

The Great Brain Robbery

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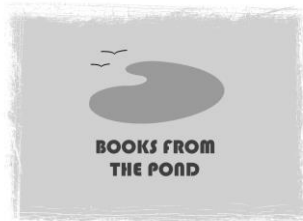
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The Great Brain Robbery

Herb Hughes

A Drake Blast Novel



Books From The Pond
2020

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For Dana, Stephen, and Lacey



Preface

First, the security cameras. These were the best available: Facial recognition, night vision, infrared interpolation, dark color, house system integration, power autonomy, law enforcement backup, and anything else you could make a camera do. These could do it.

The installations were well camouflaged. The intruder could not see the cameras, but he did not have to look at them to know this flat had the best available. He had done his homework. Good or bad, cheap or expensive, it made no difference. He was prepared.

Since modern surveillance cameras were internally powered with the newer long-life batteries that continually recharged via low-level microwaves, there were no power lines to cut. No problem. He hid behind the elevator door and pulled a small device from his coat pocket. Looking down at the miniature electronic hijacking device in his fingers, a piece of electronics he had named the eJacker, he smiled. It was his own invention. The smile faded quickly as he reminded himself there was no time to waste.

With a few button taps, he linked to the internal command board of the camera in the corridor outside, taking control of it.

With better cameras such as this, if it stopped recording without a handshake with the house system, the alarm would sound, and the residents would be notified via their implanted communications chips. So the first thing he did was provide that handshake, the “I’m turning off, and everything’s okay” signal. Once the handshake was made, he used the eJacker to snake into the house system and turn the camera off, halting the recording without the slightest note of protest from the alarm.

Turning off run-of-the-mill security cameras was easy. Child’s play. The more capable spies and criminals had been doing it for ages. Disarming an ultra-modern, fully-integrated, high-end surveillance camera while safely hidden behind a wall was something

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entirely different. It had not been possible before he invented the eJacker.

Since he was now wormed into the house system through the first camera, he could disable all of the cameras inside the flat without needing line of sight or sound. He stood at the front door and did so, one at a time. Eleven more cameras quietly quit recording. More than he had expected. There was no alarm, no flashing lights, not even a click to let anyone know the cameras had gone offline. Plus, there was no message sent to law enforcement computers. And there was no silent comm message to the people who lived in the flat. The intruder knew what he was doing.

Considering himself a generous man, the intruder believed in sharing. He didn't keep the incredible little piece of electronics he had developed a big secret. In fact, he made sure the eJacker was available on the black market weeks ago. Better not to be the first to use one. That might draw unwanted attention.

The eJacker was already causing a scramble to catch up in the security industry, but they had not caught up yet. There were no countermeasures on the market. So the timing was perfect. He was far from being the first to use an eJacker, but he used it before countermeasures were available. No sense leaving things to chance.

Care would still have to be taken every step of the way. There were other security inputs to the house system besides the cameras. Any of these were capable of causing the alarm to scream its dire warning the moment they were breached.

That was fine. The eJacker was not the only breakthrough technology he had brought with him. Patting the lumps in his pocket, the intruder smiled to himself again. He knew every security input in this flat and how to get around them.

The boron subarsenide or BSA sensors embedded in the front door casing were not visible to the human eye. Even so, they were old technology. BSA sensors had been around for five long years. The tiny BSA sensor neutralizer built into the glove he pulled over his right hand was not old technology. Like the eJacker, the neutralizer glove was fresh on the black market and causing massive headaches

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for the security industry. But the glove was not his invention. It was built by someone else using multiple technologies, all embedded and integrated with each other. Only a couple of the technologies used in the neutralizer glove were his. The maker of the glove was, of course, anonymous. The intruder would get no royalties for the inclusion of his inventions. After all, the device was illegal on several levels. Black market devices did not pay royalties. But he could sure make use of it. That would be royalty enough.

Even though the glove was new, it was already a must-have for every person who had a need to get through a door or window undetected. In a few short months, millions of homes and businesses would be ripping away their outdated BSA sensors and replacing them with newer technology. It would cost billions, perhaps trillions. Kept the economy booming.

The neutralizer would confuse and warp the signals inside the sensor, distorting them and sending them bouncing around internally, over and over again, trillions of times, rendering the sensors unable to do their job. But it wouldn't last forever. The better sensors, and these were the best on the market, were self-repairing. This was an exceptionally expensive system, the top of the line in home security. No amount of skill or illicit technology could get around the safeguards built into it, not forever. He would have roughly eight minutes before alarmagedon broke loose. When it did, there was going to be noise, a thunderous noise, and an emergency message flashing and sounding at the police station. Moving quickly would be imperative. Eight minutes? Plenty of time.

Standing back from the door, he reached out with the index finger of the neutralizer glove and traced slowly along the casing. The BSA sensors were internal and impossible to detect without the glove. There were no marks on the outside of the casing whatsoever, and no human being in the world had the sensitivity to physically feel the tiny amounts of current inside the sensor. But the miniature electrical detector chips embedded in the fingertips of the glove could sense them.

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A tiny light on the back of the glove's finger went from green to red when the first sensor was located. He stopped moving at that location.

The glove also held the electronics necessary to neutralize the sensor. By lightly tapping his fingers against the casing in the proper order, the neutralization signal would be emitted, and the door sensor would be temporarily disabled.

Without standing in front of the door, he continued working all the way around the casing, swiftly but thoroughly, until all the sensors were found and disabled. There had been twenty-nine of them. Even a rat would have had trouble getting through undetected. It was now safe to open the door and step inside.

He removed the electronic neutralizer glove then slid skin-thin rubber gloves over both hands before reaching into his pocket and pulling out another device that would trigger gargantuan waves through the security industry once it became widely available on the black market. He slid it over the doorknob. Within nanoseconds, the device knew the code. Within a few more nanoseconds, the electrical lock was unlocked.

He turned the knob and pushed. The door still wouldn't open. An old-fashioned mechanical lock held it in place. The man who lived in the flat, the target, was obviously paranoid. *For good reason*, the intruder chuckled to himself.

He had anticipated this. From another pocket, he pulled a "tumbler rumbler," an old-fashioned way to get through mechanical locks. This sweet little device was why practically everybody in the world had converted to electronic locks.

He placed the tumbler rumbler against the doorknob and switched it on with the tap of a button. Three highly flexible miniature arms slid silently into the keyhole, testing at each bend and curve like water seeping through the holes of a sponge. Moments later, he heard the small click of the latch opening. The door was now completely defenseless.

One more electronic trick before entering the apartment. He reached into his pocket and punched a button on another one of his

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pet devices, a simple comm chip signal jammer, something that had been around for almost as long as comm chips. If the target or his wife tried to send a message from their implanted comm chips, the jammer would scatter the signal into indecipherable radio noise before it could get out of the flat. No emergency message would reach its destination.

It had taken far too long to neutralize and open the door. Too many cameras and too many locks. And he hadn't expected twenty-nine sensors. A quick check showed five minutes and eighteen seconds to alarmagedon. He could not afford a moment to catch his breath. Time to act. He picked up his battery-powered chainsaw, a relatively quiet machine. It had a pushbutton start, fast and reliable. Moving both hands quickly, at the same time that his feet started running toward the bedroom, the chainsaw was lifted and started.

Time was no longer a luxury. Speed became critical. He couldn't waste precious seconds using the subtlety of his electronic gadgets on the bedroom door's electronic lock. With a hard thrust, the chainsaw slashed through the solid hardwood door on the side by the touchpad. So much for sneaking in.

The sound of splintering wood spilled through the air. The intruder hurriedly reached through the rough edges of the new hole as the lights came on in the room beyond. The target was sitting up, shaking his head to toss off sleep. The intruder grabbed the knob and unlocked the door from the inside then rushed in.

The target, a middle-aged man who appeared quite fit, was turning toward the nightstand, likely for a pistol. By now, he would have discovered that his implants were disabled. The intruder raised the chainsaw and advanced at a run. The man in bed never had a chance to reach his weapon. He put his hands up in a futile attempt to protect himself as the intruder swung the tip of the blade through the front of the man's throat. A thick gush of blood spurted over the bed and the nightstand as the man fell forward, dead in mere seconds. His wife screamed loudly as the chainsaw swung toward her.

The intruder finished his business quickly then left the flat. As he exited, he passed the elevator and moved toward the stairs. Never

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get caught on an elevator. Nowhere to run. But he would have to fly down the stairwell. Alarmagedon time was less than a minute away.

As he started trotting down the stair treads at a comfortable speed, one of the door sensors finished repairing itself, early by almost thirty seconds. *Damn!*

In its mad fury, the alarm began to clang unmercifully loud. There was no doubt it would be heard on several floors below, perhaps the entire building. And at police headquarters. Officers would be jumping out of their comfortable desk chairs, moving even faster when they saw the upscale address. Speed became critical for the intruder as he hastened his steps, widening them to take three stairs at a jump.



Chapter 1

I hate messy crime scenes. They're popular in books. People seem to enjoy the shock factor of reading about gore and violence. I won't mention any author names, but there have been quite a few popular literary series over the years that depended on violence to generate sales. Many of these books would never have made the bestseller list without inflicting tons of pain on imaginary people and providing long paragraphs with graphic descriptions of massive amounts of imaginary human gore.

But in real life? Totally different. I suspect most of the readers who enjoyed those books would not enjoy seeing the same type of violence when the human gore was not imaginary, when the blood and pieces of body were scattered about an actual room instead of scattered across the pages on the reader's screen. Most of them would run for cover. Even if they didn't see the crime, the aftermath of a real-life violent crime scene would sentence many of them to toilet-hugging time.

The luxury penthouse apartment I was now standing in was just such a scene.

Oh, by the way, I'm Master Detective Drake Blast. I handle special investigations for the combined United Nations Capital Security Service/Washington D.C. Metro Police Force.

I love my job. It always gives me a great feeling and a good sense of accomplishment when I solve a crime and collar a bad guy. As a bonus, since we're combined with the UN, I get to do a lot of international travel. But nothing's perfect. Standing in a gore-filled bedroom was *not* bringing out the love. Even worse, this looked like a local case, which meant there would be no reason to travel overseas. But it was early yet. You never knew where a case might lead.

I'm a detective, so I have to investigate the crime scene with an open and inquisitive mind. That meant I would have to look at the blood and bits of skull and brains all over the walls of the bedroom

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and focus on splatter patterns and lines of direction and other such details as though we were investigating fruit juice spills and not human gore. It meant meticulously looking at bodies with mutilated heads and at brains spilled all over the sheets and furniture as though we were studying the lifecycle of the linen and not the scattered remains of two human beings. I do what I have to do because it's my job, and I do my job well. That doesn't mean it's always pleasant. This scene fell into the 'not pleasant' category.

Dennis Williams, the head of Forensics, had come down to get a firsthand look. Dennis doesn't get out of his office in the basement of HQ much – or from his home where he lives alone for that matter – but he wanted to see this scene personally. The first beat cop who arrived had attached a picture to his comm call. That piqued Dennis' interest. He got here several minutes before I did. Oh, Dennis would not be one of the readers running for cover from real-life violence. Dennis was different. I don't think he quite looked at human beings as, well, human beings.

“Chainsaw,” he said to me.

“That would explain the mess,” I answered. “These people...” I quickly checked the names in the comm call that had brought me here. “Mr. and Ms. Feinstein were quite wealthy. Robbery?”

“No. Too many valuables in plain sight.” Dennis waved absently around at everything in the room. “All this stuff is valuable. And still here. The knickknacks in this place are worth more than you and I will make in ten years. Hell, in twenty years.”

I glanced around the room. Dennis was right. There were plenty of original paintings and sculptures. I recognized a few of the pieces. They would have been worth a whole lot of money. Probably millions. “Simple murder, then?”

“It was murder, all right. Maybe not so simple, though.”

“Yeah, a chainsaw is a unique way to murder someone. Seems so unnecessary unless the perp was trying to prove a point of some sort.”

“Humph,” Dennis grunted around his cigar. The cigar was not lit. As much as he loved cigar smoke, Dennis knew better than to

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contaminate a crime scene. He pulled the cigar out of his mouth and pointed it at the dead man and said, “Maybe, but I don’t think that’s the case. Here’s what I see. The perp disables the alarms. Somehow. God knows how. Everything here is the best on the market. He gets in a hurry and cuts through the bedroom door with a chainsaw. That wakes the Feinsteins up. Mr. Feinstein makes a move for his pistol, which is in the nightstand, but he got no further than pulling out the drawer. The perp swiped the saw across the front of his neck, taking a couple of fingers in the process.”

“Fingers?”

“Yeah. Mr. Feinstein put his hands up in a futile attempt to protect himself. Natural reaction. He may have tried to grab the blade because it not only took a couple of fingers off; his hands are chewed up as well. I doubt it even slowed the blade down as the perp swiped the tip across his neck and severed his jugular. Then the bad guy reached over and did the same thing to Ms. Feinstein. She must have put her hands to her mouth as she watched her husband die. The chainsaw took her hands off at the wrists.”

“Ugly,” I said. “It’s messy, but it’s still a straightforward murder so far.”

“Until you look at their skulls.”

“Skulls?” I glanced at the heads of the two victims. Each one had part of their skull missing, chewed up by the chainsaw, which explained why brains were scattered about the room. The rectangular open space in their skulls was precisely where their implant frames should have been. If you looked close, you could see a froth of neural lace, tiny dangling organic wires, sticking out of their brains. “Oh, yeah. He cut their heads open.”

“Yep. And took their chip frames, skull and all. The guy made four quick cuts a little beyond the sides of the chip frame. He was none too neat about it. In a hurry, I guess. He pried the rectangle of skull out, with the chip frame and chips still attached. He didn’t take the time to snip the neural lace. He jerked them loose. There isn’t much blood, though. I would have thought there’d be more.”

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“With the first swipes of the chainsaw,” I said, “He completely severed their jugulars, cutting the flow of blood to their heads. No blood flow, not much bleeding. Besides, they died in seconds, so their hearts were no longer pumping by the time he cut their heads open.”

“Oh, yeah,” Dennis said. “Makes sense.”

“The perp was after their implants, but what the hell for? Sure, they’re pricey, but not as expensive as the things he left sitting around in this room. Besides, the brain surgeon costs more than the chips.”

Dennis stared at me then shrugged and said, “You’re the detective.”



Chapter 2

I put my Chevy CitiRoll electric on autodrive and let it take me back to HQ while I thought about the murders. The Feinsteins had their implant frames removed, the quick slashes of someone in a hurry. But why a chainsaw?

On the surface, the chainsaw did not make sense. There are a lot of ways to murder someone, of course. Shoot them. Stab them. Poison them. Whatever. The vast majority of these are less messy than a chainsaw. I know. I've seen them all. But when you look at possible motives, the chainsaw starts to make sense.

There are a lot of reasons why the perp might want their implant chips. The obvious one is theft. Chips are expensive. But there are a lot of easier ways to steal implant chips without having to cut them out of somebody's head. Far more likely, the perp was after what was on those chips. He was in a hurry, and a chainsaw could get them out quickly.

Before we go any further, though, for the sake of simplicity, I'm going to call the murderer 'he' instead of 'she.' While women are committing more and more crimes these days, it's still usually the men who wield chainsaws against other human beings. Like I said, it's messy. Women are just plain neater. Generally. When they kill, they don't usually make as big a mess.

Not always true, so if there is any evidence to the contrary, I can switch to 'she' easily enough.

Now, back to the chips. My first inclination was that taking the entire chip frame was completely unnecessary. If it wasn't theft, the only thing the perp would have wanted was the memory chips. Why? That takes some background. Stay with me a sec.

The perp knew he couldn't get near the victims without being picked up on a security camera. Without faux flesh, it would be a simple matter to identify the perp from the security video, no matter what he tried to put over his face. Since faux flesh is exceptionally

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hard to get, even on the black market, and requires a medical specialist to apply, it was highly unlikely that his face was disguised. Even the cheapest of security cameras has a built-in face scanner that would ID the intruder immediately. So the perp's only choice was to disable the security cameras.

Even though the cameras in the Feinsein flat were high-end, my detective's intuition told me there would be nothing on them. I have to be thorough, so I checked. There was nothing on them. The perp had disabled them without showing his face.

That was quite a trick with any camera, but especially with cameras as expensive and autonomous as these. If they are shut down improperly, everybody within a hundred yards would be woken up, not to mention the cops would be called. The perp knew that, so he had to have a clever way to shut the cameras down without setting off the alarm. He did. This guy knew what he was doing.

But the security cameras were not the only way to get video of the attack. It was probably recorded through the victims' own eyes. It would have been easy enough to think 'record.' Only takes a microsecond. But many people, particularly wealthier people with massive memory chips, set their video chip to record continuously so that there is a record of everything they experience. Extract the video from the memory chip, face scan it, and voila! You know who killed them.

That is, if the victims had photo/video implants, and I was confident these victims did. People who lived in luxury penthouse apartments surrounded by priceless knickknacks could easily afford simple photo/video implants. A quick check of the victims' medical records would let us know for sure, but I was willing to bet a sizable amount of money that both the Feinsteins had a long list of implanted chips, including the most expensive photo/video chip money could buy.

Which brings us back to the chainsaw. The murderer needed to get the memory chips out of their heads and destroy the chips so he could not be identified. The chainsaw was an easy way to do that. Maybe he could have killed them faster with a gun instead of running

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across the room with a chainsaw, but the saw was quick enough so the deceased man's personal revolver was still lying in the bottom of the opened drawer of his nightstand. When I thought about it, going from chainsaw to cut through the door to a gun to shoot them then back to the chainsaw to cut out the chip frames would take too much time. Sticking with the chainsaw was the quickest way to get the job done.

Besides, unlike shots from most guns, chainsaw cuts are not traceable. A chainsaw is a chainsaw is a chainsaw. The mess they can make doesn't vary much from brand-to-brand or chain-to-chain. And a chainsaw blade doesn't have a traceable chemical signature like a modern bullet.

So once you look at the details, the chainsaw makes sense. Probably the best way to go if you want the entire chip frame. It allowed the perp to quickly retrieve the implanted memory chips after the victims were dead from the overzealous throat slitting. This meant there was no recording of the crime, either by the security cameras or the victim's implanted video chips. Thus the perp, most likely a contract killer, did his job and left no evidence.

That is, if the perp destroyed the data chips that he took with him. If he hadn't done it by now, I expected he would soon. So, as usual, I had a crime to solve and very little evidence to work with. I'm used to that.

What was the motive for murdering the Feinsteins? No telling at this point. There were many reasons the perp might want the memory chips, other than to destroy the video of the killings. Perhaps they held some files that would implicate the murderer in another serious crime. Maybe they held other pictures or videos or information that the murderer needed to ensure never saw the light of day. Or there was something on the chips the perp could use to blackmail others. There were dozens of possibilities, all tied to the memory chips.

Which brings me back to: Why did the perp take the entire chip frames? The other chips were processing chips of one sort or another. They held no data whatsoever. They were worth no more than what they were worth, which was not near enough to commit this type of

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crime. It would have been easier and quicker to use a knife to make a small slit in their scalps then slide out the memory chip. It slides in and out without having to use any other tools. No cutting up the skull and no taking the time to rip the frame and skull loose from the neural lace.

Was it possible the perp was not sure which chip to take, so he took them all? No, I didn't think so. With the way this guy neutralized the security systems, he was technologically savvy. He would know. He would not have to take the whole chip frame only to get the memory chip, so it would seem as though he wanted all the chips. That was curious. Why would he want processor chips that held no data? They were valuable, but, once again, their value was almost a pittance compared to the untouched artifacts he left behind.

By now, my analysis was confusing even me. I needed to talk to Chief.



Chapter 3

Chief Cheryl Denny is a true jewel. The lady is a tiger of a cop, a real trooper. And she's smart. Over the years, I've learned a lot from her. I'm proud to call her 'boss.' Or one of my bosses. I report to Chief Denny on the D.C. Metro Police side. My other boss is Gaston Lamizana, head of Capital Security on the United Nations side. The upside of the combined organizations is money savings, so they can afford to pay decent salaries. The downside is I have two bosses. As you would expect, they don't always have the same priority.

I rapped lightly on the top of her office door, the glass part, directly under the gold and black letters that let everyone know that Chief Denny was, in fact, Chief Denny. She glanced up and motioned for me to come in.

"Morning, Drake. I heard the Feinstein's place was a cookie-tosser."

"Made my stomach churn. I managed to hold onto my breakfast, though."

"So, what have we got?"

I quickly ran through everything I knew, which wasn't much beyond the grisly crime scene.

"If all the murderer wanted to do was steal the video recording of the attack," I said, "It would have been easier to slash the scalp and pull out the memory chip. It slides right out of the frame. Quickly, with minimum force exerted. There is no need to cut out a rectangular piece of skull and jerk the whole bloody mess, chip frame and all, loose from the neural net if he only needs to get one memory chip. That takes a fair amount of force, not to mention more time."

"Yep," Chief said. "And since time was critical because of the alarms, taking only the memory chips would have saved a few seconds during the murder and even more on the perp's escape."

"On the escape? How's that?"

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“Two big pieces of skull, both dripping blood and brains, might leave a trail.”

“There was no blood trail going out of the flat.”

“So the perp took the time to bag them first. And he had to do it meticulously so there would be nothing on the outside of the bag that might drip down. If he was only popping the memory chips out, he could wipe them on the Feinstein’s robes then drop them in his pocket and go.”

“Good point,” I said. “I don’t understand it, either. I can’t see a motive for taking anything other than the memory chip. The other chips would have been standard. They perform a function, but they don’t have any memory or information. Why take them? Especially when it adds time to the crime and jeopardizes the getaway? Maybe the perp was nervous and not thinking clearly.”

“Possibly, but highly doubtful. I understand there was no blood trail from anything, not even the chainsaw. So he had a sleeve to cover the chainsaw blade, too. A crime like this has to be carefully planned. There’s no way any amount of careful planning would overlook the fact that he could save time and effort by taking only the memory chips. So my guess is he took the entire implant frames because he wanted the entire frames, chips and all. Robbery, while not impossible, seems an unlikely motive. No, there’s something else. Damned if I can guess what, though.”

I grunted then we sat there in silence a moment. I finally said, “That’s what investigation is for.”

“And that’s what makes you famous, Drake.”

“Me? Famous? You crossed over into fantasy land, Chief.”

“You’re famous amongst the bad guys,” she said with a smile. “The victims were wealthy and lived in a high-end high-rise, so this will be a high-profile case. I suspect our perp knows who will be assigned to it. Where are you going to start?”

“Let’s see... By the time the perp made it to the ground floor, the cops may have been entering the building. Probably were. But the guy got around them somehow.”

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There was a gentle knock on the glass. Chief Denny motioned for Corporal Janette Simmons to come in. As usual, the Corporal's long red hair was tucked under her cap. A few stray hairs swayed gently about her freckled face in the light breeze from the overhead register.

"I got a report from the sergeant at the condo site," she said in her slow southern drawl. "Thought I ought to let you know right away. They reviewed the exterior security cameras. No one left the building, all the way back to almost a half-hour *before* the alarm sounded."

"Before?" Chief said. "That means..."

"The perp is still in there," I said, verbalizing Chief's thought for her. "It would be awful hard to get away undetected, as long as the exterior building cameras never stopped functioning."

"The sergeant said the video in each camera was continuous," Simmons said.

"The place is crawling with D.C. Blues," Chief said. "They've looked in every nook and cranny. They're checking everybody coming or going. Where could the perp hide?"

"Maybe he's not hiding," I said. Both Chief Denny and Corporal Simmons looked at me funny. "Maybe he lives there."

"Oh," Chief said. "That would narrow the suspect list considerably, from the full population of D.C., overnight visitors and all, down to only the building's residents and guests. It also means we need to do a thorough investigation of each resident."

"That's ugly," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's a high-rise. Over two hundred units. Maybe double that in population. Background checks. Interviewing every single one of them. It'll take hours and hours. Not to mention the fact that these are VIPs. They'll grumble big time about the inconvenience. And call every politician in D.C. to complain about us."

"That is ugly. Dennis is still there. Maybe he can help with the interviews."

"Chief, this is Dennis you're talking about."

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“Yeah, you’re right. Better get him back to the basement where he belongs. But we can’t waste time since it looks like the perp is still there. Go back and get started with the interviews. I’ll round up another couple of detectives and send them out to help. And I’ll get a half dozen working on the background checks here.”

On the way back to the condo, I had to let the car drive again. My mind was way too preoccupied to focus on negotiating my way through traffic. But, truth is, I find myself driving on manual less and less. It’s too easy to sit back and do something else while the car does all the work.

As it seemed to be with most of my cases, the more I thought about this, the less sense it made. Why? I’ve mentioned that the brain surgeon is even more expensive than the implant chips themselves. What I haven’t talked about is why. For an implanted chip to work integrally with your brain, a neural lace is required to complete the chip-brain interface. Doctors inject the seeds of an ultra-fine electronic mesh into your brain at the proper level. The mesh grows and forms an electronic interface with your brain, an organic neural lace that can then communicate with your implanted chips in realtime. The surgeon goes through the complicated and lengthy process of connecting everything so it’ll work. Takes time and they don’t come cheap.

I think that’s more or less correct. I’m only going by what I’ve read. I would not be one of the surgeons installing the neural lace.

All things considered, it makes little sense to steal someone’s implants to make money. A smash and grab at a jewelry store would be easier than cutting someone’s head open and would likely net the thief a larger payday. And wouldn’t require killing people. Besides, there were the high-priced knickknacks left behind at the Feinstein’s condo. So robbery appeared out as a motive.

That left no shortage of other possible motives. The question that kept nagging at the back of my head was: Why did the perp take the time to rip out the entire frame when all he needed was the memory chip? Taking the memory chip alone would eliminate any possible

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video of himself. Once again, the other chips meant nothing more than a few dollars.

It was a major curiosity, and I didn't have an answer. Chief was right. There was something we were missing. And we may not have had enough information to fill in the gap. Yet.

I drove to the high-rise to start interviewing over two hundred residents. Since the perp might be one of them, I would need to be careful. If I interviewed the murderer and tripped him up on his own words, well, the guy had proven he was dangerous.



Chapter 4

The upscale high-rise residents were mostly current or retired top executives of a variety of companies. Interviewing them while they looked down on you with apathetic disdain was something less than pleasant. A full day of that was more than enough.

When I got back to HQ that evening, I sat down with Chief Denny to go over the video from the building's security cameras. I'm sure a dozen cops had seen them, but it never hurts to be thorough.

"Any way you could get me out of the interviewing detail?" I asked as we watched unchanging and painfully boring video of the building's service entrance, the first of six outside security cameras that we had to sit through. Unfortunately, you had to watch at normal speed. You might miss something if you sped up the playback. "I need to be pursuing other leads."

"I wish I had that luxury, Drake. We don't have enough cops to go around. I've got a high-end high-rise that looks more like a police station. There are cops interviewing residents, cops rummaging through everything, including the dumpsters for the third time, and cops standing around guarding the exits. Since the perp is likely still there, I need every badge I can get. Meanwhile, the rest of D.C. has not taken a break from committing crimes. This one is draining us."

I saw something in the video, a tiny blip that shouldn't have been there. "Run it back thirty seconds," I said. She did. When the thirty seconds had run a second time, I added, "You can ease up and bring most of your cops back. The perp's no longer in the building."

"How do you know?"

"Run it back thirty seconds and watch the far corner of the sidewalk, where it turns ninety degrees toward the parking lot."

As she watched, a slug began its slow slime crossing of the walk. It was a small speck since the walk was well away from the camera, but a noticeable one. Suddenly the slug jerked back to where it started, about four inches away, and traversed the same path again. At

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the end of thirty seconds, it suddenly jerked forward four inches. Slugs don't move that fast.

"I'll be damned," Chief said. "I wasn't looking for a slug."

"They only come out at night."

"So the perp left and looped the prior thirty seconds over the thirty seconds it took him to get out of range of the camera."

"He was probably out of range in ten or fifteen seconds but went thirty for good measure. He had to have altered the camera's memory chip electronically, I suspect from his car as he was driving away. This guy is no ordinary killer. His electronic skills and toys are top of the heap. I'm beginning to think he may not be a contract killer."

"Too early to tell, but you've got good eyes, Drake. Nobody else caught the slug. I'll get Dennis to verify in the morning, but I'm sure he'll tell us the video has been tampered with. I'll also pull back everybody but the interviewers. We've got too many other things to do. And you've earned your way off interview detail!"

After a short night's sleep, the next morning it was time for a thorough background check of the Feinsteins.

Robert Edward Feinstein was the founder, CEO, and President of a high technology company, Feinstein Laser-Etched Circuitry. Everyone called it FLEC, which was appropriate since they could print complicated circuitry on a tiny fleck of material. It was a job shop, but a highly technical one.

FLEC did not design circuitry. They printed the customer's circuit design using their proprietary process. They did not make chips, either. They manufactured the nanocircuitry that went inside chips, specifically implant chips. The chip manufacturers, typically a different type of job shop, used FLEC's circuitry to manufacture either the completed implant chip or the next step in the process toward a market-ready chip.

Mr. Feinstein's friends and acquaintances, and there were lots of both, knew him as Bob. He was a typical CEO in many ways, worked hard, but played hard, too. Long seven-day weeks at the office were typical for this guy, yet he still found time to play the piano, quite

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well according to the reports, and to play tennis at a highly competitive level amongst his age group. He was also a scratch golfer, or close to it, maintaining a two handicap even though he rarely played more than twice a month and only then to entertain VIP customers. He was a member of several exclusive clubs, an elected officer in two of them, and was an active participant in half a dozen charitable causes.

Basically, he was a highly active, involved person who appeared to be well-liked by the people who knew him and the community where he lived. I thought my schedule was tough, but this guy had me beat. I've got to stop and take a breather every once in a while. Apparently, he didn't. His death was going to leave quite a vacuum.

That was what I discovered from my search of news records and social networks. I also applied for and received a warrant for a full ECS (Electronic Communications Search) for the last four months on both the Feinsteins. This included all their comm chip conversations. It's amazing how many hours a day executives spend using their comms. Going through them took a long, long day. It would have taken weeks had I not been able to rule out conversations with family and many close friends and business associates early on. I only listened to the conversations with people outside this group. And I sped the playbacks up a little. Everyone sounded like they had been sucking helium, but I kept it slow enough so I could still understand the words.

No matter how I searched, though, no obvious personal enemies showed up. That's not too unusual, but a man in his position likely had a few enemies. It is hard to do everything he had done without stepping on a few toes here and there.

Time to talk to people face-to-face. The starting place, of course, was FLEC. I made a video call. Cop or no cop, it's too inconvenient to drop in on high-level people and try to bully your way in. You're lucky to get ten minutes while the participants of the exec's next meeting sit around drinking coffee and impatiently tapping their briefcases. An appointment is much better.

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The electronic secretary was so well done, I would have thought the lady was a living human being had there not been a disclaimer at the bottom of the screen. She (it?) consulted the CFO's schedule then communicated directly with him before coming back and offering me a choice. His name was Wade Farrington IV. He had a half-hour at two-thirty tomorrow afternoon, or he could meet me for a match of table tennis at seven o'clock tonight at his club. He'd have close to an hour before he had to change for a late dinner engagement. I decided on tonight. I wasn't the best at table tennis, but I was respectable enough to hold my own. Besides, sooner was better than later.

I stayed at my desk researching news stories about Bob Feinstein's wife until it was time to meet Mr. Farrington. It was not likely, but it was possible that she was the target while he was collateral damage. You never knew.

The club was on the outskirts of D.C., but not too far away. I made it with a few minutes to spare. One of the nice things about automated cars is you can drop yourself off at the front door while the car finds its own parking space. When you're ready to go, you send a comm message to the car to come pick you up.

It works great everywhere except at Metro Police HQ. They've got an antiquated rule about having unoccupied cars around the police station. It's supposed to be for security, but it's ridiculous. If somebody wanted to blow up the police station, they wouldn't have to have an unoccupied automated car to do it. All they have to do is find somebody stupid enough or crazy enough to be a suicide bomber. It still wouldn't work, though. There are other safeguards in place that can detect and disable virtually any type of bomb from far enough away so that HQ is relatively safe.

Our brand spanking newly-elected Mayor is Ms. Georgia Hinds. She was selected to replace the dearly departed Charles Cantrell in a special election. I decided I would need to have a conversation with her on her first day in office, which would be tomorrow. It was time to get rid of that silly old rule so we could have our cars drop us off at HQ. Walking six blocks back and forth to the parking lot cuts into my investigation time!

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I figured she would want to get off to a fast start, make some friends in the police department. Changing that one silly rule would be the best way for her to impress the D.C. Blues.

But, for now, back to Wade Farrington IV.

After a quick greeting in the lobby, we walked into the table tennis room, a room almost large enough to hold a rodeo. There were dozens of tables, each separated by lots of open space. The open space seemed like overkill. Why not put in more tables? Or use a smaller room?

I selected a paddle from the rows hanging on the wall and walked over to the table we had been assigned. Wade, a handsome fifty-something who looked more like a thirty-something, pulled his personal paddle out of an expensive leather cover. He tossed the ball to me and said, "A little warm-up. Guests serve first."

I walked to my end of the table and waited for Wade to step up to the table at his end. He was standing several feet away, paddle in hand, as he looked at me curiously. Then he held his hands up in front of him and asked, "What are you waiting for?"

"Oh, ah, nothing." I decided that, for whatever reason, he liked to leave extra distance between him and the table. I went ahead and served. I was still leaning over in my serve position when his return shot flew past my hands faster than I could react. I swear it curved two feet while it was in the air. "Nice," I said. I picked the ball up from the floor and served again. The same thing happened.

"You'd have more time to react if you stood back from the table," Wade said.

"Oh, sure." I did and tried another serve. When the ball left my paddle, it hit my end of the table, on the thin back edge, and rebounded straight at me. Standing this far away was going to take a little getting used to.

I smiled and picked up the ball and tried again. This time the serve was proper, and the ball made it to his side of the table. His return was more proper. I barely got the edge of my paddle on it, causing the ball to skitter to the side where it almost hit another player two tables away.

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I tried another serve then another and another. Although I was starting to get the hang of it, I didn't come close to a clean hit on any of his return shots. Playing friends and family intermittently over the years, I had beaten them all regularly. I thought I was good at the game, but this was not the same game. This was table tennis on a totally different level. The open space between tables made sense now. This game should have had a different name, maybe something like War Tennis.

I was confident I could learn to play table tennis on this level, but it would take longer than an hour for me to become competitive with Wade Farrington IV. I could tell he was getting exasperated, so I laid my paddle on the table and said, "Wade, you win." We had not started keeping score. Heck, we never got past the 'warm-up.'

He smiled and put his paddle back in its comfy little leather cover as he said, "Let's go to the bar. We can talk there."

He ordered some sort of vegetable concoction in a glass, thick and lumpy and throw-up green. I went for a beer. I figured I deserved it after the embarrassment of the absolute shellacking I had endured. "So what kind of man was Bob Feinstein?"

Wade chewed on his lips a second before saying, "Smart. Not genius smart, but highly intelligent. Corporate leaders tend to get a rap for being cold and calculating, for not caring about others. Perhaps it's deserved to some extent, but that was not the case with Bob. He was friendly. To everyone. He truly cared about people. The guy would roll down the window of his Lexus and give a twenty to a beggar."

It was easy enough to tell from the tone of his voice that Wade Farrington IV would not be someone handing out twenty-dollar bills to people on the side of the road.

"Any changes at the office?" I asked. "Has FLEC lost any major accounts, serious equipment problems, anything of that nature?"

"No..." He hesitated a moment. "FLEC is humming along smoothly. Or was before this. Sales are increasing, but steady, a sustainable pace. Deliveries are going out the door on time, and

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product is good. There was nothing negative around the company until this.”

“Any possibility there’s something less on the up and up going on? Money missing? Something of that nature.”

“Absolutely not, Detective Blast. I assure you, everything at FLEC is aboveboard. Please, feel free to check our SEC filings. All of our external audits have come back clean. There is nothing even remotely reprehensible going on. Bob’s personal finances are solid as well.”

I would have the behind the scenes cops check that out thoroughly, of course. But at this point, I had no reason to doubt Farrington, so I plowed ahead. “To your knowledge, did he have any enemies, anyone who might want him dead, or might benefit from him being dead?”

Wade looked down at the floor and thought for a few moments then looked up and said, “He will be missed. There is no question about that. But FLEC is on solid ground. We’ll name a new CEO, and business will continue. Our competitors will not benefit from Bob’s passing, certainly not enough to justify murder. They know that. Hell, he was good friends with the guys he competed with. Even threw them business if they got in a pinch. That’s the kind of person he was.”

“You have no idea why anyone would want him dead?”

He looked across the bar and out the door then turned back to me and said, “Not that I’m aware of. And if he had an enemy, I would probably be aware of it. That’s what makes this whole thing so bizarre. It’s like something out of a cheap B-grade horror movie.”

“Wade, I’m a detective. It’s my job to notice everything. Like how ridiculously good you are at table tennis.” I smiled.

He chuckled and smiled and said, “Or, perhaps, how bad you are.”

“I was pretty good until I met you,” I laughed. “But what I’ve noticed is that you’ve hesitated on a couple of answers like you’re trying to decide whether to tell me something or not. If I’m going to solve this murder, I need to know everything.”

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He smiled warmly and nodded his head. “You’re right, of course, Drake. It’s... I’m not trying to hide anything. It’s just that I’m not sure how to say this.” I kept my mouth shut, and my eyes glued on Wade Farrington IV, his signal to continue. “Bob’s, well, he’s been a little different lately, a little odd. And it was getting worse. A couple of months ago, he and his wife took a vacation to the Canary Islands. That’s, well, vacations are not unusual. But the two of them always wrapped their vacations around his business trips. If he had a technology conference or was meeting a potentially important new customer, something of that nature, they would often take a few days to be tourists, before or after the business part of the trip.”

“And the Canary Islands trip was different?”

“Yes. He was gone for two full weeks. That was odd enough, but even more unusual, he was incommunicado for two weeks. He said he needed to get away from work and would not be in touch. He meant it. He wasn’t. I handled everything for him.”

“Had he ever done anything like that before?”

“Not since I’ve known him. One week is the longest vacation he’s ever taken. And when he did, he spent four or five hours each day taking care of business, either by comm call or on the net. He loved work. He hated being away from it.”

“Did he talk about the trip to the Canary Islands when he got back to the office?”

“Ah, a little,” Wade said. “Not much. He said they walked along the beach and got away from everything and renewed their love for each other. He said it was something they needed to do to ‘keep their equilibrium’ whatever the hell that means. I took his word for it. But then he started acting differently, and I wondered.”

“How was he different?”

“He was okay at first. Well, he seemed a little distracted the day he returned, which was not like him, but he was more or less the same old Bob. But as the days went by, he slowly began to change. He seemed a little more... I don’t know... fidgety, maybe. Nervous. Jumpy. I thought it was nerves. We’ve got a stockholders meeting in a couple of weeks. I get nervous about speaking to the stockholders,

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too, so I thought he might have been nervous about that. But it wasn't like Bob to get nervous. He loved talking with the stockholders. So I thought, perhaps, it was my imagination. Perhaps my own nerves."

"Was it?"

"No. He got worse. About a week ago, he started getting downright cranky. Other things, too. He would be looking right at you while having a conversation with you then say something totally off the wall, something not related to the conversation at all. It was weird beyond words. And he would be holding a meeting with you while he worked on his computer at the exact same time. To be perfectly honest, Drake, I thought he was losing his marbles. But he never missed a word in the meeting even though he appeared to be busy with something else."

"Schizophrenic? People don't typically go crazy in their fifties or sixties, but it could have been a reaction to a medication."

"That crossed my mind, but I don't believe he could be crazy and still perform his job. And at a superior level. He did a marketing analysis for me on the same day he had all day back-to-back meetings with customers. I expected to have to wait another day for the analysis, but he gave it to me as he was walking out of his last meeting. The work was thorough and well thought out. I was astounded. Crazy people can't do reports like that, especially in a few spare moments between meetings. I'm not at all sure how he did it."

So it went until Wade was late for his dinner party. The rest was more of the same. Bob kept getting stranger and stranger yet more and more productive at the same time. Wade could not figure out what the heck was going on. He begged off further questions since he needed to dress for his dinner party then gave me his card and told me to contact him with any additional questions that might come up. I thanked him for his time as he rushed out of the room.

Something happened that caused Bob's personality to begin a slow change after the vacation to the Canary Islands. It made little sense. A sudden change would indicate a traumatic event. But a slow change? Perhaps an illness of some sort? Some type of infection? Or maybe he suffered an accidental bump on the head, something that

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seemed like nothing at the time, but set off a sequence of neurological events that caused him to get worse as the days passed.

The realm of possibilities was infinite. What was not infinite was the usable information in Wade's comments. It was interesting, but there was little I could act on. That meant, of course, he could have been stonewalling. If he was, I would have to put him on my suspect list. Too early to tell, but I didn't see where he had anything to gain by killing the Feinsteins. On the surface, you'd think he would suffer financially because of the upheaval the company would go through. FLEC's stock had taken a beating when the murders hit the news. It would not fully recover for quite some time.

Under the surface, of course, there might be something going on that I was not yet aware of, so I'd write Wade Farrington IV out to the side of the suspect list with an asterisk by his name.

It was late enough to skip the office and go home. The car eased out of the parking lot and turned toward my flat as I ran back through Wade Farrington's conversation in my mind. I was barely five minutes away from the club and deep in thought about Wade's statements when my UN boss, Gaston Lamizana, rang my comm chip.

"Good evening, Gaston. I would have thought you'd be at a dinner party at this hour."

"It is, indeed, a great and glorious evening Master Detective Drake Blast. However, I must call your attention to the indisputable fact that not all my evenings in the beautiful and wondrous and continually bustling city of New York are filled with dinner parties and social gatherings with celebrities and dignitaries of a large variety of types. Indeed, there are many evenings, such as the one we are enjoying at the present moment from the comfort of our seats, wherever those respective seats happen to be, when I have to perform additional duties in relation to the accomplishment of the tasks that I have been assigned by the wonderful people within my management chain, specifically President Wilkins, the United Nations World President."

"Working late, eh?"

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“I suppose that is how you would word it in your somewhat less descriptive detective’s vernacular, yes. As pleasant as they may be, life cannot be one continuous dinner party. We must perform the functions we are directed to perform, or we would become unproductive, which would render us without purpose to our employers. This could result in the disappearance of that employment, causing us to then lose the honor of being invited to outside social events since these events are inexorably tied to our positions in the organizations we serve.”

I shook my head a moment then said, “Yes, well, what were you calling about, Gaston?”

“Ah, yes, the subject of my current labors, and your future labors, my friend. Do you remember when some highly sensitive top-secret documents were stolen from the German military about a month ago? We were informed that these documents were the schematics for some super-secret military implant chip. There was no explanation beyond that.”

“Vaguely,” I said. “I did not pay much attention to it. Haven’t they solved it by now?”

“Unfortunately, no resolution to the theft of the documents and files has ever been effectuated. They still do not know who took them or how. All they know is what they knew from the first night, that the documents were stolen electronically by a hacker from somewhere outside of the German military. Even after a full and lengthy investigation, the Bundesnachrichtendienst has not been able to narrow the location from which the computer theft originated. And they have not been able to determine the methods used. The files simply vanished without triggering a single electronic alarm of any type.”

The Bundesnachrichtendienst is the BND, the German version of the CBI. (The Central Bureau of Investigation is the agency that resulted from the consolidation of the FBI and CIA some years back.) Why Gaston did not say BND instead of the twenty-three character long name is, well, that’s Gaston. That’s the way he is.

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“I’m surprised,” I said. “The BND usually gets their man quickly. But why are you calling me about a BND investigation?”

“They have, as you say in America, thrown in the towel, my friend. Or, you might say, it was thrown in for them. This case has proven to be beyond their capability. Not only for them but also for all the other Deutsche agencies they called in. Forgive me, Master Detective Drake Blast. That would be ‘German’ agencies in your native American English.”

While Gaston was a resident of the city of New York in his capacity as UN Security Chief, he was from Burkina Faso, a small, impoverished country in central Africa. Even though his homeland had the lowest literacy rate in the world, Gaston rose beyond that to make a name for himself. He had made his way to a high-level UN position not only because of a convenient connection but also because he is more intelligent than most of us and exceptionally good at his job. But he never forgot that Burkina Faso was his home.

“Germany. Deutschland. I understand. I speak a little Deutsche even without my language chip. Not much, but enough to get me around when I’m there.”

“That is good to know, Master Detective Drake Blast, because that is where you must go. I have taken the enormous liberty of directing my lovely and efficient electronic secretary to book a flight for you to Munich, Germany. You will be leaving Washington D.C. at 7:48 tomorrow evening.”

“What? Why?”

“The BND, as you so succinctly put it, has informed the United Nations that the information contained within the stolen documents has the potential to threaten the existence of the free world as we all know and love and cherish. After much consultation between the BND and the United Nations, oh, and the CBI as well, it has been decided that your assistance is needed to track down the hacker who has stolen these top-secret implant chip plans prior to their exploitation on the black market, a development which could prove extremely detrimental to us all.”

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Uh, oh. I like Germany, but... “Whoa, Gaston. Talk about a setup for failure. The Germans are not prone to allow foreigners to get involved in their investigations. If the UN is forcing this upon them, I will receive zero cooperation from the BND. Without cooperation, my assistance would be doomed. Besides, I’ve got a major case breaking here.”

“Yes, yes. I am aware of the brutal and senseless murder of the Chief Executive Officer of Feinstein Laser-Etched Circuitry and that of his wife, as well, at the same and identical time. It is a pity and a shock to all of us. It goes without saying that the vile villain who committed such a heinous crime needs to be apprehended and punished to the fullest extent of all applicable laws. But, my good friend, this murder, as despicable as it was, does not threaten the safety of the entire world. The theft of the German documents has the potential to threaten all of us. I cannot give you the details over the comm waves, Master Detective Drake Blast, as even I am not privy to all the details. But, World President Wilkins has assured me this case threatens the foundations of our civilization.”

Gaston, the head of security for the United Nations, not privy to all the details? Wow. How do you argue with that? “But the Germans. If they don’t cooperate...”

“They will cooperate. If not, you notify me forthwith and immediately. President Wilkins will personally reprimand any person who is not forthcoming with the assistance you need to resolve this case.”

“Gaston, I’m a detective, not a spy. How did my name get thrown into this?”

“Ah, but Master Detective Drake Blast, my dear friend, you are a great detective and have operated in the role of a spy many times in the past. And, I might add, have proven yourself quite adept in those performances. Based on your broad resume of success, I suggested your name to World President Wilkins and the Chancellor of Germany in our meeting. They both knew of your exploits and were more than thrilled to bring you into the investigation.”

“So you lied to them to get me assigned to the case?”

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“Lying is such a harsh terminology. I merely explained your past successes. And, perhaps, provided a slight embellishment to the ingenious solutions you yourself accomplished.”

“Nobody else would take the case, eh?”

“Uh, I’m sorry, Master Detective Drake Blast. I have so many things that are calling for my attention at the present moment. I must say farewell to you, my friend. I will inform Chief Denny of the importance of this trip. If necessary, I will have President Wilkins call her. Now, let me consult with my secretary a moment... Yes. Ralf Fisher with the BND will meet you at the Munich airport. Goodbye and good luck, my friend. I will not burden you by telling you that both our jobs are dependent on your success.”

Duly noted and duly burdened.

The connection closed. That might have been his fastest goodbye ever. And no wonder. I would have to leave a critically important case to go to Europe so I could get stonewalled by the BND. If they acted up, as I suspected they would, I could have the President of the World personally scold them. That would sure make some friends. To top it off, both my job and Gaston’s job were on the line.

I love to travel, but nobody likes a no-win scenario. It looked like I would be flying to Germany to put my head on a chopping block.



Chapter 5

The next morning I was up early. Flying to Europe that evening was no excuse for being late to work. Besides, I had a short “introductory” meeting scheduled with Mayor Georgia Hinds, my boss’s boss. There was no way I was going to miss that. The last thing I wanted was another uncomfortable relationship with the Mayor’s office.

Since Chief Denny reported directly to the Mayor, it was essential to get off on the right foot, so to speak. Besides, my idea about eliminating the rule prohibiting driverless cars around HQ would help get the new Mayor off on the right foot with D.C. Blues. I was sure she would appreciate me giving her that little tidbit.

Chief Denny was leaving the Mayor’s office when I arrived. “How’d it go, Chief?”

“She’s... nice. Budget-conscious.”

“She ran on a platform of getting D.C.’s finances back in order.”

“And she means it,” Chief said. “Our raises for this year may be in jeopardy.”

“Ouch. I guess it’s a good thing we love our jobs so much we don’t do it for the money.”

“Speak for yourself, Drake. Well, you’re up next,” Chief said as she waved at the Mayor’s door. “Enjoy.”

Mayor Charles Cantrell’s name had long been removed from the office door. His inglorious end was still a blot on the history of the office, and all too vivid a memory for me. But that was done and over, and a new name had been freshly applied to the fogged glass panel in the upper half of the door.

I thought it was interesting that the Mayor was the only one allowed to have glass that you couldn’t see through. The rest of us were on display for anyone who walked down the hallways. But that’s the way it had always been. Whatever. Time to get off to a

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good start with the new Mayor. I opened the door and stepped into the office.

It was easy enough to recognize Mayor Hinds from her TV ads and political posters. She was standing in front of a mirror, gluing one of her eyelashes back on. She glanced over her shoulder and looked at me and said, “Just who do you think you are?”

“Ah, I’m Detective Drake Blast. We’ve got an introductory meeting scheduled for ten-fifteen.”

“Isn’t that as sweet as summertime tea? But, honeydew, don’t you understand that I would appreciate a little respect for my privacy? If you don’t, listen to this. Next time, please knock.”

“Why, of course,” I stammered. “But this is the outer office. I mean, we always come in and talk to the electronic secretary...”

“Look around here, sugar pooch,” she said as she interrupted me, waving around the reception room where we stood, which was outside her office proper. “Do you see an electronic secretary?”

“I, uh...”

“No, honey bunny. You don’t. That’s because there’s not one. This city has been wasting money for far too long. Electronic secretaries! I declare. It’s like they don’t think we’re capable of doing anything ourselves. This place is seething with waste. Well, I’m going to fix that.” She glanced around the room like a carnivore looking for its next meal then pointed at the door I had come through. “Why, you look at that fancy sand-blasted glass panel in the door, the one they put my name on. You tell me, if you can, why they went to the trouble and expense of putting in a glass panel door when you can’t see through the fogged glass anyway?”

“The maintenance people can replace the door...”

“Replace it? Honeypie, what is wrong with you? Doing anything to it would cost money. The last thing I want to do is waste the hard-earned money of the wonderful citizens of Washington D.C. You mark my words, young man; we’re going to quit wasting money in this city. Our citizens deserve better. That door will stay like it is, and you need to corral your extravagant thinking. Now come on into my office and let’s get to know each other.”

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Not my best introduction. I followed her into the office and remained standing as she sat behind her desk.

“Are you going to stand there like a statue? What am I going to do with you, child? Sit down and make yourself comfortable. We can’t get to know each other if you’re going to stand there all stiff and rigid like a wooden Indian.”

At that point, I was not sure what to say, so I slowly lowered myself into one of the visitor’s chairs while keeping my mouth shut.

“Cat got your tongue, eh? Well, maybe it’ll loosen up. Drake, honey, I’ve been looking at your file. You’re always flying here and flying there. You spend a ton of money, sweetheart. I think I see the potential for saving the taxpayers a lot of expense. What do you think, hon?”

“Mayor Hinds...”

“Please, sugar, call me Georgia.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, ma’am? That doesn’t sound like we’re getting to know each other, does it? First names, baby. Call me Georgia. You know, like Georgia on your mind.”

“Oh, of course, ah, Georgia.”

“That’s better, sweet pea. So tell me, what is on your mind?”

“Ah, I wanted to congratulate you on winning the election. Welcome to the Mayor’s office.”

“No, sugarplum. I’m not talking about social trivialities. I want to know what’s on your mind about saving the taxpayers’ money. You spend an awful lot of it, Drake. What can you do to quit spending so much?”

“Mayor, uh, Georgia, my expenses are all related to the cases I am investigating. I have to follow up on the leads we get. Otherwise, we wouldn’t solve the cases. We’d never stop the bad guys.”

“Uh, huh. Well, Drake honey, think about this. I’m the Mayor of Washington D.C., not Paris, France, and not Dublin, Ireland. You work as a detective in Washington D.C. Looking in your recent records, why am I paying half the price of an airline ticket for you to fly off to Paris? Or half the price of faux flesh removal in Dublin?”

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“The budget is split between D.C. and the UN. The UN pays for half of my local expenses, too.”

“Which are a whole lot less than what you’re spending while you’re gallivanting around all over the globe.”

The last thing I had expected was having to justify my existence. Maybe being Drake Blast didn’t mean as much as Chief Denny was always telling me it did. I decided it was time to go on the offensive... But a gentle offensive. “Georgia, I am assigned cases to investigate, and I plunge myself into them. I have never had a case I didn’t solve. No other detective in D.C. can say that. And, I suspect, damned few detectives anywhere can say that. I’m not an insurance clearinghouse. I’m a detective who gets the job done.”

“Bully for you, hon.”

“I don’t worry about the expenses.”

“That’s obvious.”

I held my hands up, palms out. “I didn’t mean it that way. What I meant was I don’t worry about who is paying what share. It was decided before I became a detective that the two organizations would split the costs down the middle. Maybe the city takes it on the chin a little in my case, but the UN takes it on the chin with a D.C. beat cop. It all comes out in the wash. If I sat around worrying about who was paying for what, I’d be less effective in getting my job done. I don’t want to be less effective. I like solving cases and collaring bad guys. And I think the citizens of D.C. like having me solve cases and putting the bad guys behind bars. It makes the world a safer place.”

Mayor Hinds stared at me a moment then smiled wide and said, “You know something, sweet pea? That’s a good explanation. I like you. Now, what do you think we need to do to improve things around here?”

“We’ve got this antiquated old rule that driverless cars are not allowed within six blocks of headquarters. So we have to park our cars and walk the six blocks to the office then back again, no matter how bad the weather is.”

“Don’t you understand, honeybun? That’s a security issue. We don’t want any bombs going off down here, now, do we?”

HERB HUGHES

“Mayor... ah, Georgia, we’ve got the technology in place to disarm any bomb that gets close, whether the car has a driver or not. If you get rid of that rule, all the cops in D.C. would appreciate it. They’d love you.”

“Now you listen here, Drake, sweetie. I didn’t get elected to come down here and try to win a beauty pageant.”

I was pretty sure that wasn’t going to happen.

“I don’t care whether the D.C. cops love me or not,” the Mayor continued. “I care whether they do their job and save the taxpayers some money in the process. Like this.” She held up a piece of paper from her desk. “You’re flying off to Germany tonight to do the UN’s business, and I’m getting stuck with half the bill.”

“But...”

“No buts. I get it that the UN is paying half the salary of a cop who has never set foot out of the D.C. slums. But I still want my money’s worth out of my half of your plane ticket. Not to mention your hotel bill and your meals. So while you’re over there helping the BND figure out how to pull their pants back up over their butts, I want you to talk to Jonas Scholz, the CEO of Neuste Technologie AG in Aalen, Germany, whatever Neuste Technologie means.”

“It more or less translates to Cutting Edge Technologies, Inc.,” I said.

“Well, that’s peachy, Drake sweetie. Mr. Cutting Edge was a business associate of Robert Feinstein. In fact, Neuste Technologie was often the downstream end for FLEC’s circuit printing process. They embedded the circuits into the internal layers of the implant chips. And they were good friends, too. You do your detective thing with Mr. Scholz. He may know something. Maybe, just maybe, we can kill two birds with one stone.”

“Sure. That could prove helpful.” I had planned to talk with Scholz, but there was no need to mention that. It was better PR to let her think she was plowing fresh ground.

“I have to tell you, hon, it was Chief Denny’s idea, but I am behind her one hundred percent. She’s a smart lady and has a lot of good ideas. Now, back to your silly parking lot idea. Your wonderful

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technology doesn't always work. There are bad people out there who are always finding ways around technology. And, besides, they don't need a bomb. A driverless car can be a weapon by itself. Drive it by remote and run over people. If you're so lazy you're afraid of a little walk, hon, I'm worried that the city's not getting its money's worth out of you."

So much for that idea. And so much for getting on her good side.

HERB HUGHES