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The bar was over in West Oakland. Just a squat block of concrete sitting in a parking lot. Neon Bud Light signs threw blue light over a dozen beat-up cars and trucks parked in front. I'd never been. Probably never go again. I pulled up at the edge of the lot, on the outskirts of the lights. Cut the engine of the red Aprilia motorcycle I was on. I walked in. Early side of a Friday night, just past nine. A half-dozen rough-looking men sat at the bar, another few at tables, and two shooting pool. Only one other girl. She was half of a couple wedged into a dark corner booth, a pitcher of beer in between them. She had a nose ring. I'd always wondered if nose rings were as painful as they looked.

I stood at the bar. "Heineken."

"That's five dollars." The bartender was a big, paunchy guy, better side of fifty, graying hair. He eyed me without bothering to hide it. So did the rest of the bar. So what.

I took the beer, took a swig, headed into the ladies'. The smell of Lysol and floor polisher. Stared into the chipped mirror and took a careful look at myself. I was tall, five foot eight. Taller with the heavy motorcycle boots I wore. I smoothed out my auburn hair from the helmet. I'd never be called skinny, but I kept my body toned. I looked over my tight stonewashed jeans, and a black, scoop-necked tank top under an unzipped black leather bomber jacket. A touch of shadow around my green eyes. A touch of red lipstick I'd never ordinarily wear. I looked okay.

I could start.

I headed over to the pool table. Threw a quarter on the table. "Next up," I said.

The two men playing were about my age, thirty-three. They gave me that hungry look that men give women. Predatory, almost. As though they wanted to snap me up in a quick bite. As though by talking to them I'd walked up and nibbled on an earlobe, whispered something dirty. The taller one held his cue casually in one hand. Turned back to the table. He wore a backward black-and-silver Raiders hat. Aimed carefully and sank the final stripe ball. Hitting harder than he needed to. Men did, usually. Only the really good players were able to resist the temptation of shooting hard, showing off. He aimed again. Shot a bit slower, the white ball glancing off the eight and sending it softly into a pocket. Game.

He turned back to me. "You're up, then." Started to bend to put quarters in. "I'm challenging. My dime."

He stopped and shrugged. "Suit yourself."

I took my quarter off the table and three more from my pocket. Set my purse next to my beer and bent to put the coins in. Could feel the whole bar staring at my ass in the tight jeans. I racked.

"You know how to hold a stick?" his friend asked me. Leering as he said it, emphasis on stick. Shorter, a beer gut hanging over a stained T-shirt. Like his question would make me want to take him into the bathroom for a quick hand job. I didn't bother to answer. Just went over to the rack, pulled the straightest-looking cue, rolled it on the table. Seen better days, but it would do.

"You play for kisses, honey?" This from my soon-to-be opponent. Raiders Hat. The same shit, every bar in the country, probably. Every bar in the world.

I looked up at him. "I want to make out with someone, I'll go to prom."

"Playing tough," he said, like I was flirting. "But you all warm up eventually."

I kept my eyes on him. "I don't play tough. I play for money. Unless you just want to play for drinks. Your table. Your call."

When I said that, he didn't have a choice. "I don't usually take money from girls."

I reached into my back pocket. Threw a fifty-dollar bill on the table. "Smallest I got."

He exchanged a look with his friend. Wondering.

The bar was watching us.

Good.

“Fine.” He fumbled in his wallet. Put down two twenties and a ten. “I break.”

When money was down people always woke up a bit. He hit a good break. Sunk two solids and got lucky on the roll. Made another two before missing a midrange bank shot. Which put him about at par for the kind of pool players found in any bar that had a table. Not really bad, not really good. Average. That was fine. The first game wasn't really about winning. More about finding out what kind of things the other person wanted to do and how likely it was he could pull them off. Winning was secondary.

I took a big swallow of beer and ran half the table without saying a word.

Gentle, unhurried. Letting each shot position itself for the next one. Sequential. One move setting up the next. Thinking not about what I was doing but about what I wanted to do next. The balls making polite little clicks across the scuffed green felt. They said the only thing that separated amateur chess players from the grandmasters was how many moves ahead they could see. Pool was like that, a little, I'd always figured.

When I missed he took his cue up with a resolved look in his eyes. Focused. Seeing he had more than a pretty ass on his hands and not wanting to lose his fifty bucks. I didn't blame him. I'd never met anyone who liked losing money.

He shot and missed. Nerves, maybe. More people were watching now.

I was feeling good. Easy. Relaxed. Ran the other half of the stripes. Tapped the far corner pocket with my cue, aimed at the eight, not saying a word.

Sank it softly. Game.

I took his money off the table and pocketed it. Left my fifty on the table. “You want to try to get your money back, Jack?”

He was pissed now. “Hell yeah I do. And this time I'm gonna try.”

“Money down, then. You lost. Rack 'em.”

I left my fifty-dollar bill sitting there like I didn't have a care in the world. Went over to the bar. “Shot of Jameson and another beer.”

An older guy leered over. He wore a Warriors T-shirt and had potato chip crumbs across his chin. “That's nice of you, sweetheart. You didn't have to buy me anything.”

I didn't bother to even look at him, just skewered him with my silence. His face reddened and he turned his eyes back to the counter. I knocked the

whiskey back. Threw one of Raiders Hat's twenties on the bar and walked away with the beer, not bothering to ask for change.

He had racked the balls but left a centimeter of space between the lead ball and the rest of the triangle. Trying to be sneaky. Which meant he didn't think he could beat me fair. I went over and took the triangle and reracked without a word.

"Must've rolled," he said, embarrassed. Caught.

"Must have," I said. "Money down."

He fumbled with his wallet again. This time the bills were smaller, a few dollar bills making up the last of the fifty. I took a swallow of cold beer and broke. By this time most of the men in the bar had drifted around the table.

"Little firecracker has a shot."

"Wonder if she's this good at other things."

"I could watch her bend over all night long, tell you that much."

I ignored them. Beat Raiders Hat again. Took his money. He was done. He eased his way toward a wall and slouched against it.

His beer-bellied friend wanted to take me on next. Maybe vengeance, maybe to stare down my cleavage some more. What did I care. I took twenty dollars off him because that was all he had.

Then I saw him.

He must have walked in while I was wrapping up the last game, because I hadn't seen him at the door. He leaned on the bar with a beer in front of him. I checked my watch. 10:40.

I went over to the jukebox. Men watching me. Took more quarters out of my pocket. Dialed in a Rolling Stones song. Walked back to the table. Moving my hips a bit this time. Took a long, slow sip of my beer. "Who's up?"

I beat someone else. One of them. I didn't care who it was. The man who had come in had settled in at the bar but was watching the little crowd at the pool table with curiosity. Watching me. Wondering. I had his attention.

I took my money off the table. "I'm thirsty. Table's open. I'm done."

Back to the bar. Took my jacket off for the first time. Sat down near him, one empty stool between us. It was him, all right. A couple of years older than me. A thickset guy with a black goatee and dull eyes. Broad shoulders, blue-green tattoos running down both forearms.

I caught the bartender's eye. "Another Heineken. And another shot."

This time I didn't take the shot right away. Left it on the bar, sipped my beer, and stared into the chipped wood. Someone had carved initials into the

surface. RS & CJ 4EVER. I wondered if RS and CJ were still together. My money was on no.

“They say it’s bad manners to drink alone.”

I looked over. Directly, for the first time since he’d walked in. “Who says?”

He laughed. “They. The fuck who. I have no idea.”

“So have a drink.”

“Think I will.” He nodded at the bartender. “A shot of whatever she’s having, Teddy. Both on me.”

“No,” I corrected. “I pay for my drinks.”

He looked at me, surprised. “Never known a woman to turn down a free drink.”

“First time for everything.”

“Guess you can afford it with that pool action you got going on.”

“I could afford it when I walked in. Still can.”

He laughed again. “You’re a little sparkplug, ain’t you?”

“You don’t know me,” I said.

“But I could.”

“Could?”

“Know you. Better, anyway.”

“If?”

His turn to shrug. “If we keep talking, I guess.”

I held up my shot. “Cheers.”

We clinked shot glasses. Drank.

“Haven’t seen you in here before,” he commented.

“That’s because I’ve never been in here before.”

“Why tonight?”

I traced a red-painted nail through the wood scarring in front of me, wondering again about RS and CJ. “Do you really care?”

“Not really.”

“Exactly. I’m here. You’re here. Why search for origin?”

“Fair enough.” He looked up at the bartender. “Two more. She pays for hers.” Turned to me. “Who says you can’t teach an old dog new tricks?”

“You an old dog?”

He threw a wink my way. “Not too old.”

“Then maybe we’ll try and teach you a few tricks.”

Two more Jamesons. We drank.

"I'm bored," I said. Slid off my barstool without looking back. Back to the jukebox. Put on a slower song. "Love Me Two Times," by the Doors. Started moving slowly by myself near the machine. Eyes on me, the whole bar. I felt him behind me. Sensed it. Like I was watching him through the back of my head. Felt a big hand tentatively cradle my hip. Moving with me. I didn't stop him. Felt him press against me from behind. My tongue was sharp against my teeth but I didn't stop him. We danced out the song together.

"You should come over," he said when the music stopped.

I smiled a little. "Is that right?"

"You've been drinking. You shouldn't be driving."

My smile grew. "You're looking out for me."

He grinned. "I'm lookin' out for both of us. Come on, I'm a mile down the street. Got a great bottle of whiskey we can get into." He paused significantly. "And I got some eggs and coffee. For breakfast."

I stared frankly at him. "I want to tell you something. The two of us won't ever have breakfast together. Not in the cards."

His eyes flickered with anger. "Could've told me that an hour ago. Waste of time."

He turned on his heels and headed toward the bar.

I let him get three steps away before I spoke.

"I never said I wouldn't come over."

He turned back around in a hurry.