

DARKLING



J. M. Patterson

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By

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Prolog

The temperature had gotten a bit less miserable after the sun went down so Eddie was hanging with Clipper and Tommy on the corner parking lot of Max's Mini Mart when the maroon minivan pulled up to the curb. The passenger side window slid down and Gonzo leaned across from the steering wheel. Eddie peeled himself off the wall and slouched over as smoothly as he could. "What's up Gonz?"

"Come on. Get in. We got work to do."

"Work? Like what?" Eddie wasn't really old enough to worry about getting a real job.

"Come on. We gonna' go gonging. We gonna rock a good one."

Gonzo was bobbing his head with music playing too low for Eddie to hear. He wasn't totally into the kind of trouble Gonzo usually practiced, but the town was too dead to bear tonight. Maybe they could have some fun without running from the cops. He opened the door and got in. Gonzo punched up the volume and sped away from the curb. "We gonna rock a hard one Shimmy!" Gonzo shouted.

Eddie had once asked Gonzo why he always called him that and the Gonz' had explained about some old song, even played it for him. Eddie didn't get it and it didn't sound much like music to him, but when Gonzo got some stupid idea in his head you got nowhere trying to change it. Eddie wasn't really sure what Gonzo's whole real name was, but he had been waiting outside his house for him when the Gonz's mom had thrown one of those parental threats at him and called him Franklin. Eddie never called him that, his own mom called him Edward when she was pissed and Teddy when she wasn't. Who could figure parents?

"So what are we gonna' do?" Eddie yelled over the CD player.

"I told you, we gonna' go gonging. You know that one stairway in the fourth spaceship in GodHunters? Where you can pull that blue guy's arm off and beat him with it? We gonna gong 'em with one of their own." He motioned to the back with his thumb.

Eddie looked back into the dark. He wasn't sure what he was looking for until they went under the next streetlight. He caught sight of a dark shape on the floor. Half a block later the next light revealed a piece of train track under the seats.

"Shit, Gonzo. Where'd you get it?"

“I found it at my uncle’s house out in Aurora. Cool huh? We gonna bang one loud.”

“We can’t park on the bridge,” Eddie was thinking about leaving his options open on this one. “We have to carry this thing up by hand?”

“Yeah, I got faith. We got all night anyway. It’s gonna make them rocks seem pretty weak.”

“Yeah, I guess it will.” Eddie was starting to fidget in the seat, tapping his hands on his knees.

They drove out and got on 57 going north. They flew through the ramps onto 80 going east and finally pulled off before the bridge at Park Avenue and the train tracks. It took almost an hour to drag the five foot section of track up the hill. Apparently the state police had other things to do than patrol the highways at one a.m. on a Wednesday. They got it up and balanced on the safety rail as cars whipped by at seventy. Then all they had to do was wait for a train. They were looking for a freight with a lot of closed cars and tankers, the flatbed ones just didn’t make the right kind of noise. It didn’t take long for the right one to come along.

“This is our express train from Hell!” shouted Gonzo. “Get ready!”

Just as the last engine passed under them, they both heaved as hard as they could. The big steel track plunged out of sight below. They were rewarded with the loudest clanging, crashing noise either of them had ever heard outside of a set of headphones. Gonzo jumped up and down with both feet in total bliss.

“Hot Damn! Hot Damn! Let’s get over to the north side and see if we can see anything!”

The two of them dashed recklessly through traffic, vaulted over the concrete center barrier, through the westbound traffic, and over to the north rail. By the time they got there, the train was too far along to see the damage they had caused but they laughed like a couple of Hyenas, high fiving each other for most of a minute. Finally Eddie came down to reality.

“Hey Gonz?. We oughtta get out of here before somebody calls the cops about the kids on the bridge.”

“Yeah! Let’s drive up along the tracks and see if we can see anything.”

They ran down to the van and got back on the highway. They would never fully understand what they had done. They would never know that the track they had dropped had gotten hung up under the train and in about a mile it would ram into a switch and throw tank cars off the tracks halfway into

Harvey. They would never see the results of their prank because the colorless, odorless gas would kill them both within eighteen seconds after they drove into it. They would lay un-noticed in the wrecked van looking like bloated creatures from a horror movie as that same gas cloud drifted slowly north for miles.

Thirty one years later..

Chapter One

At 12:52 am. the entire fourteenth floor of the Lake Hotel went dark. Victor Santra was watching television when it happened. The craggy face of Henry Losson, night-time anchor for the Stock Channel, faded rapidly from the screen and from his mind. There was some light filtering in through the sheer drape, but Victor still managed to bark his shin on the furniture feeling his way to the bed to retrieve his pistol. He waited a moment for the emergency lights to kick on. They didn't. There was no light coming under the door from the hallway. He could hear footsteps and some disorganized questions mixed with at least three people giving orders.

Victor made a decision after two seconds of listening to the confusion outside. His eyes were starting to adjust to the dim light as he grasped the knob to the adjoining room and turned it as quietly as he could. He eased the door open and automatically ran his hand up the wall until he found the light switch. He pushed it up with a soft click and realized his mistake, cursing silently. The curtains were shut tight in here, that had been part of the security. He felt his way to the bed cautiously and stooped down with his left hand outstretched. He knew as soon as he felt across the bed that the woman sleeping there was dead. His hand came involuntarily away from the warm wetness that bathed the sheets.

He stood trying to decide what his next move should be. He knew that if he wasn't careful the trigger happy bodyguards securing the floor would likely shoot him first and apologize later. He heard the door click and swing open, the sounds in the hall becoming louder and clearer. Victor moved carefully away from the bed expecting to be challenged (or worse) at any moment.

There was a burst of automatic gunfire in the hall, the muzzle flash right in front of the door. To his relief it

wasn't aimed into the room, but west, down the hall. The answer was a heavy thud and a tremendous amount of return fire. Victor decided to wait it out right where he was.

The bodyguards in the hall were taking fire that was far more accurately aimed than their own. With every burst, another suited guardian went down, protective vests and all. The remaining guards continued to return fire. They aimed just above the muzzle flash, as they had been taught. One of them with better than average eyesight noticed in the brief light from the tiny explosions peppering the hall that there was movement a half meter to one side of the deadly muzzle. The assassin saw him like it was daylight as he took aim. They fired simultaneously. Only one of them fell. The other guards' fire was keeping the personnel at the east end of the hall out of the fight, and none of them figured out that the lone figure was walking sideways with the gun held out from the body.

As if on cue, the last guard at the west end of the hall fell in the same instant the elevator doors slid open with a ding. There was no one aboard, but the anemic emergency lights in it worked. The guards that had taken cover in doorways at the far end of the hall began shouting and shooting as a single dark figure dashed into the car. The doors slid shut and the indicator showed that it was going down. Victor edged to the doorway and called out to the personnel in the hall, identifying himself and giving instructions not to shoot him. The remaining bodyguards seemed more interested in where the stairs they could use to follow the elevator down were located, something every one of them should have known before now. Victor grabbed the sleeve of one as he passed.

"Check the roof, you ass!" He flung the arm away as he called out, "Where the hell is Roberts?!"

Within seconds the emergency lights came up revealing seven dead or dying figures in the hall. Victor stood for a moment reviewing the carnage, calculating how much this was going to cost. Soon the east elevator dinged and the doors slid open revealing the tense face of Security

Specialist Roberts. He was snapping commands into a headset as he stepped from the two and a half meter cube and approached to make his report. Victor raised his pistol in both hands. "I thought you said you could control the situation here, and nobody even had a fucking flashlight! I thought you said she'd be safe here, you jackass!" Roberts looked puzzled and scared. Victor pulled the trigger. "You're fired." He reached down and took the bloody radio from the remains of Specialist Roberts' head. He didn't have any training in this kind of operation, so he just slumped down the wall next to the dead man and listened. He continued wiping his left hand on Roberts' clothes until the police arrived.

Later, after the building had been secured and searched, Roberts replacement would piece together the almost unbelievable route of escape. The assassin must have ridden the elevator just long enough to open the tampered access panel in the top and jump to the service ladder in the shaft. From there it had been a short climb to the roof. A loose cover on one of the air shafts revealed a very thin but strong line that led all the way to the basement levels. There were no obstructions in the shaft, they must've been removed days before. Then came the really tricky part. The assassin had to have made the twisting, turning change from outflow to intake ducts through the plenum, cutting through the filter stack in the process. It looked like only a circus performer could've done it, but there it was. The grate on the return vent had been loosened, giving full access to the utilities room and subsequently the underground garage. The police had entered the structure there first, to secure the exits, but they had seen only two surprised newlyweds looking for a little adventure. It was only twenty meters from the utility room across the parking garage to the sewer access, but no one thought to check that until days later. There was no evidence that anyone had used it lately, but process of elimination seemed to leave it as the only way out.

* * *

At 1:30 in the morning, the 76th street Zippy Zap

wasn't deserted, there were three wandering crazies and a pack of six teenage schoolers staying out late. All of the kids and one of the crazies looked up when the sleek, black, heavily modified Tottori 1700 Windstorm pulled up. The rider shouldered open the door, wearing a long coat and taking off her helmet with only her right hand. She had five centimeter long, spiked silver hair and face paint that looked like a broken windshield with a hole centered on her right eye. The crazy looked immediately into his foam cup. The kids looked at the rider until she pointedly returned their stares. They took a few covert glances as she got her food, nuked it, and sat down facing to one side.

She ate looking out the window at the dirty grey of night, not needing to look at the kids to know what they were up to. She could hear them whispering six meters away and see them reflected in the window: "She could be attractive without all that crap on her face. What's she trying to prove anyway?" That from the artificial platinum blond.

The boy in the green shirt answered. "Look, see how that coat is kinda stiff and how her pants have like, plates in the knees and shins? Anybody dressed like that in this part of town is either from over the Wall, or trying hard to look like it. Whichever, you don't want to get caught staring, ya' know? There's like, a percentage chance she's killed somebody before. Those people inside the Wall are all chemically psycho. Don't make trouble." The others whispered agreement while the blond girl giggled nervously.

The cycle rider was halfway through her meal when the kids finally left. The crazies at her back were keeping quietly to themselves as she pulled the wad of blood-soaked Zippy Zap napkins from under her left arm. She fished a med kit out of an inside pocket and opened it with her right hand. She tore the wrapper off a clear plastic nozzle and snapped it on the aerosol cylinder of Bleed-Stop Foam. It fit right into the seam of her vest and the wound underneath. Relief came with the hissing. The bullet had slid a centimeter along the vest and into the

seam at an angle. It had torn up the flesh, bounced off her rib, exited four centimeters further back, and was now lodged between her back and the Kevlar vest. Not a bad wound as gunshots went. She'd had worse.

After cleaning up the table and her hands, she finished her soy-chicken- chow-dog-meat-with-greasy-noodle surprise. She put her med kit away and threw the napkins in the trash recycler with the food wrappers. She paused at the door to put her gloves back on and the crazy that had looked up before held both hands up, the left one still holding a cup. "No waves, Shatter" he mumbled. She smiled just a little as she put her helmet on and pushed out into the parking lot. She put her left leg over the bike and reached up under the back of her helmet with her right hand and connected the fiber optic interface to the stainless ring on her head. The crazy put his empty foam cup over his mouth and mumbled quietly to himself as he watched her ride away.

Twenty minutes later, she rolled up a disused street toward a dark warehouse, checking it both visually and on the HUD inside her helmet. When everything came back green she activated the scrambled radio link to the building's electronic brain. "You keep a-knocking, but you can't come in," she spoke quietly into the mike. The system only took a second to verify her voice pattern before it slid open the first chain link gate. She rode into the trap and waited for the gate to close before she punched in the number code that opened the second gate. She gave the voice code again as she rode across the asphalt and into the widening doorway. The system noticed when she was clear enough to begin closing again and did so.

She rode smoothly across the dark building and onto the freight elevator as if it were daylight. It recognized the electronic signature of the Tottori and began to rise toward the top floor. When it stopped, she rode off the platform and shut off the engine. She had a reliable source for gasoline, but there was no need to waste

it. She walked to the workbench along the wall and disarmed. The bench looked like wood, but it wasn't and it quietly accepted the SMG, both pistols, survival knife, and two tantos without leaving a trace. It wouldn't float them to the surface for anyone without her DNA. She still hadn't turned on any lights, she almost never did. She didn't need them to see, in fact she wasn't even sure if they all worked anymore. She wasn't sure about a lot of things lately, like why she was still doing this for a living. It was an ever escalating cycle. You did a big job with big risks for a big payday that you invested in better tech so you could get bigger jobs that paid even more. It didn't look like there was any end to it except for the final death. She didn't know anyone who'd made it out any other way. Maybe, just maybe, it could be done though. If a girl had the right connections and maybe a friend or two that could be trusted for more than five minutes, there might be a way to go over to the light side of the day. It would be tricky, but then any wrong step could get her killed in a heartbeat anyway.

Chapter Two

Sitting in the recliner in the corner of the lounge, he carefully extracted his nutritionally balanced, vitamin enriched lunch from his old vinyl brief case. The enhanced juice drink was warm, but it didn't taste much different, and he'd never had good luck leaving it in the refrigerator. Seemed like nothing was safe around here anymore. The students were one thing, but you'd think the teachers would have a shred of decency left. He was just taking the first bite of his apple when the door opened and Principal Huber stuck his sweaty, bald head in.

"Hey Woody, is your free period at 2:10?"

"Yeah."

"Great! I remember at the last board meeting how you said you'd be happy to do whatever you could to help make the school a safer place."

"Yeah." Woody gave a mental groan, waiting to see what half baked idea Huber had come up with this time.

"Well, after the incident last week, the board decided to let go of a little money to look into it. There's a security consultant coming here this afternoon, and I was hoping you could show her around the place and answer whatever questions she has."

Woody had zero interest in getting involved in another project that would likely never see fruition, had other plans for his only free period, and Huber knew school security wasn't his job. On the other hand, saying no to Huber had a way of coming back to haunt you later.

"Yeah, okay. In the office at 2:10?"

"Glad you could be involved in the process." Huber gave a hearty thumbs-up before he slipped back out into the hall.

Woody finished his lunch trying to remember why he put up with jerks like Huber. He decided for the thousandth time that it must be for the kids. He had decided an equal number of times that if he ever felt he wasn't reaching at least some of the students he would just quit this crappy job and run his dojo full time. There were always people who needed to learn how to protect themselves in the city. Maybe business would really boom if he moved it out into the suburbs somewhere.

At 2:05 he made his way through the crowded halls to the office with a heavy feeling in his chest. He'd spent the last two hours more as a policeman than as a teacher. And now instead of sneaking into the gym to practice a few katas he was down here on a fool's errand for that greasy fat pig, Huber. He pulled open the heavy door and stepped to the counter. "Hi Lois. I'm supposed to meet a consultant here?"

The secretary's eyes darted a little to one side as she opened her mouth to speak. Woody turned his head to the right and realized there was a woman standing just off his shoulder. Her hand came up faster than a striking snake, and Woody flinched a little. He couldn't help it. She had the first two fingers of her right hand extended holding a business card the way magicians flip the Ace of Clubs out of nowhere. Woody kept his cool, he had enough expertise in martial arts to recognize a real threat. He took the card and scanned it quickly. It was plain white with the name "Bethany Marie Johansson" at the top, the words "Security Specialist" in the middle, and a contact number at the bottom. He slipped the card into his pocket and extended his hand. "I'm Mist-" she cut him off in mid-word.

"You're Hidoshi Woodson, age 29, you teach Social Studies, you're not in charge of school security." She shook his hand. Her palm had no obvious calluses but the skin felt very tough. She wasn't the most attractive woman he'd ever met, but she wasn't bad. He couldn't tell too much about her figure under the knee length brown coat

she wore, but he liked the long brunette pony tail. He reserved judgment on the dark shirt, pants, and SWAT style shoes. Maybe she would look better smiling.

"I know, but the small security force we have is always busy. We'll have to go to their stations to talk to them." He led the way out of the office. She followed, handling the door effortlessly with one hand.

"How much do you want to upgrade?" she asked. Woody noticed that she moved with as much grace and precision as any martial artist he'd ever met. Her blue eyes were always scanning the area rather than checking the floor or looking at him.

"I don't think anybody's decided that yet. Maybe you can tell us where we should start, and the board can go as far as funding will allow."

"Well, you can trash that useless old Sec-Tex alarm system and get something that will integrate all the security. Start with pattern or print locks on the perimeter with a dedicated camera at each one. You've got three teachers that are ripping materials and services after hours." She handed him a data pad with the pictures and the school's full employee file for each of the three offenders. "Kids can pretty much get in and out anywhere they want, and those thirty year old metal detectors are useless, even if you could get people to go through them." He scrolled the pad past Tony Johnson, the math teacher, and found a series of images showing students climbing through windows, using the utility access, and opening doors that were supposed to be sealed unless there was a fire. "Your computer security is a joke. A five year old could get in here with his eyes closed. Luckily, your systems are so screwed up that none of them talk to each other, so a lot of the stuff you want to protect isn't online. But your students have done eight felonies in the last six months using your computers and access. It's on there too." He scrolled the pad ahead, trying to read and keep up at the same time. She went on, "At least three of your security guards couldn't engage in foot pursuit to save their own lives. Two of them can't even pass the eye exam

anymore.”

“I had no idea things were this bad.” Woody fumbled with the pad as he walked. There was hard copy to back up everything she said.

“Clearly.” They were reaching the end of the hall. Woody watched in stunned silence as she, in a series of short fluid movements, deprived the door guard of his pistol and shocked him with his own taser. She handed the weapons to Woody saying, “This is typical of the readiness of you whole security staff. Inadequate.”

“Was that really necessary?”

Bethany lifted the guard with little visible effort, pushed his stool against the wall, and dumped him onto it. Amazingly, he stayed there. “He’ll live.” She let her arms hang just out a bit from her sides as she faced Woody. He took in the incredibly rich blue color of her eyes, noticing there seemed to be some small print around the edges of her irises. Probably the name of the contact manufacturer. He was trying to decide if it meant anything that he was suddenly aware of his pulse. Her right hand slid quickly into her coat pocket, and he decided maybe it was fear. She pulled her hand out of her pocket more slowly and held it up with half a dozen unprinted student I.D. cards on her palm. “Even your safe is out-dated and vulnerable.” Woody reached out palm down to take the cards and she *moved*. As his hand passed above hers, she moved hers up, grabbed his, turned them both over, and moved hers back to her side, leaving the card blanks in his out-stretched palm. His heart had started a beat when she moved and it was only finishing that same beat when her hand stopped at her side. There was the faintest grin in her eyes. Woody had no idea what to make of this woman, but he knew something unusual was happening. Curiosity was gnawing at him and he wasn’t sure it was entirely academic.

“If you don’t mind my asking, have you ever studied any martial arts?” He realized after he said it that it was probably a stupid question. Her subtle look of contempt confirmed it. “Okay, dumb question. You

wouldn't be much of a security specialist if you couldn't even protect yourself." He pocketed the cards and wiped his palms on his pant legs. "I run a little dojo over on the—"

"I know."

"Oh.....yeah, I guess you would. Anyway, I was wondering if you'd have time to sit in on a class sometime. Maybe give a few tips and pointers to the students. Real world kinda stuff."

Her eyes narrowed just slightly for a second or so. "When?"

"Well, I teach classes on.....but I bet you know that already, too. When would be a good time for you?"

"Tonight at 7:00." That impish look was back in her eyes, as if she was playfully toying with a child. She must have pulled that hand move for his benefit, as if to say 'See what I can do? I dare you to try.'

"Okay, great. I'll be there a little early to open the place up.....but then I bet you don't need me to get inside, do you? Just don't break anything, okay?"

"Anything?"

"Like the locks or the alarm system. You know."

She actually flashed something like a small smile. "See you there." She turned and went out the door.

Woody went back towards the office planning to turn the data pad report into Huber, but thought better of it at the last minute. If he went in there now, he'd no doubt be late for his last class. It could wait until morning. Nothing would get done about it anyway, and he had other things on his mind. He'd met other confident women before, some of them even his equal in the martial arts, but they always seemed a little pushy, like they had something to prove. Bethany Johansson seemed like she had everything under control, like she didn't care what the world thought of her. Woody was intrigued. He floundered through his last class though the students didn't seem to notice or care. He was still meandering

verbally about the current political situation when the bell rang. The students dashed out of the room while he made no real effort to give them an assignment. Only five of them would even try to do it anyway.

Woody followed his usual routine after school. He spent a couple hours trying to grade papers with little effect. Finally he left and drove his aging Subaru Electric the same way he always went to the dojo. The drive took him past the only drive-up health food place for clicks, apparently most of the places that sold healthy food thought that somehow driving while you ate their cuisine would damage your karma or something. He got something with a lot of sprouts in it and ate as the car crawled through evening traffic. As he pulled into the parking lot next to the building that housed the local Musik-Attack store and his second floor studio he noticed a big black, gas burning thing that looked like it just had to be military surplus from Eastern Europe. He was trying to place where he might have seen one before when the door opened and Bethany Johansson slid out. She wasn't carrying a bag or anything that could hold a change of clothes. Woody worried that perhaps she had changed her mind or had to dash off to more important business, as she strolled over. Woody got out fumbling for his duffel bag. "Are we still on for this evening?"

"I'm here," she replied slowly sliding her hands into her coat pockets. She tipped her head toward the building, "Race ya."

"What do you mean?"

"Upstairs." She said it as if it were obvious.

"Why?"

"Why not?" That impish look was back again. "I'll give you a head start."

Woody wasn't sure what game she was playing, so he walked a bit faster than usual toward the door expecting her to dash past him at any time. As he reached to put the key in the lock he glanced back to see what she was

waiting for. Bethany Johansson was no where to be seen. Slightly puzzled, and feeling the beginnings of disappointment, Woody went inside and up the stairs. When he opened the door and checked the alarm, it was already off. He rounded the corner and was confronted with a lone figure in the center of the practice mat. She'd apparently had enough time to hang up her coat and stood, feet apart, arms crossed, in a full length black bodysuit, padded at the shoulders, elbows, forearms, thighs, knees, shins, and hips. That impish look was back again. One of the side windows was open.

“Okay, so I didn't get my shoes off.” She began removing them from a standing position with no loss of balance as if she always did it that way. Woody was impressed. With both her agility and her figure. It wasn't like a model's or anything, but she was toned and shaped like one of those national aerobics competitors, only sleeker.

“I guess you don't need to warm up,” was all he could manage.

“I'm always warmed up,” she replied without looking at him. She put her shoes on the floor under the hook that held her long coat and returned to the center of the mat.

Woody fumbled with his duffel, “I need to, uh....” he pointed towards the office/changing room. She just nodded and closed her eyes. Woody walked around the mat in his street shoes, noticing that she was as still as any statue he could remember seeing.

When he came back out in his uniform, she still hadn't moved as far as he could tell. He walked over to her side and reached up to tap her shoulder. Before he could fully comprehend what was happening, much less react, he was looking at the long ceiling fluorescents. She was looking down at him with that impish look in her eye again.

“I wasn't, uh,” he blinked slowly three times, “ready.” She shrugged her shoulders slightly while her

head tilted a tiny bit to the right. She straightened, stepped back a half pace, and crossed her arms. Woody rolled to his feet and took a few calming deep breaths. His pulse was just about up to workout pace already. When he felt centered, he moved to a standard stance and nodded his readiness. He expected blinding speed this time. He wasn't disappointed.

Her first few strikes were undoubtedly just feints to feel out his defense, but Woody was less than comfortable with how narrowly he was blocking them. After the fifth one she stepped up the pace. It didn't take Woody long to realize he was going to be on the losing end of this exchange. He was moving in total desperation just to keep up a defense. There was absolutely no chance for him to take the fight to her. Finally, one of her moves got through. It was a reverse knife hand strike to the temple, but it was feather soft when it hit his head while the hits he had blocked had been punishing. As her hand moved away she said, "One." The flurries kept coming and Woody had a bad feeling about how high that count might go. After thirty seconds the count was up to six. Woody took three large quick steps back and put his palms forward, "Enough."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve to cover the scared look that was probably on his face. It was clear that she was just toying with him. She could have taken him out of the fight at any time she wanted to and they both knew it. Woody tried to calm himself, but he felt just like he had when he was a tyro getting beaten regularly by the older kids in the dojo years ago. Bethany Johansson was just starting to break a sweat.

"You're good." It didn't sound like sarcasm.

"I used to think I was pretty good, but I'm never gonna be in your league," he conceded. "Where the hell did you learn to fight like that? I mean, I don't recognize the style and I've never seen anybody as fast as you. Are you on some kind of drugs or something?"

"Or something." She winked briefly at him and

turned away. Woody stood on the mat, puzzled, sweating, and breathing heavily as she glided over to the long table by the wall and sat on the top with her lower legs crossed, feet under her knees. Every move she made was fluid, graceful, and completely economical. Woody was definitely impressed. Breaking out of his stupor, he got a towel and wiped up the moisture on the mat in preparation for the class that should be starting to arrive in a few minutes. Bethany just sat calmly on the table with her hands resting comfortably on her sleek, muscular thighs. She wasn't moving again and it made Woody feel a little edgy. He finally realized where he'd seen that kind of thing before. There were shows on those animal and nature channels from old Africa where big cats stalked and killed some kind of deer-like animals. She looked more relaxed than the prowling cats, but he imagined she could spring into motion just as quickly and with just as deadly results. Woody was pretty sure most "security consultants" didn't have the physical skills this woman had, and he was starting to wonder if that was an accurate description of her business. And where the hell had Huber found her? He probably just picked somebody out of the net-ads who advertised low prices and who cares if they're qualified or not. Jerk.

Woody managed to putter around the dojo without making eye contact until the students had finished wandering in. He gave them a few minutes to catch up on each other's gossip before lining them up with two loud claps. He ran them through stretching and warm up with out looking over to the side, but he knew she was watching with the fierce eyes of a predator.

"Okay, last time I said we would learn a new combination tonight, but we have a special opportunity instead. Ms. Johansson is a Security Specialist here in the city and she has been generous enough to donate her evening to us. For those of you that get the opportunity to spar with her, I think you'll find her an interesting and challenging opponent. For those of you who don't, try to keep up, notice everything, and decide what you would

have done differently, what worked, and what didn't." He looked over and Bethany held up three fingers on her right hand. As Woody picked out students, the rest of the class shuffled to the edge of the mat and she moved to the center. Woody decided on his three most advanced students, two of them, a man and a woman, were five year veterans and knew enough to stay out of each other's way. The third was an eighteen year old kid who was moving up fast, had natural ability to spare, was a bit too aggressive, and didn't listen to instruction very carefully. He could use a lesson in humility.

The three moved into positions roughly equidistant from the black-clad woman in the center of the mat. She moved her hands up from her sides, palms inward diagonally and flexed her fingers. The students began to circle and move in closer. When the first one got in reach he sent a firm closed fist strike in and found it easily blocked and received a solid counter-strike at the same time. Bethany was gone before he could move again. She moved around the tight circle tagging each of the others in turn. The kid looked angry. He moved in boldly and got a face full of mat for his trouble. As he rolled to his feet, the other two were exchanging a glance that acknowledged they were going to have to work together. The two students moved to opposing positions, leaving the kid excluded from the circle. He put on a fierce face and charged in punching, only to find himself looking at the ceiling and trying to suck air back into his lungs. The others took full advantage of his distraction, and the female student actually landed a glancing blow to the shoulder. An instant later, both students were on the mat tangled in each other's limbs. Bethany moved to the center of the mat again. "More. Weapons," was all she said. The three students had regained their feet as two more took staves from the wall and moved in. The two veteran students realized there was no room for close fighting between flashing staves and moved back to rest. The kid just couldn't let it go and dashed to the wall to snatch up a pair of Sai. He rejoined the fight and within seconds found himself relieved of his weapons and looking at the ceiling

again. Bethany put the Sai to good use defending against the staves. Before long she had abandoned the Sai and had both staves, one in each hand. The students tried valiantly to use what they had learned about fighting an armed opponent with just their hands, but a few sharp whacks with a staff quickly discouraged them. Soon it was just Bethany in the center of the mat with a staff in each hand. She tossed both at once to Woody and bowed. He managed to catch both and affect some sort of small bow in return.

As Woody returned the staves to the wall, one of the students who had been watching grabbed up the Sai and brought them over. The young girl raised her eyebrows and tipped her head toward the mat as Woody took them and said thanks. Woody nodded and laid the Sai on the shelf, he could rack them later. On the mat, Bethany was showing the kid, in slow motion, how she had so easily thrown him to the floor. He looked like his curiosity was winning over his anger at being defeated. The rest of the class was spent with students taking turns making a slow motion attack and Bethany showing them two or three different ways to turn it against the attacker. The class ran half an hour over, but Woody didn't mind. The students finally filed out thanking Bethany and Woody for a great evening.

After the last student had gone, Woody turned to his guest and asked, "You want to take a shower?" She raised her left eyebrow a little, let it down, smiled and shook her head.

"Got a towel?" she asked.

"Yeah." Woody tossed her a towel before he shut the door and raced through a quick rinse and change. He wondered if she'd still be out there when he got done.

When Woody emerged from the restroom, he was pleased to see Bethany still waiting. She'd put her shoes and coat back on and was standing motionless by the door. Woody skirted the mat with his keys in one hand and duffel in the other. She opened the door and stepped into

the hall as he approached. She held the door open while he set the alarm.

“That was hard,” she offered.

“Hmmm?” he was distracted with the key for a moment. “You made it look pretty damn easy.”

She slid one hand behind his head as he turned away from the door. “I’m not used to pulling punches.” Before he could respond, she pulled his face to hers and kissed him heatedly on the lips. Woody stood stunned as she scampered down the stairs. His thoughts and emotions swirled around each other almost as fast as his pulse. The last time he’d felt anything remotely like this was the day one of his students had pulled a gun in class. Turned out the kid was just showing off to another, it wasn’t even loaded, but no teacher wants to see an angry youth waving a weapon around. Woody knew that was adrenaline born of fear, but what did he have to be afraid of here? He’d met an exciting woman who shared some of his interests, and had nothing to do with work, what could be dangerous about that? He realized that while he stood there trying to figure it out, she was likely pulling out of the parking lot and leaving. He would probably see her again if the school took her recommendations seriously, but what if Huber decided to let the whole security matter drop. He had her card, but could he call her at work for a date? Was a date really what he wanted or expected from this woman? The part of his brain that worked his feet decided the issue for him, and he nearly fell down the stairs before he got his movements organized. By the time he hit the door at the bottom, he was almost running. When he realized how it would look for him to burst outside in a rush it was already too late to slow enough. He saw her vehicle still in the space as the door rebounded loudly off the wall and into his shoulder. Bethany Johansson was nowhere to be seen.

As Woody chastised himself for freezing up on the landing and missing his best chance to keep this relationship going, he felt something just tickle the tip of his ear. He thought it nothing more than a moth until

something the size of a rodent rubbed the top of his head. He jerked down and around to look at the bottom of a familiar shoe. She was suspended in the corner between the stairwell and the wall of the building with her hands and the other foot. Without him there to block it, the door swung shut and she dropped lightly to the ground between Woody and the building.

“Dinner,” she kept a straight face, but the impish gleam was in her eyes, “tomorrow.”

Woody opened his mouth to ask a question but she put a finger to his lips faster than he could speak, “Shhhh.” When she moved the finger away, he asked it anyway.

“What time?”

“You’ll know.” She didn’t seem unhappy with him.

“Where do you want to eat?” He hadn’t been this nervous since high school.

“Your place.” She walked away across the lot.

“Does that mean, uh, that I’m cooking, or do you want to order something?”

She turned around and walked backwards flawlessly long enough to put her finger to her lips, “Shhhhh.” Woody got himself locked up between frustration and excitement long enough for her to make it into her truck and pull out of the lot. She waved and looked away before he could raise a hand in return. Woody started towards his car before he realized he’d left his duffel on the landing. He managed to drive home without incident, spent about an hour longer than it should have taken to grade some papers, and went to bed. He fell asleep thinking and wondering about Bethany Johansson. He woke up the next morning feeling like something fundamental in his life had changed. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he was looking forward to finding out.

Chapter Three

The day dragged on as slowly as any ever had for Woody. He tried to think about work, but other thoughts kept creeping into his head. It didn't help that he had to deal with the security recommendation report, he should have turned it in the day before. Finally, he chickened out and put it in Huber's box with a quick note about how he thought the Board should do as much of it as they could afford. Delivering it in person would probably give his opinion more weight, but he wasn't sure he could discuss it without the fact that he was really interested in the consultant in a completely personal way showing through. He wrestled with himself about the report on and off throughout the day until the final bell sounded. The reality of the situation hit him square in the chest. Was he really letting some woman he'd barely just met, and knew nothing about into his home? And was it just dinner he was worried about? Was he ready to go where ever this went after that, or was he ready if it went nowhere? By the time he parked the car at home, he was concentrating on more immediate issues. Who was fixing dinner? As he rode the elevator to his floor he decided he'd just have to roll with what ever came along for the time being. He thought he liked the excitement of not knowing exactly what was happening next, but it scared the hell out of him too.

As he put his palm on the lock he realized the TV was on inside. He never left it on, but then again this hadn't been just any regular morning for him. He figured it shouldn't have been a surprise to find Bethany relaxing on the center cushion of the sofa. She was wearing a skin-tight leather outfit and there were two cycle helmets, one on each side of her. Without looking away from the financial news, she tossed a bundle directly at him that turned out to be heavier than he expected. He managed to keep his grip on the bundle, but dropped his briefcase on his foot.

“Hope that fits.” She kept her attention glued to the set. She seemed intensely interested in the closing report from the stock market. Woody went into the bedroom to see what he was trying on. Half an hour later he discovered that the bodysuit did indeed fit, but only if he wore nothing but his jockeys under it. The shoes didn’t leave room for socks, but were surprisingly comfortable even so. It took quite a bit of strength to work his hands into the matching gloves. The whole outfit clung like a second skin which felt kind of good in a freedom of movement way, but it also left him feeling very exposed as well. He fiddled around in front of the mirror long enough to convince himself that it wasn’t as revealing as it felt. Finally, he got up the courage to open the door and go back into the living room. Bethany had turned off the TV and was standing, holding both helmets, by the time he walked in. She held one of them out to him and he took it without really thinking about it. She looked him up and down once.

“Ready?”

“Yeah, I guess so. What are we doing?”

“Come on.” She lead the way out of the apartment and onto the elevator that had just opened on their floor without anyone getting out. That almost never happened. On the ride down, she seemed distracted and kept tapping her fingers on her helmet as if she was listening to music only she could hear. Woody took advantage of the moment to steal a few long glances at her. The cycle suit looked good on her, and he had a feeling she knew it. When the doors opened, she stepped out into the parking garage under the building. He looked for a second before he followed. There was a large, sleek black motorcycle he’d failed to notice on his way in parked just feet from the elevator, in a yellow striped zone. Bethany put her helmet on as she slid her leg over and straddled the machine. Woody fumbled his helmet on and joined her a little awkwardly. When she reached back over her shoulder to the side of his helmet and used her thumb to flip some small switch under the edge, the helmet came

alive. Music flooded into the closed space and the face shield lit up with a dashboard display from the bike. The words “Hang On” appeared across the center of the display as the engine roared to life. He wrapped his arms around her waist just as they shot away from the wall, narrowly missing a support column. Woody had ridden on a few cycles before, but they were all hybrids. This was his first time on a gas only model, it had a tremendous amount of acceleration and was a bit more nimble than he was comfortable with. He wondered if he would feel like eating when they got wherever they were going.

Bethany rolled the bike out onto the street without stopping to check for traffic. Woody cringed a little. He wanted to take a look at the display on his faceplate, but he was too distracted by the chances she took and the narrow spaces she shot the bike through. Woody felt a strong urge to keep his knees in tight to the bike. By the time he felt comfortable enough with the fact that they hadn’t hit anything yet to look around, they were rocketing south on Lake Shore Drive at 150 kph. He was getting a little nervous about their destination, there wasn’t anything good down around Undertown. The area outside the Containment Zone was safe enough if you didn’t mind the concrete, the APCs, and the troops with guns everywhere. Woody had driven through the area a few times just to see if the militarized images from the news were anything like reality. They weren’t far off. He was greatly relieved when they got on 55 going west. When he realized they were leaving the city, he tried to ask Bethany just exactly where they were going, but she didn’t seem to be able to hear him over the wind, through both helmets, and over the music blasting inside his head. He had no idea what it was, but it had a driving beat, the words were hard to understand, and it sounded like it might have gone out of style a decade or so ago.

By the time they had cleared Joliet going 250 kph and dodging things on the highway with only centimeters of clearance, he was pretty much happy that he hadn’t wet himself. He was wondering, in the idle second or two

between near collisions, when exactly the cops were going to descend on them like the creatures in a science fiction movie. Looking around only made the feeling of speed worse, so he resolved not to do it anymore. In fact he spent several minutes with his eyes pinched tightly shut after he noticed that they had no lights on. He tightened his grip on Bethany's toned, firm torso but she didn't seem to notice. He had gotten used to the display in the helmet which outlined the other traffic in a blue glow that turned red if they got too close, but when he had started looking around the display had trouble keeping his view current. He was hurtling down the road well over the speed limit, on a small darkened vehicle with no roof or doors as the chill night air stole the heat from his neck until it hurt. He should have realized that choosing to get on the bike would leave him without a choice about getting back off.

After what seemed like half the night to Woody, they shot past the "Welcome to St. Louis" sign. Woody was relieved to see the display indicating a decrease in speed down to something at least resembling legal city limit. He had no idea where they were or where they were going, but it was a relief to feel like they might arrive intact. Somewhere out on the west side of the city, they pulled into a parking lot full of odd and outdated vehicles. There were a couple other fast looking gas bikes, but mostly the lot held tough looking all-wheel-drive things that looked like they could eat an electric car as a snack. Woody was happy to be off the bike but found his muscles weren't completely ready for him to stand, though he was managing. Bethany took his helmet and locked it in a little bracket on the bike next to hers. She tipped her head in the direction of the nearest building, a big dark thing that Woody thought was an abandoned warehouse, and walked over with him lagging a bit behind. There was a recessed door with a keypad that looked like it should have been lighted, but Bethany tapped in some code without a second thought. The door opened onto a long hall that ran against the outside wall along the back of the building. At the far corner, there was another door but it was blocked by a guy about the same size as a door. Bethany walked a

little ahead of Woody and put her hand up to shield the side of her face briefly as the guard stared. The big man made a slight nod to her and looked directly at Woody.

“C’mon, flash man,” he growled.

Woody had no idea what the correct response was, he thought about putting his hand up like Bethany had, but that would only expose him if there was some kind of code word or something. Bethany interjected on his behalf before he could make an ass out of himself. “He’s with me,” was all she said.

“No biz. You know the rules,” the large bouncer said.

“Yeah, I do.” She seemed irritated with the man.

He shrugged and opened the door letting music pour out like a tidal wave.

The inside of the building was clearly some kind of bar or club, but it looked like a cross between a hospital and a high tech machine shop and scrap yard. Woody noticed there were at least three hundred people in the place and most of them looked in his direction when he and Bethany entered the room. Most, but not all. Those that didn’t look had a certain bearing that bespoke a confidence born of experience Woody had seen in mature black belts and war veterans. The others were clearly posers and wanna-be hangers on. Not surprisingly, the confident veterans were in small groups with their own kind and pointedly ignored the rest of the crowd. He also noticed the rest of the crowd seemed to be entering the building from the other side in small clots as others left. Bethany definitely fit into the veteran crowd, though Woody wondered just what they were veterans of.

Without any real effort, she was cutting a path through the crowd like fire in a dry field. He couldn’t see exactly where she was headed but he was content to follow along and soak up the awed looks of the posers and keep his cool. He didn’t really know the score yet but he was pretty sure he was on the winning team. There was a little

clear area in the back of the room that held a low table surrounded on three sides with a black leather sectional sofa. The five people seated there were clearly of the same elite crowd.

The man on the left was probably the biggest Hispanic that Woody had ever seen. The guy had to be at least a meter nine and around a hundred eighty kilos. It didn't look like his body fat percentage was any higher than Woody's though. He had a lot of geometric tattoos on his arms below the sleeves of his t-shirt. Woody idly wondered where you bought a shirt that big. Next around the semi circle was a plain looking Caucasian woman in dark synthetic clothes. She had dark, medium length hair and kept her hands in her jacket pockets. She seemed almost frozen in place, only moving her eyes without ever blinking. Next to her was a black man with the physique of a professional football player. He wore loose, casual clothes with some sports team logo Woody couldn't place. He seemed totally relaxed as he sprawled on the center section of the sofa. Around the corner was an Asian woman with a build much like Bethany's only somewhat slighter. She wore skin-tight pants and vest in blood red leather. Her neck, upper chest, and arms showed a series of scars that looked like they were made by something thin and very sharp. Woody couldn't find a pattern like tribal scars or anything and wondered if they could've come from knife fighting, or worse. Farthest on the right was a woman unlike any Woody had ever seen before. He couldn't place her race exactly, she had faint narrowing at the corner of her eyes, but not as much as he did and he was only half Asian. Her skin was darker than white, but not as dark as black. He wondered if she might be some kind of Pacific Islander, but her luxurious long copper hair confused him yet again. She was, to put it bluntly, drop dead gorgeous. He imagined she would have only looked better standing, even in the blue jeans and shimmering black blouse she wore without jewelry.

As they neared the table the immense Hispanic looked up at Bethany and said, "Nice hair."

The Asian woman across the table looked at the Hispanic and without obvious malice said, “You shit.”

Bethany stopped near the table and addressed the Hispanic man, “What, you jealous Choo?”

“Naw. Where you been woman? Startin’ to worry a little,” the man replied.

Before Bethany could answer, the plain woman spoke. “Who’s he?”

Bethany answered, “He’s a friend, Skitch. Safe. Not like the twitchy one over there.”

The woman now identified as Skitch flicked her eyes to her left ten degrees, “Yeah, asshole is gonna go inside a week.”

Bethany turned her attention to the man in the middle, “Don’t get up Torch, I wouldn’t want you to get up a sweat or anything.” The black man smiled and gave a small shrug in reply. Bethany reached over the table to cross palms with the Asian woman as the gorgeous woman stood up. Woody was right, she was a knock-out. Bethany let go of the Asian woman’s hand saying, “Nice one Silver.” She turned to the stunning woman on the end and Woody was a little shocked when the two kissed full on the lips. It wasn’t just a little kiss, it lingered for a moment and he started to wonder what kind of a past these two might have had.

The tall woman looked at Woody as if he might be tasty while clearly speaking to Bethany, “Where’d you get this one? He a prodigy or something?”

“No Vertical, he’s real people. You know, you’ve seen them on the news sometimes? Citizens? Those people?” She seemed a little annoyed with the woman she’d just been kissing on the lips. Woody was sure they had some kind of past now. Did it mean anything that Bethany seemed to be defending him? What exactly was she defending him from? Her friend’s jealousy, or something darker?

Bethany was addressing the whole table now, “If

you're all here, who's getting things done? There a strike or something?"

The Asian woman with the scars, Silver, smiled, "Just a slow night, eh? Must be the weather. Some of 'em get nicer when the sun shines."

"Yeah, I buy that," she gestured over her shoulder at him, "This is Woody. Play nice."

"Clue?" asked Torch.

"No Clue," Skitch said, barely moving any facial muscles.

"So what's up, Shatter?" Torch directed at Bethany.

Bethany tipped her head slightly, "Sooner or later."

Vertical let go of her aloof facade for a moment, "Girl, you went over? How?"

Bethany shrugged, "So far...."

"Don't be a bitch, you bitch," interjected Silver. It wasn't said with any real malice that Woody could hear.

"It's just,.....never mind," Vertical gave a flourish with one manicured hand and went back to scoping the club like she might be looking for a meal.

"Can't stay. Good to see you all," she aimed a thumb over her shoulder at Woody, "He has a real job. Reg hours, reg pay, reg sleep. That a scream? You all got it?"

The others nodded and gave mumbled acceptance. Bethany turned and pulled Woody by the arm. He waited till they were out of ear shot before asking the obvious question.

"We're leaving? We only just got here."

"Yeah, longer would be rude." She let go since he seemed to be following on his own. They were headed for the same door they came in. Woody was puzzled by the whole thing. Why drive all the way here just to spend a

minute and a half? And what about dinner?

Bethany opened the door on the bouncer's back, hooked his ankle, and used both hands to launch him into the opposite wall. Just as he hit the floor and started to roll over she announced, "Asshole." The bouncer got quickly to his feet as if he expected the trouble to continue.

"Stupid?" asked Bethany.

The big guy looked seriously pissed, but made no aggressive moves. Woody thought the guy was angrier that he was somehow prevented from doing anything in return than he was about being attacked in the first place. Woody wasn't sure what kind of place this was or what the rules were, but he had a creeping suspicion that his life was going down a different set of tracks than he would have chosen on his own.

They got back on the bike and sped a few blocks to a little Mom & Pop diner with a musical theme about 50 years out of date. Woody noticed that Bethany seemed more relaxed than she had inside that club. He really hadn't known her all that long, but it seemed to him the only time she was truly relaxed was when she was living in the moment, concentrating on the task at hand. Not that she had ever seemed all that tense to him, but she seemed somehow calmer when she was fighting at the dojo or piloting her bike through tight traffic.

As they got off the bike, Woody asked the question that had been with him since that kiss.

"That woman in the jeans. Is she,...I mean was she, or...were you...maybe you and she, uh, you know.....?"

"Lovers?"

"Well, yeah. I kinda have to wonder, you know?"

"No. That's just how she is. If you meet her again, she'll probably put her hand down your pants. Nothing personal."

"So, are they in the same business? Security?"

“You could say that. If I didn’t know you, I’d say you sound like a Suit.”

“That sounds like a bad thing.”

“Yeah, Suits are pretty heinous. Not really people at all. Just greedy and weak.”

They entered the diner and took a booth in the corner. There were only half a dozen people in the place including the employees. The waitress took their order almost instantly. It seemed they only served thirty variations on the same basic burger and she looked excited just to see people.

Woody continued the conversation. “I have about a thousand questions I’d like to ask you, but I don’t want to step in anything ugly, you know?”

“Like what?”

Woody decided that meant ‘what questions’ rather than ‘what kind of ugly’. “Well, what does it say on your contact lenses?”

Bethany put the back of her thumb on her forehead and used her fingers to pull her eyelid up as she leaned across the table. Woody leaned forward some so she wouldn’t have to press the table into her ribs and took a good look into her eye. The writing was the name of a European company that made optical equipment. He was pretty sure that the science labs in college had some of their microscopes. He was trying to figure out what color her eyes might be under the lenses when he realized that there was no shadow line where the edge should be. His brow pinched down a bit as he leaned to one side to make sure. He leaned over to the other side and checked the other eye.

“I read where they plan to start testing artificial replacement eyes in humans later this year. It looks like you have two of them already. You must have, like, military connections or something.”

“No. Black Market.”

There's a Black Market in prototype medical prosthesis? How did you lose your real eyes?"

"Surgeon took 'em out."

Woody had a bad feeling about where this might be going. "What was wrong with them?"

"Weren't enough to stay dead."

"You mean they were diseased or something?"

"No."

"But that means you just had your eyes taken out of your head and replaced with artificial ones becauseyou could? Why would you do that?"

"You work with danger, you need the edge."

"You don't just tell people what kind of alarms to buy, do you?"

"I do now."

"So what was the most interesting job you ever worked? You ever guard a President on anything. Any superspy kind of intrigue? Save the world from evil and all?"

She looked sad in an impassive sort of way. "It's not like that at all. I got out. Let it go."

"Sorry, I guess I had this image. So are those people we met in that club in that part of the business?"

She sipped slowly at her water, almost as if she were stalling, "Yeah."

Woody plowed on. "And those other people in there, the wanna-be ones, they know what kind of business your friends are in?"

"They think they do."

"And this is what they aspire to?" He pondered his own question for a moment. "How would they get into that kind of business anyway?"

"Most can't. Some will. They won't last. Nobody

from outside ever has. They don't have what it takes."

"Huh." Woody feared he was treading on a sensitive area so he changed the subject to something more banal. "So where'd you grow up anyway?"

Bethany waited while the waitress set down their food trying to be polite and brief at the same time. After she was gone, Bethany looked him right in the eye, "In the Zone."

Woody almost had a seizure. When he remembered to breathe again, all he could manage was, "Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"You mean, like, Undertown?"

"Yeah, except nobody from inside calls it that. It's a Q-Zone. They don't care so much if you go in, but they care a lot if you want out."

"I should probably keep this to myself, right?" She gave a serious nod. "I never would have guessed you were from there, so I'm thinking that most of what I've heard about the place is wrong. So what's it really like?" Bethany continued eating and waited for him to go on. "I mean, the news people make it look like it's the worst ghetto on the whole planet. Like all the people there are ignorant savages and mental defectives. But you're not like that at all." He wasn't sure what he was asking yet, there was so much that didn't make sense about the situation. "So, you spent your whole life there?"

"No. I'm out now."

"Sorry, I mean, the whole beginning part of your life. You were born in there?"

"Yeah."

"So...how did you learn to read? Do they have schools or something in there?"

"My mother taught me before she died. Survival skill."

“Survival skill?”

“If I gave you a colorful box of thirty red things that smelled like cherry would you know whether they were safe to eat if you couldn’t read the label?”

Woody pondered for a moment. “I guess I always took it for granted. I never thought about it that way before. So, if you don’t mind my asking, how did your mom die?”

“The Zone killed her. She wasn’t tough enough.”

“No, I mean, how exactly. Disease, old age, violence, or something else?”

“Violence. She had food. *We* had food.” Woody looked like he wanted to inquire further but wasn’t sure if he should. She settled it for him. “Eat your food.”

After they had eaten, Bethany got up from the table and went to the counter to pay. As Woody watched her svelte form, he realized that he hadn’t thought to bring any cash. For that matter, he hadn’t thought to stuff his ID and his smart cards into one of the suit’s many flat pockets. Suddenly he felt very exposed again. He followed her outside and got behind her on the bike.

The ride home was pretty much the same as the ride down, but it didn’t seem as bad to Woody now that he knew what to expect. There was one spot where they squeezed between two multi-trailer land trains with only a centimeter or two to spare that made him sweat, but he was confident that Bethany could handle the bike. He was also distracted from the traffic by the thoughts swirling in his heart and in his head. He wasn’t sure what this was between the two of them, nothing new, but he wasn’t sure what he wanted it to be either and that worried him more. Before long they were pulling into his garage. She came to a smooth stop just in front of the elevator and shut off the bike. Woody got off, but she stayed on.

“Uh, you want to wait while I change out of these?” He handed her the helmet.

She took her helmet off and smiled. “Keep ‘em.”

“I had fun tonight. Well, I had fun being with you, other parts of this evening scared the crap out of me. Will I see you again?”

She stood and grabbed both sides of his head. “There’s no where you can hide.” She kissed him, slid back on the bike, and started it with one hand while putting her helmet on with the other. Woody watched her lissome form astride the massive motorcycle glide up the ramp and out into the night. His mind was far too occupied to put his feet to work for several minutes. Some of the things he was feeling were very familiar and some were completely new. He decided that was a good thing and finally pushed the elevator button.