



JAMES PATTERSON

TOYS

THE ONE WITH THE MOST TOYS . . . *DIES*

& NEIL McMAHON

Toys

A NOVEL BY

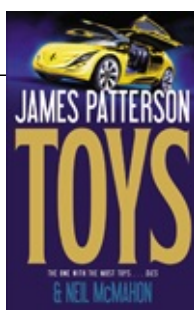
James Patterson

AND

Neil McMahon



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upcoming books by James Patterson and more information about the author, visit

www.jamespatterson.com.

For Kim—my partner in crimes of passion

—*NM*

EXTINCTION

Many species have become extinct because of human destruction of their natural environments. Indeed, current rates of human-induced extinctions are estimated to be about 1,000 times greater than past natural rates of extinction, leading some scientists to call modern times the sixth mass extinction.

—*Encyclopedia Britannica*

TOY

A material object for children or others to play with (often an imitation of some familiar object); a plaything; also, something contrived for amusement rather than for practical use.

—*The Oxford English Dictionary*

Prologue

7-4 DAY

I WILL NOT forget this moment for as long as I live, which, in truth, might not be that long anyway. I pop the ominous disc labeled “7-4 Day” into the player and sit back on the dusty, threadbare couch in my parents’ cluttered fallout shelter at our beloved lake house in the north country.

I figure that something titled “7-4 Day” can’t be good news.

And it isn’t.

Wham!—no slow reveal, no fade-in. There are just bodies everywhere. Human beings are slumped in car seats, collapsed on sidewalks, lying on the floor in front of the counter at a once popular fast-food restaurant called McDonald’s.

Next comes a classroom in which high school students and their teacher are just lying, pale and bloated, at their desks.

A construction worker is dead in a cherry-picker, and it is possible that his eyes have actually popped from his face.

A postman is sprawled on a porch, the mail still held dutifully in his hands.

A towheaded girl is dead on her bicycle at the bottom of a roadside culvert—and this finally brings tears to my eyes.

It’s as if some master switch has been thrown, turning off their hearts and brains just as they went about their daily lives.

Not everyone’s dead though.

In one indelible scene, elevator doors are pried open and a screaming, traumatized businesswoman emerges—at least seven corpses of business types are visible behind her.

There is some hope at least.

A few hundred survivors are gathered at midfield in a baseball stadium, possibly in New Chicago. The camera pans around. *Horrible!* The pitcher is dead on the mound, his face buried in dust. There are uniformed bodies at the bases, in the outfield, in the dugouts. The stands are filled with fifty thousand forever-silent fans.

I’m light-headed and ill as I sit on my parents’ couch and watch all this. I’ve been forgetting to breathe, actually; my skin is clammy and cold.

Now I view a snapped-off flagpole displayed against an urban skyline—a skyline of blackened, broken, and smoking buildings. They’re like teeth in a jawbone that somebody has pulled from a funeral pyre.

I’m beginning to suspect that this footage *must* have been staged—but who could have made such a clever and horrifying film? How had they been able to pull off this hoax with such authenticity? And for what possible reason?

Now there’s street-level, hand-shot footage showing thousands of people coursing over bridges and along highways. They’re carrying coolers, water bottles, blankets, small children, the infirm. There are furtive close-ups of military patrol vehicles at intervals along the way. Checkpoints. Tall, broad-shouldered government soldiers with mirror-faced helmets and automatic weapons attempt to bring order to this incomprehensible chaos.

The film’s final scenes are of earthmoving machines and the enormous trenches they’ve made. These trenches are as wide and deep as strip mines. Bulldozers are standing by to help refill them, their scoops loaded with the uncountable dead.

The video ends and I sit in the dark, lost in shock, horror, and total confusion.

Is it some sick joke? A staged holocaust? Am I supposed to believe that some hideous plague has been hidden from history? When did it happen? Why have I never seen anything like it before? Why has *no one* ever seen or heard about this?

There are no answers to my questions. How could there be? What I have just witnessed simply isn't possible.

Suddenly there are hands on my shoulder, and I leap up from the couch, fists clenched, crashing into an end table and knocking a coffee cup to the concrete floor. There is the sound of breaking glass, and my heart nearly explodes.

“Hays! It’s just me. Dad. Hays, *it’s me!* Down, boy.”

Of course, it was just my father putting his hands on my shoulders, meaning to comfort me. Still, can’t quite give him a pass for this. It is his shelter, and his damned film, and his hands.

“*What*— what was that?” I demand to know. “Tell me. Please? Explain it.”

“That film?” he says. “That, Hays, is the truth. That’s what really happened on 7-4 Day. They almost killed off the entire human race. What you learned in grade school, everything you read at university, is just a cruel hoax.”

FALL FROM GRACE

Chapter 1

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS EARLIER—a mere two days before I watched the 7-4 Day film at my parents house.

When I arrived at President Hughes Jacklin’s inauguration party that night in the year 2061, I was flying high, happier and more self-satisfied than I had ever been. I couldn’t have dreamed I would end up losing everything I cared about—my home, my job, my two darling daughters, Chloe and April, and my beautiful wife, Lizbeth, who was there by my side.

In the catastrophic whirlwind of those next horrible days, it would seem as if my world had been turned upside down and any part of my personality that wasn’t securely bolted in place had fallen into the void. And what was left was what I guess you’d call the essential Hays Baker—well, if you brought the old me and the new me to a party, I guarantee nobody would accuse us of a family resemblance.

Lizbeth and I arrived at the presidential estate at around eight thirty, delivered in high style by our artificially intelligent Daimler SX-5500 limo. This wasn’t our usual car, of course.

A cheery, top-of-the-line iJeeves butler helped us out onto the resplendent, putting-green-short grass of the front lawn. We promptly began to gawk at our surroundings—like a couple of tourists, I suppose. Hell, like lowly *humans* given an unlikely glimpse of the good life.

Even now, I remember that the warm night air was sweet with the fragrance of thousands of roses, gardenias, and other genetically enhanced flowering plants in the president’s gardens, all programmed to bloom tonight. What a botanical miracle it was, though a bit show-offy, I’d say.

“This is absolutely incredible, Hays. Dazzling, *inspiring*,” Lizbeth gushed, her gorgeous eyes shining with excitement. “We really do run the world, don’t we?”

By “we,” Lizbeth wasn’t talking about just herself and me. She was speaking of our broader identity as ruling Elites, the upper echelon of civilized society for the past two decades.

Most Elites were attractive, of course, but Lizbeth, with her violet hair set off by ivory skin and an almost decadent silver silk gown, well, she sparkled like a diamond dropped into a pile of wood chips.

“You’re going to knock them dead, Jinxie,” I said, winking. “As always.”

“Flattery,” she said, winking back, “will get you everywhere.”

Jinxie was my favorite nickname for her. It stemmed from the fact that she’d come into this world on a Friday the thirteenth, but there wasn’t a single thing unlucky about her—or our life together, for that matter.

I took her tastefully bejeweled hand in mine, inwardly thrilled that she was my wife. God, how I loved this woman. How lucky I was to be with her, as husband, as father to our two daughters.

Every head turned as we walked into the huge, high-ceilinged ballroom, and you’d have thought we were music or film stars from the bygone human era.

But not everybody in the high-society Elite crowd was pleased to see Lizbeth and me.

Well, hey, you can’t make everyone happy. Isn’t that the sanest way to view the world? Of course it is.

Chapter 2

AS LIZBETH AND I entered the glittering ballroom, Westmont DeLong, the world's most popular and most celebrated comedian, was at center stage, entertaining with his droll patter of antihuman jokes. When he noticed that the audience was momentarily paying more attention to Lizbeth and me than to him, he raised his voice to win them back.

“Listen to this one, folks. Eyes on me, gents—ladies too! Right *here*, you and me.... The star is up on the stage.

“So an Elite's out for a night on the town. He has a few too many, and he wanders into a tavern in borderline human zone,” DeLong announced with his trademark sly grin.

“He buys a drink—then says to the people around him, ‘I've got to tell you the best human joke I've heard in years.’ The tough-looking woman bartender gets in his face. She says, ‘Listen, buddy, I'm a martial arts expert, my boyfriend next to you is a professional no-gravity wrestler, and the bouncer is ex-Special Forces. All three of us are *humans* and—guess what?—there are *fifty* others like us in here. You really want to tell that joke?’ ‘No, forget it,’ the Elite says. ‘It would take me all night to explain it fifty-three times.’ ”

The crowd laughed loudly. Clearly, they were fans of Westmont DeLong—as was I—and a barrage of antihuman quips sprang up:

“One human asks another which is closer, the moon or Mexico,” someone called out. “The second one points at the moon and says, ‘Duh—you can't see Mexico from here.’ ”

“Scientists have started using humans instead of rats for laboratory experiments. They breed faster and you don't get so attached to them.”

DeLong chuckled and contributed, “Know what happens when humans don't pay their garbage bill? The company stops delivery.”

“Come on, Hays, your turn,” said a voice behind me. “Let's see that quick wit of yours in action. Dazzle us.”

The tall, athletic, and handsome man who'd spoken was none other than Jax Moore, the head of the Agency of Change, where Lizbeth and I both worked. Moore was enjoying one of his trademark cigars—smokeless, odorless.

Everyone around us went quiet and watched expectantly. Since the challenge came from our boss, couldn't duck it, could I? So I smoothed the lapels of my tux, smiled, and told the best human joke that I could remember.

“Well, there's an office full of human workers. One human woman notices that her boss, who's also a woman, is leaving early just about every day,” I said. “So the worker decides she can get away with it too. That afternoon, she waits until the boss leaves, waits another ten minutes, and then sneaks out herself. But when she gets home, she hears an awful commotion coming from her bedroom. She peeks in—and there's her boss *in bed with her husband!*”

I paused, just a beat—pretty good timing, I was sure.

“She hurries back to work. ‘Well, I'm not going to try *that* again,’ she tells her coworkers. ‘I almost got caught!’ ”

The room echoed with genuine laughter, and Westmont DeLong's face reddened. His double chin sagged as well. Lizbeth managed to look appropriately blasé, like she'd heard it all before, but she

shot me a surreptitious wink that said, *Way to go, Hays*.

“Not bad, Hays,” Moore said. “OK, if you can spare a minute or two away from the limelight, the president wants to see you both.”

The president! Lizbeth didn’t look blasé at that news. Neither of us had ever met President Jacklin before. This was a huge honor, of course.

“We don’t usually give interviews without an appointment... but we’ll make an exception in this case,” I said.

“I’m sure the president will be flattered,” Jax Moore said wryly. “And Hays—no more jokes. Not even human ones.”

Chapter 3

“MY, MY. THE *PRESIDENT* wants to meet us,” Lizbeth whispered in my ear as we followed Jax Moore farther into the mansion.

“Of course he does,” I said with a grin.

Actually, Lizbeth and I *were* considered stars at that particular moment in time. We’d just returned from New Vegas, where we had saved countless lives while arresting a gang of moderately clever human bank robbers who had been terrorizing the West.

Anyway, Jax Moore whisked us through eight-foot-tall carved oak doors that led to the mansion’s private living area. Well-concealed scanners examined every pore of our bodies as we walked to the entrance of the president’s oval office, which was modeled after the famous original in the now-sunken city of Washington, DC.

I was immediately reminded that humans had created some good things in the past, such as this fine neoclassic style of architecture. But they’d also severely ravaged the planet, hadn’t they? A couple decades ago the first generation of Elites had barely managed to save it from total destruction. Washington, DC, was one of many cities on the casualty list, along with most of the low-lying eastern seaboard, including New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia, all of which had been swallowed up long ago by the rising oceans.

When we stepped into the Oval Office, President Hughes Jacklin was standing in front of a full-length mirror, fumbling with his cravat. At his side was his faithful bodyguard and supposed lover, a behemoth named Devlin.

Seeing us, the president let the tie go and strode across the room to greet Lizbeth and me as if we were old friends. He was a hugely impressive man, classically educated, firm-jawed and broad-shouldered, and his thick dark hair was just beginning to gray at the temples.

“My dear, the sun is down and it’s still as bright as day around you,” he said to Lizbeth, kissing her perfect cheeks, one, then the other.

“Mr.—Mr. President,” Lizbeth stammered ever so slightly, “I’m speechless... almost, anyway.”

“What you are is incredibly charming,” countered the president.

He turned to me and gave a firm handshake. “Hays Baker, this is a great pleasure. *You’re* beautiful too. Look, I’m late for my own party—we’ll have time to get better acquainted later. But I want you to know I’ve followed your careers at the Agency closely. And I’m a big fan. That operation in Vegas was pure genius. Efficient and effective. Just what I like.”

“We’re proud to help, Mr. President,” Lizbeth said, actually blushing a little now.

“Then would you help me out with *this* thing?” He flapped the loose ends of his cravat with good-humored exasperation. “I never could get the hang of it. Or the significance of ties, damn them.”

“I could do that,” said Devlin, but the president waved the bodybuilding bodyguard away.

“Lizbeth?” he said, exposing his throat to her. “Let’s see how you would *garrote* a world leader.”

Chapter 4

“IT WOULD BE my pleasure, sir!”

Lizbeth laughed like an impressionable schoolgirl and took over. As her nimble fingers arranged the president’s tie into an expert knot, he gave us a conspiratorial nod. Off to the side, Devlin was grimacing and fidgeting, and I hoped we hadn’t made an enemy of the giant bodyguard.

“I will tell you this much about my future plans,” the president said. “My best people have developed a program to—let’s just say, *complete* the work of making our world a safer, cleaner place with respect to the human strain. We’ll be launching it soon. In *days*, actually.”

Lizbeth and I had heard rumors that a sweeping human-containment initiative had been taking shape. It was hard not to be relieved. The foolhardy and dangerous humans had only themselves to blame. They had blown their chance to make the world a better place. It was undeniable that they had accomplished quite the opposite.

“I’m counting on you both for important help with the launch of the human cleanup. Meantime, you’re the best we have at holding the gross and undesirable elements in check. Please keep up the good work. Bigger, better things are coming for you two. For all Elites, actually.” He checked himself in the mirror. “Come to think of it—humans are responsible for *ties!*”

President Jacklin smiled, then he said good-bye with effusive warmth—he was obviously an expert at it, perhaps aided by the prototype Cyrano 3000 implant he was rumored to have. I’d only read about the device, but what I knew was that it was surgically attached to a person’s inner ear and could offer guidance through any social interaction. The amazing appliance had wireless access to a database of pretested social cues, pertinent information about whatever person you were talking to, and other useful facts, names, quotes, and quips that might fit a given situation. The irony: a human had also invented it.

Jax Moore took my elbow, then Lizbeth’s, and walked us back to the oak doors. He lit up another of his cigars and puffed contentedly.

“Not a word about this. There can be no security leaks. Check with me first thing tomorrow,” he said. “I have classified information we need to discuss. The president specifically asked for you two on the ‘human problem.’ You’re both... *beautiful*,” Moore closed, giving us an icy grin that could have frozen vegetables. I doubted he’d undergone a Cyrano 3000 implant, or even heard of it.

After the doors closed, Lizbeth took my arm and said, “One of the best nights of our lives, don’t you think?” She’d handled the president with perfect poise—and charm—but she was also clearly starstruck after meeting the great man in person. To be honest, so was I. I just didn’t let on.

“Definitely in the top hundred or so,” I teased her.

“*Really*,” she said archly. “You’ll have to remind me of the others. Such as?”

“How about the night when we met? Michigan Avenue, New Chicago.”

She laughed. “Hmmm. Well, that *might* be in the top hundred.”

“I guess I asked for that,” I said as we exchanged a kiss that I’m sure caused a whistle or two in the president’s security-camera control room.

Chapter 5

WHAT CAUGHT MY attention next was the incredible number of high-ticket toys at the party.

Sometimes it seemed like toys were all the world cared about in the second half of the twenty-first century. Humans and Elites had both fallen under their spell and become addicted to the endless pleasures and nonstop excitement they could provide. And the toys were only getting better, or worse depending on your point of view.

Even in the presidential mansion—where you might think the serious business of the country would be getting done 24-7—toys were playing a big part in the celebration. Wide-eyed, deep-pocketed guests were crowded around a display where employees from Toyz Corporation were giving demos of some of the choicer items in the forthcoming, but thus far unreleased, catalog.

As Lizbeth and I reentered the ballroom, we were surrounded by a menagerie of cloned, geneticaly tamed animals—birds of paradise, Galápagos tortoises, enormous butterflies, pygmy hippos—and then we almost got knocked over by a beautiful woman in a gold gown and matching high heels, who was laughing while riding on a thick-maned lion.

“Oops, sorry,” she said breathlessly as she raced by. Then she called over her shoulder to Lizbeth, “You’ve *got* to try this, Liz. You’ve never felt such *muscles*.”

“Now that’s certainly not true,” Lizbeth whispered as her hand delicately grazed my upper leg. “My beauty.”

Other women were draping defanged cobras and wondrously patterned tropical vipers around their necks like mink stoles, and one demented man showed off by thrusting his head into the jaws of a docile baby *Tyrannosaurus rex*. I almost wished the toy would take a bite.

While Lizbeth admired the fauna—Elite and otherwise—I stepped up to a bank of SimStims, the hugely popular and addictive simulators that offered a variety of different experiences, all so intense and real that it was illegal to sell SimStim machines to anyone with a heart condition. You could choose from any number of simulations—have passionate sex with a movie or government star, for example, rock out onstage surrounded by a vast audience of screaming fans, or fight for your life in the heat of combat.

I slipped on a mood helmet at one of the simulators and scanned the on-screen menu. The range of choices was staggering: Moorish Harem, Eye of a Hurricane Experience, Pagan Barbarities, Tennis vs. the Pro, Pig Out: No Calories, Death Experience: A Final 60 Seconds, Visit Your Former Lives.

Movie buff that I am, I picked the general heading of Great Moments in Cinema.

I barely glimpsed the words “This Program Has Been Edited for Your Enhanced Pleasure,” and then I was *there*. Bogie in *Casablanca*.

I gazed into the liquid blue eyes of Ingrid Bergman sitting across from me—then I raised my whiskey glass to touch hers.

“Here’s looking at you, kid,” I said, losing myself in her answering smile.

Then the door of the noisy café burst open and a toadlike little man ran in, looking around in panic. The great human character actor Peter Lorre had arrived.

“Rick, you have to help me,” he gasped in a heavy accent, thrusting a sheaf of papers at me. “Hide these!”

I strode to the piano as he rushed out the back door, and I had just managed to shove the papers

*under the lid when gunshots sounded in the street outside. Suddenly, jackbooted soldiers stormed in—
My heart raced, and I felt myself instinctively backing away toward the bar. There was a Luger
right there under the counter.*

This was amazing. I was living Bogie's part in the film masterpiece. And then—surprise of surprises...

Chapter 6

I FOUND MYSELF staring at the menu screen, a little miffed at the next message. “Presented by Toyz Corporation,” it blinked in stark black and white. “We hope you’ll come back soon.”

“Great,” I sighed. “Well, it did say great *moments* in cinema, didn’t it?”

Lizabeth was watching me with folded arms and raised eyebrows as I removed the mood helmet.

“Have a good time?” she asked and started to grin mischievously.

“A little short-lived,” I said, wondering if any of the other programs were full-length—maybe next time I’d get into something like a Viking raid, or maybe visit that Moorish harem.

Actually, I was quite a student of human history. I never would have turned the government back over to them, but if one thing’s true about the *Homo sapiens*, it’s that they almost *never* let you down in the drama department. I mean the scandals, the three World Wars, the artistic movements, games, literature, films... and the music! I adored Mozart, but also Bob Dylan and Edith Piaf.

I took Lizabeth’s hand and we strolled back toward the center of the great hall.

“Let’s take a look at those dolls. I want to see if they’re suitable for April and Chloe,” she said.

“They’re absolutely *begging* for them, Hays.”

“They have more than enough toys already,” I said, but quickly relented. “Oh all right, Jinx. I can say no to them.”

Lizabeth pointed at a demonstration of the season’s hottest new items—Jessica and Jacob dolls, beautiful miniature androids that looked and acted perfectly lifelike. Kids everywhere—including our own two daughters—were causing parents to line up around the block to purchase them at Toyz stores all over the country.

The clever display was set up in a series of tableaux—separate scenes of home, office, store, and restaurant—with dozens of the lifelike dolls chatting, working, and eating just like real people, though only sixteen inches tall.

To be perfectly honest, while I couldn’t quite take my eyes off them, I found the dolls more than a little creepy.

But the crowd was riveted, especially a growing knot in front of a sign that read THESE MODELS SPECIAL ORDER ONLY.

When Lizabeth and I strolled over there, we immediately saw why.

“Oh my,” she said. “Oh dear, Hays. That’s just gross.”

Underneath the sign was a doll-sized bed where a Jake and Jessie in the buff were thrashing around in primal delight. I mean, those two were really going at it.

“I guess we can scratch the special orders off our list,” Lizabeth said.

“They really *can* do everything. Energetic little devil, isn’t he?”

Lizabeth rolled her eyes. “There’s more to it than slamming in and out like a piston. Don’t you think, Hays? I’ll bet you anything these dolls were programmed by a man—and probably one between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. They should let a woman redo the code if they really want them to sell.”

“Thinking about volunteering?” I said. Biocircuitry was Lizabeth’s specialty—she was one of the foremost experts at the Agency of Change. “And what would you do differently, dear heart? Have all the Jacobs look like me?”

Her lips brushed my ear. “That’s not such a terrible idea, Hays. Say, I’m thinking this party has served its official purpose for us,” she murmured. “What do you say we go home? Maybe play some games of our own?”

“Umm, coming through,” I said, taking her hand and leading her off the crowded floor. The best night of our professional lives was about to get even better, and on a much more intimate level.

Jinxie and I were going home.

Yippee!

Chapter 7

THIS WAS WHERE the slope began to get slippery, dangerously slippery indeed.

Outside the presidential mansion, more iJeeves butlers were escorting rich and famous guests to a long line of waiting limos. Lizbeth and I were soon settled back in our Agency-loaned driverless vehicle to enjoy the air ride through the beautiful Elite zone of New Lake City.

Glittering hundred-story buildings stretched out before us for miles, with impossibly fast-moving flying cars, trucks, and buses streaking between them. As Jinxie had said earlier, *We really do run the world*. In truth, we Elites had saved the planet, so why not?

Off toward the outskirts of the high-rises, you could see the dark gaps of the human slums. Sad stuff, even if you despised the humans. But maybe the president's plan would fix that once and for all. The humans had proved they couldn't be trusted under any circumstances.

Lizbeth and I snuggled together like giddy teenagers inside the limo, whetting our appetites for later on. She kept making jokes about how "beautiful" I was.

"I want you to try the new Rapture pill, Hays. Two-minute orgasms."

"Contact your physician if orgasm lasts an hour or longer," I said as I leaned in for a kiss.

Then—out of nowhere—it felt like a giant boulder had crashed into the roof of the Daimler. The impact buckled the incredibly strong titanium roof, rocking us from side to side, then bringing the car to a graceless, airbag-assisted landing on the street below.

"Hays?" Lizbeth said in alarm. "Are we being attacked? We are, aren't we? *How dare they?*"

At first I could see nothing outside the smashed-open windows. But I definitely heard yelling and pounding feet. Five, six, seven people coming toward us—fast.

Even as I ordered the limo to disengage our safety restraints, I could smell their foul body odor. *Humans*. Damn them. They must have crashed another vehicle on top of ours and forced us down, and they were now moving in for the kill. Robbery, of course, possibly rape—for both of us.

Like all Elites, I thoroughly distrusted humans. They were terminally lazy and stupid, and their flesh reeked of the greasy food they gobbled. The popular Elite term for them was *skunks*, although they were a bit more like hyenas, or wild dogs, in terms of the lives they led. Violence, deceit, and opportunism ruled their petty days and nights, just as it had through most of history. Hell, they had even written books about it, from Horace and Homer to Thomas Friedman and Stieg Larsson.

As Agents of Change, Lizbeth and I were dedicated to bringing fairness and justice to their barbaric ways and making them pay for their crimes. An act this outrageous—entering a restricted-access area and actually attacking Elites—made these vandals candidates for the harshest penalty there was: *slow death*.

I could see now that they were an ugly bunch, even for humans: grim-faced and menacing, armed with knives and scalpel-sharp box cutters, plus a few old-fashioned handguns.

My threat-assessment sensors instantly ranked their strength from lowest to highest. Three of them, I noted immediately, had biotech upgrades: enhanced musculature, joints, and reflexes. It wasn't commonplace, but it was possible—through bioengineering—to augment a human to nearly Elite levels of power and conditioning.

"Shall we?" I asked Lizbeth. Besides being a doctor of engineering and possessing a genius-level IQ, my beautiful wife was a deadly hand-to-hand fighter. Besides being a doctor of history, I was also

“I wish I’d worn sensible shoes,” Lizbeth said as she glanced at her party pumps and grimaced.

Chapter 8

I WRENCHED OPEN the limo door on my side, using it as a shield to clear a path as I leaped out. Lizbeth followed close behind, one of her shapely legs flashing from under her evening gown as she planted a spiked heel in a punk's ear. He staggered away, howling in great pain.

"Drop your weapons!" I yelled in warning.

They didn't, of course. What a surprise.

So I began with the weakest-ranked assailant in my reach, slipping aside as he charged at me swinging a nasty-looking box cutter. I snapped the skunk's wrist and tossed him across the street against a lamppost. He hit with a doughy crack—as an empty beer bottle wrapped in clay would—and slid down to the pavement.

I briefly wondered if he'd had a chance to hear the thud when his skull shattered.

The next piece of human scum charged, screeching like a savage beast. I feinted a lunge, then somersaulted over him, dislocating both his shoulders in midflight.

"Three of them are fully augmented," I cautioned Lizbeth.

"Got it, Hays. Thanks, darling. I'll take it easy on them."

My next foe was a fast learner, and clearly had undergone impressive augmentations. Instead of fighting, he ran—or pretended to. It took me all of three 10-foot strides to catch him.

As my hand lashed out to crush the elbow of his knife arm, he whipped around at me like a snake—a preternaturally fast snake—holding a second knife in his other hand. It sliced past my throat so fast I could hear the whir of the blade through the air.

"Close, guy. I'm impressed." I gave him his due.

Then I followed the arc of his knife with my own slashing left hand, slapping the weapon out of his grasp as my right hand crushed his other elbow from behind. Next, I jammed his head between two vertical bars in one of the neighborhood's iron fences and bent them around his neck to form a snug, but not quite strangling, collar.

"Not to worry," I said. "The police will be here to rescue you soon."

I absolutely needed to keep a couple of these skunks alive for interrogation. Had to keep that in mind.

I glanced over at Lizbeth to make sure she was doing OK. My lovely bride was just dispatching her next assignment with a graceful rib-cage-collapsing ballet kick. In her spare time, she's a dancer, a private dancer for the kids and me.

"Way to go, Dr. Baker!" I called to her.

"You too, Dr. Baker!"

I turned my attention to the last of the group, the one who had registered on my sensors as far and away the most dangerous. The criminal was still in the driver's seat of the car they'd rammed into ours—he only watched while the others fought. *Coward, or mastermind?* I wondered. *If there is such thing as a human mastermind.*

Only it wasn't a he, I suddenly realized. The creep's shaggy blond hair was cut short, but the body and facial structure was definitely female.

She was staring at me through the open car window, and the emotion she projected, the undisguised hatred in her eyes, made my scalp bristle. Then she completely shocked me—she knew my name.

“You think you’re a hero, Hays Baker, but you have no idea what you’re doing,” she said softly. “*You’re the criminal here.*”

Then she pulled back on the car’s wheel and it accelerated straight skyward. My muscles tensed to leap and catch hold of the rear bumper. I could have done it. But I stayed rooted to the ground. I had no idea why.

Lizbeth was watching me, suddenly looking concerned. “Hays, are you hurt?” she called. “*Hays?*”

“No, I’m... I’m fine.”

She looked puzzled. “Why didn’t you go after the driver?”

“I... I thought it was too risky,” I said, though that wasn’t it at all. “If the car had taken off and we’d crashed... we’re in a residential neighborhood. Don’t worry, we’ll catch her.”

“*Her? It was a woman?*” Lizbeth asked in amazement. “I thought all human females were pregnant and working behind a stove.”

“Good one, Jinxie,” I said and gave her a hug. She could tell a human joke with the best of them.

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