

CHASING THE DRAGON

: A *GUNSMITH CATS*
FAN FICTION STORY :



BY MADAME MANGA

.: VOLUME FIVE :.
CHAPTERS 11, 12, 13

::: DISCLAIMERS AND SO FORTH :::

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

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

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

Author's Notes:

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

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

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::: CHAPTER ELEVEN :::

“Sure as shit, it’s the airport,” said Smith. He jabbed a finger at a large map of the San Francisco peninsula on his office wall. “He’s been busting for the airport this whole time.”

“What would he do with the car?” asked Wesson. Several other agents stood around, chatting and kibitzing. One spoke on the phone, another passed out cups of coffee.

Roy Coleman sat in the corner of the room, ignored by nearly everyone. His face rested in both hands, his fingers shielding his mouth, and he muttered “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women,” over and over.

“Gonna ship it, naturally. She said he shipped it out here. So he drops it off at air freight — ” Smith looked over at the agent on his phone. “You got that United freight office yet, Bui?”

“Not yet,” replied Bui with a hand over the receiver. “I keep getting automated message systems.” He shook his head. “Yes, the FBI. That means I want to talk to a human being! No, don’t cut me off — ”

“OK,” continued Smith, “so then he strolls off to the terminals and gets on a flight. Maybe not straight home — he could fly to Milwaukee or Indianapolis or something and buy a car to take him to Chicago. He’s got a cool half-million with him, so not a lot of obstacles in his way there. Make sense? We going to plan accordingly? I’ll send a detail to the airport now.” He grabbed his phone.

Several agents nodded, and Wesson got up. “I’m going to have them check that radio again. I don’t know why it cut out. In the mean time...” He picked up his cell phone and dialed Rally’s number. It rang ten times before he clicked it off. “Huh. Turned it off? Or lost it?”

“Or she’s dead,” said Roy in a hollow voice. “May’s with her, too.” He dropped his hands; he looked haggard and pale under his beard. “She told me what kind of fighter he was. How can two young women hold off *Bean Bandit*?”

“Thought you said she could take care of herself,” snorted Smith. “If she’s such a tough broad, don’t worry about her. If she isn’t so tough, well, she shouldn’t have

taken up this line of work.” He turned back to the agents. “OK, talk to the chopper. Ask if they’ve spotted ‘em.”

Gonzales, with the radio and a set of headphones with a mic, shot off rapid questions and narrated at the same time. “Yeah, last seen heading over San Bruno Mountain on southbound 101. You said that. This guy can’t spot a car he’s been following all over the map! So where the hell are they? Not on the road? Guess he thinks she put on wings and flew away, since the airport’s right down the road. So either she’s on the freeway, or she’s on a surface street. Well, try it, then! Tell me soon.”

He looked up. “He’s going to look in South San Francisco. The industrial area north of the airport.”

“What about Bandit?” said Roy. No one paid attention. He closed his eyes and cursed, then shouted, “WHAT ABOUT BANDIT?”

Wesson shot a reproving look at him.

Roy waved his hands. “If he can’t see the Cobra, what about the red car? Buff stands out like a — ”

“Buff?” cackled Smith. “Got an ear for a moniker, too, hey? I think I want to meet this guy!”

“Can’t the chopper see *him*? For God’s sake, ask!”

“No, of course they can’t see him. They’re out over the bay and turning around,” said Gonzales. Everyone looked pityingly at Roy, who clenched his fists.

“He said he would kill her if she got in his way,” said Roy with an edge of desperation. “Tailing him for thirty miles and calling in his location to the FBI, CHP *and* SFPD definitely qualifies as getting in his way.”

“She’s got a gun.” Smith shrugged and turned away.

“HE’S GOT A JACKET MADE OF BATTLESHIP PLATE!” shouted Roy again. “She only has a nine-millimeter and two smaller guns! *He* can take a .44 magnum without missing a step! Will you, for God’s sake, listen to me?”

“Cobra’s not in the industrial area,” said Gonzales, listening to his headphones. “The motorcycle cops are coming over the rise.” He paused for a moment. “Yeah, now they see the red car. It’s parked on the left-hand shoulder, down the mountain a ways. Cops are getting closer — they’re up to it. Holy crap!”

“What?” said everyone at once.

“Throwing knives. He took them down. Not dead, pilot thinks, but they’re not going anywhere soon. His co-pilot’s unlocking the twelve-gauge.”

“Hasn’t that chopper got a rifle on board?” begged Roy. “Buckshot won’t stop that monster!”

“He’s firing... The guy shielded his head with his arms. Oh!”

“Huh?” said Smith.

“It’s the Cobra! It’s down at the bottom of the slope against a fence. Tires ripped the grass all the way down. He must’ve forced it off.”

“Tire tracks all the way?” Roy grabbed a spare headset. “She didn’t roll!” He listened tensely. “Explosion? Oh, thank God! May’s got her — ” He broke off when four FBI agents stared at him. “Um...” Roy smiled uneasily.

“*What’s* the explosion?” said Smith.

“Uhh... he says... confetti? With pink smoke?” The agents looked at each other in incredulous amusement. “What is she doing? Having a birthday party down there? Woah!” Gonzales ripped the headphones off and jammed a hand to his ear. “*That* wasn’t a confetti bomb!”

Roy looked pained, but kept his headphones on. “A big explosion with shrapnel flying. Halfway up the slope. Not right near Bandit, but in his direction.” He bowed his head. “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Blessed Mother Mary.”

“I don’t think they’re gonna float down from above and form a cordon!” shouted Smith. “Those little gals planning to blow up my Roadbuster?”

Roy turned on him. “When *that* man’s coming after them with the full force of his unholy wrath? I think they’ve GOT THE RIGHT!”

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“Do it again, kid,” said Bean with a ferocious grimace. “Ya already tossed a goddamn frag at my car! Throw the next one closer than *that*.”

He shook shrapnel from his hair and jacket, his face bleeding slightly from a few stings. Buckshot marks peppered his jacket. One of the motorcycle cops cried out in pain, crawling along the road above and trying unsuccessfully to aim his service pistol. The chopper hovered low, blasting dust off the road and blowing Bean’s hair around like a tornado. The co-pilot took aim at him again with the Ithaca twelve-gauge.

BABOOM! Again Bean put up his arms; the pellets rattled against his armored jacket and struck up dirt around him. He whirled and threw the bowie knife he had already drawn. It crashed through the chopper's windshield and lodged in the cockpit bulkhead between the seats. The pilots yelled and took the chopper up again.

Rally crouched in the car, CZ75 braced and her injured knee throbbing. She tried to take an uphill sight with trembling hands. Head shot. Her only choice... again.

Blow out his God-damned brains, her rational mind screamed. Put a bullet in the big bastard's cranium — but above or below the armored headband? Place it too low, and she wouldn't hit a vital point. Her first shot had to take Bean down for good, because there probably wouldn't be a second shot. Like hunting a grizzly bear. Any wound short of mortal would only make him mad, and even with a mortal wound he might still live long enough to kill...

Rally stared at Bean's head. Could she take him through the top of the skull? Misjudge by even a fraction of an inch, and the bullet would only crease his scalp or whistle through his hair, which perfectly obscured the target. Was that why he so often wore that sprawling black shock standing on end?

"That was a warning, Bean!" shouted May from behind her opened passenger door. Since the car pointed slightly upslope, it provided her with fairly good cover, as far as that went. "I gave you the toy one first to prove I've got *all* my stuff along. And the second to show I mean business! Just get in your car and drive away!"

"Uh-uh. I'm taking care of *my* business first." He glanced over at Rally. "Why ain'tcha shot at me yet, Vincent? Don't tell me; yer hopin' for another nice big piece of me, right?" Bean adjusted his crotch and smiled in a manner that reminded her of O'Toole. "Well, you ain't gettin' it, slut. So go ahead and fire." He began to walk down the slope again.

"You *son of a bitch!*" howled May. "I knew it!" She threw another grenade with all her force. It bounced off Bean's chest and fell to his feet. He kicked it off the embankment and it went off with a loud pop and another cloud of glitter and pink smoke. "Oops..." Rally made a quick mental inventory of May's jacket. She had no real grenades left!

"Yer old enough to play by the rules." Bean looked in May's direction as he approached with a deliberate pace. He shook his right arm; the switchblade appeared in his hand and he shot the blade out of the handle with an ominous *'snik'*. "Don't think I'm gonna disinvite ya to this shindig!"

"You planning on demonstrating your way of getting angry with women at this shindig?" she yelled. "Try it on me, Bean! I'll bite it in half! I'll pull it out by the roots!"

Bean made a contemptuous, uncomprehending smirk and moved closer to Rally. “C’mon, you murderin’ slut. Gimme your best shot.” He held up the switchblade and beckoned.

Rally met his gaze head on. That best shot was right between the eyes, as he’d said before, but it was extremely difficult to look into those eyes and take a fix at the same time. It wasn’t the anger that simmered there, nor the adrenaline heat of the chase; it was something that lay crushed and struggling under their weight, something that looked suspiciously like pain. Rally’s trigger finger twitched and her stomach turned over.

“No,” she said to her own surprise. “I am not going to start this, Bean. If that’s one of your rules, we are not going to fight.”

He lifted his lip to show his teeth. “Oh, I can get ya to shoot first, bitch. Easy.” Bean headed for May, chuckling. “Got any more party favors?”

WHOOM! May’s grenade went off in the air right in front of his face. It scattered a big whitish burst which for a moment obscured Bean’s head as completely as if she had decapitated him. Then he staggered out of the cloud looking like a snow-capped peak. A thin white drift covered his hair and features and slid in dusty trails from his shoulders.

“*Ahchoo!*” Bean sneezed like an engine backfire. He sent up a fresh dust cloud and tried to swat it out of his face. “Ah... ah — *choo!*”

“What the hell was that, May?”

“Sneezing powder, of course! Get him while he’s off balance!”

“But — ”

“What the hell are you waiting for? He just taunted you about — what he DID! God, girl! Don’t you want him DEAD?!”

“I — ” Rally sighted on Bean’s head, and pulled the trigger.

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“Can’t they get there sooner? Tell them to hurry!”

“They’re driving twice the speed limit on an empty freeway! Believe me, they’re hurrying.” Bui put his hand on Roy’s shoulder. “I know you’re worried. So are we all... well, maybe for different reasons.”

He glanced at Smith, who stood head-to-head with Wesson while both shouted into phones. “Ten SFPD squad cars! And a dozen more heading up 101 from Millbrae and San Bruno and Brisbane. He’s going to have to beat it fast if he doesn’t want to be arrested by every jurisdiction in twenty miles!”

Bui patted Roy’s shoulder again and picked up the radio headphones as Gonzales relinquished them. “OK, they’re hovering. Got off another buck load, but he’s too close to the girls now — uh, hard to tell what’s happening. Some kind of cloud around his head? They hear gunshots — muzzle flash from her nine-millimeter. Hey!”

Bui turned to Roy, his eyes scanning as he listened. “He’s down, he’s down — no, he’s up again. Lurching around like he’s drunk. What did she do?” He listened again. “Shot at his head — OK, she must’ve aimed for the headband. Yes, sir, Agent Smith, I guess she’s trying not to kill him.”

He did a thumbs-up and listened for a moment. “Wait! He’s recovered! Oh, there he goes! He’s grabbing the little blonde one!”

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“MINNIE-MAY!!” screamed Rally. She grabbed her door and vaulted out of the car. Landing, she put all her weight on the injured knee and fell. She snapped the CZ75 into a two-handed grip as she hit the grass. “Oww! BEAN! LET GO OF HER, OR I AIM A LITTLE HIGHER!” The chopper swooped low again and landed on the road, the pilots tumbling out with their shotgun ready.

Bean hoisted May in the air with one hand gripped around both of hers, her legs frantically kicking. Blood ran down his face from under his headband where Rally’s bullets had hit. He held his switchblade to May’s stomach, his eyes still a little unfocused.

Rally let out a silent scream, horrified beyond measure. The baby!

“Come and — AHCHOO! — get me, Vincent! ‘Less you want me to — ahCHOO!”

He couldn’t... no one could... oh yes, they could! Rally found her voice and shrieked in near-hysteria. “Nooo — you BASTARD! You unspeakable piece of — please God, NO!”

Bean seemed a little startled at her cry. He stopped and looked at May’s midsection, about level with his eyes. Rally watched his expression change as he blinked. Apparently he had forgotten until that moment that May was pregnant. He glared at Rally, accusing her with his expression of using May’s condition as a shield, then sneezed and tossed May down, not very roughly.

Leaving her sprawled on the ground, he stalked towards Rally, bending over for a sneeze every few seconds. “Guess you get *all* my — ah, ahCHOOO! — attention, babe. Why’d you bring her along on the tail? AH — CHOO!” He pressed a finger hard under his nose. “Just to — ah, ah, CHOO! Shit!”

“May came along on her own hook!” Rally scrambled backwards and prone on the damp grass towards the fence. Bean advanced with the switchblade glinting in his right hand. “Why did you go bashing my car while she was riding in it, you moron?” She backed up to the fence and aimed her CZ75 under his jaw as he loomed up and stood over her. “You wrecked my bodywork so bad it’s gonna take a MONTH to get fixed!”

“Speakin’ of — ahCHOO! — bodywork, babe — ” Bean began with a dirty snarl and shifted his grip on the knife. Rally’s finger tightened on the trigger again. Suddenly he jerked forward; his face registered shock. “Hey!”

Rally’s eyes went wide — May had landed square on Bean’s back with a running leap! She wrapped her arms and legs around his neck and face as hard as she could squeeze. “Knock it off, kid!” Bean turned around and around, spinning away from Rally and trying to dislodge May. She jammed her fingernails in his eyes and pulled hard on one corner of his mouth. “OW! AHHCHOO!”

Bean jerked forward and back with the violence of his sneezes and with May’s seesawing movements. She got a thick hunk of black hair in her teeth and flung her head back and forth like a puppy shaking a toy. “HEY! OUCH! Ah, ah, CHOO! Aw, shit... !”

May grinned with her mouth full of loose hair, spat it out and snapped for more. The chopper pilot waved the shotgun, obviously hesitating for fear of hitting May.

“Ah... ha...” Rally, although terrified for May, began to laugh hysterically at the sight. The mighty Bean Bandit, rendered helpless by a cloud of sneezing powder and little May’s ferocious attack! “Bwaah-haa-ha-ha-ha!”

Weeeoooooooooh...

Waaaaoooooooooh...

Weeeoooooooooh...

Waaaaoooooooooh...

Weeeoooooooooh...

Waaaaoooooooooh...

About a dozen police units and an ambulance arrived on the embankment above them, in various badge colors and makes. May fastened her teeth on one of Bean’s ears. “HEY!” he kept yelling, swatting at her with his left hand and holding the knife out at arm’s length when she tried to grab it.. “Goddamn little monkey! Ah — *choo!* Ah... ah... ahCHOO!”

“Bwaah-ha-ha-ha-haa!” spluttered Rally. Police officers swarmed down the embankment, yelling and drawing weapons. Bean registered their presence, then suddenly lashed his whole body and shook May off in Rally’s direction.

May hurtled through the air, hit Rally in the stomach and knocked them both into a heap against the fence. Bean raced up the embankment toward his car. Police officers bowled over as he shoulder-slammed, stiff-armed and tossed them aside.

KRAK KRAK KRAK KRAK went a bevy of service automatics. More bullet scars appeared on Bean’s jacket, but he threw off the last officer and leaped into Buff. The engine roared and Bean launched the car southwards. He knocked one patrol car aside and rolled right over the hood of another one that tried to block his path. Half a dozen took off after him, as did the chopper, and approaching units made U-turns to follow.

“Oh, May! You were so BRAVE!” Rally threw her arms around her friend just in time to see her face turn color and her eyes bug out. “Oh boy! Lean over!” She held May’s head while she fertilized the grass with her lunch.

“No, she’s fine,” Rally assured the approaching officers, patting the sweaty blonde hair. “Just a little morning sickness... Yeah, I know, it’s afternoon!”

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“Wish I’d barfed on HIM,” grumbled May, accepting a water bottle from a policewoman. “Eww, gross! I’m still picking his hair out of my teeth!” An SFPD tow truck eased the Cobra up to the road. The injured motorcycle officers were loaded into the ambulance and driven away north, all sirens going in spite of the emptied road.

“You sure you girls aren’t hurt?” said the policewoman. “I saw that guy throwing cops around like paper dolls! What a monster!”

“No, we’re OK, thanks to May,” said Rally. “What a Warrior Princess you are, sweetie!”

May rinsed her mouth and spat, then took a deep drink, smiling at Rally. “I’d’ve eaten him raw without salt for you, honey! Too bad all he lost was a few chunks of scalp!” May looked fierce and made some kung-fu chops in the air, then stopped and fished another long black hair from the back of her throat. “Gross!” She hacked and took another drink.

“There’s a Detective Coleman asking after you two,” said an officer, handing her a radio handset.

“Roy!” said Rally into the radio. “Don’t worry; we’re fine! May’s a spitfire!”

“Thank God,” said Roy, sounding monumentally relieved. “They tell me he came right at you with a knife! He would have — ”

“You know, Roy, I’m not certain about that.” Rally creased her brow and looked south along the road the way Bean had gone.

“Huh? Not certain he meant to kill you both?”

“Well... no. It’s a little strange...”

“Why on earth would you say that, girl? Isn’t that what he promised to do the next time you crossed him?”

“Yes. He did... and Bean sure keeps his promises.” Rally swallowed hard and tried to think. “But... when May jumped on him, I don’t think he was aiming to stab me. Something about the way he held that knife... he might have meant to put a mark on me. Sort of like the one he has.”

“An X on the face? Holy name!”

“Like another warning, or a... I don’t know.” She rubbed the skin between her eyebrows with the tip of her ring finger. “I was scared, but I didn’t have the feeling he was actually going to just *kill* me, no matter what he said.”

“Maybe not this time! But perhaps he’s just working up to it — ”

“Yeah, that’s a comforting thought!” Rally hunched her shoulders and shivered. Bean — what they had done in her car — he couldn’t still feel the fallout, could he? He hadn’t sounded like he wanted to recall one moment of it. “Where is he now? They still chasing him?”

“Uhh... they lost him.”

“Oh, fine!”

“Yeah. Somewhere between... uh, they say he vanished between the airport and the San Mateo bridge. They blockaded the bridge for a while, but no dice. He’d left the chopper behind and wrecked most of the cars pursuing him. They’ll be cleaning up the road for hours. The whole Bay Area’s going to have the traffic jam of the century — no, the millennium!”

“Sounds like it! Oh, there’s my car!”

The Cobra emerged at the top of the slope and the winch eased down until all four tires sat on the road. “The damage’s not too bad this time, at least to the working parts... oh, man, look at that scrape!” The right side was nearly bare of paint on the door and badly dented, with traces of Buff’s red color here and there.

Compared to it, the left side didn't look so bad, though it too was dented. "Well, at least Bean took a little punishment too, because May got off one good shot at the car. She's a hero!"

"Oh, uh... if she's got any more grenades..."

"Only the toy ones. She used up all the frag bombs. I don't think anyone's going to get technical today!" Policemen hovered awestruck around May as she retold the whole fight, baring her teeth and shadow-boxing. "But I know what you mean. We'll be careful. OK, I'm going to head south." She got out her keys.

"What?"

"I want to check out the road. I might get some idea where he's gone."

"Oh, crap... well, OK, I guess that's what the FBI would want you to do. You're going to take some units with you, I hope?"

"Sure I will. I'm not stupid! Talk to you later, Roy." She handed back the radio and called, "Who wants to escort me for a while? I'm going to scout the road." Three burly cops leaped in her direction, grinning, and she gave them a jaunty OK sign. "Thanks, guys! I'm going to feel *totally* safe!" She turned to May. "Ride back with one of the Frisco cars, honey. I think Junior's had enough excitement for one day!"

"Awww... darn, I guess you're right." May put a hand on her belly and looked a little chastened. "I'm lucky he actually gave a damn about the baby!"

"Yeah..." Rally got in her car and considered that. Bean hadn't lost every sense of principle. He'd put her and May on his shit list; that didn't make him a different person. She had seen the face he showed to enemies... in a way.

May was right; she had to admit the truth. Bean looked miserable under his ferocity. This wasn't a fight he relished, in the way he liked to dust it up with almost anyone else. That might be the only reason she had no injuries other than a stiff knee. His heart wasn't in this...

Rally closed her eyes for a moment, mind in turmoil. If Bean only found out that she hadn't stolen the money, he would probably have no more reason to continue the feud. She thought he wished, very deeply, that he didn't have to uphold his honor this way. But he'd believed it of her so easily. Could she ever forgive him for that, if he ever asked her for forgiveness? She had no idea.

"We going?" asked an officer, rapping on her window.

"Yeah," said Rally, smiling and starting the engine. "Let's roll!"

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“You all right, May?” Roy put down his slice of pizza.

“Me? Just great. Fine and dandy, thanks.” She grabbed a slice of pepperoni and bit fiercely into it. “Man, I’m starving! Wasted a whole sandwich! Thanks for having this waiting for me!”

“That chase shake you up? I gather this hasn’t been the kind of vacation you anticipated.” Roy got up and fetched May a glass of water from the bathroom of his hotel room, then sat by the table where they ate with a takeout box between them.

“No, it hasn’t been,” said May through a mouthful. “Though I had some fun tossing poppers at Bean! But missing amusement parks is one thing. THIS stinks.” She put the pizza slice down and rested her chin on her hands.

“Brown? Yeah, it stinks.”

“Brown...” She made a face.

“You were thinking of something else?”

May stuck out her tongue. “... Bean.”

“I hear you used to like Bean all right. I’m sorry he turned out to be...”

“I used to, yeah.”

Roy drank off the last of his beer. “I gather this was in character for him, though. Walking away with the suitcase. Forcing you off the road. And going for Rally.”

“M-maybe.”

“Minnie-May?”

“Oh... nothing.” She poked at her slice of pizza and peeled off one piece of pepperoni. “I thought I knew something about him, but I guess I didn’t.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Oh, Roy...” Her eyes began to fill.

“Hey, kid.” He reached over and put a hand on her shoulder. “Ol’ Roy’s here. We’ll figure this out. Rally’s not sunk, not by a long shot. The FBI will see reason.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“What on earth is getting to you, May? Something about Bean?”

May’s eyes began to fill with tears. “I should have stuck with her on the job — getting Brown. I should have insisted on going along. Then this wouldn’t have happened... or at least I could have done something to prevent it! I wouldn’t have been snoring away in a hotel room while she was all alone out there...” She slumped into her seat, rounded stomach protruding.

“Alone?”

May sat up and sniffled into the back of her hand. “Roy, you know something about criminals. How do you tell what kind of crimes they’re capable of? I mean... are there some guys that won’t do certain things even though they’ll do anything else? Or is a criminal just a criminal?”

“Uh...”

“I mean, take Bean for an example. Would you think he was capable of hurting someone... like someone he knew, who was a friend? Just to be an asshole, if he got mad?”

“I don’t know Bean that well, May. I can’t say I’d put much past him, though. I mean, look at what he did today.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I know he tries to protect children. That’s common among men of his stripe. Beyond that, I doubt he draws the line — Rally told me he intended to kill Brown at first. A man who’s capable of cold-blooded murder is probably capable of most other crimes.”

May nodded, her expression grim.

“What do you think he’s done, kid?” Roy’s voice was quiet, but his eyes looked hard.

“I don’t have any real proof, Roy.”

“What do you have, then?”

“Just... a smell. He sort of admitted it today... yeah, I’m sure he did. And she wouldn’t tell me what happened. I know she’s holding something back!”

“Yes?”

“Oh, God, Roy.” May covered her face. “...I think Bean raped Rally.”

The detective's face went pale; his eyes widened. "Holy name."

"I smelled something in her car. She seemed really disturbed when I asked her what happened after he found the suitcase. I'm positive *someone* had sex in there recently, and it's a little hard to imagine who else it could have been. And it's impossible for me to imagine that she did it of her own free will!"

"May..."

"What? You don't think she — "

"She liked him, May." Roy awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. "Before all this happened. You didn't see them together, did you?"

"N-no... but she's not the kind to get physical! She was OK with him for a while when he was a good sport about the bet, but then she got mad when he asked her to go partners! She's been torqued off at him for months."

"She wasn't a couple of days ago. She was laughing and joking with him."

"Really?"

"I'm afraid so." Roy made a face. "I warned her about that. Um... I overreacted, in point of fact. It looked to me as if they were already lovers, but Rally assured me they weren't."

"She told me the same thing Tuesday evening. I was teasing her about him and she blew her lid. And, um, Roy, you might not know this about her..."

"Huh?"

"She's a virgin. Or... she was."

"May, that's none of my business — "

"It is if Bean attacked her when he found the money in her car! It doesn't matter if she thought she liked him! He could still get angry and HURT her!"

"You have a point." Roy's face darkened. "What's your evidence?"

"The smell in her car. It smelled like *him* in there, Wednesday evening, as if he'd been exerting himself and sweating. That would have been only about eighteen hours later. *And* it smelled like jism."

Roy's face grew even darker. "Go on."

“Well, I didn’t see anything on the upholstery or anything like that. But Bean’s driving gloves were under the passenger seat. And Rally acted so strange when I mentioned it... I shouldn’t have just blurted it out like that! She had bruises on her arms and on her back and chest the morning after the fire — plus really bad ones around the wrists.” May illustrated with a grip on her own wrist. “Someone with big hands held her so tight she got his fingerprints on her skin. I helped her shampoo, and there was a monster goose egg right on the back of her head. That would have been a blow hard enough to stun her, and... um... well, you’re a police officer. I can tell you.”

“Go on.”

“She was sore between her legs — her pussy was all swollen and tender. I know that for a fact, Roy. Rally denied that he’d done anything to her. I *know* she’s lying. Then Bean said something when he was waving that knife around, about giving her another nice big piece of himself. And he grabbed his crotch when he said it.”

Roy gritted his teeth, his breath rasping. “You think she’d shield him if he actually had raped her?”

“She’s very independent. There are all kinds of things she doesn’t tell me. She might think it will just go away if she ignores it. She might not want to admit that she made a mistake trusting him and that you were right, that he was dangerous. She might be ashamed that she was ever that vulnerable.”

“Why wouldn’t she just have pulled a gun on him, if he threatened her?”

“I don’t know. But if he was determined, she would have had to kill him to stop him. Maybe she couldn’t bring herself to do that.”

“What?” Roy looked disbelieving, but it mixed with dawning horror. “If a guy like that came at me with violent intentions, I wouldn’t think twice about killing him. It’s not like she’s a novice at this.”

“She hated the fact that she’d killed Huang and that all those people were dead, including Brown. Maybe she couldn’t face killing someone else that night. She’s known Bean for a long time, and if you’re right, maybe she did like him. By the time she sorted all that out, it could have been too late to do anything to stop him. If he disarmed her, he could do anything to her that he wanted to do — I mean, *look* at him! Rally’s fast and strong, but that man’s a monster.”

Roy put a shaking hand on his lowered head, then over his taut lips. “This is all speculation, kid.”

“I know it is. But you believe me anyway, don’t you?” May started to cry.

“There’s no physical evidence by now.” Roy’s face was stiff. “The FBI went all over the car last night and surely destroyed it, if there ever was any, and she didn’t have an exam at the time, obviously. I couldn’t arrest anyone on this. Especially if the victim denies that the crime ever took place. He knows her, he was angry with her, they were all alone. It sounds like a perfect scenario for a retaliatory rapist, but that’s psychiatry and not evidence. It wouldn’t stand up in a court of law...” His face contorted, tears of helpless fury starting in his eyes.

“You are not a judge or a jury.”

“No, I’m not.” Roy reached into his jacket, took out his .38 Special and laid it on the table with deliberation. “I’m a cop. God save me from becoming an executioner.” He crossed himself and folded his hands in silent prayer.

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“Dear God, what a mess...” sighed Rally. She put her hands on her hips and looked around at the wreckage of half a dozen SFPD units spread over the highway south of the airport. “How’d he do it?”

“D-damn, lady,” said a shaky young patrolman. “I thought I was gonna lose bladder control! He slipped right in among the pack and started bashing side to side... he forced me to crash into O’Neill and White, and he sent Nguyen off the road and into the soundwall...”

The young patrolman gulped, his chin wobbling. Rally patted him encouragingly on the back. “There, there... then what happened?”

“Th-then he stopped short and let Lieutenant Nakamitsu plow right into his back end, and Beltran hit the lieutenant’s car... and *he* didn’t look even dented! What is that car, anyway? Some kinda CIA secret weapon?”

“He had it built for him.” Rally shook her head, then did a double take. “Oh, my God! *That* Officer White!” She dashed over and jogged alongside the stretcher two paramedics rolled to an ambulance. A tall blond officer lay strapped to a backboard, his forehead scraped and bloody: one of the San Francisco patrolmen who had responded to the call at the Eight Dragon Delight. “Oh, no! How badly is he hurt?”

“Might have a couple of broken vertebrae,” said one of the paramedics. “His car went straight into the ditch. Too soon to know if he’ll have any paralysis.”

“Is that Rally Vincent?” said White weakly.

“Yes, it’s me. How are you doing?”

“Just get that guy, OK? He’s a menace. No, he’s insane. Why doesn’t he like you any more?”

“Long story, Officer.” The paramedics loaded the stretcher into their van, folding the legs up and sliding White inside. “I’m going to get him, all right. If it’s the last thing I do.” Rally watched the doors close and the ambulance drive away. Flatbeds loaded the black-and-whites and hauled them away, but glass and metal lay strewn in every direction. When she got back into her Cobra, she had to pick her path carefully to avoid a flat. Her three-car escort followed.

Rally continued south on 101, her view obstructed by soundwalls in the residential areas. High-tech companies and dot-coms in new office buildings lined the road elsewhere, obscuring the mountains to the west and the bay to the east. Further south the highway was open to traffic and jammed solid. Even the police sirens, intermittently fired off, couldn’t open a path.

Rally crept along in bumper-to-bumper between two squad cars with another flanking her on the right, wondering what the fuming motorists around her would do if they knew she was one of the causes of the backup. String her up to the nearest Caltrans sign, probably!

Her radio crackled. “Miss Vincent? They tell me you’re scouting the freeway the way he went. Glad to see you’re showing some initiative.”

“Gosh, Agent Smith, I felt I’d participated so little, only following him for a few miles and getting run off an embankment! The whole time he was coming at me with a knife, I was thinking, man, I’m just not doing enough on the FBI’s behalf today!”

She heard a snort and low chuckling. “Frankly, I’m impressed. How you little ladies got away from that guy passes me. What, did you start crying or something?”

“I don’t cry, Agent Smith. It doesn’t accomplish much. I’m stuck in traffic right now, somewhere in Burlingame. I’d take a surface street, but according to the local news station, they’re all congested too, since people are working around the 101 southbound barriers on other routes and making it back on the freeway north of here. I don’t know the roads anyway. He went this way, so I’m going this way.”

“Oh, he must have doubled back. We figure he’s trying for the airport.”

“The airport? Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Smith sounded smug. “He’ll ship the car — we have an alert out at the air freight offices — and then hop a flight east. There are agents at every check-in desk. So I’m afraid you’re stuck in the jam for nothing. Better turn around... if you can.” He chuckled.

“No. He doesn’t fly.”

“What? It’s the best way out. It’s plain as day.”

“Agent Smith, he told me he never flies. He hates the very idea. He doesn’t fit in the seats.”

“We’ve got this all set up.” Smith sounded impatient and resentful. “Everything’s in place. Agents swarming the terminals.”

“That’s right,” Wesson broke in. “We planned this all very carefully, Ms. Vincent. Please recall that we are experienced agents, not bounty hunters. FBI training — ”

“Well, I’m sorry you went to all that trouble. If you’d asked me — ”

“You’d have given us your advice,” said Smith. “Fine, you’ve given it. If you want to go on a wild goose chase... or crawl... you can do that. Hope you get back in time for the snatch.”

“You made me sign my life away for *this*? So you could dismiss what I tell you?” Rally’s face felt hot, and she had never hated Smith, Wesson and even the FBI more than at that moment. “What on earth did you want my expertise for, if you don’t even care about what I know?”

“Calm down, sugar. Do I hear some tears there? We’ll see you sometime this evening, I guess. Have a nice drive.” Smith signed off.

“OOOOooohh!” gasped Rally. “That chauvinist pig ASSHOLE! That self-righteous know-it-all!” She made horrible faces at her rear-view mirror and thumped her forehead on the steering wheel a few times. “I wish it was THEM Bean wanted to slice up! I’d like to see THEM chased by a huge guy with a switchblade! It’s a loong time since SMITH saw combat! He’d probably have browned his JEANS! OOOooohh...”

She eventually calmed down by imagining Smith running and screaming like a woman while Bean carved Wesson into bite-size pieces and ate them off the end of his knife. “Heh heh heh... OK, that’s enough of that! Take out the aggression on the job at hand!”

“OK, this is San Mateo?” she asked her radio, which she had tuned to the patrol cars’s frequency. “There’s another bridge across the bay in a few miles, isn’t there?”

“Yes, ma’am. They had a blockade set up on the eastbound approach until a little while ago.”

She peered at a slowly passing road sign. “So you take the off-ramp for Highway 92 east to get to the bridge. Where does 92 go, westbound?”

“Over the mountains and to Half Moon Bay and the beaches. About fourteen, fifteen miles to the coast. Nothing much over there but the ocean and a lot of artichoke farms.”

“Hmm...” Rally examined the buildings to her right; the city rose up foothills that reached a crest a couple of miles from the highway. “You know, if I wanted to wait and see if I was going to get stopped on this bridge, I might take the road in the opposite direction and find a place on those hills where I could watch with binoculars. Yeah, looks like some good lines of sight from there. I’m taking 92 west for a little while... if I can get over to the right in time! Sheesh!”

Even a driver of Rally’s caliber had trouble squeezing through the monstrous traffic, and by the time she reached the 92 off-ramp, the afternoon was wearing on. She sighed as she inched up a high flyover on the way to 92 west, surrounded by police cars. Bean was probably long gone. She wouldn’t get a chance at him until she got back to Chicago. “OK,” she told the officers. “It’s probably too late now. We can turn around as soon as it’s possible.”

Rally tapped her fingers on the wheel and fiddled with the car radio, trying to find a decent station. A few feet lower than the ramp she was on, eastbound 92 crossed 101 on the way to the bridge, the flyover no more than twenty feet away. That too was packed solid with cars inching in the direction opposite to hers. She amused herself for several minutes by naming make, model and year on every vehicle she could see.

1988 Ford 5.0 Mustang, with sunburned paint. A brand-new 1999 Cadillac Eldorado, shiny and pearly. A 1972 Volkswagen Beetle, well-restored. A 1997 Thunderbird, a 1998 Mustang Cobra — no comparison, she thought — a 1995 Honda Accord. A black Hummer. Plenty of boringly new BMWs, Lexuses, and Mercedes, with a fair sprinkling of 1970s Camaros in primer.

“Oooh,” she said aloud, “Look at that mid-year ‘Vette convertible! What a pretty car.” It was dark, sparkling blue with the hardtop on in spite of the sunny day — a 1967 big-block with a serious hood bulge. The color, for some reason, reminded her of the beautiful earrings she had forced Brown to take back, the ones that matched her eyes. “Wonder what the engine is on that gorgeous thing? An L-72? Oooh...”

She was too far away to read the badging. “Who’s the lucky owner? Hope he appreciates what he’s got.” Rally peered through the windshield as the car slowly approached on the 92 flyover. The driver was a man wearing a shapeless red and gold 49ers jacket. His baseball cap’s bill obscured his face as he stared off to his right, away from her.

“Some dot-com multimillionaire, probably.” She shook her head in admiration. “That car must have cost... well, if it’s all original, at least a hundred grand. Wow, I’d love to test-drive something like that!”

The car came nearer and slid into the left lane, closest to her. Corvette and Cobra moved almost directly opposite each other as they both eased forward, and Rally strained to read the tiny chrome lettering on the side of the power bulge. The driver looked up, and she stared directly into Bean’s eyes from twenty feet away.

Bean recognized her at the same moment. Apparently he had just spotted the Cobra. Rally’s mouth dropped open and her heart raced; she grabbed for her police radio handset.

Bean’s expression twisted from a moderate meditative frown into consternation. Instantly his alerted eyes took in the police units front and back of Rally and the handset in her grasp. As his car crawled forward with other bumpers inches from his on all sides, his gaze stabbed right and left. The highway flyover he sat on soared forty feet above the ground, and the impenetrable traffic crowded so tightly around the Corvette that even Bean Bandit could force no escape.

Trapped! He balled a fist and hit the steering wheel, his tight-clenched teeth bared to the gums. Rally still held the radio handset, her thumb on the switch but not pressing it hard enough to activate.

“What’s the deal with always getting in my way up close and personal?” “Sorry about that comment — I could tell he likes you.” “You know well as I do that you ain’t gonna go back on a handshake.” “For which of them would he sacrifice several hundred thousand dollars in annual income?” “But they want to make him into much more of a criminal than he is already — ” “Just can’t keep my hands off you, beautiful lady. Feels like they ought to stay there.” “He could have killed me with his bare hands, but he didn’t.” “I didn’t think you were that kind of woman. Reckoned ya knew your own mind.” “What’s that old proverb? Save someone’s life and he becomes your responsibility?” “How long have you been in love with Bean?”

If he ever asked her forgiveness...

Bean’s car had almost passed hers, his head swiveling to keep her in view. Rally held out the handset where he could see it, slowly shook her head at him and let it fall on the seat, mute.

His eyes went wide. Shocked. Suspicious. When she held his gaze with hers, her face settling into a guarded, quiet expression, she saw something surface in his eyes: doubt, perhaps. A suggestion of distrust of his own convictions, a gentle shaking at the roots of his settled assumptions.

But before she could tell how that tiny seedling would grow, or if it would wither unnourished in the dark places of his mind, the traffic moved on.

::: CHAPTER TWELVE :::

“Rally Vincent?” A young woman, sounding tired.

“Yes. This is Rally Vincent.” Rally cradled her cell phone between ear and shoulder, driving up Highway 1 along the coast, north to San Francisco again. The sun had already set into the grey sea to her left, bringing with its passing a bank of low clouds approaching from north and west.

Perhaps it was going to rain again tonight... she felt something in her bones that resembled a change in the weather. Her mind had gone detached and grey again. Had she really let him go in the slim hope it might help him to realize the truth? What if it didn't work? What if she'd only let him slip through the FBI's grasp to see him wreak more havoc, more injury: perhaps even death? Such as her own...

“This is Vanessa Sam.”

“Oh!” Rally's brain snapped to attention. “How is Larry? Oh – and your parents – are they doing – ”

“Larry's good. Well, not good. But alive, which is good. He spent four hours in surgery Wednesday morning. Repairing lungs and things. He has tubes. To the max. But alive.”

“I'm so glad to hear that.” Rally closed her eyes briefly, then took a curve in the growing darkness, headlights passing her once in a while. “Thank you for calling. I know you must be very busy.”

“I am working like a member of the starving underclass... but man, I'm glad Larry had the business insurance and the health insurance in order. It's all a plot of the economic oligarchies to bleed the petty bourgeoisie of their resources, but it sure comes in handy when you have large bullets in your lungs. Can you come see him? When he's awake, he asks for you.”

“He does? He doesn't – ”

“What, blame you for it? Look, Ms Vincent – ”

“Rally, please.”

“Rally, it was his own goddamn stupid fault. He’s a member of the intellectual, entrepreneurial, property-owning elite, so he thinks he’s somehow above, or immune from, in some class-based sense, the anti-revolutionary forces of the goddamn mother country. You know, Triads are about the most traditionalist, anti-feminist, reactionary sinks of corrupt exploitation... well, they bite big time.”

She took a deep breath. “It’s not like I don’t agree with what he was trying to do. I even set aside some deeply held principles, like the theoretical freedom to plot criminal activity in public places, to help him out. He probably told you I put those stupid mikes on the tables.”

“Yes, he mentioned it.”

“He told me it was going to benefit all those women they smuggle into the States as indentured sex workers. Mengleng isn’t the only one of them Emerald has found a job for. Emerald’s the next sister down the list, by the way; she’s a sophomore in Ethnic Studies and is totally committed to social justice. I have one cool sibling, at least. The rest are all interested in getting MBAs and MDs and money, like your average first-generation Chinese-American, which is one reason I’m an engineering major, to shut them up when they get on that ‘social standing and earning power’ jag — OK, well, I am a total bore, which you figured out a while ago. Larry wants to see you, and I don’t mind if he helps you take out some of those scumbags. I’ve got all the tapes he ever made. I know you’re not a cop, so you won’t care if they’re a little bit unconstitutional.”

“At this point, Vanessa, I wouldn’t give a damn if he’d bugged the Federal Building and given me tapes of the FBI agents talking in the men’s john. That would probably come in handy about now. When should I come?”

“He’s been sleeping all day. He might wake up in an hour or so, when the drugs start wearing off, or so the nurse said. It’s the UCSF Medical Center, over near the east end of the park.”

“I will be there. I have to go report in to my personal handlers, then I’ll get a little dinner, and I’ll come to the hospital. About eight-thirty?”

“Any time. There’s always a Sam or two hanging out in the room with the vending machines, and my parents have been here almost the whole time. I’m going to try to persuade them to go to my apartment and sleep, so if you’re here, maybe they’ll go. This does have something to do with the fact that he’s the firstborn and the only son, which if you’re Chinese is so important it’s not funny. I will spare you my take on the survival of patriarchal traditions in Asian immigrant populations. He’s my big brother, and I am so glad he’s not dead I want to dance. But I am too fucking tired to dance, so I will go get another package of peanut butter crackers from the machine, the kind that are cheese-flavored, and go crash in the waiting room for a while and get crumbs of artificially colored junk

produced with underpaid labor, pesticide-drenched crops and refined white sugar into my shirt pockets. See ya.”

“I like peanut butter crackers too. See ya.” Rally decided that she liked Vanessa.

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“Hey, Rally,” said May, looking carefully at her as she came into May’s hotel room and plopped down at the table. “How’s things?”

“Besides the busy day? OK.” She had already decided not to say anything to May about having spotted Bean on the overpass — if the FBI started asking questions, it was better for May not to know. “I was in a big traffic jam for hours, and I drove over to the coast to get back. I sat and looked at the ocean for a while until the sun went down. But you didn’t miss much.” Just one of the worst moments of emotional epiphany of her life, and a lot of blank staring out at the elements...

“You went to the Federal Building already?”

“Uh-huh. You might get a chance at that folder tomorrow. The one on Bean. I want to get hold of that even more now.” Rally leaned her head on one hand, elbow on the table.

“Sure,” said May. “Uh, Roy and I had a pizza — I took the rest in case you came back. There’s some pepperoni left, if you want it. How were Smith and Wesson?”

“Boiling.” Rally grinned. “Absolutely furious, because Bean never showed at the airport. I told them he didn’t fly and they wouldn’t listen because they had already made all the arrangements. That’s like going ahead and marrying a man you’ve surprised in bed with a goat just because you already rented the hall and you can’t get the deposit back. They did *not* like me being right. They are keeping their details there all night anyway.”

“So they’ll listen to you next time you tell them something?”

“Nope, because I am not telling them jack from now on. I’m going to go through the motions, I guess, but getting my help to force Bean into the Dragons? They can kiss *my* ass.” Rally lifted the lid of the takeout box and examined the leftovers.

May looked confused. “But... but you don’t care what happens to him, do you? He tried to cut you up! At the very least!”

“Uh... well, you know, May, he is going to find out I didn’t steal that money. One way or another. I don’t know what he is going to do when that happens. I’m not sure anyone would want to be in the room... or the county... when he does.” Rally took a bite of cold pizza. “Yuck. Salty grease on burned crackerbread.” She

consulted her watch. “Oh well, I don’t have a lot of time... it’s eight already. I want to get to the hospital soon.”

“Hospital? Oh, did you get a call — ?”

“Larry’s sister called me an hour ago. He’s recovering, but he’s not very healthy at the moment. He’s asking to talk to me.”

“What do you think he wants to say to you?”

Rally chewed for a moment. “I don’t know, because Vanessa said neither he nor his family blame me for the shooting. She thinks he was overconfident... but frankly, he was very careful, and spoke about the risks several times. It was like pulling teeth to get anything out of him.”

“Maybe there’s something he didn’t tell you.”

“Maybe there’s something he didn’t *tell* me? Like how he knew Brown was on a short leash? Like just why he thought gangsters were going to visit his restaurant all the time? When he tells them to go fuck themselves, and calls the cops when he sees them brawling on the sidewalk? I don’t know why he’d...” Rally stopped chewing. “Oh, no. I hope he doesn’t tell me... something I *really* don’t want to hear.”

“You think he’s... not what he says he is? Like one of *them*?” gasped May. “Did Triads eat at the place because he’s a Triad?”

“God damn. Is he going to confess something to me, or is he going to...”

“I stocked up on grenades again, Rally! If it’s a setup, we can go there and take care of some of ‘em!” May looked excited. “Pow! Boom!”

“You come with me to the hospital.” Rally stood up and grabbed her jacket. “Though I really don’t think that’s what it is. Vanessa Sam couldn’t keep a secret like that to save her life. She says exactly what she thinks, and it jumps all over the map... the ideological map! We should be prepared, but if there’s a threat waiting for us there... I don’t think it’s been cooked up in a restaurant.”

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“I don’t give a shite,” muttered O’Toole, examining a new, empty rifle magazine. “I want ta kill that wee bitch *now*. I don’t give a shite if the Chinks want ta wait, and I don’t give a shite if they got plans, now do I?” He raised his PSG-1 and shoved the magazine in place, then sighted through his scope. “Fockin’ nigger bitch. Goin’ ta do ‘er good, ain’tcha? An’ a lot more than that, me foine lad...”

For a moment he bowed his head. “I won’t let ye down, Mr. Brown. I’m comin’ to ye soon, and I’ll bring ‘er with me. In bits.” He stroked his rifle’s barrel and attached the sling, then got up from his food-wrapper-strewn camp cot and knocked on the door of the small storage room in which he had been living for two days. “Hey, 189. Do I get to take a shite any time this week? Or is it the dirty protest all over the walls?”

The lock clicked, the door moved, and a tall, burly Chinese man filled the opening. “There’s a briefing anyway, O’Toole. Come and eat with us, and I’ll give you a heads-up beforehand.”

“Beauty.” The little bodyguard grinned and followed 189 into the corridor. “What’re ye eatin’ tonight?”

“Burgers. And hungshao ro — that’s red-cooked pork to you.”

“Ye got the overseas fellas all in one barracks wi’ th’ Americans?”

“Sure. They want to learn English, and we pick up more Cantonese too.”

“Educational, hey? Those Hong Kong boys’re a buncha queers, ain’t they now?”

189 gave a snort, showing slightly uneven teeth. “Watch it with the fag comments around 426, guy. You don’t want to give him any lip on that subject. Unless you want the blowtorch to come out again, or the garrote. I’m serious.” He nodded at O’Toole’s chest. “You gotta be feeling that still.”

O’Toole put a gingerly hand to his shirt, just over the character 426 had burned into his skin. “Yeah, smarts a bit.”

“He doesn’t bother anybody that doesn’t want to be bothered, so we don’t give a shit one way or the other, understand? Huang was a smart guy, and good-looking, and he wanted it bad — 426 is majorly pissed about that. Don’t think he got the kid in bed even once, so he’s looking for blood. You’re sure lucky it wasn’t you that shot him dead.”

“Yeah,” said O’Toole, with a small twitch at the corner of one eye. “The Vincent bitch done it, all right.”

The two men entered a large kitchen, where twenty or so men, Chinese-American, Malay, and Macanese, were already seated around two round tables heaped with dishes and crowded with bottles of whiskey and beer. A male cook worked at a large commercial stove, the streetlights outside shining through the small windows. 189 pointed at a chair for O’Toole and took his own nearby.

“Meet the troops. This is Brown’s bodyguard, guys.” He looked around the table. “Name’s Tom O’Toole, for those of you who don’t know.”

Two men got up, one gesturing at O'Toole and hissing in a heavy accent. "He shoot 72! And Po and Sung! What he doing here?"

"426's orders, so sit down, Omdurran," said 189. Omdurran and the other man sat down. "Gimme the pork and rice, Wo. I think Irish here wants a burger."

"Hell yes," said O'Toole, reaching for one as the platter was shoved in his direction. "I don't eat that shite — " Twenty-two or three pairs of eyes turned to him. "Pork, I mean. I'm convertin' to a Jew, ain't I?" He gave a nicotine-stained smile and a few men laughed. The rest turned to their meals.

"OK," said 189, chewing. "This is going to be a planning session. 426'll call you upstairs in a little while. You get to go for the bounty hunter soon, O'Toole. You just got to put together a plan of action. They'll tell you where she's staying and all that, and you get equipment — a car, whatever, and backup if you want. There's a tracer on her car, so we can pinpoint its location any time. You can use your guns or you can get something out of the armory."

"Soundin' lovely ta me."

"Only thing is, you don't whack any FBI, and you don't whack any cops, like this one she's got out from Chi-town. Just the broad — and her kid friend, if it comes to that. So think along those lines."

"189!" called someone from the corridor, and a man came into the kitchen. "426 wants you up in his office, sir. He said to bring what you'll need for a trip."

"Huh?" 189 swallowed his mouthful and looked up. "Did he say where?"

"No, sir. He said he got a message just now, something real important, and he said to pack fast. You're going to fly the Cessna, I know that. Bring a suit. There's not going to be a meeting after all, so O'Toole will have to cool his heels. 426 says 111 will handle it."

"Got it," said 189, rising and wiping his mouth. "111, consult with him on the MO. Show him the garage and the armory. O'Toole: get thinking, but keep your shirt on 'til the boss gets back. I'm gone." He left the kitchen and followed the messenger.

Every Dragon turned to look at the sole white man in the room, who stared every one of them down, yellow eyes narrowed and jaws working.

"Beauty," said O'Toole again. "Boss'll be outa town, eh?" He finished one burger and reached for another, then poured himself a glass of whiskey. "Though I'd have ta say, before I get done with that wee bitch, she ain't going ta be one bit pretty, will she? Any of ye inclined to have a taste before I get out me knife?"

Several of the Dragons grinned unpleasantly. Omdurran nodded in approval. "I hehp you, O'Toor."

O'Toole raised his glass. "A man after me own heart. Ye know, fellas, it's an even chance I'll get along wi' the pack of ye just like a house on fire. So here's how, an' long live the Eight Dragons." Twenty-odd men poured whiskey, and drank.

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"Vanessa?" said Rally, peering around a darkened waiting room at the UCSF Medical Center with May at her side. "I'm here. Are you awake? I brought a friend."

"Ohh..." moaned Vanessa, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. "Yeah, I'm alive. I hope I can stay awake to drive to Berkeley... nah, I guess I'll take Mom and Dad to the BART station and we'll go home on the train." She yawned. "What time is it?"

"Eight-thirty."

"Wow, you're punctual." She looked at May.

"This is May Hopkins, my partner. May, meet Vanessa Sam. How's Larry?"

"Hi, May. I think my parents are in with him right now. He woke up in time for dinner." Vanessa yawned again. "He asked for you again and I said you were coming. His reaction to that says he's objectifying you on the basis of your physical conformity to the sexual ideal promoted by the mass media... or he likes you, I guess. Oh, God, there I go again." She rubbed her eyes again and stood up. "You guys are going to go home to Chicago with stories about the People's Republic of Berserkley, aren't you? Not all Californians talk like this, you know."

"He's glad I'm coming?"

"I said it wasn't your fault. He was riding for a fall, Rally." Vanessa sighed and picked up a backpack from a chair. "I think he'll explain, but I don't want to violate his confidences. Come on; he's in 351."

Room 351 was a semi-private, but only one of the beds was occupied. A bored cop sat outside the door with a magazine. Larry lay half elevated, oxygen tubes in his nose and drain tubes around his wounds, which were heavily bandaged over his otherwise bare chest. His left arm was wrapped in an elastic bandage, an IV inserted into a vein, and his left eye and temple shone purple-black. Both of his eyes were closed.

Rally felt a deep pang and bit her lips as she looked at him. Larry was almost unrecognizable; frail and battered where he had been vital, healthy and

handsome. His mother and father sat close to the bed in armchairs, holding his hands and talking quietly in Cantonese. All around the bed and stacked against the walls sat dozens of floral arrangements and fruit baskets, overwhelmingly red and gold and decorated with banners printed in Chinese characters. Obviously the Sam family and Larry himself had many friends and well-wishers.

Rally and May stood back for a moment as Vanessa approached and touched her father's shoulder. He looked up and nodded, then turned to Rally and May. "Good evening, Mr. Sam, Mrs. Sam," said Rally. "This is May Hopkins, my partner."

To her surprise, May bowed and spoke a greeting in singsong Cantonese. Mr. Sam looked at his wife in astonishment, and Mrs. Sam laughed, greeting May in turn. She was small and round-faced, but with sharp eyes that quickly sized up both of them. "May? You speak Chinese?"

"Gosh, I only worked in a Chinese... um, business, for more than two years! I picked up a lot!" May spoke to the Sams again, seeming to explain what she and Rally did for a living, and they nodded, replying. Mr. Sam made some noises as if he were telling May about the attack on the restaurant, with sound effects, and his voice rose excitedly.

May paid close attention, asking a question or two, and several times suppressed a laugh. Rally felt rather left out, but when Larry opened his eyes and smiled at her, ghastly with pale, clammy skin and red blotches on his face, she moved to his bedside and sat down.

"She speaks good Cantonese for a kid," said Larry, his voice thin and raspy. "Where did she say she picked it up?"

"She's a little older than she seems, Larry. How are you feeling?"

"Just as great as I look," he said with a faint smile. "They tell me I have a few weeks of rehab to go before I can run the Bay to Breakers dressed as a fortune cookie."

"I'm so sorry about what happened that night. I've been worrying about you ever since."

"Thank you, Rally. When I woke up, my first thought was, 'Darn, she's going to worry about me. I'd better get healed up.'"

She smiled at him. "If you can joke, you must be better. I'm really glad you're going to be all right."

"Where's Bean?" he asked, with no sense of broaching a sensitive subject. "Did he drive you here?"

“Uh... no.” Rally wondered if she should tell him the truth. Larry looked far too fragile to hit with such a heavy piece of news, so she only smiled. “He’s on his own right now. May’s better at this kind of thing.”

“Since she speaks Chinese, I guess she is. But how did the operation go?” Larry looked at his family and lowered his voice, which wasn’t particularly loud in the first place. “Did you get your man?”

“I’m afraid not. But it’s a long story, and not a nice one. I don’t want to upset you.”

“Oh, boy,” said Larry, closing his eyes. Then, to her shock: “426.”

“You do have something to tell me, then.” Rally felt her heart rate jump.

“I see; he did show up. Don’t look at me like that, Rally. It’s not...” He trailed off, coughing. “It’s not something you are going to hate me for. Not like... that money.”

“We didn’t get any money. I’m sorry.”

“I figured that. You know; forget about it, OK? I’m going to tell you something that I might have told you from the start. I was too damn cautious, and I could have helped you much more than I did. So now that it’s too late...”

“Oh, Larry. Don’t you go blaming yourself for my professional problems! I’ve got lots of people to dump THAT on! So relax.”

“I’m taking Mom and Dad home now,” said Vanessa, coming over to put a hand on Larry’s forehead. “I think Emerald’s coming when she finishes her study group at nine. Or maybe not.”

“Where are Jade and Cassandra?” asked Larry.

“They’re staying with the Leongs, remember? I’ve got it under control, bro.” Vanessa kissed Larry’s face and smiled tiredly at Rally. “He looks better already, so we’re going to blow. Mom thinks you two look like a pair of tough cookies, and Dad thinks you and your little friend are awfully sweet to come. I anticipate a ‘discussion’ all the way home.”

“I think your mom has us nailed. We’ll take care of Larry until your sister gets here.” The parents patted and kissed their son, and left with Vanessa. May looked around the room.

“You know, Rally, I’m a little hungry. My tummy gets bad if I don’t have regular snacks... so I’m going to check out the vending machines.” She winked and left.

“Your partner seems like a smart kid,” said Larry.

“You bet.” There was a quiet pause.

“Rally...” he began. “I have a confession to make. Well, several confessions...”

“I kind of had that feeling, Larry. But please, don’t start talking about stuff that’s going to bother you, OK?” Rally took Larry’s right hand, which lay on the coverlet. It felt cold, and too heavy.

“I have to. I have to get it off my chest — ” He coughed rackingly, his tubes jiggling. “That was a joke, and I was laughing.” Rally put her other hand on the bare part of his chest and rested it gently there.

“Thanks. You know, I feel better with you here. My mom’s pretty overwhelmed by this, and so is my dad. Vanessa is trying to be in charge for me, but she’s devastated, no matter how strong she tries to be. Emerald has to be at school most of the time and prefers it that way. My younger sisters are embarrassed by the whole thing. The family dynamics get a little thick in here.”

“Oh. Well, I had a tense family too... but never mind. If you really feel like you have to get something out, and you want to tell it to me for some reason, then go ahead.” She hoped he didn’t think he was making a deathbed confession.

“It pertains to you, Rally. Indirectly. What it is directly about... is the Eight Dragon Triad.”

“OK...”

“I hate them. I have been trying to find ways to fight them for as long as I can remember. I encouraged them to come to my restaurant, Rally. The ones you beat up on the sidewalk were only visiting for lunch. I cultivated them so I could find out what they were up to. Those punks I told you about, the ones who were supposed to go fuck themselves? They weren’t in on the joke. They thought I was a legitimate target. I didn’t call the cops. I complained to their superiors, and they were punished. I did tell them that, though.” He smiled weakly. “There’s nothing like being able to swear in Chinese. Most of the ordinary curses would make even Bean blush.”

“I’m sure it comes in handy.”

“You’d be surprised at my dad’s vocabulary when he’s speaking Cantonese. He’s so polite in English. It’s not the same in translation.”

“Oh... that’s why May was laughing!” Rally smiled and lifted her chin. “Gosh, I wouldn’t have thought it of him. Such a nice old man.”

“No, and you wouldn’t have thought this of me. I hope.”

“Oh, Larry, if that’s all it is... you just took a foolish risk, that’s all.”

“That’s not all, Rally.” His bloodshot eyes moved away from her, then back, open and truthful, but bleak.

“Uh-oh.”

“There was one Triad... in particular. He liked the place a lot. He came back nearly every day at one time, a few years ago. I thought it was a compliment to my dad’s cooking. That was part of it, but not all of it. Not even the major part of it.”

“No?”

“I didn’t give you any mug shots of him. There aren’t any. When I recorded him, the conversation I told you about... the night you were going for Brown... I knew him by sight. Very well, in point of fact.”

“The man you recorded... what, Huang? 426’s assistant?” Huang had been only a couple of years younger than Larry. “Was he a friend of yours?”

“No. I don’t mean Huang.”

“Oh, man.”

“Yes. 426 himself. I cultivated him, because he was the highest number to come to the place. And then he started cultivating me.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. He liked your conversation?”

“Maybe he did. But... well, speaking of Huang.”

“I should tell you something, Larry. Huang is dead.”

“He’s dead? Oh, no.”

“I share that feeling, because... I’m afraid I’m the one who killed him. One of my bullets got him accidentally through the head when I fired at Brown’s bodyguard... or someone. It was chaos that night.”

“Oh... my... God...” Larry went whiter than before, then broke into a coughing fit.

“Larry? Damn, I knew you shouldn’t talk about this.” She reached for the call button. “I’ll get the nurse.”

“No, don’t... I have to tell you...” He struggled to sit up.

“You look terrible! Please, we can do this some other time — ”

“Rally, he’s going to go for you if you’re the one who killed Huang! You have to know this! Thank God you came... because you have certainly been marked for death by the Eight Dragon Triad’s chief assassin!”

“Holy crap, Larry! Why?”

Larry fell back on his pillows, wheezing, and it was a moment before he could speak. “426... he came that night with Huang, and I listened to the conversation. 426 liked Huang, a lot, and he seemed like a smart kid, though he kept deprecating himself. I got the feeling that 426 was going to push the guy fast up through the ranks. He was going to get a number soon, at the very least.”

“His protégé, huh? Oh, man. As if the Dragons needed another excuse!”

“You’ve got your gun with you, I hope?”

“Uh... no, I don’t, Larry. At least not the nine-millimeter. Hospitals don’t let you take guns inside, especially when the patients are mob targets.” Rally glanced at the door; the guard had ambled off to the bathroom. “I’ve got one .25 auto, and May has a couple of her... specials.” She patted her ankle.

“Rally... you’re not safe. You should go as soon as I tell you the rest. Don’t hang around without protection. You’d better call Bean and warn him too...”

“Um... How would they know where I am?”

“I think they may have a tracer on your car.”

“What? Did they talk about that?”

“No. But it’s 426’s style... and Huang was a surveillance expert. 426 was praising the guy to the heavens, to his face, and that’s not something he does often. Huang must have been good. As I say, I know 426 very well... because he cultivated me for quite a while. I know that way he has of talking to young men. Huang was surely going to be his newest lover.”

“Huh? Ohh... duh. He’s homosexual.” The penny dropped. “Oh! You mean, he, um, kind of wanted to, uh, with you?”

Larry smiled ironically. “He didn’t just kind of want to. I know I don’t look too hot right now, Rally. But you saw me healthy. I’m not trying to come across like a vain preener here, but I know I’m usually a good-looking guy.”

“Yeah, that’s true. You’re very handsome, even now.” Rally dropped a kiss on his pale, blotchy brow. “Oh, geez. Did he get really persistent? I saw him during the operation. Made my skin prickle to look at him.”

Larry shook his head. “He’s not a crude man. He doesn’t try to attack people... young men he’d like to keep around, that is. He’s very intelligent and cultured. You could talk all night with him about Chinese painting or porcelain or history. He likes good-looking men, but they have to have smarts — he’s not interested in male bimbos.

“This was about four years ago, when I was still in college and working a lot of nights at the restaurant. He took me to museums and the opera. Stuff like that. It’s the pursuit that interests him, not the conquest. He never grabbed me or anything.” He shook his head again. “No... he just looked at me. You’ve seen him?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Can you imagine those eyes, boring into yours? With desire? Night after night in a room you can’t leave? That’s one overwhelming personality in there. He doesn’t look impressive on the outside. Many people never notice. He has to turn it on.” Larry started to look a little shaky. “Would you hand me that glass of water, please?”

“Sure.” She helped him drink and wiped his chin with a hand towel.

“You’re a very tender person, Rally. For someone who always carries a gun.” Larry smiled.

“You don’t have to go on with this story if you don’t want to, Larry. I get the point, and I think you’re getting too worked up.”

“I need to tell you. Please don’t make me stop.” He took a deep breath. “I’m not homosexual. I think you know that. I don’t have anything against gays — heck, I live in San Francisco. I grew up thinking of them as ordinary citizens, which they are. I just wasn’t made that way — I like girls, not boys.”

“Larry — ”

“It’s all right. I did sleep with him, once. He’s not kinky or anything like that. He doesn’t use handcuffs or whips. He’s got his preferences, sure, but everyone does. I let him use me the way he wanted to. It wasn’t actually unpleasant, except for... knowing I had prostituted myself. But...”

“But?”

“He asked me to join the Eight Dragon Triad. While we were still in bed together.”

“Please, Larry. Don’t tell me — ”

“I said no, Rally. I wasn’t willing to go that far. I wasn’t going to become what I hated most in order to fight it. I turned him down as politely as I could. I told him that my father wouldn’t approve — which is true — and since he’s a traditional Confucianist, he respected my filial piety and let the subject drop. He didn’t ask me out any more, and he never tried to have sex with me again. He still likes me... or he did until Tuesday night.” Larry put a hand on one of his bandages. “The Triad’s his whole world. He loves it more than he loves any person. He would never hesitate to sacrifice a person to the greater good of the Triad. It wouldn’t matter who. Me, or his own brother. He’d have killed Huang himself if he’d thought it was necessary.”

“I got that impression. I only looked at him for a few moments, but that was enough.” She squeezed his hand. “Oh, Larry...”

“What I mean is, I know him. I know what he’s likely to do. I know for certain that he is going to do his best to kill you, or have you killed.”

“But how could he know who shot Huang? It hasn’t gone beyond the FBI.”

“Oh, he’d find out. He’d be determined as hell to know. Weren’t there other people there, who might have witnessed it?”

“Yes... O’Toole. Brown’s bodyguard. He would have seen it happen, and... I told Bean about it.” A little twitch of her mind. “But would O’Toole have told anything like that to 426? After all, he shot Huang first, and several other Dragons later. I suppose he just beat it out of the city with all that money.”

“I don’t know this O’Toole... I don’t know whether he would have contacted the Dragons. Bean knows? He wouldn’t have told the Dragons anything, of course.”

Rally felt cold pass through her. “Uh... no...” If they had contacted him yet — they had to know that Bean was no longer her partner, and they might very well know that he had called off his promise to her. After all, they had been behind the suitcase planted in her trunk. And she had let Bean go...

She got up and checked the window to cover her expression. “I’m sure it’s occurred to you that if 426 is that determined, I’m not the only one he’s liable to finish off, Larry.”

“I know.” She turned and saw him close his eyes. “I probably don’t have long.”

“What? The SFPD has you under guard!” The cop meandered back with a Coke and sat down outside the door again, slouching in his chair. “OK... maybe you have a point.”

“My parents have gone home, my sisters aren’t here... the Dragons will have been watching the hospital. Someone will arrive soon, I’m sure. I’ve told you what you need to know, and I glad I got the chance. You’d better just go back to your hotel...”

“What? Not a chance! I left the other guns in the car, and it’s right out there in the parking lot. I’ll call May, and we’ll get the stuff inside, and we’ll take care of anything that comes along!” She turned to smile at him. “May and I are very tough cookies indeed. Just let them try!”

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“Mr. Bean Bandit?” said a voice at his elbow. Bean rattled the dice he held in his fist and threw them with calculated force against the end of the craps table. Snake eyes; he’d lost two thousand dollars again, for the tenth time in an hour. He didn’t seem too put out about it, but tossed the dice to the next player and leaned back as the croupier raked in the chips. He turned half an eye toward the man who stood beside him.

“What the hell do you want?”

“Just asking if you’re available for work.” It was a tall, burly Chinese man with an American accent, dressed in a black turtleneck and collarless black jacket. He smiled, showing slightly uneven teeth. “If you aren’t available, we’ll look elsewhere.”

“I ain’t available. How the hell do you know who I am, anyway?”

“Gentlemen, place your bets,” said the croupier, and Bean dropped two thousand dollars worth into the Doubles slot, barely looking down.

“A lot of people have heard about your presence on the West Coast.” 189 touched his nose with an ironic smile. “It wasn’t difficult to deduce who was behind the mess in the Bay Area earlier today.”

“Heh,” said Bean. “How’d you know I was in Vegas?”

“You don’t blend into the crowd too well.” 189 shrugged, gesturing at Bean’s heavy leather jacket and slicked-back hair. “We had a call from a local observer. Nothing sinister about it, Mr. Bandit. We thought we might take advantage of an unexpected opportunity, if you’re amenable. It’s a big job, by the way.” He rubbed forefinger and thumb together.

“Ain’t they all.”

“It’ll take only a couple of days, and it’ll pay a hundred grand. I can’t say more about it in public.”

“I ain’t looking to earn anything right now. Sorry.” The next player threw the dice and again came up snake eyes. The little white spots on translucent red seemed to glow in the bright casino lights. “Dang,” muttered Bean as the croupier pushed six thousand dollars worth towards him. “Let it ride.” He flipped a hundred-dollar chip to the croupier.

“No, you seem to be working on losing your cash as fast as you can. That’s a little strange, hey?”

“Gentlemen, place your bets,” said the croupier.

“Maybe.” The next player threw a seven and whooped. Bean’s six thousand vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and he rubbed his hands together in satisfaction. “There ain’t no better way to flush money down the toilet than spendin’ some time in Vegas.” A blonde cocktail waitress came up to him with a mug of beer and a whiskey chaser, and Bean downed both in ten seconds, immediately putting the glasses back on her tray and digging in his jacket for his wallet.

“Oh, sir, your drinks are comped,” said the waitress when he tried to pay her. “The pit boss said you’re the highest roller he’s seen all week. I’ve got some dinner and room coupons for you too — ”

“Ah, hell,” grumbled Bean. “I didn’t ask for none of that. Keep ‘em.” He gave her a hundred-dollar tip and pretended to swat her backside as she waggled it at him. “Get outta here and bring me the same again.”

“Yes sir,” the waitress giggled. “Is there anything else you’d like?”

“Nah,” said Bean briefly, turning to the craps table again. “I go for brunettes.” The waitress made a moue of semi-feigned disappointment and strutted off.

“Even if you’re not interested in earning money,” said 189, “I do have some information that will interest you.”

“Gentlemen, place your bets,” said the croupier.

Bean dug in his pockets and came up with one ten-dollar chip. “Scuse me, dude, but I have to go buy me some more little plastic things.” He pushed away from the craps table and headed to the line at a cashier’s window, 189 following. After plunking down several rolls of hundred-dollar bills, Bean scooped up twenty-five thousand worth of chips and turned to the gambling floor again.

“How much have you lost today, Mr. Bandit?”

“Drop the mister, dude. I’m Bean.” The waitress came back, and Bean gulped his beer and whiskey and tipped her again.

“All right, Bean. Why are you throwing money away?”

“Cause this money smells, that’s why. I don’t want it any more.”

“Really? Money is money, isn’t it?”

“Who’s ‘we’, anyway? Who you working for?”

“The Eight Dragon Triad,” said 189 blandly. “May we speak in private? My superior is in the bar.”

Bean stared at him, his eyes narrowing and brows drawing down. “Just come right out and say it, huh?”

“My superior and I don’t believe in obfuscation,” said 189. “Unlike a late colleague of ours.”

“No shit.”

“Please, come into the bar. May we buy you a drink?”

“Beer,” said Bean, and followed him into a lounge lined with vinyl booths. The Triad man ordered a pitcher of Samuel Adams and a vodka martini, then gestured to a booth in the corner of the room. One person sat there, a middle-aged Chinese man with cropped hair, slightly grey.

“Hey there,” said Bean after a moment’s silence. “426.”

426 rose and bowed. “Please sit down, Bean. I am honored to meet you again.”

“No shit? You Dragon fellas had a hot time that night. Ain’t you carryin’ a grudge?” He turned his eyes to 189. “Settin’ me up? Bring it on.”

426 showed his palms, a slight smile on his face. “We have no grudge against you, Bean. Rather the opposite, in point of fact.” He indicated a seat. “I wish only to speak to you about those offers that were never made in San Francisco.”

“I dunno.” Bean shook his head slightly and stayed where he was. “I got business out there at the tables. It ain’t likely I’m gonna accept the kind of job offer yer likely to make. I got a taste of that with Brown, and if he’s a good example of the Dragon way of doin’ business, I got my fill for a lifetime already.” He turned to go.

426 cleared his throat. “Bean, you are a professional, and deserve to be treated as one. So am I a professional, although my area of expertise is different from yours. I promise you, if you will speak to me about this job, I will tell you the truth about it. No tricks, and I will take no for an answer. If you are not interested, may the gods speed you on your way. I believe you may be interested, however, when you hear the details.” The blonde waitress brought their drinks and 189 tipped her.

“What’s yer name, dude?” said Bean after a long pause.

“I do not use my personal name in a professional capacity — something like you. I am always referred to as 426. My associate is referred to as 189.” The man who had approached Bean in the casino inclined his head.

“What, that’s all? A number? Code name?”

“My number is symbolic of my function in the Triad. It is a great honor to bear it, and I bear it proudly. Has no one ever asked you why you call yourself ‘Bean’?”

“Oh, they ask.” Bean finally cracked a smile. He sat down, grabbed the pitcher and took a deep gulp of beer. “OK, Four. You want to talk, I’ll talk to ya. But I got about sixty large leavin’ a stain in my pockets, so gimme a rain check on any work for a couple of hours. I ain’t gonna leave this joint until I’m cleaned out.”

“Indeed. Why is this money so dirty?”

Bean’s expression went dark and disgusted as if he had tasted something foul, and he took another swig of beer. “I ain’t gonna get into that. No offense, it ain’t something I want to talk about.” His eyes focused on 426. “You know about it? About... that guy named Sly Brown?”

“I knew Brown, of course.”

“You know what happened with him ‘n’ me? You said something about it at the pier.”

“Brown had made an attempt to recruit you, but broke it off after tricking you into carrying a load of drugs. You pursued him to California and caught up to him in Hollywood. There he attempted to have you killed, and when that failed, he fled to San Francisco with two associates. You were helped by a young female bounty hunter named — ”

“Yeah.” Bean put up a hand. “Keep her damn name out of this, hey? If I bust a table in half or something, they’re gonna throw me out of here before I’ve lost all this dough.”

“You will become violent at the mention of her name?”

“I got a feeling I might.” He stared at the bottom of his pitcher, angry sorrow briefly surfacing on his face.

“I see,” said 426, watching carefully. “At any rate, this young woman planned to rescue Brown from the consequences of his own stupidity. That ended in his apparent death in a fire he set himself, and in your falling out with the young woman. She stole one million dollars in cash from Brown’s office, which is still missing. You are wanted by the FBI and the San Francisco — ”

“Just a freakin’ minute. One million cash? Don’tcha mean *half* a million?”

Something flared in 426’s eyes: a piercing focus that examined Bean’s face and manner like an X-ray. “Brown had one million dollars of Triad money with him. None of it has been recovered. We are planning an operation to get it back from Ms — from the bounty hunter. She is still in San Francisco, but the money has not been turned over the FBI, to the best of our knowledge. It’s logical, therefore, that she still has it in her possession.”

“One million? A whole million?” Bean’s eyes went wide, their expression half-demonic. “She screwed me out’ve *that* much dough?” His fists clenched and he looked around.

“If you’re about to become violent, I’d suggest that you do it in a better cause, Bean. Help us recover the money, and you will get a share. Ten percent finder’s fee — one hundred thousand dollars.”

“I already got a share, Four.” Bean stuck his hands in his pockets. “Everything that was comin’ to me, and I kinda spent it already. Which is why I don’t want to hear that little bitch’s name.”

“You got some of the money from her?” 426 raised his brows and drew down the corners of his mouth, as if confirmed of some fact of which he had been skeptical.

“The half million bucks Brown owed me. I was supposed to let her have half of it since she was helpin’ me, but I guess she decided to take it all. She tried to hide it from me, but I found it. Now I’m wishin’ I’d killed her. She’s got *another* half million somewhere?”

“Apparently so,” said 426, his air of reluctantly accepted corroboration deepening. “Brown had it in his possession, but after diligent search of his office, we have not found it. The only other person who could have known it was there, besides his bodyguard and driver, was your erstwhile partner.” 426 glanced up through his lashes, turning his hand over to inspect his nails.

“God damn,” said Bean.

“You have spent most of the \$500,000 you took from her?”

“Yep. It’s gone. Except for the smaller change.”

“That is unfortunate,” said 426, pulling on his lower lip. “It was not Brown’s to dispose of.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Bean yawned. “Yer gonna have to take that up with him... heh.”

“To the best of your knowledge,” said 426 with a searching look, “is Sylvester Brown dead?”

“Sure he is. Burned up in that fire on the pier. I heard him yellin’ blue murder in there, and it sure didn’t sound like he got out.” Bean chuckled.

“And... who put the .32 through Huang’s head?”

“*She* did. Accident, she said, but I reckon she didn’t want him to tell me where she’d hid the dough. Why’re you so torqued about a lousy million, anyway? You Triad guys must make that in profits every couple of minutes.”

“It is the principle of the thing, something I am sure you will understand. One instance of laxness or self-indulgence can undo an entire system.”

“Seems like you burned off that particular loose end. Auction off his fancy-ass cars or something if you want to get the cash back. It ain’t *my* problem.” Bean pushed the beer pitcher away and shifted as if meaning to leave the booth.

426 didn’t laugh. He held Bean’s gaze with two hard pupils, like snake eyes under casino lights. “If the Eight Dragon Triad does not recover their money, it may well become your problem, Bean.”

“That so?”

“I do not like to make idle threats, so I will not. I merely suggest that if your former partner has stolen that money, you are implicated by association. How do I know that you had no hand in the theft? You say you have spent half a million dollars. You and she might simply have split the one million dollars and gone your separate ways.”

Bean’s nose wrinkled like a pit bull’s. “You think what the hell you want, Four. I am so far from giving a shit about you and your buds that I don’t even care if you know I’m goin’ back to Frisco right frickin’ now, and I’m gonna find that girl and that money. That’s the job you want to hire me for, hey? Well, I wouldn’t take a frickin’ dime. It’s a point of honor.”

“Very well,” said 426, smiling faintly. “What do you intend to do with the money when you recover it?”

“I dunno. Burn it, if I had any sense. I’m so frickin’ sick of this deal...” Bean stared off at the wall of the bar, something contending with anger behind his re-controlled expression.

“If you will return it to me, we will trouble you no more. Or... do what you like with it, and you can consider it a retainer. For six months, renewable and renegotiable. What do you say?”

“Be on yer payroll? I dunno. I ain’t worked for anyone in a coon’s age, and nothin’s happened lately to change my mind.”

“Oh, our proposal is not one that will change your life. Simply return to Chicago and take up your usual pursuits again. Once or twice a month we will call you for a job, with plenty of advance notice. All that we would require is that you keep some space in your schedule for us and refrain from taking our direct competitors as clients.”

“Huh,” said Bean noncommittally.

“Most of the work will be routine. We plan to run a regular route from Canadian ports through the Great Lakes, so you will meet a ship in Chicago or Green Bay, or possibly Detroit, and take packages to various drop-off points in the Midwest. You will be free to set your routes and procedures; we know very well that you work best according to your own rules, and we have no intention of cramping your inimitable style.” 426 smiled pleasantly. “Your career has been of great interest to our leadership, Bean, as you know. We would like to consider you a comrade, not an adversary.”

“Yeah? Why me?” Bean tilted his head and raised a brow.

“Your ability and experience, of course — ”

“There’s gotta be something else going down, dude. There’s other drivers than me, and there’s plenty that wouldn’t say no to a sweet offer like that. If you know anything about me, you know I ain’t exactly the kind to jump at it.”

“Perfectly. Yes, there is something else — your racial heritage.”

“So that’s what the hell he was on to.” Bean finished the pitcher and clonked it on the table.

“What who was on to?”

“Brown. He was babblin’ about my parents. What frickin’ difference does that make? I’m some kinda Injun halfbreed — who cares, besides redneck assholes? What do *you* care?”

“You are half Japanese, Bean. Did you not know that?”

Bean peered skeptically at 426, then snorted out loud. “Ahh, horseshit.”

“Horse shit?”

“I ain’t some little monkey that eats raw fish. Yer pullin’ my leg.”

426 looked blank for a moment. “According to Brown’s research, your father was a famous *yokozuna*, a champion sumo wrestler, which may account for your size. You truly didn’t know this?”

“No, I didn’t, and if it’s something you’re gonna live and die by, better get up and walk out now.” Bean belched. “Thanks for the beer.”

Taken aback, 426 stared at Bean for some time. “Well... we are an Asian organization...”

“That hires a white-eyes like Brown? Heh, heh.”

“Point taken,” said 426. “Well, you were originally singled out for your skill, not your background — that was the deciding factor, but not the only one.” He waved a hand. “Your Asian blood is a fact nevertheless. I would like to call such a professional my comrade. Does the proposal appeal to you in any way?”

“Yer talkin’ drugs, I gather.” Bean stuck out his jaw and rubbed the end of his chin with one thumb.

“I am. China White, the best and purest heroin in the world. The market expands daily, and we can afford to pay whatever you require. I should mention that you will receive your usual fee for each run, in addition to the retainer. We don’t wish you to have any cause for complaint.”

Bean grinned halfway. “You know, Four, I kind of like a guy that’ll say what he means. That don’t mean I’m a wage slave, though. And I don’t like smack.”

“I have heard that. I have also heard that you dislike betrayal. Is it not true that you originally stopped running drugs at the request of... the bounty hunter?”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“From Brown.”

“No shit? How’d he know that?”

“The bounty hunter told him.”

Bean’s lips curled back from his teeth. “That little bitch...”

“She told him a great deal about you, and about your dealings with her. For instance...” 426 cleared his throat apologetically, tapping his fingertips together. “I mention this only in illustration, you understand. She told Brown you attempted to have sexual relations with her, and that she refused you — ”

“Bullshit!” hissed Bean.

“A lie?”

“Yeah.” His fists clenched on the table. “She was workin’ on me and I didn’t fall for it... at least, not in the end.” Bean’s head drooped and a few strands of his hair fell over his eyes. “I ain’t no iron man, not when a girl like that...”

426 waited for a few moments, but Bean was silent, hand working over the lower part of his face. “She has injured you,” he said quietly, but not with sympathy. His eyes seemed as cold as a lizard’s as he stared at Bean’s bowed head. “She has betrayed your secrets, cheated you, smeared your name. Regain your honor.”

“By doin’ what I promised her not to do, you mean? Two wrongs make it all right?” Bean looked at 426 with a suddenly haggard expression.

“Is it wrong to do what you are the best at doing?”

“What is it you do, Four? Ol’ Red Mountain didn’t say nothing about yer professional specialty. You the best at it?”

“I don’t like to say it myself — ”

“Yeah, yeah. What does four-twenty-six add up to?”

426 glanced casually around the room, then flicked back the right lapel of his jacket. The finely machined butt of a black steel Sig P229 automatic protruded from a close-fitting shoulder holster.

Bean’s eyes focused on it and lost their weary questioning look, sharpening and closing off at the same time. The jacket fell into place again.

“I am Red Pole 426, chief of assassins. And yes, I am the best at what I do. I enjoy my work and I carry out my duty. I do not expect you to share that sense of duty to the Triad — not yet. But it is my guiding principle in all things.”

“They got their own rules, huh? Duty equals murder?”

“Execution of our enemies and our wayward members. Every society must have order and accountability, and its rules must provide for punishment of crime. I have heard that you also make your own rules, Bean.”

“Yeah... like I don’t run drugs.” Bean’s jaw tightened.

“If you place a woman’s — that woman’s — scruples higher than your own profit and profession, that is your business.” 426 let out a slight snort through his nose. “It is not what I have heard about Bean Bandit the famous Roadbuster, I confess. But image and reality are seldom the same thing.” He rose and put down his drink, as did 189. “Ms. Rally Vincent seems to have the upper hand at last.”

Bean let out a furious growl and kicked the table over, sending glasses flying. The bartender jumped, but stood still at 426’s glance. “I don’t want to hear that name, dude!” Bean surged to his feet, looming over 426 by a full head. “You think you can make me run if ya wave her like a frickin’ red flag? Watch yer ass!”

“I apologize,” said 426, holding up a hand. “To be honest, you seem attached to her still. I only mean to advise you against giving her such power.”

“You think I got a weak spot or something? No way, Four. That day won’t ever come!” A flush passed over his face and faded again.

“If you say so. Would you like some time to consider my offer? Of course, every day that money remains missing increases the odds that you will not be able to recover it. Please treat the immediate situation as a separate matter from longer-term employment. Will you act now to prevent her from escaping with her ill-gotten gains? If you accept this as a job — no payment if you insist — the Eight Dragon Triad can mobilize its resources to aid you in any manner you choose, or keep out of it entirely. If not, we may act at cross-purposes and get in each other’s way. Won’t you take the logical decision?”

Bean glanced up at the mirrored ceiling of the bar, his image shattered into multiple tiles above his head. “Sell myself to ya for a little while?” He smiled tightly. “Yeah, yer makin’ sense. If she can be a whore for half a million, why not me?” He got up and stalked out of the bar, shoulders hunched, face frozen. A numbered Dragon flanked him on each side.

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“Shouldn’t we call the FBI?” asked May, opening Rally’s rifle bag on the floor of Larry Sam’s hospital room. “They could set up more guards or something!”

“I do NOT want to talk to Smith OR Wesson for ONE more second today...” growled Rally, coiling up a length of rope she had used to hoist the bag through the third-story window of the room. “But I guess I might have to.”

She took out her cell phone and dialed Smith’s number. It rang several times and went to voicemail. “Ah, Agent Smith, this is Rally Vincent. There’s a real wedge into the Eight Dragon Triad in this very room, and I know what it is, and you don’t. It’s about to draw an assassination attempt. Call me back.” She clicked off and put the phone away.

“Yow,” said May with a mischievous grin. She took out some C4 and several grenades.

“Let him get mad!” Rally pulled her CZ75 from the bulging bag and strapped on the shoulder holster. “And the ten-gauge... You locked the trunk?”

“Yes, I left the rifle there like you told me. You really think the FBI are going to care? They went over the car already. Though they didn’t see that tracer!” May held up a small round item. “It was a good thing the body panels were bent, because I might not have found it otherwise. I left it functioning for now... do you want me to smash it?”

“No. I have an idea for that little thing. As long as I don’t actually use a firearm that’s illegal in California, Smith probably won’t come down on me. He’s a Fed, not a state official.” Rally loaded her shotgun and pumped the handgrip. “I doubt the rifle would come in handy here, anyway. It’ll be close-range work if the Dragons burst into the room.”

“Oh, man...” said Larry from his bed, eyes bugging out at their guns and explosives. “I don’t like this kind of stuff even when I’m mobile...”

“Don’t worry, Larry. You’re assassin bait tonight, but I have something for you.” Rally took a Kevlar vest from the rifle bag. “I’ll put this over your chest, doubled. That will absorb any handgun rounds, and you can pull it over your head if necessary. OK?” She tucked it around him, trying not to dislodge his tubes, and pulled the covers up over it.

“Ah ha ha... I don’t think I’ve got anything to say about this, do I?”

“Nope,” said Rally, smiling and patting his hair.

“What’s going on in there?” asked the San Francisco cop outside the closed door.

“Officer, you might want to call a little backup. Mr. Sam here is fairly sure that a Chinese mob assassin will be here in no time. Don’t open the door unless we invite you to, OK?”

The cop made a strangled sound and she heard him click on his radio. "Lieutenant, there's a possible situation..."

"May, keep an eye out the window. You have the door rigged yet?"

"Just about," said May, cutting a piece of wire with snips. "Anyone comes in without my say-so, he gets a BIG surprise!"

"Ack!" said Larry. "You might kill someone!"

"That's more or less the idea, given that they're trying to kill you," said Rally, loosening her CZ75 in the holster and putting on a pair of reinforced shooting range goggles. She waggled her fingers and did a quick draw, aiming at the door, then replaced the gun and shook her arms and legs to limber them up. "We are set. Let 'em come."

"Who the hell *are* you girls?" said Larry, appalled. "Where did you *learn* this stuff?"

"Sssh..." said May, looking out the window. "I see two men. Dark suits, both Asian. Coming right to the front entrance."

"Either of them middle-aged, with a salt and pepper buzzcut?"

"No, they both look under thirty. They're inside."

"Just lieutenants, then. Take up position at the door." May moved across the room and grabbed her detonator cord.

The room phone rang, and Rally picked it up. "Yes?"

"There's a couple of visitors for Mr. Sam. His cousins, Edward and David Chang."

"Sure, he's awake," said Rally brightly. "Send 'em up!" She repeated the names to Larry.

"I have Chang cousins, yes. They live in New York and they have *not* flown out to see me." Larry settled the Kevlar vest around his torso a little more tightly.

"Officer, that backup here yet?" called Rally through the door.

"No, ma'am. On their way."

"Better get out of the line of fire, then. They are probably going to come in shooting." Rally's cell phone rang. "Rally Vincent here."

"Listen to me, you little — " began Smith.

“Agent Smith, I’m a little busy right now. UCSF Medical Center, room 351. Larry Sam knows the Dragon chief assassin very, very well. Two goons coming up in the elevator now.” She put the phone down without turning it off and looked at May. “Give them a couple of flash-bangs first, then leave the door ajar and duck. Officer! You out of the way?”

“I’m in the next room. Got my .45 peeking out the door.”

“Sounds good. Keep your eyes closed when the grenades come — ”

“Miss Vincent, what the HELL are you doing?” squawked the phone.

“Keeping your wedge safe and sound. If you want to get here in time for the fireworks, step on it!” Rally eased the door slightly open.

Here came the elevator — *ching* — the doors opened — feet in the corridor. May nodded at Rally. Outside: jackets flipping back, the snap of two holsters, a sharp slide-click of two automatics cocking. She pointed at May, who pulled her pins and waited until the men were nearly to the door. “Go!” May threw.

BOMF! BOMF! White-hot magnesium flashes, the shock wave hitting — “Aiiggh!” Rally darted out when the men yelled. Arms crossed over their eyes, the assassins blundered through a storm of flying papers and magazines from the waiting room tables. KRAK KRAK KRAK KRAK said her CZ75 as she drilled two right thumbs and two right shoulders.

One man caught his gun with the left hand and fired at her, trying to ram the door open with his shoulder. BAM! Rally skipped aside. KRAK! The assassin’s bullet lodged in the wall behind Larry and Rally took off the Dragon’s left trigger finger at the same moment.

WHABAM! May’s booby trap detonated.

The Dragon collapsed, most of his hair and clothing gone. The other assassin flopped around on the floor, screaming. Rally kicked their guns away and holstered hers.

“Good placement!” she said to May, and reached for her handcuffs as the elevator chimed again. Six or eight SFPD officers stampeded down the hallway, yelling.

“Freeze!” Since she was the only person still standing outside the room, the cops all aimed at her. “Drop the holster! Put ‘em up!”

“Can I cuff ‘em first?” said Rally, smiling. She let her ID flip open in her hand. “My name’s Rally Vincent, from Chicago. Bounty hunter!”

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“You... crazy... little...”

“Lady?” chirped Rally. She sat on Larry Sam’s bed and held his hand as a nurse checked his tubes and gave him an injection of painkiller. “C’mon, Agent Smith, we did good!” Dozens of police and FBI agents milled in the corridor discussing security arrangements.

“Jesus...” Smith groaned, apparently unable to refute that contention. “You couldn’t have called the cops?”

“We did!” said May, packing up extra grenades. “We were here already; they weren’t!”

“I can see so many illegal items in this room you two could pull ten years if you aren’t careful! Where in God’s name did you get hold of THAT?” He pointed to one of May’s frag shells.

“Gosh, it’s not like they’re hard to buy!” sniffed May. “I went shopping this afternoon and I scored pretty well for an out-of-towner!”

“I think he’s about ready to say something to you,” said Rally, getting up from Larry’s bed, but retaining his hand in hers. “Special Agent Peter Smith, meet Lawrence Sam, restaurateur and Triad expert.”

“Hello,” said Larry, his eyes already drooping. “Pardon me; I’m a little...”

“Hello, soldier.” Smith spoke gruffly but with a kindly undertone, to Rally’s surprise. “You bucking for a Purple Heart?”

“Kind of by accident... yes, sir.” They shook hands.

“You willing to testify about the Dragons, soldier? Miss Vincent here says you have a hell of an angle.”

“Yes, sir. I will tell you everything I’ve ever... heard.” Larry glanced at Rally with a faint smile. “When I can sit up straighter, that is...”

“You get well, kid.” Smith put a hand on Larry’s shoulder and stepped back. “Nice call,” he said to Rally, and headed for the door. “We’re in your debt, Miss Vincent.”

Rally’s mouth fell open in shock and remained that way. May finished packing and slung the rifle bag over her shoulder. “The nurse wants us to get out of here and let him sleep. The place is swarming with fuzz, so he’s safe now. It’s about bedtime for us, too!”

“Rally...” she heard faintly from the bed.

“Larry?” she answered softly, squeezing his hand.

“Thank you.”

“I owed you. It’s nothing.”

“No, I owe you. If you hadn’t come along... I might never have had the courage to do this. Thank you for bringing Smith... he seems like a good guy. I’ll talk to him as soon as I can.”

“Yeah? I’m not saying he’s a great conversationalist or anything. I warn you, you may feel like giving him a whirlie within two minutes. Though at least he won’t call you ‘little lady’.” Rally got up and put her purse on her shoulder.

“You... are not the kind of woman who’s ever going to be a restaurateur’s girlfriend, are you, Rally? You’re incredible. Frightening... but incredible. It’s going to take a hell of a man to keep up with you. I hope he deserves you...”

Unfortunately, she knew whom Larry meant. “Good luck, Larry. I know luck’s supposed to be your stock in trade. But I think you deserve better than you got. Truly.” She bent to kiss his forehead as his eyes closed, and one weak hand reached up. She let him guide her lips to his. Cold and dry, but with some promise of future warmth. “Bye.”

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“What do you mean by ‘whore?’” 426’s eyes narrowed. “If you mean to imply that service to the Eight Dragon Triad is — ”

Bean laughed mirthlessly, striding rapidly across the casino floor with the Dragons in his wake. “Ahh, I told ya the bitch was workin’ on me. She tried to distract me or something. I found the cash in the trunk of her Cobra, and she always kept it double-locked. No one else could’ve put it there. She was tryin’ to pull the wool over my eyes, so she jumped my bones right there in the car.” For a moment his face contorted; his voice went hoarse. “Frickin’ little slut.”

“I see. But she didn’t stop you from taking the money?”

“Nope. She had a gun on me, but she didn’t fire. Wouldn’t have done her any good anyhow — just a nine-millimeter.” Bean shrugged his shoulders inside his armored jacket and zipped the front up halfway.

426 blinked in surprise. “She had a high-powered rifle. That would have penetrated your personal armor.”

“Yeah, had it right in her hand, but she pulled out the automatic, that fancy Czech one. She likes that gun — keeps the long arms locked in the — ” Bean stopped abruptly, eyes dilating and pupils contracting. He licked his lips, which trembled oddly.

426 caught up and passed him, then halted as well. His eyes narrowed again when he looked into Bean’s face. “You were saying?”

“Nothin’.” The slight tremor spread to Bean’s hands and to his breathing, but an unyielding will seemed to keep it in check as he spoke rapidly. “I’m gonna head back to Frisco. I’ll keep that offer in mind. You give me a call if you want to get in touch.” He flicked a business card at 426, took the one offered to him and aimed for the elevators. 426 and 189 looked at each other, then at Bean’s retreating back, and shrugged.

“What do you think, sir?” said 189.

“I honestly don’t know,” replied 426. “But we should give him a little more time. He will have to spend a few hours on the road back to San Francisco, and he will surely think it over on the way. If he contacts us, well and good. If not, we have done our best. Let us return to headquarters and make our report to Red Mountain.” The two Dragons left the casino and 189 stepped out to the curb to hail a cab.

“At any rate, his services will be useful for eighteen months at most.” 426 half-smiled and rubbed his chin. “It will not be easy to eliminate such a man, but I have some time to think that over as well.”

A cab pulled up and 189 opened the door for his superior. “Airport,” said 426, and the Dragons departed into the night.

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“What would it be like, May? Just you and me?”

“Hmm?” said May drowsily.

“No one else. The two of us together the way it used to be, only us. The Gunsmith Cats...”

“No one else?”

“No one. Just us.”

“It was nice. I liked it.”

“So did I.”

“I know you don’t like Ken, Rally... but I love him.”

“I know.”

“I am a horny little slut, of course, so I worked in a whorehouse when I lost touch with him. That was just sex. I love Ken and when I make love with him, he’s all I can think about. Maybe that means I have a blind spot... but that’s the way it is. You can’t always choose what is going to be your destiny in life.”

“Is he your destiny?”

“Yes.”

“You sound very sure.”

“I am.”

“I wish I knew what mine was.”

“You will.”

“Will I? I thought it was doing what I do. Bringing criminals back to jail. With you helping me.”

“Maybe it was for a while.” May rolled over in bed and put a hand under her head. “Things change.”

“Does destiny change?”

“I don’t know. Hey, Ral, you’re only twenty-one. What’s the hurry?”

“You’re twenty and you already found yours.”

“I found it a long time ago. But you don’t think that was a good thing anyway. Why be envious?”

“It’s just... Ken sees you as a little girl. He likes you that way, and you even took drugs to stay small for him. But you have to change, May. You have to grow up. That baby...”

“I know.” May stroked her round stomach. “But it’ll work out, you’ll see. Me and Junior will be OK.”

“You’ve been so sick. It’s five months now and the book said the nausea would stop in the third...”

“Oh, some people barf all the way through! It’s no biggie.”

“I’ll remind you that you said that the next time you lose your lunch on the street.” May made a raspberry, and they laughed. “I love you, May, you know that?”

“I know. I love you too.”

“Will I ever love someone the way you love Ken?”

“A man, you mean? I don’t know.”

“What if I fell in love with the wrong man?”

“The wrong man?”

“Someone who wasn’t good for me. Someone who didn’t share my way of looking at things.”

“I don’t know that I’d call that BAD...”

“But wouldn’t that be the wrong kind of man for me?”

“I don’t know if you can pick it that way. He’s just who he is. He’s not some kind of man, right or wrong; he’s one man, a particular man, and he’s the one you love. Nothing else matters.”

“Maybe I’m a lesbian?”

May chuckled. “You sound hopeful.”

“It seems simpler.”

“Dealing with women? Honestly? After living with ME, you can say that?” May giggled.

“OK, maybe not!” Rally groaned in the dark.

“And it’s not like it’s something you can choose... well, you could choose to live any way you liked, of course, but I don’t think you can change yourself from one to the other just because you’d prefer it that way or someone else would prefer it that way. You like who you like. You’re stuck with ‘em the way they are, women OR men!”

“Men are just so DIFFERENT...”

“Oh, not so different. They go about things differently, maybe.”

“Well, sure, there you go.”

“Men ARE still people, believe it or not! They want the same things at bottom. Warm place to sleep, something to eat, and someone to love.”

“Love? Really?”

“Sex, maybe. To be close to someone.”

“But they’re not the same thing, are they?”

“If they don’t have something to do with each other, then neither of them has a lot of meaning. That’s why they say ‘body *and* soul’.”

“Does everybody really have... one of those?”

“Huh?”

“Some people... maybe I’ve run into more than my share of them. But how do you find the soul in a guy who would rape little kids? Or blowtorch someone to death? Or... or who thinks it’s all right to k-kill someone over money?” Rally’s voice trembled. “How does love even live in the same world? How can anyone believe in love when she’s seen how horribly people can treat each other?”

May was silent for a while. “Occupational hazard.”

“Yeah, I suppose... but, even so, I never thought I was a cynic.” Rally turned over and dug her face into the pillow. “I’m not a cynic...”

“Unlike me, you mean.” May’s tone had an edge.

Rally raised her head. “Minnie-May?”

“Hell, I know I’m not the spiritual kind. I don’t talk about purity or goodness when I talk about love. When I say I love Ken, I think about screwing him and I think about how he makes me feel in bed.”

“That doesn’t make you cynical. It just makes you...”

“Horny!” May snickered. “But you know, I’ve had a lot of men, more than most women would ever think about having. Some of them were rotten in bed and some of them were fantastic. Most of them I managed to have a good time with one way or another.” She made a light, dismissive chirp in her throat. “Not a single one of them made me feel the way Ken does.”

“Then having sex when you’re not in love...”

“Like eating candy instead of a good meal. It’s quick, it’s pretty tasty... but it’s never going to fill you up all the way. Plenty of people feel satisfied with that, though. You do me, I’ll do you. I’m not saying money has to change hands, but if all they wanted anyway was a business transaction...”

“Y-yeah...”

“Hey, no problem — other than not getting anywhere close to the heart of the matter. But sex with love... ahh.” May hugged herself and sighed with a romantic flutter. “Now that’s destiny.”

“Does one ever... change to the other? Can people have sex just for... for a business transaction, and then have it turn into something else?”

“Well, sure, I guess so. That never happened to me, of course. I knew a couple of girls who ended up living with men they met at the house. But I always loved Ken. It was never business with him. I wanted him and when I let him know it, he wanted me too. Simple as that.”

“Oh...”

“Are you trying to figure something out, Rally?”

“Maybe. I’m going to have to sleep on it...”

“Good night, then.”

“G’night.”

::

“Locked in the trunk,” said Bean softly, leaning on the Up button in front of the casino elevators. “Locked in the trunk...” He repeated the phrase over and over as if his brain could not quite absorb or process the simple meaning of the words, mumbling through the fingers of his left hand and slowly moving his head from side to side. “Locked in the trunk. Took out the shotgun once, but never the rifle. Never used the damn rifle ‘cause it wasn’t legal in frickin’ California...”

His fists clenched and the color of his face alternated between sick gray and a reddish flush. “Hid it in the goddamn double-locked trunk. Never showed it to no one except me...”

His voice failed as the elevator doors opened. Bean got on and pressed the button for his floor. The elevator walls were mirrored, and he raised his head and looked at the endlessly repeated reflection of himself.

As the elevator ascended, an elderly couple waiting by the doors on Bean's floor heard a splintering, tinkling crash in the shaft, which repeated itself four or five times. The doors opened and Bean got off. He brushed past the couple, shaking his opened hands with a peculiar look.

His knuckles were chopped to raw meat; tiny razors of glass sparkled in his fresh cuts. Remnants of the mirrored panels fell to the floor of the elevator and shattered, spattering the drops of blood that streaked their surfaces. The elderly couple stared with open mouths.

"Jesus H. Christ!" whispered the man to his wife. "That guy punched all the glass out! Did you see what a mess he made of his hands?"

"He must have lost big," said his wife. "God, his face."

"Must have," said the man, gazing after Bean's retreating back. "But still."

::: CHAPTER THIRTEEN :::

“What the HELL!” yelled an Inyo County sheriff’s deputy. “That sonofabitch’s doing something like one-eighty! On the CURVES!” His SUV still rocked slightly in the wake of the car that had just passed, a dark-blue streak in the SUV’s headlights, a tumultuous engine roar Doppler-shifting to the west. “Is he drunk, or stoned outta his gourd?”

“He’s gonna be *dead*, if he don’t slow down,” replied his partner, pointing at the car’s headlights as they moved up the treeless desert ridge ahead and swerved back and forth. “Look at him take the hairpins! He’ll go off the cliff at Deadman’s Drop right there... hey!” The two watched for a moment longer, awed, as the headlights swept around the curve and continued up the ridge. “Wow, he ain’t half bad. Wish I could hold it to the road like that!”

“Not skidding much... damn, he’s got traction to burn. What was that car?”

“I’m supposed to tell at that speed, in the dark? Might’ve been an old ‘Vette. We gonna chase him?”

The deputy peered through his windshield as he tracked the car, a dark blotch racing the moon. “Naw, we’d never catch him. Any rate, he’s gonna be Fresno County’s problem in about five minutes. Give Randy a call.” His partner picked up the radio handset and spoke into it. The deputy watched the car disappear over the top of the ridge still going like a bat out of hell. “Man. You’d think his best friend was dyin’.”

“Naw, I bet his girlfriend’s gonna have his hide ‘cause he’s late for dinner.” Both men chortled. “Pussy-whipped, that’s it. Crazy bastard.”

::

“Someone’s cleaning out the bank accounts,” said Smith, throwing a sheaf of documents on his desk in front of Rally. “We froze a couple of them in time, but about ten million dollars went bye-bye early Wednesday morning.”

“Brown’s accounts? Would it be his wife getting the money out? Where is his family, anyway?” Rally glanced at the papers.

“We don’t think it’s his wife. Brown didn’t tell her anything about his finances, or his day job, for that matter. Just gave her a cash allowance, and she’s not the sort

who asks questions.” Smith sat down and rubbed a hand over his face. “Got to be one of the men. O’Toole or Manichetti... and O’Toole isn’t the type he’d let in on the business end. I doubt that guy ever had access to the account numbers — too much of a loose cannon.”

“I know what you mean about O’Toole. Manichetti, huh? I noticed him every time I met Brown, but he never said much.” She and Smith seemed to see a little more eye to eye today, but Rally wasn’t yet willing to make much effort to like him.

“He’s a reliable type. Brown took long trips to Asia — Thailand, mostly — and he always left Manny in charge of the family. So he’d know where the dough is.”

“Thailand?” Rally had had another phone conversation with an effusively grateful but vehemently pro-gun-control Vanessa Sam, and the subject had wandered onto the Asian sex industry. “Isn’t that where they have all the child brothels? Where the Japanese pedophiles take guided tours?”

“Not just Japanese, hon. Americans, Europeans... anyone with money who digs that kind of crap. The pimps buy little girls from poor families and keep ‘em chained up until the kids die of AIDS. Why, I read about a fire in one of those places — ” He stopped abruptly when he saw Rally’s face. “Sorry, kid. That was an awful thing to bring up.” Smith gritted his teeth, his face reddening slightly. “But there are a lot of nasty doings in this world, Miss Vincent, and somebody’s got to deal with them head on. That’s why I’m in this line of work.”

On that question, she and Smith were in perfect agreement. “Brown...” Rally’s stomach turned over at the dreadful images in her mind. “He said some things, about how young I was...”

Smith grimaced at her. “No shit, sister. He got into that particular kink four-five years ago, after trying everything else under the sun, and I figure that’s exactly what he was doing over there, under color of business trips.”

“He’s got a little daughter! He... seemed really attached to her... Oh, God.” Rally covered her mouth.

“Makes ya want to puke, doesn’t it?” Smith shook his head. “At any rate, somebody’s gathering the assets. Some of the cars have been sold through a broker and the house is on the market. It’s going to take a while to seize it, if we can even get a judge to agree. Brown laundered his money damn well.”

“He would! But I wanted to know where Mrs. Brown and her daughter are.” Rally put down the financial statements, remembering the photographs she had seen of Brown’s family.

Smith spread his hands with a shrug. “We have no idea. We were supposed to pull them from the house in L.A. at the same time you went to the pier. Sent a

squad and found the place empty. We thought Sly had done it, but apparently not, from what you told us. 426 knew the girls were gone, but not Brown.”

“Roy told me about the extraction operation. Thanks for nothing on that one, by the way.” Smith rolled his eyes with mild annoyance, and Rally leaned back in her chair, tapping her chin. “Brown didn’t pull them. O’Toole wouldn’t have. That leaves Manichetti again.”

“Damn, that’s right.” Smith snapped his fingers. “He pulled them himself? Yeah, he’s got the connections for something like that!”

“Connections?”

“He’s ex-Mafia. Got in trouble with his capo in about ‘92 and had to run. Brown picked him up and paid a fine for him. Manny still has a lot of friends in the business, though.”

“He was *that* concerned about Brown’s family? And he didn’t even tell Brown he was doing it? Why?”

“No idea. Guess he’s just a nice guy.” Smith grinned. “That partner of yours come in today?”

“Yes, May’s with Agent Wesson.” Looking for a thick black folder...

“Good. I’ll talk to her later.”

“I still have that Dragon tracer in my car. I have an idea, but I’m going to need the FBI’s help to carry it out. I told you that 426 may be after me because of Huang. Probably since I took care of those assassins, even more so than before. I need some room to work in.”

“Yeah? Ah.” Smith smiled in comprehension. “Decoy operation?”

“Exactly.” Rally smiled back; he did think along the same lines. “Someone drives my car around town while I investigate elsewhere. The only thing is, I don’t have any leads on where to look yet. I don’t know where their new HQ is, and neither does Larry Sam.”

Smith got up and rummaged in a file cabinet. “We have a list of recently leased and sold properties in the area that would fit their needs. They’d want a whole building to themselves, naturally, so nothing too big or too small. I put red dots against the best prospects.” He tossed a sheet on the desk. “Take down the addresses and check ‘em out. You seem to have a nose for it. We’ll have to loan you one of our cars, I suppose.”

“I hear those are sacred objects.” Rally jotted in her notebook.

“Yeah, you use a Bureau car — Bu-car, we say — on personal business, and you are hung out to dry.” Smith grinned. “No worries. This is official. I’ll check out a sports car for you. Don’t so much as get lipstick on the upholstery.” He sat and wrote out an authorization form. “Anything else you need?”

“Well, I need someone to drive my car. I don’t want to risk May on that, not alone.”

“The GT-500?” Smith’s eyes went wide and eager. “Hell, you got a volunteer right here.”

“Uh... well, thanks, but I think I’ll ask Roy.” Rally took the form between finger and thumb when Smith held it out. “I just show them this down in the garage?”

“Coleman?” Smith looked crestfallen. “Why him?”

“He needs something to do, and he’s been looking... I don’t know. Not well.” Rally shook her head, feeling concern. “All he talks about is Bean. What he’s going to do to catch him when we’re back in Chicago, and how many years of hard time he ought to pull. I guess he’s mad that Bean would believe I stole that money. Or something.” She shrugged. “I want to keep him busy.”

“Hm. Well, you arrange that. I’ll get together a detail to follow him while he drives.” Smith picked up his phone.

“Thank you. He may get tailed. According to Larry, and what I’ve heard and witnessed, the Dragons generally drive new, imported luxury sedans, even the lower ranks.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Smith put down his phone. “OK? We done here? I can get this decoy operation going about one this afternoon and keep it up for four-five hours.”

“That should be fine. I wanted to ask, have the ballistics tests been finished yet?” Rally bit her lip. “Is there a report? On the bullet that hit Huang?”

“I’d think Wesson has it by now. Ask him. He hasn’t said.” Smith filed the carbon copy of the car authorization. “OK, I’ll talk to the kid now and you can brief Bob on Mr. Sam and the hospital fracas. Go and knock on his office door.”

He turned to his papers again. Rally had examined Smith’s desk carefully, but saw no sign of the black folder among the piles. She hoped it hadn’t been locked up or sent elsewhere. Walking into the hallway, she saw Wesson’s door open and the agent escort May out.

“Hi, sweetie! Agent Smith’s ready to see you.” Rally suppressed a laugh at May’s outfit: a short, frilly dress, very wide in the skirt and supported by lacy petticoats. She had tied her hair in pigtails, put on patent leather Mary Janes and looked about nine years old. Wesson seemed unsettled, but nodded to Rally and indicated his office. “You tell Agent Wesson *all* about Bean?” she asked May.

“Sure did!” piped May, winking at Rally and giving her an OK sign. She sashayed into Smith’s office and greeted him. Rally heard only a stunned silence from Smith, chortled to herself, and accompanied Wesson.

“So... Ms. Vincent,” said Wesson as he sat down, and stopped there.

“Yes?” said Rally innocently.

“Ah... well, I don’t have too many questions today. You’ll be able to leave soon, I think.” He took an envelope out of a drawer. “This is your FBI check to cover food and lodging, retroactive to last Sunday. Two thousand dollars. The SAC signed it this morning.” Wesson pushed the envelope towards Rally. She snatched it up, gave it a smacking kiss and stuffed it in her purse.

“Money! I like eating on government dough! Did May give you some good leads?”

Wesson jumped slightly. “Ah... Did she really work in a Chinese... brothel?”

“That’s right. You do know how old she is, don’t you?”

“Uh, yes.” Wesson mopped his forehead. “Jesus Christ...”

Rally tried not to enjoy his distress too visibly. “Well, let’s see... Agent Smith and I were discussing Manichetti. We figure he could be the one who extracted Brown’s family and is liquidating the assets. You think he’s got some special regard for the wife and kid?”

“Anything’s possible,” said Wesson absently. “Uh, that is...”

“You feeling OK, Agent?” asked Rally sweetly.

“Yes, yes. Fine. Um, that was quite a chase yesterday, hmm? And then defending a hospital room. Quite a day.” He fanned himself with a folder.

“I thought so too.” Obviously Wesson couldn’t bring himself to utter a compliment, unlike Smith. Rally put a black mark against him and gave a gold star to his partner. “And I called it right on Bean, too, didn’t I? Have those poor guys at the airport gotten to go home yet?”

Wesson heaved a sigh. “Yes. A few hours ago.”

“No questions? How about that mondo scoop on Larry Sam, huh? Oh, and Agent Smith said you might have the ballistics report on Huang now. I would really like to see that, naturally.”

Wesson jumped even more. “Ah... um, a messenger might have left it on my desk.” He shuffled a few papers. “No, um, I don’t see it.”

Rally stared. “Okaaay.” *You’re mighty careless about something that important, Agent Wesson!* “How about Brown’s body?” She put an elbow on his desk. “It’s Friday and they’ve been digging in that warehouse since Wednesday morning. Hasn’t he turned up yet?”

“No, not yet. We’ve got FBI agents doing the forensic investigation now, and they are being very careful not to disturb things too much. You can go back to your hotel now. We’ll drop your partner off there when she and Agent Smith are finished.” He waved a nervous hand. “Nothing more today. Mr. Bandit has apparently left the Bay Area.”

“Yes, apparently. So I get to go home now, right?”

“Uh... we’ll have to iron that out with the SAC and coordinate with Chicago. In a little while, perhaps.”

“I’ll start packing,” said Rally breezily, and left the office to find Roy.

::

“Tom?”

“Manny? What the hell’re ye doin’? Where the hell are ye?”

“Coming up I-5. I’m going to get to Frisco in a few hours, maybe ten-thirty. I got to talk to you.” Manichetti tucked his phone between chin and shoulder. As he drove north, his black Range Rover climbed a high embankment with the burned skeleton of a 1968 Corvette Stingray lying at the bottom.

“Do ye? Yeh fockin’ coward, ye left ‘im to die in the fire!” O’Toole choked and howled into his cell phone. “Yeh just motored off an’ let ‘im die!”

“Tom, c’mon, listen to me. There wasn’t a damn thing I could do. He wanted to watch the goings-on for a while, so he stayed up at the top of the ladder after ya passed him the morphine. And... uh, then he crawled up through the hole into the warehouse again... like a, just a damn fool. I stayed there as long as I could. I heard him yelling, but I couldn’t get up the frickin’ ladder, and that fire was hot, naturally. I’m too damn heavy to climb a flimsy thing like that and I still got this sore leg from the throwing knife, you know? I had to beat it. I pulled the ladder and I went soon as Bandit dragged the girl off the other pier. They were the only

ones in position to see the boat, but the cops were moving in. I had to beat it, see?”

O’Toole could not reply for weeping.

Manichetti went on. “I’m damn sorry, see? I know how ya felt about Mr. Brown, Tom.” His voice thickened. “He died pretty quick, I promise ya. I ain’t sayin’ I don’t blame myself some, you know? But that’s the way it crumbles sometimes. Life is shit, my friend.”

“Fock ye. Fock ye...”

“Tom, I heard you’re with 426 now. Probably told him the girl shot his good friend, eh? Little risky, I think.”

“I left the gun in th’ boat!”

“He’s gonna get the ballistics report, you know, right when the cops get it. 426 doesn’t dilly-dally. And then you are going to die a *lot* slower than Mr. Brown.”

“No, I ain’t going to.” O’Toole let out a strangled chuckle. “I beat it already, now didn’t I? Got me a bike and some firepower and I’m on me own. Th’ Dragons showed me where everything’s kept and 426 went gallivantin’ off somewhere last night. Seems they all get drunk and take their ease when the boss ain’t watching. I grabbed what I wanted and I left the place. So I’m workin’ for meself now, ain’t I? I’m goin’ ta find that wee bitch and — ”

“You’re gonna need some help, Tom. You think the Dragons were bein’ careless? Don’t fucking bet on it. 426’s got some reason for you to be on the loose. Like nobody traces the hit to him or you get yourself killed or somethin’ like that. You can’t do an operation like that without backup.”

“Bollocks I can’t!” yelled O’Toole. “Yeh fat bastard, just ‘cause YE can’t even climb a rope ladder wi’out a focking forklift, yeh think I’m — ”

“Calm the fuck down, Tom. I want to help ya. Don’t be dumb. You need all the help you can get now Mr. Brown’s gone. He ain’t gonna be bailing you out no more when you get too frisky with some tart. Hell, Interpol and the RUC’s gonna nail your ass in double-quick time. There ain’t no statute of limitations on settin’ bombs in pubs, guy.” Manichetti paused as silence filled the car. “You there, Tom?”

“...Yeah, I’m here.”

“You get my point? Let me help ya. You can kill the bounty hunter if you want to, and stick with me. You can have yer job and get paid. I’m no gunsel like you,

Tom. I need ya to guard Mrs. Brown and the kid, 'cause you know 426 wants 'em bad."

"All fockin' right," said O'Toole savagely. "Fock ye anyway."

"Yer welcome. Now tell me what's up and where I can meet you."

O'Toole let out a long, simmering breath. "All fockin' right."

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"I wanna see!" yelled Rally as May twirled into the hotel room in her frilly dress, grinning ear to ear. "What did you get?"

"I am the petty larceny queen!" shrieked May, flipping up her voluminous skirt. Under the petticoats hung a large plastic zipperlock bag, holding a black folder and a few stapled sheets of printed documents.

She yanked the bag off the fabric straps that held it suspended from her waist and tossed it onto the bed, then tore it open and brandished the contents. "No one dreamed I was anything but a very strange kid! Wesson went out for a few minutes to get coffee and left me with ALL his stuff — totally against security rules — and he was so rattled at the things I told him that he couldn't pay any attention to his papers anyway. If you want to *totally* discombobulate him, by the way, mention 'golden showers'!"

"Eww!" said Rally, fairly discombobulated herself.

"Don't knock it! I did get the folder — it's the real thing, because I checked it before I stuffed it up my dress — and I got something else very, VERY cool!"

"Really? What's that document?"

"Ballistics report, honey. The bullet in Huang's head." May waved it under her nose. "This is even BETTER than the folder!"

"What? That's saying something!" Rally snatched the report with burning curiosity and scanned it for a minute in amazement. "What? WHAT?! It didn't MATCH?!"

May jumped up and down, whooping. "No match! No match! Hahahhah! You are OFF THE HOOK, BABY!"

"I don't believe this!" Rally flipped all the pages again, looking at the magnified photos of the test-fired bullets and the killer slug. "It was a .32 slug, but it wasn't from that SFPD gun! Not the same striations! Not even close!" Rally whooped as well, hugging May and spinning her around off the floor. "You go, girl!"

“You betcha!”

Rally put May down. “Wait a second — Wesson didn’t want to tell me! He knows, and he’s scared stiff! Without that, the FBI doesn’t have a hold on me — ” She broke off. “Brown. There’s still Brown, and the money Bean got. Oh well.” Rally sat down, feeling a little weak, and dropped the report on the table with a long sigh of relief, letting her limbs collapse. “I didn’t kill him... Thank God!”

“That’s a giant load off in any case, huh? YOU didn’t shoot Huang!”

“But who did, then? Geez — it could only have been O’Toole!” Rally gritted her teeth. “He saw my gun. He knew what its caliber was. And he could easily have fetched a similar one when he left.” She shook a clenched fist. “That vicious little...! Brown probably told him to do it, too. It’s possible I heard a gunshot right after the explosion while my ears were numb...”

“That Brown guy doesn’t seem very dead, does he?” said May, sitting down to pull off her Mary Janes. “Keeps throwing crap at you from beyond the grave!”

“No kidding.” Rally sat up straight. “You know... I keep hearing more and more inconsistencies. That might be a theory worth exploring...”

“That Brown’s alive? But you were sure he was dead!”

Rally lay back again. “Yes, I was.” Screams... dying screams, as she frantically tried to reach him, struggling against Bean’s grip. Some of the horror of those moments came back to her, and she rolled over and buried her face in the bedspread.

“Oh, Ral...” May came to her and hugged her, kissing the top of her head. “That must have been such an AWFUL night...”

“Uh-huh.” And the worst of it had been Bean. Not the money, not the deaths and carnage. Huang was no longer on her conscience, and some good had come from the attack on the restaurant, however dearly Larry had paid for his new courage. Now her sneaking feeling that Brown’s death had not been all it seemed oddly cleared her mind. With the other traumas of that night set aside, she could look more directly at the one that still festered.

Bean. A friend, she’d believed. Something more. And he’d told her he would kill her for a banged-up suitcase full of funny green paper. He’d coveted her body for years and now he knew he would never have another chance — he’d thrown away even the slim possibility of it with both hands. That was what she had seen under the menace as he came at her with a knife, wasn’t it? Nothing like a broken heart.

Rally's anger, which had somehow never really aimed directly at Bean, began to swell alarmingly. Probably he'd forgotten even that regret in some other woman's embrace by now. She didn't care. It didn't matter.

"Ral? You're looking kind of sick. You need to lie down for a while?"

"Someone's gathering Brown's assets," Rally said, trying to calm herself with analysis. "The best guess we had was Manichetti, and that makes only a small amount of sense. No body yet, and the fire might not have been intense enough to kill someone at the bay end of the warehouse. Plus, Wesson said that the roof had collapsed at THAT end, even though I know the big blast was at the front. O'Toole got out somehow, since he ended up on the secondary pier taking shots at Dragons. And he wouldn't have left Brown in a dangerous spot! That I know for sure, from all kinds of sources."

Larry Sam's story had some resonance here... just how deep was O'Toole's attachment to Brown? "May... if you were going to escape inconspicuously out of a concrete-floored pier during a fire, from a dead end with no doors, and you had lots of time to set up charges beforehand, how would you do it?"

"Hmm... I'd blow a hole and make a trap door. A small one, just big enough for a person." May moved over to the dresser to put on jeans and a T-shirt. "Small shaped charges in a ring for precision, and smokers to hide the result. If I didn't want anyone to realize what I'd done right away, I might put some charges on the roof to weaken it and set it on fire so it would collapse soon after. And I'd use something large as a covering explosion. With a blast as big as the one you described, no one would notice a smaller one going off at the same time. The FBI should look UNDER the pier!"

"He could have escaped." Rally's heart started to beat furiously. "It's possible. Brown could be alive."

"But you said he screamed in agony! You said you tried to get in to save him!" May ran over and hugged Rally again. "You were so upset, honey!"

"The man was an ACTOR!" Rally spat. "A really good one! He could change personas, accents, vocabulary — on a moment's notice! Screaming his head off would NOT be a stretch! Ooooh!" Rally leaped up and stomped across the room. "If he's not dead, I'm going to KILL him!"

"I'll second that motion!"

"So maybe he faked his death! THAT'S why he pulled me into his defection! That is what it was all about... no, wait."

"What?"

“I wondered about that. Brown seemed to want me to shoot him. O’Toole herded me back towards Brown when I tried to escape, and when he had me pinned, he called Brown out of the office... out of cover. He’d said ‘just do it myself and that’ll have to do’, something like that, and Brown said that was too much to ask. O’Toole loved Brown. LOVED him, and of course Brown knew it. Asking him to shoot Brown *would* have been too much to ask. Probably would have shook so hard he’d have ruined his aim! But Brown had to get shot! By me, or at least with my gun, and they wanted me to stay alive and escape with it, because O’Toole could have simply killed me and taken the gun. He had lots of chances.”

“This is heading somewhere,” said May, looking scared. The black folder lay forgotten on the bed.

“You bet it is. Ballistics.”

“Ballistics?” asked May, picking up the report.

“They wanted a spent bullet from my gun. One that had been fired into a body, because bullets deform differently according to what they strike. Hitting Kevlar or a solid surface flattens them much more than hitting flesh — the difference is blatant.” Rally creased her forehead. “I shot a lot of bullets in that warehouse — into the office ceiling, into the solid wooden wall, into O’Toole’s armored vest, and four through the glass wall, of which only the last one or two hit Brown.” She ticked them off and brandished an index finger as a period to the list. “There are spent bullets of mine lying all over in there!”

“But O’Toole was going to set a fire! He’d know the lead would melt pretty quick.”

“Bingo. The only way they could be sure of having a properly deformed bullet, identifiable as mine, was to have it in someone’s body.”

“In someone’s *body*?” May shuddered. “But he’d still have to get out of there before the whole place went up!”

“It fit Brown’s plan to fake his death for that person... to be him.” Rally let out a long heated breath. “My God. He was braver than I gave him credit for, even if it was in a cause like that.”

“But... how could they know you were not going to KILL him?” gasped May.

“I’m one of the best target shooters I know, and it carries over to combat situations, even with a lousy little gun. I *don’t* miss what I’m aiming at.”

“I know that, but...”

“Brown had to know that about me too. He also had to know I don’t kill people unless I absolutely have to. I’m not a murderer.”

“Killing HIM wouldn’t have been murder!”

“His shooting hand was crippled, May. I did that to him myself. He was completely unarmed. For my own sake if not for his... how could I have put a bullet in his brain, even right then?” Rally vehemently shook her head. “He was directing O’Toole to shoot, but he never touched a gun himself. That’s according to... the rules.”

“Brown worked all that out? He made it happen?”

“That’s right, he did. Because he was, or is, a dead-on self-taught psychologist, an amazing researcher and an excellent actor, which are very nearly all the same thing.” Rally’s throat tightened and her stomach cramped. “He miscalculated me once or twice, yeah. He sure as hell wasn’t going to do it three times in a row!”

May sucked in a deep breath and blew it out again. “This guy sounds like a *totally* meticulous planner. This does NOT sound like a guy who would accidentally die in a fire after he set up all the factors.”

“Nope, it doesn’t. But that’s not what I’m truly wondering about.”

“...Why am I not surprised?”

“Brown and O’Toole didn’t realize that the mini was a loaner. They thought I was going to keep using it after that night, and that it would be plausible that someone would die with a distinctively striated .32 through the head or the heart in the near future. What I really want to know is... for whose murder was I going to be framed?”

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“This gives me the creeps, “ said May, looking around and shivering as Rally deposited her FBI check into an automatic teller on a busy street outside their hotel. Shoppers and office workers streamed by on the sidewalk and the noontime traffic moved slowly. “It feels like big invisible things all around us. Conspiracies and plots and... malice. Or something.”

“You sound like you need some lunch, sweetie.”

“My tummy’s BAD.” May rubbed her midsection with a tongue-out expression of nausea. “Yes, let’s eat.”

Rally took out a hundred dollars in twenties and tucked them in her purse. “We’re set for food. Want to eat somewhere nicer today?”

“Sure! How about Thai?”

“Oh, no...” groaned Rally. “Not Thai!”

“Huh?”

“Sweetie, you are so lucky you had a CHOICE about working where you did!”

“What the hell’s that got to do with — ?” May put her fists on her hips and gave Rally an impatient sigh. “Girl, you have developed a *lot* of weird food prejudices lately!”

“OK, OK — you pick the restaurant! I have no say in this whatsoever, and it’s your stomach, anyway!” Rally threw up her hands.

“Sounds like yours is growling, too!”

“Huh?” She heard a distant rumble, growing louder even above the noisy street traffic. “That’s not my stomach.” They both looked down the street. “Sounds like... a Harley?”

There it was, approaching from the southeast. Rally pointed at the gleaming black machine. “Oooh! Looks like a brand-new Night Train. Nice bike!”

The rider seemed smallish for such a big raked-fork mount, but he barged through traffic with little caution, splitting the lanes and racing right up the street toward them. He wore a black helmet with a face panel that entirely obscured his features. “He’s not going to keep that bike shiny for long, riding it like that — ”

Rally looked at the rider more closely as he came within fifty yards. A wiry little man in a dark green jumpsuit, his movements quick and sure. Her heart jumped and began to beat faster. “May, get back! I think I recognize that guy!”

May retreated into the architectural recess by the automatic teller machine and peered out. “Who?”

“*O’Toole!*” Barely ten yards away now. “Watch it!”

The bike made a sharp right and jumped the curb. O’Toole barreled straight at Rally, pulling an Uzi. Pedestrians fled and screamed. Rally threw herself backwards out of the motorcycle’s path, drawing her CZ75 at the same moment. They fired simultaneously.

KRAK! Rally’s nine-millimeter hit O’Toole square in the chest. The bullet punched a hole in his jumpsuit and sent up a puff of dust from the armored vest underneath. BRAAP! His burst plowed into the automatic teller behind her and smashed holes in the screen. May shrieked and crouched on the ground, hands over her head. O’Toole zoomed past Rally almost close enough to touch, his snarling face faintly visible under the dark face panel.

“May! Do you have any of your — ”

“Two confetti bombs!” May scrabbled under her jacket and pulled them free. “Oh, shit! Everything else is in the car!”

O’Toole rammed through the fleeing crowd and out to the street. He screeched a U-turn and aimed again. “He’s making another pass! Get ready!”

May threw her confetti bombs. O’Toole ignored them. He plowed into the billowing pink smoke without swerving a millimeter from his course.

“Damn!” Rally fired into the smoke and heard a bullet carom off O’Toole’s helmet. It hit a parked car. “Oh, no, it’s bulletproof! I’m going to send ricochets into the crowd!”

BRAAAP! He let off another burst at her, which barely missed her head as she ducked. Fragments of glass and metal from the automatic teller flew all over.

“Take Junior under cover! NOW!” Rally shoved her partner toward an open store entrance. May gave her a terrified glance and ran.

O’Toole paralleled her, knocking people aside with the big black Harley and aiming directly at her blonde head. Rally fired twice. The Uzi acquired two holes through the receiver and O’Toole’s next trigger pull jammed.

O’Toole cursed and threw down the Uzi. He drew his Colt .45 and skidded to a J-turn stop, now facing Rally from about fifteen yards down the sidewalk.

May made it through the door and slammed it behind her. Rally ducked into the architectural recess as the teller machine groaned and whined, spitting out twenty-dollar bills at a great rate. O’Toole put down the kickstand, got off the motorcycle and leveled his .45.

All around him, people hollered into their cell phones and ran, but the crowd was still thick. A few people even tried to retrieve some of the flying money. KRAK KRAK KRAK crashed the .45 into the wall right in front of Rally’s face, spraying dust and shards. Though Rally threw up an arm to shield her face, bits of the cratered bricks lodged in her unprotected eyes. She was half blinded!

Blinking and tearing, Rally yanked her trigger as O’Toole advanced. She fired again and again at his chest in the hope of slowing him down a little. He staggered — he didn’t have Bean’s imperviousness — but he kept coming.

Rally’s blindness worsened, her eyes burning and stinging so much that she could barely open them to tell where O’Toole was. There wasn’t a chance that she could

take off his trigger finger with a random shot, and she couldn't see well enough to aim at anything other than his general shape.

She slid down the wall and took a low crouch. Bills fluttered around her head, which didn't help the visibility one bit. O'Toole moved around the automatic teller with his gun braced at shoulder level and paused for an instant when his sights didn't immediately fall on her. Rally fired straight up at him, at the gap between vest and helmet. The bullet hit the lower edge of the helmet, deflected into the padding and tore through it.

"Arrgh!" O'Toole bellowed and tore off the helmet, seizing his face in his left hand. His rusty hair stood up in sweaty spikes, his mouth bleeding profusely and his lower jaw oddly out of alignment. The bullet had probably broken it. He screamed at her in incoherent curses, his eyes filling with tears of pain. He fired wildly, bullets hitting the sidewalk and wall behind Rally as she sprang out of the way. KRAK KRAK KRAK KRAK!

Rally pushed off from the wall and lunged for O'Toole's legs. He fell to the sidewalk and hit the back of his head on the concrete. Jolted, he looked glassy-eyed for a moment. Rally sat hard on his stomach and knelt on his elbows.

She yanked at the zipper of his jumpsuit and tore at the Velcro straps to open his bullet-resistant vest. When O'Toole got his wind back and struggled, she struck him across the face with her CZ75, provoking a howl. The vest slipped and she glimpsed a strange burn on his upper chest. Lines — no, strokes? She stared at it for a moment, trying to make sense of the figure. Sirens whined in the distance.

"Ooaaggh!" yelled O'Toole through his broken jaw, thrashing his body and trying to aim. Rally got a foot on his right hand and stomped the .45 to the concrete. She lunged up to stand and pointed her gun straight at his exposed chest. A twenty soared down like an autumn leaf and rested on the strange burn.

"Give up, O'Toole!" she shouted, tears still running down her face from her irritated eyes. O'Toole's answer was not understandable, but he whipped his left hand over his head and grabbed Rally's ankle with a movement so swift she couldn't avoid it.

He jerked her leg and rolled over. Rally lost her stance and stumbled back, barely avoiding a fall. O'Toole crouched on the sidewalk and fired from close range. She desperately twisted and ducked. KRAK KRAK! One bullet whistled through her hair, another grazed her shoulder.

He'd shot off his nine-round clip! Rally frantically scrubbed her eyes on her sleeve and finally cleared her vision completely.

O'Toole popped the empty magazine from his .45 and let it clatter to the sidewalk. Rally whipped around and drew a bead on his right eye. The sulfurous

iris glared at her, but he thrust a hand in a jumpsuit pocket and pulled out a fresh load.

Rally shot the magazine out of his hand. “Freeze!” she yelled. “Throw away the gun!” The whining sirens swelled to a scream. Instead of obeying, O’Toole launched himself at her quick as a snake. He struck her CZ75 with an open palm and knocked her shot into the sky. Then he clamped down on the gun and tried to twist it from her hand.

They wrestled for a moment, O’Toole’s sour breath fogging in her face and bloody saliva trickling down his chin. His hands corded with effort. Strength versus strength — she couldn’t win a contest of muscle with him. The wiry little man forced his fingers under hers and almost parted her gun from her grip.

Rally gritted her teeth with a touch of panic and tried to turn the barrel around to aim at him. Her fingers slipped, her sweaty grip weakened. Broken jaw hanging, O’Toole grinned. Bloody-toothed, his yellow eyes burning into hers with pain, fury and dawning triumph.

Rally drove a knee into his testicles. He let out a gasp but didn’t release his hold on the gun. His arms trembled, however, and Rally shoved the CZ75 into his face, hitting him square in his broken jaw. He cried out and doubled over with one hand on his face and the other going to his injured groin. Rally tried to slam her gun into the back of his head, but O’Toole recovered, lashed out with a karate kick to her stomach and staggered her. He scrambled for his Harley. May emerged from the store with a long clothes-rack pole and swung it at him as he revved the engine. She hit him and lost the pole, though O’Toole kept his seat. He zoomed past Rally and into the street.

She took a snap shot at his rear tire, gasping for breath, but put out a tail light instead. Rally and May ran for the Cobra, parked at the curb, and followed with squealing tires and a cloud of flying money behind them. Pedestrians converged on the malfunctioning cash machine.

May turned on the FBI radio and yelled into the handset. “It’s O’Toole! We just had a house call from Brown’s bodyguard! Heading northeast on Market from Kearny! Black Harley-Davidson Night Train!”

“We got the alert from the SFPD!” came Gonzales’s voice. “Police heading your way.”

“He’s evading me!” said Rally. “He can get through all the gaps on that bike!” O’Toole had accelerated to about a hundred miles an hour in congested traffic, slicing between stopped cars, and Rally had no chance of keeping up. “This isn’t going to work!”

“There are units about to cut him off,” said Gonzales.

“He’s way ahead of us now — going fast,” said May. “Oh, no! What’s that?”

A black Range Rover with a reinforced grille pulled out from the curb ahead in what looked like a calculated move. Two SFPD cars approached from the opposite direction and turned broadside to block the motorcycle’s path. The Range Rover rammed between their noses and created a gap, then reversed out. O’Toole shot through and past the police units, and the black car continued to reverse in the Cobra’s direction.

“Who the hell’s driving that?” For a cold, horrible instant, Rally was sure it was Bean. She stared at the face in the rear-view as the Range Rover came closer. A thick, jowly man with sunglasses and dark curly hair — Manichetti. “Shit!”

The Range Rover turned ninety degrees with a squeal of brakes and tires, roared forward again and dived into a small cross street. The Harley receded into the distance. Rally could not pass the damaged black-and-whites blocking the road ahead, so she took the right turn in pursuit of the car. Manichetti glanced at her in the mirror.

Both of them accelerated up a narrow road lined with parked cars, barely enough room for one lane left between them. The Range Rover crossed an intersection just in front of another car, which screeched to a stop. Rally had to brake to avoid hitting it; no room to pass. Manichetti gained two blocks on her before she could squeeze around the obstacle and pursue him again. Far ahead, he crested a hill, took a hard right in the middle of a block and vanished.

“What the hell? Where did he go?” Rally reached the spot a few moments later. All she saw was a series of louvered metal garage doors set into the wall of an old brick building. Every one of them was closed tight. “Dammit!” She slowed down and circled the block, hoping to spot him if he emerged on the other side, but no Range Rover showed.

“He went into a garage, 800 block of Octavia Street,” said May into the radio. “It looks like a factory or a warehouse — private property.”

“Who cares!” said Rally, braking when another car pulled out of a parking space. “I’ll just barge in there and — ”

“You can’t do that, Ms. Vincent,” said Wesson over the radio. “You have no search warrant, and that’s not a public garage.”

“What? I’m a bounty hunter! I don’t need a search warrant!”

“You are deputized on official FBI business, I would remind you. For now, that makes you technically a law enforcement officer. You must observe the legal rules. I must say, your methods are not only sloppy, they border on — ”

“Oh, SHIT! Not only am I the FBI’s property, I have to go by the BOOK!” Rally’s fury knew no bounds. “Wesson, I *know* I’m not the one who killed Huang! SO KEEP YOUR GODDAMN GOVERNMENT SCRUPLES TO YOURSELF, YOU — !”

“*What?!*” spat out Wesson in similar fury. “How did you — ”

Rally bit her tongue. She’d almost given May away! “Just a lucky guess! I saw how rattled you were this morning when I asked for the ballistics report! So there!” She shut off the radio and kept circling the block.

“God, Rally,” said May, turning a little pale. “I know you don’t like the agents, but you have got to be more careful.”

“I’m sorry! My lips are sealed!” Three SFPD cars came up and Rally rolled down the window to speak to them. She pointed at the garage doors. “Hi, officers! This is the building.”

“We’ll keep an eye on it, ma’am. Black Range Rover, California plates?”

“Exactly. And the driver — white, name of Manichetti, about forty, six-*zip*, two hundred and eighty. Brown and brown.”

“Got it.”

Rally took a deep breath as her adrenaline began to ebb. “Officer, do you know a patrolman named Tony White?”

The cop looked up from his notebook. “Yes...”

“Is he OK? I know he was hurt yesterday. And the armorer at the main HQ? What’s going on with that?”

The cop grimaced, obviously not inclined to consider her completely innocent in either case. “Armorer’s on suspension. The guy who runs the firing range got a reprimand. The police union’s fighting both judgments.”

“Oh shit... and Patrolman White?”

“He’s in the hospital. Got surgery and he’s all racked out on a frame to keep his back straight. Maybe he’ll walk, maybe he won’t.”

“Thank you, Officer,” said Rally quietly, and drove May to lunch.

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“We’re all set,” Smith told her over the phone. “Coleman’s at your hotel and ready to start from there, and we’ll have two cars following. Me and Wesson, and Gonzales and Bui in the other. You take care of that Miata, now.”

“Sure will, Agent.” Rally patted the FBI car’s dashboard. “It’s a cute little thing!”

“Nothing compared to the Cobra, I know. But you don’t want to be too distinctive, of course.”

“No.” She wanted to ask Smith if he had seen the ballistics report yet, but decided to wait until she saw him in person. Preferably with Wesson in the room. It was almost certain that Smith knew nothing about it, since she doubted that he was the kind to keep such a thing from her. Of course, on the other hand, he had not told her about the rescue operation in Los Angeles.

She had left May at the hotel, telling her to hide the black folder in a safe place until later, and although May had looked disappointed, she had agreed to keep it concealed and not read it until a safer time. Rally had picked up the Miata at the Federal Building and given her Cobra to Roy, who perked up slightly when she told him his help was valuable. He had a haunted look, patting her shoulder frequently, though gingerly, and could not get off the subject of Bean and his various malfeasances.

Rally checked her list of properties. “OK, you told me that the garage Manichetti went into is owned by interests connected to the Mafia, not the Triads.”

“Yes. We’re getting a search warrant now, but I warn you, it’s not likely he’s still there, even with the SFPD stakeout. Some of those old buildings have tunnels connecting the basements, and the Mob seeks them out.”

“Oh, great. Hmm... that would seem to say that Manichetti and O’Toole are not working with the Dragons. But I saw something on O’Toole’s chest... a fresh burn. It wasn’t a random blotch. It was a drawing.”

“A drawing?”

“Like a Chinese character. Of course, I don’t read Chinese. I copied down what I could remember. May’s not sure what it was, since she never learned to write more than a few characters. But there’s only one person I can think of who could, or would, have done that to him.”

“You thinking of 426?”

“Yes. That must have been done with a blowtorch, and he would have been howling in pain when it happened. Looked very fresh. The question is, why didn’t 426 just kill him, if he had hold of him?”

“Don’t know. Not like 426, I admit... I’ve talked a little to Mr. Sam today. When I could get through the well-wishing crowds, that is. The Asian business community has taken up a collection for the Sams, and it’s pushing a hundred thousand dollars by now. They should have no trouble setting up anew in any location they want.”

“That’s wonderful, Agent Smith.”

“Hey... call me Pete. You and the FBI may be working together for a while longer, Miss Rally.”

That prospect did not bother her nearly as much as it once had, except in regard to Smith’s partner. “OK, Pete.” Rally smiled. “I will see you later when I’ve finished my real estate tour.”

“You OK with just the cell phone for contact?”

“I think the radio would be too obvious. And I can’t carry it anyway. I might as well use the phone.”

“Your call... literally.” Smith chuckled. “Be careful, now.”

Rally clicked off and consulted her city map, circling locations. Most of the buildings were in the business district and south of Market, and she decided to park the Miata in the general vicinity and do most of the tour on foot. She had already discovered how difficult it was to find spaces to park in that area, and it would speed things up, even considering the walking time.

Rally cruised down a busy street, enjoying the little car’s pep, and circled for a few minutes until she could snag a spot. She had dressed in her professional outfit of short black skirt, collared shirt and tie, and wore a tan jacket to hide her holstered CZ75. There was the first building, right at the corner, and she had ten to check off the list. Rally took a deep breath, walked through the front door and got started.

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“Ooaagghh! Oooooaarrgggh!”

“Keeh-rihst, Tom. You’re gonna wake up the kid.” Manichetti looked through the door of the tract-house kitchen and shook his head. “Didn’t ya give him something, Doc?”

“Two entire ampules of morphine,” said the sweating doctor, trying to hold O’Toole’s head still on the table and fit a wire brace to his broken jaw as he screamed. Blood spattered the vinyl floor. “Doesn’t seem to have much effect.”

“OOOOAAGGGHH!” howled O’Toole.

“Give him a few shots of whiskey,” said Manichetti, and ducked his head around the corner to look at someone down the hall. “He’s just kinda hurting, ma’am. Hasn’t got much pain threshold for a guy in his line.”

“Please, Manny,” said a feminine voice. A slim blonde woman peeped into the kitchen, her lovely face creasing in revulsion and reluctant sympathy as O’Toole continued to howl and thrash. “Can’t we stay somewhere else? Do we have to...” She lowered her voice. “I don’t like having him around. Not just the noise, Manny. You know what I mean.”

“Don’t I, though,” Manichetti replied, guiding her back into the hallway. “I’m sorry, Sarah. I thought he’d come in handy. Not like I have a lot of choices in bodyguards right now. The Dragons don’t fool around.”

“I know.” She looked at him, her iris-blue eyes wide and ingenuous. “Sly never told me how much danger he was in, and this is something I have even less experience with. You know best, Manny.” A small voice murmured and a bedroom door eased open. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry it’s so noisy. Mr. O’Toole got hurt.”

“He gets hurt a lot,” said the child, wrinkling her nose. “He smells bad, too.”

“Come back into your room, baby.” Sarah Brown patted the girl’s dark-blonde hair. “Come with Mama, Tiffy.”

“I don’t wanna take a nap. I don’t like this room. I like my old room. It was bigger. I want to talk to Daddy.” The girl hugged her stuffed teddy. The adults looked at each other with trepidation.

“Daddy’s not here, honey. He took another trip. Please go take your nap, or you’ll get all tired before dinner, baby. Just for Mama, honey?” She bent and kissed one rosy cheek, and the girl sighed. She looked up at Manichetti with a luminous gaze, her big brown eyes rimmed with dark lashes.

“Does Manny say I got to take a nap?”

“Yep,” said Manichetti, and picked the girl up, bumping the bedroom door open with his knee in a practiced motion. “Ol’ Manny says Miss Tiffany has got to take her nap. C’mon, I’ll read you a story.”

“Read me a story, Manny,” said the girl, cuddling in his arms. “I want a story.”

“You bet,” he said, and he and Sarah Brown went into the child’s bedroom, closing the door behind them. About twenty minutes later, the yelling from the kitchen having ceased, they tiptoed out and gently closed the door again. “Hope

she sleeps a while,” said Manichetti. Smiling, he looked at Sarah Brown. “This’ll be over soon as I get the papers and the cash, ma’am. We can all get to Switzerland and meet up there. Mr. Brown arranged everything.”

She nodded, also smiling, and reached up to smooth a lock of hair from his forehead. The look in his eyes threatened to spread to his entire broad face, but he made an effort and tamped it down. “You might want to get some rest too, ma’am. No telling when we might have to blow town.”

Sarah Brown nodded again and went into another bedroom. Manichetti turned around to see O’Toole leaning alone against the kitchen door, his jaw wired partway shut and his eyes bloodshot. He raised a large tumbler full of whiskey and downed half, dribbling it along his cheeks.

“Somethin’, Tom?”

“Ain’t the snip gettin’ sweet on ye,” said O’Toole in a venomous tone, muffled by the wire brace and a drunken slur. “Wraps ye around ‘er little pinky finger, don’t she? Why don’t ye lick ‘er boots and be done with it?”

“Shut the fuck up, Tom,” said Manichetti, flapping a hand downwards to signal for quiet. “You are fucking drunk.”

“Like I got a choice? Fockin’ bitch broke me fockin’ jaw an’ it focking hurts. I hate women. Hate ‘em. I hate that nigger bitch worse’n any woman I ever knew. Even me old ma, God blast her black soul, didn’t never shoot me in the fockin’ face.” He started to cry. “Paki bitch burned me sweet lad. I didn’t never love no one in me life ‘til I met Sylvester Brown. Fockin’ woman took him from me. He’s gone, me darlin’ lad. Didn’t never get to kiss his sweet lips...”

Manichetti rolled his eyes and angrily stage-whispered. “You gonna be so drunk you’ll tell me your goddamn sex fantasies, do it someplace else. Don’t do it around the kid. She don’t know her daddy’s dead, and we aren’t going to tell her yet. So shut up and get out’ve the house until you’re sober.”

“Yeah, why should I be hangin’ around, anyway? Why would I want ta work for the snip an’ the brat without me darlin’ lad about? I didn’t sign on ta nursemaid that hoity-toity bitch — I’d like to see ‘er all spread out an’ beggin’ for more, wouldn’t I now?” O’Toole let out a sloppy laugh and snapped open a black-bladed commando knife. “That’d put ‘er in ‘er place, now wouldn’t it? Give ‘er me hard nine inches and watch ‘er... oogghh!”

Manichetti punched him in the stomach, his eyes blazing dark fire. The whiskey splashed the wall; the glass hit the carpet and rolled. “Get out’ve here! And don’t bother coming back, you fucking savage! Guess the fucking Micks never got out’ve their caves!”

“Yeh greasy wop sodomite!” O’Toole got out, gasping and waving the knife. “Yeh fat bastard Eyetalians all fuck yer mothers, don’t ye now? Ye like going in where ye came out?”

“Get your shit and get out,” said Manichetti. He drew his .40 Beretta and cocked it with a deliberate click. “I don’t want to see your ugly face again long as I live!”

O’Toole gave him an evil look, closed the knife and lurched down the hallway to the garage door. A few minutes later he emerged with a duffel and his rifle strapped across his back, slammed the front door open and left. The roar of a big Harley started in the driveway and receded, the tires skidding irregularly.

Manichetti let out a long sigh of equal parts relief and foreboding, holstered the Beretta and knocked gently on Sarah Brown’s bedroom door.

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“And this is the Web designer’s area,” said an eager young man, showing Rally around the sixth property at which she had inquired. “See, we have a juke box and a pool table, and the pinball machine’s over there. The vending machines are all subsidized.” He picked up a quarter from a basket full and put it in the slot of a Coke machine. “You want something to drink?”

“No, thanks,” said Rally, politely but a little wearily. “Uh, I don’t see a lot of actual work going on.” Several other young men, most of them badly out of shape and wearing T-shirts advertising video games, stood around the pool table drinking sodas and laughing loudly. “Isn’t it a little late in the afternoon for lunch breaks?”

“Oh, we have a flexible hours policy,” said the young man. “Some of these guys stay here all night. Sleep right under the desks — there’s Mark’s camp cot.”

“I can see why,” she remarked, glancing into one of the cubicles. A twenty-inch television with enormous speakers sat on the desk, and three more young men, two of them Asian, and one woman were watching a videotape of ‘Big Trouble in Little China’. “I doubt they have all this cool stuff at home.”

“Yeah, you have a point... um, are you a journalist or a venture capitalist?”

“Freelancer,” said Rally, and gave him a card.

“Bounty hunter? Wow — like Steve McQueen in ‘The Hunter’?”

“Yes, *exactly* like that,” said Rally with sweet sarcasm, and left. Out on the street, she looked at the sun declining behind the high-rises and checked her watch. Nearly four. She would go to one more place and call it a day. Taking out her cell phone, she tried to call Smith. The phone was dead.

“Aw, crap.” She’d forgotten to charge the battery the previous night, so it hadn’t lasted long. Rally put the phone back in her purse and headed down the sidewalk.

Her car was now about one and a half miles distant, and she groaned at the prospect of walking back all that way with aching feet. But the next address, 108 Redwood Lane, was only a block away, and she might as well check it first before heading back. The discreet sign out front said ‘World Trade International’.

All the businesses she had checked had been utterly innocuous, though she might have put Internet enterprises on the questionable list, and her instincts told her nothing as she moved through a revolving door and walked up to yet another reception desk with yet another security camera behind it. “Hi there.”

The woman behind the desk was Asian, as had been three other front-office people, and she smiled at Rally. “May I help you?”

“Oh, I’m from out of town. Just getting a feel for the business climate in the Bay Area. I’m thinking of relocating. Could anyone tell me about the facilities here?” She’d told a slightly different story in each place, but generally got the best results with a smile and an easy manner, no matter what the pretext might be.

“Oh, the building manager’s here. He’s got some other properties for lease. He’d be glad to talk to you.” The receptionist picked up a phone and spoke into it. “He’ll be right out.”

Rally took a seat in the lobby, glad to take the load off her feet for a moment. In a few minutes, a thirtyish man emerged from the double doors behind the reception desk, bleached-blond and wearing an earring and a casual suit. “Hello there. I hear you’re interested in the building. Well, I’m interested in keeping that interest, Ms. — ?”

“Victor,” said Rally. “Ruth Victor.”

“Oooh, sounds tough. You must be an aggressive negotiator.” He had a salesman’s manner, but that was to be expected. Rally smiled back at him and got up to follow.

Through the double doors, a featureless corridor ran to the back of the building, broken by occasional doors. “This is just my storage and maintenance rooms on the ground floor,” said the building manager. “The offices are upstairs, and the garage goes down three levels, though it doesn’t cover the entire architectural footprint. There’s a partial basement that’s fireproof and earthquake proof — there was going to be a bank vault in there.”

He nattered on for several minutes, listing every amenity. “Lots of employee parking, and even living quarters on the second and third floors. Now about the seismic upgrades — ”

“Living quarters?” Rally chuckled. Now that seemed to be going a bit far, even in a world of camp cots in cubicles. “This World Trade International have flexible hours or something?”

“Oh, something like that. They have a big sales force that goes out on assignments all the time. People here all around the clock.” The manager assumed a confidential air. “Now, don’t tell anyone I told you, but I’m not sure they’re entirely on the up and up.”

Rally’s mind gave off a slight alarm. “How so?” Probably he meant that they took investors’ money and spent it on pool tables, but maybe she was getting warm at last.

“Well, they generally pay the rent in cash. Always on time, and they don’t ask for every little thing to be fixed. I’d have to say they’re good tenants. But I keep getting hassles from the bank about the big cash deposits. Some dumb law.”

“You mean the anti-racketeering laws?” Rally raised a brow. “Not so dumb.”

“Oooh, you’re into law and order? Sounds exciting.”

“Totally,” said Rally, looking around with every sense alert. “Any chance I can see the garage? Or this basement vault?” She’d get a feel for the place, maybe some actual confirmation, and scoot — the FBI could do the rest.

“Not the basement. They say there’s some hazardous materials in there, but they have all the permits, so I don’t care. The garage is no problem.”

The manager took out a ring of keys and unlocked a door. “Stairwell. The fire exits are all up to code.” Rally followed him down the stairs to the bottom and through another door to the garage. It was well-lit and new-looking, partially filled with sleek cars. “They must pay well, hmm? Look at these jalopies.”

She did, noting that they were almost uniformly imported luxury sedans. Over in a roped-off section, however, were a number of motorcycles and SUVs. Rally walked over to them, checking makes and models.

Behind a large Ford Expedition stood a black-on-black Harley-Davidson, the logo shining silver on the gas tank. A big Night Train, looking brand new except for some scrapes along the sides and a shattered tail light. Someone had left the keys in the ignition, as if too hurried or distracted or in too much pain to remember to take them. A few smears of blood were visible on the handlebars.

“OK, I’ve seen enough. Thank you so much. May I have your card?”

“Yeah, here you go. Give me a call, or there’s the fax number — ” He broke off, glancing over her shoulder. Rally’s sixth sense flared, finally, when she realized it was already too late.

A person ten yards behind her spoke. Slurred with fading drunkenness and an injured jaw, deep and growling with a hint of Irish lilt.

“And if it ain’t the pretty girlie,” he said. “Little Paki bitch.”

Rally slowly turned and watched eight Dragon men approach from another door. They spread out around O’Toole with drawn automatic weapons, Uzis and Tek-9s. If she tried to run, they would cut her into pieces in an instant, and probably kill the petrified building manager as well.

O’Toole grinned at her, his nicotine-stained teeth rimmed in dark yellow. “Yeh killed me darlin’ lad. An’ just look at this damn wire on me handsome face, an’ me poor ear. What ought I do to ye?”

He looked at the building manager, who beat a hasty, cowardly retreat to the stairwell. His steps clanged up the stairs and faded.

Two of the larger Dragons came forward and grabbed her arms, taking her CZ75 and the .25 from the wrist slide. One man decocked them and put the .25 in his pocket. He replaced the CZ75 in the holster, draping it over his shoulder.

“Try letting me go, O’Toole,” said Rally, mostly succeeding in keeping her voice steady. “The cops and the FBI know I’m here.”

“Bollocks they do. They don’t send little girlies to do a man’s job.” He unzipped his nylon jacket and nodded at the men who held her arms. “Put her flat.” They forced her to her knees, then prone, her arms bent behind her. Each man knelt on the back of one knee, heavily and painfully. Was he going to shoot her in the back of the skull?

O’Toole’s feet right in front of her face. He caressed her cheek with one booted toe. “This won’t take long, fellas, an’ then ye can all have yer turns, those that care to. We’ll save a few bits for the latecomers.” Drawing back the boot, O’Toole kicked Rally hard in the face and laughed at her cry of pain.

“You’re going to regret this, you bastard...” she gasped.

“I’m already regrettin’ I ever heard yer name, yeh wee bitch. But I’ll have me fun, won’t I? Me sweet lad’s lookin’ down from heaven and noddin’ his approval, ain’t he?” O’Toole moved behind her. His jacket hit the floor.

He knelt between her legs and yanked her skirt up over her buttocks, then tore her hose apart at the crotch seam. Rally twisted violently, but the men holding her ground her knees into the concrete and forced her face down.

“Oh, I like ‘em wiggling. Keep it up, girlie, and I’ll be right there with yeh.” She heard O’Toole unzip his pants, sick horror bringing the bile to her mouth. With a desperate arch of her back, she lashed her entire body from side to side and dislodged the crushing weights from her legs.

Scrambling on concrete, she skinned her knees badly, but ignored the pain. Rally got to her feet and ran, steps pounding close behind her. Reaching a support column, she looped an arm around it and launched herself in an arc around and back at her pursuers.

Her shoes took one Dragon in the face and another in the shoulder, and she landed. Two men tried to grab her, but Rally dodged and rammed her elbow into the nearest stomach. The owner went down, gasping, but four more men stepped over him and converged on her. O’Toole stood back with an ugly grin.

“No exits, girlie. Locked all the doors on the inside. Takes a car or a bike ta trigger the garage gate, so it’s no good runnin’ that way either. Saw yeh on the security cam and we just had ta come greet ye. Proper welcome, eh?”

Rally fought with all her determination and skill, knowing exactly what was going to happen to her: inevitably, inescapably. She had no gun, no chance unarmed against so many. From somewhere deep inside her came a silent prayer, breathed out through clenched teeth. She chopped and kicked, struggled out of clutching grasps and went down at last under three heavy attackers, her bones jarring on the hard surface. God, help me, she prayed. God, be with me now. God, let me come to you quickly...

“Don’t I get an invite?” asked someone a little distance off. “You jokers startin’ the party without me, when I said I’d be here?”

She knew that voice too. Through her roaring ears, pounding with her own heartbeats, it was difficult to make out at first. The latecomer spoke again in reply to someone’s remark.

“Hey, I may be new, but I know the rules around here. Share one, share all. Glad I called in when I did — I had a long drive this morning and I could use a little pick-me-up.” A low chuckle with a hard, brittle edge. “So don’t pass around the crackerjacks, boys... until I dig out the prize.”

It was Bean.

::: END OF VOLUME FIVE :::

CONTINUED IN VOLUME SIX