

# Excerpt *Hot Wheels*

Sequel to *Loose Threads*

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

## 22. Phantom

Kuala Lumpur: 12 May 2076, 12:55 p.m.

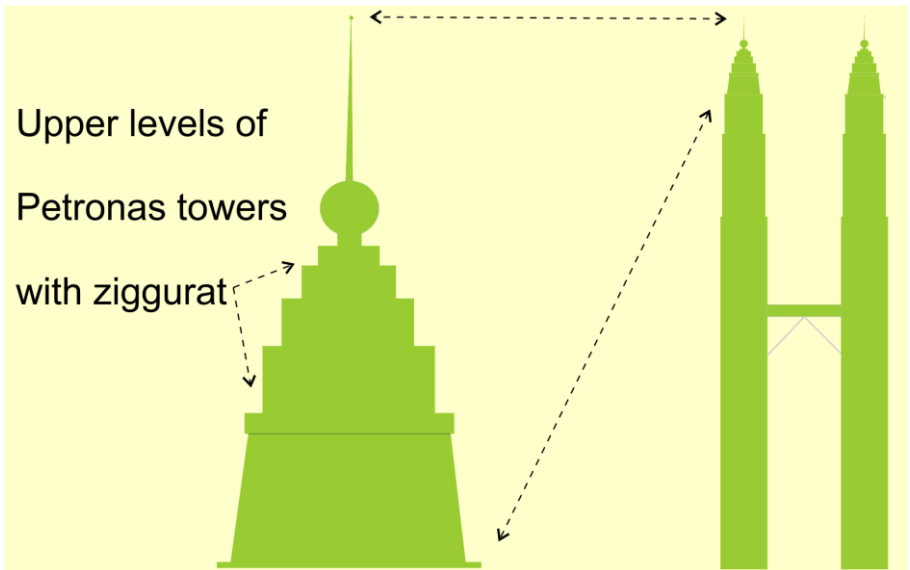
Half-cooked and sweat-soaked, Jen awakes to tropical daylight. Her makeshift coverlet, a thin-cotton wrap, has been kicked away where it huddles at the edge of the lean-to.

She pokes her head outside and eyes the truncated shadow of the tower's spire. This close to the equator, daylight hours mark  $15^\circ$  shifts in the shadow's azimuth, so Jen has a handy sundial.

\_The shade points to about 1:00 p.m.

\_Good. I've got lots of time to prime

\_the bomb and prepare my escape.



After six hours of dreamless sleep, Jen has gotten recharged from last-night's toils. She's on top Petronas tower 2, the tallest loft in Kuala Lumpur. Preparations still need to be made before she attacks the

summit room. These can be done inside the camouflaged lean-to, which hangs from the ornamental sphere to the top step of the ziggurat.

The lean-to projects a holographic background that hides her from the “eyes” of **aerodrones** flying at various altitudes around the KLCC grounds. A soft breeze through her workspace cools the scorch of tropical sunlight.

Her cat-burglar threads fit like a 2nd-skin. The co-op supplies tailored clothes for her ultrapetite size which is much better than making do with gaudy styles from adolescent clothing racks.

\_Before joining DB, I had  
\_heaps of trouble finding  
\_decent clothes to wear.

Outsiders often judge her fearless or reckless, but close friends know she's both careful and cautious. Her amazing feats have evolved from hundreds of hours of practice. Each day Jen squeezes a solid rubber ball, ten minutes for each hand. Strong wrists are crucial when there are no footholds. Those same small wrists have agonized muscle-bound foes who've fallen prey to her pressure holds.

The rubber ball is a mere footnote of her daily practice regimen. She works the horse, the parallel bars, the high jump and unique high-wire stunts that would stagger airborne avians. In past decades Jen has toured with the Imperial Circus as its premier aerial performer.

\_Not bad for a gal who's suffered  
\_bouts of vertigo since childhood.

No wonder Dog Breakfast has sought her as a prodigal daughter. DB's metics train almost as hard as she does. They strive to be the best they can be. So Jen fits right in. No one raises a brow when she adds new wrinkles to her repertoire.

The hardest challenge has been severing ties from her past. Family and childhood friends believe she died in a Chilean highway accident. It grates her sometimes that she can't set the record straight. But her pact with the co-op forbids contact with former friends and family.

She has kept track of the old gang, most of whom are working at humdrum jobs. Her parents are about to begin their retirement years. Her younger brother hasn't lost his soul to the Russian Mafia. In fact, he's settled down as IT manager for a large Russian oil company and

married a local gal.

The old ties are fading since colleagues in DB satisfy her emotional needs.

Jen squats lotus-style and hums a pet melody from the Nutcracker Suite. It's one of those tunes that just pops to mind, lending a pleasant ambiance for paraglider assembly. Serenity reigns in her earth-brown eyes and heart-shaped face, her high-rounded cheeks, firm lips and puggish nose.

Her do-it-yourself skills have led to several blind alleys until enough hang lines have been secured.

\_Once the framework starts  
\_to piece together, the rest  
\_ought to follow in kind.  
\_It's just busy work afterall,  
\_no heavy lifting involved.

It's therapy for sore muscles and stiff joints from the marathon climb of last night. No amount of physical discomfort can wipe the smug smile off her face.

\_I climbed to the pinnacle  
\_without getting caught.  
\_Vertigo hasn't stopped me yet.  
\_Few will ever match my pace.

She has jumped at the opportunity to climb another landmark.

\_A proud mark of excellence.  
\_I judge my climbing skills,  
\_acrobatics and self-defense  
\_harsher than anyone else.

She's loyal to a fault because DB's cause is worth doing. That's why she's perched atop this venerable skyscraper, ready to wreak havoc on a gang of haughty CEOs.

She fastens more stays to the wing. A careless smile exposes her missing front tooth. The prosthetic has been left behind. She couldn't care less how she looks.

\_Even if it all comes out peaches,  
\_there won't be time for selfies.

Once the prep is done, Jen will climb down to the summit room and blow the CEOs to smoker's hell. Her goal is unmitigated terror in the guise of a wake-up call, yet it won't dishonor the scales of justice. Her real aims are the conglomerates that've escape public scrutiny because they've grown too big to fail.

The CEOs hold true to their codes of business, and they're devoted to friends and family. But they ignore the consequences of their decisions. For them it's smart business to retire aging plants and open state-of-art robotic assemblers in low-tax regions with complacent regs. Investors applaud the promise of renewed profits. The media seldom dotes on the loyal employees who've been sent out to pasture. Too often the closures break families apart and sometimes provoke murder-suicides.

High finance and auto-assembly have narrowed the wealth into fewer and fewer hands. Postmodern business favors tiny-specialized workforces. Those still on the payroll must concede to whatever terms or wages the employers offer. Economies of scale have created the means for transnats to dominate the global marketplace. In short, the CEOs have garbled the mainstays of commerce and achieved unbridled monopolies.

Jen has no qualms about using her bomb. The chaos ought to embarrass W. A. Rathbone who's attending in teleconference mode. His roosters are charged with safeguarding the summit. He'll escape the misery of those present, so they're sure to make him the goat.

Dissent in the cartel is good for DB, good for **TCP** and good for the orbital habitats.

She wonders what JoAnna has planned at the rendezvous.

\_Will it be enough?  
\_Dozens of Rathbone's shock troopers  
\_and every cop in Kuala Lumpur  
\_will be hot on our trail. Jo better  
\_have an ace up her sleeve.

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Leonid Turku eyes the master panel and its rows of green beacons. The LEDs display status reports for 102 sensor clusters and tactical feeds from 78 roosters stationed at Petronas tower 2. He nods satisfied.

\_No leaks, no loiterers,  
\_no apparent threats.  
\_The indicators look fine.  
\_Yet my thumb still itches.

Leonid prides himself at being thorough as he shoves his appetite aside. No need to dwell on soft-boiled eggs, sirloin shish kebobs, hash browns with spicy tomato paste, buttered toast and a large **UltimaPop** to wash it down.

\_Breakfast can wait till I finish  
\_the final round of checks.  
\_Business before pleasure.

His job is safeguarding the VIPs and ensuring there are no leaks. The public must not even suspect that CEOs of the largest **transnats** are gathered here for cartel business. His boss owns the building, so Leonid has the authority to expel quebies and onlookers from the upper eight floors, and he has done so. All that's left are the VIPs, the inhouse attendants and his elite roosters whom he trusts without question.

The meeting is in progress and will continue through the afternoon. When all have arrived, the CEOs will stay on the 81st-floor in a secure room where its height above ground discounts steeple climbers. To thwart armed drones, steel armor has been added to reinforce the windows. Vidcams and sensor alerts monitor the traffic on stairways and elevators. His **roosters** will turn back and detain party crashers long before they reach the upper floors.

Leonid checks the wide-angle cam atop Petronas tower 1 which covers 70 hectares of the KLCC complex. It pans the bottom floors of Petronas tower 2, its adjacent office tower and concert hall, the conference center, the hypermall and parking space for 6,600 vehicles bordering a park and walk-around lagoon. Plenty of antlike shoppers and tourists amble about the complex. Anyone could be a media snooper or saboteur.

To minimize public exposure, he has devised a "shell game" to move VIPs on-site with utmost discretion.

Since late morning the entourages have debarked from private jets at a seldom-used annex building. Each group has been split in two

separate parties and shuttled to KLCC. The tag-along folks have taken flashy limos to the conference center, whereas the CEOs and key aides have used older mud-splattered limos to the underground freight docks of Petronas tower 2. Then elevators lofted them to the summit room.

Everything has gone down as planned, but he can't afford to relax. Nosy paparazzi could be anywhere among the tourists and shoppers. Assassins could be plotting all kinds of mischief. It takes mere seconds to foul a ventilation system with anthrax, sarin or bacteriophages.

His roosters have checked and rechecked for biological, chemical and radiological residues, but redundant inspections don't ensure 100% confidence. The summit is no better defended than the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's rampart, Maginot Line, Iron Curtain or Trump's Gate, all of which have failed despite the best efforts of their builders.

\_Shit happens, but I aim to turn

\_all vermin away on my watch.

Leonid opens a voice link to the ground crew. "Rashid?"

"Yo, Leo."

"How's the sweep going?"

"We've covered every square meter. Nothing here but creepy bugs and bird brains."

"Good work. Stay on the lookout for phony tourists."

"No prob. Walkways are covered, Leo."

"Puts my mind at ease, Rashid." He closes the link.

Five quartets of surveillance drones have been deployed since dawn. There are 16 drones in the air, four refueling and soon ready to relieve the next quartet low on fuel. Those airborne are circling Petronas tower 2 and other points of interest around [KLCC](#).

Leonid's stomach growls as he calls on the drone maestro. "Viktor?"

"On the ball, Leo."

"Good to hear. Any of our drones squawking?"

"Not a one."

Leonid would've launched the birds earlier, but there were delays in obtaining permits. Kuala Lumpur's privacy laws are a bloody nuisance to say the least. Private security outfits need special permits to fly aerodrones at altitudes within 400 meters of human habitats. Since the Petronas twins stand 450 meters above ground, the drones minus

permits must fly at 850 meters, rendering them next to useless.

Leonid figures the beauty-pageant scandal prompted tougher bylaws for surveillance drones. Ms. Malaysia of 2074 was forced to abdicate in disgrace after nude photos were posted online and then “discovered” by a data miner at Webvine News.

Contest organizers had advised beauty contestants to erase suntan lines for swimsuit reviews. Ms. Hloh basked in natural sunlight to gain a whole-body tan. A drone that patrolled the mansion next door spotted her inside the walled compound. The teleoperator extracted a juicy clip that showed sunblock being rubbed on privy glands.

The exposé crushed Ms. Hloh. It roused her wealthy father who got angry as a pit bull. He was devoted to his daughter. He never let her leave home without chaperones and bodyguards. He swore the photos had been faked, and his legal hounds forced the webpage offline.

His lawsuit against Webvine News failed after the court ruled the photos were genuine. Not to be outdone, Mr. Hloh enlisted PIs who tracked the photos to a security outfit. His barristers pounced, but the culprits had already decamped and left town.

At this point Mr. Hloh grew hot as a blast furnace, his ears huffing smoke. He sent angry complaints to City Council, half of whom owed him their campaign funds. In consequence, Kuala Lumpur passed new bylaws governing aerial drones.

Leonid grimaces.

\_The sleazebag teleoperator has ruined  
\_the scene for every other security outfit.  
\_If the fool ever tried a stunt like that  
\_under my command, he'd spend the next  
\_six years tracking reindeer in Siberia.

Leonid would've tolerated an inhouse sharing of girly photos. But the fool stepped out of line when he sold the pics to Webvine News. The media wags weren't much better. They must've smelled rotten jellyfish, but they nabbed the video to boost viewer ratings, which skyrocketed for two weeks. One lousy leak has voided Ms. Hloh's crown and, more important, delayed the deployment of aerodrones till this morning.

The same bylaw has a silver lining. It authorizes him to stop media drones from snooping around KLCC. If they sneak across property

lines, his **wifi**-tools will zombie them till they plunge to the bottom of the lagoon.

His birds are flying regular patterns in semiautonomous mode, so one of his teleoperators can monitor half a-dozen at once. Their **highres** cams track suspicious actions in the visible spectrum. Infrared mode has been disabled since the tower's facades absorb solar heat at different rates. Humanlike signatures would be lost amid the riot of scorched surfaces.

“Viktor, I'm grabbing breakfast and handing the comm to you.”

“OK. Got it.”

“Ring me, anything comes up.”

“Natch.”

Leonid strolls to the kitchenette. His thumb still twitches.

\_Something ain't right.

\_But what?

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If you haven't read “Loose Threads”

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**Phantom.**

**aerodrone** is a robotic aircraft used for reconnaissance and warfare.

Sometimes called Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). The “aero” part of the word distinguishes this type of drone from robotic sentries, battle tanks or naval “kamikaze” drones. [Back](#).

**holoproj** (short-form slang) holo projector. It projects holographic images in Ultracolorakinesis and optional audio in Hexaphonic waveforms. [Back](#).

**TCP** (SOAR acronym) Tsawwassen Coastal Preserve. TCP encompasses the Pacific coastal ecologic zone: the far western foothills and rainforests of Canada, including the outlying islands and territorial waters. [Back](#).

**UltimaPop®** is a popular soft drink that carries a wallop. It contains huge amounts of refined sugar and caffeine, plus carbonated water and a trace of smoked lime. [Back](#).

**Transnat** is the short-form for transnational (corporation). By mid-21st-century, multinationals have merged into conglomerates. Together they have one billion employees on affiliated payrolls. Below are major CEOs and transnats in the order of greatest cash flow.

W. A. Rathbone, CEO of Zesticon Plc.;  
 Okuno Ayumi, CEO of SonyKong Ltd.;  
 Trevor Wynestoop, CEO of Wexol Inc.;  
 Ralph Heck, CEO of Beuack AG;  
 Choong Zhijian, CEO of Yuhan Ltd.;  
 Martin Gagnon, CEO of Goranda ADR;  
 Torero Grabb, CEO of Shrinkwrap Inc. [Back](#).

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

**KLCC** (acronym) Kuala Lumpur City Center. KLCC signifies the Petronas Towers complex, especially the hypermall at the towers' feet. [Back](#).

**wifi** (tech term: *Why-Figh*) or Wi-Fi is a wireless technology that connects mobile devices to wide area networks. [Back](#).

**highres** (short form) high resolution. [Back](#).

