

**TRAIN ROBBERS OF MARS**

**CANNONBALL**  
**EXPRESS**

**KIT KANE**

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# 1

## *Deathbed*

“Please, Sara. I got a family. Three kids. You *know* that.”

Sara Winchester *did* know that. Of course she did. One of those kids was pals with her own little Mikey. The youngest of the three could barely have been off the breast. This was a goddamn *family* Sara was swinging her merry old wrecking ball at here. A family she’d known—a family she’d *cared* about—for close on six years.

And yet, what else was she supposed to do?

Looking across her invoice-strewn desk—a soul-crushing paper landscape of pale red final reminders—Sara allowed herself one more

unhappy moment to regard the man who stood opposite—the anguish in his eyes, the sagging shoulders beneath his dusty overalls, the palms of his leather-skinned laborer’s hands turned towards her in a gesture almost of supplication. And even as Sara’s heart sank further still, her mind continued with its feeble justifications: Deke Jones was young and fit; a solid, reliable worker; his chances of finding other employment had to be pretty good, right? *Right?*

All around, the peeling walls of Sara’s rickety, pre-fab office unit seemed to close in, the sickly trickle of Martian light that managed to filter its way through the grimy windows seeming to deepen rather than alleviate the gathering gloom. From outside, the thud and grind of ongoing work in the adjacent yard drilled at Sara’s temples...

Drawing in a deep breath, Sara unclenched her fists and finally met the eyes of the man standing before her. Met them with what she hoped was frankness and honesty. She owed the guy that at least. “Deke,” she said, “I *swear* this is temporary. I’ve told everyone else the same. Soon as things turn around, you’re back. *All* of you. You have my word. It’s just that right now—”

“Dammit, Sara, we can barely pay our air tax as it is. How the hell are we gonna—”

“I understand. I *do*. And there *is* a small hardship fund available if—”

“Don’t do this. Please, Sara, I’m begging you here. Don’t do this.”

But she did it anyway. Just as she had done with so many others this last disastrous year. Did it with the swiftness and suddenness you might use to put down a beloved pet. Whether that was to make things easier for her or for him, who the hell knew? Either way, fewer than ten seconds later, Deke Jones turned on his bootheels to go storming out of Sara’s office, cursing with every furious footfall as he shouldered his way on past a small, silent figure lurking just beyond the doorframe on the step outside.

Hoping with all her heart that this second visitor might read the room and select a more appropriate moment to reveal the news they had clearly come to impart, Sara put her elbows on her desk, let her head drop into her hands, and issued a soul-weary sigh.

But no, apparently this particular news could not wait, and one tentative *ahem* later, Sara looked up again to take in the slight, singular figure of Doctor Isaac Lovelight. Perennially out of place in this bluest of blue collar environments—neat three-piece suit, floral necktie, shoes that glistened like two particularly fastidious beetles—the tiny man stood poised in the doorway, peering at Sara through fine, gold-rimmed spectacles, the black leather bag of his profession dangling from

his perfectly manicured right hand.

Sara sighed again. “Not a good time, Isaac. *Really* not a good time.”

“Oh, my love, it never is for the kind of news I come bearing.”

An anguished groan heaved its way up from Sara’s leaden gut, and moments later, she was accompanying the medical man through the company’s dusty yard, heading reluctantly for Maintenance One. The vast building—biggest by far in the entire complex—loomed taller and more ominous with every step Sara took towards it, figuratively mirroring both her mounting problems and her spiraling anxiety. “So you’re telling me it’s just gonna get *worse*?” she said to Isaac as they tramped on through the yard, both of them careful to keep their voices low, lest they be overheard by any of the remaining workforce.

“Sara, he is *acutely* undernourished,” Isaac replied. “When was the last time he even ate?”

Guilt clawed at Sara’s gut. “You don’t wanna know.”

“Well... you *need* to get him back onto emergency fluids. And pronto.”

“You think I don’t *know* that?” and once again, the guilt dug in, ripping at Sara’s insides like a tiger at the kill. “We’re all out, Isaac. Done. Insurance won’t cover it anymore. Insurance won’t cover *anything* anymore.”

Arriving at Maintenance One, Sara paused with Isaac by the building's main entrance, next to which, parked by itself in a muddy, oil-clogged bay, was Isaac's pickup—cleaner and more meticulously maintained than any working pickup had a right to be on this part of the Martian frontier. Much like its owner, many would hold.

“Sara, my love,” the man said, and when he turned to her, the look in his eyes was as grave as Sara had ever seen in the pixie-like specimen that was Isaac Lovelight, “this breaks my heart, it truly does, but I have to be honest here. His entire body is failing. Failing *fast*. You *need* to understand that.”

Sara opened her mouth to offer whatever pitiful excuse might emerge this time round, but the little man plowed on before anything could:

“If you do not get at least *some* essential nutrients into him soon,” and graver still, Isaac hauled open the door to Maintenance One, a harsh, rusty creak echoing in the cavernous space beyond, “I promise you, losing a tooth is going to be the *least* of his concerns.”

With these final words, Isaac's gaze shifted to the single titanic object that filled the flatbed of his pickup. Shifted, in fact, to the ‘tooth’ in question—its bloody, decayed root like the stump of some gigantic tree; the dental enamel of its massive, three-meter-tall business end glinting in the afternoon sun. At the same moment, almost as

if on cue, a monstrous, rumbling roar rolled out through the open door of Maintenance One, the entire yard and its surrounding complex shaking from the sheer, gut-wrenching depth of sound. The effect was like being caught in a minor earthquake, and for several long seconds Sara watched Isaac's pickup tremble on its suspension, the business logo stenciled onto the truck's side—LOVELIGHT'S VETERINARY SERVICES—leaping and blurring before her eyes.

Eventually, once the roar had died away, Sara pulled in a slow, deep breath, turned to the open door of Maintenance One, and forced herself to step through it with Isaac. Step through it into a world filled with pain and hunger and the imminent death of everything Sara held dear.



## 2

### *Loading Up*

*What the hell was it with guys?* Jess Flint thought. *Seriously, world! What?* And it wasn't the first time Jess had pondered this question today either. Truth be told, she'd found herself considering the matter all too frequently of late, arriving invariably at the conclusion that if guys were more like engines, the universe would be a far less confusing place. See, if an engine wasn't responding as per factory specs, you just stuck it on the bench, ran some diagnostics, and then tweaked that sucker till it did. Either that or got yourself a new damn engine. But if a *guy* wasn't responding as per... well, okay, sure, as analogies

went, shaky ground perhaps. Point was though, if somehow there *had* been a factory producing guys, that place had some *serious* quality control issues. Cos as far as Jess could make out, *none* of their product *ever* responded quite as a final user might reasonably expect. Not once. And not least the example currently occupying the Cannonball Express's rearmost freight car with Jess.

Declan Donovan.

Oh, sure, the luxury model, no question, with all the fixtures and fittings a gal could possibly desire (not that Jess would ever claim a wealth of experience in such matters). But did the guy *like* her; *there* was the pertinent issue. Early indications had been positive, and yet, for reasons still to be ascertained, nothing so far had come of those indications. No actual romantic liaison of any kind arranged. And why? Who knew! Frankly, if that notional guy factory had had itself a notional complaints department, it would by now have been in receipt of the very stiffest of notional letters from one J. Flint (Dissatisfied of Tranquility).

A voice from outside the freight car interrupted Jess's frustrated musings:

"Okay, gang, last lot," and with a clomp and a clatter and a hiss-hiss-clunk, Sally Chu stepped up, strapped into the pilot's seat of her beloved steam-loader exoskeleton. Maneuvering the hulking

robot suit up to the freight car's open side door, Jess's founding partner in Trans-Mars Haulage grinned her pin-up gal grin and set down the laden pallet in the steam-loader's arms. As the pallet's timber base hit the concrete floor outside the car, the stack of steel drums on it rattled and clanged together, their stark red warning labels—DANGER! URANIUM OXIDE - HIGHLY TOXIC!—dancing in the low evening sun that bathed the chemical refinery's loading yard.

“Dave!” Sally called out, and even before the rattle of the drums had died away, the fella so named came swooping in—Dave Hart, Jess's *other* founding partner in western Mars's most up and coming rail haulage company. With a speed and agility that belied his soft physique and less than heroic stature, TMH's 'temporal stowaway' from a twenty-first century Earth cut the plastic ties that held the drums to the pallet and took a step back.

“Much obliged,” Sally said, before reaching out with one steam-powered robo-arm to lift the drum nearest her and pass it through the freight car's open door. “Comin' at ya,” the gal announced, depositing the drum at the feet of Jess and Declan while Dave hopped nimbly on up into the same wagon to help with what was now the last of the evening's stowage duties.

One by one, the other drums followed, Jess, Declan, and Dave securing them to the freight

car's interior with a network of webbing straps. As the three of them got into a steady work rhythm, Jess took the opportunity to make some further discreet study of the preposterously good-looking Irish fella beside her—the fella who may (or may not [or *may*]) in fact be attracted to her. Or not. The short term goal here, Jess had decided, would be to create an opening for one of them at least—maybe Declan, maybe Jess herself—to make some kind of positive move re the aforementioned but still largely theoretical romantic liaison thingy. And it was with this strategy in mind that Jess resumed her not-so-idle banter:

“Seriously?” she said. “How can you never have seen *The General*? Best movie *ever*.”

“Really?” Declan replied, shaking his blonde fringe out of his eyes as he yanked tight one of the webbing straps. “I *have* sort of heard of it, if that’s any consolation. Me, I’m more of a Douglas Fairbanks guy.”

“Figures.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning *you* need to see more movies.”

“Fair enough. So let me know next time this *General* is on at your local fleapit then.”

*Ha! Result!* and Jess turned away to hide the involuntary smile that flitted across her face. “Okay, sure. I’ll keep an eye on—”

“Which would be tomorrow night.”

*Uh-oh.* Jess stiffened. *Busted.* “Um... what?” she managed. “Really? No way!”

“And which *you*, apparently, were entirely unaware of,” Declan added, the smile that flitted across *his* face not even *slightly* involuntary.

“Well... I... I *was*,” Jess came back. “*Entirely* unaware, as you so rightly say.”

“Despite the copious posters plastered all over Tranquility? Weird...” and damn damn *damn* that playful twinkle in the SOB’s *gorgeous* frickin eyes...

“Okay, look,” Jess said, “if you’ve got other stuff on tomorrow night, not a problem.”

“Never said I had other stuff on.”

“As did I. Not. Say.”

“What?”

“God, I don’t know... Look, forget I even mentioned it, okay? Just—”

“Oh, for the love of Betsy,” came a frustrated growl from outside the freight car, and reaching through its open door with two robo-arms, Sally grabbed Jess and Declan by the backs of their overalls—one in each titanium fist—and hauled them both out of the wagon to let them dangle before her, their two pairs of workbooted feet pedaling in mid-air above the refinery’s concrete floor.

“*You*,” Sally said to Declan with a take-no-shish-

kebab scowl, “pick her up at seven on the dot, and do *not* be late. And *you*...” she turned to Jess now, her scowl, if anything, even *less* tolerant of the cuss-word substitute, “wear a *frock*, and keep him waiting at least half an hour. More if he looks too cocky.” A pause as Sally frowned then returned her attention to Declan. “And *you* did not hear that last bit,” she said, before directing her concluding remarks to them both: “So... are we *clear* now? A nod will suffice.”

Jess gulped then nodded, relieved to see Declan, still dangling beside her, do the same.

And with matters thusly settled, Sally jerked out a satisfied nod of her own then lowered Jess and Declan to the ground. “Okay, *good*. Now—”

But apparently, any further orders from Ms. Chu would have to wait, because just then a voice from behind cut in:

“Excuse me,” it said, and turning with the others, Jess found herself looking up at an imposing middle-aged woman, chisel-featured, broad of shoulder, and dressed in overalls that were almost as dusty as Jess’s.

“Hi,” Jess said. “Can we help you?”

“I hope so,” the woman replied, clearing her throat a little before turning to Declan. “I’ve been told that *you* are the buyer of this particular load, yes?” and she gestured to the train of eleven freight cars hitched behind the Cannonball in the

refinery's loading yard.

"Well, the organization I work for is the *actual* buyer," Declan said, "but I'm overseeing the purchase and transport, yes. Is there a problem?"

The woman shook her head. "No. No problem. It's just..." and she cleared her throat a second time. "I wonder if you might consider selling the shipment on."

Declan frowned. "Selling it *on*? To whom?"

"To me."

"I'm sorry, no can do. In case you haven't heard, this is the last high-grade Uranium 'O' in the sector. No more for at least a month now, or so the refinery bosses keep telling me."

The woman nodded, and though her attitude remained cool and businesslike, her eyes betrayed something else to Jess then—some underlying anxiety, some unspoken sense of urgency...

"Which is exactly my problem," the stranger continued, "and which is why I am willing to offer you twice market value for it."

Declan's own eyes widened. "Ah... well... tempting, to be sure. *Very* tempting. But again, no can do, I'm afraid. Our needs are—"

"*Three* times."

"... *Three* times market value? Are you *serious*?"

"In cash. Right now."

Declan stared back at the woman, who stood her ground in silence, awaiting a reply. In the end

though, the Irishman shook his head. “That *is* a very generous offer, no question, but I’m sorry. Guess you’ll have to wait till the month’s out.”

For a second, Jess thought she saw anger flare behind those troubled eyes, and the woman opened her mouth as if to say more... but then shut it again and nodded, her business here concluded it would seem, if not to her satisfaction. Following a final curt dip of the chin to Jess and the others, the woman turned on her bootheels and marched off, heading for the only non-rail vehicle parked in that section of the loading yard—a bubblegum pink and unfeasibly clean pickup truck, on the side of which were stenciled the words LOVELIGHT’S VETERINARY SERVICES. Waiting by the pickup was a small, neatly attired and bespectacled man, who, upon noting the woman’s approach, opened the truck’s driver’s side door and settled himself in behind the wheel.

Along with Declan and the others, Jess watched in puzzled silence as the woman climbed into the pickup’s passenger seat, following which the little man cranked the ignition, shifted the gearstick, and the truck trundled off in a cloud of rising dust.

“Hmmm,” Jess said, arching a single eyebrow at Declan. “That was some serious profit you just turned down, fella.”

Declan nodded. “Sure. But hey, gotta keep my



focus here, right? Cos with this little lot,” and turning, he banged on the freight car they stood beside, his eyes sparkling with excitement as they took in the drums of uranium oxide that filled it, “we can *finally* bring New Avalon’s reactors online. And that, folks, is one *seriously* big deal.”

It was too, Jess had no doubt. Indeed, as far as ‘deals’ went, the top secret project known as New Avalon was as big as they came. Created millennia ago by the ancient Martians, the astonishing underground eco-system had been bio-engineered from the ground up as a way to produce a surfeit of oxygen that could replenish the planet’s dying atmosphere, and since the discovery of the site—in a ruined state and minus its long dead creators—by outlawed activist group Free Air, renovation of New Avalon had been the rebels’ number one priority. Understandably so, Jess thought. Even with the little she still understood of its science, she could see that the project had the potential to revolutionize life for the red planet’s millions of human colonists. And the potential to put out of business for good the ruthless ‘air barons’ who ran so many of Mars’s privatized air companies. According to Declan and his Free Air colleagues, once New Avalon was fully up and running again, and once it had been re-integrated with its network of sister sites, only one more of which had so far been discovered, it really would

mean free air for all on Mars. That said, there was still a *lot* of work to be done—*years* of it as far as Jess could see—so although originally designed to be an *organic* system, if adding some temporary nuclear power into the mix hastened the process by which New Avalon could be brought back online, well then, all to the good in Jess’s opinion.

“Believe me,” Declan continued, “those reactors are gonna provide us with some *serious* grunt. They’ll supercharge our irrigation systems, maybe even—”

“Hey all!”

The voice—warm and melodic, with the rounded tones of a born-and-bred Brit—emerged from the fine-featured face of Vera Middleton, the fourth and final founding member of Trans-Mars Haulage, and the company’s accountant/administrator/mistress-of-all-paperwork.

Notebook in hand, the English gal approached the waiting group at her usual efficient trot, peering at them over the rims of her ‘Madame Librarian’ eyeglasses.

“Hey girl,” Jess said as her friend came to a stop beside them. “How’d you get on?”

“Not as well as I’d hoped,” Vera replied, the most delicate of frowns creasing the gal’s flawless alabaster brow. “The town *is* rather busy, and I could only get three rooms in total, so I’m afraid some of us *will* have to, you know, double up.”

Never one to waste an opportunity as tease-worthy as the preceding, Sally, still towering over them in her steam-loader, unsheathed a wicked grin and waggled her eyebrows at Jess and Vera. “Well hey, you know me, gals. I’ll ‘double up’ with most anyone. Feel free to draw straws,” and, her loader mimicking her every move, Mars’s foremost exponent of the showgirl shimmy did her foremost thing, before segueing into a cartoonish, sexy-cute pose, buttoning the entire cornball routine with a mischievous pout in Vera’s direction.

In response to which, as was her unfailing custom, Vera gulped in deepest embarrassment and blushed like a ripening apple, looking anywhere but at the brazen hussy in the giant robot-suit. “Um, a-a-actually, Sally,” the English gal stammered, “I’ve p-p-put *you* in with Jess. And I’ve given *me* the single room. Hope that’s, um...” cue a further gulp “...okay...?”

As the sole person present who knew of Vera’s intense crush on their own Ms. Chu, Jess smiled to herself and waited for Sally to pile in with further teasing... only to be surprised when the gal came back not with more of the same but with what appeared to be a disgruntled frown, her steam-loader sagging around her and magnifying a body language that looked for all the world like foot-shuffling awkwardness.

*Hmmmm, Jess mused. So that was a most un-Sally-like response. Most un-Sally-like indeed. What on earth had been going through the gal's head just then?*

### 3

#### *Twin Room Torment*

“She *hates* me,” Sally Chu said, directing her statement at the half-open door of the hotel room’s en suite. “In every possible way a gal can hate, that gal frickin hates *me*.”

“Vera does *not* hate you, Sal,” came Jess’s weary reply, drifting through from the en suite to the bedroom and prompting in Sally a huff of frustration. It was not, by a *long* chalk, the first time Sally had heard this idiotic rebuttal tonight, and in response to it now she proceeded to compose in her head several possible comebacks, few if any of which would find their way into *The Nice Girl’s Guide to Appropriate Frickin Language*. In

the end though, Sally buttoned her lip and just sagged back onto the upholstered headboard of her bed, where she huffed a bit more, hugged her knees, and stared out through the single window of the tiny hotel room. Not that the view there provided much comfort, consisting as it did of several rows of rickety rooftops, beyond which lay the chemical refinery the small township served, its perpetual glow warming the lower regions of an otherwise pitch black Martian sky.

“I mean, look,” Sally said eventually, “I get it, okay? She’s a classy babe. Used to hob-nobbing with her classy English friends back on classy ol’ Planet Earth...”

“Vera does *not* hate you, Sal,” the voice of the idiot monopolizing the bathroom repeated.

“Yeah, right,” Sally growled back, and rising with a frown, she stepped up to the room’s full-length mirror to scowl at the young Asian woman framed in its mottled glass. “You seen what she’s like. I go anywhere *near* that gal, I swear she thinks she’s gonna catch something. Catch what exactly, I have no frickin clue.” Sally scowled again at her image in the hotel room mirror. “Terminal *hotness*, maybe? Stage 3 *everyone-else-would-kill-for-this*?”

“You don’t think maybe she just finds you a little... intimidating?”

Sally snorted. “Oh, please! *Me? Intimidating?* It’s *her* that’s got the frickin vowels that built an

empire! And damned if she don't know *exactly* how to use 'em either. Do you know, she actually says the word 'golly'. For *real*. In *actual sentences*. Not even sure I ain't heard a 'jolly good' or two in there neither. And it's *me* that's intimidating? Ha!"

In response to which entirely irrefutable arguments, the bathroom-hogger next door proceeded only to compound her idiocy: "So why do you even care?"

"*Care?*" Sally exclaimed. And hey, if more snorting accompanied the exclamation, who the hell could blame a gal, right? "What do you mean, *care?* I don't *care*." And she didn't. Of *course* she didn't. Had the serious *hots* for? Yeah, sure. Would dearly love to ride the bedsprings with? Darn tootin', mon ami! Vera 'Drop Dead English' Middleton was just about the single most desirable human Sally Chu had ever met, regardless of the fact that the lady herself clearly had no clue about this. No clue whatsoever. Gal *smelled* amazing too. Like, *all the time*, in a way that seemed to defy the very laws of biology. But *care?* Ha! Time to clarify the hell outta that little misunderstanding:

"Seriously, babe," Sally continued to Jess through the half-open door of the en suite, lacing her throaty drawl with what she hoped was just the right edge of withering derision, "do I *look* like I *care* what Vera Middleton thinks of me?"

"Um... well you sure *sound* like you—"

“It’s the *principle*, babe. The frickin *principle*. Me? I take people as they are. Always have done, always will. But her? Oh no. You seen the way she looks at me, right? Or, more to the point, *doesn’t* look at me. Like, *ever*. Nope. To her, I am just a Grade A tramp, yeah? Trash. *Trampash*, that’s what I am. A hussy. A frickin *trampashussy*, that’s ol’ Sally Chu.”

A sigh from Her Next Door. “If you say so...”

“I mean, look, can I help it if I got natural assets?” and here Sally shot a careless look at her own cleavage in the mirror. “Proud of ’em too. Always have been. Always will. Ain’t never changed for no one, me, and I sure as hell ain’t starting now,” following which impassioned assertion, Sally proceeded to lace up the gaping neckline of her black satin babydoll, adopt what she imagined to be a slightly less T&A posture, and study the overall effect in the mirror...

... before rolling her eyes and succumbing to a frustrated half-snarl. *Dammit*, what the hell was she *doing?* and turning to glare again at the half-open door of the en suite, Sally snapped out a tetchy, “Look, are you about done in there, hon?”

“Um... nearly,” came Jess’s reply.

“What the hell ya even up to anyway?”

“Oh, um, nothing. Don’t come in though.”

*Huh?* Sally thought. *Don’t come in?* Okay, so *this* had just become moderately interesting—not to



say a welcome distraction from troubling self-scrutiny—and stepping away from the mirror, Sally strode towards the en suite, shoved its door fully open, and barged on through into the brightness of the lamplit bathroom.

“Hey! I *said* don’t come *in!*” a startled Jess yelped, her head whipping round to fire a furious glare at Sally—

—who, in turn, froze where she stood in the doorway, mouth hanging open as she took in the spectacle presented by her seated friend.

“Girl, if you so much as smile,” Jess growled, “I swear I will kick your hottie ass.”

As hilariously unlikely as the outcome just proposed might have been, it was, Sally felt, nowhere *near* as unlikely as the sight of the gal who had proposed it.

Perched on the bathroom’s lone stool, Jess Flint sat before the washstand mirror, eyeliner pencil in one hand, sundry other makeup offerings arrayed before her, engaged, Sally was forced to assume, in some puzzling effort at cosmetic enhancement. *Puzzling* because, well, the actual *results* of that effort were... Fighting back the torrent of quips that begged to be released to a deserving world, Sally instead enquired with as much straight-faced sincerity as she could muster:

“Um... care to explain, babe?”

For a moment, only that scorch-the-flesh-

from-your-bones glower continued to communicate the simmering emotions of Jessica Ashley Flint. But then, eventually: “I... I got this stuff at the drugstore in town.”

“... Uh-huh...”

“Thought I’d, you know, maybe try some of it out...”

“... Uh-huh...”

More glowering, more simmering, until finally, Jess threw the eye pencil onto the ledge beneath the mirror, screeched her stool back half a meter, and turned her glare up to *incinerate*. “Okay, look, thanks to *your* big goddamn mouth, I have now got a big goddamn date tomorrow night.”

“And you are most goddamn welcome. *And...*?”

“*And...* maybe I oughtta, you know, make some kinda effort, or something, right? *Right?*”

“Well, sure... and that effort would involve impersonating a victim of serious assault *why?*” Yeah, okay, cheap shot, but honestly, how else was Sally supposed to react here? The gal before her truly did look like she’d just gone ten rounds with... well, with *Sally*.

Glare ripening still further, Jess snatched a tissue from the box on the washstand and scrubbed angrily at the almost childlike attempts she’d made to augment her eyes. Unfortunately, the move succeeded only in smudging those attempts even

more. “*Dammit!*” Jess spat, throwing the now empty tissue box at a nearby waste basket and rising to barge her way past Sally in the bathroom doorway. “*Dammit dammit dammit,*” she repeated, those panda-in-a-punch-up eyes of hers lasering in on a fresh box of tissues that sat on the table beneath the window.

“Seriously, babe,” Sally said as she tailed her furious roomie, “it’s like you never picked up an eye pencil in your entire life.”

What followed this harsh but inarguable observation was silence. A whole heap of it.

“Oh my *god!*” Sally blurted. “You never picked up an eye pencil in your entire life!”

Ripping open the fresh box of tissues, Jess whirled on Sally. “Oh, come *on*, Sal! It’s *me!* When would *I* ever need to use makeup? Most times, it’s all I can do to get the axle grease outta my hair every night. Not like I even—” at which point, completely without warning, Jess stopped—stopped *dead*—her gaze directed out the bedroom window, her eyes widening. “What the *hell...?*”

Sally frowned. “Huh? You okay, babe?” and moving in behind Jess, she too peered through the room’s small, grimy window, though if she had been expecting enlightenment to follow, she was disappointed. Outside, in the distance, Sally could just make out a diesel locomotive with a long train of freight, trundling past on the mainline track

beyond the chemical refinery. But apart from that, there was, as far as Sally could see, nothing else of note. Certainly nothing to justify Jess's apparent shock. "Babe, what is it? I don't know what you're—"

"First wagon," Jess said, and frowning deeper, Sally turned to look again at the distant freight train—this time at its first wagon.

That was when Sally's own eyes started in shock, her heart leaping at the same time.

The thing was, such had been the frantic, never-a-minute-to-spare nature of forming, promoting, and running Trans-Mars Haulage, Jess and her crew had so far gotten round to painting the company logo onto just *one* of their many freight cars. And now, framed in the hotel room window, there that very freight car was, its two-meter-tall, bright yellow TMH logo almost glowing in the dark behind the diesel locomotive the car was now hitched to. But that wasn't all. Not *nearly* all. Because *behind* that freight car were another ten—maybe not so readily identifiable as the first, but recognizable in context nonetheless.

"Holy crap!" Sally said. "That's our frickin cargo!"

## 4

### *Train Robbers of Mars*

Whirling from the window, Jess flew across the hotel room floor, hauled open the door, and hurled herself through. Bare feet pounding threadbare carpet, she covered the length of the second-floor corridor in moments, hammering at two of the doors along it as she sprinted past.

“Downstairs now!” she yelled, barely slowing as she issued the command, let alone stopping to wait for an answer. “We got a problem!” and even as Jess came stumbling to a halt at the corridor’s far end, she heard the two doors she’d hammered on clatter open behind her, followed by the bleary voices of first Vera then Declan:

“Golly, Jess, you *scared* me! What’s going on?”

“Yeah, whassup?”

But Jess was already gone, dragging open the door at the end of the passage and pitching herself through it onto the landing atop the stairs. Fortunately, Sally was also on the case now, the gal’s voice ringing out from behind Jess as she gave chase: “What the boss lady said! BIG problem!”

Tumbling down the single flight of stairs, Jess hit the hotel lobby in seconds, barged her way out through the building’s front door, and skidded to a halt on the stoop, her fury surging as she spotted the receding diesel and its stolen cargo, still just visible in the distance, heading northwards out of town.

Exactly what Jess intended to *do* about any of this, though, remained, for the moment, a mystery, and as she stood there peering through the gloom of the Martian night, watching Declan’s precious cargo disappear into the darkness, the best Jess could manage was an enraged growl followed by some Sally-grade cursing.

A heartbeat later, as if summoned by the profanity, the benchmark-for-cursing herself came tumbling out onto the hotel’s stoop, black satin babydoll billowing in her wake. “Aw goddamn it!” Sally spat as she and Jess watched the train’s rearmost freight car vanish in the night. “What *now?*”

Jess spun to Sally and opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, the hotel's front doors crashed open for a third time, and Declan and Vera all but fell through them. Like Jess and Sal, both were clad only in their nightwear.

"Will somebody *please* tell me what the hell is going on here?" Declan demanded.

"We been robbed," Jess said. "They *took* it! *All* of it! Whole damn cargo!"

At this grim revelation, Jess fully expected Declan to go ballistic, but weirdly, that's not what happened. Instead, Jess watched a *different* kind of emotion—a sort of open-mouthed horror—transform the Irishman's features as the fella took in Jess herself. Principally, the parts of Jess located between her neck and her hairline.

"Oh my god!" Declan exclaimed. "Jess, what did they *do* to you? Are you okay?"

"Huh? What are you— Oh! No, that's not—" Jess made to swipe at the makeup smudges around her eyes, then thought better of it. "Um, see, that isn't actually—"

But before she could say more, Trans-Mars Haulage's final crew member came barging through the exit to join them on the stoop, huffing and puffing in his flannel nightshirt. "What is it?" Dave gasped. "What's going on?"

"We been robbed," Declan declared. "They beat Jess up."

Aaaaannnd now it was *Dave's* turn to recoil in horror as he too took in Jess's face:

"Oh god, Jess, are you okay?"

"Yes! *Yes, I'm fine! Really!* It's not what you—"

"Bloody scumbags! I'll go get a first-aid kit."

"Guys, guys, *relax*," Sally said. "They did *not* beat Jess up, okay? That's actually just—"

"OIL!" Jess blurted. "Or... *something...*"

Vera frowned. "Um... *really?* You don't *wash* before you put your *pajamas* on?"

"Look, can we maybe discuss this later? Cos in case y'all haven't noticed—" Jess jabbed a somewhat irate finger in the direction of the distant railroad. "Train robbery! We gotta follow 'em! Don't know how, but—"

"Babe..." It was Sally's voice—low, thoughtful, and tinged (as it so often was in times of crisis) with the kind of *chill-folks-we-got-this* attitude that made Jess love the gal like a sister.

Grabbing Jess by the shoulder, Sally whirled them both around to face the opposite end of the hotel's stoop, fixed to which, Jess saw, there was a sturdy timber rail. And hitched to that rail? Several similarly sturdy horses, slurping at a drinking trough.

Jess turned again to Sally, and the look in the gal's eye said all that needed to be said.



## 5

### *Dress Down Fridays*

Leaving the others agape and standing, Jess and Sally launched themselves for the far end of the stoop, vaulting the rail there to land by a pair of towering stallions, one chestnut, one a dappled gray. Unprepared for the impact as the soles of her bare feet slammed into gravelly ground, Jess stifled a cry of pain, then grabbed the reins of the dappled gray and hoisted herself into the saddle, slotting her traumatized feet into stirrups she could barely reach but which would just have to do. Beside her, Sally was already thrusting her heels into the flanks of her own ride, and as the gal's chestnut stallion took off, Jess kicked the

dappled gray into action too, the animal surging forward after Sal's.

Jess's horse was powerful, responsive, and, crucially, *fast*. Within seconds she had drawn level with Sally, the pair of them thundering along after the diesel and its stolen cargo, visible once more up ahead. Which meant, of course, that they were catching the train up. Though maybe not for long, Jess thought. Currently negotiating a tight bend on its way out of town, the loco would surely accelerate once it hit any significant straight, and after that, the chances of outrunning it on horseback would diminish rapidly to zero.

*Not gonna happen*, Jess assured herself and dug her heels deeper into her galloping mount.

Beside Jess, over the thudding of hooves and the rumble of the train ahead, Sally's voice suddenly rang out in a wild, exultant whooping, and when Jess shot a startled look at her friend, she saw the beaming gal run a wry gaze over Jess's flapping pajamas, before looking down at her own wind-buffed babydoll. "Gotta love these dress-down Fridays, huh?"

Jess grinned right back. "Hell yeah!" she said, and then, "HYAH!" as once again she kicked her heels into the dappled gray's flanks, the animal surging forward in tandem with Sal's.

Fewer than ten seconds later, they had closed the distance between them and the train to just

meters, galloping on into the dense dust storm wake that billowed behind the thundering rolling stock. One final bare-heeled spurring was all it took, and at last, hoofbeats pounding their relentless tattoo, Jess and Sally's horses drew level with the train's rearmost wagon.

Even before Jess could yell "What now?" Sally rose on her stirrups and launched herself from her saddle, sailing through the dust-filled air. Jess gasped in both shock and disbelief, but she needn't have worried; Sally landed neatly on the narrow railed-off ledge at the very back of the last wagon, hauling herself up to safety as her now riderless chestnut stallion dropped back, vanishing into the night behind them.

*Damn*, but that gal made it look soooooo easy...

Heart hammering, Jess maneuvered her own horse into the position Sally's ride had just vacated—level with and just meters from the train's rearmost freight car. This close up, the clatter of wheels on track was almost deafening, and the train's churning dust cloud wake lashed at Jess's face, blinding her for seconds at a time.

Crouched less than three meters away on the narrow back ledge of the rear wagon, Sally beckoned furiously to Jess, yelling out, "Come on! You got it, girl!"

Yes, dammit, she *did*. Whoever the hell these train robbers were, they were *not* getting away

with this. Not if Jessica Ashley Flint had anything to say on the matter.

Hoisting her left foot over the saddle so that both her legs were on the side facing the train, Jess peered through the dust storm at the speeding railcar her horse kept pace with. At the same time, her right foot remained locked in its stirrup, ready to give her the push off she would need for the leap. But with her straining fingers struggling to maintain their grip on the saddle behind her, just stopping herself being thrown from the jouncing horse was a challenge in itself. How the hell was she supposed to judge a jump like this when she could barely stay upright?

And then the train began to accelerate.

Gaze whipping front once more, Jess swore in frustration. Because, yes, as she'd feared, the diesel had just hit a long stretch of straight track and was taking full advantage, pulling away from Jess and her horse with startling speed.

"Do it!" Sally yelled over the thunder of the wheels. "You got this, babe! *Do it!*"

Jess sucked in a deep breath—*now or never*—and coiling her body like a spring, she shoved off from the stirrup, leaping for the rear ledge of the speeding freight car.

And could the enterprise have gone any worse? No, ma'am, it could not. Even as she launched herself into the chasm between galloping stallion

and hurtling train, Jess felt her right foot slip *through* the stirrup it was using to push off from. Slip through and then catch on that same closed semicircle of hardened steel. While her body sailed onward for the wagon ahead, and her reaching hands grabbed the safety rail of its rear platform, Jess felt her right leg yanked up behind her, foot still caught fast in the stirrup.

And did the whole horrific fiasco end there? Not a chance. Because the train *continued* to pull away, and the dappled gray *continued* to drop back, and strung out like so much washing between accelerating train and retreating horse, Jess felt the stirrup bite into her bare ankle even as her fingers fought to retain their grip on the freight wagon's rear safety rail. "Oh god," Jess gasped, every vertebra in her spine stretching towards some inevitable breaking point, until finally, unable to maintain their hold any longer, Jess's pain-wracked fingers snapped free of the rail, and the front half of her body went plummeting towards the boulder-strewn ground rushing by beneath.

## 6

### *Heroes in PJs*

Since the unanticipated founding of Trans-Mars Haulage earlier in the year, Jess Flint had come to reflect with surprising (not to say alarming) regularity that, these days, her life seemed to benefit from way more than its fair share of thank-the-sweet-lord-for-Sally-Chu moments.

And here, right on cue, came another one.

Lunging forward with panther-like speed, Sally thrust both hands over the safety rail at the back of the hurtling freight car and grabbed Jess's forearms, halting at once the deadly plunge that threatened to send Jess face first into the rushing, stony surface of the red planet. Not that death,

imminent and bloody, ceased still to loom large. Slung like a hammock between galloping horse and speeding train—single stirrup holding her fast at one end, Sally (thank-the-sweet-lord-for) Chu gripping her at the other—Jess remained utterly helpless, unable to do anything but stare down in heart-thumping horror as, less than two meters beneath her, that jagged terrain of bone-shattering rock continued to race past at forty or more kph.

“It’s okay, I gotcha,” Sally yelled to Jess, but no sooner had the words left the gal’s mouth than the horse attached to Jess’s ankle began to drop back again, and the pain in Jess’s wracked spine cranked its way up to excruciating once more.

Stifling a cry, Jess shook and twisted her foot to try and free it from the stirrup. But with no slack to speak of, the effort brought only further pain, and the stirrup’s semicircle of hardened steel remained stuck where it was, caught just above Jess’s ankle.

Then the dappled gray dropped back farther still, and this time there was no chance of stifling it—Jess screamed, a full-throated howl of agony.

In response, Sally’s already vice-like grip on Jess’s forearms tightened, and she heaved hard, yanking Jess towards her. But it was no use: the cold steel of the stirrup only bit deeper into Jess’s ankle flesh, its straight-edged tread lodged fast behind her heel bone.

“No!” Jess yelled. “Gimme some slack! Now!”

“Slack? Are you *insane!*”

“NOW!” Jess screamed, and with a grim nod, Sally complied, allowing her hold to loosen and Jess’s forearms to slip backwards through Sally’s fingers. Just a little, the gal’s formidable grip locking in again around Jess’s wrists, but the result was at least *some* slack, and praying it would be enough, Jess once more jerked her foot in the stirrup.

Nothing.

She kicked out hard, one, twice, three times, foot flailing in the dusty air as Mars raced by a meter-and-a-half beneath her.

Still nothing.

Breath now coming in harsh, ragged gasps, and with despair closing in, Jess pulled her knee towards her, kicked out yet again, hauled inwards a second time—

—and bingo! Finally, her foot slipped free, the hard steel tread of the stirrup sliding past her heel and falling away as Jess’s knee shot up towards her chest.

With Sal still clutching her by the wrists, Jess felt the rear half of her body drop like a sack of wet cement, legs plummeting for the rocky ground rushing by below. But at the very same instant, roaring her defiance, Sally hauled hard, pulling Jess towards the freight car. Tumbling over the



low steel balustrade of the safety rail, Jess slammed into Sally's midriff, and together the pair of them went careering backwards onto the wagon's rear platform, thudding to a halt in a graceless heap of limbs, hair, pajama flannel, and torn black satin.

After a moment, Jess dragged herself into a sitting position so that her back lay flat against the freight car's sealed rear door, and for several seconds more, there she sat, huffing and gasping and trying hard not to contemplate all the ways in which what they had just done had been insane-to-the-point-of-suicidal.

Beside her, Sally simply brushed her hair out of her eyes and straightened her disheveled nightwear. "Know what?" she said. "Something tells me this is *not* conducive to a good night's beauty sleep."

With her breathing finally dropping back to levels that might *just* allow concurrent speech, Jess squinted into the dark behind the speeding train. "You see any of the others yet?"

Sally didn't even bother to look. "Are you serious?"

"I thought they'd be right behind us. There *were* other horses there, right?"

"Yeah, but ain't none of them can ride for beans, hon. Nope, they, bless their city-folk hearts, are gonna have to source themselves some

alternative transportation.”



Vera hauled open the driver’s door of the ATV, glanced at the dash, and once again felt her heart sink. The diesel four-wheel-drive would surely have been ideal, but with no keys in the ignition, and no Jess or Sally to hotwire the thing, the vehicle, like the other examples Vera had just vetted, might as well have not been there at all.

Slamming the ATV’s door in frustration, Vera turned from it and raced on through the darkened yard of the closed chemical refinery, scanning the gloom for any other potential rides and finding none. Maybe Declan was having better luck, she thought, but just seconds later, she rounded a corner to meet the fellow himself concluding his own search from the yard’s other side, and the look on the Irishman’s face told the same story.

“Well?” Vera asked anyway.

“Nothing,” Declan said. “You?”

Vera shook her head, and together the pair of them took off once more across the shadow-drenched compound, skidding to a stop just moments later beside the steam-powered hulk of the Cannonball Express. Now hitched only to its coal tender, crew car, passenger car, and the empty flatbed for Sally’s steam-loader, the gleaming red loco remained parked where they’d

left it earlier that evening, untouched, it would seem, beyond the theft of its cargo. Apparently, the robbers had simply uncoupled said cargo from the Cannonball end then re-coupled it to their own diesel loco at the *other*, before making off with all eleven trucks, the entire heist conducted under the non-existent eyes of the refinery's non-existent security detail.

"Dave, please tell me you got this," Declan growled through gritted teeth.

Huddled over the controls in the cab of the Cannonball, a clench-jawed Dave yanked on a lever then twisted two valves simultaneously. Determined look and purposeful activity aside though, the fellow did not, Vera thought, present the aspect of a happy bunny.

"She'll be up to pressure in about an hour," Dave said. "Best I can do."

"*What?*" Declan shot back. "By which time they are gonna be god knows where. *Dammit!*"

"Okay, look," Vera said, "it's a railway, yes? How hard can it be to follow them? Not like they've got free rein to go anywhere they want, is it?"

Declan glowered at her, the beginnings of some angry objection rising in his eyes. But Vera was having none of that. Not with her friends' lives potentially relying on quick and decisive action here. "*You,*" she snapped at Declan, "get with the

shoveling,” following which she whirled on Dave in the cab. “And *you*, vent the boiler to fifty percent capacity. That should get us up to pressure faster. Well what are you waiting for? Go go *go!*”

And almost instantly, the boys leapt to it, taking Vera momentarily by surprise. “Golly,” she murmured to herself. “And they went went went...”



Huddled together on the narrow platform at the back of the speeding freight car, Jess and Sally hauled at the heavy steel door set into the car’s rear end. With the pair of broad sliding panels on the wagon’s flanks providing primary access for loading up, the smaller back door was essentially rusted shut through years of apparent non-use, and Jess and Sal’s first two attempts to pull the thing open got them precisely nowhere. But then, after a third coordinated heave, the grimy rectangle of metal wrenched free of its corroded frame and swung aside in a swirling cloud of rust flakes.

Faint silver light from an unusually clear and starry Martian sky spilled into the dark interior of the freight car, and after a moment, as her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, Jess began to make out the squat tubular shapes of the uranium ore drums—dozens of them, stacked three or four high, strapped to the walls and floor of the wagon.

With, as far as it was possible to tell, no black-hatted welcoming committee waiting there to whup their idiot asses, Jess and Sally exchanged looks of relief, and Sally darted through into the wagon itself to crouch low behind the nearest stack of drums.

Jess followed, ducking down beside her friend. “You think they saw us get on?”

Sally shrugged. “If they did, expect the merry thud of incoming bad guys any moment.”

They waited... and heard nothing but the rhythmic clatter of wheels on track and the rush of wind past the sides of the wagon.

“I’m guessing *not* then,” Sally said.

Jess rose to her feet, a righteous fury finally vanquishing the last of her fear. “Okay, so let’s go take out these scumbags and get our damn—”

“Whoah whoah whoah, Douglas Fairbanks,” Sally said, pulling Jess down again into their hiding place behind the drums. “Just dial back the action hero a notch, huh?”

Jess scowled at her friend. “What? *Why?*”

Sally, sensitive as ever, offered the mother of all patronizing eye-rolls before continuing: “One: we have no idea how many bad guys we’re dealing with here. Two: we have no idea how heavily armed they are. And three: *we are in our pajamas.*”

All good points and well argued, Jess was forced to concede. “So what’s the plan?”

“Okay,” Sal said, “first up, there *is* still a chance that Dave, Vera, and Declan might swoop in with some sort of super heroic rescue bid involving heavy artillery, delightful banter, and the full might of Western Mars Law Enforcement.”

“You think?”

“No, of course not. What am I, an idiot? But hey, you never know, right?”

“And if the others *don't* show?”

“If they *don't* show, well then, right now we have got ourselves the element of surprise, yeah? So let's not waste it. Reckon we lay low in here till the train gets to wherever it's going. Then, provided Lady Luck stays on our side, we wait till whatever crew there is up front clears outta the loco, following which we steal the whole damn shooting match back again, from right under their thieving scumbag noses.”

Jess weighed this up. “Okay, nice,” she said. “Laying low could be a problem though. What if somebody comes back to check on the cargo?”

For a moment, they pondered in silence, then Jess's gaze shifted to take in the stacked drums of uranium ore... before darting back to Sally, whose grinning mug revealed at once that great minds thought alike.

Just five minutes later, Jess and Sal had prized the lids off two of the steel drums, hauled those same drums out through the freight car's end

door, and were emptying the drums' contents onto the single track railroad that unspooled behind the hurtling train...

## 7

### *End of the Line*

Stifling a sigh of disappointment, Vera offered her thanks to the fellow she'd spent the last ten minutes questioning and took her leave of the signal box, stepping out from its lofty main cabin and onto the steeply descending access stairs of the tower it sat atop. At the foot of the tower, the complex rail junction of Mars West 30—the most elaborate in the entire region—lay spread out before Vera, a mind-boggling spaghetti of steel and timber lit by a low morning sun whose russet splendor did little to lift Vera's sunken spirits.

To be sure, the fellow manning the signal box had been as obliging as anyone could possibly be,



his eagerness to help fueled by the same intense hatred of train robbers that burned in the veins of most Martian rail workers. But while the man had admitted to being on shift since early last night, he remained adamant that nothing fitting the description of the robbers' diesel had come through the junction at any point in the last nine hours.

Descending the signal box steps, Vera hit Martian dirt once more and began to make her way back to the siding where they'd left the Cannonball, the loco's dazzling red and brass livery ablaze in the early morning sunshine. Halfway there, she caught sight of Declan and Dave, the pair appearing almost simultaneously, on the way back from their own separate enquiries and each sporting a near identical frown of dissatisfaction.

"No luck then?" Vera asked as the three of them converged and then hurried on together for the Cannonball.

The two boys shook their heads.

"Which," Vera said, "would seem to confirm what the chap in the box says. Nothing like our robbers' train through all night."

"So we've lost 'em," Dave growled, tramping along at Vera's shoulder. "Great."

"No, we have *not* lost them," Vera replied. "All this means is that we have to use our brains. Make

enquiries. Interview leads.”

“Leads?” Dave said. “What leads? We ain’t got no leads.”

“Actually...” came Declan’s voice from behind, and alerted by something in the musing tone of it, Vera paused mid-stride and turned to look over her shoulder at the Irishman.

Declan had stopped several meters back and stood peering at a rickety timber outbuilding on whose paneled front had been fixed a large cork noticeboard. Covering every square centimeter of the board’s real estate was a dense clutter of paper—posters, leaflets, notices, all fluttering in the gentle morning breeze—and as Vera watched, Declan plucked one of the more colorful leaflets from the noticeboard’s top left corner. From where she stood, Vera was unable to make out the leaflet’s actual contents, but whatever they were, a moment’s study of them brought to Declan’s face something that *did* finally raise Vera’s spirits. Something that looked to her very much like a thoughtful—even a *hopeful*—smile...



Lady Luck was a bitch.

Such was the considered opinion of Jessica Ashley Flint, and on current evidence, it was an opinion unlikely to change anytime soon. Still huddled in the cramped and acrid-smelling

darkness of her emptied ore drum, it seemed to Jess that she'd barely registered the robbers' train lurching to what turned out to be its final stop before she heard the clatter of the cargo wagon's doors opening, followed almost immediately by the sound of voices:

A male voice came first: "How many?"

Then a female: "Four barrels should do for now. Bring 'em all straight to the lab."

"Will do."

Great. Just great. Because they couldn't have chosen any of the *other* cargo wagons to unload *first* now, could they? Any of the *other* cargo wagons that *didn't* contain a couple of pajama-clad, deathwish-harboring, idiot stowaways? No, of course they couldn't.

As previously mentioned: bitch.

With her brain processing as best it could the noises that followed, Jess heard what sounded like two people clamber up into the wagon, then a series of rumbles, clanks, and clicks as the unseen pair presumably selected, unstrapped, and then extracted the four barrels the female voice had requested. The hydraulic hiss of what might have been some kind of forklift or steam-loader accompanied the sounds. Fully expecting her own barrel to be one of the four chosen, and with frankly no plan whatsoever to deal with said eventuality, Jess braced herself for the lurching

that would surely follow once the drum she was in was grabbed by the two individuals at work in the freight car. As it happened, however, Lady L appeared at this point *finally* to cut Jess a break, and several seconds later, the ongoing sounds of manual labor moved from *inside* the cargo wagon to *outside*, Jess's drum remaining happily in situ.

As those same sounds grew fainter still with distance, Jess risked a whisper:

“Sally? I think they’ve gone.”

No answer.

“Sal?”

Still nothing.

Curled up in her ore drum like some kind of human snake-in-a-can, Jess pressed her upper back into the underside of the drum's lid, which she'd previously pulled down on top of her only just firmly enough to stop it rattling about in the course of the wagon's normal movement. With the mildest of upward shoves, the circle of steel duly popped off, Jess just managing to catch the thing before it clattered to the floor of the wagon.

As her head rose above the rim of the barrel, Jess was forced to squeeze her eyes shut for several seconds, the light streaming in through the freight car's open side door dazzling her after her time in the total darkness of the ore drum.

Ready to duck back down again at the slightest hint of trouble, Jess waited a moment in breathless

silence, before finally uncoiling her cramped and aching body from the cylinder of metal and stepping out onto the floor of the wagon.

“Sally?” she whispered again but with the same result as before.

Glancing round, Jess noted that several of the webbing straps securing the other drums to the freight car’s walls and floor had, as she had guessed, been unbuckled, and that a number of the drums (four, she presumed, though it was difficult to tell for sure) were indeed gone. By now, Jess was beginning to suspect that Lady Luck might not in fact have cut them a break here after all.

Of the drums that remained, only three were, by their positions, contenders for the one in which Sally had taken refuge, and with her heart thumping, Jess hauled the lid off the first of them.

It was full of ore.

She opened the second.

More ore.

Finally, number three.

And as Jess took in the ore-packed interior of the third drum, she felt her guts twist with fear. Cos yup, no question about it now. Lady L, true to her long-established form, had flipped them the finger, sashayed her bitch-like way out of the building, and torched the place on the way out.

END OF SAMPLE

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