

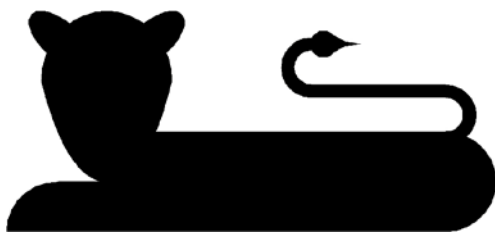
LIONHEART'S HEART

ZOE LIONHEART 1



Valerie J. Long

On the evening of her planned betrothal, a killer shoots down the friend of young system programmer, Zoe Laforge. On the run from a killer and bogus policemen, she is drafted into a maelstrom of violence. Soon her entire existence is on stake. The witness protection program offers Zoe a new identity and a new job. In the beginning, it seems as if her hacker skills are needed most, but suddenly someone's after her life. Zoe's fighting talents surprise her teammates, but even more of a surprise is the data about a terror act of yet unknown quality, which she retrieved. And only Zoe is in a position to make it fail.



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LIONESS' HEART
ZOE LIONHEART BOOK 1-3

BY

VALERIE J. LONG

DEDICATION

*To all the people who have encouraged me to
write.*

BOOK ONE: DECISIVE DATE

CHAPTER ONE

Slightly on edge, Zoe hurried from the office to the company parking lot to fetch her car. Once again, it was later than she had planned. Just as she had wanted to shut down her PC, her staff manager had called her. That talk had been unpleasant—somebody trod on his toes during the day and she was the outlet for his steam. If she hadn't been the agency's token Eastie from Philadelphia and alibi woman, he surely would have fired her already.

Privately she wished painful hemorrhoids on him while she refreshed her caffeine-enhanced lip-gloss. She felt guilty because she had promised Rick she wouldn't be late again.

Several times other drivers honked at her while she wove swiftly and recklessly through the already fading evening traffic. She didn't care. This time the evening should turn out better than the last when she was two hours late because she had to procure new photo paper after this brainiac from the artwork department idled that task away

during his midday tour. And that evening those three thousand Tabaluga flyers had to go into print.

In front of Rick's door, a parking space had just become available. Hastily she maneuvered her Mini into the gap. A last look into the mirror—fine. She opened another two buttons of her blouse as the stern office look was not to Rick's taste and because she wasn't just flat as a pancake, she could depend on that to titillate him.

Shit. She'd almost landed in the pit, which was gaping in the sidewalk—the municipal services had been in a hurry to knock off work. Well, she could understand that.

In the corridor of the old five-story building, she stopped once again. Today she would go the whole hog so she quickly removed her slip from under the new, trendy black Kate-Moss-look miniskirt, which she had bought last Saturday for this opportunity. For a moment, she pondered where she could leave it, then dropped it into Rick's mailbox with a whimsical smile.

On the stairs to the upper floor, she had to restrain herself. She didn't want to be out of breath—at least not yet. Impatiently she covered the last steps, key in hand. Silently she opened the apartment door. She smiled as she heard the light music from the kitchen. To the left, in the dining room, everything was prepared—candles, bowls,

chopsticks—so he would be cooking Asian style. One look to the right—oh, rose petals on the pillow! Yes, Rick knew how to create a romantic atmosphere. The corners of her lips slightly lifted.

There was a loud bang and then Rick's horrified, painful cry sounded from the kitchen. She ran across and jerked the kitchen door open. A cloud of steam gushed toward her. Rick lay on the floor with a blood-covered chest and a dark-red face, rice grains stuck everywhere—to cupboards, ceiling and floor. She leaned down to Rick and lifted his head—perhaps the wonderful curves in her neckline would help to clear his fogged senses—and cried out, "What happened? Are you okay? Does anything hurt? Should I..."

His index finger covered her mouth. "The pot exploded. I meant to change the pressure cooker's valve seal ring long ago—must have been jammed." He looked down his body and plucked a small metal piece from a bleeding wound in his chest. "Mmm. This must have been the bolt to the handle."

He flipped the bolt away as she hugged him, glad that nothing too serious had happened to him. She didn't care that her blouse was soaking up his blood—but she noticed very well how his trousers became too tight for him. With swift fingers, she opened his fly and seated herself on him. A pity about the dinner, but this would

become a wonderful evening!

Still totally inebriated by the adrenaline rush of the exploding pot spectacular, their first intercourse was short and intense. Rick just let it happen, but Zoe took control, her sensual perception sharpened by the preceding shock—and resulting fear for his life. When he responded with passionate strength, the sex was better than she had ever experienced.

She'd had lovers before, had been with tender and patient partners as well as indifferent *mechanics*. She'd had short and intense relationships up to the three-minute balcony fuck—which hadn't been too bad, had wasted painfully long, affectionate evenings with a half impotent Italian-American, but nothing could have prepared her for this moment.

And Rick was insatiable. While she still waited for her heartbeat to slow, his hands slid up her side, found the beginning of her breasts, wandered toward her buttons. Methodically, he opened her blouse, pushed the blood-spattered fabric away, let his fingers tenderly circle her round, firm breasts. Then suddenly he grabbed her waist, pushed her above himself. She tensed, spread out her arms, enjoyed the feeling of hovering above him.

They made love to each other a second time, short but intense, on the groaning, protesting

kitchen table. Afterward, she wrapped her legs around his hips, let herself be carried around the kitchen table in waltz time while his tongue played with her nipples. Finally he settled her to the floor, ran his hand across her short black hair.

She admired his toned body as he faced her from the kitchen door and she sprawled herself, purring, on the rice-covered kitchen floor. Her gaze wandered up his trouser legs to his still open fly, followed his chest's muscular curves, where suddenly two red flowers blossomed.

As if in slow motion Zoe watched how Rick's knees gave in, how his breaking gaze ran across her body for the very last time, how his voiceless cry fought to protest, how the stream of his life pulsed from his chest, how his light went out forever.



Methodically his gaze searched the surroundings. His victim had expected a visitor as the decorations in the living room—and bedroom—clearly indicated. But both rooms were empty and dark while from the kitchen a light shone on the lifeless body lying face down in the doorway. He stepped closer, aimed quickly and drove another bullet into the back of the head. Just to make sure.

The kitchen looked chaotic—rice grains were

scattered everywhere, stuck to the brown doors of the cheap kitchen furniture while parts of a blown-up cooking pot lay in different places. Some scattered speckles of blood attested that his victim had to have been injured before his arrival. Too bad—a real accident would have been preferable.

A cool draft from the kitchen window to his right made him shudder. The cooking pot had left its traces there as well—the lower pane was almost entirely blown away.

But he kept away from the window—to be spotted from the street by chance would not suit him at all. Up till now, there had never been witnesses.

That left only one thing. Systematically he started searching the apartment.



With her entire body trembling, Zoe fought for balance. The ledge in front of the window was narrow and her high-heeled sandals were not well suited for such a balancing act. She was getting goose bumps from the fresh evening air. Her open, bloodstained blouse flapped in the wind. Rick's last farewell trickled down the inside of her thighs. With her right hand, she kept an unsteady grip on a masonry joint while her left clutched her

purse. If she hadn't quick-wittedly grabbed it as she stepped outside through the frame of the blown-out window, if the killer had spotted her, she would certainly be dead now, lying on the asphalt floor of the inner courtyard with a bullet in her head from his silenced pistol. On the wall of the opposite building, out of her reach, the iron of an ancient fire ladder rusted.

The first drops of a late summer rain followed the tracks of her tears across her cheeks, blurred the stains of Rick's blood on her clothes, chillingly caressed her breasts, soaked her blouse and her black miniskirt, trickled down her thighs, flowed over her feet and finally mixed with the dust on the ledge into a greasy, slippery compound.



The apartment was sparsely furnished. In the bedroom, he took in one bed, one small dresser with bedding and underwear, a slim wardrobe with two old pairs of jeans and a few tee shirts. The living room held a covered table, two chairs and a sideboard with an unopened bottle of Napa Valley Chardonnay. In the bathroom, he found shaving equipment, shower gel, some unused toothbrushes and an empty laundry basket. The popular hiding place in the toilet tank was empty.

He turned back toward the kitchen. Perhaps

he'd find a clue on his victim's body? As he turned the corpse, under which a puddle of blood slowly expanded, a quiet but appropriate *fuck* escaped him.



Zoe's hope that the killer would disappear quickly after finishing his job burst like a bubble. He had noticed that Rick hadn't been alone. When the kitchen light went out, she knew she had no time left. She looked down—and jumped.



The night's pouring rain washed away her footprints on the ledge quickly, but not quick enough for the killer. So indeed there had been a visitor. Where had she gone? He looked down into the courtyard. In the rainy darkness, he could barely see anything. He had to be certain. Carefully, he stepped across the puddle of blood—didn't want to leave a trace—and hurried to the apartment door.



Although everything hurt, Zoe knew that her life hung by a thread so with a careful motion, she

reached for the edge of the trash container, pulling herself up slowly. Now the other arm. Pull. A stinging pain in her back made her wince. She felt behind her. A hard, sharp-edged object that came off at a light push and dropped back into the trash pile. No time! Again she pulled herself up, rolled on the edge, threw a last thankful glance on the stuffed trash bags that had cushioned her fall, let herself drop to the outside. It hurt.

Her sandals were fancy, but not suited for running. Off they came. That gave her another excuse to remain seated on the wet asphalt for a few seconds. She struggled to her feet and called herself to order—another excuse like this and she'd never need another excuse again.

As she let herself drop into her Mini in front of the building, she was close to giving up. The pedals under her bare feet were uncomfortably hard and cold. Nonetheless, she performed the routine—clutch, starter, first gear, turn the wheel, let the clutch out, full throttle.



With squealing tires, the small car dashed away. Angrily, the killer watched her leave. But still, such a car would be easy to find in Phoenix. He collected the sandals and went back to the apartment to construct evidence that would satisfy

the police—a deadly confrontation with a jealous lover.

CHAPTER TWO

Rick took a sip of his cappuccino. He was a lucky guy, to know he could ignore the partially jealous, partially admiring glances of the other guests. Opposite him sat the most beautiful woman he had ever met. The black, wild short hairstyle framed a face with emphasized cheekbones and a pointed chin, with a long nose between the green eyes. Her narrow lips were carefully colored in glossy cassis, followed below by a slim, athletic build cut off from view by the edge of the table. But he knew that her legs underneath were only stopped by the floor from continuing endlessly. Her gym top stressed the firm curves of her breasts, crested by a pair of cute nipples. Although she had just jogged through Encanto Park for an hour, she was scarcely out of breath.

She put down her cup of coffee and gave him a dreamy smile. The morning sun played on her hair. He took a deep breath, drew in the smell of her hairspray mixed with a hint of honest fresh perspiration.



Zoe enjoyed his attention. Since they had come across each other in the park some weeks ago, the picture of his youthful face with the dimple on his permanently stubbly chin dominated her thoughts. His strong hands always showed traces of oil, a hint of his work in the small motorcycle garage which he owned. His hairdo seemed to resist every attempt of taming and his blue eyes often gleamed impishly under the bushy blond eyebrows. The best sight – his firm butt in those tight jeans – remained unavailable to her for the moment.

But today his smile appeared wan. Patiently she waited for him to tell her what he had on his mind while she threw some cookie crumbs toward one of the numerous rock squirrels.

"I don't want to spoil your nice day," he began, "but I have a big request – no, two."

"What is it?" she asked quietly. "Are you in trouble?"

"Not directly. Please – listen first and decide afterward."

She nodded.

He continued, "Recently I found something suspicious." As he recognized her tension, he added, "I didn't do anything illegal, but I don't always know where the bikes come from, you know?"

Zoe nodded.

"Now, one of the bikes had a prepared tank. I pretended not to notice anything, but I had my own

idea about it. So I waited to see what these customers would bring next time." He took a deep breath and placed his hands on hers. "I don't want to pull you into this. It would be best if you didn't know anything. It's way too risky. But if anything should happen to me..."

Zoe wanted to protest.

Rick pressed her hands more firmly. "No, please listen. I've probably seen too many crime stories, but I'd simply feel better to tell you about it. I've created an encrypted blog. You are the only one except me who knows the password. If anything happens to me, promise me one thing—please!" He gave her a smoldering look. "Please!"

Slowly she nodded.

He looked into her eyes. "Read the blog first, then decide what to do. You must read it first. Before you call the police. Okay?"

Again she nodded. He gave her a small smart media card, which she put away quickly.

He smiled. "Do you remember the place in the park where we met for the first time?"

The memory faded while Zoe guided her little runabout through the nightlife of Phoenix and contemplated her situation. Drenched, scratched and scarred, with bruises all over her body, an open wound of unknown size in her back, barefoot, dressed only in a miniskirt and a blood-soaked blouse—and somewhere, a killer on her heels whom she hadn't even seen—she would have a lot to explain to the cops. And for that she

felt far too exhausted and dirty right now.

As she tried to get out of the Mini, Zoe found out that she was stuck to the driver's seat. The black fabric of the backrest was soaked with blood, too, and she noticed a thin warm trickle running down her back. Not good, not good at all. Quickly she covered the few steps from her garage parking space to the elevator of the small apartment house in downtown Phoenix.

When she got to her apartment, she dropped the blouse and her purse, stood in front of the large mirror on the corridor wall and threw a glance over her shoulder. She saw a quarter-sized cut on the left, close below her rib. The wound didn't bleed any more, nothing serious. She let the miniskirt fall to the floor, hurried to the bathroom and turned on a hot shower. Then she grabbed a bottle of Vintage Islay from her bar cupboard in the living room and a towel. On the fly, she activated her Jura espresso machine.

While Zoe stood under her shower, she took a big mouthful directly from the bottle. The 58.4 percent alcohol bit her throat, the scalding shower burned intensely on her sore skin, but both together put some life back into her. That was where the name *Uisge Beatha* came from—water of life.

The second mouthful was better, brought the

intensely phenolic taste to full bearing. She dried her hands and let herself drop into her leather couch nude and wet, bottle in her left hand, her notebook in her right. She switched it on and launched Firefox as soon as it had booted. Meanwhile, she got a cup of espresso from the machine. She struggled to recall the address of Rick's blog, then her fingers scurried across the keyboard. To enter the protected area she had to expand the address, he simply had not linked this part. Then the encrypted data flowed to her computer. The plug-in asked for the key. She inserted Rick's smart media card into the universal reader.

Calmly she read the first paragraphs. A seemingly stolen motorbike, which had caught Rick's attention. Some modifications. His clients are overdue. Then a pasted news clip. Two dead in the sewers. Her breath accelerated, she read down the screen while her espresso got cold. She flew over the last paragraphs.

She jumped up and hurried to her wardrobe to grab a selection of essentials—backpack, underwear, iPod, travel bag. She reached for her leather suit which she had used on the few motorbike tours with Rick—trousers with kidney protection, vest, jacket, gloves, sturdy boots. In a hurry, she slipped inside the suit. Then she closed her notebook and shoved it into the backpack

together with its power unit, followed by her purse. Zoe grabbed her backpack, pulled her integral helmet from the wardrobe and rushed to her apartment door.

A resolute knock sounded. "Police, open up!"

That fast? A shiver ran down her spine. That her Mini—the car, not the skirt—just wasn't inconspicuous had been clear to her. But that the cops had arrived—she glanced at her watch—just half an hour after her proved that the killer must have excellent connections to them. Or to whomever was standing in front of her door now.

She turned off the light, tore the window behind her kitchen counter open and looked down to the street behind the house. Nothing to see—perhaps those guys at her door had come without backup? She estimated her chances—only two floors this time and the grass sodden from the rain. She threw out the helmet and let herself down from the windowsill as several shots systematically smashed her apartment door's lock.

With bent knees she let herself drop, rolled away to one side. Every single one of her numerous bad bruises protested against the new stress and she needed a few moments to push away the pain. Then she grabbed her helmet and looked around.

The rain had stopped. A short and intense downpour that would let the surrounding creeks

swell, that would fill the many little canyons with spring floods which would tear every careless creature away and shatter it against the rocks. If the traces of those grinding water masses were a much admired tourist attraction in bright sunshine, they still gave witness to the daunting primal power. But now at night no tourist would be there looking for scenic views.

Downtown the camera-armed tourists would have looked for a hideout, too. The streets were wet, dark and lonely and would only slowly come back to life.

Zoe leapt up and sprinted away. The first steps on the sodden grass didn't come easily to her.

The open window gave her escape away clearly.

"Halt! Don't move!"

It came from behind her. She accelerated again toward the near corner of the street. Now it would be settled.

A crack sounded, she threw herself to the right. Something evil chirped past her head. A second crack, she twitched to the side, then she felt a hot bite on her right arm. She had reached the corner and dived for cover. Two more rounds whistled past her. So that was settled – no cops. These guys were after her life.

Her Mini – which had given her away once before

and was now useless for her, as she told herself miserably—did not need much room in the garage. Rick had gladly accepted her offer to park his Harley Sportster here because his garage was notoriously overcrowded. In return, she had gotten a second key. The machine was always fueled up and would be ideal to cover some distance between Zoe and Phoenix, plus probably no one knew about it. But between her and the garage death was waiting.

On the other hand, she wouldn't get far on foot, as the burning pain in her arm and back told her. The contusions of her first jump still hurt and the whisky's numbness had faded away a long time ago. How she'd like to lay on her couch in her apartment now, a glass of Zinfandel in her hand, accompanied by the tunes of Gordon Sumner...instead she literally was on the *Highway to Hell*—with an express ticket.

A row of trash containers in the passage, dimly lit by the lonely flickering fluorescent tube, between street and garage ramp triggered a different idea.



The two men in cop uniforms came storming through the passage onto the street. No trace of their victim in sight. No hasty footsteps in the

distance in a futile attempt to escape an inevitable fate. No obvious hiding places along the street that would hold for more than a minute. So, where was she? The girl had been out of the window much too fast, as if she had known they were no policemen. Annoyingly the boss hadn't given them more detailed orders. Name, address, license plate, foreign subcompact called *Mini*, eliminate then wait for cleanup team.

One of the trash containers stood askew, a little too far away from the passage wall. Far enough to hide a slender body from being spotted accidentally. But totally unsuitable against two canny professionals, even if their victim had reckoned that she should pull up her legs. With a nod that they understood each other, they approached the container from both sides.



With aching muscles, Zoe clamped to her hideout while the two killers sneaked up to the container like two cocksure lions who already took their prey for granted. That was the law of the jungle—eat or be eaten. An old song by Wings came to mind—and yes, wings would have saved her some trouble tonight.

The first had almost reached the container, his gun leveled in front of him, hammer pulled back,

his trigger finger slowly pulling. One more step to the side, shoot!

The crack echoed through the passage, rang in Zoe's ears. She let herself drop.

Unerringly with one leg, she hit the second killer's neck. Her right hand pulled up his chin. As he went down under her weight, his upper spine gave up with an ugly crunch.



The first killer turned to her with a disbelieving look. He glanced up for a moment, to the air conditioning duct that crossed the passage there and which he now realized had provided her with a hideout. This moment decided his fate as his supposed victim jumped at him and poked her fingers into his throat.



Her Kung-Fu and Karate teacher had warned her, when she was still learning and working in New York, not to play with this move. Much too easy to crush the victim's voice box so he would suffocate before the emergency medic could arrive. But as a last resort against a junkie with a dirty knife, or against a false cop with a gun, any means suited her. Again, Paul McCartney's voice sounded in

her head, singing *Live And Let Die*.

She collected the guns of both men and secured them. One into her backpack, which she fetched from the trash container together with her helmet, one into her waistband—wincing as the cold hard metal pressed uncomfortably into her side. She hurried down the garage ramp to her parking space. Again, she threw a woeful glance at her small car—built in 1980, just like herself—as she moved the small first-aid kit to her backpack. Then she lifted the heavy machine from its stand.

With a hollow hum the big 1100s engine came to life. She put on her helmet, checked the gun's rest once again, then she sped away.

CHAPTER THREE

A black motorbike with the dull humming of a large engine rolled through the streets of Phoenix. The driver, a slender, toned body dressed in clinging black leather, with bruises all over her, a fresh cut wound in her back and a graze at her left arm, a gun in her waistline, struggled in vain for a more relaxed posture.

She'd had trouble with her boss, witnessed the violent death of her lover, jumped from a fifth floor window and on top of that had just put two professional killers to death with her bare hands. She felt pain in her entire body. To say this was not her day was a shameless understatement. She was totally pissed off. And tired. All she wanted was a peaceful rest and a hot cup of coffee.

The latter could be managed. Her gaze hit a coffee shop at the roadside where numerous bikes were already parked. There she would take cover for a while. Zoe parked her machine between two Japanese bikes, took off her helmet and gloves and

entered the small flat-roofed building.

There were two kinds of guests—overweight guys in heavy, riveted and sticker-covered leather suits with cans of beer on one hand and the second sort—long-haired, busty and scantily clad rocker babes—on the other. In this company, she was as inconspicuous as a tigress at a breeding sheep auction. As the conversation stopped as if thunderstruck, Brian Johnson's voice roared from the jukebox, "Thunder!"

She ignored the suggestive, hopeful glances and stepped single-mindedly to the counter, where two stools were vacant at the left, toward the wall-curved end—the perennially unpopular place right next to the crapper door. She chose the stool at the wall, placed her gloves and helmet on the second stool to mark out her territory, opened the zipper of her leather jacket and pulled her notebook from her backpack. She countered the bartender's questioning look with a terse "Coffee. Strong and black."

A single rocker dared one first step in her direction. She threw him a short glance, denoting a feral lust to kill and he stepped back.

While her notebook awoke from hibernation—or of what Redmond understood of it—her coffee arrived. She took a few dollar notes from the purse in her backpack and put them on the counter. Then she leaned forward and looked the bartender

in his eyes, which oscillated between her neckline and her face. "I don't want to cause any trouble. But I want to drink this coffee in peace and without company before it gets cold. Understood?"

He gave her a nod and took the dollars.

She sipped her coffee—ah, what a relief!—and continued to read Rick's diary. Concurrently she copied the text to his smart media card. Then she reorganized the contents of her backpack, primarily transferring the contents of her purse to a pocket of her jacket. The storage card went there, too.

She ordered a second coffee, grabbed her notebook, which would otherwise have vanished with alarming speed, and the first-aid kit, and disappeared—to the tune of *Whole Lotta Rosie*—for the ladies' room. Finally, there was a time to tend to her wounds.

A rocker babe threw her a curious glance as she dropped first her jacket and then her vest, especially as she hadn't found the time to put on a bra under it. But she had no room for shame in her considerations. Aside from that, the blonde babe's clothing scarcely left room for fantasy. Anyway, Blondie was less irritated by her tits than by the gun handle in her waistline and the pattern of her numerous bruises. She pulled out a strip of band-aid, handed it to the befuddled girl and turned her

own back with the scabbed shard wound toward her. "Stick it there!"

Blondie was much too surprised to do other than commanded.

Zoe grabbed a wound dressing and a gauze bandage, pressed the dressing to the black and red wound on her arm and tossed Blondie the bandage. "Wrap it around. Nice and firm." She looked around. Except for the basin, on the edge of which her notebook held its balance, there were no counters. Her jacket lay on the ground, vest and first-aid kit on top. The toilet bowl rested unobtrusively in the center of the room, with no curtain or stall. A single weak light bulb dangled from the ceiling, mercifully unable to illuminate all corners and grooves. In a sudden fit of neatness, Blondie held her vest up.

Zoe gave her a nod. "Thank you. Hang on a moment." Then she took the gun between her teeth, let down her trousers and used the bowl.

Bandaged and completely dressed, Zoe returned to her coffee. She stuffed the notebook and first-aid kit back into the backpack while she checked inconspicuously that the second gun still rested between her tee shirts. A newcomer, a tall, red-bearded guy with a richly decorated jacket, took advantage of this moment to approach her. She tried to ignore him until he put one hand on

her right arm — which was still in her backpack.

He declared, “Tonight you are mine.”

Slowly, through gritted teeth she said, “No!” She tried to shake off his hand. His grip tightened and he grinned maliciously. His other hand reached for the gun handle in her waistline. His lecherous gaze wandered across her plunging neckline, his alcohol-smelling breath covered her face. Her right thumb operated the safety switch.

One look around told her that she should not expect any support. The bartender ignored her pointedly, intently concentrating on washing one already clean pitcher again and again, not looking in her direction.

Redbeard had almost reached her waistline, not without touching the bulge of her breasts beneath her leather vest with his hand. She crossed his look with a sinister, crooked smile and pulled her right hand closer to herself, turned slightly more toward him.

That elicited from him a *Good girl*, thus totally misinterpreting her intentions.



Which became uncomfortably clear to him as her steel-protected boot tip drove through his leather trousers into his shin. His grip eased a little, just sufficient to let her pull her hand out of the

backpack but not enough to signal his surrender. On the contrary, it tightened unpleasantly and his other hand had reached the gun in her trousers.

A sharp crack echoed through the room. Redbeard's face distorted in agony as the round fired at closest distance entered his abdomen, while the muzzle flash additionally singed his wound and spit dirty powder dust into the lesion. His bladder failed and his urine mixed with the smell of blood and gun smoke to a stinging stench. Brian Johnson commented from the jukebox what she had done—shot from the hip—while Redbeard's grip failed and he sank to his knees.



With a boot against his shoulder, she cleared her path, swung her backpack over her left shoulder, grabbed gloves and helmet with her left hand, tossed a few notes for her second coffee on the counter, skipped across the expanding puddle of blood and piss and walked slowly—one gun in her right hand, the other under her open jacket visibly in her waistline—through the respectfully retreating rockers to the exit. Meanwhile Brian Johnson had come to *Back in Black*.

As soon as she was outside, she accelerated. The shock would not hold long, so she slipped the secured gun back into her backpack quickly, put

on the helmet and gloves and drove away. She had barely left the parking lot when the first rockers came out of the door. From the distance, she could hear the whine of a siren.

Her situation hadn't particularly improved, Zoe thought, while she guided the bike—steadily vibrating between her thighs—through Phoenix toward the western suburbs. Still, she had an unidentified killer with unknown, but presumably far-reaching resources on her heels—she didn't even dare to activate her mobile phone in fear of being tracked down. In fact, probably by now the cops were on her tracks, too. After all there were three corpses at her last two known whereabouts and a castrated Redbeard at the coffee shop. She would soon have a problem from lack of sleep despite the coffee and the adrenaline rush—not to mention that together with the pressure cooker and then Rick's chest her dinner had been ruined—and her wounds were now bandaged but not in the least less painful for it. And Rick's decrypted blog gave her a clear sign of whom she was up against, but no evidence at all to gain anything via press or FBI—except that someday someone would find her with a bullet in her head on the municipal rubbish dump.

She did not dare to visit a colleague. Her company would be known to the killer by now.

No, she had to get away. Preferably, across the United States border before dawn. Mexico—via Tucson—would be an obvious solution. Highway 10 to LA would get her to California in two hours. Obvious, too? More a question of time. Probably nobody knew yet that she traveled by motorcycle. Let's see what this machine can do, she thought grimly.

Behind her, she left the quickly shrinking illumination of the hometown of choice, her job, her tasteful, comfortable and convenient apartment, her dear Mini, her good standing and her un-avenged, murdered beloved. Shit.

In her head, Pat Benatar asked what she was running for, and where? Good question. Where to? Where could no one find her?

And who would be the *one*? No. She was alone, nobody would miss her. Without knowing who was after her, what this all was about, she couldn't afford to run away, she couldn't successfully hide herself.

At the next exit, close to Buckeyes, she turned around. Back to Phoenix, back to her life—or to her death. She had nothing to lose.

She considered the events. The killer had searched the apartment before he came back to the kitchen. He hadn't looked for her in the first place. He had been surprised when he did find a trace of another person.

Rick must have had something, which was important to the killer and his bosses. And as the killer hadn't found it, they hadn't sent real cops after her but another team. Zoe must have overlooked something important. Something that would incriminate this gang and their devious operations. But what?

Did he invite her to this, in his words *decisive date* for this reason? She had innocently expected a nice evening. Perhaps she had even hoped for a proposal. Did he plan to report on a breakthrough of his problem?

What did he say then?

Do you remember the place in the park where we met for the first time?

At least a chance. Using side streets she navigated to Encanto Park, didn't even notice that she passed Rick's garage. She looked around several times before she parked her machine close to the western park entrance on a dimly lit part of the street. Then she pulled the second gun from her backpack and put it half down a pocket of her leather jacket before she entered the park.

Not far from the entrance, the path crossed her usual jogging route. Out of habit, she fell into a trot, although the leather clothes, both guns and the backpack were a burden she wasn't used to and the sturdy boots barely cushioned her steps.



She failed to notice as an old Chevy stopped at the park entrance, from which a bulky, athletic figure in a long gray trench coat emerged to carefully follow her.

The killer grinned to himself. He had hoped the girl would come to the garage after the watchers on the arterial roads hadn't found anything. He had been surprised that she hadn't stopped for a moment, but he had followed her spontaneously. That was the second fluke after he had heard about the incident in a coffee shop and thus found out he had to look for a motorbike. And his third lucky moment, after he almost lost her track, came when he spotted her again at the park entrance. Now he had to follow—he could look for the bike later.

Damn! Why does the stupid girl have to run now? Where is she heading so fast?



Zoe had almost reached the place of her first encounter with Rick. There was the old, half-broken down tree with the heart-shaped knothole. He had looked back to it for a moment too long and run into her sideways. She had been concentrating a bit too much on the music from

her iPod and noticed him too late to avoid him.

One moment she had been angry about this stupid klutz—and about herself, too—when he smiled at her with open admiration in his eyes and instead of an excuse simply said, “This very moment Cupid’s arrow has struck the center of my heart.”

The sound of a wheeze pulled her back from her dream and she stopped briefly to listen. The noise reminded her of something—when did she hear that wheezing breath before? When she stood on the ledge in front of Rick’s kitchen window?



Shit, the killer thought. *She’s heard something.* But she seemed to have reached her destination—whatever was there, he would find it anyway. Now he would not miss the opportunity. He leveled his gun and pulled the trigger.



A heavy blow hit Zoe hard in her back. She toppled and thought, *Over.*

The bullet pierced the pocket of Zoe’s backpack, her iPod, the first-aid kit with several layers of triangular bandages, grazed the bandage scissors, continued its way through three of Zoe’s favorite

tee shirts, crushing several paste gems. It penetrated the power pack of her notebook, then the TFT screen in the lid, two key caps, then the hard disk, exited through the bottom of the notebook and worked its way through the back of the backpack where it still had enough power to knock into Zoe's tough leather jacket with painful force.

Zoe wondered why her back felt neither hot nor cold, why she had a clear impression of pain instead. No pictures of her life flowed by, but a new push of adrenaline cleared away all unimportant thoughts—except one line from Madonna's *Die Another Day*. Her feral instincts made her roll forward and sideways to the left—at the end of the roll her right hand pulled the gun from her waistline, her thumb moved the safety switch. She remembered a quote from her favorite author Robert Heinlein, *The first shot has to come quick. Then the opponent is surprised and you got time to aim.*

She spotted a dark silhouette and simply pulled the trigger. Then she lay flat in the grass, gun in front of her. Along the barrel of her gun, she could see that the silhouette had bent and held something in her direction. Fuck aiming—she pulled the trigger, again and again.



The sudden dive-roll of his doubtlessly hit victim had surprised the killer. *Does the damned cat have nine lives?* Then a bullet chirped past him and he twitched in reflex. *Fuck! Take this, you bitch!* He tried to make out her dark, flat contour in the grass as her second round hit him in the right kidney. The shock of impact made his arm tremble, his second shot missed.



In rapid succession, she hit the killer's body several times. His weapon arm moved up once more, but no further round was fired.

As if in a trance Zoe stood, stepped to her tormentor, stood over him. His breath rattled, he still tried to level his gun. "No." She deliberately shot his right arm.

She didn't care what would happen to him. Cold as ice she watched as he warped under her in his pain, while she took off her backpack. With a smile, she peeled the bullet from its backside and pocketed it. Then she pulled out one of the punched-through tee shirts, used it to wrap the silenced gun—the gun that had likely killed Rick—together with the tee shirt it went back to the backpack. Then she tapped his chest area—ah! She pulled out his mobile phone.

Zoe turned back to the tree stump and reached into the heart-shaped knothole. Dirt. She dug a little. More dirt. And the tip of a plastic bag. *There.*

Unlike the killer's gun hers wasn't silenced—the shots must have been heard for a distance. It seemed to be time for another quick retreat. She looked back to the killer. The rattle had stopped.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the light of a street lantern, some blocks distant from the park, Zoe checked the bag's contents. Another gun for her collection, carefully wrapped in a freezer bag. An envelope with the inscription *Sworn witness account on the origin of the weapon and its utilization for two homicides, by Richard Murdock*. And a small slip with Rick's handwriting, *Zoe, hand these things to Officer Jack Hammond of the 1st Precinct. I hope that you can trust him*. Below, today's date. She gazed on her watch—after midnight. Yesterday's date, she corrected herself.

Oh shit. After all that, now to the cops. With four used guns and a graze on her arm, she only had to enter the door of the 1st Precinct, ask for Jack Hammond and recite her speech and every problem would dissolve? As well as her body, somewhere in a dark spot of this completely normal city. She had to think of Clint Eastwood in *The Gauntlet*. She already was in Phoenix, but she had no armored bus, only her leathers and a

crushed notebook. On the good side she didn't need to protect a bitch. Only herself.

This had to go down differently.

She stopped at a phone booth and searched for coins. Then she called the operator and asked to be connected to the 1st Precinct. A friendly telephone voice asked for her demands. She decided to remain anonymous. "Tanja Cartwright here. Can I talk to Officer Jack Hammond? He promised to call back." She heard a short click from the other end.

"No, I'm sorry, he's already left. Do you want to leave a message?"

Crap. Different track, sad voice, "I fear, the ice cubes will have melted away by then."

Giggling from the other end. "I see. You mean he stood you up? Try at McCaffrey!"

Okay. Second leg. She called the operator for the address of Seamus McCaffrey, an Irish pub, as suggested by the name.

Eighteen West Monroe. She stopped in a passageway on the opposite side. The swinging tunes of Irish music played live could be heard outside on the street. She pulled out the killer's mobile phone and dialed the pub's number.

Over laughter, music and the clatter of glasses she could barely understand the voice from the other end. She simply shouted, "Jack Hammond,"

several times into her mobile until she thought she heard a, “Wait.” More music, scraps of conversation, mumbling. Finally, the background noise faded, as a tall young man with curly black hair in jeans and green tee shirt left the door across the street.

He said, “Yes? Who’s there?”

“I have a message from Rick Murdock for you,” Zoe improvised. “Can we meet somewhere?” She saw how he looked up in alarm.

“Sure. When and where?”

Instead of an answer, she started the engine, dashed across the street and stopped close to him. “Hop on!” He seemed to hesitate, looked through her helmet’s visor into her green eyes, then he gave her a nod and simply placed the pub’s phone on the ledge next to the door.

“Where to?” he asked, as he mounted behind her.

“Your place, show me the way,” she answered and pulled away.

With her perforated backpack, which he had to look at during the entire cruise, and the leather jacket, which had been ripped open by the graze, she had his full and patient attention from the first moment on. First, she showed him the gun Rick had left behind. Then Rick’s blog from the smart media card—her notebook wasn’t usable any

more. Afterward she described the evening's events. Jack obviously was a little distracted as she stripped off her vest to show him the shard wound on her back, after all, she still hadn't found the time to put on a bra. And, troubled by the events, by the until-now-suppressed terror of having killed four men, finally she flung her arms around his neck and cried like a baby.

Jack held her for a long time, but right now, that wasn't enough for her. Zoe needed more, she urgently needed a reason to live, a positive thought. And Jack was a sympathetic listener, so decent, so—cute. She clung to him as if she was drowning, began to nibble his earlobe, tore at his tee shirt while she placed his hand on her breast, licked his neck. He gasped as she slipped her hand into his trousers, grabbed his swelling erection and started to knead it. All the while with Amy Lee's song in her head, *Bring Me To Life*.



She lounged naked on his couch in front of him, a half-emptied bottle of Corona in her hand. His gaze wandered back and forth between the evidence on his coffee table, her tits and her carefully trimmed, small black bush. "How did you know I don't belong to them?"

She lowered her gaze. "I didn't know."

“And if you had been mistaken?” he insisted. She sat up, placed down the can and gave him a serious look.

“I would have killed you.”

He flinched as he noticed the coldness in her voice. He felt goose bumps on his scrotum. Suddenly she was no longer the delicate, frail victim in need of protection, but the cornered savage cat, snarling, with unsheathed razor-sharp claws.



She noticed how he shrank back and rose. “Where can I...” She let the end of this sentence dangle in the air like a piece of smoked meat above a dog’s den—he had no choice but to leer for it and to silently indicate the way to the bathroom door to her.

She stared into the mirror for a long time. Not only the wound on her arm, freshly bandaged by Jack, or the numerous areas on her body that soon would splendidly dazzle in green, yellow and blue, had changed her. She saw hardness around the corners of her mouth. Her innocence was lost forever in more than one way. It wasn’t clear to her, how she—worn out, sore, starving—could return to her desk and be berated by her boss in a

few hours. If Jack, together with *a few reliable mates*, as he called them, was able to apprehend the entire gang.

There was a sound. Two knocks.

Zoe froze. She knew that noise. It wasn't the sound of knuckles hitting wood. It was the sound of a muzzled shot. *Shit*. And she stood stark naked in Jack's bathroom, on the eighth floor of a small apartment building in a suburb of Phoenix. Her guns rested on the coffee table, her leathers somewhere behind the couch. She looked around—shaving equipment, towels, deodorant, Jack's used laundry unsorted in a corner. A box of condoms, a hairdryer, hairbrush.

She opened the bathroom window.



Bad luck for the cop, he knew too much. Now he lay on his living room carpet with two bullets in his chest. An impressive collection of shooting irons lay on his coffee table. And the slut? Ah, a light came from beneath a door. In the bathroom then.

He jerked the door open and saw the open window. He had heard of that, that was her mode of operation. Not this time! With two long steps he reached the window and looked outside. Nothing. No pale skin on the dark pavement and neither a

ledge...

He grunted as he felt her impact, as her legs clung to his hips and her arms around his head. But this naked girl, as athletic as she was, was no match for a strong, trained man. It only cost him a sardonic smile.

Except for the sharp blade of Jack's razor, which drew a second smile across his throat. He lashed about, threw himself backward to the bathroom wall which extracted a violent gasp from her and loosened her scissored legs. The razor continued to glide along under his ear as her grip eased.

With every heartbeat a stream of blood gushed from his throat, ran down his open windpipe. He felt his strength fading but he didn't give up. He pushed himself away and turned around, levered his gun and aimed at her naked left breast.

A karate strike pushed away his weapon arm, a pointed toe hit his groin, then two sharp fingers drilled into his eyeballs. That was the last thing he noticed before he suffocated on his own blood.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dan was appalled by the picture offered to him as the apartment door swung open.

Stark naked with penetrating green eyes, she stood in front of him, muscles tensed as if to leap, the evenly suntanned skin covered with slowly drying blood from tip to toe, in one hand a gun now pointing to the floor, the other with claw-like flexed fingers. Behind her right shoulder, he could see Jack lying in a puddle of blood on the living room floor, two fatal shots in his chest. To her left the gory eye-sockets of the local police commissioner, from whose full-width-opened throat another stream of blood had trailed into the corridor, stared past him.

Her gaze seemed distant as she turned around and her swaying hips paced along the dry areas with somnambulistic sincerity and the graciousness of a cat of prey.

He stuffed his FBI service card into a coat pocket and followed her, slamming the apartment

door close behind him. If she hadn't warned him on the phone, he'd have to arrest her on the spot. But he wasn't sure if he would be able to do so.

Methodically he reviewed the evidence, tried not to let himself be diverted by the nude shape in his vicinity and whose smell of blood, sweat and woman he sensed all around him.

She waited patiently while he read Rick's account, then he had to put his questions. She answered at length, but on target, obviously prepared for the relevant topics by Jack's previous questions. With increasing discomfort, he took note of the details of her story.

The thin armor of civilization had been peeled away from her like the skin of an orange, what was seated in front of him was the pure feral woman, ready for anything. She seemed unaware of her nudity, she wore the drying blood of her victim like war paint. Her already well toned, athletic body had been forged to a weapon with blood, fire and tears. The emotional impact of losing two lovers in close succession had put her sanity to a hard test. As she squatted in front of him, eyes alert, muscles tensed, she looked to Dan as if she could jump on him any time—to kill him or to lay him. He thought of one of his favorite tunes, of the much too early deceased Freddie Mercury, *Killer Queen*—the description suited this woman perfectly. So much so that he found it

difficult to concentrate on his job.

But the facts were clear to him. Several acts of self-defense would surely be in her favor if they ever reached court. Except for illegal possession of guns and perhaps a traffic offense, she couldn't be accused of anything. Unlike the gang, whose dead boss now lay in the bathroom. Drug smuggling, organized crime, several murders—a few hundred years in jail once the FBI had unfurled the entire case. Which would easily take a year or two. Maybe more. With a sigh, he looked at her.

She threw him a questioning glance.

He sighed again and said, "Witness-protection program."



Witness protection. This meant a completely new start, a totally new perspective. What did it matter to her? James Hetfield's voice in her head delivered an answer—she needed an open mind for a different view. *Nothing else matters.*

BOOK TWO: LIONESS' HEART

CHAPTER ONE

“Can I offer you something?” Dan asked.
“A quadruple espresso, please,” Zoe replied.

G-Man Dan—she hadn’t asked him for his family name—had been the successful rescuer who had brought her to safety from the drug smuggler gang’s killer commandos inside the Phoenix police.

Now she sat in a *safe room* provided by the FBI Los Angeles waiting for his colleagues who were discussing her fate after she had repeated her story.

The small room hadn’t been renovated for a long time, in several spots the ceiling plaster had disintegrated, the walls showed cracks through the once pale yellow wallpaper. A rickety table, two worn chocolate brown armchairs and a dark green upholstered couch, on which she tried to get some rest, were scattered around the room. An empty sideboard completed the sparse furniture. She looked out of the window to the opposite

wall, lit by the morning sun, which helplessly tried to conceal its own dreariness with paint-on windows. She knew from her arrival that this room was on the second floor and that the masonry with its protrusions and ledges was well suited for climbing, but she hoped to leave this apartment some day through the front door. She had jumped out of enough windows for the rest of her life.

She felt weary. The last night had been the longest of her life, the purest hell. Only on the last leg of the road, after the California border, did she get a little sleep. Her biker leathers had been most uncomfortable, but after Dan had pleaded with her for some sort of clothing at the time of their departure, she hadn't removed anything except her heavy jacket and her boots. Still she wore only her black trousers and her vest.

Dan brought her a paper cup with a thin-brewed coffee from the kitchen. In her situation, she supposed it was the best she could get for now. She thanked him gratefully and tried not to cringe as she gulped it down.

The tall, bony FBI psycho plumber who just entered the room had introduced himself as Willy. The stocky local FBI chief was called Dennis. Except for Dan and these two—hopefully—no one knew anything about her current location.

Willy sat down on an armrest opposite of her and leaned forward while Dan left the room without being asked. Zoe watched expectantly.

"What shall we do with you now?" he asked.

She recognized a rhetoric question and waited straight-faced.

"You have killed four men and severely injured another. Just so."

Zoe sipped from her coffee. "They wanted to kill me."

Willy raised an eyebrow. "All of them?"

"Redbeard – the rocker – tried to rape me. And he reached for my gun." She sighed. "I'd rather have kicked him in the balls or shot his leg as warning, but he'd been too fast."

Willy nodded. "And the others?"

She held up her bandaged upper arm. She already had shown him the ugly graze scar underneath the fresh gauze bandage. "Number one and two." She gestured toward her backpack in the corner. The shot that surely would have killed her had been slowed down by her notebook to cause only another bruise. "Number three." The edge of her left hand showed another red mark where she had knocked away the hot barrel of the police commissioner's gun. "Number four."

"And how did you feel afterward?"

What did he want from her? "Fucked up. What else?"

"Can you express your feelings in more detail?"

Zoe groaned and started to enumerate, "First, I hadn't had anything to eat. Second, I had to watch my only friend get shot and killed. Third, I fell from the fifth floor into a trash container and got a shard in my back. Fourth, I had to jump out of my kitchen on the third floor. Fifth, I've got a bullet wound on my arm. Sixth, I have an ugly bruise on my back. Seventh, I've lost my apartment, my car, my job. I've got every reason to feel just great."

Willy kept at it. "And the dead?"

That's what he is after! "At least I know they'll never again shoot at me." She took another sip of coffee. "Until the next one comes. That what you wanted?" Before Willy could reply, she added, "I won't shoot just anyone who comes along and gives me a wry look. It's no fun. But I'll defend myself. One thing I can't tell, Willy?"

He watched her attentively.

"If I have the choice to run away or to shoot back, I don't know if I'd want to run away." She put down her coffee cup. "No. I don't want to jump out of the window and run away. That hurts."

"Let's start from scratch. Who are you?" Willy smiled.

"What do you want to know? Zoe Laforge. Born first of April 1980 in Philadelphia. School, College, Cheerleader, MIT, Computer Science,

with distinction. Two years in New York. For half a year admin and graphics program fiddler and girl Friday at Brooke's Prints in Phoenix."

"Hobbies? Leisure?"

She thought about it. "Jogging. Karate, Kung-Fu, female self-defense. Marksmanship. Archery. Climbing. More precisely, free-climbing. My car." Zoe sighed. "Listening to music."

"Parents and family?"

"Nada. My parents died in a car crash when I was fourteen. My coach took guardianship."

"How come?"

"I've collected sports badges. Anything available. I think she planned to send me to the Olympics, but we didn't get that far. I believe she just wanted to make sure that I continue my training." She paused. "And then I got a scholarship for MIT and that was it. Goodbye. She didn't even write."

"And who else?"

She frowned. "Rick. No, not any longer. Nobody."

"Colleagues?"

"The boss is an asshole and all the others are brown-nosers."

"Then why do you work there?"

"Good pay. Good enough to move from the Big Apple to Phoenix."

Chief Dennis ambled up and down in front of her. "I've got a problem."

Zoe crossed her long legs and waited.

"Dan here—" he pointed at the young G-Man—"promised you witness protection. You've heard about it."

She nodded.

He had reached one end of the room and turned. "Two words. Protection. We make sure that the persons concerned are safe from violent prosecution."

Nicely put. End of room—turn.

"Witness. Those are people who know something that can incriminate someone else at court." Turn. "And that's what it's about." He stopped. "All the people you could have incriminated are dead." Dennis continued his tiger walk. "You are no witness. You may perhaps need protection. But I don't know how I could reason that internally."

She threw a glance at Dan, who intensely focused on his shoe-tips as if he could gather substantial insights from there. "So I have to return to Phoenix and somehow try to carry on?"

Dennis stopped abruptly. "By no means! I won't throw you back into that snake-pit!"

Zoe drew a deep breath. "Thank you, Dennis."

He visibly relaxed after this and sat down in one of the chairs. "I'm not an inhuman bureaucrat.

I'm only trying to point out our situation. Witness protection is difficult to reason but not impossible. Do you know how the program works?"

She shook her head.

He summarized the program. New name, new town, new apartment. Assistance in finding new employment, a stipend for startup. No contact to old acquaintances, no problem in her case—she wouldn't know who to contact anyway.

But what about her belongings, her savings, her old apartment?

She could forget about her Mini.

"We can transfer the money. Be prepared to pay a big chunk of taxes." He grinned shortly, then got serious again. "Are there many things you are bound to?"

She pondered his question. The apartment had been ready-furnished. "I have a few nice, expensive clothes..."

Dennis waved his hand. "It would be better to change your style. You don't really need them."

Zoe smiled and pointed to her leather vest. "The *new style* is covered in blood. Right at this moment I could use something to change into."

Dennis smiled back. "One step after the other. Anything else?"

"My computer. Actually, only my MP3 collection. I'd be really sorry to lose that."

Dennis turned around. "Dan, what do you

think? We could copy that, couldn't we?"

Dan nodded. "I'd send Martin Jackson. He'll do it with a twist of his hand."

Dennis turned back to Zoe. "Call him now. Tell him to get it before the City Police turns her apartment upside down."

Dan drew his mobile out and walked into the kitchen.

"Back to you. Where can we send you? Philadelphia, New York and Phoenix are out of question. That will leave us some room. Do you have any preferences?"

"No. Any big city not in North Carolina." Zoe changed the subject. "How do I find a new job?"

"What could you do?" countered Dennis.

"Except killing people?" Zoe replied grimly and threw Willy a side-glance. "Everything related to computers. Hack, program, administrate, assist, organize. Make coffee for the boss. Order materials. Organize an event. Climb, martial arts, walking dogs, change diapers or tires, exchange a fan belt, stop a dripping tap..."

Dennis waved his hand. "Let's concentrate on the highlights. Computer and sports." And then, surprisingly, "Willy, leave us alone." He paused. "Just listen first. Four weeks ago I received an internal request. We need agents with in-depth computer knowledge, preferably little exposure yet and also a short internal record. Freshmen, so

to say. A contradiction in itself—our experienced hackers aren't fresh anymore and the youngsters don't have a plan. And now an expert crosses my way, nobody at the FBI knows her, agile mind and body, unattached. A fluke."

Zoe frowned. "You want me to become a G-Man? Why?"

Dennis shook his head. "I don't know exactly what it is, but it's not the FBI. And why not? You need a job, you got the brains, you're free to go. And by the way it would solve our problem."

"How's that?"

"If you're hired by the government as a nobody, no one will ask if the witness protection program will fit perfectly. It will be made fit. We'll be paying for you anyway." He took her hand.

She didn't shrink back.

"Think about it. Don't talk to the others, please. Next time we meet you tell me if you want to talk to those guys."



Zoe forced herself to swallow the cold remnants of her chop suey, then she dropped the cardboard box on the table.

Dan had reluctantly left her alone, but someone had to go and get lunch and Zoe had insisted on a replacement for her bloodstained leathers. Now

she'd had a refreshing shower, wore a loose black tee shirt with the silver letters *Angel*—Dan's pick—plus a black miniskirt and a pair of flip-flops.

Maybe Dan had a problem with her not wearing panties. But to send him away to get her underwear would have been a bit of a stretch. And without panties, she wouldn't squeeze herself into jeans, not to mention how much she disliked bad-fitting trousers. Her actual clothing was comparably uncomplicated.

He was visibly trying to distract himself, as the seams of his trousers were firmly tight behind his fly, so he reached over to hand her a Bud light.

"You need a new name," he declared.

"Any?"

"It's recommended to keep the given name and the initials. Zoe L-something then."

"Mmmm. Letterman?"

He laughed. "Well, then you'll be asked every time if you're a relative. But as long as you don't join TV, it doesn't matter."

"Do you have an idea?"

Now he mused. "Well, when I saw you for the first time, in Jack's apartment, I had a sudden vision."

Zoe didn't like to remember. "What?"

"You were moving like a cat. A big cat. I had to think of a lioness."

She smiled shyly. "Zoe Lion? Doesn't sound right somehow."

He leaned forward, put up a serious face. "Lionheart. That suits you." He paused. "Zoe Lionheart. How does that sound?"

CHAPTER TWO

When Dennis arrived the next morning, Zoe felt much better. She hadn't slept well, but at least she didn't feel as crappy as the day before. Dan, feeling chivalrous, had spent the night on the couch.

Now she stood in the center of the room in her miniskirt and tee shirt and watched how the text on her shirt raised Dennis' smile. Dan joined them and began, "Officially you don't know each other yet. Zoe, may I introduce Dennis Waters, FBI. Dennis, may I introduce Zoe Lionheart."

A sounding laughter followed, then Dennis offered his hand. "Very pleased to meet you, Zoe Lionheart."

She took his hand and dropped an elegant curtsy which made Dennis and Dan both smile. "The pleasure is all mine, Dennis."

They took their seats opposite each other. Zoe tugged the hem of her miniskirt down between her legs not to irritate Dennis too much, she

couldn't help for the conspicuous curves under her tee shirt.

"I've come to talk with you about possible directions and options for jobs," Dennis started. "I've listened around if the FBI may have a suitable job and if that doesn't do, you can have a look for yourself."

He drew a notebook from his briefcase.

"A loan from the FBI. Wireless. You probably know online job portals better than I do." Then he put a DVD jacket on the lid. "With the best wishes from Martin Jackson. Your music collection."

Zoe was all smiles.

"And another thing." Dennis put a gift-wrapped packet into her hands.

Zoe gave him a questioning look.

"With regards from the FBI office in Phoenix. Your friend Rick's information was most revealing and they made five arrests yesterday. They asked if they could return the favor somehow."

Zoe impatiently tore away the paper and cried out in joy as she spotted the picture of a black iPod Nano on the box. Before Dennis could react, she had jumped across the table and had thrown her arms around his neck. The armchair groaned alarmingly.

She didn't care for exposing her well-formed backside, which had been partially uncovered by her sudden jump, to Dan on the other side of the

room.

The next two hours she and Dennis discussed her alternatives. Project business was out of question, sooner or later she'd have to accept an assignment in New York or Philadelphia and couldn't plausibly reason a denial without giving herself away.

She could get a dull job as an administrator for any large company or a hotline desk where she could explain to each idiot who called that computers didn't work without electricity. Data typist. Secretary. Developer for a not-to-global end user company. None of these prospects were particularly exciting. Aside from sports, she'd played the inconspicuous wallflower for over twenty years, a boring life only interrupted by an occasional orgasm. But had it saved her from trouble? Apparently not.

"Alas, Dennis," Zoe said to him as he stood in the doorway, about to leave, "one more thing, the answer is *yes*."

Dennis frowned, then obviously remembered his question. "You sure? Okay. I'll call back."

Dennis had brought her a financial jump-start, *for clothes and food during the next days*. It hadn't been ample, but it had been sufficient for good sports shoes, jogging shorts and top, underwear, jeans and some tee shirts to change—stuff Dan

hadn't thought of. She had wanted to pay Dan for her initial equipment, but he had insisted that his *Angel* tee shirt and the miniskirt had been a gift, whereupon she had thanked him with a friendly kiss which had made him visibly abashed.

She wasn't the type that needed makeup—although the results were usually received well—so she didn't miss expensive cosmetics and her *safe apartment* was well equipped with shower gel, shampoo and toothpaste.

More important to her was to get out, she needed training. As soon as she had spotted a suitable course in the neighborhood, she jogged her daily twelve miles and in the apartment, she cleared the space for the following workout.

In the beginning, Dan tried to join her. But as he failed the second time to keep up with her after the first half of the course he left her alone. Instead, he could serve as her sparring partner for her martial arts exercises.

She spent a large part of the day checking employment offers. Soon she had collected a list of more or less interesting positions. In parallel she worked—with help from Dan and Dennis—on a new *résumé*. It had to reflect her true qualifications but should not bust her disguise. And it had to be coordinated with the Marshals Office where her new life was backed up with appropriate proof.

One week after her hellish night, Dan brought distressing news, he had to return to his desk in Phoenix. She bade him farewell with a long, heartfelt hug.

Now she was alone in an unfamiliar apartment in an unfamiliar city. In a city where nobody walked except tourists, dog-sitters and athletes, where a man without a car was as inept as a fish out of water, where *public transport* was a meaningless term.

But she no longer had to respect Dan's feelings, nor her own toward him. One week she had been torn between the more sister-like respect for his admirable reserve against her and the desperate cry for tender passion from the depth of her body. Several times, she had helped herself when he had been away, but in fact, she needed more.

Tonight she would grab herself a man.

A detailed inspection of her cash balance had shown her that she could just afford a pair of cheap, trendy high heels that would go well with Dan's miniskirt, the black tee shirt and a G-string—a complete new evening dress was out of question. She checked her appearance in the half-blind bathroom mirror. Simple, but barely justifiable for the City of Angels, where she would merge into the more or less tastelessly and leisurely dressed tourists, where she should expect less problems with questions about her past.

CHAPTER THREE

The alarm rang. Zoe hit the snooze button and turned around. In her head hammered a road construction team and her crotch still tingled. Two hours long, practically without interrupts, with slow and rhythmical movement, she had worked her victim, had slowed him down, then heated him up again in a careful rise and fall, while pearls of sweat had meandered between her breasts down her flat belly, while his hands had caressed her nipples, had worked her buttocks, had massaged her thighs, while she had dug her claws into his chest hair, while the candles were burned down and gone long ago, while the forgotten remnants of cheap champagne had become warm and stale, until she—with new detours every other time—had reached the terrific climax. When she finally had allowed him to come it had been like an explosion, a tremendous outbreak that had streamed into her, that had sent waves of ecstasy through their hot bodies, that had made her

collapse on his chest, until eventually she had regained her breath, had felt his shrinking cock had retracted from her.

Then she had thrown him out. *Thank you and Ciao, but I need my sleep, after all I have to do some work. No discussion, get lost.*

The alarm rang again. Once more, she inhaled some male smell that had survived the night, rolled to the edge of her bed, moved down her lower legs whereby she struggled for an upright position, yawned heartily, rose, grabbed for jogging shorts and gym top and slipped inside.

At the door of her one-bedroom-kitchen-bathroom attic city apartment, she collected socks and her Nikes, fastened her iPod to her upper arm, fetched the key and left her apartment to get rid of the tightness in her hips and upper legs from her night's escapades with a long lap around the block. Only four weeks ago, she had moved in, had stripped the last remnants of her former life and had started a new chapter, which would nevertheless remained just another station on her way.

One hour later, she took a shower while a large cup from the coffee shop down at the corner cooled down to drinking temperature and dreamed of last night again.

One glance at the clock. *Oh, hell!* One gulp of

coffee, one bite of croissant, G-string, socks, coffee, her faded jeans, croissant, blue v-neck tee shirt, coffee, purse, memory stick, croissant, iPod, money, mobile phone, coffee, watch? *Shit*. Blue office sneakers, briefcase with her notebook, coffee, the rest of the croissant in her hand, key, *go!*

As she left the doorway, the bus just came around the corner. A short sprint and they both arrived at the same time at the bus stop. The blond-curled, blue-eyed driver grinned happily as he opened the door for her and she took a seat right behind him.

Thoughtfully Zoe's gaze followed the bus which drove down the street with her briefcase under the bus driver's seat. Then she turned around and strode toward the main entrance of her company.

Easily she crossed the street, traversed the wide court in front of the flat, space-consuming office building and let herself drift through the central revolving door while she stuffed her ear-buds into her purse. In the center of the lavish, fully glass-covered entrance hall, a uniformed, broad-shouldered and dark-haired giant sat behind a delicate counter and smiled at her gleefully.

Carl had been a college quarterback, had spent several years as a marine—he never spoke about

his assignments—before getting married and finally joining Nortronics' security department.

"Good morning, Carl," she greeted and leaned over his counter, presenting her v-neck in his field of vision to her best advantage, wherewith she regularly teased him, although he both loved his wife and was much too father-like to her to make any use of it. "How's Sonny today?" Sonny, his son, lay in the hospital with a complicated metabolic disease and was Carl's daily worry.

"He's getting along," Carl answered calmly. "The doctors will try a new test today. Let's see." He twinkled at her. "You forgot your bra again!"

She grinned back. "I love my freedom." Then she fetched her ID card and passed the turnstile that decently parted a low alibi glass barrier to one side of the counter.

Her desk lay at the end of the left wing to the rear side, in one of the numerous open space rooms with small windows, small tables and dim neon lighting. Her way, as always, led her along her boss' office, who'd never be encountered this early, then skirted the open space of the computer site group. Inside Zoe groaned but she forced herself to put up a smile as Bert waved at her from his paper-slip loaded desk.

Bert was an overweight, pudgy, ill-shaved male in his thirties with slimy and scarce hair, tainted

skin, wet and usually bad breath, an always-similar greasy garb of baggy jeans and ragged tee shirt who took advantage of his position as system administrator and master of firewall, proxy server and internet filter to collect porn images and illegal music downloads. He liked to boast about his would-be outstanding skills. Because he also had unlimited access to every computer in this building and could—in his opinion undetected—log himself into everyone's session it was advisable to stay on his good side. Zoe always had internalized that, but she still didn't like him. She always felt uneasy in his presence. He on the other hand believed she would be at his and his skills' feet and she didn't plan to give him grief as long as he could be useful and didn't grab for her. Rule one—get along with the admin. Rule two—if the admin is a bastard, see rule one. But as a precaution she never had worn a skirt in the office. So—as always—today he was limited to pat the back of her jeans while he greeted her.

"You got it?" he asked while he unashamedly stared at her thinly covered breasts.

On such days, when she *forgot* her bra, his limited wits were effectively switched off in her presence. "Sure!" She twinkled conspiratorially. "Let me just boot up." Thereby, she unwound herself out of his grasp before his hand could wander up under her tee shirt and walked toward

her desk with an accented wag of her hip.

While her computer started, she fetched the memory stick from her purse and put the purse into a drawer of her desk. Right after the login, she started the task manager. As expected, it took less than two minutes before Bert hooked himself into her session. Patiently, she waited until the messenger popped up.

Bert: can we start?

Zoe: mom

She inserted the memory stick. As a protection against industrial spies or deviations impairing productivity, all USB ports of standard computers were locked by default and required explicit administrator permission for each use—like Bert did now. She acknowledged.

Zoe: plugged

Bert: abracadabra

Her computer recognized the stick and opened a window with its files. She owned a few rare pieces of music that weren't easy to find in the open file sharing networks that had remained after the end to Napster and that were prosecuted with every legal trick. For Bert, an irresistible bait to which he stuck like the fly to the paper. She moved the MP3 files to the server.

Zoe: goods delivered ;-)

Bert: c001

Zoe removed the stick and began to read her daily mail. The next few minutes, Bert would be occupied with other things anyway.

Zoe pushed herself back with her swivel chair. Time for a coffee. Time to get sidetracked from the more-than-dull work as a presentation typist where she had to convert the dry, confused, unstructured PowerPoint drafts of her marketing colleagues into significant, comprehensive, customer attracting presentation material, a task for which she was scolded regularly because while the slides went well with the customers they appeared either too perspicuous or too inscrutable to the marketing colleagues, depending on their current mood.

She took a cup of coffee in the break room, stuck her carefully kneaded chewing gum to the back of the coffee maker and strolled back to her desk, just in time to see her company's boss arrive at his number code protected office door with a large folder in one and a sandwich in his other hand.

"Hey, Zoe," he called, "would you please?"

Of course. She changed her course in his direction, stood in front of the keypad and looked at him, waiting. He took a moment to peek into her cleavage, then he told her the code.

"Three seven oh four."

She keyed it in, the door unlocked.

He pushed himself backward inside. "Thanks, Zoe!"

Zoe waited until he had completed another glance at her curves, then turned away with a "You're welcome, boss!" She ambled away with swiveling hips, feeling his hungry look on her ass. But until now he'd had himself under control, hadn't tried to abuse his power as he, as she knew from her female colleagues, was prone to do. Under different circumstances, she wouldn't have been reluctant herself, he was an athletic man in his forties with gray temples but still full-grown hair, not extraordinarily tanned, always dressed tastefully and unobtrusively, he went without pretentious watches and big golden jewelry, unmarried, owned a flat in Bel Air with a swimming pool, a Cadillac and a Porsche and a well-stuffed banking account with money of dubious origin, of which she could secure herself a larger chunk with a temporary marriage. If she'd be that kind of woman.

CHAPTER FOUR

Quitting time, the provisional end of a typical day at work. Zoe let her gaze wander across her cleaned-up desk, dropped her last coffee cup into the trash bin, adjusted her keyboard, flipped a fluff from her 21-inch flat screen, took her purse from the drawer, kicked it shut with one heel and left the office, one of the last to leave as always.

Bert still sat at his desk and chewed on a pencil.

Shit. Today of all days he has to work overtime? She faked a smile and bent over a corner of his desk. As he turned to her, she almost could watch his blood stream from his brain to his crotch. "Hi, Bert. You don't work the night shift today, do you?"

He took out his pencil. "Yes. Spent too much time with music this morning. Fucking cool stuff. Have yet to test some patches."

Zoe brought her assets into a better position and pouted. "I had hoped for an invitation for drinks tonight."

Slowly and creaking, his brain functions resumed their work.

She imagined a *plop* as his stare, adhered to her cleavage, tore itself free to focus on her face. He had no choice but to interpret her question as an unmistakable request to pick her up and she recognized that he had just swallowed her bait deeply and irreversibly.

Mechanically his fingers moved across the keyboard, stopping processes, closing applications, shutting down his computer. Then he fetched his heavy bunch of keys and followed her to the exit.

Zoe pondered her next steps. Sex with Bert definitely wasn't on her agenda. Somehow, she had to knock him out before the situation got out of her control.

On their way to the next bar, it turned out difficult enough to ignore his paws which were everywhere on her body at the same time and to protect at least her most intimate parts from his urge for close research. But she didn't have to worry, he was a cheap drunk. After the third drink, he was barely able to stand upright while she still tended to her first Cuba Libre. When she proposed a cab, he immediately agreed. At least he still managed to produce a few dollars to make his invitation come true.

They drove to his place. She had to pay the cab

driver, then she actually had to carry him to the elevator and down the hall to his apartment. Zoe maneuvered him to his bed that she only could spot easily between the piles of dirty laundry, CD covers with pictures of scarcely or not at all dressed women, several volumes of *Penthouse*, empty beer cans and computer equipment boxes. The crowning achievement of this display was a life-size blowup doll of a perky blonde on his bed.

She let him go so that he dropped on the bed alongside the puppet. He made a half-hearted try for her tits before he collapsed and started to snore heartily.

As a test, Zoe pushed him. No reaction. Okay, to make sure the scene looked realistic, she removed the inflatable doll, rumbled the smelly sheets, opened his trousers and pulled them down to his ankles, even brought herself to remove his briefs, then she hurried to the bathroom to wash her hands. Finally, she staged a shower, left some wet towels and flew from his apartment.

Next morning, he'd hopefully be hopping mad to have had sex with the best girl in town and not being able to remember anything.

CHAPTER FIVE

The meeting point was an old storehouse in a commercial park on the outskirts of Fresno.

Once Dennis had provided her with new ID papers – including a bank account on her new name with her old savings – she had purchased new, black leathers with helmet, gloves and firm but soft boots. And then there had been this classy, formed soft black leather corsage under which she wouldn't need a bra. At Victoria's Secret, she found a wonderful tiny, low-riding G-string that wouldn't stick out no matter how far she bent forward. And nobody needed to know about the slim boot knife.

The black and silver Sportster had stressed her account a lot more but also had won Dennis' appraisal. But it had brought her considerably closer to the need to get a new job.

As well as to an opportunity, right after her first long ride on her new bike she had the chance for an interview for an inconspicuous agent. Her interviewer whom she had contacted by phone called

himself simply Matt, a very athletic, clean-shaven guy in his forties with short blond curls, blue eyes and a dimpled and pointed chin.

He waited at the rear end of the storehouse.

She passed long rows with piled boxes of different sizes and asked herself which director had let this set be decorated for which movie while she took in the different opportunities for actors to sneak up to each other. Reality looked different, she knew, she'd had to get along with much less cover.

Her reception was short and businesslike. He came straight to the point while she was still putting down her helmet, gloves and jacket.

"Which school?"

What did he mean? "MIT."

He waved aside. "No, which police school?"

Zoe shook her head. "No police school."

Matt turned away and raised two clenched fists. "Fuck! Another amateur."

Zoe felt her tension rise. "Why should that disqualify me? The few hints Dennis gave me didn't sound as if I had to perform regular arrests or list offenses."

Matt sighed. "Fine." He turned back to her. "What are your abilities?" He showed her a gun. "Four targets, ten seconds."

He tossed the gun at her and operated a remote control.

While Zoe picked the gun out of the air, quickly releasing it with her thumb, cardboard figures dropped

from their hidings in four spots.

Three shots sounded second by second, punched three holes into the heart-shaped markings on the man-like silhouettes. Zoe paused, startled as the slide stopped after the third shot—emptied! But she was moving already anyway. The useless weapon hit target number four in his head, which Zoe's kick amputated just a moment later.

Eight seconds. Another cardboard man suddenly appeared next to her. The edge of her hand decapitated it while she moved on. If Matt could change the rules to his own desire, she'd introduce her own set, too. What next?

A rattling voice boomed overhead. "Agent Matt. Disable your colleague!"

Shit. Zoe threw herself behind a line of boxes, dashed on. First, he had to find her and she wouldn't make it easy for him. She got her bearings, remembered some points that she had memorized on her way in and grinned. Oh yes, a neat surprise.

Matt only just noticed Zoe's plan as she landed on him, hit him between his shoulder blades with her right knee and threw him forward. Before he hit the floor, her left arm pulled his chin firmly back, her right pushed against his neck. If he tried to buck her off, a slight pull could break his cervical. "Give up!"

He tapped the floor three times with his flat hand.

Slowly she released her grip, then pulled herself up.

Matt jumped up and tossed around, ready to make a move.

"Never trust an opponent giv – ouch!" A well-measured kick dislocated his left knee, the edge of her hand found his nasal bone, which yielded with an ugly cracking sound. While he tried to ignore the pain in his knee and move his weight to the intact right leg, another severe blow hit his privates, bringing him to his knees.

A sweet voice whispered in his ear, "If you want to tap out again, you'd better be honest about it!"

Matt tapped powerlessly three times.

He cried out as Zoe adjusted his knee with a firm tug. Then she handed him a towel, which she had found and wet it in an adjacent bathroom and helped him sit up, leaning to a large box.

"Are you completely out of control?" he snapped at her angrily as soon as he regained his speech.

"In that case, your knee would have been crushed and you'd be dead by now," she replied coolly. "But this has been just a test, hasn't it?"

"Indeed..." He caught himself and mused, "Did you kill someone before?"

Remembering, her gaze darkened. "Four."

"Four? How? A training accident?"

He obviously had no idea yet. "No. Self-defense."

Matt looked up. "Shot down? You score quite precisely."

"I've shot one. One broken neck, one crushed voice box, one cut throat."

Matt's eyes widened as he realized she really could have killed him several times. "Shit." Obviously he had

to chew on this confession. "Wait a second. It was in the news. The Phoenix blood night? Six dead in one night, including two cops and an FBI-wanted hit man?"

She leaned back. "Yes," she replied, "and two good friends."

"Shit. The entire city was stirred up, the only witness disappeared. Of course – to the witness protection program. Sure, your contact – Dennis? – had mentioned that. Shit." His nose was still bleeding, he dabbed around it with the soaked towel. "Shit. And what are you?" For the first time he seemed to really look at her and take notice of her skin-tight wrapped shape. "The Angel of Revenge? A professional fighter?"

Zoe took a deep breath. "Four weeks ago I was a foolish young orphan with nothing but a well-paid job as a fucking system admin and a man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Now I'm a witness with a blown cover, no home, no job and no friends who just beat her only chance for a prudent job up for a hospital visit." She reached for his chin and pulled it up. "And I'm no professional fighter. But I've practiced all kinds of martial arts for twenty years and have hit the bullseye with every gun I laid my hands on for the last sixteen years."

His face was a single question mark.

"When I was younger I walked into some unpleasant guys' trap once after school and just barely escaped. Then I'd swore to myself I want to be able to defend myself."

Matt massaged his knee with one hand. "Oh, I think you're able." He was silent for a while after that.

She took a seat on an opposite box and waited. Her tension slowly faded. She believed she had spoiled it. The tap next door, where she had found the towel, trickled. One drop for each ten heartbeats. Six times a minute. His nose stopped bleeding.

He looked up to the roof, then down to the floor.

His knee surely must hurt, not to mention his nose. After two hundred drops, she quit counting.

He fetched out a small notebook and began to browse through it. Finally, he asked, "Can you hack into a third party computer network?"

She was startled. Why this question now? "I have a few times before. Some are gaping wide open, some are iced bloody well."

"Iced?"

"Protected by Intrusion Countermeasure Electronics, ICE. Do you read William Gibson?"

"Who?"

"Ah, forget it. Yes, I can hack into any third party computer if it's not too well protected and I've tried it before. Finger exercises during studies and then I've switched sides."

Matt raised his eyebrows.

Zoe continued to explain, "As system administrator, you have to close all those back doors. Luckily my last boss had more money than ideas, so I could do basically what I felt like."

"And how long does such a thing take?"

"Which? Break into a computer?" Zoe pondered the problem. "If it's a commonly protected server in the network, with the necessary tools – with a twist of my hand. By trial and error, several days?"

"And if it's not connected to the internet? How long?"

What was he doing, taking her for a ride? "No time at all," she answered dryly, "I can't hack without access."

"No, with a terminal in the local network," Matt explained.

"Depends again. First, I have to guess or find the password. If the computer can boot from a CD or thumb drive I've got a chance. Or someone left a slip with a password. And then the computer needs to have access to the server – that can sometimes be shut off, too."

"How long?"

"Anywhere between five minutes and several hours. The more I know in advance, the better I can be prepared. What are you up to?"

Matt waved aside.

Secret. Instead, he started to systematically tap her résumé. Family, education, employment, sports, tournaments, hobbies, topics of interest, languages, holiday destinations. Zoe mused. Was she still in the race? When his questions moved to private topics, she stepped on the brake. "Stop. Not homosexual, not pregnant, and the rest is not your business."

The next step was logical puzzles and behavioral questions. What-would-she-do-if type questions. She

knew that from previous assessment centers. He placed the usual catch questions, she had the correct answers. Zoe became bored. "Matt?"

"Yes?"

"I know these games. You won't find out anything new about me this way."

"What would you propose instead?"

"Either we brawl again..."

He made a face.

"Or you finally invite me out for a decent cup of coffee."

Surprised, he looked up, then grinned. "I'll be damned. You're right." He reached out his hand. "Welcome to the team, Zoe! May I invite you for a cappuccino?"

Now it was her turn to be surprised. "Does that mean I've got the job? Thanks!"

"That means I know more than enough about you. You're trained and the chemistry is good. The rest can be arranged. You driving?"

She helped him up, fetched her belongings and led him outside. Her engine produced a friendly nod and he didn't hesitate to secure himself with a tight grip around her waist.

It didn't seem to matter that she didn't know a lot about this job...

CHAPTER SIX

Leaning against the bus stop, in the semidarkness of a tree shielding the light of the street lanterns, Zoe watched the dimly lit entry hall of her company and waited patiently. Now she wore thin black trousers and a long-armed black tee shirt, soft black sneakers and likewise dark gloves.

Every evening at about nine o'clock, Carl shortly left his post to fetch a cup of coffee before he called his son in the hospital. *Hopefully he'll do that today as well.*

As he rose, Zoe tensed and pulled down the mask. Carl would need about two minutes for his way forth and back and twenty-five seconds for the coffee machine. She had about one hundred seconds for her dash across the street, the hundred meters to the entrance, the revolving door, the hall, the short corridor and the door to the broom closet. As soon as Carl disappeared around the corner, she started.

The revolving door challenged her patience. In return, she didn't slow down for the turnstile, but flanked across the glass barrier with full speed. Once at the corner that Carl had passed, she stopped and listened to the sound of the coffeemaker. Then she slipped around the corner, silently opened the door of the broom closet, which she had greased three days ago and waited until Carl's shuffling steps had passed.

Back into the corridor, she hurried to the code-protected door of her boss' office. Three Seven Oh Four. Click. As she had hoped, he'd forgotten to instruct Bert to change the code. Or Bert hadn't found the time yet.

She closed the door behind her and hurried to the desk. Boss' computer wasn't just the only one where Bert hadn't been allowed to install any sneaky surveillance, it also had the only IP address that was allowed to access certain server files. If she knew the password.

Her Trojan Horse that she had built during late evenings and the last weekends using information spied from Bert's desk or wormed out of him over lunch, which Bert had copied to the central server together with her music files this morning, had dutifully recorded her boss' login and now delivered the necessary information to her, simultaneously blocking every possible logging of her current actions.

Nevertheless, she needed several minutes to find the desired files. Project *Mindmap*, inconspicuous but explosive. Using Bert's privileges, she opened the boss' USB port and started the download to her memory stick.

Then she began to methodically alter the digital recordings of the surveillance cameras and modify their operations for the next fifteen minutes.

Done. She verified the downloads. *Readable, good.* An additional program from her stick, which only needed a few more parameters from her, would remove the Trojan Horse immediately after her logout, thus rendering every tracing of her visit impossible.

The small Micro-SD-card wandered from the adapter slot of her USB to stick to the appropriate cavity of her mobile phone while she left the room. She sneaked back to the broom closet and waited again.



With a nod, Matt indicated her to switch to the next picture. The projector showed the distinctive face of a suntanned, toned man in his forties to the white wallpaper of the shaded room. Around Zoe, the small team watched attentively.

"Jeb Norwich. Age 48. Head of Nortronics. Our target."

Jeb was suspected of belonging to an international ring of high tech weapons dealers and developing the software for highly effective electronic warfare systems in one part of his company, to subsequently sell it to, let's say, non-democratic governments.

"Our goal is to dig up background information and details about a project called Mindmap. There is a high possibility that this data is stored at Nortronics, because Jeb insists on unusually strict security measures—for example, his company has a very well shielded internet access and some device to jam mobile phone connections on the company grounds."



At exactly nine forty, the sesame seed-sized circuit melted and issued a single spark, which ignited the tough, sticky substance that covered the circuit, thus causing it to spread a hot cloud of smoke.

From the back of the coffeemaker, the smoke cloud from Zoe's *chewing gum* rose to the room's ceiling. The smoke enveloped the smoke detector for a few short seconds before its sensors started screeching.

Sprinkler heads sprayed fountains of cold water, automatic breakers forced the sensitive servers into a harsh emergency shutdown before they could suffer from a short circuit, emergency

exits automatically unlocked and a totally disabled Carl stared at his blinding surveillance monitors, while his carefully plated uniform shirt slowly soaked through.

Then he decided to look into the cause. According to the display on his control panel, the fire alarm had originated from the break room. He hurried up the corridor.

As soon as Zoe heard his steps pass the door she dashed out. After her dive across the turnstile, she had to fight for her balance on the wet, slippery floor in the entrance hall, then she reached the revolving door and a few seconds later the dry, crisp night air outside.

Another sprint brought her to the street for her escape, while she unpacked the mobile phone from the waterproof bag and activated it. Around the next corner, on the side of the road, a rusty '82 Chevy Camaro waited. She slipped inside, a short push on the upgraded starter button let the small-block V8 engine thunder to life. While the phone began transmitting the memory card's content, Zoe stepped on the accelerator.



"What is it really we are doing?" Zoe asked and sipped from her coffee. "It's some kind of detective job, isn't

it?"

Matt shook his head. "Not quite. We're doing those things others cannot or will not do. We are the antibodies, the scavenger cells in the system which take action when nothing else will help."

"So it's some kind of Mission Impossible?"

Matt grinned. "Well, sort of. But the assignment procedure is less dramatic. I receive an ordinary call and collect the papers. And if anything goes wrong, we'll get help. At least as long as we're in the States." He made a serious face. "But it can become dangerous. We dare to approach people who aren't prissy at all and we aren't as well."

"Am I a double-zero then?"

A sounding laughter was the answer. "Certainly not! First, you are no zero, but for all I could notice so far –" he touched his healed nose – "bloody good. Second, you are no killer. If there's going to be a shoot-out, we have other experts. And third –" he made a dramatic pause and gave her a conspiratorial glance – "we're not in Great Britain."

Now Zoe laughed, too.

"On the other hand," he continued seriously, "if you have to eliminate someone in the course of the mission, that's usually covered by your mission orders."

Her laughter got stuck in her throat.



She had almost hoped to get away undetected.

But—right after the second corner—as the first black limousine closed up to her bumper with squealing tires her hopes vanished. When the first bullet stuck in her rear window, she knew she had a serious problem. Full throttle.

The four hundred angry horsepower of her massively tuned engine let her oversized tires write black rubber marks on the street before they catapulted the stripped-to-the-bone sports car forward. A short glance to the phone on the passenger seat. Twenty-five percent. *Shit.*

At the last moment, before the dark blue Lincoln could ram her she pulled the Camaro around, passed it with a movie-like detour across the sidewalk, then put the pedal to the metal again.

Forty percent. Ahead of her two cars tried to block the street. *Where do they all come from so suddenly?*

She slammed on the brakes, let the car skid around, accelerated. The black limo shot past her, she barely missed the blue Lincoln. At the next corner she forced her car into a sharp right turn, left several angry drivers behind her, didn't bother with the next red light, shot across the intersection with a waving tail, just barely missed a pedestrian crossing the street, regained control over the car, headed for the ramp to the freeway.

Seventy percent. And the blue Lincoln was

blocking the ramp for her.



"Don't talk crap," she interrupted Matt, "I have to get to the computer myself. That's what you hired me for. And I'm also best qualified for the cover job." Zoe looked around to the faces of the team she had learned to know during the last hours of the briefing.

The always taciturn, strong, well-tanned, curly-haired Cheb, expert for vehicles and technology. Supposedly a little bit older than Matt, he didn't wear accessories and so far, she'd only seen him in jeans and a large-checkered long-sleeved shirt.

The lively, only one meter and fifty tall of slight build, fair-haired April, authority for explosives and chemistry. She actively and briskly participated in their discussions, could always present an intelligent objection or a useful proposal, could rarely sit still for a longer time and had immediately greeted Zoe with kisses right-left on her cheeks.

The edgy Rico, weapons expert. According to his stature, he could be an ex-marine. He always wore a shoulder holster with a dark gunmetal 45-cal pistol. When he spoke, he did it slowly and with short sentences that quickly brought his arguments to the point.

And Matt, team lead and until now expert for unarmed defense. A role that he soon might have to hand over to her if he wouldn't be able to someday beat

her in training.

There was no opposition from the small team, she only had pointed out the obvious.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the middle of the commercial district, the Camaro waited with an open door, a flat left rear tire and the charred mobile phone. Matt silently cursed. He had lost her. She not only had escaped her bloodily quick appearing pursuers for a while, but him and his team as well.

That wouldn't look good in his records—a new member lost during her first assignment. But it looked even worse in his very personal list of events he never wanted to encounter. He wouldn't want to imagine what Zoe had to endure right now.



The two sturdy guys had Zoe tightly in their grips and dragged her along the hazily lit hallway of an old market hall.

Maybe it would have been possible for her to shake them off. Joe to her left, a blond ninety-kilo-

thug, had a not-too-strong grip. Scarface at her right arm was of a different caliber. Not only did he look fearsome with his skinhead and the large gash across his entire face, he also had a beefy combat weight of one hundred ten kilo and held her so firm that her arm hurt. Nevertheless, it would have been a manageable task if not for the white-haired spokesman in his noble double-breasted suit following behind her who gave the nasty impression he'd know how to deal with his silver 45 caliber gun. A gun that could punch uncomfortably large holes—the shock of the impact alone could put her out for a long time. And he wasn't close enough.

Further behind a wispy type with black beard followed with two pitbulls who'd made a very unfriendly impression on Zoe right from the start.

When these four finally had surrounded her so that she'd had no open escape route for her car and also had shot one of her tires, she had to give in. Whitehair's gun and the two dogs had scratched every idea of escape. And she had hoped for the cover Matt had promised her.

"We're sticking close to you," he had said. But she couldn't see any trace of him.

At least the transmission was finished. Once the small Java program had delivered the bits of data and had got a receipt, it had triggered the acid cartridge, which had irreversibly destroyed the

data chip. Nobody would find out which data she had stolen.

Joe and Scarface dragged her through a steel door into a bleak, windowless room with formerly light blue-painted concrete walls and numerous metal rails below the ceiling. This room was comparably well illuminated by end-to-end neon lights. It must have been used to store cattle. A half dozen new looking twenty-liter fuel canisters rested in one corner.

Whitehair placed himself in front of Zoe and waved his gun at her face. "You'll tell us everything now, cutie."

She stared back grimly. "Go fuck yourself!"

He stepped back and smirked, then he stroked her left breast with the barrel. He gave a nod to Scarface who planted a strong blow into her right kidney so that she writhed in pain. With a firm jerk Whitehair pulled her tee shirt up over her head. Her resistance faded as he hit her elbow with the gun-barrel and a cheering pain shot through her bones as two kicks against her shins forced her onto her knees.

He took another moment more with her black micro fiber bra. His greasy left hand touched her breast. As it seemed, Joe was about to start to drool like the two dogs at the door.

"Shall Joe help you with your trousers or do you want to undress yourself?" Whitehair asked

with a crooked grin. She looked at him first, then at Joe who just drew a Crocodile Dundee-bowie knife from his belt, then she shrugged and put one leg forward to untie her shoe.

She had to play for time. Her cover couldn't be that far.



"What does that mean, you don't have anything?" Matt shouted furiously into his mobile. "How many fucking places can Jeb have to drag her to?" He looked around, stroke back his locks with his left. "You have one of the cars? Look for the license, then the owner, then his mobile phone number. Then we need the cell he's booked into."

Cheb replied from the other end of the line, "That's exactly the kind of tasks we wanted to have a new computer expert in the team for. Patience, I'm on it!"



After her leather trousers, her G-string followed. She could feel the men's lecherous looks on her body. *Men! So easy to compute!*

Zoe didn't allow her nudity to trigger shameful feelings, and put aside any thought of vulnerability. It could be humiliating to have to

stand naked in front of such sleazebags. But if she did it herself, she wasn't humiliated, but proved her own strength. Not entirely been put aside was a slight shiver that sent a tender shudder across her skin, created a hint of goose bumps and let her nipples stiffen.

"Very crisp, that girl," Joe commented. Scarface only nodded. "Perhaps we could have some fun?"

"I'm soo ready," Scarface volunteered.

Whitehair nodded toward Zoe. "If you're not kindly telling everything, that can be arranged. Are you kind?"

She only stared back at him.

"Perhaps we just cut off one finger and feed it to the dogs." Whitehair glanced at Joe. "With only the knife that may take some time, but you surely have no other appointments tonight."

Zoe shook her head, slowly the outrageousness of that scenario trickled into her. But Whitehair topped it.

"Perhaps we don't cut off the finger, but feed it to the dogs anyway? Hmmm, what do you reckon?"

If she had been terrorized before, now she was just pissed off. Slowly she rose, alertly and expectantly watched by the four men. *Yes, these guys would indeed enjoy it!*



"What you got?" Matt asked again.

"Jeb's gone," April replied. "His Porsche is gone, too. We try to locate his car phone."

He only could hope that Zoe was still alive. If he got Jeb into his hands...



Zoe closed her eyes and collected herself.

Her cover wouldn't come. Surely Matt had lost contact somewhere during the wild car chase. She wasn't angry, but she still felt abandoned. She hugged this feeling, soaked it up, let her loneliness gain strength, converted it into tension, energy. Her senses became more acute, more precise, more focused.

One after another, she blanked out the pain in her kidneys, in arms and legs, at her ribcage, concentrated on the cold, harsh concrete under her feet. In front of her she sensed Joe's heavy breath, smelled his sweat, felt the slight trembling of his knife hand. To the right Whitehair stood with his silver gun that had lowered a few degrees to the floor, with a strong heartbeat that rang in her ears. To Joe's left Scarface waited with the heavy belt and suppressed a tickle in his throat. At the door, Blackbeard struggled to restrain the two curs who tore at their leashes while salivating and hackling.

Joe shrank back, startled as she abruptly opened her eyes.

Her left hand batted his knife hand away, two fingers of her right drove into his eye sockets, tore his skull around, flung it into the barrel of the upward jerking silver gun. A kick to the left crushed Scarface's knee.

Her left hand now unwound Joe's knife, just in time to pierce the throat of the first pitbull who tried to jump at her neck. A well-aimed kick held the second dog shortly at bay, then she had freed her fingers from Joe's skull, turned a standing somersault over Whitehair and swept him off his feet. Blackbeard's retreat was spoiled by Joe's knife, which suddenly stuck in his back up to the hilt.

Zoe assisted Whitehair with aiming and shot down the second pitbull before she broke his right wrist with a jerk. Then she studied her situation.

Two dead dogs, one blinded, one quadriplegic and one knee-lame thug, only Whitehair considered resistance until Zoe shot both his feet.

"Now your turn to answer a few questions," she declared.

"Go fuck yourself," Whitehair replied through clenched teeth.

Zoe ambled over to Blackbeard and jerked out the knife, ignored the gush of blood that followed. "Oh, that was a declaration, not a request."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jeb opened the steel door behind which he knew his people questioning. Luckily, he had safeguarded his office computer with an independent signal—every time it was switched on he got a short message to his mobile—which, of course, he only could receive outside. His own startup procedure every morning assured him of the operability of the system. When the computer had started tonight, he immediately had sent out a team and they had soon been able to report him about their catch. Surely, the girl was well worn down by now.

In the center of the room, two dogs' carcasses lay in a large puddle of blood. On the opposite wall he could detect the shapes of four human bodies, the wall itself covered with sprays of blood, the floor shining from a sea of blood that only had started to dry out at the borders, all in all like a picture from Dante's *Inferno*. As he approached and had a closer look, he could spot

the rusty-red stained white of blanked bones and felt nausea coming up. What in the devil's name had happened? And where was the bloody treacherous bitch? He turned to leave.

A blood-red stained, stark naked body dangled upside down in front of him, legs hooked into one of the steel rails, a grin on her face and a silver gun in her right hand, the gun-barrel darkly yawning at him.

"Hi, boss!" Her left hand reached up to a rail, her legs unfastened, and with catlike agility she came to a stand in front of him, the gun-barrel aimed at him uninterruptedly. "Time for an interview!"



When Matt spotted the black Porsche in the half-dark front of the old market hall where the mobile phone positioning had led him, it was a load off his mind. If Jeb was here, Zoe might be here, too – and possibly alive! He stopped and got out.

The market hall suddenly gleamed in a tremendous ball of fire, making him duck. Shit! Had he come too late?

Then he saw a slim silhouette slowly coming closer with swinging hips. The flaring yellow shine of the fire played wildly over the female body with dark red hair and only dressed in body

paint... Zoe! Relieved he was about to rush up to her as he suddenly realized what kind this *body paint* was made of. And Zoe sang with forceful voice, as an a cappella double of Annie Lennox, *I saved the world today*.

After a few lines, her voice broke, and, completely powerless, she staggered into his arms.



He had placed her on the back seat of his car, had spread his jacket over her — fuck the bloodstains! — and drove her to Operation Central. By phone, he had informed Cheb, then he had carefully prepared April in what condition he would bring Zoe in. She deserved every bloody bit of sympathy that his team could muster.

To his amazement she hadn't asked for anything but a warm blanket and a coffee, wanted to deliver her report first — *while I'm not yet aware of what I'm remembering*, she had said.

It had been a bizarre situation—a blood-covered naked woman surrounded by her team, who had reported with emotionless voice first how she had successfully intruded her company, then—without change of inflection—soberly how she had retrieved every little detail first from the four thugs then from her boss with the aid of a knife, while around her the team had to fight

raising nausea as well as anger.

When she finally finished by narrating how she had explained to Jeb who was hooked to the steel rails that he wouldn't have to fear he might scream in the fire that would burn him, because then he wouldn't have vocal chords for screaming any more, there was silence for several minutes, while Zoe drank her coffee.

The faces around her mirrored anger and terror. About what the men were up to, what they were willing to do for money. About themselves, that they hadn't been able to give Zoe cover. About that they couldn't tell Jeb himself what they thought about his plan.



After a while Zoe rose, letting the blanket drop to the couch and stepped to the balcony, let her gaze sweep the roofs of the city, the name of which she didn't want to remember, the city that had nurtured a snake at her bosom whose act and will lay far beyond any imagination, had nothing, really nothing to do with the simple, disagreeable trading of software for the purpose of warfare. It was over. She dreamed of Mark Knopfler's *Brothers in Arms*.

Yes, she felt hurt. But Matt had finally found her, the team had not deserted her.



Matt stepped up to her and listened to the steady breath of the woman who had walked hell but didn't dissemble any sign of the terror that had caught them all.

"How do you do it?" She would know what he meant.

"The only useful kind of self-deception is if you can persuade yourself to be strong."

"Cool quote," he replied. "Whose?"

She turned to him, still seemingly unaware of her own nudity. "Mine."

**BOOK THREE:
LIONESS' CLAWS**

CHAPTER ONE

While a different team had decrypted the data submitted by the mobile phone, Zoe had spent the larger part of the remaining night either dictating the results of her *interview* to Matt and April or writing them down herself.

Not until she was finished had she allowed herself to fall into an uneasy sleep on the couch in the team room. Her toned, well-shaped female body, still nude and largely covered with rust-red, clotted stains like Siegfried after his bath in Fafnir's blood, offered a bizarre, almost demon-like view to the team and yet she now appeared rather vulnerable to the four who had listened to her report.

All four had solved numerous assignments and had taken some for themselves, they knew the risk. Zoe hadn't known. At least not like this. She had been hired to the team for shielded, background tasks, not for a front line assignment. It had looked comparably easy—sneak into her own office, some minutes at the keyboard, out

again and back under the team's wings. They all had assumed this would have been the entire job. But their opponent had reacted much too fast and too fervently. Alone and unarmed she'd had to stand up against four partially armed thugs and two savage dogs and she hadn't got more than a few scratches and bruises. None of that blood was her own. Still they felt guilty because they hadn't been able to give her cover as they had planned.

April finally picked up the woolen blanket and spread it over Zoe, affectionately stroking her bloodstained hair.



The team had moved to the kitchen to let Zoe sleep. The decryption team had just called.

Matt summarized the findings from Zoe's interview and the first impressions of the captured data.

The server in Jeb's company, Zoe's temporary employer, had held two software packages. One package contained a Trojan Horse that served to build a simple botnet, which could easily be triggered to interrupt the entire internet traffic by simultaneously accessing DNS servers and other neuralgic points. The second component in the same package was a control program that mainly would transmit the *spark* due moment to the

distributed bots. Someone else had, according to Zoe's ex-boss, already cared for the distribution of the Trojans. They weren't very sophisticated, as the analysis team had said, only put together from readily available parts. Inconspicuous.

The second software was simple-knit but more interesting—it only served to trigger a single impulse on a USB port at a point in time also received via the Internet.

Jeb hadn't known all the details, but what he had known he had revealed—the first Trojan should cause confusion and draw off the attention from the important action that should take place in all larger cities worldwide simultaneously. Involved were larger amounts of biological warfare agents of unknown quality, computer-controlled valves for small gas cylinders with a USB plug, which were connected to computers in rental apartments in the central areas of all large cities of the G8 industry nations worldwide.

Jeb should receive a warning shortly before initiation and was prepared to travel to South Africa within the same day.

"What does that mean?" Matt asked to the circle of aghast faces. "Five hundred cities? In centers with fifty thousand people each?"

Matt dropped the suitcase phone receiver. The device looked bulky and clumsy in the age of

mobile phones, but it served a special purpose.

"Okay, we've got priority One," he announced.

"And what does it mean?" April asked back. She had a rough idea, but she wanted to hear it from Matt, who took a deep breath.

"First, that we now have to save the lives of about twenty-five million people worldwide. Second, that I have to explain to the President within two hours where he can send the Air Force and Marines."

April chuckled and Matt feigned a frown.

"So. Where are the initiators?"

Zoe was awake again and came to the kitchen. Matt summarized the results of their last counsel and pointed to a flipchart. "The botnet can practically be triggered from everywhere, as well as the probably already mounted computers that surely will be activated through the Internet as well. We don't know how much time we've got. We don't know how soon Jeb's disappearing will be noticed. We don't have the slightest chance to identify all apartments and we can't inoculate the people because we don't know what to inoculate them against. Not to mention the large number. That's as far as we got with the exclusion method."

While Zoe determinedly walked up to the coffeemaker where a half-empty can slowly cooled

down, Matt continued, "Now let's see what we could do. Ideas?"

April was the first to pipe up, "We could listen around if there are any unusual events about biological substances."

Cheb nodded. "The modified valves must be built somewhere. That's not available off-the-shelf."

Rico added, "And the gas containers themselves?"

"Right," April emphasized. "And with pressure cylinders, otherwise nothing would happen."

Matt duly took notes on a new flipchart sheet. "Rico?"

"The apartments. In the central areas everything will be handled by agents. And all with telephone and internet."

Zoe sipped from her lukewarm coffee. "And no traffic on the lines."

"Someone must have bought a large amount of computers," Cheb added and frowned, "or many small amounts?"

Zoe nodded, "For the desired effect they needn't be alike. USB ports have been common for years."

Matt nodded and wrote it down. "Other ideas?"

Zoe put down her coffee cup. "We'll install a few honeypots with the captured Trojans so we

can spot the initiation signal. Then we'll have an advance warning. Sadly, we'll only know when it happens how much advance they've planned. Minutes or days."

"Okay, I'll tell that to the analysts, they already know the software."

"Another thing we can do," Zoe added, "Jeb has sent out a tenant once. We have to find him, visit the apartments he rented and check the installation there. The trigger will tell us more about the plan. And perhaps we'll have a chance to hack into the other installations to deactivate them."

Matt diligently wrote on. New sheet. He looked around.

"What about the masterminds? What did Jeb know?" Rico asked.

"Not enough," Zoe replied, "in this regard they were cautious. Always contacts per paper slip under the door or meetings in dark spots where he wasn't allowed to look at them, never by phone or mail."

"Did he conceal anything?" Cheb asked.

"First he bitched about how his clients would kill him," Zoe answered. "Nothing that I would threaten him with could be worse, he believed."

"And?" April inquired. "What did you threaten him with?"

"Nothing. I just did it."

For one moment, silence ruled the kitchen, while Zoe's dry, emotionless reply trickled into the team's minds and triggered different but equally unpleasant associations.

"He has revealed *everything*. The name of his grandmother, his account, his balance and his locker in Capetown, his passwords, his social security number, the phone number of his dentist, the cup size of that guy's nurse, his golf handicap, his Porsche's mileage, the amount of his tax evasion, whom he elected, his virility problems, his affection for pictures of little girls and so on."

After a pause, April suggested, "We could follow his transactions, when he had been in Capetown, his flat..." Her voice faded. "Who has called him?"

That triggered another sequence of routine tasks, which they dictated to Matt. As they were used to, Matt only collected. Suggestions weren't checked, weren't discussed, weren't pondered, there was no *but*. And no task assignment aside from Zoe's honeypots.

She was downing at her third cup of coffee, this time stretched with a lot of cocoa. She cleared her throat. "We could somewhat rain on their parade. We could trigger their bots, of course the crammers only, not the fuses. Short chaos, but then the system administrators worldwide are warned and prepared when things get serious. Or

they already have removed the pests."

Matt couldn't refrain from the objection—anyway the typical timeframe for creative ideas was over, "And the other side is warned. They don't know yet that Jeb is out of the game."

"Okay," Zoe replied, "so we hijack the bots and reprogram them."

"That's possible?"

"Almost as easy as to spread them."

"Good," Matt noted, "Do it."

"But hidden, as a private hacker. Just in case the others have a lab bot for control of success. Like our honeypot early warners. By the way I'd like to spot it."

Matt wrote everything down on a new sheet. "You get everything you need. Can you make a list? Cheb will get the stuff."

"Can I get my own coffeemaker?" Zoe asked.

"Your own personal Italian coffee brewer and accompanying orchestra. Just write it down! You'll get a team for support, test, research, back rub, everything."

Zoe grinned. "And then I'll join the spammers..."

Matt began to assign the other tasks while Zoe already had slip and pen in her hand and was busy writing. "Cheb, dig into the gas container issue..."

Afterward the team spread out. Matt and Zoe

were left alone in the kitchen.

"Well, Zoe?"

"Yes?"

"Wouldn't you like to take a shower?"

Zoe looked down her stark naked body, seemed to notice her dried, rust-red war paint for the first time. Her lips formed a voiceless "Oh," then she hurried away.

When Zoe finally reappeared in the kitchen refreshed—somewhere she had found trousers and a tee shirt—and handed Matt her order, Matt found her looking considerably better.

He told her that. She smiled at him, then she frowned. "Matt, tell me..."

"Yes?"

"What about salary? I'd like to buy a few clothes."

"Oh, right. We haven't discussed that yet," Matt observed. "No salary."

"What?"

"No salary." He searched a folder. "Oh yes, here." He offered her a credit card labeled *Zoe Lionheart*. "Between assignments or during preparations you can use this one. If you get a cover identity of course there will be different cards."

Zoe took the card and pouted. "I'd like to have some freedom with my shopping."

Matt fetched a bottle of Coke from the refrigerator. "You are entirely free."

"What does that mean?"

"No limit. As long as you don't buy Hearst Castle, you can do as you like. Once up and down Rodeo Drive. Chanel, Dior, Kenzo, whatever you prefer." Her gaze was aghast. Matt put the bottle aside and took her hand. "Would you prefer I'd offer you a monthly compensation of twenty million dollars?"

"Twenty million?"

"Um. You're right, that's penny-pinching. Forty?"

The surprised expression on her face had vanished.

Instead, Matt noticed an alert lurking.

"What's going on here?"

"You're part of an exclusive special unit. Very exclusive. Clear?"

"How exclusive exactly?"

"So exclusive that, aside from my boss and the President, only thirty or forty people know about us, including the people working for us. And even fewer of them know me by name. There are a few other teams. I don't know how many and I don't know them. And vice versa. If we're working in the same region I might receive a hint so that we don't chase each other." He took a breath. "So exclusive that money doesn't matter. Well, almost."

More than you can spend."

"I haven't tried yet," Zoe joked. "But I think I got it. More than I could want to spend typically."

"You got it," Matt confirmed. "By the way, there's another thing."

"Yes?" Zoe had reached the door already and turned around.

"I've talked with my boss. You need a cover as a hacker, that's okay. But you must go to the training. He said, *if it's getting too hot now she needs the full program or she's out.*"

CHAPTER TWO

One week later, Wyatt called on the phone. Not much progress with their research. Then they arrived at the topic that was almost closer to Matt's heart.

"How's Zoe doing? Did she pass the tests?"

Wyatt grumbled something incoherent. "Yesterday we had martial arts on the agenda. We let her confront Kim on the mat."

Shit. Kim was the organization's best man in martial arts. Matt listened on.

"She had to take a lot in the beginning. Kim knows a lot of dirty tricks. It was incredible."

"Why?"

"She didn't let any trick happen twice, became faster and faster. Then she turned the tables and put him down. Applied a neck lever."

Matt knew that. "And?"

"He tapped, of course."

Of course, that's what he had done himself. Before he had tried...what had happened? Wyatt

sounded reserved.

"Then she helped him up and as soon as he stood he had swept her from her feet and was over her. Didn't look good. But she was back to her feet like a cat—I've never seen someone moving so fast—and then..." Wyatt's voice faded.

"And then?" Matt probed and touched his healed nose.

"Then she finished him good and proper. She didn't let him tap again. Cold as ice and controlled. No irreversible damage, no serious injuries. But all that hurts. Until he fainted. Then she provided first aid and passed the doctors as she left."

"And then you took her to task." Matt knew Wyatt, that was a statement.

"She only said, if you play without rules you have to take it as I play it. Fairness is reciprocal." Wyatt sighed. "And because she hadn't broken Kim's bones, that's been it. And I thought, let's see how she does on the Course and sent her over."

Of course Matt knew the Course, too—a series of labyrinthine storage halls with folding plates, light effects and all kinds of tricks. You were given a pistol, several spare magazines and the objective was to reach the exit within a given time limit. The route differed every time. One point scored for every hit, one point deducted for hits on the moving plates of hostages and innocents,

sometimes almost indistinguishable in the weak or flaring light. And a few armed targets dressed like hostages. Ammunition was tight—you could only afford ten misses. And the slower you were, the more your opponents were controlled as *alert* by the powerful simulation program—in any case the ten-minute schedule allowed for perhaps a one-minute delay.

After long years of training in different police units he had scored ninety-nine of a hundred points, thus reaching the top ten of the all time best scores.

To pass, Zoe would have needed sixty points, he wouldn't put that past her. "And how did she cope?"

Wyatt clicked his tongue. "After the show with Kim, I've sped the simulation up by thirty percent. I wanted to see what she's got."

"Thirty percent?" Matt cried out. "That's a fucking unfair—"

"Shut up," Wyatt snubbed him, "and listen, she's undercut the limit by another minute. Score one hundred, ten rounds left."

Matt's thoughts raced. Six minutes for the Course and one hundred flawless hits? "Bite me!"

"Exactly," Wyatt replied over the phone, "and every fucking hit right between the eyes, with no more than one millimeter scatter. She's the damned most efficient and most precise killing

machine I've ever seen. Can you imagine what's going on here? Many have seen what she's done to Kim. And now that."

"And how does Zoe get along?" Matt asked and imagined how the colleagues in the training center stared at her with open jaws like to an extraterrestrial.

"She went to the makeshift weapons class, took the ABC track in the evening, then to her room. No comment about her result. This morning she appeared and asked for the next point on the agenda. Large calibers."

Matt frowned. "And now?"

"I'll send her back to you tonight. She's ready for business. But I give you one piece of advice, don't hand her a nuke if you don't want her to use it. Bye."

Cheb and April watched their team lead curiously and inquiringly. He threw the phone into one corner of the couch and looked from one to the other. "A hundred points in six minutes."

"Holy virgin Mary," Cheb uttered, "how can she do that?"

CHAPTER THREE

When the doorbell rang, Matt happily hurried to the door. Zoe was back! He had to admit that he had missed her, far beyond the purely professional necessity. She was an enrichment for the team—straightforward, honest and uncomplicated and she spread out a sometimes hardly understandable amount of optimism that did good to the team's mood—as long as you didn't remind her of her experiences. And he liked her. Just chummy, he tried to convince himself. Yes, she looked good. And everyone had seen her nude. Nevertheless...somehow she managed to appear dressed when she was nude—and to appear nude when she was completely and decently dressed. Just one look from her...

Matt opened the door and his thoughts made room for the deepest dismay. In front of him stood a trembling sheaf of woman that barely could keep herself upright, with deeply hollowed cheeks, dark rings under her eyes, pale as a

corpse, and fell into his arms.

"Cheb!" he roared.

"What did you do to Zoe?" Matt yelled at the phone while Cheb tried to instill a cup of hot beef broth into his teammate, wrapped in blankets, resting on his couch. An intravenous drip, which April held above her, was tucked in her arm.

"What are you talking about?" Wyatt gave back. "She was here for the common crash course. Cars, technology, fitness, martial arts, the Course, large calibers during the day, physics, ABC defense, psychological warfare and defense—just the usual. Not much time for leisure, of course."

Matt tried to calm down, took a deep breath. "Pulse is one-seventy, blood pressure forty by ninety, shallow breath, thirty-five point three degrees Celsius, blood sugar negligible and pale as a wall. April reckons with such figures she should long be dead."

From the other end of the line sounded a muted, "Shit." Then, louder again, "She left us like the incarnation of life, ready for the Olympics. Perfect."

"And now I've got the walking dead on my couch." Matt uttered a long line of four-letter-words. When he couldn't find new ones, he started over. He finally had to pause.

Wyatt jumped in, "I'll send you Doc Holiday.

By jet, right now. Then we'll continue talking."

Wyatt had hung up. So it would be Doc Holiday. He had gotten this nickname because most of his patients needed longer holidays. Mostly he treated the victims of poison or biological attacks or those agents who had suffered the most severe injuries. He was as a physician as well as a psychologist, one of the best experts one could get. They couldn't call just any doctor without compromising their mission, just as they couldn't feed Zoe to the wolves in the next hospital.

Matt walked to the couch and took away the cup from Cheb. "Get to the airport. Wyatt is sending Doc Holiday over."

He caressed Zoe's hair. She wearily looked at him and put an ice-cold hand on his lower arm. It seemed to him she tried to say something and he leaned down. She could only issue one syllable. It sounded like *shock*.

No, not shock. What did she mean? Then it clicked. "April? Get cocoa and chocolate. Bitter. Go."

Matt took the infusion bottle from her and April hurried to the door.

Zoe looked so miserably wretched that it tore Matt's heart apart. But still that other issue was nagging in his head like a little devil—he still had to save the world!

After the third cup of hot coffee and two chocolate bars Zoe's spirits seemed to return. Temperature, blood pressure and blood sugar slowly rose, making Matt's hope raise as well.

Sometime later Doc Holiday only could confirm this trend. He still requested every detail on the symptoms and how her condition had improved. Following the standard infusion from the team's emergency box he prescribed Zoe another dose of *power injection*.

Then he questioned Matt about Zoe's last assignment, about his previous experience, similar symptoms from the past. He repeated the same questions to Zoe. Then he called Wyatt from the next room and let him explain in detail the events of her training week.

After another examination of his patient, a blood sample and giving some directions for her treatment, he let Cheb drive him back to the airport.

"I'll come back tomorrow. I have to check something."

Matt sat on the couch in the living room balancing his notebook on his knees, when Zoe came in. He looked up. "How are you?"

"Totally fucked up. What about you?"

She looked pale and delicate, but at least not

like the living corpse of the previous day, and nibbled from a power bar. The white tank top with the pale rose paste gems that formed the lettering *Bitch* formed a very nice contrast with the tight black Gucci jeans. Her toenails were freshly polished cherry-red and her hair was carefully done wild.

"So-so," he replied and dropped the computer into the cushions next to him. Then he massaged the heated upper legs of his classic blue Levi's, rose, stroked his fingers through his messy blond curls and pulled up one arm of his black, undecorated tee shirt. "Coffee?"

"Gladly."

Zoe followed him into the kitchen.

Matt determinedly headed toward a brand new full automatic coffeemaker.

"Oh!" she cried with delight.

Matt smiled. "Rico found it last night. What would you like?"

"Espresso doppio please."

Matt placed a cup under the spout and pressed a key. The machine started up with a loud howl of the grinder.

Zoe asked, "And? Already found out something?"

Matt turned toward her. "We've focused on LA for the moment. Do you know how many matching, that is recently newly leased apartments

with negligible gas and power consumption there are? And how many unused internet connections?"

"Any correlations between them?" Zoe asked, while the first drops of coffee trickled into the cup.

Matt nodded. "Sure. Only two thousand left. And we'll do them one by one."

Both watched the coffee run.

Then Matt placed the cup on its saucer and handed it to Zoe.

She reached for it and disagreed, "Tut. Give me the list." She went back to the living room with her cup. There she started her notebook that she had trusted to the *bus driver* Matt before her last working day. He handed her a memory stick with the data, which Zoe plugged in shortly to copy the list.

Then she began to re-sort the data. Apartments by region. Internet connections by provider, then by NPA/NXX-coding, registration addresses, billing data. By pressing a key a window with a text that appeared encrypted to Matt, a program code popped up. Zoe moved a few lines around, changed some words here, added a list there. "The computers we are looking for must be permanently online and watch for signals. So you can see them."

"Wait," Matt interrupted, "we don't want to warn them."

“Don’t worry. Port scans are a common thing, they have hundreds of them every day. That doesn’t stir anyone. To be sure, I won’t scan just those we are looking for.”

A few more edits, save, test, then Zoe started a virtual machine not to completely expose her notebook and let it make contact with the cyberspace.

Her coffee had cooled down to drinking temperature and she enjoyed it in small sips as she watched her computer work.



Fascinated, Doc Holiday watched the recording of Zoe’s passage through the heavy weapons course. The accelerated handgun course had already been insightful, but the swift dexterity with which she scurried through the training shell and flash powder explosions and casually distributed hand grenades and bazooka rockets looked more like a carefully choreographed, martial-yet-rhythmic dance than a dangerous exercise.

Wyatt hadn’t mentioned it to Matt, but Zoe had passed this test not only with a perfect score but in record time. He was especially taken with one scene where she had to cross a wide square between two rows of houses. He noted of the video time codes of start and end.



After they'd had lunch together, where Zoe—to the great amazement of the entire team—had devoured several takeaway servings of pizza, Chop Suey and tacos, only interrupted by a sip of an energy drink here and there, Zoe presented a much shorter list. It contained twenty-nine addresses.

"I've removed all that are entirely offline, probably not even plugged in. As well as those that have only recently commenced regular use. Some are online, unused, but completely shut off, in such a way that an activation signal couldn't get inside. The ones left are those that don't do anything but listen. Some of them are totally open, so that everyone could hack inside. That could be one or two honeypots of other parties. Some only listen on ports that we're not interested in." She paused shortly. "And the last group is the twenty-nine computers that have closed the delicate doors and left the window to our signal emitter wide open. Our targets."



Carefully Doc Holiday measured the route across the square three times. It had almost exactly one

hundred and seven meters in length. Likewise, he had carefully re-checked the time codes, then he had filmed a calibrated timer with the same camera. The result was just under seven and a half seconds, about forty percent faster than the current world record over one hundred meters. For men. And Zoe had completed the entire course, about half an hour long, at this speed.

That way her body had supposedly used up a lot more reserves than normal, which had led to her almost-collapse after an astonishing long time lag. It surely would be of scientific interest to measure this consequently, but first he had a patient and a responsibility.

He switched off the camera and monitor, extracted the video tape, walked over to Wyatt and handed him the recordings of Zoe. "That's top secret effective immediately, only to be accessed by you, Matt and myself."

"And now?"

"Now I go fly back to my patient."

CHAPTER FOUR

“Tonight we’ll start,” Matt announced, “to have a look at these apartments. Cheb will retrieve a car and access, Rico our coverage. April, we might need protective clothing and countermeasures.”

All three nodded. Zoe watched Matt expectantly.

He returned her look. “Zoe, you should rest a bit more.”

“Negative,” she replied calmly, although the rebuff hurt her inside. Sure, she’d had a bad personal low, but she already felt much better and until this evening and after another hearty meal she felt completely recovered. But that wasn’t her point. “Who will examine the computer if you find one?”

“We’ll bring it back to you,” Matt explained, “you needn’t come along for that.”

“Negative,” Zoe repeated, “except you’d like to light a beacon for the opposition.”

Matt appeared clueless.

"What I can do," Zoe continued, "the others can do as well, use a port scan to check if their machines are still alive. They don't know their cram bots' distribution, but they know exactly how many fuse bots should reply. If you take one off the net, it will be noticed."

"But not your scans, you're sure about that?"

Zoe nodded and grinned. "The software we found simply can't. Or they'll get a lot of false alarms every hour. I've scanned their computers for an MP3 music swap client, they won't have second thoughts about that."

"Okay." Matt slowly nodded. "For all I care you're in." He looked at his team—no objections. He knew them long enough to spot any reservations—and they all knew they could be frank with him.



This time April had picked up Doc, as she had wanted to use the time to ask him about some medical aspects of her task. She couldn't avoid making him feel more and more uncomfortable by the direction of her questions alone. Usually he wasn't informed about the tasks of field agents, but the mentioning of biological warfare substances and potential cures made clear that this

team was dealing with some burning hot assignment. He memorized some ideas on the composition and necessary equipment of a rescue team.

After arriving at the apartment that the team used as the operation center, at a wave of his hand Matt took him aside first. Both retreated into an adjoining room.

"And?" Matt asked impatiently. Doc considered where to start.

"She's running the hundred meters in seven and a half seconds."

Matt didn't respond.

"Okay," Doc added, "Justin Gatlin needs 9.76 seconds for the same distance. That's the world record."

Matt still mused. "You're saying she performed a super record sprint and has overstrained herself?"

"No. I'm about to say she has covered the entire heavy weapons course at this speed and has totally drained herself with a half-hour sprint marathon. I've got no clue how she can do that, but it must have devastated her reserves."

"Bloody hell!" Matt clapped his hand against the doorframe. "That fits. She's devouring nutrient-rich food like a black hole and regenerates so fast that you can watch it."

He gave Doc a piercing glance.

“And? Does she know?”



Interested and without interrupts Zoe listened as Doc unfolded his findings. She furrowed her brows when he stated that he had no medical explanation for her noticeable *talent*.

“I can’t explain it either,” she finally said, “I didn’t know anything about it. I’ve never noticed anything special.”

“But me,” Matt replied and rubbed his nose.

“I’ve got the impression everybody knew it except me,” Zoe complained. “Sure I’ve noticed I’ve passed the shooting course well, I knew I had scored. But nobody has told me that bloody thing had been sped up.”

“And what about Kim?” Matt dug deeper.

“Well, what? He played like a bad-ass, so I’ve paid him out in his own coin.” And, with a side glance to Matt, “Somehow that seems to be common here, knock the stuffing out of colleagues with rotten tricks. As you like. In Phoenix I decided not to back out anymore.”

Matt nodded approvingly. “I guess we have to take that criticism. Please believe me when I say such things don’t normally happen on an assignment. We are one team, we depend on each other.” He waved her objection aside. “What I was

up to, Kim was the best. He knew all the tricks. And he had no chance against you."

"After all I've training for some years now."

"Granted, but that wouldn't have been sufficient. You've been too fast for him, much too fast."

Zoe bit her lower lip. "So I'm a monster? A freak?"

Doc felt the urge to intervene. This discussion was taking a dangerous course. "Do you feel like a monster? No, to be more precise, did you feel like a monster until now?"

Her initial *Yes* got stuck. Zoe pondered the question. "No. Not yet."

"You see? No, you are no monster. Your blood sample shows signs of deficiencies, but nothing inhuman. Like a marathon runner who joins too many competitions. Did you deal with that topic before?"

She nodded. "I didn't have the impression to hit the wall. Shouldn't I have noticed it?"

"Perhaps," Doc Holiday admitted, "but you didn't trot along some contemplative jogging track, but on the course you were distracted and under high pressure. You may have missed or misinterpreted it. I'd like to put you to the treadmill with some measurement patches, but I reckon you've got more important things to do, right?"

Both nodded.

“Well, I’d recommend you fuel up properly after all the athletics so you don’t nearly collapse like that again. For now you should be sufficiently well, are you?”

“Oh yes,” Zoe confirmed and smiled at the Doc. “Will you stay for dinner?”



Rico and Cheb carried several heavy boxes in, distributed them on the living room floor and unfolded them. A small assortment of weaponry appeared—although smaller than Zoe would have expected based on common Hollywood clichés.

She already wore her bike leathers that had proven useful during her application interview—robust but flexible leather trousers, matte-black leather corset. And the hidden, very slim boot knife. The team was similarly dressed—Matt in black jeans, cowboy boots and a dark-blue tee shirt, Cheb in classical black corded leathers, April in dark claret—leather trousers and sweatshirt—and finally Rico in dark blue jeans and olive green pullover. All except Zoe already wore a shoulder holster for which Rico, squatting close to the weapons box, handed them their guns and spare magazines. When he had served all but Zoe, he smiled up at her.

“And the princess’ order?”

With everyone else, this label would have sounded snotty or pejorative. For Rico, it was just a proof of his fondness, Zoe already knew. From the depths of his box, he magically produced a sturdy double holster. Devoutly he reached inside again and produced a pair of big black pistols that he handed her by the handle first.

“Two Glock 32s, with larger magazines. Fully loaded and secured.”

Zoe raised both compact, heavy weapons slowly to eye-level, test-wise aimed to a point at the empty wall. Then, with a quick twist of her hands, she let them both disappear in the holster, reproduced them with another likewise quick and elegant movement and put them away again. “They’re resting perfectly in my hand,” she complimented Rico and smiled. “Thank you for the fine choice.”

Rico visibly melted away. Finally, after a short pause, he handed her the spare magazines.

Matt got a word in. “What’s going on between you two?” he asked impishly. He nevertheless couldn’t help for high brows on her equipment—until now Rico, who as always wore his two Heckler&Koch P12s, had been the only one to use two weapons simultaneously.

“Princess said to me she needs two proper, precise guns with large magazines and certain

clout, if she's joining another operation. And she'd let me choose. I've asked her which ones she knows and how she got along so far, so I got the Glocks. Twice seventeen rounds after all. Three-fifty-seven. *That* thing will stop a bear."



Twice seventeen rounds with Zoe gave thirty-four stone-dead opponents without reload, Matt calculated with a shudder. But he had been through enough *simple* external jobs to be thankful for every bit of additional firepower. And he knew Zoe could get along, even without proof from the training course.

CHAPTER FIVE

Zoe wouldn't have been surprised if Cheb had organized a black, pimped-up van, A-Team style. But their vehicle was a common dark-green Chrysler Voyager with tinted windows and a Hertz sticker.

It wouldn't attract attention as they parked it in a side street in downtown LA if it hadn't been late evening. At this time though, the city was dead. Ordinary residents parked in their garage or a closed parking space, not on the street. Only tourists got out of line. For a disguise, Cheb placed a worn French California tourist guide on the dash before they went off.

The big backpacks weren't completely inconspicuous either. But they reached their target unnoticed—a leased apartment on the sixth floor of a building in need of renovations, with a rumbling elevator and a greasy linoleum floor.

The team stopped in front of the apartment door. Zoe waited for Cheb to produce a picklock

or for Rico to kick the door open, but nothing like that happened.

Matt twinkled at her. "Watch and learn!"

So she watched attentively as Cheb swept across the door with a device that looked like a circuit tester. Then he produced an endoscope with a little screen from his backpack that he pushed under the door very slowly, then moved it back and forth with easy movements of his fingers.

"Bingo!" Cheb turned to them. "A simple wire trip with little allowance. Everything else is clean."

Now the expected picklock came into use, then pliers for the wire and the door swung open. Cheb took a glance inside and whistled gently through his teeth.

The others followed and immediately recognized what he had spotted—the cut wire led to a considerably large clay package—explosives—enough to blow the entire apartment across the street and also crush everybody who waited in the corridor behind the wall.

"Expensive toy," Rico commented, "if they've done it like that in every apartment."

With a confident pick he removed the wire and the attached fuse.

Then they stepped through the door into the living room and saw the infernal machine.

From the phone plug at the wall, a short patch wire lead to a router, from there to a cheap Radio Shack computer. From there again a USB cable reached to the head of a CO₂ gas container that was placed directly in front of the blocked open window. A smaller, bright yellow metal cartridge with a skull symbol, the deadly payload, was mounted to the head.

Zoe cursed. "Idiot me. Dumbass. Blockhead. Moron. Damned bloody fool."

The reason was obvious. She couldn't do anything on this computer. Screen and keyboard were useless for the completed installation.



"What will happen if we pull the plug?" Matt asked while Cheb diligently studied the gas container's valves and April closed and sealed the window with some compound. "Will the valve open then?"

"Don't know," Cheb replied. "Probably not but I wouldn't bet on it."

He already closed the valve of the ordinary gas container. Without pressure, fewer things could go wrong. Then he closed the smaller valve of the small cartridge. He fetched a little syringe from the backpack. With a quick-hardening paste, he sealed the outward pointing nozzle.

"No more pressure. Now the valve can open."

He reached for the USB plug to pull it from the valve.

"Stop!" Zoe commanded.

Cheb paused automatically. "Why?"

"First," Zoe began, "we don't know what's inside the computer. If they're working so lavishly with explosives at the door..."

Cheb nodded.

"Second, it's possible that the computer will send a signal if a USB device is removed."

"I thought the fuse software can only trigger the USB port?" Matt mused.

"Correct," Zoe replied, "but do you know which other software is on this box?"

"Okay. What do you propose?"

Zoe had already fetched her notebook. "First I replace the computer with a mock-up." She had prepared the device so that it would appear to an examination over the Internet like the real computer, that is, the right ports were open. It would show every specific access attempt.

While her mock-up booted, Cheb examined the computer with a sniffer. "No explosive emissions."

The patch wire was quickly replaced. Now they had to hope that the computer would not specifically react to this, but on the other hand a router interruption wasn't uncommon. She

wouldn't tie a treacherous reaction or a premature trigger to it. Then she gave Cheb a nod. "Now you can pull the other plug."

Next, she booted her own notebook. "I need fifteen minutes preparation," she declared.

Matt nodded and turned to April, "Meanwhile we'll try to secure the cartridge."

The challenge consisted of the substance that could have spread to the T-piece after the first opening of the cartridge's valve. None of them had the least interest in experiencing the effects first-hand.

April and Matt unfolded a large piece of a convoluted plastic bundle. Then Rico and Cheb had to help lift the gas container to move the plastic film underneath it. Wrenches of suitable size were placed on the film bottom. Now they could uncoil the strong, tear-proof film up around the gas container installation and close the top. A small gas bottle then filled the double-walled film with colored gas and made it erect to a dome shape. As a side effect, it produced negative pressure inside the dome. Every leakage would be indicated by a colored gush of gas.

Two recesses and a bulge were only vaguely recognizable, which changed for two of them as April pushed her arms into the film sleeves.

Next, she picked up the tools placed inside and began to unfasten the metal cartridge. The last full

revolution yielded with a jolt, the yellow cartridge sprang away.

April could just catch the cartridge but had to let the wrench drop, which hit the film-covered floor with a loud clanging noise.

Cheb, Rico, Matt and April looked at each other, looked to the floor. No gas vapor. All four took a deep breath. Then April fetched the small cartridge at the valve with a tight grip of her hand.

It wandered into a film bag that was part of the bulge and was quickly sealed off. A precise closing mechanism with a heated knife between two brass muffles hopefully would allow the safe dismantling of the outer film bag, which Matt fetched and quickly placed in a sturdy, foam-padded steel container with fat sealing.

"Secured," he proclaimed with relief and handed the closed container to April as soon as she'd freed her arms from the film dome.

Zoe was ready. She pulled a USB stick out of one pocket and inserted it into the unfamiliar computer.

A moment later several lights flashed.

"It's working," she stated and added an external hard disk. "They didn't disable the autostart feature. The stick will pull a complete image of this computer to the hard disk."

CHAPTER SIX

Silently and patiently, the team waited for Zoe's program to finish its work. The film dome had to remain erected, they hadn't brought the means for a complete decontamination. This cleanup work would be left to others.

The atmosphere switched to alert tension as the creaking and crumbling of the elevator could be heard from outside. With a few silent steps, Rico and Matt reached the apartment door, followed by Cheb with his endoscope. April gave Zoe a questioning glance and pointed at the computer. Zoe shrugged, without a monitor, she had no way to check the progress.

The rattling of opening elevator doors sounded. Through the living room door Matt gestured his findings—six men, armed, full automatic weapons.

Zoe shrugged again.

Matt added another signal. Zoe didn't immediately recognize it. But when April

distributed the ABC protective masks she remembered. This could only become ugly.

Zoe's program was finished, the hard disk's writing LED went dark. In a few quick steps, she disconnected her equipment, replaced the network connection back to the original computer and slid the stick, hard disk and both notebooks into her backpack.

April with her container disappeared into the kitchen, while Zoe followed. Cheb already had opened the window, which triggered uncomfortable memories for Zoe. He just fastened the clamp of a thin rope to the sill. Gloves and harness were prepared for everyone.

A low hiss sounded from the apartment door. Rico and Matt retreated to the kitchen, weapons drawn. Matt pointed consecutively to Cheb, April, Zoe and the window. Cheb nodded and hooked into the rope, he would safeguard the lower end. Zoe drew a gun herself and scanned the concrete parking lot and the surrounding house fronts for conspicuous movements while Cheb slid down. With her other hand, she helped April heave the container over the sill.

The apartment door gave in with a crack. Rico's gun bellowed, a muffled cry answered, then a machine pistol started rattling, crumbs of plaster dashed across the kitchen. Matt fired several

times, too.

April was on her way, Zoe browsed the surroundings again. Nothing to see. She vaulted outside and glided down the five floors on the rope.

An ugly lead insect passed her by. Concrete shot away. From the corner of her eye she spotted the muzzle flash at the corner of the building. Her free left hand drew the Glock from its holster in a flowing motion while she swung around the rope in her downward movement. A dark human silhouette loomed around the wall, threatened her with a metallic object, about twenty steps away. She pulled the trigger and watched with concentration how the heavy bullet pierced the upper part of the silhouette and tore it apart.

Then she landed close to April and Cheb who cowered low on the concrete ground and dashed for the corner. Like in slow motion, she watched how her target sank to the ground, but she arrived before his fall had ended.



Cheb and April had heard that Zoe had been quick on the Course. But now they saw it with their own eyes. Zoe was *fast*.



Zoe arrived at the corner with two weapons drawn as her first victim fell. She found three more persons. One had a machine gun and had just begun to level it. The second stood to the right holding an egg-shaped object in his left hand and had just pulled out a pin on a ring. Number three stood behind the second and still had his right hand in his jacket in the typical posture with which someone is about to reach to a pistol handle in a shoulder holster.

Zoe's Glocks spat fire and lead. Number one had a hole in his head before he'd had a chance to notice her consciously. Number two felt a hot pain in his chest before the impact shock numbed his senses. The bullet that hit him also penetrated number three, thwarting his attempt to get at his weapon.



Cheb saw Zoe running toward the street, heard two shots, then watched how Zoe pushed herself off a hydrant on the sidewalk and dashed back into his direction. She already squatted behind them when the sharp crack of a hand grenade sounded and a gush of fire flashed around the edge of the building.

Matt and Rico just vaulted out of the kitchen

window, shooting some rounds back into the apartment, let themselves down the rope with almost free rein. Two barrels appeared in the kitchen window, followed by two human bodies. While Rico tried to turn his weapon to the window, Cheb aimed at the left shape carefully. He didn't need to pull the trigger, however, it cracked twice behind him, both bodies in the window were thrown back.



Matt and Rico could touch the ground unhindered, then Zoe saw a small, dark, round object flying out of the window. *Hell*. One reach into her jacket, a silver disc, backswing, toss!

A strike in the air, the grenade changed its direction, sailed off to the far end of the lot.

"Grenade!" Zoe shouted and kissed the dust.

The others followed her example just in time.

The explosion crushed several parked cars but didn't harm the team.

"Go!" Zoe yelled. She already stood and fired, left and right alternating, while she slid backwards between the parking cars, improving her angle for the kitchen interior. Her bullets pierced holes in the kitchen ceiling, let concrete splinters rain down, howled ricocheting into the apartment—might perhaps prevent the grenade

caster for a moment to produce a second one.

Matt and Cheb lifted the container with the warfare agent, April hurried ahead, Rico copied Zoe's blocking fire and moved sideways.

Then they all had reached the street, safe from further grenades from the kitchen. They ran toward their car.

"Those were Jeb's men," Zoe informed Matt. "I recognized one of them, he was in the office once."



"Stop!" Cheb shouted, shortly before April could reach the car. "Check!"

April stopped abruptly, gave Cheb a thankful nod and cast herself on the ground in front of the car. With a small Maglite, she examined the car bottom. "Bingo!"

Zoe guessed what her mate meant—an explosive surprise.

Matt already looked around. Several larger cars parked on another parking lot on the opposite side, his gaze landed on a sturdy GMC pickup with extended cab. With a gentle pull on his side of the container, he gave Cheb the new direction while Zoe and Rico watched the street.

Shortly later, they had crammed themselves into the lock-picked and hotwired pickup and were on their way heading southeast.

"Where to?" Cheb asked from the driver's seat.

"405 to Los Alamitos," Matt replied, producing his mobile phone.

"What did you throw after the grenade?" Rico asked, watching for pursuers.

"A BSD boot CD," Zoe replied dryly, "just right against such devilish work."

"It's Matt," Matt cried into his phone. "I need clearance for Los Alamitos Naval Air Station and a plane with an escort."

Short pause, they heard a muffled answer on the other end. Matt shook his head although the gesture was wasted.

"The code is Pandora Four-Three-Seven-Zero and I need confirmation within two minutes."

After another pause he disconnected and shook his head again. "Cheb, push it!" Then he dialed a different number. "Matt. Pandora Four-Three-Seven-Zero. The President, please."

Cheb shot down the ramp to the highway.

"Mr. President? Yes. We have a package. Yes. No losses. I need clearance for Los Alamitos. No, Admiral Hancock refused. Okay, thank you." Matt disconnected while Cheb accelerated the heavy pickup.

Five minutes later Matt's mobile rang. He answered and listened. "Okay, thank you." He supplied their license number. Then he turned to Cheb.

“Approved. Welcomed with pomp.”

Cheb and Rico grinned, Zoe made a questioning face. “Pomp?”

“Wait and see,” Rico advised her.

Zoe asked Matt for his mobile. He looked puzzled but didn’t ask. She dialed a number, listened.

“Hello, Dennis! There was a shoot-out a few minutes ago.” She provided the address. “Tell your colleagues, the scene might be contaminated by biological warfare agents. Lionheart out.”

She hung up and looked at Matt. “Before someone’s infected.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pomp implied that at the highway exit two military police cars were waiting. The road to the Naval Air Field was thoroughly guarded by several other cars and at the gate by some armored vehicles with threatening machine guns. Along and behind the gates at least three companies of armed soldiers had formed up, but faced away from the street.

They had to stop at the gate. Matt told his story. They had to park their pickup, while two strong Marines carefully fetched the container and loaded it into a Humvee. Followed by curious glances a tall Marines officer with eagles on his epaulettes lead them across and invited them to mount the Hummer.

“Where is Admiral Hancock?” Matt asked.

“By order of the President of the United States arrested for suspicion of failing to obey an order, sir!” it bellowed back.

“Mm. There must be a misunderstanding.

Continue, Colonel," Matt replied and took the front passenger seat while his team tried to get comfortable on the back seats as far as possible.

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Rico smirked.

The Marine officer drove himself, didn't care for the lawn or other markings, their Humvee pointed straight toward the airfield. There a Cessna waited for them with running engines.



"What have you got?" Matt asked and handed Zoe a paper cup with a hot, black liquid that was served in military circles under the euphemism *coffee*, although from Zoe's point of view the justification for that could only be proven on the laboratory scale, as she had said. Immediately after landing in Edwards, Zoe had continued her work—which she had commenced on the plane—to examine the captured image of the fuse computer for weaknesses. An hour and a half later, she had leaned back and smiled for the first time. Until then Matt had patiently sat in the background and had silently waited, had observed her female shape, the strands of her hair, while on the screen in front of her letters and digits tumbled back and forth that he just didn't want to understand. His thoughts had run away

in different directions, none of which were tolerable under professional aspects.

Matt remembered.

Before their mission he had taken Doc Holiday back to the plane, Doc had worried about Zoe. "You're aware of the fine line she's walking?"

Matt had replied negatively.

"The poor girl had to take some. In her last job she had a lame duck character for her boss. No recognition, only pressure. And then? Emotional attachment leads to death penalty."

Mad had only nodded, he had remembered her story about the *Phoenix Blood Night*.

"The killer gets attention, credit, admiration, awe. She's awarded emotionally. When she kills, she has friends. That's very bad medicine."

Matt had been about to object, but then had pondered these arguments again. The psychology of culprits and victims belonged to his basic training. As he had remained silent, Doc had continued, "You know what that leads to. You have to stop it."

He had raised one hand before Matt had a chance to object.

"I can guess what's at stake. April has pestered me with questions on biological warfare agents. I know your job, and killing people is a part of it. But you have to make very clear to her that she's only doing a duty and it is not a very

commendable achievement. And credit her for her true tasks."

That Matt could do. "Sure."

He also had thought of the storehouse, something that Doc didn't know and would be better off not finding out.

But Doc wasn't finished yet. "There's another thing."

He had watched Matt. "I've noticed how you're looking at her. Yes, I know, you are a professional. Nothing's going on in the team. Laudable, but not in this case. At this moment, you're her only attachment. The only one who can reach out to her. The only one who can keep her emotionally grounded."

He had let that sink in for a moment.

"If we don't want to lose her, she needs more than a team chef. She needs a father, a brother, a friend – and, when it's due – also a lover."

"Damn."

Doc had padded Matt's shoulder.

"I tell you one thing, the problems that an affair in the team can stir are a gentle breeze compared to the trouble that an unrestrained killer off her trolley with her skills could cause us."

"Maybe. But the others..."

Doc had interrupted him, "They're ahead of you. I can see it in their faces. They know, and they approve it. They like you – and they love

Zoe. All three of them.”

It was difficult for Matt to admit his own feelings to himself. Yes, damn, he liked this girl. As a killer, she caused him goose bumps on goose bumps, but he also sensed she wasn't the ice-cold angel. It affected her and she fought to suppress the memories, to overcome them by professional distance. At her keyboard, she was the lovely girl again.

“Anything else?” he had asked.

“Yes,” Doc had replied dryly, “don't get yourself killed, that's a very negative amplifier.”

When Zoe had finally come out of her working trance, he had activated the coffee maker in the building that had been completely cleared for his team.

“No specific safeguards,” she replied and took the cup, “we just could have unplugged the lines. Except for the fuse there's nothing installed beyond the basics.”

“And? Can you hack it?”

“Can you take the candy from a baby?” she grinned back. “One touch on the button and we can install a patch to all identified computers worldwide that will disarm the fuse program.”

“Fantastic!” Matt cheered. “You're an ace! So I can give the all-clear soon!”

Her sober look didn't reflect his enthusiasm. That brought him down from his high feelings.

"What?"

"All identified computers, I said. There's no guarantee that we get them all."

"Damn." He beat his fist against the wall. "Start it anyway. The sooner the better. Do you have to stay?"

Zoe pressed the Enter key. "No."

"Then I can invite you to a late breakfast on behalf of the Air Force now."



The breakfast was better than either thought, but Zoe had replaced the coffee with hot chocolate. Gradually the sleepless, but eventful night became apparent, she felt very tired. And, well, in her leathers not fresh anymore.

"Can I get a hot shower and clean clothes somewhere?" she asked Matt.

He nodded. "Quarters are prepared for us. I would have shown you, but you had been so absorbed with your computer, I didn't want to disturb you."

Zoe rose. "Okay, let's go. Before I fall asleep sitting."

The rooms were arranged on the upper floor of the two-story-building, Matt's room was right at the stairs. He pointed to the left, "Next two doors

for the boys,” and to the right, “and for the girls. April took the outermost, she said Cheb snores.”

That left the room between Matt and April for Zoe. She entered. The room was unpretentiously furnished but clean. A blue running dress with *Air Force* embroidery, a tee shirt and boxer shorts lay on the bed. In the adjoining bathroom, someone had prepared dental care and shaving tools, shower gel and fresh towels.

Zoe checked the shower—ahhhh, hot water! Without hesitation, she dropped her mission clothes, tossed them through to the door at the bed and placed herself under the vitalizing spray.

Tensed muscles eased, pent-up thoughts gained momentum.



Matt had only planned to deliver his report by phone to Wyatt, but his boss kept him, “There’s another thing you have to know.”

“What?”

“We’ve routinely analyzed Zoe’s past during the last weeks, like we do for all new recruits. That proved more difficult due to the witness protection program because the Marshal’s Office did a good job. But we got everything together, as always.” He paused. “Everything is okay, except for the birth papers.”

"What doesn't fit?"

"Everything fits. Perfect. No mistakes, corrections, anything. Totally normal. Only...the delivering doctor has passed from old age. And a few other things—let's put it this way, we have unusually few facts documenting Zoe's first year. No witnesses, no second copies, no birth announcement. What does that remind you of?"

Matt reflected on it. "A product of the Marshal's Office?"

"Game, set and match. Exactly. A perfectly constructed story that will pass every examination, because there's nothing to examine. Clean."

"And?"

"No *and*. We stay on track. I've handed the case to a specialist and sentenced him to strictly hold his tongue. I don't want to expose Zoe if everything is okay. It can just as easily be a happenstance. However, there are a few suspicious facts about the parenthood. Nothing tangible." He took a breath. "I thought you should know."

"Okay, thank you." Matt sounded reserved.

Wyatt added thoughtfully, "It's very likely that Zoe has no clue. She was only a child when her parents died. And—as I said—the time thereafter is clean."



Matt had taken a quick shower, then stretched himself out on the bed wearing only his boxers and in his own thoughts had just closed his eyes – although it had been almost an hour – when there was a knock, the door opened almost simultaneously and a stark naked Zoe with damp hair stormed in, slamming the door shut behind her, tossed her notebook on his bed, rested her upper arms on the edge of his bed.

“I’ve got it!”

He shook his head in confusion. “What?”

“The solution. Here!” She pointed at her notebook.

Matt saw a brightly colored world map. Nested, rainbow-colored bubbles seemed to encircle the Arizona region, stretch to the north, meander across the North American continent, then grow amoeba-like toward Europe. “What’s this?”

Matt was seriously trying to ignore Zoe’s ravishing, toned slender body, especially the delicate pink rising buds on her firm breasts. Moreover, he was aware of the fact that his boxers were totally unsuited to cover his unprofessional male reaction to his sight even rudimentarily. This time the rust-red body paint was missing that had helped him before to divert himself and to concentrate on the business aspects. In addition he

felt her warm, peppermint-fresh breath at his neck, followed the line of her arm to her slender, but firm hand that pointed at the computer screen.

"I've followed the tracks of the tenants. If you dismiss some dropouts and apply a made-up fuzziness to the data and then transfer it into map coordinates, it results in a clear sequence of traveling around." Zoe's finger moved across the screen, followed the curved track which she was talking about.

Matt's thoughts followed the curved silhouette at his side, only after a while he realized what her statement indicated.

"The origin is somewhere in Arizona. With high probability in the Phoenix area."

"Fascinaaaaating," Matt drawled as her hand touched the bulge in his trousers. He should develop some plans now, summon the team...in fact...but then...



Gently Zoe lifted her notebook from the bed with her left hand and let it slide to the floor, inadvertently starting her iTunes. It started to play, oddly enough, Mousse T. vs. Hot'N'Juicy's *Horny*. Then her right hand dedicated itself to Matt's bulged boxers. "Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?" she whispered.

He raised one hand and let it gently slide up her side from her hip to the edge of her breasts. "Said Mae West to Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca."

His other hand felt its way along her upper leg.

"I'm very glad. Have you again been so preoccupied by your work that you forgot to dress up for your visit?"

She pushed his arms aside, bestrode him and began to streak across his shorts with her bush. "No, that's been calculated. I'm so horny that I can't be bothered with clothing. By the way, what's this?" She plucked at his shorts.

"Superfluous," he replied.

Zoe gently pulled the shorts down over his hips, only slightly lifting her riding position. "I've wanted to do that for a long time," she explained.

"How long?" Matt asked.

"Since our meet at the storehouse in Fresno. You looked fucking cute!" Zoe suddenly had to giggle.

Matt made a face as if he had just spotted a frog in his trousers.

She crouched on her heels and pressed her chest flat over Matt's upper legs, took his firmly erected penis into the soft hollow between her breasts and then pushed herself slowly forward. Matt rolled his eyes. Very gently, she let her nipples slide over his chest in a circling movement

before she raised up and again started to brush the tip of his manhood with her pubic hair – this time without interfering shorts. Oh, it felt good to hear him moan! But today she was too impatient. She clung to his blond curls, let his cock feel how wet she already was by stroking it with her labia several times. Then, without warning, in mid-movement, she changed direction and pulled him deep into her wet cave.

Shortly she paused, enjoyed the filled sensation between her legs. Then she started to move on him very slowly, up and down, a little bit back and forth, a little bit rotating, thereby rhythmically tensing and easing her inner muscles while her claws worked his chest, the movements of his pelvis answered her.

She watched him put his hands on her breasts, to slowly stroke her while she slowly picked up speed, still varying the direction of her movements.

Her mind cleared except for the wonderfully hard, hot sensation inside her, registered his growing tension, noticed how his rhythm slightly clenched as he had to restrain himself. She put all her strength into a few last, straightforward, fast pushes of her pelvis, firmly pressed her vaginal muscles tight, before she came with a loud moan that was promptly answered by a warm gush inside her and the sudden relaxing of his

movement.

Infinitely relieved, she let herself down on his chest, enjoyed the relaxation, began to purr like a kitten as he gently, with almost unnoticeable touch, let his fingertips glide across her back.

In the background, Chris de Burgh sang *A Woman's Heart* and Matt thought Doc Holiday couldn't have better expressed it—a man could not ignore a woman's passion or a woman's lust.

Oh no, this mistake he wouldn't make.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“O kay,” Matt began, “I’ll sum up again.”

April, Cheb, Rico and Zoe sat on several boxes in the deserted car repair garage in Phoenix which served as their provisional operation center for this mission, which was located on the outskirts of a commercial area, and which, with its rusty car hoists, tool shelves, piles of worn tires, empty fuel barrels, oil stains and puddles of hydraulic fluids, painfully reminded Zoe of Rick’s bike repair shop.

They wore the same clothes as on their last mission—they hadn’t delayed themselves with the acquisition of replacements. It had been much more important to complement their equipment in the boxes, replace used ammunition and to fill the gaps in their data. Zoe sucked from an energy cocktail with a rich share of vitamins and mineral nutrients, which Doc Holiday had mixed her. Since she took this stuff, she felt simply great.

Zoe’s first program had—hopefully!—tracked

down all fuse programs, had overwritten the fuse mechanism with a functionless routine and had logged every successful infiltration. These confirmed addresses now had to be consecutively freed from their deadly charge by Special Forces from different states.

April—together with some experts that had been taken from their sleep and placed in an Air Force plane in some cases—had managed to classify the content of the small metal cartridge in a mobile laboratory on Nellis Air Base. With high probability, it could be a genetically manipulated variant of the SARS virus in a nutrient solution. Its release in a tightly built city area would certainly have led to immediate infection of a large part of the population and subsequently to a quick epidemic spread over the surrounding suburbs.

Zoe's second program then had tracked down a potential origin from the chronological distribution of leases—Phoenix, where they were now. Once the first excitement about their discovery had faded—and Zoe had gotten from Matt what she had needed so urgently—Matt had started the painstakingly detailed work of verifying it. Some police records of not-too-long ago arrests in the Phoenix area had given another hint. Cheb then had been able to track down the special valves to Arizona, where he also could verify an order of small metal cartridges, but for a

cover address that didn't exist anymore. As it seemed, certain raw material for the biological agent had been smuggled across the Mexican border by motorcycles. The local police not only hadn't prevented it—the police commissioner himself had been involved. But all arrested had believed to be part of *ordinary* drug smuggling. The police commissioner couldn't be questioned any more. A certain *Zoe Laforge* had killed him under unexplained circumstances and then had disappeared without a trace.

Thereupon Zoe had commenced to check the internet-connected computers in Phoenix, using login, usage and address data.

Connections with gigabytes of low-grade video material of unequivocal content? Inconspicuous. Connections with sporadic long-term use but low volume, traceable to addresses like *battle.net*? Gamblers. Connections with regular poll intervals and classical chat traffic? Unlikely. Connections searching for music exchange clients with regularly scheduled port scans? To be excluded. Company addresses? Possible. Almost unused private connections with a special combination of protected and unprotected ports? Worth a second look. Located in an officially unoccupied office building? Very interesting!

One of these addresses also appeared on another list—in the blog of Zoe's friend Rick, who

had suffered a much-too-early violent death. He had inconspicuously followed one of his clients there. Perhaps not inconspicuous enough. The killer who had shot him and almost had got Zoe, too, had in fact been much too expensive for a small regional drug smuggling operation without any hint of a connection to the large rings, which had caused the Phoenix FBI some headaches.

Close to this address, Cheb then had installed micro cameras, which kept a lens on the building and reported movements. Yes, there were movements. And a very interesting circle of obvious security measures that had to be overcome. Plus, some they could only guess.

For two days the cameras watched. Specifically the nightly recordings had been interesting, they had regularly shown lighting in a room on the third floor and changing lights on the fourth floor.

Matt had obtained construction plans. Interestingly, the building had two specially secured underground floors under the obligatory underground garage, by the distribution of rooms suitable for a computer center—only that the stuff that used to be placed in such a basement space today just needed one slot in a server rack and thus could be comfortably placed in the room next to the kitchen, given sufficient cooling.

The team took to planning like a duck to the water—cameras, motion sensors, infrared and

laser light barriers, secured doors and windows, elevator shafts, garbage and air ducts, code locks, emergency power supplies.

“One...”



We'll enter from the right, where the windows are dark at night. Cheb disarms the motion sensors and freezes their camera images outside.

The first part was easy. With a kind of air gun Cheb shot small balls of sticky paste that spread over the motion sensor lenses and blinded them.

To reach a camera, in principle one had to cross the viewing field of another camera. Simple blindfolding wouldn't do, not without warning the occupants.

But all cameras were designed to guard the premises close to the ground. So Cheb started his operation from the neighboring building with a well-aimed harpoon shot into the concrete wall between the second and third floor. Along an almost invisible, tightened glass fiber wire a small device drove across and anchored itself firmly to the harpoon tip. Then it dropped a common-looking digital camera and a clamp mechanism attached to another wire.

For a very short, hopefully unnoticed moment, the edge of the camera slipped through the video

camera picture, then the clamp mechanism locked the photo camera to the video lens. Cheb pushed a button. The camera took a picture and switched to display mode. Now the video camera could only see what the photo camera showed to it, as long as the power pack of the latter held.

Cheb repeated the procedure for two other cameras, sufficient to guarantee them a surveillance-free corridor.

Two. We jam every external communication. Telephone, data transfers, mobile radio. It will take at least five minutes for the local authorities to get a bearing on our jammer and deactivate it, perhaps longer.

Cheb pushed another button. His activation signal was the last radio impulse that would be receivable for the next minutes in a radius of at least a kilometer. They had to prevent the opposition to send a last desperate trigger impulse to any eventually overlooked fuse computers by any means. Unfortunately that also meant the team couldn't talk to each other by radio.

And it couldn't be helped that also police radio frequencies were jammed, so this measure surely wouldn't keep up long.

Three. We enter. First the communication center.

On daylight pictures of Cheb's cameras, they

had recognized numerous screens in the nightly lit room on the third floor. According to the construction plan it had in fact been a computer and security center where specifically protected cable ducts from the computing center area as well as surveillance signals joined.

Together they hustled to the wall encircling the premises. Cheb and Rico placed an ordinary ladder at the wall, which Matt, followed by Rico, climbed first. With a jump, he landed on the soft lawn inside while Rico guarded them from the top of the wall. On a wave from Rico Cheb, April and Zoe followed. Finally, Rico dropped from the capstone. The building remained dark, it seemed they had no sneaky observers. Then they hurried to the building.

One window on the ground floor fell victim to a glasscutter. Again, Matt entered first, the others followed. Quietly Matt and Rico sneaked one by one from the door to the corner of the corridor, to the stairways, to the third floor, each time followed by the rest of the team with some distance. Nothing else stirred inside. Luckily, there were no surveillance cameras along their path.

They paused at the door to the computer center.



Grinningly, Rico had presented her a pack of five throwing stars. "Can you put these to any use or do you toss only CDs?"

Instead of answering, Zoe had picked the stars, turned around in one flowing motion and, within a twinkling of his eye, had tossed all five across the garage with some flicks of her fingers.

On the narrow opposite wall of the repair shop, about thirty meters away, had been a large pin board with security advisories. About the handling of car hoists, flammable materials, about self-protection measures, procedures in the event of fire up to a guide for first aid. The latter had shown several pictures of rescue breath and recovery position.

Rico and Zoe had walked over. The sharp tips of five throwing stars had pinched five just penny-sized pictures of heads.

"Mmh. Seems you can put them to use," Rico had dryly commented as soon as he had overcome his surprise.



Matt positioned himself right of the door, Rico to the left. Zoe waited in the center, a throwing dart in each hand, her little finger moved sunglasses into position, then she nodded. Cheb and April guarded the corridor to both sides.

Matt turned the knob and pushed the door wide open, the room's light radiated into the

corridor. Without sunglasses the sudden dark-light change would have dazzled Zoe, but so she captured the situation at a glance—a tall, slender Adonis in jeans and tee shirt, with a pistol in his shoulder holster, stood behind a desk in the room's center, a cup of coffee in his hand, his right side facing the door, and watched a battery of surveillance monitors. His counterpart, a stubbly-bearded, curly-haired, stocky and spotty youngster lolled in a swiveling chair with a can of Coors in his hand, rested his feet on the desk in front of him and watched the suddenly opening door.

Adonis dropped his coffee cup with an impressively quick reaction, began to squat and turn toward the door, his right hand reaching to his shoulder holster, while Stubble Boy held his can toward the door with a pointing forefinger and drew breath for a surprised outcry. Zoe tossed.

Stubble Boy's outcry was stuck in his throat together with a sharp-edged metal spike. Adonis' floating, turning motion changed to an uncontrolled drop as Zoe's second shuriken unerringly cut his throat. She dashed across the desk and pushed the dying boy in his chair aside, scrutinizing the computer screen.

Four. Zoe checks the security center. Rico and Cheb

clean the fourth floor. April and I will visit the basement.

Zoe fetched another chair and dropped her leather jacket while the other four left the room and fanned out within the building. Alone with the two dead, one Glock ready next to the keyboard she made herself acquainted with the controls, soon found the screens which safeguarded the basement doors.

These were the menu entries for the basement doors. Here the outside cameras, the main gate. And this...



A small crossbow leveled in each hand Rico sneaked along the corridor on the fourth floor. Cheb watched the already passed doors with a muffled pistol.

The only lights shone through a door crack to the right and another on the left side at the end of the corridor. The first door was left ajar. Rico gave it a push with his knee, quickly moved inside and scanned the room. He saw only one person, a bored, gray-haired guy with a tie and shoulder holster, polishing his gun's barrel. Rico's crossbow dart hit him precisely in the left side of his chest.

The gun dropped from his victim's hand and struck the floor with a loud thud.



Matt faced the door from the staircase to the lower basement and a problem. The door served as an emergency exit in case of a fire and thus was code- and alarm-protected. If he would open it, there wouldn't be only an alarm in the security center but also a fire alarm in the entire building.

But perhaps Zoe had already found the right switches or buttons in the software as well?

Suddenly several green light-emitting diodes at the door lock, at the escape route lighting and at the sprinkler above Matt went out. Ah! Zoe had been successful!

Matt held his breath and slowly opened the door. No alarm. He pulled the door entirely open and waved for April to follow.

They found themselves in a dark corridor, only poorly illuminated by a flickering, decrepit fluorescent tube. On its far end the elevator doors were only scarcely visible. Halfway to the left they arrived at a heavy, two-part sliding steel door, to its right again the number keys of a code lock. The door was monitored by a camera, which Matt now waved at.

He imagined Zoe waving back, then a green light flashed above the keypad. With the quiet hum of an electric motor, the doors moved apart.



Zoe heard a muted rumble from the floor above her. Then, at the same time the basement door opened, several further surveillance screens came to life and showed the basement's inner rooms. Together with her memories of the construction plan they told Zoe that big trouble was waiting for Matt behind the second-next door—opening the main door had alarmed the three machine-pistol-armed guards. And in the room behind them two lab-coated men had been stirred from their chess game and now hurried toward tube- and flask-equipped installations the purpose of which she simply couldn't figure out.

The rattling of a machine pistol on the next floor—not from where it had rumbled, but from the other end of the building—told her that Rick and Cheb had encountered problems, too. And into the bargain came a surprised *What?* from the adjacent room—she wasn't alone!



Zoe took a big mouthful of Doc's miracle cure from her drinking bottle, then she fetched her first Glock from the desk and drew the second. She couldn't be everywhere at the same time although

she wanted to. But if she had understood Doc Holiday's explanations correctly, she could do significantly more than she had ever wanted so far.

In all her previous training courses and missions, she had just called to use what she had believed to be able to. Every time she had become faster. Her limit, if she had one, she didn't know, because she hadn't really figured out what it was.

Now she would find out, would call up everything that could be called. She was in a bloody hurry if she wanted to clean up her floor, assist Cheb and Rico and warn and help Matt and April.

Matt. She saw his blond curls, his blue eyes, the dimple in his chin. And had visions of bullets tearing his chest apart, of his breaking gaze, saw herself squatting at his lifeless body – that couldn't be!

Fierce determination crept into her face, her muscles tensed, her heartbeat picked up pace, pumped nutrients into her tissues to prepare them for peak performance. She felt the temperature rise in her limbs. Again, she checked her grip around the two Glocks, they felt organic and familiar, like an extension of her body, concentrated on sensing her muscles, collecting her *Ki*, like her martial arts trainer had taught her, and let the gentle rhythm of Hayley Westenra's

voice singing *Dark Waltz* swing inside her head while she dashed across the desk. Okay, she thought, let's start dancing.

CHAPTER NINE

A gloomily determined-looking guy just put his head and the barrel of his machine pistol through the door of the next room as Zoe left the security center. He ran straight into a round from her Glock.

He hadn't hit the floor yet when Zoe jumped into the room he had emerged from. Three lazy faces looked at her, then three gun-barrels jerked up, but too late—three bullets from her guns crushed the roots of their noses, brains, skulls and every idea of resistance.

Zoe already dashed to the stairs, adjusted her balance, had difficulties to cut the corner at her speed, almost ran up the walls of the staircase, dove over the upper landing into the lead-infested corridor, her weapons spouting death and destruction.

Two MP shooters died at the same moment, freeing Cheb and Rico from their hassle, let the burst from their weapons silence uncontrollably.

A last round hit the ceiling, angrily ricocheted away, pinched cold leather, hit hot flesh, unjust but only following the laws of statistics, sent a nauseating wave of pain through Zoe's accelerated nerve tracts.



Matt tiptoed to the second door on the right. The first basement room had been empty except for some wooden pallets and a small pallet jack, now he listened at the next door. All quiet.



Behind him, April had caught a hold on to her small pistol. She hadn't been in a situation to shoot very often, but her shooting range results were okay. And she could cope with ticklish situations, like a few years ago in Colombia or earlier in Afghanistan. Matt could depend on her. And she trusted him without reserve. She even liked him. At that time, they had become intimate, despite the rules. Ah, at that time it had been so fitting, that *Sweetest Taboo*. Yes, he could be a *Smooth Operator*.

But it hadn't worked out. Right after the fight, it had been a confirmation for them both, to be still alive, a passion born from the rage of violence that

had passed over them. No suitable basis for a long-term relationship. But it hadn't spoiled their comradeship, they both had been able to accept it without grudges or envy as a temporary event that had left a deep, amicable understanding, a rare turn of events that they both had accepted as a precious treasure. At the same time it had helped to permanently overcome the tension between them, had made him take her into his arms and hold her without letting waves of erotic passion divert them from their professional relationship.

She was glad that Zoe got along with Matt so well. She could look through Zoe, a kind, fair and honest girl, driven by the demons of her recent past while balancing herself on the roaring, raging bull of her uncommon talent, in desperate need of the emotional safeguard that only a deep and unquestioning relationship could give her, something that April could not provide her in spite of her own amicable fondness.

Matt signaled, nothing to hear from the next room. He levered his pistol and reached with his left hand to the door handle. April nodded and leveled her gun with both hands.



The machine pistols had silenced. Rico cautiously

put his head out of the splintered doorframe and watched Zoe going down, recognized from the blood-smeared tear on her left hip that she had been hit. Saw how she writhed herself around, recognized him, twinkled at him, before an expression of determination showed on her face that unconsciously sent shivers down his spine.

A short tension of her muscles—swinging around, pressing her feet against the corridor wall she dashed away like shot from a bowstring. He felt the sudden gush of air that trailed her leave.



Zoe dove over the handrails, elastically touched down on the next landing, triggering another wave of pain from her hip, immediately catapulted herself over the next rail swinging downwards around it, hooked her feet into another rail, let herself drop from landing to landing as if the stairs' handrails were forming endless uneven bars, dashed through the door she had previously unlocked, dive-rolled across the fluorescent-flickering darkness, came back to her feet and accelerated past April toward the door the handle of which Matt just pressed down.



Matt jerked the door open as he noticed something was very wrong. Behind the door he saw the barrels of three machine pistols pointing at him, the shooters at least partially covered by tables and chairs, the light of a floor lamp subdued by a jacket.

From the right, where they had come, something black shot toward the gaping door in front of him like a launched missile.

Three silver streaks flashed through the room as Zoe's throwing darts hit the points where she—as she later explained—had memorized the hideouts of the three guards on the surveillance monitors, perforated three skulls before the sluggish brain convolutions could grasp what had come over them.

The black silhouette continued to brush across the basement room, came to a stop between two white shapes, hammering hand edges crushed two right wrists which were just about to reach for the valves of two ugly yellow steel canisters, froze in tensed posture, one hand each closed around the necks of the two lab coats, her fingernails pinching their throats. Every movement set. Slowly one drop of blood after another trickled from Zoe's injured hip.

Matt just realized that the barrel of the guard he was aiming at would not spout any more deathly lead, noticed the throwing dart whose rearmost

tip still protruded a few millimeters from the skull, the only thing visible of the metallic item.



April had made one step toward the door as something fast had flown past her, tearing a strong gush of air with it. She completed her step, noticed Matt's terror from the corner of her eye, the tension of his trigger finger, saw Zoe standing between two white-coated men, a bleeding wound at her left hip.

EPILOGUE

The two scientists, the only survivors, were under shock. In only slightly lesser form the same applied to Matt and April who still hadn't conceived how a human being could move that fast.

When they had entered the rearmost basement room, Zoe had hurled them both lab coats, had let herself drop to the floor and had pulled out a small metal case. With trembling fingers, she had retrieved the little syringe and had driven it into the vein of her left arm. Highly concentrated minerals and nutrients had streamed into her blood circuit, had prevented her total collapse.

Matt had taken over watching their prisoners, April had treated Zoe's hip wound, had provisionally squeezed it tight before the loss of blood could make Zoe faint.

The computer meant to send the triggering command rested in the same basement room, untouched, looking innocent although designated

for the slow murder of millions of people.

It was not the task of their team to endure questioning by the police. They had got the core of the gang—the bosses had gone down in a short but heavy shoot-out with Rico and Cheb—and had prevented the nasty terror attack, that was enough. The local police would have to be content with some bits of information from *protected sources* that they would receive via the FBI.

Eight minutes after the start of their mission, they left the building and drove off in their dark blue Landcruiser.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am Valerie J. Long, born in 1963. I live and work in Germany as an IT project manager. I like role-playing games and I like putting my ideas to the paper. I like all kinds of Science Fiction and Fantasy, I like music and I like making you bite your nails off.