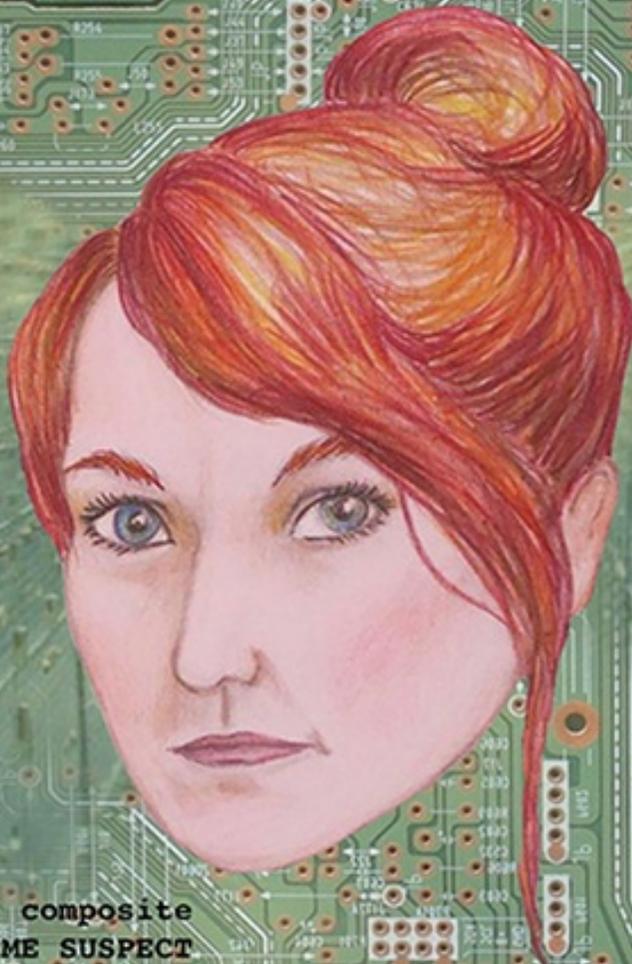


Bitchiprocity

**FREE
PREVIEW**



FBI composite
PRIME SUSPECT



Daniel Sandoval

Bitchiprocity

By

Daniel Sandoval

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Chapter I: Mutiny of Heart

If they called her agency, they weren't kidding around. They had money, they had purpose, they had connections. It's not as if people could find them in the phonebook, or online, or anywhere else. Referrals from former clients, this was the only way. As for the sort of work they did, she was a harbinger of vengeance, for their clients. She didn't judge. She couldn't. A big part of her professional credibility was to get the job done by whatever means necessary.

Ciara Britton was paid handsomely because many of her jobs involved doing things that could land her in prison. This was where the not judging part came in; if she investigated someone and couldn't find something that would discredit the mark, she would manufacture it. Ciara did that more often than she cared to remember. Sometimes the clients would have the incriminating evidence they wanted her to plant, and sometimes it was left up to her. The result was the same. The mark's life would become a living hell. She preferred it when they left it up to her, though. She could then become creative.

Sitting on the United Airlines flight from Salt Lake City, she wanted a drink. Neurosis argued against the idea, starting with the horror story of carbohydrate combustion. *It'll make you look old*, she thought. *You're already thirty-nine. Remember the slip in Seattle? You told that man your real name.*

Her boarding pass and driver's license identified her as "Clare Benton," her cover for the next few days. "Clare" went back to reading her e-reader. The mark had written a couple of novels and the one she was reading was pretty good, good enough for her to keep forgetting to look for angles. The main characters were mismatched, him a middle aged man, her a nineteen-year-old girl. Maybe that was her angle. But nineteen was legal, and the circumstance in the novel made their budding romance seem not only strangely plausible, but actually beautiful, and they hadn't had sex anyway, and she was more than halfway through the novel.

The flight's captain announced that they were going to be landing on schedule. Clare looked out the aircraft window and was struck by the ruggedness of the landscape below. They floated over a series of mountainous ridges and valleys with a steppe of plains and creeks off to one side. "What the hell am I even doing out here," she whispered to herself. Clare wondered why anyone would care what happened out here. Sure there was wealth being generated in the hinterlands, but the people who controlled those resources were living in New York, or London, or Beijing, Riyadh, or Washington, D.C., or anywhere but in the wilderness slowly rolling under the airliner.

Clare made note of her place in the e-novel and began to prepare for disembarking the flight. Another look out the window was perfect timing for the lumbering arc of mountains running north-to-south, to abruptly end at a mountain that looked like a tsunami, twenty miles wide, on a straight, east-to-west line, ready to engulf a small city waiting helpless just north of the cresting wave. The plane drifted down to an immense flat landscape north of the city. As the airliner descended, the flatness was interrupted by variations from the buff brown of dry, grassy plains; there was the green of the undulating banks of the river that broke over the horizons to the west and east. Variation continued in draws and settlements with trees ablaze in early autumn colors.

Touchdown for the aircraft was smooth and the turboprop was soon taxiing toward a tarmac in back of an airport. Clare was annoyed when she realized the passengers were expected to descend by a mobile staircase instead of the unused docking gate next to where the plane pulled in. Out in the Wild West, she thought. Playful eddies of air pulled at her shoulder length auburn hair as she walked from the tarmac to the terminal.

She looked around once inside, doing a subtle but methodical survey of the airport, sixty yards to get past the security gates, escalator up to the second floor and the boarding ramps, exits with alarms. Once past the gates and the throngs of passengers and greeters, the space opened up; there was a waiting area immediately to the right and a hallway to a lounge, gift shop, and restrooms just beyond the hallway. She went in to organize herself. As she put her carry-on next to the far sink of the counter, she looked at herself in the bank of mirrors. There she was, a petite woman with ridiculously fair skin, oval face, narrow nose, large blue-green eyes, wind-blown auburn hair. Her dark blue business suit had wrinkles. She would have to dress down. The scheme was to be unremarkable and the attire of the people in the airport was considerably more casual on the spectrum of business casual. A woman in her twenties came into the restroom, plunked her purse on the sink counter, and went into a stall. What sort of trusting world was this? She took her own bag and hung it on the hook in the stall to use the restroom.

Clare used the restroom while listening to the woman two stalls over place a call. Her voice sounded plaintive in the call to her boyfriend. Why wasn't it obvious that the boyfriend picks her up from the airport? For that matter, why wasn't he waiting for her? Clare wondered if the woman had something to confess. She knew something was up. People ignored so many indicators and yet were always surprised when things went wrong. Clare shouldered her bag and went to wash her hands. The other woman, a brunette, joined her at the sink counter and washed her hands while staring at herself in the mirror. Yep, thought Clare, something happened. It was either a family crisis or the woman had been unfaithful. If she had heard the boyfriend's voice, she would've been able to tell.

A wide walkway past the ticket agents and rental car vendors led to the baggage carousel. Tinker stood next to the wall. Tinker was dressed as some sort of urban commando—at thirty, getting too old for the leather and metal jacket, black fatigue pants and black boots. Tinker also wore an expression even more hostile than usual. She was the agency's surveillance operative, tall, tufted blonde hair, built like a boy basketball player, including the apparent lack of breasts. Her face was pretty enough, but always looking pissed off about something prevented the observer from relaxing enough to notice her cute sprinkling of sand-grain freckles across her cheekbones and graceful nose, her almond shaped, dark brown eyes. She darted her eyes to indicate that luggage was finally rolling out on the conveyor but didn't move from leaning against the wall next to an exit.

Only after Clare had pulled her suitcases off the conveyor did Tinker approach and grab the heavier suitcase. Tinker started toward a different door out the front of the airport. The view outside was spectacular, the mountain dominating the southern view, the clear blue sky, the curving, staggered line of autumnal colored trees lining the long drive up to the terminal. The air was crisp and sweet. The sunlight was warm.

They walked to a champagne colored Ford Taurus, and typical of Tinker's style, she didn't say a word until the luggage was stowed in the back seat and they were both sitting in the car. Once sitting behind the wheel, Tinker asked, "What the fuck are we doing here?"

"I've been wondering that myself," said Clare.

"No, seriously, have we accepted this job?"

"Not officially, but the retainer went through so we're on the hook for that."

Tinker stared angrily out the windshield and demanded, "Who decides?"

Clare didn't like Tinker's tone and forced patience into her voice, "I decide."

Starting the car, Tinker signaled before turning into the parking loop away from the airport. "You can keep my cut because I think this is bullshit."

"Your cut isn't enough to change anything, Tinker. So how about you just give me your report?"

"How about I just quit without giving you shit?" growled Tinker.

Clare was stunned. Tinker had worked for the agency for three years, had worked some pretty dicey cases, had created some cyber weapons that made her a world-class talent. The agency needed her.

"What's going on?" asked Clare.

"What's going on is this guy doesn't have a pot to piss in. His profile is totally clean. The chatter about him is clean. His search history is sparse and absolutely clean. He's at home, at work, at a coffee shop, walking a river path, or at church; that's it. The few times I've caught communiqués, like between his daughter or his son, I think the world needs people like him. If I've lost the mission, fine, 'cause he ain't a threat to anybody."

"That's not for us to decide."

"You just said you decide," said Tinker. An unsettled silence fell between them. Tinker drove between the airport and the town, an industrial interface between the encroaching wilderness and the enormous lots of the oil industry, a tank farm, a pipe yard, a heavy equipment dealership. "My cover is blown, anyway," said Tinker while taking a turn from one highway to another.

"How?" asked Clare.

Tinker's eyes made a succession of nervous blinks. "He spotted me in a parking lot at the end of the trail he walks on. He spotted me again at a different place sleeping in the car. He pulled up in his car, pulled a bicycle pump out and inflated one of my tires that was low. He asked if I was homeless. I said yes as a cover. He bought me a hotel room. The guy has probably four hundred bucks in his bank account, and he bought me a couple days of fast food, bought me a room, gave me both keys, and left without even asking my name."

"You are not supposed to make contact, ever." Clare sensed there was more. "Was that all?"

"No." Tinker frowned. "I was spotted again a few days later, and I lied to him, said I got some money wired to me and I invited him to my room, another room, so I could get near his phone." Tinker's mouth quivered. "He spent the night, just talking, holding me. It wasn't sexual. I'm a lesbian, for fuck's sake, and he refused me, saying our hearts weren't ready for that. But the way he touched me, the way he looked at me ... I've never been able to sleep next to somebody. And I woke up spooned with a man. And it was so, he was so..." Tinker's eyes closed and her head tilted as she drew a breath. Clare pushed a small correction on the steering

wheel. This brought Tinker back to driving. “So loving,” she finished. Tinker shook her head. “Nobody gives a shit about my heart, least of all me.” Tinker took shuddering breaths as she tried to concentrate on her driving.

“Pull over, hold it together long enough to find a good place, then pull over,” commanded Clare.

Tinker nodded, turned left onto a frontage road, drove to the crest of a hill, and turned right onto a narrow asphalt path that ran behind a tall, cylindrical water tank. She parked next to the water tank where they had an impressive view of the town.

Clare wanted to break the tension so she tried some humor. “You’re a lesbo?”

Tinker laughed. She actually laughed, a cleansing, musical laugh that started with surprise and ended with delight. Tinker sighed before saying, “You didn’t know that?”

“Damn, girl, I never heard you talk so much.” Clare gave her a gentle smile.

Tinker’s mood drifted back toward stoicism. “Well, he got to me. I’m compromised, and I don’t want to help with whatever is going down.” Tinker rolled down her window and got a cigarette out of her jacket pocket. She lit the cigarette with a defiant look at Clare. Smoking was against the rules. A smoker was more visible, vulnerable, and left evidence of her passing.

Clare ignored the cigarette, figuring Tinker was off the project, anyway. Hopefully just off this project. If she quit the agency, they had a serious problem. “I’m talking to the stone-cold bitch when I ask this question, so take a minute if you have to.” She waited for Tinker to look at her. “Is there any chance he played you?”

Tinker took a drag off her cigarette and stared out the window. She nodded slowly and said, “The kindness is real. But his intuition is off the scale. Talking to him, you feel it, the way he senses and absorbs your mood. It’s more than just kinesics. If there’s such a thing as clairvoyance, maybe, and with that, considering how smart he is, it is possible.” Tinker took a nervous drag off the filter-less cigarette, flicked the ember off the end out the car window, broke apart the butt to release the loose tobacco into the breeze and rolled the paper into a tiny blob before flicking it away. “But that just may be how he is. There are indications, from his jobs and his last relationship that he’s too honest, if anything, so I didn’t get played like that.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Clare. “He spotted you, more than once, initiated contact, and now you’re out.” Clare held an insistent gaze on Tinker’s eyes. “He’s smart, you say. Taking you out of the game would be pretty fuckin’ smart.”

“The man lives in a shack, on the wrong side of the tracks. He’s got a paper trail that goes back to his birth, most of it in this god forsaken hellhole, and his writing, for thirty years of that, indicate a brilliant mind but an idealistic fool. That’s where idealistic fools end up, busted ass broke, working for peanuts, keeping things together as best they can.” Tinker’s face flushed with anger. “You ever hear the saying, ‘Nice guys finish last?’ That’s this guy!”

Clare nodded before saying, “First off, this ain’t a guy. He’s a fifty-year-old man. Are you thinking to stay here, get a job somewhere and live happily ever after with him?”

Tinker thought about the question. “No,” she said quietly. Tinker’s head tilted again; again, her eyes closed for an instant. She straightened up, and, in an embarrassed voice, said, “Well, if he let me have a girlfriend, maybe.”

Clare felt tension clench her brow as she stared in disbelief at Tinker. “You are *so* off this project,” breathed Clare. “And I realize how tactically stupid it is for me to say this before you’ve given me the dossier, but you need to leave, tonight.”

The defiance on Tinker’s face startled Clare even more. If Tinker didn’t leave, then that meant she just flipped sides; her loyalty was no longer with the agency. If she stayed, they would have an operative working against them. Clare had to remind herself that Tinker had yet to respond to the idea of leaving. Clare waited, purposefully silent, denying the temptation to persuade. Tinker was smart enough to not disclose her true intentions, as well, so everything depended, potentially Tinker’s very life, depended on her leaving.

“Okay,” Tinker said angrily.

“And you are reporting home, taking another assignment, far away from here, something without field work, encryption or something. Agreed?”

Tinker put the car in reverse and pulled onto the blacktop. “Fine, there’s an eight o’clock to Denver. I’ll be on it. I’ll leave my cell phone on so you can track me.” Tinker pulled onto the frontage road. She drove in silence as her turns indicated she was driving back to the airport. Clare sat in the passenger seat, utterly astounded. She wondered why it was so surprising. People did have hearts. Yet, Tinker had never shown hers. Maybe it was the job getting to her, but maybe it was the man. And maybe, just maybe, she would be happier living there. If he let her have a girlfriend? Who does that? Is that something they talked about that night, or was it something Tinker discovered in her three weeks of surveillance? Was it something in the dossier that she might not get? Tinker pulled up in front of the airport and parked.

She pulled the keys from the ignition, got out, and went to the trunk. Clare got out quickly, suddenly thinking she needed watch Tinker. Standing behind the open trunk, Tinker pulled her two black bags from the trunk, put the straps over her shoulder and held out the keys. Clare accepted the keys as Tinker said, “I know that you doing the same investigation I’ve just done increases our profile, but I don’t care. If you can decide, then don’t do this, and whatever happens, I don’t want to know.” Tinker stood there with emotions tormenting her face, ending with sorrow that pulled her brows into the same shape as the frown of her mouth. She swallowed hard and her face went blank. Tinker’s voice was an angry monotone when she attended to details. “You got three days left on the rental car. You got no nest.” Tinker hesitated. “And you need to be the one who monitors me, because if I catch so much as a trace of our regulator, I will find and kill that fat-ass, clumsy motherfucker.” Tinker stood for an extra second as contempt flared her nostrils. Her expression corrected to a forced calm and she walked away.

Clare closed the trunk and leaned against the back of the car. She rubbed her forehead with her eyes closed for such a long time that a woman in business attire stopped in front of Clare and asked, “Excuse me, are you okay?”

Emerging slowly from her thoughts, Clare responded, “Yes, it’s just been a rough day.”

The woman gave her an understanding nod and continued pulling her wheeled suitcase across the driving loop to the parking lot beyond. Clare reprimanded herself for doing something that increased her visibility as she went to lock the car doors. For the first time she could ever remember, she wanted to make sure Tinker was okay. It was crossing a line which people in her line of work normally didn’t, shouldn’t, but the anguish on Tinker’s face haunted Clare’s mental

imagery. She was so sad. For a fleeting moment, the woman towering above her looked like an injured child. As she walked she realized that there wasn't anything that she could do, really, but she cared, at least tell her that. Tinker's heart, come to find out, was beautiful.

Clare searched the whole interior of the airport complex. Her mind flashed upon the exit door near where Tinker was standing when she first spotted her, exit door near the luggage conveyor. Clare looked out as far as she could see to the right of the door. She opened out and immediately checked left, first to search for surveillance cameras and then to see Tinker stand from sitting on her heels against the wall next to her two bags, in a windowless niche of the airport. Tinker's left hand moved back out sight. There was a burning cigarette on the pavement in front of her. Still an operative, thought Clare. Then the shock rolled in; was Tinker going to knife her? Clare showed two empty hands as she approached. "How you going to get that on the plane?" asked Clare.

Tinker remained tensed and battle-ready until she saw that Clare would stand about twelve feet back. "It's ceramic," said Tinker. She flashed a light brown knife with a handle that looked like a makeup compact.

"So that's where we're at?" asked Clare. "You don't trust me anymore?" Clare shook her head in disbelief. "I love you, Tinker. I'd kill that fat-ass motherfucker myself before I let him hurt you." Tears formed in Clare's eyes. She wiped tears off her face with frustration in the movement of her hand. "I can't make the decision about this until I know more, but I'm standing here because I'm worried about you." Clare glanced around for people who might notice unusual behavior before she crouched down and stretched out on hands and knees to get close enough to reach the cigarette. She backed up the same way and stood up at a safe distance. She took a puff off of the cigarette with a slow, luxurious inhale.

Tinker got another cigarette and lit it—all with the ceramic knife still in her left hand. Her demeanor changed only slightly and said nothing.

"We're sticking with the plan," said Clare, "because for reasons too many to mention, you need to get on that plane. But I'm just curious how a lesbian almost fell in love with a man, and how if he let you have a girlfriend, then you're good. And why would you think he might do that?" Clare mostly just wanted to get Tinker talking.

"His last girlfriend was bisexual," answered Tinker. "His Internet modem is direct connection, not wireless, and he's had his computer for five years without registering it, and none of his passwords are left logged on, so I've only had a few shots at his contents. Anyway, when they were first starting out, in e-mails he said he understood she had desires he couldn't fulfill, and he would consider letting her have a girlfriend, that he didn't expect to be part of that relationship but he would respect it." Tinker still stood in a guarded stance, foreshortened torso and foot position.

"Did they try that?" Clare dropped the filter-less cigarette to let it burn to ash.

"I don't know. His e-mails to her became few and more discreet. They were together for almost two years. She broke up with him, maybe just to shake things up—she was young, practically half his age—he declined a chance to get back together. I didn't have enough time, and his e-mails are so well written, with literary devices like acrostics, so I was usually reading instead of pulling data. And then he'd shut down and pull the cable."

Clare smiled when she asked, "Did you ever track down the ex from the e-mail address?"

“Nope,” replied Tinker.

“You’re really not going to give me the dossier?”

Tinker shook her head with a frown. “There isn’t one to give. And I encrypted everything that ever went into the cloud, and that computer, along with the camera and phone chip, got dropped into a very hot campfire, kept burning for about three hours, and you can bill me.” Tinker’s jaw muscles twitched. “And, obviously, you don’t have to pay me for the past three weeks, hell, round up to a month.”

Clare changed the subject, sensing that Tinker was still about ready to quit her job. “Can I buy you dinner? Your flight isn’t for a couple of hours.”

“Nope, we’re loners, you and me,” said Tinker. “We’ll go back to that. We don’t get the nice person to settle down with. But,” Tinker squinted thoughtfully, “all the people we’ve nuked, they had something ugly going on. Maybe it was just they were greedy assholes, sometimes something much worse, so I didn’t mind so much, even if what they got was disproportionate to what they did. This is different. This is somebody with shit-tons of money coming after somebody who’s good. And that ain’t right.” Tinker tossed her cigarette, picked up her bags with a wary eye on Clare, still holding the knife guarded and away, and walked crisply to the door into the airport.

Again, Clare found herself standing with her eyes closed and rubbing her forehead. “Unbelievable,” Clare whispered. She walked to the corner of the terminal and turned toward her car. The preliminary profile was in a folder in her bag, but that had just the basics, physical address, picture, place of employment, a notation about a coffee shop he would occasionally go. The thought of Tinker burning the computer with all the important stuff had Clare shaking her head as she walked. People walked past her as they came out of the airport and she didn’t even see them. The practice of making mental note of everybody in her vicinity, and her general surroundings, in fact, had been abandoned since Tinker’s emotional meltdown in the car. It was all a blank. She didn’t even know the layout of the town.

Another problem presented itself. Tinker said that the man knew the car, put air in a tire, so even if there was three days rent left on the car, she should turn it in immediately and rent a different one. “Unbelievable,” she said aloud while unlocking the door and checking the visor. Nothing under the driver’s side, she leaned in and found paperwork for the rental car under the passenger visor. Thank goodness, she at least knew which company to return the car to, and if they took a loss for returning the car early, too bad. Tinker waived off a month’s pay, so that was about seven-thousand saved, but add in expenses, that was probably another five already spent. What a mess.

Clare got her bags out of the car and walked into the airport, turning toward the right to the rental car counters. The clerk said the early return would be refunded to the credit card and seemed surprised when Clare asked which card was used. She had several credit card numbers committed to memory and recognized the number as an agency card. She charged a luxury car to a different company card and soon was tossing her bags into the back seat of a black Lincoln.

She briefly considered going back into the airport and trying to get some sort of reconciliation with Tinker, but nothing had changed. As for the gnawing feeling in her heart, time would have to lessen the ache of that; distance would de-escalate the tension. Tinker preparing for a deadly fight at the sight of her, it was heartbreaking. Her next thought was that

maybe it should be. Clare, too, had taken rationalizing comfort in the moral failings of marks in the past. And Van, the agency's co-executive with Ciara, warned them all during a meeting that as long as the wealthy and the industrialists were going after each other, they had a moral neutrality, but when the plutocrats began to use their agency to scratch out the poor for mere convenience or spite, then they would have to re-evaluate. At the time, no one seemed to care; it was dismissed as Van just waxing philosophical, as he was so prone to do. And following a disturbing correlation with a decline in Van's personal life, which Ciara suspected was tied to an addiction to prescription drugs and alcohol, the jobs degenerated from corporate espionage to professional vendettas, to personal ones.

Clare remembered that Tinker said that she had "no nest," which meant all the legwork, including a hotel with certain services established in Clare's name, wasn't done. And there wouldn't be a folio with helpful information about the town and its business community, either. Tinker not only dropped the ball, she burned it in a fire. If she worked for a regular company, refusing work and destroying company property, Tinker would've been fired. That was a really bad idea, too. With her particular skill-set, there were nation-states, terrorist organizations and multinational corporations that would hire her in a second, and perhaps pay her even more than did the agency.

This is a free preview of the first chapter of "Bitchiprocity." For the full e-book, please visit <http://www.amazon.com/Bitchiprocity-Daniel-Sandoval-ebook/dp/B00H03TVAU/>