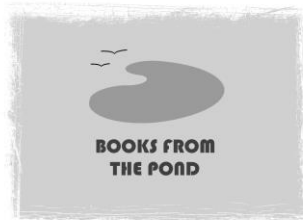


The ystick Murders

Herb Hughes



Books From The Pond
2016

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For Charlotte. Thank you for your beauty, your intelligence, your patience, your wonderful sense of the world around us, and, most of all, for putting up with me. You deserve a medal to end all medals!

Chapter 1

Listening to a speech by the head of the EU in a meat manufacturing plant just outside of Washington D.C.? Yep. Boring. But I needed the work credits. The streets had been relatively quiet for weeks and working a nice, safe security job was a good ‘fill-in’ until my next big case.

Our tour guide, a perfectly manicured, powder puff blonde with long, silky legs – well, that part wasn’t so boring – walked to the podium on the makeshift stage on the factory floor and, in a deep but feminine voice, extolled the great virtues of her company for several minutes before introducing the company president. The president talked for several more minutes then introduced the US Secretary of State who, in turn, introduced Olaf Gustafsson of Norway, the Prime Minister of the EU and leading candidate for World President at the next election. Even though the election was still almost two years away, in 2044, it was half the news nowadays.

The audience sat quietly and attentively on folding chairs placed in semi-neat rows on the factory’s plasticrete floor. It was a good crowd, hand selected. They clapped politely at all the appropriate times even though the introductions were too long and drawn out. I could imagine the international 3V viewers sitting in their living rooms saying, “Come on! Get on with it!”

When Gustafsson began speaking, the lights were dimmed. For effect, I suppose. A politician at that level used every trick in the book. Or, more accurately, his people did. Politicians live on slogans, shaking hands, and kissing babies. The campaign manager usually assigned accent lighting to a dedicated, long laboring, and virtually anonymous volunteer underling. Occasionally that underling actually knew what he or she was doing.

In a soft but convincing voice, Gustafsson spoke to the meat plant employees, press, and other dignitaries with fluid and only slightly accented English. He was an intelligent man and a velvety smooth

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politician. This had been billed as a major speech. Only a few sentences into it, he had the Americans eating out of his hand.

Sure, he'd done a lot of good stuff. The economy in the EU was booming thanks to his leadership. And he was a champion for orphaned children. He was the founder and former director of Children First, an organization that housed, counseled, and assisted orphans throughout Europe. He was still on the board of Children First even though he now had a larger job leading the EU. They were in the process of expanding Children First onto other continents, which was the surface reason for his being in D.C. But for all his accomplishments, he was still a politician, and a damned good one. I marveled at the way he handled...

What the hell?

From my position as rear tail for the entourage, I watched as one of two Secret Service agents directly behind Gustafsson reached inside his suit coat and whipped out his automatic. I quickly looked in front of the stage to see what he had seen, at the same time reaching for my shoulder holster. Someone had to be a severe threat if a Secret Service agent pulled his weapon in plain view of everyone, including the 3V audience, but I didn't see anything moving in front of the stage. What *had* he seen?

As I glanced back toward the agent, the sound of automatic gunfire shattered the quiet of the polite, attentive audience. I watched in total disbelief as the Secret Service agent spewed a flood of well-aimed bullets at the back of the Prime Minister's head. Blood and brains splattered onto the crowd as Gustafsson's head crumpled in front of their eyes. What was left of the European leader slumped to the floor. A Secret Service agent? These guys were top of the heap! They didn't assassinate people. I was so surprised that I hesitated half a second before springing forward.

The dignitaries on the stage jumped from their chairs and began to scramble away. The second Secret Service agent sprang into action. He turned and wrestled with the first, the shooter, trying to take the weapon out of his hand. Responding strictly on reflex, I pulled my Strikezone SF automatic pistol and started to get a bead on the agent who had killed Gustafsson. There was no question that the EU leader was dead. His head had been turned to mush.

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I held my fire. I knew we would want the shooter alive if at all possible. Besides, the other Secret Service agent had him tangled up and had a firm hold on the automatic so the perp couldn't shoot anybody else. I shook my head in disbelief again as I lowered my Strikezone SF. A Secret Service agent? How could this happen? This guy was going to have a lot of answering to do.

I started running toward the tangled agents to help subdue the shooter. Panicking dignitaries flew past me, running in the other direction to get away from the struggle. I had taken maybe three steps when I felt the heat and force and heard the ear-splitting sound of a loud explosion. I was twenty-five, thirty feet away by this time but the concussion that hit me was strong enough to pick me up, flip me over backward, and slam me against the metal wall of a meat machine.

It took a few seconds to clear my head enough to remember who I was. Remembering where I was took a little longer. People were screaming and crying, but it was the sounds of aftermath. There were no more shots being fired, no more explosions.

I shook off the cobwebs and crawled to my feet, looking around as I did so. The speaker's platform was covered with gore, human gore. I found my pistol on the floor, next to a piece of bloody flesh. I carefully picked it up and put it into my shoulder holster. No need to keep it out as several dozen security agents had automatics pulled and pointing in every conceivable direction, their eyes wide and attentive and surveying for any possible follow-up attacks. Gathering my slowly returning wits, I staggered over to where the shooter had been. A few people had gathered around, either trying to help or just to see what people looked like on the inside.

As I took in the scene visually, I began to piece together what had happened. The explosion had severed the shooter's head and sent it flying. Mutilated and bloody, it landed in the audience, coming to rest on an elderly woman's lap. The woman had passed out and was still unconscious. The bloody head remained in her lap and was slowly turning her cream-colored suit to red.

The shooter's legs and lower torso went in the opposite direction and were slumped on the floor against the back rail. The rest of his body

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was most of the gore scattered around on the stage: a bloody clump here, a piece of bone there, little pools of blood all around.

The explosion was centered in the shooter's upper body, somewhere around the neck. It was a relatively small charge. In fact, it appeared to be designed specifically to take the shooter out, a straightforward murder-suicide. This agent had killed the Prime Minister then blown his own head off. The other Secret Service agent, the one trying to take the shooter's weapon away, had been too close and became collateral damage. He was mostly in one piece, but it wasn't pretty. And some of the gore scattered around the makeshift stage was his.

Besides Prime Minister Gustafsson and the two Secret Service agents, there were no other dead people, at least not yet. Two EUS agents had been only a few steps away. Both were severely wounded. It was a good thing the dignitaries on the stage had tried to get away. When the bomb exploded, they were far enough from the podium to survive. If they hadn't left their chairs, this would have been worse, a lot worse.

Several wounded people, including the EUS agents, sat or lay on the stage. There were people attending to them, but few of them knew what to do. A couple of people were directing others on how to stop the bleeding, which is always important. But giving comfort and saying soothing words is often the best help that can be given in situations like this. That is, until the paramedics arrived. Better to leave most things to the professionals.

The stage was smoky, but it was thinning. Several people were walking around holding their ears and making motions to others to indicate they could not hear. The powder puff blond was one of them. She was not so neat and trim anymore as her dress was covered with blood and lumps of flesh. My ears were ringing loudly, but I could still hear. The rest of the crowd was trying to wipe the gore off themselves and their clothes. I'd have to do that myself at some point, but it could wait.

Oh, by the way, I'm Drake Blast, Master Detective for the combined United Nations Capital Security Service/Washington D.C. Metro Police Force. You're probably wondering why I was in the meat factory to begin with, why I wasn't out in the city solving some

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unspeakable crime. Hey, even a top-shelf detective like me has to have a break now and then. Well, to be perfectly honest, this was not a break. It was work. I like a good medium-rare steak as well as anybody, but I wouldn't spend my off-time touring a meat-making plant. I've got better things to do. I was here in a security role. The Prime Minister of the EU was visiting America, and I was assigned to his security detail. There was plenty of special security, of course, lots of Secret Service guys and lots of EU security of several different types. I was only a rear tag, following up behind to cover the entourage's tail. Heck of a job for the best detective this side of, well, anywhere, but, like I said earlier, there wasn't much happening at the moment. Even though it was work, it was almost like taking a break.

At least, that's what it was supposed to have been. I mean, how do you anticipate that a Secret Service agent is going to go rogue and assassinate the leading politician in the entire world? You don't. No way.

Of the few implants that I was able to afford, one was a Sterling Hi-Vid 808. It's a video/photo implant. Any detective worth his weight in salt has a video/photo implant. Mine, the Sterling, was not the best on the market, but it was close. The best implant was way more expensive than the Sterling and the difference in price was a lot greater than the difference in quality and function. No need to waste money.

The tiny chip was in a chip frame on the outside of my skull, beneath the skin, and was wired through my skull directly to my vision center. The chips and frame were ultra-thin and the slight lump they caused on the side of my head was virtually undetectable by human eyes, especially under my hair. I could take many thousands of pictures or hours of video simply by looking and giving the appropriate mental command.

I also had internet and communication chips, along with a sixteen terabyte mass storage chip. The rest of the frame was empty. I'd get more chips when I could afford it. The chips were expensive enough, for sure, but that was only a small part of the total cost. Wiring them to the brain was the big financial hit. Good brain surgeons didn't come cheap.

Taking video by mental command, I looked around at each area of the crime scene and captured everything the way that seemed to show

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things best. It would be evidence. I also took some still shots here and there after moving people out of the way and getting the scene framed with my eyes exactly the way I wanted it. I'd download the pix and video in the office later, pick out a few dozen stills, blow them up maybe fifteen or twenty X, and then see what the details revealed. If anything.

Oh, yeah. I'd give a copy to Dennis in Forensics in case stuff got moved around before his guys got here.

I'd heard about eye implants that would allow you to zoom in and out real time, but they were still some years away. Unlike a video chip, which was linked directly to the brain, these new implants were installed into the eyes. They adjusted the visual signal that was sent to the brain. When they did reach the market, they'd probably cost more than a year's salary so I would not be getting one right away. A detective's salary doesn't go as far as it used to, and it never went all that far to begin with. The Sterling Hi-Vid chip would have to do for quite a few years to come. Besides, waiting made sense. The cost always got substantially lower after the initial rush to get something new had fizzled away. And, frankly, it was going to take a little time for me to get used to the idea of implanting something directly into my eye. I squirmed a little when I thought about it.

My communications chip was an Ethridge 421 Comm Commander, the most popular model. Most people nowadays had gone to a comm chip and ditched the old smartphone. If you could only afford one implant, it was typically a comm chip.

Listening to the cop buzz over my comm, I knew that Forensics was on the way. There was nothing else for me to do here. I started wiping the goop off my shirt and jacket. I needed to get to the office and download the vid.

What had promised to be a boring morning on a routine, low-level assignment had turned out to be anything but boring and routine. Boring would have been far better than this. It was not the kind of excitement that made for pleasant memories.

I stopped at my flat and bagged my clothes for the Forensics team. They could burn them when they were through. There was no way I was

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going to wear that outfit again. I took a quick shower to clean everything off of me, real or imagined, then left for the office.

Chapter 2

On the way downtown, I fluffed up my old-fashioned organic memory and went over everything in detail one more time. Did the people who owned the meat manufacturing plant have anything to do with the assassination of Olaf Gustafsson? On the surface, you wouldn't think so. The powder puff blond had spoken for quite some time about how her company's founders had saved the world from greenhouse gasses and total destruction. Sure, it was partly true. How? Simple. They got rid of cows. No, they didn't slaughter them all. They made them obsolete, and nature took its course. Not Mother Nature, the great nature of commerce and profit. But how did that tie-in to the assassination? Or did it?

Oh, the way they made cows and other meat animals obsolete was through the old fashioned method: technology and hard work. These guys invented a way to make the most delicious steaks that ever caused a tongue to water, and did it without the benefit of a living, breathing cow. They also made chicken breasts that had never strutted around, slung below a beak with wobbly, rubbery red stuff around it. And the pork chops, well... You get the picture. They made the best meat in the world without live animals.

And it cost less. Great pasturelands stretching as far as the eye could see were no longer needed. At the price of land nowadays, that saved tons of money. The livestock population in the world plummeted. And so did animal farts. The amount of methane escaping into the atmosphere had dropped by almost ninety percent in the last twenty years, and the reduction of livestock populations was the single largest reason for that.

Livestock farms were a mere novelty now. There were a few, but these were kept for historical value, and to keep farm animals from becoming extinct. There were no more major livestock operations, no more slaughterhouses, no more bones and entrails and wobbly, rubbery, red stuff to make hot dogs out of, and, best of all, no more huge farts thundering into the sky.

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Oh, and, perhaps even better than the best part, no more need to cut the rainforest down to make pastureland because pastures were no longer needed. Trees took root, literally, and sucked in more carbon dioxide, spewing forth great new torrents of oxygen, which cured a lot of ills. No, the environment wasn't perfect, but it was better than it had been in many decades.

The meat plant itself? Perfect boneless steaks, pork chops, and chicken breasts were extruded from, well, for lack of a better term, gigantic cell cultures. They did have a better term, but it sounded too scientific. All the magic happened in these monster three-story high machines. Basic ingredients would go into the top, and they would literally grow the meat cells at an astounding rate. The meat was alive, but never part of a living animal.

Perfectly marbled steaks extruded from a steak-shaped tube and a wire blade at the end cut the steaks to the proper thickness. There were different machines for various types of steak and for other types of meat. Chicken was extruded in a cylindrical tube, like a large salami, and cut to the old breast shape because that was what people wanted to see. The excess from the cuts was chopped up for chicken fingers and strips. A little further down the conveyor lines the meat was wrapped and packaged by machinery, never touched by human hands. Every steak was identical, and every chicken breast was shaped exactly the same, but that was quite acceptable since the steaks and breasts were perfect and tasted great.

Unlike when I was a kid, hamburger was more expensive than steak since it required grinding, an additional task on the conveyor line. But they still made billions of tons of it. Burgers are a deep-rooted American tradition. Besides, even though hamburger was more expensive than steak, it was still cheaper than it used to be and tasted much better. There were no more soy extracts, bread, or God knows what else. When you ordered a hamburger or taco, you got one hundred percent ground steak. If you wanted a soyburger, that was a separate menu item and cost more since crops were still grown in the field the old-fashioned way. I supposed that, too, would change in the not too distant future.

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The meat-growing process had started in the laboratory much earlier in the twenty-first century but had been vastly improved over the decades. The meat was as healthy as food could be. It was engineered to have more of the good cholesterol and virtually none of the bad. There were no contaminants absorbed from the environment, no heavy metals, no antibiotics, nothing bad at all. It was pure, healthy, delicious meat. The whole operation was relatively simple and highly automated, almost employee free.

So, yeah, what she was saying was mostly true. The company had pretty much saved the world, or significantly helped the process. But you got tired of hearing them toot their own horn. It wasn't as if they'd done it by themselves. They had a lot of help from the new batteries that had made electric cars and trucks so practical, almost eliminating the need for burning gasoline. And the new solar cells that had drastically cut back on burning coal or oil to generate electricity.

But back to the assassination. When I considered everything, I could not come up with any reason for the company to kill the EU Prime Minister. Besides, the company's officers had been on the stage and in harm's way at the time. Several of them had to be treated by medical personnel. Putting any or all of them on my suspect list was unlikely, at least for now. That left me with exactly zero suspects. Hopefully, that number would increase soon.

Chapter 3

“Look at that,” my main boss, Chief Cheryl Denny, said the next morning as we were going through security camera video of the shooting for the fourth or fifth time. She shook her head side-to-side, and her medium length brown hair bounced with the movement. There were a few strands of premature gray in the brown, the dividend for her years of police work.

We watched the video from every camera, covering virtually every possible angle, and she was still wide-eyed with disbelief. I had never seen those hazel eyes pop out quite that much as she continued, “This... this agent, Wilson Landry, he just starts shooting the Prime Minister of Europe from behind. It doesn’t make sense. He’s a Secret Service agent, for crying out loud! Perfect record. Years of service. A real stand-up guy. Look at that. He pulls out his automatic and starts shooting. What the hell?”

Chief’s seen a lot in her years, and things don’t usually get to her like this. Frankly, it got to me a little, too. But, then, there were a few people who accused us of being peas in a pod. Some people even thought we were brother and sister. Ridiculous! Chief was a few years older than me, but I didn’t see the similarities anyway. Yeah, maybe we talked alike. Both of us came up hard in the D.C. suburbs. But that was where the similarities ended. I’m a male, and she’s a female. And I’m better looking.

“Yeah,” I said. “If it weren’t for the explosives he had strapped to the back of his neck, you’d think he suddenly snapped and went looney tunes. Had to be planned, though. There was nothing spur of the moment about this.” Okay. So I was doing my Captain Obvious imitation. But that’s common in this business. You have to go over the obvious time and time again and maybe something not so obvious will eventually stand out. Chief understood that. She took the statement in full stride.

“I got the initial explosives analysis,” she said, through lips only lightly touched with lip gloss. No lipstick at all. Chief Denny wasn’t one to pile on the makeup. “It was C12, a derivative of the old C4 but several times more powerful. This guy, Agent Wilson Landry, he didn’t even use

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a thimble full. When it's flattened out, that little bit is way too easy to hide under a shirt, but a sniffer should have picked it up. They're running a trace on the chemical signature now. We should know where it came from in a few minutes."

"Didn't they run a sniffer over Landry before the speech? They're supposed to check everybody regardless of who they are. That's standard ops."

"Yes, he was checked. Nothing. The EU guy running the sniffer swears he checked every single person there, even the Prime Minister himself, and everybody was clean, including Wilson Landry. Both the Secret Service agent and the CBI agent assigned to help him said the same thing. We ran all three of them through a lie detector a few minutes ago. They all checked out. The sniffer checks out, too. Working fine."

"Doesn't make sense. No question the C12 was there. You can't get that stuff through a sniffer undetected." Chief stared at me without speaking. Maybe that was carrying Captain Obvious too far. Time to move on. "You want me to talk to this Landry guy's family?" I asked.

"CBI already has. An Agent named Holland was in here a couple of hours ago, shaking his head about the whole thing. The shooter's slick clean, a dedicated Secret Service man. Nothing on his record at all. No associations with any known criminals or terrorists. Except when he arrested them, and he's got a good record on that score. The family has no money problems, no emotional problems, nothing to hide that CBI can tell. There were no notes on his body, in his office, or anywhere else that we've looked so far. It makes no sense. But you'll still need to follow up with the family, of course. See if you can dig up something the CBI might have missed. Those guys aren't perfect."

The CBI, Central Bureau of Investigation, was a combination of the old FBI and CIA. The two agencies merged as a cost saving measure shortly after Interpol was absorbed by the UN. It turned out to be a good marriage, letting the FBI expand internationally. Legally, that is. They had done international work "under the table" for decades.

"Will do," I said as I nodded my head. "Any claims of responsibility?"

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“An even dozen the last time I checked. Mostly the usual crew. The CBI’s taking them all seriously, but from what I saw I wouldn’t give much credence to any of them.”

There was a knock on the office door. I looked up and saw the freckled face of Corporal Janette Simmons on the other side of the glass insert in the top half of the door, immediately under the backward letters announcing Chief Denny’s office to those on the other side. While I remembered her first name, it wasn’t because I used it. Nobody did. She was known either as Corporal Simmons or, simply, as Simmons. The Corporal’s longish red hair was tucked under her hat, but there were always a few renegade strands that did not get tucked. They waved about as she moved. Chief Denny motioned for her to come in.

“Explosives report, ma’am,” she said with a touch of a southern drawl. Local accents were getting rare in this day and age of instant communication, but Simmons was recently moved up from the hills of northern Arkansas. There were still some places where they talked a little different.

“Thanks,” Chief said as she took the report.

“You’re sure welcome. By the way, Mayor Cantrell’s on the way down, ma’am.”

Chief glanced at me then back at Simmons. “Not surprising,” she said. “It’s Charlie’s town, and this is about as high profile as it gets. He’ll want answers and a quick resolution. Thanks, Corporal.” Chief motioned the Corporal’s dismissal with her hand.

When Simmons left, Chief Denny glanced at the report. “That’s pretty much what I expected. It was from the shipment to Fort Hampton that was hijacked two years ago. Forty pounds of C12. This stuff has been floating around on the black market ever since, used by everybody from terrorists to common, run-of-the-mill bank vault burglars. Somebody stole the C12 to sell it, and they didn’t give a damn how it got used. Unfortunately, CBI’s never caught them. They’re still out there selling.” All old news. Chief Denny could play Captain Obvious as well.

I could see by the shadow that came over the desk that someone was at the office door again, someone large. Mayor Charles Cantrell didn’t knock as he stepped inside. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man

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with an imposing presence and a commanding attitude. His face was a little on the plump side, as was his body. His medium-length, curly hair had enough gray to give him a distinguished look. I found it interesting that the curls in his hair were fairly large and natural looking, but were always identical. The same curls were in the same place every time.

This was only his third term as mayor, but he had done such an impressive job of turning the city around, he was being touted for national and possibly international office. He had also been mentioned as a possible candidate for World President though he was a longshot at this point. But who knows? Things change.

Holding his jacket on his arm, he plopped down in the other guest chair before the Chief could invite him to have a seat.

“Hello, Charlie,” Chief said.

“What have we got on this suicide bomber?” Mayor Charles Cantrell asked in his booming, quake-the-walls voice.

I said, “Technically, he’s not a suicide bomber since he shot his target first.”

The mayor waved the statement off with a flick of his wrist. Not significant.

“Not much,” Chief said. “The guy appears to be an exemplary Secret Service agent with no reason whatsoever to assassinate anyone, especially not Gustafsson. We’ve found nothing from him so far, no notes or demands.”

Mayor Cantrell raised his hand and pointed his index finger straight at Chief Denny. “Well, you better find something quick. This whole thing is a great embarrassment to the city of Washington D.C. I’ve got the entire European continent on my back because we couldn’t provide adequate security. That’s your job.”

“It was actually a Secret Service and EUS job,” Chief said.

“You think that matters to the rest of the world?” Mayor Cantrell thundered, slapping at the air in front of him. “This guy was shot to pieces in Washington D.C. On international 3V, for crying out loud! The damn thing was being broadcast live all over the globe, and suddenly the European Prime Minister’s brains are splattering all over the audience. And splattering on the 3V camera lenses, for Christ’s sake. The Secret

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Service be damned for bringing this plague on us, but the entire world blames D.C. That's you and me, in case you don't remember. We better get to the bottom of it, and we better do it quick. I promised we would do exactly that at the press conference last night. You better damned well keep my promise!"

"Yes, Sir," we said in unison.

"You realize what this does to me politically?" the Mayor continued. "Huh? Well, I can forget about the US Presidency, let alone the World Presidency. If I decided to run, I wouldn't get two votes in Europe right now."

The mayor stood, his jacket still hanging over his arm. He stared directly at me. "Blast, you're supposed to be some sort of hotshot detective, so this is in your hands." He glanced at Chief. "I want him reporting directly to me. The two of you need to talk and compare notes, but I want Blast reporting directly to me on this. The reputation of D.C., not to mention my entire political future, is at stake here."

"Yes, sir," Chief Denny said. "I understand."

"And you," Mayor Cantrell said, turning back to stare me eyeball-to-eyeball. "Get to the bottom of this and get to it quick. Keep me informed every step of the way." With that he turned on his heels and walked out, leaving the door open as he went through.

"Yes, sir," I said to the air he left behind. Great. Now I had three bosses instead of the usual two. Regardless of what the mayor said, I still reported to Chief Denny. That was on the D.C. side. On the UN side, I reported to Under Secretary for Capital Security Gaston Lamizana in New York. Like many cities, D.C. could not afford a full-size police force. The UN was now mandated to protect national capitals, but they couldn't afford a full force either. So they split the cost and got one police force between the two. The downside was that I had two bosses and sometimes their orders conflicted. The upside was that I got involved in international investigations and got to travel quite often. I like to travel.

I turned back to Chief and said, "Looks like my job might be on the line."

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“Both our jobs,” she answered. “He may want you reporting directly to him, but if it goes badly, it’ll still be my responsibility. And my butt in a sling, as well as yours. Remember, he’s a politician, and a good one. If we can’t solve this case quickly, don’t expect any of the blame to stick to him.”

“Good point. I’ll make sure you know everything I know, Chief.”

“Thanks. Now, let’s get going. I think the shooter’s family is as good a place as any to start.”

“On it,” I said as I left her office.

Chapter 4

It's not easy talking to someone who is on the verge of being hysterical. Ms. Landry's eyes were so red from crying there was little white left. The red against her pale blue irises made an interesting contrast, almost like a cheap horror flick. Thanks to me she started bawling all over again, and I quickly forgot about her eye color. Sometimes being a detective is not all it's cracked up to be, and most people don't think much of the job anyway.

"Yes, ma'am," I was saying patiently. "I know the CBI has gone over this with you several times. And I understand this is difficult for you, but it happened in D.C. so we've got to investigate, too. I promise I'll be less clinical than the CBI."

It was an easy promise. I'm not the robotic, by-the-book type. I pay attention to people's emotions. I'll have to admit, though, not always out of compassion. Sometimes, if you twist those emotions in the right way, voila! You can elicit the information you need.

"My Wilson would never do something like this," she sobbed. "He was so proud to be an American. Wilson wouldn't hurt a flea unless that flea were trying to hurt our country. I promise he wouldn't. It's got to be trick photography. You can do things with a computer so that people can't tell that the video has been manipulated. That's what I told the CBI, but they didn't seem to believe me."

"Ms. Landry, I... Well, it's hard to say this, ma'am, but I was there. Wilson Landry did pull the trigger. There's no question he did it. The question is: 'Why?'"

Once again she started sobbing too heavily to talk. She put her hands on her face and her dirty blond hair intertwined with her fingers as she mumbled something through the sobbing, something not altogether intelligible, but I got the gist of it. She more or less said someone must have forced Wilson because he would never do anything like that on his own. I sure didn't see anybody there forcing him to shoot, but there was no need to get into that. And there are different ways to apply force, many different ways. Some of them aren't so visible.

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I waited a couple of minutes to let her calm down. Then, I'm ashamed to say, I used one of the oldest tricks in the book. "Somebody forced him, eh? Why, that's a strong possibility, Ms. Landry. But we'll never know who it was if you can't help me out. Do you think you could do that so we can clear your husband's name?"

I know. I'm a scumbag. But I needed something, and a detective has to play many roles. Sometimes scumbag is one of them. Maybe she couldn't tell me a thing, but I had to try. She began to get control of herself. Slowly at first, but I could tell she was thinking, going back over things in her mind. Finally, she was composed enough to talk.

"I... I don't know anything that would help. I'm trying..."

"I tell you what. Tell me everything you told the CBI. That's as good a place as any to start."

Once calmed down, she meticulously went over the CBI's questions and her answers. I was surprised that she remembered as much detail as she did, especially in her state. None of it was helpful at all, though. Basically, she said her husband was a typical Secret Service agent. Quiet to a fault. As patriotic an American as there was. Lived by a schedule to the point where it seemed as though his life was choreographed according to some pre-existing script. Always on time. No history of any incidents or behavior even remotely out of line. To listen to his wife, this guy was a regular Mr. Patriotic America and absolutely perfect, totally beyond reproach. Except for one little detail. He blew the EU Prime Minister's brains out. Why?

The European Union and the US were close allies, but, like all international relationships, that was not carved in stone. The way we handled this case was critical to making sure both countries stayed on the same side of international affairs. Unfortunately, I was beginning to worry that the Mayor was not going to get the quick resolution he so badly wanted. And, even more unfortunately, that quick resolution was intertwined with the detective's job I so badly wanted to keep.

"And that's about it," she said. She shrugged her shoulders.

"I see. You, ah, haven't had any arguments lately, have you? You and Wilson that is. Anything at all out of the ordinary?"

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“Oh, mercy, no! Detective Blast, Wilson and I have never had an argument. In four years of dating and seven years of marriage, never the first argument.”

That was damned hard to believe but so was everything else in this case so far. It had a certain warped symmetry to it. “Did you make love the night before?” An odd question, but one that had helped me elicit some valuable information in the past.

She stared at me for a moment but apparently decided the question was not unreasonable. She answered. “Not the night before. He was late getting in from work. And he had to get up early.”

“He was late getting in? I thought he was never late for anything.”

“Never late for an appointment. He was often late coming home from work. But that was understandable with his job.”

“How often?”

“Three or four nights a week. Sometimes more. Well, maybe four or five. But it’s his job, of course.”

“And he was late coming home the night before the shooting?”

“Well, yes.”

“How late?” I could tell that, all of a sudden, she did not want to answer my questions.

“I was in bed asleep. I woke up for a moment when he crawled in, of course, but I’m used to him working late. I didn’t even look at the clock. I-I don’t know when it was.”

Bingo! I had tagged her as a clock watcher early on. Most people are. Human nature. She had glanced at the clock on the wall a dozen times since I had been there. For whatever reason, she didn’t want to tell me how late it had been.

“Was he this late often, the other times he worked late?” I asked, trying to zero in on the time a little better.

“Well, no. He’s never come in quite that late without calling. But he’s a Secret Service agent. You have to understand they sometimes work odd hours. This time, it lasted longer than usual.”

So, the best I could guess, it appeared to be midnight or later when he got home, and he hadn’t called beforehand like he usually did. There was something different about that night. “Did you tell this to the CBI?”

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“Ah... No.” She looked at me funny then said, “They never asked. Not directly. I did not volunteer anything. The CBI and the Secret Service aren’t the best of friends, you know.”

“Thank you, Ms. Landry. You’ve been quite helpful. I’ll do my best to clear your husband’s name.”

Chapter 5

The next step was to talk to Wilson Landry's boss and find out what kind of work assignment kept him out until the wee hours the night before the shooting, especially since he was supposed to be on duty early the next morning. And why was it so important he had not called home to let his wife know? Now, I've got to be careful here. Any half decent conspiracy theorist would say that, perhaps, the Secret Service assassinated the head of Europe. In fact, based on the news feeds, many of them had said just that. There were brand new blogs out there about the Secret Service's secret war against Europe.

If that was the case, and I go snooping around and find out too much, well, I probably wouldn't be long for this world. I'm not ready to check out yet. Far from it.

On the other hand, though, if the Secret Service were going to assassinate the head of Europe, I think they would do it in a way that would not look like they'd done it because they sure as hell would not want to start an overt war between the US and the EU. There's no percentage in that kind of war. And the Secret Service wouldn't have used agent Wilson Landry, one of their own guys. They'd have used some quirky, low-level character who was not a part of any government organization then had him murdered shortly afterward to make sure he wouldn't sing. We've seen that before. So, if it would help clear the Secret Service's good name, I thought Wilson's boss might be willing to cooperate.

Getting into the Secret Service to talk to Wilson Landry's boss proved to be a chore. The first thing the attractive blond receptionist told me was that no one named Wilson Landry had ever worked for the Secret Service. She was a looker who stretched her blouse nicely, so instead of doing my bully act I managed to maintain a pleasant smile as I explained that the Director of the Secret Service had admitted on international 3V that Wilson Landry was, in fact, a current agent in good standing when he shot Prime Minister Olaf Gustafsson. There was no lingering doubt whatsoever.

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She sat there and stared at me, not speaking, with deep blue eyes, bordering on being purple. I didn't think that was a natural eye color, but I could not see any kind of lens. Finally, she broke the silence by saying the management structure of the Secret Service was classified information, and she could not tell me who Agent Landry's boss was, let alone allow me to talk to him.

I quickly got tired of the stone wall. No sense wasting time, so I stepped to the side and used my Ethridge comm chip to call the Mayor direct. To my surprise, he took my call right away. Now, on an implanted comm chip call, the other person's voice is in your head so the receptionist could not hear what the Mayor was saying. I could keep my part of the conversation in my head, or I could say it out loud. I chose to keep this particular conversation inside my head so the receptionist could not hear what I was saying, either.

I explained to the Mayor about the runaround I was getting at CBI and asked if he could help. He said to give him a minute or two to contact someone. Three minutes later the door behind the reception area opened, and a distinguished looking gentleman walked out. He smiled and held out his hand.

"Good afternoon, Detective Blast. My name is Robert Sizemore. I am, ah, *was* Wilson Landry's immediate superior, as well as Agent Keith Johnson's. How may I help you?"

Good old Mayor Cantrell. The guy had some pull. Oh, Agent Keith Johnson was the collateral damage, the Secret Service agent serving with Landry, who was killed in the explosion. His only sin was trying to wrestle the automatic out of Landry's hand to keep him from shooting anyone else.

"Could we go somewhere we could talk?" I asked. I noticed the receptionist was at her desk working away on an old-fashioned roll-up screen as though nothing had ever happened. She didn't even give me a dirty look.

"Of course," he said. "I cannot take you to my office since it is in a secure area, but there is an open conference room over here. Please, step this way."

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Agent Sizemore was a mixed-race man, black and white, who carried himself with great dignity. Oh, by the way, I've always found the terms 'black' and 'white' a little misleading. When I put a blank piece of paper against my arm, my skin looks nothing like the white of the paper. Likewise, a black man's skin does not come close to something black, like charcoal. Maybe it's me, but I think we all look like we've got brown skin with reddish tones. There are varying degrees of darkness, and sometimes a hint of yellow in the mix; but we're all some shade of brown. And we're all people. I believe we're a lot closer than we think we are.

But I've gotten off track. Back to Agent Sizemore. In this day and age of lens implants and image correcting processors, he wore an old-fashioned pair of bifocal reading glasses. Odd, but not all that uncommon. Some people do not adjust to technology that well. Some want to save money. And, of course, there are always those who are squeamish about having their eyes cut open. I was thankful that my eyesight was perfect. Somebody cutting on my eyeballs? No, thank you.

We walked into the overly large conference room immediately off the reception area. Agent Sizemore closed the door behind us then motioned for me to take a seat. He walked over to a small cabinet with a coffee pot on top. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No thanks," I answered. "Never after lunch." I sat down on the side of the conference table.

He carefully mixed and stirred his coffee, then sat down opposite me and took a sip before saying, "Now, how may I help you?"

His voice had a slight echo in the over-sized room. The table was large enough for twenty, maybe twenty-five people, but I didn't take the time to count chairs. Even though he sat on the side directly opposite me, he seemed quite a distance away because of the size of the table. "I've got a couple of questions I need to ask," I said. "It won't take long."

"Of course. Please," he said as he motioned for me to proceed.

"What kind of agent was Wilson Landry?"

"The best. The man knew his job and did it well. He was quiet, determined to succeed, and followed orders. He was the opposite of a loose cannon."

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“Why do you think he killed Prime Minister Olaf Gustafsson?”

Agent Sizemore looked down at the table. He removed his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes a moment. There was an ugly, curved scar on his right temple that had been covered by the thick frame of the glasses. Perhaps that was why he wore them? Then he put his glasses back on and looked up at me and said, “I have no idea.”

That was simple enough. And pretty much what I expected. “Had he been acting any different lately, moody, shying away from friends, anything out of the ordinary?”

“Not that I noticed. He seemed as normal as ever.”

“Were you around him enough to notice?”

“Detective Blast, I was his boss, and I am a well-trained Secret Service agent. If his behavior had changed in any way whatsoever, I would have noticed. That is the sort of thing we keep a keen eye out for.”

“Gotcha. You realize this doesn’t look good for the Secret Service?”

He nodded and shrugged. He wasn’t taking the bait.

“So how often did Agent Landry work late at night?”

“When the job called for it. He always made himself available as needed, but it wasn’t that often.”

Not that often? That did not seem to jive with Ms. Landry’s statements. “Two or three times a week? Something like that?”

“No, not that often. We do a lot more paper pushing than we used to, and paper pushers hit the doors at five o’clock. In a typical month, he might be out on assignment four or five evenings at the most. Often less.”

Bingo! It was finally beginning to look like something was going on with this Landry guy. He was telling his wife he was working late four or five times a week, but, according to his boss, it was less than four or five times a month. If his boss was telling the truth, that is. My gut said that Robert Sizemore was telling the truth.

The CBI must have missed this. At least, it looked like they did, but that’s not too surprising considering the CBI thought the Secret Service ought to be a division of CBI and not independent. They did not communicate all that well.

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“How late did he work the night before the shooting?”

“We all worked a little late that evening, but not too much. We went over the next morning’s schedule with the agents assigned to the speech then they went home. A routine meeting. The Prime Minister was being escorted by a different group of agents that evening, so there was nothing else for Wilson Landry’s group to do.”

“You saw Agent Landry leave after the briefing?”

“Yes, of course. We dismissed them a little before seven, and all of them left the building.”

Okay. Something was going on. “Did you actually see him get in his car and leave?”

“No. I went back to my office and shut it down for the day. But his car was gone by the time I got to the parking lot a few minutes later. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, nothing, I guess. Trying to cover everything. Well, that’s about all I had, Agent Sizemore. Thank you very much for your cooperation. May I call you if something comes up?”

“Of course. Here.” He handed me his business card. It was a standard card with his name on the front, the CBI Logo, and a tiny embedded circuit ribbon. The ribbon would contain whatever information he cared to give out. “My comm chip number is in there, but it is for your eyes only, as it relates to this case. Please do *not* allow it to get into anyone else’s hands. It’s, ah, a security issue.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

As I was walking out, I turned to the cute but rude receptionist and said, “Hey, Doll, I’ll forgive you over dinner tonight.”

Now, I don’t usually go around calling women “Doll” like some cheap 3V detective, unless I want to irritate somebody. She deserved some irritation. But, then, you could forgive a lot from someone who looked as good as she did. She continued working, totally ignoring my comment, but it made me feel better. I left with a smile on my face. Once outside the smile faded quickly as I started thinking about the case again.

Where had agent Wilson Landry gone between seven o’clock in the evening when he left work and whatever wee hour of the morning when he arrived home and climbed into bed with his wife? What was he doing

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during those missing hours? He had not called his wife to tell her, either. Any normal wife would have called her husband, but not a Secret Service wife. An agent on assignment was not allowed to make or take personal calls, and their wives were strictly lectured about it. In a lot of ways Secret Service marriages were more old-fashioned, more twentieth century than modern marriages. And they typically lasted a lot longer for some reason. It seemed reasonable to assume whatever he was doing that night had to be connected with the assassination, but how?

I hopped into my Chevy CitiRoll electric to head home. It's a multi-car. They're all the rage nowadays, as long as you've got a garage where you can store the different bodies. In addition to my driver's module, I own a backseat module and a truck bed module. The vast majority of the time I use it with the driver module only. Better MPC, Miles Per Charge.

Changing modules is easy. Everything is in an automated storage area in the garage, and you communicate with it using your comm. Tell it which module you want, and the module rolls out on an overhead conveyor. The mini-crane lowers it onto the low-level frame that contains the wheels and tires, electric motor, battery cartridge, and full drivetrain. The body clicks into place on the frame and, voila, you've got a new vehicle arrangement.

It's a solid click. It locks together exceptionally tight like the two pieces have become a single unit. There's also an SUV module available, but I used my backseat and truck bed modules so little I decided not to get one. I couldn't imagine a situation where I would need a module with a third row of seats since I rarely needed the backseat module. And if I ever did, there were plenty of places where I could rent one short-term.

Oh, I need to mention that driving is a relative term in this day and age. Cars can and usually do drive themselves. All you do is say "go to" then the address and it takes you there. Or you tell it "home" or "work" or "Grandma Perkins" or whatever other code you've set up.

In reality, of course, it's not quite that simple. Never is. For instance, if you let all the cars loose to drive themselves on the interstate system, without any kind of overall guidance, especially around a big city at rush hour, it would be absolute mayhem. Automated driving means accident avoidance and no wrecks, of course, but, thanks to that

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same accident avoidance, thousands of cars in a small area of highway all set on automated driving would quickly clog to the point where nobody was moving.

It became a serious problem some years back. Traffic kept increasing. At the same time, we got to the point where we could not afford to add more lanes. The money wasn't there and, in most cities, space wasn't there, either. We had to do something else to get the necessary traffic throughput, so guidance systems were installed. Any car going onto an interstate highway, and most of the other major highways, drives itself but is controlled by the highway's guidance system. Cars travel much faster that way, typically over a hundred miles an hour, and they're much closer together. So we get the throughput without adding more lanes.

Don't even dream about driving manually on the interstate. Won't happen. Manual driving on the interstates and most other major highways was banned years ago. The guidance system takes control of your car the moment you get on the entry ramp. There's nothing you can do about it.

The reward of the guidance system is that you get wherever you are going quickly and safely. The downside is when the system goes down or has a glitch of some sort, it is traffic Armageddon. Literally. You could be stuck on the highway all night long, till time to go back to work the next day. Fortunately, that didn't happen too often.

City streets were mostly different. Few cities went to the expense of installing guidance systems on regular streets, so most people relied on their vehicle's automated driving and did something else while the car was moving. Or, even simpler, sent the car on an errand by itself. That's right. More and more cars were becoming driverless and passengerless. The people who make such projections are now saying that in the not too distant future, the majority of the automobiles on city streets will not have a human inside at all!

Picture this. You sit in your living room and use your comm to order something on the net. They've got a lot of deliveries lined up. You don't want to wait two or three hours for web delivery. So, without getting off the sofa, you use your comm to send your car to pick up the order. The empty car arrives at the store, and the car's computer

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communicates with the store's computer to ensure that the correct order is placed inside the car by the automated picker. Often, there are no workers involved at all. If there's any issue with the order, the store's computer calls your comm to clear it up. Once loaded, your car drives itself home. All you do is step into the garage and retrieve whatever it is you ordered. Or, if you were rich and could afford it, you use your home conveyor system to get your order out of the car and into the house. You never even get off the sofa!

And there are other reasons to have your car on the roads without you. For instance, you could go for a walk or take a ride with someone else then, later, call your car and instruct it to come pick you up.

Of course, you could still drive your automobile manually on the lesser streets, but fewer and fewer people were doing so, particularly in larger cities. It was a headache most people didn't need, and most insurance companies were starting to ban. People who still wanted to drive with their own hands usually went to driving clubs that were located outside the city. But it was mostly older people. Kids don't care about driving. Few of them even bother to get a driver's license anymore. Why bother when you can tell the car where to take you and play with social media while it does? Besides, you don't have to take a driving test if all you're getting is an ID card. You already know who you are, so there's nothing to study and no tests.

Okay, that was a long-winded way of saying I put my car on automatic and let it drive me back to the office, but I thought you might want a little background. Back to the case. There were too many questions and way too few answers. Which made me much too distracted to drive manually. The crash alarms would have been going off constantly, and the automatic brakes would have been pumping like drums in an up-tempo rock song. So the car drove, and I stared out the window and thought. Nothing came to mind.

Chapter 6

“Driving back to the office” is a slightly misleading term. I drove back to my assigned space in our parking deck, which was a full six blocks from police headquarters. So there was always a long walk to my office, hot or cold, rain or shine. D.C., like most big cities, still hadn’t solved its parking problem. In fact, it had only gotten worse.

There was a lot of talk about eliminating personal cars and using a public “pod” system. Pods were public cars that traveled the city, sometimes independently and sometimes hooked onto an overhead guidance rail. You could get into any pod and rent it to take you wherever you wanted to go, within the limits of the service area. The pod car dropped you at the front door then went on its way to find another fare. But D.C. could never muster the money for an extensive pod system, and none of the manufacturers wanted to foot the entire bill, so the system only covered downtown.

Besides, most people still preferred having their own cars even if the driving had been more or less taken out of their hands. The personal automobile is a well-loved tradition in America. It won’t go away easy.

Maybe the mayor could start on the parking problem after he finished fixing everything else. I would have suggested it to him, but, frankly, I didn’t want to be around him any more than I had to. He could be, well, uncomfortable company when he wasn’t happy, and right now he wasn’t happy in triplicate.

About half way through the walk from the parking deck to the office, I heard a strange sound behind me and turned to see what was causing it. There was a young man some distance back, and he was sporadically putting out deafening snippets of music, a staccato sound that was quite unpleasant. One of the cancellers on his ear-pod was failing.

An ear-pod is a device for listening to your preferred music without bothering others. There are two tiny stereo units, each one containing player, speaker, and canceller. The units are inserted into your earlobes. They’re small enough so that getting them installed is similar to getting your ears pierced. Maybe a tad more painful, but not much. The player

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sends the selected music signal to the other components. The speakers emit the sound waves and the cancellers send out perfect reverse waves to completely deaden the sound a few inches away from the wearer's ears. That way, the wearer can listen to the music as loud as he or she wants without disturbing someone standing nearby. But this guy was disturbing everybody. The canceller in one of his ear-pods was failing intermittently, and bits and pieces of his music were getting through.

I knew the song. It was The Big Tools singing "She Does It So Gooooood!" I didn't particularly care for the song, but it's typical of pop music these days. I guess they ran out of subtle ways to say things decades ago. You would think these guys could come up with something to sing about besides sex. I guess they're all so ugly and greasy and desperate that when they finally find a girl who will give them some, they have to write a song about it. Come on, guys! Act like you've been there before. Sing about something besides finally getting laid.

Even if it had been my favorite song, it would not sound good blipping in and out at ear-splitting volume. I wondered how many times this guy had had his ears replaced. At that volume, no way he still had his original equipment.

I waved him to a stop when he came up beside me. He tapped his ears to turn the players off. Cheap model. Not controlled by mental commands. Of course, the ultimate is a music chip implant wired directly to the hearing center of the brain but, typically, only the rich could afford that. And the rich were more likely to be listening to streaming stock quotes than songs about sex from a group of horny kids.

"Ah, can I help you?" he said, looking at me as though I was the intruder and not his failing ear-pod.

"Your canceller is failing. Your music is bleeding through. Well, more like blipping through. Quite loudly."

"Ahhhh. So that's why everybody is staring at me today!"

"Hard not to."

"These damn things are brand new, too. They're still under warranty but, damn, I hate going through that."

He thanked me for bringing it to his attention and went on his way with the ear-pods off. While getting them installed was relatively easy,

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getting them out for replacement was a little tougher. Not fun. Covered or not, he wouldn't enjoy the warranty work.

When I got to HQ, I went directly to Chief Denny's office.

"Any luck?" Chief asked.

I know I'm supposed to be reporting directly to the mayor, but the mayor is not a detective. Chief Denny cut her teeth on the streets of D.C., tracking and catching and, most importantly, getting convictions for criminals of all types, including terrorists. She was an expert, and I needed to talk to an expert. As far as I was concerned, there was a dashed line to Mayor Cantrell. The solid lines still went to Chief Denny and Gaston Lamizana, my UN boss.

"Yeah, a little," I answered as I sat down. I explained about agent Landry's missing time the night before the assassination.

"So you think he was coordinating the plan with others during the missing hours?"

"Quite possible. There may or may not have been others. He could have acted alone. But it looks like something has been going on and apparently going on for years. His wife said he worked late four or five times a week, but his boss said he didn't work late that much in a month."

"Uh, oh."

"Yep. Since he was a Secret Service agent, she couldn't call him when he was on assignment, so there was no way for her to know any different. I've been thinking. The way I figure it, we've got three choices for how this went down. First, he acted alone."

"Unlikely," Chief said. "There's no note, no demand, no nothing. If somebody acts alone, they almost always leave something that tells why they did it. Doesn't accomplish anything otherwise."

"Well, in the old days, before the postal collapse, the perp might have sent a note through the old-fashioned snail mail. Nowadays, of course, he could have used IntEX."

"Possible." Chief Deny was quiet for a second, staring at her desktop. I could see that her clockwork was turning so I didn't say anything for a moment. Then she looked up and said, "IntEX is exclusively overnight or two-day now. If he'd sent something before the

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shooting, it would have arrived no later than this morning. Nothing came here, and we haven't heard a thing from any of the 3V stations, or any sites on the net, so I think we have to assume he did not ship a note through IntEX. I'll have IT put a tracer on the net and see if we can find a website that received a note, but I doubt we'll see anything more than hoaxes. If that.

"He could have used a time delay email or text or something through social media," she continued, "but we haven't seen anything and my gut feeling is we won't. I think we've also got to assume he had no vendetta or revenge motive against Olaf Gustafsson. By every account we can find, it appears there is no connection between the two of them whatsoever. He had no reason to do what he did, so I think we can safely rule out agent Landry acting alone. That means it's a conspiracy by some group that does not like the EU or did not like Gustafsson personally. Somehow they recruited or forced Landry to kill him."

"Yep, and that's our second choice, Gustafsson was assassinated by a big international terrorist organization. I heard on the news feed that all of the big-name groups have claimed responsibility at this point. One of them might be telling the truth."

"Also possible," Chief said, "but I've read all the claims. The ones from the big, well-known terrorist organizations don't sound right. That doesn't mean one of them may not have done it, but nowadays the big groups have press writers and marketing people, and there's always a pattern to their claims. And that pattern is usually a little different when the claim is true. None of the claims from the usual suspects have that tone. Besides, if Landry were a member of a large terrorist organization on the side, I would think there would be some indication of that. Every indication we have is that he worked hard to bring these groups down and get their members brought to justice. I'm not going to rule number two out because he could have been coerced by them somehow, but I'm pretty sure we can set it aside and work in a different direction."

"And that different direction," I said, "is number three, our final choice: Some small group of misfits or some new weirdo terrorist organization we've never heard of before. Not one of the usual suspects."

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“There are several claims of responsibility from unknowns and micro-terrorist organizations. Maybe one of them is legitimate. It’s harder for me to read between the lines with these groups because I either don’t have any history with them, or they’re a little on the crazy side to start with. Or both. Could be one of them, but it could also be a group that has not yet made a claim of responsibility at all. Whatever. I like number three.”

That’s where the Chief’s expertise came in. She had that sort of feel for things and she’d invariably been right over the years. If she said the claims from the big terrorist groups were not true, you could bank on it.

“Great,” I said. “Choice number three is the hardest to track down.”

“In theory, it shouldn’t be hard. You can’t spit in D.C. without getting picked up by a surveillance camera. You could get access to all available cameras and track Agent Landry’s movements from the moment he left work until the moment he arrived home. Find out where he went, what he did, who he saw, everything. Not hard at all. But that’s only in theory. It depends on how sophisticated this guy was. A good agent can make himself disappear. And, by all accounts, Wilson Landry was a better than good agent.”

“I’ve requisitioned the video from every public and private camera along his route,” I said. “But I think there’s more to it, something we don’t know yet, and it’s mishing my brain up. This Landry guy was squeaky clean, a highly dedicated All-American by every account we can dig up. And he had a good family life. How the hell does a small splinter group get him to commit the biggest international assassination of the century then, for an encore, blow his own head off? What’s the motivation for that?”

“Damn good question.”

Chapter 7

As expected, Chief was right. Wilson Landry was a good agent, a *very* good agent. Three blocks after he left Secret Service headquarters at 7:04 PM the night before the shooting, he and his car disappeared. The proverbial thin air. No wisps. No vapors. Nothing.

Using a variety of commercial and government cameras, I tracked him for three blocks without a hitch. All of a sudden, every damned camera within a six-block radius malfunctioned at the same precise moment. There was no apparent reason for them to stop working, no electrical outage or anything of that nature, and no visible problems with the cameras that I could see. The failure lasted exactly ten minutes. One second the time indicator in the video of every camera in the six-block area showed 7:06:32 PM and the very next frame showed 7:16:32 PM. All the cameras had come back to life at once, as though nothing had been wrong all along.

It could not have been a power failure. Virtually all cameras have battery backup, and most are exclusively internal power these days, yet all of them, no matter what type of camera or how it was powered, stopped right on queue. Whatever caused them not to work had some sort of timer, and the timer was set to exactly ten minutes. How could that happen? Most of these cameras were independent, not related to each other in any way. Some were connected to the web, and some weren't. Yet all of them stopped and restarted right on queue. Whoever pulled off that little trick was no dummy. That was a head scratcher.

Neither Wilson Landry nor his car could be seen in any of the cameras after the ten-minute failure ended. He had not shown up in the cameras that were outside the six-block radius, either. I requisitioned more video, everything within a reasonable ten-minute radius from where the car disappeared, and methodically looked through hour after hour of video. It was a pain in the butt, but a top-notch detective has to be thorough. Which means you get to endure a lot of pains in the butt like this. Landry was gone, disappeared, not even a ghost. Not even a shadowy ghost. My butt hurt.

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So I decided to backtrack. I picked up his arrival at home, which turned out to be at 3:36 in the morning, and went backward from there. The same thing happened. Every camera in a six-block radius quit working then magically started working again ten minutes later. There was no sign of Landry coming from any direction before the failure then ten minutes later, when the cameras resumed recording, there he was driving into his driveway. So he disappeared amid a mysterious temporary surveillance camera group failure and reappeared after another temporary surveillance camera group failure, twelve miles away and over eight hours later. Nothing's ever easy.

Chief was gone for the day, so I left a note on her desk and asked her to have the tech cops go out and look at the failing cameras. I left her a list of the types and locations. Maybe they would be able to find some reason, some shred of evidence, anything that would indicate that the cameras were tampered with and how. This could be the weak link in the plot. Or maybe not. It depended on how good agent Wilson Landry, or whoever was behind this plot, turned out to be.

The office was almost empty in late evening. I was as miffed as I'd been about a case in a long time, a very long time. I shrugged my shoulders to myself and left for home.

On the evenings when you've got nothing to do but sit at home, 3V sucks. Seven hundred web-based channels and not a damned thing on. I wondered if the rich people who could afford the two thousand channel package were finding anything. Over two thousand channels? Heck, by the time they found something on the channel listing, the show would be over!

Oh, no more free 3V over the web, except for a few channels only people who have had a lobotomy would watch. The media folks got wise. Now you have to buy one of their many packages, each one a better deal than any of the others, of course.

The doorbell rang. Who would be dropping by unannounced in this day and age? That's what comm chips were for. I flipped the 3V remote to the front door security camera and was surprised to see the good-

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looking Secret Service receptionist on the 3V screen. She was standing on my front porch with a solemn, composed look like she knew she was being watched. There was a Chinese take-out box in her hands. What the heck?

This didn't make sense. A Chinese take-out box? Maybe she was mad and out for revenge and the take-out box held a gun or a bomb. No. No way. That made even less sense. Nothing had made much sense lately.

Maybe she was crazy? But if she was still employed by the Secret Service, that was highly unlikely. Like Agent Sizemore said, Secret Service management was trained to notice differences in behavior. Surely her boss would have noticed, and she wouldn't be working out front in the CBI lobby. But then, Wilson Landry didn't seem crazy either until he did something bizarre, until he whipped out his automatic and started destroying a man's head like it was nothing more than another target dummy.

I set the thought aside for a second. She did not look crazy though I'm not sure I could have told by looking at her. The woman was beautiful, and beauty can hide some ugly things at times. Still, it was strange and quite unexpected seeing her at my front door. I could think of no other explanation than she wanted to tell me something. Perhaps, in this day and age where you could not do anything without leaving an electronic signature, the most secure way to tell somebody something was in person. I was curious, so I touched the remote to unlock the door. I approached cautiously, my hand ready to make a fast grab for my Strikezone SF.

The SF stands for Safe Firing, by the way. My automatic pistol is tied to my Ethridge 421 comm chip, and it takes a mental command from me before I can pull the trigger. I can disable it with a mental command as well. Theoretically, this keeps the gun from being stolen and used by someone else, possibly when pointed at me. In actual practice, there are a few crooks out there who know how to rip the gun apart and rework it to make it fire without the mental command, but it takes a lot of work. If someone takes my gun and wants to use it on me, I'm not going to stand idly by while he spends a couple of hours or so breaking the gun down

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and rebuilding it. So there is a degree of safety, as long as the gun owner doesn't go berserk and start shooting strangers.

Holding my hand at my jacket, ready to snatch my pistol, I opened the door. The receptionist said, "I brought that dinner you were talking about." She smiled. It was a smile that could knock an elephant down at fifty yards. She looked even better at night with the porch lights reflecting off her face.

"You're forgiven." There. That was easy. I swung the door wide and told her to come in.

"Sorry I had to be a little uncooperative today," she said. "It's standard procedure for people the Secret Service does not know well. Which is almost everybody, of course. I did want to make it up to you but, since you're the detective on this case, and I'm a Secret Service employee who knew Wilson Landry, I cannot afford to be seen with you in public. Raises too many suspicions. I hope Chinese is okay."

"Wonderful. Set it on the table, and I'll get everything else." I grabbed some plates and flatware – I hate using the plastic stuff they send with take-outs – while she laid the contents of the box on the dining table. There was no bomb or gun. It was typical Americanized Chinese food, and it looked pretty good. "So, ah, what's your name?" I asked.

"Call me Sue. That will do for now."

For now? These guys played their role to the max, didn't they? Whatever. At least I was getting a free meal out of it. I dug in while she picked at her food sparingly. We made small talk, nothing significant. I don't even remember what it was. All I remember was trying hard not to stare at her. God, she was gorgeous. Suddenly she looked up at me and caught my attention with those big burning blue-purple eyes. My fork stopped in mid-air, halfway to my mouth.

"Detective Blast," she said, "I've got to tell you that agent Landry could not have done this."

"But I saw..."

"I know you saw him. I know he pulled the trigger then blew himself up. But it doesn't make any sense at all. He would never assassinate anyone, and there is no way he would ever take his own life.

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He loved being alive. Are you sure it was him? They can do wonders with plastic surgery nowadays. Perhaps a real assassin took his place?"

"DNA matched. There's no question it was him, not an imposter. And there's no chance he's still alive." I could tell she was harboring some faint hope, and I hated to have to dash it, but there was no sense feeding an illusion. "I'm sorry."

"Okay. I-I didn't think so." But I could see her visibly drop a small notch. "I don't understand. If you had a hundred suspects lined up, he would be number one hundred, the very last one you'd expect to have done something like this. He wasn't that kind of person."

"Perhaps you didn't know him as well as you think."

"Actually... I did. I knew him, well, intimately. But that's privileged information, please."

"Of course." Suddenly it was getting interesting. And working late at night four or five times a week was beginning to make sense. "So why do you say he couldn't have done what I saw him do?"

"I guess I understand that he pulled the trigger, but I know that he would not have done so if he had not been strongly coerced in some manner. Somebody somehow forced him to do this. He would not have done it himself. No more than he would have blown himself up. He loved America. He loved life. He loved being alive... And he loved me."

Well, that answered some questions. Now I was certain why he was late coming home so many nights. "Did you love him, too?" I was trying to figure out how a love triangle resulted in the assassination of the leader of the EU. It didn't. No way could I put it together.

"I... well, I did like him. A lot, but, no, I don't think I was in love with him. I'm not the, ah, long term type. I guess I was taking advantage of him, so to speak. He didn't seem to mind being used."

I thought about an old song I'd heard once, something about "using me till you use me up." It seemed to fit. At the same time, if she was that involved, she was also a possible suspect, as remote as that might be. I had to be careful. "So why do you want to clear his name. Why is it so important that you came here to see me?"

"Because it isn't right! Wilson was a nice man. I knew him on every level, and he would not have done something like this. He loved

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his family, and he felt guilty about our relationship, but he loved me so much he couldn't seem to end it with me. You've got to clear his name. For his family and, maybe, for me a little, too."

"I'll do my best. Tell me, what did you two do the night before the assassination?"

"Nothing."

"Sat around staring at each other?"

"No, not that kind of nothing. We were not together. He said he needed to go straight home after the briefing." She reached up to her blouse and began to unbutton it. "Detective Blast, perhaps you need some incentive, some encouragement."

I stared at her as she took off her clothes. I probably looked pretty stupid with my mouth hanging open, but this was getting a little weird. Well, a lot weird, but my god what a lovely body. Unlike most women, she looked better naked than scantily clad. And, thank God, not one distracting tattoo anywhere!

There are people who are addicted to alcohol, and there are people who are addicted to drugs. This woman was addicted to sex, sex with no strings attached. She had had an affair with Wilson Landry, and I suspect others at the same time. Probably several of them married. No strings that way. My pride would like to say that I was strong enough to refuse her. I wasn't. But the rest of me disagreed with my pride. I mean, what the heck? I'm not married, my STD vaccinations were all up to date, the blood in my veins is red, and she looked soooo good.

The next morning she promised to come back for an encore but only after I had proven that Wilson Landry had not acted of his own volition. Then she left. As I wandered into work, sleepy and happy, I decided to do my best to prove just that. Besides, it was beginning to look very much like it was, indeed, quite true.

Chapter 8

Two long days later I knew Wilson Landry had few close friends outside his family and his lover. He went to work, had his affair, and went home. His comm chip conversations – yep, every word was recorded and could be subpoenaed – had nothing in them that gave any indication there was something the least bit unusual going on. But, once again, a good agent could get around having all of his conversations recorded. So you could never be sure, but the one thing that was beginning to look certain was that his affair with Triple S, Secret Service Sue, was not connected with the assassination. It was only an affair. Nothing else.

His associations were more or less limited to co-workers, family, and lover. His movements – except for the night before the shooting – were work, side sex, and home. Perhaps for more sex? That was likely the case some nights. But that's another issue altogether.

Everyone who knew anything about him said he could not have assassinated a political figure, and yet there was no doubt whatsoever that he had. I'm sure his wife didn't think he could have had an affair with another woman, but he had. Fortunately, she didn't know that. And with Wilson dead, it served no purpose for her to find out, not yet, so I kept a lid on my tongue. But my knowing that he had had an affair did not help the case. I'm not condoning anything, mind you, but there is a vast gulf between having an affair and brutally murdering the head of Europe. There didn't seem to be any connection at all. I was at a dead end, no pun intended.

Time to talk to Dennis in Forensics. Maybe he had come up with something. I took the elevator down to the basement of police headquarters. The basement was Dennis' playground.

"Lo, Dennis. Find anything?"

Dennis Williams, gruff and grumpy, was single and always had been. He would probably stay that way forever. Most people were nowadays, but unlike most people Dennis didn't have much of a social life. He was a lot better with dead people than with live ones.

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He was dressed in his usual dirty white lab coat. I don't believe I've ever seen him in a clean one. About all you saw of him, other than the lab coat, was a slightly plump face that was gently starting to sag, a nearly bald head that was covered with long strings of hair from the sides, and a long, fat cigar that perpetually hung from his mouth. He never seemed to change. Still, he was one heck of a scientist and had an uncanny ability to zero in on minute details that often turned out to be crucial.

"Hello, Drake," he answered with his usual growl, around a puff on the cigar. "I think I've got something. Thanks for the pix of the crime scene. They were helpful."

He motioned toward the 3V and used the remote to bring up a holographic image of Wilson Landry, automatic still in his hand. Landry was about a quarter of his actual size and was standing on top of a dissection table.

"Here," he said. "You can see it better this way." He adjusted some dials on the 3V remote and as he did the image grew until it was life size, at the same time moving to an open area on the floor in the middle of the room. It looked odd seeing a still of Landry growing while floating through the air to his new location.

"That's better," Dennis said as he puffed. "Now, watch this." He punched a button. The image started moving in slow motion, firing the automatic assault weapon. "Step around here," he growled and indicated the side so that the image was in profile. "Watch his head."

The other agent, Keith Johnson, jumped into the holographic image, a slow motion jump. He grabbed Wilson's automatic and they began to wrestle with each other, both with their hands on the automatic. Dennis sped the video up then slowed it down again as the wrestling was winding down. A few seconds later the explosion went off. Even though it was in slow motion, it looked like real time because it happened so suddenly, so fast. Wilson Landry's head separated from his body and quickly flew forward until it was out of the image frame. Of course, it was an invisible frame in the case of a 3V holographic image. There was no screen edge. The head simply disappeared stage left. Much of the

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body flew backward while shreds flew in all directions. Keith Johnson's body jerked back then slumped to the floor. He lost a few shreds, too.

"Did you see that?"

"See what? I saw two men come apart and die," I said as I waved my hand in front of me to dissipate the cigar smoke. The entire basement was thick with it.

"Okay," he said, rolling his eyes back. "I'll run it again, slower this time. Pay attention to Landry's head."

He backed it up to immediately before the explosion, and we watched again, slow enough so that the severed head took several seconds to move out of the frame. Then he wound it back and stopped it at a fraction of a second after the explosion began. Dennis turned to me and grunted his question around his cigar, "Humph?"

I stared at the frozen scene for a moment, the head freshly separated from the body and only about a foot away. Then I walked around to see it from different angles. Finally, I gave up. "You're going to have to spell it out for me Dennis."

He acted put out, but he loved this. He enjoyed noticing things other people overlooked. He took the cigar out and thumped it against a table, a huge hunk of ashes falling to the floor. Then he used the cigar as a pointer as he said, "Look at the angle that the head and body separated. Look at this chunk of neck here. See? It's going up, but it's also going backward."

"How do you know it went that way in real life? And how do you know how big the chunk was?"

"Ran an auto-digitization of all the chunks of Landry from your photos and then morphed backward to where Landry was in the security videos. Much more accurate than the security videos alone. No question this is the way it happened. But the important thing, and what all this means, is that the C12 was not attached to him. It was inside him."

"Inside?"

"Yes. Somebody surgically placed C12 inside the base of his neck. The best I can tell it looks like a small ring of explosives was placed close to the discs, between vertebrae five and six. Not all the way around. It was u-shaped, covered the back and a little on both sides. Far enough

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down his neck so the surgical cut would remain hidden behind his shirt collar, under a strip of pseudo skin.” Dennis stuck the cigar back into his mouth and puffed, sending another volley of smoke into the already contaminated air.

“Really, really interesting,” I said. “And really strange, too.”

Patricia Landry’s and Secret Service Sue’s words came back to me. They both said Wilson would never have done this type of thing without being forced. Well, it was starting to look like he may have been forced. Someone planted the bomb inside him, told him to kill Olaf Gustafsson or get blown up, then, afterward, they blew him up anyway... No. Wait a sec. That didn’t work. Not a dedicated Secret Service agent like Wilson Landry. If Landry was a good guy, and by all accounts it was almost certain that he was, except for the affair, of course, he would simply have not shown up for work. Instead, he’d have driven to a vacant area and waited for them to blow him up. Or he would have cut himself open to take the explosives out. Without pain killer if he had to. He was that good an agent. No, there had to be more to it than that.

Maybe he didn’t know the explosives were there? Was that possible? Maybe he didn’t know what he was supposed to do? But, then, if that were true, why did he pull the trigger? This whole thing was starting to make my head hurt. The only thing this cleared up was how he had gone through the sniffer. The C12 was not exposed to the air and never touched him on the outside, so it wasn’t picked up. That wasn’t much, but at least one question was answered. Hopefully, one answer would lead to two, two would lead to three, and so on until I had the case solved.

“Yeah, it seems like a stupid idea,” Dennis said. “Why not strap the explosives to his back?” he wondered aloud. “Why go to the trouble to surgically insert C12 inside his neck?”

“To get past the sniffer?” I suggested.

“That’s the obvious answer and the one I keep coming back to. But that’s a painful way to do it. And dangerous. Anything around the spine is delicate surgery. There are easier places to insert C12 if all you want to do is fool a sniffer.”

“Swallow it?”

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“Hmmm... doubtful. He probably could not have swallowed the entire bomb, trigger and all, without getting traces on and around his mouth. Sniffers are too sensitive. The damned thing would have beeped like crazy. But we can eliminate him acting alone.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Dennis said, as though having to state the obvious, “Somebody had to perform the surgery.”

“Could he have done it himself?”

“Not impossible, but extremely doubtful. If any part of the C12 touches any part of him on the outside, he doesn’t get through a sniffer. He could have worn surgical gloves, but that wouldn’t necessarily have helped. He would probably have gotten a trace on himself taking the gloves off. It’s absorbed by the skin. You can’t wash your hands enough to get all of it off. No, somebody else put this bomb inside him. They sewed the muscle over it, stitched up the skin, super-glued the sutures and the cut, and then covered the whole thing with a strip of pseudo-skin so no trace of C12 would be readable outside his body.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I found traces of both regular and dissolvable sutures, super glue, and pseudo-skin on the flesh from the back of his neck.”

“Oh.”

“But what I don’t understand is why there? Why not somewhere else? Putting anything around the spine is sophisticated surgery. Why would a man let somebody do that to him? Especially if all he wanted to do was commit suicide? All he had to do was turn the automatic on himself.”

“Damned if I know, but I am seriously beginning to doubt that it was suicide. It’s starting to look like suicide is the least likely option. That seems to be the way this case is going, though. I’ve got a lot of weird facts that don’t make much sense. Hell, the more we find out, the less we know. You got anything else, Dennis?”

“Yeah, I do. There wasn’t much from his neck to work with, but I did find several traces of circuit ribbon. A few tiny little pieces. Not enough to put together.”

“Circuit ribbon? In his neck? It gets even stranger.”

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“Maybe not. The circuit ribbon was probably a trigger device for the bomb. Pretty straight-forward.”

“Ah! That makes sense. One down and a zillion to go.”

A call came through on my comm. It was the Mayor. “Drake here. Yes, sir, Mayor. I’ll get to your office immediately, sir.”

“Gotta go, Dennis. Thanks.”

“Humph,” he grunted around his cigar, another puff of smoke coming out of his mouth. “Oh, I thought of a title for your pictures.”

“Title?”

“Yeah. ‘Meat at the Meat Factory.’”

I stared at him a second before I could speak. “That’s bad, Dennis. Really, really bad.”

He shrugged and said, “Humph,” and another puff of smoke came out.

Chapter 9

“Yes, sir, but it typically takes more than three or four days to solve a homicide. There is a lot of work that has to be d...”

“What the hell do you mean, Blast?” The Mayor’s voice was always loud, even when he tried to whisper, but when he got mad, it tended to out boom thunder. “This isn’t a run-of-the-mill Joe-got-made-and-shot-John homicide. This is a major international disaster! I’m on the hot seat here. You’re supposed to be such a big time hotshot detective! Why haven’t you solved this thing and gotten all the high muckety-mucks from all over the world off my back? Hell, you don’t even have the first worthwhile clue. What sort of detective are you?”

“Ah, sorry, sir. We’re working as hard as we can. Oh, we do have something I think is significant.”

He almost spilled his coffee as he lurched forward, “You’ve got something? What?”

I kind of hate to say it but, frankly, I would have enjoyed watching him spill hot coffee all over his lap. As long as he didn’t seriously hurt himself, of course.

“The explosives weren’t strapped to him. They were surgically planted inside his neck, at the base where his neck connects to his body. That’s how he got past the sniffer.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No, sir.”

“How did you figure that out?”

“Forensics. Dennis took my crime scene pix and auto-digitized back to match the surveillance video of the shooting. We looked at the angle of the explosion and how the body parts reacted afterward. Without a doubt, it was implanted inside his neck.”

“Hmm. That’s interesting. What else have you got?”

“Well, let’s see. Agent Landry’s wife says he was forced. She said there was no way he would do anything like that. His boss tends to agree. His record is sparkling.”

No need to mention Triple S. He got the point without bringing her into it, and I promised her I’d keep her part in this confidential. Well, I

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would unless her part started to have some bearing on the investigation. I'm mostly honorable, kinda, but doing my job always comes first, if, maybe, sometimes a little late.

"So this thing may be big," the Mayor said. "A conspiracy? He couldn't have put it inside his neck by himself, could he?"

"Not impossible, according to Dennis, but highly doubtful."

"He could have used some sort of deadener. To kill the pain."

"It wasn't a matter of pain. Agent Landry could possibly have done it without a local anesthetic. He was a good agent. It was the angle of the work. The lower part of the neck would be difficult to get to and still have good agility with his hands and fingers."

The Mayor reached up and touched the back of his neck with his hands, tapping his fingers as though pretending to do surgery. "I see what you mean. It isn't easy to do."

"It's not impossible. He could have reached over his shoulders, using a camera system to keep track of what he was doing, and operated on himself. But the neck is a small area, and there's a lot going on, biologically speaking. This was relatively delicate surgery and required considerable precision. It would be extremely difficult to do, even for a surgeon. Landry was no surgeon. One slip and he could have paralyzed himself. Or killed himself. And if he got even the tiniest trace of C12 on his skin, he wouldn't get past a sniffer. No, somebody else inserted the explosives."

"Makes good sense." Mayor Cantrell stared at the wall a second then added, "I think."

"What does not make sense is his motive. If his intention was to commit suicide, there's no need to perform delicate surgery and have explosives planted inside his neck. There are much easier places on the human body to insert explosives. And why get cut open at all when he could have simply shot himself? It makes no sense whatsoever unless it is not suicide."

"What the hell else would it be?" the Mayor asked.

"Coercion of some sort."

The Mayor tapped his fingers on his desk a moment and glanced at the ceiling. Then he said, "I don't know. That sounds pretty far-fetched.

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This agent deliberately shot that European politician, the Olaf guy. Looks to me like he's guilty regardless of how he killed himself. Hey, I've heard there are sixteen claims of responsibility."

"Eighteen at last count. That's probably all of them by now. Chief doesn't think any of the ones from the well-known terrorist groups are valid claims, but one of the unknowns may be."

"So what's your take on it?"

"I think it's a small group of crazies, some new terrorist organization we've never heard of before."

"I don't know. The little guys would have a hard time pulling off something like this, don't you think?"

"Maybe, but so would the big groups. All the major terrorist organizations have become so bureaucratic and so infiltrated they can hardly do a thing without the UN and the CBI knowing about it ahead of time. The smaller guys don't have that problem. The intelligence community didn't even have a hint that something was about to happen. The first anybody got wind of anything was when the bullets started hitting Gustafsson's head. I don't think the big groups could have kept a lid on it that well."

"Hmmm. I see your point."

"Maybe one of the claims of responsibility we've received is the one, or maybe the guys who were behind it are keeping their mouths shut. For now. More likely the latter. But we still don't have a motive. I mean, why the head of Europe? He didn't have any serious enemies. He was one of the most well-loved politicians in the world. Why would anybody want him dead?"

"Why, indeed?" the Mayor echoed. "If it's one of the small groups, you'll probably never know their real motive, even after you catch them. If they've even got a motive. I think a lot of these crazy types want to make noise and make a name for themselves. They love to see their names all over the net, so they'll do anything for publicity no matter how stupid and senseless it is. Be that as it may, you get your butt out there and find these guys and get the rest of the world off my back. And do it quick. You need any resources, all you've got to do is ask."

"Yes, sir."

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As I was walking out of the Mayor's office, Gaston Lamizana, my UN boss in New York, called my comm. *"Hello, Mr. Detective Drake Blast. How are you this lovely sunshiny day?"*

"I'm doing fine, Gaston. How are you?" Trite socialities were extremely important to Gaston.

"I am well but still saddened by the news of the death of our beloved Prime Minister of the European Union, Mr. Olaf Gustafsson. I believe that it is important that we resolve this issue within a reasonable time frame. International tensions are quite high at the moment, due in great part to this tragic event that has taken place. A quick resolution would be helpful in bringing this high state of anxiety down to a more manageable level. But at the same time, we must make a thorough investigation to ensure that we know the exact circumstances of all the details that are involved."

Huh? I'd have to think that last one through later, but for once, all my bosses had the same priority. The good news was that two of them were more patient and had more realistic expectations of how long this would take.

I re-explained everything I had explained to the Mayor a few minutes earlier. Gaston seemed to be mostly satisfied with progress. I told him I would update him immediately if anything new came up. He said that was fine and asked me to travel to New York for a detailed briefing the first chance I got.

Two weeks and five ear lashings from the Mayor later I had no suspects and was no closer to solving the case. I may have been further away. The Mayor had gone as far as calling me into his office and going over the messages from the fringe groups who were claiming credit for the assassination. He went through them one-by-one and tried to tell me which ones I needed to go after. At one point he told me to arrest them all, and even if they weren't the ones, at least, they'd be out of business for a while. Ridiculous, of course, especially since we had no idea who the people in most of these fringe groups were or where they were located, but that was the Mayor. I had to treat his conjectures as quite

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possibly real and his suggestions as somehow doable. I gave him all the lip service I could.

Meanwhile, in real life each and every tiny lead that came up, and there were few of them, led me to nowhere. I was quickly running out of options as the lectures from the Mayor were getting successively louder and longer. Sitting in my office early one morning, I was contemplating the pros and cons of pursuing another line of work when Gaston called.

“Good morning, Mr. Detective Drake Blast. I trust you are doing well this beautiful cloud-filled day here in New York. It is so brilliantly wonderful how the clouds help protect the covering of our skin from the harmful rays that are contained within the beams of sunlight from above.”

Sunlight from above? Where else would it be coming from? “Hello, Gaston. I’m, ah, fine. How can I help you?”

“I am concerned that the investigation has not yet yielded any significant leads to guide us in the direction of a much-desired conclusion.”

“Yeah, me too. Everything I look at turns out to be a dead end.”

“I received a communique from your Mayor asking if I could help in any way. He is less than pleased with your progress at this immediate point in the investigation, and he thinks that I might be able to assist you in some manner.”

Thanks, Mayor. “I’m doing everything I can, Gaston. Of course, I would appreciate any insights you might have.”

“Let me propose that you make preparations for and then actually do take the trip to New York that we had previously discussed, in order to fully and thoroughly update me on the details of the investigation as it currently exists up to this point in time. You and I may enter into conference together in hopes that a synergistic effect could greatly assist us in bringing about some significant new revelation that would help us in our quest to determine who is behind this despicable crime.”

“Okay. How soon do you need me there?”

“I have taken the necessary steps to ensure that my schedule for this afternoon is completely and totally free of appointments or distractions of any type. If you can please arrive by lunch I will treat you

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to my favorite restaurant then we will return to the office and close the doors so that we will not be disturbed during our deliberations for the entirety of the afternoon.”

Fun. “I will do my best to get there in time for lunch, Gaston.”

“Very well, my friend. But please make sure your best results in success in this endeavor.”

“Yes, sir,” I answered. You don’t get much clearer than that, especially with the emphasis on the word ‘best’.