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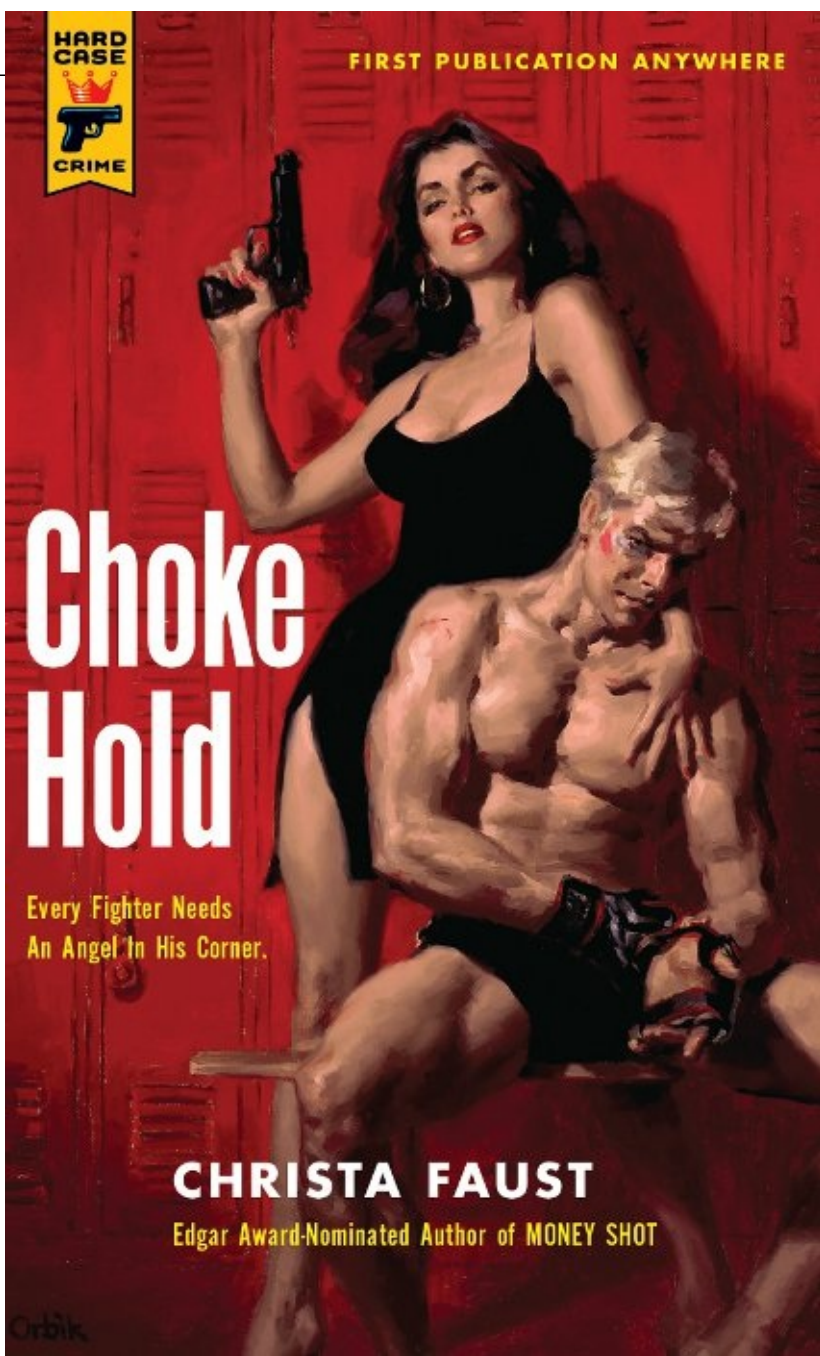
Choke Hold

Every Fighter Needs
An Angel In His Corner.

CHRISTA FAUST

Edgar Award-Nominated Author of **MONEY SHOT**

Orbit



~~Acclaim for the Hard Case Crime Debut of~~ **CHRISTA FAUST!**

“*Money Shot* is a stunner, careening along with a wild, propulsive energy and a deliciously incendiary spirit. Laced with bravado and loaded up with knockabout charm, Christa Faust’s Hard Case debut is the literary equivalent of a gasoline cocktail.”

—Megan Abbot

“I was sucked into the tight, juicy *Money Shot*, from the ripping car trunk start to the hard-pumping climax. This novel is so convincing that you want to believe Faust has been an oversexed, naked killing machine, at least once.”

—Vicki Hendrickson

“*Money Shot* is smart, stylish, insightful, fast-paced pulp fiction with razor sharp humor and a kick-ass heroine. Christa Faust is a super crime writer.”

—Jason Statham

“*Money Shot* makes most crime novels seem about as exciting as the missionary position on Tuesday night. The results are stunning.”

—Duane Swierczynski

“Wonderfully lurid, with attitude to spare and a genuine affection for the best of hardboiled tradition, Christa Faust is THE business.”

—Maxim Jakubowski

“Christa Faust writes like she means it. *Money Shot* is dark, tough, stylish, full of invention and built to one hell of a climax.”

—Allan Guthrie

“Christa Faust proves she can run with the big boys with this gritty thriller set in the darkest places of the porn industry. I loved it!”

—McKenna Jordan, *Murder By the Book*

“Never has an avenging Angel been sexier. *Money Shot* leaves you spent and wanting more.”

—Louis Boxer, founder of NoirCity

We had been driving through dusty Mexican nothing for so long, I would have gotten white-line fever if there had been any lines on the rutted dirt road. When we passed a dead car, it seemed way more exciting than it should have. A sad cluster of cement-block houses seemed like a bustling town. After the sun went down, I started to see pairs of bright, reflective eyes watching from the scrub brush on the sides of the road.

Then finally lights in the distance. Strobes in gaudy headache colors and way too much neon, like an impossible fever dream after the sensory deprivation of the dark desert. Our destination turned out to be this weird lost fragment of Vegas imprisoned behind barbed wire. A maximum security Señor Frog's.

A razorwire fence ran all the way around the place with a sliding gate standing open. The front of the long, narrow building was all molded to look like rock, with fake plastic orchids sticking out at random intervals and several small waterfalls spilling into scummy plastic basins full of greenie American pennies. A big throbbing red sign read CLUB OASIS and flickering neon women shifted their glowing hips robotically from side to side.

"Is this a strip club?" I asked, frowning at the bored-looking guy with body armor and an AK47 who waved us into the fenced parking area.

"It's an anything-you-can-afford club," Hank replied...

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CHOKER HOLD

by **Christa Faust**



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For Chris Nowinski. Keep fighting.

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Do the things you've done in the past add up to the person you are now? Or are you endlessly reinvented by the choices you make for the future? I used to think I knew the answer to those questions. Now, I'm not so sure.

I was cutting a slice of lemon meringue pie and watching the door out of the corner of my eye when my past walked into the forgotten desert diner where I'd been waiting tables.

"Angel?"

No one had called me by that name in ages, but when I heard that familiar, sand-blasted South Side voice, I'll admit I felt a tiny fishhook tug in my heart. I used to love hearing that voice say my name. Then I hated it. Right now, I didn't know how to feel about it.

The last time I saw Thick Vic Ventura, it wasn't pretty. Neither was he. Twenty years of crank had cooked him down to bones and ashes. That was nearly two years ago, in another lifetime. I don't know what the hell I was expecting to see when I turned to face that voice, but what I did see grabbed hold of the hook with both hands and twisted.

I saw the ghost of the old Thick Vic. What little was left of his hair had gone steely gray, chopped short by an unskilled hand. His face looked ten hard years older than it should have but the young Vic was still there in his eyes. The same Vic I'd fallen for, back when we both believed that nothing real bad could ever happen to either one of us. Standing there by the register with his hands in his pockets he looked clean and earnest. He'd put fifteen healthy pounds on his lanky frame and his skin looked warm and pink, like it actually had red, living blood running underneath. His dark eyes looked calm and sane and more than a little melancholy. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me. I had no fucking idea what to say to him.

"Hey, Vic," I eventually said, for lack of anything better.

For a long, uncomfortable moment, neither of us spoke. I looked down at the cheap yellow filling leaking from the slice of pie on the plate in my hand. Vic looked everywhere but at me. He was the one who spoke first.

"I heard...well..." He paused, pulled his hands out of his pockets, looked down at them and then put them back in. "I heard a lot of crazy rumors about...what happened."

That line of conversation went nowhere fast. What was I supposed to say? *Well, Vic, I was raped and shot and left for dead so I hunted down the bastards who did it and killed them in cold blood.* That sort of thing doesn't exactly make for nice casual catch-up chat.

"You look good," I said. At first I just said it because I needed to say something, but once it was out, I realized that I meant it.

He shrugged and cocked his head with a self-deprecating smirk that was vintage Thick Vic.

“Yeah well,” he said. “I’m not trying to kill myself with a needle anymore. I’ve been sober for year and two months. This time I think it’s really gonna take.”

I thought maybe I should say something like *congratulations*, but wasn’t sure, so I said, “How did you find me?” instead.

“I didn’t.” Vic looked over at the corner booth and then down at his hands. “See that kid sitting over there.”

I looked over at the kid Vic was talking about. He was barely eighteen. Broken nose but still was too handsome for his own good. Intense hazel eyes and dark hair buzzed down to the scarred scalp. Lean, athletic build under an expensive white t-shirt printed with trendy rococo designs, silver skull and wings. His long, sinewy arms were already sleeved in unimaginative tattoos. There was a red and black motorcycle jacket slung over the back of the booth and a brain-bucket style helmet on the table beside him. He was trying a little too hard and wore bad-ass like a brand new pair of boots that hadn’t quite broken in yet. He’d ordered nothing but black coffee and flirted with me every time I came around to fill his cup. Told me he was waiting for someone, but not a girl because I was all the woman he’d ever need. Cocky, like some hot young gun who thinks he doesn’t need Viagra for his first scene. But underneath the bad-ass and the heavy handed Lothario charm, I got the feeling that he was anxious about something.

“What about him?” I asked.

Vic wiped his dry lips with the pad of his thumb and swallowed hard.

“That’s my kid,” he said.

“Your *kid*?” I frowned.

Vic nodded, smile fading.

“I’ve never met him.” He wiped his thumb across his lips again. “I mean, at the time I knew that Skye was knocked up, but she told me she was gonna get rid of it.”

“Skye?” I asked. “You mean Skye Blue?”

Vic shook his head. “Skye West.”

“Natural blonde, kind of a hippy-chick amateur look? Shot mostly for Metropolis but wouldn’t do girl/girl?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“No shit,” I said, looking back at the kid in the corner booth.

Now that Vic had mentioned it, the kid did bear more than a passing resemblance. He was a few inches shorter, a little prettier and much more muscular than his beanpole father but the crooked, charming smile and that cocky, big dick swagger should have been a dead giveaway.

“I found out about him five years ago,” Vic said. “But at the time I was too strung out to care. My life is different, now, so...” Again, that familiar self-deprecating smirk. “I got no idea what to say to him.”

I didn't either, so I said nothing.

"Well..." Vic said.

"You really had no idea I was here?" I asked. "Your kid just happened to pick this diner to meet you?"

"Small fucking world, eh? Of all the gin joints in all the towns..." More silence, then, "I'd like to see you again, Angel."

And there it was. I had kinda seen it coming but it still caught me off guard. We weren't exactly in love back in the day, but I suppose it was as close to love as a couple of callow, narcissistic twenty-somethings who fuck other people for a living can ever really be. Anyway it's the closest I've ever been. Whatever you call the way I used to feel about Thick Vic, I was sure I'd buried all those feelings the day I kicked him to the curb. Right around the time that kid in the corner booth had been conceived.

"Look," Vic continued. "I know you got no reason to give me the time of day, not after the way I fucked everything up between us. But I just want a few minutes of your time, to make amends."

"Amends?" I looked over at the old guy at the counter, waiting for his pie. He was starting to look annoyed. "It's ancient history, Vic."

"Indulge me, Angel," Vic said. "It's part of my recovery."

The old charm was pretty threadbare but it still made me smile despite myself.

"Is a blow job for old time's sake part of your recovery too?" I asked.

He cracked a grin that took years off his weathered face.

"Come on." He put his hand to his heart, mock offended. "What kind of guy do you think I am?"

"I know exactly what kind of guy you are," I told him. "That's the problem."

"Just a few minutes, Angel," Vic said. "Please? The blow job is optional."

I laughed and rolled my eyes.

"Go talk to your kid," I told him. "I'm off at midnight, okay?"

He looked back at the kid and his smile evaporated. The kid was drumming on the table and looking out the window.

"Miss?" said the man waiting for pie, one gnarled finger in the air.

"Go on, willya?" I said to Vic. "You'll be fine."

I walked down to the end of the counter and set the pie in front of the old man, who scowled down at it as if it were the pie's own fault that it had taken so long to arrive. I turned to grab the coffee surreptitiously watching Vic as he made his way over to the corner booth. He stood there with his back to me, shoulders hunched and uncomfortable under his beat up leather jacket. He was saying something I couldn't hear. The kid stood and offered his hand.

As I poured coffee for the old guy, Vic looked down at the kid's offered hand and then slowly reached out to take it. They exchanged an awkward handshake and then Vic let go and reached up

push back long hair fifteen years gone in a nervous gesture that was painfully familiar. The kid was looking up at Vic like he was Santa Claus and not really paying attention to the three jittery Mexican guys who walked right past the "Please Wait To Be Seated" sign. I was staring into the mouth of the coffee carafe and wondering if I might actually fuck Vic again after all when one of those Mexican guys made the choice for me. He pulled out a gun and shot Thick Vic in the back.

For a moment after Vic was shot, nothing happened. Vic pulled an instant, boneless pratfall so goofy looking that I almost believed he was just horsing around. The rest of us stood frozen in place like children caught up in a game of red-light/green-light. My ears were buzzing and my heartbeat seemed like the loudest sound in the room. The kid was wearing a substantial portion of the contents of Vic's abdomen, staring bug-eyed at the mess all over his expensive t-shirt. The Mexican guys were looking back and forth at each other. The shortest one all flushed and pissed off. The shooter with an indifferent *whatever* kind of expression like a teenage son about to be lectured for staying out too late. The tallest but obviously youngest of the trio looking queasy and ready to bolt. Finally, the shortest guy spoke up. When he spoke, I realized how young they really were. My high school Spanish was useless in deciphering the angry barrage of slang and profanity.

The short, swearing kid was bleached blond and manic with a tough, wiry build that he flung around in hyper-exaggerated rap video gangster body language. He was clearly jacked up on something much stronger than diner coffee. The bored looking shooter was darker skinned and a little Asian around the eyes, an adolescent rash of pimples across his high cheekbones. He seemed the least trashed and the most dangerous. He shrugged and pointed his gun at Vic's kid.

The third Mexican started to say something. He was tall and awkward and looked like he still had several years to go before his first legal American lap dance. He was wired and terrified, eyes jumping and jittering like shiny beetles in their sockets.

"Shut the fuck up, man," the short guy snapped in unexpectedly perfect English, adding a second gun to the mix but not sure where to point it.

Vic's kid, who up until that moment had been standing there clenching his fists and slowly flushing deeper and deeper red until his face matched his gory shirt, let out a wordless howl and launched himself at the bored-looking shooter.

The shooter put a wild stray bullet into the dessert case as the two of them went down hard. Vic's kid had the shooter's gun hand locked up and stretched away from his body while the shooter twisted and flailed, using his free hand to punch the kid repeatedly in the back of the head. There was a sudden crisp snap and the shooter screamed, his gun skittering away and sliding under a nearby booth.

The tall, awkward kid had his own gun out by then, but he held it like a venomous reptile, one that might bite him if he wasn't careful. The short, pissed-off guy was shouting and trying desperately to regain control over the rapidly deteriorating situation. He was clearly the brains of the operation, which didn't bode well for whatever plans these three had made. Especially the part of the plan that involved bringing trouble into Duncan's Diner.

Duncan chose that moment to pop up in the pass with the Benelli semi-automatic shotgun he kept

on hand for just such an occasion. Duncan Schenck was not a big guy, but he didn't need to be. He was in his late fifties with a deep, permanent tan and a skinny frame that was just starting to go a little paunchy in the middle from too much of his own greasy cooking. Sharp gray eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses and a thin, salt-and-pepper ponytail. Duncan was ex-military and often referred to as a gun nut, although he told me he preferred the term "firearms enthusiast." I'd been fucking him for nearly two weeks, so I knew just how enthusiastic Duncan really was. There were more munitions in the concrete bunker under his old '63 Airstream trailer than out at the nearby Yuma Proving Grounds.

"Get down, Julie," he said, voice as calm as if he were calling an order up.

For a few near-fatal seconds that name "Julie" didn't mean anything to me. I'd had too many different names in the past month and seeing Thick Vic again had thrown me, made me forget about my latest half-assed identity.

"Now," Duncan added and that was enough.

I flung the coffee carafe away and dropped down behind the counter as Duncan let loose with the shotgun. The sound of it was so loud I felt like I'd been hit by an auditory truck. The damp black rubber mat beneath my cheek smelled of ammonia and old food. There was a wilted piece of lettuce a few inches from my nose. I heard more shots above me and some shouting that sounded like Charlie Brown's teacher in my tortured, ringing ears, but I had no idea what was actually happening. I covered my head with my hands, sick from adrenaline and furious that this was happening now, when I had been so close to getting what I needed out of Duncan.

There was a crash, stagger and thump and when I uncovered my head, I saw that Vic and his kid were behind the counter with me. The kid had Vic's arm thrown over his shoulder and the two of them were wedged back against a stack of paper napkins. Vic was alive, but not happy about it. The kid was hyperventilating with too much white around the pretty golden-green irises of his eyes. After a long quiet minute, I risked a peek up over the counter. It didn't look good. The tall awkward Mexican kid was sprawled on the linoleum in a spreading ocean of blood. He was dead or might as well have been. Duncan was hanging over the lip of the pass, also dead or might as well have been. The old man with the pie was dead too, but from my vantage point it was hard to tell if he'd been shot or just keeled over with a grabber from all the excitement. The short, aggro kid was having a tense, hissed-between-clenched-teeth argument with the original shooter, who was shaking his head vehemently, cradling an obviously broken arm and saying the same thing over and over.

I noticed that the cheap Coca-Cola clock had fallen off the wall and landed face up a foot to my left. It was quarter after eleven. That meant the headlights I could see sweeping across the lot belonged to Highway Patrol Officer Norman Ketlin, who would be stopping in to refill his big thermos coffee cup one more time just like he did at eleven fifteen every other night of the week.

Norm didn't mess around. He didn't say, "*Freeze! Police!*" or anything like that, he just left the engine running and came out shooting. I grabbed my go-bag from under the counter and slung it over

one shoulder. If I had a chance to get gone, this was it. Then I looked back at Vic and his kid.

The kid must've hit a mental wall. His handsome face was pale and blank with shock. If he had been conceived a few weeks earlier, he could have been my son. And Vic, that charming bastard, I had already let him fuck up my life once. It would have been smarter to leave them, but I didn't. I couldn't.

"Come on," I whispered to the kid, throwing Vic's other arm over my own shoulder and indicating the swinging door to the kitchen. "Help me get him out of here."

The kid turned to me, eyes still way too big.

"They shot him," he said, or something along those lines. My hearing was still pretty iffy at that point. He could have meant any number of our patrons or employees, but I figured he meant Vic.

"They're probably gonna shoot us too if we don't get the hell out of here now," I said.

"Um, yeah okay," the kid replied.

Vic was still pretty skinny, but every pound hung limp and useless, dead weight between the two of us. I tried to keep Vic's head low as we duck-walked towards the kitchen door. More shots and a furious Spanglish and I could hear Norm's deep, angry voice swearing, but didn't want to stick around to watch the show. More importantly, I didn't want to answer to anyone official. I had two shitty fake IDs and a halfway decent one, none of which would hold up to serious scrutiny.

When we got into the kitchen, we moved low and quiet past Duncan's body and the blood sizzling grill. Hannibal, our ex-con dishwasher, had cut and run the second the trouble started, leaving the back door wide open. He had the right idea.

"Where's your car?" I asked the kid, once we were outside.

He looked at me with a dangerously unfocused glaze in his eyes.

"Car!" I said as loudly as I dared. "Do you have one?"

The kid seemed to sharpen up a little and shook his head.

"I've got my bike," he said, indicating with his head. "Around front."

I remembered the tough-guy motorcycle helmet I'd seen on the table back in the diner. The motorcycle just wasn't gonna work. I didn't relish the idea of going back into the kitchen to get the keys to Duncan's truck out of his hip pocket but couldn't think of any other option until Vic spoke up.

"Angel," he said. "...my car..."

"Where are the keys?" I asked. "In your jacket?"

"Yeah," Vic said. "Brown '75 Bonneville."

As we headed around the side of the diner, the action tumbled out the kitchen door behind us. First the two Mexican kids, the short, aggro blond ducking behind the dumpster and the shooter with the broken arm making a run for Duncan's trailer. Norm came out fast on the shooter's heels as the kid zigzagged like a bunny across the dusty lot and dove under the trailer.

I'm not exactly sure what came next because it all happened so fast, but from my angle it looked

like the bleach-blond kid popped up from behind the dumpster and took a shot at Norm just as he was bending down to grab the shooter's ankle and haul him out of his hiding place. The bullet must have missed Norm by an inch and hit the large propane tank on the side of Duncan's trailer. The subsequent series of explosions knocked us all to the ground and knocked any more wondering right out of my head.

When I looked up again I saw two people on fire. One was running in a wobbly, decaying circle and the other lying face down in the dust. It was impossible to tell who was who under the flames.

By the time I was able to look away, the kid had gotten his feet under him and lifted Vic across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. I got up off my skinned knees and ran for the parking lot, motioning for the kid to follow.

Out front was Norm's prowler, an aging green Town Car, a souped-up riceburner and Vic's beaten Bonneville. At the far end of the lot was a candy apple Harley Shovelhead that sparkled like it had just rolled out of the showroom.

We made it to the Bonneville and the kid let Vic down beside the car, but Vic's legs wouldn't support his weight. He was still bleeding profusely, but his face was eerily calm.

"I can't..." Vic said. "You'd better..."

The kid held him up under the armpits while I went through his pockets. Gum. Change. Phone. Matchbook from a strip club. A pen featuring a sexy pin-up girl whose bikini disappeared if held at a certain angle. A folded printout of Google directions to the diner from Los Angeles. Finally, keys.

I unlocked the car, opened the passenger-side back door and then went around front and got behind the wheel. The engine coughed and spluttered as I fired it up and put it in gear. The kid laid Vic out on the back seat and then turned away, leaving the door open.

"I'll be right back," he said over his shoulder, heading across the lot towards his motorcycle.

I swore softly, gripping the wheel. There was a powerful stench of blood, bile and fresh shit inside the confined space of the car. The kid was fucking around with the fancy saddlebags on his bike and my foot was itching to hit the gas. I didn't. I waited.

"Talk to me, Vic," I said, tilting the rearview so I could see his pallid, sweating face. "You're not dead, are you?"

"You wish," he replied with ghost of a smirk on his bluish lips.

That's when the blond Mexican guy came around the corner of the diner and started shooting.

Vic's kid saw the angry blond with the gun and ducked down behind his bike. He grabbed a saddlebag and made a sprint for the Bonneville while the blond emptied his magazine into the side of the car. God bless old-school American steel. If we'd been in a Kia, that would have been the end of it right there.

"Come on!" I called, gunning the engine.

The kid dove in the back and I floored the gas pedal, wheels spitting gravel and dust. Momentum slammed the door as I tore out of the lot. The blond jumped into the riceburner and fired it up, hot on our heels.

"Shit!" the kid said, looking out the back window. "Shit, he's following us. What are we gonna do?"

That was a good question. What the hell were we going to do? Or more specifically, what was I going to do?

The riceburner was gaining on us and the Bonneville was in pretty sorry shape, the indisputable tortoise in this particular race. It complained noisily as I bullied it up into the low eighties. There was a faded old sweatshirt on the passenger seat and I scooped it up and tossed it over my shoulder into the back.

"Use this to put pressure on the wound," I said. "You need to try and stop the bleeding."

"He's bleeding from the front and the back," the kid said, his voice pinched and breaking. "It smells really bad."

"Just do what you can," I said.

"Turn," the kid shouted. "Here, on the left!"

I did as he ordered, fishtailing wildly and taking out a small church billboard in the process.

"Watch it!" he said. "You're knocking him around back here."

"Look, you want to drive?" I asked, more than half serious. I've never been a car chase kind of girl. I've got other talents.

The turn put us on a long dark road through endless fields and farmland. Born and bred urban that I am, I never could get used to all that deep desert blackness. L.A. is never really dark at night. Neither is Chicago, where I grew up. Yuma is like the dark side of the moon. It spooked me a little even when I didn't have an armed and jacked-up teenage killer trying to run me off the road.

"He's puking," the kid cried from the back seat. "He's puking! Jesus fuck!"

"Turn his head to the side," I said, flashing back to scraping a shitfaced and spewing Vic up off the sidewalk outside Gazarri's. "Don't let him choke."

When the riceburner rear-ended me, I just about had a heart attack. The hit sounded louder than the

shotgun and my forehead bounced off the steering wheel, scattering flaming pinwheels across my vision. I'm sure there were seatbelts somewhere in that old Buick, but I hadn't bothered to look before. I peeled out of the diner lot. I would have tried to find one then, but my hands were locked, white-knuckled, around the wheel.

Vic's kid was in the back freaking out, saying "fuck" a lot and being generally unhelpful. Vic had gone silent and could have been dead by then for all I knew. I had no idea where I was or which direction we were headed. With everything that I'd been through in the last few years, I had pretty much come to terms with the possibility of violent death, but this was different. It wasn't just me and the car.

The ricer hit again from the rear, more to the left this time, sending the Bonneville skidding off to the right. I wrestled the wheel, fighting to keep the old beast steady on the road, but the ricer came up close on the outside until we were neck and neck. I could see the blond in the driver's seat, gun raised and trying to steady his aim while driving with one hand. His eye was on me, not the road.

I wrenched the wheel to the left as hard as I could, the Bonneville chewing fiberglass as the shiny little ricer crumpled like a tissue box. The blond's shot shattered the driver's side window and buried itself in the foam padding of my seatback.

The wind through the broken window whipped my hair into my eyes, making it even harder to see the dark road. Behind me, the ricer swerved across the shoulder, flattening a barbed wire fence and several rows of lettuce, plowing up a fountain of loose dirt and eventually bumping to a crooked stop. The cockeyed headlights quickly receded in the Bonneville's rearview.

Silence in the backseat as I took the next two turns at random. A right then a left. I still had no idea where I was and was about to ask when Vic's kid spoke up between clenched teeth.

"Pull over."

"What?" I frowned into the rearview.

"I said pull over!"

I pulled over and Vic's kid tumbled out the door, tore off his bloody t-shirt like it was soaked in poison and then staggered away into the dry, tangled cotton field by the side of the road. I could hear the sound of vomiting. My hands were shaking as I peeled them off the wheel.

"Hey Vic," I said.

"Yeah?"

I looked into the rearview but couldn't see him. He must have been lying flat on the back seat.

"How you doing?"

"Well, you know...I've been feeling a little depressed lately," he said. "What with the recession and global warming and all that. Thanks for asking."

I laughed before I could stop myself. Son of a bitch always knew how to make me laugh.

"Come on, seriously."

“Well the good news is...I don’t feel any pain,” he said. “Bad news...I don’t feel anything at all from the nipples down. That’s really bad, isn’t it?”

“It’s not good,” I said. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

“Angel,” he said. “Could you...come back here...for a minute?”

I didn’t want to, but I did. In the back seat, the stench was even worse. The vinyl seat was sticky with coagulating blood and other pungent fluids. I had to move Vic’s head so I could slide my legs underneath it and that movement started the crater in his belly oozing again, something dark and foamy that wasn’t just blood. It took everything I had to try and keep my expression neutral.

“Sorry about the smell,” Vic said, trying for a smirk that came out more like a grimace. He paused and I could see how scared he was underneath the wisecracks. He took my hand in his. His fingers were damp and cold.

“Do you know those guys? The guy that shot you?” I asked.

Vic shook his head.

“Never seen them before.”

“They seemed pretty high strung,” I said. “Meth, maybe?”

“Coke,” Vic replied. “Not crank. I oughta know. But hey, I pissed off a lot of people in my twenty-year career as a professional fuck-up, so I suppose those kids could be connected to any number of disgruntled former business associates. Or not.”

“But why come after you in a public diner?” I asked. “Why not wait till you were alone?”

“You know...I hate to interrupt your sleuthing, Nancy Fuckin’ Drew, but I’m on a ticking clock here,” Vic said. “And there’s really no way to say what I have to say so it don’t sound all sappy and cliché. So fuck it, I’m just gonna say it. I’m sorry Angel. For being a lousy boyfriend, for...everything I put you through.”

“It’s okay,” I said, wishing I could think of something that didn’t sound so empty. It’s hard to make words like “it’s okay” mean anything when you’re covered in blood and shit, miles from the nearest hospital.

“This isn’t some bullshit twelve-step lip service either. I mean it,” he said. “You were the only one that ever mattered. I just...”

He trailed off and I could feel all the muscles in my neck and shoulders go tense and stiff with anxious anticipation. Vic may have driven me crazy a million different ways while we were together but he understood me better than almost anyone. I knew he hadn’t forgotten how uncomfortable and kind of mushy love talk makes me feel. The truth is, I can take on six strangers at once without batting an eye, but as soon as someone starts making love noises at me, I start looking for the exit.

There was an endless minute of heavy, loaded silence that felt as stifling and unbearable as the stench inside the car, then:

“Look, I know I got no right asking for favors,” Vic said.

I squeezed his hand.

“Then don’t,” I said.

“Christ, Angel, you’re still such a hard ass.” Another grimace. “Come on, one last favor...for a dying man.”

“You’re not dying, for Christ’s sake,” I said. “And if you think I’m still gonna blow you after you shit your pants, you’re out of your fucking mind.”

He laughed, a soft, breathless wheeze.

“Nah. It’d be a waste of your legendary talent, since I wouldn’t be able to feel it anyway.”

That had started off as another wisecrack, but by the end of the sentence I could see the truth in those words starting to sink in. Again, the flash of raw fear in his eyes.

“Listen,” he said. “I’m in bad shape here. Even if I do make it...well....” His grip on my hand was weak and getting weaker. “Just make sure the kid is okay.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “You fucker, don’t lay this on me. You’re gonna make it. You have to, you hear me?”

“Just promise me, Angel,” he said. “Don’t let anything happen to him. Lie if you have to, but make it sound good, willya? Please? I’m dying here.”

“Fine,” I said. “Fine, I promise, but don’t you fucking die on me.”

But of course he did, the selfish prick.

I got out of the car and looked up at the cold stars. The sky seemed way too big and the headlights were the only illumination. I wrapped my arms around my body and let out a long shaky breath. I thought about the last time I was out in the desert with a dead man. I felt like I ought to cry about something, but it was as if I’d forgotten how.

I tried to remember what it was like the last time I’d cried. To remember the person I had been back then, beaten and terrified and wailing at the unfairness of it all. The shit I’d had to do to become the person that I was now, all those things conspired to wall up any hope of tears.

But goddamn, it had felt good to look into someone’s eyes and have them really see me. Really know me, not just some generic, forgettable name on a fake ID. So much for that.

Truth was, I was furious at Vic for slipping so easily between the plates of my emotional armor. For making me care about him again, just in time to make me feel this.

“Sorry,” the kid said when he returned to the car, wiping his mouth with his knuckles. “I just...”

He gave a little self-deprecating smirk and shrug that reminded me so much of Thick Vic that I couldn’t look at him.

“No problem, kid,” I said.

He must have seen something in my expression or body language that clued him in. “What’s wrong?” he asked, voice tightening with panic. “Is it my dad?”

“He’s dead,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

The kid flipped out. Put his fist through the passenger side window. Screamed at the sky. Flaile and tripped and collapsed to his knees, flinging handfuls of dirt and pebbles around. I knew I should try to do something to comfort him, but I felt numb and frozen, crushed beneath the weight of my promise to Vic. I wanted to run as fast and as far as I could and never look back.

Eventually the kid tired himself out. I walked slowly over to where he was huddled on the shoulder.

“Let me see your hand,” I said.

He held it out like a child with a boo-boo. I took his hand in both of mine and found that it was unexpectedly broad and massive, big enough to palm a paperback the way a magician would palm a playing card. Vic had big hands, but this kid’s mitt was so huge that holding it made me feel like a little girl holding Daddy’s hand to cross the street. The first two knuckles were crowned with old scabs and scars in addition to the fresh cuts from the safety glass. Surprisingly, the damage wasn’t all that bad. Superficial, mostly. Kid had a fist like a cement block.

“What are we gonna do?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, letting his hand drop.

The kid was shirtless and must have been freezing in the chilly desert night but he didn’t show it. He had shaved off what little hair he might have had on his lanky torso and had the word “OUTLAW” tattooed in clichéd Old English lettering forming an arc over the tight six-pack of his belly. I could see little rims of fresh black scab still clinging to the edges of the o and the w. Again I was hit with a strange unfocused ache that might have been about Vic or a weird kind of disconnected loneliness or maybe something else entirely.

“You need to call the cops,” I said.

There was no way around it now. Of course, I couldn’t be anywhere near this mess when the cops arrived and it was a long, dark walk to anywhere, but I just didn’t see any other option. I’d promised Vic I would make sure the kid was safe. In spite of my longstanding distrust of cops, getting him in the hands of the proper authorities was the only way I could think of to do that.

“My phone’s in my jacket,” he said. “Back at the diner.”

I looked over my shoulder at the Bonneville. Of course I didn’t have a phone. But Vic did.

“Wait here,” I said.

I walked over to the car and stood for a moment by the back door, steeling myself. It didn’t help. I hadn’t thought the smell could possibly get worse, but it had.

I nearly threw up. Twice. The phone was in the pocket on the side of Vic’s body with the fist-sized exit wound. There was a bright, ugly kind of hysteria lurking around the edges of my cool, but I managed to keep it submerged as I wiped the worst of the gore off the cheap little phone and flipped it open.

After all that, it didn’t work. The little screen stayed gray and dead no matter what buttons

pushed. In a fit of blind fury, I flung the phone away into the cotton. The moment it left my hand, occurred to me that maybe it just needed to be charged. Maybe Vic had one of those cords that plug into the cigarette lighter in the car. Too fucking late for that.

I got my backpack and the kid's saddlebag out of the car and walked back over to where the kid stood with his back to me, scuffing the dirt with the toe of his boot.

"Is there somewhere that we could go?" I asked. "Somewhere with a phone?"

"Sure," he said. "My friend Hank lives about a mile down the road." He pointed. "That way."

"Well then, I guess we'd better start walking," I said.

"We can't just..." He looked back at the car. "...leave him."

"We'll call someone to pick him up as soon as we get to your friend's house."

He ran a shaking hand over his head.

"Right, okay."

"Let's go," I said, handing him his saddlebag.

He hefted it awkwardly, then unbuckled the flap and pulled out a notebook. He let the bag drop to the ground and started walking away.

When he noticed I wasn't following, he looked back. I was staring at the discarded bag. This was what he'd run back for—risked his life for—and now he was just throwing it away? "I only wanted this," he said, lifting the notebook. "It's stuff that I've been writing, you know, about my training and my feelings and stuff. I really didn't want to lose it. But I don't need the rest of this crap, and there's no point lugging the stupid bag around."

An unmarked disc in a plain paper sleeve—a CD? a DVD? —slipped out from between the pages of the notebook. Before it could fall to the ground, he caught it with his other hand. Not quite catching a fly with chopsticks, but still pretty impressive reflexes. He stuck the disc back in the book and handed it to me.

"Could you put it in your backpack? I can carry the backpack for you if you want."

"That's okay, kid," I said, sliding the notebook into a side pocket and wrapping my fingers tight around the strap. "I got it." I didn't want to tell him that I couldn't stand the thought of someone else taking my go-bag. "We'd better get moving."

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