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Win Some, Lose Some

A Daphne Kay Novel

By

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if interested.

## I: A Small Favor

Daphne Kay was a little nervous. Not "I might have to shoot someone tonight" nervous, but "I hope he likes me" nervous. She paced her apartment, watching the second hand on her clock tick, feeling the irritation at her impatience rising. She never thought that as someone who could wrestle down a hardened criminal and pepper-spray them into submission, she would be unprepared for a simple date.

Daphne didn't go on many dates. She kept herself unapproachable, mostly because she didn't want to be a burden to anyone. Her father, Carl Ellis Kay, had been a police lieutenant and she knew what it was to sit at home and wonder if she'd ever see him again. One night she hadn't needed to wonder any longer. Daphne wasn't a police officer, but a bonds-woman and owned her own bail-bonds company. While she did her best to help her community, there was always that chance that her clients would jump bail, stop checking in with their parole officers, or try to leave the state. When they

tried any of these things, they were stealing money from Daphne's pocket and she had no choice but to hunt them down and bring them in.

She started her business a year after her father passed away and was laughed at for being the ex-junkie daughter of a dead cop. She soon gained notoriety as the sober woman who would haul your ass back in if you so much as looked at her sideways.

Through the years Daphne became well known for several high profile take downs and she took side jobs hunting down people who didn't want to be found. Her experience being a heroin junkie helped her get into the minds of those who did not want to be found, had lost all hope, or just wanted some sort of escape. While her moral compass always directed her actions, the bottom line was cash. Cash to keep her business open, but also for clients who needed a fresh start, the clients who needed a job or a place to stay for a while.

Her secretary, Jean Davies, was one such person. She had been a addict the same as Daphne. While her particular poison wasn't heroin, she had needed a sponsor and a steady job to stay out of jail. Daphne filled both of these roles. Later, she did the same for a friend, and the ex-drunkard biker, Freddie Gomez, became an employee, and he was now on his way to get his BEA, Bail Enforcement Agent, certificate.

While her life was filled with the up and downs of a struggling business, the do's and don'ts of addiction, and the here today gone tomorrow tendencies of her clients, she did have one constant: Awes. Her official partner and co-name on the front of her building: Kay-Awes Bonds. He had been a gift from her father, a mixed breed dog and he and Daphne were inseparable. As a puppy, she spent hours training him, loving him and as a result, his loyalty was unparalleled.

Daphne paced around her apartment from the bare kitchen to the sparse bedroom. Daphne kept her life simple, a chair for sitting, a coffee maker for coffee. Extraneous items and clutter didn't make it's way into her life anymore. Awes watched her from his bed in the living room, his head raising in question every time she left the room, and relaxing when she appeared again.

Daphne stared at herself in the full length mirror that, on any normal night, would sit unused in her bedroom. She was wearing a casual knee length black skirt, and a semi-revealing blouse that was an off-white that she had borrowed from Jean. Her makeup was sparse, except for the bright red lipstick that she received compliments on when she had the occasion to wear it. Her hair, which was a dark brown and shoulder length, had been released from its practical ponytail. Daphne had taken the time, an unbelievable twenty minutes, to curl it into

ringlets. She shook her head first in denial on how different she looked, then just to watch her hair bounce around. It was a far cry from the ponytail, jeans, t-shirt and military green jacket she usually wore.

Her outfit also had no place to conceal her dual .45 caliber handguns that had been bequeathed to her by her father. She had obtained a permit to carry concealed, and rarely left the house without them. She always considered herself on-call, and this was the first time in years she was taking for herself.

Daphne's cellphone beeped at her, she checked its time against the clock on the wall. She pet Awes and told him to stay out of trouble. He cocked his head at her, and then laid it back on his bed, his eyes following her. She felt guilty for leaving him, and gave him a dog treat. He took it from her, his powerful jaws gentle, and laid it next to himself on in the dog bed. He looked at her while he licked it once and then set his head down in protest.

\* \* \*

Daphne drove her restored 1968 Camero SS/RS down the main street towards the bar her date was waiting for her at. The car was a gift for Daphne on her 21st birthday, it had been a

rusty and broken mess, much like Daphne herself. Her father gifted it to her, his increasing time with the police force taking time away from the restoration. It kept Daphne occupied, and it became her sole link to her father after he passed. It was bright orange, a color that had come about on a job that had almost taken her life.

The man who she was meeting was Officer Phillip Hodge. They had met at a desk in the police station, his post while he waited to be assigned to another department. Daphne had brought in a client that was a no-show to his court date. She had to plumb the depths of a meth house to find him, and passed on the info to Hodge. Hodge used the tip to build a case and convince his superiors to take down the lab, which was in the house next door. The bust made the papers, and as a thank you, he invited Daphne out for a drink.

The bar they were meeting at was called McArthur's Pub and was as far from an authentic English or Irish pub that you could find. There were British tchotchkes stapled to the walls, soccer and football uniforms underneath scratched glass cases, and a fishing video game that shouted "Come on down to the lake and find yourself a big fish!" over and over in a scratchy electronic voice. The bar itself was a plastic that approximated wood, and the lighting shifted from green to blue to pink in time with a juke box that was playing a pop single.

When Daphne entered the bar she almost turned around. It was Americanization at it's worst.

Just as she was about to give up the night as a bad idea, she noticed Phillip Hodge waving at her from a table near the bar. Daphne smiled and walked over to him, dodging the looks from a group of tight-shirted guys who were drinking beers and leering at anything that moved.

"Daphne! It's so good to see you!" Hodge stood and hugged Daphne, who returned the gesture and took a seat on one of the raised stools that encircled the table. Hodge stood and raised his near empty glass to his lips and finished it off.

"I'm going to the bar, what can I get you?" He smiled at Daphne and she noticed that while he had looked handsome in his uniform, the polo shirt and jeans he was wearing gave him an attractive devil-may-care attitude that the rigid uniform never could.

"Just some ice water for now please, no lemon."

"Huh, okay. Sure." He turned to the bar and Daphne wondered if there was some image she wasn't living up to. She rubbed her arms, an old nervous tick that she had picked up in the days when she was using. She caught herself and forced herself to stop. Maybe she had misjudged his invitation.

"Here you go." Hodge placed the drink in front of Daphne and slid into his own seat.



"Thanks." Daphne took a sip and placed the drink back on it's coaster. "So, hero, how's it feel to take down a meth lab?"

"Ha, pretty good. They were the second largest lab in the state, and supplied from here to the south county. It was a significant hit to someone. We're still trying to figure out just who they were working for. There are the usual suspects, but it just seemed a little, I dunno, sloppy."

"Sloppy like a bunch of drug addicts were running the show?"

"Yeah. The chemicals weren't stored right, the work stations were filthy. I think that if we hadn't caught it when we did, the whole place would have blown in another week or so."

"That right?"

"Yeah, truly deplorable." Hodge took another huge gulp of his beer. "There was this one guy there." Hodge winked at Daphne, "I can't say that his name was Sam Wilde, but he was right in the thick of it all, pointing out to us where they cooked, where they stored ingredients, the packaging area. It seemed like he was trying to help us so we wouldn't charge him for intent to use."

"Sounds like Sam."

"I thought you might know him." Hodge smiled.

"Yeah, old friend." Daphne rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Oh, there's a story there. Come on, give it up."

Daphne took a long pull from her glass of water and wondered if work was all they were going to talk about. Maybe she'd have to take him up on that drink offer. She'd never had a problem with alcohol, her tastes had been towards opiates and their ilk. While she didn't drink for recreation, it was sometimes necessary to blend in.

"Sam Wilde is one of those guys who was everywhere you didn't want him to be, and would give up any information for a few bucks. A real fast talker, I'm sure you heard."

"Yeah, yeah." Hodge took another gulp.

"Well, he'd give me any info on the clients I was looking for, for a few bucks, you know, standard informant fee."

"Sure."

"Well, one time he tried to double cross me. The client was trying to get his stuff together to move out of state, and needed time to pack. Sam sold me the information on when he was going to pack, and I knew where the client lived so I was going to go over there to pick him up. I get over to the guy's apartment, and Sam is there, waiting for his payment and then tells me the guy had already left. Then the asshole offered to sell me the location of where the client ran to. I could see

into the window of the apartment and someone was obviously packing, right?"

"What'd you do?"

"You know Awes?"

"Your dog, right?"

"My partner. Anyway, I wrestle Sam to the ground and have Awes sit on his chest. I told Awes that if he moved, he could attack, and I was going to take a look at the apartment for myself."

"No shit. Your dog can do that?"

"He's pretty well trained."

"What happened?"

"Sam moved."

"Oh no."

"Yeah. Sam disappeared for a while after that."

"He wasn't seriously injured, was he?"

"Nah, Awes just clamped onto his leg, didn't break the skin, but traumatized Sam pretty good."

"That's some funny shit." Hodge gulped his beer down and let his eyes wander around the bar, unfocused. Daphne again began to wonder why she was here. Sure, she had been instrumental in helping Hodge get out of his desk job, but if this was a thank you celebration, he should be doing more than sucking down beers and giving out confidential information on

informants, right? Maybe he was working up to ask her something. Excited at the thought, Daphne decided that maybe her ordering a drink would help loosen him up.

"So, maybe you can get me that beer-"

"Okay, listen, I have a small favor to ask." Any jovial pretense that Hodge had mustered disappeared.

"In my experience, favors asked after two beers are never small." Daphne was surprised at the serious expression that had blossomed on Hodge's face.

"Uh-" Hodge's expression softened somewhat in confusion.

"What can I help you with?" Daphne crossed her arms and settled into her seat, finally seeing this meeting for what it was.

"See that guy at the end of the bar?"

"The douche with the backwards hat, the sparkly shirt and the pants that look all torn to shit?" Daphne had tagged him as a person of interest when she had taken her seat. Old habits died hard.

"Yeah. He's Ethan Evans. I know, sounds like a fake comic book name or something, right? He's a small time pill pusher. He comes here to sell, but I can't figure out how he gets his product out."

"So our date is a stake out? Or do you just want advice?"

"Date? Uh-" Daphne could see she had caught Hodge off

guard.

"I thought- ah fuck it. Yeah, I thought this was a date. You want me to buy from him?" Daphne's respect for Hodge dropped a few pegs. Why disguise the need for help?

Hodge's expression went from confused to knowing to apologetic. "I'm sorry Daph, I didn't think you'd-"

"Don't worry about it. I didn't have high hopes anyway. What's your plan?"

"I was just going to wait for someone to come by, but he has ignored everyone who has come up to him since I got here. I can't figure out why he sells to some people and not others. Maybe he's ID'd me as a cop."

"Well, if that's the case, he's already seen me with you, so I can't really do much to help."

"If the, uh, date goes bad, maybe he won't think we're on the same side, you know?"

"Alright. I'll meet you outside in fifteen minutes."

"What are you-"

"I SAID GET AWAY FROM ME!" Daphne screamed at him, and threw the remains of her ice water in Hodge's face. He stood, gasping, and the stool he had been sitting on crashed to the floor. "Asshole!"

"Wait, what-"

"Is there a problem here?" The group of tight-shirted

guys who had been eyeballing Daphne approached Daphne's table and their blue shirted leader gave Hodge a look that would make most people cringe. He put a hand on Hodge's shoulder and started pushing him towards the door. "Come on buddy, I think you've had enough."

"Thank you. What a dick." Daphne hugged one of the other guys, and held her breath as her head was enveloped in a cloud of cologne. When the blue shirt came back, he picked up the stool, gave a look to the rest of the guys, who retreated back to their table, and sat next to Daphne.

"Who was that asshole?"

"An Ex." Daphne snorted, and sneered through the window at Hodge, who was trying to dry his face with his soaked shirt.

"That's too bad. Can I buy you a beer?"

"Something stronger?" Daphne hit him with a desperate smile, and rubbed her arms in the practiced action she fought so hard to hide.

"Uh- no. No, sorry." The blue shirt's smile faltered as he stood up. "Not my thing. Me and my boys are going all-state this year. Right boys?!" A cheer rose from the table, drinks were raised and devoured. "But if you need something special, talk to that guy, he'll hook you up." The blue shirt nodded towards Ethan Evans, and gave Daphne a thumbs up. Daphne

watched him go back to his table and saw him pantomime a needle in an arm, and a few of the tight shirts looked back at her. She pretended not to notice and slunk her way up to the bar. She took an empty seat a few stools over from Ethan, who appeared to be engrossed in typing into his cell phone.

Daphne leaned forward and raised her arm and got the bartender's attention with her low cut shirt. She ordered a shot of whiskey and a light beer chaser. When her drinks arrived, she paid the bartender and leaned over towards Ethan.

"You ever wish you could order something stronger?" He glanced at her, and then looked at her again, lust crossing his face.

"If only, my dear." He had a European accent that Daphne couldn't place.

"Bottoms up." Daphne raised her shot glass and Ethan set his cell phone down and picked up his glass.

"To ex-boyfriends, and the pain they used to cause." Ethan said with a wink.

"To dulling the pain." Daphne winked back, but managed to make it look more like a twitch.

Daphne took her shot, made an exaggerated face, and sipped her beer. Her throat burned, and her stomach churned, but she managed to grin at Ethan, who smiled back.

"Do you do all your dulling through shot glasses?"

"Not always. You holding?" Daphne tried her best to sound desperate while she slid off of her stool and mounted the one next to Ethan, dragging her beer with her.

"Could be. What are you looking for?"

Daphne lowered her voice and leaned in close to Ethan.

"Painkillers. Oxys. Something with a little kick, you know."

"I might be able to help you. Forty."

"How many?"

"Two."

"Shit, that all you have?"

"How much can a little girl like you handle?"

"I have two hundred here. You do the math."

"I'll give you eight."

"Don't be a prick man. Fourteen."

"Ten. That's at value. You want a better deal, get on your knees."

"Fuck you, asshole. Ten is fine. Where?"

"Pull out the cash and put it on the counter. The bartender will take it and give you a glass. Pills will be at the bottom."

Daphne pulled out a stack of twenty dollar bills, the money she hoped to buy groceries with later in the week, and placed them on the table. Ethan held his arm up, as if he was going to order a drink. The bartender looked at him, and with



his other hand close to his chest, Ethan flashed five fingers twice. The bartender nodded and bent down. He came back up with a glass filled with ice. He set it in front of Daphne and swiped the money from the table. She looked in the glass and saw the pills at the bottom. If she let the ice melt, the pills would dissolve. That didn't give her much time to pocket them as evidence.

"A little warning next time? I don't want to take them all right now."

"You said you could handle it."

"Prick." Daphne grabbed the glass and, after giving Ethan a dirty look, marched towards the bathroom. Once inside, she quickly dumped the ice in her glass into the sink and used a paper towel to dry off the pills that stuck to the bottom of the glass. She twisted the bundle closed and put it in the waistband of her skirt. She exited the bathroom and made her way to the exit. The tight shirted guys watched her go, a few of them snickering at the way Daphne made herself stumble.

Once outside, she went to her car and got inside. The whiskey shot was eating away at her empty stomach, she'd have to wait a while before driving home. She watched Hodge get out of his car and made a circuitous route around the parking lot so he wouldn't catch the attention of the tight shirt tribe. When he tapped on the glass window of the passenger side door,

Daphne leaned over and unlocked it. Hodge slid in and slouched in the seat, making sure nobody could watch them.

"Was that fun for you?" Hodge sounded irritated. Daphne looked him up and down and noticed his pants were still damp.

"Don't get my car wet."

"Did you find out anything?"

"Yeah. Bartender is in on it. Evans takes the order, the bartender serves it up. They put the pills at the bottom of a tumbler, with ice on top. They don't want you going too far without swallowing."

"Huh."

"By the way, you owe me two hundred." Daphne pulled the bundle out of her skirt and handed Hodge the pills.

"Did you have to buy so many?"

"Do you always have to have me do all of your dirty work?"

"Sorry Daphne, thank you, I really appreciate this."

"Just remember me next time someone needs a bond."

"You got it."

## II: Bait

Daphne sat around her office, bored. No calls came from the courthouse, which was both good news and bad. Hodge had made the papers again, and had sent over a check for two hundred dollars, but didn't invite her to celebrate this time. She started to wonder if she had offended him with her jibes but decided that she didn't care much for people who asked for favors and offered none in return. Daphne leaned back in her chair, her feet on her small desk. No calls from the courthouse meant that they didn't have any new work coming in.

Awes slept on a pile of blankets that looked too dirty to be allowed indoors. His ear twitched, and Daphne's phone beeped.

"Ms. Kay?"

"Gimme good news Jean."

"We have no scheduled appointments today and there have been no calls. Can we call it a day?" Daphne looked at the clock mounted on the wall above her office door. The second

hand clicked past 12, and the clock chimed twelve soft electronic noises.

"What, no lunch break?"

"The courthouse closed early, some sort of furlough day. I don't think we're going to get any calls."

"Okay Jean, we can close up. Just forward office calls to my cell, okay?"

"Yes mam, I'll see you on Monday."

"Sounds good Jean. Have a nice weekend."

"I will Ms. Kay, have a good afternoon."

Daphne listened to the sounds of an office being shut down and wondered what she was going to do for the rest of the day. She looked down at Awes, who was working on a nice pile of drool while he slept, and she thought about past cases. The first time she had helped someone with their bail. The first time tracking down that same person, who had tried to break parole and leave town.

She thought about the Deckard job and how it had almost ended her career before it really began. The first time she had met Gomez and the Flaming Skulls. The scar that ran across her torso from the wreck that almost totaled her Camero. She had learned a lot on that job. Made high friends in low places. Friends that owed her, and that she owed.

Then she thought about the Cross job. A simple job

looking for a junkie kid. A junkie kid that was being held for ransom by Escobar. Escobar, the drug peddler, the human trafficker, the mob boss. She had left her mark on him, and he had promised death.

The clock ticked over to 12:30, and chimed once. Daphne shook her head back into the present. She dropped her legs from her desk and her chair squeaked its familiar squeak. Awes' eyes opened at the sound and jumped out of bed, glanced at Daphne, and trotted through her open office door. Daphne followed him down the hallway, past the small kitchen, the darkened second office, and into the reception area. Daphne reached under Jean's desk and flipped the switch to the outside sign. Daphne watched the neon letters flicker to life. Kay-Awes Bonds. She smiled, reached down and scratched Awes' head.

"Wanna go for a ride, boy?"

Awes' head twitched to the side and his tail stopped its slow wag and stood out, stiff and alert. A hanging bit of drool fell from his still mouth to the threadbare carpet.

"Okay boy, let's go waste some gas."

Daphne turned and lunged towards the hallway, but Awes beat her. He ran back down the hallway and into the small kitchen, his nails clicking on the linoleum floor. He reached the exit to the back parking lot and jumped up on the door,

bouncing off and looking back at Daphne.

"Hold your horses' boy; I have to get my bag." Daphne dipped onto her office and snatched her shoulder bag from the hook on the back of the door, swung it over her head in a smooth motion, and walked into the kitchen to see an impatient Awes staring at her.

"Awes, sit." He sat.

"Awes, lay." He laid down. Daphne reached over to the counter and grabbed a dog treat from a jar. She threw it on the ground.

"Awes, guard." He looked at the treat, and stood up, walked over to it, and laid down on it. Daphne reached towards him and he let out a soft growl. Daphne smiled.

"Good boy Awes. Awes, door." Awes stood up and went back to the exit that Daphne was pointing at.

"Good boy. Awes, treat!" Awes lunged at the treat on the floor and inhaled it. Daphne walked past her partner, who was sniffing for crumbs, out into the bright afternoon.

"Awes, come." He ran past her to the Camero as she locked the back door to her business.

\* \* \*

Daphne looked at the car that had once belonged to her

father. That was many years, parts, miles and gallons of gas in the past. She had lived in the car for a time, and even attempted to sell it for a few moments of pleasure. She was glad she had never been desperate enough in her addiction for it to come to that.

Daphne opened the car door, and Awes jumped into the back seat. Daphne threw her bag onto the passenger seat, and thrust the car key into the ignition. She stomped the clutch to the floor, and twisted the shifter into the reverse gear. Looking into the rear-view mirror, Daphne turned the key.

Nothing happened. She twisted the key again. She checked the clutch. She listened for the click of a bad starter. She even remembered that the last time she had put gas in the tank was only a few days ago and turned the key again. It should have started.

She got out of the car, and opened the trunk. She had a garage worth of tools packed away next to her bounty hunting gear and she pulled out a dented metal tool box. Awes watched her through the car windows as Daphne circled from the trunk to the hood, placed the tool box on the ground and popped the hood open. She peered into the engine compartment and was blinded by the polished chrome. The last time she had her car worked on, the mechanics had added some extras to help repay the bond she had lent his son. The mechanic was the father of

a client, and she hoped, for his sake, he hadn't tried to palm off any worn or broken parts.

She scanned the air cleaner, the spark plug wires, and was about to reach down to check the starter when a loose wire caught her eye. She looked at the battery and was shocked at what she saw. The metal clamps were still around the battery terminals, but one of the wires was cut clean into two pieces. No amount of wear could cause that break. Daphne pulled her head out from under the hood and reached back to the holsters strapped to her lower back. She placed one hand on the grip of a .45 pistol and unclipped the safety snap with her other hand. She looked around the small parking lot.

Her building, part of a strip mall, had a small parking lot designed for business owners and employees to be able to park their cars, have space enough to accept deliveries, and let the garbage trucks through. The Camaro was parked facing the building, and from where Daphne stood, a handicap space with striped area was two spaces down to the left, with a cinder block encircled dumpster beyond. To her right were two more spaces and a planter with several dead looking bushes; beyond that, more spaces, a few cars, and the a side street. Directly in front of Daphne, away from the building, was a tall ivy covered fence. There were apartment buildings beyond.

Daphne knew that there were not many places to hide in



this small alleyway. The only place that she could not see was beyond the cinder block dumpster enclosure. Daphne circled her car, facing the dumpsters. As she passed the driver-side of her car, she popped open the door and whispered to Awes, "Awes, come" and left the door open. She brought her gun around, checked the safety, and chambered a round. Awes' ears perked up as the gun clicked, and jumped out of the car to join his master.

"Awes, bark!" Daphne pointed at the dumpsters. Awes reacted to the urgency in her voice, bounding in front of Daphne, lowered his head, and started barking at the dumpsters, his furious voice bouncing around the alleyway.

"Awes, quiet!" Awes stopped barking with a whine, and turned his head around, licking his lips at Daphne. Daphne listened for several heartbeats. She heard a foot scuffle on asphalt. Adrenaline coursing through her veins, Daphne strode up the edge of the cinder block structure, took a deep breath, and spun around the corner, raising her gun up to shoulder height.

"Freeze!" She shouted. There was a man on the ground; his dirty shoes scuffed the broken asphalt as he tried to stand up. He was dirty and his clothes were battered and torn. He had a sore on his lip that looked infected, and his eyes were full of fear.

"No, no, no-," the man stammered "no, no, no!"

"Who are you? Answer me, or he gets hungry!" Daphne nodded towards Awes, who was at her side and was staring at the man, his eyes locked on the potential target.

"No, no, no, n-"

"Hey! Shut up! Listen to me! Who are you?"

"No, no-" The man continued to stammer, his eyes shifting from Daphne to the animal at her side.

Daphne sighed, the adrenaline fading from her, its prickling sensation streaming from her hands and feet. This man wasn't an obvious threat and as scared as he was, he wasn't going to answer any of her questions. "Awes, car." Awes looked at her, looked at the man, and then trotted away, towards the car.

"Okay sir, he's gone," she tucked the gun back into its holster, "and the gun is gone too. What's your name?"

"No, no, um, uh, it's ah-" He looked around, unsure and scared. "Joe, Joseph."

"Joseph what?"

"Phillips, Joseph Phillips. Friends call me Joe."

"Okay Joe," Daphne crouched down to the man, their eyes level. She stayed far enough away to be safe from his grasp, but was close enough to smell that the man had not bathed in weeks, perhaps months. "Tell me, what are you doing back

here?"

"Nothing."

"Uh-huh."

"I was just sitting here, and heard your dog bark."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, yeah. I was just sitting here."

"What about those other guys?"

"What other guys?"

"You know, the ones that gave you that and told you to keep your mouth shut." Daphne pointed at a fast food wrapper that was crushed up next to a still sweating soda cup.

"What? No, I bought that."

"Yeah, from where?" The man started to turn his head around to look at the meal when Daphne leaned forward and gripped his chin in her hand, its considerable stubble scratching her fingers, "Don't. Where's it from?"

"I don't, I-"

"Come on, you bought it right? I'm sure you don't get a meal like that every day. Where'd you go?"

"Come on lady! It's just a burger, I don't remember where I got it! I just got it! I just, I just-" His voice trailed off.

"Who? How many?"

"He was just a kid. He was under the hood of that old car

over there. I walked by, asked what he was doing. He looked up at me, real scared like. He had the food sitting there, next to his bike-"

"Bike or motorcycle?"

"Bike, ah I don't know, a bike, just a normal bike with pedals and stuff. Anyway, he had these big clippers, and he gave me the bag of food, told me to keep quiet and rode off." Joe pointed off towards the side street.

"How long?"

"Wha-"

"How long ago was this?"

"I don't know, I just ate my burger and you came out and the dog barked and-"

"Which way did he go?"

"He turned left, towards the neighborhoods." The man, Joe, pointed towards the end of the alleyway and crooked his finger around to indicate the direction.

"Thanks." Daphne held her nose, patted his shoulder and stood up. She walked back to her car, estimating how long it took for a starving man to eat a hamburger and weighing it against on how fast and far someone could ride a bike with the same amount of time. "A few blocks," she thought, "a few minutes, a few blocks." She then turned her mind to the car and how she was going to get it running again. She planned

methodically.

Unclamp terminal. Strip wires. Twist wires. Electrical tape. Re-clamp to battery. Three Minutes.

Three minutes later she slammed her trunk closed, sat down in the driver seat, pressed down on the clutch and turned the key. The engine roared to life. She threw the transmission in reverse, pressed the gas pedal all the way down, screeched the tires, slammed the gear stick into first gear and watched Joe Phillips dwindle in her rear-view mirror.

### III: Spare Parts

Daphne combed the neighborhood for half an hour. She saw several kids riding their bikes, and questioned all of them. None of them knew who sabotaged her car, appeared to recognize her car, nor did any of them run away in fear. Five minutes must have been enough time for whoever had cut her battery wire to either outrun her, run home, or disappear in some other fashion. Her car was easy enough to spot from a distance, and although it wasn't the stealthiest car, it more than made up that particular shortcoming in intimidation. Even with a car that screamed her name, she still caught who she needed to catch.

Except today.

She weaved through the neighborhoods one last time, looking for suspicious activities, but saw none. She sighed, reached into the backseat to scratch Awes on the head, and decided that she might as well get a new battery wire at the auto-parts store.

She drove to the closest store as it was only four blocks

away from her business, on Main Street. She had made that particular pilgrimage more than a few times in the years that she owned both her car and her business. A car that was over forty years in age, no matter what point in its restoration, was never finished, and was prone to any sort of breakdown you could imagine. Especially the way Daphne drove.

Auto-Topia Auto-parts was a large building, and as Daphne walked through its familiar doors and heard the familiar chime, she inhaled. The smells of rubber, grease and oil brought back fond memories of her childhood. The summers spent in the garages with her father and his brothers. The uncles that let her help when her father said it was too dangerous. She remembered looking down at her arms, and seeing not pale young skin, but black greasy skin, and smiling.

There are points in her memory that are blank except for the memories of laying on cold garage concrete, staring up at the greasy and oiled undercarriage of the Camero, her father next to her. She knew that he couldn't have been there all that often, he was on duty more often than not, and Daphne couldn't remember him being around for family meals, holidays or the occasional school play. He wasn't there for those memories, but those memories weren't the strongest in her mind. Laying on the cold garage concrete, next to her father, his smiling face directing her to unclamp this or bolt in

that; that was where the smells of Auto-topia sent her mind.

Daphne smiled to herself and her memories as she waved at the man behind the counter, who greeted her by name. She didn't have to look at the aisle names or a directory to know where she was going. She walked past the stack of motor oil, the shelves full of boxes of different air filters, past the sockets and wrenches, and the carburetors bolted down to their displays. She rounded a corner lost in thought and almost ran into a guy in a jumpsuit, who had an arm full of engine cleaner. "Oh, sorry!" Daphne said, and sidestepped the man before he could say anything.

She continued until she got to the wall of batteries. There were more black boxes exclaiming they were the best at what they did then Daphne could count. Next to these stacks were shelves full of charging units, safety gizmos and finally, the wires. Daphne scanned the different brands, selected the one that would replace her quick splice job, and headed back to the front counter. The man who had greeted her was the only one behind the counter and he was busy with a customer. The Jumpsuit Guy Daphne had nearly run over was next in line and was tapping his foot as he tried to balance the different cans of engine cleaner, carburetor cleaner, and rust remover. She noticed that the jumpsuit he wore was immaculate. There was not a spot on it. That was a rare thing in an



auto-parts store; people came in mid job, their arms and clothes stained with oil, grease and grit to pick up that one thing they forgot. She looked from the man's clothes to the products he was buying and Daphne laughed to herself. No doubt this guy was some sort of obsessive compulsive. Every item he had in his arms was some sort of cleaner or polisher. She imagined his garage looked like an operating room. A large tarp over everything, him in his jumpsuit, a mask over his face and rubber gloves on his hands; the greasy and oily engine parts spread out before him like organs after being dissected.

The first man in line, who was finished asking his questions, wandered off back into the middle of the store. Jumpsuit Guy ran to the counter and managed to put all of his items on the counter without dropping any. He looked up to the clerk, who started placing the different spray cans, bottles and jars right side up before scanning them.

"How are you this afternoon, sir? Find everything you need?"

"Fine. Yeah, I think this is everything." He reached into one of the many zippered pockets and pulled out a typed list. Daphne tried to read it, her curiosity piqued, but the type was too small and she didn't want to creep up behind the man, who already looked jumpy.

"Yeah that's everything. But I uh, had a question."

"Yessir." The man behind the counter, Wyatt, had been working at the store since Daphne was a little girl. Any question she had ever needed an answer too, he could answer. Sometimes he rambled a bit, and got off topic, but he always had an answer.

"Um, well, do any of these," Jumpsuit pointed at the cleaner on the counter, "react badly with one another? I mean, I'm not going to mix them all up or anything, but, if, say, say I got a little of this," He picked up the rust-remover, "and a little of this," He pulled the carburetor cleaner out of the pile, "and accidentally had them mix, it wouldn't explode or anything, would it?"

Wyatt looked at the man above his large glasses. "No sir. Those two touching one another will not cause an explosion. Have you ever used any of these products before, sir?"

"No."

"Well, be cautioned then. Look here. Every one of these are flammable. No, they won't explode, but if you spray them on a hot engine, or near a cigarette or some other flame, they will catch fire, and, if the flame is large enough or hot enough, it could travel back into the container and might possibly explode. I knew a kid once, who took some of this," he took the carburetor cleaner from Jumpsuit Guy's hand,

"well, not this brand, but this same basic stuff. He took it and held out his lighter like so," Wyatt put one arm out and mimed flicking a lighter to life and held the aerosol cleaner behind it, "and he sprayed. Now, that'll let out a large flame. Like a flamethrower you'd see in the movies, right? Well, he used to go around his garage and hunt down cockroaches. He'd burn them up. Weird kid. Anyway, one day his neighbors heard a loud pop. Not an explosion mind you, but a really loud pop. It turned out, the flame traveled right up that spray and into the can. Luckily, it only blew off two fingers, the can was almost empty, you see."

"Oh jeez."

"Yeah, oh jeez. You just be careful, don't go hunting cockroaches, and you'll do fine. What are you up to with all this anyway? What are you restoring?"

"What? I-"

"Restoring, come on, you don't just go and buy a bunch of cleaner like this for fun. What year?" Wyatt leaned on the counter, ready for a long chat.

"Year?"

"Yeah, what year or make?" Wyatt's eyes flicked to Daphne and back to the man.

"I'm sorry, I don't-"

"Okay, okay, sorry for all the questions." Wyatt stood up

and looked over his glasses at the register. "That'll be \$57.46. There's a car show next weekend, if you want to see some really nice hot rods-"

Daphne watched and listened to the exchange, at first smiling at Wyatt's tall tale, but was then as alert as the old man when Jumpsuit Guy didn't seem to know what he was doing there or why. You didn't buy any of that stuff without a purpose. Then Daphne saw something that sent a little shiver down her spine.

As Jumpsuit Guy reached into his back pocket for his money, his sleeve pushed up and Daphne saw a tattoo on the inside of the man's right wrist. It was a lion head, its mouth frozen in a snarling roar. There was a black skull within the lion's open mouth. Daphne recognized the tattoo. It meant he was part of the León de la Mafia and the skull meant that he had been in prison. León de la Mafia was a Mexican gang that operated within the county, and was heavy into the drug trade. Daphne had bailed out other members before, but this man was unknown to her. She took a deep breath and tried to think it through. There was a gang member buying cleaning supplies. There was no crime there. He even had a jumpsuit, which probably meant he worked in a garage. It was honest work; there was a good chance he was just trying to turn his life around.

He paid cash for the cleaning supplies, gathered an armful, not waiting for Wyatt to put all of the items into a plastic bag and started walking towards the door. Wyatt held up a bottle that he had forgotten and was about to yell to the man when Daphne snatched it from his hand and smiled. She shrugged off her green jacket and tossed it with her battery cable on the counter and jogged after the Jumpsuit Guy.

"Hey, uh, excuse me. You forgot this." Jumpsuit Guy turned around and gave Daphne a suspicious gaze. His eyes tracked from her face to her chest to her legs and back again. Daphne ignored his leer, smiled and held out the bottle.

"Oh, you can put it here." He motioned with his chin to place the bottle on top of the pile in his arms.

"No, looks like you have your arms full," Daphne gave a short flirty laugh. "Maybe I can take a few of these and help you to your car?" Daphne didn't wait for Jumpsuit Guy to respond; she grabbed an aerosol can, a plastic tub, and whirled by the man to exit the building first.

Daphne walked with her hips swaying in such a way that it was impossible for anyone inside the store to look away, hoping to relax Jumpsuit Guy's guard. She walked into the parking lot and looked around. There was her car, a small truck with Auto-topia stenciled on the side and a dirty white van. She turned to look at him, and saw his eyes go from her

backside to the white van. He looked at Daphne again, grinned, and nudged his head to the van. She smiled back at him and continued towards the white van.

Daphne waited for him to juggle the cleaning supplies in his arms and pull out the keys to the van. She noticed they had a plastic tag on them, denoting the van as a rental. She helped him put the cleaning materials in the back and looked to see what else was back there. She expected to see car parts, tools and maybe more cleaning supplies. Some mechanics would rent a truck or van if they had a demanding client or a large job. The back of the van was nearly empty. There was a clean rubber mat on the floor, and stacked on top was a blow torch, large bags of cheap shop rags, a pair of bolt cutters with the price tag still on them, batteries and coils of wire. These didn't seem too out of place, but then Daphne spotted a large tub of used cooking grease.

"So, where do you work?" Daphne put on her best cutesy-face and leaned in towards the man, her hands in her back pockets.

"At O'Mally's on 23rd and Boston. It's a garage that specializes in foreign and domestic cars. We're open Mon-Fri and weekends." The words spilled out of his mouth in the same fashion as young kids that had memorized a speech for a play, or were reciting math figures. His eyes scanned the sky, and

Daphne noticed minute head bobs as he spoke. It was this action that prompted Daphne to really take notice of how old Jumpsuit Guy was. He was younger than she had thought, maybe 21 or 22. His head was shaved and he had a thin build.

"Oh wow, so you, like, fix cars?"

"Yeah."

"Oh cool. What's your name?"

"Raymundo."

"Hey Raymundo, my name's Judy. Judy Nash." Daphne put her hand out to shake his. He took her hand and shook, his grip was soft and unsure but his eyes watched her like a predator. Maybe she was laying it on too thick. "Well, I have to go Ray. See you later. Fix those cars real good!" He didn't say anything, just watched her turn and walk back towards the store.

Daphne walked back into the store and up to the counter. Wyatt was rubbing a non-existent stain on the counter and didn't look up when she stood in front of him.

"One of your clients?"

"Ha-ha Wyatt. No, he isn't. Suspicious though. Has he ever been in here before?" Daphne picked up her jacket where she had tossed it and put it back on.

"Nope."

"Every see anyone buy that much engine cleaner before?"

"Nope."

"Want to check me out of here as fast as you can so I can follow him?"

"Nope." Wyatt looked up Daphne, grinning. He held out a bag with her battery wire in it. "I know you're good for it. Go get him."

Daphne grabbed the bag and thanked him. She jogged towards the door and watched the dirty white van pull out of the parking lot through the door's window. She tried to see the license plate, but there was a placard for the rental company instead of a plate. She swore, and banged the door on its frame on her way out.



#### IV: O'Mally's

Daphne ran a red light. She was trying her best to follow the dirty white van, but traffic was working against her. She shifted into second gear and pulled out her cell phone. She clicked a button and spoke aloud.

"Call Jake Gallagher." She listened to the speaker ring. Jake was an old friend of Daphne's; she had helped him and his motorcycle club, the Flaming Skulls, with bails and bonds and they helped back with information and backup. They were also responsible for the bright orange paint job of her Camero, a payment for a mutually beneficial job that had forged their friendship. The phone rang four more times before a box of shaken gravel spoke.

"Yeah?"

"Hey Jake, it's Daphne."

"Oh hey Daph, how's it-" he coughed into the phone and hacked up something, "going?"

"Fine Jake, listen, I need a little info on a garage."

23rd and Boston, named O'Mally's. You heard of it?"

"Garage huh? 23rd and- hmmm." His voice trailed off. Daphne drove and waited for his response. Jake knew the locals, the old-timers and all manner of people that Daphne didn't have access to because of age, gender or location. He was a good friend to have, and more often than not, Daphne considered him family.

"No, no, that place closed down. They did foreign jobs, but Mick, the guy who owned it, fell and broke his leg. They've been closed for a few weeks now."

"How long has the shop been there?"

"Hell, Mick is damn near as old as I am, and he opened the place."

"You know if they were hiring before the place shut down?"

"Mick? Hire? Fuck no. He worked with the same three old bastards that he opened the place with; two of them his brothers, the other a cousin of some sort. All of them part of the O'Mally family."

"Any idea why a León would say he worked there?"

"A Lion? No, no idea." There was a scraping noise and Daphne heard Jake call out to someone. "Hey, hey Juarez! Juarez! Yeah, how'd Old Man Mick break his leg? What? What?! Come over here I can't-" His voice trailed away and Daphne

again waited. She could see the white van half a block up, and it was heading for Boston Ave. She changed lanes, and seconds later, the van did as well.

"Daphne, you still there?"

"Yeah, what do you have for me?"

"Robbery."

"What?"

"Robbery. That's how Mick broke his leg. At least, that's what he's telling people."

"Do you think a León strong armed him into selling his place?"

"Could be. I haven't heard anything like that from my contact in the León, but you never know. What's this all about?"

"I was in Auto-topia, buying a new battery cable, someone cut mine-"

"What? Who-"

"I don't know, some kid on a bike, anyway, this guy who's got a León tattoo buys a bunch of supplies and says he works at O'Mally's, but doesn't know what the cleaners- shit!"

The car in front of Daphne slammed on its brakes at a yellow light and in turn, Daphne had to slam hers on.

"Goddamn-mother-fucking-piece-of-shit! Go! GO!" The car didn't listen to her cries, and the lane beside her was

already stacked with other commuters. She was stuck, and the white van drove on, turning right at Boston Avenue.

"Shit Jake, I lost him. I think he's heading for the shop."

"You need backup? I can send a few boys to watch your back."

"No Jake, it's okay, I don't think this is going to be anything but a wild goose chase. Thanks for the info."

"Stay safe Daph. You call me if you need anything."

"Yep." Daphne clicked the button to disconnect her phone and reached back to scratch Awes' chin. A León working at an Irish auto-shop. The new Hispanic and old Irish didn't mix, not in this city, and not anywhere else that Daphne knew about. This was either a whole lot of trouble, or a whole lot of nothing. Daphne waited for the green light, shifted, and drove on.

\* \* \*

Daphne parked across the street from O'Mally's. The building was on the corner of Boston Avenue and 23rd Street. Anything south of Phoenix Avenue west of 19th was considered the wrong side of the tracks; Daphne found herself roaming that part of town looking for the clients who thought

themselves tougher and more clever than her. While that particular part of town was dangerous, to those not in the know, Daphne was considered part of the danger.

O'Mally's was a white building, with green trim. There was a thick steel sign pole on the corner near the cracked sidewalk with a sign on top, a large three leaf clover with the O'Mally's logo emblazoned across it. The sign was built to rotate, but hadn't turned in years. Most of the neon tubing on the sign was broken, and the logo was streaked with rust. The sign had broken twenty years back, and the owner, Mick O'Mally, hadn't thought it prudent to repair the sign; while the truth, he was too old to climb up there and fix it himself and too proud to hire someone else.

The building had a small parking lot in front, with two large green garage doors padlocked to the left of a regular door marked ENTRANCE. The white rental van was nowhere to be seen. Daphne waited across the street in her car, the new battery cable twirling in her hands. Where was the van? Daphne supposed that she could have been wrong and the van wasn't headed here. Maybe Raymundo just lived nearby. It could be that he worked for whoever bought the shop from O'Mally. It could be that old man Mick thought better of running a shop on the bad side of town and he and his brothers decided they should sell. It could be that-

The explosion rocked the Camaro on its suspension. A large fireball rocketed into the sky above O'Mally's, and pieces of roof top rained down onto the street. Awes whined and jumped into the front seat, nuzzling his head into Daphne's side, something he hadn't done since he was a pup.

A second explosion followed the first, this one blowing out one of the garage doors in a shower of smoke and twisted metal. A chunk the size of a college textbook slammed into Daphne's driver side door, causing a loud bang and shaking the car once more. Awes cried out and buried his head in Daphne's lap.

All of this happened in a matter of five seconds and Daphne sat dazed, petting Awes and watching the thick black smoke billow out of the building. She shook her head and grabbed at the phone that she hadn't remembered dropping onto the floor of the car. After three tries she finally grasped it, her eyes not leaving the smoldering wreck of a building. She dialed 911 and spoke to the operator.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"There was an explosion at the corner of Boston Avenue and 23rd Street. The building is on fire."

"Mam, are you hurt?"

"No, no, my car was hit with some debris--"

"How close are you to the building?"

"I'm across the street, I-"

"Mam, is it safe for you to drive away from the building?"

"Yeah, I think I-"

As Daphne answered the questions, she saw a white blur behind the black smoke that the wind was causing to blow across the road. The van. She had only seen it for a second, but she was sure of it.

"I have to go." Daphne hung up the phone and ignored the ring as the emergency services tried to call her back. She ordered Awes into the back seat, pulled her jacket up over her head to protect it from falling debris, and shoved her car door open. It was reluctant, but gave way on the second push. Daphne jumped out and peered in front and back of her car to see if there was any damage to her tires. She kicked some smouldering pieces of wood from the front of the car, hopped back in, roared the engine to life and tore after the white streak that she hoped wasn't a figment of her imagination.

Her car blasted through a plume of black smoke and she saw a white van turn the corner. She gunned the throttle, her car revving up to an RPM that any gear-head would drool over. She power-shifted her car, the tires squelching at every gear shift. She down-shifted and turned the wheel in the direction the white van had turned. The rear tires lost their grip and

the car slipped around the curve; she was getting closer. The van had taken the turn driving fast, but was now braking as it was going down residential streets. Daphne had to slam on her brakes to avoid rear-ending the van. She honked her horn and flashed her high-beams, trying to get the attention of who she hoped was Raymundo.

The van slowed and pulled over. Daphne leaned forward, reached behind her and pulled free one of her .45s. She tucked it into the crease of the passenger seat, so it wouldn't slide around if she had to give chase, and left it easy to grab if she needed it. In the same smooth motion that she used to tuck the gun into the seat cushion, she reached over and cranked down the window.

The van slowed to a stop and Daphne didn't know what she should say. Should she accuse the man of blowing up the building? Did he do something on accident and just didn't want to get fired? Was this even Raymundo? Maybe she should just stay back and pick up her ringing phone, answering the 911 operators questions. Then she saw the familiar rental placards in place of the license plates and knew what to do.

Daphne pushed the distracting thoughts aside and, as she often did, acted on instinct. She rolled her car forward and leaned down to look out of the passenger window at the driver of the van. His face was sweaty and nervous. He looked at her



and she looked at him. It was Raymundo. His eyes brightened with recognition, then fear. The van tires popped out a small squeal as he mashed his foot on the gas pedal. Daphne grinned and mashed her own foot down. If it was a chase he wanted, it was a chase he'd get.