

UNDER THE SHELL

David Wilkinson



Chapter 1

TWO RATS TUGGED at the index finger of a white hand protruding from the rubble. *Opportunities*, mused Jaq Pilakin as she tried to stamp on a tail, *dead bodies are full of them*. She managed to land her boot on one and the high-pitched squeaks caused the desired outflow of other rats that had invaded the rubble pile in search of flesh. They swarmed through the cordon holding back gawpers, where street kids landed metal rods on them, scooping up the twitching bodies and deftly tossing them over shoulders into sacks tied to their backs with string.

Opportunities.

Pilakin turned from the street boys, who had got what they came for, and looked at others still waiting for their share. Scappers gathering up anything they could reach through the cordon – twisted shards of metal and some charred rope; the van from Daskovich Biorendering with two intimidating men inside; the LRT Forensics people, touting for business; several reporters looking for something juicy; and some Engalise City Corporation 5th Right Engineers, who just wanted to tidy up and re-open the

street. And there were those like herself. The independent Freedom Protection Agents, slabs in hand, looking for a case.

“Hey, Jaq! Glad you got the message.”

Sam Lyttle picked his way over the rubble towards her with a big grin on his artificially tanned face. The same adolescent-like quiff of brown hair still hung limply over his forehead, interfering with his left eye. His boss had been threatening to take it off with a pair of scissors ever since he'd arrived at work five years ago. Pilakin was pleased he had managed to hang on to it in the three hundred odd days since she had been finally forced out of the Engalise City Corporation Freedom Protection Agency.

“Thanks, Sam. You're a nova.”

Despite being a detective, Sam still sported an ECC-FPA bomber jacket and carried his gun in a visible holster at the hip. He gestured at the white hand at their feet, so far the only sign that a freshly dead body lay beneath the rubble.

“Oh save it. I mean, I don't know why you'd want it – the guy just got unlucky. As soon as we got here we knew it was nothing we were interested in...”

“So disinterested that you haven't even shifted enough rubble to see his face.”

Sam lifted his hands in a mock defensive gesture. “Hey, we pricked his finger. DNA's not in our database so he's not going to be anyone we're interested in. Why break our backs digging him out if there's no money in it? Especially as there's plenty queuing up who will.” He smirked at her and continued. “Okay then, Miss Holier-than-thou. You going to get your hands dirty?”

She looked at the filthy pile of rocks for a moment before turning and stalking over to the cordon where a group of five

boys waited with metal bars for any more rats that might be about to make a break for it. She smiled as she saw one near the back lift a wallet from the pocket of the man next to him.

“Hey, lads. A credit each if you dig the body out for me and another if you find something with his ID on it.”

As they ran past her she grabbed the hand of the last and yanked away the stolen wallet. Handing it back to the surprised victim she let the boy go as the man swore. Pausing only to present him with a view of his middle finger, the boy scampered off after the others, who had already started to energetically heave off the rubble.

The wallet-man’s stream of invective grew more colourful and Pilakin suspected he may be about to jump the cordon. If that happened, others might too, and there would be chaos. Voice raised, she pulled her arm back so that the lapel of her jacket rode up to reveal the concealed FPA badge and then rested her hand on her gun.

“Of course, you’re free to say anything you like, sir. But please watch the threats or I may have to detain you for a Tenth Right violation.”

He switched targets and began hectoring her instead about the Sixth but, after seeing the look on her face, he threw up his hands in frustration and walked away. Pilakin smiled at a woman who was grinning at the exchange. She wore the uniform shirt of the electronics store right opposite. Pilakin gestured at the scene.

“You see it?”

“Sure. We heard the usual bang up top and the falling rubble. It sounded close but the wailers didn’t go off so no-one scattered ’til the last minute.”

“Really? No sirens?” Pilakin tapped on her slab’s screen.

“Nope. Shit City maintenance as usual. Just a few seconds to get under awnings but you know how it is out here on the rim. Everyone’s a cockroach when the rubble’s coming down. *He* didn’t seem to have the sense of it though – looked like an inny, too. He still had a couple of seconds and everyone shouted at him to get under. He seemed to twig and made to run but his legs collapsed under him. Then the stuff landed. Nasty. I realised as soon as it happened we were going to get half an hour off while you guys did your thing so I went for coffee.”

“No one tried to dig him out? Not interested in the reward of a thankful inner-dweller?”

The woman wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

“Didn’t stand a chance. He’s blatantly dead and the biorendering guys around here like to guard their business, if you get me...”

Pilakin nodded, handing a business card and a credit note to the woman.

“You think of anything else, you call me, okay?”

“Sure but how long ’til I can get back to the shop? Boss in’t gonna pay when no punters can get in.”

“Shouldn’t be long now.”

“But this is a breach of my freedom to move.”

“Well, if you can find the Imperial soldier who fired the shell, you can sue him...”

“Hey, lady!”

One of the boys she had hired to shift the rubble was standing near the top of the pile, waving at her with a triumphant look on his face and the dead man’s wallet in his other hand. She sighed as she walked gingerly back up the mound. The brief interview had suggested this was just another tragic accident of

war, all too common in a city under siege. Paying these boys now was just going to be another waste of her dwindling resources. When she reached the top she took the wallet and distributed the necessary credit notes.

Finally looking down at the body, she noticed the face had a pallor out of keeping with the more expensive gold edging on his shirt collar. She used her slab to take pictures as several the other agents muscled in to do the same. She pushed them away.

“Fuck off. You want pictures, you pay.”

They grumbled but stood back, waiting for her to lose interest. She logged the image but refrained from paying to run it against any databases until she'd looked over the wallet. Inside were pictures of a family, some credit cards, money and a business card. She stared at the name and her heart pumped with growing excitement.

Jeremiah Flow.

Bloody hell.

This changed everything.

Chapter 2

JEREMIAH FLOW.

It was certainly an easy name to remember and Pilakin had thought so the previous week when she'd found it on the Kristani Syndicate's revised hit list. The Kristanis wanted him dead and now he was. Surely more than coincidence, however much it appeared to be an accident.

"My case!"

She held up her badge to muttering and expletives from the other agents clustered around the scene. As soon as the name appeared in the wallet, she had dropped it in her haste to grab her slab and log a stake with Central Records. Of course this didn't mean others would not seek out the dead man's relatives and try to get a contract. But it did mean that, for a small fee, Central would lock all the information they held on him for 48 hours. Hopefully, no one else knew his identity yet.

She could see the ECC Agents were on the verge of dismantling the cordon and so frantically waved at the forensics team to come over. Smiling, two of them picked their way over the rubble with a stretcher. Pilakin watched them approach, not leaving the side of the body for fear of someone stealing it.

“Hi guys. I want a full post mortem.”

The taller of the two unhooked a computer from his belt.

“No problem. Do you have an account with us, Agent...?”

“Pilakin. No, I don’t.”

“Then I’m afraid we’re going to have to ask for full payment up front.”

Dammit, thought Pilakin, *this is going to be pricey.*

The man’s computer buzzed and a flimsy piece of paper spewed out of the front. The ludicrously small typeset left her in no doubt it was a contract.

“You’ll need to sign.”

She stared at the tiny writing for a moment and then up at the man. His ID card showed him to be a doctor and her gut said he was honest.

“I can’t read all this. What’s going to piss me off?”

He laughed shortly and his eyes twinkled.

“2600 gets you the service. Any additional costs incurred will be charged before the report is released to you.”

“So I get nothing until I pay some extra amount currently unknown?”

The man shrugged. Glowering whilst sighing pointedly, Pilakin signed.

The hoisting of the body on to the stretcher was clearly the moment the ECC Agents had been waiting for to lift the cordon. As they rolled up the tape, Corporation engineers moved forward on a dump-truck with grapple to clear the rubble, and the pent up crowds swirled around them. Inside the tape it had been easy to forget that this blocked street would have been causing people jams for streets around but, despite the jostling,

she managed to keep her eyes on the body being carried away and breathed a sigh as it was loaded into the forensics vehicle.

“Fucking bitch!”

Pilakin jumped as the insult came right next to her ear. The Daskovich Biorendering van had pulled up and a very large driver with cauliflower ears and an overhanging brow lent out of the window. He was a prize specimen of the body-snatchers who roamed the City, harvesting the bodily chemicals of the dead. He had a look of rage on his face and he was close enough that his spittle hit her cheek. But she had a dozen years of experience, a gun in her pocket, hundreds of witnesses and several other agents still in the area. The latter, despite the competitive nature of their work, would not allow a fellow agent to get a beating. She smiled coldly at the ape-man.

“I do hope you’re not going to threaten me, sir.”

“Nope. I respect the rights of others – even body-snatching whores. Bet you shag it later. You’re so ugly, no one living would have you.”

Pilakin blew the man a mocking kiss as he revved the van’s engine and drove it into the crowd, using the loud horn like a force field to carve his way through. She exhaled with relief as she took her hand off the butt of her gun and found it was shaking.

Shit.

She needed a drink.

THIRTY METRES DOWN the street she found a gut-rot bar and, having downed a measure of the filthy, oily stuff, ordered another so as to have reason for remaining on the bar stool. As the fumes cleared her head she connected her earpiece to the call

service and dialled a number. The harassed looking man on her slab's screen looked familiar.

"ECC Maintenance Despatch;" he said, "what do you want?"

"Iovanni Chung, please."

A moment later the boyish features of a younger man appeared. He smiled at her and, despite herself, she couldn't help but smile back. He leaned forward and spoke quietly, as if he didn't want others hearing.

"Hello, Jaq! What's up? Finally realised you can't live without me?"

"Not quite that desperate yet, little man. Will you help me for old time's sake though?"

He leaned back and resumed speaking in a normal tone of voice.

"Sure. Go for it."

"I've just been at a rubble site. Location.... oh hell, wait a minute..."

She fumbled to split the screen in two and find the coordinates but Iovanni beat her to it.

"+0725, -6798, +0002? Yeah, we've got people out there now."

"Okay, thank you, but I want to know where the impact was. You got another job on the same z-line?"

"Hang on... yes. Same x and y. The z is +0247 - private apartment in the Southwind Building. Number 4263."

"Thanks, Vannie."

"Hey, joking apart, maybe we should go for a drink on Sa..."

She disconnected the call, picked up the tiny glass of gut-rot and made the mistake of examining the contents. Flaky bits of something swirled around as she moved it. The oily consistency

and bubbly film meant the alcohol was cut with something other than all-too-expensive water to keep the price down. Her sensibilities revolted but she downed it anyway.

PILAKIN LEFT THE bar and headed to the Southwind Building, where the explosion had hit. She stopped off on the way there to look at the siren that had failed to sound the alarm. Bored kids often smashed up Corporation property and she fully expected to find the yellow and black striped metal cabinet in pieces. However, as she inched out along a ledge ten metres or so above the street below, she could see the metre-cube appeared fine. That was odd. Closer inspection showed the doors were still locked shut and the siren appeared to be in one piece. She reported it to the commission as broken anyway, with some justification given the witness statements, and annotated the report with a request for service update.

Down below, the clear-up gang had almost finished scooping up the rubble. Surging crowds of people swirled past it like ants around a fallen leaf.

She stopped and caught hold of herself. Where had that simile come from? Leaves she had seen on, what were they called? Trees... in Gursky Park. But ants? What were they? She shook her head as the alcohol made a fresh effort to hijack her balance. Turning to face the wall, she inched along it slowly back to the safety of the public stairwell and reluctantly resumed her climb up another 235 metres.