

Shark Bait

I look up from my desk when she walks in, the finest dame God could create. Her perfect long legs lead the way, making her hips move in wondrous ways because of the four-inch heels she's wearing. The curves of her body flow in the tight, small dress like an open highway to freedom, her breasts perfectly formed and skirting the edge of decency. Her long neck and young face are things of beauty, perfectly spaced from shoulders to eyebrows. A little dimple when she smiles makes me catch my breath. But all of that takes a back seat to the stunning mass of swirling red-orange hair that envelops her, making her stand out while somehow protecting her like a shield. She is sexy, and she knows it. The single most dangerous combination in a woman.

The rest of the brainiacs in the forensics department stare dreamy-eyed at her through their coke-bottle glasses, wishing and never getting what they wish for. They are the type that will never understand that if you see something you want, you go for it. I am. I was. Not anymore. Still, she's easy on the eyes.

Her stride is deliberate and slow, soaking in the adoration around her. She is someone you could pour your heart out to, and she'd make everything better. I shake my head. Damn dames could turn a man's head around sometimes. Especially a romantic Italian boy from Queens like me. Anthony Guiseppe's the name, or Agent Digger around this prison they call "The Agency."

Anyways, she just walks straight up to me. "You're the one they call Digger, right?" she smiles seductively. Those green eyes are smiling too, making me feel like the hottest guy in the joint. Damn, she's more dangerous than I first thought. Have to watch yourself around this one, Tony, I tell myself.

"Call me Tony, sweetness. Who's askin'?"

She offers me her hand. I take it. "I'm Samantha Killian, field agent gamma. I need some discreet inquiries made, and I hear you're the man for the job."

"Is that so?" I lean back in my chair, sizing her up. Yep, still beautiful. "What did you have in mind, darlin'? I've got a lot of paperwork here to do, and not a lot of time."

She bats her eyelashes at me, I swear it. Just like the movies. "I need some information on a group calling themselves the Darkened Mined. We ran into some of their people." Behind her, Niles F-in' Galliston tilts his head slightly. I'm a detective, so I pick up on the subtle cues that others miss. He's extremely interested, and he was never interested in anything before, except if someone came in late or talked smack about the hats upstairs. I always figured him for a rat, and I can't let this angel come to harm because of a dung beetle like him.

"Sorry, sweetness," I say, raising my hand, "it works a certain way around here. You turn in a work request; I process it when it hits my in box." Niles' head nods slightly. Good boy, Digger. Fuck you, Niles. I've buried countless little ratfucks like you under the waves of the harbor.

She pouts, and my heart just goes out to her. A dame with that much power could entice a weaker man to jump in front of a speeding locomotive to slow it down for her. But I'm no weakling. "Look," I say, "sorry I can't help you. But if you want to go out sometime..." I hand her my card, with a post-it-note attached to it. She stops pouting and pockets it quickly. Smart girl, she'd picked up that the game was afoot.

I watch her leave, all 5'10" of her in those heels. Then I put my head in my hands and stare down at the top of my desk, littered in paperwork. I don't go for cheap flings, or for the real deal, either. Not enough pain the first way, and way too much the second. Not after some son of a bitch stole the two things that mean the most to me: My wife and my son.

I wonder what the hell I'm getting into with this fire-haired woman that looked at me with some kind of understanding in her eyes that no woman has ever had. The post-it said Mick's Lounge, 218 Fairway, 8 o'clock. Time to start seeing who the players are before I jump into the first quarter.

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Mick's is dark, with deep leather high-back booths, the perfect kind of place for cheating on your wife, selling drugs, or in my case, getting into more trouble than it was worth for a broad. Cigarette smoke wisps into spirals from the force of my arm pushing open the door. A few young guys look up while the old-timers ignore me. The stench of dried sweat, blood and old vomit assails my nostrils. Anyone looking to tail me into a place like this will stick out like a sore thumb, and there are people in here who are trying like hell to stay off the radar. More than likely they'd take care of the problem for me if they thought the tail was watching them.

I step inside and light up a coffin nail. I know they're bad for me, but what the hell. I took the Big Sleep two years ago anyways. At least that's the official bull. Turning on the mob and singing like a canary will get you dead in unpleasant ways, and I should know. I was a bruno back in the day, an enforcer, and damn good at it too. If someone needed to be rubbed out, I knew the best way to finish him off and where to dump the body.

I might not have mentioned this before, but I'm no angel.

I make my way to a corner booth where I can see the door and make myself comfortable. Jimmy the bartender slaps down a cold one before I have time to shrug out of my jacket. Good guy, that Jimmy.

Time to eyeball the locals. A mug at the other end of the L-shaped bar catches my attention. Something isn't right about him, and that's all I need to know. He's good though, I have to admit. Missed him on my first pass. I finish my beer and slide back into my trench coat. The meet's off.

She walks into the bar as I'm walking out. A split-second of hesitation on her part, a little bewilderment before she catches on. Yeah, she's a quick one. She turns to the cigarette machine to buy time for our next message exchange. Good girl. Then her eyes widen. I hit the floor as the button man behind me burns powder, his lead flying through the space I'd just been occupying like a bird on the wing. Whoever the guy is, he doesn't care about using a silenced pistol in public. Button man, then, a hired gun.

Samantha dives for cover behind a booth a half-second later as the automatic pistol spits lead death at her. Quick reflexes, that one. Just one of her many good qualities, it's beginning to seem.

My Beretta 93 R falls into my hand like an ace up my sleeve. It's already on burst fire. I could probably have dropped him with one bullet, but three is so much more fun. I caress the hair trigger I had installed, feeling the well-oiled mechanisms inside send three messengers of death on their journey. To the hitman's credit, he tries like hell to get out of the way, but my kind of aiming puts him behind the eight ball this day.

The first round shatters his right collarbone. The second tears through his lung, perforating it neatly like a paper towel tear. The third hits somewhere a little lower down. He drops like a ton of bricks, crimson blossoming on his starched shirt. His gun skitters across the floor to rest against the bar rail after an eternity of motion.

The herd runs for the exits. Not that they're all that scared, the muscle in the room knows a gunfight's over when one side hits the floor. They just don't want to be there when the cops arrive. Jimmy shoos us out the back before calling copper. Gotta love your neighborhood bartender. He probably won't remember what I look like thirty blinks from now.

Samantha and I walk briskly to the parking ramp and free her wheels. My Detroit Steel is two levels up, and quite a bit more nondescript. Still, you've got to love this woman's taste, I think. Her old school Chevy Nova is in top shape. The powerful engine roars to life, sucking fuel like a vamp sucks blood. We pull out and take a few laps to make sure we aren't being followed. But hitmen generally work alone. We're clean, as far as I can tell.

Samantha pulls over, slamming the gearshift into first and killing the engine. Her eyes bore into mine like twin emeralds, breaking through my defenses. "Now you know what you're up against, Tony. I wouldn't blame you if you walk away right now. Someone at the Agency is a mole. They sabotaged our last mission and almost got me and my friends killed. Now they know I'm tracking them down. This could get you killed."

"Dollface, I've already been dead. If you came looking for me, you know that already. Besides, leave a looker like you in the lurch? Not my style. We need to find a flop. They'll be watching our digs already. And I need to talk to some people."

"Thanks for doing this, Digger."

"I told you, it's Tony. And you're welcome."

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She lounges on the bed of the crummy hotel, her heels draped idly off of two elegant fingers as she flips the channels on the picture box on mute. I eye her appreciatively as I lean back in the cheap chair by the window, jawing with an old pal from darker days.

"Hey Vinnie, how's the family doing? Is that so? Little Lito's growing up, eh? Listen, not to chop it, but I need some information. I let the daylight into a hatchetman this afternoon, don't know who he is. I think he's from one of the Families. I want to know who. Yeah, it might have looked like Donnie a little. Try and nose around for me, will ya? Will do, call me at this number. Thanks, Vinnie, I owe you one. Okay, I owe you two. Don't remind me." I smile wearily as I flip my cell phone closed.

"Anything?"

"Not a definite, but it seems Donnie Colombo of the Colombo crime family was down in these parts, and the family is in an uproar. I figure it's the guy I clipped at Mick's. I hate to tell you, darlin', but it wasn't you he was after. I may get you into more dutch than you can shake a stick at."

"Well, you're the one that said you couldn't leave this looker to fend for herself on this one, Tony."

The dame is right. If there's anything I know about in this world, it's keeping my word and my honor intact. I snug my under-the-armpit holster and get ready to move. "I need to get to my car. Give me a lift to the ramp, then breeze until you hear from me. I need to get some stuff. Are your two friends in a safe place?"

"Rodeo and Skynet? They're on a yacht for the next three weeks. Safe enough, I guess."

"Rodeo's one of your family, doll? I ran a job with her in Italy, she's tough as nails. Now that's a dame that can look after herself." I start to smile. Things are looking up, if even a little.

The desk clerk looks at us in that sly way as we come down the stairs, you know the one. Places like this, they cater to the professional skirts and their marks, if you know what I mean. I almost wipe that grin off his face with a quick left, but we might need this place again. "No one rents our room," I say, pushing half a large his way, "and do something about the room. That bathroom could kill a guy."

We reach her car and look around. A quick glance underneath shows the bottom is clean; no bugs or things that go boom. With any luck Donnie was alone when he tried to drop us. That would give us at least until morning before more goons show up to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

The miles drain away under Samantha's expert handling of the car. A broad that can fight, drive, and look that damn good, it's like a devil's deal. That little voice keeps telling me, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is. But I reason with that inner yapping in the only way I know how. Someone is trying to kill her, so she's not that perfect.

The ramp is a hotspot this close to the red-light district outside of the capitol throughways. Good. Nothing like a crowd to make a hitman pause in his tracks. I tip my fedora at her as I step out of the passenger door. I watch the tough lines of the Nova disappear into the stream of taillights emptying into the sea of the overcast DC night. Keep your head in the game, I tell myself, not up some looker's skirts.

A car's tires screech as it rounds the ramp going down to the first level, leaving a taint of burnt rubber in the air. My attention shifts back from that just in time to feel the business end of a piece press into my spine. "Holy shit, Tony, you are alive," an incredulous voice says from behind me, "no funny business, just go fer yer car. I don't want to kill ya. Not yet, leastways."

I start to turn towards the voice, but the barrel jabs me again. "Nu-uh, Anthony, jus' keep on walkin' before I plug ya right here and now." What can I say? I do what I'm told.

My heap is sitting there in the slot, just waiting for me. I slowly pull the keys out of my pocket so I won't scare the little guy. No sense in getting ventilated on accident because a goon has an itchy trigger finger.

"You want to drive?" I ask. He just laughs, short and angry-like. I get in, buckling my seatbelt as I start the ignition. Dead Donnie's brother, Luciano, drops in beside me, slamming the heavy door hard. He leans into the leather of the Impala at a 45 to keep one eye on the road and the other and a gun on me.

"Do I haveta spell it out for ya, ghost boy?" he sneers, "just fuckin' drive."

I pull out and descend the ramp in slow, lazy circles. Luciano drops the gun out of eyesight as I pay the booth attendant, then jabs it back in my side as we get rolling. He tells me where to turn, how fast to go. I know this neighborhood like the back of my hand. The warehouse district isn't far away, and we're headed right for it.

Things could be better, I reflect. Still, if Lady Luck hates your guts, you've got to make your own luck. Now it's just a guess to see if dying once already used all mine up.

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Traffic flies by like lovers in the night, a constant stream of faceless nobodies that you forget as soon as they leave your sight. I slouch a little in the seat, stretching out my shoulder blades. No matter how long I've lived in places like this, the stop-and-go traffic still gets to me. The locals are always cutting each other off to get five feet farther in the stack of traffic, as if they're stealing sand from the hourglass. But tonight I welcome it, grabbing it close.

"Je-sus, Tony! Watch yaself! I don't want to be sitting in this coffin with you riding that guy's bumper like that!"

"Relax, Luciano," I laugh, a bit forced, "I know what I'm doing. Question is... how did you know I was still kickin'? I thought I covered my tracks pretty well two years ago."

He shifts, looking shamefaced. "Yeah, after you killed the boss' wife, Tony, we were all over you. Just a matter of time. Then your corpse showed up, and we thought one of the other Families had taken care of the problem for us. When me an' Donnie rolled into town, we happened to see you with the skirt. Bad luck for you, Tony, bad luck all over. All that time spent hidin', and we find you with the one woman we've traveled down here to kill. She's dead now, though. Steve-o's down here wit' us too, and he's following the skirt. She won't be tellin' no tales, if you catch my drift."

"Wait a minute," I ask, "you're not after me at all?" My investigator's mind begins clicking, connections firing up all over. "You're here about the diamonds."

Luciano looks surprised as hell. That's what I was going for. He never was too bright when I knew him back in the five boroughs, and it doesn't look like he's learned anything in the two years since I left. The egg never knew when to quit jawing and get to killing. Back in the day, his brothers used to say the only way he killed people was by talking them to death.

"How you know about dat, Tony-boy?"

"I'm a quick study, Luciano, you know that," I remark offhand as I deftly maneuver through traffic, "anyways, the Africans tried to kill the skirt and her friends here less than a week ago, and they failed. So this Darkened Mined company that's smuggling the diamonds, they're piping them up to the York to the Families, eh?"

"Yeah, it's a pretty sweet deal. The only time all Five have come together for something wit'out blood getting spilled all over da pavement." He was talking of the five crime families in New York, of which I'm a late member. If they were all getting along, someone was pulling the strings to make them dance.

But first things first. I'd learned all I needed to know. I come up on the intersection, first in line because I'd been dragging my heels in the slow lane. The light has just changed from yellow to danger red. The cars start crossing in front of me, people rushing to their nightlife at breakneck speed. There we go. Come to daddy.

Luciano has enough time to yell "what da hell a ya doin', To-" before I gun the Impala, finding my bull's-eye on the side of the two ton work truck crossing the intersection. Remember that seatbelt I clicked in when I got in the car?

Metal and glass fragments shower everywhere as my head bounces one sharp time off the steering wheel. No airbags on these classic rides. And old Luciano? He red-lights right through the windshield like an oversized june bug. I shake my head, hearing nothing but silence for a few blinks. Then the typical DC traffic starts up, honking their horns as if that will make the mess get cleaned up any faster.

Luciano looks bad, all ruined. He lies on my hood after bouncing off the truck stuck to my front end like a leech. The jagged hole in the windshield is streaked with bits of his blood, clothes and skin. The side of his head is flattened from the impact, don't know if it was the windshield or the truck that did that.

The engine is halfway through the ruptured hood like a butterfly escaping a cocoon. This baby isn't going anywhere. I kick open the door and pull myself into the rain. The freezing droplets sting as they hit the cut on my forehead, but at least they clear my vision for a few moments. Thunder rolls across the sky as the storm intensifies, dropping gallons of the wet stuff.

I pop the trunk and grab my gear out of the back as the crowd finally starts to gather. One guy, probably the city's only Good Samaritan, grabs my arm. "Hey man, you can't leave!" I shrug him off and walk briskly into the crowd, my duffel bag slung over one shoulder. I am a ghost.

A block later, I pull out my cell phone. "Agent Digger, 45765. I need a cleanup at 12th and Robert, one fatality. My DNA in the interior, as well as from the victim. Make it disappear. Yep, my report will be on Noray's desk in the morning."

I click the cell closed and make for the nearest hack I can find. Dropping into the backseat, I spit out, "18th and Jamison apartments. There's an extra fifty in it if I get there by 10." The cabbie smiles and nods.

I hope to God there's still time to save that gorgeous angel. I don't need another death on my conscience, the two are enough.

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I flip up my cell and punch in Rose's number. Pick up, Samantha, pick up. No dice. The voicemail clicks on --"This is Samantha. If you've got this number, I'm already dead." Cute. Better hope it's not the truth.

I stare out the window, past the streams of water shining in the neon lights like diamonds. Those jewels started this mess. I look at the row of diamonds in my wedding band and wonder why I still wear it; two years after my actions caused the death of my wife and son. Some mysteries will never be solved, even when they're pursued by as vigilant a gumshoe as I am.

It seems like the end of time before the hack turns left on a red and glides to a stop in front of Samantha's apartment. Kind of a dump, I think, but that was the point. For the Agency, nondescript is the law of the day. Don't raise any eyebrows of the people you're spying on.

I pay and step out, slashed by the sharp knife of the wind and rain. The gutter overflows as God weeps for the pitiful subjects under his gaze. That's what Mama used to say, anyways. Like all good Catholics, I find some perverse pleasure in the darker things. If life is rosy, something's terribly wrong. How did that movie put it? You Catholics don't celebrate your faith, you mourn it, or something like that. I loosen my peashooter in its holster, then slip in behind a woman and catch the electronic door before it swings closed.

Second floor, where is it? 208. Okay, door's still open a crack. Forced entry. I ease the door open and step inside into darkness that feels alive, crackling with energy. The rectangle of light from the door shrinks and disappears as I let my eyes adjust to the light. Just a light scratch, but I know exactly where it's coming from: the master bedroom.

I get to the door just as the stereo starts blaring from inside. Steve-o probably asked all his questions, if there were any at all, and if I know my girl she gave him zero. Not much time now. He'll want to finish it quick before the tenants above and below start banging on the door to see what all the noise is about.

The door blows back into the wall as I bull on through, ranking the man before me in a few blinks. He turns, scared to high hell, but he's quick, too. A glint of silver is my only warning as he slashes at me. I feel the burn of the shiv along my arm as I strike out. He got me, but I got him better. The butt of my Beretta swings around and pops him in the melon.

He doesn't go down right yet, a tough bird. The shiv comes at me again, but this time I'm ready. With a sidestep I brush past sharp death and get in behind him. I get a grip on his shoulder and pull him into my pistol butt again, finally crackin' that melon open. Like a bull in a slaughterhouse, he doesn't know he's dead yet, and keeps flailing. I hold him until his brain catches on and his body goes limp, then pitch him into the corner.

There she is, her red hair shining in the moonlight that's just broken through the clouds. I untie her and kick over the chair, my blood still hot from the action. I feel like I could lift a truck and a half. I got here in time, thank you Mary Mother of God. I vow in that instant to go to confession, something I haven't done in all these long two years.

"Tony, you look like hell," she teases as I pull the gag out of her mouth. She lightly touches the cut on my forehead, and I swear it stopped bleeding right then and there at her touch.

I look over her blackened eye and bruised cheek. "You're lookin' a little rough there yourself, doll. I'm glad you're okay. I don't know how I would have gone on --"

She puckers up those beautiful fat lips and pulls my head down. Her kiss is like fire racing through my mouth, cleansing all the fear and pain of the last few hours in an explosive rush of...I don't know, life. There's no word for it, really.

We stand there in the dark with a dead man a few steps away and kiss like teenagers. Any man in the world out there, and she's kissing me. There's something about a crisis situation that makes people do weird things.

I break it off, finally, or I'd go mad. I'm so dizzy with this dame that I can barely stay in control, and for a moment I wonder why I don't just grab her up in my arms then and there. But they're always there just over someone's shoulder, two ghosts looking at me with wet eyes. Eyes that ask me why I wasn't there for them that day. I can't shake 'em and get on with my life, not until I know.

"C'mon, Samantha, we need to walk away." She sighs and follows me.

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The desk jockey at the hotel looks up as we walk in. I can see the rude comment forming on his lips before he even says it. "Back for more, eh?" Then he gets a good look at our cut-up mugs and pales. If there's anything these boys don't want in their places of business, it's the kind of trouble we're bringing.

"We'll take our room," I say, slapping a half-large on the guest book, "and some food, whatever you've got."

"The kitchen's closed --"

I point to the \$500. "Make it happen," I start, peering at his nametag, "Luis." I fill my voice with enough venom to make him understand bad things will happen to him if he doesn't snap to it. He catches on.

I close the door behind her, flipping on the lights and locking the deadbolt. When I turn around, she's right there. Her breasts crush up against me through the thin fabric of her blouse as she lays one right on me. She's stronger than I thought, pushing me up against the wall with one arm while reaching to pull my trench coat off of me with the other.

"I --I can't, Samantha," I mumble out between kisses, "please stop." She does, that hurt look in her eyes. She's not used to being told no, and I wish to God on high that I wasn't the one to do it to her. "I'm not right, darlin', and I don't want you getting yourself into something that'll turn sour. It wouldn't sit well with me."

She looks deep into my eyes, and sees all the hurt in there. Taking my hand, she pulls me to the bed and just gives me a hug. "I know you lost your wife and son, Tony. I've been there too. Let's just talk, then."

So we tell each other our life stories, or at least the important parts, as we wolf down our too-rare room-service burgers. "So my Don, the head of the Lucchese Family, told me to rub out the wife of the head of the Bonanno Family, Marieta Bonanno. So I did it."

"What?" Samantha asked, grabbing my hand, "why?"

"Number one, sweetheart, if your Don asks you to do him a personal favor, you do it or you get dead. Two, well, Frankie Bonanno was using his wife as a mule. She was into the tea cigarettes if you know what I mean, and some snorts too," I said, settling back against the headboard. She curled up beside me, listening. "The problem was she got some bad blow to one of the sons of a made man in the Lucchese Family. Cut with something, who knows what. Anyways, the kid ends up so out of his gourd that he takes a long walk off a short pier. The Don traced it back to her, or so he told me. That Mathew was a good kid that died too early, so I took on the job."

I could feel her draw back from me a little bit. She was scared of the new information on me. I could feel it change her whole view of me as a person, and I couldn't blame her. "I don't have to tell you that I've done worse things, Samantha. I'm not always a nice man. I was a killer for a crime family, and I've got to live with that."

I look at her, deciding if I should go on or not. Ah, hell. All in on the bangtails, as they say. "Bottom line, I killed a Don's wife. My Don gave me up when he realized the only thing coming to him for that one act was civil war within the Families."

I looked at the ceiling, the memory of that day springing out at me as it always did. You can hide something away, but you can't always decide when it will come out of hiding on its own. "I shot my way out of the bar when the hatchetmen came for me, so they took my family. They walked into my house before I could get back. My wife, she knew these men that used to be my brothers, so she opened the door and they shot her in the face. Then they walked into my little boy's room and smothered him with a pillow."

I wanted to cry, to let the poison of two unendurable years of guilt and pain pour out of me in big unstoppable rivers. It had been so long with no one to talk to about it that I forgot what it was like to trust someone with these memories. And that fire-haired angel took pity on me like no one has, just holding me while I poured out my heart.

And her story, damn if it didn't trump mine. She was brought in for her looks, to give men what they wanted in exchange for secrets. They had taken this dame from Broadway itself and turned her into not much more than a professional skirt, a woman of the night. I felt the anger rising, clean and bright. She deserved better, but she did the job.

It was her first deep cover assignment, spying on a bean-counter in some corporate company. She fell in love with him, all the while knowing it wasn't in the cards, and then the Agency told her to kill him.

So here is this beautiful woman, putting her heart out there for a man she could never have, and she broke the rules. She was going to warn him to get out, to try desperately to save his life, but sometimes Lady Luck is smiling on someone else. The Cold Zero Clan, a group of gunrunners that sprang up after Vietnam, wanted the same information the Agency was after. They'd worked their way into the building and killed her lover, and very nearly her.

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Ever since then, her heart was a closed book. No one got close. Until me, that is. Funny how life works sometimes. We fall asleep like that, just holding each other in a ratty hotel room in an even rattier part of town. Outside, the storm throws shadow punches, but for a little while we're safe from it. Safe in each other's arms.

But tomorrow is always another day that can kill you, as we say back in the Big Apple.



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The sun sears through the clouds to wake me like a snapping finger. The day is here, and it's time to find some answers. I leave Samantha to sleep while I peel off my dirty, stiff clothes from the day before and get into the cold shower. The spray sloughs off the blood, dead skin and sweat. I feel like a man reborn, and I realize it's mostly because of the absence of weight on my shoulders. It will return, I know, until I finally piece together who pulled the trigger on my wife and smothered my son. That bastard will get cut to the front of the line to the Big Sleep. But for now I feel good.

I walk out, drying my hair, as she raises her sleepy head and blinks away confusion. I can see her giving the room the up-and-down before remembering where she is. She looks at me, and smiles shyly. With the sun beaming in on her like that, I can almost forget that the worst part is still to come. Almost.

"Rise and shine, dollface," I smile, "we've got a busy day. And I think I know where to start." I got dressed and gave her a few minutes to freshen up. And boy did she ever. A little foundation covered the bruise, but her shiner was another story. I slipped her my cheaters to cover it up. As for my gash, that's what lanky unkempt hair is all about, eh? It would do unless someone was really looking.

We got in the car and drove for a little while, waiting for the plan to come golden in my conker. Finally it all clicked. I called the Agency number and asked for Niles F-in' Galliston. Part one, and the most important one.

"This is Niles, Anthony. What can I do for you? Are you going to be late again?" I ignored the jibe. That little daisy knew I was never late.

"In a manner of speaking, Niles. I need a favor." The silence was deafening. He knew I hated his guts, and now he was rolling it all around up there to see where the marble would stop.

"What kind of a favor, Anthony?"

I smiled even as I said the words, relishing what would come next. "I need a disc from my laptop. Can you pop it out of the drive and meet me at the west entrance? It's really important, case-related. You know, classified stuff." He wouldn't be able to resist, that's what made him such a good watchdog in the office --and in other channels, I was beginning to suspect.

"This is a little...unusual, Anthony."

"Believe me, I know, but like I told you --"

"Okay, I'll be there."

"See you in five, Niles, thanks."

When we pull up, I look around. "Okay, Samantha, here's the draw. We need him to get out of view of the door so the badge in there can't see us."

She looks at me, her eyes dancing at the chance to do a little role-playing. "I can arrange that."

"That's my girl." She gets out and walks over to the little weasel. I see them talking for a few minutes, then Niles follows her over like a puppy-dog. He eyes me as I get out, fingering a disc in his jacket pocket: the disc with a bunch of information on the Darkened Mined. Anything I could find out through Agency channels was on there, and I knew when he was listening in on our conversation yesterday morning that he was in on it, somehow. I didn't need the disc; anything worth remembering was in my conker already. Sometimes you just know when you need a little insurance.

"Thanks for coming, Niles," I say, moving closer, "I put a few things together, and we're going to need them for our next move."

"That's far enough," he yelled, reaching for his other pocket. His hand gropes furiously in there. I smile as Rose Asp pulls his own gun out of her purse and points it at his head. Nice pull, Angel, I think to myself.

"What the-?" Niles manages to stutter out before I open the door of Samantha's car. She jabs him in the back, but he still tries to backpedal, denying what's happening.

"Niles." I slap him in the face, hard. His head snaps around on his long skinny neck, and his eyes glaze over for a second. "Niles, get in the car before she gives you lead poisoning. Everyone's already inside, the guard can't see you. We can do this without you if we have to, you fucking worm." He gets in, starting to cry. It's tough being a spy.

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Shark Bait

Twenty minutes later we make it to an abandoned warehouse. The sun is finally getting up into the sky, sizzling off the puddles of rainwater in a shroud of haze. I take Niles' cell phone off him and flip it open, searching through the address book. Nothing's jumping out at me. "Niles, who's your contact in the Darkened Mined?"

"Fuck you, Tony, you've done it now! Kidnapping an Agency operative, stealing classified information, you're going down! I'll see to that!"

Samantha pulls him into the warehouse and we lash him to a chair with duct tape from my duffel bag. I pull out an empty two-liter bottle and duct tape that to the barrel of my Beretta 93R. His eyes go wide as I place it against his kneecap.

"I'm going to ask you two more times, Niles. Think carefully here. Your insurance co-pays won't cover this, you stinking rat. Who's your contact?" He gives me the finger. That's what I was hoping for. Rose Asp puts the strip of duct tape over his mouth, and then I pull the trigger. The slug pops through the kneecap like a lance through a boil, and Niles screams through the duct tape. The popping of the bottle muffles the shot. Nothing like a ghetto silencer.

After he quiets down, Samantha rips the tape off his kisser so he can scream obscenities at us. I let him vent, it must have hurt. Then I start taping another two-liter on. "So Niles, who's your contact?" I ask casually. I sit on a crate in front of him and light up a cigarette. Taking a couple of puffs, I put it in his mouth. Greedily he pulls the air and smoke into his lungs before answering.

"Someone else at the Agency, I don't know who." I grind my thumb into his gunshot wound. He screams for a little while, but finally coughs it up. "He's under Randall Smith in my phone! Jesus!"

I pick up his phone and punch in the number, then toss it into a corner of the warehouse behind some crates. Whoever is pushing this egg, they won't want him jawing to anyone.

"Now what?" Samantha asks, pushing the hair out of her face.

In answer I pull some more broken crates and pallets and pile them next to the door we came in. Sure, it was a trap, but they were going to come in anyways. They had to be sure. "How do you get the bigger fish?" I ask as I work. She comes to help me, throwing pallets around as if they weigh nothing. I want to stop and just watch her work, but there is not much time left.

"Chum the waters," she answers, brushing the dust off on her pants, "and now Niles is the shark-bait."

I just smile. We make a good team, me and this dame.

Shark Bait

The button men come knocking with tear gas, automatic shotguns, and assault rifles only twenty minutes after I make the call. Someone's got muscle on standby, never a good sign. They blow the door with a well-placed blast, sending the door handle and surrounding wood flying through the air. The laser sights on their weapons are beams of death in the darkness, darting here and there in search of a victim. Three dots center on Niles' chest, still strapped to the chair in the center of the room.

"Oh, thank God!" he yells, "they're to your --"

I knock the stack of crates on them, trying to see through the haze of tears welling up in my eyes. If they'd thrown the gas grenades and waited a couple of minutes, we'd be sitting ducks. As it stands, we still have the advantage. They aren't the only ones packing iron.

As they disentangle themselves from the pile of garbage, my Remington shotgun comes up to my shoulder with a mind of its own. The flechette rounds tear through their Kevlar vests as if they were wet toilet paper, piercing bones and organs. As I reload, a late-comer rushes the doorway. He has me dead to rights before Samantha's Ladysmith burns powder. The single armor-piercing slug passes a hair's-breadth over my shoulder, shattering his shooter's glasses and passing out the back of his skull. The soldier slumps over with his three buddies in the Big Sleep.

We duck down behind some boxes, waiting for the gas to disperse. In the background we hear Niles coughing and tearing up, unable to pull his shirt up to cover his nose and mouth like we do.

After a few minutes we breathe normally again. "Samantha, you saved my life back there. I won't forget it."

"Don't worry, baby," she drawls, "that's what we call Chicago Lightning." I realize she's making fun of me, and laugh like nobody's business. We make our way back to ol' Niles. He's a sore sight, streams of tears down his face. I don't know if he's crying because of the gas or the Broderick we just laid down on his would-be rescuers. I cut him loose.

He takes one look at us and sprints for the doorway, still trying to grasp his new-found freedom.

"So you think he'll lead us to someone that can give us the bigger picture?" my fire-haired angel asks, clicking the safety on her gat.

"That's the plan, darlin'," I smile, shoving the Remington back into my duffel bag, "you got the bug on him?" At her wry grin I laugh. Of course she did, she's a professional.

The sound of the gunshot scares the bejesus out of us both, echoing off the faces of the industrial buildings all around. The 7.62 mm shell blows through Galliston's head like an M-80 in a toad's mouth. He bites the Big One in one of the most gruesome ways I've ever seen. For a few steps his body still tries to stay upright despite missing half his conker, but finally sags to the ground in mid-stride. Whoever the sniper is, he wants to make sure Niles didn't lead us to whoever's in charge of this operation. It just makes me more determined.

I grab Samantha's arm, propelling her to the far side of the warehouse. "We've got to breeze, dollface," I hiss, "snap out of it! If there's one mug out there, he's called for backup." She follows me to her wheels, hidden under a tarp in the corner. No chance of opening the dock door without being bopped off by the lurker, we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way.

She pushes the pedal to the floor as we both hold our breath, racing across the creaking production floor to the dock. The crushing dock door flies up and back as the Nova blasts down the ramp, catching air and landing in a shower of sparks. A hurried shot from the sniper snaps through the rear side window. Too late, sucker.

We're off, screaming while the adrenaline still courses through our bodies in waves. Sometimes you feel like everything is right, and there are other times when you know you just escaped a deathtrap. This was one of the latter. We make it about five miles away before she pulls over, shaking from the adrenaline crash.

I look at her, hungry, and pull her to me. She kisses me hard, mashing her lips into mine as I cup the back of her head. This time she finally has the strength to pull away first. "The two of us are not done yet, Tony. Not by a long shot. But we still have work to do first." I kiss her again, feeling like a million bucks. I take out my deck and shake out a smoke as she puts the car in gear and starts driving.

"What's our next move?" she asks, trying like hell to be serious when all she really wants is to take me someplace more private. I blow out a smoke ring, considering.

"One place left, doll," I muse, staring at her profile as she drives, "back to where it all began."

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Shark Bait

The place is still buzzing as I push my way through the door and show my badge to Luke. The Agency security guard tips his hat at me, his feet propped on the counter. "Afternoon, Guiseppe," he laughingly remarks, "pick your own hours these days?"

"You know how it goes, Luke. Just chin with the hats upstairs. It's all about who you know, not what."

"Amen to that, brother! Have a good one."

"You too, Luke."

I shoe it around a corner and pull out my shims. The door to the maintenance closet pops in seven seconds, I must be slipping. Back in my prime it would have taken me five. Inside is everything I need: toolkit, straps, coveralls, and spare computers on a shelf on the wall. Sometimes it pays to scout out the home turf. I throw the coveralls on over my rumpled threads and grab everything I need before making my way to the cube farm where my desk is.

No one even glances my way; the techs are in and out of our area all the time. I waste no time, not counting on my cheap disguise to fool anyone for long. Niles' desk has the computer on the floor underneath. I kneel down and unplug everything, switching the case for the one I brought with me. Almost home free.

"Niles will be happy," a chipper voice says right behind me, "I think he went home, probably because of whatever problem the computer was having. I know he took off in a hurry."

Shit. Janice Jones, the office gossip. That broad doesn't know the meaning of "I'm gonna give you a Chicago overcoat if you don't shut yer yap." If she doesn't get away from me right now she'll recognize me, and the game will be up. I do the only thing I can in that situation: slip back to the days of my youth.

"Listen, lady, can't a guy work `ere? My boss is ridin' me all freakin' day long t'git things fixed. I ain't got time ta listen to every sob story in the joint, y'knowwhatlmean? Jimminy-freakin' Christmas!"

Janice falls back a step, finally saying "Well, I never!" as I walk away from her, happy for the cap I pulled down low over my eyes. She finally comes to her senses. "I want your name, sir!"

But I'm already out the door, striding down the hallway at a fast clip. I take a left instead of a right, heading down a different hallway. Along the way I pull a fire alarm, hearing the instantaneous blaring of the sirens as I fly towards a fire exit. I kick it open, and there she is: my angel in a devil's chariot, sitting in first with the clutch in. I smile at her, throwing the case in the backseat as I jump in. The fire alarm blares as she pops the clutch and gets us the hell out of Dodge.

I pull the case onto my lap and twist off the thumbscrews holding on the side panel. I pull the guts out of it, keeping the hard drive and ignoring the rest. "Now we'll see what Niles was hiding, Samantha. He's too meticulous to be keeping stuff all up in his conker. Worse than a dame for details, no offense."

"None taken," she says swatting my cheek. Her hair blows in the wind from the open window in long molten streams as she speed-shifts through the gears like a pro. My digs are possibly being watched, but we'll have to chance it. All my tools of the trade can't fit into a duffel bag, after all.

Shark Bait

All's quiet at my place, but that's bound to change. We make it in, covering all the corners, then bolt the door. My apartment is on the fourth floor of an old building, drab but solid. And I've been hard at work making it better than it appears.

My angel cases the digs while I shrug out of my trench coat and fire up my workstation. The powerful processor practically roars to life, preloading my algorithms. I attach an external line to the hard drive and watch it click up on the second screen. The days of the pencil-and-notepad detective are over, and while I'm bummed as hell about that, I don't let it stop me from finding the advantages to a number cruncher.

I whistle out loud and light up a coffin nail. Ol' Niles has some steep price tags on these toys he's got locked away on this thing. I start cracking some code. I'm not the best code-slinger; that Skynet guy my doll talks about sounds like the cream of the crop. Still, I make do with good old-fashioned stick-to-it-iveness and some mental leaps of faith. Simply put, I can't do much programming, but I can crack the hell out of a code.

His anti-intrusion software ramps up, trying to block the pass. My fingers start to sweat as I type. I do a little better when I can sit down with no interruptions and just look at all the angles, but I'd just as soon not be sitting here when the Agency's brunos come knockin'. With a quick guess I crack his password: Milan. The name of his cat; the only personal thing he has on his desk is that damn cat's picture.

I checked him out two years ago when I first started in the Agency Investigative Unit. Sometimes a photographic memory is a blessing. I know his cat, his doctor, the address of his parents, the credit card number he keeps hidden from the Agency. My favorite rule: always know the people you work with. You find out the dirt that way.

I log into his email. Same password as the access to the hard drive. Sloppy. Almost as bad as using "secrets" or "god" for your password. I find all the usual trash that comes from desk jockeying, as well as his lists to superiors about people coming in late, all old news to me. Zero. I think for a minute. Must be something here, I'm just missing it.

On impulse, I pull up his file structure and poke around. After a couple of minutes, it catches my eye. He has two pictures folders, but they don't show up next to each other like they should. One is all the way at the bottom when I bring up the window. I click the command to rearrange the icons, and it doesn't move. Bingo. False door.

I double-click it, bringing up the program it hides. The I.P. scrambler activates, that's no good. That means that while my true location is hidden, so is Niles' contact. I'd give a million berries to have that scum in the sights of my peashooter right about now. Guess I'll have to do this the hard way. I log in after three attempts. The dumb-ass used his mother's maiden name for the password.

"Got something?" Samantha asks me, wandering over. Guess she got bored looking at a widower's sterile pad. Can't blame her.

"That's right, doll. Our pal Niles was talking to someone, and I'm going to find out who. And if they cared enough to chill him, it's because he has a way in." My fingers fly over the keyboard, calling up external programs to monitor the one I was in. Finally I hit the connect button to the virtual site he has contacted the most. A text window pops up, complete with blinking cursor.

A couple of blinks later my trace program is online, winding its way snakelike through the maze of portals and routers. The comm. program I'm using hits a series of nodes and leaves a mark for the rest of the communication to follow, standard procedure. It's nearly unbreakable, but the program I crafted doesn't care. It doesn't want to break the routing algorithm; it wants the host node's signature. Then it ghosts in and takes over the routing each time a message is sent. From there it piggybacks to the next node and waits again. If the message goes on long enough, it can make it to the source.

The screen comes to life.

Who are you?

My digits flash over the keyboard, dancing like light through a diamond.

It's Niles, I need extraction asap.

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Shark Bait

Niles is dead. Who are you?

The bloody hell I am! Some sniper almost took my head off!

Verifying. Wait.

I sit there, Samantha's hand on my shoulder. She doesn't talk, just lets me concentrate on working my magic. Three nodes down. No way to tell exactly where it is originating from yet. I'd gone from national to state level, the message being routed through my ISP. Come on, give me something you son of a bitch.

Niles terminated, verification obtained. You were the worker in the office today.

Well, no need for much more tracing. It was someone in the Agency; we knew that for sure now. "Another fucking mole," Rose Asp whispers next to my ear. I almost forget what I'm doing, her breath and body that close. I touch her flawless face gently, then continue what I'm doing.

Good call asshole. Guess what I've got? You.

Doesn't matter now.

****Connection Terminated****

"We're in dutch now, darlin'."

Samantha hears the urgency in my voice and races to the window. "The fucker was tracing us, too. I thought you had all kinds of stuff on here? Two vans outside, looks like eight men with tactical body armor and assault rifles."

"Looks like their stuff is better than mine. They're the Agency, after all." I pack up the external hard drive and flip the switch. The internal hard drives spin like tops, whirring faster and faster before melting down in a soupy slag. 95% data loss is good enough for me. I connect a cord on the top of the door to the frame, and set up a tripwire while making my way back deeper into the apartment. A quick swipe with the butt of my Beretta smashes the light bulb in the entryway. The fishing line vanishes in the shadows like a beautiful broad with a mark's money. "This way, Samantha, and move those gams."

She does, running with me to the master bedroom. I shove the dresser aside to reveal the apartment below. I rented it under another name months ago. I slip through the hole, catching her as she follows me. Next, I pull the handle on the bottom of the dresser. It resists, but finally slides back into place over our heads.

An explosion, then a second one, rocks the apartment over our heads. They'll be watching the fire escapes, one option left. "Laundry chute."

"Are you kidding me?" she says, staring at the tiny opening.

"Hey, you're a skinny dame," I remark, pulling her over and sending her feet-first into the hole. I follow after a minute later, hoping there's a laundry basket at the bottom.

I stand up on a pile of dirty laundry, brushing myself off. My Fedora comes tumbling down a moment later, Saints be blessed. Lighting up a smoke, I pull my angel to her feet and we move, propping up a basement exit window and getting into the alley. I reach down to pull her up, giving it the old heave-ho.

As I pull her up, she slips my Beretta out of my shoulder holster and fires to the left. A scream of pain marks the lookout that found us the hard way.

"Thanks, doll. I owe you one."

"I'll let you make it up to me," she smiles. We run like rabbits, leaving the building with the smoking shell of an apartment far behind us. Time to make some insurance.

Shark Bait

Wingate sits in a corner booth, clutching the end of a pipe between his perfect set of teeth. His silver hair peeks out from the aging bowler cap he's got on. An enigma, that bird certainly is. Samantha follows a few steps behind me, watching the corners. She smiles and nods slightly to two men sitting at a table close by. Must be Wingate's muscle, Colonel Ruthers and Master Sergeant MacDowell. Good men, from what Rose tells me. They're locked and loaded; I can see the bulges beneath their clothes. They're going for scare tactics, not stealth. Any hood in the room can tell they're packin', and the message is clear: get lost or get dead.

We get to Wingate's table, sitting on the other side. My back is towards the front of the establishment, something I don't like. Guess I'll have to rely on the two boys packing heat for Wingate. "Thank you for meeting us so soon, sir," Rose Asp smiles, touching his hand lightly. She told me he's one of the few she trusts, so if he's good enough for her he's good enough for me.

"My dear Samantha, what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into?" Wingate smiles warmly, "and you as well Mister Giuseppe. I've been watching you for a long time."

I don't know if I like the sound of that. Anyone poking into my business is bad news for yours truly. Still, what can I do? I work for the Agency, after all. I let Rose take the lead, she knows as much as I do anyways.

Samantha flips her hair back, such a cute habit. "We were almost killed, and another man certainly was. Niles Galliston, have you heard of him?"

"I have. A snitch for the people that mean to run me out of my job," Randolph Wingate states, a trace of venom in his voice. He may be old, but old tigers still rip throats out if you fuck with them. He coughed and continued, "why him, though? He's a nobody."

"He was more than that," I broke in, pulling the hard drive out of my trench coat carefully. "He was the eyes and ears of a rat in the Agency that's trying to ice us. I made contact with whoever it was and dogged them back to an Agency IP before they hit us at my apartment. Someone that has access to snipers and mercs in assault gear. Heavy weight, Mr. Wingate."

He took the hard drive and rose to leave. "I'll check into this personally, my friends. Remember, trust no one. The wind of change is upon us, and we need to be on the upwind side. Be careful out there, and I will put the word out that you're being watched. It might not stop the assassins, but it will certainly slow down whoever is pulling the strings. I have a feeling his plan is in motion, and he won't jeopardize that so easily."

Then he was gone, disappearing into the swirling cigarette smoke like an apparition. MacDowell and Ruthers followed after like shadows. I lit up a smoke and drew in a deep breath of all the chemicals that made them taste so damn good.

"I don't know about you, dollface," I said, exhaling smoke, "but I don't feel much safer. Still, we're out of our league on this one, best to let the pit bulls start nosing around for us."

"I think it's time for a little vacation, just the two of us," she said, gripping my hand, "I know a nice island in the south Pacific..."

How an ugly mug like mine is walking around with a sweetheart like her, I don't know. I'm also not gonna start tempting fate by asking questions. "Sounds like a dream, baby. When do we leave?"

END