

Sweet Young Things
by Kristine Kathryn Rusch



Art by Laurie Harden

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Pawnshops were all the same. Crowded with junk, reeking of cigarette smoke, they always had one guy who hadn't bathed in a week sitting behind a glass counter. The counter was the only thing that had been cleaned in twenty years.

Fala rested her palms against the countertop, feeling the warmth of the glass beneath her skin. Old lights illuminated the jewelry inside. Some of it glistened. Much of it was as worthless as the junk on the walls—old class rings, Masonic pins, cheap rosaries—but some of it had possibilities. A garnet ring with emeralds on the side, clearly 1950s. A Tiffany pin, all gold, shiny and complete. A grandmother ring, ostentatious with its twenty different jewels, half a dozen of them small rubies.

Estate jewelry. Desperation jewelry. The last of a large lot.

"Sixty-five dollars," the scrawny guy said, taking the Jeweler's Eye from his own. His fingernails were black, and his hair was matted against his skull.

She reserved her shiver of distaste for later. The ring he held was worth four thousand, minimum. The diamond was an emerald-cut from the 1920s, rare these days, and the setting was pure white gold.

"A hundred and fifty," she said.

"Lady—"

"C'mon," she said, trying to sound whiny. "It was my grandmother's. I doubt I'm coming back for it. At least give me something."

“A hundred.” The ring clinked as he set it on the countertop.

“I need a hundred and fifty.”

He wouldn't get a deal like that anywhere else, but then again, he wouldn't turn it around that quickly, either. She knew how it worked, maybe better than he did.

“You're lucky I'm a soft touch.” He reached the shelf behind the counter, tapped the old-fashioned cash register, and it opened with the ring of a bell. She hadn't heard that sound since she'd been in college.

He handed her seven twenties and a ten, all crumpled, all feeling slightly greasy. She counted them, forcing her hands to shake as if she couldn't believe her good fortune.

Actually, she was making sure each bill was legit. The last time she'd done this, in Detroit, she'd gotten two counterfeit twenties, all the “unduplicatable” kind. But the bills she held in her hand this time came from the last century: none of that phony-color Monopoly money stuff.

She shoved them in her right-hand pocket as he filled out the brown ticket with her fake name and address. He slid the top half back to her. She put that in her left pocket, knowing she'd lose the little stub within a day.

Not that she cared. The ring hadn't been her grandmother's and she wasn't here for the money.

She'd come to check out the place before she made the owner an offer he couldn't refuse.

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Division Street in Gresham, Oregon, still wore its 1950s roots with pride. Once the main drag in a city that had once been more than a suburb, Division had decaying supper clubs with faulty neon lights, taverns with one single greasy window up front, and more pawnshops than any other stretch in the Portland metropolitan area.

If you drove with your eyes half-closed, you could see how classy this place had been: An overgrown golf course hugged the bend in the road, and motels that advertised color television led into a development of 1950s houses twice the size of an ordinary ranch.

There'd been money here once—not a lot, but enough to give its residents a sense of power and pride. But sometime in the 'seventies, the highway bypassed Division, taking the important business traffic with it, and nearly killed the street. The moneyed elite either moved to Portland proper or watched sickness and old age eat away their tiny pot of gold.

The houses got shabbier, the businesses rattier, and the neighborhood filled with outsiders who had too many babies and bought their clothing at Wal-Mart.

Fala had known it was the perfect place the moment she'd driven past the newly opened discount cigarette store, right next to the boarded-up bank. It was only a matter of time before Preston Lidner—or someone like him—would show.

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She bought the Fast Cash Pawnshop for two hundred thousand dollars cash, about a hundred and fifty thousand more than it was worth. The business might've been a going concern twenty years ago, when it had been the only pawnshop on Division, but now it had rivals on every block, most of them computer savvy and willing to take the absolute junk for much higher prices.

Behold the great god e-Bay.

In the back, beneath a decade's worth of newspapers, she found a four-foot-high cast-iron safe with a combination lock. She called a locksmith from Portland, had him reconfigure the lock, and, the moment he left, placed the estate jewelry inside. She set up her computer, added a DSL line, and established more firewalls than she really needed.

Then she spent the next two days combing through the junk, looking for the buried valuables, and placed them in the back as well. When she got a chance, she'd take the larger items to a storage unit she had just rented. The storage unit was at the edge of Lake Oswego, another once-independent city that had become one of Portland's high-end neighborhoods.

Her new home, though, was a trashy apartment at the edge of Division, in a cinderblock building that had never seen better days. Every morning when she went to work, she tucked her long hair under a Seattle Mariners baseball cap and put a fresh pack of Pall Malls in her purse, next to the scratched vintage lighter she'd found in Topeka.

She kept her nails short, but painted them ruby red, wore matching lipstick, a little too much blush, and fake eyelashes that brushed against her upper cheeks every time she blinked. She made sure all her denim shirts were one size too small. She tied them at the waist, left them unbuttoned, and wore a bustier beneath them instead of a bra. Her stone-washed jeans, all of them ripped at the knees, were too tight. Every day, she matched the color of her high heels to the color of her bustier, and she'd disappear into the shop, determined to impress no one.

The first week, not a single customer pushed open the grimy glass door. She spent her days watching the black-and-white 12-inch television the greasy-haired former employee had left her.

The second week, she had a couple of customers, and they were elderly, just as she expected, looking to sell rather than buy. She gave the old man a fair price for

his 1950s Timex and lied to him when he tried to sell her his grandfather's pocket watch, telling him she had too many pocket watches right now.

The elderly lady's eyes teared up when she tried to pawn a gold broach that looked like a peacock's tail. It only took a little prodding to get her to admit that her husband had given it to her on their twentieth anniversary oh so long ago.

Fala pushed the broach back across the countertop, but paid nearly two hundred dollars for the Bakelite bangle bracelets the old lady wore on her right arm. The bracelets weren't even worth one-tenth that.

The old woman had clutched the broach to her heart as she left, eyes still filled with unshed tears.

Damn Preston or whatever the hell he was calling himself these days. Damn him forever for bringing her here, and forcing her to make choices she never would have considered ten years before.

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Ten years before, she'd been twenty-five, newly divorced, and naive as hell. She'd been pretty, too, in a wholesome all-American-girl way, with her rounded cheeks and bright blue eyes and not-quite-blond hair. Anyone looking at her had to trust her, because she wore every emotion she'd ever had all over her unlined face.

Preston had been five years into his business then, and thinking of making a change. Only she hadn't known that. All she'd known was two things: He'd hired her despite her lack of experience, and he was the most dynamic man she'd ever met.

Dynamic: that was a word she hadn't understood until Preston. He wasn't conventionally handsome—his nose was too wide, his eyes too small—and he wasn't very tall. But he had a beautiful head of shiny black hair, so thick every woman longed to run her hands through it. His mouth was generous, and his smile was endearingly crooked—just as he turned out to be.

She'd been lonely, she'd been hurt, and she'd been broke, all three of which made her the perfect skill for H.T. Corrent Investments, the company that Preston supposedly owned.

He'd been brilliant, even then. He'd rented office space in a brand-new building, bought furniture at a tax liquidation, and set up all three rooms as if he'd just moved in. Boxes sat in the corners, all of them labeled with a date and a letter of the alphabet, all of them taped shut so thoroughly that only a lot of work with a knife or a straight razor would get them open.

Dusty filing cabinets filled the smallest room, along with an early 'eighties microwave and a half-sized refrigerator. Preston's office had the large desk and an oversize leather chair, along with some photos which, Fala later learned, he'd bought

at an estate sale.

Out front, a middle-aged woman sat behind a smaller desk, working the phones. She kept a pencil in her sprayed hair, and wore a sweater against the chill of the air conditioner. Other women, all under the age of thirty, sat in chairs along the wall, waiting for their turn to be interviewed.

They'd gone inside one by one, and Preston had smiled at the group each time he closed the door, as if he expected to get lucky with each and every one of them.

He'd gotten lucky with Fala and her favorite pair of black shoes, which fell apart—literally—as she walked through his office door. She'd tripped, leaving the sole of her right shoe on the threshold. Preston had picked it up, ever so gallantly, and that crooked smile of his had turned into the widest grin she'd ever seen.

“Now that you've established how badly you need the job,” he'd said, “how about answering a few questions?”

She'd been so mortified that her cheeks felt as if they would burn off. She'd pressed her hands against them, trying to cool them, and refused to look in his eyes as he went through her one-paragraph resume.

When he gave her the job two days later, he'd told her it was because of the shoe.

That was probably the only time in their entire relationship that Preston hadn't lied.

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The signs went up a month after she bought the pawnshop. This time, they'd been professionally printed, with the word “cash” in such large letters that a driver could see it from the street.

When she arrived at work that morning, she saw one on the telephone pole half a block away, and her stomach gave a little lurch. Other people stapled signs to telephone poles and headed those signs with the word “cash” in gigantic black letters. But she knew, even before she walked those last few yards, that someone in Preston's employ had stayed up all night walking the streets and stapling.

CASH!!

Planning to sell your home?

**We'll give you cash on the
dollar this week!**

Fala memorized the phone number at the bottom of the sign, and then walked away as if the notice meant nothing to her. Still, she opened her purse, grabbed the unopened Pall Malls, and pulled them out, her blunt-edged fingernails finding the edge of the cellophane wrapper. She opened the package like a chain smoker

missing her fix, tapped out the first cigarette, and stuffed it in her mouth before she realized what she was doing.

By that point, she was at the shop. She left the cigarette in her mouth as she unlocked the front door.

Only when she got inside did she toss the cigarette in the nearest wastebasket. Her hands shook. She shoved her purse under the counter, placing one foot on top of the open leather top before she was sure she wouldn't grab another cigarette.

Then she reached for the phone, dialed a number she hadn't used in nearly two months, and counted the rings. At ten, someone picked up.

"He's here," Fala said, and broke the connection.

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The hell of it was, the only job she had ever loved was her job at H.T. Corrent. Every day she'd drive to the office, get a list of prospects from Reggie, the office manager, then head to the first appointment. Fala always arrived two minutes late, per Preston's instruction. Get the clients looking around, get them interested, get them antsy.

She'd thought it smart then. Only later did she realize that the manipulation occurred long before she arrived on the scene.

Most of the people she met were young marrieds or professors about to take their first assignment. She never thought it strange that none of them were locals. She'd never worked as a rental agent before; she didn't realize that in most rental agencies, especially in a college town, ninety-five percent of the clients already lived here and were simply looking to upgrade.

She was happy to show these wonderful people the small rental homes, walking them through the empty rooms, describing how the place would look with a couch over there and a bed over there and the perfect table just below that window.

People loved her and they trusted her. Most of them never came back to the office, instead filling out an application right then and there, writing a check for the security deposit to get the process started. Preston had been so very smart—his rental houses were cheaper than the rest, easier to get into. He didn't add first and last month's rent to the security deposit. He demanded just enough to seem legitimate.

We have to trust them from the start, he'd said to Fala, and that was what she said to the clients. *We trust you. We're going to be in this together for the long haul.*

She was better than Preston expected. She'd rented all two hundred units that he had scattered throughout the city in less than two weeks. She was a natural-born saleswoman with a true interest in people, and she worked as hard as she could to

place the right renters with the right house.

When she'd finished, she asked Preston what the next stage was, and he'd smiled at her. That crooked, crooked smile.

Now we manage, he said.

That last week, she'd stayed in the office, filing all those filled-out applications in the new drawer, first by client's name, then by property address. All the other filing drawers were locked, but because she was so new, she thought nothing of that, either.

That last morning, she'd been the first one in the office, just as usual. She'd put on the coffee, tuned the radio to NPR, and started answering the phones while she waited for Reggie. The first call was strange: an hysterical woman wanting to make sure she had the right address.

Fala had been warned not to give information over the phone—that was Reggie's job—so she promised to have Reggie call back.

But Reggie didn't show, and neither did Preston, and by noon, every call had an angry person on the other end, demanding addresses, demanding keys, demanding money back. Finally, Fala turned off all the phones, let the service handle the crisis, and headed to the nearest address.

It was also her favorite, a tiny one-bedroom on the edge of campus, with a view of the nearby lake. A small U-Haul van was parked against the curb, the passenger door open, and a woman sitting forlornly on the front steps. When Fala got out of her car, the woman ran to her.

"You gave me the wrong address," the woman said.

But Fala hadn't given her the wrong address. Fala remembered her; this woman had rented this house, and was supposed to move in on this day. But the house had furniture inside now, and an upset man who claimed he owned the place.

Fala tried to reason with him, but he screamed at her. So she drove to the nearest pay phone and called the police.

She returned to the house to discover that the police had already arrived.

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The phone number Fala took off the sign belonged to a landline that rang in an office several blocks away. The office, in a new complex near the MAX train line, fit Preston's M.O. perfectly: rent in a new space, buy old furniture, pack several boxes with newspapers, seal them, and make it look like you're still moving in. The smell of new paint always convinced, as did all the empty office suites still for rent down the hall.

Once she found the landline, her job got easier. She decided to go old-fashioned instead of high-tech, splicing into the line late one night. She could record off-site, just like the feds used to do in all their investigations. No one looked for low-tech anymore; they had firewalls and virus protection and spyware, but no one expected a simple bug in the line, established at the routers in the basement, routers that wouldn't get checked in a building so new, not even if there was some kind of outage.

She was amazed at the skills she'd learned in the last few years: how to enter an empty office building without anyone getting suspicious, waiting in the dark in an unrented office suite until everyone had gone home, working the basement lines with a flashlight between her teeth.

Technically, she hadn't done any breaking and entering. She hadn't broken at all, and she'd entered during normal business hours. She hadn't stolen anything, nor had she left any fingerprints down on the lines.

And if she played this right, no one would get hurt.

No one except Preston, of course.

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The police arrested her for two hundred counts of fraud. Preston and Reggie were long gone, leaving the office filled with her fingerprints only, and empty file cabinets—except, of course, the one drawer that was unlocked, the drawer with four hundred files, two hundred by client name, two hundred by address, all the information in Fala's handwriting, and all the forms touched only by Fala's hand.

By Fala's reckoning, Preston had skipped town with more than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for three weeks' work. For that same amount of time, Fala had received \$810 gross pay, three nights in jail, and a legal nightmare that would extend for the next three years.

It had been a brilliant plan. Preston had scouted real-estate records, found empty houses that had just sold, called the real-estate agents, identified himself as a welcome-wagon volunteer, and asked for the closing dates. Most of the time, he got them.

He only picked vacant houses whose closing dates were at least a month out. In a college town, such places proliferated in the summer. He waited until the lockboxes came off, then broke in and changed locks only on the doorknob itself. The deadbolts remained the same. He carefully left the deadbolts unlocked and locked only the doorknobs, giving himself—and Fala—access throughout the entire month.

Once the place rented to some poor unsuspecting sap from out of town, Preston returned to the house, unlocked the doorknob, and locked the deadbolt from the inside, leaving by a side window.

It was a variation on an old scam, renting the same apartment to a dozen unsuspecting people, all of whom showed up on move-in day and duked it out among themselves. Preston's version was more sophisticated.

None of the stiffed renters had ever seen Preston or done more than speak to Reggie on the phone. For all they knew, Reggie could have been Fala disguising her voice. Fala's first break came her third day in jail when the attorney she hired with the hundred dollars she'd managed to scrounge from her ailing bank account found the owner of the office building. Preston had been cautious; he'd rented the office sight unseen, over the phone. But the owner, conscientious and a bit paranoid, had dropped in unexpectedly that first week to make sure his new clients liked their brand-new office space. He saw Reggie and Preston and the entire setup. Then a few of the other applicants came forward, remembering that series of interviews. A few of them even remembered Fala.

Still, she remained under suspicion, and every so often, the police would drag her to the station for no apparent reason. The stiffed renters all sued her and she found herself on the evening news, running from cameras, her purse raised high to hide her face.

She couldn't get work, she couldn't get help, and she couldn't leave town.

She had no money.

Her lawyer quit because she couldn't pay him, and she got evicted. She slept in her car for two weeks before she finally gave up and called her ex-husband.

He loaned her enough money to start her revenge.

Half a dozen calls had already come through the landline before Fala decided to make her own. She was sitting in the back of the pawnshop, staring at another unlit cigarette, as she listened to that day's recording.

"Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes. May I help you?"

To Fala's relief, the woman's voice sounded nothing like Reggie's. Either Reggie wasn't a part of this scheme or she had moved upstairs, delegating the receptionist role to someone else.

Most of the callers were elderly, inquiring about the flier. One caller sounded like a real-estate agent: He was told to call back in a week.

That gave Fala a double confirmation of her timeline: the flier had said *this week*, and the real-estate agent, whom Preston wouldn't deal with, had to call back next week. Preston expected to be done in just a few days.

It made sense. When Fala had found his fliers in Detroit, the phone number had already been routed to a calling service. She'd traced him to Topeka and managed to speak to someone on the phone, but no one occupied the office when

she arrived.

He'd always been one step ahead of her, and she was getting tired of it. Years of research, fundraising, and planning; extra points for anticipating. It helped that Preston had gone more or less legitimate.

It also helped that he liked patterns.

So did she.

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Patterns had saved her the first time. The new lawyer, the one she hired with her ex-husband's money, said she'd get off the hook if she could prove Preston had done this over and over again, always leaving some sweet young thing to hold the bag.

Of course, the emphasis was on *her* proving it; no one else was going to do the work, not even the new lawyer and the detectives employed by his fancy firm.

Her scam had been his biggest. Later, she learned it was his last hurrah. He'd been in real estate long enough now to realize there were legitimate ways to make a fortune by doing very little work; all it took was the same kind of planning he'd been doing, and this time, no one could touch him.

But that was in the future. In the past, he'd left a trail of broken promises, empty office suites, and people sobbing in their U-Haul trucks. When Fala looked deeper, she also found one other thing he left behind: a gaggle of sweet young things, all impoverished, who had ended up with the blame.

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Fala could guess which homeowners Preston had approached; she certainly knew which neighborhood they were in. But she didn't want to go door-to-door. That would make her suspicious, and she'd worked hard this last month avoiding suspicion.

Unfortunately, she hadn't made many inroads anywhere else either. Her pawnshop had almost no clientele. The bar next-door was filled with elderly male vets who had no room for a middle-aged female, no matter how slutty she dressed, and the supper clubs were nearly empty, on the verge of closing.

She had made a few nodding acquaintances, but no one who would confide in her. No one who would help. If anything, she was as suspicious as someone who knocked on doors and offered cash; she hadn't realized that Oregonians—especially those in the old neighborhoods that had once been real cities—didn't trust any newcomer. Either you'd lived in the state most of your life, or you were an outsider, pure and simple.

So she had to do it the risky way, which, she acknowledged late at night, was the way she preferred. She'd set up for it from the beginning. The only way the

operation could work was if she covered all contingencies.

She called Preston's new office, which sounded like a law firm, but could just as easily be a brokerage firm or a mortgage broker or a group of certified public accountants. No designation had been put after the names, and there wasn't one on the door. Just Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes. Three very solid, very trustworthy names.

When the new receptionist answered, Fala made herself sound hesitant. "I'm calling about your signs?"

"Yes?" The receptionist was all business. "How can we help you?"

"It's not me exactly," Fala said. "It's my grandma. She wanted me to call for her."

Then she put her hand over the phone and mumbled. She deepened her voice, as if someone were responding, and kept twisting her hand, so that the receptionist heard only voices and that scratchy clutchy sound of flesh against plastic.

"Sorry," Fala said when she got back to the phone. "Is your sign really right? Do you mean cash this week?"

"Yes, ma'am. We'll buy your house from you, and pay you immediately. There'll be a lot of paperwork to sign. Does your grandmother own her home outright?"

And so it went. The receptionist alternated between explaining the very familiar procedure of a home sale done without the intervention of a real-estate agent or a standard lender and adding little queries of her own: How much was the home worth? Where was it located? What kind of condition was it in?

"Of course, we'll have to inspect, but only after you talk to us. We prefer to see you in person, just to make certain everything is on the up and up," the receptionist said.

Fala wondered how she could make that statement and still sound sincere. Or perhaps the receptionist was the person in the Fala position: the young, naive, nearly broke good girl who would do anything her boss asked.

There were so many young women like that in so many towns; it was one of the many reasons Preston had had the success he'd had.

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Fala had found three sweet young things in her own state, four more two states over, and five scattered throughout the Midwest. It hadn't been easy; she'd spent weeks in the university library, reading the local sections of various newspapers, hoping for an article about the people who had moved to a town believing they had rented an apartment when they actually hadn't.

She wrote down the names, the towns, and the dates, and realized just how patterned Preston had been. First, he picked college towns, with definite move-in, move-out times. He targeted professors, young marrieds, and lower-middle-class families because they usually didn't have rich parents who would chase him to the ends of the earth. They would swallow the loss and move on, although not happily, and certainly not well.

She found two suicides that she could attribute to Preston's actions: men who were on their last legs, hoping to make a go of it in one more town, only to discover that someone had stolen their very last dime. She'd found several more divorces—young marrieds who couldn't handle the strain—and an even larger number of children who lived in poverty because their parents lost the opportunity that had brought them to the big, bad city and sent them spiraling back to the welfare office.

But, with the exception of the suicides, they weren't the worst off. The worst off were the girls, the young ladies, the innocents who had happily taken a job with a rental agency, only to find themselves holding the bag for fraud.

The lawyer used them to get a judge to dismiss all the cases against Fala. He also used them to make the police leave her alone, and to interest the FBI in Preston Lidner, who happened to be running scams across state lines.

But Fala used those girls—women now—for a different purpose.

She used them for revenge.

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Fala sat at her kitchen table, her feet crossed at the ankles, her red high heels resting on the back of her ratty couch. The apartment smelled of old grease and newly fried bacon. An untouched BLT rested on the Formica tabletop, half a foot away from Fala's tapping index finger.

"No," she said into her disposable cell phone, "I don't have proof it's him, but I know it's him. And besides, if it's not, it's someone just like him who has to be stopped."

Tess, the woman on the other end of the phone, sighed heavily. She'd heard the argument before; Fala knew that because she'd made it. Twice she'd been right—Topeka and Detroit; three times, she'd been wrong. But in those three cases, the "Club," as they called their organization, had still managed to salvage something from the mess.

"Just send the team," Fala said, "and hurry. He expects to be done by Monday."

Then she hung up, her finger still tapping. She reached for her purse, which sat on the counter near the landline she'd gotten for her pawnshop-owner persona, a

phone that had only rung five times in the month-plus that she'd lived here. She had her hand on the purse's leather strap before she realized what she was going for: those Pall Malls, now open, luring her with an ever-so-tantalizing memory of their taste.

Fala dropped the purse strap and closed her eyes. Smoking was one of her many legacies from Preston. Smoking and fingernail biting and the inability to trust.

She thought she'd been hurt by her divorce, but it turned out her only mistake had been marrying much too young. Her ex-husband had been more of a support than she had expected during the long years of her post-Preston recovery. Her ex hadn't been interested in rekindling the romance, but he had taught her the meaning of friendship, and it had been a valuable lesson.

It enabled her to work with the Club now, to make choices that benefited everyone, and to interact on an equal level.

She hadn't been able to do that at any other job. After Preston, she never believed her employer would stick around; she always asked why she had to sign a particular paper or how come she was the only one assigned to a certain task.

Like all those others touched by the hand of Preston Lidner, she ended up damaged in ways she couldn't completely comprehend.

At first, the Club had no idea how to proceed. At first, they weren't even a club. They didn't have a name or an organization or a meeting room. They didn't even live in the same town.

Fala put them together. She figured a group of women, ten strong, could do anything they wanted to. The first thing they did, before they even met, was find more women. In little more than five years, at a minimum of four scams a year, Preston had ruined the lives of more than twenty sweet young things.

Fala wasn't sure what they could do. She had envisioned all the sweet young things finding Preston and making him pay, a kind of all-women's detective agency. But it was Tess who figured out what their mission had to be.

Under Preston's guidance, they had hurt hundreds of families. It became the mission of the Club to help those families heal.

Soon, though, they realized they couldn't help the actual families heal. Some of the hurt was years in the past; people had disappeared, lives had ended. Instead, Tess said, they had to help others in need, figure out a way to provide transitional housing, cheap mortgages, and easy credit.

The Club couldn't do any of that while its own members were having trouble, and so the first focus became reassembling their own lives. Fala came up with a way to do that. The women switched apartments with each other—all of them subletting in different cities, places where they weren't known, where their faces hadn't been

plastered all over the nightly news.

They got jobs, then they got education—the real kind, not Pres-ton’s kind—and then they went to work.

And it would have stayed like that if it weren’t for one thing.

While on a business trip to Las Vegas, Tess and Fala ran into Preston Lidner.

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Fala made her appointment with Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes for nine A.M. She stopped at the pawnshop on her way in, placing a sign on the door, delaying her opening hour until eleven. Not that anyone would stop, but just in case.

She wanted everything to look legit.

Because she was trying to stay in character as she dressed up, she wore a black leather mini, her red bustier, and a man’s white dress shirt tied at her waist. She wore black high-heeled sandals, and painted her toenails red. She pressed on two tattoos—a butterfly on the back of her left knee, and an elaborate spider’s web just above her right breast, the edge of the web partially visible above the bustier.

On the way inside the brand-new office building, she actually lit a Pall Mall with her vintage lighter, and watched in satisfaction as the smoke wove its way down the hall. This time, she didn’t have to force her hands to shake; they did so all on their own as she took her first drag in nearly six months.

Of course, the receptionist made her tamp the cigarette out the moment she stepped inside the office suite. The receptionist, another middle-aged woman who didn’t look nearly as old as Reggie had, pursed her lips when she saw Fala’s outfit, but said nothing. Instead she took Fala’s name and directed her to the fifth floor, where their “experts” would take her information.

Fala climbed the stairs, still catching the faint hint of her now-lost cigarette in the recycled air. Her legs hurt—she wasn’t used to walking this far in heels this high—and she had to be careful not to let that leather mini ride up any more than it already had.

When she reached the fifth floor, she wasn’t surprised to see a large conference room set up with desk after desk after desk, rather like a Charles Addams cartoon. Behind each desk sat serious young people in suits. In front of each desk, an elderly person sat, clutching a purse or a pile of papers.

Fala was assigned Desk 14. Behind it sat a young woman wearing a black business suit, a white blouse, and a tiny gold Phi Beta Kappa key on her right lapel. She gave Fala a perfunctory smile as she bade her to sit down.

The young woman, who called herself Kayla, was clearly not a sweet young thing.

“Where’s your grandmother?” she asked, almost without preliminaries.

“She’s bedridden,” Fala said. “I explained that to your receptionist when I made the appointment. I have to do all the stuff, and bring it to her to sign.”

“We have to work with her,” Kayla said. “We can’t do anything with you unless you own the house.”

“I have her—what is it?—attorney power? I got that,” Fala said.

And Kayla softened, just as Fala knew she would. Kayla explained their rules and regulations, all of them legal, pressed a sheaf of paper forward, and went through it bit by bit.

Fala had no real house to sell, but she had given Kayla factual information taken from the title of a house just outside the neighborhood, enough on the fringe that she figured they hadn’t checked it out. She had: A young married couple had just bought it from their grandmother, and the title was in the process of being transferred.

For the moment, and only for the moment, all of the information (excepting phone numbers) that Fala gave Kayla was correct.

The information was a lot less important than the procedure. Kayla worked on a relatively new Dell. The other desks had the same equipment. It appeared that they were networked. All the better for Fala.

As Kayla spoke, Fala tilted her chair sideways just enough so that she could see the screen. Kayla used standard real-estate software. The toolbar showed a continued Internet and e-mail connection, probably to check courthouse records. And the desktop system itself looked like standard Microsoft.

Fala finished the meeting by exasperating poor Kayla. “My grandmother wants to see the documents before we sign.”

“But you have power of attorney. If you deem this sufficient—”

“I still let her make the decisions,” Fala said. “It’s polite and all. I’ll bring them all back tomorrow, signed by us both.”

“You realize that we won’t be able to get you the money by Friday if you don’t sign today,” Kayla said. “We need your signature before we do a title search, which can take three days or more.”

“Title search?” Fala asked, pretending ignorance.

“To make sure there are no irregularities with the home’s ownership. Once we’ve cleared that, we will have all the documents for you to sign. When we finalize the deal, we will cut you a check.”

“You can’t do this stuff, like, you know, based on a good search?” Fala asked, trying to avoid jargon.

“You mean, can we have you sign on the contingency that the search won’t turn up anything?”

Fala nodded.

“We can, but you’ll still have to come in to finalize the documents. We don’t hand out checks until everything is complete.”

Fala bit the polish off her right thumb. “Gram has some bills we gotta pay. Isn’t there, like, an advance you could give us or something, a loan, just till everything comes through?”

“I’m sorry.” Kayla was clearly a pro at this. “We’ve found that it’s better to dot our ‘i’s and cross our ‘t’s before we hand out any money.”

Protecting the company against some old person stealing a few thousand dollars. How rich.

“And no way to hurry this stuff up, right?”

“I’m afraid not,” Kayla said.

Fala sighed. “It’s hard to come back. I got my business, you know.”

The pawnshop gave her legitimacy. If Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes asked around, they would know that she had owned the shop for more than a month, which made sense for someone who had just moved to Gresham to take care of her grandmother.

“I can’t change our policy. We’ll give you cash faster than anyone else can.” Kayla gave her an insincere smile. “But you will have to show up during business hours then, too.”

Fala nodded. She gathered the papers, having no intention of signing anything, and rolled them before sticking them under her arm.

“Thanks,” she said, trying to sound as humble as she could. “You people are real lifesavers.”

* * * *

That last lie nearly tore her up inside. They weren’t lifesavers, although she would have wagered some of the younger people behind those desks in that upstairs room thought they were. Those young ones, like Kayla, weren’t involved in the other side of the operation: the conversations with the various developers, getting them to outbid each other for a hunk of valuable land now owned by one company.

Gresham was in the process of rebuilding. Six blocks from her pawnshop, a

brand-new Safeway store paved the way for a new upscale neighborhood. That neighborhood would backtrack from the Safeway, through the run-down houses and Division Avenue, all the way to this new office development complex near the MAX train line.

Eventually, five or ten years from now, no one would know that this part of Division had once looked as if its better days were behind it. And instead of the homeowners who tended these places for fifty years getting the profit, they got little more than they originally paid for the houses, not even what the bare land was worth. They were old; they were tired; they were ill. They didn't have the time to research, probably didn't even know enough to look up the tax-appraised value.

Instead, they got what sounded like a small fortune to them in exchange for signing some documents, moving into the assisted-living development the kids had been begging them to join, and maybe never discovering that they could have gotten ten, twenty, thirty times more if they'd just sold their house through a reputable agent.

Fala had until Friday. Friday was a tough deadline, but she knew the Club could make it work.

* * * *

Fala had only one more task, and she had to wait until after five before she could even start.

She had to get the list of people who had considered selling their homes to Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes.

She knew it wouldn't be tough. The network looked standard, the computers were standard, and that meant the firewalls were standard, too. She figured it would take her two hours maximum to hack into the system, find the information she needed, and e-mail it directly to the money group, holed up in Portland's Hilton downtown.

It took her a lot less time than she had figured. More than one little wage slave had left a computer on, with the Internet connection running. Fala hacked in, tapped a few buttons, looked through the files, and found all the information she needed.

She paused long enough to delete every mention of her fake name, and the name of her pretend grandmother. She even went into the receptionist's log and took out the record of her phone call.

And then, because she could, she went through all the personal and confidential office files, searching for a mention, any mention, of Preston's name.

She found a Preston L. Steinman, President and CEO of Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes. The picture on the company's only ad brochure sure looked a lot like an ageing Preston Lidner.

“We’re going to get you where it hurts, buddy,” she whispered.

* * * *

That fantasy of getting Preston Lidner first surfaced in Las Vegas at three A.M. Fala had just turned down a pickup from one of the best-looking men she’d seen in a long time. It had been years since she’d trusted a man enough to spend more than a night with him and, as Tess had reminded her, Fala didn’t have a night.

She had a rigorous exam in three days. She wasn’t at a conference; she was at an advance training course in real-estate law, and she needed the certification.

The last person she expected to see was Preston. He sat down at a craps table not fifty feet from her. He didn’t look any different. His hair was slicked back in a more modern style, but his jaw was still square, his smile crooked. He had several stacks of one-hundred-dollar chips in front of him, and he was playing with the single-mindedness of a man who had money to burn.

“Look,” Fala whispered.

Tess did, and got noticeably pale. Even then, Tess had a solidity that made her seem more powerful than she was. Her legacy from Preston, besides the legal fees and jail time, was an additional 100 pounds on her five-foot-two-inch frame. Tess made it work, though. She dressed as if she were worth a fortune, designer dresses in a size 18, and expensive shoes for her tiny feet.

That night, she looked like the CEO of a major corporation, and Fala, in her baggy jeans and University of Chicago sweatshirt, looked like her ratty kid sister.

“Can you believe it?” Fala whispered. “I’m gonna call the cops.”

Tess grabbed her arm. “It won’t do any good.”

Fala frowned. “You know what he did. We all have proof.”

“Old proof,” Tess said. “I don’t know what the statute of limitations is on fraud, but I think it’s pretty short. He might not even be wanted anymore.”

“Fat chance,” Fala said. “He hasn’t gone straight. Look at all that money.”

“Tell you what,” Tess said, her voice barely audible over the *ping-ping* of nearby slot machines. “Let’s find out what he’s been doing these last few years, and then call the cops.”

“Maybe round up some evidence?” Fala asked.

Tess nodded.

“Think he’ll recognize us?”

Tess let out a loud snort. “Definitely not me. And probably not you, either.

How many people has he seen over the years, anyway?”

“Still,” Fala said.

“If he does, we haven’t lost anything,” Tess said. “Let’s give it a shot.”

And a fantasy rose up, just for half a second, not the fantasy of conning Preston, but the fantasy of giving him a different kind of shot—one he wouldn’t live through.

Then Fala nodded. “All right,” she said. “I got fifty bucks. Wanna play some craps?”

* * * *

Thirty people had filled out enough information to let Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes run title searches on their property. Another forty had taken information and promised they’d be back. But the list contained twenty more names, none of whom seemed to have come to the Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes offices.

It took Fala awhile to figure out why.

In one of the computers, someone had found a neighborhood map. The property of each person who had filled out information was marked in blue. The property of each person who promised to come back was yellow. Any properties that adjoined either of those other two kinds were marked in red for “urgent.” For Preston’s plan to work, he needed entire swatches of land. Any property owner who refused to sell or hadn’t approached him at all, and got in the way of a swatch, had an urgent tag.

Fala downloaded the map as well. She wondered what kind of tactic Preston had used in other cities to get the urgents to sell. She doubted the tactic was illegal—Preston didn’t want any charges of fraud to get in the way of this new kind of profit—but she also had a hunch he skirted the very edges of legality when he approached these folks.

In the end, it wasn’t her problem. She was the advance man and researcher, the person who put it all together. The rest of her scheme relied on teams of women who would visit these elderly sellers and explain their rights, offering to intercede with them at banks and other institutions.

When the Club had run this operation three times in the past (the three times that weren’t Preston), most of the elderly took out reverse mortgages after learning how much their homes were worth. A lot of older people didn’t know that the bank would pay them to stay in their homes, often at a sum that many older folks called “princely.”

If some company wanted to buy them all out to build a shopping mall or supermarket, then the Club would intercede on the part of the homeowners, making sure they got more than market value for their homes.

The last time Fala had worked this was Dallas, where it turned out the scumbag trying to screw the older folk using the letter of the law hadn't been Preston at all, but some local Preston-clone who'd gotten the nasty idea all by his little self.

The Club hadn't put him out of business, but they had made certain that he didn't get his pennies-on-the-dollar initial sales. He also got several write-ups in the papers and on local TV stations talking about his unethical but totally legal business practices.

The difficult part of this was that the Club often made money in these transactions. Whenever the Club interceded, it did so for a percentage: People, particularly older people, mistrusted things they got for free. The Club always made money on the resale of the property purchased for the advance man, like the pawnshop Fala bought. The Club would wait until the neighborhood started its transition, then sell the property for much more than the Club initially paid for it.

Club members paid themselves salaries, and plowed the money back into the organization, but still felt uncomfortable making profits. Money, to every member of the Club, was the root of all things Preston—another legacy he had bequeathed them.

Fala leaned back in her chair. In three days, Preston would know his house of cards was collapsing when no one showed up to sign the final paperwork and pick up checks.

With luck, he'd learn nothing until then. The teams would help the older folks stay silent—saying that Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes wasn't exactly on the up-and-up, adding credence by bringing local banks in on the Club's side, and working quickly to make people a lot of money instead of screw them.

But there was always the possibility that someone would talk.

Fala's only job these next three days was to monitor the phone lines and the computer systems, to make sure nothing leaked. Or if it did, that it seemed like an isolated incident, one that Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes could handle.

* * * *

At the craps table, Preston had been slightly drunk. He had switched from beer to Coke just before the women arrived, but he still swayed slightly as he pushed his chips onto the come line.

Fala and Tess pretended they knew nothing about craps. They let him explain the game, and they followed his lead, squealing like schoolgirls whenever they won.

He didn't recognize them, of course. Sometime during the night, his hand migrated down Fala's back to her ass. She moved away, but he always managed to touch her, to squeeze, brush, and fondle.

Once she sent a help-me look to Tess, who glared at her, as if reminding her to keep at it. Fala could barely hide her revulsion. She kept finding reasons to move away from Preston, but somehow he always ended up beside her, groping and rubbing as if he had the rights to everything, including her soul.

The game finally ended at five A.M. when he declared himself hungry. Fala was up five hundred dollars and Tess had made even more. (“Just not enough to pay me back for all the court costs,” Tess later said, bitterly.) They accompanied him to one of the nearby restaurants and ordered breakfast.

He insisted on sitting next to Fala. When she managed to slip to the other side of the table, his foot found her leg. She twisted away. They played this game during the entire meal. Tess was the one who spoke to him, telling him lies about their pasts, pretending they were here for some kind of teachers’ conference, which only made Fala think of her upcoming exam, and the fact that she’d had no sleep at all.

Finally, when he finished his bacon and eggs, Preston told them a little about his life. “I sell property.”

“Oh,” Tess said in this fakey little-girl voice she’d managed to find inside herself. “You’re a real-estate agent.”

“Better than that,” he said. “I work big deals. I find communities on the verge of turning themselves around and purchase a lot of property at bargain prices. Then I find a big business to go on them.”

He made it sound like he was helping the communities. Fala’s stomach turned and she pushed away her half-eaten pancakes.

“How do you find communities?” she asked.

He looked at her as if she had suddenly, and surprisingly, grown a brain. Tess caught the look, too, and elbowed her, encouraging her to shut up.

“It takes a little urban-planning knowledge. First you go to a state with high unemployment or a backwards economy. Then you find a community that has, for some reason, started to grow. You look at the surrounding communities, and find the one that hasn’t changed in thirty, forty years. That’s the one that’ll rebuild because the land is cheap. And you buy up what you can.”

“There’s money in that?” Tess asked before Fala could ask anything else.

“If you sit on the property for the right amount of time.” Preston made it sound as if he sat on the property for weeks, months, maybe years. And that was what had screwed the Club up in its early pursuit of him. They looked for someone who acted on the long-term rather than the short.

He didn’t reveal anything else that night, not even the name of his company, although he did give Fala his room number. He made her promise to come upstairs

with him. She shot a trapped glance at Tess, who shrugged, offering no help at all.

Fala's breakfast threatened to make a reappearance. She forced herself to smile at Preston. "I'll be right up," she said, and hurried to the ladies' room, hiding there until her nausea passed.

It took nearly half an hour. By then, Preston had gone upstairs, and Tess had lost fifty dollars in a nearby slot machine.

"You should've gone," Tess said. "Imagine what you could've learned."

"He would have died," Fala said, which was one of her favorite phrases, an attempt to sound tougher than she was. But she wondered, as she pried her friend away from the slot machine, if there wasn't more truth in that statement than she wanted to acknowledge.

Deep down, she wanted her pound of flesh from Preston. Tess liked to think that pound would come as money, repayment for all they had suffered. At first, they thought he was working Vegas. It was only later they discovered that he was just passing through.

Still, Fala and Tess worked out the beginnings of a plan that morning, a plan that the Club would implement all over the country, in an attempt to destroy Preston's life the way he had destroyed theirs.

But Fala wondered if poverty, jail time, and humiliation were enough to satisfy her. She wanted to hurt Preston so badly he had no sense of self left.

Preston had already climbed out of poverty with his schemes, and he didn't seem to have an understanding of humiliation. He was the kind of man who might talk his way out of jail time.

She kept falling back on the primitive solution. She wanted to bash his head in, to strangle him, to take a knife and chop him into five thousand pieces.

Fala wanted Preston's complete and utter destruction, and she wasn't sure how to get it.

* * * *

Three days after Fala had given the list to the Portland team, the guards positioned outside Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes's building reported only two elderly folks who had come for their checks. Both were intercepted, both reminded of the benefits they could have if they sold their property through a real bank or used a reverse mortgage.

Both left before going inside.

By Monday, Preston's scam had utterly collapsed. The suits inside were calling prospectives, asking them to come in, and discovering that they had already

made other arrangements, all through a variety of institutions. The receptionist cold-called the remaining homeowners to learn that no one was interested, and Preston called the office manager, who was obviously in cahoots with him on the entire scheme, and demanded to know what exactly had gone wrong.

The panic and fear in Preston's voice as it came through Fala's bug into the pawnshop was almost enough to satisfy her. At least he had a small taste of her life, of the way she had felt when she discovered that he and Reggie had disappeared on her, leaving her with two hundred renters, all of whom had been cheated of their money and their home.

Almost enough to satisfy: Later she played the tape for the teams, and they toasted each other with champagne that Fala had brought to the hotel suites.

Almost enough: the frustration and the fear and the growing understanding from the entire staff at Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes that someone had gotten to their marks just in the nick of time, and that Preston and his colleagues would lose tens of thousands, maybe a hundred thousand or more, on the Gresham project alone.

Almost enough.

But not quite.

* * * *

That night, Fala found herself hacking into Herbert, Steinman, and Wilkes again, just to get Preston's Portland address. Then she looked up the address on MapQuest. She found it ironic that he had rented a house while he set up this scam instead of staying in a hotel or even buying property.

The house, in Portland's West Hills, was as far from Gresham as Preston could get. She stared at the map for the longest time, studying the little red star, reading and rereading the directions that took her from the door of her pawnshop to the door of his six-bedroom house in a protected cul de sac. She even looked at the house on satellite photographs offered by one of MapQuest's competitors, zeroing in on everything from the bland landscaping to Preston's silver Mercedes with California plates.

She could picture herself entering that yard, sabotaging the Mercedes, going inside, and—what? Getting revenge? She had already gotten her revenge just this week, and it hadn't improved her mood at all.

She still felt like Fala, the girl he had tricked into tricking others, the young woman he had fondled as she tried to get information from him, the woman he had humiliated, time and time again.

Still, she hit Print on the MapQuest instructions, then walked away from her computer. She had forgotten to lock the front door of the pawnshop, but she did so

now. Then she paced.

The interesting thing about pawnshops, the thing she had never really thought about until now, was the wide variety of weapons they carried. She had her choice of brass knuckles, real swords from various parts of the world, and, of course, guns. Everything from rifles to handguns filled one wall of the place. In order to buy the store, she'd had to apply for a gun-dealer's license. She kept it displayed above the cash register, never really thinking of the significance.

If anyone had asked her, she would have told them she was opposed to handguns. Opposed to anything but hunting rifles, and she wasn't even sure about those. In the month-plus that she'd owned the pawnshop, she hadn't sold a single gun.

She took one from the case. The gun had a laser sight. She figured out how to change the clip, and how to turn off the safety. The handgun was a semiautomatic.

She might not be an accurate shot, but something she fired would probably hit something.

She made sure the safety was on, then put the gun in her purse, right next to the Pall Malls.

* * * *

Fala was halfway across Preston's darkened back lawn when the sprinklers came on. She squealed softly, then froze in place. No one looked out the window to see what the noise had been. No one had even noticed her.

She had dressed in Oregon casual: a pretty knee-length skirt and a T-shirt, along with a pair of Birkenstocks. She had parked two blocks away, and walked toward Preston's rental house as if she belonged in the neighborhood.

Except for the sprinkler moment, everything had gone well.

Now she was damp and uncomfortable, and more than a little frightened. She really didn't have a plan. She just felt she had to confront Preston for the first and final time.

The back door was open. Only the screen stood between her and the kitchen. In a faraway room, she heard an electronic voice—whether it was television or radio, she couldn't tell. She pushed on the screen door. It wasn't locked. Quietly, she stepped inside.

The inside of the house still retained the day's heat. The kitchen smelled of coffee and brandy. An empty tumbler sat beside the sink, along with the remains of a Subway sandwich.

Fala pulled the gun out of her purse, and carefully walked down the hall toward the electronic noise. Light spilled across the hallway. She was heading

toward a den. She kept her back to the wall, and the barrel of the gun pointed upwards.

Her breathing was coming in short, sharp bursts.

When she reached the den, she saw a large-screen TV tuned to CNN. Preston lay on his couch, his face fleshier than she remembered, jowls hanging off his chin like whiskers. His thick dark hair had thinned and gone mostly gray. He had a potbelly, and his hands, once things of beauty, seemed pudgy and small.

He was sound asleep, snoring slightly, coffee on the table beside him. The room smelled faintly of booze.

It would be so easy to wake him, so easy to scare him and make him squeal in fear. It would be just as easy to shoot him, to carry out all those fantasies that she'd had for years now, to make sure he never hurt anyone again.

He snorted, then turned slightly. The anchor on CNN talked of car bombings and deaths and fires. The crawl at the bottom of the screen mentioned fifteen soldiers who died in an ambush.

She was about to ambush Preston. He had ambushed her all those years ago, taken her innocence and ruined it forever. The other sweet young things had recovered, thanks in part to her. They had real jobs, most of them had families, they had lives.

She didn't. In fact, he had left her with the taint of crime, and she continued it, breaking into office buildings, hacking into computers, carrying guns into someone else's unlocked house.

She could take that criminal behavior to its logical conclusion. She could murder a man, take the very last thing he had to give, and do it simply for her own pleasure.

Not that he was even a criminal anymore. Sure, he bilked old people out of their homes, but like all good con artists, he made sure the old folks left happy. His behavior wasn't ethical, but it was legal—and her revenge, until now, had been both ethical *and* legal—except for the breaking and entering, the hacking, the bugs on the phones. She did all that. Everyone else, her friends, the Club, they didn't break a single law.

She wouldn't let them.

She sat down on a nearby armchair, slipped the gun beside her, and kept her right hand on the barrel. She made sure the gun was out of sight.

Then she coughed loudly.

He snorted again, wiped his mouth, and sat up, looking very confused. The

confused look grew as he realized where he was, then focused on her.

He clearly didn't remember her.

"What the hell's going on?" he asked.

"Do you care about the lives you've ruined?" she asked.

"What?" He ran a hand over his face.

"I just wonder. You've ruined, by my count, at least three hundred lives. I wonder how you sleep at night, if you think about the people you've hurt, if you even care."

"Who are you?" There was fear in his voice.

"I suppose you probably don't think about them," she said. "I suppose you figure people get what's coming to them. I suppose you believe what happens has nothing to do with you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You," she said, "and all your cons."

He stared at her for a long moment, as if he was trying—and failing—to figure out who she was. "What do you want?"

She paused.

The answer suddenly became clear. She wanted the past to go away. She wanted to be someone else, someone who had a perfect life, someone who never made a mistake, who never allowed herself to be hurt by a con man, never allowed herself to help him destroy others.

"I want you to know," she said quietly, "that you won't succeed again. I want you to know that every time you try to take something from someone who can't match wits with you, I will be there to prevent it. I want you to know that my goal in life is to make sure you ruin no one else's life—except your own."

"You're the one," he said, blinking with surprise. "You're the one who stopped all those people from working with me."

She inclined her head just a little, like a queen acknowledging a subject.

"Why?" he said. "I wasn't cheating them. They helped determine the price. I haven't broken any laws."

"These days," Fala said.

He frowned. His eyes were red, either from sleep or drink. "Do I know you?"

She almost answered yes. Then she stood up, the gun clutched in her right hand. He looked at it, and went so pale that she thought he might pass out.

“I just want you to remember my face,” she said. “Every time you try a new scheme, realize I’ll be watching you, and I’ll be there to make sure you fail.”

“Why?” he whispered. “What have I done to you?”

She almost laughed. It had been so personal to her for so long, and he didn’t even recognize her, didn’t even remember her, didn’t even realize how he had hurt her.

“Remember what I told you,” she said, and backed out of the room. Once she realized he wasn’t following her, she ran down the hall and out the back door.

She would leave prints on the sprinkler-soaked grass. She hurried through a small copse of trees, across other yards, taking a shorter path to her car, so she could get away before the police arrived.

What had he done to her?

He had given her something to push against.

He had given her a determination she hadn’t realized she had.

He had made her stronger.

She reached the car, unlocked it, set the gun on the seat, and started the car. Then she sped off, hurrying to the freeways, taking a long and circuitous route back to her makeshift home.

What had he done to her?

He had taught her how to hate, and she had become very, very good at it. Better at it than he was.

Better than most people.

The ironic thing, the sad thing, was that she wouldn’t be here without him. She wouldn’t have changed all those lives, helped all those people, without him.

She didn’t want to give him any credit. She couldn’t. He hadn’t meant for her to become a better person.

He’d meant to ruin her, and he hadn’t.

He never would.

When she reached the apartment building, she parked the car in the lot across the street, then hurried upstairs. She let herself in, took off the suburban clothes, and wrapped herself in a terry-cloth robe.

Then she sat on the couch, picked up her cell phone, and called Tess.

“We’re going to have a party when you get back,” Tess said. “We miss you here. We’re celebrating already.”

“Save some champagne for me,” Fala said. “I’ll be back in a week or two.”

“That long?” Tess asked.

“I have to shut things down here. And I have one other thing to do.”

“What’s that?” Tess sounded suspicious.

Fala didn’t want to say that she was going to make good on her promise to Preston. She had his new name, his license-plate number, his company’s business records. She was going to watch him, electronically, personally, digitally.

She was going to track his every movement, and she was going to make certain he never hurt anyone again.

“It’s nothing much,” Fala lied. “I just have to take care of an old friend.”

* * * *

Two days later, she pulled the jewelry out of the safe. Item by item, she checked the names and the addresses, setting aside the pieces whose owners she couldn’t entirely identify. If she couldn’t figure out who the pieces really belonged to, she would take them to the police.

Then she picked up the phone and called the number on the tag hanging off a necklace.

“Mrs. Spaight? This is Fast Cash Pawnshop. I have your ruby necklace here. We’ve had it for more than a month, and we haven’t been able to move it. I’d like to give it back to you. Would you mind picking it up in the next few days...?”

“I can’t afford to repay you,” the quavering voice on the other end said.

“I know.” Fala kept her own voice gentle. “I’m giving it back to you. We’re changing our focus here.”

“But you gave me money. It was a loan—”

“I know, ma’am. I’ve had the piece for more than a month. Let’s just call it even.”

Silence. Fala held her breath.

Then the woman on the other end let out a short laugh. “Bless you, child. Bless you.”

Fala smiled. She liked her work. She liked doing it for the right reasons—not

for hatred and revenge, but because she wanted to.

Because she could.

She finished the call and started another, slowly working her way through the pile, giving back treasures and restoring other people's dreams.

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