

EXCERPT: BABY SHARK'S BEAUMONT BLUES

I eased down the dark hallway with a cocked .32 in my hand. It was a small caliber, I knew. But up close and put in the right spot, it would do the job.

Light came from around the corner that I approached. No sound—dead quiet. I noticed small spots of blood on the hall floor. I glanced back and saw the trail. Bobby Jack had cut his feet in the window glass—and hadn't seemed to notice.

On the far side of the hallway something was on the wall that didn't look right. It was a moment before I understood it. It was interesting how blood splattered on a wall could look so brutal.

Easy. Easy. I peeked around the corner and discovered Chuck on the hallway floor. He was face down in an expanding pool of blood, his legs splayed out, his feet pointing strangely. The back of his bloodied jacket was torn and riddled from the exiting slugs. His beautiful Stetson was crushed and stained beneath his head. He had an arm under him and one reaching forward. And at the end of his stretching arm, his finger pointed at his car keys on a silver ring.

Ching-ching.

Beyond his body there was an open door. A lighted bedroom. I could hear the low hum of an electric fan. I listened hard for any other sounds. Nothing. I looked behind me and got ready to go around the corner...

"Gotcha!" a male voice said from back there somewhere.

I froze. The voice was not close, but not far away.

I heard whimpering. A girl.

That was a relief. I had begun to worry that she might be dead.

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes, stayed where I was, and listened some more. A slap. The girl cried out. The guy's voice again.

"What makes you so stupid? Try'n hide from me in my own fuckin' house."

I stood there, around the corner, with my pistol at ready and listened to him force the crying girl up the hall from back in the house somewhere. From where I was, my view of the bedroom was narrowly framed by the open door. I could see a box springs and mattress on the floor through that doorway. Not much else.

When I heard Bobby Jack push the girl into the bedroom, I chanced a quick look and saw them. They were both naked. He shoved her onto the mattress and moved out of sight. She curled up and began sobbing.

It was Sherry Beasley: long brunette hair, seventeen years old, five feet tall.

Bobby Jack yelled at her from wherever he was in the room.

"Shut up your fuckin' bawlin' and getcher skinny ass over here. Get over here and do some of this, you lazy slut."

"No more, Bobby Jack." She sputtered through her sobbing.

"Yeah, more. This'll wake you up. Call yourself a good fuck. You don't know jack shit about how to fuck. Get over here."

"I'm gonna be sick."

Sherry saw Bobby Jack coming before I knew he'd moved. She scooted off the bed and out of my sight. Bobby Jack crossed my doorframe view as he went after her. I heard him catch her and saw him drag her by her hair back past the open door.

"You get sick, I'll beat the livin' shit outta you," he told her from the other side of the room.

Sherry was growing hysterical. I could hear her crying and choking. Bobby Jack started snorting. I stepped around the corner and moved as fast as I could. I wanted to take a new position closer to the bedroom. I took care to keep my bare feet out of Chuck's blood as I passed him. I was almost to Bobby Jack's door when Sherry got slapped again. She fell to the carpeted floor in front of the open door.

I put my hand holding the revolver behind my leg and kept moving toward her.

Sherry's eyes widened when she saw me. Her face went from wrinkled and panicked to stunned and disbelieving. Her nose and lips were dusted with a pale-colored powder. She had dark circles under her eyes. Her face was bruised and splotchy, not at all like it was in the pretty pictures that I had of her. She pushed her dirty, matted hair out of her face and opened her mouth to speak.

I brought a finger to my lips, showed her the palm of my hand, and moved out of her sight. I positioned myself beside the bedroom door, hoping that she would do the right thing. I couldn't count on it. I just hoped.

I crouched down on my heels so that if he came to the door I would be below his natural line of sight. That instant might make the difference.

I heard Sherry get to her feet and speak to him using a calmer voice.

"I'll do you good, Bobby Jack. I will."

"Yeah?"

"I got scared for a minute. All those guns."

"What about the guns?"

"Nothing. Nothing about the guns. I just got scared, that's all."

There was a long awful silence before I heard struggling. Sherry sobbed and groaned and it was quiet again. I wiped the sweat out of my eyes and slowly—carefully, carefully, staying low—I peaked around the edge of the door.

Bobby Jack had his back to me. He stood beside the bed with a hand holding Sherry by her hair. She was on her knees, her face to his crotch. His other hand held a nickel-plated Luger.

That was not good. I stood up and moved into the doorway just as he growled with disgust and pushed her away.

"You don't know what you're doin'." He let go of her hair and jacked one into the chamber.

Sherry screamed and back-pedaled away. He fell to his knees onto the mattress, grabbed her by her ankle, dragged her back, kicking and screaming, and pointed his pistol at her face.

I was going full speed by then, crossing the carpeted bedroom in giant strides.

Before anything else happened, I rabbit punched Bobby Jack with the butt of my snub nose. Solid. Right at the base of his skull.

He grunted, fired a wild shot into the bed, and collapsed on Sherry.

The loud gunshot so near her face ratcheted Sherry into even more of a girl-gone-crazy mode. She screamed louder and began clawing and kicking her way from beneath his limp body.

And then—Bobby Jack groaned, raised himself up, and gave his head a shake.

That really set Sherry off.

She yelped like she'd been jabbed with a cattle prod and pushed away so hard she launched herself off the low bed. She scrambled across the room on her hands and knees like some wild creature.

I gave my boy another hard smack on his brain stem. This time blood sprayed from the gash I opened and he fell face down on the soiled mattress, seriously unconscious.

"And stay there," I told him.

Sherry jumped up and dashed back to the bed.

“Hey, hey,” I had time to say before she grabbed his shiny pistol and pulled the trigger. I wrenched the weapon away from her before she could fire at him twice.

She grew hysterical again. “Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!” she shrieked.

“You’re beginning to piss me off,” I said because that wild shot of hers had hit the electric fan and stopped dead the single decent breeze I’d felt since I’d come into that house. I stuffed the Luger in my belt, wiped the sweat out of my eyes, and looked around the dirty, disheveled room. “Where’re your clothes?”

Sherry Beasley, soon to be one of the richest women in Texas, stopped as if she’d had a switch thrown. She just stood there, all ninety pounds of her, naked as a jaybird, her feet planted wide apart in a defiant stance, a thin stream of blood coming from her nose, her dilated eyes bloodshot and wary. She wasn’t herself. God only knows what cruel indignities she’d had to suffer the past few days. She shook her head like she was denying a nightmare.

“It’s all wrong,” she said.

“You’re right about that. Where’re your things, Sherry?”

I thought I saw something hopeful in amongst the debris and clutter on top of the low dresser and went over to it. I picked up what had to be her pocketbook.

“This is yours, right?”

She snatched the Dior saddlebag from me, opened it, and dumped the contents out on the floor—the expected things, keys, money, lipstick. Taking her posh bag over to a side table, she dragged a pile of grayish powder into it.

“Forget that stuff. Let’s get your clothes on so we can get out of here.”

Her bruised face was flushed with anger and confusion. “Who the fuck are you to boss me around?”

“I just saved your ass, that’s who. Get dressed. Let’s move it.”

She pointed at a soft leather travel bag on the floor by the dresser, near where the phone jack had been torn from the wall. “Get that,” she said.

“Your clothes in there?” I stepped over to grab the bag and saw movement in the dresser mirror.

It was Sherry with a glittery Mexican figurine in her hands, coming at me to use it like a club. I turned, brushed aside her attempt to brain me, and cold-cocked her with a right cross. With a little help from me, she toppled back onto the mattress next to Bobby Jack.

Glancing down at the shattered chalk and glitter—all that was left of Jesus of Nazareth—I wiped the sweat from my eyes and said, “Hallelujah.”