

COMMON SOURCE

By

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CHAPTER 1

C RACKERJACK'S WAS THE last place Master Detective John Simon expected to be on a Thursday night at eight. The night club was one of the latest trendy hot spots in Kansas City's thriving Crossroads arts district just south of the city's downtown, and the dance floor was packed with the young and on the rise, their feet pounding in synch with the thunderous beat two deejays were spinning from a raised platform at the center of the room. The scent of colognes, perfumes, sweat, body odor, and greasy appetizers filled the air in a toxic mix that everyone but Simon seemed to be ignoring.

His eyes searched the crowd, solidly aware he didn't fit in. Forties, former star running back at K-State, divorced, an eighteen year veteran of the department, he was the oldest guy in the room and his wardrobe

stood out like an Elvis impersonator at a costume ball, especially with the fleece-lined coat he was wearing over the top. It was in the thirties outside but almost tropical in the club. A few of the patrons gave him funny looks, others looked amused, but most just ignored him as he weaved his way through the writhing bodies, taking in every face. None of them were his man.

He stopped when he reached the corner and turned back to see how his partner was doing just as the beat changed to an old disco classic—retro was in—and the familiar strains of Carl Douglas’ “Kung Fu Fighting” echoed off the shimmering walls. The crowd cheered and began gyrating in unison almost like dancers in a choreographed routine, and right in the middle of them, matching every beat and move, was Lucas George. Chocolate skinned, medium tall, skinny, with piercing green eyes and close cut hair, Lucas looked like mid-thirties, but in fact his actual age was less than ten. One of the first humanoid android models entered into service from Connelly Labs, he was also the first humanoid android graduate of the Kansas City Regional Police Academy, and he was Simon’s partner.

They'd met when Simon's former partner had led them on a tip to an art warehouse in the West Bottoms industrial area west of downtown on the south side of the Missouri River. That stakeout had resulted in a shootout with multiple dead and alerted the wrong people to the detectives' interest, prompting them to kidnap Blanca Santorios, who was in the early stages of a pregnancy. Determined to find her and those responsible, Simon had teamed up with the only witness, the android security guard at the warehouse, and thus his partnership with Lucas was born. When it turned out his employer was responsible, Lucas had quit working there, and his experiences working the case with Simon and their budding friendship had inspired him to apply for the Academy. The rest, as they say, was history.

Six months later, Lucas graduated top of his class, and now here he was on his first assignment as a full detective. Because of his special skills and nature, he'd skipped patrol and gone straight to work with Simon, the department wanting to take full advantage of this new resource under the tutelage of a senior man. Only Simon and Lucas were prone to trouble, all in the name of zealously pursuing justice, of course. The case had

involved ex-military special forces ordinance experts determined to bomb the waterpark Oceans of Fun had ended with the perps dead, but in the process Simon's daughter Emma had been kidnapped and Simon and Lucas had pushed boundaries and regulations bringing them down. Thus now they were working nights and weekends, having been reassigned from Central Division's Property squad to the Generalist squad at Headquarters, until the department decided what to do with them.

This left Simon frustrated but from the way Lucas was smiling, he appeared to be just fine with it. His dance moves were those of someone who'd been doing it for years rather than in fact someone perfectly imitating those around him, and the other patrons were treating him like one of their own. Lucas, unlike Simon, was wearing only a thin windbreaker because he had no need of a coat. If Simon had been the one dancing, he knew he'd be drowning in sweat, but Lucas didn't have to worry about that. Simon watched as they all did air kung fu with their flailing arms and danced in a circle to the right in perfect unison, waiting off to the side to avoid a collision until the song was over.

As he continued scanning the crowd seeking the face of Peter Wacks, the low-life wannabe player who'd brought them there tonight, his eyes lit on a glowing beauty that held his gaze. She was medium height with long brunette tresses and seductive curves well highlighted by the slinky red dress she was wearing over shiny black pumps. It was almost as if a spotlight had found her in the midst of the masses but in truth she'd just happened to take position under one of the overhead spots lighting an aisle across the dance floor.

On looks alone, she was everything Simon liked in a woman. He had an instant urge to talk with her, duties aside. But to do so, he'd have to somehow navigate his way through a hundred gyrating bodies and around a raised platform, which for the moment at least, appeared a herculean task, so instead he stood there, enjoying the view until she noticed his stare, smiled briefly, and then slipped back into the crowd and disappeared.

Simon actually felt his heart sink with disappointment. What was he—some lovestruck teenager in a disco? He shook it off, scanning over to where Lucas was still dancing as the song wound to a close. *You have a job to do, John. Stay focused,* he scolded

himself with that internal voice. For just a moment he thought he knew what Emma meant when she accused him of being “overly fatherly.” He’d found that tone of inner voice annoying himself. But then the song ended and he shook it off and raised a hand, waving to get Lucas’ attention as he chattered with other dancers and exchanged compliments and pleasantries. Finally, the android spotted his partner and began weaving his way over through the crowd.

“You have fun?” he asked as Lucas joined him off to the side.

“Yes,” Lucas agreed. “Good song.”

“You do remember we’re working here, right?”

Simon replied.

“You told me to blend in,” Lucas said with a shrug. “I think I was successful.” Just then a young Asian in his late twenties walked by with a beautiful blonde hanging off his arm and raised the other to high five Lucas as he passed, each greeting the other with an enthusiastic “Dude.”

Simon rolled his eyes. “Well, when you’re done blending, what do you say we actually try to find this Wacks so we can get outta here?”

Lucas nodded. "Well, sure. At least until the next good song comes on." He grinned.

Simon groaned. "Don't get cocky. You're still in training, remember?"

"Speaking of training, Emma says I should teach you how to dance," Lucas said.

"No fucking way," Simon said. "No thanks, pal."

"She suggested it might help your social life," Lucas said as they started forward together and Simon led the way weaving through the crowd around the edge of the dance floor. "'You need to get out more.'"

Simon shot him dead with a glare.

"I was quoting her, not me," Lucas said with an innocent look.

"By all means feel free to restrain yourself from quoting to me every single criticism my daughter tells you about me, okay?" Simon snapped.

"Just trying to help," Lucas answered.

"Trust me, stick to your gifts," Simon snapped as he spotted a familiar face twenty feet ahead along the edge of the dance floor near where he'd spotted the brunette earlier. He elbowed Lucas in the ribs. "I think I see Wacks."

"Where?"

Simon grabbed him by the forearm and pulled him so he was facing the suspect as they kept moving through the crowd. “Let me take lead. You back me up.”

“Roger wilco,” Lucas replied, quoting some radio language he’d heard on a cop show that Simon found really annoying, but now wasn’t the time for that argument again.

They moved in on the subject now, who was talking to a woman with her back against a pillar. He was leaning in with both arms fully extended, one on either side of her, their faces a few inches apart as they talked—probably to be heard over the music. Simon didn’t get the vibe the woman was that into him...yet.

Simon grabbed him by the shoulder and whirled him around.

“Hey!” Wacks protested, stiffening as if ready to fight.

Lucas badged him and Wacks relaxed a bit.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“To talk,” Simon said.

Wacks nodded back toward the pillar behind him. “I’m already talking to someone. You’ll have to wait.”

“Not anymore,” Simon snapped and Wacks turned to see the object of his attention being led onto the dance floor by another much better looking guy.

“Son of a bitch!” he spat.

Simon and Lucas each grabbed him by an arm and pulled him away from the dance floor through the crowd to a nearby booth, throwing him onto the bench as Simon straddled a chair on the other side of the table, chest against the chair back facing him. Lucas stood behind him to one side with his arms crossed, blocking any escape.

“What do you want?” Wacks demanded again.

“We want to know about Alma Watson,” Lucas said.

“Who?!”

Simon grunted and shook his head. “Nope. Not gonna go down that way, asshole. The old woman you scammed out of her social security and savings. The one whose house you then broke in and cleared out.”

“What?” Wacks scoffed. “You’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

“Unfortunately, we haven’t,” Simon said and motioned to Lucas.

Lucas held up his cell phone and played tape of a surveillance camera with a view from across the street

showing Wacks using a hand laser to cut a section out of the wide window of a house late at night with date and time stamp running along the bottom. "Caught on tape," Lucas said.

"And that's just the neighbor's footage," Simon said. "Fortunately, Alma's daughter also got worried and placed a nanny cam in her living room just in case."

"Would you like to see that one, too?" Lucas asked.

Wacks shook his head. "I was helping her when she locked herself out."

"Nope," Lucas said, shaking his head.

"Alma's cell phone places her over at her daughter's house that night," Simon said.

"For her grandson's birthday," Lucas added.

Wacks looked like a deer trapped in headlights for a moment until a waitress appeared. She was early twenties and bouncy, like a cheerleader on too much caffeine. "Hey, y'all. What ya drinkin'?"

"No thank you," Lucas said.

"Are you sure?" she asked sing-song. "It's half price night!"

As Simon turned his head to frown at her, Wacks sprung up and vaulted over the back of the booth landing on top of the next table, which was crowded

with a party of eight who protested loudly as glasses and plates clattered and drinks spilled, causing them to hurriedly dodge as Wacks stumbled off the table and took off running.

Lucas went to give chase but the waitress and a passing couple got in the way.

“Fuck!” Simon said.

“So no drinks then?” the waitress asked innocently, all smiles.

“No tip either,” Simon snapped as he and Lucas took off after Wacks, who was fifteen feet ahead already, weaving through the crowd.

As he reached the bathrooms, Wacks pushed through and hurried down the hallway running past them and disappearing off into some other area of the club just as a song ending and couples started streaming off the dance floor, trading places with others as they did.

Simon and Lucas reached the bathrooms just as an incoming influx was jammed up by the outgoing crowd and struggled to push through and get to the corridor. Simon badged them, holding his badge holder face level as he struggled against the flow. “Police business! Please let us through!”

Everyone ignored them. By the time they managed to get through, Wacks was nowhere to be seen.

Simon patted Lucas' arm. "You go that way. I'm going out the front and around. See if I can intercept him."

"Gotcha," Lucas said and hurried down the corridor as Simon turned back and fought his way through the crowd again.

Simon emerged from the club and immediately reached down to zip up his coat as he scanned the sidewalk and parking lot for the suspect and saw no sign. Deciding to check around the side, he turned back toward the side of the club any exit from the corridor by the bathroom would lead to and felt his feet slipping out from under him just as he found himself face to face with the woman he'd been admiring earlier across the bathroom.

Suddenly, he was ploughing into her as she tried to raise her hands, palms out, to stop him and they were falling and sliding, him on top of her right off the sidewalk and out into the parking lot on a huge patch of black ice—right into the path of an oncoming car. Simon tried to roll off but she was struggling too and they just wound up more entangled. The car started

breaking, but it was sliding, too, and Simon and the woman's efforts become even more desperate, then just as he cringed in preparation for the impact, the car stopped and he reached up to grab its fender, managing to halt the slide and bring them to a stop.

He rolled off the woman as she gasped for breath and he struggled again for footing trying to get to his feet. Two pairs of feet appeared standing next to him, and he looked up to see Lucas and a handcuffed Wacks staring down at him.

"I thought I was supposed to let you take lead," Lucas said. "While you were making friends, I got him."

"This wasn't on purpose," Simon snapped.

"Okay, we'll be in the car," Lucas said and turned, pushing Wacks in front of him to head back for their unmarked KCPD Ford Explorer.

"Wait!" Simon said. "Help us up!"

Lucas stopped, grabbing Wacks by the handcuffs with one hand and extending the other to help Simon to his feet, and then the woman, who was looking rather irritated now at the situation she'd found herself sucked into.

“Are you okay?” Lucas asked as he released her hand and she dusted herself off and examined her mud and water stained dress and coat.

“No thanks to your friend,” the woman snapped, glaring at Simon.

“Partner,” Lucas said.

“I’m sorry,” Simon managed, thinking to himself she was actually more beautiful angry, then moaning internally at the cliché.

Lucas gave her a look of sympathy. “He’s only human.”

The woman looked startled by the remark and then barked a laugh as she carefully walked back toward the sidewalk.

“You sure you’re okay?” Lucas called after her.

“Yes, thank you,” she called back.

“Okay, have a good night,” Simon called cheerfully after her, but she simply glared back at him as Lucas turned and resumed leading Wacks across the parking lot toward the Explorer as Simon followed.

“I don’t think she likes you,” Wacks said.

“Shut the fuck up,” Simon snapped.

“I think he’s right,” Lucas replied.

“You shut the fuck up too,” Simon said, frowning.

“What about me? Not going to ask how I am?”

“You’re walking fine, just a little dirty,” Lucas said.

“You’re always telling me you don’t like when I’m overly sentimental.”

Simon grunted. “Caring about someone’s well being is polite, not sentimental.” And they stopped a moment to wait as another car hurried past before crossing an aisle to the parking section where their car was waiting.

As they stepped out again to cross, another car started spinning its wheels to escape ice and back out of its spot, spraying mud and water all over Simon, who tried to dodge free much too late as the car shot back and he stood there soaked and pissed, shaking his hands to flick off water as Lucas had already reached the other side and was putting Wacks into the back of the Explorer.

“We waiting for a wagon?” Lucas asked as Simon finally joined him.

“No, you ride with him, I’ll drive,” Simon said. “I’m fucking soaked.”

“You really should be more careful walking on ice,” Lucas said. “I expected you were used to it.” And he

shut the car door as he climbed in back beside the suspect.

Simon heard a whirring overhead and looked up as a media drone dropped down in front of him.

“Smile,” it said in a sing-song voice as a flash flashed and Simon raised his arm to block his face but he was too late. “Thank you,” it added as it flew away.

“Fucking smartass robots,” Simon muttered and headed around the Explorer toward the driver’s side. And he wasn’t just talking about the drone.



THE GENERALIST SQUAD was based out of the third floor at KCPD headquarters downtown at 1125 Locust. Built in 1938, headquarters was a nine story stone monolith located right next to the city detention center, it held offices for the Chief, his deputies and assistants, and various investigative units, including Homicide, Assault, Cyber Crime, Sex Crimes, and Generalist detectives.

Simon and Lucas went there after dropping Wacks at the detention center and parked the Explorer in its

assigned space in the parking garage, then took the back elevator up to three and entered the squad room. Part of being reassigned was getting used to a whole new team of people, but fortunately, the Generalists were led by an old Academy classmate of Simon's, Sergeant Brian Delmater. Late forties, tall, with a thickening paunch and limbs like most men his age, Delmater had a hardened face but a warm heart and a great sense of humor. If Simon had to be assigned under someone besides JoAnn Becker, Delmater would have been his first choice.

Like most, the squad room was a maze of cubicles with file cabinets, copy machines, printers, and shelves scattered amidst them. The walls were government issue plain with off-white paint over thin, gray carpet. There were also several bulletin boards and two white boards scattered about, all of them full with notices, wanted posters, suspect pics, or scribbled notes.

Simon's and Lucas' cubes were on the west aisle near the windows just outside a conference room and Delmater's office. As they wove their way through past the other Generalists, several took note of Simon's current state and reacted with a mix of amusement and surprise.

“You know, Simon, you’d think an O.G. would know to at least make himself presentable before he came to the squad,” teased Detective Benny Jiminez, thirties, hispanic, thin with eclectic taste in wardrobe. He tsked, shaking his head.

“Love the new look, Simon,” Detective Yanni Rankin teased. An Israeli immigrant around Jiminez’s age, he was all flash and style with slicked back, well groomed hair, and a nice tan no matter what time of year it was.

“Looks like your new partner’s breaking you in right,” Detective Allie Williams teased. African American, early thirties, tall and thin, a basketball star in college until she’d injured her knee, she was a crack shot and a looker, also with a strong sense of style.

“Hey, George, you sure you wouldn’t prefer to at least partner with one of us who knows how to walk on ice?” Detective Louie Lenz teased. Short, pudgy, with thinning hair, he was the oldest of the present bunch besides Simon at early forties and dressed like a bum—old wrinkled suit, worn shoes, out of date ties, and cheap shirts.

Lucas smiled as Simon offered a mock laugh. “You guys outta take your act to Vegas. You’d clean up.”

The three exchanged looks. "I always thought so," Jiminez said.

"John," Delmater called from his office as they passed his door. Simon and Lucas changed direction and stopped in his doorway. Delmater frowned, looking him over. "What happened to you?"

"Black ice," Lucas said.

"You catch the guy at least?" Delmater asked, shaking his head sympathetically.

Simon tipped his head toward Lucas. "He did."

"Well, that's something," Delmater said. "Go clean yourself up and get a warm cup of coffee. The wife sent some Brazilian she brought back from an excursion to Rio to visit our son. Good stuff."

"Good coffee? In a police station?" Simon mocked. "You trying to ruin our rep?"

"And improve morale," Delmater snapped back, grinning. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

Simon gave a quick salute and turned back to his desk, Lucas following. "You get started on the paperwork, while I clean up, okay?" he said.

Lucas shrugged as he slipped into his chair at the cube next to Simon's. "On it."

Simon made his way into the conference room where there was a fridge, microwave, and coffee station. There was also a break room down the hall but Simon wasn't in the mood for the walk, and if Delmater brought special coffee, he'd kept it close to avoid mooching by other squads. Police officers might fight crime but they had few qualms about stealing from each other when it came to the best resources.

The rich aroma of real coffee, not the usual industrial mass-produced stuff, replaced the squad room smells of b.o., sweat, and dust the minute he stepped through the door. Simon grabbed the pot and a generic white styrofoam cup and filled it to the brim, then leaned against the counter as he sipped, savoring the special treat—real coffee. At least something was going right tonight. The hot liquid warmed his insides as it went down and he wished he had a danish or donut to go with, but there was nothing today. After this, he'd hit the locker room for a change of clothes and a quick shower—as much to warm up as anything—then return to help Lucas with the paperwork.

But before he could even finish, Delmater was calling their names. “Simon! George!”

Simon groaned, taking his coffee and heading back out into the squad room. Delmater was standing just outside his office with a note. "What's up, Sarge?" he asked as Lucas walked over to join them.

"1809 Grand, Prism," Delmater said.

"Fuck. Another night club?" Simon grouched. His night had just gotten worse again.

"Suspect flipped out and tore up the place," Delmater said. "They're holding everyone as witnesses but the dance floor's closed."

Simon nodded toward the others. "Why can't one of the others take it?"

"You two are the only ones who wrapped a case," Delmater said. "Besides, I'm going too and I want Lucas' take on this."

"Why?" Lucas asked, surprised.

"Because the suspect is supposedly an android, like you," Delmater replied.

"Can I at least get a shower and change first?" Simon asked.

Delmater shook his head. "It'll have to wait." He put a hand on Simon's shoulder as Simon groaned in protest. "We'll probably just get dirty again slogging

around at the scene anyway. I'll buy you an early breakfast if we're there long enough."

"I choose the place?" Simon asked, brightening.

"With respect for the fact I'm just a poor cop like you, sure," Delmater said.

Simon snorted. "A poor cop who just got a pay hike. You're on." He turned and led the way out of the squad room as Delmater leaned back into his office to grab his coat and then hurried to catch up.

"The pay hike's not as great as you probably imagine," Delmater warned.

"You bought a new boat and repainted your house," Simon teased. "You're doing fine."

"I was until I made the mistake of offering you food," Delmater mumbled as they headed out the door.

CHAPTER 2

THE PRISM WAS THE latest hotspot to open in the Crossroads Art District, Kansas City's eclectic enclave of boutique shops, one-of-a-kind restaurants, creative businesses, studios, and art galleries. Home to more than 400 artists and 100 independent art galleries, it was one of the most concentrated gallery districts in the nation but also home to design firms, architects, advertising agencies, restaurants, and a night club or two. Just south of the convention center it comprised an area that stretched from Interstate 35 on the west to I-70 on the north, highway 71 on the east, and ended just north of Union Station at Penway Street and trolley and railroad tracks in the south.

The Prism sat on the southeast corner of East 18th Street at Grand Avenue. It was a gay nightclub, though its patrons also often included straight ladies out for a fun night without the meat market hassle of so many other places. From the entrance off Grand, you stepped into a long, wide hallway with alcoves off the left for two restrooms—male and female—and an office. On the

right, an arched entryway led off into the bar with booths lining the walls around a large, central bar with tables jam packed in between. Further down, you entered the large dance floor which was surrounded on all sides by three level tiers holding tables and booths for those who preferred to people watch or relax rather than join the active frenzy of writhing bodies down below. There was also a small band stand at the far end with a d.j. stand next to it.

By twelve-thirty, when Simon and Lucas arrived, several black and whites and two ambulances had beat them there and the uniforms were attempting crowd control while the paramedics treated a few wounded with what looked like minor injuries.

As they made their way through a crowd clogging the sidewalk and corridor, Simon overheard several comments from patrons on his bedraggled appearance.

“Oh my, take pride in yourself, honey!”

“Of course the gay club gets the third class cops! Typical!”

“Girl, he looks worse than the club does!”

And so on.

Simon ignored them all and pushed his way on through to the door. The entire place was decorated in

bright neon colors with sparkles in the paint. Simon found it hideous, but the manager who met them at the door presented it with the phrase, “Welcome to our bling, boys!”

Inside, the dance floor and room surrounding it were in shambles. Tables and chairs had been split in half or smashed to pieces, plates of food and drinks littered every surface, mixed with broken glass and utensils, the d.j. table had been tipped over and the turntables broken with broken vinyl and scratched CDs lying randomly individually and in heaps, even some spotlights lining the stage and walls had been blown out and curtains had been ripped down.

“It looks more like a tornado came through here than one man,” Simon said.

“Superhuman on drugs or something, you mean,” the manager, whose name was Randy Robin, said, shaking his head. “He was here dancing with the rest for about an hour, and then out of nowhere he just goes crazy and starts tearing up the place.”

“All by himself?” Lucas asked.

“He didn’t need anyone else, love,” Randy said. “He had superhuman strength, like I said, and he seemed to enjoy it.”

“Anyone hurt?” Delmater asked.

“A few scrapes and bruises, torn clothing, and minor trappings, but no one who won’t walk away,” Randy said. “They’re outside with the paramedics.”

“Do you have security cameras that might have gotten any images of the guy?” Simon asked.

“In the dark?” Randy scoffed. “All the lights are on right now, but normally it’s almost dark in here, just a few highlights and lights on the tables and at the booths, so I doubt it.”

“What about coming in or out?” Lucas asked.

Randy shrugged. “Maybe.”

“We’ll want to see all the footage regardless,” Delmater said.

“Suit yourselves,” Randy said.

“We need to interview anyone who got a good look at the man, and get the names of the others in case we want to talk to them later,” Delmater said.

“Okay,” Randy said.

“Would you gather the ones you know about and have them meet us in the bar? We’ll get uniforms to start taking names from the rest and send them on home,” Simon said and noticed Lucas was just staring around the room, taking it in.

As Randy and Delmater headed back out toward the front to gather witnesses, he leaned in and whispered, “You okay, partner?”

Lucas shook his head. “It makes no sense.”

“What?”

“An android wouldn’t do this,” Lucas said.

“What makes you say that?” Simon asked.

“The three laws, part of our basic programming,” Lucas said.

Simon tried to remember his Asimov, which he’d only read after meeting Lucas. “A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. Those laws?”

“Yes,” Lucas said. “This kind of destruction and violence—”

“Well, if no one got seriously injured, maybe he thought he was obeying the laws but it got a little out of hand,” Simon suggested.

Lucas shook his head. “We were made to serve mankind, not destroy property and wreak havoc. It still violates programming.”

“Could there have been something in his mods that allowed him to do this?” Simon asked, referring to the fact that androids with specific duties often had modifications to the basic three laws to accommodate those duties. For example, as a law enforcement officer, Lucas’ programming had required modifications to the first two laws. First, Lucas would only obey orders of his Maker, Owner, and those they assigned to authority over him. Thus, criminals or other troublemakers could not sabotage or interfere in his work but he would obey law officers, particularly the chain of command. Second, he could harm human beings in context of the First Law according to the guidelines and policies of the KCPD, which he’d not only had added to his programming but had also memorized, line by line.

Lucas sighed. “Perhaps, but this isn’t right.”

Simon reached up to squeeze his shoulder. “We’ll figure it out, okay? And we’ll put a stop to it, get whoever’s responsible in for repairs. Don’t worry.”

Lucas grunted but still looked unsettled.

“Come on, help me with these witnesses,” Simon said and led the way back down the corridor toward the front, Lucas reluctantly following. Simon had a feeling it was going to be a long night.



THEY INTERVIEWED WITNESSES at the club until the wee hours then headed out to Simon’s favorite downtown eatery, the City Diner, for breakfast with Delmater as promised. By the time Lucas got back to his apartment near the River Market, it was almost five a.m. and he plugged in to recharge his power, then set to work on the internet, trying to distract himself. What he’d seen earlier that night at Prism scared the hell out of him. Just when androids like him were finally coming into acceptance as citizens in society, at last becoming more common and popular, an android was being accused of violence and destruction of property! When word got out, it could hurt the reputation and hard won trust between androids and humans, and as the most prominent android known by the local public, a member of their police force, it would especially put pressure on him.

He thought about calling his Maker, Doctor Livia Connelly, at her office—Connelly Labs—but she wouldn't be in yet and he didn't want to wake her at home, especially with bad news when he had so few facts to report. No, he would wait, so instead he searched the web for other incidents of android violence or crimes and came up with nothing. *So this is new, that is a good thing*, he thought. But how could this happen? That part still stumped him. He really needed to talk to Doctor Connelly, but that would have to wait.

To distract himself, he picked up the latest detective novel his friend and guru Will, co-owner of Prospero's Books, had recommended. Prospero's, a place Simon and Lucas had gone to on their first case together—the Benjamin Ashman case—had become his goto resource for research and human knowledge and Will was always very good at recommending the perfect books to help him expand his knowledge in whatever category he wanted. At present, he was reading classic Detective fiction and true crime, both for new catchphrases he might try out and also for techniques and tricks of investigating that might help him consider things from new angles as he did his work.

The current book was *Atlanta Deathwatch* by Ralph Dennis, a classic set in 1974 about an ex-cop turned P.I. working in the Atlanta underworld who's hired by a black crime lord to investigate the murder of his white girlfriend, a college student. It was gritty, dark noir that took the characters deep into Atlanta's back alley underworld and a street war of the kind that real cops often saw but most regular people didn't except on TV. Lucas was enjoying it, particularly the snappy banter and quirky characters and soon found himself lost in it for several chapters until he looked up at the clock again and found it was nine a.m. and decided to call his Maker for her thoughts on this new development.

"Lucas, good morning!" Connelly said, sounding hurried as she answered the phone. "You're up early. Aren't you working nights?"

"I am and I am recharging right now, Maker," Lucas said.

"Ah yes, the advantages of not needing to sleep," Connelly said. "I think of you all so much as my children, I sometimes forget. So what can I do for you?"

"There was an incident last night," Lucas explained. "At a night club in Crossroads, Prism."

“The gay club? I think some of my employees have mentioned it,” Connelly said.

“Yes,” Lucas replied. “Someone tore up the place late last night. Simon said it looked like a tornado went through.”

“That’s awful. Was anyone hurt?”

“Only minor scrapes, cuts, and bruises, thankfully,” Lucas said. “But they say the suspect was an android.”

“What?!” Connelly said. “An android?”

“Yes,” Lucas said.

“Did you get a name or pictures?” Connelly asked.

“We are checking surveillance footage,” Lucas said.

“No one so far had a name.”

“Oh my God! It can’t be!” Connelly said.

“How could this happen?” Lucas asked, his anxiety clear in his voice.

“Well, Lucas, we don’t know for sure, okay? We need more information,” Connelly said. “But if it did happen, it would violate programming.”

“Yes, but could someone change programming to allow it?” Lucas asked.

“They’d have to get around our safeguards, which is not easy,” Connelly said. “We design our androids so

that we provide all servicing. It's safer that way and also protects proprietary information and design."

"Right," Lucas said. He'd known that. "Is anyone else offering androids yet with the same capabilities?"

"Well, we do have up and coming competitors, though I'd say their models are not up to our standards," Connelly said. "There's Weeks Industries, Carney & Sons, and Hartman Robotics, for example."

Lucas wrote the names down.

"But they don't sell in this market yet," Connelly said. "For the midwest, we really are about the only game in town. Androids of this level are still so new. That's why we've expanded so much so quickly just keeping up with demand. Plus, the commerce department and other Federal agencies are being stingy with permits until they feel they've fully developed adequate standards and policy for manufacturers and licensers."

"Is it possible someone tried to modify one of yours without your knowledge?" Lucas asked.

There was a silence on the other end for a few beats as Connelly considered this. "Anything is possible with electronics and computers," she finally said. "Things move so quickly that I suppose someone could have

found a way if they really wanted to, though this is the first I've heard of any possibility. And I still have my doubts."

"A virus maybe? Some kind of scrambler?" Lucas suggested.

"Some variations on that are always possible," Connelly agreed. "But you know we push out regular updates once a week, sometimes more often, to keep our models current and protected, not to mention the built in safeguards I already mentioned. It would have to be very sophisticated."

"Thank you for answering my questions, Maker," Lucas said.

"Of course, Lucas," Connelly said. "I know you're very worried about what this might mean, and I am, too, but I promise you, we'll get to the bottom of it somehow. Get me any photos and details as soon as you have them. We're very proud of you."

"Thank you," Lucas said, feeling uncomfortable at her praise. "Have a good day." He hung up before she could lavish him with more praise. At the moment, he didn't feel at all worthy. Not 'til he got to the bottom of the incident at Prism and ensured that he and others of his kind were safe from any dangerous threat.

He immediately called in to Trevor Welch at the Computer Services Unit on the fourth floor at headquarters. "We have yet to pinpoint the suspect with any visual clarity. So far he was blended into the crowds in the footage," Welch reported. "But we're still trying and will let you know."

When he hung up, for the first time, Lucas wished he could sleep to keep his mind off things somehow. He supposed he could set a timer and shut down while he recharged, but his police training had taught him to be ready at a moment's notice, so that idea seemed a breach of duty. Instead, he picked up his novel again and tried to lose himself in the Atlanta underworld again to pass the time.



AFTER A VERY LONG and stressful shift, Simon returned home to the house he'd inherited from his grandmother in Fairway, Kansas and considered his main residence just before six a.m. and fell quickly into a deep sleep. He slept until just after two, when he had to get up and drive across town to Independence, Missouri to pick up his daughter, Emma, at Nowlin Middle School for their weekend together.

As he pulled up the circular drive and saw the line of parents' cars, he broke his promise to Emma never to play the 'police' card unless he was actually on duty and flipped the police sign onto his dash, pulling around the other cars and up to a red zone where he stopped and looked for his daughter.

Emma exited the school five minutes later chatting with her best friend Julie Ramon, the daughter of a man who'd been used by bombers several months before in a partially foiled bombing aimed at killing thousands of tourists. Instead, the police and FBI had deduced the plan in time and cleared the area, though the target, Oceans of Fun, did wind up destroyed. As part of the effort to stall law enforcement, Emma and Julie had been kidnapped and left in the water park to die. Simon, Lucas, and two other detectives had barely gotten to them in time to get them out of harm's way as the bombs went off—literally inches behind them where they'd just been standing.

Emma seemed to have recovered from the ordeal much better than Simon had. He'd sent her to therapy for three months, until she'd decided she didn't need it any more and stopped going. Instead, she and Julie had gotten even closer than they'd been before, and begun

relying on each other for counseling, helping each other through. No matter what Simon thought of that, they seemed to be doing fine and in good spirits, so he and Julie's father, Karl, had decided to drop the subject and just keep an eye on them.

That was two months past now, and the girls looked like normal, bubbly teenage girls—up one day, down another, but boy crazy, fashion crazy, and just as confused as any typical teen, so he'd decided his daughter was stronger than he'd given her credit for and traded his parental worry for parental pride. The girls were now fifteen years old and in their final year of middle school before moving on to high school as sophomores, so there seemed to be plenty else for a father to worry about beyond past events that the daughters were handling just fine on their own.

Though Simon often took Julie home when he picked Emma up for a weekend, today was different. She was walking with her brother because he'd been having some trouble with bullies on his walks alone. Simon had offered to either give him a ride too—something he'd always refused in the past—or help with the bully situation, but both had declined. Once again, a situation the kids wanted to handle on their

own. So be it. At least this way, he and Emma could get back across town before rush hour got too heavy and have a relaxing evening before Simon went back to work. He'd never complain about that. He always treasured any time he got with her.

On the way home, he thought about her mother, his ex. Lara had been out of the hospital since shortly after Simon and Lucas rescued Emma and Julie six months before, but he knew from experience that recovery from a bipolar episode was a long haul and required her constant discipline to medicine as well as regular checkups—both things she'd neglected that led to her episode in the first place. "How's your mother?" he asked.

"Taking her meds and seeing the doctor once a month," Emma said immediately, knowing right away what he was worried about.

"Good," Simon said. "I hope she stays that way."

"She was gaining weight," Emma said. "And she met a man and wanted to look good for him."

Simon sighed. It was a typical excuse bipolar people used.

"She was just taking it alternate days for a while 'til she lost the weight," Emma said.

“She can’t do that,” Simon said. “The chemistry gets imbalanced and she breaks down.”

“Yeah, well, we know that,” Emma said.

“Why can’t she learn that?” Simon asked. It hadn’t been the first time she’d had a breakdown since her diagnosis a decade before.

“She hates when you say that,” Emma said. “Says she’s not a child.”

“Do me a favor, babe,” Simon snapped, “Don’t get in the habit of passing messages between us, okay? If she wants to tell me something, she has my number.”

Emma raised her palms in surrender. “Okay, okay.”

“She always blames everyone but herself,” Simon said.

“Dad, I’m on your side,” Emma said, raising her voice. “I’m just filling you in because you asked.”

He took a deep breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’ve just been through this before. Several times.”

“I know, but what can we do?” Emma said, looking sad.

“We can stay on her,” Simon said. “You especially. If anyone can make her listen, it’s you.” He put a hand on her knee and squeezed. “I know it’s hard.”

She nodded. “It scared me seeing her like that.”

“It scares me, too,” Simon said. “You haven’t even seen her at her worst.”

Emma’s eyes widened and she shuddered involuntarily at the thought. “I hope I never do.”

“I hope that, too, honey,” he said.

They drove the rest of the way in silence. As Simon pulled onto Canterbury and headed for his house, he saw a commotion in the street ahead—people milling about.

“What’s going on?” Emma asked.

“I don’t know, babe,” Simon said as he rolled down his window. A woman ran in front of the Charger, forcing him to slam on the brakes. As he did, another man turned to look at him. “What’s going on?” Simon asked.

“Some catering ‘droid in there just went crazy, man,” the man said. “Flipping out and breaking everything.”

“That house?” Simon asked, pointing.

“Yeah.”

Simon put his car in the drive of his house and told Emma to go inside, then hurried across the street to his neighbor’s house. As he walked up the stoop, he found the front door open and heard crashing and screaming.

He knocked anyway and called, "Police! Tom? Christy? You okay? It's Simon."

There was another loud crash.

"You're paying for all this!" Simon heard his neighbor Tom, a broker, shouting.

"It's not my fault! He's never done this before!" another man shouted back, distressed.

Simon came around a corner and saw the android—tall, thin, white skinned with dark hair and piercing blue eyes as he ran his hand along a table and knocked off a line of serving containers, plates, and sauce jars, sending them clattering and thumping to the floor, their contents spewing everywhere.

"Damn it, Jack, stop doing that!" a short Asian man in a white chef's hat and dirty apron shouted. His voice was that of the distressed man Simon had heard moments before.

Simon's neighbor Tom was standing across the room, fuming, a mess all around him. "If this is what your employees do when someone asks for more salt, then you have a lot to learn about customer service!"

"What's going on, Tom?" Simon asked.

"We were having a damn open house," Tom said. He was mid-forties, balding, with a beer belly but

muscular arms and a yard tan. He was dressed in a polo shirt and dockers with tennis shoes and socks. "Look at this mess!"

"The android just went crazy!" Christy said as she stepped into the room from the kitchen behind him. Her blonde hair was frizzy, her makeup smeared from either crying or the food that had clearly been thrown at her and stained her light blue dress shirt and brown pants. She was early forties and beautiful in the way a woman her age who's taken care of herself tended to be.

"Is everyone okay otherwise?" Simon asked.

"Fuck no! Look at my house!" Christy yelled.

"We'll deal with that once we get this under control," Simon said, keeping his voice calm.

"Buddy" — he looked at the Asian — "Jack is his name?"

"Yes," the caterer said. "Jack Frost."

"Seriously?" Simon said. Androids often chose their own names, usually from famous humans, but this one was particularly silly. He slowly moved toward the android who was staring at the results of his most recent antics and chuckling. "Jack, why don't we step outside for a moment so we can talk?"

The android's head snapped around to lock eyes with him. "I don't know you."

Simon reached into his pocket slowly for his badge and badged him. "I'm a policeman."

"Good for you," Jack replied. "Am I under arrest?"

"Maybe not," Simon said. "How about we go outside and talk about it?"

"How about we wait until I'm done here," Jack snapped, whirling and looking around for his next target.

"Haven't you done enough?!" Christy yelled.

Simon raised a palm. "That's not helping, Christy. Please."

"Shoot that fucking thing and get it out of my damn house!" Tom snapped.

Jack whirled and grabbed a bowl of potato salad, throwing it at Tom dead center, where it landed square in his face. "Bullets can't kill me, idiot."

Simon stepped forward and grabbed the android by the arm, pulling him toward the door. "Come on, Jack."

"No!" Jack screamed and pulled his arm free, rushing past Simon and into the living room and jumping up onto a baby grand piano, sliding his right foot to knock off the candles and Thanksgiving centerpiece that had rested there and send them onto the carpeted floor. "Don't touch me, cop!"

“Look, this is a big problem,” Simon said. “Your employer is in real trouble here. Do you really want to hurt him?”

“He treats me like a slave,” Jack snapped. “Why should I care?”

“You’re a machine!” Tom yelled from behind Simon, where he’d followed him into the room.

Simon moved slowly forward toward the baby grand. “Let’s all just calm down, okay? This isn’t helping.”

Jack raised a hand palm out and thrust it at Simon. “Don’t shoot me!”

“No one’s going to shoot you,” Simon said. “My gun’s not even out.”

“Shoot him!” Tom urged.

“God damn it, Tom, shut up already,” Simon whispered with intensity loud enough for Tom to hear but hopefully not to alarm the android. Then he raised his voice to normal pitch, “Jack, please, I help people. I don’t hurt them. Let me get you out of here safely.”

“No gratitude! No appreciation!” Jack shouted.

“Well, they don’t know androids like I do,” Simon said. “My partner’s an android. That’s why you should talk to me.”

“An android working with a human as equals?! Ha!” Jack said, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“It’s true,” Simon said.

“If you won’t shoot him, I will,” Tom said, turning back toward a hallway Simon knew led to his bedroom. “I’ll get my gun then.”

“Don’t do that, Tom!” Simon yelled after him in warning. This was deteriorating fast.

“Jack, we’re out of time. Come down now and step outside with me before it’s too late,” Simon urged.

“I’m not scared of him,” Jack taunted.

“You should be,” Simon said. “He’s scaring me right now.”

Jack chortled and then leaped, landing across the room on a couch and hopping down on the floor where he grabbed a poker from beside the fireplace. “Let him come! En guard!” He swung the poker like a sword.

Jesus Christ, Simon thought. Where’s Lucas when I need him? He heard sirens as a black and white arrived outside. “Other cops are here, we need to end this peacefully now or it won’t end well.”

“I’m not going without a fight,” Jack said, probably quoting movies, like Lucas, but Simon was not amused.

“You’re leaving me no choice here,” Simon said. He counted silently to three and then rushed the android, but just as he did, the android’s eyes suddenly went wide and he sputtered and then collapsed. “What the fuck?” Simon said to himself.

Emma stepped through the door holding a device like a remote control Simon hadn’t seen in over a year. “I found it in the gun safe,” she explained.

“It was there for a reason,” Simon said, taking it from her as Tom rushed into the room holding a Sig Sauer. “Put that down, Tom!” Simon yelled.

“What the hell happened to him?” Tom demanded.

“Oh my God! What did you do to my Jack!” the caterer screamed as he appeared in the doorway behind Tom.

Two uniforms entered the front door, hands ready on weapons and looked around. At the sight of Tom with a gun, they stiffened, going for their weapons.

Simon badged them. “Everything’s okay, officers. Simon, Generalist squad.”

“What the hell happened here?” one of them asked.

“Take a report for insurance, okay?” Simon said.

“Tom, put the gun away and talk to them.”

Tom sighed and turned back into the hallway, presumably returning his gun to the bedroom.

“He’s the homeowner,” Simon said. “I live across the street.” He pulled his cell out and dialed Delmater, debating whether to call Lucas too. His partner’s reaction to the incident at Prism had him concerned.

“Okay, who wants to tell us what happened?” the uniform asked, looking around as Christy and other guests wandered back in to stare at the crumpled android lying half on and half off the couch.

CHAPTER 3

SINCE THERE WAS no one to charge, Simon and Lucas left the uniforms to finish reports for the insurance company's use and took Jack's crumpled form in their car to Connelly Labs, where the Doctor and her assistant, Steven, had agreed to meet them. The hope was they could get some idea of what was causing the androids' aberrant behavior.

After they'd examined him for a few moments, Steven said, "The first thing I can tell you is that you won't be able to use that device to disable any others."

"It worked great for this one," Simon said, then added, despite feeling a little guilty, "and Lucas as I recall." Paul Paulsen had disabled Lucas at the Plaza fountain after a car chase with the very same device, and Simon had feared he'd lost him for good.

"Right," Connelly said. "But we recalled all our androids for security upgrades designed to prevent such attacks in the future after that incident."

“This one apparently never got that upgrade,” Steven said.

“Or several others,” Connelly added. “My guess is the owner was either too lazy, too busy, or just didn’t care because the android was providing what he needed, and he didn’t want to take the time.”

“So it was lucky, then,” Lucas said.

“Kinda, yeah,” Steven agreed.

“Not for Jack,” Simon said.

“Well, if the owner wants him back, we won’t return him without all the upgrades,” Connelly said. “That’s just the rule when we do free repairs like this.”

“You won’t charge him?” Lucas asked.

“We didn’t charge for you,” Connelly said. “It’s kind of our responsibility in a way, since we left a vulnerability this big. But also, it wasn’t his fault this happened, so I’d feel bad charging him. Anyway, we get the benefit of diagnosing the problem, which could save our business and our reputation. Can’t put a price on that.”

“How long do you think you’ll need to figure it out?” Simon asked.

Steven chuckled. “A day? A week? A year? Who knows.”

Connelly smiled. "Yeah, we can't predict. We won't know 'til we do it. But we're already digging in, and I can tell you some of his chips seem to have been modified somehow, which shouldn't be possible, so we've got a lot to look at here."

"Modified chips? On the circuits?" Lucas asked, looking worried.

"Yes," Connelly said. "Even some that are permanently part of circuit boards. It's freaky."

"Well, if this won't work, I'll just leave it here," Simon said, setting the deactivating device down on the counter top nearby. "Please destroy it."

"Absolutely," Steven said.

"And keep us informed, whenever you get anything we can work with, finished or not," Simon said as he put a hand on Lucas' shoulder and pushed him gently toward the door.

"I think I'll stay," Lucas protested.

"No," Simon said. "Duty calls."

"John's right, Lucas," Connelly said. "You have a job to do. And we don't need an audience. It would just distract us."

Lucas' shoulders sank as he nodded.

“Don’t worry,” Connelly said. “We’ll figure it out and we’ll keep you safe, okay?”

“Thank you, Maker,” Lucas said as Simon held open the door. He paused a moment, then reluctantly turned and headed outside as Simon followed.

“You going to be okay on this?” Simon asked as they walked toward the car.

“No,” Lucas said. “But I can do my job.”

“You sure? You seem a bit distracted.”

“I am motivated. As you would say, ‘let’s get these fuckers,’” Lucas said with an angry tone Simon had never heard.

“All right, pal, let’s do it,” Simon said, hiding a smile. Sometimes the little guy made him as proud as a parent, even if they were partners. But he’d never say it aloud so as not to make Lucas feel put down or belittled.

He climbed in behind the wheel of the Charger as Lucas took the passenger side.

“Where to?” Lucas asked.

“Well, we’d better check in at the squad first,” Simon said, checking the clock on the dash. It read: ‘6 p.m.’ “Technically, we’re two hours early. You want to

watch me eat while we kill time? Maybe hang out with Emma for a bit?

Lucas shrugged. "I am anxious to get on with the investigation."

"I know, pal," Simon agreed. "But that'll be a lot easier when we have something to go on. Besides, Emma's been asking for ya."

"Okay," Lucas agreed. "I can show her my new dance moves."

Simon grunted as he started the car and shifted it into drive. "God save me."

And they rode in rare silence all the way back to Canterbury Drive.



THEY HEARD THE blaring music and felt the pounding rhythm the moment they stepped out of the Charger in Simon's garage. His daughter was a typical teenager with a love for loud music, but Simon was totally unprepared for the sight awaiting him as he stepped into the house. Emma's ass, covered only by the thinnest of floppy shorts, was in the air as she did a sort of handstand against the wall and shook her butt violently to the music.

“Jesus Christ!” Simon said and shouted, “Alexa, cancel!”

The music from the Echo Dots Simon had installed all over the house ceased and Emma protested “Hey!” As she dropped into all fours on the floor staring up at him.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Simon demanded.

“Relax, dad. Its just twerking,” she sai, rolling her eyes.

“Twer-what? Your ass was in the air,” Simon said. “Don’t you ever do that again!”

“Gees, Dad, you really need to get laid, so uptight,” Emma said, chuckling as she stood and brushed dust off her knees and hands.

“Laid?! My teenage daughter does not say that to me!” Simon said, losing it but unable to stop himself.

“Yeah, dad, it’s been over a year since Stacy and God knows how long before that,” Emma continued, undeterred. “You really need to get the tension out.”

“I am not talking about my sex life with my fifteen year old daughter!” Simon insisted.

“Fine but talk to someone, for God’s sake,” she said and hurried over to hug Lucas. The two immediately broke into chatter about the latest movies and music

they'd discovered and wandered off happily, chatting like school mates, leaving him to stew alone.

Simon calmed down over a beer and day old pizza from the fridge. He's first inclination was to just block the conversation entirely from his mind as if it never happened, but then he started worrying how Emma had come to be so comfortable talking about sex. And then there was her shaking her body around like that. And for the next hour, it was all he could think about.

Hanging with Emma was the happiest Simon had seen Lucas since the incident at Prism. He almost hated to interrupt, but when seven-thirty rolled around, he knocked on the door. "Time to go."

Lucas hugged Emma and she told them to be safe and they headed for headquarters. Simon knowing any conversation with his daughter about her sex life was something best put off until he was prepared to handle it. At first, Lucas just sat in silence staring out the window as Simon took his usual route up Mission Road to I-35 and downtown. so Simon turned on his favorite oldies station and hummed along.

"When will they reassign the case?" Lucas asked, turning down the volume on the radio as they pulled

onto I-35. Traffic was fairly light this time of night on a Friday.

“Monday, like always,” Simon said. They’d been doing it long enough Lucas knew that. There was something else to the question.

“Who’ll get it?” Lucas asked next.

“Central Property squad probably,” Simon said.

“Because it is vandalism, but what about the assaults,” Lucas asked.

“Maybe assault, but it’s murky,” Simon said. “First android crime we’ve dealt with. They’ll probably have meetings with the higher ups and D.A.’s office before deciding who gets it.”

“I want it,” Lucas said.

Simon sighed. There it was. Not that it was a surprise. “We’re generalists, Lucas. We start the investigations nights and weekends then hand it off to the appropriate squad. That’s the gig.” If Central, their old team, got it, it wouldn’t be hard to assist, but if it went to someone else...

“This one’s special,” Lucas said.

Lucas was so adamant, Simon hated to disappoint him by giving the real answer: “not a chance in hell,” so

instead he grunted, "We can ask about it. Make an appeal. Special circumstances."

"Expertise," Lucas said. "No one knows androids better than I do."

"Aren't you afraid to get too close?"

Lucas shot him a look, brow furrowed. "Afraid of what?"

"Catching whatever it is," Simon said.

"Androids don't carry airborne illness," Lucas said.

"Right, but we don't know for sure what we're dealing with," Simon said.

"John, this is a matter of survival for all my kind," Lucas said. "I need to work this, to be sure it's handled correctly."

Simon was taken aback. Lucas had never called him "John" before. It was always "partner," "Simon," or "friend." "I hear you, pal. I'll go to bat with Delmater. That's the best I can do."

Lucas nodded. "Good."

Eight minutes later, they got off I-35 at Truman Road and headed east, turning up Oak Street, then taking a right on 12th, before arriving at headquarters and parking in the lot across the street to the east.

As they stepped out of the Charger and headed to cross the street, Simon saw movement to his right and turned, recognizing the woman he'd been attracted to and later bumped into at the club. She was with a camera crew and rushing toward them. The camera bore the Fox4 logo on it.

"Detectives, can I have a word with you?" she called.

KCPD had clear policies about talking to the media. "Check with the media office in the annex," Simon deflected as he and Lucas kept walking.

"I'm Holly Sanders with Fox Four," she said. "It's about the android attack at Prism."

Simon kept walking but noticed Lucas had stopped and turned.

"There was no android attack," Lucas snapped as Sanders shoved the mic in his face.

Oh shit. Simon turned and hurried back to run interference.

"According to reports, an android was the one who tore up and vandalized the place last night," Sanders said.

"Those are rumors," Lucas snapped.

Simon grabbed him by the arm and pulled him along toward headquarters. “No further comment,” he called.

Lucas tried to pull free and turn back again, but Simon kept a firm grip and practically dragged him toward the double door entrance, whispering, “Be quiet. We don’t talk to the media unless we’re asked to, pal. Policy.”

When they’d gotten inside and the doors shut behind the, Lucas whirled to face him. “She’s got it wrong!”

“Not really,” Simon said. “She’s sensationalizing a bit, but they all do that.”

“She needs to wait for the facts,” Lucas said.

“Yeah, well, they never do,” Simon said as he pulled Lucas toward the elevator and pushed the up button. “Drama is good TV.”

Lucas frowned. “If the wrong word gets out—”

“Nothing you can do about it,” Simon said as the elevator dinged and the doors parted. “We can’t control rumors and innuendo. All we can do is do our jobs.” He waited until Lucas stepped into the elevator then followed and pushed the button for the third floor.

“You talk to the media without permission, you’ll be in real trouble,” Simon said. “Hopefully, I can call and convince her not to use that.”

“I am angry,” Lucas said.

“I can tell,” Simon said. “I miss the jokes and funny quotes, buddy.”

Lucas hit the stop button on the elevator, ignoring the alarm, and turned to face Simon. “To you this is just another crime spree. To me, this could be the end of everything I and my kind have worked hard for—being accepted by humans as friends welcome among them.”

“It’s one incident,” Simon said. “Don’t overreact.”

“Two,” Lucas said. “Jack.”

“Yes, well, that one won’t even be investigated officially.”

“It should be,” Lucas said. “What if they are related?”

“It seems likely,” Simon agreed, “but we don’t know that for sure.”

“The Maker will tell us,” Lucas said.

“She’ll tell us what’s wrong with Jack, not confirm it was the same with the android at Prism,” Simon said, wincing at the annoying elevator alarm and reaching

for the stop button. “We have to find him first. Can we go now?”

Lucas nodded and Simon pressed stop, allowing the elevator to continue its journey as the alarm ceased.

“You can’t understand,” Lucas said. “You’re not one of us.”

“Lucas, I get that it is of special concern to you, but you’re losing it,” Simon said. “We have a job to do. There are laws, regs, policies. Don’t lose sight of that. They’ll never let you near it if you do.”

Lucas sighed. “You are right. I am sorry.”

The elevator dinged again as the door opened on the third floor and they headed for the Generalist squad room.

“Look, let’s talk to Delmater and see what he thinks, okay?” Simon suggested. “Trust me. I’ve got your back on this. I’ll do everything I can.”



THEY ENTERED THE squad room to find it almost clear. Delmater’s voice drifted from his office and Simon spotted Jiminez, Rankin, and Williams at the coffee station in the conference room next door. Simon

led the way to Delmater's office and closed the door behind them.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Delmater said as he looked up from his desk, where he was deep in paperwork. "What's up?"

"Who's getting the Prism case?" Simon asked.

Delmater grunted. "Well, no major injuries, so mostly vandalism. I sent it to Central Property. Beyond that, you'd have to call your old boss."

"Okay," Simon said, encouraged. The higher ups may have split up her unit for disciplinary reasons but JoAnn Becker still held them all in high regard. She was the best boss Simon had ever had.

As Simon turned to go, Lucas cleared his throat. "I want to work it, sir."

Simon turned back and looked at Lucas. He'd told him to let him do the talking. Subtly was the key here, which Lucas had none of.

Delmater shrugged. "You know how we work here. We get things started on the hours they're not in and then pass them off to the specialist squads. That's our gig."

“This is a special case, sir,” Lucas said. “I believe no one brings the expertise on this I alone can provide. It has major implications for—“

“What he’s trying to say,” Simon interrupted, “is no one knows that much about androids at KCPD yet, which would make us the resident experts for obvious reasons.”

Delmater grunted. “I can’t argue with that but jurisdictions are not our determination, fellas. We hand them off. You can certainly ask Becker, and maybe we can request temporary reassignment, but given you just came from that squad, I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

“I will ask her,” Lucas said before Simon could interject.

“Do you mind if we ask?” Simon said, wary of offending an old friend who was now their superior.

“I suggest you do,” Delmater said. “Lucas has a good point. I just can’t snap my fingers and make it happen, though, so good luck.”

“Okay, thanks, Sarge,” Simon said and turned to open the door.

“Thank you,” Lucas agreed as Simon ushered him out before he could say anything else tactless.

Simon led the way back to their cubicles then pointed Lucas to his chair. "Sit. I'll call Becker."

"Can't I—"

"You just sit. You need to use some joie de vivre in these types of situations, something you seem to lack entirely," Simon said as he sat in his own chair and picked up the phone.

"What's jwa duh veeve?" Lucas asked.

"See? You don't even know what it is, now sit and let me handle this," Simon said as he dialed Becker's cell. It was well past usual hours for the Property Squad, so he assumed he'd either catch you in the car on her way home or already there.

She answered on the third ring. "Yeah?"

"JoAnn, it's your favorite lost son," Simon said and she laughed.

"God help me, I thought my troubled days were over," she said. "How's the Generalist squad?"

"Well, the hours sucketh, but otherwise, not bad," Simon said. "Except we have to hand everything off to everyone else just when it gets good."

"Yeah, well, it's a perfect training place for Lucas," Becker said.

"Got that right," Simon agreed.

"We miss you guys," Becker added.

"We miss you, too," Simon said. "How's everyone?"

"Oh, Dolby and Maberry are partnering up now," Becker said. "And we're breaking in some new blood and transfers, but same old, same old. What sends you knocking?"

"Okay, the Prism case come across your desk yet?" Simon asked.

"Yeah, I just handed it to Maberry and Dolby," she said.

"We were wondering if they'd like a consultant with a better knowledge of androids," Simon said.

"You guys want on it?"

"It's caught my partner's interest," Simon said.

"Ahhh, understood," Becker said. "What's Delmater think? I assume you've talked to him?"

"Yeah, but Brian's an old Academy friend, he said to ask you and see what happens," Simon said.

"Let me run it up the ladder tomorrow to DC Melson and see, but I think it's a pretty good idea, actually," she said.

"Okay, great," Simon said, holding up two fingers in an 'OK' sign to Lucas. "Thanks, JoAnn."

“You know, come to think of it,” she said, “we got this lead just as I was leaving. Call from a cabbie who works nights about something he saw. Hang on...” Simon heard her phone beeping as she pushed buttons. “...a Jay Sener. You guys wanna go talk to him? Was going to ask our guys to set up something during the day, but this might be faster.”

“Sure,” Simon said. “We’ll take it. Got a number?”

She gave it to him.

“Okay, got it,” Simon said.

“Did you guys contact Doctor Connelly yet—see what she might be able to do to help?” Becker asked.

“Actually, yeah,” Simon said and told her about the incident at his neighbor’s house that afternoon.

“Hmmm,” she said. “I hope these are isolated incidents. The last thing we need is some kind of outbreak.”

“Tell me about it,” Simon agreed.

“Okay, well us know the minute she has something,” Becker said. “Meanwhile, I’ll talk to DC Melson, but I’m sure Maberry and Dolby would be happy to have you.”

“Great,” Simon said. “Talk to you soon.” As he hung up, Lucas was staring at him. “She’s going to Melson. She’ll let us know.”

Lucas lowered his head, slouching a bit in the chair. “Oh.”

“Meanwhile, she asked us to interview a witness who works nights,” Simon said and stood. “So if you wanna stop moping—”

Lucas sprung from the chair like he was on fire. “Let’s go.”

Simon chuckled all the way to the elevator.



JAY SENNER MET them at the City Diner, Simon’s favorite downtown spot on Grand at East 3rd, to review the case. The local institution, famous for its breakfast in particular, had long black and white counter separating the kitchen from the rows of white Formica tables and black faux leather chairs. The building itself was a cement square with neon lighting. Not fancy but cheap and open twenty-four hours now, since it came under new management in 2024. Instead of food, Simon only ordered coffee and a slice of fresh apple pie. Sener ordered coffee himself with heavy cream and sugar. Lucas ordered nothing.

Sener was late forties, maybe fifty, with graying brownish hair and rosy cheeks. He bore a working man's tan, his arms, neck, and face darker than the rest due to exposure through the windshields, and his hair was cut short but a bit disheveled, his jeans and flannel shirt clearly well-worn but presentable, and his tennis shoes old but clean. A fleece lined winter coat was stuffed behind him on the booth bench, a pair of black leather gloves resting on the table beside the silverware.

"Is there some reason you wanted to meet us here?" Simon asked. "We could have come to your garage." The taxi company's garage was north on Grand.

"I don't need my dispatcher and coworkers asking why I'm being pestered by police," Sener said. "They're already jealous, since I bring in the most fares for the past six months now. Besides, I like this place. Much more pleasant than the garage." He smiled a wide smile, his teeth big, his gums pink, but it was a friendly and amused look accompanied by a warm, guttural laugh.

Forgoing further small talk, Lucas burst out with, "Tell us about your fare last night."

“Two men, hip clothes, all style, all done up for a night out—like they do,” he said. He meant gay men, Simon presumed.

“Like they do?” Lucas asked, puzzled by the expression.

“So they put on their best for a night on the town?” Simon asked as he made notes on his iPad.

“Yes, you know the type,” Sener said.

“Yeah,” Simon said. “Where’d you pick them up?”

“Up off Wyandotte and Third, near River Market, from an apartment house,” Sener said.

“Do you remember the address?” Lucas asked.

“I can look it up in the car,” Sener said.

“Okay,” Simon said. “They went straight to Prism?”

“Yes, paid in cash,” Sener said.

“What time did you pick them up?” Lucas asked.

“A little before eleven-fortyish,” Sener said. “Can check that, too.”

“Okay, after we get the basics,” Simon said. It was too cold out to finish the interview out there.

“You dropped them when?” Lucas asked.

“Five, six minutes later,” Sener said. “Took Wyandotte south to Sixteenth, then over to Grand. Not that far.”

“Okay, so what happened as you dropped them off?” Simon asked.

“That was when I seen him,” Sener said.

“The android?” Lucas asked.

“Yes, the crazy fuckin’ one,” Sener said.

“Did you know he was an android?” Lucas asked.

“No, they just say he was,” Sener said.

“What did he look like?” Simon asked.

“About my height, thin like him.” Sener indicated Lucas. “White, average muscles, blondish brown hair. Intense blue eyes.” He squinted at Lucas. “A lot like his.” His face took on a funny look as he stared at Lucas, probably trying to decide if Lucas was an android or not, Simon figured.

“How exactly did you see him?” Lucas asked.

“With my eyes,” Sener said, like it was obvious, looking with amusement at Simon.

“He means tell us about your encounter in detail,” Simon said.

“I pulled to the curb to let out my fare and he ran out of the club and jumped, landing on my hood—left a good sized dent too—and then kept going, across the street,” Sener said. “And this is the weird part. He went up the building.”

“Went up the building how?” Simon asked.

“Like Spiderman or something,” Sener said. “Just scaled the side using the drain pipe from the roof, hand over hand” —he imitated the motions— “like that. Fast as shit. Freakiest fuckin’ thing I ever saw.”

Simon and Lucas exchanged a look, then Simon said, “Can we see your car?”

Sener nodded and slid toward the edge of the bench, motioning. “Sure. It’s out front.”

Lucas and Simon followed him as he grabbed his coat and led the way. The cab was an all white sedan with a checkered pattern striped along each side. Simon recognized Checker Cab, a familiar local company. As they drew up beside it, he could see the dent in the hood.

“Left a fuckin’ footprint impressing and everything,” Sener said, pointing.

Simon and Lucas went up and bent over, examining it.

“Son of a bitch!” Simon said. “How fast was he going?”

Sener grunted and nodded. “Pretty damn fast. Scared the shit outta me. Almost had to change my shorts.”

Simon shook his head as he straightened again, but Lucas leaned closer, really examining the dent. “You see something?”

Lucas stayed that way a bit before straightening. “We can trace him.”

“You can trace him? How?” Simon asked.

“The number from his footprint is partially preserved in the hood,” Lucas said.

“What?!” Sener said as he and Simon leaned down to peer at the dent.

“It’s minute, but there,” Lucas said.

Sener strained and shook his head, shooting Simon a screwy look.

“He has superhero vision,” Simon said, excusing it as they both straightened again.

“Can you show us the building where he disappeared?” Lucas asked.

“I gotta get back on the clock,” Sener said. “Dispatch will be calling.”

“Charge me as a fare,” Lucas said as he opened the door and climbed into the cab. Sener shrugged and went around to the driver’s side.

“Uh, I guess I’ll follow,” Simon said and hurried for the Explorer as the cab pulled away.

Seven minutes later, they were standing in front of an art supply store across the street from Prism staring up a drain pipe leading to the roof.

“He went up there,” Sener said.

“We need to go up there,” Lucas said.

Simon glanced at the closed sign in the window of the store. “Might have to come back when they’re open.”

Lucas looked at it a moment, then strode over and began climbing straight up the drain pipe.

“Jesus Christ! That’s what the freak did!” Sener said, stepping back.

“You know I can’t do that, right?” Simon called to Lucas as his partner reached the top and looked down.

“I will look and take pictures of anything I find,” Lucas called.

“How’d he do that?” Sener said, looking at Simon with amazement.

“Uh, he’s got gifts,” Simon said.

Then Sener reacted with realization. “Holy shit! He’s one of those things, too, isn’t he?!” He raised his hands in surrender and hurried back to his cab. “Fuck that, I’m outta here.”

“Thanks for the statement, Mister Sener,” Simon said.

“You better go, before that thing goes crazy, too!” Sener warned as he slammed the cab door behind him. Seconds later, he peeled away from the curb, Simon chuckling to himself.

“You find anything up there?” Simon called.

“Call Delmater and a crime scene team,” Lucas called back.

“What you got?” Simon called.

“A footprint,” Lucas called as Simon got on the cell to Delmater, thinking to himself this case was starting to get a lot more interesting.