

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL BASED ON THE HIT SERIES!

WITCHBLADE

GHOST SWORD



MIKE BARON

GHOST SWORD

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 snuggled 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.

