

A Story by Jack Sparacino

The concussive explosion shook them all in their boots. Team captain Carla “String Bean” D’Andrade had been concerned about the firepower of the explosives they chose to blow open First National Bank of Charleston’s vault. Her Navy SEAL experience led her to use CL-20. She tried it with a plastic binder in a 90 to 10 ratio, which slightly reduced its explosive power to that of HMX. Still, they might have gone a tiny bit overboard.

Sarah “Slingshot” Fiedler didn’t worry about anything when she teamed with Carla. Her rumpled handful of seven dollars at Foley’s bar was her ticket to the big dance and she wasn’t getting cold feet now. She nevertheless found herself stone deaf, hair singed, her face nicked with bits of plaster. Welcome to the big leagues, she thought, quickly regaining her composure in the rubble. She reached for her hip flask and slugged down some Bacardi and soda. It tasted great after she choked down a mouthful of grit.

Their latest addition to the hell team was the incredible Joanna Ciampa. Joanna was an artist and designer by trade, maybe the most creative and dynamic in New England. Sarah met her in Charleston during a mural painting demonstration and left the session stunned. She was so blown away that she could only stutter a few parting words. “H-holy c—c-crap, M-Miss Ciampa, you’re inc-c-credible.” Joanna tossed her head back and laughed. “What’s your name, sister? Do you paint?” “Uh, sure, I mean not really, I just want to be a f-famous artist like you. S-some day. I’m Sarah, by the way.”

Joanna burst out laughing again. “Don’t try to be like me, you might hurt yourself. Better to be like *you*, kiddo. Maybe you’ll end up a lot more talented anyhow.” Sarah stood mesmerized by her granite self-confidence and poise. Wow, she thought, she has it all going. Smart, charming, pretty and of course supremely gifted. How does she paint a 300 square foot mural with such intricate designs without so much as a sketch to work from? Joanna painted like a feral cat, all five feet six and a hundred and fifteen pounds of her, climbing up and down her ladder while working on a large piece for a client. She often moved so quickly that her tattooed arms blurred into the mural. The cat in the hat with a brush singing scat, Sarah thought.

Joanna was their front woman. She didn’t look like a bank robber or a swindler. Or a scammer. She looked like an artist, quite an easy role to play since actually was one. Carla liked her

anti-glamour, her quick wit and salty language. Who would ever figure her for crimes and misdemeanors? If she could fake her way as a sommelier, with a phony command of French, Italian, and California wines, why not an innocent customer? The three ladies had mused about who among them might be their leading contender for a sequel to "Catch Me If You Can." Sure, none of them looked like Leonardo DiCaprio, but women usually get away with more bull than men anyhow. People seemed to want to trust women right off the bat. They had to earn a lousy reputation.

Carla, Sarah and Joanna relieved the bank of \$322,000 in cash and assorted customers of decent looking jewelry from their safe deposit boxes. They howled over the word "safe." Yeah, Carla pointed out, "safe from dorks and made for thieves." Sarah only made out a few muffled words in their conversation after the explosion but didn't care. She was fresh off the street. Dressed like a proper lady now. Lit up by brilliance.

"I'm so glad to be finally recognized for my own skills, you guys."

"Skills like what, Slingshot?" Joanna practically yelled in her right ear. "Ripping people off? Whipping out your piece without it getting caught in your purse? Knowing not to worry about an \$85 dollar glass of fizzy wine?" She roared with laughter at herself, knowing that she was taking a few liberties here. Pushing the boundaries, again.

Back in Carla's apartment, the boss said "Sounds like you two claim jumpers are ready for a bottle of Dom Pérignon. Hey, didn't you love the look on the chubby dude's face at that fancy-ass club when we paid him a couple grand for a few bottles? And the \$500 tip we left looked like it sent him over a cliff. Oh mama, I think I'm in heaven. Three gorgeous women just bought some very pricey wine and paid me in cash. Plus they tossed in some sapphire earrings just because they thought I was cute or something."

"By the way, let's not get too full of each other," Carla continued, "the total legitimacy of tonight's little celebration notwithstanding. We're still a bunch of green bananas. Not really ripe yet. Not really clicking. A few days on the kitchen counter away from being at our peak, y'all get me, ladies?"

"Who you calling a preening bandana chick?" Sarah burped. Carla and Joanna exploded in

laughter. Carla dropped to the floor right there in the living room, her Stuart Weitzman knee boots on full display as she leaned back on her butt. Joanna pulled out a sketch pad and furiously penciled the scene. "Put that stuff down a minute, Senorita. We've gotta do some planning before we kill all the cham...."

A sniper's Army M-24 sniper rifle bullet blasted through the window. Shattered glass shards peppered the walls and furniture. Carla's sprawl kept her out of his line of fire, but Sarah and Joanna weren't as lucky. Sarah's 'good' ear was nearly ripped off. If it weren't for Joanna's thick sketch pad, protecting her like Teddy's Roosevelt's prepared speech did when he was shot in 1912, she would have met her maker.

"Get into the bedroom closet!" Carla bellowed. "Move your goddamn asses. Now!" They scrambled in like retrievers chasing down a mallard. Maybe more like Pamplona bulls barreling down the narrow streets, idiotic humans bouncing off their horns. Dozens of designer outfits on hangers and hooks tangled the trio up and muffled their frantic utterances. The smell of assorted perfumes overcame the pheromones of their stunned fear.

"Look for the trap door," Carla implored. "How can I flap more?" chirped Sarah. "Trap door. TRAP DOOR!"

Joanna scratched her way into a corner and found a small pull ring. "I think I got it, y'all." Her nimble fingers slid inside the ring and pulled up firmly at first, then hard as the door began to budge. A rickety wooden stairway, like the kind that lead to southern attics, came into view. Up wafted the smell of rotten wood, burnt cooking oil and rat droppings.

One by one the team shuffled down the stairs. The smell was making them sick. "C'mon, ladies, hurry! *¡Apúrate, ya estamos atrasados!*" They heard dogs barking through the walls. Then the blasts from three more sniper rounds.

"Sounds like h-he r-r-really means business," Sarah stuttered.

"You think?" croaked Carla and Joanna in tandem. "C'mon, barked Carla. I've got a plan."