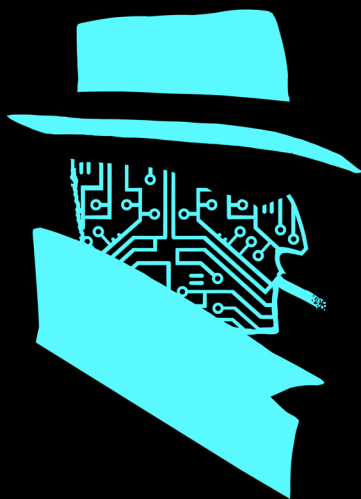


LONG CHILLS & CASE DOUGH

A SANDERSON CURIOSITY



BRANDON SANDERSON

LONG CHILLS &
CASE DOUGH

FICTION BY BRANDON SANDERSON®

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SANDERSON CURIOSITIES

LONG CHILLS & CASE DOUGH

a detective story

BRANDON SANDERSON



DRAGONSTEEL

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

LONG CHILLS AND CASE DOUGH

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PREFACE

This story has the most unique inception of any story in my catalogue. While I wrote it in the early 2000s (during the same period as *Defending Elysium* and *The Way of Kings Prime*), the first line is actually lifted from an essay I wrote way back in my undergraduate days.

You might assume by “essay” I mean a personal narrative or the like. No, this was a research paper from a boring early English course—I think my 200-level sophomore English-major survey course where we focused on writing ordinary college essays. You know the type. The research paper with the citations page that is such a pain to get into the exact right format, the strict structure of points to be made, introduction, conclusion, blah blah.

I . . . didn't generally do things the way I was supposed to. I knew I wanted to write fiction. I wanted to write stories that changed the world and the way people interacted with the form of narrative. So I took every opportunity (including otherwise boring essay assignments) to write something different. To this day, I think these early professors groaned when they got my projects, because (having taught those classes myself now) I know that something out of the ordinary really makes the grading rubric difficult to follow.

In this case I wrote my in-depth, supposedly serious, exhaustive semester-end research project in the form of a hardboiled detective story. It was a delightful experience. I wrote it in first person, using all of my favorite flavors of noir detective slang. I don't remember the topic, but I had the detective hunting out answers and theories as if they were clues to solving a case. Instead of going to the Harold B. Lee Library for information, my detective went to Big Harold's Library and Sushi Bar.

Yeah, I was one of those students. If you're reading this, former professors, I do apologize.

They were great, though, and put up with this budding, bizarre fantasy writer and his eclectic methods. I got a good grade on the paper—because I did fulfill the assignment. And if those professors were anything

like I was when grading papers from early composition classes, anything that broke out and was actually interesting to read was worth some extra points. Even if it was difficult to grade.

A few years later, when I was really polishing my fiction, I came back to this character. I'd loved writing in the pastiche of a hardboiled noir story, but each stab I made at it felt a little . . . forced. Like, this was a style of story that was successful and popular during its day, but doing one in the same style now felt regressive in a way that bordered on parody. I couldn't get the Calvin and Hobbes noir detective strips out of my head, which were done as obvious and loving parody. Early reads of the stories from my budding beta reader community gave me the same feedback: The language is really fun, but the story—somehow—just doesn't work. It feels too out of place in today's writing market.

That's when the idea hit me: what if the character himself was out of place? I dug deep into what made me love the noir language, tone, and slang. The fan-boy of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett—I pulled that piece of me out, and built a character around it. That's where Jack was born. A person who intentionally looked backward, living in a science fiction setting of the future, but loving what came before. A kind of

science fiction story with that same fantasy feel that we get looking back to kings and kingdoms. Maybe, in the far future, their fantasy stories about the past will involve noir detectives.

I was able to lean into the language, go even further than I had before—but I also worked in moments of vulnerability, where the real character shone through. Getting the character to click is where the story really started to shine, and it came together. And to this day, I'm proud of how it turned out. But why didn't I do anything with it?

My oldest file for this story is from early April 2002. The exact same month I got a phone call from Moshe Feder at Tor, offering to buy *Elantris*—the day my professional career began. I put down short fiction for a while at that point, focusing on novels, as I wanted to strike. The next story I'd write after this one was *Mistborn*.

Years later, though, my fondness for this story has remained. Peter, my VP of editorial, was part of my beta reading team way back when. He consistently brings up the story as one of his favorites, wishing we had a good place to release it. And so, when we wanted to do something celebratory at the end of the Year of Sanderson—a thank-you to everyone who backed our

Kickstarter and made the year so special—this is where my mind went.

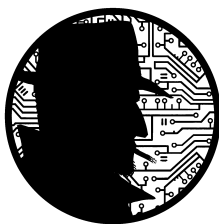
We're making this a "Sanderson Curiosity," our appellation for stories we aren't quite sure how else to release. This is such a quirky, bizarre little story that I'm not sure I'd be comfortable releasing it in a magazine or the like. But it is also a wonderful picture of the person I was in college, the person looking to take any piece of writing he did and make it fresh and different. So with that, I hope you enjoy reading "Long Chills and Case Dough."

Thank you again for all of your support. I hope you have enjoyed this year, and that I achieved my goal of taking some of the turbulence of recent times and giving it a silver lining. And thank you for being part of my journey from a somewhat groan-worthy student who ignored essay conventions to a professional fantasy novelist who ignores publishing conventions. This story was born out of me pushing boundaries of what people expected, and in a way, that's what this Kickstarter was all about.

Brandon Sanderson

DECEMBER 2023

LONG CHILLS & CASE DOUGH





1

The rain snapped against my skull like a plinger playing tunes on an old tin can in the middle of a dark alley. I don't like rain; I never have. It dampens your clothes almost as fast as it dampens your soul, and it makes my normally melancholy disposition turn downright dreary.

It was a day to be snuggled up tight with a dame in one hand and a bottle of white in the other—unfortunately I didn't have either. Instead I was tromping down a remote street, the rain my only companion. My name's Jack Derrins, and I'm a private eye. It's my job to be lonely.

The year was 2151, a good year for scotch but a bad year for business. Of course, in my line of work, business is rarely good. You just pound your shoe leather day after day in the hopes that you'll earn enough scratch to stay alive. The thrill of investigation, that's what keeps us going, not the promise of cabbage in the future.

Anyway, back in '51 we still hadn't managed to break the light barrier. That, combined with the problems caused by stasis sickness, had pretty much kept humankind stuck in its little corner of the universe. I lived on Earth itself. Cold, dirty Earth. I laid my head in Chicago, land of glommers and button men. It was my kind of town. Both dirty and clean, both straight and crooked. The perfect place for a shamus.

Parts of the city almost seemed like a space station, what with all the new elanium buildings. But Chicago in the fifties wasn't like cities nowadays. Sure, there were the bright new metallic shacks, but there were also the old sectors—places built of brick and wood, remnants from the old days. Most of these buildings weren't holding up too well. They were sickly things, stuck together with sweat, nails, and a fair amount of cursing. My office was in just such a building.

I looked up at it, squinting my peeps against the rain. It was a four-story red dive, a moldy thing, its very bricks decaying. I pulled my coat tight and huddled my way through the door and up the stairs, dripping rainwater on the creaking steps. My office was on the top floor, behind a cracked wooden door that was supposed to read *Jack Derrins, Private Detective*. But the C in my name was missing. Had been for a long time.

I pushed open the door and walked in.

“Morning, Derrins,” my secretary—Alici—said. She was a pert broad with a mop of black hair and pinched-up map. Not a bad looker, but far too young for me. She was wearing a pair of imitation-leather pants, a T-shirt, and a matching imitation-leather jacket.

“I thought I told you to wear a skirt to work,” I said, pulling off my coat and hanging it on the rack.

Alici gave me a long-suffering look. She did that a lot. She was new—had barely worked for me for two weeks. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“You have to look the part, Miss Smith,” I said, pulling off my lid and tossing it to the top of the coat-rack. I didn’t miss—I never do.

“You’re a really weird guy, Derrins,” Alici mumbled, then pulled a line from her desk and jacked it in to the port on the side of her head. “What do you want me to do today?”

“The same as always, doll,” I said, sauntering toward my back room. “Listen for the phone in case someone decides to drop me a dime, and keep your googs open for signs of a good job.”

“Phone?” Alici asked. “You mean the holo-imager? If you say so, Derrins. But you never get any calls—and you turn down every job I find you.”

“They aren’t right for me,” I said, pushing open the door to the back office.

“Can you afford to be so picky?” Alici demanded from behind. “You keep claiming you’re broke.”

“I’ve been lone-wolfing longer than you can imagine, doll,” I said. “Don’t worry—I know what I’m doing.”

I shut the door before she threw something at me. Alici didn’t understand the importance of an authentic vocabulary in my line of work. I sighed, looking over my office. It was a cluttered place, its walls lined with bookcases, and there was an old fan spinning lazily on the ceiling. In the very back, before the windows, was a massive oak desk. My desk.

I slid over and took my seat. Leaning back to cool my heels on the desktop, I lightly rapped my knuckles against the desk’s upper right drawer. It slid open responsively, a half-empty bottle of JD inside. With the rain falling and the work not coming, it was definitely a day for the hooch.

Unfortunately my path to self-enlightenment was interrupted by an annoying buzz from my desk. I opened my peeps, the bottle of shine halfway to my lips. The noise came from the intercom.

“Are you going to answer it or not?” an annoyed Alici yelled from the other room.

I reached up and pressed the button.

Alici swore, her voice crackling and warbling over the intercom. “If you’re going to make me use this thing, you should at least answer it! I have no idea where you got a piece of equipment this outdated.”

Alici wasn’t the most patient of pair of ankles you’d meet.

“Never mind, dame,” I said. “Why’d ya buzz me?”

“You have a call,” Alici said. “Do you want me to put it through?”

“Of course,” I said. “Good work.”

The intercom crackled off, and a square of wood on my desk folded back upon itself, revealing the holo-imager beneath. A second later a form snapped into existence in the middle of the room.

And when I say “snap,” I mean it. This dish was such a looker that my orbs nearly burst from the gandering. She had a sleek body as full as her dress was sheer, and her kisser was gussied up with a bright, inviting shade of red. Her blue eyes were wide like a doe’s, and she had a look of quiet vulnerability on her divine face. She was a redhead, which is my favorite—along with blondes and brunettes.

“You have to help me, Mr. Derrins,” the holo-vid goddess whispered.

I gulped my response, recovering my wits long enough to assess the situation. A beautiful frail had just appeared in my office, asking for help. I should have turned off the holo-imager right there—I should have known better. It's like I always say: dames are nothing but trouble.

"What's the jam, skirt?" I said instead.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"What's your problem, miss?" I repeated.

"Oh, you have to help me, Mr. Derrins—"

"My friends call me Dalley," I interrupted.

She paused. "Well then, Dalley," she continued, "I've been framed. Please help me."

"Calm down, miss," I said, looking at her suspiciously. "Who's trying to drop the chuck on you?"

"The . . . chuck?" She trailed off. "I don't know who's trying to frame me, Dalley. I—"

"Don't tell me you're actually considering this!" an annoyed voice called from the other room.

I sighed. "Are you piping this, Miss Smith?" I demanded, pressing the intercom button.

"If you're asking if I'm eavesdropping, then yes," Alici's voice said, crackling as the intercom barely transferred it. A moment later she cursed, and the door to my office swung open.

“Blasted machine.” Alici stalked into the room. “I can’t talk to someone I can’t see.”

My potential client, who still had yet to name herself, turned as Alici entered the room. I groaned and dropped my head against the table. You have no idea how hard it is to find a good secretary—like, the kind who won’t involve themselves in business negotiations.

“Do you know who this is?” Alici demanded, pointing at the holo-vid.

“She’s a tomato stuck behind the eight ball, and I’m her sure-thing man,” I replied smoothly, looking back up.

Alic rolled her eyes and walked over to stick her neural jack into my holo-imager. A scene from one of the major news networks popped up in the air before me.

“Watch,” Alici ordered, pulling out her jack.

And there on the news was my holo-goddess. She was standing on the street, blasting a group of confused bystanders with a pair of what appeared to be Repeating Volley Ultralight 32 Missile Launchers. Those were some pretty heavy roscoes. Ultralights could spit out a pack of thirty-two self-guided, high-explosive charges every second, and their electron-compressed clips could keep them squirting for ten minutes straight. Nasty things. I’d always wanted a set.

Needless to say, the innocents ended up on the short

end of that little confrontation. The newsnet fuzzed out most of the obvious gore, but even still, I could see the carnage. Those poor plugs. Even worse than the violence, however, was the look on the dame's face while she iced those people. It was a look of utter, wild paranoia. It was so chilling I felt myself shiver in response.

“. . . perpetrator escaped, leaving over thirty people dead and more than a hundred injured,” the voice-over droned into my office.

“It wasn't me,” said the image of the dame, who was still standing in the center of my room. “Please, Mr. Derrins—Dalley. They say you're the best. You have to believe me. Do I look like the type who would do something that horrible?”

I have to admit, she certainly didn't look all that dangerous to me. At least, not in a destroy-innocents-with-a-missile-launcher kind of way.

“Derrins, this is insane!” Alici snapped, standing with her arms folded, an angry expression on her face. “This isn't spying on a cheating husband or finding a lost cat—this is serious crud! Leave it to the real police.”

Maybe it was her attitude. Maybe it was my need for work. Maybe it was the way that dame looked in a dress.

“I'll take the case,” I announced.

2

"You're an idiot," Alici informed as

I pulled on my sodden flogger. It was a good, solid coat—a full trench. Not like those half-sized ones you always see in the holo-vids nowadays. No, this was a vintage London Fog, with all the tassels, flaps, and ties. I checked my toys as I put it on and tied the belt at the front.

"I figured you for a sap," Alici continued, "and probably a loon, but I didn't realize the extent of your delusion. Did you see the firepower she had? That woman's unstable—she'll kill you like she did all those people."

"Doll," I said, pulling on my hat, "you talk too much."

Alici snorted. "Aren't you at all worried? You're working for a maniac. She's all over the holo-vids. Even if she didn't do it, the one who did is going to be very annoyed when you start messing with her."

"Don't worry," I assured, strolling back into my

back office. “I’m not exactly a rube. I’ve got my own ‘firepower,’ as you put it.”

Alici followed me into the room, then leaned, eyebrow raised, against the doorframe as I walked over to one of my bookshelves. I removed the third book from the right on the third shelf—a copy of Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*. I flipped open the cover to reveal my prized possession, my best friend, my surest backup: my .45-caliber Colt M1911.

“You have *got* to be kidding,” Alici said dryly.

I ignored her, pulling the gat out of its hider and snapping the magazine into place.

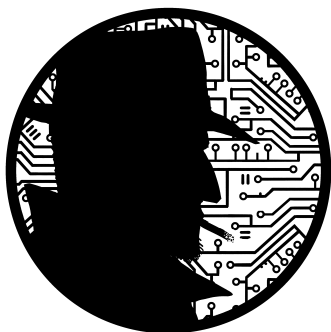
“Is that what I think it is?” Alici asked. “A projectile gun? Derrins, that woman has repeating PMLs, for heaven’s sake! The bullets in your gun aren’t even self-propelled, not to mention the fact that they won’t harm a person with a decent endoskeleton replacement.”

I ran my finger along the top of the Colt. “I’ve made a few improvements to it,” I admitted. “The magazine is electron compressed, so I never run out of slugs, and I use high-explosive bullets.”

Alici snorted, unimpressed. She was truly a product of her time—she’d seen so many holo-vids that she

focused on power, not finesse. I checked the safety and slid the heat into its holster under my arm. It felt good to be wearing iron again.

“Watch the joint while I’m gone, doll,” I said. “I’ll be back for lunch.”



3

The Fourth Precinct police station

sat in the middle of a wealthy commercial section of town, far from the scum it was sworn to protect. You don't know how bad things were back then. Society had given up on the slums. The world had decided, as if by agreement, that the plugs inside weren't worth the bother. The new mob ruled Chicago—a retro throw-back to the old days of the 1900s, when the criminal underground was the high pillow of society.

The cop shop had bright silvery elanium walls set with reflective windows and an air of superiority—a false one, in my humble opinion. Everyone knew that the police weren't really cops anymore. They were glorified security stooges, paid to protect a small circle of shiny office buildings. They didn't even make an effort to patrol the more run-down parts of the city.

I had bad memories of the place—I'd spent the better part of a decade chewing beats for the hammer

and saws. I was my own man now, with no head to order my days and no eyes to keep track of my nights. Still, memories are hard to abandon. The badges inside thought I'd betrayed them by leaving—they would be cold to my invasion, to be sure. I'd probably have to muscle my way to any information I got. However, I knew this was the best place to start.

I took a deep breath and walked up the steps to the clubhouse, ignoring the sour looks I got from the bulls who passed me. I stepped in the door—where, of course, the weapon-sensing scanners went haywire.

Every eye in the cluttered room of coppers turned toward me. Then several of them waved, and they all turned back to their conversations.

“The chief’s in his office if you want him, Dalley,” said the receptionist—a cute skirt with curly black hair and smooth fingers.

“Don’t be so hostile, copper,” I warned. “I know you want me to dust out, but I won’t fade until I can give ya a spill on who’s in the soup and how much you elephant ears have heard.”

“Whatever, Dalley,” the receptionist said, turning back to her work. “You know the chief will see you anytime you want.”

I ignored her, pushing my way toward Paisley’s office

anyway. The folks at the precinct, they'd been none too kind to me since my unfortunate dismissal. I suppose I can't blame them, but it still gets my goat.

Paisley was in his office, looking over a data-stream in the air before his desk. He was a big man, with enough cushioning in the midsection to take a couple of slugs without pausing. He wore a simple brown suit and a tie—the paisleys on it were red today. He always wore red paisleys when he was troubled.

“Dalley!” he said, closing the data-stream and standing as I entered.

“We'll make this quick, flattie,” I said, closing the door behind me. “I seriously doubt either of us has the patience or nerve to stand more of the other than is necessary.”

Paisley laughed, shaking his head. “Whatever you say, Dalley. How's business?”

“Horrible, as usual,” I said with a shrug.

“Of course. I assume you're here about the hit?”

I paused. “The hit?”

“Don Lucrani got killed yesterday,” he said. “You didn't hear about it?”

“Not until just now,” I said, leaning back against the doorframe.

“Well then,” he said with a frown, “why are you here?”

“Camilla Ball,” I said. “I’ve taken her on as a client.”

Paisley’s eyes popped wide open and his jaw dropped. “Ball? You mean the sociopath who gunned down thirty people earlier today?”

I nodded.

“Dalley, that woman is dangerous! I haven’t seen someone that loaded down with weapons since my days in the military.”

“I’m going to prove her innocence, Paisley,” I said. “That dame’s as sweet as candy.”

He rolled his eyes. “This is hardly a case that merits your attention, Dalley. Help me with the Lucrani problem. I have to make a deal with the new boss soon, otherwise the entire precinct might be in serious trouble.”

See, like I said. And they ask me why I left.

“I’ll take care of the new don later, elbow,” I said. “Right now I’ve taken a case and I can’t back down. I know how little I’m welcome here since our fallout, but a Jane’s life is on the line, and I’m determined to see justice served. If you’re not going to help me, just say so, and I’ll go grill information in some other dive.”

“Not welcome?” Paisley asked. “Dalley, you’re practically still part of the force. We’d take you back in a second—you haven’t even explained to me why you left.”

“No use trying to cover it up. I know there’s bad blood here.”

“Whatever,” Paisley said with a sigh. “You know, Dalley, you’re one weird little man. If you weren’t the best detective we ever had, I’d have had you committed years ago.”

“Your threats are useless, Paisley. I didn’t come to bump gums—are you going to tell me what you know or not?”

“All right, Dalley,” he said, swiveling his chair and jacking into his holo-imager. A second later a scene appeared in the air before him—the one I had just watched back in my office.

“I’ve seen this before,” I said, watching the massacre, cringing slightly—this one didn’t fuzz the gore. The mini missiles, each the size of a pin, easily blasted through flesh and bone. About a third of the people had endoskeletons, but modern weapons were meant to deal with those, and most missiles blasted through the hard elanium and got at the soft organs underneath.

“Sorry,” Paisley said. “I just wanted to make sure you knew what your ‘client’ is responsible for.”

“Are you sure it was her?” I asked. “I mean, how hard is it to lay a covering of styrofoam over a fake endoskeleton? That could be anyone.”

“No, not anyone.” He brought up another screen—a set of hundreds of waving lines. A mind-scan.

Some people call ’em soul-scans, because of the way they read more than just your thoughts—they read your essence. Mind-scans replaced DNA imprinting decades ago—DNA is too easy to fake. Mind-scans are completely unforgeable.

“This was taken by an officer who witnessed the attack,” Paisley explained. “It’s an eighty-five percent match for Miss Ball’s mind-scan.”

I raised my eyebrows. Eighty-five was about as accurate as a mind-scan could get—even within a person’s mind, the brain waves, pheromones, and psi-waves fluctuate. However, mind-scans are so unique that even a sixty percent match is admissible in court.

There was only one loophole. Members of the same gender from the same family *sometimes* have similar mind-scans. “So?” I asked. “That just means a member of Miss Ball’s family did it.”

“Miss Ball’s mother has been dead for ten years, and she doesn’t have any sisters or female cousins,” Paisley said.

It looked bad. Very bad. “Ditto that for me, Paisley,” I requested, “and send it to my office.”

He shrugged. “You know, Dalley, we really could use

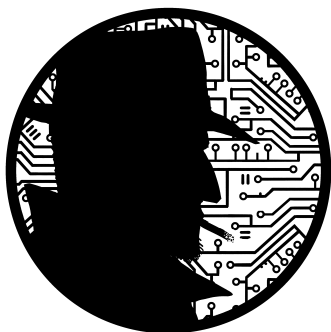
you back on the force. You're a bit—a lot—eccentric, but you get the job done better than anyone. If it was the pay . . .”

“No use trying to bribe me, peeper!” I said. “This sleuth’s gonna loner it from here out. No more carrying a buzzer and answering to some other fella.” With that, I turned to go.

I hesitated, however. “Um, and say hi to Clare and the kids for me, will you, Dave?”

Paisley shook his head and laughed. “Sure, Dalley.”

“Goodbye then, copper!” I declared, marching out of the clubhouse.



4

The rain had stopped, but my mood was as bad as ever. I slunk down the street like a bad stench, realizing that this time I might have gotten myself into a serious pickle. The mind-scan was hard evidence against my doll. A holo-vid plus a mind-scan was enough for most courts to determine guilt—no wonder the skirt was keeping low.

I wandered the street, content with my brooding gloom, but it didn't do me much good. That bottle of JD back in my desk drawer was increasingly tempting, and eventually I found myself wandering toward my office. I lurked up the stairs and through the door. Alici was sitting jacked in to her data-port as usual. She seemed completely absorbed—she was probably jacked in to some singles site.

I removed my jacket and hat and made my way to the back room. There, I took out the bottle of eel juice and lit

up a gasper—the two necessary parts of a good thinking session.

“Those will kill you,” Alici suddenly said, unjacked and standing in the doorway.

I puffed on the gasper. “I wish.” They were 99.9 percent nicotine free, tar free, and nearly smoke free—the things were so safe even a priest would smoke ‘em. They were all that was legal anymore.

I took a swig on the bottle, then held it toward Alici.

She shook her head. “No thanks.”

I shrugged and took another swig. It’s like I always say—a sober gumshoe is of no use to anyone, least of all himself.

“Well,” Alici said, jacking into my holo-vid, “while you’re getting yourself intoxicated, you might want to look at this.” A moment later four small boxes appeared in the air, each of them labeled with a date.

“What are they?” I asked, frowning slightly.

“Data packages,” Alici said. “Newsfeeds. Watch.”

One by one, the boxes enlarged and showed me their contents. Each one was the same—someone going berserk and blasting their way through dozens of unfortunate plugs. I’m glad I had a few shots in me while I watched, otherwise it might have been too much to handle. The worst thing was the eyes. They all had that

same look in their eyes, the one I had seen in Ball's. That wild look of utter paranoia.

"Where'd ya find those?" I asked, coughing down another shot of skee.

"I searched the newsnets. I figured I might as well do something useful. You're paying me, after all."

I sat, stupefied. Never, during ten years at this gig, had a secretary actually tried to do something useful. It was amazing, though a little depressing at the same time. Alici definitely didn't understand her place in our relationship. I was supposed to do the gumshoeing; she was supposed to do her nails.

I'd explain that to her later. "Four of 'em," I said softly, trying to block the scenes of carnage from my mind.

Alici nodded. "And two of those, plus Miss Ball's, happened here in Chicago—or in one of the suburbs. All occurred within the last five years, and all of those people continued to rampage until they were killed by the FBI special ops team. However, alone they each seemed like random shootings, so they aren't linked as far as the police know."

I sat back on my desk, staring at the four boxes. Things weren't square here. "What were the backgrounds on these mugs?"

Alici worked silently, still jacked in. Eventually four heads appeared in place of the boxes.

“Sorry,” Alici said. “I’m blocked by FBI secrecy holds. All I can give you is their faces.”

“Confirmation A34785-Derrins-34r42,” I mumbled.

Alici rolled her eyes, but she did enter the code. A moment later her skeptical look changed to one of pure surprise.

She whispered a quiet curse. “It actually worked.” Her eyes unfocused, and she began to search. Lines of information appeared in the air below the faces—all of the data the johns had on the killers.

“It seems they have more in common than their ram-pages,” I said, reading the backgrounds—or lack thereof. They were nonpeople, as far as the government was concerned. Their mind-scans were unregistered, their faces unknown. Such things weren’t unheard of—back then, you only had to take a mind-scan if you wanted to get a driver’s license, register to vote, or work legally, but a lot of hoodlums found ways around the problem.

Except the faces before me didn’t look like your standard-fare red hots. They were all older people, well groomed and distinguished. There was one woman and three men. Two white, one Black, one Hispanic. All looked completely normal in every way—if you

discounted the fact that they happened to be blowing holes in innocent plugs at the time.

“Very odd,” I noted. “You know they got a mind-scan of Miss Ball?”

Alici nodded. “I got it about an hour ago.”

I took another snort of JD, feeling its warmth sharpen my mind. Then I looked up at Alici. “You’ve shown yourself to be a dish with brains, Miss Smith. What do you make of this?”

“That this woman is irrationally homicidal,” she said with a shrug.

“Assume she’s innocent. What do you think then?”

Alici tapped her foot, leaning back against the wall with her arms folded. “Cloning?” she finally asked.

I shook my head. “Human cloning just makes a body with no thoughts—a mindless vegetable. The brain is too complex—it never clones right. If someone had figured a way beyond that, I would have heard. Trust me.”

“All right,” she said slowly. “What about relatives?”

“Dead,” I said. Then something occurred to me. “Alici, what *do* the nets have on Miss Ball?”

“She’s a socialite. She’s not rich herself, but her family is an old one, and she’s the sole heir of her name. She’s managed to get herself into some very classy company.”

“Is she involved with anyone in particular?”

Alici paused for a moment, looking for the information. “I can’t— Wait . . . Derrins, that code of yours is amazing! Where’d you get it?”

“I have my means, doll.” I leaned back on the desk and looked up at the ceiling fan.

“She was seeing one Melvin Wells,” Alici said.

I took a shot, congratulating myself.

“He’s a wealthy business owner,” she continued. “He has numerous clubs, runs a few restaurants . . .”

“And he’s also known as Don Lucrani,” I added. It’s coincidences like those that make my job so much fun.

“What!” Alici asked with surprise. “How do you know that?”

“I have my means.”

5

A couple of things still chived me.

It didn't pan out—I knew Ball was involved with Lucrani, and that he got iced the day before, but what did that have to do with the random killings? And what about the paranoia I'd sensed in Ball when she'd chilled off those innocents? What could make someone go that far off the track? I was certain I'd seen that look before.

So that's how I ended up scanning through photos of people a century dead. Surprisingly I found my answer fairly quickly—but I had no idea what it meant.

“Wow,” Alici breathed, staring at the face hovering in the air in front of me. “Is that . . . ?”

“Fran Wellington Ball,” I said. “The grandmother of our client.”

Alicy walked around the image, regarding the oversized holo-head with interest. “She looks just like her granddaughter,” Alici breathed. “But what does it mean?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “She died in 2031, when she was only thirty years old.”

Alici smiled. “2031? I’ll bet little Miss Camilla is a tad older than she looks.”

I shrugged. I’d already gleaned that Camilla was in her eighties. Modern science could generally keep someone looking like they were thirty until they passed their first century. They deteriorated quickly from there.

“But the killer can’t be this woman,” Alici said, nodding to the image. “She’s dead.”

“True,” I admitted. “She’s not just zotzed, she’s over a century zotzed. There’s no way she could be here unless . . .”

There was a moment of silence, then Alici’s eyes met my own.

“Oh crud,” she said, her eyes unfocusing slightly as she ran the nets. A moment later an image appeared in front of us.

It was a famous picture; everyone has seen it. It’s one of those specs that gets trapped in time, like the American Marines raising the flag over Iwo Jima or the Hindenburg explosion. The Barlett picture, it was called—the last image that crossed the expanses of space from the failed colony on Felamis Prime.

The picture was infamous for its blurred garbling.

Forms seemed to be moving in the foreground—undefinable plugs, fuzzed by the poor camera angle. However, for some reason, the direct center of the picture was sharply in focus. In that small ring of clarity, a single mug stood out. An angry, wide-eyed mush with a look of extreme paranoia in its eyes. A look just like the one I saw earlier in the face of the supposed Camilla Ball.

“Stasis sickness,” I said quietly. For some reason, sending someone into forced stasis warped their mind. The meds claimed it had something to do with different parts of the brain going into hibernation at slightly different temperatures. When the plug awoke, they would be fine for a couple of years. However, during that time they would grow more and more paranoid. Eventually they always lost control and greased everyone around them.

The Felamis expedition was sent before we discovered the sickness. The test subjects had all seemed perfectly normal, and the mission launched before anyone knew differently. We gathered the truth long before the expedition arrived, but we couldn’t do anything. There was no cure. Two thousand plugs, sent into stasis for the forty-spot trip, only to awaken and discover that no matter what they did, no matter how they tried, they would inevitably go insane . . .

Earth had listened while its first space colony turned upon itself.

“So it could be her!” Alici exclaimed, her eyes eager. “Derrins, we actually did it! We solved the case! The killer isn’t Camilla Ball, but her grandmother, who’s been in stasis all this time. That explains the mind-scan!”

The girl still had a lot to learn about gumshoeing. I shook my conk slowly. “Doll, stasis wasn’t invented until the 2050s—twenty years after Grandma Ball died.”

“But maybe it was kept secret,” Alici said. “Maybe someone discovered it earlier, and no one knew about it. Maybe the government kept it quiet. Maybe they knew about stasis sickness all along!”

That’s one thing kids today need to learn. Not everything has to be part of some conspiracy by the government. Private citizens can work much more quietly, more secretly, than any government. They make *much* better conspiracies.

“Check,” I said, nodding to the holo-imager. “That code will get you almost anything. If there’s any record of early testing with stasis, you should be able to glom it.”

And so she looked. She probably gave the entire net the up and down. I have to admit, as poorly as she fit her part, Alici was a competent net runner. Eventually she shook her head.

“Nothing,” she admitted. “There isn’t even a rumor of stasis being discovered earlier. But that doesn’t mean it’s not possible.”

“True,” I said, rising and stretching my back. “However, why would someone go into stasis only to wake up now? What’s special about this time? It doesn’t give bees, doll. We haven’t even begun to chin about what the mob has to do with any of this.”

Alici frowned. “I don’t know.” She stood, her imitation leather stretching as she watched me leave the back office and pick up my jacket and lid. “Where are you going?” she demanded.

“I have some sources to check,” I said. “Keep an eye on the joint, babe. I’ll be back for—”

“No you don’t!” Alici snapped. “I’m coming with you.”

I sighed. This dame had no sense whatsoever of proper roles. “You’ll just gum me up.”

“You’re paying me, I’m in this firm, and I’m part of this investigation,” she said. “I’m coming with you, Mr. D.”

Mr. D.? She was finally getting the hang of it. “All right,” I rumbled. “But keep your head low and your peepers open.” I reached under my belt, pulled out a small rod, and handed it to her.

“What’s this?” she asked, frowning at the tiny weapon.

“A Colt derringer,” I explained. “It’s only got one bullet, so make it count.”

She gave me another long-suffering look. “You are a very strange little man, Mr. D.”

“So I’ve been told,” I said, leading the way out of the office.

6

Big Harold's Sushi Bar. It didn't

quite fit with my scheme of the way peaching should be done—gumshoes did *not* eat sushi. Informants should be people you meet in alleys or by the docks, not in restaurants serving colorful raw fish. But Harold was the best go-to man in the town. He had managed to turn a sushi bar into a musty dive for miscreants and greasers. I guess even the worst slime likes a bit of cuisine diversity once in a while.

Alici regarded the place with a frown. She belonged in a holo-disco or a college classroom, not the seediest gin-mill on this side of Chicago. Still, she was the one who insisted on coming with me, so I wasn't about to let her go flimsy on me now.

We moved into the dive, and I nodded to Big Harold, who was mixing drinks behind the bar. The entire place smelled of day-old fish heads and spilled whiskey.

A couple of mugs turned my direction, their features shadowed by the dark light.

“Take a seat, doll,” I said, nodding to an empty booth.

She gave me an angry look—she didn’t like me ditching her—but she did what I said.

“Two orders of spring rolls and a couple cuts of the eel, Harold,” I said, approaching the bar. “Bourbon for me and a soda for the lady. I’d like to barber, if you’ve got the time.”

Big Harold grunted, then went back to his mixing. I joined Alici in the booth.

“You think we’ll find something here?” she asked with a dissatisfied frown.

“Harold’ll come through for us,” I promised. “He always does.”

One thing about Harold’s place: the service is quick, even if it doesn’t come with a smile. Harold didn’t have a storied sushi-making background—he’s Inuit, with no ties to Japan—but he knew how to slice a fish. He delivered my order with his characteristic grunt, slapping it down on the table next to a purchase scanner.

I picked up the scanner, added a zero to the amount listed at the bottom, and gave it my authorization code.

Big Harold humphed. “What’cha want, Dalley?”

“Camille Ball.”

“Bad news,” he replied.

“I savvied that, Harold.”

“That . . . event the other day. The one where someone lost their hat? That was her.”

“Really?” I asked with surprise. “I knew she was involved, but . . .”

“The spaghetti man is after her. He found the hat, you know.”

“I assumed,” I answered. “Why would a looker like her do something like that?”

“Argument,” Harold grumbled. “Something about a family nest that got robbed.”

“Thanks, Harold,” I said with a nod. You can understand why I liked the guy—he was perfect for the part, even if the scenery felt off. Harold wandered back toward the bar and I took a shot of corn.

“Well, that helps a little bit,” I said.

Alici gave me an annoyed stare. “All right, Derrins. Explain.”

“Ball was the one who offed Lucrani.”

“*What?*”

“Quiet, skirt,” I said. “Don’t get us noticed. We want to remain inconspicuous.”

Alici looked me over, noting my coat and hat, then shook her head.

“I don’t understand it completely,” I said. “It had something to do with a pot of money, though.”

“So it was Fran Ball who killed the mob boss!” Alici said. “Don’t you understand, Mr. D.? She tried to get in and take Camilla’s place, maybe to get at the family money. This Lucrani guy figured it out, so she killed him. Then the stasis sickness kicked in, and she lost it!”

It made a bit of sense, I’ll give her that. But it was missing one thing. “Alici, I’m starting to suspect that there is only one Ball after all.”

“What?” Alici demanded.

“I—” I paused.

Three hinky-looking forms had just entered the building. They were wearing long imitation-leather coats like Alici’s—I refuse to acknowledge them as trench coats—and they had a decidedly unpleasant air about them.

Sure enough, they came straight to our booth. “Mr. Derrins,” one of them croaked. “The boss would like to have a word with you.”

7

Alici pounded on the door like a plinger playing tunes on an old tin can in the . . . oh wait. Did I already use that one? Anyway, her banging did little good. The place was sealed up tight—it was Harold’s fish locker. The goons wanted to make certain we didn’t skive off while their boss was on his way.

“Let us out!” Alici screamed, her voice ringing through the metallic chamber and rattling around in my brain. However, I was kind of happy for her screams—anything that took my mind away from the stench of the locker was welcome. At that moment I swore I’d never eat another bite of Harold’s sushi again.

I sat against the back wall, my collar pulled up around my neck, my hat down over my eyes, a lit gasper pinched between my lips. All we could do was wait.

“I thought this Harold guy was supposed to be a friend of yours,” Alici complained, wandering over and plopping down across from me.

“No one has friends on the street, doll,” I said. “Harold’s a businessman—he knows better than to cross the mob. They pay better than I do.”

“I knew it,” she said quietly. “We’re going to get killed, aren’t we?”

“Probably,” I admitted. “The new boss is an old acquaintance of mine. Don Rigallo, Lucrani’s right-hand man. He’s a crass palooka, as mean as they come, and he has it out for me.”

Alici swore under her breath. She was gripping my derringer so hard I thought the bullet might explode from the pressure.

“Put that thing away,” I said. “You’ll know when to use it.”

She complied weakly. Finally she sighed and pulled her jacket around her. She looked up at me, obviously trying to forget what was coming.

Deliberately she said, “I can’t figure you out, Derrins.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, tipping my hat up slightly.

“Sometimes you seem like an incredible fool.” She stared up at the icy wall. “You wander around in your own little world, oblivious. You ignore what people say, flout convention, and generally act like an idiot.”

I shrugged. She wasn't saying anything that hadn't been said before.

Alici continued to stare at the wall. "At the same time, there's something else. You don't seem delusional—in fact, you seem quite in control. I looked through your records. You aren't poor, like you always say. You're incredibly wealthy."

This got my attention. "How'd you find that out?"

She smiled. "Your code. You should be more careful who you give that to."

I grunted. "You little fink."

"I still think you're a fool, of course," she said. "You're just a fool with money. Still, at times I see something else in you. Something almost . . . I don't know. What are you hiding, Derrins?"

After a beat I said, "I'm just a gumshoe who's seen better days, doll. There's nothing to glom about me. Spend your time on something more useful."

Alici grunted, unsatisfied. "You were a police officer, weren't you?"

She'd done her digging, that was for sure. I shrugged.

"Why'd you leave?" she asked. "The official reports say you were highly decorated. What's with the act, Derrins?"

I tried to keep my trap shut, but she stared me down. You know how hard it is to deal with a doll staring at you like that. Finally I sighed.

“I worked on the force for a long time, Miss Smith,” I said. “You’d be surprised how political it is. The world gave up on the slums a long time ago, though it wasn’t until our time that it became official. I wasn’t allowed to cross the mob. If someone got into trouble in the slums, I was supposed to ignore it. There’s no law for the poor mugs out here. A cop’s job is to protect the wealthy—there’s no funding for anything else. That’s why I left.”

“And the act?” Alici prodded.

I paused. This wasn’t the kind of thing I liked to jaw about. “Is it any wonder that a man might think back to another time?” I asked, tipping my hat back down over my eyes. “A time when there were some people who had the guts to stand up to the mob?”

Alici sat in silence for a moment, shivering occasionally. “You know,” she said, “that’s almost noble—in a twisted sort of way.”

“Yeah, well, me and Quixote,” I said.

“You could ease up on the misogyny, though.”

I changed the subject. “Did you bring your portable jack?”

She shrugged—though it might have been another shiver—and nodded.

“Get it out.”

“Now?” Alici asked. “I don’t really feel like it. We’re about to get executed, if you remember.”

“I’d rather not die with questions unanswered, doll.”

She sighed but did as I asked, pulling out a small headset contraption and strapping it on. The things were bulky, so people usually preferred to jack into stable ports, but for now she would have to live with the discomfort.

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

“Look around for that Ball family inheritance I mentioned. Find out how much it was worth, what it is, that sort of rumble.”

Alici worked for a few minutes, during which the gasper ran out and I decided not to light up again. It just wasn’t the same as it used to be, even if it did fit with the job.

“I can’t find much,” she finally said, her breath puffing in the cold air. “Like I said, the Ball family is an old one, dating back to the 1800s. It did very well with investments during the 1900s, but hit on harder times after the millennium. It’s been doing poorly in recent years.”

“And what year did their financial troubles begin?”

“Let me see . . .” Alici trailed off.

“Well?” I prodded.

“2031,” she said slowly. “The same year that Fran Ball died.”

I nodded. “The question is, where did the jacks go? That kind of cash doesn’t just disappear. Do a search for Fran Wellington Ball on the banking secure netweb.”

“I can’t get into . . . Code. Right. I’ll look.”

It took about fifteen minutes. Rigallo was certainly taking his time—not that I’d have complained. I wasn’t particularly looking forward to our meeting.

“Here!” Alici said suddenly. “There’s an entry on a bank account for a Fran Wellington Ball, dated 2031!” She frowned. “I’ve never heard of this bank before. Insang Securities?”

I shook my head. “I’m not wise to it either.”

Alici swore. “We have a problem.”

“What’s that?” I asked. She was staring straight ahead, her eyes unfocused as she looked at something I couldn’t pipe.

“You were right, Mr. D.,” she said. “Fran Ball did die—she couldn’t have been put in stasis. I have her medical reports right here—she died of cancer, years

before we found the cure. She spent time in nearly every hospital in the world. Apparently her husband spared no expense trying to save her. I don't think these records could be falsified—not so many of them. Fran Ball was almost something of a world hero; her struggle made most the newsfeeds. When she died it was a very big deal.”

“Tell me one more thing, Alici,” I said, playing a hunch. “What was the name of the company that handled Fran Ball’s funeral?”

Alici paused for a moment. “Insang Mortuary Services! What does it—”

She was cut off as the massive door handle turned and the seal on the room broke.

I stood, dusting off my coat and double-checking my toys before stepping forward to greet the man who entered the room. Rigallo, now Don Rigallo, was a tall man with jet-black hair and a beezer the size of Arkansas. He was accompanied by two button men—dons never travel alone. All were dressed in black suits. The mob’s fashion sense is as hopelessly retro as my own.

“Mr. Derrins,” Rigallo said with a nod.

“Let the dame go, Rigallo,” I said. “You can play chin music with me, but she’s got no part in this. Try

and blip me off if you must—I'm ready for you. You won't find me easy to kill."

"Kill?" Rigallo asked with a greasy, smooth voice. "Calm down, Dalley. I'm not going to kill you. Why would I do that?"

"I've dropped some of your scams before, Rigallo," I said, "and I know you bear me a grudge. Well you've got me this time, but don't think I'll go easy. Let the broad free, and maybe you'll leave here breathin'."

"Oh honestly," Rigallo said. "There's no talking to you, is there? Just tell me where Camilla is, Dalley. That's all I want. She killed the boss—she deserves what's coming to her. You're the one who's always talking about justice."

"You won't make me squeal. I don't know nothing." I paused. "Besides, she didn't tell me where she is. Apparently she guessed you might try to muscle me up."

Rigallo sighed. "All right. There was no harm in asking. Come on, boys."

Alici watched Rigallo and his droppers turn to go, a look of relieved surprise on her face. "You mean you're not going to kill us?"

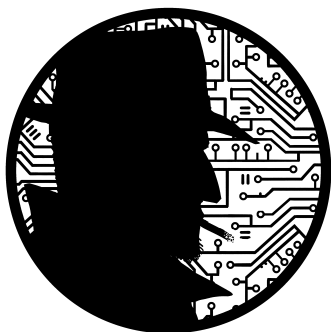
Rigallo turned. "I'm not a fool, my dear Miss . . . Smith, wasn't it? Mr. Derrins is odd, but he's well-liked. If anything happened to him in here, the trail would point

directly at me. I have an organization to run—I don't have time to deal with petty accusations. Good day.”

I watched them go with relief—another scrape barely survived. “Come on,” I said, striding out of the doors.

“Where are we going?” she demanded.

I just smiled.



8

"Insang Trusts," Alici read with disbelief.

I nodded. "I figured they'd still be around."

The building was squat and metallic—oddly out of place in Chicago. In a city filled with slums and hundred-story buildings, a short but expensive building was very abnormal. It even had grounds, though not large ones.

A massive sign outside the building proclaimed that the place had gone out of business a few days before.

"What now?" Alici said, regarding the large elanium front door. It had a magnetic pressure lock—those are so resistant to tampering no box jobber could get through 'em.

I reached under my coat.

"Please tell me you're not going to try and jimmy it with a credit card," she said.

"Wrong era," I said, pulling out my Colt. "You're getting closer, though." With that, I pumped a slug

directly into the lock. The high-explosive slug easily tore through the mechanism.

Alici cried out in surprise, nearly tripping down the front steps. I reached forward and pushed the door open.

She swore. "Now they know we're coming!"

I snorted. "With heat orbs, IR beams, and mind-scan alerts, I hardly think we can presume to get the jump on them, Miss Smith. I may live in the 1920s, but I work in the 2100s. Are you coming?"

I raised my beanshooter before me and strode into the dark chamber. Alici gulped nervously, pulling out the derringer and following less certainly.

The emergency lights were the only ones on, but they were more than enough to see by. It was a rather small building. We passed several chambers filled with odd metallic columns, each with several dials on its side, but they were void of staffers. I was beginning to think the mugs had all taken the run out when I heard a sound coming from the far end of the hallway.

I raised a flipper, motioning for Alici to follow, and walked quietly down the hallway, trying to get a slant. At the end was one final room with broad glass windows. Through the windows I could see a short man in a white lab coat who sat jacked in to a data-port. He wasn't completely gone, however, for as soon as he saw me, he

yelped and unplugged himself, then began to breeze for the back door.

I drilled the doorknob off in one shot and stepped into the room. “Freeze, or I’ll fill ya with daylight.”

He stopped, falling to his knees. “Please,” he wept. “There isn’t much time!”

Alici walked into the room, regarding the data-port and the scattering of mem-drives on the floor. “He’s been erasing his memory banks.”

“She told me to erase it all!” the man wailed. “I was just doing as she said. We need to go! We can get out of here before she comes back!”

A noise sounded from the hallway outside.

“Too late,” I noted.

Alici screamed and raised her derringer to throw lead as the room’s front wall—windows and all—burst in a fiery explosion. Beyond stood the now-familiar face of Camilla Ball, the haunted look of stasis-induced paranoia in her eyes. Except now, seeing her up close, I could tell it wasn’t Camilla at all—the face wasn’t quite right. Of course, I’d already guessed that.

Another volley of missiles ripped into the room, thrown from twin launchers on Ball’s shoulders. Alici yelped and pulled the derringer’s trigger. A globe of light extended from the front of the gun but didn’t

shoot toward Ball. Instead it extended around Alici herself, then flashed, glowing bright blue and remaining stationary.

“That’ll keep you out of trouble, ya mug,” I mumbled as the null-shield enveloped Alici.

Then I jumped into action, activating my toys. The back of my trench coat ripped apart as I fired my countermeasures, each one streaking forward to meet one of Ball’s missiles. I dodged to the side—countermeasures are great, but there’s no need to get cocky—and raised my left arm. The sleeve exploded as the electron-compressed missile chambers on my arm let loose.

One could say that Ball was suitably surprised to see missiles coming back at her. But she had countermeasures too—who doesn’t these days? The larger problem was that in addition to the launchers on her shoulders, she carried a pair of very large plasma rays in her hands. Energy weapons are tricky—they have less sheer power than missiles, but they’re much more precise and harder to counter.

Unless you have null-spheres. Mine zipped free from my belt, then hovered in the air around me like fist-sized gnats. As soon as Ball fired, the little guys moved in front of the plasma streams and absorbed the energy.

The launchers on her shoulders continued to fire sixty-four missiles per second; the countermeasures on my backplates continued to block them. My own missiles continued to fire; *her* countermeasures continued to block them. Her energy shots continued to come; my null-spheres ate them up. This is why modern combat is no fun anymore. Everyone is so decked out with countermeasures and endoskeletons that it's blasted hard to bop anyone.

Of course, there was one factor few people took into account. I raised my Colt, taking aim. She probably had an endoskeleton, so even if I clipped her right in the eye it wouldn't do more than tear away a little bit of replaceable skin.

So I shot one of her missile packs just before it discharged its payload. My slug, not being self-propelled, was completely ignored by her countermeasures. It smacked into the center of thirty-two missiles, producing an explosion that shook the room.

The blast threw Ball's body against the far wall, shredding her flesh and revealing the elanium below. She might have survived, had the blast not also blown off her head.

I skidded to a stop at the end of the leaping dodge I

began when Ball entered the room. The entire fight had taken less than five seconds.

The room was, of course, a mess. However, most of the missiles had been destroyed in midair, so once the smoke started to clear, it didn't actually look too bad. The short, professor-like man huddled beneath a desk.

I walked over, typing a code on my palm-set to deactivate Alici's null-field. The ball of energy winked out in an instant, revealing a very surprised young woman underneath.

"That was amazing, Mr. D.," she breathed.

I shrugged modestly, removing my shredded trench coat. As always, the launcher on my left arm and the counterlaunchers over my shoulder blades unlocked themselves as I took off the coat, returning to standby mode and attaching themselves to the garment's lining.

"All right," I said, "tell me 'I told you so.' You were right all along. There were two of them." I folded the tattered coat over my arm and slid my rod back into its holster.

"What?" Alici asked, looking around. She immediately closed her eyes as she saw the mess that had once been Grandma Ball.

"Come with me," I said, stepping over a fallen table

to walk toward the hole in the wall. “You too,” I told the little man on the floor. He slunk after me, probably realizing he didn’t have a chance of escape.

I stopped briefly, however, and crouched near the stiff on the floor. She was really a victim in all this—she must have been amazed to be returned to life after a century in the big one. The sickness would have made her more and more paranoid, driving her to get endoskeleton replacements and to buy weapons and countermeasures. Eventually she had flipped. Just like the other four mugs. Poor skirt. Few people have to die twice, and this time I was the one who’d had to send her to the wooden envelope.

I sighed, rising. “Come on.” In the hallway I randomly picked a room full of metallic cylinders and walked inside. “These have been deactivated, I assume?” I asked the little man.

He nodded.

“Open one for me, croaker.”

The man sighed, then pressed a button. The top of the cylinder hissed, then opened. I could see the top of a naked head inside.

“Ugh,” Alici disapproved. “Clones after all?”

I shook my head.

“They’re corpses,” the short man said. “Corpses of people who died more than a century ago.”

Alici frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“These people went to the big sleep before medicine had gotten to the point that it could save them,” I explained. “In the hopes that someday science would find a way to revive them and cure their diseases, they had themselves frozen once they kicked it. I suspect that in Fran Ball’s case, it was her husband who had her corpse frozen in case we eventually found a cure for cancer.”

“Frozen?” Alici asked. “That’s a little weird.”

I shrugged. “We all have our eccentricities, Miss Smith. These people hoped that they would someday live again, and companies such as Insang promised that they would—as long as they were willing to pay the proper price.” I looked over at the little man. “I assume I’m right?”

He nodded slowly.

“There aren’t any more of ’em, are there?”

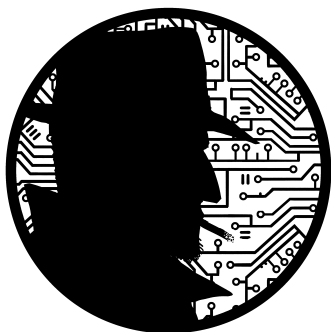
The man shook his head. “Mrs. Ball was the last one.”

“And the money?”

“When they were frozen, they had our firm invest their fortunes in personal accounts. Insang made good money off the investments, but the clause in the contract said we had to try and revive them when possible. We

are an honest company, sir. We intended to keep our contract—we *did* keep our contract. We just didn't figure . . .”

“That cryogenic freezing would have the same effect on a mind as stasis,” I said. “Come on, I want you to meet my friend Paisley.”



9

I climbed up the steps to my office, thinking longingly of my appointment with JD and an afternoon of relaxation. It had been a hard day, but the life of a private detective is a hard one. I knew what I was in for when I signed up.

“I kind of feel sorry for the guy,” Alici admitted as we walked into the office.

“Don’t,” I said. “He’s more a crook than poor old Ball. For all his claims of honesty, I’d bet anything there’s more to the story than he’s singing. Take a look at the records—I suspect you’ll find there was a clause on those bank accounts. If a hundred and twenty years passed without the cabbage being claimed by the original investor, it all reverted to the next of kin—namely Camilla Ball. Insang was probably planning to use the revived people to try and get at the dough.”

I hung my coat—what was left of it—on the rack. I’d have to see about getting a new one. My hat found

its usual place on the top. I stretched, walked into my comfortably dark room, and took a seat at the desk.

It probably wouldn't take very long.

Sure enough, a few minutes later Alici warned me that I had a call. She put it through, and soon Camilla Ball—lush, dreamy Camilla—was holo-standing in my office again.

“Oh, Mr. Derrins,” she breathed. “You did it.”

“149YY78491,” I said.

“What?” she asked with confusion.

“149YY78491,” I repeated. “It's the claims number on your bank account, doll.”

Her eyes opened wide. “Oh Dalley! I don't believe it! You're even better than they say!”

“I'd get the green quickly and breeze,” I suggested, leaning back in my chair. “Before Don Rigallo finds you.”

She paused. “I . . .”

“You killed a mob boss, baby,” I said. “You thought he had found a way to dip into your family fund, didn't you?”

“How did you know?” she demanded, looking slightly less innocent.

“About two years ago,” I said, “the mazuma in your family account started to disappear—the account you

weren't allowed to access until the time limit came up. When you asked the crediting firm, they only told you that the original investor had returned for the money. You knew that couldn't be possible—your grandmother had been stiff for a hundred and thirty years. So you assumed Lucrani had done it. He's the only other one who knew about the account. He said he didn't have anything to do with it, but the money continued to disappear. Eventually you confronted him one last time. When he still wouldn't give you the meat, you offed him."

"I . . ." Camilla said, taking a step backward.

"The mob's coming for you, miss," I said. "I suggest you brace that cash and skedaddle. Go far away from here—very far."

There was a brief moment of silence, and then Camilla turned those doll eyes on me.

"Come with me," she pled, walking up to—then through—my desk. She paused just in front of me, her torso seeming to sprout right out of my office decor. She reached for my chin, trailing incorporeal fingers along my face. I could almost feel her touch. "Please, Dalley," she whispered, "you've earned a share of this money."

And I almost said yes.

"No."

She frowned, but walked back to the center of the room. “Fine,” she declared. “You’ll never know what you missed out on, Jack Derrins.”

And she disappeared.

I let out a breath and reached over to tap my knuckles against the top drawer of my desk. The bottle of JD rapped lightly against the wood as the drawer opened. I took a long swig.

I never found out what became of Camilla, but I’ve often wondered what would have happened if I’d gone with her. Of course, it doesn’t matter. Going with that skirt would have violated Jack Derrins’s primary principle of life.

Dames are nothing but trouble.

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