

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL BASED ON THE HIT SERIES!

WITCHBLADE

GHOST SWORD



MIKE BARON

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A WITCHBLADE NOVEL

By Mike Baron

KARMA: The concept that whatever one does in life becomes the seed which determines one's destiny in the next life. Rebirth is the endless recreation of life in obedience to moral necessity. Whenever a person dies, the KARMA is left. A new life must follow to work out the retribution involved. It is a matter of action and reaction. The process NEVER ends.

St. Elmo Nauman, Jr.

PROLOGUE

Thaddeus Bachman's antique shop was the crown jewel of Worth Street, a renovated and gentrified slice of the Village dedicated to separating the upscale from their money. Bachman's famed brownstone rubbed elbows with Lubitsch Rare And Hard To Find Books on the west and The Estelle Gallery, featuring Outstanding Western And Wildlife Art on the east. Bachman's four-story brownstone had been built in 1898 by a shipping heir, and had been equipped with a ballroom on the top floor. Bachman renovated the joint stem to stern, turning the first floor into his main showroom.

Four broad steps led to his generous red granite stoop, a double wrought-iron gate protecting his Italian hand-carved oak doors from the depredations of the hoi polloi. At ten a.m. on a Tuesday morning, those gates should have been open, allowing ingress to Bachman's loyal customers, who included several members of the House of Saud as well as a Baldwin or two. In particular, they should have been opened to admit Robert Hotchkiss, Esq., an investment banker facing a messy divorce. Hotchkiss was five eleven, thin on top and round in the middle. He had one of those bland middle-aged faces that gets less memorable as it ages, marching toward anonymity. He wore a black Fedora to hide his bald spot. He glanced impatiently at his Tag Heuer and cursed his soon-to-be ex-wife for putting him in this position, forcing him to sell a Japanese

sword she didn't know he owned, to pay his lawyer.

Where was Bachman? Worth Street was chock-a-block with cabs, delivery vehicles, tourists, bike messengers, and immigrants with portable stands hawking everything from fake Rolexes to Viagra. Hotchkiss leaned on the bell. Inside, he could hear a faint trilling. He went down the steps and stood on the sidewalk, trying to see in through the large display window on which the words Thaddeus Bachman Antiques was written in Gothic gold-leaf script, with black accents. In the corner was the blue and white rectangle of Panther Security Systems. Behind the glass were two Ming Dynasty vases, a jade dragon, a free-standing silk screen, and an immense hand-carved mahogany Balinese wedding scene that must have weighed a ton, complete with dancers, fire-walkers, and elephants. Bachman specialized in Eastern art, had perked right up when Hotchkiss told him about the sword. The banker's father had smuggled the sword home from Iwo Jima after World War II.

"Hang on to this Bob. You never know. It might be worth big bucks someday."

A frisson of panic crawled down Hotchkiss' spine. He was hanging by a thread at the Bloare Agency, the investment house where he worked. If he missed the eleven-thirty meeting it would only give his boss the excuse he needed to give Hotchkiss the sack. It was a warm June morning and as usual, Hotchkiss was overdressed in his wool worsted suit and London Fog overcoat. A bead of sweat crept out from under his hat.

Hotchkiss returned to the stoop. The nerve of the man! In frustration, the banker grabbed Bachman's elegant wrought-iron gate handles and shook. The handle swivelled freely. The gate opened. Peculiar. Hotchkiss folded back the gate, which swung silently on oiled hinges. He tried the heavy brass latch

to the split Italian doors. It swivelled and the door swung inward.

“Bachman?” he said. Investment bankers didn’t bellow. “You in there?” The darkened foyer beckoned.

Hotchkiss ventured further, searching for a light. He found one. He stood on a parquet floor beneath a domed twelve-foot ceiling from which hung a Tiffany chandelier. On his left was a glass case featuring Bachman’s announcements, an intercom system, and an alcove holding a jasmine-scented candle in a jade bowl. Directly ahead was the closet-sized elevator. To Hotchkiss’ right was the heavy door leading to the shop itself.

Hotchkiss turned the knob. If the place were unlocked, he would leave Bachman a note. It didn’t occur to Hotchkiss that something was amiss. His primary emotion was irritation that the famed Bachman had stood him up. The door to the shop swung inward, revealing utter blackness, and emitting a peculiar coppery smell. Hotchkiss stepped through the door and felt along the wall for a light switch. His hand swept something small which fell to the floor with a tinkling sound.

“Shit,” he muttered, venturing further into the cluttered room. He was assailed with the comforting odors of antiquity, all our yesterdays stacked and polished with lemon wax, and something else. Something metallic and dangerous. Hotchkiss recalled that Bachman kept a goose-necked lamp on the counter opposite the door. He took one step toward the counter. His feet shot out from under him as if he’d stepped on ice. Hotchkiss went down, instinctively shoving out his hands to break his fall. He slipped on something slick and sprawled on the floor feeling ridiculous for one nanosecond, until his reptile brain clicked that all was not normal in the antique shop.

The strange smell, the sticky slickness added up to animal panic. Demons lurked in the shadows. Gasping, Hotchkiss

scrambled to his feet, hanging on to a hand-carved Indonesian table, spilling expensive doodads to the floor where they landed with a muted clatter. Hotchkiss scraped, bumped, and turned into the heavy drape separating the display window from the shop. Like Jerry Lewis flubbing an entrance, Hotchkiss twisted in the drapes, admitting sunlight into the shop. He looked down. He was standing in a sea of crimson. He stared at his blood-soaked hands and found himself sobbing. He began to shake.

His first thought was to call the police. He hesitated. His soon-to-be ex-wife knew nothing about the sword, or certain other assets he'd kept hidden. If her vampiric lawyer learned about this attempted sale, it would go even harder on him, if that were possible.

Breathing in little shrieks, Hotchkiss decided to let himself out the rear. If he hurried, he would just have time to stop at his condo, shower, and change. He looked toward the front of the store. The height of the floor and the forest of objects insured that no one in the street could see in. Shambling toward the rear, Hotchkiss glanced once behind the counter. He instantaneously wished he hadn't.

CHAPTER ONE

“Pezzini!” Lieutenant Joe Siry yelled from his redoubt at the end of the detectives’ bullpen, on the second floor of the Nineteenth Precinct at 221 West Eighth St. Detective First Grade Sara Pezzini paused at her keyboard. Since discovering she could type seventy-five words a minute, Lt. Siry had found no end of work for her.

“What?” she yelled back. No intercoms in the Nineteenth. It was a miracle they even had computers, purchased with forfeiture money from a drug kingpin Sara had helped bring down.

“Would you come in here please,” Siry shouted back without a trace of self-consciousness. He’d been born screaming and he hadn’t stopped since.

Sighing, Sara saved her work and stood, tucking her gray cotton sleeveless turtleneck into her Versace jeans. “Like a hog-calling contest around here,” she muttered as she strolled toward the lute’s office, aware of but not-intimidated by the sex-hungry eyes of two male detectives. Sara looked like some coke-crazed casting director’s dream of a detective. At thirty-three and one hundred and twenty pounds of lean muscle and feminine curves, she looked ten years younger. But no one would ever mistake her for a pushover. Not with that swagger. Her auburn hair hung straight down her back. She wore her

detective's badge on her belt.

One detective hummed the theme from "The Twilight Zone," in reference to Sara's caseload. Even before acquiring the Witchblade, she'd been the go-to guy on weird. Every bizarre killing or ritualistic murder fell in her lap. Initially, this was because the overwhelmingly male hierarchy got a kick out of watching this perfect "10" get down and dirty with the guys. Just to see if she could do it. Being a woman in the police force was a lot like being gay or a Quaker, in that she was constantly being called upon to prove herself. No matter how many cases she closed or perps she brought in, there would always be a gaggle of cops standing around saying, Yeah, but what have you done for me lately?

Baltazar, the cop who was humming, even looked like Rod Serling. He had the dark good looks and the voice. Baltazar was a Portugese-American. Cops spent more time studying each other's genealogies than hagiographers for the House of Windsor. If it were up to New York cops, there would be no plain Americans, only hyphenated-Americans. Actually, Sara mused, if cops were free to speak their minds, many hyphenated Americans would become politically-incorrect. The police force drew its recruits overwhelmingly from blue-collar strata, from tribes clinging fiercely to their tribal identities. You had your Sons of Hibernia. You had your Black Police Officers Coalition. You had your Puerto Rican cops who did not necessarily groove with the Cuban-American cops.

"Submitted for your approval," Baltazar said, dropping each word like a perfectly formed platinum billet. "Sara Pezzini, mild-mannered homicide dick for the Nineteenth Precinct, innocently answering her lieutenant's come-hither..."

Sara had to smile. It really was a perfect Rod Serling. "That's great, Manny. Leave your number with the secretary, would ya? We'll call you."

She went into the lieutenant's office, shut the door, and planted herself in the middle of a deluxe office chair, adjustable for rake, lumbar, height, and castor, more fruit of the confiscatory tree. The chair slid six inches on its balls.

"What's up, Joe?"

"Decapitation in the East Village. Big shot antiques dealer named Thaddeus Bachman. Anonymous informant over the phone. I got two greenies guarding the place. Here's the address."

"Come on, Joe. I'm up to my eyeballs, my partner is on vacation..."

"Shift your caseload to Baltazar. If he gives you any grief tell him to talk to me."

Sara took the slip of paper. "Does this mean I don't have to continue typing your report to the Equal Opportunities Commission?"

"Come on, don't bust my balls. Murder investigations take priority over bull shit. Get your butt down there before the Daily News beats you to it."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Sara strode forth, snagged her jacket, crime kit and open-face Arai helmet off the coat tree, and headed out the open door of the detectives' bullpen. Behind her, Baltazar's words echoed faintly, "...a mission that will take her...to the Twilight Zone..." He wasn't bad, actually. Kind of cute and at least he had all his hair and no gut. But if Sara were looking for romance, and she wasn't, she wouldn't look in the detectives' bullpen. She'd learned the hard way not to find romance on the job.

Toting helmet like a bowling bag she took the rear stairs to ground level, exiting into the fenced-in motor pool, a tiny lot that because of its location and the plethora of police vehicles, was jammed tighter than a bus at rush hour. The lot only held a dozen vehicles, fitted together like parts of a puzzle, so that to

get one out, you had to move at least two others.

Not Sara. Her Yamaha RZ1 took up little more space than a ten-speed bicycle. She kept it snugged tight against the building in an odd little enclosure protected from cars by huge concrete posts, designed to keep trucks from careening into the rear door. There were two bikes in the enclosure, hers and a spanking new silver and copper Hayabusa. Whose was it? Another biker cop? Only cops were permitted to park personal transportation in here. She paused to admire the Hayabusa, a sleek Suzuki with a thirteen hundred cubic centimeter engine, and allegedly, the fastest stock production motorcycle you could buy. One ninety, as if any sane person would ever go that fast on two wheels. The owner had glued a pair of Powerpuff Girls decals to the minuscule instrument display. Charming.

Sara pulled on her red Joe Rocket jacket, her backpack, then the silver Arai. Straddling the Yamaha, she turned the key, thumbed the ignition, and the four cylinder engine hummed smoothly to life. The Yamaha only weighed four hundred and thirty pounds, less than her Buell. Brave cops, who wouldn't hesitate to run into a darkened alley after an armed assailant, blanched in terror at the thought of riding a motorcycle in Manhattan. What they didn't realize was the unbelievable mobility it gave her. She could be anywhere in the city in literally one half to one-third the time it took others to get there by more conventional methods. If she ran into gridlock, she could roll right down the dotted line between stalled lanes. If anybody gave her any grief, she flashed her badge.

Given an opening, she could accelerate from a dead stop to one hundred miles an hour in eight seconds. Worth Street was a mile southeast of the station house. As she cruised down Center Street, the gaping hole in the sky that used to be the

World Trade Center stared at her like a baleful god. She would never get used to it. It was like losing a leg, but the nerve endings remained alive, constantly reminding her that there used to be a living thing from which those phantom feelings spring. The Nineteenth had lost eleven men and women on September 11. Had Sara not been involved in a hot investigation at the time, she may very well have been among them. There were a lot of new faces around the precinct, which would account for the Hayabusa.

Worth Street was virtually impassable most weekdays. No one noticed the two Crown Vics double-parked in front of Bachman's. Yellow police tape sealed off the entrance, and a uniformed kid with the café latte complexion and brown wool hair of mixed parentage stood nervously behind the tape sipping from a Styrofoam cup. Sara swerved onto the sidewalk at a service entrance, rolled the bike in front of Bachman's and set the sidestand beneath the display window. She removed her helmet, locked it to the bike, took off the jacket and draped it over the seat.

Ducking under the tape, she went up the steps. "Patrolman Sosa," she said, reading the kid's tag, "I'm detective Pezzini. What have you got?"

"Some sick stuff, Detective. Someone cut the owner's head clean off."

"You positively ID the vic?"

"We're trying to locate next-of-kin now. It's hard to tell. I mean, Jesus! You wouldn't think so, but when you cut a guy's head off, it changes his looks. The face goes all saggy and stuff. Sorry."

Sara batted the kid in the arm. "Hang in there." She entered through the propped-open front door, hung a ralph in the foyer and stopped short. The floor was a stinking, sticky mess of blood, smeared and marked with hand and footprints.

Someone had taken a pratfall.

“Yeah,” said the cop standing at the end of the counter. “Watch where you step. If you circle around the perimeter of the room clockwise, you can get over here without stepping in anything. Put some bags on, willya?”

Sara recognized the cop. “Hi Leary. Great way to start the day, huh?” She took a pair of clear plastic baggies out of her backpack, pulled them on over her black leather Nikes, and fixed them in place with rubber bands.

“I’m glad I had breakfast two hours ago. That’s all I’m gonna say.”

Picking her way carefully around the crowded show room, Sara noted where someone had knocked over several small tables spilling expensive gee-gaws across the hardwood floor. She reached Leary who stepped back, permitting her to stand in a dry spot and look. The antique dealer’s body lay on the floor, dark lake of blood extending from the surgically cut neck. The white spine protruded like the wire in a meat cable. She looked up. The head sat on the lower part of the counter staring at them over a crimson clutch of leaves. On closer inspection, they were invoices. The killer had mounted the head on the bills spindle. Blood completely covered the part of the counter not visible from the entrance. Bachman had had a lot of blood.

Sara swung out of her backpack, laying it carefully on the seat of a wicker chair. “You touch anything?”

“Come on, detective. You know me better than that.”

“You call the coroner?”

“Ain’t had time. I’ll do that right now. You okay in here?”

“I’ll scream if I need you.”

Digging in her backpack, she found a pair of latex gloves in a sealed plastic bag that said, “Warning! Latex may cause skin irritation! Do not use if you are latex sensitive!”

Balancing precariously on a patch of dry floor, she

hunkered down next to the headless corpse and shone a penlight on the cut. The vertebrae had been severed cleanly, leaving a faint wave pattern in the bone. Every bone cut left striations behind. The crime techs might be able to suggest the type of instrument the killer had used. Carefully, plucking at the dealer's white cotton cuff, she raised his left hand from where it had fallen. At first it did not want to come loose from the floor, to which it had been glued with dried blood. Rigor had set in, making the whole body feel like badly set plaster-of-Paris. Sara succeeded in prying the arm loose with a dry sucking sound. She examined the palms and fingernails for signs of struggle. Nothing. She carefully lowered the arm back into place.

A number of flies had found their way into the feast and were skating across the sticky black sea of blood. Breathing shallowly through her mouth, Sara rose and forced herself to get up close and personal with Thaddeus Bachman. The antiquarian had an expression of surprise on his face. At least it was quick. But what kind of assassin lops a man's head off with a single blow? She was reminded of Zatoichi, the blind swordsman. Well, a samurai, of course.

It was then that she noticed the empty sword display on the credenza behind the counter. "DOINNGG-G-G!" she said, like the bell in a game show. Bachman specialized in Oriental antiquities. His head had been removed with a single blow. Here were a pair of missing swords. Sara did the math in her head. Someone had been after some swords. And if they had been given so prominent a display, surely there had to be some recent paper record of their existence.

Which brought her back to the red salad poking out from under the severed neck. If the record were among the invoices on the spindle, she would not be able to touch it. The crime lab would get those papers, and it would be their job to provide

her with a complete account. By which time the killer would be on the French Riviera. Gingerly, standing on tip-toes so as not to dip her shoes in the blood, she picked up the sword display stand, made of black-lacquered wood and resembling a pair of antlers.

The display stand had been mass-produced in China. No help there. There was a heap of papers on the credenza next to the display stand. Carefully, Sara gathered the whole pile to her breasts and tip-toed out of the sea of blood. Finding a spot in the light from the street, she sat cross-legged on a Persian rug and went through the magazines and papers. A third of the way down, past Christy's catalogs, dealer magazines, and a phone book, she came to an old office copy of a paper reprinted from *Oriental Antiquarian*: "Master Swordmakers Of Sixteenth Century Japan."

Placing the article in a plastic sleeve, she put it in her backpack. Next, she spied an old-fashioned rolodex on a wooden rolltop desk tucked in behind the counter, beyond the credenza. Aha. Come to think of it, there were no computers in the shop. A single black and white monitor showed the front stoop. She looked up. A camera mounted over the shop entrance stared at her. Good. Maybe the killer was on videotape. The rolodex went into a plastic bag and into her backpack. Next, she went through the cubbyholes. There were bills of lading, receipts, and customs forms in languages she didn't recognize. All of it went into plastic envelopes.

She heard a shuffling in the hall and a moment later Gerhard Koenig of the New York City Coroner's Department entered followed by his assistant, a moon-faced Korean girl Kim Something. Or maybe it was Something Kim. Koenig wore his characteristic mechanic's coveralls, a fashion accessory he'd pioneered for coroners up and down the East Coast.

He paused just inside the entrance. "My stars and garters,

what happened here? I haven't seen this much blood since the Rangers played the Bruins. Is it safe?"

"Watch where you step, Gerhard. The body's behind the service counter. The head is on the counter."

Stepping gingerly in plastic-wrapped shoes, Koenig made his way to the counter. His assistant remained behind, setting her plastic crime scene kit on an antique chair. Koenig stood at one end of the counter and looked down. He emitted an admiring whistle. "Someone has been very naughty. And what have we here? An empty sword display case."

"Yup. We're looking for a samurai killer. You go ahead and do your thing. Holler if you need me."

Koenig nodded and went to work. He would bag the antiquarian's hands to preserve any evidence, search the body, preserve the head, and ultimately separate it from the stack of bills on which it had been impaled. Sara went out onto the stoop where Sosa slouched with a cup of hot chocolate.

"Patrolman, you and I are going to go up and down the street asking merchants if they heard or saw anything unusual. We want to know the last time anyone saw Bachman alive."

Sosa looked up and down the street. "What do you mean unusual?"

Sara shrugged. In the East Village, you had to go some to be unusual. "You figure it out. You go west, I'll go east. When we get to the end of the block, start down the other side and we'll meet in the middle."

Sara could have used more manpower, but since 9/11, every department in the city had been understaffed. The academy was doing its best to catch up. Sara questioned a gallery and a green grocer, the next two shops. The proprietors barely knew Bachman, had seen or heard nothing out of the ordinary. A florist had seen Bachman the previous evening, as the antiquarian exited his brownstone on his way to dinner.

They had exchanged greetings. That at least confirmed what Sara surmised from the body's condition, that Bachman had been alive the previous evening. Koenig would be able to establish time of death more accurately once he took the body's temperature.

Other antique dealers took notice. The rumor that one of their own had fallen had swept up and down the street, was probably racing through galleries on Fifth Avenue as well. Mildred Oxnard, who had operated her fine art gallery on Worth since '89, remarked that Bachman frequently visited the Far East in search of booty, and perhaps had run afoul of some Asian warlord. Sara thanked her and moved on.

She was a third of the way back on the other side of the street when she saw the wrought-iron sign hanging discreetly beneath a larger sign promoting "The Feldstein Gallery: Specializing In the Art Of The Czars!" It belonged to the shop beneath Feldstein's stoop, a shop accessible by a wrought iron stair, protected by a wrought-iron gate, now open. The little iron sign beneath said, "Togi/Sword Polishing."

CHAPTER TWO

It was approximately noon when Sara tried the green metal door with an eyehole in the middle. It was open. A pair of chimes tinkled as she pushed the door inward.

“Hello?”

“Just a minute,” someone called from a back room. She was in a carpeted foyer with an aquarium gurgling softly beneath the barred sunken window. The aquarium was large, at least a hundred gallons, and contained a dazzling display of coral, sea cucumbers, spider-like crabs, and other colorful denizens. The floor was covered with thick, charcoal-colored nap. The room had been furnished with a comfortable old leather sofa, a teak coffee table, and an overstuffed chair. Examples of Japanese brush painting adorned one wall. Another wall was covered with swords, dozens of them nestling in hand-finished padded oak arches. A beaded curtain separated the foyer from a hall.

The beads parted and a man came through, bringing with him the fresh chill of the outdoors, as if he'd just stepped in from the Colorado Rockies. He was about five-nine, late twenties/early thirties, with close-cropped dense blondish-brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and grey blue eyes which went from Sara's face to the badge on her belt and back again. He grinned disarmingly.

“What can I do for you?”

“Detective Pezzini, Homicide South. I’m investigating the death of your neighbor, Thaddeus Bachman. You are?”

The man’s mouth opened and he stalled as he tried to digest the news. “Thad is dead?”

“Yes sir. We received an anonymous tip this morning. May I have your name?”

“David Kopkind. I can’t believe it. What happened?”

“We’re not exactly sure yet, Mr. Kopkind. That’s what we’re trying to determine. When was the last time you saw Mr. Bachman alive?”

Kopkind slumped in the chair. “Last week sometime. He used to send me clients. He phoned me Friday said he was sending me a client and begged me to move him up the list.”

Sara sat on the sofa, removed her note pad and a pen. “What list?”

“I’m a sword polisher. It takes about two weeks to polish a sword, and I’m currently booked about 3 years out. I rarely make exceptions. Nobody likes a linecutter.”

“You actually make a living at this?”

“You bet. There are enough collectors in Manhattan alone to keep me busy for the rest of my life.”

“So you know something about swords.”

Again, the disarming grin. Sara stifled an impulse to grin back.

“A little. I’d be happy to tell you anything you want to know.”

The curtains parted and a large orange tabby cat came through, snarling and yawning. It made a bee-line for Sara and jumped up into her lap before she had a chance to move.

“Yoshi, no!” the sword polisher hissed, getting up from his chair and reaching for the cat.

Sara resisted an impulse to pet. She liked cats. But she was

on the job. And the damned thing was covering her jeans in hair. She allowed Kopkind to lift the cat off her thighs, his fingers just brushing.

"Sorry," he grinned. "Yoshi's on patrol." He shooed it back behind the curtains.

"No problem. Did Bachman have any enemies?"

"Maybe other antique dealers who were jealous. Thad was famous for obtaining rare Japanese swords, particularly the work of Masamune and his top rival Muramasa, both of whom were active in the Fourteenth Century. Those swords are virtually priceless."

"Hmmm," Sara mused. "I guess if people are willing to cut each other up for ten bucks' worth of crack, a priceless sword is good a reason as any."

"That's a beautiful bracelet," Kopkind said. "Where did you get it?"

Sara looked down with a touch of alarm. He was staring right at the Witchblade, a piece of platinum rococo with a large vermilion stone, nesting on her wrist.

"Old family heirloom."

Kopkind was across the room on one knee. "May I see?"

She permitted him to examine the strange band, holding her slender wrist, feeling his heat for one second before shaking him off. "Mr. Kopkind, this is a murder investigation. Please sit down and answer my questions."

The sword polisher resumed his seat. "Sorry. Would you like something to drink? A cup of tea?"

She *would* like a cup of tea. But she refused to let down her professional guard. "Some other time perhaps. Are you aware of Mr. Bachman acquiring any valuable swords recently? Something that might prompt this crime?"

"Well, he did phone me, and when I asked him who the client was he said he couldn't tell me, just to get ready 'cause

the guy would make it worth my while. That's another thing. I try not to let money sway me. I would have had to tell his client that I won't move him to the front of the line. My only exceptions are for humanitarian reasons."

Sara set down the notepad. "What possible humanitarian reasons could there be that would cause you to alter your routine?"

Kopkind leaned forward and touched his fingers together between his knees. "Last year, a big-time industrial Japanese player was forced to downsize. They had to lay off twelve hundred workers, workers whom they'd promised employment for life. The CEO who made this decision realized that there was only one way for him to atone for his shame. I made an exception for him."

Sara hung fire for a second. "Do you mean he used the sword to commit suicide?"

Kopkind nodded.

"You bumped his sword to the head of the line so he could kill himself?"

Kopkind spread his hands. "You can't judge him by Western standards. Suicide is not a form of mental illness in Japan. Often, it is the only honorable course of action. He did not actually wield the sword himself. That was done by a subordinate. He used his short sword, his tanto, to disembowel himself while..."

Sara held up a hand. "I get the idea. Here's my card. Gimme one of yours. Are these swords valuable?"

"They're priceless Sotheby's sold an authenticated Masamune last year for three and a half million dollars."

Not that it mattered. Sara had learned that people will kill for any reason or no reason. Greed just helped her make sense of the crime. The nature of the crime precluded gang-bangers and other low-level criminals. "Does it take extraordinary skill

to behead a man like that?"

Kopkind nodded. "You can't just pick up a sword and start slicing. If an ordinary man picked up a *katana* and tried to cut someone's head off with one blow, he wouldn't get very far. He may kill the guy, but it would be a mess. It takes incredible strength, focus, and training. The ancient samurai used to test their blades on live criminals. Once you dipped your sword in a person of low station, you had to purify it. All the great swords were baptized in blood."

"Are you aware of Bachman taking possession of any extremely valuable swords recently?"

Again the shrug. Sara decided Kopkind had an aw-shucks demeanor, and might have originated on a farm upstate. "That's what he did for a living. I imagine his inventory is worth maybe fifty million."

"That's a pretty informed guess."

"I'm a pretty informed observer. We were friends. We visited each other's shops, although I wish I'd stopped in recently. I don't know, not that I could have made a difference... You don't expect these things to happen in your own neighborhood."

Sara stood. "Nobody does. Thanks for your time, Mr. Kopkind. If you can think of anything else, you have my card."

Kopkind sprang to his feet. "You bet. Maybe I can ask around too."

"You do that."

Sosa was back on duty, looking anxiously down the street when Sara returned.

"Any luck, Mr. Sosa?" she asked.

"Nobody saw anything. It's a circus down here. You got green-haired hermaphrodites on unicycles selling Girl Scout cookies. Nothing's out of the ordinary. What about you?"

"Maybe a motive."

Two crime techs came out of the brownstone wheeling a gurney with collapsible wheels atop which rested Bachman's remains encased in a rubber body bag like a big blood sausage. She waited until they passed, then went into the foyer and stood in the shop entrance. Koenig was peeling off his latex gloves and packing up his kit. Kim Something waited patiently with her legs slightly spread, her plastic toolbox held in front.

"Find anything, Gerhard?" Sara asked.

"Nothing beyond that which you've already seen. For the amount of blood, it was a remarkably clean killing. Whoever did it left precious little of himself. No hairs. No fibers. No fingerprints. Didn't step in any blood. I got crime techs dusting all the doorknobs, but I doubt will find anything. I think the dealer let his killer into the shop."

Sara thanked him and booked.

CHAPTER THREE

Weaving in and out of traffic, Sara zipped back to the Nineteenth, resisting the impulse to pull a wheelie at the intersection of Lexington and Vine. She zipped into the motor pool cage and worked the bike into the odd triangle between the loading dock and the rear entrance. Hers was the only motorcycle.

Someone had planted a rubber Godzilla on her desk with a word balloon. The balloon said in crude block lettering, “PEZZINI CAN HANDLE WEREWOLVES AND MUMMIES— BUT IS SHE READY FOR GODZILLA?” Sara couldn’t help it if she was a weird magnet. She hadn’t chosen the Witchblade. It had chosen her. Speaking of which, the thing had receded to a costume bracelet, an art deco band of silver enclosing what appeared to be a large garnet. You’d never guess it could expand in a nanosecond to enclose her entire body.

Sara grabbed the Godzilla. It was super-glued to the desk. “Very funny, guys,” she said, getting a good, two-handed grip. The two other detectives in the room buried their noses in their work. With an unpleasant sucking noise that reminded her of Bachman’s arm, she pulled the atomic dinosaur loose and set it aside. She opened her backpack and set out the plastic envelopes filled with receipts, notations, and the rolodex. Sitting, she pulled her dog-eared Manhattan phone book out of

her lower desk drawer and thumbed through until she found Panther Security.

She dialed the number. "Welcome, and thank you for calling Panther Security!" a hearty male voice boomed. "Please listen carefully to the following menu, and make your selection when you are ready. This call may be monitored for quality purposes."

Impatiently, Sara stabbed zero. A phone rang. A female answered, "Panther Security, this is Doris speaking."

Identifying herself, Sara asked to be put through to a supervisor. Moments later, a male voice answered. "This is Norm Hansen. How can I help you?"

Sara identified herself again. "Mr. Hansen, I'm investigating a homicide that took place at Thaddeus Bachman's antique shop on Worth Street. Do you know it?"

"Very well. I installed that set-up myself, about twelve years ago. Who died?"

"Mr. Bachman was murdered in his shop sometime last night. I'm hoping we can review those security tapes as soon as possible. They're not stored on-premises, are they?"

"Nope. Everything's here at central. We revised the entire system three years ago. Completely digital. How about I messenger those tapes over to you?"

"Mr. Hansen, that would be very helpful."

"It's my pleasure, detective. I can't believe someone killed Thaddeus Bachman. He was a real gentleman. Give me the address and a phone number."

Siry came out of his office, unlit cigar in his mouth like an unexploded bomb. No one had ever seen him smoke one. In fact, no one had associated Siry with tobacco in any way until the City Council passed an ordinance forbidding smoking in public buildings.

"Where are we?"

“Thaddeus Bachman, a noted antiques dealer, head lopped off with a single blow. Maybe by a samurai sword.”

Siry worked the cigar like a six-speed transmission. “A samurai killer, huh? Well why not. With you, it couldn’t be an ordinary homicide.”

“This case was assigned to me on a random basis, Joe. But we may have caught a break. Panther Security’s sending over the tapes. We may have caught the killer on tape.”

The cigar downshifted into four. “Ha. We should be so lucky. Keep me posted. Don’t talk to the press. You leave that to me.”

He turned to go. “Hey Joe.” He paused. “Any idea who owns that Suzuki Hayabusa in the vehicle pool?”

“What is that, some kind of car?”

“It’s a motorcycle.”

“Might be that new guy Sharpe, from the Bay Area. Started this week.” Siry picked up the Godzilla. “Nice.” He stomped back to his cave.

Sara began with the rolodex. There were over a hundred names which she removed one by one and placed in three stacks: unlikelies, possibles, and likelies. The unlikely pile quickly grew with service firms, auction houses, the deceased, etc. The possibles included a long list of clients about which Sara knew little or nothing. There were no candidates for the likely pile.

Her telephone buzzed. “Detective Pezzini.”

“Sara, it’s Ben Weiskopf.”

It grooved her off-track. While on the job, she had a cop frame of mind. Ben Weiskopf was the retired accountant who lived across the hall from her in Brooklyn. She took a minute to shift gears.

“Ben. What’s up?”

“Sara, I hate to bother you, it’s not even your problem. It’s

those kids, those Puerto Rican kids who hang out on the front stoop. They're charging us a dollar to get in or out of our own homes. Mildred Gribble can't afford to go shopping."

"Ben, that's terrible! I had no idea. Did you phone the Brooklyn PD?"

"Yeah, yeah, phoned 'em a bunch of times. Every time I phone they send a cop car to cruise slowly by the building. Once. That had a big affect. They scatter like flies and five minutes later they're back."

"How about I phone them? I might be able to get some different results."

"Yeah, sure, that would be a big help," Weiskopf said dispiritedly.

"Well Ben, what do you expect me to do? I'm on duty in Manhattan, not Brooklyn. Let me talk to them. I'm sure we can do something. People shouldn't have to live in fear in their own houses."

Weiskopf thanked her and hung up. He did not sound optimistic. They weren't best friends, but they were closer than most apartment dwellers. Ben looked after Sara's cat when she was out of town. She had brought him groceries when he had the flu. He helped her with her taxes, not that there was much to it. Weiskopf was retired, a widower, with grown children, a son in Florida, a daughter in California.

A bike messenger appeared at the end of the bullpen on the other side of the rail, carrying his thick-tired mountain bike over one shoulder. In blue and black spandex, gloves, and helmet, he looked like a participant in some new-wave extreme sport. Jan Pooley, the office secretary pointed at Sara and held the swinging wooden gate open for the messenger, who headed her way with a brown-paper wrapped package under one arm.

"Detective Pezzini?"

"That's me."

“I have a delivery for you from Panther Security. Sign here please.”

She signed the form and took the package, which was sealed with scotch tape. When she opened it, there were three videocassettes inside, each labeled Bachman Galleries with the time indicated. The three tapes were for the hours from six p.m. Tuesday to noon Wednesday, encompassing the period during which Bachman was last seen alive, and when he was discovered.

This was going to take some time. The only videocassette machine on the floor was in Siry’s office, and she could hardly commandeer that for eighteen hours. Nor could she watch the tapes straight through. The smart thing would be to divvy them up among the detectives. She badly wanted to watch them all herself, to be the one who saw the killer first. But she knew she could use help. When she looked at her watch, she saw it was twenty minutes past quitting time.

Sara took the cassettes, knocked on Siry’s door and went in.

He didn’t look up. “What?”

“These are the video tapes from Bachman’s shop. Can you get someone to watch these, someone we can trust?”

Siry glanced at his watch in annoyance. He was making notes on a legal pad, sheer torture for him. Like most bureaucrats, he was at war with the English language. “I’ll ask Raj when he comes in. Go on. Get out of here. Go home and relax. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

One more task. She phoned the Brooklyn Sixteenth Precinct Division, eight blocks from where she lived. She spoke to a desk sergeant named Hannity who promised that he would step up the patrols in her neighborhood. She thanked him, hung up, and methodically stored her belongings in her leather Skechers backpack.

When she went outside, the Hayabusa was back.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sara lived at Waubeska Place on St. Mark's Avenue, state-of-the-art luxury in 1959. Today, Waubeska place was a five story red brick U-shaped apartment block, the two arms embracing a tidy little garden, lovingly maintained by the residents, who until recently, had fought a winning battle against graffiti. But the neighborhood was changing. Section Eight had assumed control of part of the building through a complicated judicial arrangement based on the previous owner's alleged crimes against groups traditionally considered to have been marginalized. In other words, discrimination. Since the previous owner's name ended in a vowel, and he was now serving ten to twenty at Ossining for RICO violations, no one wept for him. One wept for the honest tenants left behind.

The present owner was a retired entrepreneur in the garment industry who'd acquired the property when his consortium took over the property management company previously owned by the goombahs.

Sara seldom used the main entrance, because she stashed her bike in the underground lot of the Neame Medical Center, directly behind St. Marks on Prospect Place. The medical center was happy to accommodate her, because she was a cop. Wheeling down the ramp, she waved to the security gal and found her spot on the second level down, in a yellow-striped

rectangle adjacent to the elevators. After she had secured her helmet to the frame, she ran a kryptonite bike lock through the front wheel. You couldn't be too careful.

It was six-thirty, still bright out, a gentle breeze playing off the East River. Instead of ducking in one of the rear entrances, for which she had a key, Sara shouldered her backpack and headed around the block, noting the young tea and mulberry trees planted in squares of soil like devotionals, held in place by guy-wire. The soil was barely visible through the layers of discarded crack vials, trash, and cigarette butts. At least the dog crap had disappeared. For some reason, Brooklynites took that ordinance seriously.

Walking now in the shadow of one of the wings, she passed a couple homeboys working on a '67 Chevy Impala, one bending over the open hood, the other with his feet sticking out from below. A wolf whistle emitted from beneath the car.

"I'm ugly on top, essay," she said without stopping.

"No she ain't!" sang the other one.

Around the corner to St. Marks Avenue, off which Waubeska Place sprung like an extra head. The street was a genteel mix of residential and retail, mostly restaurants, neighborhood markets, and laundry. As usual, the broad boulevard was parked up on both sides. It was a warm evening and many residents were taking the stroll or cruising the boulevard. Skaters, skateboarders and bicyclists swooped around her, even though it was illegal to operate any of those devices on the sidewalk.

As Sara came into view of the main entrance, she saw the problem. A cement walk extended straight back from the street to the broad stoop and arched main entrance, framed on both sides by narrow strips of flowers surrounded by lawn. A half dozen kids, five boys and a girl, were draped around the stoop passing cans of malt liquor and listening to bad rap on a

portable boom box. The noise was intolerable. Sara's apartment faced the back, so she'd never heard it.

As she approached the stoop, the youths stirred. You couldn't really call them kids. They'd forfeited their childhoods on the altar of machismo. No, these were homies, a tribe of feral youngsters observing gang rule. The men began making comments when she was a hundred feet away.

"Que *guapa!*"

"Hey, missy! You look sweet in that jacket!"

"Hector, let her through."

"No way. Everybodies got to pay. But she don't got to give me money!"

They laughed. She spotted the leader at once, the hulking Hector, a cruiserweight at least, in his white muscle shirt and black jeans that were so baggy they could have supplied the main sail for a schooner. Hector had limpid black eyes over an eagle beak and a hairline mustache. His black hair was slicked straight back with either Vaseline or axle grease. He wore a red bandanna around his forehead, and a gold chain around his neck. Hector. The other three were negligible.

Sara started up the steps. Hector stood on the stoop, legs spread, directly in front of her. She moved to go around him. He moved with her.

"Huh-unh-unh, *guapa!* Is a dollar to get in, a dollar to get out. But chew know what? You and me, we can strike some kind of deal..."

Sara lowered her head and kept on moving. Hector had to move aside lest she butt him in the groin. When she had obtained the top step, she pulled out her badge.

"I'm a police officer. It's illegal to consume alcohol on a public ingress. It's illegal to throw your trash in the flowers. And it's illegal to extort money from people going in or out. Now get out of here."

Five heads turned grinning toward Hector who grinned at Sara. "You ain't no cop. Lemme see that badge, wild thing."

Sara flashed the briefest grin before her left hand shot out and snagged Hector behind the neck, followed immediately by the right. Boosting herself up, she slammed her right knee into Hector's solar plexus with enough force to crack a brick. She let go and stepped back as Hector sank to the stoop like a collapsing skyscraper.

"*Chinga su madre!*" one of the guys said. "She smoked Hector."

Another one gave a long, low whistle.

The third said, "Are you really a cop?"

"In Manhattan. But this is where I live. And you do not, repeat, do *not* want to fuck with a cop where she lives. I want, I can have half the Brooklyn police force hassling your asses twenty-four/seven. Comprende?"

One of the girls looked familiar. Sara turned toward her. "Do I know you?"

"I live here," the girl said.

"That makes us neighbors. I'm Sara Pezzini. What's your name?"

"Lupe. Lupe Gutierrez. I live here with my mother and little sister."

"See you around, Lupe."

Lupe said something snarky which Sara didn't catch, because she was through the double glass doors and into the marble-floored foyer. Using her key, she unlocked her mailbox and removed several bills, and the latest issue of *Sunset, the Magazine of the West*. Someone had propped open the inner security door to bypass the lock. Sara took the chunk of wood with her as she let the door click shut behind her. She really was going to have to talk to the landlord.

The trouble was he didn't know she was a cop. She'd

inherited the apartment from a friend who got a job in Colorado. If the lease had formally changed hands, the landlord would have at least doubled the rent. It was an awkward situation. The management company to which she paid rent never noticed the shift in accounts. They only noticed the bottom line. Technically, she was in violation. But if the police tried to enforce every violation, it would simply choke the court system to death.

Rather than wait for the elevator, Sara took the marble steps, still elegant, to the second floor balcony. She passed an apartment that had been unoccupied since the previous tenant flipped out on ecstasy and bashed in the walls. The door was covered with faded, "DO NOT ENTER—CONSTRUCTION ZONE" tape. Unoccupied apartments were bad news—magnets for trouble. Something else she couldn't tell the landlord.

She entered the regular stair. She couldn't help but notice the fresh gang graffiti littering the stairwell. "Romeros," "Brooklyn Romeros," and "Hector" were among the more legible scrawls.

Sara emerged on the fourth floor and proceeded to her apartment, 427, opposite Ben Wieskopf's, which faced the inner courtyard. As soon as she put her key in her lock Weiskopf's door opened.

"Did you see them?"

"Hello, Ben. Good evening to you too. Yes, I saw them, I spoke with them, and I don't think we're going to have any more trouble."

"I know you saw them. I watched you coming up the walk."

"Did you see what happened?"

"No. I don't want to remove the screen so I couldn't see straight down. You talked to them?"

"I talked to them."

"One of them lives in the building. That's why they're here, picking on us. Even jackals know not to crap where they live."

"Ben, don't worry. I took care of it."

"What about the graffiti in the stairwell. Did you see?"

"Ben, I can't do everything, and I've been working for nine hours straight. Call the management company about the graffiti."

"The management company! No, you're right. You're right. I'm sorry. And thank you. Thank you, Sara, I'm just a querulous old man."

Sara got her door open, swung her backpack inside. She turned around and went up to Ben. He was about her height, with a slightly protruding belly, and wild white tufts behind each ear, like some exotic bird. He wore rectangular horn-rimmed glasses and had a mustache.

"Ben, let's you and me get together later in the week for some java and I'll tell you all about it. I'll even let you put brandy in your coffee." She winked. The old man brightened.

"Okay. Okay! And thanks again. I think Shmendrick is hungry. He keeps meowing. I was going to feed him, but I figured you'd be home soon."

Sara nodded with good-natured weariness and gently closed the door. Shmendrick immediately began twining between her feet. She knelt and picked up the long-haired Himalayan. He was one big cat. Blue eyes and a folded back ear.

"Meow!"

"What else?"

"Meow!"

"And?"

"Meow!"

“Very good!” Sara poured the cat back on the floor, picked up her backpack and set it on her dining room table, which served as her desk, and removed the sacked stack of invoices and notations she’d brought from Bachman’s. She’d left the rolodex at work under lock and key.

She peeled off her clothes while the tub filled, poured in some bubbles and lavender bath oil, adjusted the temperature so that it was almost too hot to bear, and carefully lowered herself into the water. A luxurious soak in a sudsy tub had always been one of her favorite guilty pleasures. A private moment to escape, to wash away the stress of the day and just completely relax. Twenty minutes later, she emerged in a floor-length terrycloth robe, hair wrapped in a beige towel, and famished. She went to the freezer. Genuine Palermo Microwave Chicken Cacciatore beckoned with an olive grove and quaint skyline on the package.

She grabbed it. “Father, forgive me.”

While she waited for Palermo’s Pride to cook in the microwave, she turned her attention to the stack of papers on the dining room table, an old oak circle she’d bought on Mulberry Street and shipped home in the Black Syreeta. The Black Syreeta was what they called the prisoner transport vehicle, a black Ford van. Shmendrick sprawled, a furry centerpiece, tail whipping the occasional paper into the air and onto the floor.

“Shmendrick!” She flicked a dishtowel at him. He looked at her with catly disdain. As if! She’d never done anything like that to the cat before, and she wasn’t about to start now. She had to physically lift the twenty pound cat off the table. Only then did she see on what he’d been lying. A Xerox copy, bastard child of a twelfth generation twice removed, as if the article had been copied and recopied in clandestine circumstances so that by the time it got to her, the faded gray

letters were barely legible.

MURAMASA-TO, it said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Not just sword lovers, but people in general regard the swords of MURAMASA as bad swords with evil powers. This is simply a failure of imagination on the part of the public. Originally, the sword was a divine object filled with fire, water, iron, wood, and earth, in other words, the five elements of energy, and even though it is a tsurugi that is protected and pacified the country, or a tsurugi that is a living person, it is not something that can be expected to bring evil or calamity upon the owner.

The legend of Murumasa's evil swords began after the emergence of the Edo Jidai, and is something that was born because ill fortune followed ill fortune upon the Tokugawa Ke. The grandfather of Ieyasu, Jirosaburo Kiyoyasu, was slain at the age of twenty-five by a katana made by Muramasa. His son Nobuyasu also received a serious wound by a drunk with a wakizashi made by Muramasa. Finally, Ieyasu himself cut his hand at Miyagasaki in Suruga with a ko-gatana made by Muramasa. For Ieyasu, this meant that the death of his grandfather, the maiming of his father, and his own cutting were all done one after the other by works of Muramasa. It is not unreasonable to surmise that the swords were evil, and it is not unreasonable that during the Edo Jidai, when the Tokugawa Ke was all powerful, that the story of the Muramasa swords became popular.

This was very unfortunate for Muramasa's heirs, who were unable thereafter to find buyers for his swords among the daimyo who

curried favor with the Tokugawa Ke in the Edo Jidai. It is understandable that many popular novels and Noh plays dealt with the legend of the evil swords, and the circumstances were that the feeling of the evil swords of Muramasa permeated the public consciousness.

Inevitably, among the daimyo and buge (military families) who harbored animosity towards the Tokugawa Ke, there was a tendency for them to like and keep swords made by Muramasa. These were, beginning with the Sanada Ke, the Fukushima Ke, and such, the people who had a feeling of deep obligation to the Toyotomi Ke of Osaka, and included the patriots of Satsuma and Choshu of the Sonno Ha (Restore the Emperor Faction) and Tobau Ha (Anti-Tokugawa Faction.) In their attempt to overthrow the Tokugawa Bakafu, they favored the Muramasa swords, which were said to have an evil influence on the Tokugawa Ke, and tried to use them.

In the fourth month of Meiji Gannen (1867,) Katsu Yasuyoshi came to Satsuma Yashiki in Mita to discuss the surrender of Edo Castle. Saigo Takamori, who sat opposite him, held a heavy gunsen (war fan.) Inside this gunsen was a moroha zukuri tanto by Muramasa. The gunsen is made of iron, inlaid with silver iro-e where the fan paper is inserted in the fan, and on the back of the omote and ura is a Chinese poem sketched by Fujita Toko. This Chinese poem is probably based on the tradition of a song sung by Keika when, in the vicinity of Ekisui, he assassinated Shikotei (First Emperor of the Chin Dynasty (China, 221 – 206 B.C.). The contents of the Muramasa and this poem were together a very positive statement of his opposition to the bakufu, and are articles left behind which graphically show the honor and dignity of Dai-Saigo.

However, in reality, the reputation of the swords made by Muramasa for being exceptionally sharp is an actual fact. The yakiba epitomizing keenness, combined with the terrible clarity of the ji and ha, may in themselves have given rise to the stories about them being evil. It is said that they cry in the night for blood, driving the owner

to murder.

Moreover, Muramasa's terrible end, and the murder of his four assistants provide further proof, if any were needed, that his blades were cursed. In 1368, the swordsman Udo, contending with the swordsman Oji for the hand of a young lady of the Gozen family, commissioned Muramasa to forge for him a remarkable blade...

The page, and the narrative stopped there.

CHAPTER
SIX

Sara woke up on the sofa when her cell phone started beeping. She'd fallen asleep reading about the art of swordmaking. Shmendrick lay curled up contentedly next to her belly. She grabbed the cell phone off the coffee table and flicked it on.

"Pezzini."

"It's Joe. We got another one."

"Another what? What time is it?"

"Another homicide by decapitation. It's eleven forty-five. Sorry to disturb your beauty sleep, kid, but that's why they pay you the big bucks."

"Riiiiight. Where do I go?"

Siry gave her the name and address. Sara whistled. "Scott Chalmers? I've heard of that guy."

"He's a page six regular. Charity balls, Democratic fundraisers, feed the children. Also a big time collector."

"Of what?"

"Wives, lawsuits, and Oriental art."

"I'm on my way."

Chalmers lived on Park Avenue, on the Park. Normally, that was out of Sara's precinct, but the city often fudged the lines for homicide dicks investigating weird cases like this. Since 9/11, all departments had been short-handed and forced

to share time and info with other departments. In terms of internal politics, the NYPD was as mellow and together as Sara could ever remember. She only hoped it stayed that way.

Throwing on her Joe Rocket, she drummed down the stairs, splanged out the back entrance and dashed across the street to the medical center. Minutes later, she zipped out of the underground garage and headed for the Brooklyn Bridge.

She was at the Park Avenue address within ten minutes, the denunciations of Pakistani cab drivers hanging in her wake. There was a Channel Six news van at the curb, a blow-dried producer arguing with a cop. Six or seven cop cars were double-parked at the curb and a small crowd had gathered. This was a big deal. People knew who Scott Chalmers was.

Also, your second samurai killing. Wouldn't the press have a field day with this? She wondered if they already knew. Sara pulled onto the sidewalk. A cop came to chase her away until she showed her badge and tugged off her helmet.

"Pezzini, Nineteenth. I'm doing the headless killings. Hold this." She handed the cop her helmet, got off the bike, tucked it next to the glass entrance, took the helmet back and locked it to her bike.

The cop trailed behind her as she headed for the revolving glass doors. "He's on the penthouse. They can tell you more, I just got here. Nice bike!"

She waved, went through the doors, beelined past a homicide dick interviewing the security guard. Chalmers' penthouse was on the fifty-second floor. Two cops stood in the round marble foyer guarding a Greek fountain whose gentle gurgling belied the carnage inside. Sara introduced herself and showed her badge.

One of the cops said, "Ain't you the X-Files cop?" and hummed the theme from the show.

Sara didn't bother to acknowledge him as she let herself

through the double, hand-carved teak doors leading to the living room, where three cops were standing around an incredible scene: Chalmer's decapitated body lay spread-eagled in the middle of a white shag rug. His head lay about five feet away staring toward the patio. At first glance, it looked as if the swordsman had lopped and run. No planting of the head on a receipt spindle this time.

Sara detected quiet, steady sobbing from down the hall. "I'm Pezzini," she said. "I caught a similar case in the Village yesterday. Who's in charge?"

A plain clothes raised his hand. "McVickers, homicide, twelfth. Yeah. We've been waiting for you. The wife found the body about an hour ago when Chalmers didn't come back to bed. Her screams alerted the maid, who phoned 911."

Sara scrunched up her forehead. "There was a wife and a maid in the house when the murder was committed?"

"Apparently."

"Guy must be some kind of ghost. How'd he get up here? Did you talk to security?"

"Security swears no one entered the building after ten p.m. We have videos of the main entrance, entry hall, elevators, and stairwell. We're going over them now."

Sara looked around the room. It was constructed on two levels, with a broad sunken area, at least eight hundred square feet, filled with glass display cases and priceless objects. Conspicuous by its absence was the sword. The top of a glass display case had been pried up on its hinges. Inside, what was obviously a display frame for a sword was empty.

"Anybody know about the sword?" she asked, pointing.

"That's what we figured. We got a call into the insurance company."

"Mind if I talk to the widow?"

"Be my guest."

Sara followed the sobbing down a hall lined with Japanese and Chinese prints and brush paintings, past plinths topped with Chinese pottery, past a life-sized terra-cotta warrior to a sitting room overlooking Central Park in which a plump police matron tried to sooth the inconsolable widow.

Sara put a hand on the widow's shoulder. "Sara Pezzini, homicide, Nineteenth. I'm very sorry for your loss, Mrs. Chalmers."

The cop got the message and stood. A moment later, they were alone. The grieving widow appeared to be in her late-twenties, with the leggy good looks of a Rockette. Her long blond hair slumped shapelessly over her satin-clad shoulders as she sniffled into a handkerchief.

"Ma'am, I'm very sorry to intrude on your grief, but if we act quickly, we have a better chance of apprehending the killer. What is your name?"

"Grace."

"You found the body how?"

"We were asleep last night. We'd been watching Leno. Scott leaned over and said he thought he heard something. I wasn't very awake, but a few minutes later I heard a disturbance, a swooshing sound and voices, and when I went to investigate, there he was..."

"You have a maid?"

"Yes, Giselda. She called 911. She knows what to do. She's not afraid, she's perfectly legal. She's from Nicaragua."

"Did you notice the missing sword?"

"Oh no..."

"What?"

"That damned sword! I should have known! He beat some other collector out in an online auction, and the other collector sent threatening e-mails. Scott had to put a block on him. Then, when the sword arrived, the delivery man slipped

on the stoop and ended up suing the association. When Scott opened the sword, he cut himself very badly."

"Was it a Muramasa sword, by any chance?"

Grace looked at her with wide-eyed astonishment. Her eyes were green. Sara recalled from somewhere that this was Mrs. Chalmers number four. "That's right. A very rare collector's item. How did you know?"

"Just a hunch. I would appreciate seeing anything you might have about the sword, including history, a cancelled check, how Mr. Chalmers learned of it, anything like that."

"All right."

"We'll have to take Mr. Chalmers' computer, the one he used to purchase the sword."

"Of course. I'll show you where it is."

Sara thought the woman's grief was a little showy. What the hell. So what if she'd married Chalmers for his money? She hadn't killed him. Sara made a mental note to check up on the three prior Mrs. Chalmers, to see if any held a grudge. It was a long shot, but cases were made on less.

Mrs. Chalmers showed Sara to Chalmers' office. Sara ordered the computer bagged and brought in. When she returned to the living room, Koenig and Kim had arrived.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," Koenig told her.

"I agree. Did you take a look?"

Koenig nodded. "Just like the other one. A clean cut. I have an enlargement of the striations, by the way. We should be able to match the cuts. Something tells me this killer is not going to great lengths to disguise his modus operandi."

It was nearly three by the time Sara returned to her apartment, where she switched off all the phones in defiance of regulations and fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She was in the court of the Tokugawas and she was a man. He was kneeling on a cotton pad on the polished mahogany floor of a castle, wearing a white silk kimono displaying the family crest, a crab superimposed on a peony. Two samurai stood on either side wearing *kabuto* of varnished leather, their hands resting on their long swords. Immediately in front of him knelt his son, Genzaburo, eighteen, until the past week, an up-and-coming officer in the shogun's army. Genzaburo wore a white silk kimono, also with the family crest. His topknot had been unceremoniously severed moments earlier. He knelt now facing a slab of sandalwood atop which lay a simple sheathed tanto. Directly behind Genzaburo, feet at shoulder width, arms crossed behind him, stood the Captain of the Guard Kamo Atsutane wearing the double swords of his office.

"Shigeyoshi!" barked Grand Superintendent Mizuno Kawachi no Kami Morinobu in Japanese. The dreamer experienced the language both inside and outside. She could hear it as Japanese—harsh, indecipherable. At the same time, she heard its meaning clearly.

"You have betrayed your shogun by collecting forbidden swords! When ordered to deliver these swords to the magistrate to be destroyed, you distributed them among your retainers! Most infamously, you gambled your future on the

failure of your shogun! For this most heinous crime you and your son Genzaburo, a party to your betrayal, are ordered to commit seppuku.”

Shigeyoshi looked up, from under his hedgerow brows, and saw his son, his pride and joy, face so young he had not yet begun to sprout facial hair. He looked beyond his son, out the open door to the garden outside. It was overcast, and he could just see the branch of a ginkgo tree. Even in the pale autumn light, the leaves glowed luminescent.

The breeze stirred through the great hall, bringing with it the scent of jasmin and horse manure.

“Grand Superintendent!” Shigeyoshi declared in a firm voice. “Permission for my son and I to compose our death poems!”

The Grand Superintendent, a squat, powerful man with a mustache like a swallow’s tail, nodded curtly. He motioned for the guard to provide paper and brushes. Moments later, these were given to Genzaburo and Shigeyoshi.

Shigeyoshi had been working on the poem in his head for some time. The peculiar thing was, he felt no shame for betraying the shogun. He never liked the man anyway. He felt instead a transcendent calm, a satori which he’d never studied, but somehow, on the knife edge of death, achieved. He saw in his mind a long line of glittering blades extending back two centuries to their creation. Extending far into the future, into a land that was as much straight up and down as horizontal, a place where life exploded in an unstable mix of barbarism and high culture.

The universe tilted, with Shigeyoshi in the center. It was as if he could suddenly see all the way to the sun. All those glittering blades, extending far into the future, much farther than their origin in the past. The magistrate had always known he was destined for greater things. His own rise through the

bureaucracy had been meteoric; he'd been hailed as one of the most talented of the Shogun's administrators, and marked for great honors and responsibilities.

Vanity, all, in the face of the purity represented by the Muramasa blades. Particularly the Blade. Which even now, had escaped the shogun's wrath.

The Grand Superintendent shoved him with a boot. "Go on! We don't have all day! Do you have a poem in mind?"

Taking brush in hand, Shigeyoshi wrote,

*As it flies into the sun
How piercing the swallow's song
Feathers turn to dust*

Pleased with the steadiness of his hand, the casual but controlled line of his script, he handed the paper to the Grand Superintendent who held it before him like a proclamation, then rolled it tightly into a cylinder to be delivered to Shigeyoshi's widow.

Shigeyoshi was pleased to see that Genzaburo too had finished his poem and handed it to one of the guards.

"May I know my son's poem?" Shigeyoshi asked.

"No," the Grand Superintendent replied. "Proceed."

Shigeyoshi watched as Genzaburo let the front of his kimono fall open revealing his flat belly over a knotted white loin cloth. Composing himself, the boy gripped the tanto, removed the blade from the lacquered hardwood sheath, and, holding it in both hands, plunged it into his belly. The curved arc of his body jerked, once, then the boy regained control and drew the blade horizontally across the lower part of his abdomen to free his intestines. At a nod from the Grand Superintendent, the samurai to Genzaburo's left drew his long sword, spread his legs, held the blade over his head for one

heart-stopping instant, then brought it down in a killing stroke that severed Genzaburo's head from his shoulders and sent it rolling across the sandalwood base trailing blood.

How unnatural for a father to see his child die, Shigeyoshi thought. The thought was cool, as if he had not just seen the flesh of his blood forced to destroy himself. Beneath the cool, buried deep as within the heart of a glacier, a white-hot kernel of rage flickered. He had cut himself on the Blade, let his blood seep into its soul. He and the Blade were one now. Even if he were destroyed, his soul would live on. In the Blade.

The Grand Superintendent nodded in satisfaction. "At least your son conducted himself like a samurai. Can you do less?"

Shigeyoshi took in three long breaths and let them out. Untying the knot of his kimono, he let it fall open. His belly too was flat as the Tokaido Road, despite his forty plus years. He was samurai, and had not failed to practice his skills on a daily basis.

Feeling an immense calm settle over him like the fog in Edo Bay, he grasped the honoki wood shira-saya of the *katana* before him and slowly drew the blade.

He almost gasped. But years of Bushido had taught him to control his emotions and he gave no sign. How could they make such a mistake? Or was it a mistake? Had the Shogun deliberately ordered the Muramasa placed there as a form of ironic punishment?

No. Nor was it a mistake. It was a sign, a sign that he, Shigeyoshi, was correct and the Shogun was wrong! Freeing the blade entirely, he rocked forward on his knees, got the balls of his feet under him, rose in a twisting motion and plunged the blade forcefully through the Grand Superintendent's belly an instant before a guard rushed forward and killed him with a single blow, albeit not as artful as that which had dispatched

his son.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sara woke with a piercing pain in her neck and shoulder. The bedclothes were twisted and drenched with sweat. Shmendrick was purring loudly and licking her cheek with his sandpaper tongue. Sara lay there for a minute, gasping, wondering what she'd done to cause such pain, until it gradually subsided. She tried to connect it to the dream she'd been having, but it was one of those dreams, so utterly vivid while you dream it, that disappears like cotton candy in the rain the moment you wake.

Thank God the pain subsided. She must have twisted something working out the other day, and this was a delayed reaction.

By the time she had stretched, showered, and eaten something, it was noon. She turned on her cellphone. It immediately began ringing. She thumbed the button.

"Pezzini."

"The shit has hit the fan," Siry said.

"Give me a minute, Joe. I just woke up."

"Yeah. I know you were out late and I'm sorry to bother you, but somehow Channel 6 got wind of the two decapitations, and they're beating the drum about a samurai killer. Turn on the news."

Sara thumbed on her remote and the small Sony flared into

life. She switched to Channel 6 and there was footage of her arriving on her motorcycle and taking off her helmet. She turned on the sound.

“...homicide detective Sara Pezzini who has been involved in a series of high-profile cases with bizarre elements.” She turned it off.

“What do they know?” she asked Siry.

“They know two prominent Manhattanites, one an antique dealer, the other a collector, have had their heads lopped off, and even though we ain’t said one word about it, they’re speculating that in each case something was taken.”

“Did they mention swords?”

“No, and thank God for small favors. I want you to come down here and give a statement.”

Sara sighed like Al Gore at a debate. “Oh, Joe...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know you hate this p.r. bull shit. I hate it too. But you do it so well. And the press loves your cute little ass, please don’t turn me in for sexual harassment. So hop on your Yamaguchi and zip on down here, will ya? Oh and by the way. Got anything new?”

“The killer took a sword made by a famous swordsmith named Muramasa. And I suspect the same was taken from Bachman.”

“Well that’s something. I’ll need a report.”

“Before, or after I meet the press?”

“Don’t bust my chops. I scheduled a conference for five p.m. That way, we can at least make the bastards sweat a little. Come on in—you’ll have the space you need to compose your report and whatever you’re gonna tell ‘em. We’ll work it out together.”

“Thanks, Joe. You’re a pip.”

Sara splashed water in her face, combed her hair, inhaled a yogurt and a banana, fed Shmendrick, packed her kit and split.

As she opened her front door, Weiskopf opened his with the swift moves of someone who'd been waiting a while.

"They're back," he declared.

"Who's back?" Sara asked, knowing full well and wondering how she was going to get out of this.

"Those juvenile delinquents! I can hear 'em right now down there playing that crapola music."

"Okay, Ben. I'll go talk to them."

Ben pointed at her wrist. "Why don'tcha use that whatchamacallit on 'em? Maybe then they'll get the message."

"Ben, I have no idea what you're talking about, but I will talk to them."

"Yeah, that's right," Weiskopf said with an air of defeat. "Go talk to them."

Sara took the elevator to the lobby. As soon as the doors opened, she could hear loud salsa music emanating from the front door. At least it wasn't rap. She briefly considered shooting the boom box, but then she'd have to file a discharge report, and they'd put her on suspension. If anyone complained.

On the other hand, sad to say, she could hear gunshots occasionally at night, and no reports were ever filed. Who was going to turn her in? She looked out. It was relatively gloomy in the marble lobby, and bright outside, so she doubted the pachucos had detected her presence. She counted five of them, including the girl Lupe, and a smooth new player wearing wide, pleated cotton trou with suspenders over his muscle shirt, revealing a sinewy torso covered with tattoos.

Making sure her badge was visible, Sara strode out the front door, took one look at the boom box and froze. The pachucos watched with amusement as she dug in her backpack for a piece of paper. They stopped smiling when she shut off the boom box.

“Hey, what for you do that, cop lady?” said one of the lesser fish, a kid whose hairline mustache did little to conceal the acne constellations stretching across his face.

Sara turned the boom box around so she could read the serial number, ostensibly matching it to a slip of paper she held in her hand. “Guys, you may not believe this, but this boom box is stolen. I’m going to have to confiscate it.”

“You can’t do that!” acne constellation wailed. “I pay my man Roberto twenty bucks for that box!”

“Would you be willing to testify to that in court?” Sara asked earnestly. Acne constellation was silent. Suspenders grinned wolfishly.

“Ey *guapa*,” he said. “Yesterday you told me essay Hector off pretty good. Jorge Candido, el presidente for life of the Brooklyn Romeros.” He held out his hand.

Sara took it. “Sara Pezzini, Manhattan Homicide South. Pleased to meet you, Jorge. Could you and me maybe have a little talk?”

“Whoah,” said acne constellation.

“Look out,” said another.

Lupe, who lived in the building, knotted her pretty little face into a scowl.

“Just you and me, officer?”

“Just you and me, Presidente. Walk with me around the block.” She turned back toward Acne Constellation. “The rest of you are loitering, except for Lupe. Take off and I won’t bust you for receiving stolen goods.”

“Chinga su madre!” acne constellation snapped. Almost instantaneously, Jorge’s hand shot out and clipped him on the chin.

“Do as the police officer says, Eddie. Come on, officer. Let’s you and me take a walk.”

Sara could feel Lupe boring holes in her back as she and

Jorge headed for the street. "Jorge, I never met you before, so this is a chance for you and me to get off to a good start. I don't know if you have any friends on the force, or if you ever thought about it. But it's better to have friends on the force than not, don't you think?"

"Yeah I do. An' I want to apologize about today. When Lupe tol' me what you did to Hector yesterday, I 'bout bit the sidewalk. I mean, Hector is our numero uno soldier. He's our enforcer. So I come to see for myself this bad lady cop, and I got to say, *guapa*, that you are everything I could have imagined."

"Don't let your imagination run wild. You seeing Lupe?"

"Lupe and I have an understanding, but I'm not tied down to any woman, place, or thing. What about you? You seeing anyone?"

"I'm married to the job."

"You give Jorge a chance, he lure you away."

"I'll bet. You work for a living?"

"Jesus was a carpenter and so am I. When I gets the work. I can't get in the union 'cause I don't got no sponsor. I do after-hours stuff, get paid under the table."

"The people who live in that building, a lot of them are old, don't get around so well. The last thing they need is a gang of pachucos hassling them as they go in or out. I want you to keep this block safe. I want you to help these people, not hassle them. In return, you got a friend on the force."

"I can dig it. Okay!"

"You need to get in touch with me, here's my card."

They did a multi-faceted soul clasp and Sara headed on down the block to the medical center. When she was at the end of the block she turned around. Lupe was walking angrily toward Jorge, who stood with his hands spread at his sides, like Alfred E. Newman.

CHAPTER NINE

A truck driver gave Sara the finger and leaned on his airhorn as she went around him on the sidewalk going down the Avenue of the Americas. In New York, that was like being serenaded by a bluebird. The station house was a mad zoo, reporters bumping into perps and cops at the entrance. Sara stashed her bike in the motor pool. The Hayabusa was back.

She could sense the tension going up the stairs, and her worst fears were confirmed when she pushed open the door to the detectives' bullpen. Deputy Commissioner McElroy, with the physique and disposition of a nose tackle, was in Siry's office taking up most of the space and talking in a loud voice while one of his lackeys took notes in a pad. As if the fat blowhard had something to say. Everyone knew McElroy was gunning to be the next Commissioner, and was mainly concerned with covering his ass and making sure he made no mistakes. He should have been an executive producer for one of the major film studios.

As she headed toward her desk trying to look inconspicuous, Raj hissed at her like a spitting cobra. Raj was a two-year veteran, originally a citizen of New Delhi who had emigrated several years ago, become a U.S. citizen, and joined the police force. He had dark, delicate, almost feminine features, hair the color of fresh-poured tar, and thick black

horn-rimmed glasses. Sara always thought *affirmative action baby* and she was always ashamed. It would never occur to her in a million years that she was an affirmative action baby.

“What up, Raj?”

“The captain asked me to review those tapes. I have been watching night and day.”

“And?”

“And I have found the killer on the tapes.”

A nova pulsed through Sara’s nervous system. “Where is it? Have you got it cued up?”

“In the break room.”

They went to the break room down the hall, where three detectives were stuffing their faces at the thrift store table. The break room contained a counter, cabinets, a sink, a refrigerator, a micro-wave oven, a wild collection of ugly furniture, and the “audio-visual center,” more fruit of the busted drug dealer tree.

Raj cued the fifty-two inch TV and a grainy black and white—blue and white, actually—tape began to roll. Like crows sensing carrion, the three detectives rose or turned their chairs to watch.

“Watch you will see,” Raj said softly.

The timer in the corner of the screen indicated eleven-thirty p.m. The room was empty, light coming from the banker’s lamp on the counter, and from an overhead source. Movement. A slight, balding figure in a dark sport jacket, probably navy blue, entered the picture from the shop door and went behind the counter. He seemed agitated. He was fumbling for something beneath the counter—a gun? Another figure entered the room. The second figure was clad entirely in black, even his head, and seemed to flow into the room like a cat stalking prey. The figure erupted like a geyser in front of the old man—it was difficult to tell from the camera angle. The figure delivered a series of blows with his gloved hands, subtly,

delicately, as if he were playing a harp. The figure seized the sword off its rack, plainly visible in the video, and in one graceful movement, flicked the blade through the old man's neck as easily as if he were cutting a cheese log. The head fell heavily to the floor and rolled. A tingle ran up Sara's arm from the costume bracelet.

"Jesus Christ," one of the dicks said softly.

"There's your samurai killer."

"Raj, can you freeze the frame?"

Raj ran the tape backwards, searched in slo-mo for the best angle on the assailant. There was no good angle. You couldn't even tell how tall he was. Black cloth covered his entire body, including his hands. Everything but his eyes, which were exposed.

"What is this ninja shit?" one of the detectives asked.

"Pezzini's on the case," said Barley Carruthers, the size and shape of a restaurant freezer. "Freak of the week."

Baltazar stuck his head in the door. "Hey Sara — Siry wants you in his office like five minutes ago."

"Keep working on that tape, Raj," Sara said. "There's gotta be a computer geek around here somewhere who can tell us something. And you guys, please don't mention this to anyone. The boss'll have a cow."

Deputy Commissioner McElroy was beet-colored and sweating as Sara entered Siry's office. This was not unusual. The Deputy Commissioner maintained a state of high dudgeon. That was his pose: the perpetually indignant public servant, fighting for the commonweal. Sara thought it must have been exhausting, but apparently it worked. McElroy had risen through the ranks without spending time on the street. If he could do it, more power to him, Sara thought.

"Detective Pezzini, you know Deputy Commissioner McElroy. Have a seat."

Sara nodded and sat. Siry didn't offer her anything to drink.

"Detective," McElroy wheezed, "Scott Chalmers was a close friend of the mayor. There's no way we can keep this out of the papers, but we can try to minimize the sensationalism, so-to-speak, if we can assure the press that these killings are not related."

"I'm sorry, Commissioner, but in my opinion they are related."

Siry tried not to roll his eyes. He had witnessed many futile attempts at spin-control over the years, but this was the dumbest. "Of course they're related, Hank! The coroner's already confirmed that."

McElroy regarded Siry through little slit eyes, as if he beheld a snake. "The last thing the mayor wants is for this to become a media freak show. The public spooks easily."

"Sir, I respectfully disagree," Sara said while Siry made a throat-cutting motion with his finger and tried desperately to signal her. When she refused to look at him, he retaliated by sticking the cigar in his mouth. "New Yorkers can handle anything this freak throws at them. I think they've proven that. Not that I'm suggesting you publicize this, but it's hardly a terrorist attack. These men were specifically targeted for something they had: ancient Japanese swords."

McElroy turned his gun slits on her. He appeared to be chewing his tongue. "Why is it you attract bizarre criminal elements, Detective? Why are you a freak magnet?"

"Sir, this case was assigned to me. I think if you'll check, you'll see I was miles away from either crime scene when the killings occurred."

"You're right, I apologize. The city's lucky to have you. So. You're obviously making progress. We're looking for a murderous thief?"

“So it would seem. We have the killer on videotape, but it doesn’t tell us much. He’s just a blur dressed in black. We may be able to get more details from a computer enhancement.”

“All right. Now we’re getting somewhere. Anything you need, give me a call. The mayor wants you to know he’s behind you one hundred per cent. What’re you going to say at the press conference?”

Sara shrugged. “Sir, I haven’t had time to catch my breath since I woke up. If you’ll give me a few moments...”

“Please emphasize that these are not terrorist incidents.”

“I’ll make it clear the killer only targets rich white men.”

Siry grunted and tossed his cigar over his shoulder.

“Are you trying to be funny?”

“I was. I was out of line.”

McElroy glared at her with his knackwurst face. He heaved himself to his feet. “No jokes! Short and sweet. The mayor is watching.”

Siry and Sara got up too. They all shook hands and McElroy rumbled out the door like a hay bailer and headed for the stairs.

Sara held her hands up, trying to suppress a smile. “I know! I’m sorry.”

“Sara, why do you do this to me? Putting me on the spot in front of the Deputy Commissioner...if you weren’t my best detective, I’d, I’d...”

“What, Joe, what? Say it! Ship me out to Far Rockaway.”

“You heard what the man said. You’d better prepare a statement. Keep it short—twenty-five words or less. You got,” he glanced at his watch. “One hour.”

“You’re hosting this thing, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“You know what you’re going to say?”

“Some whack-a-ding-hoy is running around in black

pajamas slicing off heads.”

Sara pointed a finger at him. “That’s good, Joe.” She let herself out and headed toward her desk. Baltazar worked his eyebrows like he was transmitting a secret message and nodded toward the front desk.

“You got a visitor.”

David Kopkind lounged, one leg up, on the wooden bench facing the bullpen.

CHAPTER TEN

Unexpected pleasure flushed Sara's system, along with a small rain of embarrassment. She'd only just met the guy. And she had work to do. She was under the gun. She was going on live TV in one hour. She walked over to the wooden rail separating the visitors' area from the bullpen.

"Mr. Kopkind. What brings you here?"

He grinned and stood, completely un-selfconscious. "Detective, I've been invited to a party at James Bratten's house."

"Bratten the retired NBA All-star?"

"Yeah. He's a devotee of Eastern culture. Owns a lot of swords. I'm his polisher. A lot of big-time collectors will be there."

Sara was immediately hooked.

"You're telling me why?"

"I thought maybe you'd like to go as my date. Give you an opportunity to see some of these players, and the type of sword we're talking about. Adrian Hecht will be there."

Hecht, a big-shot developer and owner of the team that Bratten used to play for, was putting together a major development at the site of the Twin Towers. Homicide dicks rarely received invitations to such functions.

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow night. I'm sorry it's such short notice..."

"I'll go."

"Great. Great! Can I pick you up?"

"Where is it?"

"Bratten's got an estate in the Hamptons."

"You have a car?"

"Sort of. It'll get us there and back."

Sara did the math. She could ride her bike to the village, hook up with Kopkind. It would work. "I live in Brooklyn. I'll meet you at your place. What time?"

"If you live in Brooklyn, I could pick you up."

"No, I'll come there. What time?"

"Five? I know it's an awful time, but I've got the new Dylan in my car!"

"Okay. I'm sold."

"Great! See you then."

She gave him the briefest of smiles. "Bye."

When she turned around, heads swivelled back to work, not quickly enough. Baltazar's desk was closest.

"James Bratten—that's the high-priced district, Pezzini. Better use the right fork."

"Thanks, Baltazar. Think you could show me?"

"Anytime."

"Not with egg on your tie."

Baltazar looked down, chagrined. There was indeed a fleck of breakfast still clinging to his lifeless, loose tie.

"Try that astronaut food. It's hard to spill."

Sara returned to her desk, thumbed on her computer and composed two short statements, one for her boss and one for herself. She was acutely mindful that she'd become something of a media darling. She wouldn't have got nearly as much attention if she'd looked like Janet Reno.

Next, she pulled Jorge Candido's rap sheet. There wasn't

much—one arrest for assault as a juvie, plus a couple of parking violations. She was relieved to learn he wasn't a serial killer.

The news conference was held in the media room of the courthouse next door. At four forty-five, Sara and Siry went next door via the skywalk, down the marble steps to the first floor where a tall black cop Sara had never seen was on duty at the door. The media had gathered, hanging out on the broad apron sucking on cigarettes as if their lives depended on it. The new breed, who didn't smoke, had already staked out the best positions inside.

Sara went over Siry's notes with him in the hall. "You ready?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Let's go."

They entered the media room through the door near the dais. Klieg lights turned the room into an incandescent star chamber. There were about twenty media people bunched toward one end of the long, rectangular room. Siry had long ago learned not to look into the lights, but to look into individual faces. Reporters immediately started asking questions.

"This have anything to do with Al Qaeda?"

"Is it true the victims were decapitated?"

Siry held his hand up and waited for silence. "Hello, I'm Captain Joe Siry, Homicide South. As far as we know there have been two homicides: Thaddeus Bachman and Scott Chalmers. Both victims were beheaded. We have some significant leads which we are following, and will report to the public as soon as we have made progress."

"Is this Detective Pezzini's case?"

"Sara, what's the scoop? Is this another monster hunt?"

Siry turned the dais over to Sara. "The first murder

occurred in my precinct and I was assigned the case purely on a random basis.”

“Oh, come on!” screeched the reporter from the Village Voice, a belligerent leftie who was convinced the cops had nothing better to do than conspire to deprive minorities of their civil rights. “You’ve developed a reputation for weird cases, detective. What about the Orc killings? And the Cemetery Demon?”

“Well, Mr. Mathers, the press tends to amplify any lurid angle. Admit it. You love me, because weird sells papers.”

The reporters laughed. Siry and Sara beat a hasty retreat. The tall black cop stopped the stampede of reporters after them as they made their way to the second floor and across the sky bridge.

“I thought that went rather well, don’t you?” Siry asked.

“I don’t know. We’ll have to watch the news later and see.”

The detective bullpen was in a lather, cops milling outside the interrogation room. “What’s going on?” Siry demanded.

“We got him,” one of the dicks replied. “The samurai killer.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

According to witnesses, the alleged perp, a native of Jamaica named Sh'mall Ibanez, had boarded a bus at 110th Street with a machete hidden under his jacket. Screaming "White man is devil!" he began hacking his way through the bus, severely mauling two people before he was overcome by other passengers, most of whom were black or Hispanic.

Sara joined a hepped-up Baltazar at the one-way to stare at this sad specimen of humanity as he twitched on a bench. His dreadlocks looked like hair clogs in a drain. He was emaciated, had a black eye and a split lip and wore baggy Oshkosh B'gosh coveralls. Sara could smell his foul odor and bad breath through the glass.

Baltazar was practically frothing at the mouth, licking an Italian ice and exulting over the apprehension. "There he is! Don't look like much does, he?"

"Oh come ON, Roy!" Sara protested. "Look at that guy! Have you seen the video? That guy can't even tie his own shoes, let alone sneak into a penthouse on Fifth Avenue."

"Pezzini, he confessed! Case closed."

"I want to talk to him."

"No way."

"Come on. It's my case."

"We already got a confession, and somebody tipped off the

pd's office, so one of their birds is headed our way."

"Come on, Baltazar. You owe me that much."

"Owe you? How do I owe you?"

"For all the bull shit practical jokes I put up with, for one thing."

Baltazar grinned snarkily. "Okay. But I'm going in with you in case he tries to twist your head off."

Siry stood behind them. "Go ahead. I want to see this."

Sh'mall Ibanez smelled like the monkey cage at the zoo. He stared at them with pin-prick eyes, ivory yellow whites showing all around, like an extra from *I Walked With A Zombie*.

"White devils!" he barked.

"Mr. Ibanez, I'm detective Pezzini. Would you mind telling me what you told this other gentleman earlier?"

"'Bout what, white devil woman? Dat I and I kill de white devil antique man and de guy on de park? Dat is not in doubt. I already told you. Jah come to I and I in a vision—he were the Lion of Judah riding on a black horse—he command I and I to kill de white devil."

"How did you kill them, Mr. Ibanez?"

"I *stab* dem wit' Judah's mighty sword!"

"Where did you stab them, Mr. Ibanez?"

He touched himself on the forehead and in the heart.

"Here. And here."

Sara put her hands on her hips and turned toward Baltazar, her mouth a slash.

"We have the murder weapon," Baltazar responded defiantly.

The door opened and the public defender hustled in, a stocky woman with a butch haircut. "Mr. Ibanez, I'm Lisa Thorgard your public defender. Please don't say another word to these men. Gentlemen, do you mind?"

Sara looked at Baltazar. He shrugged. They left the pd to

her client.

“Roy, once they match the so-called murder weapon with the striations on our two decaps, you’ll realize you’re barking up the wrong tree. I mean, use your noodle, for God’s sake. How in the world could a dirtbag like that get into Bachman’s shop in the middle of the night? Bachman would never let him in.”

“You think Bachman knew his killer?”

Siry stood to one side, his unlit cigar tracking the conversation like a boom mike.

“Yeah, I do. In both cases, the killer took a rare sword. Does that guy look like a sword collector to you?”

Baltazar began to crumble. “Okay. Okay! But he did maim two people on the bus! We got a dozen witnesses.”

“Good for you.”

There was a shriek and a scuffle from the interrogation room. Baltazar opened the door to find Ibanez straddling Thorgard, who was down on the floor trying to defend herself against his blows. Flecks of her raving client’s saliva speckled her face. Baltazar immediately applied a headlock and dragged Ibanez off the terrified public defender, while cutting off his air.

“Don’t kill him!” Sara warned, rushing to help Thorgard, who was sitting up and coughing.

“I, uh, I think Mr. Ibanez would really be more comfortable being represented by an attorney of color,” she coughed. Sara helped her to her feet and out of the room. Baltazar emerged a minute later and shut the door.

“He’ll be all right. We’re gonna ship him to lockdown until you straighten out your attorney differences.”

“He didn’t scratch you or bite you, did he?”

“No, I’m all right.”

“What about you, Thorgard?”

The pd searched herself. Her jacket was scuffed but she

was otherwise all right.

"We lucked out," Sara said.

"No shit you lucked out," Siry said. "Baltazar, the next time some nut job confesses to a murder, try to get some independent corroboration, aka evidence. Know what I mean?"

"Sorry, chief."

"If it were that easy, I'd have retired long ago."

Raj was at his desk when Sara returned to the bullpen.

"What's happening with the video tape?" she asked.

"We have secured the cooperation of Ravensoft Graphic Imageworks. I sent the tape over to them. They will isolate the image and work up computer models of weight, height, and right or left-handedness."

"Who they?"

"They are just as the name implies," Raj replied in his sing-song lilt, "a company that deals in graphic and computer imaging. They are most famous for the bloody popular video game, Soldier Of Fortune."

"Do you mean 'bloody,' as in literally drenched in corpuscles, or 'bloody' in the British sense, as if to imply emphasis or feeling?"

"The latter," Raj replied without batting a lash.

Sara batted Raj on the shoulder. "Bloody good work. Keep me informed. Anybody wants me, I'll be home."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lupe Gutierrez lived in a first floor apartment at Waubeska Place, with her mother and younger sister in one of the units that had been taken over by Section Eight. Lupe didn't understand the law, but at some point the landlord had forfeited forty per cent of his building. It had been a complicated decision, resulting in the first decent housing for the Gutierrez family in memory.

Lupe was hell on wheels. Streetwise and sophisticated, she looked far older than her fifteen years, and had been busted twice, once for shoplifting and once for whacking another girl over the head with a garbage can in a dispute over a boy. Now she was with Jorge and he was going to make her a star, the way Tommy Matolla made Mariah Carey. Jorge was getting his act together to buy a recording studio, and he was going to feature Lupe as his first release.

Lupe's mother Bella thought Jorge was bad news. She warned Lupe that Jorge was just going to grease her descent into hell, but mothers had been telling their daughters that since the world began, and they still ended up with sons-in-law they didn't like. Lupe lay on the bed she shared with her sister Syreeta, earphones connected to the boom box Jorge had given her, listening to Christina Aguilar wail. The walls of her room were papered with posters: 'N Sync, Britney Spears, Backstreet

Boys, Christina, even Madonna, who was older than Lupe's mother. But you had to hand it to Madonna—the bitch had balls.

Lupe knew the cop lady was a witch the moment she laid eyes on her. Lupe had always been gifted that way, even Bella had to agree. Once, when Lupe was five, she woke screaming in the middle of the night, terrified of a fire. She roused the whole house, and her mother was quite angry at the time until the living room sofa, on which a visiting boyfriend had been smoking a joint, exploded into flame. Prescient. That's the word her home room teacher used in class when Lupe had raised her hand one day and asked if they were about to see a film on sexually-transmitted diseases.

Why yes, my dear, however did you know that the teacher asked. I just knew Lupe replied. She knew other things as well—that Mr. Mayer the shop teacher was having an affair with Mrs. Anderson, the librarian. That Mack Daddy, the corner crack dealer would be dead that night of gunfire. Lupe had refused to go to school one day, with a feeling of impending doom. That had been 9/11.

When the witch with a badge appeared, Lupe could tell instantly. So sweet. So cute. So butch in her Joe Rocket jacket. She had the boys twisted around her little finger without even trying. But she didn't fool Lupe. Not for one second.

She fooled Jorge. He was mucho macho, but like every other PR out of the projects, he couldn't keep his eyes off the ladies. Lupe had learned at an early age that men were fickle beasts, and would dump you in a New York second for someone prettier, sexier, or younger. What really galled Lupe was that the witch was older! She had to be in her thirties, at least! And Jorge was making a fool of himself over her as if she were a fine young fox like Lupe.

Okay. Lupe had to admit that the witch lady was a looker.

Maybe even a stunner. But that could have been the magic. Strip away her protections, she was probably a hunchback. Further proof she was a witch: she kept a familiar in the form of a large gray cat, which Lupe had observed from the stairwell. Knowledge was power. Toward that end, the teenager had taken to following the witch, whenever possible. That's how she learned the witch usually entered and exited the building through the rear door on Prospect Place, across from the medical center. That's how she learned the witch rode a motorcycle which she kept in the medical center garage.

Further proof she was a witch: the ease with which she'd brought down Hector. It was true that some girls could fight. Lupe could fight. But no girl, no matter how tough, could bring down someone like Hector, veteran of countless street brawls, and the harshest weapon in Los Romeros' arsenal. Not that Los Romeros were evil. They were gangsta wannabes. They bought their drugs retail from Los Tecolotes. Some of them even had jobs.

There was only one way to fight a witch, with witchcraft. Lupe decided to pay Estrella a visit. Taking off her earphones, she turned the boom box off, got off the bed, and went to her secret place in the closet. She pried up the loose floorboard and dug around, brushing aside insect larvae, rat feces, and dustballs, until she found the crumpled Chivas Regal bag in which Jorge had given her a heart-shaped locket. She reached inside the bag and closed her hand around the wad of bills she'd been accumulating, mostly by snatch and grab at the street fairs. Lupe was fleet of foot, and if she spied easy prey, mostly the elderly, waving their billfolds or purses, she would swoop down like a hawk, grab the booty and be gone so fast, they usually never got a good look at her. Sometimes they fell down. That was their problem. Incapable of empathy, Lupe never envisioned a day when she would be old and feeble.

Two hundred and twelve dollars, more than enough to convince Estrella to lay a terrible curse on the witch. Lupe examined her Citizen watch, another gift from Jorge. It was nine-thirty. Her mother was stoned out of her skull on muscatel watching videos in the bedroom with the jerk-de-jour. Syreeta was in the living room watching Power Puff Girls. Not for Lupe, not tonight. She had to keep a clear head to deal with Estrella. Popping off the screen, she let herself out her bedroom window, hanging from the sill and dropping the three feet into the garden, lovingly maintained by the geezers, who were always complaining about her depredations. Big deal. It was just a stupid garden. She never looked at it anyway.

Lupe caught the Atlantic Avenue bus to the Long Island Terminal, switched to the Fourth Avenue Bus which took her to the waterfront. She'd learned about Estrella from Jorge, who let her accompany him once when he had to put a hex on Los Tecolotes, who'd jumped two Romeros the day before, putting one in the hospital. At least they didn't have guns. Jorge didn't use a gun either. He paid Estrella two hundred dollars to hex the Tecolotes, and a day later, two of them were shot dead in a drive-by by the Kingston Posse.

Lupe had always respected Los Tecolotes. In fact, Bobby Chacon, their Warlord, made no secret of his admiration for her the last time they'd met. Had she told Jorge that Bobby Chacon told her she was a fine fox and wouldn't mind taking her out, it would have meant war. She held that in reserve, just in case.

Lupe got off the bus by the big red warehouse and walked toward the freight yard, which fronted the river. Estrella lived inside the freight yard, in a switching box that hadn't been used in years. There were more ways into the switchyard than bulls to cover them. Lupe's favorite was through a hole in the hurricane fence concealed behind a steel shed. She was barely able to squeeze through, scratching herself slightly in the

process.

The switchyard covered about a square half mile, and used to belong to the New York and Pennsylvania Railroad, but had since been taken over by the city as a storage and repair facility. Old subway cars now occupied most of the rail space, and served as a canvas for the many area gangs. It was practically a daily show, with gangs sneaking into the yard nightly to spray over their rivals' logos and establish their own. Sometimes the tagging battles led to death. The railroad bulls didn't even have green cards and mostly stuck to their shack playing poker and running out back to get high.

Estrella the Witch subscribed to a potent blend of Santeria and animism known as *Gounj'go*, which she'd brought from her native Santo Domingo. The switching box was located in an isolated part of the yard on a gravel bed near the waterfront next to a Con Ed transfer station which emitted a radioactive hum night and day. Estrella had lined the wall closest to the transfer station with aluminum foil to keep out harmful radiation. "Bad vibes," as she put it.

It was ten at night as Lupe picked her way across the plain of gravel, broken glass, and rusted rails in her black BKs, heading toward the transfer station and the little corrugated steel hut, studded with odd objects designed to hold evil spirits at bay. She had dressed to impress in black Danskin leotards and pearl earrings, clutching her Nike backpack. Los Romeros didn't carry purses. She made her way through an army of silent fifty gallon drums oozing a yellowish green fluid that stung the eyes. When she was ten feet from the open steel door, a harsh voice emanated from within.

"Who go dere?"

"Estrella, it's me, Lupe, from the Waubeska Projects."

"I know you, girl. You come in here, tell Estrella what you want."

The door made a hideous creaking noise as Lupe forced it open to permit her entrance. Inside, the floor had been covered with wooden pallets and these had been covered with a myriad of carpets and scatter rugs, some salvaged from the street, some purchased at St. Vincent de Paul, some given in trade, so that the net effect was that of a trampoline. This type of floor did not permit normal furniture, so Madame Estrella made do with a variety of cushions, mostly sofa bolsters swiped from furniture on the sidewalk waiting to be loaded into a truck.

Madame Estrella's pirated power line gave her light. Several low lamps, and six candles provided illumination. Estrella reclined on a futon covered with bedspreads in one corner smoking an American Spirit, using a hubcap as an ashtray. Nearby, a small cube refrigerator hummed. A color television crouched on a packing crate. Beneath it was a DVD player and a stack of DVDs including *Eyes Wide Shut* and *Bring It On*. Estrella's ferocious cat Duran crouched in one corner, yellowish eye regarding Lupe as she moved hesitantly on the spongy floor.

"Sit down. You got man trouble. See it in your face, girl."

Lupe slumped on the sofas. Was it that obvious? No. Estrella was a witch! It wasn't as if she were parading around with a cuckold sign on her forehead. Besides. Girls couldn't be cuckolds, could they? No. Just chumps. And fools.

"My man Jorge is seeing a witch from the police department!" she blurted.

Madame Estrella looked up, regarding her through turquoise catseye glasses. She'd made her mouth up like a Ferrari F-40, crimson lips revealing alloy teeth. "I know dat Jorge. He got de wandering eye, girl, you know dat when you take up wit' him. What make you t'ink dis cop a witch?"

"I can see it! The way you taught me. Here." Lupe thrust forth the bag of personal belongings she had so patiently

gathered by waiting in the basement garbage room, combing through countless loads of disgusting trash until she had identified her prey by the discarded promotional flyers with the witch's name on the label. "Here are some of her personal things. If you feel them, Estrella, you'll know too."

Estrella took the clear plastic bag of discarded flyers, used cotton swabs, a discarded Lady Schick with no change in expression. She held the bag beneath her nose and smelled the contents. She reached behind her and snagged a sterling silver platter with run-off grooves for the gravy. It was stained dark gray. She dumped the contents onto the platter with a muffled clunk. Duran got up from his cushion and padded forward. He must have weighed thirty-five pounds. One ear had been torn off in battle. He sniffed a cotton ball, batted at it with a paw, yowled and scrambled.

"You is right," Estrella replied. "She a witch, all right, and she very powerful. Dat she be a cop too, dat is furder evidence of her power. Normally, I would not touch dis witch. But I know you. I know Jorge. I no like see him get sucked into her circle of evil. I help you cast a spell on dis witch. But you must go furder. I cannot do dis alone. Before I continue, I ask you, you got two hundred dollar for Estrella?"

Lupe reached into the backpack, dug around until she found her coin purse. She drew it out, snapped it open and took out two hundred dollars in tightly packed twenties. Three weeks of grab and runs at the Saturday markets. She could always make it back forcing Syreeta to give blow jobs.

Estrella counted the money, folded it back up and stuck it down her bosom. It was safe there. No one but a crazy person would reach down there. "Okay. Dis what you got to do. I use dis material you bring me to cast a spell. You get your best man and plan an ambush. Dis woman not like udder witches. Not like udder cops, for dat matter. She very powerful. We

must launch double attack. Me from here, your best man from dere.”

Lupe’s smooth forehead scrunched into a relief map of Afghanistan. “Where am I going to find a best man? I tol’ you, my boyfriend is seein’ her! That’s why I came to you in the first place!” Her voice took on a whining, querulous quality.

“Ho girl, you tink dis be easy? You tink a witch of dis magnitude just poof go ‘way? I take great risk helping you. You tink she not know when I begin to cast my spell? Dat is why you must distract her wit an all-out attack! Wit a man! Not some little girl. You unnerstan’ what I’m saying, or am I talking to de wall?”

Lupe nodded sullenly. “I hear you.” Frantically, she wracked her brain. Where was she going to get a man to take on this lady cop? She couldn’t go to Los Romeros—they were loyal to Jorge and would certainly tell him.

That left Los Tecolotes, Los Romeros’ closest rivals, and a force to be reckoned with in Upper Brooklyn. Head Tecolote Bobby Chacon had the hots for her. And he hated cops.

Afghanistan morphed into the Gobi Desert. A plan began to form.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sara arrived at the sword polisher's a half hour early. She'd decided to take the bike, and stash it in his workshop. Earlier, she'd cased the alley and discovered that she could bring the bike in through a back door.

She left the bike at the head of his stairs, chained to the railing. That was only temporary. Left there, the bike would be picked clean, leaving nothing behind but one wheel, sans tire.

The door chimed pleasantly as she came in. Kopkind emerged from the hall wearing athletic shorts and an old judo t-shirt, face flushed. He beamed with pleasure as Sara shook her auburn hair free of helmet head.

"Hi! Sorry I'm early, I decided to bring my bike."

"You ride a bike? You mean a motorcycle?"

"Yup. Can I stash it in your workshop? It's not very big."

"Of course. Bring it around to the alley and I'll unlock the gate."

Sara left her helmet on the counter, went back outside, unchained her bike, pushed it over the curb and thumbed the engine. Passing a Harley guy going the other way she gave the Sign and he responded. She zipped halfway up the block, down the tight little alley made even tighter by the *de rigueur* illegally parked trucks until she came to the concrete wall

directly behind Kopkind's shop. Kopkind stood with his back against the open steel door as she rolled the bike in without getting off. Inside was a common area serving the Feldstein Gallery and the apartments above. She wheeled the bike through another steel door propped open with a hard rubber wedge into the back of Kopkind's shop. It was a crowded area with racks of swords on the walls, some bare blades, some mounted, and some in rich silk brocade sword bags. A series of locked steel cabinets lined the wall. In the center of the room was a peculiar installation resembling two miniature sawhorses fitted together to form a platform. It was made of sturdy redwood, and cross-braced, with its legs splayed outward for maximum support. A rectangular gray stone was clamped in place on a slanting board facing a bucket of water. A modified balans chair, one of those Swedish devices on which you sat on your thighs and knees, faced the apparatus.

"It's a bit unconventional," David explained. "In fact, my old instructor nearly seized a piston when he saw it. 'You no can do this!' he said. 'Must use traditional *today* and *shogi*!' The traditional method is a bit more cramped. I tried it for a while, but it led to back problems. This is better."

"What do you do here?"

"I'll show you."

Kopkind waited until she had parked her bike in the corner and taken off her jacket. He knelt on the stool, picking up a long, curving piece of steel that lay on the table next to him. The piece of steel was sheathed in tightly-wrapped newspaper. Unsheathing the blade, Kopkind reached into the bucket, doused the clamped stone with water, and began to run the blade back and forth over the wetted stone.

"This is a synthetic stone, made of aluminum oxide. It's okay for the coarse stuff, but when we get down to fine quality, only natural polishing stones from Japan will do." With an

almost reverent expression, Kopkind ran the blade along the stone, creating an oddly soothing sound. Swoosh. Swoosh. Sara was mesmerized. For awhile, both were lost in the sounds of the blade sliding over the stone.

The polisher shook himself as if coming out of a daze and grinned. "Sorry. It's extremely therapeutic, once you get into it."

"Doesn't it kill your back?"

"Not if you do it right. And I have all sorts of ways to relax. One of which is to go to a party with a beautiful woman."

Sara grinned in spite of herself. Kopkind blushed, surprised by his own effrontery. "I'll just go out front and get my things," she said. "Have you got some place I can change?"

Leading her down a hall with doors to what she presumed were his private quarters, Kopkind showed her to a large combo bath/utility room with a mahogany hot tub mounted on a platform in the corner. There was a clothes washer and dryer, a large shower and a cabinet filled with fluffy towels. "Don't worry—I have a sink in the shop. Take your time."

Sara had brought The Little Black Dress by Dolce & Gabbana, and a pair of Black Satin low risers. Her cunning little beaded black purse barely contained her .25 caliber Beretta and badge. The twenty-five was barely even a gun, but fashion demanded that she leave the .357 at home. The Witchblade had assumed the form of a platinum weave pattern. Somehow, it knew what would go with the outfit.

Kopkind was waiting in the foyer, lounging on the sofa in a pair of gray pleated Dockers, a loose-knit cotton sweater that reminded Sara of Shmendrick. The color. His eyes went saucer-wide as she emerged and he whistled.

Sara smiled at him. "Don't get any ideas. This is strictly police work." She didn't believe it herself. Kopkind was

refreshingly simple after the self-styled Romeos of the Nineteenth, and the usual grade of overfed, oversexed egomaniacs who hit on her.

Yoshi came through the beaded curtain snarling and yawning. Kopkind reached down and scratched the cat's neck. "Yoshi, guard the shop."

They left through the front door, which Kopkind locked with two different keys. "My car's in the Bleecker Street Garage, two blocks up. Wanna walk?"

"Sure." His hand naturally found hers as they walked up the street, taking in the show.

At the garage, Kopkind slipped the kid a fin and they waited on the street. "It must cost a fortune to store your car here," Sara said.

"Not so bad. I did a favor for the owner once, and he charges me a really low rate."

"What sort of favor?"

"Well, you may not believe this, but one night as I was delivering a sword, two punks tried to stick him up. I just sort of crept up on them by accident. I had no idea what was happening until I was like ten feet away. Then it all hit me at once. They were holding this guy up! And in one second they were going to see me. I didn't think, I didn't hesitate, I drew the sword and just happened to catch this guy's gun. It was like some kind of twenty dollar special 'cause it fell to the ground and fell apart. It was almost comical, these two guys standing there looking at the broken gun, so I figured what the hell, I brandished the sword like a berserker and started screaming in Japanese. They took off."

Sara regarded the sword polisher with new respect. "You speak Japanese?"

At that moment, his car arrived, an elderly steel gray Acura Legend in excellent condition. Kopkind held the door for her.

The interior smelled of leather. It was only after Kopkind got behind the wheel and they took off that she became aware of his scent, a haunting, exotic musk. Sara approved. She couldn't abide men who slathered themselves with cologne like suntan lotion.

Kopkind took the Manhattan Bridge and worked his way toward the Long Island Expressway, Nancy Wilson singing on the stereo. "That's some bracelet," he said as they slowed to a crawl by Hicksville. "Where'd you get it?"

Sara held the hand up, modeling the Witchblade in its latest incarnation. "Some thrift store. Baroque, huh? I think it's Spanish." Luckily the Witchblade seemed to have a talent for camouflage, otherwise she would have a lot more explaining to do.

Ninety minutes later, Kopkind took the Bridgehampton Exit and headed toward the beach. Kopkind pointed at an imposing stone gate. "That's Alex Baldwin's house."

"Didn't he move to France?"

Bratten's place was a Bauhaus-inspired party palace lit from within like a Chinese lantern. It was a two story white box with rectangular and round windows and aluminum decks, suggesting a cruise ship. Gray and crimson-jacketed valets moved in smooth precision to handle the influx of luxury automobiles. A valet held the door for Sara while another waited to slide into the driver's seat. The moment they were out, the Acura rocketed ahead and dove into a cubbyhole between an Audi TT and a Rolls Royce.

Cameo bopped from numerous speakers as Kopkind and Sara mounted the broad white marble steps to the front door, where a smiling personal assistant in buzz cut and granny glasses checked for invitations. Inside, the broad foyer gave way to an immense sunken living room, open to the deck and the sea in the distance. The living room was filled with brightly

dressed party people, snagging champagne off circulating trays. The room was decorated with African and Japanese art, brooding mahogany masks and feather-light brush paintings, paintings of players and NBA greats. Several NBA greats were in attendance, including Bratten himself, a handsome six foot nine inch sun at the center of a swirling constellation of guests. Upon spotting Kopkind, he flashed his brilliant choppers.

“David. David.” He came forward, hands extended, until he made contact. Sara paused two steps above the living room floor and still found herself looking up at Bratten.

“And who is this beautiful woman? Where you been hiding her? You been holding out on me?”

“This is Sara Pezzini, James. She’s a New York City detective, so watch your step.”

Bratten assumed a face of mock horror. “You’re a cop?”

“Don’t worry. I’m off-duty.”

“Well okay, then. Didn’t know they made cops like you. Surprised there’s any crime.”

“You collect swords, Mr. Bratten?”

“Call me James. Yes I do. And like every other sword collector worth a damn, I get mine polished at Kopkind’s.”

“Would you show me your most valuable sword, James?”

Bratten’s eyebrows made twin peaks. He held out his arm. “Ahmina borrow your date, David.”

Kopkind winked. “Okay, but don’t try that NBA hustle on her. She’s a cop. I see some friends of mine.” He headed down the steps and across the crowded floor.

Sara accompanied Bratten across the floor, past a free-standing pit fireplace, up some redwood stairs, down a hall to a room Bratten unlocked by punching some buttons. Inside, a large hall was illuminated by offset lighting and spotlights shining on specific exhibits. A number of swords were on display inside hinged glass cases. Sara noted the videocam

hidden in a ceiling fixture with approval.

Bratten led the way to the central glass case and indicated a *katana*, a full-length war sword, resting in a hand-cut teak base. "That's my Masamune. Paid two point five mil for that sucker, and it was a bargain."

"Masamune was a swordmaker?"

"One of the best. Lived in the 1300's."

"Have you heard of a swordmaker named Muramasa?"

"Of course. All serious collectors know about Muramasa. He was Masamune's rival. They held a competition to see who could craft the sharpest blade. Masamune stuck his sword in a stream and allowed a single maple leaf to drift against it. Cut the leaf in two. But Muramasa's blade was so keen, the leaves could sense its fearsome edge and swerved to avoid it."

"Are Muramasa's blades valuable?"

"Does Oscar Robertson know basketball? Thing about Muramasa's blades, they got a reputation for evil, so many people died from them. Also, experts disagree on whether the first Muramasa, to my mind the one and only, actually existed. So it's damn hard to find an authentic first generation."

"But that doesn't stop people from collecting them?"

"Hell no. Some collectors even favor that sort of thing. Like my man Hecht. Hecht got me into this Japanese worship in the first place. Gimme a Masamune tanto to celebrate our first NBA championship."

"That would be Adrian Hecht, the team's owner?"

"He's here. I'll introduce you."

"I'll introduce myself," said a voice from the door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bratten and Sara turned toward the door where Adrian Hecht had silently entered. He was a distinguished man with close-cropped silver hair, six feet, black silk jacket over black silk T, pleated black pants and sandals.

"You couldn't pull that ninja shit on me if I wasn't so tired."

Hecht came up to them holding himself a little too carefully, aware he was a little drunk. "Adrian Hecht."

Sara took his slightly clammy hand. "Sara Pezzini."

"Watch out, Hecht. She da fuzz."

"You're a cop?"

"Homicide South, Manhattan."

"Good. That's where I'm launching Hecht Gardens. I feel better knowing I'm in your jurisdiction. Terrible, what happened to Bachman. That your case?"

Sara nodded. "You knew Bachman?"

"Of course. All serious collectors knew Bachman. He was a gentleman, and extremely knowledgeable about Oriental art in general and Japanese swords in particular."

"Do you own any Muramasas, Mr. Hecht?"

A funny look crossed the tycoon's face. Almost fear. So quick, if you blinked, you missed it. Then the old instincts took over and he was the smiling confident captain of industry.

“Nope. But I can dream, can’t I?”

“So you don’t believe in the Muramasa curse.”

“I didn’t say that. I don’t know if James told you, but I’m a bit of a buff.”

“He said you were the one who got him into collecting.”

“Well James was interested in all things Japanese before I met him. He already had his black belt in karate, and had been over there with the NBA All-stars.”

“What do you know of the Muramasa curse?”

“This guy just published a book in Japan, not available over here. It’s called *Way Of The Blade*, and it’s a history of the great swordmakers. It’s 756 pages long. I had it translated. Well, parts of it. The author has dug up all sorts of information that nobody ever knew about Muramasa, including how he died.”

“Oh honey,” Bratten said, rolling his eyebrows. “Don’t let him commence!”

“It’s a long story.”

“Maybe you can tell me later.”

“I could do that.” Hecht dipped two fingers inside his silk jacket and handed her an ivory-colored business card. “Call me. I am always happy to accommodate Manhattan’s finest.”

Bratten headed for the door. “You’d better get hip, Jack, before you step in it. Ahmina head back, make sure my homies ain’t pocketing the silverware. Close the door when you’re done in here. And don’t take anything—I know exactly what I got.”

Bratten left. Hecht turned the full force of his considerable charm on Sara. “Love that bad boy. He’s like a son to me. So what’s happening with the Bachman case? Are you handling Chalmers too?”

She nodded. “We have some leads. In both cases, a valuable Japanese sword was taken. Both Muramasas.”

Hecht maintained his cool, but Sara could sense his unease through her wrist, where the Witchblade had again assumed the shape of a bracelet. "Let's head back to the party, Mr. Hecht. Or we'll end up on Page Six together."

Hecht grinned, held the door for her. "Please call me Adrian."

"Okay. Out here, you're Adrian. In the city, Mr. Hecht."

Most of the crowd had moved out onto the broad patio. A half dozen sleek young men and women splashed in the free-form pool while liveried bartenders dispensed drinks from rolling bars. Sara spotted Kopkind talking to an older guy with a pasteover, in a Ralph Lauren that was too young for him. She walked up to them and took David's hand.

"Oh, there you are. Sara, Bob Hotchkiss. Bob, Sara Pezzini."

"Pleased to meet you," the businessman said, extending his hand.

"Likewise," Sara said, shaking, cards spinning behind her eyes, stopping next to the name Robert Hotchkiss, which she'd found in Bachman's rolodex. A sword collector? What were the chances of three of the city's top sword collectors all gathering at the same spot, a day after two of their number had their heads lopped off? Coincidence turned to dust beneath the weight of circumstance.

"Mr. Hotchkiss, I'm investigating the Bachman homicide. You knew him, didn't you?"

Hotchkiss turned white. "I don't collect Oriental art."

"You are the Robert Hotchkiss whose name I found in Bachman's rolodex, aren't you?"

David looked ill-at-ease. She was embarrassing him. Too bad. This was a break and she intended to pursue it.

"Yes, well I, uh, my wife, my soon-to-be ex-wife, you might as well know, was quite a collector. She has a black belt in

spending. She may have bought and sold some things through Bachman."

"You are aware that he was killed two nights ago."

"I heard. A terrible tragedy."

Kopkind tugged at her hand. "Sara, this is a party."

She ignored him. "Someone phoned in an anonymous tip that he'd been killed. You know anything about that?"

Hotchkiss turned red. If he could turn blue, he could rent himself out at patriotic events. "No I do not. Now if you'll excuse me, I see someone I have to talk to."

He stalked off.

"Sara, I brought you here as my guest. You can't go around questioning these people as if this were a crime scene. For one thing, there are a half dozen people here who could ruin your career with the snap of their fingers."

"Thanks for the advice, David. But I know what I'm doing. Didn't you invite me out here under the pretext of meeting the city's top collectors?"

Kopkind nodded ruefully. "Yeah, I did. I got no cause to complain."

Sara graced him with a smile. "That's what I want to hear! Come on, let's get some food before it's all gone."

Kopkind followed her inside to the buffet table. "It's never all gone."

Sara suddenly realized she was famished. She loaded a plate with bacon-wrapped scallops, Swedish meatballs, chilled shrimp, and carrot and celery sticks. She and David found an unoccupied table by the pool and dined in the warm night air while the sound system quietly pumped "Stayin' Alive." She was grateful for the respite. Not only Hotchkiss, but James Bratten and Adrian Hecht were among Bachman's customers. Who among them knew Bachman well enough to know when he acquired the sword? Sara made a mental note to dig into

Bachman.

Later, they went for a walk, hand in hand, along the trail that skirted the upper level of the dunes. The wind sighed in the reeds, bringing with it the scent of sea. There were occasional pine bridges over rivulets, and they could see lights from the Jersey shore in the distance. It was ten-thirty by the time David asked for his car to be brought around.

They were on the expressway before Sara finally asked, "How do you know Hotchkiss?"

"I polished one of his swords a couple of months ago. A Muramasa."

She shot him a glance. "David. Did it ever occur to you that that might be one of the missing swords?"

Kopkind hung fire for a second, his lips slightly parted like a schoolboy surprised in reverie. "Uh-no, not really", he said.

"I don't suppose you could identify it?"

"Of course I can. Each sword is unique. I made drawings."

"Drawings?"

"It's called *oshigata*. I draw all the swords I polish. It helps me to visualize and understand them, before I start polishing. I put the drawing up on my website, swordpolish.com. That was my one and only Muramasa. I was scared to death I was going to screw it up. They're virtually priceless. Fortunately, it's a very togishi-friendly blade. It couldn't have been easier to work with."

"You talk as if the blade has a mind of its own."

"It does. It cut me! Seriously, the Japanese believe each sword has its own spirit or kami. Being a Christian, I don't really buy into that, but I have definitely noticed that some swords are friendlier than others."

"What?!?"

"No kidding, I can go for months without a single cut, and

then I'll start on a new sword and it will cut me five or six times before I get done with it. It's unreal! I mean statistically it just doesn't add up that there isn't something going on there."

Sara was about to say something else, but her arm tingled, ever so slightly. She wrapped her hand around the Witchblade, a silver strand around her wrist.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was just past midnight when Kopkind unlocked the front door to his shop and invited Sara in.

“David, I’ve had a wonderful time. I’m going to get my bike and go.”

“Guess I won’t offer you a nightcap.”

“Some other time. Really.”

They entered his foyer. The little bell rang, and Yoshi advanced through the curtain yawning and snarling.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. What is it with that cat?”

David stooped and scooped the basketball-sized mound of fur, causing Sara to involuntarily cringe as she envisioned the fur deposit on his shirt. “He’s got some kind of sinus deviation that makes him do that. The vet says he’s fine, and it would cost too much to correct.”

Sara ducked into the washroom and quickly changed back into her “curvy fit” stretch jeans, leather boots and jacket, neatly packing her party dress and accouterments in the leather backpack. Her badge and gun went in the tank bag. As Kopkind held the alley door open for her, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“Call me.”

She used the ride home to sort out her feelings. He was

cute. And he was smart. And he had nothing to do with police work, an enormous plus. But she'd just met him, and she was in the middle of an investigation. Sara had been single since the disastrous affair with Mattie Dreyfuss, a vice cop. When IA busted Dreyfuss, they took a good long look at her as well. Mattie couldn't stand the heat. He ate his gun. Which had left a bad taste in her mouth, as if they were telepathically linked.

She sensed none of the brooding fury in Kopkind that she found in most cops. Even the best, like Joe Siry, nursed a secret kernel of rage that could explode at any time. Police work was not therapy. Even though it provided therapy, most cops refused to take advantage of the benefit. They just wouldn't admit they had a problem. Wouldn't be manly.

Not Sara. She knew she had a problem. Her problem was convincing a doctor. And how could she do that? If she went to see some shrink and said, look, Doc, I got a sentient ancient weapon living on my wrist, they would have her fitted for a rubber room.

It was past one by the time she got home. Shmendrick scolded her as she let herself in her door. She wondered if Yoshi were a boy or a girl. "Shmendrick," she said, clutching the cat. "How would you feel about double-dating?"

Sara woke with sun streaming in through the windows. She glanced at the bedside clock. Eleven-thirty. Sunday. No day of rest for her, but she'd promised herself a ride before she took another look at the evidence. Her father had had an old cop Harley and at least once a year, until he died, he'd take her up the Hudson to Brandywine.

Sara stretched, showered, spooned down a yogurt and a banana. She phoned the Fifty-second Precinct in the Bronx and connected with a desk sergeant named Bryan, whom she'd met when she first moved in.

"Danny Boy, it's Pezzini."

“Why aren’t you at morning mass, darlin’?”

“Ha ha. Listen. Do me a favor. Find out who owns my building, will you?” She gave him the address.

“Sure and I’ll do that, darlin’. When you gonna buy the Sarge a cuppa?”

“Soon, Sarge, soon. And thanks.”

Always, the debate: what to wear. It wasn’t a matter of style, it was a matter of comfort versus safety. It was hot in the city. But leather was undeniably the best defense against road rash. In the end, she compromised, as she always did. Boot cut Levis, leather boots, jacket, and gloves. And of course the full-face Arai.

She rolled up the medical center garage ramp at twelve twenty-five and headed south. It was Sunday, when even Manhattan’s ferocious traffic rested. She zipped across the moderately crowded streets and soon reached the Henry Hudson Parkway. It was a sunny day in the high-sixties. Sara was perfectly comfortable leaning into the pocket behind the Yamaha’s minuscule cowl. When trucks passed her going the other way, she lay down on her tank bag, although no debris could penetrate the Arai. She was past Yonkers when she noticed the close-spaced twin gleam in her rearviews. Another bike.

Like dogs marking their territory, bikers were instantly aware of other bikes. She glanced down. She’d been cruising at eighty. She throttled back, waited for the other bike to catch up. She wanted to know what it was. The bike zipped around an amblin’ Camry and pulled next to her. It was the beige and silver Hayabusa from the station.

Sara downshifted, opened the throttle and jerked back on the bars. The ferociously fast RZ-1 obediently reared up on its rear wheel as she wheeled away at one hundred per. The Hayabusa lagged a moment due more to the rider’s surprise

than any lack of ability. She dove into a cluster of slow-moving mini-vans, weaving from lane to lane, space to space, until she was convinced she'd buried the Hayabusa. Her pursuer emerged almost immediately behind her.

You want to play? Sara thought. Fine. Let's play. Worse that can happen, I'll crash. The Witchblade will protect me. What will protect you, new boy?

She downshifted and accelerated to one hundred and forty miles an hour. At this speed, she had to concentrate far ahead on the four-lane expressway, looking for any potential obstacle. Fortunately, her reflexes were up to the task. Although she knew the Hayabusa could easily match her top speed, its rider had to outweigh her by approximately a hundred pounds, which would slow him down somewhat.

Wind whistling through the helmet sounded like a million police sirens in pursuit. The sound had never bothered her. Her father had taught her police sirens were the truest signs of civilization. Road signs and exits whisked by in a heartbeat. Trevor Mansion. Hastings-on-Hudson. They zipped through traffic like fireflies among armadillos, not slowing down until Sara crested a rise just past Dobbs Ferry and saw traffic stopped a half mile ahead, due to an accident.

The first exit led to Trevorton and St. Benedict's Retreat, A Cloistered Order of the Benedictine Brotherhood. Sara zipped off and took the left turn toward the river and the retreat. The Hayabusa was right behind her. The entrance to the retreat went through a wrought iron gate, open for Sunday, between brick pillars. The blacktop road wound between a hardwood forest until it came to the retreat, a three-story red brick Reformation structure with steeply-raked green copper roofs, a wide turn-around occupied by an old Cadillac and a heating/air-conditioning van, and a turn off into a walled alcove overlooking the Hudson.

Sara used the handicapped ramp to zip up onto the alcove. She kicked out her stand, semaphored her legs off the bike, and was taking off her helmet when the Hayabusa drove in beside her. The guy was big all right. When he got off the bike, he towered over Sara. A moment later he removed his full-face shield and it was the handsome black cop from the press conference. There was a slight Oriental tilt to his eyes, as if there might be some Japanese in his family blood.

He stuck out his hand. "Hey, how are ya, Derek Sharpe. I'm the gang guy they hired from Hawaii."

Sara took his hand, looking up into warm brown eyes. "Pezzini, but you know that. You left Hawaii to take a job in New York? Why?"

"Man, I have always wanted to be in New York. This is the center of the world. If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere. Macadamia nuts and Don Ho get old after awhile. How many reasons do you want?"

"Were you following me?"

Sharpe held his string-backed gloved hands up and waggled his fingers. "No, ma'am. But when I saw you zipping in and out of traffic up ahead, I thought I'd better take a look."

"As a copper? Or a biker?"

Sharpe grinned. "Both. Anyway, I've heard a lot about you. I'm glad it's you. How you coming with the samurai killings?"

Sara rolled her eyes. "I should have known. We're looking for a killer who's collecting rare swords."

Sharpe went over to the brick abutment and leaned on it, gazing down at the slowly trolling blue Hudson, a scattering of small pleasure craft, a barge working against the current, nudged along by a tug. The New Jersey Palisades were dense with growth, gleaming in the afternoon sun. It was a perfect day.

“Really? What kind? I know a little bit about swords.”

The hair on the back of Sara’s neck tingled. She didn’t believe in coincidence.

“How is it you know a little bit about swords, Derek Sharpe?”

“I was midshipman on the USS Teddy Roosevelt, an aircraft carrier in the Pacific during the nineties. We made some ports of call in Japan, where I was privileged to study kendo and iaido with some of the masters.”

“Iaido?”

“The art of drawing the blade, striking the target, and returning the blade to the scabbard all in one smooth motion. Really, a perfectly useless skill.”

Not quite, Sara thought, jerky video image of the swordsman rising like a cobra to lop off Bachman’s head. As she said, she didn’t believe in coincidence. But this guy was a cop. And in the wake of nine/eleven, the department was going over every new recruit with a Geiger counter up the ass. Just because Sharpe was into swords didn’t mean he was the samurai killer.

“And you have a Japanese bike,” she said.

“Two, actually. Got a Shadow 1100 for cruising. My favorite movie is The Seven Samurai. I like sushi. I like sumo. What is sumo, anyway, but sushi with larger pieces of meat?”

Sara laughed. Sharpe flashed a Steinway smile.

“Too bad you couldn’t have been with me last night. I had all the big-shot sword collectors in Manhattan, in one room.”

“Really? Where was that?”

She told him about Bratten’s party. Sharpe listened intently. He seemed even more interested when she mentioned Adrian Hecht.

“I’m investigating a series of vandalisms down at his new site, near Ground Zero.”

"He wants to give me the grand tour. What kind of vandalisms?"

"The kind that verge on sabotage. Cables nearly cut in two. Sand in gas tanks. Some kind of jive-ass Third World up-against-the-wall mother fucker all-purpose protest. You know. Down with capitalism, Hecht is an exploiter of the masses and a despoiler of the environment, etcetera, etcetera." Sharpe's voice had a performer's sing-song quality. Sara was mesmerized.

"The Anti-Global Village Gang?"

"Exactly."

"Seems to me the public has less tolerance for this sort of thing in the wake of nine/eleven."

Sharpe sighed and rested his weight on his elbows as he leaned over the Hudson. Sara noticed his incredible biceps. He wore a sleeveless safari vest over a muscle shirt. "These people are True Believers. They are immune to reason, or public sentiment. Yeah, they do have a lot in common with the Taliban. On the other hand, Hecht has powerful enemies who would like to see him fail. It's possible one of them is using this bunch as a cover, to cause mischief."

"You got evidence, or is this a hunch?"

Sharpe peered into the distance, as if he'd spied a hawk above Jersey. "You know Bob Koske?"

"Amalgamated Truck Drivers of America. Twice indicted, never convicted. RICO's perennial runner-up of the year."

"Last year the Teamsters gave fifty grand to PETE, People for the Ethical Treatment of the Environment."

"Well for Pete's sake..."

"A-huh. Makes you wonder. So I'm down there at odd moments, looking for saboteurs."

Sara looked Sharpe up and down. Physically, he was the exact opposite of most New York gang members, who were

small and feral. "Rotsa ruck. You said you know a little about swords. Have you heard of Muramasa?"

Sharpe's face darkened. "Of course. The so-called evil blades. In Japanese mythology, restless demons haunt the earth. Muramasa's blades were legendary for being associated with them. The motives would vary from one legend to the next, but these demons would usually end up inhabiting some poor goob to work their evil mojos on the living.

"Like some form of possession?"

"So the stories go."

A few years ago, Sara would have dismissed Sharpe's comments as nutwork. Not now. She had seen too much. She was acutely aware that aliens/demons/spirits could walk the earth. One walked her.

Sharpe clapped his hands and whirled, abruptly giddy. "But we are in America, Detective! You're an educated woman. Surely you don't believe in such superstitious nonsense!"

"No, of course not."

They both laughed.

"Virtually every surviving Muramasa is accounted for. I think there are in the neighborhood of three dozen, including long and short swords, all from the later period, not the original Muramasa, the one who made the bloodthirsty blades. From time to time rumors surface of a long-lost masterpiece, but there hasn't been an important discovery since '95, when the last Masamune was discovered."

A busload of tourists had disgorged behind them and they found themselves surrounded by seasoned citizens with cameras, some of whom clucked at the bikes.

"One more thing," Sharpe said. "Ever think that the thefts may just be a dodge to cover up the murder? I'm thinking of Chalmers. Big shot like that has enemies. If the killer gets you wasting your time looking for some kind of samurai ghost, so

much the better.”

“Hmmm.”

“A-huh.”

“Do me a favor?”

“What?”

“See what you can find out about the Brooklyn Romeros, and their leader, Jorge Candido.”

Sharpe pulled out a small spiral pad and made some notes. “I’m on it like white on rice.”

“Come on,” Sara said. “Let’s get out of here before someone turns us into the monks for parking violations.”

They rode into Reedsburg, found seats at a sidewalk café beneath a Bacardi awning at a round steel table and ordered café lattes. Antique hounds from Long Island rummaged down the busy little Main Street, SUVs parked diagonally in orderly ranks.

“So, Sara, word is you’re a freak magnet.”

“I attracted you, didn’t I?”

Sharpe displayed his teeth, like a flashing “SMILE!” sign. Sara liked having him around. He sent off no predatory vibes. He made her feel safe. “Touché,” he said.

“How far does your fascination with the Japanese go, Sharpsie? Do you work out?”

“I have a few black belts.”

“I’ll bet you have. Maybe you’ll take a look at the tape. I’d like to hear your opinion.”

“What tape?”

Sara told him about the Bachman video.

“Sure,” Sharpe said, glancing at his watch. A Seiko. “I’d be glad to. I have to head back. My partner’s expecting me to make the salad.”

“Who’s your partner?”

“Just a guy I know works on Wall Street. He’s still shaky

in the morning.”

Sara was impressed, with both Sharpe and the Powers That Be. It was one thing to see a gay cop on some television drama. It was another to have an openly gay cop functioning in a real New York precinct. Of course they did cover the Village. And Sharpe was hardly a screaming queen. He would fool many women.

They split the tab and agreed not to race each other back into the city. They rode together into central Manhattan, where Sara finally peeled down Broadway, with a wave and a wiggle of the Yamaha’s pert rear.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As Sara headed across Prospect, a 1979 Pontiac low rider detached itself from the curb down the block and cruised slowly her way. The car was painted a metallic emerald green with orange and yellow flames sweeping back from the front wheels. The rear rose up and down like a slinking cat.

When it drew close, Sara saw Jorge at the wheel, doo-rag around his head, grinning like Pepe LaPew. "Wait up, Chiquita!" he waved through the open moon roof.

Sara paused. The car pulled up at the curb, low as Cleopatra's barge. It had gold spoked wheels. The interior was lushly appointed in rolled and pleated green and yellow naugahyde.

"What's this? Official ride of the Green Bay Packers?"

Jorge grinned vacantly, trying to hide his ignorance. "This my sweet ride, *guapa*. Listen, siddown here with me for a sec. I been thinking 'bout what we talked about, you know, and I got my boys doin' good now."

Sara looked for a door handle. The door clicked open of its own accord and she slid on to the faintly aromatic seats. Of course he spritzed his car. "How are they doing good?"

"Jew know, I got to thinkin' about the Guardian Angels an' I figure, what the hell, we can do that. So that's what I got my boys doin'. Just this block, but if things work out, who knows,

maybe we'll spread out and do some more."

Sara regarded Jorge dubiously. Gang-banger to neighborhood saint overnight? She didn't think so. On the other hand, she must never underestimate her own sex appeal. She'd learned that the hard way. Jorge pulled away from the curb and cruised down Prospect Place, the elaborate stereo softly playing Heavy Hittaz, a Houston-based rap group.

"If you're serious about this, we're going to have to have a meeting between you guys and the residents so you can introduce yourselves. And we need rules. Like, no boom-box playing in the common areas."

"I already put out the word on that."

"Really."

"Yeah, really. You don't believe me? You heard any loud rap music last couple of days?"

Sara avoided the common areas, but decided to take Jorge at his word. It wouldn't hurt to get the whole gang together and photograph them. Brooklyn Gangs would thank her for it. On the other hand, she might alienate Los Romeros. The medical center had some un-used meeting rooms. She was certain she could get permission, especially if she got Jorge to extend his jurisdiction to the center, which had been plagued by petty theft, vandalism, and assaults.

"Okay, that's good. Thank you. But listen. If you're doing this so you can get in my pants, fuggedaboutit. You're not my type."

"Eyyy, pretty mama, I din't say nothin' about that. I already got an old lady."

"If you're talking about Lupe, that girl can't be older than sixteen. How old are you, Jorge?"

"What year is this car?"

Sara looked around. "I don't know."

"It's a '79. You got to build your low-rider from a car made

in the year you was born.”

“That makes you an adult, and her a minor. I’m not going to bust you for statutory, but I do hope you’re not just messing with her. She might get the idea you actually love her.”

“I do love her,” he grinned. “I love all my women.” Proud to be a playa.

“Take me home, Jorge. I need a bath.”

“You smell just fine to me, pretty mama.”

“Take me home.”

As Jorge pulled up to the main entrance, Lupe peered through Venetian blinds in her first floor apartment, knowing she could not put her plan into play soon enough.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN
(Monday)

Raj was waiting for her when she arrived at work the next morning. "We have analysis from Raven Software," he sang as agreeably as a robin. "Come and see!"

Sara squared her gear away and followed Raj into the audio/visual room, where the monitor had already been pre-cued. Raj played the sequence from the antique store in slow-motion while he read. "Assailant anywhere from five nine to six four, weight between one fifty and two hundred and fifty, and can be in age from early-twenties to early-fifties."

"Oh that's terrific. That's wonderful."

"All is not lost," Raj continued. "They have narrowed the possibility that it is a woman to one in ten million. And he is right-handed."

"Oh great. Thank you, Raj."

"I'm sorry it was not more helpful."

"You did your best. I appreciate your help."

Returning to her desk, Sara found a six-inch Freddie Krueger super-glued to her telephone, with the crudely-lettered word balloon: "Don't let Detective Pezzini get me! I give up!" Fortunately, she returned before the glue had set and was able to twist it off. She held the doll up and confronted five detectives burying their noses in their work.

“This is very childish!” she declared, tossing Freddie in the bottom drawer with the Godzilla, a flying monkey, and a Medieval Spawn. She worked her way through the daily flurry of inter-departmental memos and Requests For Assistance and dug out Adrian Hecht’s business card. She was very interested in what the builder had to say about the mysterious Muramasa, and his cross-town rival Chalmers. Hecht took her call, invited her to his offices in the Griep Building, a stone’s throw from Grand Central.

There was a message from Bryan in Brooklyn. Esther Management owned Waubeska Place. The principle shareholder and Esther Chair was one Murray Rothstein, who lived in Upper Salem. She made a note in her pad.

Sara took the bike, wheeled it right into the lobby. A bushy-browed security guard loomed. She showed him her badge and asked him to watch the bike. The Griep Building was an art deco masterpiece built in the twenties by the railroad tycoon, Marvin Griep. Hecht had bought the property in ’91, saving it from almost certain implosion, renovated it, and rented it out, except for the twenty-third floor, which he reserved for himself.

Sara got off the elevator into an hexagonal reception room with marble floor inlaid with Tuscan tiles. A marble fountain bubbled in the middle of the room, water trickling from a nymph-held vase. A smart young man led her through a maze of corridors to Hecht’s corner office, overlooking the Pan-Am Building and points south. The broad, airy office held a cluster of sofas around a coffee table, a media wall with a fifty-two inch screen, a free-form redwood desk, and a large display table atop which sat a model of Hecht Gardens, his business/retail/residential project thirty blocks south on West Street.

Hecht was on the phone when she came in, tilted back in

his Freedom Chair, snakeskin boots on the redwood slab. He waved at her, motioned toward the model. While he talked, she walked over to the table and looked at the development. In miniature, it had a gay, Disney-esque quality, tiny automobiles unblemished by road salt or collision, streets spotless, soaring steel skyscrapers gleaming in the morning light. The plan incorporated a central courtyard with reflecting pool and gardens, and a performing arts center that resembled a nun's wimple with windows. Looking up, she could see the top of a crane several miles to the south where the real Hecht Gardens was taking shape.

In one corner of the office stood a wood carving of the ferocious Japanese demon Fudo The Immovable, rope for binding evil in one hand, sword in the other. Nearby was a glass display case which held a two-sword display, the long *katana* and the shorter *wakizashi*. It also contained a number of wrought-iron discs with slots in the center, which Sara deduced were the guard part of the sword. Hecht hung up the phone, plunked his boots on the beige carpet and rose.

"Those are my *tsubas*, or sword guards. I believe the one on the left to be a genuine fourteenth century Muramasa, but I have been unable to obtain verification. The others date from the early Edo period, and include a authentic Kotetsu."

"They must be worth a lot."

"They are priceless, Detective. I don't mind telling you these murders you're investigating have made me nervous."

"Do you have security?"

"You bet. But as I said before, just knowing I'm in your jurisdiction makes me feel better."

Sara did not acknowledge the remark. "What kind of security?"

"Well, no one can get up here without a visual scan. I identified you myself. I figure anyone manages to disguise

themselves to look like you, well, how bad can it be?"

Sara gave a tight little smile and thought of twelve different ways she could kill Adrian Hecht before he could take another step. "What about you?"

"I have security. It was with me the other night, you just didn't notice."

"What did you want to tell me about Muramasa?"

"As I said, I've arranged for a private translation of a book called *The Way of the Sword*, by Ryoza Nakamura." He returned to his desk and began sifting through a stack of papers. "Until recently, no one knew what happened to Muramasa. I'm talking about the original Muramasa, the one who lived in the 1300's, not the fifteenth century bunch."

"Of course."

"Ah. Listen to this."

"In the 5th month of the 7th year of Joji, the swordsman Udo, a hanshi of Ise province, approached Muramasa, the greatest swordsmith of the day, about forging a sword using iron from a meteorite. Udo was certain that the unearthly lump of brown iron was a harbinger of death as it had fallen from the heavens on the very day that the previous Shogun, Yoshimitsu Ashikaga, had passed away, less than one year earlier. Udo swore the rock spoke to him, instructing him to fashion it into a weapon, to slay his enemies, and to aid him in achieving his ambitions.

Udo was in love with a young woman of the Gozen family named Sakura. Her beauty was renowned throughout the province, but she had been betrothed to Udo's bitter rival Oji in an arranged marriage. Udo knew that he could not defeat Oji in a fair duel as Oji was a master of the Kenseito school of sword fighting. Udo believed if he defeated Oji in combat, the Lady Sakura would be his.

Udo went to Muramasa and said, "You are known as the greatest sword maker in the land. I need you to forge me an

exceptional weapon which will aid my victory, a blade that is guaranteed to cut down my enemies."

Muramasa said, "I can do what you ask, but the cost will be great..."

"I will pay any price," Udo replied.

Muramasa set to work with the strange meteoric iron. He fasted and ritually purified himself with water. He prayed to GOZU and MEZU, the horse and ox headed demons of hell and damnation to empower the Kami of the sword he was forging. He collected eight turtles and eight cranes, symbols of long life, cut their throats and mixed the blood into the water in his quenching trough. He finished folding and forging the blade and quenched it in the tainted water. Satisfied with his work, he named the blade Kyutensei and made a final prayer in the name of Meifumado (Buddhist hell) that the blade would never rest until it had tasted the blood of its enemies. With a chisel, he signed and dated the blade, marking it finished and sealing in the evil Kami.

Muramasa had asked Udo to return in thirty days. Instead, Udo spied on the master swordmaker, and just as Muramasa declared the sword finished, Udo appeared, seized the sword, and beheaded the swordmaker, lest word of his sword reach Oji before Udo. Udo then turned his fury on the four apprentices and cut them down one by one as they tried to flee.

Thus armed, Udo confronted Oji as he rode with his young bride near the family estate. Udo stepped into their path and challenged Oji to a duel, convinced that once the Lady Sakura witnessed the depth of his love, and his great skill, she would join her heart to his. The two combatants drew their blades, assumed offensive stances. They stared for several minutes attempting to perceive each other's possible weaknesses. Udo attacked with Shin Choku-giri which Oji sought to parry with his sword. Udo's blade cut Oji's sword in two and did not stop until it had cloven Oji himself in two.

Sakura, beside herself with grief and fury, drew her dagger and

threw herself at Udo who slew her as well. Bewildered by this turn of events, Udo's soul became sick with the need to kill. He went on to slay over a hundred innocent men, women, and children before he was finally killed.

The sword Udo commissioned and Muramasa made is called Kyutensei, or 'Rooted In The Sky.'"

Hecht put the piece of paper on his desk and beamed like a child who had just completed a successful recitation. "Could this be the item you're looking for?"

Sara's mouth was a slash. "You mean, could be the item the killer is looking for. But if you just had this translated, how would the killer even know about this sword?"

"I don't claim to be the only source of knowledge on the subject. Such a famous sword would be mentioned countless times in Japanese monographs, about which we would have no knowledge. Therefore, the killer has special knowledge."

"Therefore the killer might be Japanese, or at least understand Japanese."

Hecht beamed wider. "Exactly."

"That's very helpful, Mr. Hecht. Who, among your circle of collectors, speaks Japanese?"

"Bratten speaks a little, but not enough to read. Besides, I've known that boy since he was in college. There's not a mean bone in his body. And with his money, he could buy the sword legitimately."

"Really? Even millionaires have limits."

"True. Maybe he couldn't buy the sword. But he's not your killer, that's just ridiculous. I understand why he's a suspect. Then again, with your experience, you have to consider other possibilities."

"Excuse me?"

"The spirit of Udo, searching for his lost sword. Japan is

rife with legends of restless warrior spirits. Bushido dictates that the sword is literally the physical embodiment of the samurai's soul."

"A reincarnated fourteenth century ronin who's looking for his lost sword? Thanks a lot, Mr. Hecht. I prefer to think the killer is a normal human being."

Hecht looked astonished. "Really? I thought you were on the case because some freak was involved."

"A guy who dresses like a ninja and lops peoples' heads off isn't freakish? Why's he even looking in New York? Why not Japan?"

"There are a lot of swords in Manhattan. Returning servicemen after WW II ran off with everything they could find. That's how most of them ended up over here in the first place. And of course Emperor Meiji decreed you could no longer wear 'em, which put most of the traditional swordmakers out of business. They're only now just beginning to come back."

"Okay, I see your point. And I appreciate you're sharing this with me."

Hecht came over and looked out the floor-to-ceiling window with her. "I appreciate you're not laughing in my face. I hope you're not just trying to be polite."

"No. One thing I've learned is not to discount anything. Not that I buy your reincarnation theory..."

"I thought you might be receptive. I know a little bit about you, Detective Pezzini. You attract bright lights and strange energies."

They stood side by side looking south. "I understand you've been having some vandalism at the site."

"Nothing we can't handle. We're working closely with the Nineteenth."

"How's it going?"

"We're on schedule for our grand opening next week. I

hope you'll be my guest."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Hecht."

"I wish you'd call me Adrian."

"Only at parties. May I borrow your Muramasa *tsuba*?"

"For what purpose? Do you know what it's worth?"

"Sir, I can't tell you just now, but it would aid greatly in my investigation. And of course I accept full responsibility."

Hecht laughed. "You couldn't pay for that *tsuba* with your entire stock portfolio, if you have one. What the hell. Anything to help our brave girls in blue, right?" He opened the hinged top of the display case, reached in with his handkerchief and picked up the finely wrought iron disc. "Don't touch it with your hands. The oil can permanently harm the design."

Sara accepted the disc in the handkerchief, wrapped it carefully, deposited it in her jacket pocket and zipped it tightly shut. She knew full well that she would be paying for it for the rest of her life should any harm befall to the brown circle of iron. "Thank you. May I have a copy of your translation?"

Hecht handed her an envelope. "There's an invitation in there too. Puleeze, RSVP. My social secretary gets all bent out of shape if you don't. I may have some more news for you in a few days."

"What sort of news?"

"Can't say. My translators work slowly." He winked. Sara thanked him, let him show her to the foyer where she summoned the elevator. The bushy-eyed security guard was standing alertly by her bike, one hand on his baton.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Lupe first floated her plan past Bobby Chacon, he stared at her like she was a two-headed goat.

“Whoa. What is this? What for you signing me up? Kill a cop? You crazy, girl. Not even for your sweet pooty tang. Why not get Jorge do the job? He your man, not me.”

“Bobby, didn’t you hear what I said? She’s a *witch*, aragon! She got Jorge so hexed up, he don’ know his ass from a hole in the ground. He don’ listen to me.” Her voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper, even though they were seated in Bobby’s tricked-out Celica across from Fort Greene Park, with no one around but pigeons.

“You kill her, you take her power. Think, Bobby! A witch who is also a cop! Think of the power you would have in her shield alone! Man, all you have to do is shine that shield at someone and bam!” Lupe snapped her fingers. “They disappear in a puff of smoke.”

Bobby hunched down in his bucket seat, eyes gleaming with avarice. He was from Santo Domingo, and he believed in witches. He’d seen the lady cop, and she possessed an unearthly beauty which put crazy thoughts in his head, kept him up at night. But she was just a woman, and if he had a blessing from Estrella, it might even the odds a little. Nor did he see a need to involve *todos los Tecolotes*. He was the leader.

He was equal to any two Romeros, including that *maricon* Jorge.

He even knew the medical center parking garage, where she kept her bike. Before 9/11 and the tightened security, he'd regularly cruised the underground garage looking to rip off car stereos, drugs, anything he could find. Once he raped a nurse in a utility closet. Just thinking about catching the lady witch/cop in the underground parking garage made him sweaty. And his reward, should he successfully remove her from this earth? Not only power, but this sweet young thing who had thus far resisted his advances. And it wasn't just because she was the girlfriend of Jorge, his mortal enemy.

"Hold out your hand," Lupe commanded. Only fifteen, but already bossy and domineering. Bobby held out his hand. Lupe dropped in a hard little plastic figure. Bobby stared. Yoda. Pieces of colored thread, human hair wrapped around.

"What is this?"

"Madame Estrella tol' me give this to you. It give you the power you need to take her down."

Armed with the Power of the Force, Bobby felt invincible. He would do the lady cop, then party with Jorge's girl. Life was good. It was six o'clock, and the lady cop ought to be on her way home now. Lupe had been spying on her for a week. Sometimes she came home at the end of the day, sometimes not. When she came, she always stashed her bike in the medical center parking lot.

Bobby started his car and pulled out into traffic. His sub-bass made manhole covers jump, one more thudding burden on the cacophony that was the city. Ten minutes later, they pulled up at the med center's main entrance on Park Place. Lupe was driving. Bobby wore a clean white orderly's tunic and looked like any other med center employee as he got out of the car. The med center required all employees to wear picture identification, but security was spotty. America would never

acquire the paranoid mindset necessary to protect against terrorism unless terrorist attacks became a daily event. Bobby prayed that wouldn't happen. He came from the Dominican Republic, but he appreciated the Land of Opportunity. Damn those terrorists, he thought.

Bobby casually followed a Datex-Ohmeda delivery vehicle into a docking area, appearing at the rear just as the driver was opening the rear door. "Lemme give you a hand, bro," he said.

He entered the medical center carrying a large cardboard box. The security guard down the hall assumed he was with the delivery truck. The delivery truck assumed he was with the clinic. Bobby just kept on walking with that box, past a nurse who smiled at him, down the utility corridor until he came to the stairwell leading to the underground parking garage. God bless America.

Bobby knew from past forays that the lady cop locked her bike to a concrete post on Level 2, within sight of the elevators. He went down one level, let himself out on 2, and stripped off the bright white orderly's uniform, leaving the dark of his skin and his black muscle shirt. Bobby was a hard-body five eleven. He pumped four days a week. An experienced street fighter, he feared no man, and hated cops, who'd been giving him grief all his life. He crept along the dim far wall until he came to the utility closet he'd scoped out earlier. Locked, but nothing he couldn't fix with a tire iron. An obliging Lincoln driver had left the doors unlocked, permitting Bobby entrance to the trunk. He popped the door on the utility closet, carefully laying the tire iron behind a pillar in the dark in case he needed a weapon.

Like most gang-bangers, Bobby wasn't good on stakeout. He muttered, he paced, he smoked two Basic cigarettes. He wasn't much of a planner, either. His plan was to wait until she got off the bike, grab her from behind, drag her into the utility closet and do 'er. Then he heard it.

The unmistakable whine of a high-compression four-cylinder engine coming down the ramp. Bobby quickly fixed his doo-rag back on his head and grinned fiercely to himself. This was going to be fun. He hid behind a pillar about twenty feet from the well-lit patch of yellow-striped concrete where she stashed her bike. There was already a BMW there, shackled to the wall like some mechanical beast. With a roar, the lady cop drove into view on her white and blue bike, zoomed up to the striped patch and stopped the bike. She shut it off, set the kickstand, and got off, swinging one long leg over the bike as if it were an Olympic event. Bobby was practically salivating. He decided to wait until she took off the helmet. It would make her more vulnerable.

An instant later, she had the helmet off and swung her long red hair around, reminding Bobby of a horse in a movie. But she was no horse, this lady. She was some fine booty. She took off her backpack and set it on the ground. Bobby waited until she bent over to run the Kryptonite bike lock through her front wheel. He made his move.

He had his arm around the lady cop's neck and was pulling her backward before she had time to squawk. Bobby knew from experience you really had to mash your forearm against the windpipe to keep her under control, and from getting off a shout. The lady cop struggled ferociously as he dragged her inexorably back toward the utility closet, using her boot-clad legs to kick back at him with her heels, but Bobby kept his hip turned into her so as not to give her a target. She got her legs around one pillar and Bobby had to brace one foot against the pillar to pry her loose. She reversed direction and lunged for him, getting her feet on the front bumper of a Mercedes, kicking off, and suddenly she was airborne.

The abrupt reversal of position freed her from Bobby's grip as she somersaulted over one shoulder and landed on her feet

with one arm spread out for stability, red hair spilling in her face. No problem, Bobby thought, just a woman.

The woman sprang forward, catching him by surprise and planting the top of her sleek red head in his groin, driving him backward until he smashed into the grill of a Lexus. Whang! That hurt. Fucking bitch! She was not cooperating. She was making noise. Next thing you know, some pain-in-the-ass good Samaritan was going to shuffle up. He had to end this quickly.

Bobby slithered toward the pillar where he'd stashed the tire iron. She nearly got him with a kick. How could she get off a bike and kick that high without tearing her hamstrings, Bobby wondered. His hands closed around the tire iron and he came up swinging, trying to shatter her forearm.

KAWANG! The shock zapped back from the tire iron and resonated up his arm making his teeth ring. Bobby looked in astonishment to see what he'd struck with the tire iron. The lady cop stood ready four feet away, green eyes seething, one hand encased in bizarre metallic armor, looking most like a medieval gauntlet he'd once seen on a school trip to a museum, before he'd dropped out. On the back of the hand was a large red gem that seemed to glow in the darkness. Where had that come from? She wasn't wearing it when she got off the bike.

The gauntlet formed a fist and catapulted forward, striking Bobby full in the face and flattening his nose. He could hear the crunch resonating in his skull. Blood exploded in all directions. No lady cop was worth this. She was more witch than cop, any fool could see that.

Bobby put his head down and headed for daylight, trying to barrel past the lady cop. To his surprise, she stood there staring at her gauntleted hand like she'd never seen it before. Bobby didn't need an invitation. He got one foot on the Lexus' bumper and leaped onto the hood, over the windshield, and off

the trunk, directly into the path of a Ford F-150 coming up from Level 3. The orderly at the wheel had been on duty for twelve hours and was eager to get home. He drove too fast. Collision of truck with Chacon left no doubt. It sounded like a train wreck.

By the time Sara reached the truck, the Witchblade had withdrawn into a simple wrist band. One look at the crumpled husk and she knew her attacker was dead. She didn't hesitate. She dashed around the truck, got up on the step and looked in at the driver, who was hunched over the wheel breathing in high, thin gasps.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

The guy squeaked a little, then moved hesitantly. "I never saw him! Jesus Christ, he came out of nowhere. He leaped out of thin air!"

"Okay, calm down. It's all right. I'm a police officer."

"Oh God, am I under arrest?"

"No, sir. I doubt you'll be charged. That man assaulted me."

The driver turned his head. Big guy, honest, blank expression of a Canadian lumberjack, still wearing his orderly's greens and a laminated badge. Elmer Henderson.

"Mr. Henderson, why don't you get out of the vehicle and sit down with your head between your legs. Make sure nothing's broken."

Two more orderlies appeared. The brouhaha had attracted attention. Seeing Chacon's body, they immediately turned to get a stretcher. Sara held out her badge.

"Hey you guys. I'm a cop. My name is Sara Pezzini, I'm with Manhattan South. Let me make the call."

One of the orderlies, who'd seen her around, waved. Sara went back to the driver, got him out of the truck, made him sit with his back against the wall. Looking in the cab, she snagged

an empty McDonald's bag from the busy floor, had the driver breath into the bag, an old trick to reduce shock.

She checked the crumpled body for identification. The man was no Einstein. His wallet was in his hip pocket, connected to his leather belt by a chain. He had no driver's license. He had two credit cards in names that couldn't possibly be his. A little plastic Yoda figure adorned with colored thread and beads. He had the business card of a bail bondsman, and a membership card for something called the Afta Owaz Club, to which he'd signed his name.

Bobby Chacon.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Lupe heard the crunch, she knew it had something to do with Bobby. Guy could mess up an omelet. She stayed put, scrunched down in the Celica a block away from the medical center, parked in front of a Korean grocer. When the cop cars started showing up, she figured Bobby had blown it and it was time to split. Good thing Bobby taught her how to drive. Good thing the Celica had an automatic.

Driving too fast, sitting too low, Lupe made her way to the switching yard, parking the car in a cinder lot next to a rusting Erie and Lackawana pick-up truck. She was leery of leaving Bobby's fine ride unattended, but there was nothing to be done for it. The car was not visible from the street and would hopefully still be there when she came back. Damn all thieves anyway, she thought.

The old woman was asleep when Lupe reached her shack, flat on her back on her makeshift bed, making a noise like a low pressure valve. Lupe knocked loudly on the rickety wood door frame. "Knock knock," she boomed.

Estrella sputtered, opened her eyes, did a little jolt like she didn't know where she was, recovered and sat up. "What you want with Estrella, girl?"

"Lupe. My name is Lupe. Don't you remember? I was here yesterday. I paid you two hundred dollars to help me get

rid of the lady cop.”

Estrella reached for her cigarettes. “Dat right. How did it go?”

“Not good. Bobby never came out. I think he blew it.”

Estrella lit her cigarette with a pungent Zippo, puffing like a locomotive building up a head of steam. She fumbled around among her cushions and produced a police scanner. She turned it on, adjusting the frequency. Snatches of conversations came and went.

“...responding to automobile fatality in the parking garage of the Neame Medical Center, Prospect Place in Brooklyn. Looks like a gang-banger waiting to assault someone. The dumb sumbitch assaulted Detective Pezzini, Manhattan Homicide South...”

“Holy Shit! Pezzini? The monster cop?”

“Yup, that’s the one.”

“Poor bastard...”

Madame Estrella turned off the scanner and buried it beneath the cushions. “So. You is right. You give him the charm?”

“I gave it to him.”

“Hmm. Dis witch more powerful den I thought. My mistake. I tol’ you I make it right, girl, an’ I will. I see now dis Bobby a weak vessel in which we place our hopes. It be mistake to send just one man. You need five to take her down.”

Lupe reeled. She knew Los Tecolotes, but they were likely to be furious when they found out Bobby was dead. That could work to her advantage. Also, she hadn’t met a boy yet whose head couldn’t be turned by a blow job. If she had to offer Syreeta to Los Tecolotes, she would. What was family for?

“Udderwise, you must do da deed yourself.”

Lupe thought about it. She was not afraid of the lady cop. The only thing she feared was getting caught, spending the rest

of her life behind bars.

“Tell me how to stop her with my homies.”

The witch fluttered her fingers, palms up. “I need two hundred more dollar.”

Lupe’s mouth dropped open. “I already gave you two hundred dollars, and your stupid plan didn’t work! All I know, the cops come looking for me next! Madame Estrella. You see that Zippo lighter by your knee?”

Madame Estrella’s claw automatically closed around the lighter.

“That Zippo lighter carries a lifetime guarantee with no conditions. Once you pay for it, it works or the Zippo company replaces it free. And that lighter only cost ten bucks! Madame, I’d like to tell the community good things ‘bout you. But here you be, charging me twice for the same job...”

Estrella held up her hand. “I see your point, girl. Hokay. Dis what I do. I help you dis time, no more money, ‘cause I should done right by you inna first place. It dis witch—she much more powerful den I first t’ink. Madame Estrella should have charge you five hundred. But what’s done is done. You listen to Madame, an’ if she work for you dis time, you don’ forget come back and see your madame.”

The Celica remained untouched where Lupe had left it. She let herself in, started the engine, and headed for home. Problem. Where could she leave Bobby’s ride that it wouldn’t get ripped off? Bobby had kept the car right in front of his crib on Duke Street, watched over by his homies and his pit bull Samson. But if Lupe showed up, they’d want to know what happened. Once they learned, they’d never let her keep it. Certainly Chango, Bobby’s second-in-command, would demand the car for himself.

Lupe figured she had as much right to the car as anyone. Bobby owed her that much for screwing up the plan. The more

she thought about it, the more Lupe figured Bobby owed her. He'd only succeeded in making her life more difficult. She thought about parking the car directly beneath her window, but the cops would notice and come with questions.

After driving around for awhile, Lupe headed for the church. St. Patrick's in Brooklyn wasn't like St. Patrick's in Manhattan, but it was a substantial church made of good Vermont granite, with a small parking lot in back surrounded by a chain-link fence. More importantly, the parking lot was invisible to anyone on the street, and Los Tecolotes had nothing to do with the church.

Lupe bumped the Celica up over the high driveway sill, driving carefully between the charcoal granite wall of the church on the left, and the red brick wall of the apartment building on the right, red brick which bore many a scrape attesting to the narrowness of the alley. Lupe barely had six inches clearance on either side. She got the car back there without mishap and parked it next to an old Cadillac sedan.

Lupe shut the engine off and breathed deeply. She hadn't realized what a strain driving was. She wasn't used to driving, and had tensed every muscle in her body, fearing a collision. It was a relief just to sit there surrounded by high walls with nobody giving her any crap. After awhile, she leaned over and flipped open the glove compartment. May as well check her assets. Bingo. A loaded, Ruger P-93. She slipped it into her B.U.M. Original Equipment backpack which served as her purse.

The door to the church opened with a hideous screech. Father Donagin emerged on the concrete lip and stared down four feet into the parking lot. "Excuse me," he said.

Lupe got out and smiled. "Hello, Father! It's me, Lupe Gutierrez."

"Lupe?" The priest's face cracked in a smile as he came

carefully down the iron steps, holding tightly to the rail. He had to be in his late seventies. He'd been there long before Lupe came to New York. Before Lupe was born. "Haven't seen you at church in a while. What are you doing back here? Is that your car?"

"Father, it's for my mother. It's a gift. We all pitched in together—all the kids and cousins and nieces and nephews. It's for her fortieth birthday."

"Why that's wonderful, Lupe. I wasn't aware your mother drove."

"Oh, she always want to drive, but she say, 'What am I going to drive? I'll never have a car.' Don' worry. We not let her drive around 'til she get her license. But Father, it's a secret."

"I won't tell anyone."

"Can we keep it here for a few days? Until her birthday?"

"When's her birthday?"

Lupe did some fast mental calculation. She needed to buy as much time as possible without arousing the priest's suspicions. "Four days." Everything should be settled by then.

"Til Thursday? I don't see a problem. Now Lupe, if you're not in a hurry, you could come in and I could take your confession."

"I'm sorry, Father, but I have to get home right away to look after my little sister Syreeta."

"Go then, child, with God's blessing."

Lupe walked the six blocks home, stopping at a Walgreen's for a jumbo bottle of mouthwash. Fourteen-year-old Syreeta was plunked down in the living room watching Ricki Lake.

"Hey Syree," Lupe said. "You want to have some fun?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

Better Bodies, the health club where Sara worked out, was located in the Shienbaum Building on MacDougall Street, downstairs from All Japan Martial Arts. Sara tried to work out at least three times a week. Better Bodies was not one of the newer health clubs with row after row of gleaming stainless steel machines. John Heinz, the proprietor, didn't believe in gizmos. He barely believed in weights. If he had his way, everybody would train using jump ropes and the climbing wall.

Better Bodies stank of stale sweat and lineament. It had a creaky hardwood floor, numerous heavy bags, made of leather and patched with duct tape, and a raised boxing ring in one corner where Eric Morel and Roy Jones Jr. had trained, among others. Sara was one of a handful of women who worked out at Better Bodies. A lot of cops worked out there. The grizzled veterans hardly gave Sara a second glance. Working out was serious business. If they'd wanted to ogle young women, they would have joined one of the numerous upscale health clubs with whirlpools, daycare, and Tae Bo.

Late Tuesday morning found Sara in baggy sweat pants and shirt wearing bag gloves and wailing on an eighty pound bag. She'd earned her black belt in Tae Kwon Do while an undergraduate at Cornell, and had continued to work out with

the Police Athletic League and at Better Bodies since joining the force.

A boom box in the corner broadcast Huey Lewis' "The Heart Of Rock And Roll" as Sara alternated punches and kicks. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Heinz approaching. He was a well-developed thirty-five-year-old who'd studied with Royce Gracie and taught Brazilian ju-jitsu.

"Hey Sara," he said. "James Bratten and Derek Sharpe are about to go at it upstairs with kendo sticks."

Sara paused, panting. "Since when does Sharpe work out here?"

"Since he showed up last week," Heinz replied, heading for the stairs.

Sara grabbed a towel and followed. Up a long, narrow flight of stairs, the All Japan Martial Arts Academy occupied a four thousand square foot studio with hardwood floors and a glass wall protected by a room-length bar overlooking MacDougal Street. When Sara arrived, the smallish visitor area was jammed with cops and honchos. Sara worked her way to the front, resting her arms on the four foot banister separating the holding pen from the vast hardwood floor.

On the floor, four kendo students sat cross-legged in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. In the center of the large room, facing each other, identically dressed in heavy black cotton uniforms, wide legs resembling skirts, stood the combatants. Their faces were covered by the *men*, a steel caged kendo mask. Their chests surrounded by the hard shelled *do*, styled after traditional samurai armor. Their hands were protected by the armored and padded gloves, the *kote*. Each held a *shinai*, a multi-sectioned bamboo replica of a *katana*. It was easy to tell them apart. At six four, Sharpe was the short man.

Sara had arrived just in time for the formal salute preceding combat. Baltazar, whom she'd spotted earlier doing

sets, appeared at her elbow.

“This is gonna be good. Bratten was channeling Ali, bragging on how he was the baddest cat who ever played the game, and he could take any two guys in the joint. Sharpe made some crack that when Bratten's team played an exhibition game in Tokyo, two of ‘em were picked up for shoplifting. Bratten called Sharpe a punk and here we are.”

“Does Bratten know Sharpe is a cop?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think they even know each other. It’s a case of hate at first sight.”

The instructor, a wiry little Japanese by the name of Ojima, held his hand up to signal the start of the contest. His hand fell. The combatants clashed in a blinding series of strikes, like two trees fighting each other. It was difficult to tell which was an attack and which was a defense, so quickly did the blows fall. Sara knew that in kendo, there were only seven blows and one thrust. The blows flowed one into another, from attack to defense and back again, as the combatants moved swiftly around the room, their feet tracing semi-circular patterns. Both men were big, but Bratten was extra-big. He towered over the tall cop by four inches. Even so, it was the shorter Sharpe who soon proved dominant, driving his larger opponent around the room like a reluctant bull.

Bratten was good. Sara could see the moves which had earned him NBA All-Star status five years in a row. But despite his superb athleticism, and his size advantage, Bratten could do nothing with his smaller opponent. Sharpe seemed almost psychic in his ability to sense where Bratten’s blows would fall. He effortlessly deflected Bratten’s attacks, turning each defense into an offense until it became evident to everyone that the cop was playing with the basketball star. Just when it seemed Bratten was beginning to tire, Sharpe ended it with a spectacular rising blow that caught Bratten’s grip, causing him

to lose the *shinai* which soared through the air and thumped against the wall.

Sharpe instantly stopped, stood upright, and bowed deeply. Bratten had no choice but to respond. "Shit!" he muttered as he headed for the sidelines, stripping off his protective mask. Sharpe walked calmly to the side of the room and sat, cross-legged, before he removed his mask.

The crowd dissipated. Sara followed Baltazar down the stairs to Better Bodies and drifted toward the heavy bag, consumed by one overriding thought: Derek Sharpe was one of the finest swordsmen she'd ever witnessed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sara showered in the women's locker room at the station and returned to her desk to finish her report on the assault, for the Brooklyn Fifteenth Precinct. Sharpe's image, effortlessly disarming Bratten, kept getting in the way. She tended to give all cops the benefit of the doubt. And she liked Sharpe. But she didn't believe in coincidence, and her curiosity about the new cop had been set free. She needed to obtain as much background information on Sharpe as she could, without alerting Internal Affairs. She wondered about contacting his partner. All she knew about him was that he worked on Wall Street.

All street cops hated Internal Affairs and vice versa. It was an animosity as natural as Jews versus Arabs. The Nineteenth had been saddled with a particularly odious internal affairs officer named Selzer. Another case of hate at first sight. Selzer had it in for Sara for the simple reason that she represented unobtainable beauty, and the miserable son of a bitch couldn't control his hard-on. Sara had half a mind to sue Selzer for sexual harassment. Like most street cops, she was an amateur lawyer and had constructed lengthy arguments in her head to prove that Selzer's attentions were symbols of his warped sexuality.

No way was she going to sic Selzer on Sharpe, even if the

latter was the Samurai Killer.

There. She said it. She found herself staring at the jumble of words on her computer until Raj rose and left the room. She leaped up and followed, catching up with the Hindu cop in the hall.

“Raj, hang on a minute.” The slight cop paused at a landing next to a window protected by iron bars. Raj was her go-to guy in computers.

“Raj, can I trust you with something?”

“Most assuredly.”

“Could you get me Derek Sharpe’s service record, run a background check?”

“Sharpe the new policeman from the Bay Area? I could do that. Will you tell me what it’s about?”

A public defender banged into the stairwell at street level and headed up, toting an overstuffed briefcase and breathing heavily. They exchanged greetings and waited until he exited on the third floor.

“Sharpe is an expert swordsman. I need to know where he studied.”

Raj’s eyebrows rippled with understanding. “I will use my home computer.”

“Thanks, Raj. I owe you.”

“Nonsense. It is I who owe you, for the assistance you rendered in the case of the vanishing sardine truck.”

Sara planted a quick kiss on Raj’s cheek and headed back to her desk. Someone had crazy-glued another Spawn figurine to her desk, with the word balloon, “EEK! DETECTIVE PEZZINI IS AFTER ME!” She broke Spawn loose with a pop and held it up like an Academy Award. “Thanks, guys. These are highly collectible.” She tossed it in the bottom drawer with the others. One of these days she intended to take all her toys over to the Child Burn Unit at Sloan-Kettering. On second

thought, some of those Spawn figures looked too much like cooked meat.

A check on Bobby Chacon produced a rap sheet like a Chinese takeout menu. Head of the Brooklyn Tecolotes, Chacon had served four years at Ossining for assaulting a police officer. Los Tecolotes were active in the crack market. But the assault on Sara had a personal feel to it. The Yoda doll had been festooned like some kind of religious fetish. In addition to the colored thread and beads, Sara had discovered some long red hairs which looked suspiciously like her own. She was familiar with some of the more arcane paths to power favored among New York's many immigrants; weird religions from the Caribbean and Southeast Asia, ritual sacrifice of hogs and chickens. Sometimes a child.

Sara phoned Nelda Garrulitis at the *New York Post*. Nelda wrote the Page Six gossip column.

"Garrulitis," she answered in a voice like crunching snow, the result of a three-pack-a-day habit.

"Nelda, it's Sara Pezzini."

"Do you have a zombie sighting for me?"

"Nelda, I need your help. What do you know about an investment banker named Robert Hotchkiss?"

"Consummate bore. Quite the whiz-kid in the nineties but his career seems to have stalled and his society wife, Janet, is giving him the heave-ho. Looks like a nasty divorce battle. Hotchkiss has retained Lawton & Cates. The former Miss Dolores Greenbaum has employed the flamboyant women's rights advocate, Mildred Squires."

"You think he's strapped for cash?"

"Men like Hotchkiss are always strapped for cash. The only reason I know about this insignificant little man at all is because he married the former Miss Dolores Greenbaum, of the Kensington Greenbaums. What's this about?"

“Murder investigation. Please don’t mention this to anyone and you get the scoop.”

“What’s the scoop?”

“The samurai killer.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“What are you looking for?”

Sara told the gossip columnist her theory that the samurai killer was collecting swords. “I need to know if either Hotchkiss or his wife has tried to peddle something through Bachman recently.” She did not mention she thought Hotchkiss was their anonymous informant or the fact that she new Hotchkiss had once owned a Muramasa blade.

Sara accessed info.com, a for-fee investigative service that had access to credit reports, military records, rap sheets, your fourth-grade report card. Robert Hotchkiss had been born in 1950, the only son of Arthur and Anne Hotchkiss of North Salem. Arthur Hotchkiss had served with distinction in the Pacific during WW II. He’d been on Iwo Jima, that hellish two-mile patch of beach that cost the lives of twenty thousand Americans.

At four p.m., the phone rang.

“Pezzini, Homicide.”

“Officer, it’s Dave Kopkind.”

Sara unconsciously relaxed her neck and shoulder muscles, surprised at her own relief. She hadn’t realized she’d wanted him to call. “Hello, David. I want to thank you again for the other night. I had a lovely time.”

“Yeah, well, I thought, you know, maybe we could do it again, or something. Like maybe dinner and some music. There’s this little jazz club around the corner featuring the Ray Rideout Quartet—he’s an absolutely ripping sax player...”

“I’d love to.”

Pause. "Really?" Genuine shock.

"Yes, I'd love to. I can't Friday. That's my volunteer day. But Thursday or Saturday..."

"Thursday? You want to come by my place? If that's a hassle I could drive over to Brooklyn."

"No, no, no! Manhattan is the center of the universe. One should always head for the center. I'll come to your place. Around seven?"

"That would be great!"

"See you then."

Sara hung up. A minute later, Baltazar looked at her in annoyance. "What are you humming about?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Kopkind was walking on air. He'd only been in a handful of relationships in his life, and none of his prior girlfriends approached Pezzini in the looks or brains department. Amazing, the way she'd knocked on his door. Every red-blooded American male entertains daydreams of a beautiful woman mysteriously arriving at his doorstep, but no one expects it to happen. So what if she was a cop, and there'd been a murder? Through some mysterious process he didn't understand, Kopkind had convinced her to go on another date with him.

Kopkind was from Syracuse, the third son of a career Air Force guy and stay-at-home mom. Both Kopkind's older brothers were in the Air Force. He himself had enlisted in the Navy, served a three year hitch, decided he wanted a civilian life. The Navy posted him to Japan where he first became interested in swords, and the rudiments of polishing. After his honorable discharge, he remained in Japan for several years apprenticing to a master polisher named Kenji Makura. By the time Kopkind left for the states, he and Kenji had celebrated St. Patrick's Day with green saki, and swore undying fealty to each other.

He went into the polishing studio, picked up the newspaper-wrapped long sword, knelt at his polishing table,

the *today*, and unsheathed the sword. It was a *Hisakuni* from the year 1199, the master's signature and the date chiseled into the tang. Kopkind had been working on the *shitajitogi*, or foundation. The sword was in sad shape, having been completely neglected for at least half a century. Rust had gained tiny foxholes in the surface from which a spider web of decay expanded. But the steel was good, and Kopkind was confident he would be able to remove the blemishes. After a full day of polishing, he'd succeeded in smoothing out the two upper surfaces, or *shinogi-ji*. Once they were finished, he would tackle the lower surface, or *ji*, then the *kissaki* (point) and *mune* (back edge). All other parts of the sword had to be trued first, saving the cutting edge for last.

Dribbling water on the stone, Kopkind ran the blade back and forth over the block of *arato*, coarse polishing stone from the Ohomura Quarry in Shinano Province, a traditional source of good *arato* stone in Japan. Kopkind was convinced somewhere in the vastness of the United States, good polishing stone existed. Possibly in the West. He intended to conduct a search someday, with the idea of opening a quarry in the United States. Good polishing stones commanded anywhere from a couple hundred to a couple thousand dollars. Kopkind obtained his through Kenji.

He found the back and forth action of the blade soothing, a form of meditation. He lost himself in the vibration of the blade in his hands, the hum in his ears. And what appeared before his mind's eye but Detective Pezzini, wearing The Little Black Dress and dancing to Kid Creole and the Coconuts. Ahh yes...the coconuts! He imagined her in his arms, the way she moved, the taste of her lips, the scent of her hair.

Ouch! Kopkind looked down. He'd sliced open his left index finger. Served him right for daydreaming on the job. At least, he thought, it wasn't another one of the cursed Muramasa

blades, like the one that had cut him a few months ago. Kopkind was bleeding heavily, crimson droplets splattering the wet stone, running over the edges. He got up holding his hand, went to the large utility sink against the wall and ran cold water over the wound. He opened the first-aid box attached to the wall and fumbled with the Bactine. Yoshi came into the room yawning and snarling.

“Don’t just stand there. Do something!” Kopkind commanded, tearing open a band-aid with his teeth. At last he got the bandage around the cut and the bleeding stopped. His hands looked like leather that had been dragged over barbed wire, he’d cut himself so often. He’d gone for months without a serious cut, then the Muramasa. Now it had been barely three days since the last cut. It certainly didn’t pay to get distracted.

Yoshi suddenly leaped onto the workbench, scrabbling for an instant at the ledge and knocking a mallet and a chisel to the floor, before gaining purchase and letting out a shriek. An instant later, the door chimes tinkled softly. Wiping his hands, Kopkind headed for the front.

Adrian Hecht stood in Kopkind’s front office wearing aviator shades and a black cashmere sweater, clutching a long, narrow package wrapped in an elaborate golden silk brocade sword bag and tied with a heavy silk cord terminating in ostentatious tassels. It took Kopkind a minute to register. A little like finding Bill Gates in your foyer. They’d been introduced at Bratten’s party, but what did the developer want with him?

“Mr. Hecht,” Kopkind said. “What can I do for you?”

Hecht was examining the certificates and prints on the wall. “Bratten tells me you’re the best sword polisher in New York.”

“Well I don’t know about that...”

“Bratten is not one to use hyperbole. As you know, I’m a collector.”

“I’ve heard. I’d love to see your collection sometime.”

“That can be arranged.” He held up the package. “I’d like you to polish this.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m booked solid for the next couple of years!”

“I’m an impatient man, Kopkind, and I have a great deal of money. Name your fee.”

Kopkind grimaced. He’d always thought of himself as a man of honor. Bushido was based on honor. But he was also a man with needs and aspirations. There was no shame in accepting a special commission for a windfall profit. “Mr. Hecht, I hardly know where to start. I make a good living...”

“I will pay you one hundred thousand dollars if you can turn this sword around in five days.”

“Impossible.” But was it? The hundred grand danced behind his eyes like children circling a maypole. If he worked twelve hours a day—a grueling prospect—it was possible. A hundred grand bought a lot of polishing stones. “What kind of sword is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Excuse me?”

Hecht stifled a sneeze by pressing up on his nose. “I’ve taken a bit of a gamble and purchased a sword sight unseen from a dealer in Japan.”

“How...”

“I’ve been dealing with this gentleman for many years. He’s dying, and wants to leave something for his heirs. He is selling me something that has been in his family for generations with his personal guarantee that it’s what I’m looking for.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I believe it to be a lost Muramasa.”

Yoshi brushed aside the beads and entered, snarling and yawning. Hecht took a step back. "I'm allergic to cats."

"Sorry." Kopkind scooped the cat up and dumped it back on the other side of the curtain. Like most sword experts, Kopkind knew about Muramasa and his supposedly cursed swords. "You don't know which one?"

"I was hoping you could identify and authenticate it for me. My agent tells me the signature was removed centuries ago."

"What's the rush?"

"I want to show it next week."

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"I don't have time right now. Kopkind, Bratten tells me you're the best sword polisher on the East Coast, maybe the best working outside of Japan."

Kopkind blushed, but didn't bother to deny it. "Does this have anything to do with Bachman? Bachman was a friend of mine."

An angry look came into the developer's cold blue eyes and for an instant, Kopkind was afraid Hecht was going to take a poke at him. He took a half step back to be ready, just in case. The look passed. "Don't be absurd. I've never dealt with Bachman. I knew him, of course. We'd show up at the same gallery shows. I had no business with him, and I had nothing to do with his death." Hecht dared Kopkind to argue with him.

Kopkind didn't take the dare. Men like Hecht, men who were accustomed to ruling empires and making split-second decisions affecting the lives of thousands, were seldom dissemblers. Kopkind considered himself an excellent judge of character. As far as he was concerned, Hecht was telling the truth.

"All right, Mr. Hecht. I believe you. Tell you what. Leave the sword and I'll get to work on it right away. I'm not sure I

can deliver in five days, but I could do it in a week."

Hecht frowned. "I don't want to have to postpone my party. I was hoping to show the sword there."

Kopkind shrugged. "I tend to allow myself more time than I actually need."

"You'll do it?"

"I'll try my best, but I won't guarantee I can turn it around in five days. If I stay at the bench too long, I get tired. My concentration falters."

Hecht held up a hand. "I understand. I just don't want to show a blade that looks like a bad case of varicose veins. However, this deal is contingent on absolute discretion. No one must know you have this sword, understand?"

Kopkind nodded.

"No, you don't understand. I mean absolutely no one but yourself. Not your lover, not your mother. No one."

Kopkind took a step backward and bowed his head. "*Wa kare mas,*" he said.

Hecht took the sword polisher's card and left. Yoshi came back into the room, curling between Kopkind's legs. He knelt and picked the cat up. What could possibly be so urgent about polishing an old sword?

"My my. Adrian Hecht. Whoda thunk it?"

Carrying the cat and the sword, he went through his showroom into the backroom where he'd been polishing, unconsciously whistling the Colonel Boogie March. He was excited about the prospect of the mystery sword. A collector as important as Hecht would want an important sword. If Kopkind could identify it, and verify the identification, it would send his stock, already high, through the roof.

One wall was covered floor to ceiling in oak bookcases he'd built himself. The shelves were filled with books, many of which he'd obtained in Japan. Standing on a stool, Kopkind

reached for the top shelf, which badly needed dusting, and, using both hands, retrieved an ancient, leather-bound tome titled *Kuyamigusa*, published in Japan in 1890, and translated by a Christian missionary in China, who had obtained it in trade.

As an antiquarian, Kopkind was aware of the book's value. Strictly as a collector's item, it was priceless. The fact that he owned probably the only existing copy of an English translation didn't phase him. Recognizing the *oshigata*, he'd snatched it up at a bargain basement price. It had proven to be an invaluable tool for appraisals. The book contained detailed histories of most of the great swordmakers, beginning in the twelfth century. The book was 768 pages long and weighed twenty-one pounds.

A cloud of dust rose like residue from an underground nuclear test when Kopkind set the book on the workbench. He imagined the lonely missionary, one Rufus T.K. Laughlin, by name, spending endless hours in the shade of a ginkgo tree laboring at his translation. Ironic, that a man of peace would devote his life to translating a book of war. Laughlin had apparently been trained at Oxford or Cambridge, because he had included an extensive bibliography and index. The project must have consumed the bulk of his adult life. How utterly quixotic, Kopkind thought. Living in China, translating Japanese, the Reverend Laughlin made himself a double-outcast.

Kopkind searched the index for Muramasa. The Muramasa entries covered half a page, and included not only the earlier, shadowy, legendary Muramasa, but his descendants who were active through the sixteenth century. Yoshi leaped on the workbench, purring like a generator.

Burying his face in the cat's fur, Kopkind said, "Yoshi, guard the book. I need tea."

After he had prepared a cup of tea for himself, Kopkind

pulled up a stool and began to read. As a sword expert, he was aware of the Muramasas' reputation, and the Tokugawa Ke's efforts to destroy them. He'd only read portions of the book previously, because it was a chore to decipher Reverend Laughlin's cramped, angular penmanship. Kopkind read slowly, running his finger under the text.

Eventually, he came to the tale of Shigeyoshi the Magistrate.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE
(Tuesday)

Sara headed home Tuesday at six p.m, unfazed by gridlock as she zipped down the dividing line between lanes, ignoring honks, curses, and the single finger salute. She stopped at a Delitalia on Murchison Street and picked up some pre-fab fettucine alfredo and a bottle of California Merlot, which she bungeed to the rear seat.

She arrived at the medical center without incident, locked her bike to the pole, waved to the newly visible security guard, and walked up out of the parking ramp, across Prospect Place, and in the rear entrance of her building. She made it all the way to her door without incident. She set down her backpack and box of food on the floor while she unlocked her door.

“It’s a miracle!” Ben Weiskopf declared from behind her. Inwardly she cringed. All she wanted was to make it inside her apartment without incident, turn off the phones, soak in a hot bath, eat her dinner and watch NYPD Blue in peace. Bracing herself, she pasted on a happy face and turned. “What is, Ben?”

“The hoodlums! Whatever you did, it worked! An overnight transformation. The whole building is talking. Of course, I told them what happened, that our own fourth floor cop had a little talk with them, and you know what they said?”

You know what Mrs. Milman said? She said you couldn't possibly have had anything to do with it, because you're a tiny little woman, and who would listen to you? So I told her, 'Mrs. Milman, you don't know Sara very well, do you?' Anyhow, I made a bundt cake. I don't know if you like bundt cake..."

"Ben, that's awfully sweet of you. I wish I had time to chat, but you're going to have to give me a rain check. I'm still on the job."

Weiskopf's ears perked up. "Some big case? Are you after the samurai killer?"

The power of the press. Her elderly Brooklyn neighbor knew about the samurai killer. "Something like that," she smiled. "I wish I could discuss it with you, but it's a matter of internal security."

"I understand, I understand. Well, at least let me give you some of this bundt cake." He retreated into his apartment leaving the door open. Sara got her own door open and shuttled her goods inside, returning in time to accept Weiskopf's small replaceable plastic container. "I want that container back when you're done."

"Of course."

At last she was alone, except for Shmendrick, who did not make demands. No phone messages. Thank God for small blessings. Retiring to her well appointed bathroom, she began filling the old claw-legged tub while she put her things away. She poured in some bath oils, stripped off her clothes, piled her hair on top of her head, clipped it in place, and lowered herself slowly, carefully, into the hot water. The tub was so full, any excited motion would cause water to slosh on the floor.

She relaxed completely with just her head and shoulders protruding from the bubbles, feeling all the tension dissipate from her body. The Witchblade was in costume bracelet mode. The bracelet looked too loose to stay on her wrist. But it never

slipped off.

She wondered how her partner Jake was doing. She could really use his help with the samurai killer, but he was relaxing on a Jamaican beach somewhere with the stewardess du jour, enjoying a much needed vacation. He'd sent her a post card of smiley-face black children thrusting flowers at the camera. "Jeez," he wrote. "You can buy any freakin' thing you want on the beach at Negril! I mean anything. Good thing I'm not working. Cheers, Jake."

Good for him! He really deserved a break after everything he had been through. Sara couldn't have asked for a better partner. Jake McCarthy was a good cop and more importantly, a good person. He knew about the Witchblade and was cool with it, even helped her to keep it under wraps. Smart, brave, loyal, a stalwart who had her back no matter how weird or dangerous things got, but that was the problem. He had come close to being killed several times since being assigned to replace Sara's previous partner. Sara did everything she could to protect him, to keep him safe. Hell, he had even saved her a couple of times, but she still couldn't stand the thought of losing another partner, especially a stand up guy like Jake. It kept her up at night, but what could she do? The department didn't jive with detectives doing a lone wolf solo act, so she was stuck, just dreading the day when the extraordinary threats that were inexorably drawn to her might cost another friend his life.

Sara forced herself to stop thinking about it and slipped deeper into the suds, until only her head and the tips of her knees protruded. Submerged in the sublime warmth of the bath, she surrendered to the moment. She had always relied on a good soak to alleviate the aches and pains of the day, but that hadn't been an issue for a couple of years now. At her last physical, the doctor told her she was in perfect health. Since acquiring the Witchblade, she hadn't had a single sick day.

Last December the entire precinct came down with the flu, except for Sara. Detectives joked she'd made a deal with the devil, but it was not a laughing matter to her. She believed the Witchblade was a symbiote that enhanced her immune system. She could no longer watch any of the Alien movies, because the damned chest burster reminded her too much of the Witchblade.

Most of the time she didn't really notice it was there. It only manifested during crisis, or sometimes gave a little surge for reasons Sara didn't understand. Like talking to Hecht. It had given a little surge then, just enough to remind her she was wired. Like a one degree warming of her nervous system. Like a ripple down her spine. Just enough to say, *I'm here. I sense something. Something's not quite right.*

Other times the Witchblade actually seemed to speak to her. A voice from nowhere that she would hear in the back of her head. It would seem to be her own, a bit of insight, a clever inspiration, an early warning, just cropping up in the course of the internal monologue of her own mind. Later, in a quiet moment, the disturbing realization, *how did I know that? or where did that come from?*

It was enough to make her blood run cold. She tried not to dwell on it. How much influence did the Witchblade have over her? She knew that if she was strong, she would win out and the Witchblade would be a tool of her will. She also knew that if she faltered, the contrary might well end up being true. This was a thought that had preoccupied her ever since the night she first encountered the Witchblade, the same night her previous partner was killed, but that seemed a lifetime ago. The samurai sword killer was the current threat.

Hecht and Bratten both collected swords. Both men of action, although Hecht had to be in his fifties. So what? O.J. was in his fifties when he cut down Nicole and Ron. Did Hecht

or Bratten want the sword enough to kill for it? Sara considered motive the least important aspect of police work. Motive was important to juries and defense lawyers, not to cops. Motive was the most slippery of aspects. Sara had encountered mothers who drowned their children because they heard voices from God, a man who bludgeoned his neighbor to death over a parking space dispute, murderers who took umbrage at the way people dressed, looked, or behaved.

Men would certainly kill for a sword, if not a thousand other reasons. Anything could become an obsession, even collecting. *Especially* collecting. Sara recalled one case in which one suburban hausfrau had stabbed another to death in a dispute over a Beanie Baby. Poopsie the Bear, in Jets livery. Her own father, Vincent Pezzini, collected jurisdiction patches which he mounted on red velvet and hung on the rec room wall.

That both Hecht and Bratten were prominent members of the community with no criminal records meant nothing. Again, O.J. But Sara couldn't feature either one sneaking around in a ninja costume. Bratten, on the other hand, had demonstrable skills with the sword and was easily capable of beheading someone. Hecht she didn't know. But she intended to find out. In any case, she was convinced that as outlandish as the crimes were, they had natural, if not reasonable explanations. There were rich collectors all over the world who would pay seven figures for a sword, and only look at it themselves.

She had to consider Sharpe's suggestion that the sword thefts and ritual beheading were just covers for the murder of Scott Chalmers. Or Bachman. But Chalmers struck her as a far more likely candidate for murder, with all those bitter ex-wives and business rivals.

As the water began to cool, she pulled the plug with her

toe, reluctantly levered herself up, the few remaining suds sliding down her body and heading for the drain. Drying off in a hotel-sized white towel. Shmendrick stuck his nose in the bathroom, licked her leg and split. She slipped into a particularly delicate pair of panties that had been languishing in the back of the drawer for ages, followed by fleece-lined workout pants and a ribbed cotton tank, then headed for the kitchenette where she uncorked the Merlot and popped the fettuccine in the microwave. The sounds of traffic from St. Marks Place washed against her walls like surf.

She turned on the little TV without sound in the kitchen and flipped through her mail. Two magazines: American Rifleman and Real Simple. Utility bills, three credit card offers, and a plain white envelope with her name written in block letters by an unsteady hand. It looked like the lettering on the anthrax letters to Tom Daschle and Pat Leahy.

Sara went cold. For an instant she was seized with an irrational desire to pop the envelope in the microwave and nuke it. Then she remembered the Witchblade. It lay lightly on her wrist, something a girl would wear to a garden party. Dormant, inert, unconcerned. She trusted the Witchblade to protect her, and if it sensed no danger, she was in none. There was no scientific explanation. It had nothing to do with science. This was beyond science, in a world as complex and mysterious as the workings of a computer to an ant.

The microwave dinged. Sara jumped. Shmendrick jumped too, onto the counter. Sara let out a whoosh of air and collapsed back onto the plastic chair. "Okay, let's everybody settle down."

Holding the plain white envelope in her left hand, she made a conscious effort to extend the Witchblade from the tip of her right index finger. She felt an extrusion, as if the skin had gathered itself and surged outward. The tip of her finger

had formed into a half inch curving steel blade. She slit the envelope. The blade withdrew into the tip of her finger like a flare falling back into the sun.

She shook the envelope out on top of her copy of Real Simple. A single small sheet of paper fell out, with a crude drawing of a lady cop, like something a bored kid would draw in math, with exaggerated boobs and a Gestapo hat and a badge, surrounded and attacked by three savage...wolves? There was a totemic quality to the drawing, the wolves widely spaced, forming a triangle. Sara could easily imagine coming across the drawing on the wall of a cave in the Southwest.

Sara had an enemy. Someone who knew where she lived. But what did it mean? Was the drawing a warning? And if so, what was it supposed to accomplish, other than putting Sara on her guard? She checked the postmark. Brooklyn Post Office 10029, within walking distance.

The microwave beeped again, a dull but reliable servant. Sara fetched her fettucini, pried off the lid, and picked at it with a pair of chopsticks. Adrian Hecht spoke earnestly, silently from the tiny TV in front of an architect's rendering of his project. The phone rang.

Shit, she thought. She was certain she'd turned the ringer off. She automatically answered. "Pezzini."

"Sara? It is Raj."

She was suddenly glad she answered. "What did you find?"

"Sharpe's a former Navy SEAL."

"What?!"

"Most assuredly. It was not easy for me to discover this as his military records were sealed under executive order. One can only surmise he was involved in highly classified missions."

"How'd you find this out, Raj?"

"I rely upon this young chap I busted last year for hacking. He is most adept at these things. He hacked into the Defense Department computers. Again, I am assuring you not to worry, as he leaves no trace. Moreover, I am telling you that Sharpe was stationed in Yokohama for ten months, June 1997 to March 1998. While there, he participated in joint anti-terrorist operations with JDM Special Forces. The exact nature of these operations were beyond my capabilities, I'm afraid."

"Outstanding, Raj. Thank you. I owe you dinner at the cheap East Indian restaurant of your choice."

"You are owing me nothing, but if you are to treat me to dinner, I get to choose."

"That's what I just said."

"But I do not wish to dine Indian. I wish to dine French."

"Raj, you got it. French, Indian, whatever."

Sara hardly tasted the rest of her dinner. She was too buzzed. She didn't like the idea that a cop might be committing murder, but she couldn't ignore the evidence, even if it was circumstantial. Like many another doctoral candidate, Sara had suffered through an interminable semester on statistics which, if nothing else, taught her not to believe in coincidence. Sara's thesis, like her study of Latin, was on hold.

If Sharpe were the Samurai Killer, what was his goal? Collecting rare swords for a profit? Absurd. A Manhattan cop had plenty of opportunities to make easy money without resorting to ritual slaughter. Suppose it was a ritual? Suppose the killings had nothing to do with greed, but with some arcane philosophy as yet unrevealed? Who would have dreamed that a group of madmen would commandeer commercial airliners and fly them into the World Trade Center? Motive remained a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.

Sharpe had sent off no warning bells. Quiet the contrary. She found herself drawn to the tall, charismatic cop. It could be

a devastating disguise. She hoped not. One thing was for sure. Her curiosity about the new cop was far from satisfied.

But it was not Sharpe's image who remained in her head as she finally faded away. It was David Kopkind's, accompanied by a low-voltage thrill of anticipation.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR
(Wednesday)

Wednesday rose bleak and wet. Sara left her bike, dressed in her gray London Fog and a wide-brimmed hat, and took the bus across the bridge to Manhattan, where she caught a subway to the Village. Police tape still sealed Bachman's front door, but the techs had done their work. The hardwood floor had been scrubbed clean leaving a broad stain, slightly lighter than the rest of the floor. Techs had gone through the entire shop, performing inventory as well as looking for clues.

Sara bypassed the shop and pushed the button for the phone-booth sized elevator. She wanted a look at the private Bachman. She took the elevator to the fourth and top floor and emerged in a cozy study/office, with a bathroom on the left and a bedroom on the right. Obviously, where the private Bachman spent most of his time. An English Renaissance desk looked out on Worth Street. The elegant oak desk had brass handles and a banker green blotter on top. A set of Waterford writing pens, and a journal.

She checked the bedroom. The bed had been neatly made. Four amber pill bottles sat next to the bed alongside a decanter of red wine, a glass of water, and a copy of John Adams, the new biography. Bachman's copious closet contained a selection of conservative, tailored, three-piece suits, dozens of long-

sleeved white and pastel shirts, most with linked cuffs, and two dozen shining shoes arrayed in battle formation.

Returning to the den, Sara sat down and began to read. In precise script, the antiquarian listed his diet. On the morning of May 29th, he'd consumed a half pint of two per cent skim milk (Marks Dairy,) an onion bagel from Einstein Brothers, and a shmear of low-fat cream cheese. Sara was grateful for the banker's diligence, but found little of interest. She skipped ahead.

"Monday, June 7. Bob Hotchkiss phoned, anxious to unload the Muramasa his father brought back from Iwo Jima. I am reluctant. These things have a reputation, after all. And it has no papers."

"Excuse me," a querulous female voice rang out.

Sara's first thought was, *Witchblade, why has thou abandoned me?* She stood, adjusting her face to its bland, public persona. A woman had stepped out of the elevator freighted with two rope-handled shopping bags jammed with food. The woman was in her mid-thirties, stocky, dowdy, her short brunette hair pasted to her forehead by the damp, her designer glasses misting. She took them off and stared at Sara with small gray eyes.

"What are you doing here?"

Sara produced her badge. "Sara Pezzini, Homicide South. I'm investigating Mr. Bachman's death. And you are?"

The woman stepped forward, extending her hand.

"Leesha Bachman. Thaddeus was my father. What's going on? The police won't tell me anything. The coroner said my father had his head cut off! Is that true?"

Sara mentally kicked herself. She should have contacted Leesha by now. "Miss Bachman, I apologize for not contacting you sooner. We're a little understaffed right now..."

Leesha held up her hands. "Oh, please. I'm glad you're

taking the case seriously. I've heard of you. Aren't you that cop who was involved in catching the vampire killer?"

"Yes, but for the record he wasn't really a vampire, just a nut job with a Goth fetish. So, where are you living now?"

"Newton, MA. I'm a schoolteacher. I had to hear my father had been killed on the evening news."

Sara hung her head in shame. "I'm so sorry. That should have been my first priority. I'm working the case alone..."

"Don't worry about it. Just tell me what you've found."

Sara briefly recounted developments and her theory. "When you arrived, I was looking at your father's journal. He'd just recorded the arrival of a Muramasa. I believe that's what the killer was after."

"But why did he have to kill my father? Why not just sneak in when there's nobody here and take it?"

"Maybe he couldn't get in by himself. Maybe he had to have your father admit him. Maybe it was someone who knew your father, and had made an appointment."

"I'm not much help, I'm afraid. I don't know about his business."

"Did he indicate anything peculiar to you recently? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"I'm sorry. There was nothing unusual."

"When did you last see him?"

Now it was the school teacher's turn to hang her head in shame. "About a year ago. I came down and he took me to this fancy society party at this place on Fifth Avenue. Very swank. One of his clients, I gather. He was trying to impress me. He was always trying to impress me, I don't know why. I loved my father. We just weren't very close, that's all."

"Do you remember who hosted the party?"

"It was Scott Chalmers, I believe."

This was new. Scott Chalmers had not been in Bachman's

rolodex, but here at last was a connection tying them together. Both murdered men knew each other, connected by their interest in Japanese swords. There had to be a pattern, if only Sara could see it.

“Do you know the nature of your father’s relationship with Chalmers?”

“Dad sold him some paintings, silk screens, wood prints, I believe.”

“No swords?”

“None that I know of.”

Sara recalled that Chalmers had bought his sword in an online auction. The boys at Lab had had Chalmers’ computer for three days now. They ought to be able to provide her with copies of his e-mails, including the heated exchanges with the collector whom Chalmers had outbid.

“Did your father ever buy anything online?”

Leesha Bachman shook her head. “He didn’t even own a computer. I tried to get him interested, but he was too set in his ways.”

Sara gave the woman her card and asked her to phone should she discover anything of interest. As Sara boarded the elevator, she looked back. Leesha Bachman was seated alone at her father’s desk going forlornly through the drawers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When Sara returned to her desk, there were three messages from Brandon Stern with the Mayor's office, one from the computer lab, and someone had crazy-glued a rubber King Kong to her desk, with the word balloon, "HELP! DON'T LET HER GET ME!" Sara twisted it off and dumped it in the bottom drawer with the other monsters, then she dialed Brandon Stern's number.

"Thanks for returning my call, Detective. I'll get right to the point. Scott Chalmers was a close friend of the mayor. We'd like to be personally appraised of your investigation as you proceed."

Great, Sara thought. Just what I need—the mayor's office turning this murder investigation into a political football. "No problem, Mr. Stern," she replied.

"Very good. And, ah, the mayor would like to meet you. He's long been a supporter of the police departments, and affirmative action in particular..."

Blah blah blah, Sara thought. "That's good to hear."

"Would it be possible for you to attend a small gathering at Gracie Mansion on the fourteenth, to commemorate the unveiling of a painting honoring the mayor's predecessor?"

"Huh?" Excuse me, for a minute there I thought you were inviting me to meet the mayor.

“His honor would like you to attend a cocktail party the evening of the fourteenth, to unveil a painting of Mayor Guiliani. You may bring a date if you like, but please R.S.V.P. by Friday, will you do that?”

“I certainly will.”

Sara hung up, all abuzz. Suddenly she was in demand on the party circuit. After years of her social life consisting of Law and Order reruns and Cooking Lite video seminars, she had been cast into a fandango of social activity, rubbing shoulders with movers, shakers, and union breakers. It was exciting, and fun, and the thing that made it exciting and fun was she didn't have to go alone. She had a date. Someone she actually looked forward to seeing.

She felt like singing, “Sara's got a boyfriend! Sara's got a boyfriend!” And she hadn't even kissed him yet. Not really. Pecks on the cheek didn't count.

She phoned the computer center and learned that they had already sent over transcriptions of all Chalmers' e-mails for the past year. According to Mrs. Chalmers, he'd only purchased the sword five months ago. When Sara checked her mailbox she found a three inch thick manila envelope with the e-mails. She returned to her desk and began to read. At least two dozen Nigerians had contacted Chalmers with schemes to smuggle twenty-three million dollars out of the country, if only Chalmers would give them his bank account numbers.

The sword first appeared in October of the previous year, as a bulletin to a user list from swordauction.com, specializing in Oriental swords. Chinese swords had their own history and tradition, but swordauction did the bulk of their business in rare Japanese swords. Sara understood that serious collectors seldom bought sight unseen. The sword had to be examined by experts to determine its authenticity. Unless the sword were so well known it came with a pedigree. Swords offered on e-bay

and other online auction houses were mostly junk. There were exceptions.

The sword auction bulletin said, “For bid — authentic Muramasa *wakizashi*, “*Ishi no hana*, Stone Flower,” 1506, with TOKUBETSU HOZON papers from the NBTHK. To view the sword in detail, go to XXXXXXXX. Minimum bid: \$85,000.” Sara went online and looked up the sword. It was beautiful, approximately two feet long, photographed in such a way that the light played on its flowing, wave-like temper line. There were links to numerous close-ups, details of the handle, the menuki, or hilt ornaments, in this case, a pair of gold tigers, as fine as anything she’d seen in a jewelry store or museum.

She instructed the computer to print out pictures of the swords. Minutes later, the printer, which homicide shared with all the other departments, spewed out five sheets of indistinguishable gray sludge.

Think, Pezzini, think, she berated herself. Who had a high-quality computer and printer? Nelda immediately came to mind, but then the pictures would be plastered all over the *New York Post*. Brooklyn Yamaha was the answer. Like most serious bikers, she maintained close relations with her bike shop. Brooklyn Yamaha had state-of-the-art equipment. She phoned the shop and asked for the service manager, Clancy Imada.

“Clancy, I need a favor.”

“For you, anything. But when ya gonna come by and take care of this darn blood demon that rises at the stroke of midnight and steals all the Almond Joy bars from my vending machine?”

“Very funny, Clancy. I’m going to send you a file and I want you to print it out for me, using whatever high-quality photographic program you have, okay? Just set it aside, don’t show it to anyone. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, sure. I can do that. You gonna tell me what it’s about?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Fine. Be that way.”

Next she phoned Nelda at the Post.

“Garrulitis,” the gravel-voiced columnist answered.

“Nelda, it’s Pezzini. I need more dirt.”

“What kinda dirt?”

“Scott Chalmers. I interviewed wife number three. What can you tell me about wives one and two?”

Nelda lowered her voice to a conspiratorial rumble. “I try and light a cigarette in here, they unload with the firehose. This about the samurai murders?”

“Could be.”

“Can you meet me?”

Sara agreed to meet Nelda at four p.m. at the Java Jungle in the Pergament Building. She returned to the e-mails. The first threat appeared on December 7.

I know who you are. I know where you live. Stop bidding on the sword. Stone Flower is mine. Kagemusha.

How nice, she thought. He even signed his name. Shadow Warrior. The e-mail was from a hotmail account—anybody could start a hotmail account in any name, and send it from anywhere. No help there.

The second threat appeared in mid-January, after Chalmers had purchased the sword.

I know who you are. I know where you live. I warned you. Kagemusha.

Sara accessed the data base of daily complaints for that

month, searching for something from Chalmers. Surely a good citizen like Chalmers, a friend of the mayor, would do the right thing and notify the police. Nada. If Chalmers read the threats, there was no evidence that he took them seriously. Perhaps he'd notified building security, or his internet provider.

Sara studied the e-mails for another hour, but there were no further revelations. At three-thirty, she packed up, grabbed her umbrella, and headed uptown toward the Pergament Building. The Java Jungle was set on the mezzanine overlooking the lobby, a pert fern bar decorated with balsa parrots and palm trees, a real parrot in a cage behind the bar. "ARRR, BITE ME MATIE!" it greeted Sara. She arrived early, grabbed a plush sofa in the back, and flipped through the Times until Garrulitis arrived, burdened like a bag lady.

The gossip columnist plumped down in the overstuffed chair opposite and hoisted her bulging briefcase on the table. It clanked. "Did you see that cunning little notions store on the ground floor? They have the apple coring machine I've been looking for."

"I'm so glad. What are you having?"

"I'll buy. I have an expense account."

"In that case, I'll have a double mocha latte."

Garrulitis rose and placed the orders. She was a broad-shouldered woman who alternated between lush and plump. She returned with two drinks, two forks, and a slice of raspberry cheesecake. "We'll split it," she said, sitting down.

A wild thrill rocked Sara's world. Cheesecake! She had to do it, for the sake of the job. Emitting great smacking noises and grunts of satisfaction, they ate the cheesecake.

"Okay," Garrulitis said, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "Chalmers' first wife was the former Miss Patricia Willoughby, society dame, father's Brian Willoughby of Abercrombie, Lusk, and Hanig, old Wall Street Firm. They married in 1990, he was

thirty, she was twenty-nine, divorced in 1992 citing irreconcilable differences. Word is, he was playing around. He traveled a lot, had a girl in every port. There was no pre-nup, she got a very generous settlement, and today is working on husband number three, Otto Kruger.”

“Not the type to bear a grudge?”

“No. But wait. Wife number two is more interesting. She is the former Miss Erika Madureira, a Brazilian model, whom he married on a junket to Rio in 1995. He was thirty-three, she was twenty-two. Apparently, Erika was the high-maintenance type, and something of a drama queen. Altogether a handful. She signed a pre-nup, then contested it. It was a bitter, ugly divorce. She used Albert Kammer. He used Sidney Mellon. The lawyers made out like bandits. Details of the settlement were undisclosed, but word is she got about five mil, and she still bad-mouths him every chance she gets.”

Yeah, Sara thought. But she’s unlikely to sneak into his penthouse at night and lop his head off. On the other hand, perhaps *Kagemusha* was her agent. On the other hand, perhaps *Kagemusha* was just an inconsequential internet pest, and had nothing to do with the murder. “Where’s Erika now?”

“Twenty blocks uptown in her condo at the Wisconsin.”

Sara raised her eyebrows in appreciation of the toney address, also home to several rock stars and minor British royalty. Perhaps a visit to Miss Madureira was in order.

“Guess who’s invited to Gracie Mansion,” Sara confided.

“Dish, girl. Dish.”

Sara pointed at herself with all her fingers. “Moi.”

Garrulitis’ mouth formed a perfect ‘o,’ surrounded by lips as ripe and plump as satin pillows. “What’s the deal?”

Sara told her about the invite.

“That figures. Chalmers and Hizzoner were tight. Be careful, girl. Once you get their attention they can hurt you.

So. You seeing anyone?"

A sly grin crept on to Sara's face. Garrulitis zeroed in like an FBI sniper. "You are, aren't you? Dish, girl. Who is he? How did you meet him?"

"He's a professional sword polisher. I just met him last week."

"A what?"

Sara explained. Garrulitis expressed amazement that anyone made a living at such an arcane craft. Sara extracted a promise from Garrulitis not to spill the details of her social life on Page Six, while promising in return to give the gossip columnist an exclusive on some aspect of the investigation.

Sara took the bus to Brooklyn, switched twice to get to Brooklyn Yamaha. It was five-thirty when she arrived, and they were closing the doors. The manager recognized her and let her in. The new Warrior was on the showroom floor, and she paused to run her fingers over its sleek aluminum frame. No way. Not her style. She was strictly a toes down kind of girl.

Clancy Imada was in his office off the service bay. "Hi," he said. "Have a seat. Is this what you're looking for?"

He handed her a series of color computer print-outs showing the sword. "I gotta say, you've piqued my interest. What's this about, the samurai killings?"

Sara slumped in her plastic chair. "What else? Do me a favor, willya? Don't tell anyone about this."

Imada put a finger to his lips. "I haven't told a soul. No one has seen those but me. And if someone did see them, they'd probably chalk it up to my crazy kamikaze nationalism."

"Long live the emperor and all that?"

Imada locked his hands behind his head and leaned back in his executive lounge. "Not my style. I'm Brooklyn-born and bred. Ah'm an Amurican, gundamnit! When we gonna go

for a ride?"

"Soon's I bust this case, Clancy. And thanks."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Wednesday beckoned dry and bright. Sara took the bike and arrived at the Wisconsin at nine fifteen. She chained the bike to the portico pillar, showed her badge to the door man and asked him to keep an eye out. The door man admitted her. Erika Madureira lived on the twelfth floor of the historic Restoration wedding cake, next door to a reclusive British rock star who'd made his millions in the seventies. Sara had hoped to arrive unannounced, but the doorman must have phoned Madureira, because the door was open the limit of its chain when Sara stepped off the elevator. A pair of kohl-rimmed eyes looked out suspiciously.

Sara showed her badge. "Erika Madureira?"

"Yes?"

"Sara Pezzini, Homicide South. May I come in? It's about your former husband."

"What about him?"

"He was murdered. I'm in charge of the investigation."

"I know he was murdered. I had nothing to do with it."

"Miss Madureira, will you let me in? I only want to ask you some questions. You are not under suspicion."

"Do I need a lawyer?"

A seal-point Siamese darted out the door. "Willie!" the former model cried. Without thinking, Sara swooped down

and scooped up the wayward tabby, handing it back to its owner through the narrow opening. "Protect and serve," she said.

Madureira took the cat cooing and shut the door. A moment later it opened. "All right. You may come in."

Madureira was unexpectedly tall, with a puffy, rumpled face that had been lifted at least once. Her curly dark brown hair hung in her eyes, tell-tale gray peeking out. She wore a quilted floor-length lavender housecoat and kept one hand at her throat, to close the collar, or to prevent anything from escaping. "Come. Come into the living room. I will make coffee. You drink coffee, yes?"

"Yes, please."

Madureira went into the small but complete kitchen adjacent to the living room while the Siamese twined between Sara's legs. The living room looked like it had been tossed and hurriedly thrown back together. There were copies of *Islands*, *Destinations*, *Vanity Fair*, *Cosmo*, the *Crump Catalog* on the rosewood coffee table.

"I was very shocked to learn about Scott. Very shocked. We were not close, but still."

"You weren't still angry with your ex-husband?"

The ex-model barked. It was meant to be a laugh. "Life is too short to harbor grudges! I don't deny that we got along terribly, and that it was probably a mistake for me to marry him. I should have just screwed him and let him buy me a Mercedes. But no. I had to let him make me a respectable woman. He changed completely once we were married. No more Mr. Nice Guy. He was very controlling, very jealous, at the same time, he was jetting all over the Western Hemisphere screwing every stewardess in sight. He may have screwed some of the stewards, too. I don't know."

"Was he that way?"

"I don't know. We live as man and wife for two years, I hardly know him. He was all man in the bedroom, if that's what you mean. But he was so private, so peculiar. And he worshiped the ancient samurai. He wished he'd been born Japanese. All those samurai, weren't they gay? Who was that emperor-worshiping fascist writer..."

"Mishima?"

"Him. Scott worshiped Mishima. Don't tell me that didn't have homosexual overtones."

Was it possible? Could Chalmers have been murdered by a gay ex-lover? As outrageous as it sounded, Sara vowed to take another look at those e-mails.

"Have you ever heard of someone called *Kagemusha*?"

"Who?"

"A man signing himself *Kagemusha* sent Mr. Chalmers threatening e-mails involving a Japanese sword both were bidding on. It was an on-line auction. Mr. Chalmers bought the sword, but it was stolen when he was murdered. It's quite possible that the thief was after the sword and had no interest in your ex, except that he got in the way."

"Scott was no hero, I can tell you that. He shrank at the prospect of physical confrontation. That's one of the things that soured me on him. In Brazil, we expect our men to fight!"

"Are you thinking of some particular incident?"

Madureira fished in the pocket of her housecoat, coming up with a red and gold package of Dunhill's. She shook one out, lit it with a gold turbo-lighter, puffed up a head of steam. "Several. But no one who would bear a grudge. The only one who would bear a grudge, in all those confrontations, was Scott. He would bear a grudge. But he would be too cowardly to act on it."

Sara considered Madureira too disorganized to plan so precise a crime, let alone carry it out. Sara gave the ex-model

her card, and asked Madureira to call if she learned anything.

Sharpe's Hayabusa was in the motor pool when Sara arrived. Parking her bike next to his, she took the rear steps to the detective's bullpen on the second floor. Someone had crazy-glued a glow-in-the-dark Creature From The Black Lagoon to her desk with the word balloon, "Detective Pezzini! You are invited to the Monsters' Ball! Please RSVP Internal Affairs."

Gripping the Creature with both hands, she tore it loose, noting that her desktop was becoming pock-marked with glue craters. The bottom drawer was nearly filled. Time to cart the lot over to the Children's Burn Unit. There was a note on her desk from Baltazar, who was out. He'd caught a double homicide in Soho the previous night and requested her assistance. She could hardly deny him. All detectives were expected to pitch in on everybody else's cases in the wake of 9/11, in the new spirit of cooperation. She would have asked Baltazar to help her with the samurai killings, only she was afraid he'd mess it up.

Baltazar wasn't the most delicate of cops. She read the report with resignation. An armed robber accosted the clerk at Pertzborn Grocery, ended up shooting the clerk and a late night customer. Grainy video film being processed at the computer lab to enhance the perp's likeness. Blah blah blah. Baltazar wanted her to go through the mug shots, a thankless job.

Instead, she turned to Chalmers' e-mails. They were alternately tedious and fascinating. Chalmers had carried on endless chit-chat with a variety of pals all over the world. He traded online. Most of it was meaningless, but a number of exchanges had to do with the sword. The most notable were to a correspondent named Tadashi, in Indonesia.

Dear Tadashi: Eat your heart out! I just bought Stone Flower

for \$286,000. Be nice and I may show it to you when you come visit. Scott.

Dear Scott: The black flame of envy curls my heart. But I am happy for you, my old friend. I look forward to viewing this marvel. Tadashi.

There were numerous in that vein. She looked up. Sharpe appeared briefly in the doorframe to the stairwell as he headed down. On impulse, Sara sprang to her feet and went after him.

“Hey Derek!” she called as he was halfway to the street.

He paused, turned, his face breaking into a wide grin.

“Oh, hi! How’s the hunt for the samurai killer?”

She caught up with him, standing on a higher stair so she could look him in the eye. “I’m developing some leads. Say, I saw you kick Bratten to the curb yesterday. Man, where did you learn to fight like that?”

“In Japan. I feel a little bad about that. I probably went too far, but that pretty boy was shooting off his mouth. I remember when he came to Tokyo for an exhibition game. That mack act doesn’t go down well in Japan.”

“What’s up at Hecht Gardens?”

“Place has been real quiet, but we’re coming up on a World Trade Organization meeting, and it’s bound to get hit.”

“Surely Hecht employs private security.”

“Oh yeah, he’s got Judson all over the place. Those guys make less than airport screeners, spend most of their time getting high or sleeping.”

“What do you know about this soiree he’s got planned for next week?”

Sharpe rolled his eyes. “That’s going to be a real shanglally. He’s holding it in the lobby of the Hecht Center For The Performing Arts. They’re working ‘round the clock to

finish it up. It's going right down to the wire. I got myself assigned to security that night. You going to be there?"

Sara batted her eyelashes. "Why yes I am. I feel better just knowing you'll be on duty, Officer Sharpe."

"Flattery will get you everywhere. Here's what I learned about the Romeros."

Sara crossed her arms and parked one hip against the wall.

"They don't seem to be involved in any major criminal activity. Brooklyn Gangs tell me it's more of a social group, and gave me a list of a dozen members, half of whom are either deceased or moved on into adulthood without incident.

Candido's got no record to speak of, works as a gypsy carpenter for some Russkis renovating old warehouses."

"Thanks, Derek."

"No problema. Let's go for a ride one of these days."

"I'd enjoy that. We'll talk at the party, if not before."

Sara returned to her desk humming. She really liked Sharpe. She hated to think he was some kind of psycho-killer, but she did not believe in coincidence. Sharpe's timing was just too perfect. He was not in the phone book, but he'd be easy enough to find. All she'd have to do would be to ask the desk sergeant. She wondered what a search of Sharpe's premises would reveal. Ancient swords?

She felt a chill, a surge of negative energy down her spine. She looked up. Selzer, the internal affairs zombie, was staring at her from the far entrance. Seeing her looking at him, he turned and left.

Under the rules of conduct, if she had sufficient reason to suspect a fellow officer of a felony, she was supposed to file a report with Internal Affairs. In reality, such reports were few and far between, usually filed by sore losers on their way out. No cop would finger a fellow cop, even a crooked one, to Internal Affairs. No way was she going to put her suspicions

before Selzer. The man had been sent by Central Casting. He was a cold fish with coke bottle lenses and a buzz cut. His cheap sports jacket had pills on the lapel.

Nope. If she wanted to know what was in Sharpe's place, she'd have to toss it herself.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

Sharpe lived in a town house at 454 Huron Place on Staten Island. Checking the duty roster, Sara learned that Sharpe was moonlighting as a security guard at Hecht Gardens. Nothing wrong with that, plenty of cops did it. It spoke to his enthusiasm—the guy was willing to spend his off hours looking for perps. Might as well get paid for it. At five, she left her desk, donned her jacket, backpack, unlocked her bike, and put on her helmet. Sharpe’s bike was already gone.

At five o’clock on a June afternoon, Manhattan resembled a giant puzzle, like one of those sliding checkerboards filled with letters, one missing. In other words, gridlock. Traffic moved in tiny increments, inching here, honking there, gesturing and threatening everywhere. Sara took full advantage of her bike, splitting lanes, cutting corners, even riding on the sidewalk when necessary, fighting her way south to the tip of the island and the Staten Island Ferry. Sara walked her bike into the hold, setting the kickstand between two vinyl-wrapped pillars. She wished Yamaha would wise up and put center stands on all their sport bikes. The silly little kickstands almost seemed designed to fail. Sara decided to stay with her bike rather than mingle. Smelling of the sea, the hold conducted a discordant symphony of squeaks and groans. Faint odor of deep-fried clams trickled down from the concessionaires.

She needn't have worried. The ferry was steady as bedrock and her bike hardly shifted at all, not even when the ferry slugged the pier forty-five minutes later. Sara put her helmet on before zipping between the cars to the front of the line. She was first off once the ramp was lowered. She was gone by the time the first car hit the pavement.

She'd already found the appropriate map of Staten Island, mounted it in the clear plastic pouch atop her tank bag with Sharpe's address circled. Fifteen minutes later, she found it, a new development on its own dead-end circle, neat little two-story townhouses, each with its own attached one-car garage. Although the houses were planted cheek by jowl, they were designed in such a way as to give the illusion of privacy. Sara tucked her bike right into Sharpe's alcove and locked the front wheel. She doubted she needed extra precautions. Staten Island was an island of calm in a sea of crime.

Although no one was watching, Sara went through the motions of knocking on the door and ringing the buzzer. Nada. She placed her right hand on the knob. Immediately above it was a dead bolt. Breathing deeply to relax, she channeled her energy into her right hand, willing the Witchblade to rise, to congregate at the tips of her fingers. It seemed to have a mind of its own, but it often anticipated and acted in Sara's interests. This was different. This time her life was not in danger. She formed a mental image of the door swinging inward.

There was a tingling on her wrist and when she looked down, her hand was buried in a metal apparatus. It might have been a glove, but the index finger extended, by dogleg and kink, into the keyhole and the deadbolt. There was a click and the door swung inward. Sara slipped inside, shut the door, and stood with her back to it trying to still the rush of blood in her ears.

She was breathing hard. She had just committed breaking

and entering. Other cops, sad to say, could commit felonies without blinking an eyelash. There were tons of studies comparing the psychology of cops and criminals, finding them similar. Not Sara. For as long as she could remember, she had a burning need to right wrongs. Not that a mere technical felony put her in a fainting spell. But it was against a fellow cop, someone she liked and admired, and she wasn't used to breaking the law.

Gradually, her beating heart stilled and she listened. She extended her hearing throughout the cool, silent house. Not entirely silent. She heard the compressor in the refrigerator, the whoosh of air through the ventilation system, the tick of an old clock in the living room. She looked down. She wore high-topped Adidas black sneakers. Safe enough. She wore a latex glove on her left hand. Except for the kitchenette, the first floor was carpeted and consisted of a high-ceiling living room looking out on a tiny, fence-enclosed back patio. There were two stone Japanese lanterns on plinths in the back yard, along with a tiny koi pond. Sara would have bet money there were fish in the pond.

The living room was sparely but elegantly decorated with Japanese brush paintings, an Hiroshige print, and a couple of black and white Ansel Adams prints of the Grand Canyon. And of course the swords. There they were, mounted on a credenza, without so much as a plexiglass case or man-eating tiger to protect them. A *wakizashi* and a tanto. Sara could tell they were valuable just by looking at them. The hilt was wrapped in ray skin, and finished in leather wrapping. The silver menuki depicted a fish. Sara held her hands in front of the paired swords, as if warming them by a fire.

"What's happening here," she whispered to the Witchblade. "Did one of these kill those men?"

The Witchblade was silent.

The downstairs bathroom was tidy and held no surprises. Nor the kitchen. Sara used only the gloved left hand in opening drawers and cupboards. Sharpe had a couple bottles of saki socked away, otherwise appeared to be a tee-totaler. She crept carefully up the stairs to the second floor. There were two bedrooms and a bath. Sharpe used one of the bedrooms for his office. It was here Sara found the safe. It was a full-size Sheffield, tucked into the closet, and it was locked. Sara scanned the office first. A desk, with a computer. How she would have loved to boot it up and try and get in. But that would have left a record, one a clever cop could easily discover. The Witchblade didn't do computers.

Photo of a man taped to the shelf, stylin' dude with California hair, tennis whites, grinning like a box of Wheaties. Carefully, using her gloved hand, Sara removed it and turned it over.

"To the Samurai, from Surfer Dude." No signature. There was a leather address book on the desk. Sara went methodically through it. Most of the entrants were old, and lived in California. One was circled three times. Ralph Munster. Ralph at work, Justine And Associates, old-line Wall Street investments. Sharpe's banker pal. She found his card lying on the desk top and took it. She put the photo back.

She leafed through the stack of papers on the desk. Mostly police work, plus some correspondence with pals, none of it of much interest. Copies of *The New Yorker* and *Law Enforcement Monthly*. Burning with impatience, she forced herself to go methodically through the contents of the desk. There was nothing that would connect the tall cop to the samurai killings other than his Oriental tastes. She even checked the titles on his bookshelf, pulling out each volume to look for hidden compartments.

Finally, she turned her attention to the safe. It was six feet

tall and made of reinforced, carbonized steel, dark green with the Sheffield logo painted in old-fashioned gold leaf script on the front. Planting her feet at shoulder width, Sara willed herself to relax and extended her right hand. Her palm immediately began to tingle, as if she'd slapped it hard against a flat surface. Her hand flew to the dial of its own volition, abruptly encased in shiny metal. Whatever was in the safe, it beckoned to the Witchblade and vice versa. She turned the tumblers like a kid playing table hockey.

Click, click, click, the thing unlocked. She pulled the heavy door toward her on silent, well-oiled hinges. Her eyes settled first on the guns. The black nylon stock of the AR-15, the bulldog body of the Heckler & Koch MP5A3, the pistol-stocked Ithaca pump-action twelve gauge. Either Sharpe was a serious collector or he was planning an insurrection. Sara knew a lot of cops were gun nuts, but Sharpe hadn't seemed the type. For some reason, she felt a vague disappointment.

Next to the guns, held vertically in place by a series of foam brackets, were six long narrow bundles wrapped in plain burgundy silk. Sara knew what she would find even before she unwrapped the first bundle. A spasm of apprehension had settled in her neck, but her hand was alive with a mind of its own. She had to restrain it from unwrapping the bundle too fast.

She set the bundle flat on the floor of the office and unwrapped it carefully. And there it was. A long sword, a daito, housed in a black-lacquered wood scabbard, with mountings through two rings. There were four bundles counting the one on the floor. A string of obscenities bubbled from her lips. Not a cop. Not Sharpe.

It was all circumstantial, unless she could match one of Sharpe's blades to one of the missing swords, or somehow match striations produced by one of his blades to the neck

wounds of the victims. Carefully, she grabbed the sword by the handle and the scabbard and drew it part way out. Even in the pale evening light, the blade gleamed and shimmered like a thing alive. Unfortunately, she knew from David that the blade's creator had signed his name on the tang, beneath the wrappings. The sword's peg seemed to be buried beneath the ancient silk handle wrapping and she didn't want to risk damaging the several hundred year old handle to take a look. She doubted her ability to render the Japanese characters accurately. The best she could do would be to make detailed notes of the blades' appearances, and see if they matched descriptions of the stolen swords. She kicked herself for not bringing a camera.

Then what? How could she introduce evidence and get a search warrant? Sharpe was completely above suspicion. He was a cop. She was committing a felony by tossing his apartment. Working swiftly, she unwrapped each blade and made a series of detailed descriptions in her notepad, including sketches the handles and the points. None were Stone Flower. She drew with her right hand, which again behaved as if it had a mind of its own. Her drawings were uncannily neat and accurate.

She knew points were all-important in determining a blade's origin. She was extremely careful not to touch any part of the blade itself, and not to let the blade touch the ground. She pointed the tip of the blade toward the light and peered at it from the pommel, as David had taught her. She balanced the blades carefully on a book to lift them off the floor while she sketched. Finally, she returned all the blades to where they had been, in the proper order.

There was a safe within the safe, a recessed wall cabinet. She opened the door and found a Glock .45 inside with a barrel-mounted laser, typical macho toy, and a series of manila

envelopes. She took out a manila envelope, opened the unsealed end, and shook out a series of eight by ten black and white glossies. A man clad in S&M leather, studded dog-collar, zippered face mask, more belts and straps than a gladiator, chained spread-eagled to a bed. Sara felt a lurch, as if her plane had hit a vacuum, a sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach. She looked at the rest. They were similar. Some were worse. Some involved foreign objects being inserted into portions of the body. She told herself it could be crime evidence. She told herself some men had harmless fantasies. But she could not tell herself that the man chained and shackled in one of the photographs wasn't Sharpe, and if that was him, someone else was taking the picture.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Thursday promised to be one of those sweltering days of which the Lovin' Spoonful sang. Sara could feel it lying in bed at six-thirty in the morning. Her apartment was old, and the only air conditioning came from what she could cram in the window. Her own unit was currently in storage in the basement because it took up too much space when it wasn't running. She'd have to haul it up and put it in. She'd have to do it before she left for work if she didn't want to return to an oven.

Sighing, she got up, washed her face, put on some old comfy Levis that were just starting to wear through in places, a sweatshirt, her beat-up hiking shoes, grabbed a pair of canvas gloves and descended five flights to the basement where she had a storage space among many others, protected by a Master padlock. The basement was dark and filthy. She got the lock open and wrestled the air conditioner close to the door, but no way would she be able to cart it up single-handed. It wasn't the weight. She could handle the weight. It was just too awkward. She needed another set of hands. Where would she find one in this zoo? There was Matt, the janitor, but he was likely still sleeping it off, and he looked as if he'd keel over from a thrombo any day.

Frustrated, Sara ascended to ground level, forcing open the

creaking service door at the back of the corridor and stalking out into the foyer in search of muscle. And there, parked by the curb in his '79 Chevy, was Jorge. When she got to the car she saw that Jorge was sleeping, his seatback reclined, legs up on the dash, wearing Ray-bans and a raspberry beret. The windows were open. She reached in and shook his leg.

He came awake with a start. "Huh? Whassup?"

"Jorge. What are you doing here?"

He looked at her, took off the shades, rubbed his eyes with a fist, put the shades back on. He lay back for a minute until juice reached the sparkplugs. "Officer Pezzini. Jes' doin' what we discussed, lookin' out for the folks."

"You've been sleeping out here all night?"

He glanced at his fake Rolex. "Since about four, that's when I called it quits. I figure the people know my ride, nobody's gonna try anything with me out front."

The only people who ever tried anything were Los Romeros, Sara thought. But she smiled. "You're just the man I want to see. Help me carry my air conditioner up from the basement and I'll buy you an egg McMuffin."

"Sure, okay. Jes' give me a minute to get my stuff together."

"I'm in the basement."

Sara returned to the basement, eyeing a box full of vinyl records that had belonged to her father. Might be worth something on e-bay, she thought. Moments later, Jorge appeared at the end of the dusty corridor.

"Yo, mamacita! Where you at?"

"Down here."

Together, they carried the air conditioner out of the storage locker. Jorge held it while Sara set the lock, insisted on carrying it solo to the freight elevator at the back of the building. She let him show off. It was too hot to argue. He mounted the thing in

her bedroom window, accepted a cold Diet Pepsi.

“What’s that on your arm?” she asked.

Jorge looked down. “Which arm?”

“The right one.”

He stared at his biceps. “Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

“Whatcha got on your stomach?”

He peered at her, half-smiling through his bandito mustache. “You really want to see?”

“Sure. Don’t be bashful.”

Jorge peeled off his muscle shirt. He had the hard, lean body of a grey hound, ribs you could climb like a ladder, six pack like rolled naugahyde. A heavy crucifix was tattooed on his abdomen, its base in his groin.

“The Lord’s cross. I got a skull on my right arm.” He turned.

Sara made a little spinning motion with her finger. “Forget the skull. Are you a Christian?”

“I’m Catholic. Most us ‘Ricans are Catholic. Aintchoo? I mean, you bein’ Italian and all.”

“Yeah, I am, although it’s been a long time since I’ve been to confession.”

“Me too, Chiquita!”

“You’re a gangbanger.”

Jorge started to protest, but Sara held her hand up and continued. “I’m a cop. I appreciate this turn-around you’ve pulled off, but I’m not sure what’s behind it. I don’t believe in miracles. Now anything you’ve done in the past, I don’t want to know, unless it becomes a police issue. I guess what I’m saying is, I’m suspicious. I’ve been a cop a while, and in my experience, hardened street criminals very seldom change direction. You know what I mean?”

Jorge listened with an open face that reminded Sara of a

dog. "I ain't no hardened street criminal."

"You look like one. The way you wear those pants, drooping down to your butt, that's prison style. You can understand where loud music and hanging out on the stoop would scare some of the residents."

"Oh sure, that's what I'm tellin' you, Chiquita, I'm down with what you're sayin'. I know there ain't no future in hangin' out, dealin' a little dope from time to time, not to say I done it! I mean, I know people who do, but I don't consider them hard-core street criminals."

"See, then we got a problem. I catch anybody selling, doing, or holding dope on these premises, and I personally will make sure they go away for a long time."

Jorge stared at her for a minute with large liquid eyes. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. I mean, what the hell. I'm twenty-six. I got to think of my future."

"That's right. Thought what you're going to do?"

"I don't know. I'm a pretty good carpenter, but man, trying to get into the union..."

"I hear you. Maybe I can help. In the meantime, I want you to do something for me."

"What's that, pretty lady?"

"Think about what you want to do for a living that's legal. I have to kick you out now while I get ready for work." She was glad she didn't say, *think about what you want to be when you grow up*.

"Happy to oblige. Say. How's about you and me checkin' out this salsa band over at La Hacienda Saturday night?"

She smiled, placed a hand on his gleaming bicep. "I'm sorry. I'm seeing someone."

Brave smile. "Tha's okay. You get bored with him sooner

or later.” She watched him swagger down the hall toward the elevator.

Lupe watched in disbelief and fury from her bedroom window as the witch roused her man from his car. Twenty-five minutes later, her fury metastasized into murderous intent. She’d been holding off, out of fear of acting too soon. Too soon after the last debacle. Not this time. This time the witch would die, and her faithless lover too.

Sara arrived at her desk by nine. There was a message from Brandon Stern. “His Honor is very keen to hear of the latest developments in the Chalmers investigation. Please contact soonest. Don’t forget to R.S.V.P.”

Sighing, Sara RSVP’d before turning on her word processor and preparing a report for the mayor. As if she didn’t have anything better to do. She said that she had interviewed Chalmers’ wife and at least one of his ex-wives, and ruled them out as potentials, but that Chalmers had been receiving harassing e-mails regarding the sword. She was checking these out. There was nothing in the report about Sharpe.

At eleven-thirty, Detective Carraback asked her to participate in a line-up involving a high-priced hooker suspected of lifting a rack of diamonds from a Jewish geezer in a hotel. Sara recognized Bernadette Goines from Vice made up like a streetwalker, winked at her. The geezer fingered Sara.

“Tough luck, Detective,” she told Carraback. When she returned to her desk, someone had crazy-glued a plastic samurai warrior with the word balloon, “BOO!” A samurai ghost. Isn’t that just lovely, and so tasteful. The samurai came off with a single twist.

“You guys are slipping!” she announced to the other detectives, all of whom were studiously involved in reports or yakking on the phone. It was time to beard the lion in his den.

Specifically, it was time to call on Robert Hotchkiss. It was Sara's experience that persons of social standing would often cooperate rather than embarrass themselves in front of their colleagues.

Hotchkiss worked for the Dynasty Group, with offices in Hecht's Twelve South Plaza. Sara left her bike at the station and caught a ride uptown with a Cheetah Express driver. He dropped her off right in front. Sara carried a leather Haverhill briefcase as camouflage. In taupe Armani slacks, olive ribbed cotton short-sleeved pullover, and khaki jacket, she was indistinguishable from hordes of other bright young things on the make. The Dynasty Group was on the twelfth floor. The receptionist stared at Sara's badge as if it were the Hope diamond.

"Point me to Mr. Hotchkiss, please, and don't say anything. I will be discreet."

The receptionist pointed. Hotchkiss was on the phone when Sara appeared in his office doorway, to his astonishment. First he was pleased, then flummoxed, finally distressed when he recognized her.

"Phil, I'll have to call you back." He hung up. "Come in and shut the door, please. What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Hotchkiss, I'm aware that you're involved in divorce proceedings, and I understand your need for discretion. But this is a homicide investigation. I believe you phoned in the tip about Bachman's death. I believe you went there that morning to discuss with him the sale of a sword your father brought back from Iwo Jima."

Hotchkiss stared at her for a minute, then leaned his elbows on his desk and buried his face in his hands. "You have no idea the strain I've been under."

"Tell me what happened," Sara said softly.

"You're right. Bachman was handling a sword for me. My

father brought it back from the war. He was a Marine sergeant. I never told Janet about it. Janet. That's my soon-to-be bitch-of-an-ex-wife. I'm leveraged to my eyeballs. She finds out, or her attorney, they'll go after it. I got two kids in college. I got a nut you wouldn't believe."

"I feel for you, Mr. Hotchkiss. I'll try and keep your name out of it, but it would be helpful if you told me what happened when you discovered the body. Everything you can remember. There's a murderer running around."

"I know. All right. Hang on." He picked up his phone and instructed the secretary they were not to be disturbed. "My father found the sword in a cave on Mt. Surabachi. Technically, they weren't supposed to bring this stuff back but everyone was doing it. He kept it in the attic for decades. He used to clean and oil it on occasion and he would bring it out and show it at parties. He stopped showing it in the early seventies, he knew it was worth something. He died in 1989 and the sword came to me. I took it in to Bachman to be appraised."

"It's my understanding that sword appraisers are few and far between."

"That's right. Bachman couldn't issue a certificate, but he knew enough to recognize what it was. He said he could find a buyer."

"What was it?"

"The swordsmith was Muramasa. Apparently, there are two distinct lines of Muramasas. This was the later one, who was active in the fifteenth century. I'd been keeping the sword in a safety deposit box here at Dynasty since my father's death. A couple of months ago, David finally managed to work it into his polishing schedule. I decided to sell it and took it over to Bachman two weeks ago. Last week, I'd made an appointment to discuss the terms of the sale. Bachman was nervous about

trying to keep the whole thing secret from my wife and her bastard lawyers. You don't move an item that expensive in this town without someone noticing."

"Did he have a buyer in mind?"

"Yes, but he wouldn't tell me over the phone. I got there around ten o'clock and the place seemed closed. Nobody answered the bell, but the gate was unlocked when I tried it. So I went in. I didn't notice the blood until I fell on my ass. I nearly fainted. It's the most shocking thing I've ever witnessed. It's the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

If that's the worst thing that's ever happened to you, Sara thought, you are one lucky bastard. "Tell me exactly what happened."

Hotchkiss walked her through his grisly discovery. He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "And there on the counter was the head, planted on the receipts spindle."

"Do you know Scott Chalmers?"

"I've met him a couple times. I wouldn't say we were close friends."

"How do you know James Bratten?"

"Dynasty maintains a skybox. Bratten came to us for a loan. He wanted to buy five Wendies. I'm his loan officer, and I've always been a huge Knicks fan. And the Jets. And the Yankees."

"What about the Giants and the Mets?"

Hotchkiss shrugged. "Screw 'em. I can't be all things to all people."

Sara smiled in spite of herself. "You did place the nine-one-one."

Hotchkiss nodded. "Pay phone in the Café Belladonna. I don't suppose...if you find my sword, there's any chance you could return it to me?"

"After the disposition of the case, you can petition to have

it returned from the police evidence lab. However, that's open to the public so your wife might find out."

"'Might.' There's no might about it."

"Who's her lawyer?"

"Elron Dubuis."

"You have my sympathies. I would appreciate copies of any documentation you have concerning the sword. I'd also like pictures, drawings, descriptions, anything like that."

Hotchkiss leaned forward, opened the bottom right drawer of his desk and began to rummage. Sara looked around. Pictures of his two kids, smiling, fresh-faced boy and girl. Pictures of the treacherous wife had been removed. Pictures of Hotchkiss and some pals on a golf course. Certificates of achievement and appreciation. A crystal ball. Be nice if it worked, she thought. We could have avoided this mess.

Hotchkiss handed her a legal envelope with Bachman's old-fashioned script. "There's the description he gave me last week."

"I don't understand. If he had the sword, and you had the description, why did you go visit him?"

"He said he had a buyer, but he didn't feel comfortable discussing it over the phone."

"Why not?"

"He was a peculiar man. For example, do you know he had a bagel and cream cheese, a grapefruit, and a vanilla yogurt for breakfast every morning?"

"I don't see what's so strange about that."

"Every morning of his life, for thirty-five years, without exception?"

"It's odd. I grant you. But I don't see why he was afraid to mention the buyer's name to you over the phone."

"I don't know. Maybe he thought his phones were bugged."

Sara's eyes opened imperceptibly. "Thank you, Mr. Hotchkiss."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

At the office, Sara phoned Bachman's. No one answered. Leesha had probably arranged for the body to be shipped to Newton for burial. Sara left work at four o'clock, overnight kit bungeed to the back of the bike and crammed into her tank bag, and headed toward the Village. Yellow police tape still sealed the entrance to Bachman's shop, but the place was no longer guarded. Sara had requisitioned the key from evidence. Pulling onto the curb, she tucked the bike in close to the building, removed her helmet and locked it to the frame. She locked her bike, went up the steps, and unlocked the front gate. A different key unlocked the hand-carved double doors.

The place smelled faintly of antiseptic and dried blood. Sara switched on the lights in the shop and stood in the doorway for a minute. The place seemed to have been left untouched since the technicians left, the antiques all still in place. At some point, someone would have to take inventory, if only for dispersal of the estate. The phone was behind the counter, next to where the killer had planted Bachman's head. It was a Radio Shack voice recorder. The lab had already analyzed the tape. Nothing helpful. Sara pushed the announce button.

"Greetings," said a dry voice with a touch of Europe. "You have reached Thaddeus Bachman, specializing in Oriental

antiquities. I regret no one is present to take your call right now, but if you leave a message, someone will get back to you. Our office hours are from nine a.m. to five-thirty p.m., Monday through Friday, special hours by appointment. Thank you.”

She turned the phone over and using a tiny screwdriver attached to her keychain, unscrewed the base. She examined the phone closely but found nothing resembling a bug. Next, she traced the line back to the wall, went out into the hall to the elevator. Bound to be a transfer box in the basement. If a crook had access, he could put the bug there. The elevator opened at her touch. She stepped into the tiny booth, pushed the button for the basement, and waited for the nictitating door to close.

The elevator descended groaning, like an old janitor complaining about his arthritis. The basement was surprisingly well lit with fluorescent fixtures, and consisted of row after row of storage locker jammed with cardboard boxes, rolled rugs, coddled paintings, a lifetime of collecting. Sara found the exchange box. There was only one line into the house, with a phone on each floor. There was no bug.

Sara went to the second floor, which housed a library and what appeared to be a guest room, where Leesha had spent the night. The soap in the guest bath was still damp. Sara went through the whole house but could find no evidence of a bug. She looked behind the pictures. She looked beneath the tables, chairs, and desks. Nada.

Finally, conceding defeat, she called it quits. She briefly debated showering there, instead of at David’s, across the street, but decided against it out of respect. Going methodically through the house, making sure she left everything as she found it, she let herself out the front door, locked it, closed the gate and locked that. She turned and gazed across the street, at the little sword polisher sign beneath The Feldstein Gallery. She looked up. A tailor advertised in the second floor

windows. The third floor appeared to be residential, blinds open, except for one window, open perhaps one third, on a darkened room.

You could bug someone without even entering the house by shining a laser on a window. The window acts as a speaker membrane—much like the eardrum—vibrating with whatever sound is produced inside. The bounced laser beam comes back, faithfully recording every sound. Apprehension mixed with excitement, Sara crossed the street. Instead of going down into the tiny alcove that serviced Kopkind, she went up the broad granite stair to the arched Roman entrance, into the elegant little foyer, the door to the Feldstein Gallery open, garrulous customers inside. Behind a glass, the building's occupants were listed in white plastic letters. Kopkind. Feldstein. Art the Tailor. Grossman the Accountant. The third floor contained two private apartments: Bloomberg and Andersen. The building was managed by the Chalmers Group, Scott Chalmers' management company.

Head swirling, Sara stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine. She was certain that the apartment with the slightly open window was vacant, except for a laser listening device. She didn't believe in coincidence. Chalmers had been ga-ga for swords. Perhaps he had been Hotchkiss' mystery buyer. But why the subterfuge?

She glanced at her watch. Whoops! She was actually fifteen minutes late for her date with David. She'd warned him she was coming over early to shower and get ready. She descended to the basement shop and entered through the tingling door. Yoshi appeared, followed a moment later by a smiling David, slightly disheveled.

"Hi! Make yourself at home. What?"

"What, what?"

"You look like you're either on the verge of a great

discovery, or you've lost your mind."

"The former, I hope. I'll tell you about it."

"Good. Because I have a story for you too. Take your time. I've got three hundred strokes to go."

"David, can I stash my bike in your work room?"

"Sure. I'll go open the door."

She went outside, brought the bike around, threaded through the gate and door and parked it in a corner of his work room. She looked for the sword on which he was working, but couldn't see it. Unclipping her leather overnighter, she disappeared into the bathroom.

Sara showered, toweled off and started in on her hair. The hair. There was so much of it, drying had become an ordeal. First, she had to haul along her own hair dryer, never sure if her destination had one, or if it would be up to the job. Second, drying took time, and often left frizzed ends.

Sometimes she really resented how much extra work went into "being a girl". It wasn't just the hair, it was the fashions designed for visual appeal not comfort, the make-up, the nails, the endless shaving and plucking. Occasionally she found herself envying her male co-workers, many of whom obviously put no effort whatsoever into maintaining their personal appearances. She'd thought about cutting the hair short thousands of times. Go for a nice bob. She wasn't a teen-ager anymore, and sometimes, in a scuffle, long hair could become a liability. She kept it pinned up at work.

But tonight, she wanted all her hair. They were going to a jazz club, not a party, so she'd brought a pair of low rise Seven jeans and matching jacket, and wore a luscious jade-colored silk top, cut low, sure to stun. Finally, the make-up, a minimalist operation, thank her lucky stars. A touch of blush, a flash of Cover Girl Goglam! Gem, a smear of Neutrogena, hey, presto! She was transformed from gorgeous to spectacular. The

Armani Ella was last to go on, in Certain Strategic Spots.

She turned off the fan and opened the door. "In here," David called from the living room. She entered. Kopkind, who'd been standing at his entertainment console loading CDs, took one look, slapped his forehead, and leaped off his feet like Dagwood Bumstead confronted with a conundrum. He landed on his back in a perfect judo roll, slapping the carpet, but maintaining his cartoon characterization.

"Whoo! Whoo!" he barked, like the wolf in a Betty Boop cartoon.

Sara was pleased, couldn't help blushing. "Okay, come on, get up. You've seen me all dolled up before."

Kopkind got to his feet, a goofy grin on his face. He wore khakis and an olive green coarse weave cotton shirt, neatly tucked and held in place with a leather belt. "I thought we'd have a glass of wine before heading over. It's only a couple blocks away, if you don't mind walking."

"I love to walk."

David pushed a button and Charlie Haden's Quartet West began to cast its film noir spell through the speakers. He opened a lacquered cabinet and poured two glasses of pinot noir. Sara sat on a fold-up futon sofa. One wall was covered floor to ceiling with oak shelves, supported by designer cinder blocks. The shelves were crammed with books, DVDs, CDs, and the entertainment system, a large-screen television with all the perks: cable, DVR, DVD, and a sound system. One wall was exposed brick, decorated with several paintings and a Japanese wood cut of a priest traveling toward Mt. Fuji. The hardwood floor was mostly covered with a thick, Southwest Indian style rug. Aside from the futon sofa, there was a leather chair and a series of cushions, a low, free-style walnut coffee table, and in the corner, what appeared to be Shinto shrine.

Kopkind handed her a drink, toasted. "Cheers."

They sipped.

"David, do you know your upstairs neighbors?"

"Who, Feldstein? Sure."

"No, I mean those two private apartments on the third floor. Do you rent from the Chalmers Management Group?"

"Yeah."

"You know, Chalmers was the samurai killer's second victim."

The polisher's face twisted in consternation. "*That* Chalmers? I had no idea."

"What about Bloomberg and Andersen? Those are the two names on the mailboxes for the third floor. Do you know them?"

"No, I've never met either one. I've been here for two years, too. It's funny."

"Do you think it's possible there's no one in those apartments? At least one of them?"

"Where are we going with this?"

"I want to take a look at that one apartment with the open window facing Bachman's shop. I'm wondering how did the killer know Bachman had what he wanted? One answer is, he may have bugged the shop, and one way you can bug a place without actually going inside is to bounce a laser beam off the windows."

Kopkind frowned, impressed. "Jeez. I don't know. I suppose we could go up there and knock on the door."

Sara smiled and set her glass down. "Lets."

CHAPTER THIRTY

They went out the front door, up the stairs to street level, up the stairs to Feldstein's entry, and into the building. Access to the second and third floors was both by stair and elevator. The elevator opened on the third floor vestibule, single window looking out on Worth St., apartments to either side. Neither apartment looked lived-in. There were no homey touches, no welcoming mat or door sign. The apartment with the open window facing Bachman's belonged to Bloomberg. Sara knocked.

Nada.

Kopkind knocked on Andersen's door. No answer there. "Well. Curiouser and curiouser."

"Do me a favor. Keep an eye out while I fiddle with this lock."

"Hey, officer, I don't mean to tell you your business, but isn't that illegal?"

She turned her peepers on him. "Let's just call it extra-legal, okay?"

Kopkind shrugged, grinned. "Not like I'm a perfect citizen."

Bloomberg's apartment was sealed with a Masterlock deadbolt, very difficult to pick. Shielding the Witchblade from Kopkind with her body, Sara confronted the lock and

channeled her concentration through her wrist. The Witchblade morphed and crawled over her index finger and into the lock like a thing alive. An instant later the tumblers gave. Sara turned the knob and the door swung inward.

“Bingo,” she whispered.

Kopkind gaped. “How did you do that?”

“Sorry. Secret cop trick.”

Silently, she stepped into the apartment, holding up a hand to keep Kopkind back. She listened. She smelled. She tasted the air. The apartment was empty. Not only was it empty, it was unfurnished, save for the living room facing Bachman’s. Set three feet inside the window mounted on a black tripod was a tube-like device that resembled a telescope, with a parabolic boom mounted directly below, also facing out.

“What’s that?” Kopkind whispered, having caught the caution bug.

“It’s a laser listening device.” She looked at it closely without touching. It was plugged into a wall outlet. There was some kind of black transfer box with a cord going to the phone jack. Sara bet that when she checked the lease, Bloomberg would turn out to be a front for Chalmers himself. As Kopkind said, curiouser and curiouser. One victim of the samurai killer had been spying on another. Over a sword, she bet.

She took David’s hand. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

They returned to David’s living room where he poured them each another glass. “What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. But I intend to find out. You said you had something to tell me.”

“Do I ever! I don’t know how much stock you place in ghost stories, but you know that book Hecht showed you? *Kuyamigusa*? Well I have an English translation.”

Without taking her eyes off him, Sara sipped her wine. “You do. Hecht told me he was paying someone beacoup

bucks to translate. How did you come by a copy?"

"I bought it at a yard sale in California several years ago." He got up, stood on the stool and reached for his copy. A cloud of dust rose when he set it on the coffee table.

"Holy smokes. What does that thing weigh?"

"About twenty pounds. Anyhow, you told me you believed these killings are about Muramasa's swords."

"Yeah. The killer's after sword or swords."

"Well I've read the whole thing, believe it or not, and that struck a chord so I began reading, and sure enough, I uncovered this character who collected Muramasas. Let me just read it to you."

This incident concerns the lord of Funai, Bungo province, Takenaka Unemenosho Shigeyoshi, as well as his son, Genzaburo. At the time of the incident (1632,) Shigeyoshi had taken up the important position of Nagasaki magistrate. While in office, there were some other irregularities and the shogunate in Edo initiated legal proceedings. Shigeyoshi was convicted of his crimes, and, as a consequence of his punishment, his property was confiscated. As it happened, there were some Muramasa blades among his possessions. In fact, the number was said to have totaled 24 blades. Because of that crime, he was sentenced to be banished to a distant island. However, the sentence was increased in severity, and together with his son their seppuku was to be presided over by the Grand Superintendent Mizuno Kawachi no Kami Morinobu. Just the fact that Shigeyoshi possessed a large number of Muramasa blades indicated that he believed the price of Muramasa blades would increase after the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate. The fact that the shogunate strongly despised these swords was the reason that Shigeyoshi was ordered to commit seppuku.

In the days leading up to his death, Shigeyoshi handed out his swords one by one to his loyal retainers until there was only one left,

the sword Skyroot, which had been commissioned by the demon swordsman Udo. Finally, he gave Skyroot to his most loyal retainer. However, after Shigeyoshi's death, the retainer is said to have traded the sword to a Dutch sea captain for a pair of match-locked pistols. Thus, it is said Shigeyoshi's spirit is doomed to walk the land forever, searching for his lost Muramasa.

“Your killer may be the reincarnated spirit of Shigeyoshi.”

“Let me see that.” Sara got off the sofa and knelt next to Kopkind, who sat cross-legged on a cushion in front of the coffee table. The old book had been entirely hand-written in elegant penmanship that reminded Sara of the style booklets she studied as a grade school student. It must have taken forever, a true labor of love. Her fingers traced the ancient script, the sword polisher breathing over her shoulder.

It was her dream. She'd dreamed she was Shigeyoshi. Had she heard the story before, or had the spirit sought her out? Because of the Witchblade? But in her dream, Shigeyoshi did not succumb to the shogun's order. He had struck back, slaying his appointed executioner.

She was aware of David's fragrance, masculine with a touch of sandalwood, followed by the touch of his hand on her arm. She turned toward him, lips parted and they came together like magnetic dogs, falling backwards onto the cushions. First he kissed her tentatively, but she reached up behind his head and pulled him close. Heat blossomed. Kopkind's ridiculously smooth fingers roamed her body, her hands cradling his head. His groin banged into hers like the Crusaders at the gates of Damascus. They sprawled.

“You want to unfold that futon?” she said huskily.

“Okay,” he replied in a choked voice. He climbed unsteadily to his feet leaving Sara tumbled amid cushions, practically threw the futon open, went around the room

turning off lights until the only illumination was the soft glow from the kitchen.

Smiling, Sara stood and peeled off her shirt. David was mesmerized, a deer caught in headlights. She grappled with his belt. "Come on, you. Don't go wobbly on me now."

Kopkind's body was lean and hard, as she'd suspected, but his style was soft and gentle. Just before they joined, he turned her face to his. "Should I wear a rubber? Do you have protection?"

A silver laugh bubbled from her lips. Not a day of illness since she got it. The Witchblade would never tolerate a baby, another life form horning in on its private preserve. "It's okay," she whispered. "Are you clean?"

"I'm so clean I scrubbed away my fingerprints."

Fifteen minutes later they lay in each other's arms, pleased and astonished.

"I can't believe I just did the wild thing with a cop."

Sara snuggled against him. "Very well, I might add. It's best to have sex on an empty stomach, don't you think? That way, you don't have to spend the whole evening worrying about whether you're going to get laid. We can enjoy our dinner."

"Oh Sara!" David swooped and kissed her hard. "They're going to have to create a new category for you. A twelve. No. There is no category. You are the greatest woman who ever lived!"

"Not hardly, but it's nice of you to say so."

David sat, reached for his skivvies. "Would you settle for greatest woman I've ever met?"

She watched him with big eyes, knees drawn up to her chin. "Yeah. I would. So where are we going for dinner?"

"City Club, around the corner. Sort of a Spanish/French sorta place. Plus the music. This guy Ray Rideout is straight

out of Bird by way of Phil Woods.”

“Who?”

“He’s a terrific sax player. You’ll like him.”

It was seven by the time they descended the Mayan steps to the subterranean City Club. Many restaurants had occupied the space at 223 East Houston Street. The basement reminded Sara of old Italian restaurants, with its exposed brick Roman arches dividing the rooms, white linen tablecloths, and paintings of the Pyrenees. They must have had that lovers’ glow, because the waiters treated them like royalty, hovering, solicitous, eager to please.

It was a magical evening. David blushed charmingly when the waiter handed him the wine list, was grateful when Sara held out her hand. “Let me see. All children of Italian/Americans know something of the grape.” After determining they were going to order fish and poultry, Sara ordered a California Chardonnay.

“You can order the French stuff. I’m not exactly poor.”

She balanced her chin on her bridged fingers and batted her lashes. “I refuse to patronize the French for a laundry list of grievances about which I shall not bore you at this time.”

“Perhaps later?” he asked hopefully.

“Perhaps.”

The band, sax, drums, piano, and bass, filed in and began to play “Fool On The Hill.” They ate slowly, lingered through the long set, returned to David’s just before midnight, and made love again on the futon while Yoshi snarled and yawned around the base of the bed.

Sara lay in David’s sleeping arms, wide awake. She was pleasantly exhausted but her mind would not shut down. Vroom, VROOM it went. Was this the man who would make an honest woman of her? Would Vince have liked him? And how. What about the Witchblade? Would the Witchblade

permit her to let someone into her life? Dear Witchblade: There's, uh, someone I'd like you to meet.

Did Sara believe in reincarnation? Since acquiring the Witchblade, there were few things in which she didn't believe. If the Gaia, Athena, Hildegard, Kali, or Brunhilde—whatever the name of the ancient deity that inhabited the Witchblade—could live again through her, then Shigeyoshi could live again to claim his precious sword.

Skyroot. The root of all evil. It was, after all, priceless, the desire of powerful men. Would the killings stop when the killer finally possessed the sword? Would the sword ever surface? What criteria would a ghost samurai use for choosing a host? Certainly, Shigeyoshi would want someone physically capable. Sharpe was capable. He also had the knowledge. And the swords.

The swords! She'd completely forgotten the detailed drawings she'd made of the swords she discovered in Staten Island.

David stirred, one hand falling to her hip. "What?"

"What, what?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden I felt you get all tense and it woke me up."

"I'm sorry. Go back to sleep."

David stretched languorously. "Mmm. What time is it?"

Sara glanced at the bedside digital. "Five o'clock."

David sat up, swung his legs to the floor. "Time to feed the livestock." Sara watched him head for the bathroom, admiring his muscular backside and, oh yeah, his butt. He was in and out of the shower in just five minutes! Yup, guys definitely had it easier. He was dressed in jeans and a white tank as he started rattling things in the kitchen.

Sara emerged from the bathroom a half hour later. She'd pinned her hair up for a neck-down shower, and dressed in her

sensible Gap khakis and a stretchy knit beige top. Fetching her notes from the previous night, she joined David in the kitchen where he was whipping up scrambled eggs and cheese. He removed a bottle of grapefruit juice from the refrigerator.

"My old polishing instructor, Kenji, told me to always drink grapefruit juice with eggs. It breaks down the cholesterol."

"I didn't know they had grapefruit in Japan."

David laughed. "Kenji got that out of Parade magazine."

"David, I wonder if you could look at some drawings I made of some swords and help me identify them."

"I can try."

She laid out her notes and drawings. David pondered them in silence. "I see you have a long slender blade here with deep koshi-sori curvature and a ko-kissaki, or small point. This is a kamakura period tachi from maybe the 1300's, but I can't tell the smith from this. You've done a remarkable job. This one has what looks like a crab claw choji pattern to the temper line. That is a trademark of the Sukesada smiths from Bizen province, but it could be anything from late koto to mid-edo period. I'd have to see the signature, or look at the blade in person to be sure. Where did you get this?"

"I can't say."

David went through the drawings. "I don't recognize any of these swords. Did you do these drawings? These are good."

"Can you tell for sure if any of them are Muramasas?"

"No, I can't. But I can say, there's such diversity of styles, they represent the work of several different swordsmiths and time periods. Not much help, huh?"

"Nope." She kissed him on the cheek. "I like you anyway. I have to go to work. Unlock your garage for me."

"When can I see you again? Is tonight too soon?"

"Yes!" Sara laughed. "I'm busy tonight. However,

Saturday I have to go to the mayor's house for a cocktail party..."

"As in Gracie Mansion? As in the Mayor of New York?"

"Yes, and don't get excited. It's politics. Would you like to be my date?"

Sara had repacked everything in her overnight bag and the detachable tank bag. David helped her carry them to the workshop, where she reattached everything to the bike, put on her jacket and helmet, straddled the bike and walked it out the door. David tried to kiss her through the helmet, but her lips remained tantalizingly beyond reach.

"Story of my life," she said, thumbing the starter. The Yamaha thrummed to life. David held the gate for her as she let out the clutch and slid into the alley. A United Waste Management truck completely occluded the alley, like a rhinoceros in a chute, snorting, stinking, bellowing to frighten lesser creatures. With a sigh, Sara turned and headed the wrong way down the one-way alley until she exited on Second Avenue, turned and headed uptown.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE
(Friday)

Sara was at her desk by six-thirty, surprising even the jaded denizens of the night shift who were agonizingly pecking out their final reports of the day before wandering off to get loaded and fall into bed. The tell-tale tang of forbidden cigarette smoke hovered in the air. Her desk was monster free. For a moment she fantasized about gluing monsters to all the detectives' chairs, give them something on which they could perch until they learned respect. Ha, fat chance, she thought.

The more immediate problem was to either prove or eliminate Sharpe as a suspect. She awaited Siry's arrival with a mixture of dread and anticipation. It was the type of dilemma every supervisor hated: investigating one of their own. She needed to share her problem, but she didn't envy Siry his responsibilities. The worst part was, she liked Sharpe. Her private knowledge notwithstanding, everything about him indicated he was an outstanding cop. His Navy discharge had been honorable, and of course there was a reasonable explanation why he hadn't said he was in the SEALs; they were still considered covert ops.

In the meantime, she prepared a detailed memo covering everything she'd discovered in Sharpe's apartment, including the pictures. She did it in longhand, in a notepad, and put it in

her locker. Shortly after eight, Siry arrived, looking as if he'd gone home the night before and fallen asleep fully clothed, rose this morning without looking in the mirror. A heavy stubble covered his chin and his normally dark and sunken eyes were more so. He spotted Sara's anxious expression at once and motioned her into his office with a nod.

Once inside, she pulled the blinds. Siry sat at his desk and began to rummage through the drawers, retrieving a bottle of Alka Seltzer and a tube of Tums. "What? I can just tell by that look on your face. What is it?"

"Joe, there any chance this office is bugged?"

Siry looked around, as if trying to spot a mosquito.

"Bugged? By whom?"

"By Internal Affairs."

"That's illegal. I'd have whoever did it up before the police commission. Is it that bad?"

"Maybe we ought to take a walk."

Detectives and secretaries leaped at them like midway creature features. Chief, you gotta look at this. Chief, you gotta look at that. Siry waved them off with an unlit cigar. "Be right back! Keep your shirt on. Back in five. It'll keep."

Sara slapped a black Red Sox hat on top of her pinned-up hair. They went out the back, through the motor pool. No Hayabusa. Exiting the cage, they walked down Church Street, toward Ground Zero.

"Well?"

"I searched Sharpe's apartment yesterday. I found six swords concealed in a standing safe."

"What were you doing in Sharpe's apartment?"

"Joe. He's a suspect. He collects old swords. He's a master swordsman. I saw him pulverize James Bratten last week in kendo." There was more. But she couldn't bring herself to share it. Not yet. What if she were wrong?

"Hizzoner's on my ass. Where do we stand with all this? Don't tell me Sharpe's your only suspect."

"Hecht and Bratten are both collectors. Bratten, I can't see. He doesn't strike me as the obsessive type. But Hecht is. You don't get to be the biggest developer in Manhattan without a certain degree of ruthlessness."

Siry pointed his unlit cigar like a howitzer toward 666 Fifth Ave. "Sweet mother of Christ. You're telling me your only two suspects are Sharpe and Hecht?! I can't tell the mayor that! He's a friend of Hecht's too. And Sharpe, Christ, he's vetted. Have you seen his discharge papers?"

"Joe, trust me. I have other reasons I can't go into."

"So what do I do? Tip Internal Affairs?"

"Absolutely not. They'll only make things worse."

"Whaddaya want from me?"

"Your support, as usual."

"B'gorrah and oy vey. Can we go back?"

Sara pirouetted, paused to wait for Siry to catch up. Someone had glued a plastic Elvira to her desk with the word balloon, "Dear! Mother's in town!" Sara snapped it off, tossed it in the drawer with the others. The surface of her desk now resembled the backside of the moon, there were so many glue craters.

Sara went online and used Google.com to research reincarnation. Of all the cops in New York City, she was least likely to dismiss reincarnation. Motive? The killer was driven by ambition and blood lust from beyond the grave to recover his lost Muramasas. New problem: what if the host were innocent? How did she separate Shigeyoshi, if it were he, from the host body? One link spoke of an *oni yurai* ceremony to drive out demons. A gust of Armani Pour Homme tickled her nose.

"Go away, Baltazar," she said without turning.

The Portugese-American cop, and proud of it, hovered over her left shoulder. "Hey fellas!" he shouted. "Pezzini's researching reincarnation! She's got a hot one!"

Sara immediately minimized her screen but the damage had been done. There arose from the detectives' bullpen an ululation as from ten thousand drunken college sophomores on South Padre Island during spring break judging a wet T-shirt contest.

"New York's Finest!" she spat. "If only Katie Couric could see you now!"

A hush descended like damp fog as Selzer appeared at the entrance to the detectives' bullpen and made his way silently toward Siry's office, radiating chill. Faces turned away. Fifteen minutes later, Selzer emerged, once again plunging the bullpen into silence.

Sara waited until he was five minutes gone before approaching the boss. Siry was poring over a report when Sara entered his office. "What?" he said without looking up.

"Joe, what did Selzer want?"

"None o' your freakin' business. It had nothing to do with you, okay?"

"Did it have anything to do with Sharpe?"

Siry looked up, touch of panic in his brown eyes. "No," he stage whispered. "Shut the door."

She shut the door, even though no one could hear what they were saying. "Selzer don't know nothin' about Sharpe, and let's keep it that way. I just found out Sharpe's moonlighting for Adrian Hecht. Did you know about this?"

Fear licked at her spine. Had she messed up? "Yeah, but lots of cops moonlight."

"Those two got a lot in common. They're both Nipponophiles. They're both nuts for those swords."

Sharpe and Hecht? Sara couldn't see it. Hecht nurtured his

reputation as a playboy, flaunting a string of twine-thin models from the pages of Vanity Fair. Yet, there were whole continents of the developer yet to be explored.

“Okay,” she said. “Sorry to bother you.”

“Close the door when you leave. I gotta get some work done.”

Sara returned to her desk and Google.com. There was more material on Hecht than she had time to read; a profile in Fortune, lengthy attacks on anti-capitalist websites lurid with conspiracy, and of course photos of Hecht and his women.

Her cell phone thrummed in her leather bag. She took it out. “Pezzini.”

“Sara, it’s Derek Sharpe.”

Goosebumps marched up her neck. How could he know? He couldn’t know. It was synchronicity, another piece of the puzzle slipping reluctantly into place. Trouble was, she was too close to the board to see the patterns. “What’s up, Derek?”

“I think I may have stumbled on the break you’ve been looking for. I’m not comfortable discussing it over the phone. Could you meet me?”

“Where?”

“Hecht Gardens, say around eight p.m. You can find me in the trailer, inside the gate.”

“Why not now?”

“I’m on duty now. I’m watching a bunch of Flying Tigers. They’re watching a discount electronics store. Something’s going down. Later.”

Click. Flying Tigers were a Viet gang and Sharpe was on the gang task force. With a supreme effort, Sara turned her attention back to her report. Hours dragged by like injured soldiers. Sara was no master spy. As careful as she’d been, she couldn’t be certain she hadn’t left behind a clue when she’d tossed Sharpe’s place. A real paranoid would have left tell-

tales, such as eyelashes pasted over door jambs, little pieces of thread tied between cupboard and wall.

If he knew, if he were crazy, if he were a killer, maybe he was luring her downtown for other reasons.

No. Not another cop. But she knew from bitter experience that cops went wrong. She actually preferred a supernatural explanation. If the killer was a ghost, maybe they could contact him via *séance*. Yeah. And do what? Interview him? She had to look into this *oni yurai* business. At half-past four, a delivery person appeared at the landing with a bundle of flowers asking for Pezzini. A cop pointed at Sara.

The person deposited a dozen roses on her desk, to Baltazar's wolf whistle. Not even Baltazar could knock her off her high as she reached for the little white card.

The winter sky breaks

Dissolves into rose petals

No match for your eyes

It was unsigned. Sara shut her eyes and imagined the swordpolisher's powerful, smooth hands at work on her body. Tonight was volunteering, then Sharpe. Tomorrow was the mayor's reception. She couldn't wait for tomorrow.

She sought connections in the Chalmers, Hecht, Bachman Triangle. Was it significant that Hecht and Chalmers had been rivals? As far as she knew, there had never been any personal animosity between them. What was new was the fact that both men turned out to be serious Japanese sword collectors. Small world indeed. If the laser eavesdropping device above David's apartment did report to Chalmers, he would have known when the antiquarian acquired the latest sword. The missing sword. Was it *Skyroot*? Was that what this was all about? The ghost of a disgraced samurai, forced to commit seppuku, struggling to

recover all his swords? It made as much sense as anything else and Sara had seen weirder.

Or was it something more subtle, a dodge to conceal the real motive and target? Who would go to so much trouble? Someone who knew her reputation, that's who.

She ran the serial number of the listening device through the manufacturer, Hagira, in Milford, Connecticut. Hagira was owned and operated by an ex-policeman who'd turned to private investigating. Hagira was a small specialty shop turning out electronic eavesdropping devices to order. They were able to tell Sara that the laser listener on Worth Street had been purchased by Panther Security. Panther Security worked for Chalmers Property Management.

Sara phoned Panther. A secretary answered. Sara identified herself and asked to speak to Norm Hansen.

"I'm sorry, Norm has gone home for the day. May I take a message?"

"May I have his cell phone number please?"

"I don't think I can do that."

"Ma'am, this is a homicide investigation. My badge number is 259370. Now I'll wait until you get on another line and verify whatever, but I need that number now. And may I have your name please?"

There was a pause. "Mr. Hansen's cell phone number is 777-6895."

"Thank you."

It never failed. Ask a bureaucrat to take personal responsibility, they would crawl under the nearest rock. She dialed Hansen's number. It rang and rang. No help there.

At four, Rubinstein's kid Amelia made the rounds selling Girl Scout cookies. Sara ordered two boxes of the caramel fudge. At five, she saved her reports, shut down her machine, and packed up. Every Friday night for the past four months

she'd been volunteering at the Bowery Mission on the Bowery near French Park, ladling fish chowder to rows of foul-smelling orcs, many of whom were afraid to look directly at her for fear they'd self-combust. No one knew she was a cop. She didn't understand why she did it.

Yes she did. She had to make a contribution. Had to know she made a difference. She didn't have kids. The way things were going, she'd *never* have kids. At least, not until the *thing* left her. Nor did she often think about kids. But in the past few days, she *had* been thinking about kids, while berating herself for giving in to soggy middle-class pretensions.

Oh sure, marry the guy, settle down in suburbia with two point three kids and a Labrador retriever. Dave could take in swords and she could take in dry cleaning. Well, why not? Didn't he say he had a waiting list of several years? Obviously marriage material. But was she?

The other side of the equation: she ran screaming, firing over her shoulder, whenever the prospect of bourgeoisie family life raised its ugly head. Not Vince Pezzini's little girl! She wasn't cut out for housewifery. Sara had been born to adventure. Check and double check.

It was a relief to confront the bike which forced her to concentrate. She bungeed her leather bag to the back seat, jammed more gear in the tank bag, zipped her jacket and put on the half-face helmet. Half face was better, because you were right out there in the open with no intervening sheet of plexi. You could smell the city. Sometimes a good thing, sometimes not.

Fighting traffic with all the resources at her disposal, including the sidewalk, she clawed her way to the Mission by five thirty and wheeled her bike right in through the front door, past the lines of silent, gray men cradling smoldering butts, as if against a gale force wind.

“Well if it ain’t our own dark angel of mercy!” sang Father Heeber Finn, from nearby St. Benedict’s. Not a big church, but persistent. Father Finn had been administering to the bums since 1968. He’d nearly driven Sara out with his early entreaties for her to seek confession, but when he realized she was about to bolt, he clammed up. They had an unspoken understanding: he wouldn’t bug her about returning to the church and she would continue to assist him every Friday night.

She’d considered returning to the Church for an exorcism. She envisioned a day when she and the Witchblade no longer got along, like Scott Chalmers and his first three wives, and figured the only way to get rid of it would be a full-scale exorcism. Get the Man himself, the Pope. Donate the jewelry to the Church. What did they call it? The *Digitablum*? The Vatican had a file on the Witchblade that went back to the very dawn of the church.

“How ya doin’, Father. What’s for dinner?”

Father Finn worked the kitchen with four other volunteers, two from the church, a big Filipino kid whom he’d taken under his wing, and an ex-con and murderer named Scully who seldom spoke and was gentle as a summer breeze.

“Oh, and it’s a lord’s own supper I’ve cooked up with me own two hands...a hearty chicken and bean soup, plus baked potatoes, and four square yards of peach cobbler for dessert.”

“Bean soup, huh? Hope I’m outta here by the time they go to bed.”

“You will be, darlin’. You will be.”

Sara put on a white apron under which she pinned her badge and her gun. Those were regs. You wore the gun until you got home. For two hours she ladled food, carted pots back and forth, and washed dishes, unaware that every time she stepped out of the kitchen into the broad front room, she was

being observed through the misty window from across the street, where a tricked-out Celica was snug to the curb.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Tonight the *bruja* was going down. Lupe slunk low in the Celica's bucket seat, although she was invisible to the outside world through the tinted windows. She had the window open an inch to vent smoke from cigarettes. She was not alone. Two Tecolotes crouched in the car with her. Three more jammed in Tito's cat puke yellow Cavalier behind them. The past few days had been an exercise in patience, never Lupe's strong suit. She had surprised herself with her dedication. Getting rid of the *bruja* had come to dominate her life, even as she was repeatedly haunted with dreams of flashing swords and gouting blood. She would never be able to move ahead, never reclaim her man until the witch was dead.

Nor was it as easy as pulling a trigger. If it had been that easy, Bobby would have done it. Lupe had a gun, Bobby's nine, tucked beneath her seat. Estrella had told her that ordinary bullets would be useless against the witch, who had magical protection, and Lupe believed her. But on this night of the full moon, if the witch could be isolated among iron, she could be taken down by a determined pack.

Lupe had the full moon, the iron, and the pack. Anywhere on Manhattan you were surrounded by iron. You couldn't get away from it. And she had the pack, at last. Five of the toughest Tecolotes with hard-ons for the lady cop. Lupe

probably could have got them all just by showing them the witch's picture, and promising they could play with her before they killed her, but having a little insurance was always a plus. Jorge, damn him, had taught her that. So Lupe had told them how the witch had killed Bobby. Los Tecolotes were hungry for revenge.

"How we gon' get the bitch?" Benito rumbled from the back seat, cradling a Mac-10 in his lap like a puppy.

"Jes' wait. She leave the mission around eight-thirty. We'll run her off the road, grab her, take her to the warehouse. Then you boys gon' have some fun."

Chango, who'd been Bobby's second-in-command and sat in the shotgun seat, put his hand on Lupe's thigh. "Like to have some fun witchoo, Chiquita."

Lupe casually shoved her cigarette into the back of Chango's hand as if it were an ashtray.

"Hey!" he howled, snatching his hand back and sticking it in his mouth.

Lupe didn't even look at him. "Hesh up, Chango. You gon' make me put a curse on you."

Chango's eyes went wide and he bit down on his anger. Lupe smiled inwardly. Maybe she could get Estrella to teach her a few things. In the back seat, the crack pipe sounded like a bowl of Rice Crispies. That's right, *hijos*, Lupe thought. Crack it up. Get in a real sharp mood for the lady cop. It was the only way she had of ensuring they'd hang around for the task at hand. Los Tecolotes did not have long attention spans. In the rearview mirror, she saw the tell-tale glow of a turbo lighter. She phoned Tito on her cell phone. She could hear his cell phone beeping through the cracked window.

"Yeah?"

"Don't smoke it all up. You got to make it last."

"Don't worry, Lupe. We're makin' it last."

“I ain’t gonna take time go cop for you, you run out.”

“Don’t worry!”

Lupe hung up. At eight twenty-five, the witch rolled her motorcycle out the front door. Lupe could not deny a certain admiration for the witch. So young, so beautiful, a police woman, and she rode a motorcycle. A veritable litany of forbidden role models.

That, in itself, should have set the alarms off in Lupe’s head long before the witch fixed her sites on Lupe’s man. No woman could have all those things without paying a terrible price.

Lupe dialed Tito.

“I see her,” he answered.

“Okay. Let’s go. Ahmina wait for a chance, try and knock her off the bike. You guys be waitin’ to grab her.”

“Don’t hurt her,” Tito cautioned. “That’s our job.”

By the time Lupe had whipped into traffic, the lady cop was four car lengths ahead, not toward Brooklyn, but toward Ground Zero. Didn’t matter. This was New York. You could still knock a bitch off a motorcycle and bundle her into a car without intervention. That was one of the things that made New York great. Freedom!

“Step on it! Step on it!” Chango chanted.

“You’re losing her!” Benito said.

Lupe pulled the automatic transmission down a gear and stood on the gas. The tricked-out Celica shot forward with a chirp of its front tires, cutting off a Paki in a gypsy cab who leaned on his horn and invoked Allah against them. They got hung up at Civic Center by the usual four fire truck progression, sirens blaring, lights flashing.

It was no use. No matter how fast Lupe drove, she was no match for a motorcycle in Manhattan traffic. She could have been driving a Viper, same difference. There simply wasn’t

room to maneuver. She refused to admit defeat. The witch cop would not escape.

Lupe finally turned off Vessey toward Ground Zero, chained, roped, and stanchioned off due to massive construction. Hecht Gardens was taking place at the northeast corner. Lupe couldn't believe her luck as she drove by the massive chain link fence and spotted the blue and white motorcycle inside the gate, parked next to a house trailer that had been trucked in to serve as HQ.

The construction site was surrounded by an eight foot hurricane fence topped with concertina wire and no-man's land cordoned off with yellow sawhorses, like a giant prison camp. Lupe got on the phone to Tito.

"We're at Ground Zero. Don't go near the fence. Meet us round the corner at Maiden Lane. The bitch is here."

They rendezvoused in the lee of another construction site, parking on the curb next to a vast hole in the ground while traffic swirled past on one side. A big white wooden sign said, "Future Home of Pace-Hong Kong Bank/Mark Zingg Architect/Chalmers Construction Company." The worn curb was fenced off at both ends with plywood construction, but the wall had been torn down for some reason, allowing the cars to snug in. They gathered in the narrow strip between the illegally parked cars and the plywood wall with cut-outs to look at the hole. Chango wore black trou, black muscle shirt, hair net pinning back his obsidian curls. His shoes were the color of pure Peruvian flake. Tito, and Benito wore baggy trousers and muscle shirts, without Chango's panache. Sammy and Li'l Mack looked like a pair of dwarves who'd been dipped in horse glue and dragged through a rag factory.

Lupe fingered Chango, Tito, Sammy and Benito. "You guys gon' do the job. You my wolf pack, *malditos*. You gon' fuck that witch bitch up for me. Who got the bolt cutters?"

Sammy hefted the big clippers.

"You be sure you got them gloves on when you cut the cable, or you gonna turn into a chicken mcnugget."

"Hey!" Li'l Mack squawked. "What do I do?" The fourteen-year-old gang-banger was eager to get in on the action.

"You and me gon' drive the cars," Lupe said. "Can't leave 'em here. You do like I say, Li'l Mack, I get my sister Syreeta to pop your cherry."

They all laughed at Li'l Mack's virginity.

"Don't use guns unless you got to. We don't need the fuckin' cops."

Chango grabbed his crotch like Mike Tyson at a press conference. "She need to be healthy to taste my mighty cobra."

"What you waitin' for?"

Chango led his Tecolotes toward the construction site. He was six feet and two hundred and thirty pounds and carried an Uzi submachine gun with a twenty round magazine. He carried another magazine in the baggy pockets of his baggy jeans in case he found himself pinned down by a division of Marines. The rest of Los Tecolotes were jealous of the Uzi, which Chango had taken off a drunk Paddy Boy on St. Patrick's Day.

Benito had his MAC-10. Sammy and Tito had a pair of cheap revolvers.

Sara watched until they rounded the corner, then turned on Li'l Mack. "Whatchoo waitin' for, a sign from the Virgin Mary? Get in that piece of shit and drive."

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE
(Friday night)

When Sara arrived the front gate was open just wide enough to admit the bike. Figuring Sharpe had left it that way, she pulled into the lot, got off the bike, and shut the gate behind her without latching it. She wheeled the bike up to the house trailer, a big job, propped up on heavy metal braces and connected like an astronaut to a series of external tanks and outbuildings. Fat cables trundled across the lot in bundles. Stacks of treated lumber formed orderly ranks perpendicular to an enormous, multi-leveled excavation that was beginning to sprout steel support struts.

Sara went up the two plank on cinderblock steps to the trailer door and rang the buzzer. No response. "Sharpe!" she barked, trying the knob. It was open. She stepped into the construction trailer, an orderly office with banks of monitors, twelve screens covering various aspects of the site. Blueprints were taped to a drafting table, others rolled into tight cylinders and shoved in cubbyholes. A large bulletin board covered one wall and to which had been fixed work rosters, security rosters, and an architect's rendering of the finished Gardens, reminding Sara of an optimist-hued spread from Popular Mechanics circa 1980 describing a city of the future.

The lights went out, the screens went blank. Sara reached

for the phone on the desk, but that too was dead. She looked out through one begrimed window at Manhattan, glowing from a million orifices. Only power to the construction site had been cut.

Sara moved instinctively away from the door and unclipped her stainless steel short nose .357 mag, Smith & Wessen K frame round butt. The boys had been trying to talk her into a Glock nine for years, but it didn't have a round butt.

Moving fast and low, Sara pushed the door open with a T-square. The area immediately in front of the trailer appeared empty. She wasted no time, slipping low out the door and over the side of the steps before anyone had a chance to draw a bead. It looked nice and dark under the trailer so she rolled beneath its mass, retreated to the darkest corner and turned her attention to the yard. At first there was no sign. She blinked rapidly, willing her eyesight to adjust to the dark. Within a second, it was so. Her night sight had increased uncannily since acquiring the Witchblade.

She wished she knew where the transfer box was, she could gauge where they were coming from. A pair of legs ending in blindingly white cross-trainers padded lightly into the yard from the direction of the front gate. That's it—just the shoes, like some kind of mime act. She saw the rest of them trailing tentatively behind like a rat pack in the jungle.

Some kind of gang. Were these the ones responsible for the vandalism? Where was Sharpe? One of them passed through a beam of light and she saw the gun. As far as Sara knew, eco-terrorists didn't carry weapons. Guns were not healthy for children and other living things. These guys didn't look like greenies, either. They looked like a PR street gang, far from their turf.

She counted three. She couldn't see if they were all armed, but she had to assume they were. Where was Sharpe? She had

no intention of drawing down on three armed gang-bangers. She slithered out the back of the trailer and stood in a narrow corridor formed by the trailer and a seven foot stack of steel girders. If she could get atop the girders, she'd be in a good position to see without being seen. She could hear them spreading out now, despite their clumsy attempts at concealment. She had to get some altitude now, before they separated too far from each other.

Spying an empty five gallon laminex container, she jammed her gun in its holster, turned the pal upside down and used it as a stool to get a leg up. As she reached for the top girder, the Witchblade overwhelmed her right hand with a faint, crystalline ping. The decorative metallic wrist band had grown almost instantly to encase her right hand and forearm, the preternatural armor an exotic mix of segmented metallic bands and spines with the large red stone at the posterior.

"Whazzat," said an adenoidal voice behind her.

Sara instinctively lashed out with her left foot, cocking it high and jamming it back into the neck of a fourth gang-banger who had somehow managed to get the drop on her. Her adrenalin-fueled kick slammed the punk so hard up against the trailer his head bounced like a speed bag. A piece of heavy metal fell and clattered under the trailer. The punk fell to his knees choking.

Tough shit, Sara thought, pulling out a pair of handcuffs. Before she had a chance to handcuff the punk to the trailer, gang-bangers appeared at both ends of the narrow corridor.

"There she is!"

"Rush her!"

Sara dropped and rolled, leaving the one she'd struck retching on his knees. She rolled under the trailer, scrambled out and took off toward the vast pit that dominated the construction site. Adjacent to the pit a Manitex Crane rose

hundreds of feet into the sky like some huge steel gallows. A series of steel barriers surrounded the crane's broad stance, hydraulic pistons resting on cracked concrete. The top of the crane hovered over the huge pit, like something out of Lord of the Rings, from which the construction scaffolding had already begun to sprout.

A series of flashes opened up to her right, from atop the very pile of girders she'd set out to climb. A bullet whizzed by her ear. Several struck the ground and kawanged off with a whine. New York surged and pumped around them, drowning the sound of individual gunfire. Sara had no choice but to run for the protection of the steel structure protecting the tower's spine and ladder. She began to climb, the Witchblade gripping each rung with a clang, fingers folding into an iron grip. She knew that if she closed her hand around the steel and threw the rest of herself off, she would just hang there, unable to let go, until she took the weight off her hand.

Where was Sharpe?

They were closing in now from three directions, squeezing off shots in her direction. It had been a mistake to gain altitude, now they could shoot at her without risk of hitting each other. She thought of going back down, but that would only bring her within their range. They were closing in too fast.

The Witchblade yanked her hand around in a tight little arc into a stunning collision with a bullet. No. She would not get hit. The Witchblade would not permit it. But could even the Witchblade protect her from three different shooters coming from three different directions? She looked up. The supports seemed to stretch into infinity. Someone let loose with a short burst of automatic weapons fire and the Witchblade absorbed the blast with a bone-jarring clatter that traveled up her arm and left her shoulder momentarily numb. The gauntleted hand reached of its own accord for the next rung. She had no choice

but to climb.

She saw the one with the auto now, it was Twinkle Toes, in his pure white sneakers. If he got directly beneath her, all he had to do was stick the gun into the shaft and fire straight up. Of course all she had to do was fire straight down. Bracing herself on the ladder with one foot and an elbow, she drew her magnum, and fired a round straight down. Give 'em something to think about. She thought about pulling her cell, but now they stood in a tight little cluster around the base of the crane discussing what to do.

“Ey Chiquita,” one of them said in a Speedy Gonzalez voice. “You want to parrrrty? We gon’ have a little picnic witchoo.”

“Up there or down here,” another cooed softly. “Don’t matter to us.”

They began to climb, outside the triangulated central support. Smart. Made them tough to spot, hard to shoot, if they didn’t lose their nerve. Sara climbed, barely staying ahead of them. No one spoke. She could hear them breathing heavily as they worked, the occasional clang of metal against metal. At one point they stopped. Looking down, Sara saw the flare of a turbo lighter, heard the faint tinkle of burning crack. The pause that refreshes. They were at least a hundred and fifty feet up now, twenty feet beneath the gondola, which hung to one side and just beneath the horizontal cross member, stretching far out over the pit.

Where was Sharpe? Had this group somehow managed to kill him? Inconceivable. They were just a bunch of low-life gang-bangers! But they had the drop on her. They must have been following her. But why? She flashed on Jorge, but her instincts told her he was okay. What about Lupe then? Had Sara been negligent in not taking the girl more seriously?

Could be, she decided. She climbed the twenty feet to the

base of the gondola, up onto the tiny steel platform. The door was locked. Locked! Who would lock such a place, two hundred feet in the air? Sara had no choice but to scramble up into the tiny crow's nest clinging to the back of the control gondola. From here, she could see down one side of the pillar, but she couldn't see her pursuers. She heard voices directly beneath her feet—they were clinging to the underside of the gondola.

Crouching, she drew her pistol. "Boys," she said clearly. "I'm a New York City police officer and I'm armed. You have two choices. You can turn around and head down, or you can stick your snouts up over the rim and have me blow them off."

"Tough talk from the lady witch," a basso profundo rumbled from directly beneath. "We get done witchoo, won't be nothin' left but your badge."

Activity from the other side of the gondola. While Deep Voice distracted her, he'd sent one of his wolves up to take her by surprise. She was in a pickle. They were just waiting for her to commit to one of her attackers before another swarmed her from behind. Evidently they were so high on crack they no longer cared whether they soared, got shot, or did the dirty deed.

The kid was coming over the top. He'd scrambled up past the gondola and stepped out onto the steel roof, slithering on his belly, thrusting his gun in front of him. Must have picked up his ninja technique from a Michael Dudikoff movie, Sara thought, listening to his inept scraping. She waited until he thrust the gun over the roof, grabbed it in both hands, her left thumb on the cool blue metal of the gauntlet, braced a leg against the wall and heaved.

The kid sailed out over the pit like a Frisbee. He screamed all the way down, struck with the sound of an ax hitting a melon. She'd only meant to throw him to the floor of the

platform, but the Witchblade had had other ideas.

“Jesus!” a voice exclaimed from below. “She fuckin’ killed Tito!”

“Damn you!” she hissed. A hand reached for her pistol. Twisting, she punched the gang-banger flush in the face with her gauntleted right hand. His nose dissolved in a mist of red, but reeling back, he’d managed to snag the magnum and flip it over his head so that it sailed out over the pit.

Next to losing your badge, losing your gun is the worst that can happen. Thus spake Vincent. No, Pop, she thought. There’s worse. There were three of them now swarming the tiny platform, holding her down.

“Get her!” said Twinkle Toes, reaching for her throat, a coyote grin on his face. One grabbed her left leg. Another grabbed her right. The Witchblade went to work, snapping into the short one’s crotch. His mouth made a perfect oval beneath a hairline mustache as he reeled back to the limits of the platform, gasping for air. She shot out her left leg catching another in the thigh, sending him skidding back. Now she was wrestling with Twinkle Toes, who’d moved to straddle her. Saliva dripped from his pronounced canines. Sara bucked with all her might and threw him off. She scrambled free, sinking the Witchblade into Hairline Mustache’s thigh like a tiger claw. Metal flanges hooked deeply into his flesh as she literally clawed her way over him to the gondola’s roof.

From here, she could either retreat to the counterweight, a distance of some thirty feet, or head out over the pit, where the crane did its lifting. The massive horizontal girder was triangulated with the flat plane on top. The Witchblade wanted to stay and fight. It urged her on, trying to goad her back toward the cupola, where the three survivors were checking their actions and plotting. She could hear them discussing her clearly.

"She's a fuckin' witch, Chango. Choo see what she did to Tito?"

"She got lucky...be tappin' that sweet ass soon enough."

"I'm bleedin', you guys. What was that?"

"Put a rag on it. Me and Benito'll drag her back here. The bitch owes you a blow job, at least."

"You go on and run, Chiquita! You runnin' out of room!"

The strange thing was, they didn't scare her. Not in the slightest. Height scared her. Looking down, the bottom of the pit was lost in shadow, far beneath ground level. It was probably a three hundred foot drop. She crouched inside the girder thirty feet out, another fifty to the end.

Could Sharpe have set her up? Could he have somehow learned that she'd burgled him, that she was on to him, and lured her down here to get snuffed? If so, why not do it himself? Sharpe was a hands-on guy. Could this wolf pack have taken him down? That didn't make sense either. If they'd taken care of Sharpe, they would have already been at the site when she got there. But they weren't. They'd followed her in.

The tell-tale glow of a lighter flared on the far side of the gondola. That's right, boys. Crank yourselves up. A moment later, a silhouette entered the triangulated section of the beam, followed shortly by another.

"Benito, get up on top. We'll catch her between us."

"What we gon' do with our guns?" one of them asked softly.

"Leave 'em. She ain't got one either."

At least they were down to two. They had no fear. They would have made great high iron workers. The lesser of the two boosted himself up to balance precariously atop the giant horizontal girder while the leader, Twinkle Toes, slowly advanced, wolf grin dripping.

"I thought crack made you paranoid," Sara said

conversationally.

“Nah, we used to it. Getchoo high, if you like.”

“No thanks. I’m high enough.” She took out her cellphone, the size of hotel soap, and flipped it open. It was as dead as John Kerry’s Presidential aspirations. She faked it.

“Dispatch, this is Detective Pezzini, on the crane at Hecht Gardens. I need back-up and lots of it. Seem to be a bunch of gang-bangers...just a minute.” Holding the dead phone to one side she called out to her pursuers, watching with an uneasy mix of humor and apprehension.

“Boys, what gang are you with?”

“We the Brooklyn Tecolotes, *guapa*,” the kid on top sang with pride. Show and tell time.

Sara spoke into the phone. “You hear that? Yeah. Thank you.” She folded the plastic clam and slipped it in her pocket. “They’re on the way. You got maybe five minutes to get out of here.”

The two looked at each other, grinning like mongrels at road kill. Twinkle Toes began crab-walking her way. “Cops don’t use cell phones, *guapa*.”

“Everybody uses cell phones, Pancho. Bet you got one.”

“Why you call me Pancho? My name is Chango.”

Now the one on top had begun to creep forward. Sara glanced back. She was about forty feet from the tip of the crane, directly above the rolling lift unit or skyhook. She couldn’t fly. She didn’t know what the Witchblade could do if she took a diver. She’d never tested it that way. She had a feeling it wasn’t designed for high-altitude bail-outs.

They were so close now she could smell Chango’s fruity cologne and the skinny one’s rank body odor. “Benito, see if choo can grab her hair. I’ll get her around the waist, we’ll drag her back to that platform where we can lay ‘er out.”

Benito inched forward on all-fours like a dog crossing a

frozen pond. "Cool."

Sara was limited. She had only a single rail on which to stand, maintaining her balance by gripping the side supports which ran the length of the crane. She wished she hadn't stopped carrying mace. The Witchblade played for keeps, and would probably kill these creeps if it went into action.

Benito paused about six feet away. "What's that on her hand?"

"Whatchoo got on your hand, *guapa*?"

"Just a glove, boys, like Michael Jackson. For shaking hands. Who wants to be first?"

"I do," Chango grunted, lunging forward, head down, reaching for her waist. Her right hand lashed out in a ridge strike, catching him on his cheekbone and slamming his head to one side. Chango reeled back from the blow, gripping a rail with one hand and touching his bruised face with the other. He spit out a tooth.

"That's all right, *guapa*." Blood trickled from his mouth. "You just make me harder."

The one on top got down on his belly and reached for her hair. The Witchblade shot up, index finger poking through the kid's thorax like a leather punch, hooked around a floating rib, and yanked it loose like a car door handle. The kid gave a little sigh and slumped. Blood poured from the hole in his torso as from a faucet.

Chango got his head in her stomach and his arms around her waist and bulled her down on the single horizontal beam. The Witchblade dug for his eye with a thumb. Chango sprang back, shoving her violently and she felt her body slip off the edge of the beam, heels bump, and as she flew toward the ground, her last thought was, why doesn't the Witchblade do something?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The change was instantaneous. One moment she was plunging through the air seeing faint stars against city glare, the next, the Witchblade had expanded to enclose her entire body in a multi-faceted carapace with a series of extensions, like dogwood petals, facing the earth. It sprouted from her skin like dandelion spores. Her way too expensive Prada jeans ripped. Her leather jacket shredded. Sara instinctively twisted, watching the great void rush to her face. The dogwood petals swung around and covered her front, extending, extending...

The petals collapsed. She struck with a sense of rapid deceleration followed by an elastic rebound. She bounced, spinning gracefully through the air, the dogwood petals sprouting again and dancing around her body so that they always faced the earth. The second arc ended on a pile of steel girders which would have cruelly broken an unprotected body. The series of petals formed a heavy cilia which absorbed the collision and pushed away, not so spectacularly this time. She tucked into a roll and landed lightly on her feet, breathing hard.

"Thank you!" she blurted. She was standing in the basin of the excavation, some thirty feet below street level, surrounded by steel and concrete infrastructure, warm breeze chilling her newly exposed body. The Witchblade had done a sushi chef on her clothes. She now wore her Skechers, white low rise hipster

briefs, a thin strand of denim around her waist, her leather belt with badge, and a sports bra which she had had the good sense to don earlier, expecting action. The chill in the air was evident. The corners of the huge excavation receded into blackness. Looking up, she saw the outline of the crane stark against the city lights. Blood dribbled at her feet. Something grew out of the sky, a mote expanding to fill her vision. She jerked back just in time to avoid being struck by a falling body.

The wiry one, Benito, with the hole in his ribs. A shudder rippled through her as she recalled the feeling of her finger poking through his side.

“Look out!” someone shouted from atop the crane. Her right hand jerked out, grabbed the ridge of a steel beam, and yanked her out from under a heavy piece of meat as it whipped by, grazing her cheek with blood. She stared down. The head and one shoulder of her primary assailant. She stared, trying to make sense of what she saw. Twinkle Toes had been cleaved in two as neatly as a piece of prime porterhouse at the hands of a butcher. As she stared in horror at the cross-section of anatomy, dark organs oozing black, the other half dropped, one leg bouncing like a chorus line. The two parts of Chango lay together like the aftermath of a train wreck.

Sara looked up. Something glinted in the city light. A sword. A tiny figure held on to the girder with one hand and looked down.

“Sara! Oh my god.”

Sharpe. Where had he come from? He could not possibly have seen what happened to her, and had to assume she was dead. The construction site stank of set-up. If Sharpe had been there all along, why hadn't he come to her aid before this? Unless he wanted her dead. For whose benefit was he pretending remorse?

She could have said something. She could have called out

to him, Sharpe, I'm all right. She held her tongue, wanting to see how he'd react to her amazing disappearing body. Where had Sharpe come from? Where had that sword come from? What was he doing, moonlighting as a security officer, carrying a samurai sword? Was he nuts? Was he a psycho killer? She could hear him on his cell phone calling for an ambulance.

As Sharpe turned and headed for the vertical strut, a vehicle squealed its tires.

Sara stared at the neatly severed corpse and shuddered. That certainly answered one question. Was Sharpe capable of cleaving a man in two? He'd just done it. Not even the isthmus of the neck. Straight across the continent, Portland to Miami. She could hear him descending the ladder with an occasional clank as his hardware hit the steel. She burrowed back into an alcove formed by the juxtaposition of the steel beams and an immense spool of wire.

Sharpe appeared at the edge of the excavation, looking for a way down. He spotted a series of ladders descending in three stages, with scaffolding at the intervals, and came quickly down, something long, dark, and narrow strapped to his back. When he reached the bottom, he turned on a flashlight and strode swiftly, lightly to where the severed corpse lay. He shined the flashlight all around, unconcerned with his handiwork. The beam touched briefly on a third body, the one the Witchblade had hurtled to the ground.

No. Not the Witchblade. Sara and the Witchblade.

"Sara?" he said tentatively.

"Behind you."

He whirled, keeping the light low until it found her feet. "Thank God! I'm so sorry...this is all my fault. I saw you fall..."

"I need clothes."

The flashlight lingered a second on Sara's exquisite form,

then switched off. "Right. Wait here a minute."

Sharpe scrambled up the scaffolding like a lemur, returning minutes later with a soft cotton sweatshirt and sweatpants, intended for a much bigger person. Sara put them on and emerged resembling a moving pile of laundry.

"Where were you while those ebolas were chasing me up the crane?"

"I was in the control booth."

"Then why in heaven's name didn't you do something?"

"I wasn't conscious."

"You weren't conscious?"

"I know how that must sound. Listen, it's a long story. I called you down here because I learned something that may be pertinent to your investigation. I am so sorry about what happened...listen, I have a problem. I had a blackout. I've been suffering from blackouts off and on, for about a year now."

"Excuse me?"

"Periods of time I can't account for. It doesn't happen often. I should probably see a doctor or something, but I don't want to get stuck at a desk."

"Stuck at a desk? Man, you're lucky you're not in Bellevue! How did you ever get by the screening board?"

"You know, they were so desperate for new blood after the towers, and let's face it. I have impressive credentials. My problem has never before interfered with my job. This is the first time, and I'm so sorry."

"Derek, you've got a lot of explaining to do. You cut that kid in half like a breakfast sausage. You think that doesn't make you a suspect? What are you doing with that thing, anyway?"

They could hear the sirens rising in the distance. When you didn't hear sirens, that was a rarity.

"I'll tell you. What are you going to say happened?"

"Exactly what happened."

Sharpe gestured to her hand. "Including that?"

Sara looked down and was surprised to see her right hand still enclosed in the spiny alien gauntlet. *Go away*, she willed. It obediently morphed into the simple bracelet. Sharpe stared.

"I didn't see that."

"No you didn't."

"You going to tell me how you survived that fall?"

"Maybe."

"Okay, mutual defense pact." He pointed up. "You see that guy wire, running between the steel frame and the edge of the pit? That's how the gang-banger got cut in two. And as to how you survived the fall, you see that pile of dirt?" He gestured to a mound of freshly excavated earth the size of a small house.

Sara nodded tersely.

The ambulance arrived accompanied by a squad car. Sharpe shined his flashlight up at them and waved. "Down here!"

Five minutes later, two EMTs with a folding stretcher reached the bottom, followed by two uniformed cops from the nineteenth. When they reached Sharpe, he no longer had the sword. One cop took Sharpe aside. The other questioned Sara. She'd seen him before—his name was O'Malley and he was nearing the end of his twenty-year stretch. Sara told her story, omitting the Witchblade.

"I lost my grip. Fortunately, I landed on that pile of dirt and rolled down the side. It broke my fall."

O'Malley looked from Sara to the huge mound and back. "You're the freak detective."

"I'm just unlucky. Or maybe I'm lucky. One or the other."

"And how'd this boyo get cleaved in two like a piece of

pork loin?"

"He fell on a guy wire."

O'Malley followed her finger, shone a light on the taut cable. "Jaysus, Mary and Joseph. Ain't this one for the books."

It would never stand up to good police work. A good cop would haul the wire down and try to match DNA samples. But there were no DNA samples on the cable, because Chango had never touched it. Fortunately, the cable was close enough to where the kid had landed as to be plausible. Given a choice, New York cops did not want to believe in Godzilla, the Tooth Fairy, or leprechauns. Okay, maybe leprechauns. By providing a plausible scenario, Sharpe had done their work for them. They weren't going to push themselves out of shape to prove the deaths of a handful of miserable gang-bangers was anything but divine justice.

Benito was easily explained. He'd landed on a rebar mounted in the concrete foundation. More cops and techs began to arrive. Four of them climbed the crane tower with a portable stretcher into which they strapped the hapless Sammy, who was babbling for crack. As a witness, he was in no position to contradict anything Sara or Sharpe had said. He'd spent the fight writhing on the floor of the platform.

Finally they were done. It was half past ten. Leaving her motorcycle locked to the command trailer's butane tank, she accompanied Sharpe across the street to a Chock Full 'O' Nuts where they got coffee and sat opposite each other in the church pew booth.

Sara regarded the tall cop opposite. He had to sit sideways to get his legs under the table. He looked like a fashion model. He suffered from black-outs, as if his body were being borrowed.

"Where's your sword?"

"How'd you survive that fall?"

Sara smacked her fist on the table. Sharpe looked down at the gaudy bracelet. Sara tapped it with her left index finger. "See this? You hear funny stories about me when you got here? That I'm a freak magnet? It's because of this thing."

"What is it?"

"That is a really good question. Some kind of alien/biotech/magic/parasite that's invaded my body. No, parasite isn't the right word. symbiote. I call it the Witchblade. As far as I know it predates recorded history. It's sort of a cross between a Swiss Army knife, and the bad terminator from T2."

Sharpe stared at the bracelet. Gently, he extended a finger and touched it, leaving a faint moist outline that disappeared as they watched. "Why do you call it the Witchblade?"

"That's what it asked to be called."

Their eyes met. Sara noticed that Sharpe's were an unusual hazel. "It speaks to you?"

"Sometimes."

"How did you get it?"

"You remember Kenneth Irons, the auction he tried to hold a couple years ago at the Rialto?"

"I was in Yokohama at the time, but I think I read something about it. Big gangland slaying..."

"Yup. I was there, undercover. Irons was auctioning off this artifact which allegedly conferred invulnerability on the wearer, but he didn't know the damned thing had a mind of its own. The stakeout went south, big time. My partner, Michael Yee, and I were both shot. I was dying. The Witchblade came to me. It chose me. It saved my life, but I wasn't able to save Yee."

"Jesus Christ", Sharp whispered eyes wide.

"So, you always moonlight with a sword?"

"Security is mostly long stretches of inactivity. I like to work out on my own. I practice kendo and iaido, you know."

"I saw you do a number on Bratten the other night."

"You were there?"

"Why'd you call me down here, Derek?"

"Do you know anything about swords?"

Do you? She refrained from blinking. "A little."

"I've always been fascinated with them. You know Adrian Hecht has been searching for a particular sword."

"A Muramasa."

Sharpe's eyebrows did a complex *pas de deux*. "This is a huge deal in the world of collectors. Most famous sword maker in history! Most experts think the Muramasa of the 1300's never existed. They think he was a mistake made by early sword book writers in the 1500's since there are none of his blades existent today. For sword people, proving he existed by finding his greatest sword would be like a UFO nut finding the Roswell spaceship in a government warehouse somewhere. It would be about as big a deal as you could have short of aliens landing on the White House lawn."

"Both Bachman and Chalmers claimed to have documented Muramasas in their collections."

"Those are later Muramasas. The thief can't tell the difference until he has the sword in his hands. The sword Hecht seeks is called *Skyroot*, and was made for a rogue samurai named Udo."

"I'm familiar with Udo."

Sharpe regarded her with hooded eyes. "You have done your homework."

"It's my case."

"I took this after-hours gig because I think Hecht's the samurai killer."

"I thought of that myself, but come on. The guy's a bazillionaire. Why would he get his own hands dirty? He could snap his fingers and have a dozen hit men at his beck and

call.”

“Hecht’s not a gangster! He doesn’t know those people. But he is ruthless, and totally obsessed with acquiring Sky Root. Well guess what? The reason I asked you to meet me was to tell you that he’s got it. It arrived two nights ago and he’s showing it at his party next week.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

"How do you know this?"

"I got a snitch working Newark International. Thursday morning, around two a.m., Hecht's private 747 touched down. They had to clear the sword through customs. It was appraised by Hon'ami Kozan, and valued at three point six million dollars. Of course that is a very conservative estimate. It is the first Muramasa from that period the Hon'amis have recognized. This is a huge event in the world of swords and collectors, and hasn't officially been announced. That's what the party's all about. There will be people from the Smithsonian and Vanity Fair. Hecht likes to see his photo in the society rags."

Sharpe talked about the sword with a religious fervor. His eyes blazed. He was a Believer. Did he want the sword for himself, or was he merely excited at the magnitude of the find? She wanted to trust him. But she had seen too much.

"Is that all you're going to say? You've got a snitch?"

He nodded grimly.

"Derek, may I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

"Do you collect swords?"

He gave her a funny look, like he'd just stepped on an egg. "I have a few swords. Got 'em in Japan. You knew I was a

Nipponophile. Why?"

"You're aware of the legend surrounding Muramasa's final sword, Sky Root?"

Sharpe's brow furrowed into a map of Mississippi delta. "What do you mean?"

Was he faking, or did he know? The Witchblade was no help. Sara felt a flash of rage. What good was it? She hadn't asked for it. If it would function as a lie detector or telepathy advice, that would be helpful. But no. It had its own agenda.

"Udo! The legends suggest his restless spirit haunts the earth, searching for his lost sword."

Sharpe stared at her for a minute, forehead warping into eagle wings. "So?"

"So you've been having black-outs. Periods where you can't account for time. Aside from the threat this poses to your work, don't you think this might indicate a deeper, personal crisis?"

They stared intently at each other in long silence.

"Brain tumor?"

She didn't reply.

"Possession?" Sharpe whispered.

Sara shrugged. "I've seen a lot of weird stuff. I've learned not to discount the so-called supernatural."

"You think the reason I black out is because I'm being possessed by a ghost samurai?"

"For awhile I thought the killer was trying to hide the real target, Chalmers. But now I'm not so sure. Chalmers received several threatening e-mails from someone calling himself *Kagemusha*, because Chalmers beat him out in an online auction."

"Shadow warrior."

"What did you think when you cut that punk in two? Were you thinking?"

Sharpe rubbed his forehead with his knuckles. "When I came to in the control booth, you were already out at the end of the crane, those two scumbags reaching for you. I remember running out on the crane..."

Sara recalled the fight they'd had on the gondola. Would have been difficult for an ordinary man to sleep through that. But nothing about Sharpe was ordinary.

"Derek, if you killed those men under some outside influence, we need to find out. *You* need to find out. If you're a man, you'll turn yourself in and ask for a complete psychological evaluation. We can even contact the parapsychology department at Columbia?"

"I can't believe we're having this conversation."

"I just hope you'll remember."

"I'll remember."

"Why did you conceal the fact you're a former SEAL?"

"That's classified."

"Come on, Derek."

"Seriously. I know how this must look, but I'm trying to lead a normal life. I was involved in some highly classified missions in the East, and one of the conditions of my release was that I not talk about my years in the military."

"I can check that easily enough. You need to take a leave of absence."

Beat. "You're right. I will, as soon as Hecht shows the sword."

"You need to take a leave of absence now."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

He gritted his teeth. "Because I have to see the sword."

"Is this Derek talking, or Udo?"

A look of immense confusion came over his face. A yellow gleam of fear crept into his eyes like a distant sun. "I don't

know.”

“It’s okay to admit it.”

“I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’ve always been in control.”

“I know how scary that can feel. You need to see a shrink.”

“I know.”

“Promise you’ll get help.”

“I promise. Listen. I swear to you, I didn’t murder Bachman or Chalmers! Just let me stay on the job through the Grand Opening.”

“Derek, I’ll have to think about it. But I promise you I won’t do anything before telling you first.”

“Fair enough.”

It was almost one by the time Sara arrived home. She parked the bike, strolled across the busy avenue, and let herself into her apartment. Shmendrick scolded her until she picked him up and took him to bed with her, purring loudly. She needed a séance, with or without Sharpe’s cooperation. Sara knew of numerous psychics in and around the city, mostly humbugs, a few not. In the morning, she’d see about contacting someone.

She slept until eleven, rolled out of bed, showered and shaved her legs. Big day! The mayor’s reception was that evening. She pushed it out of her mind. Derek Sharpe was a ticking time bomb. She phoned Siry at his home in Queens.

“Joe, it’s Sara. Can I come over? I need to talk to you.”

“What the hell, hey. It’s a zoo here anyway. My brother and his family are here. Come on around back.”

Siry’s house in Rego Park was a white clapboard two-story job with Amityville windows. Fifty feet of crabgrass ground with picket fence was girdled round. A place for little Joe to play, a port for Siry’s Chevrolet. It was just past one when Sara arrived. She left her bike in the driveway between a Chevy

Suburban and a Subaru with Connecticut plates. In the back yard, four adults were seated around a picnic table while four kids raced pell-mell, pausing to douse each other with super-soakers. Joe's kids were grown up. These had to be his nieces and nephews.

Siry's wife Dalia noticed Sara first, rose to greet her with a smile. "Hello, Sara. Would you like a beer?"

"Okay."

Siry introduced her to his brother Dave, and Dave's wife Ruth. Sara accepted a beer and she and Siry walked around the side of the house, through the hinged gate, to the front yard, where they sat on the stoop, watching kids swoop up and down 243rd Street on their skateboards, in-lines, and Razors. One quaint candidate for the Society For Creative Anachronism even rode a bicycle.

"I heard about your set-to last night at Hecht Gardens. What the heck was that all about?"

She told him, omitting her knowledge of the sword's ancient history. Siry had little use for the supernatural, despite, or perhaps because of, Sara's previous cases.

"You think Sharpe is the samurai killer? Thanks for letting me know. What happens if I reach out to him? Is he gonna cooperate? Or is he gonna go nuts and chop down my guys?"

"I don't know."

"All right. I'm putting Sharpe on administrative leave."

"You do that, he'll know I talked. Internal Affairs will get involved."

"Well Sara, I don't see where you've left me much choice. You come to me with loads of circumstantial evidence, then last night Sharpe asks you to meet him, he doesn't show, four gang-bangers do and you're nearly killed. When he does show, he acts like some kind of nut instead of a cop. Any rookie can put the lie to your story about how a guy wire cut that kid in two.

Something doesn't add up here. Something you're not telling me."

Sara experienced a sinking sensation, her heart being sucked toward the center of the earth like a pneumatically-propelled drive-up bank capsule. She liked Sharpe. He would know instantly that the reason he was being placed on administrative leave was because Sara had talked.

A mad M80 went off in her skull, aimed at Sharpe for putting her in this situation. He was a cop! He knew what the job entailed. It was he who'd placed her in this untenable situation through his bizarre behavior.

"Say something. You're scaring me." Siry's voice seemed to come from far away.

Sara blinked. "What?"

"You got that look on your face, like Bhodidharma at the wall."

"Joe. If Sharpe has mental problems, this could push him over the edge."

"Yeah, so I have to detail two plain clothes to follow him, and I ain't got 'em. I'm going to have to put in a special request to One Police Plaza, they're gonna want to know why..."

"Joe. Tell them you're closing in on Chalmers' killer. That'll give you the cover you need."

An expression of enlightenment slowly settled onto Siry's heavy features. "That's right! Now my only problem is keeping this away from the press. That's all the department needs. Samurai killer exposed as cop. That'll finish the job Sharpton started."

"I'd say that's the least of your worries."

"That's because you're not chief. You going to this thing at Gracie Mansion tonight?"

"Yeah."

"I'd tell you how to behave, except I think you know more

about it than me. Have a good time and don't piss on or piss off the mayor."

"One more thing."

Siry slapped a hand over his face and dragged. "What?"

"Maybe we should alert Hecht he could be in danger."

"I'll take care of it."

"Thanks, Joe."

Two teen-age boys watched with a mixture of awe and admiration as she strapped on her beanie helmet and took off. She ran the tach up to nine, dropped the clutch, and did a wheelie. Something to remember for the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lupe watched dumbfounded as the witch made mincemeat of her Tecolotes. Confident that this time, between Estrella's efforts and her own hard work revving up the troops, she'd pulled up in front of the gates and parked. She'd seen her Tecolotes get the drop on the bitch, close in on her and then, what was that? Suddenly the witch was climbing the crane. Her boys followed like rhesus monkeys after an ovulating female, but a funny thing happened once they reached the cross-bar. One by one, the witch/bitch/cop picked them off, until only Chango and Benito were left.

Then, just as Chango and Benito were about to sink their meat hooks into the witch/bitch/cop, something happened, too far away to see. The witch fell, turned into a Christmas tree ornament, and bounced. She summoned her familiar, an eight foot demon who pitched Benito off and cut Chango in two with a glittering blur.

As the demon descended the crane, Lupe floored it, leaving a four-foot streak of rubber and a fairly reliable tire track and car signature for the cops. She was fearful and furious. Fearful that the witch/bitch/cop would somehow divine her identity, if she hadn't already done so, and come after her. Furious at her failure to put the bitch away, after so much effort. Furious with Estrella for her impotency. Furious with her Tecolotes. Furious

with Jorge for putting her in this situation in the first place.

It was like she didn't know him any more. The witch had him under her spell. He was obsessed with good deeds, reading up on his karma, practically manhandling little old ladies across the street. Quoting Jesus, Martin Luther, and Martin Luther King Jr. It was enough to make Lupe sick.

But if they thought Mrs. Gutierrez' little girl Lupe was going to fold her wings and crawl back into the nest, they were mistaken. There was more than one way to skin a cat. By now, it had become not so much a matter of jealousy as a matter of honor. Jorge was ruined for Lupe anyway. Last night she'd practically begged him to go after the chain around the neck of a woman coming out of a green grocer's on West 175th, and he'd just laughed.

"Jorge don't play that game no more."

And she'd said, "You dumb greaser. You think this gon' get you in that lady cop's pants?"

She'd half-hoped he'd slap her. He just looked at her funny and walked away.

To hell with Jorge. If he wasn't going to love her any more, she may as well get rid of two birds with one stone. Jorge and the lady cop. She drove erratically across the Brooklyn Bridge, pulling over once at Cadman Plaza to toke up from her crack pipe. When she arrived at St. Patrick's, vespers was still going on and she had to thread her way through a pile of vehicles to make it back into the church's tiny, crowded lot, where there was just room to park the Celica. She sat in the car lot for a minute, shielded by a van belonging to the Archdiocese of New York, and toked up again. She examined her crack stash—enough to get her through the night, if she didn't want to come down.

And she didn't. She nurtured her rage from a tiny spark into a devouring blaze. She reached beneath the seat and

seized the pistol Bobby had left her, tucked it in her Power Puff Girls' backpack, and headed for home.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN
(Saturday)

Sara needed a psychic. With all its powers, she wondered why the Witchblade wouldn't pitch in. There were limits to its powers. It certainly didn't do readings, or contact spirits from the netherworld. Sara phoned Brooklyn Vice, spoke to a bunko expert named Palmer, and it was Palmer who told her about the witch lady Estrella who lived down by the tracks.

After leaving Joe's house, Sara headed for the switching yard that cut Brooklyn off from the waterfront at Map Street, using her badge to get by security at the freight-loading gate. A squat black security guard gripping the Daily News in a khaki Blane's uniform with Hawkins on the tag accosted her as she chained her bike to the hurricane fence surrounding a switching station.

"What do you think you're doing?"

She flashed the badge.

The guard shook the newspaper at her. "I know you. You're the freak detective. That vampire cult!"

"That's me, Mr. Hawkins," she said with a somewhat fatigued smile. "And that wasn't an actual cult, just one idiot with a webpage and delusions of grandeur. Right now I'm looking for Estrella."

"Shoulda figured. You want the witch. She's down there a

quarter mile in an old switching shack surrounded by hex signs, next to the Con-Ed box. She's hard to miss. What do you want with her? We always figured she was the bunk, but we let her stay 'cause she discourages taggers. Scares 'em shitless."

"Thank you, Mr. Hawkins."

"Anything I can do, here I am."

Sara set off through the freight yard, walking sometimes on the dull nickel-colored rails, sometimes on cinders, sometimes on ties, in and around boxcars on sidings, occasionally losing sight of the skyline. The switching yard was a maze. Most of the sidelined boxcars were covered with graffiti, Estrella notwithstanding. Sara recognized a dozen different gang monikers, including Los Romeros and Los Tecolotes.

Eventually, she emerged from the thicket onto a dusty plain at one end of which sat the corrugated steel shack, roof draped with fishnets into which the owner had inserted various fetishistic objects, including Barbie and GI Joe dolls, green Rolling Rock bottles, faded lotto tickets, cracked CDs, and what might have been chicken bones. There was no graffiti on the switching station.

A big old tom was sunning itself on a concrete block as Sara approached. It watched her with baleful yellow eyes and twitching tail, and when she drew abreast, let out a yowl that cut through the hum of the transfer station like a shotgun blast through fog. The cat leaped up and headed directly away from the hut as fast as its scabbed legs could scabble.

The front door was open. Incense drifted from within. The door faced north east, so Sara cast no shadow when she finally stood in the entrance, took off her sunglasses and let her eyes adjust to the gloom. The witch Estrella lay sprawled on mismatched cushions

Across the short floor, one hand clutching a bottle of muscatel. The interior of the cabin smelled of cheap wine, body odor,

sandalwood, and spice. Estrella was a dumpy woman, hard to tell her age, with a brown face and black hair streaked with gray. She might have been beautiful once, but age and hard living had left her ravaged as a gravel road.

"Excuse me," Sara said. "Estrella?"

The old woman stirred, moaned. "Wha--? Who want Estrella?"

"Detective Pezzini, Manhattan Homicide South."

The old woman's eyes popped open. She sat up, lips parted like an old purse left in the rain. An expression of terror descended like the night.

"No," the witch croaked, working her legs as if to skitter backward. "Witch!" she shrieked. "You de witch!"

"No," Sara said forcefully. "*You're* the witch. I'm the cop. What's the problem? Have you been reading the tabloids? Do you know me?"

Estrella had backed herself up against an old wooden packing crate she used as a table, breathing hard, her mouth a slit. Sara came into the room. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom, a couple of candles the only light. Like a filthy little Bedouins' den. She crouched in front of the witch and held up the little plastic figure of Yoda she'd taken from Bobby Chacon.

"Do you recognize this?"

The witch's eyes grew until yellowish whites showed all the way around. She reached frantically under some covers. Sara dropped Yoda and went for her revolver, had it up and the hammer back when Estrella held up an ornate old cross draped with cheap plastic beads, colored pipecleaners, and other ornaments. For an instant they faced each other, the two witches, each holding their shamanistic totem. Sara lowered hers first.

"You shouldn't make sudden moves like that in front of a cop. I might have shot you."

“What for you use de gun anyway? I know ‘bout you. I know you very powerful witch. I make no excuses. The girl come to me wit’ a job. You would have done de same.”

Connections started sliding into place. Bobby Chacon’s Yoda doll. The peculiar way in which the gang-bangers had pursued her. The ugly little drawing she’d received in the mail. “Someone hired you to put a hex on me.”

Estrella nodded, still grasping the crucifix. “You would have done de same.”

“Uh, no. But that’s not why I’m here. What you just told me suggests you had prior knowledge of an assault and did nothing. You also admit to helping the perpetrators. You’re guilty of prior knowledge, being an accessory to assault on a police officer. I could arrest you.”

The yellow eyes contracted. “Go ‘head an’ ‘rest me den.”

“No. That’s not why I’m here. I need someone to help me conduct a séance.”

Estrella looked confused. Unconsciously, she reached for the muscatel. “Huh?”

“I need someone to help me contact a ghost, a spirit. Someone who’s been dead a long time. Your name came up. That’s why I’m here. I came to ask for your help in conducting a séance. While you’re at it, you can tell me who set me up.”

A look of low cunning stole over the woman’s ferret-like features. She was as transparent as glass. Sara wondered how she’d managed to fool so many people. “I do not contact de spirit world. I know someone who does. And dat de same person who set me after you. Lupe Gutierrez.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT
(Saturday afternoon)

It was four-thirty by the time Sara returned to Waubeska Place. She left her helmet with the bike, cut straight through the building to the front lobby and out the front door. Hector sat on the concrete abutment framing the stairs, wearing a pair of pleated Dockers, white T, and a set of headphones through which Sara could hear Malo faintly blasting. He puffed out his cheeks and blew up on his mustache when he saw her, took the headphones off.

“Ey, *guapa*. How you doin’? Man, that was some hurt you laid on me the other day.”

They did a complex soul clasp. “No hard feelings?”

“Ell, no. Din’t hurt my stock with the ladies to learn you laid me out, specially ‘cause I so humble about it.” He flashed a disarming grin displaying a gold tooth with a small ruby.

“Nice tooth. Where can I find Lupe Gutierrez?”

“You live here and you askin’ me? She in the ground floor apartment on the right with the picture of Selena on the door. I tell that girl she ought to switch to Aaliyah, but she don’t listen.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Guardin’ the place. Watchin’ out. Helpin’ little old ladies with they groceries. That’s what Jorge told me to do and that’s

what I'm doin'."

"Hector, you surprise me. You turn out to be very intelligent and well-spoken. You keep on like this, and there's no limit to how far you can go."

Hector balanced his forearms on his thighs and regarded the street with equanimity. "Jes' doin' a job."

Sara went inside. The inner security door was locked, at least. She let herself into the apartment proper and followed the hall around to the right on faded rose carpeting. Life boomed faintly through the walls: a snatch of Snoop Dogg, a few bars of Tony Bennett, an argument in Spanish. The halls were fragrant with cumin, curry, a wild mix of spices. The Gutierrez apartment was number 124. There was a poster of the late Latin singer Selena taped to the wall along with some humorous postcards and phrases in Spanish.

Sara knocked. A moment later the door opened on the chain, framing a wan-faced girl whose straight black hair hung in her face. She was sucking on an electro-pop, little motor in the handle turning the sugar in her mouth so she didn't have to lick. She stared, holding the device to her mouth like a self-directed drill.

Sara showed the badge. "I'm looking for Lupe. She in?"

The girl nodded, stood there whirring.

"May I see her? Inside the apartment?"

The girl closed the door, unlatched the chain, and opened it again. Sara entered a cozy apartment rich with religious symbols. The tiny living room was devoted to several pictures of Christ, with and without Mary, and there was a small shrine in the corner, plaster Christ preaching from a heavenly blue shell on top of a cheap end table, numerous candles at his feet. The television was showing Power Puff Girls.

"Where's Lupe?"

The girl flopped down on some cushions in front of the

television. It was a miracle she didn't drive her candy through the roof of her mouth. She gestured down the hall. "She's in her bedroom."

There were more Selena posters on the door to the bedroom, plus Ricky Martin, Aaliyah and Madonna. The door was shut, quietly pulsating with music. Sara tried the knob. It was unlocked. Carefully, she swung the door inward. Lupe sat cross-legged on her bed, bopping to tunes playing in her head through a Sony walk-man. The walls were crowded with posters and pictures: 'N' Sync, Backstreet Boys, J Lo. A pile of comic books spilled out of one corner. X-Men, Powers, Birds of Prey.

Sara let herself in and shut the door. Lupe's shoulders hunched. She turned. Eyes and mouth expanded into sinkholes. She snatched the headphones off and scrambled for the head of the bed, hand reaching beneath the pillows. Sara instinctively leaped after, both hands burrowing under the cushions after Lupe's. Sara's hands closed around Lupe's hand closed around a chunk of steel. Sara twisted the nine millimeter Ruger loose, tossed it over her shoulder. Her right hand came back ready to strike Lupe hard across the face.

Sara had to restrain herself. The urge wasn't hers, it was the Witchblade.

Lupe crouched on her knees, looking scared. Sara backed off, panting.

"Okay. Just so we know where we stand. I could bust you for attempted murder of a police officer. That's a lifetime term, little lady. But if you help me, I may not have to do that."

The girl stared at her with undisguised hatred.

"Is there a problem? You look like you hate my guts. What have I ever done to you?"

The girl's face twisted in outrage. It made her look even younger. "You take my boyfriend away from me and you ask

me that?"

"Your boyfriend? Are you referring to Jorge?" Sara barked a rueful laugh. "I have nothing to do with him! I have a boyfriend. Girlfriend, you must be dreaming. Only reason I talk to Jorge is to get him to lay off the residents. So far, he's risen to the task. He might be a lot better than you think." Too good for you, she thought.

"So what? What you want with me?"

"Estrella told me that you sometimes see future events, that you have precognitive ability."

Lupe drew herself up with new found dignity. "I got the power, if that's what you mean. Sometimes I can see things before they happen."

"Do you know what a séance is?"

Lupe nodded.

"Have you ever conducted one?"

Lupe's young face clouded with blood. "Once, I try to contact my brother Enrique who was killed by some Jamaicans 'cause they wanted his corner. He tell me he in a strange place now, neither here nor there. It made me cold..." The girl grabbed herself around the arms and squeezed, as if trying to hold in heat. It was very warm in the bedroom.

Sara reached into her pocket and pulled out the Yoda. "My hair. It must have come from you. Where did you get it?"

Without looking at Sara, Lupe said, "The garbage chute."

Sara held up the drawing of her surrounded by wolves.

"And this?"

Lupe bit her lip, eyes wide, and nodded. "S'posed to make you scared."

"I see that you're an enterprising young lady. It's too bad you haven't found something constructive in to which you can channel your energies, but if you help me, and keep your nose clean, maybe I can help you."

The girl said nothing. Simply stared at the floor and pouted.

“How old are you, Lupe?”

“Fifteen.”

“You go to school?”

Lupe shrugged. “Sometime. Malcolm Shabazz Middle School.”

“You gonna help me with this séance?”

At last the girl looked up. “Who are you trying to reach?”

“A Japanese sword maker who was killed seven hundred years ago.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE

"Close the door," Lupe said.

Sara shut the door. "You going to help me?"

The girl nodded, swallowing. "You got something that belonged to this sword maker?"

Sara produced the *tsuba*, black iron in the shape of a lotus blossom, and handed it to the girl. Lupe set it on the bed, went to the window and shut the blinds. "Works better if there's less light." She took a towel, wadded it up, and spread it at the base of the door like a dormie about to light a doobie.

"How often have you done this?" Sara asked.

"Twice. Once to find *mi hermano*. Once to talk to Selena."

"How'd it go?"

"I tol' you 'bout Enrique. I never could get in touch with Selena 'cause I don't got nothin' of hers. Maybe I buy something on e-bay one of these days."

Sara looked around. She hadn't seen a computer. "How do you know about e-bay?"

"I learn about it at school. They sellin' all sorts of stuff used to belong to Selena. There's this statue of her in black leather jacket, but that wouldn't help me get in touch with her. In order to reach someone who's dead, you need to have something that used to belong to them."

The *tsuba* had belonged to Muramasa, not Udo, or

Shiegeyoshi. But it was Muramasa's sword that had supposedly started this whole mess. If Udo had killed Muramasa, perhaps the swordsmith's ghost was in touch with that of the warrior. Perhaps they took tea together. Sara didn't know what she expected, but she was out of leads on the earthly plane. Time to cross over. She tapped the disc on the bed. The girl took it, held it up to the light, looked as if she were about to take a bite out of it.

"What is this?"

"It's a *tsuba*, the hilt from a samurai sword."

"Who we reachin' out to?"

Sara smiled. The girl had unconsciously invoked cop talk. "The sword's builder, Muramasa. He lived in Japan in the 1300's."

"How long ago was that?"

"Seven hundred years. You couldn't figure that out?"

"I don't have my calculator, okay? Hesh up now, I got to concentrate."

The girl set four large candles around the room, at the four corners, and lit them. They sat cross-legged on the bed facing each other with the black metal disc between them. Lupe instructed Sara to rest her finger tips gently on the edge of the *tsuba*. Lupe did likewise. Outside, they could hear traffic swooshing by a block away on Atlantic Avenue. The sound seemed to recede as Lupe bent forward at the waist and began to speak in a low voice.

"Muramasa, great swordmaker, you who wander in the void unsatisfied, unrequited, without rest, hear us. Speak to us. Tell us what you seek."

Nothing. Nothing save the distant swoosh of traffic, like an angry sea, the hiss of water moving through the pipes, the muted glee of the Power Puff Girls from the television in the living room.

They sat awkwardly for five minutes. Lupe looked up from beneath her black bangs. "Sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes the spirits are busy."

"How often have you done this?"

"Twice, I told you. Hesh up. I got to concentrate."

The girl dropped her voice an octave as if speaking in a patently fake tone would convince the spirits of her sincerity. "Muramasa, great swordmaker..."

Sara's hand began to tingle an instant before the gauntlet arrived with a clank. A cold wind blasted through the room, making the blinds buzz and blowing out the candles. The room grew dark, as if someone had set a bell cover over the entire building, blocking out the sun. The Witchblade yanked her hand outward in a fascist salute and held it there, as if to ward off a blow.

The voice emanated outward, in ripples, from somewhere within Lupe, but did not issue from her mouth. Her lips moved, but the sound came from everywhere and nowhere. It was a man's voice, harsh and guttural. It spat forth the words, *Washi no katana, kaese!* in a dialect that hadn't been heard in seven hundred years.

A tendril of burning chemical fiber wound through Sara's sinuses like a bramble. She looked down. The *tsuba* was glowing red hot, igniting the cheap bed cover. Instinctively, the Witchblade swooped down, picked up the glowing disc and tossed it in the girl's metal wastebasket. The trash can was empty. The *tsuba* glowed dull and began to fade. Lupe's eyes rolled up into the top of her head and she collapsed sideways on the bed.

Sara looked down. The Witchblade was gone, replaced by the ornate costume bracelet. Her palm tingled, from the heat of the disc. Leaning over, she straightened the girl out, thumbed open her lids, looked at her eyes, felt her pulse. Sara let herself

out of the bedroom, down the short hall to the tiny bathroom where she found a clean washrag and soaked it in cold water. At the end of the hall, the younger sister remained sprawled on a cushion watching Nickleodean. She seemed a little old for those programs. Maybe she was retarded.

Lupe opened her eyes as Sara applied the cold cloth to her forehead. She blinked a couple of times. "Wow. I guess we made contact, huh?"

Sara had been repeating the strange words over and over in her head until she found the mnemonic key, which she used to lock the memory and then swallowed. "Are you all right? Wait, don't try to sit up yet. Tell me what happened."

"You know what happened, lady. I made contact. I wasn't there. I got displaced. Only you saw and know what happened."

"You don't remember the words?"

"No. What's that smell? Is something burning?"

"The artifact I brought became red hot and set the bedclothes on fire. Don't worry. It's out. There's no danger." Sara scooped up the now cool iron *tsuba* from the trash can and stashed it in the snug back pocket of her jeans. If she didn't get it back to Hecht, she would be paying it off for the rest of her life!

Lupe sat up. "Wow. Did that really happen?" She stared at the charred spot in the middle of her bedspread.

"Why are you surprised? You believe in witchcraft, don't you?"

The girl nodded.

"You have extraordinary abilities. How are you doing in school?"

The girl drew her knees up beneath her chin. Suddenly she looked twelve years old. "You ain't my mother."

"That's right, I'm not. When someone expresses interest in

you, the least you can do is be polite. Let me guess. You don't attend regularly. Can you read and write?"

"Of course I can read and write. I'm not stupid."

Sara just stared at her with limpid green eyes. Lupe squirmed. "Okay. I'm sorry. Maybe I made a mistake 'bout choo. Maybe you ain't evil. But you a witch, I seen that for myself!"

Sara winked. "Takes one to know one."

Lupe gaped. A guffaw escaped her reluctant lips. "Okay. We just a couple a witches havin' a coven."

There was noise outside the room. A moment later the door swung inward revealing a rail-thin Latino woman, her long black hair streaked with gray and fixed atop her head in a bun, wearing a coral-colored waitress uniform. "I thought I heard voices. Who is your friend?"

Sara stood. "Sara Pezzini, Mrs. Gutierrez. I live on the fourth floor."

"You're the police woman." She offered her thin, strong hand, quizzical expression on her face. "Is Lupe in trouble?"

Conspiracy, incitement to riot, illegal possession of a firearm, driving without a license. "No, ma'am. Not at all. We just discovered we have a few things in common."

More quizzical.

"We both have precognitive abilities, Mama," the girl said.

Mrs. Gutierrez nodded, smiled. "Would you like some coffee, Officer?"

"No thank you, ma'am. I have to be going. But if there's anything you need, that I can help, here's my card."

She scooped up the nine on her way out the door, gave mamacita a smile. "It's mine. I just set it down for a minute."

CHAPTER
FORTY
(Saturday afternoon)

Sara had three hours before she was to meet David for the mayor's reception. Ralph Munster was not in the Manhattan phone directory, but Sharpe had written Munster's home and cellphone numbers on the back of the card. She tried the cell phone first.

"Munster," he answered quickly with a hint of impatience.

"Mr. Munster, this is Detective Sara Pezzini, Manhattan South. I wonder if I could see you for a few minutes this afternoon."

"What's this about?"

"Homicide investigation."

Beat. "I'm golfing."

"I won't take more than a few minutes. I can come out to where you're playing, if you like."

"No." Sigh of exasperation. Hand over the receiver while he explained to his foursome. "I can meet you briefly at three-thirty."

"Where?"

Not the clubhouse! Oh God not that! He named a tavern called J. Pierpont's on Route 29 near Danbury.

She carefully packed her bike with all necessary items. It was a tight fit, enough to make a girl wish for saddlebags.

She'd been thinking of investing in a pair of Corbin Beetle Bags, but they weren't much larger than her compact, and cost eight hundred bucks. Between her tank bag and the strap-on overnighter, she got it all in: the dress, the shoes, the makeup, even the hair dryer.

It took her just over an hour to make the run up to Danbury, dicing with semis and brain-dead hausfraus in SUV's. Although she was generally against new laws, Sara loved it that New York had banned drivers from using cell phones. She found J. Pierpont's on a frontage road between Schulman's Wholesale Furniture and Curtis Chrysler/Dodge. It was one of those faux folksy fern bars with a polished brass rail and an eight page menu, from Mexican to Thai. She made a bet with herself that the BMW 5 series with the WALL ST license was Munster's.

He was in a window booth scowling at a copy of Barron's, iced latte at hand. He had the lean, tanned good looks of a surfer or professional politician, wore a coarse-weave ecru cotton jacket over a white golf shirt, looked surprised when she slid in across from him. Surprised at her. He wasn't expecting this.

"How do you know me?" he asked at once.

She slid the card she'd taken from Sharpe's place across the table. He picked it up, examined it, put it back down.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Never mind where I got it. Nobody knows that I have it except you. Nobody has to know. I'm in the middle of a homicide investigation and I need answers fast. It's possible the killer will strike again."

"What's this got to do with me?"

"You're a close personal friend of Derek Sharpe, aren't you?"

The waitress came. Sara ordered an iced tea.

"This is about those damned swords, isn't it?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Derek. Thinks he's the reincarnation of Toshiro Mifune."

"Toshiro Mifune has only been dead a short time. Does Derek really believe he's a reincarnated samurai?"

Munster offered a wry grin. "I was speaking figuratively. You know that song, 'We're Turning Japanese?' That's Derek. He is a great admirer of their culture, history, and tradition. He speaks Japanese, you know."

"I didn't know. Look, it's none of my business, but are you Derek's gentleman friend?"

"I'm his lover, okay? I'm not butch and I'm not a drag queen. My partners know I'm gay, but they don't mind because I don't mince around in a pink tutu demanding money for AIDS research. Derek's situation is somewhat different."

"That's why I'm being discreet."

"I appreciate it. Not that he makes a secret of it."

"I'm actually surprised he was hired."

Munster shrugged.

"Mr. Munster, is Derek the samurai killer?"

"How would I know?"

"I figure if anyone would, you would."

"Well I don't. We have a complicated relationship. He's a very private person. So am I. I do know he went native in a big way, and now he's back. Certainly he's physically capable of these deeds, but not mentally, or spiritually. Derek is a very spiritual person. I just can't see him murdering anyone."

"He's a former SEAL."

"He's changed."

"Has he ever experienced black-outs?"

"What do you mean?"

"Periods of time for which he can't account."

"Not that I'm aware of."

Sara handed Munster her card. "If you think of anything, please call me."

Munster tapped the card against the tabletop. "There is one thing..."

Sara leaned forward. "Oh?"

"He did tell me, he'd gone on a joint operation with Japanese special police after some terrorist, one of those charismatic monks in a mountain stronghold in Hokkaido. Something happened, something that frightened him badly. He cut himself..."

"Cut himself how?"

"On a sword. That's all I know. He won't talk about it."

"Do you know what happened to the sword?"

"No. But he worries...that he's been infected. Some poison."

"Has he had himself tested?"

"Everything. He gets a clean bill of health. I asked him what made him think so. He said, 'I just don't feel like myself.'"

"That's it?"

Munster shrugged. "I'm sorry."

"You'll call me if you think of anything."

"Sure."

She arrived at the precinct house at ten of five. Hers was the only bike. She sat at her desk and wrote out the phonetic statement she'd heard, as accurately as possible. It looked like this:

WASHI NO KATANA, KAESE!

She knew enough about Japanese to recognize the word for sword. She phoned the Oriental Languages Department at Columbia and got a recording. It was, after all, Saturday

afternoon. She couldn't hope to connect with any scholars. She searched the central roster for Japanese-American cops, came up with a couple, tried reaching out to them. Nada. She ended up e-mailing the phonetic phrase to the foreign language departments at Columbia, CCNY, SUNY, and the Japanese Consulate. Any luck, she'd find an answer waiting Monday morning.

Who had spoken through Lupe? Muramasa? Udo? Shigeyoshi? She knew so little about any of them, she felt lost. The *tsuba's* maker was not necessarily the speaker. Any powerful spirit would seize on the opportunity Sara and Lupe had provided. Sara was convinced that whoever had spoken, it was the driving force behind the murders. Forget the ex-wives. Forget the business rivals. It was another monster chase.

"Lord," she said to herself, "couldn't you send me a nice, simple, live human suspect? Just one."

What's the matter with Sharpe, sayeth the Lord.

"Please, Lord, I said simple."

Her phone rang.

"Pezzini."

"Officer, it's Norm Hansen with Panther Security."

Sara's heart did a one-and-a-half gainer. "Yes, Mr. Hansen. It's about a device I found across the street from Bachman." She described the device, and how she had traced it back to Panther.

"I don't know about that, and I should. We were all shocked at Mr. Chalmers' death. I knew him, not a close friend, but we were friendly. Let me look into this and get back to you."

"I'll e-mail you the serial number."

"That would be helpful."

At five-thirty, she packed it in and headed downtown to change at Dave's place. She could have used the women's

room at the station house, but she preferred David's commodious bathroom. It was more private. She'd phoned David ahead of time so that he was standing by the open door in the alley when she arrived. He wore a pair of loose-fitting heavy black cotton pants with elastics at the waist and ankles, Chinese kung fu slippers, and a gray T-shirt that said "FOURTH ANNUAL PRIDE CLASSIC" and was dripping with sweat.

"Hi! I was just working. Make yourself at home while I take a quick shower. Won't be more than ten minutes."

"Just a minute," she said, grabbing him before he bolted. She drew him close and kissed him on the mouth. "Okay. You may go."

The swordpolisher clasped his hands together next to his tilted head, a moony expression on his face. "Whoo! Whoo!" he sang like the wolf in a Tex Avery cartoon, spun around, leaped in the air, clicked his heels together three times before he landed and sped off. Sara laughed.

She set her bike in a corner and unpacked her bags. She looked around for the sword on which he'd been working, but couldn't see it. The Witchblade pulsed warmly up her arm, down her spine, to her libido. The Witchblade approved of David. That was a first. Her social life had been pretty bleak since acquiring it. Sara felt gratitude, even love toward the Witchblade, as if it were a stern parent who had suddenly and unexpectedly given her approval.

Swords occupied slots on the wall. Toting her bags, Sara went through the workroom, down the hall, into the living room where she set her bags down, sat on the folded futon opposite the television and flicked it on. It took her a second to figure the controls. She cued in WKAX, the all-news Fox affiliate. Not a blip about her set-to the other night at Hecht Gardens. She could thank Hecht for that. The man had an

aversion to negative publicity.

She turned off the television and turned on the radio. It was on the jazz station, Rahsaan Roland Kirk blowing three horns at once. Sara stretched supine on the futon, feeling safe and cozy for the first time all week. No one knew where she was. David made her feel secure, which was funny, because she generally felt superior to the men around her.

It was her who made them feel secure. Or scared them to death. Maybe it was just the Witchblade letting down its guard. Between the end of Rahsaan and the beginning of Art Blakey, she heard the shower running. She dozed. The next thing she knew David was tapping her on the shoulder. He'd covered her with a Navajo blanket.

"It's seven, Sara. You probably ought to start getting ready."

"Oh my gosh, the reception's at eight!"

"Plenty of time. We'll take a cab."

Sara sat up and blinked. For a moment she thought she was still dreaming. The young man before her was a far cry from the sweaty smith she'd first met a week ago. This David Kopkind appeared to have stepped from the pages of *GQ*, in a cream-colored French-cut Pierre Cardin over a coarse beige peasant shirt with the top button undone.

"David, you look like a great big vanilla sundae. I could eat you."

He blushed charmingly. "We don't have time. You can't be late for the mayor. He won't invite you back."

Sara got up. "Ha. As if. The only reason I got this invite is because he wants to hear first hand what I've got on the Chalmers investigation. Which is bupkus."

"And maybe, just maybe he's been told how beautiful you are?"

"I doubt that."

“And maybe he wants to meet the famous flying vampire detective?”

“Hey! That ‘vampire’ didn’t actually fly until we cornered him on the roof of his mother’s apartment building and then he more like fell.” With a toss of her head, Sara chuckled and headed toward the bathroom. “You’ll have to wear a tie with that!” she shouted over her shoulder.

“I know.”

He’d even straightened out the bathroom, clearing out the used laundry, providing enough fluffed cotton to dry a buffalo. She emerged a half hour later in a white St. John shift by Marie Gray and a pair of white Dolce and Gabbana heels with straps. David did a double take and flopped over backwards on the floor in a perfect judo drop.

“Get up!” Sara said, laughing, pulling on his hands. “You’ll ruin your suit!”

David got up, took off his jacket, and used a lint roller to remove cat hair.

They caught a taxi right in front. The Egyptian driver had decorated his cab with an ostentatious show of patriotism, red, white, and blue bunting draping the interior like a campaign car. A small photo of George Bush was affixed to the dash next to a Yankees button. He whisked them uptown toward Carl Schurz Park and Gracie Mansion. A uniformed cop checked Sara’s invitation at the gate before admitting them to the mansion grounds. The circular driveway in front of the mansion was bumper-to-bumper with limos. The house itself was gaily lit, highlighting its wedding cake regency style.

Only when they stepped inside did Sara realize David had chosen a tie the exact color of her eyes. They joined the reception line. A dozen people ahead of them, Sara spotted Adrian Hecht and his date, the supermodel Katrina. A liveried waiter offered them champagne from a sterling silver tray

while they waited in line. As they approached the Mayor, an aide whispered their names and why they were there.

“Detective Pezzini,” the Mayor said, shaking her hand solemnly. “I’m so glad to finally meet you. You’re a folk heroine in the police department.”

“My escapades have been greatly exaggerated, your honor. This is my friend David Kopkind.”

David and the mayor shook, the mayor introduced his wife, a bubbly lady with pink cheeks and silver hair, and then they were through the line and mingling with several dozen other swells in the ballroom, with parquet floor and oak paneled walls hung with paintings of past dignitaries. Fiorello LaGuardia. John Lindsey. A string quartet in the corner played a Brahms concerto.

They drifted toward a buffet set up under a large painting of The Deal For Manhattan, Dutch settlers handing over trinkets and beads to pipe-smoking Indians, at a time Manhattan was a cow pasture. Sara observed Katrina carefully inspect the shrimp before choosing one, eating it with the delicacy of a cat. Hecht was jawing with another square-shouldered mover and shaker.

“Detective Pezzini,” he said, extending his hand to include her in the conversation. “Want to thank you for looking out for my property. Barry Gower, Sara Pezzini. Barry’s a developer. Sara’s a detective.”

Gower, with an obvious rug, a chin the size of New Jersey and a sharkskin suit, shook her hand. “Ah, the famous monster detective.”

Sara gave a tight little smile. A moment later, the developer tilted toward the groaning board leaving the foursome. Katrina dabbed at her lips with a monogrammed towel.

“Katrina, Sara, David, is that right?”

David nodded and shook the model's hand. She was taller than him by at least two inches.

"Detective Pezzini," she said with a faint East German accent. "You could be a model."

"I've had offers," Sara grinned ruefully, thinking of Bob Guccione's phone call. "I'll stick to police work. It's less dangerous."

"You're coming to our soiree Sunday night."

"I wouldn't miss it. A little bird told me you're going to unveil something special."

Hecht stared at David for a hard instant, looked at her, gave a slight nod of the head. The two of them drifted off, leaving David looking up at Katrina's famous features.

Hecht and Sara stood beneath a portrait of Willem Van Der Koot, an early Dutch settler. "What did you hear?" Hecht asked just loud enough for her.

"You've got it. The Holy Grail. Muramasa's last sword, Sky Root."

Hecht's eyes and mouth were slits. "Who told you that?"

"Hunh-unh. Is it true?"

"I don't know. It hasn't been verified."

"Oh come on, Adrian. This is what you've been waiting for. If it is true, you're in danger. The samurai killer is after that sword. And he has a nasty habit of decapitating whoever's got it."

"Trust me, the sword is safe."

"Unless they get to you."

Hecht turned his body so his back was to the crowd, opened his jacket just enough for Sara to see the butt of an automatic pistol riding in a custom leather holster. "I'm aware of that, and before you start squawking, I've got a permit to carry."

"How did you get that by security?"

“Be cool. I’m an ex-marine officer.”

“I’m not worried about you shooting someone. I am worried about you defending yourself. If you think you’re a match for this nut job, you’re mistaken. Why don’t you have bodyguards?”

“What makes you think I don’t?”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I have security here. But, as always, detective, just seeing you around makes me feel safer.” He grinned, pleased with himself.

Sara spotted the Japanese consul across the room clutching a drink in a tumbler with fruit. “We’ll be there, Adrian. In the meantime, be careful. I mean it.”

She excused herself and made a beeline for the consul, joining the group as Mr. Harushi explained economic policy to three Wall Street heavy hitters. Noticing her, Harushi excused himself. They had met at several functions where Sara was often chosen for parade duty. She was the type of face the department liked to feature in p.r. campaigns, even if she was white.

“Officer Pezzini. How can I be of service to you?” Hana Harushi was a short, middle-aged gentleman with huge rectangular glasses and a shock of gray black hair.

“Good evening, Mr. Harushi. Would you be so kind as to translate for me a Japanese phrase?”

“If I can.”

Over Harushi’s shoulder, an intense, balding young man in oval designer glasses was heading her way like a torpedo, mouth set in a grim line. Brandon Stern. As soon as he saw her looking at him he forced a wan smile.

“Good evening, Mr. Harushi. Good evening, Officer Pezzini. When you have a minute, the mayor would appreciate your company in the den.”

Sara raised her eyebrows. "Brandy and cigars?"

"I'm sure those are available if you wish."

Stern hovered. Apparently, she had a moment now.

"Mr. Harushi, will you excuse me?"

"Certainly."

She accompanied the aide toward a hallway beneath a carved oak lintel. Looking back, she saw Harushi staring after them, playing with the plastic sword in his cocktail.

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE

The mayor was all smiles as he greeted Sara in his private study. He was a jovial, pink, pear-shaped politician with a fringe of curly white hair, a moderate Republican, which of course meant his policies were indistinguishable from those of any urban Democrat. The library had a sixteen-foot ceiling, wall after wall of oak shelving laden with red-leather bound books, softly glowing in the light of a green-shaded banker's lamp on the mayor's Federalist rosewood desk. A fire crackled in the marble-framed hearth, surmounted by a slab of Vermont granite the size of the *Queen Mary*, above which a portrait of Jimmy Walker twinkled with a hint of mischief.

"Officer Pezzini! Thank you for coming. I've heard so much about you! I'm sorry it's taken us this long to meet."

She shook the Mayor's hand. His palm was surprisingly moist for a politician. Maybe he needed to warm up. "We've been on the same podium several times, your honor."

"Is that right? Can I get you a drink?"

"Just water."

The Mayor went to a sideboard, opened a camouflaged refrigerator and removed a bottle of designer water. He twisted off the cap, poured into a tumbler, added ice with a pair of silver tongs, and a twist of lemon. He indicated a wing-backed red leather chair, brass studs gleaming softly in the

firelight.

The Mayor sat opposite, resting his drink, Scotch and water, on a small round rosewood table. "Is that young man your boyfriend?"

A hint of blush crept into Sara's cheeks. She clasped her hands and mooned. "Oh, gosh, I think he's sweet on me."

The Mayor laughed. "You are refreshing. The Commissioner tells me you're a genuine super-hero. That you've got secret powers."

Sara sipped water and offered a Mona Lisa smile. "Your honor, incredible luck is my only super-power. That, and good genes. As you know, my father was a cop."

"Yes indeed. Vincent Pezzini, one of the brave heroes who gave their lives protecting the citizens of this great metropolis." The phrase tripped off his tongue like a macro-key. "Brandon told me about your involvement with the Russian Mafia a couple months ago. You're a very brave young woman. I'm putting you in for a mayoral commendation."

"That's very kind of you, your honor, but a lot of the credit goes to my fellow officers."

"You're too modest. I guess you know Scott Chalmers was a friend of mine."

She nodded. Here it comes, she thought.

"As is Adrian Hecht. The problem is, some people look at these crimes, including your donnybrook the other night at Hecht Gardens, and think it's part of a terrorist plot to discourage developers in lower Manhattan."

Sara tried not to do a double-take. The Witchblade helped; it had taught her not to alter her heartbeat or emotional temperature lest she trigger a change. "Sir, with all due respect, that's ridiculous. The killer is clearly after ancient Japanese swords."

"Have you heard of a group called Black September?"

“Yes sir, and I’m aware that members of the Japanese Red Guard participated in an airport massacre in Rome in 1984. But as far as I know, they haven’t been active since.”

“I received a report from the State Department yesterday. They seem to think the Red Guard branch of Black September may be in the country.”

What do you want me to do about it, she thought? I’m dancing as fast as I can. “I’d like to see that report, if I may.”

“I’ll have it sent over. If there’s any chance you can wrap this up before Hechi’s wing-ding Sunday night...”

The mayor must have seen something in her eyes because he quickly back-pedaled. “I know...I’m sorry. I know that’s unreasonable. But it would be helpful if you could announce that you’ve got a suspect, or even some new leads.”

“Your honor, all I can tell you is that I do have a promising lead, and I’m close to cracking the case. But the answer isn’t simple, and it’s only going to add to my reputation as a freak magnet.”

The mayor stared with pursed lips a moment, sipped his drink. He sighed. “I was afraid of that. I’d appreciate it if you’d keep me posted.”

“Of course. Will you be at the party Sunday night?”

He nodded.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I really have no choice. I said I’d come, and Hechi is a major campaign contributor. Whoops. A gaffe is when a politician inadvertently tells the truth. How about you? Will you be there?”

She nodded. The Mayor stood. The interview was over. “Then I’ll feel safer.”

They shook hands and she showed herself out. Harushi was waiting for her in the ballroom. “What did you want to ask me?”

"I'd like you to translate a Japanese phrase for me."

"If I can."

"*Washi no katana, kaese!*" Sara snarled.

The consul blinked. "Give me back my sword."

"Excuse me?"

"What you just said. Give me back my sword."

"Thank you, Mr. Harushi."

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO
(Saturday night/Sunday morning)

Sara gazed down into David's sated eyes as he lay on his back on the futon in the living room.

"Wow," he said. "Wow wow wow."

"Was it good for ya, baby?" Sara asked, batting her eyes.

David propped himself up on both elbows with exaggerated exhaustion. "If you have to ask, you must not have been paying attention!"

Sara slid off and snuggled under one arm. Contented smile beaming across her face despite her best efforts to contain it. The perfect moment stretched into minutes.

"So, tell me again what the Japanese consul said?"

"Give me back my sword." She said it again, in a scary campfire voice. "*Give me back my sword!* I was sent to summer camp when I was eleven. The counselors used to tell us scary stories at night, around the campfire, and the one story I always remember—that everybody always remembers—is about the corpse searching for his heart/hand/kidneys. And he creeps right up behind you and growls in your ear, 'Give me back my kidneys!' The Polish variation is, 'Give me back my kischkes!'"

"What's a kischke?"

"I don't know and I don't want to know."

"Don't get too comfortable because I have to go work."

Sara looked up. The digital clock on the DVR said eleven-fifteen. "It's Saturday night. What kind of work?"

"Polishing, that's all I do."

"Tonight? Saturday night?"

"I promised the client it would be ready on Sunday. I have to put in twelve hours a day."

"Can I see it?"

"Nope. I promised the client I wouldn't show it to anybody."

She ran her nails lightly across his lean muscular chest. David had a ripped athletic build somewhat reminiscent of the legendary Bruce Lee. He wasn't a fitness nut or anything, but pumping iron, or more specifically sword steel, nine hours a day had left him with a physique to be envied. "Come on, David. You can show me."

He hoisted himself to one elbow and cradled her head in one hand. "Sara. I promised. And when I make a promise, that's it. If I made a promise to you, I wouldn't break it. The client asked for absolute discretion. This is absolute."

She gazed into his true blue eyes for a minute, heart swelling. At last. One true man. "I understand. You mind if I just curl up here and sleep?"

She was rewarded with a lupine grin. "I was hoping you would."

She heard him pad lightly down the hall, the key in the lock, the swing of the workroom door. He kept it locked? The door shut, the lock latched faintly shut. A few minutes later, she heard the steady swoosh of steel on stone through the vents, like the surf at Playa del Mar. She plunged into sleep.

She was walking down a hall, a celestial corridor lined with magnificent white Doric pillars inlaid with gold, a marble bridge across the sky surrounded by towering cumulonimbus clouds. A frangipani breeze wafted through the marble hall.

Sara looked around for David, but she seemed to be alone, save for a predator bird, barely visible as it flew in and out of a distant cloud.

“Welcome,” said a woman’s voice from behind her, in the melifluous/echoey coin of dream voices. “No, don’t turn around. There’s nothing to see anyway. I just wanted to tell you, you’ve been doing an outstanding job. Outstanding. And I’m putting you in for a commendation.”

“Thank you,” Sara replied, without turning. “Are you with the department?”

“Nooo,” the woman replied, as though explaining to a slow child.

“Are you with the mayor’s office?”

“Nooo.”

“Well who are you?”

“I’m your Witchblade.”

Sara whirled. Nothing. A hint of fragrance, something exotic, from the Solomons, then gone.

“I asked you not to turn around,” the voice said from behind her.

“Sorry,” Sara said. She felt a deep shame, as if she’d let down Vince.

“I’ve come to warn you...”

“Warn me about what?”

“About love. You are not one who can share her life with a man, the way most women can.”

An irrational anger descended, like a red curtain. “Don’t dare to dictate my love life!” she snapped.

Sara came awake, sweating. She’d kicked off most of the bedcovers and lay tangled in the sheet like a badly-wrapped sandwich. She extricated herself. It was three-thirty in the morning, and the swoosh through the vents was as steady as ever. Had he been at it for four hours?

She rose, grabbed a terry cloth robe, went into the bathroom, relieved herself, splashed some water on her face and washed up. She doubted she'd get back to sleep. She dressed swiftly in her True Religion jeans, a stretch cotton tank top and cotton sweatshirt. Yoshi came into the room, yawning and snarling.

"C'mere, cat," she said, scooping the chubby fur ball to her breast, falling into a sofa and cuddling. Yoshi clawed his way loose. Well fine! How could a cat so snugly be so resistant to snuggling? Sara put on her over-the-ankle Reeboks and began to pack up. She would have liked to have spent the day in bed with David lingering over the Times, maybe going down the street for take-out breakfast, flipping through the news shows. But clearly, he had other priorities.

Problem. Her bike was in the work room. She'd have to disturb him to get it. Oh well, she thought, hoisting her leather overnighter and the tank bag, both of which she'd lugged into the living room. She went down the carpeted corridor past his library, his Spartan bedroom, to the workroom door, constructed of heavy-gauge steel, closed, and sealed with a Dunwich deadbolt. The steady swoosh of steel on stone issued faintly from within.

Sara listened for a moment, loath to interfere with his concentration. But if she wanted to leave, there was no getting around it. She had to have her bike. She knocked lightly on the door. There was no response. The swooshing never stopped. She knocked harder. There was a break in the swooshing for an instant. Absolute silence, save for the constant susurrus from the street.

"David?" she said tentatively.

The swooshing began again, a little more intently. She rapped hard on the door. No response. The swooshing continued. This was ridiculous. She had to have her bike.

What was the matter with him? Maybe he was wearing a set of headphones and couldn't hear. She thought of deploying the Witchblade, but that would be a betrayal of trust.

In fact, when she felt for it, it was inert. She looked down. Bracelet mode. She held her hand up to the door and willed the ancient gauntlet to appear. Nada. No extrusion. No cooperation. It did not want to unlock the workshop door. Or maybe it was out to lunch?

Sara hauled back her foot and kicked the door robustly several times. The swooshing stopped. An instant of silence, followed by a scraping sound and then the thick click of the lock unlatching. The door opened twelve inches to reveal David, flushed, without his glasses, sweating profusely, with a silly grin on his face.

"What?"

"David, I'm sorry to bother you, but I need my bike."

"You're leaving?"

"I'm done sleeping. I'd love to stay..." If there were an invitation. "But I've got work to do. No rest for the wicked."

"I understand. Hold on one minute and I'll let you in." David shut the door and slammed home the deadbolt. She stood for a moment outside the locked door feeling foolish. Surely he realized she would never violate his sanctuary if he requested privacy. She heard him scuttling around, some scraping, then the door swung open.

"Sorry about that," David grinned foolishly.

"It's okay. I understand." The polishing stone was wet, the odd apparatus surrounded by splattered water. She couldn't help wondering where he'd stashed it. The work room was a museum of oddities, with hundreds of concealing places; among the old cabinets, beneath stacks of packing blankets, in tons of boxes arranged against the wall, in any of several old steel and wood cabinets. She forced herself to stop

looking, and concentrated on fixing her bag to the back of the bike. When she finished, she turned and David was waiting to take her in his arms.

“I’d love to have you stay. I really would. But I promised the client...”

She put a finger to his lips. “Hey, it’s all right. I understand. Work’s work. Call me?”

“Count on it.”

She put her helmet on, got on the bike, and walked it out the door into the alley. He’d shut the door and locked it even before she got the engine started.

CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE
(Sunday morning)

It took Sara slightly over an hour to cover the sixty-five miles from Manhattan to Upper Salem, where Murray Rothstein resided in a twenty-two room Richard Neutra designed retro-futuristic monstrosity that was meant to suggest a Superchief. Sara had ignored the PRIVATE ROAD signs and rolled up the seventy-five yard red brick drive to the parking circle in front of the white and stainless steel house. A white XK8 and a Lexus sedan were parked in front of the square glass entry. Sara wheeled her bike up to the glass wall and left it there, beneath the stainless steel portocochere, while she rang the buzzer.

A moment later the speaker grill snapped. "Yes?"

"Mr. Rothstein? It's Sara Pezzini. I'm a New York City Police Detective. May I speak to you for a minute?"

"Just a minute."

Five minutes later, Rothstein approached the door grumpily, clad in a white terrycloth robe loosely fastened at the front so that Sara had a better view than she wanted of his blue Speedos, a slight roll of fat spilling over the rim. He was damp, and his dime store flip-flops left a trail on the Spanish tile floor. The glass door opened, releasing an exhalation of chill air.

"Come in." He turned, oblivious, and marched back down

the hall. They emerged in a gleaming stainless steel kitchen, stovetop a single smooth surface, glass patio doors looking out on the pool area, which Rothstein seemed to have to himself that morning. He wheeled on her.

“Well? Who did I kill?”

He was a bantam rooster with tufts of white hair behind his ears. Sara bet they stood out like bird’s wings when they were dry. His beak-like nose and crane legs did little to erase the impression of some exotic bird. He crossed his arms.

Sara gave it a hint of blush. “It’s not about murder, Mr. Rothstein, it’s about a property you own, Waubeska Place in Brooklyn.”

“What about Waubeska Place? Christ, I got so many properties I can’t keep track of them all. Are you really a detective? You look like a chorus girl, please excuse my impertinence.”

Sara held up her badge, directing light from the extensive skylights into Rothstein’s eyes until he put a hand up.

“Okay! Okay! You’re a cop! What about Waubeska Place?”

“I have friends in that building. They were being harassed by a group of Puerto Rican kids. I got to know the gang members, and far from being hardened criminals, they’re just a bunch of kids who are at a loose stage in their lives. Three of them are carpenters. You have a couple unfinished apartments in that unit...”

Rothstein held up his hands and signaled like a railroad flagman. “Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Now I remember. Waubeska Place! I hadda give up forty per cent of that building ‘cause I got this furshtunker bleeding heart liberal judge, who thinks the world owes blacks a living! Excuse my harsh language, Detective, but I’m an old man, I been around, and I know how things work. Can I help it if the onsite

property manager lets in some yob, her second nephew twice-removed turns out to be a crack dealer? You have no idea the headaches, being a landlord.”

Sara let him ramble. When he paused for air, she resumed. “Sir, I understand how frustrating it must be, but surely, at this stage in your life, you’ve reached a level of success that keeps you insulated from the daily grind.”

Rothstein looked around, as if to reaffirm his wealth. “You might say so. So what’s your point, young lady?”

“I would like you to let the Romeros use those apartments while they fix them up. I know these boys. They know what they’re doing. Instead of the property standing vacant, you could be renting it out. In the meantime, they’ll fix it for free, if they can stay there while they’re doing it.”

“The reason those apartments are vacant is because they’re in the part of the building controlled by the federal government. If they were in my sixty per cent, I’d fix ‘em up.”

“Then what have you got to lose?”

Rothstein raised his eyebrows. “What indeed? If you’re asking for my permission, go ahead. But don’t come crying to me if they knock you on the head and gang rape you behind locked doors.”

“I appreciate your frankness.”

“Alright, enough, already! It’s Sunday. I don’t want to hear business. You’re welcome to join me. My daughter Roberta is about your size. I’m sure we have a suit somewhere.”

“Thanks, Mr. Rothstein, I’ll take a rain check. I have to get back to the city. I’d appreciate it if I could use your phone.”

He pointed to a wireless on the counter. “Don’t call Singapore.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-FOUR
(Sunday afternoon)

The meeting between the residents of Waubeska Place and Los Romeros took place at one p.m. Sunday, in the lobby and on the front stoop of the building. Jorge wore a three-piece suit like something out of Saturday Night Fever, with a long, pointy, open collar, and a snap-brim fedora. Hector wore white linen pants and a silk shirt. Mrs. Finkelstein made raspberry strudel that disappeared faster than free beer at a ball game.

There were five Romeros present, the core homies, and a dozen residents, including Ben and Mrs. Milman from the third floor. Jorge brought two cases of Tecate. Ben offered him sips from a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps he kept in the pocket of his heavily pillared Cardigan. Lupe did not attend.

Ben, Howard Lubar, Frank Hernandez, and Mrs. Finkelstein discovered that they shared a passion for baseball with Jorge and Hector. None of them could fathom how Robert Ruiz, an up-and-coming rookie with the Yankees, could have thrown his career away by stealing teammate Derek Jeter's glove and bat, which he sold for a fast twenty-five hundred.

"One of my homies did that to me," Jorge said, "I'd light him up."

"Light him up?" Lubar asked.

Jorge made a gun out of his right hand and picked off a

few ghost targets. "You know. Blam blam blam."

"Are you carrying a gun now?" Lubar asked.

Jorge made a pained expression. "No, essay. It's just an expression. I ain't never shot nobody."

"But do you have a gun?" Lubar persisted.

Jorge made an expansive sweep of the room with his arm. "Man, we all got guns. My choice is the Glock nine, even if it does have that stupid trigger safety. You?"

Lubar looked startled, as if he'd discovered a spider in his cottage cheese. "Me what?"

"You got a piece?"

"A piece of what?"

"Howard!" Ben snapped. "He's asking you if you own a gun!"

"Certainly not! Why would I need a gun? Why do you need a gun, if you've never shot anybody?"

Jorge looked surprised. "Man, are you for real? If you're a man in this country, you have a gun. I don't mean to insult you, dude, it's a cultural thing. I come from a culture of machismo. I had a gun for ten years now, ain't shot nobody yet. Ain't sayin' they ain't a lot of punks packin', that maybe shouldn't. All I'm sayin', a man should have a gun."

Ben looked like he was about to volunteer something. Sara stepped to the center of the foyer and waved her arms. The front door was propped open with a rubber wedge, admitting warm afternoon air, circulating lazily up through the building and out a skylight courtesy of a large ceiling fan.

"Hey, listen up, everybody!" The hubbub immediately stilled. "I want to thank the residents, especially Ben Weiskopf and Mildred Finkelstein, for pitching in and providing refreshments. Thanks also to Jorge for bringing the beer. You all know we've had trouble with gangs in the past. My friend Jorge assures me those days are over."

Jorge raised a clenched fist. "Power to the people!"

"Fuckin 'A' bubba," Hector said, not so loud.

"I spoke with the landlord, Murray Rothstein, and he's agreed to let the Romeros have the two vacant apartments on the second floor in exchange for fixing them up. As most of you know, three Romeros work as carpenters, and they assure me that they will finish the job in two months. Those two months will be a trial period to see if we can coexist."

"Time we done with them, those apartments will be like a palace," Jorge stated. "Donald Trump will be standing in line." He said it again with a carnival barker's conviction. "Standing in line!"

"Rothstein!" Ben spat like a piece of bad fish. "That goniff!"

"Mr. Rothstein was very nice. He didn't have to do this. Let's give it a chance, shall we?" She gave Ben a dazzling smile.

He nodded and smiled back. "Yeah, you're right. You know what you are, Officer Pezzini? You're a fixer-upper. You find problems and you fix 'em."

"She's a saint!" Mildred Finkelstein said.

Sara laughed. "And on that note, I gotta go."

CHAPTER
FORTY-FIVE

When Sara knocked on the Gutierrez door, Syreeta answered, electric swirling lollipop drilling into her teeth. She stood there, mouth buzzing, staring over the chain. Sara showed her the badge. "May I come in?"

The girl closed and unlatched the door, opened it, and returned to her place in front of the color console as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Is your sister in?" Sara asked.

A shrug, without looking.

"Hello!" Sara sung. There was no answer. She went down the hall to the closed bedroom doorway and knocked on Christina Aguilar's taut midriff. She felt, rather than heard a subtle bass line and figured Lupe was plugged in. She tried the door. Unlocked. She swung it open. Sure enough, Lupe was seated cross-legged on the bed, back to the door, big pair of earphones clamping down on her glossy black hair, bouncing slightly to the bass, surrounded by CDs. "Insane Clown Posse" said one of the booklets.

Sara moved into the girl's line of sight. Lupe lurched once, as if zapped, and whipped off the headphones. "What are you doing here?"

"You know the Romeros are in the lobby."

"I know."

“Where’s your mother?”

“How should I know?”

Sara snagged a folding chair, the only piece of sitting furniture in the room, and sat on it backwards, arms on top of the back. “Only reason I’m here, girlfriend, is to see if you’re okay. I understand why you don’t want to run into any Romeros right now.”

“I hope you’re happy with him, ‘cause he dump you in a New York minute.”

“I told you, Jorge is not my boyfriend. You’re young. You’re very pretty, smart as a whip, and you have special abilities. The whole world is yours, Lupe, if you’ll give it a chance.”

“Here it comes,” the girl sneered. “Stay in school, don’t be a fool.”

Sara stared at her, unblinking. The girl fidgeted, shuffled CDs. “How you get that power?”

“Excuse me?”

“You a for-real witch. I saw you fall from that crane. All of a sudden, your whole body zipped up tight in some kinda armor. Then you bounced. How did you do that? How did you get to be a witch?”

“I’m not a witch.”

Lupe looked bemused. “Hokay. I see where you goin’. What are you then, a mutant?”

Sara gave a tight little smile and held up her right hand. The costume bracelet dangled. “See this bracelet? I found it one day or more accurately if found me. It’s not department issue and I can’t get rid of it. It warns me of danger, protects me when I’m in trouble, takes care of me after a fashion in exchange for letting it live on my arm. I don’t know if it’s alive or magic or some kind of alien super high tech. It seems to have a mind of its own. It’s scary sometimes, but I seem to be

stuck with it.”

“Huh?”

Sara glanced at the pile of comics in the corner. Here was an explanation this girl could accept. “You read comics?”

“Yeah. My favorite is X-Men, and my favorite X-Man is Storm. Halle Berry played her in the movies.”

“Well, I guess I’m sort of like Storm. Just a special girl with some special gifts. Just like you. I try to find ways to use my abilities to help people. Tell you what, girlfriend. Let’s you and me get together later in the week and we can talk some more. Maybe I’ll give you some pointers.”

Lupe nodded. “That be okay. Sorry I...pulled that stuff.”

You mean trying to get me raped and killed? “Forget it. You help me, I’ll help you.”

“How can I help you?”

“You remember that little séance we had here the other day.”

“I remember you comin’, I don’t remember what happened.”

“You were possessed. It’s okay. He’s not coming back.” Not here, at least. “See, I dig the way you do that. Maybe we can trade secrets.”

Lupe shrugged. “I don’t know how I do it.”

“That’s all right. We’ll figure it out.”

Sara let herself out. The party was still going on in the lobby so she took the stairs four flights up to her unit. The air conditioner was going full blast in her bedroom. She went inside, shut the door, and phoned Leesha Bachman in Newton. The woman answered on the first ring.

“Miss Bachman, it’s Detective Pezzini.”

“Have you caught my father’s murderer?”

“Not yet. But I expect something to break soon. There have been several promising developments.”

"I heard somewhere that if you don't catch a killer in the first twenty-four hours, the odds against catching him increase astronomically."

"Well, those are the statistics, but every case is different."

"Well who do you suspect?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Then why did you call?"

Sara could sense Bachman's anger and impatience, although she'd kept her voice neutral. Why did she call? Out of guilt, perhaps, for initially leaving Bachman out of the loop? Out of genuine concern? To cover her ass? "I'm calling to tell you that I'm confident we're going to find the person who did this."

"Well, I appreciate that. The next time you call, I hope you have better news."

Click.

I deserve that, she thought. Before she could set the phone down, it rang.

"Sara, it's David."

He sounded breathless. Her heart did a stutter-step and dove for daylight. "Hello! I was just thinking about you!"

"Yeah, well, about tonight..."

For one awful second she thought he was going to cancel. Her brain turned into a strobing file search as she sought the reason why. Came on too strong? Another girlfriend? Not ready to commit to a serious relationship? Freaked out she was a cop?

"Yes?"

"Is it all right if I meet you at the party? I'm really sorry, but I'm working on a rush job that has to get done, and I still have a little ways to go. It's going to take me right up to party time. So I thought I'd just meet you there, and we'd take it from there."

Her heart performed a complex series of aerial maneuvers. “What kind of job do you have to do on a Sunday night?”

She could hear the grin through the phone. “A lulu. I’ll tell you all about it. Tell me what you’re going to wear so I can wear something complimentary.”

Dream boat, she thought. “Emerald sleeveless dress, one over-the-shoulder strap, and matching heels. And a jade necklace.”

“You look beautiful already. The other women will hate you.”

She sighed theatrically. “That’s the burden I have to bear.”

“Okay. I should be there by seven-thirty. Love you.”

Her apprehension gone, Sara let the receiver float back into the cradle while she floated into the bathroom. Pause. She’d planned taking the bike to Manhattan and stashing it at Dave’s place. That was now out. The journey by bus and subway would take at least an hour, and she did not relish doing it in her little green dress. On the other hand, if she threw on black leather jacket, *de rigueur* for residents of Manhattan, she could project enough attitude to keep the creeps at bay.

Or, she could pack her tank bag and overnighter as cunningly as a Chinese chess master, and use the facilities at the station house. She might even luck out and cop a ride with a patrol. That way, she’d have her bike in the morning when she went to work.

All righty then, she decided. By motorcycle to the world. She took a shower, hair down, and spent a half hour drying it. She pulled out the cheap, motley-patched leather overnighter she’d bought for seven bucks in Playa del Mar and cunningly packed it with her green Jil Sander—it really was wrinkle-proof—her green Louis Vuitton high-steppers, a hair dryer that resembled a radar gun so much she’d used it to freak speeders, and her make-up kit. She’d ride clean and make up at the

station house. Last but not least, the little bottle of Hugo Red. She pinned her hair up and slapped a Yankees cap on top. One bag looped over her shoulder, gripping another in one hand and her helmet in the other, she made her way down the stairs, let herself out the back door, and ambled across Prospect Place.

The newly installed and vigilant security cop waved to her. He looked like a native of Central America. Sara hoped he at least spoke English. It was nearly six when she hit the Brooklyn Bridge, and traffic was light. The motor pool was jammed tight but hers was the only bike. Of course. Sharpe had told her he'd be working security tonight.

Bernadette Goines was ending her shift as Sara applied make-up in the women's locker rest room. She'd let her hair down and tied it loosely at the nape of her neck with a black velvet ribbon. Sara wondered if other women's rest-rooms had condom machines.

"You like to start a riot the way you look, girlfriend," Goines told her, dabbing at her face with a piece of brown paper towel.

"Thanks, Bern. Rough night?"

"John comes at me with a Swiss Army Knife. 'Gonna put my brand on you, honey,' he says, right before I clock him between the eyes with my leetle brass fran'." She held up a set of brass knuckles that must have weighed a pound.

"Nice."

"Then some sheik wants me to join him and a few other select buddies on his yacht. But by then, the sun was comin' up and I was NOT goin' down, no more, not today. I'm headin' home, I'm catching some shuteye, and then Waggles and me are headin' upstate to a little B&B and some R&R."

"That that cop from the twenty-seventh you've been dating?"

"A-huh. Saw your little honey bunch in the dock t'other

day. Don't he look like a vanilla parfait. Where you off to, dolled up like that?"

"The Hecht Center For the Performing Arts. Adrian's throwing a party to celebrate the sublime beauty of his Hechtness."

Goines laughed, flashing white choppers. "Really? What's the occasion?"

"Getting the Hecht Center ready in time, I guess. And he might be announcing a new acquisition to his collection. Big deal, huh?"

"What's he collect?"

"Japanese swords."

Goines closed her large black leather bag with a snap, tossed her processed curls. "Well why not. I knew a guy collected insects. Y'all have a swell time."

"You too, Bern."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The Hecht Center For the Performing Arts was situated kitty-corner from the excavation where Sara had confronted los Tecolotes. It was also separated by its own eight foot hurricane fence topped with concertina wire. Contractors had been working around the clock to finish it off in time for the Big Event, and it looked like they'd pulled it off. Sara exited the taxi directly in front of the main entrance, a cascade of crescent-shaped steps in front of the arched entrance. Security in suits greeted each vehicle at the main entrance on Liberty Street. A number of cars were parked directly on the spanking new concrete that would eventually become Hecht Plaza.

A number of thin-blooded saplings were held in place by guy wires. The building itself suggested concrete sails, with great, soaring abutments and tiny cube windows punched into its side like player piano tape. At its base, valets in green jackets were busily parking large cars inches from each other, slotting them in like so many dominos, leaving barely enough room to squeeze out the doors. As Sara exited the cab and approached the main entrance, invitation ready, she glimpsed a flash of chrome between the cars. Someone had parked a motorcycle in an alcove too small for a car. She walked back to take a look.

A bronze and black 1100 Shadow rested in the penumbra,

fitted with crenulated Roadhouse pipes and a fishtail tip. This was Sharpe's other bike. He'd told her he had a Shadow for cruising. And suddenly it all came together.

Akira Kurosawa had directed a film called *Kagemusha*, which meant literally, "shadow warrior." Chalmers' rival for the online sword had signed his e-mails *Kagemusha*. Sharpe was the shadow warrior! Had Sharpe beheaded Chalmers and taken the sword? Munster said that some crazy monk had cut Sharpe with a samurai sword when he was in Japan, said he thought he'd been poisoned or infected somehow. In that instant, had a warrior's restless spirit entered into Sharpe?

But which warrior? Which blade?

There wasn't a lick of proof. It was all circumstantial.

Sara joined the knot of swells waiting to be admitted by a body builder in an Armani suit, carefully examining each invitation before dropping the red rope. Sara was just about to show her invite when three limos whipped up to the curb nearly clipping a valet. From the front and rear limos, two well-dressed flunkies sprang into action. A tall young man with styled blond hair opened the rear door of the middle limo and extended his hand to New York's junior senator.

The gatekeeper's eyes were on the senator.

"Excuse me," Sara said, flashing her invitation. "Excuse me."

"You'll have to wait. The Senator's here, and she doesn't like to stand in line."

Sara caught a glimpse of the frosted blond hair as the senator stalked past, surrounded on all sides by expensively-clad bully-boys lest one of the hoi polloi try to touch her garment.

There was a great deal of cooing and the pop of flashbulbs as the Senator entered the building. Only then did the gatekeeper turn his attention back to Sara. He looked like the

Rock, from the Caribbean somewhere, with a slight lilt to his voice.

"I am sorry about that, but we have strict orders to move the Senator to the front of the line. Always to the front of the line."

"She is the smartest woman on earth."

"That's right." He examined Sara's invitation and let the red rope drop. "You enjoy yourself," he said with a smile.

The lobby of the Adrian Hecht Center For the Performing Arts resembled a high-tech cathedral, peaked ceiling displaying bones, immense steel girders with oval cut-outs. The floor was an intriguing mix of circles, squares, and triangles set in marble and granite, a patchwork of contrasting textures. Huge crimson rugs with the Hecht logo endlessly repeated provided a jolt of color. There were at least a hundred guests wandering the lobby, oohing and ahing over Hecht's art collection, hanging from walls, from ceiling beams, mounted on plinths, or crouching in corners. A set of Sixteenth Century Samurai armor mounted on a mannequin and enclosed in a plexiglass display case. Another case displayed a dozen of the rare blades, naked steel reflecting a thousand little lights. Several waiters in black tie circulated with trays of champagne, and there was a buffet in the corner presided over by a chef in a white toque.

The gently curved glass front wall arced thirty feet to the ceiling. Sara scanned the crowd for David, but couldn't see him. She made a beeline through the growing hoard. Might as well eat something while she had the chance. She was on her third bacon-wrapped shrimp when she sensed a presence at her shoulder. The smart young thing with blank white hair, pierced chin, and silk jacket over black silk T looked familiar.

"Hi," he said, flashing high-priced choppers. "I'm Rondo." She shook his hand. "Sara Pezzini."

"You don't know who I am, do you," he said with an air of jovial expectancy. He had a strange, toothy, East Coast accent that sounded made-up.

"Sure I do. You're Rondo. You just said so."

"Maybe you've heard of my band, Flying Stankfish."

Sara paused. If he were trying to be witty, he was incredibly dry. He wasn't trying to be witty. He was some self-involved rock star who expected her to know who he was.

"Sorry. You're fifteen minutes haven't come up yet."

"Excuse me?"

But she was already cruising toward the front entrance, where James Bratten had entered with a tall, thin model on his arm. His gaze fell on Sara and he headed her way, towing the model like a skiff. "Offisa! Arrest this woman! She incitin' indecent thoughts!"

"Hello, James."

"Sara, Celque. Celque, Sara." Sara recognized the Somalian model. She was six feet two and weighed one hundred and forty pounds, with Nefertiti cheekbones and cinnamon skin. A string quartet in some distant corner dove into Vivaldi with a small splash.

"Have you seen our host?" Sara asked. "You probably have a better view from up there."

Bratten looked around with the slightly self-conscious profile of the well-known celebrity. He was gratified by the subdued murmuring of his name. "Nope. Tha's all right, though. Adrian's always late. You still seein' that sword polisher?"

"Yup. I'm supposed to meet him here."

"Tha's good. David's a fine lad. Hey! There's my man Calvin!"

Bratten veered off like a fighter jet going into combat, moving to intercept his teammate Calvin Broadbent. Celque

gave an indulgent smile. "He's like that. Always rushing off, every second, a new interest. He sees life like a child."

"I envy him."

"Me too. Sometimes I think I am too sophisticated to enjoy life."

Sara scanned the crowd for Hecht or David. There were at least two hundred people now swirling across the cubist floor, jumbles of voices rising like startled pigeons. "How so?"

"I have had nothing to drink, nothing to smoke, nothing to snort, and nothing to shoot now for two weeks. Can you believe it?"

Sara reappraised the ectomorphic model. There had been rumors of drug use, but who cared what a bunch of overpaid models did in their spare time? Celque looked serious, with a sober gleam in her eye. "I'm sorry, I have nothing to compare it to. You seem perfectly normal to me."

The woman's face split in a supernatural smile. "Thank you," she said warmly, extending her hand.

A steady clinking penetrated the throng, and conversation gradually slipped away. All heads turned toward a cantilevered balcony extending over the lobby like the prow of a ship. There stood Hecht, striking the metal rail repeatedly with a silver spoon. Sara wondered if it had been in his mouth when he was born. Behind him, at a slightly lesser elevation, stood a flush-faced David, grinning like an idiot, light striking his glasses in such a way that the lenses appeared to be a field of white. He was clutching a long narrow object shrouded in an elaborately decorated padded silk brocade bag.

"Greetings!" Hecht boomed from the bottom of his diaphragm. He had a good voice to begin with, and had taken CEO and public speaking training. "Greetings and salutations from Hecht! Thank you for honoring us with your presence on this, our inaugural night, the Official Grand Opening of the

Hecht Center For The Performing Arts!”

The crowd applauded enthusiastically for such a well-heeled bunch. Sara noted the imperial “we.” She tried to catch David’s eye. And there it was. He took the glasses off, winked, blew her a kiss. As she responded, Celque nodded approvingly. Bratten returned and took the model’s hand. The three of them looked like Russian nesting dolls standing next to each other.

“I had planned to treat you all to a performance of Forty-Second Street, but the auditorium isn’t finished. In fact, only this room is finished so we’re having the party in here. In a little while, Mama Digdown’s Brass Band will walk among you, along with some of the more energetic members of the Peach Haddison Dance Company.

“As some of you know, today’s my birthday...”

“Happy birthday, you old weasel!” cried a drunk.

“Thank you, Cyril. And don’t let go of that young man you’re leaning on.”

Laughter. Other comments. Hecht made a down boy gesture with his hands.

“I didn’t tell you, because I didn’t want you to bring me gifts. I have everything I need tonight. Many of you know I have a passion of samurai swords and have, in fact, made my own modest contribution to the art and hobby. Some of my pieces are on display in the lobby tonight.

“I’m proud to announce a new addition to my collection, and something that should create a bit of a stir in the world of collectors.” He turned and David handed him the silk wrapped bundle, turned, stepped crisply off the balcony and disappeared from view. Hecht held the long narrow package before him for a moment, as expectations built.

Here it comes, Sara thought. *Skyroot*.

“As aficionados know, a debate has raged about the origin

of the swordsmith Muramasa, the most famous or should I say infamous sword maker in Japanese history. No one doubts the existence of the later period Muramasa, his sons, cousins, and descendants. But of the original legendary Muramasa, the rival of Masamune, there has been much doubt . . . until now. With the aid and assistance of many people, including Hon'ami Kozan and the NBTHK, I have acquired and authenticated the first Muramasa's last and greatest sword . . . the legendary *Skyroot!*"

He fiddled with the large tassels and heavy cord tying the padded treasure bag shut. The silk brocade came off. The slender, curving, lacquered black scabbard emerged. Gripping the scabbard in one hand and the handle in the other, Hecht slowly drew the blade, extending the shimmering steel toward the ceiling. The bright temper line, a pattern of rolling flame. The upper surface engraved with stylized dragons and indecipherable ancient runic kanji. Someone started clapping, Bratten joined enthusiastically, then everyone. A triumphant moment for Hecht. As he expertly slid the blade back into its sheath tracing an ellipse in the air, jugglers, dancers, and acrobats appeared and a nine piece brass band, lean young men in hip-hop clothes, chugged out of an alcove pumping "When The Saints Go Marching In" on trombone, trumpet, tuba, and snare drum. Chiseled young men and glamorous young women wearing discreet Navy HCPA jackets released confetti and glitter from the upper decks. Something for everyone, including the unions, who would clean up in the morning. Heck, Sara thought. They're cleaning up right now. She spotted the local Teamsters' president yukking it up with the Junior Senator.

Warm breath gusted Sara's cheek. David put an arm around her and pulled her close. "Sorry I'm late," he whispered.

"You're just in time," she whispered back. "Was that your rush job? That sword for Hecht?"

"Yes. Sorry I couldn't tell you, but I was sworn to secrecy."

Sara closed her hand around her tiny suede Luis Vuitton purse, feeling the hard outline of the .25 auto. David had had *Skyroot* in his house while they'd made love. Why hadn't the Witchblade said something?

White hot pain flooded her right arm from the tips of her fingers to her shoulders. Dipped in acid. Her forehead scrunched and she bit her lip.

"What's wrong?" David asked, immediately sensing her distress.

A force rippled through the crowd on her right. The pain went away, replaced by a relief that made her gasp with gratitude. She staggered. The heavy metallic gauntlet appeared, a stark contrast to her ephemeral gown. David gripped her arm, startled.

"What is that?"

Sara looked up. No good. She was too short! But she knew what had happened. Sharpe had passed her, heading for the stairs. Suddenly the Witchblade was doing its job, sensing danger, putting two and two together. Sharpe and the sword. Or, more accurately, whichever of the samurai ghosts was most fierce and the sword.

She took off, threading through the throng. The crowd thinned behind the groaning board, toward the broad, curving stair leading to the balcony. Sharpe was halfway up the stair, just as Hecht appeared on the landing halfway down.

"Sharpe!" Sara yelled. He did not respond. Hecht paused at the landing, holding the sword in both hands.

Sara saw Hecht form the words. "Sharpe. What is it?"

Sharpe never slowed. His left hand shot out, clipping Hecht on the chin. Sharpe's right hand grabbed the blade and

he kept on going. A few others saw what happened and gasped. David appeared at her elbow.

“What the hell was that?”

She turned and grabbed him by the arms. “David, listen. Find the chief of security and tell him to meet me here.”

“What’s going on?”

“Just do it!” She raced up the steps, cursing herself for not alerting security as soon as she’d arrived. But it was all circumstantial! Until Sharpe hit Hecht, there had been no proof he’d so much as jay-walked. Hecht was sitting on the marble landing, legs splayed, feeling his jaw.

“Are you all right?” Sara snapped.

Hecht goggled. She’d forgotten the Witchblade, encasing her right arm to just below the elbow. “Don’t look at me! Are you all right?”

“Yeah, what the hell—”

Sara kicked off her strappy heels and sprinted up the stairs two at a time, feeling in her purse for the Beretta. Without breaking stride she hung her badge around her neck and tossed the bag over her shoulder. Twenty feet ahead of her, crimson arced across her path, hit the gray marble. A security guard, pale blue shirt drenched crimson, staggered backwards from between naked iron girders, designer rusted to henna. He collapsed, half turned toward her, one hand extended. He’d been nearly cleaved in two with a horrendous slash from shoulder to waist like a Sam Brown belt.

Confusion mixed with calliope music drifted from below. Sara could sense men running, weapons being drawn, but so far she was alone. She stepped to her right, back into the shadows where the girders created a separate gallery. Sharpe stood with his back to her at the end of the long corridor, facing the wall, the bloody sword in his right hand. He’d thrown the scabbard away.

Sara went into a shooter's stance, both hands cupped around the tiny Beretta. At this distance, she doubted she could hit him, much less bring him down. And she didn't want to get any closer.

"Sharpe! Police! Drop the sword and get down on the floor!"

She heard someone running up behind her, the quick slap of leather on stone.

"David, stay back!" she hurled over her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he said from right behind her.

"David, go downstairs. You're not helping." Her eyes never left Sharpe, who still stood with his back to her. He turned, chin buttoned to his chest, regarding them through loony, hooded eyes.

"Sharpe!" Sara snapped, drawing a careful bead on his center mass. "Drop the sword and lie down now! I will shoot you!"

"He's not Sharpe," David hissed. "Look at him." Abruptly, David fired off staccato Japanese, the only word of which Sara recognized was 'Shigeyoshi.' At the mention of that word, Sharpe snapped into *chudan no kamae*, holding the blade in front of him with both hands, the point directed at David's throat. Sara heard the zing of metal on metal. David stepped forward holding one of the long swords from Hecht's exhibit with two hands in a classic kendo ready stance.

"David! Stop it! Get the hell out of here!"

"I know what I'm doing," he said through his teeth. Holding the pistol in her left hand, she reached with her gauntleted right, grabbed him by the collar of his jacket, and pulled him forcefully backward. He twisted loose, leaving the jacket behind. *Oh my God! A horrific realization! Poor sweet David was going to get himself killed trying to protect her and it would be all her fault!*

An elevator gonged. Hushed voices, the quiet mutter of dispersal. Two men in pale blue of the security force dashed around the corner gripping riot batons and ran smack into a propeller. Sharpe took one step, shifted his shoulders, and sliced through the first one's neck like a cheese log, continuing the motion downward at an angle as the second guard ran into the suddenly inert body of his companion. Blood soaked the blade, covering its arcane engravings, dripping down onto the handle and staining the silk wrappings with bloody hand prints.

David stopped when the men had appeared, giving Sara an opportunity to catch up with him. Her gauntleted hand shot out, striking him just above the elbow. The sword fell to the floor with a pure ding. David looked at her with surprise, mingled with pain.

"Don't make me handcuff you. Go downstairs now." She shoved him forcefully and he grudgingly retreated a few feet, hurt expression on his face. The last thing she needed was a distraction. Sharpe/Shigeyoshi had just killed three men.

He advanced, blade like a dousing rod, speaking Japanese. Sharpe wore a black silk T-shirt beneath a silver jacket, loose-fitting black cotton trousers. His sneaker-clad feet edged forward without leaving the floor. He looked demented, mouth a slash. Sara was ready to shoot. She braced herself, cupped the pistol, aiming at his thigh, knowing she shouldn't play around, especially not with a .25, knowing she should let him have five right in the torso, and then the Witchblade tossed the gun away.

It flipped the gun off at an angle like a Frisbee. Sara stared at her hand like it *was* an alien thing. It was an alien thing. Betrayal. Sharpe was upon her. The blade whistled, a silver blur. The Witchblade twitched, subtle as a hummingbird's wings, and caught *Skyroot* in its center with a splang, closing

around the blade. Sara was too astonished to move, right arm extended, feet in a wide stance, braced for the impact. Sharpe froze too, a ghostly expression on his face, as if he were emerging from a long sleep. His muscles remained fully engaged, thrusting forward with all his strength. Sara's nylon stockinged feet slid backwards on the newly polished floor, but she did not yield, nor did the Witchblade, its embrace of *Skyroot* complete and unbreakable.

Sharpe stopped and reversed direction, drawing the blade out of Sara's grip with a teeth-rattling ching. A synapse-popping shock whip-cracked up Sara's arm and burrowed down into her center. Her arm was numb to the shoulder, but continued to move, controlled by the Witchblade. The volatile mix of emotions left her shaken. Sharpe looked confused as well. He withdrew, sliding backwards.

The Witchblade urged her forward. *Skyroot* came alive in Sharpe's hands and appeared to be struggling. In a gobsmack of insight, Sara understood.

Skyroot was like the Witchblade, only male. They were drawn to each other, as Udo had been drawn to the Lady Sakura. Although that encounter had not ended well for the Lady.

Sharpe gripped the blade in both hands like an aluminum baseball bat and dragged it backwards. It appeared to have great weight. Sara glanced behind her. It looked like Hecht had rallied two NYPD blues from out front and was directing them toward her. David was gone, presumably back downstairs. Thank God! She couldn't bare the thought of being responsible for his death, having to live with that. Sara was strong, but the weight of it, the guilt, she knew it would crush her. And even worse, it was distracting her!

Sara couldn't wait! She had to get to Sharpe before anyone else got hurt! She turned the corner just in time to see the elevator doors shut, in a bank of four leading to the unfinished

ballroom on the fifth and top floor. Paused by the closed doors, a revelation. Her training dictated that she contain the threat and wait for backup, but she had to get to Sky-root! Who's idea was that, hers or the Witchblade? The thought birthed a tiny spark of terror in her heart. Was she still in control, or had the Witchblade achieved dominance without her notice?

The Witchblade did not wait for the crisis of conscience to be resolved. It demanded action! Like the Flying Fickle Finger of Fate, a protrusion from the Witchblade's index finger made a beeline to the button and the decision was made. The doors gonged open and into the elevator she went, just as the two cops skated around the corner, guns drawn, one high, one low.

"Hold your fire!" the high one cried, as the elevator doors slid shut.

Kenny G played softly on the sound system. It was only audible in the elevators. Sara stood with her back against the wall feeling the cool marble tiles on her bare skin and through the sheer fabric of her diaphanous dress. She watched the digital display count up to five. The doors dinged and slid open. Sara braced herself, ready for anything. The door had opened on a broad area of indeterminate depth, lit only through reflected light streaming through the immense arched windows that encircled the ballroom like a crown.

The Witchblade was inert, awaiting her command. An instant ago it had been alive, driving her on. "What do you want?" she snarled. "Help me or get lost." Witchblade leading, Sara came out of the elevator fast and low. She was behind a colonnade marking the grand ballroom, with its inlaid wood floor, cut into a vast map of the world. America was oak, South America was mahogany, teak from Thailand, cedars from the Middle East. The oceans were alternating strips of ash and maple, cut into a wave pattern.

Sharpe knelt on the Canary Islands, sword thrust before

him. "Help me," he groaned.

"Derek?" Sara asked, cautiously edging forward. She did not regret the loss of her gun. It wouldn't have done any good. "Derek, can you understand me?"

He looked up with haunted eyes. The mask of death was gone. "Sara, stay back. It's the sword. It wants me to kill..." The thing twitched gleaming in the city light. Sharpe looked like he was trying to hold it still. It vibrated, casting off shimmering rays of light.

Sara stopped ten feet away, Witchblade held placatingly forward, inert for now. "Who? Who does it want to kill?"

His eyes were pleading. "Everybody. . ." he said in a hoarse whisper. His face twisted, mouth a grimace, some internal struggle taking place.

"Run!" he screamed, rising, struggling with the blade, gripping the handle like a mountain climber at the end of his rope. It turned toward her, dragging Sharpe like a pull toy. He was trying to hold it upright, but the blade bent in a tight little curve. It yanked Sharpe along like a kid on water skis. It dragged him across the polished hardwood floor, his heels emitting a rodent-like screech.

"Let go!" she barked, backing up, feet describing alternating crescents, never leaving the ground. "Let go of it!"

"I can't" Sharpe wailed in a voice frayed with pain. *Skyroot* flicked, a god's eyelash. The Witchblade rose to meet it. The impact caused a crack to appear in one of the glass arcs overlooking Battery Park. The very air seemed to come alive and punch her, everywhere at once. Sara was deaf. The mask descended on Sharpe's face and he and the blade were one, attacking with savage fury, leaving a quicksilver figure eight in the air. Sara was forced backwards by the overwhelming attack. She had no chance to think, to plan strategy. The Witchblade thought for her, parrying, trying to hang on. As

Sharpe withdrew the blade, Sara could actually feel the metal splitting. Not deep enough to reach her hand. But it was parting before the samurai sword, acknowledging a superior force.

Her head was filled with buzzers, fire alarms, tinitis, black noise. Her eyes were filled with tears of rage and frustration. The gem stone at her wrist blazed red/orange like the heart of a forge. She cursed the Witchblade and in that instant it sprouted a scythe, index and middle finger blending into one. Sharpe reversed direction and thrust forward like a fencer. The Witchblade rose. Snick-snack. It made a faint metallic whisper as it cut through Sharpe's arm above the wrist. Sword and hand fell heavily to the floor, dappling the finely finished ash with the suggestion of a chrysanthemum.

Sara panted like a spent border collie, supporting herself with her hands on her knees, the delicate fabric of her emerald gown clinging to her perspiration. Her blade was gone, faint after-image of a quicksilver loop. *Skyroot* lay on the wood floor still in Sharpe's grip, blood spreading, tip of the blade thrust skyward. Ever so slowly, it began to descend, a recalcitrant lever, until it touched the ground. One by one, the fingers of Sharpe's hand let go.

Sharpe had staggered back until he hit one of the iron girders, slid to the floor clutching his pumping stump. The sight of his blood gouting forth like a kid's bubbler snapped Sara out of her trance. She was on him in three steps, had his belt off in three seconds. It was narrow, made of some kind of lizard skin, and had probably cost more than her entire wardrobe. Sharpe was going into shock. She got the belt around his forearm below the elbow and drew it tight.

"You're going to be all right, Derek. I have to stop the flow of blood. You're going into shock, okay? That's normal. Breath deep, from the pit of your stomach. There's an

ambulance on the way.”

Was there? Where the hell was everybody?

Her hand blazed. The Witchblade extended a particularly ferocious manifestation with a sound like wind chimes.

Hooked claws, articulated spines at the knuckles and armored tendrils winding all the way up her arm culminating in heavy layered shoulder plates.

And then the power went out.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Not just the building. All of lower Manhattan. First the Woolworth Building. Then every light on every wall in the canyons of Lower Manhattan. The elevators wouldn't be operating. But somebody should have showed up by now. Maybe they were waiting to hear from the SWAT guys. Why weren't they coming up the stairs? Where were the stairs?

The gout of blood from Sharpe's cleanly amputated arm had stopped. The wound was grotesque. Sharpe sat with his knees up, his head resting against the wall, eyes shut, slowly counting out his breath. It was an impressive display of self-control, the result of years of martial arts and yoga.

Sara squatted down next to him causing her hem to rise up in an immodest manner that under any other circumstance she would have been quick to correct. "Derek, you're doing great. I have to leave you for a minute to get help."

"Cell phone," he rasped. "Jacket pocket."

Sara felt in his jacket, found the plastic clam, flipped it open. Dead. She looked at her watch, hands frozen. Not good. It wasn't a natural black-out. Something was sucking the juice out of every battery in Lower Manhattan, not just the grid.

"Remember we have to loosen the tourniquet every five minutes." Or did they? What were they trying to save? The remaining four inches of stump? She chastised herself. She

had to focus, keep it together until help arrived.

"I was..." Sharpe croaked. "Water," he gasped.

Sara rose. She remembered passing a water fountain by the elevator. She grabbed an Etruscan style vase off a plinth, rinsed it out, filled it with water. Outside, the city breathed in fear, wondering what had happened. Millions would assume it was another terrorist attack. They'd rush to the televisions but receive no solace. The cars were dead. Nothing was moving. For the first time ever, Sara couldn't hear any sirens.

She heard voices, howls of confusion, anger, paranoia, floating up from below. Cries of fear, questions hurled into the night. She ran back to Sharpe, knelt, helped guide the vase to his mouth. He drank greedily, Adam's apple bobbing.

"This time," he said, "I could feel what was happening. Spirit of a dead samurai, fierce. Fierce spirit. Chose me! Because of what happened over there..."

"What happened, Derek? What happened over there?"

"Joint exercise...with Japanese Anti-Terrorist Police, charismatic Shinto cult leader named Osagi, holed up in a mountain retreat in Hokkaido...he attacked me. I took a cut in the shoulder...right through my vest. I shot him, but it was too late...cursed. A samurai who was forced to commit seppuku... when he cut me, the spirit transferred from him to me."

"Shigeyoshi?" she asked in surprise.

"How did you know?"

"It doesn't matter." Where was the damned ambulance? She forgot. Nothing was running. No help was coming. Sharpe looked pale, and had slumped down. The best she could do for now was to make him comfortable. She looked around for something to cover him, to keep him from getting cold, found an expensive looking Oriental rug on the wall in a side room, tore it down.

Taking a cushion from a sofa near the elevator, she covered

Sharpe and made him as comfortable as possible. There was nothing more she could do. She turned to examine the sword.

Sharpe's hand lay on the floor, empty.

A scraping sound from the shadows, a gleam of reflective light from the three quarter moon as the blade emerged, seemingly suspended in mid-air. Then the man, short blondish-brown hair, moon in glasses, then the rest of him.

"David," she said in an eerily calm voice. "Put it down."

But he was not David. The creature that shuffled into the moonlight wore David's clothes, his body, but it belonged to another era. Death lurked in its eyes, no longer hidden. The thing that was David spat a squirt of guttural Japanese and attacked. He did not seem to lift his legs. He skated forward, seemingly exempt from the laws of physics, the glittering blade held overhead like an ax. Sara had always been quick, but were it not for the Witchblade, her reflexes would have failed.

Her arm didn't raise the Witchblade. The Witchblade raised the arm, meeting *Skyroot's* downward stroke six inches above Sara's head. The shock compressed her nearly to the floor as the Witchblade entwined *Skyroot*. It was like catching a Lincoln Blackwood with a razor attached. For an instant they remained frozen, the un-David bringing all his weight to bear on the blade, Sara struggling, free hand bracing the Witchblade inches from her face, as Sharpe struggled feebly to distance himself.

"Who are you?" Sara demanded.

With both hands, the creature withdrew the blade. There was a sound like exposed nerves, fingernails on chalkboards, yowling cats, screaming children. *Skyroot* repelled her, slicing through the unknown metal of the Witchblade, gashing Sara's palm to the bone. She could feel the warm blood flowing down her arm.

Skyroot cut Witchblade.

The creature backed off leaving Sara sprawled on the floor. An unknown expression subtly rearranging David's features so that he resembled a bad wax image of himself, or the way he might look after an undertaker had done his work.

Slitted eyes beamed hate. Clenched jaw spat forth a stream of jagged-edged consonants like tobacco juice. One word was recognizable.

"Udo," she hissed.

The creature smiled grimly, a smile of death. She recalled the story—how once he had slain his rival and the Lady Sakura, Udo had gone on to slaughter hundreds of innocent men, women, and children. His malignant soul had come to roost in sweet, innocent David. How could that happen? How could she fight him?

Crunching sounds from below, as someone tried to batter their way through a locked steel door. Hecht was concerned about security, all right. He'd made his performing arts center a fort, an elegant pillbox with a wig and make-up. The glass was three inches thick, optically perfect, impervious to armor-piercing rockets.

Hand burning fiercely, Sara summoned up all the strength she could muster in her battered state and rose to her feet. A whispered prayer. She tried to conceive a strategy that would somehow save both their lives, but was left wanting. She was hurt badly and she knew that she couldn't compete with the heavy sluggers. She would have to rely on her speed, agility, and the Witchblade.

"I know you can understand me," she hissed, speaking not to the young man she'd come to love, but to the warrior spirit lurking like cancer behind him.

"What do you want?"

"*Blood.*" Voice like buckling metal, like white noise, like screams in the night.

It attacked, fusing supernatural strength with skill and cunning, a dragon's tongue, leaving a gleaming retinal silver trail. Sara had no time to anticipate. The Witchblade was in constant motion intercepting each blow, describing a series of arabesques. The stone glowed like a red dwarf with each contact. If Udo killed her, nothing would stop him. Udo was apparently beyond death's reach and *Skyroot* had proved a match for the Witchblade. Would the police be able to gun him down in a fusillade of lead? An entity powerful enough to black out the entire city wasn't likely to be stopped by bullets. Would its otherworldly power continue to animate David's corpse, long after his body had been mortally wounded? An unstoppable, inhuman, engine of destruction!

A bolt of white hot fury ignited in her gut and flushed through her system, indistinguishable from the Witchblade. Her fingers fused into a twenty-eight inch blade of a delicate curving nature. The metal itself was not smooth, like the *katana*. It was a crazy quilt of textures that never settled. Only in motion could Sara get a sense of shifting patterns, rune-like, a ghost finger writing on the wall of some long-forgotten tomb.

"Leave him!" she screamed, fighting back with a series of withering parries.

"*Sakura...*" the thing rasped.

Sara's eyes went wide with horror. The non-David grinned and pressed his attack. Sara gave herself to the Witchblade, moving through a series of complex steps designed to provide maximum mobility, thrust, and defense. The non-David relentlessly circled, slashing, stabbing, seeking an opening with terminal fury. It drove her across the inlaid ballroom floor, across the North Atlantic, East to West, almost faster than she could shuffle on the balls of her feet. She stumbled at Hudson Bay. The thing coiled like a serpent. She saw death in its obsidian eyes. She remembered that David's eyes were blue.

For a nanosecond she saw the way things might have been, the split-level in Westchester, the two moppets, one boy, one girl, some kind of pound puppy, spreading waistlines and happiness. All futile. Not for her. Never for her. Not for Vince's little girl. She had her own curse to bear.

The malevolence shrieked with all the bloodlust in the jungle and slashed downward in a man killing stroke. Sara lunged forward, ducking inside the slash and inserting her knife arm at the hip, drawing across his body toward the opposite shoulder, feeling the meat part, the scrape of the bone, the tensile snapping of connective tissue. The Witchblade was out the other side, flicking blood as far as Rio de Janeiro. David looked down in astonishment.

"What--?" he said before slipping in two. He was dead before his torso hit the floor. His guts splashed in righteous display. A man of honor forced to commit seppuku would welcome such incontinence. Sara remained sitting at David's feet, her face speckled with blood, but the Witchblade had withdrawn into itself, leaving only the wrist band. A massive scraping sound issued from somewhere close followed by matter-of-fact murmuring. Hecht must have rallied his troops and broken through. Or maybe the PD.

Trembling, she sank to her knees and crawled forward, cradling David's lifeless head and torso in her arms, soaking her ruined dress in gore. *Skyroot* lay inert, temporarily sated. Her tears dripped onto his lifeless eyes.

"Oh David," she moaned softly. "God damn it. I'm so sorry..."

The black bone snouts of assault rifles poked around the corner, followed by black-clad SWAT guys in Kevlar helmets.

"It's okay," she tried to say. It came out a croak. She waved her hand. She remembered the shield around her neck and held it up, dripping blood.

"I'm a cop," she gasped.

EPILOGUE

She wouldn't let go of David. Siry had to pry her loose, finger by finger, while talking to her in a low voice. He rode with her to the Emergency Room at Cedars/Sinai, where a woman doctor examined her for damage. Her physical injuries had all ready healed. The Witchblade would not suffer a damaged host. Only shock, the doctor declared, and gave her a sedative.

Siry drove her home and tucked her in. "I'm putting a guard out here just in case."

Sara rallied. "You don't have to do that, Joe. I've got Los Romeros."

He wondered what she meant, did it anyway. She hated the fact they'd put her under, hated that she wouldn't be in on the clean-up. She fell through warm gauze toward a feather bed. When she woke, it was noon Monday, and Raj was seated in a kitchen chair he'd brought into the bedroom, and was sipping tea from a cup, Schmendrick perched contentedly on his lap.

"Greetings. It is I, Raj."

"I see that. What are you doing here?"

"I am protecting you from the press and seeing you do not choke on your own vomit."

Sara sat up, feeling woozy. "What time is it?"

Raj set his teacup down in its saucer on a tray on a TV

table, and carefully lifted the cat to the floor. "It is just past noon on Monday, and even as we speak, the Mayor, the Commissioner, and the Chief are proudly declaring that the case of the samurai killer has been solved."

Memory caught up with Sara in a great, walloping smash and took her breath away. A sob clawed its way unbidden from her lips.

Raj rose. "I shall get you some tea."

Sara fumbled for the remote and keyed on the little Sony that perched on her dresser. There was Joe, reading from a teleprompter in a monotone. "...responsible for these murders. He had all the missing blades, hanging on the wall of his studio."

Coiffed heads bobbed for attention. An especially shrill reporter drowned out all others. "Chief, Mr. Commissioner, wasn't Detective Pezzini involved in this case? Didn't she in fact shoot the alleged perpetrator?"

"I have no comment."

Sara switched it off.

Oh David. First decent guy she'd dated in years, and he turns out to be the samurai killer. A case could be made that David was innocent, being possessed by a blood crazed fourteenth century samurai at the time of the murders, but this was small comfort to the victims' families.

Sara held her right hand up and stared at the swirl of silver orbiting her wrist. Very French nouveau today. "You didn't warn me because you were in love too. You and Muramasa's bloody blade."

Raj returned to the room with an old tray he'd dug out of her cupboard, a silver pot of tea, and a plate of Pepperidge Farm Bordeaux cookies. "To whom are you speaking?"

"I was just talking to myself, Raj. Thanks for baby-sitting, but I'm all right now."

“The chief told me in no uncertain terms to stay here until I was relieved.”

“I’m relieving you, Raj. I’ll take full responsibility.”

“You are certain?”

“Want me to throw you out?”

“That will not be necessary.”

She padded after him and made sure the door was locked and the phones were off. She took a shower for fifteen minutes, toweled herself off and put on a set of workout fleece. She sat in the middle of the living room cross-legged for a while staring out the window at a high cloud in the west. Sometimes the cloud resembled a horse, sometimes a man. But when all was said and done, it was just a cloud.

She stared down at her wrist.

“Did you have to kill him?” she sobbed. She was overwhelmed with such a feeling of loss and regret, it was like a physical blow. The voice came from everywhere and nowhere.

Skyroot rejected my love.

EPILOGUE

(Alternate Ending)

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Raj rose. "I shall get you some tea."

Sara fumbled for the remote and keyed on the little Sony that perched on her dresser. There was Joe, reading from a teleprompter in a monotone. "...was responsible for the murders of Thaddeus Bachman and Scott Chalmers. Mr. Kopkind was killed while resisting arrest following an altercation with the police at the Hecht Center for the Performing Arts on Sunday night. Our investigation is ongoing, but we are confident that this will close the books on the samurai killings."

Coiffed heads bobbed for attention. An especially shrill reporter drowned out all others. "Chief, Mr. Commissioner, wasn't Detective Pezzini involved in this case? Didn't she in fact shoot the alleged perpetrator?"

"I have no comment."

Sara switched it off.

Oh David. First decent guy she'd dated in years, and he ends up being named the samurai killer. The Commissioner wanted the samurai killings cleared off the books and blaming David was just too convenient. David was close to at least one of the victims, collected swords and had attacked a police officer with a sword, a Muramasa no less! For a Police Commissioner that cared more about appearances than fact, it was open and shut. As far as she knew, David hadn't actually killed anyone. A case could be made that he was not

responsible for his actions when he attacked her, being possessed by a blood crazed fourteenth century samurai, but this was small comfort.

Sara was sure that Sharpe was *Kagemusha* and had killed Chalmers during one of his black outs. Probably did Bachman too, but the investigation into those murders would die with David. Sharpe had assaulted Adrian Hecht in front of several hundred witnesses and then murdered three security guards in cold blood. They had enough on him to put him away forever. They would say he snapped from an unrelated case of post traumatic stress and do everything possible to hide the connection between an active duty cop and the samurai killer. He would spend the rest of his life locked up in a nuthouse somewhere, trying to come up with a believable explanation for his actions. Another victim of Muramasa's curse.

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