

Bibiana got to her feet, **groping blindly for her handbag**. Too late. The couple converged on us. The blond woman placed a firm hand on my shoulder, effectively **nailing me to the chair**. The guy pressed a Browning forty-five against Bibiana's spine. I saw Jimmy reach for his thirty-eight, but the guy shook his head.

"I got the option to smoke her if there is any problem whatsoever. It's your choice."

Bibiana picked up her jacket and her handbag. Jimmy and I watched helplessly as the three of them moved toward the back door. The minute they were out of sight, he bolted for the front, attracting startled looks from all the patrons he bumped in passing. The front door banged open, and he was gone. I threw some money on the table and headed after him. By the time I hit the front street, he was already pounding toward the corner, elbows pumping, gun drawn. I ran after him, plowing straight through a puddle on the walk . . .

I reached the intersection moments after Jimmy did. A Ford sedan shot out of the alley three doors down. Jimmy, as if moving in slow motion took a stance and fired. The back window shattered. He fired again. The right rear tire blew, and the Ford took a sudden fishtailing detour into a van parked at the curb. The Ford's front bumper clattered to the pavement and glass fragments showered down with a delicate tinkling. The front doors of the Ford seem to open simultaneously. The blond woman emerged from the passenger side; the big guy, from the driver's side, taking cover behind the yawning car door as he turned and took aim, fired the shots. I hit the pavement and flattened myself in the shelter of a line of trash cans. The ensuing shots sounded like kernels of popcorn in a lidded sauce pan. I heard three more shots fired in succession, one of them plowing in the pavement near my head. I feared for Jimmy and felt a sixth sense of dread for Bibiana, too. Someone was running. At least somebody was alive. I just wasn't sure who. I heard the footsteps fade. Then silence.

I pulled myself up onto my hands and knees and scrambled toward a parked car, peering over the hood. Jimmy was standing across the street. There was no sign of the blond. Bibiana, apparently unhurt, clung to the Ford's rear fender and wept hysterically. I approached her with care, wondering where the guy in the plaid sport coat had gone. I could hear panting, a labored moan that suggested both anguish and extreme effort. On the far side of the Ford, I caught sight of him, dragging himself along with sidewalk, blood streaming down the left side of his face from a head wound. He seemed completely focused on the journey, determined to escape, moving with the same haphazard of a crawling baby, limbs occasionally working at cross purposes. He laid his head down, resting for a moment before he inched forward again. A crowd had collected like spectators at the finish of a marathon. No one cheered. A woman moved toward the injured man and dropped down beside him, reaching out tentatively. At her touch, a deep howl seemed to rise from him, guttural and pain filled. There is no sound so terrible as a man's sorrow for his own death.

---From Sue Grafton's *H is for Homicide* (pages 39-40)