

# Arland

## Chapter 1 – Uneasy Rider

Michael Levits was on his way home to his condo in Flagstaff from a distant college lecture. Hunger could no longer be ignored, so he pulled his chopper off the freeway onto a segment of old Route 66 in search of a meal. Slowly cruising the service road he spotted a large rustic building, surrounded by an expanse of deteriorating pavement that was large enough for semis to maneuver. The pickup trucks parked outside assured him that it had good food at a reasonable price.

He was a young man and clean shaven, but the wind and sun of the freeways made it difficult to discern his age. He was still about two hundred yards away when the setting sun revealed a young lady working her way through the weeds and sparse sage from the freeway. He briefly considered driving behind the building to intercept her and see if she needed help, but her stride seemed strong enough, so why bother. Although exceptionally young for his impressive academic credentials, Levits was not a social person.

As he entered and drank the aroma of the beef-heavy menu, he noted the already busy bar in the far end of the room. He knew he was in redneck heaven, and he didn't mind it a bit. He *did* feel a little out of place as he shed his leather jacket to reveal an expensive silk shirt, but he had no interest in relating to the culture – just the food.

He made eye contact with a waitress, who nodded towards a stool at the counter. As he slipped in and began to survey the slightly greased menu, a lovely young lady with a strong balanced stride entered. Her clothes were simple, but her long light colored hair had become complicated during her trek through the sage and the freeway fence beyond.

She paused to stand in the counter pathway, and lifted her chin slightly as she surveyed the patrons. She soon made a selection and zeroed in on Levits. “Nice shirt. Silk?” she asked with a winsome smile. “May please I borrow your cell phone?”

As Levits stood up to dig into a front pocket for his cell phone,

they were interrupted.

“I know you – you name Kat,” said a gruff and slightly inebriated voice. “Honey, you can borrow my cell phone any time you want it.”

“She wasn't talking to you,” said Levits quietly.

As Levits extended his hand with his phone, a powerful hand batted it to the floor.

“Mind your own business – Silk,” said the man, to the rustle of his friends rising to their feet.

In a pretense of reaching down to pick up his phone he crowded between the speaker on his left and Kat, to prevent him from taking a step towards her as she backed away. He had just learned that this brute was right-handed, and expected a blow would quickly follow as he bent over.

“Silk!” screamed Kat, assuming the looming blow was unexpected.

Silk shifted to his right, and raised his left forearm to deflect the blow. As he rose he continued to turn, and drove his right elbow into the side of the brute's neck. As the man staggered sideways Silk briefly face Kat. “Out!” he said. “Left – to the chopper.”

As the brute toppled, his head met the edge of a table, spewing instant evidence of a severe cut. “You've killed Tommy!” yelled a brawny worker as he reached across his fallen friend to seize Silk.

Outside, Kat paused to glance through the glass door in time to see Silk grab the wrist of the extended hand and yank it forward, causing the man to stumble over his fallen friend. Silk gave a hop as he placed a knee on the inside of the man's elbow while still tightly holding his wrist, and slammed him viciously into the floor. Bounding from there to the door, Silk quickly passed Kat as he raced to his chopper, starting it as he backed it out of the parking place. “Now!” he urged Kat, as she looked frantically back and forth between the door and the chopper.

When the restaurant door flew open in the fury of pursuit, she made up her mind. “This is insane!” she exclaimed as she bounced onto the seat behind Silk.

It seemed only seconds before the roar of the motorcycle was answered by the sound of pickup trucks awakening for pursuit. At least one of them sounded far more powerful than it would have

been while on the showroom floor.

Silk controlled his speed as they passed a scattering of gas stations, old motels and pedestrians. The pickups didn't seem to care, coming perilously close to oncoming traffic and completely ignoring a stop sign.

“I think they're gaining,” said Kat. “I expected this motorcycle to be faster than this.”

“It is but I'm not,” said Silk. “I'm not going to drive stupidly just because they are.”

“Ooh!” said Kat, cringing as she saw a pickup narrowly miss a pedestrian.

A rapidly approaching pickup was only fifty yards behind as they passed the last of the businesses and turned to ascend the overpass to the freeway on-ramp beyond. The pickup ceased to gain further as it negotiated the curve leaning heavily to its left.

As Silk aligned himself with the freeway on-ramp, chopper and driver became a different animal. “Hang on,” shouted Silk.

Kat shamelessly wrapped her arms around this total stranger and clung for dear life. The engine began to bellow and she closed her eyes tightly and let out an involuntary wail, as the power lifted the front wheel off the ground – surging forward, clawing the on-ramp for traction. Kat opened her eyes to see white dashes flickering past beneath them, and occasional cars that appeared to be parked on the freeway in comparison to their speed.

After about five minutes had passed, one of the trucks was still within sight, and Silk was in need of another tactic. He suddenly began to slow down after passing through a shallow road cut. A half-minute later he pulled to the shoulder near an obscure sign and a dirt road – as the pickup came roaring up behind. In the fading twilight and the rising moon, Kat could see that the road disappeared into some low hills.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Kat, suddenly concerned.

“I can drop you off here so you can hide while I lead the pursuit into those hills – watch out for snakes though.”

This offer gave Kat a little reassurance of Silk's intentions. “For now I'll assume you're safer than the snakes,” said Kat.

“Thank you,” said Silk.

It was soon evident to Kat that Silk was familiar with this road as it wound through the low hills. The dust stirred by the chopper and the lack of familiarity by the pursuit made it extremely difficult and dangerous for them to follow. After a few miles, the pursuing headlights pulled to a stop atop a rise overlooking a broad flat area.

At a fork in the road, Silk turned left for a quarter of a mile, turned off his headlight, and turned around to travel back the other direction. He then continued on the other road. Driving very slowly in the dim light of the sky. "That was clever," said Kat. Silk made no comment.

"You don't use your brakes much do you," observed Kat, as he kept his same speed over a rough patch.

"Were you aware that some brakes turn on tail lights?" said Silk with a touch of sarcasm.

Kat gave a brief startled look in response to his rudeness, and then silently mouthed his reply with exaggerated expression.

It was a little while before Kat dared to speak again, but finally: "Got a name?"

"It's Silk."

"Tommy works at the feed store in the town. He gives me the creeps. Are you trying to protect me by not telling me your name?"

"I'm protecting *me!*"

They slowly made their way along a flat area for about another mile, and just before it dropped off steeply to a narrow valley the road veered left. Silk took a less used path branching off to the right, but it was shortly blocked by a heavily padlocked gate just before it descended into the valley. At this point they paused to see if the headlights of the trucks were still there. They had been replaced by a campfire.

Searching for some hope of escape, Kat looked past the gate and the moonlight showed the valley becoming narrow about a mile away, as it began to drop into a canyon. "We are so-o stuck," observed Kat.

The rim of the valley through which the driveway was cut made it impossible for even the motorcycle to bypass the gate.

"How well can I trust you?" asked Silk.

"That depends upon how well you behave," said Kat.

“Fair enough. I don't want you to tell anyone what I'm about to show you – at least not where it is – promise?”

“I promise.”

Silk stepped off the bike and soon had the padlock opened.

“Where did you learn to pick locks?” asked Kat.

“Maybe I didn't.”

“I saw you. You had that lock open in ten seconds flat!”

Silk held a small object up over his head in the moonlight.

“This little gadget, is called a 'key.’”

In the relative quiet of the slow descent, Kat made another attempt at conversation. “You work out don't you.”

“Have to.”

“Why?”

After a half minute of awkward silence, Silk finally spoke: “What's the matter with your car?”

Kat just rolled her eyes and shook her head, thinking that maybe he needed talking lessons. And finally, after another long pause, and an expressiveness one might use for a small child: “I think it is out of gas. It runs very poorly under those conditions. The gas gauge quit over a year ago and the car quit this very afternoon. When it started acting up I pulled over within walking distance of civ-il-i-zation, so that I could choose my help. I thought it might be wiser to do that, rather than to wait for whomever might choose to stop. And so, I honored *you* with my request.”

“Oh,” said Silk, not even noticing the sarcasm of her intentionally wordy response.

Obviously nobody ever taught this guy how people communicate, mused Kat. “What kind of movies do you watch?”

“I don't.”

“Sports? You're obviously in great shape.”

“No.”

“What *do* you do?”

“*Important* things.”

“Like what – saving the human race?” Kat was getting really irritated, to the point that she didn't care if she irritated this... this... whatever it was.

“Yeah.”

Kat was not expecting *this* for an answer, but continued her assault anyway. “So you're some kind of a super hero?”

Silk was becoming irritated with this probing, but was also a little amused, and he silently mouthed her last question before responding. “No.” This annoying interrogation was beginning to awaken his long lost playful side. “Well, maybe not just yet at least.”

Kat was determined to get him defensive enough to get a real answer out of him. “Are you some kind of uh... a psychopath?”

“Yeah.”

She couldn't see Silk's amused smile. “So you haul young maidens out to your lair to molest them?”

“Yep.”

Backfired: A chill went through Kat's being and her mind was suddenly in a whirl of contradicting thoughts. “Stop the bike or I'll jump off anyway! I'll take the snakes!”

Silk had to stop the bike because he was laughing too hard to drive, and Kat was suddenly pounding his back with her fists in mock anger, as she realized that she'd just been had.

“Please,” she said, “Can we have a conversation sometime?”

“Look,” he said, “we are in a fix here, and I'm sorry I've been too preoccupied to think of anything else. I won't be fit to talk to until we've found an answer to eating and sleeping tonight – if there is one.” And then as an after thought: “But even so, I'm not much good at trivial conversations.”

Something had begun to thaw.

Kat sobered as she too began to face the reality of it all. Until this point the evening had registered as a fantasy adventure, shielded from reality by this strange person who seemed to have everything under control. But the adventure had been growing less appealing as she discovered he had the personality of a sand bag.

But suddenly, humor – and an apology! And even beyond this, he had just admitted that he was not invincible! This guy was beginning to look more like a human being every minute. At this point Kat resolved that she would quit toying with him and be as helpful as she could – if he would let her. She was educated, confident and at home in the outdoors.

## Chapter 2 – What on Earth?

Soon the air grew chilly and carried the scent of water. A narrow driveway bridge spanned the sandy bottom and its shallow, seasonal stream. It was supported by a large rock on the other side, and a crude concrete pillar in the middle that had been carefully poured to the same height as the rock. Less than twenty feet up the other side they were suddenly on a large concrete slab separated by short walls, shallow pits, and stairways that seemed to go nowhere.

“What is this place?” asked Kat in wonder.

“It was a biosphere.”

“A biosphere?”

“Yeah, a sealed living environment where even the atmosphere doesn't mix with outside air. Unlike the one at Oracle, this one contained only one ecosystem. Think of a sealed terrarium inhabited by humans instead of reptiles or insects.”

“Why would anyone want to live like reptiles or insects?”

“Some visionaries feel it wise to prepare for a time when the Earth might become damaged – a major asteroid strike for instance. As a precaution to ensure the survival of the human race, they want to establish human colonies in other parts of the solar system.”

At last, thought Kat, Here was something Silk seemed interested in talking about. “Tell me more.”

“An early stage of this planning involves hermetically sealed environments that are self-sufficient for indefinite periods of time. They plan to evolve these into space stations on the moon and on other planets.”

“Why would anyone want to actually live in one?”

“Like you said, I'm here to save the human race, but things didn't turn out the way they were supposed to.”

“Stop it! You're creeping me out! Now seriously: Did you actually live in this thing?”

“Yeah, for awhile.”

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