

CHAPTER 10

[Warning: contains profanity. Do not read this if you are offended by cursing.]

Faint gray fingers of light smudged the eastern sky. Dawn, Brandt's favorite time to bag hackers. He enjoyed watching the poor bastards struggle to fight off sleep while trying to cope with the colossal shithammer he and Doppler dropped on them.

He glided their nondescript FBI sedan through an exclusive neighborhood's still, silent, empty streets, tracking along a predetermined route. Foot off the accelerator, car coasting in gear, he drove easily without headlights. He glanced at Doppler peering out over the dashboard, one of his ever-present cigarettes wiggling fitfully just beyond his thin, pale lips. The wiggling stopped as he took a deep drag, then it resumed as fitfully as before. Brandt almost smiled. Doppler was at his best when nervous, and he was definitely nervous about bagging a legend. That cigarette was the last in a pack he had steadily gone through since they met at 4:00 a.m.

Each street corner in the area was illuminated by a mercury-vapor lamp, but Marsh's house wasn't clearly visible. It was the middle one of three set well back from the curb, which gave good cover for entries—legal or otherwise. They expected this time to be as easy as when he'd gone to his mountain retreat. Brandt eased the car against the curb opposite the familiar red-brick, gray-tile-roofed bungalow to their left. He cut the engine as Doppler's grim blue eyes flicked up and down the street. As both men expected, not a creature was stirring. Doppler pulled a final drag from his last butt and stubbed it in the ashtray. "Let's go kick some fat, ugly ass...."

They moved across the street and along the cement walkway, heads steady, eyes moving in all directions. At the front portico Brandt turned his back to the door to scan the street for paperboys or crack-of-dawn joggers. Doppler reached into his coat to remove a well-worn leather packet the size of a nail-clipper kit. Hidden behind Brandt's huge physique, he unzipped it, squatted in front of the lock, pulled out a tumbler pick and tension tool, then went to work. Two minutes later the deadbolt released. The door moved until stopped by an inner chain. Doppler reached into his kit for another tool. The chain was bypassed in twenty seconds, and both men were finally inside.

While Doppler repacked his kit, Brandt eased the door shut with the back of his hand. He knew there would be no sign of forced entry because Doppler never left tracks. He was already one of the best lock men in the Bureau. Brandt turned to find his partner casing the living room with a pencil flashlight's narrow, laser-like beam. They followed the dancing ray as it played over chairs, couches, and tables, into a hallway. Nothing was moved since their previous break-in to scout the place out and form a plan of action, so they moved ahead confidently.

They tiptoed to Marsh's bedroom at the end of the hallway. Doppler moved the beam through the open door, over to a big mound centered on the bed. Satisfied that everything was in order, he put the flashlight back in his pocket and exchanged it for a handkerchief. He used the handkerchief both to close the door's inner lock, and then to ease it shut until its bolt clicked. He and Brandt drew .38's from holsters under their arms. "Make it good," he muttered as he stood aside, "but not like that last guy. Broken ribs are too obvious."

Brandt's huge white teeth flashed in his black face. "Don't worry partner, I'll be gentle." With that he lifted his size-fourteen foot and kicked alongside the doorknob. A reverberating crash rattled the silent house as the doorjamb split and the door itself slammed against the bedroom wall. As it swung open, Doppler moved through to flick on the light; then he hopped to the foot of the bed and planted his feet, extending his .38 down at Marsh. "Freeze, motherfucker!"

Brandt, meanwhile, regained his balance and rushed in behind Doppler. He found Marsh blinking in confusion at the sudden sound and light, unable to rouse himself to his peril. Despite Doppler's warning, Marsh reached for a pair of glasses on the bedside table. Brandt stopped his movement with a sharp backhand slap, grabbed a handful of dark hair, pinned a knee to his quarry's chest, then deliberately jammed the .38's barrel into the mound of flesh that was his cheek.

The gun barrel's well-aimed gouge dug into Marsh's trigeminal nerve, sending a bolt of crackling pain searing across his face. He winced and twisted beneath the hazy black blob holding him down, barely realizing this nightmare was real. Then he heard a booming, resonant voice. "Easy, shithead! One more move and you're dead!"

Suddenly, everything connected in his sleep-fuzzed brain. The whole sequence fell into place as he realized his dire predicament and cut loose with a shriek of absolute terror: "Eeeeeeeeeiiiiiiiiiiii!"

Brandt lifted his knee and brought the butt of his .38 down in a vicious arc. It struck Marsh in the solar plexus, driving the air from his lungs while paralyzing

his diaphragm. That left him curled in a fetal position, desperately trying to suck back any molecule of the wind he'd just lost.

Brandt and Doppler holstered their weapons, grabbed Marsh under the arms, then yanked his pajama-clad body onto the floor. In so doing, Doppler lost his grip, which caused Brandt to lose his. Marsh crumpled into a wheezing heap at their feet.

“Christ!” Brandt snapped. “Hold onto him!”

“He weighs a ton!”

They both reached down to get secure holds, then dragged Marsh across the bedroom floor to the bathroom. They put him near the toilet, where he laid gurgling and sputtering as air seeped back into his spasming lungs. While Doppler turned on the overhead light, Brandt cuffed Marsh's hands behind his back. Then he lifted him to his knees, grabbed another handful of hair, and yanked it. That left Marsh staring up bug-eyed at the sinister faces of his captors.

“Think you're a wise guy, huh?” Brandt shouted. “Like to play funny games? Well, I've got news for you, pal! This fucking game is over, and you just crapped out!”

He lifted the toilet seat and plunged Marsh's face into the bowl. Marsh's mouth slammed into the porcelain, splitting his lips top and bottom. Blinding pain shot into his nose and eyes as his top two front teeth broke in half and slid to the bottom.

After about a half minute underwater, his face was lifted. He came up spewing bloody water through his

split lips. “He’s making a mess!” Doppler howled, knowing it would be his job to clean it up later.

Brandt slapped Marsh hard on the ear. “Don’t get blood everywhere, asshole!” Then he snapped his head back again and was delighted to see the pain, fear, and wounds etched across his victim’s face, along with the missing front teeth.

“Now listen, and listen good! You been damn lucky for a long time; you ran us pretty ragged. But now we know who you are and where you live, and you won’t ever be able to hide from us again. So don’t even dream of hacking anymore, or we’ll find out about it and hunt you down. And the next time we come after your fat ass, we’ll be coming to kill you!”

Doppler then added his own threat. “And don’t think it’s not easy for us to croak a scumbag like you and get away with it. Nothing will happen to us for busting in here and roughing you up—it’s our word against yours. And it’ll be just the same if we come after you for keeps. So think about that long and hard if you ever get another urge to hack. Understand?”

Marsh tried to nod and say yes—anything to save himself from those maniacs. But before he could respond, Brandt jammed his head back into the toilet and shoved it all the way to the bottom, as if trying to squeeze it into the sewage system. Then he looked over at Doppler and winked. “Flush it.”

Doppler complied and Marsh’s body started heaving as the water rose to cover his ears. When the level got near the rim, Brandt lifted his head enough so there would be no spillover, but shoved it back down when the water started dropping. Finally, after more than a minute, Marsh’s thrashing body began to sag.

Brandt waited a few more seconds, then lifted his victim's head. Marsh came up spewing bloody water again as he coughed up several drafts. Brandt waited for the coughing to subside, then once again cuffed him on the ear.

"You see? That's how easy it is for us to kill someone. I keep you down a few more seconds, you're past tense. So don't miss the message I'm sending here. Unless your hacking career is history, you're history! You got my word on it."

He released his grip on Marsh's hair, allowing him to slide onto the floor, where he lay stunned and bleeding and gasping for air. Grinning with satisfaction, Brandt then turned to Doppler for a technical assessment. "Think we made our point?"

Doppler looked down at the blubbery pile of flesh quivering with shock at Brandt's feet. He always suffered a pang of deflation when the best part of the job was over. But this time was especially acute because he had anticipated it so intensely. "I'll go call," he said without emotion.

"Tell them not to rush. We need time to clean the mess."

Doppler smirked, knowing who would be required to do the lion's share of the cleaning. But what could he do? He was the junior partner. So he turned to go call the San Jose city police, while Brandt began the tedious enumeration of Marsh's legal rights.