

THE RETURN OF **FANNI HALL**

SECOND INSTALLMENT

BY ROBERT BISHOP

What a mess. When last we left Fanni, she had just been jumped by her old nemesis, Gorila, after her own MI6 ally, Ian, was brutally attacked, resulting in the deaths of his partners and their captive, the evil Dawnelle. And all this in the name of defeating corrupt businessman, white slaver, and all around sleazebucket, Bertram B. Bertram.

With a shrieking yowl, the Gazelle whipped over the brittle frieze of entwined limbs, its shadow a barely visible scurrying blotch in the dim light. The man froze at Fanni's side till it was gone. Satisfied, he laced her elbows together with more of the twine. Fanni bit on the glove and arched her back as much as she could. A last, short bit of line circled her neck in a thin bristly collar. The end of this was tied to a thick root that popped out of the ground and just as quickly jumped back in, tethering her.

One of the hands grabbed a handful of her hair and bent her head back. She thought the scarf would jam the gag clear to her stomach. A broad and thinly gleeful face peered down into hers. "We can't go on meeting like this." Gorila! "Don't go away, I'll

be right back." He gave her a little wave and bounded off into the bushes.

The cords on her thumbs and elbows cut like knives, and the slight movement, particularly with her thumbs, was bought with bright, flaying pain. But she rolled, twisting and jerking, nonetheless. She had hopes, at first, of pulling her right ankle from beneath her left knee, but the position, as simple as it looked, proved escape-proof.

The wind was up in the trees again, and so Fanni didn't hear the sneaking and slithering's until Gorila and crew were nearly at her side. She turned her muffled face toward the gathering racket as fully twenty or thirty thousand bagged buffalos annihilated any-thing that could pop, snap, crackle, or break noisily—definitely not Indian Scout material there.

"Cunt!" Ah yes, Madame, Fanni thought, nothing like that initial cheerful ice-breaker to get the conversation going. "Goddamned, muthergugging cunt!" She put her own unique signature on this last with a hearty kick to Fanni's side, thus bringing the pointy end of her right boot—at some considerable velocity, mind you—squarely into a very graphic demonstration of the simple fact that it's damned difficult to get two objects to occupy the same place at the same time. That portion of Fanni's side was covered by her coat and its attached pocket, and inside the pocket was a fully loaded 20-round Heckler & Koch magazine. Said object usually doesn't get much excited—or deformed—unless it gets run over by a tank a couple of times and was thus not much impressed by the expensive but very squashed boot. Madame was very impressed with the results of her experiment, however, and her enthusiasm for demonstrating it was commendable, fully deserving of the efforts of Panaflex camera, several hundred feet of film, and several miles of Scotch 208 tape.

When the screams and howls had died down a bit, Gorila came over and took off the gag—his left hand was freezing—and propped Fanni up against a stump. Her ankles were together now, crossed and tied.

"Quite a mob you've got here," she opined, looking around the confines of the small clearing. Fanni, never much of a fan of reunions, saw no reason to change her mind. Alissa sat slumped on the ground, her wrists scrunched together in the grip of a broad nylon strap, its nether end sticking out like a bleached, stiff tongue. Madame hobbled around the periphery of the clearing taking giant steps with good foot and teensy, tiny steps with the damaged one. Gorila sat near Fanni, looking at her.

"Your people in the cabin killed the old man's kid," he said. The sentence just kind of hung there like that poor bastard of a coyote who kept chasing that bird out over cliffs. Gorila seemed disinclined to say any-thing else. He seemed tired. Madame lurched closer by degrees, her mutters becoming steadily more murderous as Fanni began to make out the words.



"Your people in the cabin killed the old man's kid!" she screeched.

"Gosh," Fanni said, "I hope he doesn't take offense. Endless apologies. Promise it won't happen again."

"Good God, you stupid bitch!" Madame screamed, perilously close to tears, whether from pain or rage . . . or fear? Fanni couldn't tell. "Don't you know what this means? He'll never stop looking for us—never! That was his only son; he was supposed to take over when the old man quit! He doesn't trust anybody else. And now you've killed him!" She turned away for a minute, pants or sobs making her shoulders heave. "Ah, Jesus Christ, we might have been able to make some kind of deal or something. But now... " She sat down in the wet grass, then turned her face back to Fanni, glaring.

"You've still got her," Fanni reminded, jerking her head towards the quacking Alissa, her face red and puffy and tear-streaked. She had seen her brother's head demonstrate the wonders of hydro-static shock. They'd never been that close, but he had still been her brother.

Fanni turned to her. "I'm sorry, muff. But what did you expect them to do, just sit there and die? You've seen what they did to the cabin; they had no intention of taking any-body alive. You must see that, don't you?" Alissa had been staring at her. Now she turned her head to the side and the tears began again. "Don't you?"

"She doesn't mean anything to him," Madame started.

"Oh, yes, she does," Fanni interrupted. "If there's anything old Bertram B. is, it's possessive. She's his and he's going to want her back. Particularly now that she's his only living kid," she added for emphasis. "So long as we have her, we've got a bargaining point."

"What the hell do you mean 'we,' bitch?" Madame growled, snatching for the end of Fanni's throat tether. "We!" She got it and dragged Fanni off the stump. The knot began sliding, and Fanni suddenly discovered that she couldn't breathe. "You got us into this in the first place! We?!" Madame howled with laughter as she dragged Fanni father through the leaves. She got a mouthful of twigs and leaves, and the loop on her throat got smaller and smaller.

Gorila suddenly jerked upright from his slouch against the tree, then collapsed onto the grass. It was as simple as that. Once a living monstrosity . . . now a dead hunk o' meat. The wind was roaring now, and all eyes were on the pair in the center of the glade, the one erect and screaming and frothing, and the other bound and pulled up onto her knees, being jerked around like a bag at the end of a rope and turning a might blue in the face.

The cord joining Madame's hand to Fanni's throat snapped like a string. Fanni, predictably, dropped like a rock and Madame nearly sat down hard, so hard had she been pulling on the line. For a moment, she stood, staring at the traitorous, parted end flapping in the wind.

A man's figure materialized in front of her. Madame screamed and jerked back. Her heel snared in a root, and she did go down this time. She rolled, frantic and terrified, onto her hands and knees and faced the apparition.

The man's face and hands were covered with blood, and his eyes were wild and white. Her clothes were torn, seemingly scorched and in some places actually burned. He had a heavy odor of burnt wood and wet earth about him, and he limped perceptibly on his right leg. He glanced finally towards Gorila lumped in the grass and the dirty but still obviously serviceable 9mm PSP pistol he kept trained on the girls. That's why the rope broke and the hole appeared in the giant's forehead. They never even heard the shot.

He motioned Madame back towards Mara and the still sniffing Alissa, then stepped to Fanni and pulled open the loop and threw it away. He rolled her over on her side and gently slapped her face several times. "Fanni. Fanni luv, it's me, Ian." Again.

"Ready?"

"Yeah, I guess." She was a little nervous with this, Fanni admitted to herself. It was your run-of-the-mill underground parking lot with its gloom and wet concrete and echoes that went on forever that she looked out at. It was four in the morning and the crowds were elsewhere, as expected, but it was still a public place. The innocent would be greatly surprised by what they were about to do if they were unlucky. Bertram B.'s

people would be stoically waiting behind that forest of pilings, waiting for them to step out of the car, if they were very unlucky.

She thought back to her and Ian running through the trees to the Hughes 500 Ian had squirreled away. She turned her thoughts back to the matter at hand.

Ian pulled the car into a slot close to (but not close enough for Fanni) the door that read Elevator, stopped, and turned off the ignition. They both listened. Nothing but faint bumps from the trunk.

"I think we're all right," Ian finally concluded. "Sounds as if our luggage is getting a little bored." He grinned over at Fanni, his teeth a white slash in the dark. She tried to grin back.

They stood at the trunk of the car, and Ian stuck the key into the lock and twisted it. Madame and Alissa were strapped into identical bundles—they were virtually immobile.

Alissa's wrists had been bound together with her palms touching one another. Over this had gone thick windings of duct tape to seal the cords, and then the windings had worked down to cover her hands and finally her fingers. Her elbows had then been pulled together and wound with tape. A thick leather strap had then been looped around her arms and chest, then tightened until her joined elbows were hard into her back.

Another strap had been looped around her wrists, then pulled down between her legs, up the front of her belly, and anchored to a belt around her waist. Her arms and hands were totally useless. Another strap, very broad and much thicker, pulled her knees to her chin and kept them there. Ad infinitum. Her ankles, crossed and strapped, had been pulled up into her bottom and were kept there by a short cord that joined her wrists to her legs, itself running across the straps already holding her hands in position. Thus, doubled and then doubled again, Alissa was capable of little more movement than a small turn of the head or the lift of her chin. Madame was similarly endowed, and, if possible, the straps had been drawn just an extra hole or two tighter.

Each had been heavily gagged. A variation of the traditional ball gag stretched jaws and lips wide, bulging their cheeks. The variation was, simply, that the securing strap went over the ball rather than through it and stuffed the rubber wad just that much farther into the wearer's mouth as a result. In addition to that, a heavy foam rubber pad had been cupped around the ball before the gag was inserted, packing the two reluctant mouths just that much more firmly. At least the foam soaked up the inevitable excess saliva, so the poor dears didn't have to contend with unsightly drooling.

Thick leather-covered blindfolds completed the binding. Soft leather-covered sponge pads fitted directly over the eyes and were then glued to the backs of a broad padded strap that covered the face from just above the lips to just under the hairline. At the center of each a roughly triangular hole allowed the tip of the wearer's nose to protrude for breath. It also quite nicely pre-vented the blindfold from being shifted up over the wearer's head.

Thus appointed, the two girls huddled next to the jack and the spare tire and a clinking canvas sack. Ian reached in and brought the sack out first.

"All right, ladies, we've got to our destination. Remember, no cocking about and we'll all get on famous. Right? Right." He nodded his head in counterpoint to his question and his answer. Alissa and Madame didn't move a muscle.

"You first, little one," he went on, hefting Alissa around so that his legs were towards him. He released the cord that bound her ankles to her rump, and as he did so, her ankles popped forward several inches as tightly compressed muscles and tissue were freed. Alissa groaned deep in her throat. The neck/knee strap came next, and the accompanying groan was much more evident.

"Shut up." Ian yanked a short strap hard about the girl's knees and left her there with her lower legs draped over the sill of the trunk. Then he turned to Madame. Fanni kept swiveling her head around, looking for shadows to become something more. None had, so far.

Alissa and Madame eventually stood, trembling and awkward, trying to find their sense of balance and finding it difficult with no arms or eyes. "Off we go." Fanni was getting more and more nervous. The snail's pace mandated by the knee-hobbles the girls were wearing and the thunderous racket they were all making, compared to the almost eerie silence that damned the place, was getting to her. She prayed to whatever gods who were still awake at that hour that the door to the elevator wasn't locked.

It wasn't. They had a bad moment when they thought they heard somebody coming down the stairs, but the seeming two and a half hour wait as the elevator came down ended as the doors slid open before anyone showed up. Ian hurriedly punched the button, and Fanni heaved a profound sigh of relief when the doors slid shut on the sight of a battered fire extinguisher and the peeling paint of the door. They rode in silence but for the bound women's labored breaths.

Fanni idly watched the floor indicator light ladder its way up the translucent plastic buttons and was mildly surprised when they winked on and off until the only one burning was the one at the very top—the penthouse. Jeez, Ian must have some rich friends, she thought.

The elevator opened out directly into the interior of the suite, bypassing any awkward strolls down heavily populated corridors. Even the lateness of the hour didn't mitigate Fanni's nervousness on that score.

Ian dropped the bag in the sunken living room floor, then strode to the center of the area, knelt, lifted a flap of carpeting, and pulled up a hinged, heavy steel chrome ring which snapped open with a distinct click. Then he rummaged in the bag and brought out a length of heavy chain, threading it through the ring so that roughly half the length of the chain protruded from either side.

He then disappeared into the rear portion of the suite, to reappear momentarily with two pairs of handcuffs, which he snapped about the ankles of the ladies. An end of the chain was then padlocked to the handcuffs, one end to one pair of cuffs. The women were now leashed to the center of the room.

"What say we unwrap our little packages, eh?" He winked at Fanni and turned to his parcel. She gave him a tight smile and turned to hers.

An hour later found Alissa avidly picking through the bones of the cold chicken Ian found in the refrigerator and Madame scowling thunderously at both. She looked away from the two huddled together in conversation, to the floor-to-ceiling plate glass window overlooking the city. She knew they were down there somewhere, but lowering clouds and pellets of rain hid any twinkling lights. She once more turned her glare to the girl, now sucking her fingers and settling her backside into the thick padding atop the circular sofa. Madame lifted her joined ankles and coldly regarded the mirrored circlets snuggling her trim legs. The tiniest of smiles caught at the corner of her mouth and she shot a quick glance back at the dynamic duo.

The pair in question were staring at a map with a good bit of intensity, and Ian was just now drawing a tiny circle on the map.

"Right about . . . there!" he finished, and threw down the pen. Fanni was shaking her head and gnawing on her lower lip. "What's the matter, luv?"

"Not good. Not good at all. I know that area: lots of money, guards, private security police, electric fences. You have to have an appointment to even get into the neighborhood. There's a master gate with a guard. A friend of mine used to live there; she always called the gate 'Checkpoint Charlie.' Her father had done a lot of business in Berlin." She shook her head again.

"Well, old gal, we have no choice on the matter, do we? My people definitely tracked the Gazelle to these digs here, right down to the landing on the bloody front lawn. We have to go in!" he went on, a tense fury shading his voice. Fanni thought about Suni. "We have to!"

"All right," she said, but her head still shook. She gave the tiny blue circle on the map another look and the corner of her mouth curled in resignation. "You realize, of course, that if this is where the old coot hangs out permanently, we're going to be facing a small army of bad guys." She gave Ian a sideways glance, but he was staring out the rain-smeared window, sullen, almost petulant.

She began to walk away; maybe there was some more of that chicken left. "Fanni?" She turned. Ian had stood up. "Look, luv, I was a bit overly tense just then. Sorry about that. It's Suni and all that, you know?" She smiled encouragingly.

"Look," he went on, "I've got some chat-ting up I have to do with my people about all this, and I may be able to spring some small surprise on the boyos if I play my cards right. We may not be as over-matched as you think. Anyways, while I'm busy doing that, you can be scouting out the premises for any chinks in the old armor, and I'll be digging up something to stick up the chink. Right?"

"Right." And she gave him a smile she didn't really feel. Right.

Fanni peered out the windshield as best she could. Even with the defroster and the wipers going full blast, it was damned hard to see anything. What she could see, however, confirmed that the circles of the very rich—particularly the old rich—don't change much or often. The familiar gate house appeared largely as it had in years past. Fanni wasn't much surprised to see the new face behind the glass. Another of those out-of-the-mold anonymous and over-muscled robots that were currently the vogue. She decided she had liked the previous old guy better. Largely inept and generally incompetent, he was at least friendly and rather likeable in a bum-bling sort of way. Definitely not the android stock she now looked at. And the android had such a big piece on his hip. Boo, hiss.

She thought she might scout the perimeter to see if there was an easier way in. Something about android man's mirrored aviator-style sunglasses made little alarm bells keep tinkling down in the pith of her stomach. As Ian would have said, a right sodding boyo. Even though he probably wasn't. Probably.

. . . 298 . . . 299 . . . 300. Madame stopped counting. 300 seconds. Five minutes. She had started counting when they left. Five minutes should be enough, she hoped.

They were both fucking pansies when it came right down to it, she thought. Jesus Christ. No real taste for revenge. With all its embellishments and then some. Made life worth living. Boobs.

It was always a light show behind the blindfold. Lots of little private lights that went off like strobes. And there was always a peculiar eroticism about having her mouth filled with the gag in conjunction with blindness. She hated it on the one hand, and it made her life worth living on the other. Odd. Disturbing. But probably one of the reasons she didn't snuff that damned Hall when she had the chance, as had been the case in many instances over the years. Ya had to have a little sense of humor just to survive!

She had known without being told that the dynamic duo would put the blindfolds back on them before they left. Blindness had certain psychological, as well as practical advantages to someone leaving someone else bound and hopefully helpless in a room for extended periods of time. The reason was painfully simple: if you couldn't see a way out of your troubles, you were highly unlikely to go after it with any vigor. That's why Madame's little eyes had been so very busy before they left.

The phone she'd seen was near the door they had originally used to enter the place and not too far from their conversation pit. She thought the chain might be long enough. Maybe.

The more immediate problem, though, was getting rid of the gag so that she might do something useful with her mouth when she finally got to the phone. And that meant getting free of her restraints.

The latter were indeed impressive. Both she and Alissa wore identical black leather strait jackets that fit like second ebony skins. Madame's arms had been pulled down and across her chest, and the ends of the sleeves, terminating in a holed strap on her right arm and an appropriate buckle on her left, had been drawn nearly together, so tight was the stricture. That goddamned Hall had actually knelt on her back with one knee forcing her into the floor while she pulled for all she was worth on the strap threaded through the buckle. Madame felt as if her arms had been changed into some kind of new, way-too-small corset.

A broad, stiff collar cinched the garment at her throat, while a broad, soft strap passed through her crotch to anchor the thing from the other end. The garment opened or closed along the length of her spine with a zipper of anchor-chain dimensions.

The only thought in the whole design was that there was no loop or fastener to hold the sleeve buckle in place at the small of the back. It would normally have made no difference anyway, so tight was the fit of the jacket and subsequent strapping of her arms.

Today, however, that minor omission was going to cost those bastards, and cost them dearly. With a little luck, and if they stayed away long enough. She continued this train of thought as she cautiously lowered herself from the sofa to the floor, inching her soft, warm rump down its side and using it for a brake. She got to the floor with nary a bump. It was carpeted anyway, so what the hell.

Then began the even more cautious, lurching advance on the coffee table sitting over their anchor-ring in the floor. Well before the blinders had gone back on, Madame's roving eye for detail had spied a small gold-colored hook protruding from one end of the table's top. She didn't know what it had been used for in times past, and she didn't particularly care. The only thing that mattered was that it was there; she had her own plans for it. She found the table when she ran into it. She knew the hook to be at the right end of the table

relative to her position on the couch, and she now pressed her sleeved elbows against the edge of the piece and slid her upper body down its length until there was nothing left to lean on.

The next step was to turn her back to the end of the table, lean back against it, and rub until she found that damned hook. If her legs had been freer, she could have knelt with a good bit less awkwardness, but bitch Hall had been her usual reactionary self. The handcuffs at her ankles had been supplanted with cords, and her ankles had been crossed and lashed together. More of the thin line circled her knees and rendered her legs into one big, cumbersome lump. Fortunately, she didn't have to go far.

There was an air of uncertainty here. The hook had to stick out far enough to be use-able, but not be so thick that the pointed end wouldn't fit through the grommets adjustment holes in the strap terminating her right sleeve. She had no particular concerns about the buckle, it being of pretty generous dimensions, but she had no way of knowing about the damnable holes until she tried to get loose. A further irritant would be the fact that she would have absolutely no way to visually confirm whether or not the hook would fit into the grommets. She'd just have to fish around as best she could and hope for the best. Not encouraging, but better than nothing.

She cautiously slid her back over the narrow edge of the table, angling her butt in as much as possible, using the entire expanse of her back as a tactile sensing board to locate the hook.

She found it almost immediately, its point painful even through the leather jacketing. Slowly and as carefully as she was able to be under the circumstances, she slid herself around on the hook, positioning it so that the open end would lie directly under the buckle. When she felt that it was about right, she rocked her back and buckle against the hook, trying to slide the curved point under the strap looped through the buckle.

It was amazingly simple. At first, she couldn't believe that she'd actually done it, not on the first try! Cautiously, as infinitely slow as before, she leaned out away from the table, and the hook pulled the free end of the strap through the buckle. The very end, perversely, stuck for a moment, then popped clear. So far, so good. Now came the hard part.

It would be kind of like fishing, in an odd way. Her problem was to dangle the strap over the end of the hook in such a way that one of the black brass grommets would snare the hook and thus anchor the strap so she could pull against it. The fact that not merely her hands, but her fingers as well were safely sheathed away in the sleeves left her with no effective capacity for precise manipulation. The blindfold assured that her eyes would be of similar uselessness. Not that she could have seen back there anyway.

She got to it, rising and falling on her cramping legs, each time dragging the strap one more agonizing time over or under or through that goddamned hook with repetitively dreary results. Once she thought she had it, but it only turned out to be the hook temporarily snagging on the bead running down the length of the strap's edge. Keep on!

Suddenly, after what seemed like hours—and actually was hours—the thing caught with absolutely no fanfare. And held. Madame was so exhausted by the ups and downs and arounds that she could hardly register emotion. Her legs were quivering like leaves in the wind, and she feared an immobilizing cramp. Not now!

She wanted more than anything else the simple relief of a rest, but she knew it was a luxury she quite simply could not afford under the circumstances. With a groan and a rubber-muted curse, she heaved herself away from the table and got back to work.

She inched her way out from the table until all the short slack in the strap had dis-appeared. She then gradually increased the pressure on the strap, turning her body at a right angle to the direction of the pull. Finally, she gave the strap a little jerk while at the same time turning her body even more into the direction of pull. The theory was that the buckle's tongue was now out of its hole. The theory.

Biting on the gag and panting like a dog, she concentrated on hugging herself as if she intended to squeeze herself in half. Then she slowly, slowly relaxed her arms and tried pulling them around to the front of her body. They were coming! They were coming! They were . . . stopped. The miserable bastard of a buckle-tongue was probably gouging into the leather. She pushed her arms back around the sides of her body, jerked on the strap, and tried again. This time her arms came nearly all the way around before getting hung up again. Fuck it! She rocked her shoulders forward, forcing her elbows toward each other, and gave the strap bridging her back as much slack as she could, then began sliding and twisting the thing up towards her shoulder blades. As it got higher, her torso got thicker, and the slack rather quickly disappeared. The trick now was to somehow pull one elbow under the other.

She had done it. For a second there she'd sworn the leather wouldn't slide across itself. She lay back flat on the floor and panted into the gag; her matt-black world alive with tiny soundless popping balls of color. Techni-color Brownian movement. She realized that it probably had some marketing merit: high performance stereo headphones with an attached blindfold. She didn't know what merit the gag would add to the package. Somehow, she just couldn't see herself as a legit businesswoman. She didn't understand the straight world. Not for a minute.

She sat up with another groan and went after the gag-strap. No use wasting time on the blindfold; she didn't walk with her eyes. She wouldn't waste time getting out of the jacket just now. The phone call was infinitely more important. She was thus unable to use her nimble little digits to coax the gag apart, but she persevered and it was eventually done. She almost lacked the strength to pry the damned thing out of her mouth, it was so huge and she so effectively crippled by the sleeves.

She still wasn't out of it yet, she realized. She might have been off in estimating the distance to the phone, or they might have moved it after the blinders went on. That would be just like Hall, she thought. Bitch. The only goddamned broad more perverse than she was. Suddenly nervous, she fought with the blindfold and got it off.

The phone was still where it had been before. Small blessings and all, she breathed. She glanced back at the kid. Looked like the dummy was sound asleep. Good god, she thought, shaking her head. The phone may well have been where she expected it, but the chain just wasn't long enough. Period. She was nearly eight feet from the instrument, even splayed out on the carpet like an incautious roach. Shit!

But then it dawned on her that the chain, rather than being linked at the floor bolt, was merely run through it and terminated at the other end—at Alissa's ankle. Opportunity still knocked.

She reached down and grabbed a good handful of the chain and gave it a hearty yank, launching Alissa right out into the middle of the rug with a thump. Her sudden grunt of surprise at this novel alarm clock was highly gratifying to Madame, who reeled her into the ring-bolt like a fish. Only when the girl's round little butt was hard against the ring did Madame stop the pulling. What was that she'd been complaining about not enough chain, she asked herself.

She fumbled the receiver off the cradle, and it immediately went straight to the floor. The faint buzzing from the earpiece seemed somehow malevolent. Madame couldn't care less.

Fortunately, the thing was of the push-button persuasion. She would have done damn little dialing with her hands still buried inside the strait jacket sleeves. As it was, she still couldn't really manage those damned little buttons. With her hands, at any rate.

Casting one more glance at Alissa, Madame stooped to the phone, aiming care-fully with her nose, and began pecking out a number like some odd featherless chicken. She only hoped somebody was there. The phone was answered on the first ring, and the voice that came through sounded as if it had been made by a machine.

Alissa listened with growing disbelief as Madame told her father's people exactly what had happened at the cabin: how Hall had engineered the entire thing, complete to being personally responsible for Alissa's brother's death; how Madame and Alissa had been hustled away by Hall and the English-man; how the Englishman had subsequently raped the both of them with a variety of things while Hall cheered him on; what Fanni was up to now and where she was going—right into the lion's den; and that Fanni wanted to deal. With her father. Direct. No intermediaries. There was a pause that wasn't as long as she might have expected before Madame once more began talking. It was at precisely this stage of the game when little Alissa began to do some real serious thinking about the nature of things. She had been in a somewhat petulant sort of way, content to go along for the ride, up to this point. Not that she really had any choice in the matter.

Now, with Madame's treachery, her whole world had tipped over. She knew full well what her father was and what he would do to Hall when he got his hands on her. Ian he would merely have killed, unless, as Hall had suggested earlier, her now being reduced to his only surviving heir had made her somewhat more sacrosanct than in times past. If that was the case, Ian was in for a very bad time.

Probably the most incredible irony of the whole unfolding situation was that Madame was voluntarily offering herself for a torment very little mitigated from that which Fanni would scream through. One of her father's most cherished axioms for dealing under duress was that he had never, ever compromised. The world's quick-lime pits and myriad rivers bore mute and aromatic testimony to that.

Ultimately, and more to the point, she was beginning to fear for herself. What had begun as a simple disciplinary action to teach her some manners when Madame's goons had snatched her at the beach had very quickly degenerated into a debacle of spectacular proportions. The cost of lives had been limited, but that anybody should have been killed at all was appalling. The cost in money was stupendous. People could be replaced, but money was another thing altogether, especially for good old dad. And then there was her brother, the posturing smart-ass, the stupid arrogant shit with more money than brains, who had ended up with that dubious organ smeared all over the side of a pine tree. Money and the only male offspring had gone with the proverbial wind. All because of her. All her fault, her father would say. Christ.

What if her loving, indulgent pater simply forgot to tell the goons that his kid was one of the people in the apartment? Wearing the blindfold and the gag, they wouldn't be able to recognize her. One very short squeeze of an M-10 trigger and Alissa would never, ever have to worry about peer group pressure again.

On the other hand, Madame, being singularly ignorant of Alissa's father's rather bellicose business-under-stress stratagems, was feeling just fine. The only problem now was to get the hell out of there before anybody got back. She hunched around and snailed across the rug towards the ring in the floor.

Swearing under her breath, she repositioned herself in front of the coffee table with its provident hook and positioned her back once more where it had been when the escape had begun. To say that reinstalling the

blind-fold and gag with her hands still muffed by the strait jacket was a tad difficult is to push the word euphemism damn near to the breaking point. The monumental struggle to get her arms back around her and then snub up the strap on the point of an invisible hook was to wander perilously close to that of a Homeric epic. Homer had been dust long enough now that any spinning engendered by my clankish smile would be rendered largely moot—like Hurricane Camille, I suppose.

When Ian finally got back to the place, it was to find Madame curled up on her couch and the other one sitting up in the middle of the floor like a dog begging for scraps and making one helluva racket behind her gag. Maybe she had to pee.

Fanni drove for two miles under the fading trees before she found something that looked cautiously optimistic. And a bit contrived, her alarms told her. An overturned wheel-barrow gleamed in the misting rain like an enormous turtle beside a breach in the ubiquitous wall. The wound was as fresh and clean as the rain itself. Muddied shovels were stacked against the turtle and the wall. Lots of very fresh tire tracks zippered the mud between the paving and blunt stay-the-hell-out-of-here rejection of that vertical stone fence. And all the bodies that had muddied those shovels were gone. Lunch break? She glanced at her watch. At three o'clock in the afternoon?

She parked the car up under an oak with a few tan leaves still hanging on for dear life, then walked back to the proffered hole-in-the-wall. It was all very convenient. And it stank to high heaven.

To be continued