

Trinity

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the
Writer

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Chapter One

It looked like the girl might have been drunk, but maybe she was being molested. It was difficult to tell. One of the lads was on the ground doing something with his mobile phone. He could have been checking his messages but he could have been filming, you never know. The other lad had his arms around the girl and she might have been struggling but, then again, she might just have been having difficulty standing, especially if she was drunk. It didn't help that it was after sunset and the light was fading fast.

I watched them carefully as I got closer, wondering if I should get involved. The three of them were on a patch of waste ground next to the footbridge over the creek, right next to the footpath, so the time and place seemed to suggest it was all perfectly innocent. But then why would a teenage girl be drunk so early in the evening? It wasn't as though the two teenage lads were drunk, in fact they looked sober. So why did they have a drunk girl with them? Maybe she was drugged? Maybe by them? Or maybe not.

I looked around, there was no one else in sight. The two lads looked up when they heard my footsteps then the one on the ground went back to his phone and the other let go of the girl and she sank to the ground and sat there, giggling. There were none of the movements that would suggest anything untoward was happening. No sudden movements, no whispering, no looking guiltily innocent. Just three kids out of doors in the early evening.

The lad standing up pulled out his phone as I approached and the girl said something to him that I couldn't make out but her voice sounded ordinary, not panicked or alarmed. Then she grabbed his waistband and used it to pulled herself to her feet and draped her arms around his neck. I toyed with flicking Ruby off and going over to ask if all was well but if all was well they'd resent my intrusion since teenagers don't like having adults around and if there was a problem they couldn't handle they'd probably ask me for help. Certainly, the girl showed no sign of being upset, although if she was drunk she may have been in trouble and not realised it.

“Just because a girl is with two boys, it doesn't mean she's in trouble,”

I thought to myself as we walked past.

Up close they were younger than I had thought, early teens rather than late teens, which made the drunkenness of the girl less likely. On the other hand, young teenagers do experiment. An older girl, say in her early twenties, would have more experience of life and would be less likely to be drunk and outdoors in the early evening.

So, I did what any sober, respectable, suburbanite would do. I walked on by and pretended to ignore them even though I was tensely ready for any sign that intervention was needed. There was no sign so Ruby and I kept going and crossed the footbridge. On the far side, Ruby decided to investigate one of the trees and I stood behind it and looked back at the teenagers. The boy on the ground was still on the ground, still doing things with his phone although he wasn't pointing it up at the girl so he wasn't filming her. The girl was leaning against the other boy, with her arms around his neck and he was sideways to her, looking down at his phone. All perfectly innocent.

They'd gone when Ruby and I came back that way towards the end of our walk although it was now dark. I supposed it was possible that the girl's body was now lying in the long grass under the footbridge but it was far more likely that the three of them had gone home or to whatever party they were going to. One of my, too many, personality flaws is a tendency to imagine the bad rather than the good and this is fuelled by my frequent news updates which always focus on the bad and never the good. 'Girl Raped And Killed By Two Sadists' is a frequent news item whereas I've yet to see 'Girl Has A Nice Evening Out With Two Friends And Goes Home Safely'. I suppose that's partly because the latter is too long for a news feed headline but, even if it were condensed, there would be literally thousands of such headlines every day. After all, most people go out and have a good time and don't come to any harm.

"Honey, I'm home," I called, opening the front door.

I flicked Ruby off and stowed her handset in the slot by the door to recharge. I like to go for a walk in the evenings outside the complex but, because I'm mindful of the frequent news headlines on assaults, attacks, shootings, robberies, rapes and murders, I don't like to go

alone so I take Ruby with me. She looks just like a real dog, except possibly she glows a little too brightly in the dark, so I feel safer even though she'd be of no use if I actually was assaulted. Being not very imaginative, I call her Ruby because of her model code, RB-i, which is short for 'Retriever Bitch - interactive'.

"Enjoy your walk?" asked Claude. I sometimes called him 'Honey' since it amused me.

I told him about the incident with the teenagers and he retrieved seven recent news items relating to assaults on women and girls in the last five days.

"You were right to be watchful," he said. "By the way, you had two messages while you were out."

"Oh no," I groaned. I knew who they'd both be from, my agent and my husband. They were the only two people who ever contacted me after curfew.

"Would you like me to read them to you?" asked Claude.

"Oh I suppose so," I said. "Give me Damien's first."

Damien was my husband and, as usual, he was brief and to the point.

"Wanna get together over the weekend?" he'd said.

"Do you want to reply?" asked Claude.

"Tell him I'll let him know later in the week," I said. "Have I anything scheduled for the weekend?"

"You're having dinner with Rania Ferrantino of the Coberg Gallery on Saturday at five," said Claude.

"Right, yes," I said, thinking. "I can't miss that. Remind me to decide about Damien on Wednesday and keep Sunday free, just in case."

I could always go to Damien's after dinner on Saturday, if I was in the

mood.

“And Annabel?” I asked.

“Annabel said she has an order for six more, if you can do them by Friday, if not then forget it.”

“Six?” That was pushing it, especially in four days.

“Yes,” said Claude. He rarely made mistakes.

“OK, I'd better give her call, then.” I said.

Claude phoned Annabel for me.

“Hey Annabel,” I said, when Lorenzo answered. Annabel had gone to the trouble of thinking up a cute name for hers. “I got your message, who wants six?”

“It's two outfits,” she said. “Geng Hao want four and Sergey Vanofov want two. Can you handle them or shall I pass them on to someone else?”

“How long are they?” I asked.

“All five seconds,” she said.

Five second promos usually took around three hours to create so I could probably do them in two and a half days. Less if there was a product overlap which was likely as Geng Hao wanted four.

“What's my work schedule like for the rest of this week?” I asked Claude

“You have two five second promos, two eight second promos and a sixty second artwork,” he told me.

“OK Annabel,” I said. “I can do them. Send me the specs overnight. What's the payment?”

“On their way,” she said with an audible sigh of relief which made me wonder if she actually did have anyone else available to do the videos. “I’ve added a fifty percent rush order surcharge and payment up front.”

This was why I had an agent and Annabel was one of the best. I wasn’t cheap at the best of times and a fifty percent surcharge was respectable. Very respectable.

“Reschedule the artwork for next week, Claude,” I said, after he broke the connection to Annabel, “and remind me to tell Rania it’ll be late.”

“Will do,” he said.

I earned my living from the short advertising videos that littered everything on the internet so when push came to shove the artistic pieces for galleries simply had to wait. Admittedly I could make a lot of money from collectors and art buffs but they were few and far between and I always put the bread and butter first since jam on its own isn't enough. Rania wouldn't be too pleased since the gallery was her bread and butter but that's the way life goes and she knew my philosophy of life, well at least that part that concerned her.

“Get me a coffee, would you?” I said to Claude, settling back in my recliner to watch the Go Championships on the wall.

“Your usual?” he asked, standing up.

“Hmmm, no, I’ll have the chocolate vanilla coffee this time,” I said. “This is going to be a good week so I can afford a treat.”

He smiled and rolled off and started to make noises in the kitchen.

Since the rules for Go changed, it's no longer possible for games to end in a draw but the game I was watching, between Chen Ya-ting, the Taiwanese Champion, and Jelena Kukk, the Estonian Champion, effectively ended in a draw. Technically it's called 'Eternal Life' and is a situation where the two players get themselves into an endlessly repeating cycle with no outright winner and it's very tedious to watch.

“Anything else available?” I asked when Claude reappeared with my coffee.

“There's a feed of the new Life Art Exhibition from Harare,” he said, “that might interest you.”

“OK,” I said, sipping my coffee, “let's see it.”

“This is a piece called 'Rainbows At Sunset',” said Claude, changing the wall to the Harare Exhibition. “Apparently the programmer created a simulation of rainbows using the behavioural patterns of bird flocks.”

I had to admit it wasn't that good. It was conceptually artistic but the actual implementation was basically like watching a flock of multi-coloured birds flying around. I'm not boasting but I had done better in a seven second promo for the Danish Animatronic Zoo.

“Can it,” I said, after giving the Exhibition two minutes of my time. “Play something mellow and give me an abstraction. Fancy a game of Boggle?”

The sound of a melodic electronic saxophone overlaid on falling rain gently filled the room and the wall turned to random shapes in pastel colours sliding over each other in a three dimensional field.

“I'm afraid I can't,” said Claude. “I have an upgrade coming through and need to restart.”

“Oh what a nuisance,” I said. “Well, if you must.”

Claude walked over to the environment control board and switched the house to fully automatic. I didn't like that setting as things happened unexpectedly but it meant the place was fully protected while Claude wasn't around to manage things.

“How long do you think it will take?” I asked.

“Approximately twenty three minutes and seventeen seconds,” he said.

“What version will you be?” I lose track of all the updates to all the devices in the house.

“CL-D331 v-914.3” he said.

'CL-D' stood for 'Caucasian, Light - Domestic' and I'd chosen 'Light' because I like my men to be blonde and on the paler side. I disliked looking at Annabel's holobot since he was Latino and to me just looked a little unwashed but she prefers the darker types. The company had almost eight hundred styles of Caucasian Lights available and I happened to like the 331s. They seemed a little friendlier and more, I don't know, easier to live with, I suppose. Personal taste is like that.

“Will there be any visual update?” I asked, but it was too late, Claude had disappeared.

It was very lonely with Claude gone. The house seemed very empty so after a few minutes I got Ruby from beside the front door and turned her on and set her to 'Playtime'.

“Here, Ruby,” I called and she started to bark excitedly. “There you go, fetch!”

I jerked her handset and the ball flew across the lounge and Ruby pelted after it, barking, her tail wagging enthusiastically. She skidded on the smooth floor and scrabbled to get a foothold then grabbed the ball in her mouth and ran back to me, panting. She dropped it at my feet.

“Good girl,” I said and scratched her head.

She pranced around a bit, waiting for me to toss the ball again so I did, making it bounce off the wall to try to confuse her. It didn't work and she caught up with the ball just before it disappeared into the hall.

“Change the music,” I said as the constant rainfall was beginning to annoy me.

Ruby ran back, trying to bark with the ball in her mouth and dropped

it at my feet again. The music hadn't changed.

“Oh faf,” I said irritably. I'd forgotten Claude wasn't there.

I paused Ruby and got up and went over to the wall controls. It had been so long I'd forgotten how to use them. I waved my hand over the console and it lit up.

“Ohhh,” I said, wondering what to touch. “What does this do?”

I touched 'Switch' and the room lights went out so I touched it again and they came back on.

“Oh to hell with it,” I said and touched 'Off' and the wall disappeared, leaving only bare plastic. It would have to do.

“I really ought to figure out how to do all this stuff myself,” I said to myself, since there was no one else to talk to. “What if Claude shuts down for a long time?”

Actually that would be a nightmare. He did all the cooking, cleaning and washing and tracked all my schedules as well as managing the house itself and the security. Without him I'd be helpless. Trapped in my own house with absolutely no idea of how to even open the door, let alone feed myself. Claude even did the shopping, ordering whatever supplies we needed and doing my accounts as well so that we never ran out of anything. I couldn't live without him, to be honest.

I flicked Ruby off and put her controller back beside the front door. I stood there for a few moments, studying it. It was flat and featureless.

“How do I open it?” I wondered.

Ordinarily, Claude opened it, either because I'd told him to or because he knew I was going outside. Presumably there was a manual override of some sort.

“What do they do?”

I'd noticed a pair of small faintly lit squares beside the door. One was

faint red and the other was faint grey. I touched the red one. It turned green and the door clicked but didn't open so I touched the grey one. The door slid open.

“Hey, frosty,” I said in approval.

I stuck my head through the doorway and looked around, It was dark and quiet, which was only to be expected since it was night time and the secured perimeter didn't let anyone through after curfew. I touched the green square and nothing happened so I touched the grey one again and the door slid shut. The green square started to flash so I touched it and the door clicked and it turned red again.

“I guess that locked it,” I said and went back into the lounge.

I didn't like the look of the plastic wall so I went back to the control panel and touched 'On' and the abstract shapes reappeared. So did the irritating rainfall and sax music. I wrinkled my nose at it in a kind of snarl but left it alone. It was useless trying to work it out on my own. I couldn't even access the instruction files without Claude.

“Give me a news update,” I said.

Of course Claude didn't since he wasn't there.

“Jesus,” I said.

I had no idea what to do with myself. It was like being cut off from my senses.

“Hello, Trina,” said Claude. “Please wait.”

I sighed with relief. Claude was back! Well almost. A faint blue line was slowly crawling up his body, indicating the progress of his update. I sat and watched, bored by the whole process. Still, he was easy on the eye, which was why I'd bought him. “Update complete,” said a soft, female voice which made me cringe. What was a female doing in my house, talking about my Claude?

“I'm updating your profile settings,” said Claude.

He looked subtly different. Perhaps it was something in the shape of his eyes? He seemed more ... knowing, if that makes sense.

He smiled at me.

“Update successful,” he said. “Please say my name for voiceprint product update registration.”

“Claude,” I said.

“Hello, Trina,” said Claude. “Would you like me to change the music?”

“God, yes,” I said. Claude and I had always been on the same wavelength, which is fairly inevitable, I suppose, since I'd had him for six years and his AI software had learned almost everything there was to learn about me.

The rainfall faded away although the sax music continued and a backing track faded in with a soft bass line.

“We have an incoming message with multiple attachments,” he said, “from Annabel.”

“Ohh, that must be the product specs for the promos,” I said. “By the way, I opened the front door while you were away, check it's locked, would you, honey?”

“Yes it is,” he said. “Would you like to see the attachments now?”

“Yes,” I said. “Just in case there are any special difficulties.”

He displayed the two sets of specifications from Sergey Vanofov on the wall. One was for a night light with a surround of simulated Russian Oak and the other was for simulated Russian Fox pillow cases. Neither would be a particular problem, although the videos were to be in Spanish since they were targeting South America. This wasn't a problem either as I had one of the best real-time voice translation apps on the market.

“There's a news update as well,” said Claude.

“Show me the Geng Hao specs first,” I said.

He put all four on the wall, minimising the Sergey Vanofov specs. Three of the specs were for fashion clothes made from bamboo which would be a piece of cake as I could create one video and simply tweak it to fit each of them. In fact, I thought I had a video from a few months ago that I could modify rather than create a new one. It was the fourth that was going to be a bit of a problem and I'd have to get in someone to help, since what they wanted wasn't my strong point.

For some reason Geng Hao wanted a video that would indirectly influence voters in the upcoming elections in Romania in favour of the Democratic Forum for Romanian Chinese Integration. That in itself wasn't surprising since political influence was rife, even though it was supposedly illegal. Politicians create the laws and, because they all want to be able to influence voters, they build in sufficient loopholes to allow voters to be influenced indirectly while looking as though they were stamping it out. What was surprising was that Geng Hao wanted me to do it since my reputation is solidly grounded in tangible manufactured products and this sort of thing is way outside my area of expertise.

“Hmmm,” I said. “Any thoughts, Claude?”

“I think you should see the news update,” he said, “as it concerns this complex.”

I, and he, lived in a house in a secure complex. Each of the thirty or so houses have their own security and the complex itself has secure fencing and surveillance. Access is strictly controlled through face recognition, apart from the occasional contractor who gains access through the use of one time codes, issued by the security company. It's an irritating process but that's the price you pay to be safe. I possibly found it more irritating than others in the complex because I'm not quite as security conscious. I am, for example, the only one who goes for walks outside the complex. Claude never went out since he was the Domestic version.

“OK,” I said, my mind on the Chinese in Romania, “flash it.”

Claude put the news feed on the wall on top of the Geng Hao specs and my heart went cold.

“Girl Raped and Killed,” it said.

According to the feed, it happened an hour and forty minutes earlier, inside the complex.

Chapter Two

The whole thing had been caught live on a security camera and I watched the entire feed, all three minutes of it, sick with horror.

“I should have called Veilance, I should have called Veilance,” kept running through my head.

Veilance was the security company that policed the town although AllSecurity managed the security for the complex. Veilance provided a low level of security, rather like the old police forces used to before they were privatised but they had limited resources since they were funded by local taxes and, demographically speaking, most of the townsfolk were relatively poor. Those who lived in the various secure complexes in the area were, demographically speaking, relatively well off. Like me.

The three of them had climbed over the six metre high wire perimeter fence and, once inside the complex, the two boys had turned on the girl, forcing her into a corner, in full view of the camera, where they raped her then killed her with what looked like a large carving knife. According to the timestamp in the top right hand corner the whole thing had taken some forty minutes although only the edited highlights were in the feed. There was a link in the feed to the full video for those who wanted to see every gory detail. Such things are popular these days.

I sat frozen in my chair, horrified at the idea that I could have prevented the girl's death if I had only been more conscientious, more aware of the little scenario I'd seen on my walk.

“Where did it happen?” I asked Claude in a strangled voice. “It looked familiar.”

“Seaview Mews,” he said. Seaview Mews was the next street but one from my unit.

“Didn't anyone hear her screams?” I asked. I might even have done if I had been home.

In fact, going by the timestamp of the security camera, the boys had run off within a minute or so of me walking past Seaview Mews on the way home. Surely I would have heard their footsteps?

“There is no report of that,” said Claude, calmly. He was always calm.

“Play it again,” I instructed.

Admittedly there was an element of morbid fascination but there was something nagging at my mind.

“Freeze,” I said suddenly, about fifty seconds into the video. I heaved a sigh of relief. For a split second the girl's face and one of the boy's faces were visible. They were not the teenagers I'd encountered on my walk. They were older and the girl's hair was noticeably shorter.

“Incoming multi-recipient,” said Claude. “Do you want to view it or continue the news feed?”

“Hold the feed but display the incoming on top,” I said.

It was Vera Swanson, who lived in Seabreeze Mews, the street between mine and Seaview Mews. She was visibly agitated and had sent her message to everyone who lived at the complex.

“I've just seen the most awful news feed,” she gasped, displaying a link to the feed at the bottom of the window, “I watched it again and again and I'm so upset. It could have been any one of us, we're not safe in our own houses!”

She rambled on for a couple of minutes and the message ended with her in tears.

“Another incoming,” said Claude.

“Display it,” I said.

It was from Elly Yangtze, current head of our Community Residents' Group.

“I don't know if any of you have seen this news feed,” again the link was displayed, “or Vera's video but I am calling an emergency residents' meeting tomorrow evening at seven to discuss improving our security. I'm sure we are all desperately sorry for that poor, poor girl but the feed clearly shows that it is possible for intruders to gain access to our complex and we need to ensure that this sort of thing can never happen again. After all, that's why we all live here, to be safe.”

“Confirm my attendance, Claude,” I said. “And get me a coffee, would you.”

By the time my coffee was ready there had been four more messages from other residents, all broadly much the same as Vera's. The complex was for women only and so we tended, as a group, to be a bit on the nervous side when it came to security.

“Thanks, honey,” I said when my coffee, ordinary coffee this time, arrived. “Show me that news feed again.”

There was something bugging me about it.

“Go back to the beginning,” I said, halfway through. Claude restarted it for me.

“Why would two guys persuade a girl to climb over a six metre security fence and then rape her under a security camera?” I asked. “Wouldn't it be a lot easier and safer to stay outside the complex where they wouldn't be seen?”

“I can't find any relevant results for your question,” said Claude.

“It doesn't make much sense,” I said. “I guess I could understand it if they came in to do some robberies or something but they don't make any attempt to. Look, as soon as the girl is over the fence they drag her under the camera. Why?”

“I can't find any relevant results for your question,” said Claude.

“Hmmm,” I said.

I thought about it for a few minutes while drinking my coffee but it still didn't make sense. If you planned to do something nasty like that then surely you would plan to get away with it as well and everyone knew that these secure residential complexes had fairly high levels of security so the likelihood of being caught was very high. On the other hand, if they got over the fence to do something else and got carried away there would surely be some other behaviour before they attacked her. And the girl had clearly climbed the fence willingly, she hadn't been coerced. And why bring a large carving knife anyway? There are more effective, more easily concealed weapons readily available.

“Get the full video for me,” I said. Maybe there was more information in that which had been edited out.

It was pretty gross. There were about three minutes of footage showing the trio arriving at the fence and making their way over it then the rest was pretty much snuff porn which I got Claude to fast forward through since I didn't particularly want to watch it. Still, according to the timestamp nothing had been edited out and the full video showed that the girl was attacked as soon as she got to the bottom of the fence.

It did not make any sense.

If they'd been drugged up, and there wasn't any sign of that, why would they climb over the fence? The girl looked as though she knew the boys, so why climb over the fence?

“Can you access the security camera live feeds?” I asked after a while.

“All but the one in Seaside Boulevard,” said Claude after a moment. “It's offline for repairs.”

“Display the Seaview Mews feed,” I said.

Seaview Mews was deserted. Where were the security people? Where was the girl's body? The news feed had gone out at least forty minutes ago and there was still a lot of messaging going back and forth amongst the residents about it but on the street, nothing was happening. It was like it had never happened.

“This is ridiculous,” I said. Claude smiled. His AI system had learned very quickly that I liked it when he smiled and so he smiled at every opportunity, even when it wasn't appropriate.

“Hold on,” I said. “Display the full video as text.”

Everything on the net is digital which means that it is stored and moved using electricity and magnetism to represent binary codes, noughts and ones, basically. Everything, literally everything, on the net was essentially just combinations of noughts and ones. Video, sound, text, medical records, bank accounts, you name it, just noughts and ones. And since there are only limited possible combinations of noughts and ones, what any particular pattern of noughts and ones represented depended on what you were expecting. If you were expecting a video you feed the noughts and ones into video software and it showed them as a visual image. If you were expecting sound you fed the noughts and ones into sound software and it played it as sound.

The thing is, if you took, say, someone's medical records and put them through some video software you wouldn't get an interesting video, you'd get garbage, which is why no one ever does that. But, if you do, you sometimes find interesting things. Like, for example, when you put a video into some text only software so all the noughts and ones are treated as text, not video.

The video, displayed as text, was nonsense, as you'd expect. Except, right at the very end, there was some meaningful text. It's called a signature. I know that because I put my own signature at the end of my own videos as well so that I can easily identify them if they get shown somewhere they shouldn't be. The signatures get displayed by video software as a minute flicker of nothing so they're never noticed but when the video is viewed as plain text it's easily read.

Right at the end of this video there was a small block of text that read '© Demetrius Deo 2034'.

Why would a security camera feed have a copyright signature?

“Find out who Demetrius Deo is,” I said.

“I have found approximately twenty thousand Demetrius Deos,” said Claude. “Can you narrow the search parameters?”

“Video, film or movie,” I said. “Maker or creator.”

“I have found seventeen matches to those criteria,” said Claude, smiling happily.

“OK, note the links,” I said. There didn't seem any real point in taking that line any further since any one of them could have made this video. The main thing was that it was a video made by someone called Demetrius Deo and wasn't a section of the security camera's feed as was claimed. This was, to put it bluntly, a movie. Fake news.

That explained why Seaview Mews was as quiet as it usually was. Nothing had happened. No one had been raped or killed. No one had even climbed the fence.

“See if you can match the girl's face on the net,” I said. “She may have been in some other videos.”

That took a lot longer but Claude identified nearly a thousand images of girls who looked very similar to the girl in this video. It took thirty minutes to go through them and there was one girl that I thought was sufficiently identical to be of interest. Her name was Cassie Berenson and she had appeared in two commercials for French television. In other words, she was an actress. Not that that mattered, since all Demetrius Deo needed was a single image and some nifty software for superimposing that image on another image and animate it. I had some software to do that myself for my own videos.

I had a pretty good idea now of what was going on.

“Can you find out where that news feed was sent?” I asked Claude.

Asking where it came from was easy since all he had to do was trace back where it had come from but I didn't want to know that. I wanted to know if it had been sent all over the world, just to Australia or just to the state of Queensland Coastal in Australia. That was more difficult but he managed it.

“Every residence in this complex,” he told me twenty minutes later.

“Nowhere else?” I asked.

“Nowhere else,” he confirmed.

I'd spent that twenty minutes studying the video again, now that I knew what I was looking for. Demetrius Deo, whoever he was, was pretty good and must have some access to some impressive hardware since he had combined three people, the girl and the two boys, with sequences from presumably a movie where a similar fence had been scaled, and the security camera feed from this complex to make it look as though they had got in. Presumably the rape and killing had come from videos at the darker end of the net and he had superimposed the three onto the performers and then superimposed the lot onto the view of the Mews.

Looking at the video as a shocked and horrified resident it was completely believable but, looking at it as a professional video producer myself I could now see the joins. Subtle things like a head jerking between frames where the mapping software hadn't quite got it right. Demetrius Deo had tried to hide these tiny flaws with some fancy lighting and shadow effects but they contained tiny little flaws as well. Such as the shadow of one of the boys coming down the fence not rippling on the wires the way the shadows of the other two had. Still, he had done a good job, it was just his bad luck that I lived in this complex since almost no one but another professional would have spotted anything.

So why do it?

It was pretty obvious really. Almost certainly AllSecurity, who handled the security for our complex, wanted to raise more revenue by selling us better security to protect us against a risk that they had invented. It was working since we were having a meeting the following evening to discuss our security because of this news feed and it was a fair bet that a representative of AllSecurity would be there to offer us new options.

I know this because this is along the lines of what I do myself. My own

videos are carefully crafted to persuade viewers that they need whatever the product is and the viewers are selected because their particular emotional and economic profiles matched those being targeted for the videos. I just didn't like having it done to me, especially as a video of this quality and the cost of inserting it into a news feed would have been quite high which meant that whatever AllSecurity wanted to sell us wasn't going to be cheap, which was probably why they went for a rape/killing video for an all female community. High impact on possibly our greatest fear, since that was why we lived in an all female complex. Rape and killing had been on the increase for years and the streets in town just weren't safe any more, which is why Veilance, the town's security company, had imposed a curfew three years ago.

Being fairly well off meant we could afford to live in a secure complex but at the same time it made us a more attractive target. On the one hand we were possible targets for men because we are women and on the other hand we are ripe targets for protectors because we are well off. Having said that, on balance it's probably better to buy protection you don't need than not be able to afford the protection you do need, which is the situation for the women in town. Or so we believe since, of course, the plight of people not living in secure complexes we only know through the news feeds.

The real question though was what to do about it.

I could put together my own little message explaining that the feed had been fake news and showing how it had been put together but it probably wasn't a good idea. In the short term it wouldn't work since the other women in the complex were now scared and a little explanation would not make the slightest difference. What happened to that girl, the actress Cassie Berenson, would be burned in the minds of us all and the fact that it was faked was irrelevant. We were here because we believed it was all too possible and we believed it was all too possible because we were here. The video reinforced that and nothing I said would unreinforce it.

Longer term, if AllSecurity blamed me for losing revenue then I might not get the security assistance I need when I need it. Conversely, if I pushed for changing our security company then they might use their

resources to seek revenge. Paranoia? Hey, if I wasn't paranoid I wouldn't be living in a secure, all female community in the first place, with a fancy semi-robotic male companion instead of in town with the man I'd married, who I saw perhaps one weekend a month.

Maybe I'm crazy but the world I live in is crazy too. And paranoia breeds paranoia and paranoia makes money for those who feed off it so it's in their interest to foster paranoia. Fake or not, news is news and we all believe what we want to believe and something no one wants to believe is that they got it wrong in the first place.

So, thinking about it, there was really only one sensible thing I could do.

“Get that list of links for Demetrius Deo,” I told Claude. “If we find the one who made this video he might be able to help on that political video for Geng Hao.”

And just maybe, if I did a good job, I'd get more like it which would help pay for the enhanced security that AllSecurity would no doubt be supplying very soon.

“Hey hon, nice surprise,” said Damien when Claude called him, “you're looking good. I wasn't expecting to hear from you until Wednesday. What's up?”

“I missed you,” I said. That news feed video, now that I was over the initial horror and knew that it was just a promo video, had made me feel lonely.

“Yeah, I miss you all the time too,” he said, smiling in that way that had got me to marry him.

“You wanna come here at the weekend or shall I come there?” I asked. I usually went to his place since the rigmarole I had to go through for getting a man to stay overnight was extreme, not least because if any of the neighbours encountered him they'd call security, even though they all knew damned well who he was.

“You want me to come there?” he asked. “What's happened?”

I told him about the news feed and Claude sent him the link. He watched it then I explained how it was all a fake but that it had still made me nervous and lonely and I could use a hug. He was very understanding.

“No problem, Trine, I'll come to you. You still have my biometrics?”

He'd supplied his biometric data, fingerprints, facial and retina scans, the one and only time he'd been here before.

“Yeah, they should still be in date. I'll clear you with AllSecurity tomorrow, you want to come over tomorrow night?”

“That'd be awesome hon. Lacy, what's my schedule tomorrow evening?”

Lacy was his version of Claude, obviously not male. I don't know what Lacy told him since she displayed it on his wall which I couldn't see.

“I'm free after six,” he said. “So I can be there before the curfew.”

The curfew was an issue in town but out here, on the complex where we had our own security, it was less of an issue which was why I was able to go for walks after the curfew. In town I wouldn't have been able to do that.

“That would be lovely,” I said, suddenly feeling sad. “I've got a Residents meeting at seven because of that feed but I can do that from home, so long as you don't mind being in the bedroom?”

There would be fifteen kinds of panic if a man was seen with me at the meeting, all the more so because after that news feed, many of the complex's residents would be convinced their own attacks would be imminent and that Damien would be the attacker.

He grinned. It was pretty obvious he had no aversion to being in my bedroom. We chatted inconsequentially for a while then, before hanging up, I kissed him on the lips although the feel of the wall wasn't as nice as his real lips. Claude smiled, as always. His AI hadn't figured out that sometimes his smile irritated me.

Chapter Three

“I think I'll go to bed,” I said after Damien had broken the connection.

“Would you prefer a NyteOut or a Streeze, Trina?” asked Claude.

“I think a Streeze,” I said, “I am feeling a little stressed tonight, with a little warm soy milk.”

I still wanted a hug but I wasn't going to get one so I wandered into the bedroom and Claude helped me undress and arranged the duvet neatly around me before producing my milk. As always it was just the perfect temperature, warm enough to be soothing and not hot enough to cause a delay or hurt my mouth. The Streeze takes a little longer to work than the NyteOut because it spends a few minutes relieving stress and anxieties so any subconscious worries don't interfere with my dreams but even so it's fairly fast acting. As was his custom, Claude stayed by the door, slowly dimming the walls until there was just a faint glow as I fell asleep.

I'm told that everybody dreams when they're asleep but, to be honest, I rarely have even a recollection of dreaming let alone any memory of what the dream was about and that night was no exception.

I woke to the sound of Claude softly repeating my name and raising the light levels. I felt groggy and disorientated, as usual, and I lay there, wondering what the day would have in store for me until Claude brought me my chai tea. He'd probably put Dazeup in it since that was a better counter for Streeze than MornNGo but I didn't ask. I leave these things up to him since his AI system tracks my medicals and biometrics and knows me as well as my doctor does, probably even better.

By the time I'd finished my chai I was raring to go.

“So what's first on my schedule, Claude” I asked, disappearing into the bathroom.

“You have tennis with Mee Long at ten,” he said, “then I've scheduled you to work on the Sergej Vanofov promos until your lunch with

Armand Suleyman.”

“Great,” I said, emerging from the bathroom. “I’ll just wear a gown for now then change for tennis after breakfast. What time is it?”

“A few minutes after nine,” he said, helping me on with my dressing gown.

“Any messages in the night? Interesting news?” I asked going into the living room.

Claude had already stowed away the evening furniture and laid out the breakfast furniture. It was a one person unit and so the bedroom doubled as my workroom and the living room covered all the other functions, apart from the bathroom and the kitchen. The kitchen was somewhere at the back, behind the bathroom but I had only been in there once, the day I inspected the place before I bought it. It was designed for holobots like Claude and there was barely room for a human to squeeze in, let alone operate the appliances which were all far too low, even if I did have any clues as to how to use them, which I didn't.

There's a certain irony in the fact that I chose this unit to fit Claude rather than a holobot to fit the unit which is probably how most people do it. I didn't buy Claude until I moved in but I had already decided which holobot I wanted and since Claude's compact rectangular body was slightly larger than the norm I needed a place with a slightly bigger kitchen. I have no idea what the technical issues were but the salesman had assured me that the holographic overlay for Claude required the larger, 'luxe' robotic body and since I particularly wanted Claude's hologram I paid the extra for the bigger box, even though I didn't actually need the larger tray top or the second manipulator. My needs are simple but visuals won out, as they usually do.

I scanned the news over breakfast.

Apparently the Queensland Coastal government was disputing water usage rights with farmers in the Hinterland but, frankly, that was nothing new. The Hinterland government wanted to renegotiate the

Desalination-Soy Accord after only three years despite provision in the Accord for renegotiation every five years. It seemed that one side or the other, I wasn't clear which, had underestimated, or possibly overestimated, the extent of drought conditions in the hinterland as the coastal sea levels rose.

As far as I was concerned, the farmers were always complaining about something instead of getting on with their job of growing soy for the food manufacturers, and consumers like me, on the coast. Frankly, why anyone would choose to live in the deserts of the hinterland was beyond me but I had no sympathy for their endless bitching having made that choice. Although, thinking about it, having chosen to create an eighth state with its own government, I suppose they wanted that government to actually do something. Either way, the Coastal government had put the issue out to a referendum.

“Boring,” I said. “Say 'No', we need our water here. Next.”

This was more interesting. Apparently the Coastal Government had agreed to accept another seven thousand Victorian refugees who had lost their homes and livelihoods as the coastline of Victoria receded, provided they agreed to re-populate the Cape York region in the far north. The proposed refugees were, rather foolishly in my opinion, up in arms about it. Their argument was that if they had wanted to live in the hot, tropical region of Queensland they wouldn't have made their homes in the cool, oceanic climate of southern Victoria in the first place. It seemed to me that this was an irrelevant argument since they had lost everything down there. A better argument would be that if they wanted to go on living at all they'd better move somewhere that wouldn't kill them. Cape York wasn't that bad, or so I had heard since I'd never actually been there.

“The current tally with 47% of eligible votes cast is 71.9% against the renegotiation of the Desalination-Soya Accord,” said Claude. “The projection is that the final result will be approximately 68.5% against.”

“Frosty,” I said. “That'll teach the sandbaggers to mess with our water.”

Water is a bit of a touchy issue here in Australia.

“Have there been any reports on the killing of that girl last night on any of the state or federal feeds?” I asked.

“No,” said Claude, “although according to the Coastal Joint Security Companies' overnight bulletin, twenty two females and one hundred and eleven males were involved in assaults outdoors during the curfew last night with three females and eighty one males dying as a direct consequence, although there is no way of ascertaining if the girl in this complex is included in that tally. I do not have sufficient rights to access the raw data.”

Ordinarily, the killing of someone only made the local news. But, because this one was allegedly caught entirely on security footage, I would have thought it would go national, if not international. After all, a nice, juicy rape and murder is good entertainment, provided it isn't in your own neighbourhood.

“There's another referendum,” said Claude. “Deadline 4pm.”

“What's this one about?” I asked.

I wasn't really that curious. Since the political collapse in the early twenties, democracy had become very irritating with at least one and sometimes as many as five referendums a day. What's the point in electing a government if it can't make decisions on its own?

“Raising the state retirement age to 83,” said Claude. “Apparently the state superannuation fund is virtually bankrupt again.”

“So if we don't they'll raise taxes again?” Claude nodded, smiling as usual.

“Vote 'Yes',” I said. “If people don't provide for their own futures I don't see why I should support them. And make a note to vote against politician pay rises the next time that issue comes up.”

It came up roughly every three months and never got more than about 15% 'Yes' votes. Only fools went into politics so why should we pay them more than a subsistence? Of course, if the pay was better more intelligent people might be attracted into the field but that wasn't my

problem.

“Your match with Mee Long is in eighteen minutes,” Claude reminded me.

“Ahh, right, “ I said and stood up and stretched. “Better get ready then.”

Claude followed me into the bedroom and caught my gown as I slipped it off en route then helped me into my tennis outfit, which he'd already had laid out on the work table. The single bed had been transformed into my work recliner and the single use bedclothes and my gown were no doubt on their way to the complex's incinerator/generator. Eliminating virtually all washing saved a huge amount of valuable fresh water and the Chinese had developed a strain of bamboo that thrived in the salty, waterlogged coastal regions which had revolutionised the cloth industry four or five years ago. Why couldn't the Australian farmers get together and develop strains of soy that grew in salt water instead of constantly bitching about desalination rights?

“Shall I do your face now, Trina?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “something sporty.”

I lay back in my recliner and shut my eyes while Claude rapidly applied my makeup. It only took a minute or so and I critically appraised my appearance, four times life size on the wall. It's actually quite a depressing way to view yourself.

“Hmmm,” I said. “Have I gained weight? I look a little puffy.”

“Only 87 grams in the last twenty four hours,” said Claude, “that's well within parameters and your urine emissions suggest water retention is unlikely. Shall I schedule an appointment with Dr Stopes?”

“No,” I said, turning my face from side to side, “I probably didn't sleep as well as I should have done last night. Are you sure you got the dosage right?”

Claude didn't bother to answer as he knew as well as I did that it was a rhetorical question. Of course he got the dosage right!

Anyway, I knew the real reason. I was getting old. At nearly thirty six I was long past the first flush of youth and almost everyone I knew had started resculpting their bodies before their twenties had ended. It was my own vanity that had delayed me this long, my over weaning pride in my unenhanced, naturally sculpted looks. Well, those days were coming to an end.

I sighed. It was another expense and one I couldn't really scrimp on. A botched body sculpting was a nightmare that never went away and not sculpting simply wasn't an option. I'd probably put it off too long already.

"Trina? Are you there?" called Mee Long from the living room.

I jumped off the recliner and trotted in. The furniture had folded away to leave a large empty space and the boundary lines of my half of the tennis court were already on the floor. Her half was displayed on the wall.

Mee Long was a friend of mine who also lived in this complex. We regularly played tennis and we were both in the same league round robin although she was currently lying in second place and I was tenth.

"Sorry," I said, "I was just getting ready."

Mee Long looked every inch the season tennis professional Chang, her holobot, had made her up to look. It didn't help that she had regular sculpting sessions every year to keep her 49 year old body looking 29.

I felt old just being there with her.

She was bouncing a tennis ball on her racquet and Claude passed my racquet to me.

"Did you see that news feed last night?" she asked, stopping bouncing the ball and coming up to the net to talk to me.

“The one about the girl in Seaview Mews?” I asked, joining her at the net.

No doubt she smelt as good as she looked but I hadn't been able to justify to myself the extra cost of aroma enhancers for the walls. Visuals and audio were good enough for me. I suddenly remembered Claude hadn't given me any perfume and Mee Long did have aroma enhancers on her walls. My heart beat slightly faster in panic until I remembered that I hadn't installed the aroma pickups either.

“Drop the room temperature,” I whispered to Claude. Thinking about smells had reminded me that I was going to be running about and I didn't want to break into a sweat.

“Wasn't it just so shocking?” she said in a trembly voice, looking wide eyed at me. “I had to have extra Streeze and I couldn't face being with Oh San at all.”

Oh San was her bed mate, euphemistically referred to in the marketing promos as an “Intimate Lifestyle Companion,” but essentially just another holobot although designed for very specific purposes. I didn't have one since I was married, and I found them slightly tacky, although Damien did. He'd named his Veronica and I'd met her. She was nice enough, if a little limited in her conversation since he had opted for the Basic Conversational Pack rather than one of the more expensive packs such as the Academic or Sports Conversationals.

“The salesman told me that it was usually only women who ordered the advanced conversational packs,” he'd told me with a broad grin when he introduced me. “Men don't usually get them to talk to.”

I hadn't been overly happy about my new husband getting Veronica but who am I to stand in the way of fashion and lifestyle trends? Especially as I'd created a promo for one of Veronica's manufacturer's competitors in Korea.

“Oh it was dreadful,” I said, “did you watch the full sec-cam feed?”

“I had to,” she admitted, “I was in such denial!”

Yeah, deny the three minute version by watching the forty minute enhanced graphics version. Why do people do this? I have no idea but we all do. Even cynics like me.

“You know it was fake news?” I asked.

“Nooo!” she said, wide eyed again. “It looked so real!”

I briefly explained how it had been done and mentioned Demetrius Deo's name but she wasn't listening.

“Will you be at the Residents' Meeting tonight?” she asked, bouncing the tennis ball again, this time on the floor. “We need to increase security. Elly's going to propose a motion to do just that and someone from AllSecurity is going to be there to advise us.”

“But it was faked!” I said. “It didn't really happen, our security is good enough as it is.”

“But it could have happened,” she said seriously. “And we are all at risk. We owe it to ourselves to get the best security we can. That's why we live here!”

And this was why I wasn't going to bring up the fake news side at the meeting. Almost everyone would have the same attitude as Mee Long. It didn't matter if it was fake or not, such an attack was possible, or at least it seemed to be in their eyes, and so we needed even more protection. It had been a good ploy by AllSecurity, although not one they could use again for a while.

I won the first game, on my serve, but Mee Long's fears didn't stop her winning the next six to win the match, and probably move into the number one spot in our league. I told myself, once again, that I only played her to stay fit. I almost believed it this time.

“By the way,” I said, before we quit the game, “who do you use for sculpting?”

“Oh!” She tried to give me a hug through the wall. “At last! I've been so worried you were letting yourself go! I use three and they are all so

absolutely awesome! Cheng ...,” her eyes shifted to one side, “... send Claude the details for Charão in São Paulo, Prikhodko in Nur-Sultan and Lin Su in Beijing.”

She looked back at me and ran her eyes up and down my body.

“Don't let Lin Su near your face,” she said, “he's a butt man, but he'll do you a great butt. Get Charão for your face and neck, he's way better on the delicates, like your eyes, oh my god, you're going to have awesome eyes!”

“And Prikhodko?” I asked, dryly, “what's his area?”

“He's a she,” said Mee Long, “but she'll do you some kick ass boobs and trim your middle down a bit, maybe even take out those bottom ribs, they make your torso look scrunched up. But tell me if you're thinking of going anywhere else first, I know them all!”

After my resounding defeat, both in tennis and self-image, I went and had what is still the highlight of my every day, even now, more than six months after installing it. Almost a year ago, during one of my periodic 'must save the environment' bouts I was trawling through environmental forums and discussion groups and come across this guy at the University of Bendigo who was saying he'd invented a way of cleaning human bodies without water. I'd got in touch with Stanislav privately and he'd explained that it worked by subjecting the naked body to an ultra high energy burst of sound, too high pitched to affect even a real dog's ears. I'd been impressed and had invested quite a lot of my liquid cash, in the form of VCoin, in a startup company and done a couple of promos for free to help it on its way. I had been the second to have one installed, the inventor being the first, and the company was growing at a reasonable pace. That wasn't the highlight of my day though. The highlight was the shower itself.

Stanislav had told me that the burst of sound cleaned the body by literally shaking the dirt off and leaving it as a thin scum on the bottom of the cubical, but what no one had told me was what it felt like. Oh my word! You take all your clothes off, get in the tiny cubical, push a button and wham! Your whole body is suddenly one gigantic tingle from head to toe and, even though the burst lasts less than half

a second, the tingle goes on for several minutes. It's just a magical sensation! Oh and it leaves you squeaky clean as well although it's worth getting one just for the feeling. One time I experimented with pushing the button a second time before the tingling had worn off and nearly suffered sensory overload, it was so intense. When I'd stopped vibrating like a tuning fork I'd let Stanislav know and he put in a thingy to stop anyone pushing the button again too soon which probably saved a few lives. Some people get easily addicted to stimulation.

It's totally irrelevant but it's one of the very few things I don't let Claude do for me. Part of the fun is letting my hand hover over the button and the anticipation that brings, as well as the self teasing I sometimes do by pretending to hit the button and deliberately missing or rubbing the button until it fires unpredictably.

I'm pretty certain that the shower has another beneficial side effect. Even though a decent proportion of the videos I produce are rehashes of previous ones, I still have to be creative and, as anyone who is professionally creative will tell you, there is nothing better for destroying creativity than a deadline. And, since net-based marketing is incredibly fast paced, there are always deadlines and they are always very soon. Over the years I've tried all sorts of things, including substances that are still technically illegal, not that any of the privatised security companies give a damn about them, but the only thing that really worked for me was my recliner and slightly edgy music. Until I installed my wonderful sonic shower.

I don't know what it is. It could be the blast of sound shakes my brain or the tingles stimulate some inner facet or something else but I am significantly more creative after a shower. This isn't just a subjective thing either. Since installing the shower my work has been in greater demand and, according to the feedback I get, is more effective at getting sales. I'm even starting to hear rumblings in the art world involving my name so there are measurables to it as well. I've never mentioned that side to Stanislav since I don't want my competitors doing the same. It's a cut-throat world out there and any advantage you have you hold on to as long as possible.

Anyway, after my morning blast of thrillingly high energy I actually

managed to come up with a new way of marketing bamboo products. Admittedly a bit on the radical side but since bamboo has become *the* raw material for everything from clothing to construction, the marketing hype has become hyper and finding anything new to say is almost impossible. Still, I drafted promos for Geng Hao's three new bamboo products and sent them off to Annabel for pre-approval.

Claude didn't seem to mind that I rearranged his schedule on the fly. He just rescheduled Sergey Vanofov's work for the next day. That's what I like about Claude. He doesn't get upset about things. He just smiles and keeps track of them and reminds me when I forget about something. He's very Zen.

Chapter Four

“Your lunch with Armand Suleyman is in twenty two minutes, Trina,” reminded Claude.

I looked up from where I'd been doodling on the wall with my recliner handset, lost in thoughts about bamboo products.

“Why am I having lunch with him?” I asked. If nothing else, it was a factor in deciding what to wear, although I have to have lunch and having company is usually nice so it wasn't that big an issue.

“He's with Kenar Analitiği,” said Claude. “I am not clear about why he requested this lunch but he was quite insistent and you had no other lunch engagement today.”

“So it's a business meeting rather than a social one?” I asked.

“I would think so,” he said, “otherwise he need not have mentioned his company name.”

“Hmmm.” I pondered for a couple of moments. Why hadn't this been arranged through Annabel? Not that I have any problem with meeting potential clients, it's just not the normal protocol to go behind your agent's back.

“What form of lunch is it? Did he say?” I asked.

“A family run Turkish cafe restaurant,” replied Claude, sounding a little huffy, if that was possible. Maybe it was a new feature in his recent upgrade. Personality traits seem to get more sophisticated with each one. When I'd first got Claude he was quite brusque and rough edged, rather like a farm boy.

“Oh, I suppose I'd better keep my shoulders covered, then,” I said. “I think a trouser suit although I refuse to wear a hijab.”

“Hijabs are not required in Turkey,” said Claude. “Although the ban on headscarves was rescinded in 2013 and headscarves have been recommended for Muslim women since 2027 but as you are not a

Muslim that doesn't apply to you.”

“Good,” I said. “Right, let's get changed. Is he a Muslim?”

“I haven't been able to obtain any personal data about Mr Suleyman,” said Claude.

“Well, with a name like that it's probably safe to assume he is so you'd better give me a french pleat.”

My hair is pretty short but a french pleat should soothe his religious sensibilities, if he had any.

“When did he arrange this lunch?” I asked while Claude fussed over my hair.

“Just after midnight,” said Claude. “Is that satisfactory?”

I looked at my hair from all four sides in the wall and nodded.

“And the suit colour?” he asked.

“I think that silver blue for the suit,” I said, selecting it from the palette he put up. “Matt, not shiny.”

Claude transferred the colour I'd selected to the dresser and sprayed a molecular thin layer of fast drying colourant on two sheets of raw bamboo paper then quickly cut out a jacket and trousers. He sealed the seams and helped me get dressed. A thin tie belt held everything in place.

“Yes,” I said, admiring myself, “nice colour. Ooops, you missed a bit.”

There was a small gap in the side seam of one of the trouser legs so Claude bent to seal it.

“Leave the makeup,” I said. “It'll do for a lunch.”

Claude was hovering and, since I hadn't requested this lunch I wasn't going to put myself or him out over it.

Armand Suleyman wasn't due for a couple more minutes but I went into the living room anyway.

“Oh, very nice,” I said, looking around.

The walls showed several tables dotted around the room with people already having their meals. There was a bar at one end and the walls of the cafe were decorated with tapestries. Even the ceiling display had been integrated to show a richly decorated pattern of blues and golds.

“Your table is this way, Trina,” said Claude, now dressed as a Turkish waiter. It didn't really suit him, being blonde.

My living room table was up against a wall and the display continued it into wherever Armand was, with more diners and the cafe entrance in the background. The likelihood of Armand having the same table as me was vanishingly small but that didn't matter. He would eat at his table wherever he was and I would eat at mine and the software would map each of our tables onto the display of the other so it would seem that we were both seated at the same table, even though what he would see would be different to what I would see. It wasn't impossible that Armand actually was in a real restaurant, or would be when he arrived, maybe even the one being simulated in my living room.

“You know,” I remarked to Claude as I sat at the table, “maybe I ought to get the aroma enhancers after all, this place must smell fantastic.”

I'd only had Turkish food two or three times before but they did seem to use interesting and aromatic spices.

“There is a local installer who could do the installation by Thursday,” said Claude.

“I wasn't serious,” I said. Claude has a tendency to take these things literally although he's slowly learning. “Ahh, that must be him now.”

A tall, faintly Arabic looking man had come in the cafe entrance and was coming towards my table without having looked around.

“Ahh, Ms Moss,” he said, “delighted to meet you. May I?”

I gave him my most gracious smile and half nodded to allow him to sit. He looked to be in his fifties, not that that means much these days, with very distinguished swept back salt and pepper hair and a thick moustache. He was wearing an old fashioned black suit which seemed to be made of real wool, which would mean either he was still wearing old suits from years ago or he was very wealthy.

“I’ve taken the liberty of pre-ordering, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” I said politely, wondering why he’d gone to the formality of mentioning it.

Pre-ordering is the norm since it allows the holobots of the guests to prepare the dishes. Self ordering from menus is really only possible in real restaurants with centralised food preparation facilities. It’s standard practice nowadays because it allows the guests’ house systems to negotiate with the organiser’s system over the dishes to be served when the arrangement is made so that the final meal is both to the taste of the guest and produceable by the guest’s systems. Anything requiring a flavouring Claude didn’t have or couldn’t get in time or that he thought I wouldn’t like would simply not make the final cut. It’s a good system, when it works, and means that you don’t have to waste time travelling to a restaurant or arguing about the bill or, come to think of it, risking food poisoning from a dodgy restaurant kitchen.

Our waiters produced glasses and carafes of water.

“Perhaps a glass of wine before we eat?” asked Armand. “This restaurant has a particularly fine Hong Kong Riesling.”

“That would be nice,” I said, “although I’ll have mine without alcohol.”

I don’t like to drink alcohol during the day as it tends to make me sleepy and I had work to do after lunch. In fact, I don’t drink much alcohol at all, which is why Claude doesn’t stock much ethanol, although he does hold a respectable range of flavours.

Armand looked faintly disapproving but smiled charmingly anyway.

“So is this a real restaurant?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Armand, “it’s in Ankara. My cousin owns it, although I’m in Canberra at the moment.”

“You are with Kenar Analitiği?” I asked. He nodded.

“Yes,” he said, smoothing back his hair with one hand and adjusting his tie. I struggled to repress a smile since no one, literally no one, wears ties these days. I don’t think even my father ever wore a tie.

“I don’t expect you’ve heard of us,” he said, glancing up as his waiter brought him his glass. Claude brought mine a second or two later. “We like to keep a low profile.”

“I’m assuming this is a business meeting,” I said, toying with the stem of my glass.

“In a manner of speaking,” said Armand, “although being social can be quite a business as well, don’t you think?”

He smiled and ran a finger under his moustache. I didn’t quite know what he meant by that so I just sipped my wine, which was really quite pleasant. Smooth, if a touch too sweet for my taste. Was Armand hinting at a liaison or was Kenar Analitiği simply one of the proliferation of social media-based businesses?

“Kenar Analitiği are in the information business,” he continued. “Roughly translated Kenar Analitiği means ‘Edge Analytics’.”

I shot a quick glance at Claude and he gave a half nod to confirm the translation. I do a lot of business with non-English speaking clients and had taught him to give me on-the-fly translations during meetings. It helped avoid breaking the flow of a conversation and also gave me an idea of when someone was not being perhaps as open with me as they should be.

“Net edge?” I asked.

It was a common term in cyber space although rare outside. In the

early days of the internet, large data suppliers, like the now defunct Google, centralised their servers and data stores in one or two physical locations which meant data flow through the internet tended to be massively concentrated around those suppliers which in turn meant bottlenecks and, of course, vulnerabilities. With the rebirth of the internet in the mid 20s large data suppliers had learnt to decentralise by setting up remote data centres in areas with large consumption.

So, for example, SouSuo, the Chinese giant that had replaced Google, had small data centres in the main population areas of Australia which cached frequently used data from their central servers in what used to be Tibet. When I say 'small' I don't mean that literally. Their data centre in Sydney, for example, was a very large warehouse in the Blue Mountain suburbs, well away from the low lying coastal areas, and held perhaps a tenth of all Sydney's computing power. Anyway, all these remote data centres were collectively known as 'the edge' since they were the outer edge of the internet that interfaced, on the whole, with the general public.

So, Armand's company analysed data usage and traffic from and between the nodes on the edge.

"I'm surprised I haven't heard of you then," I remarked.

The promotional videos I made were fed to highly targeted audiences, selected from personality profiles built up by companies that analysed data usage, since it's pointless trying to sell a product to someone who has no interest in that product or whose personality isn't inclined towards it. I wasn't involved in that side of the business but I still knew many of main players. After all, knowing the quirks and foibles of a particular information analyst meant I could tailor my promos to be even more specific.

"We specialise in certain areas," he said, guardedly, "and rarely get involved in product placement."

"Oh yes?" I said. "So this is one of those times?"

Since product placement promos are what I do there didn't seem to be

much point in this meeting otherwise.

“You could say that, yes,” he said, with a half smile. “Ahh, shall we eat?”

Our waiters had appeared and were busily putting dishes on the table for each of us. One was clearly yoghurt with chunks of cucumber, another looked like finely chopped chillies in oil and a third was a plate of flat pide breads. Claude put the main dish in front of me. It didn't look particularly appetising, being an unpleasant shade of pink and on the sloppy side.

“What is it?” I asked.

Claude wouldn't have given me anything I wouldn't like although he based that on taste and nutrition rather than visual appeal.

“It is Mememen,” said Armand, looking at his with pleasure. “It is basically scrambled eggs with tomatoes and peppers, cooked in olive oil.”

“Could have done with another couple of minutes cooking,” I thought to myself and grabbed some bread to mop up with.

“Try it,” he said, making swirly motions with his hand. “It's delicious.”

Actually it was, particularly with some extra chillies. The bread, soaked in runny egg, oil and tomato juice was quite delicious as well, interspersed with scoops of yoghurt and cucumber. The sweet tang of the wine provided an interesting contrast. I didn't need to tell Claude to make a note of the recipes since he had the details of everything I had ever eaten and drunk somewhere in the house storage cloud.

“Tell me, Trinity,” said Armand after we'd finished and the waiters were clearing the table. “What do you remember of the Cyber Wars?”

I leaned back in my chair, wondering why he had brought up the Cyber Wars, or the Thirty Second Wars as we tended to call them in Australia, since each one lasted less than half a minute, even though the devastating results continued to this day.

“I remember them quite well,” I said, drily. “My parents were killed in the Sydney riots after the eighteenth.”

“Quite,” he said, giving me the impression that he knew about them. Then again, he was in the information business so he'd probably got my entire history. “Do you know how they started?”

Actually no one really knew how they started, or even when they'd started. There had been widespread computer viruses almost since the day the first computer was invented so identifying which particular virus attack was the first in a series that became known as 'wars' occupied the minds of historians. For convenience the wars were numbered from the one which took out the leading western stock exchanges, most notably the New York Stock Exchange, NASDAQ, the London Stock Exchange and Deutsche Börse in Frankfurt on 31st March 2023, but who knows how many there had been before that. It was the NYSE and NASDAQ attack that prompted an American retaliation which, I guess, is what you need to be able to label something a 'war'. If there's no retaliation then presumably it's just a raid or something.

“Didn't the Chinese take out those stock exchanges in America and Europe?” I said, “back in '23?”

“Well done,” he said, and I raised an eyebrow at him. I didn't particularly need his condescension.

“There had been a number of viral attacks by the Chinese before that,” he continued, “in the two years or so prior to CW1 but they were more exploratory, just practice, if you like. Establishing the principles before they launched their main attack. And, as you probably know, the Americans counter attacked against the Shanghai, Tokyo, Shenzen and Hong Kong exchanges three days later. It took their technical people that long to identify where they thought the attacks had originated and devise a counter attack.”

It also showed a little of how well the Chinese understood Western psychology since they chose the day before April Fool's Day which give them a weekend of extra time before any retaliation since everyone in the West thought it was all a big joke, especially as the

virus flashed up a Santa Clause with “APRIL FOOL!! HAHAHA” on his red coat on the screens of any computers it infected. To begin with, at any rate.

“The problem,” added Armand, “was that a lot of people had given a lot of thought to computer based viral attacks but they had all overlooked one important point.”

“What was that?” I asked, feeling it was expected of me, even though I wasn't that interested in history.

He took a deep breath, which made me cringe a little inside since it suggested the explanation was going to be a long one.

“With a conventional war, even nuclear,” he said, toying with his wine glass in a way that suggested he was thinking of having another one, “an attack destroys physical resources which means that the, umm, victim, has fewer forces to deploy in a counter attack and the counter attack does the same so the counter counter attack is always, and inevitably, a lot weaker. And then both sides continue until one or other runs out of physical resources and only then does their economy collapse.”

“So?” I said, gesturing to Claude to bring me some more wine. Armand did the same with his waiter.

“With the Cyber Wars, the direct targets were the economies, not the military forces,” he said. “CW1 took out the major western exchanges, CW2 took out the major eastern exchanges, CW3 took out the minor western exchanges and major western banks and finance houses, CW4 the same in the east and so on down through the economic and governmental structures on both sides but, unfortunately, neither side directly attacked those responsible. After all, it's relatively easy to bomb an army base but it's very difficult to take out three or four computer nerds in the back office of an unknown building.”

Australia had become involved after CW5 since Australia was well down in the economic power structure of the west, a fair way behind America, Britain and Germany. Our techies weren't in the world's top handful either.

“So you see,” he continued, after sipping some of his fresh glass of wine, “there was no real way of stopping the wars after they had started.”

Which was also true. After the various stock markets and large companies had been taken out, the wars shifted over to government tax departments, medium sized companies, public welfare, medical and police departments, public transport systems and so on down to small businesses and local councils. It was when unemployment benefit departments could no longer pay out benefits to the rapidly swelling ranks of the unemployed, whose employers had only days before folded, that the riots began, fuelled by food chains that could no longer buy in food or buy the fuel to ship the food out to their stores to sell to people who had no money and hospitals and pharmacies that had no drugs or even dressings. Those who did have money weren't any better off since the massive shortages lead to inflation as rapidly dwindling stocks of bread and potatoes got auctioned off to the highest bidders, until there were no more potatoes or bidders.

The Cyber Wars only last three months and not a single shot was fired, although many shots were fired in the aftermath as people fought each other for food and fuel but the effect was devastating. All democratic and most non democratic governments collapsed since they had no money and governments without money have no power to do anything, least of all pay those who keep them in power, such as the police and the military.

It all sorted itself out in the end although it took a couple of years for a new ruling class to appear. Before the Cyber Wars, a relatively small number of companies and individuals had played with cryptocurrencies, hoping for some vague, long term profits. As it turned out, their profits were short term.

Ironically it was computer based economic attacks that brought down the old world order and ushered in the new world order. Old money, dollars, pounds, marks, yuan, roubles, were all based on the economies of the countries that spawned them. With their economies dead in the water, the cryptocurrencies were the first to reestablish themselves. After all cryptocurrency mining just requires a little

computer time so as the old national economies began to rebuild themselves, the cryptocurrencies leapt ahead.

My parents, mostly my dad, had invested in VCoins back in 2017. Before CW1 the exchange rate for VCoins was roughly VC1 to Au\$0.79c. By the Christmas after CW87, the last of the Cyber Wars, the exchange rate was Au\$135,000 or thereabouts. Six months later, mid 2024, it was up to Au\$6.3 million and, today, something like Au\$50 million. That's if you can even find an Australian dollar, let alone fifty million of them. As I said, my parents were both killed in the '23 Sydney riots and I inherited all their money, a lot of it in VCoins and the rest, worthless dollars. Which is why I was now part of the new world elite, living in a secure complex, unlike most of the rest of the world.

“So why are you telling me all this?” I asked.

He looked around to see if anyone was listening, which is a little absurd since we were in a virtual restaurant with a secure connection.

“Kenar Analitiği is an information analysis organisation,” he said quietly, “and we specialise in economic warfare information and we have recently, after intense investigation, discovered who started the Cyber Wars and it wasn't the Chinese Government.”

Chapter Five

“Oh yes,” I said, politely.

I felt Armand expected some show of shock or horror but someone had done it and whether or not it was the Chinese, the world had moved on. Nationalism and patriotism were more or less finished with anyway, except perhaps amongst a few die-hard older people.

Armand regarded me as if reevaluating some preconception of me that he had.

“Aren't you curious to know?” he asked.

“Will knowing it make any difference to me or my life?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow and continued to regard me then called his waiter over for a refill of wine.

“Another?” he asked.

I sighed inwardly. I still didn't know what this meeting was about but it was looking less and less likely that I was going to get any paid work out of it. Still, it hadn't reached the point of impossibility so I decided to stay for another drink and see what panned out.

“You were only seventeen at the time,” he said, leaning back with his wine in his hand, “but you may remember when Raymond Trounce was elected President of the USA, in 2016?”

“Vaguely,” I said. When I was seventeen Sydney had not long introduced tough lock out laws to control late night revellers that more or less killed the night life in the city and the problems of where to party far outweighed some foreign election.

I could see behind Armand that the cafe was slowly emptying and only a small handful of people remained, all drinking coffees or wines, and waiters were clearing the emptied tables. It made me wonder if the cafe scenario was actually real since all but the best simulations keep the background characters in a continuous loop to cut down on

processing.

“Trounce was the first of the non-political presidents,” said Armand, “although he did pretend to have a political agenda. His successor had even less and since the Cyber Wars, well, pffft.”

This was certainly true. I had not one single American client because the USA had borne the brunt of the attacks on the west and every president since the wars had blatantly gone into the job with the sole intent of lining their own pockets out of the ruins of the American economy. Empires throughout history have declined and fallen but the American empire had just collapsed, too fast to call it a decline or even a fall. It was basically now just a fire-sale.

“This is lovely wine,” I said, “although I do have work to do this afternoon,” hinting it was probably time he got to the point.

“In 2018, four South Korean businessmen got together to discuss what they could do to protect their commercial interests against Trounce's trade war with China,” he said, taking the hint and talking a little faster. “The American import tariffs were hurting all of Asia and South Korea's economy was the fastest growing and one of the largest in the region. They were getting very worried since China could always resort to military action whereas South Korea could never take on the US military. So they sought another solution.”

“So it was the South Koreans, then?” I asked.

“No, not really,” he said. “It was four businessmen who just happened to be South Koreans. Their government would never have supported them. Anyway, they set up a dummy company called Saeloun Sijag, which means 'Better Way' in Korean, in order to launch an economic counter attack against the USA if Trounce intensified the trade war.”

“I'm guessing he did,” I said.

“Actually, no,” said Armand, “Trounce backed down. It was his successor, Barkely J Harvey III who intensified the trade war and, after the mid-term elections in 2022, started a chain of events that by February 2023 banned all Asian imports indefinitely in a vague

attempt to boost his personal business interests within America. This caused Saeloun Sijag to panic react and the rest, as they say, is history.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

“We've spent years trawling through Asian company records,” said Armand, “and we came across Saeloun Sijag which sparked our interest.”

“How come?” I asked. I supposed it was vaguely interesting, in some abstract way.

“The company employed only eleven people, four economists and seven computer programmers. No sales staff, no administrative staff, just those eleven and while they seemed to generate quite a lot of revenue, they only had four customers and never seemed to provide any product or service. So, we started investigating and it turned out that all seven programmers were highly skilled virus writers and hackers so we turned to internet logs and, after nearly two years of tracing data packets we concluded that Saeloun Sijag sent out a data packet at precisely 2pm GMT on the 31st of March 2023 that triggered sleeper viruses hidden within the major western stock market systems. Later attacks were written as and when required but the initial attack was highly planned and coordinated.”

“So what happened to Saeloun Sijag?” I asked. “Are they still around?”

“Oh no,” said Armand. “They disappeared after the last of the Cyber Wars.”

So what was the point of telling me all this?

“Well, Mr Suleyman,” I said, pushing my chair back. “This is all very interesting but I do have a lot of work to do.”

He waved his hand at me to stop me standing up.

“The company disappeared,” he said. “But the eleven employees didn't. In 2025, another company was created with those same eleven

employees, this time in China.”

“Well, so what?” I said. I was beginning to get irritated and I actually did have work to do.

“That Chinese company’s name is Gèng Hǎo de Fāngfǎ, or 'Better Ways',” said Armand, leaning forward. “You know it by its short name, Geng Hao.”

I stared at him until the silence started to get uncomfortable. We were the only people left in the cafe, apart from a couple of waiters.

“Who are you?” I asked after a while. Yesterday I got some work from Geng Hao and today I had lunch with someone who was telling me Geng Hao more or less started the Cyber Wars. Even I could see there was a connection.

“Armand Suleyman,” said Armand with a half smile.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“What are you, then?”

“I am the head of Kenar Analitiğci,” he said. “What you really should be asking is why you and I are here.”

“Why are we here?” I asked.

“We discovered yesterday that you have been approached by Geng Hao to produce some promotional videos,” he said. “As best as we have been able to determine you are the first non Asian to have been asked to be involved with them.”

“Yes, I have but I wouldn't know if I am the first,” I said. “And what does it have to do with you anyway?”

He leaned back in his chair again and finished the last of his wine.

“We're very much afraid that Geng Hao are developing internet tools to destroy other businesses through indirect customer manipulation

assisted by judicious direct financial assault. In the short term it isn't that big an issue as businesses come and go all the time but in the long term it could result in a single, global monopoly which would have dire consequences for the entire human race, potentially even the enslavement of the human race for the benefit of those few who control Geng Hao.”

I stayed there for at least another hour. I confess I didn't understand everything he said and I didn't agree with all his arguments but in essence what he seemed to be saying was that with the decline of national governments and their enforcement of laws against monopolies, cartels and so on, any company that can become a monopoly in some area has immense power over both the supply of goods and services and the payment of wages. If, and I thought it was a huge 'if', if a single company managed to become a monopoly for the supply of all goods and services, then people can't go anywhere else for those goods or services nor can they get jobs anywhere else. They'd be controlled from both ends and essentially end up as slaves where whatever pittance the company chose to pay them, if anything, went straight back out in paying for the things they needed simply to survive.

It didn't seem possible to me since I couldn't see how any profit could be made and the people at the top of that company would, presumably, need to generate profit in order to benefit themselves. Needless to say, Armand had an answer to this since he had been thinking about it for years whereas I had only been thinking about it for minutes. He was of the opinion that profits were irrelevant since the people at the top would be able to have whatever they wanted simply by getting others to provide it by threatening not to pay them or withholding food or whatever, since there would be no other companies to get jobs with or buy food from. Maybe he had a point, I don't know, but that's where the slavery side came in.

“Anyway,” I said after trying to get my head round it all and not really succeeding, “what does all this have to do with me?”

“We need your help, Trinity,” he said quietly, looking me directly in the eyes.

“What can I do?” I said.

“We're working on ways to counter financial attacks,” he said, “but we need you to help us with the social manipulation, through your promotional videos.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“We would like you to embed some code in your promos that will feed back information on the people being targeted, to help us develop ways of countering that manipulation.”

I thought about it for a few moments.

“Bullshit,” I said. “You don't need me for that. You can just attach the code after the promo leaves my hands. I don't even need to know. In fact, it would probably be better if I didn't know.”

“Yes,” he said, “your profile said you are intelligent. What we actually need is you as a cover for the data feed back to us. Sooner or later it will be noticed and traced so it cannot come directly to us.”

“So set up some fake IP addresses,” I said, “so when they trace them back they don't get any further.”

“If we do that then they'll know that someone is monitoring them,” he said, “and they'll change their methodology. But if the data feeds back to you, the person who created the promos, there's a better than even chance that they'll assume that it is simply your own research data, not a spying operation on them.”

I confess I didn't entirely agree but my head was swirling a little. Well, a lot really. What I really needed was some time to think it through. Like, twenty years would be good.

“So what do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Embed some code we'll send you,” he said. “That will collect data from viewers of your promos and send it to you. We'll also give you some software that will code and summarise the data and send it on

to us, suitably disguised so it will not be identifiable as being the same data you received. We'll also need you to spend a little time now and then working on the data so that if you are monitored it looks like you are using it yourself.”

“What do you mean, if I'm monitored?” I didn't like the sound of that. Being monitored by a power hungry Chinese corporation sounded like it would not be in my best interests.

“Sooner or later someone will pick up on the data transmissions,” he said. “The important thing is to understand that all net activity is monitored and usually by the creators of the data. We simply want you to do that so it all looks perfectly normal and innocent. The more normal and innocent it looks the less attention it will attract. The most likely scenario is that someone will track the data back to you, discover you are the creator of the promos and leave it at that. They won't even try to stop you since that will be suspicious in itself and draw attention to them.”

I confess I wasn't wholly convinced and we agreed that he would let me have some time to think about it.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” he asked as I was about to break the connection.

“OK,” I said. He'd already admitted to having a personal file on me so I was curious about what he didn't know.

“Why did your parents name you 'Trinity'?” he asked. “It's a very unusual name.”

“Mum was going to call me Katarina,” I said, “and I would have preferred that since I don't really like Trinity. That's why I get everyone to call me Trina.”

“My apologies,” he said. “I will be sure to call you Trina in future. But why Trinity?”

I sighed.

“Have you heard of an old movie called The Matrix?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “I’ve seen it.”

“Well, it was a big hit a couple of months before I was born,” I said, “and my mum decided to call me Trinity after the lead female in it. Especially as our family name is Moss and Trinity was played by an actress called Carrie-Anne Moss. So, I was named after a movie character, that’s all, nothing special.”

“How interesting,” he said, nodding his head, “and somewhat ironic. Until we meet again.”

He broke the connection before I could ask what he meant by 'somewhat ironic'.

There are times when Claude’s AI system can read my mind. Not often, admittedly, but every now and then. Claude cleared away the cafe so I could recline on my couch in comfort and brought me a nice strong wild berry coffee without me having to tell him. He let me sit in comfortable silence for a while, trying to digest more than the food I’d eaten. Presumably some almost imperceptible change in my body language alerted him to my being available for more information.

“Trina, your new makeup system has arrived,” he said, with a smile. “It’s coming over from screening in the next few minutes.”

One of the benefits of living in a secure complex was that personal shopping was forbidden so that nothing could be secreted in our shopping and get into the complex undetected. Whenever I bought anything I had to buy it over the net and have it delivered to our security screening office where it was checked. What it was checked for I’m not entirely sure but bombs were certainly a risk as were surveillance devices and drugs that could cause unconsciousness or even death. There was an indirect benefit as well in that I never had to give out my actual address, only the address of the security office so if anyone did manage to get into the complex looking for me they wouldn’t know which of the units I was in.

More to the point, my new makeup system was here!

I was kind of excited. I'm lying. I was very excited. It was so new that there weren't any reviews on the net yet except, of course, the ones the manufacturers themselves had posted. I'd found out about it through the specs for the promo I was supposed to be creating for it this week, which was now postponed to next week because of the rush jobs from Geng Hao and Sergey Vanofov and the manufacturers had agreed to let me have one for free when I pointed out I'd be able to make a more convincing promo with first hand experience. That was nice since they were very expensive.

Claude came into the lounge carrying a small box and unpacked it on the table. It didn't look particularly impressive. There was a standard makeup spray gun, a bottle of dull, mud grey liquid and a strip of tape with a couple of dozen tiny skin coloured dots, each about two millimetres in diameter and barely a hair's thickness thick.

"I need to download the software and instructions," said Claude. He froze for about a second and a half. "Installation complete, would you like to try it now or later, Trina?"

"Now, of course," I cried, jumping up. "Come on, let's go into the bedroom."

I lay back on the recliner while Claude cleaned off the makeup he'd sprayed on this morning. Then he filled the spray gun with the muddy fluid and carefully sprayed it all over my face, including my lips and eyelids. It felt just like ordinary spray makeup and I looked absolutely ghastly!

With great care, since his manipulators aren't quite as sensitive as human hands, he removed one of the dots from the tape and positioned it on my skin just above the hairline at the base of my neck so it wouldn't be visible.

"We have three options, Trina" said Claude. "We can use any of the pre-defined templates, create new, personal makeups or use a saved makeup, although we have not yet saved any."

"Let's try some of the templates," I said. "Do one at random."

A moment later I had glossy deep red lips with just the hint of a dark outline, more prominent cheekbones and slightly hollower cheeks and rainbow eyes which graduated from the outsides towards the insides. Even my eye lashes seemed thicker and longer.

“Fros-ty,” I said. “Wow I’m impressed. Give me another.”

My lips turned to grape purple and my eyes went fairly dark with elongated corners.

“Ewww,” I said, “I look like a zombie, I don’t like that.”

My entire face turned silver and seemed to shimmer, and a hint of gold sheened my lips and around my eyes.

“Interesting,” I said. “I think I like it but it’s a bit metallic.”

“There is a wood template,” said Claude, “would you like to try that?”

“Sounds kind of weird,” I said. “Yes.”

It looked like my face was made from a plank of wood.

“Oh god no,” I said. “Forget the party ones, go back to the beauty ones.”

My eyes turned to a striking dark green and seemed to change shape slightly, making me look a touch oriental.

“Now that is gorgeous,” I said, staring at my face on the wall. Even four times life size I looked better than good.

The principle was fairly simple. Millions of minute nano particles were suspended in the mud grey liquid paste which could be made to change colour through some sort of electric field which came from the dot on my neck. The pattern of colours was controlled through computer software which downloaded through a wireless link to the dot, which didn’t have to go on the neck. You could put it anywhere on your body so you could do amazing things with any body part and, of course, there was no need to stop with just the one. You could use

several dots for a full body makeup. The beauty of the system was that because it was computer based, you could design your own custom makeups and save them for future use. Or even ...

“Would you like to try an animate, Trina?” asked Claude.

“Definitely,” I said. “This is what I've been waiting ... ohhhhhh.”

Subtle shades of colours were slowly fading in and out all over my face. It was eerie but at the same time fascinating. My face took on subtleties of shape I never knew existed. My eyes, in particular, seemed to hypnotise and my lips took on an erotic life of their own.

I was hooked, narcissist that I am.

Chapter Six

“Damien will be here in about one minute,” announced Claude.

“Oh my god!” I exclaimed, “I'd forgotten all about him!”

I jumped up and started to fuss around then paused and looked at Claude in puzzlement.

“How did he get through security? I didn't let them know.”

“I filed a visitor notification while you were asleep,” said Claude.

“Frosty,” I said. “Hey, give me that slightly Asian look again and do me a cheongsam.”

We'd spent the entire afternoon playing with the makeup and Claude had rescheduled the Sergey Vanofov work for the next morning and postponed that morning's Neo-Zen Transitional Guidance session to late in the afternoon. The needs of the body outweigh the needs of the mind in my book, not that I was going to starve if I didn't do the Sergey Vanofov job. It's just the principle.

“Be with you in a moment,” I called, as the house system opened the front door for Damien. “Do you want a drink?”

Claude went to get Damien a drink and returned almost immediately and made me a nicely tight sleeveless black cheongsam with red plum blossoms on it and sealed me inside it so there were no fastenings.

“You look spectacular,” said Damien, getting up from his chair to greet me as I came in the living room.

I gave him a long hug and he held me. I felt my tensions ebb away.

“Oh, it's so good to hold you,” I whispered.

That's really the only disadvantage of living alone, no touching. We stayed like that for a long while and Claude, as always, waited patiently by the door, smiling.

“You want me to go to the bedroom?” asked Damien.

“Don't you want some dinner first?” I teased, feeling pleased that the dress and makeup were having a positive effect.

“You've got a meeting,” he said, missing the point, as always.

“Oh yeah,” I said, feeling slightly deflated. “I'd forgotten.”

“It's not for another eight minutes,” said Claude.

“Oh flood it,” I said. “I can't be bothered. Claude, send my proxy to Ella to vote at her discretion.”

I knew exactly how the meeting would go and how the vote would turn out so it was a bit of a waste of time when I'd rather be with Damien although, to be safe, I was going to vote with the head of the Resident's Association as Ella cared more than I did and had her finger on the pulse of the community as well.

“You're looking particularly happy,” I said, stepping back and holding Damien at arm's length.

“I had some good news today,” he said, smiling, “I'll tell you about it later. How are you coping with that killing?”

We talked about it for a while, sitting side by side on the couch, with me holding Damien's hand in my lap and I got Claude to replay it again and showed Damien the text version and the advertisements in France that Cassie Berenson, the girl supposedly killed in the incident, had made. Damien agreed that it looked like the same girl.

“Claude couldn't find that guy whose face is visible though,” I said, “and the other one never showed his face.”

“And they never put it on feeds outside this complex?” he asked.

“Not that Claude could find,” I said. “What would you like for dinner?”

“Oh you choose, Trine,” he said. He was the only person who called me Trine rather than Trina which I thought was rather cute.

“I’ve already had European today,” I said, thinking about it. “How about South American? Maybe seafood?”

“Sounds good,” he said.

“What do you suggest, Claude?” I asked.

Claude, of course, had a detailed profile for Damien so knew his tastes and preferences almost as well as mine.

“I think you’ll both be pleased with a Brazilian moqueca,” he said.

“I’ve never heard of that,” said Damien. I hadn’t either but I trusted Claude far more than Damien did, just as he trusted Lacy, his domestic holobot, more than I do.

“It’s seafood stewed with tomatoes, onions, coriander, palm oil, peppers and coconut milk,” said Claude, “and served with rice.”

“Sounds good,” said Damien.

“Would you prefer prawns or halibut?” asked Claude.

Damien shrugged so I said “you choose, Claude.”

“Can I suggest a caipirinha with it?” asked Claude, “rather than wine. It’s a cocktail made from the Brazilian rum, cachaça, and served with sugar and lime. I think you’ll find its sharpness is a good counter to the coconut milk base of the moqueca.”

There are times when Claude can come across as a little pretentious but it’s part of what makes him Claude.

“I’ll have mine alcohol free,” I said.

“Me too,” said Damien. “I want to keep a clear head for later,” and he grinned at me.

“So tell me your good news,” I said. “How long will dinner be, Claude?”

“Approximately seven minutes,” he replied.

“I’ll tell you over dinner,” said Damien, reaching for me. “Come on, we’ve only got seven minutes.”

During those seven minutes I discovered an undocumented side benefit of the new makeup system. Because it was controlled through a microchip, no matter how dishevelled it got, it repaired itself, which is a very useful little feature. I mentally filed that discovery away for use in a promo since there’s nothing worse than smeared lipstick or streaky eye shadow when you’re at a social function.

Claude discretely laid the table before coughing to let us know that dinner was ready.

“Has the meeting finished yet?” I asked Claude as I walked across the room.

“No, Trina,” he said. “The representative from AllSecurity is still explaining available upgrades.”

“Oh dear,” I said, “this is going to be expensive.”

Units on the complex were relatively cheap and one of the conditions for buying one was that you had to pay up front in full, with no credit. This was partly because of the risk of a buyer defaulting because the credit company had gone belly up as they are so prone to do, but mostly it was because if you didn’t have the cash to buy a unit outright then you weren’t the type of person they wanted living in the complex. They did background checks to make sure you hadn’t borrowed before approval was given. The big expense though wasn’t the purchase, it was the communal overheads. At the moment they stood at 32% of the purchase price of the unit per year and that was mostly for security. When you have thirty rich paranoid women living on one place you need a lot of security and, unsurprisingly, the level of security was such that there was a waiting list for units. If I ever chose to sell I’d have a buyer within a minute and the cash in my VCoin account a

minute after that.

“This is delicious,” said Damien, tasting the moqueca.

Claude had given him a smaller portion than the one he had given me so presumably Damien had had a fairly high calorie lunch and Lacy had updated Claude so that his intake stayed within good health parameters.

“Your good news?” I prompted.

“Oh yes,” he said, looking very pleased with himself. “I was contacted by Jivaro Consulting.”

“Frosty,” I said. “Who for?”

Jivaro Consulting were a prestigious firm of head hunters, as evidenced by their name which was taken from the Jivaro tribe in Peru who are well known for literally hunting heads although they shrank them after death whereas Jivaro merely fleeced you.

“Australian Bamboo,” he said, then had another mouthful of moqueca. “It seems that Aus-Bam have been tracking me for some time and are impressed with how I've been handling the marketing and distribution of moly. They want me to set up their Queensland bamboo plantations.”

“Wow, frosty!” I said, leaning over to give him a kiss. “But what's molybdenum,” I stumbled over the pronunciation as always, “got to do with bamboo?”

“Nothing,” he said, “but I've never been involved in the mining of the stuff anyway, I'm not a metallurgist. No, my area is in selling the stuff after it's mined, you know, for circuit boards, catalysts and alloys and stuff and that's all very transferable to bamboo. I'll have specialists who know how to grow and harvest the stuff. They've been buying up the flooding coastal areas for years and they now have enough land to make it viable to start planting.”

“Does this mean you're going to have to move?” I asked.

“No,” he said, finishing his moqueca, “although the bulk of production will be further north, I don't need to be there. In fact my first task is to clear Bribie Island.”

Bribie Island was just off the coast directly down from where we were, roughly fifteen kilometres away.

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Ohh there's still a few people living there,” he said. “Apparently fifteen or twenty years ago there were maybe thirty thousand people living on the island but the rising sea levels flooded most of the place since it was very low lying but there's still some people there on the higher ground. They said something like fifteen hundred or so. It's all prime salt bamboo swampland now so they've got to go.”

“Where will they go?” I asked, pushing my single use bamboo plate away and reaching for my caipirinha.

“Couldn't care less,” he said. “Wherever they want to go. I imagine Aus-Bam will give them something for their properties but not much. After all, they'll never be able to sell to anyone else anyway. What kind of idiot is going to buy a house that's going to be under water in a few years?”

It was ironic, really, that Australia had led the anti-global warming movement back in the 2010s and poured endless tax dollars into coal mining because the Americans, under Tronco, had followed suite and then a number of other far-right governments had joined in and climate change had leapt forward with gay abandon. In Australia, the Cyber Wars of '23 had run their course against a backdrop of profound social unrest driven by desperate hundreds of thousands fleeing inland from the rising seas which destroyed their homes and businesses only to meet the desolate deserts creeping in from the hinterlands as the drought inland worsened. Australia had always been known for its population living in a narrow strip around the coastline but in the last decade or two that strip had got significantly narrower, and had disappeared in several places.

The irony came from the fact that new energy sources and falling

energy demands meant that the new Australian coal mines became too expensive to mine surprisingly quickly. It didn't take long for some enterprising people to start to harness the energy of the waves and the rising sea levels and the growing number of sunny days meant even the cooler parts like Victoria and Tasmania could harness solar power cheaply. With a quarter of the population dying from starvation and hyper-inflationary poverty as the Cyber Wars took their toll, the country's energy needs dropped dramatically. Australia couldn't even export coal anymore and the coal mining industry had collapsed.

Bamboo was the big new thing though, and I was delighted Damien was getting involved.

"Why's it taken so long for Aus-Bam to come to Queensland Coastal" I asked as we moved back to the couch.

"Bamboo's being grown everywhere now," he said. "Everywhere there's some land flooded by the sea we can now grow bamboo which means it's dirt cheap to grow so they've been waiting for the sea to rise enough to give enough swampy land to make it worthwhile. And it grows so fast! Lacy told me it grows much as 75 millimetres a day."

"Wow," I said, holding up my thumb and finger to show myself what 75mm looked like. "So does that mean it's going to get cheaper?"

"Yeah," said Damien. "Bamboo is now being grown all around the world just about everywhere that's been flooded, at least between the tropics, although the techies are working on a cold climate bamboo as well. That's why they want me involved, to find new uses and markets."

"It's a shame it can't be used for food," I said, "Claude, get rid of that show and put on some soft romantic music."

There had been some reality show on where the contestants had to do various complex manual tasks while a variety of nasty looking distractions were used to prevent them. One poor girl had been trying to build a circuit board while in a tank of fire ants and had been bitten any number of times before being ejected by the hyper excited studio audience. It was fine for during dinner but didn't really fit the

evening I had planned.

“Yeah, salt bamboo is really only good for construction and fibres,” said Damien, “although it would be good if we can make it edible. Then we can start to take on the soy farms.”

“We?” I said. “You’re taking the job?”

“Already have,” he said proudly. “I start on Friday.”

“That’s a bit quick isn’t it?” I asked.

“The pay’s four times what I’m making now,” he said, “there was no real decision to be made.”

“So, what, Jivaro came to you with a complete package from Aus-Bam and just gave it to you on a plate? Didn’t Aus-Bam even want to talk to you?”

I had met any number of high level executives in the course of making my promos and, while Damien was reasonably good at what he does I’d never thought he was that good.

“I had a chat with the head of Aus-Bam when I accepted the position,” said Damien. “I’m sure there will be a lot to talk about when I’m on board. Hey, your name came up too.”

He slowly tore a thin strip from the bottom of my cheongsam and I shifted a little to make it easier for him.

“How did my name come up?” I asked, watching as he slowly tore off another thin strip.

“They are hoping you’ll be willing to do some promos once we start to open some new markets,” he said, then kissed the bit of my leg that was now exposed through the tears in the bamboo paper.

I helped him tear off another little strip, over my other leg.

“Well that’s very nice of them,” I said, quivering slightly as he kissed

that spot as well.

He selected another area of my cheongsam and started to tear a bigger strip off.

“Yes, very nice,” he said and kissed me there too.

“How did they hear about me?” I asked, several tears later. There was a growing pile of confetti on the floor.

“Oh, I'm sure you're famous in your own world,” he said, finding another interesting patch of me to uncover.

I lost interest in Aus-Bam around that point although he didn't stop until he'd shredded the cheongsam completely. He had to stop then since I wasn't wearing anything else so we went to bed instead.

“Damien has an appointment at eight,” Claude told me when he woke me.

“Right,” I said drowsily, “what time is it now?”

“Seven o'clock,” he said. “I've ordered a taxi for seven thirty.”

I kissed Damien awake and reminded him of his appointment before he got distracted.

“Do you want some breakfast?” I asked.

“Oh, just some fruit,” he said, “and some chai tea would be nice.”

I had my usual chai, although without any stimulant as I never need a sleeper when Damien is here. Claude must have got a pattern from Lacy since there were some clothes ready for Damien when he'd finished his fruit salad.

“Damien's taxi is outside,” said Claude at seven thirty. “It's been cleared by security.”

“Obviously,” I thought, “since security wouldn't have let it into the

complex otherwise but then I suppose it's Claude's way of reassuring him, or me more likely.”

“I gave the navigator your home address, Damien” said Claude. “Was that correct?”

“Hmm? Oh yes,” said Damien. “Hey, busy day today.”

“Are you going to tell them you are leaving?” I asked.

“No, I'll tell them tomorrow since I'll have to leave right away. If I tell them today I'll be sitting round my unit with nothing to do all Thursday. Besides, I need to figure out how to download some data without them knowing.”

He enveloped me in a hug and gave me a long kiss.

“Mmmmm, you still coming over at the weekend?” he asked, giving me that boyish innocent grin that was definitely not in the least bit innocent. “You said you'd let me know today.”

“Twice in a week?” I said, pushing him away, “what do you think this is? Christmas? Veronica will think she's redundant.”

“Aww, Trine,” he protested, “she's just a bot, she doesn't feel anything.”

“No, but I do,” I thought to myself then pushed the thought away. Veronica really was just a bot and getting jealous of a bot was not the way to go.

“OK,” I said, making myself feel happy. “I'll come over at the weekend.”

He started to run his hand over my shoulder and I pushed it away.

“Only to find out how your first day went, though. Nothing else,” I said.

His face clouded then cleared when he realised that I wouldn't bother

coming over just to talk to him. The wall screens would be fine for just talking.

“You need to get a move on,” I said, slapping his bottom and pushing him towards the door.

I followed him out to the taxi, even though I was virtually naked. One thing was certain, round here there wouldn't be anyone outside to see. The early sun was sharp on my skin.

Damien climbed into the armour plated single seater taxi and the side panel closed behind him. I blew him a kiss as it whirred off towards security, since he had to be formally cleared for exit, and he gave me a happy wave.

I went back inside and my door closed behind me.

“What's my schedule, Claude?” I asked.

“You've got jagarti with Paulette at eight thirty, Trina,” he said. “Then I've scheduled you for the Sergey Vanofov promos.”

“Any word yet from Annabel on the Geng Hao promos?” I asked.

“Not yet, Trina. Do you want me to follow up on those?” he asked.

“Leave it until midday,” I said. “I need to start the Sergey ones, at least. Anything interesting in the news? Oh, what happened at the Residents' Meeting yesterday?”

“There was a motion to implement additional security and to change three procedures,” said Claude, “which was passed unanimously.”

“What's the cost?”

“The annual fees will increase to 32.8%” he said.

That wasn't as much as I was expecting so I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Do I need to know any of the procedure changes or can you handle

them?" I asked.

"No, I have the parameters," said Claude. "They took effect at midnight and I'll alert you whenever the need arises."

"Great."

That was good news too since I hate having to remember the details of security procedures.

"Any interesting news?"

"Just two I thought would interest you," said Claude, "although there have been more riots in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Singapore."

"What is it this time?" I asked.

"Sea levels," said Claude. "They're all fairly low lying."

That part of the world was suffering a lot from climate change, being high population and low lying. Bangkok had disappeared only three years ago. It was kind of sad really, as I had wanted to visit Bangkok when I was a teenager.

"Oh well," I said, sitting on a chair. "Show me the two then I'll get ready for jagarti."

Apparently, in Honolulu, a fourteen year old schoolgirl who had stabbed one of her teachers to death had just been appointed as Student Counsellor at the University Of The Pacific. It wasn't at all clear from the feed whether she had been appointed to help prevent tensions arising between students and staff or to teach students how to be more effective in pursuing their grievances.

The other news item was couched as good news and a triumph for the security companies that policed this sort of thing, although I had my doubts. It seemed that the black market trade in guns in Australia had finally fallen dramatically after a decade of uninterrupted growth. The real reason was given as a casual aside, right at the end of the feed; 3D printing technology had improved too. The new guns didn't have

the problem of the early printed guns which was that you still had to buy bullets because you couldn't print gunpowder. The new printed guns used ordinary, everyday batteries to deliver a printed projectile with an electric charge which could, if the batteries were powerful enough, like from a car, deliver a fatal dose of static electricity. They didn't go 'bang' either.

Chapter Seven

“Greetings Swamini Paulette,” I said, holding the flat palm of my right hand against the fist of my left hand and bowing my head towards Paulette.

“Greetings Jagartine Trinity,” intoned Paulette, not opening her eyes or even moving from her crossed legged position on the floor. She held her hands, palms together, in her lap.

I knelt on the floor and sat back on my heels, concentrating on breathing deeply and evenly. A quick glance around showed that Jagartine Brenda hadn't arrived yet.

A soft pulsating gong in the background marked out our breathing intervals. In on the higher note, hold on the middle note, out on the deeper note, hold on the middle note and back to the higher note. It usually took a few breaths to get coordinated.

“Ooooh, sorry I'm late, Paulette,” squealed Brenda, suddenly appearing and startling us all. She was new to the jagarti class and hadn't yet got the hang of protocol.

Swamini Paulette completely ignored her. Flustered, Brenda looked around then dropped to her knees.

“Oh, ummm, greetings, Swamini Paulette,” she intoned, with a catch in her voice. She probably felt a bit self conscious and foolish for forgetting the correct greeting. I know I had when I first joined although part of the discipline is to not laugh at others' mistakes, since we all make them.

“Greetings, Jagartine Brenda,” intoned Paulette.

Brenda sat back on her heels and tried to regularise her breathing. The pulsing was timed to be just a little bit shorter than normal relaxed breath and required concentration. Paulette waited, as motionless as a statue.

Suddenly, on a high note, she clapped her hands, once, then rose

smoothly to her feet and sank back down to a kneeling position.

“We will centre our chakras,” she intoned.

Paulette had a distinctive way of speaking that gave two syllables for each note of the gong, occasionally making a single syllable into two in order to keep the rhythm so it came out more like a long drawn “Weee-willl cennn-terr owww-errr chakkk-rasss,” and kept her voice in a low, unemotional monotone. It must have taken her a long time to get the hang of it, but then, she was a swamini.

I focused on my root chakra in my groin and envisaged a ball of red energy hovering at the tops of my thighs, concentrating my entire mind upon it.

“Saaa-cralll,” intoned Paulette after a two or three minutes.

I concentrated on turning the red energy into orange and let it drift up to just below my belly button, where my sacral chakra was. Slowly we worked our way up through the solar plexus (‘sooo-larr plex-suss’), heart, throat and third eye chakras to the crown chakra at the top of the head, with the ball of energy going through yellow, green, blue, indigo and ending with, supposedly, violet.

My favourite was the rich indigo of my third eye chakra which is probably why I tend to stay permanently in intuition and inspiration and have never quite managed to achieve full wisdom in my life. To do that I would need to get my violet crown chakra a little less burgundy but I was working on it. One day, perhaps, but not, as it turned out, today. My energy ball was defiantly burgundy, richly, gloriously burgundy and definitely not violet (‘viii-ooo lee-ttt’).

“And centre,” intoned Paulette so we all brought our fingertips slowly down from the tops of our heads to our groins and breathed purposefully.

“Neutral spine position,” intoned Paulette, gracefully rising to her feet.

I lay on my back with my hands beside me on the floor and my legs bent. I imagine the others did as well. I couldn't see them as it was

important to keep my spine straight and not let it twist by moving my head from side to side.

“And raise,” intoned Paulette.

I raised my legs so my thighs were vertical and my calves parallel to the floor.

“And sits,” intoned Paulette.

Keeping our legs where they were we did some situps. I won't bore you with the rest of the routine but it was basically a full body workout with the focus completely on smooth, controlled, flowing motions in time with the pulsating gong and maintaining the even, slow breathing while Paulette moved around ensuring we were doing the moves correctly. It must have taken me four months to get the hang of it and stay coordinated and even now, after two years, it was still difficult to stop my breathing from getting ragged and gaspy by the end. We finished by re-centring our chakras.

Then came the best bit.

“Time for my shower, Claude!”

Invigorated and bursting with creative energy I immersed myself in the supposed delights of fake Russian night lights and fox fur pillow cases for Sergey Vanofov. I confess it was something of a relief when Claude told me it was lunchtime.

“Any messages while I was working?” I asked as Claude served me my chicken salad and iced tea.

“Annabel has sent a list of required modifications, Trina” said Claude, “and Armand Suleyman will call again later. He did not want to leave a message.”

“Huh, I wonder what he wants,” I said. “Anything else?”

“Misha called to ask if you will be going to the concert on Saturday.”

“I wonder why she called?” I said, after all it was easy enough to get her holobot to ask Claude rather than go to the effort of actually calling me, even though she was my best friend.

“Misha wanted to know if it would be possible for you and her to attend the concert from her unit.”

“Ahhh,” I said. Although we could sit together in the virtual concert hall, actually being together in the same room was something Claude couldn't make a judgement on. “Did you tell her I had another engagement?”

“Yes,” said Claude. “She sounded disappointed.”

I was a little disappointed too. The concert was a revival program of three of the bands I used to like as a teenager in Sydney.

“How many concerts are they giving?” I asked.

“Five,” he said.

“Coordinate with Misha's bot and see if we can arrange another evening. If we can, let her know I'd love to be there at her unit. Actually no, just let me know and I'll call her myself. It'll be fun.”

“Monday is free,” he said after a moment. “Do you want to talk to Misha now?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I haven't talked to her in a few days.”

“I'm sorry,” said Claude, a few moments later. “Her channel is on private suspend. Do you want to leave a message?”

Private suspend meant she was probably working and didn't want to be disturbed.

“Yeah,” I said, “tell her about the concert on Monday and that I'll call her again this evening. Show me the list of modifications Annabel wants.”

I looked them over and they weren't anything dramatic, just minor little tweaks really. The important thing was that required modifications meant that approval had been given, which meant I'd be paid.

“Get back to Annabel and tell her I'll work on the promos this afternoon. I should have them finished by tomorrow midday. Send her the Sergey Vanofov drafts as well, they'll need approval too.”

I got stuck back into my chicken salad and had nearly finished when Claude interrupted me.

“Annabel is calling live for you,” he said.

“OK, put her on screen,” I said. “Heya Annabel, how's things?”

She was looking a little harassed.

“Oh, Ben's sick again,” she said.

“Oh no,” I said, “more headaches and diarrhoea?”

“Yes,” she said, “it's not too serious but it's still debilitating him. The doctor can't figure out what the problem is. He's now saying we should see a counsellor since he never had this before we moved to this place.”

Ben was her nine year old son and he'd been having these intermittent attacks since they'd moved house over a year ago.

“Is Ben stressed?” I asked. “Is he having problems with school?”

“Not as far as we know,” said Annabel, “but I think what the doctor was trying to say is that he thinks Ben should see a psychiatric counsellor rather than a stress counsellor. I hope we find out the cause soon though since the insurance won't pay out unless he's got an identified condition and the specialists are just so expensive and we keep getting passed from one to another. I'm going to need stress counselling soon myself. Anyway, enough about us. I've sent off your Vanofov drafts and I should hear back by tomorrow morning. With the

Geng Hao promos, will you have all four finished tomorrow or just the three bamboo ones? The Romanian one hasn't been approved yet.”

“Just the three bamboo,” I said. “I haven't started the Romanian one yet.”

Actually I didn't quite know where to begin but I didn't want to admit that just yet.

“You will have a draft for me by Friday, won't you?” she said anxiously.

“Definitely,” I said, giving her my most confident look.

I heard Ben call out something in the background and Annabel half turned.

“I've got to go,” she said. “I'll call you tomorrow evening to see how you're getting on with it. Adios.”

She disappeared before I could say goodbye.

“Well, this is a bit of a pickle,” I said to Claude.

“I'm sorry,” he said calmly. “I do not know how pickle got into your chicken salad.”

“No, no,” I said hurriedly. “There isn't any pickle in the salad. It's just an expression. It means I've got a bit of a problem. Add that to your idioms file.”

“I have,” he said. “Does it have to be any particular pickle or are there different pickles for different problems? Does the amount of pickle vary with the size and scope of the problem?”

“No,” I said, “any pickle will do and the amount doesn't matter. 'A bit of a pickle' just means 'a problem'.”

The natural language programmers still had a lot of work to do.

“You know,” I said, pondering the problem, “I'm going to need help on

this one. I just don't know enough about political manipulation. Do you still have that list of Demetrius Deos?"

It seemed to me that even if Demetrius Deo didn't know he might well know someone who did and I'd rather collaborate and split the fee rather than lose it altogether. Also I'd probably be able to learn something in the process and wouldn't need to collaborate if any future jobs in this area came my way.

"Yes," said Claude. "Do you want me to message them?"

"No, I'll talk to them myself."

It occurred to me that they might not be completely open about their activities and I, a human, might glean more information than a bot would through expressions and body language.

"Get rid of lunch and call the first one," I said.

The first one didn't answer. "Note that," I told Claude, "and call the second."

"Hello," said a smiling face.

"Hello," I said, smiling back, "My name is Trina Moss. Are you Demetrius Deo?"

"I can be anyone you want, cutie," he said.

"That's not particularly helpful," I said.

"Ohhhh, so you need help then do you?" he said. "Sorry, I'm no use in a crisis situation. Bye." "

He disconnected, leaving me staring at a blank wall.

"Oh well," I said. "If that's the right Demetrius Deo he wouldn't be much use anyway. Wipe him and call the next."

"γεια σας," said the next, not smiling.

“Hello,” I said, smiling back anyway, “My name is Trina Moss. Are you Demetrius Deo?”

“ΕΣΟΥ ΤΙ ΘΕΛΕΙΣ?” he said.

“Do you speak English?” I asked. “Claude, give me a translation.”

“Oh go away and stop bothering me,” said the man, in translation, and hung up as well.

“That was Greek,” said Claude. “Do you want me to wipe that one as well?”

“Yes,” I said. “How many left?”

“Fourteen and one retry,” said Claude.

I wrinkled my nose. It's always a lot easier in the thrillers I sometimes watched on MovieNet.

“Are you Demetrius Deo?” I asked the next one, without bothering to smile.

“Yeah,” he said. “Who are you?”

“I'm Trina Moss,” I said. “Do you create videos?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “Why?”

“I'm looking for the Demetrius Deo who made a particular video,” I said. “If I show you a short clip can you tell me if it was you?”

He laughed. “I guess,” he said. “Why do you want to find the creator?”

“I just want to talk to him,” I said.

“I don't give away my production secrets,” he said.

“I don't want your secrets,” I said. “I'm a creator as well.”

“What did you say your name was?”

“Trina Moss.”

He put me on hold for thirty seconds or so.

“OK,” he said, coming back. “Show me the clip.”

I played him the first three seconds or so of the feed where the three teenagers started climbing the security fence.

“I’ve done some like that,” he said, “and it’s a common meme. Got any more of it?”

I was in a bit of a quandary. I needed him to tell me, or show me, how the clip continued so I knew I had the right person rather than someone who simply claimed they had made it but if I showed him any of the more specific parts he’d probably be able to make a decent guess at the rest.

“Have you made any like that recently?” I asked.

“How recently is recently?” he replied. I sighed. Clearly he wasn’t the most helpful of people.

“Say in the last week or so?” I said.

“Might have done,” he said, grinning, “but then I might not have done. Depends really.”

“On what?” I asked.

“How much trouble you’re going to cause me,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, in surprise. It hadn’t occurred to me that Demetrius Deo might have a perspective different to mine. “I’m looking for the creator of this clip because I have a job I can’t handle on my own and I was hoping to collaborate.”

“How nice,” he said. “But you could just be saying that to trap me.”

“Oh for crying out loud,” I said in frustration. “Did you make that clip or not?”

“Ooooooh, she's got a temper,” he said sarcastically.

I stared at him and he stared back at me, a twisted smile on his face.

“Please?” I said, giving in first.

“Well you're obviously not in security,” he said, “they never say 'please'. Yes, I made it.”

“How does the rest of the video go?” I asked.

“So you don't believe me, huh,” he said. “I could show you the rest of it but how do I know you're not just trying to steal it?”

I was about to tell him that it was publicly available then realised that if I did he might quickly download it in order to claim he'd made it.

“You could play it for me at high speed,” I said. “That way I'll be able to see enough to know if it's the same one but I won't be able to get a normal speed copy.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “And you can do the same with your copy just to prove you're not bullshitting me either.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Who goes first?”

“Oh for god's sake,” he said, losing his patience. “This is getting ridiculous. The full version is about 50 minutes and here's the link. Watch it, copy it, do what you want with it, I really can't be bothered,” and he disconnected.

“Did you get the link?” I asked Claude, feeling a little drained by the conversation.

“Yes,” he said.

“OK, play it.”

It was the same video, except that it had a few extra minutes at the start and the end and a fifteen second copyright notice which made his coyness seem rather pointless since it gave his name and contact details.

“I suppose I'd better call him back,” I said, although I was having doubts about whether I wanted to collaborate with him after all. It promised to be a difficult process.

“Incoming from Armand Suleyman,” said Claude.

“Oh god,” I said. “Just what I need. I suppose I'd better take it. Hello Armand.”

“Ahh, Trina,” he said, careful to use the diminutive correctly. “I trust I find you well?”

“Yeah, I'm fine,” I said. “How are you?”

“All the better for seeing you,” he said, smiling happily. With his mouth, though, not his eyes.

“What can I do for you?” I asked. Foolishly, in retrospect, since he'd told me the day before what I could do for him.

“Have you had a chance to think about our discussion yesterday?” he said.

“Not really,” I said. Actually I had sort of intended to talk to Damien about it but other things came up.

“Oh.” He seemed quite disappointed. “Perhaps if we could have dinner and talk some more?”

“Mr Suleyman,” I started to say.

“Armand, please,” he interjected.

“Oh, Armand, yeah, umm, I am rather busy and I was planning to work through dinner ...” I said.

“On the Geng Hao promos?” he asked, “now they've been approved?”

“How did you ...?” I started to say then changed my mind. If he could track an individual data packet through the net twelve years after it was sent he'd have no problem intercepting my chats with Annabel. “Oh forget it. Am I going to get paid for helping you?”

I figured it was easiest to go along with his request, since there really was no privacy on the net anyway, so I asked about payment on the off-chance. After all, if Geng Hao found out they might not use me again and I had bills to pay.

His face fell. No doubt he'd been hoping that his charm or his appeal to my humanity would get my help for free.

“Well, I suppose some form of remuneration would be appropriate,” he said. “Umm, how much were you thinking of?”

We negotiated briefly and I got Claude to process his payment there and then. It seemed to me that an up-front, one-off payment would be easier than trying to get future instalments out of him since it would be difficult to stop the data flow once it was started.

“Frosty,” I said. “I'm finalising the promos this afternoon so send me the code and I'll shove it in. Do you want it on all three?”

“All four, actually,” he said. “We mustn't forget the Romanian one.”

“I haven't started that one yet,” I said. “I can't embed anything until it's been approved.”

“Quite,” said Armand. “I'll send you the code to embed and the apps for your own system in the next few minutes.”

“Great,” I said. “Is that it?”

I seemed to have caught him on the wrong foot again. Perhaps he thought I'd have qualms about it or something. Actually I did have qualms but I was beginning to know how Demetrius Deo felt when he'd disconnected from me.

“Umm, well, yes,” he said. “We will talk again though.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” I said, “now if you don’t mind, I do have things to do. Goodbye.”

He managed to get in a quick ‘goodbye’ before I disconnected.

“Oh, you again,” said Demetrius Deo when I called back. He didn’t look delighted.

“Yes, me again,” I said, trying to be up beat and charming even though I was actually quite nervous. I found Demetrius’ manner quite difficult to deal with.

He just sat there, waiting.

“I, umm, was wondering, since it was you who made that video, umm, if you’d be interested in collaborating with me,” I said, feeling under pressure.

“On what?” he asked.

“A video,” I said.

I saw his nostrils flare.

“Obviously,” he said irritably. “What kind of video?”

“A political one,” I said.

He froze.

“Sorry, I don’t do political videos,” he said. “Fraid I can’t help you.”

“Oh.” I felt surprisingly disappointed. Even though I wasn’t convinced I wanted to collaborate with him I had, for some reason, pinned my hopes on him. He got up and started rummaging through something outside his cam view.

“Umm,” I said, “do you know anyone who does?”

"I'd have to think about that," he said.

He sat down again and seemed to be writing something.

"So what did you think of my little video?" he asked.

He held what he'd written up to the screen, upside-down. It took me a few moments to work out what it said.

"never talk polit vids online"

"Oh, umm, I thought it was very good," I said, disconcerted.

He waggled his plastic sheet at me and I nodded. I figured he was asking if I'd read it.

"You don't seem like the sort of person who'd like a video like that," he said, writing some more.

"Actually, I don't," I said. "It's just that the video was used by the security company who looks after my complex to sell us more security."

"meet n talk" he'd written, again holding it upside-down.

"Oh really?" he said. "Well, I'm sorry. I just made the video to a brief, I can't be responsible for how it's used."

"Oh shit," I said.

I'd just realised why he was holding the written messages upside-down. If this conversation was being monitored by an app it probably wouldn't think to try to read the letters since upside-down it wouldn't look like text. I wasn't too bothered about the conversation being monitored but what did bother me was that Demetrius seemed to think that someone would care and was taking precautions.

"Exactly," he said. "So if you have a complaint it's best if you take it up with your security company. Whereabouts are you?"

“Queensland Coastal,” I said.

“I do a lot of work in Queensland Coastal,” he said. “Can you be more specific?”

“Umm, Weston Downs,” I said, “in the Glasshouse Mountains.”

“Ahh, nice place,” he said. “I was born in Deception Bay.”

He held up his plastic again.

“5 sisters cafe ll 2mrw”

“In Deception Bay?” I asked

“Yes,” he said, writing “no west dns”

“Ahh right,” I said.

It's surprisingly difficult to try to hold a normal sounding conversation and keep a straight face while reading upside-down written messages.

“Umm,” I said, wondering how to let him know I'd understood. Aha!

“Well, yes,” I said. “I'll, umm, do what you suggest and, umm, talk to the security company.”

“Great,” he said. “Well, if there isn't anything else?”

“Oh god,” I thought, panicking slightly. “ll in the morning or evening? How do I ask?”

I didn't have anything to write on.

“Umm, just one more thing,” I said. “I'm doing a little research on how people feel about numbers. Which do you prefer, eleven or twenty three?”

He looked a little puzzled then said “ll” and held up “in the morn!”

“Frosty,” I said. “I feel the same way. Well, nice talking to you.”

“Bye, bye,” he said and disconnected.

“Well, flood that,” I said to myself after he'd gone. “What was all that about?”

My heart was beating a little faster than usual and I felt quite, I don't know, stimulated? A clandestine meeting! Just like in the MovieNet feeds! How exciting!

Chapter Eight

“Oh you idiot,” I said to myself a few moments after disconnecting from Demetrius. 11pm would be after the curfew so no cafe would bother to be open since they wouldn't have any customers. No wonder he'd looked puzzled when I asked about 11 and 23. I felt a little foolish.

My initial twinge of excitement was also fast evaporating. It was dangerous in town which was why I lived out here and even though I would be meeting him in daylight with, presumably, other people around it was still risky. On top of that was a vague unease from why we were meeting in the first place. What was so bad about a political video that we couldn't talk about it on a secure channel?

It was a worry.

“What was that?” I asked.

Claude had said something but I hadn't been listening.

“Three files from Armand Suleyman,” he repeated patiently. “Your biomedes are indicating you are a little stressed, Trina. Would you like some Prozac Lite?”

“No, I'll be fine in a minute or two,” I said. “Show me Armand's files.”

Two were apps and the third was some brief instructions. Basically, all I had to do was put the larger of the two apps on my home system and insert the smaller app twenty two bytes from the end of each of my videos and forget both apps ever existed. Every two or three days the larger app would dump some data into a spreadsheet and Armand wanted me to spend a couple of minutes looking at it and pretending to do something with it. It all seemed easy enough.

“Open the smaller app in text, Claude,” I said. “No, cancel that.”

I was curious to see what it did but opening it would be a waste of time since it would be in machine code, the language the computer used, rather than anything intelligible to a human. It was probably best I didn't know anyway.

I was still feeling a little stressed though.

“Get me some Chamomile tea, would you, hun,” I asked Claude.

I didn't feel up to working on the Geng Hao videos just yet and, although the Prozac did normally calm me down it also dried up my creativity.

“Any interesting news?” I asked when he brought my tea.

“A kindergarten in New Brisbane is offering a free puppy to every new enrolment,” he said. “The CEO says it is to help the child settle and will improve learning and social development.”

“I wonder if that's true or if it's just a marketing gimmick. Are they real puppies or holobots?”

Real puppies would be expensive and you really had to wonder how many would survive the experience.

“I have found sixteen academic studies on the effectiveness of pets in child development and learning,” said Claude. “Would you like to read any of them?”

“Oh god no,” I said. “Just give me a summary of the conclusions.”

“There is some evidence that pets can aid early learning,” said Claude, “but it is not conclusive and not every child benefits equally.”

“I wonder what the effects are on the puppies,” I wondered, “assuming they're not bots?”

“I am unable to find any research on that topic, Trina,” said Claude. “Would you like me to contact an animal behaviour institute?”

“No, forget it,” I said. The tea was beginning to calm me down a little.

“I have an incoming multi-recipient from Vera Swanson,” said Claude.

“Put it up,” I said.

Vera liked to keep an eye on the news and keep the residents of the complex up-to-date on things that might, however remotely, affect us in some way.

“This is really for Elly,” said Vera, breathlessly. “But I thought you all should see it anyway. Elly, are we properly covered?”

“Open the link, Claude,” I said.

The link was a news feed from the early hours of the morning and showed a very excited reporter beaming happily with a large block of apartments engulfed in flames behind him. Every now and then he jumped as small explosions could be heard.

“Behind me is Gravel Towers in Redfern on the Sydney foreshore where, around four this morning fire broke out on the third floor and rapidly rose to the floors above.”

He stepped aside as the camera man zoomed in to show that, indeed, the third floor and the nineteen above it were burning nicely. The camera pulled back to show the reporter again.

“Did anyone notice anything missing?” he asked, theatrically. “Apart from the one hundred and seventy residents of the tower nicknamed Suicide Towers so far unaccounted for?”

The camera panned a little from side to side to help us see if we could spot anything missing.

A large question mark appeared on the feed and the caption “#suicidetowersmissing if you think you know the answer!”

“Yes, that's right folks, tell us what you think is missing and everyone who gets the right answer in the next five minutes will get a free ANBC barbeque tool set, guaranteed to keep that party alight!”

A picture of a barbeque tool set appeared and a timer started counting down from 5:00. A superimposed image of a busty blonde in a skimpy bikini appeared, toasting what looked to be a marshmallow over the burning tower and giggling beside an impossibly handsome

man holding a stubby. In the background faint screaming could be heard briefly as something fell from one of the top floors in a ball of flame.

“Jump to the end of the countdown,” I said.

I wanted to know what it was about and why Vera had circulated it, not watch the reporter mentally calculating his bonus for managing to be on the spot during an actual news event.

The feed jumped to the counter reading 0:02 and two seconds later it disappeared. “#suicidetowersmissing now closed” appeared on the screen and the couple having a barbeque faded away.

The reporter fiddled with something in his ear then his happy beam grew even wider.

“And we have a winner!” he exclaimed. “A superb ANBC barbecue tool set is on its way to you Azalea Camilleri in Canberra, yay!” and he pointed his finger at the screen and winked.

“WINNER! AZALEA CAMILLERI, CANBERRA” flashed repeatedly on the feed.

“And now, in this ANBC exclusive,” cried the reporter as the camera zoomed in on him to avoid another reporter from another feed, “we can reveal to you that what is missing is ...,” he paused for dramatic effect, “... the fire service!”

“WHAT??? NO FIRE SERVICE???” flashed up on the feed.

“Here's what a representative from Pyre Fyre had to say.”

A window opened in the feed and a harried looking woman in a grey business suit appeared. She was sitting behind a desk with a wall display showing columns of figures.

“Jenny Pyre, Pyre Fyre” flashed up at the bottom of her window.

“Thank you for joining us, Jenny,” said the reporter. Jenny gave a half

smile.

The reporter turned to look at the blazing tower block behind him.

“It now looks like all twenty two stories of Gravel Tower are well and truly alight,” he said, trying to look serious, “and I’m hearing that there are upwards of one hundred and seventy people missing. Since the fire started at around four this morning, do you think it would be reasonable to assume that most, if not all, of the missing are still inside?”

“Yes, that would seem a reasonable assumption,” said Jenny Pyre.

“As a fire expert,” asked the reporter, “how many people, realistically, will survive a fire of this magnitude?”

“Well, obviously it’s very difficult to say but judging from the images I’m seeing from your feed,” said Jenny Pyre, “I’d say, approximately speaking and as a conservative estimate, none.”

“And Pyre Fyre are the fire service for this apartment block?” asked the reporter.

“Absolutely,” said Jenny Pyre. “We have been happy to provide our services for the last three years and, might I add, without a single complaint.”

She tapped her finger on her desk twice to emphasise this point.

“So can you tell me why Pyre Fyre are not here, fighting this terrible blaze and saving the lives of the residents?” asked the reporter.

“Oh, it’s very simple,” said Jenny Pyre. “When we were notified of the fire ...,” she consulted her spreadsheet, “... at 4:11 this morning, we immediately contacted Collateral Risk Insurance, who insure the building for fire and other risks. Collateral Risk Insurance refused to authorise payment of our fees and so we cannot be held under any obligation to attend the fire. We are, after all, in the business of fighting fires. We are not a charity.”

“Eloquently put, if I may say so,” said the reporter. “I believe we have a representative from Collateral Risks Insurance ... no, I'm sorry, we cannot talk to Collateral Risk Insurance at the moment due to a technical problem to do with the intense heat from the fire disrupting our microwave link but I am told that the reason Collateral Risk Insurance have refused to authorise payment for Pyre Fyre's services is that the Residents' Association are late in paying their premium for this month.”

“Kill the feed,” I said. Obviously that was what had caught Vera's attention; non-payment of the premium.

“Let me know when Ella replies to this, Claude,” I said.

It was actually quite a serious issue since AllSecurity handled all of our security, including fire prevention and control, and it would be serious if, for some reason, any of our payments were not made and we had a fire.

Still, the feed was part of everyday life and had restored my usual equanimity. Given that news feeds were now more or less global and continuous and at any given moment scores of disasters were occurring somewhere on the planet they really just faded into the background. I went back to my workroom and got on with finishing the Geng Hao bamboo videos.

An hour or so later Claude interrupted me.

“Multi-recipient reply from Elly Yangtze, Trina,” he said quietly.

“Visual,” I said and a window opened up on top of my videos.

“Thank you for that Vera,” said Elly. “I'd like to thank you for your conscientiousness with these news items. Now, for the record, we have never been late with a payment for any services and, under the terms of our contract with AllSecurity ...,” and a display of a clause in the contract appeared in the window, “... we have a two week grace period in the event of a late payment so we are still covered for two weeks after a payment is due. I hope that puts yours, and everyones, minds at rest.”

I'm no lawyer but it looked all right to me.

“Record a message to Elly” I said.

“Recording,” said Claude.

“Thanks for that, Elly,” I said with a big smile. “Stop, send.”

“Sent,” said Claude. “Do you want the thread deleted?”

“Umm, no, save it,” I said. “I might need to prove what Elly said one day. What time's my Neo Zen session?”

“Five thirty,” said Claude.

“OK, call me at five and no interruptions until then.”

That would give me about three hours and I wanted to get the Geng Hao videos finished. I hadn't finished when Claude alerted me but they only took another ten minutes, plus another five to insert Armand's code twenty two bytes from the end of each. I wanted to play them back to see if the insert made any difference to the videos but I was nervous about what the insert would do to my system.

“I wonder if I should warn Annabel?” I thought. “I guess I'd better not since that would be suspicious although she's bound to play them just to check they're OK. And, thinking about it, I need her to check them too to make sure the insert isn't apparent. Oh well.”

I felt kind of guilty. Mind you, she was the agent for quite a few net content producers so she probably had any number of unexpected attachments and inserts going through her system. If she had any sense she would have her business system completely separate from her home system. I would too except that I couldn't be bothered.

“OK, send them to Annabel,” I said.

I'd been paid by Armand so I now had an obligation to him as well.

“I suppose I ought to give 17% of that to Annabel,” I thought.

As my agent, Annabel took 17% of my income from promos, even if she didn't find the job for me. It hadn't been an issue before since all my promos came through Annabel, although the artworks I did myself, paying a percentage to whichever galleries sold them.

“Then again, if I give her 17% she'll want to know why and I promised Armand I wouldn't tell anyone. And I suppose, technically, Armand didn't pay me for a promo, he paid me for a data feed insert so I'm probably covered there too.”

Always useful to have an 'out' when you feel a little guilty.

“Trina, your Neo-Zen Transitional Guidance session is in four minutes,” said Claude.

“OK, clear up for me would you, I'm done for today and get me some chai tea in the living room.”

“Greetings Trinity,” said Greg on the dot of five thirty.

“Greetings Roshi Greg,” I said. “I have a question.”

“Good,” said Greg. “It is only through questioning that we can come to understand the nature of reality and our places within it. What is your question?”

“I have been studying with you for nearly four years,” I said. “When am I going to become a better person?”

“When you understand the futility of that question,” said Greg.

“Oh no, not another koan?” I asked, my heart sinking.

“No, not a koan” he said, “just a simple misunderstanding.”

“What do you mean?” That was a question I asked Greg a lot and rarely got a satisfactory reply.

“You will never be a better person,” he said, shifting his false leg to a more comfortable position. “Just as you will never be a worse person.”

You are you and you are a multitude of qualities and none of them are better or worse, they just are.”

“So if I'm never going to be a better person, why have I been coming here all these years?”

“Meditation and Neo-Zen practice do not make you a better person,” said Greg, “whatever 'better' might mean. Meditation merely gives you insight into who you truly are, regardless of any value judgement. You may be better now than you were but equally you may be better now than you will be. If you know yourself then you know your truth and your truth is beyond the subjective judgements of yourself and others. As to why you have been coming here for all this time, I cannot answer. I am not a mind reader. Only you can know that.”

I told him about the fire at Gravel Tower in Sydney.

“A terrible thing,” he said, “but a wonderful thing at the same time. Those who have died in the fire have suffered but at the same time their suffering has come to an end in this life.”

“Would I not be a better person if I felt more sympathy for them?” I asked.

“How will your sympathy alleviate the suffering of those who no longer suffer?” asked Greg.

“So you are saying I shouldn't be sympathetic towards those who died in the fire?” I asked.

“No, I merely asked how your sympathy will alleviate their suffering. If you are genuinely sympathetic that is good but if you are genuinely unsympathetic that is also good. It is falseness to yourself that is bad. Perhaps we should review the seven stages of compassion.”

“I know the seven stages of compassion,” I said. “What I am asking you is why, after all these years, I still haven't reached the seventh stage.”

“What is the seventh stage?” he asked.

“May all beings be free from suffering and the root of suffering,” I said.

“Are those who died in the fire free from suffering?” he asked. “At least until they are reborn?”

“Well, yes,” I said.

“And what is the first stage?” asked Greg.

“May I be free from suffering and the root of suffering,” I said.

“Are you free from suffering?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Then why are you worrying about applying the seventh stage to those who are no longer suffering when you have not yet applied the first stage to yourself and you continue to suffer?” he asked.

“Because I think I'm being selfish,” I said after a while.

“Tell me,” said Greg, “do you want someone to come to help you when you do not need help who says ‘I hate what I am doing but I am doing it for your sake?’”

“No, of course not,” I said.

“Then why are you doing that to those who died in the fire? You are hating yourself for not being as sympathetic as you think you ought to be towards those who don't need your sympathy in the first place. Worse than that, you are increasing your own suffering in the process by making yourself feel bad because you don't feel something you think others think you should feel.”

I pondered that.

“You have to be compassionate to yourself,” said Greg, gently, “before you can be compassionate towards others. If you are false to yourself then you cannot be true to others.”

“I hear what you say,” I said, after a while, “I just feel I would be a better person if I was more sympathetic, that's all.”

Greg thought for a few moments.

“In the Shobogenzo,” he said, “Great Master Ungan Muju asks Great Master Shu-itsu of Dogo-zan mountain, 'What does the bodhisattva of great compassion do using his limitlessly abundant hands and eyes?' Dogo says, 'He is like a person in the night reaching back with a hand to grope for a pillow.' What do you think that means, Trinity?”

I thought about it for several minutes.

“I don't know,” I admitted.

“There's no rush,” said Greg. “Perhaps we can talk about it more next week. Compassion is a very difficult subject to come to terms with.”

“Surely compassion is very simple,” I said. “Isn't it sympathy for the sufferings of others?”

“Indeed,” said Greg. “It is that simple, isn't it,” and he laughed and slapped his false leg. “Are you compassionate for me because of my leg?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Why?” he asked. “I'm not suffering from it. It hurt when I lost it many, many years ago in Turkey, but it hasn't hurt for many, many years either and I have a very good, strong prosthetic leg now, much better than the old flesh and bone one was.”

I screwed up my nose. “Well, I'm sympathetic for the suffering you once had, then.”

“Seems like a waste of sympathy to me,” he said. “OK, how about losing my home in Italy when the sea level rose and flooded the beach village I lived in? Do you think you should give me your compassion because of that?”

“Well, of course,” I said.

Greg laughed uproariously.

“What on earth for? I just moved inland a little and I still live beside a beach. How am I suffering? You think you should give me compassion because I moved from one beach to another?”

“But what about everything you lost?”

“What have I lost? Bricks and stones? A leg? I have other bricks and stones, I have another leg. Don't give me your sympathy, I do not need it. Give it to yourself since you are the one suffering from guilt.”

I scowled.

“You are twisting things,” I said.

“Am I?” asked Greg. “Tell you what, think about it and explain how I am twisting it next week when you tell me what Dogo meant. I welcome the opportunity to be educated.”

“I know why I've been coming to you all these years,” I said.

“Oh, why's that?” asked Greg, looking alertly curious.

“Because you frustrate the shit out of me!”

Greg found that very funny.

“You begin to know yourself,” he said. “There is no greater wisdom.”

Chapter Nine

“How's the weather, hon?” I asked as Claude cleared away dinner, there being no windows in my unit.

“About 25 degrees,” he said, “but overcast. The forecast is for light rain in about an hour.”

“OK, sounds good. I'll take Ruby for a walk.”

“The sun set an hour and a half ago, Trina. Perhaps you should take a torch.”

“Ahh, yes, good idea.” I said. “Get my phone too, hun.”

I took the velcro belt that I kept hanging on Ruby's handset charger and put it round my waist while Claude fetched me a torch and my phone and I stuck them on the belt. I flicked Ruby's handset on and Ruby appeared, sitting beside the door. She gave a polite woof in greeting and thumped her tail on the floor.

“Good girl,” I said. “Wanna go walkies?”

She woofed again, and I set the handset to 'Walkies'. She immediately started barking excitedly and running frantically up and down the hallway and jumping up at the door.

“OK, we're off,” I said to Claude and he opened the door. The outside light came on automatically.

Ruby ran out to check for any new smells in the immediate vicinity and I stuck my hand outside to check it wasn't raining. Paper based clothing was very cheap and convenient but the techie people still hadn't quite figured out how to make the paper entirely waterproof. From experience I knew that my clothes would hold up for half an hour or so in a light shower but any longer or heavier would mean walking home in dissolving clothing which, even though no one would be around, wasn't top of my list of fun things to do.

I do own a properly waterproof overcoat for those odd occasions when

I am in the mood to go walking in the rain but tonight wasn't one of those nights. It was a bit hot and muggy for an overcoat, anyway. Still, the good news was that it wasn't raining yet so we set off down the footpath between the units, the outdoor lights coming on as we went past.

At the main security gate I waved my wrist at the sensor and the gate clicked open. When the curfew was announced by Veilance, we'd had a Residents' meeting and I'd managed to persuade enough of them to leave complying with the curfew down to the individual rather than having AllSecurity enforce it though blocking the gates. Of course there had been security concerns but I pointed out the absurdity of their arguments. If anyone really wanted to get in to the complex badly enough to cut my wrist open and take my ID chip they'd have to look sufficiently like me to get past the face recognition system so whether it was before or after the curfew really made no difference.

I didn't recognise the man in the guard house but I waved cheerily at him anyway.

“Have a nice walk, Trinity,” he called, waving back.

No doubt the night guards were told about the eccentric resident who liked to go walking outside the complex at night.

The road curved off to the right and Ruby and I went left. I like to go down to the creek and smell the water, when there is some which isn't very often, and hear the faint sounds of life coming from the non-secured suburb on the other side of the creek. The occasional argument sometimes drifted across and very occasionally I met someone else out walking, like those teenagers a couple of nights ago, but it was rare since the curfew had been introduced.

I paused on the footbridge over the creek while Ruby sniffed around and did what dogs do. Off in the distance I could see a flashing blue light as a Veilance patrol car slowly made its way around the streets. An owl hooted derisively at me.

“Come on Ruby,” I said, quietly, giving her handset a flick.

Obediently she ran up to me and we crossed the footbridge. I always felt exposed on the footbridge and I liked to get over as quickly as possible.

There was a faint whirr as, presumably, the owl went to another tree to look out for stray mice or whatever they ate. It might even have been a bat since I have a vague feeling we get bats up here.

Walking along the footpath beside the creek, Ruby running here and there, I still felt exposed, which was strange. Normally I was fine once off the footbridge.

“Maybe it’s that killing playing on my subconscious,” I thought.

There were no stars visible and the quarter moon was hazy so it looked like there was thin cloud up there. It wasn’t pitch dark though; the hazy moon gave enough pale light to make out the edges of the path and there was that dampness in the air that suggested rain wasn’t too far away.

“What was that?”

I thought I’d caught something out of the corner of my eye and I turned to look but couldn’t see anything. Ruby looked at me as if wondering why we’d stopped. There was a faint whooshing sound like a light breeze in the tops of the trees on the other side of the creek but no other sounds. Listening intently I thought that perhaps, after all, I could just make out the sound of someone’s TV coming from one of the nearby houses. It seemed to fade from nothing to the edge of my hearing then back to nothing again.

“You’re just spooking yourself,” I muttered under my breath and started walking again, just a tiny little bit faster than I had been.

Ruby ran down to the creek to see if there was any water but she couldn’t quite get there since I had her set to be no more than three metres from me and closer if the sensor picked up anyone nearby. Not everyone likes dogs, even holodogs, and very occasionally, back before the curfew days when I met people out walking, someone would get nervous. So, when the sensor picked up someone, Ruby would come

close to me and dog my heels.

Actually this was also a good little warning system since I didn't always hear someone catching up behind me and Ruby suddenly coming close was a warning that there was someone else within twenty five metres. Some frogs started calling to each other and Ruby froze, her nose and ears alert.

“Just some frogs, Rubes,” I said.

She glanced at me and trotted off up the footpath ahead of me.

I had the uncanny feeling I was being watched.

I hadn't heard anything, other than the frogs and the owl or bat, but I had a strong feeling that there was something out there, in the darkness. Watching me. Still, Ruby was up ahead rather than at my heels so the sensor hadn't detected anything.

I started to march briskly. The next footbridge wasn't too far away.

The feeling got stronger. Someone was watching me!

I pulled the torch off my belt and flashed it quickly around, full circle. There was nothing there, other than the usual bushes and crispy grass from the summer heat. I played the beam over the creek but couldn't see anything on the other side, apart from the thin trees. Ruby was sitting on the path, three meters ahead, waiting for me. The owl whirred overhead, or possibly another owl. Were owls pack creatures or solitary? I made a mental note to ask Claude when we got back. I shone the torch up in the air and waved it around but, of course, didn't see anything. The feeling slowly ebbed away as Ruby and I kept walking.

Just over the other footbridge was a short section, only twenty metres or so, where the path ran between the trees. I didn't like that section. Even in daylight it was a little claustrophobic and if I was going to attack someone on the footpath, I'd ambush them in those trees. I'd hide and then suddenly leap out behind them just as they walked past, since sensors can't detect people hiding behind trees. In the dark it

was even scarier and I walked quickly.

Past the trees the footpath curved back around and headed back to the complex. For the last hundred metres or so it ran alongside the road. I'd just reached that point when I got that feeling again. Someone was watching me.

There was no traffic on the road, obviously. Someone might risk walking after curfew but vehicles were just too conspicuous, especially on the approach to the complex. I stopped again, Ruby ahead of me, and flashed the torch around. The trees were off to my left, some way away but I suppose someone could be lurking in there. I caught a tiny movement in the sky as the owl hurried its way back to the safety of the trees. Maybe what was spooking me was simply the owl out hunting. Maybe I'd subconsciously heard the cry of a dying mouse or rodent as the owl grabbed it. Who knows.

I flashed my wrist at the gate again and there was the briefest of flashes as the face recognition system decided there wasn't quite enough ambient light to recognise me then the gate clicked open and I walked in. It closed before Ruby could get through but she reappeared, sitting beside the guardhouse. The same guard was there and he opened his window.

"You got back just in time, Trinity," he called.

"Why?" I said, "what's happening?"

Had someone been following me? I wasn't too sure what the contract with AllSecurity said about protecting residents who were outside the complex after curfew. Maybe they'd be like Pyre Fyre and stand and watch impassively as I was viciously assaulted and killed just outside the perimeter fence. Maybe they'd even film it to sell to a news feed.

"Rain's coming," he said. "I can see it on the radar, it's about two hundred metres behind you.

"Oh right," I said, glancing back through the fence. I couldn't see any sign of rain although the entrance to the complex was well lit and that made the darkness beyond considerably darker.

“Did you see me on the radar?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I saw you come out of the trees up there and I tracked you all the way back.”

“How did you know it was me?” I asked. “Does radar show what I look like?”

“Oh no,” he said, “but we've got lots of recordings of you outside the perimeter and you had the same radar signature. We try to identify everyone as soon as we pick them up.”

“Was there anyone else out there?” I asked.

“Not that I saw on radar,” he said. “Why? Did you see someone?”

“No, but I had a funny feeling,” I said. “Anyway, I'm back safe now.”

“You'd be a lot safer if you didn't go outside after curfew,” he said seriously then gave a little laugh. “Hey, did you know you're part of our training?”

Actually, I didn't know that.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I'm new here,” he said, “as you probably guessed. On the last afternoon of our training we were shown a video of you going through the complex and out the gate. We were given a radar recording of you going for a walk and a threat scenario and we had thirty seconds to think up a rescue plan for you.”

“Wow,” I said. “What happens if you don't come up with a plan?”

“We're failed,” he said. “Same if the plan wouldn't work and you die or get seriously injured.”

I didn't quite know what to say.

“Why me?” I asked, after a long silence.

“You make it personal,” he said. “You’re the only one that goes out after curfew and having a real person suddenly makes the training real. It makes it all not just theory when there’s a real person out there in danger. Even more so now I’ve met you.”

I blinked at him a few times. All of a sudden I didn’t begrudge their high fees.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Aarav,” he said, “pleased to meet you,” and he stuck his hand through the window.

I shook hands with him.

“I’m Trina,” I said. He just smiled. Obviously he had my full profile available.

“So, err, how far from the complex am I protected?” I asked.

“Pretty much if we can see you,” he said. “So basically from the footbridge over there, along the tree line and the road. We can’t see you on the other side of the creek or in the trees.”

He glanced at his display.

“You’ll be able to hear the rain any moment,” he said. “You’d best get indoors before you get soaked.”

I couldn’t hear it but I could certainly smell it now.

“So, err, you passed the training, then?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t be here otherwise,” he said grinning.

“So, umm, what was the scenario you had?” I asked. “What did you save me from?”

“Someone chased you back over the footbridge,” he said.

“What did you do?”

“I ran out and managed to get him within range of my stun gun,” he said, “although I lost marks for forgetting to recharge it after the morning training so I didn’t have enough power to kill him outright. Still, I passed and you weren’t hurt so no worries, eh.”

“Well, umm, thank you,” I said. I didn’t quite know what else to say. After all, it’s not every day that someone risks his life to save mine, even if it was only a training exercise. I could hear the rain now, a light pattering, and the wind was picking up in the trees.

“Here comes the rain,” I said. “I’d better be getting home. Nice to have met you, Aarav.”

I slowly walked back to my unit, Ruby dogging my heels until we were away from the guard house, then she went off to check something in Seaview Mews. I felt strangely, elated isn’t the word, more buoyant, I suppose, after my little chat with Aarav.

“Hey Claude,” I said, when I’d stowed Ruby’s handset away and given him my phone and torch, “see if you can find out anything about one of the security guards here call Aarav.”

“Focus area?” asked Claude.

“Interests and hobbies,” I said.

“His hobbies are listed as Amateur Dramatics and Rugby,” said Claude.

I had an urge to get him a gift of some sort but there didn’t seem to be a lot of scope with Amateur Dramatics or Rugby. I certainly couldn’t afford to buy him a professional rugby team to play with and he didn’t seem the type to appreciate flowers, even real ones.

“Oh well,” I said, “something will occur to me later. Any messages or news?”

“Annabel acknowledged receipt of the Geng Hao videos,” said Claude.

“Other than that nothing within your defined interest parameters.”

“OK, call Misha for me, hun.”

“She is displaying 'away' at the moment,” said Claude a few seconds later.

“Really?” I said. “I wonder where she's gone?”

“Her phone is in Bundaberg,” said Claude, “at her parents' address.”

There really is no privacy on the net. The only way to be completely private is to go completely offline which is virtually impossible. Even if you are not online yourself, everything you interact with is online so your movements can be tracked by following the trail of where you bought food, for example, or used any form of transport other than walking. Even bicycles had built-in GPS now and were tracked. If you stole one rather than hired it, it would be tracked and sooner or later someone would come and get it and if someone was deliberately tracking you, the mere fact that there was a bicycle stolen not far from your last transaction would give them something to work with.

“There's no privacy on the net,” I mused.

Something was rolling around in my mind, trying to tell me something.

God knows what it was though.

“Ohh, I'm going to bed,” I said. “Get me a NyteOut, Claude.”

“What's my schedule tomorrow morning?” I asked when Claude brought me my bedtime warm milk.

“You have no appointments until 11,” he said, “so I've scheduled you to work on the Sergey Vanofov videos if they have been approved, otherwise the artwork for the Coberg Gallery.”

“11's that meeting with Demetrius, isn't it,” I said.

“My clandestine meeting,” I thought with a little chuckle.

“I have no information on the meeting,” he said. “Shall I update it to include Demetrius Deo?”

“No, there's no need,” I said absently. My mind was elsewhere.

My clandestine meeting.

There's no privacy on the net.

“So how am I going to get to the cafe?” I asked myself. “If I get a taxi then the destination will be on the net so if someone actually is tracking me then they'll know where I am going. I could just get a taxi into town and walk to the cafe from somewhere innocuous but I don't know where it is. If I get Claude to look it up then that'll be on the net as well.”

It was a problem.

“Oh damn,” I said out loud.

“Can I be of assistance?” asked Claude, still waiting patiently beside the bed with my milk.

“No, I just thought of something, that's all,” I said.

Claude had me scheduled for an llam meeting, possibly with Demetrius if it was still in his cache, which meant that snippet of information was on the net as well. At the very least I had an llam meeting with no one, which would be suspicious.

“Where is my llam?” I asked him.

“I have no information on that,” he said, “so the default is a video conference.”

Well, that was something.

“Who is it with?” I asked.

“Demetrius Deo,” he said.

So it was still in his cache.

“Clear your cache,” I said. “Who is my llam meeting with?”

“I have no information on that,” said Claude.

“Now we're getting somewhere,” I thought.

This was going to be tricky, since I had no secrets from Claude, at least up until now.

“Cancel my llam,” I said.

“You have no appointments tomorrow,” said Claude.

I lay there and thought for a while.

“Get me a list of all businesses in Weston Downs,” I said, “with addresses.”

If someone was monitoring my net access that would hopefully confuse them.

There were around 1800 of them. I hadn't realised the place was quite so busy.

“Display them alphabetically,” I said, “and scroll, 3 seconds per page.”

It seemed to take hours to get to 'Five Sisters Cafe' but fortunately I managed to get the address before the display scrolled to the next page and I had to let it scroll all the way to the end so if someone was monitoring me they wouldn't have any clue as to which business I was interested in. At this rate I wasn't going to need my NyteOut and my milk would be cold by now anyway.

Eventually we got to the end, although I'd almost forgotten which street the cafe was in.

“Show me a street map of Weston Downs,” I said.

A street map came up on the wall.

When you are trying to find a particular road without using the index, even a small town becomes surprisingly large but I found Mandalay Street fairly quickly by assuming that a cafe would be in the centre of town. It wasn't, but it wasn't far from the centre either.

“Crop to a 1 kilometre square, centred on the junction of McKean and Hayes and print it,” I said.

Judging by the scale, the cafe was less than a kilometre from that junction so if I got the taxi to take me to anywhere within that square I now had a map I could use to walk to the cafe. I hadn't realised being clandestine was so much hard work.

My warm milk was definitely cold.

“Warm the milk up again, hon,” I said.

“I bet Demetrius will be impressed,” I thought to myself as I drank my warm milk. I was sound asleep within sixty seconds.

Chapter Ten

The taxi dropped me off in town at the main shopping centre as I thought that that would be a plausible place for me to visit, if anyone should be monitoring the taxi. I'd been getting more and more nervous as the morning progressed, to the extent that I abandoned any pretence of doing any work an hour before I had to leave. And, since paranoia breeds paranoia, I made a great show of telling Claude to get me a taxi so I could see what people actually did in shopping centres to help me with my promos, the point being that some residue of that might stay in the house system and give me cover.

Cover for what I didn't know but Demetrius' seeming paranoia had spilled over onto me and I was a confused, conflicting mess of suspicion and excitement. Suspicion because, once a seed is planted, it generally grows nice and strong in a fertile environment and the ubiquitous presence of the net in every aspect of my life provided a very fertile environment. The excitement, of course, came from my imagination fuelled by a lifetime of movies and much of my adulthood being alone. Yes, I had a lot of social interests but, with the exception of occasional interludes with Damien, I rarely actually left my unit. Most of my time was spent in my living room in a virtual world with people I'd never physically met. The paranoid side of me even started to wonder just how many of them were real and how many were simulations.

Vera and Ally were definitely real since I'd met them in actual Residents' meetings but Swamini Paulette could easily be a simulation since she was so controlled and non-reacting and unchanging. Roshi Greg, on the other hand, had to be real. He was just too weird and freaky and unpredictable to be a simulation. After all, a one legged Australian in his eighties who'd failed as a Catholic priest and was now living in Italy and doing Neo-Zen Buddhist guidance over the net was simply too implausible to be simulated. No one would waste their time creating him.

I waited at the main entrance to the shopping centre for the taxi to go away. Its internal monitoring cam didn't have a wide enough field of view to see much outside but I had no idea how many other cams it had. After all, it was able to monitor the roads and other traffic well

enough to move around and it could spot and evade animals so if I was being monitored maybe its operating system had been hacked to keep an eye on me. I stood to the side of the entrance, a little away from the handful of strangers coming and going, and watched it. It didn't move, just sat there at the kerb, silently waiting with three other taxis. Did that mean it actually was watching me? Or did it mean that it just had no other pickups to make yet? I guess the latter since, after a few minutes, it suddenly whirred off.

I breathed a sigh of relief and pulled my map out to see where to go. I looked around to get my bearings and froze. There was a man the other side of the entrance, leaning against the wall, watching me. He looked young and dangerous. Seeing that I had spotted him he slowly straightened and slipped a hand into the pocket of his shorts, his chest muscles rippling under his thin tee shirt. Was he reaching for a weapon? A gas spray to knock me unconscious?

I started to back away and stumbled into a concrete pot with some sort of dry, half-dead looking tree in it. Oh god, there was another man! Older, bulkier, wearing what looked like overalls. His dark glasses hid his eyes from me but he was walking purposefully towards me. Did he just nod at the man in the tee-shirt?

I edged around the concrete pot, trying to keep it between me and the man and he strode past, turning his head to look at me.

“G'day,” he said with a nod and carried on walking towards the shopping centre entrance.

Had he said something to the man in the tee-shirt as he went past? I wasn't sure and my knees were feeling a little weak but either way the man in the tee-shirt was now eating something in a wrapper in his hand and was looking intently at a young blonde woman with skin tight trousers bending over to pick something up that her baby had thrown from its stroller.

She straightened up and looked at me. Was that a toy in her hand or a stun gun?

“Kids! Huh!” she said and wiped the stun gun with her other hand

and gave it back to her baby. OK, it looked more like a soother now that I could see it better but it could be a stun gun disguised as a soother. She marched off and the stroller followed her, the baby pointedly ignoring me.

“Josh, give us a hand,” came from inside the sliding door and the man in the tee shirt levered himself off the wall, pushed the rest of whatever he was eating into his mouth and dropped the wrapper on the ground. He disappeared inside and reemerged moments later, still chewing, carrying a large box and with a large, unkempt girl following close behind. They pointedly ignored me too and headed off between the parked taxis.

“Pull yourself together,” I told myself. “They’re just ordinary people at a shopping centre.”

I looked around but no one else seemed to be paying me any attention. Then again, a trained spy or assassin probably wouldn’t make it obvious anyway. I gazed at my map and slowly it came into focus and it dawned on me that there was a problem.

The shopping centre had four entrances, one on each side.

“Excuse me,” I said to the elderly lady walking past.

“Hmm?” she said, stopping to look at me short-sightedly.

“Which entrance is this?” I asked.

“It’s the shopping centre entrance,” she said, pointing to the entrance. “Inside are the shops but you have to go inside, you see. That’s why it’s called the entrance.” She beamed happily at me and walked away.

“Yes, I know, but ...” but I was now out of earshot.

“Excuse me,” I said to a young woman.

“Wassup?” she said, without looking up from her phone.

“Where is Hayes Street?” I asked.

“Hayes Street?” she said, slowly looking puzzled then she looked at me. “Hayes Street? Rings a bell, it's somewhere round here, I'm sure. Is that a map?”

She gestured at the paper in my hand.

“Yes,” I said.

“Well then, it'll be on the map, I reckon. Why doncha have a look?”

“I know where it is on the map,” I said.

“So what you ask me for then, eh?” said the girl irritably and scowled at her phone. “Dimmo.” She scurried off.

“It's over there, mate,” said a teenaged boy, “other side of the car park,” and he pointed.

“Oh, thank you,” I said.

“Got any spare coins?” he asked, pushing his phone at me.

I was about to transfer some VCoins to his phone when I realised that the transaction would identify me and show where I was.

“Sorry,” I said.

He looked disbelievably at me then muttered “effing rich bitch,” before sliding off on his hover board.

I watched him go, feeling mean for not giving him any money and relieved that I hadn't since he was a rude little sod who didn't deserve my charity then realised that simply having my phone on meant it was broadcasting my location so I turned it off and headed across the car park towards Hayes Street. It occurred to me when I got to Hayes Street that if someone was monitoring me via my phone that they not only had an idea where I was from where the phone had been when I'd turned it off but they now knew that I was doing something I didn't want them to know about since this was the first time I'd ever turned my phone off.

“I really can't cope with all this,” I said to myself, “it's just too damned difficult to stay hidden,” so I turned my phone back on. It felt funny too, not having a live channel with me.

I was the only person walking along Hayes Street. There were a fair number of cars, including quite a few of the old petrol ones, but no people which made me feel very conspicuous. I also slowly realised that something like half the shops I walked past were boarded up. Still, the cafe was in Mandalay Street, just where the map said it would be. It didn't look to be thriving.

“Hello, Trina,” said Demetrius, when I went inside.

He was sitting at a table near the thrumming air conditioner, one of those really old ones that hung precariously in the window frame.

“Hi,” I said.

“Grab a seat, want anything?”

“Umm, a chai tea would be nice,” I said, sitting down.

He jumped up and walked over to the counter and said something to the woman who was lounging behind it.

“Are you hot or something?” I asked when he came back.

“How do you mean?” he said.

“Well you're sitting right next to the air con, and the place is deserted,” I said.

He smiled. “You got a phone on you?”

“Of course,” I said. After all, everyone has a phone since you can't even pay for things without one.

“Put it on the air con unit,” he said.

“What for?” I asked.

He just looked at me and so, after a few seconds, I put it on the unit next to his. He reached over and turned it off.

“Even if you turn it off it isn't completely off,” he said. “If someone's clever enough they can still use its microphone to pick up what's being said but the air conditioner will make that almost impossible. The only way to really turn it off is to take the battery out but then you'll need to reconfigure it when you put the battery back in.”

We sat and regarded each other. He looked to be in his late forties and was a little on the plump side.

“You've made me paranoid,” I said after a while. “I even got the taxi to drop me at the shopping centre and walked here so there'd be nothing on the net about where I am.”

“You must trust me,” he said.

“Why should I trust you?” I asked.

“Absolutely no reason why at all,” he said, “it's just that you're all alone, meeting a strange man you don't know, somewhere where there's no record of you going. Even worse, you've just told me there's no record so I could easily abduct you and no one would ever know. Such a silly thing to do, so you must trust me. Either that or you are incredibly gullible.”

I went bright red. It had never occurred to me that I might be in danger from Demetrius. Strangers on the net, quite possibly. Strangers in the street, definitely. But Demetrius? I really must be pretty gullible.

“Ummm,” I said.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to abduct you,” he said. “But you've just had your first lesson in political manipulation.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I played on your fears and hinted at giving you a solution and you fell for it.” said Demetrius. “Only this time it was an accident since I

hadn't planned to do it. If you're going to get into political manipulation that's half your basic strategy.”

“What's the other half?” I asked.

“Making the one you want desirable,” he said.

“Trust me,” I said, “I really don't find you desirable.”

The woman behind the counter brought me my chai tea. In a glass. No doubt teeming with germs. I didn't touch it.

Demetrius laughed. “Of course you do,” he said, “otherwise you wouldn't be here. I didn't mean you want to sleep with me. I meant there is some aspect of me that you want. In my case it's what you think I know about political videos, and that's the second lesson.”

“What's the second lesson?” I was getting little confused.

“You don't actually know what I know. I might not know anything but the important thing is that you think I do.”

“Run this by me again,” I said. “I don't understand.”

“OK,” he said, “it's actually pretty simple in this instance. You have to make a video but you don't know how to. You think I do and, because I played on your fears by implying that there was some sort of danger to it, you have come over to my side and put yourself into a genuine position of danger. See it now? If I'd just said 'meet me in this cafe I know,' you'd never have come here.”

I let out a long breath. He actually had a point.

“Now in this case it was an accident. I didn't set out to do this, it just occurred to me that that's what happened when you said I'd made you paranoid. The trick with political videos is to plan it in advance.”

“So you're saying you weren't playing on my fears?” I said.

“No, I wasn't. I have no idea what your fears are.” he said. “It's just

that playing in the political arena is pretty dangerous.”

“How come?” I said.

“Are you going to drink that?” he asked, pointing to my chai.

I shook my head and he pulled it over and sipped it.

“Funny taste but not that bad,” he said. “You do mostly commercial promos?”

I nodded.

“Clever goes where the money is,” he said. “No real money in politics so the really clever people don't go into politics which means that politicians are, on the whole, not particularly clever. So, in the business world when there's a problem, the clever people work out a solution and they always make the solution cost effective. On the other hand, when the politicians have a problem they don't know how to be clever and they don't waste their time trying to be cost effective. That's why over the centuries wars have always been incredibly expensive, pointless and killed a lot of people. On the other hand, the Cyber Wars were business wars and they cost very little to implement, had a huge payout which is still generating huge profits, were over very quickly and killed virtually no one. A dead person isn't profitable, except maybe to undertakers.”

“OK, I get that,” I said, “but what's that got to do with me?”

“Your promos meddling in business won't get you killed,” he said. “Meddling in politics will, maybe even me as well and I don't like that idea.”

“Oh don't be stupid,” I said, laughing. “You've already said you played on my fears so don't think you can do that again.”

“Oh well,” said Demetrius, having a long swallow of the chai. “That's the third lesson. Honesty in politics loses votes.”

“Well, that I do believe,” I said. “Do you think this place has any

bottled water?"

"In the chiller at the end," he said but showed no signs of moving so I got up myself and found one.

"How long have you been doing commercial promos?" he asked when I got back.

"Nearly ten years," I said.

"And political ones?"

"This is my first," I said, "which is why I thought I needed help."

He nodded and finished the chai.

"Not sure I like the after taste," he said. "Hmm. Oh well. So, for ten years you've been doing these commercial promos and, what, someone comes to you and says 'do me a promo for this' and you do it and they pay you and that's the end of it?"

"Pretty much," I said, "although they do it through my agent."

"So in all those years nothing unusual has happened? No one other than the people who want the promos has ever talked to you about them? No one else has ever wanted you to do something, or hold back or anything strange?"

"No, of course not," I said, "except ..."

Demetrius laughed.

"Except it's happening now, isn't it." he said.

"Well, maybe," I said.

"I know it's happening now," he said. "Two reasons. Firstly because I do know a bit about political manipulation and so I know something is happening or is about to happen. What is it so far? Someone's been to see you? Have a nice little chat?"

“Well, yes,” I said. “The day after I got the brief for the video this man bought me lunch and gave me a long talk about the Cyber Wars and how he needed my help.”

“What sort of help did he want?” he asked.

“He wanted me to put some spyware inside my videos.”

Demetrius nodded. “Yeah, sounds about right. I'm guessing he asked you to put it inside some commercial promos and, since you were doing that you might just as well put it inside the political one too.”

I thought back and, well, Demetrius was right. Armand had only talked about the commercial promos and the Romanian election video had seemed to be just an afterthought.

“Thought so,” said Demetrius. “Magicians do that too with their sleight of hand. Make it look as though something is going on in order to deflect attention away from what they're really doing.”

“So you're saying Armand wasn't really interested in Geng Hao's business activities?” I asked.

“I have no idea who Armand is,” he said, “or Geng Hao. Well, obviously I've heard of Geng Hao but I have no idea what they might be up to or what this guy would be interested in, but I'll bet you that it's about the political vid. You've done promos for Geng Hao before?”

“Yes,” I said, “quite a few.”

“So why's this Armand never bothered you before, then?”

“You could be right,” I said slowly.

I had a sip of water and looked around. There was still no one else in the cafe and the woman behind the counter was now watching a game show on a screen over a display of sad looking cakes.

“You said two reasons,” I said, looking at Demetrius. “What's the other one?”

He picked up his phone and turned it on. He flicked and tapped his fingers on it for a few moments then turned the screen towards me.

“Enjoy your walk last night?” he said.

“What? I asked.

“Press 'play',” he said, so I did.

There was a video on the screen. It was difficult to make out what it was but a smallish yellowy blob moved towards a large red area then ...

“You got back just in time, Trinity,” said a male voice, faintly.

“Why? What's happening?” said a faint female voice, not dissimilar to my own.

“Rain's coming, I can see it on the radar, it's about two hundred metres behind you,” said the male voice.

I hit pause.

“What the hell?” I demanded.

“I was poking round the net last night and came across this,” said Demetrius. “It's an infrared drone feed and has your name attached to it. Who was that you were talking to?”

“The security guard at my complex,” I said. “But, what the hell? A drone feed?”

“So it was you, then” he said, taking his phone back and fiddling with it. “I wasn't sure since there might be another Trinity Moss under surveillance. You look different from above. How about this?”

He passed his phone back to me and I watched myself get out of the taxi, faff around outside the shopping centre then walk to the cafe. I peered out of the window up into the sky. I couldn't see anything.

“Oh it's up there, all right,” he said. “Just in daylight the resolution's much better so it's probably a thousand meters or more up. Infrared isn't so good so it had to go lower last night. Would you like a coffee or something to eat? You're looking bit faint.”

Chapter Eleven

“But who's following me with a drone?” I said. “And why?”

I felt a strong urge to hide under the table.

“No idea,” said Demetrius. “Could be Geng Hao, could be that guy who talked to you, Amadeus or something ...”

“Armand,” I said. “Why would he be following me with a drone?”

“Could even be the Romanians. Are you in a relationship?”

“I'm married,” I said.

“Could be your partner then, or even me, except it isn't. Maybe you've just got yourself a stalker. One thing's for sure, it isn't just a random thing like a student doing research on something.”

“Why couldn't it be a random thing?” I said, trying to find a little positive news in this revelation. I peered out of the window into the sky again.

“It was tagged with your name,” he said. “That means either the drone went looking for you or whoever it is decided to find out who you were after picking you up. I'd say the former is more likely, the drone was sent to find you. And, and I think this is significant, I wasn't able to find any older feeds. It looks like last night's was the first.”

“Why do you think it was looking for me?”

“Who is going to waste their time sending a drone to look for random people after the curfew and outside an ultra secure complex? The odds of finding someone there are more or less zero. Whoever sent it had a pretty good idea of where you were and when you'd be there. After all, someone had to fit an infrared sensor grid in the drone.”

“Oh Jesus,” I said. I found the idea of being followed by a drone very unsettling. “Who do you think it is?”

“I'm guessing since you live in that complex you don't go out much?”

“No, rarely.”

“Then it's probably not a stalker since you'd be unlikely to have ever been spotted by one of the crazies. I can't prove anything so you'll have to take my word for it but it isn't me. No offence but I'm really not that interested in you. Is your partner the jealous type? Does he or she always want to know what you're up to and where you are?”

“No, he doesn't,” I said. “He lives in another complex and we've been married for six years and he knows I rarely go out.”

“Six years, huh. So if it is him I'd expect some earlier feeds. He knows you go out walking after curfew?”

“Yes,” I said.

“OK, we can probably rule him out too. You have a lover?”

“No, of course not,” I said.

Demetrius grimaced. “There's no 'of course not' about it. Plenty of married people do. Anyway it's almost certainly not personal because of the timing. You get this job from Geng Hao and all of a sudden Amadeus pops out of the woodwork and drones start appearing. It'll be connected. What do you know about him?”

“His name's Armand Seleyman,” I said. “He's with Kenar Analitiği. They're some sort of data analysis company. That's really all I know. Oh, I think he said he was the CEO or something like that.”

Demetrius wrote this down on the little napkin that had come with my chai.

“I'll see what I can dig up about him,” he said. “Old guy, young guy?”

“Late fifties, I'd say but you can't tell these days.”

“Unlikely a young guy would get himself resculpted old,” said

Demetrius. “More likely he’s a lot older than fifty. Still, it’ll probably rule out any twenty somethings with that name, if it’s his real name.”

“What if it isn’t his real name?” I asked.

Demetrius looked out of the window for a few moments.

“People say there’s no privacy on the net,” he said, “which is nonsense. There’s plenty of privacy you just need to go about it the right way and one of the easiest ways is to have lots of different identities for different things so that none of them are tied back to you or to your identities for other things. You, for example, are just way too open. You’ve got all your business and financial affairs in your real name as well as where you live, who you know, what you do. Your whole life is out there on public display.”

“How come you didn’t know I was married, then?” I asked, irritated.

“Did Damien enjoy his moqueca on Tuesday?” asked Demetrius, giving a half smile.

I scowled at him.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I just had a quick look at some random things Claude did over the last few days to see how easy you were.”

“Easy?” I asked, scowling harder.

“To hack,” he said. “Either you’re incredibly wide open or you’re very sophisticated at hiding another identity. I didn’t find any trace of one. Actually, in a way, you’re quite clever since any professional hacker is simply not going to believe how open you are and will waste a lot of time looking for hidden facets of your life when there actually aren’t any.”

I took a deep breath and held it then started to do the controlled breathing Swamini Paulette had taught me in the hope it would clear my mind. Demetrius watched for a while.

“Does that work?” he asked, curious.

“Not really,” I admitted. “It just makes me feel I should be doing some exercises.”

“K. This job from Geng Hao seems to be significant. Tell me about it.”

I explained that Geng Hao wanted a five second promo that would help sway voters in the upcoming election in Romania in favour of the Democratic Forum for Romanian Chinese Integration who were fielding candidates in most of the constituencies. The idea was to target people whose profiles suggested they were in favour of the Chinese, stronger economic ties, strong civil law and order and a host of other parameters.

“Is that it?” he said, looking baffled.

“Well they send me a fairly detailed brief,” I said. “I can show you the details if you want.”

“One promo?” he asked. “Or is this just the first of a lot?”

“No, there's been no mention of any others,” I said.

“But just one is a complete and utterly pointless waste of time and money,” he said. “It's a joke.”

“How come?” I asked.

“You're not going to change a single vote with just one promo,” he said. “Basic voter manipulation is based on constant repetition of the familiar so that the voter keeps hearing the same name over and over again in connection with things they support or believe in until eventually they link their beliefs to that name in their minds and only then will they vote for that person. At the same time you have to break the link they have with anyone else. You're looking at hundreds of videos for each of the constituencies, as well as all the other things like faked messages about the candidates from friends, fabricated numbers of 'likes', staged rallies with paid audiences and so on since most people like to go with a crowd. One video isn't going to do a damned thing no matter how often it's repeated. When is this

election?”

“In about three weeks, I think.” I said.

“Three weeks?” Demetrius was aghast. “There is some seriously bad shit going on here. If you get everything just right you might be able to do it in six months but that’s a big ask and you can’t make a single mistake and it’s impossible not to make any mistakes. Voter manipulation usually takes years of drip feeds. You can’t do anything in three weeks!”

“Yeah, I wondered why they’d approached me,” I said. “I’ve no experience of this. I only do commercial stuff where one promo can get some people to buy something, it’s just a matter of letting them know how much they need it. Maybe they’ve got a lot of other people working on this and I’m just doing one tiny little piece of it.”

“It’s possible but if that’s the case then you aren’t significant enough to track. Even if you give entirely the wrong message and no one picks it up you won’t have any impact on the votes. No, there’s something else going on here I just can’t see what it is.”

He relapsed into silence and I sat and watched him for a while.

“So, err, will you help me with the promo?” I asked.

“What?” he said, coming out of his reverie.

“Will you help with the video?” I said again. “I don’t know how to make a political one.”

“Ohhh, just do one of your normal commercial ones,” he said, “using that party as the product. That’s what they want otherwise they’d have gone to a professional political outfit.”

“Oh,” I said. “I was rather hoping this would be a new revenue stream for me.”

“No,” said Demetrius, “you’re being set up, I just don’t know why.”

“Oh, don't be absurd,” I said. “Why would someone set me up?”

“I don't know,” he said, “but you've been given a pointless assignment that's outside your skills area and you are being tracked and monitored. You've got to admit that isn't normal.”

He had a point there.

“Maybe I should turn down the promo,” I said.

“Maybe,” he said. “Have you ever done that before?”

“A couple of times, in the early years,” I said.

“Geng Hao?”

“No, I'm pretty sure I never turned down any of theirs,” I said.

“Then do it, just don't worry about trying to be political,” he said, “since that's what they're expecting. Will it take you long?”

“If I do a normal commercial one, maybe three or four hours,” I said.

“I'm willing to bet that whatever you offer them, they'll accept,” he said.

Then his face cleared and he laughed.

“Shit, I never thought you'd manage to do this,” he said.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Get me interested.”

“You mean you're going to collaborate on the promo?” I asked, hopefully.

“God no,” he said. “I'm going to go home and then I'm going to try to find out what's going on. Dig out one of your old promos on pet food or something and send them that. Oh and send me a copy as well, I

want to see what that spyware does. No, cancel that. When you've finished the promo and sent it off, put a copy on a stick for me. The less they know about me the better.”

“Won't they already know I've met up with you?” I asked. “You turned your phone on earlier.”

“It's not registered to me,” he said. “This one's registered to the cafe so they'll just think the cafe owner turned it on to test it or something.”

“How do you do that?” I asked.

“I forget,” he said. “Can you meet me back here tomorrow afternoon?”

“Claude, what's my schedule tomorrow afternoon?” I asked.

I felt foolish when he didn't reply. I'd just asked out of habit.

“I don't know,” I said, trying to remember what I normally did on Fridays.

“Oh, don't you just love technology dependence,” said Demetrius with a snort. “I'll request a video-conference with you for some time when you're free and after you've confirmed it, I'll cancel it but that'll be the day and time you're to meet me here, OK?”

“Won't that give away your identity?” I asked.

“It'll be a request from Coastal Teas, to discuss a possible promo job,” he said.

“All enquires go through my agent,” I said. “It'll look suspicious.”

“You do like to make life difficult, don't you” he said with a laugh. “OK, when you get the request, tell Coastal Teas to go through your agent and reject it but come here at that time anyway. Happy with that?”

“OK,” I said. “Coastal Teas, got it. I suppose I can get a taxi from

here, since it'll look suspicious otherwise if that drone is still watching.”

“Sure,” he said. “Unless you want to do some shopping since you're in town. There's quite a nice little book store just down the road. Catch you another time.”

With that he got up and left. I didn't quite know what to do so I just sat there for a couple of minutes then peered at the sky through the window again. There's something about knowing you're being watched that makes you feel very self conscious and I was reluctant to go outside. I picked up my phone from the air con unit and found I was reluctant to turn it on again so I left it off.

“If I turn it on later, maybe when I need to get a taxi, it'll look as though I turned it off and forgot to turn it back on again,” I said to myself by way of self-justification, “rather than turned it off for a particular reason.”

When you are being watched you find yourself thinking up innocuous excuses for your behaviour as though you are somehow able to communicate them to whoever is watching. What's more likely though is that the watcher will think up their own reasons for your behaviour which fit in with whatever preconceptions they have about what you are up to. Trying to look innocent is no doubt a guaranteed way of actually looking guilty.

For want of anything better to do, meaning innocent looking, I left the cafe after declining more chai tea from the woman at the counter and went to visit the bookshop Demetrius had suggested. It was, as he'd said, quite small although it wasn't that nice, being a little on the dirty side with a worn woven bamboo carpet and fairly dim lighting but on the positive side it actually had some old fashioned printed books. Not many admittedly but I found myself reminiscing about the days before the impact of climate change really hit and the scarcity of paper made paper books too expensive to be worthwhile. It wasn't until I actually picked up one of the books that I remembered just how inconvenient they actually were. Heavy, bulky and you had to keep turning the pages. Electronic books are so much easier and, of course, the bookshop had millions of those to choose from.

Including, I was interested to discover, *Political Marketing: Theory Into Practice* by *Izabela Lazarescu*, published in 2031. Not only did it seem to be reasonably comprehensible to a lay person such as me but Izabela Lazarescu was the Professor of Politics at Bucharest University, in Romania, and she had thoughtfully included two potentially very interesting chapters. One was on big data analytics and the other was on social media based strategy. I bought a copy and had it uploaded to home although a brief scan did seem to suggest that what Demetrius had been saying was right.

It was three thirty or thereabouts when I emerged back into the bright sunshine and I stood on the pavement, wondering what to do. None of the people on the street seemed to be paying me any attention and a quick glance at the sky showed no sign of any drones in my vicinity so I decided to go for a walk around town. This was the second or third time I'd actually been into town, even though I'd lived here for six years. It didn't take me long to wonder why I'd decided to move here, since it was quite apparent that Weston Downs was a fairly dull place. Still, after a while it came back to me. After living through most of the 2020s in big city Sydney and the never ending crises caused by the Cyber Wars, climate change, economic collapse and the hunger riots, all I had wanted was a small, fairly dull place, with a decent climate and no particular threat from rising sea levels. At around 300 metres above sea level, this year anyway, it was going to be a while before my complex was a beach resort.

Chapter Twelve

“Catstail Residential Complex,” I told the taxi bot as I got in, relieved to get off my feet after all the walking I'd done.

The quarter life size holographic head on the dashboard in front of the single seat acknowledged and gave me an estimate of the fare and time it would take, based on prevailing conditions, and a short liability disclaimer.

I agreed to all three and the wing door panel closed. There was a slight vibration as the electric motor eased the taxi away from the kerb and into the light traffic.

“The Baggy Greens were 307 for six at lunch,” said the taxi bot, chattily. “Them paki bowlers can't seem to make any headway against ...”

“Silent mode,” I said and he shut up. I really didn't care how the Australian cricket team was doing in their tour of, presumably, Pakistan.

I leaned back against the imitation plastic upholstery then craned my head to look at the sky through the side window. I couldn't see anything suspicious so I half twisted to look behind to see if anyone or anything was following. There were several vehicles behind, all following fairly closely since Hayes Street was the main road in town.

“How do you tell the difference between someone following you and someone going in the same direction?” I wondered out loud.

“I don't understand your command,” said the bot. “Do you wish to change your destination?”

“Lose the car behind,” I said, remembering a line from a movie I'd seen a couple of years ago. It had been set in New York before the Wars and the hero was trying to escape from someone chasing him and the taxi driver ended up doing various driving stunts, including driving the car on its side through a narrow alley. Sadly the programmers for the taxi company hadn't seen that movie.

“I don't understand your command,” said the bot. “Do you wish to change your destination?”

“No,” I said. “Can you go any faster?”

“For your comfort and convenience, Coastal Taxis comply with all relevant traffic regulations,” said the bot. “We are currently travelling within the prescribed speed limits, consistent with current road and weather conditions.”

The taxi turned left in McKean Street and the car immediately behind did the same, which wasn't particularly surprising as it could only go left or right and McKean Street was the second main road in town and one of the two main routes out of town. The other was McKean Street in the other direction.

“You're being stupid, Trinity,” I said to myself. “Whoever it is already knows where you live and they've probably hacked the taxi's navigation to find out where you're going and they've got a drone anyway so why bother following in another car?”

Logic is a wonderful thing but it doesn't really work well on anxiety unlike, for example, chamomile tea or Streeze.

I sat back again and concentrated on watching the people and the shops going by. Everything seemed very ordinary in the late afternoon sunshine. Suspiciously ordinary, in fact, although armed gang members probably don't stalk the streets in daylight wearing uniforms or signs saying 'I am an armed gang member.'

My phone warbled to let me know there was an incoming personal message.

“Hello,” I said, tapping the screen to receive the call.

The taxi hologram on the dashboard changed to show the head and torso of a middle aged man in a green denim-like shirt with a slightly garish tie. He wore steel rimmed glasses which meant he either couldn't afford laser eye sculpting or affected a counter-culture image.

“Hello Trinity,” he said. “I am Professor Milton Skyman, Acting President of the Archaeology Department of the University of Queensland Coastal. Are you having a good day?”

“I’m being followed by a drone from an unknown foreign government or corporation,” I said, a little sarcastically I have to admit. “Is that good or bad?”

“Oh what an interesting life you do lead,” said the Acting President happily. “I wonder if you have considered how much more interesting your life would be if you were involved in the uncovering of rafts found in the subsoil near Nanum in the Cape York Peninsular.”

“I’m not sure why you would think I’d find that interesting,” I said.

“Oh my word!” said Milton Skyman, full of enthusiasm. “This is the discovery of the decade, of the century even! Just imagine how our understanding of the domestication of Australia will be enhanced if it turns out that people groups from Indonesia or Papua-New Guinea sailed these rafts across the Arafura Sea and made landfall right here in Queensland Coastal. Why, that would make Queensland Coastal the birthplace of Australia, the foundry in which a nation was forged!”

“Oh really?” I said. “Ummm, ...”

“Oh I can tell you are lost for words at the opportunity!” burbled Milton Skyman, smiling happily and scratching the end of his nose. “Just imagine! A new understanding of the social and cultural heritage of our nation and its place in the global framework of early human expansion and you can be a part of it! Just imagine the envy and admiration you will receive from your friends at dinner parties!”

I laughed. “Yeah, Professor Skyman, I can imagine how my friends would react.”

Off the top of my head I couldn't think of a single one who'd be interested. Or impressed.

“Oh yes,” he continued, “I can tell that you can see the possibilities here. And you're excited, aren't you! Oh I can just feel your excitement

over the phone! Now you can be a valuable and important part of this tremendous discovery for a tiny, one off contribution of ...”

He said something very quickly which sounded suspiciously like 'twenty thousand VCoin' but I may have been mistaken.

“... and that will entitle you to our free monthly newsletter updating you on progress at the site and an annual inspection visit, terms and conditions apply, with a portrait of yourself at the site and your name inscribed on a plaque of notable benefactors. Now, isn't that a wonderful opportunity!”

“What terms and conditions?” I asked.

“Oh, just some bureaucratic nonsense,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand, “such as travel and accommodation at your own expense, nothing important, and of course, that gives you, yes you, Trinity Moss, the opportunity to inspect the site with the level of comfort and convenience you expect!”

“So not even a free lunch, then?” I asked.

“You are free to have whatever lunch you want,” said the Professor, “at your own discretion, of course. Now tell me, Trinity, isn't this just the most exciting opportunity you've been offered in years?”

“It might be,” I said, “if I had any idea what you were talking about.”

“I'm talking about the discovery of a lifetime,” he said, beaming with pride. “We at the Department of Archaeology at the University of Queensland Coastal, in conjunction with yourself, are privileged to be able to excavate the possible site of a possible landing of possibly Austronesian peoples who possibly contributed to the arrival of homo sapiens in Australia.”

“That's a lot of possibilities,” I said. “Why are you calling me?”

The Professor became serious.

“There's no state funding for Archaeology any more,” he said. “What

little money there is goes to biomedical research.”

“So basically you want me to fund an archaeological dig for you?”

“Yes, in part,” he said, sorrowfully. “I’m not very good at this, am I.”

“No, you’re not,” I said. “And anyway, I’m not particularly well off.”

I have to confess, though, compared to a university academic I was very well off and he knew this. I could see he was about to launch into another sales pitch so I forestalled him.

“What I will do, though, if you like, is create a four or five second promo for you to help you raise funds,” I said, “which will widen your range beyond just those people you can cold call.”

“I don’t think we can afford ...”

“I’ll do it for free,” I said, “and you don’t even need to put me on the benefactors’ plaque. Call my agent and she’ll tell you what details we need from you.”

I gave him Annabel’s contact details and he disappointedly thanked me. I doubted I would hear from him again as, generally speaking, academics don’t trust those in the media. They like rationality and the media plays on the irrational.

“I wonder how he found me,” I thought, as I closed my phone. “Oh no, I hope I haven’t found my way onto one of those net ‘rich lists’.”

“Hey Claude,” I said, ringing home, “have a look to see if I am on any ‘rich lists’ anywhere.”

“Certainly, Trina,” said Claude. “When would you like dinner?”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I said. “See you soon.”

I put my phone away and looked out of the window. It was starting to get dark so curfew would be starting soon.

“Taxi, how much longer?” I asked.

“One minute four seconds,” said the taxi bot.

The taxi turned left onto a dirt track.

“Why are we on a dirt track?” I asked. There weren't any dirt tracks around the complex.

“Your destination is three hundred metres along this road,” said the taxi.

“Umm, no it isn't,” I said.

“Your destination is two hundred metres along this road,” said the taxi.

Two hundred metres later the taxi stopped.

“Where are we?” I asked. I opened the wing door panel and half got out.

“We have arrived at your destination,” said the taxi. “Thank you for using Coastal Taxis. Would you care to review your travel experience?”

“This isn't Catstail Residential Complex,” I said, peering around. “It's an old farm house.”

The place was dark and deserted and overgrown with weeds. A large water tank on the side of the house tilted at a crazy angle as its supports slowly gave way.

“This is your stated destination,” said the taxi.

“No it isn't,” I said, starting to get irritated. “This is some run down old farmhouse.”

“Do you wish to make a complaint?” asked the taxi.

The holographic head disappeared and “Client Complaint Procedure”

took its place. It looked long and complicated and glowed brightly in the deepening gloom of twilight.

I took a deep breath. I knew from experience it was pointless to argue with bots, especially narrow-minded ones like taxis where virtually all their AI was given over to driving skills.

“Oh shit,” I thought, suddenly. “Has it been hacked? Has someone bought me here deliberately?”

Hurriedly I pulled the wing door shut.

“Please state your destination,” said the head on the dashboard.

“System status check,” I ordered.

“Please state your authorisation code for system status check,” it said.

“Administrator,” I said, making a wild guess.

“Invalid code,” said the taxi, “please state your destination.”

“Catstail Residential Complex,” I said, as clearly as possible.

“You are at that destination,” said the taxi. “Please state an alternative destination.”

“Ummm, Hayes Street,” I said.

“Insufficient time,” said the taxi. “Curfew begins in two minutes. Please state a closer destination.”

“Catstail Residential Complex,” I said.

“You are at that destination,” said the taxi. “Please state an alternative destination.”

I tried the suburb next to the complex and Catstail Creek which ran between that suburb and the complex but they were both too far away.

“Curfew is now in force,” said the taxi and opened the door panel. “Please vacate this taxi.”

“No,” I said, “I’m not getting out. Shut the door.”

Even if I had to spend the night in the taxi it seemed safer than getting out.

“This taxi is returning to base,” said the taxi. “Curfew is now in force. Please vacate the taxi.”

“No,” I said. “I’m going back to base with you.”

The taxi did not reply. It simply tilted the seat to the side so that I slid out onto the ground then shut the door behind me. It drove away, its headlights illuminating the dirt track as it went. I started to run after it but it was going too fast to keep up. I slowed to a walk then stopped and watched its headlights disappear into the distance.

I felt very lost and lonely, in the middle of a dirt track in the middle of nowhere in the dark.

The derelict farmhouse loomed behind me, black against the dark grey sky. A gentle breeze sighed in the trees and something made a coughing barky sound.

“Now what?” I said to myself.

I did a full 360 degree turn but there were no lights anywhere although there was a glow on the horizon which may have been the town. I started to walk along the dirt track in the direction the taxi had gone, wishing I’d paid attention to the route it had taken. Then I had an idea.

“Your call is valuable to us,” said Veilance when I rang them, “please hold. You are third in the queue.”

I didn’t have a lot of choice so I stayed on the line and cheerful music played for a while. I noticed that the phone still had 60% charge.

“Thank you for holding, your call is valuable to us,” said Veillance a short while later, “please hold. You are next in the queue.”

The cheerful music started up again.

“Veillance Security, Martha speaking, how may I help you?” said a very bored sounding female voice.

“Oh hello,” I said. “My taxi dumped me out in the countryside somewhere. I have no idea where I am and the taxi has gone. Can you help me?”

“Are you in any immediate danger?” asked Martha.

“No,” I admitted, “I’m just scared and lost.”

“We’re a security company,” said Martha, sounding even more bored, “not a counselling service. Please call again when you are in immediate danger. Thank you for calling.”

“Wait,” I cried, a touch of panic in my voice.

“Are you indoors or outdoors?” asked Martha.

“I’m outdoors,” I said. “Please help me.”

“I suggest you get inside,” she said, “or you will be charged with violating the curfew.”

“But there’s nowhere around here to get inside,” I protested.

“You should have thought of that before you dismissed your taxi,” she said.

“I didn’t dismiss it,” I protested. “It refused to take me anywhere because of the curfew.”

“That is correct procedure for taxis,” said Martha. “Please confirm you are refusing to enter premises in violation of the curfew.”

“Are you going to arrest me?” I asked, a glimmer of hope stirring inside me.

“Please stay where you are,” said Martha, cheering up at the prospect of taking part in an arrest. “A patrol vehicle will take you into custody shortly.”

“How long will it be?” I asked. I couldn't quite remember but I had the feeling that the fine for breaching curfew was relatively small. Certainly better than staying out in the open all night.

“Approximately nine hours,” said Martha.

“You are joking,” I said. “I'm admitting to an offence, you should arrest me right away.”

“You are outside the town centre,” said Martha, “and rated low priority. Please stay where you are until a patrol vehicle can attend to you.”

“Sure,” I said sarcastically. “I'll just sit here all night out in the open and wait for someone to come and arrest me in the morning.”

“Thank you for your cooperation,” said Martha. “Please hold for our customer satisfaction survey.”

I hung up in disgust.

“Well, at least it's quite warm,” I said quietly to myself. “Now what?”

I rang Claude.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“Catstail Rapeseed Combine,” he said, “currently closed, no opening hours available.”

Interesting. That suggested that it had simply been the taxi mishearing my destination rather than anything deliberate.

“How do I get home?” I asked.

“There are no taxis available after curfew,” he said.

“So I’ll walk,” I said, “give me the route.”

A map flashed up on my screen which lead me back to the edge of town and out again. A helpful little box told me it was 23.6km. Oh great.

“Can I go cross country?” I asked.

“Three point one kilometres,” said Claude. “You need to follow a bearing of 19 degrees.”

A little compass appeared on the screen with a red line on 19 degrees and an arrow pointing upwards. I rotated, holding my phone firmly in front of me, until the arrow coincided with the red line.

“That must be the direction to go in,” I muttered.

I looked in that direction and couldn’t see much since it was dark and the moon was behind some cloud but I could tell it didn’t line up anywhere near the dirt track. I stood there, indecisively.

“I could always take the road,” I thought, “and walk all night, or I could wait here till morning and maybe get arrested in the process.”

Neither prospect seemed enticing and after looking over at the farmhouse again I realised that I really, really didn’t want to stay here.

“Three point one kilometres,” I muttered. “An hour, maybe an hour and a half. Oh flood it.”

Purposefully I started off in the direction of the arrow and after three steps I reached the edge of the dirt track and my courage faltered. A dirt track was one thing and fields and god knows what else was another. I turned and started off down the dirt track then quailed at the prospect of twenty extra kilometres. I stopped and turned to look out over the countryside again. There seemed to be some trees in the

distance. I took another couple of steps along the dirt track then turned back to look at the house.

“Oh shit!”

Was it my imagination or was there a faint light in one of the windows? It seemed to disappear then reappear. God knows how long I stood there, staring at the house, trying desperately to decide if I really could see a light or if I was imagining it. I took a half step towards it then felt something on my shoulder and I screamed.

It was probably only a bird or insect of some sort but I panicked and just ran. Not far though because when I got to the edge of the dirt track I discovered there was a ditch running beside it and lost my footing and fell over, which hurt my dignity as well as my knee. It hurt when I got to my feet again and in the pale glow of my phone screen I could see my trousers were torn and there was a little blood oozing blackly out of the graze.

“Oh flood it all,” I said and started to head off cross country, limping because of my knee and stumbling because of the uneven ground and tufts of thick grass. I didn't get far. Maybe five metres from the road was a wire fence. I groped my way along it and found a fence post and used it to clamber over. At some point this had probably been a field but it was now overgrown and whatever the plants were, they came up to mid thigh.

“Either this or twenty kilometres,” I said grimly to myself and kept on going. It was a surprisingly big field and when I reached, eventually, the fence on the other side I called Claude.

“How much further?” I asked.

“Two point eight kilometres,” he said.

“You're joking!” I exclaimed. “I've only come three hundred metres?”

“You are averaging one point nine kilometres an hour, Trina,” he said. “You should be home in one hour and twenty eight minutes at your present rate of progress.”

I wasn't too sure I could keep up this rate of progress. I was already getting tired and I was feeling thirsty. My knee was throbbing and starting to stiffen and my feet hurt since I was wearing thin shoes and not hiking boots.

I climbed over the fence and kept going, checking my direction on the compass on my phone every few seconds. Slowly the trees in the distance got closer. They were only slightly off the direction I was heading in and, with a bit of luck, they were the trees beside the creek where I took Ruby for walks.

I fell over again. I suppose it was inevitable, given that I couldn't really see where I was going and my constant looking at the screen of my phone meant my eyes weren't adjusting to the darkness. The second time though I didn't hurt myself since I landed in what had probably once been a small reservoir although given that this was summer in Queensland there wasn't any water in it. The rain of the night before had just left a few inches of glutinous mud and that cushioned my fall although I did drop my phone. Fortunately it fell screen up and I was able to see it, glowing cheerfully.

I tried to wipe the mud off the back of it using the seat of my trousers and succeeded mostly in coating the screen with mud from my hands so I wiped my hands on the seat of my trousers instead and unbuttoned my jacket so I could wipe the phone on the inside. It cleared the screen well enough to see the compass. I squelched around in the mud to get the arrow lined up again with the red line.

“Don't move,” said the voice as a hand clamped my throat.

Chapter Thirteen

Thinking back on it now, he must have been a fool. After all, what kind of idiot creeps up on someone, puts his hand around her throat, growls “don't move” and expects no reaction? Of course I moved. My knees buckled in fear and I started to struggle and wave my arms about in panic and dropped my phone in the process. The instruction “don't move” requires higher order brain functions to process whereas panic is an instantaneous low level amygdala response.

Then again, maybe he wasn't that much of a fool since a hand around your throat is easily squeezed and the pain and loss of breathing is quite effective for stopping movement, as was a strong arm wrapping itself around my upper arms and chest.

I tried to scream but all that came out was a strangled “yerrrrghh” and caused the hand to tighten still further until nothing came out.

“Feels like a woman,” said the voice.

“Sweet,” came another voice, deeper and huskier, from off to one side. “Bring her over.”

The man holding me started to drag me through the mud and up the side of the reservoir. I struggled a little more and tried to pull the hand away from my throat.

“Feels young,” said the first voice with a snigger, “good muscle tone. This un's gonna be fun.”

He forced me to the ground and put a knee on my chest before letting go of my throat. I tried dragging in some air but it wasn't helped by his weight on me. The spiky burrs of bindi-eyes dug painfully into my back, bum and legs through my thin paper clothing.

“Move and I'll kill you,” said the first voice. “Got it?”

Despite the bindi-eyes I was now frozen in fear and could barely nod my head but he seemed to understand and got off me. I could breathe again and celebrated by gulping in deep breaths. After the first few

calmed me a little I became aware of the man's fairly strong body odour. It wasn't pleasant. I could make out their shapes against the sky as they stood over me.

"I'll get a light," said the second voice. "Wanna see what she looks like."

He started to move away.

"What do you care what she looks like?" said the first voice. "Just feel the bits you're interested in, like," and he guffawed.

The second figure reappeared.

"Yeah, you're right," he said and sniggered a little. "Maybe if I could see 'er it'd put me off."

"Pah," said the first. "Ain't nothing gonna put me off. I'd have a dead dingo if I could find one."

"Shit, Bluey," said the second. "Could use a drink first, like."

"You and me both," said the first. "Shall we do 'er here or take 'er back to camp?"

I tried to inch away but the bindi-eyes cut into my back and made me gasp.

"Sounds like she wants it right here," said the second. "Bitch in heat, like."

He knelt down beside me and felt around for my head. I jerked it away when his hand touched it so he slapped me. I froze again in fear. He ran his hands over my head, they felt rough.

"She feels blonde," he said.

His hands moved lower, over my mouth and down my neck then onto my chest.

“Oh yes, very nice,” he said. “Reckon we’ll save this one for seconds, after.”

He must have turned his head towards the other man since I got a sudden silhouette of a long, bushy beard then he turned his head back to me and tried to kiss me. I nearly threw up. His breath stank of cheap soy whisky with a strong underlay of rotting teeth and I twisted my body as far away from him as I could. He didn't like that and hit me again. For a few moments I could see shooting stars.

“It's up to you, sweetie,” he said, almost gently. “We've having you whether you're dead or alive, makes no never mind to us, but it might to you.”

“I'd rather die,” I said hoarsely as my throat hurt.

“Suit yourself, sweetie,” he said. “Got your knife, Bluey?”

“It's at the camp,” he said. “Remember? I was gutting that rabbit? Let's get 'er back there and have some real fun.”

It dawned on me that these two were very probably either homeless men or criminals on the run and living rough on the outskirts of town. It was distinctly possible that there were others back at their camp who might be up for some fun too, with me as their sole entertainment.

“I've got some whisky,” I tried to say but it came out as more of a wheezy whisper.

“She say something about whisky?” said Bluey.

“I've got some whisky,” I said, this time more strongly.

“Where?” said the man kneeling beside me. “I didn't feel no bottles.”

“I've a couple of bottles in my car,” I said.

“What car?” he said suspiciously. “Didn't see no car. You were on foot.”

“I went for a walk,” I said. “But I drove out from town in my car. I was meeting some friends for a party but they didn't show. Maybe I can party with you guys instead.”

“She wants to party with us, mate,” said Bluey. “Must be effing Christmas,” and he started laughing which turned into hacking coughing. “Strewth, mate.”

“So where's your car?” said the second man.

“I don't know,” I said. “I dropped my phone when he grabbed me and I need it to find my car again.”

He grabbed my chin and twisted my head so he could look into my eyes, even though it was too dark to really see much.

“What you reckon, Bluey?” he said.

“Reckon she's got a car, all right” said Bluey. “Ain't no way she's going to walk this far out of town.”

“Yeah, reckon you're right,” said the second man. “Better find this effing phone, then.”

“You stay here with her,” said Bluey. “I'll find the phone.”

He faded from sight and for two or three minutes all we could hear was squelching sounds as he rummaged around in the mud.

“Got it,” he said, reappearing triumphantly.

“Help me up,” I said.

The second man rose to his feet with a groan then leaned over to grab my outstretched hands. He pulled me up and I stood there, every twitch and spasm reminding me of the bindi-eyes sticking in my back and legs. They were like little knives, stabbing again and again with every movement.

“Give me the phone,” I said and Bluey handed it to me. It was covered

in mud again.

Very conscious of the two men staring at me, even though it was dark, I opened my lower part of my jacket and wiped the screen of my phone enough to make out the compass. Fortunately the phone was water-proof enough to have kept out the mud and not short circuited.

“Just got to line up the arrow with the red line,” I said, turning to get them aligned, “then we just go in that direction. It isn't far.”

I started to move off, every step making the bindi-eyes dig painfully in a tiny bit deeper. To my relief and surprise the two men started to follow. It looked like the promise of whisky had far more attraction than me, which was a good thing, or would be until they discovered I didn't actually have any whisky.

The trees that I hoped were the ones beside my complex didn't look too far away now.

“Two bottles, she said,” said Bluey. “Shit, I could murder a drink. I'm all dry, like.”

So long as it was only a bottle of whisky he was going to murder I was happy.

“Come on,” I said, trying to ignore the pain. “Not much further, then we can party with the whisky.”

Bluey stumbled and stopped for a coughing fit but I ignored him and kept plodding determinedly on. As far as I could guess we were maybe five hundred metres from the trees. When he stopped coughing he carried on, following but dropping further behind. I gritted my teeth and started walking a little faster.

The other man managed to keep up but he was breathing heavily.

“We're getting bloody close to that complex,” he said, grabbing for me and missing. “You effing trying to trick us? Where's that effing whisky?”

“It's just over there,” I said, pointing off to the right, “in my car. See? By that big bush.”

He peered over at the bush and wiped his mouth with his hand.

“Yeah,” he muttered, “I see it.”

He started a shambling run towards the bush. He was too intent on the prospect of whisky to notice me anymore and Bluey, twenty or thirty metres behind, veered off in that direction as well. I hesitated for a moment then ran too. In the other direction.

“Where's the effing car, then?” I heard but I ignored them and kept running, my head throbbing and with a thousand stabs at every step. My breath was ragged and the pent up adrenaline from fear kept my legs pumping, until I hit something on the ground and snagged my foot and went flying. My rolling impact on the ground drove the bindi-eyes in all the way and I had to stuff my hand in my mouth to keep from screaming out loud.

I lay there, waiting for the agony to die down, listening for the men. I could hear muffled shouts but they seemed quite distant. When the pain was bearable again I cautiously got to my knees and peered in that direction but the darkness had swallowed them up. I knelt there for an eternity, my weight on my good knee, praying they hadn't followed me and were even now creeping up on me in the darkness. I lifted my nose and sniffed deeply. I couldn't smell them either.

I very slowly rose to my feet, staying bent over then very cautiously straightened up. There was no sign of the two men and their voices seemed even further away. Hiding my phone with my hand I checked the display but it was blank, save only for a faint message that read “3% power – recharge now.”

“Oh flood it,” I whispered as quietly as possible.

I shook the phone a couple of times but that didn't seem to give it any more energy and it switched itself off. Now what?

“Oh thank god!” I shouted silently in my head.

The trees were maybe two hundred metres away, off to my right. I strained my ears and sniffed the breeze. Nothing. I started to tiptoe towards the trees. My every sense straining for any sign of the men. Still nothing. My clothes were stiff with mud, my knee felt three times larger than usual and would barely bend and my entire back from heel to neck was burning red hot. Every step was an exercise in sheer painful determination.

I fell over again. This time I grazed both my hands on the hard, tarmac surface and my injured knee turned into a screaming universe of pain. I rolled over onto my back so I could hold my knee and my back exploded into another universe of pain so I rolled back onto my side and lay there, in a foetal position on the road, sobbing with pain.

It took a while for me to realise I was lying on a road. A proper road, not a path or a dirt track. A road with tarmac. That went somewhere.

I tried to get up and my knee touched the road and I collapsed in agony again and rolled onto my back again and started sobbing, again. It was a while before I tried to stand up again but when I did I was very careful not to let my knee touch the ground.

Standing on one leg, with just the toe of the other foot touching the road for balance, I could see that the road went past a small wood and, as far as I could tell in the darkness, the road curved around out of sight just past the trees.

“Please let it be the complex,” I muttered, “please let it be the complex.”

I hopped forward on my good leg and dragged the other behind me. A deep breath then another hop then another deep breath. Inch by painful inch I slowly made my way to the bend then inch by painful inch I slowly made my way around the bend.

Then I fainted.

I was dimly aware of the throb of a couple of powerful electric motors and some shouts and someone peering into my face and calling my name then I fainted again.

When I came round, I found I was lying flat on my face. Miraculously nothing hurt.

“I must be dead,” I thought, very content with the idea.

“Hello Trinity,” said a voice. “I know you're awake.”

I became aware of pulling sensations on the skin of my back. I tried to roll over but something on my shoulder stopped me.

“Don't roll over,” said the voice. “Claude is removing the bindi-eyes. He won't be long.”

“Who are you?” I asked. My throat felt constricted although it didn't hurt.

“Magdalen Stopes,” said the voice. “Your doctor. If you open your eyes you can see me on your wall screen.”

I forced one eye open and sure enough, there was Magdalen, sitting in her chair, looking at me.

“Hello,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“Claude called me,” she said. “You seem to have had an entertaining evening.”

“So I'm at home then,” I said, cautiously opening my other eye and failing.

“Yes,” she said. “Is that the last of the bindi-eyes, Claude? Excellent. Now don't move, Trina. I've sent a drone with some ointment for your back and legs as well as some antibiotics and anti-inflammatories. They should be with you in ...”

She checked something on her own wall screen.

“... oh, it's already arrived, just being cleared by your security so the medications will be with you in a few moments. Once Claude has put the ointment on your back and legs you can turn over and we'll deal

with your face, knee and hands.”

I heard the door open and Aarav appeared, carrying a package which he gave to Claude.

“Hello Trinity,” he said with a smile then turned to face Magdalen on the wall screen. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I'm floating,” I said, smiling at his back.

“Claude gave you some opiate painkillers,” said Magdalen. “They'll wear off soon but there are some better painkillers in the package.”

“Where did Claude get opiates?” I asked, mildly curious although somewhat detached.

“I gave them to him,” said Aarav, focused on Magdalen. “We keep a supply in the guard house.”

“The last thing I remember was coming round the bend and seeing the complex,” I said. “How did I get here?”

“We picked you up on radar as soon as you came round the bend,” said Aarav. “It took a few seconds to identify your radar signature since you were lying on the road but as soon as we did I sent out an armed response team to get you. They brought you in.”

“Well thank you,” I said. “That was very nice of you.”

Claude had unwrapped the package and was gently rubbing the ointment over my back. It felt very nice.

“Can you tell me what happened?” asked Aarav.

I thought about it for a while.

“I think so,” I said, “but it all seems so distant. What time is it?”

“Almost 11,” said Aarav. “We tracked your phone and payments after we got you home. Why did you take a taxi to that disused farmhouse?”

“I told the taxi to take me here,” I said dreamily. “It took me to that farmhouse and insisted it was the complex then it dumped me there because of the curfew.”

“Right,” said Aarav. “We’ll follow that up with the taxi company. There must have been some sort of glitch in its navigation system. You did tell it to take you to Catstail Residential Complex?”

“Yes,” I said, “several times, but it took me to Catstail Rapeseed Combine instead.”

“That’s definitely something the company needs to address,” said Aarav. “So why did you walk across country?”

“It was after the curfew,” I said, as Claude started to put ointment on my legs. “I couldn’t get a taxi and Veilance wouldn’t help and it was a very long walk back into town and out again.”

Aarav checked his own phone.

“Ahh, yes,” he said. “You did make a call to Veillance. Did you tell them you lived here?”

“I don’t remember,” I said. “Why?”

“We have an arrangement with them,” said Aarav. “If anyone from this complex is found outdoors after curfew Veillance are supposed to give them top priority and bring them here.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

“We’ll send out a reminder bulletin to all residents,” said Aarav, noting it on his phone. “Umm, how did you get into such a mess walking from the farmhouse?”

“I got caught by two men,” I said. “I think they were homeless people but I managed to get away from them and I fell over a few times, I think.”

“Homeless people?” said Aarav. “That is a serious security issue. Were

there just the two or were there others?"

"I only saw two," I said, "although they said something about having a camp nearby."

"Really?" said Aarav, making another note. "We'll get Veilance to do a sweep of the area. We can't have vermin like that around here."

"I think Trinity has had enough for the moment," interrupted Magdalen.

"Of course," said Aarav. "Perhaps if we can get a full statement from you tomorrow?"

"Sure," I said. To be honest I didn't really care. It was nice just floating here, without a care in the world.

"I hope you feel better very soon," he said.

"I feel just fine now," I said.

"Well, I'd better be off."

He gave me a quick glance then left. The front door closed behind him.

"Try to turn over," said Magdalen. "We need to have a look at that knee of yours."

I gingerly rolled over and, to my intense joy, my back didn't hurt at all. It just felt deliciously warm.

"Magnify the knee, Claude," said Magdalen.

I lifted my head to see what was going on around my knee and discovered I was naked.

"Well, that makes sense," I said.

"What does?" asked Magdalen.

“Me being naked,” I said. “Claude couldn't have put the ointment on if I'd been dressed, could he.”

“Quite,” said Magdalen. “We're going to have to clean that knee and seal it which will hurt, even with the opiates, so Claude is going to give you a sedative so you sleep through it.”

“That's fine,” I said happily. “I could use a good sleep. It's been a long day.”

I stretched my arms above my head then started giggling helplessly.

“What's so funny?” asked Magdalen.

“Aarav saw me naked,” I said. “Isn't that just hilarious?”

Chapter Fourteen

I felt groggy when I woke up. I reached out for my morning pick-me-up tea and Claude wasn't beside my bed so I let my arm flop back and just looked at the ceiling.

“What a boring ceiling,” I thought.

Various parts of my anatomy started to make their presence known. It wasn't long before the rest of my body joined in.

“Claude,” I called gently, because I had a sore throat.

“Good morning, Trina,” he said, from over by the door.

“Where's my tea?” I said. “Why didn't you wake me with tea?”

“Dr Stopes instructed that you were not to be woken,” he said. “Would you like your chai tea now?”

“Yes,” I said. “Ugh, I feel terrible.”

I tried to sit up and managed on the third attempt.

“I'll stay in bed for a bit,” I decided.

Claude brought me my tea and a paper cup with four tablets in it.

“What are these?” I asked.

“A painkiller, an antibiotic, an anti-inflammatory and an anti-histamine,” said Claude. “Do you want their pharmacological names?”

“Flood, no,” I said.

Wearily I tipped the cup of pills into my mouth and sipped my tea. The usual wash of energy didn't hit me.

“Is this straight tea?” I asked. “No MornNGo?”

“Dr Stopes instructed that you receive no stimulants for forty eight hours,” said Claude, “and that you rest for twenty four hours. I have a schedule for your medications and cancelled your appointments for today.”

That was nice since I wasn't really in the mood for appointments.

“What appointments did I have?” I asked.

“Your jagarti session, your weekly mahjong game with Erica, Wei-Li and Joanne and an unconfirmed appointment with Coastal Teas.”

Demetrius hadn't wasted any time then.

“Coastal Teas? How did you cancel that one?” I asked.

“I said you were indisposed today and suggested they request another appointment,” said Claude.

I hoped Demetrius would take that at face value and not assume that I was agreeing to meet him today, since the arrangement for agreeing was to tell him to talk to my agent.

“Has there been any reply to that?” I asked.

“Not as yet, Trina,” said Claude. “Would you like breakfast now?”

“Actually, I'm not hungry,” I said, “so just some more tea.”

“Dr Stopes said that your medications may suppress your appetite, Trina,” said Claude, “and recommended a high-carbohydrate liquid supplement to help your body recover faster. Would you prefer the chocolate or strawberry flavour?”

“Ohh, strawberry,” I said, resignedly.

Although Claude was programmed to obey my instructions, for some reason when it came to medications I couldn't overrule him so if Dr Stopes had ordered I have a liquid supplement Claude would make certain I got it. I wouldn't put it past him to put a sedative in

something and force feed me the supplement while I slept.

“Have there been any messages?” I asked, after I'd drunk my strawberry supplement, followed by some tea to take the taste away.

“Damien would like you to call him when you feel up to it,” said Claude. “I advised him of your status after Dr Stopes' visit.”

“Was he worried?” I asked.

“I believe so but he was reassured by your status,” said Claude. “You requested I ascertain if you are on any 'rich lists'.”

“Oh yes,” I said. “Am I?”

“A list appeared on the Asian social media site, Yaegihaja, two days ago,” said Claude, “entitled 'The 100 Most Influential People In Australian Media'. Your name is eighty third on that list.”

Yaegihaja was a Korean platform that became global after Facebook was taken out in the fifth Cyber War. I'd been an avid Facebook user until then but after its demise I lost interest in social media and never bothered to move to Yaegihaja. After all, I was 24 at the time and growing out of that sort of thing anyway.

“Who posted it?” I asked.

“A member identified only as plague666,” said Claude. “As of 10:13 last night, the list had received only thirty eight views and ten likes.”

“Let's hope it stays that way,” I said. “Is plague666 an influencer?”

There's no real way to get your name off postings like that and if plague666 was a popular poster then my life could become a misery with potentially millions of people targeting me, all wanting money for various reasons. I'd have to implement considerably tighter privacy controls.

“Plague666 has only one posting on Yaegihaja, although that name appears frequently in Sardonica and four videos have been uploaded

on Nhìn Tôi.”

“What sort of videos?” I asked.

“Cute puppies’ is the primary tag for all four,” said Claude. “Would you like to watch any of them, Trina?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said, a little surprised that the University of Queensland Coastal had not done their basic research.

By the sound of it, plague666 was not an influencer. Nhìn Tôi was a Vietnamese video platform that had risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of YouTube and Sardonica was a British based site that let members post short, sarcastic commentaries on any topic. The site was moderated and any postings that were not deeply offensive or contained facts that might conceivably be true were swiftly deleted. Influencers didn’t go near Sardonica because the kind of people who liked Sardonica postings were beyond any form of influence. I would have thought that UQC would have followed up on plague666 to establish his or her credentials for posting a list of influential media people. They must really be desperate for money.

“So why would plague666 post a list of influential media people,” I wondered, “and why on earth would I be on it?”

I couldn’t even think of an unreasonable explanation, let alone a reasonable one, unless it was an elaborate charade intended to stop me noticing I was being taken to the wrong place by the taxi.

“Who is the Head of the Archaeology Department at UQC?” I asked.

“Professor Milton Skyman, PhD, is currently the Acting Head of Department, pending university restructuring,” said Claude a few moments later. “The Department is scheduled to be disbanded at the end of the current academic year, due to lack of funding.”

OK, it looked like the poor man actually was clutching at straws in the desperate hope of finding someone who’d give him some money. Maybe it was just a coincidence, after all.

Presumably all the medications were doing their jobs but it was the painkiller that seemed most effective since my aches, stings and throbs had more or less disappeared and I drifted off back to sleep, quite naturally. I woke up again around lunchtime, not in the least bit groggy. I tried to leap out of bed and discovered that, although my knee didn't hurt, it was very stiff and encased in a gauze-like bandage and didn't lend itself to leaping anywhere so I lurched out of bed instead.

"I'm definitely hungry now," I told Claude after I'd got dressed and inspected my blackening eye on the screen. It wasn't too bad, actually, compared with some of the black eyes I'd got playing soccer at school although I hadn't been involved in any contact sports since.

Claude brought me some food which was, presumably, more of what the doctor ordered since it didn't resemble anything in particular and there was a faint medicinal taste not entirely disguised by garlic.

"Any interesting news?" I asked.

"Extensive bushfires in the hinterland," said Claude. "15% of this year's soy crop is under threat."

"Ignore it," I said. Bushfires have always been common in Australia although the increasingly hotter, dryer weather in the hinterland didn't help, and every year a significant proportion of the soy crop was lost to fires. It did make you wonder why the soy farmers bothered to sow crops in those high risk areas but presumably they'd done their maths and worked out it was worth it.

"80% of Australian beef sales in China are fake meat," said Claude. "I flagged that as being of possible interest because you have produced promos for beef exports."

"Really?" I asked, mildly intrigued. "How do they know?"

The Chinese were prolific consumers of Australian beef and, since Australia had very little real beef production now since climate change had wiped out most of the grazing land, it was almost inevitable that some enterprising chemist would have come up with ways of

producing imitation steaks from soy. I ate them myself every now and then as real steak was very expensive and was difficult for Claude to work with since the kitchen wasn't designed to handle real meat and vegetables. And, yes, I had made quite a few promos for meat products, and not just for Australian producers. Not being obsessed with nationalism I did promos for Brazilian and Indian beef exporters as well.

When I started making promos, the Dutch were major beef exporters but the country had lost nearly 12% of its land area since then as they couldn't build dykes big enough or fast enough and much of their grazing land had become flooded and salty. In fact, the Dutch were in the process of moving their capital from Amsterdam to Vaalserberg because of flooding and many of the international organisations that still functioned, such as the International Court of Justice which struggled on despite their chronic lack of funding, had moved from The Hague to the mountains of Switzerland, when they could find office space not taken by the proliferating number of Swiss banks.

Since few governments still maintained food inspection facilities, I was curious how whoever had produced that news report knew. According to the news feed, the Chinese still maintained food inspections on imported food, although they didn't bother for home produced food, and, acting on a tip-off, had started to sample and test Australian beef arriving at their various ports. The feed didn't give the source of the tip-off although it was most likely a competitor trying to increase market share. How true it was we would never know although there was a good chance I'd get some extra business out of it through promos designed to counter any negative effects. It was fairly easy to track who'd received the news feeds on this and target them but the word of mouth effects were more difficult as it isn't always possible to track who they talked to.

“OK, call Damien, hon,” I said.

“Trina! How are you? What happened?” said Damien. “Claude told me you'd had some injuries and that the doctor said you were fine but I still worried.”

“I went into town yesterday,” I told him, “and the taxi back took me to

the wrong address and dumped me since it was just before the curfew.”

I explained about walking back cross country and being attacked by the homeless men.

“You were attacked? Oh god, did they hurt you?” he asked.

“No, not much,” I said. “I managed to get away by promising them some whisky.”

“Oh, well done,” he said, his voice full of admiration. “So why did the taxi take you to the wrong address?”

“It took me to Catstail Rapeseed Combine,” I said. “It’s an old, disused farmhouse not far from here. I think it was just an audio malfunction or maybe some sort of mapping confusion. The farm was easily old enough to have been disused before the taxi’s database was created.”

“So you don’t think you were hacked?” he asked. “Or that someone deliberately had you taken to the wrong address?”

“It’s possible,” I said, “but why would anyone do that? It’s not as though anything happened at the farmhouse. I was attacked a couple of kilometres away as I was trying to walk back.”

“But the taxi wouldn’t take you anywhere else?” he asked.

“It was just before curfew,” I said. “I tried to get the taxi to take me back to town but there wasn’t time.”

“Hmmm,” he said thoughtfully. “Why were you in town anyway?”

“I went to see someone,” I said.

“Really?” he said, looking puzzled. “Why would you meet them in person? Who was it anyway?”

“Just someone I needed to talk to about collaborating on a promo,” I

said. "Does it matter?"

Surely Damien wouldn't be jealous, would he?

"Oh, no reason," he said, giving me his big smile. "You don't suppose he hacked your taxi, do you?"

"I can't imagine why," I said.

Maybe he is jealous, I thought, since he's assuming the person I met was a man.

"Are you jealous?" I asked.

"Why would I be jealous?" said Damien. "We don't have an exclusive marriage. What do you need to collaborate with someone about?"

"I've got a political promo to do for Geng Hao," I said. "I've never done a political one so I wanted some help from someone who knows more about these things."

Damien nodded and scratched his cheek thoughtfully.

"Political, huh," he said. "Maybe the person you talked to has enemies and they got at the taxi. Who is he?"

"You seem very worried about the taxi," I said. "Technical malfunctions happen all the time. Why are you so worried about it being hacked?"

"Oh, no particular reason," said Damien. "I'm just worried about your safety, especially if you get a taxi back from town again. I don't want this to keep happening. Have you told this man what happened? What was his name, again?"

"AllSecurity is sorting it out with Coastal Taxis," I told him. "I'd be astonished if it happened again. Anyway, if I do go into town again I'll make sure I come back with plenty of time before the curfew. Hey, do you mind if I don't come over tomorrow?"

His face fell. "Don't you want to come over?" he asked.

"Of course I do," I said. "I just don't know if I'll be feeling up to it. I'm a bit sore and stiff and I'm on painkillers at the moment. Maybe I ought to stay home and rest, although I could come over just to talk but I don't think I'll be up for much else."

"I'll leave it up to you," he said. "I'd love for you to come over but if you don't feel up to it, I understand, although if we're just going to talk maybe you'd be better off staying at home and relaxing and talking over a channel."

"I'll let you know how I feel tomorrow," I said.

"Hey, I've got to get back to work, Trine," he said, "but it's awesome to know you're OK. Love you."

He blew me a kiss and hung up before I could ask him anything about his new job. I stared at the blank wall for a few moments, thinking over our conversation. It bothered me for some reason that he'd seemed more interested in the taxi than the homeless guys attacking me. In fact, thinking about it, he'd asked who I'd been with at least three times. Maybe he was jealous, after all, although he'd never suggested an exclusive marriage contract. I wasn't entirely sure I wanted one myself. It wasn't that I had lovers, it was more that an exclusive contract seemed so final, a bit too committed.

"I'm going back to bed, hon," I said. Despite the medications and supplements, I was feeling decidedly drained and lethargic. "I probably won't sleep but if I do, don't disturb me."

"You're scheduled for your next round of medications in approximately three hours," said Claude. "Shall I wake you for those?"

"Yes," I said. "I suppose you'd better."

I did go to sleep. Within thirty seconds of lying down, in fact, which surprised me as I normally have great difficulty getting off to sleep which is why Claude usually gives me something to help me sleep.

“Trina,” said Claude, quietly, “Trina, Trina.”

I slowly came out of sleep and reached for my tea.

“Has it been three hours already?” I asked, sleepily.

“Yes,” said Claude. “Time for your medications.”

I took the paper cup and emptied it into my mouth then had a swig of tea.

“Thanks,” I said. “Hold this for me,” and passed him my tea mug.

I reached down and felt around my knee. It didn't seem as swollen so I tried, gingerly, to bend it. It certainly wasn't as stiff either.

“Great,” I said.

I levered myself out of bed and stood up. It wasn't too bad so I tried walking around a bit. Admittedly I wasn't back to my usual self but I was definitely more agile and less robotic than I had been before. I finished my tea standing up, gently twisting from side to side. It would be a few days before I'd be fully up to doing jagarti again but at least I was able to move around fairly well.

“I'm going to have a shower,” I said. “Make me some coffee, hon. Original, black, three sugars.”

I rarely drank black straight coffee or had sugar but I had a craving for both. I had my usual blast in the shower which made me feel more my usual self although the intense vibrations did make my knee and eye feel decidedly unusual for a few moments.

Claude had left me a loose sarong so I dressed myself and walked into the living room.

“Your coffee, Trina,” he said, putting a steaming mug on the table. “Dr Stopes said you would probably want plenty of carbohydrates by this stage, so I have made you some crumpets.”

“Floods,” I said enthusiastically, “unreal!”

I sat down and rapidly ate two of the crumpets then drank half my coffee before, more slowly, eating the other two.

“Delicious,” I said, feeling much better. “So, what's been happening while I was asleep?”

“You have two new communications,” said Claude. “One from Coastal Teas, requesting an appointment and one from Armand Suleyman who left no message.”

“Jesus, what does he want?” I grumbled. “Did Coastal Teas say when they wanted an appointment?”

“Three o'clock tomorrow,” said Claude.

I didn't know if I'd be feeling up to seeing Damien tomorrow but I should be able to cope with a meeting in a cafe and if I did decide to see Damien I could go straight to his place after seeing Demetrius. Come to think of it, Demetrius had probably thought much the same when he chose the time.

“OK,” I said, “record a reply to Coastal Teas.”

“Recording,” said Claude.

“Thank you for your appointment request,” I said, trying to look business-like even though I was wearing a sarong. “I would be delighted to meet with you to discuss how I can be of assistance, but all arrangements should go through my agent in the first instance. I attach her details. Thank you. Stop, attach Annabel's details and send.”

“Sent,” said Claude. “Do you want the thread deleted?”

“No, file it for future reference,” I said, “no cross references yet. Make me another coffee, hon, before I call Armand back. Make it white mocha, are there any more crumpets?”

Claude came back a few moments later with two crumpets and my coffee.

“Damn,” I said, moments later, “we should have crumpets more often.”

Claude just smiled, as he always does.

I sighed. “No time like the present,” I said. “Best get it over with. Call Armand Suleyman.”

I rather hoped he'd be out or busy but he wasn't.

“Thank you for calling back, Trina,” he said then looked at his screen. “Have you been fighting?”

I'd forgotten all about my black eye. Then I remembered the message I'd sent Demetrius.

“Oh well, too late now,” I thought and shrugged mentally.

“I was attacked last night on my way home,” I said.

He frowned. “Tell me what happened,” he said.

I quickly gave him the short version; returning from town, faulty taxi, curfew, homeless people, as I didn't really see any need to give him the long version and I had to give some sort of explanation because I had stupidly not worn any makeup to hide my eye.

He sat in silence for a few moments after I'd finished.

“Do you have any reason to think this incident could be related to your work with Geng Hao?” he asked.

“Why would it be linked?” I asked, a little surprised.

“It's an interesting coincidence,” he said. “I take it you've not experienced a faulty taxi before?”

“I've had taxis with mechanical problems,” I said. “But, no, I haven't

had one go to the wrong address before. Are you saying Geng Hao might have hacked it?"

Why were people jumping to the conclusion that the taxi had been hacked?

"I just raise it as a possibility," he said. "Were you in town for any reason connected to your work with Geng Hao?"

I didn't want to tell Armand about Demetrius so I just said "no" without offering any explanation for being in town.

"Would you hold for a moment?" he asked and put me on hold without waiting for my reply.

I sipped my coffee and waited for him to return.

"This was a Coastal Taxis taxi?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "why?"

"I'll see what I can find out," he said. "Now, the reason I called you is because I wanted to ask if you have finished that promo for Geng Hao?"

"The Romanian one?" I asked. "No, I haven't started it yet. I was going to work on it today but ..." and I touched my eye by way of a reason for not starting.

"Excellent," he said. "I was rather hoping you hadn't submitted it for approval yet."

"Oh really," I said. "Why's that?"

"I want to ask you another favour," said Armand. "The other promos will feed back data from their targeted viewers but I wanted to ask if you would be willing to meet someone from Geng Hao."

"What on earth for?" I asked.

“You are something of a special case,” he said. “You are the first non-Asian they have approached for a political promo which suggests that they have an unusually high level of trust in you, for a Caucasian at any rate.”

“So?” I said.

“So I would like you to meet with someone concerning this video and try to develop that trust,” said Armand.

“Why?” I asked.

He looked at me impassively.

“You may be able to develop another source of information,” he said. “Particularly if you are able to work your way into the higher levels of the organisation.”

“Wow,” I said. “You’re asking me to spy on them?”

“Not in the traditional sense,” he said.

I had no idea what he meant by that.

“More just having clarifying meetings with members of the organisation,” he continued, “and reporting back to me what information they give you. I don’t want you to get into their system or do anything out of the ordinary, other than to discuss promos and what their objectives are.”

“It sounds a little dangerous,” I said. “What if they find out what I am up to?”

“There is no need to ever meet any of them in person,” he said. “Video linking will be fine and, of course, that’s commonplace. I suspect anyone you meet will be more vigilant if they meet you in person anyway.”

“So you’re saying you just want me to invent reasons for having discussions about the promo and simply tell you what they say?” I

asked.

“Yes,” he said. “And there is a good chance that if you ask enough questions you will get passed on to the next higher person. You might even be able to get, ohhh, three perhaps even four levels deep inside their organisation.”

It amused me that he thought he was appealing to my competitive side.

“So, if I agree to do this and I'm not promising anything, how do I go about it?” I asked.

Yes, I admit it. I do have a mild competitive side.

“In the first instance,” he said, “it's probably easiest to ask your agent to ask Geng Hao for a video conference to discuss the Romanian video. You want to clarify their objectives so you are better equipped to create a more effective promo.”

Actually, I could see the sense in that and it had the benefit of being eminently plausible and, in fact, quite sensible. I have, in the past, had several clarifying meetings, although not as yet with Geng Hao.

I stayed silent though, as I wanted to think about it.

“But why me?” I asked after a while. “Surely you could approach one of their Asian contractors, someone who'd be better able to get deeper inside their organisation?”

“It's a matter of trust,” he said.

“That's my point,” I told him. “Wouldn't they trust an Asian more than me.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Armand. “But, you see, we trust you more than we would an Asian.”

Chapter Fifteen

"I'll think about it," I said. "It's a good idea to get a clarification meeting with Geng Hao so I think I'll do that anyway, I'm just not sure about the spying bit, especially since I'm collaborating with someone on this promo."

I hadn't meant to tell him that, it just slipped out.

"Collaborating?" Armand jerked his head back in surprise. "Collaborating? Why?"

"I don't know anything about political promos," I said. "I have no idea why Geng Hao gave me this assignment but I found someone who knows more about it than I do because I want to learn so I can broaden my field for the future."

"Does Geng Hao know about this?" he asked. "Have they approved a collaborator?"

"No," I told him. "I haven't mentioned it to anyone."

"This could be awkward," he said. "Who is it?"

"I'm not sure I want to tell you," I said. "I wasn't going to mention it at all. Actually I really don't think I'm the right person for this. As you can see I'm not good at keeping secrets."

"I'm glad you did," said Armand. "I'm glad you can't keep secrets, from me at least."

He drummed his fingers on his desk for a few moments.

"When you or someone like you, collaborates with another, mmm, artist, is it normal to get the approval of the commissioning party?" he asked after a while.

"I haven't collaborated before," I said, "but I believe it's the polite thing to do even though it isn't a requirement. Certainly there was nothing on the brief that forbids me from collaborating or requiring

approval for a collaborator. I suppose if I wanted to charge them more to cover the cost of a collaborator I would get approval but since I was going to split my fee with him I didn't really see the need."

"Is it common?" he asked.

"Not that common but, yes, collaboration certainly does happen and, of course, there are plenty of promo makers who work in teams as well.

He stopped drumming his fingers.

"Right," he said. "Sounds like there's no harm done. Will you tell Geng Hao who your collaborator is if they ask?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess it depends on how they ask. I don't like being threatened but if they ask nicely I probably will."

"But you won't tell me?"

I thought about it and, frankly, I didn't really understand Demetrius' paranoia and since Armand was paying me for the data feed inserts I supposed I really ought to show him more loyalty. Well, cooperation at any rate. Speaking of which, I did have a living to earn.

"Umm, you did pay me for the data feed inserts," I said, "and that's an ongoing operation. Do you expect this spy work to be included in that fee, since it was never discussed at the time."

Armand gave a deep sigh. "How much?" he asked sadly.

"Before we discuss that," I said, "I have a bit of a legal problem. According to my contract with my agent, I have to pay her 17% of any fees I earn for promos. Now, technically I don't think the inserts were part of the promos so I wasn't going to give her 17% of what you paid me. In this case though, since you want me to have meetings about a promo and since I'll have to arrange the meetings though my agent I really can't see any way of avoiding telling her."

Actually it wasn't so much a legal problem as a moral one. Annabel

was an excellent agent and a friend as well and I wasn't too happy about going behind her back on the inserts. Since she'd have to be actively involved in this new activity I really felt she ought to know and get her 17%.

"You aren't serious," said Armand. "What if she tells Geng Hao? No, I really can't have her knowing anything about this. What if I pay you extra for the inserts and you do this for, technically, nothing? That way there's no fee to disclose to her."

I thought about it and, in the end, reluctantly agreed. Having already convinced myself about not telling Annabel about the fee for the inserts it was fairly easy to do the same with a higher fee for them and it would certainly be safer if she just thought the meeting request was just a meeting request.

Claude processed Armand's payment, which I suppose meant that I was agreeing to spy on Geng Hao, professionally. It would be nice to have some training in the art.

"Do you need to know who my collaborator is?" I asked.

"Yes," said Armand. "I'll find out sooner or later anyway, it'll just make things a lot easier if you tell me."

"OK," I said. "His name is Demetrius Deo."

"Ahhh," said Armand, "I thought so. Which one?"

"What do you mean, you thought so?" I asked.

"You contacted several Demetrius Deos last Wednesday," he said with a wry smile. "I'm guessing the one you are working with is the last one you contacted."

"So you've been tracking me?" I said. I was quite annoyed by that.

"Of course," he said. "Why do you think we trust you?"

I scowled at him to show my disapproval but he didn't seem to notice.

Perhaps he did this tracking so routinely that he failed to understand the concept of privacy.

“So it's you that's been following me with a drone, then,” I said.

“Actually, no,” he said. “I've seen the drone feeds, of course, but I haven't found out yet who's doing it. The drone itself is registered to Brisbane Airport but their records show that it hasn't been used for nearly a week so someone has gained unauthorised access to it.”

“Why would Brisbane Airport use drones?” I asked out of curiosity. “Surely they have lots of aircraft and radar and stuff?”

Actually I was quite miffed that both he and Demetrius seemed to be able to access drone feeds of me whenever they wanted.

“I believe they use them for tracking flocks of birds which can be a hazard for landing and departing aircraft,” he said drily. “Well, that's the official reason anyway. More likely they use them to track smugglers. Queensland is a major importer of unbranded copy drugs.”

With the decline of central government law enforcement, previously criminal activities such as recreational drug use had become more or less legal, depending on the attitude of the specific private security company for any particular area. However, the pharmaceutical companies that manufactured the, previously illegal, drugs kept prices artificially high so a thriving new criminal activity had arisen, that of unbranded and cheap recreational drugs. The pharmaceutical companies worked with airports and sea ports to try to block the trade of unbranded drugs but they were fighting a losing battle. The pharmaceutical companies' argument for keeping prices high was that they needed to compensate for losses due to unbranded drugs but since it was their prices that created the unbranded drugs market in the first place it was a dubious argument.

“How did you get hold of the drone feed?” I asked.

“Oh, there are ways,” he said. “More to the point, how did you know you were being watched by a drone?”

“Demetrius showed me,” I said. “Your turn.”

Armand laughed. “OK,” he said. “Fair's fair. Here's the link but you won't be able to view the feeds unless you're a hacker.”

“Are you a hacker?” I asked. It seemed pretty obvious that Demetrius was.

“No, but I have several people working for me who are,” he said. “Kenar Analitiĉi depends quite heavily on restricted data.”

“Was the drone following me yesterday?” I asked.

He looked at me thoughtfully then reluctantly admitted that it had been.

“So you knew what happened before contacting me?” I asked.

“Up to a point,” he said. “After sunset the drone switched to infra-red so there was a significant loss of detail while you were going cross country and, of course, the drone was overhead so it's difficult to make out the details of what happened.”

“When did you see the feed?” I asked. “Did you see it live? Would you have let them kill me?”

“Alas I did not see the feed until this morning,” he said. “Although had I known what was happening I would have sent you some assistance.”

I didn't really believe him but there wasn't a lot of point in pursuing it.

“Are you still looking for whoever is running the drone?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “I'm really not happy that someone is spying on you.”

“Will you tell me who it is when you find out?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said.

I didn't really believe him about that either. I had the funniest feeling that he was quite happy to have someone else spy on me, so long as he had access to it, assuming he wasn't lying about running the drone himself. The thing is, I didn't have a clue what to do about it, short of never leaving the house again. I figured it was a bit like having a net presence – you just had to accept a certain loss of privacy and, at the end of the day, was it really any different to the surveillance cameras used in shops and on roads?

“Oh well,” I said, “I'll let you know what happens about these meetings. Bye.”

“Try that link Armand gave me,” I said to Claude after hanging up from Armand.

“You are required to log in,” he said several seconds later. “I do not have login details for this site.”

“Neither do I,” I said. “See if you can find a drone feed linked to my name, and call Annabel for me. Oh and see if the link Armand gave me is in any way connected to Kenar Analitiği.”

“Yes, Trina, what do you want?”

I turned to look at Annabel in surprise. I'd never heard her sound angry or impatient before. Her face was drawn and tear stained and her office in the background was a sea of packing cases.

“I've called at a bad time, I'm sorry,” I said. “I'll call back another time.”

I was about to tell Claude to break the connection when she burst into tears.

“Annabel, what's wrong?” I said helplessly. “Is it Ben? Has something happened to Ben or Trevor?”

Trevor was her husband and Ben was their son and he'd been sick for some time.

She didn't answer, just kept on crying and I couldn't do anything to comfort her. In the background her holobot lifted a packing case and disappeared off screen with it.

"I'm sorry, Trina," she said after a minute or so. "Have a look at this while I get myself together. We got it this morning."

"Play that link, Claude," I said and he put it in a new window on the wall beside me. I swivelled in my chair to watch it.

"Oh god," I said, several seconds into the news feed. "Oh my god."

I watched the whole two minutes in horror then got Claude to replay it.

To cope with the exodus of people from the coast around Bundaberg, which was about 350km north of where I was, a new town by the name of Cascata had been built on the site of a former gold mine. The site had been abandoned when the gold ran out some thirty years ago and hadn't been used since. It had been bought by a property developer three years ago because it had been cleared by the mining company and was therefore cheaper to develop new homes. Unfortunately the site had been used by the mining company for dumping their waste and was heavily contaminated with arsenic. The news feed didn't say whether the developer knew about this or not.

The thing is, Annabel and her husband and son had moved to Cascata, a year ago.

"What are the symptoms of arsenic poisoning, Claude?"

"Mild poisoning causes headaches and diarrhoea," he said. "More severe poisoning causes severe diarrhoea, stomach cramping, hair loss, blood in the urine and convulsions. Long term exposure to arsenic can cause cancer and death."

"Jesus, Annabel," I said, going back to her window. "At least you know what's wrong with Ben now. Are you moving?"

"Ben's already gone," she said. "We sent him off to my mother as soon

as we saw the feed and she's taking him to her doctor since we don't trust ours anymore.”

Their doctor had wanted Ben to get psychiatric counselling for his headaches and diarrhoea. I guessed the doctor hadn't tested for arsenic.

“We're packing up everything right now and moving down to Brisbane. I will not stay another night in this place.”

“Is there a cure?” I asked. “Will Ben recover?”

“Apparently he's going to be fine, so long as we get him away from the arsenic,” she said. “In a few months.”

“What about you and Trevor?”

“Trevor seems to be fine,” she said, “since he's away a lot for work but Ben and I have been here all the time and I've recently started getting headaches and diarrhoea as well. It's just such a damned mess. We sunk all our savings into this place when we lost our home on the coast and now we're losing this as well.”

“Where are you going to live in Brisbane?” I asked. “Can you afford somewhere else?”

“With my sister,” she said, “but it's going to be years before we can buy another place. Anyway we'll worry about that later, we've just got to get out of here.”

“Claude, find out the name of the property developer who built Cascada,” I said quietly.

“At least you found out now,” I said to Annabel, “before it became serious.”

“It is flooding serious!” she shouted at me. “Ben's being poisoned by arsenic and so am I!”

“Oh god, I'm sorry!” I said, aghast that I'd seemed so callous. “I'll go

now, you need to pack everything and get out of there. Listen, if there's anything I can do to help, call me, OK?"

"OK," she said and hung up.

"J T Brinslow Developers," said Claude. "The company was deregistered six months ago and there are no listed contact details for the directors."

I had a sneaky suspicion that the developer knew about the arsenic. One thing was for certain, there would be no compensation.

"OK," I said sadly. I felt desperately sorry for Annabel. Well, for all three of them actually.

"I cannot find any drone feed linked to your name," said Claude. "And I cannot find any connection between the link Armand gave you and Kenar Analitiġi."

"OK," I said. By the sound of it I had no way of knowing if the link Armand had given me was genuine, short of hacking in to see what it was and I didn't have the skills for that. Still, it sounded like it wasn't anything to do with Kenar Analitiġi either, or at least not directly.

"Get me some more of those crumpets," I said, after sitting silently for a while, wondering if there was anything I could do to help Annabel. Realistically, the only thing I could think of was to keep her as my agent. Not that I was thinking of changing agents, of course. "And some chai tea."

"It is time for your medications, too," said Claude, bringing me the tea and crumpets and another paper cup of tablets. "Incoming from Annabel."

"On screen," I said. "Hello Annabel."

"Hi Trina," she said. Most of the packing cases in the background had gone. "I just phoned to apologise. It's been the worst flooding day ever and I kind of took it out on you. I'm sorry."

“There's no need to apologise,” I said. “I can't begin to imagine what it's like discovering you're living in a vat of poison.”

I regretted saying that as soon as I'd said it but she didn't seem to mind. Maybe she'd already thought it herself.

“We'll be out of here within an hour,” she said. “Just got a few last things to pack.”

I wondered if there was any arsenic on the furniture that they were taking with them but I didn't like to ask.

“Anyway,” she continued. “You rang me about something. What was it?”

It occurred to me that even if there was arsenic on the furniture it would gradually disappear and not be replenished the way it would be if they stayed and maybe they were washing things as they packed them.

“I'm having problems with the last of the Geng Hao promos,” I said. “I wanted to ask if you could organise a clarification meeting.”

Mind you, washing wouldn't help if the water was contaminated.

“Is that the Romanian one?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“I don't expect it'll be a problem,” she said, “although it didn't come through my usual contact at Geng Hao. I have a good relationship with Yanyu, I've worked with her for years and I can call her at home but Stefan I don't know at all.”

“Stefan doesn't sound very Chinese,” I said.

“No, he's with their Eastern Europe division, in Sofia,” she said. “Yanyu's at head office in Beijing. Would you mind awfully if I left it until tomorrow, only today's a bit awkward for me?”

“Oh, anytime,” I said. “I quite understand, only they did want the promo finished today.”

“Oh flood it, so they did,” she said. “I’d forgotten. Hey, what happened to your eye?”

“I was attacked last night,” I said. “It’s just a black eye, no big deal.”

“Awesome,” she said. “I’ll call Stefan now and explain that you were attacked and see if they’ll give you an extension. I’m sure they will although I may have to give back the surcharge. Is that OK?”

“Sure,” I said. “Let me know if you do and I’ll claim against my business insurance. I’m covered for loss of profits through injury.”

“Frosty,” she said. “I’ll get back to you soon as. Ciao.”

“Where’s Sofia, Claude?” I asked.

“Bulgaria,” he said, putting a map on the wall.

“Back out a bit,” I said.

The map shrunk a little and showed that Bulgaria bordered Romania to the north.

“Interesting,” I said then downed my tablets and started on the crumpets. “I guess it does make sense for a political campaign to be run from a neighbouring country, although why the Chinese give a stuff I can’t imagine. By the way, have Sergey Vanofov approved their promos yet?”

I should have asked Annabel but I hadn’t thought of them and she probably wasn’t in the mood to chase them up. I certainly wasn’t going to call her back about it.

“You have had no confirmation as yet,” said Claude.

“OK, remind me to ask Annabel when she calls back,” I said. “With a bit of luck they won’t want many changes. I’m going back to bed for a

bit. I'm feeling drained.”

I didn't sleep but I had Claude play me some soft, relaxing music and some relaxing visuals and I let my mind just float. I guess I needed a bit of mental healing as well as physical. Claude probably decided my calorie intake was sufficient for the day as well since he didn't disturb me for dinner either, just quietly left me some Chamomile tea and my tablets.

“You have a visitor,” he quietly informed me mid evening.

“A visitor?” I said in surprise. “You mean someone has actually come here?”

Other than Damien and an occasional repair man, I'd never had a real person in the house. Even the guy who upgraded the house computer each year did it from the outside, hot-swapping components and keeping the system live.

“Aarav from Security is waiting at the door. Shall I let him in?”

“Well, yes,” I said, flustered. “Ummm, take him in the living room.”

“Oh god,” I thought, “what shall I wear?”

I guess it was the shock of having an actual visitor that made me feel rushed. If it was someone on screen, I'd have made them wait while Claude ran me up something to wear but a real person in my living room made me time anxious so I slipped on the sarong I'd been wearing off and on throughout the day and quickly ran a brush through my hair without waiting for Claude.

“Hello, Aarav,” I said, limping a little as I walked into the living room. “This is an unexpected pleasure. Can I offer you a drink?”

“No, thank you, Trinity,” he said, standing up as I came in the room. “I'm on duty.”

“Have a seat,” I said and he sat down rather self consciously at the far end of the couch.

“That's an impressive black eye,” he said. “How is your leg?”

“The swelling's going down,” I said.

I was about to show him when I realised I probably shouldn't pull open my sarong and show him my bare leg. Then again, he'd seen me naked the night before so what the hell. I pulled up the hem and held it above my knee and showed him the bandage. He clucked in sympathy and made a determined effort not to let his eyes wander. I felt quite naughty and let my sarong drop back to the floor.

“Must be the effect of the drugs,” I thought to myself as I sat down at the other end of the couch as I'm not normally like this.

“I, erm, thought I'd come round and see how you were,” said Aarav, “rather than just calling.”

“That's very kind of you,” I said, noticing his eye lashes for the first time. “Are you sure I can't get you a drink or perhaps something to eat? Some tea, if you don't want anything alcoholic?”

“Some tea would be very nice, Trinity,” he said, “if that's not too much trouble.”

I sent Claude off to make some tea.

“I thought, if you are interested,” he continued, “that I might update you with what has happened today.”

“You mean with the taxi?” I asked. “Well, yes, I would be quite interested. After all, I don't want it to happen again.”

“Indeed,” he said. “We contacted Coastal Taxis and they pulled the taxi's logs. It seems that for the last three kilometres or so of the journey the taxi lost contact with its base and had to use its internal data map. Coastal Taxis have admitted that they have not updated the taxi internal maps for several years and it seems that that map was out of date and contained some errors which is why you were taken to the wrong address.”

“I thought there'd be a simple explanation,” I said. “Are they going to do anything about it?”

“They have assured us that the internal data maps of all their taxis will be updated by the end of curfew tomorrow morning,” said Aarav.

“Great,” I said, passing him the tea Claude had brought and taking one for myself. “So it shouldn't happen again then.”

“No, indeed,” said Aarav, smiling. “And even if it does and you have to walk across country again you will not be accosted. We informed Veilance of the presence of a homeless persons' camp in the area and this afternoon they located it and arrested four men and a woman who have been taken into custody.”

“What will happen to them?” I asked.

“They will be taken to a labour camp in the hinterland until they have earned enough to establish residency again. This is most excellent tea.”

For some reason that pleased me, even though Claude had made it.

“As two of the men have admitted their roles in what happened to you,” said Aarav, clearly being careful with his wording to avoid being explicit and perhaps causing me undue stress, “we won't be needing a statement from you.”

“OK then,” I said. “I'm glad to hear it as I don't really want to relive it all again.”

He drained his tea and stood up and handed the cup to Claude.

“I won't disturb your evening any longer,” he said, “although I am most pleased to find you are recovering well.”

“It was a pleasure to have you round,” I said, standing up as well. “I rarely get visitors.”

He seemed about to say something else then changed his mind so I

told Claude to show him to the door. He paused in the hallway and turned to face me.

“I know I should not do this, Miss Moss,” he said, “and please call security if I offend you.”

He paused, uncertainly.

“I can't imagine you offending me,” I said with a little laugh and took a couple of steps towards him. “After all, you specialise in protecting me, what with your training scenario and last night and so on. What did you want to say?”

“Would you do me the honour of having dinner with me tomorrow evening, at my house in town?” he blurted out.

Chapter Sixteen

I was caught completely off guard and didn't know how to react.

Then I started to laugh since I found it funny that I was caught off guard by a guard. Then I stopped laughing hurriedly since Aarav looked quite hurt.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wasn't laughing at you, I was laughing at me."

He just regarded me silently so I tried to explain about being caught off guard by a guard. I don't think that helped the situation.

"I apologise for offending you," he said quietly. "I will go now."

"Wait, don't go," I said. "I'd love to have dinner with you, I just don't know if I can tomorrow or not. I've got something else half scheduled depending on how well I feel."

"Of course," he said, a little formally, "it was wrong of me to ask so soon and naturally you will have many dinner engagements. I was overly presumptuous, forgive me."

He turned to leave again although the door stayed shut. Interestingly, Claude's AI seemed to have had one of its occasional flashes of insight and appeared to be following my "don't go" rather than Aarav's actual attempts to leave which is what he should have been doing. Perhaps I was exhibiting some body language that Claude was picking up on. Maybe he was even responding to Aarav's.

"How about Sunday?" I asked.

"Saturday is my only evening off," said Aarav, looking at the door. No doubt he was wondering how to open it himself.

"You want to spend your only evening off with me?" I asked. "I'm flattered."

He gave a half smile. "How do I open this door?" he asked.

“Claude doesn't want you to go,” I joked.

Aarav frowned and looked at Claude who smiled happily back at him.

“Open the door, please, Claude,” he said.

I nodded and Claude opened the door. A warm, humid breeze came in.

“How about six o'clock?” I said when Aarav was half way through the door.

“Excuse me?” he said, turning back to look at me.

“I have a business meeting in town at three,” I said. “So if I come over to your house at six that should be plenty of time for the meeting and I won't have to come back here.”

“My house?” he said, looking puzzled then his face cleared. “You are coming to dinner? Tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I said. “It certainly looks like it. Assuming the offer is still open.”

“Most assuredly,” he said, beaming. “Six o'clock, yes. Thank you. Goodnight.”

He turned and strode off. Claude shut the door and I went back into the living room.

“Well,” I said to myself, “looks like I've got myself a date. How the hell did that happen?”

I started giggling.

“Oh Claude, hon,” I said after a while, “find out what Aarav's address is and, urmm, don't put this on my schedule.”

It occurred to me that Damien might look at my schedule and not be impressed that I was cancelling seeing him in order to go out with

another man. It wasn't really like that; I just didn't feel well enough to spend the night with him but I did feel well enough to have dinner with someone but I didn't think Damien would quite appreciate the nuances of that.

“Do you want to cancel Damien?” asked Claude. “He is currently on your schedule for that time.”

“Ahh,” I said. “Probably a good idea. Ummm, send him a message saying I'm not going to feel well enough and suggest next weekend instead.”

I didn't particularly want a visual with Damien since he might start to argue. Even worse, he might suggest I just went to dinner with him and didn't stay the night which would make things rather awkward.

“You have a message from Annabel,” said Claude.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Sergey Vanofov have accepted both your promos as they stand and she has not been able to contact Geng Hao concerning a clarification meeting and she will let you know when she does,” said Claude.

Now, that was pretty frosty. If Sergey Vanofov had wanted modifications that would have taken the promos over the deadline, which was midnight, and lost me my 50% rush order bonus. This was good news, especially as Sergey Vanofov usually wanted to make modifications. Maybe I had finally hit the style they liked.

“Acknowledge and thank her for the update,” I said.

It also occurred to me that it would simplify my life if Geng Hao declined a clarification meeting or delayed long enough to make the promo unnecessary.

“You have messages from Damien and Misha,” said Claude.

“Hey, busy night,” I said. “Give me Damien's first.”

“He hopes you feel better soon and will let you know about next weekend in a few days,” said Claude.

I confess that made me feel a little flat, even though I had caused it by sending him a cancellation message. It would have been nice if he'd at least tried to visual.

“Acknowledge,” I said. “Misha?”

“She thinks the Monday concert is frosty,” said Claude, “and she'll subscribe as soon as you confirm. She will be back on Sunday.”

“Back?” I said, then I remembered. “Oh yes, she went to her parents in Bundaberg. Ohhhhhh. Message back confirmation on the concert and ask how her parents are and if they've been affected by that arsenic business at Cascata.”

I've heard that arsenic can sometimes get into the water supply and Bundaberg might well be getting its water from a catchment near Cascata. It was unlikely since her parents had lived in Bundaberg for years and almost certainly got their water from the desalination plant but you never know.

“Aarav has sent his address,” said Claude. “Do you want him added to your permanent contacts?”

“Yes,” I said. “Put him under 'Friends - Good' and 'Weston - Local'.”

I felt that, since I was going on a date with him, he should be rated higher than 'Friends - Casual' and only time would tell if he warranted being moved up to 'Friends - Intimate'.

“Put him in 'Security' too,” I added. It never hurts to know people in the security world, although the only contacts I had in 'Security' so far were companies, not individuals.

“Updated,” said Claude. “Aarav does not have a domestic management system so I am unable to liaise regarding dining arrangements. Do you wish me to cancel?”

“Wow,” I said. “You mean he does his own meals?”

Actually it went deeper than that. Since Claude couldn't negotiate dinner with Aarav's house computer on my behalf I had no idea whether or not I would like the dishes he served which could, potentially, be embarrassing. After all, no host wants a guest to turn up and not like what they are offered.

“No,” I said hesitantly. “No, don't cancel. I'll risk it.”

It occurred to me that Aarav just might also get a little too ambitious and try to impress me with something he couldn't prepare and expect me to help. I wouldn't have a clue.

“I'm going to bed,” I said. “It's been a long day. Prioritise my outstanding work and schedule me for five hours before 2pm and keep the rest of the day free.”

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had an unscheduled appointment and tomorrow I had two of them. Demetrius and Aarav. Still, it was unlikely I would forget either of them.

“Hello, Demetrius,” I said, breezing into the cafe as nonchalantly as I could with a mild limp.

He looked up at me and gestured to the air conditioning unit without a word. He didn't even smile.

I switched off my phone and put it on the unit beside his.

“So where's your black eye gone?” he asked.

“Makeup,” I said. “Wonderful stuff, hides all kinds of flaws. You should try it.”

I was feeling in a flippant mood. I'd woken after a wonderful night's sleep feeling rested and relaxed and I'd had a very productive morning working on a sixty second artwork. These open-ended works of pure creativity without any hint of commercial restraints always cheer me up.

He grimaced which amused me.

“Did you see the drone feed of my attack the night before last?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Did you hack my taxi?”

I know Aarav had said it was an out of date data map but I wanted to see how Demetrius reacted.

“Yeah,” he said. “I reprogrammed the taxi to take you to the middle of the countryside where I knew some homeless guys would attack you even though they were more than two kilometres away simply so I could get rid of you and your annoying questions.”

“I knew it,” I said, acting triumphant. “But it didn't work and I'm back with more annoying questions.”

He curled his lip then gestured to the woman behind the counter.

“Like what is the address of the drone feed you've been watching,” I said.

“And?”

“And why would Bulgarians be interested in helping the Chinese in a Romanian election?”

“What do you want?” he asked as the woman behind the counter came over. “Chai tea?”

“Yes, please,” I said. I was going to try it this time since I was due to have a home cooked dinner a little later and needed to overcome my inhibitions on that.

“Two chais,” he said and the woman walked off without acknowledging his order.

Demetrius watched her walk away then twisted to look at the elderly couple having what looked like coffee and muffins in the far corner. He must have decided they were innocent.

“That one's a little more difficult,” he said. “But maybe they aren't helping the Chinese, maybe they're doing it to block another party.”

“Interesting idea,” I said after thinking about it for a couple of moments. “So who would suffer most from losing Chinese votes?”

“How would I know?” he said. “I'm a Greek living in Australia. I don't follow Romanian or Bulgarian politics. Why do you think Bulgaria is involved anyway?”

“No particular reason,” I said breezily.

“Didn't you tell me Geng Hao ordered that promo from you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I just wanted to see how you reacted when I mentioned the Bulgarians.”

Demetrius snorted then picked up his phone and turned it on.

“That's the link,” he said, showing me the screen. It looked similar to the one Armand had given me.

“Happy now?” he asked.

He went to turn his phone off but I stopped him.

“Just a moment,” I said and turned my own phone on and took a picture of his screen then I turned my phone off again and put it back on the air conditioner. “Thanks.”

“You want to watch it yourself?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Give me the log in details you use.”

He looked at me appraisingly for several seconds.

"I'll send them in a message," he said eventually and pulled a small flat panel notepad out of a bag that was sitting on the chair beside him.

"Won't that give away your identity?" I asked.

"I'll route it through several other identities," he said, busily running his fingers over the screen. "It won't be traceable back to me."

I thought of Armand tracking a single data packet through the net a decade after it had been sent and wondered if Demetrius was as secure as he thought he was. The woman brought over our chai teas and I looked at mine. It looked fairly innocuous.

"Oh well," I said to myself. "Here goes, at least I'm pumped full of antibiotics."

I lifted the mug to my lips and barely moistened them with the tea. It tasted like chai tea. I took a small sip and swallowed. I had no immediate nauseous reaction.

"So far so good," I said to myself and took a deep breath then gulped a mouthful. I held it in my mouth then swallowed convulsively and put the mug down. It was several minutes before Demetrius finished sending me the message and during that time I suffered no ill effects from the tea although the tension in my legs made my sore knee ache.

"OK, sent," he said, sitting back and picking up his mug.

"Thanks," I said. "Do you know who is running the drone?"

"Not yet," he said. "Whoever it is is quite clever. They've made it look like it belongs to Brisbane Airport but I checked the drone registrations against their purchasing records and although that drone is registered to the airport they never actually bought it and it's never appeared on any of their asset audits. So, either it's a secret drone run by the airport or someone wants it to look like it's run by the airport, but if the airport was running it themselves why would they register it to themselves? That doesn't make sense. So, I checked back through their asset registration logs and guess what?"

“There was some unauthorised access from a Bulgarian source?” I said.

He stared at me suspiciously. “How did you know that?”

“I didn’t,” I said. “It was just a joke.” I frowned. “Hey, are you serious? It actually was a Bulgarian source?”

“Why did you bring up Bulgaria?” he asked. “You know something, don’t you.”

“OK,” I said. “Yes. My agent told me that although the order for the promo came from Geng Hao, it came from someone in their Bulgarian office, in Sofia. I’m trying to set up a clarification meeting but so far the Bulgarian guy hasn’t replied.”

“Bulgaria,” said Demetrius, meditatively. “Hmmm, Bulgaria. It wasn’t Sofia though. The access originated from Varna, which is on the coast, the other side of the country to Bulgaria.”

“Have you any idea who it was?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I’ve only tracked back to the originating server so far. Getting to the node routing through the server is a lot more difficult and the person who did it may not be the registered user of the node anyway. Like someone else using your phone without you knowing.”

“So it’s a dead end, then?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said, “maybe not. I haven’t given up yet. Anyway, the geographical location isn’t that important. Most likely whoever is tracking you is either with Geng Hao or Kenar Analitiqi. It could be someone else but those are the two most likely candidates at the moment.”

“I suppose I could see Geng Hao doing this,” I said, “if they’re worried about me doing this promo although why they chose me I have no idea.”

I was still alive and not feeling sick so I had some more tea.

“But who are Kenar Analitiği and how do they fit into all of this? Have you found out anything about them?”

I knew what Armand had told me back when he took me to lunch but there was no reason to suppose he was telling me the truth.

“Yes and no,” said Demetrius. “Kenar Analitiği is a genuine company, operating out of Istanbul in Turkey, except that they aren't a commercial analytics company. As far as I can tell from the traffic going through their system they're actually a front for the Australian Cyber Security Bureau which is based in Canberra.”

“Canberra?” I thought to myself, “didn't Armand say he was in Canberra when we had lunch?”

“I can't be absolutely certain though as roughly 10% of the traffic is using non-commercial encryption and I haven't been able to break it but that in itself is suspicious. Why would a commercial company use non commercial encryption?”

“But why do you think they're Australian?” I asked.

“Because slightly over 40% of all the traffic is between Canberra and Istanbul,” he said, “as is around 85% of the ultra high encryption stuff. The other 60% is from all over the world and nowhere else gets anything like as much traffic. The next highest is Beijing but that's barely 10% and maybe 2½% of the ultra encryption.”

“Maybe Kenar Analitiği has a data centre in Canberra,” I said. “Why do you think it's the Australian Cyber Security Bureau?”

“Because all the traffic between Kenar in Istanbul and the servers in Canberra goes to five servers and those five servers were bought by the ACSB over the last three years,” said Demetrius. “The most recent being eight months ago.”

I slowly sipped the rest of my tea, thinking about this information.

“So you think Armand is with the ACSB and is tracking me because I'm working with Geng Hao?” I asked.

“Could be,” he said. “Or maybe Geng Hao is tracking you because you're working with ACSB. No way of telling yet.”

“It would make sense for Kenar in Turkey to get at Brisbane Airport through a server in Bulgaria,” I said thoughtfully. “Isn't Turkey near Bulgaria?”

“It actually borders Turkey,” said Demetrius, “and Varna isn't far from Istanbul, it's just up the coast of the Black Sea. You could drive there in half a day, but so what? We're talking computers here. It's just as easy for a computer in Beijing to access a computer in Varna as it is from Istanbul.”

“I guess,” I said. “But wouldn't the Australians be more interested in me working for the Chinese, seeing as how I'm Australian too and living in Australia.”

“Maybe,” said Demetrius. “But wouldn't the Chinese be interested in an Australian who works for them and the ACSB? Maybe they think you are spying on them.”

That hit a little close to home, since I was, or at least would be if Annabel ever managed to arrange a meeting with Stefan.

“Have a look at some pictures,” said Demetrius after watching me thinking.

“What of?” I asked as he powered up his notepad again.

“People,” he said. “I haven't been able to find an Armand Suleyman yet so tell me if you recognise any of these people.”

“OK,” I said and he started flicking through pictures. Some were new and sharp, some were old and crappy. Some were portraits and some were clearly candid, taken on a street where the person being photographed was half hidden by someone else. Two or three looked like they'd been captured off feeds. Apart from being all men and somewhat Mediterranean looking, they were all shapes, sizes and ages.

“Hold it,” I said after maybe forty of them, “go back one.”

I studied it. It was an old picture, candid and stained, as though it was a photograph of another photograph. It might or might not have been Armand. There was certainly a resemblance but his hairstyle was different and he looked a lot younger and fitter.

“That’s definitely a possible,” I said.

Demetrius made a note of the file name, which was just a sequence of numbers.

“Let’s keep going,” he said, “since you’re not certain.”

“How many do you have?” I asked.

“About three hundred,” he said.

“Do they all work for Kenar Analitiği?”

“A lot of them, yes,” he said with a faintly malicious grin. “Some I just threw in to test you. Don’t let that put you off.”

“Was that one I just picked a test?” I asked.

“I don’t remember,” he said. “I’ll tell you when you’ve been through them all.”

I picked out another couple of possibles in the next fifty or so then there was a long sequence of people who looked nothing like Armand.

“Flood,” I suddenly said. “Stop, that’s him.”

There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that the man in the picture was Armand.

“OK,” said Demetrius, making a note of it. “Keep going.”

“But that’s him,” I said.

“Maybe you’ll come across someone else you think is him,” he said. “Not many more.”

Grudgingly I went through the rest until I'd looked at them all. There was one other who looked a little like Armand.

“So who was that one?” I asked, “the one who is Armand?”

He backtracked to find it.

“This one?” he asked. I nodded.

He opened a text file and searched for the number of the photo file.

“That's Mehmet Gunes,” said Demetrius. “Former coach of the Turkish National Gymnastics squad, but it's not Armand Suleyman.”

“Yes he is,” I said. “I recognised him immediately.”

“Sorry,” said Demetrius. “Mehmet Gunes died back in 2025. He had a heart attack in the middle of the European Championships and over a hundred TV cameras recorded him dying.”

“Oh flood it,” I said, bitterly disappointed. “Now what?”

“Let's just check the other four,” he said and typed busily on his notepad. “OK, one of them is a fishmonger who won a lottery. I got his picture from a newspaper. The other three have all, at some stage, worked for Kenar Analitiği. I'll see what else I can find out about them.”

Chapter Seventeen

“How about we get together again on, say, Monday?” I asked.

“What for?” asked Demetrius.

“So you can tell me what you found out about those guys,” I said. “You were going to tell me, weren't you?”

He said “yes, of course,” but something about the look in his eye suggested he probably hadn't intended to.

“Umm, I'll get Coastal Teas to make another appointment,” he said.

“Won't that look suspicious?” I said. “Since I've already told them to go through my agent.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said, gazing at the three photographs side by side on his notepad screen. I got the feeling his mind was elsewhere.

“How about we say three o'clock,” I suggested, “and I'll make sure I have no one else booked for that time?”

My phone warbled to say I had a news feed, which was strange since I thought I'd turned it off. I picked it up since I obviously hadn't.

“Yeah, three o'clock works for me,” said Demetrius, frowning at my phone.

“Must have forgotten,” I said brightly. “Anyway, that drone that's following me knows I'm here and since hardly anyone goes in or out it won't take long to spot you if they're interested enough.”

He didn't bother to answer so I looked at the feed.

“Apparently the Australian government is ending the requirement for companies to submit annual audited accounts with immediate effect,” I said. “Hah, I've never submitted audited accounts, I didn't know I was supposed to.”

“Can I see that?” said Demetrius, suddenly looking animated. “Oh, you’re a sole trader, you don’t need to submit accounts or get audited. It’s only for companies, not small businesses.”

He replayed the feed on my phone. The gist of it was that, copying the recent action of several European countries such as Germany and France, the Australian government was recognising that few companies bothered any more to submit audited accounts and that they no longer had the resources to do anything about it. Frankly it didn’t seem a big deal to me, although Demetrius thought it was interesting.

“You know what this means, don’t you,” he said.

“Some unemployed auditors?” I said.

He rolled his eyes at me.

“No, it means the end of any corporate oversight,” he said, “the end of government and the end of protection for the people.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “It’s just a bit of bureaucracy.”

“It means that companies can do what they want and there’s no one left to watch what they are doing. They can do whatever they want now with no transparency whatsoever. Screw over consumers, pollute, act fraudulently, anything. The government has given up policing them and, since their taxes are based on their audited accounts they’re also not going to pay taxes anymore. The government has basically said ‘do whatever you want, we’re not even going to watch!’.”

“Well, is that really so bad?” I asked. “The government doesn’t do much anyway.”

“You’re not thinking it through, Trina,” he said. “With no one to say ‘no, you can’t do that’ what do you think is going to happen?”

“Umm, companies will just get on with running their businesses without any interference?” I said.

“No,” he replied, putting my phone on the table in front of me, “over the next few years there's going to be a rush of takeovers and mergers and the big companies will get bigger and swallow up the smaller ones. In a few years there'll just be a handful of super companies and who do you think will be making the laws?”

“Ummm,” I said.

“That's right,” he said. “The ruling companies will. And who do you think the laws will benefit?”

“Ummm,” I said.

“Yup, the ruling companies. Goodbye to personal freedoms. The law will require you to do whatever your local big business wants you to do. I wouldn't be surprised if, when the dust settles, the big companies that win out will form some sort of cartel or conglomerate and agree which company rules which area and everyone in those areas will have to do what they're told.”

“But won't the security companies stop them?” I asked.

“They own the security companies,” he said. “The security companies will become the corporate divisions that enforce their laws against you and me, not enforce our laws against them. And not a single one of the people running those companies will have been elected by the people whose lives they control. We probably won't even be able to find out who they are. It'll be like a return to the feudal monarchies of the Middle Ages.”

“Well, is that such a bad thing?” I said. “After all, democratic systems turned out to be as big a failure as communism did and, let's face it, democracy caused the worst wars in history, back in the twentieth century. At least commercial wars don't kill people.”

“Really?” he said. “Are you really that naive, Trinity? You don't need a war to kill people, all you need is the potential for profit. Take slavery, for example, that was all about profit or those people dying from arsenic exposure up north. Those houses were built and sold by someone who knew about the arsenic but didn't care about the lives of

the people he sold them to. It was all about a quick profit.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said. “And look at how effective the governments were at putting a stop to it. I wasn’t that good at history at school but I seem to remember that the American and British governments played a big role in the slave trade. And didn’t the British run the opium trade from India to China in exchange for tea?”

“But it was the governments that stopped it,” said Demetrius, “not the companies.”

“I don’t know much about it,” I said, “but didn’t the British and American governments fight to keep slavery going until public opinion overwhelmed them? Surely the same happens with companies? When people turn against them they change the way they do business or go out of business.”

“That’s only true when there’s competition,” he replied. “That’s why democracies have choices. When there’s no choice, like with a monarchy or a one party state, public opinion doesn’t matter and it’s the same with companies. When there’s a monopoly the people have no choice and no say.”

“Wow,” I said suddenly. “Armand was saying something just like that when he asked me to help him with Geng Hao.”

“Really?” said Demetrius. “What did he say?”

“I forget the details,” I said, “But he claimed that Geng Hao were developing internet tools and strategies to take out other businesses with the long term objective of setting themselves up as the global monopoly. He seemed to think that Geng Hao wanted to take over the world.”

“Now that is interesting,” said Demetrius, “since China is one of the few places left with a strong government and Chinese companies, at least the big ones anyway, work for the state. Not even the Cyber Wars managed to bring true capitalism to China. I wonder if this Armand Suleyman is really who he claims to be?”

“Why wouldn't he be?” I asked. “Surely if he is with Kenar Analitiği and they are a front for the ACSB they'd be very interested in net based corporate wars and the possibility of a Chinese company becoming the world monopoly?”

“Yes, you'd think so, wouldn't you,” said Demetrius, thoughtfully. “It certainly sounds very plausible. It's just that this news feed shows very clearly that the Australian government doesn't care any more and, since governments don't change policies quickly, they clearly haven't cared for a long time. So why would the ACSB care? Why would they still be caring the day they announce they don't care? Why would they bother to check up on Geng Hao and why would they waste their time with you? After all, compared with China, Australia is a piddly little place with no power or influence. It would make much more sense for the Australian government to get involved with the Silk Road rather than take on the Chinese in another cyber war.”

“What Silk Road?” I asked.

“Don't you know anything?” said Demetrius. “The Silk Road is a project the Chinese started back in 2013. It's full name is the 'Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road' or something like that. Anyway, it's a Chinese economic program to develop the infrastructure for a global trading network centred on China. The Americans tried to set up something similar in 2019 with their 'Blue Dot Network', involving Australia and Japan but it didn't survive the Cyber Wars whereas the Chinese Silk Road is thriving. I never did understand why Australia went with the US and not China back then. Do you want some more tea?”

“No,” I said, checking the time. “I have to go soon. I have another meeting at six.”

“With Armand?” he asked, waving the counter woman over.

“No, a friend,” I said.

“Can I have a chocolate raspberry cappuccino? Thanks,” he said to her and waited until she was back behind her counter before turning back to me.

“Would you do something for me?” he asked.

“Depends,” I said. “I nearly got killed a couple of days ago, I’m not taking any more risks.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” he said. “This is no risk though. I just want you to try to find out what Armand is really up to the next time you talk to him. I’ll try to track him down from this end.”

“How on earth do I do that?” I said. “I’ve got no skills in intelligence gathering.”

“You could always tell him you know Kenar Analitiçi is a front for the ACSB and see what he says,” said Demetrius. “He just might let something slip.”

“Yeah, and he just might decide I know too much and have Claude poison me or something,” I replied, tartly. “I just make videos, that’s all.”

“Who’s Claude?” asked Demetrius.

“My holobot,” I said.

“Oh yeah, I’d forgotten,” he said. “Yeah, Claude’s security is a joke. He’ll talk to anyone, he’s your weakest link, you ought to upgrade his access protocols.”

“I’m happy with him just the way he is, thank you,” I said, standing up. “Anyway, I have to go now. See you Monday.”

The woman behind the counter brought over his chocolate raspberry cappuccino and he bent his head over it to sniff its aromas appreciatively.

“Have fun,” he said. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Ta leme.”

I paused. “What does that mean?” I said. “Is it rude or something?”

“Ta leme?” he said, looking puzzled. “No, it’s Greek for ‘goodbye’ or ‘

until we meet again'. Sorry, I was just being friendly.”

“OK,” I said, “ta leme.”

Before going to meet Demetrius at the cafe I'd checked where Aarav lived and, although he was only a couple of kilometres away, just off the town centre, I was still going to take a taxi. After all, even though it was unlikely that there would be homeless men prowling the streets looking for women to attack in broad daylight, who knows what a drunk or stoned guy might do? And, since I no longer had total faith in taxis I made sure the map was on my phone so I could check where the taxi was going. My plan, should it seem like the taxi was going the wrong way, was to pull open the door which would force the automatic safety system to stop the taxi which would allow me to leap out and run away. I didn't really have a plan for what to do after that but it was a start.

Anyway, the taxi pulled up outside the cafe 47 seconds after I'd requested one and, when I told it Aarav's address and asked its proposed route, it told me that it would not go down McEwan Street, which was the shortest way, since there were delays due to road repairs, and would instead be going via Pease Street and Quaintly Road. Apparently this would save one minute eleven seconds in travel time even though it was 210 metres longer.

I checked on my map and Pease Street and Quaintly Road did indeed get me to my destination so I agreed the route and fare, and the inevitable liability disclaimer, and we set off. The taxi chatted happily about the people who had died in Brisbane when their houses had collapsed following a record high tide while I traced every metre of its path on the map, tracking every twist, turn and junction of the trip.

Even so, I was relieved when the taxi pulled up, one second ahead of schedule, outside Aarav's house. I knew it was his house since I'd used SouSuo Road View to see what it looked like before I left home. Aarav lived in the second from the left end, looking from the road, of four small terraced houses. The OztateEstate website had, when I asked, given me a current valuation of the property, which didn't interest me, and the layout of its interior, which did. Now it's by no means conclusive, since one person can live happily in a four bedroom home

just as four people can live, presumably less happily, in a one bedroom home, but it did seem to me that since Aarav's house had one bedroom, he probably lived alone. Or, at any rate, didn't live with his extended family. I wasn't overly keen on going to dinner with Aarav, a wife, seven children, four parents and any number of grandparents, cousins and so on. Aarav on his own, however, was a more attractive prospect.

Most importantly of all, when I tentatively knocked on his door after searching for a voicebox, he opened it with a nervous but welcoming smile and invited me in.

"I saw your taxi pull up," he said. "Welcome, welcome, come on in, please excuse the mess."

I don't know if his place was a mess or not because it was immediately apparent he didn't have self-stowing furniture and the place was cluttered with things. With my house, everything stows away behind the wall screens and Claude does whatever he needs to do to create a room appropriate to whatever situation I'm going to be in. Aarav, in contrast, had solid walls with no screens and his furniture and everything else was on display all the time. It kind of reminded me of my days as a uni student, before the Cyber Wars. There was a certain solidity about things. Aarav's table and chairs, for example, were reliably always the same table and chairs and never changed their shape or appearance. Inconvenient but consistent.

"Probably quite dull, too," I thought to myself as I looked round. "Imagine having to sit on the same chair and look at the same wall all the time." I'd got used to being able to change the décor any time I wanted to with just a command or two to Claude.

He did have a screen, of course. It would be inconceivable for him not to have one, but his was a rectangle roughly two metres wide and a metre high and sat on top of a box in a corner of his living room, unlike mine. My screens basically were the walls, floors and ceilings.

"How nice," I said brightly, standing in the living room and looking around. "Oh! You have a bookcase!"

He actually did have a real, old fashioned bookcase with real, old fashioned books on the shelves. I walked over to have a look. They were predominantly books on physics and computers although there were a handful of books on religion and philosophy.

“Those are from my student days,” he said, coming over to stand beside me in front of the bookcase. “Most of my library is on the computer.”

“Did you study physics?” I asked, picking up a book entitled *Algebraic Methods in Statistical Mechanics and Quantum Field Theory*. I opened a page at random and it looked as though a drunken spider had been walking all over it. There was a small section of text although it made no sense to me; *When K is realised as the space of all square-integral functions...* I closed it and put it back on the shelf.

“Yes,” he said. “Although only to graduate level. My PhD is in AI and system analytics. Can I get you a drink?”

“Oh, thank you,” I said. “What do you have?”

I figured since he didn't have a domestic management system, he wouldn't have a holobot to make beverages and so he'd have to have pre-made stuff, in cans or bottles or whatever.

“Would you like some wine, or perhaps tea?” he asked.

“Do you have any chai tea, or chamomile?” I asked.

“I have some chamomile tea,” he said. “I'll put the kettle on. Have a seat and I'll be back in a few moments.”

I sat on the couch in front of his screen but I was nervous of telling it to do anything. I guess I didn't want him to think I was being presumptuous or anything. He bustled back in with a small, dainty little tray with two small cups of chamomile tea which he placed very carefully on a low table. He handed me a cup and sat himself at the far end of the couch.

“I hope you don't mind,” he said, “but I have set up a dinner table

outside in the garden as it is a lovely evening. I thought we might have dinner and watch the sunset.”

I was a little taken aback by this. Did he really expect me to be staying the night?

“Oh, that sounds lovely,” I said, “but I can’t stay that long. I have to be home before the curfew.”

“Of course,” he said. “But I am a security officer, I am exempt from the curfew and I can take you home in my car anytime you want to go.”

Ahhh, that made more sense. I’d forgotten security staff were exempt.

“Then I’d love to watch the sunset,” I said.

We sat in silence for a few moments, wondering what to say.

“This is delicious tea,” I said, after sipping it. “So you’re a PhD. Should I call you Doctor Aarav or something?”

“Oh no,” he said. “Just Aarav is good.”

“You can call me Trina,” I said. “Trinity is too formal. Can I ask you something personal?”

“Of course, Trina,” he said, hesitating only slightly over the diminutive.

“If you have a PhD in computers, how come you are working in security?”

“Ahh,” he said. “It is not that easy for someone like me in your country. Even now it is difficult to find, shall we say, suitable employment?”

“You mean because you are Indian?” I asked, a little surprised.

“Yes,” he said. “But let us not talk of these things.”

"I'm feeling very intimidated," I said with a laugh. "All that maths and high level computer stuff. I did graphic art and media and only to degree level."

"But you have great talent, Trina," he said, reaching for his own tea cup. "I have seen some of your artworks. Most creative."

"Well, thank you," I said.

"I particularly liked the video you made for the Sydney Moving Art Festival in 2022."

"You mean *Countdown*?" I said, racking my brains to remember ancient history.

"Yes," he said. "Where you mixed cuttings of all those movies to get a sequence of people counting down from one thousand."

I remembered it now. It had actually been quite fun. I'd scoured hundreds of movies, some even in black and white, to find people speaking a number until I'd had a thousand clips, one for each number up to a thousand.

"I particularly like the way you build a sense of panic and anxiety as the countdown goes down to zero," said Aarav. "I found it particularly poignant that the movie suddenly stops with a tremendous sense of something about to happen and nothing happens. The lack of closure allows the build up of tension to excite the imagination."

"I'm glad you liked it," I said. "I always felt it was a little too long at 66 minutes but it had to be that length as each number had to be fully articulated and it takes a surprisingly long time to say 'four hundred and eighty seven', for example."

"Yes, I can appreciate that," he said. "Tell me, what was your inspiration?"

I laughed. "Actually it wasn't that creative," I said. "A few years before I'd seen a movie called *The Clock* which was a montage of film and TV clips that showed the time for a full twenty four hours. I found the

whole idea fascinating, this concept of linking unrelated segments into a meaningful sequence.”

We talked about some of my other artworks for a while until interesting smells started to weave their way into the room and made me feel hungry.

“What's for dinner?” I asked.

“I'm baking a fresh barramundi,” said Aarav, “I hope you like fish?”

“Yes, I do,” I said.

“And for dessert,” he said with a shy smile, “I have a very special treat for you.”

Chapter Eighteen

Aarav had set up a small table with two hard wooden chairs in his backyard. It was small and was mostly bare earth with patchy brown grass and was separated from his neighbours by lengths of wire. More importantly, though, the yard backed on to wasteland which meant there was a good view of the Mount Archer in the distance. The sun was low in the sky.

“What's that smell?” I asked.

“Citrus burners,” he said, waving at a couple of lightly smoking tin cups perched on thin poles. “To keep the insects away. We get a lot of mosquitoes round here because of the creek.”

“Oh, is that Catstail Creek? The one that runs past my place?” I said.

“Yes, and from here it runs down to the sea, over there,” he said, pointing towards the house.

“It's a lovely view,” I said, sitting on the chair he was standing behind. “Is that why you bought it?”

“I rent this house,” he said. “Like most people I cannot afford to buy a house. I'll be back in a moment.”

He disappeared inside and I leaned back in the chair to enjoy the view.

“Evening,” said a gruff voice.

Startled I looked in the direction the voice had come from and there was a man in the doorway of the house next door. He had a close cropped head, long thick beard and a shapeless thing with no sleeves which exposed his heavily tattooed arms.

“Good evening,” I said politely.

“You Arf's bit, then, is ya?”

He was smoking a cigarette although the smell of it was hidden by the citrus burners.

"I'm a friend of Aarav's," I said, "I'm just here for dinner."

He spat on the ground and scratched his bottom and I turned away to look at the view again. He laughed then coughed and spat again.

"Good evening, Gareth," said Aarav, reappearing, carrying a bottle and two glasses.

"G'day, Arf," said Gareth, "aving a party?"

"Just dinner with a friend," he said. "Are you staying in tonight?"

"Nah, mate," said Gareth. "I'm off up the club, just finish me smoke."

He flicked his cigarette into his backyard and disappeared, slamming his door behind him.

"Neighbours seem OK," I said, diplomatically.

"Gareth's not too bad," said Aarav, "I've had worse. He's a little rough but he has a kind heart. I've got some Pinot Noir to have with the fish, would you like some? It's only Tasmanian, I'm afraid, synthetic, but it's not too bad chilled."

"Yes, please," I said.

He poured two glasses. I tasted the wine and it was definitely chilled.

"So, um, how's Gareth going to a club after the curfew?" I asked, mainly to avoid commenting on the taste of the wine.

"Veillance turns a blind eye," said Aarav, standing beside the table. He put down the bottle of wine. "The club's owned by one of the directors, you see."

He disappeared back inside and reappeared with a bowl of salad and two plates which he put on the table then disappeared again to

reemerge with a large flat dish with something wrapped in foil on it. He put it in the centre of the table and sat down and flashed me a smile.

“I hope it's cooked,” he said, leaning over to unwrap the fish.

“It smells delicious,” I said.

“I baked it in a little olive oil, with lemon juice and dill,” said Aarav.

He slid a flat knife of some sort under one of the pieces of fish and gently laid it on a plate and put it in front of me.

“Help yourself to salad,” he said, pushing the salad bowl towards me, so I did.

He served himself while I sat, fascinated by his level of concentration and the care with which he served. It was as though he didn't want to make a single mistake, such as allowing a drop of oil to dirty the soft, white tablecloth.

“Please, eat while it is still hot,” said Aarav, waiting for me to start.

Acutely aware he was watching my every move, I lifted a sliver of fish with my fork and put it in my mouth.

“This is delicious, Aarav,” I said. “Perfectly cooked. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

“I have always liked to cook,” he said. “I would have liked to have been a chef but my parents wanted me to become a professor. They liked the status of it.”

“Why aren't you a professor, then?” I asked.

“The universities have very little money these days, and they don't appoint professors anymore, just casual lecturers.”

“You didn't want to be just a lecturer?” I asked.

“The pay is very bad,” he said. “It is much better in Security. I could not afford even this place if I was a lecturer.”

“Is it expensive to rent here?”

“Yes and no,” he said. “All rentals are expensive because of the properties on the coast being lost but as rentals go, this house is relatively cheap.”

“Does Gareth rent as well?”

“Oh yes, we all rent around here.”

“What does Gareth do?”

“He's a bamboo cutter,” said Aarav, “with Australian Bamboo, down on the coast. He drives in every day.”

“Oh? I didn't think we grew bamboo in Coastal yet?”

“Bamboo had been grown here for several years,” he said. “And more is being grown each year as the sea level rises and swamps more ground.”

“How strange,” I said. “My husband has just started with Aus-Bam and I thought his job was to set up bamboo plantations on the coast. I must have misunderstood.”

“Can I ask you a personal question?” said Aarav, stopping eating and looking shyly at me.

“Of course,” I said.

“Why do you not live with your husband?” he asked.

“Oh, we did live together for the first year or so,” I said, having a sip of wine. It wasn't too bad as a complement to the fish. “But I started to get afraid, living in Sydney, so I wanted to move somewhere secure so I came up here.”

“Why didn't Damien come with you?” asked Aarav.

“We have a non-exclusive marriage,” I said. “Damien had another partner in Sydney and he didn't want to leave her.”

“But he lives in Weston Downs now, doesn't he?”

“Yes,” I said. “She decided to make her own marriage exclusive so she ended her relationship with Damien and he moved up here. I was living in the Catstail Complex which is women only and I didn't want to move out so he bought a place at the Glassview Complex.”

“Ahh, yes,” said Aarav. “That is men only, is it not?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Are you happy with that arrangement?”

I gave a little laugh. “This isn't a criticism of Damien,” I said, “but, having lived with him for a year, I really think I prefer him in small doses. How about you?”

“Ah, I have had lady friends,” said Aarav, “but I have not yet found anyone I want to marry.”

“Not even non-exclusively?” I asked.

“No,” he said, seriously. “When I marry it will be exclusively. Did you not want an exclusive marriage?”

“With Damien? Good god no,” I said. “No, I only married him for the security but I didn't want to make the full commitment. No, Damien wanted the freedom to have other lovers but I just wanted some of the freedom of being single.”

“What security did he bring you, if you don't mind me asking?”

“No, I don't mind. I graduated in Graphic Art and Media in '22 and I was still looking for a job when the Cyber Wars started and the economy collapsed. It was a bad time for job hunting with companies

failing left, right and centre so in the end I decided to set up on my own but it was difficult getting established for the first few years.”

“So you married Damien for financial security?”

“Oh no, I had a good inheritance when my parents died so I was as financially secure as anyone was in those days. No, it was more an emotional security. I needed someone who would support and encourage me while I struggled to get known. I got a lot of rejections in those early days. Now, of course, they come to me but it took a few years. Damien was very supportive but no, I didn't want to wholly commit to him.”

The sun had set by now and Aarav went in the house and brought out two candles. They were surprisingly large and were ornately decorated.

“Oh, those are nice,” I said appreciatively. “Owwww, flood it, are they real candles?”

I'd thought they were holograms and had stuck my finger in the flame of one of them. It stung and I put it in the chilled wine. Aarav thought it was quite funny.

“Yes, they are real. My aunt sent them over from India for my last birthday. I have not used them yet. Would you like some aloe vera for your finger?”

“Oh no, I'm fine,” I said. “I just wasn't expecting real candles.”

“Are you ready for dessert yet?” asked Aarav?

“Oh yes, this very special treat.” I said, smiling. “I can't wait, what is it?”

Despite my slightly sore finger it was really very pleasant sitting outside in the warm evening talking with Aarav by candlelight. Despite their convenience, holograms and wall screens are a little too hard-edged to be truly romantic. Even some bugs flying in circles around the citrus burners added a little, in their own way.

“Let me make some space,” said Aarav and he stacked the dishes on top of the salad bowl and carried them inside. After he'd gone I wondered if I should have offered to help.

He returned with two small plates and two forks then disappeared and came back with a tray covered with a cloth.

“So what's this treat?” I asked. There was a faint but familiar smell coming from the tray. I couldn't quite place it but it had happy associations.

“Before I found the courage to ask you to dinner,” said Aarav, sitting down, “I hope you don't mind, but I did some research on you on the net.”

“Yeah, people seem to be doing that of lot at the moment,” I said drily, “but I don't mind.”

It seemed churlish to tell him I did mind a bit, since he was presumably doing it to find out my likes and dislikes.

“Hmm, yes,” he said. “And I came across an old archive of Facebook postings from 2021-23.”

“Oh my god,” I said, giggling, “you mean you found my Facebook stuff from when I was at uni? Oh, how embarrassing!”

Actually it was embarrassing since I'd posted a fair amount of stuff that I wouldn't dream about making public now. Like random thoughts on boyfriends, lecturers and movie stars and endless little mini-quiz results like which Game of Thrones character I most resembled.

“Yes, you were free with your ideas and opinions in those days,” said Aarav, smiling.

“Oh!” I suddenly went wide eyed and put my hands over my mouth. “You haven't! Have you? Oh my god, tell me!”

Aarav leaned forward and slowly pulled back the cloth. I stared at the

tray in disbelief.

“Portuguese Tarts from Cake Palace,” he said.

“Oh my god,” I said, “oh my god!”

For my final two years at uni in Sydney I had religiously gone to the Cake Palace Cake Boutique in Crystal Street every Saturday afternoon and bought a box of their Portuguese Tarts. Every Saturday I intended to make the box last a week and every Sunday they were always all gone by evening. I seemed to remember every Saturday evening I raved about them on Facebook.

I reached out a trembling hand and touched one of the puff pastry casings. It was warm, exactly the perfect temperature.

“Oh, oh, oh,” I whispered, the saliva pooling in my mouth.

I looked at Aarav. “But, but how ..., I thought Cake Palace folded, how ..., where did you get them?”

“Have one,” he said, lifting one onto a plate with his fingers. “Enjoy.”

He sat back and smiled indulgently as I bit into the creamy vanilla and cinnamon custard. Suddenly I was back at uni again, happy and carefree.

“Mmm, mmm, mmm,” I muttered, my mouth full, “mmmmmm.”

“Cake Palace survived the Cyber Wars,” said Aarav, “although they're no longer in Crystal Street. Abigail Farrugia moved the shop to New Canterbury Road but she still runs it and she still makes your Portuguese Tarts. She sent these up to me by drone this morning.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” I said, reaching for another. “They're still wonderful! Aren't you having any?”

“No, they are all for you,” he said.

“I can't eat all four,” I said, lying through my teeth since I could easily

eat four and still want more.

“On Saturday, 12th June 2021,” he said, smiling, “you posted on Facebook that you had eaten seven in half an hour. I don't think four will be a problem, do you?”

I blushed. “I'm not a greedy student anymore,” I said, “I'm a lady now. Have one, I insist.”

“Ahh, if the lady insists ...,” he said and picked one up. “Yes, they are very nice.”

I had the other three though. After all, they were my special treat, not his.

“I've had a lovely time,” I said, a couple of hours later. “But I really ought to be going home.”

Actually, it had been a lovely evening. We'd sat in the back yard after dinner reminiscing about our university days. We'd both been to the University of Sydney and, although Aarav graduated a year after I did and stayed on to do his doctoral thesis, we both knew many of the same places and even a few people since much of my Graphic Arts had been in the Computing department.

“It will be my pleasure to drive you home, Trina,” he said, “I, too, have had a lovely evening.”

He blew out the candles and snuffed the citrus burners and I was very conscious of his shadowy presence in the sudden darkness. I wondered how I wanted the evening to end.

“My car is just up the road,” he said softly as we went into the house, “I'll just get something from the kitchen.”

He returned with a bamboo box and opened the front door.

“Is that what I think it is?” I said, smiling.

“You did post you could eat seven,” he said, smiling back, “so I

ordered eight, just in case. You can finish these tomorrow.”

“You'll make me fat,” I said.

“Do you want me to put them back?” he asked, pretending to go back in the kitchen.

“Don't you dare,” I said, grabbing his sleeve, “come on, take me home.”

I didn't let go of his sleeve until we got to his car. He needed a key to unlock it, it was so old. And noisy.

“Wow,” I said. “Is this a petrol car?”

“Yes,” said Aarav. “It was a gift from my father when I was awarded my PhD. It's one of the last petrol engined cars Toyota ever made. It's a '24 Corolla, my father couldn't afford a new one.”

“Can you still get petrol now? I thought all cars were electric.”

“There are still quite a few around. I get my petrol from a man in Woodford.”

He drove me home quite slowly and we were only stopped once by a Veilance patrol car who waved us on as soon as he scanned Aarav's wrist.

“The curfew is a nuisance, isn't it,” I said.

“It's ending soon,” said Aarav, concentrating on the road. There had been no street lighting for years. “It's going to be announced in two weeks.”

“So it worked, then?” I asked. “It ended all the violence?”

“There never was much violence,” said Aarav. “Yes, it did go up a bit as desperate people moved in from the coast but that's mostly been settled now, although there are a few small pockets of homeless around.”

“So why was the curfew brought in then,” I asked, puzzled.

“It started in the big cities, like Sydney and Melbourne,” said Aarav. “They did have some significant security problems but in most places, like here, it was brought in for the shopkeepers.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, as people started moving significantly over to internet shopping, the shopkeepers wanted the curfew to shorten their opening hours,” he said. “After all, many shops were staying open until midnight and some were open twenty four hours a day and they wanted to reduce their staffing overheads. Their thinking was that if there was a curfew people would be forced to do their shopping during the day and they could get rid of evening and night staff.”

“So why's the curfew being lifted?”

“It didn't work. Most of the evening shoppers just moved over to internet shopping so the shops now want the curfew lifted to try to get their customers back, which probably won't work either now that people are used to the convenience of internet shopping.”

“So why did they make out it was a security problem then?”

“Because it's easier to get people to accept things if they are afraid. If people had been told the curfew was to make them shop earlier in the day there would have been resentment but if you make them fearful then say it is for their safety, they welcome it.”

“Yes, that's true,” I said. “Like that rape and killing in the complex a few days ago. That was faked.”

“How do you know?” he asked.

“The security cam feed was manufactured,” I said, “by someone called Demetrius Deo.”

“Ahh, you spotted that,” said Aarav. “AllSecurity does that sort of thing all the time, but please don't tell anyone I said so. There's

actually very little violence or crime generally. Most of the news feeds are fabricated so the security companies can sell more services. Still, it's nowhere near as bad as it is in America now. I have heard that one third of the population pays another third to protect them from the remaining third. It's all psychological manipulation, but these are the times we live in and at least it's got me a job."

"I know I should be shocked," I said slowly, looking down at my feet in the foot well. "But actually I'm glad. I would hate to think that you were at risk of being hurt or killed all the time."

It was a thought that had come to me two or three times during the evening. Generally you don't think about the safety of security people but now I was getting to know Aarav it was becoming more personal. It really was nice to know that he wasn't in as much danger as I had assumed.

He glanced over at me and the atmosphere in the car became a little ... tense, I suppose.

"Hey, if something happens to you, where am I going to get my Portuguese Tarts?" I said, trying to turn it into a joke. It didn't really work but the atmosphere faded away.

Aarav pulled up outside the Complex security gate and got out.

"Evening, Abshir," he called to the man in the guard house.

"Aarav," he called back. "Who is that with you?"

"Trinity Moss," said Aarav. "I'm bringing her home."

I got out of the car too so that Abshir could scan me.

"Would you walk me to my unit?" I asked Aarav, shyly. I wanted to thank him again for the evening but I didn't want to do it with an audience.

"Of course," he said. "I am walking Miss Moss to her house, Abshir."

“I shall alert the house,” said Abshir formally.

We went through the security gate and slowly walked in silence to my unit and the door slid open. I stopped outside and turned to face Aarav.

“I’ve had a lovely evening,” I said again, putting my hand on his arm. “Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure,” he said and handed me the box of Portuguese Tarts he’d been carrying.

I took the box and stood there like a dummy, wondering whether or not to kiss him goodnight. I wanted to but he seemed a little formal.

“Umm,” he said, nervously, “I wonder if perhaps I could see you again? Perhaps another dinner or something?”

“That would be nice,” I said. “Call me tomorrow and we’ll organise something.”

He looked very relieved.

“Oh, to hell with it,” I said and kissed him on the mouth. “Goodnight!”

Chapter Nineteen

“There is an incoming news feed that may interest you, Trina,” said Claude.

“Frosty,” I said, “I’m not getting anywhere with what I’m doing anyway.”

I’d been trying to catch up on my outstanding work by working on a Sunday which is something I generally try to avoid and since I’d cleared my schedule to be with Damien and then not gone, I didn’t have a lot else to do. That said, I was getting nowhere. I tried to blame it on the product, a supposedly new concept in insurance which was remarkably like every earlier concept in insurance. This made it difficult to develop a new concept for a promo for the insurance concept, but in reality I was having difficulty concentrating. For some reason my mind kept veering away from insurance and onto Aarav. Presumably since he worked nights he’d stayed up all the previous night and was probably now asleep, which made me wonder what he’d done and thought about after he’d brought me home.

“Put it on screen,” I said, saving what little work I had achieved so far and getting it off display.

Actually it was quite interesting. Apparently, on 20th August 1977, twenty two years before I was born, the Americans had launched a space probe called Voyager 2. For some reason Voyager 1 was launched after Voyager 2 but the feed didn’t explain why. Still, after recording and sending back data about Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune, Voyager 2 had continued travelling and had left the solar system back in 2018 just as I was starting university. That in itself was no mean feat but the incredible thing was that Voyager 2 had continued to broadcast for fifty seven years. The feed covered NASA’s announcement that finally Voyager 2 had got too far away from any stars to generate any power and its batteries could no longer provide enough energy to send a signal.

I confess that kind of blew me away. Voyager 2 was only two years younger than my dad and no one had expected it to last more than four or five years. Now it was 57 and still racing through space at

somewhere around 15 km every second. It would just keep going for ever, until it happened to run into something which, given the vast emptiness of space, is quite unlikely.

“You must be very lonely,” I said quietly, “all alone out there, billions of kilometres from anything.”

My dad had had a photograph on the wall in his den. He'd got it off NASA's website back in the 1990s, before I was born, and printed it and framed it. It used to fascinate me when I was little and beginning to come to terms with the world and my place in it. The picture had been taken by Voyager 1 when it was near the sun and looking back at the Earth. Most of the picture was black but there were a few coloured streaks caused by the sun doing things with the lens but there, roughly in the centre of the image, was a tiny, tiny, tiny blue dot. My dad had told me that the pale blue dot was only 0.12 of a pixel in size but, since I didn't know what a pixel was then, that didn't mean a lot.

What did grab my young, impressionable mind was that that vanishingly small pale blue dot was me, my mum, my dad, our house, my nan, my school, Sydney, Australia and the entire world. Everything I knew or imagined, loved or hated, had been or would be was encapsulated in that minute, pale blue dot.

Voyager 1 had been over six billion kilometres away from the Earth when it took that picture and now, after 57 years, Voyager 2 was some 27 billion kilometres away. Planet Earth no longer existed for it. Even if it could muster enough energy to see one last time, Earth would not be visible.

I found that very sad.

The picture on the wall had been smashed when the rioters broke in and ransacked my parents' house looking for food. I'd found it later when I was clearing up. Someone had trodden on it and left a dirty smudge. They'd obliterated the planet. Still, that pale blue dot had had a profound effect on me and, in times of great stress, I think about the immensity of the universe and how trivial my problems are.

“There's still one of those Portuguese Tarts left, isn't there, hon?” I

asked Claude.

“Yes, Trina,” he said. “Do you want it now?”

I'd been trying to save it to have after dinner but thinking about Voyager and pale blue dots had squashed that plan.

“Yes, please,” I said. It was just as delicious as the first had been the night before. I tried to push waves of pleasure in Aarav's direction, maybe he'd have pleasant dreams. He deserved them.

But, pleasures of the flesh are all too fleeting. The Portuguese Tart gone, its after taste still on my lips, my tranquillity came to an end.

“Incoming from Armand Suleyman,” said Claude.

“Oh, not again,” I complained.

“Do you want to receive the call?” asked Claude impatiently.

He didn't really ask impatiently, he didn't have the personality profile for impatience. It was just my irritation that made me think he sounded impatient.

“Oh, flood it,” I said, “I can't be bothered.”

“Armand Suleyman has not left a message,” Claude reported thirty seconds later.

“Good,” I said.

I was starting to get annoyed with all this cloak and dagger stuff, especially if what Demetrius had told me was true since that made Armand a liar. I just wanted to be left in peace and quiet, on my own pale blue dot somewhere in the universe.

“Get me another tea, would you, hon.” I said, “make it a green tea.”

I called up the insurance promo I was trying to work on and started rereading the brief, looking for inspiration.

“The house is being queried,” said Claude suddenly.

“What?” I said, startled. “Explain.”

“I am detecting signs of unauthorised access in your bio-med feed, intrusion code BM-489,” said Claude.

“Track source,” I said, “and upload pseudo-data.”

“Pseudo-data initiated, tracking commenced,” said Claude, “please wait.”

Time always seems to drag by very slowly when you are waiting for a computer that has told you to 'please wait'. The pseudo-data was a set of files of data on various aspects of the house system that were designed to look like the real data but be very misleading. The pseudo bio-med data made it look as though the house was empty. It was more secure than simply blocking the access attempt, since blocking meant the intruder would try again through a different path whereas giving them pseudo data would make the intruder think he or she had succeeded and was accessing real data.

“Source located,” said Claude after a lengthy wait. “Identifying, please wait.”

I really couldn't be bothered with the insurance promo so I shut it down again.

“Unable to identify the source,” said Claude. “However, it is the same node as the call from Armand Suleyman six point eight minutes ago.”

Interesting. It looked like Armand was trying to find out if I was at home or not, although it was a little foolish of him to use the same node as the one he'd called from. Maybe he just assumed I was even more naive than I actually am.

“Call Armand Suleyman,” I said.

“Hello Trina,” he said, smiling. “I tried to call you a few minutes ago.”

“It's really not polite,” I said, not smiling.

“Not leaving a message?” he asked, now looking puzzled.

“Hacking someone's house system,” I said.

He looked as though he was going to deny it then he changed his mind.

“I just wanted to know if you got home safely,” he said. “You went out last night and might not have been back yet.”

“Oh rubbish,” I said. “Why would the Australian Cyber Security Bureau care if I was home or not?”

“I have no idea,” he said, frowning. “Why would you think they would?”

“You work for them,” I said. I wanted to see how he reacted.

He took too long to reply, which suggested he was thinking through options rather than simply denying it.

“Interesting,” he said. “Who put that thought into your head? Demetrius Deo?”

“Why would you think it was Demetrius Deo?” I asked.

He sighed. “I suppose I'm going to have to tell you the truth,” he said.

“That would be nice,” I replied. In my innocence, I'd believed him from the start although what Demetrius had told me had started to make me wonder. He was also implicitly confirming he was with the ACSB.

“Everything I told you about Geng Hao is true,” he said, “although I wasn't perhaps as open as I should have been about your role.”

“Now would be a good time to change that,” I said. “Why did you want me involved? I never did fully understand the point of inserting

that code into the promos.”

“Yes,” he admitted, “that wasn't a good cover story, was it.”

“No, not really,” I said. “I'm also guessing you didn't particularly want to me to meet people from Geng Hao either.”

“Have you had any success with that?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “My agent hasn't been able to contact the person who ordered the Romanian promo. I'm guessing she never will.”

“Yes, you're right there,” he said. “It was one of my staff who ordered it.”

“So what was the point of getting me to ask for a confirmation meeting?” I said. “Obviously I can't spy on them if it's you.”

He gave a wry smile.

“I didn't really want to tell you this,” he said, “since it might scare you but the whole point of this exercise was for your involvement so that Geng Hao would become alarmed and send people to find out what you were up to.”

“Excuse me?” I said, somewhat taken aback.

“We wanted to bring their people out of the woodwork,” he said. “So we sent you in as bait.”

“You what? Me? Bait?”

“Yes,” he said. “We rather thought we'd been too successful when you were attacked but that turned out to be a random thing. Those men were genuine homeless men and had nothing to do with Geng Hao.”

“But you nearly got me killed!” I spluttered.

“We've been watching you carefully,” he said. “That's why we've had that drone following you. It was for your protection.”

“You bastard,” I said, hotly.

“I’ve been called worse,” he said cheerfully. “At the end of the day the ends justify the means for us. There was a risk to you, no matter how much we tried to minimise it, but it does seem to have been successful.”

That took a while to sink in as I was stressing over the ‘risk to me’ part of what he’d said.

“What do you mean?” I said, “You’ve caught someone?”

“No, not caught,” he said, “but yes, someone has come out of the woodwork.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Xander Angelopoulos,” he said, “also known as Marius Albescu although perhaps better known to you as Demetrius Deo.”

“Demetrius?” I asked, stunned, “what’s he got to do with all this?”

“We’ve been investigating him since you told me he had made contact with you,” said Armand. “He is a Greek professional hacker and he’s currently working for Geng Hao trying to rig elections in various European countries that have not yet become fully involved with their Silk Road project. We knew someone was but not who, exactly. Thanks to you, we now know at least one of them and through him we’ll uncover the entire network.”

“He didn’t make contact with me,” I said. “I made contact with him.”

“Which just shows you how subtle and manipulative he is,” said Armand. “He rigged a security cam feed to look like a fake, knowing that you wouldn’t fall for it and would look into it. That’s how you found him, wasn’t it.”

“Well, yes,” I said. “It was a feed of a girl being killed in my complex. His name was in the signature.”

“He's a very clever man,” said Armand. “He knew you'd be curious and would track him down and since you'd found him rather than him finding you, you'd be more inclined to believe what he said. After all, if he had just turned up on your doorstep you probably wouldn't believe a thing he told you and wouldn't have given him any information. As it is, you passed on rather a lot of information to him.”

“How do you know what I told him?” I asked.

“We bugged your phone,” he admitted, rather shamefaced.

“But I turned it off and had it sitting on an air conditioning unit,” I said.

“The bug didn't run off your phone,” he told me. “It can't be turned off. It uses the microphone of your phone but has its own comms link and power source.”

“Oh,” I said. I didn't know what else to say, even though I felt both outraged and foolish. Outraged for having been duped and used and foolish for letting it happen. Maybe I really was as naïve as he thought I was.

“So is it all over now?” I asked. “Or do I still have to do that promo and spy on people?”

“Oh, forget the promo,” he said. “That never was a real thing. After all, why would anyone want you to do a political promo? It's not your field.”

“Well, I guess.” I'd thought the same but it's never nice to be told to your face that you're incompetent.

“Anyway, you've been paid for it, twice in fact if you include what I paid you,” he added, “and no one will ever ask for the money back.”

This was a good point.

“So you'll let me have that in writing?” I asked.

“Of course not,” he said with a snort. “But there is just one more thing I’d like you to do.”

“You don’t say,” I said drily. “Who do you want me to spy on this time?”

“No one,” he said. “I’d just like you to keep your appointment with Demetrius Deo tomorrow. The conversation will be picked up by your phone so you don’t need to do anything, just listen to him.”

“Why on earth should I?” I said. “You’ve got your man. Why not just arrest him and interrogate him?”

“We will,” said Armand, “although we’d like to identify more of his network first. As to why, well, let’s just say that the information he gives you freely tomorrow may actually be more useful than what we manage to extract from him later.”

“Useful to who?” I asked.

“I know you’re not much of a patriot,” he said, “but the survival of Australia depends on it.”

Well, since he put it that way I couldn’t really refuse, could I.

“But that’s it,” I said. “No more after that.”

“No, that’ll be the end of it,” he said. “We’ll follow up anything he says ourselves.”

“Great,” I said, “well, goodbye.”

“Before you go,” said Armand, “I have one more question.”

“OK, what is it?” I said. I was feeling tired and confused and disheartened.

“Where were you yesterday evening? After you left Demetrius Deo at the cafe?”

“I had dinner with a friend,” I said.

“Oh please god Aarav isn't involved with any of this,” I pleaded in my head.

“Can I ask your friend's name?”

“Aarav,” I said. “I don't know his surname but he's one of the guards at the complex. Hey, you're following me, how come you don't already know where I was?”

“Ahh,” said Armand. “Umm, the battery on the drone was dying so we had to swap it with another and you left the cafe at just that time and we lost contact with you.”

“Oh great,” I said sarcastically. “So much for your protection then.”

He had the grace to look embarrassed.

“So is Aarav one of these things coming out of the woodwork?” I asked. I needed to know.

“Just a moment,” said Armand and turned to do things to another screen.

“No,” he said a few moments later. “He's a genuine security officer with AllSecurity. He was thoroughly security checked before he was offered the position ...”

“That's good,” I said, sarcastically. “Nice to know I have a friend I can trust.”

“... although he did have a rather dubious connection when he was at university,” continued Armand. “An activist, although there seems to have been no contact since they left university.”

“You're saying Aarav was an activist?” I said, alarmed. “What sort of activist?”

“No, no, I'm saying he was friendly with an activist. There's no record

of him being an activist himself. I daresay it's possible he didn't even know his friend was an activist. These things do happen.”

“I'm going now,” I said. “You're giving me a headache. Goodbye,” and I broke the connection.

I leaned back and rubbed my eyes and forehead. He really had been giving me a headache and my head was spinning as well.

“Jesus,” I said.

“Do you need a painkiller?” asked Claude.

“I don't think so,” I said. “I'm going to go and have a lie down. This is all too much for me.”

“Your knee bandage is scheduled to be removed in one hour and seventeen minutes,” said Claude. “Shall I wake you or delay the procedure?”

“Do it when I wake up,” I said. “It isn't time critical, I'm sure.”

I tried to sleep but of course what Armand had said wouldn't stop circulating in my head. I lay there for ages then decided to get a mild sedative off Claude.

“Claude,” I said, calling him over.

“Yes, Trina,” he said, appearing beside my bed.

There was something bugging me though.

“Why would Demetrius fake a security feed to get me to contact him?” I said. “If Armand put in the order for the Romanian promo how would Geng Hao ever know about it? Why would Demetrius bother? It doesn't make sense.”

“I am unable to answer that question,” said Claude.

“Oh, never mind,” I said.

I lay there continuing to think about it. I could accept, I suppose, that Demetrius was a hacker working for Geng Hao. I could even accept, at a pinch, that he'd subtly manipulated me into contacting him. But why would he want me to contact him? Why would he care if someone puts in a fake order for me to do a promo?

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that either Armand hadn't placed the order for the promo – in which case why would he say he had? – or Armand had placed the order for Geng Hao which would mean he was actually working for Geng Hao, not the ACSB, after all.

“Oh god,” I thought. “What if it's Demetrius that works for the ACSB and Armand who works for Geng Hao and not the other way round, after all. Doesn't that fit what facts I know better? Oh god, what the hell is going on?”

“Incoming from Damien,” said Claude, interrupting my confusion.

“Put him on screen,” I said. “Hey Damien, how are you?”

“I'm fine, Trine. More importantly, how are you? Did you get plenty of rest last night?”

“Yes, thanks,” I said. “A quiet night worked wonders.”

“Great,” he said, smiling. “So you didn't get up to anything, then?”

“No,” I said. “Just had some dinner and went to bed.”

That wasn't technically a lie.

“Well, you're looking a lot better,” he said.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you how your new job is going,” I said.

I had to be a little careful here since I'd heard about Aus-Bam having been in business in Coastal for a while from Gareth when I was round at Aarav's.

"It's great," he said. "I think things are really going to happen."

"I've forgotten," I said, "so much has happened in the last few days. You're setting up bamboo plantations for Aus-Bam, aren't you? Not just taking some over?"

"No, hon, it's all new. It's a tremendous opportunity for me, you know. Hey, I had an idea, maybe you could think about it and we'll talk about it maybe next weekend?"

"Oh yes?" I said. "What idea's that?"

"I was thinking, maybe, if you wanted to, we could maybe think about making our marriage exclusive, you know."

"Flood, where did that come from?" I wondered.

"Is that what you want?" I asked. "Well, yes, we could talk about it, I suppose."

I really didn't want to make it exclusive and I was astonished that Damien would. He really wasn't the type.

"Great, hon," he beamed. "We can talk about it at the weekend then, maybe."

"Sure," I said, "next weekend, maybe."

"Oh, that reminds me," he said. "That security guard, you remember, the one who found you after your attack and brought you home? What was his name?"

"Aarav," I said.

Why was Damien asking about Aarav?

"Yeah, that's him. I just wanted to thank him for helping you," he said. "Have you seen him since?"

Chapter Twenty

I would probably have accepted Damien was calling me out of concern for my welfare if it hadn't been for Armand's curiosity about Aarav barely an hour before. I suppose it was possible that Damien was, well, probably not jealous, perhaps intrigued by my having been out with another man but he had never been in the past. I suppose he might even have pushed it further than a casual enquiry because I had more or less said that I'd been home but how would he know I hadn't been home? And, since it was very unlikely that a chance meeting with Aarav's neighbour would have led to Aarav lying about where Gareth worked, why was Damien lying about that too?

"Incoming from Aarav," said Claude.

I took the call and just stared at him wordlessly.

"Hi, Trina," said Aarav, smiling.

Why were Armand and Damien so interested in him?

"Trina? Hello? It's me, Aarav," said Aarav, leaning forward and starting to look worried. "You remember me?"

I came out of my reverie.

"Oh, hi, Aarav, yes, I remember you. Didn't we go to the same primary school together?"

I tried to make a little joke out of it to hide my embarrassment.

"No, I don't think we went to the same primary school," said Aarav, seriously. "You had dinner with me at my house, last night, remember?"

"Sorry, I was only teasing you," I said brightly. "How could I forget someone who got me Cake Palace Portuguese Tarts? I've eaten them all, by the way, so you can't have them back!"

He looked nonplussed.

“I do not want them back,” he said. “They were for you, a gift.”

Mental note: Aarav does not have a strong sense of humour.

Mind you, he was probably, hopefully, calling about a second date which probably meant he was focused and not in the right head space for humour. Maybe he has a better sense of humour when he's relaxed.

“Oh dear,” I said, “You're taking me too seriously. Let's start again. Hello, Aarav, nice to see you again!”

He smiled, which was encouraging.

“You said to call you today,” he said.

I was sorely tempted to ask him what about but decided that would be too cruel.

“Yes,” I said. “Hey, I'm going to a concert tomorrow evening with a girl friend. Do you want to come too?”

“I work every evening, except Saturday,” he said, “so alas, I cannot. I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me again next Saturday?”

“I'd love to,” I said, “although I really do have to see my husband next weekend.”

Oh yeah, and what was all that about making our marriage exclusive? Fre-aky!

His face fell.

“What hours do you work? Maybe we could get together after work?” I asked.

“Six pm until midnight,” he said.

“Oh, that's a bit late,” I said, unless one of us was staying the night but it seemed a little too soon to be suggesting that. “How about a

lunch?”

We agreed to meet up for lunch in a cafe in the centre of town on Tuesday, a better cafe than Demetrius’.

“So what did you do after you brought me home last night?” I asked. “Since you probably weren’t tired.”

“I surfed the net,” he said. “I do a lot of that when I’m not working. I like to keep up to date with physics and AI, there are so many advances happening at the moment.”

Well, I suppose it was too much to hope he’d spent the night thinking about me, or that he’d admit it if he had.

“Hey, you’re a computer expert, aren’t you,” I said. There was an idea forming in my mind.

“I don’t know if I am an expert,” he said, “but it is certainly a field I am most interested in.”

“I don’t suppose you could get into a house system and have a look around?” I asked.

“It depends on the system,” he said. “Some are more secure than others.”

“It’s just that Damien, my husband, seems to be lying to me,” I said. “He told me he had just started working for Aus-Bam to set up the coastal bamboo plantations but you told me yesterday that Gareth has been working for them for years.”

“That’s right, he has,” said Aarav. “Do you, umm, want me to find out who he works for?”

“Would that be OK?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t do it for just anybody,” he said, frowning. Then his face cleared. “But he needs AllSecurity clearance, doesn’t he. So this could actually be a legitimate routine review.”

We talked about it a little and I gave him what few details of Damien's system I knew. I did have some qualms about invading Damien's privacy but there was something funny going on and I was fairly certain he wouldn't tell me what it was.

Aarav called me in the middle of the following morning.

"Hello, Trina," he said. "I hope I am not interrupting you?"

"No, you're good," I said. "I was about to start some work on a promo but it can wait. How was work last night? No problems I hope?"

"Oh no," he said, "there were no problems at work. But, umm, I have found something rather strange."

"Ohh, tell me," I said. I wondered if it was about Damien or if it was just a bit of juicy gossip about one of my neighbours.

"I accessed Damien's house system, last night, while I was at work," he said, "through AllSecurity's system so it looked perfectly normal and I left a little something that would help me access it later from my home that would mask me. He has an unusually secure system which is suspicious. It's like he has something he wants to keep hidden."

"I can't imagine what," I said. "As far as I know he's just a conventional middle level executive."

"Hmm, perhaps," said Aarav. "Anyway, I managed to get in although I had to use some of the biometrics he has on file with AllSecurity and had a look through his files. What is strange is that, although you told me he does work from home some of the time he has absolutely no work files on his system. I couldn't find anything that gave me any indication of who he might be working for."

"How strange," I said. "Surely he must have memos or analysis files or something."

"You would expect so," said Aarav. "I even checked his banking records and although there are regular credits their descriptors are bland and anonymous. I could track them back if you want but that

would be quite time consuming.”

“No, it's not worth it,” I said. “I'm idly curious more than anything. I doubt Damien is up to anything particularly nasty, he's not the type. Thank you for all your effort though. Have you had any sleep yet?”

“No, not yet,” said Aarav. “Umm, I have to say that I got intrigued. He does have a number of files that are heavily encrypted which I haven't been able to decrypt yet and this is what bothers me.”

“That you can't decrypt some files?” I asked

“No, no,” he said. “That, I expect. Everyone has sensitive records that they keep encrypted. It's just that, how can I put this, he had highly encrypted files and he had innocuous, uninformative files, but he had nothing in between. Most people have medium level encryption files for personal and day to day work information but that middle level is missing. Everything he has which isn't extremely trivial is highly encrypted. It is very strange.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, we can't condemn him for using a higher level of encryption than we would expect.”

“No, this is true,” said Aarav. “So I scanned for deleted files.”

I knew that when you deleted files they didn't actually get deleted. This was partly so that you could undelete them later if you found you'd deleted them in error and partly because of the way computers worked. To obliterate a file you needed to write another file on top of it and, since huge numbers of temporary files were created and deleted all the time, it was more efficient to leave a deleted file to be overwritten by normal processing than to make a point of overwriting it.

“Ohhh,” I said. “I'm guessing you found something interesting in his trash then.”

“Yes,” he said. “It seems that Damien routinely shreds his deleted files.”

If you were security conscious, you could run a 'file shredder' which basically wrote a file of random numbers on top of a deleted file, thus obliterating it, rather than leave it to chance. The better shredders wrote multiple files on top of the deleted file to make absolutely certain. They weren't commonly used since they were time consuming and took up system resources.

“But if they were shredded you wouldn't be able to read them,” I said.

“The problem with shredders,” said Damien, “especially when someone shreds everything, is that they sometimes miss one by accident, since it's so routine. If you only shred the occasional file you take more care. Umm, it's about you.”

“What?” I said, taken aback. “Damien has an unshredded deleted file about me? What does it say?”

“I'm sending it to you,” said Aarav.

I opened it. It looked to be part of a report and the single page in the file was headed 'Project BoxScape: Appendix C ~ Initial Target: Primary’.

Beneath was a brief but fairly detailed biography of me. Name, date of birth, address, occupation, major clients and so on. More worryingly there was a personality profile that was summarised with 'subject clearly has medium level paranoia although compensates with outdoor experiences’.

What???

I stared at it. It was definitely me and not some other Trinity Moss. Why did Damien have a document with my biography and personality analysis in it? Why was it Appendix C? What was in the rest of the report?

“Umm,” said Aarav, after watching me for a while, “did I do the right thing by showing that document to you?”

“Yes,” I said, “thank you.”

Actually, I think my life would have been easier not knowing about it. What was it about and what could or should I do? After all, I could hardly challenge Damien since that would mean I would have to explain how I had it. Which could, conceivably, get Aarav into trouble.

“I think I should try to find out more about Project BoxScape,” said Aarav. “It could be perfectly innocent. Perhaps it's just part of an online game Damien has been playing or a fantasy thing.”

“What sort of fantasy would have me as medium level paranoid?” I asked, a little sarcastically.

“I do not know,” he said, “but you are living in a secure complex so you must be, umm, a little paranoid.”

“So you think the reason I'm dating a security guard is because I'm paranoid?” I replied, angrily.

“I apologise,” said Aarav, looking very worried. “I did not mean it as a criticism.”

“Maybe I should have dinner with Gareth, then,” I said, “to prove I'm not paranoid.”

“I do not think you would like that,” said Aarav. “Ummm ...”

“What?” I said, tersely. Actually he was probably right, if being safety conscious means you are paranoid.

“Are we still lunching tomorrow?”

I curled my lip. “I suppose so,” I said, “since I'm too paranoid to eat alone.”

He looked a little relieved. It occurred to me that I used the word 'dating', which was probably not a good thing to have said. Still, he didn't seem to have picked up on it.

“I need to think about this,” I said. “Let me know the moment you find out anything else about this Project BoxScape. Bye.”

I ended the call without waiting for him to say goodbye, which was rude of me.

What the flood is Project BoxScape and why was I the initial and, presumably, primary target? Target of what? Did this have anything to do with Armand or Demetrius? Did the reference to 'outdoor experiences' have anything to do with the drone? Was it something to do with the Geng Hao promo? What the flood was Damien up to?

I had no idea.

I couldn't summon the concentration to get back to work so I sat there and fretted. Thoughts about the last few days went round and round in my mind but nothing made any sense. I couldn't even eat any lunch. I had a feeling that somehow everything was connected and that Damien was involved but for the life of me I couldn't see how. Definitely more information was needed and it looked like only Aarav could supply it, unless I had a confrontation with Damien and, realistically, I needed more information for that, too.

“Incoming message from Trinity Moss,” said Claude.

What??

I was sending myself a message?

“Check sender,” I said.

“Sender confirmed as Trinity Moss,” said Claude.

“Check for viruses and badware,” I said.

“Message clean,” said Claude.

“Hmmm, OK, display message,”

“You are late,” read the message, cryptically.

“I'm late?” I said, puzzled. “Late for what? Who sent this?”

“You did,” said Claude, “and you have nothing on your schedule.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

“3:07,” flashed up on the wall screen.

“Oh flood it,” I said, remembering. I was supposed to meet Demetrius at 3:00. “Get me a taxi.”

How do I reply to a message from myself? I could only think of one way.

“Reply message Trinity Moss,” I told Claude, “20 minutes, send.”

“Incoming message from Trinity Moss,” said Claude, fifteen seconds later.

It was probably my message to myself telling myself I'd be there in 20 minutes.

“Display message,” I said.

“OK,” said the message.

How the flood did Demetrius do that?

“How did you do that?” I asked, marching up to Demetrius' table beside the air conditioner 25 minutes later.

“Blind luck,” he said. “I don't know what most of the functions on this phone do. Your chai tea is probably cold by now.”

“Get me a fresh one, then,” I said.

He shrugged and told the lady behind the counter to reheat the cold one.

“So, did you enjoy watching the feeds of yourself?” he asked.

I tried not to say “What??” to myself yet again. It was fast becoming a

habit.

“You made me give you the login details for the drone feeds,” prompted Demetrius, obviously seeing the “What??” on my face.

Oh yes.

“No, not yet,” I said. “I, erm, wanted to ...”

I couldn't for the life of me think of a plausible reason for not watching them. The truth of it was though that Aarav and Portuguese Tarts had driven it out of my mind but I suspected Demetrius wouldn't understand.

Demetrius snorted. “Must have been that guy you spent Saturday night with,” he said.

I waited for him to ask who Aarav was but he didn't. Did that mean he didn't know or that he didn't care?

“So have you found out anything more about Armand?” I asked.

The lady behind the counter brought my reheated chai over and Demetrius waited until she'd gone back behind the counter before replying. Interestingly he hadn't made me turn off my phone or put it on the air conditioner unit. Did that mean he'd forgotten or that it wasn't an issue any more?

“Yes, I think so,” he said.

He pulled out his notepad and brought up one of the pictures I'd thought looked a little like Armand.

“By the way,” I said, “I talked to Armand again yesterday morning and he confirmed he was with the ACSB.”

“Good,” said Demetrius. “Now, based on what I've found ...”

“He also mentioned you, Demetrius,” I said, “or should I say Xander?”

“I prefer Marius,” said Demetrius. “Did he mention that one, too?”

“Yes,” I said. Why didn't it bother Demetrius that he'd been uncovered?

“Names are just labels,” he said. “None of them are my real name but then, what is a real name anyway?”

“Armand said you were a professional hacker,” I said. “And that you'd ordered the promo from me pretending to be Stefan at Geng Hao.”

Actually Armand hadn't told me that last bit, I just made it up to see how Demetrius would react.

“It might have been me,” he said. “I really don't remember.”

OK, now I was confused. Armand said that he had put in the order and Demetrius wasn't denying that he'd done it as well. Oh great. This situation reminded me of an old movie I'd once watched where two twins killed someone and got away with it because each of them claimed to have done the deed while the other twin was somewhere else with lots of witnesses. The police couldn't charge either of them since they couldn't prove which one had done the killing.

“Oh well,” I said, giving up. “Tell me about this man.” I pointed to the man in the picture.

“His real name is Berat Subasi,” said Demetrius. “He was born in 1958 in Erzurum which isn't far from the Armenian border.”

“1958?” I said. “You mean he's, ...” I had to work it out on my fingers. “Seventy six? No, he didn't look that old.”

“He had had some resculpting,” said Demetrius. “Basic facelift and hair transplants, that sort of thing.”

“Hmmm, OK,” I said. “Carry on.”

“He did well in High School and won a scholarship to Van Lake University where he graduated in Politics and Psychology, getting a

first class honours degree.”

“OK, so he's quite clever then,” I said, leaning back. “Do you have a degree?”

“I studied with the University of Life,” said Demetrius, “in the Department of Practical Reality. I'm not a pampered academic. No windows of opportunity where I come from, just trapdoors.”

“OK,” I said. “Continue.”

“In 1980 he joined MIT ...”

“What, that uni in America?” I asked.

“No, of course not,” said Demetrius. “America was the enemy, no way would he have gone to America. MIT is Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı, which is the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation, or was in those days. They were disbanded when the government collapsed after the Cyber Wars.”

“Why was America the enemy?” I asked.

“Turkey was on the edge of the old communist Iron Curtain,” said Demetrius. “The Americans never trusted the Turks and there were a number of bad policy decisions by both the Americans and the Turks in the 2010s. Importantly, the Turks expected the Americans to launch an attack on Turkey so they started to develop economic counter-measures. Berat Subasi seems to have become involved with that soon after he joined MIT, probably because of his political and psychological background and by 2023 he'd become head of the project. Anyway, and this is the interesting part, things got very tense between America and Turkey in 2023 when the Americans cut all diplomatic ties with Turkey and started massing strike forces in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq with the intimation that they would be unleashed on Turkey.”

“Wow,” I said. “So what did the Turks do?”

“The Turkish government sought the aid of the Russians and the

Chinese,” said Demetrius, “although nothing was ever formally agreed.”

“How come?” I asked. This was quite interesting.

“They ran out of time,” said Demetrius. “You see, as far as I can tell, Berat Subasi, on his own initiative, instigated the counter-measures his department had been developing.”

“Did they work?” I asked.

“Better than they expected,” said Demetrius, drily. “You see, Berat Subasi, or Armand Suleyman as you know him, started the Cyber Wars, all by himself.”

Chapter Twenty One

“I thought it was a group of South Korean businessmen,” I said. “They set up a company, umm, what was it? Oh, I don't remember. Anyway, it later became Geng Hao, and it's Geng Hao that's trying to take over the internet.”

“You mean Electrororks?” said Demetrius, looking puzzled.

“No, it was two words, both beginning with 'S',” I said.

“Well, that's not right. Geng Hao grew out of Electrororks, in Hong Kong, and Electrororks started back in the early 1990s.”

“So you're saying that Armand made it all up?” I asked.

“Well, he's hardly going to admit it was him, is he?” said Demetrius with a snort. “Anyway, it doesn't matter. The important thing is that MIT was disbanded after the Cyber Wars and Berat Subasi got snapped up by a Russian company, called Polnaya Yerunda. He's been with them ever since.”

“Well, this is all very interesting,” I said, “but what does it have to do with me? Why would this Berat whatever be trying to get me to spy on Geng Hao?”

“Ahh, you've hit the nail on the head,” said Demetrius. “I have no idea, although I would guess it's to do with his speciality which is psychological manipulation and the net is ideal for something like that. There's so much true and false information out there that it's almost impossible to check on anything.”

“Seriously,” I said, “why would a Turk working for the Russians use an Australian to trap a Chinese company?”

He shrugged.

“Why does anyone do anything?” he said.

“I'm going home,” I said. “I have no idea what's going on or what, if

anything, to do about it.”

I stood up and turned to go, my chai untouched, but Demetrius stopped me.

“I’m not sure why,” he said, “but I think your Armand’s next move will be to arrange a physical meeting with you.”

“What for?” I asked, looking down on him.

“Like I said, I’m not sure,” he replied, looking up at me seriously, “but I would think to try to increase his influence over you. Be careful. He isn’t as nice a man as he seems.”

“I’m not going to meet him,” I said. “I really don’t trust him at all, not the least little bit. In fact I think I’m going to get Claude to block him. Every time I talk to him he changes his story and it’s annoying me.”

“Well, even if you do block him,” said Demetrius, “he’ll find a way to meet you in person. Like I said, be careful.”

“I’m going,” I said, “goodbye.”

“Before you go, Trina,” said Demetrius, “put this number in your phone.”

“What for?” I asked.

“It’s an emergency contact number for me,” he said. “If and when Armand meets you and you need help, call me.”

I gave him a long, quizzical look but he seemed to be serious.

“OK,” I said after several long moments and put the number in my phone.

“It’s funny,” I said to myself in the taxi on the way home, “when I first met Armand I trusted him but it looks like I was wrong. He turned out to be a lying little flooder.”

I had just finished dinner when Claude told me Aarav was at the door.

“Let him in then,” I said. “Hello Aarav, come on in. What a nice surprise. Shouldn't you be at work? Are you coming to the concert after all?”

I had been about to go and get ready before going round to Misha's to have a chat before the concert started.

“I am at work,” he said. “Umm, can you come outside for a moment?”

I was intrigued, so I joined him outside and he pulled the door almost closed.

“I, umm, I brought something round to show you and you're not going to like it,” he said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It's a video,” he said, “of Damien.”

“Has he got a lover or something?” I asked, “because if he has that wouldn't bother me. How can I watch it outside?”

“Umm, I was monitoring his system, this afternoon,” said Aarav. “And I happened to be connected when he started a video conference. It looked like it was work related so I started recording it to try to find out who he worked for, as you requested.”

“OK,” I said, leaning against the wall of my unit. “Did you find out?”

“Yes,” he said. “It's a company called ANO23.”

“That's a strange name,” I said, looking puzzled.

“Yes,” said Aarav, “I haven't had time to do a thorough search but I couldn't find out anything about it in a quick search. Anyway, judging by the familiarity between Damien and the others it looks like he knows them quite well so he's probably been with them for quite a while.”

“Oh,” I said. I didn't know what else to say.

“Anyway,” continued Aarav, “I can find out more later and I should be able to get into their personnel records and find out more about Damien.”

“OK,” I said, “thank you. What is it you want to show me?”

“The recording of the video conference,” said Aarav. “Ummm, it looks like Damien is updating the others on the status of a project called Boxscape.”

I stared at him and he slowly held out a memory stick. I took it.

“Why did you bring it round,” I asked, “instead of just sending it to me?”

“I didn't trust your system,” he said. “Ummm, they seem to be monitoring you pretty closely and I didn't want them to know you've seen the video, which is why I didn't want to tell you in front of Claude.”

I carried on staring at him, my mind in a whirl of incoherence.

“OK,” I said slowly, after a few seconds.

I looked at the memory stick in my hand. It looked like a perfectly ordinary memory stick.

“I'm going to have to watch it inside though,” I said.

“Not here,” said Aarav. “Your system is being monitored.”

“Who by?” I asked, quite reasonably I thought.

“The people in the video,” he said. “Umm, you're going to a concert tonight. They know that and expect that so I suggest you watch it at your friend's house. That way nothing will seem out of the ordinary.”

“Are you serious?” I said, waving the stick from side to side while

looking at it in case it did something.

“Yes,” he said. “And you really need to watch the video. It's, umm, only about half an hour.”

“Will you come with me?” I asked. I didn't like the sound of this and I had a feeling I was going to need some friendly support. Misha, friend though she was, wasn't particularly good in a crisis.

“Yes,” he said. “I thought that might be the case so I've told AllSecurity I am meeting with you to review your security arrangements. In view of your recent attack they thought that was a good idea. When are you going?”

“Umm, a couple of minutes,” I said. “I just need to get ready.”

I went back inside and Claude, as usual, had my outfit ready and did my hair and makeup much the way I used to do it back when I was 19. It seemed an eternity ago and, despite the look, I had changed a lot in the last seventeen years. The last few minutes hadn't exactly helped to make me look young and carefree, either.

“OK,” I said, re-emerging from my bedroom. “Let's go.”

Misha lived seven houses away and it didn't take long to walk there. We didn't say anything on the way.

“Hey, Trina,” said Misha happily when we were let in. “Ohhh, who's this? I didn't know you were bringing anyone.”

“This is Aarav,” I said. “He's a friend and one of the guards here so you can trust him. Aarav, this is my friend, Misha.”

Aarav smiled politely and shook hands with Misha even though he probably knew exactly who she was since he guarded all of us at the complex.

“Come on in,” said Misha. “Leon, set up another seat for the concert.”

Leon was her holobot and her living room was already set up as the

inside of a concert hall with quite a number of other concertgoers already there.

“No,” I said, “Aarav's not staying for the concert. Hey, Misha, can I use your system to watch a video? Somewhere private?”

“Certainly,” she said. “Umm, Leon, clear the bedroom and get two chairs. I'll be at the concert. Ummm, it starts in about twenty minutes. Can Leon get you a drink or anything?”

“No, thanks,” I said.

“Right then,” she said, looking from me to Aarav and back again. “Umm, right, I'll leave you to it. Do you want Leon?”

“No,” I said. “Keep him with you. We'll use the manual controls.”

Misha told Leon to get me the handset and they disappeared into the concert hall.

“This had better be worth it,” I whispered to Aarav, “otherwise I'm going to feel an idiot in front of Misha.”

“Damien's not the last to arrive,” said Aarav as the video started. “The first two and a half minutes is just idle chat. I'll just fast forward ... ahh, here we are.”

The video was a grab of Damien's wall screen and showed a matrix of six windows. One of them was Damien himself and the other five were unknown strangers. On those occasions when I had been involved in video conferences, each person's name had been displayed at the bottom of their window but no names were visible here. The last of the windows had just flickered into life.

“Good, we are all here,” said the man in the top centre window.

“Sorry I'm late,” said the woman in the bottom left window. “My last meeting overran a few minutes.”

“Can we get on with this, please?” said the man in the bottom right

window. "I don't have all day."

"Over to you, Damien," said top centre.

"Right," said Damien. "Thank you. Now, we are moving into the final phase of Project Boxscape so I need to update you all, since things have not gone entirely to plan."

"I told you they wouldn't," said the woman in the centre bottom window. "There wasn't sufficient allowance for unknowns."

"And you were right," said Damien, smoothly. "But as you all know this was an experiment to test the principles, a learning experience. The more that doesn't go according to plan here the better. That way when we move to a reality situation we can be better prepared."

He paused to look at something to one side.

"Now, as you know, the objective was to force the development of trust in the Primary subject by way of misinformation from two sources. One intended to gain her trust and the other to lose her trust. Three unplanned events occurred during the seven days. The first, in fact, occurred shortly before the experiment officially began."

"You mean the teenagers?" asked bottom right.

"Yes," said Damien. "When Primary went for her usual evening walk with her holodog she encountered two males and a female. Of itself it was of no consequence but, and this is an important but, when Primary was exposed to the news feed of a killing in her complex, that chance encounter made her more motivated to locate Demetrius Deo. You will find a full analysis of this in Appendix A of the interim report that you were sent before this meeting."

There was a flurry of activity as the other five presumably located Appendix A.

"Yes, that seems to be a valid conclusion," said the woman in the upper right window. It was the first time she'd said anything.

“I do have a couple of questions,” said top centre.

“Perhaps if we could leave questions until the end?” said Damien.

There seemed to be general agreement to that.

“The second unplanned event was the data mapping error in the taxi and the subsequent attack on Primary as she tried to make her way home. This is detailed in Appendix B. I was able to speak personally with Primary the next morning and clarify that she believed the cause to be a fault with the taxi rather than a deliberate hacking. We were very fortunate because if she had believed that the taxi had been hacked we would have needed to develop an impromptu strategy to associate the hacking with Armand, the non-trusted participant. As it was, we still needed to reinforce the accidental nature of the incident although, in retrospect, we might well have been able to use it to reinforce trust in Demetrius. This is an area that needs more consideration since, inevitably, the preparation of contingency plans for every possible unexpected event will be prohibitive.”

“Indeed,” said bottom left. “The project must stay within budget although we should give consideration to increasing the budget for a reality situation. Could we schedule a budget planning meeting for that?”

“I’m on to it,” said top centre. “Please continue, Damien.”

“The third event,” said Damien, “was completely unexpected. As you will know from the personality profile of Primary, the two protagonists, Armand and Demetrius, should have been sufficient to meet her social needs during the experimental period, Primary not being an overtly social person. However, and this does call into question the quality of our profiling, Primary has, in fact, introduced a third new person into her life. We anticipated that Primary would not be willing to accept physical meetings with two individuals concurrently so all contact between Primary and Armand was via the net. This aspect needs serious consideration before moving to a reality scenario.”

“Is there any significance to this third person being a security

operative?” asked top right.

“It was a major cause for concern,” admitted Damien. “We were suspicious when Primary deviated from her normal pattern by visiting this third person at his home and I was alerted to it by Armand. Worryingly, although she readily told Armand the name of this person, when I called her shortly after Armand reported him to me, she hid his existence.”

“Do you have any explanation for this behaviour?” asked bottom left.

“There are a number of possible explanations,” said Damien. “It seems, from my preliminary investigation, that this security operative is solely a romantic liaison and his security credentials do not appear to be a factor. Indeed, he was the operative who first attended Primary after her attack so that may be a causal factor. Regardless, it is not unreasonable for us to assume that her hiding his existence from me was because I am her husband. I tested this by proposing we make our marriage exclusive and she was reluctant to consider it which would tend to confirm the romantic nature of the relationship. This is all detailed in Appendices C, D and E.”

There was a lengthy pause while they all considered Appendices C, D and E.

“Now to the purpose of this meeting,” said Damien. “As you know, the objective was to engender trust of Demetrius and distrust of Armand. We now have to decide whether we can go to the final phase and test the extent to which we have been successful. Subject to your unanimous approval, we will engineer a situation in which Primary encounters both Armand and Demetrius in a physical situation and is forced to kill one or other of them. The desired outcome being, of course, that she kills Armand, the one she should not be trusting.”

“I’m assuming that we’re not talking of an actual killing at this stage?” said bottom left.

“Indeed not,” said Damien. “Both Armand and Demetrius are valued members of my department. The killing will be staged although, of course, Primary will believe it to be genuine.”

There was ten minutes or so of animated discussion before the five others voted, unanimously, for me to kill someone. I had to watch the entire video twice more before I could start to come to terms with it. Aarav sat silently beside me throughout.

“So it's all been lies?” I finally said. “Both of them lying to me about everything?”

“I don't know,” said Aarav, “as I don't know what you've been told. Actually I don't really know anything about any of this.”

“So who sent in the order for the Geng Hao promo?” I said.

“Sorry,” said Aarav. “I've no idea.”

“They both said they did,” I said. “Maybe it was actually Damien?”

Damien!

“That flooding bastard!” I said slowly. “Damien's behind all of this? Damien's been experimenting on me? Me? His own wife? That flooding, ...”

I didn't know enough nasty epithets to express myself adequately but there was an anger building inside me.

“Come on,” I said abruptly, “I'm going home. I need to get out of here.”

“The concert's nearly finished,” said Misha when we came out of her bedroom.

“We're going,” I said angrily. “I'm sorry but, ..., I have to go, talk to you another time, I'm sorry,” and fumed while Leon opened the front door. Aarav smiled apologetically at Misha.

“Delighted to have met you,” he said politely before chasing after me.

I stormed in through my own front door and knocked Claude's bot unit over. Aarav picked him up.

“Get that bastard on the screen,” I shouted at Claude, “now!”

“Which bastard?” asked Claude, smiling that insufferable smile of his.

“That Damien bastard,” I shouted.

Aarav stayed by the door.

“Trine,” he said, looking surprised and delighted, “what a pleasant, ..., what's wrong? You seem a trifle upset.”

“You ... bastard,” I shouted at him. If he had been in the room I would have hit him with something. “How could you?”

He was looking both worried and puzzled, then he caught sight of Aarav in the background.

“Who is that?” he said. I didn't answer as I'd started to cry.

“Who are you?” he asked Aarav.

“I'm the security operative,” said Aarav.

“Has Trine been attacked again?” asked Damien.

“I rather think she has,” said Aarav.

“Who by?” demanded Damien. “What happened?”

Aarav glanced over at me but I wasn't paying a lot of attention. I was feeling very betrayed and very vulnerable.

“Project Boxescape,” said Aarav.

Damien froze then let out his breath in a long hissing whistle.

“Aarav?” he said. Aarav nodded.

“Flood,” he said, then fell silent, deep in thought.

“What do you know?” asked Damien after a while.

“We watched your video conference today,” said Aarav.

“Ahh,” said Damien. “Then you more or less know everything. Damn.”

“Umm, I do have one question, if I may,” asked Aarav.

“Yes?”

“Why?” asked Aarav. “What was the primary objective?”

I flinched at the use of my codename.

Damien gazed at him for several moments.

“There's no patriotism any more,” he said. “Oh well.”

He gestured in my direction.

“I thought she might be romantically involved with you,” he said. “If she is, she's all yours. I have no further use for her,” and he closed the call.

Aarav stared at the blank screen for a while then looked at me.

“You were really married to that ... person?” he asked.

I nodded, unable to take it all in.

“Can we have some tea, Claude?” asked Aarav.

“What did he mean, there's no patriotism anymore?” I asked, a couple of hours and several cups of tea later.

“I'm not sure,” said Aarav, “but I think he meant that there is no equivalent to the strength of patriotism now that most countries and states are moribund. For businesses on the net there is brand loyalty but that is weak. Since the objective was for you to be manipulated into trusting one person and killing the other, I suspect they were

trying to develop ways of generating a loyalty that is as strong as patriotism, although for what purpose I have no idea. Maybe they want to build a global network of people willing to kill for some reason. The Cyber Wars have a lot to answer for.”

“Do you know who started the Cyber Wars?” I asked. I didn't know who to believe anymore.

“Actually I do,” he said. “I was in my final year as an undergraduate when they happened. One of my professors couldn't sleep that night and he was checking his investments when it all started.”

“Didn't it start in the afternoon?” I asked.

“It was afternoon in London,” said Aarav. “3pm GMT, which was 1am in Sydney on the Saturday morning. Professor Milav didn't know it was the start of the Cyber Wars, of course. He just thought it was an ordinary viral attack but he started tracking it to use as a demonstration in class on Monday. Still, everything started to collapse after that which is why there were no official enquiries and he never had to give evidence.”

“So who did start it then? Was it Geng Hao or some South Korean businessmen?”

“Hmm? Oh no, it was an American Bank. Lakeman, Schweiz of Alabama. They were about to be investigated for some sort of stock market fraud and one of their brokers thought he was a computer guru and sent out a virus to confuse the stock markets they traded on to hide what they'd been doing. Of course he wasn't anywhere near as good as he thought he was and the systems set up to block sophisticated viral attacks simply didn't recognise anything so simple and crude as his so it got through. Then, and no one knows why, the Americans blamed the Chinese and retaliated. Ironic really. Do you feel ready to eat anything yet?”

I nodded and Claude brought out some Portuguese Tarts. I'd got him to find a recipe when Aarav's special Portuguese Tarts ran out. Aarav and I were sitting side by side on my couch and Claude positioned himself between us, at a respectful distance.

“Are these soy based?” asked Aarav after tasting one.

“Yes,” I said. “Everything in here is soy based.”

He put the half eaten tart back on Claude's tray.

“Oh Aarav,” I said sadly, leaning against him. “I just don't know what's real anymore and what isn't.”

“We're real,” he said, twisting to look at me intently. “You and I. All that out there is just junk, like Damien and these tarts, none of it matters. What matters is what's in here,” and he tapped his chest.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said quietly, toying with my reconstituted soy Portuguese Tart. “Hey, would you teach me to cook, you know, real food?”

“I'd love to,” he said. “Although, ...” and he stopped.

“Although what?” I asked.

He sighed. “I don't know, it's just, well, it's just that everything on the net is just an illusion now. Even the news. They don't report what's happening in the world, they just send out manipulative advertisements pretending to be news, designed around people's individual personalities so they're more effective.”

“I know,” I said sadly. “I'm one of the people who make those promos. I guess nothing in my life is real, is it.”

Aarav shrugged, as best he could with me leaning against his chest.

“You know,” I said, sitting up and looking round my living room. “I am so sick of all this. My life, my marriage, my work, even my house, it's all so false and ... and I'm just sick and tired of it all.”

I leaned forward and turned off Claude's main power switch. His smiling hologram flickered and died.

“Let's make everything real again, huh.”