

It got on the news. The explosion, the raid, everything. Thanks to Verne, they had no footage to show, and the private security company that had been running the show couldn't offer a definite description of any of us. Miss Songdog, Verne and I managed to regroup at the abandoned apartment building two days later, and Miss Songdog assured us that the money would be hitting our proxy accounts soon.

The order was to lay low. I wasn't complaining. My ribs felt close to busted, my armor plate was dented, I was tender all over, and my legs were on fire from the stairs. I took some painkillers and hoped to ride it out. I sat on my couch for days, looking over the piles of laundry in the living room of my apartment, the dust collecting on the television and the table tops, the dishes piling up in the sink, the bloodstains on the carpet from when the Koreans took my finger. The photos Vincy had somehow taken of Cheri and I were still on the coffee table, now accompanied by empty syringes and empty pill bottles.

There was a picture of my sister on the wall, of my mother and father, of my cousin and her family, of me and some of my old Navy buddies I hadn't seen or talked to in decades now. On the other wall there was a photo of me and some of my work friends. There was Frankie and Janie, Mister and Missus. I missed that party they invited me to. I didn't so much as call. They must've had a great time. I wasn't even sure when it was supposed to be, anymore. What was I doing that night? It must've been around the time Synth killed that overweight pinstripe suit in the restaurant, when I scarred that poor hostess for life by leaving three warm, freshly-aerated bodies on the carpet.

Maybe it was for the best that I didn't bother Frankie and his family. They were always a happy bunch. His kids were grown up and he was retired. They spent vacations in Florida, or South Carolina, or somewhere warm like that. Here I was, waging a war on my own liver, watching reruns of a reboot of a reboot from the late New Tens. I needed to get out, somehow, go somewhere, gulp some fresh seaside air, pry myself off the couch and stretch my legs. I hobbled around trying to piece together a mostly-fresh outfit.

It was a mistake. The crisp air burned in my lungs. The sun stabbed my eyes and I had to wear sunglasses, even inside the pub. I felt shriveled and dehydrated, even though I'd been pounding glasses of chlorinated tapwater like it was going out of style. I found myself at one of the little seaside bars in front of a half-eaten basket of fish and chips, supping on an overpriced, watered-down domestic brew. I was trying not to let the dull roar of the other patrons laughing and blending with the loud sports announcers and the cacophonous jukebox turn my head.

I'd like to say that flop-eared dog in the duffle coat from two weeks ago appeared like an angel. He was surrounded by light, alright. A blue and red halo of beer promos and blurry effects appeared around his messy undercut. The way he was limping wasn't very angelic however, and neither were the traces of what was once a prominent black eye that tainted his white-furred, brown-spotted, boney face.

"You look like shit." He dropped into the chair like a bag of potatoes and leaned over to steal my basket. It was okay, I didn't have much of an appetite.

"That makes two of us."

He smiled as he twirled a fry and pointed it at me. "You should see the other guy."

"I don't like to visit the morgue."

"I didn't catch your name last time we met, but I always did like meeting tall, dark, well-bred strangers in alleyways. Especially when they're great kissers."

"I didn't catch yours either, hot stuff." I straightened up in my seat and winced against the aching pang in my ribs.

"Roscoe."

"Fran."

"Really? Fran? Not Frank?"

"There were too many Franks in school."

"I see." He dipped a lukewarm beer-battered fillet in a mess of tartar sauce and stuffed it in his maw. "Sorry. Been a little hard up. Can't work when I look like hell."

"You know, Roscoe, it's none of my business, but whoever did that to you..." I let the sentence hang, and watched the look on his face. His eyes weren't blown wide open, his eyebrows weren't steeped in worry. I couldn't tell what was going through his head.

"You're right, it's none of your business."

"Does Cheri know?" I still wasn't quite sure of his relationship with her, or how much about her he actually knew, but judging by the look he got, similar to the one I just described, I could guess he knew enough to tell she was dangerous.

"Don't bring her into it."

"I thought you two were friends?"

"We are, just, she doesn't need to be bothered."

"I'll say."

A beat passed. He finished off the ill-fated food and shoved the empty basket back into the middle of the table. I swirled the backwash at the bottom of the bottle and rubbed at my eye under my sunglasses with the other hand. He looked a little tense. His head was on a swivel. I wasn't sure exactly how upset I should feel about his black eye. On one hand, these things just happen. On the other hand, I've always been a bleeding heart hero-wannabe. There was a certain kind of justice, the only kind I knew worked for sure, that could only be delivered with a fist or a bullet.

"Is this just a social call, Roscoe?" I tried to tease it out of him. Maybe I was selling myself short, but a pretty young dog like that wouldn't come sit by a hungover retiree in broad daylight. Well, maybe it was brunch time, but I had my doubts that he was trying to get a boy-scout badge for helping old folk across the street.

"Maybe. I haven't decided yet."

"You look like you're scared." I slumped in my chair. There was some trouble, I could tell. He was trouble the moment he limped up to my table.

"Scared? No way, I just..." He quickly got up. "Can we go somewhere? Anywhere? Just you and me?"

That wasn't quite the way I was hoping to get a cute guy in my car, but I relented. I paid off my tab and we were out, around the corner to the dim parking complex I'd left my car in. No one was following us that I could see, but Roscoe walked close to me down the slush-covered sidewalk. It was relief as the shadow of the multistory concrete garage blocked out the light, and I tipped my shades up to see better until my eyes adjusted.

"That's your car?" Roscoe huffed as I hit the keyfob to start it. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"You got a problem, pup?" I ran my hand along the sharp-cornered curve of the body panel.

"No, it's just, I thought you'd have something newer."

I popped open the door and slid into the worn leather bucket seat, and he did the same on that side. I hit the locks and put my key in the ignition. The radio opened up on the classic rock station and I had to turn it down to ease the screaming of some hectic ad.

"I've put a lot of work into this car," I said as I gave it a minute to idle down. Only a little touch of the pedal was needed to get it going and soon I pulled it out of the spot and headed for the exit. I pulled out onto the street that led out of the twisty bayside area, back up toward my apartment.

"Wherever. Somewhere quiet, maybe."

"Is someone after you?"

"I need a place to crash for a night." He looked away, out the window at the dingy snowpack covering the curbs.

I thought to ask if he was in trouble, or if he needed to go to his place to grab a few things, but instead I took the turnoff that lead home. I didn't say anything, and let the radio play a dissonant song while we rolled through the mid-afternoon traffic. I thought about calling Miss Songdog, but I didn't want to get him involved with her. Maybe it was something minor. Maybe he was just trying to avoid an abuser for a night, or something. My place was a mess, but it'd do.

We pulled into the parking lot, and I backed into my spot and put the wipers up before we went upstairs and inside. I kicked my shoes off and started clearing the laundry off the couch and chair. Roscoe put his coat on the hanger and untied his boots, then let himself fall into the couch cushions while I tried to make the place presentable.

"Your place looks like mine."

"Yeah? How so?"

"Like a bachelor pad."

"Yeah, thanks, pup."

"You live alone?"

"I do." I sat in the newly-decluttered chair.

"Not married?"

"No, never." I leaned back and unbuttoned another button from my shirt.

"Hard to believe that." He leaned over the arm of the chair and rested his head on his palm.

"Handsome man like you? I bet you were a hell of a ladykiller."

"I got around." Ugh, I felt like I should've gotten a beer before I sat down, but I was too tired to want to get up right away and get it.

"Yeah? I can believe you there."

"Are you hitting on me, Roscoe?"

"Do you want me to be? I might owe you a little something for the refuge."

I raised my hand and waved the thought off. "You don't owe me nothing, not a thing."

He let it rest for a moment as he sunk into the worn-out cushions and got comfortable. The day wasn't young but the sun wasn't close to setting yet. His eyes peeked down at the photos haphazardly strewn across the table. Before I could get out of my chair he'd picked them up and started to flip through them.

I walked over and snatched them out of his hands, but it was too late.

"That's Cheri."

"Yeah."

"Who took those?"

"A friend." I went over to the bedroom and threw them onto the bed. Only about half of them made it. Roscoe was shifting in his seat.

"So you were a client of hers."

"Yeah? She's a prostitute, I'm an unmarried retiree with a pension."

Roscoe stood up from the seat. "No, she's... Something else!"

"I know that! She fucking killed that fox fuck while she was sitting on his prick! Oh, that was the wrong fox fuck, by the way."

"She killed him?" He looked down and side to side. "I thought..."

"You thought what?"

He pointed at his black eye. "Nothing. She tried to kill me."

My jaw dropped. "What?"

"Okay, so, she sent some thugs to kill me. I took care of them, but that's why I needed to crash here. My place isn't safe."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Why is she trying to kill you?"

"I saw something. I've been watching her, at a spot in the park, she goes every week."

"What did you see?"

"I don't know!" He threw his arms out, palms up. His lips curled up a little. He was yelling. "She scared the hell out of me, she kept asking me what I knew!"

He was right in front of me. I could feel his breath. I put my hand on his shoulder, and he just slumped against me. I wrapped my arms around him. I didn't want to say it, I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to have to stand up against that synthetic cat. She was strong, smart, and cruel. She was working for someone, running some kind of game. She was collecting information, and I didn't know for whom. She was some kind of spy, but not like a calm, corporate spy who'd just quietly shuttle the information along. She had some kind of ulterior motive. She'd dragged me into it and put blood on my hands.

"What did you know?" I finally choked out. Roscoe looked up at me and narrowed his eyes.

"Enough to get me killed. I need to leave Grey Anchor."

"Then do it."

"I don't have a car! I can't afford a ticket out of here!"

I bit my lip, looking down, tracing the brown splotches on his white fur. "Okay. Can you get a ticket out of Port Smith?" It was the nearest city outside the Greater Anchor Metro, a small old town with a train station that ran south out of state. From there he could get somewhere else and get a plane ticket anywhere.

"Yeah, I think that's far enough."

"Can it wait until the morning? Nothing's rolling out of Port Smith today."

"I'll look up the schedules." He shuddered as he sighed. Sweet relief. He leaned up and pushed his snout against mine in a kiss that was still lemony from the fish and chips. "Thanks."

I couldn't sleep. When I dozed off, I had a dream about Jeff Decouier. He was a Senior Investigator, but I was under him. There was a heated moment after-hours in his office, we were yelling, something about some case. It was late. I'd had something, I didn't remember what. He knew.

Next thing I knew he was pushing me against the wall, but instead of a fist impacting my mouth, it was his teeth. He was huffing, his tie was loose, and I was hot blooded and dizzy. He blinked and tried to back away, but I pushed him against a file cabinet and shoved my face in his. He grabbed my ears. I got plowed on his desk like a desperate bitch.

I didn't know it then, but that was the start of a lot of issues. I tried not to think about it at briefings. He didn't act any different, and I kept pushing it out of my head. When I was just starting to gaslight myself and doubt it'd ever happened, he asked me out.

Workplace romances were great, but stress was high. I was young and living recklessly. At the time, protests were everywhere, cropping up every week. There was a riot here, a march there, shootings, gang activity, drug busts. I volunteered for SWAT and it seemed we were on raids every week. There was no keeping up. Jeff and I found comfort in each other, and a little sense of normalcy with it. It sure didn't hurt to have someone on my side higher up the chain who could smooth things over when I breached procedure.

Looking up at the cracks in the ceiling, I could see his face when we broke up. "We can't keep doing this anymore," I could still hear his voice. "It's unprofessional. There's a conflict of interest." I don't know what changed. He'd never had a problem with it before. I understood, though. That was our last kiss. I didn't remember what he tasted like.

I must've fallen asleep because suddenly there was a weight on the bed and my eyes were closed. I pulled my revolver out from under the pillow and heard a gasp. Suddenly my nose was filled with Roscoe's scent.

"Jesus, Fran."

"Roscoe," I groaned, "What the fuck?" I put the revolver on the nightstand and hit the lamp.

"Your couch sucks."

"Sleep on the floor."

He laughed and ran his hand over my chest. The younger dog was in nothing but his fur as he sat on the old, faded quilt. He lifted it and slid underneath it with me. I tried to push myself up onto my elbows but he held me down with one finger.

"I might not see you again, and, you were a hell of a kisser in that alley. I thought about it for days afterwards."

"I didn't know you were that kind of escort."

He huffed. "I'm not. I'm strictly eye and arm candy. This is because you're doing something good for me."

"You're trading sex for a favor, with some old man, no less."

"You fucked Cheri."

"Yeah? And?"

"I know your morals aren't that airtight."

He twined his fingers with mine, and looked down with surprise.

"What happened to your pinky?"

“Shaving accident.”

He laughed. His chest pushed against mine. His fur was short and rough. His hands ran over my chest and through the thick red curls there. He thumbed against my gums and looked at my teeth and my grey muzzle. He kissed me again, and our tongues met. He pulled me on top of him.

It'd been awhile since I'd been with another man, but it came naturally. I held us together with one of my hands and we were both panting like summer animals. He was easy to get going and I was eager, even if it took me a minute and a rougher touch to get going. There was a bottle of lube and a box of condoms in the nightstand that I'd hardly gotten the chance to move, and a little negotiating led to his rocket in me. I was straddling him and lowering myself down, and he was gently encouraging me. I was blushing feverish under my fur.

One of his hands was on my hip and the other was on my snout, and I had one on his chest and one guiding him in. He was sweet and his voice was calm. He didn't overact like Cheri did. I was still sleepy, I was still thinking about that first time with Jeff in his office at midnight. Roscoe wasn't as big and felt different and smelled too different for me to mix them up, but it'd been years. When was the last time I'd had a boyfriend? Chicago?

Once I'd gotten comfortable, he flipped us over and held my knees to his shoulders. He had to get back in but when he did, he fucked me like he meant it. I gasped and he shoved his thumb in my mouth, then his fingers. It was perfect. I knew I'd be sore for it in the morning, though. He'd likely be just fine. Youth was wasted on the young, indeed.

He knotted outside and we laid together for a minute before getting up for a late-night shower. We took turns, of course. The low-end apartment stall wasn't quite enough for two fully grown dogs. I managed to change the sheets before I tried to sleep out the rest of the early morning.

A snowstorm was starting in but we had no time to lose. It was early and the sun hadn't come up yet. We were on the dilapidated, remote highway that wound through the woods to Port Smith, far from the neon lights of Grey Anchor. I still had plenty of traction, but I deigned to take it slow.

The treetops were silhouetted against the slowly brightening sky, and my headlights weren't making it very far ahead of us. I felt myself slide around a couple corners. We hadn't seen another car since we left the city. Roscoe was dozing off in his seat, wrapped tight in his warm wool coat with the collar up.

The radio blared to keep me awake. I was trying to blink away the stress. The 8:30 Royal Northern departure was the target, and we were still 45 minutes out from Port Smith. There was a sick feeling in my stomach, but I chalked it up to anything but my instincts.

Headlights appeared in the rearview, then the brights and overhead fog lights came on. It was a large, new truck, lifted for offroading, going way too fast. I thought he was going to pass me, but as he pulled up beside me, another car's headlights appeared in the rearview.

Roscoe woke up and looked around. The truck suddenly slammed against the side of my car and broke what precious little traction I had at that speed. I tried to correct the swerving but the truck pulled ahead and whipper over, knocking my front end to the shoulder of the road, where I ground through the settled snowpack and down into the ditch.

The car rumbled as it plowed into the snow and the windshield cracked. I quickly threw it into reverse, but I was fucked, this thing wasn't moving unless I got a tow. The truck and the car both stopped, one ahead and the latter behind me. I doubted they were going to help.

Roscoe was bleeding from his nose where he'd kissed the dash. I was sore from where the seatbelt dug into my shoulder. I hit the release as two men in fatigues hopped out of the cab of the truck, both armed with modern plastic rifles.

I hit the release on Roscoe's seatbelt and shoved him out the passenger door toward the woods, shouting something incoherent. The crisp early morning air lit up with the sharp crack of 5.56 fire.

We crashed through the abrasive underbrush but they were following us. Running into the pine barrens was a fool's savior, but it was our only hope. I was practically dragging Roscoe along and he was choking and I was huffing. Our breath made white plumes of mist.

There was another ditch with an overgrown wire fence on the other side and I threw Roscoe in and dived in behind him. I whipped around and tried to steady my pistol, and blasted the leg out from under one of the men. A puff of red blood misted the virgin snow around him and he collapsed in a heap. His friend whipped and fired at where I just shot from, but I was already crawling through the snow and shoving Roscoe along.

The guy was flanking as he laid suppressive fire along the ditch, but I was already out of the area. As soon as he got close to the edge, I jumped up and emptied my revolver's remaining shots at his profile. Between my shaking hands and the snow and my panting, I managed to land two in his armor and blasted a gory hole in his muzzle with the third shot. I didn't waste the opportunity, and even while he was making a ghastly gurgle I sprinted forward to throw him to the ice and rip the rifle from his writhing, kicking form. I didn't look at the gruesome wound, I just finished him off and turned to finish off his thrashing companion who laid where I left him.

I fished a single magazine from the dead man's vest and jammed it in my coat pocket. Roscoe stood up, looking sick and covered in snow. Another shot rang out from somewhere. I saw a figure by a tree, and fired at it until it ducked out of sight. I ran and grabbed Roscoe.

The trees towered around us as twisting spires dressed in white rags. I was turned around and had nowhere to go, no game plan, no big heroic deal. I was just trying to get Roscoe out alive for now, even if running into the snowstorm with just the clothes on our backs was a bad idea. I didn't let go of him, and was holding the rifle in one hand with the stock tucked under my armpit. The powder was knee-deep here. The sky was turning a lighter grey as the sun rose behind the clouds.

In a clearing in the woods, our assailant leapt from a bush and knocked the rifle clean out of my grip. Those eyes were no mistake. It was Cheri, huffing hot clouds of mist, her black PDW in her hand.

I ended up on my back in the snow, and Roscoe was running away. She turned with the gun and blasted his legs out from under him. I groped for the rifle, but it was ten yards away. I whipped out my revolver and jammed a speed loader in it.

Roscoe rolled over onto his back in the snow. The synthetic cat was raising her gun to him. I stood up out of the snow.

"Cheri!"

She turned to look at me. She held the short-barreled deal with one hand, but it was steady as could be. I was perpendicular to her and Roscoe. I had a perfect line of sight. She wasn't wearing any

armor, just an unzipped grey fleece jacket and a T-shirt and shorts. Her plastic legs reflected the blue light off the snow.

"Cheri, let him go." I aimed at her chest.

"Sorry, pops. The kid knows too much."

"Cheri!"

"You don't have to do this! Cheri, please!"

"You're lucky you're so useful, Petty Officer Van Grantze. Detective Van Grantze. You can just walk away, and we'll talk later. You don't even need to watch this."

I couldn't. There was no way I could walk and let Roscoe die here. There was no talking her out of it.

I felt the trigger shift under my finger.

The double-action mechanism cocked the hammer. It was all in slow motion. The pin on the hammer struck the primer of the .357 magnum round.

I fired six times. I saw the puff of eviscerated material on Cheri's chest. Five holes in her shirt and jacket. A neat grouping. I was only five feet away.

She looked down at herself. No blood. Nothing. She didn't even twitch. She was mechanical through-and-through. The rounds did nothing.

She looked back at Roscoe. She pulled the trigger. A string of 70 grain bullets rammed through his guts. Blood poured out the holes, which were much bigger in the back. He didn't even cry out. He just looked down at the blood, and slumped into the snow.

Cheri laughed, turned and disappeared into the pine barrens. It was just the howling wind and Roscoe's ragged breath. I shoved the revolver in its holster and ran over to the dog. He was starting to shake. Shock was keeping him calm.

I was reaching for my phone.

"Am I going to die?" Roscoe asked me.

"No," I told him as I pulled Verne's contact information up.

"Cheri killed me."

"No she didn't. Not yet. We can get you patched up."

"Hello?" Verne answered gruffly.

"Verne, listen, I'm 30 minutes outside of town on the highway to Port Smith, I need the SUV."

"What for?"

"Some fucks tried to whack me. This guy I'm with is hurt bad."

"I'm on my way."

I hung up. I shoved the phone back in my pocket. I pulled Roscoe up onto my back. We started back to where the car was stuck. Blood from the guy I'd just slept with that morning was soaking into my coat and dripping off and staining the snow red.