

Quantum Flesh

Christopher V. Davis

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One-Dayne

Striding along the flawless sidewalk, a slight breeze wisped through the night air, grazing his exposed flesh. Dayne recalled how back in his youth —as wasted and halcyon as it was— schools taught him how cities once smelled of trash and sewage. Old-fashioned cars and trucks spewed poison from their engines. The geeko-warriors and self-appointed intellectuals long ago got rid of all that. Cleaned everything up. Rid the world of everything polluting the air, water and the ground. He wished they'd done the same to people.

Without pausing, he glanced back. The woman still followed him. The intriguing itch he couldn't scratch. The same beams of clean, but dull light from the street lamps above lit her path as well.

After stopping off at Rocks for a few, his focus was to head back home. Dotted the streets between the two were the usual occupants. Autocars moved along the road without an iota of a carbon footprint. Racers speed by on their longboards. People with gainful, mind numbing employment hurried back to homes they sought an escape from. Street vendors selling everything from organic snacks to homemade jewelry. Mixed in were those peddling knockoff goods. For many in this world of equality, the real stuff was beyond their means. And for enough coin, one could even get food with all those evil, tasty, long outlawed additives. Eats made with processed sugar, carbohydrates or raw meat cooked to order.

He first noticed her upon leaving his last client. She looked no different from the other stoners and neo-punks inhabiting this part of the city. Her short, blond hair done up in a flared

out bob held small metal plugs at the tips, fused to a quarter inch strand of hair. All dangled around her head in even precision. The latest rage on the streets for those who thought it cool, or didn't mind having them hacked off when the fad wore off. Her pale skin meant she didn't get out of the city much. With all the skyscrapers, buildings and elevated highways, little sunlight reached the modern eco-friendly metropolitan jungle. And her skintight pants and multi-colored pullover shirt... no different from what others her age wore.

Looking back again, he guessed she must be about twenty-one. Twenty-five tops. Another pillar of their shiftless society.

He did have a chip full of cash on his bankcard. Payment for his last job. Figured she got wind of what he did for his client. There were few secrets on the streets if you know where to look. Who to ask. Who to bribe. He knew the drill. She'd get close. Wait till he was in a crowd. *Accidentally* brush up against him. Use a wireless, digital inductor to steal the money from his chip card. Then run off to her dealer, boyfriend or person she was currently banging for a fix.

Another block and she still tailed him. Enough was enough.

He walked onto a side street, one empty of people, vendors and autos. Ahead, a narrow alley jet off from the road. Once there he darted in. Pressing his long, brown hair and dark, synthetic cotton jacket against the wall, he glanced across the street. The clear, clean window opposite the alley and high-powered diode streetlights made the storefront a perfect mirror.

And there she was. The itch still moved down the street towards him. She looked left, then right, then behind her. He waited. Planting his feet just so, flexing his hands. Getting limber. Let her get close.

She marched by the entrance. In one smooth, silent action, he reached for her slender arm and pulled her in. He went for the other, intent on putting her in a chokehold. Not too hard. Just enough to hold her. Wouldn't want to break her thin neck.

But she twisted around, flinging herself forward and down, escaping his grasp. The spry young woman rolled forward and sprung to her feet. She then lunged at him. Stunned and impressed, he readied himself for the assault.

She started with her right fist. He parried. Her left joined the fight. Despite her petite stature, she was no amateur. He stepped back, fending off another round of blows. The smacking of fists against flesh mixed with the heated grunts she let out with each effort. Both echoed through alley.

She spun around, lifting her leg for a round kick. Meant for his head, he saw his chance. Now he'd show her he was no amateur either. He leaned back, letting her boot covered foot swing by. As it did, he lunged forward, placing both hands on her airborne leg. Twisting it down and away, she spun around, caught off guard and off balance.

Jetting from behind, he grabbed each slender but firm biceps. In one thrust, he hurled her at a nearby trash container lit up by the lone light near the entrance. A cramped yelp left her lips as her body slammed against it, placing both hands atop the clean dumpster to stop herself. The shock stunned her small body.

Not waiting for her to recover, he moved full throttle, again wrapping his strong hands around each bicep. Just in case she went for his groin with her nimble legs, he lodged one of his between her two and planted the other behind him. Pinned face forward onto the container, struggled like a fish out of water.

“*LET ME GO!*” she shouted, squirming back and forth, twisting head and body. Given he was a full head and a half taller she presented no match for him in her current position. “I said— *LET ME GO YOU ASSHOLE!*”

The profane request had no effect. He caught his breath, letting his catch burn herself out. Squirming around, her legs kick him as her hips wiggling against his leg. Leaning in close to her ear, he avoided her still thrashing head. The metal plugs slapping one another added a chiming noise to her huffing, puffing and muted curses.

“You grinding your crotch against my thigh might get you off, but it won’t get you loose,” he said in a firm, clear voice, tightening his grip. “Why are you following me?”

She didn’t answer. Her only response a continued struggle, albeit with diminishing strength.

“We can do this all night,” he said. “Or you can answer my question— *Why are you following me?*”

Her head came to a stop, spitting out words between efforts to catch her breath.

“You’re... you’re... you’re Dayne. Viggo Dayne. Right?”

“Perhaps.” His left eyebrow peaked up along with curiosity.

“I... I...” she stuttered.

“You what? What do you want with me?”

“Let... me... *GO AND I’LL FUCKING TELL YOU!*”

He shook his head as she resumed a feeble struggle. “No deal girl. And like I said...”

With gritted teeth, he went on. “We can do— this— all— *night*—”

“Your friend... Jack...” Her spastic head came to a stop. Jack Spillaine told me to find you.”

His eyebrows shot up. She continued wiggling. “Really,” he said, sarcasm and disbelief in his voice. “And how’s my good friend Jack doing these days? He ever get that fake left eye replaced with a real one?”

“No! And it’s his right one.” Loosened his grip, she went on. “Said he lost it on Mars... when you and him were stationed there... in the Aero-Marines.”

“Is that so? And why don’t I just give my good old friend a call. Catch up and ask why he didn’t tell me about the smart ass friend he’s made!”

“You can’t talk to him—”

“And why not?”

“Can’t talk to the dead, asshat!”

Anger filled his tightened grip, pushing her harder against the container. He leaned in. An angry breath beat against her neck. “And how did my friend get dead?”

Turning her head away, her struggling came to a stop. “Helping me... that’s how.”

He held her firm as his mind processed the news. A few moments passed, he then drew in a deep breath. “You have a phone?” he asked. “A cell? Tablet?”

Her response was one last attempt to break free. His was a push forward and harder against the container.

“Again, girl. You have a phone?”

“No,” she spouted. “Lost it.”

He leaned back and let out a huff, pulling his stalker back towards him. With a quick jolt, his left arm shot around hers, then around her back, pinning her arm within his. Grasping her right arm from behind with his left hand, he pinned both against him.

Her arms locked within his, she began struggling again. But his one arm hold was just as strong as two. His now free hand move along her stomach, moving down towards her hips.

Feeling his hand slide under the elastic of her dark, skintight pants, she cringed. His warm hand sent a chill through her. Succumbing to her predicament, she awaited the worst.

His moved hand down within her pants. Finally, he found it. Once in his grasp, he pulled out, then flung her away. The girl brought herself to a stop, her boots making a scuffling noise upon the roadway as she did.

Gazing at the black, rectangular, wafer thin mobile phone, he tapped the screen with his finger. The small device came to life.

“How...” the girl asked, staring at him, catching her breath between words. “How did... you know... no guy would’a...”

He smiled, staring at her phone. “If you did know Jack, he should’ve told you I’m not some guy.” Upon the small screen a circle appeared. Within it, the outline of a fingerprint surrounding a small heart slowly pulsed. “You used a biometric pass code.” Looking at her, he held up and out the device. “Smart girl. Now open it.”

She looked at her phone, then back at Dayne. Clenching her fist, she stepped forward and shouted. “*THAT’S MINE AND—*”

In an instant, the muzzle of a handgun appeared directly in front of her face.

Expecting such a reaction, he kept a free hand on the handle of the weapon concealed under his coat. Drawing it out at aiming, she stopped dead in her tracks. For the first time he got a good, hard look at her in the half-light of the alley. Her small, almond eyes stared back at him. Her pointed nose shot out from her young, square face.

Frozen, she glanced between the screen of the phone in his one hand and the automatic pistol in his other. The round, blackened hole at the end of the square muzzle just as ominous as the phone beckoning her warm fingerprint.

She stepped back and shook her head. He grimaced.

“Okay,” he said, stepping back himself. “Since you haven’t bolted I’m assuming there’s something on this phone you want. *Really* want. And you’re smart enough to know what a nine mm round would do to your pretty face.”

Never taking his eyes off her, he put the pistol away. Reaching over to the holster adjacent, he produced a stun gun. Making sure this would be stalker knew he was still armed, he held it up, flipping a small switch on the side. She looked on as a thin, blue spark shot between the two prongs atop the non-lethal weapon. He moved the device towards the phone. Her eyes swung from fear tinged with curiosity to wide-eyed alarm.

“*NO!* Don’t!” she spouted, raising her hand in supplication.

He smiled, moving the stun gun to the back of her phone. “You know what this would do? Don’t you? Fry everything you have on there. All your contacts to your boyfriends, girlfriends, lovers, dealers, sugar-daddies or mommies.”

Anger grew on her face. He remained mute, not sweating or showing fear. The ball was in her court.

Her hand came up and clench itself into a fist, save for the thumb. Ever so slowly, she moved it towards the phone. All the while he kept his eyes on hers, looking for that tale-tale sign of intent. Even as he felt the slight push of her thumb against the screen, he didn’t lower his stare or guard. A low chime sprang from the phone.

He smiled and stepped back. “Good girl.” He brought the phone close to his chest, keeping the stun gun adjacent the device.

The young woman stepped back as well, dropping her arm, then spouted. “Don’t call me girl! I hate that word!”

He thumbed through the apps on the phone. “Do you have a name? Or just a penal number?”

“Licia,” she said. “I’ve never been in the box! So you can stop making dumbass assumptions about me. And I’m nobodies bitch or plaything either.”

Another nod, displaying no emotion as he looked at her contacts then pictures.

“Licia,” he said, tabbing through various folders. “Short for the old English name Felicia.”

Confusion filled her voice. “I don’t know about that. About... old English.”

“Figures. But’ll give you credit for your somewhat user friendly filing system...” His voice trailed off, finding what he searched for.

It was Jack. The slight wrinkles and receding hairline tinged with bits of gray hair. And that artificial eye. Noticeable not because he knew, but the way the sunlight would bounce off it, giving any observer the impression he had two different colored eyes. Jack smiled in the selfie. Still had all his teeth too. Next to his head was that of Licia with just a big a smile.

A glance at her. “You know, you have a nice smile. Should use it more often.”

She scowled. “Don’t have much to smile about.”

“Makes two of us.” He moved towards the dumpster. “But if you have any complaints about the world... cry into your pillow tonight.”

He sat the phone on the lid, then reach under his coat. “So tell me, Licia,” he began, producing his own, larger, thicker phone. “Why was my now dead friend helping you?”

She took a judicious step towards him. “My sister. Helping find my sister—”

He spewed a staccato laugh. His mocking tone reverberated off the walls.

“The hell’s so damn funny?” Licia demanded.

“That’s an oldy girl. I mean Licia.” He didn’t look at her as he brought up one particular app on his phone. “The story goes like this: My sister’s lost. Here’s her picture. I need you to find her. She’s in trouble. I love her so much...” Giving her a cursory glance, her face grew both angry by his sarcastic tone and confused by his story. “Then,” he continued, turning back, “Jack or any other private cop would discover that your—” He then gave her feigned puppy dog eyes. “Long lost sister who you love *soooo* much was just banging your husband and or boyfriend, stole your priceless whatnot or owed you money and just wanted her dead.” Back to the phones.

“That’s... that’s not it,” she pleaded, angered by yet another implication. “He found her and—” She stopped, “The hell you doing?”

He placed his phone over hers. “Cloning your phone.”

Wide eyed, she stepped towards him. “You have no right—”

Again his stun gun barred her path. Yet another pale blue streak of electricity shot across the probes. She stopped all but two steps from the charged weapon.

“And you have no right following me. So we’re even,” he said.

The process only took a few moments. Turned back, he saw the meter reach one-hundred percent. The lifeless words ‘TRANSFER COMPLETE’ confirming the digital transmission.

Without a word, he pocketed the phone, then picked up the other. Turning round, he tossed it back.

Stunned, she caught it with both hands mid-chest. He headed for the main street.

“HEY!” she shouted, following behind. “You gonna help me like Jack said you were?”

He kept moving, adjusting his coat.

“I said— *are you going to help me like Jack said you would!*”

“Does it look like I’m helping you,” he said, stepping onto the sidewalk. There he paused, turned and pointed at her. She stopped dead in front of his raised finger.

“Two things,” he began. “One— Get better encryption on your cheap phone. Two— Don’t follow me.”

Her fierce eyes fixed onto his. He then continued away.

“Jack didn’t tell me you were a big *jerk off!*”

Smiling, he didn’t turn. “He should have.”

After a few steps, the sound of her boots scampering away filled the now still air. He turned, but didn’t pause, seeing Licia jet across the street, cutting in front of an auto-taxi coming the other way. Within moments of her near accident, she was out of sight.

Despite the thoughts now dancing through his mind, all he wanted to do was get home.