

~ White Fever II - Dames, Dollars and Death ~

by Norsebard

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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:

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MASSIVE SHOUTOUTS to all the members of AUSXIP Talking Xena's Subtext Central - thanks, gals and guys! I really appreciate your support. :)

Jackie - Once again, thank you for helping me :)

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CHAPTER 1

'... and that's tomorrow's weather, brought to you by Pellegrino Umbrellas & Raincoats.

Pellegrino, we love it when it rains. All right, we're onto the last few seconds of the day, and you all know what that means... that's right, it's time for Bill Haley's immortal rock'n'roll anthem, Rock Around The Clock. I'm Ricky Dean, and you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. Hit it, Bill!

The song started, and Maeve Donnelly, better known by her street name White Fever, tapped the beat on the steering wheel of her black Mustang GT as she was cruising south on Jefferson Boulevard. Even though she had heard the tune countless times before, she whistled along to the evergreen.

The traffic lights at the intersection at Sixth Street turned red, and she slowed to a halt. As she waited for the lights to change to green, she put her arm out of the window, and let it dangle down the side of door.

Just as the guitar solo started in the song, a souped-up, metallic orange Charger drove up next to Maeve's Mustang. The driver blipped the throttle a few times, and looked expectantly at Maeve. She nodded, and bared her teeth in a badass grin as she disengaged the Overdrive, and moved the gear lever down into First.

The millisecond the lights changed to green, Maeve buried her foot on the gas. The twin exhausts roared like a T-Rex in heat, and the Mustang practically flew across the intersection. Relying more on the sound of the revs of the Mustang's 427 V8 than the rev counter, she manually changed up to Second, and then Third. By then, the Charger was more than a car length behind, and had seemingly given up.

The traffic lights at Seventh Street turned yellow just before she got there, but she kept her foot down, and barreled across it - the Charger was caught by the red, and stopped.

Maeve slowed down to a more leisurely pace, and celebrated the victory by waving her hand out of the window.

When she reached Ninth Street, a commotion on the other side of Jefferson caught her attention. She tried to stretch in the seat, but no matter what she did, she wasn't quite tall enough to see through the windows of the SUV in the lane next to her.

She cursed and rolled her eyes.

"Why the hell can't I be 6'2" instead of 5'5", " she growled, and tried to crane her neck to get a clearer view.

The lights turned green, and the SUV drove away from the intersection. Maeve remained stationary, earning herself several long honks from the cars behind.

A group of bystanders were hollering and cheering loudly at two men slugging it out on the

sidewalk near the corner of Ninth Street.

Neither of the two combatants were skilled fighters, so they punched the air more than each other, but they occasionally managed to get a hit in.

A pale blue Impala lowrider pulled up to the curb in front of the fighters, and obscured Maeve's view. She growled again, and hit the gas. The Mustang lurched forward, and she quickly made it to Tenth Street. She made a hasty u-turn, and started making her way back.

"Oh, yer gonna be in a heap o' trouble now, dillweed!" one of the fighters said, and waved two boney fingers in the other man's face.

"Shut da fuck up, or I'm gonna make ya wish ya wuz never born, moron!"

"Oooh, make me, big boy!"

The second man swung wildly at the first, but missed by a foot. The crowd cheered, and it seemed to spur the man on, as he attacked again - and missed again.

Out on the Boulevard, a thunderous roar signaled the arrival of Maeve's Mustang, and as she got out of the car, the onlookers parted like the Red Sea.

"Hey, hey, hey! Cut it out! What the hell is going on here?" Maeve said loudly.

"Told ya ya'd get in trouble, dillweed! Fever's here, and now she's gonna spank ya," the first man said.

"An' I told ya to shut up!" the other man said, and charged again. He stepped forward only to be met by Maeve's strong hand on his chest.

"You! Over there! ... You! Over there!" Maeve said, and first pointed at the two men, and then at two lampposts.

The two fighters knew better than to go up against White Fever, so the fight fizzled out of them, and they slinked away from each other.

"So...?" Maeve said, and put her hands on her hips.

"He took my place!" the first man said, and pointed at the other.

"You wasn't here!"

"Was, too. I was over there, takin' a piss."

"You wasn't here. I was. I took the place."

"One at a time. You first," Maeve said, and nodded at the first man.

"Look, Fever. I had my Diamonds table set up an' everything, but then this big piece of dillweed comes and shoves everything aside. So I got mad, you know? Next thing, he's swingin' at me, like I'm the one who's doin' wrong!"

"You wasn..." the second man started to say, but an icy glare from Maeve shut him up.

"How long have you had a table here?" Maeve asked the first man.

"Two weeks."

"OK. You. Talk," Maeve said, and nodded at the second man.

"I'm... I'm... he wasn't here!"

"Never mind that now. Where do you usually have a table?"

"Up near Third."

"Then what the flyin' flip are ya doin' down here!" the first man said.

"Pickin's are gettin' slim up there..." the second man said, and took his cap off to appear more sincere.

"Oh, boo hoo hoo," the first man said, but his voice trailed off when he saw Maeve put her hand near the handle of the chrome-plated Beretta she kept in a shoulderholster.

"My patience has run out. You," she said, directed at the first man, "stay here."

"Oh, crap," the second man said, and threw his cap on the ground.

"And you, move two hundred yards further down Jefferson. There's no one down there," Maeve said, and by the tone of her voice, the two men knew the decision was final.

"Yes, ma'am," they both said.

Out on the Boulevard, a charcoal gray Chevrolet Blazer with four people aboard drove slowly past the commotion.

"Speak of the devil..." the driver said.

"... and she appears," the passenger in the front seat said, as she looked at White Fever standing on the sidewalk. From a distance, Fever didn't appear intimidating, but Siobhan McWhirter already knew of Fever's reputation as a badass.

She let her eyes wander up Fever's form-fitting white jeans that accentuated her shapely rear end very nicely, past her broad shoulders, now covered by a bottle-green shirt, and up to her spiky, white hair.

A nervous smile creased Siobhan's lips as she watched Fever move around on the sidewalk. The Enforcer moved like a big cat - very fluid motions, but with a clear promise of danger lurking right beneath the surface.

Siobhan licked her suddenly dry lips. Despite knowing her brother had planned this operation meticulously, she couldn't stop a cold shiver from running up and down her spine.

"She doesn't look that tough to me," one of the passengers in the back seat said.

"Make no mistake, Dillon, she's as tough as they come. So don't underestimate her," the driver said.

"Hmm," the passenger said, and snorted.

"Do you really think she'll help us, Shannon?" Siobhan said to the driver.

"She'll have to, sis. She simply won't have a choice," Shannon said, and stepped on the gas, leaving the commotion behind.

After having dealt with the two hustlers, Maeve went back to her car and got in. She unclipped her cell phone, and found Staci's number on the speed dial.

'Three-In-One Club, it's Danielle. How may I help you?' a voice said from the other end of the connection.

"Hey, Danielle, it's Fever. Is Staci around?"

'Hello, Fever. I'm sorry, Miss Hart's really busy right now. Is it urgent?'

"Nah. What are you doing?"

'We're not open for business tonight. We're holding an audition.'

"An audition?"

'For pole dancers.'

Maeve's eyebrows shot up, and then she leaned her head back and laughed out loud.

"And I'm not there? Holy shit, I'll bet Staci's face is beetroot red right now!"

'Well... it is, actually.'

Maeve laughed again, and drove away from the curb.

There was a fumble at the other end of the connection, and suddenly, Staci's dulcet tones filled the phone.

'Hiya, Maeve,' Staci purred.

"Hey, baby. A pole dancer audition?"

'Yep.'

"See anything good?"

'Well... it's really overwhelming, that's for sure.'

"I'll bet. Listen, I was thinking... are you doing anything tonight... I mean, apart from what you're doing now?"

'No, I'm not doing anything special. I was planning on going to bed early.'

"Could I tempt you to come over?"

'You probably could.'

"Good," Maeve said, and bumped over the cobblestones at the entrance to the parking lot at Burger Palace.

'What are you doing?'

"I'm gonna take a coffee break. I've just had to deal with two smelly hustlers who couldn't agree on sharing the sidewalk," Maeve said as she got out of the car.

'Oh, poor you. See you at around two o'clock?'

"That's a deal, baby. Oh, and Staci... if one of the pole dancers asks if you're interested in a private show, you'll say no, right?"

'But of course,' Staci said and laughed.

"Thought so. See ya," Maeve said, and blew Staci a kiss through the phone.

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Staci put down the receiver and looked around the office. At times, she still couldn't quite believe that it was really happening. It had only been a month since the former owner had been thrown out by Maeve, and two weeks since Staci had been appointed the new daily leader of the Three-In-One Club, one of the most fancy establishments on Jefferson.

The Three-In-One Club was thus named because it was divided into three parts: a discotheque in the basement, the nightclub on the first floor, and a restaurant on the second. Staci had dined in the restaurant several times since she took over, and she was always amazed how little sound seeped through from the lower floors. Sammi Jo Bradley, the former owner, had certainly poured a heap of money into making the noise reduction effective - too bad she had held such a nasty grudge against Maeve.

Staci shook her head and got up from the chair. She straightened a small picture frame on the mahogany desk, and adjusted a stack of papers. She hadn't had time to personalize her office yet, but she knew exactly what she wanted in there, and what had to leave, and the mahogany desk was one of the things that would fly out of the door.

She took a deep breath, and ran her fingers through her long, jet black hair. She steeled her resolve, and opened the door that separated the office from the nightclub.

Five young women, all wearing identical nervous smiles - and next to nothing in the way of clothing - were waiting on the 120 feet long, rectangular catwalk that was placed in the middle of the large room.

The mirrors on the outer walls and in the ceiling reflected the glittery costumes, creating a surreal effect.

"All right, I'm back. Who's next?" Staci said, and sat down at one of the two dozen bar stools lining the catwalk.

"That'll be me. I'm April," a twenty-something brunette said.

"Hello, April. Let's see what you've got. Danielle, cue the music."

Danielle pressed a button on the stereo, and the room was filled with pumping dance music, blasting out from the twenty hidden speakers.

April started her routine, and Staci wished she was somewhere else entirely.

When the last of the pole dancers had gone through the motions, Staci and Danielle had thanked

them all using the usual nonsensical, saccharine words, and then locked up for the night.

"So, what do you think?" Staci said as she fell down into the chair in the office.

"Well, April was adequate, but Candy was better," Danielle said, and placed her backside on the corner of the desk.

"Jeez, where do they get these names?"

"Bought and paid for. The remaining three weren't good enough for the Three-In-One Club."

"I'd agree... if I had any clue of what the hell it was I was talking about."

"You'll catch on soon enough, don't you worry 'bout that," Danielle said, and leaned across the desk to pat Staci's arm.

"Have I ever thanked you for staying on? I'd be lost without you here."

"You've thanked me half a dozen times already. I'm glad to be your assistant. I was so sick and tired of wearing that awful miniskirt," Danielle said and wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"I understand, it was horrible," Staci said, and looked at the woman sitting opposite her - Danielle was in her late 20s, with dark blonde hair and hazel eyes. She was a very pretty woman, and she had a great head on her shoulders. She was wearing classy clothes now, but when she was working for the previous management, she had been a hostess, and her outfit had been 4" heels, a plastic miniskirt and an outrageously revealing silver top.

Staci hated those outfits, and the first thing she did when she took over was to ban them. The second was to appoint Danielle as her personal assistant, because Staci knew she needed all the help she could get.

It had been a tumultuous first two weeks, with several key staffers and a few of the dancers leaving because they were upset over the sudden change of leadership.

Staci didn't want anybody there who were unwilling to work for her, so she didn't have a problem with them leaving, but it did create a void that she and Danielle had to work extra hard to fill.

"Anyway, so you're saying it's Candy?" Staci said.

"Mmmmm. For now. I don't want to rule out April, either, just in case the next dancers we see are poor. Don't forget, we have a second audition in a fortnight's time."

"Oh, goodie. I'm looking forward to it already," Staci said, and turned off the lights in the office.

Fifteen minutes later, Staci parked her Toyota Corolla in front of the apartment building on First Street where she had rented a flat. Although First Street was technically still downtown, it was a quiet and respectable neighborhood, not like the hustle and bustle of the real downtown. She locked herself in, and quickly walked up the stairs to the second floor.

After unlocking the door to her apartment, she picked up a wad of junkmail, kicked off her shoes and started to unbutton her shirt. On her way to the bedroom, she threw the junkmail in the trash, and clicked on the answering machine - which told her she had four messages. She clicked on Play, and the tape rewound and started playing.

'Hey, baby. I hope you're home soon, 'cos I'm really hot and I need some company,' Maeve said from the tape, purring like a big kitten.

Staci chuckled, and opened a dresser. She took out a pair of blue jeans and a white button-down shirt and placed them on her bed.

A beep was heard, and the next message started.

'Hey, baby, it's me again. What are you wearin' right now?'

"Wouldn't you like to know, ya pervert!" Staci said to the machine. She took off her shirt, and put it in the laundry basket. Then, she took off her slacks, folded them neatly and placed them on the chair at the footend of the bed.

The machine replied by beeping again.

'Good evening, Miss Hart. My name is Daniel Hansen, and I'm working for The Evening Herald. I have an exceptional off...'

In two seconds flat, Staci was into the living room, pressing the button marked NEXT.

"Blah, blah, blah. Why won't those morons take 'no' for an answer?" she said on her way back to the bedroom.

'Hey, baby... it's me again. I want you to know that I'll be waitin' for ya. In the Jacuzzi. I'll be naked, so... hurry up, OK?'

"Jeez, Maeve!" Staci said and laughed. She unhooked her bra, and hung it over the back of a chair.

When she looked at herself in a full-size mirror on the front of the closet, she noticed that not only did she need to trim her hair, but her stomach was bulging out slightly. She patted her gut and sighed.

"Hmmmm... damn fastfood," she said out loud, and furrowed her brow. Shrugging, she took off

her panties, picked up a towel, and headed for the bathroom.

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"Let's see... Sensuous Massage... sounds good. Program #4 it is, then," Maeve said as she went through the electronic menu system on her Jacuzzi.

After preparing the spa, she went back into the living room of her loft and gave it a quick once-over.

"Candles, check... drinks, check... music, check... curtains, check... oh, shit!" she said as she noticed a pair of black silk boxer shorts hanging on the hallstand.

She adjusted her purple kimono, the same one Staci had borrowed when they had re-connected so memorably a month ago, and tied the belt around her waist. She padded on bare feet across the plush carpet, and stretched to get the boxers off the hallstand.

"How the heck did they get up there...?" she said to herself as she quickly threw them into the bedroom.

She re-checked everything thoroughly. Satisfied with the result, she went over to the fridge and took out a bottle of spring water. She unscrewed the cap and took several healthy gulps.

Her phone started ringing, and she was over it instantly. She looked at the display and her face cracked in a big smile.

"Hey, baby..." she purred.

'Hey, yourself. I'm downstairs. Care to send the elevator down?'

"I'm on it," Maeve said, and went over to the panel next to the airtight door. She pressed DOWN, and she could hear the elevator working its way down.

"It's on its way, baby," she said, and giggled over Staci's predictable reply.

'Won't be the last time you'll say those words this evening, I'm sure.'

"HMMMM. Let's see."

'OK. I'm in, hit the switch.'

"Going up!" Maeve said, and pressed UP on the panel.

Staci opened the door and stepped into Maeve's loft. She took a deep sniff, and looked around for

the source of the unusual fragrance.

"Hi. Lavender?"

"Hey, baby. It's my natural scent, doncha know," Maeve said, and stood up on tiptoes so they could kiss.

"Yeah, right," Staci said, and claimed Maeve's soft lips in a deep kiss.

"Scented candles?" Maeve offered when they separated.

"More likely."

"I got the Jacuzzi ready an' everything. I think we're gonna have a good time."

"I hope so."

"Oh, that's right... are you busy tomorrow afternoon?"

"Hmmm, no. Why?"

"Well, Mary Red called... you remember Mary Red, right?"

"Sure."

"Well, she called and asked if I would come over for an important talk. D'ya think you'd want to tag along?"

"I'd love to, Maeve," Staci said with a smile.

"Good. That's a deal, then." Throughout the conversation, Maeve's hands had been placed firmly on Staci's backside, and she didn't seem to have any intentions of letting go of the taller woman.

"Are you going to grope my butt all evening?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Maeve said, and sniggered.

"I could live with that," Staci said, and leaned down to kiss Maeve again.

Ten minutes later, they were sitting in the Jacuzzi, enjoying the view of the City's skyline through the large windows.

"More white?" Maeve said, and held up a bottle of chilled white wine.

"Yes, please." Staci held out her glass, and Maeve poured it three-quarters full, before putting the bottle back down in the wine cooler.

"What was that you said about the smelly hustlers?"

"Oh, that was nothing. Two guys who couldn't decide where the best spot was. No big deal."

"Mmmm."

"We've had a quiet week."

"The quiet before the storm..." Staci said in a deep voice.

"Don't say that... don't even think it!" Maeve said, and gently slapped Staci on her arm.

"All right. Do you think I could borrow your exercise equipment?"

"Sure?"

"I'm getting a roll of fat where there shouldn't be one, so I was thinking that maybe a few miles on the tread mill would cure that."

"A roll of fat? Don't make me laugh, Staci."

"No shit, it's right here," Staci said, and grabbed her stomach.

With a wolfish smile, Maeve put down her glass on a small table next to the Jacuzzi.

"I don't see it. I need a closer view," she said, and moved over to kneel in front of Staci. She took a deep breath, and dunked her head under the surface of the bubbling water. She kissed Staci's stomach, and then came up for air.

"Looks all right to me," she said as the water poured off her hair and face.

"I think you need an even closer look, Maeve. It's definitely there," Staci said and laughed.

" 's that an offer?"

"You better believe it is," Staci said, and framed Maeve's face. They looked into each other's eyes for an eternal second, and then Maeve moved up so she could kiss Staci thoroughly.

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An hour after dawn, the charcoal gray Chevrolet Blazer pulled up to a rusty fence. Shannon got out, inserted a small tool into the padlock, and twisted it a few times. The old lock gave up the ghost without too much hassle, and he swung the fence open.

He got back in the car, and proceeded to drive across a lot that had been neglected for so long that the grass was nearly a foot high. It was a bumpy ride, and he and his three passengers were rocking back and forth.

It didn't take long for them to reach an abandoned two-storey building that was located in the center of the lot. Shannon parked the Blazer in front of an old- fashioned chain driven gate, and got out.

Siobhan looked with disgust at the derelict building - most of the windows were broken, and the walls were either smeared with graffiti or stained with bird droppings.

"Shannon, this place is a dump!"

"Wait and see, sis. Wait and see," he said, and put on a pair of gloves. He went over to the gate, and pulled hard on the chain to get it to open. It howled and creaked from years of neglect and disuse, but it eventually started moving upwards.

Once it was fully up, he tied the chain around a drain pipe, and put the gloves on top of an old, rusty oil drum that stood next to it.

"Siobhan, take the wheel..." he said, and waved his hand at his sister.

She slid over into the driver's seat, and put the Blazer in gear.

"... And follow me!" he said, and walked into the derelict building.

The inside of the building looked even worse than the outside - there were two large holes in the ceiling, and everything was horribly filthy.

Siobhan parked the Blazer and turned off the engine. She got out and shook her head.

"What the hell..." she said, and put her hands on her hips.

"This'll be our base for the next few days," Shannon said.

"Oh, no, you've got to be kiddin'!" Siobhan said with a growl.

"It fits our needs perfectly."

"Yeah? So does the crapper, apparently."

"Now you mention it, there's a hole in the ground over there for that exact purpose. We'll set up the showers somewhere over there, too."

"Oh. Great."

The two passengers on the backseat opened their doors and stepped out. Robert Wellman and Dillon O'Shaughnessy looked at each other and chuckled over the language used by the feisty Siobhan.

"Are you guys ever gonna behave like a regular brother and sister?" Wellman asked as he opened the hatchback of the Blazer.

"Go to hell, Bob," Siobhan said, and stomped off in a huff.

The broadshouldered African-American studied her retreating form, and chuckled again.

"Guess not."

He pulled out four large canvas bags, and placed them on the ground.

"Dillon, get your lazy ass over here and help with the bags," he said loudly.

"Yeah, yeah, what's the fuckin' rush. You heard the bossman, we're spendin' the next few days here. We'll get it done," O'Shaughnessy said, and pulled up in his drooping pants.

"Jeez, look at you! You'd think you were eighteen. Well, you're 42, so get yourself a proper pair of pants!" Wellman said and rolled his eyes.

"Ah, fuck it. We can't all be Mr. Cool."

"There's no risk of you ever being Mr. Cool, Dillon."

"Stay outta my hair, Fancyass," O'Shaughnessy said, and picked up two of the bags.

"Shannon! Where do you want these?" Wellman said, and marveled over the way his voice echoed through the derelict building.

"Over here. This room will double as our office," Shannon said, standing in a doorway at the far side of the building.

A little later, all four were standing near a rusty fence that separated the lot from the western riverbank of the Monroe.

Shannon looked at himself and the three others, and chuckled over their wildly varying appearances.

'Jeez, it would be impossible to find a more diverse group,' he thought.

O'Shaughnessy and Wellman were both in their early 40s, but that's where the similarities between them ended. Dillon was a brute, with a pockmarked face, a strong jaw, and a hawkish nose - and all in all, he was a bit of a slob.

Wellman was his exact opposite - his complexion was akin to melted chocolate, and he was a handsome man. He was stylish and well-dressed, and usually wore a gold Rolex, though he had left it at home for this operation.

Siobhan was 24, but seemed younger. She was a very pretty girl, though she pretended she wasn't, and her tough attitude had often brought her trouble. She dressed like a teenager, with loud sweatshirts, low-cut jeans, and well-worn sneakers. Her eyes were pale green, and her short hair, cut in a youthful, 'wild' style, was dyed a mousy brown with red streaks.

Shannon himself was 30, and couldn't hide his Irish heritage. Like his sister, he sported pale green eyes, but he had kept his original hair color, which was a faintly reddish blond. Shannon appeared to be a charming rogue, with boyish good looks and a disarming smile, but those who knew him well could tell stories of a hard personality - and a raging temper.

"So, in case you're wondering where we are: We're just off Twelfth Street, three blocks south of the financial district in Midtown West. We're on Salvatore Coluzzo's turf, but he doesn't have a beef with us... yet... so his boys won't pay attention to what we're doing. Over there," Shannon said, and pointed at the other side of the river.

"... is Fast Freddie Donnelly's turf. Late tomorrow night, that'll be the biggest goddamned beehive you'll ever see. They'll send every single soldier they have out on the street to find us, but none of those idiots will even consider looking for us on this side of the river."

Wellman and O'Shaughnessy smiled in a nasty sort of way, and patted each other's backs.

Siobhan sighed, and started biting her lip.

"It's too late for second thoughts, sis, you can't pull out now." Shannon said quietly, putting a hand on his sister's shoulder.

"I know. It's just... I got a bad feeling in my gut."

"It's nerves. It'll pass once you hold the money."

"Hope so."

"OK. Come on, let's go back to the base," Shannon said, and led the way.

"All right. This is it. Now we're getting to the serious part, folks, so listen up!" Shannon said, standing in the middle of the derelict building.

They were all four dressed in identical blue boiler suits, and they were all wearing black gloves.

"First, we synchronize our clocks," Shannon said, and moved his sleeve back to reveal an expensive wristwatch.

"Jeez, this ain't no military operation, and we're definitely not the Delta Force, ya know?" O'Shaughnessy said, and scratched his hair.

"Do as I tell you," Shannon said with an angry glare.

"Yezz, Bozz."

"On my mark, it's 8:17 AM, in four... three... two... one... mark."

"Yezz, Bozz," O'Shaughnessy mocked.

"T minus 37 hours and forty-three minutes, so now is a good time to drill. Wellman, you're Number One, Dillon, you're Number Two. I'm Number Three, and that leaves Siobhan as Number Four," Shannon said, pointing at each of them in turn.

"I'm always Number Four," Siobhan whined.

"Well, if you grow some balls, you can be Number Three... maybe," Wellman joked, but was met by a Death Glare from Siobhan.

"Easy now," Shannon said.

"Here's the plan. Number One: the radiator, the right hand tires and the front seat passenger. Number Two: the left hand tires and the driver. Number Three: open the back door, do the back seat passenger, grab the money. Any questions?" he continued.

"Yeah! What's my job in all this?" Siobhan said with her hands on her hips.

"You're the lookout, so you'll cover our asses. And then you're the driver," Shannon said.

"I think we should only split the money three ways, Shannon. I mean, it's only us guys who are doin' the dirty work, right?" O'Shaughnessy said, and stifled a snicker.

"Fuck you, snot-for-brains!" Siobhan shouted.

"Will you fuckin' CALM DOWN!" Shannon thundered, and the others quieted down.

"Now, wear these. They'll restrict your vision if they're not on right, so get used to 'em," he said,

and threw the others a skimask each.

"You look like fuckin' Freddy Krueger, Bob," O'Shaughnessy said and pointed a fat index finger at Wellman, who had some trouble lining up the slits for the eyes.

"Oh, ha ha. Come a little closer, I've got a knuckle sandwich I want you to try."

Shannon rolled his eyes, but kept quiet. He went over to one of the large canvas bags and took out four Springfield SAR4800 automatic rifles. He took four clips, but only loaded one of the rifles.

"All right, line up for a drill. We've gotta get the moves down pat," Shannon said, and rolled down his skimask.

He threw Wellman and O'Shaughnessy a rifle each, and handed the third one to his sister.

"Hey, ain't ya forgettin' somethin'?" O'Shaughnessy said, and pointed at the empty hole where the clip was supposed to be.

"No. This is a dry run. I don't want any of you to blow off your balls before we even get started. Now line up!"

Using the Blazer as a mock-up of the primary target, they spread out around it and waited for Shannon's command.

"Go, Number One!" he shouted, and Wellman ran forward, aiming the rifle at the SUV.

"Radiator!" he said, pointing the weapon at the front of the car. Then he moved down the right side of the car.

"Right hand side tires!"

Moving the rifle up, he aimed at the passenger side window.

"Passenger! Clear!"

"Two!" Shannon shouted, and gave O'Shaughnessy a push.

"Left hand side tires! Bang, bang! Driver! Bang, bang, splat! Clear!" he said, and lowered the weapon.

"Three!" Shannon said, and moved forward. He opened the door to the back seat, and moved the barrel of the weapon in an arc to show that he took care of the passenger. Then he reached in and grabbed one of the empty canvas bags.

He pulled out, and they ran away from the target.

Through all this, Siobhan was standing with her hands on her hips. She hadn't bothered to roll down her skimask, and the sour expression on her face clearly showed how she felt about the drill.

"Come on, Shannon! I need to know what to do, too," she said.

"Pretty good, but let's do it again, anyway," Shannon said, choosing to ignore his sister.

"Shannon, what happens if a rifle jams?" Wellman asked.

"If it happens to one of you two, I'll move in. If it happens to me, you'll move in, Wellman."

"OK."

"Hey, why not me?" O'Shaughnessy said.

"Cos you're on the wrong side of the car, Chief Featherbrain," Wellman said.

"Suck me," O'Shaughnessy grumbled.

"Calm down. I won't tell you again," Shannon commanded.

"Yeah, yeah..."

"Line up. From now on, we'll do it in real-time so we can get the rhythm... Number One!"

**_*_

'... and that's a wrap for me today, I hope you've all enjoyed this two hour rockabilly special. I'm Susan Blaine, and you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. It's four PM, and here's the news. Early this morning, a freight train suffered a broken axle...' the radio said, but Maeve clicked on the off button.

She turned off Fourteenth Street, and drove the black Mustang through a narrow gateway. The rumble from the exhausts echoed loudly in the small space, and Staci considered covering her ears. Once they had gone through the gateway, Maeve soon found a suitable place to park.

"Man, I'd hate to live down here... I really would," Staci said as she got out of the car.

She looked at the desolate, rundown buildings, and got the shivers. Everything was bleak and filthy, and graffiti had been smeared on every single wall. Nearly all the streetlamps and windows had been vandalized, and there was a stench of garbage and human waste hanging in the air.

The hairs on Staci's neck stood up, and she felt like they were being watched - which they probably were.

"Yeah, well. That's Fourteenth Street for you," Maeve said and locked the car.

"I don't understand why you'll risk your Mustang by parking here," Staci said, and looked over her shoulder. Suddenly she noticed a group of three dangerous looking young men casually hanging around on the other side of the gateway, at the corner of the street and the alley.

"They know me, and they know we'll wipe 'em out if they do something stupid," Maeve said, and shrugged.

"Still..."

"Are you coming?" Maeve said, and held open the door to the first stairwell.

Staci didn't need to be asked twice, and she hurried out of the smelly courtyard.

Maeve knocked on the door to the apartment, and then stepped back.

"Staci, you need to stand where she can see us," Maeve said, and pulled at Staci's arm to get her over to the other side of the poorly lit hallway.

"Who is it?" a female voice said from the other side of the door.

"It's White Fever and a friend, Mary."

They could see some movement through the spyhole, and after a few seconds, they could hear no less than four locks being worked on.

The door opened a few inches and was then held by a sturdy chain.

"Fever?"

"Yes, and a friend," Maeve said.

Staci smiled and waved, and that seemed to calm the nervous woman down. She closed the door again, and unhooked the chain.

"Come in," she said as she opened the door fully.

Maeve and Staci stepped inside the sparsely furnished apartment. Staci immediately noticed the thick wads of rolled-up newspapers that were stuffed into the cracks surrounding the

windowframes, and she had to shake her head.

"Hello, Mary," Maeve said, and shook hands with the woman.

"Hi, Fever. It's nice to see you."

"Hello, Mary, I'm Staci Hart," Staci said, and put out her hand. She quickly realized that Mary couldn't see her hand, despite standing only two feet away, and she shot Maeve a shocked look.

Maeve sighed, and shrugged.

Staci moved over to the other side of Mary, and tried again.

"Oh, hello... I'm Mary Reynolds. I don't think we've met before?" Mary said with a smile.

"Actually, we have, but... I doubt that any of us want to be reminded of that night," Staci said quietly.

"Oh... no. You're right."

"How are you doing, Mary?" Maeve said as she sat down on an old, stained couch.

"Well..."

The bedroom door creaked open, and a young girl wearing a faded pink and white pajamas walked out, wiping her eyes and yawning widely. Suddenly she realized that there were two strangers in the living room with her mom, and she froze in mid-step. She looked at the two strangers with a frightened expression on her face, and she took in a sharp breath.

"Josey, it's all right. These women are friends of ours," Mary said, smiling broadly to convince her daughter that they weren't in danger.

The young girl seemed to understand the words, but it still took her nearly a minute to approach the two strange women. Once she had given them a thorough once-over, she appeared to decide that they were all right.

"Hi," she said.

"Hello, Josey," Maeve said, and put out her hand, palm up.

Josey took a hesitant step forward, and then slapped her hand down on Maeve's palm.

"High five," Josey said, and Maeve and Staci laughed.

"How was your nap, darling?" Mary said.

"Good."

"That's good to hear. Miss Hart..." Mary said, after clearing her throat.

"Oh for heaven's sake, call me Staci!"

"All right. Staci, would you mind keeping Josey occupied in the bedroom... Fever and I need to talk about... something," Mary said.

"No problem. Come on, Josey. I'll bet you like to hear stories...?" Staci said, and took Josey by the hand, leading her to the bedroom.

"I love stories!"

"She's a wonderful kid, Mary," Maeve said as she watched the bedroom door close behind Staci and Josey.

"Yes. Yes, she is. Despite everything, she's doing great in school. I'm relieved they allowed me to keep her. If her father hadn't been a drug addict, I would've lost her," Mary said, and pulled out a rusty kitchen chair.

"How are you feeling?" Maeve asked again.

"I... still have some problems. My ribs and my jaw have healed, but my left eye is cloudy, and I still have some nerve damage on my face, as you can see. But... that's not why I asked you to come over."

"No?"

"No, I... need some money, Fever. Badly. I only have for this month's rent, and that's it. My parents don't want to give me anything, and I... I tried to go out the other night, but no one wants to buy a whore who looks like this," Mary said, and touched the left side of her face.

Maeve leaned back in the couch and sighed.

"How much do you need, Mary?"

"\$1000."

"I need to know if you have a habit."

"No. Never. I tried some pills once, but they made me puke. That was the only time I tried anything like that."

"Good."

Maeve started thinking very deeply about Mary's situation. This was no place for a sweet kid like Josey to grow up, and her mother deserved so much more, too. A thought suddenly flashed through Maeve's mind, and her eyebrows twitched.

"Mary, I have a proposition for you."

"Anything, Fever, I'll do anything. Is Staci your girlfriend? Do you want a threeso..."

"No, Mary! Jesus!" Maeve said, and bolted upright so fast that Mary jumped back.

"I want to offer you a job. A *real* job. A job where you can earn some legit money so you can support yourself and Josey," she continued.

"A job?"

"In the kitchen out at Fast Freddie's mansion. One of the staffers has retired, and they need a another pair of hands."

"Oh... as a waitress, or something?"

"You might call it a waitress, yes. You'll be working in the kitchen, preparing the meals, and when they're done, you'll put them on a small cart and wheel 'em around to the various offices."

"I worked as a waitress in a little diner back home..."

"Great, so you're already qualified. When can you start?"

"But... but..."

"Tomorrow?"

"But...!"

"That's a deal. Oh, I think I forgot to tell you - you'll get a small apartment at the mansion. It's not big, but it's better than this rat hole," Maeve said, and got up from the couch.

"No, Fever, I can't accept that..." Mary said, and put a hand on Maeve's shoulder.

"Listen, Mary, let's not waste any time bullshitting each other. You know damn well what might happen if you stay here," Maeve said quietly, so her voice wouldn't be heard in the bedroom.

Mary shrugged, and opened her mouth to speak, but Maeve cut her off.

"One day, some twisted psycho will offer candy to Josey, only it won't be chocolate he's gonna

give her, if you know what I mean. Or a couple of crackheads will break in lookin' for money for drugs. And when they don't find any, they'll settle for the next best thing," Maeve said, and took Mary's hands in her own.

Mary sighed deeply, and nodded.

"But there are other families with children here... I'd feel like I was... leaving them behind for the wolves."

"I can't save them all. But I can save you and Josey," Maeve said strongly, and squeezed Mary's hands.

"... All right," Mary said, and took a few trembling breaths.

"Me and Staci will swing by tomorrow afternoon and help you pack, OK? We'll bring a truck and a couple of guys, and do everything in one go."

"How can I ever repay you, Fever?"

"By staying alive, and staying off the streets. I know you won't be feelin' particularly lucky living here, but you're lucky to be alive, Mary."

"I know. Dolores told me what happened that night. The man who attacked me... he killed another girl later on, didn't he?"

"That's right. And then I blew the psycho's brains out," Maeve said coldly. She went over to the door to the bedroom and knocked twice.

"Come in!" Josey said, and Maeve opened the door.

Josey and Staci were sitting on the bed, holding a sketch book with large, colorful pictures in it.

"Josey's been showing me her artwork," Staci said with a smile.

"That's cool. Josey, Staci and I are leaving now, but we'll be back tomorrow afternoon. Then we'll help you and your mom pack your stuff and move to a much nicer home. How's that sound?" Maeve said.

Josey didn't quite understand it all, but she nodded enthusiastically.

Staci cocked her head, and looked intently at Maeve - who winked in return.

"Do you have some friends here you want to say goodbye to?" Staci said, and ruffled Josey's hair.

"No. I don't know anybody here. And they're all strange," the young girl said, and flipped the

page in her sketch book.

"Maeve, did you plan this all along?" Staci said on their way back down to the Mustang.

"Well... no. Not exactly. It was actually a spur of the moment thing. But one look at this... this cesspool made my heart bleed, ya know."

"You big softie."

"Shhh. The walls have ears."

*
*

CHAPTER 2

The next day, the Mustang once again rumbled through the narrow gateway, this time followed by a delivery truck with 'Donnelly Furniture' printed on the side in gold and Irish green.

"I don't think the truck will fit through here, you know," Staci said, looking out of the window at the worn down bricks in the gateway.

"Sure it will," Maeve said, but kept an eye on the rear view mirror in case the truck got stuck - fortunately, it didn't.

Maeve parked the Mustang in the same space as the day before, and she quickly got out to assist Danny Watts maneuver in the tight confines.

It didn't take two minutes for them to attract attention, and several shady characters started forming around the outer edges of the courtyard, no doubt hoping to find something to swipe.

"We shoulda brought more men," Danny said as he and three other men jumped down from the cab of the truck. Some of the more cowardly of the shady characters disappeared at the sight of the 6'7" former wrestler, but others stayed.

"We'll be all right if we get it done quickly. First of all, Staci and I will go upstairs and tell Mary Red we're here. Then Mickey, Johnny and I will carry one thing down at a time. That leaves Geoff and yourself to guard the truck. Should be enough," Maeve said, and put on some heavy work gloves.

"Mary doesn't have much, anyway, so it won't take long," she continued. She clapped her hands together to get the gloves snug, and looked at Danny.

"Okie-dokie, Fever."

Mary opened the door to her apartment, and greeted Maeve and Staci with a broad smile that, unfortunately, made the injured side of her face really stand out.

"Hi again. Come in! We've already packed much, so it's ready for you to carry down," Mary said, and waved Maeve and Staci inside.

When Mary turned away from them, Staci looked at Maeve with a sad expression in her eyes. Maeve pounded one gloved hand into the other, and shook her head.

When they entered the apartment, Josey came flying out from her bedroom, and grabbed hold of Staci's pant leg.

"Hello, Staci! We're moving today!" she said, almost giddy with expectation.

"Whoa! Hey, there, Josey. Yes you are, and we're here to help you," Staci said, and mussed Josey's hair.

"She couldn't stop talking about you after you had left yesterday, Staci. I could hardly get her to fall asleep last night, either."

"Really? She couldn't stop talking about me?"

"I shoulda known you'd be a natural around kids," Maeve said, and batted her eyelids.

"Well... it couldn't be that much of a surprise. After all, I have years of experience pamperin' you, 'Fever'," Staci drawled.

Josey didn't understand that exchange, so she just looked at the three women with a blank stare. Mary blushed furiously, and didn't dare look at either Maeve or Staci.

Maeve guffawed loudly, and the sound made Josey laugh as well. Staci mussed her hair again, and was rewarded by a genuine smile from the young girl.

"I think we'll talk about that a little later, baby," Maeve said, and winked at Staci.

"Fever, do you have a CD player in your car?" Mary said, trying to change the subject.

"Yep. Why?"

"Well, I was thinking... wouldn't it be a good idea if Josey wasn't running around while we were carrying the stuff down? I have her favorite CD with some fairy tales on it," Mary said, and picked up a compact disc.

"Sounds like a great idea, Mary. I'd like to volunteer. Keys, please," Staci said, and put out her hand.

"Yes, dear. Remember to press the small button before you touch the doors. No point in setting the alarm off and waking up all the sleeping potheads," Maeve said with a grin, and handed Staci the car keys.

"Will do."

"Hey, Josey, would you like to go down to Fever's car with Staci, and listen to some fairy tales?" Mary said.

"Oooh, yes!"

"I'm sorry?" Mary said, and winked at her daughter.

"Yes, please," Josey repeated.

"That's better."

Forty minutes later, Maeve and Danny watched the hydraulic lift on the back of the truck close until it locked in place with a metallic clang.

"That's it, Mary. All your stuff is inside," Maeve said, and took off her work gloves. She moved her fingers through her damp hair, and wiped some sweat off her brow.

"I still can't believe you're doing this for us, Fever. I can never pay you back."

"As I told you yesterday, you'll pay me back by staying alive," Maeve said, and put her hand on Mary's arm.

Mary nodded, and sighed deeply.

"I'll never work the streets again. That's a promise."

No words were necessary, so Maeve just patted Mary's arm.

"Let's go rescue Staci from whatever fairy tale it is they're listening to, huh?"

"We better. Josey loves Goldilocks the most, and I'm sure it's been playing on repeat," Mary said, wiping away a tear that had found its way onto her cheek.

"Hey, baby. Goldilocks?" Maeve said, after she had opened the door of the Mustang.

"Three times now, yes," Staci said with a tired grin.

"Mmmm-Hmmm!" Maeve said, earning herself a thump on the arm.

"Temper, temper, baby!"

"So, what now?"

"Well, now we drive back to the mansion. Ummmm, which reminds me... Staci, would you mind driving with the boys in the truck...? Mary wouldn't feel safe there, and... well, I don't think she and Josey will be able to fit in the back seat."

Staci's upper lip curled into a sneer, but it quickly faded, and she sighed.

"All right. But it'll cost ya. Plenty," she said, and got out of the Mustang.

"I'm good for it, you know that," Maeve said, and got into the driver's seat - the first thing she did was to move the seat forward by seven inches.

Staci went around the car, and crouched down next to the opened passenger door.

"Bye, Josey, see you at the mansion," Staci said, and held up her hand.

With a giggle and squeal, Josey slapped it.

"See ya, Auntie Staci."

Maeve's eyebrows shot up, and she very nearly made a smart-alec comment, but the look on Staci's face convinced her not to.

Josey got out of the car, and then Mary held the seat for her so she could slip in the back. Mary got in, and rolled down the window. She smiled broadly at Staci, and put out her hand.

"Thank you for all your help."

"You're welcome, Mary," Staci said, and shook Mary's hand.

Maeve chose that moment to start the Mustang, effectively cutting off all conversation. Staci stepped back and put her fingers in her ears to show her displeasure, but Maeve just grinned wickedly, and blipped the throttle.

Staci walked over to the delivery truck to look for Danny - she found him already sitting in the driver's seat.

"Hey, Danny. Looks like you're gonna have me as a passenger on the way back," Staci said, and folded her arms across her chest.

"Uhh, OK?"

"Yeah. Maeve thought it was best to protect Mary from the rowdies," Staci said slightly surly.

"Good point. But in that case, I better lay down the law," Danny said, and climbed back down. He quickly rounded up the men they had brought along.

"Listen up, guys. Miss Hart will be with us for the return trip, and..." he said, but was interrupted by a loud cheer and a wolf call from one of the men.

"Johnny... Tell me, would you like to be known as Joanna?"

"Errr, no, boss...?"

"Then shut the fuck up. Fever's very fond of Miss Hart. Don't forget that."

"Yes, boss," Johnny said, and gulped.

"And if any of you as much as look at her funny, you might as well bend over and kiss your asses goodbye, 'cos there won't be any left once Fever's done with you."

"Yes, boss," all three men said.

Staci had a hard time keeping a straight face, but she managed to maintain a stern facade.

"Miss Hart," Danny said, and helped Staci up in the passenger seat of the truck.

"Mr. Watts," she replied, and smiled at him.

"And you... in there," Danny said, and opened the door to the cramped crew cab.

The three men groaned, but squeezed themselves into the narrow back seat that definitely wasn't built for men their size.

Behind them, Maeve reversed out of the parking space. As she went past the truck, she honked twice, and waved her hand out of the window.

Danny started the truck, and honked back.

**_*_

At the exact same time, Jimmy Snakes turned off Thirteenth Street, and drove under a marquee that proclaimed 'WELCOME TO THE SEVENTH ANNUAL 13TH STREET FLEA MARKET' in two-feet tall bright green letters.

He stopped his Ford Taurus Stationwagon in front of a smallish booth, and the parking attendant came out. Snakes paid \$5, and a young kid helping the attendant put a green slip of paper under his windshield wiper.

Snakes drove away from the booth and onto a grassy field. He had come early, so he had a vast choice of parking spaces. He decided on one relatively close to a soft drink vendor, and parked the Taurus.

He got out and opened the hatchback. He looked at the three tables and the four cardboard boxes, and sighed deeply. Taking a deep breath, he pulled out one of the tables, and carried it to the spot he had decided on - five feet from the car. Once there, he put it down hard on the ground, huffing and puffing like a steam locomotive. He leaned down and extended the legs, and then flipped the table over so it was level.

Snakes reached into his shirt pocket, and found his brand new, freshly stolen, pair of Supastarz Midnight Black sunglasses. He put them on, and turned around... and nearly fell when he stepped into a pothole in the grass that he wasn't able to see because of the black sunglasses. He cursed, and looked around, but it appeared that no one had noticed.

He ran a hand through his greasy hair, and then scratched his scraggly beard. In his heart, he couldn't quite believe that he, Jimmy Snakes, had fallen so low that he had to sell low-grade stuff at a flea market just to make ends meet, but it was the unfortunate reality. After the fiasco with the Websters, and then with White Fever, he had lost most of the friends he had, simply because no one wanted to be associated with someone who had first tried to take out Donnelly's number two himself, and when that hadn't worked, had ordered a hit on her.

He sighed and went back to work.

A little while later, he had set up the three tables in a horseshoe, and had arranged the items from the cardboard boxes so they would look interesting to the customers. His throat was as dry as parchment, and he desperately needed a beer, but the drinks vendor wasn't open for business yet, so he had to settle for a stale mineral water that had lost all its fizz.

With a sigh, he sat down in the back of the Taurus. After a minute, he pulled a separate cardboard box towards him, and looked inside it - he had set it aside for the 'special' customers, and he hoped that he'd sell most of what was inside. Patrick Daly, the owner of Daly's EmPORNium, was one of the few people who would still talk to him, and he had offered Snakes a box full of discarded porn tapes and discs for only \$40. There were 25 movies in the box, and Snakes knew that if he sold them all, he'd make one hell of a profit.

The customers were still few and far between, so Snakes dug into his pocket and took out a small glass of stolen prescription medicine. Flicking open the cap, he quickly swallowed two pills, and scooted backwards so he could lean against the back of the backseat. He made himself comfortable, and prepared to be engulfed by the familiar, colorful buzz.

Ten minutes later, two fancy-dressed men walked up to his tables, and started looking at the merchandise on offer.

Snakes climbed out of the Taurus, and dusted off his hands.

"Hey. You lookin' for somethin' special?"

"Maybe. Whatcha got?" the first man said. He was in his late 50's, with a well-groomed salt-and-pepper beard and matching hair. He was wearing an expensive looking brown leather duster, and a dark suit underneath.

"Oh, you know, man. This and that, as you can see."

"This is just junk," the other man said. He was at least twenty years younger than the other man, and looked similar enough to be a younger brother, or a son.

"Yeah, but I've got somethin' good back here. C'mon, take a look," Snakes said, and waved his hand.

"This is the good stuff, man," Snakes said, as he pulled out the cardboard box with the porn. He reached in and took out a few of the movies, so the older man could see the colorful pictures on the covers.

"Interesting. How much?" the older man said.

"\$10 a movie?"

"Forget it."

"\$8 ?"

"\$6 a movie, but that's it."

Snakes tried to calculate it in his head, but the buzz kept interrupting his mental arithmetic. He shrugged, and let it go.

"Six bucks, you betcha, man," he said, and placed the box on one of the tables.

"Are they originals?"

"Oh, absolutely, man," Snakes said, and opened up a couple of DVDs, so the older man could see for himself.

"Ace quality movies, too, man. Most of 'em are made by Silver Stallion, my favorites. They always have the best babes."

The older man looked through the box, and picked out six movies. Snakes shoved the box back in the Taurus, and dusted off his hands again.

"\$30, here ya go," the older man said, and handed Snakes three \$10 bills.

"Thank you... hey, wait a minute... it's \$36, man!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. That's right. I'm so forgetful these days," the older man said, and gave Snakes two \$1 bills and a handful of nickles and dimes.

"Yeah, I know that feelin' well. Just last week, I couldn't remember where I had parked my car, man!" Snakes said, and smiled at the two customers - then he put the money in his pocket without looking at it.

"Oh, no! If I did that, my wife would kill me," the older man said, and laughed.

"Say, my good man, you wouldn't happen to know the way to the restrooms, would you?" he continued.

"Sure thing, fella. You just go to the end of the tables, and then turn left. They've set up a long line of portable shithouses down there, man. You can't miss it," Snakes said, and pointed out the way.

"Down the end of the tables, and left?"

"That's right, yeah. You can't miss 'em."

"Thank you," the older man said.

"Come on, dad. We're all done here," the younger man said, and walked away from Snakes' tables - carrying a large, black plastic bag.

Snakes looked at the \$36, and punched the air in triumph. He sat down in the back of the Taurus, and recounted the money over and over again.

Fifteen minutes later, another customer walked up to Snakes' tables.

"Hi, man. What can I do for ya?"

The man, an Ordinary Joe wearing jeans, a denim jacket and a green beret, looked around, and leaned in towards Snakes.

"You got any porn?"

"Man, do I ever," Snakes said, and pulled the cardboard box towards him - only to discover it was empty.

"What the..." he croaked, and looked around in a panic. He checked everywhere, even under the car, but the movies were gone.

"Oh, man! Oh, Jeez... Oh, man!" he said, and clutched his head.

"No porn?"

"Oh, man!" Snakes said again, and started to run around in circles. The customer shrugged and walked away.

"The men! The two fuckin' men! Jesus Flippin' Christ, the two men!" he suddenly said out loud, and slapped his forehead. He quickly threw all the other merchandise and the tables in the back of the Taurus, and closed the hatchback with such force the windows rattled.

"I'm gonna find those assholes, and when I do, I'm gonna teach them a goddamned lesson!" he said loudly and set off to search for the con men.

An hour later, he was no nearer finding the two men. Dejected, he shuffled back to the Taurus, got in, and let out a long, slow sigh. He rubbed his forehead, and pondered why life was always so unfair to him.

**_*_

"Gaaawd, I'm glad this is the last of the big crates," Maeve said in a strained voice as she carried a packing case into Mary's and Josey's new apartment on the second floor of the Donnelly mansion. She put it down on the floor with a bump - and groaned when she stood upright.

"Your back?" Staci asked, and placed a much smaller cardboard box next to the big one.

"Yeah," Maeve said, and held her hand hard against a muscle on her lower back that had given her trouble ever since she sprained it in the clash with the Websters a month ago.

She gave the apartment a thorough once-over - it wasn't huge or extravagant, but it was certainly

a massive step up from the dump Mary and Josey had lived in previously. The living room and both bedrooms were fitted with a very nice dark brown carpet and a tan wallpaper. All the panels and the window sills were painted in a lighter shade of brown, as were the ceiling and the cabinets in the kitchenette.

"Poor you. I'll give you a massage tonight... if you're interested, that is?" Staci said for Maeve's ears only.

"The only time I won't be interested is when I'm face-up in a casket," Maeve said, and wiped off her hands on a kerchief.

"Gawd, that's morbid, Maeve," Staci said, and got the shivers.

"I know. Hey, what do you think of this place?"

"Well, I like it. A good-sized living room with a kitchenette. Two bedrooms, both with a window overlooking the garden. Yeah. I think it's a great place for Mary and Josey to live."

"I agree."

"What are you two talking about?" Fast Freddie Donnelly suddenly said, standing in the door. The heavy-set man lumbered into the apartment, and looked around. He nodded appraisingly, and pushed aside a cardboard box so he could sit down on the couch.

"Oh, nothin'. Don't sneak up on us like that," Maeve said.

"Don't give me that, young lady. It's my house, innit?"

"Yeah, but who knows, we might've been doin' somethin' adult," Maeve said with a mischievous grin.

"Maeve...!" Staci whispered, feeling her cheeks grow hot from the blush that spread out over her face.

"True," Fast Freddie said, and crossed his stubby legs.

Mary and Danny came in, carrying the kitchen table between them. Josey ran in behind them, but stopped abruptly when she saw the fat man sitting in their couch.

"Just put it down here, Danny," Mary said, and nodded her head at the spot where she wanted it.

"Hey. You must be Josey," Freddie said, and waved at the young girl.

"That's right," Josey said, and hurriedly hid behind her mother's legs. She poked her head out, and studied the large man intently.

"Hello, Miss Reynolds," Fast Freddie said, and got up from the couch. He put out his hand, and lumbered forward.

Mary was completely dwarfed by Freddie's bulk, but she politely put out her hand, and even curtsied when they had shook hands.

"Mr. Donnelly."

"Mr. Donnelly was my father. I'm Fast Freddie. So, welcome to my house. I've been told that you'll be working for us from now on...?" Freddie said, looking at Maeve with a twinkle in his eye. Maeve responded by flashing her trademark crooked grin.

"Yes. Fever was kind enough to offer me a job here."

"I'm glad she did. Well. You have a beautiful daughter, Miss Reynolds."

"Thank you. Please, call me Mary."

"All right. Are we done here? Because I want to give you a tour of the house..."

"No, there's still a couple of chairs left, and also the suitcase with Josey's clothes," Mary said, and moved an errant lock of red hair behind her ear.

"I'm sure Maeve and Staci can handle that... right?" Fast Freddie said, and winked.

"But of course, uncle Freddie," Maeve said, grabbed hold of Staci's elbow, and led her from the room.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Donn... I mean, Fast Freddie, but it's already past Josey's bedtime, so would it be possible to wait a few minutes...?"

"Oh, absolutely. I'm just in the way here, anyway, so when you're ready, ask Danny or one of the girls to show you the way to my office. OK?"

"OK. Thank you very much," Mary said, and curtsied again.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, child, stop doin' that!" Freddie said with a belly laugh that almost rattled the window panes.

"This is the Donnelly mansion, not the White House. Here, we're one, big family. Some are bigger than others, granted..." Freddie said, slapping his gut, "... but we're definitely one family. But anyway, just come and see me when you're ready," he said, and lumbered out of the apartment.

Fifteen minutes later, Josey was safely tucked in and fast asleep. As soon as the young girl started snoring, Mary leaned down and kissed her on the forehead, and then walked on tip-toes over to the bedroom door.

She closed it softly, and leaned her head against the doorjamb. She sighed deeply, and rubbed her weary face.

"Are you..." Danny started to say, but Mary quickly put a finger against her lips and shushed him.

"... ready to visit Mr. Donnelly now?" he continued, making sure to whisper.

"Yes. I'm ready," Mary whispered back, and waved at Maeve and Staci, who were both sitting in the couch - biting their lips, so they wouldn't break out in laughter over the unusual sight of the former wrestler being shushed by a woman a third his size.

Danny and Mary left the room, but just before Danny closed the door, he stuck his head in and wiggled his eyebrows.

"OK, that was weird," Maeve said quietly after Danny had closed the door.

"Yeah. But fun, though," Staci said, and got up from the couch. She went over to the refrigerator, and found a bottle of spring water.

"Want one?" she whispered, and held up the bottle so Maeve could see it.

"No, thanks."

Staci came back to the couch, and sat down.

"Move over," she said, and pushed Maeve up towards the top end of the couch.

"Yes, dear."

Once Maeve was located at the end of the couch, Staci swung her legs up, and placed her head in Maeve's lap. She wiggled a bit to get comfortable, and purred when she found a good spot.

"Much better," she whispered, unscrewed the cap of the bottle, and took a healthy swig.

"Oh, I definitely agree. Are you tired?"

"Yeah. I have a headache. I'm not used to all this physical work."

"Oh, I don't know. You always seem very physical when we're together," Maeve said, and leaned

down to give Staci a kiss.

"Oh, ha, ha. That's different."

Maeve started giving Staci's scalp a gentle massage, stopping occasionally to run her fingers through the silky black locks, and to caress Staci's chiseled features.

"Mmmmmmmmm," Staci purred, and closed her eyes. As usual, Maeve's touch did wonders for her, and it wasn't long before she could feel her entire body relaxing.

Suddenly Maeve stopped, and Staci could hear her clear her throat.

"Don't stop, baby," she whispered huskily.

"Ahem. Staci, we've got company."

"Compa... oh, gawd...!" Staci said, and bolted upright so fast the cap of the bottle went flying. Her face turned crimson red in an instant, and she found a very interesting dark blotch on the carpet that needed to be studied thoroughly.

Danny was standing in the doorway, sporting a blush very similar to Staci's.

"Come in an' have a seat, Danny-boy," Maeve said with a throaty chuckle.

Danny pulled out a rickety armchair, and sat down very carefully - in case the old thing collapsed under him. It didn't, and after a few seconds, he relaxed, and crossed his legs.

"Miss Reynolds is visiting Mr. Donnelly now. He's going to take her on a tour of the house."

"Good," Maeve said, and looked at Staci, who was still busy studying the dark blotch.

"It's too bad that Miss Reynolds suffered that injury. She's quite a pretty woman otherwise. Don't you think, Fever?" Danny said, and played with his shoelace.

"She is. Are you interested?"

"Well... I've only known her for four hours," he said with a chuckle.

"Oh, believe me, sometimes four minutes is enough."

"Maeve! Do we really have to talk about your former ladyfriends now?" Staci said, and poked the Enforcer in the side with her elbow.

"No... except that particular ladyfriend was... you. In your parents' flower shop, remember? You bowled me over the first time I saw you, baby," Maeve said, and leaned over to give Staci a quick peck on the cheek.

"Oh... in that case, it's all right," Staci said, and resumed the study of her favorite dark blotch.

Maeve grinned, and ran her thumb across the back of Staci's hand.

"But, Danny, please remember what Mary's been through. I think it's too soon for romance. What she needs is a good friend who'll be there for her when the demons come a-knockin'," Maeve said.

Danny nodded solemnly.

"I understand that. And I hope she'll let me be that friend."

Fifteen minutes later, Mary came back, wearing a beaming smile that stretched from ear to ear.

"I take it the meeting went well?" Maeve said.

"It went better than well, Fever. Mr. Donnelly has promised me some new furniture. He said that the old stuff I brought was ripe for the junkyard, and... well, he's right."

"Oh... great. That means we have to carry everything back down again," Maeve said, and groaned.

"I'm sure Danny won't mind carrying some of it?" Mary said.

"Won't mind at all," Danny said, and returned the smile.

Maeve and Staci looked at each other and exchanged knowing grins.

Mary bounded over to the kitchen table, and sat down on a rusty chair.

"Mr. Donnelly showed me the stuff I'll be working with - it looks really easy."

"I'm glad to hear it," Maeve said.

Mary's expression turned more serious, and she looked down at her hands.

"Fever, there's something else on my mind, but I don't know if it's appropriate, considering all you've already done for me..."

"Hmmm...? I guess you have to tell me what it is, first," Maeve said, and chuckled.

"Well, I think it would be much better for Josey if she was moved from the school she's in now, Van Buren Elementary at Fourteenth and Madison. I hate that place, it's so bad for her. She's

exposed to all kinds of bad people every single day. They..."

She drew a deep breath, and let it out very slowly.

"... bully her for being the daughter of a hooker," she said quietly.

Maeve nodded.

"I understand. I'll get to it first thing tomorrow. Do you want private tuition?"

"No, I'd prefer Josey to continue in a public school. That way she'll have some playmates, but... do you think it's possible to move her to a better school?"

"If it isn't, we'll make it possible," Maeve said in a tone that left no room for misinterpretation.

Danny looked at his watch, and got up from the rickety chair.

"Well, I guess it's time for me to do the money run."

"Already?" Maeve said, and checked her wristwatch - it was ten to eight, PM.

"Yep. Time flies when you're workin' hard. I'll take Johnny and Katie. She needs to learn the ropes."

"All right. Call me when you're on your way back."

"Sure thing, Fever. Good night, Miss Hart... Miss Reynolds," Danny said, and put out his hand. Mary shook it, and then Danny left.

"It's about time for us to leave, too, Mary. We're gonna grab a burger down at the Palace, and then I'm drivin' Staci home so she can change for work, so..." Maeve said, and got up from the couch.

"OK. But I'll see you around, right?"

"Yep. We'll be by now and then. Are you sure you'll be all right, Mary?" Staci said.

"Oh, yes. For the first time since Josey was born, I have a bedroom all to myself. It's incredible, really..."

Mary looked around in her new apartment, and tears started to build in her eyes. She wiped one away, but more followed, and soon, she had tears running down her cheeks.

She went over to Maeve, and embraced the Enforcer in a crushing bear hug. Mary let out a few

sobs that ended in a long, trembling sigh.

"Thank you, Fever. Thank you so very, very much," she whispered.

"You're welcome. And please, call me Maeve. All my friends do."

Mary nodded, still too choked up to speak. She pulled back from Maeve, and managed a faint chuckle at the wet patch that had formed on the shoulder of Maeve's dark blue shirt.

"Whoops..." Mary said, and tried to wipe it away.

"Never mind that," Maeve said with a chuckle.

"Miss Ha... I mean, Staci, thank you, too," Mary said, and gave Staci a similar, if briefer hug.

"It's all right, Mary. We're glad we could help."

**_*_

Shannon McWhirter finished off the sketch he was working on, and placed the pencil on the desktop. He leaned back on the chair, and studied the things he had drawn.

To the untrained eye, the drawing was a mess of unconnected lines, arrows and dots, but he knew exactly what every little doodle represented - it was a highly detailed battle plan.

He took a grainy black and white photo and held it up against his drawing. He traced some of the drawing's lines with his finger, and simultaneously used his wristwatch to time it to the exact second. He furrowed his brow, and picked up the pencil to make a few corrections.

'Everything has to be done to the second. If one of us is late, even if it's only by a second, the people there will have time to react, and that'll most likely mean curtains for all of us,' he thought.

He made a few more corrections to the drawing, and added two new dots, and then put down the pencil again.

Finally satisfied with the result, he took the paper, folded it several times, and put that and the pencil into a pocket in his boiler suit. He clicked off the small penlight, and went into the main room of the derelict building.

"All right, listen up. T minus 16 minutes, gentlemen, so stay..."

"Lady and gentlemen," Siobhan said surly.

"... alert. We won't get a second stab at this," Shannon said, ignoring his sister as usual.

"I'm ready," Wellman said, as he clicked the final cartridge into the clip, and inserted it into his rifle.

"Good. O'Shaughnessy?"

"I was born ready, boss."

"I don't doubt it."

"Blah, blah, blah! I can't take much more of this macho bullshit," Siobhan said with her hands on her hips.

"Siobhan, have you prepared the Blazer?"

"Yes. It's fully gassed up and ready to go."

"Good. Then get inside. And shut up," Shannon said.

Siobhan flicked him the bird, but did like she was told. She got in, and rolled down the window.

"Are you sure you two are related by blood, boss?" O'Shaughnessy said, and inserted the clip into his Springfield with a metallic clang.

"Getting less sure for each passing day, Dillon," Shannon said, and put on his skimask. He briefly rolled it down to check that it lined up with his eyes, and then rolled it up again.

"Anyway... remember, keep your gloves and your mask on at all times. I don't want to see any forgotten items when we leave the site. The cops are smart these days, they can extract prints from fabric."

"What about the spent cartridges, Shannon?" Wellman asked.

"I've never touched them with my bare hands, and I hope none of you have either?"

Wellman and O'Shaughnessy both shook their heads.

"Good. We'll leave them behind. It'll take too long to pick them up."

"I've heard that these days, you can get small collector bags to wrap around the rifles so you don't have to worry about 'em," Wellman said, and opened the backdoor of the Blazer.

"Heard that too. But they're custom made, so they can be traced." Shannon went around the front of the Blazer, and signaled Siobhan to start the engine.

"Hey, boss, how about gettin' ourselves a fancy name?" O'Shaughnessy said.

"A name?"

"Yeah, you know... like Bonnie & Clyde, or something?"

"That's a good idea, Dillon. Got any suggestions?"

"Well... we're four, so how about calling ourselves the Four Leaf Clover?"

"Not bad. I like it," Wellman said with a grin, and gave O'Shaughnessy a thumbs up - Siobhan merely rolled her eyes.

"I like it, too," Shannon said, and ran into the small office. A minute later, he came back out holding a small piece of paper with a few letters written on it - 'FLC - Four Leaf Clover'.

"What's that for, boss?"

"It's our calling card."

O'Shaughnessy went around the car, and opened the door on the right hand side. With an evil grin, he gripped the roofline with his strong hands, and started rocking the Blazer left and right. Wellman immediately joined in on the fun, and they soon had the Blazer moving like a fishing boat on the high seas.

"Stop fuckin' doin' that, you stupid fuckin' morons!" Siobhan howled, hanging on to the steering wheel for dear life.

O'Shaughnessy laughed out loud, but stopped rocking the car. He and Wellman dusted off their hands and got in. O'Shaughnessy placed the Springfield by his feet, and got comfortable in the back seat.

Siobhan spun around, and looked at them with a murderous glare in her eyes.

"Yer fuckin' INSANE!" she yelled, and gave them a two-fingered salute.

"Enough of that nonsense. Drill!" Shannon said.

"One... tires, radiator, passenger," Wellman said, and put his own rifle down in the footwell.

"Two... tires, driver," O'Shaughnessy continued.

"Three... back seat passenger, money," Shannon said, and nodded to himself.

"Four... lookout and then foot to the floor," Siobhan said, and revved the engine.

"Gentlemen, I think the Four Leaf Clover is ready."

"Lady and gentlemen," Siobhan said surly, and selected Drive.

Shannon ran ahead and pulled the chain to open the gate. Once it was fully open, Siobhan drove the Blazer through it, and then waited for her brother to close the gate and get in. With a low growl, the heavy SUV rumbled away from the abandoned building, and disappeared into the dusk.

**_*_

'... so, we'll be done in around 20 minutes, barring unforeseen disasters,' Danny said at the other end of the connection.

"Good. I'll stand by in case you need me."

'We shouldn't, but thanks anyway.'

"Sure thing. Talk to ya later, Danny-boy."

'Later.'

"Danny's nearly done with the money run," Maeve said, and put the phone in her shirt pocket.

"Mmmm."

"You're wearing that frown you always get when you're thinking about something, baby," Maeve said, as they slowed down for a red light at Third Street.

"I'm thinking about something Josey said when we were listening to the fairy tales. I have to admit it shook me to the core."

"Oh? Something about you and me... our relationship?"

"Oh, no, no. Nothing like that. No. Josey asked me if her mommy would ever be pretty again."

"Jesus..."

"Yeah. Seeing her mother like that must've given that young girl the fright of her life. She's such a sweet kid. Mary's reared her well."

Maeve didn't reply, but instead stared out of the windscreen. When the lights turned green, she behaved like she was on auto-pilot, and drove on without a word.

Suddenly Staci realized what was wrong, and clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Oh, Jeez, Maeve... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." she croaked through her fingers.

"Nah... it's all right. It's been so long, I should be over it," Maeve said, her voice gradually trailing off until it was no more than a whisper.

Staci started speaking again, but Maeve didn't hear her. Instead, her thoughts wandered back more than thirty years, to an event that would always be etched into her soul - it was a few weeks before her sixth birthday, and her parents had dropped her off at her uncle's house because they wanted a quiet, romantic evening at a retreat upstate. It was a thunderous day, and Maeve and uncle Freddie had been looking at the lightning, when Freddie received a phone call that would change Maeve's life forever.

On the way to the hotel, Maeve's dad had lost control of their car on the rain-slicked road, and had hit a telephone pole head-on. He had been killed instantly, and Maeve's mother, Freddie's sister, had suffered severe head injuries, and had fallen into a coma.

A cold trickle ran down Maeve's spine as she remembered the many traumatic visits to the hospital. After a month in a coma, her mother died without ever regaining consciousness, and without ever saying goodbye to Maeve...

Maeve blinked a few times, and slowly pulled back from those negative thoughts. She noticed that they had gone too far, and as she drove up to the intersection at Tenth Street to make a u-turn, she looked at Staci to ask why she hadn't said anything - to Maeve's great surprise, two wet streaks ran down Staci's face, and she was sitting very still, looking down into her lap.

"Hey, baby, why are you cryin'?" Maeve said, and gently clawed Staci's thigh.

"You were thinking about your family, right? ...I'm sorry for ripping up in those old wounds..."

"It's all old news, Staci."

"This is why you wanted to help Mary and Josey, isn't it?"

"Well... I guess it was in my subconscious, yeah."

The lights turned green, and Maeve made a u-turn. They drove a few hundred yards North on Jefferson, and soon stopped in front of the Three-In-One Club.

"Don't worry about it, Staci. I'm cool. Come on, gimme a kiss..." Maeve said, and leaned over to the dark-haired beauty next to her.

Their lips met in a loving kiss, and Maeve wiped the tears away from Staci's cheeks with her thumb.

"No more crying, please. I can't let you go to work looking like this, you know. They might think I can't satisfy you... it'd be bad for my street cred," Maeve said, and flashed her trademark

crooked smile.

"Oh, Jeez, Maeve, they all know you're a Birddawg..." Staci said, and chuckled. She took out a handkerchief, and wiped her cheeks dry.

"How do I look?"

"Like a respectable business woman, Staci."

"Gawd, that old, huh?"

Maeve guffawed, and gently punched Staci's shoulder.

"See ya tonight, Miss Hart. Your flat at two?"

"You have a date, Miss Donnelly," Staci said, and leaned over to kiss Maeve again.

Staci adjusted her collar, and stepped out of the Mustang. Maeve waited for a few seconds, greatly admiring Staci's swagger, and then she put the car in gear, and drove off.

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CHAPTER 3

Three minutes later, Maeve pulled off Ninth Street, and drove into the gas station on the Burger Palace lot. She got out of the car, and inserted her credit card in the pump.

She had barely lifted the nozzle off the pump when she heard the familiar staccato chatter of an automatic rifle in the far distance.

"What the fuck..." she said, and tried to strain her hearing.

It soon became clear that more than one weapon was firing, and within a few seconds, Maeve's mind had connected the dots.

"Fuck! Danny!" she said, and threw the nozzle back on the pump. She yanked her credit card out of the machine, and jumped into the Mustang. She turned the ignition key, and left the gas pumps in a cloud of dust.

The lights at the intersection were green, and she took a hard left and put her foot flat down on the accelerator. The speed quickly climbed to nearly 80 mph, and she zoomed through the traffic, heading for Second Street.

When she got there, it was already all over. The silver Lincoln was parked at an oblique angle to the curb, with all four tires shot to pieces. White steam billowed like a geyser from the shot-up radiator, and all the windows were broken.

All four doors were open, and two people were hanging out of the left side - both clearly dead.

Maeve brought the Mustang to a screeching halt, and bounded from the car. She drew her Beretta, and ran to the Lincoln, continuously scanning the surroundings in case the perpetrators were still near.

She kneeled next to Katie, and put two fingers on her neck, but the cashier was long since dead. Maeve cursed loudly, and closed Katie's eyes. She moved ahead to Johnny, and established that he was dead, too. She looked across at Danny, who was in the passenger seat, but he was sitting very still.

Maeve looked up and down the deserted street, but nothing moved. A few cars had stopped a hundred yards or so back, and the drivers were watching what was going on.

As Maeve moved to the other side of the Lincoln, sirens were approaching from somewhere in the distance, and she knew she didn't have much time. All their connections at the police wouldn't be enough to stop her from being brought in for questioning, and she didn't have time for that.

Suddenly, movement up ahead caught her eye, and she aimed the Beretta at a nearby alley. She kneeled behind the fender of the Lincoln, and held the weapon in a double-handed grip on to aim better.

"Come out with your hands up!"

A young man peeked around the corner, but quickly pulled back.

"I won't tell you again!"

A young man came around the corner with both hands high up in the air, and a frightened expression on his face. It didn't take Maeve two seconds to realize that he didn't have anything to do with the hit, and she growled in frustration.

"Get outta here," she said, and he ran away as quickly as he could.

A pained groan made Maeve spin around and look at the person on the passenger seat. Danny coughed a few times, and Maeve breathed a sigh of relief.

"Danny! Jesus, Mary and Joseph, man! What the fuck's going on!"

"Fever? They got me, the assholes," Danny said, clutching his head.

"Let me see," Maeve said, and removed his hand.

A bullet had carved a 7" long furrow on the side of his head, and the wound was bleeding profusely.

"You were lucky, Danny-boy," Maeve said, and felt immensely relieved that her friend was basically all right. She took a quick glance at the backseat, where an empty holdall was all that was left of the shipment. A few dollar bills were strewn on the seat and on the floor - the bills were soaked in Katie's blood. Maeve looked at the body of the cashier, and noted that the young woman's stomach and chest were riddled with bulletholes.

Her jaw began to grind, and she gripped the Beretta so tight her knuckles turned white.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a small piece of paper lying on the backseat. It looked so out of place that she reached over and picked it up to see what it was. It was 2" x 3", and the only words on it were 'FLC - Four Leaf Clover'.

"Did ya get a look at the people who did it?" she asked through clenched teeth, as she looked at the piece of paper.

"Four guys... blue boiler suits, skimasks... auto rifles. Man, they were ruthless, shot us up at point blank range. Black car, couldn't see which, and after that I was kinda busy. I didn't even get a single shot off..."

"Four guys... Four Leaf Clover... Jesus... Did you call it in?"

"No time," Danny said, and groaned again.

"All right. Danny, stay here, you need medical attention. The sirens are really close now, and I don't have time for that shit. I wasn't here, get it?" Maeve said, crumpled the piece of paper in her hand, and crammed it into her back pocket.

"No problem. I can't see straight, anyway, so I don't know who the hell you are," Danny said, and leaned back towards the neck support.

"I'll be at uncle Freddie's. If Coluzzo's responsible, he's just earned himself a full scale war," Maeve said, and patted Danny on the shoulder. He gave her a weak thumbsup, and she ran over to the idling Mustang and drove off.

"Yes, that's right. The shipment's been hit ... no, the money is gone ... no, I wasn't there ... Danny's been shot, but he's mostly all right ... no, the others are DOA ... yes ... I agree," Maeve said, holding the phone in one hand and steering with the other.

She made a hard right onto Franklin, which was soon followed by another hard right onto First Street. She blasted past Staci's apartment, and a thought flashed through her mind that she should call Staci so she wouldn't hear about the hit on the grapevine. The grapevine had a tendency to exaggerate, and Maeve didn't want Staci to worry about her.

Maeve honked her horn several times to get an errant Dodge to move aside, and when that didn't have much effect, she zig-zagged past it, and waved her free hand out of her window.

The irate man at the other end of the connection was still squawking madly in her ear, but she simply hung up on him - she was only three minutes away from the HQ, and it was more important to call Staci.

She rapidly dialed the number to the Three-In-One Club, and prayed that Staci was there to pick it up. It rang a few times, and Maeve was about to give up, when...

'Three-In-One Club, it's Staci.'

"It's Maeve. Hey... we've had a problem. I'm not involved myself, but it's definitely a problem. Danny's been shot."

'Oh, God! Is he all right?'

"Mostly."

'And you're fine? Don't lie to me!'

Maeve had to chuckle, and she could well imagine Staci's expression.

"I'm fine. I wasn't there. The money shipment was hit. We're gonna hafta cancel the thing we had planned for tonight. I'm sorry, baby."

'No problem. I can hear you're driving?'

"That's right, I'm on my way back to the HQ."

'All right. Take care. Love you,' Staci said, and blew Maeve a kiss through the phone.

"Love you too. Talk to ya later," Maeve said, and hung up. She threw the phone onto the passenger seat, and turned onto the street where her uncle's mansion was located.

When Maeve arrived at the Donnelly headquarters, she was reminded of an army base under Red Alert. Dozens of men were running around, all armed, and all looking like they were ready for a fight.

She pulled up to the gate, and the guard came out of the booth. He turned on a flashlight, and shone it in her face.

"Jeez, man!" she growled, and shielded her eyes from the bright light.

"I'm sorry, Fever. I need to check if you're alone," the sentry said.

"Well, how about shining that damn thing into the car instead of at my eyes, huh?" she said, and shook her head angrily.

Two beefy men holding MP5s were guarding the door to Fast Freddie's office, and they nodded to Maeve as she entered the hallway.

"Mr. Donnelly told us to let you straight in, Fever," one of them said, and opened the double doors to the office. Maeve's reply was a growly grunt as she squeezed between the two guards.

Fast Freddie Donnelly was on the phone with someone, and judging by the flushed hue of his face, it was a frustrating conversation.

"I'm not threatening you, Don Coluzzo. All I'm sayin' is that we'll get to the bottom of it, and when we do, there'll be hell to pay for someone ... Yes. That's all I'm sayin' ... No, I'm not sayin' you did it ... No ... Yeah. All right," he said, and put down the receiver.

"Did you just say 'Don Coluzzo'?" Maeve said incredulously as she approached the huge desk.

"Yeah. He called me, moanin' and cryin' that it wasn't them."

"How the hell could he know so soon if it wasn't his guys?"

"I don't know. His spies, probably. He sounded convincing enough," Freddie Donnelly said, and chucked down half a glass of Scotch.

"Huh! Do you believe him?"

"I don't know," he said, after regaining his breath.

"It's a fuckin' massacre out there. They even killed the cashier, and she was unarmed," Maeve growled.

"Katie? Motherfuckers," Freddie said, and sat down with a bump on his expensive leather armchair. He put down the glass, and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"The driver didn't make it, either."

"Fuck."

"How much was in that shipment?"

"One hundred sixty thousand dollars."

Maeve whistled slowly, and scrunched up her face.

"Now what?"

"I don't fuckin' know! Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Freddie said, and wiped his forehead again.

"I don't think there were any witnesses there. Well, I guess if there had been, these guys would've killed them."

"Probably."

"Danny was lucky as hell. The bullet only grazed his skull," Maeve said, and poured herself a drink.

"He was able to give me a description... boiler suits... the usual stuff. Not enough to go on," she continued, and suddenly remembered the piece of paper she'd found on the backseat of the Lincoln - she reached into her back pocket, and pulled out the crumpled note.

"I found this on the backseat. They're calling themselves the Four Leaf Clover. That's gotta be a new crew," she continued, and showed Fast Freddie the piece of paper.

"Well, whoever they are, we can't let such a ballsy hit on our own turf go unanswered. Get everyone on the horn. Someone must have heard something. Call Patrick Daly... didn't he help you that time with the Websters? Maybe he has something."

"It's worth a shot," Maeve said, and reached for her cell phone.

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The Chevrolet Blazer bumped over the uneven surface of the grassy lot, and stopped at the gate. Shannon quickly jumped out, and pulled it up.

He got back in, and drove the car into the derelict building. Once there, O'Shaughnessy and Wellman quietly took the two heavy bags out of the trunk of the car and placed them on the ground in front of the Blazer, so they had some light to work by.

Shannon came out of the office carrying a knife. He kneeled down next to the bags, and cut the first one open. Holding up one end of the bag, he shook it for all it was worth.

Dollar bills rained out of the bag, and quickly formed a mountain of green on the filthy concrete

floor.

Shannon threw the bag away, and looked silently at the money.

Unable to contain himself any longer, O'Shaughnessy let out a long, howling whoop that echoed through the empty building. He jumped up and down, and hollered a string of expletives - Wellman and Shannon were slightly more calm, but they still had broad smiles on their faces, and Wellman rubbed his hands repeatedly.

The second bag had been torn in the hit, and a few of the bills at the top were blood-splattered, but Shannon calmly picked them out, and put them in a separate pile. He held up the bag, and emptied it out on the floor.

Siobhan slowly got out of the Blazer and leaned against the hood. Her legs were shaking, and she felt so cold that her entire body was trembling. Her face was as pale as a sheet, and she could taste the bile at the back of her throat. She tried to wrap her arms around her body, but the thick boiler suit restricted her movements.

She briefly looked at her brother sorting the money, but it held no interest for her. She closed her eyes, and shook her head, but no matter how hard she tried to exorcise it from her mind, she could still hear the screams of the young woman in the silver car. She had never heard a human being screaming that way before, and just thinking about it made her skin crawl.

Suddenly, her stomach clenched violently, and she ran to a corner of the building to throw up.

"What the hell's the matter with her?" O'Shaughnessy said, holding a fistful of dollar bills.

"First kill jitters," Shannon said coldly.

After a few minutes, Shannon took pity on his sister, and tore himself away from counting the money.

Siobhan had curled herself up in a corner of the building, and looked thoroughly miserable. She was still very pale, and appeared much younger than her 24 years.

"Here, I brought you some water," he said, and threw her a plastic canteen.

She picked it up from the floor, and took a hesitant swig. She rinsed out her mouth, and spit out the water next to her.

"Thanks. Was that really necessary?" she whispered in a hoarse voice.

"The killings? Yes, they were necessary."

"Why? That young woman was..."

"An opponent."

"God, Shannon... she couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than me...!"

"Mmmm."

"Don't you care about her family at all?"

"No."

"Then you're a fuckin' psycho!"

"Get real, Siobhan. You were here when we drilled, you knew what we were going to do. What do you think we should've done, huh? Give them flowers and chocolate and ask politely for the bags of money?"

"But you didn't have to slaughter that young woman!"

"She was in my way. But anyway, I'm rich. And so are you. We haven't finished counting the money yet, but there's at least \$145,000 in that pile," Shannon said, and pointed at the money behind him.

"Do you honestly think I give a fuck about money now?!"

"Well, I'll just split it three ways, then. Doesn't matter to me."

Siobhan looked at her brother, and started to cry,

"You're sick, Shannon. You're really sick... I'm out. I wanna go home."

"No. I need you to drive the Blazer in tomorrow's hit."

"No! No! I can't.. Not again! I won't do it!" Siobhan said, and felt her stomach clench again. She clumsily got up, and stumbled over to the place where she had thrown up before.

"That's just too fuckin' bad, little sister," Shannon said coldly.

"159 thousand, two hundred dollars were good, Shannon. Four hundred bucks were too covered in blood to be legit," Wellman said, after having counted the money twice.

"Good. I guess the remaining \$400 got left behind in the Lincoln. Well, all right. That still makes it a fraction less than forty G each. Burn the bills that were too bloody, Wellman."

"Will do."

"Forty Grand. Just peachy, boss," O'Shaughnessy said, and started collecting his share.

"Not so fast, Dillon."

"What? I fuckin' earned this dough!"

"We're not done yet. We're only one third of the way home."

"What the fuck? You never mentioned anything about two more hits?" Wellman said.

"We'll have one more peanut hit like this one, and then we'll..."

"Peanut hit! I wouldn't call this peanuts, boss," O'Shaughnessy said, and picked up a large fistful of dollar bills.

"It's peanuts compared to the five million dollars waiting for us, Dillon."

Wellman whistled through his teeth, and a wolfish grin spread out over his features.

"Who we gonna hit, Shannon? The Vatican?"

"Not quite. I'll tell you if the next hit goes well. And speaking of which, we'll need to drill some more. This hit is different."

Wellman looked at O'Shaughnessy, and they both nodded.

"All right, Shannon. For five million dollars, we can drill 'till we drop. But what about your sister? She seems a bit shaky?" Wellman said.

"Oh, don't worry about her. She'll do her part of the job. I'll see to that. Well, that's for later."

He rolled up the sleeve of his boiler suit, and checked his watch.

"It's T minus 14 hours 27 minutes for hit number two, so I suggest you get some sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"OK, wait just a minute! Now you're tellin' us the next hit is tomorrow!?" Wellman said shocked.

"Yes, I am."

"Holy shit... don't you think we're pushing our luck, Shannon?"

"We have the skills, the means, and the proper mindset. It'd be criminal not to use them,"

Shannon said, and put his hands on his hips.

"Are we hittin' the Donnellys again, boss?" O'Shaughnessy said.

"No. We're hitting Salvatore Coluzzo."

**_*_

'Good morning to all you insomniacs out there, I'm Nat Thompson, and you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. It's a few minutes past four AM, and this hour is dedicated to the genius that is Fats Domino. We'll play all his big hits, but also some of the b-sides...'

Maeve turned off the radio, yawned, and rubbed her weary face. When she got out of the Mustang, she looked around the Community Hospital parking lot, and got a major case of deja vu. The hospital hadn't changed much since the time Maeve went there to see her mother, and the parking lot hadn't changed at all.

She opened the trunk, and took out a white plastic bag with some magazines for Danny. Just as she was closing the trunk, her phone rang.

"Fever. Talk to me."

'Hey, Fever, it's Dolores.'

"Hey. What are you doing up so late? You should be in bed," Maeve said, and leaned against the rear of the Mustang.

'Are you kiddin' ? I've barely been out of bed... Anyway, what's that I hear about you being attacked?'

"Not me personally. One of our money runs was hit."

'Shit. Catch 'em yet?'

"No. Whoever they are, they're good."

'They must be if you haven't caught them yet. I'll put my ear to the ground, and I'll ring ya if I catch anything.'

"Fast Freddie would really appreciate that, Dolores."

'I was hoping you'd appreciate it, Fever.'

"Oh... yeah. Well..."

'That's a deal, then. I'll call ya if I get any news. Bye.'

"Talk to ya later," Maeve said, and hung up. She clipped the phone to her belt, and started walking towards the rear entrance of the Hospital.

Even at this time of night, there were plenty of cars in the parking lot, and a security guard was doing regular rounds to maintain the peace and quiet. Maeve nodded to him on her way to the door, and he raised his hand to his cap as a reply.

After arguing with the night matron for five minutes about letting her see a patient outside of visiting hours, Maeve opened the door to the ward and stepped inside. It wasn't the same wing her mother had been in all those years ago, but the smell was the same, and she had to close her eyes, and take a deep breath before she could go on.

Finding the room Danny occupied wasn't difficult - no less than four beefy guys were waiting outside, protecting the door in case whoever had shot Danny decided to come back and finish the job.

"Fever," the first one said, as Maeve approached the horde of men.

"Doyle. What's up?"

"Not much. The doc's been going in and out from time to time. I don't think there are any problems. Any news on the shooters?"

"No. Is Danny alone now?"

"Yep."

"Good," Maeve said, knocked once on the door, and then swung it open.

"Hey, Danny-boy. I brought you some magazines, if you're interested," Maeve said, and placed the plastic bag on a low table next to the bed.

Danny's huge bulk looked completely out of place in the relatively small hospital bed. His head was totally wrapped in a bandage, and only his mouth, his nose and his steel gray eyes were out in the open.

"Thanks, Fever."

"Jeez, look at you. You look like you're wearin' a turban, buddy."

"Heh."

"Seen any good lookin' nurses yet?"

"The night matron is the only woman here. The rest are men."

"O... K. I've just spoken to her, and... wow, who let the dogs out?" Maeve joked, and sat down next to the bed.

"D'ya have any news, Fever?"

"No. Not a damn thing. I must've been up and down Jefferson twenty times since the hit, but no one knows anything, not even Patrick Daly. Whoever these guys are, they're a brand new crew. I guess the note I found on the backseat is a signature of sorts. They're calling themselves The Four Leaf Clover."

"Never heard of 'em."

"Me, neither."

Danny shifted around in the bed, and the old metal structure creaked and groaned under his weight.

"If you need anything, just let me know. Well, except for the bedpan. If you need that, I'll call for Doyle," Maeve said, and winked.

"Yeah, very funny. I tried to get up before, and..." Danny said, and held up a hand grip that was supposed to be suspended from a bar above the bed.

"This piece of shit broke off when I pulled on it," he said, and shrugged.

Maeve laughed out loud, but then turned serious. She put her hand on Danny's arm, and gave him a little squeeze.

"Apart from the obvious, you're all right... aren't ya?"

"I guess. The doctors x-rayed my head, but they didn't find anyth..."

"And they needed an x-ray for that? Hell, I coulda told 'em that for free," Maeve joked, and quickly pulled back so she was out of reach of Danny's long arm.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the door, and Maeve turned around to see what was going on - Doyle opened the door, and stuck his head in.

"There's a cop here to see you, Fever."

"Sounds like the game's back on. Just get some rest. See ya later, Danny-boy," Maeve said, and squeezed Danny's arm again.

"Will do, Fever."

Even wearing plain clothes, Sean Duffy couldn't hide the fact that he was a homicide detective. He was in his early fifties, tall and of a sturdy build, with a square jaw and forest green eyes that never missed a single thing that went on around him. He held a notepad in one hand and a pencil in the other, and he had already written down the names of the men waiting outside.

"Good morning, Miss Donnelly," he said, as Maeve left Danny's room.

"Detective Duffy."

"I have some questions for you."

"I'm sure you do. Let's take a walk, shall we?"

"All right."

"How's Patricia and the kids?" Maeve asked, as they walked out of the rear entrance and onto the parking lot.

"Fine. How's your uncle Freddie?"

"Fine."

"By the way, I've never thanked you for giving us the murder weapon in that prostitute homicide a month ago," Duffy said, and closed his notepad.

"You're welcome," Maeve said, and walked slowly towards her Mustang.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about how a certain Mr. Jerry McFarland ended up with a 9mm slug in his brain... would you?"

"No, I don't. Sorry. This is the first time I've ever heard that name."

"Didn't think you would."

"Are these the questions you wanted to ask me?"

"No. Here's what we know: Two people are dead, 26-year old Katherine O'Sullivan, no previous

record, and 31-year old Johnny Price, who had a rapsheet a mile long. And Danny Watts was shot in the head, but lived. They work or worked for Fast Freddie Donnelly..."

"I know that already, Detective."

"... and four \$100 bills were discovered in the car, covered in Katherine O'Sullivan's blood, next to an empty holdall. How much money was originally in that holdall, Miss Donnelly?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Does Fast Freddie have any enemies?"

"Ha! Plenty of people. But none of 'em are crazy enough to kill two family members."

"Who did it, Miss Donnelly?"

"You're askin' me?" Maeve said, and leaned against the driver's side door of the Mustang.

"Was it Don Coluzzo?"

"Not according to Don Coluzzo himself."

"Oh?"

"He called uncle Freddie soon after the hit. My uncle told me that Coluzzo basically spent the entire conversation sobbin', moanin' and cryin' that he had nothing to do with it."

"Hmmm," Duffy said, and found his notepad. He quickly scribbled a few words, and then put it away again.

"Look, Detective, I don't know who did it, but I'm itchin' to find out, too. If I do, I promise to give you a call."

"So we can come and sweep up their remains?"

"No comment."

"Hmmm. Yeah. All right. Good night, Miss Donnelly. I'll be in touch," Duffy said, and walked over to a Ford Crown Victoria that was parked in the shadows.

"Can't wait!" Maeve said after him, and unlocked the Mustang.

._*._*._*

"Yo, Snakes... ya want another beer? You've been fondlin' that empty glass for half an hour now," the barkeep said.

"No, man... not now."

"Look, I can't let you stay here if ya don't buy anything. This is the fabled Brown Bull, not some public warming center. The only reason I haven't kicked you out already is because I know you're barred from most other places."

Snakes looked around the near-deserted bar room. The place had a reputation as a dump, and even the hardened barflies knew to steer clear of the Bull on Twelfth Street. Everything was brown - brown curtains, brown linoleum on the floor, brown panels on the walls, and even the lamps above the counter were brown, but that was from being exposed to nicotine for decades.

"Yeah, well, thanks... but there ain't no one here but me, man!"

"My word is law, ya know that."

"Oh... all right."

"What'll it be?"

"A 10 cent Coke."

"Shit, man! Are ya still broke?"

"Uh-huh."

"A 10 cent Coke, Jeez Louise. Snakes, ya better not let my boss hear that. He'll kick ya out in an instant. Luckily for you, I'm ya friend. Right?"

"How about offerin' me a job, then?"

"Sure. Dishwasher?"

"No way, man."

"It's the best I can offer you at a quarter to five in the goddamned morning," he said, looking up at a large clock hanging behind the bar.

"No way, man. And that's final."

The bartender shrugged and walked away.

Jimmy Snakes sighed, and went back to fondling the empty glass.

A few minutes later, the bartender brought Snakes a very small glass of sodapop.

"Gee, thanks, Archie," Snakes said in a sarcastic tone, as he held the glass up to the light to see if it really was Coke, or just dark brown water.

"Don't mention it. It'll be 10 cents," the bartender said, and held out his hand.

"Whatever." Snakes put the coin in Archie's hand, and emptied the glass in one gulp.

"Wanna play cards, Snakes?" the bartender said, and sat down at Snakes' table.

"Nah. I always lose."

"You know, ya wouldn't be in this position now if ya hadn't tried to off Fever."

Jimmy Snakes groaned and rolled his eyes.

"Don't talk to me about Fever, man. Coluzzo paid me to take her out of the picture, but when I go an' do it, not only won't she stay dead, the Don don't pay, either!"

"Perhaps the two are connected, huh?" the bartender said, and winked.

"How the flip would I know? Where's your can, I gotta pee..."

"Over there. It'll cost ya 25 cents, in advance."

"Oh, man!"

"In advance, 'cos the faucet's crapped out, so ya can't wash ya hands."

Just as Jimmy Snakes opened the door to leave the bathroom, two people walked into the Brown Bull. He recognized them instantly - it was the same two men who had conned him at the flea market.

"Those good-fer-nothin' assholes," he hissed under his breath, and clenched his fists.

For a brief moment, he pondered whether he should go over and confront them... but they were both much larger than he was, so he put those thoughts aside, and remained in the shadows where they couldn't see him.

The two men bought beers with chasers, and started talking to the bartender. Snakes tried to listen in, but he could only pick up a few words here and there.

'... Word on the street is ... money run was hit ... Chevy Blazer ... leaf clover ... reward ... Fever

...'

'Reward!' Snakes thought. He licked his dry lips, and tried even harder to listen in on the conversation.

The bartender nodded excitedly, and poured the two men another round of chasers. They picked them up, and started walking towards a table - Snakes inched closer so he could continue to eavesdrop.

"D'ya think he bought it?" the young man said.

"He bought it. Won't be long before all of Twelfth Street knows it."

"Four Leaf Clover, ha! The second I heard that, I knew Dillon O'Shaughnessy had to be involved. He's used that name for a couple of very low-rent things. He's always had a sense for the supremely cheesy," the young man said, and gulped down his second chaser.

"Did you call him?"

"Yeah. He didn't say much, but I got enough... Enough to use against him."

The old man nodded wordlessly, and a cold, calculated grin spread out over his face.

"Money's on the table. See ya later, Archie!" the old man said, and opened the door to the street.

"See ya, Harry!" Archie shouted, and waved his hand.

As soon as the two men had left the establishment, Snakes came out of the shadows, and went up to the counter.

"Ummmm, Archie... who were those two men?"

"Harry Weaver Senior and Junior. Why?"

"Oh... nothin' Did they mention 'reward'?"

"Yeah, they did. Earlier this evening, there was a hit on one of Fast Freddie's money runs. Your favorite girlfriend was busy cruisin' Jefferson askin' around. She never came here, though."

"My favorite...?"

"Fever, ya dumb schmuck!"

"Don't talk to me about Fever, man!"

"How about a 10 G reward, then?"

"Ten thousand dollars?!"

"That's what the Weavers told me."

"Holy shit, man..."

Jimmy Snakes scrunched up his face, and began to rub the impressive double-Cobra tattoo on his neck that had given him his street name. He soon came to the conclusion that, even though Fever wasn't his best friend, for 10 Grand, he wouldn't mind helping her just once.

"I don't get it, though. Fever oughtta know that a 10 G reward will bring out all the weirdos and con men, not to mention the freaks, nutjobs and potheads trying to make a quick buck. Maybe Fast Freddie has a plan," the bartender said, and dunked the two beer glasses into some lukewarm, filthy dishwater.

"Mmmhhyeah," Snakes said, only hearing half of it.

'Asshole Junior said that he knew one of them... What was the name he used... Dalton, no. Denton... no. Dill... Dillon! Dillon O'Shaw-something. If I give that name to Fever, not only will the 10 G be as good as mine, Fever'll be indebted to help me get my porn tapes back!' Snakes thought, punched the air, and started dancing around in a circle.

The bartender stopped washing the glasses, and stared wide-eyed at Snakes' antics.

"Are you sure you're all right, buddy? You seem a little... trippy...?"

"I feel beautiful, man! I have it all worked out, man!" Snakes said in a sing-song voice. He suddenly stopped dancing, and strode towards the front door of the Brown Bull.

._*._*_._

Maeve cruised slowly down First Street, hoping and praying that Staci was still awake. When she reached the apartment complex where Staci lived, it didn't take her but a second to see that the lights were off in both windows.

She sighed deeply and tapped her fingers on the steering wheel - suddenly the lights were turned on in the bedroom, and Maeve could see a silhouette of Staci's familiar figure pulling the curtains aside.

The figure looked out, and waved.

Maeve let out a loud, if tired, whoop, and quickly drove into the parking lot to park the Mustang next to Staci's dark green Corolla. In two seconds flat, she was out of the car, and stood by the

front door. She found, and pressed, the button to Staci's apartment, and waited for the door to be buzzed open.

'Yes?' Staci's disembodied voice echoed through the parking lot, creating an eerie effect.

"It's me, darlin'. Wouldya mind if I came up?"

'HMMMM. No.'

"Wow, you look like shit!" Staci said, as Maeve walked past her and into the apartment.

"Why, thank you, Staci. I feel like shit, so that's probably why..."

Staci chuckled, and closed the door. She put on the safety chain, and then followed Maeve into the living room.

"Hey, baby. I've missed ya," Maeve said, and stood up on tiptoes so she could give Staci a kiss on the lips.

"You have dark circles under your eyes... I know something that'll make 'em go away," Staci said, and gently kissed Maeve's cheeks just below her eyes.

"Thank you, darlin'. I think I have dark circles in my brain, to be honest. I'm so damn tired."

Suddenly she noticed that Staci was looking very fine indeed, wearing dark blue silk jammies and matching slippers.

"Oooh, baby, look at you! You look fantastic. Were you expecting someone?" Maeve said, and winked.

"Nah. The Noisy Beast woke me up, and when I peeked out, there you were."

Maeve chuckled, and moved closer to Staci with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

"That's funny... two seconds ago you said you were damn tired, and now...?"

"I'm never too tired to appreciate you, baby," Maeve said, and pulled Staci down for a loving, and lengthy, kiss.

A few minutes later, Maeve turned on the lights in the kitchen and made a beeline for the refrigerator. She took out a can of the local brew, cracked it open, and took a long swig.

"Man, I *really* needed that," she said, and rolled the can across her forehead several times to cool down.

"Listen, do you want to crash here tonight?" Staci said, standing in the door to the kitchen.

"Well, yeah... if it's not too much hassle?"

"Of course it isn't. You're gonna have to sleep in your T and boxers, though. I don't have anything for you to wear."

"I can sleep in my birthday suit if I have to."

"When I said 'sleep', I meant it, Maeve."

"Oh, sure. There'll be no hanky-panky tonight. As soon as my 'do hits the pillow, I'm gone," Maeve said, and yawned widely to underline her words.

"Anyway, it's a nice place you have here," she continued.

"Thanks."

Maeve took another swig of the beer, and looked intently at Staci.

"Of course, it would also be nice if you moved in with me...?"

"Maeve... we've had that discussion already, and I doubt we can add much to it a quarter past five in the morning."

"Yeah, but I thought we'd agreed on it...?"

"We agreed on taking it one step at a time, and I'm sticking to that plan. This flat is... it's my lifeboat. Let's call it that... Look, can we talk about this some other time?" Staci said, and smiled wistfully.

"All right," Maeve said, and took another swig of the beer to hide her disappointment.

"How's Danny?"

"He was fine when I left the hospital. He was shot in the head. Right here," Maeve said, and moved a finger across her skull, illustrating the wound.

"God..."

"Yeah. But he's basically all right," Maeve said, and pulled out a kitchen chair. She sat down with a bump, and rested her head on her arms.

"It must've been a rough night."

"Baby, you have no idea."

"Tell me about it," Staci said, and sat down opposite Maeve.

"I was there within minutes of the hit. Jesus, it was... overwhelming. Even for me. Two people dead... shot all to hell... and all the money was gone."

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Staci said, and took Maeve's hands in her own.

"And then I've been running around like a goddamned lunatic for seven straight goddamned hours! I've been going flat out ever since I dropped you off at the club," Maeve said, and sighed.

"Holy cow..."

"Yeah. I've spoken to so many people I've forgotten most of 'em again. And nobody knows anything!" Maeve said, and took another long swig of the beer.

"How's that possible?"

"It's a new crew. It must be. That's the only thing that can explain why we can't find them, and why no one knows who they are... whatever the reason is, it's frustrating as hell. They're ruthless, so we gotta stop them fast, but..." Maeve said, and shrugged.

"Ruthless? Oh, baby, please promise me that you'll be extra careful," Staci said, and held Maeve's hands tight.

"I promise," Maeve said, and brought Staci's hands up so she could kiss them.

With a smile, Staci leaned back on the kitchen chair, but it wasn't long before the smile slowly faded from her face.

"... Who were the people that were killed?" she said quietly.

"Johnny Price and Katie O'Sullivan."

"Johnny... the same Johnny that helped us with Mary's apartment...?"

Maeve nodded.

"Dear God," Staci said, and put her hand over her mouth. She blinked several times to remove a few tears that had suddenly appeared, but one spilled over, and ran down her cheek. She quickly removed it with her hand.

"He... he whistled after me when I came over to the delivery truck yesterday afternoon. It wasn't

meant seriously, it was just for fun. Jesus," she said, and sighed deeply.

"Yeah, that was Johnny, all right," Maeve said, and emptied the beer can.

"I hope he didn't suffer."

A grisly image of how the driver's head and body looked flashed before Maeve's eyes, and she felt a cold trickle running down her spine. She shook her head and pinched the bridge of her nose to get rid of the disturbing images, but neither really worked.

"He didn't," Maeve said quietly.

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CHAPTER 4

"Now, just remember the things I've told you, and there won't be any problems," Shannon McWhirter said, and helped his sister don her boiler suit.

"Wait by the door, and keep a sharp lookout."

"That's right, sis. Wait by the door, keep a sharp lookout... and don't look inside. Get it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. How many people are you gonna slaughter today, bro?"

Shannon grabbed Siobhan's collar, and twisted it hard. Siobhan shrieked, and struggled to break free, but Shannon was too strong for her.

"Let me go, you fuckin' psycho! Let me go!"

"Don't fuck with me, Siobhan. Don't fail me, and don't do anything that'll jeopardize the operation. You're my sister, but if you fuck up, I wouldn't think twice about leaving you behind for the cops... or even better, leave you to Coluzzo's men," Shannon said, his face only an inch from his sister's.

"You're sick!"

Shannon let go of his sister's collar, and she hurriedly stepped back from his reach. Walking backwards, she stumbled over a loose piece of concrete, and she fell, landing hard on her backside.

"I think you get the picture," Shannon said coldly, and walked away.

Five minutes later, Shannon let the gate fall down, and got into the Blazer.

"Are you ready back there?"

"Ready, boss," O'Shaughnessy said, and checked the safety on his rifle.

"Me, too, Shannon," Wellman said, and rolled down his skimask to see if it was lined up properly.

"Good. Siobhan?"

"Stay away from me, you creep," she croaked, and looked out of the side window.

"I guess that means you're ready, too."

Shannon stepped on the gas, and they were soon rumbling across the grassy lot, heading for Buchanan Boulevard.

As they drove onto Twelfth Street, Siobhan briefly glanced at her brother, and realized that she was in the middle of a living nightmare.

"We're almost there, so stay sharp," Shannon said, and slowed down.

He turned off Buchanan and onto Second Street, and drove slowly past the Golden Goose Café. Just like everywhere else in the financial district in Midtown West, the wide sidewalk in front of the café was an anthill of people walking back and forth, wearing expensive business suits and carrying leather attaché cases, and most of them talking into a cell phone.

The café itself was typically well-lit up, even in the daytime, and judging by the number of people sitting near the windows, business was booming.

Shannon scanned the area, looking for any signs of potential trouble. Despite this being the very heart of Coluzzo's territory, everything seemed normal. He arrived at the conclusion that Coluzzo hadn't stepped up the security after the hit on Fast Freddie's money shipment, and that it was safe to go ahead.

"What the fuck? We're hitting a... a café?" Wellman said, and shook his head in disbelief.

"In name only, Wellman."

Behind them, a yellow cab started honking, so to avoid attracting attention, Shannon stepped on the gas, and drove down a narrow alley next to the café.

One hundred yards into the alley, he had room to make a three-point turn, and he turned the Blazer around, and drove very slowly back towards Second Street.

"We're going in through the backdoor, which is right there... can you see it?," he said, and pointed out of the window at a very discrete door, painted in metallic gray.

"Check," O'Shaughnessy said, and rolled down his skimask.

"I see it. No spyhole. It appears to be wooden, and not reinforced. They're not expecting anybody to come through there. Is it a speakeasy of some kind?" Wellman said.

"It's a casino, actually."

"Clever," Wellman said, and chuckled.

"Not clever enough. Drill... One!"

"One, I bust down the door, and spray whoever's guarding it," Wellman said.

"Two!"

"Two, we run in, pop-pop-pop-pop-pop, everyone dies..." O'Shaughnessy said.

"Dear God, no! There could be fifty people in there!" Siobhan said loudly, and turned around, so she could look at the two men on the backseat.

"Shut up, Siobhan. Three, you hold everyone at bay while I go for the main money depository, then the roulette tables, then the poker tables. Everything beyond that will be a bonus. Four!"

"Shannon, please, listen to me...!"

"Four!"

"Wait by the door, and k-k-keep a sharp l-l-lookout..."

"Very good, little sister."

"But you can't kill all those people!"

"Relax. The casino is separate from the café. Only the special guests are allowed to go into the back room. All the people out front are just regular coffee drinkers. They'll run like hell once the shooting begins," Shannon said, and appeared to be sincere for once.

Siobhan didn't know whether to trust her brother or not, but she nodded slowly, and rolled down her skimask.

"Sounds like we're good to go," Wellman said, and released the safety on his Springfield.

Shannon checked his wristwatch - 11:59, AM.

"In a minute's time," he grunted.

"Three... two... one... hustle!" Shannon said, and pushed Wellman on the shoulder.

The powerfully built African-American moved forward, and gave the door an almighty kick right on the lock... the door gave off an ear-splitting creak, but it didn't open.

"Fuck!" he roared, and kicked again, even harder.

The second attempt succeeded in breaking down the door, but as soon as it flew open, the men were met by a barrage of gunfire from the inside.

Siobhan screamed, and dropped her rifle. She threw herself onto the ground, and tried to protect her head with her hands.

Shannon, Wellman and O'Shaughnessy fanned out on either side of the door, and returned the fire. Soon, a heavy fog of gunsmoke filled the alley, and made it nearly impossible to see what was going on.

A long salvo from Wellman killed the last man guarding the door, and then he and O'Shaughnessy changed clips, and rushed inside.

Shannon grabbed hold of Siobhan's collar, and pulled her upright.

"Stop fuckin' screamin', and do like you've been told!" he roared, and then went into the casino.

With shaking hands, Siobhan picked up her rifle, and crouched down next to the corner of the building. Her heart was pounding in her throat, and she was sure she was on the verge of passing out.

While Wellman covered him, O'Shaughnessy fired off a long salvo above the heads of the people in the casino, who were already panicking after the shooting at the door.

"This is a fuckin' holdup! Reach for the fuckin' roof or die!" he roared, and waved his rifle around in a threatening fashion.

When Shannon came inside, he quickly counted sixteen people in the casino - eleven gamblers, two dealers, two security guards, and one cashier, who was cowering behind the solid steel bars

of the money depository at the opposite end of the room.

The small casino had two poker tables, two roulettes, and a Blackjack table, but only the poker tables were in use. All the gamblers were centered around them, and there were very large piles of money on both.

From the other side of the wall at the far end of the room, they could hear people screaming, and chairs and tables being moved, like predicted.

Suddenly one of the guards reached for his sidearm, but before he could draw it, O'Shaughnessy had cut him down.

"Anybody else wanna be a hero? I got enough lead to kill all of you!" he shouted.

"Get 'em away from the tables!" Shannon shouted, and ran towards the money depository.

O'Shaughnessy and Wellman started herding the gamblers away from the poker tables, using the barrels of the rifles as cattle prods on those who were slow away.

Shannon waved the rifle at the cashier, but the woman was too frightened to understand him.

"Open it! Open it, or I'll shoot ya in the throat," Shannon shouted, and aimed the rifle at her.

"It won't kill ya, but it'll make you wish you were! Hurry!"

She found the key, and managed to get the bars opened after several fumbled attempts. Shannon quickly went inside, and immediately sent a salvo into the cashier's body at point blank range. She collapsed with a scream, but was soon silent.

The people behind him shouted angrily, but Wellman shot a few rounds into the ceiling that convinced them to shut up.

Shannon pulled out six boxes, and opened the lids to check the contents. The first two boxes contained \$10's and \$20's, and he pushed them down the counter. The last four boxes held \$100's, and he nodded to himself.

With one hand, he unzipped the boiler suit, and pulled out a large canvas bag he had wrapped around his body. He put the four boxes containing the \$100's into the bag, and looked around for more, similar boxes.

Outside, Siobhan fought a losing battle against a wave of panic that threatened to drown her. Her breath came in explosive bursts, and her hands were shaking so much she couldn't hold the rifle straight.

Suddenly a man came running around the corner of Second Street and the alley. He was brandishing a revolver, and shouted something to her that she couldn't understand.

"Shannon! Shannon! We've got trouble!" she shouted to the men inside the casino, but soon realized that her brother couldn't hear her.

"Stop! Or I'll s-s-s-shoot!" she said, and aimed the rifle at the man running towards her.

The man opened fire on her, and a brick just above her head was hit, sending a shower of old dirt down on her.

She screamed, and closed her eyes. She yanked the trigger on the Springfield repeatedly, and the recoil almost tore the weapon from her hands.

She heard something hit the ground hard, and she stopped firing. She opened her eyes, and stared wide-eyed at the fallen man. She had hit him in both legs, and he was writhing about on the filthy asphalt, moaning in agony, and holding his injured limbs.

Siobhan let go of the rifle like it was on fire, and wrapped her arms around herself. She fell onto her knees, and started rocking back and forth, sobbing quietly.

Shannon couldn't find any more boxes, so he left the money depository, and went straight for the poker tables - scooping up the dollar bills, he dumped them into the canvas bag, and looked around one final time.

There wasn't enough time to pick the gamblers clean, so instead, he reached into one of his pockets, and took out the FLC-note he had prepared earlier. He placed it in the center of the poker table, and started walking backwards, still aiming the rifle at the gamblers.

"Clear!" he shouted, and ran out of the casino. Wellman followed him, leaving O'Shaughnessy to guard the rear.

"Everybody on the floor! Now!" he said, and waved the Springfield. When a few were slow to comply, he fired off a long salvo above their heads to make sure everybody understood.

He started walking backwards, and then turned around, and ran from the casino.

Shannon picked up Siobhan by the scruff of her neck, and dragged her to the Blazer. He opened the passenger door, and pushed her in. Then he ran around to the back of the car, and threw the canvas bag inside.

He got in, started the engine, and waited for Wellman and O'Shaughnessy to catch up. As soon

as they were inside the car, Shannon hit the gas, and the heavy SUV lurched forward.

"Watch out!" Siobhan said, and pointed at the man she had shot. He was still lying in the middle of the alley, holding his legs.

"Too fuckin' bad!" Shannon shouted, and didn't turn the steering wheel an inch. Siobhan screamed, and covered her face with her hands, but at the last possible moment, the wounded man rolled away, and escaped from being run over.

The Blazer barreled through the alley, heading for Second Street. The sidewalk had cleared out in the mass panic, so there was no one there to hinder their progress. The car bounced over the curb, and Shannon forced it to turn right.

He kept his foot flat on the throttle, and the Blazer was soon out of sight.

"You cost us a lot of time, Wellman," Shannon said, as they were driving back to the derelict building.

"I'm sorry, Shannon. The door was more solid than it looked."

"Don't be sorry, just improve."

"I will."

"Siobhan, what happened in the alley?"

"I shot a man... he came running towards me with a revolver, and... I shot him," Siobhan said hoarsely.

"You did well. I'm proud of you," Shannon said, and put his gloved hand on his sister's shoulder - she shook her head in disgust, and looked out of the side window.

"You proved you had the guts to pull the trigger. It was his life or yours. You chose yours. There's hope for you yet," Shannon said, and grinned.

"How much do you think we got, boss?"

"Hard to say, Dillon. I think we got plenty."

"How long do you think we have before Coluzzo sends his soldiers out to chase us down?" Wellman said as he took off his skimask.

"They're probably out there already. But we'll be fine, don't worry 'bout that. We're almost home."

As they were waiting at a red light at the corner of Buchanan and Twelfth Street, four black Cadillacs, two sedans and two Escalades, thundered across the intersection going in the opposite direction. All four cars ran the red light, and a disharmonic concert broke out behind them, caused by a large number of cars honking their horns all at once.

"Coluzzo's boys," Dillon said, and flipped the bird at the cars.

"No doubt."

A further black Cadillac sedan that had fallen back from the others decided against running the red, and stopped at the intersection. The driver took a great deal of interest in the charcoal gray Blazer, and Shannon furrowed his brow.

"Dillon, Wellman, take off your masks if you haven't already done so."

"Problems?"

"Potentially."

O'Shaughnessy released the safety on the Springfield, and took a few deep breaths to calm down.

"Siobhan, look straight ahead, and smile. They're looking for four guys, not a woman and three men," Shannon said.

The lights turned to green, and Shannon drove out into the intersection. He turned left, and passed right in front of the Cadillac.

The driver of the Cadillac followed the Blazer with his eyes, but didn't seem to take further action.

Shannon kept driving down Twelfth Street, constantly checking the rear view mirror. He could see that once the Cadillac got the green light, it didn't follow them, but rather continued across the intersection.

"We're clear," he said, and increased the speed to get home faster. He checked his wristwatch again - it read 12:11, PM.

._*._*._*

Chaos reigned supreme at the Golden Goose. Coluzzo's soldiers arrived from all directions at once, adding to the panic that was already threatening to turn into mass hysteria. Several men with broad shoulders, sunglasses, and identical black suits tried their utmost to keep the nosy spectators back, but one or two got through the ranks to get a better view.

Pietro Cazale was among the last to arrive, and he had difficulty finding a place to park - he finally found a vacant spot, and stepped out of his black Cadillac.

He took his camel hair overcoat off, folded it neatly, and placed it carefully on the back seat. He adjusted his trademark crimson tie, and made sure his white shirt and his navy blue suit were on straight.

"God almighty..." he said, as he surveyed the damaged cafe. The shooting in the back room had caused everyone in the café to try to escape all at once, and there wasn't a chair or table left in good condition in the entire room. Both the large windows on either side of the entrance had been broken in the confusion, and the glass door was hanging off the top hinge.

He put his sunglasses in his pocket, and sighed deeply.

"Alessandro, where are you?" he shouted as he walked across the floor. He tried to avoid the worst of the carnage, but the shards of glass still crunched under his expensive leather shoes.

"I'm here, Silencer," his assistant said, and came out from behind the counter. Alessandro Bello was 26, with heavily gelled foppish hair, and a platinum chain around his neck, visible through the open collar of his pale turquoise shirt. He had a nickle-plated .38 revolver in a holster clipped onto the belt of his black trousers, and he used the same brand of shoes as his superior - to impress him.

"What in God's name happened here...?"

"Well, it's like this... when the clock struck noon, three men broke down the back door, and raided the casino. They killed three guards, and the cashier. They swiped more than 200 grand."

Cazale bared his teeth in a pained grimace, and groaned.

"What about the gamblers in the casino?"

"They've all left. I doubt many of them would be interested in talking to the Police."

"You're probably right."

"The Don is on his way," Alessandro said quietly.

"I'm sure he is," Cazale said, and moved further into the cafe. He picked up the remains of a broken chair, and looked at it. Rolling his eyes, he let it go, and it fell to the floor to join the rest of the trash.

"Franco was here by accident, and he heard the shots. He tried to confront the robbers, but they gunned him down out in the alley. They shot him in both legs," Alessandro said.

"Hmmm. I'll talk to him later. Perhaps he can give us some info."

"I've already spoken to him - he's absolutely one hundred percent positive that the robber who shot him was a woman, and he also says that the robbers were driving a charcoal gray Chevrolet Blaz..."

"A charcoal gray Blazer! Goddammit! I had them!" Cazale said, and slammed one fist into the palm of the other.

"I'm sorry...?"

"Down at Twelfth Street. I was as close to them as we are now. Alessandro, listen to me... Don Coluzzo must not hear a single word of this conversation. You understand? Not one word."

"I... I understand, Silencer... I think."

"I'll deal with it myself. Hmmm," Cazale said, and furrowed his brow, deep in thought.

A large group of police and press vehicles arrived, and the café was instantly transformed into a beehive - scores of people, either in uniform, or carrying cameras or other electronic equipment, started running back and forth seemingly without any semblance of a plan. The uncoordinated nonsense soon became too much for Cazale, and he and Bello left the ravaged cafe.

The Don's Super-stretch limousine didn't have problems finding a place to park - it simply stopped in the inside lane of the street.

"Don Coluzzo," Cazale said, and held the door open for the crime lord.

Salvatore Coluzzo climbed out of the limo, and took a deep breath when he saw the destruction. He ran a hand through his silver-gray hair, and his eyes shot fire.

"Look at what those bastards did to my café! Buncha fuckin' rotten turds!"

"Yes, Don Coluzzo. It's a terrible shame."

"How much?"

"More than \$200,000 is missing, Don Coluzzo."

"Recover them."

"Yes, Don Coluzzo."

"What do we know of the men who did this?"

"... not much. Actually very little. But there's no doubt it's the same crew who hit Fast Freddie Donnelly yesterday."

"Cocky sons o' bitches."

"Yes, Don Coluzzo."

"Nobody raids this place... *this place*... and gets away with it. Cazale, I'm giving you carte blanche. Do whatever's necessary to capture these assholes."

"Yes, Don Coluzzo."

The Don turned his head, and looked directly into Cazale's eyes.

"And when you have them, I want you to cut off their balls and let them bleed to death," he said, in a voice as cold as ice.

"Yes, Don Coluzzo. Consider it done."

Salvatore Coluzzo took a deep breath, and wiped some sweat off his brow.

"And one more thing, Cazale. Call Freddie Donnelly. Tell him that... that I want to talk to him again."

"Yes, Don Coluzzo. I'll do it at once."

**_*_

The smell of coffee filled the apartment, and Maeve stirred. She yawned and stretched on the unfamiliar bed, and she briefly wondered where she was. She rolled over onto her back, and put her hands behind her head.

"Mornin', Maeve. Sleep well?" Staci said quietly, standing in the doorway to the bedroom, holding two steaming mugs of coffee.

"I certainly have. Hey, baby," Maeve purred, and rubbed her eyes.

"That's good to hear, and hey, yourself."

"What time is it?"

"Nearly one o'clock."

"D'ya know what I dreamt of?" Maeve said, and wiggled around on the bed.

"Nope. But I'm sure you'll tell me."

"It was about you and me. It took place on a tropical island somewhere, and we were skinny dipping in the warm lagoon. After that, we let the sun dry our naked bodies while we were making love on a white beach..."

"Now why am I not surprised, huh?" Staci said, and chuckled. She placed both mugs on the nightstand, and sat down on the side of the bed. Chuckling again, she started running her fingers up and down Maeve's bare thigh.

"Do you ever dream of me?" Maeve said huskily.

"Sure I do. But never that detailed."

"It doesn't have to be detailed to be hot."

"Perv."

Maeve suddenly grabbed hold of Staci's arm. With a cheeky grin, she pulled Staci down next to her, and began to kiss her soundly.

"Mmmfmm... ohhhh... what... mmfmhmm... about the coffee, Maeve...?"

"What about it," Maeve said, and let her tongue dance around on Staci's neck.

A good forty minutes later, Maeve swung her legs over the edge of the bed. A sudden stab of pain shot up from her lower back, and she pressed her hand hard against it, and growled under her breath.

"Oh, that's right, we never got around to give you that massage," Staci said, getting back into her jammies.

"We'll do that the next time," Maeve said.

"Uh-huh?"

"Ohhh yeahhh," Maeve said, and claimed Staci's lips in a thorough good morning kiss.

After a quick shower, Maeve put on her clothes, her bulletproof vest, and her shoulderholster. She checked the clip in the Beretta, and clicked it into place.

"I'd go nuts if I had to carry that heavy thing under my arm all day," Staci said.

"Well, it's not so bad once you get used to it."

"It's my turn to shower. You didn't steal all the hot water, didya?"

"Dunno. I asked you if you wanted to share, but..." Maeve said with a grin.

"You did, but I'm not insatiable like certain other people. Maybe some other time. See ya in a few," Staci said, and went into the bathroom.

Maeve found her cell phone, and turned it on. As she waited for it to power up, she turned on the TV.

'... Back to the day's top story. At noon sharp, four men executed an armed robbery against the Golden Goose Café on Second Street. In a press conference, the spokeswoman for the police has confirmed that four people, three men and a woman, all employees in the cafe, were killed in the holdup...'

"The Golden Goose! Holy fuck!" Maeve exclaimed loudly.

'... and that a further man was found wounded in the alley next to the café. We have a reporter on site, and Linda Taylor, what's the latest?' the anchor said, and turned to another camera.

The picture changed to a very pretty blonde reporter, who was holding a microphone, and pressing her hand against an ear-piece. She was standing in an alley in front of a door that had been forced open, and all around her, a small army of police officers swarmed in and out of the café.

In the background, a handful of beefy men, wearing identical black suits and dark sunglasses, talked very agitated amongst themselves, and Maeve had to chuckle at the sight.

'Thank you, Richard. Well, at this point in time, it's unclear how much the robbers were able to get away with. The figure the owner of the café has given to the police and the press is a surprisingly low \$3000, but we have unconfirmed, and I stress unconfirmed, rumors claiming the figure could have been as high as \$250,000...'

Maeve whistled, and rubbed her forehead. Suddenly her phone rang, and she almost dropped it in surprise.

"Fever. Talk to me."

'It's Fast Freddie. Where the hell have you been? The Clover gang has hit Don Coluzzo. I need you back at the headquarters ASAP. And that means NOW!'

"I'm at Staci's... we... ummm... were busy. I'll be there shortly," Maeve said, and hung up.

"Baby! Something's come up, and I gotta go!" she shouted, and sat down on a chair to put her boots on.

Staci opened the bathroom door, and peeked out. She turned off the shower, wrapped a towel around her, and came into the living room.

"But we haven't even had breakfast yet... What's going on?" she said, and looked at the images on the TV.

"Trouble. The Clover gang's struck again. Against Coluzzo," Maeve said, as she finished tying her bootlaces.

"Oh..."

"They raided the Golden Goose. Oh, boy, the Don's gonna be so pissed."

"Hmmm... I remember that café... there's nothing special about it."

"The Golden Goose Café is a front for a casino, but it's more than that... it's where Salvatore Coluzzo started his empire. He inherited that café from his father, and built everything around it."

"Man, that's like kicking him right where it hurts the most..." Staci said.

"Yeah. And they killed four more people. Jesus, they're ruthless."

"Baby, remember what I said... please, please be careful," Staci said, and pulled Maeve up from the chair.

Maeve stood up on tip-toes, and planted a fast kiss on Staci's lips.

"I will. You don't have to worry about me," Maeve said, and swatted Staci's butt. Staci squealed, and tried to reach Maeve, but the Enforcer was already past her and out of the door, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

A few moments later, Staci stood in the window and waved to Maeve, who drove out of the parking lot with an impossibly loud roar, and turned left onto First Street. Staci listened to the sound of the Mustang's characteristic exhausts going further and further away, until it finally faded out. She sighed, and adjusted the towel.

On her way back to the shower, her own phone rang, and she debated if she should take it, or let the answering machine do its business.

'This is Danielle, Staci. Are you there? ... I guess not... I'll call later,' the voice said, but Staci

reached it just in time.

"Hello, Danielle! I'm here, I was just... never mind. What's up?"

'Have you seen the news?'

"Yeah, I'm watching Channel 7 right now. Doesn't look good, does it?"

'No. I've just had two of the dancers call me and tell me they won't come in until those creeps have been caught.'

"What? But... If we don't have any dancers, we can't... shit!"

'I think I can persuade them to come in if you give me a good reason, Staci... because, I have to admit, I'm a bit scared myself. The Three-In-One Club is well-known as the largest on Jefferson, and they might think we have lots of money floating around, or something...'

"Oh, man. I see your point, but... tell them White Fever's on the case. Do you think that'll be enough to sway them?"

'I don't know. I'll tell them, and then we'll have to wait and see how they decide.'

Staci sighed, and scratched her damp hair.

"All right. Thank you for calling, Danielle. Bye."

'Bye, Staci.'

Staci put down the receiver, and groaned.

**_*_

Jimmy Snakes sat on a barstool in a smoky bar on Ninth, sipping a very small, very stale beer, when someone shouted to the barkeep that he should turn up the volume on the TV that was droning on in the background.

The TV cut to a pretty, blonde reporter, who was standing in front of a broken door in an alley somewhere.

Some of the barflies hollered and made lewd comments at her, making it impossible to hear what was said.

"Shaddup, I wanna hear it!" the same man shouted, and the patrons fell quiet.

'... Richard. Well, at this point in time, it's unclear how much the robbers were able to get away with. The figure the owner of the café has given to the police and the press is a surprisingly low

\$3000, but we have unconfirmed, and I stress unconfirmed, rumors claiming the figure could have been as high as \$250,000. We have been told that the robbers have left a note inside with the words 'FLC - Four Leaf Clover.' If this is the case, it's most likely the same people responsible for the shooting on Second Street the other day. Back to the studio.'

Snakes' eyes popped wide open when the reporter mentioned the Clover gang. His mind started working overtime, going back and forth on whether or not he should contact the Don with the info he had.

'Man, the last time I dealt with the Coluzzos, the motherfucker sent someone after me who tried to kill me... no, it's a much safer bet to find White Fever. She's not my best friend, but at least she's not lookin' to blow my brains out... this time,' he thought, and emptied the glass of beer.

'And the 10 G reward... watch out, man! With 10 G, I can buy the world!'

"Yeah, man!" he said out loud, drawing a lot of odd looks, and a few sniggers from the barflies next to him.

"Got somethin' cookin', Snakes?" the barkeep said.

"Naw, man. I'm cool, just sittin' here mindin' my own business."

"I get the picture," the barkeep said, and continued polishing the counter.

Snakes reached into his pocket, and took out his Happy Pills. With some shock, he realized that he only had three pills left. He debated for a little while if he should only take one, or two, or all three, and after a few minutes, he decided on taking all three.

'After all, man... with 10 G, I can buy the entire drugstore,' he thought, and laughed out loud.

The barkeep looked at him, shook his head, and mumbled a few cusswords under his breath.

Snakes poured all three pills into his hand, and then swallowed them in one gulp. After a few minutes, the pills began to work, and he found himself engulfed in a kaleidoscope of psychedelic colors.

"Hey, man... Once I get the reward, I'm gonna come back an' buy you out," he said to the barkeep.

"I'm not the owner. And which reward?"

"Fever's reward for catching the Clover gang, man. Don't you watch TV?"

"Never heard of such a reward, Snakes. You're trippin'."

"No man, there's a reward. Fever told me herself, man... I think. No, I'm sure I heard her say it."

"WHATever, Snakes," the barkeep said, and rolled his eyes.

After a few minutes, Snakes got off the barstool, and leaned against the counter, trying to control his wobbly legs.

"All I gotta do now is find her. That shouldn't be so hard. Maybe I should send her a telepathic message," he said out loud, earning himself a few more sniggers.

Snakes didn't understand what it was the others were laughing about, so he laughed along with them as he left the establishment.

._*._*._*

"Danny! What the flying fuck are you doing out of hospital so soon?" Maeve exclaimed the second she saw the former wrestler's huge frame standing in the door to the Donnelly mansion.

"I hated that place. So I excused myself, and went back to work," Danny said, still wearing the turban-like bandage.

"I mean, Jeez, man! You were shot in the head only yesterday!"

"Like I told you last night when you came to visit me, they couldn't find anything wrong, so here I am."

"That's what I call dedication, buddy," Maeve said, and slapped Danny across his stomach.

"You call it dedication... I call it terminal boredom. Anyway... Mr. Donnelly is on the phone, but he told me to send you in as soon as you got here."

"All right. By the way, when you see Mary, will you please have her make me a few bagels with cheese, or something? I didn't get any breakfast this morning."

"Will do, Fever."

"Maeve, come in. You're just in time," Freddie Donnelly said, and waved her inside. He was holding an old-fashioned telephone receiver in his hand, and there was a notepad with a few scribbles on it in front of him.

"For what, uncle Freddie?"

"For history in the making."

"Pardon?"

"Patience, young one," Freddie said, and leaned back in his leather armchair, still holding the receiver.

Maeve shrugged, and sat down.

"So, they hit the Goose, huh?" she said.

"Yeah. Don Coluzzo is spit-flying mad right now," Freddie said, and chuckled, making his entire body shake.

"They've got some balls, I'll give 'em that. They killed four more people."

"I heard."

"Who's on the phone?"

"I'm on hold right now, but it was Pietro Cazale just before you got here."

"Boy, this deal just gets crazier and crazier," Maeve said, and laughed out loud.

"I agree."

Suddenly there was a knock on the side door to the office.

"Enter!" Freddie said.

Mary Reynolds opened the door, and entered the office, pulling a small cart with various breakfast foods, including two small jugs of milk and orange juice.

Maeve shot up from her chair, and helped Mary pull the cart across the lumpy carpet.

"Oh, great... thanks, Mary," Maeve said, and smiled at the other woman.

"Hello, Fever... I'm sorry... Maeve."

"That's better," Maeve said, and poked Mary on the arm.

"I can't thank you enough for giving me this job. I mean, look at me," Mary said quietly, and posed in her brand new uniform - black shoes, long black socks, a black skirt and an off-white, short-sleeved shirt.

"I haven't looked so good since my Confirmation," she said, beaming.

"You look fantastic, Mary. How's Josey?"

"Great. She's..."

"Hello, Don Coluzzo?" Freddie said, and waved Maeve over to him. He clicked on a button on the telephone, and the Don's slightly accented voice filled the room.

'Mr. Donnelly,' Salvatore Coluzzo said.

"Don Coluzzo, you're on a speaker phone."

'All right.'

"I better join them," Maeve said, and quickly scooped up three bagels, and poured herself a glass of orange juice.

"It's so exciting!" Mary whispered, and clapped her hands together. She left the office, but tried to listen to as much as she could before the door closed.

"I have my number two, White Fever, with me. She'll take care of the details on our side," Freddie said.

'Excellent. Her reputation precedes her. Cazale is listening in, too.'

"First of all, please accept my condolences for the people you lost in the holdup."

'Thank you, Mr. Donnelly. Likewise, for the other day.'

"Thank you. Let's get down to business, shall we. I understand you're proposing that we hold a summit."

Maeve's eyes popped open, and she quickly sat down so she wouldn't miss anything.

'Indeed I do. I'm sure we both agree that we must work together to stop this gang from raiding our assets.'

"Yes. Name the time, and the place, and I'll have Fever go to work at once."

*'11 PM in two days' time. I'll leave finding a suitable place to you. My only demand is that it *must* be on neutral ground.'*

"I understand, Don Coluzzo."

"Hmmm..." Maeve said, and scrunched up her face. Absentmindedly, she began to chew on a bagel as she tried to work out where the best place would be - the demand for neutral ground ruled out both sides of the Monroe, and she doubted that Coluzzo would agree to holding the summit south of Fourteenth Street. The Southside Chicas ruled down there, and they were an unpredictable bunch.

Suddenly a thought flashed through her mind, and she quickly swallowed the mouthful of bagel she was chewing on.

"Don Coluzzo, it's Fever speaking. How about holding the summit at the halfway point of the bridge at Ninth Street? The Monroe marks the boundary between our territories, and there's plenty of room on the bridge for the limousines and the support vehicles."

'Hmmm... that's not a bad idea, Miss Fever. Cazale? ... All right, Cazale agrees. I think we have a deal, Mr. Donnelly. The bridge at Ninth Street, in two days' time, at 11 PM,' Salvatore Coluzzo said.

"We have a deal, Don Coluzzo," Freddie said, and hung up.

"Oh-boy-oh-boy-oh-boy, there's gonna be a summit between the Donnellys and the Coluzzos," Maeve said, and buried her head in her hands.

"For the first time in at least twenty years," Freddie said, and folded his hands across his large belly.

"I'll bet that Danny's gonna wish he'd stayed at the hospital..." Maeve said, and groaned in anticipation of the mountain of work she would be facing.

Concluded in Part 2

Norsebard's Scrolls Index Page

~ White Fever II - Dames, Dollars and Death ~ by Norsebard

Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

DISCLAIMERS:

See part 1.

SPECIAL WARNING for graphic violence

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

something else to read than this story.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Written November 2009 - January 2010

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CHAPTER 5

Danielle burst into Staci's office at the Three-In-One Club without even bothering to knock. Staci was reading the small print on a few documents, and she nearly dropped the entire stack of papers.

"Staci, we need you outside. Quick!"

"Wha...?"

"There's some dude who's had a little too much to drink. He demands to have Larraine dance for him."

"Oh... but..."

"Well, come out and intimidate him!" Danielle said, and put her hands on her hips.

"I couldn't intimidate a lamb!"

"Then improvise."

"Oh, you're tough, you know that? You must be related to Maeve somehow," Staci said, and got up from the swivel chair. She sighed, and tried to act cool.

"How do I look?"

"Hmmm... well... not particularly intimidating."

"Told ya so," Staci said. She walked past Danielle and out into the club.

It didn't take her two seconds to notice the man creating a scene. He was in his late 40's, with an unruly mop of curly hair, and wearing black trousers and an impossibly loud red and blue Hawaiian shirt. The top four buttons were undone, so his graying chest hair stuck out in an obnoxious fashion, and he had a gold chain of vulgar proportions around his neck.

The music was playing at near-maximum volume, and all four poles were occupied by dancers doing their stuff. As she was walking towards the man, Staci saw Candy, the recently hired dancer, being a little too friendly to a customer sitting on the bar stools lining the catwalk, and she made a mental note to tell her off later.

"What seems to be the problem, Sir?" Staci said, and tried to act as cool as she possibly could.

"Where the hell is Lorraine?"

"She's taken a few days off."

"Look here, lady, I've paid fifty of my hard-earned bucks just to get in here, and now you're tellin' me my favorite girl ain't even here?"

"That's right, sir."

"I wanna fuckin' complain! It's not right!"

"Your complaint is noted. You have several other dancers to look at. Come on, have a drink on the hou..."

"The others are nothin' but a buncha' skanks. I want my favorite girl, goddammit! Lorraine's the only one with decent jugs in this place!"

The corner of Staci's mouth twitched, and her eyes narrowed to blue slits. Her face darkened, and she bared her teeth in a sneer. She started creeping closer to the loud man, and her voice took on a dangerous undertone.

"I won't accept that kind of language in here, buster," she growled.

"But.. I'm... I..."

"It's time for you to leave," Staci said, standing toe to toe with him, towering over him by at least three inches.

"I... OK," the man said, and made a hasty retreat.

Danielle's jaw was hanging halfway down her chest, and she stared wide-eyed at her boss. She didn't know who it was Staci had morphed into, but she almost expected her to sprout fangs and fly off.

"Holy smokes, Staci... where did *that* come from?" she whispered.

Staci took a deep breath, and slowly returned to normal.

"I don't know... but when someone like that start callin' people names, I get... pissed off."

"I'll say! Man!"

"Danielle, please tell the bouncers that the dickhead in the Hawaiian shirt has earned himself a lifetime ban."

"With pleasure."

"If there's anything else, I'll be in my office." Staci suddenly noticed that every single person in the club was looking at her, and her face instantly colored crimson red - her eyes were glued to the carpet all the way back to the office.

She closed the door behind her, and leaned against it. She felt dizzy, but at the same time, she felt incredibly good.

She went over to the bar, and poured herself a healthy Bourbon. She added a few ice cubes, picked up a napkin, and went over to her chair to calm down.

At that exact moment, the phone rang, and she rolled her eyes. She put down the napkin and the glass on the mahogany desktop, and picked up the phone.

"Three-In..." she started to say, but her voice broke, and she had to clear her throat.

"... pardon me. Three-In-One Club, Staci Hart speaking."

'Hey, baby, it's me. You sound funny?'

"It's a long story. What's up?"

'Nothing really... I was wondering if you wanted to... you know, come for a spin up and down Jefferson?'

"Well, it does sound tempting, actually. When?"

'Twenty minutes?'

"Can we make it thirty? I have to lay down the law to one of the dancers first."

'Sure. Problems?'

"Not really. She's just a bit too friendly with the customers."

'Oh-ho, he he he. It's not Brandi, is it?'

"No. Brandi doesn't work here anymore. I thought you knew that?"

Staci sloshed the Bourbon around in the glass to get the ice cubes to melt, and then took a sip.

'I didn't. Any particular reason why?'

"Not sure, but I guess she didn't like working for her ex's new squeeze."

'Oh. I hope she didn't give you any grief?'

"Nah. She just didn't show up one day, and she called in and said she was quitting."

'Hmmm. But anyway, thirty minutes?'

"That's a deal. Love you," Staci said, and blew Maeve a kiss over the phone.

'Love you too. See ya then.'

Half an hour later, Danielle knocked on the door to the office, and peeked in.

"Hey Staci, your Princess Charming is here for you," she said, and winked.

"Thanks, Danielle. I'm taking the night off," Staci said, and put some papers into the filing cabinet. She locked it, and put the key in her pocket.

"I'll hold the fort. If there's any more trouble, I'll call the bouncers. Have fun tonight."

"Thanks."

Maeve was sitting on one of the barstools next to the catwalk, moving to the beat, and looking up at the dancers with a wide grin on her face.

One of the dancers spotted Maeve, and waved at her. When Maeve waved back, the dancer came over to her, and started doing a rather provocative routine. Maeve reached into her shirt pocket, and pulled out a \$50 note that she put into the elastic band of the dancer's garter.

Staci walked up to stand behind Maeve, and crossed her hands over her chest. She sent a steely glare in the dancer's direction - and the dancer quickly moved down the line.

"Was that really worth fifty bucks?" Staci said into Maeve's ear, and slid her hands up the outside of Maeve's thighs.

"They have to earn a living too, ya know," Maeve said, and chuckled.

"Believe me, they earn plenty, and... I know you too well, Birddawg."

Maeve swiveled around on the bar stool, and gave Staci a genuine smile.

"But I was just lookin', darlin'. My, aren't you gettin' possessive."

"Mmmm...?"

Suddenly Maeve noticed how good Staci looked, and she let her eyes climb slowly up the long, statuesque body.

"You know, Staci, I have to admit... you look great when you're wearin' jeans and a shirt... but you look damn near sensational in that business outfit."

Staci looked down at herself to see what Maeve meant - she was wearing gun metal gray flared slacks, a black turtleneck, and a jacket in a slightly paler gray.

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. It makes you look like a billion Dollars."

"Don't be silly," Staci said, and blushed.

"I'm deadly serious, baby," Maeve said with a cheeky grin.

Staci saw that the dancer was watching them, so she leaned down, and put her hand behind Maeve's head - and planted a firm kiss right on the Enforcer's lips.

"You're damn right I'm possessive. You're mine. Let's go," Staci said as they separated.

"Yes, dear."

"Where are we going?" Staci asked, as she put on her seatbelt.

"Here and there, and we're gonna do this an' that."

"... are we on a date?"

"We sure is, Mizz Hart," Maeve said, and looked over her shoulder. She waited for a few cars to pass, and then she hit the gas, and left the curb in a cloud of dust.

"Ohhhh yeah, ain't this just the greatest? It's been far too long since you and me last cruised Jefferson," Maeve said, and picked up Staci's hand. She started playing with the long digits, tickling and squeezing them, and running her thumb across Staci's knuckles.

"I thought you were busy as hell?"

"Well, I am, and that's why I needed your company, hon. Arranging the summit is drivin' me nuts. I've spent most of yesterday and all of today sitting in an office with a phone to my ear, and... yuck. Just yuck. And on top of that, I haven't seen you for a day and a half, and that's a flippin' crime, baby."

"Ohh, poor you."

"Wanna hear some music?"

"Sure."

Maeve turned on the radio, and they just caught the last ten seconds of Little Richard's Long Tall Sally - and then it faded into a commercial.

"Typical," Maeve said, and laughed.

They slowed down for a red light at Thirteenth Street, and in front of them, two Corvettes, one yellow and one dark blue, were making overtures to a drag race.

"What is it about you rock'n'rollers and cars, huh? I can't quite work it out," Staci said, and turned in her seat so she could look at Maeve.

"Oh, that's easy to explain," Maeve said, and blipped the throttle a few times. The engine roared, and the exhausts popped and banged. Several of the people on the sidewalk gawked and pointed fingers at them, and there was even one woman taking a picture of the midnight black Mustang.

"That sound is our heartbeat," she said with a smile.

The lights changed to green, and the two Corvettes left the intersection in two clouds of tiresmoke. The yellow one had the dark blue one beat, but not by much. Maeve drove away from the intersection at a more sedate pace.

'... and we're back. I'm Ricky Dean, and you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. The 10 o'clock news is next, but we just have time to squeeze in the immortal Only You, as sung by the original Platters. Enjoy.'

"Hey, Staci, I do believe that's our song they're playin'!"

"We don't have a 'song', Maeve."

"Sure we do... come on, sing along."

"Oh, gawd, no..."

"Come on, there's no one else here but us..."

"I. Don't. Sing. You know that!"

"You should, you have a wonderful singing voice."

"Oh, no..."

Maeve grinned, and turned up the volume. The song came blasting out of all six speakers, and Maeve sang along at the top of her lungs.

"Oooooon-ly youuuuuuuuu... can a-maaaaaaake this wo-horrrrrld seem riight..."

Staci buried her head in her hands, and groaned pitifully.

Fifteen minutes later, the ringing in Staci's ears had receded somewhat, but she could still hear a faint echo of Maeve's singing.

As they cruised past the Majestic, Maeve spotted Dolores' characteristic figure exiting the hotel. The classy African-American woman was wearing high heels and a skimpy silver dress, and she was attracting attention left and right.

Maeve honked twice, and pulled over at the curb. Dolores looked over her shoulder, and turned around when she saw who it was.

"Hiya, Dolores," Maeve said, and stuck her hand out of the window.

"Hey, Fever. Staci," Dolores said, and shook Maeve's hand. She crouched down next to the driver's door, and winked seductively at Maeve.

"Hi, Dolores," Staci said.

"Whassup, D ?"

"Oh, nothin'. By the way, I still haven't heard anything about the attackers. They're like ghosts."

"I don't have anything, either. Any problems on the streets?"

"Naw, we're cool. Last night, we had a john who refused to pay, but we ganged up on him, and

convinced him that he should."

"Good. Be careful, OK? You never know who you're dealing with."

"Oh, sure. He looked like an accountant. There wasn't any danger."

"All right. See ya 'round, Dolores," Maeve said, and put the Mustang in gear.

"See ya, honey," Dolores said, and stepped back from the car. As she sashayed back to the sidewalk, she turned around and blew Maeve a kiss, before disappearing into the crowd of people.

Maeve hastily looked at Staci, whose eyebrows were at her hairline.

"Ha ha... don't mind Dolores, she's... you know... that's what she does... it's just an act."

"Uh-huh?"

"And she's straight."

"So was I, once."

"Well, I didn't have anything to do with that. I'm yours, baby. Body and soul. You know that," Maeve said, and hit the gas.

"Uh-huh. I know," Staci said, and leaned over to kiss Maeve on the cheek.

**_*_

When Maeve slowed to a halt at a red light at Ninth Street, the neon sign on the Burger Palace building caught her eye. As the sign cycled through the company colors, Maeve could almost taste the fries, and her stomach began to growl like a grizzly.

"Hey, Staci... are ya hungry? Please say yes!"

"I guess I could eat a bite or two. I definitely need to stretch my legs," Staci said, and shuffled around in the seat, trying to find a cool spot.

"Sounds good. Let's eat."

Staci opened the door to the Burger Palace, and held it open for Maeve.

"Why, thank you, dear," Maeve said, and pinched Staci's bum as she walked past her.

"Rascal," Staci grumbled.

"That's me all right. What's your fancy?"

"Something low on salt, low on sugar, low on carbs..."

"Low on taste, low on..."

"Mock me all you want, but you saw the roll of fat. I don't want to end up like the Goodyear Blimp."

"No chance of that, Staci... none what-so-ever," Maeve said, as they arrived at the counter.

"Don't bet on it. The Fat gene runs in my family," Staci grumbled.

"Good evening. What'll it be?" the young man behind the counter said.

"I'll have a Double Cheesy Deluxe, hold the onions, a medium fries, and a large Coke, please," Maeve said, and took out her wallet.

"I'll have a... a... small salad. Hold the mayo," Staci said, and sighed.

"We only have a standard size portion, Miss. However, you have a choice of eight delicious salads - Cajun, Greek, Danish, Prawn, Tuna, Chicken, and Ham and Cheese."

Staci sighed, and looked lost.

"A... Greek salad, please."

"Would you like something to drink?" the young man asked, as he punched the order into the cash register.

"A mineral water."

"One moment, please," the young man said, and went over to the softdrink machine. He poured their drinks of choice into two polystyrene cups, and carried them back to the counter.

"That'll be \$28."

"Here ya go. Keep the change," Maeve said, and handed the young man \$40.

"Thank you, Fever. It'll be a few minutes. Have a seat, we'll bring the food down."

"Thanks. Come on, Miss Salad," Maeve said, and picked up their two drinks.

Five minutes later, the young man carried a tray down to where Maeve and Staci were sitting, and distributed the various boxes of food.

"Smells great. Thanks," Maeve said.

"Anytime, Fever."

Maeve unwrapped her Double Cheesy Deluxe, and immediately went to work on it, but Staci just sat there and gawked at the salad.

"Somethin' wrong with ya salad, hon?"

"I... didn't think it'd be so... well... big. I expected it to be smaller," she said, and picked up her fork. She rummaged around in the Greek salad, that had turned out to be a small mountain of iceberg lettuce, black olives, sliced cucumbers, peas, and square chunks of feta cheese.

"It looks really yummy," Maeve said, and stuffed a handful of fries into her mouth.

"Yeah... but there's so much of it. I wanted a small salad."

"Come on, get eatin'. It's a salad, it can't help being good for ya no matter how big it is."

"I guess," Staci said, and stuck her fork into the salad. She tasted it, and her eyes popped wide open.

"Mmmm... it's great!" she said, after chewing on the first mouthful.

"Knew it would be."

Staci didn't have time to respond - she was busy stuffing her face.

"Wow, that's the best salad I've ever had. I definitely need a word or two with the chef in the Three-In-One restaurant. This is how a salad is supposed to taste, not that... that... blah-ness he serves."

"It's the seasoning. These guys are experts. But anyway, hooray for fast-food," Maeve said, and slurped the last of her Coke up through the straw.

"Yeah... three cheers for the Burger Palace. So, where do we go from here?"

"Around. Want a coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"I need to gas up the Stang, and then I was thinking about... maybe going back to my loft?" Maeve said, not looking at Staci.

"Oh...? To do what?"

"Well, you know... Watch an old movie, have a drink or two, make love a couple of times..."

Staci grinned, and emptied her mineral water.

"You know, Maeve, on any other night, I would've said..."

Maeve crinkled her nose, and shrugged.

"...maybe. But not tonight," Staci continued, and winked.

"It's all right, Staci, we can... huh?"

"Hello? Earth to Maeve?"

"You said yes?"

Staci looked at Maeve, and reached over to tickle the Enforcer's ears.

"Do these things actually work, or are they just for display?"

"Smart-alec. Believe it or not, they actually do work. It's just that the sound takes an age to come down from your lofty heights to the rest to us regular-sized mortals," Maeve said, and grinned.

"Oh, ha, ha... don't give up your day job."

"You're not pinchin' me this time, Maeve." Staci put her hands on the Enforcer's shoulders, and pushed her out of the door.

Once they were out on the parking lot, Maeve sought and found Staci's hand, and they walked hand in hand to the Mustang.

"Fever!" a male voice suddenly shouted from somewhere behind them.

In one, single, fluid motion, Maeve gave Staci a hefty shove towards the car, drew her weapon, and spun around. She scanned the area, but couldn't see who had addressed her. She quickly ran over to the corner of the Palace, and used it for protection.

After having jumped to safety, Staci hid behind the Mustang's fender. Gathering up all her

courage, she peeked over the edge, and tried to see what was going on. Her heart was hammering away in her throat, and her hands were clammy, but she didn't want to lose sight of Maeve.

"Get out where I can see ya! With ya hands up!" Maeve shouted.

A lone figure came shuffling out of the shadows, with both hands way up in the air.

"Holy crap, man, it's just me, Jimmy Snakes! Calm down, man!"

Aiming the Beretta directly at Snakes, Maeve came out from behind the corner, and walked towards him with determined steps.

"That wasn't nice at all, Snakes," she hissed.

"I'm sorry, man, I wasn't... I wouldn't... I wuz just gonna..."

"Are you alone?"

"Oh, yeah, man. Completely."

Maeve looked around again, and put the Beretta into the shoulderholster.

Staci drew a big sigh of relief, and stood up straight. She ran a shaking hand through her hair, and rubbed her face.

"Whaddaya want?" Maeve growled.

"I've come to give you some info, Fever."

"Info?"

"On the Clover gang."

"Bullshit."

"No, no, no, it's true. Cross my heart, hope to die, man!" Snakes said, and made the sign of the cross.

"All right. Let's talk over there," Maeve said, and pointed at the car wash.

"Staci, it'll only be a few minutes!" she said to Staci, who waved as a reply.

Maeve and Snakes walked over to the car wash, and went around the corner to get out of sight of the parking lot.

Maeve looked severely pissed off, and crossed her arms over her chest, so her hand was close to the handle of the Beretta in case Snakes tried something stupid.

"Talk to me."

"Well, it's like this... I... need your help, Fever."

"And?"

"And I've come across this piece of info that might help you catch the Clover gang."

"Go on."

"Will you help me?"

"If the info's good, I'll consider it. If it's bogus, now's a good time to start runnin', Snakes."

"No, no, man, it's legit, I guarantee it."

"What is it?"

"Do you know two assholes called Harry Weaver senior and junior?"

"Not personally, but I've heard of them. The Sleazy Weasels."

"The Sleazy...? Ha! That fits 'em, the assholes! They conned me out of some porn tapes that Patrick Daly had sold me, and that I wanted to sell on at the flea market, and..."

"Is there a point hidden in there somewhere?" Maeve said, and sighed.

"O-yeah, I'm gettin' to it, man! To cut a very long story short, I ran into 'em again, and I overheard them talking about the Clover gang. And I heard Asshole Junior mention a name."

"And which name would that be, Snakes?" Maeve said, suddenly focused.

"Will you help me get my porn tapes back?"

"How much were they worth?" Maeve said, and reached for the wad of bills she always had in her shirt pocket.

"No. No way, man. I don't want your handouts. Promise me you'll help me get my tapes back, and I'll tell you the name I heard. No handouts, man."

"All right. That's a deal, Snakes."

"Asshole Junior said that he had phoned a man by the name of Dillon O'Shaughnessy, and that he had more or less confirmed that he was in on it."

"Hmmm. Never heard that name..."

"Me, neither, man."

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No. Hey, Fever, if it works out, will I get the reward?"

"What reward?"

"The 10 G, man."

"We haven't put up a reward...?"

"But the... I don't fuckin' BELIEVE IT! The two assholes conned me AGAIN! It's so unfair, man! FuckfuckfuckfuckFUCKfuckfuckfuck..." Snakes shouted, and began to dance around, clutching his head, and kicking at all the loose gravel.

Maeve stared wide-eyed at him, not really sure how to respond.

"... fuckfuckfuckfuckFUCK!"

"I'll get back to you with the tapes, OK? I have to go now. Are you all right?"

Snakes stopped his little dance, and looked at her with big, sad eyes.

"I'm outta pills... but I'm fine..." he said, turned around, and walked away.

"Jeez, that poor slob," Maeve said quietly to herself, as she watched Snakes shuffle back towards the shadows.

On her way back to the Mustang, she unclipped her phone from her belt, and found Patrick Daly's number. She pressed the dial button, and waited for him to pick it up.

'Daly's EmPORNium, it's Patrick.'

"Evening, Patrick, it's Fever. I have a name that I need you to check for me."

'Shoot.'

"Dillon O'Shaughnessy. I don't know how it's spelled."

'... O'Shaughnessy. OK, I've written it down. I'll put my ear to the ground, and call you when I

have something.'

"Great, Patrick. Talk to you later," Maeve said, and hung up.

**_*_

Just as Maeve and Staci slowed to a halt at a red light at Fourteenth Street, preparing to make the u-turn that would take them back North on Jefferson, Maeve's phone rang, and she unclipped it from her belt. She looked at the display, but couldn't recognize the number. She shrugged, and pressed the button.

"Fever. Talk to me."

'Hey, Fever, it's Marco from the Fairy Godfather.'

"Hey, big boy. Do you have creep trouble?"

'Nope. I have someone here who'd like to have a word with you... about the hit on the money run the other night.'

Maeve sat up straight in the seat, and turned down the radio.

"Put him on."

'No can do... he says he'll only talk to you face to face.'

"What the hell...?"

'I don't know the details. Are you interested?'

"Well... hold on a sec," Maeve said, as the lights turned green.

She executed the u-turn, and as soon as she had the Mustang pointing North, she pulled over to the curb so she could concentrate fully on the phone call.

"Is he legit? Or just a poser?"

'He looks legit. He's been here before.'

"All right. I'll be there in... five minutes."

'Fine by me, Fever.'

"OK. Bye."

Maeve hung up, and clipped the phone onto her belt. She briefly tapped her fingers on the

steering wheel before pulling away from the curb, driving towards The Fairy Godfather on Third Street.

"Who was that?"

"The bouncer from the Godfather, Marco. Remember him?"

"Vaguely."

"He said he had someone who wanted to talk to me. Hmmm."

"Just like old times, huh?" Staci said, and laughed.

"Yeah!" Maeve said, and hit the gas. The exhausts roared like a T-Rex in heat, and the Mustang lurched forward.

"I better buckle up," Staci said, and reached for the seatbelt.

Maeve stopped in a no-parking zone right in front of the Fairy Godfather, and waved to Marco, who was standing in the door.

The bouncer waved back, and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He was sporting a one-inch crew cut, and he was wearing tight black jeans, black Doc Martens, and a silver Lycra T-shirt that was at least two sizes too small for his abundance of muscles.

"Hey, Marco," Maeve said, and put out her hand.

"Fever," he said, and shook it.

"This is my girlfriend, Staci Hart."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise, Marco," Staci said.

"I've never seen Third so packed before. There are cars everywhere! What the heck's up, man?" Fever said.

"We're hosting a wedding reception! And it's a private party, actually, but I've squared it with the grooms."

"Oh... I don't want to intrude... I better wait in the car," Staci said.

"Hell, no," Maeve said.

"It's no problem, really. I'll wait here. I'll listen to the radio."

"Yeah, but..."

"Go on, Maeve. See ya later, Marco."

Marco held the door open for Maeve, and pointed out the way to her.

"It's up the stairs and to the left. He's waiting for you in the bar."

"Thanks, Marco."

Maeve opened an inner door, and found her senses assaulted by a loud cheer coming from her right. She took a peek, and saw two men up on a stage, engaged in a bout of Battle Karaoke. She heard a few strains of the music, and recognized it as one of Cher's more famous hits.

She chuckled, and turned left - and almost bumped into one of the wedding guests, who was on his way back from the bar, carrying a large bowl of what looked like Pink Demon.

"Hey, watch where ya... God, you're a woman!" he said, shocked.

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that, buddy."

She quickly walked off to the left, but the man kept standing in the middle of the hallway, gawking after her.

Maeve turned right into a large bar room, and started to look for the man she was supposed to meet.

"You must be Fever. I'm Steve," a young man said, and got up from the table he had been sitting at.

"That's right. Hello," Maeve said, and put out her hand.

They shook it, and sat down at the table.

"Wait a minute... I know you. You're the one who peeked around the corner of the alley where the hit took place!"

"That was me all right. I wanted to talk to you, but you were kinda... tense!"

"Well, you caught me at a crappy time, to be honest," Maeve said, and laughed.

"Yeah..."

"So, tell me what you've got."

"I think I saw the robbers before they put their masks on... but you better hear it from the beginning."

"That's always a good place to start. Go on."

"I live on Second Street on the other side of Franklin, so when I want to come over here, I always walk - it's easier. Well, there I was, happily walking along Third when I heard a V8 rumbling behind me. I was... well, I was worried that it might be some creeps, you know, so I looked over my shoulder. It was a charcoal gray Chevy Blazer, and it was only driving at a walking pace."

"Are you sure it was a Blazer?"

"One hundred percent. A guy I dated some years ago had a similar one."

"All right. And then...?"

"Well, I had a bad feeling about it, so I stopped to let it drive past me. I looked directly at the woman on the..."

"One of them was a woman?"

"Yes, definitely a woman. Several years younger than you... errr, sorry... no offense."

"None taken," Maeve said, and chuckled.

"She was blonde, and she looked... I don't know. Dazed?"

"Drugged?"

"No, more like scared, actually, but I couldn't say for sure. A man was driving the Blazer, and there were two men on the backseat. The one closest to the sidewalk was white, and he looked like a real SOB, by the way, and the one next to him was black."

"Then what happened?"

"Then the driver hit the gas, and... well, everything happened at once. Two minutes later, you arrived, and you know the rest."

"Yeah... hmmmmm," Maeve said, and leaned back on the bench.

"I have to admit that as soon as the shooting started, I ducked behind a car. I'm no hero," Steve said, and toyed with the glass he had been drinking from.

"... but when they left, I ran over there to see if I could do anything. Gawd, the people in that Lincoln looked horrible," he said, and shivered.

"The passenger in the front seat lived, but..."

"Well, that's good to hear. The two others probably died at once."

"Yeah. Thanks, Steve. You've been most helpful. Here's my card. If you see the Blazer around town, call me at once," Maeve said, and handed him a small business card.

"Thanks, Fever. I will."

Maeve got up, and they shook hands.

"Did he help you, Fever?"

"Yeah, I think he did, Marco. Thanks for calling. I owe you one."

"I'll remember it."

"I'm sure you will, big boy," Maeve said, and slapped Marco across his taut stomach.

He swung his arm at her, but she quickly sidestepped, and opened the door of the Mustang with a wide grin.

Maeve clipped her phone off her belt, and found Danny's number.

"Danny? It's Fever. Listen, I have some new info about the shooters. We've gotta look for a charcoal gray Chevy Blazer, and it's not four guys... one of them is a woman."

'Really?'

"Yep. You got it?"

'I've got it.'

"Good. Talk to ya later," Maeve said, and closed her phone.

"News?" Staci said.

"Yeah. With the name Snakes gave me, and now this... I think we've gotten a lot closer to nailing the Clover gang."

"Wow, that's great," Staci said, and leaned over to give Maeve a kiss on the cheek.

"Let's hope we get 'em before they hit again."

"I wish we had an all-girl bar somewhere around here," Staci said, as they were waiting at the red light at the end of Third Street.

"We do, the Purple Umbrella down on Eleventh."

"Yeah, but... no. Have you ever been there?"

"Only on official business. I agree, it's a sucky place."

"Perhaps we should open one?" Staci said, using the tone of voice she always used when she was making plans.

"Perhaps we should. Remember Sally J's? That was a fun place."

"You went to Sally J's, too? I don't recall ever seeing you there. I would've noticed," Staci said and winked.

"Thanks. I think I was there a few years after you. Sally James was one hell of a dame, wasn't she? Oh, boy."

"I agree. Sally was classy."

"She taught me a *lot* of things..." Maeve said dreamily.

"Uhhh... about what?"

"Sex. She was my first... well, my first adult," Maeve said, and turned onto Franklin.

"What?! Sally was ancient! She was older than dirt! She had a window seat on Noah's Ark! She was..."

"She was 39 when I met her, Staci."

"... oh."

"How old are we again?" Maeve said, and patted Staci's thigh.

"Never mind."

"Cos I coulda sworn we're roughly the same age now that she was back then...?"

"Never mind."

"... and, well, I don't really consider myself, and definitely not you, older than dirt...?"

"Never mind, Maeve! Jesus, Mary and Joseph, let it go will ya!"

"Only for a kiss, darlin'."

Staci leaned over, and gave Maeve another kiss on the cheek.

"Will that do?"

"For now," Maeve drawled, and wiggled her eyebrows.

"Sheesh... you and Sally James... Sheesh!" Staci grumbled under her breath as they drove down Franklin, heading for the shortcut that would take them over to Maeve's loft.

**_*_

Maeve unlocked the airtight door to her loft, and let Staci move past her into the apartment. Maeve flashed a wolfish grin as she watched Staci's hips sway in the tight slacks, and she licked her lips in anticipation of the night's events.

"Ohhh, baby, I can't believe how good you look tonight," Maeve said, and closed the door behind her.

Staci waved her hand dismissively, and walked over to the fridge.

"I'm never kiddin' when it comes to you, baby. You look sensational."

"Thank you. You want something?"

"Nah. Not right now."

Staci found a mineral water, and unscrewed the cap. She quickly took a few gulps, and then placed the bottle on the kitchen table.

"So... if you really like my business outfit... I guess you wouldn't like it if I slipped into something more comfortable...?"

"Baby, the only thing that's better than you in those slacks, is you with no slacks at all," Maeve said, and laughed.

"I had a feelin' you might say that. Lose the Kevlar, I'll be right back," Staci said, and went into the bedroom to change.

"You betcha," Maeve said, and immediately began to unclip the shoulderholster.

A few minutes later, Staci came back from the bedroom wearing dark green baggy sweat pants and a white t-shirt. She sat down on the couch, and scooted real close to Maeve. She looked lovingly at the Enforcer's profile, and then leaned in to nibble her ear.

"Oh, baby," Maeve purred, and grabbed Staci's hand. She turned towards Staci, and began to kiss the long digits.

"Maeve, I think we should skip the movie..."

"I agree. We'll make our own entertainment instead," Maeve whispered, and took two of Staci's fingers into her mouth, and let her tongue play across the tips.

Staci broke out in a cheeky grin, and pulled Maeve down on the couch. Staci rested her head on the armrest, and moved her legs apart so Maeve could fit between them.

Maeve made herself comfortable on top of Staci's long torso, and she sighed contentedly. She moved her hand inside the loose t-shirt, and started to gently claw Staci's stomach and ribcage.

"I'm so glad I got a chance to see that sparkle in your eye again, baby. You don't know how much I missed that when you... were away," Maeve said quietly.

"I'm glad you're glad, Maeve," Staci purred, and toyed with the Enforcer's spiky hair.

"Mmmm."

Maeve kissed Staci's neck, and then started to crawl downwards. On her way down, she repeatedly put her mouth against Staci's t-shirt, and sucked on it, creating a line of wet patches.

"Oh, you're so silly!" Staci said, and laughed.

"Going doooooown..." Maeve said, and found the hem of the t-shirt. With a cheeky grin, she lifted it, and stuck her head inside.

"Going up!" she said, and placed a similar line of kisses on Staci's skin.

Staci laughed out loud, and eased Maeve's access by lifting up in her t-shirt. She could feel the

Enforcer's lips and tongue slowly move upwards across her stomach and up to the underside of her breasts, and she closed her eyes, and allowed the sweet sensations to roll over her.

Suddenly, Maeve's phone rang.

"Oh crap! I forgot to turn the sonovabitch off!" Maeve growled, having just reached the swell of Staci's breasts.

"Maybe they'll call back," Staci said, still with her eyes closed. Maeve continued kissing Staci's breasts, but the phone kept ringing. And ringing. And ringing.

"Son of a bitch!" Maeve bellowed from underneath the t-shirt.

She reached out with her hand, but only succeeded in knocking the phone off the coffee table. It hit the plush carpet with a soft *phlum*, but kept on ringing. And ringing.

Maeve sighed, and pulled her head out of Staci's t-shirt. She sat up, rubbed her face and took a few calming breaths. She picked up the phone and flipped open the display.

"Fever. This better be important!"

'It's Patrick Daly. I have a lead on the O'Shaughnessy-character.'

Maeve rolled her eyes, and looked at Staci, who was lying with her hands behind her head. Her eyes were half-closed, and her lips were parted in a most seductive manner. As Maeve was watching, Staci let her tongue draw slowly along her upper lip, and sighed sensuously.

Maeve gulped, and rubbed her forehead.

"All right, Patrick, go ahead."

'This is one nasty SOB, Fever. He's done everything, and I do mean everything. He's spent a few years inside for dealing, and he was allegedly involved in a kidnapping that turned out messy last year. And plenty of other things, too.'

"I see. How about his known associates?"

'I don't have much, but he's worked with an African-American man called Robert, or Bob, Wellman on one or two things.'

"All right. I think he's been ID'ed, too."

Staci sat up on the couch, and moved her long legs on either side of Maeve. She reached in front of the Enforcer, and began to unbutton her silk shirt. After working the final button, she pulled it off Maeve's shoulders, and began to gently massage Maeve's taut neck muscles.

"Oh, baby..." Maeve whispered huskily.

'Erm... Fever... what are you doing?'

"Oh... not you, Patrick. Go on. Do we know how he looks?"

'He has a pockmarked face, with a strong jaw and a hawkish nose. That's all I have.'

"OK."

In a single maneuver, Staci hooked her fingers inside the straps of Maeve's black tank, and pulled it off of her.

Maeve's eyes popped wide open as the relatively chilly air hit her flushed upper body, and she couldn't stop shivering briefly.

Staci moved her hands down, and started to caress Maeve's breasts. She moved her fingers in a circular motion around Maeve's peaks, spiraling ever closer to the already hardened nipples. She finished by cupping Maeve's breasts, and pinching the nipples between her index- and middle fingers.

"Oh gawd!" Maeve exclaimed loudly, and nearly dropped the phone.

'I better hang up now, you sound really busy,' Patrick Daly said, and laughed out loud.

With her last ounce of strength, Maeve hung up, and pressed the OFF button on the phone - then it dropped from her unresponsive hand, and fell to the floor, ending up somewhere under the couch. She sighed, and leaned back into Staci's touch.

Staci continued the sweet torture, and let her hands roam all over the front of Maeve's body, gently pinching, groping and clawing as she went along. Finally, she reached down and unbuttoned Maeve's white jeans, and unzipped her fly. Moving two fingers inside the jeans, Staci made her intentions known by applying gentle pressure to Maeve's center, and she was instantly rewarded by a guttural groan.

"Come on, baby, let's make love," Staci whispered into Maeve's ear.

Maeve got up, and took off her jeans. Her boxers were already quite soaked, so she threw them on the floor as well. She turned around, and helped Staci take off her t-shirt and her sweat pants.

Maeve admired the planes, dips and curves of the statuesque woman in front of her, and she couldn't hide a wolfish grin from spreading out across her face.

Impatiently, she pulled Staci down for a bruising, open-mouthed kiss - their tongues met, and danced against each other in a frenzied tango that lasted for several minutes.

"The bedroom or the couch?" Maeve whispered huskily when they separated.

"Bedroom. More space..."

"You got it," Maeve said, and effortlessly lifted Staci off the floor. Staci squealed and squirmed, but Maeve simply let out a Tarzan-like howl, and carried the naked woman into the bedroom.

"Oh, damn, I forgot to remove the bedspread!" Maeve said as she walked into the bedroom.

"You forget a lot of things tonight, huh?"

"Hang on, I got it..." Maeve said, and stuck her foot inside one of the corners of the bedspread. Balancing on one leg, and still carrying Staci in her arms, Maeve managed to pull the cover off the bed without too much hassle.

Maeve carefully put down Staci in the center of the bed, and leaned down to kiss her.

"It's you. You make me forgetful. Once I see your goddess-like body, the world stops," Maeve whispered between kisses. She pushed the rest of the bedspread off the bed, and let it fall to the floor.

"Awwwww, how cute," Staci teased, and sniggered.

Maeve's mouth moved from Staci's lips, and down to her throat.

"Cute?"

Maeve put her hands on Staci's shoulders, and pushed her down until she was flat on her back.

"I'll show you cute," Maeve said, and zeroed in on Staci's right breast. She let her tongue flick across the tip of the erect nipple, first slowly, then fast, and then slowly again. Maeve took the nipple between her lips, and squeezed very, very gently.

"Ohhhh, baby..." Staci said, and moaned sensuously. She moved her hand down, and began to run her fingers over her already slick folds.

Maeve let go of the nipple, and dragged her tongue across Staci's chest. She cupped the full breasts, and dove down into the cleavage - and gave Staci a hickey right between her breasts.

"Oh, you rascal!" Staci said, and giggled.

"D'ya still think I'm cute?"

Maeve slowly moved to Staci's left breast, and ran her tongue around the nipple. She placed a

line of little kisses all around the center, and then took the nipple into her mouth.

"Oh, yeah, I d..." Staci said, but was cut off mid-stream by Maeve squeezing the nipple between her lips, and flicking her tongue across the tip.

Maeve pulled back, and kissed her way down Staci's long torso, only stopping to draw 'I LUV U' on Staci's stomach. After that, Maeve continued downwards, finally ending up at the patch of dark hair. With a mock growl, she placed a little kiss there, before moving on to Staci's right leg.

"Mmmm. I'm in love with your thighs..." Maeve whispered, as she lifted Staci's leg off the bed, and kissed the sensitive skin on the inside of the thigh.

Staci giggled, and moved her legs apart to ease Maeve's access - but much to her dismay, Maeve crawled back up Staci's body.

"Not yet," Maeve whispered, and started kissing Staci's throat and jaw. She moved away slightly, so she was lying on her side, next to Staci.

"But, Maeve!" Staci whined, but was soon silenced by a searing kiss.

"Turn over, baby... let's do it together," Maeve whispered, and took Staci's hand. She led it down past her closely-cropped golden hair, and placed it on her center.

Staci immediately started probing and exploring, running her long fingers up and down Maeve's outer lips, and occasionally venturing inside.

Maeve closed her eyes, and let out a long moan that sent a shiver of pleasure down Staci's spine.

"Oh, you like that, baby?" she whispered, but Maeve was too preoccupied to respond.

Staci didn't want to be left out, so she started pleasuring herself. Maeve soon noticed, and came to her assistance by gently inserting two of her own fingers into Staci's opening.

With four fingers moving rhythmically inside her, Staci knew she wouldn't last long, so she used the last of her strength to plunge deep into Maeve - the Enforcer's hips bucked, and she groaned in a way that nearly made Staci climax prematurely.

"Open your eyes, baby, open your eyes..." Staci whispered hoarsely, desperately hoping to see Maeve's Irish green orbs before it was too late.

Maeve opened her eyes, and looked directly into Staci's - the bond between them worked its magic, and they went flying over the edge together. They bucked and moaned simultaneously as the orgasms racked through their bodies, creating surges of pleasure that threatened to drown them both.

As the afterglow slowly engulfed her body, Staci rolled over onto her back to savor it fully. She gently pulled her fingers out of Maeve, and rested her hand on the Enforcer's back.

"I can't tell you... how... how good that felt, baby," she whispered. Her heart was pounding away, and the strong climax had left her panting, but a few mouthfuls of cool air helped to even out her breath.

Maeve put her head on Staci's shoulder, and sighed contentedly.

"I think I have a pretty good clue," Maeve said, and chuckled hoarsely. She brought up her hand, and tasted the salty residue of her lover.

"I love you, Maeve Donnelly," Staci whispered.

"I love you, too, baby... wanna go again?"

Staci guffawed loudly, and reached down to squeeze Maeve's butt.

"You rascal, you!" Staci croaked, and wrapped her arms so tightly around Maeve that the Enforcer couldn't move an eyebrow.

"... that's a 'yes', right?" Maeve said, and began to kiss Staci's throat.

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CHAPTER 6

Shannon McWhirter pulled back his sleeve, and checked his wristwatch - 10:43, AM. He got up from his recently acquired deck chair, and walked to the small office.

On his way there, he observed his fellow Four Leaf Clovers. Wellman and O'Shaughnessy were busy cleaning the Springfields, and Siobhan was sulking in the corner - as usual. To ease her pains, Shannon had given her some of her share, and she had immediately bought a portable music player, a stack of CDs, and several magazines.

"Gentlemen, I need your attention, please," Shannon said as he came out of the office. He went over to the Blazer, and spread out a map of the city on the hood.

Wellman and O'Shaughnessy put the Springfields in the back of the SUV, and shuffled around to the front.

"All right, it's T minus 37 hours and 16 minutes for the last target. This is the basic layout, and... well, I better tell you right away, we really need to be on our toes with this one. This is larger

than the two others combined," Shannon said, and thrust his index finger down on the map.

Wellman whistled when he read the name of the target.

"Wow, we're raiding that place? Either we're gutsier or we're crazier than I thought."

"Definitely crazier, Wellman. No one has ever thought of raiding that place... no one has ever even considered it."

"And you're sure there's five million bucks there, waitin' for us, boss?" O'Shaughnessy said.

"One hundred percent sure. I had an inside contact."

"Well, one thing's for certain. They won't give it up without a fight. How the hell are we even going to get in there, Shannon? It'll be as tightly guarded as a nun's cunt," Wellman said, and scratched his hair.

"They'll open the door for us. Who knows, they might even roll out the red carpet," Shannon said, looking unbearably smug.

"You have a plan."

"I have a plan, and it involves one White Fever, and a few photographs."

"I can't see how the fuck that's going to work, boss. There's no fuckin' way she's willingly gonna do this."

"Oh, she'll do it, don't you worry about that. It'll work, Dillon, trust me."

"The fuck it will."

"Mmm-hmmm...?" Shannon said, and shot O'Shaughnessy an icy glare.

O'Shaughnessy couldn't hold Shannon's stare, and looked down at his boots.

"Sorry, boss."

"Wellman, did you finish recounting the money from the casino?" Shannon said, choosing to ignore O'Shaughnessy for now.

"Yes, I did. \$60,000 in each box. With four boxes, that makes it a very, very cool \$240,000. Add to that the \$160,000 from the Donnelly hit, and we're all set... one hundred thousand dollars for each of us."

"Good," Shannon said, and nodded solemnly.

"Siobhan, take those things out of your ears. I need a word with you," Shannon said, and nudged his sister's boot with his own.

"What?" Siobhan said, and took out an earphone. Through it, some kind of very noisy rock music was heard, and Shannon wondered how the hell anyone could find pleasure in listening to that sort of thing.

"I need a word."

Siobhan turned off the player, and put it away. Shannon opened his mouth to speak, but Siobhan cut him off.

"Shannon, please tell me something... why did you kill all those people? Don't you understand that we'll never be able to have a normal life now? The cops will hunt us down, and if they don't, Donnelly's or Coluzzo's soldiers will!"

"I understand that perfectly. You fail to see what we gain."

"But I don't care about the money! Until now, we've been small-time hustlers, where no one got hurt. But now... now we're killers, Shannon!"

"The trick is to not get caught, Siobhan. If you're not caught, it doesn't matter one damn bit what you've done. Don't tell me you're not interested in sitting at a pool in Rio, sippin' a Margarita, and being courted by a long line of cute local boys."

"Oh, God... you don't get it at all," Siobhan said, and sighed deeply.

"Sis, this is your moment to shine. You have the most important part of this last hit. I want you to focus... to concentrate on the task at hand."

"Oh, Shannon... I don't think I can do it... I mean, what do I know about..."

"Siobhan, this is not the time to question yourself," Shannon said, and crouched down next to his sister.

"But... It's all so new to me. I don't know if I can... you know..."

"Look... a few kisses will suffice. You don't need to go all the way, if that's what bothering you. We know that she always stops by the Palace before she goes home. Get her into one of the stalls in the restroom, and I'll snap the pictures."

"But what if she's not interested in me?"

"She has a reputation as an notorious skirtchaser, and you're a pretty girl. Of course she'll be

interested in you. You just have to act natural."

"But what if..."

"No. No, Siobhan, no 'buts'."

"My stomach's one big knot, Shannon, and I just know I'll freeze up. I'm not sure I can pull this off convincingly."

"Listen to me. It'll work," Shannon said, and pointed his index finger at his sister.

"But what if she rejects me?"

"She won't. With some garish makeup and some revealing clothes, you'll fit into that scene perfectly."

Siobhan sighed, and ran a hand through her hair.

"We need those pictures. If we don't have them, I can't blackmail her into helping us. It's really quite that simple, Siobhan. You get us those pictures, or..." Shannon said, and got up. He stared coldly at his sister, and then spun around on his heel, and walked away.

Siobhan buried her face in her hands, and started to sob. With surprising clarity, she knew exactly where all this would end - she knew they'd all be torn to pieces in a hailstorm of hot lead. It was inevitable, and she felt so frightened she could hardly think straight.

When Shannon returned to the SUV, Wellman and O'Shaughnessy were in the middle of a good-natured wrestling match. Shannon's lips curled into a sneer, and he had to restrain himself from giving them a piece of his mind.

"Dillon! Wellman! Stop that fuckin' nonsense, and get over here," he barked angrily.

"Aw, boss, we were just messin' around," O'Shaughnessy said off Shannon's angry stare.

"You can do that later. This is serious business, and I demand that you behave accordingly."

"Yes, Shannon," Wellman said, and sighed.

"All right. As I said before, this will be the largest hit yet. We need to have every move down pat, or we'll end up in plastic bags."

The two henchmen came over to the SUV, and studied the map again.

"The layout is very different to the other two places. As we arrive, we'll pull up to a fence, here,"

Shannon said, and tapped the map with his finger.

"It's nine feet tall, so there's no way we can go over that, but there's obviously a gate that we'll use. Beyond the fence is a garden path, fifty feet long, which leads to a windbreak with armored glass. That's the main entrance."

"Shannon, what if..."

"Later, Wellman. Once we're through the main entrance, there's a short hallway leading to a stairwell going down to the basement. And that's where the five million dollars are waiting for us."

"With all due respect, Shannon... what if, for whatever reason, the opening gambit fails, and we don't get Fever's assistance? How are we going to get through all those safety features then?"

"I have something in the car that might help us with that. I'll get to that in a minute. Back to the plan - once we've bagged the money, we get out of the basement, clear the garden path, go through the opening in the fence, and into the car... and zip, we're outta there."

Wellman rubbed his brow, and looked at the map with skepticism written all over his face.

"So much can go wrong, Shannon."

"That's right, Wellman. That's why I keep saying we need to stay sharp," Shannon said, and moved around the car to open the hatchback.

"This little beauty is our backup. It'll easily blast through the gate, and the windbreak," he said, and took a rocket launcher out of a wooden box.

"Holy fuck! We'll attract one hell of a lot of attention if we start blastin' everything in sight..." O'Shaughnessy said, and whistled.

"Yes. That's why it's the backup, Dillon."

"Shannon, let's say that Fever actually does help us. What are you going to do with her once we're done...?"

"I haven't quite decided yet. But I doubt she'll leave the basement on her own two feet."

Wellman nodded, and put his hands on his hips.

"Man, I can't believe it! I just cannot believe we're going to raid the Donnelly mansion...!"

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Staci stirred and yawned widely. She wanted to roll over onto her back, but discovered that she

was completely entangled in Maeve's arms and legs.

She grinned broadly, and started to thread her arms out of the mass of limbs surrounding her. Amazingly, Maeve didn't wake up - she just mumbled a few nonsensical words, and then went back to a deep sleep.

Staci studied Maeve's face, marveling at how young and relatively innocent the hardened Enforcer looked when she slept. All the lines were gone from her face, and her jaw didn't have the steely strength it did when she was awake.

She reached out to caress Maeve's cheek, but stopped at the last moment, deciding instead to let her sleep - she had certainly earned it, Staci thought, and grinned again.

She sat up on the bed, and ran a hand through her mussed hair. With a last look at Maeve, she got up from the bed, and walked, slightly awkwardly, to the bathroom.

A few minutes later, she scooped up the sweat pants and the t-shirt she had thrown on the floor last night, and put them on. Remembering that Maeve's phone was still under the couch somewhere, Staci got down on her hands and knees to search for it.

At the exact same time, Maeve stepped out of the bedroom, wearing a black muscleshirt and a dark green pair of boxers. She stopped and gawked at Staci's rear end, hovering high in the air behind the couch.

"Oh, baby!" she exclaimed loudly, and then went into a gigglefit.

"Don't even think about it, Maeve Donnelly," Staci said, and came up for air, holding the wayward cell phone in her hand.

"The thought never crossed my mind... thanks for finding my phone. I'd forgotten all about that."

"You're welcome," Staci said, and dusted off her hands.

"Hey, all your clothes are over here, too. Ya want them?"

"Nah, I'll take 'em later. Thanks."

Maeve walked over to Staci, and got up on tip-toes to kiss the taller woman.

"Thank you for last night, Staci. It was sensational... as usual," Maeve whispered as they separated. She put her hand inside Staci's t-shirt, and ran it up and down her back.

"You were great, too," Staci said, and kissed the tip of Maeve's nose.

"Thanks. Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, please. Medium strong."

"Will do, baby," Maeve said, and walked into the kitchen to prepare the coffee.

Maeve put down the two mugs of coffee on the kitchen table, and pulled out a chair.

Staci kept standing, and Maeve noticed that she looked a little uncomfortable.

"Is anything wrong?"

"I'm a bit sore this morning," Staci said, and blushed.

"Oh... sorry."

"It's not your fault... well, I guess it is, actually, but anyway... you know what I mean," Staci said, and sat down, quite gingerly.

"He, he, he. I guess it did get kinda wild. No, I'm really sorry, baby. Soreness sucks," Maeve said, and gave Staci's hand a little squeeze.

" 's all right, I'll just walk funny for a couple of hours. So, this is the big day, huh?"

"Ughh. Don't remind me. Today is gonna be hell on wheels. Everyone is going to be so high-strung it'll be... ughh. Unbearable," Maeve said, and rolled her eyes repeatedly.

"Ouch... Well, maybe so, but you're going to be part of a summit at the highest level. I can't quite believe it... it's so exciting," Staci said, and stirred her coffee with a spoon.

"I coulda sworn you weren't a thrillseeker, Staci?"

"I guess spending so much time with you has rubbed off on me."

"Heh. Now is that a good thing... or a bad thing? Huh?"

"Oh, definitely a good thing," Staci said, and leaned over the kitchen table to give Maeve a quick kiss.

Half an hour later, Maeve sat on a chair, completely lost in the fascinating sight of Staci toiling away on her rowing machine.

"You know, if I had known you wanted to get sweaty, I would've proposed something entirely different..." Maeve said, tying her bootlaces.

"Ha ... ha ... I ... have ... to ... do ... this ... The ... roll ... of ... fat ... is ... even ... bigger ... now."

"Listen to me, Staci... there's no roll of fat!"

"Yes ... there ... is."

Maeve chuckled, and shook her head. She got up from the chair, and adjusted her bullet proof vest to get it just right. Then she put on a cobalt blue silk shirt, and started to button it. She flattened the shirt's collar, and reached for her shoulderholster.

Staci stopped rowing, and pressed a button on the small display on the side of the machine. Panting, she pulled up her legs, and put her feet on either side of the center bar. She took a towel and wiped off her neck and arms, and then rested her head on her knees while she waited for her breath to even out.

"One hundred and seven strokes," she said proudly after checking the display.

"Bravo," Maeve said, and chuckled. She took the Beretta out of the holster, and checked the clip.

"Man, there's going to be enough firepower present at that summit to invade a small country," Staci said, as she climbed out of the rowing machine, and walked over to help Maeve button her cufflinks.

"Yeah. Let's hope no one'll get trigger happy."

"Is there a risk of that?" Staci said, slightly shocked.

"Hopefully not, but you know... a buncha Eye-talians and a buncha Oirish... fireworks are guaranteed," Maeve said, and grinned.

"Oh, you're evil, Maeve Donnelly. Stop fiddlin' with those cufflinks, and kiss me."

"Yes, dear. We're leaving in fifteen minutes, so you better grab a quick shower, and slip into those exquisite slacks from last night," Maeve said, and winked.

**_*

'I'm Susan Blaine, and you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. It's a quarter to one, and we're almost halfway through our special show called B-Side Bonanza, brought to you by Supashiny Shoe Polish. Supashiny, the ultra effec...'

Maeve turned off the radio as she parked in her designated space in front of the Donnelly mansion. She stayed in the car while she debated with herself if she should call Staci or not, but

she finally decided to do so.

'Hi, it's Staci Hart. I'm not home right now, but you can leave a message. I'll get back to you as soon as I can. BEEEP.'

Maeve scrunched up her face and looked at the phone in disgust - Staci obviously hadn't had the time yet to turn off the answering machine.

"Hey, baby, it's me. I just wanted to hear your voice. That's all. Talk to you later," Maeve said, and hung up. She clipped her phone on her belt, and got out of the Mustang.

"Hey, Fever," Danny said, as he opened the door to the Donnelly mansion.

"Hey, Danny-boy. Are you all set for tonight?"

"Uggh, don't remind me," he said, earning himself a broad grin from Maeve.

"Anyway, Mr. Donnelly is ready to see you. One word of caution, though... he's in a bad mood. The new shirts he ordered have arrived, and they're too small."

"Oh, shit. Good thing I'm wearin' Kevlar," Maeve said, and ducked underneath Danny's huge arm.

"Good afternoon, uncle Freddie," Maeve said, as she stepped into the private office.

"Hrmpf!"

Maeve took a deep breath, and scratched her cheek.

"I heard your new shirts are too small?"

"Hrmpf!" Fast Freddie Donnelly said again, and turned around to face her.

Maeve's eyes popped wide open, and she stopped dead in her tracks - her uncle was wearing one of the new white shirts, where, unfortunately, all the buttons bar one were strained to breaking point, making him look like a beached whale.

Maeve briefly considered if she dared to laugh, but decided against it.

"I guess we're gonna put out a contract on your tailor, huh?" she said, and rubbed her chin so she wouldn't laugh at the stupid sight.

"You fuckin' better believe it! What the hell's wrong with that fuckin' eejit?!"

"Ah, yeah. Couldn't say for sure, but it looks like your measurements were fouled up."

Fast Freddie sighed deeply, and sat down - causing every single one of the buttons to tear off in a loud RRRIP.

"I'm gonn' kill that motherfucker!" he bellowed, and slammed his fist down on the armrest.

Maeve just stared at the comical sight, biting her tongue hard so she wouldn't laugh.

Fast Freddie sighed again, and held up the tattered pieces of his brand new shirt.

"I guess I have to wear one of the old ones, then..." he said, and got up from the leather chair.

"I'm going to the bedroom to change, Maeve. D'ya wanna stay here and wait, or come with me?"

"I'll walk you there. Somebody needs to protect the staff."

"Oh, har har."

Freddie opened the door to the bedroom, and ripped off the remains of the shirt. He threw it into a trashcan, and picked out a new one from his closet. It was older, but he knew it would fit.

"Jeebus, child, all this brouhaha for a relatively simple meeting. Unbelievable," he said, and shook his head. He put on the new shirt, and nodded to himself when it fit him perfectly.

"I know what you mean. My head's all a-buzzin' already, and there's a long way to go, still," Maeve said, sitting on the corner of the Emperor-sized bed.

"I've just had a scary thought... if someone wanted to take control over the entire city, all they needed to do was to blow up the bridge, or something like that... we'd all be wiped out!"

"Heh, Staci and I spoke of something similar this morning," Maeve said, and chuckled.

"Oh, did she finally move in with you?"

"Ah, no. Not yet. But I'm working on it."

"You know, Maeve... I'm really glad you two hooked up again," Freddie said, and sat down next to Maeve. He put his arm around her shoulders, and gave her a big squeeze.

"Thanks, uncle Freddie."

"Do you love her? I mean, really love her?"

"I... I love her very much. And I'm deadly serious about it. And... I think she is, too."

"And I trust you're not gonna make the same mistake twice... right?"

"That won't happen again. Absolutely will not happen again," Maeve said, and shook her head vehemently.

"Good. Staci's a knockout gal, and she deserves to be treated with respect. She's transformed you into a completely different person, you know. More mature. Less cocky. I like that."

"Yeah, she has me wrapped around her little finger!"

"I'd like to invite you and Staci over for dinner some time. After all, she might end up being my daughter-in-law, and I'd like to get to know her better," Freddie said, and got off the bed.

"Ohhh, we haven't talked about the M-word yet. But dinner sounds great. I'm sure she'd love to meet you."

"All right, that's a deal, then. Maeve, it's good that you've calmed down a bit. One day, you're gonna take over the family business, you know."

"Oh, hopefully, that'll be a good while yet."

"Well, you never know in this bizz."

"True."

"Yeah... one day, this family will be run by Badass Maeve Donnelly," Freddie said, and punched Maeve on her shoulder.

"I already have a street name, thank you very much," she said, and laughed.

Freddie lumbered over to the bedroom door, and put his hand on the handle.

"Well, I guess we better get back to the real world. They might think we've high-tailed it outta here."

"You know, I actually wish that we could," Maeve said, and got off the bed.

**_*_

Some time later, a rather unusual convoy snaked its way through the city streets, heading for Adams Boulevard - three silver Ford Expeditions, two silver Lincolns, a black super-stretch armored limousine, and Maeve's midnight black Mustang out front. Two of the Expeditions were

driving on either side of the limo to protect it in case they were attacked.

They turned left off Second Street, and began the trek down Adams. The cars were filled to the rafters with soldiers, and everyone was armed to the teeth - even Maeve, who not only had her spare Beretta in a holster on her belt, but a fully loaded H&K MP5 on the seat next to her. When it came to Fast Freddie's safety, half-assed just wasn't good enough.

Maeve's phone rang, and she turned down the radio.

"Fever."

'It's Danny. How does it look out front?'

"We're clear. How's it hangin' in the limo, Danny-boy?"

'Pretty good for now. Over and out.'

"10-4, good buddy!" Maeve said, and chuckled.

She hung up, and placed the phone in the tray between the seats. She turned the radio back up, and whistled along to one of Jerry Lee Lewis' numerous hits to take her mind off what they were about to do.

When the convoy reached the bridge at Ninth Street, Maeve picked up the phone again, and dialed Danny's number.

'Danny. Go ahead, Fever.'

"The bridge looks clear. The boys in the traffic department have put up signs advertising roadworks, so there won't be any other traffic there."

'Good.'

"I'll proceed to drive onto the bridge to check it out. If it's all right, I'll flash the lights at Coluzzo's boys down the other end, and then come back and do the same to you."

'Roger that.'

"I'll stay on the line."

'All right.'

Maeve let her foot slip off the brake, and the Mustang rolled forward. She passed closely by the roadworks sign, and she noticed that there wasn't enough room for the limo.

"Danny, you need to send someone out to move the sign a bit. It's too close to the sidewalk. The limo won't fit."

'Will do, Fever.'

Maeve cruised across the bridge going no more than five miles an hour, heading for Coluzzo's part of the city, and constantly checking for anything unusual.

When she reached the other end of the bridge, she flashed the headlights twice. She waited a few seconds, and then the signal was repeated from a black Cadillac that was first in a line of cars parked at the side of the street just off the bridge.

"I'm at the other side. They've acknowledged. I'm coming back," Maeve said.

'All right.'

Maeve made a u-turn, and drove back towards her own turf. Everything looked secure there, too, so she flashed her lights again. The lead Expedition responded, and Maeve made another u-turn to get back in the right direction.

A few minutes later, no less than fifteen cars were parked on either side of the center of the bridge. A myriad of soldiers poured out of the SUVs and the sedans, and soon, the bridge was crawling with heavily armed men and women.

Maeve parked the Mustang nearly at the center. She turned off the engine, took the MP5, and got out of the car. As she unfolded the shoulderstrap of the submachinegun, she saw in her peripheral vision that her opposite number, Pietro Cazale, was doing much the same. She chuckled, and saluted him - he waved back with a knowing grin.

She put the MP5 over her shoulder, and went over to lean against the bridge's balustrade.

Just as the clock struck 11 PM, the doors of the two limos opened, and the two crime lords stepped out. They began to walk towards each other, and soon met at the exact center of the bridge. Behind them, Danny and a goon of similar build waited two paces from each other, giving each other the Evil Eye.

"Mr. Donnelly."

"Don Coluzzo. Nice to meet you. It's been a while."

"It certainly has."

They walked over to the South side of the bridge, and looked out over the dark waters. The street lights were lit on the bridge, but the lamp at the center had been disabled, so the two men wouldn't be sitting ducks for a sniper.

"A chilly evening," Don Coluzzo said.

"Yes."

A long pause. The only sounds heard came from a tug boat approaching them from the South, pulling empty barges soon to be filled with the city's garbage.

"What can we do to stop that fuckin' Clover gang?" the Don said.

"Well, I have my best woman on the job."

"But she hasn't caught 'em yet."

"No. Neither have any of your men."

"No."

Another long pause.

"But we do have a name," Fast Freddie said, and enjoyed the Don's reaction. Salvatore Coluzzo's eyebrows twitched, and his mouth opened and closed a few times, like he was trying to string a sentence together, but coming up short.

"Oh...?" was the only word he managed to say.

"Yes."

"What do you think they're talking about?" Cazale said as he strolled towards Maeve.

"Oh, the usual stuff. Horses, booze, women."

"You know, Fever, we're really very much alike," Cazale said, and joined Maeve leaning against the balustrade. He adjusted the strap for his Uzi so it wouldn't pull so hard against his expensive overcoat.

"Hardly, Silencer. Just look at us."

Maeve gave Cazale the once-over. His shoes were so shiny that she almost needed sunglasses, and he could use the creases in his pants to slice a sausage if he wanted to. His pale brown

camel-hair overcoat was in impeccable condition, and his black hair was glistening from an excessive amount of grease.

Then Maeve looked down at herself, at her rugged all-terrain boots, her white jeans, and at her black silk shirt, and shook her head.

"The only thing we have in common is the fact that we both prefer to use plenty of gel," Maeve drawled.

Cazale cast a glance at Maeve's spiky, white hair, and chuckled.

"Oh, I didn't mean physically. Even I could see that. No... I meant mentally. We're both killers, trying to look and act civilized... even though we're not."

"True. I'll give you that."

"Smoke?"

"No, thanks."

Cazale lit a cigarillo, and blew out a cloud of smoke that drifted over the edge of the bridge, and into the dark night.

"Are you still pissed that we stole those sculptures from the docks, Silencer?"

"No. Are you still pissed that we stole 'em back from right under your nose, Fever?"

"Nah. Old news."

"A name?" Don Coluzzo said, and turned to look at Fast Freddie.

"One of Fever's contacts gave it to her. Dillon O'Shaughnessy."

"One of your people, then?" Coluzzo said, and grinned.

"Sounds like it. He's a small time crook. Well, he used to be."

"Where is he?"

"We don't know. I've had a couple of men visit his apartment, but... nothing."

"Then his name won't help us much."

"No. But it's all we have."

"I'll have my men look for him on our side."

"We'll keep lookin', too."

A pause.

"What I don't understand is why none of us can find their fuckin' base. They must have a place somewhere to hide their vehicle. Not to mention the money they've stolen from us," the Don said.

"Hmmm. We've searched high and low. I trust you have, too?"

"Of course. We've found nothing."

Fast Freddie shook his head, and thrust his hands into the pockets of his overcoat.

"They're somewhere close. I can feel it..." he said quietly, and looked South, towards the Twelfth Street bridge.

"Say, Fever, why do you insist on driving such a crude, noisy car? You're not exactly incognito, you know? If you're after someone, they can hear you coming from a mile away," Cazale said, and pointed his thumb at the Mustang.

"Oh, you know. I like it like that. It's part of my image," Maeve said, and turned around to look out over the water.

"Anyway, it's better than your grandpa-mobile. The suspension is so soft on that thing that you can't even turn properly," she continued.

"I like it like that," Cazale said, and grinned. He stubbed out the cigarillo on the balustrade, and sighed.

He studied the tens of thousands of colored lights on either side of the river, some twinkling, some steady. He looked at the woman next to him, and briefly considered if he should share that the Clover gang was driving a charcoal gray Blazer, and that one of them was a woman - but he decided against it.

"It kinda makes you think, doesn't it? The Clover gang could be hiding behind any one of those lights," Maeve said, looking at the same lights as Cazale.

"Yeah."

"Don Coluzzo, I fear we can't get much further tonight. I'll intensify our search for these crooks, and I expect you to do the same...?"

"Indeed, Mr. Donnelly."

"But the crux of this particular biscuit is... can we use these unfortunate incidents to create a positive working environment...? Can we cooperate on a grander scale?"

Don Coluzzo furrowed his brow - the biscuit analogy had gone completely over his head, but he didn't want to lose face, so he didn't mention it.

"I believe we can, Mr. Donnelly. I'll inform my number one, The Silencer, that he must share all his info with your number one, White Fever. And... I take it that the, ah... no-go zones that were put in place after the mishap in the docks a month ago will now be lifted, so we can actively pursue our interests in your part of the city?"

"Well, if you do the same in your part of the city...?"

"Oh, naturally, Mr. Donnelly."

"Then we have an agreement, Don Coluzzo," Fast Freddie said, and put out his hand.

Salvatore Coluzzo shook it, and then they started walking back to their limos.

"Looks like the old men are done talking. I guess it's back to work. It's been nice chatting with you, Fever," Cazale said, and saluted Maeve.

"Likewise. See you in the cross hairs."

They separated, and went over to their respective cars. Once Fast Freddie and all the soldiers were safely back in the vehicles, Maeve started, and made a quick u-turn.

After waiting for what seemed like minutes for the huge limo to perform the same maneuver, Maeve lifted her foot off the brake, and began to drive slowly towards Adams Boulevard - a few minutes later, the unusual convoy was travelling North on Adams, heading back to the Donnelly mansion.

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Much later, Maeve was sitting at a table in the Burger Palace, looking at five handwritten notes, and trying to make sense of it all the info she'd received in the last few hours. All the tension surrounding the summit had given her a throbbing headache, and she dearly longed for Staci's skilled fingers to work their magic on her neck muscles. She took a sip of her coffee, and

checked her wristwatch - 2:15, AM. She sighed, and reached for her phone to call Staci.

She picked it up, and had already found the club's number in the phonebook, when the door opened, and two people walked in - an older man, and a young brunette wearing far too much makeup, and a very revealing dress. The man sat down at the table nearest the door, and unfolded a newspaper.

The young woman made a beeline for Maeve's table, and sat down opposite her.

"Hey, Fever. I'm Jillian," Siobhan purred, trying her damndest to act sexy and cool.

"Hello. I'm sorry... do I know you?" Maeve said, and put down her phone.

"Not yet. But soon, we'll be intimately acquainted."

"Oh...?" Maeve said, and leaned back on the bench.

"Yeah," Siobhan purred.

"Are you a working girl?"

'What's a working girl?' Siobhan thought, and was momentarily nonplused by the unfamiliar term.

"I, errr... no. You see, I'm just out lookin' for a little hot action, and... well..." Siobhan said, and ran her thumb across the knuckles on Maeve's hand.

"... baby, you're my type," she whispered using her huskiest voice. She knew that line would pick up nine out of ten straight men, and she hoped the woman with the broad shoulders and the spiky hair sitting opposite her would fall for the same tactics.

"Well. I'm flattered, but this ain't gonna work. Sorry," Maeve said, and wanted to get up, but Siobhan held on to her hand.

"Come on, baby. I don't see no ring on your fingers. Don't tell me you don't want to..."

Siobhan leaned forward to give Maeve a clear view down her cleavage.

"...eat me?" she said, and ran her tongue across her upper lip.

Maeve forcefully removed her hand from Siobhan's, and bared her teeth in a disgusted grimace. Her eyes narrowed dangerously as she looked at the young woman in front of her.

"Take a hike, little girl, you've overstayed your welcome," Maeve growled.

The corner of Siobhan's mouth twitched, and her eyes grew wider and wider as she realized she

had ruined everything. She decided to make a last ditch effort, and all but flashed her breasts at the Enforcer.

"But... but you make me so wet, baby! Let's go into the restroom and f-f-fuck our brains out!" Siobhan said in a panic. Her voice gradually rose in pitch and intensity until it was a near-shriek.

The other customers turned around to look at the strange scene, and a few of them guffawed.

Maeve just stared in disbelief at the young woman, and then she scooped up the notes, and put them and her phone in her shirt pocket. She emptied her coffee, and got up from the table.

"Listen, kid, I don't know what the hell it is you're trippin' on, but I'd be more careful if I were you. It's a nasty world out there, and some day, you're gonna run into someone who'll force you to deliver on that offer," Maeve said, threw the empty polystyrene cup in the garbage bin, and left the Palace.

Siobhan turned around, and looked at the man who had arrived at the same time as her - Shannon. His face resembled a thundercloud, and his lips had been reduced to two narrow lines. He got up with a jerk, and stormed out of the Palace.

Siobhan could feel that everyone in the restaurant was looking at her, so she blushed and looked down. With a sound that was a mix between a sob and a cough, she got up, and followed her brother.

As Fever walked over to her Mustang, she picked her phone out of her pocket, and called the Three-In-One Club.

'Three-In-One Club, it's Staci.'

"Hey, baby," Maeve said.

'Hey yourself. What's cooking?'

"Oh, this and that. Lemme tell ya, this city is populated by the weirdest people..." Maeve said, and leaned against the driver's side door of the Mustang.

'And you've only just noticed...?'

"Ha, ha. I ran into a..."

The sounds of a struggle reached Maeve's ears, and she looked around. In the shadows next to the car wash, she could see the young woman from before being roughed up by an older man.

'Yoohoo, Maeve?'

"I'm sorry, baby... something's come up. I gotta go," Maeve said, and didn't wait for Staci to reply.

She drew her Beretta, and half-walked, half-ran towards the fighting couple.

"HEY!" she shouted loudly, her voice echoing through the parking lot.

The older man's head whipped around, and he stared at the approaching Enforcer. He grabbed the young woman's arm, and dragged her around the corner.

"Fuck!" Maeve said to herself, and began to run flat out.

As she turned the corner of the car wash, she could see a dark SUV leave the parking lot in a cloud of dust, driving West on Ninth.

"Goddammit!" Maeve said, and punched the air. She closed her eyes, and sighed. After holstering the Beretta, she found her phone, and quickly dialed Danny's number.

"Danny, it's Fever. Do we have anyone on Franklin, near Ninth Street?"

'Ah... no. No, we don't.'

"Crap!"

'Something wrong? Did you see the Clover-gang's Blazer?'

"No, nothing like that. It was just... never mind, Danny. I'll talk to ya later," Maeve said, and hung up. She sighed again, and started walking back to the Mustang - and her head was throbbing twice as hard as before.

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Shannon stopped with a screech at a red light at the intersection that would lead them onto the Twelfth Street bridge.

"You stupid, immature, little brat! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't ring your neck right here!" Shannon gripped the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles turned white, and he had red blotches on his cheeks.

"'Cos I'm your fuckin' sister, you fuckin' psycho!" Siobhan said, and punched Shannon hard on the arm.

"That might not be enough anymore... sis."

"Fuck you! I told you this would happen! I told you she'd reject me, but you still forced me into

doing it. And guess what? I was fuckin' right!" Siobhan said, and started to cry. Her tears ran down her cheeks, ruining the mascara, and making the already garish makeup look like something out of a grade-Z horror movie.

"She rejected you because you acted like a fuckin' whore!" Shannon shouted, and mashed the gas as the lights turned green.

"You gave me these clothes, Shannon. It's your own fault..."

"One more word out of you, and... and..."

"And what? And you'll kill me, like you killed all the others?"

"Yes. And don't doubt for a second that I wouldn't," Shannon said, and took a few deep breaths to calm down. He was already working on plan B in his mind, and he had a pretty good idea how to go ahead with it.

Suddenly he thought of something, and stepped on the brakes. As soon as the Blazer was stationary, he reached across Siobhan, and opened the passenger side door.

"Get out, loser," he said, and gave his sister a hard push.

"But we're not there yet..." Siobhan said, and climbed out of the car.

"You can walk the rest of the way. Who knows, you might even earn a quick buck," Shannon said, and stepped on the gas. He made a u-turn across all four lanes of the bridge, and drove back the way they had come from.

Siobhan watched the Blazer drive away until she lost sight of the taillights in the traffic. She turned around, and wiped the tears off her cheeks. She sighed deeply, and started walking towards the derelict building on the other side of the river.

Shannon thoroughly scanned the Burger Palace parking lot to see if Fever was still there. Satisfied that she wasn't, he pulled into the lot, and parked the Blazer behind the car wash.

With a few deep breaths, he managed to get his fiery temper under control. He opened the door to the Burger Palace, and walked inside. Most of the people there were the same as before, and one or two were still talking about the embarrassing incident.

Shannon went up to the counter, and ordered a small hamburger.

"That'll be \$1.98," the young man said.

"Here ya go. Man, that thing before was really somethin', huh? For a second, I thought we'd get

an honest-to-goodness catfight right there," Shannon said in a carefree voice. He unwrapped the hamburger, and splattered some extra ketchup on it.

The young man leaned forward and placed his elbows on the counter.

"No shit, man. They were gettin' loud!" he said and grinned.

"Too bad, too. I was supposed to talk to Fever, but she kinda left in a huff. You wouldn't happen to know where she can be reached, would ya?" Shannon said, and took a bite of the hamburger.

"No, sorry, I don't. She comes in most nights, but..." the young man said, and shrugged.

"Shit. Hey, what's your name, anyway?"

"Thom."

"Hi, I'm Shannon."

"Hello. Oh... wait a minute... I've seen Fever with a real babe a couple of times. Yeah, that's right."

"Oh?" Shannon said, suddenly rather interested, but trying not to look it.

"Yeah... tall, brunette, blue eyes, legs that won't quit."

"Typical, huh?" Shannon said, and winked.

"I've seen her in the Three-In-One Club just across the street."

"She's a dancer or something?"

"No, I don't think so. She came out of an office there."

"Hmmm. Maybe I can use her to find Fever. I'll try it. D'ya happen to know the brunette's name?"

"No."

"All right. Much obliged. Great burger, by the way. Here's your tip," Shannon said, and handed Thom \$100.

"Oh no, man, I couldn't..."

"Listen, I really need to reach Fever, and you've been most helpful. Keep it. You've earned it," Shannon said, and crumpled the burger wrapper into a ball.

"Thanks, man!"

"Pleasure's all mine," Shannon said, and threw the ball of paper into a garbage bin.

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CHAPTER 7

Maeve's bedroom was peaceful and quiet, and the only sound heard was Maeve's soft snoring - until her phone suddenly rang, shattering the peace.

She groaned, and tried to fight her way free of the pillow and the blanket that had somehow swapped places. She reached over to the side of the bed where Staci usually was, but the bed was empty.

Maeve sighed, and groaned again. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, and fumbled around in the darkness, trying to find her wristwatch. After finding it, she had to do a double-take when she saw the time.

She reached down to pick up her jeans, and unclipped the phone from her belt.

"Fever," she growled.

'Hi, Fever. It's Jimmy Snakes. I... I need your help, man.'

"Snakes...?"

'Uh, yeah. Have you been smoking weed?'

"Hell, no."

'It's just that your voice sounds, like, really rough, man. Never mind.'

"You need my help?"

'Uhhh, yeah, like I said, man. It's two things, actually. I've been doin' some snoopin' on my own, and I've found Asshole Junior's secret hideout, man.'

Maeve rubbed her tired face, and tried to make sense of the things Snakes told her.

"Secret hideout? Asshole Junior... oh, the Weasel."

'That's right man. I've found his stash, man. His hideout, his hut, his home base, his crib, his...'

"I get the picture. Where?"

'Thirteenth Street, nearly out at the docks.'

"All right. What do you need my help for?"

'Breakin' in and gettin' my porn tapes back, man, like you promised.'

"We haven't found that O'Shaughnessy dude yet, Snakes."

'Oh... well...'

"What was the second thing?"

'I was wondering if you had... maybe a c-note or two you could spare? I'll pay you back as soon as I get hold of my tapes.'

"I might have, but... Snakes?"

'Uhhh, yeah?'

"What the HELL are you doing up at a quarter past six in the fuckin' morning!"

'I never sleep, man.'

"Well, I do!"

'Sorry. But, you know, could you...?'

"All right. Thirteenth, nearly at the docks."

'Yeppers, man.'

"I'll be there in half an hour at the most."

'Too fuckin' cool, man! Snakes and the Fever workin' together, man! Too fuckin' cool!'

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Maeve said, and hung up.

She groaned again, and staggered towards the bathroom to splash some water in her face.

Twenty-eight minutes later, she parked the Mustang behind Snakes' Taurus, and got out of the car with a deep sigh.

She walked up to the driver's side door of the Taurus, and looked in. Snakes was leaning against the inside of the door, looking quite miserable.

Maeve tapped on the window, and poked her head in when Snakes opened the door.

"Hey, are you all right? You look like shit."

"I've got the shakes, man. But I'm cool."

"Still no pills?"

Snakes shook his head. His complexion was never the healthiest, but now he was pale gray, making the tattoo of the twin Cobras really stand out.

"I tried something different, but they didn't work, man."

"Or maybe they worked too well..."

"Yeah. Anyway, it's right over there," he said, and pointed past Maeve. She turned her head, and looked at a one-storey building that had probably been a garage once upon a time.

"You sure you can handle it, Snakes?"

"Oh, yeah. My tapes are in there, I can smell 'em," he said in an unsteady voice.

"Well, let's go, then," Maeve said, and went back to the Mustang. She opened the trunk, and took out a crowbar.

"Always prepared," she said off Snakes' surprised look.

Maeve stood up on tip-toes, and tried to look in through a window, but it was so dirty it was impossible for her to see anything.

"Nah. Can't see shit. Can't get through there, anyway," she said, and started looking for another way to get inside. She walked around the front of the building to check out the sliding door, but it had a sturdy padlock on it.

"Nope. Backdoor," she said, and walked with determined steps to the rear of the small building.

The backdoor proved to be accessible, and Maeve put the crowbar against the doorjamb.

"Ready?" she said.

"Hell, yeah!"

Maeve gave the crowbar an almighty tug, and the entire doorjamb broke off. The door swung open, revealing a few cardboard boxes that Maeve's trained eye immediately recognized as being stolen goods.

They stepped inside, and Maeve found a lightswitch. The strip lights blinked a couple of times, and then came alive.

"Ohhhhhh shit!" Snakes said, and gawked at the hundreds of cardboard boxes that nearly reached the ceiling of the small building.

"We're gonna need a forklift! How the hell am I gonna find my tapes in here?!" he said, and leaned against the wall.

"I'm more interested in finding out how the hell they've kept this from us," Maeve said, and frowned. She folded her arms across her chest, and started thinking about all the strange events of the last few days.

Snakes went further into the building, nudging a few of the boxes with his boot, and pulling others out from their shelves so he could look inside.

Maeve went the other way, past endless stacks of brand new DVD and BluRay players, flatscreen TVs, and high-end home entertainment systems. Down at the other end of the small building, an old-fashioned wooden desk with a very scratched top was placed next to the sliding door. It had several small cardboard boxes and plastic bags on it, and Maeve put down the crowbar and started rummaging through the bags, searching for Snakes' tapes.

She soon found a plastic bag with videotapes and DVDs in it, and when she pulled one out, the colorful image on the cover left no doubt as to what was on the tape.

"Yo, Snakes!"

"Yeah?"

"I think I've found your tapes."

"Woohoo, man!" Snakes said, and hurried over to where Maeve was standing.

"Are these your tapes?"

"Lemme see, man... yeah... yeah, looks like it. One or two are missing," Snakes said, as he looked at the boxes.

"Good. Take the bag, and let's get outta here," Maeve said, lifted the bag off the desk, and gave it to Snakes. She took the crowbar, and moved away from the desk, but just as she did so, she spotted a small cardboard box in her peripheral vision marked '\$\$\$'.

"Wait a minute," she said, and reached up to pull the box off the shelf.

Maeve and Snakes looked at each other, and then Maeve pulled the lid off the box - it was packed with brand new, crisp dollar bills.

"Oh, gawd... PAYDAY! PAYDAY FOR JIMMY FUCKIN' SNAKES! OHHHH YES! PAYDAY!" Snakes shouted, and began to dance around on the spot.

Maeve quickly took up a bill, and held it against the light.

"It's genuine. There must be at least 25 G in there. Holy shit..." she said, and rubbed her forehead.

"And now it's mine! All mine! All mine! ... well, I guess you can have some of it if you want..." Snakes said, and grinned broadly.

"Hmmm..."

Suddenly, someone fiddled with the lock on the sliding door, and within seconds, it started rolling upwards.

Snakes ran away, but Maeve drew her Beretta, and waited for their uninvited guest.

Harry Weaver, Jr. pushed the sliding door into position, and dusted off his hands... and froze in mid-step when he noticed that Maeve was aiming her Beretta directly at his head.

"What the...?" he said and put his hand inside his jacket.

"D'ya really think ya can outdraw a speedin' bullet, Weasel? Reach for the sky," she drawled.

Junior slowly pulled his hand back out of his jacket, and raised both hands high in the air.

"You!" he said angrily when he saw Snakes come back towards the sliding door.

"Me, yeah! And now you're toast, asshole! You know who this is, right? Well, if ya don't, this is White fuckin' Fever, asshole, and she's gonna ventilate your head!"

"Get in, and pull down the sliding door, Weasel," Maeve said, and waved the gun in the air.

He groaned, and turned around to pull the sliding door back down. It hit the ground with a metallic clang, and kicked up a little cloud of dust.

"What do you want, Fever?"

"A couple of things. One, where did you get this money from?" she said, and held up the brand new bill.

"Why the hell should I tell you?"

"Cos I'll kill ya if ya don't?"

She was bluffing, but Junior couldn't know that, and he turned a little pale.

"Ea... Easy now. We got the money from the armored car heist a few years ago."

"So that was you, huh? I woulda thought that was a bit outta your league? I thought you and Daddy Weasel were just two-bit hustlers?"

"We didn't pull off the heist itself... we just... laundered the money."

"And then you hid it in plain sight? Clever. I'll confiscate the money."

Snakes' shoulders slumped, and he groaned, and rolled his eyes.

"But...!" Junior said.

"Got a problem with that?"

"... no."

"The second thing I want to know is... two words - Dillon O'Shaughnessy."

"Oh... first of all... can we make a deal?"

"Perhaps we can. Depends on what you've got."

"That's good enough for me. Want do you want to know about him?"

"Is he one of the Clovers?"

"I believe so, yes."

"What's his story?"

"Well... I know him from earlier. When we were younger, we both lived in the slums over on Fourteenth Street. When I heard they called themselves the Four Leaf Clover, I gave him a ring earlier in the week, and... well, he didn't say that he was one of them, but he didn't refute it, either."

"Who does he run with?"

"This is where we're going to talk about what kind of deal we can make, Fever."

"Well, how about... if you tell me what you know, I won't burn this place down to the ground?" Maeve said, her face an unflinching mask of steel.

Junior gulped, and he rubbed his brow.

"A-a-all right... Back in the day, before he did some time in the state pen for dealing, Dillon used to hang out with someone called Shannon McWhirter. Shannon must be around my age, but they moved out of the city not long after Dillon went in the slammer, and I haven't seen 'em since."

"'Them'?"

"Shannon had a kid sister... can't remember her name. She was only nine or so when they left. He's about six years older than her."

Several pieces started falling in place in Maeve's mind, and she nodded to herself.

'That fits with what Steve told me... and that's gotta be the young woman and the slightly older man I met in the Palace last night, too. But why?' Maeve thought.

"Much obliged, Junior. Looks like my matches won't be gettin' a workout today after all. We're leaving now. Open the sliding door," Maeve said, and grabbed her crowbar and the box of money.

Junior complied, and gave Maeve and Snakes the Evil Eye as they walked past him.

"Oh, and if you follow us, I won't hesitate to shoot," Maeve said, and aimed the Beretta at Junior's crotch.

"Just so you know," she said, and winked.

A few minutes later, Snakes leaned against the roofline of the Taurus, and sighed deeply.

"At least I got my porn back, but man, I really thought I had it made," he said, and looked at the box of money in Maeve's hands.

"Who says you don't, Snakes?"

Maeve put the box on the Taurus' hood, and opened the lid. She quickly counted the money, and scooped up a handful of dollar bills.

"It was Weasel Junior who lied to you about the 10 G reward, so it's only fitting that it'll come out of his money. Here ya go, Snakes. Don't blow it all at once," she said, and handed Snakes the wad of money.

His eyes popped open, and his jaw fell down to his chest.

"But... But! ...But..."

"This is yours. I get the rest," Maeve said, and put the lid back on the box.

"Oh, Jesus flippin' Christ!" Snakes said in a trembling voice.

"If I were you, I'd hide it somewhere out of Junior and Senior's reach."

"Man!"

"Gotta go. See ya around, Snakes. Snakes...? Snakes!"

"Huh?" he said, completely transfixed by the dollar bills in his hand.

"Now's a good time to skedaddle. Junior's gotta be pretty pissed, and he won't stay in there forever."

"Oh... yeah... Thanks, Fever. You're my friend!"

"Uhhh, anytime. But, I'd appreciate it if the next time was a little later in the day, you know," Maeve said, and yawned.

Snakes got into his Taurus, and started the engine. As he drove away, he waved his hand out of the window, and honked repeatedly.

Maeve chuckled, and waved back.

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After having returned from the crude, makeshift shower they had set up at the far end of the derelict building, Shannon stood with his hands on his hips, and observed his partners in crime, who were still snoozing in their camping-style sleeping bags.

He was moderately impressed with Wellman and O'Shaughnessy, but Siobhan still caused him headaches. After her pathetic performance in the Palace, he had come to the conclusion that she was too young to take part in such a daring operation - and also that there was a risk she'd betray them all, simply by being so inept.

He snorted, and left the derelict building, treading his way through the grassy lot and down to the rusty fence overlooking the Monroe.

The day had dawned overcast and cool, and the breeze coming from the river was giving him the shivers. He stuck his hands deep into his pockets, and looked up at the sun trying to break through the thick cloud cover.

The Monroe river looked and smelled like it always did, but this morning, the travelling water and faint smell of garbage caused Shannon to reminisce about the many times he and Siobhan had played together as children.

He remembered one particular incident thirteen years ago where she had been sitting on a swing, and he had pushed her. Harder and harder he had pushed, until the inevitable happened, and she flew off, and landed on the hard ground, breaking her wrist. She had cried terribly that day, but he had comforted her. She had let him, despite the fact that it was actually his fault that she had been hurt.

'... Amazing how history has a tendency to repeat itself. After all we've been through, I'm actually planning on sacrificing my sister,' he thought, and surprised himself by feeling ill at ease.

'But it needs to be done. She's the weak link. She could jeopardize the operation if I bring her. She could be the deciding factor between incredible wealth, or a messy death. But it's strange to think about... If tonight's hit is successful, I'll leave her and the 400 G behind, and ride off into the sunset with five million dollars...'

"Shannon?"

Shannon spun around, and looked startled at Siobhan, who had managed to sneak up on him without making a sound. Again, he felt a short stab of pain in his heart, but he knew that cutting her out of the final hit would be the best solution for all parties.

"Did you want anything, sis?"

"No... well, I just wanted to apologize for screwing up last night," Siobhan said quietly. She had thrown away the revealing dress, and had changed into a more civilized combo of blue jeans and a white, long-sleeved sweatshirt. Today, without the garish makeup, she looked exactly like the young, naive, insecure woman she really was.

"It's all right. Fortunately, I was able to set plan B in motion. We're still on target."

"Oh..."

Shannon looked at his sister, and felt a pang of regret - but after debating with himself for a few seconds, he finally accepted the decision he had made earlier.

"If everything goes well, you'll soon get a visitor. Don't worry 'bout last night, sis. That was just a glitch. Tonight's the night," Shannon said, and turned his back to his sister to look at the river.

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Knock, knock

"Enter!" Staci said, and closed one of the filing cabinets.

"Hey, baby. Redecorating?" Maeve said as she peeked into Staci's office at the Club.

The large, ungainly mahogany desk was gone, replaced by a much more modern and sleek design with a steel tube frame and a glass desktop. An anglepoise lamp stood near one of the corners, shining through a filter screen so the lightbulb wouldn't reflect on the glass surface, and on the other far corner, a laptop was opened and turned on.

"Yep. I got a good deal on the mahogany monstrosity. Some collector wanted it. He offered me \$500! Can you believe it?"

Staci put a wad of files on the brand new desk, and sat down. She adjusted the chair to fit the height of the desk, and pulled the laptop over so she could get some work done. She looked up and noticed that Maeve was still standing in the door.

"What are you waiting for? Christmas? Come in for Chrissakes."

"It's just that... seeing you like this gives me such a buzz, baby."

"Don't be silly, silly."

"I'm not kiddin'. Seeing you in charge like this really make my hormones stand up and salute, ya know. And I mean that in the good sense," Maeve purred, and walked over to stand next to Staci.

"Uh-huh?"

"Oh, yeah," Maeve said, and leaned down to kiss Staci thoroughly.

"Well, I told you I'd be good at this job," Staci said when they separated.

"That you did," Maeve said, and moved her hand underneath Staci's hair. With a feather-light touch, she ran her fingers across Staci's neck, gently clawing and caressing the super-soft skin she found there.

Staci leaned into Maeve's touch, and sighed. She looked up, and locked eyes with Maeve. Their special connection kicked in with full effect, and they both broke out in identical, knowing grins.

"I need a break, anyway. Let's go snuggle on the couch," Staci said, and got up from her swivel chair.

Staci kicked off her shoes, and stretched out on the couch. She put her head in Maeve's lap, and made herself comfortable.

"How are you feeling, baby?" Maeve said, running her fingers through Staci's black hair.

"I'm tired. I've been staring at these files ever since I got here this afternoon. Did you know that Sammi Jo was pulling a number on you and Fast Freddie?"

"I had a hunch, but I couldn't prove it. Have you found anything in the files?"

"I've found so much I don't know what to do with it. It's everything, absolutely everything. She had her fingers in all kinds of things. Errr... No pun intended."

Maeve chuckled, and made a grimace.

"Do you know where Sammi Jo is now?" Staci said, and grabbed Maeve's hand.

"She tried to work with the Don for a short while, but that didn't work out, either. I don't know what she's doing now. Good riddance."

"Yeah. Maeve, do you think I'll end up being like her... eventually, I mean?"

"Hell no, Staci! You have a heart, that's more than she ever had. No, you won't be like her. Besides, I won't allow it."

"Oooh!" Staci said, and laughed.

"Ummm, that wasn't supposed to be funny, hon."

"Oh."

"ANYway. I had a most interesting morning. I went on a field excursion with Jimmy Snakes, of all people. I learned something new about the Clovers, too."

"Oh, really?"

"I think we know all their names now. We already knew about O'Shaughnessy, and Wellman, his running bud, but this morning, Harry Weaver Jr. told me about a brother and sister-combo that we didn't know about. Shannon McWhirter. Ring any bells?"

"Hmmm... no. Can't say that it does. What's his sister's name?" Staci said, and toyed with Maeve's strong fingers.

"Weaver didn't say. But I think I met them last night."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Remember I called you, and then had to run almost at once?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, that was down at the Palace. Literally three minutes before, I had the weirdest experience. A young woman walked in, early to medium twenties, followed by a man who was maybe five years older than her..."

"And you think it was Shannon and his sister?"

"I'm almost certain it was. But anyway, she sits down at my table and comes on to me like you wouldn't believe. A real sex pot. She practically throws herself at me right there, and I was thinking 'what the hell...?' I still don't know what they were trying to accomplish."

"But you weren't tempted at all, right? Because if you were, I'll go down to the First National Bank and take a swan dive off the 42nd floor!" Staci said, and squeezed Maeve's fingers.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Staci! Don't even joke about that! No, I wasn't tempted. I know I can be a bit of a Birddawg..."

"A bit!"

"... but she was just so unbelievably over the top that I actually felt sorry for her. She was so far out of her league it was awful to look at. Like a train wreck."

"Uh-huh?"

"Absolutely. But underneath all the garish makeup and the horrible clothes, she was actually a very pretty girl," Maeve said, and then realized how that sounded.

"Uhhhh, that didn't come out right..."

Staci guffawed, and poked her thumb into Maeve's side. Maeve jumped, and retaliated by tickling Staci's stomach, earning herself a loud squeal that segued into a throaty chuckle.

"Ahem! Jeez, I can't leave you two lovesick teenagers alone for five minutes!" Danielle said, standing in the door to the office.

"Hi, Danielle," Maeve said, and nodded - both her hands were still busy tickling Staci's stomach.

Staci was too preoccupied to blush, but she still closed her eyes, and shook her head.

"Good evening, Fever. I'm just gonna put this little note here, and then I'll go home and kick my

husband's ass for never getting me going like that," Danielle said, and winked at Maeve.

Now Staci really blushed, and she covered her face with her hands. She groaned, and shook her head, making her hair slide from side to side across Maeve's lap.

"Awww, you're so cute when you do that, baby," Maeve purred, only adding to Staci's blush.

"You better stop teasin' her, Fever. You didn't see how she reacted to an SOB the other day."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, she morphed into a real badass."

"I better stop, then," Maeve said with a laugh. She removed her hands from Staci's stomach, and clawed her cheek instead.

"What's the note about, Danielle?" Staci said, finally catching her breath.

"Candy called in sick. She's got the cramps."

"Ouch. All right, I'll enter it into the logbook."

"Good. See ya later, Fever," Danielle said, and left the office.

"I guess I better go, too," Maeve said.

"Oh, already?"

"Yeah. I still have some people to see tonight."

"OK. I'll call you around two as usual," Staci said, and sat up. She started arranging her wild hair, but gave up after a short while.

"Look what you did!" she said, and chuckled.

"Oh, baby, I can do a lot more than that. Watch me," Maeve said, and claimed Staci's lips in an all-singing, all-dancing kiss.

Outside the office, in a booth on the opposite side of the room, a man folded up a newspaper, and picked up the Dry Martini he'd been working on for a while. His eyes briefly followed Danielle walking around the room, but soon returned to the door to the office.

It wasn't long until the door opened, and Fever came out. She waved goodbye to the person still inside the office, and then left the Club.

He nodded to himself, and pulled back his sleeve to check his watch - a quarter to eleven, PM.

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Pietro Cazale pulled over at the curb in front of a convenience store on Twelfth Street West, and turned off the engine. He pressed the button for the interior lights, and picked up a map that was lying on the seat. He quickly found his position, just about halfway between Buchanan and McKinley.

'All right, this is where I saw the Blazer. Where could they go from here? Hmmm.'

Cazale took a ball point pen, and started tracing the nearby streets on the map.

'I doubt the Clover gang spotted me the other day, so they probably haven't dumped the Blazer. But where's the best place to hide an SUV... hmmm,' he thought, and rubbed his brow.

The tip of the pen reached a small pictogram that indicated that there was a multi-storey parking garage on McKinley Boulevard, just around the corner from where he was. He put the map away, and drove away from the curb.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but this is a private garage... oh, good evening, Mr. Cazale. I didn't realize it was you," the parking attendant said, as the black Cadillac drove up to the booth. He quickly adjusted his tie, and buttoned his jacket.

"Evening. Say, have you seen a charcoal gray Blazer recently?"

"A Blazer? Hmmm. Well, I have, but it's a popular car, so it might not be the right one... Do you have the license plate? Or does it have any distinguishing features?"

"No to both. Unfortunately."

"Oh..."

"I'll take a look around," Cazale said.

"As you wish, Mr. Cazale," the attendant said, and pressed a button. The bright yellow bar blocking the road quickly rose up, clearing the path for Cazale's Cadillac.

Cazale went through all nine floors of the parking garage with a fine tooth comb, but in the end, he had to admit defeat. He had found three Blazers, but none had been the right color. As he finished checking the top floor, he drove over to the far side, parked, and got out of the car.

He walked to the edge of the roof, and looked through the fence. He studied the night sky, and sighed deeply.

'Nah. It would've been too easy,' he thought, and lit a cigarillo.

From his vantage point high above McKinley Boulevard, he could easily see the very dark area of the city that had been home to a multitude of small factories and businesses before the financial crisis a decade ago. Now, all that remained were a few empty lots and some vandalized, derelict buildings. Here and there, pinpoints of light revealed that some of the buildings had been reclaimed by the homeless - or by people who didn't want to be found.

'It would be the perfect hiding place. It's so big that it would take a battalion of men a week to search it. Hmmm.'

"No luck, Mr. Cazale?" the parking attendant said when the black Cadillac pulled up to the booth.

"I'm afraid not."

"Better luck next time, eh?"

"Let's hope so," Cazale said, and drove out into the night, heading for the old industrial zone.

Cazale pulled over just before he reached the bridge at Twelfth Street. He waited briefly for some traffic to pass, and then executed a u-turn.

'I guess this is as good a place as any to start,' he thought.

He got out of the car, took off his camel hair overcoat, and placed it carefully on the back seat. He put on his black leather gloves, and then attached the silencer to his Walther P99, just to be on the safe side.

After making sure the silencer was fitted properly, he opened the trunk, and found a small, but powerful, flashlight.

He ran across the street, and walked along an old, rusty fence until he reached a gate.

The padlock looked like it had been jimmied recently, but that wasn't so unusual in this part of the city. Cazale moved the gate aside, and squeezed through.

He found himself in a grassy lot where the vegetation was nearly a foot high. He grumbled,

because he knew that the risk of stepping in dog poo was always far greater in places such as this one.

He moved the cone of the flashlight across the lot, but he couldn't see any obvious signs of activity. Most of the windows on the side of the building were broken, but one or two were intact. The light reflected off an old-fashioned chain driven gate that appeared to be rusted shut, and an equally old and rusty oil barrel standing next to the gate.

Cazale took another step forward, but his foot slipped on a rock hidden in the tall grass, and he nearly fell flat on his face. He cursed loudly, and reached down to massage his ankle.

He shone the flashlight closer to the ground, and saw to his great horror that the grassy lot was covered in rocks and lumps of concrete.

"I don't fuckin' think so!" he said out loud, and spun around on his heel.

Cazale moved the gate back to its original position, and then crossed the street. After one last look at the derelict building, he got into the car, and put the flashlight in the tray between the seats. He took off his gloves, and picked up the map and the pen. He made a big, fat X across the site he was at, and then started the engine and drove away.

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'Hello all you crazy people of the night, this is Nat Thompson, and you're listening to WERC on 91.2 FM, your number one rock'n'roll station. It's a quarter past two in the morning, and we're busy celebrating the golden voices of rock'n'roll. Here's Del Shannon with his unforgettable hit from 1961, Runaway...'

Just as Maeve had stopped at a red light at the corner of Twelfth and Franklin, her phone rang, and she leaned over to unclip it from her belt. She flipped it open, and smiled broadly when she saw the caller ID.

"Hey, baby," she purred, and turned down the radio.

'Hey, yourself,' Staci said at the other end of the connection.

"Are you on your way home?"

'Yep. Thanks for stopping by earlier.'

"Sure. Listen, I couldn't tempt you to come over? You know, we could... ah... have some fun?"

'Not tonight, Maeve, please. I'm really tired. Oh... wait a minute...'

Maeve could hear Staci fumbling with the phone through the connection, and she furrowed her brow.

'Oh, man...' Staci said, sounding irritated.

"What?"

'A cop is pulling me over. Damn.'

The lights turned green, and Maeve pulled away from the intersection. She only drove at a walking pace, and several of the cars behind her began to honk.

"Are you sure it's a cop?"

'Yeah. He's got a flashing red light on the dashboard and everything.'

"Are you still on Jefferson? I'm over on Franklin, I can be with you in two seconds."

'No, don't bother. I used my cell phone while I was driving, so I guess I broke a law.'

"Come on, Staci, that's silly," Maeve said and laughed.

'Not to me it isn't. The cop's nearly at my window now, so I gotta go. Love you, see you tomorrow,' Staci said, and sent Maeve a couple of kisses through the phone before hanging up.

"See ya, baby. Sweet dreams."

Maeve chuckled and clipped her phone back on her belt.

"Sheesh, I'm living with the only law-abidin' citizen in the whole damn city..." she said out loud, and turned the radio back up.

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'Man, that damn thing is ringing off the hook tonight,' Maeve thought, and unclipped her ringing telephone from her belt.

"It's Fever. Talk to me."

'Fever, it's Sean Duffy. Where are you?'

"Good morning, Detective. I'm at the corner of Jefferson and Thirteenth, going north. May I ask why?"

'Well, one of the black-and-whites has just radioed in saying they've found an abandoned car in an alley off Sixth, east of Jefferson.'

"So? What's that got to do with me?"

'The car's a dark green Toyota Corolla hatchback. I checked the license plate, and it's registered to a Miss Staci Hart. Then I ran her...'

Maeve stood on the brakes, and the Mustang stopped dead with a howling screech in the middle of Jefferson. Maeve's heart began to pound, and she had to pinch the bridge of her nose hard to stop a sudden, explosive headache.

'Hello?'

"I'm still here. Was there a... DOA in the car?" she said hoarsely.

'No, it was empty when the black-and-white arrived. It's been vandalized pretty badly.'

"A-all right. Where did you say it was?"

'Sixth Street, in an alley next to Benitez Clothing.'

"I'll be there in sixty seconds," Maeve said, and threw the phone onto the passenger seat.

She thrust her boot hard down on the gas, and the Mustang rapidly picked up speed. The scenery went past in a dizzying blur as she thundered up the still crowded Boulevard, ducking and diving through the traffic, and going at nearly 100 miles an hour - and with her mind going even faster.

She ran a red light at both Eleventh, Ninth and Eighth Street, and by the time she reached Sixth, she was going so fast she nearly didn't make the turn.

Keeping her foot on the gas, she wrestled the Mustang around the corner in a cacophony of squealing tires. After turning onto Sixth, she could see the multi-colored flashing lights on the roof of the patrol car in the distance, marking the spot where Staci's Corolla had been found.

As soon as the Mustang had come to a halt next to the patrol car, she bounded from it, and ran over to the vandalized Corolla.

"Hey, Fever. One of yours?" the first policeman said.

"Mmmmm," Maeve said, too preoccupied with the sorry state of Staci's car to answer. All the windows were broken, and all four tires had been cut to pieces. There were large dents in the hood and the roof, and the hatchback had been forced open.

"Looks bad. The vermin got to it before we found it. But anyway, there's no blood or anything, so..." the second policeman said, and waved his hand in the direction of the Corolla.

Maeve looked through the busted window in the driver's side door, and noticed a piece of fabric lying on the seat. She recognized it as coming from the jacket Staci had been wearing in the Club, and her heart violently skipped several beats. She brushed away the shards of glass, and carefully picked up the piece of fabric.

Up until that point, she had hoped that it was all a sick joke, but the realization that something had happened to Staci hit her like a slap across the face.

Holding the torn-off piece of fabric to her nose, she closed her eyes, and drew a deep breath. The fabric still held Staci's scent, and Maeve felt tears sting her eyes for the first time in years. She cleared her throat, and turned away from the two policemen to have some privacy.

Suddenly her phone rang, and instinctively, she reached down to pick it up. She flipped it open, and stared dumbfounded at the display - it was Staci calling.

"Hello? Who is this?"

'Oh, hello, Miss Fever. It's so nice to finally get to talk to you,' a male voice said.

The corners of Maeve's mouth twitched, and she gripped the phone hard, making her knuckles turn white.

"Who the hell are you?" she sneered.

'A fan. Have you found the Corolla yet? I'll bet you're wondering where Miss Hart is? Well, we have her. She's unharmed, and she'll remain thus if you comply with our instructions. If you don't, Miss Hart will end up very, very harmed. You know we're not bluffing.'

"You've picked up the wrong Staci Hart, buster. My Staci is right here with me," Maeve growled.

'Oh, come on! Don't insult my intelligence, Fever. You'd be amazed how much info \$100 can buy... especially when it's given to a dirt-poor teenager working the night shift at the Palace.'

"Motherfucker!" Maeve bellowed out into the night, startling the two policemen.

'Now, now, that's no language for a lady!' the voice said.

"Where's Staci?"

'As I said, she's with us. Perhaps you want to talk to her?'

"Yes!"

'Go ahead, then. She's right here,' the man said.

'Maeve?' Staci said in a strong, if a bit shaky voice.

"Staci! Are you all right?"

'I'm fine... it wasn't a cop before...'

"Listen! Do whatever they tell you. They're ruthless. Don't give them a reason to hurt you!" Maeve said, drawing the attention of the two policemen.

They looked at each other, and then the driver reached into the patrol car, and picked up the radio mic. He keyed it, and began to talk to the dispatcher.

'I will. Love you,' Staci said.

"Love... you... too," Maeve replied. Her throat contracted so badly she could hardly get the words across her lips, and she could feel more tears sting in her eyes.

'Awwwww, isn't that sweet? Now you know what's at stake, Fever,' the man said.

"What the hell do you want from me?"

'We want you to meet us at the rear entrance of the Donnelly mansion in fifteen minutes. Once we're there, we'll...'

Maeve looked at the two policemen. She turned around, and walked away from them so they couldn't listen in on the conversation.

"You're stark-ravin' insane! If you think you're gonna raid the mansion, you have another thing coming!" Maeve said quietly.

'Oh, Fever. We're not going to raid the mansion itself, we're going to raid the treasury in the back yard... or rather, you are.'

"The hell I am! Look..."

'Fifteen minutes. Rear entrance. Oh, and it goes without saying - if you call ahead, and alert the soldiers, you'll never see the delightful Miss Hart again. Play along, or become a widow. Your choice,' the man said, and hung up - Maeve just stared at the phone in a state of shock.

She looked up when she realized that one of the officers was standing next to her, talking to her.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, are you all right, Fever? Has the owner of the car been abducted?"

"Oh, no... that was... that was just a wrong number," Maeve said, and clipped the phone on her

belt. She checked her watch, and cleared her throat.

"I'm getting late for an appointment, so... I have to go," she said in a voice trembling from the massive strain.

"We're going to get the car towed to the police impound, and get it assessed. You can pick it up there in a few days' time," the policeman said.

"Yeah... All right. Whatever."

'If we're still among the living then...' she thought, and walked back to the Mustang.

Maeve got in, and turned the ignition key. As the car started, the radio came alive, and she was greeted by Roy Orbison's crystal clear voice singing of a long lost love. Maeve reached for the gearshift, and let out a long, trembling sigh that she hadn't even realized that she'd been holding back.

She put the Mustang in gear, and drove towards the Donnelly mansion in a haze. Wherever she looked, she saw Staci's smiling face and her sparkling eyes, and all the traffic sounds morphed into Staci's soothing, throaty laugh.

Maeve knew she had to put all those thoughts away for the time being. She knew that the Clover gang would exploit any sign of weakness, so she had to stay focused - she had to become an ice cold killer when she met them.

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CHAPTER 8

Eleven minutes later, Maeve turned onto St. Francis Road, the quiet uptown street where the rear entrance to the Donnelly mansion was located. All the other villas and mansions were dark and quiet, save for a lit window here and there. Most people appeared to be asleep, but Maeve knew that wouldn't last long if the Clover gang stuck to their regular M.O.

The charcoal gray Blazer was parked in the shadows on the other side of the street, but Maeve parked under a street light in front of the fence. She turned off the radio and the engine, and picked up the torn piece of fabric.

Holding it to her nose, she took a deep breath, and did something she hadn't done for many years - she closed her eyes, and prayed to whomever was listening that Staci would stay safe and that they would see each other again when all this was over and done with.

She sighed as she watched three men, all carrying large canvas bags, and wearing street clothes instead of their customary boilersuits, climb out of the SUV, and walk over to the Mustang. She

put away the piece of fabric, and got out.

The first man reached down, and peeled back one of the corners of the bag he was carrying, revealing a rifle.

Maeve knew they were performing this charade because of the security cameras, and she had to restrain herself from not alerting the guards inside.

"Good morning, White Fever," the first man said, and waved at Maeve in a mock salute.

"I know your names, but it's nice to put some faces on the assholes," Maeve growled, and put her hands on her hips.

"Charming. Fever, please allow me to introduce the Four Leaf Clover. The handsome brother over there is Bob Wellman, the less than handsome Irishman over there is Dillon O'Shaughnessy, and I'm..."

"Shannon McWhirter. I know. Where's your sister? And where's Staci?"

"All those questions, Fever. As you might've guessed, Miss Hart and my sister are together. Miss Hart's fine... for now. But death is always just a phone call away," Shannon said coldly.

"Where. Is. She?" Maeve growled, putting a strong emphasis on all the word.

"Oh, dear, you really are impatient. I'll let you know later. First things first. I believe you've agreed to help us raid the treasury?"

"Hmmm."

"Goody. So, here's what we do. You take your access card, and run it through the slot by the gate. Then we enter, and walk up the garden path which will lead us to the door. There, you'll repeat the access card trick, and we'll enter the treasury itself. I'm sure you've done it a hundred times."

Maeve sighed, and reached for her wallet. All three men twitched, and pulled the canvas bags closer to their hands.

"A little slower, Fever. Just a little slower," Shannon said with his hand buried deep inside the bag.

Maeve pulled out her wallet, and found the access card. With a scowl, she waved it in the air, so it reflected the light from the street lamp above them.

"Oh, that's a good Enforcer," Shannon mocked, and pointed at the small electronic panel next to the gate.

Maeve swiped the card through the slot, and punched in her access code. After a few seconds, a red light changed to green, and a buzzer was heard.

"It's open," Maeve said, and opened the gate. She stepped aside to let Shannon walk in.

"Oh, no. Ladies first, Fever," Shannon said, and gave Maeve a push on her shoulder.

Maeve sighed, and walked through the gate.

Halfway to the windbreak, they were met by a sentry carrying an MP5. Shannon and the others froze slightly, but Maeve kept on walking.

"Hey, Doyle," she said, and waved at the sentry.

"Hiya, Fever. Kinda late to go into the basement, huh?"

"Yeah. Something's come up. Shit happens, you know."

"Boy, don't I ever. See ya later."

"See ya, buddy."

As the small group reached the windbreak, a video camera panned around, and zoomed in. A strong lamp was turned on, and illuminated their faces.

'Good morning, Fever. Who's that with you?' a male voice said from the intercom.

"Three Family members fresh in from overseas," Maeve fibbed, and turned to look quizzically at Shannon - who nodded in return.

'All right. Please enter your access code.'

Maeve punched in a second set of numbers, and the door in the windbreak opened.

"Very good, Fever," Shannon mocked, holding the door open to let the others walk in.

Once they were standing inside a small hallway, and out of the prying eyes of the security cameras, all three men took their Springfields out of the canvas bags, and released the safeties.

The walls, ceiling and even the floor were fitted with white tiles, and Shannon couldn't help

comparing it to a public restroom.

"We'll take over from here... and I better confiscate that," Shannon said, and reached for Maeve's Beretta. With a growl, she took a step back, but Wellman poked the barrel of his rifle into her neck.

"Tut, tut, Fever. Remember what's at stake," Shannon said, and held up his cell phone.

Maeve growled again, but let Shannon take the Beretta out of the shoulderholster unhindered.

Shannon swung open a frosted glass door, and peeked inside. The room behind the door was a short hallway that led to a flight of stairs, going down. At the far end of the room, a metallic gray wall could be seen.

"Wellman, guard her. Closely. She's a cunning little critter," Shannon said, and pointed the Springfield at Maeve.

"Will do, Shannon," Wellman said, and poked Maeve in the neck again.

"Do that again, asshole, and I'll stick that piece of shit where the sun don't shine," Maeve growled, and clenched her fists.

Wellman glared at her, but took a step back just in case.

"Less talk, more action, please. Come on," Shannon said, and went through the door.

Wellman grunted, and signaled Maeve to follow Shannon. Reluctantly, she went through the door, and down the short flight of stairs.

O'Shaughnessy guarded the rear, but since nothing was out of the ordinary, he quickly followed the others down.

The short flight of stairs led into a rectangular room where two of the three walls were filled with hundreds of little deposit boxes, very similar to the ones found in bank vaults.

Shannon surveyed the room, and went directly down to the far wall that held nine large deposit boxes.

"Now, Fever, tell me something. Why don't you have cameras in here, huh?"

"Because nobody in their right mind would ever raid this place," Maeve said.

"Oh, really?"

"This is the end of the road for you, Shannon. If you want what's in those boxes, you're shit outta luck. You can only unlock them with a special keycard... which I don't have."

"Perhaps you're referring to this keycard?" Shannon said, reached into his pocket, and took out a small piece of plastic the size of a regular credit card.

"Luckily for me, you, and Miss Hart, a friend cloned it for me," he continued, and inserted the card into an electronic reader. It processed it for a bit, and then unlocked all three large boxes in the upper row.

Maeve's eyes narrowed dangerously as she digested Shannon's words. A traitor inside the Donnelly organization would explain quite a lot of the recent strange goings-on.

"Does this 'friend' have a name?"

"Well, he did."

"Tell me."

"It won't help you at all, I'm afraid. Johnny Price," Shannon said, and took out a large filing case from the first deposit box. He carried it over to a small table, and put it down.

"Johnny Price...? You mean to tell me you killed your own inside man?" Maeve said, and experienced a flashback of Staci crying when she'd been told that Johnny had died. A sudden surge of anger rose within her, and she had to clench her fists firmly to quell it.

"Yeah. True, I had to look twice when I saw he was the driver of the money run, but I had no further use for him anyway, so..." Shannon said, and shrugged.

"Shannon... you have no further use for me, either. I've helped you raid the treasury as you commanded. Now's a good time to tell me where Staci is," Fever said, and crossed her arms over her chest.

"You know, Fever, I'll do exactly that... because it won't do you any good. She and Siobhan are in the old cookie factory down on Twelfth Street... on the other side of the river. On Coluzzo's turf. Oh, that's right, you can't cross the Monroe without permission from the Don, can you? That's really too fuckin' bad," Shannon said, and laughed coldly.

"Do you really think that'll stop me from goin' after her?" Maeve growled, realizing that, for once, she knew something that Shannon didn't - the no-go zones had been removed after the summit.

'All that matters is to get away from these motherfuckers,' Maeve thought.

"All in all, I couldn't really care less about what you think you'll do," he said, and took the lid off the filing case. When he looked inside, his eyebrows twitched at the sight.

Wellman pushed Maeve forward, eager to see what was in the case.

"Is it all there, Shannon?"

"Oh, this is just one of the cases, but a quick guesstimate says that this is about one million bucks," Shannon said, and picked up a carefully stacked bundle of \$1000 bills - one of at least a dozen identical bundles in the case.

Five minutes later, the contents of all nine filing cases had been dumped into the canvas bags, and Shannon closed the doors to the deposit boxes.

"That's it, we're done. O'Shaughnessy, you take one bag... Wellman, you take the other. Careful, they're heavy," Shannon said, and reached for his own bag.

"Sure thing, boss," O'Shaughnessy said, grinning like a maniac. He took the heavy bag over his shoulder, and adjusted the strap. When the buckle proved to be recalcitrant, he took his eyes off Maeve.

Wellman put down his Springfield, and picked up his bag - and Maeve knew she'd been presented with a golden opportunity. The second Wellman bent down, she jumped into action.

She violently kicked Wellman in the face, breaking his nose and sending a shower of blood and broken teeth cascading all over the white floor. She grabbed Wellman's Springfield, and in one, fluid motion, she turned the rifle around, and fired off a salvo into O'Shaughnessy's body.

The force of the impacts made the gangster's limbs jerk and spasm, and he was thrown backwards, banging against the deposit boxes, and then falling to the floor, limp as a ragdoll.

Maeve turned to finish off Shannon, but he had already drawn the Beretta he had taken from her. He squeezed the trigger, and the projectile whizzed so closely past Maeve's head she could hear it zing through the air.

She decided not to press her luck, so she threw the Springfield at Shannon's face, and sprinted up the stairs, towards the frosted door.

Shannon roared, and emptied the entire clip in Maeve's direction, peppering the tiles with bullet holes, and breaking the frosted glass door. With the final two rounds, he hit her twice in the back, and she was thrown forward, through the remains of the broken door.

She landed heavily on the smooth floor, moaning and groaning from the impacts, and pressing a hand against her lower back. The rough landing had winded her, but she knew she had to keep

moving, so she pushed herself up, and staggered around the corner to get out of the firing line.

Once she was there, she leaned against the cool tiles, and thanked her lucky stars that she'd been wearing her bulletproof vest. Her back was killing her, and she had banged her knees on the hard floor, but she had escaped.

"Fever! You've just killed her! You've just killed your girlfriend!" Shannon shouted in a near-insane voice.

He threw away the empty Beretta, and grabbed his cell phone. He quickly found Siobhan's number on the speed dial, and pressed the button.

"Siobhan, it's me. Kill her! ... Don't argue with me! Kill her! Now!"

**_*

With trembling hands, Siobhan put the phone away, and picked up the Glock Shannon had given her.

She worked the action, and went out of the small office and into the main room of the derelict building.

Staci was sitting on a rusty, old kitchen chair in the middle of the room. Her hands were tied behind her back, and her legs were tied to the chair, making it impossible for her to move even the slightest.

With the Blazer no longer there, everything was very dark, so before he had left, Shannon had set up a powerful work light to shine on Staci, and she was bathed in a bright, off-white light.

The electronic hum coming from the work light drowned out most sounds, but Staci recognized the metallic sound coming from the office. Her heart began to pound, and she struggled to break free, but the rope she was tied up with was too strong.

Siobhan walked up to stand behind Staci. She slowly raised the weapon, and held the tip of the barrel against the back of Staci's head.

"Oh, God, no... please don't kill me... please don't!"

"I... I... h-have to," Siobhan said in a voice trembling with fear. A peculiar sense of numbness swept through her limbs, and she had to use both hands to keep the Glock steady. Her face grew

paler by the second, and she pressed her lips hard together to stop the terrible taste of bile that rapidly swelled up at the back of her throat.

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Outside the treasury, the flood lights had been turned on, and the entire back yard was crawling with heavily armed men.

Maeve burst out of the windbreak like the devil was on her tail, running right into Danny's arms. The former wrestler was carrying an MP5, but he managed to stop her before she bowled the two of them over.

"Fever? What the fuck's going on? Who's shootin'?"

"They have Staci, Danny... I need to get to her fast..."

"The Clovers? The Clover gang's raiding our treasury?"

"Yes, for fuck's sake! Now gimme your spare piece, goddammit!" Maeve barked, and held out her hand.

Danny knew that Maeve wouldn't act that way unless it was absolutely necessary, so he hurriedly unholstered his Beretta 92F, and gave it to her.

She put it into her shoulderholster, and began to run towards her car. After running for a few yards, she stopped, and turned back to face Danny.

"Danny... kill 'em all."

"Consider 'em dead, Fever."

Maeve nodded, and then continued towards her car.

She jumped into her Mustang, and turned the ignition key. The 427 came alive with a pre-historic roar, and she left the curb in a cloud of tiresmoke.

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"That fuckin' bitch broke all my teeth. She fuckin' broke all my teeth! Fuck!" Wellman said, and wiped off his bleeding mouth on his sleeve.

"That's the least of our problems now, Wellman," Shannon said, busy moving as many bundles of bills as possible from O'Shaughnessy's bag to his own.

"The fuck it is! Look at me!"

"Get a grip, man! Better yet, get Dillon's rifle. This may end ugly, but we're not giving up without a fuckin' fight," Shannon said.

"Crap," Wellman said, and grabbed O'Shaughnessy's Springfield and his spare clips.

"You down there! Come out with your hands up!" someone shouted from atop the staircase.

As a reply, Wellman sprayed the end of the room with bullets, making whoever had shouted at them jump to safety.

"All right, I'm done. We have to leave some of it behind... but I guess Dillon won't be needin' his share after all," Shannon said, and looked at the dead body at his feet.

He picked up the bag, and reeled from the additional weight. After regaining his balance, he took his Springfield, and began to walk briskly towards the flight of stairs.

"Come on, Wellman. We're leaving."

**_*

Just as Maeve was running the sixth red light in a row on Jefferson, her phone rang, and she leaned over to unclip it from her belt. Never taking her eyes off the road, she flipped open the display, and pressed the button.

"Fever. Talk to me!"

'Fever, something's going on here, you gotta come quick!' a female voice said at the other end of the connection.

"Mary?"

'There's so much gunfire, and I don't know what the hell's going on! Everyone's shootin' like crazy!'

"Mary! Get away from the windows! Take Josey and get under the bed, or something... anything. Make sure you're away from the windows!"

Maeve went flying past a line of cars going at the legal speed, and they all honked wildly at her. She glanced in the rear view mirror to see if one of them was a police cruiser, but they were all lowriders or sportscars filled with young people out enjoying the night.

'But... I don't understand...?'

"Just do it!"

'All... all right.'

The connection was terminated, and Maeve put the phone in the tray between the seats. Her face was a mask of concentration and determination, but in reality, a rock hard knot of fear festered in her stomach.

After what seemed like forever, she finally reached the intersection at Jefferson and Twelfth Street. She turned the steering wheel hard right, and the Mustang nearly went up on two wheels as it took the corner.

'I'm almost there, Staci... Please be alive,' she thought, and pressed down her boot even harder on the accelerator.

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"Come again?" Salvatore Coluzzo said into the receiver of his old-fashioned telephone as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. He turned on the lamp on the nightstand, and started looking for his slippers.

'The Clover gang is raiding the Donnelly mansion, Don Coluzzo. The shooting can be heard a mile away,' Cazale said. To underline his words, the background was filled with the familiar sounds of a gun battle.

"Where are you?"

'I'm on the next street over. Do you want me to call in some boys and help Fast Freddie?'

"Not yet. Stand by for now. I'll get back to you."

'Yes, Don Coluzzo.'

Salvatore Coluzzo hung up, and rubbed his eyes. Thinking hard about his next move, he picked up the phone again, and dialed a local number.

"Bianca, call Fast Freddie on his personal line. Now!"

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Shannon peeked around the corner at the top of the stairs, and counted at least five men waiting for them outside the windbreak, all carrying submachineguns.

He pulled back, leaned his head against the tiles, and sighed deeply. The heavy bag was cutting into his shoulder, so he put it down, and moved his arm to get the circulation going.

"What's the problem?" Wellman said after he had caught up with Shannon. He spat out some more blood, and wiped his mouth again.

"The exit's blocked."

"Fuck."

"Don't worry. I'm still working on the escape plan. First of all, let's kill the lights. Cover your eyes," Shannon said, and used the butt of the rifle to smash the strip lights to pieces. The hall fell into darkness, and sparks and shards of glass rained down over the two men.

"Fuck!" Wellman said, and feverishly brushed his hair to get all the shards out.

"Time to let them know we won't make this easy for 'em," Shannon said, and used his thumb to change a little lever from Full Auto to Single Shot on the Springfield.

He jumped out in the open, and quickly fired off four rounds into the garden without aiming at anything in particular. Out of sheer luck, he appeared to hit someone, but he wasn't interested in hanging around to find out for sure. Instead, he jumped back to safety, and waited for the inevitable reply.

The men outside soon returned fire, and the wall at the end of the hall leading to the windbreak was soon riddled with bullet holes.

"You in there! This is your last chance! Come out now, or die where you stand!" someone shouted from the outside.

Shannon rolled his eyes, and took the clip out of the Springfield to check how many rounds he had left. He put it back in, and moved away from the wall.

"I need some space, Wellman."

"Sure thing. We've fucked, anyway."

"Perhaps. But not necessarily," Shannon said, and got down on the ground. He worked the action on the rifle, and put it around the corner. He squeezed the trigger five times, emptying the clip, and then he pulled back.

He ejected the empty clip, and slapped a fresh one in.

"That door over there," Shannon said, and pointed with the barrel of the rifle.

"... leads to the control room. My guess is that there's one, maybe two guards in there, scared shitless, and afraid to come out. I say we go in, grab 'em, and use them as human shields."

"Jeez, you're cold, man," Wellman said, and shook his head.

"Who cares, just as long as the plan works. On three?"

"The door's probably locked."

Shannon aimed carefully, and fired off a few rounds, blowing the lock out of the door. A brief shriek could be heard from the other side of the destroyed door, and Shannon's eyes lit up.

"No, it ain't. On three?"

"Sure."

"One... two... three!"

Moving as one, Shannon and Wellman jumped across the narrow hallway, and dove into the control room.

**_*_

Maeve thundered across the Monroe, and felt the Mustang go light as it went over the crown of the Twelfth Street bridge.

250 yards later, she slammed on the brakes, and the Mustang came to a screeching halt in front of the abandoned cookie factory.

Maeve opened the door, and quickly bounded from the car. She could see an artificial light shining through the broken windows of the derelict building, but other than that, the place seemed to be deserted.

She ran across the street, stopping at a rusty gate that separated the sidewalk from a grassy lot. The gate was padlocked, but Maeve drew her borrowed Beretta, and blew the padlock apart with a single shot.

She forced the gate aside, and started to run towards the building. She had only gone a few steps when she stumbled over a lump of concrete, and she fell down on one knee. She cursed loudly, but got up, and continued towards an old- fashioned chain driven gate.

Once she got there, she quickly established that it was locked, so she ran around the corner of the building to find another way to get in.

When she passed by the first of the broken windows, she tried to peek in - what she saw made her stop dead in her tracks.

A powerful work light was shining directly in Maeve's eyes, so she couldn't see many details, but it appeared that Staci was sitting on a kitchen chair in the middle of the room, and her head was slumped forward. Another woman, dressed in blue jeans and a white, long-sleeved sweatshirt, was lying on the ground next to Staci, curled up in a fetal position.

The knot in Maeve's stomach grew exponentially by the sight, and she took the Beretta by the

barrel, and started crushing the already broken shards of glass in the window.

When the window was sufficiently cleared, she grabbed hold of the sides, and pulled herself up. Jumping through, she landed on the dusty concrete floor, and sprinted towards Staci.

Just as Maeve approached her, Staci looked up, and the corners of her lips crept upward in a tired, but grateful smile.

Maeve felt the world being lifted off her shoulders by the sight, and she couldn't stop a deep sigh escaping her lips as she slid to a stop next to Staci.

"Oh, God! Baby! Are you all right?" Maeve said as she untied Staci's hands.

"I'm fine... I'm tired, but I'm fine..."

As soon as Staci's hands were free, she reached out for Maeve, and wrapped her arms around the Enforcer in a crushing bear hug.

"Gawd, we gotta stop meetin' like this..." Staci croaked, and chuckled hoarsely.

Maeve's head was spinning, and she couldn't hold back the tears any longer. She buried her head in the nook of Staci's shoulder, and began to sob. Soon, tears were running down her cheeks, creating two wet streaks, and even spilling over onto Staci's jacket.

Staci let out a trembling sigh, and ran her hands up and down Maeve's back to offer some comfort. When Staci's fingers touched the torn fabric in Maeve's shirt, she stopped in surprise, and craned her neck so she could see what it was.

"Maeve! You've been shot!"

"The vest caught 'em," Maeve said, and pulled back from Staci. She sniffed several times, and wiped her eyes and her nose on her sleeve. She took Staci's hands in her own, and gave them a little squeeze.

More than once, Maeve opened her mouth to speak, but she was unable to find words that could properly convey the emotions she felt inside. She finally settled for shaking her head, and sighing deeply.

"I know," Staci whispered with a smile.

The body on the floor moved, and Maeve bared her teeth in a feral sneer. Her eyes turned to fire as she drew the Beretta, and gave the woman a hard shove with her boot.

"Get up."

Siobhan sat up, and clutched her head. She rocked back and forth, moaning and sobbing, and mumbling to herself.

"What the fuck's wrong with her?" Maeve said angrily.

"I don't know. She came out of the office with a pistol, a-and threatened me with it, but then..."

With a roar, Maeve reached down, and grabbed Siobhan's collar. She pulled the young woman up, and pressed the Beretta hard up against her throat.

"Nobody... but nobody pulls a gun on the woman I love. Hear me, little girl?" Maeve hissed right in Siobhan's face.

Siobhan was frightened witless, but she managed to nod.

"Maeve, please... she's just as much the victim in this mess as I am," Staci said, and put her hand on Maeve's arm.

"A victim? *She's* a victim? Well, she's certainly gonna be one... Hey, little girl, how do you think it feels when nine millimeters of burning hot lead is drilling through your brain? You're gonna find out in five seconds," Maeve said, and cocked the Beretta.

"No, Maeve! Stop! She could've shot me, but she didn't! She threw the gun away, and then she... collapsed... like this."

"Where's the gun now?"

"I don't know. Somewhere over there," Staci said, and waved her hand at the far end of the room.

"Is my brother dead...?" Siobhan whispered very quietly.

"What?" Maeve said.

"I-Is my brother dead...?"

"He wasn't when I escaped. But he probably is by now."

Siobhan started crying for real. Fresh tears ran down her cheeks, and created a surreal looking effect when they mixed with the dust and grime from the concrete floor.

Maeve sighed, and felt some of the fire leave her. She let Siobhan go, and the young woman slid back down on the floor. Maeve uncocked the Beretta, and put it back into its holster.

"What should we do with her?" Staci said.

"She's an accomplice in three armed robberies and several homicides. We need to hand her over to Detective Duffy."

"Oh..."

"The alternative is to either deal with her ourselves, or give her to Coluzzo's men."

"We can't do that, Maeve! She's just a young girl."

"I know," Maeve said, and sighed again. She crouched down next to Siobhan, and put her hand on the young woman's shoulder. When Maeve looked at Siobhan's yellow and black sneakers, at her hipster jeans, at her sweatshirt advertising a punk rock band Maeve had never heard of, and at her youthful haircut, she realized that Siobhan was just a young, naive woman caught up in an impossible situation.

"What's your real name?"

"Siobhan McWhirter."

"You're coming back with us... do you understand me?"

Siobhan nodded, and cleared her throat.

"The money... the money from the first two hits is in the office..." she said, and pointed.

Maeve's eyes popped wide open, and she took a deep breath.

"Staci, would you mind checking it out?"

"I'm on it."

"She's right, Maeve. It's pitch black in here, but I can just barely make out a huge pile of money on a table," Staci said, standing in the doorway to the office.

"All right... that complicates things even further. Hmmm," Maeve said, and rubbed her forehead.

"Siobhan, do you know how much you've used of the money?"

"Maybe a thousand dollars... I don't really know."

"OK. We're leaving now. Do you have any personal effects you want to bring?"

"A Discman and some CDs. They're in the office."

"I'll get 'em for ya, and then we're outta here. All right?"

Siobhan nodded, and Maeve patted her on the shoulder.

"Hey, Maeve, I've found the gun she was using before," Staci said, and held up the Glock so Maeve could see it.

"Take it over to the light," Maeve said, and dusted off her hands. She got up, and walked over to Staci.

"Hmmm. Glock. Definitely not for beginners," Maeve said, and held the gun up to the work light so she could see better. She pulled back the slide to eject the cartridge in the chamber, and then took out the clip - and stared in disbelief at the empty magazine.

She looked up, and locked eyes with Staci, and then they both looked at Siobhan, who was still sitting on the floor.

"Jesus, I don't believe it," Maeve said quietly.

"Her brother gave her that gun just before they drove off. Not only did he order his own sister to kill someone, he left her without means to defend herself... Why that... that... mother-**fucker**!" Staci said, and clenched her fists.

Maeve chuckled, and put her hand inside Staci's elbow.

"Come on, baby, let's get the money and the girl tucked away in the Stang, and go back to the real world. Danny might need my help."

._*._*_._

Fast Freddie sat down at his desk, and pressed a fat index finger down on the blinking button on the telephone. He picked up the receiver, and leaned back in his expensive leather armchair.

"This is Fast Freddie. Go ahead, Don Coluzzo,"

'Mr. Donnelly, first of all... are you all right?'

"Yes I am, thank you. I can't believe those fuckin' wankers have the balls to raid my fuckin' vault!"

'I have The Silencer on standby very close to you in case you need our help.'

Fast Freddie stared gobsmacked at the receiver, and he had to shake his head twice to understand that he had heard right.

"Ahhh, not right now, Don Coluzzo. Thank you very much for offering your help, but we've got

them covered."

'The times are sure changing,' he thought.

'All right. If the situation gets worse, don't hesitate to call me,' the Don said.

"I won't. Thank you, Don Coluzzo," Fast Freddie said, and hung up.

He got up from his desk, and paced back and forth on the carpet. His office was so crowded with beefy bodyguards that breathing was almost impossible, and he had a finger permanently lodged inside his collar to get some air down his neck.

"That's it, I'm opening a window, right fuckin' now!" he said, and walked over to pull the curtains apart.

The large group of bodyguards all moved at once, and surrounded him before he reached the windows.

"If you know what's good for ya, ya better let me open one of those goddamned windows!" Fast Freddie barked.

"Mr. Donnelly, it's much too dangerous," one of the bodyguards said.

"They're shootin' on the other fuckin' side of my fuckin' mansion, down at my fuckin' vault in my fuckin' garden...," Fast Freddie said, his face turning redder by the syllable.

"... so don't fuckin' tell me that I can't open my own fuckin' window!"

The bodyguard gulped, and looked down at his shoes.

"Uhhhh, Mr. Donnelly... You may open the window now."

"Thank you!" Fast Freddie said, and walked over to the windows with determined steps.

._*._*._*

"I've found some old plastic bags that were just lying around, Maeve."

"Good. I guess we better start shovelin', then," Maeve said with a sigh. When she had moved the powerful work light into the small office, it had revealed a mountain of work ahead of them - in the shape of a mountain of dollar bills.

"You hold the bag, I'll shovel," Staci said, picked up a large fistful of \$100 bills, and stuffed it down the first plastic bag.

"Jeez, I can't believe it... I've never seen so much money in one place," Staci said, and held up another fistful of \$100 bills.

"Me, neither," Maeve said, and stopped to wipe some sweat off her brow.

"Good thing upstanding citizens like us found it. Someone else might've kept it for themselves."

"Heh. Upstanding citizens like us? Heh!"

Maeve chuckled, and looked at the Beretta sticking out of her shoulderholster.

"You know what I mean, Maeve. I like to consider myself upstanding."

"Well, you are. Me... not so much."

"Don't be silly."

"Anyway... thank gawd, that's the last of it," Maeve said as she put the last of the money into the bags.

"Are we done here?"

"Almost. I promised Siobhan that I'd take her Discman and some CDs. But where the hell are they...?" Maeve said, and rummaged through all the dusty shelves and drawers in the small office.

"I feel sorry for her," Staci said quietly.

"Yeah. Me, too. Her brother must be the biggest asshole ever to walk the earth. Believe me, I've seen and met plenty of 'em, but he takes the prize."

"Setting up his own sister like that... it's diabolical."

"And not just once, either. She's the one I told you about... remember? The one I met in the Palace. The sex pot."

"Oh, man! I mean... Jesus!"

"Here it is," Maeve said, and found a small, white plastic bag with a CD player and some headphones.

"Let's get the hell outta here. I'm sick and tired of this place," Staci said.

"Amen."

"Come on, Siobhan, we're leaving. Here's your Discman," Maeve said, and handed the plastic bag to the young woman.

"Thank you..."

"You're welcome. Can you walk?"

"I... think so."

"Good, 'cos I'm sure as shit not gonna carry ya."

After having made sure Siobhan was as comfortable as she could be on the narrow backseat, Maeve opened the trunk, and started hoisting all the bags of money into the relatively small space.

With a sigh, Maeve closed the trunk, and pressed a hand hard against her back. Her lower back felt like it was on fire, and she knew that her old injury had been aggravated by the impacts of the two shots that had hit her earlier - and carrying the heavy bags of money hadn't done much good, either.

"I think you need to see a doctor," Staci said, and put her hand on Maeve's arm.

"Maybe later," Maeve said, and started to move, but Staci held on.

"Maeve... if you had arrived a few minutes earlier, and you had seen Siobhan hold the gun to my head... What would you have done?"

"Well, what do you think I would've done, baby? I would've killed her."

"You wouldn't have tried to talk her out of it?"

"No."

Staci looked at the determined expression on Maeve's face, and she nodded slowly. She leaned down, and gave Maeve a loving kiss on the lips.

"Thank you for rescuing me," she whispered.

Maeve closed her door, and waited for Staci to put on her seatbelt. Once she had done so, Maeve started the engine, but instead of driving off, she turned to look at Staci.

"Staci... ah, when we get back... please don't tell anyone that I cried, OK?" Maeve said sheepishly.

"Well... sure, but why not? It's a very human reaction. I'm sure everyone would understand...?"

"I'm an Enforcer. And everyone would exploit it," Maeve said, and selected Drive.

._*._*._*

Shannon studied the control room closely. It was packed with monitors and all sorts of other electronic equipment - and all the monitors hooked up to the outside cameras showed the same thing: dozens of heavily armed soldiers running around.

He had been right in predicting there would be people in the control room they could use as hostages. Two Donnelly employees, a middle-aged woman and a slightly younger man, were huddled up in a corner of the control room, whimpering and clinging on to each other.

"Oh, shut up. I won't hurt ya. You're our tickets out of here," Shannon said coldly.

Wellman was standing in the door, carefully observing the hallway.

"The path is clear, Shannon. They haven't moved any closer."

"All right. We've waited long enough. If they don't know by now that we've got hostages, they never will. You! Get on your feet," Shannon said, directed at the two hostages. The woman started crying, and Shannon rolled his eyes.

"Stop that nonsense, and get on your feet. As I told you before, I won't hurt ya."

Moving like in a trance, the woman stood up. She appeared not to understand anything of what was going on around her, and Shannon rolled his eyes again.

"Wellman, you take the guy. He's tallest."

"OK."

"What's your name?" Shannon said to the woman, but she didn't respond.

"Her name's Deidre. I'm Carl," the other hostage said.

"Thank you. I prefer to know the names of my hostages. Makes me feel better," Shannon said in a tone that didn't reveal if he was joking or not.

Shannon pulled the heavy bag of money over his shoulder, and walked over to stand behind the woman. He wrapped his left arm around her, and yanked her very close, so the back of her body was up against his front. By ducking down, he was able to hide most of his face behind her shoulder, and his right arm was still free to shoot if necessary.

"Wellman, insert a fresh clip and set it to Full Auto. That way we can fire longer bursts if we have to."

"Understood," Wellman said, and ejected the clip.

"Grab the guy like this," Shannon said, and turned around so Wellman could see how he was holding Deidre.

"Yep. Got it."

Wellman did like he was told, and soon, both Clovers were using a hostage as a human shield.

"I'd say we're good to go," Shannon said, and tightened his grip around Deidre's waist.

They walked clumsily over to the door, and Shannon peeked out. With a deep breath, he went out into the hallway, holding Deidre in front of him.

._*._*._*

"Jeez, will ya look at this! It's a fuckin' three ring circus here," Maeve growled as she turned onto St. Francis Road, trying to get through to the rear entrance of the mansion.

At least two TV news helicopters were suspended in the air above them, and the street was lit up by the lights flashing away on top of several police cars.

Maeve had to slow down to a walking pace to get past all the people milling about, and she continually honked the horn. They drove past several camera crews that insisted on shining their powerful lights into the car, and Maeve fought an urge to give them all a one-fingered salute.

When they finally reached the gate, Maeve could see that the mess still hadn't been resolved. Danny and the other soldiers were still lined up in front of the treasury, all holding MP5s, and all looking nervous.

She sighed, and turned off the engine.

"Staci, I'm not asking you, I'm telling you - stay in the car! You, too, Siobhan. And get down if there's any shootin'," Maeve said vehemently, leaving no room for misinterpretations.

"Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere near that madhouse," Staci said, and pried her fingers free from the panic grip.

Maeve got out of the Mustang, and walked up the garden path. She waved at Danny, who nodded back.

"What the fuck's going on here, Danny?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Good to see ya, Fever. Is Staci...?"

"Yeah, she's safe. She's all right."

"Glad to hear it."

"Thanks. She's out in the car with the fourth Clover."

"Oh... is that wise?"

"It's a young girl, and she's completely out of it. It won't be a problem."

"LOOK!" someone shouted, and Danny and Maeve spun around, and raised their weapons.

Shannon took one step at a time, inching closer to the windbreak. The heavy bag of money and the hostage were slowing him down more than he had anticipated, so he was getting impatient.

"Come on, you stupid cow! Move your fuckin' legs!" he roared into the frightened woman's ear.

Shannon took a deep breath, and forced the woman to step out of the windbreak and onto the garden path. He looked around, and saw that everyone had their weapons trained on him, including Fever.

"Hey, Fever. I guess it didn't take long to ID the body, huh?" Shannon said.

"Bastard," Maeve growled in reply.

Shannon laughed coldly, and winked at her.

"You shoulda listened, Fever. I told you I'd do it. Wellman! Get a move on!"

Wellman stepped out of the windbreak, and moved up to stand right behind Shannon. Because of his larger size, he was able to control his hostage better, and he held the poor security guard in an iron grip.

"I'm here."

"And now we're leaving. Everybody, clear out! Unless you want these two people to die, of course," Shannon said to the soldiers, moving the rifle in a sweeping arc.

"Do what he says!" Maeve shouted, and took a few steps back.

"That's a good Enforcer!" Shannon mocked. He quickly checked to see if the path down to the gate was clear. It appeared to be, so he began to move sideways away from the windbreak, still holding the near-comatose Deidre in front of him.

"No! God, no!" Siobhan said, looking out of the side window of the Mustang. She stretched out her arm, and reached for the knob that would move the front seat forward.

"Siobhan! What are you doing?! Maeve told us to stay here!" Staci said, trying to turn around enough to stop Siobhan from escaping.

After a few fumbling tries, Siobhan found the knob, and twisted it hard. The seat leaned forward, and she squeezed through the opening, and bounded from the car.

"Siobhan, come back! ...Oh, fuck!" Staci cried, and quickly got out to follow the young woman.

"Shannon! Give up! It's over! Give up! Please!" Siobhan shouted while she ran up the garden path. She waved her arms frantically to make her brother know she was there.

"Great... That's all we needed!" Maeve said, and rolled her eyes with a groan.

Shannon whipped his head around, and stared at his sister running towards him. In the background, he could see Staci's familiar figure, and a multitude of emotions flashed across his face - finally ending in pure, unadulterated rage.

With an insane roar, he raised the Springfield at his sister.

"SIOBHAN! GET DOWN!" Maeve shouted, and jumped forward, wanting to wrestle the rifle out of Shannon's hands.

Before Maeve could get there, Shannon squeezed the trigger, and fired off a long salvo. With the distance only being a few yards, there was no way he could miss, and a slew of bullets hit Siobhan in the chest.

She stopped like she'd hit a brick wall, and let out a long, wailing moan that faded away into a gurgling whisper. Bright red blood blossomed through her white sweatshirt, and she clutched her chest in agony. She staggered backwards, but only managed a few steps before her knees buckled, and she crumpled to the ground.

Down by the gate, Staci screamed, and buried her head in her hands.

Shannon lowered the smoking Springfield and stared wide-eyed at his sister's body. He clenched his teeth, and turned the rifle against the soldiers. He noticed that Maeve was considerably closer to him than before, and his eyes shot fire.

"Get back, Fever!"

Maeve put her hands up, and stepped back.

"Move! Now!" he shouted into Deidre's ear, but the woman was in a state of shock.

Maeve stared in disbelief at Siobhan's body, and felt a surge of anger rise up inside her. She bared her teeth in a menacing sneer, and prepared to jump Shannon.

Suddenly, Wellman's hostage took advantage of the confusion and began to struggle. Carl viciously stomped the heel of his boot down on Wellman's foot, and thrust his elbow into the tall man's gut. Wellman *oomphed*, and let go of the hostage.

"Motherfu..." he began to shout, but was permanently silenced when Danny and eleven other men opened fire on him one second later. The shower of hot lead sent him flying backwards, killing him instantly, and almost tearing his body apart.

When the heavy bag with the money landed on the paving stones of the garden path, it split wide open, sending a wad of \$1000 bills flying through the air. The bills fluttered around, eventually coming to a rest on top of the body, turning red as they absorbed Wellman's blood.

"Cease fire!" Maeve barked loudly.

Shannon sighed, and looked at Wellman's remains. He turned his head, and looked at the gate at the end of the garden path.

"Give it up, for fuck's sake, Shannon. You'll never get there," Maeve said, aiming her borrowed Beretta at Shannon's head.

With a prolonged moan, Deidre suddenly fainted, and Shannon had a hard time holding her upright. He tried to take a step towards the gate, but he nearly tripped over her legs.

In a single move, Maeve closed the distance between her and Shannon to a few feet, and the tip of the Beretta nearly touched Shannon's head.

He roared, and pushed Deidre away. As she fell, he gave her a vicious kick in the rear, and raised the rifle at Maeve and the approaching soldiers.

He locked eyes with Maeve, and realized that he was facing an opponent that was as stubborn and ruthless as himself.

"Die, you motherfuckers!" he said, and gripped the rifle with both hands.

Staci cried out for Maeve, but before Shannon had time to pull the trigger, Maeve grabbed the barrel of the rifle, and forced it upward - and then she emptied the Beretta into Shannon's head and body.

At point blank range, the results were devastating, and Shannon McWhirter was soon reduced to a slab of raw meat that only vaguely resembled a human being.

After Shannon's corpse had fallen to the ground, Maeve ejected the spent clip, and inserted a new one. With a sigh, she holstered the borrowed Beretta, and stepped away from the sea of blood spreading out from the body.

Staci came out of her hiding place, and sprinted up the garden path. She stopped at Siobhan's prone form, and knelt down next to the young woman. She rolled Siobhan over onto her back, but quickly realized that there wasn't anything she could do to help her. Staci rubbed her eyes, and wiped away a tear that had found its way onto her cheek.

Maeve crouched down next to Staci, and put a hand on her back.

"She's gone, baby."

"Oh God, Maeve, it's so unfair...."

"Yeah."

Maeve reached down, and closed Siobhan's eyes with her hand.

**_*_

Once the excitement died down, the TV helicopters flew away, leaving the garden in a somber, eerie silence. Sean Duffy and two other detectives were busy interviewing people, writing down statements on little notepads that no one would ever read.

Danny and Doyle carried O'Shaughnessy's body out of the treasury, and dumped him on the ground next to the three others.

"Danny, find a tarp and cover their faces. We're not animals," Maeve said.

"Yes, Fever. By the way, here's your Beretta," Danny said, and threw Maeve her own gun.

Maeve caught it, and handed Danny the one she had borrowed from him.

"Thanks for the loan, buddy. Don't forget to clean it."

Staci looked at Siobhan's lifeless body, and sighed deeply. One of the soldiers brought her a blanket, and she thanked him, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"It couldn't have ended any other way, could it?"

"No. Live by the gun, die by the gun," Maeve said, and shook her head.

"Siobhan didn't live by the gun."

"No, but... when bad people fight, innocent people always suffer," Maeve said, and gave Staci a squeeze through the blanket.

"One of these days, it's going to be me or you lying there."

"Maybe."

Staci opened her mouth to speak, but she realized that she didn't have anything to add. She sighed, and bowed her head as a sign of respect for the dead.

"What's going to happen to them? To her?" she said after a little while.

"I suppose they'll go down to the city morgue. The cause of death is kinda obvious, so... I don't know what will happen after that."

"I think we should arrange her funeral. She deserves a proper one," Staci said, and sniffed.

Maeve turned to look at Staci, and nodded slowly. She leaned her head on Staci's shoulder, suddenly overcome by a wave of tiredness.

"That's a good idea, hon."

Ten minutes later, Fast Freddie arrived at the treasury, having finally convinced his bodyguards that it was safe to go out.

"Jeebus, child! I'm glad you're all right," he said the second he saw Maeve.

"Yeah, I'm fine. This was a mess an' a half, though."

"So, that's the infamous Four Leaf Clover, huh?" Fast Freddie said, and nudged Shannon's boot with his shoe.

"What's left of 'em. Uncle Freddie, we've recovered most of what they took from the money run."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, it's out in the Mustang. And most of the money from the hit on Coluzzo's Golden Goose, too."

"Oh, I'll bet the Don will love that. I'll give him a call. Apparently, The Silencer is somewhere close, so perhaps he could get it right away...?"

"No, that won't work. We didn't have time to sort it, so it's all stuffed down into some plastic bags," Maeve said, and put her hands on her hips.

"Oh... OK. Well, there's plenty of time. Is Staci all right? I heard the fuckers had kidnapped her...?"

"She's fine, but she's very shook up. She's resting down in the Stang," Maeve said, and looked at the car, still parked at the end of the garden path.

"Listen... Uncle Freddie, Staci suggested that we give the young woman a proper funeral. I know she was part of the gang, but she was just... she spared Staci's life, even though her brother, the gang leader, had ordered her killed."

"I understand. I'll see to it."

"Thank you."

"Staci needs you, Maeve. Go be with her."

"I will. I just have to check up on Mary Red and her kid..."

"I'll do that. Staci needs you *now*," Freddie said in a very fatherly tone.

"Yes, Sir."

When Maeve reached the Mustang, she turned around, and waved at her uncle. Fast Freddie waved back, and then he left the treasury with Danny at his side.

Maeve opened the door, and moved the driver's seat back in place. She sat down, and let out a long sigh.

"Man, this was a bad one," she said, and started toying with a loose thread on the seam on her jeans.

"Mmmm. Why do we always get mixed up in these insane situations?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's God's will."

"Maybe it's the Devil's will."

"Could be. Anyway, uncle Freddie agreed on arranging a proper funeral for Siobhan."

"Good."

Maeve moved her arm up, and ran her fingers through Staci's hair.

"Detective Duffy will be looking for you. You'll need to tell him what happened out in the factory."

"All right... Tomorrow."

"Sure. He'll understand."

Maeve sighed, and felt incredibly guilty for involving Staci in yet another terrible mess that she didn't have anything to do with.

"Baby, please look at me," Maeve said, and gently scratched Staci's scalp.

Staci slowly turned her head, and looked at Maeve with big, sad eyes.

"Look, I'm so sorry you had to experience all this. There was no other way. Shannon would never have surrendered."

"Oh, I know. He was nuts."

"Yeah."

Staci sighed deeply, and Maeve leaned over and placed a very little kiss on her lips. Not satisfied with the small peck, Staci grabbed hold of Maeve, and gave her a proper kiss in return.

"That's for saving me," she whispered, and ran her thumb across Maeve's cheek.

"You're welcome. But I'd prefer if we didn't make it a monthly ritual," Maeve said, and took Staci's hand in her own. She brought it to her lips, and kissed it gently.

"Which reminds me... Have you found my Corolla?"

"Uhhhh... well, baby... it's... I'll buy you a new one," Maeve said sheepishly.

"Oh, no... what's happened to it?"

"Well, I guess it's been vandalized pretty badly..."

Staci's face fell, and she covered her eyes with her hand.

"Fuck. Fuck!"

"My thoughts exactly when I found it."

"Where is it now?"

"At the police impound yard."

"... Do I want to see it?"

"Uhhhh... no."

"Fuck. I need a Bourbon. A stiff one."

Maeve started the engine, and put the Mustang in gear. When she drove away from the curb, the plastic bag with Siobhan's Discman toppled over, and the CDs spilled out onto the seat.

Maeve stopped, and reached behind her to scoop up the CDs, and put them back in the bag.

"Here, I'll hold it," Staci said.

Maeve gave her the plastic bag, and as they drove off, Staci took out the CDs to look at them.

"I've never heard of any of these bands," she said after having flipped through the entire stack of discs.

"Me, neither. We're gettin' old, baby."

"Oh, God... She didn't deserve to die. She was so young... it's so unfair..." Staci said, and put the CDs back in the bag. She put it down on the floor, and leaned back in the seat.

"It's so unfair."

Staci's voice trailed off until it was only a faint whisper. She cleared her throat, and wiped her eyes on her torn sleeve.

Maeve sighed, and put her hand on Staci's thigh. She clawed it a couple of times, and then moved her hand up to turn on the radio.

"Come on, baby... let's go home."

Soon, Janis Joplin's characteristic rendition of Me And Bobby McGee filled the midnight black Mustang GT as it left uptown behind, and drove down the hill towards the bright lights and the busy streets of downtown.

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THE END

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