

# Whatever Gets You Through the Night

by W. T. Quick

The windows of Keller's, a small bar on a side street in a run down section of San Francisco, were smeared over with dark green paint to keep sunlight from disturbing the early morning drinkers. The paint was cracked in places and admitted a watery glow. The inside of the place was like a dingy aquarium filled with red-eyed, wrinkled patrons who resembled those prehistoric fish they keep finding in out-of-the-way parts of the world. I was filling my glass with Dewars scotch when the explosion rattled the thin walls and flaked even more paint from the windows.

"Jesus," Herbie Johnson said. "What the fuck was that?"

I was pleased to note my hand didn't shake. I finished topping off my glass and placed the bottle back in the middle of the table, where Herbie grabbed it and took a long, shuddering swallow straight from the neck.

"Easy, boy. That jug has to last all day." Keller's was the kind of law-bending dive that sold booze by the glass, the bottle, or the keg, for all I knew.

Herbie wiped his lips and let out a long sigh. "You want to go look?"

"Huh uh. If something out there wants us, it can come inside."

The morning bartender, a new guy whose name I hadn't bothered to learn, came round from behind the bar, an anxious look on his bug-eyed face and a sawed off baseball bat in his hand. He sidled warily to the door and opened it a crack.

"See anything?" Herbie called.

The bartender shook his head. "I don't see nothing."

"Stick your head out. If something shoots it off, then we'll know." Herbie sounded cheered by the thought. The bartender glared.

"Why'nt you stick your head out, you old gasbag? Then if something happens, it won't be no loss."

Herbie turned back to his own drink. "Young punks," he muttered. "Got no respect."

I tasted my scotch. It was my first of the day, and it went down smoothly, a tight little bomb of warmth straight to my gut.

"Ah," I said. "Better."

The bartender was still peering nervously through the cracked door, shaking his head. "I'm telling you, ain't nothing out there."

"So go on outside. Send us a telegram," Herbie advised. "We'll wait right here till you get back."

"God, you're a nasty man," the bartender said.

Herbie cackled. He was good at that. He had just the right kind of ruined face and gap-toothed mouth for cackling. "I'll drink to that," he said, and raised his glass again. "I'll sure as hell drink to that."

My own scotch was extending rosy fingers into the rest of my body, scraping away the foggy remnants of a moderate hangover. It hadn't been a bad night. I remembered everything, and everything I remembered was okay. So you think scotch is a weird breakfast? Some people think eggs are pretty strange. I happen to be one of them.

The bartender, who had extended his bony skull slowly around the edge of the door, suddenly jerked back inside. A cascade of whistles and a long, low growling noise yammered at the green windows. Herbie's eyes widened.

"What the hell now? Is it a gang war?" Immediately he shook his head. "Naw. No guns." He screwed me with a glance across the rim of his glass. "Come on, Chandler. You're our hero. Go take a look."

I wasn't feeling very heroic. It doesn't come with only one scotch. But it didn't seem that either the racket or Herbie was going to let up any time soon; and the bartender, now hovering against the inner wall of Keller's, didn't look like he was coming up with any ready solutions.

I chugged off the rest of my drink and closed my eyes. Nine a.m. is too early for bravery. Hell, any time is too early.

"I'll go look," I said.

"That's my man," Herbie said, and toasted me with his drink. For some reason I noticed his fingernails were caked with grime.

My feet hurt. "That's me," I agreed, and stood up.

I stood just inside the door and looked out on the part of the street I could see. It was empty in a perfect blue San Francisco morning. "Give me that bat," I said to the bartender. He handed it over and then scuttled behind his bar. I hefted the thing. It was heavier than it should be, and weighted funny. The fat end was taped. Lead-loaded, I guess.

I don't know what I thought I'd do with a sawed off bat if it was some of the local drug entrepreneurs out there settling differences with bombs, but it made me feel better just to hold it. I pushed open the door and stepped outside. The street -- called Rose Alley, but only the locals knew because the street signs had long ago been ripped down -- was empty from one end of the block to the other.

The noises were coming from the right, where Rose Alley intersected with Twenty Fifth. I walked in that direction, keeping close to the storefronts, holding the bat out in front of me like a blind man with a stick. Feeling stupid.

The bizarre sounds had diminished. Now something like a final gasp -- a huge balloon collapsing, slowly flubbering out -- filled the bright morning air. Then nothing. I reached the corner and stood there.

A long time ago in another world I was in the army. I ended up at an exclusive school in the Virginia countryside, learning how to be a spy. It was a joke, of course, but at the time the choices had been leading a company through the jungles of El Salvador, or learning how to be a spook. On balance spookery had seemed the safer option. They called it tradecraft. Mostly it consisted of keeping your mouth shut, your head down, and your ass covered at all times. Always good advice.

So what was I doing investigating strange happenings in a rotten neighborhood armed with a baseball bat and a single glass of scotch in my gut?

Shit happens, that's what. It just does.

I got down on my hands and knees and put my head right up to the corner of the building about six inches above the cracked sidewalk. If any hyperspaced cowboys around that corner looked in my direction, they'd be looking head high. Or so I hoped.

I sneaked a quick peek, pulled back, then stood up. Walked around the corner and crossed the street.

The big black maserlimo had hit the dirt right before the intersection and plowed a few feet into a corroded light pole. Now the pole was bent over the receiving lenses of the limo like a wilted daisy.

I peered into the car. The chauffeur was crumpled in the front, his neck at a crazy angle. There was a lot of blood. In the rear, the passenger safety bag was deflating slowly, making soft flup-plup noises. Her eyes were closed but she looked okay. I turned back to the chauffeur and reached through the blood to touch his neck.

Nothing.

On closer examination the big hole in his skull was quite obvious. Like somebody had pounded him a good one with a baseball bat.

Just like the one I held in my right hand. Was still holding, as cops began to fall from the sky like rain.

The first cop hit the ground rolling, came up in a crouch, and did what any cop would do if he saw some ragbag standing next to a wrecked maserlimo holding a baseball bat. He raised his tangler and pulled the trigger.

Whereupon one Chandler, only recently recovered from a mild hangover, became one hundred eighty pounds of nerve-frozen meat. Or so I assume. I wasn't really there any more.

I woke up in a cell. Not surprising. People the cops tangle usually wake up in a cell, if they wake up at all. There's an old joke among drinking folk. Some mornings they say that if normal people felt this bad, they'd check into a hospital. I felt that bad. And there was no hospital. Worse, there wasn't even a drink.

My skin ached.

So did my head.

I knew it was a cell because I could see bars. Sort of. Sudden bursts of white light kept exploding in my retinas, making details hard to decipher. It was an aftereffect of tangling. It would go away. I hoped.

I was lying flat on my back on a hard bench against a dirty tile wall. I managed to roll over. Just enough, and just in time. My morning scotch hit the floor instead of hanging up in my throat and going back down to my lungs. Thus I avoided drowning in my own vomit.

Us poor folk lead such exciting lives, I thought, as my exciting life faded into merciful darkness.

When I woke up again the pain had receded a bit. No more than a Grade One hangover. I could handle that. My vision was a bit blurry, but the starbursts had disappeared. So I could see her standing on the other side of the bars looking at me. The heavyweight three-piece with her, who might as well have tattooed "Lawyer" on his forehead in big neon letters, carefully didn't look at me. Instead he spoke rapidly into her ear.

"This is crazy, Marie. He's just a bum. You don't owe him a thing."

"Get him out, Henry. Save the lecture for later."

Yeah, girl, I thought.

He said something else, too low for me to make out, and she tightened her lips and shook her head. He paused, then turned stiffly and marched away.

"Are you awake?" she said at last.

"I think so." My voice sounded like somebody had punched me in the larynx.

"What?"

I whuffed and gurgled and tried again. "Yeah, I'm awake."

"Good. I'm going to get you out of here."

"That would be fine."

"It wasn't your fault. You didn't do anything."

She made the statements sound like questions. I started to shake my head, thought better of it, and said, "I was just trying to help, lady."

"You were just trying to help," she repeated. The conversation trailed off and we stared at each other. I knew what she saw. She saw the results of what I called, in my occasional moments of sentiment, a long, slow, bad trip down.

I didn't look as bad as I could have, but the years and the booze had left a trail across my face even I couldn't ignore. Of course, I had to look at it every time I shaved, which might have been why I had a three-day stubble across the evidence right then. The rest of the hundred eighty pounds was about what you'd expect from a resume that included not only spooking but short order cooking, tech writing, the kind of pro boxing where the outcome was determined in advance, bartending, (of course), and some freelance stuff for friends that probably should be listed under "other."

She didn't look impressed. But she didn't look disgusted, either.

I saw a woman pushing that indeterminate age which might have been anything from thirty to fifty. Straight black hair cut like a cap. Strong cheekbones and large, disconcertingly blue eyes. A perfect figure both concealed and revealed by a red silk outfit that would support my bad habits for a year. And the Bobby.

I don't know why I hadn't noticed it at the beginning, in the maserlimo. I probably wasn't thinking. But I saw it now, the elegant golden bracelet with its distinctive bulge, like a watch without a face. On her right wrist.

The going price, I recalled, was twenty million dollars.

And I wondered what I'd got myself into now.

Old pinch-face Henry, her lawyer, handled clout as effortlessly as I did Dewars. He had me out in less than ten minutes. The two cops who brought me up didn't look happy about it, and neither did Henry. I made a note to avoid those cops if I saw them on the street. I didn't think I'd be seeing much of Henry. He left as soon as he did his duty, with a final warning to her about my obvious lack of character. She ignored him.

"Sorry," she said. "Three piece suit and all, he's still a flunky. Sometimes I have to remind him who makes the decisions."

"Sure," I said. As if keeping a guy in line who could buy the entire block I lived on was a normal problem. Good old Chandler. So hard to find decent help these awful days.

She glanced at me. "You don't look very well."

"I don't feel very well."

"Was it . . . painful?"

"The tangling? No." One of my more useful talents is a convincing ability to lie.

She nodded. "Well."

We'd reached the steps leading down out of the station house. She looked around uncertainly, as if wondering where her limo might have gone.

"Hey," I said. "I haven't thanked you yet."

"That's not --"

"No, really. Let me buy you a drink." I felt giddy, lightheaded. I wanted to talk to her. Get to know her. And I did need that drink.

She licked her lips. Thought about it.

"I'll get you a cab," I said.

"Okay."

Oh, Lord, what fools these mortals be.

The Hallcrest Cafe was right across from the station house. I'd been there a few times, on those occasions when I'd had business with the local cops. Usually bailing out Herbie Johnson when he'd had too much and decided he was superman. Herbie was a cop fighter, a stupid avocation for a man who weighed about a hundred twenty soaking wet. Or just plain soaked, which he usually was.

It wasn't a bad place as San Francisco bars go. Clean and neat, with a row of tall windows across the front and around the corner, so you could sit and sip and watch the bag ladies mumble at the bluecoats across the street.

I looked a little out of place there. The bartender saw it, but wasn't about to say anything when he caught the golden glint on the lady's wrist.

I settled into a thickly padded lounge chair and let out a long sigh. "Scotch," I told the bartender. "Dewars, straight up. Make it a double." Then I remembered my manners. "I'm sorry. What would you like?"

"Oh, whatever. Same as you, I guess."

My eyebrows rose a bit. I figure scotch comes in two sizes, large and larger. But nobody ever called my drinking habits ladylike. "You sure? That's a pretty hefty drink."

Now her eyebrows rose. Probably the effect was totally different than my expression. On her it looked nice. "No problem." She seemed amused.

The bartender left, poured, came back. I drained mine down before he could retreat again. "One more," I said.

He shook his head and did what he was told. I sipped this one. The first one had been a depth charge, to blast loose all the heebie jeebies from the morning. Now I could lean back and enjoy the taste. It tasted good.

"Your name is Chandler," she said. "The police over there seem to know you."

"Yeah. Some of them."

"But that's your only name. They said you didn't have a first name. Not even initials. Is that right?"

I shook my head. "That's right. Well, once I did. But everybody calls me Chandler now."

"What were they? The initials, the other names?"

I actually had to think about it. Like many things, my other names had slid away. From lack of use, mostly. "O. T.," I said. "For Oran Thistleman."

Her lips quirked. "I see," she said.

"They were easy to lose," I told her seriously.

"My name is Marie. Marie DeBakey." She said it as if it should mean something. She was right. It did.

"Mining? Lumber? Newspapers? Terrible Teddy Dee?"

"My father," she acknowledged.

"Maybe you should buy the drinks."

"I already have," she told me.

The afternoon sunlight oozed around us like warm honey. Was it afternoon already? Yes. I'd lost a morning. Not for the usual reasons, but not the first time, either. They didn't have a good janitor in the Hallcrest. Tiny dust motes danced in the air. I felt loose and comfortable. The memory of the tangling had become only a memory. Thank God.

She looked at my empty glass. "You drink a lot, Mr. Chandler?"

"Just Chandler. Yeah. You could say I do."

She swallowed the dregs of her own drink. "So do I. Maybe that's why --" But she bagged the thought and tapped the base of her glass on the marble tabletop between us. "I've had a rough morning. Let's get drunk."

It was a surprising invitation from a lady like her. And now I noticed her staring at my face, nodding, as if she'd been thinking about me and only just now made her decision. I wondered what the question had been. But it was her tab. Things become more simple in some ways, when, as I do, you drink a lot. One of the things you learn is to take what's offered. Take it with both hands. And though I didn't know her reasons, I would have bet my last drink on earth she was offering more than booze.

"Sure," I said. "Let's."

Some of my instincts still worked okay. Too bad others didn't. But I didn't know that yet.

We were rollicking by the time we got to her place. We'd hit enough bars that I couldn't recall each one individually. Just a blur of bartenders, strangers, and glittering bottles. I'd even taken her to Keller's, where the petrified ichthyosaurs had watched her with slow, bemused wonder.

She was a frenetic drunk. Loud, happy, with a sharp, dark undercurrent. I wondered about that deeper river. Sadness? Fear? Or anger?

It could have been anything. Her house was a palace.

I don't know what I expected. I'd never been on the other side of the Wall. We called them Changers, those fantasy folk who wore Bobbies on their wrists and ruled the world. They tended to cluster with their own kind. They'd built a wall around the best part of Pacific Heights, where all the views are of the Golden Gate, and where sunrise and sunset are only different, private windows. They'd built a wall and now it was the Wall, and people like me didn't come across to the new high tech fairyland.

Except I had. Ah, scotch, sweet nectar. If it hadn't turned my brain to pudding, I might have asked myself why. But it had, and I didn't.

We ended on a broad patio that seemed about the size of a football field. We sat on spindly metal ice cream chairs at a white ice cream table and toasted the stars over the bay with twenty year old McCallan's single malt. The bubble condos strung beneath the bridge looked like God's necklace. The night was aquiver with perfection.

There was no one about but us. No servants or family. The house had an empty feel to it. She left the doors behind us wide open, and occasional breezes stirred the crystals of huge chandeliers within.

"Is this place haunted?"

She laughed. Her voice had gone deeper, whiskey rough and intimate. "Not hardly. I built it two years ago."

"That all?" I was amazed. The house had that feel of centuries to it, heavy and hulking and dark. A masculine place that seemed at odds with her rampant femininity.

"It's a big house. Lot to it. You didn't see it all. Want to?"

I knew what she was saying. "Like what?"

"Like the bedrooms," she said, swaying gently. Or maybe I was.

I stood up and took the bottle of McCallan's by the neck. "Lay on," I said. I thought it was a pretty good pun. I'd forgotten what happened to the last person who used the line. But then, she wasn't Macduff, either.

I didn't have to open my eyes to know it was going to be horrible. Maybe it was the combination of booze and tangling. Maybe it was just the booze. Maybe I would die.

Maybe I wouldn't. Suddenly I understood those pious folks who went around calling death "a release."

She wasn't in the bed with me. I could feel the subtle differences between two bodies and one on a single mattress. I was alone.

After a while I cracked an eyelid.

She'd left the drapes drawn. It was a mercy. One single fierce lance of light burned through a slit in the draperies and seared my eyeballs. I closed my eyes again. Perhaps I moaned.

I heard her open the door, close it, walk across the room. Her footsteps made little noise, but even that was painful. I knew this was a four alarm head, the kind that could keep me in bed two or three days. I hoped she didn't mean to kick me out right away.

"Here," she said. "Drink this."

It wasn't scotch, thank God. But it was a tall glass of very thin looking tomato juice. Just enough juice to turn the vodka a clear, lucid blood color. My hand did shake as I reached for it. Medicine.

"Not good this morning?"

I didn't reply. I concentrated on getting the glass to my lips without spilling too much. Finally I made it. The cool liquid flowed down my parched throat like a benediction, and the vodka explosion in my gut scared my heart into beating again. I waited while various parts of my body groaned into action.

After a while I raised my right hand and stared at the fingers. Almost steady.

"More," I croaked.

"No. Not yet. Food first. Take my word. Mama knows best."

I propped myself up and stared at her. She looked fresh, brisk, bright-eyed. She wore something brief and frilly and blue, and she looked a lot closer to thirty than fifty.

I tried to remember, and realized that I'd lost quite a bit of the night. I recalled a visit to Keller's, and then nothing till our sojourn on the patio. Nothing after that, either. Did I, had we? It wasn't something you asked on the morning after.

But she'd been matching me drink for drink. Nobody could look that good after a night like that. Nobody.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

She grinned a devilish grin. "I feel fine. Why?"

I hate malicious innocence. "Because you should be dead. I'm dead. Don't I look dead?"

She shook her head. "You'll live, friend. You always have, haven't you?"

I sank back down.

"No you don't," she said. She stripped the blanket and sheet away from me with a single motion. I grabbed for my crotch and curled up. "I've seen it already," she said. Her tone was dry. "Come on, get out of there. Shower's across the room. I put out some clothes. And a razor." She started to walk away, then paused. "Use the razor," she said.

At the door she stopped one final time. "About breakfast, in case you're interested. I made a pitcher of eyeopener. Don't be long." And then she was gone.

I didn't cut myself shaving. It was an electric razor.

Small favors, Lord. Small favors.



We ate in a kitchen that would have done credit to a medium hotel. She prepared bacon, sausage, omelets, waffles and country fries with her own hands, another surprising turn. We sat at a solid oak table next to windows overlooking the perfect sparkling blue of the Bay.

I ate ferociously. Maybe we had done something the night before. I wished I could remember. Dimly, I recalled that sex had once been able to goose my appetite. But I still didn't ask.

When I'd quit shoveling it in with both fists, she left and returned with a huge pitcher of that thin tomato juice. The food had done wonders. I poured without a quiver, and only sipped my drink.

She sat across from me, her blue eyes as clear as the sky outside, one finger tapping absently on her chin.

"Something wrong?"

"Why?"

"You're staring at me like I'm a piece of meat you're interested in. Buying, maybe?"

"You selling?"

She hadn't screwed up the tomato juice with a lot of spices. I liked that. Perhaps the sense of well-being interfered with my bullshit detectors. "Look, Marie," I said. "This is all wonderful, but I don't think a lady like you is interested in a man like me just for my sparkling personality, my amiable companionship." I paused, then added, "Or was it as good for you as it was for me?" Brutal, but I like to puncture my own bubbles.

Her lips thinned. "You don't even remember, do you?"

"No."

And she laughed. It was a good, strong, belly laugh -- haw, haw, haw -- and it wasn't what I'd expected.

"Chandler, you are a piece of goods, aren't you?" And she started in again.

I wondered if I was blushing. Couldn't be. Too old for that. It had to be the vodka. I swallowed some more of it.

Finally she ran down. "Okay, I'm sorry. I think. It was just the look on your face." She sobered further, if that was the right word. "Clothes okay?"

I pinched a fold of my sleeve between two fingers. "I haven't owned a suit like this in -- maybe I've never owned a suit like this. It's fine."

"You like this house?"

"What are you asking? You want me to move in?"

I thought she was going to start hooing and hawing again, but she pressed her lips tight together instead. "No. But I decided you might be the man I need. For a job. A real important job."

I finished my tomato juice, but I didn't pour another. She was serious. And if she was serious, then she must be crazy.

"What kind of job?"

"Let's discuss payment, first."

I sighed. Humor her, then get out fast. "Okay. What's the payment?"

She didn't say anything. She took it out of her pocket and tossed it on the oak tabletop. It made a soft metallic clunk and lay there glittering in the sunlight. As golden as a thousand dollar piece, and a lot more valuable.

"It's a Bobby," I said.

She wasn't crazy. She was just rich. Maybe at her level, the two meant the same thing.

She lifted her glass of tomato juice. "So," she said. "Do you want to discuss conditions of employment?"

"She thinks somebody's trying to kill her," I told Herbie.

He seemed a little in shock, even more than usual. On my way home I'd stopped at the big booze mart a couple blocks from my house and picked up a case of McCallan's. And although I'd kept my jacket sleeve pulled down to cover my Bobby, already my taste in liquor had improved. As well as my ability to pay for it.

Herbie had a bottle all to himself. He tilted it up and I watched his Adam's apple go glug glug for quite a while. He wiped his lips on the back of his shirt sleeve. He couldn't quite take his eyes off the golden bracelet on my wrist. He kept glancing over, the way you do when you try to avoid looking at a badly disfigured face, and can't make it.

"She gave you that Bobby?" he said for what must have been the fifth or sixth time.

"Yeah." I extended my hand. "Here. Touch it. Go ahead. It's real."

His callused fingertips smoothed across the metal and brushed the back of my forearm. "You sure about that, Chandler? It's not some kind of rich bitch scam?"

And he had me. I sat back. I remembered what she'd told me, how it would take two or three days for the Bobby to read my body right down to the genetic level, then extrude tiny wires through the skin of my wrist and start to make changes. She'd warned me not to take the Bobby off for any reason.

But I didn't feel different. I didn't know how I was supposed to feel. She said that when it began to happen, I would know.

"It's not a scam," I said finally. There had been something in her eyes, something black and determined behind the guileless blue. Whatever it was, whatever she thought she was doing, it meant something to her. And the Bobby didn't mean anything at all. It was only money. Something irresistible to get what she wanted. I didn't pretend to understand. I wondered if I ever would.

His raspy voice held a hint of soft wonder. "They say one of those things is worth twenty million bucks."

"It is, and it isn't."

"Huh?"

"If you went out and bought one for yourself, yeah, you'd pay that much. But if somebody stole mine, it would be worthless to them. They have to be set initially for one person, and they're only good for that

person afterwards. If somebody -- " I glanced at him meaningfully -- "were to steal this one, for instance, all it would be worth was the metal. And it's not real gold, Herbie. So don't get any ideas, okay?"

"Me? I wouldn't even think of such a thing." He raised his bottle again.

"In a pig's ass."

We both laughed then, but we understood each other.

He shook his head. "Chandler, she's a rich lady. She can buy whatever she wants. Why does she want you?"

That was the question, all right. It sure was. But I couldn't answer it. Not then. And I wanted that Bobby. I wanted it forever. She'd told me why she didn't have a hangover.

Her Bobby took care of it. She could drink whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted, and get exactly the result she desired. And no hangovers, ever.

She didn't seem too impressed by it.

But then, she'd bought me with it. Are the trinkets worth the purchase? Then the trinket maybe wasn't worth very much.

I didn't understand any of it. Not really. But I could pretend. If you wait long enough, almost anything comes clear. Or fades away.

"Why would anybody want to kill her?"

I reached for my own bottle, thought again, and put my hand in my lap. The Bobby couldn't do anything about a hangover yet. I could take it easy for a couple of days. Hell, as far as it went, I could quit any time I wanted to. Easy. I just didn't want to quit yet. That was all.

"Not the right question. Not yet, at least. Did you get a look at that wrecked maserlimo?"

He shook his head. "When the cops come down, this boy stays inside." He stopped, grinned. "I did this time, anyway. I saw them hauling you off. Who would have bailed me out?"

"Yeah. Well, her chauffeur had a hole in his head the size of a baseball. And his safetybag worked just fine. He didn't hit his head on anything. But something punched a piece right out of his skull."

"She got any ideas about it?"

I remembered the blank, taut look on her face as she'd told me. "Uh huh. She says his head exploded."

Herbie just stared at me.

"I know, I know." It was time for a drink. I did.

Detective Lieutenant David Shedleski was called Cementhead by everybody who knew him, although not to his face. And it was his face, not his brains, that led to the nickname. Dave Shedleski's face looked as if it had been carved from a stretch of very old sidewalk, all gray and lumpy and cracked. He'd once been a friend, back when I'd had friends instead of drinking cronies. I'd done him a few favors and never called in the markers. Now I needed some official help. It would have been nice to think he'd pitch in without having to keep score, but I was glad the markers were still open.

His office was in the same station house I'd recently almost puked myself to death in. It had been over a year, but he came around his desk, big meaty fist outstretched, as if we'd had lunch just the day before.

"Chandler. How you doing?" His voice sounded like rocks rattling in a garbage can, but his brown eyes were mild. He was the toughest sonofabitch I knew, but I'd seen him cry like a baby on occasion. He gave me the once-over as I pumped his hand. "Nice suit, bubba. You picking a better class of dumpster these days?"

"Yeah. I quit hanging around behind your house," I told him. "Even bums got some dignity."

The word seemed to pain him. "Still hitting the sauce like always?" Then he shook his head. "You could do better, Chandler."

Maybe this was one reason our get-togethers were few and far between. But I still needed his help. I could swallow a veiled hint or two. "Sauce is sauce, Dave. I've seen you belt a few yourself."

"Yeah, but -- oh, hell. Skip it. What can I do for you?"

I didn't say anything. I just shot the sleeve on my new suit and let him look at the gold.

I'd expected him to be surprised, but I should have known better. In his line he'd seen it all, and then seen it again. All he did was shake his big head slowly.

"Oh, Chandler. Oh, buddy. What did you do now?"

"No, Dave. Not what you think. It's real. Go ahead, take a look."

He touched the metal gingerly. "Uh, Chandler, I want to check something. You mind?"

"Not at all. Go ahead."

He brought me over to his desk and unraveled some kind of probe at the end of a long cord from his data remote. "Hold still," he said, and waved the small wand over my Bobby. Then he looked at his monitor. I couldn't see what the screen said, but his eyes narrowed slightly, then widened.

"Jesus, Chandler. It's not a fake. You're registered. It really is yours."

"Uh huh."

"What -- how -- ?" He stopped. Something strange came over his lumpy face. "No, I'm sorry. I'm just a cop. I don't ask questions like that of Changers. Please accept my apologies, Chandler. Mr. Chandler."

It was one of the saddest things I've ever felt. If I had any friends left, Dave Shedleski had to be one of them. And now, because of a band of gold around my wrist, a wall had come between us. No, a Wall. And it hurt as bad as anything ever has. He was looking at me like I'd died and gone to heaven. Or hell.

"Dave, it's Chandler. Just Chandler. Like it's always been."

He shook his head. "Not like it's always been." He paused, trying to think it through. Made up his mind. Sighed slowly. "Okay, still Chandler. Until you want to change it."

"I'll never want to."

There was something almost like pity in his voice. "Maybe." He slumped back in his creaky chair, a big, tired man who'd seen a lot and knew he would see more. He swiped one hand across his face, pulling at

the gray skin like it was rubber. "Anyway. So you've come up in the world. Way up. What do you need with a cop?"

"You do that maserlimo thing the other day? Was that yours?"

"The chauffeur? Yeah, I caught the beep on it. Why? Is there a problem?"

"I just want to know what you think?"

"What I think? I think it's more Changer bullshit, and I don't want any part of it." He stopped, glanced at my wrist. "Pardon me."

I'd tried to imagine what it would be like, being a Changer.

Everybody has. Now I was seeing it firsthand, from the other side. It wasn't as nice as I'd hoped.

"Dave, look. I'm still me. This thing on my wrist doesn't make any difference."

He kept his face carefully blank. "If you say so, Chandler. And listen. If you want to know about the limo wreck, why not just key into CeeNet and get it all direct?"

"CeeNet?" I was confused. "What's a CeeNet?"

He blinked. "You mean you don't know? Chandler, you sure everything's all right with that Bobby? With how you got it and all?"

I was clearly missing something here. And I didn't see any other way out. So I told him the whole story. Right from the beginning. The only parts I left out were what I couldn't remember. They were gone forever.

He started laughing right near the end, and kept on chuckling and snorting until I finished. Then he made more noises that sounded like a pig choking. I told him so.

He wiped his eyes. "So she just gave it to you after a little boff, huh? One fast bang-bang and now you're a Changer? Oh, shit, Chandler, you don't even remember. You probably can't even get it up." He choked some more. I felt like helping him with it a little.

But the Wall was down. I might have looked ridiculous to him, but he was used to that. The Chandler he knew probably was ridiculous. At any rate, that standoff look was gone from his eyes.

He blew his nose on a big plaid hanky. His voice went serious. "Chandler, that's the goddamndest story I ever heard. But I got to believe it, cause you got a Bobby on your wrist. So let me give you one piece of advice. You be real careful. You take real good care of yourself. Because this whole thing stinks to high heaven."

I'd been smelling a rank odor already. "I know."

"Just so you do. Okay, so you're not turned on and plugged in yet. CeeNet. I don't know everything about it. It's Changer territory. Private. But ChangerNet is into everything. I'll tell you what I've got on this deal, but there's probably more. Maybe you can dig it out once you're functioning."

I nodded. "So give me what you got. Right now I don't have anything but DeBakey's suspicions."

"And watch yourself with her, too. I've heard stories . . ."

"Yeah? What kind?"

But he shook his big head. "Not my place. There was something a long time ago . . .but if it's relevant, you'll find out on your own. Anyway, the chauffeur. A nobody. Hired help. Name of Oscar Verrazano. Also did gardening work at her place up on the Heights. Been with her four, almost five years. No family but his old mother, and he ain't seen her for longer than that."

I chewed my tongue and wished I had a drink. I knew Cementhead kept a jug of bourbon in his desk, but I wasn't about to ask. "So was he murdered?"

Cementhead nodded. "Bigger than life."

"How?"

"He had a bomb in his skull."

"Horseshit."

He steepled his thick fingers and stared over them at me. "You're a Changer now, Chandler. You'll learn. He was a trusted servant. Had some fancy hardwiring behind his ear that let him hook into CeeNet in a limited way. Changers are paranoid. They like to know what's going on with the people close to them. But this is a new wrinkle. I never heard of an exploding plant. Course if there was such a thing, they wouldn't tell me. Like I said, I'm only a cop."

I played with it. "So it could have been anybody?"

He shrugged. "Who the hell knows? I don't know what was in there."

"Then Marie DeBakey's a suspect?"

His brown eyes went darker, more hooded. "Well. Suspect is a pretty strong word, Chandler."

It was finally beginning to sink in. How powerful the Changers really were. Dave Shedleski was a very good cop. He had ideas, but something was holding him back. It made him angry, but he'd been around for a long time. There's another thing a drunk knows. Sometimes life hands you shit. And you take that with both hands, too.

"I'll give you a printout of what we've got." He leaned forward and opened a side desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of Jack Black bourbon. "Chandler, let's you and me have a drink." He rummaged around and found two glasses that were almost clean.

He filled both and pushed one across the desktop.

"To the old times," he said. We tossed off and put the empties down and looked at each other. There was nothing more to say.

I stood up. "Thanks, buddy," I said.

"You take care of yourself."

It seemed like there ought to be more to say, over the last drink I would ever have with my best friend.

But there wasn't.

"You didn't tell me he had a bomb in his brains," I said.

We were standing on her patio again. It was late morning, almost noon, and a high sun beat down on the Golden Gate, turning the bridge and its necklace of bubble condos into a line of red fire over the water. A freshening breeze off the ocean brought salt and the smell of fish to our high place.

There was a sterling champagne bucket between us, cradling a bottle of Dom Perignon. She held a delicate crystal flute glass in her hand and watched the tiny bubbles rise. I'd taken a cab. The guards at the Wall stopped me, of course, but only for a moment. They had me put my wrist into a box, then snapped quick salutes and stepped away. "Have a good day, Mr. Chandler," they'd said in unison.

Three days before they'd probably have shot me.

"Is it important?" she said. She sounded worried, as if she was wondering what else she'd forgotten.

"Anything could be important. Listen, Marie, I'm not a real detective. I've had some training in this and that, done some favors for people. But I'm not a pro. So I do things my way. Usually you find out things by checking everything, especially the little stuff. Eventually something doesn't fit. Or something does. Either way, you go on from there. But this guy was killed with his own hardwiring. Don't you think that's relevant?"

"Oscar," she said. "Oscar Verrazano."

"What?"

"That was his name. Oscar."

"Oh." I waited. "Did you like him?"

She tasted her champagne. "He was a good man, I suppose. Loyal. He'd been with me a long time, always did his job. There was no reason on earth for him to . . .to -- "

I touched her shoulder. "I have to ask things, Marie. Even painful things. Did you put the bomb in his skull?"

She faced me, her blue eyes wide and blank in the sunlight. "Well, of course. It was standard. It was, uh. Three years ago. New tech."

I nodded patiently. "So tell me about it. Why did you do it? How did it work?"

She turned away. The wind whipped at her voice so I had to strain to make her out. "We Changers are paranoid people, Chandler. You don't understand how much, or why, yet, but you will. We have to be very certain of the people around us. He agreed to it, you know. I've got the release forms around her somewhere, if you want to see. He signed them without a second thought. He wanted to be trusted."

"Go on."

"He was hooked into CeeNet. Not all the way, but he could access certain areas, and I could communicate with him through the Net. It was more . . .convenient. But because he was hooked in to potentially sensitive data, there had to be safeguards. The bomb was one of them. If he tried to reveal something he shouldn't, then, well . . ." Her shoulders moved suddenly. I wondered if she was reliving it. What did it look like, to have a man's head blow up in front of you?

I got the picture. "You know, the cops think you did it."

She was shocked. "What? But why?"

"They don't like Changers, I don't think. And it was a Changer device that killed him. In a Changer vehicle. With a Changer in the back seat."

She finished her champagne and poured another. "Do you think I killed him?"

"I don't know. Did you?"

She drank the whole glass in a single gulp. "Only the Net can trigger the bomb, Chandler. And only under certain very special circumstances. Don't you see? It wasn't a protection for me. It was to safeguard the Net."

"Can you prove that?"

"If I have to. Do I?"

I sensed some kind of test. She was staring at me intently.

"No," I said. "You don't."

The tension drained from her face. "You'll understand, Chandler. Soon enough. They were trying to kill me. It was a warning, that's all."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

When you lie a lot yourself, you become attuned to the signs. I was a liar. And so was she.

"Okay," I said. "I'll keep poking. One more thing. That maserlimo flies itself. Why did you need a chauffeur?"

She smiled then, a hard-edged little flip of very white teeth. "Status, Chandler. Only status. I have a chauffeur I don't need for a car I can't drive. Status."

"That's all?"

She seemed genuinely puzzled. "How else could you tell us from the rest of the herd?" She paused. "You want a drink?"

"No," I said. "Not today." That was a lie, too. I did, very much. But not with her.

I went to the local branch of the Public Library that afternoon. It's quiet inside, and it's free. You see a lot of the older soaks there, hiding behind newspapers or just plain sleeping it off. Sometimes they scared me, those real alkies. They were what happened if you couldn't handle your booze.

I still hadn't plugged in, or punched in, or whatever the Bobby was supposed to do for me, although I'd noticed a persistent itching underneath the bulge on the gold band, like a scab that needed scratching. I ignored it as well as I could.

But since the Bobby couldn't help me yet, I had to use what was at hand. The Library wasn't perfect, but you could find out a surprising amount of information if you knew how to use the machines properly.

I set up searches on Verrazano, Oscar; DeBakey, Marie; and DeBakey, Theodore; otherwise known as Terrible Teddy. I don't know why I threw her father in, just a hunch. But you learn to follow your hunches. I also did scans on Bobbies and the CeeNet, and an overview on Changers in general.



The resulting hardcopy was over two inches thick. The search was free, but you had to pay for paper. I used some of the money Marie had given me. She said that when I had access to the Net I could tap her accounts directly, within limits. She hadn't told me what the limits were. I supposed I would find out.

I bundled the printout under my arm and started walking for home. Stopped at the corner store and bought a bag of potato chips, a pack of bologna, and a loaf of seven-grain bread. Health food fanatic, that's me. Paused a moment in front of Keller's, but didn't go in. Everybody there knew about the Bobby now, and while they left me alone, they stared. I was different than they were. Before, I'd been one of them. Now I wasn't.

I wasn't sure what I was any more. It was a strange, almost scary sensation. Neither fish nor fowl. Just Chandler.

Back home I made two sandwiches, cracked some ice into a glass, and filled it with McCallan's. I munched and sipped as I read the printouts. I hadn't expected much, and I didn't get much. Not about Oscar the clunker, at least. He was still a cipher. But there were a few surprises.

Theodore Allen DeBakey had been born a poor boy in San Francisco's Tenderloin in 1927. Bootstrapped himself up, bought timber originally, then switched to mines and finally newspapers. His company still owned several news services, but most of their money was in high tech. Silicon Valley, that kind of thing. Which made sense. He'd been one of the original investors in Robert Schollander's company, RobiRobot, the firm that had developed Bobbies in the first place. I figured he'd been one of the first to have a Bobby. Very high powered man. The puzzle was, according to his birth date, he'd be over ninety today. But I didn't find any obituary. Could he have lived this long? Was he in some kind of sanitarium someplace, waiting to die?

I figured out a sort of answer when I checked on Marie. She'd been his only child, issue of a marriage that ended twelve years after her birth. Some kind of scandal, about which the printouts were vague. When Terrible Teddy was thirty. Which made her seventy years old.

Which was bullshit.

Or was it?

I still didn't know what a Bobby could do, but I was beginning to see that was the wrong question. The right one was, what couldn't a Bobby do?

It seemed to beat the hell out of a facelift. I'd been there. If Marie DeBakey was seventy, her body sure as hell didn't know it.

I finished the sandwiches, put the plate in my wheezy dishwasher, and returned to my chair. This time I didn't bother with ice. Just a bottle and a glass. The itching beneath my Bobby had turned into a sharp, almost burning sensation. And my vision seemed kind of blurry.

I filled the glass, slugged it down, and filled it again. I knew what to do about blurry vision.

When you can't beat them, you join them.

Changers. Over time, names lose their real meaning. Do you know why New York is called the Empire State? I don't either. The word meant something once, but nobody remembers.

If I'd stop to think about it, I'd have guessed they called them Changers because they changed things. Changers owned high tech. It was their companies that had made the world what it is today. That would have been my guess.

It would have been dead wrong.

Changers are called that because they do. They have changed themselves. Welcome to the wonderful world of nanotechnology.

I was deep into the pitch and swing of things, with that fine rhythm only an experienced drinker can establish, a careful balance between coma and sharpness where all the edges are blurred and you can taste the peat from the bogs in the scotch.

Sitting in my chair, sipping, watching the wall in front of me, humming a mindless tune.

It started in the base of my skull and moved up. A sudden flowing warmth. The room brightened and then winked out, like a video screen punched off.

Darkness.

I felt nothing. The taste of scotch was gone. The feel of my butt on the chair. The glass in my hand. All gone. I hung in the darkness, too startled to be frightened.

And then I began to see the lights.

Dim at first, fuzzy, far away. Growing brighter. It was like standing at a junction of a million tunnels, and down each tunnel was rushing a train.

Light exploded over me in a soundless white fury. I screamed. It tossed me and turned me like a chip on a flood. The pressure of the light was like an endless bellow.

Finally something began to penetrate. A thoughtless thought, meaning without information. I could manipulate the light. Slowly, with hands that weren't hands, I tugged at the stuff around me. Pushed it, shoved it. Arranged it.

Found a door and opened it.

Stepped through.

Stepped into the tacky splendor of my own brain.

Hello, Chandler.

Hello.

It smelled brown and tasted of thunder. Soundless lightning shrieked.

- click -

Was back out, and now I heard the voices. A vast, soothing babble. Limitless sounds, words without end. An ocean of words. Who were they talking to?

Nobody. Everybody.

They were talking to me.

I had finally broken through, and the Net had caught my infinite fall.

Welcome to CeeNet, Chandler.

Welcome, Changer.

When I opened my eyes, my room was unaltered. The scabrous paper on the walls still peeled in curly strips of faded blue. My carpet still smelled of smoke and scotch and ancient perspiration. The single window overlooking the street was still streaked with greasy yellow phlegm.

All the same. All totally different.

Because I was. I had Changed. And I understood.

I simply sat for a while, listening to the sound of my own breathing. The McCallan's bottle was almost empty. I picked it up and finished it off. No problem there. I could drink ten more if I wanted, and awaken the next morning as healthy and clear-eyed as a ten year old. Infinitely tiny molecular machines in my body would scavenge the alcohol, break the molecules into smaller, harmless structures, expel them. Other machines would repair any cellular damage that might be caused if I allowed the alcohol to do its work. Like getting me drunk.

The only thing that would happen is I would sweat a lot.

I suppose every Changer has this moment, this blinding instant when it all begins. The terror of the infinite vista opening like the eye of God. But Changers have other Changers around to help, to explain, to guide. Marie had left me alone to deal with it by myself, and I didn't thank her for it. In fact, perhaps I hated her just a little bit.

But it was over.

And just beginning.

So much data had crowded into my brain, or was on ready tap from other sources, that it took me a while to sort out what I needed. But finally I was ready to access the great archive that was the Hypertexted Group Database, sometimes called CeeNet.

Everything in that database was crosslinked, sometimes in thousands of ways, to everything else. You could pursue a bit of information down a million twisting paths. I understood that experienced Changers could do it directly, dancing like fairies through endless fields of information, plucking what they wished, discarding the rest. I wasn't that experienced. I settled for something more primitive. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

Something very like a huge monitor screen appeared in glowing green lines on the back of my eyelids. I could manipulate the screen simply by thinking about what I wanted. I tried it out.

"DeBakey, Marie," I directed.

Obediently, a slow roll of information drifted across the darkness. By picking one bit of data and asking a question, I would bring up other relevant information. And thus I tracked my mistress, my benefactor, down the hidden trails of her life.

I opened my eyes some time later and realized I was ravenously hungry. But when I stood up my new suit was soaked with sweat. I glanced at the empty bottle of McCallan's. I was only mildly high, just a pleasant buzz. I realized I could adjust that to any level I desired, but right now it was fine.

I shucked out of the suit and pulled on a pair of blue jeans and a clean white shirt. I didn't bother with a tie or jacket. Although I was going to the most expensive restaurant in town, I didn't feel any need to dress up.

The ring of gold on my wrist was all the reservation I would ever need.

Changer, you have Changed yourself.

That is the true meaning behind the word.

At last I understood.

Occasionally when I read about drunks in literature, I notice they always have a reason for becoming that way. A broken love affair, a dead child, an injury of some kind. Some terrible loss sets off their dance with the jug. But it really isn't like that. Not with me, at least. I always drank pretty good, and after a while I drank all the time. Habit. Addiction. Call it what you will. Nothing triggered it. I'd stopped even looking for reasons. I drank because I did. And, of course, I could quit any time. But old habits die hard.

Masarini's was on top of Nob Hill, and if you were lucky you could get a reservation for two months down the road. Unless you wore a gold band on your wrist.

The maitre d' bowed me to a table, ummed and ahed about my lack of a tie, then decided it didn't matter. I paid him no attention and ordered a double McCallan's.

"Keep them coming," I told him.

"Of course, sir," he said. He seemed happy to see me. He'd never seen me before in his life.

I was in a bright, brittle, hard-drinking mood. The service in Masarini's was famed for impeccability, and justly so. Every time I placed an empty glass on the spotless white linen, a full one magically replaced it.

Off and on while I waited, I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. Nobody paid me any attention. Changers do what they want. The scotch was wonderful. I was wonderful. And I was working.

I was amazed at the amount of data I could learn to handle. I remembered the pitiful stack of printouts I'd carried home from the library. The entire pile was but a moment's consideration in my new condition. I flicked through the subjects I hadn't read then and paused, surprised.

Linked my way into some old history, then more recent stuff. Yes. No wonder Changers were paranoid.

Why do only a few become Changers? Why does a Bobby cost twenty million dollars? Interesting questions with interesting answers.

Back at the beginning of the nanotech era, there was a great deal of fear that the technology might well destroy the planet. Thoughtful people raised a specter of technology gone wild, infinitely powerful computers and manufacturing complexes in the hands of untutored barbarians. Science has always been ambivalent about the masses. On the one hand, research creates an unbounded cornucopia of new things for which masses are necessary. After all, somebody has to buy the stuff. On the other hand, scientists have a strong bent toward the priesthood. The mysteries of science, which are not for the unwashed many. There is an air of tension, and it comes from both sides. The untutored majority fears that science will invent their destruction, while the scientists fear that the proles will destroy science with their ignorance. There is a certain amount of right on both sides.

However. We have had the tiny machines for almost twenty years now, and mankind has neither destroyed itself nor destroyed science. What happened?

What happened with the nuclear bomb? Similar fears were rampant during the terrorist decades.

Everybody's nightmare. Some fanatic yahoo would build an atomic weapon in his basement and blow up New York. It never happened.

But why not? Simple.

The technology was too expensive. Expensive in time, in money, in knowledge, in life. Detailed instructions for building such a weapon were even openly published, for Christ's sake. But nobody built the bomb.

Because plutonium was relatively well guarded. Because the other uranium isotopes were hard to make. Because they were deadly. Because alternate methods were uncertain. Because governments were paranoid.

Because of a million reasons.

And a nuclear weapon was as complicated as a sharp stick, compared to a Bobby. A full high-tech complex, mature and developed, was necessary to even contemplate building such a thing. And who owned such factories and laboratories?

Of course. The same people who always own things. Rich people.

Rich people ended up with the technology, and they protected it with a ferocity that made atomic weapons seem as open and free as lollipops.

Sure, maybe if you were extraordinarily resourceful you could find blueprints. Even if you did, you weren't going to brew up a Bobby in your basement.

But you could get one if you wanted. Anybody could. All you needed was twenty million bucks.

Only the western technocracies had so far developed the technology, and they sold it on their terms. Come one, come all, but bring the money. It was a safety valve. As long as people thought they might have a chance to buy a Bobby, they wouldn't burn down the store. The odds were insane, but it wasn't a stupid setup. Look how many people poured money into the lottery. There's one born every minute.

With very few exceptions, rich and Changer meant the same thing. But I was one of the exceptions.

There had to be a reason.

I didn't think it was a good one.

Like all Changers, I had become paranoid myself. So I made the call I should have made all along.

"This could be very dangerous, Mr. Chandler."

"Just Chandler. That's okay."

"It would be best if you could drink a lot."

"That's okay, too."

She served dinner on the patio. It struck me that I hadn't seen much of the house. I doubted that I would, now.

"Champagne?"

"No thanks," I said. "I'll dance with the guy that brung me."

She smiled. "Is that a joke?"

"I think so."

Her face was as close to haggard as a Changer's face could be. Something thick and opaque moved deep behind her eyes. Her gestures were quick as knives, and as sharp. I was amazed she'd fooled me as long as she had.

For it had been all out in front of me. Changers don't indulge in charity. Not on that level.

I finished the duckling. As before, she'd cooked everything herself. The vast house behind us was echoing and empty.

She poured her own champagne almost as an afterthought. Her mind was miles away. In more ways than one.

"How do you feel?"

I nipped down yet another double scotch and reached for a refill. My Bobby was struggling hard to keep up. I was sweating like a sow, and feeling the chill in the winds off the Bay. "A little cold," I said. "It's windy. You want to go inside?"

I tried to put an appropriate leer in my voice.

She nodded. "Of course. I don't want you to get sick."

"No, me neither," I said.

Inside meant only one thing. I wondered how she would do it.

#

I took both her and the bottle to bed.

"Do you have to do that while we -- "

"I like to drink. Do you mind?"

"Yes!"

"Sorry." I placed the bottle on a nightstand where it was handy. Then I rolled over and put my arms around her. It was almost the hardest thing I've done in my life. Almost. The next thing would be the hardest.

I was in her when she came into me. It was very neatly done. Even though I was expecting something, it took me by surprise. Our sweaty tangle winked out and I stood in a different place.

It was a tall room with broad, open doorways at one end. Long, silky curtains swirled in a soft breeze. I smelled magnolias, and wondered whose memory this was.

There was a great faceted chandelier overhead. It glowed softly and cast a thousand shadows. Mirrors lined the walls, doors into forever.

He turned from the windows and walked over to me.

Tall man with hunter's eyes, the eyes of a wolf or a hawk. Dark hair combed straight back. Good shoulders. He walked with a heavy inevitability, graceful and ponderous. He was comfortable with his body, with his life. With his unmeasurable power.

He smiled. "You've Changed," he said.

"You noticed?"

"Of course. Did you think you could hide it from me?"

I shrugged.

He moved closer. "Have you figured it out yet?"

I nodded. "I think so. I was awfully stupid, wasn't I?"

"Not really. It was difficult if you weren't a Changer. You adapted quickly. It was a surprise."

I remembered our first meeting. "Did you plan for me? Is that why you crashed the limo there?"

His eyebrows rose. "Plan for you? Of course not. You showed up. I decided you would do as well as anybody."

So he'd just played it by ear. Arrogant. But then, he would be arrogant. "What happened to Oscar Verrazano?"

He paused. "Who?"

"You lie. The chauffeur. What happened to him?"

He shook his head slightly, puzzled. "He died. In the wreck."

I sighed. "No, he didn't. I don't know when he died, or if he did, but it wasn't in the wreck. How did you get his template? Did he help you? Work with you?"

"You know quite a bit, don't you?" An ugly sheen ghosted across his face. "But how do you know it?"

I sighed. "I don't know this. That's why I'm asking. As for the rest, it didn't take that much. Not after I thought about it. You gave me a Bobby. Drank with me, had sex with me. A Changer, and me a bum. There had to be a reason. Then I Changed and got on the Net. Read the family history. Why would Marie want me? And want me Changed? No reason. Unless she wasn't Marie. I learned that was possible. But if Marie wasn't Marie, then who was she? The best candidate was somebody close to her. Real close. And guess who that was?" I paused. "It's funny. I couldn't have figured it out without being Changed and getting on the Net. Learning what Changers could really do. Changers change, Teddy. The templates are mental and physical. Once I realized that, the rest was easy." I stared at him. "You couldn't get what you wanted without Changing me. So you cut your own filthy throat. Don't you think

that's kind of funny?"

"Ah. Cut my throat, Chandler? I think not. But you want answers?" His voice was thick with scorn. "Why not? You won't be telling anybody. I had Verrazano's template made through the Net, of course. Through his hardwiring. And yes, he helped."

I quit feeling sorry for Oscar Verrazano, wherever he was. Probably living in luxury on a tropical island somewhere. Or buried under it. Teddy could afford either one. "Why, Teddy? Do you miss her that

much?"

And then his urbane mask collapsed, and the madness behind it peeked out slyly. His voice seemed to stretch, and tiny whining sounds vibrated along it.

"She wanted it to end. After sixty years she wanted it to end. I loved her, Chandler. You could never understand."

"No, I suppose I couldn't. I did a little research. It has been that long, hasn't it? Since her mother left you. The scandal. Child molestation, wasn't it? But you managed to hush it up. Jesus, Teddy, she was only twelve years old. You never even gave her a chance."

"She loved me!"

"Oh, I'm sure little Marie did. All little girls love their fathers. But she finally stopped, didn't she? And so you killed her. You're a sick mess, aren't you?"

He turned away and paced quickly back to the windows. "Go on. Say whatever. It doesn't mean anything now."

"No. But I'm glad I figured it out. You own a big piece of Robi, don't you? So I suppose you'd have access to the newest technologies. Changers are real hard to kill. You couldn't shoot her or poison her. The Bobby would take care of anything like that. Unless you changed her entirely. Put a different template on, gave her a different brain even. If there's a way to overpower someone's Bobby, you'd know about it, wouldn't you? For God's sake, Teddy. It worked, didn't it? You turned her into the chauffeur. Used his physical template. But his body didn't have the nanotech protection, the ability to rebuild itself. Then you blew out her skull. Just another stiff. Your own daughter!" And the horrible thought tormented me. Had she realized, at the last, trapped in that foreign body, what Teddy would do? Had she begged? Had she, in the end, loved him?

I took a deep, shuddering breath. "You had no servants. Because you weren't her, you just looked like her. You couldn't take the chance one of them would figure it out. And me. I was the perfect fool, wasn't I? A drunk who'd be so thrilled with a Bobby I'd never think about any of the weirdness. You must have been ecstatic. Lucky Teddy."

His back was to me, as rigid as a plate of steel. He hovered there a moment and finally turned. When he came to me this time, he moved like a mechanical man. His smile winked on and off like a searchlight. "Do you feel anything yet?"

I sucked in a deep breath. "Should I?"

"Yes," he snarled, and then his arms were around me, tight as steel bands. I could feel it as he reached deep into the Net, his Bobby gathering her file template like a lightning bolt. Ready to hurl it through my own Bobby into my genes, into all the trillions of machines in my cells awaiting orders. An old template, the pattern of a woman who still loved her daddy very, very much, body and mind.

"Just relax," he husked in my ear. "It will be over soon."

His voice went dreamy. "And you'll be back, my darling. My precious . . ."

I felt my body begin to change. Rivers of sweat poured off me. I shivered, then began to burn with fever. He crushed me to him, squeezing me tighter, while my cells danced a gavotte of insanity.

Had it been like this for Marie, when he changed her into Oscar Verrazano?



I screamed.

My breasts. My beautiful breasts.

We awoke.

Naked, he was a hairy, ugly beast. Older than he looked in the dream. He was an evil man, and the marks of it, as sure as the marks of my sea of booze, showed in his face. I don't know how long I was out. Long enough for him to Change into his real form. The bed was soaked with sweat. Physical Changing is an energy-intensive process. It requires a lot of cooling.

He was pale. "You," he said. "You."

I reached for the scotch and swallowed long. The liquid burned my throat. "Me," I said. "That's right."

"Impossible!"

"What? That Marie's template didn't work? That you didn't turn me into her? I'm a drunk, Teddy." I rolled on my side and stared at him. He shied away, his eyes widening.

"You drink, Teddy, but you don't have hangovers. Or the morning heaves. Or the night sweats. Or blackouts. You know what a blackout is, Teddy?"

He stared at me as if I was a deadly insect. Perhaps I was.

"Two kinds of memory. Short term is an electrical phenomenon. Long term is RNA coding. When a drunk blacks out, he fucks up both kinds. It's the only kind of memory you can't recover. Gone forever. The kind of RNA that nanomachines work with. The cellular machines. Your Bobby couldn't get through, Teddy. Cause I'm a drunk. How about that, you murderous fuck?"

He lunged for me then, but the man I'd called that afternoon was with us now. With two others. They peeled him off me and stood him up and took him away.

I sat up on the edge of the bed. He took my hand and pulled me upright. I was soaked with sweat and weak as a baby.

"That was very risky," the man said. He looked quite young but there was something about him Cementhead Shedleski would have recognized. Even with the gold band on his wrist. A cop is a cop. They could have shared a beer together, and toasted the destruction of crooks. "Are you all right?"

I took an enormous swig from the bottle. "I am now," I said.

They let me keep the Bobby. I don't know why. It would have probably killed me to remove it, but I don't think that would have bothered them much. Maybe CeeNet told them to. CeeNet runs everything anyway.

Me? I earn a good buck doing consulting work for non-Changer companies. And I play the markets, with the vast advantage of CeeNet backing me up. There are only a couple hundred thousand Changers at the moment. We live on the rest of humanity like vampires. Or werewolves. Any of the shapeshifters from humanity's nightmares. That may seem wrong, but consider the alternatives.

And maybe even this will change. Perhaps we Changers will find a way to lose our paranoia, give up the murderous hoarding of our powers. I wonder, though. People don't usually relinquish the things they value without a fight. They need a push. Sometimes, I think I might have something to do with the

pushing. Down the road a bit, perhaps. I wasn't born to godhood. It gives me an edge. And a reason.

What a joke. Chandler the drunken derelict, worried about the future of mankind. But I don't know. Just because people Change doesn't mean they can't change. Like, I don't see Herbie any more. Or Cementhead Shedleski, either. I was right about that.

I don't go to Keller's.

I told Teddy DeBakey that he wasn't a drunk. He didn't have hangovers, sweats, heaves, blackouts.

Nor do I.

Maybe that's why the last time I tasted scotch was almost ten years ago. I could if I wanted to. It can't hurt me. But I don't. I get through my nights on my own now.

That's the biggest change.

And the best. Because it wasn't the Bobby.

It was me.

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