

~ White Fever ~

by Norsebard

Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

DISCLAIMERS:

This is an original story. All characters are created by me. If you wish to use any or all of these characters in your own stories, feel free to do so - I only ask that you send me an e-mail with the link to the story if you put it online.

All characters depicted in this story are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

The registered trademarks mentioned in this story are © of their respective owners. No infringement of their rights is intended, and no profit is gained.

This story depicts and refers to sexual relationships between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top right corner of your screen right away.

PLEASE NOTE - There is a massive amount of profanity in this story, so people who are easily offended by bad language should probably find something else to read.

SPECIAL WARNING for graphic violence

This story revolves around gangsters, hoodlums and goons of all shapes and sizes, and is therefore, by definition, graphically violent at times. In some scenes, that violence is directed towards women, so people who are disturbed by such themes are advised to find something else to read than this story.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Written April - September 2009

Jackie - Thank you **very** much for giving me a key piece of advice at just the right time. This story would've been less without your input.

Jae - Thank you for your feedback and suggestions **wave**

"Strong dames, fast cars, bad boys - WHITE FEVER" :D

"When the going gets tough, WHITE FEVER just reloads" :D

*

*

CHAPTER 1

Maeve Donnelly turned off Madison Boulevard and drove into the dark alley. The rumble from the Ford Mustang GT's exhaust echoed back and forth between the tall buildings, and caused a few rats to scurry this way and that.

She stopped the engine and got out of the car. She closed the door and leaned against it with her arms crossed over her chest, making sure her right hand was close to the Beretta 92F she wore in a shoulderholster.

She was an impressive sight. Everyone knew her as White Fever, a street name she had received for always wearing white jeans, and for her spiky, white hair. Some people mistakenly called her 'petite' - At 5'5", she wasn't tall, but a closer look at the abundance of muscles on her torso, arms and legs proved them wrong.

Other people called her a skirt-chaser, and *they* definitely weren't wrong. Her Irish green eyes, her cute smile and the two dimples saw to that. Maeve Donnelly could pick and choose from a wide selection of women... and she often did.

She looked around. The alley was like any other: plenty of trash, mostly discarded cardboard boxes and a few overturned shopping carts. A horrendous stench of God knows what hovered in the air. Two large dumpsters were placed down the far end of the alley, and by the looks of it, neither of them had been emptied this year.

She checked her watch, which read 10 past 10 PM. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. Jimmy Snakes, the man she was waiting for, was late, and she was going to tell him in so many words when he arrived.

'I don't know what the hell that junkie wants from me, anyway. Even that nitwit must know that I'm working for uncle Freddie, and that I'm not some two-bit dealer...' she thought and sighed.

Another five minutes went by, and by now, she was getting furious. She reached into the car and took out her cellphone. She dialed Snakes' number, and waited. Her black silk shirt stuck to her in all the wrong places, and she grumbled a bit about the weather being so muggy.

She jumped when Snakes' telephone started ringing not far from where she was standing. She threw the phone back into the car and drew her weapon.

"Snakes, you son of a bitch! If you think this is funny, wait until I kick your balls around the moon!" she roared out into the dark alley.

No reply was forthcoming, so she started going in the direction from where she had heard the

phone ringing.

Suddenly a flashlight was turned on right in her face, blinding her. Instinctively, she shielded her eyes with her free hand, and fired off two rounds into the darkness beyond the flashlight. She knew she had to get out of the way, but before she could move, Snakes returned the fire.

Two bullets hit her squarely in the chest, one just above her heart, and one on her right breast. The force of the impacts made her stagger backwards and she tripped over a piece of trash, making her fall heavily down onto the filthy surface. When she landed, her gun flew out of her hand, and she hit her head on the tarmac.

A young man came out of the shadows, holding a smoking .32 revolver. He was in his late 20's, with long, greasy hair and a scraggly beard. He wore a dirty, white muscle shirt and he was heavily tattooed around his neck and down his arms.

He let his eyes roam slowly up Maeve's body, at the tight white jeans, at the black silk shirt, now sporting two ugly holes right in the chest, and at the spiky white hair.

An evil grin spread out over his ugly face as he bent down to pick up Maeve's Beretta.

"Spoils for the winner. What a trophy, man. I killed White fuckin' Fever! Me, Jimmy fuckin' Snakes, man!" he roared into the alley and thumped his chest like a wannabe gorilla.

Several dogs began barking in the apartments, and a window was opened.

"Will you people keep quiet down there!" A female voice suddenly said from one of the windows above him.

He pointed the gun at the woman, but she slammed the window shut before he could get a good aim. He threw the old revolver away, and stuck the new Beretta in his pocket before walking back to his car, an old, beat-up Buick Century. He started it and quietly drove out into the traffic on Madison Boulevard.

After he had driven for a few minutes, he flipped open his cell phone and dialed the number to Salvatore Coluzzo.

"Yo, babe, tell your boss that Jimmy Snakes is calling," he said to the woman who had received the call.

'Coluzzo,' a voice said on the other end of the connection.

"Fever's dead, Bossman."

A long pause.

'She's... what?' the voice hissed.

"Dead, man, don't you hear good? I capped the bitch twice in the tits, man. Just like you told me. The rats are gnawin' on her bones right now."

'I didn't tell you to kill her, you goddamned moron! I told you to take her out of the picture for a few hours!'

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, Bossman. She's out of the picture, permanently..."

'I meant you should detain her! ...Hold her up! ...Stall her!'

"What the hell? You obviously haven't seen her, she had arms bigger than my ass, man! I had to ice her."

'You stoopid fuckin' idiot! Don't you understand what you have done? You've fuckin' killed Fast Freddie Donnelly's number two! He's gonna start a full scale war!'

"So? Don't you think he'd ha' done that if I had beat her up, or sumpin'? Fuck it, man. When do I get paid? 10 G, like we agreed on, Bossman."

A very long pause.

'That was for detaining her. For killing her you'll get a bullet,' Coluzzo said, in a disturbingly calm voice.

"Fuck you, man. 10 G."

Click.

Snakes looked dumbly at the phone and then threw it on the passenger seat.

Back in the alley, Maeve's body had indeed attracted the attention of a few rats, but they scurried away when she coughed. First once, then twice, and finally a big one that made her chest throb.

"Ouch..." she croaked, and coughed again. She sat up gingerly and very slowly in the middle of the filthy alley. Her fingers touched her chest, and found the bullet holes in the black silk shirt.

"Snakes, you sonovabitch."

She rapped her knuckles on her Kevlar bulletproof vest and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thanks, Kev."

The lack of weight under her left shoulder made her aware that her gun was missing. She looked around for it, but moving her head made her dizzy. She had a throbbing headache, and when she tried to feel if she had a bump on the back of the head, her fingers got coated in blood.

"Crap," she growled as she looked at the sticky red stuff.

'Shit, Maeve, you're in trouble now...' she thought, and looked up and down the alley. The gunshots hadn't attracted any attention, so she was the only one there. Even though she hated being dependent on others, she knew she had to get that bleeding looked at.

She rasped off a string of curses as she tried to get up. As soon as she moved her head, the headache worsened, and she had to slam her eyes shut to escape from the blue flashes that invaded her vision.

"Snakes, you son of a bitch," she repeated in a growly voice, still with her eyes closed.

After a minute-long struggle, she finally got up and had a closer look at where she was. She knew she shouldn't be driving in her condition, and it was too far back to the Mustang anyway, so she started walking in the other direction.

As she came to the end of the alley, she tried to remember which people on Madison Boulevard she could trust, but the beehive inside her head made it difficult to concentrate.

She leaned against the building on the corner of the alley and had a look around. She breathed a sigh of relief when she spotted the Irish green marquee outside Rose Dougal's bar.

Rose's place was on the other side of the very busy Madison Boulevard, and Maeve pondered how the hell she could get over there without being knocked down. Usually, she'd just run across, but that was out of the question now.

She took a deep breath and staggered out between the parked cars. A couple of people honked and shouted obscenities at her, but she made it across all six lanes in one piece.

In her battered state, she considered that a victory, and she grinned broadly as she opened the door to Rose's establishment. Now all she had to do was to safely navigate the four steps up into the bar itself.

._*._*._*_

"Staci, I need to go to the can. Hold the fort while I'm away," Rose Dougal said, and left the bar room for the bathroom.

Rose was in her late 50's, but she had so much spirit that she looked ten years younger. With her red hair and green eyes, she couldn't have hid her Irish ancestry even if she wanted to, and if those clues weren't enough, her brogue and fiery temper gave it away instantly.

Staci Hart nodded and grunted.

"No problem. We haven't had much to do this evening, anyway, so why should that change just because you need to take a leak?"

"True... but you never know, right?" Rose said, and disappeared out of sight.

Staci turned her head and looked down the narrow bar room. They had seven tables on the right up against the window, and nine against the wall to the back room. Currently, only one of the tables was occupied - three older gents were playing cards very noisily.

She wiped off the last of the wine glasses and hung them upside down in a rack above the bar. When she was finished with that, she polished the tap to the keg of Guinness, and then the surface of the counter.

"Oi, lassie, 'nother round of pints, if you will!" one of the card players said. On the table next to them, all the beer glasses they had emptied already were lined up - nine in total.

"More? What'll your wife say, Donnie?" Staci said as she poured three more pints.

"She says plenty, but I hav'n listened to her in years!"

The other two card players roared with laughter and slapped the first man on the back.

Staci put the three glasses on a tray and brought them down to the table. Without spilling a drop, she expertly avoided the inevitable gropes and pinches and put the tray down on the table top.

The little bell above the door jangled, and Staci looked up. For a second, she thought the figure standing in the doorway was a ghost.

"Rose, I need your hel... Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Staci Hart!" Maeve said loudly as she recognized the woman holding the tray.

Even in her fuzzy state, Maeve could still appreciate comeliness when she saw it - her eyes performed a slow journey upwards, over Staci's mile-long, jeans-clad legs, her deliciously accentuated hips, the flat planes of her stomach, now covered by a dark blue long-sleeved shirt, and up to her ample chest that Maeve remembered so well from years gone by. Reluctantly, her eyes continued upwards, over Staci's pale blue orbs and up to her jet black hair that was cut a lot shorter than it used to be.

The only things spoiling the ensemble were Staci's jaw hanging somewhere right above her navel and the gobsmacked look in her eyes.

Maeve grinned mischievously, but the headache returned with a vengeance, and she groaned. She put a hand up against the wall so she could lean on it, but unfortunately, this left a bloody handprint on the pale green wall.

The sight of the blood kicked life into Staci. She put the tray down on one of the tables without even looking where it landed, and leapt forward to help Maeve. She put her arm under Maeve's and more or less dragged the injured woman over to the door to the back room.

At the same time, Rose came back from the bathroom, and immediately understood the situation.

"Quick, get her out back."

A few minutes later, the back of Maeve's head had been thoroughly washed, and the bleeding had stopped - at least temporarily.

"Jeez, Maeve, how many tubes of gel lost their lives for your 'do?" Rose asked as she wiped off her hands on a towel.

"That stays between me and the manufacturer. How does it look back there?" Maeve said, and tried to get her hand to the wound, but Rose swatted it away.

"It looks good now. What the hell have you been doing, anyway?"

"Little o' this, little o' that. I left my phone in my car, can I borrow yours? I gotta make a couple of calls."

"Sure. It's over there," Rose said and pointed at an old-fashioned telephone hanging on the wall.

"A landline? How quaint," Maeve said and chuckled. Rose rolled her eyes, and went out front to serve the customers.

Maeve looked at Staci, who hadn't said a word throughout.

"Hi, I'm Maeve. How's it hanging?" she teased, and put out her hand.

"Hi. It's been a while, huh?"

"Sure has. You look great."

"You look like shit."

"Yeah, and this is one of my good days," Maeve said, and winked.

"Are those bullet holes?"

"Yep," Maeve said and stuck her index finger out through one of them.

"Oh. Still up to your old tricks?"

"I'm an expert in those old tricks, Staci."

"Well... apparently, you got outplayed by someone..."

"Yeah. So..." Maeve said and pointed at the phone.

"Knock yourself out."

"Gee, thanks, kiddo," Maeve said and went over to the phone. She dialed the number, and marveled at the disc spinning as it returned to zero after each digit.

"Hey, Danny, it's Fever. Just so you know, a cockroach just took a potshot at me, but tell uncle Freddie that I'm not harmed, OK? ... Jimmy Snakes ... Yeah ... No, I'll deal with that scumbag myself ... All right, but I need to go home and change clothes first. I'll be there in forty-five minutes ... OK. Bye."

She hung up and looked at Staci with a dangerous gleam in her eye.

"Staci... ah... I could use your help. When do you get off?" Maeve said, making Staci roll her eyes and guffaw loudly over the double entendre.

"I get off from work in three hours, I'm working 7-to-2 right now."

"Oh. Listen, do you..."

"Don't mind me, girls," Rose said as she came out into the backroom, carrying an empty keg of Guinness. She put the empty keg next to the wall, and unwrapped a new one. She started to drag the heavy keg back into the bar, but she soon stopped and wiped the sweat off her brow.

"How do you two know each other, anyway?" she said.

"Well, a couple of years ago, we lived tog..." Staci started to say, but Maeve cut her off.

"We used to be bedmates."

"We were a damn bit more than that, Maeve!" Staci said in an offended tone.

"Oh. That disappoints me, Staci," Rose said and appeared to frown.

"How so?" Staci asked apprehensively.

"I really, honestly thought that... well, someone like you... would have better taste in women..." Rose deadpanned.

Staci guffawed again over the insulted look on Maeve's face.

"Well, excuse the hell out of me! Kick a woman while she's down, why don'tcha?"

"Anymore lip from you, and I'll give you another swab of iodine," Rose teased.

"Gawd, no, not the iodine, anything but the iodine. I only need two Aspirin and half a bottle of O'Connor's Finest Irish Whisky, and I'll be back on my feet," Maeve said, and appeared to sob.

Rose left the back room in a hurry so she didn't have to listen to Maeve's nonsense, and that gave the blonde woman a perfect opportunity to move closer to Staci.

The dark haired beauty was leaning against the back wall, and Maeve walked up to her and stood very close. She took Staci's hands in her own and placed them around her well-toned waist.

"You're right, we used to be a lot more than just bedmates," she said seductively, and inched so close to Staci that their legs touched. She moved in for a kiss, but at the last possible moment, Staci evaded her lips and moved away.

"Won't work this time, Maeve," she said flatly, and walked through the door to the bar room, leaving the blonde woman by herself.

Maeve sighed and ran a hand through her hair - and then went back to the phone.

She dialed the number she had used before for Snakes' cell phone, but after it had been ringing for a minute or so, she hung up.

'Nah, he must've tossed it. Not even he would be stupid enough to keep it,' Maeve thought, and left the storage room.

"Maeve, I'm making you a mug of liquid gun powder, I thought you looked like you could need it. Milk and sugar?" Rose said.

"Nah, I'll take it black. Thanks, Rose."

"Don't mention it. That'll be \$2."

Maeve's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, but Rose's grin broadened.

"Kiddin'."

"I'm not laughin'," Maeve said, and sat down on one of the tall chairs at the bar. She looked at Staci who was busy serving yet another round of Guinness to the three men playing cards.

Staci walked back from their table and sat down on the tall chair next to Maeve. She made a point of not looking at the enforcer.

Maeve, however, took in all of Staci's beauty. *'She hasn't aged a day,'* she thought, and a cheeky grin spread out over her lips.

"Rose, would it be all right with you if I borrowed Staci's services for the evening? I promise I'll bring her back to you in one piece," Maeve said.

"Well... Why the hell not," Rose said, after looking at the half-empty bar. She put down the steaming mug of coffee on the counter.

"I don't think I can drive yet, and I've told Fast Freddie that I'd meet him in... thirty five minutes," Maeve said after checking her watch.

"Besides, I really need you to help me look for my Beretta over in the alley," she continued, looking at Staci.

Staci sighed. On one hand, she wasn't completely disinterested in spending some time with the fiery Fever, but on the other, she knew that the woman could be the most infuriating human being on the planet.

"Huh? Whaddaya say?" Maeve said, and flashed Staci her trademark crooked smile that could make the knees knock on any woman who were thus inclined - well, any woman apart from Staci Hart.

"All right. I'll go with you. But you gotta promise me one thing, Maeve - that you'll drop me off at the first sign of trouble. I'm not a thrillseeker like you are."

"Deal," Maeve said and took a long swig of the coffee.

._*._*._*

Salvatore Coluzzo hadn't calmed down yet. He sat in his expensive leather armchair and cursed every last one of Jimmy Snakes' ancestors. His tie was crooked and the top button of his shirt was missing, the result of him being so pissed off that he'd simply ripped it open.

He had a fierce scowl on his face, and his eyes were burning a hole in the plush carpet.

He couldn't believe a relatively simple plan had gone so wrong. Coluzzo was expecting a big shipment to arrive tonight. He knew his men in the docks were quick and efficient, so they'd only need two hours, if that, to get the crates from the ship over into their trucks. However, with Donnelly controlling the docks, Fever would be on site at once with the entire Donnelly cavalry. So she needed to be 'detained'. Fever would never agree to meet someone from the Coluzzo family, so it was decided to use an outsider.

And now that whole plan was FUBAR. As soon as Fast Freddie heard about the shooting, he'd mobilize every single man he had, and completely shut down his part of the city in the hunt for his niece's killer. Coluzzo was surprised it hadn't happened already.

Someone knocked on the door to the office, and Coluzzo turned around and straightened his tie. It didn't look good for a Don to be breaking his own dresscode.

"Enter!" he growled. His secretary opened the door and a man walked in.

In his late 30's, Pietro Cazale was a suave and sophisticated man. His street name was The Silencer, based on his favorite method of offing Coluzzo's enemies. His suit was in a deep navy blue, and his crimson tie stood out against his white shirt. His hair was slicked back, and even his eyebrows looked like they had been treated with gel.

Even though he had been in the Don's office plenty of times before, he took a good look around. The Don himself was sitting behind a mahogany desk that had a few picture frames on it, and the entire room was lined by expensive looking sculptures and paintings. One whole wall was covered by a tall bookcase, containing what Pietro knew to be leatherbound originals.

"Good evening, Pietro. Have a seat. A drink?"

"No, thank you, Don Coluzzo," Cazale said, and pulled out a chair. He sat down and crossed his legs in a very orderly fashion. He pulled out his cuffs from the sleeves of his jacket, and removed an imaginary piece of lint.

"I take it you've been filled in?"

"Yes, Don Coluzzo. Too bad about White Fever. I respected her."

"Hmmm. Yes, I suppose you might say she was your opposite number."

"Indeed, Don Coluzzo."

"Jimmy Snakes. Do you know him?"

"I've know of him. A no-good bum."

"Unfortunately, that's very true. I need you to kill him. Quickly. He's a loose cannon, and right now, he's rolling around on the deck, you understand?"

"I understand, Don Coluzzo."

"I'm sixty five goddamned years old, and I've been in this business all my life. I haven't come this far only to get screwed by an upstart..."

Coluzzo ran a hand through his silver-gray hair and cursed again.

Pietro shuffled uncomfortably in his chair over the unusual outbursts from his normally impeccable boss.

"Oh, and don't bother making it look like an accident. I want him to serve as an example. Make it look gruesome."

"As you wish, Don Coluzzo," Pietro said and nodded, already planning Snakes' demise. The Don wanted it to be gruesome... well, if there was one thing Pietro Cazale was really good at, it was to kill people in gruesome ways.

._*._*._*

After ten minutes of searching through the garbage for the missing gun, Staci and Maeve had to give up.

"Shit!" Maeve said loudly, and began to rasp off a string of curses that threatened to strip the last of the remaining paint off the derelict buildings.

Above them, a window was opened, and a woman stuck her head out.

"I told you before, keep quiet down there! The next time, I'm calling the cops!"

"Mind your own goddamned business, lady!" Maeve roared back at the unknown woman. They could hear a window being closed forcefully, and Maeve cursed again.

Staci sighed over Maeve's lack of people skills, but she still felt relieved that the wildcat was basically all right. She shook her head, and continued to search for the missing Beretta.

"What the hell are you doing back here, anyway? I thought you'd left the city for good?"

"Well... I had, but I came back," Staci said, as she kicked aside some cardboard boxes.

"Obviously. You could've called."

"Didn't have your number. And we wouldn't have had anything to talk about, either."

"Hmmm. Seems to me we're talking just fine right now?"

"You know what I mean."

"Not sure I do, actually," Maeve said and looked at Staci.

"You know damn well chances are I would've interrupted you boinking some leggy blonde. Like last time."

"Well, I apologized for that. More than once..." Maeve said and shrugged, even though she knew Staci couldn't see it in the dark alley.

"An apology doesn't change the fact that you cheated on me."

"Staci, let's not stir up all that old shit again. You're back, and well... I know we can't start over, but can't we at least be friends?"

Staci smiled sadly. She and Maeve had lived together for more than a year, and she had really loved the feisty woman back then - but it all changed one dull Thursday afternoon. She remembered well the thousands of emotions rushing through her when she caught Maeve in the act with a blonde from one of the bars. Anger, an acute sense of betrayal, even pure hatred... she had felt it all.

"We can be friends, Maeve. But no more than that."

"All right. I'd like that. Thank you."

"Snakes must've taken your gun, Maeve, because it sure as hell ain't here," Staci said and shrugged.

"He would've, the son of a bitch. Gawd, I feel so naked. Are you packin' heat?"

"I have a .22 in my purse, yeah."

"A .22! You couldn't hurt a flea with that pea-shooter," Maeve said and snorted.

"Well, excuse me for carrying a weapon I feel comfortable with!"

"It's a false sense of security, Staci. You won't be able to stop anything... or anyone."

"Let me worry about that. What are we going to do now, Maeve?"

"First of all, we're going back to my apartment. I need to change my shirt and get my spare piece... and then I'm gonna visit Fast Freddie. I need his blessing before I hunt down Mr. Shit-For-Brains Snakes."

"Sounds like you could really use my help," Staci said, and Maeve recognized a genuinely caring undertone in Staci's voice.

Even though the worst of the pain and the dizziness had died down, Maeve's chest and the back of her head were engaged in a fierce competition to see which body part could ache the most. Right now, the head was winning, though not by much.

"I could, yeah. You really wanna come with me?"

"Well... yes. Unless you don't want me to?"

"Oh, I want you to, baby," Maeve said and winked.

"OK. I need to get my purse first," Staci said and started walking back towards the entrance to the alley.

"If you only have that pea-shooter in it, forget it!" Maeve yelled after her, and laughed.

Staci dismissively waved her hand over her shoulder and didn't look back.

Maeve admired the tall woman's swagger for a little while, and then she turned around and headed for the Mustang - slowly.

._*_*_*._

"Where the fuck have you been? You were supposed to be here a fuckin' hour ago," Janine McFarland said to her husband as he entered their crummy apartment.

"I'm sorry. dear. I lost track of the time," Jerry McFarland said, and hung his work jacket on the hallstand.

"You'll lose track of your fuckin' brain one day, Jerry. Now shut the fuck up. I can't hear the teevee."

She was sitting with her feet up in a stained couch, eating a tv dinner. Janine was 47 and looked it, too. The bathrobe she was wearing hadn't been washed this decade, and her teeth and her fingernails were yellow from years of nicotine abuse. She was living off a disability pension for a chronic back injury, but Jerry knew she was faking it.

"Yes, dear."

He prepared himself a dinner similar to his wife's, and sat down next to her and started to eat. The tv was showing one of those mindless talk shows where some poor slob had to face his enemies. The theme of the talk show was "your girlfriend's twotiming you with your stepdad."

"What the fuck you lookin' at? I hate it when people look at me, you know that. Stop fuckin' lookin' at me!" Janine said.

"Yes, dear."

"That's right, cocksucker! You tell that skank she's a piss poor fuck," Janine bellowed out to the things happening on the tv.

Jerry finished his tv dinner and went into his bedroom. He sat down on the bed. From time to time, he could hear his wife swearing or laughing, and he wished he had the balls to do what he'd spent months planning on.

He got up from the bed and went into a small storage room. He stood up on tiptoes and reached for a cigar box he had placed on the top shelf, buried under a heap of t-shirts he couldn't fit anymore.

He placed the cigar box on the bed and took out three items - a lipstick that he had stolen from the local supermarket, a piece of rope, and his prized possession, a 10" bowie knife. He kept it in an impeccable condition so it was ready for use whenever he felt like it. He had traded every last one of his Hustlers for it, but for him, it was a fair trade.

He couldn't count the times he had fantasized about slitting his wife's throat when she slept, or even when she watched tv. Sometimes he couldn't understand why he didn't just go out there and did it... but he usually only got as far as the bedroom door, and then he'd run out of courage.

"What the fuck you doin' in there, anyway? You can't get it up, so I know you ain't jerkin' off!" Janine shouted, and banged on the door on her way to get a new pack of cigarettes. She laughed over her own joke, and moved back to the couch.

Jerry looked at himself in the mirror on the closet. In his prime, he had been a goodlooking, well-built man, but that was over twenty years ago. Now, he was just a miserable, fat, bald, fifty-one year old loser with a wife who refused him sex.

Once again he cursed the day that goddamned Chicano bitch came into the bus he was driving and tried to rob him. He didn't have more than \$35, but she didn't believe him, so without warning, she cut his face with an old, rusty blade. Everything had changed that day. Everything. He ran his fingers down the right side of his face, where the long, snaking scar was still visible.

He started thinking about the filthy whores he had met. The first one was six months ago. A Mexican that had reminded him of the bitch from the bus. He could clearly remember the look in her eyes when he drew the blade instead of paying for her services. Pure fear. That look awoke something within him that he wasn't sure what was, but that he knew he couldn't control.

The next one was three months ago, a white girl with a dirty mouth - even worse than his wife. She didn't even shut up when they did the deed. He beat her half to death and finished off by breaking her jaw. That shut her up... She was also the first one where he cut open the clothes and used the lipstick to paint 'FILTHY HORE' on the body. Yes, that one had given him a lot of inspiration...

The last one had been only two weeks ago. A very pretty girl, with curls and gray eyes. At first, he was only going to use her service, but then... but then she had laughed at him. She shouldn't have. He made sure it would be a while before she laughed at anyone again.

He gripped the handle of his knife so tightly that his knuckles turned white. He felt a familiar

need rising inside him like a wave. He had to get out of here, right now.

He quickly put on his favorite sports jacket and put the lipstick and the rope into the pocket. Grabbing a leather sheath for the knife, he clipped it onto his belt and zipped his jacket.

He took a deep breath and looked again at his reflection in the mirror. The body was still the same... but the eyes had changed. Before, they were watery and dull... now, they were on fire.

'Yes,' he thought. 'Tonight is going to be a very special night.'

"What the fuck? Are you leavin' already? You only just fuckin' got here!" Janine barked at him as he exited the bedroom.

"Yes, dear. I need to get some fresh air," he said without looking back.

"Ain't the fuck nothin' wrong with the air in here, asshole," Janine said and snorted. She took a long drag from her cig and blew out a large cloud of smoke to prove her point.

._*._*_._

After having driven for ten minutes or so, Maeve and Staci turned off the main street and went into another alley. Maeve made a wide turn and reversed up to a sliding garage door.

Staci was sitting very awkwardly in the passenger seat because she had to hold a handkerchief against the back of Maeve's head - not because the enforcer was bleeding again, but because Maeve didn't want to risk getting blood on the upholstery.

"Staci, see if you can find a small plastic key-thingamajig in the glove box. It's the remote for the door."

Staci used her free hand to rummage through a heap of miscellaneous items before she found what she was looking for.

"Here."

"Just press it, it's automatic."

Staci did as she was told, and the sliding door slowly crept upwards, revealing a dark garage. Maeve reversed into it, and as she moved past the entrance, a photoelectric cell turned on the lights. She killed the engine and reached out to press a blue button marked 'Door' that was placed on a metal pillar next to the car. At once, the garage door began sliding down again.

"Watch this, baby!" Maeve said and pressed a green button on the metal pillar.

"Whoa! It's an elevator!" Staci said very surprised as the entire garage started moving upwards.

"Sure is." Maeve grinned mischievously at Staci.

When they reached the top floor, the ninth, the elevator stopped, and they got out of the car. Maeve opened an airtight door and invited Staci inside.

Staci could hardly believe her eyes. The entire loft of the building had been converted into a single apartment, making it at least 25 by 60 yards, possibly even more.

The part nearest to the entrance was one, large open space with a leather couch, three armchairs and a sideboard with a lot of electronic equipment to the left and some exercise and weightlifting gear to the right. A bit further back, two white walls had been erected across the loft, both carrying massive paintings. High above them, the ceiling had four skylights, all equipped with automatic curtains so the sun wouldn't damage the leather furniture.

"This place is absolutely huge! It's a palace!" Staci said gobsmacked as she took in the splendor. She looked around at the high quality furniture and the art, not to mention the plush carpets, and she simply couldn't take it all in.

"Yep. It's meant to impress the ladies. Are you impressed?" Maeve said, and winked.

"Yeah!"

"Good. I need to get this blood out of my hair and some new clothes. If you want a drink, help yourself. It's over there," Maeve said and pointed at the corner of the apartment that had been set up as a fully equipped bar.

"Thanks.. I'm almost afraid to set foot in here!" Staci said and laughed out loud.

"I'll find you if you get lost. Don't worry 'bout that."

"Gee, thanks, Fever."

Maeve went over to a large, gun metal gray safe that stood behind the exercise equipment, and punched in the twelve-digit combination on the keypad. The locks released, and she swung open the heavy door.

Scanning her collection of firearms, she decided on taking a black Beretta 92F, identical to the one Snakes had stolen from her. She checked the clip, and then inserted the gun into the shoulderholster.

"Ahhhh, much better. Staci, do you want a more potent weapon than that pea-shooter?"

"What do you have?" Staci said from the couch.

"How about a chrome-plated Smith & Wesson .38 revolver?"

"It's too heavy for me."

"Oh." Maeve looked at the other weapons, but there wasn't anything better suited for Staci.

She wasn't a gun-nut like so many of her colleagues, but she did like the feel of a powerful weapon in her hand. She had even kept the first pistol she had bought for herself, a Colt M1911. It could only hold six rounds in the clips, and that just wouldn't cut it today. The Berettas held fifteen rounds, and she always carried five spare clips, which added up to 90 rounds in total.

Maeve went into the bedroom and looked at herself in the full-size mirror. She winced at the ruined state of the black silk shirt, and took it off with a curse.

She unclipped the shoulderholster and the bulletproof vest and pulled them off, revealing a black t-shirt. When she moved her arms, her chest muscles still hurt from the impacts, so she took the t-shirt off as well to check how bad the bruises were. The two dark brown spots were very visible, one just above her sternum, and one on the swell of her right breast.

"That asshole," she grumbled. She went into her walk-in closet and picked out a fresh muscleshirt and a new silk blouse.

She sat down on the bed and took off her boots and unbuckled her jeans. For a split second, she considered to ask Staci if she would join her in the shower, but then she decided against it.

Ten minutes later, Maeve emerged from her shower, and put her clothes back on. She picked up the bulletproof vest and went back into the living room.

Staci was resting on the couch while sipping a drink of some kind.

"I'm back. What's your poison?"

"Bourbon."

"I didn't even know I had that."

"Well, that's understandable, considering you have close to fifty bottles of booze in your cabinet, Maeve. Your stash is larger than Rose Dougal's."

"I get a lot of company."

Staci raised an eyebrow, but chose not to make a comment.

"Jeez, Maeve, you've really gone ahead in the world. I thought you still lived in that run-down old apartment complex. Who said crime doesn't pay?"

"I wouldn't know, I'm not a criminal," Maeve said matter-of-factly.

"Uh-huh...? But anyway, this place is amazing."

"Glad you like it. Wanna see the bedroom?"

This time both Staci's eyebrows went up, then down.

"Come on, Miss High And Mighty, I just wanna give you a tour," Maeve said and winked.

"You do, huh? All right, impress me, 'Fever'."

As Staci had expected, the bedroom was large and exquisitely decorated. The ceiling was a lot lower than out in the main room, and it created a very intimate atmosphere. A king-sized bed stood in the middle of the room, covered by a white bedspread. A huge flatscreen TV was bolted to the opposite wall, and the black remote stood out on top of a small, white nightstand.

The white carpet was nearly ankle-deep, and very plush.

Staci looked up, and then over at Maeve, who was grinning broadly.

"A mirror in the ceiling? Jeez, Maeve," Staci said and chuckled.

"Well, you know..."

"Birddawg."

"Who, me?"

"No, your neighbor. I'm almost surprised you don't have a video camera hooked up in here..." Staci said and looked around.

"Nah. I'm not a pervert."

"Since when!"

"I beg your pardon!" Maeve said and grinned.

"Weren't we on our way to Fast Freddie?" Staci said and checked her watch in an exaggerated fashion.

"We were. And we'll get there, but you gotta check out my bathroom."

"I'll bet you have a bath tub of pure gold, or something," Staci said, as Maeve opened the door to the bathroom.

"Nope, but a genuine Finnish sauna, and a Jacuzzi with room for four," Maeve said and flashed Staci a beaming grin.

Staci looked at the extravagant bathroom mainly held in white and chrome, and at the Jacuzzi, complete with a wine cooler and a tray for the glasses. The Jacuzzi was placed in front of two large windows with automatic curtains, overlooking the skyline. There were even little orange lights installed inside it.

"In the evenings, it's really cool to sit there with a glass of wine, and the lights dimmed, and just watch the city live, you know," Maeve said.

"And a blonde on your left arm and a brunette on your right... I'll bet you get a lot of mileage out of that thing," Staci said, and winked.

"Ohhhh yeah."

*

*

CHAPTER 2

The Mustang rumbled down the street, heading for Fast Freddie's domicile. Once they got there, Maeve pulled up to the gate blocking the driveway, and waited for the sentry to come out.

This was Staci's first visit there, and she was quite surprised to see that the house wasn't the opulent mansion she had imagined, but rather a non-descript two-storey building, separated from the road by a very tall and sturdy fence and a small park with a duck pond.

The sentry came out of a booth and checked them out.

"Hiya, Fever."

"Sean. Any problems tonight?"

"Nope. Heard you had some."

"Nothing I couldn't handle. This is Staci, I can vouch for her."

"Sure thing, Fever. Go right ahead, I'll alert Danny," the sentry said, and went back to the booth where he pressed a button that opened the heavy gate.

"See ya," Maeve said, and waved out of the window as she drove past him.

As they drove up the curved driveway, Maeve turned to Staci with a mischievous grin on her face.

"Staci... you don't know Danny, do you?"

"No, I haven't had the pleasure."

"When you see him, try not to act too... ummm, surprised, OK? He knows his height is against him, especially when it comes to women... I don't want him to feel uncomfortable around you, you know."

"Oh, no problem. I know my height can intimidate some men... you can count on me," Staci said.

They parked the car in front of the house, and went up to the very large double doors, seemingly made of a very fine wood. Maeve made eye contact with Danny through a gun slit, and she winked at him.

Staci turned around and looked at the park, which was quite nice. She could hear the door open behind her, and she turned around again to walk in... and froze in the middle of a step.

Danny was standing in front of her, or rather above her. She had to lean her head back to see above his neck.

The former wrestler was 6'11", and still close to his preferred fighting weight of 340 lbs. His black suit was strained severely to accommodate his barrel chest and his broad shoulders, and his buzz cut was a good match for his steely gray eyes and square jaw.

Staci's eyes popped wide open and her jaw fell down to her chest. Loudly, she exclaimed...

"Holy SHIT!"

"Awwww, Staci, you promised not to say anything," Maeve teased, and broke out into a big grin.

Danny did similarly, and Staci began to feel she had been set up. She narrowed her eyes and raised an eyebrow in Maeve's direction.

Maeve grinned again and gently slapped the big man across the stomach.

"Staci Hart, meet Danny Watts, all-round good guy and uncle Freddie's personal bodyguard."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss," Danny said in a rumbling voice. When he smiled, his whole

demeanor changed, and he looked almost human.

Staci shook her head, and put out her hand.

"Hello, Mr. Watts. Fever's a bit of a joker, isn't she?"

"By all means, call me Danny. And... yep, she is. Come in. I'll let Mr. Donnelly know your here," Danny said, and stood aside so the two women could enter the hallway.

"Thank you, Mr. Wat... I mean, Danny," Staci said, and walked in.

The house was far more impressive on the inside than on the outside. The hallway was held in mostly deep red and golden colors, and it was lushly decorated with large paintings and exquisite furniture. Four white double doors, two on each side, led away from the hallway, and a large white staircase went up to the first floor.

Staci looked down at her blue jeans and felt horribly out of place.

"It's all right, Staci. This is mostly for show," Maeve said, and put an arm around the taller woman's waist.

"I better wait out here while you talk to your uncle."

"Yeah. I promise it won't be long."

"All right."

The double doors that were closest to them slid open, revealing a smiling Danny.

"Mr. Donnelly is ready to see you now, Maeve."

"Thanks, Danny," Maeve said and tickled Staci's sides, making the taller woman squeal and jump in the air.

Maeve grinned and hurried into the office, with the double doors closing softly behind her.

Fast Freddie Donnelly was sitting in a leather armchair behind a huge desk, signing some papers. When he heard Maeve enter, he looked up, and his face lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Maeve! Jeebus, child, I'm so glad to see that you're all right!"

With some trouble, he got up and lumbered over to Maeve. Belying his nickname, Fast Freddie

was only a few inches taller than Maeve but he was at least three times her size around the waist. He weighed in somewhere above 275 lbs. - his exact weight was a mystery as he flat out refused to be weighed - and most of it was fat. Back in the day, however, he had been a very accomplished boxer.

He hugged the white-haired woman furiously, and she laughed heartily.

"Thanks, uncle Freddie. Yeah, I sorta got the short end of the stick that time. That's what I'm here for."

"Figured as much."

Fast Freddie Donnelly was sixty-two, but looked slightly older. His eyes were the same green color as Maeve's, and they almost shared the same hair color, too - only Maeve's white hair was out of a bottle, Freddie's wasn't.

"Have a seat. A drink?" Freddie said and lumbered back to his armchair.

"Not for me, thank you," Maeve said, and sat down in a very exquisite leather armchair, crossing one leg diagonally over the other.

"Rose Dougal was a great help tonight, uncle Freddie," she continued.

"I'm glad to hear it. I like Rose Dougal. She's a firebrand." Freddie chuckled as he thought of the redhaired woman.

"No two ways about that."

"Hmmm... I think I'll call and ask her out some time. Anyway, Maeve... what the hell was all that shootin' business about?" Freddie said.

"Here's what I know: A bum called Jimmy Snakes phoned me and told me he had some interesting information that he'd like to share. We arranged to meet in an alley off Madison. When I got there, he had already arrived, and had set a trap for me. He shot me twice in the chest and drove off."

"Son of a bitch," Freddie growled.

"That's what I said," Maeve said and chuckled.

"And he's an independent?"

Maeve nodded.

"What are your intentions?"

"Well, I respectfully request your permission to hunt Jimmy Snakes down."

"You have it, Maeve. Hell, you have my full blessing for huntin' him down. Any way you see fit, and with any force necessary. Am I clear?"

"Loud and clear, Sir."

"But take care while you're doin' so. Your late mother will come back to haunt me if you get hurt," Freddie said with a smile.

"Oh, that goes without saying. I'll be so careful he'll never hear me comin'," Maeve said and flipped open her phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Patrick Daly and a few others. To let 'em know who we're lookin' for."

"Good idea."

Maeve finished the brief conversations and put the phone into her pocket.

"Now, go out there, find him and kick his ass, you hear?" Freddie said.

"Yep!" Maeve said and got up from the chair.

Maeve opened the double doors and looked for Staci. She found the dark haired woman playing cards with Danny, and judging by the matching smiles on their faces, they seemed to have a good time.

Maeve instantly became transfixed by Staci's smile. She had the most beautiful smile imaginable, never fake, never goofy... always just right. And when she smiled, her eyes twinkled in a way that was almost humanly impossible.

'Way to go, Fever. You lost all of that just because you couldn't keep your libido in check. Ace work, jackass,' Maeve thought, and felt her guilty conscience give her a kick in the pants.

She cleared her throat, and Staci looked up. For a brief second, Maeve saw the faintest hint of that twinkle in the blue eyes.

"I'm glad to see the two of you get along so well. What are you playing?"

"Texas Hold 'Em," Danny said and grinned broadly as she slapped down a winning hand on the table, much to Staci's chagrin.

"I don't need to ask who's winning," Maeve said and chuckled.

"Actually, Miss Hart sure knows how to play a mean hand," Danny said as he collected the toothpicks they were playing for.

"Maybe so, but I'm glad it's not strip poker," Staci said as she looked at her meager pile of toothpicks and compared it to Danny's large stack.

In an instant, Danny turned serious.

"I'd never do that, Miss Hart. Never with a friend of Fever's," he said, and looked directly at Maeve.

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way, Danny," Staci said, but Maeve waved her hand.

"It's all right, Staci. We have an agreement, Danny and I. I don't steal his girlfriends, and he doesn't steal mine," she said and slapped the big man on the shoulder with a wide grin.

"That's right. Fever would kick my ass in point-five flat, and it would be hell for my street cred," Danny said.

"An' don' you fer-get it," Maeve deadpanned in her best cowpoke voice, making them all laugh.

"Staci, are you ready? We're about to get the show on the road."

"Yep. It was nice meeting you, Danny," Staci said, and put out her hand.

"Likewise, Miss Hart," he said and shook it.

After they had climbed aboard the Mustang, Staci turned to face Maeve.

"You couldn't really kick Danny's ass... could you?"

"Of course I could, baby," Maeve said, and flexed her right biceps a couple of times. As she did so, she thumped her left hand on the inside of the door for effect.

"Can you hear that? There's a beast inside, and it wants to get out!" Maeve whispered.

Staci's eyes narrowed dangerously until they were nothing more than blue slits.

"Ha. Ha."

"It's true!" Maeve said and turned on the ignition. She didn't dare look at Staci's face, so she concentrated on reversing out of the parking space, and onto the driveway.

After driving for a little while, Maeve turned off Third Street and onto Jefferson Boulevard.

Jefferson was a six-lane boulevard, and acted as the main artery of the city. It carved its way past the upscale fashion boutiques in uptown and all the way down to the derelict buildings and closed shops on the South Side. Along the way, it would pass through the entire length of the downtown area - four miles of bright lights, loud music, and horny young men and women cruising around in souped-up vehicles.

"Welcome to my world, Staci. A world of pimps, prostitutes and pickpockets. A world where hustlers play Diamonds in the shadows between the street lamps, and where bodegas, night clubs, strip joints and porn shops are side by side all along the Jefferson. Yeah. This is my world," Maeve said, as they slowly cruised in the inside lane of the boulevard, going south.

The night was still incredibly muggy, so they both had their side windows rolled down. Maeve had her arm out of the window, and she'd occasionally wave to people she knew. A few times, someone on the sidewalk hollered at them when they saw the characteristic Mustang driving past, and Maeve answered by honking the horn.

The traffic almost slowed to a stop when a car full of young men drove slowly past one of the strip clubs. They all stuck their heads out of the windows to gawk at the colorful billboards advertising the new dancer, 'luscious Lola from Buenos Aires'.

A barker came out and walked next to the car for a few yards, trying to get the young men to visit his establishment, but they drove off.

Maeve and Staci drove past the barker, and he nodded at them before returning to the sidewalk.

"Lola from Buenos Aires," Maeve said and laughed.

"Sure, and I'm Mary Jane from Kansas City," she continued.

Two street rods raced each other away from the traffic lights on the other side of Jefferson, and Maeve turned her head to check them out. An orange Charger won over a blue Mustang, but not by much.

"The rich people from up north never see Jefferson like this. You know, I think they'd be poopin' their panties if they ever came down here after dark," Maeve said.

"I believe you. It's been a long, long time since *I* was in this part of town after dark, and I've lived here for nearly all my life."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I, er... when I drive home from work, I always take the long way round. Well... it's a long story."

"Don't worry, I understand," Maeve said, and patted Staci's thigh.

The traffic lights ahead of them turned red, and Maeve slowed to a halt.

"Yeah, this isn't for everybody. Staci, please let me know if this is too much for you. If it is, I'll drive you back to Rose's in a heartbeat."

"Thank you, Maeve... but I think I'm good to go for a little while yet."

"All right. Just say the word, OK?"

"Sure."

The lights were still red as a bright yellow Corvette drove up next to them. The driver blipped his throttle a few times and the exhausts roared.

Maeve looked over at the driver who was a young man with a crew cut and a white t-shirt.

"Not this time, buddy," she shouted, but she didn't know if the other driver heard her, because the lights changed to green at the exact same moment.

The Vette took off in a cloud of tiresmoke, but Maeve wasn't tempted to race with Staci along for the ride, so she left the intersection at a more sedate pace.

"What are we actually doing here, Maeve?"

"Well, we're cruisin' Jefferson, baby."

"No shit, Sherlock. I meant apart from that. How are we going to find this Snakes character driving here?"

"I have a couple of things I need to do, some people to see. I made a few calls back at my uncle's place, and I'm hoping that one of those people will have some info that'll lead me to him."

"Oh..."

"Finding Snakes in this beehive would exceed even my skills," Maeve said, and winked.

"Uh-huh?" Staci replied dryly.

"I'm in no rush, I have all night. Hasty decisions only makes for messy solutions. Besides, I've got what I want right here, a fast car and a beautiful dame," Maeve said, and patted Staci's thigh again - this time, she let her hand linger there, and she was pleased that Staci didn't tell her to

move it away.

"Thank you for the compliment."

"You're welcome. Have you eaten lately?"

"Er, no?"

"Me, neither, and my gut is about to walk out on me. Burger Palace is just up the road. I was thinking we could stop there for a quick bite? My treat."

"Sure. I'd like that."

"Cool. It'll be like a date," Maeve said and grinned.

"A strictly platonic date."

"But of course," Maeve said and activated the turning signal.

Twenty minutes later, they were back on Jefferson, this time cruising in the other direction after having made a u-turn at 14th Street, the bottom end of downtown.

Staci looked at the little clock on the dashboard, which read ten past twelve. She couldn't believe how big the crowd still was here - at Rose's over on Madison, the last of the regulars would've left by now, leaving the bar pretty empty until those working the nightshift arrived at just before two.

The big difference was of course that Rose's customers were older blue collar workers, and the people cruising Jefferson appeared to be much younger.

Suddenly she realized that Maeve had spoken to her.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, when we reach the intersection at Third Street, I'm taking a detour off to the left. There's a gay bar on Third that has had a bit of creep trouble lately, and I promised the owner I'd pop by now and then."

"No problem."

._*_*_*._

Three cars behind them, a black Cadillac kept to the same speed as Fever's Mustang, and had done so for several minutes.

'If Fever ever needs to travel incognito, she better find another car; that black Mustang GT sticks out like a sore thumb with those fat silver racing stripes and those bling-bling wheels,' Pietro Cazale thought.

He had noticed the characteristic car when it was parked on the Burger Palace lot, and he had been trailing it ever since. He had ID'ed Fever when she and another woman left the fast food restaurant, and right now he was thinking heavily about what this could mean.

Either Jimmy Snakes was in cohorts with Fever, and that seemed unlikely, or the dumb fuck couldn't shoot worth a damn, and he had made up the story to cover his ass - which seemed much more likely.

In any case, Cazale needed to tell Don Coluzzo. He picked up his phone and found the number to the office.

'Coluzzo.'

"This is Pietro Cazale. I have some interesting news for you, Don Coluzzo. I'm driving on Jefferson Boulevard right now, and three cars ahead of me is none other than White Fever."

'What?! Are you sure?'

"One hundred per cent, Don Coluzzo. It's her. Another woman is with her, I don't know who she is."

'Hmmm. Interesting. So Jimmy Snakes lied to me. Hmmm,' Salvatore Coluzzo said on the other end of the connection, and Cazale could almost hear the cogs working in the Don's head.

'Where are you right now?'

"We've just passed Sixth Street, going north."

'Hmmm. I don't know what to make of this.'

At the same time, Maeve kept checking the rear view mirror. There was a black Cadillac a few cars behind them, and although she hadn't paid particular attention to it as such, she was sure it had followed them since the u-turn.

"Staci, buckle up. I think we've picked up a tail."

"Snakes?" Staci said, as she clicked the seatbelt into its lock.

"Not unless he stole a black Caddy. No, it's someone else."

They came up to the traffic lights at Fifth Street, and Maeve slowed down to about 20 mph.

"Hang on, Staci."

"What are you gonn..."

Just as the lights turned yellow, Maeve gunned the engine, and the Mustang thundered over the intersection. On the other side, she slowed down again, and looked behind them.

"Jeez, Maeve! You coulda warned me!" Staci said, prying her fingers off the panic grip above the door.

"I did," Maeve said without taking her eyes off the mirror. The Cadillac had been caught by the red, and was waiting in the line.

"Don Coluzzo, she's spotted me. She just ran a yellow at Fifth Street to flush me out."

'All right...'

"Do you want me to take care of Fever before she can get knowledge of the business at the docks? It isn't long until the ship comes in."

'No. Not now. Then Donnelly will know for sure something will happen. No, get Snakes out of the way first, then Fever. Call me when Snakes is dead,' Coluzzo said and hung up without waiting for a reply.

Cazale put the phone into his pocket and turned away from Jefferson when the lights changed to green.

"He's gone. Hmmm. I wonder who that was..." Maeve said, and resumed a normal speed.

"It could be anybody. A spurned lover, perhaps?" Staci said surly as she unbuckled the seatbelt and shuffled around to get comfortable again.

"I very much doubt that," Maeve said, grinning widely.

A few minutes later, they cruised slowly past the Fairy Godfather Bar on Third. Everything looked quiet, and the bouncer gave Maeve the thumbsup when they drove past.

She waved at him out of the window, and continued down the one way street, headed for Franklin Boulevard.

._*._*._*_

Ten minutes later, Pietro Cazale parked on a grassy field at the back of a derelict building in an alley off Adams Boulevard. He picked up a piece of paper and re-checked the address.

He looked around and scoffed over the condition of the houses there. The three eight-storey concrete monstrosities were placed in a horseshoe, surrounding the backyard. Judging by the very tired appearance of the buildings, Cazale quickly came to the conclusion that they had been neglected for decades.

'How typical that a bum like Jimmy Snakes would live in such an environment,' he thought.

The backyard had once housed an auto repair shop, but all that was left now was a shed with a collapsed roof, and a few abandoned cars - two of which were burned out hulks.

As soon as he got out of the car, two stray dogs ran up to him and started sniffing him and the car.

"Get away from me, ya fuckin' fleabags," he growled, and they seemed to listen. He clicked on a button on the remote, and the doors locked. He looked around again, but there weren't any people around.

The backyard was lit by a row of streetlamps, but all but two had been vandalized, leaving it very dark. About a third of the apartments still had lights in them, and he could hear a faint strain of music from somewhere.

He started walking towards the door to the nearest building, trying desperately to avoid ruining his leather shoes by stepping in dog poo.

When he reached the door, he wasn't in the least surprised to find that the light bulb above the door was broken, nor that the lock was long since gone. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his black leather gloves. While putting them on, he thoroughly checked the area for any possible witnesses.

Finding none, he put his gloved hand into another pocket for the silencer.

Tightening it onto the muzzle of his 9mm Walther P99, he once again looked over his shoulder, and then opened the door with the tip of his shoe. Silently, he slid through the door and into the building.

In his apartment on the fourth floor, Jimmy Snakes was pacing back and forth, wearing another

hole in the already trashed carpet. He was pissed off about the whole deal, and he had gone over Fever's shooting again and again in his head. He couldn't come up with a single thing he had done wrong, and he couldn't understand why that jerk Coluzzo had a beef with him.

"If that asshole didn't want me to kill that bitch, why the fuck did he even bother asking me!" he said loudly to himself.

He sat down on a horribly stained couch and put his head in his hands.

"And now that dickhead won't even give me the fuckin' money I worked so fuckin' hard for! Fuck!" he shouted.

He got up again and went over to a table by a window that overlooked the backyard. He picked up the Beretta he had stolen from Fever and looked at it with glee. It was in far better condition than the old .32 he had thrown away, and he couldn't wait showing it off to his buddies.

"I bet this baby will bring me at least \$50," he said, and tried in vain to act cool by twirling it around his index finger. It didn't quite work, so he started looking for his cell phone instead.

After searching high and low for it for several minutes, he came to the conclusion that it was gone. He slapped his forehead and started retracing his steps after he had called Coluzzo in the car on his way back from the alley - not an easy task, as he had forgotten most of it already.

"Crap!" he shouted, and threw his arms in the air. Life could be so unfair sometimes. He knew he could forget all about ever seeing that phone again - and it was brand new, as he had only stolen it the week before. Cursing, he went over to a desk and pulled out a drawer. He paused for a moment to decide which of his seven other stolen phones he should choose.

After choosing a silver and black one, he went over to the table and picked up the keys for his car. As he did so, his peripheral vision spotted an unusual car parked in the backyard. It was hard to see in the darkness, but it looked like a black Cadillac.

He furrowed his brow. A car like that could only belong to a wiseguy, or possibly a drug dealer. His foggy brain prevented him from thinking too clearly, but he knew a car like that in a neighborhood like this could only spell trouble.

He took the clip out of the Beretta and checked how many rounds were left. Satisfied with the result, he clicked it back in place and stuck it down the back of his pants.

After locking the door to the apartment, Snakes started walking towards the stairs. He was halfway there when he heard a step creak very close to where he was.

He leaned flat against the wall of the hallway and tried to blend in - which didn't work particularly well, because he was mostly grungy white, and the wall was painted in a pale brown

color.

A man wearing a black overcoat came slowly up the stairs. Even though the gap between them was close to twenty yards, Snakes instantly recognized the thing the man was holding in his hand - a pistol with a silencer.

Snakes knew he was outclassed, so he frantically looked around for a way out. He spotted the window at the end of the hall, and remembered there was a fire escape on the outside.

He started walking backwards, but he didn't pay attention to where he was going, and the handle of the Beretta clanged against a doorjamb with a loud *ka-lonk*. He froze to the spot, but it was too late.

Pietro Cazale's head snapped around, and he raised the arm holding the gun. Snakes turned on his heel and bolted down the hallway towards the fire escape. He could hear two strangely muted coughs behind him, and two bullet holes appeared on the wall in front of him. He ducked and ran even faster towards the window.

Just before he got there, he remembered the Beretta and reached behind him to grab it. He stopped in the middle of the hallway and fired off three rounds towards the hitman.

"Fuckin' yeah, man! That'll fuckin' teach ya, man!" he shouted as he saw Cazale duck behind a pillar and out of sight.

Snakes turned around to jump through the window, but before he got to it, it was hit by one of Cazale's bullets and exploded in a shower of shards. He was already committed to jumping through it, and he was carrying so much speed he nearly continued out over the edge of the fire escape.

After flailing his arms in the air for a few seconds to find his balance, he fired off two more rounds into the hallway. He didn't bother hanging around to see if he had hit Cazale, but rushed down the fire escape at a breakneck speed, taking two or even three steps at a time.

It was almost suicidal to run down stairs so fast in the darkness, but Snakes knew he'd stand no chance against a pro hitman like that, so he'd rather take his chance with the fire escape.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Cazale shouted as he was leaning out of the broken window to see where Snakes had gone. He could see from the vibrations in the fire escape that the worthless bum was still on it, but Snakes soon reached the ground and ran like a greyhound over to a couple of parked cars. He got into an old Buick and quickly left the backyard in a cloud of dust.

Cazale sighed and took the silencer off the Walther. He pondered his next move, and came to the conclusion that he had to tell Coluzzo about the fiasco. He sighed again, and flipped open his phone.

Snakes drove away from the backyard like the devil was on his tail. Without even bothering to look for traffic, he burst out onto Adams, wrestling with the car as he took the corner on two wheels.

"Think! Think! Think, ya stupid goddamned idiot, think!" he shouted to himself as he ran several red lights on his way northbound on Adams. He zig-zagged between the other cars, forcing a few of them to brake hard to avoid hitting him.

When he arrived at the intersection at Ninth Street, a thought suddenly flashed through his abused brain. At the last possible moment, he turned right onto Ninth, heading for the gas station behind Burger Palace.

When he got there, he turned sharp left, and the car bounced over the paving stones that marked the entrance to the gas station. The old car's springs and shock absorbers squeaked and creaked loudly in protest over the rough treatment, but they held together.

After driving far too fast past the gas pumps, he turned right behind the car wash. He stepped on the brakes, and the Buick came to a smoky stop next to the large gray building.

He jumped out of the car and ran first to one end of the car wash, and then to the other, each time peeking around the corner to see if the black Caddy had followed him. Everything seemed calm... for now.

Running a shaky hand through his greasy hair, he breathed a sigh of relief, and walked back to the ticking and steaming Buick. He got in and opened the glovebox, searching for a glass of stolen prescription medicine he knew was in there somewhere.

He found it and quickly swallowed two pills - and then added another just to be on the safe side. He leaned back in the seat and waited for the kaleidoscopic colors to engulf him.

Ten minutes later, he was feeling muuuuuuch better. Everything always seemed to be clearer and easier when he was chillin', and this time was no exception.

He took his phone off his belt and dialed a number. He was surprised he could even remember what it was, but his thumb seemed to have a life of its own.

'Talk to me,' a gruff voice said.

"Which one are you, man? Randy or Marshall?" Snakes said and snickered.

'I'm Abraham Lincoln. Who wants to know?'

"Jimmy Snakes."

'Oh. In that case, I'm Marshall.'

"I have a job for you, man."

'Really?'

"Yeah. Both of you. Meet me behind the gas station at Burger Palace on Jefferson."

'All right. We need to finish off some things first, so ETA is twenty minutes,' the voice said, and the connection was terminated.

"Yeahhhhh..." Snakes said, and closed his eyes again so none of the pleasant buzz would go to waste.

._*._*_._

Back on Jefferson, Maeve parked at the curb in front of Sammi Jo's Three-In-One Club. With a discotheque in the basement, a night club on the first floor and a fancy restaurant on the second, Sammi Jo's establishment was one of the largest on Jefferson.

"So... this is Sammi Jo's," Maeve said with her hand resting on top of the steering wheel. She put the car in Park and turned off the engine.

"Oh, I know about the Three-In-One Club."

"You do? From where, 'cos... I can't see you being a regular customer, you know," Maeve said and laughed.

"A guy came over to Rose's last week with a flyer. I won a free entry ticket in a raffle, actually. I threw it in the trash."

"Why?"

"Well, it's no fun to go to a night club by yourself..."

"Trust me, baby, you would've picked up a date within thirty seconds of walkin' through that door," Maeve said and flashed her cheekiest crooked grin at Staci.

"What are we doing here, anyway?" Staci said, completely ignoring Maeve's attempts of flirting with her.

"It's our first social call of the night," Maeve said, waiting impatiently for the traffic to pass so she could get out of the car.

"Social call?"

"That's a fancy way of sayin' I'm here to collect."

"Do I want to know what it is you're collecting...?"

"Protection money," Maeve said matter-of-factly.

"Oh..."

They left the car and nodded to the 300-lbs. bouncer, who let them in without hassle, provoking several loud protests from the people waiting in the long line snaking its way down the street.

A pumping bassline greeted them as they entered the night club. The main room was large with mirrors on the ceiling and the outer walls, and a 120 feet long, rectangular catwalk in the center. Four dancing poles were spread out evenly along the catwalk, and two of them were in use by leggy dancers wearing very little in the way of clothing.

The outside walls of the room were lined with booths with red velvet benches and small tables, and there were two dozen bar stools along the catwalk, to allow the patrons to get a clear view of the dancers. Several waitresses were bringing drinks and snacks to the tables, wearing only slightly more than the dancers.

Maeve and Staci walked past the catwalk and further into the room, heading for Sammi Jo's private office at the back of the room. Suddenly one of the dancers recognized Maeve, and she squealed in delight.

Maeve looked up and saw the cute redhead waving at her with all she had... which was plenty. The dancer was wearing tiny red hotpants, and her breasts were only covered by a very loose vest made of purple silk, and two pasties on her nipples.

She might have had a pretty face in the daytime, but now, she was wearing what looked like an inch of makeup. Huge, fake, purple eyelashes and far too much rouge mixed with little sparkly stars on her cheeks gave her complexion a sickly hue, and made her look five years older than she really was.

"We're in no rush. I think we should take five," Maeve said, turned around on her heel and made a beeline for the catwalk.

"Hi Fever, you gorgeous creature!" the dancer squealed.

"Hi..."

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Sure. Staci, this is... another of my friends."

"I'm Brandi, nice to meet you," the redhead dancer said, frowning over the fact that Fever had forgotten her name. She decided to let it slip.

"Hello, Brandi," Staci said.

"You look great," Maeve purred.

"Yeah, tell me about it! Quite an improvement, huh? They cost me plenty, believe me..." the redhead said and wiggled her assets. Staci's eyebrow shot up, and the corner of her mouth twitched.

"Brandi! Get back to work!" someone shouted from behind Maeve and Staci. They turned around and saw the owner of the establishment, Sammi Jo Bradley, standing in the door to her office.

Sammi Jo was in her late forties, with slightly curly hair in a deep mahogany brown that had come straight out of a bottle. She was wearing pumps and a very expensive pinstriped navy blue pant suit, and her gun metal gray eyes were protected by a set of fashionable titanium-framed glasses.

Two decades ago she'd been quite a looker, but the years hadn't been kind to her, and a slew of botox injections had only made it worse - her skin appeared waxen, and her face was frozen in a permanent scowl. Her lips, colorless despite Max Factor's best efforts, were merely a thin line in her face, and they hardly moved when she talked.

"Yeah, yeah..." Brandi said and waved her hand.

The song segued into the next one, and she started boogying to the beat, displaying an impressive array of dancing moves.

"Gotta go, see ya later, huh? Especially you, Fever," Brandi said and flicked her tongue a couple of times at the enforcer in between her moves.

"Lookin' forward to it," Maeve replied with a cheeky grin, but Brandi was already moving up the catwalk.

"*Cough*Birddawg*Cough*," Staci said, making it sound like she was coughing. She put her hand over her mouth for effect.

"That's a horrible cough you have there, Staci... you really oughtta have it checked," Maeve said and winked. She looked back over her shoulder and noticed that Sammi Jo was still standing in the door.

"I need to handle this myself. Sammi Jo ain't one of my favorite people, if you catch my drift, and it might turn nasty."

"All right. I'll stay out here, then."

"Yep." Maeve looked around and locked eyes with one of the scantily clad waitresses. She came over to the two women, holding a tray.

"Bourbon on the rocks, please, Danielle," Maeve said and winked at Staci again.

"You remembered... I'm flattered."

"I never forget the important things. See you in a few."

Two minutes later, the waitress came back with a glass of Bourbon. Staci had found a table and was looking at the dancers. Brandi was working the other end of the catwalk now, and a bosomy blonde had taken her place at the pole, sliding up, down and around.

The waitress put down a napkin and the glass on the table, but when Staci asked her how much it was, she shook her head.

"It's on the house."

"Does the house know?" Staci said, looking at Sammi Jo's office.

"No. Are you with the Donnellys?"

"No, I'm an independent. I'm usually tending the bar for Rose Dougal, but M... I mean, Fever needed my help, so..."

"I'm Danielle," the waitress said and sat down opposite Staci.

"Staci Hart. Nice to meet ya." The two women shook hands.

"I have to say, you're far better looking than the women Fever usually hangs out with... much more natural."

"Oh...?" Staci stuttered, her cheeks crimson red. She gulped down half the Bourbon to cover her blush.

"Yeah. Were you ever a model?"

"Ah... no. Not as such."

"Really? That's surprising, I mean with your height and cheekbones, an' everything..."

"Nah, it's just... you know," Staci said, and loosened her collar. She was sure the waitress would be able to spot the steam coming from underneath her shirt.

"Yeah, trust me, I do. There are so many sleazebags in that business it's not funny," Danielle said and looked at the dancers for a while. She checked out the number of customers, and decided that she could stay and talk a little longer.

"Fever's a fantastic woman," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Last year, she drove my sister, Michelle, back home to our parents upstate. She had gotten herself involved with drugs... and prostitution, and... she was a mess. I couldn't afford the busfare back, but Fever came to our rescue."

"Really?" Staci said, intrigued by the unexpected soft side to the hardened enforcer.

"Yeah."

Through the pumping music, Staci could hear Maeve and Sammi Jo shouting at each other, and she glanced at the office from time to time, almost afraid that Maeve would end up killing the owner.

Suddenly the door was flung open and Maeve strode out, holding a small envelope in her hand. Behind her, Sammi Jo emptied a glass of something and slammed the door shut with a bang that rattled the mirrors in the ceiling.

Maeve had her gameface on, all steely-eyed and square-jawed, but her features loosened up considerably when she saw Staci talking to Danielle.

"Hi, Danielle."

"Hi, Fever," the waitress said.

"You have a bitch for a boss, you know that?"

"No kiddin'," Danielle said and winked.

"Heh."

"Danielle just told me you helped her and her sister last year," Staci said.

"Er... yeah," Maeve said, and looked curiously uncomfortable.

"Michelle's doing great. She's gone back to school, and, well... it's not easy for her, but she's coping," Danielle said.

"I'm glad to hear it. Staci... are you ready to leave?"

"Yep. Thanks for the drink, Danielle," Staci said, and emptied the glass of Bourbon.

"Anytime."

They got into Maeve's Mustang and she started the engine. As soon as there was a gap in the traffic, she turned out onto Jefferson and left the busy night club behind.

"Did I say something wrong? I apologize if I did," Staci said.

"No... but I don't want to appear soft. It's not good for my line of work."

"There weren't anyone else there, Maeve."

"The walls always have ears."

"What's the story with her sister?"

"Well... when I first met Michelle, she was a dynamite girl. Curves in all the right places, a spunky attitude, beautiful eyes, the works. When I drove her home last year, she had been reduced to a 100 lbs. wreck with a pale gray complexion and needletracks all over her body."

"Jesus..."

"Yeah. Michelle had become a \$10 a pop hooker, and she was usually so stoned that she didn't notice if the tricks paid her or not. Her pimp beat her up regularly. That son of a bitch busted her teeth, her nose... everything. When I got back from my trip upstate, I took care of business."

A pregnant pause.

"Meaning you killed him?"

"Meaning I cut his throat from ear to ear and left him to rot in an alley," Maeve said with an ice cold undertone that made Staci shudder.

*
*

CHAPTER 3

A little while later, Maeve made a u-turn at Third Street and they went back to cruising south on Jefferson.

They had only driven a few hundred yards when an African-American woman dressed in impossibly high heels and a very skimpy gold lamé dress walked out on the street to flag them down. Maeve pulled over, and the woman came over to the driver's side door and stuck her head in the opening.

"Whassup, Dolores?" Maeve said.

"Fever, we've got trouble. One of the girls is late back from a job."

"Shit... who?"

"Mary Red."

Maeve didn't know Mary well, the young woman had only recently started working Jefferson Boulevard, but she knew that she was in her 20's, and a natural redhead, hence the nickname.

"The new kid?"

"Yeah. Her walking mate Vanessa told me ten minutes ago. Oh, hi... sorry, didn't see you before, I'm Dolores," she said to Staci, and nodded.

"Hi. I'm Staci."

"Have you seen any new creeps tonight?" Maeve said to Dolores.

"Nah, only the usual nutjobs and perverts, but Mary Red already knows about them."

"How long has she been gone?"

"An hour and a half. I was working at the time, but Vanessa told me Mary was picked up by a wealthy looking john in a Bronze-colored late model Caddy."

"Maybe he bought her for the night?"

"Mary wouldn't do that. She always leaves at Midnight to get home to her kid."

"Yeah... all right. I'll keep an eye out for the car. Have you told the others?"

"Of course."

"It's probably a long shot, but have you checked the Majestic?"

"Suze was just there... nothing."

"Suze was working!?" Maeve said incredulously.

"Yeah. We've got our hands full... literally. Business is boomin'," Dolores said and chuckled.

"It must be for Suze to be working. All right, Dolores, see ya. Call me if there's any news."

"Sure thing, Fever."

Maeve put the Mustang into Drive, and they rumbled away from the curb.

"Shit, that was the last thing we needed tonight," she said, and sighed.

"What's a walking mate?"

"We've told the girls to always walk around in pairs. I guess that wasn't enough tonight."

"How many prostitutes do you have?"

"Fast Freddie employs a few dozen. Everyone here on Jefferson, and a few over on Franklin."

"It must be a hard life."

"Well, I'm sure it is, but we take good care of them. We have a standing agreement with the Volunteer's Clinic so the girls can go for health checkups as often as they want or need, and if one of them gets hurt in a fight, we have connections at the community hospital so the bill is sent to us."

"Rose chased away two of 'em last weekend. She said she doesn't want them hanging around near the bar. We depend on our regular customers, and if their wives hear about Rose's Bar being a place their men can meet prostitutes, we'll lose them in an instant."

"I understand that, but... they're just trying to make a living, you know," Maeve said and shrugged.

"Well, so is Rose. And she's the one who pays my wages."

"True."

"Would you mind if I turned on the radio? I'd like to listen to some music," Staci said a little while later.

"Don't mind at all. Here, I'll do it," Maeve said, and turned on the stereo.

The radio came alive in the middle of an old rock'n'roll song, and Staci looked at Maeve in a funny way.

"A 1950s rock'n'roll station, Maeve?" she said, slightly disbelieving.

"Hey, I'm an old-school rock'n'roller."

"You're a regular John Milner, you know that? The only thing missing is the pack of Camel in your T-shirt."

"Nah, I've never smoked. But, just so you know, John Milner was and still is a hero of mine. When I started out, I wanted a yellow '32 Deuce Coupe just like his, but then I found out how expensive it would be to keep it in a good condition, so... I chose this baby here instead," Maeve said, and tapped her fingers on the steering wheel.

"Yeah... and besides, rock'n'roll is simple music... I like simple music. Not all this contemporary singer-songwriter woe-is-me stuff. Gets on my last nerve, that," she continued.

"Uh-huh?"

"Yeah," Maeve said vehemently.

The song ended, and the DJ cut away to a few commercials. Maeve turned down the volume a bit, and checked her wristwatch. It read a quarter past one, AM. If they didn't find Mary Red pretty damn quickly, someone would have to take care of her kid. Maeve sighed and gripped the leatherbound steering wheel a little harder.

The intersection at Burger Palace turned red just as they approached it, and Maeve slowed to a halt.

"It's strange about that black Caddy from before. I haven't seen it since."

"Me neither. And now we're looking for two Cadillacs. Weird how these things always come in pairs," Staci said, and shuffled in her seat.

"Whassamatter, Staci? Doesn't your world class tush appreciate my exquisite upholstery?"

"Ha, ha. I'm just not used to sitting down all night, 's all."

The traffic light turned green, but Maeve was a little slow away. That made the driver in the vehicle behind them, a black, customized GMC van with dark-tinted windows and a wide, pale blue stripe down the side, honk his horn.

Maeve scowled at him in the rear view mirror, but decided against giving him a piece of her mind. She noticed that the van turned the corner onto Ninth Street and headed for the gas station lot.

"Is there anything in this city Fast Freddie doesn't control?" Staci said, and turned in her seat to look at Maeve.

"Plenty. We own downtown, the port and parts of Midtown, out to the eastern bank of the river. Salvatore Coluzzo controls the rest of Midtown on the other side of the river, uptown and the 'burbs. To the south of us, two gangs are in the middle of a turf war, but it looks like the Southside Chicas are winning."

"So the Monroe River marks the limit between your and Coluzzo's territories?"

"That's right."

"I wonder if I'll be able to get home tonight, after having been seen with you so much... I live in Midtown West, on the other side of the Monroe..." Staci said and laughed dryly.

"Nah, you'll be all right... or, if you want to, you can come and sleep at my place...?"

"No."

"Just sleep. Nothing more," Maeve said, looking at Staci with a mischievous twinkle in her green eyes.

"No."

"Awww...?"

"No, for Chrissakes, Maeve. Quit askin'."

"Why not?"

"Because one thing will lead to the next, and soon, we'll be... you know."

"Sittin' nekkid in my Jacuzzi?"

"Grow up," Staci grumbled and folded her arms across her chest.

Maeve grinned and hung her arm out of the window.

._*_*_*_

The GMC van drove slowly through the gas station, clearly looking for something. Suddenly the driver spotted the old Buick behind the car wash, and headed over there.

After the van had stopped next to the old car, two beefy men got out, both sporting crew cuts and wearing similar outfits - sturdy army boots, black jeans and black special forces-style sweaters.

Randall and Marshall Webster were identical twins, and they were equally lethal.

"He's comatose again, that pothead," Marshall said, and rapped his knuckles on the roof of the Buick. Snakes didn't stir at all.

"Yo, Snakes, wake up, man. We ain't got all night!" Marshall said loudly, and rocked the Buick left to right.

Finally Snakes came to, and he stared dumbly at the two broad-shouldered badasses, like he couldn't remember he had called them less than half an hour ago.

"Oh... hi, man. You here already?" he said, and got out of his car.

"Obviously. I'm Marshall."

Snakes felt agitated and his palms were sweaty, like they always were when he was dealing with ruthless people. He didn't know much about the Websters, except that both of them had been dishonorably discharged from the Army. He had a sneaking suspicion that it was because they enjoyed killing a bit too much...

"Yeah, all right... I.. I have a little problem I want you to take care of."

"Name the problem, and we'll name our price," Marshall said, putting his hands in his pockets.

"Er... yeah, but I kinda haven't got any money right now, but I'll guarantee you'll have it by tomorrow night... at the latest."

Marshall sighed.

"Did you make us come all the way down here just to blow hot air in our ears, Snakes?"

"No! No, I.. I really do have a problem, man. Some dude in a black Caddy is followin' me, and I think it's because I killed Fever, and now he's..."

"White Fever? Donnelly's enforcer?"

"Yeah...?"

"We just saw her in her black 'Stang, not two minutes ago. She was with her dish of the day."

"What?! No way, man. I capped her twice at point blank range, man!"

"She's wearing Kevlar, jerkoff, everyone knows that."

"But... Kevlar?"

"A bulletproof vest, Mr. Shit-for-brains!"

"Oh... so I didn't kill her?"

Marshall rolled his eyes, and even Randall, who usually was the strong, silent type, groaned.

"I'd say... no. You didn't kill her. Betcha 10 bucks she's on the war path, though," Marshall said, and grinned.

"But why the fuck is that hitman after me, then?!"

"How the hell would we know? Do you want us to take care of your problem, or not? Just say the word."

"Er... yes. And... and..." Snakes said, and thought really, really hard about his next move.

"... and, how about adding Fever to that list?"

Marshall furrowed his brow.

"Well, we could do that, but that'll cost ya plenty. In fact, that'll cost ya more than plenty. 100 G."

"Do I look like I have 100 fuckin' G ? For fuck's sake, Marshall!" Snakes said, and threw his hands in the air.

"Then I guess Fever's off the list. Your other problem can be dealt with for 10 G."

"... all right," Snakes said and sighed.

"I don't know who he is, but he's driving a black Caddy, and he's wearing very fancy clothes. And he's using a silencer on his gun," he continued.

Marshall looked up like he had been stung by a bee.

"A silencer? Snakes, you're in way over your empty head. If someone sends The Silencer after you, you're in real fuckin' trouble. The price has just gone up. 100 G."

"You fuckin' asshole! You fuckin' owe me a favor, man! I gave you an alibi last year when you beat up that goddamned Doctor!"

"No favor's worth offing Donnelly's or Coluzzo's enforcers, moron. Don't you understand what kind of heat will come down on us if we do that?"

"Coluzzo? Coluzzo fuckin' told me to take Fever out of the picture, man! And when I go and do it, he sends his fuckin' enforcer after me!" Snakes said and repeatedly stamped his foot on the

ground.

"Snakes, I don't know what the hell it is you're trippin' on, but I'd hold the dosis if I were you. You're not making any sense whatsoever. And, for the last time, you didn't kill Fever. She's out there, cruisin' Jefferson right now," Marshall said and pointed at the busy boulevard.

Snakes looked like he didn't understand anything, and Marshall was finally fed up.

"All right, that does it. The favor has been squared, moron. The next time you call us, you'll get to see our nasty side. And ya don't want that. Trust me," he growled, accentuating the last words by thumping his index finger into Snakes' scrawny chest.

"But you can't leave me like this! What the fuck do you want me to do?"

"Rent a couple of pornos and go back to your pad... lie low for a few days."

"I can't go back there! That's where the hitman found me..."

"Well... then you're shit outta luck, Sunshine," Marshall said, and grinned evilly.

"But..."

"Oh, fer Chrissakes. Go to Conor's, or somewhere. I don't give a shit what you end up doin', just as long as it's far away from us. Comprende?"

The two Websters got into their van and drove off, leaving a very frustrated and very confused Jimmy Snakes in their wake.

._*_*_*._

Pietro Cazale was parked in the shadows in an alley off Jefferson, looking through the windscreen at the busy boulevard. His head was still spinning from the earful he had received earlier from Don Coluzzo for not getting Jimmy Snakes, and he was tapping his fingers on the Cadillac's steering wheel in a frustrated manner.

He checked his watch - forty minutes to go until the ship was supposed to come in. The mission would be more dangerous now with White Fever still roaming the streets, but they couldn't let the crates sit in a warehouse for days either. He only hoped he had brought enough manpower... and firepower. If Fever brought the whole Donnelly crew as reinforcements, it would inevitably turn into one hell of a shootin' match down there.

His phone rang, and he flipped open the display.

"Cazale."

'It's Salvatore Coluzzo....'

The hitman cringed, and he fully expected to get another telling-off.

"Yes, Don Coluzzo?"

'I've just spoken to the Captain of the freighter. He says they're right on time. The paperwork is fully sorted for all the crates, so they shouldn't get stuck in customs. If they do, grease the customs officers until they let them through.'

"Yes, Don Coluzzo."

'The larger crates are to be driven to our warehouse as planned, but the Captain informed me that a special, late deal came through, so there'll be a smaller crate as well. That crate must be delivered here and to me. I want you to personally take care of that. Understand?'

"I understand, Don Coluzzo."

'It's marked Fragile, and it has number 1707. A very small crate. You can't miss it. And Pietro, it really is fragile. No tossing it around.'

"Yes, Don Coluzzo."

'Good. Have the trucks arrived yet?'

"Not yet, Don Coluzzo, but they can't be far off."

'All right. Call me when you've secured the load.'

"Yes, Don Coluzzo."

A few minutes later, the characteristic low rumble of truck engines heralded the arrival of two delivery trucks - one from 'Amico Flowers', and the other from 'Salvatore Meat Packing Co.'.

Driving at a very low speed, they turned off Jefferson and rumbled into the alley. The lead truck came to a stop and flashed its headlights. Cazale turned the ignition key halfway over so he could do the same.

The delivery truck acknowledged by blinking his hazard-lights twice, and Cazale turned on the engine of the Cadillac. He quickly made a u-turn in the alley, and drove slowly down towards the other end, with the two trucks following him at a safe distance.

The small convoy turned onto Madison Boulevard and drove north. They turned right onto Fourth Street, and followed that for a few miles until they came up to the final intersection before entering the port.

Cazale rolled down his window and put his hand up in the air. He pulled over and watched the two trucks do the same.

He checked his watch - twenty-two minutes to go. So far so good, but he knew it wouldn't last. He scanned the area, but it was too dark to see if anyone was waiting for them.

He sighed and tightened the silencer onto his Walther. After making sure it was secure, he waved his hand at the two trucks, signaling them to follow him.

._*._*_._

Maeve let the Mustang glide up to a red light. As they were waiting for it to turn green, Staci yawned widely and rubbed her eyes.

"Getting tired?" Maeve said.

"Yeah. I'm usually off in twenty minutes. It's close to my bedtime," Staci said and scratched her hair.

"Wanna take a break and go shoot some pool?"

"Sure...?"

"There's a pool hall over on Eighth. It's uncle Freddie's, so we don't have to be on full alert there. I often go there this time of night, anyway."

"Lead on, Fever," Staci said with a grin.

Maeve dropped Staci off at the sidewalk before driving around the corner to park in an alley next to the pool hall.

One of Fast Freddie's men was protecting the parked cars, and she stopped when she reached him.

"Hiya, Fever," he said.

"Gav. Any trouble tonight?"

"Nope. Calm so far. That'll change now you're here," he said and grinned.

"Funny."

"No date?" he asked when he saw the empty passenger seat.

"She's waiting out front," Maeve said, and winked.

"I'm relieved. I was worried you might be sick, or something."

"Cheeky, Gav, cheeky."

She took her foot off the brake and rumbled further down the alley. There were more cars there than usual, so she had a bit of trouble finding a spot to park in, but she eventually managed.

Staci was glad to finally get to stretch her long legs, and quite enjoyed the peace and quiet while she waited for Maeve to walk back from the alley.

Eighth Street was considerably quieter than Jefferson, with only a few cars passing now and then, and there weren't any pedestrians either, apart from a man out walking his dog.

She looked at the non-descript building the pool hall was in. It was a rundown pale gray one-storey building, with two large windows on either side of a narrow glass door - all of them painted white so it was impossible to look inside. If Maeve hadn't told Staci it was here, she never would have guessed it.

She put her hands in her back pockets, and put one leg slightly in front of the other - the stance made her back relax, and it was a trick she had learned after spending countless hours standing up behind the bar at Rose's place.

A gentle, but muggy, breeze made her long hair flow back from her face and her shoulders, and cascade out behind her.

"Gawd-**damn** you're sexy!" Maeve growled in a husky voice. She was standing at the corner of the alley, looking intently at Staci's form.

"Uh-huh? I thought we were gonna play pool?"

"O-yeah, we are. Just allow me a few seconds in heaven. Mmmm. Mmmmmm. Done."

Even though she tried, Staci couldn't suppress a throaty chuckle over Maeve's antics.

For a few heartbeats, the familiar twinkle returned to Staci's eyes, and once again Maeve found herself cursing the day it all went wrong.

"I better go in first. These guys don't like surprises," Maeve said, and led the way through the door.

After shooting a few frames, they bought some beers, and sat down at one of the booths overlooking the pool tables.

Staci could feel Maeve's eyes burning into her, so she turned to look.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Just admirin' your profile. It's great, you know. Especially from the side," Maeve said and took a sip of the beer.

Staci smirked.

"Come on, that was a joke. You may laugh."

"Oh. Ha. Ha."

Maeve sat up straight and put her elbows on the table.

"We used to laugh all the time, Staci."

"Yeah, well... I didn't want that to end. But it did."

A long pause.

"I'm sorry for what happened back then, Staci, you know that. I've told you a hundred times."

Staci turned and looked intently at the other woman - at her cute nose, her Irish green eyes, and at her enticing lips that all signaled life... and at the shoulderholster, the five spare clips, and the Beretta that all signaled death.

"So you say. And yet, you still respond to anything in a skirt, even tonight."

"If we were back together, I wouldn't."

"Maeve, you can't stop chasin' after every skirt within a fifty mile radius any more than you can tell the sun to stay the hell away. But when I'm in a relationship, I expect... hell, I demand commitment from both parties," Staci said, slightly more heated than she had intended.

Maeve nodded.

"Are you seeing someone?"

"No. Not right now," Staci said and took a long swig from the bottle.

"Is that why you came back to the city?"

'Damn that Maeve Donnelly, she's much too smart for her own good,' Staci thought.

A long pause, and then a barely audible grunt and a non-committal shrug from Staci confirmed Maeve's suspicion. Maeve put her hand on Staci's jeans-clad thigh, and clawed gently.

"Wanna tell me what happened?"

"It ain't pretty."

"I'd like to hear it, anyway."

Staci sighed, and leaned back in her seat. She cleared her throat.

"When I split from you, I went back to live with my parents for a few weeks... but that just doesn't work for a 35-year old, so I looked for a house upstate and found one pretty quickly."

Maeve nodded. She already knew that much.

"A year or so later, I met a woman who was beautiful, and caring, and... well, we started dating. It wasn't quite a 'true love' thing like in the movies, but we clicked. She moved in with me after a couple of months or so. We had a pretty good time for a year and a half... but..." Staci took a swig off the bottle, but didn't continue.

"But...?"

"But then I came home early from work one day, and caught her in the act with the neighbor's wife."

"Aw jeez, Staci... I'm so sorry to hear that. I really am," Maeve said, and ran her hand up and down Staci's back.

"Story of my life, apparently. I gave her five minutes to pack her gear, and then I threw her out on her two-timin' ass. I couldn't sleep for two days, because I didn't want to be in the bed she had used when she cheated on me... my own goddamned bed!" Staci said and slammed her fist down onto the table.

"Everything had turned to shit, anyway, so I rented a u-haul and came back here, six weeks ago. Rented a flat in Midtown West, and... well, you know the rest."

"Staci, I'm sorry that you lost out again, but the way you look, you'll find a new squeeze in a flash," Maeve said, and started to gently scratch Staci's back.

"I'm not sure I'm on the market."

"But you said..."

"I'm not seeing anyone, but I don't know if I want to, either."

"Oh..."

For several minutes, an awkward silence filled the small space between them.

"Well, you know what I say about being in a funk. It ain't never so bad it can't be cured by a quick hump. We have few minutes... whaddaya say?" Maeve finally said, bumping shoulders with Staci to try to coax a smile out of her.

"No, I don't wanna hump! Jeez, Maeve! You're a sex maniac, you know that? ...and besides, anything short of an hour is too fast."

"Hey, I've never had any complaints!"

"That's because the type of women you're with don't dare tell the Great White Fever that it wasn't good for them," Staci said and emptied her bottle.

"Ouch! Come on, gimme some credit, Staci. I'm a big girl, I know what goes where. You know that!"

Staci shot Maeve an exasperated look and shook her head.

"Sex is all about what-goes-where, making love is about emotions and forming a magical connection with your partner, Maeve. You might wanna look that word up."

"Oh, I know what sex means," Maeve said and grinned wickedly.

"What a shock," Staci replied sarcastically.

Maeve laughed and put her arm around Staci's waist. She felt the other woman lean almost imperceptibly into her touch, and it made her feel really good.

"I know what you're thinking," Maeve said, and grinned at Staci.

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yep. You're thinking 'I wonder if Maeve can still French Kiss the panties off a nun.' And you're also thinking 'I wonder if Maeve still makes those purring sounds just before she comes'... Right?"

"Jeez, you're deluded, Maeve. The whole world doesn't revolve around you!"

"But am I right?"

"Not even close," Staci said, her eyes lingering on Maeve's enticing lips.

On their way back to the Mustang, Maeve's phone rang.

"Fever."

'It's Dolores. Mary's turned up... badly beaten.'

"Fuck! Where?" Maeve said, stopping dead in her tracks.

'The construction site on the corner of Tenth and Adams.'

"I'm over on Eighth Street, I'll be there in five minutes. Don't call the paramedics until I get there," Maeve said and closed the phone.

"News about Snakes?"

"No. It's about Mary Red. Some prick has used her for a punching bag. Come on, we gotta hustle," Maeve said and jumped into the car.

They stopped in front of the construction site and Maeve got out. Staci opened her door, too, but Maeve put up her hand.

"This is probably gonna be ugly, Staci. Perhaps you should wait here."

"No. Maybe I can do something for her."

"Well... all right. I just hope we're not too late," Maeve said, and quickly found the gate in the fence surrounding the construction site.

Two large yellow and black signs proclaimed 'HARDHAT REQUIRED' and 'PROTECTED BY DONNELLY SECURITY', but neither Maeve nor Staci took any notice.

Somebody had already kicked open the rusty gate, and the remains of the latch was still hanging off it. Maeve forced the gate to a side and jammed it behind a heavy clump of concrete, so the paramedics would have room to drive a stretcher through it when they arrived.

Maeve and Staci had no problem finding the spot where Mary had been dumped - she was lying in plain sight on a slab of concrete close to the fence, and she was bathed in the pale yellow light from a nearby street lamp. Five working girls were standing over her, talking loudly.

"Give her some breathing space, for Chrissakes!" Maeve said as they pushed their way through

the crowd. The five prostitutes all took a few steps back, but didn't stop yapping.

Finally there, Maeve and Staci kneeled next to Mary's broken body. None of them could believe their eyes - not only had Mary's clothes been cut open from the hem of her blouse to the fringes of her skirt, two words had been written across her chest with what appeared to be lipstick - 'FILTHY HORE'.

Maeve's jaw began to grind, and a vein on her neck started pumping furiously. She reached down and tried to pull up the remains of the tattered clothes so that Mary could regain some of her dignity. The clothes were too ruined to do much good, but at least she managed to cover Mary's modesty.

Dolores hadn't exaggerated - Mary Red had been very badly beaten. Her abdomen and chest were covered in purple bruises, and it looked like several of her ribs were broken. Her face was hideously swollen, and her left eye was very bloody. The right eye was clear, and through it, Mary looked at Maeve with such unrestrained shock and terror that even the hardened enforcer felt like she was being stabbed in the heart.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Maeve... have you ever seen anything as bad as this?" Staci whispered hoarsely. She put her hand under the back of Mary's head so the young woman wouldn't have to lie directly on the cold concrete.

"Any of you have a jacket or something to put behind her head?" Staci said to the prostitutes, but no one responded.

"You heard the lady," Maeve growled in a guttural voice that startled everyone there. Dolores quickly took off her gold lamé jacket, rolled it up and offered it to Staci.

"Will this do?" Dolores said, never taking her eyes off Mary's prone form.

"Yes. Thank you," Staci said and placed the jacket under Mary's head.

"Fever, I'm calling the paramedics. They don't like this part of town, so it'll take them several minutes to get here," Dolores said, holding the phone.

"All right."

"Whoever did this knew his stuff. Looks like her jaw's broken," Staci said, and pointed at a very ugly bruise across the left side of Mary's jaw.

"Yeah. Mary, can you hear me?" Maeve said.

The young woman tried to nod. She reached out with her hand, searching for someone to hold on to.

"Did the wealthy guy in the Cadillac do this?" Maeve said, taking Mary's hand and squeezing it.

Almost imperceptibly, Mary shook her head.

"No... after that," she whispered, but the faint sound was almost drowned out by the working girls.

"Will you shut the fuck UP!" Maeve roared, and the others instantly fell quiet. After making sure the girls got her message, Maeve turned back to Mary.

"You worked again after the rich guy had dropped you off?"

Mary nodded again.

"Fat... ugly... bald man... scar on his... his face..." she whispered, but it was evident the strain was too much for her.

"All right, Mary. Calm down. We'll get you to the hospital."

"Josey..." Mary whispered and coughed.

"That's her daughter," Dolores said.

"Don't worry about her, Mary. We'll make sure she's all right, you have my word," Maeve said.

Mary nodded and coughed again. A narrow trickle of blood came out of the corner of her mouth and ran down her cheek.

Maeve bared her teeth in a fierce sneer, and her eyes turned darker and darker. She found a small handkerchief in a pocket and wiped the blood off Mary's face.

"Someone's gonna pay for this crime, so help me God..." Maeve whispered, unaware that she had spoken it out loud.

Staci glanced at Maeve, and felt an ice cold shiver run down her spine from the savage tone in the enforcer's voice.

"I'm... I'm worried that her lung might've been perforated by a cracked rib," Staci said.

"Does Mary's kid know about Vanessa?" Maeve said to Dolores.

"Well.. I think so."

"Call Vanessa and tell her to go to Mary's apartment and spend the night with Josey. I'll square it with her later."

"Will do," Dolores said and opened her phone again.

Mary's breathing grew more labored and another trickle of blood appeared from her lips.

"I think you're right about the rib, Staci."

Maeve squeezed the young woman's hand again, but Mary's grip felt weaker than what it had been only a few moments ago. Her good eye had glassed over, and she didn't seem to be able to focus anymore.

"We're losing her," Maeve said and sighed.

The paramedics arrived a few minutes later and loaded Mary into the back of the ambulance. They drove off towards the Community Hospital with the sirens howling into the darkness of the night.

Maeve closed her phone after having talked with Danny to give a full update on the situation. She looked around for Staci, and found the tall woman leaning against an unfinished concrete wall.

Maeve could see Staci was badly shaken, so she put a steadying arm around the dark-haired woman's waist. She smiled at her, and was glad to see at least a small one in return.

"Hey. Are you all right?"

"Christ, that was bad," Staci croaked.

"I agree. That's among the worst I've ever seen."

"It wasn't the blood, I've seen plenty of that in the fights at Rose's... but I've never seen a woman beaten to a pulp before... and I don't *ever* want to see anything like it again," Staci said, and took a deep breath.

Maeve reached up and gently caressed Staci's cheek with her fingers. She was about to speak when Dolores cleared her throat.

"Fever?"

"Yeah?"

"Mary was found by two girls that usually work on Adams. They walked past the construction site and heard Mary crying and moaning."

"Are they still here?"

"Yeah. They're right over there," Dolores said and pointed at two women who were waiting by the fence. One of them was a tall Puerto Rican of indeterminate age, wearing an orange wraparound sarong, and the other was a short Caucasian brunette with a haggard face, dressed in a fake leather miniskirt and a fake fur overcoat.

After having checked that Staci was all right, Maeve went over to the two prostitutes. She hadn't seen them before, but they were clearly experienced working girls.

"I'm White Fever. If you're working on Adams, you must be independents, right?"

"That's right," they both said.

"Ever seen a creep who's fat, ugly, bald and with a scar on his face?"

"Doesn't really ring a bell," the Puerto Rican said. The brunette shook her head.

"You gotta watch your asses, this guy's a psycho," Maeve said and pulled out a roll of dollar bills from her shirt pocket. She picked out six c-notes and gave each woman three.

"Fast Freddie Donnelly appreciates the help, ladies. If you're ever in trouble, he's your friend. Understand?"

The two prostitutes nodded and the dollar bills quickly disappeared into their purses.

Wordlessly, Staci and Maeve walked back to the Mustang and got in. Staci softly closed the car door and leaned back in her seat. After a few seconds, she let out a long, trembling sigh and shook her head.

"Why are there so many sick bastards in this world?"

"I don't know, Staci. I honestly don't."

Maeve started the engine, and they drove away from the construction site.

._*._*_._

Jerry McFarland continued walking North on Adams, going further and further away from the construction site where he had dumped the redhead. In the far distance, he could hear the wailing siren of an ambulance, so he figured that someone had found her. He snorted and thrust his hands further into his pockets. Paramedics didn't pose a threat to him, and the cops were few and far between this time of night - they'd never catch him.

He felt thirsty, so when he reached the corner of Adams and Ninth, he turned right to go down to Burger Palace.

He ordered a diet Pepsi and found a table by the window. Even though he had accomplished everything he set out to do, he felt curiously dissatisfied. He started analyzing why it was so.

He came to the conclusion that it was because it wasn't enough anymore just to pretend that he humiliated and beat up his wife. No. That wasn't nearly enough anymore. This latest whore had been a redhead, just like his wife, but even that hadn't done the trick.

He gripped the handle of his knife and listened for advice.

A few minutes later, he left Burger Palace feeling very refreshed and ready for a new challenge. With a spring in his step, he started to walk North on Jefferson.

Too late he realized that he'd arrived just when the Three-In-One Club's restaurant closed for the night, and he had to wade his way through a large group of people - all of them walking towards him.

He hated crowds in general, and fancy dressed crowds in particular. All those tuxedo-clad men, and all those women with their high heels and their delicate little purses... they made him sick. He made sure to look every woman he passed in the eye, so he could send them a telepathic message that they were nothing but filthy whores.

Escaping from the crowd, and feeling slightly better with himself for making at least one of the women look frightened, he picked up his speed to clear his lungs of the last scents of their wretched perfumes.

When he arrived at the corner of Jefferson and Sixth, he slowed down, and then stopped completely. At first, he was confused as to why he had done so, but then a crystal clear voice in his head told him to turn around.

He spotted four prostitutes standing under a streetlamp on the other side of the boulevard, talking loudly amongst themselves. Two blacks, two whites. He looked from one to the other, trying to decide which one to choose. He finally settled for one of the blacks - after all, he had never tried one of those before.

Through the jacket pocket, he checked that his bowie knife was still where it should be. With a firm grip on the handle, he strode across the busy boulevard, heading for the four women.

**_*_

Staci hadn't said a word since they had left the construction site, and Maeve felt really bad that she had dragged Staci into all this. Hunting for Jimmy Snakes was one thing, but this was something else entirely.

Despite the fact that it was twenty past two in the morning, the traffic was just as intense on Jefferson as it had been the entire evening. Cars were still driving bumper to bumper, or in some cases, racing each other away from the traffic lights.

Maeve hit the gas to beat the yellow light at Sixth street, and she barely made it. On the other side of the intersection, she slowed down again and looked in her side mirror.

Something caught her eye - a fat man in a blue windbreaker walking next to an African-American working girl. They were in the shadows between the streetlamps, so their faces were obscured.

Suddenly a black GMC van, with dark-tinted windows and a pale blue stripe down the side, burst out of an alley and appeared right in front of the Mustang.

"Watch out!" Staci cried, making Maeve jump on the brakes.

"Watch where yer' fuckin' drivin'!" Maeve shouted at the black van. She let it move several car lengths ahead before releasing the brakes. She checked the mirror again, but the man and the working girl had vanished.

Ahead of them, the GMC van hit the gas with a loud roar and ran a red light at Fifth Street. The van never slowed down, but disappeared into the night.

Maeve rolled her eyes. It was the same van that had honked at them down at Burger Palace earlier in the evening - perhaps she should get Danny to ask their police connections to check it out.

"Staci, we're going up to Third Street. The Fairy Godfather is closing, and I want to see if there's any trouble."

"All right."

"Please be honest with me... do you want me to drop you off at Rose's so you can go home?"

"You know..." Staci said, but then fell silent.

Maeve didn't want to press her, so she concentrated on driving instead.

After a long pause, Staci cleared her throat.

"... no. I prefer to stay here with you... if you don't mind?"

"Of course not. I love your company, you know that."

"Thank you. Well... it's just that I don't want to be alone right now."

"I understand," Maeve said, and turned left onto Third.

When they came closer to the bar, the bouncer flagged them down, and Maeve pulled over at the curb.

"Something wrong?"

"Nope. The last few guests are just leaving. It's been a quiet night. Thanks for comin' by, Fever."

"Anytime, big boy. See ya tomorrow."

"You betcha," the bouncer said, and stepped back from the car.

Maeve drove on, but they hadn't gone further than a few hundred yards when a text message beeped in on her phone.

"Staci, do you mind checking it?"

"Nope," Staci said, and unclipped the phone from Maeve's belt.

"4 Fvr urgnt - Colzz in dcks unldng shp," she spelled out.

"Huh? Come again?"

"It's from someone called Eileen. Another old flame?"

"Er... don't think so. Read it again... in English, please."

"OK, here's what I think it says... For Fever, Urgent, Coluzzo in docks unloading ship."

"He's what?!" Maeve said and slammed on the brakes. After the Mustang had come to a stop in the middle of the street, she took the phone from Staci and looked at the display.

"What the hell is Coluzzo doing in the docks at this time of night? ... and what ship? No one comes in or out without our approval."

"Maybe he's found a loophole in the system?"

"He's greased a few of the customs officers is what he's done," Maeve said.

She rubbed her forehead, and suddenly looked at Staci.

"Is it a full moon tonight? Or perhaps it's this damn muggy weather? Everyone's going nuts at the same time!"

A taxicab behind them honked, and Maeve waved the yellow car past. The cab honked again, and Maeve stuck her head out of the window.

"Drive around me for Chrissakes! You could drive a goddamn 7-4-7 through there!"

When the taxi driver drove past them, he repeatedly tapped his forehead with his index finger and then pointed at Maeve. She didn't even bother to look at him, but dialed Danny's number instead.

"Danny? I've just received a text message that says Coluzzo's unloading a ship in the docks... yeah ... who do we have down there? ... Eileen McLennan? She must be the one who sent me the message ... no, I don't know what the hell is going on ... all right ... I'm on it."

She closed the display and looked at Staci.

"Baby, I'm about to go to war, but first I'm gonna drop you off at Rose's."

"Wait a minute, didn't we just talk about that...?"

Maeve gunned the engine and drove off in a roar.

"Yeah, but you told me that you wanted out at the first sign of trouble."

"Well, that was then, this is now..." Staci said, and fumbled with her seatbelt. She tried desperately to find the lock between the seats, but the damn thing eluded her.

"It's your call," Maeve said as she took the corner onto Adams on two wheels.

Staci finally found the lock for the seatbelt. Her hands now free, she instantly gripped the panic handle bar above the door, and held on tight.

"I'm staying!"

*

*

CHAPTER 4

Reality struck Jerry McFarland like a slap in the face. He started to hyperventilate, and he had to lean against the building he was standing next to as the gravity of the situation started to sink in.

He wiped the sweat off his brow with his left hand, and looked with morbid curiosity at the knife in his right. He always kept it spotlessly clean, but now it was completely coated in blood, as was his hand, and the sleeves of his jacket and shirt.

He glanced down at the whore lying on the ground. She was dead. Stone dead.

He had killed her, and in his mind, it was fully justified - it could even be called self defense. After all, she had attacked him when he drew his knife after they had finished the job.

She had clawed his face with her talon-like fake fingernails... the good side of his face. He couldn't allow that, of course, so in a single motion, he had grabbed her hair and jerked her head back. And then he had plunged the bowie knife up through her throat, as far as it would go. The blood had been cascading out of the horrible wound and onto the sleeve of his best jacket.

Her eyes had been as wide as saucers and she'd made a few gurgling sounds, but it only took a few seconds for her to turn to dead weight.

Jerry took a deep breath to calm down, and looked around. No one seemed to have noticed anything. He crouched down next to the dead whore and used his knife to cut open her clothes. He pulled them apart, revealing a female body so like his wife's, except this whore actually had curves.

Because he held his right arm away from his body so he wouldn't get more blood on his jacket than absolutely necessary, he had to use his left hand to reach into the pocket on the right side.

After fumbling for a handful of seconds, he pulled out the lipstick - and then he suddenly realized the red lipstick wouldn't show at all on the dark skin of the woman.

His jaw fell and he took a step back. Overcome by a sudden surge of anger, he violently kicked the dead prostitute several times in the ribs.

"Fuckin' whore! Denyin' me even the simplest of pleasures!" he shouted, and kicked her again, even harder this time.

A dog began to bark somewhere close, and Jerry snapped out of his rage.

'The knife... I need to clean up the knife,' he thought.

Even in his foggy state, he knew that he'd be arrested in an instant if he walked around on the street looking like this - but he didn't want to dump the knife, either.

'The gas station! Of course... they have several taps on the back side of the car wash so that people can wash their windows and stuff,' he thought and grinned.

Carefully, he put down the knife on the ground and took off his jacket. Turning it inside out, he placed the knife on the lining, and then bundled it up and wrapped it around his right forearm.

It looked unusual, but he figured that no one would pay attention with all the freaks roaming the streets at this time of night. And most importantly, all the blood was concealed.

He looked at the dead body again. Despite what the guys in the bars had told him, screwing a black woman hadn't felt particularly different to him. He shrugged and left the alley.

._*._*._*

Marshall Webster's phone rang, making *The Ride Of The Valkyries* blast through the van at maximum volume.

He lazily unclipped the phone from his belt and looked at the caller. It was an unknown number, but he still took it.

"Talk to me," he growled.

'He... hello?' a female voice said on the other end of the connection.

"Lady, I think you've got the wrong number."

'N-n-no... you're the Websters, aren't you?'

The voice sounded nervous, but from the intonation of the words, it was obvious the caller was a sophisticated woman.

"Who wants to know?"

'Someone who needs your help.'

Marshall scrunched up his face. It definitely wasn't Jimmy Snakes, but it was entirely possible that he had bought an upper-class call girl to do it for him.

"Who is this?"

'What's your price for killing someone?'

Marshall put his hand over the phone and waved at Randy.

"Slow down, bro. Some woman's got a job for us."

Randy pulled over, and looked expectantly at his twin brother.

"Who is this?" Marshall repeated into the phone.

'Like I said, someone who needs your help.'

"All right. Name the target, and I'll name the price."

'White Fever.'

"Jimmy Snakes, you better fuckin' listen to me! If you ever call me again, I'm gonna hunt ya down and rip ya fuckin' heart out with my bare hands!"

'No, no, no... wait a minu...'

Marshall closed the display and slapped his forehead.

"I'm tellin' ya, bro, that Snakes character is as dumb as a ton of dogshit."

Randy snorted and stepped on the gas.

Two seconds later, the phone rang again. Marshall looked at the display - the same number. His lips creased in an evil grin and opened the phone.

'Look, I don't know who this Jimmy Snakes is, but I'm not him. Meet me at Burger Palace in ten minutes. I'll prove to you that I'm serious,' the female voice said.

"OK. Ten minutes. If you're bullshittin' us, you'll be sorry," Marshall said, and ended the connection.

"Get this, the broad wants to meet us at the Palace. What do you think, Randy?"

"We ain't got nothin' better to do."

"My opinion exactly. Let's go."

Ten minutes later, Randy parked the van next to the car wash where they had met Snakes much earlier in the evening.

"No one's here. Shit, whoever it was must've gotten cold feet," Marshall said.

"No. Look," Randy said and pointed at a woman in a brown overcoat walking briskly towards the van.

Marshall got out of the van to wait for the woman. He briefly looked at a large puddle of water mixed with blood over by the taps, but soon lost interest.

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared with cold eyes at the approaching woman. He knew that this was his most impressive pose, and he always got a kick out of seeing the look of

intimidation on people's faces when he was standing like that.

The woman slowed down for a few steps, and a look of uncertainty flashed across her face. When nothing further happened, she resumed her pace.

"You're the Websters?" she asked.

"Yep. Let's get to the point. We can kill White Fever for ya, no problem, but it'll set ya back fifty big ones."

"Fi-fifty thousand...?" the woman said, clearly shocked.

"Fifty G, yes."

"That's a lot of money..."

"There's a lot of risk in it for us."

"...All right. Fifty thousand... I'm good for it," the woman said.

'Whoa, she must have one hell of a beef with Fever to accept that price with only a small hesitation,' he thought.

Marshall furrowed his brow and studied her closely. With her high heels and brown overcoat, she looked horribly out of place. The woman took off her designer glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. The movement caused her overcoat to part, and Marshall could see she was wearing a navy blue pin stripe pant suit underneath.

"Here's \$5000 in advance. I'll have the remainder ready when you... when you show me proof that Fever is dead," the woman said, and held up an envelope.

Marshall took the envelope and threw it into the van without even counting the money.

"All right. What kind of proof?"

"A picture... anything."

"Of her head on a silver platter?" he said with an evil grin.

The woman's face lost all color, and she took a step back.

"Just kiddin'," he said, but he did so in a tone of voice that betrayed that he wasn't joking at all.

"A regular picture will be sufficient," the woman said hoarsely.

"All right."

"I'll call you from time to time to hear if you've been successful."

"Unusual... but... we're OK with that," Marshall said, and turned on his heel. He went into the van and slammed the door behind him.

Within a few seconds, the GMC van started and drove off, leaving the woman standing all alone in the deserted parking lot.

._*_*_*._

The Mustang rumbled past the entrance to the port. Maeve couldn't see any indications of activity, but the pier where Coluzzo was supposedly unloading the ship was hidden behind several large warehouses.

"Let's be dark and quiet," Maeve said and turned off the headlights.

"We can be dark, but we sure as shit can't be quiet. This is just about the noisiest car I've ever driven in."

"It's a 427 V8, it's supposed to be noisy."

"Are you running without mufflers?"

"No, I'm using glasspacks."

"I have no idea what that is..."

"Well, it's just a different type of muffler. It's made of fiberglass, and..."

"... and I have no interest in finding out, either."

"Oh," Maeve said and pouted.

They drove a bit further into the docks. A strong breeze was blowing in from the sea, and the air was laden with the smell of saltwater. The heavy chains on the loading cranes were swaying in the wind, creaking and moaning like a pack of ghosts.

The piers were poorly lit, so Maeve was driving very carefully. The last thing she needed was to go over the edge and take an early morning swim. They drove very slowly, passing row after row of dark warehouses where the only living things were rats, pigeons and seagulls.

"It's a bit scary out here, ain't it!" Staci said, and laughed nervously.

"Yeah..."

A few times, Maeve thought she could hear someone shouting, but the words were swept away by the breeze.

"There's somethin' fishy about this. There aren't any sentries anywhere, but there's absolutely *no way* Coluzzo would be here without security," Maeve said, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel.

A flash from a headlight in the rear view mirror made Maeve slow down. The new car turned its lights off as well and slowly crept up behind the Mustang. When it was close, Maeve could see it was Danny with a few of Donnelly's men.

He drove alongside them and nodded at Maeve - and then furrowed his brow.

"Fever, is it wise for Miss Hart to be here?"

"Don't you worry about that, Danny. Did you bring any hardware?"

"In the trunk," he said, and pointed backwards with his thumb.

"All right. This is the way I see it... if they're here, they'll be out at pier #1. That's the one furthest away from the road, so they can work without their lights being seen. Let's park a few warehouses short of that. The shadows are so deep no one'll be able to see us coming. Understand?" Maeve said.

"Yep."

"Let's do it."

After they had parked behind warehouse #3, which was roughly 120 yards back from pier #1, Danny and four other equally huge guys left their Lincoln and went to the trunk of the car.

When it was opened, it revealed enough weapons to equip a small army - handguns, sub-machineguns and shotguns in all shapes and sizes. The four men each took a weapon and disappeared out into the darkness, trying to find the best place to see what was going on without being spotted themselves.

Maeve put the Mustang in Park and turned off the ignition.

"I'm going with Danny and the boys, and... please stay in the car, OK?" Maeve said, and put her hand on Staci's thigh.

"I got it. Don't forget, I'm packin' heat, too," Staci said, and reached for her purse. She pulled out a tiny .22 pistol and held it for Maeve to see.

"Ah... yes, of course. Your pea-shooter."

"Fever!" Danny whispered from his position at the trunk of the Lincoln. He held up something long and black.

"Two seconds, Danny."

Staci looked directly into Maeve's eyes. Suddenly feeling an acute need to connect with the enforcer, she pulled her close and placed a kiss on her full lips.

"For good luck. Please be careful," Staci said, and winked.

"I will... and thank you," Maeve said and grinned broadly.

Danny handed Maeve a Heckler & Koch MP5 with a night scope and a specially prepared clip, consisting of two regular clips taped together.

Maeve inserted the clip and unrolled the shoulder strap of the H&K. After putting the weapon over her shoulder, she checked the clip in her Beretta.

"Time to kick Coluzzo's ass," she whispered and gave Danny the thumbsup.

._*._*._*_

Pietro Cazale checked his watch - a quarter past three, AM. So far, everything had gone without a hitch. The six men he had brought had worked faultlessly and efficiently, and they were well ahead of the schedule. The first truck had been loaded already, and the second was nearly full.

'Another fifteen minutes, and we'll be out of here,' he thought, and wiped some sweat off his brow.

The crane on the freighter swung around again and offloaded another crate. The shipment was made up of twelve crates, each weighing 3000 lbs., so the trucks would be at the limit of their capacity.

"Two more to go!" a sailor shouted to Cazale, who responded by waving his hand.

Even though the breeze was stiff, the weather was still incredibly muggy, and Cazale was sweating like a pig underneath his camelhair overcoat.

Finally deciding that enough was enough, he went over to his Cadillac and took off the coat. He folded it very neatly and put it on the backseat. He took off his gloves as well, and placed them next to the coat.

He went back to the trunk and opened it. The loadmaster had reluctantly agreed to give him Coluzzo's special crate first, and it was now safely tucked away in the trunk, wrapped in two layers of bubble wrap.

A metallic 'clink' somewhere behind him caught his ear, and he briefly froze - there were hundreds of such sounds on the pier, but until then, none of them had come from that direction. He closed the trunk, and went back to the side door. He reached into the coat pocket and took out the Walther P99.

He strained his hearing, but the sound wasn't repeated. He looked at the men who were busy using a forklift to get the tenth crate into the truck, but the sounds they made weren't similar to the one he had heard.

He turned around and looked at the first warehouse. Everything appeared to be quiet, but he knew better than to go against his instincts, so he decided to check everything thoroughly.

Cazale walked next to the wall of the warehouse, straining all his senses - and careful not to step in anything gross.

He stopped dead in his tracks when the metallic 'clink' was repeated very close to him. He looked around and saw a light flicker through one of the windows of the warehouse.

The window was next to a door with the sign 'Coffee room' above it, and he tried turning the door handle. It opened with a creak, and he stepped inside.

The room wasn't extravagantly decorated by any stretch of the imagination - the only items in there were four chairs, a small table and a stove with a kettle on it in the far corner. A noticeboard on the near wall had a few pinups on it, and someone had painted a mustache on one of them.

A lit candle was flickering merrily on top of the table, and a cell phone and a steaming mug of tea was next to it.

A strange-looking bundle in the corner caught Cazale's eye, and he cocked the Walther.

"I'd come out if I were you," he said, aiming the gun at the bundle.

A hand appeared and pulled away the tarp, revealing the face of a middleaged woman.

"Get up," Cazale said.

She rose and dusted off her hands. She was wearing dark clothes, and her graying hair was kept in a neat ponytail.

"P-p-please don't hurt me... I'm... I'm homeless, and I... I just use the coffee room to get warm..." the woman said, clearly frightened.

"A homeless person with an almost new cell phone and with tidy clothes? Yeah, right. And I'm the Pope. Who are you?"

"I've... I stole it! You gotta believe me, it's... I'm homeless. I lost my apartment in a fire, and..."

"Shut up."

"You gotta believe me! I... I won't tell anyone you've been here..."

"Shut up!"

The woman wisely stopped talking, and took a sideways glance at the cell phone on the table.

Cazale noticed, and picked up the phone with his left hand. He thumbed through some of the phonenumbers, but the names were all initials.

He went out of that menu and checked the messages sent from it.

"For Fever, Urgent, Coluzzo in docks unloading ship... tsk, tsk, tsk," he said, looking at the woman.

"Fuck you, asshole. When Fever gets here, she's gonna kick your balls to kingdom come," Eileen McLennan hissed.

"Oh, how charming," he said and held the tip of the silencer a few inches from her forehead.

Knowing the game was up, Eileen suddenly lurched forward and took a wild swing at Cazale.

He swiftly stepped aside and let the older woman move past him. As her back was turned to him, he cold-cocked her across the back of her head with the butt of the Walther, striking her with a loud *thump*. She immediately became unconscious and fell very heavily on top of the table, which couldn't hold her weight, and promptly collapsed.

The candle had fallen to the floor, but Cazale crouched down and blew out the flame. Then he placed Eileen's phone on the ground, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. It shattered in a hundred pieces from the impact of the bullet.

He growled and loosened his tie. He wiped some sweat off his brow and started to run back to the pier. With Fever alerted, they had to move fast.

._*_*_*._

In the darkness, Maeve stepped in a deep puddle of something she hoped was water - the putrid

smell told her it probably wasn't. She could feel her sock had been soaked, and her pant leg grew wet around her ankle...

She scowled fiercely and cursed under her breath at the horrible sloshing sounds that were heard each time she put down the boot.

'What the hell good does it do to have a waterproof boot when the water goes in over the top!' she thought and cursed again.

The small team had already moved past warehouse #3 without finding anything untoward, and were now halfway across a narrow alley, heading for warehouse #2.

Suddenly the quiet of the night was torn by a long, howling squeal of metal scraping against metal. The horrendous sound, reminding Maeve of nails running down a blackboard, was immediately followed by a loud metallic crash that made Maeve and the others jump from the loudness.

Maeve looked at Danny, who shrugged in return.

A plethora of agitated voices filtered through warehouse #2 and reached the small team.

"Sounds like something just went splat," Danny whispered.

"Yep. We need to have a look-see."

"Agreed. Doyle, go see what's going on," Danny continued, and waved his hand at one of the men.

A few minutes later, the small team were leaning against the wall of warehouse #2. Maeve's boot was still dripping wet, despite her best efforts to shake her leg to get the last of the liquid out.

Danny looked with a great deal of amusement at Maeve shaking her leg, but he knew better than to make a smart-ass comment.

The sounds of men working and talking were much clearer now, but that didn't necessarily mean that it was Coluzzo's people, it might just be a few low-grade criminals trying to pull a heist from the warehouse - it wouldn't be the first time that had happened.

The scout they had sent ahead came running back out of the shadows and crouched down next to Maeve and Danny.

"There's a freighter unloading some crates. Six men on the pier, two on the ship. Two white trucks, one with the loading ramp down. Looks like they were loading the crates into the truck with a forklift, but the crane on the ship has broken down. One of the crates is hanging in the

air," the man said.

"Weapons?" Maeve said.

"Two of the men on the ground have M16s, can't see any on the men loading the truck."

"All right, thanks Doyle," Danny said, and gave the man a thump on his back.

"Hmmm... we won't find out what's goin' on by sittin' here," Maeve said.

"No. What does your intuition tell you?"

"My intuition? My *woman's intuition*?"

"Yeah!" Danny said and chuckled.

"We should go in with our guns a-blazin', that's what it's tellin' me!"

"Thought it might."

"What does your wrestler's intuition tell you?"

"Much the same."

"That's why we're so great together, Danny-boy," Maeve said, and punched the big man on his arm.

A sudden, loud crash from somewhere down the other end of the alley made Maeve bring up the H&K to look through the nightscope. She scanned the area, and just caught a few glimpses of a man disappearing around a corner.

"I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I think I just saw The Silencer run around the corner down the other end of the last warehouse," she whispered.

"All right. That means they're here for certain," Danny said quietly.

"Yeah. They must've spotted us. I know Cazale, he wouldn't run unless the Devil was on his tail. We better move quickly."

Danny waved at the other men, and they ran towards him.

"This is it. Fever and I will take the point, you're the backup," Danny said and worked the action on his 12-gauge pumpgun so it was ready.

The small group ran to the other side of the narrow alley between the warehouses. Once there, they could easily hear the activity taking place out on the pier.

"Ready?" Maeve whispered and released the safety catch on her H&K.

The men all nodded.

"Time to rock'n'roll," she said, and went around the corner and onto the pier.

Cazale came sprinting around the corner onto the pier, continued past his Cadillac, and didn't stop until he had reached the trucks.

"We've gotta hustle, Fever can't be far off!" he shouted to the workers. Only then did he notice that a crate was suspended in mid-air, hanging off the arm of the crane - which had white steam pouring out of the chain drive.

"Fuck! What's happened?"

"The crane broke," one of the workers said and shrugged.

Cazale gave the worker the Evil Eye, and spun around on his heel. He started walking back to the Cadillac to get his phone, cursing loudly in Italian over the incompetent meatheads he had to work with. Yet again he had to explain a failure to Don Coluzzo.

Suddenly, a long salvo from a submachinegun ripped through the night, making everyone jump.

"Freeze, motherfuckers!" Fever roared, lowering the smoking MP5 to aim at the workers. Danny and the other men followed her onto the pier and fanned out.

Cazale dove behind his Cadillac, trying desperately to come up with an escape plan.

The two Coluzzo guards holding the M16s briefly looked at each other, and then raised their weapons.

"Drop 'em, morons... d'ya think I won't pull the trigger?" Maeve said loudly.

The message didn't seem to get across, because the two guards opened fire on Maeve and the others.

Maeve was caught in a shower of sparks from the projectiles hitting the concrete right in front of her feet, and she jumped for cover behind a drum. The guard stopped shooting, and Maeve squeezed the trigger of the MP5, cursing loudly in the process.

Her salvo shot out the legs from under the trigger-happy guard, and he went down hard. The other guard wisely gave up the fight, and threw down his weapon.

Some of the others were less willing to surrender, but a few rounds from Danny's pumpgun took the fight out of them.

Donnelly's men quickly rounded up their opposite numbers from Coluzzo's gang and collected their hardware.

Maeve used the night scope to see where Cazale was, and she found him about fifty yards further back from where the fight had been. He was crouching down next to a black Cadillac - Maeve recognized it as the car that had followed them up Jefferson earlier in the evening, and she grunted to herself.

She moved a switch with her thumb and set the MP5 to fire single rounds. She aimed carefully, and pulled the trigger. The projectile smashed the wing mirror on the right side of the Cadillac, immediately above Cazale's head. She could see him roll to his right, but she knew she hadn't hit him.

"Danny, the Silencer is down the other end of the pier. I'm going after him. Can you take care of the situation here?"

"Sure thing, Fever. We got it," he said, and gave Maeve a thumbsup.

Maeve ran in the shadows along the warehouse wall, constantly looking through the night scope to see if she could spot Cazale. She could see the Cadillac was abandoned, so she only checked it briefly once she reached it. She noticed Cazale's overcoat lying on the backseat, and she had to chuckle over the man's absurd neatness.

Movement ahead of her shook her back to the task at hand, and she brought up the night scope. Cazale came slowly around the corner of the warehouse, using a dark figure as a human shield. It was a woman, and she was very unsteady on her feet. Maeve suspected the unknown woman had something to do with the loud crash they had heard earlier.

Cazale came closer and closer, and Maeve quickly understood that he was trying to get to the Cadillac - but she was between him and the car.

"Fever! Put down your hardware and step aside. I'm leaving. If you try to stop me, this little old rat will lose what's left of her brains. You know I'm not bluffing," he said, and pressed his Walther P99 against the back of the head of the dark figure.

"You can't get out of here, Silencer. You might as well give it up."

"Don't insult me, Fever. You'd never give up, and neither will I."

"True. Who's that?"

"She's the one who called you," he said, now only forty feet from Maeve, and still moving closer.

"Which means she works for Fast Freddie... which means you really oughtta let her go, Silencer..."

"No chance. Do as I tell you. Lose the weapons and step aside."

Maeve made no attempt to move, and Cazale stopped his progress.

"Fever... why are you risking this woman's life? Move!"

Maeve briefly weighed the pros and cons, and came to the conclusion that the hitman would indeed kill the woman if Maeve didn't comply, so she put down the MP5 on the ground, and took her Beretta out of the holster. She held it by the barrel and placed it next to the submachinegun.

"That's a nice enforcer. Now move out of my way, and I'll take my car and get the hell out of here."

"Go ahead. I won't stop you," Maeve said, and put out her hands so Cazale could see they were empty.

They circled around each other, and Cazale opened the driver's side door of the Cadillac. In a single motion, he shoved the woman inside and jumped in behind her. He started the engine and put the car into Reverse.

Maeve quickly dove for her weapons, picking up the MP5 and her Beretta. She aimed both of them at the car, but she didn't dare pull the triggers. Cazale was angry enough already, and he wouldn't need much of an excuse to put a bullet in the other woman's head.

Cazale stepped on the gas, and the car flew backwards. Maeve moved away a bit and watched as it reversed along the pier, stopping with a squeal at the end, before roaring off to the left, and going out of sight.

Maeve sighed and started to run back to Danny.

Staci had heard the brief firefight, and she couldn't help but feel worried about Maeve. She knew the enforcer was a tough cookie, but it only took one stray bullet...

The port was a spooky place. Even though Maeve had been considerate and parked underneath the only working lamp in the entire parking lot, it was still dark, and the place was so deserted that Staci felt like she was the only person left on the planet.

It didn't help that it was so blustery. The edge of the wind carried all kinds of howling, creaking, and squeaking sounds to her, and Staci had twice rolled up the windows so she wouldn't have to

listen to them - but both times it had turned so muggy inside the car that she'd been forced to roll them down again.

'What the hell am I doing in the port at half past three in the goddamn morning!' she thought and yawned.

She sighed and absentmindedly toyed with a few random items she had found in the glovebox. Out in the far distance, she could hear the roar of a powerful engine, but she didn't give it much thought.

The noise came much closer, and she sat up straight. The car sounded like it was racing away from something, and Staci was suddenly worried that she might be getting a little too close to the action.

Cazale wrestled with the heavy Cadillac, which definitely wasn't built for racing in dark alleys between warehouses.

He turned sharp right, sharp left, sharp right again, and then he was finally on his way back to the exit.

As he raced along the pier, he saw Fever's characteristic Mustang out of the corner of his eye. He needed to get rid of the rat next to him, and dumping her at Fever's car would be a fair move.

He slammed his foot down on the brake pedal, making the Cadillac lean so much forward that it appeared to be in the middle of a nosedive.

He reached past Eileen and opened the passenger door. With the door fully open, he shoved the still groggy woman out with an almighty heave. She fell heavily to the ground, moaning as she hit the filthy concrete.

Cazale didn't even bother closing the door, instead he gunned the engine and let gravity close it for him. He roared out of the port and was soon on his way back to Don Coluzzo.

With the Don's special crate safely ensconced in the trunk of the Cadillac, the most important part of the mission had been accomplished, but everything else had been a total fiasco. Cazale thought of the lecture he'd get from Don Coluzzo, and sighed deeply.

To prevent the other driver from seeing her, Staci had flung herself across the seats of the Mustang when the Cadillac stopped, and it was only when she heard the car driving away that she dared to peek over the top of the door.

When she saw the woman lying very still on the ground, she immediately got out of the car and

ran over to her.

"Are you all right?" Staci said, but the woman was too groggy to answer. Staci looked back and forth between the woman and the Mustang, and finally decided that the car was close enough for her to carry the woman over to it.

She kneeled next to the other woman and pulled her up in a sitting position. Then, Staci reached in under the woman and put her over her shoulder.

'OK. So far, so good... now for the hardest part,' Staci thought, and took a deep breath.

She tried to stand up, carrying the woman over her shoulder, but on the first two tries, her knees wobbled so badly she had to put the woman down again.

"Goddammit, Maeve! Where the hell are you when I need you?" Staci said loudly.

She took another deep breath and really put her back to it. Slowly, and shakily, she lifted the woman off the ground and carried her to the Mustang.

Very gingerly, Staci lowered the woman onto the passenger seat. Staci's arms and fingers trembled from the heavy load, but she managed to loosen the woman's collar so she could breathe easier.

With a pained groan that made the hairs on Staci's arms stand on end, the woman came to, and as she regained consciousness, she started to look around.

"Where the hell am I?" she croaked.

"In the port... somewhere."

"Are you one of the good... well, girls, or one of the bad girls?"

"I'm with the Donnellys, if that answers your question..."

"It does. I'm Eileen."

"I'm Staci. Are you the Eileen that sent the text message to White Fever?"

"That's right. I'm guessing she got it?"

"Oh yeah. Fever's here with a handful of guys."

"Good. I hope they kick that sonovabitch's ass!" Eileen growled, but then started coughing.

"I'm sorry, I don't have anything for you to drink."

"It's all right."

Staci scrunched up her face and tapped her lips with her index finger.

"Do you know where the action took place?"

"Hell, yeah, I watched those bastards arrive... it's in warehouse #1, all the way down at the other end of the pier."

"Can you show me how to get there? 'Cos I think it's best if we drive down there."

"Sure thing, toots. Man the steerin' wheel, and I'll get us there in a flash," Eileen said.

Staci walked around the Mustang and opened the driver's side door. She got in and put her hand on the ignition key.

"You might wanna protect your ears, Eileen. It's kinda loud."

"I'm half-deaf anyway... I can take it."

Staci turned the key, and the V8 came alive. After reversing out of the parking space, she selected Drive and hit the gas. The car growled like a pre-historic beast and lurched forward. Startled, Staci took her foot off the throttle and tried again.

"Er... you didn't... steal this car... or something... did you?" Eileen said, slightly concerned over Staci's apparent lack of driving skills.

"Nah. It's Fever's car. I usually drive a Corolla."

"...Oh..."

"Er... Fever?"

"Yes, Danny-boy?" Maeve said, tying a knot on the rope holding one of Coluzzo's men.

"I think that's your car," he said, and pointed at two headlights coming towards them.

"What?" Maeve said, and raised the MP5 so she could look through the scope.

"Hmmm... it's Staci... and that other woman. Staci's driving my Stang!" Maeve said, her voice rising in pitch on the last words.

"Uh-oh..." Danny said and quickly turned around. He hurried over to the prisoners so he wouldn't have to listen to Fever giving the dark haired woman a piece of her mind.

Staci pulled up next to Maeve, and put the Mustang into Park. With a grin, she blipped the throttle a few times, making the car sound like a growling dinosaur.

Maeve's left eyebrow went up to her hairline, and she thrust her hands deep into her pockets.

"Hi, Maeve. Damn, I'm glad to see that you're all right," Staci said, and got out of the car. She wrapped her arms around the shorter woman and gave her a big hug.

Maeve grinned broadly over the unexpected display of affection and hugged Staci back. After they separated, Maeve cleared her throat and put her arm around Staci's waist.

"You were driving my car."

"Er... yes?"

"Nobody drives my car... but me."

"Gimme a break, Maeve. It was 500 yards at the most," Staci said, and gave the enforcer a squeeze.

"She doesn't like anyone else but me driving her."

"'She'...? 'her'...? OK, Maeve, that's a car," Staci said, pointing at the Mustang.

"She's more than just a car... but never mind. Hi, I'm White Fever," Maeve said to Eileen, who was still sitting in the passenger seat.

"I'm Eileen McLennan. I'm the one who sent you the message. Did it help you?"

"It certainly did. Cazale got away, but we got all the crates they were offloading."

"Good. Too bad about that asshole, pardon my French. He clobbered me, and I would've liked to return the favor."

"Perhaps some other time," Maeve said and laughed.

"Yeah."

"...Maeve?" Staci said, sniffing the air.

"Yes?"

"What's that horrible smell?"

A little while later, Eileen waved goodbye to Maeve and Staci, and hobbled back to the small coffee room to begin sorting out the mess Cazale had created.

"Fever, what do you want us to do with the prisoners?" Danny said, and nudged the back of one of the six men with his knee. The captured men were sitting on the ground with their hands tied together, and they all looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Hmmm... did you finish emptying the first truck?"

"Yep."

"All right, throw 'em in there. Then get someone to drive it down to the Monroe. They can walk home from there," Maeve said with a mischievous look in her eyes.

"Deal. All right, boys, you heard the lady. Get in the truck!" Danny yelled, and started pulling Coluzzo's men upright.

The man who'd been shot by Maeve was first, and he spat at her feet.

"That ain't no lady, that's a goddamned bit-*huaadr!*" he started to say, but the sentence was cut off mid-stream when Maeve punched him hard in the stomach.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear that...?" she said, and pulled the man up.

The man was in no condition to repeat his statement, so he wisely shook his head.

"I thought as much. Now git!" Maeve said, and gave the man a powerful shove towards the truck.

Maeve was quite interested in seeing what was inside the crates, so after finding a suitable crowbar in one of the warehouses, she went over to the largest crate.

"Let's see what this is all about," she said.

"Dope?" Staci said.

"Could be, but not necessarily."

Maeve jammed the tip of the crowbar into a small crevice and pulled hard. After a few tries, the front came off the crate, revealing a...

"Holy shit!" Staci said and gawked at the content of the crate.

"Hmmm...!" Maeve said and put down the crowbar. She put her hands on her hips and stared.

Their surprised exclamations made Danny curious, and he walked over to them to see what the commotion was about.

"Oh, that's just so goddamned typical. Trust Fever to get the crate with the nekkid woman."

"Oh, shaddup ya big oaf," Maeve said and slapped Danny's stomach with a laugh.

The crate contained a life-sized marble sculpture of a naked and rather well-endowed mermaid with long, flowing, curly hair. She was sitting on a pedestal with her fishtail piously folded up underneath her - and her ample assets saucily thrust forward for the world to see.

"Hmmm...!" Maeve said again.

"You're wonderin' if that'll fit in your bedroom... right?" Staci teased.

"You know me too well, Staci," Maeve said, and chuckled.

Danny went up to the sculpture and studied it closely.

"It's very lifelike... well, I guess I've never seen a mermaid before, but the rest seems to be OK," he said, and tapped the sculpture with his index finger.

"It's solid marble," he continued.

"I'll bet it's worth a fortune. Perhaps we can use it to give ol' Don Coluzzo a squeeze," Maeve said.

"Maybe."

A distant echo of thunder made Maeve and Staci turn around and look out over the ocean. Even though they were looking East, the sky was pitch black with no signs of the coming dawn. An ominous thundercloud, frequently lit up by lightning, stretched from the horizon to the zenith.

"Danny, let's get the crates stored in the warehouse before that storm comes in. It looks nasty," Maeve said.

"Will do, Fever."

"You're on your own, Danny, I'm done here. Staci and I are going back to my apartment. I need to change my boots... and my pants. The stink's drivin' me nuts," Maeve said, and pulled up in her still damp left pant leg.

"Thank Gawd..." Staci teased, and quickly moved away so Maeve couldn't reach her.

Concluded in Part 2

Norsebard's Scrolls
Index Page

~ White Fever ~

by Norsebard

Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

Disclaimers in Part 1

SPECIAL WARNING for graphic violence

This story revolves around gangsters, hoodlums and goons of all shapes and sizes, and is therefore, by definition, graphically violent at times. In some scenes, that violence is directed towards women, so people who are disturbed by such themes are advised to find something else to read than this story.

*

*

CHAPTER 5

Two blocks away from the shortcut that would lead them to her apartment near Franklin Boulevard, Maeve's phone rang. She slapped her forehead and groaned. Reluctantly, she unclipped the phone from her belt and flipped it open.

"It's Fever. This better be important."

'Fever, it's Giacomo from Pizza 24. We need your help... pronto. Some jerkoff is tearing the place apart. Please!'

"I'll be there, ETA three minutes," Maeve said and slapped her hand down onto the steering wheel.

"Bad news?" Staci said.

"Yeah." Maeve checked the rear view mirror - the road behind them was empty.

"Hang on!" Maeve growled and pulled the handbrake, making the Mustang snap around. As soon

as the car had settled, Maeve stepped on the gas, and they took off going in the direction they had just come from.

"We're going the wrong way down a one way street!" Staci squealed and grappled for the panic grip.

"I know. The owner of Pizza 24 is in trouble," Maeve said, like it would explain everything.

"So? Why couldn't he call the cops?" Staci said, using both hands to hang on to the panic grip.

"Oh, please..."

They blasted out of Third Street and turned onto Jefferson Boulevard. Maeve was furiously ducking and diving through the traffic, and Staci had to close her eyes a few times.

Maeve had to stand on the brakes when an old Plymouth was slow to move out of her way, and she turned the steering wheel sharp right and then sharp left to get ahead of it. As they passed, she honked with one hand, and waved the other out of the window.

"Jeez, Maeve! If we die, I'll never speak to you again!" Staci said, and gripped the panic bar even harder.

For a brief moment, Staci thought Maeve would cross the center line and go the wrong way up Jefferson, too, but at the last possible moment, the enforcer turned sharp left and made a u-turn that had Staci squealing at the top of her lungs.

As soon as the Mustang had come to a halt, Maeve jumped out and strode towards the pizza parlor with determined steps.

Staci almost didn't dare to open her eyes, but she finally did. She released the death grip she had on the panic bar, and swept her hair away from her eyes.

She took a few calming breaths, and wiped the sweat off her brow...

Maeve stepped through the door to the pizza parlor. Formerly, it had been a glass door, but now it was an empty frame, with a bucketful of broken glass spread all over the ground on both sides of it.

On the other side of the counter, Giacomo's wife tended to one of the waiters, who was leaning against a wall, holding a napkin to his bleeding nose.

"All right, what in the Hell is going on here?" Maeve said in a strong voice.

An aggressive-looking man in his early 30's was standing next to a sodapop vending machine, holding a wooden club in his hand. Judging by the crushed mess at his feet, the club had earlier been a leg of one of the chairs Giacomo had in his Ristorante.

"Mind your own fuckin' business, bitch," he said, and slammed the club into the vending machine, making a deep dent in the side.

"This is my fuckin' business, buster. An' I don't particularly like people harrassin' my friends."

"Oh yeah? Whatcha gonna do about it, little girl?" he said, pointing the club in Maeve's direction.

Maeve ignored the man's threat and acted as nonchalantly as she could. In reality, she was as taut as a bowstring. She knew that jerks like that could snap at the drop of a hat, so she had to be on her toes. The first priority would be to get him out of the Ristorante without further damage.

When Giacomo heard Fever's voice, he came running out from the kitchen. He was a rotund man in his late 50's, with friendly eyes, salt-and-pepper hair and a walrus mustache.

"Thank God you came so quickly, Fever. That guy over there threatened to kick our asses... he wanted shrimps on his pizza but they had gone bad, so we only had anchovies," Giacomo said.

"I fuckin' hate anchovies!" the violent man shouted, and raised the club against Giacomo.

Maeve jumped forward and kicked the violent man just below the ribs on his right side. He groaned pitifully and his legs wobbled. He tried to swing the club at Maeve, but she kicked it away, her boot impacting on his hand and wrist with a loud crunch. He howled in pain, and staggered backwards, ending up falling on his backside on top of the crushed chair.

Maeve quickly went over to him, grabbed his hair and forced his head towards her.

"Are you done here? Or do you want more?"

"I only wanted some shrimps... I hate anchovies..." he mumbled, shaking his head in defeat.

"Whatever," Maeve said, and dusted off her hands.

The man slowly got to his feet and appeared to leave the pizza parlor - but just as he passed Maeve, he roared and took a fierce swing at her.

Giacomo's wife screamed a warning to Maeve, but she was already aware of what was going on. She ducked and easily avoided the clumsy swing, and then took a step back to get a better angle of attack. Within a split second, she fired off a right hook to the man's cheekbone that made his head snap around - he wobbled badly, but kept standing. Maeve moved in deep and finished him off with a hard left straight into his gut. In an instant, all the air rushed out of him, and his eyes

rolled back in his head.

Maeve pushed him away from her, and he fell backwards onto the floor, finally ending up poking his head through the door he had busted earlier.

She looked down at her hand and winced - all the knuckles on her right hand had been skinned by hitting that stupid eejit's rock solid chin. She flexed her fingers one by one, but she didn't appear to have any broken bones.

"Ice is your friend," Giacomo said, and gave her a pouch filled with ice cubes.

"Thanks, Giacomo."

"Never a dull moment..." Staci said, standing in the doorway. She quickly spotted Maeve's bruised knuckles, and she jumped over the knocked-out man to get to the enforcer.

"Dammit, Maeve, I can't take you anywhere. Look at your hand!"

"Meh, it's a scratch."

"When we get back to your pad, you're gonna get pampered, Maeve," Staci whispered for Maeve's ears only, and gently took the bruised hand in her own.

Maeve winked at the owner of the pizza parlor, who grinned broadly in return.

"Giacomo, here's \$400. It won't cover everything, but it's a start. Call Fast Freddie in the morning, and we'll get things squared," Maeve said, and handed Giacomo a wad of dollar bills.

"Grazie, Fever. Hey, how about I make you a Pizza? On the house, of course."

"Well, we were on our way back to my place..."

"Actually, I'm starved," Staci said.

"... but we can wait a little longer. Make it a Quattro Stagioni... hold the shrimp," Maeve said, and winked again.

"You got it, Fever."

"What about this piece of trash?" Staci said, nudging the man's leg with her foot.

"He'll be out for a little while yet. I'll call Danny in a few and make him come over with a broom."

On their way back to Maeve's apartment, the delicious smell of the smoking hot pizza wafted out of the cardboard box, and filled up the Mustang.

"The sound you hear is my stomach jumpin' for joy," Staci said, making Maeve laugh out loud.

"Cute. It does smell pretty good, I'll give ya that."

"There's something I've been wondering about... why does someone called Giacomo have connections with the Donnellys instead of with Coluzzo?"

"It isn't that black and white anymore, Staci. Thirty years ago, it couldn't have happened, but things change and we gotta change with them. Coluzzo has plenty of people working for him whose last name begins with a 'Mac', too."

"Oh... it's definitely not like that over at Rose's. I don't think we have a single customer who isn't of Irish descent."

"Well, that's the difference between a big business and a small independent."

"I guess."

Maeve turned off Fourth Street and entered the alley where her apartment was. She reversed up to the sliding door and rummaged through the glovebox for the remote.

._*._*._*

Jimmy Snakes had taken three more Happy Pills, and he had fully entered a blissful state. He was cruising Jefferson with his arm hanging out of the window, generally enjoying himself and loving everyone he met.

He had just made the u-turn at Fourteenth Street when his old Buick Century suddenly started coughing and spluttering. The engine eventually died, and the car rolled to a halt by the curb.

He stared dumbly at the instruments, not quite comprehending what was going on. After a couple of minutes, he came to the conclusion that the car had stopped because the little needle on the tank gauge was leaning against the 'E'. He turned the ignition key several times just to make sure he'd found the correct problem, but not much happened - apart from the starter motor sounding increasingly rough.

He scratched his hair and tried to focus. He knew something had to be done about the situation, but he couldn't quite remember what it was.

'Oh yeah, buy gas...' he thought and giggled.

He found his wallet and looked through it. It was nearly empty. All he had was \$1.98 and a pirated credit card. He stared at the contents of the wallet for a few minutes until he realized he

didn't have enough money to buy gas.

"Shit..." he said out loud.

Another few minutes went by without much activity, when he suddenly remembered that he still had the Beretta he had stolen from White Fever. A goofy grin spread out over his lips, and he gave himself a high-five.

He got out of the Buick and leaned against the door. Only a few people were out walking around, and none of them paid him any attention. There were still plenty of cars cruising Jefferson, but they all drove straight past him after having made the u-turn at Fourteenth Street. This section of Jefferson was simply a lot less busy than further North, and it was even more pronounced this time of night.

His eyes caught a colorful neon sign on the other side of the Boulevard, and he half-ran, half-shuffled over there.

The sign above the store read "McMillan's Pawnshop", and the glass door and the two windows on either side of it were all reinforced by thick metal bars.

Snakes opened the door and went inside. The small shop was so jam-packed with all kinds of items that he could only go a few steps in either direction before stumbling over something. A narrow path had been cleared in the middle of all the stuff, leading to a counter with a glass booth. Similarly to the shop windows, the booth was reinforced by metal bars.

Snakes walked through the narrow path and dinged a small bell on the counter. A fat man with black spectacles, long, greasy hair and an unruly full beard came out from a back room.

"Whatup?"

"Hey, man. I 's wonderin' if I could, you know, borrow some gas money...?"

"Are you fuckin' nuts? Get the fuck outta here, ya moron!"

"No wait, man! I've got something to trade."

"Let me see it."

Snakes reached behind him and took out the Beretta. He ejected the clip and put the weapon in a small drawer, which he then pushed under the metal bars.

The fat man inspected the weapon very thoroughly. He appeared to be going through a checklist, searching for known issues with this type of firearm. He finished off his inspection by sniffing the barrel.

"Hmmm. Pretty good quality. Genuine, not a replica. Hasn't been cleaned since it was last fired. Where'd ya steal it?"

"Long story, man, long story."

"35 bucks."

"What?! No way, man, \$50, or I'm walkin'"

"Then walk, buddy. \$35's my only offer," the fat man said, and put the gun in the drawer.

Snakes just stood there with his jaw halfway down his chest. This wasn't at all going the way he had planned it. Suddenly his brain made a few connections, and he took the Beretta, and held it up against the metal gate.

"Gimme all the money you've got in the cash register, man!"

"Hey, nitwit, you ain't got the clip in."

"Oh..." Snakes replied, and quickly inserted the clip.

"... and by the way, look up there. Say cheese," the pawnbroker said, and pointed at the wall above him.

A small video camera was pointed directly at Snakes, and underneath it, a red LED light was flashing.

Snakes stared dumbly at the camera, not understanding any of it.

"All right ya dumb fuck, you've had your chance. If you don't get outta here right now, I'm callin' White Fever," the fat man said, and picked up the receiver of a phone that stood on the counter.

"White Fever! Fever's the one who got me in all this trouble, man! If only that stupid bitch would stay dead, I... I wouldn't be here! Fuck, man! I capped her twice in the tits, man!" Snakes whined, stamping his foot on the floor.

"You're trippin', dude. Get the fuck outta my store, ya fuckin' moron, or else I'm gonna come out there and rip ya a new one!"

For once, Snakes understood, and he rapidly left the pawnshop.

He started running down the boulevard, loudly cursing White Fever and all of her ancestors. After fifty yards or so, he was completely out of breath, and he had to lean against a wall to

regain his composure.

A bright red neon sign shone in his eyes, and he looked up. The sign read 'Song Park Convenience Store - Open 24H'. He grinned and pulled up in his drooping pants. He double-checked that the clip was in the Beretta, and then he hid the weapon in the pocket of his pants.

The convenience store was very neat and tidy, and it had a faint smell of foreign spices and herbs. A young Korean woman was sweeping the floor around the softdrink vending machines, and an elderly man, most likely the young woman's father, was polishing the counter next to the cash register.

For some reason, Snakes had never been in here before, so he decided to take a quick tour of the store. He went up and down the aisles, picking up a few little things while he was psyching himself up to go to the counter.

He put down the assorted candy bars on the counter, and pretended to reach for his wallet. The elderly man opened the cash register, and Snakes drew the Beretta.

"Gimme all you got!" he shouted, and pointed the weapon at the man.

The man started speaking very rapidly to him, but it was in Korean, so Snakes didn't understand anything. He knew that this stickup was going downhill fast, too, so he reached over the counter and grabbed a wad of dollar bills out of the cash register.

Just as Snakes turned around to leave the store, he sensed movement behind him. He peeked over his shoulder, and looked directly into two very angry mahogany brown eyes.

The young woman roared, and brought down the broomstick onto Snakes' back with such force that it almost made him lose his balance. She hit him a second time, and the impact snapped the broomstick in two.

Snakes hollered and stumbled his way across the slippery floor. Dropping most of the cash he had stolen, but making sure he held onto the Beretta, he slipped and slid towards the exit of the convenience store.

Once clear of the door, he started running towards his Buick, and didn't stop until he reached it. He jumped in, and turned the ignition key... and remembered why he was trying to rob stores in the first place. He slapped his forehead, but unfortunately he did it with the hand holding the Beretta, so he gave himself a hard thump on the head with the barrel of the gun.

"Oh man, this is not my day!" he howled, rubbing his forehead. He looked at the few remaining dollar bills in his hand... he had succeeded in scoring \$8 from the convenience store.

'At least I can buy two gallons of gas,' he thought, and sighed.

... and on top of all his other problems, his Happy Pill-induced buzz was wearing off, too. He

sighed again, and got out of the car to begin the long trek up to the gas station at Ninth Street.

._*._*._*

Maeve unlocked the door to her apartment and waved Staci inside.

"Don't even think about laughin'," Maeve said as she closed the door behind them. She hobbled across the floor, wearing a plastic carrier bag over her left boot so she wouldn't get any gunk on her expensive carpet.

"Too late," Staci said, laughing out loud over the silly sight.

"Listen, I refuse to go anywhere near food before I've had a shower, so just pop the pizza in the microwave."

"OK. No problemo."

Maeve placed the car keys on a low table and unhooked the shoulder holster. She flung the leather straps over the back of a chair and went into the bedroom.

"This is gettin' ridiculous. Pretty soon, I'm gonna need a housemaid to come and do my laundry," she grumbled as she unbuttoned her shirt, and started working on the boot in the plastic carrier bag.

"Uh-huh?" Staci said, standing in the doorway, secretly enjoying watching Maeve take her clothes off.

"Yeah. Good thing I have so many pairs of white jeans. People on the street wouldn't recognize me if I didn't wear 'em. They're my uniform, you know."

"Uh-huh?"

"Is that all you can say?"

"Nope."

"Cute. Is the pizza in the oven?"

"It's sizzlin' as we speak," Staci said, and watched Maeve fling the filthy boot, still inside the plastic bag, across the hall and into the bathroom where it couldn't do so much damage.

"Well, they're fucked... that stink's never comin' out of 'em. Thank God I had that plastic bag in the car."

Staci looked at Maeve's pant leg - formerly white, it was now sporting a stain that was an ugly mix of organic brown and unrecognizable pale green halfway up to her knee.

"Yuk," Maeve said and scrunched up her nose.

She was about to unbutton her jeans when she noticed that Staci was looking at her... and not only that, the tall woman had that sparkling look in her eyes again.

Maeve's lips creased in a cheeky grin as their eyes met, making Staci respond with a similar one.

"Give me ten minutes, then I'll come and eat... OK?"

"Sure thing. I'll keep it warm for ya," Staci said, and left the bedroom.

"I'm sure you will," Maeve said to herself as she took off her shirt.

Ten minutes later, Maeve returned from the shower, and she walked barefoot into the living room area of the loft.

Staci was sitting in the couch, already on her second slice of pizza. She had helped herself to a can of beer from the fridge, and she took a long swig from it just as Maeve came up behind her.

Maeve crouched down behind the couch and moved a few strands of Staci's jet black hair away from her neck. Maeve put her chin on Staci's shoulder, content with observing the other woman as she ate.

"Hungry?"

"Starved."

"I'm glad we have something to eat, then," Maeve said, and gently kissed Staci's neck.

"Yeah."

Maeve went around the couch to get a slice of her own, when she noticed that Staci stopped chewing, and then gulped audibly.

"Is something wrong? Didn't I get all the gunk off?"

Staci didn't reply - instead, her eyes slowly climbed up Maeve's body, from her bare feet, over the well-toned calves and thighs, past the black silk boxers, over the form-fitting black tank top, and up to her muscular arms and tattooed shoulders. Staci swallowed again and licked her lips, her mouth suddenly bone dry.

"Are... are you gonna eat like that...?" she croaked.

"Yep," Maeve said, and toyed with the elastic band of her boxers.

"Oh..." Staci took a long swig from the beer.

"Whassamatter? You've seen me in less than this."

"Yeah, but... forget it," Staci mumbled.

"Come on, tell me what's on your mind," Maeve said and laughed.

Staci just shook her head and picked up the last slice of her half instead.

Maeve cocked her head and tried to get eye contact with Staci - to no avail. She had always been a woman of action, so she simply went over to the couch and snatched the pizza slice out of Staci's fingers.

"Hey!"

Without speaking a word, Maeve jumped up in the couch, and straddled Staci's lap. Their faces were only a few inches apart, and the air between them was electric.

"Open up, the choo-choo's comin' in..." Maeve said, and started making noises like a steam locomotive.

Staci grinned, but complied. She opened her mouth, and Maeve slowly inserted the pizza. Staci bit off a chunk and started chewing. Maeve did the same, and then put the pizza slice down in the box.

They looked deeply into each other's eyes, reliving all the good times they used to share. Staci let her hands roam slowly up and down Maeve's back, and the enforcer responded by sighing sensuously.

Staci pulled Maeve's face down towards her, and their lips finally touched. They kissed very lightly to begin with, satisfied with brushing their lips together to get reacquainted, but soon Maeve traced Staci's lips with her tongue.

Staci only hesitated for the briefest of moments before allowing Maeve inside. Their tongues met, and the kiss rapidly grew in intensity - soon it had reached a level where it threatened to incinerate both women.

Maeve was reluctant to break off the kiss, but the lack of oxygen forced her to. Panting, she leaned her forehead against Staci's, and grinned.

"Gawd, I've missed you so much... I've missed *that* so much..." she whispered, pulling her

head back and framing Staci's face with her hands, so they could look into each other's eyes again.

"Oh, you say that to all your girlfriends..."

"No," Maeve said, and leaned down to kiss Staci again.

The kiss was slow and sensuous, and Staci could feel her defenses breaking down one by one. She knew in her heart that getting betrayed for the third time would kill her, and she knew that the feisty enforcer was a dangerous woman to be around... but above all, she knew that she wanted her more than anything.

Staci's fingers found their way inside Maeve's tank top, and they started clawing the muscular back.

Maeve pulled back again, and she couldn't hide the unbridled lust shining in her eyes.

"You know where this is headed, don't you..." Staci whispered huskily.

Maeve simply nodded, and leaned forward again to resume the kissing.

At the last possible moment, Staci turned her head away, making Maeve stop.

"I'm sorry, Staci. I'm doing it again, aren't I? I'm going too fast," she said with a sad smile.

"Well... you're not exactly slow... but that's not why I stopped you."

"Oh?" Maeve said, and put her hands on Staci's shoulders.

"No. I've been roasting all evening in that sweat hut you call a car, and... I need a shower before we do anything else."

"Thank Gawd! I thought you were gonna say you didn't like girls anymore!" Maeve cried out and started to giggle.

"No, silly. I thought my tongue in your throat would have hammered that particular point home," Staci said, and poked Maeve in the ribs.

"Well, I suppose it did," Maeve said, and moved away from Staci's lap.

"I'll only be a few minutes. Don't go anywhere."

"Oh, don't worry 'bout that. I'll be right here, waitin' for ya," Maeve said, and gave Staci's backside a little squeeze as she got up from the couch.

When she heard the bathroom door close, Maeve picked up the pizza box, and wolfed down the

remaining slices of pizza. Then she went over to the fridge and debated with herself if she should take a beer or a bottle of spring water. She decided for the spring water, and gulped that down, too.

When Staci returned from the shower, she wore a kimono made of purple silk. It was one of Maeve's, so it only went down to mid-thigh on the taller woman.

"Gawd, that's adorable... and hot!" Maeve said from her position on the couch.

"You think so?"

"Ohhhhh yeah..."

She had to force herself to look above Staci's glorious thighs. It was the first time in a long while that she had seen them, but the intervening years had done nothing to impair their sexiness.

Not that the rest of Staci was any worse. Her full breasts were very visible through the thin fabric, and Maeve's heart started beating faster when she remembered what those breasts used to feel like.

Maeve licked her lips and leaned back on the couch, putting her arms on top of the back rest. The movement made the tank top tighten over her already hardened nipples, and the sensation shot directly to her center.

Staci's blue eyes seemed to be darker than normal, and a vein was beating rapidly on her neck as she was looking at the enforcer.

She went over to the couch and sat down next to Maeve. Suddenly feeling curiously shy, she let her index finger trace Maeve's tattoos.

"Does this have a special meaning?" she said, looking at the confusing patterns of ink on Maeve's right shoulder.

"They're meant to look like flames."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Maeve said, and let her fingers run slowly up Staci's bare thigh. She was slightly disappointed when Staci stopped her progress by putting her hand on top of Maeve's, but she didn't want to spoil the mood by objecting.

"Not yet, OK? We need to talk a bit first," Staci said quietly.

"No problem."

"This was the only one you had in the old days," Staci said, and prodded a stylized capital 'D' on Maeve's left shoulder.

"Yep. D for Donnelly. My family."

"Your gang."

"My family. What was it you wanted to talk about?" Maeve said, trying a different approach by running her fingers through Staci's jet black hair.

"Well..." Staci said, and pulled her legs up underneath her.

"...That we both understand that just because we're doing this tonight, it doesn't mean that we're starting over. I... can't do that again, Maeve."

"Ummm... I understand. Really, I do, but... none of us have said that we would...?"

"I know, and I guess I'm just saying it for my own benefit. I'm just so damned tired of all this relationship nonsense," Staci said and sighed.

"Remember what I told you in the pool hall?"

"...That it ain't never so bad it can't be cured by a quick hump?"

"Exactemundo," Maeve said and leaned in towards Staci's ear. Her tongue started playing with Staci's earlobe, flicking it around, pulling it, and even gently biting it.

Staci giggled and squirmed, but Maeve hung on, teasing mercilessly. When Maeve finally stopped playing with the earlobe, she started kissing her way forward, ending up with placing a very chaste peck on the tip of Staci's nose.

Staci looked deeply into Maeve's eyes. They were as they had always been, Irish green with hints of gold. Maeve could play the tough-as-nails enforcer all she liked, but Staci knew that eyes never lied. Even if she hadn't known Maeve, she would only need to look into her eyes to see that the tough cookie with the spiky white hair and the rough'n'tumble 'tude was in fact very tender, caring, and above all, passionate.

Staci grinned, and Maeve responded by flashing her trademark crooked smile.

The intimacy sent a pleasurable buzz tearing through Staci's system, making every single nerve stand on edge.

"If we don't finish this right now, I'm gonna blow up," Staci whispered huskily, and grabbed Maeve's hand. She pulled the enforcer up from the couch, and led her to the bedroom.

Maeve was right behind, still holding on to Staci's hand, when the tall woman stopped suddenly at the entrance to the bedroom - Maeve couldn't stop in time, so she ran into Staci's back.

"Whut?" she said, and looked past Maeve's broad back.

The dark haired woman was staring at the mirrors in the ceiling.

"Oh... the mirrors... if they make you uncomfortable, we can stay in the living room..." Maeve said, as she followed Staci's line of sight.

Staci turned around and shot Maeve a look of pure, unadulterated lust that went directly to Maeve's center. The enforcer's breath hitched, and her entire body ached for Staci's touch.

Staci slammed the bedroom door shut, and pressed Maeve up against the wall. She looked at her for a split second before assaulting her with a bruising kiss.

As their tongues began to dance wildly, Maeve reached down and untied the belt of Staci's kimono. She reached inside and started caressing a full breast, making Staci press her body hard against the shorter woman, and groan with delight into Maeve's mouth.

When they separated, Maeve moved down and took one of Staci's nipples in her mouth, first moving her tongue around in a circle over the nubby skin at the base to get it fully erect, and then taking the nipple between her lips and squeezing gently. While it was fixed there, she let her tongue run very slowly back and forth across the tip of the nipple, remembering that this was something that was guaranteed to drive Staci wild.

Staci responded with a few guttural sounds, and she started to sway. Her head was flung back, and her eyes were closed. She had her hands solidly planted on Maeve's shoulders, and her fingers dug so deep into the flesh that they left rounded indents when she moved them.

Even without touching herself, Staci knew that she was dripping wet, and she also knew that she badly needed a quick release, so when Maeve left Staci's nipples to get some air, she grabbed hold of her, and turned the two of them around. She leaned against the wall and breathed heavily.

"Please, Maeve, please..." she whispered, and spread her legs to ease Maeve's access.

Maeve didn't need to be asked twice, so she moved even closer and put her leg between Staci's. The skin on her thigh immediately became coated in Staci's juices, and she felt her own center responding with a sudden throb.

Staci lowered herself down onto Maeve's well-muscled thigh, and she began to grind rhythmically on the smooth skin. At first, she moved slowly, but she soon picked up the pace, and it wasn't long before she could feel the orgasm beginning to build in her core.

She closed her eyes and sought out Maeve's lips with her own. Wordlessly, they let their tongues wrestle against each other, the heated dance matching the intensity of the cadence of Staci's hips.

Suddenly Staci bucked and she pulled Maeve even closer. Staci's hips had taken on a life of their own, and as the orgasm exploded through her body, they continued to pump against Maeve's thigh for several seconds before gradually slowing down.

Staci moaned loudly, and she let out a long, slow sigh. The aftershocks swept through her like waves, and she was trembling from the aftermath of the powerful climax. She leaned forward and buried her head in the nook of Maeve's shoulder - her legs suddenly went limp, and she had a hard time standing up.

Fortunately, Maeve was strong enough to hold her upright, and with a throaty chuckle, she managed to drag the unresponsive Staci over to the bed.

Putting her down gently, Maeve couldn't help but laugh at Staci's predicament. They had known each other for years, but she had never seen Staci so turned on - or so wiped out afterwards.

"Now that's what I call a Petite Mort," Maeve said and chuckled again.

"Gawwwwd," Staci croaked, and took a few deep breaths. She rubbed her face and looked at Maeve with a gobsmacked expression in her eyes.

"Was that good for you, darlin'?" Maeve joked.

"Uh-huh... but... I'm sorry, I was a bit selfish... you didn't even get undressed..."

"Never apologize for needin' or wantin' a quickie," Maeve said, and put her hands on her hips.

Staci grinned and winked, and blew Maeve a kiss.

Maeve wiggled out of her thoroughly soaked boxers and pulled off her tank top. She crawled up into the bed and kneeled next to Staci's prone form.

Maeve took great pleasure in watching Staci's bosom rise and fall as she breathed, and with a broad smile, she reached down to help Staci out of the kimono.

"Come on, let's get this off of ya. We've only just begun," she whispered, and helped Staci up into a sitting position. She pulled the sleeves away from Staci's arms, and threw the kimono down on the floor.

The hollow of Maeve's neck was right in front of Staci's face, and she stuck out her tongue and let it play around in the small valley. She wrapped her arms around Maeve's body so she couldn't escape, and dragged her back down on the bed.

Maeve moved over so she was flat on top of Staci, allowing their naked bodies to touch each

other from head to toe. After a bit of kissing and some playful giggling, they started exploring the flat planes and the soft swells of each other to get reacquainted with the other woman's body.

The feeling of heated skin on heated skin was doing wonders for both of them, and they both felt electric. Staci still had her arms around Maeve's body, and with a mighty heave, she rolled them over so that she was on top.

Staci quickly got off Maeve, and shuffled her a bit further towards the edge of the bed, before sliding back up to offer Maeve another searing kiss.

Maeve grinned wickedly as Staci started kissing her way down the enforcer's well-toned body, making sure to pay special attention to her erect nipples.

"Yeah, baby, you know what I like," she whispered, as Staci dragged her tongue on Maeve's skin from her belly button, down past her V's, and into the closely-cropped golden curls.

Once there, Staci placed a single, gentle kiss on Maeve's slick folds before climbing back up.

"Oh, you big tease..." Maeve growled, but didn't have time to complain further as she was assaulted by another heated kiss.

When they separated, Staci once again kissed her way downwards, this time stopping at Maeve's chest. She gathered up Maeve's breasts in her hands and started kneading them gently, alternately kissing them and letting her tongue run across the swells. She noticed the ugly black and purple bruise at the top of Maeve's right breast - that was where Snakes had shot her earlier.

Staci shivered briefly, and made sure to be very gentle with that area, just in case it was still painful.

She pulled back and looked at Maeve. Their eyes met, and to Staci, it looked like the enforcer's Irish green eyes were on fire.

Staci resumed her duties, and closed her mouth around Maeve's right mound. She sucked on the breast, and felt Maeve's nipple grow rigid in her mouth.

The intense sensation almost brought Maeve prematurely over the edge, and she let out a low, guttural purr. She pounded her fist into the bed and writhed around underneath her partner.

Staci chuckled, and moved away from the right breast - only to dive down on the left one. She mirrored her actions from before, and once again Maeve reacted strongly.

After a minute of sweet torment, Staci continued to kiss her way down Maeve's body, past her sternum that had a purple bruise similar to the one on her breast, and finally coming to a rest between Maeve's legs. To prepare for the next stage, Staci climbed off the bed and knelt on the plush bedroom carpet.

Maeve instinctively bent her knees and pulled up her legs, and Staci wrapped her arms around the enforcer's thighs. She looked at Maeve's well-coated folds and licked her lips in anticipation.

Maeve pressed her abdomen against Staci, and she complied by leaning down and slowly drawing her tongue up the full length of Maeve's outer lips. Going back down, she placed a line of little kisses, and then added something that she remembered from the old days - she blew a stream of cold air on the wet surface.

Maeve's reaction was immediate - she bucked and moaned, and put her hands on the back of Staci's head, pressing it into her center.

Staci was quick to use the additional pressure to her advantage, and she poked her tongue through Maeve's folds and ventured into her vagina. Lapping up the copious amount of juices she found there, she extended her tongue as far as it would go, and let it play along Maeve's inner walls.

Maeve let out a sound that was a cross between a groan and a purr, and she pressed even harder on the back of Staci's head, nearly smothering her face against Maeve's outer lips - Staci didn't object, though. Instead, she reached down between her own legs and started pleasuring herself with her free hand.

She pulled back slightly and went to work on Maeve's fully exposed clit, taking it into her mouth and letting her tongue flick across it. At the same time, she inserted two long fingers into Maeve's opening, and began to move her hand back and forth in a rhythmic motion that grew ever faster.

Put under that kind of strain, Maeve could only hold on for a short while, and she climaxed with a force she hadn't experienced in a long time. Every single part of her spasmed and contracted, and she flung her head back and cried out in a series of short screams, each louder than the one before. Her whole body shook from the force of the orgasm, and her inner muscles trapped Staci's fingers deep inside her.

Simply watching Maeve come so hard was enough to bring Staci over the edge, too, and she groaned and bucked wildly, never stopping pleasuring herself until she needed Maeve's touch more than her own.

After a little while, Maeve's inner muscles were relaxed enough to allow Staci to pull out her fingers, and she quickly wiped them and her mouth off on the satin sheets. She climbed up Maeve's body, and wrapped her arms and legs around the enforcer. For several minutes, the two women held each other tight, out of breath, but completely engulfed in a magnificent rush.

"Thank you, baby," Maeve whispered, and turned her head to kiss the tip of Staci's nose.

"You're welcome... and thank *you*," Staci replied. Even as she was saying that, her eyelids drooped, and her breath soon evened out.

With Staci asleep, her grip on Maeve loosened, and the enforcer was able to wiggle free.

Maeve rolled over onto her back, and enjoyed the last waves of her climax. After brushing a damp lock of hair out of Staci's eyes, Maeve looked up at the mirrors in the ceiling. Intently studying the reflections of herself and her new, old lover, she knew that she was a very lucky woman indeed.

*

*

CHAPTER 6

Salvatore Coluzzo paced back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, stopping occasionally to send Pietro Cazale a scathing glare.

Unlike Cazale's last visit to the Coluzzo mansion, the hitman hadn't been offered a chair. Instead he'd been forced to stand up in the middle of the room, where he was anxiously waiting for Coluzzo to pass sentence on him.

Coluzzo suddenly stopped pacing and pointed his index finger at Cazale.

"Pietro, do you realize that the Family has invested \$2.2 million in those sculptures...? That *I'm* personally responsible for two million two hundred fuckin' thousand Family dollars!?" Coluzzo said, and slammed his fist into his mahogany desk.

"No, Don Coluzzo."

"Well, I am!"

"I'm sorry, Don Coluzzo."

"You fuckin' well better be. Fuck!" Coluzzo said, and resumed pacing back and forth.

Watching a sixty-five year old man, wearing a baby blue silk pajamas and brown slippers, rant and rave while he was walking around in circles felt slightly ridiculous to Cazale, but he knew better than to make a smart-alec comment.

"And the sculptures are still in the warehouse?"

"I can't say for sure, Don Coluzzo, but I believe so."

"What happened to the men who were with you?"

"I've just received information that they were dumped on one of the bridges crossing the Monroe."

"Alive?"

"Apparently so."

"They won't be for long. The dumb fucks. I should fuckin' throw 'em into my Ravioli machine. They probably wouldn't even be good enough for that."

"Yes, Don Coluzzo," Cazale said and gulped.

"Tomorrow night, I want you to assemble a new team and go out there and take the fuckin' sculptures back. I don't care how many of Donnelly's men you have to waste, and I don't care if Fat Ass Freddie Donnelly himself shows up. I. Want. Those. Sculptures. Back! ...Do I make myself clear?"

"Very, very clear, Don Coluzzo."

Salvatore Coluzzo stopped pacing and sat down with a bump in his expensive leather chair. He put his hand on top of a small package on the table.

"At least you managed to salvage this," he said, his voice noticeably softer.

He opened a drawer and pulled out a small pocket knife. He unfolded it, and began to cut open the bubble wrap. When he was done, he carefully picked up the item and started sniffing it.

"A genuine pre-Colombian Spanish Bible, Pietro. This baby is nearly 550 years old!"

He opened it and marveled at the handprinted pages.

"Imagine some poor fuck of a monk, toilin' away every single day of his life in some fuckin' monastery just so I could hold it five centuries later! Man!"

"It's very impressive, Don Coluzzo," Cazale lied, hoping that faking an interest would get him off the hook.

"Yes... yes, indeed. So..." Coluzzo said, and stared hard at Cazale.

Pietro's shoulders slumped. So much for that theory.

"What should I do with you, Pietro? I really can't accept that my number two is constantly outfoxed by anything that moves on two legs. What should I do with you...?" Coluzzo said, as he put the Bible into a safe and turned the dial.

"Don Coluzzo... I..."

"Silence."

Coluzzo began pacing again, but slower this time. He kept looking at Cazale, and the hitman felt increasingly uncomfortable.

"That mission in the port tomorrow night will be your very last chance. If you fuck that up, I'll give Marco, my second cousin twice over, a call. I'm sure he can find suitable work for you," he said, and dusted off his hands.

"M-m-Marco...? He's running a farm way the hell out in the boonies! He's breeding pigs with a bazillion flies and pig shit by the truckload, and... and...!"

"Exactly."

"But, Don Coluzzo!"

"It's too late for 'buts', Pietro. Much too late. I suggest you call it a night and go home. A good night's sleep will do you good. Don't forget, your career hinges on the success of tomorrow's mission," Coluzzo said, and opened the door to the hallway.

"... Yes, Don Coluzzo," Cazale said as he left, already feeling nauseous.

._*_*._

Maeve moved Staci's arm away from her stomach, and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She took a deep breath, and chuckled over the unmistakable smell of sex lingering in the air.

After returning from an ultra-quick shower, she searched for her silk boxers. When she found them, she quickly discovered that she needed a new, dry pair, so she went over to the walk-in closet and pulled out a drawer. She picked a pair of dark blue boxers and put them on.

As Maeve was doing so, Staci stirred and yawned. She rested her chin on her arms and looked at Maeve.

"Is it morning already?" she said hoarsely.

"No. You've only slept for twenty minutes," Maeve said as she bent down to pick up her tank top. She took a long, hard look at Staci's naked back and rear end, and grinned mischievously.

"Hey, Staci, didn't you say that anything under an hour was too quick?"

Staci opened one eyelid, and an ice blue orb pinned Maeve to the wall.

"I lied," Staci said, and closed her eye again.

Maeve put on the tank, and went into the living room to find her phone. She turned it on, and

waited for it to fire up.

Staci rolled over onto her back and sat up. She pulled up her knees, and wrapped her arms around her legs. She just knew that she had a huge, goofy grin on her face, but she couldn't help it.

'Wow... this was ten times better than anything we ever did back in the old days... Why is it that sex with Maeve always turns into such a wild ride? ...Animal attraction, that's why...' she thought and giggled quietly to herself.

She spread out her arms and flopped down onto the bed, hoping the satin sheets would cool off her still flushed body. In a moment of silliness, she moved her arms and legs up and down and made a 'satin angel'. She laughed out loud, not quite believing how good she actually felt - she had really needed this release to break free of the funk she'd been in for the last few weeks.

'Not release, releases,' she thought, and giggled again.

Staci looked at her reflection in the mirrors in the ceiling, and absentmindedly ran her fingers across her breasts, over her stomach and down to the upper edge of her dark patch of hair.

'Who knew those mirrors would turn me on so much...? God...'

She fondly remembered Maeve's expert touch, and her fingers started drawing abstract patterns on her stomach...

"*Fuck*!" Maeve suddenly shouted from somewhere beyond the bedroom door.

Staci sat up again and tried to listen. Her curiosity got the better of her, and she got off the bed and opened the door.

Maeve was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, pinching the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were closed, but judging by the color of her face, something had upset her.

Staci picked up the kimono and put it on. She turned off the lights in the bedroom and went into the kitchen.

"What's wrong, Maeve?"

"There was a message from Dolores on my answering service. They've found a dead prostitute in an alley off Jefferson."

"Oh, God, no. Was it someone you knew?" Staci said, and kneeled in front of Maeve. She took

the enforcer's hands in her own, and gave them a squeeze.

"Not personally, no. Her name was Dominique... she was twenty-two," Maeve said and shook her head.

Staci didn't know what to say, so she moved forward and gave Maeve a hug instead.

"Her clothes were cut open the same way Mary Red's were, so it's gotta be the same asshole who did it. Fuck!" Maeve said, and slammed her fist down onto the kitchen table.

"I'm so sorry, Maeve... do you... do you think you could've caught the bastard if you had been out there, instead... instead of..."

"No. No way, Staci. Don't even think that. Don't feel guilty for what we did. There are five million people in this city, so to go looking for one is like looking for a needle in a needle-stack," Maeve said vehemently.

"Still..."

"Still' nothing. We made love 'cause we wanted to, and I enjoyed it a helluva lot."

"Well... I did too."

"And that's all that matters. The end," Maeve said and got up from the kitchen chair.

Staci nodded, but she couldn't help feeling slightly guilty.

"What now?" she asked.

"Dolores said that the night porter working in The Majestic might know something, so now I'm gonna get dressed and go over there."

She checked her watch - 4:55 AM.

"The city's gonna be waking up in little more than an hour, and I want this problem fixed by then," Maeve said, put on her shirt, and then stepped into a fresh pair of white jeans.

She looked at Staci, who was still wearing the kimono, and looking excruciatingly sexy doing so.

Maeve moved over to Staci and put her hand on her cheek. She let her thumb run slowly back and forth across Staci's cheekbone, and then leaned down to give the dark haired woman a loving kiss on the lips.

"You better get dressed if you wanna come with me," Maeve whispered.

"Oh, I thought you'd want to take care of business on your own...?"

"Yesterday, yes. Today, no."

"Er... tell you what... I need a shower first, and..."

"Go ahead, I got the munchies anyway, so I'll just grab somethin' sweet while you shower," Maeve said, and winked.

"Deal," Staci said and made a beeline for the bathroom.

When she came out, she was fully dressed and ready to go. She zipped her jeans and closed her belt.

"All done."

Maeve was busy eating an Oreo, and Staci's mouth formed an O.

"Saved any for me?"

"Help," **munch** "yourself," **munch** Maeve said, and handed Staci the pack.

Staci twisted the top off the cookie and used her tongue to wipe off the sticky stuff - making sure that Maeve could see what she was doing.

Maeve's chewing slowed down momentarily, but it soon picked up again.

"What have I done? I've unleashed a monster," she said, grinning wickedly. She leaned forward and gently slapped Staci's backside.

"I'm just teasing... but thank you for tonight, Maeve. It was... it was... mindblowing."

"That it was," Maeve said, and stood up on tiptoes so she could kiss Staci on the lips.

Maeve put on the shoulderholster and checked the clip of the Beretta. She sighed deeply as she clicked the weapon in place.

"Back to the real world," she said, smiling sadly.

"I can't believe that some bastard is running around molesting... and killing prostitutes," Staci said as she waited by the airtight door to the elevator.

"There are so many psychos out there it makes me sick," Maeve growled.

They climbed aboard the Mustang, and Maeve pressed the green button on the elevator, making the big lift go downwards.

"Yes, but why is it always women who get hurt? Why can't it ever be men?"

"Well, actually, over the course of a few weeks last November, four men were iced by the same killer. They had their dangly bits cut off at the root, and then they were all left to bleed to death."

"Gawd, that's horrible."

"The killer was a woman they had raped at some party. She came back and took bloody revenge on them."

"Oh... well, in that case, they didn't deserve better," Staci said, and reached for the belt buckle.

"Heh."

The elevator reached the bottom stop, and Maeve pressed the button to activate the sliding door. It opened, and she started the engine.

They drove slowly into the dark alley, paused briefly to check that they were alone, and then ventured out into the neon-lit mean streets of the Big City.

._*._*._*_

In an alley off Fourth Street, overlooking the apartment complex where Fever's loft was located, a black GMC van was hiding in the shadows.

"What the hell is she doin' up there? We've been waitin' here for an hour," Marshall Webster said and wiped his brow. He checked his watch again, cursing under his breath.

"Did the broad with the dough give you any deadline?"

"No...?"

"Then what the fuck does it matter how long we've been here?"

"Cause I'm not good with just hangin' around doin' nothin'. You know that. And it's so goddamn muggy, too!" Marshall growled, and tried to loosen his collar.

"Did ya prepare our tools?" Randy said, and looked over his shoulder at the various items that were placed in the back of the van.

"Yep. It's all set."

"Everything?"

"Most everything."

"Hmmm...?"

"The last of the black plastic bags had a tear in it, so I had to take a white carrier bag."

"Should still work."

"Yep."

A pause.

"What do you want to do with your 25 G, Randy?"

"Sow them into my pillow."

"You don't wanna blow it all on somethin' fancy?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, you know. Dames, booze, cigars, the usual stuff."

"Nah."

A pause.

"I'm gonna spend every last dime. I'll gonna start with..."

"Shhh!" Randy said, and raised his hand.

A black Mustang with silver racing stripes appeared in the alley on the other side of the street. It stopped briefly, and then turned on its lights, and drove slowly out to the sidewalk on Fourth Street.

There, Fever waited for another few seconds, and then she turned right, heading for Jefferson. The rumble of the V8 echoed between the houses as she stepped on the gas.

"There she is, Randy," Marshall said, and poked his brother on the shoulder.

"I got eyes, dude."

The Mustang rumbled conspicuously slowly past the alley where the van was parked.

"Do ya think Fever's on to us? She's drivin' awfully slow," Marshall said.

"I think she's just being careful."

"Go after her. But not too close."

"Don't tell me how to do my job, Marshall," Randy said, and waited until the Mustang was a good distance away before turning on the engine.

"Just do it, then."

The GMC van rumbled out of the alley, and followed Fever's Mustang at around 150 yards.

"We're too far back," Marshall said surly.

"Hey, what the fuck happened to 'not too close'?"

"I didn't mean two blocks back!"

Randy gave up arguing with his brother, so he settled for rolling his eyes before focusing on the driving.

At the intersection at Fourth and Jefferson, Fever turned right, and the Websters followed her onto the boulevard. They continued to tail the Mustang, and it soon became clear that Fever was driving purposefully towards a target rather than just cruising.

"Looks like she's going somewhere specific," Marshall said.

"Could be."

At this time of night, there were very few cars on the streets, so it was difficult for the characteristic GMC van to blend in. Several times, they got too close, and Randy had to slow down considerably.

"I can't believe she's still got that brunette with her. Maybe she's got Fever whipped, huh?" Marshall said, and grinned.

"Meh. We better get ready in case we gotta move fast. Are we going with the usual method?"

Marshall reached into the pocket of his pants, and pulled out a string of piano wire. He snapped it taut, and it made a humming sound.

"Yep."

Just after the intersection at Seventh Street, the turning signal on the Mustang started blinking, and Marshall sat up straight.

"If she turns right into the parking lot of the Majestic, we've got her."

Fever pulled up to the curb and stopped in front of the hotel, in a no-parking zone.

"What the fuck? She can't park there!"

"D'ya wanna give her a ticket, dude? Relax, we'll get our chance," Randy said, and parked the van half a block back from the Mustang. He turned off the lights but kept his hand ready on the ignition key in case Fever was trying to trick them.

Fever and the other woman got out, and started walking to the entrance of the hotel.

"Whoa, check out the gams on that babe," Marshall said and whistled lecherously at Staci.

"There'll be plenty of time for you to have fun with her later on, Marshall. Fever's our top priority. Don't forget that."

"No problem. Some things are worth waitin' for."

Marshall carefully coiled up the piano wire and put it in his pocket.

"Yeah... all good things come to those who know when to strike," he said in a voice thick with menace. He leaned back in the seat and crossed his arms over his chest.

._*_*_*._

Maeve and Staci walked through the revolving door, and stepped into the lobby of the Majestic.

Looking at the run down and flea-infested dive it was now, it was hard to believe that sixty years ago, the Majestic had been the Jewel of the city, and the hotel all the major Hollywood stars stayed at when they were in the area - now, the couch arrangement in the lobby was old and worn out, and the wallpaper was peeling everywhere. The carpet was filthy and full of holes from cigarette burns, and the air held a faint whiff of beer and human waste.

Staci stood in the middle of the lobby and looked open-mouthed at the faded splendor. She could easily imagine how the hotel must have looked when it was used by the rich and famous. The grand, winding staircase off to the left was perfect for a Hollywood-style entrance by some Goddess of the Silver Screen - perhaps Grace Kelly, all dressed up in a ballgown, white silk gloves that reached up to her elbows, and holding a delicate, little purse.

A large, golden chandelier was suspended high over an empty space that Staci surmised could've been used for a grand piano back in the heyday of the hotel. The chandelier was covered in dust

and cobwebs, and most of the light bulbs were broken. She couldn't help but think that it almost personified the decay of the building - she shook her head and sighed.

"Anything wrong?" Maeve asked.

"No, it's just... it's too bad they let something like this go to waste, you know?"

"Yeah. It must've been grand back in its day."

Maeve went over to a worn down reception desk and dinged on a small bell. When nothing happened, she dinged again, slightly harder. Maeve turned around and looked at Staci, who was still standing in the middle of the lobby.

"Hey, had we lived back then, I'll bet you'd have been a Hollywood superstar."

"Come on... don't be silly."

"I'm serious. You'd have wiped the floor with 'em."

"Nah. That wouldn't be a life for me. You, on the other hand, would've been a perfect fit."

"Ha! Me in Hollywood? Yeah right. Working as muscle for a star, sure, but never on the screen," Maeve said, and laughed out loud.

"Hello, Fever, my friend," a man said from somewhere behind Maeve.

Jaroslav Jurasz came out from behind a curtain and wiped off his hands on his already dirty pants. Like the hotel, Jaroslav had seen better days - his greasy hair had already turned gray despite only being 41, and the sleeveless undershirt he was wearing hadn't been washed this decade.

"Jake. How are ya."

"That's Jaroslav, Fever. Ya-ro-slav. Anyway, you want a room? Free of charge for you, my friend," he said after taking a long look at Staci.

"No. I was told you have some information for me."

"That's right. I have some information for you... but that's for sale, not for free."

Maeve reached into her shirt pocket and took out a \$50 bill.

Jaroslav sighed, and appeared to polish his finger nails on his undershirt.

Maeve added another \$50 bill, and he reached for the money. As soon as his fingers touched the bills, Maeve closed her fist, trapping his hand. She looked at him with a steely glare, telling him

wordlessly that he better not be messing with her.

His face flushed red, and he hurriedly looked down.

"What's the information, Jake?"

"I heard from one of the girls that you lost one tonight?"

"That's right."

"I'm really sorry to hear that, my friend."

"Thank you. What's the information?"

"The working girl told me that you're looking for a large man with a scar on his face, right?"

"So?"

"A large man with a scar on the right side of his face was in here around two weeks ago. He looked creepy... even creepier than most of those people."

"Who was he with?"

"Some hooker, real pretty, with curly hair and gray eyes. Haven't seen her before or since," Jaroslav said, and shrugged.

"Don't mess with me," Maeve growled.

"I'm tellin' the truth, Fever. I haven't seen her! I don't think she was one of your girls..."

"One of Coluzzo's, then?"

"Could be... or maybe she was an independent. Hard to tell. They all dress alike, you know."

"All right, but I can't do shit with that, Jake. You gotta gimme some more."

"The hooker said his name... I think she called him Jerry."

"Describe him."

"Tall, taller than your friend," Jaroslav said and pointed at Staci.

"... not really fat, but, you know... large. A pale blue windbreaker or sports jacket. Dark pants. Could be a uniform of some kind."

"Cop uniform?"

"No. Looked more like a bus driver. Anyway, big hands, and nasty, nasty eyes."

"Nasty eyes?"

"Dead, ice cold, psycho-eyes."

"Great..." Maeve said, and rubbed her forehead.

"Did you get anything?" Staci asked.

"A little bit. It's funny, though. When this night started, gettin' Jimmy Snakes was at the top of my hit list... now he ain't even in the top 10... but anyway, I know that the animal we're looking for is large, probably goes by the name Jerry, and he has the eyes of a psycho."

"What are we gonna do now?"

"I think I'll call Dolores and ask her to come over. She might have some news for us," Maeve said, and unclipped her phone.

"Dolores? It's Fever. We need to talk ... I'm at the Majestic ... Yeah? ... All right. See ya in a few."

Maeve hung up and put the phone back on the belt.

"So?" Staci asked.

"She'll be here shortly. She was busy with a customer right now."

"Errr... you mean to tell me she answered her phone while she was...?"

"Yep."

"Sheesh!"

A little less than fifteen minutes later, Dolores sashayed through the revolving door and into the lobby.

"Dolores! We're over here!" Maeve said, and waved.

"Whassup?" Dolores said as she sat down in an ancient leather armchair, opposite the couch where Maeve and Staci were sitting.

"This and that. How's your night been?"

"Pretty good so far. \$1800. When we're done here, I'm headin' home."

Staci's jaw dropped, and the comical look on her face made Dolores chuckle.

"You're new around here, aren't ya?" Dolores said.

"Fresh in from upstate," Maeve said with a grin.

"How... how many c-customers is that...?" Staci asked.

"Nine. Honey, I ain't no \$25 a pop tramp, ya know?" Dolores said, and flicked an imaginary piece of lint off her gold lamé jacket. She leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs, revealing a very long and very shapely thigh.

Staci blushed, mumbled something unintelligible and looked down.

"Any news on the creep? Jake didn't gimme much," Maeve said, and casually put her hand on Staci's thigh - a gesture that didn't escape Dolores.

"Shit, he told me he had plenty," Dolores said, and shot an Evil Eye in the direction of the reception desk.

"He had some, but it won't bring us much further. By the way, any news on Mary Red?"

"She's gonna make it, last I heard. She may lose the sight in her left eye, though."

The corner of Maeve's mouth twitched a few times and she clenched her fists.

"I'm gonna get that sonovabitch, and that's a fuckin' promise," she growled.

Dolores nodded. Maeve always kept her promises.

"Vanessa's staying with Mary Red's kid for now. She knows about her mother's condition, but the hospital wouldn't allow her to spend the night there."

"Why on Earth not?" Staci said, shocked.

"A prostitute's not a model citizen. Mary's not in a single-bed room," Dolores said, and shrugged.

"How old is her daughter, does anyone know?"

"She must be eight or nine. I know Mary had her when she was only sixteen," Dolores said.

"Perhaps we should go and see her... talk to her...?" Staci said to Maeve.

"I'll talk to her when Mary's back from the hospital. It's probably not a good thing to introduce her to too many strangers at once," Maeve said, and smiled apologetically.

"You're right... I didn't think of that."

"But there is another problem... word is out on the street that you're being targeted, Fever," Dolores said, keeping her voice down, and leaning towards Maeve.

"Oh, I already know about Snakes, that schmuck. I can handle him."

"Not Snakes, the Websters."

"The Websters? What the hell for? I ain't got no beef with them."

"I don't know what for. But I'd watch my cute little patootie if I were you, Fever. Those guys are stark ravin' insane. Only last month, some poor jerkoff was found without..."

"Yeah, OK, thanks, Dolores. Nice to meet ya, but we gotta get going," Maeve said, cutting Dolores off mid-stream.

They got up from the old furniture and shook hands.

"Take care, Staci. And Fever, I hope to see ya tomorrow," Dolores said and winked.

"I'm like a bad penny, I always pop up when ya least expect it," Maeve said loudly, watching the African American woman sashay back out through the revolving door.

Once back in the Mustang, Maeve started the engine, and they drove away from the curb.

"What was that with the Websters?" Staci asked.

"The Websters are two badass-wannabes. Twins, actually. Degenerates who couldn't cut it in the real Army, so they just play soldiers."

"Yeah, but...?"

"Don't worry 'bout it, Staci. We're cool."

"If you say so..."

"I do," Maeve said with conviction - but still checked the rear view mirror for a possible tail, just in case.

._*._*._*_

In an alley off Franklin Boulevard, Jimmy Snakes parked his Buick next to the low, gray building that housed Conor MacLane's Safe Haven Bar. He got out of the old car and kicked the door shut. A flash of inspiration made him pull a tarp over the trunk of the car, so it wasn't visible from the street.

Proud over his accomplishment, he thumped his chest and strutted like a peacock towards the back door to the Bar... only to find it locked. He sighed, and walked around the building to use the front door.

Snakes stood in the doorway and looked around. This place was like any other bar - smokey, noisy and stinking of beer and sweat - and yet it was different. In the nearest booth, one of the enforcers of the Chain Gang was busy necking with a leather-clad biker chick from the Southside Chicas, and down at the other end of the bar, three tough guys from three different gangs were shooting pool.

The bar counter itself was quite long, and it was built in a traditional Irish style with meticulously carved wooden panels, and small, enameled signs that advertised products from a bygone era. A row of high chairs stood in front of the counter, but they were all vacant.

The owner of the bar, Conor MacLane, was behind the counter wiping off some glasses, and he looked with dismay at Snakes' scraggly figure.

"Snakes! Either get in or get out, ya dumb fuck!" he shouted, and Snakes hurriedly stepped into the bar and closed the door behind him.

Snakes reached into his pocket and toyed with his last remaining coins. He could really use a beer, but he didn't know if he had enough. Mustering up all his courage, he went over to the counter.

"What can I get ya?" MacLane said in a booming voice. Even though his boxing career had been over for more than a decade, the big man still posed an impressive figure.

"Um... how much beer can I get for \$3, man...?" Snakes said, his courage disappearing rapidly under the scrutiny of the former boxer.

"Three bucks? One glass o' draught."

"Gimme one, then," Snakes said, and put the three coins down on the counter.

"Comin' right up," MacLane said, and put a glass under one of the pumps. He pulled the lever, and the amber colored liquid poured down, quickly filling up the glass. He let the froth settle

down and then put it in front of Snakes.

"Er... Conor, if a real fancy dressed dude comes in lookin' for me, would ya mind not tellin' him that I'm here...? And the same goes if it's White Fever...?" Snakes said, and took a tiny sip of the beer. Since this was the only one he could afford, he was forced to make it last all night.

"You know the rules, Snakes. This bar is called Safe Haven for a reason. I won't tolerate any fightin', bitchin' or moanin', and I stay out of everything. Everyone's free to do what they want, and if ya got any problems, keep 'em outside," MacLane said.

"Just askin', man..."

Snakes took his beer and strolled over to the pool table. He observed the three players for a few minutes, but it soon bored him, and he went over to the booths instead. He found the one furthest into the shadows, and sat down.

He sighed, and took another tiny sip of the beer. He put down the glass on the table, and waited for the inevitable - that the hitman from before would find him. Or that Fever would find him. At this point in time, he didn't really care which one it was.

._*._*._*

On Jefferson, just before the intersection at Twelfth Street, Maeve pulled over and parked by the curb. A flashing neon sign hanging above the door to a shop reflected off the shiny surfaces of the Mustang, creating a light show that was positively psychedelic.

"Wait a minute... a porn shop? You really think you can get some information here?" Staci said as they got out of the car and approached the shop. She looked up at the large neon sign that read "Daly's EmPORNium" in red, white and blue.

"Well, Patrick's usually got his ear to the ground," Maeve said as she took a quick peek at the two shop windows, filled past overflowing with colorful video boxes and all sorts of associated gear, like whips and blow-up dolls of both genders. She chuckled and went inside, holding the door for Staci.

Instead of a little bell above the door, Patrick Daly had hooked up a recording of a sexy female voice purring "welcome to Daly's EmPORNium..." that played whenever the door was opened.

"Hiya, Fever," Daly said from his customary place behind the counter. He folded the newspaper he was reading and put it down, and then took a handkerchief and dabbed his sweaty forehead. He was in his late forties and didn't look like an Adonis - he was balding, slightly overweight and used an unfashionable set of horn-rimmed glasses, but he was well connected, and he always had access to a lot of info that other people didn't.

As the two women came into the shop, he took off his glasses and breathed on them, and then used the handkerchief to wipe them clean.

"Patrick. Don't you ever get tired of listening to that recording?" Maeve said.

"Nah. I love my mother, and besides that, it's her best work," he said, and put on his glasses. He took a long look at Staci, and his eyebrows twitched.

"Cute. Listen, have you heard anything about..."

As Maeve started talking with Patrick Daly, Staci wandered around between the aisles. The shop had thousands of porn video tapes and discs, and as the sign on the wall proudly proclaimed, "If it exists, we got it - if it doesn't, we'll make it."

Staci was very impressed with the spotless appearance of the shop: Very soft, sensual music was streamed out from hidden speakers, and there was a dark blue wall-to-wall carpet on the floor that was so soft it was impossible to hear when the other customers walked around. The light was just right, not too dark and not too bright, and mostly in a very faint orange - here and there Daly had set up a brighter spotlight to highlight a special title.

The aisles were kept in strict alphabetical order, A-Z for genres, and A-Z for the individual titles. Staci began at the top, casually glancing at a few boxes here and there until she reached the GIRL-GIRL aisle.

She looked a little closer at those titles, but there wasn't really anything that tickled her imagination... until her eyes caught one of the highlighted titles, and she came to an abrupt stop and gasped loudly. Her face was instantly covered by a crimson blush that was so deep it looked like it was threatening to catch fire.

At the other end of the GIRL-GIRL aisle, two young women walking arm in arm stopped and looked at Staci. One of the women said something to her, but the blood thundering around in Staci's veins drowned out everything else, so she couldn't hear what the woman had said. The young woman elbowed her partner in the side, and before moving on, they both laughed at the expression on Staci's face.

Staci's eyes grew impossibly wide and her hands trembled slightly as she picked up a box with the title "Lascivious Linda's Birthday Party." She flipped the box over to look at the pictures on the back, but a split second later, she put it back down on the shelf and tried to hide it behind the box next to it. Unfortunately, the shelf was so narrow there was only room for one box at a time, so she put it back where it stood originally.

She took a few deep, calming breaths, and looked around for the other customers. Satisfied that no one had observed her, she briskly walked away from the aisle, and hurried over to the counter where Maeve was still talking with Patrick Daly.

"Patrick, this is my friend Staci," Maeve said, and put her hand on Staci's arm.

Staci nodded in his direction, but was otherwise busy trying to loosen her collar.

Patrick Daly put his index finger across his lips and appeared to be in deep thought.

"... You know, it's funny, but you seem familiar...?" he said.

"I was young and I needed the money!" Staci said loudly, and the words came tumbling out of her mouth. She looked acutely embarrassed, and she felt her ears starting to burn.

"What?" Maeve said, confused.

"... Actually, I was going to say, aren't you the bartender from Rose's Place?" Patrick said, trying in vain to hide a huge smirk.

"... Oh... yes..."

A dark red blush started creeping up Staci's neck, and soon covered her cheeks, ears and even the tip of her nose. She looked at her boots, thrust her hands in her pockets, and wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

Maeve looked at Staci, and then at the GIRL-GIRL aisle, and then at Patrick. She grinned as the penny dropped.

Patrick adjusted his glasses, and returned the grin.

"... but anyway, call me if you hear anything, right? You know it can be very fruitful to be on Fast Freddie's good side," she said.

"I will, Fever, you have my word."

Maeve shook his hand, and turned towards Staci.

"Staci, darlin'... you gotta show me what you found that got you so rattled."

"Gawd, no, you're killing me," Staci whined.

"I'm serious, show me," Maeve said and tugged at Staci's arm.

Reluctantly, Staci led the enforcer over to the aisle where the movie was. She pointed at the offending box, and cringed when Maeve picked it up.

Maeve flipped it over and found herself face to face with a picture of a very young Staci, wearing Daisy Dukes and a very, very short, white sleeveless shirt. The young Staci stood in a quite provocative pose - her rear end was half-turned towards the camera, and she appeared to have at least one hand down the front of her jeans.

"Holy shit!" Maeve said and whistled.

"God, will you calm down!" Staci whispered and looked around.

"How can that Godawful movie still be around, even after eighteen years? Gawd, how many perverts have rented that movie, and watched me...?" Staci whispered, and got the shivers.

"It's made by the Silver Stallion production company. They're crooks... how in the hell did you get involved with those guys?"

"I was offered \$200 to do it, and without that money, I wouldn't have been able to pay my rent."

"OK. Er... did you play Lascivious Linda or one of the guests?" Maeve said and grinned.

"Does it matter!?" Staci said, her voice steadily climbing in pitch along the sentence.

"Nah. Not really. Well, a little," Maeve said, and winked.

Staci buried her burning face in her hands and shook her head.

"I was one of the guests..." she croaked.

"Hmmm. Anyway, I'll take this and then we'll be on our way," Maeve said, and started walking back to the counter.

"No, no, no, Maeve, for God's sake! I'll die of embarrassment!" Staci whispered.

"Staci, I'm taking it so it won't be on the shelf here... get it?"

"Oh... OK," Staci said, and felt even more embarrassed for not understanding that Maeve simply wanted to protect her.

"Patrick, how many copies do you have of this one?" Maeve said, and put the box down on the counter.

"Just a minute... #532-103... that's the only one. It's an ancient release, and it doesn't really live up to the standards of the modern films," Patrick said, forcing himself not to look too much at the cover.

"I'll buy it," Maeve said, and took out her wallet.

"No way, take it. It's a gift," he said, and put the video in a neutral white plastic bag. He pushed the bag across the counter, and adjusted his glasses.

"How many..." Staci started to say, but her voice broke. She cleared her throat and tried again.

"How many times has it been rented? Can you see that?"

"Sure. Hang on... seven times this past year. That's a very low number. Some of the big hits are out all the time."

"Seven times... thanks," Staci said, and cleared her throat again.

"Why did you have it as a highlighted title when it isn't popular?" Maeve said.

"Well... 'cos I think the cover is s-s-sexy," Patrick stuttered, his eyes never leaving Staci.

"And I agree with ya," Maeve said with a laugh. She picked up the plastic bag with the video, took Staci by the shoulders, and pushed the mortified woman out of the store.

Staci climbed into the Mustang and tried to blend in with the upholstery.

Maeve got in as well and turned the ignition key. As the engine idled, she looked at Staci.

"So you're a movie star, eh? Can I have your autograph? Pleeeeease?"

"Shut up, Maeve... just... shut up," Staci said and rubbed her flushed face.

Maeve laughed out loud and gunned the engine, peeling away from the curb.

*

*

CHAPTER 7

Just before they made the customary u-turn at Fourteenth Street to begin the return trip North, Maeve turned on the radio. An old-fashioned love song was playing, and she soon whistled along to the sentimental music. From time to time, she looked at Staci, and chuckled quietly.

When she had done it for the fourth time in as many minutes, Staci had finally had enough, and she turned in her seat to face the driver.

"You're thinking about that Godawful movie, aren't you?" Staci said.

"Nope."

"Come on, don't lie to me."

"I'm not!"

"Then what...?"

"I'm thinking about you participating in that Godawful movie," Maeve said, and wiggled her eyebrows.

"Oh for Chrissakes, Maeve, grow up!"

"This is as grown-up as I'm ever gonna get. You might as well get used to it."

"So I made a porno. Big deal," Staci said dismissively, but the deep red blush on her face told another story.

"Seriously, though... I'm glad you didn't stay in that business, Staci. I know my own little world can be brutal, but it's *nothing* compared to that industry," Maeve said, and put her hand on Staci's thigh.

"Yeah, I know. And I should count myself lucky. Back then, we didn't have to have a medical check before we, ummm... participated. All the girls in that movie came directly off the street, except the woman who played Linda, she was a professional. The rest were all amateurs. I guess they did that to get a few fresh faces."

"Jesus... that could've been fatal for you. The movie's eighteen years old... that was right before the HIV epidemic!"

"I know," Staci said, and nodded solemnly.

The intersection ahead of them turned red, and Maeve brought the Mustang to a halt.

"Why didn't you tell me any of this when we lived together?"

"I... I guess I preferred to keep it a secret because... I was worried that you'd think I was some kind of prostitute," Staci said, her voice trailing off on the last words. She sighed and looked out of the side window.

"OK, stop right there. There's no fuckin' way I'd do that... no fuckin' way, and it hurts me that you even think that I would!" Maeve said, and put her hand on Staci's shoulder.

Staci shrugged, but kept silent.

"Christ, Staci... I loved you!"

The traffic light turned green, but Maeve didn't release the brake. The car behind them started honking, so Maeve put her hand out of the window and waved the car past.

"You know that, right...?"

"I know you did, and I loved you, too... back then. And that's why I didn't tell you," Staci said, and turned her head so she looked directly into Maeve's Irish green eyes.

"Staci, it wouldn't have changed a thing between us. Not a damn thing. You have to believe that. Man, I've done a lot of shit in my time, too... some of it I'm definitely not proud of today. When I was in my early 20's, I stole cars and ran with all the wrong people. I got into fights on a daily basis, and shit like that," Maeve said, and caressed the back of Staci's head. She let her fingers run through the jet black locks, and gently scratched Staci's scalp.

Outside the car, the traffic light turned red again, and since Staci didn't say anything, Maeve had time to study all the red lamps.

"It's not the same," Staci said after a long pause.

"No, it's worse."

Staci sighed. She wanted to say more, but she couldn't find the words.

"Maeve, please. Let's drop it, OK?"

"All right. But only because it's you," Maeve said, and gently punched Staci on the shoulder.

When they reached First Street, Maeve continued towards Uptown instead of making another u-turn.

"Where are we going?"

"Well... I thought you might feel better if we took a tour of the Botanical Gardens."

"The Botanical Gardens?" Staci said, somewhat confused.

"Yeah? Unless you don't wanna go there, obviously."

"No, I'd love to, but... and please don't take this the wrong way, Maeve, but I can't exactly see you cruisin' the Botanical Gardens, you know?"

Maeve leaned her head back and laughed out loud.

"You're right. I haven't been there since I was a little kid. But it's a great night for a tour."

"Have you forgotten what time it is? No way they're open now," Staci said, secretly loving the attention.

"No, but the park is. And there's a nightwatchman who's working for Fast Freddie," Maeve said with a broad smile.

"Oh... but what about the Websters?"

"Ah, they'll never find us there. Besides, we can handle 'em, the big turkeys," Maeve said, and clawed Staci's thigh.

"Uh-huh?"

"Suuuure. Their bark is worse than their bite."

Ten minutes later, and \$50 poorer, Maeve turned into a gravelly parking lot, and found a nice spot in the deep shadows between two lamps. She turned off the engine, and went over to open Staci's door.

"Let's go for a midnight stroll, oh, sweet Lady of mine," Maeve said, and bowed when Staci stepped out of the Mustang.

"That blow on your head last night musta' knocked something loose... or maybe it knocked something into place, I don't know..." Staci said, and quickly moved away so Maeve's punch wouldn't reach her.

"Oh, ha ha. You're killin' me," Maeve said, and locked the car.

Staci looked around. She had never been in the Botanical Gardens before, but viewed from the parking lot, it looked very romantic.

"Shall we?" Maeve said, and put out her hand.

Staci took it with a very wide smile, and they strolled hand in hand towards the park.

The entrance to the Gardens was a twenty foot long and ten feet tall archway, completely enclosed with roses, vines and many more ornamental plants Maeve didn't know the names of.

Just before they reached it, Maeve stopped and turned so she was face to face with Staci. She moved real close, and put her hands on the taller woman's backside.

They looked lovingly at each other, and leaned in to kiss.

"Are you shorter than usual? I have to bend down a lot!" Staci said just before their lips touched, and the cheeky words were enough to make Maeve pull back and laugh.

"It's the gravel. My heels are diggin' in!" she said, and gave Staci's backside a squeeze.

"Well, I knew there had to be a reason," Staci said, and pulled Maeve back towards her.

Their lips touched in a long, loving kiss that sent waves of pleasure through both women. Subconsciously, Staci let her tongue move forward and make an intimate rendezvous with Maeve's, and the enforcer wasn't slow in returning the favor. When they separated, they both had identical goofy grins on their faces.

"I hope we didn't just give the nightwatchman a free show," Staci said, and sniggered.

"Nah. He's busy watching TV," Maeve said, admiring Staci's features.

"Let's hope so."

"Staci... you're the most beautiful woman on the planet," Maeve whispered, and used her thumb to trace the contours of Staci's lips and jaw. Even in the semi-darkness, she could see Staci blushing furiously, and it made her chuckle.

"Oh, you're so cute when you do that," she said, and stood up on tip-toes to kiss Staci again.

"God, Maeve, I..." Staci started to say, but Maeve's lips effectively muted the words coming out of Staci's mouth.

After a bit more kissing, Maeve took Staci's hand, and led her through the archway.

A path snaked its way through the park, illuminated by small lights mounted between the paving stones. At this time of night, the lights were dimmed, but the path still resembled a long line of fireflies.

Maeve and Staci strolled hand in hand along the path, occasionally stopping to look at the canopy of stars, or to kiss.

"This is so romantic," Staci whispered. She had her arms wrapped around Maeve's torso, greatly enjoying the company of the fiery enforcer.

"Yeah... even I can see that."

Staci giggled, and they moved on. They soon arrived at Spyglass Hill, the highest point of the Gardens. In the daytime, it was the recreational area of the park, with swings and sandpits for the children, and benches and a picnic table for the adults.

"Come on, let's sit down," Maeve said, and climbed up to sit on top of the picnic table.

Staci smiled and got comfortable next to the enforcer. She took Maeve's hand and toyed with her strong fingers.

"Oh! Look at how much of the city you can see from up here," Staci said, and marveled over the view.

From Spyglass Hill, they were looking due South, and it was possible to see most of the city - all the way from the cranes and the warehouses in the port in the East to the skyscrapers in the financial district in Midtown West.

"Yeah. We're pretty high up. Downtown's one big toilet bowl, and right now, we're balancin' on the edge, dontcha know?" Maeve said, and tickled Staci's sides.

Staci shrieked, and tried to grab Maeve's hands. They wrestled for a few seconds before Staci finally succeeded in taking them. Once she held them tight, she refused to let them go.

"Ooooh, tough gal, huh?" Maeve drawled, and leaned in for a kiss - which Staci promptly delivered.

Staci let go of Maeve's hands, and noted with some curiosity that her skin was tingling where she had touched Maeve.

"Hey, remember when we first met?" Maeve said.

"Sure...?"

"One day, uncle Freddie told me to go on a run with Big Sully to see how everything worked, and your parents' flower shop was on his route."

"I remember it clearly. Big Sully... I haven't seen him since I got back... did he retire, or something?"

"He was gunned down from behind. That's how I got to be enforcer. That's nearly two years ago now."

"Oh..."

"But anyway, I distinctly remember thinking that you were the most goddamned sexy florist I'd ever seen! I came back the day after and asked you out on a date," Maeve said, smiling broadly.

"And it didn't take me five seconds to turn you down, 'cause I thought you were a royal pain in the ass," Staci teased.

"You weren't wrong. I've matured a lot since then, though."

"Uh-huh?"

"But I came back, and back, and back, and, eventually, you went out with me. And I seem to recall we had a pretty goddamned good time on that first date."

"We did, but... I think I sense a pattern, Maeve."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

"In what way?"

"That if you bug me long enough, I'll give in."

"Oh, and here I thought it was my charisma and sexiness that convinced you to go out with me...?"

"Well... I guess those things helped a little, too..." Staci said, and kissed Maeve thoroughly.

In the far distance towards the East, the sky was suddenly lit up by lightning. The ominous thundercloud had moved closer since they last saw it, but it still hadn't reached the city.

"Damn, that thunder's freaking me out. There's something... creepy about it," Maeve said.

"You've never been scared of thunder before...?"

"I'm not, it's just... I don't know. It's creepy," Maeve said, and scooted closer to Staci.

"Come to mama. I'll keep ya safe," Staci said in a much deeper voice than normal, making Maeve chuckle loudly and put her arms around Staci.

"I'm glad we took the time to make love tonight. We may be a couple o' swell gals on our own, but we're one *hell* of a dynamite team when we're together," Maeve said, and winked at Staci.

"I agree, but please remem..."

"No, no, don't worry. I respect your decision one hundred percent."

"Thank you," Staci said, and leaned down to kiss Maeve again.

"You have to admit it was pretty damn sensational, though," Maeve whispered when they separated.

"No..."

"No?!"

"No... it was magical," Staci replied, and kissed Maeve on her nose.

"Jeez, you had me worried there, ya big tease," Maeve said, and squeezed Staci's butt.

One question had been burning on Staci's mind for a while, but for the second time in fifteen minutes, she couldn't string enough words together to form a sentence.

"You're thinking about something," Maeve said, and bumped shoulders with Staci.

"Yes... ah, can I ask you a frank... a very frank question?"

"... Well, sure...?"

"How many lovers have you had since I left you?"

"OK, that **is** a frank question."

Staci opened her mouth to speak, but Maeve put two fingers on Staci's lips.

"Fewer than you think," Maeve said.

A beat.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Another beat.

"Oh..."

"Why is that important?"

"I don't know, I just needed to ask..." Staci said, and shrugged.

"What about Brandi... the dancer...?" she continued.

"Yes, Brandi was one of them. Look, Staci, I have a feeling that you think I'm humpin' a new woman every night - I'm not. I like women... hell, I **love** women, but I don't sleep with 'em left and right just to get a few notches in my belt. Kissing, sure, making out, sometimes, but the bedroom is reserved for those who really deserve it."

"Well... I'm sor..."

"And they are few and far between, I can assure you," Maeve said quietly, toying with Staci's long hair.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked," Staci said, and looked away.

"Considering my reputation, you had every right to. Come on, let's stroll on. My butt's aching from sitting on his hard wood."

"So you're not angry with me?" Staci said as she got up from the table, and dusted off her rear end.

"Angry? I could never be angry with you."

Staci blushed again, and Maeve chuckled.

"Too cute. Too goddamned cute," she said cheekily, and hooked her arm inside Staci's.

Maeve and Staci continued to stroll along the illuminated path through the park, and they were having much more fun than either of them wanted to admit to.

The special bond between them that had been torn to pieces when Staci found Maeve in bed with another woman had almost mended completely, and there was a sense of unease in Staci's stomach that she knew all too well. She had promised herself not to risk her heart again, but it seemed the very part of her she wanted to protect was rebelling against her. She could feel tears sting in her eyes, and she sighed deeply.

"Are you tired?"

"No, it's just..."

"I'm going too fast again, aren't I?" Maeve said, and chuckled sadly.

"No... well, yes."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I want it, too."

Maeve nodded to herself, and took Staci's hands in her own.

"Let's just take it one step at a time... OK?" Staci said.

"Sure."

They walked hand in hand across the parking lot, and Maeve dug into her pocket to find her car keys. When she found them, she pressed the small button on the remote that unlocked the doors.

Maeve turned around, and stood up on tip-toes so her heels wouldn't dig in again.

"That was a very nice midnight stroll, don't you think?" she said.

"It was. Even though it's not midnight."

"It's the middle of the night... that's close enough," Maeve said, and reached up to kiss Staci on the lips.

"If you say so..."

"I do. Hey, I have an idea. If you think I move too fast, I could act like a royal pain in the ass so you'll get sick of me. I could say things like 'get in da car, woman!' or 'iron my underwear, woman!' How about that?" Maeve said, grinning cheekily.

Staci cocked her head, and after a few seconds of staring, she blew Maeve a long raspberry.

"I had a feelin' you'd say that, baby," Maeve said, and kissed Staci again.

Maeve started the Mustang and reversed out of the parking space. She put it in Drive, and they rolled slowly across the parking lot.

Maeve put her hand on Staci's thigh and caressed it gently. She was rewarded with a blinding smile that was so bright it outshone the instrument lights, and with a throaty chuckle that gave Maeve a pleasant buzz in all the right places.

When they reached the bar blocking the exit of the parking lot, Maeve honked twice, and the nightwatchman came out of his booth.

He pushed a button that raised the bar, and turned around to give Maeve a thumbsup.

"Thanks, buddy. Hope we didn't interrupt anything important," Maeve said out of the window.

"Nah, just the tenth rerun of an old sitcom," he said and waved.

Maeve laughed and returned the wave. She stepped on the gas, and the Mustang glided out into the night, trading the peace and quiet of the Botanical Gardens for the hustle and bustle of the city streets.

**_*_

"FuckfuckfuckFUCK!" Marshall Webster shouted, and slammed his fist into the palm of his hand.

"Calm down, Marshall. She's gotta be around here somewhere," Randy said.

"We've lost her, for fuck's sake, and you want me to calm down? Oh, that's fuckin' rich, man."

"If she's not here, she's somewhere else. We'll find her."

"I don't understand how the fuck we could lose her..."

Randy sighed and rolled his eyes repeatedly over his brother's short temper.

The GMC van was parked in the shadows next to the car wash at Burger Palace - out of sight, but with a clear view of the gas pumps. Randy had figured that sooner or later, Fever would need to gas up the Mustang, so they had spent the last half hour there. Unfortunately, during all that time, they hadn't seen Fever once, or even heard the characteristic growl of the Mustang's engine.

"You said we should wait here, so we wouldn't be so conspicuous. Well, look what that brought us!" Marshall growled.

"Will you calm the fuck down!" Randy roared, for once raising his voice against his brother.

"Jesus, man, there's no need to shout. I'm right here," Marshall said, and pretended to stick his finger in his ear.

Suddenly Marshall's phone started ringing, making *The Ride Of The Valkyrie* blast through the van.

"It's the dame with the dough again. She's persistent, gotta give her that," Marshall said, and pressed the button.

"Talk to me."

'Hello?'

"Hmmm," he growled.

'Have you taken care of your job yet?'

"Not yet. We're hav..."

Randy punched his brother on the shoulder, and moved his fingers across his lips in the age-old 'zip it' gesture.

"I mean, not yet."

'You're having... what?'

"Nothin"

'I'll call you later,' the voice said, and the connection was terminated.

"Yeah, you do that," Marshall said to himself as she closed the phone.

"Is she getting impatient?" Randy said.

"A little. She's sounding like her panties are pinchin' her."

"That's how she walked, too," Randy said, and chuckled.

"Yeah." Marshall unbuttoned the holster that held his revolver, and took out the chrome-plated Remington .38. He opened the drum, and spun it with the palm of his hand.

"Marshall, how many times do I have to tell ya that ya never put a cartridge in the sixth slot! Always leave an empty slot where the hammer is. If it goes off, you're gonna blow your balls off."

"Ah, you worry too much," Marshall said, and flicked the drum closed. He stored the revolver in the holster, and crossed his arms over his chest.

Randy rolled his eyes again, and sighed.

An old, toothless bum wearing an olive green army jacket tottered across the parking lot, carrying a bucket, a rag, and a squeegee. He spotted the van, and slowly made his way over there.

"Wash ya windows, only \$2 ?" he said, and held up the bucket.

Marshall rolled his window down, and stuck out his head.

"Get outta here, ya bum."

"Only \$2, Mister. Really cheap."

"No, thanks. Get outta here."

Undaunted, the old bum threw the contents of the bucket onto the windscreen of the van. Horrendously filthy water cascaded down the glass and the hood.

In one second flat, Marshall leapt out of the van, and grabbed the old bum's lapels. He roared, and forced the old man up against the wall of the car wash.

"You wipe that shit off my van, or I'm gonna beat ya to a cripple, get it?" he hissed through clenched teeth.

The old man nodded vigorously, and held up the rag - which turned out to be nothing more than threads.

Marshall's temper snapped, and he swung a right hook against the defenseless man's face.

Inside the van, Randy could easily hear the sounds of the one-sided fight, but he couldn't care less about the fact that his brother was beating the old man half to death.

Instead, he activated the window wipers, and let them run back and forth twice to clear the mess off the windshield. He lit a cigarette, and leaned back in his seat. All they had to do now was to wait for Fever. She'd show up eventually, of that he was certain.

._*_*._

Maeve and Staci had just pulled up to a red light at Third Street when Maeve's phone rang. She unclipped it, and flipped open the display.

"Fever... what the hell? Calm down for Chrissakes, I can hardly hear what you're sayin'!"

Maeve rubbed her face and tried to decipher the words coming from the hysterical caller.

"Angel's your walking mate? ... How long ago? ... And you got a good look at him? ... Yeah, all right. I'll be there. ETA three minutes." Maeve closed the phone, and clipped it on her belt. The traffic light had changed in the mean time, so she stepped on the gas and roared down Jefferson, headed for Eighth Street.

"Now what?"

"That was one of our girls. Not three minutes ago, a big sonovabitch matching the description Jake gave us forced her walking mate to go with him."

"And it couldn't be another creep?"

"No... She was right there, and she got a good look at him. This is our guy. I just pray we'll get there in time."

The traffic light at Seventh Street changed to yellow just before they got to it, but Maeve hit the accelerator and flew across the intersection.

"One of these days, you're gonna hit someone doing that!" Staci said strongly.

"Meh," Maeve said and shrugged. They turned left at the intersection at Eighth Street, and slowed down to a walking pace at the corner.

Two hundred yards down Eighth, a woman dressed in the preferred uniform of the light brigade - high heels, a miniskirt and a short, fake leather jacket with a purple boa - waved her arms at them, and started yelling.

Maeve quickly closed the short distance between them, and pulled over at the wrong side of the street. The garishly dressed woman stuck her head in through the opened window, and a wave of a very strong, very cheap, perfume assaulted Maeve's and Staci's senses.

"Thank God you're here, Fever. They went into the first alley on the left," the prostitute said and pointed down the street.

"All right. Stay here," Maeve said, and stepped on the gas without waiting for a reply.

Once they got to the alley, Maeve turned on the high-beams, and drove slowly past the many cardboard boxes and shopping carts that always seemed to inhabit these places.

"Nothing. Shit!" Maeve growled, and slammed her hand down onto the rim of the steering wheel.

Some distance into the alley, two homeless men were standing by a burning oil drum, holding bottles of booze and using the flickering flames to warm their hands.

"Hey, boys. Have ya seen anybody walk past here recently?" Maeve said, slowing to a halt next to the oil drum.

"Yeah, just now. A big dude was draggin' a hooker. They went that way," one of the homeless men said, and pointed further up the alley.

"Thanks. Owe you one," Maeve said and stepped on the gas.

They drove on for another fifty yards or so, until Maeve suddenly slammed on the brakes, and cursed loudly.

"There he is, the sonovabitch!"

She quickly put the Mustang into Reverse, and backed up a few yards. Then she turned sharp left, and roared down a narrow offshoot to the alley.

Jerry McFarland had the prostitute pinned to the wall, and he held the bowie knife tight against her throat.

He looked at the woman in front of him. She was so stoned she didn't understand what was going on, but that would soon change. Soon she'd cry and plead him to stop. He took great pleasure in fantasizing about how he would humiliate and beat her, starting from her face and working his way down.

He couldn't quite comprehend what had happened, but killing that black whore had snapped something inside of him. He felt liberated and more alive than he had done in years.

A car door slammed behind him, but he was so far into his fantasy that he didn't pay any attention to it, nor to the fact that he was suddenly standing in a cone of light.

"Drop the knife, and let the girl go, asshole!" a female voice suddenly said. He turned around and saw a car with a woman sitting inside it, and another woman standing in front of it, pointing a pistol at him.

Dressed in white jeans and a black shirt, and with broad shoulders and spiky hair, she looked like a badass... but even badass women were just that... women. And she would bleed and die just as well as all the others.

"Or what, whore?"

"Or I'm gonna kill ya where ya stand."

"I don't think so. If you kill me in cold blood, the cops will arrest ya and fry your little cunt in the electric chair," he said, and broke out into a cackling laugh.

"I'll take that chance."

The prostitute seemed to snap out of her drug-induced haze, and she started to struggle and whimper. Jerry considered his options for a few seconds, and decided to let her run. This new woman was much more of a challenge, anyway. He released his grip on the prostitute, and she quickly ran away.

He lumbered slowly towards the woman with the spiky hair. Holding the knife high in the air, he was dearly looking forward to letting it tear through soft tissue. With an insane roar, he set off running towards the woman.

Staci screamed, and dug her fingers into the dashboard of the Mustang, but Maeve remained calm.

She aimed and squeezed the trigger. The Beretta went off and Jerry was hit in the middle of his

forehead. His head jerked back, and his body came to a violent stop in mid-run.

He fell heavily onto the ground, and the knife clanged out of his lifeless hand, skidding to a halt just in front of Maeve's boots.

"No more living for you, asshole. Mary and Dominique send their regards," she growled and put the Beretta back in its holster.

Blood quickly pooled next to Jerry's head, and Maeve pushed the knife out of harms way with her boot.

"Staci, gimme a napkin or somethin'... please," Maeve said.

Staci opened the glovebox and found an old Burger Palace napkin. She held it out of the window.

Maeve came over to the Mustang, and took the napkin. She noticed Staci's pale face, and smiled wistfully.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. I had to do it. There was no other way," Maeve said, and gave Staci's hand a little squeeze.

"I know, but... Gawd..." Staci said, and got the shivers.

Maeve crouched down, wrapped the bowie knife in the napkin, and picked it up. Walking to the rear of the Mustang, she opened the trunk and carefully placed the knife inside a small plastic bag.

"I'll send it to our contact at the precinct tomorrow. They should be able to tie the knife to Dominique's murder," Maeve said as she sat down in the driver's seat.

"I'm about to do something I haven't done in years," she said to Staci, and unclipped her phone from her belt.

"What's that?"

"Call the cops," Maeve said, and dialed the familiar number. After waiting for a few seconds, she heard a female voice greet her at the other end of the connection.

"Good evening. There's a DOA in an alley off Eighth Street, next to the..."

Maeve looked around to find a company name.

"... back entrance to Levi & Engell Kosher Imports ... My name? ... Concerned Citizen ... Yes, that's right ... Got it? ... OK."

Staci was still looking transfixed on McFarland's dead body, and the pool of blood and brains that had spread out next to the head.

"Come on, Staci. I think we need a break," Maeve said, and reversed away from the corpse and out of the narrow alley.

._*_*_*._

Maeve turned off Ninth Street, and drove into the gas station on the Burger Palace lot. All the pumps were available, so she picked the nearest one. She put the car in Park, and turned off the engine.

"Staci, how about you go inside and get us a couple of coffees, huh? Order mine black and strong, please. I'll be there in a few."

"Sure. I think I want mine strong, too, actually," Staci said, looking a little green around the gills. She reached for the door handle with a trembling hand, and left the car on unsteady legs.

Randy Webster started the van's engine, and prepared to strike. He and Marshall watched the leggy brunette walk away from Fever, and into the building that housed the Burger Palace.

"And that's our cue," Randy said, and let his foot slip off the brake. The van rolled forward, and Marshall got up and unlocked the sliding door. The plan was that he should jump out, conk Fever on the head, and throw her into the back of the van.

"Get ready," Randy said.

"I'm ready now."

The van continued to roll forward, but suddenly Randy stepped on the brake.

"What the fuck?" Marshall said.

"Someone just joined her."

"So?"

"A gigantic motherfucker. Crap!" Randy said, and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. They could handle Fever without any problems, but the human oak tree that had just popped up out of nowhere wouldn't be so easy.

"We're aborting," Randy said, and selected Reverse.

"No, man! We're so close!"

"We're aborting." Randy let the van roll back into the shadows behind the car wash. Once there, he turned off the engine, and sighed loudly.

"Jesus, you're getting soft, man. What the hell's going on...?" Marshall said as he sat down in the passenger seat.

"*That's* what's going on," Randy said, and pointed out of the window at the seven foot giant walking up to Fever.

"Hiya, Danny, what brings you here?" Maeve said as she stood next to the Mustang, holding the fuel hose in her hand.

"I saw your Stang, and I thought I'd give you an update on what's happening out at the docks. Where's Miss Hart?"

"She's waiting in the Palace."

"Oh."

Maeve let the nozzle drip off, and then hung the hose on the pump. She closed and locked the fuel cap, and took her credit card out of the machine. She looked at the receipt, and then put the two items into her wallet.

"We're gonna have a cup of coffee. Why don't you join us?"

"You wouldn't mind...?"

"Nah. Go on, you can talk to Staci while I park."

"OK."

A few minutes later, Maeve opened the door to the Burger Palace, and stepped inside the air-conditioned restaurant. As she was walking up to the counter, she waved at Staci and Danny, who were seated in a booth by the window.

This time of night, the fast food restaurant was run by a skeleton crew. Only two people were there, and they were both sitting around a small table behind the counter, playing cards.

"Hi. Who's got the order for the coffees?"

"That'd be me," a young man said, and walked up to the counter.

Maeve looked back to check if Staci could hear her. Satisfied that she couldn't, she leaned forward and whispered a few words to the young man.

"Here ya go," Maeve said, and placed three steaming mugs of coffee on the round table.

"What do I owe ya?" Danny said, and pulled out a few dollar bills.

"My treat."

"Much obliged."

"What do *I* owe?" Staci said, and winked.

"Hmmm... let me think of something," Maeve said huskily, and moved her index finger slowly across her lips. She sat down next to Staci, and put her hand on Staci's knee.

Danny's cheeks reddened slightly, and he deliberately avoided looking at the two women.

"Come on, big fella. Don't be such a wuss," Maeve said with a laugh.

Staci took a small swig from the mug, and her eyes popped open off the unexpected strong taste. She licked her lips, and studied the dark brown liquid with some curiosity. She sniffed it, and connected the dots. She looked up at Maeve, who was barely able to hide a grin.

"Something wrong with your coffee, dear?"

"No... well, unless you don't like it 80 proof..."

"I asked the kid to add some Scotch. I thought you might need it," Maeve said, a serious expression replacing her smile.

"I do. Thank you. Good thing I'm not driving, though."

"If it was colder, we could use your breath to de-mist the windshield," Maeve said with a wink.

"Oh, ha ha. You haven't seen me drunk in years, and it won't happen this time, either," Staci said, and took another swig from the mug.

Just to be on the safe side, Danny started sniffing his own coffee, but he quickly established that his was a regular. He cleared his throat, and sat up straight in the booth.

"All right, here's the lowdown on what's been happening. First, the situation in the docks: all the crates were stored in warehouse #1, and Coluzzo's men were dumped at one of the bridges

crossing the Monroe. The man you shot was kinda bleeding, but it wasn't so bad."

"Sounds good, Danny. Did you check the other crates?" Maeve said.

"Yeah, they all contained sculptures or paintings. I don't think Coluzzo intended to sell any of it, I reckon the items were destined for his private collection."

"Could be. What about the freighter?"

"It left as we were working on the crates. I let 'em go. It would've taken too long to get the boat there and go after them."

"OK."

"Fast Freddie has a boat?" Staci said, and took a long swig from her spiked coffee.

"He has several, actually, but we're talking about a small, fast speedboat," Maeve said.

"Oh..."

"That's about the long and the short of it regarding the docks. Do you want me to do anything in particular?"

"How much do you think those sculptures are worth, Danny?"

"Hmmm... millions? I don't know, but they look valuable."

"We better double the guards."

"All right. Noted. Two, the bonehead you knocked out at Giacomo's was swept up and dumped in another place."

"Good. Did you talk to him?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?" Staci said, and emptied her mug.

Maeve's eyes grew wide when she noticed that Staci had finished her spiked coffee already.

"He didn't say anything. I 'talked' to him," Danny explained, and clenched his fist to underline the words.

"Oh... I see."

"Errr... Staci, darlin', perhaps you should get a real coffee to go with the spiked one?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

"I'm sure you are. I better get you a real coffee," Maeve said, and left the table.

She returned a few minutes later, and put down a new mug in front of Staci.

"This one's only coffee," Maeve said, and sat down.

"Thanks."

"Go on, Danny."

"Three, the police scanner's been squawking like crazy tonight. There's been a big fight among some cab drivers over at the GCS, and..."

"The what...?" Staci said.

"The Grand Central Station. It's in Midtown West, so it's on Coluzzo's turf. Anyway, there's been a fight, and several of Coluzzo's soldiers were hurt trying to separate the combatants," Danny said.

Maeve chuckled, and emptied her own mug.

"Couldn't have happened to nicer people. Did you hear anything about a male DOA on the scanner?"

"Yeah. Detectives are on site in an alley off Eighth Street. Your handiwork?"

"Yep. It's the asshole who's been hurting girls tonight. I got him. He'll never bother anyone again," Maeve said, her voice suddenly going into a lower register.

Staci got the shivers, and took a long swig from her mug.

"Sorry, baby," Maeve said, and caressed Staci's cheek.

"I have his knife. I was gonna send it to Detective Duffy tomorrow, but since you're here, would you mind doing it tonight?" she continued.

"No problem. I'll swing by the precinct house and drop it off," Danny said.

"Hey, by the way, do you know anything about what the hell's going on with the Websters? I've been told they're on my ass, but I can't figure out why..."

"I've heard the same. I don't have an answer," Danny said, and drained the last few drops out of his mug.

"Hmmm. All right. Come on, let's go give you that knife. The night's not over yet."

"I need to take a leak before we go anywhere," Staci said, and blushed.

"OK. I'll wait for you by the car," Maeve said, and got up.

"I don't know where you're parked."

"Right next to where we parked earlier tonight."

"OK, I can find that. Hi, Danny, talk to you later," Staci said, and smiled broadly at the big man.

"See ya around, Miss Hart."

"So, you and Miss Hart are...?" Danny said as they walked across the parking lot.

"Yes and no. Well, I'm working on it. It's... kinda complicated," Maeve said as she opened the trunk of the Mustang. She reached in, and took out the small plastic bag with the knife.

"That looks like the kind of bag you get at Patrick Daly's," Danny said with a grin, pointing at the white plastic bag that held Staci's movie.

"That's 'cos it is, Danny-boy."

Maeve closed the trunk, and gave Danny the bag with the knife.

"Not that I'm an expert, or anything," he said, and grinned again.

"Gawd no, we all sing in the choir every Sunday morn'."

"You what?" Staci said as she joined them.

"Never mind. See ya, Danny," Maeve said, and gave him a thumbsup.

"See ya. Have fun with the movie, guys," he said, and walked over to his Lincoln.

"Ah, yeah... thanks," Maeve said, and tried not to look at Staci.

"... What movie...? Oh no, you didn't..." Staci said, and threw her arms in the air. She tried to stare a hole through the trunk of the Mustang, and when that didn't work, she looked at Maeve instead.

"Of course I didn't. Jeez, Staci! He just saw the plastic bag, that's all," Maeve said as she opened the driver's side door.

Staci was still rooted to the spot, and her eyebrows were nearly at her hairline.

"You can't even see the pictures through the bag. Come on, we're going," Maeve said, and got in.

Staci sighed, and opened the door.

They had only driven a few hundred yards when Maeve's phone suddenly rang.

"That had better be good news. I'm gettin' mighty sick of the other kind!"

She reached into the glove box and picked it out.

"Fever."

'It's Patrick Daly. I have some information for you.'

"Shoot."

'One, the Websters are looking for you, so you better take care, those guys are mental, and...'

As Patrick was speaking, Maeve glanced in the rear view mirror. A black GMC van was driving seventy yards or so behind the Mustang - the same van they had seen a few times already. She furrowed her brow, but decided not to say anything to Staci.

"Yeah, I heard already. I don't know what the hell their problem is... Go on."

'And, two, a customer just told me that she'd seen Jimmy Snakes in the Safe Haven bar.'

"All right. Finally some good news. Patrick, don't fret about the Websters, I got 'em covered. Anyway... thanks, I owe you one, buddy."

'Anytime.'

"Talk to ya later."

Maeve hung up, and threw the phone back in the glove box.

"That was Patrick Daly?" Staci said.

"Yep. Snakes has been seen in the Safe Haven bar."

"Oh..."

"It's over on Adams. Do you know it?" Maeve said as she gunned the engine.

The speed climbed steadily, and they were soon running at nearly 100 MPH along the near-deserted city streets. Maeve looked in the mirror, and noted with some satisfaction that the black van had been reduced to a small dot in the distance.

"Not yet..." Staci said, and reached for the seatbelt.

*

*

CHAPTER 8

"Hiya, Fever," Conor MacLane said as he saw the enforcer enter the Safe Haven bar.

"Conor," Maeve said and nodded in the bartender's direction. The large man was still an impressive sight, even if he was getting a bit heavy. His nose had been broken so many times that it had been reduced to a chunk of meat in the middle of his face, but his gray eyes were as sharp as ever.

Someone made a wolf call at Staci, who responded by flipping the bird at whoever had whistled at her.

Fever and Staci went over to the bar counter, passing a table where two badass women from the recently formed Ferocious Alliance were armwrestling to see who was going to pay their tab.

"Hey, Fever. Nice lookin' honeypot with ya tonight," one of the badasses said mid-fight.

Staci's eyes shot fire, and she opened her mouth to object, but a pat on her arm and a quick shake of the head by Maeve convinced her otherwise.

"Seen Jimmy Snakes tonight?" Maeve asked Conor as she and Staci waited by the counter.

"Yep. He's over in the shadows somewhere. Nice to see that you're still among the living, Fever. I've heard a few stories tonight that suggested you weren't."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. With the Websters 'n all."

"Actually, I am dead. I'm a demon from Hell, and I've come to take Snakes back down with me," Fever deadpanned.

Conor chuckled. He picked up a glass and started to polish it.

"You can do whatever the hell you want to, just as long as you don't do it in here," Conor said, and looked at the glass against the light.

"I know the house rules. You still got the sawn-off shotgun under the counter, Conor?"

"Yep, and I ain't afraid to use it. On anyone," he said, looking Fever straight in the eye.

"I hear ya, buddy. We're just gonna talk to the piece of shit, and then we'll leave your fine establishment. How's that sound?"

"Fine by me."

"Fine." Maeve turned around and made sure she was standing in the center of the scarce light so everyone could see her.

"Jimmy Snakes, come on down! You've won a first class ticket to A World Of Hurt," she roared, getting everyone's attention.

Dead silence - except for a few sniggers. The other of the two armwrestling badasses whooped and waved at Fever, who waved back.

A minute or so later, Jimmy Snakes shuffled towards the bar with a glass of stale beer in his hand and a disgustingly smug grin on his face. He stopped about five yards short of Maeve, and started to grin evilly.

"You can't touch me in here, Fever, you worthless little pissant," he said as his eyes slowly climbed up Staci's body, undressing her as they went along.

Staci got the creeps, and crossed her arms over her chest. She had an expression on her face that clearly revealed that she considered Snakes to be a first class slimeball.

"Nobody **ever** touches you, Snakes," Maeve said, earning a few more sniggers from the peanut gallery, and a shout of 'Crush his balls, Sister' from one of the two badasses.

"Fuck you, man," he hissed.

"No thanks, buddy. You ain't got what it takes to satisfy me," she said, and put her hands into her back pockets.

Snakes' eyes flared and in one, fluid motion, he dropped the glass, and reached for the Beretta in the back of his pants. Even before the glass had hit the floor, Conor suddenly had his shotgun in his hands, pointing directly at Snakes' head.

"Snakes!" Conor roared, as the glass shattered into a dozen pieces, splattering stale beer all over

Snakes' pants and boots.

The patrons behind Snakes scattered to get away from the blast zone, knocking over a few chairs in the process.

Snakes' eyes shifted rapidly between the two imposing barrels of the shotgun and Fever's ice cold stare. He exhaled and slowly moved his hand away from the gun. He showed it to Conor so the bartender could see it was empty.

"It's time for you to take a hike, moron," Conor said.

Snakes spun around on his heel and headed for the back exit. Once there, he worked the lock, and escaped out into the alley.

"Go get the car! I'll follow him," Maeve said to Staci, and threw her the car keys. Staci nodded and ran out of the front door.

By the time Maeve had reached the back exit, Snakes had already vanished, so she peeked carefully around the corner in case he was waiting for her - a good choice, as it turned out.

A shot rang out from further up the alley, and a large splinter was ripped off the door frame right above her head. Maeve glanced back at Conor who was still holding the shotgun, looking severely pissed off. She would need to get that squared with the former boxer later.

Maeve smirked and drew her gun. She fired off a round in Snakes' general direction, before jumping out of the door and diving behind a dumpster.

The alley was a dead end, so Maeve initially hoped she had Snakes covered, but immediately after thinking that, she could hear him closing a car door and then starting an engine.

Maeve's curiosity got the better of her, and she peeked around the edge of the dumpster to see what was going on. Her eyes popped wide open when she saw Snakes' car driving directly towards her at great speed.

"Fucking hell!" she yelled, and scrambled around the corner of the dumpster. She flew across the alley, and jumped through the bar's back door, landing in a perfectly executed forward somersault.

Only a split second later, Snakes' Buick hit the dumpster with a loud *crunch*, and the impact scattered the garbage all over the entrance to the alley. The car's progress was briefly halted, but Snakes gunned the engine and was soon moving backwards again. The car's wheels ripped open several plastic bags filled with trash, and the disgusting contents were sent flying through the air.

Finally free of the trash, the car bounced over the curb and onto the street, where he raced towards downtown in a cloud of tiresmoke.

The stench from the crushed dumpster was extreme, and Maeve had to pinch her nose and hold her breath as she ran through the alley.

Wondering who she had pissed off to deserve so much shit in one evening, Maeve turned the corner onto Franklin and looked for Staci. The Mustang was parked out front, and Staci was already moving over into the passenger seat.

"Move over! I'm driving! What kept ya?" Maeve said as she opened the driver's side door and jumped in.

"Hey, I'm not Evil Knievel, ya know," Staci said, and did a double-take at the destruction at the entrance to the alley.

"Hang on, this is gonna be wild!"

Staci groaned loudly and reached for the seatbelt.

Maeve planted her foot on the gas pedal, and the sudden burst of power made the fat rear tires spin furiously - as they accelerated away from the Safe Haven Bar, they left two sixteen-foot long skid marks behind on the road.

"Uhhhhhhh!" Staci squealed as she hung on for dear life, grabbing the panic grip with both hands.

Maeve soon had the Mustang up to 100 MPH, and they were catching Snakes' old Buick hand over fist. They barreled South on Franklin Boulevard, ducking and diving around the sparse traffic.

Once they had caught up with the Buick, Maeve started honking the horn and flashing the headlights.

"How the hell is that gonna work?" Staci said, still hanging on to the panic grip.

"It'll unsettle him. I ain't gonna risk my Stang just to force him off the road!"

"Oh... Look out!"

The two cars thundered across the intersection at Sixth Street, which had turned red seconds before they arrived.

"It's **still** red!" Staci said, looking back at the traffic lights that rapidly disappeared behind them.

"I know. Nothin' ventured, nothin' gained."

"Ohhh, spare me the clichés, please!"

Maeve laughed out loud, and honked her horn again. The Mustang was positioned only inches behind the old Buick, but she was careful not to bash her front fender against the rear of the Century.

Suddenly, Snakes managed to trick Maeve by jinking left and then turning hard right, heading for an entrance to a warehouse. Maeve didn't expect that, so she flew past the entrance before she had time to react.

Once past, Maeve braked hard, making Staci jump forward and test the lock on the seatbelt. She pulled the handbrake and turned the steering wheel, making the Mustang spin around on a dime. As soon as it was pointing straight ahead, she gunned the engine again.

She took a hard left and drove through the entrance to the warehouse, following Snakes' trail up a ramp and into an area where hundreds of large crates were stored.

The squeal from the tires was deafening, and the constant turning made Staci carsick. She tried to close her eyes, but it only made it worse.

"I'm gonna be SIIIIICK!" she shrieked, as Maeve performed a series of left-right-left-right maneuvers around the huge crates at breakneck speed.

"Do it outta the window! I'm busy!" Maeve said, and took another hard left.

Suddenly they slowed down, and then came to a stop. Maeve banged her hand on the steering wheel, and looked around.

"Goddamned, we've lost him!" she growled.

"Thank God!" Staci said, and rolled down her window. She stuck her head out and took several deep breaths to calm her upset stomach.

There were rows and rows of ten-foot tall crates on either side of their car, making it impossible to see anything beyond the lane they were in. The space between the crates was probably designed for forklifts, as the lane was only three feet wider than the Mustang - which meant that even the smallest of driving errors would inevitably lead to an accident.

Through the open window, Maeve could hear an engine in the distance, so she mirrored Staci's actions and rolled down her own. She strained her hearing to listen for Snakes' car.

"Don't tell me you're sick, too?"

"Shhhh, I'm tryin' to hear Snakes' engine."

"Good luck hearing anything apart from this noisy beast."

Maeve turned off the ignition, and the sudden silence was almost a shock to their ears.

"Thank God," Staci said again, and sighed.

Maeve kept her fingers on the ignition key as she listened for Snakes. The sounds from the engine came closer and closer, and she figured he was trying to sneak back to the exit.

They could clearly hear tires squealing on the smooth surface, and it sounded like it was just around the corner.

Maeve turned the engine back on, and the Mustang's exhausts growled loudly. She put it into Drive and released the brake to make the car crawl forward.

"Maeve... you're not gonna play chicken with him... are you?"

"No. Not with you here. But I am gonna play with him," Maeve said and bared her teeth in a sneer.

Staci took a deep breath, and reached for the panic grip.

Suddenly Snakes came around a corner and appeared directly ahead of them. As he crossed their lane right in front of the Mustang, Maeve flashed her high-beams, and his head whipped around in shock. For a brief second, Maeve and Snakes looked into each other's eyes, and then he stepped on the gas to get away.

"Uhhhh!" Staci squealed as Maeve followed him, taking the corner on two wheels. They resumed the game from before, and zig-zagged their way through the lanes of crates at terrifying speeds.

Snakes finally found the ramp that led to the exit, and he gunned the engine even harder. The Buick thundered towards the ramp, but he didn't realize that he was going far too fast until it was too late - when the ramp started sloping downwards, the Buick Century took off and flew through the air.

It landed incredibly hard on the sidewalk outside the warehouse, and Snakes knew immediately that the car had been damaged. He tried to continue down Franklin, but the needle on the temperature gauge climbed like a rocket, and didn't stop until it was leaning against the small peg at the far side of the red zone.

Maeve witnessed the stunt, and she stood on the brakes to get slowed down in time. Maeve and Staci still felt the Mustang go light down the ramp, but it was never out of Maeve's control.

"Look at all that water! He must've busted a radiator hose," Staci said as they exited the warehouse, pointing at a glistening river of water on the street.

"Good. Then we've got him, the sonovabitch," Maeve growled.

The Buick coughed and spluttered, and eventually ground to a halt. Snakes could see the black Mustang approaching fast from behind, so he opened the glovebox and grabbed the glass of pills, and then opened the door and bolted from the car.

"Oh, for Chrissakes!" Maeve said and slammed on the brakes. As soon as the car had stopped, she got out and started to run after Snakes.

"No way in hell I'm gonna do a foot race! I'm stayin' right here!" Staci shouted out of the window after Maeve's retreating form.

Staci sighed and leaned back in her seat. She crossed her arms over her chest and closed her eyes to get some much needed rest.

50 yards behind her, a black GMC van pulled over and parked at the curb. A door was opened, and then closed.

Snakes ran for all he was worth down Franklin, past a few homeless people who shouted after him, and past a working girl applying her trade up against a fence.

He looked behind him and saw to his great horror that Maeve was still chasing him. Her legs appeared to move like drumsticks, and her powerful arms pumped away at great speed.

He tried to increase his pace, but after a few hundred yards, he was completely out of breath, and his lungs were burning. He huffed and puffed, and his steps started to get shorter.

He came up to an alley, and turned into it at full speed to escape Maeve's relentless chase - only to skid to a halt in front of a delivery truck that took up so much space in the narrow alley that there wasn't any room to sneak past.

He cursed, and threw his arms in the air in frustration.

Maeve appeared at the entrance to the alley and drew her Beretta.

"Dead end, huh, Snakes?" she said, trying to get her pounding heart to settle down long enough for her to talk to him without appearing winded.

"Story of my life, man..." he croaked, still huffing and puffing.

"I believe ya. What the fuck are you runnin' away for, anyway?"

He looked at her like she had sprouted a second head.

"Duh, man! 'Cause you wanna kill me! Go on, Fever, put me out of my misery."

"Nah, I don't wanna kill ya. I just wanna talk," Maeve said, and put her weapon back in its holster.

"Talk? Hey, I can talk, man."

"No shit. Why did you want to ice me yesterday?"

"Nuh-uh, I can't talk about that... they'll skin me alive, man."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Coluzzo and his cronies, man. But I can't... fuck!" Snakes slapped his forehead when he realized he had just given everything away.

Maeve smirked, and actually felt a little sorry for the poor slob.

"Do you know what their plan was?"

"I'm so confused, man. I don't know what's up or down in this deal."

"As I said before, I believe ya."

'They must've wanted me out of the way before that shipment came in,' Maeve thought.

Suddenly the sky was lit up by a spectacular lightning bolt, followed by distant, rolling thunder. Maeve studied the pitch black sky, and got the shivers for some reason.

"Look, Fever... I'm sorry for callin' you a pissant back there..." Snakes said, and grimaced.

"No problemo. It's all part of the game."

"Yeah... man, we had a bitchin' car chase, huh?" Snakes said, and wiped some sweat off his brow.

"Yeah, kinda fun actually. Your car is fucked, though."

"Meh... no big loss, I'll just steal another one. I got the most important part right here, man," Snakes said, and poured two Happy Pills out of the glass. He quickly swallowed them, and leaned against the delivery truck while he waited for them to work.

"Before you leave for La-La Land, you still have something that belongs to me, Snakes."

"Huh? Oh, the gun..." he reached behind him, making Maeve close her fist around the handle of her own weapon.

"Here, you can have it back, man. It's only brought me bad luck, anyway," he said, and put the Beretta down on the ground.

"Thanks," Maeve said, and picked it up. She briefly checked it, and then stuck it inside her belt.

"Now what, man?"

"Now nothing. I ain't got no beef with you, and I never did. But when people take potshots at me, I get pissed off, ya know?" Maeve said, and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Yeah. So...?"

"So... run along before I change my mind."

"Errrr...? Oh...!" Snakes suddenly understood that Maeve was allowing him to escape, and he spun around on his heel and disappeared up the alley. By sucking in his gut, he managed to squeeze by the delivery truck, and then he was gone.

As another huge lightning bolt streaked across the sky, Maeve pinched the bridge of her nose, and rolled her shoulders to loosen up the muscles in her neck. Thunderstorms always gave her a headache, and she hoped that Staci would be in the mood for a little massage later.

At least she had her original Beretta back.

Maeve checked the weapon thoroughly, but it didn't seem worse for wear. She sniffed the barrel, and made a mental note that it needed a good cleaning. Other than that, it looked like Snakes had taken good care of it.

*'At least *one* of our problems has been dealt with,'* she thought as she walked out of the alley and began the trek back to the car.

Maeve went over to the Mustang and crouched down in front of Staci's door so she was at eye level with her.

"Snakes won't bother us again. I let him run, the pathetic fool. Look, I got my Beretta back," she said, and showed Staci the weapon.

Staci didn't reply. In fact, it appeared she hadn't even heard the words. Maeve looked up in

surprise, and furrowed her brow when she saw that Staci's face was as white as a sheet.

"Hey, what's wrong? I said I let him go, if you're worried about me hurtin' him...?"

Still no reply - Staci just turned her head and looked at Maeve with wide, frightened eyes. Maeve knew all too well that there was more to Staci's strange condition than just being worried about Snakes, so she drew her Beretta from the shoulderholster, and spun around...

... at the exact same moment, Marshall Webster jumped out of the shadows he was hiding in, and put the barrel of his revolver against Maeve's skull, right behind her ear.

He cocked the .38, and the metallic sound made Staci twitch.

"One false move and I'll blow your brains out right here, bitch. Get up. Slowly."

"Which one of the dumb fucks are you? Butt or Ugly?" Maeve hissed, but complied.

"Nice. I'll take those," Marshall said, and took Maeve's two Berettas from her hands. He stuck them between his belt and his pants, and made sure they were secure.

"You're not so tough without your guns, huh, little girl?" he sneered.

Maeve's reply was a low growl. Her fists were clenched, and her entire body was ready to pounce on this jackass.

"You, Missy Long Legs, get outta the car," Marshall said, and pointed at Staci.

Staci looked at him with a very frightened expression on her face, but didn't move.

Marshall furrowed his brow.

"Unless you wanna see what color this bitch's brains are, I'd suggest you get out here right now," he growled and pressed the barrel of the revolver against Maeve's head.

"Come on, Staci. Do as he says... please," Maeve said quietly.

With shaking hands, Staci opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk.

Marshall let his eyes run up and down Staci's long legs, and he looked like he was ready to drool.

"Ohhh yeah. I'm gonna have a lotta fun with you later on. Turn around an' get down on your knees, baby doll," Marshall said.

Staci was too frightened to do anything but follow orders, so she did what she was told.

Marshall opened a small pouch on his belt, and took out a cosh.

"You motherfucker!" Maeve roared, but Marshall pressed the revolver into her head.

"Shut the fuck up, bitch."

With his left hand, he swung the cosh, and thumped Staci heavily on the back of her head. She collapsed onto the sidewalk, out cold.

"Stay! I promise I'll be back for ya," he said, and chuckled.

"You fuckin' coward!" Maeve roared, and tried to reach for one of her Berettas, but Marshall quickly stepped back. Without taking his eyes off Maeve, he turned his head and whistled loudly.

Randy drove up in their GMC van and stopped in front of the Mustang. He got up from the driver's seat and opened the sliding door.

"Get in, Fever," Marshall said.

Maeve didn't like it at all, but right now, she couldn't see a way out.

"Fuck off. You know Fast Freddie will come down on you two degenerates like a ton of bricks if you kill me."

Marshall closed the distance between them, and tapped Maeve on the side of her head with the barrel of the gun.

"Who's holdin' the gun, bitch?"

"Mind the 'do, dickbreath," Maeve said as nonchalantly as she could. In reality, she was worried about Staci, but she refused to let it show.

A gigantic lightning bolt ripped across the sky, followed instantly by an ear-splitting thunderclap, seemingly centered right above the street where the dramatic scene was taking place. A knot was slowly forming in Maeve's stomach as she realized that this might be the end of the road for her.

She glanced down at Staci. The dark haired woman was still lying on the sidewalk, but at least she had begun to move about and moan softly.

"Get. In." Marshall emphasized both words to make sure Maeve knew he wasn't bluffing.

With a sigh, Maeve stepped up into the van, and Marshall followed her closely. He slammed the sliding door shut, and Randy stepped on the gas pedal, making the van leave the curb with a jerk.

As soon as the immediate danger was gone, Staci sat up and clutched her head. She used the Mustang for leverage and pulled herself upright, quickly finding out that her legs were quite shaky. She cursed out loud as she watched the van roar down the street, taking Maeve away from her.

A small, panicky sob escaped her lips, but she refused to give in to hysteria, and instead tried to think logically.

Suddenly she noticed that Maeve had left the keys in the ignition, and she stumbled around the front of the car and climbed in as fast as she could. She started the engine and set off after the van, the twin exhausts of the Mustang growling fiercely into the night.

Inside the van, Marshall had forced Maeve onto her knees, and he was busy tying her hands behind her back using a piece of rope. The van hit a pothole, making the people in the back jump.

"Watch where you're fuckin' drivin', Randy!" Marshall said in a tone that made Randall look over his shoulder and glare at his brother.

With Maeve safely tied up, Marshall kicked her in her gut. Even though she didn't want to satisfy his sadistic side, she couldn't withhold a pained groan.

He chuckled, and pulled a long string of piano wire out of a pocket.

Maeve looked in disgust at the wire coming down in front of her face, and moving in towards her exposed throat. She cursed, but was resigned to her fate.

'Strange', she thought, 'all I can think of is how upset Staci will be...'

"Got any special requests on where ya want ya body dumped, bitch? Usually, we'd just throw ya down the sewer, but I'm figurin' the rats will run away once they see your ugly mug," Marshall said and chuckled.

The van hit another pothole and Marshall lost his footing. He fell backwards onto his behind, loudly cursing his brother's lineage.

It only took a split second for Maeve to take full advantage of the unexpected opportunity. She rapidly got up, turned around, and fell knee-first down onto Marshall's crotch - and scored a direct hit.

Marshall screamed like a castrated pig and turned sickly green. He grabbed his crotch and writhed around in agony, his eyes rolling insanely.

"You're not so tough without your balls, huh, little boy?!" Maeve roared, mocking Marshall's

earlier words.

With a sound that was a curious mix of a squeal and a growl, Marshall drew his revolver, but Maeve kicked it out of his hand. When it hit the wall of the van, it went off. The shot sounded like thunder in the close confines, and Maeve thought she'd gone deaf.

The van suddenly began moving erratically, and both Maeve and Marshall were thrown about. Maeve looked up and saw that the bullet had hit Randy in the head, leaving him slumped over the wheel. The windscreen was covered in his brains, but she could clearly see the lamppost moving closer and closer.

"Oh fuck, this is gonna hurt!" she shouted.

The van bumped over the curb at unabated speed and slammed into the street lamp. Maeve and Marshall were violently thrown forward, both of them ending up mashed up against the backs of the two front seats.

The van's rear end had been lifted high up in the air by the impact, and when it landed, the double doors at the back were ripped open. Several small items tumbled out, including one of Maeve's Berettas.

The lamp toppled over, and the head landed on the sidewalk in a shower of glass and sparks.

Staci had used the brute force of the Mustang to catch up with the erratically moving van, and she was right behind it as it careened into the lamppost. Watching the accident unfold, she immediately stood on the brakes, making the Mustang slow down dramatically.

She parked behind the crushed van and jumped out of the car. She ran over to the double doors and tried to peek in. She thought she could make out Maeve's white jeans, but the enforcer appeared to be tangled up in one of the Websters. Staci's foot bumped against Maeve's gun, and she picked it up and stuck it into her belt.

"Staci, 'that you?" Maeve croaked. She had a hard time figuring out which body all those arms and legs around her belonged to, but at least the rope had loosened itself, and she was able to wiggle her hands free.

"Yeah! I'm here, Maeve!"

Maeve untangled herself from Marshall and started crawling towards the back of the van. The wreck reeked of gasoline, and she knew it wouldn't be long before the piece of crap would blow sky high.

Crawling along on her hands and knees on a seemingly endless journey towards Staci, Maeve's fingers brushed against a cell phone, and she instinctively picked it up and put it in her pocket.

When Maeve reached the back of the van, Staci pulled her out the rest of the way, and embraced her in a crushing bear hug. Maeve appreciated the notion, but her back was throbbing already, and the pain definitely wasn't eased by Staci's strong arms wrapping themselves around her body.

"Don't you ever do that again!" Staci sobbed, a veil of tears in her eyes softening the blow of the words. She leaned in to kiss Maeve, but at the last moment, she noticed that Maeve's bottom lip was split, so she settled for caressing the bruised face.

"I'll try not to," Maeve said, and coughed. She wiped off her lip, and smirked when she saw the blood on her fingers.

She looked down at herself, and winced when she took in the sorry state of her clothes. One of the back pockets had been torn off her white jeans, and the right sleeve of her silk shirt was hanging on by the proverbial thread. She sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Let me help you," Staci said, and started searching her pockets for a handkerchief for Maeve's lip.

"Never mind, we better mov..."

A loud hiss and a crackling sound from the front of the van made both women look - suddenly a cloud of smoke rose from the crumpled hood, quickly followed by flames that grew bigger by the split second.

"Let's get the hell outta here!" Maeve said, and hobbled away from the wreck.

"I have one of your guns," Staci said, and handed Maeve the black Beretta. She put an arm around the shorter woman's waist and almost dragged her to the idling Mustang.

"Thanks." Maeve checked the clip and saw, with some surprise, that Marshall hadn't emptied it. She leaned against the driver's side door, and after a few seconds, she climbed in.

"What about the thugs?" Staci said.

"Forget 'em. They're dead."

Maeve hadn't even finished the sentence when Marshall Webster burst out of the rear of the burning van. His left sleeve was on fire, but he didn't even bother to put it out.

"GRAAAAAH!" he roared, and started shooting at Staci and Maeve.

The first bullet ricocheted off the hood in a shower of sparks, and the second shattered the side mirror on the driver's side. Maeve instantly drew her own weapon, stuck it out of the door and fired five rounds directly into Marshall's body. They were all hits, and he staggered backwards - he collapsed into the burning van, spasmed once, and was then still.

Staci had buried her head in her hands, and didn't dare to look over the dashboard until Maeve told her it was all right.

"I didn't know you could shoot left-handed, Maeve," Staci said in a shaky voice.

"Me neither. He hit my car, the asshole!" she said and looked at the shattered mirror with a sour expression on her face.

"I think we should call the fire department. The flames are creeping closer to that house," Staci said and pointed.

"You're right. But let's get away first." Maeve put the Mustang into gear and drove away from the grisly scene.

Half a block down the road, they found an alley that suited their need perfectly, and Maeve reversed into it and turned off the engine and the lights.

All the horrible events of the last few minutes finally caught up with Staci, and the shock that swept over her like a tidal wave made it feel like an elephant was standing on her chest. As soon as the Mustang had stopped, she opened her door, fumbled out of the car, and ran into the alley.

Not caring for a second about the trash or the unpleasant smell in the alley, she put a hand against the brick wall and started to hyperventilate. Her heart was hammering away in her chest, and it felt like it was trying to break out. Small black spots were floating around in her vision, and her ears were ringing from the blood rushing through her veins. Her mouth had suddenly turned as dry as Death Valley, and she felt very cold, despite the fact that it was still muggy.

Staci's hands started shaking violently, and for a brief moment, she couldn't fathom whose hands it was she was looking at - everything was so unreal that it felt like she was watching it on TV.

Maeve quickly jumped out of the car, and ran back to help Staci. She put her hands on the taller woman's shoulders and pulled her away from the wall. One look at Staci's ashen face told Maeve that her partner was in the middle of a severe panic attack, so she wrapped her arms around Staci's torso and held on for all she was worth, not giving a damn about the pains shooting up from her back.

Staci sobbed a few times, but she refused to cry. It felt so good to have Maeve's strong arms around her, and she wanted to hold on to her for an eternity.

"Dear God... I thought I had lost you... when I was following the van, I was so scared... I was terrified that I would never see you again... alive..." Staci whispered hoarsely. Her voice was trembling from the strain she had been under, and her hands were still shaking, though not as much as before. A few tears escaped from her eyes, but she didn't care.

"Shhhh. It's all right, I'm right here. Nothing happened. I'm safe," Maeve said quietly, and ran her hand up and down Staci's long back.

"Thank God," Staci said, and pulled back from the hug. She sighed deeply and wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

Maeve framed Staci's face with her hands, and pulled her down, intending to give her a loving kiss - but as soon as she puckered up her lips, her split lip made its presence felt with a sharp stab of pain.

"Ow!" Maeve said, and winced.

Staci chuckled, and took Maeve's hands in her own. They briefly looked into each other's eyes, and then Staci kissed Maeve on the uninjured side of her mouth.

After they separated, Staci brushed her hair away from her eyes, and took a very deep breath to fill her lungs with air. She let out a long, slow sigh, and shook her head.

"I'm sorry for freaking out like that..."

"Oh for Chrissakes!" Maeve said and hugged Staci again. She hissed when her abused back muscles complained, and she had to put a hand on her lower back.

"Jeez, Maeve, you're a wreck!"

"I've probably sprained a back muscle, but other than that I'm A-OK," Maeve said, and massaged her back.

"Man, what a night," Staci said and sighed again.

"How is your head? He hit you pretty hard," Maeve said, and made Staci turn around so she could check out the wound.

"I'm sore, but fine. I'll have a huge headache tomorrow."

"No doubt. Are you ready to come back to the car?"

"I think so."

Maeve took Staci by the hand, and led her back to the Mustang. Holding the door open, Maeve saw to it that Staci was seated comfortably before she went around the car and got in herself.

Maeve reached into her pocket and pulled out the cell phone she had found in the van. The

movement made her back hurt, and she winced again - she'd definitely need the massage jets in her Jacuzzi once this eternal night was over.

The night suddenly turned to day as a huge lightning bolt tore across the heavens. Maeve waited for the thunderclap, but it was still far away.

"Jeez, this thunderstorm's creeping me out! I wish it would start raining, or something... anything but that goddamned lightning... wait a minute, this isn't my phone...?" she said as she looked at the cell phone in her hand.

"No, yours is in the glove box," Staci said, and opened it. She pulled out Maeve's phone and presented it to her.

"Would you mind calling the fire boys? I need to see what this is."

"All right."

As Staci called, Maeve studied the cell phone with great interest. It was a fancy model, and it was still on.

Staci closed the phone.

"Done. Have you figured out anything?"

"Not ye..."

Suddenly the phone rang as Maeve was holding it, blasting out *The Ride Of The Valkyries*.

"Yep!" she said cheekily, and looked at the display.

"I don't recognize that number..." she said, as the phone rang again.

In the distance, they could already hear the wail of the emergency vehicles, and Staci felt a little better knowing that the fire wouldn't spread to the nearby houses.

"... so let's find out whose it is." Maeve pressed the button, and put the phone to her ear.

'He-hello?' a familiar voice said from the other end of the connection.

"Mmmmm," Maeve growled, trying to imitate Marshall Webster. She racked her brains to remember where she had heard the voice before - she knew it, that much was certain.

'H-have you... done what I asked you to?'

Maeve suddenly connected all the dots, and the name of the caller flashed before her eyes. She bolted upright in her seat and gripped the phone so hard that her knuckles turned white. A small

vein started beating on her forehead, and her face flushed red, contorting her usually pretty features into a mask of evil.

Staci opened her mouth to ask what on Earth was going on, but thought better of it once she saw the color of Maeve's face.

'H-Hello?' the familiar voice said on the phone.

"This is White fuckin' Fever, Sammi Jo. Your little assassination attempt failed. You better start sayin' your prayers, motherfucker, 'cause I'm COMIN' FOR YA!" she bellowed into the phone.

The connection was lost immediately, and Maeve responded by throwing the phone hard against the wall of the building they were parked next to.

The delicate electronic equipment shattered into a dozen pieces, but Maeve didn't even see it hit the ground - she and Staci had already left the alley in a cloud of dust, driving at full speed towards the Three-In-One Club.

The Mustang came to a screeching halt in front of the nightclub, making the few people on the sidewalk turn around and look.

"Stay in the car, Staci," Maeve growled, and opened the door.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Despite her aching back, Maeve quickly bounded out of the car and strode purposefully past the bouncer, who knew better than to try to stop her.

By this time of the morning, the nightclub was nearly empty. Only a few businessmen and - women, in varying degrees of soberness, were sitting along the catwalk, enjoying the dancers writhe about to the pumping music.

The hostesses and waitresses didn't have much to do, so they were sitting down in the booths, talking amongst themselves.

Maeve barged into the club and walked very fast past the booths, heading for Sammi Jo's office. Danielle flew up from her chair and nearly dropped her tray off the look of unadulterated rage on Fever's face. Danielle had seen that look on the enforcer's face during the terrible business with her sister, and she felt certain that just like last year, something major was about to happen.

Maeve quickly arrived at the door to Sammi Jo's office. She grabbed the handle, but it was locked. She didn't want to waste time on something as trivial as knocking, so she stepped back and gave the door an almighty kick right on the lock. It flew open and took a large piece of the doorjamb with it.

Sammi Jo was cowering in her fancy leather swivel chair, looking like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming freight train. As a last ditch effort, she held up a small caliber revolver, but her hand trembled so much it was pointless. Effortlessly, Maeve swatted the gun away, and it clanged harmlessly into the trashcan.

Maeve picked up Sammi Jo by the scruff of her \$1000 suit, and slammed the older woman into a filing cabinet. The leather chair went flying and toppled over into a fake palm tree in the corner of the office.

Maeve was several inches shorter than Sammi Jo, but the fire burning inside her canceled out that disadvantage.

Sammi Jo was frightened out of her wits, and she couldn't control her bladder. She cringed when she felt hot urine seeping out of her panties and down onto her thighs.

"Why?" Maeve hissed in the older woman's face, and bared her teeth in a feral sneer. A stab of pain shot through her injured lip, but she didn't give a damn.

Sammi Jo was too afraid to answer, so she shook her head frantically instead.

With a growl, Maeve released her grip on the expensive suit, and went over to the other side of the desk, clearly searching for something.

Sammi Jo's legs were shaking too much to support her weight, so her knees buckled and she fell heavily down onto the floor - landing in the puddle that had formed at her feet.

Maeve slammed down a piece of blank paper and a pen on the desktop.

"Here's whatcha gonna do. You write after me... As of today, I, Sammi Jo- whatever-the-fuck your last name is, transfer ownership of the Three-In-One Club to Freddie Donnelly..."

"You're insane! That's not legally binding!" Sammi Jo said, still lying in the puddle of urine.

"You wanna see how insane?" Maeve hissed.

"This club is all I have! I've invested hundreds of thousands in this place!" Sammi Jo said, and got off the floor. She leaned against the filing cabinet, and tried to wipe off her sticky hands on her suit.

"You should've thought about that sooner, dear Sammi Jo. This is what happens when a two-bit hustler like you starts messin' with the big girls."

"Fuck you, dyke!"

In one second flat, Maeve jumped over the desk and planted a knee deep into Sammi Jo's gut. All

the air rushed out of the older woman, and she fell forward, groaning pitifully. Maeve pulled her upright, and once again forced her up against the cabinet.

"I'll give you some free advice: Don't throw that word in my face unless you have the balls to back it up... and you don't. Catch my drift?" Maeve whispered into Sammi Jo's ear.

The older woman coughed and wheezed, but she still had some fighting left in her.

"I won't do it... I won't sign the paper..."

"I'm losing my temper. And when I lose my temper, I get really unpleasant, you understand?"

"But..."

"Write it, date it, sign it, and then get the fuck out of my city, Sammi Jo. Do it now, or I swear to God, you'll regret it for the rest of your worthless life!" Maeve roared right in Sammi Jo's face.

The fiery anger displayed by the irate enforcer made Sammi Jo concede, and she nodded her head like she was in a trance.

She slowly went over to the desk to write down the words Maeve had dictated to her. She signed the paper and handed it to Maeve.

"Here," she said, feeling empty and deflated.

Maeve didn't answer at once, but rather crossed her arms over her chest, and gave the older woman an ice cold stare.

"Just so you know... I'll be checking up on you. If I hear even the slightest thing about you working against Fast Freddie, I'll hunt you down. Get it?"

Sammi Jo nodded wordlessly. She picked up a few small items and left the office without looking back. The entire backside of her pant suit was one, large wet patch of urine that stuck uncomfortably to her rear end and her legs as she walked.

Both the pole dancers currently on the catwalk stopped their routines to stare wide-eyed at their former boss, and Danielle's jaw was hanging just above the floor as Sammi Jo walked through the club, redfaced and in a very bedraggled state.

The waitress almost didn't dare go into the office, but she called on all her courage and peeked around the busted doorjamb.

Fever was making a phone call, sitting in Sammi Jo's leather chair with her boots up on the polished surface of the desk. She looked up and smiled at Danielle. The waitress had to look

again, but, sure enough, Fever was smiling at her. Not only that, she was waving, too.

Maeve pressed a button on the phone and closed the display.

"Come on in, Danielle. I have some news for you."

"I c-can imagine," Danielle said with a stutter.

"There's nothing to worry about now. Sammi Jo is no longer your boss. She... hmmm... felt the city air was clogging up her sinuses, so she's decided to take an extended break from the whole nightclubbing bizz."

"O... OK...?"

"Yep. You're now working directly for Fast Freddie Donnelly. I'm sure you've heard of him?"

Danielle nodded.

"Good. He's a fair man, and a friend you can call on if you have problems. You understand?"

The waitress nodded again and clutched the tray she was holding.

"Good. I don't know who'll be running this place in the future, but I promise you that things will be much nicer from now on."

Danielle furrowed her brow and started sniffing the air.

"Is that...?"

"Yeah... Sammi Jo had a little accident on her way out. I'll see to it that someone comes to clean it up," Maeve said, and patted Danielle on the shoulder as she walked out of the recently vacated office.

"Did you kill her?" Staci asked as Maeve got back in the car.

"Actually, I didn't. I wanted to... but I didn't." Maeve started the engine, and they drove off.

"Then what?"

"Well... Uncle Freddie just got himself another nightclub."

"Oh."

Maeve rested her sore arm by letting it hang out of the opened window. She touched her equally

sore lip, and found out that it was bleeding again.

"Will it be under your protection?" Staci said, and handed Maeve a fresh napkin.

"Oh, yes. Well, protected by the Donnellys, anyway. When I'm around, I'll probably swing by now and then to check it out..."

"...To check out the dancers, you mean..." Staci interjected.

"I'll need to see if our investment is safe and healthy," Maeve said and grinned broadly.

"... but in short, yes, it's now part of the Donnelly family," she continued.

"Hmmm."

A few minutes went by without either of them saying anything.

"Staci, you're thinking about something again, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I was thinking... that maybe I could get a job there...?"

Maeve's head whipped around so fast that even her heavily gelled hair moved.

"As a dancer?!" Maeve said flabbergasted.

"No, silly! Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Maeve! I meant to run the place, or to be your liaison, or something. What do you think?"

"Well..."

"I happen to think I'd be able to do a pretty good job of it. I'm good with people..."

"Well, most people," Maeve said and grinned again.

"... and I know my way around a ledger, so I was wondering if... you'd talk to Fast Freddie about it?"

"So you're serious?"

"Yeah. I need to move on. Tending bars is OK for a while, but I need to do something else now. My 40th isn't that far away, and I think it's time for me to do something... respectable."

Maeve nodded. On one hand, she could easily imagine Staci running the Three-In-One Club, and it would definitely be nice to have someone friendly working there - but on the other, she didn't know if Staci's personality was really compatible with the sleazy side of the job.

'She'd be working with scantily clad women for most of the night, and there's no way a permanent blush can be good for the skin...' Maeve thought, as she looked at Staci's profile.

"There's one little problem, Staci. I don't think you'd be able to continue living in Midtown West. You'd probably need to move over here. I don't think Don Coluzzo would look too kindly on one of our people living in his part of the town."

"Well... I guess I could move over here," Staci said, and put her hand on Maeve's.

Maeve felt Staci's eyes on her, so she turned her head - for an eternal second, they looked directly into each other's eyes, and they both knew the old connection and love had been fully restored.

Maeve opened her mouth to reply, but found herself so choked up that she wasn't able to speak. Her heart started hammering in her chest, and she forced herself to look ahead to mind the traffic.

"Tell you what, I'll run it by him. Let's see what happens, OK?" she said after a few seconds.

"Fine by me," Staci said, and crossed her fingers out of sight of Maeve.

A few minutes later.

"So, what do we do now, anyway?" Staci asked as they were waiting by the red light at Fourth Street. The traffic had turned heavy again, only now it was family sedans carrying people to work, instead of souped up sportscars driven by reckless youths.

"Well, I've had it up to **here** with this city... at least for tonight," Maeve said, and demonstrated by holding her hand just below her nose.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm fresh out of assholes to kill or throw out, so I might as well call it a night," Maeve said, and clawed Staci's thigh with a wide grin.

As they drove in a long line of cars approaching the next intersection, heavy drops began to fall, and soon Jefferson Boulevard was drenched by a deluge.

The windscreen wipers on the Mustang moved back and forth on the fastest setting, but even that wasn't enough to withstand the torrential rain.

Even though it was past 6 AM, the massive thundercloud hovering above the city meant that there were no signs of the coming dawn. The sky was constantly lit up by tendrils of lightning, and impossibly loud thunderclaps rolled over the skyscrapers.

" 'And the rains came and washed away the City Of Sin,' " Staci said thoughtfully as she looked out of the window onto nature's impressive light show.

"Yeah. Perhaps we better start building an ark. So... do you want me to drop you off at Rose's...?"

"Well, ah... would it be too much trouble if I... sorta crashed at your place tonight...? Well, today, to be exact," Staci said, and checked her wristwatch.

Maeve grinned and looked at Staci.

"We're kinda on our way to my place right now, actually..." she said, and winked.

"I had a feeling we might be," Staci said, and leaned over to kiss Maeve on the cheek.

"Anyway, I need to call Rose at some point during the day, so she won't worry about me when she sees my Corolla still parked at the back entrance."

"No problem."

They turned off Fourth Street, and entered the alley where Maeve's apartment was. The Mustang hit a pothole, and the jolt sent a flash of pain up through Maeve's back.

"Ouch!" she hissed, and leaned forward in her seat.

"Your back?"

"Yeah... the son of a bitch is killing me..."

"You need a hot shower and some quality time with the massage jets in the Jacuzzi," Staci said.

"Oooh, now you're talkin'! You. Me. Jacuzzi. Match made in heaven!"

"Jeez, you're incorrigible, you know that? ...but I guess I could do that, only I need some, hell, I need a *lot* of sleep first. It's four hours past my bedtime!" Staci said, and underlined her words by yawning.

"Yeah. Me, too. Hey, you know somethin' ?" Maeve said, as she clicked on the remote to activate the sliding door.

"Errr... no?"

"I think I'm gonna call in sick tonight. I have a feelin' that I'm gonna be totally worn out again

come nightfall," Maeve said with a wolfish grin on her face.

"... Good point. Who knows, we might even catch a Fever," Staci drawled, and returned the grin.

"Ooooh, I'm countin' on it, baby!"

*

*

THE END

**Norsebard's Scrolls
Index Page**
