

Excerpt *Hot Wheels*

Sequel to *Loose Threads*

[Loose Threads on Amazon.com.](#)

[Hot Wheels on Amazon.com.](#)

0. Fast Food

Kuala Lumpur: 12 May 2076, 5:40 p.m.

Jen Marov looks small and childlike in the “shotgun” seat. A ramrod straight posture gives her more depth of sight. What she sees are sedans, taxis and mopeds swerving aside and new paths where none existed before.

The Humvee muscles ahead, avoiding near-fatal crashes. It skims around fenders and races for open tarmac. Jen can't fault her partner's road savvy, but it grates to hunker down as cargo while someone else makes the split-second calls.

Behind the wheel of the modified Humvee sits her driver who has the height and demeanor of an Amazon. JoAnna is a feisty redhead who charges through life, forcing males of all sizes to step aside. Deltoids and triceps crinkle the folds of her uniform as she manhandles the steering wheel.

Five blocks later Jen is dismayed. Her getaway doyen wants to stop for lunch and forestall their escape. If caught, Rathbone's roosters will skin them alive for the Petronas tower attack. Likewise the Malaysian Special Branch will surely brand them public enemies' number one and two.

“Fast food ain't healthy,” Jen grumps. Empty stomach or not, she'd rather keep going.

Why give our pursuers
a chance to catch up?

Between rows of parked cars, the Humvee searches for a parking space where an oversized vehicle might fit.

“The grub will be good,” says Jo, backing into an unassigned corner. The Humvee rests on a diagonal encroaching on two adjacent spots. It won't hinder traffic, though the front bumper sticks out like a pelican's beak.

“Good for what?” Jen retorts. “We should be headed to Singapore.”

“Too early for the highway.”

“North-South is a multinational expressway. Rathbone wouldn't dare target us with hellfire.”

Her driver makes a face that brooks no arguments. “Out!”

Jen resigns herself to an unwarranted delay. She can only pray the feisty redhead will divulge her plans over dinner.

The familiar McJoys logo flashes on top the artless glass box. From the outside it looks the same as a [McJoys](#) in Moscow, London or México City. The interior is an eyesore of plastic dishware and disposable utensils for workaday urbanites. Most of the fixtures are anchored down to dissuade vandal-prone roughnecks.

Halfway through the door, Jen grumps, “Miz Hell on Wheels, I ain't gonna eat [sclup...](#)”

“We won't, I promise.” Jo flashes a grin that softens her yellow-eyed glare. “And hey! Don't trash my driving, or I'll dump you in the gutter.”

“All fast food is trash.”

Her driver makes a face. “S'pozed to be a surprise, but since you're so damn skeptical.”

“Just being realistic.”

“Listen up, Miz Spiderwoman. My friend upstairs wired his cousin who's the franchisee of this McJoys. The cousin happens to be a devoted fan of your aerobatic circus act.”

“Imperial Circus was ages ago. I'm surprised anyone remembers.”

“Njoek-Fa does,” says the redhead. “He'll serve buckwheat noodles in veggie-wonton soup.”

“Buckwheat? I'm leaping for joy like a three-legged frog! But wait... He ain't s'pozed to know I'm alive.”

“It's OK. He knows Cook from way back.”

“I smell rotten fish. If you're fibbing about buckwheat...” She makes a face. “Hold on while I use the Ladies.”

“Fine. I'll tell the kitchen we're here.”

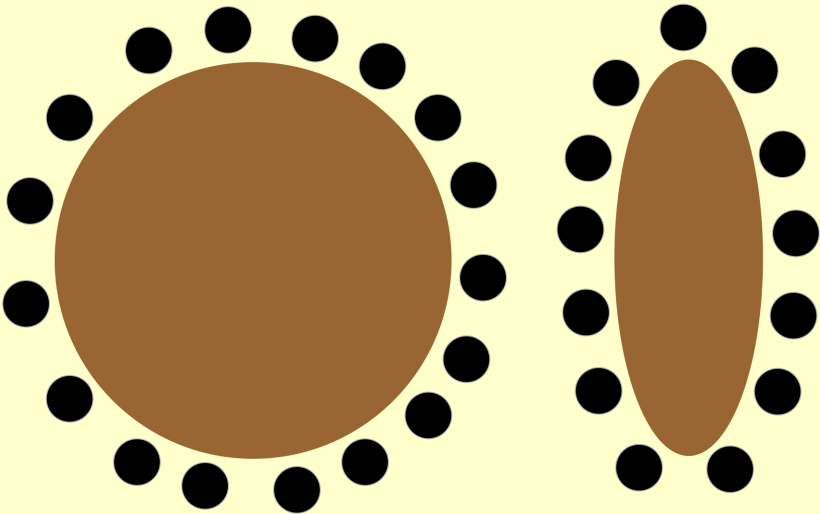
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The big redhead hasn't returned from the kitchen, so Jen chooses a table and settles into a stiff-backed chair. The overhead lights bedazzle like tropical sunlight, yet the air inside is nice and cool.

Her square table looks the same as the others, each surrounded by four plastic chairs. Most of them host singletons, and none has more than two. Treadwheel décor tends to minimize chitchat and speed the flow through of diners.

I've no clue why McJoys
attracts eat & run [quebies](#)
like nectar draws bees.

DB's Cafeteria Tables



At the front counter a teenager is making food choices, slotting his smartcard to pay. The robotic vendor takes a moment to read and approve before the dinner tray rolls out on the conveyor belt.

Sure ain't like Dog Breakfast.
I'll ring Jo's neck if the food
proves as bad as the décor.

McJoys is automated, same as [DB's](#) cafeteria, but that's where the similarity ends. DB has larger tables that host friendly chitchat.

The cafeteria ambiance is informal. Rundogs dine at circular tables, so more acolytes can join in and ask questions. The answers flow both ways, and Jen has gained crucial insights while plumping her stomach.

Fresh out of the kitchen, Jo is lugging a large tray loaded with six plastic bowls and two glasses.

Jen frowns.

The dishware looks tacky.

Why cart half a-dozen bowls?

“Don't know about you,” quips her driver, “but I could eat a whole alligator purse.”

“Make mine rattlesnake soaked,” Jen replies in the same overloud voice. Without warning, her stomach has grown hollow.

How'd my gut

get so empty?

“Soaked in what?”

“Horseradish.”

“Suit yourself,” says the big redhead, twitching her lips. She places the tray on the table and sits.

“Sorry about the plastic bowls,” Jo confides in a quiet voice. “Other diners would notice if we used ceramic. Gossip or hearsay could get back to Rathbone's [roosters](#).”

Jen glances at the other clientele. No one is closer than three tables away, and none seems interested in the weird gabble of two women.

She thumbs her head at the attendant who's standing in the corner. “*He* why we're talking overheard nonsense?”

“He acts as busboy and for-show bouncer.”

The middle-aged dude has the pear-shaped physique of a devoted couch potato. “He'd have trouble fending off a horsefly,” whispers Jen.

“He and the clientele don't worry me,” Jo whispers back. “It's the audiovisual pickups. Best we keep mum, so Njoek-Fa isn't hassled with questions after we split.”

Jen plucks noodles with chopsticks and feeds her mouth. “Mmm, good food! Gimmie another truckload.”

Midget size is deceptive. My appetite

craves more food per-kilo of body

weight than 120-kilo man bears.

“Be glad I brought three bowls apiece,” says the redhead, projecting her voice like a mountain yodeler. She lifts one end of the tray and pulls out an old-fashioned poster of a young woman in a glittery circus costume.

Jen's eyes bug out, her jaw drops.

That's me posing as a bubblegum diva.

Must've gotten recorded decades ago.

PR for the Kuala Lumpur tour stop.

Her driver whispers, “Njoek-Fa requests your autograph.” Handing over a ballpoint pen.

“How's *his* name spelled?”

“Beats me.” Shrugging. “Do your worst.”

“Yeh. Right.” Jen wrinkles her brows, scratches her autograph and slides the poster under the tray. “Can you handle three bowls?”

“I emptied my purse to get this hide. If I don't fuel-up I'm liable to drive through walls.”

“Forget I asked,” Jen mutters, dips her chopsticks and scoops another wonton. It tastes better than advertised.

Rice and beans inside pasta,
a mountain climber's banquet.

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“How'd my protégé ever team up with Shepp?” asks Jo.

“Your protégé...” Swallowing a mouthful. “You mean Nyssa?”

“Of course, *Nyssa*. Who got her going when no one else could?”

“Only 'cuz she thrives on your scare-'em-outta-their-wits school of teaching.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” [JoAnna](#) chortles. “Tell me yours ain't terrified when they dangle from a vertical rock face.”

“Touché.”

“Shepp and Nyssa make unlikely partners,” muses her driver.

I wonder if Jo is jealous of Shepp.

The Kenyan womanizer has kept
the liaison Platonic and followed
ethical guidelines to the letter.

“Shepp's not bad,” Jen says. “He goads her with reverse psychology. Nyssa oughta earn her blackbelt before summer.”

“Fantastic! She must've glued Shepp to her futon.”

“No. She found another.”

“Holy [fuxgate](#)! Don't tell me she got Cook outta his funk.”

“No.” Jen swallows a mouthful of noodles. “Outside of DB, she fell for the rooster.”

“The security chief?” Jo halts loaded chopsticks in midair. “The guy she tricked into loading the [holovid](#) worm?”

Jen nods and shrugs.

“How'll they ever get together?”

“Cook made sure Nyssa darted the rooster, so she'll hafta face him in a duel. Poor guy will be irked, but he's [def](#) gone and besotted.”

The big redhead slaps her palm on the table. “Cook playing Cupid?”

“In lieu of Nyssa's crush, he jumped on the rooster as a handy stand-in.”

“Rooster got any skills?”

“Yeh. He tinkers with surveillance gadgets.” Jen tilts her bowl and guzzles broth then eyes her partner. “Gonna finish your last bowl?”

“Keep your hands in your pockets. I take my time 'cuz of my 'Southern' breeding. I ain't no Yakut peasant like you.”

Jen gives her head a mental shake.

Jo's “Southern” breeding has
been endowed by driving a taxi
through mean streets of Miami.

“Tell me about your gig upstairs?”

Jo takes a deep breath and lets out a long sigh. “Can you believe the soupers were testing the [3-kilom run](#) at 85% gravity? And the [ellipsoid chamber](#) at Martian gravity?”

The redhead shakes her head in spite. “They claimed to be practicing for low-grav maneuvers, but low-ball gravity makes the physical tests a mockery. I moved the track and chamber to the rim. And I threatened to demote belt colors if they didn't perform in earthlike grav. Then I led the training stints and oversaw circle bouts till my puppies grew rhino hides.

“And none too soon. A saboteur had to be taken care of. He almost

wrecked the Tesla-2 soupcan. Timekeeper helped me track down his accomplices, and I uncovered some skeletons in the closets, which opened a can of worms. Solar plexus! I hate dealing with policy wonks. Upstairs has had it too easy for too long.”

“SOAR has done away with politicians.”

“Yeh, yeh. We appoint observers on a short leash to keep the bureaucrats honest. But there's no stopping the busybodies who slant popular opinion and start urban legends. They've pegged me a holy terror 'cuz I accused a few slipshod officials.”

“You get tunnel vision at times, Jo.”

“Tunnel my ass,” she growls. “I had plenty evidence to back me up. Trouble is [souters](#) have lost interest in earth's problems. They've become insulated from transnat threats. They take security for granted, counting themselves safe without paying the costs.”

“I hear you. But tell me about your recreational pursuits.”

Her driver raises brows and grins like a fiend. “I've grown too old to troll for cougar delights. So I hooked up with a research physicist who's on the cutting edge. I got him believing the secret to zero-point energy lies between my legs. How about you?”

Jen feels nonplussed and inadequate.

Nothing I've done in the past
year can match such bravado
and flamboyance. My life is
stuck in the rut of routine.

How do I compete with a gal
whose sweet spot holds the
secret of zero-point energy?

“Come on, Pix. Don't be shy.”

“Just the same old...”

The big redhead bursts into laughter. “As if Griz and Shepp aren't fighting like mad dogs to share your futon.”

“They're competing across the chessboard since I told them I'd bed whoever gets the worst injuries.”

“Gals in the co-op wet their panties just daydreaming about your beauhunks.”

"I don't hold 'em on a leash."

"No need. Once they get a whiff of your horseradish, they're goners."

"Holy fuxgate! Forget about Griz and Shepp. Did'ya know this raid is on DB's nickel?"

"Ah *ha!* You're worried about extra costs."

"Well..."

"I knew it! You should've refused when Cook asked you to keep DB's books. You can't enjoy R&R when you gotta balance the damn ledgers. It takes too much time and effort, to say nothing of your mountain climber's class."

"It's not that bad. Our finances are in good shape unless a surprise expense comes lurking around the corner."

"Ha! You can't enjoy a snack without fretting over spreadsheets."

Jen rolls her eyes. "Does your physicist really buy the claims of unlimited energy?"

"Def sure! He's convinced I'm the spark in the void, the mother of all delta-Vees. He pokes the embers and gets the campfire glowing. Then we bask in radiance till our jugs boil over and spit neutrinos like geysers."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Not at all," says Jo. But her eyes and mind are elsewhere. She lays chopsticks across the soup bowl. "I don't like the look of the SUV that just arrived. Hold the fort, Pix. I gotta visit the Ladies before those guys come in and order dinner."

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Jen peers longingly at her driver's half-empty bowl with its slew of noodles and at least one juicy wonton.

Would she notice if I
took some noodles?

Would she mind?

She's gone to the can
to give us a quick exit.

If we're forced to run
the soup will go uneaten.

She reaches out and draws the soup bowl closer.

Can't let wholesome
food go to waste.
Yum! Buckwheat.

The bright interior of McJoys matches the afternoon sunlight, so there's no obstructive glare on the windows. Support columns that frame the windowpanes have been polished to a mirrorlike finish. Jen uses one of them to keep an eye on the suspect SUV.

A burly man steps out of the passenger side. He stretches limbs before approaching the restaurant. He's wide-chested, muscular and capable of bone-crusher shakedown.

Jen applies the chopsticks and brings a squiggle of noodles to her mouth. She chews the noodles then forks the last wonton home. Her peripheral vision watches him saunter through the doorway. She hears his footfalls, while tilting the soup bowl to lap residue broth.

The hulk ain't looking for dinner
unless he wants *me* to feed him.

She eyes his partner's reflection in a support column. The SUV driver is out and leaning on the front fender.

Jen sets the bowl on the table and finds the hulk standing across from her. He flaunts a body-builder's swagger and a grin that hints more of menace than good will.

"Mind if I join you?" he asks.

"Three's a crowd," she warns. "My partner will be back in a sec."

"No prob," he says as he sits. "I just wanna ask a few questions."

She makes a face.

"I won't touch your, ah, dinners," he adds as if to make amends.

Jen takes two slow breaths before she speaks. "You've hijacked my partner's chair."

Ignoring her comeback, he points outside. "That your Hummer in the corner? A fine vehicle. Tell me where you're off to next, and I'm outta here."

"Leave now, before my partner gets back," she growls.

He appears amused, but his eyes are stone cold. "I ain't leaving till you answer my questions."

"Suit yourself," says Jen. She gets up, walks away and squats in an empty chair three tables distant.

He throws his arms overhead. From support-column reflections, she spots his partner coming toward the restaurant.

Ah *ha!* The arms-up routine must
be their inhouse signal for backup.

His partner is similar in height but lankier, more like a string bean. She reckons his crotch is a tad higher than her standup belly button.

I hate violent clashes.

But this one seems unavoidable.

The beefy guy has followed her to the makeshift table. He plops down and gives her the wolf's-head glare.

The backup dude stands in her rearview about three tables away. He's likely packing and ready to pounce if needed. Nearer to hand the heavysset dude gets right down to business. "OK, Bitch," he snarls.

"Before I count to three, spit it out."

That settles it. I'm
dealing with two [mercs](#).

"What was the question again?"

His face boils over. "I asked *where* you going after lunch?"

"Thank you," says Jen as she gets up. "Gimmie a raincheck."

He grabs her forearm.

Jen knows how to maximize her 44-kilo frame, especially when wearing sure-grip footwear. She plants both feet, leans back and brings her weight to bear.

The rooster rises, taking an involuntary step forward, knocking the corner of the table awry. She pulls hard till he takes another step. He swivels hips and swings his free hand wildly, reaching to grab and take charge.

Jen switches tactics. Momentum has left him open and close, and she jabs a hard punch to his solar plexus.

This close-quarter punch has been applied thousands of times in bouts of martial arts. It's her stock response when muscular foes like Griz get inside her guard. The solar plexus is a beefy slab that protects vital organs. She has never seen a slab thicker and tougher than Griz's, but this dude's comes close.

The effect of any punch is determined by two factors. First is the

amount of force brought to bear. Second is the area of contact where fist meets flesh. Jen doesn't have the oomph of a 100-kilo male, but her knuckles cover less area than most men, and her punch impacts as hard as a prize fighter.

This kind of strike has usually pushed air from Griz's lungs and suspended flow in his arteries. She recalls how it stymied him, which gave her an easy escape. From this dude she expects a similar result, but she's astonished when her fist plunges to the wrist.

His muscular slab must've grown
from under-the-counter steroids.
Body-builder muscles don't react
as quick as muscles hard-earned
from exercise. Nor can he count
on superluminal channels that are
acquired with the mastery of *qat*,
channels which surge faster than
signals from the nervous system.

I sure didn't mean to burst
an artery and cripple the oaf.

She has no time for regrets, for his backup threatens to attack her blindside. She has already gauged the height of his family jewels. Her estimate pays dividends when she hears the approach of his footfalls. Without looking back, she launches a backward kick at his crotch. Thanks to her *third eye*, it connects bigtime.

His posture withers and crumples forward while she pivots on her stay-at-home foot. She grips the back of his head then drives his face on her raised knee. Cartilage crunches and nasal blood spurts. He's down for the ten-count.

Mere milliseconds have passed since the burly rooster grabbed her arm.

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She kneels and tends to the brawny merc. He's breathing; his pulse seems normal, but he's still in dreamland. He doesn't show obvious signs of internal bleeding, but she's no medical expert.

Her getaway doyen strolls out of the washroom and cries, "Leave you alone for one-minute. And look what you've done!"

"Longer than a minute. Enough for a two-flusher."

"Don't go there, Pix," says her partner in the silky voice of a Southern Belle. "A *lady* doesn't recount her bowel movements."

"Humph," Jen grumps, unimpressed.

"Njoek-Fa hates to lose paying customers."

"They weren't here for the grub."

"No. I guess not." Jo pulls a minicrossbow from her thigh pocket and slots a knockout **dart**. "I better make sure these hens stay comatose."

"Now you regret stopping for lunch, right?"

"No," says the redhead, rubbing her tummy then darting the beefy rooster. "We're not prime suspects, just persons of interest. The hens found us 'cuz they spotted the Humvee which stands out like a sore thumb. New-model Hummers haven't b'en sold for 25 years. Even harder to score mothballed Humvees at military auctions. Less than half a-dozen here in town, I reckon."

"No matter, Jo. We're in the bull's-eye now. 'Well-fed and dead' ain't my favorite endgame."

"Don't fret, Pix." She fires a dart in the butt of the bloody-nosed rooster. "Rathbone's gonna stay in the dark till salvagers clear the rubble."

"You sure of that?"

"You saw the neighborhood's narrow streets and wall-to-wall buildings. The errant missile would've hit buildings and brought down huge piles of masonry." Jo pauses and grins. "Don't worry, Pix. We can still vamoose, but it'll be up to you."

"I'm all ears, Jo."

"Hand your poster to Njoek-Fa. Then ask for some used sheets or packaging wrap, enough to hogtie the hens. I'll stay here and downplay your fisticuffs for the bouncer and clientele. Gotta keep our mug shots from going viral across Indochina."

[Spin-off on Amazon.com.](#)

[Hot Wheels: Cool Assassins 2.](#)

Fast Food.

Jenna (Jen, Pix) Marov: rundog. Born 2037 in Yakutsk, Russia. Adult height: 150 centimeters; weight: 44 kilograms; brown eyes, black hair. Climbs the Eiffel Tower in 2052. Joins Imperial Circus in 2052. Earns top billing as aerial acrobat 2053. Quits Imperial Circus in 2059. Climbs the Andes until falsely arrested for theft in 2061. Joins Dog Breakfast Co-op in 2061.

[Back.](#)

McJoys® is a franchised fast-food chain. It has been accused of serving more sclup than normal food, although it has never been convicted in court.

[Back.](#)

sclup is a protein supplement that is brewed from desalinated glasswort and saltbush, plus ethanol derivatives, methanogenic bacteria, artificial flavors and fortifying additives. Sclup yields more protein than hybrid soybeans.

[Back.](#)

quebie (slang) cubicle jockey, white-collar networker. [Back.](#)

DB (acronym) Dog Breakfast is a covert SOAR co-op that works in conjunction with POE to ensure fair play. Its members include (from youngest to oldest):

Nyssa (Fu/Sis) Persson, brownbelt soon to be rundog;
 Meghan (Meg) Getzler, orange belt, dataroom stalwart;
 Subira (Subie) Herren, orange belt, dataroom super;
 Fingar (Fing) white belt, lead hacker;
 Shepp, rundog, expert swordsman;
 Jenna (Jen/Pix) Marov, rundog, acrobat, climber;
 Griswold (Griz) rundog, strength specialist;
 JoAnna (Jo) rundog, ex-taxi driver;
 Makoto (Mack) rundog, master of martial arts;
 Nailah (Nigh) former rundog, Timekeeper;
 Absen (Abb) Ho, rundog, Cook's partner, deceased;
 Ahab (Cook) Ho, rundog, founder, top dog. [Back.](#)

rooster (nickname) home guard or enforcer. Armed roosters are trained to safeguard compounds from intruders. [Back.](#)

JoAnna (Jo): rundog. Born 2035. Adult height: 178 centimeters; weight: 71 kilograms; yellow eyes; red-flaming hair. She drives taxi in Miami 2054-6. Joins Dog Breakfast Co-op in 2057. [Back](#).

fuagate (slang) spontaneous erotic fusion. 20th-century scientists linked fuagates to luminous phases of the moon. However, this hypothesis has been largely debunked and psychologists now believe that fuagates are caused by a lack of gravity. [Back](#).

holovid (holoflix) is a cinematic presentation in holographic format. It renders a 3D visual experience with authentic audio, which includes VR touch and smell for high-end devices. [Back](#).

def (short-form slang) definite, definitely. [Back](#).

3-kilom run tests endurance and stamina. To qualify for rundog, acolytes must run three kiloms in seven minutes flat. [Back](#).

ellipsoid chamber is the inside of an ellipsoid where acolytes practice dodging laser beams that simulate enemy shooters. To qualify for rundog, acolytes must dodge at least 50 of 100 kill shots. Acolytes have nicknamed it the "torture" chamber. [Back](#).

soupers (slang) Folks who live in the soup cans, which are huge cylindrical habitats orbiting in cislunar L4 and L5. [Back](#).

merc is the short form of mercenary. [Back](#).

qat (SOAR acronym) Quantum Assassination Theory. Qat training gives acolytes physical excellence and sharpened senses. The sessions involve intensive practice and psignologic meditation. [Back](#).

dart(s) are used by rundogs to disable foes. On contact the dart acts as a hypodermic needle. Pressure on the "ball" forces the potion through the needle. The superalloy needle is capable of piercing lightweight body armor. [Back](#).

