

Purple Prose

by H. W. Moss and Maurice Tani

New York. Too hot in summer, too cold in winter. That's why I moved to San Francisco long ago. The City has a lot of charm, but the most entertaining thing about it is its night life. And people are what make nightclubs bearable.

Imagine for a moment the bar in hell, because there is one you know. Who will be on the stool seated next to you?

"It was a case of natural selection and I didn't get picked." The guy seemed sane enough when I sat down and ordered a dark ale. But, then, everybody's normal until you get to know them. I made the mistake of nodding in his direction when my drink arrived. He said in response, "I love chaos. We have a two party system because anarchy is too hard to organize."

His stream of consciousness was becoming a river.

"Fact," he said with a half full glass of wine at his lips. "The fine for not picking up your dog's shit in San Francisco is \$27. Fact: The fine for not picking up your own shit is zero." Other than his mouth, his most distinguishing characteristic was a red bowtie.

I decided the conversation had taken a wrong turn long ago, saluted him silently with my beer and draped a cocktail napkin over its rim. There was no more perfect time to take a leak. Turned the corner and bumped into a mountain wearing a fedora. Nobody wears hats any more, and fedoras were out of fashion long before I was even conceived.

"The Yeesev wants to see ya." My guess was: the mountain bumped into me on purpose.

"Funny, I don't think we've been introduced."

The giant stuck out a meaty palm. My pink paw looked like a plastic Ken doll by comparison. “Morris,” he said pumping my arm up and down.

Morris was blacker than the inside of a coal mine and had a smile like a set of piano keys, from ear to ear. He was bigger than a Sherman tank with hands the size of dinner plates. He had Teamster written all over him, but the way he dealt with the situation was a testament to his intelligence.

“I meant the guy you said wanted to see me.”

“Oh, yah. The Yeesev. Why he wants to see ya, he heard about you, wants to talk. Mind coming with me?”

My hesitation must have come across as no, because that’s when Morris opened his jacket just enough for me to see he was packing.

“Mind if I hit the head?”

“Be my guest.” That wide grin again.

Remember, kids, always wash your hands afterwards. And open the window first, if there is one, so you can escape. The tackle must have investigated before letting me go in alone. There was no window. Told you he was smart. The walls, however, were covered with literature. One of the pieces of graffiti read: Lost, perhaps for good.

Morris pressed a button on his key chain and the car squealed and flashed its lights. It was the latest model Mercedes SUV available, pricier than a Hummer and twice as pretty. He tossed me the keys saying, “You drive,” adding, “and put on your seat belt.” He buckled up on the passenger side. I saw why he was not driving. He wanted to be able to hold the muzzle of the .32 steady against my right side, low so no one else might catch

a glimpse. It was a small caliber, but it would ruin about a mile of my intestines if it went off. I was careful pulling away from the curb.

“Which way?”

“Haight to Masonic, left. Then left on Geary, right on Arguello. We’re going to the forest.”

There were several places you might call “the forest” in San Francisco. Forest Knolls Drive, the woods surrounding Laguna Honda Hospital, a couple places in Golden Gate Park, maybe somewhere else south of Muir Woods, but his directions were to the one comprised of eucalyptus trees in The Presidio.

“Enlisted men’s housing or officer’s quarters?” I inquired casually. I had no idea what difference the answer might mean, I was just making small talk.

“New old digs. An NGO redevelopment.”

Now that was a twist. The Presidio was a former Army base that butted right up against the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay. America launched the Spanish American War, the Philippine-American War, World Wars One and Two from there and finally ceded it to the National Park Service in the late 90’s. Now it was being rented out to the likes of George Lucas who moved his movie making facilities there after tearing down Letterman Hospital and building his own version of military chic. Believe me, his buildings may look old, but I have a buddy who was an electrician on the project. He had to sign a non-disclosure promise never to tell anyone anything about the secrets of modern connectivity he installed. So right away he told me.

The rest of the buildings on the old base were being renovated one at a time. Renovation is a polite word for the amount of work that had to go into each of what the

Army so graciously left the City and the Park Service. With the exception of two clusters of residential housing, one set built in the 30's and another in the late 50's, most of the structures were little more than shotgun shacks with no modern amenities. Some were built during the Victorian era and those were in the best shape. Later construction practices might be described as cheap and quick single wall design with no foundations, connected to septic not sewer lines with knob and tubing as the norm and their clapboard sidings rotten.

The Presidio Trust was under a federal mandate to become self-sufficient, so they began letting non-profit, NGO for short, agencies have leases if they agreed to upgrade the property to modern building codes. Anybody can become an NGO in America. I know because I've done it. You get the book from Nolo Press, that costs fifty bucks, you incorporate in the state, another fifty bucks, and apply to the IRS for 501 (c) 3 status, which is another hundred and fifty bucks. Or you can hire an attorney and they'll do it for you for five grand.

Another thing to remember, kids, is non-profit does not mean no profit. In fact, NGO status is often a license to print money.

"So why now?"

"You mean tonight?" Morris insisted on second guessing me.

"No, I mean tomorrow. Of course I mean tonight. What are you doing pulling me out of my favorite watering hole and making me drive here?"

The gun was snug up against my kidney. "Told ya, the Yeesev wants a pow wow with you."

“He sent you to get me, so I assume he knows we’re coming in the middle of the night?”

“He knows. He knows everything.”

Morris directed me to 77 El Deora Road where we pulled up and took a spot at the top of the former parade grounds which had been turned into a parking lot. We were in front of one of the Presidio’s most venerable buildings, one I knew well and in which I had spent many hours over the years, the former Officer’s Club which, I learned later, still had the same liquor license issued to the Army when it was a going concern.

Only now instead of military, the building was occupied by the latest concept in non-profit agencies. A large white sign with black lettering identified the Prophet Center, which had taken up residence in one of the Presidio’s most cherished landmarks. Morris waved me out of the car, but, truth be told, I would have gone inside even without the peashooter, I was that curious.

We were greeted by two short Italian looking guys in pin striped suits. One frisked me, the other merely nodded at Morris who holstered his weapon in his armpit.

“Where’s your boss? The Yeeeeewhatever,” I asked.

“The Yeesev. He’ll be here,” Italian One said.

The interior of the club retained its faux Tahitian decor on the walls, but instead of rattan tables and high backed chairs, the bar furniture had been replaced with several rows of modern desks with flat computer screens and multi-line telephones on top. It struck me not so much as a business environment as a boiler room with wallpaper palm trees and beach. There was a pay phone in the hall. I heard it ring through the wall. Someone answered it, I hear a muffled voice. A moment or two passed.

There was only one person in the world I might have guessed was the Yesev, and that guy would be short with a Buddha belly, long flowing white hair and equally long white beard. After a moment, the guy came out from the hall and stopped in front of me. He looked nothing like I had imagined. He was six feet six if he was an inch, about ten inches taller than me, and bulky but not fat. I'd call him fit the way someone who works out regularly is fit. He was clean shaven with close cropped hair and when he reached out his hand to shake, I saw an identifying mark, a tattoo on the back just above his wrist. It looked like Sparky, the electric power man: light bulb head, lightening bolt in his hand.

The Yesev wore a brightly colored tie and a hushed charcoal grey three piece business suit that did not conflict with the gaudy tie but, rather, accentuated the part of it you could see springing out from beneath his vest.

"Good evening, Mr. Mars." Allowing his hand to hang there until I took it. I had to shake or look like a curmudgeon. "Let me apologize. I am sorry for the rude manner in which I asked you to come here, but my business is urgent. I was afraid you might not want to see me until tomorrow and that would never do."

"Starting to sound like a bad mystery novel."

"I assure you it is not. Please, take a seat." He gestured toward a couple of large, comfortable leather chairs, took one of them himself. He motioned Morris who brought a beverage list and placed it in my hands. I was briefly dumbfounded, but only briefly. After all, I used to drink my share of rum concoctions here. Since they were buying, I ordered a McCallum neat and my host said, "An excellent choice, Mr. Mars. Unblended sixteen-year-old Irish whiskey."

My drink magically appeared at that instant on a tray lowered in front of me by Italian Two. I took a sip, enjoyed the oak on the tongue, held it briefly, exhaled.

“My name is Yeesev, as I am sure you already guessed. That’s the entire name. And you are in the Prophet Center where we believe everyone is a potential prophet, or messiah. It’s within you to become your own good fortune.”

I was determined to keep my mouth shut except when allowing drink to pass on its way down my throat. I let him continue.

“You are a prophet in your own right, Mr. Mars.”

However, I’m too much of a cynic. I think I inherited my cynicism from my grandmother. She was even less a people person than me and hated it when anyone touched her baby, my father, in his perambulator. She did not like them saying, “Koochie koo,” and chucking him under the chin or patting his head. In order to avoid such encounters, she took him where there were few people, but still out in the open for fresh air. She strolled him in cemeteries.

As a result, the only baby pictures we have of dad, he’s propped up on a tombstone. One I particularly remember is him as a two-year-old standing outside the gates of a mausoleum pointing at the name of the deceased who was totally unrelated to him.

Armchair philosophers and cults are not my style either. I couldn’t help it, I broke my promise immediately.

“If that’s a sales pitch, I ain’t buying. Want to tell me why you brought me here?”

“What I need from you is assistance in locating my daughter. And I want you to learn who it is she is about to kill.”

He was silent a few beats. I said, “I thought you said this wasn’t a mystery novel.”

Broad smile: "It's not. This is real life."

I didn't know it at the time, but Yeesev's daughter was about to make my life very uncomfortable. Seems the girl was not a follower of her father's odd philosophy, no matter how pragmatic it might turn out to be. She had been born to wealth and social status, but now was somewhere this side of a whore, a good time Jezebel with a penchant for bad men with bad manners, according to him. According to me, she might have bad taste, but she sounded like my kind of gal.

"Parker was raised in the lap of luxury, Mr. Mars, but she has her own head and refuses to follow any of my direction."

"Think that might be the problem?"

"What, Mr. Mars?"

"You direct. You don't lead. That's how you got me here."

"Point taken. But that is not the point. However I run my own life, and it has been successful so far, is none of your concern. My daughter is different. I want you to find her and get her away from the man who has been leading her around like a snake charmer."

"Mind if I smoke?" I pulled a cigarette from my pocket.

"Actually, I do."

I put the cigarette back. "Yah, well what's this about killing someone?"

"I am not sure. The entrails were not all that clear. I know merely that it will be a violent end and Parker is probably the cause."

"You're joking. You read entrails? Animal guts tell you the future? That's what you meant by prophecy?"

He did not take this crack as badly as I hoped he would.

“It is a lot more complicated than that, Mr. Mars, and ‘entrails’ is really just a euphemism for a sophisticated prognostication program we run. It is a refinement of a form of statistical regression analysis that allows us to make long and short term predictions. The odd thing is its accuracy rate. It is merely a computer program, but it is remarkably correct. We call the results ‘reading the entrails’ as a sort of inside joke”

“You predict the future with a computer program? Is that it?”

“In a nutshell. How well the predictions turn out is a function of how much information we put in. Most of our work is fund raising to hire the best programmers who spend their time inputting facts from every possible source.”

“Now, why do I think this has something to do with Parker?”

“My daughter ran off with our most recent hire, a youngish professor of mathematics we brought on board a month ago. He is brilliant but callow. He achieved much in the field quickly, which is why we wanted him, but he turned out to be a back stabbing seducer of beautiful women.”

“Sounds like me when I was young, dumb and full of cum. She is old enough, isn’t she?”

“Parker is 22, but she was raised under strict guidelines which she has ignored. I am afraid I reared her with a strong sense of privilege which she has indulged even further.”

I inhaled the scotch, did not need to ask for a refill. Italian Two was right on time. “We knew you would like another,” Yeesev said.

“If you’re program works so well, how come you didn’t know your daughter was going to run off with this whelp?”

That barb struck home. I saw him wince in pain. “Frankly, we did not think to ask.”

Just like fathers everywhere: overlooks the obvious. “You want me to work for you. Yah, and what’s in it for me?”

“Your usual retainer plus a per diem and a bonus if you succeed.”

“That’s it? You must not want her very bad.”

“Oh, I am willing to make it a rather large bonus. Say six figures?”

“We talking a high or low six?”

“High. Plus, I would be willing to take care of that rather substantial bar tab you have, I believe you would say, ‘racked up.’”

Not a lot of people speak my language. With this guy, it must have been his mother tongue. I nodded which he took to mean I agreed. He was right.

“Oh. And one more thing. Morris is going to accompany you.” Before I could complain that two’s a crowd, I work alone, he added, “When you have completed the job to my satisfaction, the vehicle you drove here will be transferred into your name.”

“Great. I like treasure hunts.”

“Somehow, I knew you would say yes.”

“I assume we start right away, tonight.” Yeesv smiled and nodded once. “Where are we supposed to begin our search?”

“South of here on the Costanoan Indian reservation.”

There were no Costanoan Indians left unless you counted the 25 or 30 Mestizos who can claim direct descent but speak Mexican and have zero Indian ways. The indigenous peoples were killed off with white man’s diseases when the Franciscans forced them into slave labor condoned by the Catholic Church. That’s Christianity for

you. Then the Mexican government scattered what was left of the Costanoans to the four winds when they took over the Missions in 1834.

However, if you could demonstrate a drop of Costanoan in your lineage, you could join the tribe. About 500 cab drivers and hotel workers pretending to be part Costanoan heeded the call when it became clear that tribal law trumped Federal and California law. The tribe that had no members suddenly oozed a constituency.

Casinos were allowed in the state only if run by an Indian tribe and only if the tribal leaders turned the land it sat on into a reservation with their own police force and legal system. That way the county did not have to pay for an infrastructure it could not tax. True Costanoans were no more, but their name lived on in the form of five thousand slot machines and a room full of dealers in the next town down from San Francisco.

“You must mean the card room in Brisbane.”

His turn to nod which I took to mean yes. But Yeesev’s next line threw me. “You will be sifting through the remains of their former barn.”

I gulped my drink, stood and motioned Morris to follow. At that point Yeesev handed me an I. D. card in a plastic holder saying, “Here, clip this to your shirt, you’ll need it.”

“What is it?” It looked like a credit card with my picture on it.

“Identifies you as working for an NGO. You don’t think any self respecting member of the gaming community is going to talk to you without proof you’re not with the Feds? Morris already has one. This one is specifically issued to you. We encoded it with your retinal pattern. No one else can use it.”

I took it and asked, “How’d you get one made up for me so fast?”

“Like I said, we knew you would accept the job.”

* * *

Hate’s a funny thing falling somewhere between love and anger. She hated him now, but that was all right; it was only temporary. She just wanted to feel his dry, dead ashes drift through her expensively manicured fingers.

Oh sure, he’d paid the bills for her over-the-top lifestyle in bundles of crisp, unmarked C-notes. Or at least his company had paid. But all good things must come to an end and before it did, she wanted his thing to get real hot real quick.

He smelled the gasoline and should have heard the gold-plated lighter’s flint flick. It glistened in the moonlight, the flame holding steady. It was the very lighter he had engraved with their initials in rhinestone. He would have seen it if he had not been preoccupied with his latest bit of fluff. He straddled her and worked her panties down to her ankles as she writhed in the hay-strewn loft of that dark, dry, old barn.

It was the chippie who asked first: “What’s burning?”

He was not real quick on the uptake although he thought he was being super clever: “You and me, baby. I’m on fire with desire.”

When the first lick of flame tenderly singed the hairs on his ass, he changed his tune and his position. “Holy shit! Somebody set the loft on fire.” He glanced down between his legs and past her mound of dark curly pubic hair at a glowing red ember that shot hot sparks. The view was not titillating. He pulled up his pants, buttoned the fly and rose without so much as reaching down for the girl’s hand. That pissed her off.

He made good time down the ladder. “Herman, you get back here you bastard!” she screamed at his fleeing hind end. Her voice had no effect and he never wavered as he

reached the twin wood doors and pushed. Nothing happened, so he put his back into it. Still no movement. It took him a moment to realize a metal bar lay between the doors on the outside. He and the girl were locked in.

Herman ran first to the left looking for a window or side door. There was none. Then he ran to the right following the inside perimeter of the old structure in an equally vain attempt to locate an exit. Smoke filled the air before he realized the loft had an opening. He ran back up the ladder and saw the girl standing on the edge of the hay door holding onto a rope that ran over a pulley. Her purse was slung from one shoulder and she waved a gloved hand at him as he approached. Then she leaped off the side of the barn.

At the edge he tried to grab hold of the rope, but his hands were not up to the task. Its length played out making a whirring sound. He looked down to see the girl hit the dirt with the seeming gentle landing of a parachutist. It was at least 30 feet down, but she sprang to her feet, let go the rope, looked up at him and gestured with her middle finger in the air. After she flipped him off, she turned and headed toward the parked vehicles.

Maybe she would call for help, maybe not. All Herman could think was that he had to get out before the barn burned down around him. He reached for the rope, caught hold of it and stood there on the lip of the high second floor door weighing his options. There were none, he decided, and stepped away from the building.

His weight, unlike the slim figure of the girl, was too much for the armature that held the pulley. Or perhaps the arm had been sawn half way through in anticipation of just such an event. Either way, Herman heard the beam snap and looked up in time to see it tilt in his direction before he hit the ground with the force of at least two gravities.

His knees buckled and his legs went out from under him. He found himself assuming a seated position with quite a hard hit to his coccyx. Herman had a split second to contemplate the fact that his landing had been less than perfect, but at least he could survive broken bones.

That is when the wood beam crashed into his skull and knocked a big chunk out of his cranium spilling his brains like gray oatmeal out into the dirt.

* * *

“You gonna tell me all that’s in those notes?” I was doing the driving again.

“Well, maybe I embellished a little,” Morris said sheepishly. “My first love was the stage. I was a drama major before I got into business.”

There are no longer any freeways to speak of in the City. They all came down after the quake of ’89 when no engineer worth his salt would certify they might withstand another 6.9 temblor. And although it’s only seven miles from The Presidio to the City’s southern border, it can take 20 minutes to cross town what with the traffic and signal lights. We followed the Embarcadero and picked up 280 South just past Pac Bell Park. It’s another ten minutes to Brisbane so Morris read this torrid tale to me as I drove. We were running parallel to the Bay just past Candlestick Point when Morris concluded his summation.

“Why did she burn down the barn?”

“Actually, she hasn’t yet. If the entrails are correct, she’s setting fire to it at this moment.” He checked his watch. “But we are going to be late.”

This verged on the ridiculous and I told him so. “You’re joking. We’re going to a future event? One your computers predicted, not something that has already happened?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“What do we hope to accomplish? Try and put out the fire before it consumes the whole building?”

“Or catch her in the act. Otherwise we have to hunt for her.”

We rounded the last turn and came down the final hill into Brisbane proper. Morris and I were now on a level footing. If we hadn’t traded our relationship in for a new one, at least he didn’t have to hold a gun to my side in order to get me to cooperate. We were on the same payroll. “Who put this report together?”

“The ’puter when we asked it where Parker was.”

“This what you call entrails?”

“I call it forecasting. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I agreed. “Good management tool,” I said. “Forecasting and seasonality. I never had much need for it once I got out of business school.”

Morris was willing to tell me more, so I let him ramble. “I’ve seen the results. It works like any other planning tool only it has more data on which to base a conclusion. What’s creepy is it does this using principles of human psychology which means you get a real vivid response to your question.”

“Like that purple prose you just read to me?”

He seemed miffed. “Hey, remember: Everything is real. Nothing to get hung about.”

It was no trouble spotting the casino from the freeway. Bright lights concentrated in a small area. As we pulled off the road and into the parking lot I smelled smoke.

The peaceful Cañada de Guadalupe was innocence lost. What was once a refuge for the fabled outlaws Joaquin Murieta and Three-Finger Jack during the Gold Rush was now a destination for overweight pensioners. The remote gorge south of San Francisco earned a reputation as a haven for lawlessness, but by the time the gritty little burg of Visitacion City sprang up, Prohibition-era moon shiners were dumping so much sour mash in the local creek that crowds from The City were bottling the water. To quell its reputation, the place had been renamed Brisbane after the province in Australia.

The area remained unincorporated and without a police force for decades. By the 50's the main drag through town was a row of rowdy, crowded, blue collar bars blasting Johnny Cash, Webb Pierce, Bob Wills and Hank Snow all live and in person. Now they were all dead and enshrined inside the Indian casino which did a booming business drawing from all nine Bay Area counties.

Morris picked a space and parked. A San Mateo medical examiner crouched next to a body bag while hoses from a fire crew wetted down the smoldering woodpile. There were cops from three cities as well as tribal council enforcers milling around. One of the tribal cops came over and introduced himself.

“Captain Vegetable Buyer’s the name. I’m a council cop.” He stuck out a hand and I named Morris and me. The tribal guy must have read curiosity on my face. “Everyone gets a new moniker when they go on the payroll. I worked in produce for a grocery store chain before getting this job.”

He read my name tag and said, “Mars, Henry Mars. Why do I know that name?”

“Fourth planet from the sun?” I replied.

“That’s right,” he said pointing a finger at me. “You’re the Philosopher, Henry Mars. The guy who got Stevens out of prison so he could commit suicide.”

“I feel like I’ve been outed,” I said wryly. Ethical conundrums were my specialty and I did have a reputation to uphold. “You have a head for details. Most people don’t remember why I was involved, just that Stevens wanted to take his own life while he was still able. He was dying of ALS, you know, Lou Gehrig’s disease. He would not have lasted long, but he wanted to go on his own terms. Yes, I was an expert witness and I think my testimony convinced the court that everyone has a right to die as well as to live in this country.”

His response was enigmatic: I did not get a smile out of him, but he seemed to agree. “What do we call you?” I asked. “You go by Vegy or Vegan?”

“How about Captain?” He winked as he said, “So. You’re NGO. That’s good. Who sent you?”

I asked if he knew the Prophecy Center and Vegetable immediately warmed to me.

“Oh, yah. Great idea. Make probability into a science, take the guesswork out of gambling. It’ll also throw a monkey wrench into most organized religions. If it really works.”

I looked at Morris and heaved a sigh. “Well, it looks as if we have a timing problem is all. Seems the program was right on the money about the barn.” I nodded toward the medical examiner. “Who got stiffed?”

“Wallet I. D. says he’s a dead San Franciscan. Clothes say he was wealthy. Them boots alone cost two thousand bucks. My guess, a venture capitalist with a penchant for poker. Who knows how he came to be in the barn when it got set on fire.”

Morris ambled over to the corpse and struck up a conversation with the examiner. Meanwhile, my eyebrows rose when Buyer told me this. I asked, “You’re sure someone set the fire on purpose?”

“Oh, heck yes. It’s no longer a working barn. There are no fields around here any more. Instead, it was turned into a children’s amusement center with a petting zoo next door. A place to park the kids while you’re in there pulling slots. The place was closed by seven. I’d say this got started around midnight. Coroner places the time of death around then, maybe a little later.”

Morris ambled back. He looked at me with a chagrined expression and said, “That’s our mathematician, Herman Henderson. He does look rather spiffy in those clothes, but he didn’t have such gaudy taste when he put in his time at the Center. I’d say the girl got him to cut loose with as much money as she could.”

“What girl?” Buyer asked. “If there’s an accomplice, we want to find her. I can shoo all the cops away and keep this investigation to ourselves if you want.”

I liked that idea, did not want any police in on the deal at all if that could be arranged and said as much to Buyer. Then I told him we were looking for a 22-year-old with long straight hair. Morris conveniently pulled out a photograph of Parker. The tribal cop shook his head, said, “Naw. I haven’t seen her. Must have split when the fire began. If so, now it’s up to you to locate her, not me.”

Morris was on his cell phone. He clapped its clamshell case shut, turned to me and said, “Entrails just told us Parker is still in the area. In fact, she’s probably inside the casino right now.” He turned to Buyer. “You got a central office where we can watch video surveillance of the patrons?”

“Indeed I do. Follow me.”

While it may be true that all casinos are different, their patrons are all the same. There is a syndrome these people share, an illness that cuts across all human types which blinds them to reality and somehow bends, distorts their faith into wish fulfillment: The idea they can get rich quick. What I don’t get is why the sickness isn’t cured after the first inoculation. Some weird attraction exists at the tables for people to lose and lose and lose and come back for more losses.

No, I don’t get it. And yet there they were, the same people I saw last time I was in a casino in Reno musta been ten years ago. Tremendously fat men and women spread across three stools, feeding four slot machines in quick succession, fingers and hands black with the tarnish that comes from pouring fake silver dollars into the machines.

I’ve always said it’s better to waste your life than do nothing at all with it.

The casino was in a two story building so we followed Buyer to an elevator guarded by more tribal cops. They let us pass when Buyer gave his nod of approval. The upstairs command center had eyes in every corner of the downstairs casino and parking lot. I asked Morris for that picture of Parker which he handed to Buyer who placed it on a flatbed scanner. After the light passed, a technician began running the comparison program and it hit almost immediately.

Buyer pointed to a monitor on the upper right which zoomed in on a crowd around a crap table. There was the girl’s face beneath a really large cowboy hat. She rolled the dice which flew from her red-tipped fingers.

I noticed something unusual in the scene. Standing beside her, one of the many males surrounding the table with their tongues hanging out had turned lackey. Young,

muscular, well dressed in a suit and tie, he held a purse in one hand and draped over his forearm was a long flowing coat. The purse was probably not part of his usual attire and I don't think the coat would fit his 250 pound frame.

The dice were returned to the girl but before her next roll, she reached into the purse and pulled out a cigarette. Remember, this was Indian territory; state law did not apply. Before anyone upstairs with me could react, five lighters were thrust in her face as if they had all anticipated this move. She inhaled the smoke, handed the cigarette to the guy holding her purse and threw again. I could not see what numbers came up, but I said, "C'mon. Let's take her home to papa."

She must have spotted Morris and knew who I was because she went directly from the table into my arms. I'm a sucker for a desperate woman with blood on her hands. Our roles are well defined: she starts trouble, I start bleeding. True, she was the girl of my dreams, the femme fatale of my worst nightmares: duplicitous, manipulative and double-crossing. Her nails were like nettles on my back, her lips a branding iron on my throat and she knew how to scar me.

"Darling, I thought you'd never arrive," she whispered in my ear. "Hurry, let's get out of here."

It's not easy to catch me off guard, but when she fell into my arms I was tossed like a rag doll. She reached into my gut until she gripped my quivering heart in her slender, crimson tipped fingers and squeezed. I could feel the last of my pride join hands with hers, my resistance weakening, my mind slipping away in the heady fragrance of her perfume.

Desperate to break free, I knocked her ten gallon hat off and it hit the floor with a dull thud. The spell was broken. I gripped her above the elbows and shook the living daylights out of her.

“Don’t you ever, and I mean EVER, pull a stunt like that on me again.”

The players around the table had all backed away, some of the guys looking as if they wanted to step in and throw a punch. I mean, defending a woman like that? I pushed Parker into Morris who pulled her against his chest and held her tight. I stooped to pick up the hat with the hardware hidden inside. One of the guys took a step forward and I cracked him up the side of his head with the palm of my hand. Hard.

“Ouch. Hey, what the fuck was that for?”

“To get your attention. I don’t want you to think chivalry isn’t dead and try to take me on, punk.”

His buddy standing next to him looked at me like the last time he took a crap. I cracked him up the side of the head.

“God damn it! What was that for?”

“I’m just making your wish come true, pal.”

“Wish? I didn’t make any god damn wish!”

“Yah, well I can see the future. After I’m gone, about ten minutes from now you’re going to say to your buddy here, ‘I wish he’d tried that shit on me.’”

Parker glared fire ants at me as I turned my attention toward her. Morris took my cue and we began a slow march to the nearest exit. Buyer kept his security people at bay until we were safely outside. It took maybe fifteen seconds.

“Where’s your car?” I demanded of the girl.

“How should I know. I don’t drive.”

“Let’s not get cute. I want the car and its contents.” I grabbed her chin as I said this and forced her eyes to look directly into mine. She got the hint.

“Other side of the parking lot.”

“Lead the way.”

She guided us to a new Cadillac on the edge of the tarmac that still had the Nevada registration sticker on the rear window and no license plate.

“Henderson buy this for you?”

Including Captain Vegetable Buyer, there were four of us standing around the outside of the vehicle and nobody claimed to have the keys.

“Right, we need access to Henderson’s body.” I looked at Captain Buyer. He looked down at the ground, shuffled his feet. He must have resigned himself to the fact he was the only one with the authority to retrieve the keys and at last he began the long walk through the casino to the other side of the parking lot. It would take him a few minutes so I began questioning the girl.

“My guess is you and the dead guy hit every casino and card room between here and Wyoming. That true, Miss Parker?”

“How’d you know my name? Who are you? Let me go.”

Morris kept a tight hold on her wrists as I explained how her father had hired me to find her.

“He’s not my father.”

I decided not to let that statement faze me, but we would come back to it later. “He still wants you back real bad.” Then I held the Stetson up and waved it in her face. “But I bet he wants this back more than he wants you.”

Morris’ eyes went wide. He probably thought I would be unable to connect the dots. The picture emerged and it was like high school sex: everybody says they’re doing it but no one can prove it. I had to demonstrate to both of them I was ahead of the game, so I reached inside the hat and tore the minicomputer out. It dangled a few wires in my hand and looked awfully like a dead animal.

“You have a lot of control over people with something like this. But it’s only good at close range.”

Parker snarled. I explained to Morris, “It’s a pheromone emitter and a computer which contains a compressed version of the Prophecy Center’s program. The electrodes are so sensitive they don’t even have to touch your scalp. They just need to be close and you can make it work by thinking. Henderson created it. He wore it right up until the time he flew out the barn door. Parker picked it up as soon as she saw he was dead and began using it as he had: to win at the gaming table. You did not run off with him, did you now, sweetie? In effect, you were kidnapped. He was using this to influence you.”

“But it was fun,” she said in terse response to my revelations. “It was wonderful what we did. We drove until we were exhausted and then we made love in the back seat. By the time we got to Vegas, he and I were mated for life. Until he started using the gadget to pick up other women. Like the girl he ran into from the office. She was on vacation with her sister. We left that one behind and Henderson decided to take the two of us back to California. We stopped here to have one more go at collecting some money

before we hopped a plane south to Rio tomorrow. Everything would have been fine if he hadn't started playing around with her. So I set the barn on fire, locked them in and waited for him to figure out how to get out. Now what? You taking me back to The Presidio?"

I wasn't sure, and told Morris to set her free. She stood there shivering in the chill morning air. I could see my breath.

That's when the tribal cops came up from behind and slapped a set of cuffs on my wrists. It took three of them to wrestle Morris to the ground and get the bracelets on him. I saw how they manhandled Morris, and then out of the corner of my eye I saw a fist coming toward my jaw. My last thought was a line from a country western song: "I can brace myself a little if I know. Is this gonna hurt?"

* * *

Daylight was never so dull. Therefore, the light was artificial. Ok. Now where would I be if I was taken away in the wee hours of the morning to some place where interrogation meant a bruising? I know, the reservation hall.

I opened my eyes to the glow of overhead neon. It was sparkly like through a refraction lens, maybe like looking through the facets of a diamond. Or a zircon. I heard a whisper beside me and realized Morris was wide awake, his head stuck between my shoulder blades and his weight falling toward me, pinning me to the floor. I shifted my position and heard him say, "Don't move. I've been waiting for you to come to."

Then a voice in the room said, "He's awake. Get the captain." A door slammed. Maybe we were alone. If I was looking for better odds, I probably would not find them. I heard the shuffle of a pair of shoes coming toward us. Looking up, I saw a truncheon in

the man's hands, but I was in no mood to be worried about getting hit a few times in the head.

As he neared, I lunged and sank my teeth into his ankle pit-bull style: I did not let go. I jerked my head back arching my whole body against Morris who grumbled something about, "I told you not to move," as he sat up to watch the action.

The man I sank my teeth in screamed and tried to swing the stick, but my maneuver had thrown him off balance. He fell backward and hit the floor with a dead cat bounce. I opened my mouth and scrambled up on top of him, straddling him with my legs spread, my hands still behind my back. But my head was available for close work.

I have a thick skull. It's a gift from my father. I hit the guy in the forehead once, twice, the third time he stopped struggling.

At that point Morris said, "I suppose you want me to help move him now."

Actually, I had not thought my plan through that far ahead. If anything, I wanted Morris to find a way to set our hands free and do it fast. He turned his back to me and said, "Here, reach in my right front pocket and get my knife."

"Didn't they frisk you?"

"Sure they did; found my gun. But they're about as competent as security at the airline check-in. They never catch the knife either."

I felt around unable to actually see what I was doing. Then I had it in my fingers. It was small, maybe an inch long and flat. It was not the bulky multi-purpose device, just a couple blades, probably Swiss Army or a knockoff. We turned our backs to one another and he directed me to flip open the fingernail file.

“That’s the dull blade. It has a flat screw driver end. While I was hanging around waiting for you to wake up, I saw what kind of cuffs you have on. I assume I have the same standard police issue, which means they have the standard emergency release clasp. Just stick that screw driver end into the slot below where the arc meets the metal on one of my cuffs and . . .”

He did not need to finish describing where the escape mechanism was because his hands popped around in front of him. Easy, once you knew the trick. He retrieved the knife from my fingers, undid his other cuff. Then it was my turn.

Did I see an instant of hesitation? Did he really want me loose when what he was supposed to take home to Yeesev was not me but something that would fit in the palm of his hand? Trouble was, it was not in his hand, not yet, and he might need me to help him get hold of it. I could see all that pass in the front of his mind as he pondered whether or not to snap the locks on my wrists open. Just then the handle on the door rattled as a key entered its cylinder and Morris must have realized two in a fight against maybe more than two enemies was better than he alone.

My hands were suddenly free, but I still wore a silver bracelet on one of them when the door opened and Buyer marched through. He must have thought everything was just peachy keen in here. Boy, was he in for a surprise.

I let Buyer pass and stood up directly in front of the second guy through the door. I slammed the metal chain into his esophagus, hooked my free hand around the back of his head and caught the wrist band, tightened. He grasped weakly at the choke hold and fell to the floor. Buyer turned to confront me, when his legs went out from under him and he fell to his knees. Morris was no fun to wrestle with because he always won.

I felt around for weapons, decided they had none and asked Buyer where the key to my cuffs were. I didn't want to bother Morris for his file again, or reveal to Buyer and his boys how we got out of our confinement.

"Where's the girl?" I asked politely. No answer. I hit Buyer with a fist wrapped in metal.

He said, "She got away. I don't know where. And took the device with her."

I did not have to believe he was telling the truth, but I decided to confer with Morris. "What's next? Try and track her down again?"

"Ask him how she escaped."

I drew back my fist and started to telegraph the question when Buyer volunteered an answer. "Hopped in some cowboy's car heading north back toward the City."

Morris said, "Now ask him if they caught any of her departure on surveillance tape."

This time Buyer was one step ahead of me: "Yes. I'll show it to you if you want. But you'll never get out of here without my approval. And I want to deal."

I stood him up, dusted his lapel, said, "Start shuffling the deck."

Seems the reason the Brisbane casino was so interested in Parker and Henderson was they were tipped off by several of their sister gambling houses in Nevada that the couple had a real good system, one that could not be identified. They were winning big at the tables. When they took in a house limit, the house moved in and they moved on. They were last seen heading west. The Costanoan Indians were on the lookout, and sure enough, the couple's arrival could not have been more anticipated. Whatever the system, the casino wanted it or wanted to understand it. When Henderson took a header, they

only had one to watch. But when Morris and I showed up, well, the rest as they say is history.

“We want that device or we want to know how to defeat it.”

“You’re in no position to bargain. And no, you can’t have the Prophecy Center’s program,” I said. “However, I think we can work together for our mutual benefit.”

Morris looked at me skeptically. He wanted it all to himself, I could tell.

We watched a tape play back and I was able to get a good look at the car and driver. It was obvious Parker had the pheromone emitter and was using it. She carried a large satchel on her shoulder and stood at the edge of the parking lot near the freeway onramp.

When the fresh-faced guy in the Chevy offered her a lift, Parker told him to go to hell. But when she did it, the way she did it was like a sweet, maple syrup thick cocktail of mind numbing narcotics, oozing around the poor chump’s blood-starved brain, dulling his feeble thought processes and anesthetizing him to her intended point of entry until she could stick the stiletto in up to the hilt. He wouldn’t feel a thing until that warm red wave washed over everything. He asked again, “Are you sure you don’t want a lift?”

She said, “All right. But you have to take me where I want to go.”

I knew that would be back to The Presidio. I wondered if the Yeesev was going to say I earned my bonus or my SUV if she showed up unannounced and unattended.

“Here’s how it works,” I said to Buyer. “Morris and me catch up with her, take the gambling device away from her and destroy it. You’ll just have to take our word on that.”

“That’s not something I can rely on,” the tribal cop said. “How do we know you’ll do as you say? And what we really need to know is how it works, what makes it win at cards.”

“Trade secret, Vegy. Sorry. But I can say the rightful owner will pledge never to let it be used like this again.” Morris squinted disapproval at this last, but I could see Buyer was considering what I said. “They don’t call me The Philosopher for nothing,” I told him. “I have a reputation to uphold. If that device ever gets out again and is used to clean out your casino you can besmirch me in every newspaper and electronic medium in the country and it won’t be libel. It will be the truth. I give you my word, the device will never see light of day again as a gambling tool.”

I was not taking a great leap here. The Yeesev had bigger fish to fry and would not be interested in letting his little program come in contact with a deck of cards again.

“Fine. We’ll take that offer. Now get the hell out of here and stop that bitch from ruining our traditional way of life!”

Morris and I were in the SUV and headed home in minutes. The ride back was uneventful. What was a surprise was pulling up in front of the Officer’s Club and not finding the Chevy parked out front. She must have ditched the cowboy.

The Yeesev and Parker were already settled in, comfy and cozy. As we walked through the door, Parker crossed the room and slipped her arms around his waist, kissed him on the neck, and then Yeesev and Parker sat opposite each other in the same chairs where I had sampled Yeesev’s scotch what, I checked my watch and realized it was almost sunup, maybe seven hours ago. I had not been on the payroll a full eight hour day and the job looked complete to me.

“I hate to break up a lovely relationship like this,” I said bursting into the room and taking over the conversation. “But I still want a few questions answered. To start with, what did you mean when you told me this guy’s not your father?”

Yeesev took the lead on this one: “I’m her step father, so technically she is my daughter by marriage only.” Yeesev seemed quite pleased to tell me this, like it was a wonderful thing.

“Where’s mom, your wife?”

“We are separated. The papers were drawn up and she was served a week ago. I’m afraid it came as quite a blow.”

“Bet it was.” I wanted to wrap this up, but I also wanted to stick the knife in as far as it would go. “She had no idea, did she?”

“About our impending separation?”

“No, about the relationship you and Parker formed. I believe you are sleeping in the same bed.”

Fact: Marriage between parent and child is incestuous and void from the beginning.

Fact: That is not true between step parent and child as long as the other husband or wife is legally separated or dead. Just ask Woody Allen.

The Yeesev seemed none too pleased with my revelation which appeared to have taken Morris by surprise. But I used the moment to some advantage when I told him of the arrangement we had with the Costanoan Indian casino.

“And that should terminate our working arrangement,” I added. “You have your purloined program back, although I suspect you were more intent on having Parker here return with open arms. I’ll give you my bank account number where you may deposit the

agreed upon sum. And,” I turned to Morris, “the keys to that Mercedes out there, if you please.”

He was not all that happy to part with the car, but a deal’s a deal.

What I did not tell him, what I kept to myself, was my realization that although Henderson was probably the inventor of the mind control toy, Parker was the one who used it on him, not the other way around.

And that was precisely what she was doing to Yeesev. Not the other way around.

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