

Crossfire

by James Lynn Smith

Paramedic Frank Dern knew he looked sharp in his dark blue uniform. The young reporter facing him was gathering information concerning the emergency services' newly established rapid response vehicles.

“You’re both driver and a paramedic, Mr. Dern?” she asked, moving her microphone toward him.

“Call me Frank. Yes, it’s part of a new protocol. One person per EMS vehicle. More like an SUV than an ambulance with a stretcher. A number of counties are adopting this system. Ambulances are often detained in one place or transporting a patient between hospitals. To get care to a victim as fast as possible, a first respondent paramedic rushes to the venue and begins aid before the ambulance arrives.”

She moved the microphone back to her lips and eyed the video camera before speaking. “I understand the police chief was in support of this innovation. Why was that?”

Frank paused for effect, but easily remembered the information he had rehearsed. “A rash of illegal, medical suites were popping up in the city. They weren’t obvious, being located in the back rooms of legitimate businesses. Collaboration between the two entities was likely assured through bribery, threats of libel, and physical intimidation. Often, the suites were mob-sponsored, other times the business owners were the entrepreneurs, financing an illegal, but lucrative expansion to their income stream. Services dealt with patient needs where secrecy was necessary, ranging from private abortions and gunshot wounds to

plastic surgery for fugitives. Inept surgery and improper use of anesthetics led to occasional emergency calls for assistance.”

“How could they do that without giving away their illegal activity?”

“To avoid exposure and arrests, patients were ferried in a circuitous route to and from the bogus clinic while blindfolded. If something went wrong, the patient was whisked from the clinic to a room at another location where the call was made for help. Only the patient would be there when help arrived. For this reason, special permissions were obtained to allow local paramedics to carry medications used in hospital surgery, such as the neuromuscular block vecuronium and its antidote neostigmine, also sedatives nembutol and its antidote picrotoxin.”

Aware of audience expectation for a reaction, she smiled for the camera.

“That is a mouthful. How many drugs do you carry?”

“Normally around 35. If we know in advance of a potential need, we can add drugs more specific to the situation. But it’s not just drugs, there are also splints, bandages, stethoscope, intubation gear, aneroid sphygmomanometer, etc.”

“What was that last thing?”

“A device for blood pressure measurement.”

“Oh, yes.” She turned to the camera. “Thank you, Mr. Dern. And to all of you watching, back to the Channel 5 newsroom.”

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Frank was about to enter the EMS substation when he heard the loud alert tone.

His supervisor met him at the door. “This one’s for you Frank,” he said. “The dispatcher’s patched into your unit with the address.”

Frank hastened toward the vehicle, entered, punched the receiver, and said, “Frank Dern, Unit Four Paramedic. What do you have for me?”

As the dispatcher gave the location, Frank entered it into his GPS, started the

engine, and stared at the display. When the map appeared he stomped the accelerator, tires squealing as he approached the lot exit. Upon turning onto a westward street, he set the siren for the traditional wail. “Okay, any particulars on this one?” he said to the receiver.

“Bystander said he was about a block from Citizens’ Bank when a white male on the sidewalk approached him. The man suddenly collapsed.”

“Bystander didn’t see a bottle or anything. Any blood?”

“Neither, but said he had on soft, casual clothes, no belt, like he had just come from an ambulatory care center. You’ll have to investigate onsite.”

“If he’s just come from one of those illegal med suites in that area of town, he’s lucky to have been walking as long as he did. I’ve got the coordinates and I’m on it.”

Frank mostly maintained the EMS siren, only employing the woo-woo variant at intersections and slow traffic. Soon he reached the older part of the city and examined the GPS display more often, despite its vocal instructions. He slowed as his vehicle approached the cited location. “Here’s the spot. But where is—?” Switching off the alarm, he drove slightly farther, turned around, and went back. Still no victim. *I know this is the spot the dispatcher described. Better call back and check.*

After confirming he had gone to the correct place, he drove back past the Citizens’ Bank, parked, and stopped to think. Maybe the man recovered by himself and left the scene. Or, someone brought him inside their establishment to revive him. But why wasn’t anybody outside to flag the EMS down? He called his supervisor to stop the ambulance from an unnecessary trip to the same place.

“I’ll cancel that transport,” the supervisor said. “Just do one thing for me. Are police there yet?”

“No, they’re not”

“Hmm, despite protocol, I want you to walk toward the place where he was supposed to be. Look for blood, an article of clothing, or anything that might indicate he was there. We don’t want any accusations that we didn’t respond.”

“Will do,” Frank said.

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On the sidewalk, Frank looked toward the specified location. He tried to estimate how far down he should walk before needing to scrutinize. *That lamp pole looks about right. It’s in front of a bar. I could ask them if—*

Loud sirens and screeching tires broke the silence. Two police cars approached, making abrupt stops about 200 feet in front of him. Several officers jumped out of the cars as loud pops rang out behind him, near the bank. Whirling around, he saw five individuals run out of the bank, carrying bags and firing pistols in his direction. When the police drew their weapons, discharging them toward the running figures, Frank realized he was in the crossfire. Across the street, pointed in the opposite direction from the police, was a dark van with open doors in the back. Using all the power he could summon, he sprinted across the street, thinking only of shelter from the hail of bullets. Leaping into the rear of the van, he hunkered down, hoping no armor-piercing projectile would tear through.

Gunfire grew louder. Bags hurled into the van confused him, even more so the black-masked figures jumping in behind them.

“Get the hell outta here, Gus,” one of them said. The van driver stomped the accelerator.

Frank’s eyes opened wide. *I’m in the damned getaway vehicle!* Through the back, Frank saw police cars following. With the distracting pursuit and difficulty of closing the van’s back doors as it swerved and bumped over curbs, the robbers seemed not to realize he was there and began removing their masks.

“Friggin’ ski masks are hot, right?” one said to another. When his eyes

randomly passed over Frank he did a double take. “Jeez, who the hell are you?” Louder, “Guys, we’ve got an unwanted passenger.” He frowned and thrust his gun in Frank’s face. “You sit tight, bub. Any smart moves and this lead spitter makes a nasty hole through your bean.”

“Look,” a woman said. “He’s wearing a paramedic’s uniform. What are you doing in here, man?”

Frank swallowed, feeling like the fly in a web. “I was on a medical call when you and the police started shooting. Caught in the crossfire I, jumped in this van for shelter. Thought it was a delivery van.”

“Our getaway vehicle?” she asked. “Man, you made the biggest blooper of the season. What are we going to do with him, Jack? He’s seen our faces.”

The man who threatened Frank answered, “We’ll figure that out later, but now we’ve got to ditch the cops. Sure the wheelman you got us is up to snuff?”

“The best,” she answered and sat without further comment while the chase’s twists and turns almost hurled everyone from their seat. She appeared to be silently counting, as though marking progress in their escape.

Later she said, “Hang on, I think here’s where he takes a more challenging route.”

A jolt against the suspension system, followed by undulations and the sound of brush against the van indicated they were off-road. After much swaying and bumping, the van eventually stopped. The back doors opened and the riders spilled out onto dusty ground.

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“I knew he could do it,” the woman said. “This dirt road is practically invisible to anyone chasing down the highway. That hill beside the road where it curves hides the turnoff. Look at this place. Perfect.”

Frank saw a small, rural house with a maroon car in the yard. One of several

abandoned places to lay low, he assumed.

The woman sighed. “Okay, let’s get the bags into the house. Jack, keep your gun on this guy ‘til we get him tied to a chair inside.”

“The medic’s not exactly welcome company, Grace. I’d like to pop him right now. He’s trouble.”

“Remember our plan? Luckily, we didn’t kill anybody in the bank. We don’t want that on us if we get caught. There has to be a better way to make sure he never talks.”

Frank wondered if this was a reason for hope. At least their caution might buy him more time. *Could Grace be an ally or is she the cold, calculating mastermind?*

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After he was taken into the house and tied to a chair, Grace looked at him. “Is the vehicle key in your pocket?”

Frank’s brow furrowed. “I think I left it in the ignition. Wasn’t intending to be out for long.”

She glanced at Jack. “Check his pockets. If no key, you and Gus take the maroon car and bring the EMS vehicle back. Your pants are dark blue, like the paramedic’s. But you need to put on his uniform shirt and get his ID. Try to get to the vehicle before the EMS sends someone for it. Cops may be swarming the place, so be prepared to bullshit why you’re there.” Her volume dropped. “And something else...” She motioned to Jack and the others to go outside with her, presumably where Frank couldn’t overhear.

All he could pick up was murmuring, but they were likely discussing how to dispose of him. Eventually, they came back inside and Jack checked Frank’s pockets and took his ID. Then he went through the ordeal of untying Frank, taking his shirt, and retying him. He looked at Grace and shook his head. “No key. Like

he said, may be in the ignition.”

“Okay, she said, “Go for the vehicle. Look like you belong there, a flash of ID may not be necessary.”

After Jack and Gus left, Grace said to the others, “Nobody except the medic has seen our faces or suspects us of being robbers, but being stopped with bags of money would be a dead giveaway.” She motioned toward the back rooms. “You guys rip up the floorboards and hide the bags underneath. Put a rug over that spot. We may need to abandon this house and come back later.”

Frank ventured a question, in hope of finding some solution to his dilemma. “Not that it matters, but you look a bit familiar.”

“Oh? It’s likely. I’ve been around medical establishments off and on for years.”

“Nurse, or…”

She faced him with fire in her eyes and blurted, “Gimme a break, yes. If I were a doctor, you think I would rob banks? I’ve been on the low end of the pay scale long enough. No more. Even a little clandestine action in back rooms didn’t earn me much.”

“So you assisted in surgeries—or did them yourself?”

She placed her hands on her hips and stood with a defiant posture. “You ask too many questions. Trying to butter me up?”

For the first time, Frank noticed she was svelte, blonde, and had a face that would have been pretty if not reflecting the hardness of her lifestyle. There was no positive feeling in his observation, but he gained an inkling. *She’s probably in the illegal medical business but found it not so lucrative.* “Grace, maybe there’s something we can work out to—”

“And what would that be, medic? You’ll promise you won’t tell? Forget it, you’re a pain in the ass. I had it all planned, and then you get in the middle. It’s

your own fault you're in this situation.”

“But I wouldn't tell the police if they thought I were in on the robbery. I'd rather seem guilty alive than innocent dead.”

Her face brightened slightly with the hint of a crooked smile. “We should frame you as a robber for our assurance you won't talk? A thought, but just keep it to yourself.”

A possible deal? He struggled to relieve pressure from his bindings. Or words to pacify me while planning my fatality?

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The sound of automotive engines outside was almost a relief. Frank's pulse was pounding. Waiting for death was worse than being hustled toward it.

Grace walked outside, presumably to see the EMS vehicle.

Why does she want to do that? He heard loud voices, but they were unintelligible. Discussing my proposal?

A few minutes passed and Jack came through the front door. “Okay, bub, let's get you up,” he said. Though Frank's hands were still bound, Jack cut him loose from the chair and jerked him to his feet. “Okay, walk outside.”

Frank was dizzy and his walk unsteady. He stumbled forward from Jack's sudden shove against his back. *God, here I am, agreeably shuffling off to my death.* Gradually some strength was returning after the long confinement to the chair. *There's no deal. It's curtains for me.* He took a deep breath. *But not without a fight.*

He swirled around and struck Jack in the side of his jaw with both his bound hands. The robber staggered back but quickly recovered and came at him with a pistol, striking the butt hard against his head. Frank saw flickering spots and then blackness.

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A slow expansion of tunnel vision was his first sensation. Then an ache in his head. Something was wrong. His movements were sluggish and difficult. As his vision improved, he recognized the console of his EMS vehicle as seen from behind the steering wheel. The vehicle was moving toward the end of a pier. His hands were loosely draped over the bottom arc of the steering wheel.

Then memory and realization flooded in. He was again dressed in his uniform shirt and the robbers were pushing him towards a watery death. They intended that it appear as an accident, in case the vehicle were found. *Grace's way to foil murder charges, if ever caught.* Through the windows, he saw men on both sides pushing the vehicle. It was in neutral, but he could stop progress by shifting to park. In trying, he found his arms and hands were too weak. *Paralysis. They raided my EMS pack.* Knowing he should be completely paralyzed on vecuronium, he assumed the inexperienced hands doing a rush job with the hypodermic had partly missed the arm vein, making it less effective. *Grace must have located the drug and given orders.* Frank guessed her goons wouldn't know one drug from the other. The problem was in being weak, if not totally paralyzed. The moment the vehicle hit water, he would have only a minute or so before sinking.

He remembered that tests had shown water pressure makes kicking out the windshield almost impossible even with fully functional legs. To get out, water had to be admitted into the vehicle. And it had to enter before the vehicle sank to window level because, any lower, outside water pressure caused the window structure to push so hard against its guide frame that friction kept it from lowering. Neither electric windows nor a manual roll type handle would overcome this. Even with a little air inside, doors couldn't be opened because, in sinking, water pressure outside is still greater than that inside until the vehicle hits bottom and equalizes. By then the passenger could have drowned.

The driver's door opened with a yank and Jack reached in across Frank's

legs, starting the engine and placing the gear in drive. “So long, bub. Sorry you’re having this ‘accident.’”

Efforts to push Jack away and tumble out the door were futile. Frank felt himself being pushed back, heard locks clicks, and the door slam. Though the engine was idling, it still carried the EMS unit forward toward the pier’s end.

He felt doomed, but his raw, survival instinct was to struggle. *With what? I can hardly move.* He had presence of mind to push hard on the seat belt release, barely getting it off with weakened arms and fingers. Something he should remember kept trying to break through, but it had to be soon because the pier’s end was steadily approaching. *Oh, the kit with drugs. Is it here?* He slowly turned and saw it. *Must have the antidote before—*

The vehicle made a sudden downward pitch and rushed toward the water. Upon impact Frank fell forward against the steering wheel. The vehicle rocked violently, then leveled as water began rushing in, covering the floor and rising. The jump kit was now farther away but it floated near the passenger seat. It took two sluggish tries before he had it his hands. With water around his knees, he fumbled the kit open. Then he remembered, there were two kits. *Does this one contain the neostigmine and hypo?* Eventually he located them, but with hands enervated and numb, he had trouble getting the antidote into the hypo. It was only half full but, water now to his waist, time was limited. He twisted and leaned his left shoulder against the seat back, pinning his arm to restrict blood return until the vein in his arm bulged. Jabbing with his right hand the best he could, he prayed that most entered his bloodstream. The rest, injected into soft tissue would get into his system much slower.

Water now to his waist, he knew chances of getting out in a weakened state were slight. *Anything I can use to break out?* Splints were not rigid or hefty enough to crack glass. The tire tools were inaccessible. There was a sharp pointed tool

called a life hammer for breaking glass. But he had researched another tactical auto rescue tool. Foldable like a large jackknife, it had a serrated blade and a spring loaded, window punch for initiating glass breakage.

Water reaching his chest, Frank rummaged through his jump kit, looking for the tool but he had to find it by feel. That was a problem, for his hands could hardly discern any object. He sought for the most remote pocket since the tool was not standard for the kit. The barest sensation of feeling some object enabled him to bring it out. Luckily, it was the rescue tool. Exerting several pounds of pressure against the window, the punch would release and, driven by the spring, crack the tempered glass. But even that much applied pressure was a problem for Frank. With water now up to his neck, he took a deep breath and held the device with both hands atop his head, repositioning horizontally over both front seats with his feet against the passenger side door. Letting the top of his head be a support for weak hands and arms, he pressed the tool against the driver's window as he straightened his legs.

Thwack! The punch tip shot against the window and it imploded, shards of glass flying in with more water. He maneuvered through the window like a behemoth and began an ascent toward the water's surface, hoping he could hold his breath long enough.

Frank surfaced under the pier's edge. He grasped a piling, noting his hands almost felt the adhering mollusks. Strength was returning as numbness waned, perhaps the only thing that made the complex efforts of his escape possible. Waiting in the water until he mostly recovered, he dog-paddled to a dock ladder and wearily climbed upward. When high enough to peek over the pier, he saw that the robbers were gone, probably sure he had perished and impatient to leave the intended murder scene.

Frank looked at the setting sun, noted the direction of the city's skyline, and guessed his whereabouts. Walking, he eventually reached a place with a phone and reported what happened to his supervisor. Next, he called for a taxi.

On the cab ride home, he realized what a close scrape he'd had, forever grateful that his wife, Jane, and adopted daughter would not lose him or his support. After learning of his wife's inability to have children, they agreed to adopt Lucy, making their little family a source of joy and hope. Being in a profession of helping others, it never occurred to Frank that he could be the victim of something so horrendous. The thoughts of what impact it would have on Jane and Lucy filled him with anticipatory dread. His insurance and retirement plan with his employer had seemed of secondary consideration—until now. Again, he thought of Lucy, now nine years old. Dark, curly hair, and perfect, except for a small L-shaped birthmark on the side of her neck. It, in fact, helped them choose her name.

Sudden alarm crossed his mind. When speaking to his supervisor, he forgot to request that his survival be kept secret. "Driver, take me to the EMS station on 202 Nile Street instead of my home address," he ordered.

Arriving at the station, it was too late. News was already out and police wanted to question him.

"So what's your concern, Frank," the supervisor asked. "The police only want to question you downtown. They could show you mug shots or whatever."

"That's not what bothers me. It's the news media. If the public knows I survived, so will the robbers. As a witness, I might as well have a target on my back."

"Oh crap, nobody mentioned that. Sorry, man...but the robbers are not going to follow all the EMS vehicles around." He gave Frank a good-ole-boy pat on the shoulder. "Plus, cops will be going to the same emergencies. More than likely, the robbers are hiding or already in some other state. You can bury all this excess

concern.”

I'd rather bury my fist to the elbow in your big gut. Frank turned toward his desk. “I’ll be late getting home tonight. Since I’m here, I’ll put on dry clothes, call home, and then drive my car to the police station.”

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“So you recognize only two guys from the photos?” the detective asked.

“Yeah, the woman they called Grace is not in here,” Frank answered. “Must have talent keeping a clean slate. From what I overheard, she’s careful to minimize killing and anxious to cover it up when necessary.”

“That’s not the case with the fellow she called Jack,” The detective said. “John C. Martin is wanted for two murders and has been the muscle in gangs going back two decades. And Gus-the-Gas, as he is known, is suspected as being the ‘wheel’ for three getaways. He was imprisoned for participation in a robbery 15 years ago, out on probation now.”

The detective took a breath. “Enough on *who*, let’s get to *where*. Describe the way they may have driven to this little house you mentioned. How did it look and what was the model and approximate age of the maroon car?”

Frank did his best in describing his experience and what he saw and overheard. Two hours later, he was released with the suggestion to stay in touch. He was assured that a patrol car would pass by his house several times daily and be present when Lucy got out of the school bus. It gave him little consolation. In the restroom, he cleaned dried blood from his face and used makeup borrowed from a female officer to minimize the bruises.

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Upon arriving home, Jane met him at the door and wrapped her arms around him.

He held her tight longer than usual. *You and Lucy are my reason for living.*

“You were late tonight. Was there a mass emergency?”

Good, she’s been too busy to hear. Without explaining it the right way she could get upset. I’ll wait. “A bit of interdepartmental coordination in addition to the usual. Is Lucy asleep?”

“For two hours.”

Stepping lightly to her room, he opened the door barely enough to see in. He felt both pride and amazement at the joy she had brought them. Snuggled into the soft pillows, she appeared to be a diminutive sleeping beauty.

Later that night, after Jane drifted off, Frank lay awake, contemplating not only how he would explain what happened, but how to keep Jane from being distressed about the future implications. Before falling asleep, he decided he would mention but minimize those concerns and discuss caution as a routine safety procedure.

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The next morning, Frank talked to Jane about what happened, and, after assuring her the police were taking measures for their safety, drove to work.

Two calls sent Frank in an ambulance to accidents with an emergency medical technician as driver. He would not be a lone first responder again until someone made arrangements for a replacement EMS vehicle. That afternoon, he received a call from the police detective.

“Have you had any memories pop up that might help our case?” the detective asked.

“I’ve been preoccupied with how to explain this to my family. What can you tell *me* that might help?”

“Only certain facts of the case. Police located and raided the rural house you described but no one was there. They found bags of money underneath the floorboards. All but one bag from the bank were accounted for. We figure your

Miss Grace must have separated her share from the rest, maybe buried or hid it on the grounds somewhere. Keep this quiet. We haven't released this to the press. We may be able to use it somehow."

"Okay, but why do you suspect her?"

"From what you told us, she must have been familiar with that property and was the leader of the bunch. Likely, only she would have planned to separate money from the stash early on and know a place to put it. She probably executed her plan when the guys were taking you to the pier."

"That means she has motivation to hang around this area."

"Yes, so watch your back. Stay inside the ambulance until police arrive at any emergency you respond to. Away from work, keep in crowded areas."

"Not that I would want that complication, but have you considered official witness protection."

The detective paused. "It's a gray area. We're doing that, in a way, but new identities and moving your family to another town is for federal cases or those involving big organized crime. And there isn't any type budget for it in medium sized towns like ours."

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Two weeks later, little change had occurred in Frank's activities except a replacement SUV for his EMS vehicle, making him again a first responder paramedic. Several times he took the call concerning a traffic accident and the police arrived at about the same time, followed by the ambulance. He would impatiently wait for police to arrive before rushing to the victim, as requested. But, so far, those waits had been short and noncritical.

Tuesday morning, he was assigned to a traffic mishap on Nile Street, close to his EMS station. Driving off, he told the dispatcher, "This one's close by. Hope the police unit called is not far away, because I'll be the first one there."

Reaching the cited intersection, he saw nothing of concern. A little farther up the road, however, he noted the rear of a stopped car with doors open and what appeared to be a body in the road behind it. Pulling within fifty feet of the scene, he stopped and peered at the form lying on the street. No movement, but it appeared to be a man or woman in a dark pant suit. A sizeable pool of blood was spreading from underneath the person, making Frank's pulse race. *Wait for police? Not this time. Victim could be dead within seconds.* Grabbing his jump kit, he rushed to the body of a woman with a skull cap pulled over her blonde hair. He knelt to check airway and breathing before searching for a bleeding wound when he felt something jab his belly.

“Back off, medic, or you’ll get a .38 round through your gut.” She drew her leg up and thrust her foot against him, knocking him onto his back. Grace sprang upward, tossing aside a near empty squeeze-bottle of something red. “Quick, get back in the EMS vehicle. You’re taking me somewhere.”

Frank staggered toward the SUV. “Grace, if you kill me, police will know it was you.”

“Not likely and Grace is not my real name. Shut up and get behind the wheel.” She entered the passenger side, still holding the gun at his head as he settled behind the wheel. “Now drive back in the opposite direction. Don’t pay any attention to the dispatcher jabber. We put an obstruction on the Nile Street Bridge closer to town back there. Cops will be detained while we rejoin my group.”

Frank could feel her hard determination, thankful he had not been shot on the road, but wondered what she wanted.

“In case you’re trying to figure why you’re still alive, it’s because I want information. And you’re our hostage in case the cops were to surround us. So you’re simply a convenience, one I can do without. Copy that?”

“I get it.” A pang of emotion gripped him at the thought of not seeing Jane

and Lucy again or being able to protect them. Fighting hard against the ache behind his wet eyes, he realized it was time to plan for death. Somehow, he had to hide ID and personal information like his photos, home address, and phone number. *Maybe I can fish my wallet out and stuff it under the seat.*

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He was duct-taped to a chair, this time in a different, abandoned house the gang used as a hideaway. She stood before him with Jack and Gus behind. “Okay, What did you tell the police?”

“I can say little beyond what was told to the news.”

“Not cooperative. Jack, give him a little sample of what lying gets him.”

There was nothing little about what Jack unleashed on Frank. Afterwards, his eye was swollen, nose bloody, and lip torn where impacted from Jack’s pounding.

“Okay medic. Speak.”

After spitting blood to clear his mouth, he said, “The police found the rural house where you took me. They found the stash under the floor boards.” *I’ll omit the missing bag she probably took.* “They didn’t have a photo match to you in the mug shot database, but did for Jack and Gus.” He paused.

“Don’t stop. Who else have you talked to about us?”

Time to go quiet. Even with the inevitable beating. Frank sat still, breathing with anticipation of the heavy paw shattering his facial bones.

“Don’t want to say more, huh?” Grace grinned. “I got news for you. I found the personal ID stuff you tried to hide under the seat. Cute wife and—oh—a darling little girl. Bet you wouldn’t want anything to happen to her.”

“You leave her out of this,” Frank yelled. “If you have any decency whatsoever, I beg you to leave my perfectly innocent child alone.”

“Perfectly?” she taunted. No one’s perfect. They thought I was ‘perfect,’ but

did that keep me out of the misery of a half dozen foster homes? No, I was beaten as disobedient for pulling away from foster pop's greasy hands when he wanted the excitement of a little 'feel.' Also disobedient when trying to tell what was happening to me and other foster children."

She's doing an emotional dump. Maybe I can reach a human in there somewhere. "They should have listened. The system has some flaws."

"Some flaws—You gotta be kidding. Sam, Gus take a hike. Before we get rid of him, I'm going to give this medic a reality check." After they left, she continued. "So tell me about this perfect child of yours. I don't buy it. Say that again and I'll gag you so you can only breathe through your bloody nose. Tell me one way she's not perfect. There's got to be something."

This is getting personal—and irrational. "It's no big deal, but she has an L-shaped birthmark on her neck."

"No big— Wait...what did you say?" Her brow furrowed as she flipped through the photos and stopped at one. "How old is this kid?"

"She's nine."

Grace looked puzzled, then agitated as she rubbed her fingers through her hair roughly. "Nine years old with an L-shaped birthmark." She plopped into a chair and went silent, except for inaudible muttering.

Frank watched her as inconspicuously as possible. *She's reminded of some traumatic episode?*

Finally, Grace looked at Frank with teary eyes. "I'm a hard woman to cross. Not much gets to me. But I've always known I might need a plan B. What do you call this child?"

"Lucy."

She looked at the photo again. "Nice...I'm Lucy's biological mother."

Frank gasped as his eyebrows lifted. "How could that be? What happened?"

“After the foster home fiascos, I connected with a motley string of ‘lovers’ who amounted to losers. I’d almost given up on guys when I met my late fiancé, at the time studying to be a lawyer. Thomas helped me to enroll in classes and become a nurse. But I had acquired a habit earlier in life and was dismissed for snitching a few drugs. He had to support me on a single income plus whatever odd jobs I could find. Then he died from some undiagnosed heart condition. My world of high hopes crashed and it was back to hard knocks. Though I’m tough enough to take it, I soon discovered I was pregnant. Couldn’t see any way to care for a baby and live the life that awaited me. Neither would I want the kid of the best human I’ve ever met to live like me. Nearly ten years ago, I made the decision to carry the baby full term and give her up for adoption, anonymously. When she was born, I only saw her long enough to note the L-shaped birthmark and see how perfect she was. Cried for a month, but I’d made my decision and I’ve lived by it.”

Frank hesitated, letting the story sink in. “We love Lucy very much, be assured of that.”

“It’s time for plan B. I’ve almost used it a couple of times already.” She took a knife and cut the tape holding him to the chair. “Press your hanky to your face to stop the blood. We’re going to sneak out the back door to the EMS vehicle. You slip into the driver’s seat.” She picked up her .38 Colt revolver and led the way.

In the vehicle, Frank pushed the start button, and the newer SUV’s engine roared to life.

Grace lowered the window and put an arm out, holding her .38. “Quick, drive around to the front of the house and slow down.”

When they rounded the house to the front yard, Grace shot the tires of the older, green SUV. “Now get the hell out of here,” she said as the gang poured out of the house, waving and yelling for their weapons.

Frank revved the engine, spinning tires and ejecting rocks as they sped

away.

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Five minutes later Grace said, “Get me back to the first house where we stashed the loot. Despite the cops’ visit, there’s still a bit hidden. My holding this pistol means that nothing you do is willfully abetting a criminal. Understand?”

Frank nodded. “I guess plan B is to separate from your previous cohorts and strike out anew somewhere else.”

“Right, if I stay with them much longer, I’ll be involved in some screwup with reckless shooting. Murder rap avoidance nullified. Though willing, I’ve not had to kill anyone to date. I’m glad you escaped the water. Putting you there was one of my hasty decisions, and stupidity is dangerous.” For the first time, a pleasant expression bathed her face. “I’m really happy Lucy’s not in the system, but has a permanent home. I’ll probably never meet her, but I have the satisfaction of knowing the best that could happen probably did.”

*

Frank stopped at the rural house and she had him walk with her straight to the woods behind it. Fifteen minutes later, she pulled a black bag from a hollow tree and they returned to the vehicle. Soon after, they stopped by a Walmart in the suburbs while she bought some cheap luggage and a change of clothes. Then he took her to the bus depot. All under the threat of gunpoint, of course.

Driving the EMS vehicle back to his station, Frank began to plan how to explain the day. *I’d best tell it like it was, except for a couple of things.* He knew taking her to Walmart and the bus station “involuntarily” would be considered a stretch. Also, learning Lucy was Grace’s biological daughter could mean burdensome police surveillance. He had the feeling Grace, or whatever her name was, would honor plan B and not complicate his family life.

A swarm of questions assaulted him. Where will fate lead her now? Did plan

B contain a mechanism for legitimate activity? Had he helped someone become a menace farther down the road? Would he be guilty of not disclosing all details? Yes. Was he guilty of her past crimes? No. He only knew one thing. It was the memory of brief love and respect that called her back from the hard and brutal decision she was about to make at the second hideaway. Somehow, he felt she could be trusted.

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