

# Looking for Rhonda Honda

William Sanders

The minute she clanked into the office I knew she was trouble.

Okay, she didn't clank, not really; body armor hasn't clanked since before I was born. But people like her always seem as if they *ought* to clank, or at least jingle a little. Maybe it's the attitude they all seem to wear with it.

She said, "You're Johnny Noir?"

I sat back in the creaking old swivel chair and looked at her. That wasn't hard work at all. She had pale skin and nice small features, maybe a little on the sharp side. Short-cropped reddish-brown hair showed beneath her squared-off black beret. She was a little on the short side, but what there was of her, under that snug-tailored black one-piece suit, looked pretty good. Of course it was hard to tell, with so much of her upper body concealed by that damned bulky vest.

Which was silly, since nobody really needs to wear that kind of heavy protective gear any more—you can buy a vest off the rack, now, capable of stopping anything short of an antitank projectile, and light and thin enough that your own tailor couldn't spot it—but then that wouldn't send the message: *My job is so important, people try to kill me to stop me from doing it.*

I couldn't guess her age. Who can, nowadays? She looked somewhere in her middle twenties, but for all I knew she was old enough to be my grandmother. For all I knew she could *be* my grandmother; the old dear had been talking lately about getting a new morph job.

I said, "Yes, I'm Johnny Noir. And you're not, are you?"

She ignored that. So much for dry humor; it wasn't my best subject at detective school. She was looking around the office with an expression that might have indicated either scorn or routine professional paranoia. I couldn't really tell with those wraparound mirror shades hiding her eyes.

She finished her inspection and looked at me again. "My name is immaterial," she said in a dry flat voice.

"You can call me Margo."

She didn't offer her hand. I had a feeling that wasn't all she wasn't going to offer. I said, "Well, Ms. Immaterial—uh, Margo—what can I do for you?"

"We need you to find somebody," she said.

"We?" I looked past her but I didn't see anybody else.

Her mouth pulled tight at the corners. "I . . . represent the interested persons," she said reluctantly. "Please don't ask questions. You'll be told everything you need to know."

She took a quick step forward and leaned across my desk. For a second I thought she was warming to the Noir charm after all, but she was merely reaching for the battered old phone. She picked it up, jabbed quickly at the buttons, and handed it to me. I held it up to my ear just as a familiar voice said, "Noir?"

"Chief." I caught myself sitting up a little straighter.

"Listen closely, Noir." The Chief's voice was high and hoarse, with an edge like a cheap steak knife. About the same as usual, in other words. "Somebody is going to tell you what she wants you to do. Do it."

I said carefully, "I see."

"The hell you do. You got no idea at *all*—Christ, *I* don't know how far up this comes from. The person in your office right now? She's not really there. Anything she says to you, you never heard. Whatever you wind up doing for the people she works for, it never happened. Am I getting through, Noir?"

I said, "Is this an order?"

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the Chief's wheezy breath. "Of course not, stupid," he said finally. "How can I order you to do something that's never going to happen, for people who don't exist? Especially when I'm not even talking to you right now."

He hung up. "Yes, *sir*," I said to the dead phone.

Margo was undoing the front of her bulletproof vest. Hope sprang to life again, but she was just getting something out of an inside pocket. "Here," she said.

She reached across my desk again, this time holding a disk which she popped into the ancient computer with a gesture that sneered. She tapped a few keys, her fingers moving faster than I could follow, and the page I'd been working on disappeared, to be replaced by a head-and-shoulders portrait of a blond-haired woman.

"This," Margo said, "is the person we want you to find."

The face that looked back at me was pretty, maybe even beautiful if you liked that tanned-SoCal-goddess look. There was a time when I would have said she was in her late teens or early twenties. Now, I wouldn't even bother trying to guess.

"She have a name?" I queried.

"Immaterial," Margo said immediately.

"Related, are you?"

Margo grimaced. "I know, but I'm serious. Her birth name really *is* immaterial, because she's not using it now."

She reached out and touched the keys again, and the picture changed to a full-length shot of what appeared to be the same woman, standing next to a purple-and-black motorcycle. She was dressed in elaborate protective gear: full snug-fitting leathers, high-topped racing boots, lace-on plastic knee and elbow guards, even a shiny perforated breastplate, all of it neatly color coordinated to match the bike. Other figures, similarly dressed, stood around in the background, or sat on other bikes.

Jesus, I thought. A roadgrrl.

"According to our information," Margo went on, "she is now known as Rhonda Honda."

Marvelous. Now it was beginning to add up. You get these cases all the time: somebody's darling daughter runs off to join a roadgrrl gang, and the distressed family wants her back. Or now and then it's somebody's darling wife; that happens too.

Damn unusual, though, for somebody like me to catch a case like this. Not if the people concerned could afford anything better . . . I said, "You know, you'd do better to take this to one of the big private agencies, like Herod Foxxe or Gabriel Mallet—they've got the staff and the facilities, I'm just a—"

"No." She was shaking her head. "We've already tried that. It's been six months now since she disappeared, and it took a private agency most of that time to find out the little we know now. You're familiar with the Peter Pick Agency?"

I nodded, repressing a couple of adjectives and a noun that came to mind. Margo said, "Their man was able to determine that she'd joined up with these bikers—"

"Roadgrrls."

"Roadgirls?" She did a kind of double take. "I'm not—"

"Roadgrrls." I pronounced it carefully for her, trying not to grin. She probably didn't know it, but she'd given her age away with that one word. Nice clean morph job, but this babe had to be at least as old as me.

"Bikers," I told her, "are a lot of overage punks who hang around cheap bars and pool halls—or nursing homes, now—and trade lies about how tough they were in the old days. Roadkids are a whole different breed."

"Yes." She nodded vigorously. "You know about these things, Noir. You worked undercover among the outlaw clubs for almost a year, when you were with the state police. Still got your own bike, don't you?" Christ, somebody knew *way* too much about me. "You can get close to these people, talk their language. That's why we picked you."

She gestured at the photo on the screen. "That was taken by the Peter Pick op just before he lost her.

Supposed to be a good man, but he let her slip away. Somewhere near Salinas, as I recall. His report's on that disk."

I studied the picture. "Just what did you have in mind, if I do find her? If you want strongarm stuff, go back to Peter Pick."

"No, no." She scaled a white card across the desk at me. It bore a hand-printed phone number. "Just call that number when you find her. Any time, day or night. We'll take it from there."

As I stowed the card in my wallet she said, "Noir—this really is important. More important than you can imagine."

"I'll give it my best."

"Of course you will." This time she actually smiled. "After all, you're a Public Investigator."

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At home, that evening, I put dinner in the microwave and fired up my computer—an old Micromac, still better than what I had at work—and checked my messages. The only new one was from my ex-wife, asking why the current alimony payment was late, and threatening various actions, including coming down and unscrewing my head, if it got any later.

I groaned and hit the reply button. *Dear Blanche*, I typed, knowing that would piss her off. Or "him," I'm supposed to say, but screw it, gendermorph be damned, I'll start going along with that the day she/he quits grabbing half my pay. . . . *As you undoubtedly know*, I wrote, *the city is broke right now. I haven't been paid for a month. You'll get yours if and when I get mine.*

I sent it off and turned off the mail, not wanting to read the reply. For God's sake, I wouldn't mind so much, but Blanche, or rather Mad Marvin, makes more from a single pro wrestling match than I make in a month.

The microwave dinged. I got my dinner out and brought it back to the little desk, balancing the hot box on my lap and eating it while reading the online news. Not that I really gave a damn, but it was a distraction from the tasteless soysteam.

Not much of the news was new. The President was still undergoing treatment for undisclosed medical

problems; the First Lady had issued another statement promising he'd be back on the job any day. I wondered why anybody gave a damn. After all, the Presidency had been an almost wholly ceremonial office for over a decade. But the public took a keen interest in the First Family and their problems; like the old British royal family, they had prestige—and money, and therefore power—all out of proportion to their legal status.

Here at home, the mayor and the city council continued to argue over whose idea it had been to invest the entire municipal treasury in Indian government bonds, two weeks before the Pakistanis nuked New Delhi into an ashtray. An Alaskan nationalist militia, a militant Kwakiutl splinter faction, and an animal-rights group had all claimed credit for last week's sinking of a Japanese fishing vessel with no survivors. The Dow-Jones showed Blood-Crip stock up and Mafia down.

Dinner finished, I poured myself a shot of bourbon for dessert, dug out Margo's disk, and pulled up the Pick op's report.

It was a very neat, professional report. Unfortunately it didn't really contain much information. The subject had definitely been identified as the person now known as Rhonda Honda. She was now riding with, and probably a member of, a motorcycle gang known as the Devil Dolls. That was all, though the Pick guy tried to pad it out to make it sound more substantial.

I punched up the full-length photo again and sat back and looked at it, remembering Margo saying "bikers." She'd better not make that mistake around any real bikers, or roadkids either, or she might find herself needing that bulletproof for real. That's one thing the two groups do have in common, besides motorcycles and attitude: they hate each other, enough to get severely physical with outsiders who confuse them.

Actually the difference is mainly one of styles and generations. Your classic biker is a traditionalist: raggedy-assed denim, heavy boots, wind-in-the-armpits vests covered with faded patches, with the rawhide-faced old mamas favoring fringed leather bras and lots of body piercings.

Roadgrrls, on the other hand, go in for the armored look: bright-colored high-tech protective gear, the kind of thing you might see on a dirt-bike racer or a hockey player. Their male counterparts prefer snug-fitting racing leathers and everybody wears spaceman-looking full-face helmets.

Even more important, while any real biker would walk before he'd ride any bike but a Harley—preferably one made before the Xiang-BMW takeover—no roadkid would be caught dead on anything that slow and old-fashioned. Their tastes run to hot Japanese and European sportbikes, preferably customized beyond recognition. This one appeared to have herself a new Honda Kamikaze.

The bourbon glass was empty. I poured myself another one. "Here's looking for you, kid," I said to the picture on the screen.

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Mike Donne said, "You know, Noir, I wonder about you sometimes."

We were sitting in his office at the Gabriel Mallet Agency. It was a lot bigger than mine; it was nearly as big as my apartment. He had on a light gray suit that had to have cost as much as I made in a month. I didn't care about the office, but I did envy him that suit. The last good suit I had, a nice Italian silk job, got ruined a year or so back by some paint-spraying animal-rights activists protesting the exploitation of silkworms.

I wouldn't have minded a morph job like his, either. He looked younger than he had when we were on the force together, a decade and a half ago. Any morph work I could afford would probably leave me looking worse than ever. Go to some cut-rate clinic, get some alcoholic doctor who switches my dick with my nose, no thanks.

Donne said, "When are you going to give it up, Noir? You're too good a detective to spend the rest of your life in a cheesy little office and a crappy old apartment."

I said, "I'm a public cop, Mike. It's what I do."

He made a disgusted face. "It's what nobody does anymore, and you damn well know it. I'm not even talking about anything new—as long as we both been alive, anybody who really wanted something guarded went to a private security outfit, or if they wanted somebody caught they hired a bounty hunter. Hell, they had private contractors running jails, clear back last century. We're just seeing the logical development of trends."

He snorted. "Haven't you been paying attention to what's going on? The city's broke, the state's in receivership, and the United States is a geographical expression. The President is a figurehead and lately he doesn't even bother showing up to make speeches and wave at parades. Face it, Noir, the public sector has had it. Why should cops be exempt?"

Donne shook his head. "It's the twenty-twenties, Noir. It's the day of the corporation. Forget the old days," he added angrily. "I was there too, remember? But it's *over*."

He sounded really pissed off. Probably I made him uncomfortable. Most of the corporate ops despise public detectives, regarding us as low-rent losers or worse; Donne was one of the few who'd even talk to

me.

"All the same," he went on, "you're right, this business with the missing babe smells funny. I'll check into it. Kid down in the basement owes me a couple of favors, he can hack into anything."

"Thanks," I said, getting up.

"No sweat. Call me this evening at home, I'll let you know if I've turned up anything. Be careful," he said as I started for the door. "These people sound like bad news."

"There's some other kind?" I said. "Like you say, this is the twenties."

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"Devil Dolls," Crazy Norm said, "yeah, sure, new club. They split off from Hell's Belles last year."

He glanced furtively over his shoulder as he spoke. It was midafternoon and the bar was half empty, nobody close enough to overhear us, but Crazy Norm had to have his little drama.

"I've done business with them," he added. Crazy Norm was one of the biggest hot-bike-parts dealers on the Coast. "Don't really know much about them, though. Why?"

I pulled out the photo of Rhonda Honda, which I had printed out last night. "Sorry," he said after a glance. "Never seen her with the Dolls or anywhere else."

Up at the bar one of the customers groaned. The television set at the end of the bar was showing a talking-head of the First Lady. "Our next guest," she was saying, "is the well-known—"

"Loudmouthed bitch," another customer said. "Hey, Ray, shut her off."

There was a chorus of agreement. The bartender reached over and the voice ceased. The picture, though, remained, and as the camera pulled back to a waist-up shot there were appreciative murmurs and whistles. The First Lady's talk show might be unpopular with this crowd, but her latest morph job had been spectacularly successful, and she was visibly not wearing a bra.



"What you oughta do," Crazy Norm said, "try Coyote Bay. Big rally and swap meet this weekend, all the clubs will be there. Better watch your ass if you do go," he added. "One wrong move around those roadgrrls, you could wind up getting a free gendermorph job, know what I'm saying?"

I thanked him for his concern and stood up to go. As I left, the guys at the bar were still trading remarks about the First Lady's new knockers.

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I called Donne as soon as I got home. "Noir," he said, sounding relieved. "Glad you called. Listen, I—"

He paused. "Huh," he said after a moment. "Thought I heard something . . . anyway," he continued, "it was no sweat getting into Peter Pick's files. Turns out we've been hacking their confidential records, and all the other major agencies', for years. Been a very valuable resource."

"I can imagine."

"Yeah. But what you can't imagine is what I turned up today. Your little friend in the bulletproof? You'll never guess who she works for." His voice dropped. "Two words. Fur—"

Modern silencers are very efficient; with a good one, properly fitted, there is no sound at all. What can't be silenced, however, is the sound a bullet makes hitting human flesh and bone. It's not loud, but it's very distinctive. Even over a telephone.

Donne stopped speaking. Then he said again, in a very weak voice, "*Fur—*"

A clatter in my ear said he'd dropped the phone. There was a heavy thud, as of something heavy hitting the floor. Something about the size and weight of a medium-sized private detective.

The phone clicked off. A moment later I was standing there listening to a dial tone.

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The sun was going down out over the Pacific when I pulled into the storage park where I kept the bike.

I was keeping it in a rented lockup partly because things like motorcycles tend to walk away where I live, and partly to keep my ex from grabbing it for back alimony. I swung the metal door open and stepped inside. The big black Suzuki looked like a space ship in the dim light. Reddish sunlight winked off

chrome.

Everything looked okay. It should; I'd spent enough money and sweat keeping it that way. The Suzuki GSX1300 Hayabusa was the fastest street bike made during the last century, and there weren't many left. It was easily the most valuable thing I owned.

I pushed it out onto the concrete drive and climbed aboard. I'd already changed into my old black racing leathers, back at the house. I stuck the key in the ignition and pulled full choke and thumbed the button. The starter whined and then the engine burst into full heavy-metal song. A little while later I was sitting at an Interstate Corporation tollbooth, counting out money under the supercilious single eye of the robot attendant.

I didn't try to get very far that night. All I wanted right now was to get clear of the city. Whoever had hit Mike Donne might or might not be looking for me, but I wasn't hanging around to find out. Or waiting till the body was found and the Mallet people cranked up their we-avenge-our-own machinery. They'd want to ask me some questions, and they wouldn't be nice about it, especially if they didn't like the answers. My badge wouldn't mean a thing, either; the giant conglomerate that owned the Mallet Agency could buy and sell the city, PD and all, out of petty cash.

And I didn't even have a gun. The Department's insurance company had made us stop carrying them.

Up beyond Obispo I got off the payslab and found a cheap motel. I didn't get much sleep. Mostly I lay there in the dark muttering, "Fur?"

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Coyote Bay might once have been an actual functioning town; now it was nothing but a collection of dilapidated buildings, most of them empty and boarded up, strung along the ruined old coastal highway, between rusting railroad tracks and a narrow strip of beach.

But by the time I pulled in off the toll road, around noon the next day, Coyote Bay had become quite a bustling place. Roadkids were everywhere, riding slowly up and down the sand-blown street, sitting on parked bikes, or just wandering about on foot. The air reverberated with the crackling blare of high-revving engines and non-stock exhausts.

Here and there, dubious-looking characters sat or stood next to folding tables or parked pickup trucks, displaying various odds and ends—motorcycle parts and accessories, weapons, drugs, even lingerie, most of it either illegal or, almost certainly, hot—for sale or trade.

I stopped the Suzuki in front of an abandoned motel and stood for a few minutes studying the crowd. It was a warm day, and lots of the guys had peeled off their leathers and were walking around in T-shirts and shorts. The roadgrrls, though, weren't about to lose their cherished look for anything so trivial as comfort; their bright-colored outfits definitely added something to the scene.

It was quite a gathering; I recognized clubs from all up and down the Coast: Vampires, Roadkill, Black Widows—you don't want to hear about *their* admission requirements—even a big contingent of Road Goths in their distinctive outfits, faces painted white and bits of tattered black lace trailing from beneath flat-black armor. A couple of shaven-headed young grrls strolled past, holding hands and leading a Dalmatian puppy on a leash; the spiky lettering on their breastplates read VENICE BYKEDYKES.

Finding the Devil Dolls was simple enough. From the minute I put the sidestand down, the old Suzuki began collecting a fascinated little crowd; as I'd hoped, riding in on a classic bike was enough to get me at least temporary acceptance, even though a blind man could have spotted me for an outsider. I sat there and answered technical questions for a few minutes, while jocks and grrls gathered around and goggled; then I asked my question.

"The Dolls?" A husky roadjock in skin-tight pink leathers stepped from the crowd, everybody moving hurriedly out of his way; the Oscar Wilde Motor Corps are easily the most dangerous gang in the state and their members get the kind of total respect the old Angels used to. "Sure, they're here. Camping down at the south end of the beach. What do you want with *them*?" His plucked eyebrows went up about an inch. "No accounting for *tastes*, I suppose. . . ."

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"Camping" was an overstatement; the Dolls, like most of the other groups present, had merely picked themselves an area and occupied it. A couple of plastic tarps had been set up as sunshades, and a few sleeping bags and blanket rolls lay scattered about on the sand. Roughly in the middle of the area were the blackened remains of a big driftwood fire. That was just about it.

I stopped the Suzuki at the edge of the weed-cracked concrete parking lot that bordered on the beach. Down here, the sand had piled up into a line of low dunes dotted with scrubby bushes.

A few yards away, a line of shiny parked sportbikes gleamed in the sun. I gave them a brief scan, but there were at least a dozen or so that might have been the one in the photo; evidently purple and black were the Devil Dolls' club colors.

Out on the beach and among the dunes, roadgrrls wandered about, drinking beer and passing joints and talking, or lay stretched out on blankets in the sun. Here, on their own staked-out turf, several of them had felt secure enough to shed their silly plastic protective gear in favor of cutoff shorts and T-shirts, or bikinis—with or without tops—or, in a couple of cases, nothing at all.

Believe it or not, though, that wasn't what got my attention.

Nearby, a grrl stood leaning against the half-demolished metal guardrail that separated the parking lot from the beach. Her back was to me and I couldn't see her face, but everything else set off recognition signals: long blond hair, purple-and-black armor—

Maybe this was going to be easier than I'd expected.

I shut off the engine and said, "Excuse me," and she turned to face me and so much for *that*. Nose too big, mouth too wide, eyebrows too heavy; not even close.

I said, "Sorry, my mistake. I was looking for Rhonda Honda."

"Nah, man." Flat drawn-out *a*'s, Boston girl a long way from home. "My name's Vonda. That's Rhonda Honda ovah yondah."

I started to ask her to say that again. Then I was afraid she would. Shaking my own head, feeling a desire to hit it sharply a couple of times, I looked where Vonda was pointing.

And sure enough, there she was, the grrl from the picture. I wondered why I hadn't spotted her before. She stood out like a racing greyhound in a pack of mutts, and not just because she was a good six inches taller than the rest. Easily half of the other roadgrrls on the beach had that same leggy-blonde look, but it was as if somebody had been practicing and then finally got it right.

She was walking along between a couple of other Dolls, a redhead and another blonde, and swigging a can of beer. I watched her for a moment, trying to decide on my next move. Truthfully, I hadn't thought things out beyond this point.

As it turned out she was the one who saved me from overloading my brain any further. Suddenly she glanced my way and her face broke into a blinding smile. "Oh, hey," she cried, "check it out!" And came running across the sand toward me, shoulder guards clacking, while the others turned to stare.

It wasn't, of course, my smoldering good looks that had pushed her button; her eyes were fixed on the

Suzuki. "Wow," she breathed as she stopped beside the front wheel, and hunkered down for a better look at the engine. "It's beautiful—"

The other Dolls were moving in now, bunching up in a semicircle behind her, looking at the bike and then, with considerably less admiration, at me. "Who's this asshole?" somebody asked, not bothering to lower her voice.

The one named Vonda said, "He was askin' about Rhonda."

It was a nasty moment. I could feel them all tensing, practically crouching to spring. Various sharp shiny implements began to appear, amid a clicking and clattering of flick blades and butterfly handles. My insides felt very loose. For all the superficial fun-in-the-sun look of the scene, this was a bad spot for anybody—particularly male—who didn't belong. These were no Girl Scouts; they weren't into sitting around the campfire singing old songs and roasting wienies—but one wrong step and they'd be roasting mine.

I said to Rhonda, "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

A big, seriously mean-looking brunette said, "No way, man. What the fuck you think—"

Rhonda was getting up. "It's all right, Donna." She tilted her head toward the nearby road. "Want to go for a ride? I'd like to see what that thing will do."

A few minutes later we were roaring off down the old coastal highway, Rhonda in the lead. Right away it was clear she knew what she was doing. She laid the purple-and-black bike over till her knees almost scraped the crumbling concrete, and she blasted out of the turns like a rocket. Keeping up with her took all my concentration; the road had become a very narrow place and the horizon kept tilting at unreasonable angles.

Not that we were going flat-out by any means; like every other public road in the state, this one was too gnarled and potholed for real balls-to-the-wall riding. But we were going damn fast, all the same, engines shrieking like bugged banshees; and then as she led the way into a long blind turn I picked up a change in the note of her exhaust, and her shoulders hunched as if bracing for something. Without pausing to think about it I downshifted fast and rolled off the throttle and clamped down hard on the brakes.

Rhonda's Honda was already sliding to a smoking, fishtailing stop. The Suzuki's greater weight took me on past her and for a sickening moment I thought it was all over, but then the brakes took hold and the big bike stopped dead.

Just beyond the front tire, the pavement ended in a jagged break, clear across the roadway. Thirty or forty feet away, the other half of the earthquake-shattered bridge hung over a deep rocky gorge. I could have spat over the handlebars into the gap.

Rhonda Honda pulled off her helmet and grinned at me. She tossed her head, making that long blonde hair flare and bounce for a moment. "All *right*," she said.

I stared at her, momentarily speechless. Had she just tried to kill me? Or was this merely her idea of a good laugh? Her face gave nothing away; her smile was innocent as an upper-middle-class baby's.

She said, "So why were you looking for me?"

I returned her grin, trying to look much cooler than I felt. "There was a guy asking around about you," I told her. "Down in the city, a couple weeks ago."

"And you thought you'd get a reward for finding me?" The smile went away very fast.

"Nah." I shrugged. "He didn't say anything about a reward. But he had this picture and, well, you looked cute, okay? I just wanted to meet you."

It sounded phony as hell to me, and I only tried it because I couldn't think of anything else. But after a second her face cleared and she said, "Why, that's sweet. I'm flattered."

She laughed. "Only I'm afraid you had a long ride for nothing. See, I've got . . . a girlfriend, you know? Donna. You kind of met her, back there."

"Oh." I managed to look disappointed. "Sorry."

"That's all right." She started her engine. "Come on. I'll ride back with you."

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I spent the rest of the day skulking about Coyote Bay, trying to figure out what to do now. I still had the number Margo had given me, but I wasn't ready to call in yet. Not until I had some answers, and right now I wasn't even sure what the questions were.

As the setting sun began to turn the ocean red, I wandered over to where a couple of locals had set up an outdoor grill and were serving greasy soyburgers at extortionate prices. I bought one, handing a fifty across the counter and getting a dirty look and a handful of small bills back. I walked away, munching on the burger and counting my change. I wouldn't have been surprised to find I'd been shorted, but it was all there.

I fanned the bills out, idly, and looked at them, thinking how little they bought compared to when I was younger. Now, I wondered why they even bothered printing anything smaller than fives. Even the new Richard Nixon three-dollar notes were barely worth carrying. Dead Presidents, it seemed, weren't what they used to be. Just like live ones—

I stopped, feeling the world miss a shift.

"No," I said out loud.

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"You see," I told Rhonda Honda, "this old friend of mine died yesterday."

We were down at the end of the beach, in between a couple of dunes. It was dark now. Behind me, on the other side of the dune, I could hear occasional shouts and laughter: the Devil Dolls, settling in for the evening's partying.

They hadn't been happy to see me again; the one called Donna had made some very detailed threats, in fact, before Rhonda got her pacified. I hoped she stayed that way. Things were intense enough as it was.

Rhonda turned to face me. She'd shed most of her roadgrrl outfit now, all but her shoulder and shin guards, with shorts and a bikini top. Her flawless skin shone silver in the starlight.

"Yeah. He died trying to tell me something. *Fur*," I said, turning the helmet in my hands. "That was what I heard. Didn't make any sense. A shipment of hot furs? Animal-rights terrorists? What?"

I wished now I hadn't waited till dark. I'd have liked a better look at her facial expression.

"But he wasn't saying *fur*, was he? I didn't get it till just a little while ago . . . *First Family*," I said, "that's what he was trying to say, wasn't it? That's who's looking for Rhonda Honda, and doing everything necessary—including killing people—to make sure the whole thing stays secret."

She took a step backward. Even in the deep shadow between the dunes I could see the whites of her eyes.

"So I ask myself, what's the story? Runaway First Family offspring? We haven't seen the President's daughter in the news lately, have we? But then we haven't had a White House sex scandal in a long time, either. Another young intern who couldn't resist the Presidential charm? Maybe even carrying a little addition of her own to the Family—"

From the darkness Margo's voice said, "You ask too many questions, Noir. I warned you about that."

She came walking around the dune, stepping carefully in the loose sand. In that black outfit she was almost invisible, but the starlight was enough to pick up the flash of her teeth. And the gun in her hand.

"Margo." Rhonda Honda's voice carried tones of an old familiarity. "I should have known he was one of yours."

"Mine?" Margo laughed shortly. "Just temporary help, that's all." She looked at me. "Bad help, too. You were supposed to call in when you found her. Not take her for starlight walks and pour out your pathetic heart."

She gave a contemptuous snort. "Of course we weren't stupid enough to depend on your following orders. Your Chief warned us you weren't a team player." Her left hand came up, holding a small shiny object between thumb and fingertips. "So I put this little tracker on your bike. That's not much of a lock on that storage shed, Noir."

Rhonda Honda said, "I'm not going with you. You can't make me."

"Sure you are." Margo's voice was almost warm. "And sure I can. Don't be silly."



She tossed the beeper aside and made a quick gesture. Half a dozen bulky, dark-suited forms materialized from the back of the dune.

"I've brought some help," Margo told Rhonda, "in case they're needed. But I hope you're not going to be difficult. It's over, you know that. And if you make a fuss," she added, "call for help or anything silly like that, you'll just cause a lot of your new friends to get hurt."

One of the men behind her said, "Want me to go get the car?"

Margo shook her head. "Too conspicuous, with all these damned motorbikes around. No, we'll all just go for a nice quiet little walk."

"Bring this guy along too?"

"Oh, yes." Margo gave me a bright smile. "Noir's a loose end. A *talkative* loose end. Can't have that."

"You can't do this," Rhonda Honda protested.

"Oh, stop snivelling," Margo said impatiently. "We can do anything we want, you of all people know that. Now then—"

That was when Donna came charging out of the dark, knees and elbows, plastic armor clattering, screaming like a whole ward full of madwomen. God knows how long she'd been there, or what she was doing there in the first place. Maybe she'd followed Rhonda and me out of jealous suspicion.

Margo half-turned, the pistol coming up in her hand. I threw the helmet at her, a clumsy underhanded pitch that missed by a foot but was still good enough to throw her aim off; the gun muzzle flashed—no sound—and then Donna hit her like a first-string offensive blocking back taking out a dangerous tackle. You could have heard the impact a block away.

The pistol flew from Margo's hand as she went down, and I fielded it in time to snap a shot at the nearest man in black, who was hauling out some sort of machine pistol. He went down and I threw a couple more slugs at his buddies, who were scattering out among the dunes. Something popped past my ear,

though I didn't hear any bang. These people must have gotten a quantity deal on silencers.

By now there was plenty of racket coming from behind me; the Devil Dolls had finally realized something was going on. There were high-pitched shouts and curses and a man's voice cried, "Oh, *shit*, look out—" On the ground at my feet, Margo and Donna were rolling over and over, grappling and punching. Neither of them seemed to be doing much damage; they were both too well armored for serious catfighting.

I emptied the pistol in the general direction of the bad guys, threw it away, and grabbed Rhonda Honda by the wrist. "Come on," I told her. "Time to get out of here."

We ran around the dune and almost collided with a trio of Devil Dolls going the other way; one had a length of chain, one carried what looked like a machete, and the third—who appeared to be entirely naked—was brandishing a big chunk of driftwood. They paid us no mind; they were in a hurry to get in on the fun.

The Suzuki still stood where I'd left it. I mounted up and hit the button, hearing Rhonda's Honda come alive behind me.

\* \* \*

A mile or so east of Coyote Bay I pulled over and cut the engine. She eased to a stop beside me and we looked at each other. "Well," she said. "Thanks, whoever you are."

She glanced up the road, in the direction of the payslab. "Riding south?"

I nodded. She said, "Then I guess this is where we—"

I said, "I'm not playing the sap for you, Mr. President."

For a second she went absolutely rigid. Then she sort of sagged, all over. "God," she said in a totally different voice. "You knew?"

"I just figured it out. Too much heavy action for a simple First Family runaway or another Presidential bedroom scandal. Who'd go to all that trouble—let alone kill—to keep the lid on something that ordinary?"

I looked her up and down. "Nice morph job. Only six months?"

She shrugged. "I always was a quick healer."

"You've got to go back," I said. "Back to Washington, back to the job and the Family. I won't give you any speeches about how it's your duty. It's just the only way you'll be safe."

"I'm not letting them change me back," she said flatly. "No matter what."

"Who said you had to? I'm no student of history," I said, "but even I could list a lot of antics your predecessors got up to, every bit as outrageous as this, and the public loved it. And they'll love this."

I looked her over again. "Of course you're going to have to lose the ensemble, and the rest of the roadgirl bit. I mean, there are limits. How'd you get into that, anyway?"

"I figured it was the last place anybody would look for me. And I rode bikes a lot when I was younger, only quit because they said it was bad for my image. . . . What about the First Lady?"

"What about her? She can discover she's always liked girls—that'll work, everybody likes lesbian celebrities. If she can't handle it you can dump her. She's not very popular, you know."

"That's true. The last poll showed she was hurting my ratings." Rhonda rubbed her face thoughtfully. "You really think I can get away with it?"

"Getting away with it," I said, "is the American way."

\* \* \*

I never saw her again. At least not in person; like everybody else I watched her coming-out press conference, and I followed the news long enough to satisfy myself that I'd been right. The public ate it up; the Presidential ratings hit an all-time high. And when the First Lady revealed that she had always preferred to lead when she danced, her own popularity went up too.

Me? I went back to L.A., back to the job and the life. I thought I might catch some trouble, but nobody bothered me. Nobody even said anything to me about the whole business. After all, none of it had ever happened.

You can sweep anything under the rug if you've got a big enough broom.

A couple of weeks later my ex showed up and tried to kill me. But that's another story.