

~ White Fever III - Fever Vs. The Carjackers ~

by Norsebard

Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

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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.

People curse and swear massively, so people who are easily offended by bad language better find something else to read than this story.

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: July 11 - September 6, 2010.

Jackie - As usual, Thanks :)

- Once again, I'd like to voice my gratitude to all the members of the AUSXIP Talking Xena Subtext Central community - thanks for supporting me, gals and guys! :)

Description: Roberta Cain, Maeve Donnelly's former mentor, is back on the mean streets after doing a twelve-year stretch in the State Penitentiary. It soon becomes clear that Roberta is a cut above the other criminals Maeve and Staci have faced and that they need to up their game accordingly. With such an unpredictable and aggressive opponent, will there be a happy ending for Staci Hart and Maeve Donnelly...?

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CHAPTER 1

"Ohhhh, baby..." Maeve Donnelly said, lying flat on her stomach on her bed. Her bathrobe had long since parted company, revealing the Enforcer's strong back. She was resting her head on her muscular arms, just allowing herself to be swept away by her partner's expert touch.

"More?" Staci Hart said, straddling Maeve's legs.

"Yeah, baby, please..." Maeve slurred, so far into a state of bliss that she was practically dreaming.

Staci resumed her massage of Maeve's troublesome back. She expertly kneaded and molded the muscles that had given the fierce Enforcer so much pain since she had pulled them in a clash with the deranged Webster brothers a few months previously.

"Maeve, one of these days you're gonna find yourself unable to get out of your bed or even your car. You really should get a Doctor to look at it," Staci said, pausing briefly.

"Mmmmm. Later. Don't stop, baby."

Suddenly, Maeve's cell phone rang. Reaching down to the bathrobe on the floor, Maeve picked up the phone and flipped it open.

"Fever. Talk to me."

'Hey, Maeve. Can you recognize the voice?' a female voice said.

"No. Should I?"

"Do you want me to stop?" Staci whispered, but Maeve shook her head.

'Oh, I'm heartbroken. It's R.C.'

"Roberta Cain! Holy flip! Man, it's been a while. When did you get out?"

'Three weeks ago.'

"Wow. Wait a minute, you didn't bust out, did you? I mean, they let you go, right?"

'Oh, sure. I got some time off for good behavior.'

"Ha, that's a first."

'How is life treating you these days, Maeve?'

"Oh, you know, up and down," Maeve said and turned her head to wink at Staci.

'I have something I want to discuss with you... but not over the phone. Can you meet me down at the Majestic in twenty minutes or so? Room 605.'

Having completed the massage, Staci got off Maeve's legs and moved around the bed on her knees. She took off her kimono and threw it on the floor with a flick of the wrist and then stretched out like a big pussycat. With a purr, she snuggled down on the bed and swept her long, black hair over her shoulder.

"Ummm, no can do, R.C. Make it an hour and twenty and we have a deal," Maeve said and flashed Staci a wolfish grin.

'OK. Here's my number in case you need to reach me,' Roberta said and told Maeve her telephone number.

"Got it."

'See ya later.'

"Alligator," Maeve purred and let go of the phone. Growling, she slowly crawled towards the very, very naked Staci.

"Who was that?" Staci said, lazily running a finger from her collar bone down to her navel.

"Just someone from the past, baby."

"An old flame, perhaps?"

"Nope. My old mentor, Roberta Cain," Maeve said and put her hand on Staci's hip. She clawed it gently, marveling at the feel of Staci's soft skin against her fingertips.

"Should I be worried?"

"Course not."

"Good," Staci said, grabbed hold of Maeve's arm and pulled the Enforcer into a tight embrace.

"I haven't seen Roberta Cain in... wow, more than fifteen years," Maeve said in between placing gentle kisses on Staci's throat.

"Maeve?"

"Mmmmyeah...?"

"Do you wanna talk or make love?"

"I can't believe you're asking *me* that question, baby," Maeve said and sought out Staci's lips.

A good while later, Staci arched her back and let out a long, sensuous groan. Completely spent and very much satisfied, she collapsed in a boneless heap on top of Maeve.

Maeve rolled the two of them over onto the side and reached down to gently remove the toy. After she put it next to them on the bed, she crawled upwards so she was at eye level with Staci.

"I guess that little investment paid off, huh?" she whispered into Staci's ear. When she didn't get a response beyond a muffled grunt, she began to nibble on Staci's earlobe.

"No, baby, please... no more..." Staci whispered, her ice blue eyes still darkened from the lovemaking.

"I have to leave now, anyway. But I'll be back. Count on it, baby," Maeve said and once again claimed her partner's lips.

Maeve rolled off the bed and went into the bathroom. Studying herself in the mirror above the wash basin, she was rather amused to see a string of small hickeys across the swell of her breasts.

"Staci Hart, you're a wildcat," Maeve said and reached into the shower to turn on the water jets.

After Maeve had showered and rubbed an ungodly amount of gel into her spiky, white hair, she went back into the bedroom to get dressed. As she rummaged through her drawers to find some clothes, she looked at Staci who was still lying on the bed, snoring lightly.

"How someone who looks so angelic can be such a devil in bed is beyond me," Maeve said with a throaty chuckle. She finally found a white tank top and a fresh pair of black silk boxers and put them on.

Staci stirred and yawned loudly, prompting another chuckle from Maeve.

"Hey... already showered?" Staci said and turned over so she was flat on her back.

"Yep. There's still water left."

"Gee, thanks. Who was that caller before?" Staci said and sat up. She tried to run her hands through her disheveled hair to sort it out, but soon gave up.

"Roberta Cain. She was the leader of a small-potato gang I ran with for a few years when I was in my late teens. Then we sorta lost contact," Maeve said and laid out her bullet proof vest on the bed. Her trained eye went over it thoroughly, checking for defects or loose threads.

"I thought you had always been with your uncle?"

"Well, uncle Freddie entrusted Roberta with my... ummm... practical upbringing, so to speak."

"Oh... you said she became your mentor?"

"Yeah. She taught me a lot of things about surviving the mean streets. She had a set of guidelines that us young turks had to follow... I can still remember them clearly," Maeve said and put on the Kevlar vest.

"I'd love to hear them," Staci said and swung her legs over the side of the bed. On bare feet, she padded over to stand behind Maeve to help her tie the laces securing the vest.

"Thanks, baby. Well, all right... One, no drugs... Two, there's no point in running from the law, they have the bigger gang so they'll always find you. Three..." Maeve said and found a pair of her trademark white jeans in the closet. She stepped into them and closed the zipper.

"... if you've fucked up, come clean at once so it can be fixed. Four..."

Maeve put on her favorite dark green silk shirt and started closing the buttons.

"Four, loyalty is everything. Without loyalty, we can't prosper, so if you betray the Family, you must be prepared to pay the price," Maeve said and put on her shoulderholster. She took out her Beretta 92F and checked the clip. While she had said the last words, Maeve's voice had turned cold and Staci could feel a shiver run down her spine.

The metallic clink when Maeve slapped the clip back in made Staci flinch slightly, but the mood soon improved when Maeve flashed her a wide, toothy grin.

"I feel like I'm missin' something...?" Maeve said and winked.

"Your boots, perhaps?" Staci said and looked down at Maeve's socks.

"I'm glad you're here to tell me these things. I'd be lost without you, baby," Maeve said and stood up on tiptoes to place a tiny little kiss on Staci's cheek.

Staci rolled her eyes and pointed at Maeve's boots that were standing in the corner of the bedroom.

"They're over there. If you're done fooling around, I'll go and take a shower," Staci said and went into the bathroom.

Maeve grabbed the boots and sat down on the bed. Even as she started tying the bootlaces, her eyes never left Staci's perfectly sculpted rear end as the tall woman wiggled her way into the bathroom.

"And to think that some people don't like Monday mornings!" Maeve said loudly, but Staci just waved her hand and closed the door behind her.

Maeve chuckled and went over to the closet to take out her leather jacket.

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Slightly more than ten minutes later, Maeve pulled her midnight black Mustang GT off Jefferson Boulevard and into the parking lot of the Majestic Hotel. She quickly found a parking space, and as she got out of the car, a black Dodge Charger on the far side of the parking lot caught her eye.

Even though she was already a bit late for the appointment, Maeve walked casually over to the Charger to admire the car's aggressive styling.

It was the latest model, an SRT-8 special, painted in mat black and sporting a four-inch wide red stripe going from the front bumper across the hood and the roof to the back bumper. The alloy wheels were designed to be identical to the car's paintjob, black with a thin red line on the outer edge of the rim.

Maeve whistled approvingly and put her hands in her back pockets while she walked around the car to see it from all angles. After taking a final look, she went over to the rear entrance of the Majestic.

In the lobby, Maeve quickly established that everything was still as it had been for the last sixty years. She unzipped her leather jacket and went over to the elevator to press the UP button. Soon, she could hear the wagon creaking and rattling its way towards her, a journey she knew could take several minutes if the elevator was in a bad mood. She sighed and turned around to study the other people milling around in the lobby.

Even at this relatively early time of the day, a few working girls were busy chatting up their customers, most appearing to be businessmen out for a late brunch.

'Come nightfall, most of 'em will go back to their million dollar houses and tell their million dollar wives that they've had a boring, dull, uneventful day at the office,' Maeve thought.

A rattling, wet cough signaled the arrival of Jaroslav Jurasz, the night porter of the Majestic. Maeve noted with some disgust that he still hadn't changed his undershirt. When he spotted Maeve, he gave her a quick wave.

"Hey, Jake, you still here?" Maeve said, her eyes fixated on the myriad of stains on the undershirt.

Jaroslav nodded and shrugged in a very tired fashion. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and tapped it with his finger. The ashes fell onto the carpet, but he didn't seem to care.

Behind Maeve, the little bell on the elevator dinged and the mesh door creaked open.

"See ya, Jake," Maeve said and gave the night porter a salute as she stepped into the elevator.

"Jaroslav, Fever! How often do I have to tell you!" Jake said loudly, his voice echoing through the lobby.

A couple of minutes later, Maeve knocked on the door to Room 605. Taking a step to the side so she wouldn't be in the firing line in case it was a setup, she reached under her jacket and put her hand on the handle of the Beretta.

When the door opened, Maeve could hardly believe her eyes. Roberta Cain stood in front of her, but it most decidedly wasn't the same Roberta anymore that Maeve had known all those years ago.

The prison term appeared to have been very hard on her as her complexion had developed an unflattering grayish hue, and the insides of her firm, sinewy arms were riddled with scars and needletracks. Her short hair had turned gray in places and even her eyes seemed duller. She was wearing black jeans and a black tank top that revealed that her shoulders and the upper part of her chest were covered in prison gang tattoos.

"Hey, Fever. 's good to see ya," Roberta said and moved aside so Maeve could enter the apartment.

"Yeah... likewise. Man, you look..."

"I know. I look like rough, old shit. Hey, that's what happens when you do twelve in a row... but I can still kick ass if I have to. You, however, look like a wet dream come true."

"Aw, Jeez," Maeve said and laughed out loud.

"Come in. Sit down. Want a drink, or something? A beer?"

"It's ten forty-five in the morning, R.C."

"So?" Roberta said and went over to an old fridge that was standing in a corner of the room. She opened the door and took out a sixpack.

"Nah. Thanks, anyway."

"Suit yourself. I seem to recall you could chug down a few brewskis back in the day," Roberta

said and pulled out a chair at a table that had been placed in the center of the room. She tore the first can out of the sixpack and cracked it open.

"Yeah, I could. But that was then and this is now. So, is it your Charger down in the lot?"

"Yeah."

"Looks pretty good. Only been out three weeks and you already got a hot set of wheels?"

"Yeah, it was a bargain. A real steal. Anyway, what are you driving these days?" Roberta said and took a long swig from the can.

"Stang GT."

"You always said you wanted a Deuce Coupe."

"I know. They were too expensive."

"What you got in it?"

"A 427."

"Huh... I'll bet you needed a shoe horn to get it into a Mustang. I didn't even know Ford went higher than a 392 for their crate engines... The prison library had a lot of street racin' magazines and I had a lot of time to read 'em," Roberta said off Maeve's surprised look.

"Well, that's right, usually they don't go higher than a 392, but I have a few connections. You got a Hemi?"

"Of course, man. A genuine MOPAR 372 Hemi. Wouldn't have it any other way. Perhaps we could, you know, have a pissing contest one of these days down on the quarter mile?"

"Perhaps we could," Maeve said with a grin.

"Yeah..."

"R.C., what actually happened back then? Suddenly one day, you just upped and disappeared?"

"I got a tip from your uncle. He told me it was high time I skedaddled, so I did. I went out to the West coast. Didn't help me much, though, 'cos I got caught after a year. And then the trial went on for a year after that, so..."

"Right. I never knew," Maeve said with an understanding nod.

"Well, you weren't in the need-to-know loop back then. Anyway, let's get to the point. Before we start talking, I want you to meet my new business associate. Hey, Paco! Come in here!"

The door to the bedroom opened and a Latino man stepped into the living room. He was in his late twenties, with short, dark hair, a well-kept mustache and a goatee. He was wearing basketball boots, dark blue jeans and an olive green army jacket over a colorful T-shirt.

The army jacket had a characteristic bulge around the man's left armpit, and Maeve automatically moved her hand closer to the handle of her Beretta. She eyed the new arrival suspiciously, quickly categorizing him as a potential troublemaker simply based on the cold look in his eyes.

"Paco Alvarez, meet White Fever, Fast Freddie Donnelly's number one Enforcer," Roberta said.

"Nice to meet ya," Paco half-whispered in a hoarse, creepy voice that held so little warmth that Maeve's hackles immediately rose.

"Paco," Maeve said and nodded.

"Fever and I go way back, Paco. More than twenty years, ain't that right, Maeve?" Roberta said.

"Yep."

"Yeah, back to the legendary Cue Ballz crew. Maeve was my number two back then and let me tell you, we did plenty of crazy-ass things. We were the baddest mothers ever to roam Eighth Street. It was never quite the same after we'd been there."

Paco nodded and moved over to stand behind Roberta.

"Well, past is past," Roberta said and reached under the table. Once her hand reappeared, it held a white envelope that she put down on the table top. She pushed it towards Maeve with her fingertips.

Maeve picked it up and looked into it - it contained a large wad of C-notes.

"What the hell is this?" Maeve said, puzzled.

"Five grand."

"What for?"

"Well... let's call it look-the-other-way money."

"I don't think so," Maeve said and put the envelope back on the table.

Roberta reached down and found another envelope that she put next to the first one.

"Ten G, Maeve. Don't be an idiot. It's all yours."

"Didn't you just get out of the State Pen, R.C.?"

"I did. So?"

"I'm not gonna ask you where you got that money. You must be planning something," Maeve said, leaning back in her chair so she could get a clear line of fire if she needed it.

"We are. And we'd like you to be a part of it. For old times sake."

"Doesn't work like that anymore."

"No?"

"No. Did you really think you could buy me like this?"

"Everyone has a price, Fever. Hell, back in the old days, Roddy Flanagan and Big Sully were willing to accept half of what I've just offered you."

"Roddy Flanagan and Big Sully are dead, R.C."

"So I've heard. But I figured there's no way Fast Freddie would harm his only niece."

"Yeah, well, don't count on it. Nobody is above the Family. Nobody. You taught me that yourself," Maeve said and got up from her chair. She took a few steps backwards without turning around.

"Hmmm," Roberta said with a lazy shrug. She scooped up the two envelopes and put them back underneath the table.

"Roberta, if you're planning on running an operation anywhere in the square between the East Side of the Monroe and the docks, and Uptown and Fourteenth Street, you're gonna need Fast Freddie's blessing," Maeve said coldly.

"We know. Do we have it?" Paco said in his half-whispering style.

"I'm going to run it by him. Don't do anything until you've heard from me," Maeve said and reached for the door handle.

"We won't. We'll be peaceful little lambs, won't we, Paco?" Roberta said.

"That's right."

Maeve looked from one to the other, but only saw smug, knowing looks. With a grunt, she twisted the door knob and left the small apartment.

Once out in the hallway, Maeve drew her Beretta and cocked it. She walked down to the end of the hallway and waited for a few minutes. When neither Roberta nor Paco left apartment 605, she put the pistol back in its holster and hurried down the grand staircase.

Leaning against the Mustang, Maeve dialed the number to the Donnelly mansion and waited impatiently for whomever was working the phones to pick it up.

'The Donnelly mansion, how may I help you?' a young, female voice said.

"It's Fever. Is my uncle up yet?"

'No, I'm sorry, Miss Donnelly, he isn't.'

"Shit. When are you expecting him? I need to speak with him."

'Not for several hours. Do you want me to go wake him up?' the young dispatcher said and Maeve could clearly hear a gulp coming through the connection.

"Nah. You're new, right?"

'Yes, just started this morning...'

"What's your name?"

'Wynne Masters, Miss Donnelly.'

"Welcome to the Family, Wynne. I'll swing by a little later. Please inform my uncle once he's up."

'Will do... and thank you.'

"Anytime. Later."

Maeve closed the phone and got into the car. She left the parking lot and started cruising South on Jefferson. At this time of the day, the traffic consisted mostly of taxi cabs and delivery vans zooming back and forth, and sometimes stopping in the most unexpected places.

After the third occasion where Maeve had been forced to break out in the center lane to avoid delivery vans suddenly pulling over, she gave up on Jefferson and turned right on Eighth Street.

She had driven down Eighth a thousand times since her days in the Cue Ballz, but the street still meant a certain something for her. She slowed down to take a look at some of the sights - the

small park where she had kissed a girl for the first time, the alley where she had first held a gun and the sidewalk where she nearly had her throat slit when she had been on the losing side of a knife fight.

Roberta Cain had saved her ass then, like she had on several other occasions. Maeve shook her head when she thought about how Roberta looked now. The thing that upset her the most was the sight of the many needletracks on the woman's arms - Maeve could clearly remember how Roberta had time and time again ordered her crew to stay away from drugs. Maeve shook her head and tapped her fingers on the rim of the steering wheel.

She slowed to a halt in front of a derelict building halfway down the street. Many years earlier, the building had housed a small mom-and-pop convenience store that had acted as a turning point in the life of the sixteen-years old Maeve Donnelly.

In a flash of youthful stupidity, she had gone against Roberta's orders and had tried to shoplift a \$2 magazine, but the owner had caught her and whacked her half a dozen times on her rear end with an old-fashioned broom. Of course, that was nothing compared to the bollocking she got from Roberta when Maeve got back to the flat they used as a club house.

That incident had taught Maeve an important lesson on loyalty and trust, and she was quite pleased with herself over the fact that she had never done anything against the Little Guy again - only against those who had it coming.

Maeve was about to continue when she suddenly spotted two young punks loitering at the corner of the derelict building and a grassy lot. It was obvious that money and drugs were changing hands, and when Maeve blipped the throttle, both men ran away as quickly as they could towards the far end of the lot.

'Looks like we need to keep a closer eye on Eighth in the future,' Maeve thought. She grunted and drove on.

Maeve had a sudden need to hear Staci's voice, so when she pulled up to the red light at the intersection of Eighth and Franklin Boulevard, she unclipped the phone from her belt and dialed the number to Staci's cell.

'Staci Hart.'

"Hey, baby, it's me. Are you still at my pad?"

'Uh... no. I've gone home.'

"Oh..."

'Did your meeting go well?'

"Sorta."

'Do you want me to come back over?'

Maeve nearly said yes, but she knew that it was more important to speak to her uncle. The traffic lights turned green and Maeve drove right onto Franklin.

"Well... thanks for the offer, but I need to go out to the mansion in a little while."

'All right.'

"We did have a pretty good time this morning, didn't we?" Maeve said warmly.

'Yeah. It's fun when things develop unexpectedly.'

"Yeah! Heh, heh," Maeve said and overtook one of the ubiquitous white delivery vans that had seemingly overrun the city.

"Are we gonna... ummm, do you wanna go out for a quick bite tonight... or something?" Maeve continued.

'I can't tonight, Maeve.'

"Oh..."

'It's not that I don't want to, but I have a lot of paperwork to fill out at the Club. It's payday next week, you know, and I need to have everything sorted out.'

"I know," Maeve said and slowed to a halt at the corner of Franklin and Fifth Street. She briefly considered continuing onwards to Staci's apartment on First, but decided against it. She sighed and activated her turning signal.

'Maeve, you sound a little... I don't know... down? What happened at the meeting?'

"Something unexpected... but not of the fun kind."

'Oh. Listen, I gotta go. See you later, OK? Love ya,' Staci said and blew Maeve a kiss through the connection.

"Sure, baby. Love ya, too," Maeve said and hung up. She put the phone in the small tray between the seats and then reached up to turn on the radio.

'... listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. So, with the news out of the way, it's time to continue our special theme, Sad Songs For Singles. I'm Susan Blaine, and this is Tears On My Pillow by Little Anthony and The Imperials.'

Maeve chuckled over the uncanny timing of the DJ and turned up the volume. Soon, she was

merrily singing along to the sentimental classic, slightly off-key but with great gusto.

**_*_

"... No, we've got it ... yeah ... will you take a fuckin' chill pill, I told ya we got it ... it's going down tonight as planned ... yeah ... talk to ya later," Roberta Cain said and closed her cell phone.

"Jeez, those guys are impatient," she said and rolled her eyes. She put the phone on the table and looked at the two envelopes Maeve Donnelly had refused.

"What's your impression of Fever, Paco?"

"She's a wuss," the man said hoarsely as he sat down at the table. He pulled the second to last can out of the sixpack and cracked it open.

"A wuss? She's not a wuss. From what the grapevine has told me, she's fired more rounds, busted more heads and had more women than you have... or ever will for that matter. And she's an idealist. She always was. They're the worst kind of crooks."

"You don't think she'll tell Fast Freddie about us?"

"Oh, she'll tell that tub of lard about us," Roberta said and started scratching the many marks on her arms.

"But what the hell are we..." Paco started to say, but Roberta cut him off.

"Fast Freddie isn't stupid. He won't just give us his blessing to do what-the-fuck-ever we please. At first, he'll only allow us to do some small-time shit so he can check out how we're running. But we don't have time for small-time shit, 'cos we've got a deal goin' down tonight."

"Oh," Paco said and took a swig from the can.

"That's what the grease was for," Roberta said and took the ten thousand dollars out of the two envelopes. She briefly looked at the many bills and then put them into a cardboard box. She tore the envelopes to pieces and threw them into the trashcan.

"Our friends down south are very impatient people. We promised them a Vette, and we're gonna give them a Vette. But when Fast Freddie hears about our little job, he sure as shit won't give us any sort of blessing..."

Paco shrugged and finished drinking the beer.

"Ah, fuck 'em. We'll deal with Freddie and his stooges later. Come on, Paco, let's ride," Roberta said and got up from the table.

"Down to Eighth?"

"Yep. Jonesy and Garrett must be back by now. What do you think of your new crew mates, by the way?"

"A couple a' dickless wusses," Paco said and crushed the beer can against the table top.

When Roberta turned the ignition key, the Hemi came alive with a thunderous roar. She put on her sunglasses and flashed Paco a shit-eating grin.

"Love that sound, man. Raw power," she said and blipped the throttle.

Paco merely shrugged and put on his own pair of shades.

Once out of the parking lot, Roberta turned right onto Jefferson and started cruising towards Eighth Street, unknowingly going the same way Maeve had used earlier.

Five minutes later, Roberta double parked the Charger in front of the grassy lot next to the derelict building. She put the shifter into Park and took off her sunglasses so she could see better.

"Where the hell are they? They should be here by now...?" she said, craning her neck to look for the two missing members of the resurrected Cue Ballz.

"I'll go find them, R.C.," Paco said and opened the door.

"All right. I'll park. See ya at the crib in a few."

Paco nodded and got out of the car. He shook his head as Roberta took off with a roar, and then turned around to enter the lot.

He walked across the grass, constantly scouting for the two men they were supposed to meet there. When he reached the far end of the lot, he turned left and walked towards the rear side of the four-story apartment that was adjacent to the grassy lot.

Fifty yards later he stopped at one of the cellarways, rolling his eyes repeatedly when he could hear music playing from below.

"Those dumb fucks. We agreed to meet at the lot," he said out loud. Sensing some movement behind him, he immediately put his hand inside his jacket and spun around to face whomever was coming towards him.

It was a man in his late sixties with a shock of white hair and a two-day stubble. He was wearing heavy work boots, work gloves and a blue boiler suit and he had all the hallmarks of being a

caretaker.

"Hey, son, we don't want your kind here," the man said.

"And what kind is that... Pops?" Paco whispered and slowly approached the older man. He looked over the caretaker's shoulder and spotted Roberta coming closer.

Roberta held up her hands in a 'calm down' gesture, and Paco let go of his gun and took a step back.

"The drug dealin' kind, son. Vamoose or I'll call the law."

As soon as she was close enough, Roberta put out her hand and started speaking.

"Hold on a minute, Sir. I've rented the cellar fair and square. We're just a couple a' friends meeting for a few beers and a little music. Won't be no drug dealin' goin' on down there," she said.

The caretaker turned around and eyed Roberta suspiciously. After a few seconds, he reluctantly put out his hand and shook Roberta's.

"Well, all right... but lemme tell you young folks something. We've worked hard to get this apartment building free of vermin," he said and looked pointedly at Paco.

"... And we intend on keepin' it that way. Oh, and don't play too loud!" the caretaker said sternly. He nodded to himself and walked away, leaving Roberta and Paco behind.

"He won't live long," Paco hissed. His voice was even more hoarse than usual and his lips were just a thin line in his face.

Roberta studied the retreating form of the caretaker. The man went over to a small gardening shed, worked the padlock and went inside.

"Once we're done, he's all yours. But not sooner. I don't want the pigs to get interested, ya hear?"

"Sure thing, R.C.," Paco said and walked down the short flight of stairs to the cellar. He pounded once, then twice and finally once more on the sturdy metal-reinforced wooden door.

The door was opened two inches and an eye and half a face appeared in the crack. As soon as the identities of the visitors had been verified, the door was closed and the chain removed.

As Theo 'Teddy' Garrett opened the door fully, he wiped some sweat off his brow and drew an audible sigh of relief.

"Thank God it's you, R.C. I was getting worried Fever would show up with some muscle before you got back," he said and walked further into the cellar.

"Fever? What the fuck are ya talking' about, Garrett?" Roberta said, slamming the door shut behind her.

"Fever spotted me when I got your stuff, R.C. I got it in here, by the way. Looks to be first class."

"Fever spotted you? Where the hell did you get it? Out on Jefferson in broad daylight?"

"Naw, man, right here. But there she was in that black Mustang. She saw me, but didn't do anything about it. I took off like a scalded cat, man," Teddy said and wrung his hands.

"There's more than one black Stang, Garrett."

"Not with those silver racin' stripes and those cocky bling-bling wheels, man."

Roberta growled and cursed under her breath.

"How the hell could Fever know about us already?"

"Wasn't me, man! I didn't say nothin' to nobody!" Garrett said, jumping up from the chair he had only just sat down on.

"I didn't say it was. But it's awfully suspicious nonetheless. Where the fuck is Jonesy?" Roberta said, scowling intensely at Teddy Garrett. He was in his early twenties, tall and gangly, and with an acne-riddled face only a mother could love. She had known many of his type - scrawny scaredy-cats most of them, typically afraid of their own shadow and generally too stupid to do anything but follow orders.

"I d-don't know, R.C.! He's out."

"No shit, homeboy. He better be here. That's all I'm sayin'," Roberta said and threw herself onto a well-worn couch.

A few minutes later, Garrett's cell phone rang and he hurriedly picked it up.

"It's Garrett... Jonesy? Where the hell are you, man? ... The basketball courts...? What the hell are you doing there? ... Yes, they're here," Teddy said and cast a worried glance at Roberta Cain and Paco Alvarez.

Roberta got up from the couch and snatched the phone out of Teddy's hand.

"It's R.C., Jonesy. Stay where you are. We'll be right over ... No, stay where you are," she said and then handed the phone back to Teddy.

"Come on, let's go shoot some hoops. I could use the exercise," Roberta said, cracking her knuckles. Paco grinned, knowing exactly what was about to happen to the unfortunate Jonesy.

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CHAPTER 2

Half past twelve, Maeve drove past the sentry and up the curved driveway to the Donnelly mansion. She parked outside the main entrance and got out of the car.

Looking at the withered leaves on the trees, she shuddered and zipped her leather jacket. Dark clouds were gathering and the sky looked like it could dump its contents on the City at any moment - November was definitely upon them.

She knocked on the double doors and stood back so the person inside could see her. Danny Watts' eye suddenly appeared through the narrow gunslit, and after a few seconds of fiddling with the locks, the doors were opened.

"Hey, Fever," the square-jawed former wrestler said in his typically rumbling voice.

"Hey, Danny-boy. Is my uncle up yet?" Maeve said as she entered the hallway.

Danny closed the doors behind Maeve and stood up straight, reaching his full height of 6'11".

"Yes, he's eating brunch in the den. Do you want me to get the kitchen to fix you something?"

"No, thanks, buddy. I've already eaten," Maeve said and hung her leather jacket on a hallstand. She adjusted her shoulder holster and made sure her silk shirt wasn't creased.

"How do I look?" she said with a grin.

"Adequate."

"That's the best it's ever gonna get. Talk to you later, Danny-boy," Maeve said and knocked on the double doors leading to Fast Freddie's den.

"Enter!" a gruff voice said from the other side of the doors.

Maeve stepped inside her uncle's private quarters and felt, rather than heard, Danny close the doors behind her. The man sitting at the mahogany desk at the other end of the room waved his hand at Maeve and she stepped forward with a smile.

"Hi, uncle Freddie. You're looking good today," she said and sat down in one of the leather

armchairs.

"Hi, Maeve. Thanks. You want something? Donut, bagel, Danish?"

"No, thanks, I'm good."

"You don't know what you're missin', young lady," Freddie said with a rumbling laugh that shook his entire body, all 375 lbs. of it.

"Is it too early to talk business?" Maeve said and crossed her legs at the knees.

Freddie Donnelly took a large bite out of a bagel and shook his head, making his double chins wobble.

"All right. Earlier this morning, I had a phone call from Roberta Cain."

"Rommffmta Cain?" Fast Freddie said surprised, swallowing the bite whole.

"That's right. She was at the Majestic, so I drove down there to see what she wanted. There's something fishy about it, uncle Freddie," Maeve said and leaned forward.

"Oh?"

"She offered me ten G to look the other way."

"No shit?" Freddie said and took another bite of the bagel.

"No shit. I turned her down."

Freddie gave Maeve a 'duh' kind of look and then wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"What did she actually want?" he said after chewing the bite thoroughly.

"She never said, but it's something major, I'm sure of it. She was fishing for your blessing, but I don't think we should give it."

"Hmmm," Freddie said and leaned back in his chair.

A knock on the side door interrupted his train of thought and he turned his head and barked "Enter!".

Mary Reynolds came through the door, pushing a small cart with various breakfast items.

"Do you need a refill, Sir?" Mary said and held up a small jug of orange juice.

"Coffee, please, Mary," Freddie said and pointed at his empty cup.

"One coffee coming right up," Mary said and took the thermos. As she walked past Maeve, she winked several times at the Enforcer, who replied by smiling broadly.

With a grunt, Maeve reached over and took a cup from the cart. She put it out and jiggled it a bit when Mary walked back past her.

"I'm sorry, Maeve. I'm all out of coffee. Mr. Donnelly got the last," Mary said and shook the empty thermos.

"Shit," Maeve said and put the cup back on the cart.

"Do you want me to make you some?"

"Nah. I'm not staying long. Thanks, anyway, Mary. How's Josie?"

"Oh, she's doing so fine after she changed schools. She's got a lot of playmates and several close friends now," Mary said, blushing.

"I'm glad to hear it. Anyway, you're looking better every time I see you."

"Thank you," Mary said quietly and absentmindedly ran her fingers across the scar on the side of her face. Her left eye was still cloudy, but the skin around her eye socket had returned to its natural pinkish hue, making the terrible injury a knife-wielding madman had afflicted on her stand out less.

"Yeah. You look great," Maeve said and patted Mary's arm.

Mary thanked Maeve again and then left the den.

"She's really a nice girl. Never spills a drop," Fast Freddie said.

"Yep. So... what about that blessing?"

"You know..." he said and put two sugar cubes in his coffee. After using a spoon to stir it, he got out of his chair and walked over to the window overlooking the small park with the duck pond.

Maeve waited patiently for the rest of the conversation. She knew that forcing her uncle into speaking before he was ready would only annoy him, so she kept quiet.

Freddie Donnelly took a sip of his coffee and turned around to face Maeve.

"Let 'em roast a little. Tell 'em it'll be a few days. If they don't mind waiting, they're all right. If they appear impatient, tell 'em to go fuck themselves."

"Yes, Sir. I'll do that right away," Maeve said and got up from the leather armchair.

On her way to the door, Maeve turned around and cocked her head.

"Uncle Freddie, if I may be so bold... what was it Roberta Cain did that got her arrested back then? She told me that you had alerted her...?"

"She'd done a few things, but the major case was that she'd been involved in an insurance scam that had gone sour. A detective for the insurance company disappeared... only to turn up beaten to death."

"Oh... but that would give her a life sentence, though."

"She ratted out on her associates," Freddie said and emptied the cup.

"She... what?" Maeve croaked.

"You heard me."

"Yeah. But I don't believe ya."

"You better."

"But she hasn't changed her identity or anything. Wouldn't they pull some strings to get someone to come look for her?"

"None of her associates are still alive, Maeve. I guess Roberta has some very capable friends both in the slammer and outside."

Maeve's jaw began to grind - she knew exactly who Roberta's capable friend on the outside was.

"Oh. Figures," Maeve said brusquely and opened the double doors to the hallway.

Once there, she shook her head and rubbed her eyes angrily.

'I don't fuckin' believe it... R.C. has broken almost every single one of the fuckin' guidelines she taught me. The same fuckin' guidelines I've lived by for the last twenty years... That fuckin' asshole,' Maeve thought, clenching her fists.

With a growl, she left the Donnelly mansion and walked out to her car. She unclipped her phone from her belt and punched in the number Roberta had given her.

After letting it ring for a full minute, Maeve gave up and got into the Mustang. She turned the ignition key and drove out of the driveway in a foul mood.

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Staci pushed her laptop away and took a deep breath. She held it for a few seconds and then let the air out slowly. She put her hands on her extravagant glass desk and pushed herself back from it.

She looked at the round clock on the wall which read a quarter past four, PM. It wouldn't be long until the doors to the Three-In-One Club were opened, invariably followed by a mass invasion of businessmen and -women on their way to, or coming from, the restaurant upstairs - most of them came by to have a drink or two and send a few lusty glances at the pole dancers.

Later on, usually at eleven o'clock, the clientele changed, turning into Twentysomethings who stopped by to sip a \$35 cocktail and to neck in the booths before going downstairs into the discotheque.

Staci yawned and rubbed her weary eyes. On top of trying to do the accounts, she was working out how to take over a small tavern down on Sixth Street and turn it into a girls' only place. A few months previously, she and Maeve had casually discussed it one evening, but while Maeve had forgotten all about it almost immediately, Staci had kept thinking about it.

She returned to the laptop, but suddenly felt that all the paperwork was suffocating her. Instead, she left her office and went into the main room of the nightclub. Walking around slowly, she made sure that everything was in order and ready for the opening.

'Tables... all clean, check. The carpet... vacuumed, check. The glass walls lining the room... polished, check. The bar stools... cleaned, check,' Staci thought, going through a checklist in her mind.

To get a better view of the room, Staci walked up the short flight of stairs onto the catwalk. She checked all six poles, finding to her great annoyance that two of them hadn't been sufficiently polished. She raised an eyebrow and made a mental note to complain to the cleaning company later.

Staci got down from the catwalk and went through a curtain to get backstage. When she reached the small, yellow sign the dancers had put up on the wall just before the entry to the dressing room, she had to stop and chuckle, even though she had seen it a hundred times already.

'KNOCK - OR YOU'LL BE!'

After knocking on the doorjamb to the dressing room, Staci politely waited for someone to shout 'all dressed' before she turned the corner.

One of the Three-In-One Club's dancers, Rosana Dosamantes, was sitting in front of a large mirror, applying her typically garish makeup. She was a very pretty Latina in her early twenties, with aristocratic features and with hair and eyes that were black as coal. She was wearing a baby blue bathrobe and fluffy slippers that were supposed to look like little mice.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Hart. Great, then I can lose the robe. Too hot in here already," Rosana said and took off the bathrobe, revealing that she wasn't wearing anything underneath save for a thong.

Staci stopped dead in her tracks and she could feel her neck and cheeks turn redder by the second. She pulled out in her turtleneck collar to get some air down her front, but it didn't really work.

"Did you want something?" Rosana said and took a large tube containing a jelly-like substance that was a mix of purple and silver. She poured out a blob of the body paint on her chest and used her fingers to spread it out across the swell of her breasts and a few inches down her cleavage.

"Uhhh... I... yes, I wanted to tell you that two of the poles haven't been cleaned, the third and the fifth, so you need to take care," Staci said, looking the other way.

"Shit, I've had that happen once in another club. I used a sticky pole and fell flat on my ass. Thanks. I'm just going out to do a few warmup routines before we open," Rosana said and put the tube away. She picked up an aerosol can marked 'Glitter' and sprayed her hair and her chest with little, glittery stars that would reflect the lights and create a sparkling effect.

"OK. We open in twenty, Rosana," Staci said, watching in horror as the dancer put on her fake eyelashes using a tool that looked like it came straight out of a horror movie.

"Gotcha. Pasty time," Rosana said and held up two small, star-shaped objects.

"That's my cue," Staci said and left the dressing room. She walked with determined steps back to the office, but mere inches before she put her hand on the door handle, a male voice called out to her.

Staci turned around and noticed the chief bouncer standing at the exit, holding a piece of paper. With a grunt, Staci walked over to him to find out what he wanted.

"Yes?" she said.

"Miss Hart, we can't read this week's hit list. The printer in the coffee room must be on the fritz," he said, showing Staci the updated list of people the bouncers should turn away at the door. The printout was only a blurry mess of lines, prompting a groan from Staci.

"Great, that's all we needed. All right... uhhh... I'll print out a copy on my own printer. Come on," Staci said and spun around on her heel, quickly followed by the broad-shouldered bouncer.

A few minutes later, Staci handed the bouncer a readable printout and he thanked her and left the

office.

Staci sighed and walked over to her couch. She fluffed the pillow she wanted to use as a headrest, but before she had time to lie down, somebody knocked on the door.

"Staci?" her assistant, Danielle, said from the other side of the door.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Jeez, this is gonna be one ugly evening," Staci croaked and sat up straight.

Danielle opened the door and stepped into the office.

"Oh, I didn't know that you... never mind, I'll come back later," Danielle said, but Staci waved her hand.

"You're here already, so... what's up?"

"Well, I was just wondering if you would ask Fever if she'd be interested in coming to my sister's birthday party...?"

"I'm sure she would, Danielle. When is it?" Staci said and got up from the couch. She walked back over to the desk and found a pencil and a notepad.

"It's this Friday. It's at our parents' house upstate. Do you think that'll be a problem?"

"I honestly don't know. I'll ask," Staci said and jotted down the information.

"All right. Thank you."

"How is your sister?"

"She's better, but still not quite back to her old self. Even though she's been clean for more than a year, she still has some very bad nightmares. The doctors say it's because all the drugs she did changed something in the chemical balance in her brain."

"Oh..."

"But, as I said, she's better now."

"Well, I hope she makes a full recovery," Staci said and touched Danielle's arm.

Danielle nodded solemnly. Out in the main room, Rosana went up on the catwalk to do her warmup. She activated the sound system and kept turning up the volume until the hidden speakers were ready to burst, effectively ending the conversation between Danielle and Staci.

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Roberta gripped harder on the Charger's steering wheel. On paper, the operation was a simple one, but considering the quality of most of her associates, she was worried they were going to mess it up. She looked in the rear view mirror at the twenty-six year old Albert Jones who was forlornly huddled up in the corner of the back seat, sporting a shiner and a bruised face after learning first-hand that Roberta Cain didn't appreciate waiting for anybody - and that she liked to play rough on the basketball court.

She rolled her eyes and chose to look at Paco Alvarez instead. He was in the passenger seat, seemingly calm and disinterested, but Roberta knew that he was full of fire on the inside.

'He's the only one I can trust. The other two are worthless, but Paco is just as crazy as I am,' Roberta thought.

'R.C., it's Garrett. There's a blue late-model Vette waiting at the red lights at Fourth and Jefferson. It's in the outer lane, so it's probably continuing South,' a male voice said from the walkie-talkie taped onto the dashboard of the Charger.

"Good. Where are you?" Roberta said, pressing down a button on the transceiver.

'Just behind it.'

"Right. Call me once you reach Sixth."

'Will do.'

"He's gonna fuck it up, that amateur," Paco said in his characteristic hoarse voice. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a Smith & Wesson .32 snubnosed revolver.

"Wouldn't put it past him," Roberta said with a snort.

They were parked in a very dark spot on Eighth Street, only a hundred yards back from Jefferson. Roberta knew from past experience that only a few people dared to walk down the dark streets in the middle of the night so they shouldn't be too troubled by witnesses, but to be on the safe side, she had rigged the headlights so they wouldn't turn on when she started the engine.

She checked her wristwatch - 3:15, AM.

'Sixth Street, R.C.'

"Right. When you're close to the intersection at Eighth, set the plan in motion," Roberta said into the walkie-talkie.

'All right. We're almost there. Get ready.'

"Oh, I'm ready. You ready?" Roberta said, looking at Paco - who responded by spinning the drum of his revolver and then slapping it into place.

Roberta grinned and turned the ignition key.

Teddy Garrett was right behind the blue Corvette, driving an old Dodge sedan. He gulped and moved around in the seat, anxious to get the whole deal over with.

When they were closing in on the intersection at Eighth Street, he pulled up along side the Corvette and waved his arm out of the window.

"Hey, dude! Dude! Slow down! Your right rear is flat!" he shouted, practically hanging out of the window in the driver's side door to get the other driver's attention. When the driver of the Corvette acknowledged the message by waving back at him, Teddy stepped on the brakes to allow the Corvette to get into the inside lane.

The man in the Corvette activated his turning signal and carefully moved towards the curb. Cars were parked all the way up to the intersection, so the driver of the Corvette did what Roberta had hoped he would - he turned right onto Eighth.

'He's all yours, R.C.' Garrett said on the walkie-talkie, flashing his headlights several times.

Roberta stepped on the gas and the Charger lurched forward with a thunderous roar. She headed directly for the Vette, making the other driver stand on the brakes. Just when it looked like Roberta would hit the blue car, she yanked the steering wheel around, bringing the Charger to a stop right in front of the Corvette. Behind it, Teddy Garrett pulled up so close in the old Dodge sedan that the other driver didn't have an escape route.

... 1 second ... 2 seconds ... 3 ... 4 ...

In one second flat, Paco shot out of the Charger with his revolver drawn. He ran over to the Corvette and tried to open the door - it was locked. Undaunted, he reached into his pocket and found a pointy metal hammer.

... 5 ... 6 ... 7 ... 8 ... 9 ... 10 ... 11 ... 12 ...

He smashed the driver's side window with a tremendous blow, showering the driver with glass. Paco dropped the hammer and reached in to open the door from the inside. When the driver tried to struggle, Paco tugged violently at the man's arm, forcibly dragging him out of the vehicle.

... 13 ... 14 ... 15 ... 16 ... 17 ... 18 ... 19 ... 20 ...

As soon as the man was down on his knees, Paco brought the revolver up and viciously thumped the man over the head with the butt of the handle.

... 21 ... 22 ... 23 ... 24 ... 25 ...

In the Charger, Roberta kept a close eye on her wristwatch.

"Come on, come on, hustle!" she shouted, worried that it was taking longer than it should.

... 26 ... 27 ... 28 ...

Paco sent her an Evil Eye but quickly put on a pair of thick leather gloves. He dragged the unconscious man away from the street and unceremoniously dumped him on the sidewalk, out of sight of most of the windows looking down on them.

Paco ran back out on the street and waved at Teddy who immediately reversed away from the rear bumper of the Corvette, leaving the sportscar with a clear exit.

... 29 ... 30 ... 31 ... 32 ... 33 ... 34 ... 35 ... 36 ... 37 ... 38 ...

Paco reached into the Corvette to brush away the glass from the driver's seat and then picked up the hammer he had dropped earlier. He quickly jumped in, started the engine and reversed away from the Charger.

... 39 ... 40 ... 41 ... 42 ... 43 ... 44 ... 45 ...

Looking like he didn't have a care in the world, he put the Corvette in Drive and drove around the rear end of the Charger. He put his arm out of the window and cruised at thirty miles an hour down Eighth Street. Behind him, Teddy Garrett followed at a safe distance in the old Dodge sedan.

Roberta took a deep breath and reversed away from the curb. When she turned on the headlights, the cones of light lit up a small pile of glass on the ground from when Paco smashed the Corvette's window. She paused briefly, but soon shrugged and drove around the glass, headed for the intersection.

"That went well, huh? 45 seconds. Not bad for the first try. Hey, Jonesy, now you know what to do the next time," Roberta said to Al Jones, but his busted lips and his bruised ego prevented him from replying.

When the lights changed to green, Roberta stood on the gas, sending the Charger flying around the corner in a cloud of tiresmoke.

When Roberta didn't make a u-turn at Fourteenth Street like everyone else did but rather continued straight through the intersection, Al Jones finally mustered up enough courage to speak.

"Where are we going? Are we driving into Chica territory?" he croaked, careful not to damage

his lips even further.

"That's right."

"For Christ's sake, R.C.... Drop me off right here! The Chicas are nuts, each and every one of them!"

"Oh, why don't you just crawl back up your momma's womb, ya gutless wimp!" Roberta growled and pressed down harder on the accelerator.

"You don't understand, they don't like strangers and they *hate* men...! They'll kill me on sight!"

"Nah, they won't... 'cos they can see from a mile away that you're not a man," Roberta said, turning on the radio so she wouldn't have to listen to Jonesy's whining.

Even though the Southside was only slightly more than a mile and a half south of Downtown, it felt like it was in another country altogether - the buildings changed appearance and everything became more run-down. On their way down Jefferson, Roberta and Al Jones went past several city blocks that were seemingly made up of more derelict buildings than healthy ones, and they even noticed the occasional ruin.

The Boulevard changed as well, narrowing in from three lanes to two. Most of the street lights had been vandalized, leaving everything in an eerie semi-darkness that very few regular, upstanding citizens dared to venture out in.

Gone too were the shiny sportscars and the custom specials, replaced by rustbuckets held together by tank tape and pieces of string, and here and there, stripped-down chassis had been left at the curb, standing on bricks or other forms of temporary jacks.

"I made a few connections with the Southside Chicas while I was inside. They're the people to deal with these days, Jonesy. A real hardcore crew, not a lumbering mass of decaying blubber like Fat Ass Freddie Donnelly," Roberta said, mostly for her own benefit but directed at Al.

Jonesy just shrugged, not knowing what to say.

Three blocks further on, Roberta pulled over to the curb and opened her cell phone.

"Paco, it's R.C. Where are you?"

'Just coming up to Seventeenth Street now. We'll be there in two minutes.'

"All right. Meet ya there," Roberta said and pulled away from the curb.

When they reached Seventeenth Street, she turned right and immediately spotted Paco's blue Corvette approaching from the other side. They met roughly in the middle of the street, parking in front of a cluster of low, white buildings that were protected by a tall mesh fence equipped with nasty looking barbed wire on top.

"And that's how to do it," Roberta said and took her phone again.

She dialed a number and held the phone to her ear. After a few seconds, someone answered it and Roberta said a few words.

Two people came out of one of the low buildings and ran over to a gate in the fence. After unlocking it, they pulled it aside so the cars could get in.

Paco started the Corvette and drove across the sidewalk to head into the lot, but when Teddy Garrett motioned to do the same in the Dodge, Roberta hit the button on the walkie-talkie.

"No, Teddy, you stay out here with Jonesy. Leave this to the adults," Roberta said with an evil grin.

For once, Al Jones wasn't slow in the uptake, so he bolted from the Charger and ran across the road to join Garrett in the old Dodge.

Roberta put the Charger in Drive and followed Paco's Corvette into the lot. As soon as the two cars were inside the fence, the gate was closed behind them.

One of the Chicas ran in front of the Corvette, leading Paco over to a low building at the far side of the lot. Pulling hard on a shiny metal chain, she raised a sliding gate and then waved at him to drive inside.

Roberta parked on the outside of the low building and got out of the Charger. The night was chilly, so she popped open the trunk and took out a black denim jacket. As she was putting it on, she could hear booted footsteps approaching from somewhere behind her and she quickly turned around so it wouldn't look like she was being disrespectful.

"Hey, R.C., you're lookin' great," a woman in her early forties said. She was wearing the traditional colors and uniform of the Southside Chicas - biker boots, blue jeans, a black t-shirt and a dark brown leather vest. A red bandanna partially controlled her long, ash-blonde hair and she was heavily tattooed on every exposed piece of skin, except her face.

"Izzy! Damn, it's good to see ya, girl," Roberta said and gave the other woman a fierce hug.

"Likewise, R.C. Man, it's been a while," Isabela Solidas said.

"Couple a' years, but who's countin'? Did ya kill anyone lately?"

"Nah, but I dragged some guy behind my hog... does that count? Anyway, how's my cousin behavin'? I hope he's useful to ya," Isabela said with a big grin.

"Oh, Paco's doing just fine," Roberta said and locked the Charger.

"Good. Let's go talk business in my office," Isabela said and put her arm around Roberta's shoulder.

"We got a late model Vette for ya, as requested. Paco had to bust the driver's side window, but that shouldn't be a problem."

"Nah."

The two women began walking towards another of the low buildings when Roberta suddenly spotted the insignia on the back of Isabela's vest. It was a heavily stylized picture of the skull of a wild boar set against a background of red and yellow flames. The skull sported five-inch long fangs and two flaming red rubies were used as the eyes of the beast.

"Fuck, yeah. It's great to see you wearin' your true colors, Isabela. Prison orange just sucks."

"Yeah, no shit."

When they reached the low building, Isabela walked up a short flight of stairs and put her hand on the doorknob.

"So... we agreed on four K for the Vette, right?" she said, opening the door.

"It was five, actually," Roberta said with a wide grin.

"Heh, heh... still as sharp as ever, R.C. Not many people have the balls to argue with a Chica. C'mon, I've got the moolah ready in here," Isabela said and stepped aside to let the other woman enter the office. When Roberta was next to her, Isabela chuckled and gave Roberta a playful shove on the back.

Ten minutes later, Roberta came back outside, holding a wad of dollar bills. She folded them up and put them into her inside pocket, acutely aware that she was being watched by a small group of Chicas who were leaning against one of the low buildings.

"Paco!" she said loudly, looking around for her associate.

"Right here, R.C.," Paco said, standing in the corner of the lot, talking to yet another of the Chicas.

"We're leavin'!"

"All right. Be right there," Paco said and turned back to the woman he was talking to. They whispered something to each other and when the woman grinned broadly, he leaned in to steal a kiss.

"So?" Paco said as he got into the Charger.

"Here's your cut. Two G. I'll take two and a half and the two numbnuts out in the Dodge can split the final five hundred," Roberta said and handed Paco twenty Benjamin Franklins.

"Sounds fair enough," Paco said and put the money into his jacket pocket.

"Were you trading spit with one of the Chicas?"

"Yep."

"Careful, you might wake up one morning with something missing," Roberta said with a chuckle.

She started the Charger and drove slowly around the lot. When she reached the gate, two Chicas opened it for her and she thanked them by waving out of the window.

Once out on the street, she keyed the mic on the walkie-talkie.

"Garrett, we're leaving. Stick with us until Fourteenth Street, and then you're on your own. See ya tonight at nine in the cellar. Nine sharp! You, too, Jonesy!"

'Will do, R.C.,' Teddy Garrett said from the walkie-talkie.

"R.C., what do ya think Fast Freddie and Fever are gonna do?" Paco said.

"Fast Freddie can go fuck himself, but Fever... well, I hope Maeve will come after us."

"What?"

"Then we can see who the ultimate badass really is. It's gonna be like one of those steel cage wrestlin' matches. She's tough, but I fight dirty. It's gonna be great," Roberta said and flashed Paco an evil grin.

Paco blinked a few times and then looked straight ahead, wondering just what the hell it was he had gotten himself into.

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CHAPTER 3

When Staci woke up a quarter past nine, AM, she turned her head and looked directly into Maeve's eyes. The Enforcer's Irish green orbs shone with such love and warmth that Staci almost forgot how to breathe. A feeling of happiness swept over her, and the only thing she wanted was to spend the entire day in bed with Maeve.

"Good morning, baby," Maeve whispered and leaned in to place a gentle kiss on Staci's cheek.

"Morning," Staci replied with a yawn.

Maeve rolled over onto her side, wrapped her arm around Staci's waist and snuggled down next to the tall woman.

"I'm glad you called me last night, baby. This was fun and cozy," Maeve said and gave Staci a little squeeze.

"I'm glad you could make it. I had a bum night and I needed someone to hold."

"And you got it. Hey, I like your bed. It's almost as soft as the one in my loft," Maeve said with a snigger.

"I thought you were going to say you missed the mirrors in the ceiling."

"Nah. When we're together, I never have time to look in 'em," Maeve said and kissed Staci's cheek again.

Staci took a deep breath and debated with herself for a few moments whether to go ahead or not with what she had in mind - she decided to go for it.

"Um, Maeve...?"

"Yeah?"

"Where... um... what do you see happening in the long run?"

"With what, baby?"

"With us," Staci said quietly.

"Oh... are we having an 'us'-discussion?"

"Yes."

"Right. Well..." Maeve said and rolled over onto her back. She put her hands behind her head and started pondering the question.

Staci took the cue and rolled over onto her left side so she was still face to face with Maeve. She put her hand on Maeve's chest, feeling the powerful beat of the Enforcer's heart through her t-shirt.

"You know where I stand, baby. I see you moving in with me on a permanent basis," Maeve said.

"Mmmm."

"I've been a good girl. I haven't tasted any forbidden fruit... I haven't even been tempted. Hell, the only woman I've even *dreamt* of is you."

"Mmmm."

Maeve turned her head and tried to decipher the unreadable expression on Staci's face.

"That still isn't enough? Because, frankly, I don't know what more I can do," Maeve said and took Staci's hand in her own. When a few seconds passed without any sort of reply from Staci, Maeve swung her legs over the side of the bed and got up.

"I don't know why you asked, Staci. You knew what I was going to say. I'll go make some coffee," Maeve said, put on her bathrobe and left the bedroom.

Staci sighed deeply and rubbed her eyes. With another sigh, she got out of bed and went over to the windows to pull the curtains apart.

She looked down at First Street which appeared to be less busy than usual for some reason, and then at Maeve's black Mustang, parked next to her own dark blue Jetta.

Mentally kicking herself for ruining the serene moment, she reached for her bathrobe and went out into the living room.

Maeve was standing at the kitchen table, putting coffee beans and water into the percolator. Staci walked up behind her and rested her chin on the shorter woman's shoulder.

"I'm sorry for being such a dick to you," Staci whispered.

"Baby, you're a lot of things, but a dick ain't one of 'em," Maeve said and turned on the percolator. Once she had done that, she reached behind her to find Staci's hands. When she had,

she brought them forward and wrapped them around her own waist to show that she wasn't upset.

"No, I'm a dick. You're right, I already knew what you were going to say. I shouldn't have asked," Staci said with a sigh.

Maeve turned around so she was face to face with Staci.

"Baby, why are you still so afraid of moving in with me...? Even after all this time? We would have one hell of a good time together, I'm sure of it. We could wake up together every morning," Maeve said, finishing off by getting up on tiptoes and placing a kiss on Staci's lips.

"Oh, it's... I... you know the old saying, Once Bitten Twice Shy. Well, as you very well know, I've been bitten twice."

"I know, baby, but like I told you in the bedroom, I've changed. I'm not that irresponsible kid anymore."

"You weren't exactly a kid when it happened, Maeve. It's only a handful of years ago."

"Yeah, but I've learned so much since then. All thanks to you. And it's not just the sex, either. Living together is so much more than just the bedsports, it's sharing the..."

"Oh, not just the sex? ...I'm going to write that down, Miss Energizer Bunny," Staci said and looked around for something to write on.

"Aw, Jeez, baby doll, you know what I mean."

"It's just that I'm too old to be disappointed again," Staci said quietly.

"I understand that. And baby... I promise that I'll do everything I can to make sure you won't be," Maeve said and squeezed Staci's sides through the bathrobe.

With a faint smile, Staci leaned down to claim Maeve's lips in a loving kiss.

"So... you want some toast? I see you've got plenty of both the PB and the J," Maeve said, giving Staci's waist another little squeeze.

"Well... why not?"

"Good. Go get dressed. I'll fix it for ya," Maeve said and reached for the cupboard above the sink.

"Maeve?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll think about it. I promise."

"The toast?"

"No, silly... the other thing."

"That's all I can ask, baby," Maeve said and winked.

Half an hour later, Maeve exited the stairwell and went into the parking lot. Just as she was crossing the paved stones to get to her Mustang, her phone rang.

"Fever. Talk to me."

'Fever, it's Danny. I've got two news items for ya. One medium bad, one horribly bad.'

"Go on."

'We tried to call you earlier, but your phone was off.'

"I'm at Staci's place," Maeve said and unlocked the car door.

'Oh. OK. Roberta Cain has made her move. At three this morning, a man got his Vette carjacked at gunpoint down on Eighth Street. Witnesses saw a black Charger roar off.'

"Oh, fuck. I can't believe it... those wankers just couldn't wait!" Maeve said out loud.

'Yeah, well...'

"All right. I'll get in touch with R.C. Please tell me that was the horribly bad news item...?"

'It was. Earlier last night, Fast Freddie held a brief meeting with a man called Maxwell Grant. I'm sure you've heard of him.'

"The politician?"

'Yep. Seems his daughter has traveled to the Big City without his permission, so he's askin' for our help to find her.'

"Boy, that's gonna take a miracle," Maeve said and whistled. Her sixth sense made her look up at Staci's apartment and she saw her partner standing in the bedroom window. The news about Roberta had put a serious dent in Maeve's mood, so she blew Staci a kiss to get some of it back. Staci returned the kiss and mouthed something that could only be 'I love you'.

Maeve's face cracked wide open in a beaming smile and she blew Staci another kiss before

getting into the Mustang.

'Yeah, no shit. Fast Freddie told the politician just that, but he was pleadin' pretty badly, so your uncle promised him we'd look,' Danny said, oblivious to the silent conversation going on between Maeve and Staci.

"All right. Gimme some info and I'll call around," Maeve said and started the Mustang. She put it into Reverse and drove out of the parking space.

'Her name is Shawna Grant. She's seventeen years old, 5'7" and fairly skinny. She's African-American with a complexion like melted caramel, and her hair is frilly and at shoulder-length. When Maxwell Grant last saw her, she was wearing a plain, white T-shirt, pale blue jeans, Nikes, and a red windbreaker from one of those fashion companies whose name doesn't make any sense.'

Maeve leaned her head back and laughed out loud. She drove off the parking lot and turned left onto First Street.

"Spell it out, I gotta hear that," she said and changed the phone from her left to her right hand.

'The windbreaker is apparently called 'Denise 222 by Queen Denise Fashion 4 The Nu Woman'... that's the actual title. Jeez. I mean, naming a jacket?'

"Welcome to the new world order, Danny-boy."

'They can have it. Anyway, this is going to be that famous needle in a haystack again, but perhaps we'll get lucky and find her.'

"Yeah," Maeve said thoughtfully, thinking that they might find the girl, but the real miracle would be if they found her unharmed.

'You got all that?'

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Talk to ya later, Danny," Maeve said and terminated the connection. Her thoughts soon returned to Roberta Cain and her good mood vanished like the morning dew.

Wearing an angry scowl, she moved her hand up to turn on the radio. The Mustang was filled with the sounds of an instrumental evergreen, but even that couldn't take Maeve's mind off what needed to be done with Roberta and Paco Alvarez.

A few minutes after leaving Staci's apartment, Maeve pulled into the Burger Palace lot at Ninth Street and parked in a spot where she could follow the traffic on Jefferson.

She unclipped the phone from her belt and flipped it open. She sighed deeply and then found

Roberta's number in the registry.

'It's R.C.'

"It's White Fever, R.C. Just what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

'Are we upset this morning, Maeve? Didn't you get any last night?'

"You won't even try to deny that you've done a job without having Fast Freddie's blessing?" Maeve hissed, not bothering to comment on Roberta's juvenile jab.

'What's the point?'

"Where are you? I need to tell you this to your face."

'Oh... well, in that case, how about meeting us at the Majestic in twenty minutes? Same room as yesterday.'

"I'll be there," Maeve growled, closing the phone before Roberta could make a comeback. She put the cell phone in the glove box and then leaned back in her seat.

Maeve rubbed her eyes, trying to find just a single logical explanation for why Roberta Cain had done the things she had. Not finding any, she shook her head and reached for the ignition key.

Unlike the day before, Maeve stopped in the no-parking zone directly in front of the Majestic. With the things she had learned in the twenty-four hours since Roberta's return, Maeve didn't put it past her former mentor to try to gun her down in the shadows of the parking lot.

"... and if not her, then that little weasel Paco," Maeve said out loud and took the Beretta out of the holster. She double-checked the clip and then slapped it back in the weapon.

She got out of the Mustang and looked up and down Jefferson wearing a fierce scowl. Several pedestrians gave her a wide berth, no doubt sensing trouble.

Maeve walked through the revolving door and looked around. When she spotted four working girls chatting in the couch arrangement, she made a beeline towards them.

"Hey," Maeve said once she had reached the women. She recognized three of them, but one was a stranger to her.

"Hey, Fever," the girls replied.

"I need one of you ladies to do me a favor. There's a C-note in it for ya," Maeve said and held up a \$100 bill.

"Oooh, anything, baby," one of the girls, Jerri, said. She was wearing high heels, fishnet stockings, a cheap, red plastic dress with a zipper on the front and far too much makeup. She waved her hand and shot up from the couch, ready for action.

"I need you to call Fast Freddie immediately in case trouble breaks out here," Maeve said, deciding that Jerri would be suitable for the job at hand.

"Oh, is that all? How disappointing," Jerri said cheekily, but soon sobered up when she noticed the dark look on Maeve's face.

"I mean... OK, Fever."

"You think you can do that?"

"Sure. You can trust me. Jerri Layne always keeps her promises," Jerri said sincerely, putting her hand on her heart in an overly dramatic fashion.

Maeve grunted and spun around on her heel.

A few minutes later, Maeve arrived at the door to room 605. When she saw that the door was gaping an inch, she drew her Beretta and knocked twice on the doorjamb.

"R.C.?" Maeve said loudly.

"It's open, Fever," Roberta said from the other side of the door.

Maeve nudged the door open with the tip of her boot. Keeping her Beretta low, she cautiously stepped inside and looked around.

Roberta was sitting at the far wall of the room in one of the chairs she and Maeve had used the day before. She had her legs crossed at the knee and her left arm was casually draped over the backrest.

Her right hand held a Walther P99 and she cocked it with her thumb when Maeve approached her.

"That's far enough, Fever," Roberta said and raised the pistol.

Maeve stopped five paces from Roberta but didn't lower her own gun. She tried to listen for Paco Alvarez, but couldn't hear anything.

"Oh, if you're lookin' for Paco, I sent him down to the convenience store to get a sixpack o' Bud and some bubble gum," Roberta said casually.

"R.C., I don't think you understand what you've done."

"First of all, how about us puttin' the hardware away while we talk...? Huh?"

"Forget it," Maeve said and walked sideways so she wouldn't be directly in front of the door.

"Suit yourself," Roberta said and kept her Walther aimed high.

"Roberta... why? Why couldn't you wait just one, measly day? I told ya I'd ask Fast Freddie, and I did. But you couldn't wait and now you've fucked everything up for yourself. Don't you understand that?"

"Maeve, Maeve, Maeve... as idealistic as always. Tell me, do I look or sound like a woman who gives a flying fuck?"

Maeve gritted her teeth but kept quiet.

"Ya know, Maeve, I could tell you a few truths about your precious uncle, but I won't. It's much more fun if you find out for yourself."

"Stop talkin' trash, R.C., you don't know jack shit about Fast Freddie or anybody else. But hear this, if ya continue that carjacking crap, you're gonna end up ass-down in a plastic bag. And that's a promise," Maeve hissed.

"Oh, please. Who's gonna do that? You? Huh?"

"Even though you're not of Irish blood, I guess you'll still understand this ancient proverb from the old country - 'If you work with me, you're my friend. If you work against me, I'll fuckin' kill you, you fuckin' scumbag!'"

The corner of Roberta's mouth twitched and she began raising her gun. After a few seconds, she lowered it slightly and took a deep breath.

"I think there's something *you* don't understand, Mizz Donnelly, and that is that I have one hell of a powerful crew behind me now. Mmmmm. That's right."

Maeve didn't know if Roberta was telling the truth or not, but the annoyingly smug look on Roberta's face gave Maeve enough pointers to believe at least some of it.

"This ain't nickel-and-dime shit anymore, Maeve, this is the real deal. With the real people. The Donnellys will soon be ancient history. You just don't know it yet... and with that, we're done," Roberta said and got up from the chair.

"We're not done, R.C. I'm telling you to stop your operation. You don't have Fast Freddie's blessing. If you continue despite knowing that, I guarantee that we *will* stop you," Maeve said

and took a step back so she still had a good angle to shoot if it became necessary.

Roberta locked eyes with Maeve, and Maeve knew in her gut that her former mentor wasn't making any of this up - she was deadly serious.

"Well, I guess that's the way it's gotta be, then," Roberta said curtly and nodded at the door to the hallway.

Maeve walked backwards until she reached the door, and then she moved quickly down the hallway and down the staircase, anxious to relay the news to her uncle.

After calling the mansion, Maeve sighed deeply and closed her cell phone. Loud laughter from the couch arrangement reminded Maeve that she had promised Jerri Layne some money, so she clipped the phone onto her belt and walked over to the four prostitutes.

"Thanks for your help, Jerri, 'preciate it," Maeve said and dug into her shirt pocket to find a \$100 bill.

"Ooooh, anytime, Fever. Big money for a little job... hey, what else is new," Jerri said with a wide grin. She took the bill, rolled it up and stuck it down her cleavage.

"That's what they always do in the movies," she said, making the other women chuckle.

"Have any of you ladies seen a young African-American girl around here in the last few days? Seventeen years old, inexperienced with life on the streets. Blue jeans, white T, red windbreaker?" Maeve said, holding up another C-note.

Jerri and the other three working girls looked at each other, but all of them shrugged and shook their heads.

"Is she a runaway?" Jerri said.

"Yeah. Her name is Shawna Grant. Anyway, you all have my number. If any of you see her, call me at once. I don't care what time it is or what you're doing when you see her, just call me," Maeve said and put away the second C-note.

"You betcha. Listen, Fever, I was... uhhh... wondering if you might be interes..." Jerri started to say, but she was cut off by the sound of an engine revving wildly behind them.

All five women went over to the large windows to look out on the street - a black Charger with a red stripe was double parked alongside Maeve's Mustang and the driver had the engine going at maximum revs.

Suddenly the driver released the brakes, sending the Charger thundering down Jefferson in a

cloud of tiresmoke.

"R.C., you crazy sonovabitch," Maeve said, clenching and unclenching her fists. Needing to blow off some steam, she spun around on her heel and walked with determined steps towards the revolving door.

"Oh... well, talk to you later, Fever!" Jerri said, but Maeve was already long gone.

Maeve jumped into the Mustang and started the engine, intent on following Roberta's Charger. When she looked in the side mirror to see if the lane was clear, she noticed a piece of paper stuck under the left wiper.

She tried to reach it while she was sitting in the car, but her arm was too short. Letting out a string of colorful curses, she put the shifter back into Park and got out of the Mustang.

'Hey, Fever. Looking forward to our pissing contest. You probably need to put some air in your tire first, though. Love, Roberta. XXX'

Maeve took a step back and looked at the left front tire - the valve had been opened and most of the air had escaped.

With a look towards the heavens, Maeve threw her arms in the air and shook her head repeatedly. A vein started beating on the side of her neck and she needed several deep breaths just to calm down.

After regaining control of her temper, she folded up the note and put it in her back pocket. With a sigh, she went back into the car and pulled the small lever for the trunk so she could get to the tire-repair kit.

Twenty minutes later, Maeve drove up to the gas pumps at the service station on the Burger Palace lot. With a face that signaled 'stay away or else', she found a working air pump and replenished all four tires, just to be on the safe side.

After she had finished, she dialed Staci's number and leaned against the Mustang with a long, slow sigh.

'Staci Hart.'

"Baby, it's me. I want you, I need you, and I won't take no for an answer."

'Gawd, Maeve, you sound really upset... What's wrong?'

"I got snookered by R.C. Badly. Can I pick you up? Please?"

'Sure... to do what?'

"Cruise Jefferson all day long. Eat a burger an' have a Coke. Listen to some Rock'n'Roll. Hold hands and trade kisses. Anything," Maeve said in a tired voice.

'Oh, I can do that. Now, or a little later, or...?'

"Now. Please."

'All right. Well, I'm just vacuuming, anyway. I'm ready whenever you are.'

"Thank God. I'll be there in ten minutes."

'You got it. See ya then. Love ya,' Staci said and blew Maeve a kiss.

"Love ya more, baby."

Maeve hung up and clipped the phone back on her belt. Just before she got back in the car, her eye caught a colorful advertisement hanging on the wall of the fast food restaurant. An idea formed in her mind and she walked over to the Palace to see if it could be brought to life.

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Staci stared at the cell phone in her hand, wondering what on Earth had happened in the hour Maeve had been away.

'I know Maeve's ten minutes all too well... she's gonna be here in five,' Staci thought and started rolling up the cord for the vacuum cleaner.

After putting it into the cupboard, she looked down at herself. She was wearing what she always wore when she cleaned - bathing slippers, faded Capris and an even more faded t-shirt.

"Hmmm..." she said and started rummaging through her closet. Even though Maeve had shrugged it off, Staci still felt bad about initiating the little argument they'd had, so she decided that she wanted to look her best for Maeve.

"Not that she wouldn't be satisfied if I came down in a potato sack," she said out loud, chuckling over Maeve's energetic enthusiasm.

"Aha," Staci said and pulled a dark red cotton shirt out of the closet. She nodded to herself and quickly whipped off the faded t-shirt.

As expected, Maeve arrived too early and Staci had only just finished tying her shoelaces when she heard the characteristic sound of the Mustang's twin exhausts - she had affectionately dubbed

it the Noisy Beast - drive into the parking lot. She went into the bedroom and looked down.

She had to laugh out loud when she saw that Maeve had parked the Mustang at an oblique angle right in front of the main entrance, effectively blocking the entire parking lot.

She hurriedly grabbed a jacket, her wallet and her keys and then left her apartment.

Maeve almost forgot her frustrations when she saw what Staci was wearing as she came bounding out of the entrance - the tall woman wore a black fleece jacket over a very nice dark red cotton shirt... but the showstopper was a pair of form-fitting sand colored chinos that accentuated Staci's thighs and rear end to such a degree that Maeve was sure several States had banned them on health and safety grounds.

Maeve couldn't stop a wolfish grin from spreading out over her features and it only got broader when Staci sat down next to her. She had a very hard time tearing her eyes away from Staci's thighs and before she knew it, her fingers were running up and down the fabric of the chinos, just to get a feel for the treasure that lay inside.

"Hey, sailor. You need a friend?" Staci said and put her hand on top of Maeve's.

"Oh, baby, do I ever," Maeve said and leaned over to give Staci a thorough kiss.

"What the hell's happened? It's only been an hour!"

"Ugh, that's a long story. I'll tell ya when we get movin'. But first..."

Maeve reached into the glove compartment and took out a small box. She dusted it off and handed it to Staci.

"A gift for the Queen Of My Heart," Maeve said with a beaming smile.

Staci opened the small box and stared at what was inside - a ring made of pink plastic. It had a yellow plastic diamond on top, and it was encased in a paper ribbon, advertising a new animated movie called 'Princess Dreams'.

"Awww... thanks, baby," Staci said and slipped the ring onto her little finger.

"Ya like it?"

"I certainly do. It smells just like... just like... French fries?"

"Yeah, it's from a Happy Meal. I kinda figured it could be like an engagement ring. I know that none of us likes to wear jewelry, so..."

"Ohhhh. I'll cherish it for as long as I live," Staci said and ran her index finger down Maeve's cheek. When Maeve turned her head, Staci leaned over to give the Enforcer a kiss.

"Keep that up an' we'll never get out of the parking lot, baby," Maeve said in a husky voice, prompting a grin from Staci.

"Mmmm. Hey, did you eat all the fries yet?" Staci said and looked around.

"Actually, I didn't get any. I slipped the dude down at the Palace \$20 just to get the box with the ring."

"Oh. Well, perhaps we can get some later."

"We sure can."

Remembering a few hairy moments that had occurred when she and Maeve were cruising the neon-lit mean streets of the Big City, Staci reached behind her, found the seat belt and clicked it into place between the seats.

"I'm ready to go cruising," she said, admiring her pink ring.

"That's the best news I've heard all day, baby. Let's do it," Maeve said and turned the steering wheel hard left so they could get free of the windbreak.

As soon as they hit Jefferson, Maeve turned on the radio, hoping that WERC would be playing one of her favorites.

'...stening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. It's eleven thirty and here's the news headlines. Early this morning, a violent carjacking took place on Eighth Street, near Jefferson Boulevard. The victim, Mr. Jack Evans, was brought to the Community Hospital where he was treated for a head injury. The police has issued a statement saying...'

Maeve sighed and turned the volume way down.

"What's that all about? Is that why you're so upset?" Staci said and turned in her seat.

"Yeah. It was Roberta."

"Oh, Jeez... really?"

"Yeah. Her and her scumbag assistant. A slick weasel called Paco Alvarez," Maeve said and tapped her fingers on the rim of the steering wheel.

"Oh... I'm really sorry to hear that, Maeve. You spoke so highly of her earlier, and..."

"I know. I did think highly of her. I wasn't kidding when I called her my mentor. And now... crap," Maeve said and let her hand fall into her lap.

Maeve broke out into the center lane and gunned the engine, crossing the intersection at Fourth Street just before the traffic lights changed to red.

"I just don't get why she's done it... Jeez, baby, Roberta Cain practically taught me everything I know!"

"Maybe she was always like that, you just didn't notice back then?"

"Could be," Maeve said with a shrug.

"Did you have a crush on her?"

"Nah. She's always been charismatic, but, you know... I guess she's about twelve years or so older than I am. Today, that wouldn't really mean anything, but she wasn't was I was lookin' for when I was sixteen."

"Mmmm."

"Baby, I'm sorry. This is supposed to be fun. You won't hear me talking about her again," Maeve said and patted Staci's thigh.

"It's all right. I brought up the topic," Staci said and tickled the back of Maeve's hand.

"Let's get back to the real world. There's something else going on as well and you can definitely help me with that."

"What's that?"

"Well, there's this young African-American girl who's been missing since a few days. Her father came to uncle Freddie for help. He thinks she's come here."

"How young?"

"Seventeen."

"Oh... I can remember when I was seventeen, I didn't want anything at all to do with Downtown. I was actually pretty scared of it back then," Staci said thoughtfully.

"Well, the dazzle of the neon lights has always lured in young, impressionable kids. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she thought it was going to be some kind of glitzy adventure. I just hope we'll find her before she gets in too deep."

The news broadcast ended and WERC started playing their familiar jingle. When Maeve heard, she turned the volume up a little higher.

'...was brought to you by the StaySafe Insurance Company. When you're with StaySafe, you know you're in good hands. All right, you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. Let's return to the instrumental classics. My name is Susan Blaine and here's The Jetstreams.'

"Awright, Bongo Rock," Maeve said and turned up the volume even more.

When the tune started, Maeve hummed along and started nodding her head to the beat. Staci didn't know the strange song at all, so she just looked with great amusement at the comical antics of the otherwise hard-as-nails Enforcer.

As usual, Maeve expertly maneuvered between the traffic, and they had soon completed the first tour of Jefferson. When Maeve prepared to do the u-turn at Fourteenth Street, Staci turned around in her seat and cleared her throat.

"The young girl who's missing... what's her name?" Staci said.

"Shawna."

"We talked about the dazzling neon lights before, but it's not really the lights that can hurt a young girl... it's what's going on in the shadows between the lights," Staci said quietly, toying with her plastic ring.

Maeve turned her head towards Staci and then nodded solemnly.

"What do you think our chances are of finding her before... you know...?" Staci said, still concentrating on the ring.

Maeve opened her mouth to speak, but found that the only answer she had was a negative one, so she settled for shrugging.

"Last week, a girl in her early twenties came to the club asking for a job. The only thing I had to offer her was a position in the kitchen staff in the restaurant... as a dishwasher. She was so far gone into some kind of addiction that I almost couldn't look at her. It made me really ashamed to react that way, but she was just so..." Staci said with a sigh.

"You don't have to justify your reactions to me, baby," Maeve said and put her hand on Staci's knee.

The traffic lights at the intersection at Twelfth Street turned red and Maeve slowed the Mustang to a halt. In the outside lane, a dark blue Corvette Convertible glided up next to the Mustang and

Maeve's thoughts immediately turned to the carjacking Roberta Cain and her gang had carried out the same morning.

"God, I really hope we can find this Shawna before something bad happens to her," Staci said and rubbed her face.

"I do, too, baby. But we need to be realistic. The Big City is a real killer, and as you know, there's a million things that can happen to a young girl who's out there on her own."

"... And they're nearly all bad," Staci said and sighed again. She closed her eyes and appeared to be concentrating very hard, almost like she was trying to establish a telepathic contact with the young girl they were looking for.

"Errr... what are you doing, baby?" Maeve said, furrowing her brow. The lights turned green and they continued North on Jefferson.

"Nothing... I was just... never mind."

"You've been watching too much late night teevee," Maeve said with a chuckle.

"Haw, haw, haw..." Staci said and slapped Maeve's thigh.

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CHAPTER 4

Roberta Cain turned off Franklin Boulevard and onto Nineteenth Street, scouting for the best location to hold the contest against Maeve and her Mustang. Rolling down the tinted window to see better, she quickly decided that she had found the perfect place for it.

Not only was the section of Nineteenth Street between Franklin and Jefferson straight as an arrow, long-abandoned factories lined both sides of the street, meaning that the place would be completely deserted after dark.

Roberta rolled the window back up and then checked her watch - a quarter past eight, PM. She grunted and made a u-turn that took her back towards Franklin.

A few minutes later, she arrived at Twenty-First Street and pulled up to a heavily fortified gate. She brought the black Dodge Charger SRT-8 to a stop and flashed the headlights four times like she had been told to.

Through the fence, Roberta could see that the headquarters of the Chicas was an old hotel that

had been converted into something resembling a fortress. It was five storeys tall and nearly all the windows were covered by hoarding. Here and there, automatic rifles or submachineguns stuck out of the windows, giving the building the appearance of a porcupine.

On the sidewalk in front of the building, a large group of Chicas were talking amongst themselves next to a long line of Harley-Davidsons of all types. When the bikers spotted the flashing headlights, two Chicas, both carrying shotguns, ran over to the Charger.

One of them turned on a flashlight and shone it into the Charger, forcing Roberta to shield her eyes.

"I'm Roberta Cain. I'm here to see Izzy Solidas and your President."

"All right," the first Chica said and went over to the gate. The second Chica opened the Charger's passenger side door and got in.

"Hey, what the fuck...?" Roberta said.

"Drive."

"Jeez. Like fuckin' Fort Knox."

After parking, Roberta was ushered through an entrance that was protected by two piles of sandbags that almost reached the top of the doors. She didn't have time to give them much thought because she was given a sudden, unfriendly push in the back by her trusty Chica companion, still holding the shotgun.

"Watch it, tough gal," Roberta said. They went through a hall-like room and then turned sharp left to walk down a long, wide hallway that had numerous doors on either side. Her Chica guard didn't utter a word the entire way until they arrived at a pair of metal-reinforced doors without handles at the end of the hallway.

"Move," the Chica said and pushed Roberta aside so she could knock on the door.

"Enter!" someone said. The Chica used the butt of the shotgun to push on the center of the door, revealing a large room with a dais at the far end and row after row of benches in front of it.

Once the doors were fully opened, the Chica guard pushed Roberta inside, and then turned around and left.

"Evenin', R.C.," Isabela said, wiping off her hands on a rag.

"Hey, Izzy. Goddamn, that woman was itchin' for a beatin'," Roberta growled, looking at the guard. She and the guard exchanged scowls for a few seconds, and then the doors were closed.

"She just wants to look good to the seniors. Anyway, my President was very impressed by your little job with the Vette this morning. That's why she wants to speak with you," Isabela said and put her arm around Roberta's shoulder.

"Well, I'm glad. Does it mean she has another job for us?"

"It might. Now, when you speak to her, remember to address her Madam President. Some dickheads call her Mr. President, and it pisses her off no end. You dig?"

"I dig."

"All right. C'mon, it's this way," Isabela said and led Roberta through the large room.

It didn't take long before they were standing in front of a metal door that was equipped with a gunslit. When Isabela knocked on the door, the gunslit was pulled aside and both women were studied carefully. After a few moments, the door opened and Izzy led Roberta inside.

Roberta had expected an opulently decorated room, but what she found was a utilitarian, even spartan, office. It was 25x25 feet or so, and three of the four walls were lined with filing cabinets. The fourth wall was mostly bare, save for a large, old black and white photograph of a Latino woman and a teenage girl.

A relatively small wooden desk and a high-backed light brown swivel chair were placed in front of the fourth wall. The swivel chair was turned away from the room, but it was obvious that somebody was sitting in it.

Isabela cleared her throat, prompting the person in the chair to spin around.

The President of the Southside Chicas was a Latino woman in her late fifties, with dark brown eyes and salt-and-pepper hair tied into a ponytail. Her face and figure were mature, but the fire in her eyes proved that she was still very much on top of her game. She was wearing the customary black t-shirt and brown leather vest, but unlike most of her comrades, the President wasn't heavily tattooed.

"Good evening, Miss Cain. I'm Alejandra Trujillo," the woman said, still sitting in the chair.

"Good evening, Madam President."

Alejandra got up from the swivel chair and held out her hand, and while Roberta shook it, she noticed that the President's grip was quite strong.

"You did an excellent job with the Vette. Very efficient. I like that," Alejandra said and walked around Roberta, almost like she was assessing her worth.

"Thank you."

"Are you ready for another job right away?"

Despite not caring much for the warning Maeve had issued in the Majestic earlier in the day, the Enforcer's words briefly flashed through Roberta's mind - but she soon shrugged them off.

"We're ready, Madam President," she said.

"Good. We need a luxury sedan. Lexus, Merc, Bee Em, Audi, Caddy, doesn't matter. The color is irrelevant, we'll just repaint it if we don't like it. There's eight G in it for you."

"All right. We can do that. You want a limo or just a regular sedan?"

"Just a sedan... for now. Izzy, you're right, Miss Cain is clever," Alejandra said with a dry laugh.

Isabela nodded and crossed her arms over her chest.

"You're to deliver the car to the chop shop on Seventeenth Street, some time before..." Alejandra checked her wristwatch. "One AM. That way we can have it done by dawn. Get all that?"

"Yes, Madam President. We'll be there."

"I won't hold you up. Go get 'em, Miss Cain," Alejandra said, sat down in her light brown swivel chair and crossed her legs.

Izzy put her arm on Roberta's shoulder, signaling the end of the audience.

On the entire trip back to Eighth Street, Roberta's thoughts circled around one particular luxury sedan, a silver metallic Cadillac. The owner was a business man who had seriously screwed her over, and who had in fact been the direct cause of her stretch in jail - Arthur MacCready, the CEO of the StaySafe Insurance Company.

Just thinking about MacCready made Roberta bare her teeth in an angry sneer, and she put her foot hard down on the accelerator, pretending that the gas pedal was his neck.

When Roberta locked herself into the cellar room on Eighth Street, it was already twenty past nine. She hung her denim jacket on a metal hook that acted as a hallstand, and then went into the living area of the cellar.

Teddy Garrett, Al Jones and Paco Alvarez were playing some form of Poker, and judging by the

pile of money in front of Paco, he was winning. The table they were playing at was a mess, littered with empty beer cans, filled ashtrays and even a porn magazine opened on the Babe Of The Month. Garrett and Jonesy occupied the couch and Paco sat on a flimsy chair that didn't seem to be able to sustain his weight, but somehow did.

"Hey, Paco. All cool?" Roberta said and went over to the fridge to get a beer.

"All cool."

"I have a sweet deal for us," Roberta said and cracked open the can.

"I thought you said nine sharp, R.C.," Al Jones slurred, clearly drunk. At once, the room fell silent. Teddy Garrett moved away from Jonesy so he wouldn't get caught up in the inevitable fallout.

"Mmmm?" Roberta said in a surprisingly calm voice. She took a long swig from the can and started moving closer to Jonesy. When she reached the table, she put down the can and cracked her knuckles.

"Y-yeah... we were here at n-nine, b-but you weren't," Jonesy said. It was clear his courage was deserting him, but he suddenly knew that he was in too deep to withdraw.

With the speed of a striking rattlesnake, Roberta reached down and grabbed hold of the lapels of Jonesy's jacket. She pulled him upright and then smashed an elbow into his face with shocking force.

His nose broke with a loud crunch, and as his head flew back, a cascade of blood spurted out of the mangled orifice. He landed on the couch with a thump and soon started whimpering, holding his nose.

"You broke my fuckin' nose, you crazy bitch!" he slurred. He tried to get up, but Roberta put her boot across his chest and applied so much pressure he couldn't move a finger.

"Paco, it's time to throw this piece of trash in the dumpster," she said calmly.

"I agree," Paco said hoarsely and got up from the flimsy chair. Behind him, Teddy Garrett scooped up all Jonesy's money and put them into his own pile.

"Jonesy, I'll be watchin' you. If you as much as think about telling Fever what you've heard here, I'm gonna find you, I'm gonna cut off your balls and then I'm gonna make you swallow 'em. Got me?" Roberta said, still pressing her boot down on Jonesy's chest.

Al Jones nodded, not really in a position to do anything else.

"Good. Paco, he's all yours," Roberta said and stepped aside. She picked up her beer can and drained it in a single gulp.

A few minutes later, Paco came back and washed his hands clear of Jonesy's blood.

"I think he got the message," he said, drying his hands on one of the curtains.

"Excellent. Now, here's what we've got. We've been asked to find a luxury sedan, brand and color less important, and deliver it to the same place as last night... and it has to be done before one, AM. That's in three and a half hours, boys."

"How the hell are we gonna do that, R.C.?" Paco said and sat down on the flimsy chair.

"I've already found us a Caddy," Roberta said with a sneaky smile.

"Figures. Go on."

"It's uptown, parked in a driveway without a gate. I've checked it out already and the owner is an older couple, so they probably won't try any heroics. The real challenge is to get it silently. Garrett, do you think you can hotwire a Caddy?"

"Jeez, I don't know, R.C. Modern cars have all kinds of electronic anti-theft gizmos. I don't think we can count on hotwiring it," Garrett said, worried that he'd get the same treatment Jonesy did if he sounded too negative.

"Hmmm. Paco?"

"Easy. We just force our way in and take the keys," he said calmly.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. Three of us, three guns, two of them, no guns... or maybe a BB gun, who knows. In any case, it shouldn't be a problem," he said and took his snubnosed .32 out of the holster. He opened the drum and spun it a few times.

"All right. Deal. But if there's to be any shootin', I'll be pullin' the trigger," Roberta said and leaned back in the couch.

"Be my guest," Paco said and put the revolver back in the holster.

Teddy Garrett's face showed a great deal of apprehension and his eyes darted from R.C. to Paco and back again.

"Um, before we start shooting anybody, perhaps we could try the tire trick again," he croaked.

"Won't work, Teddy. This particular suit never drives Downtown. When he leaves for work, he

goes straight over to the financial district in Midtown West," Roberta said and took a new beer.

"What the hell... who is this guy? Why do you know so much about him?" Paco said.

"I'll tell you later."

"R.C., how about doing it the other way 'round, then?" Teddy Garrett said, leaning forward on the couch.

"Come again?"

"You said it's just parked in a driveway, right?"

"Yeah...?"

"I'll put on a skimask or something and sneak up to it and do... something. Whatever. Then you can call the dude and say that you're just passing by and that there's some junkie sneaking around the Caddy. Anyone will go check on his wheels. One hundred percent guaranteed, R.C."

"Hmmm. Not bad, Garrett. Not bad at all. Then he'll come out, and bam, we've got him. Maybe he'll even bring the keys."

"That's what I'm thinking," Garrett said, flashing a beaming smile.

"All right, saddle up. We'll try it. If it doesn't work, we can always kill 'em both," Roberta said and emptied the can.

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Maeve had just left Rose Dougal's bar on Madison Boulevard when her phone rang, and she had to juggle the door, the phone and the \$1400 she had just collected.

"It's Fever," she said when she finally had a hand free to unclip it from her belt.

'Miss Donnelly, it's Wynne Masters from the mansion. Something's happened and your uncle wants you here on the double.'

"I'll be there," Maeve said, wondering about the strange noises in the background.

"What the hell's going on out there, Wynne?"

'It's Mr. Donnelly. He's quite... uhhh... upset over... uhhh... something.'

Maeve strained her hearing and could pick out a few colorful Irish curse words.

"I'll say. It's been a while since he's used those words," Maeve said and got into the Mustang.

'Uhhh... yeah.'

"Tell him I'm on my way," Maeve said and closed the phone.

A few minutes later, she drove up the curved driveway and parked in front of the mansion. She was met in the door by Danny who had a sheepish look on his face.

"What's up with you, big guy?" Maeve said and slapped Danny across the gut. She took off her leather jacket and hung it on the hallstand.

"Your uncle is spit-flyin' mad right now, Maeve. You might wanna secure your flakjacket before you go in there," Danny said and closed the door behind them.

"Oh, goodie," Maeve said, took a deep breath and then went into the den.

Fast Freddie was sitting in his armchair, holding a handkerchief to his forehead. His face was very red and the top button of his shirt had been torn off.

"Good evening, uncle Freddie," Maeve said meekly as she sat down in one of the chairs.

Fast Freddie turned around and looked at his niece. He sighed and wiped his forehead.

"Roberta Cain has really gone and done it this time, Maeve. Not half an hour ago, she shot and killed a man just two streets over."

"What?!" Maeve said, grabbing hold of the armrests.

"The CEO of StaySafe Insurance, Arthur MacCready. I've gone through some of our files... apparently, he was one of the people she dealt with in the insurance scam that eventually sent her behind bars. The company kept him on the board of directors for whatever reason, and last year, he was made the CEO. In the trial, he was a witness for the prosecution. He made a deal with the shysters and took the stand against her."

"Oh... shades of what Roberta did herself later on."

"Exactly. Anyway, the widow has told the police that her husband got a phone call informing him that someone was trying to steal their Caddy. He went out to check... and then they shot him in the heart at point blank range."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. The widow was too frightened to do anything but call the police, but she did get a look at the shooter... the easily identifiable Roberta Cain, holding a smoking pistol, grinnin' like a fuckin' maniac."

"That crazy-ass motherfucker..."

"That's what I said... although I used stronger words. Anyway, after shooting MacCready, they took his Caddy and left," Freddie said and wiped his forehead again.

"How do we know all this so soon?"

"Detective Duffy called me. They're as worried as we are, Maeve."

"Uh... how so?"

"Carjacking is a federal offense. The thing with the Vette yesterday flew under the radar, but a homicide in cold blood... especially when it's one of the bigwigs... leads to big, bold headlines. Catch my drift?"

"Yeah... Sean Duffy and the boys in blue don't want the G-men snoopin' around any more than we do," Maeve said and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"No shit. We both got too much to hide. Well, that's where we stand right now. Maeve, please get Danny in here."

Maeve immediately got up and went over to the double doors. A few moments later, she returned with Danny in tow. Maeve motioned to sit down again, but Fast Freddie waved his hand, making both his top Enforcers stand at attention.

"Danny, Maeve... your orders are to find Roberta Cain, Paco Alvarez and whoever they're riding with and make sure they won't do anything like this ever again. I don't care how you do it, I don't care where it's done... just do it," Freddie Donnelly said.

"Yes, Sir. I think this is what Roberta wanted all along. A battle between her and me," Maeve said in a steely voice.

"Could be. Well, now she's got it," Freddie said and poured himself a healthy drink.

Maeve nodded and took a deep breath. As she let the air out slowly, she thought about what would happen when she and Roberta would square off - it certainly wouldn't be pretty.

"What the hell are you still here for? Get out there and find them," Freddie said angrily, wiping his forehead yet another time.

Danny and Maeve briefly looked at each other and then left the den in a hurry.

"Danny, Roberta is mine," Maeve said as she put on her leather jacket.

"Won't hear no complainin' from me. I'll get Paco Alvarez and the rest of the motley crew."

"OK. My best guess is that they'll go into hiding for a few days, but R.C. is so unpredictable that she might be planning a new job already. Goddamn! I shoulda put a bullet in her noggin when I had the chance," Maeve said and slammed one fist into the palm of the other.

"Where should we start? Patrick Daly?"

"Hmmm... it's worth a shot. Don't think Roberta would go there, though. Not the bars, either. That's not really her style. Besides, she's not exactly a mouse, so I doubt she'd want to spend too much time around other people..." Maeve said and suddenly fell silent.

"What's on ya mind, Maeve?"

"I was just thinking that she needs to hide her Charger, too. No way in hell she's gonna get rid of it so soon. Anyway, try to give Jaroslav down at the Majestic a good squeeze an' see what comes out. I've met R.C. there twice. Maybe he knows something."

"Right. I'll go there at once."

"R.C. must have a base somewhere around here, but we'll never find it unless we know exactly where to look. Oh, I feel so fuckin' useless! It's just like the Goddamn Clover gang all over again..."

"Well, we killed 'em all that time."

"Yeah..."

"Maeve, what if R.C. brings in the Chicas?" Danny said and opened the front door.

"Jeez, Danny, one disaster at a time, please. You're giving me heartburn," Maeve said and put her hand on her stomach.

"Sorry."

"Man, I feel like I'm stuck in some endless fuckin' loop!" Maeve said as she stomped through the open door.

"I know exactly what you mean..."

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'It's midnight and I'm sure you know what that means 'cos after all, you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. Nat Thompson is comin' up in a few minutes, but first, here it is - the original, the immortal, the foot-tappin' classic. This is Ricky Dean signing off with Bill Haley and His Comets... Rock Around The Clock, baby!' the DJ said and cued the classic song.

For once, Maeve didn't feel like Rocking Around The Clock at all, so she turned the volume down slightly and pulled over to the curb halfway between Second and Third Street. She sighed and leaned back in the Mustang's soft seat.

She felt lost and confused, and even worse, betrayed. She remembered back to some of the fun times she had shared with Roberta Cain and once again wondered what on Earth had happened to the woman Maeve had considered her mentor... and friend.

She shuffled around in the seat and dug her fingers into her back pocket. She pulled out the note Roberta had put under the wiper the day before and read it again...

'Hey, Fever. Looking forward to our pissing contest. You probably need to put some air in your tire first, though. Love, Roberta. XXX'

Looking for any kind of clues, Maeve flipped the note to look at the back, but quickly ascertained that there wasn't anything unusual about it at all. In fact, it was written with a perfectly regular blue ball point pen on a perfectly regular piece of paper. Maeve crumpled it into a small ball and threw it into the unused ashtray, grunting in frustration.

Needing to get the case and Roberta off her mind for a few minutes, Maeve decided on the spot that she would make a pass around the Fairy Godfather to check for creep trouble. Without hesitation, she went back out on Jefferson and continued onwards to Third Street.

Ten minutes later, Maeve was cruising down Franklin when a woman suddenly ran out onto the Boulevard, frantically waving her arms. At once, Maeve stood on the brake pedal and pulled into the slow lane, ready to see what was going on.

The woman came up to the Mustang acting like she was desperately short of breath. Maeve rolled down the window and immediately recognized the woman - it was Queen Anne, the elected spokesperson for the homeless people living in Cardboard City on a vacant lot on Sixth Street.

'Queen' Anne Beauchamp's face was red from the exertion, and the yellow-tinted street lights gave her complexion a sickly hue. She put her hands on the windowsill and bent down, trying to catch her breath.

She wore fingerless gloves and she was dressed in a heavy, green parka coat, woolen Navy pants from the Army/Navy surplus store and basketball boots. Her short hair was covered by a blue

beret, but she soon took it off to use it as a fan.

"Easy does it, Queen Anne. What's wrong?"

"I... was about to... call for help... but then I... heard your car and... I... I need your help, Fever. Some... peckerwood has attacked one... one of my friends," Anne said, panting hard.

Maeve groaned inwardly and rubbed her face. Making a quick decision, she leaned over to open the passenger side door.

"Jump in. Show me what's going on."

"Thanks a bunch, Fever. It's over on Sixth, close to Adams."

"Hang on," Maeve said and put the Mustang into Drive. She stepped on the gas and the car lurched forward with a loud roar, headed for Sixth Street.

It didn't take long for Maeve and Queen Anne to arrive at the scene of the crime, and as soon as the Mustang had come to a halt, Anne bounded from the car and ran over to the place where she had left her friend.

Before the real estate mogul who owned the lot had filed for Chapter 11, an apartment complex was supposed to have been built there, but after his financial collapse, it had never been completed. It had only taken the homeless a few days to move in, and the entire lot had turned into one big camp, soon to be dubbed Cardboard City.

"He's right there," Anne said and pointed at a man curled up inside a shelter on the outer rim of the camp, just off the sidewalk. Maeve briefly wondered why none of the other homeless were helping him, but she put those thoughts away as she kneeled down next to the man.

He was in his late twenties, with long, greasy hair and an unkempt beard. His clothes were torn and he was looking quite frail. Maeve noticed that the only protection he had against the November cold was a worn sweater.

"Hey, buddy, what's happened?" Maeve said and touched the man's shoulder - he groaned and tried to turn away from her.

"His name is Jeremy. He's new here. Only arrived the other day," Anne said.

"Is that why the others won't help him?"

"Yes. But I've met him around before. He's always been kind to me. We're friends," Anne said, wringing her hands.

"Jeremy, what happened? Are you hurt bad?" Maeve said.

Jeremy shook his head slowly and tried to sit up. Reaching in, Maeve grabbed him under his arm and she easily pulled him upright.

"It was a couple of frat boys. They just roughed me up," he said in a croaky voice.

"No they didn't, they banged you up pretty good!" Anne said, but Jeremy just shook his head vehemently.

"Anything broken?" Maeve said.

"No! And I don't want no help! Leave me alone!" he said and pulled free of Maeve's grip. Without support to keep him steady, he wasn't able to stay erect and he fell backwards into the shelter. With a groan, he wrapped his arms around his chest and closed his eyes, intent on shutting out the world.

"Jeremy! Don't be a fool. Let Fever take you to the Volunteer's Clinic. You need to be checked!" Anne said, but Jeremy's only reply was an angry grunt.

Maeve got up and dusted off her hands. Anne's shoulders slumped and she let out a long, slow sigh.

"He doesn't like strangers," she said quietly, looking at the man in the shelter. She turned away from Jeremy and started walking back towards Maeve's Mustang.

"I understand. He called them a couple of frat boys... have you seen anyone suspicious here lately?"

"There are so many people here, Fever, I... I just don't know," Anne said with a despondent shrug.

"Where's your shelter?"

"In the center of the camp. But I'll stay with Jeremy tonight. He needs all the help he can get. He just won't admit it."

"Yeah, I know the type well. Anne, if anything happens, and I do mean anything at all, try to get in touch with me. Here's my number," Maeve said and handed Queen Anne a small business card.

"Right. I'm in a good standing with the owner of that convenience store," Anne said and pointed at a small store on the opposite side of Sixth. "... he'll let me use his payphone if I need it," she continued.

"Good. I'm sorry I couldn't help your friend," Maeve said and put her hand on Anne's shoulder.

"Yeah... he's so pigheaded. Maybe I can talk him into going to the Clinic come dawn. Depends on how much he's hurtin'."

"All right. See ya later, Queen Anne. I'll be lookin' for the troublemakers," Maeve said and got into the Mustang. When she drove off, she gave Anne a quick wave out of the window.

Two hundred yards down Sixth Street, Maeve slapped her forehead when she realized that she had forgotten to ask Queen Anne if she had seen Shawna Grant.

"D'oh! Man, man, man, I'm gettin' old! Man! I'm gonna need a little notepad around my neck pretty soon just to remember the things I need to do. Jeez!" she said loudly and slapped her forehead again.

Maeve pulled over and tried to look in the rear view mirror, but she couldn't see Queen Anne anywhere. She rolled her eyes and found her cell phone instead.

"Doyle, this is Fever."

'Uhhh... yeah?'

"I need your help with something..."

'Oh, but I'm... I'm sorta busy right now...'

"Oh yeah? Keep playin' that record and your Christmas Bonus will be a one way ticket to Death Valley, chum."

'Oh... but... but...'

"But what, Doyle?" Maeve said and chuckled over Doyle's predictable response.

'But, Fever, I'm with my girlfriend... you know...'

"You're with your girlfriend? Which one of 'em? And more importantly, does your wife know?"

'Fever...'

"I'm sure I have her number somewhere..."

'Fever! You wouldn't!'

"Hell, yeah, I would. Will ya stop blabbering! I need you down on Sixth Street at Cardboard City, ASAP. Someone's been using the homeless as punching bags."

'Oh... I'm... all right. When do you need me there?'

"Like I said, ASAP. That means as soon as possible, Doyle."

'I'll be there in ten minutes. I need to get dressed first.'

"Preferably!" Maeve said and laughed out loud.

Twelve minutes later, Doyle parked behind Maeve's Mustang and got out of the char coal gray Lincoln. On his way to the sportscar, he repeatedly tried to straighten his shirt, wondering what the hell was wrong with the buttons.

"Doyle?" Maeve said, leaning against the door.

"Yeah?"

"You've buttoned your shirt crooked, man."

"Fuck..."

"And you have a hickey on your throat. Fiery girlfriend?"

"Oh, man, you have no idea... well, maybe you have," Doyle said with a cheeky grin.

"Wouldn't let you go, huh?"

"She hung on me like one of those little fish who suck onto the sharks."

"O... K. Ahem. I didn't really need to know that," Maeve said and squirmed.

"Sorry..."

"Well, anyway, like I told you over the phone, someone's attacked one of the homeless people here. We can't have that. I want you to stay here for a few hours to see if the perps return. If they do, deal with them."

"Yep. Who we lookin' for?"

"A couple of frat boys. Unknown age, unknown looks, unknown wheels."

"So, basically, you want me to intimidate everyone who looks like a frat boy to see who soils their pants?" Doyle said, standing up straight.

Like several others of Fast Freddie Donnelly's foot soldiers, Doyle Brennan was a former wrestler. He wasn't as tall as Danny Watts, nor as heavy, but he was beefy, broadshouldered and definitely able to inflict a lot of damage with his 6'2" frame if he needed to.

"That's more or less it, yeah. Oh, one more thing. When you see Queen Anne, please ask her if she's seen Shawna Grant... you know, the politician's daughter."

"Will do, Fever."

"All right. It's... twenty to one, AM. I'll be back at three or so to check if you've fallen asleep," Maeve said and opened the car door.

"Betcha \$10 that I won't," Doyle said and put out his hand, palm up.

"Deal, buddy," Maeve said and slapped her hand down on Doyle's much larger paw.

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CHAPTER 5

Roberta Cain threw herself onto the couch, put her feet up on the coffee table and started searching for the remote for the ancient CRT tv set that was sitting in the corner of the cellar's living room.

When she finally found it, she turned on the tv and leaned back on the couch. The News At Twelve on Channel 7 had already started, showing live pictures from a press conference. Roberta turned up the volume and put the remote down on the table.

The camera zoomed in on a very grave looking Sean Duffy who was standing in the middle of a temporary dais, surrounded by men who all wore similar, grave expressions. The wrinkles on his face seemed to be deeper than usual and he had dark circles under his eyes.

"Hey, Paco, throw me a beer, will ya," Roberta said - and deftly caught a can of Bud flying through the air.

"Thanks," she said and cracked it open.

Paco came over to sit on the flimsy chair and took a long swig from his own beer. On the TV, Sean Duffy cleared his throat and moved up to a microphone.

'... First we'll tell you what we've got and then we'll take your questions. All right? Let's begin. Earlier this morning, Arthur MacCready, the CEO of the StaySafe Insurance Company, was brutally shot down and killed at his house on Larke's Road.

The assailant fired two shots at Mr. MacCready at point blank range and both were or would have been fatal. After killing Mr. MacCready, the assailants drove away in the victim's Cadillac and another car.

A witness was able to describe that car, it's an older model Dodge sedan, it's blue and it has a large amount of rust around the left rear wheel arch...'

"Good thing we dumped that piece of crap Dodge," Paco said casually.

Roberta whistled.

"Wow, the wife musta been watchin'. Knew I shoulda gone inside and popped her in the skull," she said and took a swig.

'... there's an APB on the vehicle, but so far it hasn't turned up. According to the witness, the shooter is a woman, late forties or early fifties, with a haggard appearance...'

"Haggard appearance!? Get the fuck outta here! I look better than you ever will, dickbreath," Roberta said and flipped the middle finger at the TV.

'... At the time of the shooting, she was wearing a black denim jacket and black jeans. If you have any informa...'

Roberta reached for the remote and hit the mute button, silencing Sean Duffy.

"Now what?" Paco said, resting his chin on his arms.

"Now we wait for Garrett to return and then we're gonna play possum for a few hours. Let's hope he understood his orders."

"Well, I guess 'dump the Dodge' shouldn't be too hard to understand, R.C."

"You wanna bet your life on it?"

"Nope," Paco said and emptied his beer can.

"We need a new pair of wheels. I'm keepin' the Charger under lock and key for now. I need that for my little game with Fever."

"What kind of wheels?"

"MOPAR."

"Gotcha."

Roberta's phone rang and she leaned forward to pick it off the coffee table.

"It's R.C. ... OK? ... Yeah, I'm watching it now ... Well, you didn't mind when we dropped off the Caddy, did ya? ... Didn't think so ... You want a what? A Mercedes Convertible? ... Hmmm. That's gonna take us a while ... Yeah ... Yeah ... OK. Talk to ya later."

"The Chicas?" Paco said.

"Yep. They want an open-top Merc."

"Is that wise... I mean, so soon?"

"Ya wanna make some dough, don't ya?"

Paco shrugged.

"Anyway, it doesn't have to be right away, Izzy gave us 36 hours. Now, the next question is... where the hell are we gonna find an open-top Merc?" Roberta continued.

"Hmmm, uptown's gonna be crawlin' with pigs and we sure as fuck won't find a Merc Convertible here in Downtown," Paco said and furrowed his brow.

"Let's see. Let's see..." Roberta said and turned off the TV.

A sudden scraping sound at the door to the cellar made both Roberta and Paco draw their guns. Then someone knocked on the metal door - first once, then twice and finally once more.

"Garrett," Roberta said and holstered her Walther.

"I'll let him in," Paco said and went over to the door.

Teddy Garrett stepped into the living area of the cellar and put a plastic bag from CoolMart down on the floor.

"Fresh supplies," he said and dug out two sixpacks from the bag.

"So? Any problems?" Roberta said.

"Nope. The Dodge is no more. I left it in a parking garage over on Buchanan. I wiped down everything and even left the keys in the ignition. I'll bet it won't be there by dawn," Teddy Garrett said with a laugh.

"Good. How did ya get back here?"

"Took a cab. Got off on Jefferson and Seventh and walked through the backyards and stuff."

"Not bad, Garrett. Keep that up an' you'll have earned your Cue Ballz colors before you know it,"

Roberta said and reached for the new beers.

**_*_

"... So, what happened when you came back to check up on Doyle?" Staci said as she and Maeve were travelling down First Street, headed for Jefferson.

"You'll never believe it, baby. He had actually been able to talk Jeremy into going to the Clinic with Queen Anne. Turns out that Doyle's younger brother is suffering from a similar mental illness, so Doyle knew exactly what to say to Jeremy."

Maeve activated the turning signal and went right onto Jefferson. She moved out into the center lane at once, positioning the Mustang between a lowrider and a minivan.

"Well, that's something at least," Staci said and turned up the heater another notch.

"Yeah. But I lost \$10," Maeve said with a grin.

"I just don't understand why people would hit someone who's weaker than them. It's... sick."

"Won't argue with that, baby," Maeve said and clawed Staci's thigh. Much to Maeve's disappointment, Staci hadn't put on the magical pair of chinos, but the gun metal gray slacks she was wearing instead wasn't far behind the others when it came to bringing out the best in Staci - and the worst in Maeve.

"Have you found Shawna Grant yet?" Staci said, turning around in her seat.

"No... no, we haven't. Unfortunately. We haven't been able to locate R.C. and Paco, either."

"They must know by now that you're hunting them. Do you think they'll do another job, despite everything?"

"Honestly, baby... I wouldn't put it past R.C. I really wouldn't," Maeve said and reached up to turn on the radio.

'... I'm Susan Blaine, and you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. It's ten PM and here's the news. The police is still investigating the fatal shooting of StaySafe Insurance CEO Arthur MacCready early this morning. At a press conference at noon, Senior Detective Sean Duffy said that the police has an excellent description of the shooter, and that they need the support of the public to catch the criminals. The StaySafe Insurance Company has...'

"It's been all over the news all day. It was Roberta, wasn't it?" Staci said, putting her hand on top of Maeve's.

Maeve nodded grimly.

'... Annette Jameson MacCready, the widow of the late Arthur MacCready has been admitted to the Killarney-Hayes Sanitarium, following a breakdown caused by the shock. The police ask that...'

"God, that poor woman," Staci said and shook her head.

"Yeah," Maeve said and tapped her fingers on the rim of the steering wheel.

In her peripheral vision, she caught a glimpse of a man in the passenger seat of the chop-topped Mercury lowrider driving next to them doing something funny with his hand - immediately, Maeve reached under her leather jacket to grab the handle of her Beretta.

The man rolled down his window and signaled for Maeve to do the same. Keeping one eye on the road and the other on the man, Maeve rolled down the window, but didn't let go of her gun.

"Yo, Fever," he said, his voice almost drowned out by very loud hip hop. He was wearing a bright red bandanna, a white and black lumberjack shirt and black sunglasses, despite the fact that it was already pitch black outside.

"Yo. Whatup?"

"Not much. Heard you were lookin' for Paco Alvarez?"

"That's right," Maeve said and steered closer to the Mercury so she could hear better.

"Watch your ass. That motherfucker is loco. He won't think twice about poppin' ya."

"Thanks. D'ya know where he's at?"

The other man shook his head.

"No, but try down South. He's connected to the Chicas."

"All right. Thanks," Maeve said and waved at the other man.

The driver of the lowrider pulled into the turning lane at Fifth Street and was soon out of sight.

"Great. Paco's connected to the Chicas, too. That's all we needed," Maeve said and rubbed her brow.

Staci opened her mouth to speak, but before she had the chance, Maeve cut her off.

"Anyway, I don't understand how they can listen to that hip hop. I mean, it's so... so... and half the time, the things they sing about don't make any sense. What's the point in that?" Maeve said with a shrug.

"Well..."

'...and you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. The weather report was brought to you by Pellegrino Umbrellas & Raincoats. Pellegrino, we love it when it rains. Right, on with the show. I'm sure you all know this one,' the DJ said from the radio, cueing Little Richard's Tutti Frutti.

'A-wop bop-a loo-bop, a-wop bam-boom! ...'

"You were saying?" Staci said, teasing Maeve by wagging her index finger in front of the Enforcer's nose.

"Yeah, yeah..." Maeve said and grabbed Staci's hand so she could kiss the long digits.

A little while later, they pulled up to a red light at the intersection at Eighth Street. While Maeve waited for the traffic lights to change, she casually looked around - suddenly, a thought flashed through her mind and she furrowed her brow.

Looking at the street signs, she began to connect the dots, and soon, she had a pretty good idea of where Roberta Cain and Paco Alvarez were - somewhere in the vicinity of the empty, grassy lot on Eighth Street.

'Of course... back in the old days, the Cue Ballz homebase was a flat in the apartment building next to the grassy lot... I'll bet \$1000 that Roberta has gone back there...'

When that piece of the puzzle fell into place, Maeve mentally kicked herself for not realizing it earlier. She looked over her shoulder to see if they had room to go down Eighth, but the inside lane was blocked by a delivery van.

At the same time, the traffic lights changed to green, so Maeve stepped on the gas and continued across the intersection.

"Hey, baby, let's play a little game," Maeve said and turned down the volume.

"A game? OK," Staci said and turned in her seat.

"Let's say you're Roberta Cain."

"Huh? I'm not sure I like that game."

"It's just hypothetical. If you were Roberta Cain, where would you hide? Out of sight... or in plain sight?"

"Uhh... I'm not sure I'm following you, Maeve."

"You know you're hunted. Where would you hide?"

"Well... somewhere I feel safe. Perhaps a place where I can... oh, I don't know. Are you onto something?" Staci said and cocked her head.

"I think so. We need to take a detour down Eighth."

"OK...? We've just passed Eighth."

"I know."

Maeve hit the gas and swept into the fast lane, narrowly cutting across the bows of a Firebird. The driver in the sports car honked at her, but Maeve just waved in the rear view mirror.

"Jeez!" Staci said, holding onto her seatbelt.

"Just hang on, baby," Maeve said and zoomed into the turning lane at Ninth Street.

"It's already yellow, we won't make it!"

"Of course we will," Maeve said and stepped on the gas. A split second before the traffic lights turned to red, Maeve hustled the Mustang into the intersection and made a tire-squealing u-turn that made Staci shriek loudly and reach for the panic grip above the door.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Maeve Donnelly!" Staci said once she had caught her breath.

"Settle down, settle down, nothing broken," Maeve said with a broad grin. She kept her foot on the gas, making the Mustang roar back towards Eighth Street.

"Yeah, but for how long? Sheesh, one of these days..."

"One of these days what?" Maeve said and pulled into the turning lane at Eighth Street.

"One of these days you're gonna get hurt doing that, Maeve."

"Nah," Maeve said and turned left onto Eighth Street.

A few minutes later, they stopped outside the apartment complex that had once housed the homebase for the old Cue Ballz.

"Hmmm... everything's been redeveloped. I very much doubt that R.C. and Paco could hide here. They'd stick out like a couple a' nuns in a cathouse... shit. It was a good idea, though," Maeve

said and sighed.

"Oh, well," she said and continued down Eighth Street.

"Maeve... are you ever gonna tell me what the hell is going on?" Staci said, reluctant to take her hands off the panic grip in case Maeve flipped out again.

"Well, it's like this..."

Half an hour later, Maeve drove the Mustang into the Burger Palace lot and pulled up to the end of a long line of cars.

"Looks like their new drive-in is a hit already. I'm hungry, so I think I'll have my usual menu. You want a salad or something? My treat," Maeve said.

"No, I could do with a cheeseburger... Just a little one. And a Coke. Please," Staci said and flashed Maeve one of her most charming smiles.

"You had me at cheeseburger, baby," Maeve said and leaned over to place a kiss on Staci's lips.

"Mmmm?"

"Yeah. I'm glad you've finally gone past that 'oh, no, I have a roll of fat'- phase."

"Excuse me! I did have a roll of fat!"

"No, you didn't. Anyway, I can attest that you're in the best shape you've ever been in. And you can trust me when I say that... after all, there isn't a square inch of you I haven't seen in close-up."

"Aw, shucks, thank..."

"Yeah, I do love a woman with some meat on her bones," Maeve said with an impossibly cheeky grin.

"Maeve Donnelly, know that God is my witness... I'm gonna make you pay dearly for that one," Staci said and tried to tickle the Enforcer's stomach - unfortunately, even Staci's long, strong fingers weren't able to get through the Kevlar vest.

"Saved by ol' Kev. Again," Maeve said with a grin.

In the mean time, the driver behind them had become impatient, so he started honking. Maeve's own patience ran out after the second honk, so she rolled down the window and leaned out.

"Hold ya flippin' horses, buddy!" she bellowed.

"Maeve, it's our turn now," Staci said and put a calming hand on Maeve's thigh.

"Huh? ...Oh, OK," Maeve said and took her foot off the brake pedal. While the Mustang crept forward to the booth, she gave the driver behind them the Evil Eye through the rear view mirror.

"Hey, Fever," the young man in the booth said.

"How ya doin'. I'll have a Double Cheesy Deluxe, hold the onions, a small cheeseburger, a small fries, not too much salt, a large Coke and a small Coke, please."

"Double Cheesy, no onions, small cheese, small fries, two Cokes, got it," the young man said, speaking into a headset.

"Not too much salt on the fries," Maeve said and pointed her index finger at him.

"Got it, Fever. It'll be a few minutes."

"Yep," Maeve said and crawled forward to the check-out booth.

Three minutes later, Maeve was handed a large paper bag that she pushed over to Staci. At once, the Mustang was filled with the smells of the fries and the burgers, and both Maeve's and Staci's stomachs growled simultaneously.

"How much is that?" Maeve said and found her wallet.

"That'll be \$22.95, please," the young woman at the till said.

"Here's \$30, keep the change."

"Thank you, Fever," the young woman said with a smile.

"Anytime."

The parking lot was so full they had to drive around twice to find somewhere to park, but they eventually managed to find a space next to the car wash. After reversing into the parking space, Maeve turned off the engine and moved the seat back so she had enough room to eat.

"Here's your Deluxe... and your Coke," Staci said and put the items in Maeve's lap.

"Fabulous," Maeve said and immediately went to work unwrapping her Double Cheesy Deluxe.

"... And the Frenchies," Staci continued.

"Put 'em on the dashboard."

"My cheesy and my Coke... shit... no napkins."

"I have mmffmpm some in mphmmmfhm the glovebox," Maeve said through a mouthful of cheeseburger.

"Boy, you weren't lying when you said you were hungry..."

"Nah, when I'm in my car, I always eat this quickly. You never know when things happen," Maeve said and forced the straw through the large Coke's plastic cover.

"Good point," Staci said and opened the glove compartment. She rummaged around for a few moments and then found a couple of napkins. She took one for herself and gave Maeve two.

"Why two?"

"Cos a burger that big will make twice the mess," Staci said with a grin.

"Ha, ha. Man, this is great. Rock'n'Roll on the radio, burgers, Coke and a hot babe in the car... can life get any better?" Maeve said and squeezed Staci's thigh.

"Shhhh. Don't push our luck, Maeve," Staci said and bit into her small cheeseburger.

Grinning, Maeve turned her head to look at her partner.

'How lucky am I? Look at that world class babe sitting right there. Those eyes, those cheekbones, those thighs... that ass. If I could get her to move in with me, my life would be perfect,' Maeve thought. She chuckled out loud, drawing Staci's attention.

"What?" Staci said.

"Oh, nothin'."

"Yeah, right. There must be something."

"Well, I was just thinking that you're God's gift to Maeve Donnelly, baby."

Staci stopped chewing and locked eyes with Maeve.

"Yeah... maybe I am," she said in a husky voice that made a sweet thrill run up and down Maeve's spine - and sent an even sweeter thrill straight down to Maeve's center.

"Jeez, I need to wash my hands before we go anywhere," Maeve said and stared at her fingers. Despite wiping them repeatedly on the last remaining napkin, all ten digits were covered in various juices from the Double Cheesy Deluxe.

"You shoulda had a smaller one, like mine. Look," Staci said and showed Maeve her perfectly clean fingers.

"But I love my Double Cheesy Deluxe! See ya in a few," Maeve said and struggled to open the door without getting goo on the lever. After fumbling for a bit, she got it open using her thumb and she stepped out of the Mustang. On her way to the fast food restaurant, she turned around and waved at Staci, who waved back with a big grin.

Staci followed Maeve with her eyes until the Enforcer turned the corner and went into the Burger Palace. She chuckled and started collecting the burger wrappings and the cardboard box the fries had been in.

While Staci was doing that, a garishly dressed working girl walked past the front of the Mustang. The woman stopped mid-step and stared at the car and at Staci for several seconds - then she spun around and made a beeline towards the car.

"Hi. I need a word with you," she said and used one of her long, fake fingernails to tap on the window on Staci's side.

After doing a triple-take at the way the working girl was dressed - a cheap, red plastic dress with a zipper on front that was opened so far down that her bare stomach was showing - Staci rolled down the window and eyed the woman suspiciously.

"Can I help you?" Staci said, trying to look the other woman in the eye instead of gawking at the vast expanses of flesh on display.

"This is Fever's ride, isn't it?"

"Yeah...?"

"Oh, sorry, how rude of me. I'm a very good friend of Fever. I'm Jerri," the working girl said and stretched out her hand. When she leaned forward, the movement caused her assets to move dangerously close to falling out of the dress.

Staci shook Jerri's hand politely but immediately regretted it - apparently, Jerri had sprayed a ton of disinfectant onto her hand.

"Hi, Jerri, I'm Staci," Staci said, annoyed over the fact that her hand was suddenly clammy. She looked around for a napkin, but could only find the ones Maeve had already used up.

"Oh, sorry 'bout that. I just had a john over behind the car wash. He wasn't exactly... uh... freshly bathed, so I had to use my bug zapper juice. It'll wear off in a few minutes. He was so flippin'

eager he tore my dress!" Jerri said and pointed at the broken zipper.

Staci's lips parted in a disgusted sneer, and she started a frantic search for a clean napkin to wipe her hand on - she finally did, after turning the glove box inside out.

"Hey..." Jerri said and looked over her shoulder. Satisfied that no one was around to hear what she had to say, she leaned in and lowered her voice.

"Uh, I'm gonna tell you something about Fever, but you have to promise me you won't get mad at me, OK?" she continued.

"Uhhh... OK," Staci said, suddenly worried that she was about to hear some bad news.

"You're a real pretty girl an' everything, but honey... I have to tell you that Fever already has a steady girlfriend," Jerri said sincerely.

"I see?" Staci said, more confused than ever. She finished wiping her hands and crumbled the used napkin into a little ball.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I've never met her, but the word on the street is that Fever likes her very much. So, you know... just tryin' to let you down easy, honey."

"Uhhh... thanks. Fever's girlfriend, does she have a name?"

"Staci, I think. Not sure, though."

Staci blinked a few times, beginning to suspect that Maeve had paid Jerri to pull a practical joke on her. She eyed Jerri thoroughly to look for any hints of foul play, but the working girl seemed to be very sincere.

"Jerri, *I'm* Staci!"

"No! Really? Oh, I don't believe it! Not only does Fever two-time her girlfriend, she does it with someone who has the same name! I mean... can you believe it! That... that Birddawg!"

"Who's a Birddawg? Hi, Jerri," Maeve said, having snook up while Jerri was having the animated conversation.

"You are! I can't believe it, Fever. Look at her, she didn't know," Jerri said, pointing at Staci through the Mustang's windshield.

"Didn't know... what?"

"That you're using her to cheat on your girlfriend!"

"I'm *what*?" Maeve said, pinching the bridge of her nose to stop her sudden headache from

spreading.

"Yeah, go ahead and act all innocent, Birddawg. Man, I can't believe it. I'm so disappointed in you, Fever. Well, guess what, now the pretty girl in the car knows so you can't sweet-talk your way out of it!" Jerri said and strode away from the Mustang.

Open-mouthed and wide-eyed, Maeve turned to look after the working girl. After a few moments, she shrugged and got into the car.

"Um, baby, that was Jerri."

Staci was sitting with an unreadable expression on her face and she was covering her mouth with her hand.

"I got that part," Staci said through her fingers.

"She obviously didn't stand first in line when the brains were distributed."

"I got that part, too."

"Baby, I don't have another girlfriend... honest! Cross my heart, hope to croak," Maeve said and drew the sign of the cross over her chest.

Suddenly Staci couldn't contain herself any longer and she leaned her head back and started laughing so long and hard that the windows almost misted up.

"I'm glad you see it that way, baby," Maeve said and took Staci's hand.

"Man, that was... odd," Staci said, wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her fleece jacket.

"Yeah. I guess I have to square it with her later on. Boy, that's gonna take some fast talkin'."

"Well, I think I've had all the excitement I can stand for one evening," Staci said after she had finished laughing. She winked and gave Maeve's hand a little squeeze.

"Oh, but I kinda thought we could, you know, go back to my place..."

"It's 'not just the sex', remember?" Staci said and winked again.

"Ugh. I shouldn't have said that... um, baby, it's not because you're pissed off because of Jerri, is it?"

"Hell, no, Maeve, gimme some credit! No, I've had a great time. It's been too long since we've cruised at night."

"Word."

"But now I need to go to work. Danielle can drive me home when we close."

"Oh... all right. There isn't anything I can do to change your mind?"

"Not tonight, Maeve. Here's your goodnight kiss," Staci said and stroked Maeve's cheek. Pulling gently, Staci turned the Enforcer's chin around so they were face to face - then she leaned in to claim Maeve's lips in a loving kiss.

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CHAPTER 6

Much later, Maeve started the Mustang and reversed out of the parking space at the rear entrance of the Three-In-One Club. Staci's scent lingered in the Mustang even after she had left, and for the umpteenth time, Maeve found herself wishing that she could somehow convince Staci to move in with her.

As she cruised along Sixth Street to get back to Jefferson Boulevard, she started thinking about what she could do or say to influence Staci's decision, but soon came to the conclusion that the tall, beautiful woman was far too stubborn and headstrong to be swayed by cheap tricks - or even expensive tricks.

Maeve shook her head and turned on the radio. She checked her watch - ten to midnight. Soon, Rock Around The Clock would be blaring out again, signaling the arrival of yet another new day.

Just as the last bars of the immortal classic faded out, Maeve stopped in front of the redeveloped apartment complex on Eighth Street. She hadn't been able to shake the feeling that Roberta Cain and Paco Alvarez were there somewhere, but at the same time, she knew that the odds of finding them would be like picking the winning numbers in the State lottery.

"Slim to none and slim just walked out the door," Maeve said out loud and chuckled over her own joke.

She looked up and down the street, hoping that she could find somewhere to park, but dozens of cars were parked bumper-to-bumper on either side - except in front of the grassy lot, where a no-parking sign had inexplicably been placed.

With a satisfied grunt, Maeve put the Mustang into Reverse and backed up to the grassy lot. The street was narrower there, but she put two wheels onto the sidewalk so that other cars could still pass. She got out of the car and locked it.

Walking over to stand in front of the grassy lot, she put her hands on her hips and surveyed the situation.

'No flippin' way,' she thought as her eyes drifted across the pitch black lawn. She didn't want to risk stepping in something nasty in the darkness, so instead of going onto the lawn, she spun around and walked towards the apartment building itself.

The complex consisted of four stairwells, each housing eight apartments. Maeve checked the names of all the residents very carefully, but she soon realized it was a thankless task. She knew that Roberta obviously wouldn't be using her real name, but none of the names were even remotely close to being interesting.

Maeve stepped back out onto the sidewalk and looked at the windows. Most of them were dark, but one or two were still lit - not that it would be of any practical use to her. Knowing a dead end when she was in one, she sighed and started walking back towards the Mustang.

Just as Maeve walked past the first stairwell, the lights went on in the windbreak and the front door opened. A sensibly dressed woman in her mid-thirties stepped out onto the sidewalk with a stack of newspapers under her arm and a small dog on a long leash.

When the woman saw Maeve, she took an involuntary step back and nearly tripped over her dog. She tried to flap her arms to keep her balance - with the inevitable result that she dropped the stack of newspapers which ended up all over the sidewalk.

The small dog walked the wrong way around her master to sniff the newspapers, getting the leash thoroughly tangled up in her owner's legs in the process.

"Oh!" the woman said and tried to turn around so she could unravel the leash. She kept looking at Maeve with a very anxious expression on her face, almost like she expected to be mugged any second.

"No need for alarm, Miss. I'm one of the good gals," Maeve said and crouched down so she could scoop up the errant newspapers. It didn't take her long and she was soon able to present a neatly folded stack to the woman.

"Oh... thank you."

"You're welcome. Well, since we're already talking, do you have time to answer a quick question?" Maeve said with a smile.

"You're not one of those religious... uhhh... agitators, are you?"

"Most decidedly not."

"Then I guess it's all right," the woman said and stretched out the hand she was using to hold the leash.

"I'm Eliza Deegan. Nice to meet you," she said.

"I'm Maeve Donnelly. Likewise. So, have you seen anyone suspicious here in the last few days? A woman, early fifties, sort of aggressive looking, typically wearing black denim?"

"Are you a cop? You don't look like a cop."

"I'm not a cop. Well, have you?"

Eliza scrunched up her face and tried to remember if she had seen anyone matching the description, but she came up short.

"No, I'm sorry. This is a clean neighborhood these days. I've heard some horror stories from those who've lived here longer than I have, though. I moved in last year, so I've only seen the good sides of Eighth Street... well, mostly. Did you hear about that terrible carjacking incident up near Jefferson the other day? Isn't that terrible? I mean, I told my husband, his name is Kenny, by the way, I told him that it almost made me swear off driving... not that we have a car at the moment, but still..."

Maeve nodded with a crooked smile fixed on her face.

"So you haven't seen anything that would, you know, raise your alarm?"

"Well... not apart from you," Eliza said and sniggered in a very girlish fashion.

"Oh, you needn't worry about me. I'm a lamb in leather. Well, thank you for your time, Mrs. Deegan," Maeve said and shook hands with the other woman again.

Just as Maeve was turning to leave, Eliza put her hand on Maeve's arm.

"Wait, I just thought of something. Perhaps you could come back and ask our caretaker, Mr. Malloy. He's here from eight to five. It's possible that he knows something. After all, he's outside all day and I've heard he's thrown a few... uhhh... long-haired types out of our backyard."

"Oh? That's a good idea, Mrs. Deegan. Thank you."

"Anytime," Eliza said with a smile.

On her way back to the Mustang, Maeve went past a young, gangly man who was carrying three pizza boxes. She looked briefly at his acne-riddled face, but didn't pay any particular attention to him.

"Smells great, buddy," she said as they passed each other. The young man just nodded and kept

walking straight ahead with determined steps.

Fifty paces further on, Teddy Garrett spun around and stared at Fever who was leaning against the side of her Mustang, talking into her phone. He gulped several times and then disappeared into the shadows next to the apartment building.

"Hey Danny, it's Fever. What are you doing right now?" Maeve said into the cell phone.

'I'm down at Fourteenth Street. There's been a fatal shooting an' Sean Duffy and his gang are all here.'

"Don't tell me it's another carjacking?"

'No, a young woman got wasted in her apartment. Oh... the coroner is carrying the casket out now.'

"How young?"

'23 from what the grapevine tells me. She had apparently rejected her downstairs neighbor's advances. I guess he didn't take it too well.'

"Shit," Maeve said, rubbing her brow.

'I heard it on the police scanner so I thought I'd stop by in case it was connected to some of our stuff. Don't think it is, though.'

"Good thinking. Well, keep me posted."

'Will do, Fever.'

Teddy Garrett ran along the back of the building, kicking hard on the door to the cellar once he got there.

"What the fuck are you doin', numbnuts?" Paco hissed as he opened the door.

"Fever is outside! Right outside!" Teddy whispered and hurried into the cellar. He put the three pizza boxes down on the coffee table and started wringing his hands.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to deal with her, then," Roberta said and got up from her favorite position on the couch. She took the Walther out of its holster and cocked it.

"You two stay here. If you can hear the shit hittin' the fan, come and back me up," she said and ventured out into the darkness of the backyard.

Roberta ran towards the grassy lot, careful not to make any sounds that would reveal that she was there. When she reached the corner of the apartment building, she peeked around it, holding the pistol ready in case Fever was close by.

Fever was still standing at the car, but as Roberta was watching, the Enforcer got into the Mustang, started the engine and drove away.

Roberta harrumphed and uncocked the Walther's hammer.

A minute later, she returned to the cellar and threw herself onto the couch.

"So?" Teddy Garrett said worriedly.

"She left."

"And?"

"There's no 'and'. She left. Now let's eat while they're hot, I'm starved," Roberta said and grabbed the first of the pizza boxes.

"Pineapple... this is definitely yours, Teddy," Roberta said and handed the box to Garrett. She took the next box and opened the lid - black olives, pepperonis and mushrooms. She grinned and picked up a slice.

"Come on, Paco! Quit guardin' the door. I told ya Fever left," Roberta said loudly.

Paco came into the living area of the cellar and holstered his .32 revolver.

"That's the second time she was here. She'll be back," he said on his way over to the fridge. He threw Garrett and Roberta a beer each and then took a can for himself.

"Undoubtedly. But so far she don't know jack shit. Otherwise she woulda gone straight for the cellar. We're cool for now."

Paco shrugged and went over to the couch. He grabbed the last remaining pizza box and began to eat his favored Jalapeño special.

"For now," Garrett echoed quietly.

"Ah, don't sweat it, Teddy. Which reminds me... would ya mind contactin' your dealer? I'm almost out," Roberta said as she chewed on a pizza slice.

"No problem, R.C. You must be his best customer by now," Garrett said, looking away from the steely glare he knew Roberta was sending him.

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Staci looked again at the round clock on the wall of her office, refusing to believe that it was still only half past two, AM - she'd need to be at the Three-In-One Club for at least another hour and a half.

She closed the laptop, pulled out the upper drawer of her fancy glass desk and put a wad of papers on the desktop. Like so often in the recent days, she mulled over whether she should continue with the plans of buying out of the owner of Smokey's Bar or if she should just throw it all away - a part of her wanted to go ahead with it, but another, perhaps stronger, part told her that it was a futile exercise.

Staci sighed and put the files away. She took her cell phone and went over to the couch. Dialing the number to Smokey's Bar, she kicked off her shoes and folded her legs up underneath her.

'Smokey's Bar. It's Vicky,' a female voice said from the other end of the connection.

"Hello, Miss O'Neal, it's Staci Hart. Have you had time to consider my offer?"

The line fell silent for so long that Staci thought Vicky O'Neal had hung up on her. She was about to try again when the woman at the other end spoke up.

'I have.'

"Well... what do you think?"

'It's not nearly enough.'

Staci stared at the cell phone and felt a sinking feeling inside.

"Eight hundred thousand Dollars isn't nearly enough?"

'Fifty fuckin' million bucks wouldn't be enough! Did you think I wouldn't check you out?'

"Er..."

'I know exactly who you are and what you are, and I don't want anything to do with your kind!'

"And what kind is that exactly, Miss O'Neal?" Staci said coldly.

'You're a fuckin' gangster! It's bad enough that I already have to pay two thousand fuckin' bucks each and every month to you fuckin' hoodlums. If I don't, you're gonna send some muscle to rough me up, right? Don't even try to deny it!'

"But..."

'Yeah, well, I've got some news for ya. I've got a 12-gauge under the counter, so if ya want an intimate relationship with a buncha pellets, just swing by.'

"But...!"

'Don't call me again. If ya do, I'm gonna round up some muscle of my own and then we're gonna make you wish you wuz never born, bitch!' Vicky O'Neal said, shouting the last words so loudly into the cell phone that the connection became distorted.

When the irate woman had terminated the connection, Staci's shoulders slumped.

"All that work... for nothing," she said out loud, running her free hand through her long, black hair.

After letting out a long, heartfelt sigh, she leaned forward to put her cell phone on the low glass table next to the couch. With a heavy heart, she let herself fall sideways onto the couch where she put her arm across her eyes.

Vicky O'Neal's angry words repeated over and over in her mind, and deep down inside, she knew they were true - she really had become a gangster. She, Staci Hart, the daughter of a florist and a school teacher, was now firmly connected to the mob, whether she wanted to be or not.

'Oh, Maeve... if only I didn't love you so much... without you, I'd walk away in an instant,' Staci thought.

Ten minutes later, Staci rolled off the couch and went over to the minibar where she poured herself a healthy Bourbon on the rocks. Refusing to let the angry woman's words get to her, she took the glass and a napkin and left her office to go out into the main room of the night club.

Staci soon found a good spot that gave her the opportunity to watch the entire catwalk at once. The pumping dance music was blasting out through the hidden speakers and all the poles were occupied by scantily clad women, writhing up and down, left and right, and then up and down again for good measure.

April, a very leggy and sensual blonde dancer, was working the pole nearest to where Staci was sitting, and she winked at her boss when they made eye contact. When Staci smiled in return, April hooded her eyes and flicked her tongue seductively. Staci immediately made a mental note

to talk to April as soon as they closed for the night.

'... Just to weed out any misunderstandings,' Staci thought and pulled out in her shirt to get some cool air down her front.

A little later on, Danielle walked around the main room and refilled the little bowls of pretzels that were placed on each table as a free service to the customers. When she came over to Staci's booth, she sat down opposite her boss to rest her legs.

The bowl on Staci's table was empty, so Danielle poured some pretzels into it - at once, Staci scooped up a handful.

"Hungry?" Danielle said.

"Comfort-eating."

"Oh. Know it well. Ummm, Staci, have you asked Fever about my sister's request yet?" Danielle said and started playing with a pretzel.

Staci stopped chewing and swallowed audibly. As she shook her head, her cheeks began to flush a deep red.

"Gawd, no, Danielle... I'm so sorry. I've... I've totally forgotten all about it. Gosh, I'm so sorry!"

"Oh. It's no biggie," Danielle said, the disappointment etched into her face.

"The hell it isn't. Uh... stay here, I'll be back in a flash," Staci said and got up from the booth. She strode into the office, picked up her cell and then spun around and returned to the booth Danielle was sitting at.

She flipped open the telephone and found Maeve's number in the registry.

"I'm doing it right away, Danielle," Staci said and held the phone up to her ear - at the same time, she stuck her index finger in the other ear.

'It's Fever. Talk to me.'

"Hey, Maeve, it's me. Do you have a moment to pop by the club? Danielle needs to talk to you."

'Sure...? Danielle? Did something happen to her sister?'

"Oh, no, no."

'All right. ETA five minutes.'

"Good. See you then," Staci said and hung up. She put the phone on the table and grabbed a handful of pretzels. She broke them in half and started chewing on them.

"She'll be right over, Danielle."

"OK. Thanks. Well, I guess I better get back to wor..." Danielle started to say, but was suddenly interrupted by a loud crash from the catwalk.

One of the dancers, Miss Marlene Dominixx, was sitting in the middle of the catwalk, holding her ankle and firing off a blue streak strong enough to peel the crushed velvet off the walls.

She reached behind her and found the snapped three-inch heel that had caused her to fall over. With a flick of the wrist, she sent it flying up the catwalk where it skidded off the side, disappearing somewhere under the curtain to the dressing room.

The other dancers didn't know whether to help their fallen comrade or not, so they just looked at each other. After a few seconds, they shrugged and continued dancing, leaving the unfortunate Miss Marlene to get up on her own.

Staci sighed and stepped out from the booth.

"Danielle, go get the bouncer. Tell him he needs to carry Miss Marlene into my office. We better get her ankle checked."

"Right. I'm on it," Danielle said and hurried towards the exit of the nightclub.

A little more than five minutes later, Maeve knocked on the door to Staci's office. When she didn't get a response, she opened the door and peeked inside.

"Baby...?" she said and stepped into the office. She had to rub her eyes when she saw what was going on - not only was the couch occupied by a very underdressed dancer, but Staci was kneeling between the woman's legs, apparently doing something that made the dancer fling her head back and groan.

"Um... baby?" Maeve said and scratched her hair.

"Hey... good you came. I'll bet you have more experience with this sort of thing than I have," Staci said, holding something in her hand that Maeve couldn't quite identify.

"Huh?"

"She twisted her ankle and fell," Staci said and showed Maeve the bag of ice she was pressing against Miss Marlene's ankle.

"Ohhh... well, that's a load off my mind," Maeve said and took off her leather jacket.

"Hi, Fever," the dancer croaked.

"Hi. Rough night?"

"Yeah. Those fuckin' heels," Marlene said and squirmed when Staci put the bag back on her ankle.

"It's swelling even with the ice, Marlene. You're gonna have to take a few days off," Staci said.

"Shit."

"We need to apply the ice for a few more minutes, but then I'll help you get dressed and catch a cab."

"Damn... thanks, boss," Marlene said and sighed deeply.

Maeve kneeled down next to her partner and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

"Oh, baby, seein' you in charge like this turns me on *so* badly," Maeve whispered for Staci's ears only - as expected, it didn't take long for Staci's cheeks to turn fire engine red.

"We gotta stop meetin' like this, huh?" Maeve said out loud, pointing at the dancer's long, shapely legs right in front of them.

"Yeah," Staci said with a dry, muted laugh.

"Is everything all right, baby?"

"Oh... sure. Sure. I'm OK."

"Hmmm?" Maeve said and put her hand on the back of Staci's head.

"There's nothing, Maeve. Really."

"So, what was it Danielle wanted to talk to me about?"

"I forgot to ask you something important, but you better go and talk to her yourself. She's outside."

"Yeah, I know. I waved at her when I came in. I'll do that right away," Maeve said and got up from the floor.

"See ya later, huh?" Maeve continued, patting Miss Marlene's bare knee.

"See ya, Fever," the dancer said through clenched teeth.

"Maeve, I... I need a word with you before you leave, OK?" Staci said. She looked up and locked eyes with the Enforcer, sending her a very clear message that despite what Staci had said before, everything wasn't 'all right.'

"It'll only be a few minutes, baby," Maeve said as she put her hand on the door handle.

Ten minutes later, Maeve and Staci watched a yellow taxi cab leave with the unfortunate Miss Marlene propped up on the backseat. Staci sighed deeply and folded her arms across her stomach, a sure sign that she was worried about something.

"Baby, please tell me what's wrong. I know you're hurtin', but you need to tell me what's going on," Maeve said and put her hand on Staci's arm.

"Where did you park?"

"Out back...?"

"Let's talk in the Mustang. I don't feel like going back to the club right now," Staci said and began walking towards the main entrance. Nodding briefly to the bouncer, Staci continued straight ahead instead of turning right into the nightclub.

She and Maeve walked through a narrow passageway that led to the Three-In-One Club's back entrance. After working a lock, Staci opened the door to the backyard and stepped outside with Maeve in tow.

Maeve pressed the small button on the remote and the Mustang replied by blinking its hazard lights twice. Speeding up so she got to the car ahead of her partner, Maeve opened the car door and held it open so that Staci could get in unhindered. Once Staci was safely inside, Maeve ran around the car and jumped in herself.

"OK, please tell me what's up, baby. You're scaring me," Maeve said and took Staci's hands in her own.

"I had a nasty phone call."

"Oh...? A pervert?"

"No," Staci said with a tired chuckle.

"Then what?"

"Remember when we talked about maybe starting an all-girl bar?"

"Uh, not really... but go on."

"Well, I've been working on it and it's been going pretty good... until now. I've found a little place called Smokey's Bar and I offered them a very good deal."

"I'm guessing it's turned to shit...?"

"You might say that. The owner of the bar refused to sell to me because I'm connected with you. She yelled at me and called me a gangster."

"Oh... well..."

"Am I, Maeve? Am I a Made Woman? A Wisegal?" Staci said and turned to look at Maeve.

"Those terms are something Don Coluzzo would use, baby. Uncle Freddie runs a family business."

"And I'm part of it," Staci said quietly.

"It shouldn't really be a surprise to you... I mean, you've always known how I made my money. And, yes, as the owner of the Three-In-One Club, you're part of the organization... and you're definitely part of the family, baby," Maeve said and gave Staci's hands a squeeze.

Staci sighed and shook her head despondently. Maeve grinned and let her fingers run gently across Staci's cheek.

"Baby... I think I understand what you're going through, but... it's a little late for that," Maeve said.

"But I'm not a gangster!"

"Is Mary Red a gangster? Or Wynne, the new girl working the phones? My uncle has a lot of people working for him who aren't gangsters. Some of us are, yes, but not all."

"Hmmm..." Staci said and shrugged.

"Listen, baby, as my girlfriend, you have all the benefits but hardly any of the obligations of the regular Family members. And if we ever were to become more than just girlfriends, you'd come under my wing completely. That means you wouldn't have to pay to have the club protected, or..."

"It's not the club, Maeve..."

"... Hear me out, please. My uncle is very fond of you. If he wasn't, many things would be

different, girlfriend or not. Look at how Sammi Jo was treated. She paid four times the amount you do, baby."

"I know... but it's still a bit of a wake-up call. I realize I've been too damn naïve all this time, but I loved you too much to really care," Staci said quietly.

"Loved?" Maeve said, noting the past tense with terrifying clarity.

"Love. I love you too much for my own good, Maeve, and I always will."

"Thank you. Love you, too, baby," Maeve whispered and leaned over to kiss Staci on the lips.

"This deal with Smokey's bugs me, though. When I was tending Rose Dougal's bar over on Madison, I often thought about starting a little place of my own... I never dreamt of running the biggest establishment on Jefferson," Staci said with a deep chuckle.

"Well, you asked to run it, baby."

"I know, but... I'm not cut out for it. I know that now."

"Oh, tell ya what, babe. In my eyes, you **are** cut out for it. In fact, I think you're the best, and definitely the sexiest, manager I've ever collected protection money from."

"Aw, Jeez, Maeve," Staci said and chuckled.

"I'm not kiddin'! You may blush whenever you see a boob, but you have one hell of a clever noggin on your shoulders. I'll bet that in a few days, you'll have found a much better solution regardin' that bar. And I hope you know that I'll be behind you one hundred percent," Maeve said and started toying with Staci's black locks.

"I'm glad to hear it, Maeve. I really am. But I'm still a bit shocked about being called a gangster."

"Oh, baby, you know what I say. It ain't never so bad it can't be cured by a..."

"A quick hump. Yeah. I think I've heard that before. And I think I've already told you the answer. Not tonight. But thanks for the conversation, anyway," Staci said and leaned over to repay Maeve's latest kiss.

"C'mon, let me drive you home," Maeve said when they separated.

"No. Danielle has already said she'd do it," Staci said and reached for the lever to open the door.

"Staci, wait. The woman who yelled at you... do you want me to take care of business?"

At first, Staci thought Maeve was joking and she nearly made a quip about it, but the steely look in the Enforcer's eyes made Staci realize that her partner was deadly serious. She gulped and felt

a shiver run down her spine.

"No... no, thank you, Maeve. I'm fine. Really."

"If you change your mind, just say the word, baby. That's what the Family is for. I'll be there for you. Always," Maeve said and put her hand on Staci's thigh.

"I know. Thanks, but it won't be necessary," Staci said and climbed out of the Mustang.

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CHAPTER 7

"Garrett. Yo, Garrett!" Paco said, standing above the sleeping Teddy Garrett.

Paco took a step back and gave the old couch a hard kick, but it still wasn't enough to pull Garrett from his beer-induced slumber.

"We ain't got time for this nonsense. We've only got a few more hours until the deadline and we haven't even looked for a suitable car," Roberta said and put on her black denim jacket. She checked her watch and furrowed her brow.

"Jeez, he's bombed out, the dickless wimp," Paco said, moving away from the couch.

"Fuck him. We've got bigger fish to fry," Roberta said and opened the cellar door. The first rays of the early morning sunshine greeted her, making her reach into her pocket to find her sunglasses.

"C'mon. We've got work to do," she continued, waving her hand. Paco grunted, grabbed his army jacket and left the comatose Garrett behind.

"That's my new wheels? For fuck's sake, Paco," Roberta said when she stood in front of the Dodge Grand Caravan minivan Paco Alvarez had stolen the night before.

"You wanted to travel incognito, didn't ya? Can't get more invisible than drivin' this thing," Paco said and unlocked the minivan.

"Jeez... you're drivin'."

"Where are we goin', anyway?"

"Around. Up and down Franklin and Jefferson."

"It's rush hour, R.C. There's gonna be a shitload of traffic now."

"I know. Shut up and drive," Roberta said and got into the passenger seat.

Twenty frustrating minutes later, Roberta rubbed her face and started tapping her fingers on the console in front of her. When that didn't conjure up a Mercedes either, she slammed her fist down onto the dashboard, setting off a small dust storm.

"Twenty fuckin' minutes an' we haven't even seen anything close to resembling a Mercedes Convertible."

"We gotta go uptown, R.C. We'll never find it down here," Paco said, slowing to a halt at the intersection at Sixth Street, going South on Jefferson.

"Uptown is gonna have all their little surveillance cameras workin' overtime, Paco. The pigs are gonna get there before we can even take a piss."

"How about using Garrett's phone trick again?"

"Won't work. It was all over the news yesterday. Every single one of those fancy-ass broads up there will have heard about it," Roberta said and shook her head.

"R.C., do you think Izzy would mind if this one wasn't a convertible?" Paco said, looking in the rear view mirror.

"Why?"

"There's a Merc C-Class Coupe comin' up behind us. Two women drivin'. Blondes. Easy pickings."

Roberta turned around and studied the car behind them. She could see the two young women laughing and obviously singing along to some music. They were well-dressed, so she surmised they came from somewhere in Uptown. The car was dark silver metallic and appeared to be in prime condition.

"Hmmm..."

"We gotta make a quick decision, R.C."

The traffic lights turned green and the endless rows of cars continued their slow journey South.

"I know. Hmmm. Shuffle around so you get behind them. Let's see what happens."

"You got it," Paco said and swerved out into the fast lane. The cars behind him had to stand on the brakes and several of them honked repeatedly.

"Hey, that's it," Roberta said and snapped her fingers. She turned around again so she could get a clear view of the other car out of the side window. The center lane was slightly faster, so the Mercedes with the two young blondes passed them easily.

"Now get behind them! Real close!"

Paco swerved back into the center lane, cutting off a white delivery van. The Dodge minivan crept closer and closer to the Mercedes Coupe until it was only a few inches off the expensive car's rear bumper.

"I don't think blondie likes having us so close, R.C. She's gonna change lanes again."

"If she does, follow her."

The words had hardly left Roberta's mouth when the Mercedes Coupe changed into the slow lane - as instructed, Paco followed her closely. The driver of the Mercedes touched the brakes several times, making the brake lights flash.

"She's onto us," Paco said.

"Hell, even a blonde can see we're following her."

Paco and Roberta could see through the windshield that the driver of the Mercedes made a big production number out of holding her cell phone to her ear.

"Awwwww, she's gonna call Daddy," Roberta said.

"What's the plan, R.C.?"

"To ram 'em as soon as we get into less traffic. Not hard, though. We don't want to get their bumper scratched. Then we'll turn down one of the streets and get out to exchange insurance info like the polite, law-abidin' citizens we are. Or possibly to bash their cute little blonde heads in, I don't know yet."

Suddenly, Paco could see flashing lights closing fast on the other side of the Boulevard. A police cruiser turned hard left at the intersection at Eighth Street and came to a full stop, blocking the traffic in all three Southbound lanes. Two police officers got out and drew their service revolvers.

"Fuck!" Paco shouted.

"What the... she musta called the pigs! Step on it! Foot to the floor!" Roberta said and found her Walther. Paco turned the steering wheel to the right as far as it would go and stepped hard on the

throttle. Roberta tried to roll down the window, but the lever snapped off in her hand.

"Aw, fuck, what kind of crap wagon is this?!" she said angrily.

The Dodge minivan lurched forward and clipped the rear of the Mercedes Coupe, pushing it several feet to the side and busting the minivan's headlights and grill in the process. Paco kept his foot down on the gas and bumped violently over the curb and onto the sidewalk, making the pedestrians run in all directions to get away from the speeding van.

While they were racing at insane speeds towards the blocked intersection, Roberta used the butt of the pistol to break the side window, sending shards of glass flying all over the sidewalk and the unfortunate pedestrians.

"Eat this, cocksuckers!" she roared and leaned out of the smashed window. She didn't bother to aim, but settled for emptying the entire ten-round clip into the police cruiser.

Not all her bullets hit, but those that did sent sparks flying from the black-and-white, and she managed to hit the windshield and the rotating lights on top of the roof.

The two police officers had dived for cover when Roberta started shooting, but they soon returned fire, creating an even bigger panic among the pedestrians in the firing line.

"Faster, Paco!" Roberta shouted and slapped another clip into her pistol.

"Won't go any faster, fuck it!" Paco hissed, his voice even more hoarse than usual.

"Turn right onto Eighth. We can lose 'em!"

When they reached the corner leading onto Eighth Street, Paco yanked the steering wheel to the right and the minivan bounced off the sidewalk and back onto the street.

The rear window shattered at once, a victim of the hail of bullets the two police officers sent after the escaping criminals, and it didn't take long for both side mirrors to go the same way.

"They're not following us yet! Get to the park. We'll dump this crate and double back to the parking garage. I knew I shouldn't have left my Charger behind!" Roberta shouted, ducking down in the seat so she'd present a smaller target to the shooters.

A couple of hundred yards down Eighth Street, Paco stood on the brakes and the minivan came to a screeching halt in front of a small park. At once, he and Roberta bounded from the vehicle and raced through the shrubbery and across the deserted basketball courts. They continued at full speed through several backyards until they could see the rear side of the parking garage on Ninth Street.

The wailing sounds of a dozen sirens filled the cool morning air and Roberta was almost certain that the police were about to catch up to her and Paco, but when they reached the entrance to the parking garage where she had left her Charger, they were still alone.

They ran into the garage and turned a corner so they were out of sight from anybody walking on Ninth Street. As soon as they were safe, Roberta leaned against the concrete wall, panting like crazy and sweating like a pig.

"Fuck it, I'm outta shape," she said and put a hand on the dusty wall.

Paco wiped some sweat off his brow and looked around nervously.

"R.C., what the fuck are we gonna do now?"

"Follow the plan, Paco. Always follow the plan. Here, you go get the Charger. I'll wait here until you're back," she said and threw Paco the keys to the car.

"I don't know where it is, man!"

"It's on level three... I hid it under a dark green tarp and some cardboard boxes. Will you hurry the fuck up?"

"All right, all right..." Paco said and ran towards the staircase in the corner of the parking garage so he could get to the third floor.

The characteristic roar of the 372 cui Hemi and the sound of the tires squealing on the smooth concrete were comforting to Roberta as she followed her car's progress down towards her. Soon, the Charger arrived next to her and she ran over to the driver's side door.

"Get out, Paco. I'm driving," Roberta said and tugged at the sleeve of Paco's army jacket.

"I guess that means I'm shootin', then," Paco said and climbed out.

Before Roberta got in, she strained her hearing to listen to how close the sirens were to them.

"I can only hear one or two sirens now. That probably means the pigs have found the minivan."

"Probably. Now can we leave?"

"Yep," Roberta said and got in. Driving carefully, she turned right onto Ninth Street and cruised casually towards Franklin.

"R.C., for Chrissakes, we're bein' chased by the fuckin' pigs!"

"There's no way in hell they got a look at us. They're not chasing us, they're chasing the two people in the Dodge minivan who were harassing the cute blondes in the Merc."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"If the pigs knew it was us, they would've come in full force. They didn't. So why attract attention to ourselves? Lie low, drive slow."

Paco stared long and hard at Roberta, but finally admitted to himself that she was right.

Ten minutes later, they were cruising Northbound on Franklin Boulevard, heading towards Uptown. Roberta had turned on the radio and they were listening with great interest to someone reporting live from the incident on Jefferson.

When the reporter handed back to the studio, Paco turned to face Roberta.

"You were right. The pigs think it was two guys."

"Of course I'm right," Roberta said and turned off the radio. The traffic lights at First Street turned red and Roberta slowed down accordingly. A delivery van in front of them turned right, giving them a clear view of the intersection.

"What do we do now, R.C.?"

"Like I said, follow the plan. The deadline is almost here, and we still need a... motherfucker!" Roberta said and slammed her fist down on the steering wheel.

"What? What?" Paco said and drew his revolver. He looked around in a panic for several seconds until he understood they weren't under attack.

"Lookie there what Lady Luck has just brought us," Roberta said and pointed out of the windshield.

In the turning lane on the other side of Franklin, a champagne-colored Mercedes E-Class Convertible was about to turn left onto First Street. The driver was a middle-aged woman wearing sunglasses and a scarf around her head. The rag top was up, clean and unscratched and looking to be in excellent condition.

"We're gonna follow her and do the tire trick. If she doesn't respond, we'll cut her off and blow her to hell," Roberta said coldly.

"You got it," Paco said and checked his revolver.

"Miss! Miss! Your right rear is flat!" Paco shouted, leaning out of the window of the Charger.

The lady in the Mercedes rolled down her window and pushed her sunglasses up her forehead.

"Huh?" she said and put her hand behind her ear.

"Your right rear tire is flat!" Paco repeated, gesticulating wildly at the rear of the car.

"Oh... thank you," the lady said and slowed down, eventually pulling over at the mouth of an alley roughly halfway down First Street. Roberta stopped in front of the Mercedes, and both she and Paco quickly exited the Charger so they could get to the Convertible before the other woman would notice that the tire wasn't damaged at all.

While Roberta went around the rear of the expensive car, Paco came up to the driver's side door and flashed his most winning smile.

"Miss, when you passed us back in the intersection, we couldn't help but noticing that your right rear tire was flat... but don't worry, we'll help you fix it," he said and smiled some more.

When the middle-aged woman hadn't stepped out of the Mercedes after a handful of seconds, Roberta decided to up the charade by whistling loudly.

"Gosh golly almighty, it looks like you've been too close to a curb. You really oughtta come take a look at it," she said, trying her damndest to sound friendly. Wearing a smile that she hoped didn't come across as being too creepy, she walked up to the right hand side window and waved at the other woman.

With a sigh, the middle-aged woman took off her sunglasses and opened the door. Playing the perfect gentleman, Paco held it open for her as she got out - in reality, he was eyeing the pearls she was wearing around her neck and the gold rings on her fingers.

Wearing high-heeled shoes, dark green harem pants and a forest green satin shirt, the woman sashayed round the back of the Mercedes to take a look at the wheel.

"Oh, no, my husband is going to kill me. We've only just bought these whe..." she started to say, but stopped mid-word when she saw that the tire was undamaged - shocked, she turned her head and stared wide-eyed at Roberta.

Not even a second later, Roberta grabbed the middle-aged woman by the scruff of the neck and remorselessly slammed her head down twice onto the rear fender of the Mercedes.

The woman crumpled silently to the ground with blood seeping out of a long gash on her forehead. Roberta looked up and down First Street, but no one appeared to have witnessed the crime. With a satisfied grunt, she hurried back to the Charger to clear the way. Paco followed suit by jumping into the Mercedes and starting the engine.

Roberta quickly reversed out of the way and then leaned over towards the still opened window on the passenger side.

"Meet me at the chop shop in twenty-five minutes. Stay on First Street past Madison and when you get to the docks, go South. Shouldn't be too much traffic there," Roberta shouted.

"See ya there," Paco said and gave her a thumbsup. He selected Drive and pulled away from the curb.

Roberta nodded to herself and reached for her cell phone. Watching the Mercedes driving further and further up the street, she dialed the number she'd been given for contacting the Chicas.

'Yeah?' a gruff, female voice said.

"It's Roberta Cain. Is Izzy Solidas there?"

'No.'

"Tell whomever is in charge that we've got the latest package. We're on our way to the rendezvous point now."

'OK.'

Roberta terminated the call and chuckled over the taciturnity of the Chica she had spoken to. She looked over her shoulder at the woman she had beaten, but quickly decided that she couldn't be bothered to move her further out of sight.

Putting on her sunglasses, she drove off, leaving the middle-aged woman behind alone and helpless in an ever-increasing pool of blood.

Five minutes later, Staci was pulled from her sleep by the familiar wail of sirens driving past on First Street.

When the third emergency vehicle came past in as many minutes, she mumbled a few choice curse words and started fumbling around for her alarm clock. After half a dozen attempts, she finally found the clock and hit the button to activate the little light. She groaned loudly when she saw that it was only twenty to eight, AM, and she angrily turned over onto her stomach to go back to sleep.

Only a minute later, the fourth emergency vehicle came flying past with blaring sirens, and Staci slammed her fist down onto the mattress in frustration. She rolled over onto her back and sat up. Rubbing her tired eyes, she swung her legs out of bed and went over to the windows where she moved the curtains apart a few inches so she could peek out without being watched herself.

To her far right, she could see an ambulance with its lights flashing and the rear doors open, and right next to that was a shock of green lying motionless on the sidewalk. As she was watching, two paramedics and a police officer helped the person in green onto a stretcher and carried it out of sight.

A few minutes later, the ambulance, the paramedics and one of the police cars came by with full lights and sirens, headed for Jefferson.

Staci shuddered and closed the curtains. Fully awake now, she sat down on her bed and ran her hands through her sleep-tousled hair. She yawned widely and came to the conclusion that she could do with a few more hours' worth of sleep.

She opened the drawer in her nightstand and began to rummage around for her earplugs. After finding a dull pencil, a petrified, broken elastic band, the spare set of rechargeable batteries for her vibrator, an MP3 player that she couldn't even remember owning, her prescription medicine for her menstrual cramps and a faded printout of herself and Maeve mugging for the camera in Maeve's cell phone, she finally found the small box with the earplugs.

She opened the box and took out the small plastic bag which she proceeded to rip open. After molding and inserting the earplugs, she fell back down onto the bed and shuffled around to get comfortable, hoping that the Sandman hadn't gone too far.

._*_*._

'...tuning to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. I'm Susan Blaine and it's twenty past noon. We're in the middle of the B-Side Bonanza, so here's...'

"... So you didn't notice anything?" Maeve said into her cell phone as she was cruising South on Jefferson. She reached up to turn the radio down slightly so she could hear better.

'No. Not apart from the emergency vehicles. I couldn't really see anything down there, either,' Staci said from the other end of the connection.

"Oh. Well, I just wanted to hear your voice and stuff. I got a little worried when I heard on the news that a woman had been the victim of a carjacking on First Street."

'That's so sweet, Maeve. But I'm perfectly fine. Do you know anything about the woman's condition?'

"No. They didn't say on the radio."

'The TV news crews have put the Community Hospital under siege, but the info is still sparse. Anyway, are you going with Danielle tomorrow?'

"Well... I don't know if I have the time, honestly," Maeve said and slowed to a halt at a red light

at Eleventh Street.

'Michelle will be disappointed.'

"I know, and it bugs me. I'll try to work it in. It depends on Roberta Cain. If she triggers another major incident like this morning, I'll be swamped in work."

'Mmmm. Where are you now?'

"Jefferson and Eleventh. I'm on my way down to Daly's EmPORNium. He called me to say that he may have seen Shawna Grant."

'Oh! Finally some good news.'

"Yeah."

'Listen, Maeve, if you decide to go with Danielle tomorrow... do you think it would be possible for me to... oh, sleep over at your loft tonight? You know, maybe we could have a drin...'

"Yes!"

'I had a hunch you'd say that, Birddawg.'

"When have I ever not said yes, huh?"

'Let me see... never.'

"That's right, baby," Maeve growled, earning herself a throaty laugh from Staci.

When Maeve arrived at Daly's EmPORNium, all three parking spaces in front of the shop were occupied so she had to turn the Mustang right onto Twelfth Street. She pulled over at the first opportunity, putting two wheels up on the sidewalk.

"Baby, I'm here, so I gotta go. Talk to you later. Love ya," Maeve said and blew Staci a kiss through the phone.

'Love ya more, Maeve.'

The garishly decorated shop windows looked even more vulgar in broad daylight than they did in the dark, and Maeve rolled her eyes several times on her way into the shop.

"I'll be right there, Fever," Patrick Daly said from somewhere behind the circular counter that had been built in the center of the shop.

"Whatcha doin' down there, Patrick?" Maeve said and closed the shop door behind her.

"Wiping up the little mess I just made."

"Forget I asked," Maeve said and got the shivers.

Patrick popped up from behind the counter holding a roll of tissues. He was wearing horn-rimmed glasses, black polyester pants and a white, short-sleeved shirt that was buttoned up so high that it made him look like he had a double chin. It wasn't particularly warm in the shop, but even so, his face was covered by a light sheen of sweat like it always was.

He opened a hatch in the counter and stepped out into the shop. When Maeve saw the large, white splotch of something unidentifiable he was wearing right on his crotch, she had to rub her forehead and look away.

"I spilled some Greek yogurt," he said and held up a spoon and an empty cup.

"Oh... thank God. So... Shawna Grant?"

"I think I saw her the other night. Uhh, would you mind if I went and changed my pants before we talked?" he said, blushing.

"Be my guest. I'm not squeamish, but there's a limit even to my levels of tolerance," Maeve said, trying not to laugh out loud at the man's predicament.

"Be right back," Patrick said and hurried down the center aisle towards a door that led away from the shop.

Maeve put her hands into her back pockets and shuffled over to take a look at some of the new titles that were on display. She noticed with some interest that volume seventeen of 'Cowgirls Hard At Work' had arrived and she picked up the DVD box to take a look at it.

She had made it as far as 'E' when Patrick Daly returned, now wearing a coffee brown pair of polyester pants.

"I'm back, Fever."

"So you are. Shawna Grant?" Maeve said and put down a copy of 'Erotomaniacs Exposed'.

"Yeah. I think I saw her. African-American girl, late teens, caramel complexion, right?"

"Right so far, but there must be hundreds like that."

"Yes, yes, but not with frilly hair and wearing a red windbreaker. Is there a reward?" Patrick said and took off his glasses to polish them.

"Not yet, but there might be if she doesn't return soon. Sounds like you've got the right one, though," Maeve said and scrunched up her face.

"Where did you see her?" she continued.

"Right outside, two nights ago. I wanted to call you sooner, but, you know..." he said and shrugged.

"Yeah. Go on."

"Well, she was peeking through the windows. At first, I wanted to shoo her away... you know, the kids occasionally like to gawk in, but it's really uncomfortable for my customers, so I usually scare them away... uh, the kids, I mean."

"Shawna..." Maeve said, trying to steer Patrick back on course.

"Oh, yes, anyway, when I saw it was her, I ran outside and called her name, but she had already left. I saw a red windbreaker maybe one hundred yards further up Jefferson, but I couldn't go after her with people in my shop. I hope you understand that?" Patrick said and took off his glasses again.

"Yeah, I get it. Hmmm. And you haven't seen her since?"

"No."

"Shit. How did she look? Was she beaten, or...?"

"Oh, I didn't see her long enough to tell, but she seemed... I don't know... fairly normal," Patrick said and shrugged.

"Mmmmm. All right. Thanks, Patrick. Now, on the subject of Roberta Cain..."

"I haven't seen her at all since she got out. And not that other character, either. Paco Alvarez, right?" Patrick said and picked up a small feather duster. He started walking through the aisles, dusting off the boxes.

"Right. Hmmm."

"But I did see someone who I think may have something to do with it. A young pup called Al Jones. Goes by the street name Jonesy. He came in last night looking like he'd been run over by a steamroller," Patrick said, pointing the feather duster at Maeve.

"So?"

"I asked him what the hell had happened, because he'd been in here late last week and he was fine then... he didn't really want to talk about it, but he mumbled something about some badass

bit... um... woman having done it to him."

"Hmmm...?"

"Yeah, and I thought, *'hey, either it was Fever or it was someone else.'* And that someone else might be..."

"R.C.," Maeve said and absentmindedly ran her index finger across her lips.

"So it wasn't you?"

"No. I've never heard of him. Is he a local?"

"From what I know, he hangs around up on Eighth. There's no way you can miss him if you start lookin'. His face looks like a fully decorated Christmas tree."

"Right. I think I'll do just that. Thanks, Patrick."

"Wait a minute, Fever, you can't leave yet. I have a few things for you."

"Oh?"

"Yep. I have a few used rentals that I thought you might be interested in. I used to have a deal with Jimmy Snakes, but he hasn't been around lately."

"Naw, he won't be back for a while. He hit the jackpot. Used rentals?"

Patrick put the feather duster away and went behind the counter. A few seconds later, he came back out, holding a neutral white plastic bag filled to the brim with colorful DVD boxes.

"DVDs. Some of them are a bit scratched, but they should all play without any problems. There's an eight day warranty in case something major is wrong with them."

"Looks pretty good from where I'm standin'," Maeve said with a grin as she peeked down at the top box.

"Top quality, only the major production companies. People come in here and try to push their home-made videos all the time, but I always show them the door. You wouldn't believe how crappy some of them look."

"I hear ya. Did you sort them, or are they just random titles straight off the shelves...?" Maeve said and reached for the plastic bag.

"Oh, no, they're painstakingly sorted. You won't find any... uhhh... unwanted bits and pieces in any of 'em."

"Thanks, Patrick," Maeve said and grinned broadly.

"Anytime."

"Listen, if Shawna Grant or that Al Jones character returns, call me. Day or night, doesn't matter, just call me. And try to get them to stay here until I arrive."

"Will do, Fever."

"That's a good boy, Daly," Maeve said and put her hand on the shop door's handle.

Concluded in Part 2

**Norsebard's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ White Fever III - Fever Vs. The Carjackers ~
by Norsebard

Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

PART 2

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CHAPTER 8

A quarter past two, PM, Roberta turned off Franklin and drove up Thirteenth Street. The low-pitched growl of the Charger's engine echoed between the houses in the narrow street, creating a surreal effect.

"Are we going to the Palm Tree?" Paco said.

"That's right. I've got \$4000 in my pocket and I've got an urge for some male company... no offense, Paco," Roberta said with a grin.

"None taken."

"... And what better place to get that need taken care of than at the Palm? Hell, I remember back in the old days, the Palm Tree was the worst lice-infected, disease-infected, cockroach-infected

dump in the entire City, but from what I hear, the place has really come alive. Of course, it doesn't hurt that the owner is just a front for Izzy Solidas," Roberta said and turned off Thirteenth Street and into a gravelly parking lot.

The Palm Tree bar was a one-story building placed at the far end of the parking lot. Apart from a flaky coat of white paint and a tacky neon sign of a Hawaiian-style green and yellow palm tree above the main entrance, it was non-descript. The windows were whitewashed and the door was reinforced with heavy metal bars.

A video camera next to the door was slowly panning back and forth, covering the entire parking lot and filming all who walked past.

Roberta walked up to the door and pressed a small button on a door bell. A few seconds later, the door creaked open, revealing a mountain of a man. Roberta and Paco nodded to the bouncer and stepped inside.

The interior of the Palm Tree wasn't exactly world-class, but it did have plenty of atmosphere. The room was divided into two equally large halves, a bar counter made of highly polished dark wood to the left and a lounge with a couch arrangement and a low table to the right. In the center, a long hallway with four doors on either side led off from the main room.

Everything was held in shades of red - the carpet was crimson, the light emanating from the lamps was faintly pink and the booths and the bar stools were all fire engine red.

Four of the seven bar stools were occupied by prostitutes, two men and two women. Roberta briefly looked at the two women, scoffing at the cheap, red plastic dress one of them was wearing, but soon let her trained eye roam over the two men. The first one was discarded at once, but the second seemed to be her type exactly - long-limbed and brawny.

She walked over to the second man, checking him out as she walked closer.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi."

"You up?"

"Always. Watcha lookin' for?"

"Oh, little of this, plenty of the other," Roberta said and put her thumb inside her belt.

"I can deliver."

"How much?"

"\$200 for a single, \$350 for both of you," the man said, looking at Paco.

"He ain't part of it."

"Then it's \$200."

"Sounds fair enough. Let's go," Roberta said and started walking towards the hallway in the center of the room. The man emptied his drink and followed her.

"Enjoy yourself, R.C.," Paco said just as Roberta let the male prostitute open the door to the first room. Roberta grinned and pushed the brawny man into the room.

Jerri Layne nearly choked on her watered-down brandy when she realized who it was that had entered the bar. Trembling inside, she looked at Paco Alvarez who was still standing in the middle of the room, apparently busy feasting on Jerri and her colleague.

She reached for her purse so she could leave the establishment, but Paco beat her to the punch by shuffling over to stand in front of her. His cold eyes slowly traveled down her front, undressing her as they went along and giving her a major case of the creeps in the process.

"So... what are you drinking?" Paco said and moved in very close. He put his hand on the inside of Jerri's thigh and began a slow journey up under her dress - at once, Jerri reached down and removed the hand in no uncertain manner.

"I need to see some dough first," she said firmly.

"Do you doubt I have it, bitch?" Paco hissed.

"Hey, big boy, why dontcha buy me a brandy?" Jerri's colleague, Mara, said. She grabbed Paco's hand and allowed him to run it freely up and down her thigh.

Paco grinned and moved over to Mara. Before he focused his attention on the pretty brunette in front of him, he sent Jerri a cold, hard glare that almost made her blood freeze over.

Seizing the opportunity, she grabbed her purse and hopped off the bar stool. She threw a couple of bills on the counter and hurried away from Paco and out of the bar.

With trembling hands, she dug into her purse to find her cell phone. Once she had it, she ran across the parking lot and hid behind a car. Her fingers were shaking so badly she could hardly click her way through the registry, but she finally managed to find Fever's number.

'Fever. Talk to me,' Maeve's familiar voice said from the other end.

"F-fever, it's Jerri... Jerri Layne. Th-thank God I reached you. I'm down at the Palm Tree and Roberta Cain and her little weasel are inside!" Jerri said, speaking so fast that the words were

blurred together.

'Whoa, slow down, slow down, Jerri. I didn't catch a word of that.'

"G-god, Fever, I'm at the Palm Tree. Roberta Cain is here!"

'Fuck! Are you safe?'

"Y-yes!"

'Stay where you are, then. I'll be there in a few. I'm all the way up on Third.'

"P-please hurry!" Jerri said, but Maeve had already terminated the connection.

She put the phone back in her purse and crouched down at the far end of the car she was hiding behind, hoping and praying that she was out of sight from the bar.

Eight minutes later, Maeve turned onto Thirteenth Street with Danny and Doyle right behind her sharing a Lincoln sedan.

As Maeve rapidly closed the distance to the Palm Tree bar, she had the strangest feeling in her gut - it was almost like the Grim Reaper was looking over her shoulder. A cold trickle ran down her spine, but she took a deep breath and forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand.

Shaking off the premonition, she turned into the gravelly parking lot and took the first parking spot. She quickly got out of the car and waved her hand at Danny.

He stopped the Lincoln and rolled down the window.

"Block the exit so Roberta can't escape," Maeve said. Danny nodded and went about maneuvering the large sedan to plug the gap between the wall of the next building and a row of plastic barriers.

Maeve took the Beretta out of her shoulder holster and checked the clip. Her heartrate had increased exponentially and she had to wipe a few drops of sweat off her brow. She went round the back of the Mustang, constantly keeping an eye on the door to the Palm Tree.

"Jerri?" Maeve said, holding the pistol ready in case it was a setup.

"I'm here, Fever," Jerri said and came out of her hiding place. She dusted off her hands on her plastic dress and walked over to Maeve, her legs wobbling slightly because her high heels were digging into the gravel.

"Talk to me."

"Roberta Cain and her little pet weasel came in about ten minutes ago. She's in the back with some gigolo and I guess the weasel must be humping a working girl right now. Another john has just arrived with a dame, but he didn't look like he had anything to do with the others."

"And you're sure it's them?"

"The weasel in the Army jacket called her R.C.," Jerri said, wringing her hands.

"OK. All right, Jerri, stay out here. This is gonna get very, very ugly," Maeve said and put a hand on Jerri's shoulder.

"God, Fever, are you going to kill them?"

"Probably."

"Please stay safe. Even though you're cheating on your girlfriend, you're cool."

"Jerri, fer cryin' out loud, I'm not... oh, I'll explain later."

Maeve took off her leather jacket and threw it into the Mustang. She took a deep breath and then closed the car door behind her.

"Danny! We're going in," Maeve said and started running towards the door to the bar.

When her two broad-shouldered associates were in place behind her, Maeve worked the action on her Beretta and pressed the small button for the door bell. As soon as the door was opened, she pushed her way past the bouncer and quickly scanned the room - no Roberta.

"What da fuck?" the bouncer said and tried to grab Maeve's shoulder, but she was much too fast for him. Danny stepped in after Maeve and put a 12-gauge shotgun up the bouncer's nose. Doyle took that as a cue and rushed in to protect Maeve's rear.

"Just stay there, Fatty T," Danny growled, pressing the barrel of the shotgun against the fat man's face.

The bartender jumped and reached down under the counter when he saw Maeve, but stopped abruptly when the Enforcer whistled at him.

"If ya wanna die now, just take whatever it is you're reachin' for," she said, pointing the pistol directly at the bartender's head. The bartender stepped back from the counter and put his hands in the air.

"I've come for Roberta Cain," Maeve said loudly. She slowly turned around, looking at the

denizens of the Palm Tree. A working girl had her arms wrapped around a balding, pot-bellied man in the couch arrangement in the lounge and a male prostitute was sitting at the bar holding a drink.

"Th-they're in the b-back, b-both of them," the bartender said and pointed at the hallway in the center of the bar room.

"Which rooms?"

"One and th-three."

Maeve turned her head and began to move towards the hallway - a split second later, she saw light reflecting off a barrel of a gun right in front of her.

"GUN!" she shouted, but the weapon had already begun to spit fire.

"Eat lead and die, motherfuckers!" Roberta Cain shouted as she jumped out into the narrow hallway and began to spray the room with hot lead. The first bullet zinged past the Enforcer, but the next clipped her right arm, sending her sprawling to the ground.

Within milliseconds, the bar room turned into a war zone with lead flying everywhere, glass breaking and people screaming. From her position on the floor, Maeve emptied the entire clip in Roberta's direction, but she soon had to get up and jump to safety when Paco joined the fray with his .32.

After landing very ungently on the floor behind the counter, Maeve peeked over the edge and saw that Danny was wrestling with the fat bouncer at the door, and that Doyle had been hit and was lying still in a pool of blood in the center of the room.

She cursed loudly and ejected the spent clip. Her right forearm and hand were covered in blood, but she managed to reach up and pull out a new clip from the holster. She slapped it in and fired blindly at the hallway several times.

Suddenly Maeve suffered a tremendous blow across her back that made her cry out in pain. Moaning and hurting like hell, she fell against the side of the counter, badly winded from the unexpected hit.

Maeve turned her head and locked eyes with the baseball bat-wielding bartender who had snuck up on her from behind - he raised the bat again, intent on crushing Maeve's skull, but she cut him down with two quick shots to the chest before he could get to her.

"Motherfucker," she growled and spat at his corpse. She turned around and peeked over the counter again. Just as she was watching, Danny finished the wrestling match with the bouncer by ramming his shoulder into the other man's considerable gut and then headbutting him into oblivion.

In the midst of the confusion, Roberta turned around and fired twice at the lock on the fire exit at the end of the hallway. The old, rusty door flew open, leaving a clear exit for her and Paco.

"Paco!" Roberta shouted, pointing at the open door. He nodded and ran towards it - in two steps, he jumped through it and was gone.

Roberta walked backwards, covering her escape by emptying another clip into the front room of the Palm Tree. Once she reached the door, she turned around and sprinted across the parking lot.

When the thunderous roar of the Hemi engine in Roberta's Charger reached Maeve's ears, she cursed loudly and jumped over the counter. She ran to the front door and fired several times at the black car as it raced through the lot. The blood coating her fingers made the trigger so slippery that it threw her aim and she was only able to hit the Charger once, her bullet ricocheting off the hood in a shower of sparks.

Roberta expertly avoided the parked Lincoln and crashed through several plastic barriers that marked the edge of the parking lot. Once she was out on Thirteenth Street, she hit the gas and the Charger disappeared towards Franklin in a cloud of tiresmoke.

Maeve sighed and leaned against the doorjamb. The adrenaline slowly left her system and was soon replaced by a sharp, throbbing pain. The hit she had received from the bartender's bat made its presence felt in full force and she couldn't stop a groan from escaping her lips.

"Fever!" Jerri said, running towards the stricken Enforcer. Keeping up appearances, Maeve waved back and put the Beretta in the holster.

"Jerri, don't. You don't wanna see what's in there," Maeve said and put her good hand on Jerri's arm as the working girl was about to step into the Palm Tree.

"Oh, God, you're bleeding!"

"I got nicked on the arm," Maeve said, looking in disgust at the bullet hole that had ruined one of her favorite shirts. She rolled her eyes and tore off the sleeve so she could tie it around her arm above the wound.

"Oh, no, don't do... that... please..." Jerri said and promptly fainted from the sight of the bright red blood coating the Enforcer's muscular arm.

"Jeebus, that's all I needed," Maeve said and slapped her forehead.

"Fever, Doyle's badly wounded," Danny said, standing in the door. He looked quizzically at Maeve when he noticed that Jerri was lying flat on her back on the gravel.

"Fuck. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Do you need a sling for that arm?"

"Nah, it's just a flesh wound. But I'm gonna need a sling for my ass when Staci finds out," Maeve said and rubbed her brow with her good hand.

"What about her?" Danny said and pointed at Jerri.

"Carry her inside. No, scratch that. Carry her over to the Stang, it's open," Maeve said and went into the bar room.

._*_*_*._

In the Charger, Roberta pressed hard down on the accelerator, making the black muscle car fly towards the intersection.

When they got there, it had already turned red, but she jerked the steering wheel to the left to pass the waiting cars and then drove into the intersection on the wrong side of the traffic lights. All around them, people braked heavily and honked their horns, but Roberta didn't care at all.

She took the corner on two wheels, powersliding the Charger through the turn and onto Franklin Boulevard.

When Paco realized they were driving North instead of heading towards safety in the South, he turned his head and stared at Roberta.

"Where the fuck are we going? We can't stay here, R.C.! We gotta go down to the Chicas!"

Roberta Cain didn't answer - instead, she just looked straight ahead, baring her clenched teeth in a fierce sneer.

They were driving so fast that the cars they passed were merely colorful blurs and Paco was worried that Roberta had lost it. She didn't slow down at all until they reached Eighth Street, and even then, she just dabbed the brakes to get around the corner in one piece.

When they reached the apartment complex that housed their hideout in the cellar, Roberta slammed her foot down on the middle pedal, making the Charger stop so abruptly that Paco had to brace himself against the dashboard.

"Paco, get to the cellar and grab all the money. If Garrett is still there, kill him!" she roared.

Paco nodded and quickly left the car.

Two minutes later, he came back carrying a CoolMart bag with the money they had earned from the previous carjackings. He jumped into the car and threw the plastic bag into the footwell.

While Paco was away, Roberta had turned the Charger around so it was now pointed in the direction they had just come from, and as soon as Paco closed the door, she stepped on the gas. Soon, they were once again travelling at reckless speeds down Eighth Street, headed for Franklin.

"We're going to Adams Boulevard and then down South," she said.

"All right."

"Was Garrett there?"

"Nope."

"Lucky for him."

._*_*_*._

At the same time, Maeve stood in the center of the Palm Tree and surveyed the damage. Doyle Brennan had regained consciousness but he was looking very pale and he had developed a nasty, rattling cough.

Maeve crouched down next to Doyle and looked at the gunshot wound in his chest.

"I'm fucked, right?" he croaked.

"Not too bad, buddy. I think it's fixable. You'll be back with your girlfriend in no time. Hang on, the meat wagon will be here soon," Maeve said and got up.

Danny came into the bar room and made a beeline for Maeve and Doyle.

"Fever, I've put the babe in your car," he said, grinning.

"All right."

"C'mon, Doyle. Let's get you outside," Danny said and hoisted up in the wounded soldier.

After making sure that Doyle got out safely, Maeve went over to check on the obese bouncer.

The fat man sat up and rubbed his gut. When he saw Maeve approaching, he spat on the floor in front of her boots.

"You fuckin' Donnelly bitches... you really think that the Chicas will accept you trashing their place? They gonna come and wipe your asses," he said, suddenly realizing that he had said far too much.

"Care to rewind about ten seconds or so? This is a Chica bar? So Mario di Franco sold out to the

Chicas, did he?" Maeve said and put her hands on her hips.

"Fuck you. I'm not sayin' another word."

"Suits me fine, Fatty T. That means I won't have to listen to you pleadin' for your stinkin' life."

The fat man harrumphed and started crawling towards the door.

Maeve spun around on her heel and went over to the couch arrangement and the four prostitutes who were sitting there, nursing various cuts and bruises.

"You, big boy. You were with R.C.?" Maeve said, looking at the tallest of the three men.

"Yeah. My name is..."

"Don't give a fuck, Sunshine."

"Oh..."

"Did she tell you where they might be headed?"

The gigolo just shook his head and looked away.

"How about you, Mara?" Maeve said, turning to the pretty brunette.

The brunette's right eye had already begun to develop a shiner and she was holding a blood-soaked napkin under her nose. She shrugged and shook her head at the same time.

"No, Fever," she said quietly.

"Paco beat ya?"

Mara nodded but immediately regretted it as the gesture sent a new wave of blood out of her nose.

"Yeah. When he heard your voice, he punched me twice in the face and said that I'd betrayed him."

"All right. Listen up, everybody. Gather up all your things and go home... wherever-the-fuck that may be. This rathole is gonna suffer another little incident in a few minutes' time," Maeve said loudly to make sure that all had heard it.

"Excuse me, Miss... I'm just an innocent bystander in all this... are... are you going to tell my wife I've been here?" the pot-bellied man said. The working girl he'd arrived with continually stroked his chin, apparently to calm him down.

"Should I?" Maeve said and put her hands on her hips.

"No, oh, no, no... I was just... I was just... thank you."

"You're welcome."

"What about my money? That bitch didn't pay in advance," the male prostitute said.

"Excuse me? One dead, two wounded and your colleague was beaten and you're complainin' about your money?"

"I fuckin' well need my money!"

"Well ain't you just shit out of luck, buster."

"But I want my mon..."

"Are you arguing with me?" Maeve said with a cold smile.

In a flash, Mara, the other male prostitute, the pot-bellied man and his girlfriend all shot up from the couch and fled out of the front door.

"No... no, I'm not," the gigolo said nervously.

"I didn't think you were. Now scram. The next time we meet, I expect you to have learned some manners," Maeve said and kicked out after the man when he got up and left.

A few moments later, Maeve went through the eight rooms one by one to see if anyone else was hiding there. Satisfied that she was alone, she picked up the shotgun Danny had left behind and used the wooden butt to break all the doors and smash all the lamps.

When she was done, she walked back out into the main room and worked the shotgun's action. She turned around and aimed at the wall of bottles behind the counter.

"Aw shit, this is gonna hurt," she said and pulled the trigger. The recoil from the shotgun blast sent a wave of pain through her arm and particularly her back, but she clenched her teeth and ignored it. Working the action again and again, she fired off four more shots at the wall.

The blasts smashed every single one of the bottles, distributing the expensive contents all over the floor and the body of the bartender. Maeve grinned wickedly and put the hot shotgun over her shoulder - message delivered.

After jimmying the cash register and swiping the \$1700 she found there, Maeve reached under the counter to search for the bar's paperwork. She couldn't find a ledger, but she did find a

notepad containing pages after pages of information. She whistled quietly to herself and put it in her pocket.

Outside, two paramedic units had arrived and Doyle Brennan had already been loaded into the back of one of the ambulances. There was just enough time for Maeve to walk into his line of sight and give him a wave and a big thumbsup before they closed the rear doors and drove off.

"They're sending him to the Community Hospital," Danny said, walking up behind Maeve.

"Good. Here's your shotgun. You need to clean it," Maeve said and threw Danny the 12-gauge.

"Man, you look like shit," Danny said, staring at Maeve's ripped shirt and at her formerly white jeans that now sported blood stains all over the right pant leg.

"I know. I'm certainly keepin' my tailor in business, huh?"

"Looks like it."

Maeve tightened the knot around her arm - and hissed loudly when it stung like hell. She tried to hide it behind a cough, but Danny had noticed.

"All done," she said, clenching her hand a few times to prove that she wasn't badly hurt.

"Yeah, right. You need to get that wound treated. Your uncle will rip my head off and crap down my neck if I let anything happen to his favorite niece," Danny said, put his big paws on Maeve's shoulders and pushed her towards the remaining ambulance.

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Moments after the clock had struck ten PM, Maeve's cell phone rang. After jumping into a pair of pale gray sweat pants that matched the tank top she was wearing, she came out of the bathroom and quickly walked over to the coffee table to pick up the phone. As she reached down for it, the bruise on her back was stretched and the pain made her eyes pop wide open.

"Goddamn," she croaked and stood up straight.

"Fever. Talk to me," she said into the phone.

'It's me. Open Sesame?'

"Hey, baby. It's already on its way down," Maeve said and walked over to the panel next to the airtight door. She pressed the green button and listened to the elevator as it worked its way down to the ground floor.

"Hiya. You look fantastic," Maeve said as soon as her partner entered the loft. Staci was wearing blue jeans and a pale blue, unbuttoned shirt hanging loose over a black spaghetti strap tank top.

"Thanks, Maeve... Hey, what's wrong with your arm?" Staci said, taking off her black fleece jacket.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just a mosquito bite," Maeve said and picked at the bandage the paramedics had put on.

"A mosquito bite? Don't lie to me."

"Well, I guess I kinda got shot at earlier today. But it only grazed me."

Staci stopped what she was doing and stared wide-eyed at the Enforcer. A heartbeat later, she let go of her jacket and ran over to her partner.

"One of these days, Maeve Donnelly, one of these days..." Staci said quietly and wrapped her arms around the shorter woman.

"... But baby, I ducked! Just not enough..." Maeve said, wearing the most angelic smile she could muster.

Staci just shook her head and sighed deeply - then she gave Maeve a crushing bear hug that made Maeve cross-eyed from the pain in her back.

"Hey, I'll always be here. Always," Maeve said, burying her face in the nook of Staci's shoulder. She knew she was wearing a pained expression, but she didn't want to appear weak, so she took a deep breath and just shrugged it off.

"You better. What am I gonna do without you, baby?" Staci said and framed Maeve's face with her hands. She leaned down and placed a very tender, very loving kiss on Maeve's lips, once again marveling at the incredible contrast between the Enforcer's tough-as-nails appearance and the softness of her lips.

"No, really, it wasn't that bad. Honest," Maeve said when they separated.

"Who was it?"

"Roberta. Who else. We almost had her, baby. She was getting her socks rocked down in a cathouse on Thirteenth when Jerri alerted us."

"Jerri... from last night?"

"The one and the same. When it was all over, Jerri fainted and we had to carry her over to the

Stang so she could sleep it off."

"Heh. So what happened with Roberta?" Staci said and picked up her jacket. She hung it on the hallstand and went over to sit down in Maeve's leather couch.

"She and Paco Alvarez got away."

"Oh. That's too bad."

"We haven't seen the last of 'em yet. I can feel it in my gut. Anyway, enough talk about R.C. You want a drink, baby?"

"I'd like a Coke if you have it."

"Not a Bourbon?" Maeve said and opened the refrigerator.

"No, I'm trying to cut back a bit. What's this?" Staci said and peeked into a large, white plastic bag that was sitting on the coffee table.

"Well... take a look, baby."

Staci reached into the bag and took out one adult DVD after the other - 'Virgin In The City', 'Scent Of Lust', 'House Mistress 6'...

"O... K. Holy shit, did you rob Patrick Daly's place when you went to see him this morning?" Staci said, holding up a particularly colorful box. Just looking at the titles made her cheeks blush crimson red and she hurriedly put them all back into the plastic bag.

"Nope. They're used rentals," Maeve said and put a tray with a bottle of Coke, a can of beer, two glasses and two napkins down on the table.

"Oh... they're... uhhh... all adult."

"All of 'em, baby," Maeve said and sat down next to Staci.

"'Cowgirls Hard At Work 4'?"

"Long legs in leather chaps, baby," Maeve whispered into Staci's ear.

"Are you gonna sell them on?"

"No, are you kiddin'? They're for my personal collection."

"Oh..."

"See anything that might interest you?" Maeve said and put an arm around Staci's waist.

"Oh, you know... I'm not really into all that... porn... stuff."

"Baby, that sounds mighty odd comin' from a horny li'l devil like you," Maeve said and began to feast on the side of Staci's neck.

"That's... ohhhh... that's diffe... ohh... different," Staci said, leaning into Maeve's hungry mouth.

"Mmmm?"

"Yeahhhhhh."

Maeve pulled back and flashed her trademark crooked grin. She moved her hand under Staci's shirt and began to run it up and down her partner's long torso.

"So... did anything else happen since we last met?" Staci said and took the bottle of Coke. She poured it into the glass and took a long swig.

"Nah. Not really."

"Don't you want your beer?" Staci said and pointed at the unopened can.

"Changed my mind. I want you instead."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah, baby."

"Maybe a little later," Staci said with a wink.

"Ohhhh, you're killin' me slowly here."

"Gotta build up the excitement a little, you know," Staci said and leaned back in the couch.

"Too much buildup can lead to a two-minute conclusion, baby," Maeve said and started to toy with Staci's long locks.

"Good thing we women have been blessed with the ability to have multiple O's," Staci said and took another swig of the Coke. When Maeve didn't react, she turned her head - and giggled off the comical look on the Enforcer's face.

"I swear to Gawd, Staci... just when I think I have you all figured out, you hit me with such a punch line. Rrhhoawwrrr," Maeve said and leaned in so she could resume her feasting.

"I can see that we're gonna have to extinguish the flames quickly today. Come on, baby, lie down," Staci said and pushed a very willing Maeve down on the couch.

Not even a second after Maeve's bruised skin had come into contact with the fabric, a bolt of pain shot through her body and she hissed loudly and arced her abused back off the couch.

"Wha...? What's going on, Maeve?"

"Oh, it's noth..."

"If you're gonna say 'it's nothing' again, can it. Turn around and take off your tank. I wanna see what's wrong," Staci said sternly.

"Yes, ma'am," Maeve said, hooked her thumbs inside her tank and pulled it off.

"See? Everything is where it's supposed to be. Nothing wrong at all," Maeve said with a grin, flexing her pecs.

"Cute, Maeve, very cute. Now turn around," Staci said after rolling her eyes.

"Yes, ma'am."

Maeve sighed and turned around, counting down the seconds until Staci's inevitable explosion - she didn't get very far, as it only took her partner one second to blow up.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Maeve Donnelly! What in the flaming pits of hell have you done to your back, woman!?" Staci said, her voice climbing in both pitch and volume as it went along the sentence.

"Some dude with a bat mistook my back for his ball."

"Gawd, Maeve!"

"The vest caught the brunt of it, though."

"Jesus!"

"Yeah. If it hadn't, my upper spine and my ribs would have resembled a box of crushed pretz..."

"Not another word out of you, Maeve Donnelly. Not another word."

"I'll be a mouse, baby," Maeve said and turned around to face Staci.

"How is your lower back?"

"Actually it's pretty good right now. Maybe the blow shook something back into place, huh?"

"Could be. Maeve, how in the hell are you ever going to catch a wink of sleep tonight with a

bruise like that?"

"On my stomach on top of you, baby. Besides, we won't have time for sleepin'," Maeve said and pulled Staci's tank top out of her jeans so she could claw her partner's stomach.

"No, wait a minute. It wouldn't feel right... and don't forget, you have to get up early in the morning," Staci said and shuffled a bit back on the couch.

"I do?"

"To go with Danielle to her sister's birthday party, dummy!"

"Oh, that's right. I had forgotten all about that," Maeve said with a chuckle.

"Figures."

"But, baby, would you deny a hurtin' woman her last wish?" Maeve said and manufactured a world class pout.

"Well, if you put it like that... I guess we could work something out."

In a flash, Maeve got off the couch and removed her sweat pants, revealing that she wasn't wearing any underwear. Staci blinked a few times, but then a shit-eating grin spread out over her features.

"You said something about playing doctor. Well, Madam Physician, it just so happens that I have a very persistent itch that needs to be scratched on a regular basis..." Maeve said and straddled Staci's lap. She took Staci's hand and kissed her partner's long digits.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, and... well, I can scratch it myself, but it really needs an expert's touch," Maeve whispered and slowly let Staci's hand glide down her front until it reached the target.

"We better get to the bottom of it right away," Staci husked and reached up with her free hand to pull Maeve's head impossibly close. They looked at each other for one sizzling second and then began to kiss each other senseless.

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CHAPTER 9

"Maeve?"

"Hrmpf."

"Maeve?"

"Hrmpf!"

Staci shook her head and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She put on the too-short purple kimono that Maeve had somehow talked her into wearing the night before, and walked around the foot end of the bed.

"Maeve?"

"Hrmpf... Hmmppf."

Sitting down on Maeve's side of the bed, Staci silenced the alarm clock that had been ringing for the last minute.

"Come on, Maeve, it's a quarter past seven. Danielle will be here soon," Staci said and let her fingers slide over the vast expanses of nakedness in front of her.

True to her word, Maeve had slept the entire night on her stomach - and when she had discovered that even a t-shirt hurt, she had foregone clothes altogether, save for her boxers.

"Ohhh, but I don't wanna," Maeve whined.

Staci resisted the temptation of slapping - or pinching - Maeve's buttocks, but she knew that she had to find a way to get the Enforcer out of bed. She chose the one solution that always worked.

"I'll meet you in the shower if you get up now," she whispered into Maeve's ear.

"I'm up," Maeve slurred and raised herself up on her arms. Yawning, she rolled over onto her butt so the bruise didn't come into contact with anything solid.

"Hey, baby. Good morning," Maeve said with a wink. She leaned over and placed a kiss on her partner's cheek.

"Good morning, Tiger. Knew I could bribe you to get up."

"But of course. Shower?"

"Shower," Staci said and took off the kimono.

Twenty-five minutes later, Maeve's phone rang while she was trying to get dressed. With a groan, she walked over to the coffee table and picked it up.

"Yeah?" she said, rolling her eyes over the fact that even something as simple as picking up the phone hurt.

'Fever, it's Danielle. I'm downstairs, but I can't figure out how to get the elevator to come down...?'

"You can't from down there. I need to press a button," Maeve said on her way over to the panel. Her thumb was already hovering over the green button when she started thinking about how easy it would be for someone to gain access to her loft just by getting someone she knew to call her first.

"Uhh, Danielle. Hang on. It'll be there in a few. OK?"

'Sure.'

"Baby?" Maeve said and walked into the kitchen where Staci was busy making breakfast.

"Yeah?" Staci said and put a bread knife down on the kitchen table.

"I'm going to pop down in the alley for a moment. I just wanted to tell you," Maeve said and put on her leather jacket. As soon as the heavy fabric made the silk shirt press against the bruise, it started to hurt, and Maeve made a disgusted face.

"OK. But why? Wasn't that Danielle calling before?"

"Yeah, but I'm getting a bit paranoid over this thing with R.C., so, you know... better safe than sorry," Maeve said and took the Beretta out of the shoulder holster.

"All right... I can understand that. I'll make breakfast while you're away. Toast or buns?"

"Is that a trick question, baby?"

"You're a sex maniac, Maeve Donnelly," Staci said dryly.

"Hey, isn't that why you keep me around?" Maeve said and hurried out of the kitchen in case Staci decided to throw something at her.

A few minutes later, Danielle and Maeve walked into the loft. Danielle put a plastic bag down by the foot of the hallstand and then took off her jacket.

"Wow, Fever. You have a really nice place here," Danielle said, craning her neck to take in all the sights of the expensively furnished apartment. As she was gawking at the four skylights in the ceiling, the exercise equipment, the enormous flatscreen TV and at the abstract paintings on

the walls separating the large living area of the loft from the smaller rooms at the back, she seriously considered changing careers, but she knew that she'd never get her husband to agree to it.

"Yeah, it's my little love shack," Maeve said and tried to take off her leather jacket without stretching the bruise too much.

"Hi, Danielle. Please wish your sister a happy birthday from me when you get home," Staci said as she walked into the living room, carrying a tray of various breakfast products.

"Hi, Staci. Will do."

"Have you eaten?" Staci said and put down the tray on the coffee table. She fluffed a pillow and sat down on the couch.

"Yes, but those hot buns sure look fine," Danielle said and sat down next to her boss.

Over by the hallstand, Maeve let out a loud, cheeky laugh that earned her a Death Glare from Staci.

"Are you sure you can take off your jacket by yourself, honey? You've tried for nearly thirty seconds now," Staci said and picked up a hot bun and some strawberry jam.

"Yeah, yeah. I got it."

"Maeve got a bit hurt yesterday," Staci said after Danielle had shot her a quizzical look.

"Oh. In the shootout down at the Palm Tree?" Danielle said and took a large bite out of a bun.

"Yeah. You know about that?" Maeve said when she finally got around to sitting down. She picked up the coffee pot and poured some of the brown liquid into a mug.

"It's all over the grapevine."

"Figures. Pass me a bun, please, baby," Maeve said and winked.

Staci handed Maeve the tray so she could choose the bun she wanted - predictably, Maeve took the largest.

"The jam is right over there," Staci said and pointed at the small jar of strawberry jam.

"Thanks."

"It's funny, Maeve, you and I have known each other for a few years, but I've never been up here before," Danielle said and finished off her first bun.

"Weeeellll, I guess we never had a reason to meet here," Maeve said, looking at Staci with a gleam in her eye.

"Huh?"

"Oh, that's just Maeve being Maeve. She means that you like boys too much to catch her eye," Staci said.

"Ohhhh... right. Well, Fever, I'm not sure you'd be my type, anyway," Danielle said and nudged Staci in the side with her elbow.

Maeve stopped chewing on her bun and stared at Danielle with mock hurt pride.

"Har! Chew on that, Birddawg," Staci said and flicked a crumb in Maeve's direction.

After Maeve had swallowed the bite, a saucy smile creased her lips, and she leaned forward and lowered her voice.

"Just as long as I'm *your* type, Mizz Hart, I'm content."

"Oh, you are, don't you worry about that," Staci said and winked.

"ANYway... so, Danielle, how long is the drive to your parents' house upstate?" Staci said, trying to steer the conversation back to a safe topic.

"Typically two hours fifteen minutes or so. Depends," Danielle said and picked up a second bun.

Maeve groaned, already thinking about the torture it would be to have something grind on her bruise for that long.

A while later, Maeve started the Mustang and drove out of the elevator and into the alley. She rolled down the window and put her hand out. Staci took it and leaned in.

"See ya tomorrow, Maeve. Please drive carefully," Staci said and placed a kiss on Maeve's lips.

"Always do."

"No you don't," Staci said and gently slapped Maeve on her arm.

"Don't worry, boss, I'll make sure Fever sticks to the law," Danielle said.

"Thank you. You don't wanna be late, so... off you go," Staci said and took a step back.

Maeve blipped the throttle several times - and laughed when Staci demonstratively put her

fingers in her ears.

"See ya, babe," Maeve said and selected Drive. Before long, the Mustang GT crept through the alley, turning left at the end of it and heading onto Fourth Street.

Staci waved until the loud muscle car was out of sight, and then she walked over to her slightly more subdued blue Volkswagen Jetta to drive home.

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'... Police is still asking for help from the public in the violent carjackings that have taken place in our fair City over the last few days, so if you have any information, please call the special hotline the Police has set up at 1-800-1127. I'm Miles O'Shea and you're listening to CityTalk on 9-6-2 AM. CityTalk, the only station where you have the word. Right, it's just after six PM, and the topic for this hour is 'how do we battle the ever-increasing crime rate.' I hear we have a caller already. Hello, you're on the ai...'

Staci reached up and turned off the radio as she drove into the parking lot at the rear of the Three-In-One Club. Parking in her reserved spot, she noticed a mat black car she hadn't seen before, and after getting out of her Jetta, she went over to have a look at the sleek machinery.

'I must be paying my dancers too much if one of them can afford such a car... too bad Maeve isn't here. She'd have loved it,' Staci thought and chuckled.

She found her keys and walked over to the rear entrance. Moments before she inserted the key into the lock, a figure stepped out of the shadows to her right.

Staci sensed it more than she saw it, but when the figure came closer to her, she took a deep breath and reached into her purse.

"I have a gun," she said loudly, hoping that it would scare away the shadowy figure.

"Fancy that, so do I," a female voice said from somewhere to Staci's left. The familiar metallic sound of a pistol being cocked rang through the parking lot, sending a cold shiver racing up and down Staci's spine.

She instantly connected the dots and knew she was in trouble. Goosebumps rose on her arms and legs and she had to clench her lips together to stop them from quivering.

"Maybe you've heard of me?" the other woman said, stepping closer.

"You're Roberta Cain," Staci said in a monotone.

"Well done. And you're Staci Hart, White Fever's number one cunt."

Despite the dangerousness of the situation, a spark of anger ignited within Staci when she heard

the harsh words, and she turned her head to look at Roberta.

"How dare you talk to me like that?" Staci said angrily.

"That man over there is my associate, Paco Alvarez. I'm sure you've heard of him, too," Roberta said, completely ignoring Staci's remark.

"What do you want? You want my car?"

"Sorry, I don't do shoeboxes," Roberta said and stepped into the cone of light that was created by the bulb above the door.

Staci shivered when she finally saw the person she had heard so much about - Roberta's pale complexion appeared to be bordering on gray in the November dusk, and Staci could see through Roberta's open denim jacket that the black prison tattoos on her chest stood out heavily against the paleness of her skin.

Suddenly Paco grabbed Staci's purse and yanked it out of her hands.

"What she got in there? A Saturday Night Special?" Roberta said, but Paco just shook his head.

"Nope. A silver-plated .22 pistol," he said and emptied the contents of the purse all over the ground.

"Awww, isn't that sweet. I'll bet Fever gave that to you to commemorate your first fuck."

"What do you want?" Staci said again, clenching her fists.

"I want some info. How much does Fat Ass Freddie Donnelly know? And why hasn't he made a move against us?"

"How should I know? I'm not part of the inner circle!"

"Oh, come on, do you expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth..." Staci said desperately.

"Why did Fever leave the City this morning? Is she talking to some of Fat Ass Freddie's people up North?"

"How did..."

"I have my sources. Tell me."

"But I don't know anything!"

"Bullshit. I'll bet that Fever tells you plenty when you have your fist up her..." - Roberta never had time to finish the sentence, because Staci suddenly closed the distance between them and slapped Roberta hard across the face.

The slap sounded like an explosion in the quiet parking lot, and Staci knew she had overstepped the line even before the palm of her hand connected with Roberta's cheek.

"You've earned yourself a bullet in the head for that, you fuckin' whore," Paco said hoarsely and grabbed Staci's arm. Forcing her around, he pressed her hard up against the back door to the club and drew his .32 revolver. He cocked it and held it at Staci's throat.

Afraid to even breathe, Staci studied Paco's face and his ice cold eyes. Even though he was several inches shorter than she was, she had no doubts that he'd be able to hurt her if he wanted to... or if Roberta wanted to.

"No. Wait, Paco. I want her to be there when I take out her precious little Fever," Roberta said, holding her stinging cheek.

Paco slowly backed away from Staci. When he had taken a few steps back, he stretched out his arm and aimed his revolver directly at Staci's head.

"Pow. You're dead," he said and pretended to pull the trigger. Staci twitched, a gesture that made Paco laugh in a cold and menacing fashion.

Moments after the Charger had left the parking lot, Staci slowly crumbled down the side of the back entrance to the club, ending up in a crouch on the grating. She held her head in her hands and started to shake.

Once the initial shock had left her system, she started gathering up the items that had been in her purse. When she found her cell phone, she sat down on the grating with a bump and just stared at it.

She desperately wanted to hear Maeve's voice, but she knew it wouldn't take the clever Enforcer very long to sense that something was wrong - and on top of that, it would take Maeve several hours to get back to the City, even if she broke all the speed limits.

With a trembling sigh, Staci got up from the grating and found the last missing items, including her keys. She unlocked the door and hurried inside.

The first thing she did when she arrived in her office was to pour herself a healthy bourbon that

she downed in three large gulps.

The strong liquor hit her in the gut like a prize fighter, and she had to put her hand on the wall for support. Taking a few deep breaths, she wobbled on shaky legs over to the couch and let herself fall down on it without even taking off her fleece jacket.

"Oh, God, Maeve... I wish you were here..." Staci whispered and put her arm across her eyes.

A few moments later, someone knocked on the door. When no one replied, the person peeked inside.

"Staci?"

"April...? Oh, not now, please... I'm... I'm busy."

"I just wanted to say that there's a problem with one of the loudspeakers, but Danielle isn't here, so..."

"I can't fix it, I'm not a technician."

"No, but..."

"Go away. Please," Staci said without removing her arm from her eyes.

"Uhh... OK," April said and softly closed the door.

Staci sighed deeply and started thinking about what she could do. She discarded one idea after another until she arrived at one in particular.

"Damn, why didn't I think of that sooner," she said out loud and sat up. The bourbon she had downed before kicked in and she had a brief dizzy spell.

Struggling a bit with the balance, she got off the couch and went over to her swivel-chair. She opened the top drawer and took out a small, leatherbound notebook that she proceeded to flip through. It didn't take her long to find the number for the Donnelly mansion and she put the notebook away and reached for the phone on her desk.

'The Donnelly mansion, it's Wynne Masters.'

"Wynne, you don't know me, but I'm Staci Hart, the manager of the Three-In-One Club down on Jefferson."

'You're Miss Donnelly's girlfriend, right?'

"That's right. I need to speak with Danny Watts... urgently. Please tell me that he's working tonight."

'Danny Watts... yes, he's out on the street. Do you want me to call him so he can contact you?'

"Yes, please. Quickly, if you can. Tell him that I've had a little problem."

'Will do, Miss Hart. Goodbye.'

"Bye, Wynne," Staci said and put down the receiver. She leaned back in the swivel chair, hoping that it wouldn't be too long.

Two minutes later, the phone rang, and Staci reached for it at once.

"Hello?"

'Miss Hart, it's Danny. What's wrong?'

"I... I need you here. Roberta Cain was here, and she..."

'I'll be there. ETA five minutes,' Danny said and hung up.

"Thank God," Staci whispered and sighed deeply.

Right on time, Danny knocked on the door to the office five minutes later. In the mean time, Staci had paced back and forth in the office, almost wearing a hole in the carpet.

"Enter!" she said and looked expectantly at the door.

"Miss Hart?"

"I'm here, Danny, come in. And like I've told you a hundred times, please call me Staci."

"You said Roberta Cain had been here?" Danny said, standing in the middle of the office.

"Yes... she was out in the parking lot when I arrived. She and Paco Alvarez. They both pulled their guns on me," Staci said and shivered.

"What did they want?"

"Information about Fast Freddie Donnelly."

"Did you tell them anything?"

"I didn't have anything to tell them, dammit!" Staci said and turned around. In frustration, she ran a hand through her hair and cursed quietly to herself.

"All right, sorry. Staci, I need to know if they were aggressive towards you?"

Staci had a brief flashback of Paco holding his revolver against her throat, and she moved her hand up to the spot where the cold steel had touched her skin. She found herself too choked up to speak, so she settled for nodding.

"I understand. That makes it a whole 'nother story. Have you called Maeve yet?"

"... No. Not yet. She's upstate, and... no."

"OK. Well, if Cain returns, she'll have to deal with me," Danny said and crossed his arms over his considerable chest.

Staci noticed for the first time since she had arrived at the club that she was still wearing her fleece jacket, and that it was much too warm in her office for such clothing. She unzipped it and took it off - but when the head of the zipper accidentally hit the corner of the glass desk with a loud bang, she jumped and started shaking again.

In a heartbeat, Danny crossed the room and wrapped his arms around Staci to offer her some comfort. Feeling safe for the first time since her encounter with Roberta and Paco, Staci dropped all pretenses of being in control and started to cry against Danny's broad shoulder.

"It's all right, Staci... it's all right," he said in a soothing voice. He patted Staci gently on her back and led her over to the couch.

"Oh, damn, I'm so embarrassed," Staci said quietly once they had sat down.

"Don't be. It must've been a bad experience for you."

Staci shrugged and pulled back.

"It was. Oh... I've made a wet patch on your jacket," she said and wiped her eyes.

"Hell, I'm glad I was here for you to cry on," Danny said with a chuckle.

"Still," Staci said and made to get up, but Danny put his hand on her arm.

"Forget it. You want some coffee or something?"

"Mineral water... please."

"Fizzy it is. Where's your fridge?"

"Don't have one. I always go out in the bar to get some."

"OK. I'll be right back. How much do you want?"

"Oh... a bottle."

"Gotcha. Don't go anywhere," Danny said and got up.

Staci nodded and put her feet up on the couch. She moved herself up so she could rest her head on the armrest, and once she was comfortable, she closed her eyes and let out a long, slow sigh.

Danny returned to the office a few minutes later, holding a 33 fl. oz. plastic bottle of mineral water. He took two tumblers from the small table next to the minibar and put them on the coffee table in front of Staci. Effortlessly, he unscrewed the cap of the bottle and poured some mineral water into Staci's glass.

"That's enough, thank you," Staci said and put her feet back down on the carpet.

Danny filled the other glass and picked it up. He sloshed the contents around a little bit and then took a swig.

"Just because I drink mineral water doesn't mean you have to, Danny," Staci said and took her glass.

"I never drink alcohol."

"Really? Never?"

"No. Because I never know when I'm called out on a job."

"Oh... makes sense."

"And also because I used to have a bit of a drinking problem," Danny said, almost as an afterthought.

"Oh. When you were wrestling?"

"Yeah. Do you like wrestling, Miss Hart?"

"Danny, for the last time, please call me Staci. No, I... um, don't like wrestling, quite honestly. Did you have a special name?"

"Yeah. I was the Scorpion. I had a pretty good record, but I got kicked off the roster for brawling. It was my own fault," Danny said with a shrug.

"Come on, sit down. I can feel that talking helps me take my mind off the other thing, so... let's talk," Staci said and patted the couch next to her.

"Thanks."

"How long have you known Maeve?"

"Well... a handful of years, I guess. When I came to the Donnelly family, she was working as an, uhh, understudy for Big Sully. You know, learning the ropes to use a wrestling term."

"That's how I met her. In my Dad's flower shop," Staci said quietly.

"I remember you talking about that."

"Mmmm. Danny, how many Enforcers has Fast Freddie had over the years?"

"All in all... a lot. It's a dangerous job, after all. But let me tell you, Maeve is by far the most clever and cunning of all of 'em. She's incorruptible... like Elliott Ness," Danny said and chuckled loudly.

"Well, she did have one weakness," Staci said, remembering all too well an incident that had happened on a dull Thursday afternoon a few years earlier.

"True. 'Did' being the operative word. I know for a fact that she hasn't even looked at another woman since you came back," Danny said and put a hand on Staci's shoulder.

Staci blushed and looked down. She tried to hide it by taking a swig from the glass, but Danny had already noticed and he patted Staci's shoulder.

"You don't need to worry about that these days, Staci."

"Good. So... uh... one of your men was shot yesterday, wasn't he?"

"That's right. Doyle Brennan. He was lucky, though. The bullet fractured a rib and then pffft," Danny said and showed with his thumb how the slug had ricocheted off Doyle's rib.

"Oh..."

"The rib pressed against his lung, but he's fine now. I spoke to him after he'd been through surgery."

"Was that Roberta, too?"

"Her or her little friend. It was kinda hard to tell who was shootin' where at that time."

Staci nodded and took a long swig from the mineral water. She looked down at the contents of the glass, almost like she was trying to find some answers in the bubbly liquid.

"Maeve's gonna blow up when she finds out what happened tonight," she said quietly.

"Yeah."

"I have to admit... that side of her scares me sometimes," Staci said and put the glass down on the table. With a sigh, she rested her chin on her hands.

"I can understand that, Staci. You seem to have a good, pure heart."

"Well... thank you. It's not like it's completely alien to me. When I was tending the bar over at Rose Dougal's place, I ran a little numbers game for some of the customers... and, of course, I knew Maeve wasn't working for the Salvation Army back when we lived together the first time."

Danny laughed and emptied his drink.

"So, anyway... thanks for stopping by, Danny. I feel better now," Staci said and got up from the couch.

"All right. Hmm... here's what we're gonna do. When you're ready to close up for the night, call me and I'll come and pick you up."

"Oh, no, you don't ha..."

"Staci, may I be frank?"

"Uhhh... by all means."

"Maeve has told me you live on First Street?"

"Yeah?"

"Roberta Cain has already done a job there, so, quite frankly... I don't think you should go back to your own place tonight. Not alone, anyway. And I know that my wife will cut off my balls if she finds out that I've spent the night guarding a beautiful woman, so I'm going to take you out to the Donnelly mansion."

"Oh, Danny, is that really necessary?" Staci said and folded her arms across her suddenly upset stomach.

"I'm afraid it is. Cain is an unpredictable animal. There's no telling what she might do."

Staci's shoulders slumped, but she realized that Danny was right, so she eventually nodded in agreement.

"All right... but how about a compromise? If Maeve isn't back at Midnight, or if she hasn't called me to say she's on her way, I'll call you then. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fair enough. That's a deal," Danny said and put out his hand.

With a tired smile, Staci shook it, hoping that Maeve would return soon.

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Staci tried her best to act normal the rest of the evening, but when the clock struck Midnight and Maeve still wasn't back, she gave up and reached for the phone on her desk. She took the small business card Danny had given her and punched in the numbers to his cell.

'It's Danny.'

"It's Staci Hart. Maeve hasn't called me, so... do we still have a deal?"

'We certainly do. I need to drop something off first, but I'll be at the club in roughly ten minutes. Don't go outside, I'll come in.'

"All right. See you then," Staci said and hung up. Putting on her jacket, she turned off her laptop and the lights, and then locked the door to the office.

Out in the main room, dancers were hard at work at all six poles and the row of barstools in front of the catwalk were all occupied by businessmen and -women, sipping Margaritas and giving the women on the stage \$50 tips.

At once, Staci could hear that April had been right - one of the loudspeakers sounded very off. She sighed and made a mental note to call a technician first thing in the morning.

Staci searched for April and found her working the pole in the far left corner of the catwalk. When their eyes met, April winked and then jiggled and wiggled away from the pole, down the steps and over to Staci.

"Hey. You're really pale," the dancer said, moving in so close that Staci began to feel uncomfortable.

"I've had a shitty evening."

"Oh? I know a fab cure for that," April said and leaned in, looking like she was about to steal a kiss. Surprised, Staci put a firm hand on the dancer's shoulder and pushed her away.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, April?"

"Oh, just hoping that we could, you know, get better acquainted," April said and sniggered.

"Are you high?"

"Maybe I am. But only a little bit," April said and playfully reached for Staci's hips.

Staci closed her eyes and shook her head.

"April, I don't need this crap tonight. You know the house rules. No drugs."

"Oh, come on. I've just had some nosecandy. It doesn't hurt anyone and it makes me a better dancer," April said with a pout.

"I don't care what you took. Rules are rules. Now, get back up there and do your stuff... but I want a word with you tomorrow afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am," April said and gave Staci a mock salute - and a flick of the tongue.

When the dancer had gone back up on the catwalk, Staci exhaled and rubbed her forehead.

"More problems?" Danny said, suddenly standing next to Staci.

"Kinda. But this time, I can handle them. Did you see anything outside?"

"No, everything's clean and green."

"Good. I'm ready... wait a minute, what about my car?" Staci said and put her hand on Danny's arm.

"I'm open to using your car if you want to. I'm here in one of the Lincolns."

"Oh, I.. no, I guess it's all right to let it stay here tonight. All right," Staci said and began walking towards the exit of the nightclub.

Ten minutes later, Danny drove the big Lincoln up the curved driveway and stopped in front of the Donnelly mansion. The drive there had been uneventful, leaving Staci plenty of time to think about what would happen when Maeve came home after the trip upstate.

"Well, here we are. This is where I leave you," Danny said and pulled into one of the parking spaces.

"Oh... you aren't coming in?"

"No, I still got a few hours to go on my... uh, shift. But Seamus Moloney is working the door and before I picked up you, I called ahead to relay what's been going on."

"Oh... OK. Well, thank you so much for your swift support tonight," Staci said and put out her hand.

"Don't mention it. It's all part of Family life. Well, g'night Staci," Danny said and shook Staci's hand.

A few moments later, Staci waved to Danny as he reversed out of the parking space and drove back down the curved driveway.

She sighed and walked over to the main entrance of the mansion. After knocking on the door, she remembered Maeve's advice about always standing so that whomever was inside could see her, so she took a few steps back.

The gunslit was opened and a blue eye peeked out. Two seconds later, the door was unlocked and then opened.

A huge man stood in the doorway, and for the briefest of moments, Staci felt like running away. The man was at least 6'5", weighed no less than 300 lbs. and he was wearing Doc Martens boots, black pants, a black, commando-style sweater and a pale brown leather shoulderholster that held a silver pistol of some kind.

His shaved head was most likely intended to give people a fright, and it definitely worked that way for Staci - she stared at him wide-eyed.

"Hi, I'm Staci Hart. You're Seamus Moloney?" she managed to say in a croaky voice.

"That's right. Come on in, Miss Hart. Danny told me all about what happened," Seamus said. His Irish accent was so thick that Staci had trouble understanding him, but she nodded and stepped inside.

"Mr. Donnelly is ready to see you at once," Seamus said and led Staci over to the double doors that led to Fast Freddie's den.

"Oh, but..."

Seamus reached past her and slid open the doors. Then he held out his hand and an actual, genuine smile creased his lips, surprising Staci no end.

Staci looked ahead and observed Fast Freddie Donnelly get up from his leather armchair and wave her inside. She gulped and stepped into the den.

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CHAPTER 10

A quarter past midnight, Roberta Cain pulled over at the curb on Eighth Street and turned off the headlights.

"If Garrett's not here in three minutes, we're leaving," she said and tapped her fingers on the Charger's steering wheel.

Two minutes and thirty seconds later, Teddy Garrett came running out of the grassy lot, carrying two large plastic bags. After fumbling with the door for a while, he jumped into the car and sat down on the back seat with a bump.

"Hey. I didn't want to leave all the beer," he said and dug into one of the plastic bags to find a can.

Paco shook his head and muttered a few choice curse words in Spanish.

"That's nice, Garrett, but if ya spill any beer on the upholstery, I'll kill ya," Roberta growled.

"I know, I know. So... did my tip pay off? Did you find Fever's main squeeze?"

"We found her. She didn't have anything. But she more or less confirmed that Fever left yesterday morning," Roberta said.

"Oh... well, like I said, I was out strollin' and I happened to look up and there it was, there was Fever's ride up at First Street goin' towards Uptown, and..."

"You already told us, Garrett," Roberta said and started the Charger. She drove down Eighth Street, headed for Franklin.

"Right. Where are we going now?" Garrett said and cracked open the can.

"Izzy has given us another job."

"Again? Jesus Flippin' Christ, R.C.! Are you fuckin' nut... I mean, you're just askin' for trouble, man!" Garrett said and gripped the back rest of the seat in front of him.

"It's five G, wimp. You expect me to walk away from five G?"

"No, but... Jeez!"

"It's the last one. I've already told Izzy. We'll do this one an' then I'll concentrate on the thing I have planned with Fever."

"Which is what, exactly?" Teddy Garrett said, hoping that he might scoop up some free info.

"Well, it's... none of your fuckin' business, Garrett."

Ten minutes later, Roberta pulled over on Adams Boulevard, just off the Twelfth Street bridge.

"There," she said and pointed out of the window at a brand new Chrysler 300C, parked in front of an apartment complex.

Garrett whistled.

"Nice. What's the plan?"

"Haven't decided yet. I don't know who owns it, so we can't use the phone trick. I doubt they'll leave anytime soon, so we can't use the tire trick, either," Roberta said.

"I'll scout it out," Paco said and reached for the handle to open the door.

"There's a doorman in the lobby. A young motherfucker in a maroon uniform with a cap 'n everything, readin' a newspaper. He'll know for sure who's driving the Chrysler, so if we can draw him outside, we can force him to buzz 'em down. And then we can wham-bam 'em," Paco said when he returned to the Charger.

"Good thinking, Paco. But if he sees you or me, he'll just call the cops. Hmmm... Garrett, the stage is all yours," Roberta said.

"But... you want me to...?"

"Yeah."

"But how?"

"Get to work, wimp. We'll be waiting over here."

"Aw, Jeez, R.C.," Teddy Garrett said and downed the rest of the beer he was drinking. A sudden flash of inspiration hit him and he took another can from the plastic bag. With a grunt, he left the Charger and ran across Adams Boulevard.

Once he reached the building, he went up to the windbreak and peeked inside. Like Paco had said, a doorman was sitting behind a counter, reading some kind of newspaper and occasionally

looking at a small TV that was on his left.

Teddy took a deep breath and went to work. He put the can of beer down on the ground, walked into the doorman's line of sight and started freaking out the best he knew, including thumping and kicking the window panes of the windbreak.

The doorman looked up and shooed Garrett away from the windbreak, but didn't get up from his chair.

Teddy harrumphed and went for plan B. He took the can of beer, shook it heavily and then sprayed the contents all over the lobby's expensive glass facade.

That did the trick - in one second flat, the doorman jumped out of his chair and ran to the entrance. He yanked the door open and grabbed Garrett by his greasy lapels.

"You fuckin' creep," he said and started to shake the defenseless Teddy.

A few seconds later, the doorman found himself surrounded by Roberta and Paco who took him by the scruff of his uniform and forced him back inside the lobby.

"I...! I... d-don't have anything of v-value!" he stuttered, revealing that he wasn't as cool as he looked.

"Who owns the Chrysler outside?" Roberta said and pressed the doorman against the wall.

"Wh... what?"

"Who owns the Chrysler that's parked outside? If you make me ask you again, I'll break your fingers!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Jeremy MacQuillan. Th-they live up in a-a-apartme..."

"Don't give a fuck where they live. Call them and tell 'em their car has been vandalized. Do it now!"

"But it's much too late to call... OOOOF!"

Not satisfied by the negative answer, Roberta planted her fist deep into the doorman's gut, making all the air rush out of him in an instant. He began to crumble down to the floor, but Roberta held onto him.

"Call them," she said and banged him back up against the wall.

A few minutes later, a distinguished looking middle-aged gentleman with glasses, gray hair and a

pencil-thin mustache stepped out of the elevator and walked into the lobby. He tied the belt on his bathrobe and started looking around for the doorman.

"Mr. Johnson! We pay you to protect our property. I demand to know why you haven't done your job," he said, walking closer to the doorman, who was sitting behind the counter in the center of the lobby.

Suddenly Roberta jumped out from the pillar she had been hiding behind and grabbed the middle-aged man. She cocked her Walther and held it to his ear.

"Hello, Mr. MacQuillan. Did you bring your car keys?"

"My c-car keys...? Yes... yes, I did," the middle-aged man said and reached into his bathrobe pocket.

Unnoticed by either Paco or Roberta, the doorman saw a golden opportunity to become the hero of the day - he grabbed the remote for the TV and threw it hard into Paco's face.

When Paco tried to shield his eyes, the doorman jumped up from his chair, tackled him and took them both to the ground, landing in a heap of arms and legs.

Roberta roared, yanked the car keys out of Jeremy MacQuillan's hands and gave him a violent shove that made him fall backwards.

She fired the Walther twice into the ceiling of the lobby, but even that didn't stop the doorman from wrestling with Paco.

Calmly, Roberta went over to stand above the two men. Leaning down, she whacked the butt of the Walther into the doorman's neck, and when he rolled over onto his back in defeat, she aimed at the man's face and squeezed the trigger.

The doorman's head exploded all over the floor, and Jeremy MacQuillan screamed and started to crawl back to the elevator. He reached up and tried to hit the UP button, but his hands trembled too much to be of any use.

Roberta turned around and shot him twice in the back.

"You all right?" she said to Paco who was nursing a bleeding nose.

"Yeah."

"Here's the key. You drive the Chrysler. Meet you at the chop shop in..." - she checked her watch - "Meet you there at one. OK?"

"OK," Paco said and got up. He dusted off his army jacket and flicked a chunk of the doorman off his lapel.

Teddy Garrett ran into the lobby, alarmed by the shooting. His eyes grew wider and wider and his jaw fell further and further down as he looked at the bodies of the two men.

"Wh-what the fuck!?! You've killed them... you've killed them both!" he said, his voice climbing in pitch until it was a near-shriek.

"And we've scored a Chrysler 300C," Roberta said as she walked past him, headed for her Charger.

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"Staci, you needn't sit like you're at the cathedral. Relax a little," Fast Freddie said, chuckling over Staci's rigid pose.

Chuckling nervously, Staci released the breath she'd been holding and wiped her sweaty hands on her thighs.

"That's better. A drink?"

"Yes, please. Bourbon if you have it."

"I don't. Can't stand the taste of it, to be honest. But I do have O'Connor's Finest Irish Whisky," Freddie said and walked over to the bar.

"That'll do nicely, Sir."

"On the rocks?"

"Yes, please. Thank you, Sir."

Fast Freddie Donnelly poured the amber liquid into two glasses and put a large ice cube in each. After taking a couple of napkins, he lumbered over to the couch and sat down next to Staci.

"There ya go," he said and handed Staci her glass.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Staci... we're practically family. Call me Freddie," the big man said and slapped his hand down on Staci's shoulder.

"All right. Maeve has told me that you used to be a boxer?"

"That's right. A little hard to believe now, huh?" he said and patted his rather voluminous belly.

"Well..." Staci said with a shrug.

"I used to be a pretty Goddamn good boxer, actually. I was in 140 fights and when I retired, my record was 112-and-28. A lot of my defeats came towards the end of my career, so I saw the light and joined the Family business instead. Damn, that's nearly forty years ago," Freddie said with a deep, rumbling laugh.

"Well, Maeve has definitely inherited the Donnelly fighting spirit."

"She has, but she got all of that from my sister, bless her soul. Mmmm," Freddie said and briefly started reminiscing about his late sister.

"I've only known Maeve as an adult... how was she as a child?"

Fast Freddie turned his head and shot Staci a very familiar look that instantly reminded her of Maeve.

"Oh, you wanna know what Maeve was like as a little girl, do ya? Well, lemme show you something. Hang on."

His eyes sparkled as he said the words, and after a brief struggle, he got up from the couch and walked over to a mahogany sideboard behind his desk. Leaning down, he unlocked one of the doors and pulled out an old photo album. After holding it up so Staci could see what it was, he walked back to the couch and sat down with a bump.

"Prepare to get... uh, bowled over," he said and handed the leatherbound album to Staci.

She flipped it open and stared wide-eyed at the first photo. The caption was written in a female hand, and it read,

'Maeve aged five. Our little princess.'

Staci kept staring at the photo, finding it hard to believe that the little girl in it was actually Maeve Donnelly - Maeve was holding a large, sparkly star on a plastic rod and she was dressed in a pink gown with puff sleeves and a wide, white band across her stomach. She was wearing pink shoes and white knee-high socks and her hair had been shaped into an impeccable coiffure that fit the princess-theme perfectly. The priceless ensemble was rounded off by a tiara crowning her head.

"Oh. My. God," Staci breathed, fixated on the charming photo.

"Maeve doesn't know I've kept it. And if she ever finds out, I have a feelin' she'll invoke the succession a little sooner than I'd like," Freddie said, leaning in towards Staci.

"Gawd, she's so cute! Look at those eyes, they're still the same," Staci said and pointed at Maeve's Irish green eyes.

Staci flipped the page in the photo album and found Maeve again, this time wearing a black dress and surrounded by a large group of beefy men, all equipped with matching black suits and sunglasses. She took a deep breath and then let it out slowly.

"Is this from her mother's or her father's funeral?"

"Her mother's. My sister. Maeve took it well. She refused to cry in front of people she didn't know, but she... well, she let go in the limo on the way back here."

Staci turned her head and looked at Fast Freddie's profile. She wondered if he knew that his niece was still like that - not willing to show her softer side to anybody in case they'd exploit it.

"Mmmm," Staci said and went back to looking at the ten or so pictures from the funeral. One man appeared in most of the shots, but Staci couldn't really place him. She pointed at a photo where he was seen clearly.

"Who's that? He seems familiar."

"Well, that's me. 220 lbs. ago, I'm afraid," Freddie said with a chuckle.

"Oh... sorry."

Staci flipped through the pages until she came face to face with a picture of a teenaged Maeve holding hands with a girl her own age. Both were wearing identical shy smiles, but, typically, Maeve was looking at the other girl instead of at the camera.

"Oh... I had forgotten all about that photo. She was one of Maeve's first girlfriends. I can't even remember her name," Freddie said and turned the loose picture so he could get a better look at it.

"How old was Maeve then?"

"Twelve, I think. Maybe thirteen. At that point, I believe that Maeve was still trying to figure herself out, so she had a lot of friends, both boys and girls. Never anyone serious, though."

"Oh."

"I have to admit that I was a bit... uh, surprised when Maeve told me she was a... uh, you know, that she liked girls. I didn't have any experience at all with things like that, but I knew that my sister would have loved Maeve no matter what, so I did, too. And still do, obviously," Freddie said thoughtfully.

"Not all families are as understanding," Staci added offhand.

"So I gather. Well, just after Maeve's fifteenth birthday, we had a very good heart to heart where we talked about all kinds of important things. Did you have a similar conversation with your parents?"

"Yes, but I was a few years older. And it didn't go as smoothly."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that. Well, as Maeve grew older, she began to get into plenty of conflicts with a lot of people, emotionally and otherwise. I guess all teenagers do that... but being the powerful li'l lassie she was, she preferred to settle them with her fists. Flip the page, you'll see what I mean."

Staci flipped onto the next page and gawked at a picture of a sixteen year old Maeve sitting crooked on a chair. She had very short honey-blonde hair and she was wearing blue jeans and a plaid men's shirt over a black tank top. She had a look of utter annoyance on her face, and her lips were just a thin, colorless line.

"Oh...!" Staci said, unable to tear her eyes away from Maeve's angry face.

"I seem to recall that she wore exactly that expression for most of her middle-teens," Freddie said with a chuckle.

"Heh... she's certainly lightened up since then."

"After an incident where she had flattened a group of older boys because they had bullied her over her looks and her, you know, sexual preferences, I decided that she needed a mother figure to show her the softer side of things... and I sent her down to join Roberta Cain's Cue Ballz crew on Eighth Street."

"Well..."

"It was either that or a boarding school, but I knew that Maeve would turn a school upside down within the first week, so... Roberta Cain got the gig."

"Well, I'm not sure she showed Maeve the softer side of things, to be honest."

"No. But I didn't realize that until later. Staci, you have to remember that even though it was only twenty years ago, things were different back then. Maeve wasn't supposed to join the Family at all and I just thought that if she spent some time with an adult woman, she'd... well, calm down a bit. She didn't really, but the experience certainly helped her turn into a very clever young woman," Freddie said and put his hands in his lap.

Staci nodded and closed the photo album.

"Hey, I have a great idea. You would honor me if you and Maeve came over to dinner tomorrow night at seven..." - he checked his watch - "No, I mean tonight at seven. It'll be a double date, 'cos I've already invited Rose Dougal... what do you say? We'll have some wine and good food and yap endlessly about the old days."

"Dinner? Oh, I'd... I'd like that very much, thank you."

"Good. I wouldn't have taken no for an answer, anyway," Freddie said, took the photo album and got up from the couch.

At much the same time, Maeve pulled up to the red light at Franklin and First Street and activated her turning signal.

She yawned so widely that she missed the lights changing to green, but a second later, a taxi cab behind her started honking. She turned left onto First Street, hoping to persuade Staci to let her spend the night at her place.

Maeve drove into the parking lot in front of Staci's apartment, but stopped abruptly and rubbed her eyes when she realized that the blue Jetta wasn't there.

With a puzzled grunt, she dug into the glovebox for her cell phone - after finding it, she flipped open the display and called the office at the Three-In-One Club.

Maeve let it ring for nearly a minute, but no one picked it up. She terminated the connection and tapped her phone against her lips. After a few seconds, she punched in the number for Staci's cell.

'It's... it's Staci.'

"Hey, baby. I've missed ya. I'm at your place. Where the heck are you?"

'I'm... I'm...'

"Are you over at my loft?"

'No, I'm... I'm out at the Donnelly mansion.'

Maeve removed the phone from her ear and stared at it in surprise. Shaking her head, she put it back and continued talking.

"The mansion? What are you doing there?"

'I was... I had a little incident.'

"I know something's wrong, baby, 'cos I can hear it in your voice. What kind of incident? Did the woman from Smokey's call you again?"

'Oh, no... it was... it was Roberta Cain. She was at the back entrance when I came to the club tonight...'

Maeve's eyes narrowed down until they were no bigger than Irish green slits. A vein started pumping on the side of her neck and she gripped the phone very hard. Her tiredness disappeared like the morning dew, and even the pain from her back faded away.

"Roberta Cain?" Maeve said, her voice suddenly so cold and steely that a shiver ran down Staci's back at the other end of the connection.

'Yes. And Paco Alvarez, too.'

"What did they want from you?"

'They wanted some info and... and threatened me with their guns... but I actually...'

"They held you at gunpoint?"

'Yes... but, Maeve, please calm down. You must be very tired. Can't you come out here so we can talk about it?'

"I'll come. A little later on."

'No, baby, please... I need you... I really need you. Please!'

"Mmmm," Maeve said and put her phone under her chin. She pulled her Beretta out of the holster and checked the clip.

'Maeve... it sounds worse than it was. I was scared, yes, but Danny helped me. Nothing really happened. Maeve, please... don't get yourself killed chasing her.'

Maeve closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Baby, I'll be out at the mansion in an hour's time. There's something I need to do first," she said and closed the phone. She started the Mustang and reversed out of the parking lot.

"She hung up on me," Staci said and closed her cell phone.

"Maeve's a tough gal. She'll be fine," Freddie said and put his arm around Staci's shoulder.

"I know, but..."

Sensing that Staci was upset, Freddie got up from the couch and went over to the bar. He took a new glass and poured Staci another whisky.

"It'll do you good," he said and offered Staci the glass.

"Thank you."

A cold shiver ran down Staci's spine and she felt her lower lip starting to quiver. She didn't want to break down in front of Fast Freddie, so she took a long swig from the glass. When the strong drink burned her throat, she clenched her teeth and let out a long, trembling sigh.

The phone on Fast Freddie's desk rang and he lumbered over to pick it up.

"It's me ... I see ... When? ... All right ... All right. Thank you."

He shook his head and put down the receiver.

"Roberta Cain has struck again. Half an hour ago, she killed two people down on Adams. A doorman and a newspaper editor," he said.

"Oh, Jesus..."

"She's like a fuckin' ghost! Every time we fuckin' turn around, there she is, fuckin' with us... I swear to Gawd, I'm fuckin' gonna drive a twelve-inch nail into the head of that fuckin' witch an' then I'm gonna hang it on my wall! ...Er, pardon my French," Freddie said when he remembered that he had an audience.

"It's all right. I agree with you," Staci said and smiled weakly.

"Maeve needs to know," Fast Freddie said and dialed the number to Maeve's cell.

After he had spoken with her, he slowly walked over to one of the leather armchairs and sat down opposite Staci.

"Listen, I know you're worried that something might happen to Maeve... but let me tell you a story about an incident that took place a few years ago," he said and folded his hands across his belly. He took a deep breath and started talking.

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Maeve cruised slowly down Jefferson, headed for Eighth Street. Patrick Daly's info about the man called Jonesy had popped into her mind when she was talking to Staci and she had become filled with a burning desire to have a word with him.

All around her, family sedans and souped up sportscars packed with young, loud people cruised up and down Jefferson, looking for a good time - many had already found it, judging by the sheer number of people Maeve saw who were sitting closely or kissing on the backseats.

She was challenged to drag races at nearly all the intersections, but she ignored them all. The only thing on her mind was to make sure that Roberta Cain and Paco Alvarez would pay dearly for threatening and scaring Staci.

Just the thought of hearing her partner's upset voice over the phone made her grip the steering wheel hard and she reached up to turn on the radio to keep focused.

WERC was playing Green Onions by Booker T & The M.G.s which prompted Maeve to start chuckling. Inspired by the organ and the wailing blues guitar in the instrumental classic, she started compiling a list of all the horrible things she'd do to Roberta when she found her.

A few minutes later, she turned right onto Eighth Street and drove slowly down the narrow street. After parking on the sidewalk in front of the grassy lot, she got out of the car and opened the trunk.

She reached in and found a cosh and a flashlight. She weighed the heavy weapon in her hand, but decided not to take it after all. She threw the cosh back in and locked the trunk.

She turned on the flashlight and swept the cone across the grassy lot. She scrunched up her face and started chewing her lip - it was still too hazardous to walk blindly into the lot.

Turning off the flashlight, she put it into her rear pocket and then unzipped her leather jacket so she could quickly get to her Beretta if she needed to.

With a final look at the grassy lot, Maeve started walking down towards the other end of the apartment complex, soon going past the spot where she had met the confused Miss Eliza Deegan and her mutt.

After turning a corner at the rear of the building, Maeve found herself in a dark backyard. At first, she tried to go on without the flashlight, but discovered almost at once that she couldn't see anything at all. With a sigh, she activated the flashlight and let the cone sweep across the ground and the windows on the first floor.

"Hmmm..." she said out loud and let the cone of light move across the rest of the backyard instead. When she moved the light back on the wall she was standing next to, she noticed a series of steps leading down to cellars all along the length of the building.

A little voice in her ear told her to check all the doors thoroughly, and she began to do just that.

As Maeve was standing at the ninth door, the tenth door opened with a metallic clank and she immediately turned off the flashlight. Moments later, a young, lanky man stepped out into the backyard, holding a plastic bag that appeared to be filled with empty beer cans.

Even in the darkness, Maeve recognized him as the one who had walked past her carrying three pizza boxes the other night out on the sidewalk, but she knew that it might not mean anything.

She stepped forward and cleared her throat.

"Jesus flippin' Christ, R.C.! You fuckin' scared me shitless, man!" Teddy Garrett said, jumping a foot in the air.

Maeve froze mid-step and reached for her Beretta.

"Wh-what...?" Teddy said as he slowly realized that something was wrong. A heartbeat later, he dropped the plastic bag and started sprinting towards the grassy lot.

Maeve quickly put the weapon back in the holster and bolted after the fleeing man. After a few paces, she realized that he was faster than her as a result of his much longer legs, so she pulled her arm back and threw the flashlight at him. With a loud CLONK, the heavy metal rod connected with the running man's neck and sent him crashing to the ground with a bone-rattling thump.

One of the garden lamps shone an orange light on the man's head and when Maeve caught up to him, she could see that his face was untouched, meaning that he probably wasn't the man she was looking for - she drew her weapon and cocked it anyway.

The familiar, metallic sound was enough to make Garrett roll fully over onto his back and put his arms in the air.

"Are you Jonesy?" Maeve said and picked up the flashlight.

Teddy Garrett pressed his lips together and shook his head vehemently.

"I won't ask you twice," Maeve said in a deceptively calm voice.

"N-n... no. My name is Teddy Garrett. Gawd, that hurt!" he said and rubbed his neck where the flashlight had hit him.

"Are you running with Roberta Cain and Paco Alvarez?"

"N-never heard of them..."

Moving swiftly, Maeve leaned in and whacked the flashlight hard down onto Garrett's crotch. Squealing like a pig, he grabbed his injured members and rolled over onto his side.

"Wrong answer, dude."

"... All right, all right, yes I've been with them."

"Where are they now?"

"Don't know..."

Maeve leaned down and swung the heavy flashlight at Garrett's head. Inches before it would have made contact, Garrett squealed again, even louder than the first time.

"No! No! Stop! I don't know! I don't know where they are! They're down South somewhere... in Chica-land, but I don't know where!" Garrett said, trying to protect his head and his crotch at the same time.

"Were you with them when they killed two men over on Adams just now?"

"G-gawd, yes... but that was Roberta, that crazy witch."

"What's happened to the cars you've stolen?"

"Th-they've been delivered to a chop shop down on Seventeenth Street."

"All right. Stealing cars and killing people... that's bad enough, but here's the big one, dude. Who gave Roberta and Paco the tip about Staci Hart?"

"Th-that was m-me. I saw you leave early yesterday morning and I made a few calls," Teddy said and started rocking back and forth.

Maeve nodded and put the Beretta into the holster.

"Well, in that case... this is your lucky day, Teddy Garrett," Maeve said calmly.

"Are... are you gonna let me go...?"

"No. I'm gonna teach you some manners so you know how to treat women properly," Maeve said and raised the flashlight.

Five minutes later, Maeve put the dented flashlight into the Mustang's trunk and wiped her hands on a rag. She got in and started the engine. After maneuvering around a bit, she turned left to go back to Jefferson.

Teaching Teddy Garrett the a-b-c's on how to be a perfect gentleman had improved her mood, so she turned on the radio to listen to some music. The WERC DJ, Nat Thompson, had just cued an early R&B classic, so Maeve turned up the volume and began to whistle along to the catchy tune.

Instead of making a u-turn at Fourteenth Street like all the other cars, Maeve pulled over at the curb on the other side of the intersection and looked South at the desolate badlands known as the Southside.

"I can smell you, Roberta Cain. You're out there somewhere, hidin' like a fuckin' coward. But I will get you," Maeve said quietly to herself.

Angrily, she stepped hard on the throttle, powersliding the Mustang around so it faced North. She pulled up to the traffic lights and waited for them to turn green - as soon as they did, Maeve mashed the gas and flew up the road.

Soon after, Maeve parked in front of the Donnelly mansion and got out of the car. Seamus Moloney let her in without delay and opened the double doors to Fast Freddie's den.

When Staci heard the doors slide open, she turned her head to see who it was - and locked eyes with Maeve.

For an eternal second, she could feel her heart stop beating, and she knew that her face was showing a hundred different emotions all at once. Without hesitation, she jumped up from the couch and ran into Maeve's open arms.

The impact nearly made them both keel over, but Maeve's strong legs kept them upright. They wrapped their arms around each other and gave each other the hug of their lives.

When they separated, Maeve reached up and framed Staci's face. She wiped away a few tears that had found their way down onto Staci's cheek and then she stood up on tiptoes to place a loving kiss on the tall woman's lips.

"Are you all right, baby?" Maeve whispered.

"I am now. God, I've missed you..."

"I've missed you, too, baby."

"Good evening, Maeve," Fast Freddie said, grinning from ear to ear over the show of affection in front of him.

"Hi, uncle Freddie. I have a few things I need to tell you," Maeve said and took off her leather jacket. She threw it in one of the armchairs and then she and Staci sat down on the couch - it didn't take one second for her hand to seek out Staci's.

"I'm sure it can wait," Freddie said and lumbered over to the leather armchair behind his mahogany desk.

"Nah, I might as well tell you now."

"Do you want me to wait outside?" Staci said, reluctant to leave Maeve so soon after their reunion.

"No. I won't go into any details. Please stay," Maeve said and kissed Staci's hand.

"Well, if it's that important, go right ahead," Freddie said and folded his hands across his belly.

"I went searching for a man called Jonesy, but I couldn't find him. Instead, I found someone called Teddy Garrett. After a bit of persuasion, he told me that he'd been the third guy on all the carjackings, including the recent one down on Adams and also the one where the CEO of StaySafe was killed."

"All right."

"Earlier, Staci and I were told that Paco Alvarez is related to someone in the Southside Chicas organization, and Teddy Garrett confirmed that. Paco is the cousin of Izzy Solidas, the Chicas' lead muscle. Garrett also said that the cars had been delivered to a chop shop down on Seventeenth Street."

"Seventeenth Street? Hmmm. Go on."

Staci couldn't quite believe her ears - there she was, actually being a witness to a one-on-one between Fast Freddie Donnelly and his number one Enforcer. She looked from Maeve to Freddie and back again, shaking her head slightly.

'If I wasn't a member of the family before, I certainly am now,' she thought.

"Teddy Garrett also told me that Roberta Cain and Paco Alvarez are hiding somewhere down South. He didn't know where... and I believe him," Maeve said and leaned back in her seat. She wrapped her arm around Staci's waist and pulled her close.

"Maeve, I know what you're thinking, but the answer is no," Freddie said and turned around to face his niece.

"Oh."

"I can't allow you to go into Chica territory to hunt down R.C. and Paco. It would seem like a giant Stuff You to the Chicas, and there's quite simply too much at stake for that."

"I understand," Maeve said and gave Staci's waist a little squeeze.

"Besides, Roberta will be back up here soon. When she does, the old orders still stand. If any of you catch her here, you're free to kill her on sight," Freddie said, closing the discussion.

When Maeve kept sitting, Fast Freddie turned towards his niece.

"Maeve, it's obvious even to me that your girl needs you. Go home."

"Yes, Sir," Maeve said and got up from the couch.

"Staci, do we still have a date for tomorrow evening?" Freddie said with a wink.

"We certainly do."

"Hmmm? What's that all about?" Maeve said.

"I'll tell you later," Staci said and squeezed Maeve's hand.

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CHAPTER 11

For the second night in a row, Maeve had been forced to sleep on her stomach, but unlike the night before, she had at least been able to wear a t-shirt.

Staci turned off the lights in the bathroom and came back into the bedroom. She pulled the blanket aside and snuggled down next to Maeve. When she caught a glimpse of the mirror in the ceiling, she chuckled quietly to herself - every single time she looked in the mirror, she was reminded of that very special night not so long ago where she and Maeve had reconnected after their separation.

"What's so funny, baby?" Maeve slurred.

"Nothing. Sorry I woke you up. I had to pee," Staci whispered.

"s all right. I was just gonna... ZZZzzzzzzzz..." Maeve said, instantly surrendering to the sandman.

Staci chuckled again and rolled over onto her right side so she was close to her partner.

Several hours later, Maeve stirred and opened her eyes. Staci's face was very close to her and her breath was deep and even, indicating that she was still sleeping. For several moments, Maeve just admired the tall woman's high cheekbones and full lips that were slightly parted in sleep. For the hundred-and-first time, she thanked her lucky stars that Staci was still in her life.

Maeve could see that tiny crow's feet had begun to develop on the outsides of Staci's eyes, and she reached up to feel if she had them, too - she did.

Thinking that she might actually have a shot at growing old with someone sent a wave of the warm fuzzies over her and she couldn't stop a broad smile from spreading out over her features.

Reality soon caught up with her when she began to think about all the problems she was facing on a daily basis out on the mean streets of the Big City, but the core of happiness remained.

'Staci is the only one I've ever really loved,' Maeve thought, surprising herself by the simple, heartfelt truth of those words. With another smile, she snuggled down next to Staci and tried to go back to sleep.

An hour or so later, Maeve's bladder began to send out distress calls, so she propped herself up on her arms and rolled over onto her butt. That woke Staci up, and she yawned widely and stretched out her arms high over her head.

"Morning. What time is it?" she said, trying to find her wristwatch.

"Good morning, babe. Lemme see... quarter past eleven," Maeve said and swung her legs over her side of the bed.

"OK. Breakfast time, I think," Staci said and sat up, wiping her eyes.

"Sounds good. You made it yesterday, so today's my turn. I just gotta..." Maeve said and pointed at the bathroom. She put on a bathrobe and left the bedroom in a hurry.

Forty minutes later, Staci started putting the plates they had used into the dishwasher. Maeve's plate was particularly messy from the blackcurrant jam that had been on the Belgian Waffles they had eaten, and Staci held it up, pointing at the mess in a bout of mock outrage.

"Tssk!" she said and stuffed it into the dishwasher.

"Hey, it's me. If I don't get messy at least once a day, I've done something wrong," Maeve said with her trademark crooked grin.

"I'll drink to that," Staci said, emptied her mug of coffee and put it into the machine. She closed the hatch and turned it on. After drying her hands on a tea towel, Staci took a deep breath and turned to look at Maeve.

"We need to talk," she said quietly.

"I know. Come on, let's go into the living room."

"What happened last night when you met R.C., baby?" Maeve said and put her hand on Staci's thigh.

"Well... I was going to unlock the door, but before I had time to do it, Paco Alvarez came out of the shadows. And then Roberta came at me from the left. She was holding a gun, cocking it as she came closer."

"Mmmm."

"She asked me several questions that I didn't have an answer for, and then she... well, started using vulgar phrases about you and me."

"That's how people on the streets talk, Staci."

"Oh, I know, and I've heard worse language listening to my dancers, but... I just became so pissed off at her. At her and that asshole Paco and at all the things they had done, so I guess I..."

Staci stopped talking and she exhaled slowly.

"... what? What did you do?"

"Well, I... I guess I kinda slapped her across the face."

"Come again?"

"I slapped her across the face," Staci said and shrugged.

Maeve did a double-take, and then she leaned her head back and let out a long, loud laugh.

"Aw shit, I wish I'd been there to see that. What did she do?"

"Nothing, actually, but Paco grabbed me and forced me against the door. He put his revolver at my throat."

Maeve nodded and made a mental note to kill Paco the next time she saw him.

"All right..."

"Oh, I forgot something. Before that, Paco took my purse and dumped my things all over the parking lot. My cell phone got a long, deep scratch on the display."

"I'll buy you a new one."

"You don't have to do that. It still works fine," Staci said and took Maeve's hand in her own.

"I got scared," Staci added quietly after a little pause.

"I understand, baby."

"It's weird, though. I'm 39 years old, but more shit has happened to me in the last six months than the rest of my life put together! First I split from a lover for the second time in a few years, then I witnessed how Mary Red had been beaten to within an inch of her life. Then I got clobbered by one of the Websters..."

"It was Marshall Webster."

"Does it matter which one it was?"

"Nah."

"... then I got kidnapped and almost killed by Siobhan McWhirter. Then I watched her and her brother die. And now, I've been threatened by two hardened criminals. Held at gunpoint... again... for something I have absolutely nothing to do with. Nothing at all," Staci said and got up from the couch.

"It wears a woman down, you know. I'm not like you, Maeve. I can't shrug it off and go on like nothing has happened. I'm just not built like that," she continued, folding her arms across her stomach.

"Baby, I promise you that I'll do my best to stop bad things before they can hurt you," Maeve said sincerely.

"I know you will, but... I feel like I'm wearing a bullseye on my back. Will it ever get better?"

Maeve opened her mouth to speak, but when she realized that she didn't have a positive answer for Staci, she got up and put out her hand.

"I didn't think so," Staci said quietly and took Maeve's hand. They looked at each other for a few seconds and then wrapped their arms around each other.

"I'll get Danny to post a man permanently at the club... if that'll make you feel safer?" Maeve said into Staci's shoulder.

"Thanks. But not Seamus Moloney... he'll scare away half my customers. Do you have a female... uh, family member?"

Maeve chuckled and then pulled back.

"You want me to find a girl for you? You're actually **asking** me to find a girl for you?"

"I guess I am. A woman, though. Not a girl," Staci said with a chuckle.

"Deal. I'll work something out. Which reminds me... what was that about the dinner date tonight?"

"Oh, yeah. Your uncle invited us to a double date at seven o'clock. Rose Dougal is also gonna be there," Staci said and kissed Maeve's forehead.

"Sounds like fun. Was it formal wear, or...?"

"Uhh, he didn't say."

"Then it's casual wear. Are you gonna crawl into those skin-tight chinos again, baby?" Maeve said and ran her hands over Staci's butt.

"I knew it wouldn't take you ten seconds to mention those pants, Birddawg."

"I'm predictable, I know. So... dinner tonight. Watcha wanna do until then?"

"Well, I was going to go to work... I need to have a serious word with April, one of my dancers."

"Oh?"

"I think she has the hots for me. She needs to be, uh, straightened out."

"Hmmm."

"... But I don't want to do that today. I want to spend some time with you to make up for yesterday," Staci said and leaned down to claim Maeve's lips.

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'... You're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. It's Saturday, it's five PM and we're partying. In fact, we're gonna party all night! And for a party, you need some dancin'. I'm Ricky Dean and here's Joey Dee & The Starliters with the Peppermint Twist.'

"Man, you'd think we were in the middle of summer... look at all these cars!" Staci said as they were waiting at a red light at Jefferson and Tenth Street. All three lanes were filled with cars and most of them were packed with young people out for the next thrill.

"Yeah, no shit," Maeve said and turned the radio down slightly.

As the lights changed to green, the metal convoy took off as one, crawling slowly towards the next intersection.

Maeve looked down at Staci's fingers and got yet another dose of the warm fuzzies - on her little finger, Staci had put on the pink plastic ring Maeve had given her.

Staci noticed where Maeve looked and began to turn the ring around her finger.

"You didn't have to wear that toy, baby," Maeve said and patted Staci's thigh.

"I didn't have to, but I wanted to. I know it's just for fun, but it actually feels good to have this kind of connection."

"Are you interested in a real ring? I'm not necessarily talkin' diamonds and stuff. Just a gold ring?"

"Oh... you know... I'm not really sure. You can't wear one, so..."

"No, it'd be too risky. But anyway, we could get matching tattoos?"

"Oh, no, we couldn't, Maeve. No needles. Please!"

"All right. I'll keep thinking about it. Not the tattoo part," Maeve said off Staci's look of panic.

Suddenly Maeve's phone rang and she reached down to unclip it from her belt.

"It's Fever. Talk to me."

'Fever, you don't know me, but I got your number from Queen Anne. She's been attacked.'

"Fuck. In Cardboard City?"

'Yes.'

"Is she badly hurt?"

Staci turned her head and furrowed her brows, but Maeve winked to show her that it wasn't too bad.

'She got roughed up pretty bad. It was the same two frat boys again. Would it be possible for you to swing by?'

"Yes. I'll be there in a few minutes. Meet me at the sidewalk in front of the shelters."

'All right.'

Maeve terminated the connection and put the phone in the tray between the seats.

"Baby, we need to make a detour. Someone has attacked one of the homeless up on Sixth Street," Maeve said and turned right onto Eleventh Street.

"Bastards. I wish they'd leave those poor people alone. They've suffered enough already," Staci said and reached for the seatbelt.

Maeve stopped at the curb in front of Cardboard City and got out of the Mustang. Before she went into the lot, she leaned down and put her arms on the windowsill.

"Baby, you better stay here. I'm sorry."

"No problem. I'll listen to WERC."

"OK. I don't think it'll take long," Maeve said and tapped her knuckles on the roof of the car.

A young man in his mid-twenties came up to Maeve, holding a battered old hat in his hands.

"Fever, my name is Jacob. I'm the one who called you. Queen Anne is over here," he said and pointed at the lot.

It wasn't difficult to see where the troubles were as a large group of homeless were standing in the center of the lot, arguing loudly among themselves. Maeve pushed her way through the throng until she was at the center.

Queen Anne was sitting in her shelter, nursing a bleeding mouth. She had spread out all her personal belongings on the ground to see if she had lost anything.

Two newspaper clippings caught Maeve's eye, but she didn't have time to make a comment on them before Anne had scooped them up and put them inside her green parka coat.

"Hey, Anne. Looks like you got the short end of the stick this time."

"Yeah. Lost a tooth, too," Anne said and gingerly touched the right side of her mouth.

"Shit. Jacob told me it was the same two frat boys again."

"Yeah. Those fuckers. I got a good look at 'em. Typical preppy boys, young, clean cut. One was taller than the other, but both had blue eyes and very short hair."

Maeve sat down on the edge of Anne's shelter and folded her legs up underneath her.

"Oh, you don't have to spend any time on me, Fever. I know you're a busy woman."

"Never so busy that I don't have time to worry when a friend gets hurt, Anne."

"Thanks. I was just checking my stuff. They took a silver bracelet I had inherited from my mom..."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, well... I still got the most important things," Queen Anne said and patted the pocket where she had put the two newspaper clippings.

"Anne, your mouth is bleeding quite badly. Let me take you down to the Volunteer's Clinic," Maeve said and handed Anne a handkerchief.

"Nah. I'm good. But thanks, anyway," Anne said and dabbed the cloth against the corner of her mouth. She flinched when the cheek pressed against the sore gum, a gesture that didn't escape Maeve.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Where did they jump ya?"

"Only three hundred yards down the street, fuck it."

"Anne, what were those two clippings? I didn't really get to see them."

Anne looked left and right and then reached into her pocket to pull out the fragile pieces of paper.

The first headline read, 'Local girl wins State beauty pageant,' and the second was 'Beauty Queen loses family in tragic fire.'

On the first clipping, a small black and white picture depicted the top three finalists of the pageant - a very young Anne was standing in the center, holding a wreath and wearing a shiny crown.

"Oh, wow, you were gorgeous. How old were you then?" Maeve said.

"Seventeen. Can you believe it? Gawd, it's forty years ago."

"I can believe it, Queen Anne. You still got it."

"Hah! What the hell have you been smoking, Fever? 'I still got it'. Hah!"

"Hey, I'm serious. Have you changed your mind about being taken to the Clinic?"

"Nah. The bleeding's already stopped," Anne said and dabbed the handkerchief against her mouth again.

"Well, if you do change your mind, or if you want to talk, just call me. I'll be there in a flash," Maeve said and got up.

"I will. Thanks again, Fever."

Suddenly a commotion spread out among the homeless standing around Queen Anne's shelter. Some of the men talked loudly with agitated voices, but Maeve was only able to pick up the odd word.

"What the hell's going on?" Maeve said.

"Damned if I know. But when they get like that, it usually ain't because something good has happened," Anne said.

After a few seconds, Jacob pushed his way through the agitated people and grabbed Anne's shoulder.

"Bull and Joe Stains have caught 'em! They've caught the two frat boys over in an alley on the other side of Sixth!"

"I better go check what that's all about," Maeve said and dusted off her hands.

"And I better join you. Bull wouldn't think twice about killin' them", Anne said and got up.

Staci looked up in surprise when a large group of angry homeless people suddenly swarmed past the Mustang and crossed the street. She turned off the radio and rolled down the window so she could hear what they were saying, but they all ignored her, so she wasn't able to find out what was going on.

Maeve opened the driver's side door and stuck her head in.

"Baby, the two bastards who've been attacking the homeless have been caught not far from here. I need to go there to keep tempers down."

"Probably a good idea... they look really pissed off," Staci said and nodded.

When Maeve, Queen Anne and the rest of the large group of people reached the alley, a tall, beefy man had pinned two younger men to the wall, pressing them effortlessly up against the bricks. To his right, an older, skinnier man was cheering and taunting the two younger men.

"Let me guess, that's Bull?" Maeve said, pointing at the beefy man.

"Yeah."

"Do you recognize those two young men?"

"Yeah. They're the ones who attacked me."

"Gotcha," Maeve said and stepped forward. She put a hand on Bull's arm, but the big man just sort of growled at her.

"It's all right, Bull. That woman is a very good friend of mine," Anne said.

"Oh... pardon," Bull said and let go of the two younger men. They collapsed down onto the filthy ground, coughing and holding their throats.

"What are your names?" Maeve said.

"No fuckin' concern of yours. You're not a cop!" the first young man said. He appeared to be in his early twenties, with closely cropped ash-blonde hair, blue eyes and a square jaw. Maeve noted that he was wearing a pair of pale blue designer jeans and a dark blue winter letterman jacket.

"Well spotted, knucklehead."

Maeve turned to the other young man who matched his companion's age, hair and eyes, but his jaw was weak and he had a goofy face.

"You. Prince Charming. What's your name?"

The second young man just shook his head and demonstratively moved his fingers across his lips in the age-old 'zipping' gesture.

"OK. Bull, they're all yours," Maeve said and stepped back.

"No, wait just a fuckin' minute! We've got rights! You can't just leave us to these animals!" the first young man said.

"Bull, did you find Queen Anne's silver bracelet yet?"

"No... stand back," the tall man said and grabbed the mouthy young man by the scruff of the neck and the seat of his blue jeans. Without even breaking a sweat, Bull turned the young man upside down and shook him hard several times.

"What the fuck! Put me down you fuckin' moron!" the man said, but Bull didn't pay any attention to him. Several items fell out of the young man's pockets, including a few dollar bills and a silver bracelet. The second young man looked on meekly, not even trying to help his companion.

Queen Anne reached down to pick up the bracelet. Looking at it, she nodded at Maeve and then put it back on her arm.

"It's mine. You can let him go now, Bull," she said - Bull did as he was told and dropped the young man down on his head.

"So, that's the loot out of the way. Now it's time to talk about the compensation," Maeve said and put her hands in her back pockets.

The first young man got up on his hands and knees and spat at Maeve, the blob of spit landing an inch from her right boot.

"Well, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind. But all right, if that's the way you wanna do it, we can accommodate you," Maeve said and planted her boot right in the young man's face, prompting a cheer from the crowd.

"If you'd been able to behave yourself for five seconds, I woulda asked you to pay \$100 to these nice people. Now, I'm afraid we're gonna hafta do it the hard way."

"Fuck you, bitch," the young man said and spat out some blood.

"Awww, that wasn't nice. Was that nice, Bull?" Maeve said and put a hand on her heart like she was hurt by the words.

"Not nice at all," the tall man said, shaking his head.

"I guess we have to teach you some manners. You," Maeve said and pointed at the other young man.

"Y-yes...?"

"I'd run if I wuz you," Maeve said in a menacing voice. It didn't take two seconds for the young man to get the meaning, and he spun around and sprinted away from his companion.

"You fuckin' coward!" the first young man said after his fleeing friend. He turned his head towards Maeve and bared his teeth.

"My Daddy is a lawyer and he'll..."

"Too bad your Daddy didn't teach you the basic concepts of right and wrong," Maeve said calmly.

"Don't interrupt me, bi..."

A second boot to the face silenced him, and he fell against the brick wall, too stunned to talk.

"He was about to say the B-word again, wasn't he?"

Bull nodded.

"Here's what we're gonna do. I'll give you two minutes alone with him. Then I'll call for someone to come and pick him up. Do what ya like, just don't kill him. Deal?" Maeve said and put out her hand, palm up.

"Deal," Bull said and slapped his meaty paw down onto Maeve's smaller hand.

When Maeve was on her way back to the Mustang, she could hear the easily recognizable sound of Chubby Checker's *The Twist* playing loudly on the radio and she chuckled when she saw Staci's profile, apparently singing along to the old hit.

Maeve walked around her car and opened the door. Reaching in, she picked up the cell phone and flipped it open.

"We're almost done here. I'm just gonna call Danny in a few minutes and then we'll vamoose," she said and wiped the phone's display with her sleeve.

"All right...? I'll turn the radio down so you can hear better," Staci said and twisted the knob on the stereo.

"Thanks."

A few minutes later, Queen Anne walked past counting some money. When she spotted Maeve, she gave her a thumbsup and held up four c-notes. Bull was walking a few paces behind Anne, holding a pair of pale blue designer jeans and a dark blue winter letterman jacket.

Maeve returned the thumbsup, grinning broadly. When Queen Anne and Bull were safely inside Cardboard City, she dialed Danny's number.

'It's Danny.'

"It's Fever. I have a package for urgent delivery. In an alley off Sixth Street, ya can't miss it. It's a guy and he's most likely in his underwear."

'OK...?'

"Long story, buddy. I want him dumped down by the river. No aggression needed."

'Check. I'll call you when I'm done.'

"Where are you?"

'Jefferson and Fourth.'

"Hey, you're right around the corner. All right, I'll wait for ya."

'OK,' Danny said and hung up.

"Baby, Danny's gonna swing by in a few. We might as well wait for him," Maeve said and clipped the phone onto her belt.

"No problem. Do you mind if I turn the radio back up?"

"Hell, no."

Staci turned up the volume and just caught the very last bars of *The Twist* before it segued into *Let's Twist Again*.

Danny's Lincoln pulled up to the Mustang just as the song ended. After the big guy had said a quick hello to Staci, Maeve went with him to show him the package he was supposed to take care of.

When Maeve came back to Staci, she dusted off her hands and got in. She pulled away from the curb with a roar but then cruised slowly up Sixth Street, headed back towards Jefferson.

"I guess you've done your civic duty today," Staci said and patted Maeve's thigh.

"Uhhh... that's exactly what I did, baby. I did my civic duty," Maeve said with a crooked grin.

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"Uh-huh ... OK ... don't give a fuck ... you heard me ... no, I'm not gonna give you more money ... if ya want more, go rob a convenience store ... yeah, yeah. Plenty of fuck you's to you, too, chump," Roberta Cain said and threw down the cell phone on a table.

"That was Garrett. Apparently, he got the crap beat out of him last night by our little darling White Fever."

"Oh?" Paco said and cracked open a beer.

"Yeah. But I told him I didn't give a fuck."

"I heard."

Roberta sighed and put her hands behind her head. She looked around the crummy apartment they'd been given by the Chicas. Unfathomably, it was in an even worse state than the room they

had used in the Majestic.

Everything was run-down and filthy and cockroaches held drag races across the broken linoleum floor in the kitchen. The springs were sticking out of a dirty, old couch and all three chairs had broken legs or seats. The only things that worked were the refrigerator, a bare light bulb in the ceiling and the TV - but the channel selector was broken and it was stuck on the weather channel.

"I'm getting antsy, Paco. I think it's high time to go ahead with my pissing contest with Fever."

"Mmmm?"

"Yeah. With the five G we got for the Chrysler, we've made enough money for now. I wanna go kick some Enforcer butt."

"Ya think ya can beat her? She's mighty fast from what I hear."

"Hell, yeah, I can beat her. Look, you don't know her like I do," Roberta said and leaned forward on the couch.

"She's all Missy Cool on the outside, but I know that it doesn't take much to give her a fire in the gut. Her temper has always been her problem. If I taunt her enough, I'm gonna make her so pissed off at me she'll lose concentration," she continued.

Paco just shrugged.

"I've already found the perfect place for it, up on Nineteenth Street. Quiet and secluded, the road is straight as an arrow for several hundred yards. And get this, most of the street lights are actually working," Roberta said with a chuckle.

"Up at the old factories?"

"Yep."

"I was born on Nineteenth Street," Paco added offhand.

"No shit?"

"No shit. In the concrete ghetto east of Jefferson."

"Imagine that. Throw me a beer, will ya?"

Paco got up from the chair and opened the nearly empty fridge. He took the final can and kicked the door shut.

"It's the last one," he said and threw the can in Roberta's direction.

"Man, already?"

"Yeah."

"Anyway. I think I'll use Fever's pride against her. She's certainly got plenty of it," Roberta said and took a long swig from the can.

"R.C., if ya don't mind me askin'... what the fuck is the purpose of all this?"

"I wanna humiliate her."

"Jeez, man, there's a million ways you could do that. Why all this dickin' around?"

"It's all part of the game, Paco. Eh, you're a guy. You wouldn't understand."

Paco mumbled a few words in Spanish and then emptied his can.

"What if she brings reinforcements?" he said and crushed the can into a little metal ball.

"She won't. It's not her style."

"Still..."

"No. I guarantee ya that she won't."

"Are we?"

"Nope. I don't even want you to come. Oh, and I don't want you to say a word to Izzy. This is between Fever and me. Two goes in. One comes out. And that'll be me," Roberta said and emptied her can.

"R.C., if ya lose, and I'm not sayin' you will, but if ya lose... then what?"

"Then I'll just settle for blowin' her all to hell... and torching her car. Hey, that's a pretty good idea, actually. We could put up the cars as stakes. Yeah. Winner gets to choose which car she'll drive home in."

"Roberta... you're loco."

"I know. The prison guards told me at least once a day. C'mon. Let's get some more brew," she said and got up from the couch.

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Ten minutes to seven, Maeve and Staci drove through the gates and up the curved driveway.

Staci stepped out of the Mustang at the main entrance and then watched Maeve continue on to find somewhere to park.

It was a chilly night, so Staci zipped her fleece jacket and put her hands in her pockets. When she had popped home to change, she had decided not to wear the skin tight chinos but to go with a variation of her favorite business outfit instead - gun metal gray slacks and a blazer in a slightly paler gray over a black, low-cut blouse. She had her hair down and she had even applied the slightest hint of makeup.

Staci knew she had chosen the right clothes when she had presented the result to Maeve, because the Enforcer had become so tongue-tied that she couldn't even string a sentence together.

As Maeve came up the path, her boots crunched loudly on the loose gravel. She was merrily whistling an old rock'n'roll tune as she walked in her usual swagger, and Staci couldn't help but admire her partner.

Staci's eyes slowly crept upwards, past Maeve's muscular thighs in her formfitting white jeans, past her black silk shirt and the black leather jacket that added a very spicy touch to the Enforcer, going further up to Maeve's pretty features and then ending at her white, spiky hair.

Maeve quickly realized she was being thoroughly checked out, so she crinkled her nose and winked at Staci.

"Baby, are you propositioning me?"

"No, I just like what I see," Staci said and took Maeve's hand.

"That goes double for me, baby," Maeve said and gave Staci's hand a little squeeze. Hand in hand, they walked together to the door where Maeve raised up both their hands so they could knock on the door as one.

The gunslit was opened and Seamus Moloney's blue eye became visible. After a few seconds, he opened the door, wearing a friendly smile.

"I almost didn't recognize you, Miss Hart," he said and stepped aside so Maeve and Staci could fit through the door.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Staci said and unzipped her jacket.

"But of course. Here, let me take your jacket. Mr. Donnelly and Miss Dougal are awaiting you in the dining hall."

"Thanks, Seamus," Maeve said and took off her leather jacket. With a flick of the wrist, she threw it onto the hallstand where it hit the peg perfectly.

"Show-off," Staci whispered.

The dining hall was located at the rear of the mansion. It was a large, stately room that had been tastefully decorated and equipped with top quality furniture.

The room was dominated by a large, rectangular table that could seat as many as twenty people, but it hadn't been set. Two waiters were putting the finishing touches on a smaller, round table that acted as a satellite to the large table.

On a wall on the far side of the room, the largest painting Staci had ever seen hung above a Chesterfield arrangement that consisted of a four-seater couch, two armchairs and a tiled-top table.

Fast Freddie Donnelly and Rose Dougal were sitting in the couch, but when Freddie saw Maeve and Staci enter the dining hall, he got up and waved at them.

"Good evening. Glad you could make it," he said with a smile.

"Good evening, uncle Freddie. Man, you're lookin' dapper," Maeve said, admiring her uncle's chalk-white shirt, black pants and shiny black shoes.

"Thanks. So is Staci," he said and winked.

"I should feel insulted, but since it's you, I better let it go," Maeve said and waved at Rose Dougal.

Staci went up to Fast Freddie and put out her hand. Suddenly feeling unsure whether she should curtsy or not, she smiled and bent her head slightly.

"Mr. Donnelly. Thank you for inviting us."

"Staci... it's Freddie, OK? I'm impressed by your respect and politeness, but like I told you already, you're family."

"All right."

"Now, if you ladies will excuse us, Maeve and I need to talk some business before dinner. Why don't you go over and get yourself an aperitif," Fast Freddie said and lumbered towards the door.

"Won't take long," Maeve said and gave Staci's elbow a little squeeze as she walked past her.

Smiling, Staci turned towards the leather couch.

"Hey, Rose. Wow, you look fantastic."

"Hey, Staci. So do you. I guess we've both gotten ahead in the world, huh?" the bar owner said.

Staci took a good look at her former boss. She still appeared much the same with thick red hair and green eyes, but, unusually, she was sporting a woven gold chain around her neck and several rings on her fingers. Her hair was up and she was wearing a stylish crimson pantsuit with a plunging neckline that gave a pretty clear view of her cleavage - secretly, Staci hoped she'd look as sexy when she reached her late fifties.

"You can say that again. I don't remember seeing those rings before."

"I guess Fast Freddie kinda likes me," Rose said with a grin.

"How is Rose's Place going?" Staci said and went over to the bar in the corner of the dining hall. She poured herself a small sherry and sat down next to Rose, crossing her legs in a very proper fashion.

"Oh, everything's fine. I can't count the number of customers who've complained vociferously when they've realized that you're not coming back."

Staci's cheeks immediately turned red, but she tried to hide it by taking a small sip of the sherry.

"You still do that, huh? Cute."

"So... you and Fast Freddie Donnelly?"

"Well, we're not all there yet. But we're definitely working on it."

"Pleased to hear it," Staci said and put her hand on Rose's shoulder.

"Y'know, Staci, I honestly didn't think you'd ever go back to Fever. Not after what she did to you back then... you know."

"Well. She's changed. And she's really good to me. Much more than anyone else has ever been. I love her," Staci said quietly.

"That's good to hear. And I trust she keeps you thoroughly satisfied...?"

"Rose!" Staci said and covered her eyes with her hand. She shook her head and let out a long groan.

"I'm sorry, Staci, it's just too easy to get that sort of reaction out of you," Rose said with a chuckle.

At the other end of the room, the double doors were opened and Fast Freddie lumbered into the dining hall, closely followed by Maeve.

"C'mon, everybody. We can talk later. Now it's dinner time!" Freddie said and made a beeline for the round table.

Staci noticed that Maeve kept standing until her uncle was seated, and she had to chuckle over all the unwritten rules of the Donnelly family.

When all four people had found their seats - Rose to Freddie's right and Staci across from him - Fast Freddie took a small bell and jangled it, marking the official start of the dinner. A side door opened and two waiters entered, holding trays of food.

An hour and a half later, Fast Freddie wiped his mouth on his napkin and jangled the bell again. When he pushed back his chair, Maeve immediately tapped Staci on her elbow, signaling that she should get up when Freddie did.

When Freddie rose, all his three dinner guests did, too.

"That was a delicious meal only outshone by the delightful company," Freddie said and sent a beaming smile in Rose's direction. He picked up her hand and gave it a little squeeze.

Inspired by her uncle's actions, Maeve found Staci's hand and did the same. She turned her head and winked saucily at her partner, who responded by smiling broadly.

Summoned by the bell, the two waiters came in and began to clear the table.

"Coffee and drinks will be served in twenty minutes as requested, Sir," the head waiter said quietly to Fast Freddie.

"Excellent."

"You also have a phone call waiting in the den," the waiter continued.

"All right. Maeve, I'm sure you can entertain our guests while I'm away," Freddie said and left the party.

"Oh, you betcha, uncle Freddie," Maeve said and began to swing her arm back and forth, still holding on to Staci's hand.

"Fever, where's the little girls' room? I need to powder my nose," Rose said, crossing her legs in an almost comical manner.

"Use the same door my uncle just went through and then turn right into another hallway. It's the fourth door on the left."

"Thanks," Rose said and hastily left the table.

"Gee whiz, honey. They're all leavin' us... was it something I said?" Maeve said and crinkled her nose again. Pulling Staci along, she walked towards the large windows overlooking the back garden.

"Looks nice and quiet out there," Maeve said.

"Well, I don't really know about that, Maeve. The garden is crawling with guards carrying machineguns..."

"That's the price we gotta pay, I'm afraid."

"Remember the big shootout? With Siobhan and all that?" Staci said and moved over so she was standing behind Maeve. She wrapped her arms around the shorter woman and gave her a little squeeze.

"Oh, yeah. Kinda hard to forget. Down in the treasury, there's a couple of tiles that still have the bullet holes in them from the attempted heist."

"Really? Why weren't they changed?"

"Well... mostly so we don't forget that it happened. The security has been beefed up considerably, too."

"Mmmm," Staci said and buried her face in the nook of Maeve's neck.

"Hey, baby, did you drink too much wine? You're awfully touchy-feely tonight."

"And that bothers you... how?"

"Don't bother me none, babe. It's just unusual," Maeve said and turned around so she was face to face with her partner. She let her hands roam up and down Staci's long torso until they found their regular resting place - Staci's butt.

"Now who's touchy-feely?" Staci said and suppressed a giggle.

"Uhh... dunno? Me, perhaps?" Maeve said and grabbed two handfuls of sculpted flesh.

Staci yelped loudly in a high-pitched voice, making one of the sentries outside turn around and stare.

"You horny li'l devil," Staci whispered and leaned down to place a kiss on Maeve's lips.

"But I'm your horny li'l devil. Makes all the difference. Oh, by the way, the Community Hospital called me to say that Doyle Brennan would pull through. He cracked a rib and that made his lung collapse, but they were able to get it... uh... inflated again."

"Oh, that's good news. Danny told me a little about it last night, but he didn't have all the info."

"Yeah. Doyle was touch and go for while. I'm glad he pulled through. He's all right. Have you ever met him?" Maeve said and began to shuffle towards the Chesterfield couch.

"No, I don't think I have, actually."

"He's a big guy, beefy..."

"Oh, and that's supposed to give me a clue as to who he is? All your men are big and beefy."

"Well... I guess that's true, baby," Maeve said with a laugh. She sat down on the couch and patted the seat next to her.

"C'mon. We probably have a few minutes until my uncle or Rose comes back. Let's snog."

"Aw, Jeez, Maeve..." Staci said and covered her eyes with her hand.

"Come on... whaddaya say?"

Staci was still playfully resisting Maeve's offers when Rose returned, her high heels thumping loudly across the parquet floor.

"Man, that's what I call a toilet. Bigger than half my bar," she said and flung herself into one of the armchairs.

Staci winked at Maeve who responded with a pout.

Ten minutes later, Mary Reynolds appeared in the dining hall pushing a heavy cart loaded with coffee and cookies. When she reached the carpet at the couch arrangement, the cart got stuck and she wasn't strong enough to push it up over the edge. At once, both Maeve and Staci shot up from the couch to help Mary Red get the cart the rest of the way.

"Thank you very much," Mary said and looked down.

"Anytime," Staci said and squeezed Mary's shoulder.

Maeve grinned over the cute exchange and started moving cups and saucers from the cart to the tiled-top table. Working quickly and efficiently, Mary Reynolds was able to move three large coffee pots and two trays of cookies in the same amount of time it took Maeve to move two cups - when Mary was done, she winked at Maeve and then pushed the empty cart away.

"It's so good to see that she's on the mend," Staci said after Mary had closed the door behind her.

"Yeah. She's really come a long way. So... what can I get ya?" Maeve said and went over to the bar.

"Irish whisky. Two fingers' worth, please," Rose said.

"I'd like one of those, too, only slightly less. Here, let me help you," Staci said and got up from the couch.

"Nah, I got it. Not Bourbon?"

"No. Your uncle introduced me to a new brand of Irish whisky last night. It was pretty good, actually."

"Well, of course. It's Irish, after all," Maeve said and flashed Staci a huge grin.

"Hear, hear!" Rose Dougal said loudly from her laid-back position on the couch.

Staci handed Rose her drink and then took her own. When she saw that Maeve didn't make one for herself, she furrowed her brows.

"You're not drinking?"

"No. I'm officially still at work."

"Oh. Does it bother you if I...?"

"Of course not. Hell, I want you to drink. It'll loosen you up," Maeve said, whispering the last words. Staci's only reply was a "Tsssk!"

The double doors opened and Fast Freddie lumbered back into the dining hall, walking quite fast for his standards.

"Was it an important call, uncle Freddie?"

"Not really. It wasn't about R.C., if that's what you're thinking. It was something else that we can talk about some other time," Freddie said and sat down in one of the armchairs. Suddenly he noticed that Rose was making eyes at him, and he hurriedly changed his mind and moved over to sit next to the red-headed spitfire.

Freddie soon became so lost in Rose's sparkling green eyes that he forgot all about pouring himself a cup of coffee, but that meant that the others couldn't have one either.

After a minute or so, Maeve lost patience and took one of the large coffee pots. She went over to stand next to her uncle and poured coffee into his cup.

"Thank you, dear," he said absentmindedly.

"You're welcome, dear," Maeve said and put down the coffee pot. She put two sugar cubes into his cup and started stirring.

"Oh, gimme that. I can do that for myself," Freddie said and took the spoon out of Maeve's hands.

"Yes, Sir."

The small diplomatic crisis over, Staci poured herself a cup of coffee and put the Irish whisky into it. She stirred several times to get it properly distributed and then took a small sip, noting that it was just right. Rose chose a different tactic - she just emptied her drink in one gulp.

Maeve sat down and sent a loving glance at Staci that lasted for several seconds. With a dramatic gesture, she picked up her cup and held it high.

"I've known many an' liked not a few, but I've loved only one... and baby, that's you. Cheers," Maeve said and took a long swig, not daring to look at her partner.

Staci's reaction was immediate. Her neck and cheeks blossomed in a myriad of reds and she choked up so badly that she wasn't even able to grunt. Her heart started beating wildly, and it only got worse when she realized that she had three sets of eyes burning into her.

She nodded and smiled weakly. Reaching over, she picked up Maeve's hand and kissed it twice. A few tears threatened to escape her eyes but she was able to keep everything in check - just.

"Thanks, honey," Staci croaked when she finally dared to use her voice again.

"You're welcome, baby."

"I hear weddin' bells. Do you hear weddin' bells?" Rose deadpanned and nudged Fast Freddie's side with her elbow.

"I think I do, actually," he said and laughed.

"Oh, I don't know about that... we aren't even engaged yet," Maeve said and winked furiously at Staci.

"Wait, I have one, too," Freddie said and cleared his throat in a dramatic fashion.

"I hope you die in bed at ninety-five, shot by a jealous wife. Cheers," he said, raising his cup at his niece.

"Ha! Suits her down to the T," Rose said and slapped her thigh.

Maeve grinned cheekily and raised her cup back at her uncle and Rose.

"Well, I plan to die in a blissful state in bed, but I very much doubt I'll make it to ninety-five... and if I'm shot, it'll be by a love bolt. Right, baby?"

"Weeeelll... I think you better keep dreamin'," Staci said and took a swig from her spiked coffee.

"Oh, baby, I'm *always* dreamin' of you..."

"Awwww!" Rose and Fast Freddie said together, causing yet another blushing frenzy on Staci's cheeks.

Half an hour later, the party was breaking up. Fast Freddie and Rose had been making goo-goo eyes at each other for the better part of ten minutes, and Maeve arrived at the conclusion that they were holding back because they had company.

"Well, I think we should call it a night so the kids can have some privacy," Maeve said and got up from her chair. She took Staci's hand and pulled her upright.

"Oh... is it that obvious?" Rose said, stifling a snigger.

"Uhhh, yeah. The only way you could make it any more obvious would be to buy some TV time on Channel 7. We've had a great evening, uncle Freddie. Thank you for inviting us," Maeve said and shook her uncle's hand.

"Oh, you're welcome. Perhaps we could do it again some other time."

"It would be our pleasure. Good night, Rose," Maeve said and nodded at the bar owner.

"See ya, Fever."

Staci stepped forward and shook hands with Fast Freddie, but was taken by surprise when he suddenly pulled her down towards him.

"Thank you for being such a calming influence on my niece, Staci. I'm indebted to you," he whispered for her ears only. Staci didn't know what to say to that, so she settled for a polite nod.

"Good night, you two. Get home safely," Freddie said out loud, waving at Maeve and Staci.

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CHAPTER 12

At roughly the same time, Jerri Layne stepped out from behind the car wash on the Burger Palace lot and started counting the money she had earned from her latest customer. As she was walking across the parking lot, she finished zipping her plastic dress and then put the \$50 in her purse.

When she reached the sidewalk next to the gas station, she debated with herself for a minute whether she should go south on Jefferson or west on Ninth Street - south on Jefferson won out, and she walked up to the intersection and sashayed across the street the best she knew.

The first car in line was a blue Camaro and the driver honked at her several times. When she turned to look so she could gauge his interest, two young men waved back at her with expectant faces.

'Mmmmm, too young,' Jerri thought and ignored the honking men. She continued south, walking past all the various shops and shows. A homeless man was sitting in front of one of the exotic strip clubs, and she leaned down and put \$5 in his cigar case.

Feeling saintly, she crossed Jefferson Boulevard at Tenth Street. Twenty yards further south, a gold Pontiac G6 pulled over at the curb right next to her. Jerri was about to go over to it to check it out when she saw Suze, the oldest working girl on Jefferson, get out. Jerri waved at her and then carried on.

Pretty soon, another young, spotty kid tried to chat her up, but she brushed him off without hesitation.

'Jeez, these guys are horny tonight,' she thought and scoffed at all the young, inexperienced teenage boys who were trying to act suave and cool.

As she was waiting all alone at the red light at the intersection at Eleventh Street, a strange, mewling sound reached her ears and she started looking around for the source. She soon realized that it came from the mouth of a dark alley roughly twenty yards up Eleventh Street.

Jerri rubbed her chin, suddenly worried. She had heard enough stories about working girls being attacked in dark alleys to be wary of such places, and she was unsure whether to check out the sound or not.

She looked around and found that she was suddenly the only pedestrian there. Making up her mind, she put her hand in her purse and gripped the small bottle of pepperspray so she was ready to strike back in case it was a trap. With faltering steps, she began to walk slowly up Eleventh Street.

As she approached the alley, the sound she had heard became clearer and she was soon able to identify it - someone was crying. She peeked around the corner and saw a young African-American girl sitting on the filthy ground, leaning against an equally filthy brick wall.

Jerri looked left and right several times to see if it was a setup. Satisfied that she was alone with the young girl, she pulled her hand out of her purse and stepped closer.

"Hey..." she said, making the young girl jump.

"Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you," Jerri said in the friendliest tone she could muster.

The young girl settled down again and pulled up her legs. She wrapped her arms around her knees and leaned her head back so it was resting against the filthy brick wall.

"What's your name?" Jerri said and crouched down next to the young girl.

"Shawna," the young girl said in a timid voice.

The proverbial lightbulb went on in Jerri's head and she blinked several times.

"Shawna Grant?"

"Y-yes."

Jerri took a good look at the girl - she had black smudges on her hands and her face, her red windbreaker had been torn and her jeans were horribly filthy, but she appeared to be physically unharmed.

"My name is Jerri. Are you... are you all right?" Jerri said, putting her hand on Shawna's shoulder. The young girl nodded and shrugged, a gesture that could mean anything.

"Has anyone... you know... tried to touc... I mean, to hurt you?"

"My f-friend tried, but I kicked him in the crotch."

"Heh, good girl. Uh, where have you been these last few days?"

"At first, I s-stayed at my friend's flat, but after I'd k-kicked him, he threw me out... I've been out here since yesterday morning. There are so many creeps here... I..."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Jerri added offhand.

"Can you help me get home?" Shawna said quietly, sending Jerri a look of utter despair.

"I'll... uh, wait a minute. I'll call Fever. She'll know what to do," Jerri said and dug into her purse to find her cell phone. She quickly found Fever's number in the registry but it just rang and rang, and finally, she ran out of patience and gave up.

"Shit. Uh... uh... uh... OK, I know what we're gonna do. You and I are gonna go up to the Volunteer's Clinic. It's up at Fifth Street. It's not far. Come on... oh, uh, can you stand?"

Shawna nodded and got up from the filthy ground. She dusted off her hands on her jeans and began to shuffle towards the mouth of the alley. Jerri put her arm around the young girl's shoulder for support and felt even more saintly than before.

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After Maeve and Staci had wished Seamus Moloney a good and quiet night, they left the Donnelly mansion and walked across the gravel to get to the Mustang. On their way there, Maeve unclipped her phone from her belt and turned it on - it rang before she'd even taken two steps, so she flipped it open and put it up to her ear.

"Fever. Talk to me."

'Hey, Fever. It's Jerri... you know, Jerri Layne?'

"I know. Whassup?"

'I've found Shawna Grant for you. How about that, huh?'

"You have? Excellent news, Jerri. Where is she?"

'I've taken her to the Volunteer's Clinic down on Jefferson. She looks a little rough around the edges, but she's all right.'

"OK. I'll be there in a few."

'We'll be waiting, Fever.'

"Hmmm," Maeve said and closed the phone.

"Jerri... the working girl?" Staci said, putting her hands on top of the Mustang.

"Yep. She's found Shawna Grant, believe it or not."

"Oh! That's good news."

"Yeah, they're down at the Clinic. Do you want me to drop you off at home first, or...?"

"No, no. I'd like to come with you... if that's all right?"

"Sure. Get in, doll," Maeve said with a saucy wink.

'... as always, you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. I'm

Ricky Dean and we're still partying hard. We've had the fast songs, now we'll have a few slow ones. Grab your partner and dance close... real close... no, even closer than that. Here's The Platters with their immortal hit from 1959, Smoke Gets In Your Eyes.'

While the sentimental evergreen filled the car, Staci reached over to put her hand on Maeve's white jeans. She ran her hand slowly up and down the length of Maeve's thigh, stopping occasionally to claw it gently.

"Remember that we danced to Smoke Gets In Your Eyes many years ago?" Staci said and leaned in so she could give Maeve a kiss on the cheek.

"I do, actually. That was nice."

"Yeah. It was one of our first dates, I think. Back when I was still working in my parents' flower shop and you were a sidekick to Big Sully."

"Hey, I was never a sidekick to anyone," Maeve said with a chuckle.

"Junior partner, then."

"Mmmmm, better. Man, it feels like a lifetime ago. Hard to believe that it's really only... what... five years ago?"

"Closer to six, but... yeah."

On the radio, the song faded out and the DJ introduced the next slow dance, Mark Dinning's Teen Angel.

"So, perhaps you'll be calling Rose Dougal Auntie Rose soon, huh?" Staci said, still running her hands up and down Maeve's thigh.

"Uhhh... that's gonna be kinda odd. But if she's good for uncle Freddie, I'm all for it."

"Why do you think your uncle has never married?"

"I really don't know. Maybe he just never found the right girl," Maeve said and flashed a huge grin in Staci's direction.

"Could be. Rose looked really good, didn't she?"

"Yeah," Maeve said with a grin.

Staci turned her head and raised an eyebrow, but Maeve feigned innocence.

"Whaaat? You said it first... and she did look good. Really classy. I think she'll be a good match for uncle Freddie."

A few minutes later, Maeve parked in front of the Clinic near the corner of Jefferson and Fifth. The Volunteer's Clinic was housed in a converted, stationary trailer that had been painted white. The entrance and the two small windows on either side of it were all protected by heavy bars, and a camera had been installed above the door to keep an eye on anyone loitering outside. A small, backlit sign next to the camera proclaimed that it was the FREE CLINIC in four different languages.

As soon as she saw Maeve and Staci arrive, Jerri bolted out of the door and ran towards them. She cast Staci an Evil Eye and then pulled Fever into an awkward hug.

"Shawna's being given a checkup by the doc," Jerri said.

"Good."

"I can't believe you're still with that woman, Fever," Jerri whispered into Maeve's ear.

Maeve closed her eyes and shook her head. She took a deep breath and then let the air out slowly.

"I'm trying to start a harem of women called Staci," she said in a very resigned fashion.

"No...? Really?!"

"Of course not! Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Jerri. How many times do I have to tell you that she's the right Staci... the only Staci."

Jerri looked back and forth between Staci and Maeve and then started giggling, apparently finally getting the picture.

"I'm... uh... sorry," Jerri said to Staci.

Staci bit down a barb and just nodded, wearing a smile that was less than genuine.

Jerri returned the smile and then turned around. She tried to open the door to the clinic, but found that it was locked.

"Hey...?"

"You need to press the door bell, Jerri," Maeve said and pressed the small plastic button.

'Yes?' a female voice said from a small loudspeaker next to the door bell.

"It's Fever."

At once, the door was buzzed open and Maeve, Staci and the clueless Jerri stepped inside.

The public part of the Clinic was divided into three sections: a waiting room, a consultation room and an observation room with three bunks. As Maeve and the others came into the waiting room, Maeve spotted two of Fast Freddie's working girls sitting on plastic chairs and she went over to check up on them.

"Hey, Paula. Sandy. What's happened to you?"

"When we was done, some dickbreath broke my middle finger when he refused to pay what we'd agreed on," Paula said. She was in her mid-twenties with a wild haircut, an outrageous neo-punk outfit, piercings all over her face, and wearing makeup that was so garish that she looked ten years older than she really was.

"Didya get his name?"

"No. But I gave him a load o' mace right in his ugly mug, so I'd say we was even."

"Good on ya. Sandy? What's wrong with you?"

"Aw, nothing, really. I just tripped over something and banged my knee. It's kinda swollen so I guess my night's over," Sandy said. Like Paula, she was in her mid-twenties, but she was prettier and her clothes were much more subdued.

"That sucks. Well, here's two Benjamin Franklins. That should help for tonight, at least," Maeve said and took two bills out of her shirt pocket.

"Thanks, Fever. Owe you one," Sandy said and put the C-notes into her purse.

"Nah. Just stay safe."

At the same time, a nurse pulled a curtain aside and came out into the waiting room.

"Paula Roxxx?" she said, pronouncing all three X's. She looked up in surprise at the large number of women in the waiting room, but soon concentrated on the two working girls sitting on the chairs.

"That's me," Paula said and got up. The nurse looked at Paula's finger and then escorted the prostitute behind the curtain.

'Paula Roxxx?' Staci mouthed to Maeve, wearing an incredulous expression on her face. Maeve chuckled and sat down next to Sandy.

Half a minute later, the curtain was pulled apart again and a doctor dressed in a white labcoat came out into the waiting room.

"Good evening, Fever," he said when he spotted the Enforcer's familiar white hair.

"Doc Smith. How is Shawna?"

"All in all, she's in good health. You can see her now, but please, only one at a time. She's still a bit shook up," the doctor said.

"Jerri, she already knows you. Go in and talk to her for a while. I'll call her father and tell him the good news," Maeve said and put her hand on Jerri's elbow.

"OK," Jerri said and went behind the curtain.

"I'll just wait out here, Maeve. It's easier," Staci said and sat down next to Sandy.

"Yup. Hey, Sandy, please don't say anything that'll embarrass my girlfriend. She blushes so easily," Maeve said with a cheeky grin.

"Oh, ha, ha..." Staci said and swatted at Maeve's rear end, only missing by a fraction.

"Fever, I need a word with you before you call Shawna's father," the doctor said quietly.

"Oh? But I thought you said she was all right?"

"She is, but I still need a word. Step into my office, please."

"So, what's the problem, Doc?" Maeve said and sat down on a plastic chair in the doctor's private room at the rear of the clinic.

The doctor went around a desk and sat down on a swivel-chair. He took a piece of paper and looked at what he had written when he had examined Shawna.

"Let's take the good news first. She hasn't been raped, beaten or otherwise violated in any degree. She doesn't have any needletracks or anything else that would indicate drug use."

"Good."

"Yes, but she's pretty badly dehydrated and, of course, I can't guarantee that she hasn't taken any medicine or drugs in the form of pills or tablets. Also, she's very spooked, but that could be attributed to the fact that the friend she was staying with tried to take advantage of her and that she has spent many hours hiding in disgusting alleys."

"Mmmm. All right."

"All in all, their private physician needs to be informed so he or she can monitor Shawna closely for the next few days. Actually, in my professional opinion, I think it would be best if Shawna was admitted to the Community Hospital for observation."

"Mmmm. I can't decide for the family. I think it's best to call her father and then you can discuss the further course of action with him. OK?"

"Well... OK. I can live with that," the doctor said and got up. Maeve did the same and followed him out of the room.

"Baby, I'm just gonna go outside and call my uncle to give him an update," Maeve said when she was back out in the waiting room.

"Oh, Maeve, wait," Staci said and got up from the chair.

"Huh?"

"Well, I was thinking... you know how annoyed you get when we're interrupted... you know."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I think it was kinda obvious what your uncle and Rose were itching to do when we left."

"Oh... good point. I'll call Danny instead," Maeve said and unclipped her cell phone. She couldn't get a signal inside the clinic, so she opened the door and went out on the sidewalk.

"Gawd, it's gonna take me five years in therapy to get that image out of my head..." Maeve said to herself as she dialed Danny's number.

'It's Danny.'

"Hey Danny-boy, it's Fever. How did the package delivery go?"

'No problems. The dude didn't complain at all. Of course, he wasn't in any position to do so. What's up?'

"We've found Shawna Grant. She's fine. She's down at the free clinic right now."

'That's great, Fever.'

"Yeah. I'd rather not disturb Fast Freddie right now, so I was wonderin' if you had the number for the girl's father?"

'No, I don't.'

"Shit."

'I'm sure Wynne has it, though. Fever, have you ever met Maxwell Grant?'

"I've seen him on TV a couple of times, but I've never met him in person. Why?"

'Well, he's a showboater... big time. He's guaranteed to call a news crew or something like that to follow him to the clinic.'

"Oh, great. That's the last thing Shawna needs," Maeve said and rubbed her brow.

'I just wanted to let you know in advance.'

"Yeah. Thanks for the heads-up, Danny-boy. A typical headline-grabbin' politician, then."

'Yeah,' Danny said and chuckled.

"Well, all right. I'll work something out... Anyway, I'll call Wynne now. Thanks, Danny," Maeve said and hung up.

She quickly dialed the number to the Donnelly Mansion and waited impatiently for the phone to be picked up.

'The Donnelly Mansion, it's Wynne Masters. How may I help you?'

"Wynne, it's Fever. I need the phone number for Maxwell Grant, the politician."

'Please hold ... all right, it's 555-9861, Fever.'

"Thanks, Wynne. Talk to you later," Maeve said and punched the new number into her phone's registry. She called it, but could only reach an answering service. After telling Maxwell Grant the good news and the details on where he could find his daughter, she tapped the phone against her lips and went up to the door. She pressed the button for the door bell and waited for the nurse to react.

Twenty-five minutes later, a black Cadillac sedan pulled up to the curb and parked behind Maeve's Mustang. A distinguished looking African-American man in his late fifties stepped out, buttoned his blazer and ran a hand through his short, graying hair.

Looking left and right, he hurriedly crossed the sidewalk and went up to the door to the clinic. Before he had time to press the door bell, the door opened in front of him.

"Come in, Mr. Grant. Your daughter is in here," Maeve said and ushered the politician inside.

"Thank you, Miss... uhh?" Maxwell Grant said, staring wide-eyed at the gun in Maeve's shoulderholster.

"Donnelly."

"Oh, I see. Were you the one who found my daughter?"

"No. A friend of mine did. Shawna is in here," Maeve said and pulled the curtains aside. They walked from the waiting room into the observation room where Staci, Jerri, Shawna and the doctor were waiting for them.

As soon as Maxwell Grant saw his daughter, he ran forward and wrapped his arms around her. He gave her a thorough hug and started rocking back and forth, whispering words of reassurance in her ear. Soon, tears ran down both his and his daughter's cheeks and Shawna began to sob.

"C'mon guys, let's give them some privacy," Maeve said and held out her arm. Staci, Jerri and the doctor all left Shawna's bunk and shuffled into the doctor's private room.

"Well, that went OK," Staci said and discreetly dabbed the corner of her eye with her jacket sleeve.

"Yeah. I wish my daddy had been as emotional when I ran away from home. He didn't cry at all, he just laughed his ass off," Jerri said and sat down on the plastic chair. Her red dress crept up and even though she tried hard to pull it down again, she couldn't. In the end, she gave up and crossed her legs so she could hide the huge hole in her fishnet stockings on her left thigh.

"Oh, that's... um, too bad, Jerri," Staci said, trying in vain to come up with an intelligent response to what Jerri had said.

Maeve chuckled and went over to stand behind Staci. She found her partner's hand and began to play three little piggies with her long fingers.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door to the office and the doctor went over to open it. Outside, Maxwell Grant was standing with his arm wrapped around his daughter's shoulders, looking quite emotional.

"Thanks, everybody. It's been a very tough couple of days for me and my wife and we both thank you from the bottom of our hearts... and I know Shawna does, too. Right, hon?" he said, tickling his daughter's cheek.

Shawna nodded and smiled at Jerri who returned the smile, adding a little wave.

"Next week, we'll go back to shouting at each other like a teenage girl does with her hopeless parents, but right now, we're going to take a time-out."

"Mr. Grant, I need a word with you in private before you leave," Doctor Smith said.

"Oh? Yes... yes, that's fine. I need to call my wife first, anyway... and my press secretary. This isn't exactly a photogenic place, but it's a good example of how you comm... I mean, the common people living on the streets can band together to help those in need," Maxwell Grant said, his face suddenly wearing a smile very typical of politicians.

Maeve instantly puckered up her lips like she'd bitten into an extremely sour lemon.

"Oh, that'll make the Sunrise Show for sure," she said sarcastically.

"Yes, I'm sure it will," Maxwell Grant said and caressed the back of his daughter's head.

"Undoubtedly. Come on, baby. We're leaving," Maeve said and took Staci's hand.

"Goodbye, Mr. Grant," Staci said and walked past the politician, ignoring the fact that he had put out his hand. Behind them, Jerri did the same. She didn't fully understand why Maeve and Staci had left so sudden, but she knew that she didn't want to miss out on anything, so she followed them out of the doctor's room.

"Well... I guess they're not voting for my party," Maxwell Grant said and laughed.

Out on the sidewalk, Maeve shook her head and chuckled sadly.

"Man, that's a politician in a nutshell, huh?"

"At least we showed him... right?" Jerri said, still not quite understanding why the mood had changed so suddenly.

"Jerri, you didn't have to leave just because Staci and I did. He's gonna have TV crews and everything here soon. Don't you want a piece of the limelight?"

"Uh, me? No. I don't wanna go on display like some kind of... uh, specimen."

"Of us 'common people living on the street'," Maeve said, making quotation marks in the air with her index fingers.

"Yeah."

"Forget him, Maeve. The important thing is that Shawna is all right," Staci said and put her

hands on Maeve's shoulders.

"Yeah. You're right. I need to focus on the important stuff. Jerri, thanks for finding her. Here's a little something for your bother," Maeve said and fished three C-notes out of her shirt pocket.

"Aw, Jeez, I can't accept that, Fever. Well, I can..." - Jerri took the bills - "... but it's entirely too much," she said, putting the money in her purse.

"I'm sure you can find something worthwhile to spend it on. See ya around, Jerri," Maeve said and waved.

"See ya, Fever. Staci," Jerri said with a beaming smile. She turned around and paraded down the sidewalk, proving that she had mastered the working girl strut perfectly.

"She's a nice girl... if a little clueless at times," Staci said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. Come on. The night is still young," Maeve said and found Staci's hand.

They got into the Mustang and, as usual, left the curb with a roar. Soon, they were in the midst of the heavy traffic once again, but before they'd even made it five blocks down Jefferson, Maeve's phone rang and she unclipped it from her belt. She flipped it open and was about to talk when she noticed the caller ID.

"Hmmm," she said thoughtfully but still pressed the button.

'Hey, Fever. Can you recognize the voice?' a gruff female voice said from the other end of the connection, mocking the words she had used earlier in the week.

"R.C. I have a can of whoop-ass for you when we meet for threatening my girlfriend," Maeve hissed.

Staci's head pivoted around in an instant. She opened her mouth to speak, but at the last moment, she realized it might make Roberta's nasty streak worse if she heard Staci's voice over the phone, so she settled for harrumphing and crossing her arms over her chest.

'Ah, that was nothing. She hit me, not the other way 'round. Anyway, the time for our pissing contest has come. I have everything set up.'

Maeve rolled her eyes and sighed. She slowed to a stop at the intersection at Tenth Street and rolled up the window so she could hear better.

"When and where?"

'Eleven PM, sharp... the starting line is at Franklin and Nineteenth Street.'

"Nineteenth Street... are ya fuckin' nuts? That's deep in Chica territory. I might as well sign an official declaration of war!" Maeve said and shook her head repeatedly.

'I have everything squared with La Presidenta. She's agreed to a temporary expansion of the free zone so it includes Nineteenth Street as well.'

"The fuck you have. Smells like a fuckin' trap to me."

'Nope. Tricks of the trade, Maeve. You might learn that one day... on the other hand, you probably won't. If you haven't learned yet, even after all these years, you never will. Catch my drift?'

"I'm gonna take you down as soon as I see ya, R.C."

'I think we should race first. Then we can see who will take down who.'

Trying to control her temper, Maeve put the phone in her lap and started tapping her fingers on the rim of the steering wheel. When that didn't produce the wanted effect, she slammed her fist down onto the rim and picked up the phone again.

"Goddammit, R.C. If you fuck me over, you'll be sorry," Maeve said in a guttural growl. The traffic lights changed to green and Maeve released the brakes and crawled across the intersection.

'No fuckin'. Just racin'. Eleven PM. Don't be late,' R.C. said and terminated the connection.

"What the hell was that all about?" Staci said, looking worried.

"Roberta Cain wants to race me down in Chica-land. I'm taking you home first, baby. You can wait for me at my loft," Maeve said and went into the inside lane so she could turn right onto Eleventh Street.

"The hell I can. You better get one thing straight right now, Maeve Donnelly. If you're going to race against that psycho, I'm gonna be there, right next to you."

"Look..."

"No, you 'look'. If you think I'll be waiting at home for some cop to call me and say that you've been killed, you've got another thing coming. I'm going with you... and that's final. End of discussion," Staci said and tugged at the seatbelt. With an angry grunt, she clicked it into place and then crossed her arms over her chest again.

"Baby, I can't have you with me when I'm racing. It's just too dangerous," Maeve said with a sigh.

"All right, I understand that. But I'm still coming with you, Maeve. I don't care what I have to do, I'm coming with you."

"You can start the race," Maeve offered and put her hand on Staci's thigh.

"You mean like with a flashlight?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll do that. Come on, we're gonna be late," Staci said in a tone that didn't leave room for misinterpretations.

"Yezz, bozz," Maeve said and swerved back out in the fast lane.

"Now where are we going? Weren't we supposed to go down to Nineteenth Street?"

"Yep, but I need to do something first. Let's have some music," Maeve said and turned on the radio. WERC was playing Elvis Presley's Rip It Up and the rockabilly classic blasted out through the speakers.

"Fittin'," Maeve said just before she made a hard u-turn.

Once they were cruising north again, an uneasy silence filled the Mustang. Maeve was looking pensive and angry and Staci didn't have anything to add to the things she had already said, so she kept quiet, too.

Maeve started getting the same feeling in her gut she'd had before the shootout in the Palm Tree - it felt like she had the Grim Reaper riding along in the backseat. She cast a glance in the rear view mirror, almost expecting to see his scythe and the black robe, but all she could see was a blue GMC van with a young couple sitting close on the bench seat. With a sigh, Maeve looked straight ahead and tried to push away all the negative thoughts.

When they reached Ninth Street, Maeve activated the turning signal and drove into the Burger Palace lot.

"You need gas already? You just filled it up this afternoon," Staci said.

"No, I need to take out some gas. The tank is still mostly full, and that's just dead weight to haul around in the race. R.C. and her Charger are fast, there's no doubt about that, and I need all the help I can get," Maeve said and cruised around the lot to find a place to park.

"OK... but how are you gonna do that?"

"One of the guys working the car wash has a pump that I've used on occasion. I'm sure \$50 will

persuade him to let me borrow it for a few minutes."

"I'm sure it will."

Five minutes later, Maeve came back, dusting off her hands as she got into the Mustang.

"Job done," she said and turned the ignition key. She blipped the throttle a few times, creating the characteristic blowbacks from the exhausts.

"So we're ready to race Roberta Cain now?" Staci said, fighting the urge to stick her fingers in her ears.

"Well, *I'm* ready to race her. Or as ready as I'll ever be, anyway. Jeez, it's gonna be too flippin' weird though. I wish I knew why she's doing it... her motivations for doing all this bad shit."

"Maybe she'll tell you. I have a feeling she's a bit of a braggart."

"Well, you're definitely right about that. Um, baby, before we get there, there's something you need to have. Open the glove box."

"Oh? Are you giving me a present?"

"Uh, no. Not exactly. But hold that thought," Maeve said and scratched her cheek.

Staci opened the glove box and peeked inside - the only thing she could see was a handgun.

"A gun?"

"I want you to take it. I don't trust R.C. further than I can throw her and I just know she's got some kind of trap set up for us. It's my spare Beretta."

"Oh, Maeve... do you really think that's necessary?"

"Yes, I do. Please take it. I don't know what's gonna happen, but I do know I don't want you to be defenseless if things go bad."

Staci reached in and picked up the silver Beretta 92F. She stared at it, weighing the heavy gun in her hands and turning it around so she could look at it from all angles. She ejected the clip and inserted it again to get a feel for it.

Meanwhile, Maeve reversed out of the parking space and drove through the lot. She turned out onto Ninth Street and drove right, towards Franklin Boulevard.

"Maeve, I don't know if I can control this Howitzer. I'm not used to shooting with a 9mm."

"It's just for protection, baby. Hopefully, you won't get to use it. Let's hear some music," Maeve said and turned on the radio.

'...eader Of The Pack... oh, that was so sad... so sad I almost cried my eyes out. Here's another tearjerkin' classic. Ray Peterson's Tell Laura I Love Her ... sob, sob...' Ricky Dean said and cued the song.

"Aw hell no, I can't listen to that right now," Maeve said and turned the radio off again.

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CHAPTER 13

Maeve drove off Franklin Boulevard and turned onto Nineteenth Street. She had to admit that Roberta Cain had selected a good venue for the race - the road was straight and seemed to go on for miles and the derelict factories on either side of the street ensured there wouldn't be any spectators.

"There she is," Staci said and pointed at the easily recognizable figure leaning against the trunk of the Charger.

Roberta had parked her car on the left side of the street, and when the Mustang approached her, she pointed at the lane next to her. Maeve followed instructions and pulled up to a rock that had been placed in the right-hand lane. When the Mustang had stopped just short of the rock, Roberta went over to it and kicked it out of the way with the tip of her boot.

"Baby, stay in the car for now," Maeve said and turned off the engine.

"OK."

With a deep sigh, Maeve opened the door and stepped out. The air had turned decidedly chilly, so she zipped her leather jacket all the way up. She looked up at the night sky and saw little white clouds zip across the black background. Shivering slightly, she put her hands in her pockets and briefly wondered if it would snow.

"Roberta," she said, leaning against the side of the Mustang.

"Fever. How nice of you to drop in. Are you ready to race me?"

"Yep."

"How nice. Oh, I see you've brought your main squeeze. Won't she just slow you down?" Roberta said and leaned down so she could give Staci a mock wave.

"She won't be there when we race."

"Oh."

For several long moments, the two combatants checked each other out, leading to an awkward silence that was only broken by the hum of the traffic behind them on Franklin.

"So... are we gonna do this or what?" Maeve said.

"I have a little story to tell you first."

"A story?"

"Yes, and it's even got a happy ending. Once upon a time, there was this woman who was working hard for a Big City crime family. Let's call her Roberta."

"R.C., I don't have the time or the patience to listen to this shit."

"Oh, I think you do. Where was I, oh yeah... Roberta was a hardworking woman who always kept loyal to her backers and who always made sure that the head of her Family received his fair share of the financial income. Then, one day, a man from a different crew approached her and told her of a sweet deal. Roberta agreed to do it, not knowing that the deal would only cause her trouble."

"I came here to race, not to listen to you tellin' stories. Get to the fuckin' point, or I'm outta here, R.C.," Maeve said and folded her arms across her chest so her hand was near the Beretta.

"All right, I'll cut to the chase. The deal got fucked up and when Roberta needed help from the head of her Family, he just washed his hands and Roberta ended up in jail," Roberta said and clenched her fists angrily.

"Perhaps Roberta shouldn't have tried something she obviously wasn't ready for?"

"Or maybe Fast Freddie should've tried to get me out of the slammer, Fever."

"Is that what this is all about? Have you killed God knows how many people 'cos you're pissed off at Fast Freddie? Jesus Christ, R.C., you're crazier than I thought."

"So you're not even gonna apologize for leaving me to rot for twelve years?"

"No," Maeve said coldly.

"Then we have nothing more to talk about. Let's settle it on the street," Roberta said and walked around the back of the Charger.

Maeve let out a long sigh and shook her head. After opening the trunk and taking out the flashlight, she went over to the passenger side door and opened it.

"Baby, here's the flashlight. You still up for startin' us?"

"I think. Oh, baby, please be careful. I heard what you were talking about... she's completely nuts," Staci said and grabbed Maeve's hands.

"Yeah, I know. I'll try to be careful. Do you have the pistol?"

"Yeah," Staci said and opened her jacket - the heavy Beretta was tucked away down the waist of Staci's slacks.

"All right. Go stand in the middle of the street a few paces ahead of the cars. Wait for both of us to have the engines running. When we do, give us a few seconds, like, uh... count down from five, or something. Then turn on the light and run straight ahead so you won't get caught between the cars."

"OK. I love you. This is for good luck," Staci said and pulled Maeve down for a searing kiss.

"Love you more, baby," Maeve whispered.

Staci took the flashlight and stepped out of the Mustang. She walked around the front of the black muscle car, not daring to look at Roberta who was already sitting in her Charger.

A sense of dread flooded over her and she started trembling inside. She zipped her fleece jacket and put her free hand in her pocket to stop the sudden cold from numbing her fingers.

While Staci got ready, Roberta started the Charger, leading to a deep, rumbling sound emanating from the mat black car. A few seconds later, Maeve waved at Staci and then turned the ignition key herself.

The familiar sound of the Mustang's 427 soon joined the Charger's rumbling Hemi, creating an ear-splitting wall of sound. Maeve blipped the throttle a few times and then gave Staci a thumbsup.

Staci took a few steps backwards so she had eye-contact with both Maeve and Roberta. Roberta Cain's gray eyes were so cold and unfriendly that Staci almost felt like running away, but one look at Maeve's Irish green orbs convinced her to stay.

'All right... this is it... five, four, three, two... one!' Staci thought. When she reached 'one', she clicked on the little button on the flashlight.

For a split second, nothing happened - but then everything happened at once. Both Maeve and Roberta stood on the gas pedals, combining the already loud noises of the two V8s into a thunderous roar that was louder than anything Staci had ever heard before.

The two cars left the starting line as one, blasting past Staci who ducked her head and slammed her eyes shut in pure reflex. She let go of the flashlight and covered her ears with her hands, forgetting all about running to safety. When the cars had cleared her, she turned around and wrung her hands.

"Go, Maeve!" she shouted, well aware that none of the two racers could hear her.

Roberta was already in top gear, edging past 6000 revs and 110 MPH and still climbing. She had an evil look on her face and she had her foot planted firmly on the throttle. She gripped the steering wheel hard, almost like she was trying to will the car into going faster. She looked to her right and noticed that she and Maeve were still neck and neck.

Maeve had gone through the gearbox manually, finally putting it into top gear when the rev counter redlined in third. She glanced out of the window and saw the Charger's right hand side mirror to her immediate left.

The engine temperature and oil pressure gauges looked to be in order, so Maeve stepped even harder on the gas, hoping that the Mustang's additional cubic inches would give her an advantage in the final run to the finish line. She looked anxiously at the speedo that had already edged past the 125 MPH mark.

As the two muscle cars thundered past the 300-yard point, Roberta could see that Maeve's Mustang began to draw ahead, and she stepped even harder on the gas - to no avail.

Something short-circuited inside her mind and she decided on the spot to end it right there and then. She turned the steering wheel hard right, aiming directly for the driver's side of Maeve's Mustang.

Maeve was so focused on the rapidly approaching finishing line that she never saw Roberta's Charger suddenly swerve towards her. The incredibly hard impact nearly unseated her and she lost her grip on the wheel.

At 135 MPH, the result was inevitable - in an instant, the Mustang started skidding right, the tires squealing wildly on the pavement and sending off streams of smoke. Maeve stood on the brake pedal with both feet, but she could see with terrifying clarity that there wouldn't be enough time to slow the car down before it would run into a low stone fence at the edge of the street.

The recoil from the impact sent the Charger fishtailing back towards the left side of the street. In a rising panic, Roberta Cain tried to save it by frantically sawing the steering wheel and stepping hard on the gas to make the heavy car go straight.

On her side of the road, the paved surface was higher than the grassy verge, so when the Charger left the road, it was several inches off the ground. As it was still airborne, the left front wheel clipped a post for one of the street lights which unsettled the car's balance. It immediately rolled over and was thrown into a series of highly destructive, high-speed barrel rolls.

At the same time, the midnight black Mustang GT crashed hard over a curb, sending a tremendous jolt up through Maeve's lower back and making her cry out in pain. The impact slowed the car down a fraction, but it still continued at speed towards the stone fence.

Maeve kept both feet on the brakes, but the stinging pain from her back made it nearly impossible for her to apply pressure to the pedal, and she wasn't able to get the car stopped fully.

Just before the Mustang reached the fence, it skidded across a small patch of gravel, sending a cloud of dust into the air. The final impact against the stone fence crushed the right front headlight and jerked Maeve forward until she hit the stops on the seatbelt.

As the Mustang settled down with an agonized creak, Maeve leaned back in her seat; her face as pale as a sheet.

"Maeeeeeeeeeeeeeeve! Noooooooooooooooooo!" Staci screamed when the sounds of the squealing tires reached her. She could hear both engines falling off and then stopping, creating an eerie silence that was punctuated by the familiar sounds of an accident unfolding. On the left side of the street, Staci could see that one of the lights blinked twice and then shut off, like it had been hit by something.

A shockwave of terror flooded over her and she had to crouch down in order to keep her balance. She clutched her head and moaned. Taking several deep breaths, she got up and began to run as fast as she could towards the site of the wreck.

Staci felt that it took her several lifetimes to reach the crashed Mustang, but in reality, it only took her two minutes.

When she finally reached Maeve's car, she ran up to the driver's side door and tried to open it. Through the window, she could see that Maeve was in pain, but no matter how hard she pulled,

the door wouldn't open.

Staci took a step back and looked at the once pristine car. She couldn't believe how bashed-in the left side was - all the body panels were severely dented, making the black Mustang resemble a car in a demolition derby.

She tried the door again, but she wasn't strong enough to pull it against the dents. From the inside, Maeve signaled that Staci should go around to the passenger side door, so she did.

That opened as it should, and Staci flung herself into the crashed Mustang and wrapped her arms around Maeve.

"Oh, God, Maeve!" she said and gave her lover a crushing hug. Maeve cried out and tried weakly to push Staci away from her.

"My b-back, baby. My back is f-fucked..." Maeve whispered in a pained voice.

"All right. A-all right. Don't panic," Staci said, trying to come up with a solution. She ran a trembling hand through her hair and took a few deep breaths to calm down.

"I'll t-try to pop the trunk. There's a c-crowbar in the back. Get it and see if you can pry the door open. I need to check on R.C.," Maeve said, clenching her teeth together.

"But can't you just get out over here? What if I carry you..."

"No, baby, please..."

"All right. Uh, hang on," Staci said and crawled back out of the car.

As she came around the back, the trunk popped open and Staci started searching for the crowbar. She found it at once and went to work on prying the driver's side door open.

After a few attempts, she managed to get the locking mechanism to release and the battered door swung open. She dropped the crowbar on the ground with a loud clang and leaned in towards Maeve.

"Come on, baby, lean on me," Staci said and reached in to pull Maeve out.

Using Staci for leverage, Maeve was able to swing her legs out without stressing her abused back too much. When she sat at a ninety-degree angle to the steering wheel, she stretched out her arms and let Staci pull her up.

"Oh, baby," Staci breathed into Maeve's ear once she was fully erect.

"Goddamn, that was scary. In the first few minutes, my back was hurting so much I couldn't move my legs at all," Maeve whispered.

"Gawd... how is it now?"

"Better. They're still a bit numb, but I can feel the sense is returning. Thank God."

Staci exhaled slowly and shook her head. She leaned down and kissed Maeve on the forehead.

"I'm so sorry about your car, honey..." Staci said, framing Maeve's face.

"Yeah. Thanks. She gave me a shoulder block, the crazy bitch. But I'd say she got the short end of the stick. Look," Maeve said and pointed at the smoking wreck of the Charger.

The mat black car had ended up on its side another fifty yards down the street, with the underside facing towards Maeve and Staci. The front left wheel was hanging on by the proverbial thread and the driver's side door appeared to be missing.

"Do... do you think she's...?"

"I better go and check," Maeve said and took a faltering step. Her back was still killing her, but it had improved a great deal even in the few moments she had been out of the car.

"Oh, you shouldn't..." Staci said and held onto Maeve's arm.

"No, it's... it's better now. I can make it. Um, baby, I think you should stay here in case she's... you know."

"Yeah. I better. I really don't want to look at a... yeah."

"Baby, if you want to do something useful, try to see if the Stang still runs. We might need to get away quickly."

"Will do, Maeve. I'll get on it straight away," Staci said and gently put her hand on Maeve's shoulder.

"Thanks, baby."

As Maeve walked closer to the still steaming Charger, she tried several times to call out Roberta's name, but no one answered her. She walked past the driver's side door that had been ripped off by the centrifugal forces. Once she reached the car, she put her hand on the rear fender and peeked around the wreck.

Roberta Cain was flat on her back on the ground, pinned down by her Charger. The heavy car had landed on top of her abdomen, crushing it and her stomach completely. She was dead.

Roberta's arms were stretched out to either side, creating a creepy, crucifix-like effect that sent a cold shiver up and down Maeve's spine.

Despite the grotesque way the corpse was positioned, Maeve hobbled closer to her dead adversary and knelt down next to her. Almost by reflex, she put two fingers on the side of Roberta's neck, but she knew that she wouldn't find any pulse before she'd even touched the skin.

"Your fight is over, R.C. I hope it was worth it. You better be enjoyin' your thirty minutes in heaven 'cos when the Devil hears you're dead, he's gonna come lookin' for ya," Maeve said and got up.

She sighed and shook her head. Without looking back, she started shuffling towards Staci and the Mustang.

Staci reached under the Mustang's steering wheel and pulled the small lever for the hood - the mechanism still worked, clonking loudly when the spring was released.

After doing that, she went around the front to try to lift the hood so she could see if the radiator had suffered any damage in the impact with the stone fence. The hood snagged a bit on the crushed headlight on the right hand side, but after Staci removed a small piece of glass, it opened freely.

She surveyed the engine and quickly established that it hadn't been damaged. It smelled of hot oil, as expected after the race, but it didn't appear to be leaking any fluids and the radiator was still intact. Staci grunted and closed the hood again.

She got back in and tried to start the engine. The first two attempts weren't successful, but it caught on the third try, belching out a cloud of black smoke. She blipped the throttle and noted that it ran cleanly, apart from a rattle originating from somewhere underneath the car.

She was about to put the shifter into Reverse when she noticed Maeve shuffling towards her, wearing an unreadable expression on her face.

"So...?" Staci said once Maeve had reached her.

"Roberta's dead."

"Oh."

"Mmmm."

"I guess that book has been closed once and for all," Staci offered with a wistful smile.

"I guess. But look at my car, for fuck's sake!" Maeve said and threw her arms in the air.

"Well, at least it's running. I checked the engine and it looks fine. Do you want to try...?"

"No, go ahead. I need to stand up for a little while yet. Come on, I'll guide you," Maeve said and walked around the back of the battered and bruised Mustang.

Staci rolled down the window in the passenger door so she could hear what Maeve said over the impossibly loud exhaust - in fact, Staci thought the exhaust was even louder after the crash.

"Go on... slowly," Maeve said and waved her hands.

Staci put the shifter in Reverse and gingerly touched the throttle. The Mustang creaked and groaned, but slowly rolled backwards, extracting itself from the stone fence.

"Stop!" Maeve yelled and pointed at something underneath the car. At once, Staci stood on the brake pedal. Maeve went around the front of the car, picked up the crowbar Staci had dropped earlier and then came back to stand on the right hand side.

"One of the brackets for the exhaust has broken on this side an' it's dragging on the ground. I'm gonna lift it up with the crowbar until you're back on the pavement," Maeve said and bent down the farthest her abused back would allow her to.

"OK. Back it up," Maeve said, holding the crowbar under the car.

Staci touched the throttle again, making the Mustang creep backwards.

"Shit, the right front's lost a lotta air," Maeve said offhand as the car began to crawl.

The ten feet back to the curb seemed to take forever, but Staci finally felt the car bump down from the curbstone that had caused so many problems. Maeve stepped away from the car and put her hand hard against her back.

Staci continued backwards for a few more feet and then turned the wheel to make the car line up with the street.

"OK, that's far enough. Cut it, baby," Maeve said and waved her hand.

Staci put the shifter in Park and stopped the engine. She got out and went over to stand next to Maeve who was checking the flat tire. Staci was about to open her mouth to speak when her ears caught a strange, but familiar, sound in the distance.

"Maeve... what's that?"

"Mmmm?"

"That sound...? It sounds like rolling thunder. But it can't be," Staci said and looked up at the

clear night sky.

"Rolling thun... holy fuck, it's the Chicas!" Maeve said and turned around so fast she nearly lost her balance.

"The Chicas?!"

"In full force. Quick, baby, get in. We have to hustle."

"But... but...! Your back, and the flat, and..."

"No time for that. We gotta hustle," Maeve said and ran around the car.

"Look!" Staci said and pointed up towards the far end of Nineteenth Street where at least four headlights had suddenly appeared.

"Come on, for Chrissakes," Maeve said and jumped into the Mustang. As soon as Staci was in, Maeve slammed the shifter into Drive and stepped on the gas to get away from the approaching bikers.

"Goddamn, the steering's a bitch!" Maeve groaned as she wrestled the battered car in the opposite direction of where she and Roberta had just raced from.

Staci was wrestling, too, but that was with the seatbelt. She needed four attempts to make the metal plate go into the lock, and by then, the Mustang was already flying along the road.

"Jeez, Maeve, don't forget we've got a flat!" Staci said and dug her fingers into the dashboard.

"Baby, if the Chicas get their claws into us, the flat's gonna be all that's left!"

"Oh... look, there's two more!"

"I see 'em," Maeve said and swerved between two Chicas who tried to block the road with their bikes.

When Maeve and Staci reached the corner of Nineteenth and Franklin, they quickly discovered that the Chicas had beat them there. The intersection was blocked by four bikes, and the riders had dismounted and were holding their guns ready.

"Goddamn, they're everywhere... must be a million of those fuckers," Maeve said and drew her Beretta - she immediately changed her mind and put it back into the holster.

"Hang on, baby. I'm gonna crash right into 'em... no, I ain't!" Maeve said, changing her mind for the second time in two seconds. Instead of ramming the Chicas, she wrestled the Mustang up onto the sidewalk which was just wide enough for the car.

Ahead of them, the bikers tried to regroup, but Maeve blasted past them before they had time to move their bikes.

"Awright," Maeve said and took the corner onto Franklin Boulevard on two wheels. As the car went into a slide, the tires started squealing loudly, a piercing shriek that was matched by the one coming from Staci.

As soon as the Mustang was pointing straight again, Maeve stepped hard on the gas, making the V8 roar. There was almost no traffic on Franklin, so Maeve kept her foot down and they shot through the red light at Eighteenth Street.

"More Chicas! At the intersection... do you see them?" Staci said, still clinging onto the dashboard.

"Yep. Hang onto your ass, baby!" Maeve said and aimed the Mustang directly at a small group of Chicas who were standing in the middle of the Boulevard.

"Maeve, what are you doooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo..." Staci howled as the Mustang came dangerously close to the bikers. At the last moment, the four Chicas parted like the Red Sea, diving to either side of the fast moving muscle car.

"...oooooooooing? God-*damn*..." Staci croaked, clutching her head.

Behind them, two of the four Chicas fired long salvos after the escaping Mustang, but none of them were able to hit anything.

"Fourteenth Street, here we come!" Maeve said as they blasted across the intersection and into familiar territory. At once, Maeve slowed down in a controlled fashion, applying the brakes carefully so the car wouldn't snap sideways in case the tire finally gave up the ghost. After another fifty yards or so, the Mustang stopped at the curb on Franklin between Fourteenth and Thirteenth Street.

Maeve checked the rear view mirror and saw a group of Chicas driving up to the intersection at Fourteenth Street. After a few moments, they turned around and went back to the Southside.

She drew a sigh of relief and wiped some sweat off her brow.

"Maeve...?"

"I know, baby. That was too close," Maeve said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"No, uh... I think I peed my pants," Staci said sheepishly.

"Oh... uh... oh," Maeve said and scrunched up her face.

"Sorry."

"Ah, everything else is fucked. Why not the upholstery as well," Maeve said with a chuckle.

"It wasn't *that* much," Staci said and swatted at Maeve's shoulder.

"How about you and I go home now, huh? I think we've had enough action for one night," Maeve said and put the shifter in Drive.

"Good idea."

"Your place or mine?"

"Mine. I hear my bed callin' my name," Staci said with a yawn.

"All right. I'll tuck you in an' sing Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight in your ear, then. How's that sound?" Maeve said pulled away from the curb.

"Not bad at all, actually."

Maeve drove slowly up Franklin, careful not to go so fast that the broken exhaust would fall off. As they went past Eighth Street, a dark blue Dodge sedan appeared in the intersection.

Paco Alvarez tracked the Mustang GT with his eyes as it went across the intersection - observing the broken headlight, the smashed alloy wheel and the shower of sparks coming from the exhaust as it was dragging on the asphalt.

He opened his cell phone and tried for the third time in ten minutes to call Roberta Cain. When he still couldn't get a connection, he put two and two together and came to the conclusion that the race hadn't ended well for Roberta.

When the lights changed to green, he turned right onto Franklin and shadowed the battered Mustang at a safe distance. His thoughts as to where they were headed were answered when the Mustang's turning signal lit up as it came up to the intersection at First Street.

Paco didn't want to get too close, so he stopped halfway between Second and First. Once the Mustang had turned the corner, he stepped on the gas and hurried up to the intersection.

Even though it was still red, he crept around the corner, scouting intently after the Mustang - he spotted it a few hundred yards up the street. He turned off his headlights and kept to a slow speed.

As he went past the spot where he and Roberta had carjacked the Mercedes Convertible from the

middle-aged woman, a spark of anger ignited within him and he reached into his army jacket to retrieve his revolver.

The Mustang's turning signal went on again and the car soon left First Street and turned into a small parking lot in front of an apartment complex. Paco pulled over at the curb and checked that he had a full drum of ammo. He spun the cylinder and then slammed it into the revolver.

Maeve drove into the only parking space in the lot, exactly opposite Staci's blue Jetta. She put the shifter into Park and turned off the engine. As the engine stopped, the Mustang creaked and groaned all over again.

"Man, all this damage is gonna cost me plenty of blood, sweat and tears... and even more money," she said and sighed.

"Yeah. Perhaps it would be cheaper to buy a brand new car?"

"Mmmmm. It's gonna need two new front fenders, a new door, a new headlight, a new exhaust... and the hood and the section behind the driver's side door both have to go to the panel-beaters. Not to mention a new set of alloy wheels and the custom paint job. You may be right," Maeve said and opened the door.

Staci got out as well, yawning widely as she stood in the middle of the parking lot.

"Go on up, I'll be there shortly," Maeve said, putting her hands on her hips.

"OK. See you in a few," Staci said and started walking over to the entrance.

Out on the street, Paco exited the blue Dodge and quickly crossed the road, holding the revolver ready. He crouched down behind a parked car and watched Maeve look at the damaged Mustang.

After waiting for a few moments to make sure that Maeve hadn't spotted him, he ran to one of the two flower beds that separated the street from the parking lot. He hid behind it and then peeked around the corner. As he was watching, Maeve crouched down to take a look at the dented left front fender.

Careful not to make a single sound that would alert Maeve to his presence, Paco ran into the lot and quickly ducked into the shadows underneath a beech tree.

He moved forward, edging between a white Ford SUV and a blue VW Jetta. Looking up, he could see that Maeve was still preoccupied with her car. He also discovered that he had a perfect line of fire. He raised his revolver and aimed it at the white-haired woman.

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CHAPTER 14

Before he had time to take the shot, Maeve moved further right, crouching down to check the door of the Mustang. Paco adjusted his aim accordingly - but didn't realize that he was close to bumping into the blue Jetta.

Then his knee hit the fender, setting off the burglar alarm.

An infernal, modulating sound echoed through the parking lot and Paco knew instantly that his cover was blown. When he looked up at the Mustang, Maeve was long gone.

He cursed loudly and spun around. Ducking back between the two cars, he ran around the rear of the blue Jetta hoping and praying that he'd be able to get a new aim on Maeve before she got one on him.

Having only just turned on the lights in her apartment, Staci quickly turned them off again and hurried over to the window. Thinking the alarm sounded very much like the one on her own car, she pulled a curtain aside and looked down at her blue Jetta - and spotted Paco Alvarez, sneaking around with a gun.

Staci covered her mouth with her hand and started to look for Maeve. Her unease grew exponentially when she wasn't able to find the Enforcer anywhere, and her stomach started doing flip-flops. Suddenly, she spotted the familiar shock of spiky, white hair hiding behind a sedan on the other side of the parking lot.

Holding his revolver straight ahead of him, Paco ran across the center of the parking lot, searching for Maeve. The burglar alarm was still blaring away, hiding all other sounds, and he cursed loudly in several different languages.

When he reached the Mustang, he ran all the way around it, unable to find a single clue that would explain where Maeve had disappeared to.

Out of the blue, the revolver was kicked out of his hand by a size seven-and-a-half boot and he found himself slammed up against the side of the Mustang by two strong hands holding onto his lapels.

"Hello, Paco. So nice of you to drop in," Maeve hissed in his face. In the background, the burglar alarm on the Jetta finally stopped blaring, reverting to frantically flashing the hazard lights.

"What have you done with Roberta?" he said, his voice even more hoarse than usual.

"Oh, how sweet. Are you concerned about her? Who'd ha' thunk it. She's dead, you little weasel. Crushed like a fuckin' bug!"

"Fuck you!"

"Naw, take my word for it. She's d-e-a-d," Maeve said and slammed Paco back up against the car. He bared his teeth in a sneer and tried to push back at Maeve, but she was too strong for him.

"Ya wanna fight, do ya? Come on, big boy. I'll give you a fight you won't forget in a hurry!" Maeve said - a split second later, the lights went on in the windbreak at the entrance and Maeve glanced at it to see if it was Staci.

Paco took full advantage of the distraction and moved his head back and then forward, headbutting Maeve violently across her brow.

Groaning loudly, Maeve let Paco go and staggered backwards. Clutching her forehead and her nose, she shook her head and yelled a string of extremely colorful and inventive Irish expletives.

Somebody screamed over by the windbreak, but even in her fuzzy state, Maeve could tell it wasn't Staci's voice, so she didn't react to it at all.

While Maeve was still holding her forehead, Paco kicked out after her, aiming at her crotch. Sensing the danger, Maeve turned at the very last moment so Paco could only manage to strike a glancing blow to her hip.

Paco soon realized that he'd stand a better chance of escaping if he ran, so he bolted back out into the center of the parking lot, hoping to get to his car - in the end, he only made it as far as ten feet.

With her thigh and hip stinging like hell from the kick, Maeve roared loudly and set off after him. She quickly caught up with him and tackled him from behind, sending the two of them crashing down onto the asphalt.

With an angry roar, Maeve flipped him over and straddled his gut. Without showing any mercy at all, she fired off a terrifying barrage of punches into his chest and face that soon left him only semi-conscious. By flailing his arms madly, he managed to get one or two hits in on Maeve, but in the end, the Enforcer's superior strength won out, reducing Paco's face to something resembling a bowl of chunky tomato soup.

"Maeve...! God, Maeve, please stop! He's had enough, Maeve... please stop!"

To Maeve, the voice seemed to come from a million miles away, and at first, she couldn't recognize it. After a few moments, it dawned on her that it held a certain familiarity, and as she

slowly returned to the real world, she knew that she had just presented the worst side of herself to Staci.

Staci put a warm, loving hand on Maeve's shoulder and helped her up. Breathing hard, Maeve got on her feet and stepped away from Paco. She turned around, feeling too ashamed to look Staci in the eye.

"Thank you. I was so worried that you were gonna kill him," Staci said and pulled the injured Maeve into a tender hug.

"I would have if you hadn't stopped me, baby," Maeve said with a dry cough. She still didn't want to look at Staci, but the tall woman just reached in and framed Maeve's face with her hands.

"Maeve, please look at me. I think I know what's on your mind, but... even though I have to admit that it scares me at times, I love that part of you as well... especially when you're fighting for my honor. Please believe that."

"Really? So you don't think I'm some kind of rock ape just out of the cave?"

Staci chuckled quietly and then leaned in to kiss Maeve on the lips.

"No, I don't."

Down on the ground, Paco coughed and tried to hoist himself up. His nose was bleeding profusely, sending two streams of blood running down his lips and onto his army jacket.

Maeve took a few deep breaths to get the last strains of aggression out of her system. Her skinned knuckles drew attention to themselves, and as the stinging sensation spread out, she started shaking her hands.

"Hey, Paco... you mess with my girlfriend, you mess with me, get it?" Maeve said hoarsely, wrapping her arm around Staci's waist.

Paco coughed and nodded faintly, his head lolling left and right like it wasn't properly attached to his neck. He tried again to get up, and this time, he was actually able to get up on one elbow.

"I promised myself I'd kill you for what you did to Staci, but you know what? I won't. I'm gonna do something much worse. I'm gonna call the cops. I win, you lose... you pathetic excuse for a man," Maeve said and unclipped her phone from her belt.

She dialed a number and waited for someone to pick up the phone.

'Robbery-homicide, please state your business.'

"I need to talk to Detective Sean Duffy, please. It's Maeve Donnelly," Maeve said loudly, looking directly into Paco's eyes as she spoke.

'Please hold.'

Groaning, Paco slumped to the ground, collapsing in a boneless heap.

Ten minutes later, Sean Duffy arrived in an unmarked squad car with a black-and-white in tow. The two uniformed officers driving the cruiser soon rounded up the still bleeding Paco Alvarez and slapped the cuffs on him.

While they were reading Paco his rights, Detective Duffy walked around, jotting down notes in his indispensable notepad.

Saying 'hmmm' a lot, he walked around the parked cars, trying to get to the bottom of what might have taken place. When he found Paco's snubnosed .32 revolver lying on the ground half hidden under one of the cars, he crouched down and picked it up by moving his pencil through the fingerguard.

He studied the revolver carefully and sniffed the barrel to check if it had been fired recently. With a satisfied grunt, he put it into a clear plastic bag marked Evidence.

"Miss Donnelly?" he said and stood up straight.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Is this Mr. Alvarez' revolver?" he said and showed Maeve the plastic bag.

"I'm not sure, Sir, but I doubt anyone else would leave their gun out on the street like this."

"Mmmm. And you say that he was already looking like this when you returned to the parking lot?"

"That's right, Sir. He was lying face-up in the center of the lot, bleeding like a pig when we pulled in."

"When you say 'we', who are you referring to?"

"Myself and my girlfriend, Staci Hart. She lives here."

"And she is where, exactly...?" Duffy said and looked around.

"Oh, she went upstairs. All the drama was too much for the poor thing."

"Mmmm. What's happened to your knuckles, Miss Donnelly?"

"Oh... I was in a car accident earlier this evening."

"Oh?"

"Yes, as you can see, my car is pretty badly wrecked," Maeve said and pointed at the Mustang.

"Mmmm. How unfortunate."

"It was bumped into by another car, and I had to take an evasive maneuver. I scraped my knuckles on the dashboard as I turned the steering wheel."

"Mmmm. I hope you swapped insurance info with the other driver."

"Oh, I did, Sir. Don't worry about that."

"When was this accident, Miss Donnelly? You still have some blood on your cheek," Duffy said and pointed at his own cheek.

Maeve touched her left cheek and felt some stinging. When she looked at her fingers, the blood was still fresh.

"Oh, that. No, that isn't from the accident, Sir. I was bitten by a mosquito."

"A mosquito? In November?"

"Yes. Global warming, you know. But anyway, I squashed it."

"Mmmm. Well, I'm sure you did. Thank you for delivering Paco Alvarez to us on a silver platter. Now we just have to get him to tell us where Roberta Cain is and we're all set."

"Roberta Cain... well, Sir, I have a suggestion."

"Yes?"

"Try calling your colleagues down in the Southside. They may have something for you."

"Oh?"

"Word on the street is that Roberta Cain is no longer with us," Maeve said, leaning in towards Detective Duffy in a very conspiratorial fashion.

"Oh, really? Interesting. Thank you, Miss Donnelly. I'll do that."

"You're welcome, Detective Duffy."

"Detective, we're ready!" the first of the two uniformed policemen said. Duffy turned around and

waved at him. The black-and-white started and drove out of the parking lot, taking Paco Alvarez permanently out of Maeve's and Staci's lives.

"I guess we're done, too, Miss Donnelly," Duffy said and closed his notepad.

"So, how is your lovely wife these days?" Maeve said as they started walking slowly back to the unmarked squad car.

"We're getting divorced," Duffy said matter-of-factly.

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Ah, it was bound to happen. I work too much. Get this... of all people, she ran off with a florist."

"Yes, those florists... they're smooth on the surface but paddle like the devil underneath," Maeve said with a knowing grin.

"Apparently. I've met him... he looks like an accountant. Oh, well," Sean Duffy said and got into his car.

"Have a nice evening, Miss Donnelly," he said and then reversed out of the parking space and drove away.

"Oh, I'm plannin' to, Detective. You can count on that," Maeve said and put her hands on her hips.

Staci stood in the living room window and looked down at Maeve talking on her phone. Before long, Maeve started walking back to the windbreak - when she was halfway there, her sixth sense apparently kicked in because she stopped and looked up at the windows.

Staci quickly waved at her and then crossed over to the door so she was ready to intercept Maeve's call - she didn't have to wait long.

'Hey, baby, are you dressed?' Maeve said over the intercom.

"Yes."

'Oh, that's too bad. Can I come up anyway?'

"Sure," Staci said with a chuckle. She pressed a small button on a panel next to the door and then worked the lock.

A moment or two later, Maeve entered the apartment and locked the door behind her. She took off her leather jacket and hung it on the hallstand. Every part of her ached and she had to put her

hand on the wall for support until the incessant throbbing from her back had died down.

She gave up trying to bend down to unlace her boots so she just kicked them off instead. Suddenly two inches shorter, she padded into the living room on socked feet, wondering where Staci had gone to.

"Baby? Where d'ya go?"

"I'm in the kitchen, getting some ice and making some coffee," the reply came, muffled by the closed door between them.

"Mind if I sit down?" Maeve said, making a beeline for the comfy chair.

"No, have a seat. It's almost done."

"Good," Maeve said to herself and got ready to sit down. She gripped the armrests and lowered herself down onto the soft chair. As her backside made contact with the pillow, she let out a long, slow sigh.

Shaking her head, she ran a bruised hand through her hair.

"Maeve Donnelly, you're gettin' too old to play the Super Heroine," she said to herself and gingerly touched her aching nose.

"Whassat?" Staci said as she came out of the kitchen, carrying a bowl of crushed ice, two mugs and a coffee pot.

"Oh, nothing."

"Gawd, Maeve... your forehead... have you looked at yourself in the mirror?"

"Uh, no...?"

"Do you want to?" Staci said and put the items down on the coffee table. At once, Maeve grabbed the bowl of crushed ice and put her fists into it.

"Uh, no. Not when you say it like that."

"Well, I think you should," Staci said and went into the bedroom. A few seconds later, she returned holding a mirror. She kneeled down in front of Maeve and held up the mirror so the tired, aching Enforcer could take a look at herself.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Maeve mumbled to herself. The entire middle part of her forehead was one, large angry red spot four inches wide and reaching from her brow to her hairline. She pulled one of her hands out of the ice to touch the tender spot, but Staci grabbed it mere inches before it would have made contact.

"You don't wanna do that, Maeve. Trust me on that one," Staci said with a smile.

"Yeah. You're right."

"You're a mess right now, you know that? A bruised forehead, a scratched cheek, your knuckles are skinned and your nose is probably tender too, right?" Staci said, still kneeling down in front of Maeve.

"O-yeah. You better believe it."

"Your lower back is sore and your upper back is covered by a huge bruise. Maeve Donnelly, you're ripe for the scrapheap," Staci said and leaned in to kiss Maeve tenderly on the lips.

"Mmmmmmyeah. Does a condemned woman get a last wish?" Maeve whispered, taking Staci's hands.

"You betcha...?"

"Let's have some coffee first. I need to think about what would cover my needs the best."

"Cheeky, Maeve. Very cheeky," Staci said and got up. She poured some coffee into one of the mugs and handed it to Maeve.

"Thanks, baby. Hey, it's just past midnight. You wanna listen to a little WERC? Nat Thompson's on."

"Why not?"

"Okie-dokie. Lemme see if I can work your fancy radio here," Maeve said and got up from the chair. She groaned when she stood up straight, prompting a stifled laugh from Staci.

"Haw, haw. Now let's see. Oh, yeah, here it is," Maeve said and pushed the Power button. When the radio came alive, she clicked on the preset buttons until she heard Nat Thompson's unmistakable smoky voice.

'...stening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. I'm Nat Thompson and it's Sunday morning already. Can you believe it? I'll be your host for the next eight hours, so we'll have plenty of time for the second most important thing in the world, rock'n'roll. Need I tell you what the most important thing is? Nah, didn't think so, but in case you need a clue, here's The Big Bopper.'

"Oh yeah, one of my favorites," Maeve said and went back to the chair. At the last moment, she changed her mind and went over to sit next to Staci in the couch. She reached over and picked up the bowl of ice and her mug.

"Cheers, baby," she said and clinked it against Staci's mug.

"Cheers."

"Yeah, baby, you KNOW what I like," Maeve said, mimicking the classic song. As she put her fists back into the ice, she leaned in, wanting to give Staci a kiss on the cheek - but when her hip came into contact with Staci's thigh, it stung so bad that she had to pull back.

"Ouch! Aw, crap," Maeve said and moved away. She took a long swig from the mug to hide her disappointment.

"Now what's wrong with your hip?"

"I guess Paco kinda kicked me there."

"You guess?"

"All right, he kinda kicked me there. But it's not too bad. I mean, I can still walk, so I didn't break anything."

"Oh, that's reassuring. Any other injuries you forgot to tell me about?"

"Well, I have this itch..."

"Oh, no, not that again!"

"Been there, done that?"

"Uh, yeah. Maeve, what's going to happen to Paco Alvarez?" Staci said and leaned back on the couch.

"Hard to say. If he starts to sing to the authorities, I think he might be able to get away with it. If he doesn't, well... in any case, he's going away for a long time."

"He was a creep."

"Can't argue with you there, baby. I knew he was trouble from the moment I clapped eyes on him," Maeve said and put her arm around Staci's waist. She tried again to lean in, but as soon as she came close, the stinging pain returned.

"It's incredible how much has happened in the week since Roberta contacted you. We've been through all seven levels of Hell."

"As always. Of course, we've done a few pleasurable things, too," Maeve whispered into Staci's ear.

"Hmmm, yeah. With Roberta dead and Paco in jail... do you think we'll finally have some peace and quiet? Because, frankly, I long for it," Staci said with a sigh.

"I wish I knew, baby. I guess it depends on the hand we're dealt."

On the radio, Nat Thompson introduced Why Do Fools Fall In Love by Frankie Lyman & The Teenagers, and Maeve's eyes lit up. With a bit of an effort, she managed to get up from the couch and on her feet. As soon as she was standing up, she turned around and held out her hands.

"C'mon, baby... we gotta dance to that!"

"But... dance? You can't even sit without aching...?"

"Never mind that now. C'mon, get up," Maeve said and pulled Staci upright. Holding on to both Staci's hands, Maeve led them to the center of the living room where she moved in so close that the two women were almost glued together. She put her hands on Staci's hips and started swaying to the music.

"Baby, follow my lead," she said. When Staci joined the beat, Maeve grinned and leaned her head against Staci's chest. She closed her eyes and started humming along to the music.

Staci wanted to put her hands on Maeve's back, but she didn't want to apply pressure to either the bruise or the sore lower back - after a few seconds, she decided that the safest place to put them would be right on Maeve's butt, so that's where they went.

Moving as one, they swayed left and right to the rhythm of the song, completely lost in each other's presence. The music just became melodic noises in the background and they didn't even notice when one song ended and the next one began.

Until Nat Thompson cued 'Only You'.

"Oh, baby, that's our song. Oooooon-ly youuuuuuuuu... can a-make a-this wo-horrrrrld seem riiiiight..."

"Oh, Maeve...!"

"Oooooon-ly youuuuu-huuuu... can a-make a-the daaaaaaaaarkness braaaaaaaight..."

"Maeve... Maeve!"

"Yes, hon?"

To keep Maeve from singing, Staci leaned down and claimed her lips. It was just meant to be a simple kiss, but one thing led to another and soon fires were burning brightly inside both Maeve and Staci.

Maeve traced Staci's lips with her tongue, almost begging to be let in. Staci relented and allowed the Enforcer entry - at once, their tongues began to dance as closely as their owners had only moments earlier.

All too soon, Maeve had to break off the kiss to get some air into her lungs, and she leaned her head against Staci's chest with a sigh.

"Baby, kissin' you feels so good, but I don't think I'll be up to much tonight. Even my bruises have bruises."

"You know, there's a sure-fire remedy for your, uh, weakness," Staci whispered and put her hands into Maeve's back pockets.

"Whassat?"

"Two words."

"Two words...? Hmmm...?"

"Hot. Shower."

Even before Staci had finished speaking the words, Maeve had begun to unbutton her shirt, but Staci put a calming hand on Maeve's shoulder.

"No, no, simmer down. Let's take this, uh, one piece of garment at a time."

Maeve's eyebrows twitched with anticipatory glee as she watched Staci starting to undress.

Staci's opening gambit was to take off her blouse, and Maeve's eyes inevitably wandered up over Staci's long torso and her bosom, currently restricted by a black, lacy bra.

When Staci unbuttoned her gun metal gray slacks and let them glide slowly down over her hips, Maeve's eyes sparkled and she had to lick her lips several times - her mouth had suddenly gone bone dry.

After stepping out of her slacks, Staci put her thumbs inside the elastic band of her black lace panties and began to loosen them, but before she could pull them off, she stopped.

"Maeve, it's only fair that we undress at the same time... don't you think?" Staci said huskily.

"Ohhhhh, yeah, baby," Maeve said and whipped off her silk shirt. The Kevlar vest followed very quickly, leaving Maeve standing in socks, white jeans and a tank top. She reached for the button on her jeans, but Staci waggled her index finger.

"No, no, now it's my turn," Staci said and moved over to her partner. She put her hands on the hem of Maeve's tank top and pulled it up slowly, very slowly, ultimately revealing the Enforcer's

well-toned abs and her perky breasts.

After the tank had cleared Maeve's head, Staci gripped Maeve's powerful shoulders and began running her fingers across the two tattoos, first tracing the tribal pattern on Maeve's right shoulder and then the stylized 'D' on her left. Following that, Staci's hands went further down, caressing every section of skin she could find.

Maeve closed her eyes and let out a long, sensuous sigh. Staci's hands on her body did nothing to quell her thirst and she could feel her need become urgent.

Pulling back slightly, Staci reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. She allowed Maeve to come very close before she let go of the lacy garment.

As Staci's full breasts were finally liberated from their tight confines, Maeve leaned forward and placed two small kisses at the top of Staci's cleavage. She let her tongue run an inch down between the globes and then looked up at Staci, winking saucily.

"All in due time, Maeve," Staci whispered huskily, continuing her little game by reaching down to unbutton Maeve's jeans. After pulling down the zipper, she kneeled in front of Maeve and started tugging the jeans down over her partner's hips, caressing her toned thighs as they became visible.

To Maeve, this sweet torture was almost more than she could handle, and she wanted so badly to take Staci right there on the living room floor. She looked down and locked eyes with Staci whose hands were tantalizingly close to Maeve's already throbbing center.

Staci hooked her thumbs inside the elastic band of Maeve's boxers and pulled them down, revealing the closely cropped patch of golden hair. She leaned in to place a tender kiss on it and then moved upwards again.

"Oh, baby..." Maeve whispered as Staci's mostly naked body glided up her own.

When Staci was standing tall, she took Maeve's hands and led them to her own panties. Staci winked and allowed the Enforcer to remove them - and started chuckling when Maeve's hands couldn't move fast enough to satisfy their eager owner, leading to a series of growls and whimpers.

Just when Maeve was sure she'd explode, Staci pulled back and started moving towards the bathroom.

"Ohhhh... you big tease," Maeve said, but Staci moved away relentlessly. Reaching into the bathroom, she turned on the lights and then went into the shower itself.

"You coming?" Staci said and twisted the hot water faucet, making the water rush down upon her. She whipped her hair back and stretched out her hand.

"Uh, need you ask?" Maeve said and stepped over the threshold. She took Staci's hand and found herself pulled very close.

"Mmmm, how hot do you want it?"

"I'm smokin' hot already, baby. A little colder."

"All right. Now?"

"Purrfect," Maeve said and began nibbling on Staci's neck.

After a few moments, they were both dripping wet, and Staci turned off the water and found the shampoo that was sitting on a small shelf in the shower.

"I want to do you first," Staci said and poured a blob of liquid soap onto a sponge.

"Oh, baby!" Maeve said and laughed out loud.

Staci started at the base of Maeve's skull, letting the sponge do its job on the Enforcer's neck muscles. After a little while, she moved down Maeve's shoulders and arms, finally finishing up at her hands.

After taking a bit more soap, Staci moved the sponge back up to Maeve's throat and squeezed it, sending a cascade of lather down her front. Then she made sure that both Maeve's breasts were very, very clean by travelling around them endlessly in a lazy, circular motion.

Grinning over the Enforcer's rock hard nipples and the mewling sounds she produced, Staci let the sponge glide further down, moving back and forth and up and down across the lower ribs and the stomach, occasionally pausing to marvel at the way Maeve's abs retracted whenever the sponge glided over them.

Stopping short of reaching the golden patch of hair, Staci moved the sponge back up and washed Maeve's sides.

"Ohhh..." Maeve whimpered, but Staci merely chuckled.

"Soon. But not yet. Turn around."

Maeve did as requested, turning around and putting her hands on the wall of the shower. Behind her, Staci did her muscular back and then moved down to Maeve's butt, thighs and calves. Moving the sponge down the outside and up the inside of Maeve's thighs prompted several new purrs, and Staci knew that her partner was growing impatient.

"Face me," Staci said, putting some more soap on the sponge.

After Maeve had turned around, Staci moved in very close and claimed Maeve's lips. While she

was distracting Maeve with a searing kiss, she moved the sponge further up the inside of Maeve's thighs, coming to a rest on her highly sensitive, throbbing center. Staci applied just the right amount of pressure and moved the sponge back and forth a few times, each time pressing just a tiny bit harder.

Maeve's eyes popped wide open and she moaned heavily into Staci's mouth. Winking, Staci reached over and turned the water back on so it would wash off all the soap from Maeve's body.

"Ohhhh, baby. C'mon, let me have the sponge... please," Maeve said and grabbed the soaked accessory. She moved directly under the shower head to remove the last suds, making the hot water pounce down on her body.

After turning it off again, she wiped the excess water off her face and shook her head, sending a cloud of spray out from her short hair.

Wearing a huge grin, she took the shampoo and poured some out onto the freshly rinsed sponge.

"I'm gonna soap you all over, baby," she said and let the sponge do the rest of the talking.

Before long, she had repaid every last one of the favors Staci had done for her, and even added a few new ones. She had made sure that all parts of Staci's body had been cleaned thoroughly and she had paid extra-special attention to the hard-to-reach spots.

When the water was turned on again to wash off the suds, Staci moved in under it and leaned back so the water could stream down her chest.

Maeve's eyes immediately zeroed in on Staci's breasts and the way they moved as Staci washed off the soap. Maeve licked her lips and shook her head slowly.

"Baby, I'm... I'm all a-quiverin' on the inside. Please let me make love to you," Maeve said huskily.

"Who's stopping you?" Staci said and rinsed the sponge again.

Maeve's only reply was a throaty growl. In a heartbeat, she moved from one side of the shower cabin to the other and pinned Staci to the wall. Putting her hand behind Staci's head, she pulled it down and started kissing her lips with an urgency that left Staci completely breathless.

While they were still kissing, Maeve put her free hand on Staci's stomach and clawed it gently. She began to move her hand left and right across the skin, the movement gradually taking her further and further down.

Once they broke off the kiss to get some air, Staci leaned her head back against the tiles and sighed sensuously. She shivered slightly from the sweetness of Maeve's touch, but soon realized that Maeve's hand had stopped its journey of exploration. Whimpering, she implored Maeve to continue.

Maeve complied and resumed the downwards motion. After running her fingers through Staci's patch of dark hair, she finally found her target, earning herself a long, deep moan when her fingers moved across the already slick folds.

Staci wrapped her arms around Maeve and pulled her impossibly close. She moaned again and nodded with hooded eyes.

Working carefully, Maeve inserted first two and then three fingers into Staci's burning hot opening. She paused again to allow Staci to get used to the sensation, but soon started riding her lover to a slow, deliberate beat.

After a while, Staci's breath changed and became more shallow. She started bucking against Maeve's hand, prompting Maeve to slow down to almost nothing to prolong Staci's high.

"No... faster," Staci groaned, digging her fingers into Maeve's back. With a grin, Maeve resumed the rhythmic motion. At first, she went back to the original cadence, but soon, she increased the tempo and started riding Staci hard.

Almost at once, Staci's whimpers changed into moans and then into short, sharp groans that made all the tiny hairs on Maeve's arms and neck stand to attention. The muscles in Maeve's arm began to burn, but she knew that if she stopped to change hands now, Staci would kill her.

Staci bucked harder and harder onto Maeve's hand, feeling an unstoppable wave grow strong within her. Suddenly, the wave crashed down upon her and her inner muscles tightened around Maeve's fingers.

Throwing her head back, she cried out an orgasm that threatened to drown her from its sheer intensity. Her entire being was transformed into an erogenous zone that sent all her senses into working overtime. The first orgasm was quickly followed by a second, smaller, one, brought on by Maeve's continued touch.

Even though Staci was too far gone to speak coherently, Maeve knew when her partner had had enough, so she carefully withdrew her fingers from Staci's opening.

Watching Staci still breathing hard, Maeve brought her fingers up to her mouth so she could taste her lover's juices - the salty liquid was a powerful aphrodisiac, and Maeve could feel her own sex clench when her tongue came into contact with the fluid.

"Ohhh, Gawd, thank you..." Staci said, completely out of breath.

"Baby, that was so good to watch you come."

"Gawds above, what are you doing to me, Maeve Donnelly?"

"Dunno, baby, but it sure works fine," Maeve said and leaned in to kiss Staci on the lips.

After separating, Staci rested her forehead on Maeve's shoulder. It didn't take her long to notice that Maeve's body was humming with need, so she pulled back and lifted Maeve's chin with her fingers.

"Mmmm. Come on. Now it's my turn," Staci said and put her hands on Maeve's shoulders so they could trade positions.

"I won't last five seconds," Maeve said with a chuckle as she leaned back. When the bruise on her upper back came into contact with the cold tiles, she hissed briefly, but it wasn't enough to put a damper on her lust.

Staci didn't comment - instead she moved her thigh in between Maeve's legs so her knee was resting against the tiles.

"Come on," she whispered into Maeve's ear.

Maeve did as asked and lowered herself down onto Staci's thigh. Instantly, the skin was soaked with the copious amount of fluids emanating from Maeve's center, and Staci's eyes sparkled from the sensation.

Maeve began to grind her hips back and forth, slow at first but soon picking up speed. Like she had predicted, it didn't take her but a few minutes to moan hard each time she completed the cycle.

Staci helped the best she could by holding onto Maeve and by whispering words of encouragement in her ear.

"Come for me, baby, come for me," Staci whispered, pulling back slightly so she could look into Maeve's Irish green eyes.

Suddenly Maeve's eyes turned almost forest green and she wrapped her powerful arms so tightly around Staci that the tall woman could hardly breathe. A sound akin to purring escaped from somewhere deep in Maeve's throat and she bucked hard against Staci's thigh. Moments later, the orgasm came rushing over her, making her cry out repeatedly and grip Staci even harder.

As the aftershocks rolled through Maeve's body, she leaned forward and buried her face in the nook of Staci's neck. Chuckling, she finally loosened the death grip she had on Staci's ribcage.

"Oh, you devil, you... you big devil," Maeve whispered, her voice quite hoarse from the strain she had put on it.

Staci replied with a 'shhhhh' and put her arms around Maeve's body. She held her lover tight and gently began rocking back and forth so they could get the most out of their afterglow.

"I love you, baby," Maeve whispered.

"I love you more," Staci said quietly, kissing the side of Maeve's head.

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A good while later, Maeve sat down on the bed and adjusted the worn flannel shirt she had borrowed to sleep in. Taking a deep breath, she swung her legs up over the edge. Very gingerly, she leaned down until her back came into contact with the sheets. When it didn't hurt as much as she had expected, she breathed a sigh of relief and smiled broadly.

"I'm good, baby, you don't need to bring the extra pillow," she said and held out her hand.

Staci dropped the pillow, took off her bathrobe and climbed into bed next to Maeve. She reached down and pulled up the blanket - once they were comfortable, Staci snuggled down next to her partner and put her arm across Maeve's chest.

"Mmmmmmyeah, baby, this is paradise," Maeve said dreamily.

"I'm probably gonna get in trouble with the Super, though," Staci said with a chuckle.

"Why?"

"We're actually not allowed to take showers after midnight. Too much noise."

"Ah, I'll deal with him. Don't you worry 'bout that."

"Maeve?"

"Yeah?"

"I have a little story to tell you," Staci said in a voice that was so curiously hesitant that Maeve furrowed her brow.

"Oh?"

"If you're too tired, just say so."

"Are you kiddin'? Go ahead, baby," Maeve said and put her hand on Staci's side.

"When I was nine or ten, I became very good friends with a girl my own age who lived in the next apartment building. We did all the things very good friends do, like holding hands and hugging... even kissing each other on the cheeks."

"Mmmm?"

"I didn't think it was a problem and neither did she. We were only kids, after all. That went on

for a few years... and then my puberty kicked in. Suddenly, my heart started racing when I held her hand. The hugs lingered on for just a little too long, and... well, the kisses on the cheek took on a whole new meaning."

"I know exactly what you mean, baby," Maeve said. She chuckled as she remembered her own troubled teen years and all the confusion that came with them.

"Well, one day, my father told me in no uncertain terms that I was a perfectly normal heterosexual girl and not one of those queers... his words. He demanded that I stopped seeing my friend. I was heartbroken, but I wasn't a rebel at all, so I just nodded and said 'Yes, dad.'"

"Oh, that must have hurt you so bad. I wish I'd known you then. I would've comforted you," Maeve whispered and rolled over onto her right side so she was face to face with Staci. She moved her hand up and started tracing her lover's features.

"Thanks, baby. God, I was so confused in my teen years. I didn't know what to do. I tried so hard to fit in with the straight girls... I dated boys and even had... and... well, but it was all just a big, fat lie. I lived a lie for ten years until I met a woman a couple of years older than me. We weren't together long, but she opened my eyes to who and what I really was."

"Was that around the time you started going to Sally J's?"

"Yes. I was twenty-two when I finally told my parents. At first, my dad wanted to kill me, but he came around eventually."

"Mmmm."

"I'd hoped my life would become easier after my discovery, but after a while, I fell back into the same state of confusion and doubt I'd been in when I was younger... I longed for someone to love, but I was... I just couldn't find anyone I really clicked with. I had a few relationships, but they rarely lasted for more than a couple of months. That went on for a few years. But then something magical happened."

"Ooooh, what?"

"You came into my life."

"Aw, Jeez, baby!" Maeve said and guffawed loudly.

"No, I'm serious, I really am... It took me a little while, but I finally realized that you were everything I had ever dreamt of. We fit together, you know. We fit together perfectly. We had a little speed bump along the way, but..."

"Baby, I..."

"... no, please let me speak, I'm almost done. But even when we were apart, I knew in my heart

that you were the one for me. And then fate, destiny, kismet, whatever, brought us back together."

"Mmmm. The best thing that ever happened to me," Maeve whispered.

"I'm glad you feel that way, too. Listen, I've given it a lot of thought and... and I've finally made up my mind. I'd love to move in with you."

"Oh...! Ohhhhh, baby, you don't know how happy that makes me... oh, baby!" Maeve said and threw her arms around Staci and pulled her into a close embrace, completely ignoring the stinging pain that shot through her body from all her ailments. For once, the hardened Enforcer was lost for words and she could only shake her head in disbelief as she hugged the most precious person in her life.

"Well, perhaps you could show me...?" Staci whispered and closed her eyes. She leaned in and gently brushed her lips against Maeve's. When the kiss wasn't reciprocated, Staci opened her eyes again to see what was going on.

The Enforcer's Irish green orbs were overflowing with tears; the salty droplets falling off the bridge of her nose and staining the pillow. Maeve had such a look of happiness and love on her face that Staci could only smile.

"I'll never let you down again, baby... never," Maeve whispered.

"I know. I love you far too much to allow anything to come between us again. I will not allow it."

"Your word is law, baby. I love you, too."

"Maeve?"

"Yeah?"

"Less talking... more kissing," Staci said and started feasting on Maeve's mouth.

"Yeahhhmmppf... ohhhh, baby...!"

THE END