

FIRST BLOOD

JENNIFER BLOOD!



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The trick with a good lie is to make the other person do most of the work.

MORNING, MRS. FELLOWS. LET ME GUESS- TROUBLE SLEEPING?

Please Have Your ID Ready

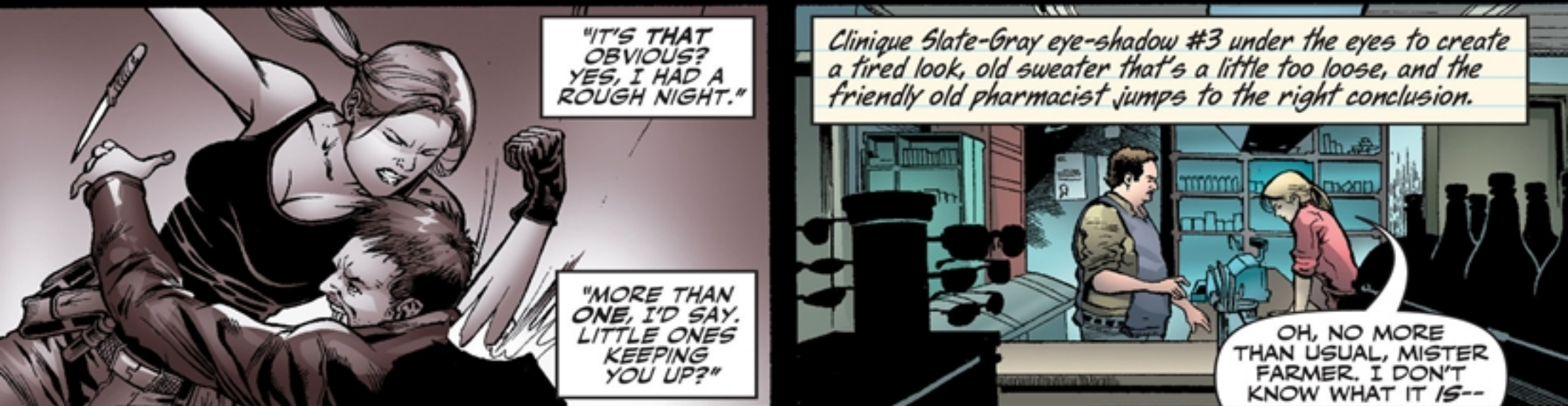


"IT'S THAT OBVIOUS? YES, I HAD A ROUGH NIGHT."

"MORE THAN ONE, I'D SAY. LITTLE ONES KEEPING YOU UP?"

Clinique Slate-Gray eye-shadow #3 under the eyes to create a tired look, old sweater that's a little too loose, and the friendly old pharmacist jumps to the right conclusion.

OH, NO MORE THAN USUAL, MISTER FARMER. I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS--



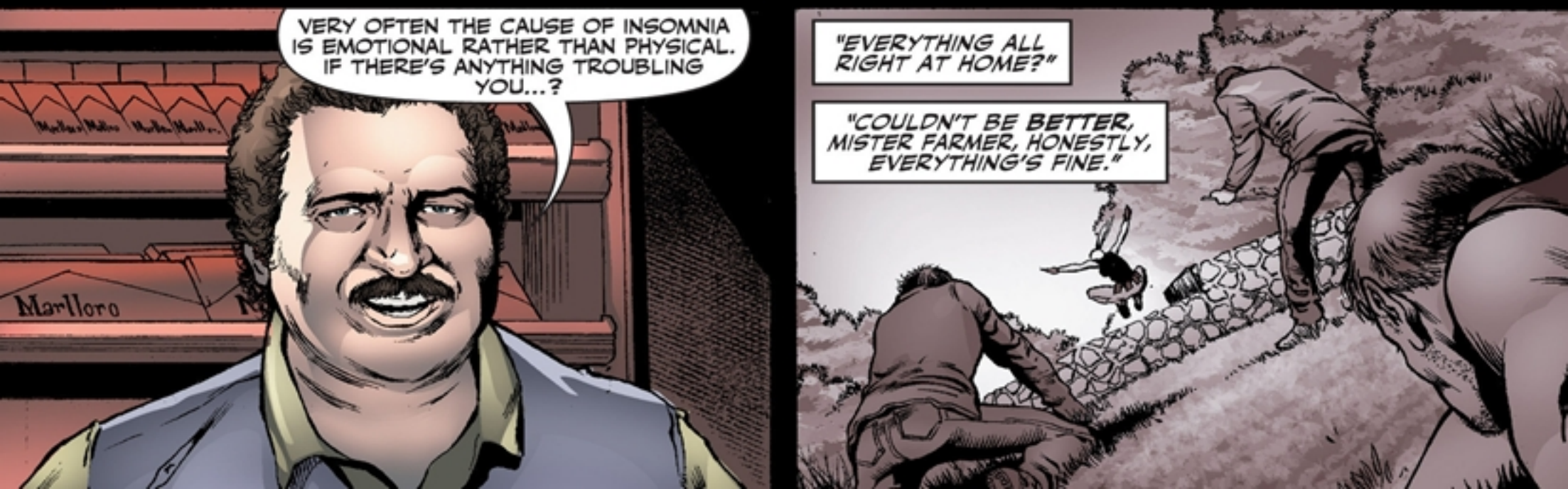
"--I JUST CAN'T SEEM TO SETTLE DOWN AT NIGHT."



VERY OFTEN THE CAUSE OF INSOMNIA IS EMOTIONAL RATHER THAN PHYSICAL. IF THERE'S ANYTHING TROUBLING YOU...?

"EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT AT HOME?"

"COULDN'T BE BETTER, MISTER FARMER, HONESTLY, EVERYTHING'S FINE."





NOW,
YOU'RE NOT
DRINKING COFFEE
BEFORE BEDTIME,
ARE YOU?

NO CAFFEINE
AFTER SIX, THAT'S
MY RULE.



WHEN YOU
DO SLEEP, HOW
IS IT? RESTFUL?
UNSETTLED? ANY
NIGHTMARES?



"ANYTHING PREYING
ON YOUR MIND?"

NOTHING
OUT OF THE
ORDINARY.

IT WOULDN'T BE...
I MEAN, IT *COULD* BE...
UM. IT'S UNUSUAL, BUT IT'S
NOT *COMPLETELY* UNHEARD
OF FOR SOMEONE OF
YOUR AGE...



...UM...BEEN EXPERIENCING ANY MUSCULAR PAIN? HEADACHES? STRANGE FEELINGS OF...SUDDEN WARMTH?

YOU KNOW.

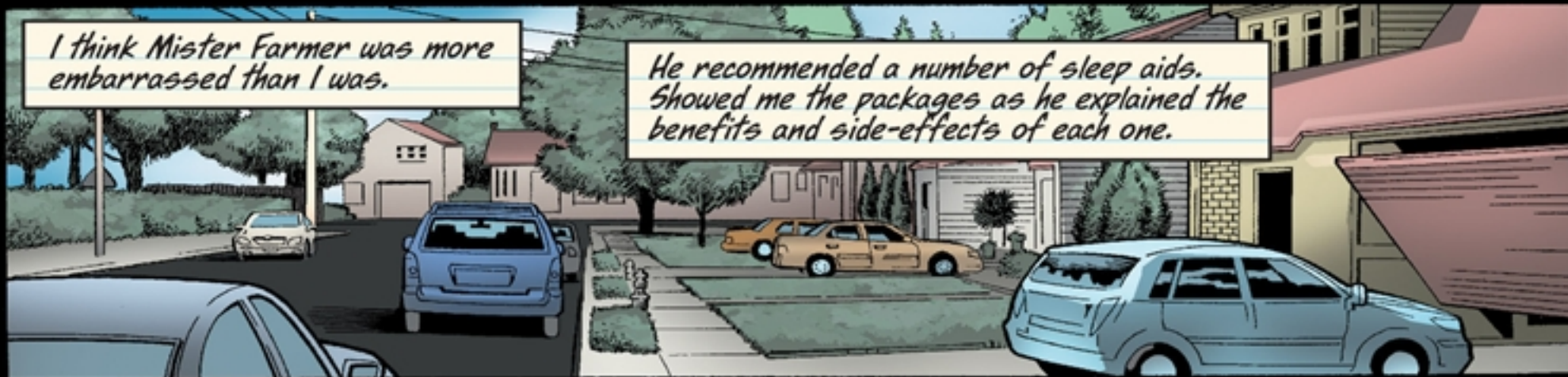
HOT FLASHES?

NO.

NOTHING LIKE THAT.

The menopause! Honestly. I'm barely out of my teens! Well, okay, but thirty-one is way too young for that!

OVERCOMING INERTIA



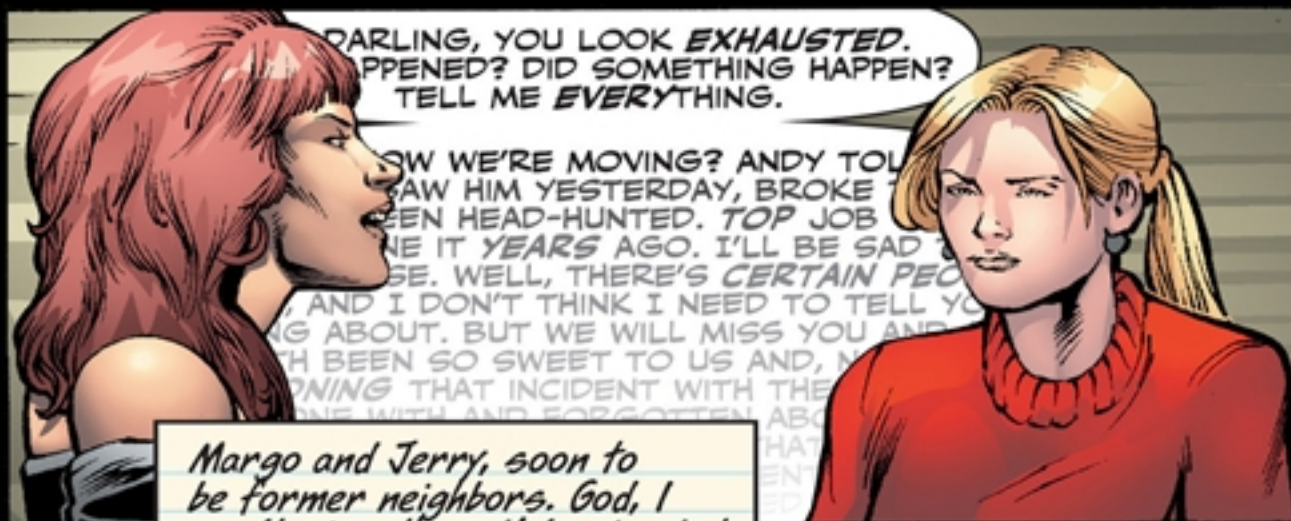
I think Mister Farmer was more embarrassed than I was.

He recommended a number of sleep aids. Showed me the packages as he explained the benefits and side-effects of each one.



I didn't buy any, of course. I mean, I'd spent the whole morning scouring the web for the right products.

JENNIFER!



DARLING, YOU LOOK EXHAUSTED. WHAT HAPPENED? DID SOMETHING HAPPEN? TELL ME EVERYTHING.

Margo and Jerry, soon to be former neighbors. God, I won't miss them. He's okay but she's a pain. How can anyone talk so much but say so little?



It's just a good thing she never pauses long enough to check that I'm listening—



—my mind tends to wander.

But I guess she's harmless. Probably lonely. She's always thought we were much closer friends than we are.



I can't afford the luxury of friends. Certainly not now.

Not with everything finally starting to happen.



I'm scared, I admit it. But not scared scared - I'm not peeing myself with fear and desperate to hide.

Last night was a setback. Now Cortland knows someone is watching him.



But he didn't see my face - he doesn't know why he's being watched.



Sometimes a setback can be a good thing-



-It can teach you to get off your butt and start acting instead of hiding.



God, I was so lucky last night.



They could have killed me. If I was them, I would have killed me.

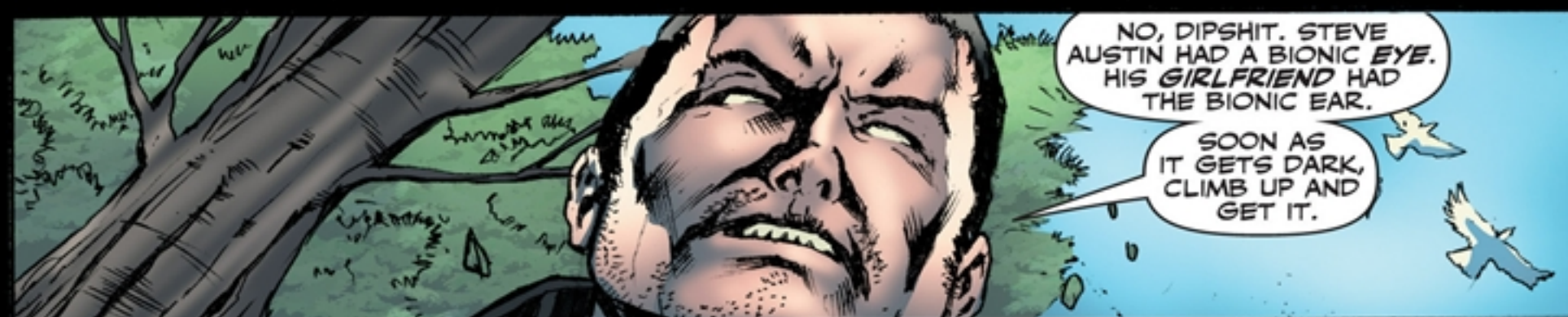
SHIT.

WHAT IS THAT?



IT'S CALLED A BIONIC EAR.

RIGHT. AFTER THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN.



NO, DIPSHIT. STEVE AUSTIN HAD A BIONIC EYE. HIS GIRLFRIEND HAD THE BIONIC EAR.

SOON AS IT GETS DARK, CLIMB UP AND GET IT.



SO WHADDAYA THINK, CORTLAND? WHO WAS SHE? ONE OF GUEN-SIK'S PEOPLE?

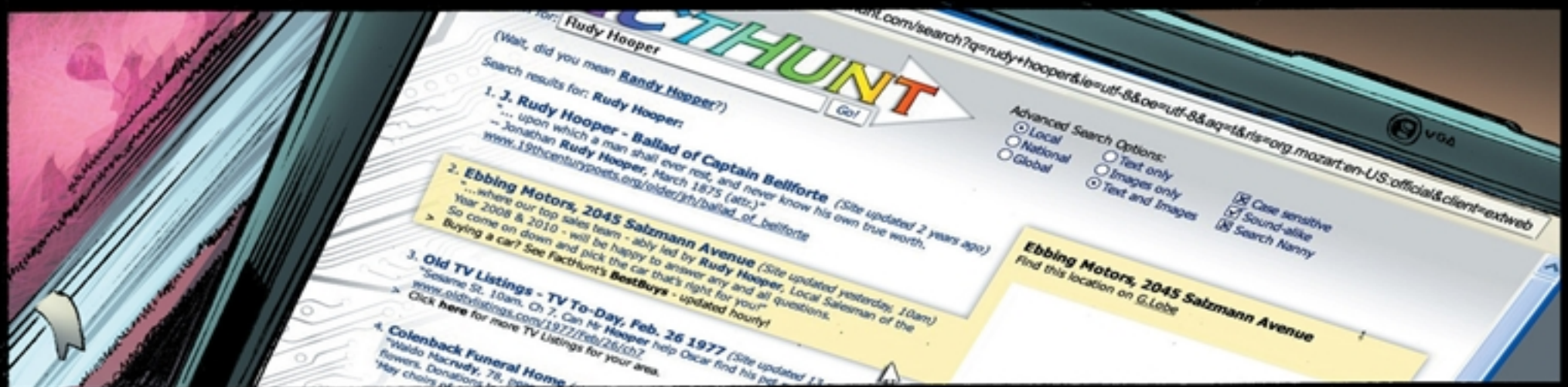
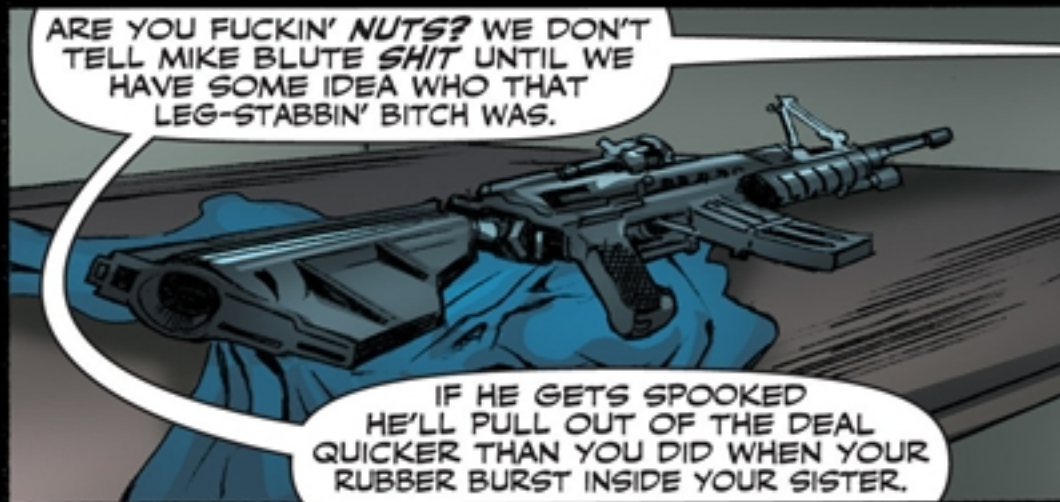
NOT A CLUE. I DIDN'T SEE HER FACE. YOU?

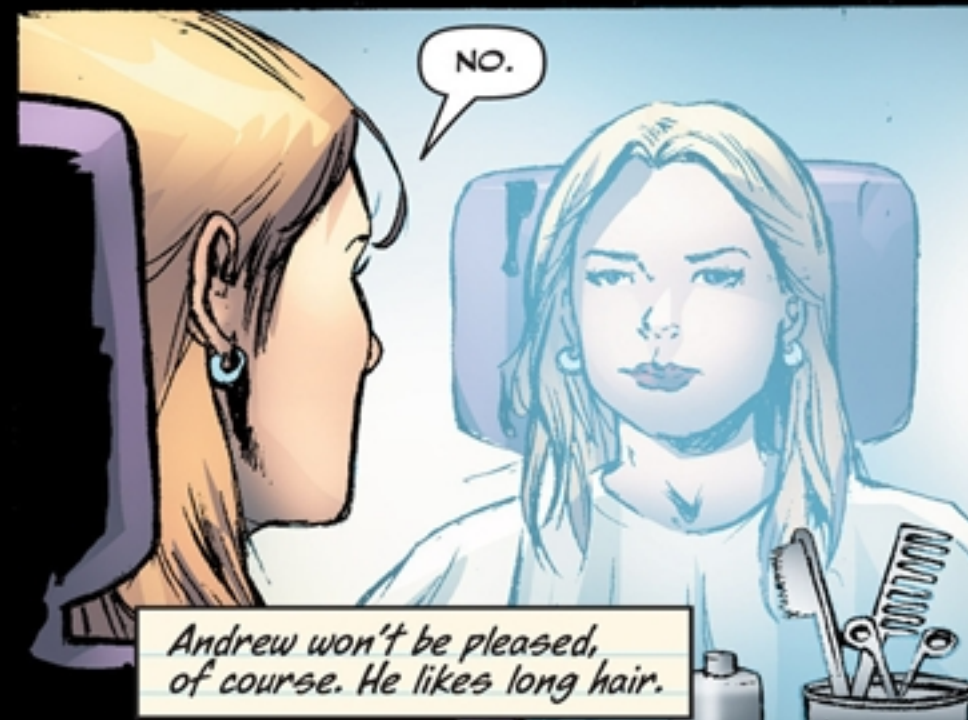
BLONDE, NICE ASS, PRETTY FUCKABLE. THAT'S ALL I SAW.



IF SHE IS WITH LEE GUEN-SIK, THEN HE'S JUST PUSHED TOO FAR.

I MIGHT NEED TO HAVE A WORD WITH HIM MYSELF.





"IT WAS DARK, CORTLAND, AND SHE WAS FAST. I WAS SUPPOSED TO ASK HER TO POSE FOR A PHOTO?"



YOU WERE LOOKING RIGHT FUCKIN' AT HER, DENVER. I ONLY SAW HER FROM BEHIND.

YOU GRABBED HER HAIR. YOU MUSTA PULLED SOME OUT. HER DNA WILL TELL US WHO SHE IS.



GOOD THINKING. SAY, WHY DON'T YOU RUN IT BY THE GUYS IN THE LAB?



AND WHILE YOU'RE THERE, ASK THEM IF THEY'LL WHIP YOU UP A GIANT-SIZE BUCKET OF GET A FUCKIN' GRIP.

WHEN I'M CALLING YOUUUUUUU.....

I GOT A CALL COMING IN SO FUCK THE FUCK OFF, YOU DUMB FUCKER.

WILL YOU ANSWER TOO0000...

BOOP



BIP

MIKE. I WAS JUST GONNA CALL YOU. WE HAVE A--

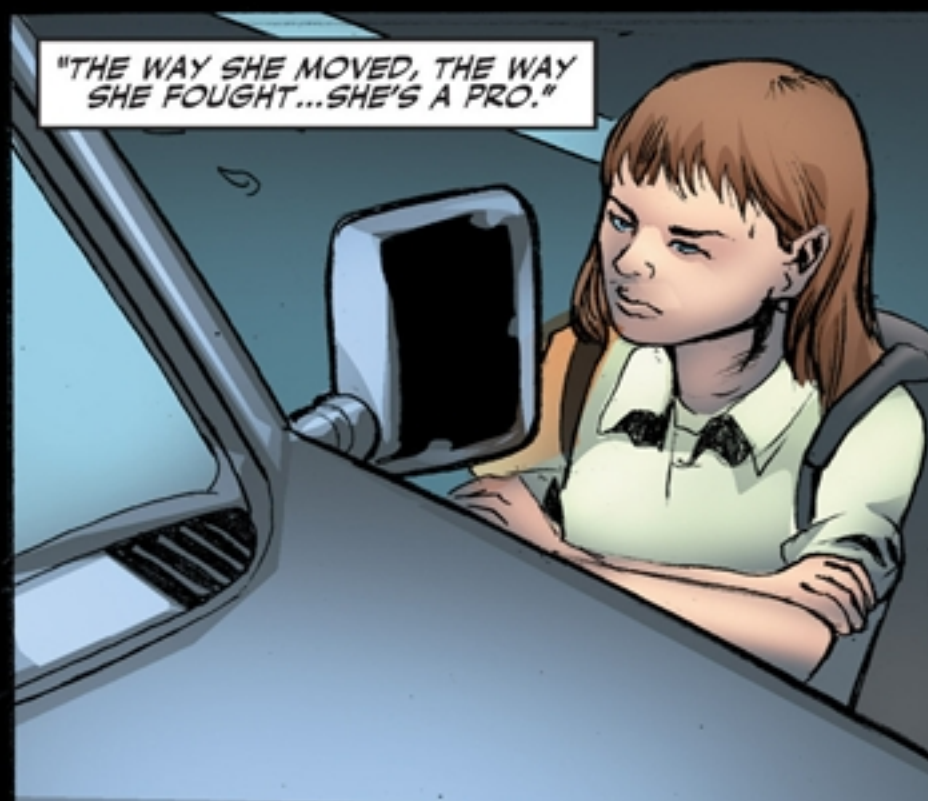
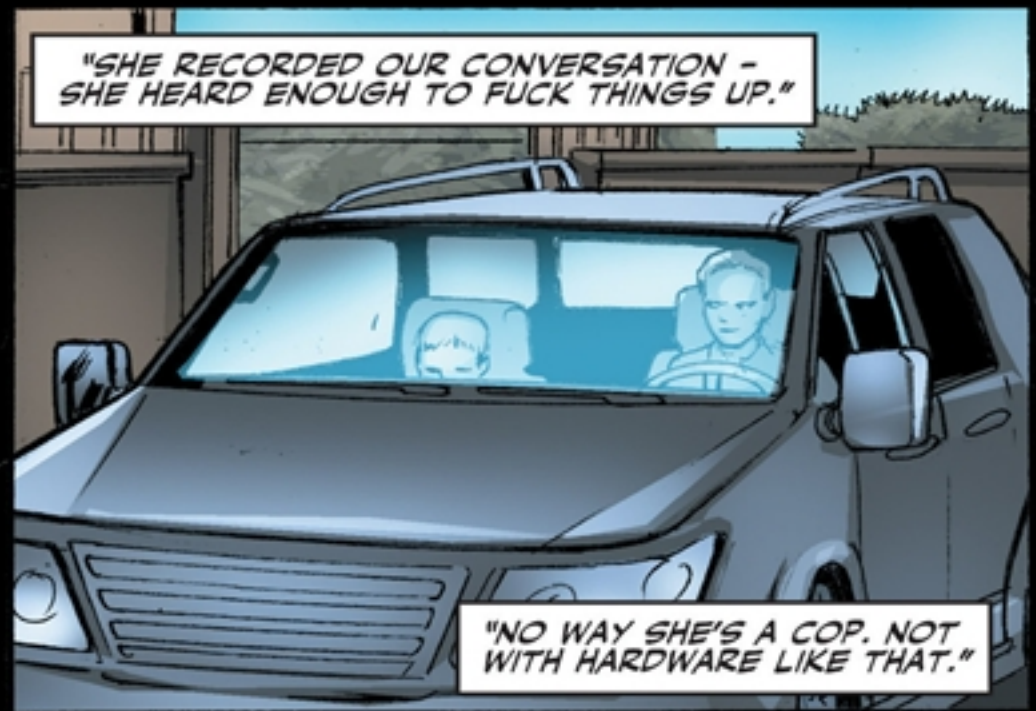
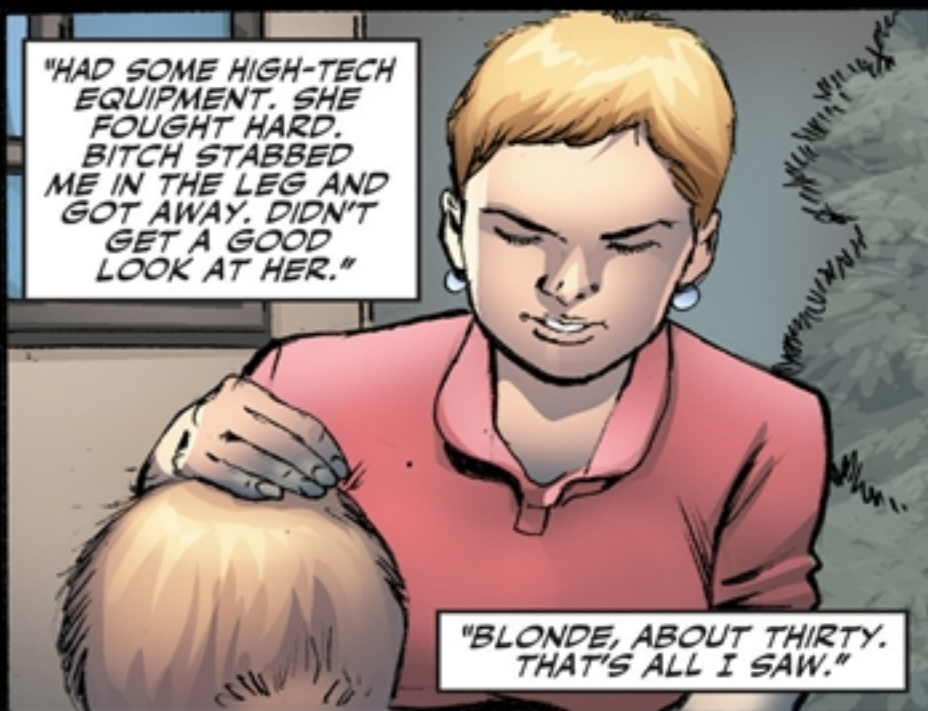
WHAT? THAT SON OF A BITCH! I TOLD HOOPER NOT TO BOTHER YOU WITH--

LOOK, THIS ISN'T ABOUT LEE GEUN-SIK. WE--

MIKE, JUST LISTEN, OKAY?



"WE FOUND SOMEONE WATCHING US LAST NIGHT. A WOMAN."



Alice and Andrew aren't impressed with my new look, but Mark says he likes it.

Then again, when he was doing his homework this evening he invented a four-sided triangle so I'm not sure his judgment is the best.



OH, THAT'S INTERESTING...

HMMM?

SAYS HERE THAT A MUG OF WARM COCOA BEFORE BEDTIME IS THE BEST WAY TO ENSURE A GOOD NIGHT'S REST.

A bit worried about tonight. I don't think that Alice believed me that she only dreamt-dreamed I was gone when she woke last night.



SOUNDS NICE. ALICE? BED.

FIVE MORE MINUTES?

BED. NOW.



LET HER STAY UP A WHILE LONGER. SHE'LL SLEEP BETTER IF SHE'S MORE TIRED.

NO, SHE...ALL RIGHT. WHATEVER.



There are times when I wish A. would be a little more forceful-less of a pushover.

YOU KNOW WHAT? I THINK I WILL HAVE SOME COCOA. YOU?

SURE.





I don't think that the cocoa will do much good - but it only has to work once.

Maybe I'll get A. to tell me about his day at work. That sends him to sleep faster than it does me.



And then I've got things to do. Places to go. Psychopaths to spy on.

LEE
GEUN-SIK.
NOW.



WENDELL CORTLAND. IT'S BEEN A FEW YEARS. YOU'RE STILL MICHAEL BLUTE'S... FIXER, SHALL WE SAY?

SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

WELL. CERTAIN FRIENDS OF MISTER HOOPER HERE HAVE BEEN OVERSTEPPING THEIR BOUNDS. THERE ARE AGREEMENTS--



NO NO NO...

LISTEN, KID, *YOUR* PEOPLE HAVE BEEN PUSHING WEST PAST 3RD AVENUE. THAT'S A NO-GO AREA FOR YOU. SIMPLE AS THAT.



MISTER CORTLAND, YOU DON'T COME TO MY PLACE, IN FRONT OF MY PEOPLE, AND TELL ME WHAT I CAN AND CANNOT DO. THAT'S... UNPROFESSIONAL.

NO, WORSE. IT'S VULGAR.

YOU'RE CARRYING A WEAPON, OF COURSE?



ALWAYS.

IT WON'T HELP. JUST *ONE* OF THE TWINS IS MORE THAN A MATCH FOR ALL *THREE* OF YOU.

DON'T BE FOOLED BY THEIR SIZE - THEY ARE *FAST*. BELIEVE ME. A HUNDRED DEAD MEN CAN ATTEST TO THAT.



AS A MATTER OF COURTESY TO MISTER BLUTE, I'LL ALLOW YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS TO WALK AWAY. AND NO MORE NEED BE SAID.

GUESS THAT MAKES SENSE. BOYS? GO HOME. I'LL BE OK.



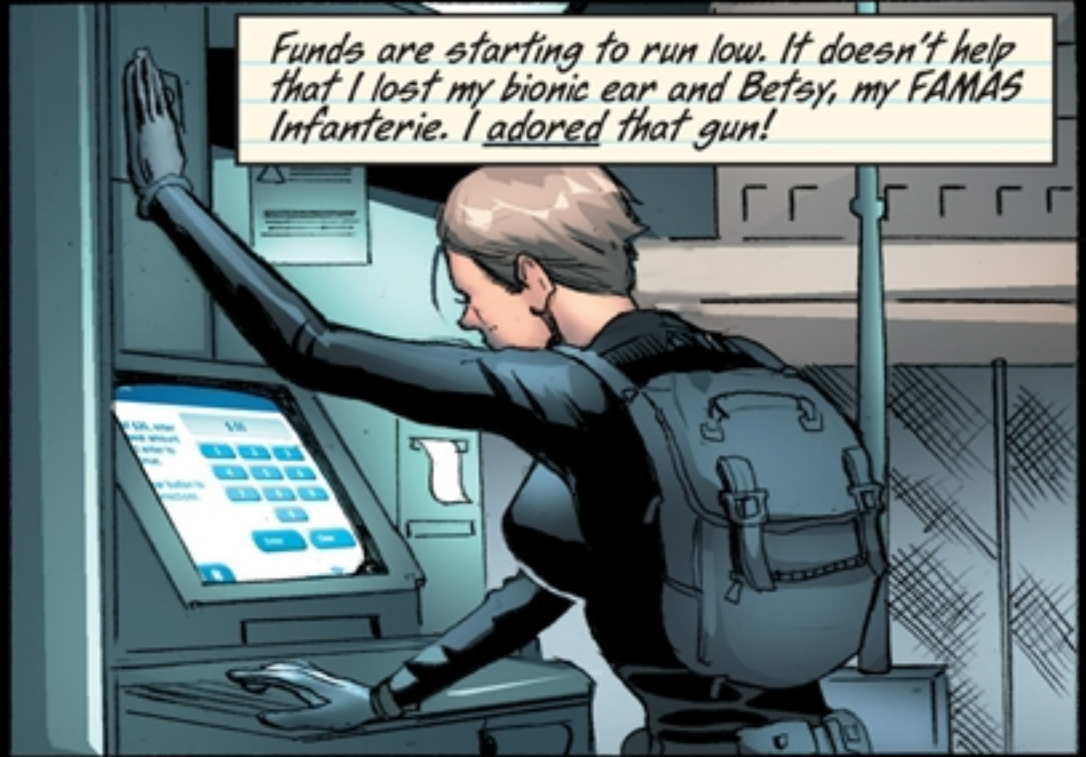




- but I'm going to tell him that it did. He'll believe me.



Funds are starting to run low. It doesn't help that I lost my bionic ear and Betsy, my FAMAS Infanterie. I adored that gun!



I memorized where everything was on my visit to the drugstore earlier.



Of course, I knew exactly what to take - I'd done my research. But I couldn't just buy it - that would leave a trail.



And I couldn't only take what I needed. I had to make this look like a robbery.



It was not one of my proudest moments.

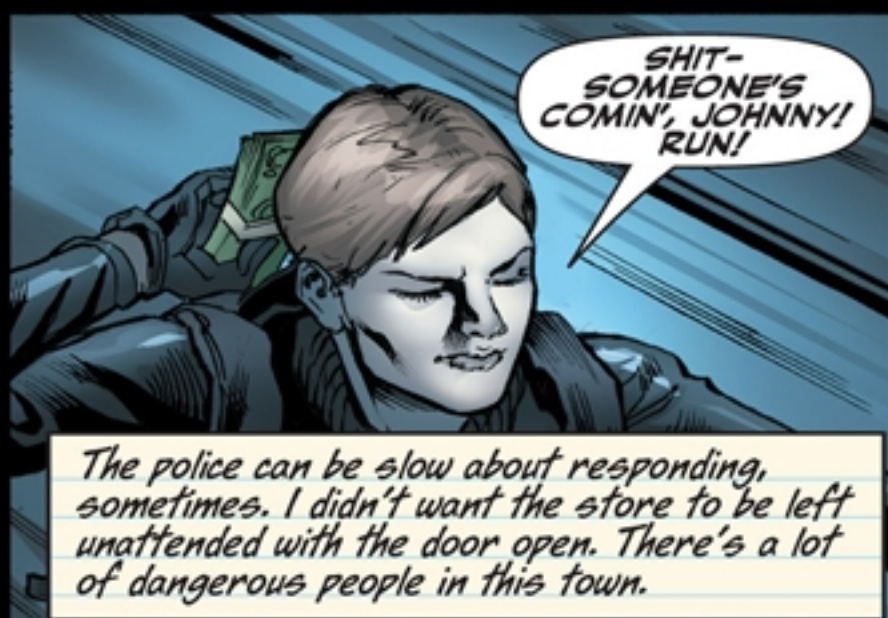




WHO-
WHO'S THERE?
I CALLED THE
POLICE!

Mister Farmer lived above the store -
that's why I chose his store rather than
the one across town.

(And because he doesn't have
video surveillance, of course!)



SHIT-
SOMEONE'S
COMIN', JOHNNY!
RUN!

The police can be slow about responding,
sometimes. I didn't want the store to be left
unattended with the door open. There's a lot
of dangerous people in this town.



THE MONEY!

FORGET
THE MONEY-
JUST GO!

My throat still hurts a little from trying
to do a deep voice. Hope it worked.



Mister Farmer's insured anyway,
but if he has any sense, he'll have
scooped up my guilt-money before
the cops arrived.



Hooper lived across town - the receptionist at the dealership was very helpful.

I'M SORRY, BUT I CAN'T GIVE OUT OUR EMPLOYEES' HOME ADDRESSES.

OH, WELL, I GUESS IF HE SAID IT'S ALL RIGHT...ONE MOMENT...

MISTER HOOPER LIVES AT 221 VILLAVICENCIO.

YOU'RE VERY WELCOME. HAVE A NICE DAY!

Three in the morning and he was still up watching TV! Honestly, some people!

I decided not to put it off for another night - I was sure he wouldn't stay up much longer.

I figured that Hooper might have a dog. Or the neighbors might. I was prepared for that -

- I'd brought along my Canine-Attack Prevention Device.

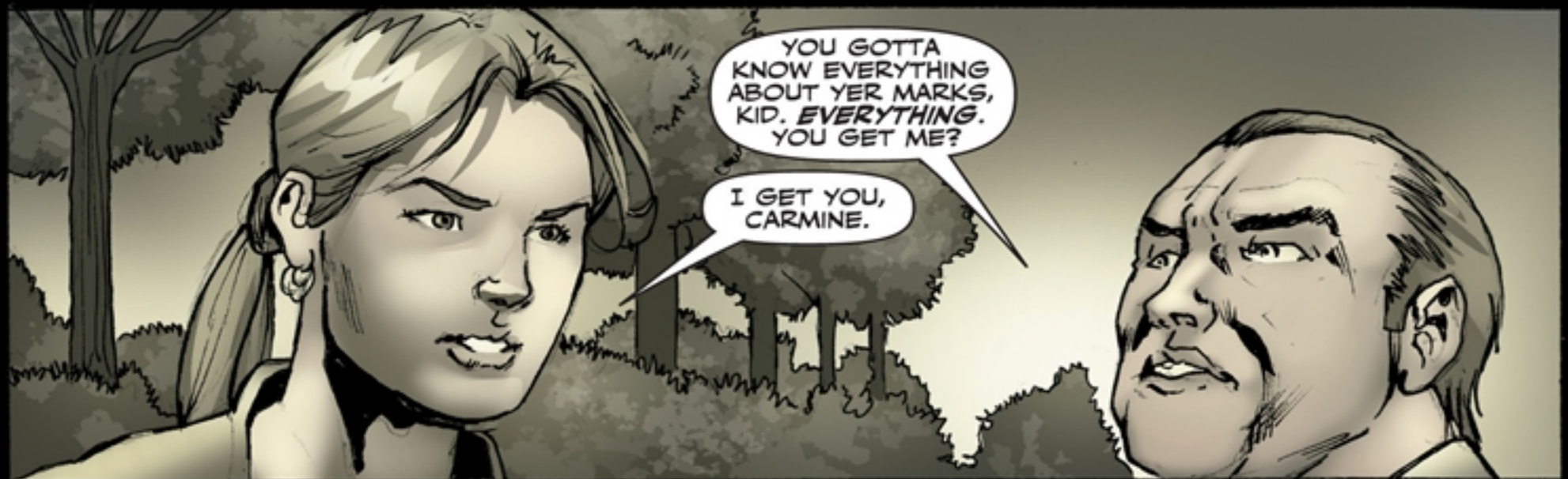
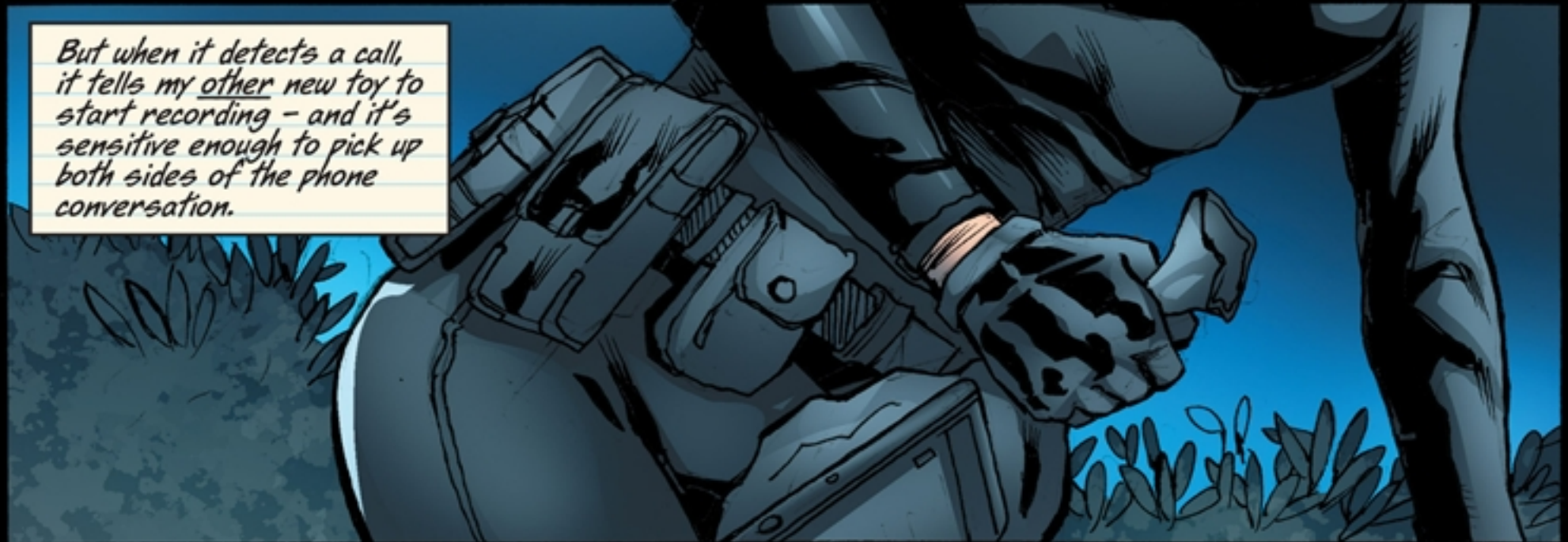


My short-range receiver can lock on to any cell-phone signal.



It can't record the calls directly, of course - they're scrambled.

But when it detects a call, it tells my other new toy to start recording - and it's sensitive enough to pick up both sides of the phone conversation.



YOU GOTTA KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT YER MARKS, KID. **EVERYTHING.** YOU GET ME?

I GET YOU, CARMINE.

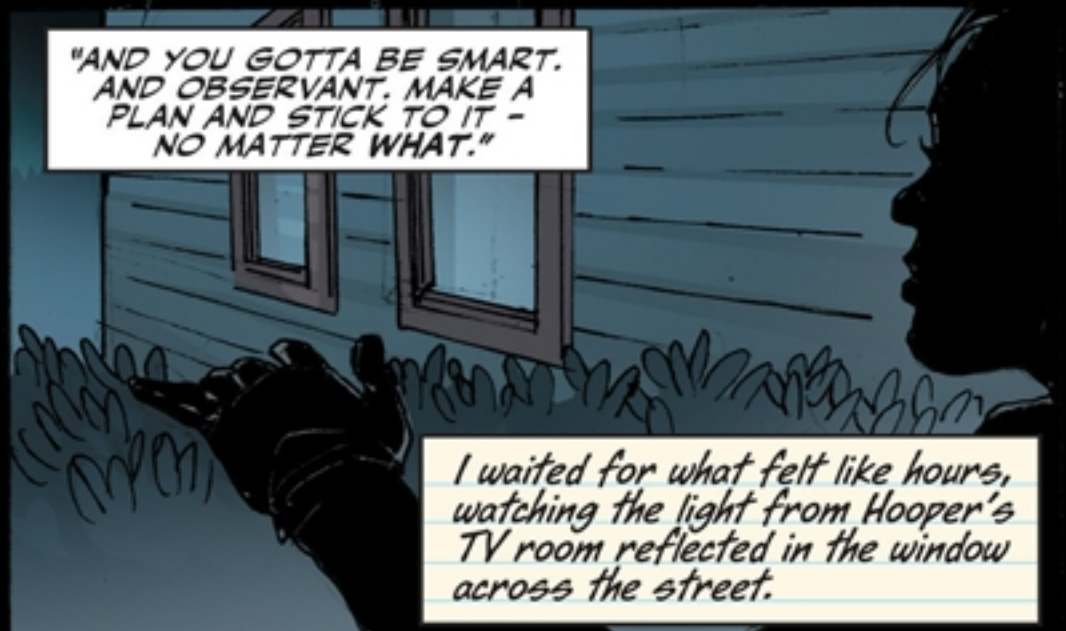
NO, YOU DON'T. YOU *THINK* YOU DO, BUT YOU DON'T. WHEN I SAY EVERYTHING, I MEAN THAT.

YOU GOTTA KNOW THEIR SHOE-SIZES, THEIR MOTHER'S MAIDEN-NAMES, WHERE THEY LIKE TO EAT, HOW OFTEN THEY USE THE CRAPPER. WHERE THEIR KIDS GO TO SCHOOL.

WHAT THEIR KIDS' FRIENDS' NAMES ARE. **NOW** YOU GET ME?



"AND YOU GOTTA BE SMART. AND OBSERVANT. MAKE A PLAN AND STICK TO IT - NO MATTER WHAT."



I waited for what felt like hours, watching the light from Hooper's TV room reflected in the window across the street.

Carmine had fallen foul of the Blutes back in the old days. His own "empire" - not much more than a handful of thugs armed with lead pipes - had been providing him with a good income for years.

And then my dad and his brothers showed up.

SAM BLUTE DID THAT TO ME. HIM AND HIS BROTHER MIKE. AND IT'S NOT JUST MY ARM- IT'S EVERY PART OF MY SKIN 'CEPT MY HANDS, NECK AND FACE.

CIGARETTE BURNS?

AN ARC-WELDER. TOOK THEM THE BEST PART OF TWO DAYS. FUCKERS DIDN'T EVEN SLEEP. JUST KEPT BURNING ME.

"THERE WAS NO WARNING, NO THREATS THAT THEY WANTED TO TAKE OVER. THEY JUST GRABBED ME OUTTA MY HOME, AND WENT TO WORK ON ME."

"SO IF YOU THINK YOU CAN TAKE THEM DOWN, THEN GOOD LUCK TO YOU. BUT TAKE YOUR TIME. GET IT RIGHT. YOU HEAR?"

"PLAY IT SAFE."


OH SHIT.

*I hadn't seen Uncle
Mike in over a decade.*

*Right then, I really,
really missed Betsy.*



TO BE CONTINUED



GET 'EM!

OKAY,
YOU HAD YOUR
CHANCE TO DO
THIS THE *EASY*
WAY.

NOW, TELL ME
WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT
"BOSS" ROTHKO AND YOU
MIGHT GET SOMETHING
OUT OF THIS...

KRAA

KZZZ

WHAT
THE--?

THOSE WHO
COMMIT EVIL
SHOULD NOT
PROFIT IN
ANY WAY.

THE
WEED OF CRIME
BEARS BITTER
FRUIT.

AND
THE SHADOW
ENSURES THAT
CRIME MUST
NOT PAY.

THIS NUT
MUST BE ANOTHER
OF ROTHKO'S
HERVIES!

YOU
MISTAKE
ME.

KI-YAH!

Oof!

MY QUARREL
IS NOT WITH YOU.

-Unght-



LISTEN, FRIEND,
YOU DON'T KNOW
WHO YOU ARE
MESSING WITH.

I'M GETTING
OUTTA HERE!

AAH!

ARNOLD PURVIS.
YOU HAVE SPREAD NOTHING
BUT DISCORD, PAIN, AND
DEATH IN YOUR MISERABLE
EXISTENCE.

I-I'LL
KILL YOU!

YOUR DAYS
OF KILLING
ARE OVER.

MASKS ISSUE #1 IN
STORES 11/28!