

# HARMONIC DECEPTION

— A LIZ HANLON NOVEL —

It's a star-studded night and Liz is feeling the magic. She'd nabbed a three-CD recording contract and now the club teems with industry big-wigs, critics, fans . . . and someone else. A brutal female gang member and two sidekicks storm in with assault weapons, shutting down the celebration and taking control of the crowd. The leader's hostility is fierce, but to Liz it seems targeted at her. The trio begins by robbing patrons of their valuables. Liz refuses to let them . . .



*Praise for Barbara Reed's latest CD, ON STAGE:*

“This lady can sing, I was wowed by her range, and if she writes the way she sings, this is something that's a must read!”

*-Trini Lopez*

“WOW, WOW, WOW...can't say much else...what a voice!”

*-Donna Loren*

“Barbara Reed casts a spell over audiences...”

*-Tedd Thomey, PressTelegram*



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— A LIZ HANLON NOVEL —

by  
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*For my husband John,  
the love of my life.*



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## CHAPTER ONE

It was going to be a great night. Liz Hanlon wanted to toss confetti from rooftops and buy a round for the entire world. She took the turn onto Melrose Boulevard a little faster than usual and hit the brakes. Traffic was at a standstill.

“Crap,” she grumbled. “Two blocks away there’s a party in my honor and I can’t get there!”

“Relax. We’re not late.” Liz’s drummer, Frankie Langstrom, rode in the suicide seat. She was a tall, trendy blonde who managed to keep a distance in relationships by talking in short sentences. “With this traffic, the rest of the band isn’t there either.”

“Ten years in L.A. dives, I *finally* get a recording contract, I’m on the radio all over the country, every big-wig in the business is going to be there, and I can’t get to the damn party!”

“Hey, we play Germaine’s four nights a week. Think of tonight as just another gig.”

“Are you crazy?” Liz glanced at Frankie, fingertips drumming the steering wheel. “Germaine’s West is the hottest club in town. Just because we’re the house band doesn’t mean tonight won’t have major ramifications.”

“Ram this,” Frankie shot back. “You’ve already got the record deal. Wasn’t that the hard part?”

The Frank had a point. At thirty-three, Liz was living her dream. Ardor Records, her new recording company, expected a sell-out crowd tonight. And as soon as these idiot drivers cleared out of her way, she could start enjoying it. She gestured toward the open window. “You mind raising that a little? Took me hours to get my hair like this.”

Frankie put the window up halfway. “Looks good. Chestnut-colored curls everywhere. How’d you get ’em up in those combs?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “You look ten pounds thinner in that dress. How much did it set you back?”

Frankie’s habit of asking how much things cost bugged her. The woman had no tact, but oddly, she was a sensitive drummer. “It was on sale.”

“You look great. That’s good, ‘cause the press’ll be all over you tonight.”

Music business execs would be judging her dress, hair, voice and original music with their pinkies hooked at an angle as they sipped champagne. “Everyone’s a critic.”

She rolled forward and hit the brakes as two girls in short black skirts, jackets and lip liner sauntered between the cars. “Halloween in Hollywood,” she cracked. “Black clothes, tattoos, chains, flat hair. Whatever happened to individuality?”

A few drivers made illegal U-turns across lanes. Liz leaned out the window and saw brake lights all the way to the club. When she spotted her name on the marquee a gratifying thrill shot through her. “Ha! Look at that!”

“I can’t believe this crowd,” Frankie said. “Are they all here to see us?”

“Get real. There’s probably a free strip show around the corner.” Then it hit her. “The songwriting contest!”

“Oh, right,” Frankie muttered, “nationwide.”

The winner received a recording deal, plus a trip to Los Angeles for tonight’s party where they’d hear their song played by Liz and

her band.

“I forget—which song’s the winner?”

“*Where Hearts May Lead*. Geez, Frank, how could you forget that?”

“I’m a drummer. We know rhythmic things, not song titles, and especially not that musical code you guys talk in.”

“What code?”

“Ninth chords, eleventh cords, a three-six-two-five. The other day I heard you describe the menu at a restaurant as ‘standard two five fare’. What the hell is that?”

Liz broke up. “In harmony, a two five is the simplest chord pattern, so I was saying the menu was plain. You know, white bread.”

“Why don’t you just say that?”

Liz squeezed past two cars moving so slowly she was sure they were parked. Near the club, pedestrians filled the intersection. Liz made a risky left and pulled into Germaine’s back lot.

A teenage attendant approached her. “Back door’s closed tonight so no one gets in without a ticket. Well, maybe you,” he smiled, “but Sonnie wants you to park in front. We got a spot for you.” She followed him as he motioned them down a narrow lane close to the building and rolled to a stop in front.

Two young valets opened their doors. Frankie stepped out and smoothed her skin-tight blouse over chocolate brown leather pants. Liz’s dark red silk gown shimmered in the glow of neon lights.

“Whoa, you look great,” the valet said, hopping in front of them. “‘Scuse us!” He cleared a path through the noisy crowd. “Coupla hotties comin’ through.”

Near the front door, the crowd closed in. Frankie moved with the flow in another direction. Liz spotted Jonathan, the club’s night manager, standing guard at the front door. Two hundred sixty-five pounds and a booming voice that rivaled the bass frequencies in any car’s sub-woofer.

“That’s her!” a voice called as Liz noticed Frankie was already near the door.

Jonathan saw Liz, wedged himself in the doorway, grabbed her wrist, and propelled her through the tight quarters. He jumped in behind her, letting the door slam.

“What a zoo,” she cried. “I can’t believe this many people care about one CD. ‘Course half of them are hoping to win that contest.”

“That means the other half’s here to see you. That’s hundreds of people—”

She noticed his kind eyes and smiled her appreciation.

The front door pushed open. Jonathan’s commanding voice stopped a couple from entering. “Sorry folks, first show’s sold out.” He followed them outside.

Liz stood alone in the arched entrance to the lounge. Not much had changed since the first time she’d played here, the same tiny lights under the liquor bottles on the bar straight ahead, the same twinkling bulbs around the dance floor that brightened the center of the room like a night-lit swimming pool. Frankie was already fine-tuning her snare drum on the stage to Liz’s left. Elliot dropped his bass case in the tiny alcove behind the stage. Miles, her keyboardist, nodded to her, dimmed the lights and depressed a wall button. The curtains closed. Directly across the room, the bar lined the length of the lounge. Booths and tables, filled to capacity, made a semi-circle around the dance floor. Liz entered, shook hands with friends, and thanked them for coming, feeling the night’s magic.

“Liz! Over here!” Owner Sonnie Tucks waved from behind the bar. She pushed through the crowd around the bar to join him.

Sonnie’s whole demeanor screamed anxiety. “Where the hell’ve you been?” he pounced, his green eyes sliding down her form. “Ooh, lady in red. You come in here looking like that it’s okay to be late.”

She showed him her watch. “I’m not late, and there’s the little

matter of that gridlock out there.”

“Your manager what’s-his-name called,” Sonnie said, hurrying into his office behind the bar.

“Grant.” She followed him into the cramped office.

“Yeah. Said he’d be here around nine.” Sonnie began rooting through a pile of papers, then hurried back to the doorway and looked into the crowded lounge.

“Sonnie, relax.” She gave him a light punch. “The cash register’s ringing, the music’ll be swinging. It’s going to be a great night.”

His fingers traced through his hair again. “It better be. You parked in front, right? Give me your keys. I need your car.”

“Are you nuts? We’re packed out there.”

“Yeah, and my idiot supplier didn’t deliver any Courvoisier. My car’s socked against the back wall.” He nodded toward the private door that led from the office to the side street. “I’ll use my door,” he said, and made a “gimme” gesture with his fingers.

“I left the keys with the valet.”

He shook his head. “When there’s a full house we gotta keep our keys with us. I’ll bring yours in when I get back.” He started to leave, then hopped back into the bar.

Liz followed, confused. “What are you doing?”

He opened the refrigerator door beneath the counter. “Making sure we got enough beer. You know what luses you musicians are. Okay, we’re cool. I’m outta here.”

“You’re lucky I don’t change the locks while you’re gone.”

“Keep in mind I’m driving your car.” He gave her a quick kiss on her cheek. “I trust you can start the show without me?”

Liz reached for a coffee cup and filled it. “I trust you can drive my car a couple of blocks without getting into a wreck?”

“Wise guy.” He snapped his fingers. “Almost forgot. There’s some famous composer here . . . Ferrini, Ferrelli?”

“Mikhail Fattani? He’s already here?” She turned and searched the room.

“Table five. He’s the one who ordered the Courvoisier.” He double-timed it through his office and out the door.

Her manager, Grant, mentioned that Fattani was considering Liz for his next recording, but she figured that was just cocktail talk.

Fattani and his wife, Nicolette, were seated at a front center table just off the dance floor. He wore an impeccable cream-colored suit and a dark blue silk shirt. His black, slicked-back hair enhanced his European features. Liz had only met him once but was struck again by his air of serenity, as if everything in the world was as it should be. Even the three large rings he wore did not seem out of place. She smiled, feeling the energy of success.

“You can’t go—!” Jonathan bellowed at the front door. His voice drowned in noisy shouts and sounds of scuffling.

Some irate customer trying to bully his way past Jonathan? Good luck, buddy.

Liz folded her evening purse under her arm, topped off her coffee and stepped out from the bar as two teenage girls in black burst into the lounge, yelling. They wore outlandish make-up layered thick enough to distort their features. The taller girl had a weapon slung over one shoulder that looked like an assault rifle in a Terminator movie. She took the lead and marched to the center of the dance floor.

The shorter girl wore white plastic gloves and a stiff yellow wig with hair that stuck straight up like a porcupine. She balanced a pistol in one hand and gripped a large green trash bag in the other.

“Who the hell are these two?” Liz muttered, backing up and sliding her purse on a shelf inside the bar. Were they actors?

The leader’s authority came in part from her dark brown wig in a ‘60s style beehive that made her even taller than her six-foot height. Beehive took charge, strode to the video camera in the corner and knocked it off its tripod. It crashed to the floor. From

the scattered pieces she plucked out the disk and dropped it into her jacket pocket.

Liz couldn't imagine Ardor Records hiring actors to stage this low-class scene. Furious, she set her coffee on the bar and started toward her. "Hey, if this is a publicity stunt, you're way out of line. You don't break up private property as a show—"

"Yeah, bitch, the whole world's dyin' to be part of your show." Beehive hooked the gun muzzle under Liz's chin. "Clam up, you ever wanna sing again."

A chill slithered through Liz. Set in the layers of makeup, she saw stony eyes. The woman's arms, cradling the rifle, were heavily-tattooed.

A voice from a bank of booths across the room called out, "Hey, Liz, you think you can top this?" But those who sat closer weren't talking. The room settled into a tense hush.

"What the hell's going on?" Liz said evenly, shoving the gun away.

Startled, Beehive slammed the barrel of the gun into Liz's cheek. Pain shot through Liz. She grabbed the back of a chair, desperate to stay on her feet. Beehive laughed, swung away and took her combative demeanor to the middle of the room. She aimed at another camera mounted above the bar and fired a round into it. Glass and plastic rained to the floor. Conversation at the back of the room ceased.

This was no stunt. Liz stared in disbelief at the warrior-like teenager holding them hostage with an assault rifle. Her cheek throbbed as she watched the accomplice stuff her pistol into her waistband and open the large bag with both hands.

"Now listen up, folks!" Beehive called out. "This is LA so I know you all carry cell phones. Dig'em out and hold'em up!" She whirled, pointing the barrel first at one person, then another.

Customers began raising their cell phones in the air.

Liz thought of her own cell, wishing she hadn't hidden it beneath

the bar. With tiny, imperceptible steps, she moved back toward it.

“Let’s go! I want to see ‘em,” Beehive shouted. More phones went up. She zeroed in as if memorizing each face. Nodding to her accomplice, she called out, “Alright, here’s the drill. The bag gets to your table, you drop your phone inside. Then add your valuables like wallets. Let’s not forget that jewelry. Rings especially. And ladies, I don’t wanna hear about your water retention. You can’t get it off, we’ll take the finger.”

The crowd gasped. But as the blonde accomplice moved from table to table, valuables fell into the bag. Beehive, her finger on the trigger guard, remained in the center of the dance floor, her back to the stage to keep an eye on the entire room.

Each time Beehive turned away, Liz inched closer to the bar. Once there, she groped for her purse, found it, pulled it close to her body and took a step sideways. On Beehive’s next turn, Liz disappeared into the office, pulling the phone from the purse.

Beehive turned back to face the bar and stopped cold, glaring at the spot Liz had vacated, then at the open doorway behind the bar. “Stupid bitch—!” She pounded toward the bar.

In the office, Liz was punching the key pad as Beehive slammed in. Liz’s arm shot up, the phone flew overhead and landed on the floor behind Sonnie’s desk.

“You lookin’ to die?” Beehive snarled, grabbing a handful of Liz’s curls. She dragged her into the lounge.

Customers shuddered as Beehive pulled Liz to the space between the bar and the dance floor, shoved her to the floor and kicked her. “Another move and you’re dead!” She made a gruff gesture toward a man at a nearby table. “Him, too.”

Amazed and frightened, the man’s jaw dropped.



## CHAPTER TWO

The robbery went on. A tomblike quiet settled over the room. Still on the floor, Liz's head ached; the knee that had been kicked started to swell. She worried that Sonnie might burst into the office, setting off the intruders and triggering a massacre. What if there was another accomplice planted outside and Sonnie walked into an ambush? She pictured the .38 he kept hidden beneath a pile of papers in his file cabinet and calculated the distance to the office door. She imagined herself making a dash for the gun, getting outside and calling 9-1-1.

With luck, these girls were more bravado than brains, high on drugs and the notion that they deserved whatever they could steal. If she could distract Beehive long enough to get into the office, grab the gun, zig zag around the desks and slip out through Sonnie's office door . . . Then what? Would they take their stolen goods and get out, or would they start a shooting spree?

She had to risk it.

When Beehive glanced her way, Liz rolled her eyes toward the front door, but Beehive, focused on pirating valuables, didn't notice. Liz slid back a few inches, narrowing the distance to the office. Beehive's gaze returned and Liz shot another surreptitious glance toward the door. Beehive paused, turned away.

On the third attempt Beehive became curious. She stepped toward the front door, still dominating the crowd by turning and shouting combative orders. One more turn and Liz pushed herself up, raced into the office, made for the file cabinet, and quickly opened the drawer. She grabbed the .38 and pushed herself to her feet.

The soft metal ping of a safety being released sounded behind her. She spun around and faced the barrel of the semi-auto.

“Drop it. Kick it this way. Or die. Your choice.”

No choice. Liz started to put down the gun, seemed to stumble, raised the .38 and fired, splintering the woodwork of the doorway beside the shooter.

Beehive ducked and raced back to the dance floor. Liz went after her, halting between two tables. She gripped the gun in both hands. “*You* drop it or *you* die!” she shouted. “Kick it over here. Your sidekick’s, too. We’re letting these people out of here.”

Patrons stirred, seeing a way out. Two men nearest the entrance rose.

Beehive faced Liz, flanked by dozens of frightened customers. “Go ‘head. Shoot. You miss me, you’ll hit someone.” Without a pause, she fired at the floor inches from Liz’s feet. The blast blew up shards of wood and metal that ripped the hem of Liz’s dress and tore across her ankles.

Stunned, Liz tightened her grip on the gun but the blonde accomplice behind her spun her around and grabbed for it. Liz slammed her right knee up to break the blonde’s hold on it, but lost her footing and staggered backward. The blonde moved in, swept her foot around the back of Liz’s knees and knocked her to the floor. Liz rolled, pulled herself up. The blonde threw her arms around Liz’s legs, tripped her, and yanked the gun away, slid it across the floor to Beehive, who scooped it up.

“No one leaves!” Beehive yelled.

Frustrated, angry murmurs came from the crowd.

“Try again,” Beehive taunted Liz. “I don’t mind killing you.” With a nod, she ordered the blonde to continue collecting jewelry and wallets.

Liz felt sick when Beehive stuffed Sonnie’s gun into her own waistband. She grew more anxious when the blonde dragged the bag close to Harry and Esther Lowe’s table. Harry had been the first booking agent to find her work in L.A., and they’d remained friends after Harry retired. Yesterday he’d called to announce that he and Esther would be at tonight’s show. “We’re celebrating, too, Liz,” he’d said, happily. “Fifty years ago, I married the sweetest lady in the world.” Now he sat close to his wife and squeezed her hand under the table.

Esther was more frail and gaunt than Liz remembered. Her light gray suit fit loosely around her waist and shoulders. Harry, almost completely bald now, split his attention between the blonde and the shooter.

The blonde dragged the bag close to their table. Liz’s eyes locked on Harry, then followed his gaze and noticed the bag shaking in the girl’s hands. She saw Harry’s expression darken. By the time the bag got to his table he confidently replaced his wallet in his jacket pocket. “This is absurd!” he cried. “Why on earth should I turn over my wallet to you?”

Beehive’s weapon snapped in his direction.

An involuntary scream caught in Esther’s throat. She slid beneath the table. Harry remained where he was, facing down the intruders.

Beehive took calculated steps in his direction. “You wanna live, old man?”

The blonde looked surprised, then afraid.

“The bag, old man,” the shooter barked. “*Fill it up.*”

He looked at the blonde, thinking it over. Finally, he withdrew his wallet and dropped it in. She hurried away.

Liz grew more concerned about Sonnie. She needed to stop him

from bursting in. Hoping for a plan, she began scanning faces and parts of the room. When the black curtain fluttered, an idea hit her. The band! They were watching from the stage. They still had their cell phones. Had they called the police? She pictured keyboardist Miles using forceful, animated hand signals to keep Elliot from charging through the curtains and being peppered with bullets.

Jewelry, cash, wallets and cell phones were being tossed into the bag like garbage, and the bag grew heavier. Beehive and her accomplice communicated with coordinated eye contact. Liz studied them and another idea suddenly flashed. The musical code Frankie mentioned—could she use it to send a private message to the band?

With effort, the blonde dragged the bag toward Mikhail Fattani's table. He had not yet removed his three large rings. Liz held her breath and prayed that he'd put his flamboyant nature on hold. This time blending into the crowd was a good thing.

Fattani's attractive trademark smile had been replaced by a rigid expression as he sat close to his wife.

Nicolette Fattani, a gentle, soft-spoken woman wore a chic, dark brown suit, and an exquisite pair of tear drop earrings that matched the pearl buttons on her jacket. The bag stopped at their table. Nicolette drew back and pressed herself against the booth's upholstery.

The blonde held the bag open but Fattani offered nothing. She looked at him, pleading.

Alerted, Beehive started toward them until Liz's sharp intake of breath made her turn back. She looked first at Liz, then back at Fattani.

"Oh, is this one yours, bitch? Does the little wifey know?"

"Leave him alone! He's got miles to go! Miles!" Liz shrieked, improvising. "They're just ninth and eleventh chords. Hand 'em over!" she shouted at Fattani. "A ninth chord and two one chords. Do it, Miles! They're only rings. You . . . you can . . . replace them."

Fattani's eyes flickered. He'd understood. What about Miles? Beehive looked at Liz, then back at Fattani.

"Prestissimo!" Liz shouted, again facing Fattani.

Beehive glared at Fattani, then his wife. He removed his three rings and held them out. "Here," he said, "these are what you want."

The blonde reached for the rings but Beehive pushed herself between them.

"Don't tell me what I want!" She snapped the gun barrel to his temple. "Let's see what kind of taste in jewels Mr. Showboat has." Her palm opened in anticipation.

Gold clinked as he dropped the rings into her hand. "One-two-three. Three's a charm, baby boy, but I know there's more. Stand up."

Fattani let go of his wife's hand and rose. At six-two he was an imposing figure in his designer suit, but the shooter, only two inches shorter, stood face to face with him.

"What else you carryin', baby?" Aiming at his chest, her eyes went down his form, mocking him. "Build like yours, I know you got protection."

"I don't carry a gun," he said, voice low.

"Don't have to be a gun." She slid her hand inside his jacket and let it glide across his silk shirt, down to the waist, playing a game of torment and control with sexual come-ons. Slowly, methodically, she made a show of patting him down, squeezing and prodding as if examining a prize steer.

"Leave him alone!" Nicolette cried.

Mikhail made a calming gesture toward her.

"The little wifey," Beehive scoffed. She inclined her head toward Nicolette's small leather handbag on the table. "Women like you don't go no place without somethin' they can show. What you got in that purse for show, honey?"

Nicolette opened the handbag but left it on the table. "I don't, uh—just a comb, compact, lipstick."

“I don’t want your friggin’ lipstick!”

Nicolette jumped. “I . . . when I’m out with my husband I don’t bring a wallet.”

Beehive snatched the purse and tossed it in the plastic bag. “Lucky you.” She turned to Fattani. “So it’s hubby here who does the protecting in your world.” She continued patting him down with rough movements. When she got to a small inside pocket of his jacket, Mikhail flinched. She noticed.

He stood stiffly as she withdrew a pocket knife with a sea-blue handle from his jacket. Their eyes locked.

Beehive held it in her palm and made a ceremony of flipping the thumb knob. A shiny serrated blade snapped up, three and a half inches of stainless steel.

“Pro-*lect*-ion.”

She turned to Nicolette. “Do you feel pro-*lected* tonight, wifey?”

“That’s enough! Take what you want and get out!”

Beehive snorted. Her shoulders relaxed and she turned away from Mikhail.

Liz breathed easier.

Mikhail looked relieved.

Without warning, Beehive spun around, took a step, and plunged the knife into his chest. Air hissed from his lips. His eyes lost focus as he crumpled to the floor.

“Mikhail!” Nicolette scrambled out of her chair and knelt beside him. Frantic, she placed her hands over the bleeding chest wound, screaming, “You butcher! Somebody . . . *help us!*”

Chaos broke out. Two people from the next table rushed to help but most of the crowd bolted for the front exit. Liz jumped to her feet and moved with them, hoping to slip behind the curtain. She had almost reached the stage when a series of shots sliced through the noise.

“Exits are blocked, fools!” Beehive yelled. “Now *sit.*”

Terrified, they ran in different directions.

Three more shots stopped them. Two more got them back to their seats.

Frustrated and discouraged, Liz felt her stomach tighten into a muscle spasm. She lurched forward, reached out for support, and made it as far as the last stool at the bar. Painfully, she slid onto it.

A woman from the back of the lounge yelled, “Kill her!”

Seventy-nine-year old Harry Lowe was holding the blonde accomplice in a choke-hold, a .22 at her temple. The bag lay on the floor.

“Let us go or I’ll shoot her!” he hollered, voice shaking as much as his aim.

Beehive smirked, stepping slowly toward him. “You think you got the stomach for killin’, old man?”

Harry had made his decision. “Leave our things and get out! No one will even know you were here.” He motioned toward the back door. “You first. I’ll walk your friend to the door.”

“Or what?”

“I’ll shoot her! On the count of three.”

Beehive’s frigid eyes stared back at him.

“I’ll shoot,” he insisted. “One . . . two . . .”

“Go ahead.”

Harry twitched. The girl whimpered.

“Do her before I do you, old man.” Beehive, impervious, menacing, stepped toward him.

Liz breathed deeply, working to ease the muscle spasm. She slid from the stool, started in Harry’s direction, but her knee buckled and she groped for the edge of the bar.

Harry let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, shoved the girl away, hastily got off a shot and dived for cover with his wife.

Bottles shattered behind the bar. Liquor dripped down the mirrors.

Under the table, Esther yanked the pistol away from Harry,

crawled out and stood up. “You can’t treat us like caged animals!” she yelled, the gun waving in her hands.

Harry jumped out to pull her back. Beehive’s shot ripped into him. He sprawled on the floor.

“*Harry!*” Esther dropped the gun and collapsed over him. Tormented, she looked up at the shooter, whisked the gun off the floor, pushed herself up, and aimed.

Beehive was dead calm. “You wanna join him, Grandma?”

Tears rolled down Esther’s reddened cheeks. “You should be *dead*,” she sobbed, her rage so focused on the shooter she failed to notice the accomplice nearby. Esther mustered the strength to fire, then let the gun drop as she sank to her knees sobbing. The bullet smashed into the dance floor.

Beehive returned fire, missed Esther, hit the accomplice, who went down with a guttural moan. She touched the bloody spot on her shirt, and held up a red-stained hand. “Get me out of here!” she begged Beehive. She tried to pull herself up. “Help me . . .”

A burst of street noise drew all eyes to the source.

The office door had swung open. Sonnie marched into the lounge, dropping Liz’s keys in front of her on the bar.

“Man, it’s a madhouse out there, Liz. I parked your car in front.” He stared at her hair hanging loose, her ripped dress, bleeding ankles. “What happened to you—?” He sized up the room. “*What the hell is going on?*” he bellowed.

Beehive whirled on him. “Shut up!”

“The hell I will!” He started toward her. “Punks like you pulled this in my Miami club and every one of ‘em’s doing time.”

The bullet tore into his thigh and sent him grappling for the edge of the bar where he fell at Liz’s feet with an agonizing groan.

Screams, shouts and panic erupted as the crowd rushed the entrance way again.

Painfully, Liz knelt next to him. “Sonnie!”

“Goddamn, it *hurts*.”

“We need a doctor!” she shouted. “Sonnie needs help!”

The crowd was bolting for the door.

Several rounds blasted. The first sent more broken liquor bottles shooting across the bar. The second hit a woman running for the exit.

“*Sit!*” the shooter hollered over their screams. “The next person who moves is dead.”

The crowd milled about, groaning. Beehive screamed and aimed again. In seconds they had all returned to their tables.

The front door broke open and a short teenage girl rushed into the lounge. The semi-automatic she carried over her shoulder dwarfed her tiny frame. Like her sisters, heavy costume makeup disguised her features. She wore a wig with straight purple hair with orange tips.

A pre-teen killer, Liz thought. How many more were outside in the crowd without wigs? What about the parking lot?

The new girl had none of her leader’s self-confidence. She spotted the wounded blonde and raced to her side. “Vett! You okay, Vett?” she cried in a thin, high voice.

“*Shut up!*” Beehive ordered.

Purple Hair stiffened. “You can’t leave her here!”

Beehive motioned toward the back door. “Get out there. Tell him to bring the car up close.”

Purple Hair’s eyes filled with tears. “You said no shooting,” she whined.

“*Do it!*”

The girl recoiled and took off.

Cradling Sonnie’s head in her lap, Liz saw his eyes open and close. Her palm felt damp and she looked down. The back of his head was bleeding. A small amount of blood had pooled around his waist. “My God! The glass hit you!” His eyes rolled backward. “*Sonnie! Stay here. We need a doctor!*” she shouted.

Kneeling at her husband’s side, Esther pleaded for an ambulance.

“You can’t let my husband die!”

With the toe of her hiking boot, Beehive kicked Harry’s .22 into the center of the dance floor, picked it up and dropped it in the pocket of her black pants. She knelt beside her wounded partner. “Bullet just grazed you. You’ll be okay—”

“It hurts,” the girl gasped. “I can’t breathe.”

The back door opened. A distant siren was barely audible as Purple Hair returned. “Denny’s gone! The car . . . it’s gone! What’re we gonna do without Denny?”

Beehive’s back-hand cracked across the girl’s face, sent her reeling. “No frigging names.”

The crowd grew edgy, near revolt. Some had heard the sirens.

Purple Hair held her hand to her cheek. “What’re we gonna do?”

The leader scanned the room. Five wounded, maybe one dead. She spotted Liz’s keys on the bar, grabbed them and poked Liz in the shoulder. “Get up, slut.”

Sonnie’s helpless body was heavy in her lap. “We need a doctor!”

“Show time. You get to make news without singing.” Beehive yanked at Liz’s arm.

Liz pulled back. “I’m not going anywhere!”

Cold steel touched her temple. “You’re our free ticket. Move!”

Sonnie choked out, “Don’t touch her . . .”

“My car’s in front,” Liz said. “Go now. You can get out before they barricade the street. But you wait and let him die, I’ll hunt you down and kill you myself.”

The shooter snatched clumps of her hair to force Liz to her feet. “You’re coming with us. Cops’ll track that car in ten minutes, but they won’t mess with us if miss high-and-mighty music star’s inside.”

Liz’s scalp was on fire. She gripped the edge of the bar with one hand and used the other to throw the hardest upward punch she

could. Beehive's grip weakened. Liz broke free, raised her arm to block the retaliatory swing, and dug her fingernails into Beehive's arm. "*What the hell do you want?*"

"I'm evenin' the score! You coulda listened to his damn music, but you wanted all the attention!" She shoved the barrel into Liz's throat. "Move."

Sonnie gave a tortured groan. He whispered, "*They'll kill you.*"

In short, painful puffs Liz rasped, "I can't move," the muscle spasm tightening again. "But I . . . I can stall the cops."

Standing above them, Beehive turned at the sound of a thump. The purple-haired girl had attempted to lift the blonde onto her back but had fallen to the floor, taking the girl with her.

Beehive rushed to them, sliding her hands under the injured girl. She pushed Liz's keys into Purple Hair's hand. "Use your piece, get outside and make a path outta here. Anyone gets in the way, shoot'em. Don't screw it up!"

The girl took the keys, raced to the front door and yanked it open, a move elevating her from innocent child to seasoned criminal.

Beehive thrust one shoulder under the blonde and hoisted her high enough to half carry, half drag her out. The garbage bag was left behind.

Liz heard the back door of her Explorer slam and the sound of the engine. Patrons raced to the front door but were pushed back when Jonathan stepped through the entranceway and roared, "Stand back! Let the police through!"

"They're here, Sonnie," she said, tracing a hand across his face. "It's over. Hang on."

Uniformed police entered cautiously. Two stationed themselves at each entrance while others spread out across Germaine's, inspecting the room for possible accomplices hiding within the crowd.

Sitting with Sonnie, the wait seemed unbearable. "C'mon, they're gone," Liz called to the cops impatiently. "We need paramedics

right now!”

“We have to secure things first,” a policewoman assured her. “Medical help is coming.”

A full minute passed. Finally, an officer gave the all-clear.

The stage curtain flew open. Frankie and Elliot ran to the side stairs, Miles jumped off the stage. All three raced across the main floor toward Liz.

Paramedics rushed in. One group surrounded Harry Lowe, another went to Mikhail Fattani.

As the band gathered around Liz and Sonnie, she called out, “Hey! We need help over here . . . and it can’t wait!”