

Excerpt from *Armchair Detective*

By

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I had the prepaid cell phone on the seat beside me. Huxley had provided that so he could keep in touch with me, and in case I had some emergency and needed to call him. It was a source of embarrassment for me that I didn't have something as fundamental as a cell phone, but Huxley seemed to understand, and displayed no judgment on it. Until now, I saw little reason to have one. Who would I call? I kept to myself and didn't have any real friends here.

Next to the cell phone, lay the .45 caliber Ruger SP-101. The gun was not for shooting anyone, necessarily, but for self-defense, or leverage to get out of any sticky situation that might arise. I wasn't afraid of guns; I was quite good at handling them and hitting targets. I used to have a bumper sticker that read, *Guns don't kill people, People kill people*. I hoped that no people would kill other people tonight.

Yawning and stretching for the umpteenth time, I frowned down into the too-expensive cardboard cup with the well-known logo. The too-expensive coffee that had been in it was now cold. I grunted into the dark liquid, rolling down the window to catch some air. Though balmy, as if August wasn't sure it wanted to be September, a cool breeze periodically felt like Freon on my skin; something I was not used to in the pre-air conditioning era of the Falcon. I sucked on my eCig, and watched the wind catch a wayward cheeseburger wrapper and propel it through the parking garage as I worked at the knot

in my neck.

What was taking so long? Were we being stood-up? Stacey's goons might be toying with us. So this could all be for nothing. Or something could already be going awry, and that hundred bucks would seem less and less equitable.

I could see that surveillance work was tedious. Anyone who would sit in a parked car for hours and drink expensive coffee, waiting for something that might never happen, was not in it for the excitement. That wasn't the reason I wanted to take up the investigative vocation; though inexperienced, I did understand there was little glamor to be had, here. Hopefully not just the coffee. But the events of my near-past segued naturally into the job. I needed a source of income, and couldn't risk doing anything I'd done before. Presumably, I was on my way to something that might release me from the tethers of the past. Still, it was my first case, and I felt a little naked.

I checked the layout in my head against the one in front of me. Second level, row C. I could see row A, near the elevator, about 50 yards in front of me and to my left. *So where the hell is—*

Just then, Huxley's black Mercury Sable pulled into Row A and parked. Somewhere in the parking deck, I heard an engine start, and faint music playing, and soon, a silver Toyota 4Runner was moving toward Huxley's car. *Ah, the delivery boy.* The SUV backed into the space beside the Sable. Its driver probably wanted to be able to make a quick exit if things got dicey.

I dropped my eCig in the seat, and slid down, peeking over the dash at the blond man who leaned over to open the passenger door. Huxley got out, carrying the bank bag of cash, and got in, closing the

door. I heard the music get louder when the door was open, and knew the guy must have kept his radio on in case Huxley intended to record anything.

Using my binoculars, I got a good look at him. He wiped at his upper lip, his attention scampering around the garage, and I ducked when his gaze came my direction.

It was too dark for him to see me, as I'd been careful to stay away from the lights that were mounted at infrequent intervals on concrete pillars and crossbeams. And I had taken a moment to stand on the roof of the Falcon and unscrew the light above the crossbeam over me. Still, I didn't want to take any chances on this case for the same reason I parked my butt and read reference manuals for hours on end. The pain was worth the gain. Maybe.

While I waited, I had an idea. Truly inspired. I removed the overhead bulb inside the Falcon and then my hand darted for the handle. I bumped my coffee in its holder on the door. The brown liquid splashed onto the top of my left Doc Marten, and ran into my sock. "Shit," I growled, kneeing the door open quietly, and stepping out. Pushing the door closed firmly, I headed for the 4Runner in a crouch, periodically shaking my sodden foot in an effort to drain the spill. The glow from the lamps moved over me, bright, then dim, as I traveled between the cars, my attention momentarily snagged by the '66 Galaxie, waiting in all its antiquity for my adoring eyes as I passed by. I toyed with the image of the car with a new paint-job and some bodywork. The general population didn't appreciate the value of these sturdy old behemoths; probably because they've never realized the true potential of a large back seat.

I ducked lower to travel the expanse of the

concrete wall behind the Toyota 4Runner, until I reached a spot directly behind it. Careful to time it so that I couldn't be seen in the rearview, I hurdled the concrete wall and crept over to the passenger side tire, taking out the tire gauge. Placing the pin on the valve stem, I liberating the tire of its air. I knew he wouldn't hear it closed up in that SUV with the radio on.

Then I hurried back down to the bottom of the ramp and crossed over, and up the other side, hiding behind a concrete pillar, watching, and waiting.

Momentarily, Huxley got out, carrying a manila envelope, got in his Sable, and drove out of the garage.

The blond man began to pull away too, but paused as he felt the flat tire. He put the 4Runner in park and got out, looking at the tires on his side, and then headed for the other side. Finding the flat, he cursed loudly, and retrieved the keys to open the hatch. As he moved to the rear of the vehicle, I got out and shuffled toward the SUV, my head down below the cars. Thankfully, he had left the driver's door open. When he opened the hatch and peered in, I dashed over, leaned inside the cab and snatched the green zippered bank bag. *Pretty easy so far.*

And it would have been the perfect ruse. But I have always had a strange intolerance for certain colognes, and I could smell the pungent odor of his, in the cab of the Toyota. In the inexplicable way that luck has a way of turning, I sensed a tickle in my nose, and before I could think about it, I sneezed.

The blond man's head popped out from behind the hatch, and our eyes met, his darting to the bank bag I held, and back up to my, no doubt, stunned expression.

I launched into full-throttle retreat, first heading

for the Falcon, but the last thing I needed was for him to be able to identify the car I was driving, and besides, I wouldn't have had time to get in and drive away before he caught me. He was tall with long legs. Instead, I headed for the lower ramp, but he had jumped the wall and was running parallel to me, attempting to cut me off at the pass.

Turning to check his location, I didn't see the car fender until I rammed my knee into it. Cursing, I jerked away at the popping sound, freezing for a nanosecond, then scanning to my right and behind me at the hole in the side of the Oldsmobile. "Holy shit!"

Looking back at him running up the incline, I saw that he held a pistol in front of him, and was firing as he ran. Several more shots whizzed past me.

Recognizing the need to put something between me and that flying lead, I vaulted to the hood of the Olds' in true Rockfordesque style, and rolled over, falling off the other side, landing hard upon the pavement near the front tire, the smell of oil assaulting my nose. A searing pain shot through my side, and with great chagrin I felt the re-injury of my ribs; they had finally healed, and now I might be back in walking-wounded status. I raised myself painfully and squinted into the early morning darkness at the Falcon: my only hope for escape.

His advancing foot steps told me I was a clay pigeon, not yet airborne, but loaded in the trap machine, with a stranger's finger on the release mechanism. I took as much breath as I could into my lungs in order to force myself to stand—the adrenaline dulling the pain in my side. I came up off the pavement and sprinted across the lot, my shoulder blades pulling together in anticipation of the bullets that would soon riddle me like the Delta

88. I was pretty sure the guy was using the type of pistol usually found on any given gang member. No one would think anything about a random shooting in this neighborhood. Gang initiations were common. *Poor girl. She didn't have a chance.*

I tried not to look at the Falcon as I ran past it. Instead I headed up the opposite ramp, on the far side of the matching concrete wall.

Crouching there for a moment, I surveyed the area. An exit ramp was nearby, but I knew I wouldn't make it with condition of my knee and ribs. My eyes darted to the large trash receptacle by the wall, in front of a big buttress. *Please, God.* I limped over, pried the lid off, and found just enough room in the garbage sack to nestle myself inside, and pull the lid back over me.

This is a mistake. This won't work. He'll know I'm in here. Fuck! What was I thinking? Trying to breathe through my mouth as quietly as possible, I waited, my heart pounding so hard, I was sure it was vibrating the trash can.

His foot steps got louder for a few seconds, and then stopped. I could hear him breathing. Cursing. He was so close. After an almost unbearable silence, I was jostled by the impact of his foot on the side of the receptacle. *Oh shit. I'm dead. He knows.*

