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Out for Blood

Written by S. J. Rozan

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OUT FOR BLOOD
S.J. ROZAN



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For Bennie

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

My agent, Steve Axelrod

My editor, Keith Kahla

Betsy Harding, Royal Huber, and Tom Savage, for setting me
on the right track

Pat Picciarelli, for keeping me out of trouble

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James Russell, and Amy Schatz, for years of weekends

David Dubal, for inspiration

Jonathan Santlofer, for support

Nancy Ennis, for coffee

Tom Savage, again, for his way with names

Ed King and Tom Phillips, the world's best runners-up

I

Crashing dark chords smothered the cell phone's impertinent chirp, but the ringtone was "Ride of the Valkyries," so it penetrated, and I stopped. I was learning a Brahms sonata. After weeks it had started to come together into something I could feel good about. So good that I was up working on it at what is, for me, early morning: half-past eight, with a mug of powerful black coffee, and a big, bright, late fall morning beyond the windows.

I hate interruptions when I'm at the piano; hate them so much, I used to turn the phone off. Now, though, I just ignore it if it rings. Except for this one number, the reason I leave it on. I leaned from the piano bench, grinning, and reached for the phone, which was still squeaking out those opening Valkyrie notes. In my world, Wagner only trumps Brahms when Wagner means Lydia Chin.

"Hey," I said. "What's up?"

Silence, unlike Lydia; and an odd tone to it. Then she said, "Nothing good."

Those two words contained darkness: anger, fear, and something else. Warning? My skin went cold. “What does that mean?”

The answer didn’t come from Lydia. It came from a different voice, relaxed and mocking in rhythm, but inhuman in tone: thin, robotic. Deliberately, electronically altered. “It means, asshole, your girlfriend got jacked.”

I was on my feet, heart pounding. “What the— Who are you?”

“Come on, you don’t know me?”

“What’s going on?”

“Jesus Christ! You fucked up so many guys you can’t keep track!”

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“No.” In a flash, joviality gone, the metallic voice dropped. “It’s what you want. You want your girlfriend to live. Or am I wrong?”

“You’re right, and—”

“Then find her. It’s a game, get it? You find her, she lives. You don’t, she dies. You following that?”

“Whoever the hell you are, leave her alone. You have business with me, bring it on.”

“It’s *on*, buddy boy. And if I were you I’d get down to it.”

“Get down to what?”

“What did I just say?”

“How am I supposed to find her?”

“Well, lucky for you, I’m going to help. Clues, evidence, all that shit. I know you like that shit. So we’ll have fun. Now get going.”

“No. This is bullshit.”

“Then your girlfriend dies.”

“How do I know she’s not dead already?”

“You just talked to her!”

“I heard two words from a woman, and you have Lydia’s phone. That’s all I know.”

“Jesus, look! The son of a bitch is in the game already! Instant offense, whoa, I like that. Okay, good, I’ll go along. Here, sweetie. Talk to him.”

“Bill?” It was Lydia, which I’d known, rock solid, from those first two words.

“Are you okay?”

“So far. I don’t know what’s going on, though.”

“Stay cool. I’ll find you.”

“I know you will. But Bill? I don’t want my mother to worry. Looks like Tony, his birthday party, looks like I’ll miss it.” She stumbled over her words. “If I don’t show up he’ll call the apartment. Could you make some excuse? He already thinks I’m a ditz. Tell him he’ll have to get a little older without me.”

“Aw.” The robot voice sliced back in, dripping acid. “How sweet is that? Doesn’t want her mama to worry. Well, her mama’s gonna have lots to worry about, you don’t get your ass in gear.”

I spun, stared wildly around the room, as though he might materialize and I could lunge for him. Forcing myself still, I said, “I want to talk to her.”

“Sorry, you just did. One to a customer.”

“As this bullshit unfolds, whatever it is.”

“And by ‘bullshit,’ you mean . . . ?”

“This insanity! Your so-called game!”

“‘Insanity’? ‘So-called’? Oh, man, where’s your sportsmanship? Respect for the opponent, all that. You know, maybe I don’t want to play with you after all. Nah, on second thought, forget it. Of course, that means I pop your girlfriend. But I guess you don’t care. So long, sucker.”

The line went dead.

My heart had been speeding. Now it stopped. My breathing, my power to move, it all stopped. What the hell had I done? Played chicken with a madman, and lost. Lost Lydia. I stood rooted, for a second, an hour, a lifetime.

No! The words I couldn’t get out crashed around inside my skull. *Not like this! This can’t be how it ends. Do something. There’s got to be—*

The phone, Lydia’s music, rang again.

“*Lydia? Are you—*”

The robot voice: “Not her. Me. You in or out?”

“Goddamn you—”

“Smith?”

“Screw you, you bastard, I’m in.” I realized I was soaked in sweat. “You think this is a goddamn game, I’ll play.” I took a breath, and did it again: “But only if I can talk to Lydia. So I know she’s all right. You touch her, you motherfucker, I’ll kill you.”

“Oh, oh, listen to him! Big man! Know what, I really should forget the game and kill her right now. What could you do about it? *What*, asshole? But I’ll give you a chance. I’ll play fair.”

“I talk to her. And you don’t touch her.” I dug in, praying my instincts were right. “Or I don’t play.”

“Are you listening? Who’s in charge here? You don’t find her, she dies. And you know what? You don’t play, I hurt her a lot and then she dies.”

“That’s your rules. My rules, as long as I’m playing, you don’t touch her, and I talk to her.”

A hell of a gamble, going head-to-head with him like this. I didn’t know who he was or what was going on. But if what he wanted was to kill Lydia he could have done that already, and he hadn’t. This “game” mattered to him.

“Hmm,” he finally said. “Okay, why not? But my rules: not whenever you want. You don’t get what you want in life, do you? Fuck knows *I* didn’t. Which would be *your* fault, motherfucker, if you remember.”

“I don’t remember. Tell me.”

“No way! This is awesome! Oh, hey, did I mention you have twelve hours? A game’s no fun without a clock. But we don’t need no stinkin’ refs. Cops come, cops even *think* about coming, she’s toast. I mean it, motherfucker. First badge I see, pow pow pow! You got the rules?”

“And I talk to her.”

“When you do something right. Like a reward. Oh, I love that! Yeah, good. I’ll call you. But if you’re thinking she can coach, fuggedabahdit. She has no idea where she is. And her phone, now that we got your attention, it’s trashed. I mean, you don’t think I’m that stupid?”

“I don’t know who you are, so maybe you are that stupid.”

The slashing laugh again. “Taunting! You could get called

for that!” Then the instant hard freeze. “Okay, that’s it. This is crap. Let’s get down to it.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re so smart. Figure it out.”

And he was gone.

I hit call back, but got Lydia’s voicemail. I cut off and waited. He’d have heard it ring; he’d know I wanted to talk. But my phone stayed silent.