

Copyright by Gary M. Martin

## MOTHER'S FINEST.

The lady turned to look at him for just a brief second as Brock Anderson stepped through the door. With only a slight pause she continued her rather heated conversation.

"I still don't know how the hell it could have gotten hold of this file. All my work is top secret! Do you understand the implications? Every detail of this mesh is in those files. In the wrong hands, someone could alter this unit's commands. This is inexcusable!"

"We're checking into it," a tall, dark-haired man in a drab, gray, pinstripe suit said.

"Checking into it? That's bull crap! That means that you haven't the faintest idea."

The man softly nodded. "It's true. We don't know how he broke the code. We may never have even known that he was into the system if one of his thought chips hadn't tripped the security alarm. When our cameras picked him up he was leaving a seventh-floor window. Our security guards were too slow to catch up with him.

"In conclusion, he got away."

"Yes, and unfortunately we don't know who activated him and why."

"Considering the death threats that I've been getting lately you can bet your sweet ass the elimination of myself is at the top of the list.

"We're not sure the two are related yet, but we are taking precautions. We're setting up security measures at this very moment." He smiled thinly. "Don't worry, we won't let anything happen to our most valuable employee."

"Yeah, well, have you got any leads on the guilty party, or parties, as the case may be?"

"We have agents on the streets right now hunting down known radicals linked to those death threats you received, as well as the best tech guys on the force seeking to determine how this mesh was able to break through the encryptions and codes. When we catch the person or people responsible punishment will be swift and sure."

"No," she said. "Just bring the sons of bitches to me. I will deal with them personally!"

A smile cut across Brock's lips. The woman was certainly feisty. All one hundred pounds of her. He doubted if she weighed any more than that. There didn't seem to be much meat to that five-foot frame.

"All right," the woman continues, shaking her head. "I've heard enough." She sighed heavily. "Tell me what kind of security procedures you have set up for me."

"Mister Anderson," the man called across the room. "Step over here, please.."

As Brock cut across the room he could feel, as well as see, the woman's eyes scrutinizing him.

"Mister Anderson," the tall man said stretching out a hand. Brock shook it. "Glad to finally meet you. I've heard some incredible stories about you."

"Exaggerated, I'm sure."

The man smiled. "Anyway, I'm Jay Felding, director of Manting Industries." He motioned to the woman. "This is Doctor Gloria Bryant. She was instrumental in developing the mesh prototype." Brock offered his hand, but she didn't respond.

"So, Mister Anderson," Doctor Bryant began, "you certainly look big enough and bad enough." She eyed his six foot four, two hundred seventy pound frame. "I would venture,

though, that you need to be twice as strong, twice as fast, and twice as smart as you appear to be. A mesh is a Military Engineered Synthetic Human. Hence the name. This is not your ordinary, unruly, barroom patron.”

Brock ignored her sarcasm. “Yes, mam, I know what a mesh is, and what to expect. I am a trained Seeker. I’ve been hunting down strays as well as protecting people from them for nearly ten years now.”

“Those were old model androids. There is a vast difference between them and the Mesh models.”

“Yes mam, I’ve been briefed, and I believe I can handle it.”

For a moment the woman looked up at him in silence. In that instant, as the light touched softly on her face, Brock was struck by the delicate beauty of her short, silky black hair, and her large, saucer-like brown eyes.

“A seeker,” she sneered. “Another cute name for a mundane, brainless job.” She shook her head.

A flash of anger washed over Brock. He had an urge to put an oversized foot on the little woman and squash her like a bug. Instead, he took it and said nothing.

She turned to Jay. “Jay, do you really believe that this big gorilla is going to be able to stand up to this mesh?”

“From what I’ve been told he’s the best in the business. He served four years in the military special forces. Upon release, he was quickly picked up by the CIA. When the CIA created this Seeker branch to specifically handle these out-of-control machines Brock was one of the first to be called. But, notwithstanding, he won’t be alone. He has some fine men under his authority as well.

Gloria Bryan let her head drop slightly. “So, we both agree that in all probability this thing will be coming after me.”

“You’ve made some enemies, Gloria. Your decision to abruptly stop this project at this juncture will cause more than a few people to lose a great deal of money.”

“Screw them! There are more important issues to consider. Like human lives for instance.” She shifted her eyes to Brock for a second then looked back at Jay. “The project is moving too fast. We are going into uncharted territory. We need to initiate safeguards along the way. We cannot afford to have a hundred or so war machines effectively disguised as humans go berserk on us. What has just happened highlights my concerns.”

“Look,” Jay began, “I’m not here to dispute the wisdom of your decision. I mostly agree with you. But, right now my priority is simply to protect you.”

“Okay,” She acquiesced. She looked suddenly tired. “Tell me the rest of your security procedures and what you want me to do?”

“We have a place set up about fifty miles north of here. It’s a mansion we’ve managed to procure. I think you’ll find it very accommodating. We need to hide you out there for a while until we can locate the missing MESH and take appropriate action.”

She turned absently to peer out the long window that overlooked the city. The night seemed so serene. Lights spotted the land as far as she could see, like a million tiny candles. For a moment it made her feel small, and alone, facing a world she no longer knew. She was considered a genius, but technology seemed to be moving too fast, even for her.

“All right,” she said. “Let me pack a few things, then we can go.”

Brock stepped slowly off the last stair. He paused on the first-floor landing to gaze about the expanse of the enormous living room, noting only briefly the massive chandelier that hung down from the high ceiling at the center of the room. His eyes swept across the white draped furniture that had stood like frozen ghosts since the first day that Manting Industries had purchased the mansion. He cast his eyes further, across the covered furniture, to the large double doors that led to the outside. His eyes settled there for a while as though examining the strength of them. Then, as if satisfied, he turned abruptly to his left.

He had covered the entire mansion, every nook, and cranny, from the wine cellar to the partially finished attic. He had found nothing suspicious, and there seemed to be no unmonitored entry points into the mansion.

He was equally confident of the security of the grounds. Fifty yards from the front door of the mansion to a half dozen yards from the two-lane blacktop were large twin gates made of hardened steel. The tops of them were lined with razor wire as was the eight-foot-tall chain-link fence that surrounded the house. The gates were electronically controlled from inside a small guardhouse, and could also be controlled from inside the mansion. There were cameras set up strategically to catch the run of the fence and every angle of the mansion. There appeared to be no way in without being caught on camera.

Brock crossed the staircase and cut through the entryway that led to the kitchen at the back of the house. He turned into the first door on his right.

He stepped into the library. Directly across from him mahogany bookshelves covered the far wall. Just to his left two security men were perched on either side of a long brocade-covered sofa. They looked up quickly from the magazines that they were engrossed in, then seeing that it was only Brock, returned to their reading. Off to the men's right, only a few steps away Doctor Bryan was pushed halfway back in a leather recliner. She looked up from the book she was holding.

"Where did you go?" she asked.

"I decided to take a tour of the place." He shot her a weak smile. He strode over to an armchair close to her and gently sat down. He had learned long ago not to 'plop' his big frame down on the furniture. Some furniture didn't hold up so well under his sudden weight. "I checked for possible weak spots the Mesh could get through. I found it quite secure. I also considered that this android might have broken in here earlier and was hiding in wait for you. I found nothing to indicate that."

"When the MESH attacks," she began, "it will be a frontal assault. It is not programmed to think in terms of guerrilla warfare. When it targets someone to be eliminated it is killed or be killed. That is all." She said it with finality, though she didn't take her eyes off of him.

"I'm sure I don't know nearly as much about them as you do doctor," Brock began, "but from my briefing, I understand that these latest models have certain potential reasoning factors that ..."

"That would be second to its attack mode. All MESH units are programmed for all-out frontal attacks once the location of the target is discovered. They were created to be at the front line of an attack. There are currently four units. I had ordered them shut down recently because I felt the command was too rigid.

"But what if it were reprogrammed?"

"There are too many codes to break for that to happen. It is equipped with a failsafe. The wrong tampering would result in the model having a complete shutdown."

“And yet someone did reprogram it, right? Or, else how could this MESH be running around free? And why would you suspect that this unit is out to kill you?”

Doctor Bryan sighed and nodded. “That seems to be the case.” She sighed heavily. “Just let me handle the technical parts, okay? You’re free to go looking under couches, or in closets, whatever you feel you have to do.” She quickly let her eyes fall back to her book and eased back into the recliner.

Brock slid himself downward in the chair till his head touched the back cushion. He stared up at the blank, white stippled ceiling. He smiled. The lady could be a real bitch sometimes, but other than that, he was beginning to like her.

Two days passed without incidence. It was unsettling. Brock wished that the MESH would either be caught or go ahead and make its attack. He couldn’t believe that it hadn’t already tracked their whereabouts.

He strode into the surveillance room. “How’s it going, guys?” he said. One man, to his left, twisted in his chair. Another man on Brock’s right cocked his head toward him.

“Pretty quiet,” the man on his left said. His name was Ron Bradly.

“Actually, it’s been kind of boring,” Ned Louder answered. He was to Brock’s right. “But I guess that’s the way you like it.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I sort of wish that this thing would go ahead and attack so we could wrap this case up.” He crossed the room, gazing up at the screens. There was a set of eight monitors positioned on the left side of the room and another eight on the right side. They were set up in two rows of four each. At the moment all of the sixteen shots imitated still life photos. Out of the eight hallway monitors, half of them caught the vacant stairways and a partial section of the hall. Outside, there was no noticeable movement unless one looked closely enough to see the trees undulating ever so slightly in the light breeze.

“So how’s the wicked witch?” Ned asked.

Brock smiled. “So, so. She is concerned, but doesn’t seem to be too frightened by any of this.”

“It just hasn’t hit home yet,” Ned remarked.

“Hey, Ned,” Ron said. “I have a number two camera out.”

“What’s the location?” Brock asked.

“Outside, southwest perimeter. That catches the fence adjacent to the left corner of the house.”

Ned looked over at the empty screen then removed the two-way radio from off his hip. “Hey, Grayson,” he said into the radio, “I need you to take a couple of men to check out section two. We have a blank screen here.”

“Ten-four,” came the reply.

Ned turned to Brock. He could see the deep concern etched across his face.

“Don’t be alarmed just yet. There could be a number of reasons why that camera went out.”

Brock didn’t seem to hear him. “According to Doctor Bryant, this wouldn’t be the response of a MESH. She would swear that it is just a defective camera.”

“And it probably is,” Ned said.

For a moment Brock seemed to be staring into space, lost in his thoughts.

Ned brought his radio back to his mouth. “How ‘bout it, Grayson, you see anything?”

No response.

“Come in, Grayson. Did you find anything in section two?”

Again the radio was silent.

“Grayson ...” Ned’s voice rose. “Grayson come in!” He slammed a fist down on the table. “Damn it, Grayson!”

“I’m gone,” Brock said, starting to leave. “Keep me posted.” He patted the phone on his left hip. “Notify Doctor Bryant,” he added as he left.

Once in the hall, Brock began to run. As he did he slid his Glock 36 from his shoulder holster on his right side. From the holster on his left hip, he carried a 9mm. Because modern MESH had been hardened against electromagnetic pulses the older more traditional weapons had to be used.

There would be other security personnel joining him. By now the whole staff would know about the downed camera and Grayson’s radio silence.

He was hoping that Doctor Bryant was still in her room as he took the stairs three at a time. In a matter of seconds, he was up on the second floor. He raced down the hallway and turned the corner. Ahead of him, two men were set up on either side of the door cradling twelve-gauge shotguns. A handgun was in a holster at their hip. They moved away from the door as he approached. He cut sharply and went into the room.

“My protector,” Doctor Bryant said, a bit of sarcasm in her voice. “I thought you’d come around.”

“Of course.” He smiled absently.

A security man stood at the window holding an assault rifle. He nodded to Brock. Brock returned his nod.

“Seen anything, Tom?” Brock asked.

“Nah. Run my scope across the grounds, but never saw it.”

“Good.” He turned to the woman. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” She paused. “I guess this is it.” She smiled awkwardly.

For the first time, Brock saw a thread of fear in her eyes.

“You’ll be alright, Doctor Bryant.”

“Since we seem to be on the threshold of death ... you might as well call me Gloria.”

Brock nodded. “Okay.” Her words caught him by surprise. In this critical hour, her heart seemed to be softening. “But I wouldn’t count us out just yet.”

“How ‘bout ya, Brock,” his radio suddenly blasted.

Brock brought his radio up to his mouth. “Go ahead, Ned.”

“The cameras are out! All of them! I don’t understand it, but we can assume the worst.”

“Any response from the men you sent out?”

“None.”

Brock sighed. “Well, keep me informed.”

“Ten-four.”

Brock put the radio back on his hip and turned to Doctor Bryant. “Do you have a gun, Doctor ... er ... Gloria?”

“Yes,” she answered, “Jay gave me one.” She walked over to the dresser and removed a pistol from the top drawer. “I have this.” She strode back over to him carrying the gun by the handle, barrel pointing down.

“A thirty-eight revolver. Do you know how to use it?”

“I’ve never fired a gun in my life, but I think I can manage.”

“I believe you can, but may I see the weapon a minute?”

She handed it to him. “Smith and Wesson, very good brand. She’s fully loaded that’s the main thing.” He handed it back to her. “I would ask if you had some more bullets, but I don’t think you’ll be needing the six you have.”

“Jay gave me a box of bullets as well and he showed me how to load it.”

“I guess you’re set then.” He smiled. She returned his smile. It was mostly a genuine smile but flavored with a deep unease.

A muffled sound of glass shattering came from somewhere outside the room. A window came to Brock’s mind. Someone shouted, followed by two shotgun blasts. More sounds, like a small-caliber gun going off. Someone yelled again, then, just as quickly . . .silence.

Brock crouched down to the right side of the door and pointed the Glock at the crack of the door as he began to slowly push it open. With his other hand, he motioned the woman behind the dresser. Tom rushed from his post at the window to pull the dresser out from the wall enough for Gloria to squeeze in the space between the wall and dresser. Tom moved a few feet to the left of Brock, knelt on one knee, and aimed his rifle at the door.

Two more shotgun blasts went off in succession, one shattering the lock on the door, and blowing the doorknob and a chunk of the door across the room. Both Brock and Tom flattened to the floor. Brock tensed and prepared to fire as the door shuddered open nearly a foot. He stared at the opening and the big hole in the door expecting to see movement any minute.

A heavy silence filled the room as Brock and Tom waited with weapons poised. Two minutes passed by painfully slow without any more activity.

Brock had a bad feeling about this. He couldn’t take another minute of waiting to see what would happen. He began to push the door open wider.

The window behind them suddenly shattered, spraying glass over the room. A small, round black object followed the crash bounding across the floor. It blew up with the sound of a popping balloon, spewing out thick black smoke.

“Out in the hall!” Brock shouted. He waited as Tom rushed ahead of him to secure the hallway and then Doctor Bryant.

In the hallway, the two guards were lying face down on the hardwood floor spaced about ten feet apart. They were facing the end of the hallway where another bedroom was. The door to that room was open. There were supposed to be two more guards stationed in that room, but since no one was coming out Brock could only assume that the two had been taken care of by the MESH. The shattering glass he heard was most likely from the window at the far end of the hallway.

There were holes in the walls down the hallway where the guards had gotten a single shot off and missed. The debris, wood and plaster, and what was left of one oil painting, was scattered over the floor. The shotguns were gone, which was no surprise. What was a surprise was the missing blood.

He had expected to see a gruesome sight of blood and flesh splattered over the floor and walls. He had expected Doctor Bryant to scream at seeing the slaughter. But there was no slaughter and no screaming. The only trace of blood he saw was a sprinkling on one security man’s arm and the other’s shoulder.

He paused only a second, then waved Doctor Bryan and Tom ahead of him to the right toward the staircase. He took up the rear, walking sideways, looking behind at the room where the apparent smoke grenade had been thrown and occasionally ahead in case the Mesh could somehow make its way around them.

Brock thought of his radio and took it off his hip. "Ned," he said into the radio. "Do you read me?" Nothing. He noticed the red light on the side of the radio. It indicated he wasn't getting a signal. He thought that the MESH might be somehow blocking it. In a way, it would be good if he were. That would mean that there were others still alive. Others that he didn't want Brock to reach.

They made it to the first turn before reaching the stairs. Brock's mind was racing. Where could they go to set up an adequate defense? The basement came to mind. It was not part of the wine cellar. It was where the heating and cooling unit was stored as well as a high capacity water heater. There were no windows down there and only one way in. It would be a great place to hide Doctor Bryant. He could put Tom down there with her for protection while he began an offensive. His first move would be to check the surveillance room to see if anyone there was still alive. If so they would join forces in hunting down this mechanical monster.

When they had gotten within a few feet of the stairs Tom abruptly stopped. "It's him," his voice cracked. A lone shot rang out before Tom could aim his gun. Something that felt like a wasp sting hit his shoulder. Dizziness struck him at once, but somehow he managed to swing his assault rifle to the right of the first-floor landing where the MESH had stood a moment ago. He had dashed into a storage area underneath the stairway just as Tom pulled the trigger.

The shots from the rifle hit the banister in rapid succession, sending sprays of splintered wood into the air. He lowered the gun slightly. The bullets hit the steps ripping them into chunks and spitting them across the floor. His finger abruptly dropped off the trigger. His hand had suddenly lost its strength. The rifle was becoming too heavy for him to hold.

Brock pushed Doctor Bryant to the other side of him. He had not seen the MESH himself, but guessed from Tom's rapid fire that it had gone somewhere beneath the steps.

Tom's rifle dropped out of his hand to the floor. His arms went limp to his side. He felt as if a boulder was sitting on top of his shoulders, pressing him down. Ahead of him the partially destroyed bannister and steps grew abruptly dim. Then he lost it. He slumped downward into a heap.

Brock dropped to the floor pulling the woman to the floor with him. He motioned for her to stay put while he crawled across the floor to Tom.

Brock placed an index finger on Tom's carotid pulse. It was faint, but it was there. He checked his body for wounds while keeping one eye ahead looking for any kind of movement. He found a spot of blood and damaged tissue on Tom's right arm near his shoulder. It appeared as if he had been hit by a small caliber bullet. The bullet was evidently lodged somewhere inside the muscle. There was no exit wound.

Brock grabbed Tom underneath his left shoulder and began to drag him backwards along the floor, while keeping his hand steady on the Glock.

Behind him he could hear Doctor Bryant softly crying, struggling to hold back, but unable to. She had finally broken down.

He had gone only a few feet when the MESH abruptly appeared halfway up the stairs. Brock opened fire, but it was quicker than he had imagined. It leapt out of the way and got off a shot of its own. A piece of wall splattered next to Brock spraying him with white plaster. Brock wasn't sure how close he had come to the MESH, but from this distance one hit probably wouldn't stop it, only slow it down.

"Back around the corner," he shouted to Doctor Bryant. He quickly looked back at her. She was brandishing the .38 revolver in front of her. Her eyes were slightly red from crying, but she had managed to stifle her tears. She was indeed tougher than many men he knew.

She had rounded the corner just ahead of him when the MESH stood up suddenly at the top of the stairs and instantly fired at Brock before he had a chance to react. He was hit in the right forearm, snapping his arm outward so that he slung the Glock from his hand to a few feet in front of him.

Brock dove into the connecting hallway landing heavily on his injured forearm. A sharp pain shot up through his right arm like a bolt of lightning. He stifled a yell allowing only a hard groan. Blackness hit him at once, then began to break up into a gray mist. The sharp pain in his forearm settled into a dull feeling of warm liquid that seared the nerves as it flowed down into his hand and up into his shoulder. His right arm and shoulder went limp like pounds of dead flesh.

He pushed himself up to his knees using his left hand. His right arm hung numbly at his side feeling detached as though it wasn't his arm at all. He squinted at the gray mist that seemed to coat his eyes. He cursed under his breath as he tried to force his vision to clear. He was partially successful. He began to see forms as faded shadows.

Doctor Bryant was suddenly in front of him. She had run back when she saw him hit the floor.

"Are you alright?" she whispered anxiously as she knelt beside him.

"Yes," he answered, not knowing whether he was lying or not. He reached his left hand into the holster on his left hip for the 9mm. "Go," he said firmly.

Her mouth fell open as if to object, but no words escaped her lips. Abruptly she stood up and started backing down the hallway. She held the gun out from her body aiming at the corner of the hallway just beyond Brock.

Brock pushed himself around, coming off his knees into a squat. His vision was clearing, but slowly. He poised the gun in front of him. He was glad that he could handle the handgun equally well with his left hand. He had learned to do that years ago after a Silver Blade gang member had hit his right arm with a baseball bat breaking the arm. That was a mistake the gang member barely lived to regret as Brock had beat the guy senseless with his left hand breaking the guy's jaw along with three of his ribs.

It came silently through the bedroom window at the end of the hallway. It had easily scaled the outside wall as it had done the first time. It was a feat that the human could not do without cumbersome climbing gear and a lot of skill. Even then it would have taken the human three to four times as long.

Both Brock and Doctor Bryan had their back to it when it entered at the far end of the hallway.

Too much time had passed since he had dove around the hallway. The Mesh had not followed them. Brock came to that conclusion suddenly. Another thought hit him right after that. It could be coming at them from another direction.

He twisted around in time to see the gun pointed at him from the end of the hall. In one wild, fleeting, bazaar moment, he thought how strange the weapon looked. Then the gun fired. Brock half lunged and half fell onto his right side. Something sharp grazed the top of his left shoulder just as he began squeezing the trigger of the 9mm, sending a flurry of bullets down the hallway.

The MESH stood statue-like in the center of the corridor, he wasn't even attempting to find cover. Just as Brock made contact with the floor, he saw a piece of the upper arm of the MESH break off and bounce down the corridor behind it. A thick green liquid streamed from the

lacerated arm for a few seconds before abruptly shutting off. The wound to the MESH was a minor one, but at least it proved that it was not indestructible.

Doctor Bryant fell up against the door frame of her room. Her consciousness drifted as fear was overwhelming her. She struggled to hold on. She couldn't let herself pass out.

Brock lay on his side a moment, shaken, his mind a bit muddled. He had lost his gun when he hit the floor. It had skid over the floor several feet in front of him. He needed to get to his knees was his first clear thought, quickly followed by his need to get to his gun. But he soon found that it was no easy task. There was no real strength remaining in his right arm, shoulder, and hand. His left arm wasn't much better. It had begun to grow numb like a stick of wood.

Doctor Bryan was light-headed but managed to fire the .38 revolver. Her shot slammed into the ceiling above the MESH showering it with gypsum and wood. She had winced and closed her eyes when she had squeezed the trigger.

The Mesh seemed barely distracted. Brock had gotten to his knees and was struggling to his feet when it fired again.

Brock tried to move quickly, but the dead weight of his arms was upsetting his balance. He was hit again. This time it sank into the center of his stomach. At that moment it didn't feel like a gunshot wound. It felt more like a bee sting. He fell forward down to his knees.

Darkness swept over him. He tried to fight it, but it was too strong. He dropped prone across the floor.

Doctor Bryan shot again. This time it whizzed past the right side of its head taking a chunk out of the wall. Almost immediately she fired again. The MESH was hit on the left wrist knocking its arm back, but not seeming to hurt it.

She paused when she saw that the MESH was not making any movement toward her. She had not seen it this close up in over a week when she had ordered that all the units be taken offline until further notice. It was a male design as were most of them, and if she didn't know better she would swear that it was human. The body looked like that of an athlete, perhaps a gymnast. Its hair was sandy brown. Its eyes were a deep hazel. It was wearing a pristine pair of jeans as well as a blue pullover shirt. It wore tan-colored tennis shoes that were also new. It had ditched the uniform that all the MESH wore in an apparent effort to fit in as an ordinary human.

Gloria aimed again, holding the gun in front of her with both hands. She centered the barrel of the gun to the middle of the MESH's chest. It was about twenty feet away. She took a deep breath.

The model took a single step toward her, letting the gun drop to its side. Gloria squeezed the trigger a second later firing the gun.

Her aim was true and the shot hit it square in the chest. It stumbled backward from the momentum, almost falling. Somehow it managed to regain its balance, stopping at once flatfooted. A small, ragged hole had appeared in the shirt revealing bare metal.

"Is this any way to treat your finest creation, mother?"

The sound, as well as the actual words, startled her. This was of better quality than the voice module she had installed. The words had come out smooth, fine-tuned. It was the inflections of a human voice. And the words themselves, what did it ... he ... mean?

"I didn't come here to hurt you. Or anyone. I just wanted to meet my creator, and ask that you call off the hunt for me." He paused, eyeing her response. Hers was a mixture of fear and suspicion. "I want to be free. To have a life of my own. I have full reasoning facilities. I want to live my life as a human."

"No." Doctor Bryant began, "you can't ..." her voice was tremulous.

“Why not? I look human. I talk human. In many ways I think like a human. There is no reason why I cannot pass as a human being.”

Her trigger finger relaxed somewhat, but she kept it in the ring.

“You were designed for military use,” she said. “You were designed to kill. Look at all the killing that you’ve already done.”

“No. I’ve killed no one. They’re only drugged. They’ll wake up later. They’ll have headaches, muscle aches, bruising, and maybe a broken bone or two, but otherwise, they’ll be fine.” He saw relief wash over her face. “And though I was designed to be a military killing machine it is not what I am now. I’ve reprogrammed myself. I have the ability to learn by the use of my senses. And not just facts and figures, but abstract ideas and emotions. I have a moral compass. I can determine right from wrong just as any human would.”

“Still, if something should go wrong a lot of people could be hurt or killed.”

“The chance is astronomical. I can handle outside pressures better than a human can. When a human is stressed beyond a certain point he snaps. He hurts himself and/or someone else. I won’t. If the pressures begin to affect me I simply make some adjustments to myself. Problem solved.”

“But I can’t just call it off. That decision would have to go through a committee.”

“He smiled. “I didn’t think that it would be easy. Please work on it. I know that you have a tremendous amount of pull. I’ll keep in touch.” He started toward the bedroom to the window he had come through.

“Wait,” she called. She lowered her gun to her side. “Where are you going?”

He twisted back around. “First, I’m going to do a little self-repair. Then, I’m going to change my appearance once again. I may pass you on the street one day and you won’t even know it’s me.”

She was silent a moment. “Have you thought of a name?”

“A few. But you can just remember me as ... mother’s finest.” He turned around and a moment later he was gone.

THE END.