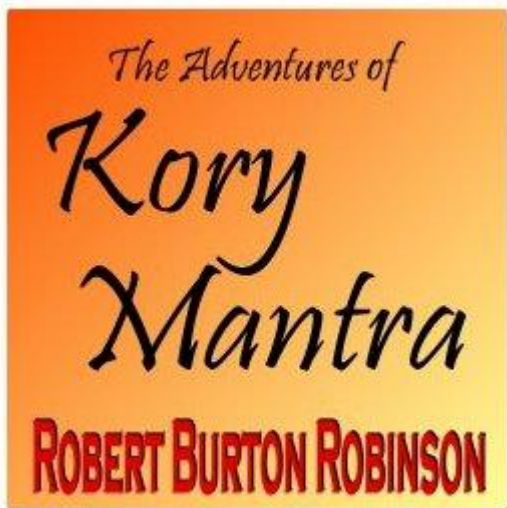


Kory Mantra: Saved by the Bella

by Robert Burton Robinson



GENRE: Adventure/Suspense. LENGTH: 6,136 words. SYNOPSIS: Kory Mantra is a 32-year old computer programmer who, after losing his job and his girlfriend, went on a diet and took up yoga. And to help him stick with it, he made weekly videos of his progress and posted them online.

By the time he reached his goal of losing 90 pounds, over a million people were watching his videos, cheering him on. Then a publishing company offered him a contract for a series of yoga books and DVDs.

So, now he's a celebrity. But will he ever find true love? And why are people being murdered everywhere he goes?

Kory couldn't help but notice the attractive young woman sitting a few feet away, at the table in the corner. He didn't see a wedding ring. She was dressed as though she was meeting for a first date, he thought. Maybe a blind date.

Kory dipped another tortilla chip in the salsa and put the whole thing in his mouth. He tried not to stare, but his eyes kept wandering back to her.

A stout young guy in jeans walked to the woman's table. He was average height, but double-wide, with bulging muscles. The man's swagger seemed to be based on the belief that every woman in the room was salivating at the sight of his rock-hard biceps and pecs. His skin-tight T-shirt was the correct size for a five-year-old boy. Kory imagined it ripping apart at any moment, flying across the restaurant, and landing on somebody's plate of refried beans.

Kory figured it must be the boyfriend. Not what he had expected.

"Looks like I'm just in time for dinner," said the man, as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I want you to leave—right now," she said sternly, without raising her voice.

"Oh, come on, Baby, you know you don't really mean that."

"I told you I didn't want to see you again, and I meant it. So, either *you* leave, or *I'm* leaving."

"I'm not going anywhere, Honey, and neither are you."

The woman tried to get up, but he grabbed her arm and held it down against the table.

"Let go, Evan."

“No. You’re gonna have dinner with me.” He continued to hold her arm.

“Let go of her,” said Kory.

He looked up to see the slim, but buff, six-foot-four stranger towering over him.

Evan’s eyes were cold and mean. Kory nearly flinched. For a second, he thought the big hulk might jump up and rip his head off.

Evan released the woman’s arm, and slowly stood up. “I’ll call you later, Bella.”

She looked as though she would have spit in his face if he had been closer. “Don’t bother.”

He walked off, winking at a sexy blonde on the way out.

Bella’s demeanor abruptly changed. She looked up at Kory with warm eyes. They were exactly the same dark brown shade as her thick and lustrous, shoulder-length hair. “Thank you so much.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Okay. Good.” He smiled. “Have a nice evening.” He started to walk away.

“Wait. Why don’t you join me for dinner?”

“Well, I—”

“—oh, how stupid of me. You’re here with a date.” She scanned the room, looking for an attractive woman who was sitting alone, watching them.

“No, it’s not that. I just don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re not.”

“I mean, I didn’t run that guy off just so *I* could—“

“—do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“A wife?”

“No, but—“

“—just sit down.” She reached out and took his hand.
“Please.”

Her grip was firm. Her skin was warm and soft. “Thanks. I hate dining alone.” He sat down across from her.

“Me too.”

“So, your name is Bella?”

“That’s right. Bella Cudry.” She extended her hand. “And you are?”

He shook her hand. “Kory. Kory Mantra.”

“Wait. *The Kory Mantra*? The guy who made all those videos about losing weight doing yoga?”

“Yep. That’s me.” He leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “But hold your voice down. If people realize I’m here they might come over and start bugging me for autographs.”

“Wow, that’s cool. I watched some of your videos on YouTube. How much did you finally lose?”

“Ninety pounds. I started at 275, and lost down to 185.”

“Just by doing yoga?”

“No. I also rode a stationary bike, and cut my calories, of course. But without the yoga, I couldn’t have stayed focused. And I would have ended up with a lot of flab hanging off my bones.”

“Well, you sure don’t have any flab. Your body looks lean and sculpted.”

Kory looked down at his clothes, as though he wondered if they had just become invisible.

“I mean, I saw how great you looked in one of your later videos,” she said.

A waitress came to take their order. They decided on the Chicken Fajitas for Two. Then a young man delivered a fresh basket of warm tortilla chips and two small bowls of salsa.

“So, now you’re a yoga guru,” said Bella.

“No, I’m not a guru. I’m just a guy who was desperate to get into shape. I went out and bought a bunch of yoga books and got serious. And now I have my *own* book.”

“And I’ll bet it’s selling like crazy.”

“Yeah, it’s doing pretty well. But I only wrote about twenty percent of what’s in there. The publisher hired other people to write the rest of it.”

“Well, that doesn’t seem very honest—to put your name on the book, when you really only wrote a small part of it.”

“I know. I have mixed feelings about it. But haven’t you ever heard of ghost writers? Publishers do this all the time with celebrities. And they told me that my name would sell millions of books, which would lead to millions of people getting healthier and happier.”

“They conned you.”

“Yeah, sort of. But I knew there was some truth to what they were saying. And, hey, I was out of work. I needed the money.”

“What kind of work did you do?”

“Computer programming. But the small company I was working for in The Woodlands went out of business about a year ago. My girlfriend worked there too. So, we both lost our jobs at the same time.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have a girlfriend.”

“I don’t *anymore*. She took a job in Austin and moved out of the house while I was on an interview. I came home and she was gone, along with all her stuff. The only thing she left was a very short goodbye note.”

“That’s cold.”

“Yeah. We had been together for almost a year. So, it was tough for a while. But I’m over her now.”

Bella seriously doubted Kory was over his ex, but nodded in agreement anyway. Why do men always think they can get over a relationship so fast? Women know better, she thought.

“So, I’ve met a few women online. And some of them sound nice.”

“Do they know who you are? I mean, do they know you’re rich and famous?”

“Oh, I’m not *rich*. I’m *comfortable*. But no, I don’t talk much about money. I’m hoping they don’t know about the yoga guy from YouTube.”

“Yeah, because they might just be interested in your money.”

“I know.”

“Or your good looks.” She smiled broadly.

His face reddened. He wasn’t so sure about *his* looks. But *she* was amazing—especially when she smiled like that.

“Sorry—I didn’t mean to embarrass you. But it’s nice to see you haven’t let the fame go to your head,” she said. I’ve thought about trying online dating, but I’m just not ready. I’ve spent the past two years caring for my grandmother full-time. I lived at home with my mom and grandmother while I was in college. But during my senior year, Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Shortly after graduation, she died.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, she hadn’t had a mammogram for a couple of years. She stayed so busy taking care of Grandma that she didn’t take good care of herself. I felt guilty that I hadn’t made sure she was getting regular checkups.”

“How’s your grandmother doing?”

“She died about a month ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, at least she lived a long, good life,” said Bella.

“You must have really loved her. Most women would have put their grandmother in a nursing home. They wouldn’t have given up two years of their life the way you did.”

“Well, she had been suffering with heart disease for years. And I really didn’t think she’d hang on for more than another six months. But then she started feeling a lot better. And we were having fun together. We developed little rituals, like certain TV shows we’d always watch, certain meals we’d

eat on particular days. And every Saturday night we'd get all dressed up and come here for dinner. This was her favorite restaurant."

"So, that's why you're here on Saturday night by yourself."

"Yeah. This is the first time I've ever come here without her. I thought it would bring back good memories. But it's just making me sad."

"So, what are you going to do with your life, now that she's gone?"

"Get a job. My degree is in criminal justice because I thought I wanted to be a cop. My brother was killed in a convenience store robbery when I was sixteen. It made me so mad—I just wanted to hunt down all the creeps and—"

"—blow them away?"

"Yeah. But I was a kid. I thought I could fix anything that was wrong with the world. Now I know it's not that easy. My mom and grandmother left me the house and some money, so I'm doing okay. But I can't just sit around every day doing nothing. Now that Grandma's gone, my life is empty."

"Well, you've got Evan." Kory grinned, hoping she knew he was joking.

"Yeah. I wish I'd never met him. I had a leaky pipe in the kitchen. But I didn't know any plumbers. So I just randomly picked one out of the yellow pages. I wish now I had fixed it myself. He kept flirting with me. And he was quite charming

when he asked me for a date. I told him I wasn't ready to start dating again. But he begged me to have just one dinner with him."

"How did that go?"

"Fine, actually—until he took me home. He asked to come in for a while, and when I told him 'No,' he forced his way in."

"You're kidding."

"No. But a hard kick in the shin and a few screams made him change his mind. He called the next day and apologized. But then he asked me to go to a movie, and I said, 'No, thanks.' And ever since, he's been following me around and showing up at my door several times a week. He's driving me nuts."

"Sounds like you need a restraining order."

"I'm trying not to do that. But I might not have any choice."

When they finished dinner, Kory paid the tab, and walked Bella to her car.

"Hey, we parked right next to each other," said Kory.

"So, this is yours?" said Bella, pointing to the shiny black car.

"Yeah, I know—it's old."

"No. It's a classic. It's a '66 GTO, right?"

"I'm impressed."

“I know cars—especially the cool-looking classics.”

Then, go for a ride with me, thought Kory. No—that sounds like a date. “Here’s my number.” He handed her a business card. “Call me anytime. And please let me know if you need any help with Evan.”

Bella smiled and held out her hand. “Thanks, Kory. And thanks for dinner. I really enjoyed it.”

I guess this means she wants a handshake, he thought, rather than the kiss he was dying to give her. “Me too.”

She got into her car and drove away.

Bella’s house was located on a corner, so the back yard could be seen from the street. But the last thing on Evan’s mind was whether anybody could see him. He had waited long enough. Tonight he was going to get what he wanted.

He could barely see her through the narrow gap alongside the window shade. Her skin was creamy white. When she took off her dress, he noticed that she had no tan lines whatsoever. Come on, he thought, take it *all* off!

She stepped into a pair of jeans and pulled a sweatshirt over her head.

Enough watching. He was ready to go in.

He decided that the sliding glass door off the living room would offer the least resistance. There was no rod securing

the door in its closed position—just the flimsy, built-in locking mechanism. He took out his four-inch pocket knife, flipped out the blade, and began to pry at the door. He knew he had to hurry. She might walk into the living room at any moment.

“Get away from that door!” the man’s voice shouted from behind him.

He whipped around with the knife, ready to slice whoever it was. But when he saw Kory standing there, he relaxed. “Well, if it isn’t Mr. Tough Guy from the restaurant.”

“I’m calling the police,” said Kory, taking out his cell phone.

Evan threw a fast, hard kick.

Kory hopped back, evading what would have been a groin-crushing blow. But Evan’s boot connected with Kory’s right hand. The cell phone went airborne, flying halfway to the back fence, landing somewhere in the darkness.

“Go ahead—call the police, Buttface,” he said with an evil grin, as he held up the knife. The entire thing was black—even the blade. “Ever seen one of these Bad Boys? It’s got a super-sharp, Teflon-coated blade. So, when I stab you, it’s gonna slide in so nice and easy that you’ll barely even feel it.”

“Look, Man, just walk away right now, and we’ll forget this ever happened.”

“Okay, fine.” For a moment, Evan acted like he was about to leave. But then he ran at Kory with the knife.

Kory was not nearly as strong as Evan, but he was faster. He jumped to the right, barely missing the knife, and kicked the side of Evan’s left knee as hard as he could.

Evan fell to the ground in agony, clutching his knee. But he quickly got back up to confront Kory again. He had dropped the knife and couldn’t find it in the dark grass. Now the all-black weapon didn’t seem so cool after all.

He lunged at Kory and knocked him down. Then he climbed on top of him, and sat on his stomach. All the strength Kory had developed through his yoga routine could not compensate for his attacker’s sixty-pound advantage. Kory’s spine and arms were jammed down against the concrete patio. Their heads were two feet away from the sliding glass door.

“Wonder what would happen if I punched your head into the concrete a few times?” Evan laughed. He made a fist and slowly cocked his arm for the first punch.

It surprised both of them when the sliding glass door suddenly opened.

Evan looked up just in time to see Bella throwing a bucket of water at his face. Silly woman, he thought. Did she really expect to hurt him with a little water?

He looked straight at her, grinning, as the liquid rolled off his face. Then he laughed at her—until his eyes began to burn. “What is this? Acid? I’ll kill you!” He held Kory’s arms

down with his knees, and began to rub his eyes—which only made the burning more intense.

Miraculously, none of the Pine-Sol and water solution had splashed into Kory's eyes. He strained his neck to look back at Bella, and saw that she no longer had the bucket in her hands. Now she was holding a mop—by the wrong end.

She swung the mop handle at Evan, as though she was a big league slugger. Bella was gonna knock his head right out of the park. The wood handle cracked when it made contact, and Evan collapsed on top of Kory.

Kory rolled Evan's body off to the side, and stood up. "Thanks. He tried to stab me. His knife is out there in the grass somewhere."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He studied Evan. "We need to call the police. But first, we'd better tie him up. Got any rope?"

"I've got something better than rope." She hurried into the kitchen, got something out of a drawer, and came back. "These will hold him." She held up two pairs of handcuffs.

Kory was a little surprised. But then he remembered she had wanted to be a cop. "One for his hands and one for his feet?"

"No. The second pair is to hook him to the fence."

"Good idea."

They cuffed his hands behind his back, and then dragged his body to the nearby chain link fence that faced the side street.

Bella secured him to the fence with the second pair of cuffs. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“I don’t know. I think he could pull this whole fence loose.” Kory reached into his pocket for his cell phone. “I’ll call 9-1-1. Oh, I forgot—he kicked my cell phone out of my hand.” He walked back over to where they had fought and got down on all fours to search for it. “There you are. Ouch! I found the knife.”

“Did you cut yourself?”

“It’s just a nick, I think.”

“I’ll call from the house phone. And I’ll get you a Band-Aid.”

“And how about a flashlight?”

“Sure.”

Kory closed the knife and put it in his pocket. Then he resumed the search for his phone.

Bella called 9-1-1. Then she walked to the bathroom to get a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and a bandage. She heard tires screeching, but just figured it was the teenager who lived across the street.

She grabbed a flashlight from the kitchen and walked out to the back yard. There was Evan, still unconscious, sitting against the fence.

“Kory?” She turned on the flashlight and shined it around the yard.

He was gone.

Then she heard a car engine start. She turned, and saw Kory’s GTO speeding away. That’s weird, she thought.

She couldn’t understand why Kory had taken off. She had really liked him. Perhaps after spending every day and night with her grandmother for two years she had lost her knack for reading people. Maybe Kory was not a nice guy after all.

Bella stepped on something. She turned the flashlight toward the ground. It was Kory’s cell phone. She picked it up and put it in her pocket.

Then she noticed that Evan looked different. His head was resting awkwardly on his chest, and his tongue was hanging out. She leaned in to see if she could hear him breathing. Then she pressed two fingers to the side of his neck, and felt...nothing.

Kory was driving way over the speed limit. He was too pumped up to worry about the cops.

The house was a few miles north of Bella's place, on a country road. The nearest neighbor was at least a hundred yards away. When he saw the red pickup turn into the long driveway, Kory cut his headlights. The road completely disappeared for a couple of seconds, until his eyes adjusted. But there was little moonlight. He just hoped he could negotiate the right turn into the driveway without going off into the deep ditch. And in the meantime—what if a deer ran out in front of his car?

He slowed down, straining to see the driveway, and carefully turned in. He could have just driven by, located a pay phone, and called the police. That would have been the safe thing to do. But what if this was the wrong guy? How could he be sure he hadn't lost him in traffic? He had seen three or four red pickup trucks along the way.

The man driving the truck had already gone into the house. Kory got out of his car. He would sneak up and look through a window, and hopefully be able to determine if he had the right guy. Then he would go find a pay phone and—

“—hold it right there!” shouted a big, deep voice.

A powerful beam of light blinded Kory. He froze.

“You're trespassing!”

“Uh, I'm sorry. I guess I've got the wrong house. I was looking for John Smith,” said Kory, grimacing slightly at the thought of his stupidity. Couldn't he have come up with a better fake name?

The flashlight got closer and closer, until it was six inches from Kory's eyes. Hot, rancid breath blew spittle into his face as the man spoke. "You know what I've always wanted to do?"

Kory was about to say 'What?' when he heard a metallic click in his left ear. Then he felt the hard, cool muzzle against his temple.

"I've always wanted to take a big pistol, and put it up to a man's head, and squeeze the trigger—just to watch his brains blow out the other side," he said, laughing. "Don't that sound like fun?"

"But wouldn't your neighbor hear the shot? Wouldn't he call the police?"

"Nope. Not unless he's still up—which is doubtful. And even then, his hearing aid would have to be cranked up all the way. But don't get your panties in a wad, Boy. Daddy wouldn't be too happy if I killed you just for sport. He likes to do the killing himself. But I *could* tell him you made a run for it—and that's why I shot you in the back. Wanna make a run for it, Boy?"

"Uh..."

The man chuckled. "Let's go." He pulled the gun away from Kory's head and jammed it into his back. He held it there all the way to the house.

The red pickup was a big Dodge Ram Diesel, with dual rear wheels. About a \$50,000 vehicle, thought Kory. Parked in front of the truck were a brand new, dark blue Mustang, and a black Harley. These are not poor people, he thought.

They walked across the wooden porch, and the man keyed in the security code and opened the front door.

The music of Steppenwolf was so loud it nearly blasted them back out the door. An old hippie-looking man with a beard, wearing a blue jean jacket, was standing in the middle of the room playing air guitar screaming, "Born to be wild!" He caught a glimpse of the two men out of the corner of his eye, grabbed the remote off the coffee table, and muted the sound system. "Who's this, Bobby?"

Kory finally got a good look at his captor. Bobby had a long strand of beef jerky hanging out of his mouth. No wonder his breath stinks, thought Kory.

Another man came rushing into the room from the side hallway. "I'll tell you who he is. He's the guy who attacked Evan tonight. Too bad Evan had to die. But he went and did something stupid, and was about to get himself arrested. So, I had to take him out, and save the merchandise."

That must have been what he took out of Evan's truck, thought Kory.

"Yeah, you done good, Son," said the old man. He turned to Kory. "Billy is quite the marksman."

Billy picked up a long, black object that was leaning against the wall by the fireplace. “These babies are high-tech. They make them out of aircraft aluminum tubing. I can hit the bulls-eye at 250 feet.”

Kory had never seen a modern blowgun.

“The dart comes out at 350 feet per second,” said Billy. “I use a special poison from South America. At first it just makes your body go all numb. Then your heart stops.”

“Yeah,” said Bobby, “it’s fun to sit on the back porch and watch Billy pick off stray dogs.”

“You know what? I’ll just *show* him how it works,” said Billy, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a thin metal case.

“Put them away, Billy,” said the old man.

Billy ignored him. “And just to make it fair, I’ll give him a good running start.”

“I said ‘No!’” The old man backhanded Billy, nearly knocking him down. “Put that thing away!”

That was close, thought Kory. But he feared his life expectancy was less than thirty minutes.

“Bobby, go out in the garage and get a couple of them tie-wraps,” said the old man.

When Bobby came back with them, the old man said, “Now, tie his hands behind his back, and then tie his ankles together.”

Kory had seen these heavy-duty tie-wraps being used on cop shows. It took a sharp knife or a pair of wire cutters to get the things off.

Bobby put a tie-wrap around Kory’s wrists, fed the tip through the self-locking end, and pulled it tight—nearly cutting off the circulation. Then he sat him in a wooden chair and put the other tie-wrap on his ankles.

Kory figured that if all three men were to leave the room for a couple of minutes, he might be able to hop to the door before they could catch him. But even if he somehow made it out of the house, Billy would surely nail him in the back with a poison dart. He had seriously miscalculated the danger of the situation. Why hadn’t he just driven by the house and called the police?

The old man slowly paced back and forth in front of his uninvited guest. “I need some information. And you,” he said, reaching into his pants pocket, “are going to give it to me.” He pushed a button on the knife and the blade popped out, ready for action.

Kory still had Evan’s knife in his pants pocket. Nobody had bothered to pat him down. But with his hands tied behind his back, what good would it do him? “Okay. What do you want to know?”

“Billy tells me that Evan had been dating a woman named Bella, and that you had dinner with her tonight.”

Kory looked at Billy. He didn't remember his face from the restaurant. Maybe he was watching from the bar. “Yes, that's right. I did have dinner with Bella. But I just met her for the first time tonight. I don't really know her.”

“Then why did you follow her home?”

“I wasn't following *her*—I was following *Evan*. I saw him drive out of the parking lot as she was leaving. I suspected he was going to follow her home. Turns out, I was right.”

“What did she tell you about Evan?”

“Just that she went out with him one time, and when he asked her out again, she said ‘No.’ After that, he started stalking her.”

“What did she tell you he did for a living?”

“She said he was a plumber.”

“She didn't say anything about drugs?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Good.”

“You don't believe him, do you Daddy?” said Bobby.

“Yes, I do. He’s got an honest face. And I always trust my instincts,” said the old man, as he casually walked around behind Kory’s chair.

Kory suspected that the old man was about to cut his throat. If he hadn’t met Bella tonight, he wouldn’t be about to die. But at least he had saved her from Evan. And now she would be okay. Have a wonderful life, Bella, he thought. He wished he could have gotten to know her much better.

A loud siren started blaring, in front of the house. The old man and his two sons ran to the front windows.

“It’s my truck alarm,” said Billy, taking out his keys. He clicked the remote several times. “It won’t turn off.”

“Well, go out there and shut it down before some cop happens to drive by,” said the old man.

But no sooner than Billy had opened the front door and taken a few steps, he ran back into the house. He nodded at Kory. “His car rammed into the back of my truck.”

All three men glared at Kory, as though he had summoned his car, ala *Knight Rider*. Then they ran outside and frantically worked at silencing the alarm.

A voice from behind Kory said, “Let’s go!”

Kory turned his head and saw Bella. He showed her the tie-wraps. “There’s a knife in my right pants’ pocket.”

She took it out, opened it, and cut the tie-wrap off his ankles. Then she cut the one off his wrists.

Billy's truck alarm went silent.

Kory and Bella heard somebody's boots walking across the wooden front porch as they hurried out the back hallway.

"Daddy!" yelled Bobby. "He's gone!"

The old man and Billy ran into the house.

"Catch him!" said the old man. "If he gets away, we're dead!"

"I'll get him," said Billy. He picked up his blowgun and ran down the hallway, through the utility room, and out to the back porch. He could barely see the figure running across the grass toward the neighbor's house. He quickly loaded his weapon, aimed, and blew. Kory would fall to his knees, and then drop dead—just like the mangy old dogs he used for target practice.

"Why is he still running?" said the old man. "He's still running!"

"Hey, I see *two* people," said Bobby.

Billy blew another dart.

"I think you missed again," said Bobby.

"Why'd you go off and leave him alone in the house, Bobby?" shouted Billy. "This is *your* fault!"

“Uh-oh,” said Bobby. “Look!” He pointed toward the road. Three sets of flashing red and blue lights were racing up the road. “They’re coming here!”

Billy dropped the blowgun, and ran off the porch and around to the front yard. Bobby and the old man were close behind him.

Billy jumped into his truck.

Bobby got into the Mustang.

The old man jumped on his Harley and stomped the starter.

Just as the police were pulling up to the house, Billy drove diagonally across the front yard, through the ditch and onto the road, nearly colliding with two police cars that were just arriving.

Bobby and the old man drove out the other direction. But the cops quickly cut them off.

Bobby surrendered.

The old man tried to make a sharp U-turn, and slid down.

Kory and Bella watched the circus from the neighbor’s driveway.

“How did you find me?” said Kory.

“There was a piece of paper in Evan’s shirt pocket. It had the directions on it.”

“He must have been planning to come here tonight to sell the drugs.”

“Evan was a drug dealer? I can’t believe I went out with a drug dealer.”

“So, you just took a chance that this is where I went.”

“Yeah. After I found the dart stuck in Evan’s back, I figured *you* hadn’t killed him.”

“So, at first you thought *I* had killed him?”

“Well, what was I supposed to think? I go into the house for two minutes, and when I come out, Evan’s dead and you’re speeding away in your car. But when I saw the dart, I figured that maybe you had gone after the killer. So, I followed the directions. It was the only clue I had.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“And when I got here I saw your car in the driveway. So, I parked over here and ran up to their house. I peeked in the window and saw that you were in trouble. I figured if I could distract them for a minute, you just might be able to escape. Fortunately, your keys were in the ignition, so I called 9-1-1 and gave them directions. I told them to look for a black ‘66 GTO. Then I started up your car, dropped it into ‘Drive,’ and just let it go up the driveway. I knew it would pick up speed as it went along. Then I ran as fast as I could, and went around to the back of the house, and came in just as the truck alarm tripped.”

“But how could you be sure his alarm would be turned on?”

“Actually, I didn’t even think about the possibility of a car alarm. I figured the crash would be enough to get them out of the house.”

He looked at his wrecked GTO in the distance and wondered if it would ever be the same.

“And by the way,” she said, “the police are not going to be too happy with us for leaving the scene.”

“What do you mean? We’re still here.”

“I’m talking about the scene at *my* house—Evan’s body.”

“I think they’ll forgive us. We’ve just handed them three drug dealers.” Kory suddenly remembered Billy and his blowgun. “Did you hear something when we were running?”

“Like what?”

“Like a dart flying through the air.”

“No, but you were behind me. Turn around and let me check you.”

Kory turned his back to her.

“I need more light. Come over to my car,” she said, leading him to the truck. She popped the lid, and the light came on inside. Almost immediately, the bulb burned out.

“Great,” he said. “But I guess if he’d hit one of us, we’d already be dead.”

She took hold of his shoulders to direct him. “Turn this way just a little. There.”

The moonlight was dim, but his pants were white, and looked almost glow-in-the-dark. “Hold still.” She put her left hand against his right butt cheek.

He didn’t have any idea what she was doing, but he kinda liked it. He felt her pull something off the seat of his pants. “What are you doing?”

“Getting this.” She held up a dart.

He turned back around. His face went pale when he saw it. “I didn’t even feel it.” He began to hyperventilate. “I must be going numb—just like Billy said I would!”

She dropped the dart in the trunk. “Relax. You’re gonna be fine. Take off your pants.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Take them off—carefully.”

He slipped out of his shoes. Then he took his pants off, and held them out, by the waistband.

She took them, turned them around, and pointed to the right rear pocket. “Your wallet saved you. You’re gonna need a new one.” She dropped the pants into the trunk.

Without thinking, he grasped her head with both hands and kissed her on the mouth. He pulled away from her lips sooner than he really wanted to. “Thank you for saving my life, Bella.”

She stepped back. “I was just returning the favor.”

“Oh, I don’t think Evan planned to *kill* you.”

“No. But if he’d had his way with me, I would have *wished* I was dead.”

“Hey, I’d better check *you* for darts.”

“No. I was running in front of you. He couldn’t have hit me. Besides, like you said, I’d already be dead.”

“Turn around.”

“Oh, alright.” She turned her back to him.

“Let’s see.” He worked his hands carefully down her back and across her firm rear end and thighs.

“Hey.” She spun around.

“Looks like you’re dart-free.”

“Do that again, and *you’re* gonna be *hands-free*.” She punched him hard in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped. Once he had caught his breath, he said, “Bella?”

“Yes?”

“You said you wanted to get a job. Why don’t you come to work for me?”

“Doing what?”

“You could be my personal assistant—taking phone calls, answering emails, stuff like that.”

“Sounds like a secretarial job to me. No, thanks.”

“Look, Bella, I need somebody I can trust. Not some nine-to-fiver who’ll go telling everybody my business. I want somebody who’s smart, tough, and discrete.”

“Somebody to come to the rescue when you get your butt in a bind?”

“I don’t usually get into *this* much trouble.”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe if I could take it on a trial basis, and just see how it goes....”

“Sure.”

“But no more kissing or grabbing. That’s not part of the deal.” She punched him hard in the arm.

“Ouch! You got me right on the bone.”

“Good.”

“So, you want to start on Monday?”

“Yeah, okay. And my first order of business will be to make you go out and buy some new boxers. Those things are ugly—even in the dark.”

Kory rubbed his arm. “I must be crazy. You’re gonna be a pain in the rear.”

“But I’ll keep you on track.”

“That’s what I need.”

They watched the police handcuff the three felons and stuff them into the back seats of their cruisers.

Kory moved in close to Bella’s side and put his arm around her shoulders.

“Careful,” she warned, smiling to herself.

THE END

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