

# CHASING THE DRAGON

: A *GUNSMITH CATS*  
FAN FICTION STORY :



BY MADAME MANGA

... VOLUME FOUR ...  
CHAPTERS 8, 9, 10

## ::: DISCLAIMERS AND SO FORTH :::

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

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Originally posted in serial chapters on these websites:  
[http://www.livejournal.com/users/madame\\_manga](http://www.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 EIGHT :::

He had her slung over his shoulder again, her head hanging down along his back. As he jogged, holding her around the waist with one arm, her body jolted up and down in a harsh rhythm that made her seasick. For a few moments, Rally could not remember where she was, or who was carrying her, and she imagined that her father had picked her up as part of a game.

She wanted to tell him to hold her more gently, and not to let Mama find them in the woods, but she opened her eyes to wet pavement passing backwards in the orange light of street lamps and fire. Seeing the backs of Bean's legs and his boots thumping along the sidewalk brought her around. She knew exactly what had happened almost up to the moment he had knocked her out.

The smell of the fire surrounded them; she had only been out for a few minutes, but the weather had broken and it had started to rain. This wasn't the rotten pier any more, it was the street outside. He'd gotten them both over the fence, then, or through it, most likely. She heard sirens, shouting policemen and vehicles: a boat motor out on the bay.

Bean slowed and turned a corner, then stopped by a wall. Bending his knees, he eased Rally forward and off his shoulder, but kept hold of her. He cradled her in his arms and supported her half upright. She tried to push against his chest and break free, though she felt as limp as a sick kitten.

Bean looked carefully at her face and put one hand on her forehead. Rally tried to turn her head away, but it whirled and pitched dizzily, her eyes rolling back, so she closed them again and groaned. "You... hit me..."

"Goddammit, girl, it was that or watch you kill yourself! Why'd you make me do it?" He felt the back of her head, which had developed a throbbing lump. Her wig sat awry. "Nice goose egg." He grimaced. "Babe, slugging you is something I don't ever want to do again. You mind not giving me any more reasons to?"

"Damn you, Bean," she got out, hitting his chest with slack fists.

"Don't go makin' noise." He glanced over her shoulder. "There's still a couple of uniforms messing with the car."

Rally turned around and looked, her vision swimming. Two policemen with flashlights examined Buff with obvious curiosity, their unit parked half across the

end of the alley. In front of the blazing pier an ambulance had arrived, its lights circulating at full tilt. The uniformed officers milled around their squad cars, radios crackling. A plainclothes detective with a bullhorn attempted to direct the chaos.

Sparks cartwheeled from a loud gas-powered saw. When the gate sprang open, the two policemen with Buff went running to join up with the rest of the officers. Bean half carried Rally across the street from their hiding place. On the way he took out a keyless remote and clicked the doors open. After lowering her into the car and buckling her seatbelt for her, he started the engine and peeled out. The parked squad car took a hit in the rear left quarter and rotated aside as Buff scraped past.

Rally's limp body sank into the upholstery as Bean threw the gearshift back and Buff purred south along the waterfront at seventy miles per hour. She closed her eyes. Two sirens behind them. Bean took a right turn and stomped on the gas, gunning it up a steep hill. The sirens faded. He took a swerving left down a steep decline, then another right, and raced the next few blocks at high speed.

She never opened her eyes. All she could see was Huang's dead face, pained and surprised, and Tiffany Brown's message glowing in the dark office. She had killed a helpless, wounded man with a borrowed gun: an under-the-table transaction on which Roy Coleman had staked his badge. And Tiffany's daddy was dead.

Rolling her head back and forth, she tried to block out the voice in her ears. Her name, over and over. Rasping and coughing, pleading, screaming: dying. Rally shook again, her muscles fluttering, and jerked up and down in her seat. Trying to master an unmasterable pain. It didn't matter who he was. It only mattered that he had died in agony while she had stood helpless. The dying voice grew louder.

"Lost 'em." Bean throttled back. "What the hell do we do now?"

"I don't know." Rally kept her eyes closed. She had an odd fancy that as long as she could keep them shut, all the consequences of this disaster would fail to fall on her head. Once they opened, the world would know every detail in sickening clarity.

Cable car tracks juddered under Buff's stiff suspension and her lids flew open. Mist and fog blurred the lights, the streets black and shining wet. Bean turned on his windshield wipers.

"I'll go to the hotel. I'd better take a roundabout route."

"Fine." Rally closed her eyes again.

Roy's face now. Accusing, disappointed, bleak, with two dour FBI agents looking

over his shoulders. Whose fault was this? She'd been too eager for the prize. So had Bean, though he'd have preferred to fetch it himself. Roy had cautioned her from the beginning, but he'd trusted her abilities and instincts. The Feds had smelled a big catch just as she had. They had not willingly trusted her with it, though, and they had been right.

Smith and Wesson, aimed like a gun to her head... And she hadn't even been able to stay on the scene and explain. Hit and run, thanks to Bean.

Rally kept slowly rolling her head on the seat, her sweaty, greasy cheeks sticking to the leather upholstery. Back and forth in sick, woozy arcs until her gaze fell on the driver.

She shuddered as if she had never glimpsed this man before, except perhaps in a nightmare. Half-dried blood streaked down his face. Lips set and tight, his huge jaw jutting out as he ground his teeth. He glanced at her and a street light splashed yellow over the scarred bridge of his nose. Him. All because of him.

"Fucking goddamn hell..." he muttered as he negotiated the dark streets. "All that shit, and nothin' to show for it..."

Bean Bandit, a crook just like Brown, but without even a hint of the dead man's oily grace. Raw, crude, incapable of playing a part. At another time, she might even have called it honesty. Right now it looked like coarse, naked greed.

"Gonna find that Mick and that wop Manichetti and twist their fuckin' heads off. And I'd kill Brown if he wasn't dead." He made a one-sided snarl, fingers tightening on the wheel, and ran a red light. "Goddammit... all that cash!"

Rally let out a hissing sound of disgust. Couldn't he think about anything but the money?

"What?" Bean glared at her.

Rally turned away and stared through the windshield. Brown was dead. Roy's badge was in jeopardy. The money was gone, and if O'Toole had it, he was probably miles away by now. There would be no reward, no testimony. Larry Sam had risked himself for nothing... and she had told Brown about him, she realized with a rolling wave of nausea.

She picked up Bean's car phone and dialed the Eight Dragon Delight. The line rang four times and went to voicemail. She clicked the phone off. It was nearly midnight and no one would be answering. She had better call Roy. But when she did, she felt sure she was going to cry. The tears were there, waiting to gush like a summer thunderstorm. Bean's wipers brushed aside a light drizzle.

She would not cry in front of Bean Bandit. Never, never, never. She put the phone

back in the console and curled up in a ball.

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“Hey, wake up,” said Bean in her ear. “Let’s go get cleaned up.” Rally blinked and straightened, realizing they were in the hotel’s underground parking garage. The lowest level, 4Z, right next to the elevator. Her head felt a little better, though the lump still ached.

“Geez, did I fall asleep? What time is it?”

“Quarter past midnight. Yeah, you were snoring all the way here.” He summoned a faint smile. “Kinda cute.”

Rally showed her teeth to him, then reached for the door handle. Pain from her cut hand sizzled through her. “Aghh...”

“You OK?”

“It’s nothing.” Bean looked at her with a wry lift of his brows. “All right, it hurts! Satisfied?”

Bean reached over her and opened the door, his triceps brushing her chest. “I could take you to a hospital.” He put his hand on the headrest of her seat.

“Uh-huh, and while I’m waiting in the emergency room, you waltz off to find O’Toole and the cash! Not a chance, Bean.”

The last trace of his smile disappeared. “You’re awful damn sure what I’m going to do in any given situation, ain’t ya? Must be nice to know someone that well.” Bean got out of the car and slammed the driver’s door.

Rally pulled herself out and leaned against the car, looking at her bloody hands and the torn dress. “I can’t walk through the lobby like this... someone’s going to notice.”

“Let ‘em notice. I ain’t no centerfold myself right now.” Bean took off his wet, scarred jacket, walked around the rear of the car and popped the trunk. He dropped the jacket with a thump and hauled out his duffel bag. “Man, I’m going through these like salted peanuts.” He unzipped the duffel and pulled out another jacket.

“How many of those do you have?”

“Last spare.” He put it on and transferred his soggy effects to the pockets, then wiped his face with a bandanna. Some of the blood came off in flakes, some smeared along his hairline.

“Look, people might assume you’re responsible for all the damage to my outfit!” Rally knotted a broken strap and yanked the dress down. “You want someone calling the cops for a suspected assault?”

Bean shot an angry look at her. “Hey!”

“Hit a nerve?” God, what a bitchy thing to say...

He took a deep breath through his nose and let it out through clenched teeth. “I never tried anything like that on you, and you know it, babe. I’ve kicked guy’s asses for it before now, and you saw me do it, too. What the hell’s with you?”

Wow, she *had* struck a nerve! “Nothing! Sorry! But you have to admit you don’t look like an upstanding citizen right now, Mr. Bandit! Try escorting me upstairs like this and see what — ”

A large T-shirt sailed through the air and landed on her face. It was clean, but smelled of him. Bean locked the trunk and strode away to the elevator with his duffel.

Rally held up the T-shirt, sighed, and pulled it over her head. It came down to the middle of her thighs, entirely covering her dress. She must look ridiculous. But the sleeves reached past her elbows and concealed some of the bruises developing on her arms. Conspicuous among them were the wide livid marks Bean’s grip had left on her wrists.

Bean held the elevator door for her, leaning against it with his arms folded. His scowl had settled in place, though he snorted at her appearance. Rally stripped off her shredded pantyhose and wadded them up in her hand, and they rode the elevator to the lobby without speaking. Her hands hurt, her head hurt, and Bean’s stony face hurt.

They crossed the lobby past the bar and the check-in desk and waited for the main elevator, their images reflected in the steel door. Bean, wide-shouldered and towering over her, his posture a little hunched. Her own face looked pale, her wig disarranged.

The elevator seemed to take forever to climb the eight stories. At the door of their room, Rally felt for the key. In her lost purse, of course. Her eyes began to sting and she bit her lip hard, praying again she wouldn’t cry in front of Bean, especially over such trivia. After a moment he looked at her.

“Ya got it?”

“N-no...” Her voice cracked.

“Never mind, I got the spare.” He pulled it out of the pocket of his jeans and opened the door. Rally ran inside, ripped off the T-shirt and dashed into the bathroom, immediately turning on the water in the tub. Bean rapped on the closed door.

“I’m gonna get some ice from the machine. That gun’s on the table. I ain’t waltzing off to China, in case you come out any time soon.”

She didn’t answer, biting her lips to keep from crying. Sitting on the toilet seat, she rocked back and forth for several minutes. The running water would cover the sound if she did cry, but then she’d have to face him with tear-streaks and red eyes.

In the mirror over the sink, she saw her expression: set, grim, much older than she usually appeared. The makeup had something to do with it, but the eyes held something she had never seen before. The reflection of death? Those could be the eyes of someone who had just committed murder... She took the wig off, bobby pins yanking and popping, and threw it on the floor.

“Hey, you finished in there?” Bean rapped on the door again. “We better blow out of here soon as we can.”

Rally got up and flung the door open, then walked to the table by the window and sat down.

“Thought you were washing up, babe.”

“I didn’t.” The sweat and scratches felt like penance, the torn dress like spandex sackcloth and ashes...

“Yeah, I could tell.” He looked at her speculatively. “You OK?”

“Just fine.”

“I got some ice for first aid.” Bean put a cardboard bucket on the table. “You want some on your hands?”

She didn’t reply, and he took a face towel from the bathroom and wrung it out under the faucet. “Here. Put some ice in it and hold it to the cuts. I’m gonna put some on my head.” He put the towel in her hand, where it hung limply, and returned to the bathroom with his duffel. The shower went on.

When he came out after a few minutes, he had washed the blood from his face and neck and the mud from his hair and changed his filthy jeans for a dry pair. Bean picked up the T-shirt she had discarded and tossed it on the hide-a-bed next to his jacket.



While pulling his bloodstained shirt over his head, he paused. Rally sat inert with the damp towel still in her hand. After watching her for a moment, he sighed, threw the bloody shirt on the floor and sat down in the other chair.

“Shit.”

With one hand, he scooped ice out of the bucket while he took the towel and spread it out with the other. He made a mound of ice chips, wrapped it up, and took her left hand in his. “Kills the sting.”

He plopped the cold towel in her palm and put her right hand on top. Then he cupped both her hands in both of his, pressing them around the ice, leaning forward with his head low, elbows on his thighs. She could smell him, his bare skin still hot, with a metallic hint of blood sharpening his usual scent of smoke and musky leather. His wet hair dripped slowly on her knees.

“I don’t blame you, girl.” Bean spoke in a cajoling tone that struck her as almost condescending. “It was Brown’s deal, and he’s dead, so good riddance. With him out of the way, maybe we can take out the other two — ”

“YOU don’t BLAME me?” Rally exploded. “Thank you SO much!”

“Shit! This ain’t the end of the world, babe! We aren’t dead, we aren’t arrested. What’s the problem?”

“*He burned to death!*” Rally yanked her hands out of Bean’s grasp. “He died because I shot him and he couldn’t escape!”

“Yeah, a scumbag of a drug dealer. Who gives a shit about him?”

“The FBI, that’s who! And his... his...” She choked.

“You don’t even like those guys — what, Smith and Jones? Who cares?”

“I do! That was the whole reason I got into this deal in the first place! Brown’s testimony! Everything’s RUINED, Bean!”

“So you won’t get the reward! That half-million is still out there, babe, and I’ll give you your cut. That ought to put the roses back in yer cheeks!” He reached for her hands and she leaped up, the ice scattering on the floor.

“I don’t WANT the damn money! Haven’t you heard one word I’ve said? It’s drug profits! I did this to bring down the Dragons, for people like Larry Sam — ”

“Oh, fuckin’ A!” Bean propped an elbow on the table and sneered. “It’s all higher motives in here, huh? Like polishing your rep? Like flirtin’ with the cops an’ the college boy to get what you want? That popgun must’ve come from Coleman,

because you sure didn't have it before. What's he think he's gonna get in exchange?"

"He's a *friend!* Do you even have any friends?!"

"Course I do! What the hell do you think I am, girl?"

"A GODDAMN BARBARIAN, THAT'S WHAT!!" she howled. "You don't care about ANYONE OR ANYTHING except MONEY AND CARS! You have no class, no restraint, you never even made it through high school, you make me sick with your eating habits and your smoking and your stinking WALNUT SHELLS! Who could ever stand to have you around, you violent, crass, oversized thug of a —"

"*Driver!*" Bean slammed his hands on the table and got up. Rally stared at him and he jutted his chin at her, emphasizing his aggressive underbite. "That's what I do. I drive!"

"You — you —"

"I don't pretend to be anything else, babe. I don't claim God's on my side and I don't claim to be any better than the next man. Except under the hood and behind the wheel, and you know DAMN WELL THAT'S THE TRUTH! You ain't said word one as long as you thought you could use me, girl! Take me as I am or shut the HELL up!"

"You're a CRIMINAL! I don't know why I ever thought I could work with you! I must have lost my MIND!"

"I don't see you doin' much different from me, babe! You never saw a law you couldn't justify breaking into bits when it was convenient! Only thing is, I don't claim it's MORAL!"

"What the hell do you know about MORALITY?! You justify the worst things under color of a JOB! If it's in your contract, you'll commit any crime up to and including MURDER!"

"At least with me, you KNOW what the rules are!"

"Consistency is the soul of virtue, huh? I don't think so!"

"I ain't ever shot a guy in the back, Vincent."

"You son of a bitch!" She shook with fury, her face stiff. "I saw someone about to shoot YOU! I can't walk out into the line of fire the way you can! I had no choice! I... had... no..."

"But you whacked the wrong guy. You didn't want to let me help you! Where'd all

that righteousness get you tonight? Where'd it get Brown?"

"Like you care!" So close to tears her voice trembled.

"I don't give a bucket of warm shit about Brown. He got what he deserved. If you weren't so goddamn wound up about — "

Rally gulped hard, trying to swallow the tightness in her throat, and found a vicious whisper. "You're an animal, Bean. A frozen-hearted animal with no better human feeling at all. You only want to eat too much and fight too much and drive too fast. And sleep with lots of women! Nothing but lower brain functions ever interests you."

"Bullshit. You don't know the first thing about me, babe." He leaned over her, his bare chest close to hers and his face even closer. His features twitched and his cheeks flushed. "You're freakin' two-faced on that count yourself. You wanted me to screw you not three days ago, and now I'm an animal? *I* didn't get THAT one rolling down the road!"

"But you sure got behind the wheel and hit the accelerator! You still want me all to yourself! You've been snarling like a dog at any man who looks at me! You even started in on Roy! You don't own me, Bean! You're NOT my boyfriend!"

"No, I'm just your freakin' partner. The guy who drives you around and bails you out when you get your ass in deep shit. Who cut you in on the deal in the first place and told you everything he knew 'cause he thought he might be on to a good thing. The guy who's been givin' this his best shot even when he gets jerked around by this little gal who calls him names one minute and makes eyes at him the next." The mixture of sting and hunger in Bean's voice reminded her of his challenge in the motel room. "What the hell am I supposed to think, huh? How the hell am I supposed to know what to do about it? Will you give me a goddamn clue once in a while?"

They stood inches from each other, both breathing hard.

"I... I..."

Bean rolled his head back and let out a deep exasperated breath. "I mean, *shit!* You let a slimeball like Brown get under your skin, and you'll call ME names? That guy was phony to the core and I knew it the second I met him — hell, the second I picked up the call. For that kind of money, I'll listen to bullshit from here to Canada, but it all went in one ear and out the other, and not 'cause I don't have a brain in there!" He raised a brow at her. "If you believed one damn word he said, you're a goddamn fool. I ain't ever going to hand you a line of crap like that, babe."

He was right. He was so right that the truth made her irrationally furious with

him. She had been a fool on so many counts she had only one defense left. If she chose to use it...

“Hey, you’ll learn. Don’t look so bent outta shape. Who cares if you ain’t on the straight any more? We could make a business out of this yet if we just work the bugs out! I can show you — ”

“I don’t need you, Bean! I don’t want to be your partner in crime! I should never have agreed to this! THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!”

“Huh?”

“You and your goddamn MONEY! You chased him across the country, you nearly got both of us killed so many times I’ve lost track, you sucked me into this and RUINED MY VACATION! Now I’m practically an outlaw myself and that’s just the way you like it! I must have been insane to make you any promises, you MERCENARY ASSHOLE! I hate your GUTS!”

His face reddened. “Yeah, I must have been nuts to ask you in the first place! And I shoulda ignored that little strip show you put on for my benefit! Man, all hot and bothered over a few buttons and a pair of stockings! Could have taken care of that with ONE HAND!”

“Same here, big guy!” Rally flipped him off. “One little finger works better than all that OVERGROWN BEEF!”

“Hey! You liked it damn well and you know it!” He raised his chin, his eyes narrowing. “I wish I’d gone ahead and nailed you good. Could’ve kept it simple and skipped all this FEMALE CRAP!”

“Oh, one good screw and I’d be fawning at your heels? Dream on!” Bean made a sudden move towards her and she flinched back. “Like to get it started again, huh? You think you can throw me on the bed and solve the whole problem the HARD WAY?!”

Bean stepped forward again, his eyes locked with hers. For the briefest moment, something like intent rose to the surface. A harsher form of the desire she’d been seeing in his face for days. But he didn’t raise his hands, didn’t keep moving towards her.

“I can see you want to, Bean. Bad enough to try force?”

His whole body shuddered. “Don’t you ever say that to me, girl. Never, you hear?”

“You’d love to do it, wouldn’t you? You slugged me so hard my head’s still ringing! Methinks he protests too much!”

“SHUT UP, YOU — ” Bean stopped abruptly with his finger aimed at her face. “I ain’t giving you any excuse to waste me. I ain’t gonna end up like Huang. If you don’t know I’m not that kinda scumbag by now, then the hell with you, Vincent.”

He picked up the clean T-shirt and pulled it on, then donned his jacket and zipped it. “I’m going to get that Mick and I’m going to get that money. You want your share, come and ask me nice. Or shoot me in the back for it if that’s too much trouble for you!”

“You son of a bitch. You don’t even care if human beings are dead...”

“You think whatever the hell you want. I give up.” Bean looked around at her. “Don’t know why I even tried. But it might come to me...” he muttered.

A shadow passed over his features, and for a startling moment Rally saw sad regret in a face she had thought almost incapable of subtler emotions. “I’m blowing this joint.” Bean picked up his duffel. “You got your own car, you got your pet cop and you got your *real* partner. Guess I was just takin’ up valuable space, huh?”

He waited for an instant, hand on the doorknob. When she didn’t reply, he opened it, went out and slammed it behind him in one motion.

Ice melted on the carpet around her feet. She watched it idly for a while, numb. It was mostly water before she moved again.

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426 sat at Huang’s desk, head on folded hands, silent. His breathing was erratic, his shoulders quivering slightly. Wo and another man looked uneasily at him and at each other, but did not speak.

“I will have to call his parents,” said 426 after a long time. “Please look up their number — I will wait until it is morning in Hawaii, but I want to have it at my fingertips.”

“Yes, sir. Um...”

“It was necessary to leave him in the office. The coroner’s team will be examining his body by now, because the fire is out. When their report is ready, get me a copy immediately. And of the autopsy when it is complete.”

“Yes, sir. Excuse me, but — ”

“The ballistics report as well. I must have that as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir. There is someone waiting to see you, sir.”

“Later, Wo.”

“This is someone you may wish to talk to, sir.”

“Why?” 426 finally looked up. “Why would I want to talk to anyone?” His eyes were not wet, but they burned red with smoke irritation and with something else. Wo took an involuntary step backwards.

“This is one of the perpetrators, sir. I don’t know why he came here, but we have disarmed him and are holding him in the basement. It is O’Toole, sir.”

*“What?”*

“We thought it might give you some consolation to execute him, sir. But of course he may have useful information — ”

426 got up and moved out the door, his lips contorted in fury. “Bring me an extra tank of fuel for the blowtorch.”

“...Yes, sir.”

In the basement room, the little bodyguard sat in a metal chair, secured to it with eight lengths of wire cable knotted cruelly tight. Four men stood or sat around the dark room, smoking and conversing in low voices.

The single bright light shone straight down above O’Toole’s head. His face was smoke-blackened and mucky, with cleaner trails washed down his cheeks, and he was still crying. When 426 entered, he let out a strangled sob and wept noisily, head on his chest.

“Behave like a man,” snapped 426. “You will make a pathetic ghost.” He pulled on his leather gloves.

“He’s callin’ out to me!” cried O’Toole. “He’s askin’ me to take revenge! He’s tellin’ me, rescue me soul out’ve Purgatory so I won’t howl there in pain forever! If ye ever loved me, he says, KILL THAT PAKI BITCH!”

“Except in regard to Bandit’s conversion, the bounty hunter does not concern me,” said 426. “You will have no opportunity to deal with her, so be silent. You will need your voice for other things.” Wo handed him a blowtorch.

“She don’t concern yeh? Man, don’t ye know?” O’Toole shouted. “She’s the one killed yer boy! Shot him straight through the head, didn’t she?”

“You shot him, O’Toole. This pitiful attempt — ”

“No! I winged him when I shot at Bandit! He wasn’t dead, see?” O’Toole rocked the chair with his vehemence. “I wasn’t gunning for th’ wee Chink. Just pinked him, y’know?”

“Why would she shoot him?”

“Why, because she’s a bloodthirsty bitch.” O’Toole gave a significant nod. “Who ever heard of a wee girl usin’ a gun that way? She’s unnatural, ain’t she? She likes to fill a man full’ve lead and see ‘im gurgle out his last breath! I saw her do it, didn’t I? And didn’t I see her laugh like a witch while he begged for his precious life? Cold as ice, that girl.”

“You are an inferior liar, O’Toole,” said 426. “You stood by and watched it happen, you say, and you expect that to soften your fate?” He turned to one of the men. “Cigarette lighter, please.”

“All right, she didn’t stand over him, then!” shouted O’Toole. “She shot through the wall from the middle office. Crippled me darlin’ lad, and killed yer Huang!”

426 frowned.

“The bullets — see, you got to figure the bullets deflected down through that thick glass, and one got Mr. Brown’s kneecap and one his thigh and another yer boy’s skull, ‘cause he was laying there on the rug.” O’Toole swallowed hard and let out a panting breath. “The bitch had a mini .32 — there’s bound to be shell casings on the floor. It’ll be a .32 through his head, you’ll see.” He swiveled as far as he could and looked at one of the men. “Ye’ve got me .45 and ye’ve got me rifle! I carried no .32, now did I?”

“You could easily have discarded it in the bay, O’Toole. That proves nothing.” 426 lit the blowtorch. The flame glowed blue and yellow, roaring softly in the quiet room.

“And why would I want a damned baby’s toy like that? That’s a gun for women, isn’t it? And it’s a damned woman’s killed ‘em both. That’s the bitch ye want! RALLY VINCENT! I don’t care what ye do with me — just let me see that nigger bitch spread out in front o’ me before I die!” O’Toole took a deep, sobbing breath. “I’ll do whatever ye want, 426. I’ll take the fall for her and ye can roast me for dinner after I’ve finished the job. He’s burned, and I’ll burn too. Use me up, toss the bits to the crabs, ‘cause I’m yours.” He hung his head again, weeping. “Me own precious darlin’ lad... me sweet boy...” The flame went on roaring.

“Take off his shirt.” Two men came forward at 426’s direction and seized O’Toole’s damp turtleneck by the sides, tearing it down over his shoulders. It split and fell to his waist. His skin was pale and blotchy, his muscles corded and taut with a sparse covering of rusty hair. “Hold his head.”

One man grabbed O'Toole's hair and pulled his head back so that his chin pointed at the ceiling. He closed his eyes against the bright light, his lips moving. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

426 stepped forward and licked the flame quickly at the side of his chest, then stroked it horizontally to the right. Rusty hairs curled and smoked in its path, pale skin reddening, blistering, scorching.

"Arrggh!"

The stroke ended in a quick downturn, and 426 drew another horizontal line an inch below the first, right to left. O'Toole jerked and arched and screamed, the chair's legs clanging on the floor. 426 made two quick vertical strokes between the long lines, changed the angle of the flame and worked for a few moments longer, ending with a long vertical downstroke and an upward hook. He moved back.

O'Toole hyperventilated a cloud of spittle, his teeth clenched. The stink of burnt flesh and hair filled the room.

"Take it." 426 handed the torch to Wo. "I have done."

"Gonna let the bumboys finish the job?" moaned O'Toole. "I'll last all night, you'll see..."

"Release him." The men all started in surprise. "I have accepted Mr. O'Toole's offer." He pointed to the Chinese character he had drawn on O'Toole's chest and Wo raised his brows.

"Retribution'?"

"I have branded his purpose on him, so that he will not forget to whom he owes this duty. Return his equipment and brief him. Do not allow him out until I give orders." Wo took the blowtorch and cut the wire cables that secured O'Toole to the chair, and he slumped forward. "Take him for medical attention now. I will speak to him later." Two men put O'Toole's arms over their shoulders and supported him out of the room.

"Is this wise, sir?" said Wo. "He is not a highly controllable element."

"That is what I am counting on," said 426.

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Rally's cell phone sat on the vanity where she had left it, and she flipped it open and pushed the first program button. The line rang only once before it was picked



up.

“Roy Coleman here.”

“Roy, it’s Rally. It’s over.” She wandered into the bedroom and flung herself on the bed.

“Yeah? Have you got Brown — ?”

“Brown’s dead.” Rally took a deep breath. “It was a doublecross, just like you suspected. We got nothing.”

“Good God, kid! He’s DEAD? What happened? The hitman show up?”

“Yes, but that’s not who killed him.”

“Don’t tell me Bean — ”

“No. I shot him. With that mini-.32. Close range through a glass wall. That thing’s got punch.” She raised the Guardian up where she could see it and dropped it on the bed. Not so cute after all. The stock was sticky with blood. “Crippled him. He couldn’t walk, and when the place caught fire — ”

*“Wha — aat?”*

“The San Francisco cops are on the scene now. Bean made me leave with him or I’d have stayed to explain. I’m in the hotel now.” She lay flat and stared at the ceiling. Still numb. “One of my shots went astray, and killed a Dragon man who’d been wounded. Went right through his head.”

“Why the hell did you shoot him? With the gun I got for you... oh, holy name.” Roy suddenly gasped. “Oh, my dear God. Why?”

“It... I don’t know how it happened, but I thought I had O’Toole in my sights, and I thought he was about to shoot Bean. But I hit Brown, and that poor kid. Are Smith and Wesson there?”

“S-Smith and Wesson... they went down to the bar to get some nachos, they said. They’ve been sitting here for two hours making cracks about girl bounty hunters and city cops and watching porno movies on the hotel pay-per-view, on my nickel. What the hell have YOU been doing, Rally?”

“Goddammit, Roy! I TRIED! It was a setup!” Weary, so dull and tired...

“Must have been one hell of a setup!”

“Oh, Christ, Roy! How do you think I feel about it?! I wish I’d never come to

California...”

“Hey, girl, are you OK? You don’t sound too good.”

“I’m all right. Got a few cuts and bruises, but it’s not serious. I’m just worn out.”

“Here come the Feds. Just a second.” Roy put the phone down and she heard indistinct voices. He picked it up again in a couple of minutes, sounding angry. “Is your partner there?”

“N-no...”

“What’s wrong? Did he pull — ”

“No, he backed me up. Distracted O’Toole long enough for me to get out of his sights. But he’s mad about the cash. He l-left. Little while ago.”

“Left? Damn, we must have missed him.”

“Missed him? You staked out the hotel?”

“Rally, Smith spotted the car today. He recognized it too, from some prison escape job, and he chewed the hell out of me.” His voice was low and hissing. “Accused me of shielding a criminal. I pointed out there weren’t any warrants on the guy, and he backtracked a little. He agreed to let you two go through with the operation, since you needed Bean’s help. But after that...”

“They were going to arrest him.” She closed her eyes, letting her head fall back on the pillow.

“They were going to detain him for questioning. There’s a lookout watching the hotel. But he hasn’t called. Bean did park there?”

“You asking me to rat him out, Roy?”

“I don’t think you’re in much of a position to refuse, girl!” Roy sounded furious. “I put my neck out for you here and I WANT AN ANSWER! Where is he?”

What did it matter? “He was parked in the garage.” Rally’s voice cracked. “He’s driving Buff. And he was moving fast when he left. Fifteen, twenty minutes ago now.” An eternity. Why had she been so angry with him? It was hard to remember.

“I’m going to confirm this with the Feds. Wouldn’t put it past ‘em to keep me in the dark...” Roy put the phone down again.

Rally stared at the ceiling. Angry? Oh, yes, she had killed someone, hadn’t she?

Shot a helpless man and let a human being die horribly in a fire. And Bean had scoffed at her distress and called her a fool for caring. Was that why her emotions seemed to have shut down? From trying so hard not to cry in front of him? Bean was gone now. Why couldn't she cry?

Roy came on the line again. "He's still watching. No sign of Buff coming out. Of course no one called me to say he'd gone in..."

"There's only one exit to that garage. That car shows up for blocks anyway." Something was knocking up against the ice of her emotions.

"Well, sure. The man had some surveillance-camera photos of Buff, faxed from Chicago and DC. But no one had a good one of Bean. So where the hell —"

A mental bullet crashed through her wall of indifference. "Talk to you later, Roy!" shouted Rally.

"Hey — !"

*Click.*

She threw the phone on the bed and yanked on a fresh pair of pantyhose, jamming her feet into her shoes while she wiggled the hose up her thighs. Where had she stashed her CZ75? She flung herself on the carpet and reached under the bed to haul out her shoulder holster and nine-millimeter. Quickly she buckled it under her breasts and threw on her professional jacket to hide it. Still wearing a torn red spandex dress — the hell with it, no time to change.

Rally dashed out into the hall. The elevator was heading down to the lobby, so she took the stairs, sliding on the wooden banisters as fast as she could go. The stairs came out next to the door of the bar and she ran over to the garage elevator and punched the button. A sluggish whirl of cables began and she jittered around in a circle.

If the car was still there, where was Bean? Had he set off on foot? Not for any distance, surely — he drove everywhere. But in a compact city like San Francisco, a hell of a lot of things were within walking distance — like the Dragon pier. If he'd gone back there to look for the cash all on his own without even a means of escape, from cops or gangsters —

Rally got in the garage elevator and went down to the lowest level. There was Buff, standing right where they had left it, and the little white Honda. He hadn't driven, wherever he had gone.

Not wanting to wait for the elevator, she ran up the ramps to where she had parked the Cobra and leaped inside the car. All of her weariness was forgotten, and for the moment even her anger with Bean. She couldn't let him get arrested!

The Cobra's tires squealed as she took a hard right out of the parking garage and raced down the hill to the pier. No one was walking on the streets at this hour. Dozens of squad cars and emergency vehicles still scattered all around the neighborhood and the area was cordoned off. Rally parked the Cobra behind TV trucks and slowly moved up to the police line.

The pier was dark under a lingering cloak of smoke-smell and a sparse rain; the fire was out. A paramedic team came out toward the street, carrying a body bag on a litter. Rally trembled, but forced down her emotions and made her way to the nearest uniform, a policewoman.

"Excuse me..." she began.

"It was a bomb, lady. This street's gonna be closed for hours."

"Oh. W-was anyone killed?"

"Yep, afraid so. There's one of 'em now." She pointed at the stretcher being loaded into a coroner's van. "Loads of stiffs in the yard there, and some inside too. It's gonna be front page tomorrow." She looked at Rally. "You feeling all right, lady? Sorry if I said something to upset you."

"N-no, it's OK." She gulped hard. "I was looking for someone. Could you tell me if anyone's tried to get past the police lines?"

"No — well, the Channel 2 news team, but they always do that. You looking for a lost kid or something?"

"No, an adult. He's about thirty, six-seven, black hair. Has anyone seen him? Maybe hanging around?"

The policewoman looked over at a colleague, who shrugged. "Nope. No one like that. Sounds like he sticks out."

"He does. Thank you." Rally smiled weakly and walked back to the Cobra.

Once behind the wheel, she tried to consider what to do. Her weariness began to return and the lump on the back of her head throbbed. Where was Bean? She had no answer to that, so she drove back to the hotel, arriving not more than ten minutes after she had started for the pier. She left the Cobra in the garage near Buff and headed upstairs again, entering the lobby and punching the button for the main elevator.

"Uh, sir, I asked you to put out that cigarette..." she heard from the bar. The elevator opened and Rally turned to enter.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a silhouetted shape in the bar. Someone hunched over the lighted counter, someone broad-shouldered enough to block out most of the view through the open double doors.

She skipped quickly aside to move out of the line of sight, bumping into a man who was trying to get in the elevator. “Sorry,” she hissed, and hugged the wall. He started to throw her a dirty look, then goggled at her short dress.

Rally worked her way along the wall, crossed the hall and crept up to the door of the bar. Before looking inside, she checked her holster and thought for a moment. Why had he stayed here? What was it going to get him?

“Sir, it’s against the law to smoke in here. Some of the other patrons are complaining.”

“It’s a goddamn *bar*,” said Bean wearily. “How can you not smoke in a bar?”

“I don’t make the rules, sir, it’s a state law — ”

“California.” Bean shook his head. “Remind me again why I left home?”

Maybe he was just having a drink for the road. But would Bean drive drunk? Rally sucked in her breath and stepped into the bar.

Three empty beer pitchers stood at his elbow and clamped in his fist was the handle of one more, half full. Rally watched as Bean lifted the whole thing to his lips and downed the remainder, then gestured to the bartender.

“Uh, sir, I’m sorry, but I can’t serve you another.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Um, it’s the law. If we serve someone who’s already had too much — ”

Bean creased a fifty between his fingers and waved it under the bartender’s nose. “Who says I’ve had too much?”

“Look, I’m sorry, but I could lose my job. If you drink on the premises, we can get sued for anything you might — ”

“Califooooornia,” moaned Bean, and stood up, all six foot seven of him. The bartender gulped. “How ‘bout I just take this outside with me? Then I won’t be drinking on the premises.” He gripped the bar, one hand on each side, and rocked it slightly to the sound of straining bolts.

“Eeek!” squeaked the bartender. “Please!”

Bean heaved and the bar worked loose. Glasses fell to the floor and the other patrons jumped clear. A tap popped free and sprayed beer in an amber fountain. A woman screamed.

Rally jumped forward, grabbed Bean's elbow and shouted in his ear. "Knock it off, Bean!"

His head snapped around and he dropped the bar with a thud. The lights under the counter went out and beer geysered to the ceiling.

"You with *him*, lady?" The bartender scrambled to shut off the tap.

"Yes, I am." Rally snatched up the duffel. "Are you drunk, Bean?"

"I'm calling the cops!" The bartender reached for a phone. "This guy's a wild animal!"

"No, wait! He can pay for the damage." Rally snapped her fingers at Bean and gestured for his wallet, but he only stared at her. She unzipped his jacket, frisked him with her free hand and pulled out a wad of fifties, dropping it in a puddle of beer on the counter. "Here — this ought to cover it. Now come with me!" she ordered Bean. Duffel in one hand and Bean's elbow in the other, she towed him to the elevator.

"He play with the Niners or something?" she heard one of the patrons say.

"Naw... gotta be the Raiders."

"Where the hell are we going?" grumbled Bean.

"Outside where I can keep you from getting arrested! Christ, what were you thinking?" She shoved him inside the garage elevator and punched the button. Bean looked down at her with slightly unfocused eyes.

"What's the deal?"

"Did you know there's an FBI man waiting for you to leave? I just talked to Roy."

"Well, I figured that. So what do you care?"

"You're spoiling for a chase, huh? In San Francisco? There aren't that many ways out of this city, and you don't know them very well. They'll nail you to the wall, Bean."

"Me?" Bean grinned wolfishly. Rally flinched.

"All right, maybe you could do it. But I don't want you causing any more mayhem

than you already have! You're plastered."

"Ahh, I'm not that drunk." Bean belched. "I only had four pitchers of beer. I was gonna get in my car in a minute."

"Even with your metabolism, that's a hell of a stupid risk! Why go into the bar in the first place?"

"Had to cool off." He ran a hand through his hair, which was standing on end over his red headband. "Don't like driving mad."

The elevator stopped and the doors opened, but Rally and Bean didn't move. She pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling. "Look, I... I didn't want to cry, so I got angry instead."

"Yeah? Did it work?"

"Kind of." To Rally's chagrin, her eyes welled up.

Bean sighed and dropped his head. "You got a conscience, girl. Guess that's more good than bad." The elevator doors closed.

"Not going to let me get angry at you again, huh?" Her voice went high on the last word, and she put a hand on her mouth, fighting down the lump in her throat. "Not going to give me an opportunity to call you names?"

"You think I got no feelings about that?"

"Bean?"

He had his hand on the back of his neck, rubbing the muscles, and didn't answer. Rally stared at the top of his head until he lifted his face and met her eyes. "Is that why you were drinking?"

"Kills the sting, babe." His smile was sour.

Her stomach contracted. Bean? Feelings? He'd proposed this partnership again... why? She'd assumed it was purely mercenary. Money was all he cared about, wasn't it? The elevator doors opened and a man started to get on, then backed out after a look at Bean's scowl. But Rally moved quickly out and strode toward her car, and Bean followed.

"Now what? You don't want the Feds getting their claws on me?"

"I think I owe you that much."

"No shit."

“I’ll get you out of here and tell them you’re gone — hey, what are you doing?” Bean stopped at Buff and dug for his keys. Rally unlocked the Cobra’s passenger door. “We’re taking MY car, not yours. They have a picture of Buff. Get in.”

Bean walked over and snapped his fingers for the keys. “I don’t ride. I drive.”

“Not my car, you don’t,” snarled Rally. “Especially not when you’re drunk! Get the hell in and buckle your seat belt!”

Bean made a face. “Four pitchers don’t take much off my reflexes.”

“I don’t even want to know how much you think it takes to incapacitate you!” Rally threw the passenger door open, tossed the duffel into the back and shoved Bean toward the car. He barely moved from her push, but slowly complied, ducking his head under the door frame and pulling his legs inside one at a time. Rally slammed the door on him and got into the driver’s seat.

“Ain’t they looking for you, too?”

“Not yet. The cops won’t have contacted the Feds, and Roy just found out about Brown and Huang. The FBI lookout won’t stop me from leaving again if we move fast.” She jammed her key in the ignition and started up the engine, its deep growl rumbling through the garage.

“Again?”

“I went down to the pier to look for you. I was afraid you were going to try to find the money and get nabbed — or shot! The fire’s out, by the way.”

“Huh. Wondered why yer engine was warm. So you skipping out on the FBI deal?”

Rally shot the car backwards out of the space and angled it down the row, heading up the ramp for the exit. “What deal? It’s blown. Brown never meant to give himself up.”

“Guess not. So what the hell *was* the idea?”

“I... don’t know.” The car emerged into the street and Rally took a left. The rain had grown heavy again, the gutters running freely, but there wasn’t much wind now. “It got a little chaotic, with the Dragons barging in and that huge explosion! I’m not sure anybody’s plans went the way they were supposed to, not just ours.”

She frowned in thought. “But you know, O’Toole had plenty of chances to kill me, and he was using a damn accurate weapon. If he was missing, it was on purpose.”



“Missin’ on purpose?” Bean blinked at her.

“Brown bragged about the guy’s ability. And I saw the rifle — a Heckler and Koch PSG-1. It confused me at first — I hadn’t expected a marksman to be using a semi-auto. Most of those aren’t too accurate. *That* monster can do 50-round groups into an 80-millimeter circle at 300 meters.”

“Whatever. Pretty special, huh?”

“I’ll say — it costs almost twelve thousand dollars. About par for these guys, since they have so much loose cash to throw around!”

“Yeah, cash. I wish I had my half-million. Quarter million,” he amended. “Man, I must be drunk.”

“I’m sorry, Bean.”

“Slick operation, though. Aside from losing Brown.”

“Damn, that’s what’s bothering me! It seemed so planned out...” She paused. They passed into the Presidio, a dark, wooded area with few buildings.

“Huh?”

“Bean! What if that was the idea?”

“If what was the idea?”

“Brown getting shot — by *me!*”

Bean looked startled. “Sorry. I ain’t drunk enough for that to make sense.”

“He set himself up! Look, it follows!” She gestured wildly with one hand on the wheel. “He wasn’t armed. He showed us the money to get us confident and he kept his mouth clean, mostly. When you left the room — who knows, he might have hinted to those old guys to come and meet you — he started saying things to piss me off.”

“No foolin’.”

“And then when the window was shot out, he stood right there and practically begged me to drill him! He made me watch the fight you had with the mercenaries and he called me a whore — if he hadn’t been crippled and unarmed, I WOULD have shot him! And all that stuff about killing May and Roy too — just taunting me! Dammit, Bean, he was trying to get me to shoot at him!”

Rally yanked the wheel to the right to enter a driveway by a park sign. She passed

a line of trees and continued into an empty, lighted parking lot. Slamming on the brakes, she jolted both of them. The Cobra came to a stop at the end of the lot and she turned off the ignition. They sat on a low cliff overlooking a darkened beach, the surf a distant pale line wavering in the gloom.

“What the hell would he do that for?”

“I... I don't know.” Rally glanced around and chewed her lips. “It didn't look like he had a bulletproof vest on, though he could have had some kind of custom-made armor over his vital spots. He must have known I was an accurate shot. Maybe I was supposed to shoot him so he could fake his death...”

“Just to make you look bad or somethin'? Or get away from the Dragons? Seems kinda risky.” Bean rubbed his eyes, which didn't seem to be focusing well. “Maybe he ain't dead after all.”

Rally put a hand over her mouth. “You heard him. God, those screams...”

“Yeah, you're right. Lucky for Huang he was already dead 'fore he was toasted. I didn't have to heave him out the window to make sure he was a goner. Wish I had, though! Why didn't you let me?” Bean made a whistling sound as he indicated a trajectory with one finger, then stuck out his tongue with a splatting noise and made a wide gesture with both hands. He laughed drunkenly.

Rally shuddered. She saw the young man's stricken face again. “He was a human being! A person, with a family and friends... someone must have loved him.” Rally put her head down on the steering wheel. “I killed him...” The tears were about to come. She couldn't stop them. “I've killed crooks before. But not like that. Wounded, helpless...”

“So what now?”

“Oh, damn, Bean, we have to find O'Toole! He's got your money, but my reputation...”

“What's the big deal about your rep? Ain't you just gonna sweet-talk the cops anyway?”

“I don't think so. Roy was so angry with me...” She gripped the steering wheel. “The FBI's going over the scene by now. I've been in trouble before. But I hadn't killed anyone with a gun registered to the SFPD. And I hadn't gotten on the bad side of an FBI sting. What Roy thinks of me isn't going to matter if the Feds decide to arrest me for obstruction...”

“Yeah? I'd better get clear before they do.”

“*What?!* You're just going to skip and leave me to face it alone?”

“What the hell else can I do?”

“Can’t you tell them what you know? Can’t you tell them I didn’t mean to shoot an unarmed man?”

“I don’t know that.” Bean shrugged, his expression sullen. “I know that isn’t something I’d expect to see you doin’. But there’s always a first time, babe.”

“Thanks a hell of a lot! I shot through that wall because I thought O’Toole was about to shoot *you* and I didn’t figure he was going to miss! Even you can’t ignore a .308 round through the cranium!”

“I never saw a guy with a rifle indoors.”

“O’Toole! He’s the one who shot out the window! I had to get out of that office while he was skimming slugs right over my head. You got that crease on your skull from his rifle!”

“Sure I did. But I couldn’t see the guy shooting and I wasn’t anywhere near when you whacked Huang. Look, girl — ” Bean grabbed the top of her seat and turned to face her. “I could tell the Feds everything I know about this deal, everything I know about you, including the color of your — yeah, well. It wouldn’t cut no ice with no Federal prosecutor. *I ain’t an eyewitness*, and that’s all she wrote.”

“So you’re going to let them hang me? You won’t help me?”

“I’ll get my ass busted if I do, and it won’t do you any good anyhow. What’s the point?”

“You goddamn... iceberg... Bean!” Rally cried. “Won’t you stick out your neck for anyone?” She buried her face in her arms against the steering wheel.

Several minutes of silence followed, broken only by her agonized sobs and the rain on the windshield. Bean sat still in the passenger seat, arms folded over his chest. He let out a deep huffing breath once in a while. Rally gradually subsided and wiped her nose on the back of her hand. Bean dropped his bandanna in her reach and she cleaned herself up, mascara and purple eyeshadow smearing.

“You’re a bastard, Bean, you know that?” She blew her nose.

“I do what I gotta do to survive, babe. So do you.”

“Don’t make me out the same as you. I care about what’s right, not just the damn money...”

“Do we gotta take that road again? Lemme out, I’ll walk.” Rally burst into tears

again. Bean sighed irritably. “It’s too damp in here for me, babe. Catch you later.” He opened the passenger door and let in a sheet of rain.

Rally felt her stomach wrench at the thought of sitting alone in the dark. The distant surf surged and crashed, a whisper of chaos on the periphery of her vision. A pale line, almost alive in its motion. “Bean — no, please. Stay here with me...” she whispered through tears, and reached out.

“Huh?” He stopped as her hand touched him.

“Oh, God, I killed a man. I killed him and he’s dead, he’s burned to death...”

“You thinkin’ about ghosts, girl?” Bean put his hand over hers where it rested on his arm.

“No! I’m not a murderer! Please tell me I’m not a murderer...” He was warm and massive, his body shifting in the seat as it creaked under his weight. He had substance. He was the direct opposite of disembodied chill or invisible wrath...

“Aw, I never said you were.” He patted her shoulder. Rally buried her face against the side of his chest, feeling the coolness of his thick leather jacket. Bean sat still for a moment, then moved and dislodged her. “Uh... I got business to transact. See you.”

“You’ve got business with me, Bean. Unfinished business.”

“Sure I do. Half a million dollars’ worth. But it ain’t going to wash up on the beach while I’m sittin’ here.”

“Not that kind. It was...” she gulped — “It was the answer to a question.”

“What answer?”

“Yes.”

“Huh?”

“The question was, ‘You want to do it?’”

“Yeah, right. What a load of laughs *that* was.” Bean shook off her hand and put one foot out of the car, but Rally put a hand on his chest and aimed for his mouth. When her lips touched his, his body tensed. “No way, girl. I am not falling for that one again.” She reached up and kissed him, feeling his resistance. His mouth was tight and unyielding against hers, his spine rigid. But he didn’t move away.

She drew back in a moment to meet his razor glare. Bean sat up and brushed her off to grab the door handle again.

“Please, Bean! Don’t leave me alone right now!”

“You don’t need me. You just told me that, flat out.” He wiped two fingers across his mouth with his face turned away from her. “Why kiss me?”

“I — I’m asking you to have sex with me. I need to feel something other than what I’m feeling now...” She wrapped her arms around herself, digging her fingernails into her skin.

“I am not the right man for this job, Vincent. Get someone else. Pretty Larry’ll fall all over himself to oblige.”

“I want you, not someone else! You were there. You saw what I had to do!”

“Yeah, and gunfire doesn’t get my wheels moving the way it does yours.”

“That’s disgusting! How can you think that I — ”

“What the hell do you want to do it for?” His huge shoulders hunched up in a defensive barrier and he gave an uncomfortable scoff. “You just want your cherry popped?”

“No! I just — damn it, Bean! Don’t make me talk!” Rally sobbed. “I feel like my skin’s roasting off! I just want to be reminded I’m still a human being...”

“How is me fucking you going to remind you of anything?”

“Shut up!” Rally grabbed the front of Bean’s jacket and the tails of his headband to yank his head around. She rose to her knees on the seat and slammed her mouth against his with bruising force. Pain shot along all her nerves, crackling in her chest and the joints of her jaw.

Bean grunted and took her upper arms, starting to push her away. She kissed him desperately and bit at his lips. He jerked back, his expression angry, but his scowl faded as he looked at her. Rally trembled in his grasp, her eyes brimming. Her nervous tension suddenly gone, her head sagged on her limp neck. Bean’s hands gripped her; he found her gaze and held it. Something behind those sharp eyes, the hard wall of his features. She had seen that look somewhere before...

“Aw, hell.” An odd grimace crossed his face.

With a slow, enveloping movement, Bean embraced her. Her face slid across seamed leather, his arms wrapped and settled heavily around her, his chin came down on the top of her head and he rocked back to hold her cradled against his chest. Very dimly, through layers of tanned moose hide and ballistic nylon and hard ceramic plates, his heart beat under her cheek.

Rally curled her hands under her chin and closed her eyes, crying silently. Bean's hands stroked her back and upper arms. Gradually she subsided and lay back in Bean's embrace, finally looking up into his face as he held her.

His expression unsettled, he examined her for a minute, then bent down and kissed her. Softly, reassuringly. He reached over and closed the car door with a solid *thunk*, shutting out the rain.

"I'm here, babe," he said at last. "Any way you want it."

They didn't speak. Bean lay back and let her kiss him, unzipping his jacket to allow her to stroke his chest and push his shirt up out of the way. The night's chill crept into the car, but Rally shed her jacket and holster. Half climbing out of her seat, she put her thigh over Bean's legs and pressed her breasts against him. He tasted of beer, he smelled of smoke and his own musky sweat, skin warm and electric, his hair thick and smooth, a little cooler than his body. Rally lay against him and touched everything within reach, exploring his musculature and the details of his body; navel, nipples, adam's apple, elbows.

He ran one hand over her back and flanks as she did so, patiently. When she unbuttoned his jeans and took his penis in her hand, he took a deep breath and stretched like a cat, as if expanding in every fiber.

His erection slowly hardened and rose up as she stroked him, the fine skin tautening and the veins growing prominent. It seemed hotter than the rest of him, as if it held more life and energy concentrated in one organ. Bean's face warmed as well, though he seemed reluctant still, staring at the headliner and out the windows while he bit his lips. Finally he became fully erect, his penis pulsing gently in her hand.

Rally examined it carefully, determined not to fear it if she could learn its ways. Her thumb and middle finger could not quite circle it at the base. He had not been circumcised and his pubic hair was dense and black like her own. Bean eased his foreskin back for her; she cradled the penis in both palms and pressed it to feel its structure and shape, hard but giving, with a slight curve up to the big purplish head dimpled with its single eye.

A clear glistening teardrop clung to the eye, and she touched it curiously, finding it slick and warm like her own moisture. She spread it over the satiny head with her finger, Bean now watching her intently with one hand resting on her back. When she slid down into the foot well and knelt to kiss where her finger had been, he took a deep whooshing breath and let it out again, his body moving in a slow undulating curl like an easy stretch of road, rising and falling like the passing crest of a hill. The upholstery dented deeply with a soft sound as he arched his neck backwards.

For a few moments she simply kissed his penis and watched his face, the changing expressions of pleasure subtle but unmistakable. Bean worked his gloves off and dropped them, keeping his eyes on her. He laid a hand over hers and pressed down hard at the base of his erection, stretching the skin tightly back.

Rally crouched to kiss the head again and lap it with her tongue, wetting it all over. It wasn't an easy fit in her mouth. It was like putting a big plum whole between her teeth and trying not to scrape the skin. But she licked the end of the glans and slurped the head like an ice-cream cone, Bean shuddering as she did so. She opened her lips as wide as she could and plunged down on him. His stomach muscles tightened under her hand; the groan he let out turned into short huffs.

"Girl... it's... oh, *man*..." Bean panted hard, his hips heaving and his fingers working into her hair. "Oh, baby..." She glanced up and saw his face turn dark red, his eyes clenched shut and his mouth wide open. "Gaah!" He howled, his swelling penis throbbing between her lips, and a warm spurt of something hit the roof of her mouth.

He was coming, she realized a little too late, and she jerked back in shock as Bean pumped several more jets of semen into the air and over her hands. He slumped, breathing raggedly and his palms trembling on her head.

"S-sorry... been thinkin' about it too much, I guess." His penis rapidly subsided and lolled limply.

"Oh... um... does that mean..." Her face grew warm, the strong taste in her mouth gagging her. "Oh, please... can you still...?"

"Huh?" Bean looked down as she swallowed and coughed. "Can I still screw you? You gotta ask that, baby?" He hissed a laugh and shook his head in disbelief, then gave her his bandanna to wipe her hands. "Yeah, you don't know much about guys, no matter how sexy you are. Gimme five minutes, that's all."

Bean put his hands under her arms and urged her upwards, then slid one palm along her thigh and under her short dress. The tips of his fingers touched her pantied crotch. Rally hitched the dress higher. Bean reached a little farther and cupped her sex in his hand.

While she knelt half on her seat and half on his, he slid his fingers and clasped her, pushing the heel of his palm up against her mound and rotating it slightly. Rally put her hands on Bean's shoulders for support, her hips moving in small circles, back arching and bending. She leaned down to kiss him and he responded with a groan, opening his mouth to her tongue, pulling her closer with his other hand on her buttocks. Both of them shook as they kissed, mouths locked in dizzy hunger, lips working greedily.

Nothing had been like this before, not even in the motel room. Rally's desire was ten times what it had been then, her emotions running far higher. Life and death in the balance... Bean seemed overcome with need, his reluctance utterly forgotten. He ran his hand up her back and pushed her breasts into his chest while his lips slid over hers, hot, damp, intensely arousing. Now that he matched her speed, it felt like a race to the finish.

His penis grew hard again, nudging her thigh. She wanted him inside her, all the way without a touch on the brake before or after the goal. Rally seized Bean's erection and tried to straddle him, pulling at her hose, but he jerked back and held her still for a moment, panting.

"Easy there, girl." His pupils were hugely dilated and his hair shadowed his eyes as he looked into hers. "You ain't ready."

"I don't care — "

"You want it to hurt?"

"Yes, I do!" she blurted out.

"The hell you do!"

"I'm — it's... I don't know..." She was thinking of penance, perhaps.

"What the fuck for? If you're plannin' on hating it I'm outta here — you think I'm gonna like screwin' a gal who's taking it like punishment or something? Shee-it." Bean sounded utterly disgusted.

"Oh..." She had to stop thinking of him as nothing but an instrument...

He sat back and looked at her, shaking his head. "I can't figure you, girl. What the hell do you really want with me?"

Rally said nothing, her chin trembling. What *did* she want with him? Why had this seemed so important? Pulling her leg from Bean's lap, she started to retreat behind the steering wheel.

Bean's hand came down on her thigh and stopped her. "Hey. Not so goddamn fast! You gonna pull that disappearing act on me again?"

"Look, I'm sorry — I really wasn't thinking — "

"Maybe not." She looked up at him and saw urgent desire rekindle in his face. "But you know what, baby? Neither am I."

Bean curled a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her towards him. His



lips took hers again. Rally closed her eyes and let their tongues entangle. In a few moments they were kissing frantically once more, Bean's heartbeat pounding against her breasts. She reached between his thighs and touched him; his hips snapped upwards and he let out a gasp.

"Oh, darlin'," he said in his throat, almost too softly for her to hear. "Can't turn you down. Not a chance in hell..."

"Um... then, can we do it? Now?" Rally stroked Bean's erection, feeling his body tremble.

"You sure are in one big hurry, ain'tcha? There ain't no rush." His hand covered hers and gently moved it away. "We got a while."

"Please, Bean, I just want to — "

"Yeah, I got that." He shook his head with a chuckle. "Lie down on the seat, baby. I'm going to do you right no matter what you say."

"What are you — "

"Just you lie down and see, hey? I know what I'm doin', baby." Bean leaned towards her and kissed her, moving up in his seat and pressing her back. She didn't like to give up control, not now — but he was right: he knew what he was doing and she did not. Rally sat back in the driver's seat, crosswise with her skirt up around her waist, and extended her legs across Bean's lap.

He smiled, then took his jacket off and folded it. Between the seats there was a hard-edged console: Bean put the jacket over it, got up with one knee on his seat and began to arrange her body.

He laid her shoulders against the driver's door, put her hips on his folded jacket and opened her thighs around his waist. Stretching out over her like a bridge, he lowered his head and kissed her again.

Rally put her arms around Bean's neck to kiss him back as he stroked her thighs through her hose. His hand moved higher until his palm nestled her sex, still barricaded with hose and panties. Rally wriggled her hips and tried to peel her hose down, but impatiently tore the crotch seam instead and tugged it open along its entire length.

Bean laughed silently and worked the crotch of her panties aside. One finger slid between her wet vulval lips. Rally took a gasping breath and clamped down on his hand, her abdominal muscles cramping. His left leg was doubled under him on the passenger seat and his right leg jammed into the seat well at an angle, his left hand supporting him on the driver's seat as he leaned over her.

His right hand worked up and down with a soft wet sound, echoing the rain that pattered outside and ran in streams down the windshield. He laid a finger at her entrance and slowly pushed it in, withdrawing it and pressing forward again until he had passed the tightest barrier. Gently he moved the finger around in a circle, exploring her virgin passage and gradually easing it open.

He began to thrust in and out, and Rally rotated her hips to meet him, whimpering. She could feel him shifting awkwardly, trying to arrange his long body into the cramped space. He could kiss her mouth, but he couldn't move much lower than that without throwing a serious crick into his back.

Suddenly he sat up and withdrew his hand from her. Before Rally could move or sit up, Bean took her hips, flipped her onto her stomach, scooped his arms under her thighs and locked his hands over the small of her back. He pulled her towards him with her backside in the air, lifted and turned and deposited her on his lap with her face in his crotch and her torso against his, her bottom touching his chin.

When she raised her legs around his neck, he reclined the seat back as far as it would go and hitched her hips upwards.

It all ran together in one ecstatic ache of sensuality, her eyes dripping tears as her voice called inarticulately to him to keep going, not to stop, not ever. He buried his face between her thighs and kissed her hungrily, lapping up her slick juices and teasing her clit with the tip of his tongue, faster, slower, up and down, hard and vigorous and then as softly as flowing water. He held her effortlessly in place, so her hands were free to clasp his penis, but she couldn't concentrate on anything but his mouth on her.

How could anything feel as intensely intimate as this? The pleasure overwhelmed her with a nameless sorrow, like a pit in the middle of her chest. Nothing would fill it, nothing would make her whole again, not ever. It expanded and grew as she drew near orgasm, shuddering up and down with Bean's tongue sliding in her folds, her knees crooked over his shoulders.

Rally groaned in long sobbing breaths. Soon she was screaming out loud and kicking her legs spasmodically, the blood that ran to her head adding to the intensity of sensation. Bean kept steadily licking her and moving his head rhythmically up and down. Rally felt a deep rumbling itch like the throb of a powerful engine starting. She locked her legs around Bean's neck and froze in place, shaking.

Her orgasm raced up on her with tremendous speed and hit as hard as a fully loaded eighteen-wheeler. Her thighs tightened and her legs jerked so hard she nearly tore his head off.

When Rally came to, Bean had lowered her so that her head lay in his lap and her

body draped over the console and the driver's seat. He stroked her sweaty hair away from her face. She rolled up to sit after a few moments, restless and a little dizzy as the blood rushed down out of her head again.

Bean looked at her with a heavy-lidded gaze. He smiled with nostrils flaring and an edge of white teeth showing, desire burning like fire in his eyes. Unbuckling his jeans, he yanked them down along with his underwear, then pulled her hands toward his penis and kissed her. He smelled of her. Rally felt shy of her own juices on his lips and chin, but Bean plunged his tongue into her mouth. She tasted salty lemon-musk with a touch of sweetness.

Smiling lasciviously at her expression, Bean wrapped her fingers around his penis and pressed them down until she began to stroke him. He erected again in her hands and rose up as high as the gearshift lever. With some trouble, he extracted a wrapped condom from his folded jacket and handed it to Rally. She opened the packet and looked at the rolled thing, wondering which way it went on. He turned it over for her and guided her hands down his shaft until he was sheathed.

Finally Bean spoke to her, his voice soft and smoky. "Get on top of me, sweetheart. It oughta go easier for you that way."

She scooted over and swung a leg over his hips. The head of Bean's erection nestled in her pubic hair when she knelt upright over his body. She had to bend him downwards to engage him in her entrance. But she was soaking wet from her juices and Bean's tongue, and the big knob began to slide inside her with her cautious pushes.

Rally bit her lips, then thrust firmly downwards.

She felt a tearing sensation and a flash of pain. All her warm arousal fled for a cold, shocking moment. The glow of sex had camouflaged a myriad of small discomforts — her tightly flexed knees, her binding dress, the chilly air. And one overbearing one — Brown's and Huang's ghosts looking over her shoulders, like the hallucinations she had once had on a hit of Kerasine. Rally twisted in panic and let out a sob.

Bean took her face in his hands and kissed her hard, holding his hips motionless. The pain peaked and faded while her muscles fluttered and contracted around the unyielding intrusion. Little by little she ceased to shake, and the warmth overtook her again.

This was it, then. She was having sex with him by any definition, his penis inside her. She was not a virgin any more. The idea sputtered and died, snuffed out by the far stronger blast of passion. Having intercourse with a man — this was what it was like. But she could not linger on anything definable in the terms she knew; Rally's coherent thoughts seemed to dissolve as pure sensation washed through her. Bean's shaft pressed gradually deeper as she paused to let herself grow used

to him, then bore down to admit him further.

“Sexy... lady...” whispered Bean.

“Oh... Oh, God...” He was nearly all the way inside her now, and the feeling of fullness was overwhelming. Bean took her hips and moved gently up and down, thrusting a few inches in and out. Each short stroke sent quivering waves through her. Rally gasped and shook, then gripped his shoulders like death.

Bean stopped short and peered into her face. “Hurting you?”

“No...” She ground her pelvis down to feel his firm warmth open her, her muscles clenching. “Oh, Bean, fuck me...” He resumed his careful thrusts. “That feels s-so good...”

“Glad to hear it, baby.” He amplified his movements and stroked her clit with a thumb. “Like that?”

Rally shook with cascading pleasure, unable to form any reply other than cries of delight. She loved the feel of him moving deeper and deeper, reaching parts of her that no one had ever touched. Could he fill her up entirely if she let him try...?

Bean watched her face with his lips parted, breathing irregularly through his mouth. Rally shrugged the straps of her dress off her shoulders and stroked the fabric down. She leaned forward and brushed his lips with hers as she sighed. “Oh, G-God, I love your cock in me...”

“I love being there, baby. I love your little tight pussy...” He buried his face in her throat and cupped her bared breasts.

“God, yes...” Rally reached down and spread her vulval lips with one hand, feeling Bean’s cock moving between her fingers, moist and slippery as it thrust inside her. This was like nothing she had ever even dreamed about. How could such a simple, animal act affect human beings this way? How could she feel so profoundly transformed by sharing a man’s body with him? Even when that man was such an incredible fuck...

Her body twisted and writhed of its own accord and she moaned out loud, rubbing her clit. Bean rocked his hips up into her, kissing her nipples and flicking them with his tongue. His fingers pushed her breasts up to his mouth and kneaded them; the tender flesh glowed with the friction. The surface of her skin tingled hot and cold, every wave of sensation radiating out from her sex and back again. A tremendous scream built up at the back of her throat.

She came violently, thrashing her body back and forth, her hair flying into her face as she cried out. Bean clutched her thighs to keep her on top of him and kept thrusting, his teeth set in concentration. When she collapsed on his chest, he

stilled the motion of his hips and stroked her hair.

“You worn out yet, baby?”

“No... just a little limp...”

“Then hang on.” Bean put his hands under her bottom, rolled easily to the side and deposited her on the driver’s seat, his cock still lodged deep in her. Rally let her arms fall back and put her right palm against the door above her head. Her left hand she rested on the steering wheel.

Bean settled her hips onto his jacket, stretched out with his knees bent and his boot toes against the passenger window and put his elbows on each side of her torso. After a pause while he hitched himself into a better starting position, he launched into long, controlled strokes.

She looked up at him after a minute, and he smiled and kissed her. Bean’s tongue probed into her mouth and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Now lucid thought returned, her desire nearly sated. So she was making love. Getting fucked, screwing a man for the first time in her life. How strange it felt, and yet how inevitable, that it should be Bean Bandit whose body rocked hers back and forth, Bean whose lips she kissed while the heavy musk of sex rose to envelop them both, rain crackling on the windshield and roof. Did it seem strange to him that she had invited him in? Or was this inevitable for him too? Was the soft throaty sound he made with every rolling thrust a word meant only for her?

The thought of Bean’s feelings, whatever they might be, jolted her into tension. Rally bumped the sore part of her head on the door handle. He had abandoned her in one bed, both of them unsatisfied, simply because he couldn’t deflower a young virgin? That seemed unlikely, to put it mildly.

There must have been some other reason, a powerful one. Why had he changed his mind tonight? Only because of her distress? No, he had been a passenger at first, willing to let her take him but not even suggesting a direction. Now the heat of his body nearly burned her.

Somewhere, somehow, they had crossed a line: the road falling away from under her wheels as if she had driven off a cliff, Corvette and Cobra locking together in freefall. For a moment Rally felt the panic of empty air again and the fear of the landing. She could not remember what came next...

She felt nearly exhausted; his cock seemed like an intruder and her tender entrance stung. Bean kept pounding away, his sweaty face pressed to hers. Rally moaned uncomfortably, then hissed in pain as he thrust deeper and bumped an ovary. “Sorry,” grunted Bean, and shifted his weight, straightening his arms so that he supported himself on his hands. “No room...” The pain lessened, and

pleasure trickled back through her body as he continued to screw her.

“You... good?” asked Bean, breathing hard.

“Uh-huh.” Bean’s cock stiffened further within her, still slick as oil, her swollen tissues wrapping him tightly and pulsing with blood. His strokes were shorter and shallower now, but she felt him begin to lose restraint, his fingers dragging on the seat as his fists clenched and unclenched beside her.

A low moan escaped him and his face contorted. His right hand slipped off the seat and his weight came down on her chest. He pushed up from the floor mat and grabbed the steering wheel next to her hand to lift himself up again.

Clutching the wheel together, they strained and arched in rhythm. Rally’s muscles gripped Bean’s shaft, his cock so hard now she felt him anew as if he had just penetrated her. She dug her heels into his buttocks and tilted her pelvis to meet him. From his penetration alone, the rhythmic weight and energy of his thrusting hips, she was going to come again...

“Oh Jesus, woman...” groaned Bean. “I love... the way you fuck me...” Rally cried out and undulated her body as her orgasm hit. Bean’s eyes closed and he rolled his head once around on his neck, then picked up his tempo and started to pant. “Gonna come, Rally...” he said through clenched teeth. “Can’t stop it now...”

His expression tensed with every pant, lips curling back from bared fangs. His breath blasted into her face and his chest swelled and heaved into hers. It seemed like a terrible struggle for him, painful and difficult, losing control utterly and giving her the triumph over his body. He arched his spine and drove into her so hard she gasped. Several powerful spasms sent vibrations through her.

Bean roared, then his voice trailed off into a long moan. “Ohhh, God...” He slumped forward and nearly crushed her. She had to beat on his back to make him sit up.

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“It’s for you, sir,” said Wo, holding out a telephone and speaking in Cantonese. “He asked for you by name.”

“By *name*?” hissed 426. “Who is it?”

Wo covered the mouthpiece. “He said, he is Mr. Brown.”

“*What?*”

“That’s what he said, sir. It seems unlikely that he is telling the truth.”

426 grabbed the telephone and switched to English. “This is 426. If you have any conception — ”

*“Thought you had me, you yellow menace? Think again.”*

“If this is Manichetti, I would advise you to leave the country immediately. Your employer has burned in the fire he set himself, and I am not interested in your poor idea of a joke.”

*“No joke, 426. This is Sly Brown, and you are dead meat.”*

“You sound nothing like him, whoever you are. You are wasting my time.”

*“I inhaled some smoke. And I did a little screaming... My throat’s raw. That’ll wear off soon.”*

“If you are Brown, how did you escape?”

*“Tom blew a hole in the floor of the warehouse at the same time the main charges went off. Manny was waiting with a boat. I’m out past the Golden Gate somewhere, but I’ll be back. If your life is sweet, get back to Macau and submit to the tender mercies of the Communists. They’ll kill you more cleanly than I will...”* The line clicked and the dial tone returned.

426 stared at the phone, his expression hideous. “Where are Bean Bandit and the bounty hunter?” he said.

“They returned to their hotel some time ago,” replied Wo. “The location finder shows the Cobra still in the city. Do you wish to send O’Toole?”

“No,” said 426. “I don’t know if Brown’s plan has gone through yet. We should give it a chance, but he or his associates may well have absconded with all the money.” He shook his head. “I don’t know if that was Brown, damn his mother’s stinking cunt, but tell no one, especially O’Toole.” He gestured to another man. “And take care of the leak at the restaurant, immediately. Kill Larry Sam.”

::

“I dunno.” Bean laughed almost soundlessly, as if at a private joke. “I wouldn’t’ve picked a sport coupe to fuck in.” He buckled his belt and tossed the condom out onto the asphalt.

“I didn’t plan that, exactly...” Rally rested her head against the cold window glass. The rain had stopped for the moment.

“Man, I’m all cramped up — haven’t done it in a car since I got my growth.” He straightened and rubbed the small of his back. “Not like I minded all that much,

though.” Rally looked up into his wide grin. “Don’t know why the hell I didn’t let you jump me right off. Rally darlin’, you are a fuckin’ magnificent lay.”

“Thanks,” she replied, and turned her head away.

“Hey, I mean it.” Bean touched her shoulder, then her face, and turned her mouth towards him. “C’mon, gimme a kiss.” He took her lips with lazy tenderness. “Oh, baby. Guess you meant that ‘yes’, huh?” Punctuating his words with kisses, he seemed overwhelmed with fresh passion. “I never thought I’d get to have you, not in a thousand years. You’re such a class dame, Rally, and I’m just a...”

His arms enveloped her, his cheek pressed hers as he hugged her close and breathed out a warm, blissful breeze in her ear. Bean kissed her again, slow and scorching, his tongue coaxing its way into her mouth. His hands moved to Rally’s lower back and buttocks, pulling her against him. Heartbeats pounded her ribcage. When he finally raised his head, his voice was husky, even a little shaky.

“Sweetheart, I could do that all night long. Let’s go someplace I can stretch out full length. I got to show you just how bad I — ”

“Um, I feel kind of sore...” Her entire crotch burned, in fact; her vulva felt congested and raw and the pain of her torn hymen throbbed inside her, pushing away any lingering warmth from what they had just finished doing. It was the pain, of course. Wasn’t that what made her feel so cold?

“Oh, yeah. Almost forgot. You OK?”

“Fine.” She gave Bean a halting smile and eased out of his arms.

“You get reminded of what you wanted to get reminded of?”

Rally shrugged with a small affirmative laugh. “Maybe. I don’t think I’ve solved the main problem, though.”

Bean grimaced and scratched his head. “Back to the real world.”

“Yeah.” Rally got out of the car and felt for her flashlight.

“Hey, where you goin’, sweet thing?”

“To get my arsenal out. After baking in the trunk for days, they might need a little oil! And I never cleaned the shotgun...” She popped the trunk and unzipped her rifle bag. A drop of rain fell on the vinyl, then another.

Bean got out too, shouldering into his jacket, and strolled around the back of the car. “You brushin’ me off? Did I say something?”



“No. Sorry, I just felt a little weird.” She pulled out the rifle and motioned him away with her chin. “It’s starting to rain again. Go on and get back in... we can — ”

Bean put an arm around her waist from behind and kissed her ear. “Just can’t keep my hands off you, beautiful lady. Feels like they ought to stay there. You gonna sleep in my bed tonight?” He kissed her cheek, his breath tickling a strand of hair against her face. “I won’t try to do anything you don’t feel up to doin’.”

Rally let out a trembling laugh. Her heart raced in claustrophobic panic. Bean chuckled and put his other arm around her. “Well, if I do, gimme a whack upside the head! Just keep me warm, huh, sweetheart?”

“Um... ”

He turned her face and kissed her mouth, catching her lips in his and letting out a long smiling sigh. “Man, I feel ready to take on anything. The whole damn mob. Just point me in the right — ”

Rally dropped her rifle from shaking hands. It hit something in the trunk with a hollow, muffled *thunk* and slid down to the carpeted floor. Bean paused and looked over her shoulder into the trunk.

Inside was a department store garment bag, a big thin piece of printed opaque plastic, with a hard rectangular bulge in the center as if it were pregnant with some strange child. It had a tear, inflicted by the rifle, and through it showed the rounded corner of something dark.

“What the hell is this, Vincent?” Bean’s voice, and suddenly his arms, had the quality of razor wire.

But he let her go. He reached for the bag and tore it end to end. Inside was a suitcase. Black-anodized aluminum, scuffed and dented, with the handle gone. Bean seized it, hauled it out, slammed it on the roof of the Cobra and popped the latches. The lid sprang up to reveal close-packed wads of hundreds, neatly banded.

Rally took a shaky breath and let it out again with a horrible tremor, her guts gone cold. She could not look away from the money: from half a million dollars in cash.

## ::: CHAPTER NINE :::

“You... lying... bitch.” Bean’s hands hung limp at his sides, his face so dazed he looked as if he’d been slugged in the back of the head by a giant’s fist.

“Bean — ”

He closed his eyes with his teeth set, then flung his head back and rolled it down as if trying to jolt the sight out of his brain. “Why? I never did you wrong. *Why?*” Rough, shaking, his voice betraying more pain than she had ever imagined he could feel. Rain speckled the greenbacks under the parking lot lights.

“Bean, I didn’t put it there. I didn’t know it was there!”

“Bullshit.”

“It has to be a plant!”

“You told me no one could tamper with that lock.” He finally moved, grabbing her jacket front in one fist but not pulling her towards him. “And why the hell would anyone *give* you half a million? It’s all here.”

“I don’t know! *I don’t know!* For God’s sake, Bean — ”

“Same damn suitcase, same money.” An awful change went through him, his eyes scanning wildly back and forth. “You must’ve shot Huang so he wouldn’t squeal to me about it!”

“Bean! STOP IT!”

“Tried to get me to leave without you! Called me names to get me out of the way when I stuck to you!” His face twisted in a mixture of anger and agony, his pupils contracting to dots in spite of the darkness.

“You bastard! How can you think I — ”

“Shut up!” Bean wrenched the jacket tighter. “Drove back to the pier, huh? Yeah, and you sweet-talked your way past the cops while I was cryin’ in my beer like a damn fool. You fetched it from wherever the hell you’d hid it and stashed it in your car. And then you fetched me along too, ‘cause I still had something you wanted a piece of! My big... stupid... ASS!”

Rally seized his wrist in both hands, trying desperately to loosen her collar, clinging to him as she wheezed out the words. “The FBI was waiting for you! I had to get you out — ”

“Just couldn’t rest till you’d screwed me every possible way there is to screw me, huh?” He let her go with a stumbling shove and slammed the suitcase shut. “Cryin’ like that to get me to melt?” Bean doubled over and pushed away from the roof of the car. His fists slammed against the window header and he bowed in front of the suitcase. His gaze swept the car interior through the rain-streaked windows. “What the hell were you thinkin’ in there? *‘Now I’ve got him by the balls? Now I can fool him so bad he’ll give me every damn thing I want and never ask another question?’*”

He straightened and pounded one fist into the roof next to the suitcase, inflicting a deep dent, his voice so hoarse and raw it tore into her ears. “IS THAT WHAT WAS ON YOUR MIND IN THERE?”

“No. Noooo...”

“Guess I spotted you right the first time.” Bean turned his head, his teeth gritted in an ugly smile. He didn’t look above her breasts. “Least now I know why you’d spread yer legs for an animal like me, *Rally darlin’*. You just come a little more expensive than the gals that work the street. Half a million bucks a screw, hey?”

Another collision. Another crash landing, and this time the damage was beyond all estimate. “You... filthy... bastard. How DARE you talk to me like that?”

“You don’t give a shit what I think of you. Save the righteousness.” He yanked the suitcase off the roof, scraping the paint. “I’m taking this, Vincent. Every red cent of it. You lied to me.”

“Stop!” Rally drew her CZ75.

Bean looked down its barrel, blinking from the rain hitting his face. “Gonna shoot me for real this time, huh? See if it does you any good.” His expression was calm, but then his upper lip curled back from his teeth. Rally shivered, the pistol steady.

“Go on.” Bean smiled at the CZ75 like a pit bull. “If you put it square between the eyes, you might take me down before I can get to ya. Or you might not.”

He was right. Nothing but a head shot would have any effect on him at all. She could not cripple, only kill.

He’d made a mistake. A terrible one, and he’d compounded it nearly to the worst extent of his harshest, cruelest, crudest nature. Could she kill him for that? For a

mistake? The lingering wetness in her groin felt cold and sticky, her swollen vulva pulsing, her bruised lips sore.

Bean finally looked her in the face, and she could barely recognize the man who had just finished fucking her — no, making love to her, she acknowledged to herself with something like nausea. He had been so passionate, but so considerate of her inexperience. She had felt so cherished, so alive and human in his arms...

Could she blow off the back of his head with a nine-millimeter slug, topple him twitching to the ground, watch his life seep out over wet black asphalt? For the sake of half a million dollars? The look in Bean's eyes was alien, close to evil, but Rally felt a draining surge of peace. She tipped the muzzle skywards, her mind emptied of violence.

"I ought to snap your neck." Bean turned away. "But if I was gonna do it, I guess I'd'a done it by now."

"Bean, that's drug money. You promised not to take drug jobs!"

"You can forget about that promise, babe. You just canceled it out, but good. And stay out of my way." He whipped a bowie knife out of his jacket and stabbed it into her left rear tire, then yanked it out and held it in front of her eyes. "You interfere with me one more time, you murdering whore, and I'm warning you, you will never do it again."

He put the knife away and turned to look at her for a moment, his hair dripping with rainwater that ran down his face like tears. "I ain't got it in me to kill you right now. But that is not going to last." He adjusted his crotch with a brutal sneer, wheeled and stalked off into the misty darkness.

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"What happened? Someone shot the hell out of the place, that's what. Drive-by with a couple of full-auto choppers, maybe M60s." The policeman held up a long, necked-down brass cartridge casing, its shiny surface reflecting the streetlights and the surrounding neon signs of the neighborhood shopping strip around the Eight Dragon Delight. "See that? That's a —"

"A 7.62mm. Those bastards..." Inside the yellow crime scene tape lay dozens more, an evidence photographer stepping carefully around them as he lined up his shots. "When?"

"Almost an hour ago. Right after one A.M. Lucky it was after closing time, so there weren't a lot of customers. Only one guy bit it at the scene. Took two ambulances to clear out the casualties, though. Man, it's a hoppin' shift for a Tuesday night — y'know, there was this bomb down on —"

“Where... where’s the manager? Larry Sam.”

“Dunno who the manager is. That old guy, his name is Sam.” Rally looked over to see a weeping man sitting on the curb, his wrinkled cheeks streaked with tears. Her heart contracted. With hesitating steps, she approached him and bent down.

“Excuse me, sir... Mr. Sam?” He peered up at her, his bowed head grey and crew-cut. “I came here to talk to your son. Larry. I’m so sorry about this...”

He wiped his hand on his chef’s apron and held it out to her. “Rally Vincent. I rememba you. You like ribs?”

Rally nearly doubled over in anguish. “Yes. Please, I don’t want to bother you... but can you tell me where Larry is?”

Mr. Sam burst into tears again. “Ambahlance. Parahmedics...”

“Thank you. I’m so sorry.” She touched the old man’s shoulder and turned towards the shattered door. Larry would have been standing right there behind the host desk, or maybe helping to bus dishes, or at the register. Clearly visible through the sparkling glass windows, their remnants now crunching under her feet as she crossed the sidewalk. The frames and the walls inside had been chewed full of ragged holes and blood stained the floor in several places.

“Lady, if you’re a reporter, wait outside,” said a young blue-jeaned Chinese woman with a furious expression. “Get your statement from the cops and get out of my way!” She elbowed Rally aside and went into the restaurant with a large camping cooler.

“I’m a friend...” said Rally. “I came here looking for Larry.”

The young woman turned around and stared at her. “Are you Rally Vincent? The bounty hunter he told me about?”

“Yes. Are you... ?”

“I’m Vanessa. His oldest younger sister.” She headed towards the swinging doors to the kitchen and stopped abruptly when they opened, bumping into her cooler.

“Hey,” said a police detective, emerging from the kitchen. “Stay off the scene, ma’am. That tape’s there for a reason – ”

“Yeah, well, the cooler’s here for a reason too!” Vanessa Sam shouted at him. “I’m not going to let all that food rot in the refrigerators while the power’s out! Fifty pounds of tiger prawns in the shell don’t come cheap, buddy!”

“You can’t remove anything from the scene!”

“Food’s not evidence! Do you know there are people starving right on your doorstep, you armed storm trooper for the repressive oligarchy?”

“Ma’am, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Vanessa Sam dropped the cooler to the floor and sat emphatically on its lid, her expression daring him to do anything about it.

“Excuse me,” said Rally, mustering as much of a smile as she could manage. “Detective, could I talk to you for a minute? My name’s Rally Vincent, and I might have some leads for you on this case...”

“No fooling? Hey, someone said you were in town!” The detective came over and pumped her hand, then looked more closely at her outfit. “Uhh... you been having a busy night or something?”

“Yeah... something.” She looked over his shoulder at Vanessa Sam and jerked her chin at the kitchen door. Vanessa raised her brows — she had a distinct resemblance to Larry, though her wire-rimmed glasses and cropped haircut didn’t flatter her face — and she got off the cooler, picked it up and backed through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

“I’ve been working with the restaurant manager here. He gave me some information on a Chinese syndicate called the Eight Dragon Triad. I... I think they got wind of that, and that’s why they shot the place up.”

“No fooling? Hey, I gotta call this in, Ms. Vincent. Excuse me a moment.”

“Sure,” murmured Rally, and slipped under the tape as soon as his back was turned. In the kitchen, Vanessa was taking boxes off the shelves of a large commercial refrigerator and packing them into her cooler. A portable construction site light stood on the floor, lighting the room in a hard white glow. A half-cooked batch of cashew chicken lay congealed in a wok, and utensils and stainless-steel basins were scattered across counters, stove and chopping blocks.

Someone had spilled and trampled a box of fortune cookies on the floor; the yellow crumbs spread over the black rubber floor mats like broken flower petals.

“Oh, hi. Thanks.” Vanessa pushed hard on the top of a box of frozen prawns. “Darn, I’ll never get half of it in here. I should have brought a truck.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“The expensive stuff... well, I was going to put it in my apartment freezer to save it, but I doubt the restaurant will be reopening soon. They shut the power and the

gas off to the whole building because of the damage from the bullets. I'll stock up at home and take the rest to the Berkeley People's Cooperative Food Bank, I guess... Larry's going to yell at me, the capitalist pig, but what the hell." She put in another box of frozen prawns and stomped it down with her foot.

"Have you seen Larry? How is he?"

"I went to the hospital first thing when Mom called. She's there now. Larry's in surgery." She took off her glasses and wiped them. "He got a bullet through his chest..." Vanessa burst into tears, and Rally impulsively hugged her. Vanessa's arms went around her and she cried for a few moments into Rally's cleavage, then straightened up. "Sorry." She wiped her nose on a kitchen towel and stomped on the box of frozen prawns again.

"I'm so sorry about this. I... I'm afraid I might have had something to do with it..."

"Larry said he'd gotten a tape of some Eight Dragon Triad guys. I told him he was nuts and I was going to come over and rip all those stupid mikes off the tables unless he promised to quit trying to be Steven Seagal. What are the damn cops for, anyway?" Tears dripped down her nose.

"Well... sometimes it takes more than just cops. Your brother's a brave man, Vanessa. He helped me out a lot, and I'm grateful. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No. Not really." She paused and picked up the cooler. "I'm going to take Dad to the hospital now. Then I guess I'll take Mom and Dad home with me, because they sure can't sleep here. I'll just kick out my roommate and her stupid boyfriend for a few days."

"Oh. Could you... could you let me know how Larry is doing, and when I can see him?" She took a card from her purse and tried to give it to Vanessa, whose hands were full.

"Put it in my shirt pocket." Vanessa headed out into the dining room, and Rally lifted the tape for her to pass through to the sidewalk. "Yeah, I'll call you if I remember. I have the feeling I'm going to be busy for a few days." She put the cooler down behind a battered 1960s Plymouth station wagon, the bumpers covered with anti-war stickers. "But I'll try to remember. Dad!" she called. "Come on with me!"

"Thank you." Rally turned towards her Cobra.

"Just a sec," said Vanessa, helping her father into the passenger seat of her station wagon. "Larry said something to me just before they wheeled him into the operating room. He was conscious for a minute, and he said your name."

“Yes?”

“He said, ‘Rally — Minced squab.’ You have any idea what he meant by that?”

“No. No, I don’t. It’s a dish you serve here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s minced breast of pigeon wrapped in lettuce leaves. Dad’s speciality. Kind of expensive.”

“Pigeon...” Rally closed her eyes. A cartridge case rang under her foot. “Chopped stool pigeon, Chinese style.”

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Another beach, this one long and straight, running north and south at the western edge of the city. She had parked in a lot that sat on top of a seawall and looked out over the grey Pacific Ocean. Dawn, almost. The pale glow of emerging sun rose behind her, shadowed by the ranks of townhouses that lined the street across from the beach. Rally’s mind felt as grey as the ocean, her thoughts dulled by the night’s emotional firestorm. The streets were still wet from the night’s storm, but it wasn’t raining any more, though the sky was overcast. She wouldn’t see a sunrise today.

“Rally... I’m sorry I flew off the handle.” Roy sounded weary. “I called my wife, even though it was three A.M. in Chicago. She talked some sense into me. I apologize.”

“It’s OK, Roy,” said Rally quietly into her cell phone. “You weren’t really all that angry. Not compared to some people...”

“The FBI’s another matter, kid. Smith is steaming.”

“Oh, God.”

“The lookout at the Sandpiper Inn saw you leave, but he thought you had Brown and were taking him in. Otherwise you would have had a pursuit on your tail.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“There are two agents in the garage keeping a watch on Bean’s car. Did you find out where he went?”

“I don’t know where he is now.” Rally’s shoulders sagged. “Roy, please don’t kill me. I took him out of the garage in my car.”

“Oh, for the love of... Why?”



“Because I thought I owed it to him.” She rubbed her temples. “B-but there’s something I need to tell you, about the suitcase with the money...”

“You are going to have to tell it to the FBI, Rally. Everything.”

“But — !”

“Unless you want a warrant to go out for your arrest. It’s a good thing you finally called me back, though you almost left it too long. Come in for questioning, and I mean NOW, or there will be nothing I can do for you.”

Something clicked on the line and another voice broke in. “Miss Vincent, this is Agent Smith. Come back to the Sandpiper Inn and leave your car in the garage. Agent Wesson is there to pick you up.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered. “I’m on the other side of the city. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

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“Detective Coleman is with Agent Smith.” Agent Wesson pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose and pointed at a hard chair in front of his desk. “He’s giving his side of the story. I do hope, for both your sakes, that it’s going to match yours.” He sat down in his own chair and laced his fingers together. About thirty-eight or nine, he was trim and brown-haired, his white dress shirt and conservative tie matching his short cut and clean-shaven face.

“I didn’t tell him everything, sir. If you think he’s left something out, it’s my fault. Please — ”

“Detective Coleman’s fate is not your concern, Ms. Vincent. I am not interested in hearing your defense of him.”

“...Oh.”

“My senior partner and I have been working Sylvester Brown for seven months now.” Wesson gazed at his hands. “We had been looking for a wedge into the Eight Dragon Triad for a year, and finally he contacted us to negotiate. He was slippery as an eel and we dangled the bait and played the line for a very long time. He shuttled between Los Angeles and San Francisco at least once a week, and so did we. I’m so sick of airline coffee I feel like puking at the mere suggestion. Seven months of care and patience, and you shot it in the leg and let it burn to death eight hours ago. Do you understand me, Ms. Vincent?”

“Yes.”

“When Detective Coleman’s call got forwarded to me, we weren’t too happy about it, to put it very, very mildly. We thought Brown was getting ready to jump. We’d been encouraging him to do so for a long time. But we thought he was going to do it in Los Angeles after some careful planning, and we had no *fucking* idea he was going to drag a Chicago bounty hunter into it. It still makes no sense to me that he did. You have any idea why?”

“No...”

Wesson waited for a long moment, putting his locked hands on the desk. “I want some cooperation here, Ms. Vincent. I don’t want monosyllables. I want full answers with every damn detail included, no matter how bad you think it makes you look and no matter what you think the implications are for anyone, including Coleman.”

He took off his glasses and glared at her with cold grey eyes. “I want total, perfect honesty. I am a Federal law enforcement officer with the full power of the Justice Department behind me, as you are well aware, and I could simply read you your rights and arrest you on suspicion of murder, conspiracy and obstruction of justice. That will pull you a life sentence, of which you will serve at least twenty-five or thirty years if I have anything to say about it. You might get out when your hair’s gone white, assuming you’re still in one piece. How would you like it in the pen? You could renew some acquaintances you’ve made in the course of your illustrious career.”

Rally’s hands trembled on the arms of her chair. “I’ll cooperate. You don’t need to threaten me like that.”

“That’s what I want to hear. Keep in mind that I have other sources of intelligence. This conversation is being recorded and I will be cross-checking everything you tell me, so keep it right on the centerline.” He opened his briefcase and put a file folder down on the desk between them.

“I understand.”

“Why did you go after Sylvester Brown? You gave us the impression that he called you out of the blue.”

“I didn’t set out to do it. I went after Bean. Bean Bandit. Has Roy told you — ?”

“I know of Mr. Bandit. Brown mentioned him in general terms — as an ace driver based in Chicago — and the Bureau already has a file going on his activities, though it didn’t have a name on it until yesterday. Agent Smith is more familiar with that file than I am, but I know that Bandit was your mystery partner on this job. Did you follow him out from Chicago?”

“No. I was on vacation in California, and we spotted him — me and my partner May Hopkins. I went after him because I thought he might be running drugs again.”

“Again?”

“He stopped... he had stopped. We had a bet that I won, and he promised to stay away from drug jobs.”

“So you consort with a criminal? On good enough terms that he’ll give up lucrative work for your sake?”

“I don’t CONSORT with him — !”

“But you teamed up with him to pick up Brown.”

“Uh... yes. But it was temporary!”

“Was it? That promise is still in force?”

“No.” Rally fought to keep her expression composed. “He told me that it was off.”

“So the Dragons persuaded him to work for them after all? Hmm...” Wesson leaned back and tapped the earpiece of his glasses on his teeth.

“No, that’s not it! He would never work for them. He despised Brown and he said that the Dragons could kiss his... ass.”

Wesson leaned forward and opened another folder, a thick black one. “He has the reputation of working for anyone if the price is right.” He extracted a business card and held it up. “Here we go. *‘Professional Courier and Driver. Passenger or Cargo. Ten Years in Business, Never Lost a Load. Anything, Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime. Certain Restrictions Apply — Call for Rates.’* How carefully legal. You are sure he had stopped running drugs?”

“Yes. I know he had.”

“Detective Coleman told us something else. He’s taken jobs from old enemies before. Specifically, the Detroit gangster known as ‘Gray’. Whom, incidentally, you shot some time ago.”

“Yes, I killed Gray. He was about to kill Bean.”

“Really. You two seem to do a lot for each other’s sake.” He put his glasses on again and flipped through the folder for a moment. “Are you Bandit’s lover?”

“Huh?”

He glanced up over his metal frames, his grey eyes hard. "Complete honesty, Ms. Vincent."

"I... I..." She blushed scarlet.

Wesson sighed irritably. "This isn't prurient interest on my part. I need to know what influences can be brought to bear on this man."

"Oh, God..." She put her head down. "I have had sex with him. But I am not his lover."

"Excuse me?"

"He won't listen to me. I can't influence him at all, unless it's to kill me the next time he sees me."

"You've saved his life, you assisted him to escape from us, you've slept with him, and he wants to *kill* you?"

"He thinks I tried to steal money from him. Five hundred thousand dollars of Dragon cash."

"What?"

"It was Brown's payoff to him. Brown tricked him into making a drug run. Bean wanted compensation, but Brown tried to kill him instead. That's why we teamed up. Bean needed some firepower on his side, and I wanted to take Brown in for the FBI reward."

"Great. We never thought anyone was going to get a chance to collect."

"Why not?" Rally asked. Wesson lowered his brows. "I know, you are the one asking the questions here. But I really don't have any idea why he pulled me into this. He claimed it was because he was afraid of Bean and thought I could help, but obviously that was only bait! If you tell me more about this situation, maybe I can figure out what you want to know!"

He looked at her for a moment, then quirked his mouth. "Oh, it was a little too clever. That reward was only a diversionary tactic. He'd approached us months ago, offering information in return for a witness-protection deal for his family. He never gave us much besides promises. We needed to gain some time for him in the Triad, so we tried to make it look as if we thought he was a pivotal figure and wanted to arrest him. With his bodyguard around, he wasn't exactly vulnerable. We thought."

"Was he pivotal?"

“Frankly, I’m not sure how close he was to the heart of the matter. He talked a good game. But he was not even part Asian and we recently found out he had no Triad number.”

“Oh, one of those divisible-by-three numerology codes?”

“You’ve been reading up on this, I see.”

“I got that from Larry Sam.”

Wesson gave a mirthless chortle. “Who is the man whose restaurant was shot to pieces last night shortly after you left the Dragon pier. Brown dead, our operation blown and Mr. Sam in the hospital. What a lucky charm you are.”

“You think I don’t care about who’s been hurt?” Rally leaped from her chair. “You think I don’t know this whole mess is on my shoulders and it isn’t going to go away? Bean thinks I tried to steal half a million dollars from him! He said he would kill me and I know he isn’t joking! Even if you let me go and gave me a goddamn medal for what I tried to do, I’ve got a death sentence hanging over me! Yes, he had sex with me, but that doesn’t make an cent’s worth of difference to him! He’ll snap my neck the next time I get in his way!”

Wesson looked her up and down, eyes evaluating the lines of her face and figure. “That’s the kind of value he puts on money?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I won’t be suffering any qualms about *him*, will I... ?” Wesson let out a long disgusted breath.

“Qualms... ?”

Wesson frowned. “Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. He left me at Baker’s Beach, carrying the money. I assume he’s stolen a car and left the area by now.”

“Stolen a car, hmm?” Wesson picked up a phone and spoke into it. “I’ll contact the SFPD,” he said to her. “Not that grand theft auto always get reported in a timely fashion, but it’s worth a shot. Speaking of which...”

“You want to know how Brown and Huang died.” She sat down again.

“Exactly.”

Rally swallowed hard. “It all went the way it was planned, until some other Triad men showed up. Two leaders, and the chief assassin, plus a couple of young assistants. Huang and a guy named Wo. They all went off into another room with Bean, and Brown talked to me. He seems to have been trying to get me angry. Then — ”

“Yes?”

“He signaled to O’Toole. You know — ”

“His bodyguard, Fearghus Martin, who has gone by ‘Thomas O’Toole’ ever since he escaped from the Maze in 1987. Convicted on explosives charges in 1983. He’s been with Brown for ten years and worships the ground he walks on.”

“So he *is* former PIRA?”

“Yes. But the Provos kicked him out before he went to prison, for conduct unbecoming. Rape, to be precise. Seems he left several prostitutes and bar girls in ditches around Londonderry, beaten half to death and permanently maimed. He was never tried for those crimes, however. They had to keep him in solitary, because his former comrades tried to rectify the omission.”

Rally shivered. Those hot yellow eyes over the barrel of a gun...

“Something?”

“No... uh, O’Toole shot out the window of the office and pinned me in there for a minute. Bean and Huang tried to interfere and O’Toole fired at them. Bean only got a crease. I think Huang was gut-shot. Bean ran to get O’Toole, but Brown showed me a surveillance camera view of a bunch of his thugs dumping Bean in the bay. I got out and evaded O’Toole for a while, but he got the drop on me. Bean came bursting in when he got out of the water — I’m still not sure how — and I moved out of O’Toole’s reach. Then I thought I saw him aim at Bean. I shot... I shot at what I saw. It turned out to be Brown, and one bullet apparently killed Huang.”

“It turned out to be Brown. Holy *crap*.” Wesson slammed a folder down on the desk. “What the hell did you see to shoot at?”

“A shadow through the glass wall of the office. I saw someone draw a bead on Bean, and I thought it was O’Toole. Brown’s right hand was half gone. He couldn’t have fired a gun. I shot four rounds through the wall and I crippled him, but I swear to *God* I was sure it was O’Toole!”

“Something does not compute here. Brown wasn’t stupid. He would not have pulled you into his defection on a whim, and he and O’Toole would NOT have let him get accidentally shot by *a twenty-one-year-old tootsie who calls herself a*

*bounty hunter!*” Rally jammed her lips together to keep from uttering a retort. “This stinks, and frankly, your story stinks. I’m beginning to believe — ”

“But I don’t think it was completely an accident, either! I think he meant to get shot. Maybe not in the leg like that, since it meant he couldn’t escape, but for some reason he wanted a bullet of mine to...” She trailed off. “Oh, my God.”

“What?”

“I... don’t know.” A idea was forming, but it seemed so peculiar that she didn’t want it to see the light of day yet. “It’s just strange. I heard O’Toole talking about doing something himself if necessary, and Brown saying he couldn’t ask that of him. I wonder if he meant — ” She broke off. “I’m sorry, I can’t make it out yet.”

“Goddammit.” Wesson leaned back and rubbed his temples. “We will get to the bottom of this, Ms. Vincent. If you are holding anything back, I am going to find out what it is, make no mistake. Start talking right fucking now.”

“I’ve answered every question you’ve asked me!”

“You’re leaving something out!”

“But how do I know... oh.” She looked wildly around. “Bean. Bean is the key, isn’t he? Brown talked my ear off about Bean, all along. He wanted to know everything about my relationship with him. He got me to tell him about the bet...”

“He did?” Wesson sat forward. “Of course, he wanted to recruit him for drug running. He didn’t know that Bean had promised you not to take drug jobs. Until you told him, that is.”

“O’Toole knows too — he listened in while I talked to Brown in the office, and so I’m sure he heard when I told Brown about the bet. I don’t know about Manichetti, but he might have been listening as well just to keep tabs on what was happening.”

“Brown’s driver? What was he doing during all this?”

“He was there briefly and then he left.”

“To go where?”

“I have no idea. But it must have been to do something important... I thought he must have been waiting with a car.”

Wesson tapped his fingertips on the desktop. “How did you get the money? Why did Bean think you were trying to steal it?”

“He found it in my car, in the trunk, after we left the hotel. I was as surprised as he was. Brown had showed it to us in his office since he was supposed to bring it along for Bean. After I shot him, it was gone, but the suitcase it had been in was still there. Bean tore the place apart looking for the cash.”

“I was at the scene earlier this morning. It looked like a tornado had hit in there.”

“It did. He was furious. Wasn’t the office all burned?”

“No, it was fairly intact, as far as that goes. Huang’s body wasn’t particularly damaged, so there won’t be any problems with the autopsy, I’m told, which I’m sure you’ll be glad to hear.”

“Wonderful. But... what about Brown?” Rally’s surprise had a sickening edge to it. “He was at the bay end of the warehouse, farthest from the fire. The offices are only halfway down, and if they’re not burned... he was screaming... he was telling me the fire was right on him. The windows were all red...” She felt her gorge rise.

“O’Toole apparently used an accelerant on the walls, and that burned off rapidly all the way down the warehouse, but the wood is damp — that pier has been sitting over the water for eighty years — and didn’t catch quickly. There wasn’t a lot of structural damage except to the front facade and the roof. The walls are charred on the surface, but not destroyed. The offices were built only a few years ago and are mostly steel and glass. There wasn’t much that would burn in there that was exposed to the fire.”

“Oh. Is... is the autopsy being done on him now? Brown, I mean.”

“They haven’t found his body yet.”

“Huh?”

“A big section of the roof fell in where it was weakened by the explosion. That’s causing problems.”

“But... I thought the explosion was at the front. It knocked me *into* the room, and it blew Bean off the — ”

Wesson made an impatient gesture. “Ms. Vincent, these details are all very interesting to you, I gather, but they are beside the point. How, exactly, did you get that cash?”

“You think I stole it too? I guess since the offices aren’t burned, no one’s going to believe that I didn’t go back and find it and pack it into that blasted suitcase again and hide it in my car! Two cops saw me at the pier! At least the FBI isn’t going to hold a knife under my nose and call me a — ”



“We don’t yet know what we are going to call you, Ms. Vincent. The cash?”

“Well... the cash was gone and I thought O’Toole must have taken it with him. My Cobra was in the hotel garage all the time and I guess the money was planted sometime after that... there wasn’t a big interval when it could have been done. It was the same suitcase we left empty in the office... or looked like it. The handle had been shot off.”

“Planted in your car. Why?”

Rally’s stomach twisted. *Why? I never did you wrong. Why?*

“No theories?”

“Obviously... to make it look like I’d stolen it... to have Bean find it. Oh, my God — if... if we hadn’t just finished making — ” She put her hand over her mouth.

“Yes?”

“Um... under most circumstances, Bean probably would have tried to kill me then and there, and I would have had to shoot him. He — he’s very strong, and I’ve seen him take hits that would have killed anyone else. Even if I shot him in the head, it’s very possible he wouldn’t lose consciousness, not right away, and it wouldn’t take him more than a moment to... ” She swallowed hard. “I think Brown must have figured it like that. It was to get us both out of the way if all else failed, but he could have sold it to the Dragons as a way to recruit Bean. It might even end up working... ”

Wesson’s right eyebrow twitched, but he said nothing.

“Manichetti left long before Brown showed me the suitcase and didn’t come back, so it couldn’t have been him. It must have been O’Toole, but he was injured and bloody and jumped into that filthy bay. He wouldn’t have had much time to clean up. Someone would have noticed him coming in to the garage.”

Wesson picked up his phone again. “Desk clerk. Or anyone parking at that time of night.” He spoke low and rapidly, then hung up. His fax machine began to chatter. The door opened and Smith walked in with a scowl on his blunt face. “Finished with Coleman, sir?”

“Yeah, for now.” Smith grabbed the other chair with a glance at Rally. “I’m here to compare notes.” He shoved a binder across the desk to Wesson, who scanned the open page and gave a short noncommittal grunt. “What a heap of dogshit this is turning out to be.” He sneered at Rally’s outfit and rummaged in his jacket. “Got a smoke, Bob?” Wesson opened a desk drawer and tossed Smith a open pack of Newports. Smith pulled one out and looked askance at it. “Aw, Christ, these are stale.”

“I haven’t bought any in months.”

“What did you go quitting on me for? Where’s a guy going to bum a cigarette if he can’t get it off his co-workers?”

“I suddenly acquired a distaste for mood-altering substances,” said Wesson, reading the binder. Smith lit the cigarette with a Bic lighter and drew in a deep drag, putting one ankle on the opposite knee. Older than Wesson, he was probably in his middle fifties. He sported a grizzled buzzcut and thick workman’s hands, a drill sergeant in a sport coat.

“This drug crap.” Smith blew out a ring of smoke. “Frankly, it’s the DEA’s problem and it should have stayed that way. All we do is step on each other’s fucking toes. They arrested another undercover agent by mistake down in Miami yesterday. Crock of shit, if you ask me. The Bureau wasn’t founded for this kind of junk. Why, back in Hoover’s day — ”

“No.” Wesson pulled out the fax and looked at it. “You spent all your time on car theft stats instead. And it was against the rules to drink coffee or smoke at your desk.”

“Yeah, and we kept our damn noses clean, too. Drugs are bad news for everyone who touches ‘em, and that includes cops.” He took another deep drag and Rally coughed. “Oh, you don’t like tobacco, miss? Sorry.” He smiled and flicked his ashes into a coffee cup on the desk. “This tastes like coffin sawdust, Bob.”

“I know. Makes them easy to resist.” Wesson slapped the fax down. “All of these were stolen before midnight. We’re going to have to wait until later in the day.” He looked at Rally. “Any thoughts on the matter?”

“Um... well, he likes sports cars. Old American ones. Muscle cars. What will you do if you find him?” Rally ventured.

“The phrase is, ‘*when* we find him’. We aren’t a bunch of fat Cook County cops on the take. This is the FBI.” Wesson picked up his phone.

“Uh... this is Bean Bandit. Do you have the smallest idea what he can do?”

“He can drive?” said Smith with a snigger. “So what?”

“He can do a lot more than that! You know the size of him?”

“Hot shit with the ladies, huh?” Smith leered at her torn dress. “Size matters?”

“It does in a FIGHT!”

“Looks like he’s better at RUNNING!”

“You mind keeping it down a little?” Wesson put a hand over the receiver. “I’m trying to work here, Pete.”

“So is Coleman’s theory correct? Mr. Bandit trying to get into your pants, *Miss Vincent?*”

“Jesus Christ...” muttered Wesson.

Rally clenched her fist over the fax. “I already told your partner that I slept with Bean. Once.”

“Once? How long ago?”

“About one this morning.”

Wesson put the receiver down. “What? After Brown died? Right around the time he found the money in your car?” The two agents looked at each other. “And he told you he’d kill you moments after he’d — hold on a moment, sir, I’ll explain.” He put up a hand. “Ms. Vincent, I thought you meant you had sex with him by mutual consent. Did he force you to take him out of the garage? Are we talking about kidnapping and rape here?”

His expression filled with anger and dawning sympathy. Even Smith straightened up and put out his cigarette.

“I...” Rally’s mouth dropped open.

It would be so easy. All she had to do was say ‘Yes’, and maybe burst into tears for effect, and Smith and Wesson would back off, apologizing and stumbling over themselves to make it all better. They’d ask her gingerly to have a pelvic exam, which would prove she had been injured — her hymen had been torn and there was sure to be blood on her underwear — and Roy would back her up, testifying that Bean had been lusting after her and had a violent air about him.

She could slough the whole mess onto Bean in such a way he would never get free of it. He could be the cunning instigator and she the innocent, none-too-bright pawn. All she had to do was play to assumptions that everyone was more than willing to make, and be the helpless victim for a while. What would it cost besides a carload of self-respect? Bean hated her anyway.

“No,” said Rally in a steady voice. “He didn’t force me to do anything.”

“He’s not here. He can’t hurt you now. You don’t have to shield him, even if he told you not to go to the police. I can get a female agent to talk to you if you’d prefer, or your friend Coleman.” Wesson picked up his phone.

“No, please. I mean what I say. I wasn’t raped. Please don’t even hint that to Roy. He’ll go nuclear.”

Smith snorted and lit another Newport. Wesson let out a long sigh and sat back in his chair. “All right. You cooperated with Bean of your own free will. I hope you realize what you’re admitting to.”

“I do. I would have stayed and waited for the police after the place caught fire, but Bean made me leave. I did call Roy as soon as I could manage! You know that.” Rally clenched her fists. “I haven’t been trying to evade this!”

“Why did you take Mr. Bandit out of the hotel, then?”

“I owed it to him. It was a point of honor, because I promised him half the money in that suitcase and my help in getting away with it.”

Wesson shook his head. “Why did you let him escape with the money after he found it in your car?”

“Because I wasn’t willing to kill him to stop him.”

“Why didn’t you contact us immediately?”

“I don’t know. I had the idea that Larry Sam could help me. I went to see him and discovered that the Dragons had shot up his place. I held together until I left the restaurant. I... I’m not sure where I went after that. I drove around at random until the sun came up. Then I called Roy...” She let her head droop a little, her exhaustion dragging at her like an anchor across a rocky seafloor. But this was no time to hit bottom again...

“Sounds like it’s about time for the Mirandizing,” said Smith. “Unless you want to go for it, Bob.” He nodded at the binder page with his handwritten notes.

Wesson tapped a pencil point on the paper. “What were you going to do with the other half of the money, Ms. Vincent? Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars — that’s a tidy chunk of change for a bounty hunter.”

“I was going to turn it over to the FBI,” said Rally with a tiny smile.

“Huh!” Wesson sounded incredulous.

“It’s true. You can ask Roy. I wanted it all to go to the government the way it should. But I had to promise Bean half of it or he wouldn’t go along with the deal. Give me a polygraph test if you like.”

Smith leaned over and flipped the binder page to the previous sheet, then underlined something in his notes with one finger. Wesson read it and raised his brows with a smile.

“All right, Pete. I will go for it. I’ve heard a few details that make it sound even better. You have the ID sheet filled out?”

“Last page,” said Smith. Wesson flipped through the binder and examined the page, which looked like a Wanted poster without a photograph, the entries written by hand. “That’s mostly from Coleman, since he saw the guy up close in good light. We put together a composite drawing and it’s ready to circulate. Good break. And I guess this little lady can bust him wide open.”

“What?” said Rally.

“I think we should let Detective Coleman give her the proposed outline of action, sir. Just to impress Ms. Vincent with the importance of this,” said Wesson.

“He’s pretty impressed, all right,” chuckled Smith. “He’s sweating bullets and sitting in a puddle. I’ll put him in the conference room.” He got up and left the office.

“Are you asking me to help you arrest Bean?”

“Not precisely,” said Wesson. “We’re asking you to help us get him into the Eight Dragon Triad.”

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“No refuge, Rally. That’s the idea. Make it so hot for him...” Roy mopped his forehead for the third time since he had come into the room. “... that he will have to join a syndicate to remain in business. The FBI will work with the Chicago department to hem him in when he returns there. We might arrest him and wait for the Dragons to bail him out, which apparently is likely. He’d incur an obligation that way, and we know he pays off his obligations.”

“You’ll never arrest him, Roy.” Rally gazed out the window of the conference room at the mid-morning sky. Still grey, though a little brighter than it had been at dawn. Smith and Wesson sat at the opposite end of the long table, shuffling folders and maps and making notes. They didn’t seem to be listening.

“No one’s invulnerable. He’s been lucky.”

“He’s not like anyone else. He’s Bean.”

“A cheap crook who walked off with all the money when he got a chance! He’s not a friend of yours! Why in the name of Christ are you defending him?!”

“I told you so.” She dropped her head in one hand. “I know you warned me.”

“Are you going to hold that against me?”

“How can I? You were right.” Rally raised her face and drew a deep ragged breath. “Bean took all the money. He threatened to kill me.”

“Then there cannot be a problem here, right?”

“Oh, God! Trying to get the money back was one thing. Telling them what kind of car he might steal — well, that was such a long shot. But this...”

“The Dragons apparently want him so badly that they let their main West Coast distributor take the fall for letting him go. The FBI already knows a little about Bean. With your help, they can get a complete profile and sense of his motivations and M.O. That’s their wedge into the Triad. And they want you to visibly participate in the effort to hem him in. You provided refuge for him before. They want him to know that’s not possible now.”

“They want to destroy any prospect of Bean’s ever realizing that I didn’t try to steal the money from him,” said Rally quietly. “They want to make sure he hates me permanently.”

“What’s wrong with that? He promised to kill you!”

“Because he made a mistake!” She gestured half in despair. “If he gets a chance to think about it calmly, if I get a chance to prove it to him, he might realize that he was wrong. If he only gets a chance! Without that, he’s going to go back into drug running. He’ll sink lower and lower. It’s even possible he WILL end up working for the Dragons, just out of spite, and then... Oh, God, Roy, he could end up DEAD!”

“Don’t tell me you give a DAMN about that!”

Why did she? Bean’s softer side had frightened her even more than his threats. What would she have done if Bean had persisted in kissing and coaxing her, if nothing had interrupted his afterglow? Anything she could have done would have been a disaster. Had she been about to wrench away from his insistent hands or had she been about to turn in his arms and kiss him back?

Anything but that...

The idea of sleeping in Bean’s bed, imprisoned in his embrace night after night, seemed worse than a prison roommate. If Bean did come after her, she could meet a violent attack. She had the tools. But if he had asked her to stay with him,

be his lover, give herself up to the kind of pleasure she knew very well he could bring her...

Rally shuddered with a cold thrill. Terrifying and morbidly tempting, like the prospect of drug addiction. She had already had a couple of powerful hits, and she had no idea how she could have fought off the craving if he had managed to get her hooked. Addiction had always been one of her greatest phobias. Once or twice in his arms again, a few intense moments of physical rush, and her mind and heart could have followed. That might have been all it would have taken to render her helpless before a thin illusion of happiness; the love of a man like Bean could lead only to disaster.

But love wasn't what he had offered her, of course. Only an opportunity to lose her direction, her ideals, her will. A self-made prison that looked like release. That was the root of the problem — she wasn't truly afraid of Bean, but of herself.

“What is it?” Roy frowned at her expression.

“He's not Chinese — why do they think he's got a shot at numbered membership?”

“He's part Japanese, Rally.”

“What?”

“I don't know the details. But the FBI has established that he had one Japanese parent. They believe that the Dragons know that too and that it must be good enough for them.”

“The FBI knows who his parents are?” What had Brown said? *‘I may be the only person in the world who has this information and has put two and two together...’* What did that mean?

“That's what I said! It got outlined to me this way: Some of the Hong Kong Triad leaders have forged alliances with other Asian gangs, and the Macau Triads are even more willing to do so. Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand. In the United States, the Triads use Vietnamese for a lot of their thug work. What seems to matter to them is Asian blood in general, as opposed to European. They don't care about Asian citizenship, either — actually, recruiting American citizens is the kind of thing that will help them a lot in this country. The Japanese yakuza are very powerful in their own country, but the Triads are moving into the vice markets there. So far, the yakuza haven't allied with them — there could be a gang war brewing. Perhaps the Dragons believe that recruiting Japanese-Americans will help them with the yakuza. They could be right.”

“But he doesn't think of himself as Japanese. He doesn't even like Asian food, for God's sake!”

“See, that’s the kind of details they want from you! I agree, it surprised me too. I thought he didn’t look quite Caucasian, but I figured he was Latino or maybe part Native American. That could be in the mix too, for all anyone knows.”

“I don’t know. It’s all such a mix right now... I’m so tired, I can’t think!” Rally put her head in both hands, then sagged to the table. “I’ve been up the whole night, doing terrible things...”

Smith looked up, then leaned over to Wesson and said something. Both of them looked at her, and Smith cleared his throat. “Miss Vincent. You have the picture now, I hope?”

“Yes.”

“And you are of course going to go with the program. Considering your alternative.”

She closed her eyes. “Can I go get some sleep now?”

Wesson slid a document over to her. It was typed on a FBI letterhead, and her eyes blurred as she tried to read it. “This is simply your pledge to aid our operation and investigation in any way that lies in your power. Basically, you are working for us until we say you’re not. In return, you have not been arrested for your role in the deaths of Sylvester Gaius Brown and Henry Kameha Huang, nor for your aid to Bean Bandit and the conveyance of five hundred thousand dollars of illegal drug profits to him. This agreement is revocable at any time, for any reason we see fit.” He tapped the paper. “On this line, at the ‘X’.”

“In other words, I sign my body and soul over to the FBI, or it’s thirty years to life.”

“Here’s a pen,” said Smith.

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“Oh, May, I feel like shit...”

“You LOOK like shit!” May stood in the doorway of her hotel room wearing only a T-shirt and underwear. “What did the FBI say to you?” Rally could only shake her head. “Come in and sit down! Gosh, what happened?” May shut the door and conducted her to one of the twin beds.

“Oh, God, May, I shot a helpless man and Brown burned to death...” Rally’s legs trembled under her and she sat down in a slump.



“I know. Roy woke me up and told me late last night. But he said it was an accident.”

“It was. But they’re still dead. And B-Bean...”

“Did he get hurt?” May’s eyebrows went up. “Where did he go?”

“I hate him.” Rally’s voice was almost inaudible. “I hate him.”

“What?”

“He got his damn money and he left! He ought to be satisfied now, the bastard!”

“But Roy said you hadn’t gotten the money! And that it was just as well, because the FBI was going to find out about it sooner or later even if everything had gone the way you hoped.”

“We didn’t get the money at the warehouse. We thought O’Toole had taken it. Someone... somehow, they planted it in my Cobra.”

“Planted it?” May sat on the bed beside Rally. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this...”

“Bean found it. He thought I’d hidden it there. That I was going to renege on the deal and stiff him for the money. And he even accused me of committing murder to keep it quiet...”

“What did he do?” May put her arm around Rally’s shoulders.

“He... he said he ought to kill me...”

“Oh, my God.”

“But then he just took it and left. I couldn’t stop him.”

“Oh, Rally...” May set her little jaw.

“I’m so tired. I’ve got nothing left. But I have to find them. O’Toole, and the rest of them — I have to prove that money was a plant. I still don’t know what their game is, but they meant Bean to find it and probably to kill me... Someone’s gonna pay for that.”

“Yeah, they will.” May had a cold edge in her voice. “But maybe not today. Come take a shower, sweetie. Let’s get that dress off you — geez, it looks like you got dragged behind a car. Were the FBI guys that nasty?” She unzipped the back of the red dress and began to work the spandex down Rally’s body.

“No. They were very quiet and very serious — at least Wesson was — and that’s how I know I’m in deep, deep shit. I had to sign a paper promising to help the investigation, but if I screw that up, they’ll just go ahead and arrest me...” Rally shrugged out of the sleeves and shifted her hips to assist May. Her panties and hose tangled with the dress, static electricity crackling, and she shed the whole set at once, leaving her in only her strapless bra. May unhooked it for her and led her into the bathroom.

“You want a shower or a bath? I’ll scrub your back and wash your hair, huh?”

Rally couldn’t help smiling. “What’ve I got here, a maid?”

“Oh, a little more than that.” May kicked off her panties and pulled her T-shirt over her head. Her five-months-pregnant stomach and slightly enlarged breasts made her seem a little older, but she still looked like a teenager. “We’ll do a shower, then you can soak if you want to. Nice to have that hotel-size water heater!” She turned on the water and rummaged through her vanity case for a loofah. “Salon shampoo... conditioner... glycerin body wash. OK, let’s get in — the water’s hot!”

Rally stood under a pounding spray and let May stroke her from head to foot with a lathered net puff. The last greasy streaks of makeup dissolved away, and the sweat, tears and stickiness of her hour in the car with Bean went down the drain with them. All that remained was a lingering soreness in her groin and the emptiness, like a cold cavity in her midsection. He hadn’t even filled that for her. Could anyone? Any man?

“Here, Ral, get your hair wet.” May squeezed a generous portion of elegantly scented shampoo into her palm and worked it into Rally’s hair. Her dexterous little fingers massaged Rally’s scalp and encouraged the lather. “Boy, I really lacquered you up, didn’t I? It soaked right through into your hair. This’ll get it all out.”

“Oh, May...” said Rally softly. “I’m sorry I got mad at you yesterday. It was all for nothing.”

“I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have been goofing off. You needed me to come through for you.”

Rally wanted to cry, but her tears had all been shed. “May, you are my best friend, you know that? I really love you.”

“I love you too, sweetie.” May dropped a kiss on Rally’s bare wet back. “Here, rinse.” She helped Rally chase all the suds out with hot water, then smoothed conditioner into her dripping hair. “Leave that in for ten minutes. This is the good stuff. Expensive!”

“Thank you. Is this what you use for Ken?”

“Oh, sort of. It’s mostly just an excuse to indulge myself!”

“Do you miss him?”

“Yeah, a little. You know pregnancy makes you horny!”

“It does?”

“Uh-huh. I always feel all warm and swollen down there, like I’ve just had a good fucking!” Rally shivered under the steaming spray. “Is something the matter?” May put both hands on her back.

“No...” She considered telling May what had happened in the car, but the words wouldn’t form. “You... you mean it feels like that all the time?”

“Yup! Not like I need any encouragement, but it makes me want to touch myself about every half-hour!” May giggled and waggled her bottom, her blonde hair streaming with water.

“Gosh, May, is that really a *change*?” They both giggled.

“Well, how often do *you* do it?”

“Ma-ay!”

“I mean, you don’t have a boyfriend, you don’t even go out with anyone — and if you and Bean didn’t have sex when you spent two nights together, you must be getting it some other way!”

“Oh, God, don’t talk about him! I don’t want to remember he exists...”

“Oh, Rally, I’m sorry!” May embraced her from behind, her little round stomach bumping Rally’s bottom. The shower flowed over them both. “I want to make you feel better. I messed up earlier and I could have screwed this whole thing up for you...”

“No, you didn’t! It was never going to work no matter what any of us did. It was a trap. They set up a trap for me. It’s not your fault.” She turned and hugged May back, their wet naked bodies sealing together. May pressed her head to Rally’s breasts, then looked up into her face.

When Rally looked down, May kissed her on the mouth. Her little hands cupped the sides of Rally’s face and she rose on tiptoe, pushing her soft tongue between her lips. Rally experienced a deep twinge in her belly and pulled back. “What are you doing, May? Are you really that horny?”

“Maybe.” May ran her hands down over Rally’s breasts and tweaked the nipples. “How about I just take care of you for a little while?” Rally blushed and leaned back against the tile. May lapped at her nipples, alternating fingers and tongue from one to the other.

Rally sighed deeply and bowed her head to kiss May’s wet hair. A hand began to explore her pubic hair and she let her legs part, relaxing into May’s soft touch. Her clit and labia were no longer slick and swollen, but her entrance felt sore. When May’s finger penetrated slightly and met the source of the sting, Rally held her wrist to guide her away.

“Is that too tender? Sorry.”

“No, it’s nothing... just feels better here...”

“Like that?”

“Yes...” They kissed and jostled lightly with their tongues. Rally felt her moisture begin to smooth May’s strokes, and let her head loll on her neck, enjoying the gentleness, the softness and smallness of her friend’s body pressed against hers. So unlike. So completely unlike. Perfect. Her hips pumped against May’s hand.

“You’re so pretty, Rally,” whispered May. “You look beautiful like this, you know? You don’t need all that junk I put on you last night.”

“Um.” Rally’s breath came faster.

“You seem a little... different today. Something interesting about the way you smell... well, never mind all the crap. Right now it’s just you and me. Do you want to touch me?”

Rally reached down and put a hand on May’s stomach. “Hi there, baby. Your mama and I are just having a little fun.” She slid the hand down and around, and discovered that May was hot and slick, fully ready. As her fingers moved between May’s labia, May’s hand worked back and forth on her vulva, their lips meeting again. May panted and jerked, then let out a loud cry and threw her head back.

“I was about ready to come the moment you got your clothes off, sweetie,” she said with a grin. “There’s something very sexy about you today. Now that I got that out of the way...” She went to work in earnest.

Rally rolled her head back and forth across the tile, bucking her pelvis under May’s expert fingers. The slippery tub felt dangerous, but her friend held her up and tongued her nipples, circling her clit with a wet index finger and stroking the other hand between her buttocks. Rally spread her legs wider. May’s finger explored her tight knothole and pressed a little way inside, and Rally shrieked.

“Too much?”

“No — oh God, do that!” Rally put her hand over May’s and clamped it firmly to her vulva, then rubbed down hard. Her skin glowed with the warm massage of the water and her face felt even hotter. Her awareness wound down tighter and tighter into the core of her belly, and suddenly she heard herself groaning loud and hoarse. She came, her legs shaking.

“Ooh, time to rinse,” said May.

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She woke to May’s gentle shaking. The window showed late-afternoon sunlight declining to the west. “Rally, it’s five o’clock. If you want some dinner before you have to go back to the Federal Building, you’d better get up now. I took a cab and got your suitcase and your guns from the Sandpiper Inn so you could change.”

“Ohh God...” Rally grabbed the pillow and pulled it over her head. “I hate sleeping during the day!”

“So get up.”

“I want to stay in bed for the rest of my LIFE!”

“And let Bean get away with all that money? I don’t think so! Wait until you feel better — you’ll be rarin’ to go!”

“Oh, all right...” Rally rolled up, rubbing her eyes. She wore underwear and one of May’s T-shirts, which was far too small for her. May winked at her, sitting on the bed. “Uh, May, did we... ?”

“Yes, we did! Don’t worry, it wasn’t serious.” May poked her lightly in the nose. “You just looked like you needed some comforting. The girls at the Purple Pussy always helped each other out that way, you know. You haven’t lost your virginity or anything!”

“Aaaghh!” Rally screamed, vaulting off the bed and heading for the bathroom, pursued by May’s laughter.

“Where do you want to eat?” May called. “Chinese?”

“NO!”

“Italian?”

“... No.”

“Umm... Japanese?”

“AAAIIGGHH!”

“Geez, have a cow. Hmm, there’s an idea — burgers?”

“No, *please...*”

“What the hell is wrong with all of those?” said May in disgust. “Aren’t you hungry?”

Rally came out of the bathroom and flopped down on the bed again. “No.”

“Soup and salad bar. That’s the ticket if you don’t feel like eating much.” May picked up the hotel’s restaurant guide and flipped through it. “Here. Fresh Choice, on Geary.”

Rally opened her suitcase. “OK, that sounds all right...” She selected a pair of comfortable black knit leggings and a hip-length short-sleeved tunic. Over that she put her shoulder holster and CZ75, then reached for her wrist slide.

“You think you’re going to need that?”

“Absolutely.” Rally donned the wrist slide with the .25 and strapped the Duo to her ankle with a pair of short boots to hide it. “You’d better bring all the stuff you can haul. We’ve got to get my car from the Sandpiper Inn, though. We can take a cab over there again and drive the Cobra to the restaurant.”

“You think Bean’s still in town?”

“I don’t know. Certainly the Dragons are!”

“OK.” May picked up her jacket and loaded the pockets and hanging tabs inside. She put in three flash-bangs, a confetti bomb, a frag grenade, a length of fuse, a detonator/timer, a location transmitter and a small pack of C4. “We are two tough broads, armed to the teeth. I’m the Blonde Bombshell, and this is my partner, Three-Gun Rally! Don’tcha mess wit’ us, sucka!” Rally smiled, May laughed, and sunshine seemed to fill the room — along with the smell of gunpowder. “Yes! Feels like old times. Let’s go eat.”

They concealed their arsenal and went down, emerging from the elevator into a brightly decorated lobby. This was the sort of hotel Rally liked — moderately priced, well-maintained, and with no armies of servicepeople holding out hands for tips. She had the feeling of regaining a happy medium after days of extremes, and the sense of balance and energy she usually enjoyed began to move through her veins.

“OK, I’m hungry now,” she said happily. “I hope we get a cab soon!” One pulled up the moment they walked out to the steps, and they piled in, joking and giggling all the way to the Sandpiper Inn.

Even the sight of the place didn’t disturb Rally’s improved mood, and she even hoped O’Toole would put in an appearance, just to give her CZ75 a workout and let May feel like a contributor. She had spun an entire scenario involving multiple grenades stuffed down his pants when they entered the garage and walked to the Cobra. Rally had parked it on the first level, in sight of the entrance gate, and sitting by the ramp was an FBI agent in a navy blazer, who rose and approached them.

“Excuse me; Ms. Vincent?”

“That’s me.” Rally got out her keys.

“*That’s* your car?” He looked bug-eyed at the Cobra. “Wow... uh, that is, I’m Agent Gonzales. Agent Smith wants you to take your car to the Federal Building this evening. Don’t take a cab.”

“Wasn’t planning to.” Rally was slightly mystified. “I just got it out of the shop anyway!”

“All right, then.” He walked to his chair — a folding camp model with a thermos standing next to it. “I’m watching for this Bandit fellow, and his car’s staked out down on the fourth level. Be sure to give us a holler if he starts tailing you or something like that.”

“No problem,” said Rally with some warmth. The mention of Bean eroded her equilibrium slightly, and when she opened the Cobra’s doors, the sight of its interior produced a sudden flashback. Not of Bean threatening her, nor of the look on his face when he had, but of him sitting in her passenger seat with his face wreathed in a happy smile, cajoling her, *‘C’mon, gimme a kiss.’*

For the first time Rally thought about how Bean must have felt when he had found the money. What had he believed, a moment before the rifle had hit the suitcase? That she wanted him as a steady lover? That she had given him her heart along with her virginity? Maybe she didn’t know much about guys, but how much did he know about women? Or even about her?

Possibly he thought they were all fickle at heart, liable to abandon him on a moment’s notice... the way someone had abandoned him in a parking lot. His natural mother had given him up, his adoptive parents had died. Probably he had been too young to have any memory of a caring mother at all, if he had ever had one. And so that suitcase must have hit him like a sucker punch in the least-armored part of his emotional makeup.

It was still no excuse, she told herself. He had no justification for what he had said, and since he had threatened to kill her, she determined that whatever sympathy she found lurking in her feelings towards him would have to be rooted out. If she ever had him in her sights again, she would not hesitate to pull the trigger.

They got into the Cobra and May wrinkled her nose. “Boy, it sure smells funky in here. Roy been smoking in your car? I thought you didn’t let anyone do that.”

“I don’t.”

“Of course, the smell tends to spread around even if he does it outside...” May sniffed more carefully. “Man, it’s thick. That isn’t just smoke — it’s... um.”

“What?”

“Uhh... nothing.”

“May?”

“You don’t want to remember he exists.”

“It smells like... Bean?”

“Yeah. As if he were right here next to me.” May looked to the side and hunched her shoulders as if to conceal a sudden quiver. “Kind of spooky...”

“How do you know what he smells like?”

“I’m pregnant! I can smell five times better than usual! I pay attention to that kind of thing... he smells like that leather jacket of his, and like motor oil and cigarettes. And as if he had an oversupply of testosterone — like a bull musk-ox!”

It did smell like Bean. Like Bean and herself combined: sweating, straining, fucking their brains out with the juices flowing like rain...

“What’s been going on in here?” May crouched over and looked at the floor, then felt under the seat. She came up with Bean’s driving gloves and a blank look. “What are these doing here?”

Rally reddened in an intense flush of blood, then felt it all drain away.

“What is it? You’re pale.” May looked at her. “Frankly, you’ve been looking strange all day. Until the last hour or so... but now — ”

“I’m a little stressed out!”



“OK, OK. Um, are you sorry you let me...”

“No.” Rally leaned over and hugged May. “I didn’t mind that at all. Frankly, it was the perfect remedy...”

“To what?”

“Bean.”

“Um... to Bean?” May’s eyes narrowed. “Rally, what happened when he found that suitcase?”

“I told you. He took it, he told me he should kill me, and he left.”

“Was that all he did? Rally... it smells like...” She hesitated. “Like sex.”

“Are you going to start THAT again?”

“I... Look, I’m sorry I teased you about Bean. I was mad. I know you don’t like him that way and you never have, and gosh, you reacted so well! I couldn’t resist! But this is serious. I mean, I know jism when I smell it. I’ve sucked off more men than I can count, and it varies a little, but...”

Rally sat with her hands on the wheel, her face twitching.

“Rally. This morning you were bruised all over. You looked terrible until you got cleaned up. I know, you’d just spent hours being interrogated by FBI agents, and you’d had a firefght and killed someone. I put it down to that. But when I touched you in the shower, you were sore between your legs. For God’s sake, sweetie, I’m your friend. Tell me what happened in this car.”

“I... I’ve told you.”

May closed her eyes, her face going white, and put the fingertips of both hands over her mouth, pressing them tightly to her lips. “Fine. I shouldn’t push you. I’m sure I’m not doing this right.” She swallowed hard and steepled her fingers over her face. “That’s your business, maybe.” She took a deep breath, then suddenly hit her fist against the door. “Goddammit, it’s my business too! I left you alone with him!”

“Oh, God...”

“This stinks! Literally!” May’s voice and body trembled. “I thought he had a heart, OK? He saved my life a couple of times. But I guess that doesn’t say everything about a guy. I guess money means more to him than anything else in the world,

and I guess if he thought you were trying to trick him out of that much cash he would get angrier than I've ever seen him."

"You got that right. But you're reading too much into this, May; you're imagining things."

May opened her eyes again, their gaze hard and direct. "You tell me what happened last night when you feel ready to tell me, Rally. I am not going to make you talk about it. But the next time I see Bean Bandit, I'm going to shove a Minnie-May special so far up his ass they're going to be looking for his balls on two separate continents and for his PRICK on the fricking dark side of the MOON."

**::: CHAPTER TEN :::**

“Physical description — we got the outline from Detective Coleman. You want to add anything?” Smith tossed a printout at her.



**DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION**

**INTERNAL INFORMATION — NOT FOR RELEASE TO PUBLIC  
JULY 7, 1999**

**FUGITIVE IDENTIFICATION SHEET**

NAME:	Bean Bandit NOTE: Probable alias
AKA:	Bean, Roadbuster
SEX:	M
DOB:	UNKNOWN, approx. 1968-1972
RACE:	Asian/White mix
HEIGHT:	approx 6' 6''-- 6' 8''
WEIGHT:	approx 240--250 lbs.
HAIR:	Black
EYES:	Brown
COMPLEXION:	Medium
BUILD:	Muscular
DISTINCTIVE FEATURES, SCARS, TATTOOS, ETC. (ATTACH SKETCH IF APPLICABLE):	X-shaped Scar over bridge of nose Large Jaw
WANTED:	No outstanding warrants
SSN:	UNKNOWN

DL #:	UNKNOWN
LAST KNOWN ADDRESS:	Chicago, ILL
PLACE OF BIRTH:	UNKNOWN NOTE: Native language English, American accent
KNOWN WEAPONS:	Not known to employ firearms
KNOWN VEHICLES: (YEAR/MAKE/MODEL/COLOR/ LICENSE # AND STATE)	1.Late model customized 2-door, 4-seat coupe, Red, 3UPY666, CA 2.1971 Ford Mustang, Mach 1, Red, THX 1138, ILL
SUMMARY:	
Works as freelance courier for a variety of clients. Known as highly professional and reliable, therefore picks up contracts for particularly valuable cargos and sensitive operations. Known to provide driving service for criminal enterprises including bank robbery, prison escape and interstate transportation of drugs, weapons, explosives, stolen goods and currency, other contraband. Possible resource for clearing many FBI cases.	
NOTES:	
Could be threatened with prosecution under Fed. Statutes 1234.12a and 967.1c. Frequents the Chicago area, but known to make occasional runs to NYC and other Northeastern urban centers. May be susceptible to bribery. Excellent hand-to-hand fighter. SHOULD BE CONSIDERED ARMED AND DANGEROUS. Do not attempt to apprehend without backup!	

Rally read the entire page. So few words to sum up a man.

“Well?” said Smith impatiently.

“This is... a little sketchy. And this composite drawing doesn’t look much like him – it looks like Jay Leno in a Beatles wig. If I didn’t know it was supposed to be Bean, I’d never have guessed.”

“It was put together from a book of facial features in about half an hour. It was obvious to me Coleman didn’t relish the task.” Smith chuckled. “You think there’s room for improvement? Fine, that’s your next job.” He picked up his phone and spoke to someone, then cocked an eye at her. “You can’t fill in any of the unknowns?”

“Not really... Brown said he was born in 1970, in Michigan, I think, but that’s only his word. I could give you a list of his cars that I’ve seen, but he buys new ones all the time. I used to know where he lived, but the last time I checked the

building, it was abandoned. I saw some of his documentation, but it was all false. He's probably got multiple sets."

Smith made a disgusted face. "And for this we let you off the hook for Brown? Try a little harder, sweetheart."

Rally clenched her lips together. "He doesn't tell *anyone* these things. He's no amateur."

"Neither am I. Start digging, and you better find some nuggets!"

Rally looked at the sheet again, her stomach wrenching itself into knots. "He... he uses a sheath knife most of the time. And he's got other knives handy, in his jacket. I saw him use a pair of throwing spikes... oh, his jacket!"

"Something special about the jacket?"

"It's armored. That's an inadequate term — it's not like an ordinary bullet-resistant vest. He's got layers and layers of Kevlar and plates and chain mail in it. It looks like a black leather motorcycle jacket and it weighs about fifty pounds."

"No shit. How does he manage to wear it?"

"He's got the strength of... Hercules."

"You've been watching too much TV, hon."

"He rolled a car over with a little help! And I've seen him take hits that would have laid anyone else flat, or killed them. Don't ever underestimate his determination. He won't give up until he's unconscious or dead."

"Sounds like one tough mother."

"That's about the size of it. Sometimes it seems like he's nearly superhuman. He's probably going to cause you a lot of — "

Smith laughed contemptuously. "Oh, right. You seem to think we're heading for trouble with this operation. As if a rinky-dink Triad or this Bandit bozo's going to stump the FBI!" Smith leaned forward. "Let me tell you something, little lady. I've been an agent of this man's Bureau for more years than you've been alive, and I was a G.I. grunt in a frontline infantry battalion during the goddamn Tet offensive. I have hunted crooks all over this country for the better part of three decades and I have put them in the slammer just about every time. I have crouched in stinking hot swamps under artillery fire with half a belt of ammo left and my best friend's brains all over my face. I am not ever going to lie down for a bunch of criminal gooks and some oversize *driver*, no matter how close I am to retirement. Just you keep that in mind, girl."

“Sure,” said Rally, disliking him more with every passing second.

“Here. Start listing the cars.” Smith tossed a yellow pad and a pencil to her across his desk. “That won’t be any use ‘til he gets back to Chicago, of course. “

“The big red one’s still in the parking garage at the Sandpiper Inn, isn’t it?” asked Rally, writing on the pad. “There’s a Honda Civic too...” She wrote its license number down on the pad, remembering how she and Bean had joked about the Honda. He had taken such care with her safety...

“I’ve got a two-man stakeout at the Sandpiper Inn. Discreet, so we won’t spook him if he comes back to claim the red car. How likely is he to do that?”

“He spent a lot of money on it. But it’s been hours and hours.” She looked at her watch. “I got to sleep around noon. It’s nearly eight P.M. now. If he hasn’t made a try for it yet, it’s probably because he knows perfectly well that you’re waiting for him. He may be figuring how to retrieve it, and he’s got to have a plan for escaping from the city with it and getting home if he’s going to have a chance of making it. That’s going to take him a little while to set up, I bet.”

“OK, makes sense. What’s that thing’s range, by the way?”

“A little shorter than an ordinary sports car. He had to fill up at about 250 miles, highway. He said he doesn’t like to drive it long distance.”

“Hah.” Smith made a note. “Say, you have any of his stuff? We didn’t find any in your hotel room, except a used disposable shaver. We let your partner take your clothes and weapons — well, except that SFPD gun. I think a couple people are going to lose their jobs over that one.”

“Oh, no.” Rally’s shoulders sagged. The damage just kept spreading.

“Well?”

“No, I don’t — oh! His duffel bag is still in my car! Maybe there’s something — ”

“Nope, nothing interesting.” Smith pulled out a typed inventory list. “Clothes, mostly. Jeans and shirts and socks. He wears a size fifteen shoe and has the inseam of a basketball player, but we knew that already.”

“You searched my car?” So that was why Smith had instructed her to bring it! An attendant at the building’s garage had valet-parked it, which she had also found slightly odd, but this was the Federal Building, after all.

Smith was looking at her. “You were expecting something else? They’re going over it with a pair of tweezers and a goddamn electron microscope. It’s in our

impound garage.”

“My Cobra? But you can’t take away my COBRA!”

“It’s not being confiscated. More’s the pity.” Smith smirked. “I’d claim that beautiful brute in a moment if it were. What the hell is a little lady like you doing with a genuine Shelby Mustang?”

“Driving it,” said Rally with as much of a snarl as she dared.

“Shit, that thing deserves a *man* at the wheel. Way too much power for a woman.”

Rally’s fists flexed. “I want it back. I need MY CAR.” She and Smith indulged in a staring match for a few moments, then the agent grunted.

“Yeah, we’ll get everything we need. You can take it back to the hotel tonight. But you aren’t driving home just yet. You’ve got work to do.”

“I can’t fill in any more blanks on the ID sheet. I’m short on hard facts. All I have is impressions.”

“No? How about scars and marks?”

“Scars? The one on his face is listed already — ”

“Ones not visible in street clothing.” He chortled.

Rally clenched her jaw, but stared Smith in the eyes until his gaze slid away and he smiled half-apologetically. She cleared her throat. “Nine-month-old bullet scars and suture marks all along the left side of his chest and left arm, and some three-month-old scars on his right arm and hand. He’s got a recent gunshot in the right thigh. Nothing else distinctive.”

“OK.” Smith made a few notes on the printout. “How do you know the dates of these wounds?”

“I was there when he got them. I’ve got a question.”

“Yeah?”

“If you know he has one Japanese parent, how come you don’t know all this other stuff? As far as I can tell, you would have to do a lot of digging to discover who his parents are. You would have found out a lot of other things on the way.”

Smith looked taken aback, which she hadn’t seen before. “Ah... well, I don’t think it’s all on this one. It’s an old one.”

“Really? Why would you give me an old one if you want to get all this correct?” Rally looked at the desk when Smith rearranged a folder over another one, a little too casually.

“Oh, somebody fucked up. You got anything else?”

“Mmm... Bean changes plates all the time, by the way, so don't rely on license numbers for identification. He brought a black Corvette Stingray along on the trip, but he crashed it out, so he won't be driving that.” She tried to sound unconcerned, but she took a good look at the folder Smith had covered. Black, thick, dog-eared. It didn't match anything else on his desk.

“If he's got a head on his shoulders, he's busting that road back to Chicago right now. We put out a bulletin for stolen cars trending east.”

“Does that mean you're going to let me go home soon?”

Smith smiled reprovably. “I'm not handing you over to the Chicago office, hon. This is my baby.”

“But... but I have a business to run! I'm spending my own money on hotel rooms — how am I supposed to — ”

“Should have thought of that before you got up to your neck in San Francisco.”

“Agent Smith,” said Rally through gritted teeth, “it is not going to help your investigation when my Visa maxes out in two days or so and my friend and I end up thrown out on the street!”

“Oh, fucking Christ!” he growled. “I'll get a requisition going. Blood from a stone — this is going to come out of my goddamn budget...” He thrust the ID sheet back into its folder and got up. “Come with me. There's someone I want you to meet.”

They went down the hallway to the elevator and rode up three floors, then got off in an area marked FORENSICS and walked to a reception desk. “Put her in with Roberta,” said Smith to the receptionist, and thrust the folder at Rally. “I'm going to go catch dinner. Give her back to me when she's done.”

The receptionist said “Yes, sir,” and picked up a phone. A man with a badge ambled out of the cubicles and indicated that Rally should follow him. He took her to an enclosed office and knocked on the door, which immediately opened. Expecting another dour agent, Rally was a little startled to see a petite ponytailed woman with glasses and a friendly smile.

“Hi, I'm Roberta.” The woman shook Rally's hand and ushered her inside. “I hear you're working with an investigation.”



“Uh... yes. Hi. Um, I’m Rally Vincent.”

“Pleased to meet you, Rally. Did Agent Smith tell you what this is about?”

“Not really.”

“Well, I’m a forensic artist. I do mug shots, among other things.” She smiled and rocked a thumb at a computer that stood on a desk, surrounded by folders. Photographs and drawings decorated the walls. “I’ve got a big library of noses and mouths and stuff, and I can put them together any way you say they should go. I’ll be asking you to relax and visualize this person that you saw, and the situation that was taking place, and describe him or her as well as you can. I don’t do this exactly the standard FBI way, with the mug book — I won’t show you the images until the face is put together, and then you can kibitz it as a whole. It avoids contaminating your memory.” She pulled out a cushiony chair and shut the door.

“I don’t think... that’s going to be a problem. He’s... he’s someone I know. Pretty well.”

“All the better, then.” Roberta held her hand out for the folder. “Here, sit down. Let me just do a quick scan of the ID sheet.” She opened the folder and sat at her computer. On the screen sat a neutral oval with a neck, surrounded by menu bars and covered with crosshair guides, but she spun the monitor around so that Rally couldn’t see it. “Bean Bandit? This is not the guy’s real name?”

“No. I don’t know what that is.”

Roberta looked up. “You know him, huh? Is he a friend of yours?”

“Not... any more.”

“Rally... are you OK?”

“I’m fine.”

“Sergeant Smith pushing you a little hard? You look tired.”

“Is that what you call him? I was up all night, I guess.”

“You want a cup of coffee or something? I brought a big thermos from Starbucks. Lowfat latte with hazelnut.”

“Oh... God, that sounds wonderful.”

“Here you go.” Roberta filled a foam cup and handed it to her. “Keeps me awake and juiced for the all-nighters. I’ve been reconstructing a face based on a skull...”

well, you don't want to hear about that. It's a little grim."

"You'd be surprised what I hear about in my line of work."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a bounty hunter."

"Really? Wow." Roberta looked honestly impressed. "Are you going to be hunting for this guy?"

"M-maybe..."

"Can you tell me something about him? About the case? Usually the agent would fill me in, but obviously he hasn't done that. And usually I get descriptions from witnesses to a crime, not someone who knows the person I need to draw. You don't have any photographs of him...?"

"No. I've been traveling and rooming with him for the last few days. But it wasn't exactly a vacation."

"Oh, no." Roberta put a hand out on the desk, as if she would like to give Rally a comforting touch. "Are you his victim? Darn that Smith — he's got the sensitivity of a rhinoceros — wait, it says he doesn't have any outstanding warrants?" The artist looked nonplussed. "What has Bean Bandit done?"

"Oh, plenty. But they want to make him into much more of a criminal than he is already — " Rally stopped. "Sorry. I'm not supposed to be complaining about this."

"I'm not an agent, you know," said Roberta. "I'm a freelancer. They bring me in for some special jobs, but I'm not on the FBI payroll." She rolled her eyes and smiled. "Don't worry about it."

Rally smiled faintly. "OK, I won't."

"What is this Bandit guy to you?"

"I... don't know. Not any more." She took a deep swig of coffee, which was just the right temperature. "You want the scoop? We became lovers last night. Screwed our brains out, right after I shot a drug dealer I was trying to bring in, and then Bean took half a million bucks from me and told me he'd kill me the next time I got in his face. You have a definition for that relationship?"

Roberta had paused with her own coffee halfway to her lips and seemed speechless for a moment. "... Holy crap."

“Now they want to get him into a secret organization of murderers so they can take credit for breaking it, whenever they might manage to get their stupid territorial concerns and ego squabbles put aside, while he is probably going to end up gutted like a fish and dumped in Lake Michigan when the murderers decide they don’t need him any more, and I am going to get put in a cell with the female equivalent of Jeffrey Dahmer unless I jump through all the hoops that the Two-Gun Twins hold out for me, so even if I get to go home sometime this year, Bean will try to stick a bowie knife through my skull and I will try to cut him in half with a ten-gauge before he gets his hands out of his pockets, but not before asking him whether every man who’s just had the present of a woman’s virginity reacts quite that badly when he realizes that maybe she isn’t going to fall down and worship at the Temple of the Oversize Cock, even when she had three orgasms and was beginning to think that she’d actually been missing something, though it was scarier than anything else I’ve mentioned to find out that a hard-case, rough-trade man like that can get so mushy on such short notice. May the best one win.” She drained her coffee.

Roberta’s blue eyes had gone huge and round, and she blinked them several times. “Oh.”

“You want to get started?”

“Uhhh... sure. Hey, I’m a professional.” She reached into her desk drawer and took out a flask-size bottle of Jim Beam. “Want a drink? Goes fine in coffee.” She poured from flask and thermos.

“Bottoms up.” They clinked foam cups.

“OK, I have the basics here — big man, muscular, black hair.” Roberta turned to her computer and clicked her mouse a few times. “Rally, I’d like you to conjure him up for me. What do you call him?”

“Just Bean.”

“OK, think about Bean. Imagine he’s standing right in front of you.” She dimmed the lights in the office, leaving the computer screen as the main illumination on her small round face. “Look at him carefully. Recall as many details as you can. See him as sharply as possible...”

Rally bit her lips. “All right.”

“Bean can’t see you,” said Roberta softly. “It’s one-way glass. He doesn’t know you’re looking at him.” Rally let out a breath, the tightness in her chest easing. “That’s it. He will never know you saw him. Us girls are checking him out together.”

“Heh... OK.”

“He’s part Asian?”

“So they tell me. It’s not immediately obvious, though it had occurred to me once or twice... he’s got the coloring.”

“So what impression does he give you, overall?”

“Big. That’s the first thing you notice; his height and the width of his shoulders. Then his hair and his jaw. He startles people — the first time I saw him, I was in a crazy firefight. I’d almost been killed, I was wounded and I was pretty jazzed. But the moment he came into view, all my attention went his way.”

Rally stopped, shifting awkwardly. This seemed so personal. Describing Bean to someone else, even a sympathetic ear? She had the feeling of describing out the contents of her own head, a secret compartment of her personality; the version of Bean she carried around with her, built up over many months of turbulent acquaintance, a great deal of thought, and a few days of chaotic anger and passion. She blushed, recalling details she didn’t want to think about at that moment.

“Good. Now, tell me... about his hair. How does he wear it?”

“Long.”

“OK. How long?”

“Seven or eight inches.”

“Good. Please, give me all the details you can think of. Nothing’s too small. Just keep talking until you run out of things to say. You won’t bore me.”

“Ah — all right.”

“So about his hair... ?”

“It’s thick... and very black. Dead black and straight. It goes a little past the base of his neck and kind of tapers off... it looks like he cuts it with a knife when it gets in his eyes.”

“Does he comb it back or part it?” Roberta was jotting notes.

“He combs it straight back, unless he has his headband on.”

“Headband?”

“Yes. It’s a couple of inches wide and it ties in the back. Bulletproof — it’s saved

his life more than once. All his hair stands up by itself when it's on. Like a horse's mane. A little messy."

"All right. Good. Now look at the shape of Bean's face. Is it more round or more rectangular?"

"Um... kind of a long rectangle. He has a really big jaw — long, not wide — and a little bit of underbite."

"Bony, fleshy... ?"

"More on the bony side... his cheekbones and brow ridges stand out."

"What's his nose like?" Roberta turned to her computer and started to click and drag the mouse.

"Sharp. Not very large. Depressed bridge. I guess that makes him look a little Japanese after all..."

"His mouth?"

"Thin lips. Close to his nose. He keeps his lips closed most of the time. When he gets roused up, his teeth show."

"Any teeth missing or crooked?"

"No, they're straight — like a fighting mastiff's. Very white and sharp. Scary."

"He looks mean?"

"Well... um, maybe. Sometimes he does, sometimes he's just... impressive. I'm not sure..."

"Whether he's a mean guy?"

"Yes." Rally swallowed. "Like, last night... first he was callous about what had happened, with the drug dealer, and then he tried to comfort me, you know, in his way. I hurt his feelings when I screamed at him, but he didn't take it out on me. He just left and got drunk. Then he... he..."

"... What?" asked Roberta softly.

"He made love to me. I begged him to because I was so upset. He was so... tender. It surprised the hell out of me."

"That he had that in him?"

“Yes.”

“And then he threatened to kill you?”

“When he found this suitcase of cash that someone stashed in my car. I still haven’t figured exactly when... but Bean decided I must have been trying to steal it from him, and he turned into... some kind of monster. I thought he was going to throttle me right there. He looked like a demon. I was so shocked I could hardly fight, or even think. I thought the worst things I’d ever heard about him had to be true... but now I’m not sure again. He didn’t actually hurt me, you know.” Rally rubbed her throat. “I mean, here I am. He could have killed me with his bare hands, but he didn’t.”

“That makes all the difference, sure,” said Roberta, and smiled. “Ears?”

“Huh?”

“His ears — what are they like?”

“Oh, um... big and round. They don’t stick out much.”

“Eyes?”

Rally closed her own eyes. “Green and brown mixed. Deep set. The lids don’t show.”

“Does he have any epicanthic fold — you know, the flat skin over the eyelids that Asians have?”

“Not really, no. Like I said, you don’t think ‘Japanese’ right away when you look at him.”

“OK, good. How big are his eyes, in proportion to his face?”

“Not large or small. His eyebrows are very straight, and they slant a little bit. Solid black. He wears sunglasses a lot of the time, as if he knows the effect it has when he takes them off. There’s something cold and sharp about his eyes. He can cut right through you.”

“Hmm...” Roberta clicked and slid the mouse around, her eyes darting over the hidden screen. “What’s the overall look of his face? Unusual? Average?”

“Not average. You’d notice him anywhere.”

“Ah. Would you call him a handsome man? Well proportioned?”

“Uhh...” She felt her breathing catch. “Yes. Not pretty at all, not with that jaw, but

striking. Masculine.”

“Mm-hmm. And he has a scar over the bridge of his nose?” Roberta pointed to the ID sheet.

“Yes. It goes from about here to here.” Rally indicated on her own face, drawing an X with her finger. “It’s whiter than his skin, but it looks old and shallow. Someone put a mark on him with a knife.”

“What color is his skin?”

“Umm... kind of light tan. Lighter than mine. Most people would take him for Caucasian.”

“What’s your background, by the way? Are you Indian?”

“No, my dad was Pakistani... is Pakistani.” Rally looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap. “He married an Englishwoman. I was born in England.”

“That’s interesting. You don’t have an accent, though... ?”

“We moved to Chicago when I was a kid. I lost it pretty fast.”

“Yes, you sound like a native. Does Bean have any accent?”

“An American accent... a working class guy. But you can’t do a voice on this, can you?”

Roberta laughed. “No, I just like to get a complete picture, so to speak. Voices and faces tend to fit together, personality-wise. How does he sound — I mean, what is his voice like?”

Rally closed her eyes again. “Kind of deep and smoky. He burns about a pack of high-tar a day, and you can hear the cigarettes in his voice.”

“He’s wrecked it already?” Roberta looked at the ID sheet. “Only thirty or so?”

“Twenty-nine, I think. No, he hasn’t ruined his throat. His voice isn’t really harsh unless he’s angry. He can sound gentle when he wants to, though he sure doesn’t look it.”

“Hmm. Does he wear a mustache or beard?” Rally could see something in the reflection of the monitor on Roberta’s glasses, but all she could make out was a pair of eyes.

“No. His sideburns are long, about to the joint of his jaw, but he’s clean-shaven otherwise.”

“Stubble?”

“No. He must have been shaving, and he might not have much beard anyway. He’s actually fairly well groomed, for a guy who always wears jeans.”

“Not a grubby guy, huh?”

“He dresses like an outlaw, but he still looks like a professional, which is what he is. Keeps himself showered and his hair clean.”

“How does he dress?”

“Jeans, T-shirt — white or olive drab, and his jacket. Black motorcycle boots, size fifteen.”

“What kind of jacket?”

“A black leather one, armored — he’s got several in slightly different styles, but they’re always waist-length and have a lot of zippers. He turns back his cuffs on warm days — and once in the summertime I saw him with a sleeveless vest. His arms are just huge...”

“Does he look like he works out?”

“Probably. He’s got some definition to his muscles.” Rally had a sudden picture of Bean naked in the motel in Buttonkettle, mixed with the memory of the time she had hidden in his closet, and felt her face warm.

He hadn’t taken much clothing off in her car the night before, but his body had still left a brand on hers. She crossed her legs, trying to push away the remembered sensation of Bean’s hands on her breasts, her body rocking with his, his lips soft on her face and mouth. The recollections overtook her and she closed her eyes in mingled pain and sharp arousal, hugging her shoulders and digging her fingers into her flesh.

“Rally?”

“Sorry. I’m just... he... oh, God, it was only last night, and now he hates me. He was a wonderful lover. I still can’t believe he could be so gentle, when I’d been so mean to him...”

“He must — ” Roberta stopped. “Well, you know him better than I do. But it sounds like he was very attached to you.”

“He was... he was a good friend...” Rally burst into tears. Roberta pushed a box of tissues into her reach and waited with a compassionate smile. Obviously she saw



a lot of this kind of thing. “Sorry...”

“It’s OK, Rally. I think I understand. I’m going to work on this — you’ve given me a lot to do.” She turned back to the computer, and Rally blew her nose on a tissue. A few minutes passed in silence, Roberta clicking busily away.

“I’m going to give you the whole thing now,” she said finally. “You have a great memory, Rally. Please fix him in your mind and then give this a glance. Tell me what’s wrong with it.” She swiveled her monitor around.

It was something like him, but — “Not enough jaw. It’s longer than that.”

Roberta clicked on a menu and made a selection. “Like this?”

“Bigger.” The artist clicked again and dragged the jawline down. “Uh... bigger. There.”

“OK.” Roberta shook her head and gave an amused grunt. “That must precede him into the room by half a minute.”

“Yeah, just about.”

“OK, give me a sec...” Roberta swung her monitor around again and worked for several moments. “So... maybe he’s a mean guy, and maybe he’s not.” She seemed to be speaking to herself, and made an exaggerated fierce face, then slowly smoothed out her expression as she clicked and dragged, clicked and dragged. “Here.” She swung the monitor back.

The face stared out from Roberta’s screen, uncannily familiar, with a slight frown and a penetrating look in the eyes that seemed meant for her. Rally shivered. “Oh, my God.”

“Close? Don’t worry about hurting my feelings here. What doesn’t match?”

“It’s awfully close. Maybe... his hair flops over a little more. And the strands separate. His mouth’s a little less wide, and the end of his chin squares off a little more.” Roberta made the changes and the face moved slightly. “He’s usually either smiling, just a little, or he’s got a scowl, like he’s thinking. His brows go down really low...” Sweat sprang out on her forehead as the face seemed to react to her presence. “That’s him. That’s Bean.”

Roberta pressed a key, and the laser printer next to her monitor began to whine. “Here we go. Thank you, Rally, you’re very observant.” The printer kept chugging. “I can’t recall the last time someone could give me such a good, quick description. Usually it takes hours and a lot of concentration.”

“I guess I was paying attention.” Rally finished her alcoholic coffee. “I didn’t

realize how much...”

“Can I ask a personal question?” Roberta took the printed picture, nearly life-size, and looked at it. “...Wow.”

“Uh... what kind of question?”

“Rally... how long have you been in love with Bean?” The artist had a sympathetic, rueful smile, and tucked the printout into the folder with the ID sheet.

“Whaaat?”

“Hasn’t it occurred to you?”

“No!”

Roberta raised her brows. “You told me you slept with him.”

“I was only... I felt awful about the deaths and I wanted someone to hold me. He was there! It wasn’t because I was in love with him! And then he told me he’d KILL me! How could I love someone like that?!”

The laser printer whined again and spat out a second copy of the portrait. “OK, Rally,” said Roberta quietly. “I wouldn’t want to have a case for someone like that either. He doesn’t sound like a good guy to have around.”

“I don’t ever want to see him again, for all kinds of reasons.”

“I have the feeling...” The artist rolled the page loosely, secured it with a clip and put Bean’s portrait directly into Rally’s hands. “I have the feeling... that you *will* be seeing this face again, one way or another, for a long time to come. You might want this. It’s not actually him, of course, since it isn’t a photo.” She picked up her phone. “I need an escort for a visitor, June.” She put the phone down. “It’s a picture of someone you hold inside your head, Rally. I’ve been doing mug shots for ten years and I’ve never seen anything like this one.”

The man with a badge came to the door of the office, and Roberta touched Rally’s shoulder for a moment. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

In the elevator, Rally began to unroll the printout. She got as far as the eyes before she thrust it into her jacket and hugged herself, the paper crumpling against the curve of her left breast.

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“May, the next time I go to the Federal Building, I want you to come too.”

“Huh? Why?” May took her soda from the counter of the sandwich shop and picked up her change.

“Because I would like you to practice a little petty larceny.”

“That’s redundant. What tiny thing do you want me to steal?”

Rally unwrapped her turkey sandwich and took a bite. “A folder.” They headed out through the swinging glass doors and walked along the street towards the Sandpiper Inn. The mid-day sun shone brightly in between occasional clouds. Here and there remained a puddle or a backed-up storm drain from the rain that had passed through two days before.

“OK, that sounds easy to hide. How am I going to find it? Are they even going to let me in?”

“I told Smith last night that you knew Bean too and could give him some information. Think of something to tell him — it doesn’t matter what.”

“All right, I will. Can you tell me more about this folder?”

“I told you that Brown claimed he knew everything about Bean, right? Well, I think the FBI has his folder, with all the research he did. Brown said he had documents and clippings. I asked him for it on the night of the fire and he said that the Dragon assassin had it. I can’t think of any reason he would have given it to that guy. I can’t think of any reason he would have given it to the FBI, either, but since he obviously had a lot of contact with Smith and Wesson that he didn’t tell me about, there must be one. And I heard something via Roy that only Brown and the Dragons knew before Brown told me.” Rally smiled. “It’s clear as crystal.”

“Oooh! Everything about Bean? That’d be an interesting read!”

“No kidding. I would dearly love to see that folder. I think I spotted it on Smith’s desk; it was thick and black. It wasn’t new and it looked like it had been handled a lot. Wesson had a folder like that too, earlier in the day, so they must be passing it back and forth. It’s bound to be in one office or the other.”

“OK. This could be fun.” May grinned. “I haven’t done anything illegal for a while!” Rally rolled her eyes and drank some milk out of her little carton as they walked. “How’s Roy doing?”

“He’s arranged things with the Chicago department, so he’s going to stay in San Francisco for a while too. He’s officially detailed to work with the FBI now and when he goes home. He’s not real happy about it. Seems having a city cop and an

FBI agent in the same room tends to cause spontaneous combustion.”

“From what you’re telling me about Smith, I can see why. Are he and Wesson doing good-cop, bad-cop?”

“Not the classic style. Wesson threatens me with jail, but doesn’t call me ‘little lady’. Smith tells me gross stories about Vietnam and seems to have a sense of humor, unlike Wesson. I couldn’t say which one I’m supposed to get mad at. It’s kind of a toss-up.” They arrived at the hotel and headed down the ramp leading to the parking garage. “Wesson is the one who thought I should do some lookout duty today. I guess they have to justify keeping me in indentured servitude. So I’m here from noon to six.”

“No, *we’re* here!” said May. “I’ll keep you company.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” Rally touched May’s hair. “We can finish lunch in the car.” The Cobra was parked on the first level again with the ramp in sight. “Then I guess I should put it someplace less conspicuous. But I like seeing some daylight while I eat.”

They got in and reclined the seats, unwrapping their sandwiches all the way. Intermittent sunlight mixed with the bright fluorescents that lit the garage.

“Gosh, we can eat in the car today,” said May. “I feel so honored!”

Rally gave a little groan and they concentrated on lunch for a few minutes. A car drove down the ramp and Rally sat up to examine it. A family with two children. She relaxed down into the reclined seat again. May finished her soda and wiped mayonnaise off her chin.

“So there are two agents on the fourth level watching Buff, huh?”

“Yes. I’m supposed to call them if I see him.” Rally indicated a small radio that she had wedged into the console. “They gave me this to use.” She clicked it on. “Hey, guys. Just testing.”

“Hello, Ms. Vincent,” replied a voice. “This is Agent Bui. I’m glad you’re here, because I know you’ll spot the guy with no trouble. We really appreciate your help, you know.”

“Aw, gosh...” Rally felt a twinge of embarrassment. “No problem.”

“We’ve got the controls for the exit gate right here, so when you call us, we’ll close it.”

“OK, but that might not do a lot of good.”

“We’ll see. Do you really have a Shelby Cobra GT-500?”

“Sure do. We’re parked up top. Come and take a look if you like. I won’t tattle.”

She heard a chuckle. “No, I think Agent Smith would have something to say about that. Maybe I’ll get a chance some other time.”

“Sure thing. Over and out.” Rally clicked off the radio. There was silence for a while. A car with two women left and another car entered, with a lone man driving — a short black man.

“This could be a long afternoon,” said May. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Uh... we have to establish a subject?”

“No, but I want to keep off subjects you don’t want to discuss.” May pulled in her lips and scanned the headliner. “Such as...”

“You want to talk to me about Bean?”

“Only if you want to.”

“May...”

“I won’t tell anyone else, if you don’t want me to,” said May quietly. “But honestly, Rally, I think you ought to talk about it.” There was a pause. “OK, that’s enough out of me. I’ll shut up now.”

“Good.” They looked out of opposite windows. Another car came down the ramp carrying a young couple. “May, I know you’re only trying to help. But honestly, don’t. There’s no reason — ”

“I said I was shutting up, OK? I mean it. The only person I care about in this is you, and you have to do what makes sense to you.” May produced a grenade and tossed it up and down. “What makes sense to me, on the other hand — ”

“OK, you do what you want to! It’s not like I’m going to stop you!”

“Yeah?” laughed May. “I almost wish he’d show up!”

“Hey, what’s that?” Rally got out of the car to listen.

Deep below them, seemingly in the bowels of the earth, a roar began. A tremendous crash, and the building shook. “Oh fuck! It’s an EARTHQUAKE!” chattered May. “And here we are in the BASEMENT!” The roar went on and grew louder. “Ahhh! Let’s run for it!” May jumped out of the car.

“Just a sec!” Rally darted forward and looked down the ramp to the next level. Echoes off concrete walls notwithstanding, she knew that sound. *KRAKKRAKKRAKKRAK* rattled above it, the sound of two ten-millimeter FBI service weapons discharging at once. The gate started to go down.

And the roar came around the corner with a shrieking, fishtailing skid of tires and a bright red flash. Buff’s nose straightened; the car launched up the ramp directly at her. She knew that this time Bean would not swerve to miss her.

The fluorescent glare on the windshield rendered it opaque, but as she threw herself aside to avoid Buff, she caught a glimpse of Bean through the side window. He wore his bulletproof headband, his hair bristling in a serrated crest over his forehead, and the vicious look he threw her felt like a knife had hit her in the chest. Without a pause he gunned Buff up the ramp and crashed through the gate with a scream of rending metal. The bars flew like swords.

No time for thought, no time for plans — Rally ran to the Cobra and revved the engine in an answering roar. Her GT-500 could surely catch Buff, though her CZ75’s 9mm rounds would have no effect at all on its armor.

“Wait for me!” howled May. She leaped into the Cobra and slammed the door just as Rally peeled out. She had to make an extreme left to get on the ramp, and May fell against the door, grabbing for her seatbelt.

“Hang on!” yelled Rally. “This is not going to be a Sunday drive!” The Cobra flew up the ramp and emerged into the street. Buff was just turning left. “OK, he’s heading for the freeway northbound. May, tell them!”

May seized the radio. “He’s northbound, for the freeway!”

“Ms. Vincent, keep on him if you can! He slashed our tires! We’re calling the SFPD and the Highway Patrol.”

“You bet!” Rally took the left with tires squealing. “Make sure they know I’m a pursuit vehicle! May, tell them our license number!”

“Illinois, BRD-529! Bravo Ransom Duke five two nine!”

“There he goes! He’s heading up the on-ramp!” Rally swerved around a line of cars and followed. “Highway 280, north!” Bean wove in and out of moderate traffic and accelerated. “He’s doing about eighty — make that ninety.” She speeded up to match him, rolling left and right just as he had. “Damn, I wish I had a siren!”

“That road’s going to go to surface streets in a mile,” said the radio. “But it feeds onto the Bay Bridge — we’re going to get all the squad cars in the area to converge on the approach!”

“Got it!” Rally dodged around a minivan and finally had a clear view of Buff. The thick glass in the back window obscured most details of the interior. Bean was only a silhouette, but she saw his hands yank the wheel to the right. He darted around a semi and accelerated again.

Rally kept to the left and sped up as well. They were doing a hundred miles an hour in city traffic now, angling down a long gradual ramp towards a flatter area.

Train tracks on the left, a long bay inlet on the right. Construction going on at the water’s edge, and the main train station on the other side of the road. Rally spotted pedestrians crossing at a light about a mile ahead. “Oh, boy. This is going to get sticky in a few seconds...” To the radio she said, “Coming down onto King Street. Going to pass the Caltrain station.”

Buff emerged from behind the semi, right in front of the Cobra. And braked. She barely had time to swerve around him before she would have crashed straight into his back end. “Shit!”

“Man, he’s playing for keeps!” May clung to the dashboard.

“You got that right!” Buff was a block behind them now, and took a sharp left. “Hey!”

“Northbound on Fourth!” May told the radio.

Rally took a left at the next street, Third. “Damn! I do NOT know this city!”

“Well, neither does he!”

“Oh, cripes, he spent the whole day on Tuesday scouting around! He’s checked out all the routes!” hissed Rally. “Damn!”

They went under a group of overpasses, braking to avoid traffic in a district of street-level stores and multistory apartment buildings. She heard sirens and a black and white crossed their path, heading east to the bridge.

“OK, OK — it’s all a grid here, kind of northwest-southeast, and he was one block west of us. If he’s heading to the bridge — ” Rally stopped and made a U-turn in the middle of a block.

“What are you doing?”

“He’s not going to the bridge!” yelled Rally into the radio. “That unit would have seen him!” She raced back to King Street and turned right, west. “He’s taking the freeway south!” Up they went on the ramp again, Rally pounding the gas pedal into the floor. “May, tell them!”

“Rally says he’s doubled back! 280 south!”

“I’ve got a map in the glove compartment! Get it out!” May found it and spread it out. “Tell me what’s coming up!”

“This freeway meets another one in about three miles, then goes west for a while, then due south. The other one — 101 — goes straight south along the bay.” May lifted the map and refolded it. “101 goes to the airport and beyond. 280 goes down the Peninsula and through open areas, then through Palo Alto and San Jose. They meet again in San Jose.”

“OK, we took 101 up here from the valley. It’s all city and industrial. It’s a shorter route if he’s only heading out to the valley again.” Rally considered the question. “He might want to get back on I-5. That’s a great place to go fast. But it’s all by itself in the middle of nowhere. No place to hide. He’d be easy to catch that way. No, that’s not it...”

“There he is!” May pointed with a pair of binoculars in her hand. Buff was a distant red dot on the flyover ramps ahead. “Which one is he taking?”

“Looks like 280!” Rally pounded her speed to over a hundred miles an hour again. Horns shrieked at her as she passed. “How’d he get into the garage? Oh geez, I bet he paid the black guy to let him hide in the back seat!”

“Not like he’s short of money right now!”

“No shit!” Buff looked a little larger now. “Yeah, he’s taking 280 west.”

“280 west,” repeated May into the radio. Rally took the ramp and passed the interchange. The traffic had thinned a little, and she pushed the car to a hundred and thirty.

“We’ve called the Highway Patrol,” said the radio. “They’re going to set up a roadblock right after John Daly Boulevard. There’ll be spikes on the road.”

“Don’t bother! He’s got run-flats — and I don’t!”

“What will stop him, then?”

“That’s a damn good question!” yelled Rally. “How about an M1 battle tank?”

“Sorry, no can do — but boy, I wish!” That was Smith patching in. “How you doing there, Miss Vincent?”

“I’m coming up on him.” Buff was about two hundred feet ahead. “But I’m not getting too close! I’m just going to try to keep him in sight.”



“That’s wise,” said Smith. “Don’t want him getting hurt, you know.”

“What? HIM?”

“He’s important, Miss Vincent. Don’t damage him.”

“Thanks a whole hell of a lot!” screamed Rally. “I don’t think he’s the one who’s in danger!”

“You’re welcome. Just keep radioing in. We’ll work on the rest.”

“Rrrr...” growled Rally. She gripped the wheel and concentrated on her driving. Buff changed lanes occasionally, but didn’t make any extreme moves for a few moments. Then Bean suddenly darted right and headed for an off-ramp.

“Ocean Boulevard!” reported May. Rally followed him. A red light popped up at the base of the ramp. Buff ran it, and so did Rally. She heard furious horns and screeching tires behind them. This was a hilly area, a large mass rising to her right, and Buff took a right onto a curving residential street.

They were doing about sixty in a twenty-five-mile-per-hour zone, and Rally tensed up, hoping nothing would appear on the street. Buff slowed and took a left onto a larger road, then an immediate right.

“San Jacinto Way, just crossed Monterey,” said May. “Heading uphill.”

“Where’s he going?” wondered Rally. The road ahead curved to the left, and she lost sight of Bean for a second. The next moment he sped back downhill at her, accelerating as he aimed for her driver’s side.

“*Aiighh!*” She heaved the wheel to the right and ran up on the curb, barely avoiding a high-speed impact with Buff’s reinforced bumper. “God! He’s going straight for me!”

She glimpsed Bean through the side window again as he passed inches away, his expression unchanged. Malevolent, almost a stranger. He roared past and stepped on the gas as she pulled into a driveway to turn around.

“God, he looks awful!” whispered May. “Did you see — ”

“Yes, I did! That’s what he looked like when he told me he’d kill me!” Rally followed Buff, taking a right after him.

“He looked that unhappy?”

“Unhappy? What about murderous?” This road curved as well, swinging right

and then left. Buff gunned it up to seventy and kept going faster downhill. Rally followed suit, hanging a few carlengths back.

“He looks like he wants to cry,” said May. “Monterey Boulevard — no, it’s Santa Clara Avenue now. Crossing Portola Drive — geez, now it’s Vincente Street.”

“Are you nuts? That’s *Bean!*” Buff took a hard left with a green light. This was a wide divided road with heavy traffic. Buff muscled its way in and forced through gaps to the right lane.

“South on Nineteenth Avenue,” said May. “Passing Stern Grove.”

“So he’s going to try losing me in the crowd now,” muttered Rally. “No way, Bean!”

“Yeah... I know it’s Bean! I never saw him look like that before. I saw him looking murderous when Gray was fighting with him, but he didn’t look like that.”

“Fine, so he looks different!” Rally fought with the traffic to stay near Buff. “Why am I not seeing any cops?” she called.

“We’re keeping them out of your way for now,” said Wesson’s voice over the radio. “We don’t want him to realize you’re in contact with us.”

“Wonderful! When is that going to make a difference?”

“We’re working on that.”

“You do that!” Rally jammed on her brakes to keep from hitting the car in front of her. Buff was moving slowly as well, half a block ahead. They passed a large shopping mall on the right.

“Probably in less than a mile. The CHP officers who were at John Daly are moving up Highway 1 — that turns into Nineteenth south of where you are. They’ll block him, if he’s still on that street, or they can cut him off on the side streets. Sit tight and wait.”

Rally looked ahead. Buff was still moving through the traffic ahead. “Tell them to be careful. That car’s armored, and he can bash through almost anything.”

“We know. There are six of them, so he shouldn’t be able to — ”

“Hold on!” said Rally. “He’s taking a left, just past the mall. It’s a one-way, and he’s going the wrong way!” She worked her way over and took the same turn, swerving around oncoming cars. Behind her was a thud and the sound of crumpling metal. “Oh great — we’re causing accidents! Thanks a lot, Bean!”

“Denslowe Drive!” said May.

“The CHP are almost there. They’ll come up the other way and block him,” said Wesson. Sure enough, at the T-crossing that ended the street ahead appeared two CHP units. Rally had just passed an intersection and two more appeared behind her. “They’re going to box him in, they say, and you’re in the box.” Two more units reinforced the pair in front of them.

“Yes, they’re here! Thank God.” The CHP units turned broadside in the street ahead of them. On the sidewalk, a woman with a stroller stared. Buff sped up and rammed the first CHP, sending it spinning.

WHAM! Out of control, the CHP unit crashed into parked cars and bounced back into the street. Rally slowed down and avoided it, but Buff continued on, speed unimpaired, and hit the second unit at fifty miles an hour. KRASSH!

Glass and metal smashed and buckled, and the second CHP went spinning as well. Its rear bumper nearly hit the stroller, but the woman turned and ran with it. Rally caught a glimpse of a little girl about two years old, looking frightened. “He’s not worrying much about kids right now, is he?”

“Doesn’t look like it!” May grimaced. Buff hit the next two units simultaneously as they tried to block the street nose to nose, and forced them around to the opposite heading. When he had cleared them, Bean leapt forward. A quick right turn, apparently heading back to Nineteenth.

Rally moved through the gap he had made and followed. “Well, that was a roaring success!” she said to Wesson. The last two CHP followed behind her. Bean had almost made it to the intersection when he suddenly slammed on his brakes. SKREE!

Rally, expecting a trick, swerved around him to the right and nearly hit a pair of children crossing the street before she slammed on her brakes as well. Buff reversed past her and rammed both CHP units coming up behind them. Then, to her shock, he moved beside her, braked — and drove sideways.

“*Aiigghh!*” yelled Rally. KRUNCH! Buff crashed into her left side and forced her up onto the sidewalk. The children watched openmouthed. She hit a tree with the right side of the car, pushing it flat, and skidded sideways, Buff shoving her into the side of a building.

“Damn! I forgot he could do that!” The children stood on the sidewalk directly ahead of her. She couldn’t move forward to escape him.

“What’s happening?” asked Wesson. “I can’t raise the CHP!”

“Gosh!” Rally fought to reverse. “Can’t imagine why!”

“He’s rammed them all,” said May. “I don’t know if anyone’s hurt — ” SCRAAPE! The right side of the Cobra made a dreadful sound against the wall as Rally squeezed out from between it and Buff, driving backwards on the sidewalk. She popped out behind him and reversed onto the street. Next to the wall lay some bits of chrome, and the concrete blocks bore a wide blue scar.

“Oooh! He’s messing up my CAR!” Rally’s blood boiled. Buff accelerated forward and crossed the intersection, taking a left. He was heading to the freeway, and she hung on his tail, truly furious for the first time in the chase. “You’re gonna pay for that, Bean!”

“Left on Nineteenth! Passing Junipero Serra!”

“He’s going to 280 again, then,” said Wesson. “South, or east?”

“Don’t know yet!” The traffic had loosened, and both she and Buff accelerated on a smooth straightaway, passing large apartment blocks on the right. They went under a bridge and began to descend a slope. The southern extent of the city rose in front of them, white houses on a dark green hill. “Where’s the on-ramp for east? Ohmigod!”

Buff shot to the left across all lanes, taking an off-ramp the wrong way. Bean bore to the right and forced a sharp drift-turn so that he faced east, crosswise on the ramp. And surged forward. He sailed over the railing and into thin air. On the westbound lanes twenty feet below him, he landed with a crash. Cars braked and skidded to avoid him.

“What’s he doing?” asked Wesson frantically.

“He... he just got eastbound, on the wrong side of the freeway! I can’t follow him!” Rally shot past the ramp Bean had used. “How the hell do I get on 280 east?”

“You’re past it! Get off the freeway and turn around!”

“Shit! I’ll be ten miles behind him!” Rally aimed for the next off-ramp a mile down the road, then crossed the freeway on a bridge and took the on-ramp north. “OK, I see where to go. Darn, where is he now?” She roared up a flyover and joined the freeway going east.

“I see him!” May looked through her binoculars. “He’s still in the westbound lanes!” Buff dodged head-on traffic far ahead, driving at the right-hand edge of the road. A concrete barrier divided the two sides, which looked too high for him to get over.

“Somebody say he’s going the wrong way?” broke in Smith. “Yeehaw!”

“Pete!” said Wesson.

“The guy’s got balls, at least! Man, this is getting interesting!”

“He’s slowed down, dodging,” said Rally. “I might be able to — ” She broke off, peering ahead. “May, what’s he doing?”

“Um... is that a flatbed tow truck ahead of him?”

“Yeah, in the right lane, there at the curve... oh, shit!”

“What?” said Smith excitedly.

“He’s gonna use it to jump the barrier! Yeah, there he goes!” Buff surged forward as the freeway turned to the right, moving into the left lane. The camber of the road was sufficient for him to get two wheels up on the barrier at the edge of the freeway and gun the car forward, leaping into the air.

Buff landed on the flatbed, tires spinning. The road turned left again and a red streak rocketed forward at an angle, clearing the barrier between lanes and landing on the eastbound side.

The road was clear in front of him, and Bean accelerated so quickly Rally felt as if her car were standing still. The red car rapidly receded, though she jammed the gas pedal so hard her foot hurt.

“Where’s he going to go from here? Back into the city, or south on 101?” Rally bit her lip in thought. “I’d bet the freeway! I’ll keep chasing, but you guys might want to put up a more substantial barrier!”

“How’re the CHP officers?” asked May.

“Alive, but some broken bones,” said Smith. “Never mind them! How far behind are you?”

“About a mile and a half. I’m passing — ”

“Alemany Boulevard,” said May. “Buff’s almost to the interchange.”

“There are a bunch of motorcycle cops running breaks on 101 and 280 in the city,” said Smith. “We’re having the CHP barricade the feeder on-ramps and usher everyone off the road. You should have a clearer field in a little while.”

“He took the southbound ramp,” said May, shading her binoculars. “He’s on 101.”

“We’re sending down a police chopper to help track him,” said Wesson. “We’re going to patch you in to them.” The radio gave out a series of clicks, and a static-y

voice announced a change in flight direction.

“Hello,” said May. “This is May Hopkins, in the blue Mustang with white stripes. Can you see us?”

“Roger,” said the pilot. “That’s an affirmative.”

“Look, Rally!” May pointed up through the windshield. “There it is!”

“There isn’t a good spot for a block until further south,” said Wesson. “We need some time, anyway.” His voice cut out for a moment. “Yes, there’s going to be a set of concrete barrier blocks in a while. I’ll say when I know just where.”

“You do that.” Rally looked at her speedometer: creeping past 140, the highest number on the dial. “I’m going to be leaving the chopper behind in a while, I’m afraid.” She took the southbound ramp.

“We’ll worry about that,” said the pilot. “We’ve got some oil on board — we are going to try to get ahead of him and dump it on the road. We can cut straight over the hill and the lagoon and get there sooner than he does.”

“Worth a try! But tell me where so I’ll be ready!”

“Roger.”

“A pair of motorcycle cops are coming up on your tail,” said Wesson. “They’re backup, just in case.”

“Oh, thanks! In case I try to hurt Bean?”

“You have the right to defend yourself within reason, of course. But I would remind you that without Mr. Bandit in the game, that agreement you signed is null and void.”

“That’s so damn encouraging, Wesson. You ought to go into the FBI recruiting division.”

“Oil will go on the road just past Candlestick — I should say, 3Com Park,” said the chopper pilot. “He may even go into the lagoon there.”

“Don’t think that you’ve seen the last of him if he does!” Rally came down a slope and saw the stadium ahead on the left, sitting on a point of land that protruded into the bay. Far ahead, passing the stadium, was Buff. The road was nearly clear now.

As she descended the hill, she saw the chopper hovering low, a spray of oil coming from it. Buff was only yards behind the chopper. Could he avoid the slick?

“He’s spinning out!” said May. “He’s off in the gravel!” Buff swerved to the left and stopped a few feet from the water on a slight downslope. The rear tires spun and threw gravel, skidding, then caught traction and sent the car up onto the road again. “Nope, he’s recovered. But he’s closer now!”

Rally steered to the right, veering off the road a bit to avoid the oil. “Yep. Not sure if I like that or not!” The chopper roared above her head and the motorcycle cops slowed to steer around the oil.

“There is going to be a roadblock in San Carlos,” said Wesson. “That’s about — ”

“Twenty miles ahead,” said May, refolding the map.

“That’s a long way! Who says he’s going to stay on the road that far?”

“That’s the best we can do,” said Wesson stiffly.

“OK, OK. San Carlos.” Rally looked at Buff, about a quarter of a mile ahead on a long straightaway that ran between the bay and a large lagoon. Beyond that was a rise, crossing the saddle of a small mountain that sloped down to the bay. “What’s coming up?”

She was leaving the motorcycles behind, her speed about one-seventy. The chopper had had a lead on her, but also began to lag. “Hoo boy. Once we pass that saddle, I don’t think we’re gonna have a lot of backup.” Buff began to climb the hill.

“There’s an industrial area next to the bay, then the airport. The road comes close to the bay again after that.” May looked up from the map. “You know, Rally, if you get close enough, I could toss a couple of frag shells. That ought to do bad things, even to Buff.”

“Yeah, I know.” Rally reached over and turned off the radio. “You heard what they said. If he gets killed or even maimed, I’m toast. We can’t do that.”

May looked at her with hard eyes. “If it comes down to us or him, I’m throwing ‘em.” She took a pair of grenades from her jacket. “Even jail is better than being dead.”

“Sometimes! You didn’t hear Wesson talking about putting me in the pen! I’ve got two deaths on my conscience — and maybe three.”

“Three?”

“Nobody’s called me about Larry Sam. I can only imagine the worst.”

“You are going to have to stop beating yourself up about that,” said May. “He did it of his own free will — and for money. It wasn’t your fault.”

“They probably found out because of what I told Brown! It IS my fault — ”

“RALLY!” screamed May. They topped the saddle, and the chopper and motorcycles were far behind. Buff had been a long way ahead when they had seen it top the rise. But as they started down the slope, Bean braked and dropped to a position on their rear left quarter. “Oh, shit!”

“Ah!” Rally tried to accelerate and pull ahead, but Buff stayed with her. KRAASH! Bean rammed her and the Cobra shook with the impact. She held the wheel and straightened out, then hit the brakes.

Buff dropped back with her. In the rear-view she saw Bean’s face through the windshield, a little obscured. But his grinning teeth were clear. KRASSH! He hit her again.

“May! Get down!” She pushed on May’s head. “Get into crash position!” May bent over with her hands on her head, her rounded stomach keeping her from crouching very low.

“Oh, dear God. *Junior!*”

Her heart started hammering even harder than it was already going, and she accelerated again. Bean seemed to know her every move before she made it and his position relative to her never changed. “You might need those grenades after all, May!” The embankment on the left side of the road was steep, and fifty or sixty feet high. At the bottom were warehouses and scrapyards. “If he sends me into that...”

Bean moved to her right side and rammed her again. The Cobra jumped to the left and swerved dangerously close to the edge before Rally could correct its path. She breathed a prayer and pounded the gas as hard as she could. On this downslope she must be going one-eighty, but it was to no avail. Buff roared up alongside her and slewed to the left. KRAAASSHH!

“Aaagghh! Rally, what’s going on — ?”

“Keep down, May! He’s trying to run me off the embankment!”

“Oh, shit...”

KRAAASSHH! Buff slewed into the passenger-side door again and the Cobra trembled, skidding sideways. Rally desperately pulled the wheel back to straighten the car’s path. “Goddammit, he outweighs me by a thousand pounds, the bastard!”



“This is NOT a fair fight, Rally!”

“Yeah, that had occurred to me!” She braked slightly and dropped back, then rammed the wheel to the right, hitting Buff in the rear quarterpanel. The car fishtailed for an instant, but did not seem out of control for even a moment. “He’s got me nailed...”

“I’ll knock him out for you, Rally!” May crouched in the seat well and brandished a grenade.

“All right, you win!” Rally braked again and managed to drop behind Buff. “But if he gets killed, the FBI will have my hide!”

“Even if it’s in self-defense?”

“Especially then! I’m expendable!”

“Not to me, you’re not!” May rolled down the window from her crouch, took a quick glance upwards while pulling the pin, counted down and threw. Rally jammed the brakes on and seemed to zoom backwards.

WHRAAKOOM! The grenade went off right next to Buff’s driver’s window. The heavy glass cracked and shrapnel scarred the paint. Bean braked and dropped back. Rally took a swift look and saw him snarl at her in his rear-view. “You dinged him, May! One more like that and he’ll — ”

KRAAASSSHHH!! Bean completed his backward move and slammed his car against the side of hers. The Cobra skidded again. He kept position, shoving her over to the left. They were approaching the airport and the embankment was much lower now, but her heart nearly stopped. SKREEEEEEE! Her tires protested as they were forced sideways.

The left front wheel hit gravel, then grass. Bean whipped his rear end into her, and she lurched to the left and tore through the guard rail.

Rally kept hold of the wheel and managed to steer after a fashion despite the jolting, but the Cobra headed noisily down a slope, half-sliding sideways. They landed in a grassy plot at the bottom of the embankment. A used-car dealership’s chain-link fence stood right in front of her, and the car came to rest against it.

“Oh, my — May, are you all right?”

“Fine!” May straightened up, looking dazed. “Wow. Well, at least we didn’t crash!”

“No, thank God!” Rally rested her head against the steering wheel for a moment.

“Oh, my poor baby... ” She patted the dash. “Mama didn’t mean for you to get all bashed up again!” At least the car was still driveable, though she would need a winch to get her out of this little swale unless she cut a hole in the car lot’s razor-wire-topped fence.

Rally turned off the ignition and started to get out, but a pain in her right knee stopped her. “Ow!”

May climbed out and came around to Rally’s side, which was almost against the fence. “What’s the matter?”

“I think I hit my knee on the steering wheel! Ack — I can’t straighten it!” She bent and massaged the bruised joint, trying to flex her leg.

“Ruh-Ruh-Ruh — ” May pointed at the top of the embankment. “RALLY!!”

“Huh?” Rally looked up. “What is it?”

Buff. And Bean, who had just slammed the driver’s door. She spotted the crease from O’Toole’s bullet under his headband. A long knife drawn from his jacket. And the expression in his eyes.

“Warned ya,” said Bean, and started down the slope towards them.

**::: END OF VOLUME FOUR :::**

**CONTINUED IN VOLUME FIVE**