

CHAPTER 23 (continued)

She stomps on the gas pedal and ratchets the wheel all the way to the left. Perfect doughnut, like she'd raced in NASCAR.

“Nice.”

“My dad was a stunt driver. Which way?”

“Left.”

“I was afraid you'd say that.”

She's worried about the bridge. I'm worried about the guys in suits and shades and slicked-back hair streaming from the front entrance, some running our way, others to their car.

“Now's not the time to fret over traffic signals or stop signs,” I say.

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The tenor growl of eight fuel-injected cylinders in beautiful haul-ass harmony tells me Mercy can take a hint. Unfortunately, Orange Avenue dinner-date traffic pulls the reigns on all 300 of the Mustang's horses. We're stuck dead last in a long line at the first light we come to.

"Shit!"

"I'm sorry! There's nowhere to go!"

"I know, it's not your fault."

"Jequon, master of the obvious."

"Mercy, now's not the time to—" and I see her wink at me. "You having fun?"

"Better believe it. Life's short."

"Yeah... it is."

In the rearview, three vanilla Chryslers with red flashers on the dash fishtail our of the Del driveway.

"Now I bet you're wishing we would have took the Strand," she says, referring to the traffic.

"Get out."

"What?"

"*Get. Out.*"

I wait until she looks worried before I wink and say I'm right behind her.

"Gotcha."

"Not funny," she says, buy her smile's on my side.

Splitting lanes at the front the line, a guy with a braided beard and more embroidered patches than denim on his denim vest straddles a beautiful Harley Electra Glide. I take Mercy's hand and jog up to our new ride, (hopefully before the light changes).

"Hey! Big guy on the bike!" Of course he can't hear me over the Harley's brain liquefying exhaust, but we beat the green and I tap him on the shoulder and now I have his attention.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry to bother you, but you see those suits with guns running toward us?"

He glances over his shoulder in the direction I'm pointing. "Yeah."

"Well, if they catch up, they're going to shoot us. Me, I probably deserve it, but I think you'll agree, letting this angel die in the crossfire would be tragic."

"Bet your ass it would. Hop on sweet mama."

Now *there's* a response I didn't expect. And poor Mercy, she's rubbernecking back and forth between us like it's Sophie's fucking choice. I'd laugh if this shit wasn't so funny.

"Uh... I was hoping you might loan me the bike?"

"Yeah man. Of course. I was just fuckin' with ya. You definitely need it more than I do right now."

We trade places and he gives Mercy his skull-cap style helmet to wear after she climbs up behind me on the saddle.

"I owe you big--what's your name bro?"

"Friends call me Deany Hopper. Ask around in OB, you'll find me. My shit's way insured but I gotta report it stolen 'case you dump it, dig?"

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“Understood. Hold on, Mercy.”

No hesitation. Just the warm union of her cheek against my shoulder. The form-fit of her breasts against my back; arms encircling my waist, holding on for dear, infinitely more tenuous life.

With standstill traffic and narrow streets no longer a problem, we put some serious distance between us and the bad guys. In a matter of minutes we’re approaching the bridge, doing ninety. I have no idea how far back our pursuers are, but with two miles of arcing blue steel and concrete between us and the relative safety of downtown, I’m game to widen the gap by at least half that. It’s no crotch-rocket, but 120 shouldn’t be a problem for the Harley.

We accelerate past the decommissioned toll plaza like demonic doves cast out of heaven. Speed limit 50. Doubling that easy. We dodge, we weave, we split lanes. The centrifugal force molds the tires into narrow discs of rubber that barely make contact with the asphalt, and it feels almost like we’re soaring high above the waiting city.

Well that was too good to last. After we crest the midpoint of the bridge it’s clear a bad day is about to get worse. They’ve set up a roadblock. Out run by radio.

I lock my elbows and brace for rapid deceleration. “Hang on tight!” I say and brake hard, front and rear, just shy of a skid.

“Now what’s wrong?”

With her face buried between my shoulder blades Mercy couldn’t see the three black sedans lined up at a right-angle to the guardrail and the center divide; nor the Mr. Smith-from-Matrix-looking-motherfuckers plugging the gaps.

“Oh.”

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“Climb off and try not to get run over.”

She does but I can tell she’s not happy about it. She *hates* heights. I motor on a guess-timated distance toward the roadblock and then slide sideways to a stop in the slow lane. There was a big rig we passed right after the toll bridge and it should be topping the hill any time now, massive spools of steel cable in tow. Hopefully I’ve given the driver enough space to stop. I don’t want to so much as scratch Deany Hopper’s bike if I can help it.

I motion for Mercy to join me. She looks almost paralyzed with fear leaning against the center divider where I left her. There’s no pedestrian traffic allowed on the bridge, so of course the lookey-loo’s are slowing down to stare at her; pulling out their cell phones to 911 another jumper.

Damn. She’s not going to move is she. But as the semi rumbles into view, Mercy shuffles a step in my direction. Two steps. And before I can say ‘road kill’ she’s jogging down the slope towards me, picking up speed as the driver of the Volvo Diesel locks ‘em up and downshifts and no doubt swears profusely. Mercy’s sprinting now--the tractor trailer--threatening to jackknife. If that trucker hasn’t already crapped himself, he’ll be shitting diamonds at the next rest stop.

Mercy doesn’t have a cab door to contend with so I hear her first.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“You tell me. You’re the therapist.”

And now the truck driver: “What in God’s name are you doing!” He’s stomping towards me, brandishing one of those wooden mini-bats they sell in truck stops. This one has ‘Fuck Carjackers’ engraved into the side.

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I think: *nothing in God's name for damn sure*, but I only tell him I'm sorry for the close call. Pointing out the roadblock at the east end of the bridge I add, "You'll have to stop anyway. Relax. Enjoy the view. And put that bat away."

The trucker slows but doesn't stop. Adjusts his grip a little lower on the bat handle.

"I don't want to hurt you."

And I really didn't until he clocks me right under the ear with his redneck stun gun.

Lucky me, the mouth-full-of-Doritos sound is the bat-barrel shattering and not my skull.

"Ouch," I say on his behalf, foreshadowing the left-hook I land to the point of his chin.

Mercy's flabbergasted. "Are you alright?"

"Nothing an aspirin won't fix."

"But he just broke a *stick* across your *face*—are you sure? Let me see."

I turn my head so she can get see I'm no worse for wear, glad to distract her for a moment from the impending two-hundred-foot drop.

"Wow. A red mark. That's it. You should be concussed or worse after a blow like that."

"Lucky I guess. Come on. Stay close."

I walk to the end of the semi trailer and loosen the rigging which secures the rearmost spool to the flatbed. Hop up on the deck and shove as hard as I can it until it starts to tip toward the middle lane. Fortunately, all the cars behind us decided to sit tight and watch the two crazy people blocking the road. If this spool were to fall on a passing motorist, it would kill them. It's about the size of a Mini Cooper.

"Stay back," I call out to Mercy, and give the spool a final push onto the roadway. The massive cylinder of braided iron and wood thuds home, wobbles for an instant, settles, and starts

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to roll down the ___-degree incline like a medieval weapon of war. I jump down after it, grab the free end of cable and give the giant wheel another push to get it moving even faster. As it builds momentum in the passing lane, I tie off this end around the nearest light post. Mercy's already back at the concrete lane divider, arms crossed, trembling. I run over and try to comfort her while the spool deposits the rest of its cable on the roadway, rolling ever faster down the grade like a gigantic runaway yo-yo.

"It's never as bad as you think it's going to be."

"You *promise* you'll help me find Cindy?"

"I gave you my word. I don't waste time making the same decisions twice."

"Then I'm cool with ignoring every voice of reason in my head telling me to stay put right here until the cops come."

"I know you're scared."

"You have *no* idea."

I hold out my hand and she just looks at it.

"Wait a sec'. I want to say a quick prayer." She bows her head and folds her hands together. We so don't have time for this.

"Mercy..."

She ignores me.

"Mercy! Come on. We can't stay here."

Her lips mouth: *in Jesus' name, amen*, and then she finally relents.

"OK, I feel better. God will watch over us."

You, maybe.

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We trot downhill after the now completely unraveled spool. The cable only stretches to within a yard of the next lamppost down from the one I secured the opposite end. Best guess: a-hundred, a-hundred twenty feet between each lamppost. Not two-hundred feet, that's for sure, so we'll be high and dry at the end of our rope. Death by cliché. There's worse ways to die.

“So what's with the cable?” Mercy asks.

“I thought you'd have it figured out by now.”

“Uh, no.”

“We have to get off the bridge. Both ends are blocked off...” I tilt my head in the direction of the waiting abyss. “Me Tarzan, you Jane.”

“I'll be going over the edge when hell freezes over and Winston Churchill builds an icehouse to fish for Nazis. Why don't we just turn ourselves in? Explain to them you're an undercover agent and that there's been a misunderstanding?”

I pick up the cable, don't say anything. It's as thick as a beer can which explains why the spool held such a short segment. Sometimes girth is better than length—especially for what adrenaline junkies call a ‘pendulum swing.’

“You're not a secret agent are you?”

I put my arm around her waist, don't say anything. Turn her around so her back is to me. Coil the steel around my forearm for a better grip. Her hair smells perfect. I back us up to the edge.

“Jequon, I don't know if I can do this.”

“You can. For Cindy.”

“Yeah. For Cindy.”

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“Ready?”

She nods, then shakes her head ‘no’. Her body quivers against mine, rigid, vibrating like a tuning fork. I press my lips into her hair and whisper warm, soothing, reassurances. Hug her a little tighter.

We both flinch as a bullet strikes the barrier, punching loose a fist-sized chunk of concrete. I peer over my shoulder and watch it fall until it makes a tiny splash. I figured a traffic jam wouldn’t keep them at bay forever, but who knew they’d have three five-minute milers among their ranks. Already the lead gunner is sprinting past the big rig. Another ten seconds he won’t need a lucky shot.

“It’s now or—”

“Just jump already!” Mercy yells.

We don’t fall straight down. After the first twenty-five feet or so, enough of the cable laid out on the roadbed above us has changed course to allow the friction between it and the rough lip of the guardrail to act as a fulcrum of sorts; a fulcrum which not only adds a horizontal component to our descent, but also a substantial braking force as the contact point between the bridge and braided steel grinds its way *uphill* toward the lamppost I tied one end to—the exact opposite of the effect experienced by water skiers when their fulcrum (the boat) motors in a direction *counter* to their angular momentum in a turn.

That’s the good news.

The bad news is, gravity has over a hundred-feet to overwhelm these otherwise favorable laws of physics. I’m holding Mercy with one arm while the other arm strains to keep our combined weight attached to the cable. Except that, at the bottom of our arc, it’s not just our

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combined scale weight I'm fighting against, but a three-or-four 'G' multiple of it. A thousand pounds or more linked to our lifeline by four fingers and an opposable thumb. I thought I could manage. I was wrong.

I let go (of the cable, not Mercy) just before we start swinging back up—still a good seventy feet or so above the water, a fatal height for most humans unless they go in the water perfectly: toes pointed, legs and torso locked and straight, arms overhead with hands clasped—which we're not going to do given our angled trajectory. We're going to bounce like a ground-rule double. Water doesn't compress, it can only displace, which it doesn't readily do when struck by objects moving in excess of 85 miles-per-hour. Fortunately for Mercy though, ribcages, pectoral muscles, and other parts of me *do* compress. I twist our bodies so we face skyward, press down on her forehead with my free hand to stabilize her neck.

Impact: like getting bitch-slapped by the Statue of Liberty. Twice, because we skip. I let her go and swim to the surface, still alive enough to breathe.

“Mercy? You alright?”

She manages a 'yes' between coughs to clear the salt water from her lungs.

“Are you a good swimmer?”

“I grew up in Minnesota. Land of ten-thousand lakes.”

“Good. They might have rifles, so we need to stay submerged as long as possible. I want you to hold onto my shirttail while I get us to shore. Take deep but quick breaths and tap my leg when you need another. Don't blow bubbles.”

“Aye-aye, Jequon Cousteau,” she quips, and before I finish thinking, *damn I love this*—she slaps 'woman' clean out of the monologue.

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“That’s for almost getting us killed.” She scissor-kicks her way closer. I deserve whatever abuse she wants to dole out so I don’t move away.

She stops kicking. Wraps her legs around my waist.

Kisses me.

Kisses me hard and violent. Softer now—a feint—punishes my lips, parts them with her torpedoing tongue. We’re ten feet under water before I remember I’m kicking for the both of us.

It’s like this when you cheat death. You want to damage things. To laugh. To scream and cry, to fondle and fuck... But more so with Mercy. I could drown inside her right now.

We come up for air and she finally pushes me away.

“That’s for *almost*.”