

# CHASING THE DRAGON

: A *GUNSMITH CATS*  
FAN FICTION STORY :



BY MADAME MANGA

... VOLUME THREE ...  
CHAPTERS 6 & 7

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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.livejournal.com/users/madame_manga)*  
*<http://www.fanfiction.net>*  
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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.

First PDF edition, September 2007

## ::: CHAPTER SIX :::

“God, Roy! I can’t tell you what a friendly face means to me right now.” Rally gave Roy Coleman a quick hug and patted his .38 revolver through his coat. “Did you have breakfast yet?”

“On the plane.” Roy looked a little weary, but squeezed her arm in return. “If you can call coffee and a miniature croissant-wich at 5 A.M. ‘breakfast’. These two shady characters met me at the airport, but I rented a car.”

“Oh, hi.” She smiled at the two black-suited FBI agents behind him in the lobby of the Sandpiper Inn. “I’m Rally Vincent. Roy tell you all about me?”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Vincent.” The older of the two, a burly, crew-cut man, shook her hand. “I’m Agent Smith. And this is Agent Wesson — never mind the joke, hmm? We’ve heard it a few too many times.” His companion, about Brown’s age and studious-looking, rolled his eyes.

“Perish the thought,” said Rally, her smile wilting slightly. “Come on up to the room and we can talk there.”

In the elevator, she grabbed Roy’s arm. “I’m so glad to see you!” Roy cleared his throat and patted her shoulder.

“Glad to see you too, kid.” His black beard twitched with a smile. “But I thought you didn’t want me to take the trouble.”

“Oh, that was stupid of me. I’m glad you did! Not that I couldn’t have handled it on my own, of course.” Rally stuck out her tongue.

“Where’s this hired muscle of yours?”

“Not in my hotel room, Roy!” She giggled and swatted at him. Smith and Wesson looked at each other. Roy cleared his throat again and put his hands in his pockets, raising his eyebrows in their direction. Rally got the message and subsided. The rest of the ride to the eighth floor was silent.

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“So how bad does it stink, Bob?” said Agent Smith to Agent Wesson as they rode down to the lobby alone three quarters of an hour later. “Army latrine, or rotting

fish heads? No, a maggoty piece of road kill, sizzling on the pavement on a hot summer day... surrounded by rotting fish heads.”

“You’re a fucking poet, Pete.”

Smith grinned, his heavy face lighting up with quirky humor. “You want to go to the wharf for lunch? I got a coupon for a steak and chowder special.”

“Ah... I’m going to eat at my desk today, thanks.”

“Heh, heh. What, waiting for Brown to call YOU? If he hasn’t done it already, my friend, I don’t think he will. This is his deal and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Wesson shook his head and pushed his glasses up his nose. “This makes no sense. Why drag a Chicago bounty hunter into it?”

Smith shrugged eloquently. “How the hell should I know? I gave him the info he asked for, but he never said why he wanted it. He’s a squirrely bastard, but he’s not dumb, so he must have a reason. He might be playing Vincent for a fool, but I don’t know. Her street rep is pretty high. The SAC in Chicago had some good things to say. Maybe we’re missing something.”

“How? Did Brown meet her last week on his trip East? And suddenly decide to do the silly kid a big favor for no discernible reason?”

“If we had the budget to chase him all over the damn country, I’d have gone out to Chicago too and kept an eye on him. Obviously more went on last week than his little ‘recruitment drive’.”

“Does Vincent have any connection to that Chicago courier? The guy Brown was trying to hire?”

“Nothing in the file about her, no,” said Smith. “But then that file doesn’t even have a name on it, besides ‘Roadbuster’. Mostly holes in place of facts. She could be his frickin’ business partner for all we know.” Both agents laughed sarcastically. “No, if Brown has something to give to the kid, I’d bet it’s below the belt...”

“You might be right, considering that he’s never given a damn how young they are.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Smith. “How’s the extraction operation coming?”

“Not so fast — that is, I’m stalling until he gets us some more information.” Wesson pushed his glasses up again. “Both on the situation at his house, and on that courier. He’s been claiming he’s got a big file on the guy.”

“I’m gonna believe that when I see it,” snorted Smith.

“Ditto. So now what?”

“Sit tight and wait. If Brown’s serious about giving himself up, at least we’ve bagged him. If not, why interfere when we don’t know his intentions? This might be something personal with Miss Vincent. We give her any info or tell her about our contacts with Brown, we probably sink our own operation. She got herself into it and she can get herself out.”

“Not our business, then.”

“Not our business.” Smith smiled, and Wesson did as well. “Never let it be said that the Bureau doesn’t mind its own business.”

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“Oooh,” moaned Rally as she shut the door behind Smith and Wesson. “How did that go, Roy?”

Roy made a noncommittal face. “OK, I guess.”

“Do you think they even believed me? That Wesson guy hardly said a word, and I don’t think Smith ever heard there was such a thing as women’s liberation. I haven’t been called ‘little lady’ since I was in school!”

“Mmm.” Roy looked out the window at the grimy street. “It’s not like there aren’t some strange aspects to this deal, Rally. I’m glad they’re gone — I wish I could have discussed the whole thing with you beforehand. I wanted to let you thrash out all the details without two Feds staring at you.” He faced around and folded his arms. “So now’s the time. I want the whole truth, kid, and I want it now.”

“Uh...”

A knock sounded on the door, and Rally jumped. It couldn’t be Bean, could it? But he wasn’t supposed to show his face in the hotel while Roy was here, let alone FBI agents. Another knock.

“You going to get that?” asked Roy.

Rally reluctantly touched the knob. “Who is it?”

“Ms. Rally Vincent?”

“Yes...” Rally replied, opening the door a crack but keeping the chain in place. “What is it?”

“Package for you, ma’am. I’m a courier.”

“Courier?” She opened the door a little wider.

A young woman neatly dressed in a miniskirted suit. She held up a small red bag with cord handles and smiled. “Special delivery.”

Roy peered over her shoulder. “That looks like it’s from a store.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Who’s it from?” said Rally suspiciously.

“Ma’am, I got a call to pick this up and deliver it to you. That’s all I can tell you.”

“All right,” said Rally, taking the bag. “Do I need to sign anything?”

“No, ma’am. Bye now.” She bowed slightly and left.

“What the hell is it?” asked Roy.

Rally put the bag down on the table and looked it over carefully. “Doesn’t weigh much. Not enough for a bomb.” She sniffed the air above the bag. “No smell. I wish May were here to check it, but it seems to be kosher.” She lifted out the small box the bag contained. “What? This looks like... jewelry?”

“There’s a card,” said Roy.

Rally retrieved it and read.

*With sincerest apologies and hope for your understanding and forgiveness. Rally, I am deeply ashamed of my weakness and I place myself at your mercy. Please accept this token of my esteem and regard me evermore as*

*Your humble servant, S.G.B.*

“This is from *Brown*?” said Roy.

“Who else? God, he lays it on thick.” She examined the little box; red satin with gold-embossed Chinese characters. “From a Chinatown jewelry store? How fancy could that be?” She flipped it open and gasped.

“Holy name,” said Roy. Two deep-blue oval stones set in diamond frames glittered in the sunlight from the window. He picked one of the earrings up and squinted at it.

“Are th-those REAL?” stammered Rally. “They’re bigger than nickels!”

“Yeah. I took a gemology course when I was on the anti-fencing task force. That’s a Sri Lankan sapphire... or rather, two perfectly matched ones of about forty carats each.” He whistled. “These must have cost him twice my annual salary, and I’ve got twenty-eight years of seniority.”

Rally grabbed the earring from Roy, thrust it back in the box, and threw the box in the bag. “Maybe I can catch her. There is no way in hell I am keeping these!” She put on her jacket and opened the door.

“Hold on! Why not?”

“I’ll explain later! I don’t want this package in my hands one second longer!” She ran down the hallway to the elevator. Just as she arrived in the lobby, a car pulled away from the curb outside: a new red Mustang GT. The courier was gone. “Damn!” She briefly considered throwing the bag into the gutter for some passerby to find, but decided against it. Brown had to get it back intact. She rode back up to the eighth floor and returned to the room where Roy waited.

“Too late?”

“Yes, damn it all. I do NOT want his presents!” She threw the bag on the table.

“Explain.”

“He... he’s apologizing for finding me a little too attractive last night. I had to show him a gun to get him to understand plain English.”

“He *what?*”

“What did you expect from a guy who’s used to buying anything he wants?” Rally shrugged her shoulders. “I got his number now — for a smart man, he’s pretty stupid about some things. I mean, sending me *jewelry*? I’d’ve thought it was obvious I’m not the kind to go all soft over some rocks!”

“Pretty handsome apology.” Roy took out the box and opened it again.

“Oh, he’s got the moves down, if he remembers to keep the charm turned on. It’s all a game to him. I don’t have to deal with him past tonight, so I don’t care. I’ll take these with me and put them right back in his hand. He bought these with drug money.”

“He sure can pick ‘em, though.” Roy shook his head, looking at the earrings and then glancing at her face. “They match just about exactly.”

“What, the stones? Didn’t the jeweler do that?”

“No, the stones match your eyes.” His smile was sincere, but a little rueful. “It’s a wonderful choice. I wish I could see you wear them, just once.”

“Roy!”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t need YOU tempting me, too!”

“Good, you’re not impervious!”

“Of course not! They’re beautiful! I know better than to go trying on things I know I can’t have!” She sat down hard on the hide-a-bed where Bean had slept the night before, and the scent of his body welled up around her. “Uhh... usually.” She got up again and sat in the lone upholstered chair.

“All right, you’ll give them back. Can’t say I blame you. But now...” Roy sat opposite her. “I was asking you about — ”

Rally’s cell phone rang, and Roy rolled his eyes and leaned back on the hide-a-bed. She answered. “Rally Vincent here.”

“Good morning, Rally.” It was Brown. *Oh, great timing!* she thought.

“Hello, Brown,” she replied, darting a glance at Roy, who sat up straight. “Sleep well?”

“In point of fact, no. I’m devastated at the thought that I may have offended you. I am deeply — ”

“OK, whatever. Let me tell you something, Brown. I am not interested in your personal integrity or your lack of same or the soft, slimy underbelly of your psyche. All I want to do is turn you in to the FBI and let you take down the Dragons, and you could be Jack the Ripper and the Boston Strangler combined, and I still would not want to hear about it. Got that? Good. Now, let’s talk turkey. Tonight, eleven o’clock. Anything changed?”

“Unfortunately, yes. The Dragons know who you are.”

Rally felt a shock go through her. “Oh, no.”

“Someone identified you last night. They know you are a bounty hunter, and they know you are working with Bean Bandit.” Brown sounded a little shaky. “I’ve just been released from an all-night grilling session. I managed to convince the



leadership that my assignation with you was all part of my plan to recruit Mr. Bandit. But it wasn't easy."

"Excuse me? Recruit... him?" She glanced at Roy.

"Ah..." That was a gasp of sheer panic. "Ah, no; I hadn't told you about the details of that. I'm still supposed to be attempting to hire Mr. Bandit as a courier for the Dragons. If I fail, it's the death sentence. But of course the effort is futile — "

"So you called me instead."

"Exactly." The man sounded desperate. Strained and ragged; he seemed to be breathing through a constricted throat. "Please, Rally. I know I'm not a shining specimen of humanity, but you've got to get me out. You've got to."

"I'd like to know how you think it's going to get done now. If they know who I am — and I have to say, the only one you've got to blame for that is yourself — then I can't get anywhere near that pier — " A sudden thought sent a grin across her face. "Hey, I do know someone who can get me in there! And out again, which is more important."

"What? Who?"

"Expect your visit, Brown. Same Bat-time, same Bat-channel." She laughed out loud. The initials did match, though 'sidekick' was not *her* job description! "I'll be there, and we'll go ahead as planned."

"But... but... who are you bringing with you? What if they — "

"Nope. No details this time. This one's my call, and I'm doing it my way. If you think I'm going to tell you what's on my mind after last night..."

"A-all right." Brown didn't sound happy. "I should get off this line anyway. I'll call again later." He hung up.

"Well, he's sure lost a few points in self-esteem since I saw him," muttered Rally to herself. *All to the good, I'd say — and if he keeps his fool mouth shut when he finds out Bean Bandit's on the rescue team, maybe he'll come out of this alive.*

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"Tom," said Manichetti anxiously. "You got a minute?"

O'Toole looked up from his Colt .45, which he had disassembled over the surface of a scratched formica table. Beside it lay rags and a can of gun-cleaning fluid. The stink of the fluid mixed with the smell of the firing range on his coveralls,

perfuming the entire room: a small kitchenette at the back of a large house. “Yeah, whad’a ye want?”

Manichetti pulled out a plastic patio chair and sat down at the table, running a slightly shaky hand over his pale forehead. “I got to talk to you, man.”

“Mr. Brown all right?” asked O’Toole.

“He’s upstairs and just dandy. Went to bed, and I’m gonna do the same. Lucky he told me what the story was before they separated us.” He took a deep breath. “I found out something last night. You ain’t gonna believe this.” O’Toole grunted, pulling a rag through the barrel of the Colt. “He wasn’t just tryin’ to recruit that gal to take care of Bandit for us. He had a couple plane tickets to Milan. Threw ‘em in the front seat, then he grabbed ‘em and tore ‘em up.” He waited for a response. “Dont’cha want to know who for?”

“Ye’re tellin’ the yarn, boyo.”

“For him and for the Vincent gal.” Again he waited for a response. “Man, dont’cha see? He was gonna make a break for it!”

“Ain’t that the idea?” said O’Toole, imperturbable.

“Without us? Without Sar — the missus and the kid? He was gonna leave Miss Tiffany to that goddamn child-killin’ 426?” His voice had risen an octave, his face reddening.

“Course not,” said O’Toole, finally changing expression. He began to reassemble the gun. “He’s all set up fer us in Switzerland. And didn’t he say himself it was all under control?”

“He ain’t done shit! So he talked to the frickin’ Eff Bee Aye! How’re a buncha damn Feds gonna figure out how to get past that Dragon cordon around the L.A. house? Hell, I know guys could do it without breakin’ a sweat, but they don’t work in no office building.”

O’Toole finished his work, filled the magazine and shoved it into the Colt’s butt. He got up and opened the refrigerator, peering into its grimy interior. “Yeh drink all that Guinness?”

“No, you SOB, you drunk it. I think it tastes like burned toast, remember? You listenin’ to me?”

O’Toole took out a bottle and scrabbled among the dirty dishes in the sink for a glass. Pulling out the cork with his teeth, he upended the bottle over the smeary glass. Only a trickle came out. “Shite, out’ve whiskey too. What’m I goin’ ta have fer breakfast?”

“Don’t you get it? He was gonna dump us!” Manichetti shouted. “Mr. Brown’s gonna let the Chinks waste us and kill the girls too! He don’t give a shit! All he cares about is his own goddamn skin! That fuckin’ asshe — ”

A cold barrel denting the end of his nose, and a pair of fiery eyes above it. The sound of glass and bottle shattering against the wall reached Manichetti’s ears only after the Colt hit his face. “Yeh shut up now, yeh hear?” hissed O’Toole. “If ye care about yer own Eye-tie skin, that is!”

“Get that thing off me, you Irish moron!”

“I don’t want to hear nothin’ against Mr. Brown, see? Keep yer damn mouth awa’ him! He’s takin’ care of it, isn’t he now? It’s ‘is own wife and kid to deal with, isn’t it? What the hell do ye care about that hoity-toity snip an’ her snotty brat?”

“Yeah, I know,” sneered Manichetti. “You wouldn’t give a damn if Mrs. Brown got strangled with a bit of wire, wouldja? I been wonderin’ how long it was gonna take you!”

“What d’ye mean?”

“You’d like him all to yourself, wouldn’tcha, Tommy? I seen you lookin’ at him undressin’ in the bedroom! Every time you get good and drunk you start in about his ass an’ his goddamn pretty face — ”

“Fock yeh to hell!” yelled O’Toole, turning dark red. “I ain’t no fockin’ sodomite!” He jammed the gun viciously into Manichetti’s nose. “Yeh take that back now!”

“Man, I didn’t say that.”

“Yeh think I’m a focking pervert with me hands in a fella’s drawers? Yeh think I want ta have it up th’ shitter? Yeh think I want him suckin’ on me — ” O’Toole stopped abruptly, his posture changing and gaze sliding away.

“You ain’t been thinkin’ about it none, I see.” Manichetti shrugged and pushed the barrel aside with two fingers. “You better go out and get your damn breakfast — an empty stomach in the morning don’t improve your pleasant disposition.”

O’Toole made a snarling sound and shoved the Colt into his shoulder holster. Pulling a windbreaker over it, he kicked the outside door open and left.

Manichetti watched him through the kitchen window with narrowed eyes until he had turned the corner. He took a cell phone out of his jacket, glanced at the door that led to the cramped servant’s quarters at the back of the house, then went through the outside door and unlocked one of the cars that stood in the driveway. When he had started the engine, he dialed a number.

“Hey, Breaker,” he said over the engine’s roar. “It’s ol’ Manny. Yeah, long time, hey? You still got the boys in L.A.? Say, I got a big favor to ask, stat, and I don’t care what the hell it costs.”

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“Did he say that bunch know who you are now?” said Roy anxiously. “Why aren’t you breaking it off?”

“When we’ve just spilled all the beans to the Feds?” laughed Rally, then bit her tongue. *Don’t say that word, you numskull!* “No, I’m set. He’s been trying to control this all along, but I’m in charge now.” She rubbed her hands in satisfaction. “Much better.”

“Something to do with your hired muscle? Look, I have to say — ”

“Uh, yeah.” Rally put the earring box in the bag. “Let’s go down to the lobby. I want to put these in the safe until tonight.”

Roy followed her out and down the hall. “Rally, this whole thing is giving me the creeps. I have to tell you that. I got that feeling on the phone in Chicago, and I’ve got it even stronger now. It’s just crawling up my spine and tickling the back of my neck.” Roy pushed the button for the lobby, and the elevator doors closed.

“The Feds didn’t bat an eye. Frankly, they hardly said a word...”

“They are not the ones taking the risk. Like walking into a den of mobsters alone!”

“No, not alone.”

“With this mystery man?”

“Tell you what, Roy. I was going to introduce the two of you anyway. I’ll do it now. Maybe that’ll make you feel better! And I’m not going unarmed, for heaven’s sake. You know me — I’m far from defenseless!”

“I suppose not. What are you going to use?”

“I didn’t bring all that much with me — I’ve got my little .25 auto, the one I usually put on the wrist slide.”

“Not a lot of stopping power!”

“No, but I can’t get anything else in time! Who’s going to waive the California TEN-day wait for me out here in the Bay Area, ground zero for gun control? It’ll

have to do. If all goes as planned, I won't have to bring it into play." The elevator doors opened to the lobby. Rally checked the earring bag in with the desk clerk and saw it locked into the hotel safe. She tucked her receipt into a pocket. "All set!"

"What about some cover?"

"Hmm — you know, I'm thinking about that. Going in as myself is not what I had in mind... but I have an idea. I'm going to have to go shopping — nothing I have fits the bill. When May gets here, she can help me make up. She, uh, kind of knows the style."

"Wonderful. So where we going now?"

"To the garage." She pointed at the door of the separate garage elevator opposite the hotel bar. "Where's your rental car?"

"I parked it in the visitor's spaces on the first level," said Roy.

"OK, let's get in it and then drive down to the third level. We can go out for breakfast afterwards. All I had was coffee at six."

"Your hired man's down there?"

"Well, he's not really hired. He's working for... percentages." The garage elevator started downwards.

"Oh, he heard about the reward? Hope you didn't promise him too much of it."

"We're still kind of haggling over that," said Rally, grimacing. "He's pretty independent. Don't be too startled."

"He is starting to sound like a wild card, Rally. Is that why you hid him in the garage?"

Rally looked up at Roy, startled. He'd used her phrase to describe Bean without ever having seen him! "I promised him I wouldn't let the Feds see him. But there are no warrants out for him, Roy — it's not like that. He's just being careful."

"I'll bet." They left the elevator and walked towards a silver Ford Focus in the visitor spaces. Roy unlocked it and they got in, pulling out and down the garage ramp. "Third level, you said?"

"Yes. He's parked in section 3X. Red car, California plates."

"Hey, if your Cobra's wrecked, what are you driving? A rental?" Roy grinned at her. "What did they give you — a Geo Metro?"

“Ha, ha. No, we’ve been using his car.” They had just drawn abreast of Buff. “Here we are. This is the wild card.”

“What? *This* car?” Roy braked and pulled into an empty spot. “Wow. That’s a hell of a machine.” He stopped the car and both of them got out. “Whoa. I’ve seen that before, somewhere.”

“Oh. Really?” Rally rapped on the driver’s window. She could see Bean stretched out in the seat, which was reclined all the way back. He seemed to be asleep, a newspaper draped over his chest, hands behind his head and mouth open. “Hey! Wake up!” she shouted. She recalled that Buff’s armor plate and bulletproof glass blocked nearly all sound, unless the external mike was on. Bean didn’t stir.

“What’s his name?”

“Uhh — I think I’ll let him introduce himself. If he ever comes to, that is!” Rally kicked the driver’s door, barely rocking the car. She drew her CZ75 and rapped sharply on the glass with the butt. “Dammit! Wake up, you oaf!”

“This guy is helping you?” Roy shaded his eyes and peered through the windshield.

“Not really helping. Cooperating might be a better word, though he isn’t all that cooperative.” She rapped harder.

“I know I’ve seen the car before.” Roy cocked his head and looked up and down Buff’s lines. “Huh — you know, it looks like a picture someone showed me — ”

“Goddammit!” Rally aimed the pistol at the driver’s window and pulled the trigger.

POW! A round hit the glass with a resounding crack, ricocheted to the ceiling and dropped to the concrete, flattened. “RALLY! What the HELL are you doing?” shouted Roy. “Trying to kill some — ” He stopped. “Hey, that glass isn’t even marked!”

“It’s bulletproof — and I figured the ricochet trajectory before I fired, so don’t get your tail in a knot!” Bean opened one eye, sleepily. Rally pounded on the window again and gestured. He began to sit up and yawned cavernously, stretching his elbows back and tossing the newspaper onto the passenger seat.

“Rally, maybe you had better tell me something about this guy.”

“Uh, well... he doesn’t have any criminal record.”

“That’s not saying much.” Roy stepped back defensively as Buff’s door opened and Bean got out. “Holy shit.” Bean overtopped the compactly built detective by an easy ten inches.

“You Roy Coleman?” said Bean pleasantly.

“Yeah. Chicago PD. I’m an old friend of Rally’s. Who the hell are you?”

Bean glanced at Rally. “What’d she tell you?”

“Nothing. Just that she was riding with you for the moment. In that car, I assume.” Roy was examining Bean’s face and build with an analytical eye.

“Yeah, it’s my car. Call me Bill.” Bean extended a hand to Roy, who took it after a moment’s hesitation.

“Bill, huh?” Roy dropped the handshake. “You’re from Chicago, aren’t you? I know that car. And I know *you*.”

Bean slid a narrow-eyed look over to Rally. “Got the advantage of me there, Detective.”

“Colleague of mine; Percy. He had a picture of that car from an investigation he was on. The getaway vehicle from the First Bank of Chicago heist last November. And he had a picture of the driver, taken through the windshield.”

Bean raised his eyebrows and put on his sunglasses. Roy gave an amused snort, as if he’d scored a point. “Wasn’t a real clear shot, as I recall. Percy was mad about that. He filled in some details for me, since he’d seen him firsthand. He said ‘Long jaw, X-shaped scar over nose, shit-eating grin. Built like a Sherman tank on stilts.’”

“My man Percy,” said Bean, exhibiting the described grin.

“He also said, ‘Arrest on sight.’”

“Roy! You can’t arrest him!”

“I can’t arrest him here anyway.” Roy looked at her. “I don’t have a warrant and I haven’t seen him do anything illegal. But this guy’s not on the level, Rally. I hope you know that.”

Bean and Rally looked at each other blankly. Bean smirked, Rally giggled, and suddenly they laughed out loud together. Bean held his ribs, whooping, and Rally wiped tears of mirth from her eyes.

“Believe me, Roy, I do know that. Stop being such a nanny-goat!”

Roy was doing a slow burn.

“C’mon, I’ve had some run-ins with him before in Chicago. He’s not misleading me about his intentions.” She patted Roy’s shoulder. “He led me to Brown and he’s interested in getting me the snatch. Don’t ask for details. All I need is a guarantee that the Feds and the San Francisco PD aren’t going to nab him while he’s helping me.”

“I can’t give you a guarantee like that! The Feds do what they damn well please, you know that. I don’t even have any relatives on the force here. And I do need the details, dammit!” Roy was turning red. “You think you can tell me nothing about your dealings with a guy I know is involved in some pretty heavy criminal activity? What’s the angle here? He porking you?”

“Roy!” Rally flinched back from him. Bean sucked his lower lip against his teeth and made a slight sound.

Roy gritted his teeth in chagrin and klonked a fist to his forehead. “Sorry. That is none of my business, Rally, and I apologize.” He glared at Bean. “But you tell me everything about this deal, and I do mean *everything*, or I can’t guarantee jack-shit.”

Rally looked at Bean, soberly. “What do you say?”

He heaved a sigh and took off his sunglasses. “Hey, Detective. My name’s Bean Bandit.”

“No... fucking... shit,” said Roy with heavy sarcasm.

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“HALF A MILLION DOLLARS?! Jesus H. Christ, Rally! You LIED to me — ” A couple of heads in the little sidewalk café snapped around when Roy shouted, and he quickly dropped his voice.

“I left some of it out, Roy. And I know I shouldn’t have. But I didn’t know you were going to come out here at first, and then... well, I made him a promise and I wanted to keep it.” Rally gulped her latte and laced her fingers together on the small marble-topped table. “I told you this in confidence. It’s not a way for me to get out of my obligations.”

“What obligations? Sounds like you’ve done him a lot more favors than he’s done you.” Roy slumped in his chair, his cheese omelet congealing untouched on his plate. “What’s he really done, besides give you a lift here and there?”



“This was his deal. I’m the one that made it my business. I don’t know — what’s that old proverb? Save someone’s life and he becomes your responsibility?”

“That’s a Chinese proverb, I think,” said Roy, downing his orange juice as if it were a boilemaker. “What the hell have I got myself into?”

“And this isn’t over yet. We have no idea what is going to happen tonight. We scouted out the pier last night. There was a lot of activity until about one in the morning, and then they posted a few guards and it went quiet.”

“And you go in at eleven?”

“Yeah, me and my little pistol.”

“What about Bean?”

“Bean’s going to drive me there and... well, he’s coming with me. I haven’t told him yet, but I’m sure he won’t mind.”

“What? I thought Brown — ”

“Yes, I know. I’ll transfer Brown to my car at the hotel, leave Bean and the suitcase there and then deliver my prize to the FBI. If he loses his lunch at the sight of Bean, tough. He deserves a good scare, the slimy creep.”

“Maybe he does. Does Bean deserve half a million dollars in drug money?”

“Of course not. But, Roy, please — you made me tell you, but please don’t make me tell the FBI! I’m insisting that half of it go to them — I’ll deliver it later. They’ll be happy to get it if they don’t know there’s another quarter million involved. Brown won’t tell them that part. He’s too scared of Bean.”

“Has Bean agreed to this? Splitting it, I mean?”

“Not quite, no. But we’re partners. He wouldn’t get any of it if it weren’t for my help. He knows that. He’s still haggling, sure, but we do have an agreement.”

“Just what the hell makes you so sure he’s going to keep his part of the bargain? I mean, for a fraction of that kind of money, I’ve seen murders done.”

“Heh...” Rally thought about Bean’s cold rage in the car duel on I-5. “I don’t know, Roy. It’s just a feeling I have.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Roy threw up his hands. “I could tell he likes you. Sorry about that comment.”

“It’s all right. I know you’re only concerned about me. Bean, um, isn’t my lover, by the way.”

“You don’t have to tell me that, Rally. It really is none of my business.” Roy paused a moment. “But thanks, anyway. How about your source?”

“I’m going to visit him for lunch. He sets a good table.”

“Saving room?” Roy looked at her bran muffin.

“Want it? I’m not all that hungry.”

“Sure, thanks.” He took it and broke it in half. “I should not be doing this, Rally. I’m biting my tongue here. I’m a cop and I should be swearing out a warrant on that man, because he’s been a thorn in the side of the Chicago PD for years. You may have your obligations, but I’ve got my duty.”

“I know, Roy.”

“I’m not in Chicago, though. This is California, and if the SFPD doesn’t have a beef with Bean, it’s not strictly my business to create one for them. And frankly...” Roy smiled and took a bite of bran muffin. “I am no more a fan of the Men in Black than any city cop is. They actually ordered me not to contact the SFPD on Brown, as if that would dilute their credit. If they can’t figure out what’s right under their noses, screw ‘em.”

“You didn’t cotton to Smith and Wesson either, huh?”

“Christ. I’d rather have Mulder and Scully. How about that cute red-head lady?” They had a companionable laugh, and finished breakfast.

After they’d paid their bill, they walked back to where Roy had parked his rental car on the street. The air sparkled with morning sunlight and a whiff of the ocean, though the water wasn’t visible from this part of the city. It was warm enough for her jacket to seem a little too much, but a hint of mist hung in the air, just a suggestion of damp and fog. “What’s your plan for today, Roy?”

“You want me to come along to see your source?” He unlocked the passenger door and held it for her.

“No... he might spook. I’ve sort of got a personal angle on him...”

“Oh yeah? Is it going to be a date?” Roy grinned and started the car.

“Not really. A working lunch. But I was wondering what to do until then... it’s barely eight-thirty, the stores aren’t going to open until ten, and I really wanted to do my shopping with May. When she gets here.”

“And she’s due when?”

“They got the part last night and they are going to install it this morning. So she’ll be able to leave about noon and it’s less than three hours from Buttonkettle to here. Plenty of time to hit the malls.”

“That’s less than three hours... when you’re riding in *that* car, huh?” The silver Focus wheezed up a hill.

“He calls it ‘Buff’.”

“No kidding. What’s he up to right now?”

“I don’t know.” She thought about the previous night; she and Bean had scouted the pier on foot after leaving Buff a few blocks away, though the pier was only a walk from the hotel.

They’d worked smoothly and unremarkably together, with neither arguments nor embarrassing heat, for about two hours. Then they’d retired to the hotel, eaten a late snack, and gone to bed in their separate rooms. Bean had said something about having some bases to cover the next day, and they had settled that he should leave the room early in the morning and stay clear of the hotel after meeting Roy so as not to run into the FBI agents.

Rally had decided both of them needed a break from each other’s company; at this point, it wasn’t likely that he would strike out on his own. If he wanted his share of the money, his best interest lay in sticking with her. She wasn’t expecting to see him until after lunch. “He’s working on his end of the deal, I think.”

“Let’s hope so. Christ, Bean Bandit? He could be up to anything.”

“I know you don’t approve of this, Roy, or of him. He IS a wild card. But I honestly don’t believe he’d ever try to hurt me. And his help could be essential if things get sticky. You know him as a driver, but he’s incredible in a fight. I saw him one-on-one versus Gray and a twelve-gauge and that sword Gray used for a hook.”

“When the hell was that? I thought you were the one who killed Gray.”

“I did. Because Bean lost the fight — barely. Gray was about to shoot him in the head. He was already badly injured, but he almost beat him, Roy. Barehanded. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“OK, he’s a fighter. The odds are still going to be two versus an entire gang, if something goes wrong.”

“Yes. Obviously there are some risks involved, and Brown isn’t the least of them. That’s why I thought that he should come along, though Brown isn’t expecting that. I think the plan’s pretty tight, but it doesn’t hurt to... have an ace up my sleeve.”

Roy was shaking his head, his jaw tight. “I don’t like it. It smells. Besides the obvious, I can’t get a grasp on just why.”

“I’m as prepared as I can be right now, and I’m going to try to get more from my source. Is there anything else you can think of?”

A long harsh sigh. “That gun of yours. It’s just too damn small.”

“It’s got to be compact if I’m going to conceal it. I’m probably going to get frisked.”

“You going to use a garter holster?”

“I’ve got one with me, though the pouch is only a magazine holster — I was going to tinker with it to make it do for the .25, but maybe I should go to a gun store and see if I can get something better. Want to shop with me?”

“I’ve... got an alternative.” Roy stopped at a red light.

“What do you mean?”

Roy’s eyes scanned the intersection, his expression faintly guilty. “I want you to get a real gun for this operation. Something I know will protect you. How do you feel about a loaner?”

“You have something?”

“Not me. All I have is my .38 Special.”

“That’s not much more concealable than my CZ!”

“Of course not. If you could pick any gun, what would you want?”

Rally thought for a moment, mentally scanning catalog pages. “Oooh... I saw something in this year’s Autopistols... A North American Arms mini-.32. It’s got a two-inch barrel and a six-shot magazine, and they claim you can shoot good groups at up to ten yards... of course, this is me we’re talking about, so make that fifteen yards!” She grinned, and Roy rolled his eyes. “That’s nothing compared to my CZ75, of course, but impressive for such an itty-bitty gun. If I could get one of those, I’d be happy! It was sooo cute!”

“You scare me sometimes, girl. A cute .32?” The light turned green and Roy moved forward. “That caliber hasn’t got massive punch, but I guess I’d feel a little better if you had that rather than that dinky .25. Well, let’s go check it out. I don’t know if I can get you that exact model, but probably something like it.”

“Where?”

“You have to promise me something, Rally...” said Roy, slowly rubbing the lower part of his face with one hand. “Don’t tell anyone where you got the gun. Especially not Smith and Wesson. I don’t think they’d approve of a lowly city cop doing an end run around a Federal law. And... well, I could lose my badge for what I’m about to do. If something goes wrong, that is, though I doubt it will.” He took a left turn.

“God, Roy, I’ll go with the .25!”

“No, you won’t. Like I told you yesterday — if something happened because I wasn’t there, or didn’t do everything I could, I’d never forgive myself. I trust you to pull this off even if I’m feeling cautious. And hell, this is for me in a way. To get a little of that creepy feeling off my back.”

“Nothing like firepower for that!”

“Actually, Rally, there’s something better.” Roy smiled. “Going home to my wife at the end of the day. That’s what blows the bad things away for me.”

“Oh, Roy, I didn’t mean to drag you all the way out here...”

“No, kid, that isn’t what I meant. Right now I’m on a job, I guess, even if it’s only semi-official. I’m a cop and I do my duty as I see it. That doesn’t always mean following the exact letter of the law — sue me, I’m a practical guy — but it does mean I have to do what I believe is right even if there’s a risk attached, so I can face myself. That’s what keeps me going when the going gets rough. After it’s all over, I can put my arms around that lady and forget it all for a little while...” Roy had a faraway look, smiling up at the sky through the windshield.

“Sounds nice.”

Roy started and flushed slightly. “Um, well, not to get too personal, but just remembering she’s rooting for me pulls me through the worst. And it keeps me honest. I don’t want to do anything, or omit anything, that would make her ashamed of me.”

“Even when you’re thousands of miles away?”

“Especially then. The anticipation of homecoming is the source of the energy. Being away from her just makes it all the stronger.”

“Yeah, and in the mean time no one takes out the garbage?”

Roy laughed. “A detective’s wife has to put up with a lot. Be careful who you hitch up with, kid. Considering your lifestyle, you are going to have to pick either a homebody or someone who can pace you all the way.”

“Like Bean, huh?” It slipped out, spoken as soon as thought, and Rally colored pink. “That’s a joke, I think.”

“Christ, I hope so.” Roy looked grave. “Look, I know he might be the kind who seems sort of... well, I don’t know how women think about these things. He’s good-looking in his way, and he knocks you over with something — size, maybe, but it’s more than that.”

“Yes... I know.”

“That might seem attractive, um, to girls... but consider what he is. You’re right, he has no criminal record. That’s because he’s been too clever and too ruthless for anyone to arrest him. You know that better than I do. He was on his good behavior when I spoke to him, obviously, but he puts me on my guard, Rally. Especially in regard to you, and I don’t mean just... sex. Be careful around him, for God’s sake.”

“Gosh, Roy, I’m not a baby! He doesn’t fool me.”

She spoke brashly, but a little incident of the early morning moved up from the depths like a forgotten dream. She’d slept more solidly than she had the night before, but at four-thirty she’d risen to visit the bathroom for a drink of water and passed twice by Bean’s bed in the sitting area.

The first time he was asleep and snoring on his back, one arm thrown over his head and the other hand resting on his bare chest. In the light of the city that rose up the hill behind the hotel and shone through the thin curtains, she was able to see his face clearly. Not exactly softened from its waking aspect, but calm and still, his eyes closed and his lashes resting on his lower lids.

The clarity and power of his face and body stopped her dead for a moment. He’d never looked as beautiful to her as he had then, like a finely made hunting piece put away in its cabinet. The action had been cleaned and oiled, the stock rubbed until it glowed, the ammunition removed and stored until it would be needed again. Until the danger had to wake in the morning with the sun.

The second time she passed him, on the way back from the bathroom, he was lying on his stomach with his arms wrapped around the pillow. His breathing told her he was awake and she tried to move quickly into her room.

But at the door, she turned to look back and saw that he had raised his head to watch her. Their eyes met, his shadowed by tendrils of his hair. His expression wasn't readable by streetlight.

The pull between them felt like a descending piston in the core of her stomach, a hollow vacuum drawing in a volatile mixture. The danger never slept. If he had moved, if she had taken even one step towards him, the spark would have cracked the cylinder.

But she backed through the door and shut it behind her, and then laid her ear against it to hear his long, sighing, quiet groan. For the hour that remained of the night's darkness, she barely closed her eyes.

"Here we are," said Roy, indicating a large modern concrete and glass building and waiting to make a left turn into its parking garage. "I'll do the talking. You just stand there like a responsible professional."

"This is the main police department offices! You said you didn't know anyone on the SFPD."

"I don't. They're still cops." Roy took out his badge.

"The blue fraternity?"

"Yep. If I can find the right guy to talk to, I know I can scare up some equipment for you."

"Thank you, Roy. I'm so glad you came!" Rally grabbed his arm and hugged it as he pulled into a parking space.

"Whoa, whoa." Roy grinned at her. "Wait until I get some results!"

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"Oooh! It's ADORABLE! Just look at those tiny little sights... and that elegant black stock, too! I can't wait to see how it shoots." Rally held up the mini-.32 and pulled back the slide. The gun was so small it fit on her palm, and its weight felt like nothing.

"You like your firearms, I can tell," said the grinning SFPD armorer. "It feels good in the hand, I can tell you that — and your hands are smaller than mine. You can get a two-finger grip where I can only get one and a half."

"And people wonder why a nice young woman like me wants to be a bounty hunter! When I get to play with toys like these?" Rally sighted at the clock on the wall, her trigger finger held straight out. "May I use your firing range, please?"

“Be my guest. I’m curious to see how well the ‘Guardian’ performs for you. I’ve only issued it once, for an undercover operation, and it never was used. Only got it last month, and I sighted it in, but I never did better than three-inch groups at ten yards. I’m more of a Colt .45 guy.” He opened a cabinet and took out a box. “Silver Tips. Stick with Winchester ammo in this one.”

Down in the basement room, Rally put on a pair of ear protectors as a couple of curious onlookers jockeyed for position behind her with Roy and the armorer. One of them was a tall blond patrolman she recognized from the day before, in front of the Eight Dragon Delight.

“Hi, Officer White! Surprised to see me?” Rally pulled the ear protectors down and stuck out her hand.

“Not really, ma’am.” He smiled and nodded at Roy, who shook hands with him as well.

“Roy Coleman. I’m a detective with the Chicago PD.”

“Officer Tony White. Pleased to meet you, sir.” White looked at Rally. “Where’s... uh, Bill?”

“He’s on his own today. Roy’s better company anyway!”

White raised his brows. “Better connections, yeah. I put a make on that guy and I didn’t get any results, but he raised my hackles. You know him, sir? Big and black-haired, drives a custom job — ?”

“I’ve met him,” said Roy neutrally.

“Oh. Well, I guess he’s all right then, if you’re vouching for — ”

“I didn’t say I was vouching for him, White. I said I’d met him.” Roy’s expression darkened. White glanced at Rally again in some confusion.

She smiled with a touch of nervousness. “I’m going to try a ten yard range first.” Everyone put on ear protectors and she turned to her stall and sent out the target. BAMBAMBAMBAMBAMBAM said the Guardian as she emptied the magazine as fast as she could shoot, the trigger pull stiff but smooth. Back came the target, and she unclipped it. Several pairs of hands seized it at once, and four men stared at her in awe.

“You sure you never fired one of these before?” said the armorer.

“Nope, I never did!” Rally stuck her finger through the one-inch hole in the center of the group, then flicked at the one stray shot. “That’s the second one. I’m a little



more used to my CZ and I didn't pull hard enough after the first shot. Double-action-only is consistent, but it's different. Spare mag?"

"One," said the armorer and passed it to her. "The release doesn't pop it out, you'll notice. Get a fingernail under the flange." Rally changed magazines and put the empty one down. "You want to try five yards now?"

"No, let's go for broke. Twenty-five, as far as we can go!" She clipped on a new target and sent it out. This time she shot a little more deliberately, but with one hand. The recoil wasn't extreme and she felt a warm glow to see her shots puncture the paper in a tight bunch. "What a sweet little thing," she said, and took off the ear protectors again. "Can I really borrow it for tonight?"

"Ma'am," said the armorer, reeling in the target and spreading it out on the counter for the onlookers to see, "for shooting like that, you can borrow the gun, my car, and the key to my condo."

"Thank you SO much! I'll be sure to have it back to you in the morning. Now I just have to get a holster..."

"Here you go. Custom made for that undercover job. This one's meant to thread on a belt or a garter."

"Perfect!"

"Now, ma'am, this gun is registered to the SFPD. But this is an under the table transaction, of course. I figure it's worth taking a little risk to haul in a big dealer like this Brown guy. I'm going on Detective Coleman's word here..."

"And you can count on it," said Rally. "Oh, Roy! Can I thank you now?"

"Just come back safe," said Roy as she hugged him. "That's all I ask."

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Larry Sam smiled.

"C'mon. I'm walking into a hornet's nest tonight. I could really use some more solid leads."

"Excuse me," he said as a Chinese couple walked into the half-full restaurant. He got up from Rally's table to seat them, and rapped on the kitchen door as he came back. Mengleng Wu emerged with a teapot and a tray of condiment bottles. The noise level was sufficient to damp their voices from eavesdroppers.

"You're very persuasive, Ms. Vincent. Where's Mr. Bandit today?"

“I took a cab. He’s doing his own thing for a while. I’m free until evening.” She twirled her chopsticks at him.

“Very persuasive indeed. How’s the mu shu pork?”

“Delicious, of course. Your dad’s an artist.”

“He’s had a lot of practice. Been cooking professionally since he was ten.”

“I’ll have to order that banana fritter. Larry, we already made good use of the tip about the pier. You were absolutely correct about it, and it may make all the difference that we were able to get a place nearby. And that bit about Brown. Every bit of information helps. I’m going to go in there tonight with only one concealable handgun, which eliminates my CZ75 — the big one you saw me use. It’s going to be me, Bean, and one itty bitty .32 auto, with one spare magazine, against the Eight Dragon Triad. Help me out here.”

“I do have more. I’m not sure what good it will do you if you get into a firefight.” Larry Sam pulled in his lips and scratched his chin. “I’d hate to think I was encouraging you to go into danger. This guns and fists thing — not my style.”

“How about kung fu?”

“Do I look like Bruce Lee?”

“Yeah, a little...” she sighed. He was just as handsome today as he had been on Monday, and she was doing her best to encourage her own mild attraction to him. But he seemed to have changed his mind about giving her better information; perhaps he had realized how sensitive the topic of Brown’s impending execution was. Who was his informant?

“Well, I couldn’t fight my way out of a take-out container. With the lid open. I know you’re better at that kind of thing than I am — I saw you in action. But these people do not fight fair, Rally. You’d be better off walking away from this deal entirely. I know the means they use to dispose of anyone who gets in their way.”

“Are you afraid of them?”

“Damn straight I am.” His manner lacked nothing in sincerity, but Rally had the feeling that he held something back, something hidden so deep that it couldn’t be as obvious as membership in the Triad. A note of falseness that she had intended to look for simply wasn’t there. “I’m not going to apologize for that — I’m a highly visible target. This business of mine isn’t easily portable. I can’t drop everything and run back East if something goes badly. I’m stuck on the streets of San Francisco.”

He gestured out at the sunny scene through his sparkling glass windows, the big tank of live carp at the front swirling with activity. “That’s why I’m afraid, and that’s why I am committed to fighting the gangsters. You don’t have that problem, Rally. You want my advice? Get out while you still can.”

“I am on this job, Larry. I am not going to drop it until Brown is in FBI custody. And maybe not even then. It’s getting personal.”

“Personal...” Larry heaved a sigh. “All right. I’ll give you more information, even if it’s not relevant to Brown. I have a file box of clippings and Internet printouts, and a notebook. Everything’s organized by category. There are photos and some charts I worked out — patterns of gang activity, that kind of thing. Pretty dry stuff. But I will loan you the whole pile.”

“Larry, you’re a prince.” It was probably useless, but it was a start.

“I doubt you will get much out of it. Nothing that will help you in the kind of work you do. This isn’t going to lessen the risk to you.”

“Then give me something that will.” They locked gazes for a moment. Rally saw something move across Larry’s face, something she couldn’t quite read. It might have been suspicion.

“How do I know what you will do with that kind of information?”

“Then you do have it.”

“Hey, I’m just a guy with a restaurant. Where would I run across anything truly important on the Eight Dragon Triad?”

Rally’s eyes narrowed. “You’re thinking aloud, Larry.”

“I suppose I am. All right, for the sake of negotiation, let’s say I have something that would help you. If I tell you, and the Dragons find out where it came from, I am dead meat. What can you offer me as a defense against that possibility?”

“I’d never tell anyone where it came from. How would they find out?”

“It wouldn’t be difficult.” A shadow passed over his face. “I think he — they can put two and two together without a lot of counting on their fingers.”

“Really? I thought you didn’t associate with these people. Why would they ever think of you?”

Larry looked at her with that peculiar expression again, then got up and took a pad from the host desk, crossing to the Chinese couple’s table. “Are you ready to

order?” he said. “I can recommend the minced squab. We don’t get the pigeons from Union Square, you know, unlike the Hong Sing Teahouse.”

The couple laughed and ordered something in Cantonese. Larry replied in that language, his voice taking on a singsong quality, scribbled a few Chinese characters on the pad, and stuck the order inside the kitchen door. He held the swinging door open and spoke again in Cantonese, apparently to his father. Rally could hear the sound of a cleaver hitting a chopping block, over and over.

Three business-suited Chinese men came in and sat down; Mengleng took their order. When Larry emerged from the kitchen, he looked carefully at them before he returned to Rally’s table. He didn’t sit down, standing quietly with his arms folded and his eyes haunted.

“I’m sorry, Rally,” he began. “It’s not that I don’t think you’ll make good use of it. But I only met you yesterday. I can’t place my future, and my family’s future, in your hands that quickly. I guess I’m more of a conservative Chinese than I thought I was. You are not from my world. It’s not easy for me to trust you.”

“You... you mentioned defense against them. Do you mean you want a bodyguard for a while?”

He let out a breath, raising his brows. “Not really. That’s too limited. You have a job to do, anyway. You couldn’t hang out here all the time.”

“Do you want... money?”

His face changed oddly. “That’s one of the few all-purpose defenses, I suppose.”

“It doesn’t stop bullets.”

“No... but it can buy them off.”

“That’s a strange thing to say!”

“Never mind then.” He turned to the kitchen and passed through the swinging doors, then emerged with two sizzling platters for the Chinese couple. They exchanged a few pleasantries in Cantonese and Larry headed back towards the doors.

“Larry...” Rally got up from her table and stopped him as he passed. “I... I can offer you some money. If that’s what you think will protect you, then I can cut you in on the deal. Information is even more important to me than firepower right now, and I’m willing to pay for it. Though frankly, if you have such good information, I’m wondering why you haven’t turned it over to the police.”

He twitched one corner of his mouth. “They wouldn’t approve of how I got it.”

“No? Well, I’m not a cop. A bounty hunter’s a private citizen. You’d be amazed at what I can legally do.” Rally smiled conspiratorially. “I don’t even have to get search warrants! Just waltz in and say, ‘You’re coming with me, buddy!’”

“That must be handy.” Larry drew her back to her table. “All right. For the sake of argument, again — how much money are we talking about here?”

What did she have to play with? One hundred thousand of honest money. And a quarter of a million in tainted cash... all of which had to go to the FBI. “It really depends on how good your information is. I pay my informants accordingly.”

“Are they usually running any personal risk in giving it to you?”

“Er... sometimes.”

“Do you ever agree on percentages?” They sat down.

A little red warning light began to flash in her brain. “Percentages?”

“Of the money you will gain in the operation. For instance... ten percent.”

Out of a hundred thousand in reward money? Ten thousand seemed steep, but if he was right about his risk, he might be selling himself cheap. “How about five percent?” Five thousand she could handle — and with an intelligent, good-looking young man, it wasn’t even that painful a deal.

“I see you are familiar with the ancient Chinese custom of haggling.” Larry smiled.

“I do it Chicago style.”

“I like your style. Probably to my regret. Well, there’s money, when we agree on the amount. And one other thing.”

“What is it?” She smiled, thinking she knew what the answer would be.

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Huh?” she asked, genuinely puzzled. “Why wouldn’t I like going on a da — ”

“No, that’s not it. Not that I wouldn’t like — well, you aren’t going to want to go out with me in a minute, anyway. The other condition is your silence. Don’t tell the FBI, don’t tell your friend Roy, and for God’s sake, don’t tell Bean.”

“What? Why would that matter? There’s a hundred thousand on Brown, and your cut — ”

He drew a deep sigh, looked in her eyes with a touch of regret, and said, “You and Bean are chasing five hundred thousand dollars in Dragon money. Ten percent for my cooperation would be fifty thousand dollars. That’s enough for me to hire protection, or help me relocate if it comes to that.”

Rally couldn’t have told anyone at that moment; she was so flabbergasted her mouth opened and shut as if she were one of the fish in the restaurant tank. Eventually she found a whispering voice an octave or so higher than her usual one. “How... who... how the HELL did you hear that?”

“That leaves you two hundred thousand from your half. Fair enough?”

“Who told you that? WHO?”

“No one told me. I overheard. Or rather...” Larry glanced around, saw that everyone was busily eating and quickly pulled up the tablecloth, putting his hand under the stained particle-board surface beneath the clean white linen. A small tearing sound, and he came up with a little wireless microphone, a self-adhesive Velcro button attached to it. He placed it on the tablecloth near her, cupping his hand half over it. “My sister Vanessa, the one who’s at Berkeley? She’s an engineering major. She made these for me and chipped them up with transmitters and hearing-aid batteries. The speaker’s in the kitchen. I can switch on any table I want.” He put the microphone in his shirt pocket.

“What the hell for!?”

“Originally, so I could hear what people were really saying about the food.” Larry shrugged with a small laugh. “She wanted a project. It started as a joke. Then she came in with all these little components and her soldering iron...”

“You listened in on me and Bean.” Rally scanned her eyes back and forth over the dishes, trying to recall what had been said out of Larry Sam’s earshot.

“Not for very long. I was at the table with you most of the time, remember? It was Monday lunch. Not very busy. But after Bean called himself a dirty job and you mentioned that the Dragons had tried to recruit him, I stepped out for a few minutes and turned on the speaker. When Bean walked out, I came out again and told you I’d been upstairs. I hadn’t been. But what I heard made me decide to give you some more solid information. I made up that story about Mama and the gossip so I could tell you where the pier was. And I will give you more. For a share in that money.”

“Why do you want their money? It’s drug and crime profits! It ought to go to the government!”

“How about back to the people who do something to stop the crimes? Bean was right about dirty money. It’s only money. What matters is what it’s used for, not where it came from.”

“That’s not true. I wouldn’t keep one dollar of it for myself!”

Larry laughed disbelievingly. “I heard you say he was only getting half. So who gets the rest, if not you?”

“The FBI. I’d rather they got all of it, but I couldn’t get him to agree to that. Actually, he hasn’t agreed to getting only half. He thinks he should have it all.”

“So I gathered. And that’s not the only thing he thinks he should have, is it?” Larry looked obliquely at her, pinching his upper lip in one hand.

“What do you mean?”

“You said he wasn’t your boyfriend. You didn’t tell me he wants you so badly. I’ve never heard a man so jealous of a woman he wasn’t sleeping with. That scared me.”

“That why you offered me your bedroom? I can handle Bean. And I sure as hell can handle you.”

“I never said you couldn’t. You’ve got guns. And Bean, if he saw fit, could tear me limb from limb, I have no doubt. I almost pissed myself when I heard what he said to you about me — ‘that college boy’. Not fair warning, Rally. I asked you about that pretty carefully, you recall, and it seems I had reason to.”

“I didn’t... I mean, he’s always been kind of distant until recently, and right then it didn’t seem like anything, um, profound...” She recalled what Brown had said about Bean’s attachment to her; taking Brown’s assessment of anything at all as even partly true didn’t agree with her at the moment.

“Did he try to assault you? Is that it?”

“No!” Their voices had risen, and the couple across the room looked at them. Larry got up again and spoke to them with a smiling tone. They returned to their meal, and he circulated through the dining room before he came back again.

“I guess it’s not my business what your relationship is with Bean,” he said quietly. “I wish it were, Rally. But you are not from my world and you are not ever going to be the kind of woman I can introduce to my parents, even if I wanted to risk Bean’s wrath, which I don’t.”

“He doesn’t own me!”

“Tell that to him. That doesn’t even factor in the racial question, which is still important to Dad and Mom, even though they left China decades ago. And it’s important to people like the Dragons. Keep that in mind when you deal with them. They don’t operate by the rules with which you are familiar, and they have different sets for Chinese and for whites.”

“White?” Rally shrugged one shoulder. “I always thought ‘caramel’ or ‘dark honey’ was a better description!”

Larry glanced at her throat and cheek and swallowed hard, as if he were thinking of the taste of sweets. “For you — I don’t know what category they might put you into. Obviously you are Anglo-Indian, or something of the kind.” Rally gave a half-nod. “That might help, but only by moving you into the general Asian sphere. A little closer to the Middle Kingdom than Brown.”

“The Middle Kingdom?”

“China is the center of the universe, didn’t you know that?” He smiled, but Rally could not muster one in return. “I’m going to wish you luck, Rally. And I’m going to give you those files, if you want them.”

“For a whopping ten percent of the take?”

“You want to haggle some more? Got to keep up the old Chinese traditions.”

“Like bugging the tables?”

Larry set his jaw, looking into the distance. “I’m not saying it’s wise to personally involve myself in things like this. It’s ironic that I’m warning you about them when I myself... may well have... gone too far.” He took a deep breath. “I left those things there because... some day, the right conversation is going to take place, here in my restaurant. Someone is going to haggle over a drug deal, someone is going to plan a murder. I will know them when they come in, because I have photographs and I’ve memorized the names and a lot of license plates that belong to expensive cars. And I’m going to turn on the tape recorder that is part of the whole system, and I will have something that I can use for a real bargaining chip. Some day.”

“That’s a very interesting statement, Larry. Gangsters eating in your nice restaurant? When you tell the flunkies to go fuck themselves in perfect Cantonese?”

His gaze flickered. “I do things my way, Rally. It’s not yours. Neither of us is really going to understand the other. But we are fighting the same fight. I’ll go get that file box.”

“Five percent, Larry. Twenty-five thousand, if we get that suitcase.”



“Done,” he said softly, and went into the kitchen.

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“I’m going to have to go shopping pretty soon... Roy?” Rally put down the sheaf of printouts she was studying at the sitting room table and looked over the back of the hide-a-bed at the detective. Roy had a pie chart in hand and turned around with a glazed expression. The back of Bean’s head didn’t move, as he was absorbed in the TV.

“What’s that got to do with me? Go shopping.” Roy checked his watch. “Cripes, it’s 4:45. Where the hell is May? It took you two less than three hours from Buttonkettle? How’d she spend FIVE?”

“I don’t know! But I need someone to drive me to the Galleria. C’mon, guys, this isn’t your average dress hunt! I’m going to need help to pick out the right thing to wear tonight. Something cute and casual that I can move in, but able to hide a .32 in an accessible spot..”

“No, please, let me off the hook for that one,” said Roy, shaking his head. “Fifteen minutes into any shopping trip with my wife and I’d rather see her in a torn shower curtain than try to give my opinion on anything women wear. I’m fashion-impaired.”

“Bean?” said Rally doubtfully. “You up for shopping?”

Bean grunted, his eyes glued to the TV. He and Roy had been sitting on opposite ends of the hide-a-bed since Rally had returned from lunch, as far from each other as possible. While Rally and Roy studied Larry Sam’s research and notes, Bean had been watching ESPN with total attention. At this moment, the screen showed NASCAR results and highlights. A few cars spiraled on a track and burst into flames as the rest of the pack zoomed past. Bean chuckled and looked up. “Shopping? For what?”

“Forget I asked,” said Rally, and got up to look out the window for the sixth time that half-hour.

Bean cracked another walnut and spat the shells on the floor. Roy didn’t look in his direction, but shifted slightly on the couch and crossed his legs. “You still taking his present back?” he asked Rally, obviously to make conversation, and got up, stretching.

“Oh, yeah,” said Rally with conviction.

“Why’d you get it out of the safe, then?” He pointed his chin at the red bag on the table.

“Uh... well, I was going to show them to May,” said Rally with a guilty smile. Roy laughed and headed to the bathroom.

Bean’s head turned. “What present?”

“Brown sent me a little something this morning to make up for being the biggest asshole in the known universe. What a maroon.”

“Yeah? What’d he give you?”

“Jewelry. Don’t worry, I’m taking it right back to him! If he objects, I’m going to chew his ear off.”

“What for?”

“Geez, use your head! I don’t want his presents!”

“Dirty money, huh?”

“Yep.”

“So let’s take a look at it.”

“Why?”

“Just curious. Engagement ring?” He grinned at her.

“Oh, God, Bean!” She tossed the box at him and he caught it out of the air and snapped the lid up.

“Hey, those are pretty,” he said. “Worth a lot, huh? Bet they look good on ya.”

“I KNEW I shouldn’t have showed them to you...” groaned Rally.

“What’s the harm? They’re just rocks.”

“They’re from BROWN!”

“Yeah, but they’re yours now.”

“No, they are not. I am never going to wear them. I do not take expensive jewelry from drug dealers.”

“Whatever.” Bean closed the box and threw it back to her. “Guess you can do what you want with your own property.”

Roy came out of the bathroom. “I see you’re looking at them again, Rally,” he said with a smile.

“All right, dammit. Just to stop everyone from bugging me about it, I am going to put these earrings on *once*. Then they are going straight in the box and back to Brown.” Rally put the box on the dresser, tucked her hair behind her ears and clipped the earrings on. “OK, Roy, take a look. You won’t get another chance.”

Roy scanned her face for a moment when she turned around, and nodded smilingly. “Yeah, he sure can pick ‘em. Thanks. You’re a picture.”

“Bean?”

He glanced up and shrugged. “Looks expensive.” His eyes lingered, though not on the jewelry.

Rally rolled her eyes and turned to the dresser again. The mirror caught the swirl of her hair and a glint of deep sparkling blue at her earlobes. Involuntarily she moved her head, tilting it to let the sapphires flash. They were the most beautiful earrings she’d ever seen, and they *did* match her eyes, in a way that brought out the elusive color of her irises and lit up her whole face. “Oh... shit,” she said with real regret. “I *have* to give these back.”

“Mmm-hmm,” said Roy, covering a smile.

“I’m going to kill you, Roy. You suggested I put these on, and now I’ve done it!”

“Don’t blame yourself for being a woman,” he said. Bean snorted and turned back to ESPN, which now showed baseball highlights. A pitcher threw a beanball and the benches cleared.

“What, is that defined by liking sparkly things? You chauvinist oinker! Sounds like a magpie.” She took off the earrings and put them in the box.

“People enjoy beauty,” said Roy, laughing and shrugging. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Unless it makes them ignore what’s underneath, or reject anything that *isn’t* beautiful on the surface!” Rally stalked across the room to look out the window again. “Brown himself is a goddamn case study — ”

“Somehow I don’t think that’s a problem of yours,” said Roy. “Relax.”

“MAY!” shrieked Rally. “Look! It’s my COBRA!” She blew kisses at a blue and white dot eight stories below. “Oh, darn, she missed the green light!”

“God, at last,” said Roy, clapping a hand over his forehead. “Hey, was that the Cubs?”

“Who gives a crap about the goddamn North Siders? I wanna hear the Sox scores.” Bean turned toward the window. “You gotta give that kid some driving lessons, babe. She just get her license or something?”

“Don’t be silly! She’s just not an assertive driver. But right now, I don’t care! My baby Cobra! Yes!” She dashed for the door. Bean got up to follow her, and bumped into Roy as he did the same thing. Roy stumbled and almost fell over the end of the couch, but Bean caught his arm and set him upright again.

“Sorry, Detective.”

Rally caught a flash of real hatred in Roy’s expression as he looked up at Bean and straightened his tie. “No problem,” he said evenly. “Let’s go say hello to May.”

The two men stood against opposite walls of the elevator, both with arms crossed. Rally jumped up and down between them in impatience. When the elevator reached the lobby, she shot out and over to the garage elevator, the men following, jamming themselves into the door opening as they both tried to exit at once. Again Bean nearly knocked Roy down. Rally could hear Roy growling under his breath and brushing off his coat behind her. She rolled her eyes. Bean seemed impeturbable.

“She even legal for a license yet?” he asked Rally in the garage elevator.

“Huh? May? Yeah, just about!” Rally grinned. Bean always seemed to be under the impression that May was much younger than she was. “But I was driving when I was twelve! How about you?”

“Yeah, I got started young. Kind of amazing I ever learned to walk.”

“Coulda fooled me,” muttered Roy, refolding his lapels.

“Minnie-May!” said Rally as the doors opened. May had just gotten out of the Cobra and was hauling her suitcase out of the front passenger seat. She turned at the greeting and gave a sourish smile. She wore shorts and a tight little T-shirt that prominently displayed her pregnancy.

“Hi, Ral. Hi, Roy. Hi...” She glanced at Rally, who nodded. “Hi, Bean. How’s it hanging?”

Rally heard Bean let out a long wheezing breath, and turned to see him staring in disbelief at May. “Uh...” he said, only the second time she’d ever seen him at a

loss for words. “Hi... kid.” He looked sharply at Rally. She returned his gaze with an innocently confused blink, and turned back to May.

“How you feeling? Morning sickness bothering you? How was the drive?” She took May’s suitcase and passed it to Roy.

“Hot and buggy. And boring! Until I got to Casa de Fruta, that is!”

“To what?”

“Oh, it was sooo cute! Right on the highway after I turned off into the mountains! I saw signs for it but I didn’t realize it was more than a restaurant! They had a train ride and a candy parlor...”

“That place? We filled up there and Bean got some walnuts at the fruit stand and in five minutes we LEFT! You spent all this time at a TOURIST TRAP?!”

May crossed her arms and stuck out her lower lip. “After Buttonkettle, I figured I was entitled!”

“I’ve been waiting HOURS for you to show up! And you were goofing off at CASA DE FRUITLOOP?!”

“Oh, shut up!” wailed May. “I’m tired and I’m hot and I want something to drink! Rooyo!” She flung her arms around Roy and buried her face in his shirt front. “Rally’s being mean to meee!” Roy patted May’s blonde head and made a face at Rally, who moaned in annoyance.

“God, May! Roy, take her to the coffee shop, would you? We’ll get the luggage — just leave that suitcase there.” Roy escorted May into the elevator and punched the button. As the doors closed, May turned and stuck out her tongue at Rally.

“That kid! Oh, well, she’s tired. And that baby’s weighing her down.” Rally got out her keys and examined the trunk lock before opening it. “Good... looks like no one’s tampered with this.” She raised the lid and lifted up her rifle bag to check the shotgun. “I had a special lock installed to keep my arsenal secure. Don’t want anyone messing with my precious small-arms!”

“How about messing with your small friends?” said Bean with venom.

“What? May?”

“Who the hell knocked HER up?”

“Her boyfriend. Ken Takizawa. You met him.” The jack had shifted to the back of the trunk, so Rally leaned far over and retrieved it.

“The bomb builder? That guy’s thirty-five if he’s a day! Why ain’t he in JAIL? What’s the damn police department for?”

“Bean — ”

“Ol’ Coleman wants to arrest me for a few moving violations or some eight-month-old getaway job? How about nabbing a freakin’ chicken hawk right under his goddamn nose?”

“Calm down, Bean! May’s twenty.”

He abruptly lost his indignant stance. “You’re jokin’.”

“Nope. Appearances are deceiving. You just made an assumption.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Bean, scratching his head. “She acts like such a kid.”

“You still think *I’m* a kid, Bean?”

He looked at her and his brows came down. “No.”

In one sense, she felt triumph, as if she’d proved herself to him. In another, she realized he meant she was now fair game. For anything. He reserved a protected status for anyone he thought was too young to play by the rules. Lacking that, she might expect him to pitch hardball. Certainly he’d done so yesterday, until they’d reconfirmed their pact and set the tone steady again. Today Bean had never broken his even mood until he’d seen May. One moment he could laugh and joke with her, the next he darkened like a fog bank rolling in from the sea to cut off the sun.

Rally turned, flipped the driver’s seat forward and pulled her suitcase out of the back seat. Kneeling to peer under the Cobra, she felt for her big black Magalite flashlight by the driver’s door. “I wish I’d been able to supervise the repairs. Not that I’m such a great mechanic myself. I always concentrated more on gunsmithing.”

“Want me to check it out? I’m kinda curious to look this car over anyway.”

“Sure.” Rally retrieved the flashlight. “You work on your cars yourself, don’t you?”

“Course I do,” said Bean, unclipping the tie-downs, popping the hood and playing his own penlight over the engine. “I know Mustangs and Vettes better than anybody I ever met. Sweet machine you got here.” He leaned in over the big V-8 and took the folding multi-tool from his jacket. “Twin four-barrel Holleys, ram scoops, the whole nine yards. Never found one like this for sale or I might have bought it.” Bean took a deep sniff of the hot air from the engine as he tested some hose fittings.

“Thanks. I like it too. Comes in handy for chasing Corvettes.”

“Except for taking corners at speed, babe.” He smiled and gave one of the cast aluminum valve covers a ringing tap. “GT-500s are kinda nose-heavy with this mother under the hood. Reckon you need that power steering.”

“Works for me.”

“You ain’t heated this up any? No add-ons?”

“No, I’m numbers-matching and smog-legal. As legal as these grand old machines get! One of these days they’re going to try to take them all away, I’ll bet.”

Bean creased his brow. “You could get another fifty ponies outta this block, easy. Not livin’ up to its potential.” He gave the engine another fond tap and straightened.

“You think so?”

“Hey, I own a ‘69 Mach 1 with the same powerplant. Got that baby haulin’ ass just tinkering with the carburation, and then I really got to work on it. Exhaust headers, reamed out the ports, bored it out to the max, and even upgraded the damn air filter. Figure I’m pushing five hundred horses to the ground now.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” He grinned at her over the air cleaner. “No use riding like the devil if you ain’t sittin’ in the right saddle.”

“You did all right with this car that time you, ah, ‘borrowed’ it to get Gray to New York! Drove it about a thousand miles, didn’t you?”

“Not quite that far. Part of the way was in the back of a truck, remember?” Bean replaced the hood and reclipped the tie-downs.

“Sure. I just got reminded you like to stick cars in the backs of trucks!” Rally sat sideways in the driver’s seat, her feet out the open door.

Bean laughed and got down on the floor on the opposite side of the Cobra. “If it gets me where I’m goin’, I’ll hitch a ride in anything.” He took the jack and hoisted up the car until the right rear tire was off the ground.

“Except a plane.”

“Yeah, well, we all got our blind spots.” He lay down on his back and scooted under the car. “Man, your undercarriage took a beating.”

“Geez, don’t burn yourself!” Rally shivered a little at the memory of Bean’s late Corvette. The smell of blistering fiberglass still seemed to cling to her.

“Naw, I can keep my nose off the tailpipes!” He flashed the penlight up and down, then reached out a hand beside her feet and snapped his fingers. “Loan me that big flashlight, babe.” Rally clicked it on and dropped it into his palm. “Thanks.” She heard Bean’s jacket rasp on the concrete and his voice emerge from under her. “Hmm... not too bad a job — it’s all scraped to hell, but nothing’s drippin’ that I can see. It all looks tight as a nun’s — ahem — nice and tidy. You’re gonna want to get it rust-coated before winter, but I’d figure you can take this thing on home without a problem.”

“Home...” said Rally, dropping her head on her knees. “I came out to California to get away from all the excitement in Chicago. Ha, ha.”

“Get away from it? Either it’s chasin’ you or you’re chasin’ it!” Bean scooted out from under the Cobra and rolled to his feet, brushing off. “You’re the one tailed me in Hollywood, babe.” He lowered the jack, took it out and came around the back of the car to hand her the flashlight. On the end of his chin, he had a smear of black oil.

Yes, Bean and excitement were roughly equivalent in her mind. She dealt with a lot of dangerous people in the course of her work; somehow he was the most dangerous one she knew, both for his abilities and for himself. At the most intense moments of her life, he was always there — he seemed as elemental as thunder, and as unstoppable. When lightning struck, he was inevitable. Deep in her gut, the physical awareness crawled and rumbled.

She took the flashlight from Bean and stowed it in the car again, the grip warm from his hand. “You got... some oil on your face,” Rally said, making a vague gesture toward her own.

Bean took out a bandanna and scrubbed his nose, then looked at the cloth. “No, not there.” He rubbed his cheekbones. “Nope.”

He grinned and handed the bandanna to her. Rally took it with a gulp, then looked up at him. Bean raised his brows and tilted his face, and she stood up and wiped his chin clean, her heart thumping.

When he took the bandanna again, his expression had a veiled, unusually thoughtful quality. Their eyes met and his fingers bumped hers in deliberate clumsiness. For a moment, Bean’s face angled as if he were about to lean down and try to kiss her, though he did not move to do so. Rally felt a quick stab of panic; his eyes lost their sudden warmth and he tucked the bandanna away.



“Let’s get that luggage,” he said, and picked up both suitcases in one arm. “You bringing the guns up?”

“No, I don’t want to carry those through the lobby! They’ll be fine here in the trunk — more secure than in the room. I don’t trust hotel locks, especially when every janitor has a skeleton key!”

“Gotta keep your valuables tight, babe,” said Bean, and headed to the elevator.

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“Don’t go in THERE, Rally!” yelled May from twenty feet away. “If you’re in such a big hurry — ”

“I am!”

“You are not going to find a bimbo dress in *Talbots!* Get moving!” May gestured at the spiral escalator that led up the center of the sparkling mall. Even though it was Tuesday evening, the place bustled with well-dressed shoppers.

“Oh, you’re a fine one to tell me to move! We could have done this hours ago if you’d gotten here on time!”

“You want my help or not?!” May stood with arms akimbo, her purse dangling from one wrist. “God, you’d think YOU were the pregnant one, the mood you’re in!” Rally’s face burned. That at least wasn’t possible, though she had come close! “Who gets the benefit of this outfit, anyway? Not Roy the ol’ married man?”

“Of course not! It’s for tonight when we — ”

“Woh-ho-ho! So it’s for Bean after all?” May made a vulgar hip-thrusting motion. “You think that’s the kind of woman he likes? Could be right! Can you handle all that hot male meat, virgin mother? Need some instruction?”

“SHUT UP, YOU LITTLE TRAMP!”

“HEY!” yelled May. “THAT’S LITTLE *EX*-TRAMP TO YOU!” People were beginning to stare.

“Oooh!” Rally stalked off towards the escalator and May trotted after her, still talking loudly.

“What’s the matter? Did I hit a nerve? You two been going like rabbits two nights in a row? How does he FUCK, huh, Ral? Is he hung like his shoe size or like his thumb?” May cackled wickedly. “C’mon, give!”

“I don’t KNOW how he — does it! WE DIDN’T HAVE SEX!! And that’s the truth!”

“I did not have sexual relations with that man, Mr. Bandit,” intoned May, shaking her finger. “Define ‘sex’!”

“Not in public, for crying out loud!”

“Oh, you ARE using the presidential definition, huh? You ever kiss him?”

“Why would I want to kiss him?!”

“Oh, he does it rough, huh?” May waggled her eyebrows. “Tackles you face down and rams it in doggy-style? Or he likes to screw you up the ass?” A woman next to them covered her little boy’s ears and glared at Rally.

Rally’s face burned even hotter, but she managed to get her voice under control. “I... did... not... have... sexual... intercourse... with... Bean. Or any other kind of sex.” She secretly crossed her fingers, but tried to maintain to herself that manual contact didn’t count.

“Mommy, what does ‘screw you up the ass’ mean?” asked a childish voice behind them.

Rally seized May’s arm and hustled her away at the top of the escalator. “Now, if you’re quite finished making a public spectacle of my non-sex life, can we do what we came here to do?”

“Get you a dress built for action? Try THAT store!” May pointed at a sign reading ‘bebe’. “This place is a San Francisco legend!”

“No kidding. How do you know that?”

“Guess!” May pushed Rally inside and past a headless mannequin in a sky-blue stretch mini. “Hi! she said to a salesclerk. “Bring us everything you’ve got in a six!”

Three-quarters of an hour later, Rally stood in front of a three-way mirror and stared at herself. This was certainly the tightest dress she had ever put on, and with the lowest neckline. The ruched hem reached barely three inches below the crotch when she yanked on it, and that maneuver made her breasts nearly pop out of the scooped and contoured décolletage. It was more like a racy swimsuit than a dress, and made of shiny red spandex material that made her look like a medium-priced hooker.

“I don’t know, May,” she said, shivering in the thin-strapped dress. “Isn’t this a little... much?”

May slumped on top of a pile of discarded clothing. “This is the only one that has a lot of detail on the hem, and you said you could move in it. If you are going to hide that gun, you can’t have something plainer.”

“Yes, it does hide the holster pretty well.” She hoisted the hem and looked at the garter strapped around her thigh. The dress was so short that the Guardian rode directly on her left hip. “But it’s so... obvious.”

“Add that little velvet jacket,” said May, rooting through the clothes pile. “That’ll cover you up on top.”

“I think I’m going to need a jacket, all right... it was starting to look like a chilly night when we came in here.” Rally put the jacket on and fastened the single rhinestone button. “There — that’s better.” It reached only to the bottom of her breasts, but now that her arms and cleavage were concealed, the dress seemed less precarious. “I am never going to be able to wear this anywhere else! How much is this going to be?”

“Two-twenty-five for the dress, two hundred for the jacket.”

“Yipe! And I need shoes, too... all I have with me is trainers and flats! This is getting expensive.”

“So take it out of the half-million bucks! Who cares about five hundred bucks worth of clothes?”

“I don’t get the half-million, May! Just a hundred grand, if Brown comes in one piece.”

“Oh, that’s a sure thing! And why not that suitcase?”

“It’s DRUG MONEY! It’s for the FBI!”

“For Smith and Wesson, those nice men who think you’re a ditz, but don’t care if you get yourself killed? Roy filled me in.”

“Not for them personally! Crime profits get confiscated and used AGAINST the criminals!”

“Sure. So they say. C’mon, Ral, you of all people ought to know the system doesn’t always work as advertised! If the FBI don’t even know about this suitcase yet, don’t tip ‘em off by giving them half of it. They’ll find out about the other half, and both you and Bean will get screwed.” May laughed. “Out of the money, that is! And probably straight into jail.”

Rally dropped her face into her hands. “I promised him. Maybe I shouldn’t have, but at the time it seemed the only thing to do. He hasn’t even really accepted that deal, though... he still says he wants the entire half-million.”

“Then it’s not a binding agreement, is it?”

“It is from my end! I’m not going to split hairs and I’m not going to leave him with nothing. It’s... a point of honor by now.”

“Why? What’s he ever done for you? How do you owe him?”

“It’s not a horse trade. It’s... about being able to face myself later. I owe MYSELF that.”

“Wait a minute. *Do* you owe him something? I mean, besides the fact that he led you to Brown?” May got up to help Rally peel off the spandex dress. “Why is keeping a promise you made to a criminal, under stress, so damn important?”

“It just is.” Rally stood with the dress pooled around her feet, braless and in pantyhose.

“Did you do him a bad turn? Is the money a payoff for that?”

“No! I... we had a misunderstanding.” Rally reached for her bra and blouse and hurriedly dressed. “I didn’t set out to cause trouble with him, but... well, we’re even now anyway. He kept an ace up his sleeve and I threw him a curve ball...”

“What kind of game were you playing?” snickered May. “You need a referee?”

“No. I can handle it.”

“Oh, I got it. He snuggled up to you in that motel room and made a move? And you turned him down flat? Something like that?” Rally didn’t reply. “Okay. So he’s miffed. That doesn’t mean you owe him anything.”

“Yes, I do. We are partners for this job, and I will not break that promise even if he hasn’t accepted it. He kept his word about running drugs, and I am not going to let him outdo me.”

“Oookaaay,” said May. “You going to buy that dress and jacket?”

“And shoes, and new hose, and a little purse and some black lingerie... God! Why couldn’t I have thought of playing the janitor instead of a party girl?”

“I don’t think you’d pass for the janitor, sweetheart...”

Rally's cell phone rang. "Hello?" she said, putting on her skirt. "Rally Vincent here."

"Uh... hello," said a voice she recognized as Larry Sam's. "Can you talk?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"I have something for you. No charge. I doubt you've gotten much useful information out of all those notes and clippings."

Rally sighed. "Roy and I spent quite a while on them. Interesting stuff, but lightning didn't strike."

"I thought so. But I just overheard a conversation between two dinner customers."

"Someone you thought was worth monitoring?"

"Exactly. Chinese men, well dressed — they looked like businessmen, but I thought I recognized one of them from a very old mug shot. I turned on the table mike and recorded them. I won't play it back — they were speaking Cantonese — but the gist of it was that they were talking about Brown. They mentioned that he was about to be 'let go' for incompetence and treachery, they bandied some racial slurs on Caucasians, and one of them asked the other if he thought the site was appropriate. The other thought so, but said that backup was in place just in case. Then they talked about getting together the next morning to go over the results. It certainly sounds to me as if Brown is going to be killed some time tonight."

"I think you may be right. Damn, and I'm supposed to go get him tonight — I wonder if they know he's going to make a break for it?"

"I don't think so. They didn't seem concerned about the timing. Rally, is there anything I can say to make you break this off? If you run into a Chinese hit man..."

"Don't worry about me. I wish I could contact Brown discreetly, though — I don't have any way to do that. I have to wait for him to call me."

"Is Bean pushing you to go through with this?"

"I thought Bean was none of your business, Larry."

She heard him let out a choking breath. "He's not. But if something happens to you, I'm going to feel responsible."

"Don't. Your information is going to make me safer, not more vulnerable. That's why I agreed to pay for it."

Larry sighed. “If I get any money out of this, it’s going to feel like I fished it out of the kitchen garbage. You may have been right about that. But I’m going to have to take the consequences. I’ll just have to hope that money actually functions as a shield in the long run.”

“Better than a bulletproof jacket? May it do you good.”

“Can I take that as good wishes? I hope you don’t hate me for this.”

“I don’t hate you, Larry. I... I like you, OK? I guess you’re right that we are from different worlds. But when I see you again... I’ll give you another kiss.”

“I’ll live in hope,” said Larry.

::

“Heh heh heh... OK, look in the mirror,” ordered May. “You are all gussied up.”

Rally turned, her eyes watering from false eyelashes and three applications of mascara. Her scalp burned from hot rollers, hairpins and an itchy wig, and her face felt stiff under what felt like half an inch of foundation and powder. For a moment, her vision was too blurred to make out much in the mirror over the dresser. She blinked away the tears and stared.

“Oh, my God,” was all she could say.

“You definitely look the part, sweetheart,” chortled May.

“I look like... Holy crap, May, I look like Ru-Paul in pink greasepaint! I won’t have to vamp my way past the guards — they will just SCREAM and RUN!”

“Oh, come on, it’s not THAT bad!”

“I have never seen this much makeup on anyone short of Tammy Faye Bakker! And what have you done to my nice WIG?!” It stood up in a profusion of blonde curls and tendrils, but was so thickly reinforced with chemical goop that it barely moved when she turned her head. “You’re really pissed off at me, aren’t you?”

“You wanted to look like Bean’s girlfriend. You look like Bean’s — ”

“Yeah, but even Bean has some TASTE! At least — uhm.” She broke off. “Hell, I look like I cost fifteen bucks an hour!”

“No, more like a thousand a night.” May cocked her head and pursed her lips. “You’re just not used to this style of making up. Believe me, you look good... for trailer trash!”

Rally took another look. Big mascaraed eyes, red lips — all right, she saw a pretty woman in the mirror. She looked sexy, frivolous, and not too intelligent. But that was what she had asked for tonight. This was who she had to appear to be in order to do her job. “Uggghhh...” moaned Rally, tearing off the bedsheet that she had used to protect her dress. “Where are those damn shoes?” She slipped her feet into them and tottered over to the mirror again. The strappy dress, the elaborate makeup, the fancy hairdo — she could hardly recognize herself. May had even covered her arms, back and cleavage with light pancake and added a dusting of glitter powder. “This is never going to work. I am going to walk through this entire thing with a wrinkled nose...”

“Uh-uh. Think ‘slut’. Think, ‘I am an airhead who likes to pick up strangers in bars.’ Put a squeak in your voice! Throw those tits forward, baby!” May demonstrated, strutting up and down in sweatshirt and shorts and bare feet. “Wiggle that butt! Yeah, more like that. Get those hips rolling!” Rally tried to follow the leader, but tripped in her shoes. May shook her head in disgust. “God, why’d you buy four-inch heels if you can’t walk in ‘em?”

Rally picked up her black leather flats and stuffed them into her rhinestoned purse. “I’m going to take them off as soon as I can. Let me practice for a minute!” She slung the purse over her bare shoulder and walked up and down, her gait gradually smoothing. The dress was tight, but so short it didn’t impede her stride. It tended to ride up, however, and she caught a glimpse of the little holster she wore on her left thigh. “Oooh! I am going to have to remember to yank this down every so often...”

“Like this,” said May, grabbing the hem of her sweatshirt and wriggling sensually. “Don’t just jerk it! Think, ‘Spandex butt lifter!’ Make a production out of it!”

“I have too many things to think about already!” Rally slipped a tactical gun light into her purse. “This is probably not going to pass for a penlight, but what the hell...” she muttered.

“You still sound like yourself, you know. Try talking like you’re sucking helium.”

“Yuck,” said Rally in a normal voice.

“Try again!”

“Ooooh, big guy!” Rally cooed an octave higher. “Where’d you get all those bulgy muscles? Wanna buy me a drink and go screw in my car?”

“Eeek!” said May. “Now that is REALLY frightening!”

“I’ll drop the sarcasm when I actually get there!”

“It’s ten-fifteen,” said May, looking at her watch. “Brown’s supposed to call?”

“Yes. Then I will call Bean, and he’ll bring the car to the corner opposite the hotel and wait for me. Roy’s at his hotel with the FBI agents, and I’ll take Brown there in my Cobra after splitting the money with Bean.”

“You mean, after Bean gives you the finger and takes off with the whole half-million, right?”

“No, he won’t!”

“I hope you’re sure about that, Ral.”

“As sure as I am of anything about him.”

“Yeah? You know, you probably should have slept with him.”

“What?!”

“Joke! But honestly, if it were me, and he’d hit on me under these circumstances, I’d have done it no matter how much of a barbarian he is. The sting wears off in a day, and it’d be worth it to get a little more insurance. This deal — ”

“It won’t make a cent’s worth of difference to the deal if I do...” said Rally softly.

“What?” said May.

“Nothing.”

*Breep.*

Rally picked up her phone. “Rally Vincent here.”

“Good evening, Rally.” Brown sounded far better than he had that morning.

“Hi there.” She mouthed *It’s Brown!* to May.

“I’ll be expecting you. There are three guards on duty tonight, but otherwise the place will be mostly deserted. I’ve said I’m working late — just some spreadsheets to finish up. And I’ve said I’ve arranged a meeting with... Mr. Bandit.”

“Oh, really.”

“After giving it some thought, I realized it was obvious.” He let out a soft laugh. “It reinforces my claim that I am close to recruiting him. I could wish that you had trusted me with your plans. You should recognize that we are not working on opposite sides.”



“Maybe not. But I’ve got some info for you.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve heard from a source that the hit is tonight. I don’t know when it’s scheduled. But apparently they have the assassin all lined up to take you out. We may run into the guy, if he doesn’t get there before I do!”

“Mmm,” said Brown. “I don’t think they’d arrange to have it here at their main warehouse. Probably they plan to do it later after I’ve gone to sleep. And since I won’t be returning home, that scarcely matters. But you have armed yourself appropriately, I hope?”

“Yes. Appropriate for what, exactly?”

“For surprises, I suppose.” Brown laughed with an odd note of jolly hysteria. “One must always be prepared for surprises, my dear.”

“I try to be.”

“Be seeing you,” said Brown, and hung up.

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Four-inch heels, tottering through the lobby of the Sandpiper Inn. Rally felt the gaze of the desk clerk and of an elderly couple checking in. This place wasn’t a high-class hotel, but it wasn’t renting rooms by the hour. Her outfit stuck out as far as her cantilevered breasts. She pulled the little jacket closer around her, shivering as a gust of wind entered from the opened door.

A man passed her on his way in, his head swiveling. In the glass door, Rally could see herself full-length for a moment, a long-legged, curvaceous figure with an upswept hairdo. The face was blurry, but her eyes looked huge and black-rimmed, her lips a smear of dark crimson. She pushed the door open and walked out into the night.

‘Godspeed, Rally,’ Roy had said when she had called to tell him Brown had made the appointment. Agent Wesson had taken the phone to remind her unnecessarily that Brown’s testimony was crucial to the FBI’s anti-mob efforts. Agent Smith had simply said, ‘Don’t fuck it up.’

What was Bean going to say? She caught a heel in the uneven sidewalk and stumbled, but recovered easily. Her curls stirred in the wind, a cold, damp breath from the sea. Mist was falling.

This wasn't like Chicago's wind and damp. That was freshwater wind, Lake Michigan wind, though it sometimes blew with Arctic intensity. This wind had a tinge of salt in it. It tasted like the ocean, like the expanse of the Pacific that ran all the way to the shores of China in continuous roll. San Francisco was in the United States, but it touched Asia in a way no Midwestern city could match.

Bean was waiting for her around the next corner, out of sight of the hotel. He had left after taking the luggage up to the room; Rally figured he was taking no chances at this point, as he didn't trust either Roy or the FBI. She waited for the green light to cross the street, though the traffic wasn't heavy. At least Bean trusted *her*. That she could count on.

Two haggard women loitered on the street by a pay phone, dressed far too skimpily for the weather and peering at passing cars. She turned the corner. Under a lamp halfway up the street stood Buff, and Rally strode forward. But someone was leaning into the passenger window — a woman wearing hot pants and platform boots. Rally stopped behind a tree to wait until the streetwalker moved off.

"Buzz off, babe," she heard Bean say. "I'm busy."

"You look hungry, baby," coaxed the streetwalker. "Want a date?"

"You deaf? I said, I'm busy."

"You don't look busy."

"Looks ain't everything. Move."

"You waitin' for your wife or something?" the streetwalker snarled, straightening up and tossing her bleached-blond mane in the yellowish light.

"Yeah, something. She's a hell of a better looker than you, too."

The streetwalker spat on the sidewalk and flounced off. Rally rolled her eyes and walked up to Buff. "Hey," she said to Bean in her experimental high-pitched voice, leaning down into the open window. "Let's go."

Bean looked over at her, flicking a smoked cigarette out on the street as he sat behind the wheel. He wore his hair combed back and his jacket zipped to the neck. "Man, the girls are standing in line for me tonight. I must look like I'm coming into money." He laughed shortly. "Go suck somebody else's cock, sister."

Rally could only stare.

"Beat it!" said Bean, and started the engine. "Did I pick hooker's row to park in or what?"

“Knock it off, Bean!” shouted Rally. “That’s NOT funny!” He jerked violently and snapped his head around to look at her again.

“Fuck...” he whispered.

“Yes, it’s me. Remember, I had to go shopping?”

Bean’s eyes were wide, their expression almost fearful. “Sorry, Vincent. It’s kinda dark.”

Rally opened the door and got into the car. “Thanks a lot. I TOLD May she overdid the makeup!”

Bean didn’t move for a long moment, scanning her up and down with more blatant attention than he had ever given her, even when she had disrobed in front of him in the motel room. This look had no furtiveness or restraint, and it burned her from head to foot. But his expression didn’t seem lustful or even admiring, and he gave his head a slight shake of disbelief when he had finished. “Where the hell you packing your gun?” was all he said.

Rally hoisted her skirt a little to show him the holster. “It’s a .32 caliber mini, six shot and combat loaded, and I have one spare mag. Plus a 225-lumen tactical light in my purse since the gun’s too small to attach it. That could be useful in a warehouse at night. Strong enough to dazzle dark-adapted eyes.”

“You said it, babe,” muttered Bean, and pulled away from the curb.

## ::: CHAPTER SEVEN :::

“So she’s off,” murmured Roy, putting down the hotel phone and crossing himself. “Holy Trinity and Blessed Mother, protect and preserve — ”

“What?” barked Smith across the room, speaking into his cell phone. “Aren’t they all deployed yet? This has to go simultaneously or we are well and truly fucked. You deal with it, you whining SOB — OK, call me when it’s done, and let’s make that some time before the crack of the millennium.”

He clicked off and tossed the phone onto the bed. “Some kinda problem, he says. Don’t ask me what they call a rescue operation in La La Land. That bunch’ve Academy rejects — ” Wesson threw a look at him. “What’s up your ass, Bob?”

“You feeling a little stressed, Pete?” murmured Wesson, turning magazine pages.

“Damn straight I am. You think I like having to count on Detective Coleman’s baby girl? Not to mention a big part of the operation going on half a state away. God, I wish I was out there with an assault rifle and a good squad...” Smith stamped restlessly across Roy’s hotel room.

“This isn’t Vietnam,” said Wesson mildly.

“She can do her job,” said Roy. “But I really think you should have told her — ”

“She doesn’t need to know,” said Smith. “It’d only complicate things.”

“To know that you’re pulling out his family too? Don’t you think she deserves to have some idea of the whole operation?” Roy was keeping his temper with difficulty. “If something goes wrong because she didn’t have complete information — ”

“All she has to do is bring him out and bring him here,” said Wesson, pushing up his glasses. “What she doesn’t know won’t worry her.”

“Yeah,” snorted Smith, “we don’t want to overtax that pretty head.”

“Now just a minute — ” retorted Roy. Smith’s cell phone rang.

“Smith,” he said, picking it up. “Yeah? What are you talking about?” He listened for a moment, then his ruddy face took on a different tinge. Wesson stood up. “What do you mean they’re gone? What about the Dragon cordon?”

His teeth gritted. “Great; then 426 knows. Hoo boy. Shit’s gonna spray.” Smith punched a program button and spoke to someone else. “It’s Smith. Just got a call from Rivera in L.A. The wife and kid were gone already.”

Roy let out a hissing breath.

“Yeah, they flew the coop without benefit of the Justice Department. ... Well, I don’t know, but I can guess. Who the hell else? After all that jaw, Brown didn’t trust us to do the job. Apparently the Triad men found out a couple minutes before we did... Oh, no shit.” He laughed sardonically. “I just wonder if Brown realizes that 426 is going to have his ass on buttered toast, and I don’t mean that in a pleasant way.”

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“I oughta just go in on my own, Vincent. There ain’t no reason — ”

“Oh, sure! He says something to tick you off and the FBI ends up with a few pulpy remnants instead of a witness! Not a chance, Bean! Frankly, I’m beginning to think you should just stay in the car.”

Bean put Buff into park and snapped off the ignition. They sat in a small alley between two waterfront buildings a block south of the Dragon pier. “I ain’t a freakin’ cab driver. This is my deal. And I don’t like you struttin’ in there with those damn high heels and one popgun. What if we get split up? You ain’t even got a wire!”

“May didn’t exactly bring her entire surveillance kit with her to California!” Was he actually concerned about her safety? She wasn’t sure whether to be touched or indignant.

“What about the Feds? Didn’t they offer you any hardware?”

Rally disentangled her purse from her seat belt. “No.”

“Generous of ‘em.”

“They don’t have such a high opinion of me, according to Roy. They aren’t sure I can pull this off. But they don’t have a choice, since Brown contacted me and not them. And neither do you.”

“I ain’t worryin’ about your technique, babe. I’ve seen you take out a room full of hoods without breakin’ a sweat. I just don’t trust that bastard Brown.”

“Neither do I. That’s why *you’re* on the scene at all!”

“Oh, doin’ me a favor? Well, thank ya kindly,” said Bean with a touch of sarcasm. “Damn, I want to cream a few more Chink gangbangers.” He cracked his knuckles through his driving gloves.

“The word is ‘Chinese’.” Rally got out of Buff and yanked her dress down, working the holster around and snugly up into her crotch. “And that’s not the point. It’s to get you your money, remember?”

“My two hundred and fifty thousand bucks? Yeah, I guess I better concentrate on that.”

“Yes, your — huh?” Rally stared at Bean. He gave her a crooked grin, easing himself out of the car.

“I can tell you ain’t giving up on that one, babe. It’s a fair split. Especially when you waltz into a mob hideout dressed in nothin’ but two inches of stretch material and a pound and a half of lipstick.” He consulted the big tank watch on his left wrist. “Let’s get moving. It’s six minutes to eleven.”

“Thank you, Bean,” said Rally, and put out her hand. He shook it with a controlled smile, then gave her a thumbs-up.

“Knock ‘em dead, sweetheart,” he said.

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“They’re at the gate,” said O’Toole with barely controlled excitement, pointing at a flat-panel video monitor. “Lookit that big bastard pantin’ at the wee bitch’s heels.” Manichetti took a glance, but seemed preoccupied. “We better get into position.” He straightened up and punched a button on the desk; the monitor retracted into the ceiling. “Sir?”

“Yes?” said Brown dreamily, reclined in a leather chair on the other side of the office. He had his good hand over his eyes. Beside him on a glass table sat a razor blade, a short straw, and a few grains of white powder in a vial. “Here on schedule?”

“Yes, sir. Just like ye said — both of ‘em. She’s all got up in a blonde wig, but it’s her, all right.”

“How amusing. I suppose that will fool the guards... all the better. We don’t want 426 to twig what we’re up to.” Brown sat up and stretched. “I’ll give you as much time as I can, Tom, but do be quick about it once you’ve left. Yours is the crucial

part.” He rose and crossed to a safe in the wall, spinning the combination with his left hand. “There, it’s open. Be sure to shut the door and let it lock.”

“Yes, sir. I got it all mapped out.” O’Toole paused and grimaced. “Sir, I gotta say to yeh...”

“What is it, Tom?”

“Why cannae I just shoot the pair’ve ‘em? Take care of it here and now?”

“Tom, Tom...” Brown shook his head, laughing. “We tried that before, remember? Even taken by surprise, neither of them would be an easy mark, and we will never take them by surprise. They will be very much on their guard tonight, and they are working together. Keep in mind as well that we may expect observers, who have a great interest in defending *him*, at least. Sometimes it’s far better to wound the enemy than kill him outright; an injury takes up attention that death doesn’t warrant. I won’t say I’m not tempted to let you have your way, but I’ve thought this out very carefully. Far better to let the drama unfold, and monitor the results... and of course, if I should have miscalculated, you can always use a more direct approach later. Plans within plans...”

“Yes, sir. I know yeh’ve got it better figured than anyone.”

“How about what she told you?” said Manichetti. “That the hit is tonight? You think 426 — ”

“I’m supposed to take *her* word on it?” scoffed Brown. “She’s been in town two days — who could she get that from? I’ve been promised a week, and nothing’s happened to cancel the grace period. My family’s still in place and so are you two. Smith promised me they wouldn’t start until 11:20, so nothing could have tipped off the Dragons yet. Let’s trust the FBI to get the job done.”

Manichetti looked as if he wasn’t reassured, but nodded and moved away. On a glass shelf mounted to the wall sat a large framed photograph of Brown’s wife and daughter, the little girl’s dark eyes filled with laughter. Manichetti glanced back at Brown, then reached out and picked the photograph up, putting a fingertip to the child’s face. His eyes closed briefly and he muttered under his breath, “Holy Trinity and Blessed Mother, protect and preserve...”

Brown picked up a phone on the desk and pressed a button. “Brown. I need the coordinates.” He listened for a moment. “Ah, it hasn’t moved from the hotel. That means they took his car, as I surmised they would. Very good.” He put the phone down. “Still in the parking garage, Tom. You should have no trouble finding it. How providential that 426 volunteered the existence of the transmitter.” He laughed, a little hysterically. “He did say he thought the plan might succeed...”

“Wires are all strung, sir. Don’t go standin’ near the landward wall.” O’Toole gestured out the glass wall of the office to the darkened warehouse below.

“No, indeed. Manny?” Manichetti turned around when Brown addressed him. “You’ll be leaving with Tom. This entire absence of personal security I am going to explain as a gesture of trust towards Mr. Bandit. Where did you tie her up?”

“Rental slip at South Beach Harbor. Tom says they’ll be waiting.”

“At the ballpark construction site at China Basin, yes. Then it will take you... fifteen minutes?”

“Yessir, once I get there and get loaded.”

“Excellent.” Brown checked his watch. “I believe we are as ready as we can be. Greet them at the door, please.” He sat down and put his hand over his eyes again.

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“I am in your debt, Huang,” said 426, taking off a pair of headphones. “If it were not for your electronics skills, we could never have intercepted his personal line. It was well shielded.”

“Sir,” said Huang, blushing, “I was not able to record any intelligible conversations until after our meal. You are too generous. My modest efforts — ”

“Have been pivotal in this matter. I will hear no more of this ‘modesty’.” 426 stood and put his hand on Huang’s shoulder, looking into his face with warmth. “I will recommend you for full membership at the next initiation. Speak up for yourself, and everyone will know about your worth.”

“Thank you, sir!” The young man beamed. “I don’t deserve this honor — uh, I am deeply honored and hope that I may live up to your good opinion of me, sir.”

426 genuinely smiled. “You realize how highly I esteem you, do you not? I don’t wish you to always speak to me as a numbered Triad.” His finger stroked Huang’s cheek. “Have you something more personal to say to me, Huang? Yet?”

“Sir... I mean — ” The young man blushed more deeply. “I have been wondering...”

“Go on. Speak up for yourself.”

“Uh... I asked why you had personally chosen me as your assistant so soon after I arrived, and some of the numbers laughed and told me I was lucky that you had respect for, um, innocence, and when Madame Lum brought the girls to the



housewarming banquet for the new recruits, you didn't take one, and... and you looked pleased that I hadn't either. I wondered if that meant..."

"Yes, it does." 426 smiled again. "I enjoy your society, Huang. You renew me. It only remains for you to tell me the same."

"But I never realized that you... would want me to say..." Huang looked up, his lips trembling in anticipation. "My esteem for you is beyond measure. You have taken me into your confidence, and I have hardly dared to wish — "

"It is my wish as well," said 426. He leaned down and kissed Huang on the mouth, caressing his face again. "You are so shy, my sweet boy, that I was not sure if you felt as I do. I am sorry I did not speak earlier. Obviously this is not an opportune time for personal matters. We will have dinner again and talk about things more pleasant than that son of a whore, Brown." They kissed again, deeply, and when their lips parted, 426's face had been nearly transformed. Younger, softer, the eyes even warm. "I would like you to accompany me to my personal residence tomorrow evening. If that is what you would like."

"Of course, sir," said Huang, suffused with happiness.

426 straightened and his manner changed, but the warmth remained in the room. "To business. It is well that I intended to have my men on alert tonight, and that I selected the guard detail for the pier. I could not persuade Red Mountain that Brown's outing with that bounty hunter was grounds for immediate termination, but I have better evidence now, thanks to you. I smelled something rotten the moment he told us he had an appointment with Bandit, and this conversation with the girl only confirms my worst suspicions. Prepared for surprises, indeed."

"Surprises for whom, sir?"

"He will not be returning home, he said, which means I should pull my team from there. Could he actually be planning to escape?"

"If he does, sir, he will leave his family in our hands," said Huang.

"I do not think he will do that," mused 426. "His reaction to the news that they were under guard implied otherwise. Still, it is possible — "

A phone rang, and Huang picked it up, speaking a greeting in Cantonese. He listened for a moment. "Sir, it is the team leader in Los Angeles. He says it is an emergency."

"Eh?" said 426, startled. "Put on the speaker."

“Honored sir!” squawked an urgent voice. “This is 213. Our cordon has been bypassed. Sarah Brown and her child are gone. I admit my incompetence — ”

“How? When?” said 426 through his teeth.

“Some time after six this evening. We have been guarding an empty house for hours! A gardening truck entered the grounds at six — the bags they took away must have been — ”

“Find them. Don’t rehash your mistakes to me. I want that woman in my custody. Do it!” He turned off the speaker, stiff with icy rage. His transformation was as if it had never been.

“He has had them extracted?” said Huang in astonishment. “But he’s still at the pier! We must inform our superiors!”

“No,” said 426. “We will go there now. Call the team at the house and tell them to come to the pier as quickly as they can.”

“Yes, sir. But Red Mountain — ”

“I don’t care,” said 426 with savage intensity, pulling on his gloves. “I will not clear this with the high numbers. They will debate it for another week, and by the time they make up their minds, it will be too late. I take full responsibility. It is easier to gain forgiveness than permission.” He looked at his assistant. “Come.”

“Sir,” said Huang. “I would not have thought it of him, but I suggest that Sam is the likely — ”

“At this moment, that is beside the point. Obviously Brown is not telling us the truth about his plans for the pair of them. I doubt that he is telling them the truth about his plans for himself, either.” 426’s eyes flickered. “His females have slipped from our grasp, for the moment. He has not. We will execute Brown and the bounty hunter at the pier — we will make it look like jealous murder and suicide. But we will have to hurry, because it occurs to me that if he is not truly attempting to recruit Bean Bandit, the most expeditious way to deal with the situation, from his perspective, will be simply to kill him.”

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The only thing that kept her heart from hammering its way out of her chest was the fact that she had already seen this place and had a good idea of its layout. The pier was about two hundred yards long and twenty yards wide, a straight projection east into the bay with a secondary angled groin pointing northeast.

On the main section, a huge old wooden warehouse took up all but narrow walkways that ran about halfway along the sides, from deck-level doors at the

midpoint to the courtyard in front. The secondary part was bare decking dotted with sheds and one larger building, and in poor repair, apparently unused.

At high tide, the water reached to within ten feet of the lower underpinnings of the pier, lapping audibly at the huge pilings; bundled, barnacled timbers that supported the entire structure over the muddy bottom of the bay. They clustered so densely under the planking that it was difficult to see through to the other side.

“So you’re my girlfriend for the week,” said Bean with an ironic chuckle. He took her arm while they crossed the broken pavement to the waterfront. “Where’m I s’posed to’ve picked you up?”

“In a bar, I guess,” said Rally. “I doubt anyone’s going to grill you about it.”

“Ain’t it a little strange, takin’ a pickup to a meetin’ like this?”

“Yes, but you figure they’ll humor you. They want you pretty badly.’

“Least somebody does...” muttered Bean.

The street entrance to the warehouse sat back behind a pair of flanking buildings, lit with small bulbs over the doors, but otherwise dark. Rally and Bean paused at the front of the southern one, looking to the right into a gated driveway. It passed between the buildings and came up short against a fifteen-foot steel barrier. Beyond the gate and courtyard, the landward wall of the main warehouse loomed up, nothing but a slim thread of light showing around the edge of a shuttered window high up on the facade. An attached ladder ran up to the window, the lowest part slid up and padlocked.

“Bean,” she said low.

“Yeah.”

“Take this.” She hooked a thumb into the garter, eased it off her thigh and lifted her foot to disengage it. “I want you to hold on to this for a minute.”

“Your gun?” said Bean in surprise, taking the holster, which looked tiny in his palm.

“Put it in your jacket. Quick.”

“Whatever you say, babe.” He unzipped an inside pocket and tucked it away.

“I just got a feeling.” She looked up at the light coming from the window again. “I told him where it was going to be hidden, and I don’t want anyone to find it there, because it will be obvious who I am if they do. They know you’ve been working with a female bounty hunter. I doubt they’ll search *you* really well. Too insulting.”

“Hope I can get it back to ya before ya need it.”

“Me too.” Rally peered at the gate and tugged on Bean’s elbow to pull him forward. “This isn’t a place I want to walk around in unarmed.” They went down the driveway and reached the gate. In a way, she was looking over the border of another country. The wind came up off the water and stirred through her stiffly lacquered wig, the little jacket almost no use against the chill and fog. She looked up at the sky and saw no stars.

“Can I help you?” said someone out of the dark, and a flashlight beam hit her in the face. Rally glared for a moment, then remembered her role and poked Bean hard in the side.

“Yeah, I’m here to see Brown,” he said.

“Who’re you?” The flashlight moved to Bean.

“Th’ Roadbuster, out’ve Chicago.” He grinned.

The guard came a little closer to inspect them through the bars, and Rally saw with some trepidation that he was one of the men they had fought outside Larry Sam’s restaurant — the one with the gold stud in his ear. His right arm hung in a sling and his face was dark with bruises. Would he recognize her, wiggled and made-up as she was? “OK, I remember you. Who’s the broad, then?” He looked narrowly at her.

“I just got her along for the ride,” replied Bean. “This ain’t gonna take all night.” He smiled dismissively.

The guard’s dirty smirk as he inspected her provoked a wish to slap the smile off his face, but Rally shrugged and tossed her curls. He unclipped a walkie-talkie from his belt and put it to his ear. “This is 81. The guy’s here, and he brought somebody.” A short pause. “Yeah, a woman.” He glanced over at her again, then turned his back and spoke lower. “No, but... height... Probably.” He laughed. “Yeah, I’ll call.” He put the walkie-talkie away and took out a cell phone. “This is the gate. Your appointment’s here, Mr. Brown.” He listened for a few moments. “OK, I’ll hold ‘em here. Yes, sir; thank you, sir.”

“Yeah?” said Bean impatiently.

“Somebody’s coming down to check you out.” He tucked his free hand into his jacket pocket. For a few minutes, there was silence, broken only by Rally’s tapping foot. Problems? Suspicions? Had Brown inadvertently given something away? It didn’t matter how well she played her part if he had cracked under strain... She began to shiver, a deep apprehension building in the core of her mind.

“Man, it’s cold!” said Rally in her high-pitched falsetto. She clutched Bean’s arm and looked around. “What is this dump, baby? We don’t have to hang out here too long, do we?”

“Nope,” said Bean, amused.

“It’s freezing out here by the water! I thought it was July!”

“You gotta be from L.A.,” said 81. “This is San Francisco summer.” Eventually footsteps approached from the direction of the main pier, and Manichetti emerged limping from the darkness, a business-suited Chinese man two steps behind him.

Brown’s driver wore a handsome black leather car coat and tailored slacks over his big-boned but doughy frame. His eyes glittered at her as he stood in the edge of the flashlight beam, examining her in silence. Something odd in that look, something as bleak as the black water behind him.

Rally’s eyes narrowed as she met his gaze. His skin looked grey, the lines between nose and mouth deep and harsh. Brown had said nothing about his henchmen. Were they defecting with him? How long could they last in the Eight Dragon Triad on their own if they weren’t? Perhaps he had an auxiliary plan for them, or perhaps he was abandoning them to their fate, with their consent or not.

Manichetti nodded at the guard, who took out a key and unlocked the gate to let her and Bean inside. “This way, Bandit,” he said in a strong Brooklyn nasal. “Mr. Brown’s waiting.” The gate clanged shut and was locked again. The Chinese man with Manichetti smiled faintly. Rally prickled with a deep chill, her eyes darting from one man to the other. She felt like an antelope facing a pride of sleek lions. But she had walked into the Dragon’s lair in full knowledge of the possible risks. The lack of any weapon on her person made her feel naked as they moved to follow Manichetti into the darkness.

Her eyes struggled to adapt to the dim surroundings, the pier lit only by small security lights and the general city glow reflected from the cloudy sky. The warehouse had windows up high on the facade, but only one of them was lit.

Last night they had all been bright. A lot of bustle and activity, and then nothing. She and Bean had staked out a position across the street for a while and then circulated closer after the last truck had left at about one in the morning. The guards had not spotted them. Rally, being more concealable and lighter on her feet than Bean, had done hand-over-hand on the fence along the pier and made it around the back of the smaller buildings to scout the layout. More lights had been on last night, and that along with the waning gibbous moon had let her spot all the important outside landmarks.

Now, the place seemed almost abandoned. Manichetti used an electronic key card to open the small door beside the big louvered truck entrance, and shut it behind her once she had stepped through. The solid click of locks echoed through the huge, dim, empty interior.

Up high, halfway along the length of the pier and centrally placed, was a row of large glassed-in offices, one brightly lit. Supported with huge steel beams, their construction seemed independent of the wooden warehouse, much newer. They sat forty feet above the floor, the warehouse roof twenty feet above them. A concrete-tiled walkway ran in front of the window walls. Steel catwalks crisscrossed the width of the warehouse at regular intervals, linking lengthwise walkways that ran beneath the offices.

Manichetti paused and held up a hand to indicate that they should stop. The Chinese man moved in another direction and went into a smaller office on the ground level, one without windows. After a moment, a Chinese woman in a skirted business suit emerged with the man at her heels.

Both of them walked straight up to Rally, and the woman looked her over carefully from all sides, circling her with a sharp glance. She looked about forty, stocky and solid, with long hair pulled back into a knot. When she stood in front of Rally again, she stared her in the face for an interminable minute.

“Take jacket off,” she said in a strong accent. Rally complied, baring her shoulders and the deep décolletage of the red dress. The Chinese man made a low whistle, and the woman shot a glance at him. He fell silent. Manichetti did not react, but Bean shifted his stance.

“Please, only routine,” said the Chinese man, bowing slightly to Bean. He touched Bean’s arm and ran his hands quickly along his sides, then stepped back and bowed again. “You have weapon?” Bean produced his bowie knife. The man examined it and gave it back. Bean raised his brows and tucked it away.

The woman took the jacket and examined its seams, then handed it to the man. “Give purse,” she said and held out her hand for it. She took out Rally’s flats, which she felt and bent backwards and forwards; a lipstick, which she opened and swiveled up; the earring box, which she shook and tapped and opened, making an appreciative, raised-brows sound at the contents; a crumpled tissue, a hotel key and the tactical light.

Handing the rest to the man, she held up the tactical light and clicked it on, aiming it at the ceiling. Its intense beam shot all the way to the curved hangar-like roof, unimpeded by rafters. The woman turned it off, thrust it into the purse, and stepped forward. She hooked two fingers in Rally’s cleavage and pulled the dress out, looking down her body.

Rally gasped, but the woman grabbed her breasts and felt them, then ran her hands down Rally's torso and between her legs.

"Hey!" Rally squeaked, trying to remember that she was a light-skirted airhead and not a professional bounty hunter. She wondered; why had Brown detailed someone who could search her so thoroughly, since he already knew she was going to be armed? The woman frowned and said something in Cantonese to the Chinese man, who shrugged and replied in a few sentences. She continued to frisk Rally and yanked her skirt up, revealing the black lace thong she had on underneath. The Chinese man cleared his throat.

"Bean-sie!" wailed Rally, pushing her skirt down again. "What is this shit? You didn't tell me I was gonna get strip-searched!" Bean looked disturbed; she couldn't tell if he was angry or trying to suppress a laugh.

The woman chuckled unpleasantly. "Shoes off," she said, and ran her hands inside and over the heels when Rally gave them to her. Looking for wires, apparently. It was just as well that May hadn't had her kit with her — Rally's cover would have been blown even more thoroughly than by a gun if she had brought any kind of mic or radio equipment.

The woman handed the shoes back, snapped her fingers at the Chinese man, and started back towards her office, getting out a cell phone and seeming to report in to someone. The man gave Rally back her jacket and purse and followed the woman.

Rally hurriedly put her shoes back on, hopping on one foot since she didn't care to bend over. The jacket and purse she left clutched in her hand, since Manichetti pointed his chin at a staircase that rose to the catwalks and led the way. Bean took her arm again and gave it a firm, reassuring squeeze.

Manichetti's shoes sounded heavy and metallic on the steps as they followed him, his big hands hanging at his sides, slack and inert. In Hollywood, he hadn't seemed energetic or courageous, but now he looked worse: utterly despondent. They reached the lateral catwalk and went along it to a secondary staircase that climbed about ten steps to the offices and their separate walkway. At the lighted office door, he paused on the landing and knocked.

Rally saw a figure cross the light inside through the full-length frosted glass. The lever handle turned and a shorter, slighter man opened the door.

Red-headed, the color faded to dull rust like old blood. He had a sharp, weathered face with broken veins in the nose and unnervingly light green eyes, almost yellow. This had to be O'Toole. In contrast to Manichetti's tailoring, he wore a black turtleneck and a dark green nylon jacket with multiple pockets. His trousers were the same material, tucked into boots of lace-up military style. But he was not visibly armed.

“Rally Vincent,” he said in a deep growling voice, his Irish lilt discernible. “More or less on time. And ‘er pet puppydog, eh?” He and Bean slitted their eyes at each other, but Bean said nothing.

O’Toole looked her up and down with an ugly expression, his eyes on a level with her upper chest — he might be about five foot six, considering that she stood nearly six-two in four-inch heels. Rally felt the growing heat of resentment, her teeth clenching, and she put her hands on her hips and stared him down.

O’Toole slid a look over to Manichetti, then back to her. “Got a firearm on yeh, girlie?”

“He has it,” said Rally, and held out her hand to Bean. With a glance, he fished the little Guardian out of his jacket.

O’Toole snagged it out of the holster as Rally reached for it and gave it a heft. “Know how ta use this, girlie?” He popped the magazine, pushed it back in, sighted along the tiny barrel and spun the gun on his forefinger, then tossed it carelessly to her. She caught it out of the air, spun it forward and in reverse, snapped it into her grip and aimed between his yellow eyes. Her finger stayed clear of the trigger, but the bodyguard’s arched eyebrows went up.

“Fancy. Just the thing for fightin’ off the boys that get too eager. Well, jam it back between yer titties and let’s get this show on the road.”

Rally slid her skirt up a few inches, strapped the garter on and put the Guardian away. O’Toole’s eyes darted down to her hemline and he showed a few nicotine-stained teeth in an ironic smile.

“Mr. Brown’s in ‘is office,” he said, and pointed to a half-open interior door a few steps down the corridor. His hands were corded and muscular, devoid of rings, but scarred with small white patches and rifle calluses.

Manichetti let out a long breath through his nose and turned to the exterior door. O’Toole clapped him on the back with a reassuring air. “Cheer up, Manny. She can do ‘er job.” He held up his bandaged left wrist. Both of them looked at her again, Manichetti still bleak, O’Toole with dark humor. “Time we faded into the woodwork,” he said, and started to move out the door.

“Just a minute!” hissed Rally. “I told Brown to leave you two out of it! What the hell is going on?”

O’Toole smirked. “We’re leavin’, right? Ask himself if ye’ve got a complaint.”

He gave her a lascivious wink and clanged down the metal stairs with Manichetti. What now? What if she gave in to her gut feeling and walked out of here? She



would have to pass Brown's two men, the office by the door, and the guard outside. Even if they let her go, she would then have to face Bean and the FBI without either Brown or his half-million. Rally took a deep breath and walked down the hallway to the open door, Bean following. Peering around the corner, she saw plush pale carpet, a large expanse of thick floor-to-ceiling glass wall and a row of stylish halogen track lights on the ceiling. Their hot white glare bounced off the glass, obscuring the view from the office bridge.

"Brown?" She moved forward a step.

"Please come in," said Brown, sitting with his back to her in a swivel chair that faced a small computer desk. "Just a moment — I'm sending some email." He clicked his mouse with his left hand, swung around and got up. "Hello, Rally — Ms. Vincent." His face went a little pale as he looked at Bean. "I'm very pleased to see you again, Mr. Bandit."

"Yeah?" said Bean ironically. "Can't say the same to you."

"Ah..." Brown turned back to Rally. "Do sit down, please. What an interesting outfit. Not your usual look."

"No, but this time I picked it out all by myself."

"Touché. May I take your things?" He laid her jacket and purse on a small leather sofa. "How did the guards treat you?"

"I was so thoroughly searched I feel like a crime scene. Why did you assign that prison matron to guard duty?"

"Prison matron?" Brown looked out through the glass.

"A woman, with a real professional technique."

"Ah. Hair in a bun, square chin?"

"Yes, and she wasn't shy at all." Rally adjusted her strapless bra through her dress. "Isn't she yours?"

"No, she's not. I don't assign the guards. But she's never been on guard duty here before... she oversees the vice businesses on the West Coast. Her name is Lum."

"Great, so I've been checked out by a big-time madam. OK, basically, that means someone knew I was coming, or made a good guess. And the gate guard was someone who's seen us before — he's got one arm in a sling, so they sure didn't choose him for his physical prowess. What's going on here, Brown? It's starting to seem like they know what we're up to."

“I really don’t think so.” He was moving towards a bar cabinet. “May I offer you anything?”

“No, thanks.” Rally shut the office door.

“Mr. Bandit?”

“Nah,” said Bean, looking around at the office and its furnishings.

“I’ll have a whisky, if you don’t mind.” He poured two fingers of Laphroaig into a crystal glass and toasted her with his left hand. “To success.”

“Yeah, fine,” said Rally. “Shall we go?”

“Oh, not so fast.” He smiled and downed the liquor. “You came here for more than just me. Let’s get the suitcase and satisfy you as to its contents first.” He glanced at Bean, who smiled humorlessly.

“Oh. Yes.”

“You must be feeling very tense, Ms. Vincent. I sympathize.” He chuckled. “I’ve been sitting here for two hours thinking about Chinese assassination techniques.”

“Oh.”

“Seeing that you’ve made it safely inside does make me feel better. So far, so good, huh?”

“I suppose so. What are your men doing here? I told you to keep them clear.”

“I apologize if they startled you.” Brown looked a little sheepish, which became him rather well. “O’Toole’s not the most polished of men — I heard the conversation in the hall, of course. But I’ve sent them away now. They won’t be an impediment.”

“Oh, speaking of bad manners...” Rally dug in her purse. “Here.” She produced the earring box and tossed it on his desk. Brown looked confused for a moment, then offended. “No complaints from you. You know why I don’t want them!”

It looked as if he didn’t know, but Brown picked up the box, opened it for a moment, and put it in his pants pocket with a sigh. “Very well. I defer to your sense of propriety.”

“Good.” Seeing him suitably chastened and those dratted earrings off her hands lifted her mood. Despite herself, she began to relax a little. Everything was under control.

This office was not menacing in the least — it was in elegant, rather European good taste, filled with sleek, comfortable-looking furniture and sophisticated artwork. Only its obvious expense reminded her this man was a gangster. That silk jacket couldn't hide a holster, and he had none that she could see, nor any armored vest. O'Toole had left. Bean was with her, for once keeping his mouth shut, and Brown wouldn't dare do a thing. He wasn't stupid, but for some reason he had chosen a criminal life. And Bean had chosen one too. Was there one single thing else they had in common? Bean next to Brown looked like a battle tank next to a Ferrari. The thought gave her an inadvertent giggle. Brown smiled at her with a whimsical question in his expression.

“Oh, nothing,” she said. “What about your wife and your daughter? You never told me if you were sending them away, and now that you're going to defect — ”

“No need to worry,” said Brown. “They're being...” His expression veiled slightly. “They will be safe soon. I was just sending a message to my wife's laptop to... confirm that you had arrived.”

“We're not out of here yet.”

“No. But there isn't really any reason to rush.” He glanced out the huge glass window wall, though nothing was visible through it because of the office's bright illumination. “The observers will assume that I'm... getting acquainted with Mr. Bandit and his lovely companion.” Rally cast a quick look at Bean, but he only flicked his gaze past Brown as if he didn't exist.

Brown's smile held nothing but humor, though his eyes were opaque. “Please have a seat. I'll get that suitcase.” He indicated the small leather sofa and armchair between the door and the window wall. A gracefully sculpted cast-glass table, like a piece of frozen waterfall, stood in the center of the group.

Rally sat on the sofa, keeping her knees together and giving her dress a discreet yank. Bean stayed by the door. She took the opportunity to survey the room; Brown had occupied most of her attention until now. From entry door to opposite wall, it was about forty feet long. Thirty feet deep, the width of the cantilevered bridge that held all the offices.

The back wall was conventionally finished in sheetrock, as were the widthwise walls for about half their extent. The remaining parts of the walls were made of white sandblasted glass, etched in irregular patterns like ice or flowing water and meeting the window wall. In the corner opposite the entry door sat a satiny rosewood desk and executive chair, backed only by glass.

Brown moved to the back wall and rolled a large abstract painting aside, revealing a wall safe. He spun the combination and opened it. Inside was a dark rectangle with rounded corners — a big suitcase of black-anodized aluminum.

Battered and scuffed, it looked out of place in Brown's hand. He put it on the floor, closed the safe and moved the painting back into place.

Rally noted that even though he was doing everything left-handed, he hadn't yet seemed notably awkward, only slow. He'd had very little time to get used to the injury, which must be painful still. She could only chalk it up to natural grace.

"How's your hand?" she asked, to her own surprise.

Brown glanced up as he picked up the suitcase again. "It's not my greatest concern at the moment."

"Worried about the Dragons?"

"Oddly, no. I think I've read them correctly. As I told you, I'm not so bad at that, most of the time." He came over to where she sat and put the suitcase on the glass table. "When I've been wrong, I've acknowledged my mistakes and asked for forgiveness. Or I've paid for it. Care to count the cash?" He sat opposite her in the leather armchair and put one ankle on the opposite knee, his slim Italian shoes so new they had no scuff marks on the soles.

"That would take a long time."

"But you certainly want to see that this isn't full of cut newspaper." Brown crinkled his turquoise eyes at her, ignoring Bean, who approached and stood behind the sofa Rally sat on. "Please do open it. Or I can do the honors if you prefer." He leaned forward.

"No, that's OK." Rally laid the suitcase flat on the table and pressed the catches inward.

The lid sprang up to reveal close-packed wads of hundreds. Each had a paper band around the middle. There would have to be five thousand bills in this case to make up the total.

She picked one wad up and flipped the ends. Fifty hundreds, five thousand dollars in a wad. Some were old-style, some had the newer design, and their condition and crispness varied. Eight wads across, three down, packed four deep, plus four more along the bottom. It was all there.

So much cash all at once hardly registered as real money. Her emotions kept insisting that this was only a case full of funny green paper with portraits of Ben Franklin. Rally lifted a sheaf of wads, hefted it and put it back, smelling the inky fragrance, feeling the tough silken texture. Half a million dollars... enough to solve every cash flow problem she would have well into the next millennium.

Rally shut down the thought, and closed the case. “Looks good. Bean?” She glanced up to see his reaction.

“Beautiful,” he replied, a smile in his voice. Rally returned the smile.

“You appreciate beauty, do you?” Brown chuckled. Bean narrowed his eyes. “Alas, that’s not for me to know.”

“Brown...” said Rally in a warning tone.

“Yes, of course.” Brown put up his hands. “I beg your pardon.”

“You’re forgiven. But I’d advise you to keep quiet, because we still have a way to go before this is over.” Rally started to stand up. “All right, it looks like we’re set. Bean, you carry the suitcase, and I’ll — ”

A loud rap sounded on the door. Everyone in the office started, and Brown put a hand on the suitcase. “Yes?” he called.

“Mr. Brown,” replied a youthful voice. “Red Mountain 531 and Red Gourd 492 are here to meet your guest. Red Pole 426 has also just arrived.”

“Good God,” breathed Brown. Aloud he said, “One moment.”

“Why are they here?” Rally whispered fiercely, springing from her seat. Bean gritted his teeth.

“I... I don’t know.” Brown clenched his one good fist. “But I can’t delay. I have to let them in.” He crossed to the door and opened it, simultaneously bowing low.

In walked two elderly, respectable-looking men, attired in conservative suits. Behind them came another Chinese man, middle-aged and similarly dressed, and two young men in their twenties, one carrying a couple of bottles of expensive California wine.

Of the five, the one that caught Rally’s attention was the middle-aged one. The older ones were smiling benignly; the younger ones kept their gazes cast down. The other looked directly at her and at Bean, the expression of his eyes holding something far colder, more remote and even more dangerous than anything she had ever seen on Bean’s face.

His appearance wasn’t distinctive in any way; his cropped hair had a sprinkling of grey and his brows were wide and heavy. But she let her eyes linger on him a little longer than she should have, trying to make sense of him. He seemed to look straight through her disguise, but he also seemed not to care a great deal. It was as if he had known exactly who she was long before he had come here and had dismissed her out of hand. Rally broke the look and stepped back, closer to Bean.

“Brown,” said one of the elderly men in a gentle tone. “Will you not introduce us?” His British-tinged accent had the precise ricochet quality of a native Chinese speaker, but his face was not entirely Asian; his eyes looked European in shape and in color — a lighter brown.

“Uh...” Brown licked his lips and put on a smile. “What a pleasant surprise, sir. I had not expected this honor.”

“This must he be, yes?” said the other elderly man, eagerly smiling at Bean and speaking in a heavy Chinese accent. “Goodness, he extensive individual!”

“Mr. Bandit,” said Brown, finally regaining some poise, “these are the two most senior members of the Eight Dragon Triad in this country. Bean Bandit; Red Mountain 531 and Red Gourd 492.” The man with the not-quite-Asian face bowed his head at the name of Red Mountain. Red Gourd stepped forward and extended his hand to Bean. No one paid any attention to Rally, which suited her very well.

Bean looked uneasy, but shook hands with both men. “Hey there. Call me Bean.”

“A-and,” stuttered Brown, “this is Red Pole 426.” The middle-aged man inclined his head and stayed where he was.

“We are honored to meet you, my good man,” said Red Mountain. “The tales of your exploits have amazed us for some time. It is our great hope that you will consider our offers in a favorable light. How do they strike you?”

“I ain’t heard none yet,” said Bean.

“Ah... I see we are premature,” said Red Mountain. He looked at Brown. “We do not mean to interrupt your conference, but there is no hurry. Please, allow us to take over the interview for a little while, and gain an acquaintance with this most fascinating person.” He snapped his fingers at the young men, who had not yet been introduced. “Huang. Assist Wo with the wine.” The young men bowed and left the room.

“No... hurry?” said Brown. “What do you — ”

“The hours will pass at the same rate in any case,” said 426. “A week — or five days — a great many hours will pass in that time.” The lights went on in the next office, towards the center of the warehouse; they shone through the section of sandblasted glass that looked like ice. Rally saw Brown shiver. Was this the man who would have killed him when the week was up? She felt sure that he was.

“Please, Mr. Bandit,” said Red Mountain, “come with us. There is a suitable room next door, my former office, which is being prepared. Will you take some refreshment? Have you eaten?”

“Yeah, I ate,” said Bean. “Look, Red, I didn’t think I was gonna get the third degree tonight, and I ain’t in the mood for it. Can I get a rain check?” He didn’t look at Rally, but he did glance at the table where the suitcase lay.

“You have another affair tonight?” said Red Gourd, crinkling up and nodding. “Such man must apprehend his women!” The old men chuckled and looked at her cleavage. “She is very comely, yes? And makes energetic in the act of intimate congress?”

“Uh... yeah, hotter’n a pistol,” said Bean. He slipped an arm around Rally’s waist. “So I ain’t hangin’ out here all night, see?” Towing her along, he made a move for the table. “You coming, Brown?”

“How friendly you have become with the man who cheated you and tried to kill you,” remarked 426. “All differences forgotten?”

“Working on it,” said Bean. 426 casually stepped into his path, so he halted. “Pleased to meetcha, but I gotta go.”

Rally felt him squeeze her side; his muscles went taut as wire. Bean and 426 stared into each other’s eyes. Of all the people in this room, probably 426 had the best idea of what might happen in a few moments. Rally placed her right hand close to her thigh, where the little Guardian snuggled heavily. Thirteen shots; that was what she had to work with, and she had no doubt that all the new arrivals were armed.

“We will not keep you long,” said Red Mountain. “There will be no third degree. I will toast your health, and we will drink to your good fortune, and perhaps ours.” Huang came back into the room. “All is ready. Mr. Brown will be glad to keep your woman company, I believe. One drink, yes?”

Bean hesitated, his eyes flicking from one man to another. Rally put her hand on his back and moved it slightly up and down. It was all right, she tried to convey. If these old gangsters just couldn’t let him go without acting like a couple of starstruck groupies, so be it. All it would cause was a delay. She thought about Roy waiting in his hotel room with a couple of impatient FBI agents. Well, it couldn’t be helped. Bean’s tension eased slightly, and he patted her rump. “OK, I’ll drink with ya. Keep it warm for me, baby, ‘cause I’ll be right back.” He let her go and preceded the old men out the door.

426 remained for a moment, looking at Brown. “You have indeed been honored by this visit, Brown. I had not anticipated it either.”

“No?”

“I did not accompany them here. When I arrived, their limousine had just pulled up in front of the pier. Their driver is waiting; they will not stay long.” He made an expression that on another face might have been a smile, and went out the door. Huang followed, shutting it behind him. Rally let out a long breath and flopped down on the sofa.

“Oh, *fuck*,” said Brown softly, sitting in his desk chair. “God damn it all to hell...”

“You can say that again,” said Rally.

“It seems you were correct about the hit. Thank God, Red Mountain and Red Gourd got here first.”

“Before Red Pole 426? Now that is one scary guy.”

Brown nodded slowly. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you all I know about him. He is the Dragon chief assassin, and he would like nothing better than to carry out my sentence. He burned a man to death once. With a blowtorch.”

“Eww!” said Rally, clenching her teeth and pulling her lips back in disgust. “I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy! That’s about the most horrible way I can imagine for someone to die!”

“I would have to concur with that,” said Brown with conviction.

“We can’t leave until the bigwigs do, can we?”

“Absolutely not. A dreadful insult.” He checked his watch. “But 426 can’t do anything until they leave, either, so it balances out. For the next ten minutes or so.”

“They just wanted to *meet* him? What’s that all about?”

“I told you they were very insistent that I hire him.” Brown wiped his damp face with his pocket square. “I didn’t realize they were such big fans.” He let out a shaky laugh, then got up and fumbled with the bar cabinet. “I need another whiskey — I just went stone cold sober.”

In point of fact, she felt distinctly limp. “As long as you’re pouring, give me one too. Put some water in it.” Brown made her drink and passed it to her, then poured himself a stiff slug. They tossed the liquor back and put the glasses down. The stuff burned a warm streak all through her. She breathed out a little cloud of Laphroaig and put her feet up. “That’s better. Now we just wait for them to get through drinking, huh? Maybe they’ll escort us out to Bean’s car!”



Brown looked at his watch. "It could be a little while, I'm afraid."

"Not if Bean has anything to say about it."

"True," said Brown, smiling. "I believe they're rather in awe of him."

"That *was* pretty funny," said Rally, beginning to snicker. "I wonder if they'll ask for his autograph?" Brown laughed out loud, and she joined him.

"I can't imagine he's encountered this before," mused Brown after a moment. "He must be feeling rather self-conscious. Not a man who wants to be the center of attention in a social gathering."

Rally only snorted. He wasn't going to draw her into personal conversation this time, if she could possibly help it.

"The woman I interviewed — I believe I mentioned her? — said he never wanted to go anywhere with her. No eating out, no going dancing, not even a movie once in a while. His interest in her lay in only one direction — well, she put it more baldly than that, but I'm sure you get the picture. The relationship lasted about six months. I gathered that she enjoyed his sheer physicality at first, but that she also felt the need to have a meaningful conversation once in a while. He likes to order in and watch videotapes." Brown reclined back in his chair. "I can't say that would be to my taste, but to each his own."

There he was, talking about Bean's sex life again. "Really? I guess that sounds pretty dull to a big-time Hollywood pusher who likes to blow his drug profits out on the town with young, expensive mistresses. How does your wife feel about that, Brown?"

"Ah... now, Rally, I'm not that bad. Truly."

"Pull the other one, Sly. I can't believe that's your real name. It fits you too damn well."

"I'll admit I *was* a playboy before I married. If I told you the names of some of the women I dated, you'd put me down as an insufferable egotist."

Now that she thought about it, she was almost positive she had seen a picture of him with Madonna in 'People' magazine a few years back. "I already have, so no problem there."

"Ouch." He looked plaintively at her. "Do you have that much contempt for me, Rally?"

"Well, let me see... yes, I do. But I told you — I don't care. I don't have to put up with you past tonight. Talk all you want; I'll just let my mind wander."

Brown heaved a sigh. “I deserve that. Neither you nor Bean will stand for cocktail chatter. I shouldn’t have tried to impress you, or give you things you had no desire for. Obviously it was futile, and I apologize. “

“Hmm... you know, there is one thing I want from you. I might think a little better of you if I get it. How about it?”

“What is it? If it’s within my power — ”

“Your file on Bean. You said you had clippings and documents. I want them.”

Brown raised his brows and blew out his cheeks. “I’m so sorry; I don’t have it with me. You would like to give it to him?”

“Yes, I would. I think he deserves it. Frankly, it’s more his than yours.”

“You may have a point there. Unfortunately, it’s not here, and I can’t get hold of it now. If I’d known a little earlier...”

“Who’s got it? The Dragons?”

“Ah... yes. It’s in another office across town... 426’s office, in point of fact.” Brown shrugged. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to retrieve it.”

“Damn.” She sat back on the sofa. “There’s only one copy?”

“Yes, there’s only one. But, Rally, I have studied it very thoroughly, and much of the information I have is stored only in my head. I know the answers to all the questions that can be answered. Would you like me to tell you more of what I know about Bean?”

“Yes, I would. One thing, though...”

“Yes?”

“Keep it to the straight and narrow, Brown. I don’t want your prurient speculations about his personal life, or his sex life, or about how bad a boyfriend he might have made once upon a time. I want to know the facts, and that’s all. So leave your dirty mind out of it.”

Brown flushed a little and tightened his lips. “Very well.”

“Begin at the beginning. Who adopted him?”

“A married couple of working-class origins. They are both dead now, but they were residents of eastern Michigan. The wife died first, of lung cancer, and the

husband two months later in a botched armed robbery — they had been bankrupted by medical bills. Their adopted son went to relatives of the husband in southern Illinois. Four months later, he turned up in a parking lot, as I told you. Half starved, and showing signs of constant beatings. His custodial family never claimed him — one or two of its members might have been arrested if they had. He went into the county foster care system but eventually was transferred into homes in Chicago where space was available. He was an indifferent and rebellious student, except in shop class and athletics, and was always large for his age... his medical records show his growth rate throughout childhood as far above the 90th percentile, and that was with an incorrect age estimate. Recall that he is two years younger than he believes.”

“I told him.”

“Naturally, you would have. You do seem very fond of him.”

“Brown...”

“Sorry.” He looked out through the window wall. “It’s just that I... well, I am in awe of the relationship you have with him. He seemed so impenetrable, and you have him eating out of the palm of your hand. And the poor man hasn’t even earned a kiss from those cruel lips? I will count myself lucky — ”

“Will you *shut up*? You must watch a lot of bad movies.”

“Please, tell me he hasn’t been entirely deprived. Surely he’s — ”

“I’m about to pistol-whip you into silence, Brown!” Rally was so angry she lost her head for a moment. “Yeah, he kisses a hell of a lot better than you do, you child molester! Satisfied?”

“Good heavens, Rally. Please try to keep your temper.” Brown didn’t try very hard to suppress his smile.

“It’d be a lot easier if you kept your promises! Get back on the subject! I want to know who his parents were. What did you mean by racially mixed, and does this have something to do with why the Dragons want him so much? You said that you could tell him how to defend himself against them. Why do you think he needs something for defense other than himself? What’s in that pretty head of yours, Brown?”

Brown’s desk phone rang. He picked it up immediately and put it to his ear. “Brown.” Listening, he left his eyes on her. “It’s a supplier of mine,” he said, putting his hand over the receiver. “Excuse me.”

He turned his chair to look out through the window wall. “No, the deal will go through. Yes, very important, but high numbers are not our only concern. We

may have to sacrifice some longer-term goals for immediate profits... How many?... That ought to do, though I admit it's a struggle to forecast demand. Has the delivery been made? Ah... good. If it doesn't end up being paid for as expected, you will have to reclaim it. Please execute the larger order as soon it arrives, if at all possible — yes, I know that is a change of plan. The other one we should handle in-house. I will expect a report soon.”

He put down the receiver and spun the chair back to face her. “I'm still considered a decision-maker, as you see. That courtesy won't be extended too much longer.”

Rally turned her head, her senses prickling. What was that sound outside? Something was making noise at the landward end of the warehouse, as far as she could tell. It had approached for a while and stopped nearby, engine going. It might be a truck pulling up, though it almost seemed to come from below. But the office's soundproofing was too thick to let her make out the details.

“There's some loading going on,” said Brown with his eyes on her face. “A local shipment.”

“What of? This place looks completely cleaned out.”

“That's correct. The Dragons are abandoning it soon. I'm the only executive who hasn't been transferred to the new offices yet.” Brown rose and strolled over to the bar cabinet again, opening a humidor. “Mind if I smoke?” He took out a cigarette and closed the humidor.

“Because you were targeted for termination?”

“Apparently so.” He picked up a sleek gold desk lighter and took a few draws on the cigarette between his lips, smoke puffing into a small cloud around his head.

“Let's get going, Brown. I don't like hanging around in here.” Rally rose and grabbed her jacket and purse. “I'm sorry to insult the bigwigs, but we have got to move. Bean can take care of himself. We can get to the hotel in ten minutes, even walking.”

“Not so fast.” He shook his head with a smile. “I... would prefer to wait until the truck leaves.”

She took a hard look at him. “All right. But if they're not gone in five minutes, I'm leaving anyway. And you are going to come with me.”

“But... what about the money?” Brown gestured at the suitcase on the glass table. “We can't leave it here, and walking through this district at night isn't safe. Mr. Bandit might become perturbed if we took it and left without him, in any case.

Perhaps he'd be afraid that you and I alone in a hotel room..." By now his smile was thoroughly nasty.

Rally let out a furious breath and seized the handle. "He'll figure it out. I don't want to stay here one moment longer, no matter what's going on outside. If you don't get a move on, your Mr. 426 is going to get his wish. And then you can just merrily burn in hell, Sylvester Brown." She lifted the suitcase — it wasn't light — and turned to the door.

"No, I don't think so," said Brown. "I'd far rather it was you."

"If that's a joke — "

"About as funny as this one." He turned to the glass wall and clenched his fist.

And the whole heavy expanse of glass leapt out of its frame, bursting inward in a spray of diamond fragments like a crystal waterfall. Slow, graceful, it seemed to her suddenly combat-alert senses. The rifle report stretched out into a roll like thunder, and crashed again, and again. The suitcase went spinning — only the handle remained in her grasp. Shot off!

Rally dived for the rosewood desk, grabbing her purse by the strap, drawing her Guardian and rolling between the heavy drawer pillars. Brown stood stock-still, smiling at her while the glass pattered around him. *BKAM BKAM BKAM* went the rifle, the slugs hitting the carpet right in front of her. And then it stopped.

Shouts next door. "RALLY!" bellowed Bean, heard dimly through the wall. "What the fuck — " She heard several excited voices speaking Cantonese, then heavy footsteps pounded along the corridor. The door opened and one of Bean's boots came in sight from her vantage point.

*BKAM BKAM BKAM BKAM*. She heard lead hit bone and flesh, and gasped. Bean let out a sharp grunt, and the door opened all the way, someone leaning heavily against it. The man slid down the door and fell, one arm flinging out. It was Huang, crying in pain. Bean seemed to stumble in the corridor; then his footfalls ran towards the outside door and clanged down the steps.

"RALLY!" he yelled again, loud and clear through the shattered window. "I'LL GET THAT FUCKING MICK FOR YOU — YOU TAKE CARE OF BROWN!"

Huang groaned and kicked his legs in agony. The Cantonese voices went on, then moved in the other direction along the offices. Apparently there was an exit at the south end too — what was 426 going to do, once he got the old men to safety?

Rally got her sights on Brown's heart and began to squeeze the trigger. He turned to face her full on, his hands in his pockets and the cigarette between his lips. The Guardian's stiff trigger began to move — and then she snapped the shot up over

his head and into the ceiling. *BAM*. He wasn't armed. She couldn't possibly kill a crippled, unarmed, unresisting man. She took a deep breath and prepared to make a dash for the door. Brown made a gesture. *BKAM*. Another slug buried itself in the floor and she flung herself back under the desk with such force that she hit the chair behind it. It rolled three feet backwards and went over the edge, unimpeded by the few shards of glass remaining embedded in the sill. A moment later she heard it crash on the concrete forty feet below.

"He's very good, you know," said Brown conversationally. "O'Toole, I mean. He's made head shots at nine hundred and fifty yards with a crosswind off the Irish Sea. He hits what he means to hit."

She put the sights back on Brown. "What's your game? Just to kill me and Bean?"

"I'd assume they'll accomplish the latter posthaste, now that he's heading outside. A pity to waste all that ferocious animal energy, but he was just too dangerous."

"No!" Rally scoffed, disbelieving but with rising apprehension. "You'll never kill him — he's got his jacket —"

Brown cocked his head as if listening. Outside and far away, someone was shouting. "Surveillance camera," he said, and walked to the desk to click a switch, avoiding the area within Rally's reach. A panel slid back on the ceiling and a screen descended, oriented towards the desk. A sharp black-and-white picture flickered in, soundless.

The open area behind the gate and in front of the warehouse, with a slice of dark water showing beside the pier. Many figures struggling — about six, but the confusion of scrambling bodies made it difficult to tell. Two men lay sprawled, unconscious or dead. One broke free from the pack and staggered to his feet, a tall man with a shock of black hair and a broad streak of blood down his face. Bean went down again under three attackers.

"Sixty seconds," said Brown, consulting his watch. "There are eight well-trained mercenary thugs on him, as you see — some friends of Mr. O'Toole's — and therefore the fight shouldn't last too much longer." Brown blew a wreath of smoke from his cigarette, the tendrils drifting across the screen. The fight continued behind the silhouette of his head, the pile of men heaving and struggling with their quarry. "Touching, really."

A knife flashed a slice of light into the camera. Bean's arm slashed downwards and a man spun away with a silent spray of black blood from his throat. Another aimed a silenced weapon and fired, and as Bean warded off the slugs with upraised arms, a third man swung a weighty-looking sap at the back of his head. Outside, Rally heard muffled zips and a heavy thud.

Bean jerked, his shoulders hunching, half turned, and collapsed. The remaining men converged on him, picked him up by both arms and both legs, carried him to the railing, heaved his long limp body over and dumped him into the water with a tremendous splash. He sank instantly and did not come up.

“Just like a movie, isn’t it?” said Brown. “I really should have become a director.”

She felt a lump rise in her throat, an awful catch start in her breathing. “Oh, God.”

“Yes, Rally, he’s unconscious and sinking to the bottom of the bay in that weighty flak jacket. He’s dead, or will be in a few minutes. The only obvious cause of death will be drowning, to which even he is scarcely immune.” Brown grinned merrily. “And your friend May Hopkins, five months pregnant with her first child, is currently asleep in her room at the Park Hilton, one floor up from Detective Roy Coleman, who flew out from Chicago to meet you. He is waiting in his own room for you to return there with me. There are two FBI agents waiting with him. Eventually they will give up and leave when we don’t show. Coleman will probably consult with May, as she is expert in the use of tactical explosives, and they will leave the hotel in search of you. Probably they will come straight here. When they do, they will end up at the bottom of the bay with Bean. And you.”

“You bastard! You *bastard!*” She started to lunge forward, then stopped.

“Feeling betrayed, Rally? Perhaps by love of money?” Brown laughed and glanced at the suitcase, lying handle-less on the carpet. “For a share in this, and for the reward on me? Or have you done all this for love of that man? Maybe you should’ve screwed him after all, huh?” His accent changed, his face took on the cheap snarl she remembered from Hollywood. “He’s gonna be an ice-cold fuck tonight, you little whore.”

Her sights trembled on him. He wasn’t more than fifteen feet away from her. She’d used only the bullet in the chamber. Six rounds in this magazine, six more in the spare. She could punch a neat circle through his black heart, she could fill his braincase with lead and put out both those icy turquoise eyes, which were probably colored contacts, the vain bastard. It would be so easy.

But Brown wasn’t armed and he hadn’t made a single move for a weapon. With his crippled hand, he couldn’t have used a gun anyway. Instead he commanded O’Toole’s rifle, which was placed high up and about a hundred yards away. The Irish sharpshooter couldn’t be closer than the landward facade, since the trajectory of the bullets had been too high for him to be on one of the catwalks. Of course that range hardly mattered with a good sniper rifle. He could take her out in an instant now that the window was gone, if she showed herself.

Wasn’t that the same as if Brown himself held the gun on her? Wasn’t it? Couldn’t she at least drop him writhing beside Huang with a nice painful slug

through the guts? He wouldn't die if she picked her target carefully; he was well-conditioned and healthy, and O'Toole would be distracted by the need to help him. He'd come down from the high window and run to the office. Manichetti was probably waiting to help them escape and would abandon his post too, so wounding Brown might be the best way to get out of here unmolested, if she moved fast.

Her finger tightened on the trigger again, but something held her back. She had a gun loaned to her by the SFPD, because Roy had vouched for her. If she shot Brown now, handicapped as he was and clean of weapon in this cleaned-out warehouse... That was what all that activity the night before had been about. The place had been scoured. Why? What could that mean? She glanced back over her shoulder as she crouched under the desk, out at the blasted window wall and the concrete walkway in front of it, six feet out and four feet down.

"Waiting for something, Rally?" Brown chuckled. "Inspiration? Cavalry over the hill? Or was the white knight supposed to be Bean?"

The only exit from this place was through the interior door and the hallway out to the north catwalk. The other way had 426 at the end. She would have to cross thirty feet of carpet to reach the door, and she'd have to climb over the wounded Huang's body. O'Toole could riddle her with bullets in that time. And even if she made it, she would be exposed on the catwalk, on the stairs and all the way across the bare concrete floor. If he were placed in a window high up on the facade, he could swing around and fire at her even after she left the building. The odds were astronomically stacked against her. She looked out the shattered window wall into the darkness beyond. Forty feet above concrete, cantilevered out into the middle of this huge, echoing, empty warehouse.

Hell, she'd taken a better fall than that only two days before. Rally holstered her pistol, kicked off her heels and executed a fast backward shoulder roll. Over the edge, and into thin air.

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"They killed him," cried 81. "They killed the Roadbuster!" He dashed across the street and hung on to 426's coat as the limousine door slammed and the driver took off, leaving 426 and 81 crouching behind a black Mercedes in front of the pier. Wo got behind the wheel of the Mercedes, keeping low, and started the engine. "Honored uncle, I couldn't stop them. They came up over the side — there must be a boat —"

426 looked over the hood at the gate, brandishing a black steel Sig Sauer nine-millimeter automatic in his left hand. A masked figure appeared, peering around the corner of one of the smaller flanking buildings, then dodged back into cover. "Bandit did not escape?"



“They sapped him and dumped him in the water. He didn’t float. Uncle, what are we going to do?”

“Get into the car.” 426 half stood to open the rear passenger door of the Mercedes. 81 crawled inside and huddled in the foot well. “Red Mountain will be very displeased,” said 426. “So am I.” He put his free hand into his coat.

81 flinched. “Sir?” He looked at the sling on his right arm. “I couldn’t do jack. There were eight of them. I beat it so I could tell you what — ” He trailed off into a soft sigh, his eyes glazing. A spot of blood on his collar spread and suffused his shirt front. 426 moved back and let him fall sideways on the seat, the blood pooling under the body. He wiped his stiletto on 81’s shirt, replaced it in his coat. “Take us to the rendezvous point,” he said to Wo. “My team will be there in five minutes; we will return with them and sort out this mess. Perhaps Huang is still alive and we may get him to a doctor.” He had to kick 81’s feet aside to close the door before he got into the front passenger seat.

“Won’t the police have arrived by then?” Wo pulled out into the street and sped away.

“No. The shots will not have not been heard outside. However, we will have to fight our way through the men at the gate.” 426 reached into the back seat and retrieved a case. He popped the latches and eased out a sleek black MP5K. “I am afraid that will make quite a bit of noise.”

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“Fock, man, she DISAPPEARED!” O’Toole was howling like a banshee down to Brown, his voice crackling through a speaker in the office. Broken glass tinkled down from the shattered window as she heard Brown’s shoes crunch in the fragments. “Didn’t hit the floor, didn’t land on the walkway! Where’s the wee bitch GONE?!”

“I don’t know. I only saw her go over the edge. Get down here and get underneath the offices! Could she be hanging on to the support beams?”

There wasn’t any other place she could have gone, of course. Rally found another handhold and inched closer to the walkway. When O’Toole left his post, she would leap to it and make her break.

She could not think about Bean. Not dead, not bleeding his life away into the cold black water. Her own life was the only one she could save right now. That empty cavity in her chest might turn into a pierced heart if she let herself feel it too much.

Rally’s arms and hands ached as she clung to the I-beam, the hard edge of steel digging into her palms. Her muscles tense, biceps bulging as she fought to keep

her elbows flexed and her body snug up against the underside of the structure. She had her feet drawn up under her, knees to chest, to avoid showing herself to O'Toole from his high perch. Now that he was coming down, she had to pull herself up even closer to the structure if he wasn't going to spot her as soon as he got to floor level. And she had to turn around and face the walkway — her backwards roll had left her facing towards the bayward end of the warehouse. Fast, now, she told herself, going hand over hand towards the center of the office bridge and a strut that connected the offices to the walkway. Fast, with a twist. She reached the strut and pivoted, scanning the inside of the facade.

O'Toole descended from his high window, his feet in their military boots hitting the wall of the warehouse with echoing thumps as he rappelled down with a rope and harness.

Rally wrapped a leg around the walkway strut and touched the little Guardian in her garter holster. He was much too far away for her to have a prayer of hitting him without a rifle. Nearly a hundred yards to the landward facade. Her bullets wouldn't even fly that distance without falling to the floor. All the marksmanship in the world didn't matter if the cartridge itself wasn't up to the task. And it was nearly certain that he would be wearing armor: a bullet-resistant vest or even a helmet. Brown had talked and jostled with her long enough for O'Toole to equip and ready himself in every conceivable way.

He landed on the floor, cast off the harness, and ran straight down the middle of the floor. Of course he knew exactly how far her reach extended. He'd seen and handled her only weapon. As long as he stayed thirty yards away from her, O'Toole had nothing to fear, and even at ten yards, she had less than an even chance of effectively hitting her mark in the dimness. This wasn't a shooting range. Paper targets didn't fire back, and they didn't move or dodge.

Rally waited until he had jogged eighty yards, then took a deep breath and swung herself forward to the concrete walkway and up over its railing. Her landing vibrated the whole length of the thing. Instantly O'Toole stopped in his tracks and unslung the rifle he carried on his back, aiming it straight in her direction. But the concrete tiles blocked his view of her and would deflect any possible shot. Unless of course he was firing armor-piercing rounds... She crouched low and scrambled for the south wall of the warehouse.

"Where you going, girlie?" called O'Toole. "Come out an' play!" She wasn't even tempted to reply. The little bodyguard ran along the floor parallel with the walkway and twenty yards away.

"Pretty girlie, titty an' thigh..." chanted O'Toole in time with his strides. "Kissed big Bean and made 'im cry..."

Rally gritted her teeth, mentally filing away the fact that he'd listened in on her conversation with Brown.

“When the men came out to play,” mocked O’Toole, “Little girlie ran away!”

Where was Manichetti? Of course, he wasn’t a fighter. It wouldn’t make much sense for him to be part of the assassination squad. But where was he? Rally descended the short stair to the steel catwalk, reached the south wall and hugged it, sliding her shoulders along the planks towards the landward facade until she came to a large square timber support post that forced her to move out from the wall.

“Now, now,” said O’Toole somewhere below her. “Wrong direction.” BKAM! *WHIZZ-THUNK!* A rifle round sank into the wood next to her ear. Rally gasped and crouched down, scrambling back towards the staircase to the offices.

Bullets crashed through the pierced steel plates under her feet. She reached the concrete walkway and lay flat on it, panting. Through the shattered window of Brown’s office, she caught a glimpse of him peering out at her with a tense snarl, but he ducked inside again and the lights went out. The two offices at this end of the bridge were dark as well, with windows intact.

She heard O’Toole’s running feet on the stairs at the north side of the warehouse, and in a moment he emerged on the catwalk that led to the office stairs and the walkway on which she lay. He was too fast — he ran and climbed like an animal. Rally rolled to the side and off the walkway, clinging to the railing and then dropping to a handhold on the support I-beams, just as she had done under Brown’s office.

How long could this go on? She could keep under cover for a while, but not forever, and Brown might simply call in a few more riflemen who could hem her in from all sides. While O’Toole was the only one she had to deal with, she had to make her move.

Rally swung her legs up to hook her feet into the underpinnings of the walkway, drew her pistol and held tight with the left hand.

O’Toole’s strides on the walkway made it bounce up and down as he approached her — and passed her. He slid down the south staircase, looped a leg around the railing, and leaned out with his rifle, which was black-stocked with a distinctive target grip. With a chill of horrified admiration she instantly recognized the make.

A Heckler and Koch PSG-1, one of the best sharpshooter’s weapons ever made, and the only semi-auto with the lethal accuracy of a single-loader. The magazine on O’Toole’s was unusually large, at least thirty rounds capacity; obviously custom made. She couldn’t have been more outgunned if he had been packing Sidewinder missiles.

He hadn't spotted her position yet — she took a careful sight on his trigger finger just as he snapped his head around in sudden recognition and swung the rifle. *BAM.*

The shot hit the rifle stock and knocked the weapon awry. O'Toole wobbled on his perch. But he did not drop the rifle since the sling held it in position. For a moment she looked him full in the face from ten yards away. This time he wore no mask. He had an avid smile like a hunting animal, his yellow eyes hot and aroused over the scope. Rally yanked her trigger.

*BAMBAMBAM.* Fibers flew from O'Toole's chest and shoulder, and he jerked off a shot from the rifle that whizzed past her head. He was heavily armored, her hits hammering his body but not penetrating his bullet-resistant clothing. She aimed for his head. *BAMBAM.* He threw himself back over the railing and landed upright on the base of the stairs, and her bullets drove themselves into the wooden wall behind him. Her first magazine was empty!

"Ooh, that stings," said O'Toole with a laughing gasp, and let off a rapid burst of fire in her direction, forcing her to cling tightly and swing her legs up out of the way. "Haah!" He let off another burst and concrete fragments spurted from the edge of the walkway into her face.

Rally jammed the Guardian into its holster and fumbled for her purse. O'Toole leaned over the railing again, smiling. "Out of stingers, girlie?" He drew a bead on her forehead, then moved the muzzle along her body as if running a hand down her torso. "Why don't yeh pull yerself up to the walk before I spoil that pretty face with a big ugly .308? Slowly, now."

Rally froze, hand in her purse.

"Drop that bag first, girlie." O'Toole nodded at her purse. Rally brought her hand out and brushed the strap off her shoulder. The purse fell forty feet and the contents scattered over the warehouse floor. "Good. Now throw yer gun up on the walk where I can see it." Rally moved her hand down to her hemline and scooted the dress up to reveal the holster and magazine pouch. O'Toole's eyes flicked down.

Straight into his face, she shone the brilliant beam of the tactical light she had concealed in her palm. O'Toole flinched away with an involuntary "Ugh!"

With a frantic heave, Rally pulled herself up to the walkway and tumbled over the railing. She yanked out the Guardian and changed magazines in midair, catching the light in her teeth. She fired directly at O'Toole.

Two trigger pulls, one to chamber the round and one to fire, her shot aimed to the middle of the face and perfectly placed — but in the split second interval between

pulls he jerked to the side and the bullet tore his right ear, a flap of flesh swinging loose along his jaw.

“Aiighh!” he yelled, the blood spurting through his fingers. “Yeh bitch!” Rally ran along the walkway and up the horizontal bars of the railing like a ladder, launching off of it for the roof of the offices.

*BKAM BKAM BKAM BKAM* said the rifle, shots going wild and shattering the rest of the glass window walls. Rally landed on the roof and rolled. The shots began to whizz above her head, and she flattened. O’Toole’s footsteps ran along the walkway again, and she heard a door open. Brown’s voice, agitated, and a furious snarl from O’Toole. Then they fell quiet for a moment. Rally stuck the tactical light into her cleavage and crept along the flat steel roof until she was directly above Brown’s office. She could hear them talking urgently, but too low for her to make out the words.

She had five shots left in the little Guardian. Five shots stood between her and a fate like Bean’s. In spite of the danger of the moment, she began to choke at the thought of his murdered corpse sinking in the black muck somewhere beneath her. All that ferocious animal energy wasted, Brown had said. The sharpness of the emotion cut at her heart and lungs. Bean was dead.

She would never hear his smoky voice again, never see his hands spin a steering wheel with casual precision, never feel her heart jump as he grinned at her. To her horror, her vision began to blur with tears and her throat to tighten until her breath came in hurtful gasps, muffled by the hand she clapped over her mouth.

What had she felt for Bean while he was alive? What was her loss now that she knew he could never threaten her equilibrium again? The route ahead seemed dull and empty now that the Roadbuster had taken his final exit... Rally swallowed hard and wiped her wet cheeks with her hand.

“... just do it meself, sir, dammit and that’ll have to do.” She caught O’Toole’s voice as it raised slightly, cracking with emotion.

“I couldn’t ask that of you, Tom!” Brown sounded emotional as well.

“Ye don’t even have to ask, sir. Ye know I’d knock on the gate of the Maze tomorrow and ask if they’ve rooms to let, if that would preserve one hair on yer dear head. I’ll do it somehow, me darlin’ lad...” O’Toole sounded as if he were crying.

“Oh, Tom.” Brown let out a long sigh. “As long as it looks right. That’s all that matters now.”

“I’ll take care of that, sir.”

“Good man.” Had they forgotten her? Rally moved towards the edge of the roof, wondering what they were talking about. If she reached over the edge and fired into the office, she might be able to take out O’Toole before he realized where the shots were coming from. She had to crawl over a raised beam and her body scraped softly over the steel.

O’Toole hissed something, and Brown let out a quick breath. The light in the office clicked on again, throwing a pool of illumination out onto the floor below. Her dark-adapted eyes stung for a moment.

*WHAM!* A hand seized the edge of the roof, and O’Toole vaulted up and landed hard directly in front of her, his rifle slung on his back. Rally leaped back and somersaulted. *KRAK KRAK KRAK* went a .45 caliber automatic in O’Toole’s hand, the bullets denting the steel and leaving craters blasted free of paint in a trail behind her. She dived over the edge of the roof and landed on the strut that tied the offices to the walkway, preparing to roll under it.

“Freeze, yeh little bitch,” said O’Toole, and she looked up into the muzzle of the .45 as he knelt on the edge of the roof and aimed right between her breasts. “One twitch, and I drop yeh to the floor.” He wasn’t smiling now, and his eyes looked as poisonous as sulfur. With his free hand, he unslung the rifle. “I swear, I may just shoot ye anyway.” The upper half of his right ear was gone and his neck and throat were covered in blood. “Come on out, sir!” he called to Brown. “I got her under wraps.”

To the south, at the wall of the warehouse, a door slammed open and booted feet thundered on the concrete.

“RAALLLYYY!!” It was a tremendous bellow. “GODDAMMIT, WHERE ARE YOU?!”

Bean! O’Toole jerked to look to his left, and she quickly rolled under the strut.

“RAALLLYYY!!” Bean shouted again, his voice filling the entire warehouse. “BROWN, YOU FUCKIN’ SLIME! YOU’VE KILLED HER, YOU’RE FUCKIN’ DEAD!”

O’Toole looked for her and made an angry gesture when he realized she was under cover again. He slid from his perch and dropped to the walkway like a leopard, slinging his rifle to his back in mid-drop. With a running leap, he cleared the gap to the shattered window and scrambled into the cover of the office.

Down on the floor, Bean cast a shadow fifty feet behind him as he ran forward into the pool of light. He streamed water, leaving a wet trail of black muck, and his face was dark with blood and mud. Bullet scars covered the arms of his jacket. Rally jumped for the railing and pulled herself up to the walkway, running in the

opposite direction from O'Toole. Bean was a sitting duck for that rifle. She was going to have to risk a shout!

"Bean!" she yelled. "Get the HELL out of here!" He stopped dead and looked up for the source of her voice.

*BKAM!* A bullet whacked right behind her flying feet. Rally leaped for the broken window of the next office and cut her hands on the glass still in the frame. She hissed in pain, but hauled herself into the dark room and rolled upright. The light next door shone through the sandblasted glass wall. She smelled spilled wine.

"CALL OFF YOUR DOG, BROWN!" shouted Bean. "YOU GOT THE WHOLE CHINK ARMY COMIN' ATCHA! QUIT WHILE YER AHEAD!"

"426!" she heard Brown hiss. "Time to blow the — "

BRAAAP! An enormous din of full-auto machine gun fire erupted outside.

"Holy Christ!" yelled O'Toole. "Get down the stairs, *now!*"

"But Bandit's down there — "

"I'll get him! Hurry!" Someone stepped closer to the glass wall, right at the edge of the floor. His shadow sharpened with proximity, though it was still difficult to read. At the level of his shoulder rose something long and slim. It must be O'Toole with his rifle! Her cut hands stung like hell, but she fumbled out her gun. The figure drew a bead on Bean, seeming to track him along the floor as he ran for the north stairs, and the shoulders rose with a deep breath.

*BAMBAMBAMBAM* said the Guardian as Rally fired through the glass, nearly losing it on the recoil because her hands were so slippery with blood. Her aim stank and the heavy glass would deflect the first couple of bullets off their track — she'd be lucky to hit anything. She heard a scream and the light went out.

A barrage of .308s roared through the wall as she dived to the side. Someone cried out in a banshee howl. "Oh, name of Jesus! Holy mother Mary!"

"I'm not dead yet," came Brown's voice, ragged with pain. "Help me!" She'd shot Brown, not O'Toole! "Do it now! There's no more time!"

"Cover yer ears!" said O'Toole. Through the crackling racket of machine guns she seemed to hear a tiny *klick*.

WHABOOOOM!

The shock wave of the explosion threw her flat, her head cracking against a table leg. For a moment she saw bright colors and lights, and when she could focus,

something bright still lit up the room. A powerful smell of C4 and electrical insulation, starting to mix with burning wood. The pier was on fire.

Her ears had gone numb from the blast, weird thrumming noises echoing in them. A dull sound next door — possibly a gunshot. Vibrations shook the floor under her — it was stumbling feet in the corridor. Rally rolled over to the office door in time to see O’Toole supporting Brown as they half ran, half crawled towards the south stairs. It was dark, but she thought she saw blood soaking the thigh of Brown’s pants.

He sobbed in pain and O’Toole let out an anguished moan. “I’ll get ye out of here! Just a bit farther!” The sounds seemed to come from a great distance, dull and dim. Smoke boiled through the broken window, and the men vanished down the stairs into the roiling clouds.

Rally staggered to her feet and headed the other way, to Brown’s office. This wasn’t any time to pursue them; she had only one shot left and her head hurt. She began to cough from the smoke and followed the trail of blood on the white carpet.

Huang lay face up in the middle of the room, dead. Someone had shot him through the temples — with a small caliber bullet. O’Toole’s handgun was a .45. She stared at him, wondering. Through the window of Brown’s office, she saw that the top of the landward facade was half gone, a few prone figures scattered inside. Bean wasn’t visible.

“Bean! I’m up here!” she shouted, hardly able to hear her own voice. She looked frantically around the office. The suitcase still lay on the floor. “Come get the money, Bean! We’ve got to get out before the place burns down!”

Near the north stairs, she saw a movement through the smoke. Bean staggered to his feet; he had apparently been blown off the stairs by the concussion. “What’s up next?” he yelled dimly. “A frickin’ airstrike?” Rally laughed in relief, so happy to see him alive she felt ready to kiss him.

“Come up! It’s here!” He began to pound up the stairs, and she put her head out over the window frame, scanning for foes. Two or three of the prone figures got up; it was hard to tell who they were because of the smoke. She couldn’t see Brown and O’Toole, but apparently the men at the front could — they raised weapons and began to fire down the length of the warehouse, the sound growing gradually clearer as her ears recovered. Rally got up and went out to the landing as Bean arrived at the top of the stairs.

Now she could see all the way up and down the warehouse, a hundred yards in each direction, though the smoke had filled most of the area, hugging the floor. At the bayward end of the building, nearly invisible, were two men, one staggering on a wounded leg. O’Toole lowered Brown to the floor and swung up his rifle.



BKAMBKAMBKAM! One of the men firing at him dropped, and the others retreated through the front door. “What’s Brown doing down there?” she said to Bean, pointing. “How are they going to get out?”

“Who cares? It’s still in the office?” The right side of Bean’s face was stained entirely red from a bullet crease across his skull. His hair was matted with blood and mud; he stank of bay muck and his jacket and boots were squeaking and dripping with wet. He looked indescribably beautiful — alive — and she gave him a wide smile.

“Yeah. The handle’s off the suitcase, so it’ll be hard to carry. But I think you want it anyway!” Rally turned again to look at Brown and O’Toole. “How’d you get out of the water?”

“We can talk about that later, girl. Right now I want what I came for!” He brushed past her through the outside door and darted into Brown’s office. The roof of the warehouse had caught now, and flames were spreading along the walls toward them.

“Hurry!” called Rally. “This place is going to really go up in a few minutes!”

“Where the hell is it? There’s too damn much smoke in here, and the light won’t go on.”

Rally left the landing with another glance down to the end of the warehouse and followed Bean into the office. “It’s on the floor — there, in front of the desk.” Bean barked his shin on the glass table and swore. She fished out the tactical light and turned it on, playing it over the floor. Huang’s dead face looked very young, very surprised. She checked his position relative to the part of the glass wall she had shot out, a horrible suspicion taking form in her mind.

“Loan me the light.” Rally tossed it to him. “Hey, there’s a hell of a lot of blood way over here. The wall’s busted. You shoot the Mick?”

“No,” she said faintly.

“It ain’t yours, girl?” He whirled to look at her. “You hurt?”

“No. A few cuts.” She held up a palm. “I shot Brown, by accident. I saw O’Toole drawing a bead on you, and I fired through the glass wall. I hit Brown instead. And, uh, I’m starting to think — ”

“Fine by me,” said Bean with a feral smile. “Don’t think the Feds are gonna appreciate it, though.”

“Don’t remind me! It’s only in the leg, I think. O’Toole helped him down the stairs. But I’m trying to say, I think I might have killed this guy. Huang.”

“Yeah, that’s 426’s boy. We got introduced. But O’Toole shot him, when I opened the door. That’s how I got this, too.” He indicated the bullet crease on his head. “You didn’t do it.”

“He was only wounded! He was alive when I left the office, and he didn’t have a head wound! And my shots went all over — I fired four rounds.” She tried to wipe some blood off her hands. “I’ve got only one cartridge left.”

“Them’s the breaks. Hope ya won’t need it.” Bean’s foot hit the suitcase and it skidded across the floor. He caught it before it went over the edge. “Hey, this thing’s empty!”

“What?” The suitcase fell open, showing the interior. They looked at each other. “Maybe he put the cash back in the safe,” said Rally. Bean threw her the light and tore the painting off the wall. He stared at the lock for a moment, but then he crushed the drywall around the frame with his fists and pried the whole thing away after plunging his fingers through the wall and under the frame. Steel studs and bolts buckled, and Bean dropped the safe on the floor with a thud that made the offices shake. He drew his bowie knife. With a deep breath, he placed it over a hinge and rammed it through the sheet steel, then yanked it out with a screech of metal on metal and repeated the operation. The door loosened. Bean got a hand inside and heaved. The corner bent back. “Take a look,” he said, panting. Rally flashed the light inside. Empty.

“No,” she said.

“Well, then where the hell is it?”

“I... I don’t know. Oh, God, O’Toole’s taken it with him!” Suddenly something beeped behind her, and she whirled. The green iMac on the computer desk. The screen came to life and a cheery voice said, “New mail!” Rally took a step towards the desk. An automatic routine executed and an email screen came up. Big pink and purple letters on a yellow background, the kind of colors a four-year-old girl would choose.

*To SugarDaddy@8dragon.org (Tiffany’s Daddy)*

*Dear Daddy, Love and XXXX kisses.*

*Mama says hello and is Manny driving us to Yerup.*

*Love 4 Ever, Tiffany*

*Sent by Candygirl@beachnet.com (Tiffany Maria Brown)*

Rally's eyes suddenly teared up — from smoke, she told herself. That was right, he had a daughter. One who loved him. She couldn't have any idea what her daddy was like; that he was a slimy, doublecrossing, murderous drug dealer. On a shelf over the computer, a large photograph of mother and daughter. A beautiful blonde, not unlike Rally's own mother, and a happy child... not at all like Rally. But her father had committed terrible crimes and would have to go deep underground now — one way or another. If he wanted his daughter to be safe, he shouldn't even see her again. Rally wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She wasn't even sure if her father was still alive; his cover was so deep that not even she could find out, though he had broken Goldie's control...

Bean was shaking his head. "What? He's got Brown on his hands and he can still haul five thousand greenbacks? What's he carrying it in if the suitcase's still here? It's gotta be in the office!" Bean heaved up one end of the rosewood desk and threw it over with a crash. "Fucking hell!" He kicked a hole in the drywall.

"Calm down!"

"Find that fucking cash, and I'll fucking calm down, girl! I ain't leavin' here without it!" He whipped his head around at her, his teeth glinting in a sharp snarl. Machine gun fire began to chatter again. Rally looked out and saw several men advancing, muzzle flashes cutting through the smoke. No one returned fire. Where were Brown and O'Toole? Dead?

*Weeeeeoooooh...*

*Waaaaoooooh...*

"The cops are coming, Bean! And the whole building's made of wood — we're going to be crispy critters if we don't get out!"

"Son of a *bitch!*" He picked up the sculpted glass waterfall table and threw it out the window. It exploded on the concrete. "Thought we'd got home free!" His gaze fell on the corpse. With a stride he was next to it and grabbed Huang by the shirt front and belt. The shattered skull lolled on the limp neck. "Wanna see how big a splat he makes?"

"NO!!" Rally shrieked. "Please!"

Bean dropped Huang's body on the carpet again and stared at her. "Hey, you're the one who shot him, babe."

"I KNOW THAT!" she wailed. "Leave him in peace! You have to go!"

"NOT WITHOUT THAT CASH!" roared Bean. He threw the sofa over and stomped the bar cabinet into a mess of splinters and smashed crystal.

*Weeeeeoooooooooh...*

*Waaaaoooooooooh...*

“You’re going to get arrested! *I’m* going to get arrested! I killed a helpless man! YOU HAVE TO GO! It’s not here!”

Bean stood panting, his nose wrinkled and teeth showing in an ugly grimace. His eyes seemed unfocused as they darted around the room. The only thing left intact was the computer, still displaying the little girl’s bright message. He ripped it off the desk and sent it sailing into space.

“You goddamn barbarian,” whispered Rally. The computer shattered forty feet below. Bean’s eyes still seemed wild, rolling from side to side as he stalked from one end of the room to the other like an animal in a cage.

“We’ve lost, Bean. Give it up.” He stopped pacing and glared at her, then started towards Huang’s pitiful corpse again as if he meant to devour it whole. “Stop!” She slapped him across the face, hard. He shook his head and blinked. “Get out of here!”

*Weeeeeoooooooooh...*

*Waaaaoooooooooh...*

*Weeeeeoooooooooh...*

Some Dragons with machine guns began to come up the north stairs. She still heard no return fire. “Fucking hell,” said Bean, his head snapping around to listen to the sirens. “Outta here, Vincent.” They ran down the south staircase and toward the door Bean had opened. Rally could see nothing through the smoke, but behind them came a cry, a man choking in anguish. Though the voice was filled with pain, it had a strange steely note, as if the man wasn’t sure how to shed tears. Outside, a narrow walkway and railing ran around to the front. Wind blew even more strongly than when they had entered. The next pier lay fifty yards away across the choppy water.

“How are we going to get off this thing?” said Rally. “I’d bet the Dragons are still at the gate.”

“I ain’t goin’ for another swim in that frickin’ septic tank. Let’s check it out first.” They edged along the south wall, sparks falling from the roof and flying out over the water. The fire’s roaring grew louder every moment. Rally peered out at the courtyard. No one, except the dead. Dragons mingled with mercenaries in heaps; probably ten men lay there, lives snuffed out with blade and bullets. Her stomach turned over at the firelight flickering in pools of blood, but Bean headed out to the gate, picking his way around the corpses.

Lights flashed down the street to the south, coming closer, as did the sirens. Bean grabbed a crossbar and an upright, braced himself with one foot against the bars, and heaved. The steel gave and twisted, the halves of the gate separating. He heaved again and widened the gap enough to put his shoulders through. “Come on, girl. Cops are almost here.” He started to crawl through, then halted when she didn’t follow. “Come on!”

“I... I’m staying.”

“You nuts?”

“I’m going to talk to the cops and explain what’s happened. It’ll be better for me if I don’t leave the scene. I’ve got to face the music!”

“Like hell you do!” He strode back and grabbed her arm. Rally shook him off. “Goddammit, girl. You come with me or I’ll pick you up and carry you!”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Try me. I ain’t letting you get arrested!” He bent, rammed his shoulder into her stomach and whipped the arm around her waist, then hoisted her with a light grunt and turned to the gate. Rally wheezed, the air knocked out of her, but twisted up and stuck the Guardian into Bean’s ear.

“Put me down, dammit!”

“Get that thing off of me!” He leaned sideways and shrugged her off his shoulder. She landed hard on the ground and rolled up as he pointed a finger at her. “I’m sick and tired of getting guns in my face, babe! The next time you aim one at me, it better be because you mean to fire it.”

“Fine!” She pulled up her skirt and holstered the Guardian. Bean flinched. “You were leaving?”

“And so are you. I don’t want to hear any crap about facing the music!” He pushed up one sleeve and displayed his huge gloved fist. “Don’t make me knock you cold.” Rally glared at him.

*Weeeeeoooooh...*

“All right, Bean,” she said through her teeth. “I’m coming with you.” She slipped through the gap after him. When he started to cross the street to where they had left Buff, she grabbed his arm. “Don’t. There’s a black and white at the alley. Someone’s seen your car.” She pulled him by the jacket and ran to the Y-arm of the pier a short distance to the north, Bean trailing her.

This part was in worse repair, huge gaps showing between the planks, but it had a few scattered structures on it. They scaled the chain-link fence and got into the shelter of an open shed just as the squad cars pulled up to the front of the Dragon pier. Every window along the length of the warehouse blazed with light now and the roof smoked at both ends. She had a good view of the courtyard area across the water as about a dozen policemen emerged from their cars and cautiously began to reconnoiter.

A fire engine hung back a few blocks away; apparently they were waiting for the officers to clear out the gunmen and bombs before they ventured near. Five men came out of a door on the north side and began to work along the walkway towards the front. Rally gasped: were they going to try to shoot the cops? One of them was 426, his face set, oddly, in grief.

She took a deep breath and prepared to give a warning yell, but a shot rang out to her left, from a point to bayward along the pier on which they hid. *BKAM-THUNK!* A man jerked, lost his machine gun and catapulted over the railing into the water. The rest of the men dropped flat and crawled along the planks.

O'Toole! He had left the pier and lain in wait for the Dragons to exit so he could kill them like rats fleeing a burning barn! Brown must be with him, then, but how they had escaped the warehouse before the Dragons had left she had no idea. The police had all piled into their squad cars at the shot and pulled back from the gate, sirens going.

Rally nudged Bean and pointed to her left. He nodded, and they left the shed and moved quietly down the pier, avoiding the enormous holes in the planking. She had one bullet left, but O'Toole might not know that. Brown was wounded, so the odds were in their favor, even considering O'Toole's rifle.

They crept around a building and saw the little bodyguard lying flat on the planks behind some garbage cans, plainly visible in firelight, tracking the Dragon men with his scope. He wore a pair of infrared goggles. Brown was nowhere in sight.

*BKAM!* O'Toole fired again and a cry rang out from the men on the walkway. A SWAT truck trundled up and halted half a block away. Assessing the situation, apparently. If she knew procedure, the whole warehouse would burn down before they moved. The Dragon men got up and ran hell bent for leather to the gate, squeezing through the gap Bean had made, and scattered. O'Toole popped the magazine and reached for a box of shells. Police megaphones squawked at the fugitives and two cars gave pursuit, but Rally was sure they had escaped. Obviously they knew this neighborhood very well.

Time to get O'Toole! She looked at Bean and made a circle in the air with a forefinger to tell him she wanted him to go around the building the other way and come straight at the sniper. Indicating herself, she pointed to a dumpster behind O'Toole's position. Bean nodded and looked at the dumpster, then counted off on

his fingers. Three, two, one. He circled the building out of her sight and she made a quick dash to the dumpster's cover.

O'Toole had just finished filling the magazine as Bean charged. He looked up and rolled over, sprang to his feet, then swung the rifle as he jammed the magazine into place. He was too fast — Bean was exposed, and she hadn't taken a fix on O'Toole's head yet. Rally quickly aimed and pulled the trigger. *BAM*.

O'Toole jerked off a shot, or tried to: there was nothing but a dull click. The magazine hadn't been fully engaged on the rifle, and she had knocked it awry with her shot. It hit the planks as it fell, vanished into a gap and splashed into the water below. O'Toole made a dreadful face, slung the rifle and launched himself over the side with a larger splash. Bean ran to the edge and looked over.

"He's in between the pilings, swimmin' out to the deep water. Hope he gets a good mouthful of that slime, the little bastard!" Bean spat into the bay, which shimmered in the red light. She was starting to feel the heat from the fire, now bursting through the roof at the landward end of the warehouse.

"If I had another cartridge, I could probably pick him off through the craters in this rotting thing!" said Rally. "Damn; I guess he's gotten away. But where's Brown?" She looked around her and started towards the largest building on the pier. "O'Toole wouldn't have left him except in a safe place. Maybe he holed up in —"

"What the hell's that?" said Bean, pricking up his ears. Someone had called her name, muffled through a wall, but distinctly.

"Rally! Are you there? Can you get to me?"

It seemed to come from the Dragon warehouse. She gave Bean an astonished look and ran down the pier in the direction of the voice. It grew clearer as she approached the bayward end where a window hung open.

"Rally? I hear your little gun. It's me, Brown. I'm still in here, and I can't get out. Can't walk..." He broke off into coughing.

"Brown?"

"You shot me, Rally. I can't walk, and the fire's creeping along the walls. In the name of Christ, you've got to help me get out of here!"

"Oh... my... God..." Her whole body shuddered. "He's going to burn to..." A human face, withering in flame. The mouth's agonized scream, the hair smoking and blazing; the smell of burning fiberglass and gasoline and human flesh. Her hands shook so much she dropped the Guardian; Bean came up and caught it before it fell.

“Brown! I hear you! I’m going to help you! Hang on!” She stripped off her jacket and ran towards the edge of the pier. The skin blistering, sizzling; the skull emerging through the skin, the teeth set in a rictus of agony, the eyes — Her sight blurred, her throat tightened, her mind went into a whirl of sick horror and desperation. “I’m coming!”

“Hey! No way!” A hand grabbed her waist as she tried to dive off the edge. Bean pulled her back and swung her around. “What in the name of hell do ya think yer doin’?”

“The fire’s so close, Rally... it’s so hot my clothes are smoking...”

“Helping him! The police won’t go in, the fire truck’s waiting for the cops — I’m the only one who can get to him in time!” She struggled with Bean while he held tight to her wrists, pulling in a frenzy against his massive weight and strength.

“Not in a thousand years, girl! You ain’t goin’ nowhere!”

“Rallllyyy...” she heard from the interior of the warehouse. “Oh God, oh God, no — ” The roar of flames grew louder. “Ahhggh! AAAGGHHH!” She could barely hear him now above the furious conflagration. “GODDDD! NOOOO! HELP ME, RALLY! HELLLL MEEEEEE! AAH! AIIIIIGGGHHHH!”

“BEAN!” she howled. “PLEASE! For the love of GOD — !”

“For him? I should let you get yourself killed for HIM?”

“AAIIIIIGGGGHHH! DEAR GOD... RALLLLYYY!”

“Let me go!” She writhed and fought him, her clothes working awry. “I have to HELP him! He’s BURNING TO DEATH!!”

“There isn’t one friggin’ thing you can do, girl! Come on!” Bean hauled her up the pier to the fence, dragging her most of the way.

“NO! I can’t LEAVE — ”

“Raalllyyy... !” The voice died out in choking gasps, drowned in fire.

“Nooo!” she sobbed. “Oh, God, Bean, let me go!” She bit his wrist and broke free; she had taken two steps before something crashed teeth-jarringly into the back of her head, and the firelight faded to black.



**::: END OF VOLUME THREE :::**

**CONTINUED IN VOLUME FOUR**