

HAREM MASTER

R. B. HATCH



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Strategic Book Group

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Strategic Book Group
P.O. Box 333
Durham CT 06422
www.StrategicBookClub.com

ISBN: 978-1-61897-523-2

Printed in the United States of America

Book Design: Stacie Tingen

Names of persons, places, organizations, and businesses have been altered for security purposes.

Chapter 1

Hi. I'm Superman. I must be. I have more money than the government. That will change next week when I pay my taxes. I own a few companies, which keeps me in spending money. Actually, a couple of them rival Microsoft in size—and if you can trace any of them back to me, you're good, damn good. I can out-work, out-fight, and out-fuck any man I've ever met. The scars that adorn my body come from miscalculation a couple times, overwhelming odds more often, and just being in the wrong place at the wrong time once in a while. They were caused by bullet, knife, bomb, assorted violent impacts, and the surgeon's scalpel. I am on friendly terms with the leaders of most of the countries on Earth. The rest I deal with from a position of overwhelming strength. I have many names; some are even acceptable in mixed company. The one I usually go by is John. It's a nice, common name. Every language has its own version of it: Juan, Johan, Jean, etc.

I own a mountain in the Kananaskis country west of Calgary. It's in a green area, and if you can trace ownership past the government, I want you working for me—or dead. It's my home away from home, away from home, away from . . . oh, to hell with it. You get the picture. You could lean against my front door and not realize it. A lot of bad people have spent a lot of money and lives trying to find it.

To be quite honest, I own two mountains. One is my home; the other is the headquarters of Terran Planetary Police—better known as TerraCop. A lot of real talented people haven't been able to find that one either, in spite of the billions of dollars worth of high-tech equipment in constant use within.

Don't feel bad if you've never heard of TerraCop. If you're an honest, law-abiding soul, average cop, or even a low-rung criminal, odds are you haven't. We go after the big guys, the international criminals that national laws can't get. We're sort of like Interpol, but more widely spread, more powerful, and a hell of a lot more successful. We don't quit. Once your file is referred to us by your nation, it is open and active until you're dead.

I've spent billions getting TerraCop set up and functioning. Not all of it was my own money, of course, but a fair chunk of it was. That's why my net worth of 900-odd million is low right now. I don't mind. I'll leave the big figures to those who care. What happens to the tax rate once you cross that billion-dollar line is downright unfriendly. It strains the hell out of the imaginations of really sharp tax accountants.

I have a harem. Eight eyeball-poppin' lovely and lusty ladies. They're all ages, from my own down to nineteen. (It's hard to believe she's been with me three years already.) They are why I claim to be a superman. I manage to keep them all sexually satisfied.

That sounds strange, considering I had a wife at one time. I was totally monogamous for forty-plus years, until she and the kids were killed by a drunk driver. Diana was always in my life. Right from my earliest memories she was there, and we loved each other. They tried to separate us once, put us in separate foster homes. We both cut up such a fuss that they scrapped that notion fair quick. It would seem no one wanted to adopt a pair, so we stayed at the orphanage until we reached the grand old age of fourteen.

There was a lot of shit going on with one of the other inmates—an older boy who wanted Diana and wouldn't accept that Di didn't want him. If you're involved with criminality, either committing or apprehending, you probably know of him. He calls himself Lucifer. The name fits.

Anyway, the situation came to a head. The choice was get out or kill him before he killed me. I didn't want to kill him—then. I couldn't come up with a way to do it that wouldn't land me in deep shit. I looked older than I was. I could pass for eighteen easily, and had done so quite regularly in my business dealings. (Sneaking out of that place was no great trick at all.) So one day Di and I walked out of the orphanage and never returned.

I was on the road the night Di and the kids died. I liked driving, and I liked it that the other drivers didn't know I owned the company—FPPE Transport. They knew I was more than just a driver; in fact they were led to believe I was lead driver. That's something along the line of an airline's chief pilot, which was all right. They could still treat me like one of the boys while Rie (general manager Marie Durocher), and Jen (head dispatcher Jennifer Cotton), very capably and profitably, ran the company. The size of the paychecks George Thomas—my financial manager, advisor, whatever—cut for them every month showed just how capable they were.

Di and the kids had been in town shopping that day, and were ready to head home when I came through with a load of lumber out of Fort St. John, going to Edmonton. Since the timing worked out, we ate together in what Grande Prairie had for a truck stop at that time. I often loaded guilt on myself when I got a real pity party going. I still do occasionally. If I hadn't suggested they eat with me, they'd have been long gone by the time the drunk went looking for his accident.

I was getting out toward Valleyview when Jen called my sat-phone and, as gently as possible, told me what had happened. Witnesses stated that a pickup had run a stop sign at a high rate of speed and T-boned Di's Jeep. The kids had both died at the scene, as did the other driver. Di was still alive, but not expected to survive. I told Jen to have someone pick up my truck in Valleyview, deliver the load, and leave the truck in the terminal compound in Edmonton. I then phoned a local friend who owned a plane

and arranged a fast trip back to Grande Prairie. He was waiting for me when I parked the truck.

The doctor who met me in the emergency room was not a total stranger. Dr. Candace Winters had been the hospital's representative a couple years earlier when I'd made a rather large donation to the diagnostic wing. It had taken a couple days to work out all the details, and we'd gotten to like each other. She led me to intensive care. Di lay on a gurney, nude with only a sheet covering her. Tubes and wires connected her to various machines, bottles, bags, etc. Her body was being kept alive, but her brain activity was slowing. I took her hand and held it until the chart traced a flat line.

The two young guys who took her away from me were very polite and professional about it. I wandered outside. It was dark, an icy wind was driving misty rain, and it suited my mood perfectly. I've no idea how long I walked, or where. I was aware of being soaking wet and cold, but I wasn't feeling it.

Then a voice called to me. I stopped and looked up. Dr. Winters was striding towards me. A late-model car sat at the curb, engine running, blowing a thin tendril of white steam out of the exhaust, and a man sat behind the wheel. I don't recall what the doc said, or what I said, and I don't think I actually agreed to anything, but I found myself being led to her car and bundled into the back seat. I was conscious of the warmth wrapping itself around me. I started to shiver and couldn't stop.

Doc Candy and her husband, Jim, got me into a hot bath as soon as we arrived at their house, and Doc got some pills into me. I don't remember getting out of the tub. Time passed in a blur. I do recall being terribly ill. I'd contracted a fair touch of pneumonia with my walk in the rain, and Candy put me on some pretty heavy antibiotics for it. She, Jim, and the

kids, Cody and Jody, ensured I took them when I was supposed to. I have no memory of the funeral. The plans had all been made long ago, and they had been closely adhered to. I knew that from the invoice.

They—the kids included—insisted I stay with them until I got my feet under me again. They spent many, if not most, of their free hours talking with me, being with me, keeping me together. It wouldn't be far from the truth to say they saved my life.

Finally I started to pull myself back together. It began with a phone call from Rie.

“John, are you okay?” she asked as soon as I took the phone.

“Yeah, sure,” I mumbled.

She'd worked for me long enough to know not to show sympathy in great amounts. “John, I can't tell you how sorry we all are, the whole staff here. Are you coming back to work? Or should I put another driver on your truck? George has been trying to reach you for a week. You should either charge your phone or turn it on.”

“So? I'm on the phone now. Whadda you want?”

“I want to tell you that if I ever have to search for you for two weeks again you can take this job and shove it. But I won't, because I know how close you and Di were. It's been almost four weeks now, John. It's time to come back to life. Now what about your truck?”

She was right. It was time. I didn't have to think about it. The answer just sort of said itself. “I'll drive. I'll book on tomorrow. What does George want to talk to me about?”

I knew better than to ask that.

“How the hell should I know?” Rie demanded. “Ask him.”

George wanted to talk to me about what I pay him to talk to me about—money. He'd closed the deal on a small software company I'd been trying to buy. He'd bought some shares and sold some shares. He'd read a prospectus, thought it was a reasonable risk, and suggested buying a few shares. I don't know why, but I asked him to read me parts of the prospectus. When he had, I told him to buy all the shares he could. Take over the company, if it was possible to do so in a friendly fashion. If not, make them an offer of financial backing that they couldn't refuse. I liked what the company's founders were trying to do, and I didn't want to kill the spark of genius.

There were a few other stocks I wasn't interested in anymore, and some that I was. I gave George some buy and sell orders, then disconnected and called Ted, my favorite charter operator at the airport, to arrange a flight to Edmonton's municipal airport. I was about to call a cab when Jim and Candy offered to drive me.

It often happened that way—instant friendships. Jim, Candy, and the kids had moved into the vacuum left by death, and while they couldn't fill it, they'd made it endurable. I packed quickly; it doesn't take long when all you carry is an overnight bag. I said goodbye to Jody and Cody, and we left.

We stood beside the plane in the fading daylight. Jim and I shook hands. Candy stepped up to me and gave me a very sisterly kiss.

"You *will* keep in touch with us," she stated. "We've talked to Rie and Jen a few times now, so we'll have no trouble keeping in touch with you if you don't." She grinned at me. "Kinda looks like you're stuck with us."

"Why?" I asked. "Not that I'm complaining, but why have you done all this for me?"

She sobered, looked me square in the eye. "I liked you two years ago, when you made that donation, and I watched you at the hospital that

night. I've never seen anyone so hammered into the ground. I couldn't have driven on by you that night any more than I could fly to the moon."

I got kind of choked up. I knew I had to get out of there pretty damn quick or I'd end up crying. "Thanks, Kid," I said, leaning in to give her a kiss.

This "kid" was right around my own age, but better preserved. She had a few gray streaks in the light brown hair; a few wrinkles firmly entrenched in the skin around her eyes and mouth. Her trim body topped out at about five-eight or nine. Jim was a couple years older, a couple inches taller, and as trim as she was. He was in construction, and he didn't restrict his activities to the office. He could operate any piece of equipment as well as, or better than, any of his employees. I wasn't about to kiss him, so I shook his hand again, got a brotherly slap on the shoulder, and climbed into the plane.

They stood on the asphalt apron and watched as we taxied away.

Every time I went through G. P. we got together. Often, either Candy or Jim would be unable to come for coffee with me, but always one of them could. Often, one or both of the kids came too. As time passed, I noticed I was in their city more often, and later in the day. Both Jim and Candy were free more often. Several times I let myself be talked into spending the night with them rather than in the truck. Their couch was very comfortable, and it soon became a regular thing. I learned later that this was due to collusion between them, Rie, and Jen.

I was in Winnipeg more often, too. Rie and Jen adopted me much like Jim and Candy had. I owned a house there, of course. Due to business demands, Di and I had spent a fair amount of time in the city, but without

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Di I couldn't force myself to go there. Instead I'd spend the nights in the truck or a nearby motel, alone.

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