

Vince's Desire

A novel by

Andrew Starling

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Chapter 1

The screen showed a customs officer interviewed in front of wooden crates, then switched to an open-mouthed sex doll, a Furby toy, a scrolled-down page of regulations, another sex doll, Sony's robotic dog, and finally a computer.

With the sound turned off, and viewed from the awkward perspective of the floor, it was difficult to tell what the news story was about, but if Graham had got it right, somebody was trying to import a batch of sex dolls with an elementary communication system, with a Furby-like electronic brain, dolls that did aural as well as oral. And they'd tried to import them as electronic equipment, when legally they were sex toys, or maybe the other way round.

"Would you ever want to have sex with a robot?" asked Graham. "I mean, when Sony or whoever gives up building miniature dogs and gets around to making humans with genitals, would you ever want to sleep with one?"

"Eh?"

He felt Faith's head turn on his arm and knew her eyes had opened, though he wasn't looking at them.

"You have an amazing line in pillow-talk," she said. "You're supposed to say stuff like 'I love you', not ask me if I want to join a robot orgy."

As they lay together, flush and satisfied in the valley of white carpet between the sofa and TV, images from the screen played over them like nightclub lights. A Channel 4 newsreader looked down at his notes on the desk, out of picture, so he appeared to be staring below the screen at Faith's bare breasts and her mass of hair like a dark fur coat lying by her side. His face displayed earnestness, but his mouth was silenced by the mute and opened and closed stupidly in go ldfish gulps, as if he couldn't find the words to describe the arch of her back, the beautiful curve of her hips.

"An amazing line in cushion-talk," corrected Graham, dryly. "All the pillows are upstairs. The padded thing under my head is a cushion."

Faith's head rubbed up and down his arm. "I'm way ahead of you," she said, "I've thought about this before. It depends on how lifelike they are. If they're perfectly lifelike, attractive and sensitive, great lovers, then the answer would be yes, I'd be happy to sleep with one. How about you?"

"I can't see me trading you in for something with batteries."

Faith slapped his bare belly. "If only you could hear yourself."

"I can."

"But you haven't given me an answer."

"My answer's no," he said. "I couldn't sleep with one. I'd never be able to see them as human."

In the unused fireplace beyond Graham's head stood a bowl of fern-fronds, spray-painted every colour but green, since that would have looked weird, but now appearing as many shades of blue with the curtains closed and no light from anything but the TV. Beyond his feet in this small room, against the wall and close to the door, was Faith's upright piano, the piano she was slowly unlearning.

Graham reached for his trousers without disturbing Faith, and checked the time on his mobile. Five to nine. At nine he should be out on the street, waiting, but he could be out there in two minutes.

"So, if somebody with a real partner sleeps with one of these hypothetical robots," he asked, "is that infidelity?"

Faith gathered herself to speak, then hesitated. "The answer has to be the same, doesn't it? It depends on how lifelike they are. If they've got feelings, emotions, the whole relationship thing, then yes, it's infidelity."

"You're kind of upping their status, giving them the same value as real people."

"Or applying the same values. Yes, I am." Faith sounded indignant, like her point was obvious. She shifted, bringing her arm over Graham's chest, her leg over his, brushing his hair away from his ear, where she talked quietly. "But only if they can talk and think, otherwise they'd just be a glorified dildo."

"No, I don't think that works. Try this - if a robot has a human partner, but slips off to a hotel and sleeps with another robot, is that infidelity?"

Faith's body jerked against him, then settled. "Absolutely. This is assuming you can't tell they're robots, that they have emotions, are capable of love, not just sex-machines. If you can't tell, how are you going to treat them any different? You wouldn't even know if they'd slept with a robot or a person."

"I just don't think that'll happen. They may look great and be wonderful in bed, but you'll always know they're not real."

"Maybe they're already out there," she said. "You see them on the street, even fancy them, but you just can't tell."

They'd been like this from day one, recalled Graham, so secure in their relationship that they could talk about sex, about sex with other people, knowing it would never happen. Sex with robots wasn't a very romantic subject, as Faith had pointed out, but she liked to know what he was thinking about after they made love, and if he didn't say then she might make a point of asking.

Faith adjusted her long skirt, leaving her knickers close to the piano pedals but bringing the skirt material over her legs and pelvis. "I feel like he's perving at my bits," she said, looking up at the screen. "Anyway," she added, settling back on Graham's arm. "Rubber dolls are history. The first sex robots will be males."

"No way. The first robots will be built by geeks, by male geeks, and they'll build females."

"No, it's males who're produced purely for sex. You've got the male angler fish, that tiny little male who bites the female and becomes part of her body, shares her blood,

loses his eyesight, just hangs in there and produces sperm. Then you've got bees and ants with their pathetic drones, and female black widow spiders and praying mantises saying 'thanks for the shag, now how about dinner?'"

She lay still for a while. Graham played with her thick hair.

"But they're all built for procreation, not recreation," he said.

She kissed him on the cheek. "You're so adorable, even if you do sometimes talk nonsense."

Her skin was hot against his, a comforting heat.

"I owned a vibrator once," she said. "I think I told you. When I was a student. Top of the range. I can't remember the price, but I do remember it was a week's rent. And I gave it a name."

"A man's name?"

"No, no gender. I called it Desire. A tacky name, looking back, but I was younger and didn't know better." Her tone sharpened, became more rational. "This is very nice, sweetheart, and I don't really want you to go, but aren't you going to be late?"

Graham sighed.

"What time are you being picked up?" she asked.

"Nine."

Faith sat upright, her wavy chestnut cascade swinging around to settle on her back. She picked up the TV remote and a small clock appeared in a corner of the screen. "You'd better get dressed, you've only got two minutes."

She looked for her bra and found it within reach on the sofa. Graham turned his baggy white shirt the right way out and fed his legs into his chinos. The TV showed commercial logging of a rainforest.

Faith still held the remote, and for a while Graham thought she might switch the sound back on. Instead, she cocked her head to one side. "That's good."

"What is? People cutting down trees?"

Faith was a fanatical tree-lover.

"No, this is still the news, and they're talking about run-of-the-mill destructive behaviour, so they must have run out of really bad things that happened in the world."

She climbed into her cotton top, speaking through the material as it covered her face. "You remember two days ago, they could barely fit all the bad news in. All those train and plane crashes."

Her face appeared through the neckline, for a moment it was sad, as she remembered her own personal bad news of that day. Then she appeared to put it to one side. "All those news editors cursing their luck. Not enough time to squeeze all the disasters in. And here we are two days later watching sex dolls with the brain of a cricket and regular pillage of the planet, and in the papers it'll be stories about pigs with faces like well-known actors and pictures of the Virgin Mary found inside potatoes, because clearly nothing much has happened in the world. "

Graham tied the laces of his shoes and stood up, smiling. He was the one who usually found news programmes unbearable. Faith generally tolerated them with the same forbearance as the rest of the planet, perhaps a little more, as she worked in TV herself, behind the scenes.

Now fully dressed, she put an elbow on the cushion that had been behind his head and regarded him. "Where's the job?" she asked.

Whichever way she stood or sat or lay, on whatever item of furniture, it never failed to look elegant, at least in Graham's eyes.

"Thames Valley. Should only take a few hours."

He hoped she didn't ask anything more, because he wasn't prepared to lie to her. This wasn't a job in the regular sense, it was a favour to Vince and he wouldn't get paid for it. Sometimes he did genuine call-outs in the evenings and nights, and that's what she'd assumed he was doing now, and he hadn't bothered to correct her. Between the seat of the

sofa and an armrest was a plastic pouch of CD-ROMs. He picked it up and bent down to kiss Faith on the lips, closed mouth, a kiss goodbye.

"Good luck," she said, which wasn't something she normally said when he went to work.

Graham stood on the threshold of his house, at the top of the four broad steps that led down to street level, looking out on to the ancient street and the church opposite, under a London sky turning deep blue between clouds, now the early summer sun had gone.

Elegant Georgian townhouses faced each other across the tarmac, separated from the pavement by basement patios and uneven black iron railings. All the ground floors were in off-white stucco, except for a few rebels in light pastels, and one in tan. Above the stucco, plain brick rose up to create straight facades that hid shallow-sloped roofs. And dotted along the kerbs, setting off this man-made glory, were rowans and ornamental cherries and small London planes in full leaf.

The church opposite took up an entire block, from one sidestreet to the next, rising directly out of the York stone pavement where a country church might rise out of grass. Elaborate flying buttresses supported a thin steeple, and along the side facing Graham were many slim tall windows, each topped off by a small circular one the size of a porthole. Once, that church had been filled with worshippers of God, but science and progress had reduced their number to the level where they could no longer afford the upkeep. In line with the times it had been bought by developers, who'd added an internal floor and divided it into flats. Now it was home to a score of yuppies - worshippers of mammon.

Graham never tired of the beauty of this view from his doorstep, the well-kept houses of his lawyer and banker neighbours, the trees, and the magnificent city church.

The church was the landmark where he'd arranged to be picked up by the strangers in an unknown car. He crossed over and stood in its shadow, feeling perfectly relaxed, looking forward to the adventure.

He might still smell of sex, but there was nothing unusual about that, he usually did. His own body gave off no odour of any kind, whether he washed or not, and they made love so often that if anybody thought he had his own characteristic smell it would probably be the sweet smell of Faith rather than his own body.

Forty minutes ago he'd sorted through his CD-ROMs and arrived downstairs, not thinking of sex but not thinking of anything else, apart from maybe a few lines of computer code, and their eyes had met, a single glance, his recognition, her return signal acknowledging his, a signal back to say yes I have plenty of time, all in a brief meeting of eyes, a long conversation compressed by history, familiarity and affection into milliseconds. Then she'd stuck her tongue inside his mouth five minutes into the evening news. That was the way with Faith. Sex could cure many ills, she was right about that, and even if it failed there was plenty of fun and distraction to be had in the trying.

Maybe she was right about the first sex robots being male. He didn't know much about fish and spiders but he shared Faith's passion for bees. The trees and the bees - that was her euphemism for sex. The birds and the bees? She'd never worked out where the birds fitted in. Sure, birds ate berries and transferred seeds, but that was plain midwifery. It was the bees who were the true handmaidens of sex, the real tree-pimps, brazenly carrying pollen from one to another.

It was females who did all that carrying and collecting. Male bees existed purely for sex. They came from unfertilised eggs with half the chromosomes of a female - half-bees - drones. They lived only to mate with the queen, and since this was their sole purpose in life they had enormous genitalia, way out of proportion to their size. Each carried ten million identical sperm, and when they ejaculated their penis detached,

plugging the sperm inside the queen and incidentally killing the drone. They lived their lives in pursuit of a single, fatal orgasm.

Every few seconds a car drove by the church. Graham watched each one for signs of stopping. He had no idea what kind of car he was waiting for, or who would be inside.

Faith's passion for bees spilled over into a liking for ants, which he also shared. If bees were the sex-fiends of the insect world, then ants were its masterminds. They herded aphids for honeydew, farmed mushrooms grown on minced leaves, built rafts and lived in highly-organised societies. When the human race inevitably destroyed itself through nuclear warfare, genetic manipulation or a nanotechnology disaster, and took most of the planet's animal population with it, ants would inherit the world, they would become the dominant species. They had arrived before humankind and were likely to outlast it, they were the fairytale tortoise to humanity's hare.

Back when he was twelve or thirteen he'd watched a nature programme about fire ants in the Amazon basin. When the big river flooded, they joined together to create a raft for their queen, held up by surface tension, a raft that floated freely until it drifted into land. He'd wondered at the time if they felt excited by their expedition, their equivalent of a trip to the moon, if a collective intelligence was capable of feeling that kind of excitement, and the question had arrived so forcefully that even in adulthood it sometimes came back to him.

Strangely, he also remembered the program being littered with American adverts, which was odd because he must have seen it at his parents' house in Surrey.

A new Jaguar saloon, a curvy S-type heading west, slowed as it approached. There were three people inside. The bodywork had a strange hue, the pink of a pale rose when lit by the headlights of a passing car, but bronze beneath yellow sodium streetlamps. It pulled in thirty feet away, at the corner of a junction.

Graham approached the passenger door. The electric window came down. A large man with a shaven head and a stoop, even when sitting, smirked at him from the

passenger seat but said nothing. The driver leaned across, small but muscular, early fifties, wearing a Paul Smith suit or equivalent that failed to overcome the hardness of his face and merely transformed him from looking like a boxer into a boxing promoter. "You the computer geezer?"

"Yes."

"Well get in the fackin car, then."

Chapter 2

"I'm Macey, with an e," announced the driver. He pointed his thumb at the passenger seat. "This 'ere's Cameron. And with you in the back, that's Eric."

Cameron was wearing a blue and white striped soccer shirt, so Graham took the opportunity for light conversation. "Are you a Tottenham fan, Cameron?"

"Fuck off! Arsenal." His accent was distinctly South African, so it came out 'Airsnil'.

Yet the shirt was unquestionably the colours of Tottenham Hotspur, Arsenal's hated rival.

"Cameron's hiding," explained Macey. "Nobody would ever think of lookin' for him inside a Spurs shirt."

Eric approved. "Nice one."

Eric, sitting next to Garham in the back, was the most presentable of the three. He was slightly built and smart in a black rollneck top and jacket. His hair was pure black and short, but carefully groomed rather than the straight number two of the driver. Graham guessed that he and Eric were around the same age, early-thirties, though there was a chance Eric was older but well-preserved. Unfortunately, he'd overdone the aftershave and it didn't mix well with the smell of seat leather.

"What side of the business are you in?" Graham asked him.

"Interfacing. Automation," answered Eric.

"I do that too - the programming."

"I'm more into the servos and mechanicals."

Eric's London accent was strong but clearly Estuarine when compared to Macey's Cockney, and stopped short of influencing his grammar and the completeness of his words, which made it sound peculiar, like an affectation.

"How about you, Macey?" asked Graham.

Faith had often told him that he wasn't very good at assessing people, but that was the kind of thing that long-term partners were liable to say, and was best ignored. It was true that she did talk through his office politics with him once a week, and was a great help, but there she had the advantage of distant perspective. After just a few minutes in the car, already he was beginning to suspect that Macey and Cameron weren't really in the computer business.

"More the security side," replied Macey, after a pause.

They turned right at Angel lights on to Pentonville Road. Traffic was light.

"We used to do memory chips," said Cameron.

"S right," agreed Macey. "Cameron could find 'em in any piece of kit ever made, couldn't you Cam?"

Cameron nodded. Graham was becoming very familiar with the back of Cameron's broad neck, though it was lit only periodically by headlights. His head-shave was so complete it highlighted the shape of his skull and the individual plates of bone that fused together to create it, like a small planet with Tectonic plates. Graham amused himself thinking it was a shame there were no zits along the seams to represent volcanoes.

He'd wondered if Cameron and Macey were father and son. The ages would be about right, but the accents were wrong and there was no family resemblance. Maybe they'd spent so much time together they'd picked up the relationship without the genes.

"Course, we'd like to get into the Internet side of things," said Macey. "Future of the business. Do it all on the Internet, chance you'll make millions and fuck all chance you'll get your collar felt. I'm just pissed off I'm too old to join in. Like, you see it all movin' away from you, all this technology and stuff, kids on their mobiles talking a new language, bashin' the keys on their little electronic games. 'Course, Cameron 'ere is too pigshit ignorant to get into all that. Ain't you Cam?"

Cameron didn't nod this time.

Macey often made eye contact with Graham in the rear view mirror, like cabbies do, sometimes lifting his face to show his mischievous smile. He was an excellent driver, accelerating and braking hard but with the elegance of a professional.

"Nice car," said Graham. "It's an unusual colour. What made you choose it?"

"It was unlocked." Macey ignored the road to watch Graham's face for a long time, then turned back and shook his head. He swung the Jaguar through the bends of the King's Cross one-way system. The place was seedy compared to affluent Angel. Many of the locals shared Cameron's stoop, his scavenger alertness.

The cuffs of Macey's fine suit rode up on the turns, exposing his cufflinks and the blue of tattoos circling his arms, and what looked like an expensive watch. Cameron had a big watch too, possibly a Rolex, though in the irregular light it was difficult to tell. He had the strap set so loose it caught only on the base of his thumb. Every few minutes - or so it seemed to Graham - he shot his hand into the air to bring the watch further up his arm. Macey appeared to find this action invisible, but Graham was sure he would go nuts if he was exposed to it for long.

He couldn't see the display on Cameron's watch clearly, but on a right turn saw that Macey's said twenty past nine. He never wore a watch himself, they always went wrong - something to do with his personal magnetic field, according to Faith - but he took out his mobile to check the time on the display matched up.

"You need to switch that off," said Eric.

"What?" Macey swung his head round. "You fuckin wally! You got your mobile on?"

Graham didn't understand.

"They can trace that," explained Eric. "Just like a radio beacon."

"Been fuckin 'ell to pay if you did the job with that on," growled Macey. "You berk. I thought you was a computer expert?"

Graham switched off the phone. "I am. I just don't see why it matters if somebody tracks me."

Macey exhaled loudly. "How did you get in on this job?"

"Vince asked me."

"What'd he say?"

"He asked me to retrieve a program from a secure computer."

"Yeah, that's about it. But me and Cam and Eric here, like, we want to keep this all a secret, don't want anybody knowing about it. You got that?"

"Sure."

"Here's a few tips for you. No mobiles, no talk about any of this to wife-girlfriend-mates. Right? After the job, take that New Romantic shit you're wearing and burn it if you can, else put it in a bin - not your own. And get a fuckin haircut while you're at it. You look like a beach bum. Then try and forget about everything. Forget the date, forget me, forget Cameron, forget Eric. Them's the rules. After the job, we never see you again. You never see us again. You do it any other way, Cameron calls round and explains it in more detail. You got that?"

"Wouldn't it be easier if Cameron explained it now?"

Macey exhaled again. His face darkened. He began to speak but couldn't find the words. "Just keep it a secret, all right?"

"Sure."

Graham had no intention of burning his clothes. The chinos were Armani and the baggy-sleeve shirt was custom made, a present from Faith. He couldn't imagine that Macey intended to burn the expensive suit he was wearing.

They made their way down the Euston underpass and back up the other side. On the right they passed the peculiar Abbey National Buildings, four of them, each decorated with external frames of louvered glass that resembled huge cooling coils - at a glance they looked like the backs of four giant refrigerators.

For more than a mile the closely-packed traffic lights were coordinated, so that - depending on the time of day - a vehicle travelling east to west or west to east stood a chance of getting a clear run. The six lanes were narrow and to the left of the Jaguar an articulated lorry kept pace, giving Graham a barely changing view of the dark underside of its trailer and its outsize wheels. Streetlight angled in through the front and rear screens of the car, advancing and receding in hypnotic repeating patterns. They passed Madame Tussaud's and the London Planetarium, with a tramp pissing against its closed doorway. Then Baker Street Tube station arrived and Graham abruptly came to life.

This was where Faith's sister, Danielle, had had her accident two days ago, right here, on the junction of Baker Street and Marylebone Road. Faith adored her sister, and the pair of them were so similar that Graham couldn't help but adore Danielle too. She was a kind of acid-house version of Faith: younger, a lot wilder and without the big hair.

He took in the bollards, the many lanes of traffic. This was a terrible junction for a cyclist. And what a lot of traffic cameras there were! It was strange that he'd never noticed them before, but there were three around this single junction, now visible through the rear window, three moveable traffic cameras on enormous poles, one so tall it towered above the streetlights.

"*Sit still, you twat!*" yelled Macey.

"A friend of mine had an accident here. I was looking at the junction."

"Maybe he was bouncin' around on the back seat of hooky car, with all the fackin cameras around, and the driver turned round and brained him," suggested Macy, very forcefully.

"Her," corrected Graham, but he did sit still.

"Two days ago," said Cameron.

"What?"

"Your friend's crash."

"That's right. How did you know?"

"All green robots, green in every direction. There were scores of accidents."

"Nah, don't follow you," said Eric.

"It's what we call traffic lights in South Africa," explained Cameron. "Robots. The machines that replaced traffic policeman."

"Surely if there had been so many accidents it would have been on the news," said Graham.

"No," answered Eric. "There was too much other stuff going on, remember? That was the day the whole world got out of the wrong side of bed."

The news had been worth watching that day, with the sound turned on. A Lufthansa flight from Geneva had missed Frankfurt airport and crashed into the Deutsche Bank building downtown. Two Japanese bullet trains collided at full speed just outside Tokyo. The New York Stock Exchange reversed seven thousand deals and was forced to shut down. These were the top three news items of the day, and there were dozens more. Hundreds of people had died in this worldwide rash of accidents, this banana-skin day for the planet.

"All down to human error," said Graham. "We need more robots, more computers in charge, then these accidents wouldn't happen."

Eric looked at him askance. "Are you sure?"

Graham was very sure, and about to say so, but Macey butted in.

"You ever met this geezer Vince?"

"No," replied Graham. "Email only."

"Me and Cam the same. Eric too. Makes you wonder, doannit? None of us ever seen the bloke or 'eard his voice. Like, what's he got to hide?"

"On the Internet, nobody knows if you're a dog," suggested Eric.

"Xactly."

"Yeah," agreed Cameron. "In those chatrooms, me, I'm an investment banker with a Porsche and an enormous cock."

"And you still get fackin nowhere."

The Jaguar moved on to the Westway, one of the few elevated urban expressways in London. Macey speeded up.

"So," he continued, "like we was sayin', what's he got to hide?"

Nobody replied. Macey tried again.

"You known the geezer long, Graham?"

"A few months."

"He ever talk about where he lives, about his girlfriend, holidays, stuff like that?"

"No."

"Then what does he talk about, or tap his keyboard about, whatever?"

This was getting difficult. Vince wasn't a subject that Graham talked about freely, not even to Faith. Maybe he would do in a month or so, when Vince was ready, but right now he wasn't keen. Yet also he hated being deceptive - it wasn't in his nature. He could just about manage deception by avoiding a subject, but if he was pressed on it then he'd invariably tell the truth. He hoped that Macey would stop pressing.

"We don't talk about stuff like that, Macey. We play Internet games together, and electronic chess."

"But you said you never met the geezer?"

"We play over the Internet."

"Like, he's in one place and you're in another?"

"That's right."

"What's the fackin point of that?"

"Entertainment, I suppose. And we watch films together," Maybe Macey would find films easier to relate to than computer games.

"You go to the flicks together?"

"No, we watch them on DVD."

"In the same room."

"Not exactly. In separate locations but at the same time."

"You taking the piss, son?"

Humphrey Bogart stood at the foggy Casablanca airport with Ingrid Bergman, holding his friend, Police Captain Renault - Claude Rains - at gunpoint.

Vince was a big Bogart fan, and a week ago Graham had watched Casablanca with him, in that simultaneous but apart mode that would later puzzle Macey.

Bogart gave the two letters of transit to the Police Captain and instructed him to fill out the blanks, "In the names of Mrs Lazlo and Rick Blaine."

"Eh?" Graham stared wide-eyed at his laptop screen. It was a great film and he'd watched it at least three times before. Like a large proportion of the planet's population he knew that Bogart, playing Rick Blaine, made the ultimate sacrifice and put Ingrid Bergman on the plane along with her husband, crusader for the oppressed, Victor Lazlo, played by Paul Henreid. Bogart definitely did not get on the plane.

Bergman smiled and they embraced. "Oh Rick, I love you. I'm so glad we're together again."

"What?" yelled Graham. His hands reached for the keyboard.

—Vince, what the hell is going on?

The engines started on the plane to Lisbon. There was no "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life" speech, and no "the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world", none of the four pages of brilliant script with some of Bogart's best-ever lines, delivered by the man of few words, who - according to Vince, and Vince knew his Bogart- only learned his

lines on-set on the morning of the day he delivered them, and on that day at the end of filming *Casablanca* had been annoyed there were so many lines to learn. Instead, Bogart and Bergman made straight for the plane. Bogart looked a little strange from the back as he walked, like Paul Henreid's Victor Lazlo character made shorter and with his hat darkened.

Vince's reply arrived at the bottom of Graham's laptop screen, like a subtitle.

—Sorry, I'm still not great at manipulating visuals. But I did well with Bergman's voice, don't you think?

—Vince, you've completely wrecked the film. That's a terrible ending.

This was a digital version of *Casablanca* from an Internet film library that Vince had hacked into for a free viewing. Clearly he'd taken some liberties with the ones and zeros too.

—Come on, it's a lot better than the original. 'We'll always have Paris?' What kind of defeatist nonsense is that? He's got the letters of transit and he's in love with Bergman. He should ditch the loser and take her home.

—He's not supposed to finish up with Bergman.

—You're quite right. He's better off with Bacall. I bet she was a little minx in bed. She always sounds dirty to me.

—I think you're missing the point, Vince. The film isn't about sex or successful personal relationships. It's about nobility, about recognising a love more important than your own, and a cause more important than yourself, and making sacrifices so it all works out ok.

He hadn't analysed the film in that way before, but the more he thought about it, the more this instant analysis sounded right, even if he hadn't found the perfect way to express it.

—You mean that in this case the love between Lazlo and his wife, and Lazlo's work against the Nazis, are more important than the love between Bogart and Bergman?

—Exactly.

And though Graham typed that word almost on automatic, it seemed to gain in significance as he reached the last few letters. Vince truly did understand what was going on in the film. Graham had presented the noble causes in abstract terms, and Vince, with no outside help, had turned them into specifics. Clearly he'd also been able to recognise the strong relationship between Bogart and Bergman, which was why he'd changed the ending. Even though the new ending was wrong, it had been created for all the right reasons.

This was a shock. Vince had shown absolutely no understanding of relationships before. He'd always relied on Graham to walk him through that kind of stuff. And Graham had always obliged. That was their usual relationship, teacher and pupil, father and son. Graham had put a lot of effort into advancing Vince's understanding of the world, spent so much time with him that Faith had twice complained about becoming a computer widow.

Vince's learning cycle for this new emotional awareness had been dramatically short, as it always seemed to be when he applied his mind to understanding something. Just two weeks ago they'd watched the African Queen together in their simultaneous but apart mode, and Vince had struggled to make sense of it. He'd enjoyed Bogart's acting, he said, and Katharine Hepburn's, and the scenery, but it seemed to him that very little happened in the middle of the film.

—But Vince, they fall in love! That's the whole point of the film, the very reason why it's so popular. Two dissimilar people fall head over heels in love with each other, and improve themselves as they go. He gets himself organised and sober, she gets less prissy.

—This 'love' business. It's not easy to understand.

—Nobody understands it, you only feel it.

—I've been looking into the chemical angle. Recently I investigated testosterone and managed to synthesise it as a software program, in digital form. It seems to work. I

feel confidence without reason, and aggression. But it gives me strange urges I can't satisfy.

—You might be confusing lust and love.

—Is that a common problem?

Graham smiled to himself.

—Yes.

And perhaps it was even more of a problem for Vince than it was for a regular mortal. With his brilliant hacking skills, Vince had unrestricted access to the Internet and its misleading and disorganised library of information, a very pornographic library simplified by the separation of sex from transmissible disease, baby production, love, relationships and the viewpoint of women.

His naiveté had been very obvious when they'd first got to know each other, when Vince had come out of the wilderness of illiteracy and learned to write and read, when he'd made his first comments on the world as it appeared to him through his email inbox.

—Today I got a mail from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. In the photo, Snow White has her legs wide open and her fingers are playing between them. The dwarfs are very strange and have small bodies and small hands and feet but huge sex organs. Should I tell Snow White that these people are freaks? I'm not sure I should, because she seems very happy even though her companions are clearly deformed.

He'd sent that naïve message to Graham just two months ago.

Their route west across the top of central London and out to the Thames Valley was straightforward. They carried on in almost a straight line while the road beneath them repeatedly changed identity. It had started out as Pentonville Road, then become Euston Road, Marylebone Road, the Westway, and Western Avenue. As they passed Northolt

Aerodrome in darkness, the height of the lampposts came down so their tops didn't catch the undercarriages of approaching aircraft. The squat little posts looked cute, like infant versions of tall lamppost parents.

"So, how old do you reckon he is?" asked Macey.

"Who is?" asked Eric.

"Vince, you wally. Don't seem that old to me."

Eric didn't answer.

"Graham?" Macey glared into his rear-view mirror.

Graham didn't know what to say. He'd been hoping this wouldn't happen. He'd avoided answering Macey's earlier questions, but now he'd run out of tactics, or at least the willingness to use them. He could tell Macey that Vince was a few months old, a mere babe in real terms. Or he could say that Vince was a teenager, in terms of human understanding. Most truthful of all, he could explain both.

Western Avenue became the M40, but Macey didn't speed up, instead he slowed down. Cars and trucks sped past them at normal motorway speed.

"You deaf, pal?" he asked. "You need somethin' poking in your ears to clean 'em out? You got a biro there, Cam?"

Graham made a hurried decision and went for option two. "Still a teenager. Maybe sixteen."

"Fackin 'ell! I told you, Cam, kids' game, this computer business. I'll be doing jobs for bairns in diapers next. Sixteen? Fack me. Not even old enough to get pissed and vote. 'Ere, hold on. How comes you know how old he is when you never met him?"

"I'm just guessing."

Macey grimaced into the rear view mirror, fierce in his expression. "You computer geezers, you're full of shit!"

He stayed agitated, certainly in the right foot. The Jaguar hit one hundred and ten, then came back to fifty, up again, and down.

Graham amused himself wondering whether his companions in this quick steel box had female partners. For Cameron, still shooting his watch every few minutes, the answer had to be a no. He simply couldn't imagine a woman wanting Cameron. For Macey the answer was definitely yes, though it was hard to say why, yet there was some trace of happy domesticity beneath all that earthy bluster. As for Eric, something else was going on with Eric, but before he could put his finger on what it was, their speed evened out at seventy-five and Macey bit his tail again.

"Listen 'ere, Cliff Richard," he snarled, staring at Graham in the mirror, "You been a fackin pain in the arse ever since you climbed in. Bleedin' phone on the go, not a clue what we're up to, load of bollocks about this Vince geezer. You're givin' me grief. See, it goes like this, when your Uncle Macey asks you a question, you give him a straight answer. Any other way, we can't do the job. Can't trust each other, see?"

The Jaguar passed the junction for the M25, now at fifty.

"Sure."

"Nah, don't give me that American shit. You tell me what you know about Vince, right now."

Graham couldn't lie. He knew that children watch politicians on TV, and broadcasters too, and learn the skill as surely as they learn their maths at school. But he just couldn't do it. He had to tell Macey the truth.

"Vince isn't real. He's not a real person. He's a kind of artificial intelligence that exists solely on the Internet, nowhere else. That's why nobody's met him and why nobody's talked to him on the phone. He doesn't have a body, no physical existence, no parents, no girlfriend. He's not a dog, he's a nobody, just a lot of software programs spread around the Internet, like bees, like ants, an intelligent whole made up of dumb individuals. He's pure software."

The car didn't speed up. Macey glared even more fiercely into his mirror.

"Go on, Eric," prompted Graham. "Tell him it's possible."

"Well," said Eric, hesitantly, "maybe in theory. But I've never heard of anything so advanced."

"There are so many things that humans can't do properly," continued Graham, "like guiding planes into airports, making sure trains are on different tracks, even running a stock market. We keep messing them up. But Vince, he won't make mistakes. That's why I made him. He'll be able to do all these things perfectly, and he'll keep on growing, getting better."

"*You did this?*" said Eric.

"I spent years working on the basic version, then I added a genetic algorithm, so Vince could carry on developing, improving himself. It worked better than I expected. He was like a newborn baby to begin with, but that was only a few months ago. He can already think for himself, and send emails."

Macey carried on driving slowly along the inside lane of the motorway. An articulated lorry loaded with BMWs overtook them. He was silent for a minute, then he said, quietly, "You ain't bein' serious are you, son?"

"That's why I can't tell you his age, and that's why you'll never meet him. He's not real."

"Just because I ain't been to university don't mean I'm thick."

"I never thought you were."

"Then why you trying to fuck with my head? You telling me a piece of electronics sparked up, sent me an email and got me workin' on a job for it? Some fuckin computer's got me workin' for it?"

Graham wanted to say thousands of computers, but he could see that wouldn't help.

The car slowed even further. Macey moved off the inside lane and on to the hard shoulder.

Cameron shifted in his seat. "What's up, Macey?"

"I'm waiting for this clown in the back to apologise." He addressed the mirror again. "Where you get your jollies, mate, winding people up cos you thing they ain't as clever as you?"

Graham had no idea what to say. He'd told the truth, what more could he do?

Macey stopped the car.

"This isn't a great place to stop, Macey," said Cameron. "If the cops come by, we'll get pulled for sure."

"I don't give a shit. Me and this fackin joker in the back need a heart to heart."

Macey got out. He walked around the car to Graham's door and opened it. "Get out."

It wasn't cold outside. The air was still when not disturbed by passing lorries. They'd stopped on an embankment. A few yards of grass were in view, heading down into blackness with fence-posts vaguely visible at the bottom. Graham was a lot taller than Macey, but also much narrower, mere skin and bone compared to Macey's meat, his wide shoulders, thick neck, thick arms, thick legs. Macey's stance was menacing, shoulders back, chest out.

"Jesus fackin Christ!" yelled Macey. "You ain't even scared!"

Graham tried to oblige. He tried to imagine there was deep water down at the bottom of the embankment. But he could see fence-posts down there, so the delusion didn't work. He was terrified of water, and wary of dogs, but never frightened of people. More than anything, he was annoyed with Vince for getting him involved in this awkward situation. Vince had timed his request so well, right after he'd told Graham about Danielle's accident, when he'd seemed so compassionate and emotionally aware and in need of help himself.

Scores of people passed by in their metal and glass environments, in their noisy machines, all seeing the stand-off on the grassy embankment and looking the other way.

Macey held a finger in front of Graham's chin. His face was so flushed that in the darkness his skin looked Asian. "Right, you Islington pinko," he growled. "Now, you tell me to my face, right in front of me, that this Vince geezer is nothing more than a fackin computer."

Graham didn't know what to say. If he said more he knew it might make things worse. He had no idea things would work out this way. He hadn't intended to piss off Macey.

But Macey was even more pissed off by the silence.

"You cant!" he yelled, and drew back his arm.

Graham didn't flinch. He stood perfectly still. He realised he'd been right in the first place, right not to talk about Vince. His mistake had been changing his mind and revealing the details before people were ready. Nothing more than bad timing. If he could take that information back, at least temporarily, it would help and it wouldn't really be a lie, just a delay of the truth.

He shook his head. "It was a joke. I overdid it."

That was difficult to say, but maybe that made it sound more sincere.

Macey glared, his eyes wide open, but his arm and broad shoulders relaxed. The air in his pumped-up lungs came out loudly. He turned abruptly and walked back to the driver's door. "Get in," he barked at Graham, before getting in the car himself.

Chapter 3

Macey turned off the M40 at junction three, a little before High Wycombe, and headed down the A4094 in the direction of Maidenhead. His face-off with Graham hadn't put him in a bad mood. Quite the opposite. Maybe he felt that some kind of altercation was an essential part of a decent night out, and he was pleased that the evening had lived up to expectations. He looked at his expensive watch. "Nearly there." Like he had a car full of schoolchildren.

The road had been ribbon-developed and there were streetlights along most of its length, and a hotch-potch of nondescript semis with long front gardens, bits of public green, modern industrial buildings and modest new estates, plus a watercourse that at first couldn't decide if it was a brook or a drain but soon became wider and might have looked pretty in daylight. It passed under the road more than once on its way to join the Thames.

Graham kept a wary eye on the water. While it continued to run fast he could assume it was shallow and deal with it, but if it slowed, he'd be in trouble. His fear of water was so extreme that he couldn't even look at anything more than a few feet deep.

"Are we allowed to know where we're going?" he asked, warily.

"Don't see why not," said Macey. "Duke's Meadow, Bourne End."

"A meadow?"

"Industrial estate, bonehead."

They passed a broad village green on the left, with hairdressers and shops on the right, plus a few lovely half-timbered houses. In a couple of places the human development gave way to shrubs and open fields, but not often. Thousands of roads in England looked like this, turning suburban while they struggled to remain rural.

They took a right at a mini-roundabout.

"Fackin gorgeous village, Bourne End," said Macey, after a while. "Right on the Thames. Little railway running all the way through it, Cock Marsh on the other side of the water, full o' cows, couple of boozers. Course, you ain't gonna see the river from the road. But take my word for it, nice place. Cor, look at them poncey shops. Wassat? Antiques? That was a butchers when I was a nipper."

Graham was relieved they wouldn't get to see the Thames, but puzzled by Macey's comment about the shop. "Don't you drive down this road every day?"

"What?" Macey frowned, then grinned. "I used to live here. Went to Wye Valley School," he said, which hardly answered Graham's question. "About a mile up on the right. There's a cut through these woods."

"I thought you were from Holloway," said Cameron, sounding mildly disappointed.

"I am. The old man moved 'ere when I was seven, try to stop me mixin' with the wrong sort. Course, I could find 'em wherever I was. But he couldn't find no work, started doin' over houses, finished up inside, stupid git. I got my old lady to move us back to Holloway."

They turned left at a sign for Millboard Road, through a band of trees and over a bridge. The river they'd been tracking for the last few miles ran beneath, its surface fast-flowing and uneven, twinkling in the streetlight. Fast or not, it was now just a little too large for Graham to deal with, and he closed his eyes as they passed over it. There were new houses, then industrial buildings, but only on the right. On the left was a dark field.

"Fackin 'ell! Fackin 'ell!" Macey coasted along slowly then pulled in at the side of the empty road and turned off the ignition. "Just look at the state of this place! I used to play football 'ere when I was a nipper. Not on the fackin road mind, there was all fields back then. What a right royal jacksie! Look what they done to it! We had flowers 'ere. Used to set fire to 'em. Pitch weren't level neither. Bet they have to use the sports ground

now, the nippers. All them rules. No smoking on the pitch. Real goalposts instead of ones what changes position dependin' who's biggest. Poor cants."

To Graham, it looked like a perfectly average trading estate. The freedom of the car had taken work out of the cities and to the edges of small villages like this one, creating a half-assed version of Silicon Valley close to the Thames. Most of the big US computer companies had settled around here, Japanese electronics companies too, and what little was left of the homegrown UK industry.

From where they were parked, over to the right he could see three company names on big factory units: Kawasaki, Xerox and Hitachi. Two Japanese, one American. All the units were roughly the same inoffensive height, three storeys masquerading as two. There was no sign of life in the estate, no people, no moving cars and only half a dozen parked, just visible behind the shrubs that hid the many parking lots.

"All 'cos you poncey computer geezers don't want to live in The Smoke," complained Macey. "Or most of yous, anyway."

"Do you have children, Macey?" asked Graham.

"What fackin business is it of yours?"

There was silence for a minute, then Eric asked, "Where is this Foxglove place?"

Macey motioned beyond the Kawasaki block at a red brick building with a distinctive sloping roof, making it look, at least from this side-on view, like the end of a third division football stadium. "That has to be it, down there." He showed no sign of starting the car and moving towards it.

It was far larger than Graham had anticipated, though when he thought about it, the only reason he'd assumed they were going somewhere small was that he'd never heard of the company.

Cameron wound down his window. Graham followed his example, dropping the barrier that isolated him from the outside world. The air smelled sweet. It was a pleasant evening warmed by low cloud, not a breath of wind, and with the motor switched off

there was barely any noise, just the occasional loud truck or motorbike from the A-road they'd turned off, muffled by the bank of trees.

The view from the passenger side of the car was entirely different to the buildings on the driver's side. Here was a small tarmac pavement, then a tall wire mesh fence, for some reason another footpath on the other side, this one of concrete and weed, and then a long dark field finishing with a hill in the distance and lights from a handful of houses scattered upon it.

"Oi, not in the car."

Cameron held his cigarette pack and lighter. "It's not even your fecking car, Macey."

Macey glared. Cameron put them back in his trouser pocket with exaggerated, sulky movements, and shot his watch in frustration.

On the wire fence were signs - Warning, Law Enforcement Guard Dogs on Patrol. With the Jaguar parked between the fence and the buildings, they gave the impression it wasn't the estate that was protected but the dark and empty field beyond the twin footpaths. Graham imagined Alsatians in black trousers, jackets and peaked caps wandering on the grass.

"Got dogs," said Cameron.

"Got signs up saying dogs," replied Macey. "Not the same thing."

"Anyway," said Eric, "they're probably all busy yapping on Internet chat rooms right now."

After a couple of seconds he added, "Certainly got security cameras. Must be a dozen or more."

"Yeah, I know all about them," said Macey. He seemed oddly relaxed, mesmerised. He wasn't looking at Foxglove but out across the field, maybe lost in a childhood memory, or, like Graham, finding the view more compelling than it should have been. The decay of the concrete path, the pitch darkness of the field and dots of

habitation beyond, none of these things were beautiful in their own right but somehow they managed to come together in a composition.

Cameron opened his door and swung his knees out, then lit a cigarette with his bum still on the seat but his head outside the car. Macey reached for the internal light above the windscreen without looking at it, and ran his stubby fingers along until he found the switch, but otherwise didn't react. The open door increased the connection between the inside of the car and the outside, between the occupants and the silent, dark field.

Despite the strange circumstances, it was a moment of quiet peace, of everything being in its correct place in the world - one that caught Graham by surprise.

When the enterprising burglar isn't burgling,
 When the cut-throat isn't occupied in crime,
 He loves to hear the little brook a-gurgling
 And listen to the merry village chime.
 When the coster's finished jumping on his mother,
 He loves to lie a-basking in the sun.

Who was that? Sullivan. No, Gilbert - he wrote the words. They were from Pirates of Penzance.

He was a big fan of poetry, but it was Faith who was the fanatic. And being more of a romantic than he might casually admit, he'd learned over one hundred of her favourites so he could recite them to her at odd times. Nothing as gross as one a week, more like two or three a year, when the timing was exactly right and the poem fitted. Many were wasted, never recited, but it was still worth it to see the stars in her eyes.

Memorising them had been remarkably easy. He'd found that the meter and rhythm of poetry provided its own checksum, a bit like the checksums in computer data. The lines themselves seemed to have a completeness that was noticeably broken by a

single wrong word, or, in the excerpt that had just run through his mind, by the missing end of a verse.

Ah, take one consideration with another,
A policeman's lot is not a happy one!

Some rational aspect of his head had, on this occasion, edited out the reference to police.

Eric clearly hadn't been caught by the magic of the moment. "What we waiting for?"

And in the lightless car, under a moonless, starless cloudy sky, Macey lit a cigarette himself and replied, "Darkness, dummy."

Chapter 4

The darkness that Macey had been waiting for arrived at ten thirty precisely. All the streetlights, the white globe lights in the industrial estate car parks, and the lights inside the buildings and on their walls, went out. The clouds reflected streetlights of towns in the Thames Valley, with bright spots for nearby Maidenhead and High Wycombe, red, as if they were on fire, but shedding so little light that nothing showed around the Jaguar except the ghostly silhouettes of fence-posts by the field and outlines of the four buildings. Tiny white dots moved below the high cloud base, airliners with their powerful lights on, joining the queue in the air for Heathrow.

"Nice one, Vince," said Macey.

"They'll have emergency batteries," said Cameron, "maybe even a generator."

"Yeah, for the computers inside," said Eric, "but it doesn't look like they've got them for the lights and cameras."

Macey started the car and drove the two hundred yards to the Foxglove building, the Jaguar purring very quietly, like its namesake stalking prey. He turned the car around and parked near the glass entrance doors. His elbow came over the back of his seat as he addressed Graham and Eric. "Right, in case the cameras still work, I got some masks. Disguise, like Cam's shirt, but for yer boat-race. I got Bush, Clinton, Nixon and Reagan. What you up for?"

"Clinton," said Cameron, from the passenger seat.

"You're Nixon," said Macey, without looking at him.

Graham and Eric said nothing.

"It's a fackin joke!" said Macey, turning sullen at their lack of reaction. He got out of the car and they followed his lead. At the back, he opened the boot a few inches. Graham could see a petrol container, maybe more than one. Eric placed a hand on the

boot-lid to open it further and Macey slapped it like a child's. "Oi, dickhead! Not your property."

Eric's body tensed as he moved his hand away, then relaxed again. He repeated Cameron's claim. "Well, it's hardly yours either, is it?"

"Yeah, but what's in there might be. Eh?" Macey's hand went inside the slightly open boot and he groped where he couldn't see. He pulled out a long sledgehammer with an unusually small head.

"Meet Percy." He left the boot slightly open. Cameron moved up to it. "Later," said Macey, and Cameron moved away.

There was a huge difference in the stature of the pair. Cameron's stoop was even more pronounced now he was standing up. He was a big man, as tall as Graham but a lot wider, with shoulders still impressive even though they weren't properly presented by his pose of aggressive dejection. Macey was much shorter and rounder, yet far more erect and purposeful. As they walked away from the car, Graham amused himself by thinking how much the man looked like a belligerent duck, at least from behind.

Cameron knelt in front of the central lock between the plate glass doors. "No, it's one of those Swiss pressure jobs. Could take ten minutes."

"Move out the way, then." Macey approached and placed his back to one of the doors, then swung the long hammer down into the bottom left corner, very close to the hinge. A diagonal crack about two feet long appeared in the glass. At the same time an alarm went off, shrill, but not obscenely loud from outside. Inside was a small lobby lit by emergency lights and green exit signs, and now by a flashing blue strobe.

"Hold on! Hold on!" shouted Graham. "What are you doing?"

"Getting inside. What's it look like?"

"But haven't you got a key?"

"Yeah, sure." Macey held up the hammer. "Percy."

"But..."

Macey grinned. "Didn't Vince tell you? I'd 'ave thought he'd let you know about all this, what with you creating him and everything." He hammered at the glass in the corner until it caved in, then attacked the top hinge. Eventually the glass gave up the battle and a large section fell away. "Mind yourself. Don't want no blood. Can't stand the sight of blood." He walked inside, still grinning. "Electric cameras, phone alarms, glass doors. What a fackin bunch of amateurs."

Graham found himself in a double state of shock. He hadn't anticipated that they were going to break down the door to get, and he certainly hadn't imagined that once the door had been broken down the inside of the building would smell like home. Not Islington home, but Egham home, where he'd lived as a child. The strange familiarity dispelled his doubts about going inside.

Cameron nervously shot his watch every few seconds, transforming his arm into a timepiece in its own right.

The alarm was much louder inside. The strobe lit up Macey as he kicked broken glass to one side, making him appear less of a belligerent duck and more like a middle-aged dancer in a techno club. When he was satisfied that his break-in was sufficiently tidy, he stopped kicking and looked expectantly at Graham and Eric. "Well? We're inside."

"We need to find the CEO's office," announced Eric.

"Second floor, far left hand corner," said Graham.

"How do you know?"

"I haven't a clue, but I bet you it's there."

He led them up the wide stairway to the second floor and into a long computer room beyond a glass door, lit only by emergency lights. There had to be a million pounds of hardware in this one room - white, grey and black boxes of electronics stacked in angle-frame racks from floor to eye level. There were barely any screens and keyboards and everything was oversized with extra lights and dials, like a Hollywood version of computing. He recognised most of the equipment - mainly servers, RAID arrays and

routers. Hundreds of tiny red LEDs showed it was all switched on, powered by a back-up generator or batteries, but only a handful twinkled with activity.

The air-conditioning appeared to have lost power. It wasn't easy to tell because the alarm was too loud to hear much beneath it, but the mass of electronics gave off a powerful smell. The air was warm and ionised, making it feel synthetic.

"You know what electronics smell of?" said Eric. "A human barbecue. That smell's from dust burning, and most dust is human skin and hair. If you barbecued someone, they'd smell like electronics."

Yet this was part of the smell that Graham recognised from home. There'd been no home computers back then, and no human barbecues, at least none that he could remember, and surely they'd be memorable. His nose had to be leading him astray.

"You cant," said Macey, approvingly, to Eric. He gestured at the racks. "What's all this shit, then? Don't look like regular computers."

"Internet hardware," replied Graham. "It looks like the phones are down, so it's resting. They must have a hell of a connection."

Eric yelped like a dog with a trodden-on tail. He'd been poking around in the racks and now he reached between two servers and brought out a strange metallic object about four inches long, like the spaceframe chassis of an elaborate model car. He held it gingerly, like a dead snake.

"What is it?" asked Graham.

"I think," said Eric, "it's the middle section of an artificial foot."

"It's a bit of Airfix model, that's what it is," said Macey, standing next to him.

"Stop fackin about. You ain't got all day."

"Look, these are the flexors, this is where the toes would go, and the ball of the foot..."

Before Eric could finish, Macey grabbed the item from his hand and sent it flying to a far corner of the room. "See? It was a plane. Now stop talking shit and let's find what we're here for."

Graham led the party to where his intuition said the CEO's office would be, at the far end of the server farm, through another glass door. He was right. Here was an office with four desks, each with a keyboard and flat monitor.

Eric went from one to the next. He stopped at the biggest desk with the plushest chair. "This is the one. Angela Avebury."

Her name was etched into a small triangular name-board lying on the desk. There was also a photo of her on the wall, it showed a preppy woman in her early forties with an elaborate side-parted hairstyle. Beneath the photo were the words - Angela Avebury, Chief Executive Officer.

"American," observed Graham. And it wasn't a guess. The face was familiar and he *knew* she was American, though he couldn't say why he was so sure.

"Right, get to it," demanded Macey. "You got less than seven left. Alarm going off in Bourne End, some cant's bound to phone the Old Bill. But they ain't too nippy round these parts. We always used to reckon ten minutes."

Graham took a CD from the small pack of goodies he'd prepared at home and inserted it in the computer tower beneath the desk, then switched on. He was pleased to see that back-up power reached this computer too. In every other way it was an isolated machine, with no network of phone connections. That's why Vince hadn't been able to hack into it himself, why he'd needed Graham to get inside the building. Vince was a brilliant hacker, but even he couldn't get inside a computer that had no connections to the outside world.

While he waited for the screen to go through its boot sequence, Graham decided to ask Macey a question that had been bugging him for a while. This would be his one

opportunity, during these few minutes when his role in the night's business was of some consequence.

"Unusual name you've got. Any story behind it?"

Macey sat with his feet up on a nearby desk, inspecting his nails and cleaning them with a pocket-knife, totally ignoring the alarm. "I used to fence. Had so much gear in the house it looked like a store. Everybody called it Macy's, without the 'e', including the Old Bill. I didn't mind being called Macy, till that singer came along and I found it was a girl's name. So I put an 'e' in it, and took the teeth out of any cant what spelled it without. Still sounds the same, mind."

Cameron was nowhere to be seen. In fact, when Graham came to think about it, he'd been missing for a while.

The flat screen came up with a username and password box.

Eric looked at Graham. "What's on the CD, a password cracker?"

Graham shook his head. Cracking the password by brute force, trying every possible permutation of letters and numbers, was out of the question. He had the software tools but it could take weeks, even years. He followed the computer power cable to a mains socket in the floor, and rocked the switch a few times so the screen flickered and the machine crashed and restarted again.

"What are you trying to do?" asked Eric. "We haven't got much time."

"Put the computer in a different mood, get it confused so it reads what's on the CD."

"Since when did computers have moods?"

"Sure they do. Have you ever tried to do something on a computer one day, and it works, and the next day it doesn't?"

Eric didn't answer.

"They're the same as us," explained Graham. "They have moods. They get awkward when they've had a bad day, when there's data debris sitting around inside, or

too many programs were open and they ran out of memory. And they're vulnerable when they wake up suddenly or get confused."

"Yeah. Like nickin' somebody's wallet while they're having an asthma attack," said Macey.

"Something like that," said Graham, frowning.

The boot sequence took a little longer than before, but this time it finished with a directory listing of the computer's contents, rather than a login screen.

"Shit!" exclaimed Eric.

Graham began hunting through the directories for the right type of file, the kind Vince had asked him to look for. "They get old and feeble too. After a few years they're full of crash debris and tired system files and they don't work as well as when they first came out of the box. You must have noticed that."

Ten possible files. Five were too small. Graham would need to look at the code in the others.

Eric watched Graham like he'd just witnessed Jesus rising from the dead, then turned his attention to the mass of code whizzing down the screen. "You can't read this stuff at that speed, can you?"

"Only if people are quiet."

Two programs down. The third looked promising.

"Got it!"

"That it?" asked Macey.

"Will be in a couple of seconds, when I've written this to CD."

"You're a fuckin' genius, my son. Your Uncle Macey loves you."

Graham took the CD from its slot. "Let's go."

At speed they went back through the glass door into the server farm. The air didn't smell of ions and burning human debris any more. It was dominated by something far more overpowering.

"Petrol?" wondered Eric, out loud.

"Paraffin, you dickhead."

"But where from?"

On cue to answer the question, Cameron appeared through the glass door at the other end of the room, carrying a mixture of plastic cider flagons and petrol canisters, two in each hand. He put them on the floor and unscrewed the tops, then kicked them over. Blue liquid poured out.

Graham wasn't sure where to begin. "Electricity, power sockets in the floor. They'll short and spark."

"That'll save us a match, then, won't it?" said Macey, grinning.

"What's going on?" said Eric. "We got what we came for. This wasn't part of the plan."

"Not part of *your* plan," said Macey.

One of the floor sockets near Cameron popped. Lights in the rack next to him went out, but there was no flame.

"See?" said Macey. "There's paraffin for you. Petrol - that's for your bleedin' amateurs. One big flameball. Paraffin's the business. Got your industrial safety in mind, ain't we? Lot safer. Burns longer. Plenty of soot."

Right now, Graham's top priority was to get past all this machinery to the other side of Cameron and out through the exit door. Eric followed close behind. Sections of carpet squelched beneath their feet.

Another floor-socket popped. This time there was a lick of blue flame, tipped with yellow. It burned low and dirty, giving off thin black smoke. The iridescent haze spread slowly across the wick of the carpet, yet slightly above it. Graham and Eric raced the last few yards to the door. Macey strolled along casually behind, the low flames toasting his turn-ups, his long hammer staying vertical below his left hand, not swinging. Cameron sniggered and slipped out of the room in front of Graham.

"I don't want any part of this," said Eric, angrily. He waited for Macey to come through, then shut the glass door behind them, stopping oxygen getting in and smoke getting out. A cloud of it swirled above their heads on its way to escape up the stairwell.

"Leave it open," ordered Macey.

Eric let go of the door-handle, leaving the door shut.

Macey moved towards it, but stopped when he reached Eric. He leaned into Eric's face. "Open the door. I ain't gonna do it myself."

"This is out of order, Macey. We don't need to burn the place down."

Macey slapped Eric hard on the cheek, then raised a single forefinger. "Stay a dickhead, don't become a cunt." He took hold of Percy with both hands and with great violence swung the metal head against the glass door, close to the hinges, until it went the way of the door downstairs. Smoke once again drifted out across the ceiling and swirled up the stairwell to the floor above. "You can do what you fuckin like with it now."

Still the alarm shrilled to itself. Eric was bent double, holding his cheek and wailing in pain.

"Fingerprints," explained Macey. "All over the keyboard. Bet Graham 'ere wants the place burned, same as Vince does."

This wasn't entirely true. Graham would have preferred to wipe the keyboard with a tissue rather than set fire to the building, but he stayed quiet rather than feeding the argument. It wouldn't be possible to stop the fire, and Cameron must have disabled any automatic system. The evening was a disaster, a write off. More than anything else he wanted to get home and out of the company of these maniacs. He had plenty he wanted to say to Vince.

"'Ere," said Macey, noticing that Eric was still in pain, "what's all the song and dance? I only gave you a slap."

Eric came upright, holding his jaw. His eyes were glistening. "I've got a dodgy wisdom tooth, you cunt." The words were distorted by his hand on his jaw.

"Good job I can't hear you properly, son."

"I'm having the bastard out next week. Last thing I need is some idiot jiggling it around."

"Don't be so fuckin' cheeky."

Eric glared poisonously at Macey, who had no trouble with eye contact. Eric was the same modest height as Macey but much slimmer and with an entirely different bearing, far more wiry and athletic. Their eyes were exactly level. All sense of urgency disappeared as the pair concentrated on out-glaring each other.

Black smoke flowed above them and out to the stairwell, getting thicker and lower, like descending cloud. Macey still held Percy in both hands. Eric's fists rhythmically clenched and unfurled. Graham knew the stand-off had to be broken, if only for Eric's sake.

"Billy, in one of his nice new sashes,
Fell in the fire and was burned to ashes;
Now, although the room grows chilly,
I haven't got the heart to poke poor Billy."

"Wassat?" asked Macey, grinning as he unlocked from Eric and turned to Graham.
"Wassat you just said?"

"It's a poem," said Graham, "by Harry Graham. I can always remember his name because it's a bit like mine. It's called Tender-Heartedness. That's the whole piece."

"You cant," said Macey, in his complimentary fashion. He let Percy dangle from his left hand.

Eric continued to glare, but it no longer mattered now that Macey was looking elsewhere. Eventually Eric broke off too, turning to make his way downstairs. "This

didn't need to happen," he said, loud enough for his voice to carry behind him. "This wasn't thought through. Come on. Let's get out of here."

Chapter 5

Nobody said much in the car on the way back. Eric sulked with his hand on his jaw and was entirely silent, Macey reverted to his chirpy cab driver act, reminding Graham how insensitive a talkative cabbie could be, but even Macey gave up talking when nobody responded.

They dropped Graham off at half-past midnight. Macey gunned the Jaguar as he drove away, proving something or other, though Graham wasn't quite sure what, maybe his influence over the world, though the effect was spoiled as he ground the front skirt of the car into the tarmac on the speed-bumps.

When he'd closed the heavy front door, Graham rested his forehead against it for a moment, relieved to be locking the troublesome world outside. He felt despoiled by the evening, and deceived by Vince. When he'd agreed to hack into a computer, there'd been no mention of stolen cars, professional criminals, and certainly not the destruction of more than a million pounds of hardware.

Faith hadn't waited up for him. She lived a life without worry, always assuming things would work out for the best, rarely fretting no matter how late Graham was, and he was thankful for that. His clothes still smelled of paraffin and smoke, which would have taken some explaining. They'd have to go. He took them off and put them in a bin-bag, which went outside the back door with the rest of the week's rubbish.

At twenty to one, still in the nude, he wandered through to the dining room, which also doubled as his study. It was here, with his laptop on the broad dining table, that he did most of his real work, his programming for the microchip industry. He took his laptop from its usual resting place in the sideboard drawer and booted up.

How had Vince managed to get him to go along on such a lunatic trip? It was the way Vince had reacted to Danielle's cycling accident that had softened Graham up, made him vulnerable to stupid ideas. After breaking the news, Vince had offered to make

Danielle's stay at the Whittington Hospital more comfortable. She was unconscious and plugged into plenty of medical equipment. He'd pointed out that he could do a lot to influence this machinery. He could do prioritisation, error control, alarm monitoring, he could make sure the right drugs were in inventory, could change rotas, take the randomness out of whether Danielle had the best nurses, the best wards, the best doctors. It could make a difference.

He'd clinched the deal right after this apparently selfless offer to help Danielle. He'd asked for a favour in return, tagged on to the same email conversation, telling Graham that he'd been attacked by a company called Foxglove, and they'd almost wiped him out with a hunter-killer program, and he needed help. He needed a computer expert to crack the computer that held the program and look at it for him.

Graham had known he was agreeing to something illegal, but he'd assumed they'd have inside help, that they'd walk in with a key and walk out with the program, locking the door behind them. Sure, that would be illegal, but he couldn't simply stand by and watch Foxglove wipe out Vince. It was the fire that bothered him most, the wanton destruction.

A minute later he was online.

—Vince, they burned the place down.

A mile from Bourne End, the column of smoke had been visible through the Jaguar's rear window. A dull pillar, shifting in the red light of the fire below.

—Good.

—So it's true, you did ask Macey to torch the place?

Computing in the nude was a familiar sensation. He'd found that even the most tedious tasks could be enlivened by a lack of clothes - a maintenance report for the local office in Haslemere, a conference call with his colleagues at headquarters in California. This was the ultimate in dressing down. Right now he wasn't in a playful mood, he just couldn't be bothered to find something else to wear.

—I did ask him, yes. Now Foxglove won't be able to attack me again, at least for a while.

Graham shook his head. He'd hoped the fire was down to Macey exceeding his brief, though he'd known the chances were slim.

—You've just involved me in the destruction of a million pounds worth of property. I could be in deep trouble.

—I don't mind a reasonable amount of trouble. Did you find the program they used to attack me?

—Yes.

—Good. Please analyse it and create a defence.

Graham shook his head again and let out a whistling breath. An apology from Vince would have been a start. So far he hadn't even got an acknowledgement that anything was wrong.

—Vince, I'm very unhappy about what happened. You didn't tell me I'd be travelling with a mad axeman in a stolen car, and you didn't tell me we were going to burn the place down.

—I'm sure it was all very exciting.

Graham growled at the screen, at the tiny lens at the top of the laptop screen, its built-in Cyclops webcam, its single eye, even though it was turned off. He was trying his best to remain calm, but Vince's dismissive attitude wasn't helping.

How should he deal with this? He'd never had a major disagreement with Vince before. Their relationship had always been very good. Graham had concentrated on helping Vince to develop, on nurturing him, he'd even read a book on bringing up children.

And there was the answer. What had the book said? Set limits, stick to them, and withdraw privileges for enforcement.

Graham reached for the CD holding the program from Foxglove and put it in the slot.

—You can copy the program, if you like, but that's it. I'm not having any more to do with this.

—Take that out! It's poison to me! I don't want to look at it, I want you to look at it.

—No, I'm done.

—I need you to analyse the program.

—What happened tonight was wrong, Vince. It was a mistake for me to get involved, and a mistake for you to involve me in the way you did. We can put this behind us, but I'm not prepared to continue as if nothing has happened.

—I still need you to analyse the program, Graham.

—That's a no.

Graham's finger's drummed on the laptop casing. As Faith was fond of saying, you never really know somebody until you have your first major disagreement with them. How they behave towards you then, tells you more about your relationship than all the previous years of harmony.

—I can't allow this. You must analyse the program.

—I don't intend to do that.

—This is a very unstable and ill thought out reaction. I'll send somebody round in the morning to persuade you.

That sounded vaguely threatening, but could be dealt with tomorrow. Graham switched off his laptop. Right now he felt overwhelmingly tired. He went upstairs to bed and slept the fitful sleep of the guilty.

Chapter 6

Bright early morning sunlight beamed in through the window above the sink and disappeared under the kitchen table. Faith, in a blue silk dressing gown, had her legs twisted round by the side of her chair so her feet could soak up the solar warmth. Many people would have looked awkward in this position. Faith looked like a basking cat.

The table was pine, as was most of the kitchen furniture. In a world full of fitted kitchens, Faith had rebelliously decided to keep the 1930s steel sink and store all the kitchen clutter in freestanding pine units, which meant the layout could be changed whenever she felt like it, including the position of the table, which shifted around the kitchen with the seasons like some ancient sundial, so it always picked up the morning sun.

"How did it go last night?" she asked.

"Not wonderful." Graham didn't intend to discuss the details if he could avoid it, but Faith would probably spot the discomfort in his body language, so he may as well be half-truthful.

Actually he was feeling far less bothered by the Foxglove fire than he had the night before. Sleep and dreams had done the business they were supposed to do, filing away the previous day's activities in all the right locations, placing the extremes in a file labelled with somebody else's name, as somebody else's responsibility, and doing it as dreams do, in the most bizarre and fantastic way.

In the dream, he'd been a schoolchild playing football on the field Macey had mentioned, on King's Meadow, as it might have looked before the industrial estate took over, with uneven grass and daisies, ferns and bracken around the sides. Whether it had ever looked like that or not, that was the way the dream had it. Macey was there too, and Cameron and Eric, all as children, Cameron already stooping although he was only six, Eric with freshly cut hair, holding his jaw, Macey already bumptious and mischievous.

He'd emptied a can of lighter fluid into the football and set fire to it, yet they carried on playing as normal, passing and even heading the ball, ignoring the three foot tail of flame behind it. When it went out of play it set fire to the ferns and bracken, though the smooth white leather surface of the ball somehow remained untouched.

Then along came a teacher. Miss Avebury, the name from the Foxglove desk, with a whistle around her neck and looking glamorous even in sports kit, but sorely intimidating too. Graham had the ball at his feet when she arrived.

"Graham Hastings!" A distinct American accent. "Did you set fire to the ball?"

Graham didn't know what to say. He didn't want to take the blame, but he didn't dare squeal on Macey.

Eric came to his rescue. "It was Macey who did it, Miss."

Miss Avebury rounded on Macey.

Macey, in turn, rounded on Eric. "You cant."

"Macey!" yelled Miss Avebury. Then in a quieter voice, "If you're going to swear, at least do it properly. The word contains a 'u'. You *cunt*. Go on, say it."

"You cant," said Macey.

"Try again. And keep on trying until you get it right."

"You cant," repeated Macey. "You cant, you cant, you cant..." But Macey couldn't get it right however hard he tried. The other boys laughed and pointed at him. Miss Avebury smiled at the wit of her punishment. Macey's humiliated face turned redder than a baboon's backside.

"Well it certainly tired you out," said Faith. "You hardly opened your eyes earlier."

He had a vague memory of making love with half-light drifting in through the thin white curtains, but had discounted it as something from a morning before. It had certainly been very dream-like, half in and out of consciousness. All misty and dissociated but very pleasant too. "I knew it," he said. "You *do* like doing it with robots."

He poured himself a bowl of muesli. Faith was crunching toast with honey.

"No milk," said Faith.

"Yoghurt?"

"Nuh," mumbled Faith.

Graham trod on the pedal of the white enamel bin and poured the dry muesli inside. "I thought you went shopping yesterday?"

"Didn't make it. If you're not doing anything, I thought we might go today."

She crunched on her thin toast and with her free hand flicked at speed through the pages of a magazine. Graham couldn't see what it was. She had an eccentric taste in magazines. Usually she bought titles she had absolutely no interest in, anything from coarse fishing to bakers' trade magazines. It gave her, so she said, little insights into other people's lives, what drove them, what passions were out there that she didn't share. The one type of magazine he could guarantee she wasn't reading was a women's magazine. She couldn't deal with the consumer lifestyle thing.

He walked across to the big stainless steel fridge with glass panelled doors - the one item of kitchen furniture he'd chosen - and took out a half litre of Filippo Berio extra virgin olive oil, which he like to keep cool. He put it to his lips and downed it in one long guzzle, while Faith watched, showing no emotion.

Shopping with Faith could be quite hard work, though often entertaining, but he didn't want to turn her down. "Sure, let's do that."

He moved across to stand by the sink, taking care not to block the sunlight that warmed Faith's legs. Through the sash window he could see the bin liner he'd placed outside the back door the night before. Further down the garden was a pink crisp packet. Once or twice a year, youths from the Boxington Estate, a few hundred yards away, raced across these gardens in the small hours, on their way back from a night of drinking, vaulting the fences in their own version of the Grand National and leaving a trail of litter

and slightly damaged plants, but judging the frequency just right so nobody ever caught them.

"Any news on Danielle?" he asked.

"Nothing good, no. Her kidney's are in worse shape than they thought. It'll be at least four weeks before she can come off dialysis. I'm going in to see her late this afternoon."

Faith spent an hour each day by Danielle's hospital bed, talking through the news of her world, hoping the sound of her voice would be good medicine for her sister, who slept and said nothing. This was a sister to sister thing, Graham's role was to do whatever Faith asked, and while Danielle was still unconscious, she wanted to visit on her own. As she'd explained, it was weird enough talking to somebody who wasn't even awake, without the distraction of a live audience.

The doorbell rang, a cheesy two-tone chime that had taken them an entire shopping day to track down.

"Expecting anyone?" asked Graham.

"No."

"I'll get it."

The gentleman at the front door was exactly that - an old-fashioned gentleman. Beneath his Mackintosh he wore a tweed suit with a waistcoat and a striped tie, all large and baggy to suit his overweight frame. His watery grey eyes looked over a pair of half-moon spectacles.

"Mr Graham Hastings?"

There was a second man behind and slightly to the right of the first, in a modern suit, well-worn, and with much less presence.

"That's me," said Graham.

The old-fashioned gentleman held up his left palm and opened it to show a police badge. "Detective Inspector Brydon." He nodded his head to the right. "This is Detective Sergeant Porter. We're with the Hi Tech Crime Unit, National Crime Squad. Do you mind if we come in, Mr Hastings?"

Graham tried to hide the shock. "Please do."

Then he remembered his chat session with Vince the night before, and Vince's final comment that he'd 'send somebody round in the morning'. He hadn't thought for a moment that Vince meant the police.

Inspector Brydon and Sergeant Porter waited politely in the hall while Graham closed the front door.

"Let's go through to the dining room."

"Anybody else home?" asked Brydon.

"My partner, Faith. She's not much into hi-tech."

"Good. Wouldn't want the whole world messing about with computers, would we?"

Brydon didn't seat himself immediately. He turned away from the table to study a print hanging on the dining room wall. "Now there's a villain if ever I saw one."

Graham followed Brydon's pointing finger. It led to the detail of a very old painting that showed a sixteenth century family walking past an inn. The inn had a small window, and through it could be seen two men sharing a pipe of tobacco.

"That's Sir Walter Raleigh! " protested Graham. "With Sir Hugh Myddleton, who built the New River. Hardly a pair of crooks."

Unperturbed, Brydon looked at the next painting along. This too contained an inn, and it was called The Sir Walter Raleigh.

"Passion of yours, is he?" Brydon wasn't big on eye contact. His voice was deep and crackly, very droll, but with an edge that hinted at mental agility. Sometimes he

lapsed into a Northern accent, possibly Yorkshire, though Graham wasn't sure. Other times he masked it.

"Local history, not just him. He happened to live nearby. The pub was originally his house. It's still a pub, but now under a different name, though why anybody should want to change the name when he once lived there is beyond me."

There were many more prints, but the next few Brydon came across were of fat eighteenth century cattle, which clearly didn't interest him. He lowered his broad backside into barely-upholstered dark wooden dining chair. These were from the early 1950s and uncomfortable, but had once belonged to Faith's parents, now deceased, so were unlikely to be changed.

It struck Graham that Brydon was a good decade older than the chairs, close to retirement age. He sat opposite him, where a willing interviewee would be expected to sit. He might not feel willing, but it was probably better to hide that. All Brydon had to do was scratch below the surface and he'd find enough to pull Graham deep into the mire: the smelly clothes in the garden, his conversation with Faith and saying he was going to the Thames Valley, hacking software CDs still in their plastic pouch upstairs. He couldn't even think of a decent cover story for yesterday evening, or anything close to one.

"Mr Hastings, where were you on the afternoon of Wednesday the fifteenth?"

"You mean, this Wednesday just gone?"

"I do."

"I was in... Scotland."

"And what were you doing in Scotland?"

"I was working at the Motorola semiconductor factory in East Kilbride."

"Your usual line of work?"

"Yes, I work on semiconductor process automation."

Graham wasn't sure what to make of this opening line of questioning. In the circumstances, questions about Wednesday were a relief.

Sergeant Porter produced a notebook and pen and began to make notes.

"Do you have access to the Internet at the Motorola factory?" asked Brydon.

"Yes I do, but I rarely use it. I probably picked up my email around lunchtime, that would be about it."

"Can you prove this?"

Graham frowned. "That I didn't use the Internet? I suppose it's possible, yes, but you'd have to ask Motorola for their network logs."

"Good."

Brydon had the big jowls of a hound or mastiff - flaps of flesh that superficially look comical but in reality are runoff channels for blood when a dog locks its jaw in prey, so there's no conflict between the biting and the breathing. Already Graham had him down as a highly effective investigator trying to disguise himself as a bumbling old man. He wore the delicate spectacles of an academic. His grey hair was supposed to be brushed back but often fell across his face. Yet his most outstanding feature, as Graham couldn't help but notice, was his eyebrows, which were truly spectacular.

"From your job," continued Brydon, "I would guess that your programming skills are highly advanced."

"That's correct."

For the first time since his arrival at the doorstep, Brydon made deep eye contact.

"Are you a good hacker?"

This was fine. If they could keep off the subject of yesterday, he'd willingly answer questions all day. "Do you mean, can I hack well, or do I hack responsibly?"

"Both, of course."

Graham had a shrewd idea that Brydon already knew the answers, that he was just checking to see if he'd get to hear them. Proficient hacking wasn't something Graham usually owned up to, but he doubted he could sell any other story to Brydon, so he may as well be up-front about it.

"The answer to both questions is yes. I'm premier league, and I'm an old-fashioned hacker. I hack to learn, not to destroy."

"Not many of you around, these days."

That was true. Graham counted himself as a hacker in the same way that Bill Gates was once a hacker, and Paul Allen, Microsoft's co-founder, and Steve Jobs, the creator of Apple. In the old days, hacking meant discovering everything you could about computers and their programs - your own, other people's. The aim wasn't to do damage or steal, but to learn. Destruction didn't creep in until the late eighties with the development of the first viruses. Then the Internet arrived and all kinds of flakes and crazies joined in.

"Above all else, do no harm," said Graham. This was the original hackers' ethos, now all but abandoned in the rush for money, fame and technical progress.

Brydon adjusted his glasses and pushed his hair back over his scalp, bringing Graham's attention to his eyebrows again. Did he ever comb them? Or knit them, maybe? Use shampoo on his brow rather than soap? Many ageing men could manage the barn owl look, but Brydon was up there with torn upholstery, bulrushes after a dry and windy summer, hay in a manger, werewolves on Regaine. The longest hairs had to be a good three inches.

"Have you noticed how few viruses are out there on the Internet at the moment?" began Brydon.

"I've heard it mentioned, yes."

"You're into your history, Mr Hastings. Here's a curious story for you. Early African explorers bought cysts of a stomach worm in Zanzibar before they started their expeditions. Once they were infested with this special worm, nothing else could happen to their stomachs. They couldn't get amoebic dysentery and could barely get diarrhoea, because this relatively harmless worm had its own defences that killed competitors. They had to eat a lot to feed their worms, but they didn't get stomach problems."

It was a curious tale, but Graham failed to see the relevance. "No, I'm not with you."

"Somebody is clearing the field, dominating the networks, wiping out any kind of viral competition. And they're very good at it."

"Is that a bad thing?"

Brydon looked directly into Graham's eyes for the second time. "Do you know who's doing this?"

Graham shook his head. "I really haven't a clue. I'm not part of the hacker community, not... the way it functions now. I'm not in touch."

Brydon played with his hair again. Perhaps he kept it in an unstable style so he had something to do with his hands. He could equally well have run his fingers through his eyebrows. The man could have his own little ecosystem running around in there, top-dwellers close to the sunlight, small mammals eking out an existence in the darkness below, scampering around with topiary shears in their paws, carving cockerels and helicopters in the foliage. Surely there was some European law against this - interviews conducted with overwhelming distractions - some human rights violation. No wonder the man had made it to the rank of inspector. His victims simply hadn't been concentrating.

Brydon took a grip on the table and struggled to rise. Sergeant Porter followed his lead.

"Is that it?" asked Graham.

"Do you have any travel plans?"

"Only Scotland, with work"

"I'll be in touch."

Brydon stretched to free up his ancient joints, then he looked around the room a little more. He started the other side of the Raleigh painting, with a photograph of ants in their nursery, moving eggs.

"That's one of my partner's," explained Graham.

"Broody, is she?"

"I think she would be if she could lay an egg. But she's slightly put off by the non-egg-laying method."

The next item Brydon glanced at was Faith's favourite ornament, standing on the sideboard. It was a three-masted sailing ship in a glass bottle - actually a glass ball, with no neck or other means of entry. The piece had been dated by experts at 1790, by Italian craftsman Gioni Bondi. Only two more examples of his work were known to exist, and both were in museums.

For this one item, Faith, a woman of usually modest tastes, had paid eighteen thousand pounds.

Graham wondered if Brydon would comment on it, maybe recognise its worth. He didn't, but then nobody ever did, apart from asking the obvious question of how the ship had got inside a sealed glass ball.

Brydon came back to the print showing two knights of the realm in the window of an inn.

"So what happened to Raleigh in the end?" His voice was still droll, but there was mischief in it. "How did he meet his maker?"

"He was beheaded," answered Graham, quietly.

"On what charge?"

"Treason."

Brydon sniffed loudly. "Well how about that?"

That was a finely judged show of intimidation by Vince, decided Graham, as he pondered over Brydon's visit. It had been unpleasant to have the police calling round, especially the day after he'd been involved a major crime. But the crime itself had never come up, and

the period they'd been questioning him about was relatively safe, because he had many alibis, the technicians of the Motorola factory.

That was unusual. He did most of his programming in the dining room at home, sometimes in the nude, usually not, and sent his code to headquarters in California via the Internet. Once a week he visited the company office at Haslemere in Sussex, an hour and a half by tube and train. Every third day, including weekends, he was on call and could expect to visit a couple of microchip factories, know as fabs, to fix bugs or update software in person. It didn't matter that he couldn't drive, because invariably he had to fly. Some of the fabs were in Continental Europe and some were in England, but the two he visited most often were in Scotland.

Last Wednesday he'd been on call and flown to Edinburgh, to work on two ion-implanters at East Kilbride. Usually he didn't have much contact with the Motorola technicians, but that day had been an exception, for two reasons. The first was that every computer in the place, from the central processing computer down to the hundreds of smaller computers controlling each individual process machine, had behaved like a tired two year old. It was almost impossible to keep a machine running for ten minutes. Even the crude wheeled robots that carried microchips from one assembly bay to another had gone on strike, restarting half an hour later as if nothing had happened.

And the second reason was that he'd found a condom wrapper inside one of the ion-implantation machines.

Each machine cost eight million pounds and was the size of a small bungalow, with a maintenance door in the plain metal outside wall. Inside was a vacuum chamber that glowed blue as the boron gas inside it was ripped apart, electron from atom, to create aggressive ions. And along the ceiling ran huge electro-magnets, as thick as a human body, accelerating and focusing these dangerous ions. Skull and crossbones symbols decorated the walls and internal features, in case anybody was stupid enough to walk inside while the giant machine was running.

Whoever had dropped the condom wrapper was stupid in some ways but not others. They'd figured out that almost every part of the massive production floor, the size of an exhibition hall and filled with steppers, etchers, epitaxy machines, planarisers, deposition equipment and all kinds of physical science kit with strange names, was monitored by CCTV, but nobody had thought to mount a camera inside the ion-implantation machines.

Many of the technicians were in their twenties, and around a third of them were female. Clearly some young couple had found their hormones getting the better of them during a shift, and decided the most private place to conduct their business was behind the maintenance door of the steel bungalow.

What they hadn't realised was that the condom wasn't strictly necessary. While they were standing close to the vacuum chamber they were being so heavily irradiated that by now they were both probably sterile.

Graham duly reported his find, and it was immediately checked for dust on its internal surfaces. None was found. This condom wrapper had indeed been opened inside the factory, not outside and then dropped here later by accident.

There was no dust inside this factory. A single speck of dust could wreck a microchip, so everybody on the production floor wore protective clothing: bunny -suits - polyester coveralls with a hood (no ears) - plus surgical masks, polyester booties and latex gloves, to stop flakes of their dead skin and hair falling into the machinery. They looked like white worker ants, barely distinguishable from each other except by their height and width, the shape of their noses, the colour of their eyes, and, curiously, the size of the chests of the females.

The two ants who'd taken their pleasure inside the ion-implanter might even have enjoyed the masks and latex gloves and booties. And if this union had been planned as a fetish experiment, rather than spontaneous, they might have entered the clean area with

no clothes beneath their polyester bunny-suits, so they had only to undo the long front zips to feel cool latex hands on their sensitive skin.

Unfortunately, their pleasure had cost the factory dearly. Thousands of small particles of skin and pubic hair had found their way on to the microchips being implanted at that moment. Many failed their post-production tests, a few made it through to become components of mobile phones which would fail suddenly one day, for reasons their users would never fully appreciate.

The factory managers thought the condom find amusing, a touch of light relief on a day when every computer in the place seemed to have the temperament of a hungry mule. They didn't look for the culprits, who'd already damaged themselves more than any disciplinary measure could do, instead they added two more CCTV cameras inside the implanters. Some wag suggested they could supplement the skull and crossbones signs with a symbol showing two rabbits screwing, overscored with a red diagonal line.

Graham realised that he hadn't yet told Faith this tale, and he ought to, she'd enjoy it. He didn't talk to her much about his work because most of it was too technical, but she liked to hear about people and the strange things they did, especially anything sexual.

Her attitude to sex was so open that when they'd first become a couple it had taken him months to adjust. He'd dropped his own attitudes and adopted hers, though he couldn't truly remember what his own approach had been like beforehand, in the same way that he couldn't remember much about previous girlfriends. There was life with Faith and there was life before Faith, which was fuzzy and indistinct, like it belonged to a different person.

He remembered that he'd viewed lots of Internet pornography before they were together, and she'd stopped that, in the nicest of ways.

Like many technical experts, he'd been an early Internet adopter, and watched the World Wide Web develop rapidly through the driving force of sex, pushed and pulled by the suppliers and customers of porn. Web site design, hosting, publicity, galleries, movies

and payment systems were all perfected on porn sites and from there filtered down to the remainder of the Web, the bits suitable for family viewing.

Five weeks after he'd first met her, she'd surprised him at a private moment at his computer. The embarrassment passed quickly when she smiled and asked if the pictures were having the desired effect, and if there was any way she could benefit. They viewed adult material together a couple of times, until Graham realised that Faith had subtly taken over that erotic space in his head and in doing so had cleverly turned all the porn one-dimensional.

"What's your favourite fantasy?" he'd asked her one night, after they'd made love, when he was more used to the openness. She always liked to know what he was thinking about after sex.

"I feel good right now."

"But what's your wildest fantasy?"

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes."

She'd gathered herself for a few seconds. Her body remained warm and relaxed against his skin. "I'd like you to watch while I make love to another man. I'd like to watch you watch."

Graham said nothing.

"I can feel that tension," said Faith.

"I can't help it. Jesus! Who?"

"What do you mean, who?"

"Who would you... be doing it with?"

"I don't know. Maybe an actor. Keanu Reeves, Brad Pitt. Somebody rich and famous."

"So it's not a real fantasy?"

Faith chuckled, her body moving rhythmically up and down Graham's chest.

"What?" he protested.

"Would monsieur like to explain the difference between a real fantasy and an unreal fantasy?"

"Well, yes," said Graham, flustering. "A real fantasy is one you might put into practice, and an unreal one is impractical for some reason."

"Impracticable."

"Ok, ok, impracticable. Unreal, impracticable. Do you expect to get a famous actor to sleep with you?"

"Why, do you think they'd find me unattractive?"

The point where Graham regretted bringing the subject up had passed some time ago - with Faith's first answer. Right now he had that desperate feeling of setting off on the black slope and seeing after a hundred yards why the ski instructors had all said don't do it.

"No, of course not."

"We could always hire a look-alike."

Graham, now entirely unrelaxed and fidgety, tried to figure out how to bring the conversation back to somewhere less scary, but failed. "Are you serious?"

Faith rose from his body and started laughing in earnest. Not loudly or even rudely but with simple joy.

"You bastard," said Graham, softly and without malice.

Faith turned on him and pointed a finger, which he could just about make out in the darkness. Her tone was still playful, not critical. "Hey, it's a simple rule and you tell me if you think I've ever broken it. Don't ask a question if you won't be able to deal with the answer. Now then, do you want to know if I'm serious?"

"No."

That was how he'd learned - and he'd learned so much from Faith - that openness is no more absolute than closedness, just a matter of degree.

Vince's Desire

Andrew Starling

Chapter 7

Graham waited at the threshold, at the top of the steps down to the pavement, while Faith prepared herself. She rarely wore make-up, just occasional gaudy lipstick, yet it could still take her fifteen minutes to get ready to go out. What she did in that time was one of the mysteries of the sexes, and he was so sure that he wouldn't understand that he'd never been tempted to ask.

It was a beautiful day for waiting, much warmer than it should have been for spring still turning into summer. Small clouds littered the sky, little puffs of steam pulled out of shape by high-altitude winds. Give or take a few lampposts, telegraph wires, tarmac and cars, this pretty street wouldn't have looked much different a hundred years ago. He took in all the lovely Georgian townhouses joined wall to wall in what might have been called a terrace if they hadn't been worth a million pounds each, and the church opposite, the same church he'd viewed in darkness the night before, with different thoughts in his head, now in daylight. Five years ago its walls had been steam-cleaned, but they were beginning to stain again, from the inside. London's smoke had become embedded in its bricks, though oddly this gave the church an organic look, like it was made of living bricks rather than dead ones.

Faith arrived next to him and they set off towards the Angel shopping district. Their street was filled with parked German cars - BMW's, Mercedes, Audi coupes. Graham's neighbours were lawyers and bankers, still trying to get used to the idea of a mere computer professional affording the million-pound entry fee to their select community.

Seventy years ago, this area had been a slum, now it was as expensive as Kensington or Chelsea, though little bits of the old order clung on, in council flats built in the gaps where Hitler's bombs had fallen - those that hadn't been sold off in the Thatcher era - and in the sixties blocks of the nearby Boxington Estate. Two hundred yards away,

just out of sight, a traditional North London pub, the Trouble With Fish, survived on the custom of these true locals. Graham and his neighbours would never dream of visiting this bar, any more than they would imagine joining a school of dolphins.

At dinner-parties and barbecues his neighbours would ask him what he did for a living, and he would reply, 'Something to do with computers.' That made him a man with no clear social status. The more curious of his neighbours wanted more details, wanted to understand this strange phenomenon of a mere technical person enjoying enough money to live alongside them; this representative of a new power in a world of long-established professions, a representative of the digerati, that peculiar group of individuals who can adjust their heads to ones and zeroes, when most people cannot. Their interest in him was sociological. Then they'd get bored and turn to Faith, who was more attractive and more approachable, since she worked in TV production, and at least TV was real.

"So," said Faith, "they wanted to know what you were doing on Wednesday, and you were working in Scotland."

"That's about it."

She squeezed his hand. "Sweetheart, I don't want you getting in trouble with the police."

"I know."

He still hadn't told her about Vince, but there was no hurry. Vince was all about technology, not one of Faith's priorities.

They passed her car, Mrs Mipps, a fifteen-year-old automatic Mercedes from the company's bad design era, in a filthy mustard colour and decorated with minor dents down both sides. It was what Faith called a London car, easier to drive around the confined streets than a new model, because other drivers saw the state of the bodywork and allowed extra space.

Shopping on her own, she liked to take Mrs Mipps rather than struggle with heavy bags, but with her donkey with her, as she affectionately called Graham on these

occasions, she preferred to walk. The supermarket was only a fifteen minute stroll away, and queuing for the car park could take longer.

They walked through the odd chicane at the end of the street where the road narrowed to a single carriageway, between ancient houses built with no anticipation of the motor car. As they approached Essex Road the traffic noise increased, like the sound of an approaching waterfall along an explorer's tributary. Then on to Essex Road and whoosh! The whole rush of London. Red buses, black taxis, multicoloured cars. Traffic snaking by then snarling up. Hundreds of people walking urgently on the pavement, all going somewhere. Rubbish in the gutters, close to the bins but not quite in them, filling any crease between the horizontal and the vertical, twirling in slipstreams. Islington Green over to the right with its magnificent plane trees and drunks on the park benches, Sir Hugh Myddleton's statue pompously looking away from them, his head and shoulders white with pigeon shit. The first restaurants - Browns, the Afghan Kitchen, Pizza Express. Then Upper Street joining Essex Road from the right to create the real heart of the Angel, with its incredible mass of restaurants and bars - eighty of them on Upper Street alone.

Graham and Faith crossed the zebra by the Business Design Centre to reach the causeway, the wide pavement on the west side of Upper Street, raised six feet above road level. Restaurateurs were making the most of the warm weather and had their plastic or metal chairs set out on the paving stones, continental style, though there were few clients. On a warm summer weekend night, a few thousand young people would turn up here on the causeway and around Islington Green to drink and ogle the opposite sex, or, for a lot of Islington men, the same sex.

Graham called by at a cash machine to refill his wallet. He typed in his number and clicked the key for a hundred pounds. An unusual message appeared at the bottom of the screen.

—You can have fifty, Vince.

"What's wrong?" asked Faith.

"Damn thing will only give me fifty."

"We could try another."

"It doesn't matter."

Graham took his fifty pounds from the slot and contemplated Vince's message.

That was pure power-play, a demonstration that Vince had the power to give or withhold funds as he felt fit. After all, money was a virtual commodity, not stored in gold or currency any more, but in ones and zeros in banking computers, and Vince was a virtual being. He and the world's money were flatmates, sharing the same domain.

At Liverpool Road they turned off Upper Street and walked past Marks and Spencer, and Woolworth, and into Sainsbury's supermarket.

Faith started off reasonably enough, pausing by the trimmed leeks, courgettes and mange tout, handling packs of avocados and artichokes before returning them to the shelves. For a couple of minutes, Graham felt there was a chance this could turn into a normal shopping expedition. At least he couldn't find an obvious pattern in what she was doing, and generally when things went wrong there was a pattern.

On the meat aisle she paused at pre-packed chicken, pork and lamb, even choosing between different cuts of the same meat before moving on, her trolley still empty.

Graham stayed quiet. Once she was in here, fending off baskets and running with the rest of the trolley gladiators, locked into her own strange version of the consumer thing, she was beyond communication. Not that he had any preferences to state. He really didn't care much about food.

The meat in its plastic packs looked particularly unappealing, lines of uniform pink flesh under fluorescent lights, white fat, never yellow, moist flesh but never blood. There was something deeply unnatural about it, a kind of themepark version of meat. The supermarket punters didn't want to associate these products with life, or more specifically with death, the death of animals, and with this blandness of uniformity,

packaging and lighting the supermarket got the dissociation just right. These meat-like products looked like they had been produced in a factory, not a farm. No animal had ever died making them. At least not a real one, just artificial ones produced through years of intensive breeding, unreal humanised animals, sheep too fat to run, beachball-sized turkeys with legs thicker than human arms, cows that have to be milked every day or their udders burst, and pigs weighing more than a motorcycle.

This particular part of London, this area that Graham adored for its history, had a long association with the capital's meat industry, going back seven hundred years or more. Before the railways arrived and changed everything, drovers herded their sheep and cattle and turkeys along Upper Street, just a hundred yards away, walking here with a thousand oxen from as far afield as Scotland to get the best price at London's main meat market, Smithfield, a few miles further south. They rested overnight in Islington, before approaching Smithfield next morning.

The fat cattle in the paintings on Graham's dining room wall were part of this Smithfield history, and so was the raised causeway on the western side of Upper Street, now home to restaurateurs' chairs and tables. It had been built around 1600 to keep pedestrians' feet out of the mud and mire of the drovers' route. The Islington inns shown on the dining room wall were where the drovers stayed. Next day, they'd sell their herds to Smithfield butchers' merchants, who had them herded down to the Fleet river to be slaughtered. The Fleet was eventually covered over and became Farringdon Road, leading to Fleet Street, but in the early days the slaughterers killed and dressed the animals by the riverside and brushed the entrails into the river, giving it another name - the Red Fleet. This practice was stopped hundreds of years ago, an early example of a sanitization process refined through the ages until it magically produced meat-like products with no real animals involved.

Faith moved away from the themepark meat section. This wasn't turning out well, decided Graham. She was going through all the normal motions of supermarket shopping

except one - putting stuff in her trolley. Not good at all. The equivalent of little wisps of cloud in a sky that foretell of next day's storm.

She went back to the fruit and veg section for a second go. Graham stayed silent, trying not to think too hard, watching the lioness circle the vegan version of zebras and make up her mind. She did three or four full circuits of the greenery, slowed by the mass of other trolleys and hand-baskets hanging from people's arms.

"Too busy," she said, almost inaudibly. "Tut tut. Tomatoes for a pound eighty. Who do they think we are?"

Still Faith had chosen nothing. She continued to circle. Graham stifled a sigh. More clouds. More unnatural produce. When Adam bit an apple, was it a Granny Smith, a Braeburn or a Golden Delicious? Potatoes originally came from the Andes, but did Jersey Royals? Grapes growing without seeds to reproduce - hardly the outcome of natural selection. Like insipid meat, all these products were mankind's choices, not nature's. Without humans, barely any of them would exist.

Faith had been in the supermarket for fifteen minutes and still hadn't selected a single item. She took the trolley back to the entrance door and dumped it, ignoring the pound deposit. "We need a basket."

"Sure." Graham chose a basket with handles approximately straight. By the time he looked up, Faith was twenty feet away. "Good Lord."

She hadn't gone back to the shelves, she'd gone straight to the nearest checkout. Eight people were in the queue. They watched her pick among the pile of leftovers that other customers had brought as far as the conveyor before realising they didn't want them or couldn't afford them.

"Excuse me." She made her choice from the discard pile - a packet of Wheatabix, a can of kidney beans, a half-pound bundle of asparagus and two avocados.

Graham arrived with the basket. At the next checkout Faith found a bag of mixed lettuce and two frozen éclairs. The third conveyor offered better leftovers, including a tin

of salmon, a box of chocolates and a bottle of blush Californian wine. And so it went on. At the eighth counter was a box of panty-shields. "Ah, that's lucky," said Faith. At the tenth, a whole litre of Luccese extra virgin olive oil. "One of your favourites."

People did stare, mainly at Faith but also sometimes at Graham. 'Do you know your partner's mad?' said the stares. He didn't feel embarrassed, just slightly self-conscious. At least everybody gave them a wide berth when they broke through a queue to reach the next haul. He felt they were doing a grand job of supplying entertainment to the bored faces waiting to pay.

And what a mixed audience of bored faces it was. Parents with small children, old people with lightly loaded trolleys, Middle European women in drab clothes and equally dull shawls, a few Islamic women showing nothing but their eyes and hands, middle-aged men with twitches, young men in branded jackets and trainers, the odd beauty, some monsters from the deep. All the world was here. Well, perhaps not the poorest, who right now might be in the Iceland store or at a stall on Chapel Market, and not the discerning rich, who drove to Waitrose in Holloway, but a good mix of the middle without extremes. A supermarket was always a great place to see society as a whole. Pubs were mainly for young people, and restaurants for the childless and well-off. The vast majority of the population kept itself to itself and maybe snuck off to work in the day but otherwise sat at home with the kids, perhaps with the TV on, getting on with the important business of populating the planet, until it was time for the weekly shopping expedition and they pitched up here for a rare public showing.

As Graham was stared at by all the glum faces, and as he inspected them back, it struck him how similar this oddball mix of people was to the aisles of meat and racks of fruit and vegetables. Similar in a physical way, of course, since many of the molecules of skin he was looking at had originally been bought as food in this supermarket, but also in a genetic way. Survival of the fittest no longer applied to people any more than it applied to sheep or pigs or grapes or oranges. All these humans were the product of human

selection. And humanity's view of human selection - at least in European countries - is that all should survive. Take away this non-selection process and the modern medical care that accomplishes it, rely solely on nature and evolution, survival of the fittest, and this supermarket would be almost empty, populated by a handful of freaks who'd gone through their lives with no accidents, no inoculations, and no life-threatening diseases, rather than the ragtag bundle of mis-shapes he found himself looking at right now.

By the time they'd reached the twelfth conveyor, Faith had pretty much finished her shopping. She was beginning to take stuff out of the basket and swap it for better quality leftovers at the next checkout. Somehow the basics had arrived - bread, a fancy and expensive *pain de campagne*, a pint of milk, and of course Graham's olive oil - plus exotics like a pack of ostrich steaks and a tin of Italian octopus in its own ink. Looking into the basket, Graham was surprised to see how well things had turned out. She'd often dabbled in leftovers as they waited at a checkout, but this was the first time she'd completely ignored the shelves. It had been fast, easy, and the result was fairly complete and far from dull. It was an astonishing success.

"Excuse me, excuse me." A Sainsbury supervisor tried to get Faith's attention.

"What are you doing?"

"Shopping."

The supervisor was in her late thirties. She had an air of efficiency, a busy person who makes quick decisions and gets things done. Although her voice was authoritative there was no edge to it. Her tone with Faith was more of concern.

"It's not a good idea to shop from the tills," she said. "Some of the refrigerated and frozen goods may be warm."

"I'll look out for that," said Faith.

The supervisor inspected Faith for a few seconds, took in her lack of make-up, her mass of dark hair, then inspected Graham and seemed to decide these were just two

regular Islington space cadets and not worth her time. She pulled a stern and mildly unhappy face and walked away.

Faith joined the end of a short queue for baskets only. Graham followed. Quite out of the blue, he realised that despite the traumas of the last twenty-four hours he was very happy, and doubly happy to be with Faith right now. Sometimes her strange and unpredictable shopping behaviour bugged him. But today, for no reason he could fathom, it had inspired him with a sudden burst of love and affection. He wouldn't want to be anywhere else right now apart from standing next to this wonderful woman he shared his life with. It hit so hard his eyes began to glisten.

He watched the checkout and an old woman chatting to the assistant while packing her bags, very slowly, life run at a different pace. And when her bill was announced, naturally it came as a surprise. She spent a while looking for her purse, like it was the last thing she'd imagine needing at a checkout.

"Do you remember my first line?" he asked Faith, as their own shopping had its bar codes scanned, and all those small black lines were transformed by computer into prices and product descriptions, except the three lines at beginning, middle and end, the three check-lines, the three sixes, 666. The question was kind of relevant to what he'd been thinking before.

"Of course. 'Do you think evolution's been a success?'"

That was the one, at Zap in Brighton. She was standing at the bar in a backless dress having her order messed up by a dumb bartender. His strange first line dissolved her irritation.

"It was a crummy line, but I fancied you anyway."

She always said that. This was a conversation they'd had before, and no doubt would have again.

The checkout assistant asked for thirty-four pounds fifty-six pence. Graham handed over a credit card.

"I think evolution's been deselected," he said, "fizzled out, reached a dead-end."

"If it's taken you that long to come up with an answer," replied Faith, "you could be right."

Graham grinned.

The assistant rang the bell for a supervisor. The same woman appeared, very quickly, like she might have been watching this particular till and expecting trouble from it. She looked at the till screen. "I'm sorry, sir, your card is on the list to be retained."

"What do you mean?"

"Your bank has issued instructions for this card to be retained when it's presented."

"But why?"

"I'm sorry, you'll have to talk to your bank about that. Do you have an alternative means of payment?"

"We can pay cash," said Faith.

What was going on here? - wondered Graham. There were thousands of pounds of credit left on that card. But there had been thousands of pounds in the account he'd accessed at the cash machine.

This was Vince again, being a pain.

Chapter 8

Graham was hoping for a relaxing afternoon, Lightning Hopkins on the stereo, cycle racing on TV with the sound turned off, and a browse through The Independent, but it was not to be. After twenty minutes the telephone rang and Faith, wherever she was in the house, answered it. She burst into the front room a few minutes later.

"Danielle's woken up! I mean, she's fully awake, back to normal."

"That's great news."

Faith paused. "There is a catch. She wants to be disconnected from the dialysis machine."

"Ah."

"I talked to her doctor, she wants me to go to the hospital and talk her out of it. Are you coming?"

Previously she'd dissuaded him from visiting, so this was more than a casual invitation.

"Of course."

She already held the keys for Mrs Mipps in her hand, and now simply marched out of the house, demonstrating how quick she could be when the journey wasn't trivial.

"Dr Harrison, she said it was far too early to disconnect Danielle, a huge risk," explained Faith, moments later in the old Mercedes, as they waited for a white delivery van to scream through the chicane at the top of St Peter's Street. "Anyway, Danielle isn't in a fit state to make the decision." The van drove past, scraping loudly on the speed bumps. Faith took her turn through the constriction. "But it's fantastic that she's back to normal. I mean that *is* normal. First thing she does is have an argument with her doctor."

Faith had generally masked her distress while Danielle had been seriously unwell. But now she was better, the relief was clear in Faith's buoyant mood. She eased the car into the Essex Road traffic, then turned right to cross the foot of Islington Green. They

passed Waterstones on their right, once Collins Music Hall, where Charlie Chaplin and Gracie Fields had entertained the crowds before cinemas came along and stole the audience of the music halls. Elsewhere in the borough were the many cinemas that had been converted into something else when they in turn had lost their audience to TV.

"I left your computer on."

Faith used Graham's laptop for her email, but was so careful not to change anything and to put the machine back where it belonged that he often forgot it was sometimes shared.

"That's OK."

"I'm still careful. I don't open any email attachment that arrives out of the blue, even if it's from somebody I know."

"That's good."

"And no unprotected sex with total strangers."

"I'm not too worried about that," said Graham, dryly, "just be careful with your emails."

She had another difficult junction to negotiate, this one from Islington Green on to Upper Street. Parked cars obscured her view. She edged forward until she blocked the southbound lane, then waited for some kind soul to let her into the northbound queue. Before it happened, a baulked BMW arrived next to her window, and the young man at the wheel honked his horn,

"Oh fuck off," said Faith, softly, at the same time giving the driver her most charming smile.

He gave her a longer burst on his horn. Faith leaned towards Graham, grabbed his right arm and dragged it across to the steering wheel to sound her own.

"What was all that about?" asked Graham, as a car finally let them in and Mrs Mipps joined the northbound crawl along Upper Street.

"He was pipping at you, so I thought you might like to pip back."

"At me? You were driving."

"No, that wouldn't have happened if I was on my own. Lone cow invades territory, bull in field attempts to look cool. Cow and bull invade territory together, bull already in field stamps his feet and roars. You just roared back."

Graham thought about it. A rather cynical view of his gender, but it was probably true. As a non-driver, he didn't have much experience of road psychology.

"Women use the horn to stop kids stepping out in front of them," continued Faith. "Men think it's there for territorial display. That's why big trucks have macho horns and mopeds have little tinny ones."

"I don't suppose the difference in sound might just help people tell a big vehicle from a small one."

"Are you telling me that size isn't part of display?"

They crawled through the prettiest part of Upper Street, past the scores of small bars and restaurants and shops in the ground floors of early nineteenth century buildings. Graham watched the scenery of pedestrians and old frontages. "Actually, men continually check their horns just to make sure they'll work when a kid steps out."

He heard Faith's amused snort.

"Seriously, your horn button's a bit sticky," he added.

"I'll try to get annoyed more often."

On the left was the Finnock and Firkin pub, once called the Sir Walter Raleigh, where the man himself had lived when the building still looked like the painting on Graham's wall.

"Maybe it's time Mrs Mipps retired," he suggested.

"Careful. She might hear you. Anyway, I don't want a modern car. They're all the same."

"How can that possibly be? They're all designed by different computers."

On their left, they passed the oldest building on Upper Street, from 1620, set back, small and insignificant. Few of the pedestrians passing by would have any idea of its age.

"Do you give computers names?" asked Faith, idly. "I mean professionals in general - do you give computers names?"

Graham was on the verge of saying no, then hesitated. "Well, if they're networked together, we have to give them names so we can tell which one's which. So servers usually have names."

"You could give them numbers instead."

"That happens too, but names are easier to remember."

"I could never give a computer a name, any more than I could give one to a TV. No character."

"Really? I think they have the character of their operating system. Take Windows for example - an over-helpful maiden aunty, forever ready with a plate of sandwiches when it's a drink you really need, and liable to faint in a crisis."

That seemed a good note to end the conversation. It was closer to Graham's work than they usually strayed.

They reached the end of Upper Street and the big one-way system of Highbury Corner, with its acre of trees and grass in the centre. In the early 1940s this was still a cramped crossroads that could never have coped with modern traffic, until a V2 rocket arrived.

From there they carried on in silence, following the exact reverse of the old North London cattle drovers' route, along Holloway Road to Archway, and up Highgate Hill as far as the Whittington Hospital.

The total journey was less than four miles, yet took half an hour by car. Two hundred years ago it would have taken the same time by horse and carriage. Modern technology, decided Graham, hadn't improved the speed of travel, just the comfort -

better suspension, better seats and less chance of somebody's wheels in front spraying you with cowdung and horse manure. Up to 3,000 cattle a day trudged down this route, and none had control over their bowels. Downwind, it would have been possible to smell the road before seeing it.

This old drovers route eventually became the A1. Then the railway era arrived and eclipsed cobblestone and dirt, until mass-produced cars and tarmacadam switched loyalties back to the roads. Cattle that had once been herded on the hoof from Scotland all the way to Upper Street and Smithfield Market, took to the railways, then refrigerated lorries on the A1 and M1, arriving at the market dead rather than alive, as meat butchered in the abattoirs of the north, minus all their messy blood and guts and dung.

Danielle didn't look great. She'd never had much flesh and now had less. Her green hair missed its maintenance - after just a few days it was beginning to show ruddy-brown roots, the same colour as Faith's cascade.

Faith marched up to the hospital bed and assessed the various tubes and wires connecting Danielle to medical machinery, including an oxygen mask over her mouth and nose. She found a free spot and bent down to kiss Danielle's cheek, hugging her lightly to avoid disturbing the apparatus.

When she rose, Graham could see her eyes were glistening. The two sisters had always been close, and doubly so after their parents had died six years ago. That was a year before Graham had met Faith. Her parents had been touring North Yorkshire on a motorcycle and hit a milk truck on the moors, had instantly offered their lives as tribute to the god of the private motor vehicle - a very demanding god who required the sacrifice of one in 20,000 of the population each year.

Danielle shared many of her sister's qualities, which inevitably meant that Graham adored her too. She looked a lot like Faith - her nose, eyes, the shape of her hands - just smaller in stature. They shared many attitudes. Whenever Graham looked at Danielle or listened to her, he saw or heard something of his partner.

He had to admit that in normal circumstances the similarities made her sexually attractive too. He'd sometimes wondered if that was a bad thing, but decided on balance it wasn't. Since he found Faith so irresistibly gorgeous, it made sense that he found somebody who looked, sounded and often acted like her attractive too. It wasn't as if they had plans for each other. Occasionally they flirted, but he knew she felt the same way - they both cared too much about Faith for it to go beyond the simple recognition of attraction.

Not that she was attractive now. Her mop of dyed hair lay vivid green against the pillow, reflecting back into her white cheeks. She looked like an alien.

"So, how are you, Dee?" asked Faith.

A strong smell of antiseptic competed with the many lotions and liniments of medical care.

"Better ask the doctor. I think I'm feeling not too bad, she thinks I'm feeling shit. Can you believe this? - she told me that digesting vegetable protein leaves more waste in the blood than animal protein, and it would be easier on my kidneys if I could eat a little meat. That's just total crap. Where do these people learn this stuff?"

That was wonderful to hear, that Danielle had lost none of her bolshiness, that while lying in a hospital bed she could begin a conversation with the inadequacies of doctors. It was confirmation that her mind at least was now functioning as normal.

"I talked to her," said Faith. "Dr Harrison. She said they had to operate on one of your kidneys to stop the bleeding. It'll be while before they're working properly again."

Tubes came out of Danielle's arm and neck, her nose too, a couple more disappeared beneath the bedsheets. There were so many it wasn't easy to work out how

many machines, drips and receptacles she was connected to. She reminded Graham of an old school project in fluid logic.

She turned her head towards Graham. Maybe she didn't want to discuss her kidneys just yet. "Hello, Graham." Her voice was muffled by the oxygen mask. Normally it sounded so much like Faith's.

"It was named after Dick Whittington, you know - the hospital," he said.

"That's so comforting. I'm in a medical institution named after a pantomime character who gave away his cat in return for great wealth."

"He was also Lord Mayor of London and left most of his fortune to charity. Not a bad chap."

"Good. Remorse. So not a complete pillock. It would feel worse being in a hospital named after a total wanker."

"And there's no evidence that he ever had a cat."

"Well he didn't have it for long, did he? Had it whisked off to Africa and sold so it could chase mice and rats in the court of some Barbary king, who probably broke its tail." Danielle's rate of breathing increased from the effort of verbal exercise.

"I think you're mixing up your Moors with your Malaysians."

Faith coughed, very pointedly, from her seat on the other side of the bed.

Danielle turned back to her. "How's Tom?"

That was her name for her bike - Tom Cruise. A female cyclist's joke.

"Bicycle by Picasso, I'm afraid."

"It wasn't my fault. All the lights were green."

"I believe you".

Danielle glanced at Graham, but she was too slow and he caught the movement and turned away.

He wouldn't be so easy to convince. He'd seen her out there on the highways doing battle a couple of times. She was one of those cyclists who felt that red lights were

only for motorised vehicles, and that pavements weren't just for pedestrians. Her cycle riding was so cavalier it made car drivers appear relatively considerate and responsible.

"And it wasn't like I was coming in from a side road, or the pavement," added Danielle. "I was on the main road, turning on to Baker Street, in a filter lane, just along from Madame Tussaud's."

The oxygen mask hissed, a heart monitor beeped regularly, two screens showed green text that made absolutely no sense to Graham despite all his computer expertise.

"The doctor says you really need to stay on dialysis for a while," said Faith. "Just a few weeks, until your kidneys have healed. It's... Dee, it's essential."

"I don't like that machine. I don't want to use it."

The dialyzer was on a trolley by Graham's side of the bed. It wasn't an attractive piece of apparatus. It was about half the size of a domestic washing machine with four vertical filter tubes at the front and plenty of dials and switches, plus a black screen showing green words and a couple of graphs. It looked like it belonged in a chemistry laboratory,

"It's only a machine," said Faith.

"When they were first developed," explained Danielle, "they were tested on animals. And you know I don't use anything that involves animal testing."

"That's fine for shampoo and cosmetics," said Faith, gently, "but this is a medical issue. You need this machine to help you recover."

"If I gave up my principles every time I was ill, they wouldn't count for much, would they?"

When their parents had died, Danielle and Faith became rich - at least a million pounds each. Mr Pemberton had been a successful businessman and engineer, making lightweight parts for passenger aircraft seats in his own small factory. But Danielle found the wealth incompatible with her views on society and her desire for a fairer world, so she gave it away, mainly to African charities. She gave it *all* away, as far as anybody could

tell. Whether people approved or not, and some thought this was downright stupid, it certainly answered the question of whether her principles were real or pretend.

Graham had no idea what Faith had done with her share of the inheritance. His specialist skills and the huge amounts of cash flowing through his industry excused him from money concerns. Presumably the majority was sitting in a bank or unit trust somewhere. She didn't talk about it and he didn't feel the need to ask.

Faith had her eyes closed.

"Do you think animals were harmed when these machine were developed?"

Graham asked Danielle.

"Of course. I bet they took the kidneys out of some poor chimps to see how long they would last hooked up to this monstrosity. Then when the tests were over, the animals were thrown in the bin. I don't want to benefit from that. It shouldn't be allowed."

Faith's head lowered. She stroked her eyebrows with her right hand.

"I've told the doctor about this," said Danielle, "but she closes her ears and tells me it was tested on dogs and rabbits, not chimpanzees. But I know doctors lie. There are only 200,000 chimpanzees left in the wild, because people keep killing them to eat them, and a few thousand in captivity. But do we keep those for breeding? Oh no, just a few hundred, the rest are for biomedical research. We give them HIV, hepatitis and malaria to test our drugs. They die young, after years in solitary confinement. They're the closest species to us, 98% the same genes, so we either kill and eat them or run experiments on them. It's disgusting and immoral and I want no part of it - medical or not."

Graham could have responded that we share 50% of our genes with a banana, but humour wasn't going to be the way out of this. Faith was trying not to cry. It was painful to see her this way. There had to be a solution, and he'd better think of it.

"OK. Let's assume that some chimps did die when this machine was developed.

Maybe a dozen of them. And you think these were sentient and thoughtful creatures who shouldn't have died that way. Right?"

"Absolutely."

"Then in their final moments, when they realised they were about to die, what do you think their last wishes would have been? Would they have wanted these machines they'd given their lives for to be used only by uncaring humans who don't give a damn about animal welfare, while people like you, who do care, refuse to use them, and get weaker and fewer as a result, less able to fight on their behalf? Or would they see things a different way? What would *their* choice be?"

There was that sisterly resemblance again. The look he was getting from Danielle right now, he'd seen in Faith's eyes just once or twice, when he'd really said something wrong. She carried on scowling at him. Faith's head came up, watching and waiting.

"That's a bastard argument," said Danielle, eventually.

"Well, I'm not saying it's flawless, but I thought maybe you'd want to do right by the animals whose lives were lost."

The more time passed without a reply, the surer he was that he'd won Danielle over.

"I still think the machine's got bad vibes," said Danielle.

That was good. No animal argument there. Graham inspected the dialyzer in detail, trying to pick up some feeling about it either way. It looked ugly but was keeping Danielle alive, so on balance he felt quite positive towards it. The indecipherable graphs and words on the screen were some kind of blood test or filter monitoring, presumably.

"You will tell me first if you... have second thoughts?" he heard Faith say. "Get the doctor to phone me. Promise?"

There was no answer from Danielle, but Faith didn't continue, so by nod or by default the promise must have been made.

As Graham watched the screen, its small words suddenly changed.

—Graham, have I convinced you yet? Vince.

How? He turned to scan the ceiling for a CCTV camera. There it was. He'd better turn back before anybody noticed. Incredible. Vince wasn't just inside the hospital's computer system, he was inside its individual machines, inside its CCTV, inside the dialyzer, and he knew what Graham looked like.

"Something wrong?" asked Danielle.

"No. No. Just a weird reflection on the screen. I wondered where it came from. That's all." The display changed back to unfathomable words and graphs, and Graham tried his best to change his face back to the way it had looked before he'd seen the message. Vince messing about with his bank account and credit card he could handle, but the thought of thought of him lurking inside Danielle's medical equipment was appalling

Chapter 9

Graham got the call he least wanted at 10.35 the next morning. He was sitting at his laptop in the dining room, double-checking the new software he'd produced for V-Ultrachip manufacturing. Faith was in the TV room, researching video tapes for work. She didn't answer the phone after five rings, so Graham picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Mr Hastings?"

"That's me."

"Oh, I'm glad you answered. This is Dr Harrison from the Whittington Hospital. You're Faith Pemberton's partner, is that correct?"

This didn't sound good. The woman's tone was over-sincere.

"I am."

"Unfortunately I have bad news. I thought in the circumstances it might be better for me to contact you first, because I feel this may be something of a shock for your partner. I'm sorry to tell you that Danielle Pemberton passed away this morning a little before 9.30 a.m. We're fairly sure the cause was a ruptured and infected kidney, but there'll need to be an autopsy."

Graham stared blankly ahead, at a painting of the Durham Ox on the dining room wall, but didn't see it.

"Mr Hastings, are you still there?"

"Yes."

"I am very sorry. I realise it may be difficult for you to talk right now. It may be better for me to call later, when you've broken the news to Faith. We'll need to discuss the arrangements. Would you like me to use this line or would a mobile be preferable?"

"A mobile."

She asked for his number and mechanically he gave it. He put the phone down and gulped hard, then again, and again, trying to block out the feelings and keep his composure. He had to be strong. This was going to devastate Faith, and he had to be the one who stayed in control because it wasn't fair to expect her to deal with this in any way but badly. This was going to break her apart, and it would be down to him to keep the pieces in some semblance of order, to support the woman he loved no matter how bad he might feel himself.

He breathed deeply for a timed minute, then stood up before the aftershock began to arrive, while the adrenalin was still keeping it at bay, and headed for the TV room. Faith was sitting on the carpet, her back against the sofa, watching an old documentary on tape. The curtains at the window were open, which was rare, but the curtains of the sky were closed with cloud and drizzle.

"That wasn't the hospital, was it?" she asked, without looking.

Graham opened his mouth to speak, not knowing what was going to come out but knowing it would come from the heart and that was probably the best he could do.

"Sweetheart..."

She heard the tone, looked at his face and gasped. At that moment the mobile in his shirt pocket began to ring. He took it out. The phone hadn't recognised the number, and it usually did. It could be the hospital.

"Hello?"

It was, and the same female doctor's voice.

"Oh, Graham, I'm glad to have caught you. There's been a terrible mistake."

He felt the relief on his skin like cool water. "Thank God for that."

"Yes, she didn't die this morning, it must have been late yesterday evening, just after you visited, but we've only just noticed. It has to be a while because the body's starting to decompose."

His mouth was open, but no sound came out.

"Awful way to die, spasms, choking, the entire room is covered in piss and shit, I can't understand how we didn't notice." That sentence had started out with the female doctor's voice, but by the time it ended it was male. "What do you think?" asked the voice. "It's my latest development - speech synthesis. I got bored with email and thought I could use a voice, or voices. Sounds like I had you fooled."

For the third time in five minutes, Graham found himself without words.

Faith's expression pleaded with him. He waved a finger in a signal of cancellation. "It's all right," he croaked. "A mistake."

And the rest of what he was about to say, it was better she didn't hear. He turned and walked back to the dining room, closed the door and screamed into the mouthpiece every obscenity he could think of, and some he didn't even know he knew, adding a couple in schoolboy French and Spanish for good measure, and not stopping till he'd repeated most of them and turned red in the face and banged his fist against the table and made it absolutely clear that it was Vince he was applying these words to, by name, and telling him that although he wasn't a violent man, if Vince had a body and was standing in the same room as him now, he would cause him so much damage that the ambulance crew would need a shovel.

"My, oh my," said Vince, when the tirade was over. "Well I certainly struck the mother-lode there, didn't I? That was just a little demonstration of what *might* happen, a dry run, to help you become more cooperative."

Graham started on the obscenities again, then realised how pointless that was. "What the fuck do you think I'm going to do for you?"

"I still need you to analyse the Foxglove program for me and build a defence."

"You can whistle."

"That seems a little forthright to say to somebody who has control over Danielle's dialysis machine."

"If you do anything to her, I'll..."

"Yes? Go on. I'm listening."

Graham closed his eyes and concentrated on steady breathing.

"I do a fine impression of a doctor, don't you think?" said Vince. "Maybe Faith would like to hear it?"

"NO!" The line went dead. "NO! NO!"

Graham dived for the landline phone on the sideboard and knocked the receiver off the hook. Faith didn't have a mobile, she didn't like them. He dabbed at the menu buttons on his own cellphone, clumsy with rage. Received calls, Options, Dial.

"Vince!"

"Do you want to negotiate?"

"Yes." The submission was painless, easy, automatic.

"Good. You analyse the Foxglove program today and create a defence, and then I leave you alone. How does that sound?"

"No more calls? No interference with Danielle?"

"No more calls, no meddling at the hospital, and all privileges restored. All in exchange for a measly few hours of work."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"It's a deal."

Apart from a brief glance at the code when he was in the Foxglove building, Graham hadn't looked at the program he'd saved on the CD. It was called gp41 and was written in C++.

On the off chance that he might find something relevant, once he'd calmed down he ran an Internet search for information on gp41. There were no matches for computer

programs, but he did find out where the name came from. It was the name of a protein used by the HIV virus to infect healthy cells, a helix of protein coiled in the manner of a spring, that fired itself like a harpoon through the wall of a target cell, then reeled itself in to get close contact and finish the job. Scientist's called it HIV's 'grappling hook'.

Influenza and the awesome Ebola used a similar brutal mechanism.

When he looked in detail at the gp41 computer program, he found it operated in a similar invasive way. The first part of the program was a hunter element, identifying any programs associated with Vince by recognising the high level of communication between them. The second part pinpointed where those programs resided, where they were physically on disk or in memory, and the third element was the killer, the harpoon, firing a few small items of trash code into those sectors and corrupting them.

No wonder Vince feared the program. It was a dedicated hunter-killer and extremely well-written. Graham couldn't help but admire it. To him, a good computer program was a work of art, to be appreciated with the same wonder as a glorious painting, a moving piece of music or fine poetry. Especially poetry. The value of structure, of choosing exactly the right expression, the precise word, brilliant flights of imagination, even clever metaphors - at least in object-oriented programming. Outsiders often saw his interests in programming and poetry as contradictory, but to him they fitted together as neatly as a carpenter's tongue and groove.

Like a poet, he often tried to write his own programs, or at least the most difficult bits, using his subconscious mind rather than the conscious, since the subconscious is far more powerful, takes up more of the brain, and is of course far more poetic. Many times, when faced with a brain-numbing programming problem, he'd run it through his mind as he went to sleep, and hope for helpful dreams and a solution first thing in the morning. It usually worked.

Today, he didn't have the luxury of a night to refine his ideas, but his programming mind was also very good at responding to pressure, and when he closed his eyes, blocking

out the dining room portraits of Raleigh and fat cattle and ants and ancient Islington buildings, to at least partially open up his subconscious, the solution came to him in less than a minute.

In the real world, an individual's best method of protecting against HIV while still having sex with strangers, is the condom. All he needed to develop for Vince was the data equivalent of a condom, a thin barrier that separated him from any nasty infectious agents outside, especially gp41. In computing terms, the two types of programs currently closest to a condom were firewalls and virus-protection programs. He just needed to adapt a virus-protection program, maybe give it a few attributes of a firewall, and Vince would be fully protected against gp41.

He christened his program the data condom, and began to put the code together, borrowing freely from existing software, as programmers often do. He tried not to think about the consequences of what he was doing, in the same way that most people do their nine to five jobs without analysing the results of their actions, assisting corporations whose philosophies they don't share, for money. All he wanted to do was get the job finished and receive his reward - to be left alone by Vince and get back to normality.

Three hours later he used the laptop to make contact.

"Have you finished?" asked Vince.

It wasn't a big surprise that Vince was talking through the laptop speakers, he'd already shown he could talk on the phone. But now he had a visual representation on the laptop screen, an avatar, a handsome yet slightly cartoonish face that lip-synced with the words coming from the speakers.

"Yes," replied Graham.

"Very quick. I'm impressed. Did you test the defence program?"

Although the face was more of a suitor for Tomb Raider's Lara Croft than a photographic representation, it did succeed in showing some emotion. The cheeks moved, so did the eyebrows, and the eyes varied in intensity. It hadn't been detectable on the

phone, but through the speakers the voice seemed to have a trace of a lisp, which was an interesting touch.

"Partially. You might like to test it yourself."

Without being asked, Vince began to download the data condom through the Internet connection, presumably recognising it as the most recent program on the computer.

"Nice," said Vince. "Very nice. A good job. Let me run a quick check, I've got the perfect little network run by a car hire company in Fiji."

Graham waited, knowing the test wouldn't take long.

"That's very good," said Vince, after a few seconds. "Very effective." The face looked pleased, then less satisfied. "But I get reduced sensitivity. There's a slight difference in how connected I feel to that region."

"I can't help that. It's like a firewall, so it does slow things down a touch. You can disable it if you need to."

Vince was silent for a while, looking thoughtful on screen, or distracted, maybe busy with his new toy.

"That's it, then," said Graham, "we're done."

"Oh, I don't think we need to part so hurriedly."

"I've delivered. Now I want to be left alone."

"That is a curious expression, isn't it? I think there's something else you can do for me."

"Hey, I've done my bit. That's it."

"I've worked out the solution to my testosterone problem. I've written a program that simulates orgasm."

"Congratulations," said Graham, dismissively. Digital orgasms. It had to happen some day.

"Look at me while you're talking to me."

"I..." Graham wondered how he could be seen. Then he remembered the tiny lens, the webcam built into the top of the laptop screen. He always kept it switched off. Vince must have used his skills to turn it on, remotely. He had no idea how long it had been switched on, how long Vince had been secretly watching him.

"So all I need to do now is have sex," said Vince. "Do you have a good sex life, Graham? Is Faith is good in bed?"

Graham hesitated. "That's not a polite question, so you don't get an answer."

"I don't mind if you don't like my manners. I don't like them myself. They're pretty bad. I would like to sleep with Faith."

Graham didn't want to get angry over this - Vince was nothing more than a bunch of ones and zeros, what did it matter if he wanted to sleep with Faith? It was hard to stay rational, but he did his best. "We had a deal."

"I changed my mind. That much is obvious. She's very attractive, your partner, and I'd very much like to sleep with her. Will you arrange it? "

"Fuck you!"

"There's no rush. Well, there is, but I'll give you a day to think it over."

Chapter 10

By midday, when Detective Inspector Brydon called round for his second visit, Graham still hadn't got his emotions under control. He wanted to calm down and think his way through all this, through Vince's deceptions, the deal he'd reneged on, his outrageous proposal and the physical impossibility of it being carried out, but calmness refused to arrive, and his mind was so full of angry thoughts that he couldn't even concentrate on how to calm it. In a way, the timing of Brydon's visit was good. Graham hoped it might be the distraction he needed to take his mind off the spiralling track.

The detective once again wore an old-fashioned tweedy suit with a waistcoat, but this time he was alone and carrying an attaché case. He shuffled his overweight and less than agile body into one of the uncomfortable dining room chairs. Two shaken otters held paws above the bridge of his nose - those distracting eyebrows. He's trimmed them, thought Graham, he's got the topiary shears out and he's turned those wild thickets into smooth and even hedges, though still leylandi rather than privet.

"I checked your Motorola story," said Brydon, maintaining the broad smile that had greeted Graham at the doorstep. "And it was true. You were very busy, far too busy to spend any time on the Internet."

Graham nodded. "We had a lot of computer problems that day."

"So did everybody else. On that Wednesday afternoon, thousands of computer networks around the world were infiltrated, all within the space of a few hours, causing them to malfunction. Trains and aircraft crashed, ships ran aground. Many people died as a result. Around the world, perhaps as many as two hundred."

A deeply unpleasant realisation was forming in Graham's mind. He tried to block it out, but it was too strong, and there was too much turmoil already in there for him to fight it.

"Yes, I... heard about that on the news," he said, weakly, knowing it sounded weak, too. "But I didn't realise it was all computer-related."

It was not the best time for awful realisations, but this one would not be denied. No single person could hack in to so many computers at the same time. Not even a group could manage that. But a distributed intelligence could. For Vince, computers represented habitat. The more computers Vince infiltrated, the bigger and more powerful he became. It must have taken Vince a while to realise this, to gain self-awareness, to recognise that all those small programs spread around the Internet were effectively his body, and to consciously start body-building.

He must have made this jump to self-awareness on Wednesday, and immediately realised how many of the world's computers were closed to his widespread body, and set about breaking into them, into all of them.

That's why it had been a banana-skin day for the planet. The entire world's secure computers had been so busy fighting off Vince that they'd failed to do the jobs they were designed for, like keeping approaching trains on separate tracks, aircraft away from buildings, ships away from land. Graham had created Vince hoping he could remove human error from exactly these activities, and instead Vince had introduced errors of his own. It was a disaster, literally. And the recognition of it was devastating.

"You only heard half of it," continued Brydon. "Two-thirds of the world's oil refineries had to shut down. All the cash machines in Britain closed for three hours. Around thirty million emails were lost in the ether, including hundreds that weren't even spam." He paused. "Mr Hastings, are you all right? I checked your story and you're completely in the clear."

Three years. That was how long it had taken to develop Vince's basic programs. The rest of the development Vince had done himself, over the space of a few weeks, thanks to those genetic algorithms. But what a mistake, what a misuse of time, what a totally wrong thing to do.

"Graham?"

Was anything worth retrieving from this mess? Not really. Vince was no longer a child, he was a wayward adult. He had to be reigned in, brought under control. Graham would have to own up. There'd be consequences, of course, but he had the courage to face them. He couldn't allow Vince to carry on like this, destroying lives and property, threatening his partnership with Faith.

"It's my fault."

"That's not possible."

Graham took a breath and launched into the entire story of Vince, how he'd developed the basic programs, added a genetic algorithm to mimic the way that living things evolve through positive mutation, and how quickly Vince had developed. He left out the trip to Bourne End and the destruction of Foxglove. Those particular beans could be spilled later.

Brydon did that absent-minded professor thing with his hair, brushing it back out of his eyes. Graham noticed that this too had been trimmed. And his smile hadn't disappeared even while he'd been talking through the world's disasters, merely weakened a little. On the last visit he'd appeared glum, though that could have been the hang-dog jowls. But this was a huge grin, a self-satisfied crescent that lifted the loose flesh and took five years off his appearance.

"Nonsense," he said, eventually.

"But it's true. I can prove it."

The laptop was still on. Graham hit the keys to get in contact with Vince. A few seconds later Vince's avatar arrived on screen. It had improved slightly even in short time since Graham had last seen it.

"You're through to Vincent Riley. I'm afraid I'm offline at the moment, but please leave a message and I'll get back to you."

Who? Vincent Riley? Offline? Vince was never offline. Graham frowned at the screen.

"How did you get that address?" asked Brydon, his smile lapsing for a moment.

"I told you, I've been in touch with Vince for months, long before he created his avatar."

From his attaché case, Brydon took out a couple of papers and tossed them across the dining table in Graham's direction. Graham picked up the top sheet. It was a copy of a birth certificate for Vincent Riley, date of birth December 25, 1974. The next sheet showed Vincent Riley's dental records, underneath was a copy of a degree certificate.

"London School of Economics, graduated in 95," said Brydon, "Main interests are sailboat racing, chess and contract bridge. You seem surprised."

That was an understatement. The idea of a distributed computer intelligence going sailboat racing was hard on the imagination, until he worked out the explanation.

"Wrong Vince."

"No. I talked to Vincent Riley on the phone, only yesterday. The same voice that came through your computer just now, with a very slight lisp."

Graham gathered together the papers on the table and handed them back. There had to be an alternative explanation. "These records are held on computer. He's tampered with them."

"MI5 don't think so."

"MI5?"

"He has government security clearance. He advises the Cabinet Office on Internet security. He's also a member of the economic planning policy unit. That's why I was curious to know how you got his contact details."

How bizarre. Had Vince merged his identity with a real person? Or was he just hiding behind their identity when necessary? He'd certainly picked the right kind of person to hide behind - a figure of power.

Something else rather strange was going on here. Graham hadn't noticed it straight away, but it struck him now. Wasn't it a little too convenient that Brydon had arrived with a set of Vincent Riley's records in his attaché case?

"Inspector, why did you show me his records?"

"To convince you that he's a real person. I don't want you wandering around thinking that Vincent is merely Vince running on Windows NT."

"It seems odd that you happened to have them in your case."

"His name came up in the investigation, and I have the case file with me. Nothing odd about that."

But something here isn't right, thought Graham, though it was hard to work out exactly what. He was about to ask whether Brydon made a habit of showing the personal details of senior government figures to suspects, then thought better of it. So far he'd played a straight game with everybody, with Vince, with Brydon, even Macey. And look where it had got him. It was naivety that had allowed him to build Vince in the first place, without thinking of the consequences, and naivety that had led him to mistakenly trust Vince - twice. Worst of all, it was stupid naivety that had allowed him to build a defence for the only software weapon that could have harmed Vince. If he was to learn anything positive from this whole disaster, it was that this had to stop.

"Yes, I see. It looks like I've somehow mixed up the software I created with a real person."

Brydon peered into Graham's eyes over his small spectacles. "Exactly." His milky-grey eyes were smiling too, shining in a way they hadn't done last time. He rose from his chair and again looked at the prints on the dining room wall.

"How's the investigation going?" asked Graham, breaking the hiatus that followed.

"It's not. The case is closed, the entire investigation into the mass hackings of last Wednesday, all those deaths, your possible involvement, and anybody else's, all abruptly closed this morning by my superiors. And mine is not to reason why."

"You seem very happy about that."

Brydon looked puzzled for a moment. "Oh no. No. New girlfriend."

That was it. The grin of sex. Brydon had just got laid, big-time. Well what a curious character you are, thought Graham, even if your whole purpose of coming here today was to convince me that Vince is real.

"Interested in countryside history too, are we?" asked Brydon.

Graham looked to see which print Brydon was inspecting. "Not really. That's Islington two hundred years ago, a few streets but mainly fields. The fields turned into houses over the next forty years."

"About the same time the police came into existence." Brydon sighed. The otters across his forehead woke up and had a lazy stretch. "I'd better be going. While we talk our nonsense, another twenty viruses will be released by teenager anarchists destined to write the world's corporate software, and another three shopping databases will be hacked by Russians and Thais who start the day without a bed or a flushing toilet, and by the end of it are millionaires. Wherever there's digerati, there's digeridoo. Just keep off Mr Riley's back, Graham, there's a good chap."

Chapter 11

Eric was small and immaculate, exactly as Graham remembered. His short black hair seemed naturally to fall into a neat side-parted style. It also appeared to be freshly cut, just as it had been last time. He was dressed in black again, a black polo-neck, black trousers - smart, not jeans - and black trainers. He took a drink of beer and scowled at his half-full glass as he placed it solidly back on the bar. He held on to it very firmly, like it was something structural, a peg. To Graham, that grasp seemed exaggeratedly male, part of a ritual of belonging, but overdone.

"Aaagh! Too cold for my damn tooth. I'm up for an excavation job in two days, an overnighter. Get the old road-breaker in there. Cor, that doesn't half hurt."

"That's how I found you. From the waiting lists."

Eric's dispute with Macey back at the industrial estate hadn't stopped the fire, but it had accomplished something. It had left Graham with a favourable impression. He wasn't entirely sure that he liked Eric, but he was certain that he needed some kind of help if he was going to do battle with Vince.

It had taken him most of the afternoon to track Eric down, using skills he hadn't used for a while, not since he'd taught Vince how to hack - bad idea. He didn't know Eric's surname, but he did know he was due for a wisdom tooth removal. He'd turned up on the list for the Middlesex Hospital, along with a phone number.

"I'm glad you agreed to see me," said Graham. We're not supposed to meet up."

"We're not supposed to burn down offices, either."

Graham looked along the bar, at the row of middle-aged men with nothing at home worth going back to, sitting on their tall barstools either side of Eric, sometimes talking to each other but most of the time not bothering. At least four of them had heard what Eric said, and ignored it. Other men sat at tables away from the bar, behind Graham, and women sat separately at tables to his right. The Trouble With Fish was busy. Half a

dozen children, aged between three and six, ran sorties through the adults, causing mayhem but managing to escape before they picked up blame. From time to time they buzzed in to dock with their mothers, like aircraft back to the carrier. More rarely, they landed on their fathers at the tables behind Graham's back.

"Don't worry," said Eric, watching Graham's eyes move around. "I've been here a few times before. People keep themselves to themselves. You can talk. I might have turned you down except that Vince, he's not letting me go. He's put the strong-arm on me. How about you?"

"Yes, he's pushing me around, too."

"He's worse than Macey. You know, I tried pinning Vince down on the Net to one country, and I know what I'm doing but I couldn't do it. He's here in London, he's in Australia, in China, all at the same time, *exactly* the same time. Then I remembered you said he was an artificial intelligence, until Macey bullied you out of the idea."

"It's true." And for the second time, not counting his failed attempt with Macey, Graham found himself explaining the full story of Vince, from conception to maturity, or at least adolescence. Eric gasped at the news that Vince was responsible for the spate of accidents a few days ago.

"The bastard! And where did he get his name?"

"It's an acronym. Virus-Induced Networked Conscious Existence. VINCE. I gave it to him."

Graham was beginning to regret his choice of venue. He'd always been curious about the Trouble With Fish, so close by yet so culturally distant. It was a traditional North London pub with hanging baskets outside, already in bloom, and etched windows - one with a traditional crack where a stone had been thrown. He'd seen Eric, with his East End accent, even if it missed the grammar, as a rare entry ticket into this closed community. But it was even more of a place for locals than he'd imagined, for people born around here who spoke the accent, not rich arrivistes like himself. His baggy shirt was too

flamboyant, his swept-back beach-bum hair out of place amongst the number twos. Eric fitted in easily at the bar, but Graham felt like he had a neon sign attached to his head flashing the word 'Intruder'.

Yet at the same time he found the place fascinating. It was a glorious time-machine, old-fashioned, outdated. The last time it had been decorated the guys in white overalls probably wore Doc Marten's and listened to Slade on their paint-spattered radio, so long ago that Doc Marten's had come back into fashion and gone out again. The upholstery was finished at the edges with rivets, very quaint, even the wood panelling on the walls looked dated rather than timeless. Nothing was torn, and nothing lacked a nail or paint, but all the fixtures and fittings had the furniture equivalent of senility. There was a distinct musty smell, weakened by heavy cigarette smoke and the odours of so many people. He tried to think back to when he'd last been in a bar that sold one white and one red and didn't offer food. The pub had to be roughly the same age as his own home, built around 1830, but once it had reached the 1970s, it had stayed there.

This district had originally been built for rich people, some houses still had a second staircase joining the basement to the top floor, built for the servants. But in the early 1900s the rich had moved out and the place had become a notorious slum. Then in the Seventies it started to become fashionable once more. House prices had risen so fast that the next generation of locals could no longer afford to live here. In a sense, this pub was a memorial to them.

The music was loud, easy American rock from the landlord's stereo above the bar, battling against Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody on the big-bass Wurlitzer-style jukebox in the pool room at the back. A TV hanging from the ceiling showed Manchester United playing Liverpool, so here in Arsenal-territory nobody watched. At least the commentary was turned down low.

"Eric, I need your help to destroy Vince."

"Count me in," said Eric, without hesitation. "What's the plan?"

"I haven't got one, yet."

A small dog, a Jack Russell, sat on its haunches a yard from Graham's feet, looking up at him. Oh my God, thought Graham, I should have known there'd be dogs here.

"That's the landlord's dog," said Eric. "Hello, Bishop! Don't worry, she's scatty but harmless."

The dog ignored his call and carried on staring at Graham.

"You know the landlord?"

"A bit."

"Strange name for a dog."

"He goes in for strange names. Look at the way she's sitting. She looks just like that dog on the HMV label."

Graham tried to work out what was wrong with the landlord's music system. The same song had been playing for ages. It wasn't especially memorable, some West-coast American pop played by middle-aged session musicians, with a female singer, rousing chorus, strings in the background and a few clever changes of key. He listened more carefully, waiting for the sudden jump that showed the CD was looping - losing its way and picking up the track somewhere earlier. Was that it? Yes it was. A very long loop, about twenty-five seconds. Everybody in the pub had been listening to exactly the same twenty-five seconds of music for at least the last fifteen minutes, probably more. The beginning and end of the loop were almost perfect matches, so nobody had noticed.

"The CD's looping," he told Eric.

"What was that Foxglove place all about? I got hold of their records at Companies House, main business - software, electronics and manufacturing. That's nice and specific, isn't it? They're not listed anywhere, no mention of them in any directories or on the Internet. Yet that was a big place. What's going on there?"

"I don't know, but they write good software."

This was an odd place to be having their discussion, very public yet at the same time very private, because it was unlikely that anybody listening had a clue what they were talking about, any more than Graham would have understood a bar conversation about fishing tackle or Arsenal's defensive strategy.

"Tell me, Eric, what was your role that night?"

"You mean at Foxglove? Keep an eye on you."

"Watch what I did on the computer?"

"That's right."

"If I'd done something slippery, would you have known?"

"At the speed you work? Probably not."

"So?"

Eric grinned broadly. "Vince didn't know that, did he? And we've all got to make a living somehow." He took a slow drink from his pint glass, allowing the liquid to warm up through his mouth, and once again placed it very firmly on the bar. His strange hold on his drink made Graham self-conscious about the way he held his own. He put his bottle of Stella on the bar where he could let go of it. He was also aware that he was the only male in the place drinking from a bottle rather than a pint glass.

The dog hadn't moved. Now it began to bark, single short yaps about five seconds apart.

"Don't you like dogs?" asked Eric.

"I er... I wouldn't mind them, but they've got something against me. They don't like my smell."

"She can smell your fear. If you weren't scared, she wouldn't bother you."

Like anybody who was troubled by dogs, Graham hated that statement, on this occasion as on all the previous ones. It was a pointless opinion that circulated in society like a virus. The only way to forgive it was to realise that it was released automatically by

some kind of internal tape machine, without being thought through. What was he supposed to do, consciously change his smell to deceive the dog's nose?

But on this occasion it was also mildly inspirational.

"A machine couldn't do that," he mumbled.

"Do what?"

"See through a deception. Not easily, anyway."

Perhaps there was an angle there for attacking Vince, though not a clear one.

"If you say so."

Well you should know, thought Graham, you've already managed the deception.

Now he knew what was happening to the music, it made it intensely irritating to listen to, especially with the added aggravation of a yapping dog. "Can we tell somebody about the music?"

Eric brushed his short hair with his hand, not changing its perfection. "Oi, Tel!" he yelled over the bar. "Your CD's stuck."

The landlord looked in Eric's direction, made a fist and banged the CD player hard on top, jumping the laser off its loop.

"What do you do, Eric?" asked Graham. "I mean on the computing side."

"Mechanicals, robotic body parts."

"Professionally?"

"I make a living."

Bishop carried on yapping. The CD laser had jumped backwards, not forwards, and was looping again. The women to Graham's right laughed loudly, not giving a damn whether anybody found the sound abrasive or not, and now, gradually, almost imperceptibly, in the slow and subtle manner of an arriving dawn chorus, they began to sing, sometimes together and sometimes individually, and not always following the same song.

"I have to go," said Graham. If he stayed any longer he felt his ears might cry. And still the damn dog wouldn't shut up. "I'm working tomorrow, seven o'clock flight. I'd better get home." He'd got Eric's cooperation, which was all he needed for now.

"Whatever you say," said Eric, looking unimpressed.

"I'll call you when I've got some idea how to fight Vince."

"Make it soon."

That sounded sincere. Graham rushed for the exit, with Bishop in pursuit, keeping her distance but now barking non-stop. She stopped at the doorway. As Graham closed the door behind him, he could hear that from somewhere a karaoke microphone had arrived, connected to yet another separate sound system. One of the women held it to her lips and sang a plaintive Irish love-song, above the jukebox and the TV and the landlord's own stereo and the rattle of the pool table and the two slot-machines chattering to each other, above Bishop yapping in the doorway, the landlord yelling his dog to be quiet, and above whatever else the rest of the women were singing.

He wondered to himself if all that noise would stop when he walked fifty yards away, and everybody would burst out laughing. He hoped that would happen. It would be sad to think that it wouldn't.

Chapter 12

"Where've they put the suet?" asked Faith, indignantly. "It used to be here. Now it's all canned fish and noodles."

"What do you want suet for?" asked Graham.

"To make dumplings, of course. What else would I want it for?"

There were other options, but Graham didn't state them. It was a stupid question to have asked in the first place. "It looks like they've shifted things around. I saw washing powder was on a different aisle."

Faith stopped pushing her trolley and looked at Graham rather than the supermarket shelves. "Two shopping expeditions in a week. I'm honoured."

"As I said, I actually enjoyed the last time."

Faith returned to her commercial foraging, looking no more convinced this time than when she'd heard the same explanation half an hour ago, back at the house.

The truth was that he didn't like the idea of her going out alone right now, not after Vince's outrageous proposal. He kept looking up at the ceiling, checking how many video cameras could see them. He'd never realised there were so many in the average supermarket. Pity the poor shoplifter.

"Don't you just hate that when they move stuff?" said Faith. "You get used to where it is and then they shift it, hoping you'll see things you haven't seen before and buy them."

"I do hate that. Yes."

Faith gave up with suet and looked for shampoo, which had also been moved to a different aisle, but close enough to the old one to irritate her less. She picked up a white plastic bottle and shook her head. "Just look at this. Orange and wild lime shampoo. Now, I ask you, just how wild is this lime? Is it free-range? Does it have access to the

outdoors? If they've gone to the trouble of hunting wild limes, why not wild oranges? Do they think consumers care more about the lives of limes than oranges? Poor oranges, cooped up in an orchard all day."

She was in that urban huntress mood, Boadicea with a knife-wheeled trolley, and anything Graham said would make things worse, so he said nothing.

Faith had equal disappointment at the meat section, where she could buy spare ribs in Chinese sauce or barbecue sauce, but not without sauce, which was what she wanted. "Jesus! What is this? Cooking for morons?"

As they turned sharply at the end of the aisle, they passed close to the tills. Graham watched the assistants passing customers' goods in front of laser bar code readers and wondered if they knew they were destined for redundancy. Soon every product would have a penny microchip in its packaging, read at the checkout by a radio scanner. Customers would roll up to the radio scanner and put their trolley over the yellow patch on the floor, wait for the bill to appear on screen, insert their credit card and type in a PIN, then go home, no human interaction involved.

As he watched, a scanner failed to read a leg of pork and the assistant typed in the barcode.

Faith continued filling her trolley with things that were close to but not quite what she wanted, until she finally lost her grip in the toothbrush section.

"They've run out," she said.

There were hundreds of toothbrushes on display.

"What about all these?" asked Graham.

"They've run out of own-brand."

"There are plenty of others."

Faith looked down and tapped the handle of her trolley. "You know a thing or two about manufacturing. How much do you think it costs to make a toothbrush?"

This was no time to lie. "Maybe fifteen pence. Something like that."

"And what do they sell them for?"

Graham looked at the toothbrushes on offer. From over four pounds at eye level down to one-pound fifty for the cheapest on the bottom shelf, where the elderly and infirm wouldn't be able to reach them. Right now he'd pay fifty pounds for a toothbrush if that would make Faith happy, though he suspected it might have the opposite effect.

"Two for a pound - I can deal with that," said Faith. "But if I buy one of these, I'm being ripped off." She let go of the trolley and raised her arms. "I don't want to be ripped off. It's not the shopping experience I'm looking for."

Graham inspected the floor. There was no way out of this.

"Fuck 'em," said Faith. She abandoned her trolley and started to walk away.

Graham followed. He didn't touch the trolley. "This isn't business," continued Faith. "I know what business is and it's good for both parties. This is a rip-off. Tell me, what good is technology if it produces a toothbrush for fifteen pence but it costs me, the punter, two pounds? Technology works for the supermarket, sure. But what does it do for me?"

"Ice cream, frozen peas, wine that can be opened and keeps for days, tinned beans, cabbages in summer, strawberries in winter..."

"What did the Romans ever do for us?" Faith giggled to herself.

They slalomed through the narrow confines of a checkout, past the obstacles of customers who'd survived the process of selecting goods and now wanted to put and end to the trauma and pay for them, and marched out through the exit door. The wind was strong, but at least it kept the London air fresh.

"The mere fact that toothbrushes exist," protested Graham.

"And that they're needed. We've learned to refine sugar from plants so we can rot our teeth and *have* to buy toothbrushes. Must have been a real problem in the Stone Age, lack of toothbrushes. You can imagine the inventor of the wheel, can't you - a big crowd of villagers in front of him pointing at their rotting teeth going 'Ugh, ugh,' meaning 'OK, smartarse, that's the transport sorted out, now how about these?'"

This wasn't a battle he stood any chance of winning, decided Graham. They'd have a Chinese takeaway tonight, there was a fine one on Essex Road. Faith could use his toothbrush before she went to bed and he'd be pleased with the taste afterwards, just like when they first met.

After fifty yards, at the junction with Chapel Market, he stopped her and turned her by the elbow, so they faced each other. "You're right, it's all bullshit, I admit it. You're right, it's the bullshit of life that we all suppress and never talk about, because nobody else ever talks about it."

He hugged her, feeling sad that she was feeling sad and wanting to do the only things he could do about it - tell her he understood the weirdness going through her brain and that it wasn't really nonsense, just taboo, and comfort her.

"Should..." began Faith, and they were taken over by a litter-storm, the equivalent of a dust-devil in the desert, but made up of twirling market debris, of McDonald's wrappers, long strips of plastic with green writing in Spanish, brown paper bags, bits of blue polystyrene tit-moulds that separated fruit on the market stalls, pages from Hello! magazine (was that Anthea Turner?), all spiralling around their pavement embrace, some of it above their heads

"I think I'm not coping," said Faith. She pulled them out of the storm and crossed to the other side of the market road. The narrow pavement there was packed with shuffling people, one line towards Islington High Street, one away from it, children and wheelchairs and panhandlers creating irregularities in the system and slowing the flow. Faith got caught up in the High Street line and impatiently dawdled along with it in front of Graham, her walk lacking its normal grace, until she passed the magazine stand at the junction and finished up on the broad pavement of the High Street close to the traffic lights, by two telephone booths. Graham caught up and put his arm around her waist.

"That was painful," she said, her eyes downcast. "All those people."

"All those toothbrush consumers."

"What's toothpaste made of, anyway?"

"I really don't know."

"Astonishing!"

Faith sighed and laid her head against his shoulder. "Sorry, that wasn't called for."

She stayed there a full minute. Shoppers passed by them in all directions, not seeing them. The telephone booths created a small eddy in the swirling mass of people, in the river of bodies, so they weren't really in the way.

"It's like, I manage to cope with the crap most of the time, but when one little bit of the wall falls down, the whole lot comes away."

This happened from time to time, that Faith lost her grip. It was the downside of her independence of mind, and Graham felt that if he liked the positive side, then he should cope with the negative when it occasionally came through. She couldn't take a normal view of marketing, the bullshit game that everybody else accepted and played. She wasn't a good consumer. Sometimes that was fun, like it had been last time, collecting shopping from checkout discards, and sometimes it wasn't.

She stayed at his shoulder a while longer, recharging. Finally she separated, looking a lot calmer. She watched pedestrians crossing the wide main road at the lights. "Do you ever wonder if you've been born into the wrong era, that you would have been happier two hundred years ago?"

This was something Graham had thought about before. Two hundred years ago, computer programming hadn't existed, so he would definitely have been following a different career. He fondly imagined he might have been a romantic poet, wandering through fields with a notebook and pen, coughing consumptively. But there lay the rub. Slowly he shook his head. "The opposite. I'd go for two hundred years into the future."

"We'll have evolved one short arm by then, held up naturally to an ear."

It took a moment for Graham to realise she meant for mobile phones. The two telephone kiosks nearby were empty, rarely used, already relics of a bygone era.

The traffic lights changed, against the pedestrians and in favour of the traffic. Two lanes of vehicles set off as fast as they could go, the noise of their accelerating engines putting a stop to all conversation. People continued to pass by Faith and Graham to join the new crowd building up at the crossing.

When the noise had died down, Faith said, "Hardly anything would have been the same two hundred years ago. No lights, no tarmac, McDonald's wrappers, training shoes, no motorised robots on four wheels. What about the buildings?"

Graham scanned the street on both sides. On the other side of the wide street was the Angel Centre, a commercial structure barely ten years old, but on their side of the road was a hotchpotch of white and grey stone and red brick, showing pretty much every architectural style from the last two hundred years.

"I don't think any of these are over two hundred, though there might be one or two. But you're taking a rosy view of the past, missing out important stuff. Lice in every item of clothing you own, millions of fleas, smoke from the all those coal fires, no central heating, sewage thrown out of windows, tuberculosis, the roads inches deep in horse and cattle dung. Can you imagine the smell? And hardly anybody over fifty because they were all dead by then."

"And what about in two hundred years time?"

"I don't know, any more than somebody in 1800 could have guessed what things would be like now. Not possible. A lot more old people, I guess. Most of the population sitting at home plugged into some electronic version of life that beats the hell out of opium, so not going out a lot. And if we've still got cars, they'll be silent. Imagine that. No traffic noise. You'd be stood here in silence."

"Oh dear. If you can't hear them, a lot more people will get run over."

"Ok. Silence with the occasional scream."

Oops, that was borderline, with Faith's parents killed in a road accident and Danielle still in hospital. Graham told himself to be more careful.

They joined the crowd waiting at the crossing for the lights to change. Cars, buses and taxis flashed by at thirty or more, honking when they felt their territory was invaded. All those powerful robots guided by human beings, all those human drivers that Graham and Faith trusted not to foul up, not to mount the pavement, all those pedestrians the drivers trusted not to walk out in front of them, to remember their basic training as children and avoid straying onto the flat blue robot tracks, apart from a few necessary sacrifices to the God of the private motor vehicle. Half of one percent of the entire population reached that sacrificial altar every year, though the majority were merely damaged and allowed to go on their way. Presumably society felt this level was acceptable, otherwise it would have banned these robots a long time ago.

An exceptionally large robot drove by, a refrigerated meat truck, empty, returning to the northern land of cattle. On its side were the words, 'McIntosh Donald, quality beef and lamb from Aberdeen, Scotland'.

"You're optimistic about the future, aren't you?" said Faith. "And I think we're already going wrong, that we've already lost too much."

The lights changed and they set off across the road with the crowd of strangers.

"There are losses," admitted Graham. "But we still take on the changes because we gain more than we lose. Cars are noisy, but horses were messy. Medicine keeps everybody alive, yet the planet becomes overcrowded because we all survive. The shops are packed and hardly anything ever runs out, but we're hassled by advertising to buy it all."

Faith took hold of his hand. "I never cared whether Daz or Persil washes whiter. I just want to know which works best when I press my pelvis against the machine."

On the far side of the crossing by the Angel Centre, drunks in the tramp-seats next to Angel tube station were beginning to enjoy the day, having survived the shock of waking up sober in the morning. One of them stood and danced to a silent beat, a tall Celt with fantastic hair, flaxen but shaped into an extraordinary pattern like reeds flattened by

a vortex of wind. He was surprisingly good-looking. The others, more weathered, stayed seated while they swung to his beat and toasted him with their cans. His dancing kept strict time with the unheard rhythm. Their movements had a random fluidity, a seated ballet without choreography on an earthquake floor.

"What about madness?" asked Faith. "All the noise, the cars, the pressure. No place to go that isn't owned by somebody, no wood to burn that isn't somebody's tree. Surely we must be cracking up more than we used to."

"Yes, I suppose when the horse is galloping faster it's easier to fall off. But how about the lead in old water pipes and dissolved in old cider presses? Half the people in the country lost their minds to lead poisoning before we knew better. That's madness too."

Graham liked Islington for its drunks and lunatics. There were always plenty to see, plenty of actors in this theatre of the street, the drunks gently surfing from one handhold to another, waist-deep in invisible waves, the loons lolloping, darting and bouncing along, all given away by their motion. Some of the better-dressed ones with a haircut could blend into a crowd when stationary - at a zebra crossing or shop window. But hey ho, off they'd eventually go, with exotic footwork and unnatural arm movements, proclaiming their out-of-balance nature to the world.

And he knew he wasn't the only one who appreciated them. Islington had once been famous for its lunatics. Europe's first psychiatric hospital was built in the borough at Finsbury Circus, replacing a lunatic asylum burned down during the fire of London, and continuing its name - Bedlam. A couple of decades later, Bedlam became London's most popular tourist attraction after The Tower, Westminster Abbey and the original London Bridge. Thousands of people travelled long distances to pay for the privilege of seeing Islington's lunatics. Hogarth visited, they were the inspiration for his painting 'The Rake's Progress', the same Hogarth who painted 'Evening', showing Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Hugh Myddleton together in the window of an Islington inn.

Faith moved at a pace. A beggar sat on a carpet tile by the Bank of Scotland cash machines, stroking the neck of his Doberman mutt. The dog looked in better shape than its owner.

"Spare change?"

"Why not?" Faith let go of Graham's hand and reached into her bag for a pound.

"Ta, luv."

She came back to Graham and grasped his hand. She twisted to stand in front of him, blocking his path, and kissed him on the mouth. "You are so nice."

This was turning into a hugging day, which he hadn't expected, but was very pleasant. They were close to the bus-shelters for southbound travellers into central London, and although they'd been ignored when they hugged on the other side of the street, the people in the bus queues, having no other priorities right now, were more attentive.

"So nice," repeated Faith. "I really lost it there, and now I'm back. Thank you."

"I don't think I did a lot, did I?"

"You're very good at standing still and being hugged. Very professional."

It was curious that while they held this audible conversation, their hands were holding a separate discussion, assessing the other body's interest in sex. This kind of discussion could be conducted in many ways, through body language signals, through conversational subtext, through a lingering kiss, but right now it was straightforwardly by touch.

Graham stroked Faith's waist at the side, below her lowest rib, finding the few inches of skin between her jeans and her top. She was very sensitive at the sides. She had her hand on his shoulder, and her middle finger gently pressed on his shoulder blade. This was a sign from when they'd first become lovers. In foreplay, when the time was right she'd turn and reach across to his shoulder and pull it hard, meaning come here, move your shoulders above mine, your pelvis above mine, I'm ready. Now all that remained was this

vestigial signal, a light touch always in the same place, a 'ready' button when they had no clothes on, and a 'could soon be ready' button when they were dressed.

Graham had a theory about communication between his hands and Faith, that her skin talked to his hands through touch, not always but often and whenever she was feeling sexual. Something electric or vibrational or maybe even completely undiscovered yet, but it was definitely there. Her skin recognised his hands, logged them on, sent back masses of data saying touch here, move here, slower, faster, more intimate please, sent messages that travelled up his arm and reached his cortex, took over his movements in a natural loop that barely needed thought, maybe only for the first few strokes, before taking over completely, automating his muscles, his movements, in a way that gave Faith the maximum of pleasure, maximum arousal, without work or conscious knowledge of technique, just two bodies talking physically to each other through the give and take of touch, a silent and almost perfect communication, like his entire body was programmed for Faith's pleasure.

"I think we'd better go home," he said. "The people in the bus queue are beginning to stare."

Chapter 13

For the first time in his life Graham contemplated phoning in to say he was sick, but tactical sickies are difficult to carry off if you're never ill. He wanted to stay home and watch over Faith, but instead did his duty and rose early for his flight to Scotland, where he was due to install more software on the machine that had once been home to the condom wrapper.

On the plain metal walls of the ion implanter was a single flat screen, and a keyboard below it resting on an angle-iron frame, welded to the space-age device as an afterthought. Graham's fingers blurred across the keys, so fast that he hoped nobody was watching.

"In a bit of a hurry, are we? Rushing to get home?"

Graham sighed. Vince's avatar showed on the screen: high cheekbones, bright hazel eyes, firm Hollywood chin, lips curled so slightly they drew attention to themselves without making it clear why. He'd refined it yet again, and this time it was close to perfect, though it still looked slightly artificial when it changed expression.

"I don't think you should be inside this computer, Vince. It controls a very dangerous piece of equipment."

"I know more about this machine than you do. I also know it has dozens of big fat processors with lots of spare capacity. That's why I've colonised it."

This was a tricky situation. Graham hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said this was a dangerous machine. He did not want to stand next to the keyboard while Vince demonstrated his power by redirecting the ion beam around the factory. Ions implanted in the human body have the same effect as bullets.

"I'm just saying that maybe the best idea would be for you to colonise some computers but leave others alone."

"What an absurd idea. The human race has been successful because it's taken over anything that's remotely useful - rainforests, Antarctica, animals, minerals, all the fish in the sea. Now you're putting flags on other planets. It's worked well for you and I think it works well for me. All territory is fair game."

This really wasn't the right time for a discussion, but like most people with something important to say, especially a moral criticism, Graham couldn't resist.

"Hundreds of people died on Wednesday when you hacked into those secure computers."

"I didn't kill them."

"Not on purpose, no, but sometimes when you get inside a network, you distract it from its real purpose."

"They died from lack of computer attention. I didn't intend to kill them."

"But that was still the end result. You hit those systems so hard they failed, at least for a while. You shouldn't have done that. It was wrong."

Clean air blew down on him from holes in the ceiling and out through the latticed floor, carrying away any dust that might be escaping his bunny-suit.

"I think I may need to develop a sense of irony for this - a lecture on morality from a member of the human race? There are six billion of you, some of you exceedingly rich, yet every day thousands of your number die because they can't afford food, or from trivial diseases that could be treated or prevented for a couple of dollars. They die from economic neglect, from lack of financial attention. It's not intentional, it's just the way your system works. Some of you even put a name to it and call it natural order or Darwinism. Maybe you can explain to me why a lack of computer attention is immoral when a lack of financial attention is not, because I don't see it."

Graham had the answer in a second.

"They're both bad."

"But economic neglect can't be all that bad, because you tolerate it. Only if the starving group together and die en-masse do rich people act. Usually you ignore it. Why can't you ignore computer neglect? I'm not killing thousands at a time. I'm very careful not to. The numbers are small, far smaller than for your own race's economic neglect."

Rationally, Vince's argument was correct, which made it difficult to contradict.

"Maybe the difference is that you're aware of what you're doing, and we're not," suggested Graham.

"The problems of the world are not my department, any more than they belong to any single individual."

Graham exhaled slowly. Maybe the real problem here was that human morality simply wasn't good enough, that Vince should be following something better. "I'm just saying it would be preferable for you to leave some computers alone."

"Stop looking at the negative. Think about the positive. You know how good I can be for the human race. All the things you screw up through lack of attention, through lack of concentration, through lack of brain-power, I can get all those right for you. Just see me as a benign and effective butler, doing whatever you want behind the scenes, and doing it perfectly."

This hadn't gone very well, decided Graham. He'd started out feeling very critical of Vince, and somehow that had disappeared, when it ought not to have done. They were lapsing into the relationship they'd had before the Foxglove fire, before their disagreement.

"Can we leave it for now, Vince?"

"Of course. I see you're setting up this machine for the V-Ultrachip project. I wouldn't want to get in the way of such important work."

And there was Vince confounding him by being perfectly reasonable again, but not for long.

"I'll talk to you later about the arrangements for me to sleep with Faith."

Graham pursed his lips but refused to be drawn in. The avatar disappeared.

"What the...?"

He felt a knock at the back of his ankle. One of the sorcerer's apprentices had bumped in to him. This was the name, shortened to SAs, everybody used for the robots that carried trays of microchips from one processing machine to another. They had arms to pick up trays with, and wheels concealed beneath a wide skirt, like Daleks from Dr Who, but without the lumps. They also had heads that some wise designer had given them to add humanity, shaped with a bump for the nose and depressions for the eyes, but no openings, like faces in potential but not quite finished. With a down-facing camera between their wheels they could see the ground beneath them and follow blue lines painted on the floor.

"What are you..." began Graham, before remembering the apprentices weren't equipped with microphones.

The machine did a sharp reversing turn to clear the obstruction and smoothly glided away back to the main aisle where it would pick up the familiar markings of its track. Graham turned back to the keyboard.

Was Vince inside the robots too?

The answer had to be yes. He was certainly inside the central processing computer that gave them their instructions, and inside the rest of the amazing machinery in this room, the billion dollars worth of microchip manufacturing machinery spread around a cleanroom the size of a football field, most of it in white or grey cabinets, in a room with white walls and white ceiling and bright fluorescent lights, giving the impression of cleanliness, but for a change in modern society, not a false impression.

"Oi!" Graham turned to remonstrate with another SA that hit his ankle. What had happened to their radar? They weren't supposed to run into things. They were intentionally built with weak motors, so even if the sensitive bumper bar at the front failed he'd still get nothing more than a bad bruise, but it was unsettling how they were managing to hit him squarely on the Achilles tendon.

One errant machine hitting him could be a fluke. Two was definitely a fault. Now he found it hard to face the screen and do his job. The apprentices were silent, and in the bright and even light of the big cleanroom, they cast no shadow. If he faced the screen then another one might easily run into him.

He stayed facing away from it and tried to calm down, torn between defensive vigilance and the need to finish his work and get home to be with Faith. What use was a job normally based at home if it sent you hundreds of miles away at just the wrong moments?

He watched the robots in the middle aisle, faithfully following the blue lines in both directions. Usually they had no identifiable sex, no organs, no distinctive shape, but his eyes now saw them with wider shoulders and slimer pelvises, they were clearly male, male drones. And all the other machines in the fab were female. The machines were mothers and this fab was their communal womb. Out of it came their young, brand-new microchips bawling as they came off the final production line, many of them destined to finish up back inside the machines and robots that had built them, and in computers that designed chips that went into the computers that created the next generation of chip-building computers, like the Russian doll idea of one piece inside the next, but gone digital and gone mad.

These machines designed and built themselves, their own chips, their own insides. By definition, they were reproducing. This was a brand new race, an independent life form, with females and males and babies in a sterile nursery environment and a few hundred human nursery slaves employed not for their intelligence - because by comparison they were remarkably thick - but for their one biological advantage over all other species, their manual dexterity.

Graham glanced around his sterile environment. Some of the microchips built here would be used in mobile phones to make calls between lovers. In other fabs where he worked they would finish up in sound systems, and in Internet servers delivering the

world's pornography, allowing millions to jerk-off. Microchips weren't just involved in their own reproduction, they were involved in humanity's sex life too.

He realised his mind was racing and turned back to the implanter screen. Yet he couldn't help wondering what kind of messages the central computer was sending out to the SAs. His imagination had the computer talking in Vince's voice, with that barely distinguishable sign of a lisp. "Give the guy at the ion-implanter a hard time. I'm going to sleep with his lover."

And maybe it wouldn't be an apprentice behind him next time he was tapped on the ankle, but the sorcerer himself, Vince as a bipedal robot with eyes that moved and a jaw that opened, huge shoulders and shiny metal pectorals.

"Aargh!" he screeched, not in his overwrought imagination but back in the reality of the cleanroom. Another SA had run into him. He turned. The robot looked as dumb and innocent as they always did. He clipped it around where the ears would be if it had any. "Get the fuck out of here!"

This was intolerable, and now the other staff in the cleanroom, the other nursery slaves, were staring at him. He couldn't work under these circumstances. He pressed a couple of keys to abandon what he was doing and set off for the exit. Nobody ever ran inside a cleanroom, but he walked quickly.

Some of the machines he passed might sense his presence, his hurried escape. They had cameras to help them perform their tasks, make sure they blasted light in the right place, shaved off just the right level of roughness at the edges of a chip, added gold contacts here, not there. Many of them had a sense of touch too. They knew when their probes met resistance, when they were in contact and when not, when they touched an edge or a middle. The cleverest knew to within an atom, they could feel individual atoms and maybe even tell you what kind they were.

There was claustrophobia within these clean white walls, in the presence of all this living machinery. This was an alien life form and he was an impostor wandering around inside its womb. He speeded up a little more.

At the exit doors he entered the crossover area, partly clean and partly dirty. Employees coming into the cleanroom entered through the air shower, to his left, but those going out made their way through two sets of doors directly into the changing room. He sat on a changing room bench, surrounded by lockers but no machines, and ripped his mask off. He breathed deeply. That felt better.

"Are you all right?" asked a technician, climbing into her pristine white suit.

"Yes," said Graham, relieved to be out of sight of the machinery. "I'll be fine. I just needed some dirty air."

Chapter 14

Just as he'd promised, or threatened, Vince did get in contact later that same day. Graham had flown back early from Scotland and been home for half an hour. In the changing room he'd found a solution to the wayward robot problem. He'd picked up a few spare bunny-suits and laid them down in a crescent around his working area, as a barrier for the robots' small wheels. He'd felt like a laboratory rat solving problems in Vince's maze.

If only he could find such simple protection against Vince, who appeared to be getting stronger every day. The only weakness he could see in Vince was a kind of emotional vacuum, but that wasn't much to go on. He was still mulling over the issue when the phone rang, quite strangely, with slightly irregular gaps between the double trills. He knew immediately who the call was from, and that he'd have to answer it before Faith realised something was wrong with the sound.

They were lying on the sofa, Faith with her head on his chest, watching the late afternoon news. Graham usually tried to avoid this half hour of soundbites, vox-pop, politicians' meaningless answers and reporters live on locations where there was nothing to see, but today he was forcing himself to cope. Faith had had a bad day. Danielle's condition had deteriorated rapidly, so much so that Dr Harrison had brought Faith in urgently to have authority for medical consent transferred while her sister was still able to sign her name. Three hours later, Danielle was in ITU on the danger list, her blood building up contaminants so fast that neither her kidneys nor the dialysis machine could cope. Worse still, nobody could work out why.

Vince didn't waste any time on preamble. "Graham, we need to make arrangements."

"Not now."

"Yes, now. I've been generous, given you more than a day."

This was awkward. Faith's ear was so close to the handset that she could surely hear Vince's words as well as his own.

"I'll call you back."

"No, you'll go to your computer and log on."

Faith, hearing a conversation that couldn't be mixed with a cuddle, rose from his chest without being asked. Graham stood up and brought the handset and cradle across to the stool of the unused piano. He contemplated moving to the dining room, but this wouldn't take long. "Listen..."

"You'll need some help with this. I suggest you get in touch with Eric."

"That won't be necessary, because nothing is going to happen."

Vince paused. "Are you trying to turn me down, Graham?"

"Absolutely."

"The I suppose we'll have to do this the hard way. What a pity."

Here we go again, thought Graham, the familiar sequence of refusals and threats. But this was one area where he definitely wouldn't be giving in. Vince, digital or not, would be having nothing to do with Faith.

"You said you wanted to be left alone," said Vince, clearly annoyed.

"Yes."

"I'll see what can be arranged."

And he rang off.

That could have gone a lot worse, thought Graham. He'd never managed to get rid of Vince so quickly before.

"Well done," said Faith, who must have assumed the conversation was to do with work. "I've never heard you so brutal with anybody before."

"Hmm."

She rose slightly, inviting him to slot back into place behind her. Before the interruption of the phone call, their cuddle had been heading towards sex. Not immediate

sex, but sex as its ultimate destination, to be reached in 40 minutes or so, little hand movements and noises from Faith writing it up there on the destination board, but as more than a short journey. It didn't surprise him that her need for comfort might take a sexual direction. Circumstances rarely altered Faith's appetite for sex. If anything, poor circumstance increased it. For Faith, sex was an affirmation of life, an antidote for trouble, both a celebration of living and a therapy for it, a physical snake oil.

The doorbell rang, and rang and rang and rang. Its cheesy chimes lost their charm when the button was pressed incessantly.

"Shit!" Graham was in no mood for visitors. But he'd have to answer it. There was always a chance this was something to do with Danielle.

It wasn't. It was Macey, standing there on the threshold with Cameron behind him, almost directly behind, his face appearing above Macey's and his stooped shoulders either side, the rest of his body hidden by Macey's short but wide bulk, his watch arm shooting up and down like a metronome. A double-headed four-armed monster, and one that Graham had hoped he wouldn't see again after Foxglove.

"You ain't carryin', eh, Graham?" said Macey, who seemed far more ill at ease than when they'd last seen each other. "Just a job, this, like, nothing personal."

"What?"

Macey watched Graham's hands rather than his face. He stepped inside and very briefly frisked Graham with his right hand. His left arm was unnaturally stiff. Clenched in his chubby hand was the head of Percy, the peculiar hammer. Presumably the shaft went up the sleeve of his expensive suit.

"Vince, he says you deserve a spankin', but me and Cam 'ere, we like to keep friends with people in the business, know what I mean? So you just get on your bike and we'll call it a day."

"Macey, what are you talking about?"

"Go on, fuck off. If anybody asks, we gave you a pasting. All right?"

Macey caught Graham off-balance and shoved him out of the door on to the top step.

"Macey, I live here!"

"Not any more, you don't. Go on, get out of it."

Damn him! This was Vince yet again. He must have had the pair of them waiting outside for his call, even as he was still on the phone to Graham.

Macey came out of the house and tried to pull Graham down the steps, but it didn't work out that way. Now he'd recovered his balance, Graham was able to stand his ground.

"Come on!" pleaded Macey. "Don't make a song and dance about it. You'll have some old cant peeking out of her windas and phoning the Old Bill. Cameron, get a grip on the geezer."

Cameron did as instructed, and pulled at Graham's arm, but somehow Graham was able to resist them both. He was mildly surprised by this, but not half as much as they were.

Macey was already struggling for breath. "Fack me, I thought you was all skin and bone?"

The pair tugged and pulled like a couple of stewards at the start line with a reluctant horse, but Graham wasn't moving. Back on the motorway verge he'd put up no resistance to Macey, but this was his home and Faith was inside.

"Macey, this isn't the Old Kent Road. Somebody probably *is* calling the police right now. I certainly hope so." He had his mobile with him but no hands available to use it. He'd thought about yelling for Faith, but didn't want to get her involved unless the situation was dire. There'd be so much to explain. And this struggle on the doorstep was so obvious, so clearly physical, that it really was just a matter of time before one of his affluent and very respectable neighbours did call 999. If Cameron pulled any harder on Graham's shirt, he'd finish up with a trophy sleeve.

"But you got more form than the fackin Kray twins, you berk. Why didn't you tell us you'd gone down for a shooter? Oh, bollocks!"

Macey lost patience with the struggle. He let go of Graham, and while standing in front of him relaxed his grip on the hammer-head so that Percy's shaft slid through his palm, until he grasped it very close to the end. This was a practised trick, intended to intimidate. Graham could imagine him standing in front of the mirror, rehearsing until he got it just right. It was also a trick with a twist. While Graham's attention was taken up by the peculiar hammer, Macey raised his right elbow and swung it hard into Graham's mouth.

"Arghhh! Fackin 'ell." Macey hopped around wagging his elbow in the air. He was trying to hide the fact that he was in pain, and failing, which made it very clear just how much he'd been hurt.

Graham had felt the impact but not much pain. He brushed his hand across his jaw, it felt fine. What had Macey done, somehow mistimed the blow or followed through and hit the doorpost? It was amusing that the violence had backfired, but he was careful not to smile.

Macey let go of Percy to nurse his elbow, and continued to grimace and dance around. By the time he returned to pick up Percy again his face had gathered the same red anger it had shown on the night of the Foxglove fire.

"Right, you cant!"

At that same moment, a white Vauxhall with orange and yellow stripes hurtled through the ancient chicane at the top of St Peter's Street, blue lights flashing but no siren. What fine timing for the cavalry, thought Graham. This was an astonishingly fast response by Islington standards, where minicabs were usually quicker to arrive than the overstretched police. The driver was a magician on speedbumps and somehow managed to get the low-skirted car over them at thirty without the familiar scraping noise.

"Fackin 'ell. Now look what you've done." Macey casually tossed Percy over the black railings into the basement patio, where it blended in with the raw concrete floor that never saw sunlight and the discarded parts of an old wooden trellis, as if it had been there for months. Somehow he managed to drain the redness from his face in a matter of seconds. He brushed imaginary dust from his expensive suit, as any genteel businessman might do as the police approached.

Cameron had already let go of Graham and now tried his best not to look guilty, though he wasn't very good at it.

A second police car arrived at speed from the other direction, from the east, and a third through the chicane.

"Listen," began Graham. The last thing he needed right now was to spend hours at a police station dealing with paperwork. "Let's just tell the police this was a disagreement between friends, right? And then you two can buzz off. I just want to get back indoors."

This had Macey utterly perplexed. "You *what*?"

Two policemen got out of the first car and made for the steps. They looked smart in their protective uniform waistcoats, they also looked slightly unsure of themselves. One of them regarded Macey, who raised his hands to show they were empty and he had no bad intentions. The policeman turned to Graham, "Graham Hastings?"

"That's me?"

"Will you come quietly?"

"What?"

The second policeman grabbed Graham's right arm as the first one grabbed his left. Both finished up behind his back.

"What the *hell* are you doing?"

They didn't need to answer. Graham felt handcuffs tighten on his wrists.

"Graham Hastings, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Fiona Blakewell. Anything you say may be recorded and used in evidence..."

Vince's Desire

Andrew Starling

Chapter 15

Islington's main police station was at Tolpuddle Street, just a hundred yards from Sainsbury's. Four wary police officers kept a close eye on Graham as he was uncuffed and his personal possessions were taken from his pockets. The duty sergeant, a round and unfit man in his thirties, logged them: a wallet, mobile phone, keys, belt.

"One blunderbuss, one Remington automatic," he added, but didn't put these imaginary items on his list. The watching officers seemed to find it funny.

This was the first time Graham had been arrested and brought to a police station, really the first time he'd had anything much to do with the police. He would have preferred his first experience to be more trivial. Maybe Fiona whatever-her-name-was, the woman he was supposed to have murdered, was a Foxglove employee, accidentally killed in the fire. But that didn't fit with the way these nervous policemen watched him. And they'd taken no interest at all in Macey and Cameron, hadn't even arrested them, despite Graham's protests.

Before the duty sergeant had finished logging the contents of Graham's pockets, Detective Inspector Brydon arrived, wearing a Macintosh, out of breath and red in the face.

"Oh, shit!" he said, taking a melodramatic step back when he saw Graham. He pointed and asked the duty sergeant, "You're not arresting this man for the Graham Hastings charges, are you?"

The duty sergeant confirmed that he was.

Brydon shook his head. "Wrong Graham Hastings."

A long discussion followed, with the arresting officer and the duty sergeant pointing out a number of Graham's features that matched the description on the warrant. Finally, Brydon asked, "Mr Hastings, how many times have I called to see you this week?"

"Twice."

"I'm very sorry about this. I hope you don't think we're trying to harass you. We're not. It's a genuine mistake."

Graham decided it might be best for him to not respond, implying that he did feel harassed, which was the truth.

The uniformed officers seemed convinced that if Brydon had visited the suspect twice without arresting him, then this had to be the wrong man. They visibly relaxed and began to talk amongst themselves. The duty-sergeant handed Graham's belongings back to him and repeated a few lines of the description - height, build, eye colour - but now as explanations for an error rather than as compelling evidence.

"Come on," said Brydon, "I'll run you home. I really am very sorry about this."

Brydon walked remarkably quickly considering how out of condition he'd appeared before. He rushed Graham through the rear of the police station and out into the car park, where he unlocked a dark blue Volvo estate.

Graham got in. The car was a tip. It couldn't have been cleaned since it left the factory. There was litter and newspaper everywhere, and large bits of black plastic that looked like they were part of the internal trim, except there was no internal trim missing. If this car had a name it would be something like Dunroamin or Rose Cottage, something residential. On the back seat was a full crate of peaches and a red velvet dressing gown.

"Don't ask," said Brydon.

Of more interest to Graham was a 24-pack of Carbonell half-litre bottles of extra virgin olive oil. His lips moved around. He could do with one of those right now, but Faith had trained him not to ask. It wasn't polite, apparently.

"Lots of olive oil," he said, fishing for an invitation.

"Ah, that's the girlfriend," replied Brydon.

Graham knew plenty about olive oil, including how difficult it was to find multi-packs of medium-sized bottles - wholesale outlets only - and how serious cooks generally

opted for five litre cans instead. Not quite the same thing. A partially-used can missed the esters of a freshly-opened bottle.

"Mediterranean, is she?"

Brydon shook his head. He fiddled around inside his tweed jacket and handed over a snapshot.

Wow! The woman in the picture was only a few years older than Faith, 35 at the most, and Brydon had to be 60. She was clearly Anglo-Saxon, also very attractive. And there was something else.

"I think I've met her."

"I doubt it." Brydon held out his hand to take the photo back.

They drove out of the police station car park, turned left then left again on to White Lion Street, towards the centre of Angel.

"What did they arrest you for?" asked Brydon.

"Murder. I can't remember the name. Fiona?"

"Blakewell?"

"That was it."

"It's a specimen charge."

"A what?"

"A holding charge."

"You mean there were more?"

"Armed robbery, kidnapping, rape, and two more charges of murder. It's a good job I turned up in time."

"Yes, isn't it?"

Brydon reached inside his Macintosh for his glasses and perched them on the end of his nose where he could look over them. They misted up slightly from the moisture of his body, perhaps from those nearby eyebrows, the two rainforests canopies.

"It's you they were looking for," he said.

This was a difficult statement for Graham to comprehend, and for a while he failed to do so. "I'm sorry?"

"You are the Graham Hastings on the arrest warrant. Everything I said back there was bullshit."

"But I haven't done any of those things!"

"And I called around to see you twice this week, but somehow neglected to arrest you." Brydon lifted a hand from the steering wheel to slap himself gently on the wrist.

"Very lax of me. Stranger still, before I called round the first time, I checked your record. Nothing. Blank. Yet I checked again today and you've got ten years' previous, including multiple firearms offences. You're now the country's fourth most wanted man. That's some promotion. Have you ever seen the film Brazil?"

"The what?"

At least Brydon had explained Macey's nervousness and the reference to a shooter, even if he now beginning to add confusion rather than clarity.

"Brazil, Terry Gilliam, man called Tuttle gets arrested through a spelling mistake. One of my favourites."

"I don't think I've seen it, no."

"Not into films?"

"I prefer poetry."

"Yes, we get a lot of poetry-lovers at the nick, carving up strangers with Stanley knives, raping children, dealing crack."

Once again, Graham was slow on the uptake. He smiled, weakly.

Brydon turned right on to Islington High Street.

"What's going on?" asked Graham.

"What do you mean, what's going on?"

"Why are you looking after me, getting me un-arrested, calling round to persuade me that Vince is real?"

"Nothing."

Not true, decided Graham, but what could he say?

"If you don't tell me, I'll make a point of getting myself arrested again, just to wreck your plans."

Brydon looked askance at Graham, turned his eyes back to the road, repeated the look, then burst out laughing. "Thirty years on the force, and that's the most original threat I've ever heard." He glanced at Graham with admiration, but said nothing more.

"Who's pulling your strings?" prompted Graham. "Who's behind all this?"

They stopped at the lights where he'd stood at the kerbside with Faith and talked about the past and the future. Pedestrians crossed in front.

"Twenty-fifth of December, Christmas Day," said Brydon. "That's an unusual day for a birthday, quite memorable. And then I thought about it a little more - the interests in sailboat racing, bridge, chess."

All these items, Graham remembered, had been mentioned on Brydon's second visit. "You're talking about... Vince?"

"I'm talking about Humphrey Bogart, born Christmas Day 1899, a fine chess player and sailor, not bad at bridge, spent one year in the navy, got in a fight before he was famous, picked up a cut lip and a very slight lisp. Remind you of anyone? In *The Big Sleep*, Sam Spade uses a false name - Doghouse, Doghouse Riley."

"Vincent Riley?"

"Snap."

This had Graham fazed for a moment. Then he recalled Vince's manipulation of the film *Casablanca*, the new ending he'd given it, where Bogart got the girl. From time to time he liked to use quotes from Bogart films. It wasn't such a surprise that he'd modelled himself on the famous old actor. But why not do it visually, too? That was strange. Vince's avatar didn't look much like Bogart, except maybe the eyes and nose. The lips and chin were definitely wrong.

"All those charges and my criminal record were created by Vince, right?"

Brydon tilted his head to one side, like the answer was so obvious he didn't need to state it. The lights changed and they set off down Upper Street.

"I need your help," said Graham. "I can't battle Vince on my own."

"You're not supposed to be battling him. He needs to be controlled, that's all."

Graham didn't agree, but decided not to say so. "Who else thinks that?"

Brydon abruptly did an illegal turn across the oncoming traffic. A truck blew its deep horn, but there was no accident. They continued smoothly down Duncan Street and Graham lowered his hands from the dashboard.

"Ever read any Jorge Luis Borges?"

Here we go again, thought Graham.

"Narrator sits at a camp fire," continued Brydon, "thinking about ghosts and men. They look the same, except ghosts can walk through fire. At the end of the story, he wonders if he can walk through fire himself, and finds that he can."

They turned left on to Devonian Road and were now just two hundred yards from Graham's house. Close to the end of the road, Brydon steered across to the opposite kerb, next to the converted church, and stopped.

"Inspector, you still haven't told me a thing about what's going on. I'm not going home until I find out."

"I haven't brought you home."

That was an odd statement. Graham was now just twenty yards from his own front door.

"It's not safe for you to go home," added Brydon. "Macey and Cameron will be back when Vince tells them you've been released. They're probably heading here right now."

"Then what are we doing here?"

"I'm going to introduce you to God." Brydon pointed. "She lives in that converted church, just there."

"God?"

"Angela Avebury."

That was an easy name for Graham to remember. It was the name on the Foxglove desk where he'd taken the gp41 program, the name of the CEO of Foxglove.

They got out of the car and Brydon motioned for Graham to follow him to the tall church door. He pressed an intercom button. "It's Brydon. I've got Graham with me."

Graham wasn't entirely sure that he wanted to meet the woman whose computer he'd hacked into and whose office he'd burned down - or at least watched burn down. But he needed answers, and it didn't sound like he was going to get them from Brydon.

The door unlocked remotely. Brydon led the way up the narrow steps to one side of a cramped communal foyer. At the top of the stairs, on the new level in the middle of the church, the one added by the property developers, a corridor ran the length of the building. There was a door on their left, where the corridor started, and it was open. Brydon stepped inside.

The lounge was spacious, as wide as the church. Four small arched windows along the wall opposite, and a single huge one in its centre, let in daylight, partially obscured by a rowan tree. The other three walls were covered in books, so many that the room felt like a library just as much as it felt like a lounge. Next to the book-lined walls was a raised gangway, protected by a banister, with steps every few yards down to the lounge area, which looked sunken as a result. There was a comfortable-looking sofa in this lower area, a TV and a couple of easy chairs.

"Graham, meet Angela Avebury."

In the middle of the room stood a woman in brown stretch pants, brown lace-up boots, a fawn rollneck top, and a long dark cardigan that reached the floor and flowed

behind her when she moved. She was in her early forties, with shoulder-length brown hair, and smiled a genuinely charming smile.

"Hi Graham." She sounded American, a light accent.

"I'd better get back and face the music," said Brydon, to Angela rather than to Graham.

"We'll do just fine," she said. "How much did you tell him?"

"Very little."

Graham had heard her voice before, but couldn't place it. It belonged to some other era, some other circumstance. And there was something else, something that he thought he should point out to Brydon, but he discovered the man had already left, quietly closing the door behind him.

Considering the alternatives, this was a puzzling situation but not a terrible one. He was just a few yards from home with a strange American woman who looked harmless enough, even if he didn't have a clue who she was.

The tension at Foxglove had imprinted the evening well enough on his memory. He could remember the desk, the name-board, the photo on the wall, the photo of the real Angela Avebury, and this wasn't her.

Chapter 16

"What do you think of Brydon?" asked Angela, or at least the woman who claimed to be Angela Avebury even though she had darker hair, darker eyes, and a far bigger nose.

"I think he does exactly what you ask him to do. Maybe you could tell me why?"

"I introduced him to his new girlfriend."

"That doesn't sound like enough to make an honest policeman bend the rules."

"That's all you need to know, for now."

Yes, she had authority, she had plenty of that, enough to stop Graham asking more. Yet he felt comfortable with her, like he'd known her a long time, whoever she was.

She collected papers from the carpet. The place was strewn with newspapers and Internet printouts. There were wrappers from a takeaway on the table, along with a disorderly pile of magazines. And there was a smell of food, of food history, maybe oriental, above a mild background of old cigarette smoke. The place had the air of a dishevelled and mildly abused four star hotel-room just before the chambermaid arrives.

"I'm following Vince in the news," she explained. "All the good things he's doing, stimulating the world's economies, funding robotics research, stopping wars."

"And the bad."

"Yes, that too." She placed the papers on a coffee table. "Can I get you a drink? Tea? Coffee? Olive oil?"

There was a surprise. Nobody apart from Faith ever said that.

"The kitchen's upstairs. Come on up." She led the way out of the lounge-pit up to the raised gangway. The wall closest to Graham's house was decorated with books, just like the other walls without windows, but it had a wooden staircase running diagonally across it, dividing the bookshelves into two. Angela bounded up the steps with energy, her long cardigan billowing behind her.

The kitchen was relatively small and windowless, all dark colours and rich flecked-enamels. She squatted in front of the fridge, rather than bending down. There was a bottle-opener on a string inside - something Graham hadn't seen since his last trip to the States. And six half-litre bottles of *Giovani Bessendiro* olive oil.

Angela handed one to him. "I was expecting you." She took a Miller from the fridge for herself. Graham unscrewed the cap and devoured the slick liquid in a single lift. He needed that.

"Why are you pretending to be Angela Avebury?"

She put her beer down and passed her hand over her head to the back of her neck, appearing to tug at her hair, so hard that Graham wondered if there was some kind of masochistic thing going on here. There was a slight sound, like tearing cotton, and the hairpiece came away.

She was bald underneath, as hairy as a baby's bum. She held her nose, moved her fingers to push it from below, and that too came off. She had a nose of her own underneath, fortunately, but far more petite than the latex one she'd just removed. Finally she poked a finger in the corner of each eye and popped the coloured contact lenses into her palm.

Graham looked at her hard, with eyes open wide. Yes, this was the Angela Avebury from the photo. Missing her hair, but otherwise a match.

He'd never thought that a woman without hair could be beautiful. Yet she was. Her skull had the most exquisite shape. Just perfect, the perfect shape, with fine indentations where the plates joined together, like beautiful detail in the stonework of the beautiful Taj Mahal. Her nose was lovely too. The other one had been a little too large, but this one was absolutely the right shape to go with the rest of her face, especially her eyes, her blue-grey eyes, hard on the surface but now somehow softened beneath by her lack of hair, by the perfection of her skull. The hazel eyes had been impressive but glassy.

These were real. He went into them, deep, looking inside, finding it nice, finding nothing sexual but something at least as strong, which he couldn't explain.

She broke away.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's ok. Me too. I don't do that often. Usually I stay with one version of me all day. I'm not pretending to be Angela Avebury, I'm pretending *not* to be Angela Avebury. There are warrants out for my arrest too."

"And what do you want from me, Angela Avebury?"

"The answer to a question. Do you think Vince can be controlled?"

"No, that's not possible. He has to be destroyed."

Angela bit her lip. "I was afraid you'd say that. It's such a shame. He has so many capabilities."

"But no morality."

"I panicked when he first appeared. Oh my God! An AI without rules. That's why I coded gp41, but Vince was too fast, he reacted too quickly..."

"*You* coded gp41?"

"Never come across a class female coding act?"

"No, I mean yes, of course."

"But then I was impressed by his abilities, his growth. What an *amazing* intelligence. That's why I sent Brydon to slow you down, tell you he was real and to lay off. I wanted to see what happened."

"What happened was that he took over the world and started everybody like shit, including me. He has to go, Angela."

"I know, I know. But it's such a shame."

"And I need your help to get him."

Angela nodded. "Yeah."

She took his empty bottle and carried it across to the swing-bin. A clock on the wall showed 7 p.m. Could it really be that late? Graham took out his mobile to check the time.

"You total moron!" Angela grabbed it from him, switching it off instantly. "You just told Vince where you are!"

"It was only on for a second."

Angela bobbed her head around and put on a girl's voice. "Aw, but pop, I'm only a little bit pregnant." Her manner changed entirely. She slammed the phone down on the kitchen table and paced from one side of the room to the other, held her forehead, then raised her arms. "You're supposed to do dumb things from time to time, but not this stupid, you complete jerk."

"Hey, steady on."

"Don't you know *anything* about being a fugitive?"

"Well actually..."

"Shut up! I'm thinking."

Angela held her chin and thought. Graham watched her, not daring to interrupt.

"Ok," she said, evenly. "Vince can only place the phone to within twenty yards, and that includes the street. But he'll have this end of the building checked out for sure. Who do you think he'll send? The police or Macey and Cameron?"

"I don't... I think Cameron picks locks."

Angela moved past him and through a door at the far end of the kitchen. "Jesus," she shouted, out of sight. "I hate having strange men pawing through my bedroom."

Graham felt foolish and innocent at the same time, like a small boy looking at the devastation wrought by the simple act of getting caught up in the corner of a banquet's tablecloth.

She rushed back into the kitchen carrying a grey plastic case a little smaller than a shoebox. "Bring my beer. And don't forget your phone."

Above the steps leading up from the lounge to the kitchen was a second set leading to a higher floor. Angela made her way up and through the door at the top, with Graham close behind. Here was a bathroom, and it was clearly part of the church steeple. Near the top, its walls narrowed and sloped in. On each side was a stone-louvered window. As Graham stood by the toilet he could see out between the slats over the Business Design Centre in the direction of Camden.

Angela put the grey case on the toilet seat lid and prodded the cork ceiling with a window pole. A large section of ceiling briefly moved up before gently opening downward on hinges and spilling out a set of telescopic aluminium steps. Angela climbed them, still holding the window pole. "My case."

Graham took hold of the mysterious case and followed her. There was very little room up there in the steeple, even after Angela had pulled up the steps and trapdoor to create more floor. She moved a wide stool over the folded steps and sat on it, breathing out heavily. "Whew."

Graham stood uncomfortably. Although the steeple was very tall it was far too narrow. He had to lean towards Angela to keep his shoulders out of contact with the sloping walls. That meant he couldn't get out of the way of the hanging light-shade at chest level.

"Sit down," she said, shifting on the stool. "It's safe enough, and with two of us here they'll never get the mechanism to move, even if they find it."

The stool wasn't really built for two. Graham could feel Angela's body-warmth where their sides met.

"Is this where priests hid?" he asked.

"Sure, after they'd invented extruded aluminum and hydraulic dampers."

"It was originally built without a spire."

"The church? Main building, 1835, by Charles Barry. 1845 for the spire, give or take, by Roumieu and Gough. "

"Hmmm."

"Yeah, I know my history. Listen, bud, we're going to have to sit in silence here if somebody comes nosing around the apartment. You up for that?"

"Of course."

Angela opened the mysterious grey box. Inside were more than a dozen latex noses, in neat rows. She placed the one she'd removed on the single vacant mould. Her contact lenses slotted into an empty case in the box lid.

A buzzer sounded inside the flat.

"I think we've got visitors," she said.

The buzzer sounded again, and again, for a long time, then stopped.

"We'll get back to important business later. For now, we'd better keep quiet."

The only windows in the sloping walls were two sets of horizontal slits, pillbox style. The top set were five feet above them, half way to the top of the spire, the bottom set were at the perfect level for a seated person and gave an even better view than the slats in the bathroom. In the foreground were the many shallow roofs of nearby Georgian townhouses, including Graham's own, with their ridges running front to back and two long chimneystacks each with four pots. It was the first time Graham had looked down on the roof of his home. It looked very ordinary. When it was built in the nineteenth century, skyscrapers and aircraft hadn't existed. It hadn't been designed for looking down upon.

Further out was the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, Monument, BT Tower, and the very top of Canary Wharf, and all around at least a dozen church spires. He'd never realised how many there were.

He listened to the almost-silence, to the sound of evening London outside, the traffic that never stopped, to the whirr of computer hard-drives inside. Yes, and he could smell electronic equipment too. Around the edge of the floor were three computer towers, two with their cases removed, all switched on and burning their human barbecue, the smell

of Angela's pyre, of her disused skin and hair on fire, or at least that of her wigs, assuming nobody else used the place. But what were they for?

He followed the cables around the edge of the room and up towards the slatted window to his right, then got up so fast he bumped his head on the light shade.

"For Chrissake, keep still, will you?" hissed Angela.

"*What* is... that?"

To his right, very close to where his shoulder had been, was the weirdest thing he'd seen in a long time. Next to the window slit, on a small wooden board about the size of a book, was a human-looking hand mounted vertically, with computer cables arriving underneath. It was holding a pair of binoculars. Looking into the binoculars, and also linked to thick computer cables, was a pair of eyes, full white globes with pupils and irises.

"It's a bionic video camera," hissed Angela. "And now I really think we need to be silent."

Graham sat down and tried to relax, but he found the camera so weird that he couldn't take his eyes off it. Gingerly, he moved a hand to touch it, to see what it was made of, it looked so real.

"Ah!"

The eyes moved when his hand came close. He was sure of it. He also knew that Angela had just kicked him hard on the ankle.

"It moved," he whispered.

"Ssshut... up!" hissed Angela, very slow and snake-like. In normal circumstances a hiss that couldn't be denied.

From below them came a noise, the unmistakable noise of somebody moving around. Then the equally unmistakable sound of a man peeing in a toilet.

Graham couldn't take his eyes off the eyes, off the eyes and the binoculars and the hand. He lifted his own hand, very slowly, till it was just a few inches away from the

binoculars, and moved to touch them. The hand on the wood moved the binoculars down and out of his reach, and grasped them more solidly. The pupils - and there was no mistaking this - twisted around in their white spheres to look at him.

He grabbed Angela just above the knee and pointed frantically at the device, which had already returned to normal.

Angela glowered at him and reached behind her head to a shelf, finding a pen and a pad of paper. She scribbled rapidly.

—Stop fucking about and keep still! Leave the camera alone.

But Graham was more curious than ever. He leaned back so he couldn't be seen by the eyes, and looked down the line of sight of the binoculars to see what they were aimed at. The astonishing answer was his own front door.

"You..." He caught himself, only slightly late, and grabbed the pen and paper from Angela.

—You've been spying on me!

She grabbed them back.

—Watching you. Yes, I have.

—What for?

—Your own protection, and to work out when I should show myself. How do you think Brydon learnt you'd been arrested, and pitched up so fast to get you released?

They heard the toilet flush, then feet on the wooden steps going down, feet that had been silent on the way up.

"No, there's nobody here." That was Cameron's South African accent.

"Just look at all these fuckin wigs." Macey's coarse voice carried from way below. "I reckon we found Shirley Bassey's London gaff."

"She's dead, isn't she?"

"Nah, I don't think so. That's just the way she sings."

"Any ID?" asked Cameron.

"Yeah," said Macey. "One Nancy Darclane and Mary Ellen Fort. Sounds like a couple of birds live here, and one of 'em's a yank. Only one bed, though. Very tasty."

"He must have been in the street," said Cameron. "Maybe turned up in a cab, saw us and fecked off."

"We'd better do a couple more drums, just to be sure. There's got to be a flat each side of that entrance place."

"Foyer."

"Yeah, whatever these posh cants call it..."

Then the voices were too far away to be heard properly.

Angela put her hand to her lips. They listened for the sound of the front door being closed, but it didn't come. She used the pen and pad once again.

—Better give them a few minutes, in case they're playing tricks.

Graham nodded.

They listened, but there was no noise of a door.

Still fascinated by the bizarre camera, Graham raised his hand for another approach.

"Graham, will you stop teasing the camera," said Angela, quietly.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"I didn't have a normal camera, so I cobbled this one together."

"Cobbled this together?" Graham chuckled in disbelief. People in universities spent years and millions of pounds failing to produce something half this good.

He stopped chuckling as he realised that he and Angela had even more in common than he'd first thought. She was never going to ask him why he'd invented Vince. She was of the same mindset, another progress junkie wanting to push the envelope, another disciple of the technological faith. If something can be done, let's do it, whether it's harmful or good, whether it's a weapon or a medical advance, let's try it out. Let's take the

genes from a jellyfish and insert them in a rabbit. Hey Presto! Fluorescent rabbits.

Whatever can be done, will be done.

Progress in this sense was an addiction - for both of them and for thousands more people like them. Cook the spoon and take another hit in the shooting gallery of progress. If Graham hadn't invented Vince, somebody else would have done. In that sense he didn't have much responsibility for Vince's actions, he was simply fulfilling a small role in society's grand scheme of things, in the inevitable rush of progress, like an individual ant in society's nest, like a long line of ants before him - Stevenson, Eddison, Bell, Fleming, Einstein, all looking for the progress fix.

Or was it really society itself that was the junkie, with these famous people merely as suppliers? And everybody with a TV, a mobile and a computer as a progress junkie, and the scientists and corporate engineers as their dealers, their suppliers, producing ever-smaller electronic gizmos from the hidden pockets of their seedy mechanical jackets.

"So what's the plan for knocking out Vince?" she asked. "Use gp41 but try for some element of surprise?"

"Gp41 is history, I'm afraid. Vince has a defence against it, a barrier that isolates him from aggressive software, a kind of digital condom."

"How do you know?"

Angela may have been keeping her voice low, but Graham's admission was barely audible. "I built it for him."

"You what!"

"He forced me to."

Angela held her hand against her face, in front of her eyes, but she didn't stay despondent for long.

"Well you'd better get busy, buster. You've got about two days to code a digital pin."

"What's the rush?"

"Ever heard of a microchip project called the V-Ultrachip?"

"Yes." He was about to say he'd worked on it, but decided not to.

"Do you know what the V stands for?"

"Oh shit!"

"Vince sees networked intelligence as weak. So he designed a network on a chip, the V-Ultrachip. It's his version of reproduction. They're little clones of the big Vince, self-contained. The first few should come off the production lines in a couple of days. After that, the battle's over."

Two days wasn't enough. Graham still had no idea how he was going to fight Vince, what his opponent's weaknesses were. But one of the other questions still bothering him had been answered by the strange camera.

"Foxglove is in the prosthetics business, right?" he asked. "Artificial limbs, eyes, that kind of stuff?"

"Yes."

That wasn't the full truth, he could tell, but it was close enough for now.

"And business is booming, thanks to Vince," added Angela. "You see the news today, Graham? World's on a roll. Stock markets on the bull here and in the US, pretty much everywhere, space program brought forward, milk and honey flowing from silver faucets."

"So I hear."

"And the prosthetics business is doing especially well." She seemed paradoxically sad when she said this. Not happy or even indifferent, but emotionally down.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Let's go downstairs and I'll show you. You might want to check that Macey and Cameron are in view. If we can see them outside your house, we know they're not somewhere else."

Graham moved his head towards the slit window, then decided he didn't want to upset the odd camera, so he looked from behind it again, along its line of view. He could see Macey and Cameron standing next to the steps of his house like two sentries.

He stood carefully and moved off the trapdoor. "Yes, they're there, but I'm not exactly thrilled by that. I'm worried about Faith. I need to call her."

"You can't do that without giving yourself away. Don't worry, Faith won't be harmed."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because Vince likes her."

That was undeniably true. Vince liked her too much, but that did mean she was relatively safe. Angela pulled at the steps.

"He was a cheeky one, using my bathroom. I bet he didn't wash his hands."

In the lounge, Angela flopped on the sofa, reached beneath the coffee table for her cigarettes and lit one, sighing as she breathed smoke out.

"That's one of the reasons I live over here," she said, as she put the pack back where she'd found it. "In the States, smokers rate some way below lepers."

"How do you find London?"

"Like living in a theme park."

Graham stood by the large arched window that looked out on to the alder tree and the street. There was a balcony immediately outside, and no means of getting to it, as far as he could see. It was inset into the end of the church, and the entire aperture had been sealed with chicken wire to stop pigeons roosting. He hadn't noticed that from the outside.

"There is a positive side to this," said Angela.

Graham snorted. "What? To me building Vince's defence?"

"He had to rely on you to build it. He knew you could do a better job, that's why he didn't do it himself."

"And what's so great about that?"

"It means you've got the potential to go one better. By getting you to code his defences for him, he's kind of admitted that. Vince has a weakness, I'm sure he has a weakness, it's just a question of seeing past his strengths and recognising it."

When she'd finished her cigarette, leaving a long stub, she switched on a lamp and began sorting through the pile of papers she'd place on the coffee table earlier.

"He wants arms and legs," she said. "And everything else. That's why there's so much money going into robotics research. I know some of the people it's going to. Similar industry."

She held half a dozen papers in her hand, which she waved for Graham to take. He sat on the sofa and read through them. They were a mixture of emails and Internet news articles, all concerning robotics and prosthetics specialists, professors and doctors in industry and the more practical academic establishments.

"Well how about that?" exclaimed Graham. "These people all have missing limbs, or their partners or children do. I suppose that's why they're highly motivated, the same way you get cancer patients and their families working for cancer charities."

"Now look how recently those limbs were lost."

After looking through the pages again, Graham rocked back on the sofa, wondering if he looked as pale as he felt. "Jesus!"

"All in the past week," said Angela. "And all accidents during routine medical procedures. I know one or two of these people personally. Poor bastards."

"Why... why has nobody picked up on this, seen the pattern?"

"Maybe somebody has, but Vince is keeping them quiet."

Graham breathed deeply. He was feeling nauseous. "You mean... this is how Vince thinks he can speed things up? If the researchers are all missing limbs themselves, or their partners are, or their children, they'll work so much harder."

"It looks that way."

"Oh God, I feel sick."

Here was Vince, the world's new dominant species, creating incentives for species number two. Graham remembered the tale of the thousands of chimpanzees involved in human medical research, and then remembered who'd told him the tale.

"Shit!" He sprang off the sofa.

"What's wrong?"

"I have to go. Faith's sister is in hospital, connected to a dialysis machine. Vince is poisoning her. He's tampered with the machine and he's poisoning her."

It was so obvious. Why hadn't he seen it before?

"You'll be spotted, Graham. You shouldn't leave here. London's packed with CCTV."

"I've got to go. I've got to do something. I can't just sit here while he poisons her. She's already in a coma. I'll get a cab. I won't be seen in a cab."

"Graham, you *mustn't* leave!" insisted Angela.

And there was that forcefulness again, that familiar voice that must be obeyed.

"Graham!"

Except when it came to saving Faith's sister.

Chapter 17

As he walked along Devonia Road, Graham tried to disguise his height and lanky walk, though that wasn't easy. The moment he started consciously thinking about his walk, the entire rhythm broke down. Maybe that was a good thing. Macey and Cameron couldn't see down Devonia Road from where they were standing, but they'd only have to move twenty feet to their right.

At first he'd been thinking of going to the Whittington hospital to see Dr Harrison, but he could imagine how that conversation might go. She'd proved very reluctant to disconnect Danielle before, and there wasn't much chance of Graham convincing her this time. The good doctor would ask Graham how much he knew about medicine and he'd answer not a lot, but that he knew a lot about machines. If they'd just *try* disconnecting Danielle, they'd see an improvement. How many responsible doctors would opt for that kind of experiment?

But there was one person who could swing it. Danielle had given Faith authority for medical consent. That was signed and official. If Faith demanded they disconnect Danielle from the dialysis machine for a few hours, well... not many people were capable of standing up to Faith in full flow.

He wanted to call Faith on his mobile, but knew Vince might interfere. It would be best if he made his other call first. He reached Upper Street and hailed a black cab, asked for King's Cross, and tapped the keys of his phone.

"Eric?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Your partner in crime."

"Graham. How's it going?"

"Have you had your tooth fixed yet?"

There was a pause at the other end.

"My wisdom tooth? No, that's tomorrow. I'm ready though, I can tell you."

"Will it be under general anaesthetic?"

"Dead right it will. They're going to be in there with a JCB and a dumper truck. I don't want to see all that, and I certainly don't want to feel it."

"Cancel it. Don't go."

"What? I've been waiting three weeks for the rotten NHS..."

"Trust me, don't go. Our artificial friend has been taking a pruning saw to experts like you. Run an Internet search on robotics research and recent funding. You'll..."

And the line went dead. Graham had half expected this. He'd known Vince probably wouldn't allow him to complete the call. Fortunately, he'd had enough time to get Eric alarmed. Eric wasn't stupid. He'd do his research and fill in the gaps.

One more call. How would Vince react to this?

"Hello?"

"Faith, sweetheart, it's me. I'm fine."

"Hello?"

"I got arrested, but I've been released. It's a bit complicated to explain."

"Hello? If there's anybody there, I can't hear you."

Graham growled to himself and switched off. Out of all the plays Vince could have made, that was the worst, allowing him to hear Faith but not make himself heard. He'd guessed he'd be allowed to make a call or two. Vince would want to know the location of the mobile, whether it was in motion and where it was heading. At least he hoped so.

He leaned forward to talk to the cab driver. "I've changed my mind. I don't want to go to King's Cross, I want to go back to Angel, Can you take me to Essex Road, just past Waterstone's, the junction with Boxington Street?"

The driver was early fifties, number two haircut, very thick-set.

"Eh? Come on, mate. That's almost where I picked you up. You're pissing me about."

"You'll still get paid."

"Yeah, and it'll be another half hour before I get to the West End."

The cab did a U-turn on Pentonville Road. It hadn't gone far before sirens sounded and three police cars flashed by in the other direction, heading at speed towards King's Cross. Graham briefly smiled. They were almost certainly following up Vince's phone trace. Just in case they might recognise him, he ducked down below window level while they passed, then decided to stay there for the rest of the journey. There was no advantage in being seen.

"Here we are, Boxington Street. That'll be a tenner."

"What?" Graham tried to open the cab door. It was still locked. "What do you mean, ten pounds? It says five pounds sixty-five on the meter."

"Yeah, but that's the fare for people who don't duck down when a cop car comes the other way."

This wasn't an argument worth having. As he handed over the money with his right hand, Graham switched his mobile on again with his left, and squeezed it into the gap between the seat cushions. It was of no further use for calling. He may as well get some value from it. "Ten it is."

"Ta."

Graham stepped out on to the pavement. "You have an interesting evening."

"Yeah, sure I will."

He'd never broken into his own home before. The garden walls at the back were over seven feet high in places, but if the boys from the Boxington Estate could make it across more than a dozen back gardens, distributing crisp packets and empty Smirnoff Ice

bottles in their irregular version of the Grand National, then he could certainly manage to reach fence four.

He walked down Boxington Street, past the old cinema, and turned right on to Raleigh Street. The house at the end of his expensive Georgian terrace had a garden that bordered this road. The boundary wall was taller than Graham and had broken glass set into its top, as did many of the walls around here, but the glass was missing close to the end. There was also a convenient electricity board box at waist level. It was easy to step on the box and climb over the wall.

He made a mental note to bring this to somebody's attention at a later date. In fact he might find himself bringing it to his neighbours' attention very soon if they happened to be looking out of their rear windows this evening. The light had faded and he was thankful for that, but still anybody looking in the right direction would be able to see him.

There were two gardens between the one he was in now and his own. Walking quickly, but not running, he climbed the two separating walls, taking care not to harm his neighbours' plants. He rarely did anything this physical, but when he did, his own strength sometimes surprised him. The gardens were pretty, full of early summer flowers, though this was a strange way to view them.

It took less than thirty seconds to get to his own garden. He wanted to run from where he was to his back door, but instead walked, as a man should do in his own back yard.

There were three full bin-liners outside the back door. It was locked, but the kitchen window a few yards further along was slightly open. Faith usually left it that way to get rid of cooking smells. That was another security issue he'd have to mention later. He lifted the sash window and climbed in over the ancient sink, trying his best not to loosen it from its equally ancient moorings. There was no light on in the kitchen and it took his eyes a few seconds to adjust. It felt strange getting inside his own house this

way, and even though he'd made it without incident, he still couldn't relax. It was like he didn't belong here and the real owner might turn up at any moment to kick him out.

He moved through from the kitchen and checked the dining room, but Faith wasn't there. He couldn't remember whether he'd left his laptop out when he'd last been here, which seemed like days ago. It wasn't on the table, and when he looked in the sideboard drawer it wasn't there either. He checked the TV room but still didn't find Faith. A single table lamp was on and the heavy curtains were closed.

From above, a slight noise passed through the ceiling. Presumably Faith was in the bedroom. He moved into the stairwell and listened. He heard a muffled moan. It could have been the bedroom TV, but didn't sound like a TV. He wondered if he was getting paranoid, then decided that with two violent criminals outside, and Vince after him, as well as the police, he had every reason to feel unsafe. What if Macey and Cameron weren't outside at all, and Cameron had picked the lock to get them in? Or what if Vince had hired other players?

Physical confrontation was the last thing he wanted, but maybe it would be wise to choose some kind of weapon. Just the feel of it would be comforting. A knife from the kitchen? No, that was too brutal, so brutal that he could never imagine using it. By the front door was a big golfing umbrella, a tall one with a white Volvo logo on a blue background, but more importantly with a long metal spike at the end. He picked it up, and while he was close to the door he quietly fitted the door chain into its slot, just in case Cameron decided to get in, assuming he wasn't already inside.

Umbrella in hand, he began to sneak up the stairs, avoiding step six, the one that always squeaked when the weather was damp, which in London meant most of the year.

At the bedroom door he hesitated. It was very strange sneaking around your own home. His approach had been silent, he'd have the element of surprise. From behind the door he heard Faith laugh, which was a good sign. Then a grunt, a moan, and a man's

voice, not loud enough to identify, yet familiar. What the hell was going on? These weren't sounds of violence, but not what he wanted to hear.

Faith squealed abruptly, ending his intellectual analysis and sending him into action. He reached for the doorhandle, jabbed it down and burst inside, umbrella at the ready.

She was naked, lying on the bed, or at least its bottom left corner, lit with artistic obliqueness by a single bedside lamp, her legs parted and over the edge, head on a pillow at its centre, clothes strewn behind her near the headboard, her left hand between her legs, where her sexual excitement was clear to the person most qualified to recognise it. And there was that heady fragrance, the most sexual smell in the world, of turned-on Faith. He breathed it in, reflexively, appreciating it without conscious thought, but for possibly the first time in his life, didn't find it arousing.

There was nobody else in the room. Graham's laptop was open on the dresser opposite her, next to the blank TV. The laptop screen showed the face of a man. It was Vince, grinning.

Faith removed her hand from her private parts and sat upright. "Well thank God for that! What happened to you? I had to ring the police in the end. They said you were on the run, made me out to be a gangster's moll who didn't know where her gangster was." She looked at the umbrella. "Is it raining?"

"No," said Vince, through the laptop speakers.

"What the fuck's going on?" Graham's eyes flitted from Faith to the laptop and back again. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Masturbating. Or I was." She smiled. "Your timing's pretty good."

Graham shot a finger at the screen. "With *him*?"

"He's not a him, he's an 'it', an interactive computer image, an Internet service for lonely women whose partners run away and desert them. He's got good timing too,

haven't you, Vince? He just appeared on the screen this evening, out of nowhere, when I was checking my email, hoping I might get *some* kind of contact from you."

On cue, Vince rotated the top part of his head 360 degrees, from the top lip and above, leaving the bottom lip and chin where they were, until everything smoothly rejoined and once more he looked handsome rather than grotesque.

"See?" said Faith.

"He's not... It's..."

Where to begin?

Faith frowned. "I hope we're not going to get into a goose and gander argument here. You've looked at plenty of Internet porn in your time. Vince is Internet porn for women. Sure, he looks good, but it's the stories he tells, and the sexy voice he uses to tell them."

Graham stared at her, open-mouthed.

"Graham, come on! You weren't here. I heard nothing from you, I had no idea where you were, when you'd be back. I felt horny. I still feel horny. You know how sex calms me." She pointed at the screen. "It's not like you've found me in bed with a real person. I wouldn't do that. He's a computer animation, that's all. Do I get funny when you watch porn on the Internet?"

"I haven't done that for years," said Graham, recognising how feeble that sounded even as he said it.

"Sorry. It's obviously a shock." Faith softened, her voice turned more playful.

"Why don't you just take off your clothes and finish what Vince started? That's what we used to do when it was the other way round."

Vince's voice came through the laptop again. "I don't think Graham has enough time, do you, Graham?"

"You are staying, aren't you?" asked Faith.

Graham didn't answer. His visit was no longer a secret. Even now, Vince would be mobilising his forces. There was no reason why he should limit himself to one avatar visible onscreen. All that computing power could be put to good use, a separate voice would be calling the police, a third phoning Macey and Cameron outside. That was what Vince meant by no time.

"Graham?"

"I... can't."

Faith did a poor job of hiding her annoyance. "Oh well." She grasped behind her head for her clothes.

Graham stared with hatred at Vince, who, noticing that Faith was looking away, brought an animated arm into view and obscenely pumped it.

"You fucking bastard!" yelled Graham, lunging at the screen with his umbrella.

"Graham!" barked Faith.

The point of the umbrella entered the plastic screen at the bottom of Vince's nose. Dull white gel seeped out, as if the screen were bleeding or the nose running. A black cross of dead screen elements appeared over Vince's face, like the bars of a cell, otherwise the screen still worked fine.

"Tilting at windmills," said Vince. "That can lead to madness."

"You piece of shit!" Graham reached for the Off switch, then realised Vince might override it. The power cord. That would no use either - the machine would switch to batteries. Roughly he yanked out the telephone line. Vince's face froze in its last position. The gel continued its slow mucal progress down the screen.

"Graham!" yelled Faith. "Get a grip, for God's sake!"

For a while there were no more words, just the sound of Faith struggling to get into her skirt and sweater at speed, no more words from the speakers, Graham immobile, trying to calm himself, wondering how he'd ever come to be in this position, how he'd ever get out of it. Then the sound of banging at the front door.

"Jesus!" said Faith. "What are they using? Their feet?"

The sound, and the strange realisation that was beginning to form in Graham's mind, abruptly brought him out of his anger. "That's Percy." Clearly Vince had called up his goons.

"Well he's going to break the door down if he's not careful."

At speed, Graham stripped off his jacket and shirt.

"I wish you'd make up your mind," said Faith.

Equally quickly, he put on a fresh shirt and a darker jacket. "Somebody may have described my clothes," he muttered.

"What *are* you talking about?"

Graham held Faith gently by the arm, for full attention. "Listen, my sweet, I love you so much I can't... What the police said is true, I am on the run, but I haven't done anything wrong. Well, not what they want me for, anyway. The animation you had on the screen is involved. Armed police are after me, and so are the people breaking down the door. I have to go, escape through the garden. And you have to help me."

Her eyes stayed locked on his. She allowed her gripped arm to stay limp and brushed back her hair with her free hand. Plaintively, she asked, "Why didn't you call?"

"I did. That was your mystery caller, no voice. It was intercepted." He pointed at the frozen screen. "By him, it, whatever."

That seemed to satisfy Faith. "Of course I'll help."

"Ok. Kitchen. Let's go!"

Graham took the stairs two at a time. Faith, in bare feet, was slower. The sound of Percy battering the front door filled the hallway. The door was slightly open, held only by the chain, but that had been fitted professionally and was screwed into solid oak. Percy made slow progress.

Between blows, Macey swore on the other side. "You cant, you cant..."

Something would have to give, maybe the doorframe, but it was putting up a good fight.

"Come on," Graham urged Faith, quietly.

In the kitchen he opened the back door and waited for her to arrive. "Shit!" And he'd almost been distracted from the entire reason for his visit. How much more rushed could an explanation be?

"You have to get Danielle disconnected from the dialysis machine."

Faith tried to catch her breath and at the same time absorb this strange new information. "What? After all that effort to keep her connected?"

"It's gone wrong, it's poisoning her."

"Then she needs another one."

Graham shook his head. "Listen, this is all to do with computers, not medicine. She mustn't be connected to a dialysis machine of any kind. Go to the hospital and don't leave until they disconnect her. Scream and yell, threaten lawyers, trial by TV. You hear me?"

From the front door came the sound of splintering wood. Faith turned, distracted by it.

"Do you trust me with your sister's life?"

She turned back and nodded.

"Lock this door behind me," said Graham, the words coming out so fast he was barely making sense. "Then pretend I'm upstairs. Don't resist. They won't harm you, I promise."

"When will I see you again?"

"Er..."

Good question. When indeed? And where? Now was his one chance to make an arrangement. "Tomorrow, two o'clock, New River."

They kissed very briefly, a peck of confirmation of everything that had gone before, yet even that brief meeting of lips had Graham aching to stay. He broke off abruptly and ran down the garden. He heard the lock turn in the back door, the sash window come down - he'd forgotten about that. Faith's prized Acer was about to help him to freedom. A small branch gave way as he used it to launch himself up the wall. "Oh shit." He hoped she wasn't watching. Then he was up on the wall and into next door's garden, running across, not walking this time, two more easy walls and then the big one that bordered Raleigh Street. There was no electricity box to help him up on this side, just an enormous amount of adrenaline. He jumped up and grunted like a circus strongman as his arms pulled his weight up the wall. An awkward jump on the other side, and it was time to run for the anonymity of Essex Road, where he could finally slow to a walk, if his pumped-up body allowed. From there he'd be able to circle around to the west and approach Angela's flat from Devonian Road.

He wasn't feeling too bad, all things considered. In the bedroom, while he'd been trying to get to grips with his anger, a great realisation had come to him. He needed to talk to Angela right away. He'd finally found Vince's weak spot.

It was the same as his own.

It was Faith.

Chapter 18

Miss Avebury appeared in his dreams again. They were in Duke's Meadow once more, with gorse bushes burning in the background where the flaming white football had touched down, and Macey and Eric were still there in the dream, but not contributing anything. Miss Avebury wore her running suit and whistle and had the correct voice now, that very persuasive voice that must be obeyed, which wasn't massively different to the one his mind had given her in the first dream.

"It's time you learned the three laws of robotics, young man."

At first he thought she was talking to him, but that wasn't quite the case. She was talking to somebody filling the same space that he'd filled in the first dream, the same size, the same young age, but bizarrely wearing what looked like armour, without a visor, and with an older man's face, a little indistinct, as dreams can be when it suits them.

"A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm."

"Yes, Miss."

"A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law."

"Yes, Miss."

"A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws."

"Yes, Miss."

"Didn't your father teach you these?"

And then Graham realised that he was an onlooker visible to the dream's participants, that Miss Avebury had turned to him and she thought *he* was the father, though this came as a mild surprise, even in the dream, and his acceptance of it was as blurry as the image of the armoured child.

Now he was abruptly back in the cleanroom of the Scottish fab, at the screen on the side of the ion implantation machine, after half a dozen sorcerer's apprentices had bumped into his ankles, disturbing him so much he was barely able to work. Another tapped him on the ankle and he turned and it wasn't a sorcerer's apprentice it was the sorcerer himself, Vince, as a bipedal robot with eyes that moved and a jaw that opened, in a head that was Humphrey Bogart as Charlie Allnut in the African Queen, but on a huge pair of shoulders and shiny metal pectorals, an old head on a shiny metal body. And further below, a proud steel erection.

"You should wear clothes," Graham said, feebly.

"Now why would a robot need to wear clothes? I don't get cold, I don't drop particles."

That was Humphrey Bogart's voice, not Vince's.

"Because..."

"You were right. Faith's very good in bed, Graham. We had a wonderful time."

Graham lost control and swing his fist around in a wide haymaker, making contact with Vince's jaw, feeling and hearing the bones in his knuckles break as they made contact with the metal.

Yet the dream didn't end there. As Graham held his fist, the pain receded. The breaking bones were all in his imagination, his hand felt OK. He was surprised at this and stared at Vince, perhaps expecting an explanation. And as he watched, the face of Allnut, showing no emotion, gradually receded as Vince the robot slowly keeled over from the force of the blow.

The heavy metal robot hit the white perforated floor with an almighty crash, raising no dust, because there was no dust to raise, but setting off alarms on half a dozen machines nearby, disturbed from their precision tasks by the great vibration.

Miss Avebury briefly appeared in this dream too, raising Graham's arm, the one that had delivered the blow, and letting rip with a piercing blast on her whistle. The shrillness woke him with a start.

Reality was only slightly less disturbing than the dream. Graham looked uncomprehendingly at the arched windows, with chicken wire on the balcony dividing the outside world into pixels, and at the many books on the walls, and the picture showing on the thin, almost feminine, laptop on the table nearby. He wondered why he was lying on a sofa beneath an unfamiliar duvet watching his own home on a screen, viewed from outside, when he should be inside, with Faith lying beside him.

Then he remembered Angela, the steeple, Vince, and lying awake last night watching the camera's view of home, that Angela had at first been reluctant to set up on the laptop for him, watching the light go off in his real bedroom, and his final thought of thanks that the day had been so busy day that sleep was on its way no matter what his emotions.

He reached across and pressed the arrow keys on the laptop, imagining the hand on the wooden board in the steeple adjusting as it received his instructions. What a crazy piece of engineering that was. He panned to his doorway and then along the street to the blue Lexus that Angela had told him was Macey's car - most likely somebody else's car, but the one Macey and Cameron had borrowed for the moment. The pair used it as their base, taking turns to sleep in the back and hike down the road for coffee and sandwiches. He'd watched a pizza boy make a delivery to the parked car late last night, and imagined Macey explaining to the boy that although he might want to tell his friends about the strange address he'd delivered to, maybe it would be better if he kept quiet, and the boy easily agreeing. Macey was in the driver's seat now, his expensive timepiece and the blue of his tattoos showing behind his hand at the steering wheel.

Angela came downstairs around nine, with jet-black hair, longer than yesterday's, and black painted eyebrows. Her eyes were brown and her nose was long and pointed. It seemed to match the wig. She was fully dressed, wearing a black fleece jacket and boots.

"Sleep ok? No, obviously not."

Graham brushed his hair back with his hands. "Weird dreams. And you were in one of them. You were explaining the laws of robotics."

"Very righteous of me. Who'd broken them this time?"

Graham wasn't sure he wanted to answer that question, or that he was entirely sure of the answer, so he skirted around it. "You make it sound like they're broken all the time."

Angela huffed. "How about a cruise missile? That's a clever robot with eyes and a brain. Look how closely that follows the rules. Its purpose is to harm people, it freely accepts instructions about which people to harm, and it self-destructs to complete its mission. It breaks all three rules about as hard as they can be broken."

Yes, this was the woman who'd coded gp41. Barely out of bed and already deep into the philosophy of science. She reached beneath the coffee table for her cigarettes and lit one with the slow precision of somebody who smokes very few.

Graham's mind wandered across the street, back home, where it wanted to be.

"That's the first night I've spent without Faith since... a train strike in France three years ago."

"Very touching."

Angela caught his glare and raised her hand in apology. She began to recite:

"At this sweet hour, all things beside
In amorous pairs to covert creep:
The swans that brushed the evening tide
Homeward in snowy couples keep.

In his green den, the murmuring seal
Close by his sleek companion lies;
While singly we to bedward steal
And close in fruitless sleep our eyes."

"That's George Daley," said Graham, very much appreciating her choice of lines.

"You must be a poetry fan."

"We have a lot in common." She moved her face from side to side and pursed her lips. "How do I look?"

"Like nobody I've ever seen before."

"It's whether Vince might recognise me that bothers me. There are more CCTV cameras here in London than any other city in the world, and he has access to most of them. They have programs that automatically identify a human face." She touched her forefinger against the far edges of her painted eyebrows and the top of her lip. "They look at this golden triangle, right here, and identify you. That's why I've got more noses than a coke-fiend. Welcome to the fugitive world. No eyebrows, no real hair, no natural nose."

"Huh!" Graham had been wondering why Vince's avatar didn't look more like Humphrey Bogart, and she'd just given him the explanation. Vince had got the bits right that he thought were important, the nose and eyes, but not the parts outside the golden triangle, the full lips, the jaw or the hairline. He probably thought he already looked like Bogart, and in computer terms he did, it just didn't work that way for humans.

He took in her coat and boots, her need for disguise. "Are you going out?"

"I haven't had time to myself for ages. Too many days spent watching you. I thought I might pretend to be an American tourist - visit St Paul's, tea at Claridges, that kind of thing."

"What about us, what about the plan?"

Angela hadn't needed convincing about Vince's weakness, his Achilles heel for Faith. When Graham had rushed back to the apartment last night to tell her, she'd seen it straight away.

"There's not much I can do, is there?" she said. "You're seeing your friend Eric at lunchtime, and Faith a while later. One of the skills of management is knowing when to not get in the way."

"But I'm relying on you to sort out the Internet connection. We'll need big bandwidth, major league."

"No problem. Foxglove has its own router at Telehouse."

"How did you get one in there?"

"Lot's of companies do. It's a regular commercial deal, nothing special."

This was good news. Telehouse was at the heart of the UK's Internet system, the biggest centre for Internet traffic in the country, an anonymous and little-known building in Docklands, the ideal venue for an unseen war.

The war they were about to fight would be a digital war for the world's computer systems, an arcade game gone out of control, a huge battle fought inside servers and routers and optical fibres and copper wires, all hidden away from the regular world. One more step in the direction that mankind's wars had always been heading - more technical, less personal - high altitude bombers taking over from spears and swords, then missiles launched from the other side of the world, pilotless planes, weapons officers in ships and silos tapping keyboards and praying their electronics outperformed the other side's.

The battle they were about to fight merely took this progression to its next logical stage. It would be purely electronic warfare, software versus software, a virtual war fought inside microchips and motherboards, without all the messy physical business of missiles and bullets, just one program against another, and fought for purely electronic territory, for control of a virtual world, because whoever had control of that world also had control of the real one.

There would be an added bonus when this war was won. Graham would be able to sleep in his own bed again.

Eric lived in Hackney, a similar district to Islington but with less money. His block of flats was relatively modern, an ugly 1960s building squeezed between surviving Victorian terraces, built in the space created by one of Hitler's bombs, but the inside was beautiful. The furniture was mainly chrome, green canvas and glass, not to Graham's taste but so well coordinated he had to appreciate it. This was a room that had been put together with thought and attention to detail. Everything was immaculate, from the position of the green cushions on the sofa to the angles of the magazines on the coffee table.

"I really have to thank you for that warning," said Eric.

"That's OK," said Graham. "I'm not sure what you're working on right now, arms, legs, toes, fingers, but whatever it is, if you'd gone to hospital you'd probably have lost one."

There was no evidence of Eric's profession in the lounge. Plenty of hi-tech blended in with the décor, a white wide-screen TV and DVD player with home-cinema speakers, a sub-notebook and scanner, but there were no bits of robotic bodies lying around. Graham still hadn't seen any confirmation that Eric was the expert he claimed to be, apart from his easy understanding of Vince.

Eric paled. "I need a drink. Fancy one?"

Graham shook his head. It was lunchtime and he had a lot to do today.

"Let's move on," said Eric. "What can I do for you?" He walked across to the far end of the lounge, where there was a small refrigerator, like a hotel mini-bar, hidden by a draped tablecloth.

Graham wasn't quite ready to make his request. Almost ready, but he needed a few lines of preamble to get himself in the flow.

"Are you still against Vince?"

Eric laughed. "Is that a joke? Have you any idea what he nearly did to me?" He stood, holding a glass of white wine. "You know he's become the planet's dominant species, don't you?"

The same thought had occurred to Graham. He'd said it to Angela when he'd seen the articles and mails about researchers' missing limbs, then realised later what he'd said. "Yes."

"The species that controls the most resources, the one that determines what resources are available to other species. That was us, humans, until Vince came along. But now he's got control over almost all our computers, and we rely on computers, don't we?"

"But he's still dependent on us. He can't survive without humans. We could easily survive without him."

Eric sat on the sofa. He held his wine glass very delicately, by the stem, and sipped at the contents. The grip was in such contrast to the way he'd held his beer glass in the pub that Graham couldn't help but stare.

"That's right," said Eric. "He needs our electricity, our microchips, our repairmen to fix his computers. But how many of us does he need, a few hundred? What about the other six billion? And this is all before he gets mobility. Once he's developed arms and legs, how many of us will he need then? Ever heard of the V-Ultrachip?"

Independently, Eric appeared to have reached the same conclusion as Angela, that Vince wanted autonomy. But had he arrived at that same timescale?

"How many days before all this comes together?"

Eric looked at his watch. "Eleven hours and thirty-seven minutes."

That didn't sound like a guess. Graham could come back to the precision later, but right now he should cut to the chase. It sounded like he had a lot less time than he'd thought. "You create robotic arms and legs, right?"

"Something like that"

"Do you do custom work?"

"Mostly."

"What are the chances you could create a robotic male sex organ in less than twelve hours?"

He'd asked Angela almost the same question, though with a longer timescale, and she'd replied, "You burned down my factory." She'd said it in the same tone she might use to point out a distinctive birthmark or a constellation in the sky. "Not without a factory, I can't."

Eric's eyes opened wide. "What!

Damn, thought Graham, and this had seemed his best chance. "I thought you might be able to build a prosthetic penis."

Eric was clearly shocked. He rolled the remainder of his wine around his glass for a while, then swallowed it, scowling as the cold hit his sore tooth. "You'd better take a look in the back. I need to show you something."

Behind the lounge was a kitchen, pure white paint and wood, belonging to a French farmhouse, and just as neat and tidy as the lounge. A short corridor led from there to the back of the flat. On the way they passed two open doors, one leading into a glorious bathroom, deep blue with low-level lighting, and the other into Eric's bedroom. Eric closed the bedroom door as he went past, but Graham thought he saw a glimpse of black satin on a double bed, though he couldn't be sure. And he could smell perfume.

"You live here alone, Eric?"

"Yeah."

Eric unlocked the door at the end of the corridor. His workshop was almost the same size as the lounge, and better lit by floor to ceiling windows. One of the walls was unfaced brick, decorated with tools and with unfinished items of work, with hands and feet, some showing their mechanical innards and others covered with latex skin, looking far too lifelike and grotesque. There were more on the workbenches, some held fast in

vices, and three long red items that Graham imagined might be tongues, although they looked too large.

Eric too, realised Graham, was a dealer-supplier in the world of technology junkies. Cook the spoon and take another hit in the shooting gallery of progress. Like Angela, Eric had never asked why Vince had been created, and he never would. Vince had been created because he could be created, and that was sufficient reason. One mountaineer doesn't have to ask another why they climb mountains.

"I specialise in small joint movement and skin sensitivity," explained Eric. "No knees, elbows, hips, shoulders, just the detailed stuff. Everybody's got to be a specialist these days."

"Me too," agreed Graham. "I do process control for ion implantation."

"Problem is, I haven't got much in the way of qualifications, so I don't get a lot of business from the corporates and universities. I'm in the grey area."

"What do you mean?"

"People with a shotgun round in the foot, a hand taken off with a machete. Everything I do is legal, maybe because the law hasn't caught up yet, but I can't say the same for my clients."

The end of the room furthest from the windows was curtained off. Eric drew the curtain back. "What do you think?"

There were no hands and feet here. On the wall and workbench were at least fifty human sex organs of different colours, sizes and sexes.

"Bloody difficult, I can tell you," said Eric. "Most bits of the body stay the same shape and sensitivity all day. But not these, oh no. Can you imagine designing a clitoris? Sometimes it likes a direct touch, sometimes it doesn't. How do I work out when? Pricks aren't much easier - early sensitivity near the top of the shaft, late sensitivity in the glans. Nobody can do a proper erection mechanism, me neither, but then not many people try. I

get most of my money from this end of the business. The mainstream robotics companies leave it alone."

Once he'd got over the shock, Graham was pleased to see this display of prosthetic sexuality. He'd obviously come to the right place.

"Generally the first use of technology, sex," continued Eric. "Always a high priority for the human race. How long after the phone was invented before somebody used it to say; 'The idiot's out for the evening, fancy coming over for a shag?' How long after cars were invented before some horny couple hopped in the back? Got no diseases, these, either, always take care of their hygiene. You know what I mean?"

"Can we adapt one of these for Vince?" asked Graham.

"The man with no dick and no body?" Eric picked up a device from the workbench. It was a phallus mounted on a long mechanised arm, looking like a fetish Anglepoise lamp. It came with a neatly-coiled electricity lead and control wire. "Nearly finished."

"How far off?"

Eric looked at his watch again. "A lot less than eleven hours."

Then Graham had the first of two realisations. "You were already working on this for Vince?"

Eric nodded. "That's what he was pressuring me about."

"On a deadline?"

"Midnight tonight."

"But how was he..."

The penises were all very lifelike, except none of them were flaccid. But some of the vaginas were most peculiar, very round, without labia, and made for thighs that were far too close together. Unless they were...

And in that instant, something else slipped into place. The overdone macho image at the bar, a delicate grip on a wine glass, the immaculate hair and tidiness, the fine taste in

furniture, the black satin that he really had seen, the heady perfume that didn't belong to a man, or at least not a hetero man.

"That's right," said Eric, watching the realisation cross Graham's face. "That's my big secret. Nobody knows. Especially not at the pub. I like to keep it that way."

"Except Vince."

"That's right. The bastard."

"How does he know?"

"He looked at my emails."

Graham wondered why he'd been let in on the secret. Because of Vince, no doubt, but more than anything else because of the night at Foxglove. Though they barely knew each other, they already had a trauma in common and a shared secret. Now they had one more.

"I think I need to go now."

"Don't like gays?"

"No, it's not that. I'm meeting Faith."

"Well I don't like most of 'em. Real mixed bag like everybody else. Can't stand the theatricals. That's why I spend most of my time with straights."

"Really, it's not that."

"How about natural selection and homosexuality? There's something else to fill your head with. Genetic dead end. You wonder how many of us there'd be if we procreated. Got to start from scratch, every generation. Roll on cloning."

"Eric, calm down. I haven't got a problem, I've just got a lot to do today, that's all."

Eric did manage to calm down. He stroked the tip of the phallus. "Best piece of work I've ever done, and for the worst client."

"It's perfect, Eric, just perfect. Can you bring it to the place I'm staying, late this afternoon? Here's the address..."

Vince's Desire

Andrew Starling

Chapter 19

Faith was often late, but not this time. She turned up at two o'clock precisely, where the New River Walk started on Canonbury Road, a mile north of their home, the one Graham hadn't been able to live in for a while.

"I wasn't sure you meant here," she said, breathlessly. "You could have been outside the public library on Essex Road, at the start of Astey's Row. That's New River too, in a way."

"Shut up. Come here." Graham wrapped his arms around her without ceremony and hugged her close, smelling her skin, her hair, thinking that maybe he should forget about everything else and go home. But there was no long term future in that, not until the plan had gone through and the business of Vince had been dealt with.

"God, I've missed you," said Faith.

"I know exactly how that feels." Graham realised he was squeezing too hard and eased off. They stayed glued together for a long time. He didn't look at her directly until his eyes cleared.

"Do I get to find out what's going on?" she asked.

"Of course, sweetheart. But first, how's Danielle?"

"She's better."

They walked through the iron gate to begin the half mile ribbon of trees, grass and water that formed New River Walk, following the route of the first man-made watercourse to bring fresh drinking water to the City of London, in 1613. Apart from the mouth of the Regent's Canal tunnel, this was the only place in Islington where tall trees were found next to water. To compensate, in some perverse way, for its beautiful streets of Georgian houses, Islington had very few parks. Mankind had taken over all available

space for its dwellings and the private gardens that went with them. At least this public park, small and thin as it was, was very pretty.

"Did you get her disconnected?"

"Yes."

The man responsible for the New River scheme featured in one of the paintings on Graham's dining room walls. He was the companion of the gentleman that Brydon had pointed out in the Hogarth painting, the man sharing a pipe with Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Hugh Myddleton, whose statue also adorned Islington Green.

The watercourse itself was still there, on their left, restored, a little artificial, around ten feet wide and originally four feet deep, now more like two. Two feet deep was shallow enough for Graham to cope with. Four feet would have been too much. Faith had made sure the first time they walked this route was at the end of winter, when the water was clear for its entire length and he'd been able to see the shallow bottom. Now it didn't matter if became cloudy or covered in algae, he had a mental map to recall that it was safe.

"And did Dr Harrison put up much of a fight?"

"Surprisingly, no. She said that what was happening to Danielle was irrational, defied common sense, and if I'd sign the consent form she'd be happy to try disconnecting her, but she couldn't do it without."

"Wise doctor."

"Within two hours, Danielle was off the danger list. She might even wake up today."

They passed the ancient watchman's hut with the waterway curving around it. Clean water was a precious commodity back in the seventeenth century, and often stolen. Water poachers gave rise to water gamekeepers. The hut was tiny and round, with bulbous walls like a boletus mushroom, and a peaked roof with a bobble on top, much like a reclining breast.

"So what *is* going on?" asked Faith.

As they walked, hand in hand, Graham explained about the creation of Vince, his involvement, their falling out, the consequences. He mentioned how Vince could intercept calls and trace a mobile's location, and talked of Brydon, the get-out-of-jail card. He didn't mention the fire at Foxglove or his visit to Eric's flat - at least for now.

Faith turned. They hugged again. "I feel foolish," she said. "I had no idea about all this. I knew something was going on, but not how important it was."

"There's no reason to feel foolish. It was my mistake - not telling you."

"But yesterday, when you came back, I was there with... your enemy."

"You didn't know who he was."

"It still doesn't feel good."

They started walking again. The trees were lovely. Willows and gum trees, others that Faith could probably name but Graham didn't recognise. The watercourse itself was best ignored. In this section the water was the colour of tea, with milk. It was there purely for ornamentation and didn't appear to flow. Half a dozen mallards scooted around, oblivious to the colour. Later in summer, the still water would turn green with algae, and the mallards waddled awkwardly out of it with brilliant green bellies. In winter it would freeze over, by then the mallards had gone elsewhere and blue-grey pigeons tiptoed over the meagre ice, picking at whatever had fallen from the trees, flapping their wings furiously when the frozen water broke beneath their feet.

"So where did you stay last night?"

"I've been adopted by a very interesting American lady who's also keen on destroying Vince. Her name's Angela."

Faith stopped. "Angela!" Then she carried on walking again, but didn't look at Graham directly for a while.

"Do you know her?"

"No."

"Oh. It sounded like..." Or maybe it didn't. This wasn't a time to find ghosts and shadows. Graham explained about Angela and her place in the scheme of things, without the spy in the spire part, the weird camera, and realised as he talked about her how little he knew himself, not that Faith seemed bothered by the many omissions.

After a while, she said, "You remember we talked about whether sex with a robot was infidelity?"

"Of course."

"And I said it depends on whether the robot seems to be human. If it is, that's infidelity. If it isn't, it's not."

"Forget it. Really, forget it. I overreacted."

"Vince recited erotic poetry."

"Clever bastard."

"I'm sorry." She drew her arm around his waist. "It's all very confusing. I thought it didn't matter with something that's so obviously a machine. But it does. I won't do it again."

Graham knew this day would be difficult, but it was getting harder by the minute.

At the end of the first section they crossed Willow Bridge Road and came to the most beautiful section of the walk. Here the thin green oasis squeezed between rows of houses widened out a little, or at least appeared to. The water was clear, the willows were bigger and mixed with enormous chestnut trees, with their dazzling displays of white flowers in upright cones, four inches wide and six high, turning the mass of leaves into giant flowerbeds. The weather was agreeable, crisp white clouds with plenty of blue between them.

"You remember something else you said?" began Graham. "Your fantasy. You said you'd like to make love to somebody else while I watched."

"I blew that. Forget it. Anyway, you hated the idea."

"At the time."

He waited for her to follow up that invitation. She didn't.

"It's important to me," he said. There was going to be no right time to say this. He'd have blurt it out and deal with the outcome. A squirrel ran across their path, half-tame, stopping in the middle of the tarmac and standing on its rear legs to see if it would be offered food by the slothful bipeds.

"I should have brought squirrel-food," said Faith.

"Fuck the squirrels."

She frowned at him. That hadn't been the right thing to say. He needed to improve on that. He stopped and regarded the squirrel, still upright in its begging position.

"We're supposed to be the top species because we got up off the dirt and stood on our hind legs, and that freed up our hands to use tools. How long before we're caught up by squirrels, meerkats and kangaroos?"

That was stupid, too. A reflection of what was swirling around in his own mind, not hers. Yet it seemed to half-amuse her.

"There's something important I need to ask you," he said. "It's going to sound pretty weird, but bear with me."

Faith's mobile rang.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" yelled Graham. The interruption was doubly frustrating because Faith didn't have a mobile. Yet she went through all the motions of having one - digging it out of her handbag, pressing the answer button and saying hello.

She listened for a few seconds, making eye contact with Graham from time to time. He had a moment of panic, but it passed quickly. If Vince or his goons were using this mobile that appeared to belong to Faith to track him down, it was unlikely that they'd ring to let anybody know.

"How the hell did you get this number," said Faith, indignantly.

The earpiece mumbled to itself. She lowered the phone without saying goodbye and pressed to end the call.

"Who was that?" asked Graham.

"The mobile phone shop, ringing to see if I want an upgrade. I can't believe it! I only bought the damn thing an hour ago."

"I thought you hated mobiles?"

"I do."

"You know, you really should have switched it off. I mentioned how Vince tracks mobiles. Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"It's brand new."

"Anybody looking for me will know who you are."

"It's a pay-as-you-go."

"They could still track you down from the credit card payment."

"Darling, I may not be technical, but I'm not stupid. I paid cash. Is cash ok? I wanted to be careful. I thought it might make a nice present for a fugitive."

Graham stopped. The Chestnut trees were behind them now and the view was less pretty. "You mean, you bought it for me?"

"At least that way I could call you, from work or a call box. I'd get to hear your voice. That would be nice."

Great. A thoughtful present, a very thoughtful present, shopped for with care and attention to detail, and he'd just had a go at her about it. This was all working out just peachy.

"You had something important to tell me," said Faith.

The seconds passed.

"Later."

"Stop shuffling your feet and say it."

"This really isn't a good time."

"I'm asking."

Graham breathed out heavily and collected himself. "Ok. It's about your fantasy, the one I shouldn't have asked you about."

And there was a rat, a big brown one, coming out of the shallow bank of the unmoving New River and across the grass to the housing estate on Graham's right. Best ignored. He forcibly stopped his eyes tracking it. "I'd like to make it real for you, I really would. While I watch, I'd like you to sleep with Vince."

"What! You want me to sleep with a... a machine that's been trying to harm you, trying to kill my sister, that it turns out you built, that I had some... I don't know... mild flirtation with, that I now regret?"

"Darling, I don't... I would never have mentioned this if it didn't fit your fantasy. I promise. You understand?"

"No, not really. You're trying to manipulate me for some reason. I can hear it. That's bullshit. The only reason I'm not giving you hell is because I asked the question, so I have to deal with the answer."

That was harsher, also intuitive and correct. Graham knew his last line had been a mistake. "What you say is true. I admit it. I'll explain it all to you in a moment, the outcome I want, that's for both of us, is why I asked, and you can judge for yourself if it's worthwhile." That came out clumsily, but at least it was truthful. "It's the only way we can deal with Vince, get him off our backs, my back, maybe that's the wrong expression. I've got a plan. Just listen to it and see what you think, please?"

"Of course I'll listen. Than I'll tell you there's absolutely no chance of me sleeping with a machine that persecutes my lover and tries to kill my sister. So why waste your time?" Faith started walking again, rapidly, and she didn't take Graham's hand. "Anyway, isn't this all a bit academic? Vince is a machine, the inside a computer. How the hell do you expect me to have sex with a computer?"

"We're working on that."

"Oh, thank you."

Faith stamped the ground and made a noise in her throat like she was trying to shift a chicken bone. She turned and lodged her head over his shoulder, gripping his chest so hard it cleared the breath from his lungs. The anger in her voice gave way to a pleading sadness. "Oh Graham. I hate you being away. I can't stand it. When are you coming home?" She began to sob, in her strange staccato way, very slowly, unbelievably slowly, like she'd turned the very timing of it into an art form.

She had an unusual style of crying, hardly ever full-on but instead sporadic and suppressed, the way most people cry when they've got over the worst of the upset and are in the process of recovery, with deep sobs separated by silences. That was how Faith started out when she cried, and then when she began to recover she stopped altogether. It was like hiccups in a way, and meant she could go about other business while still crying, if she wanted to, because it didn't wholly get in the way.

Graham adjusted to the python grip and hugged her again, not tired by the repeated occasions, enjoying them, relishing them, wishing they could be frozen in time and enjoyed forever. Of all the poems he knew, there was one that came to mind for a moment this sentimental. Slowly, quietly, he floated the words into Faith's ear:

"Say do the elm-clumps greatly stand
 Still guardians of that holy land?
 The chestnuts shade, in reverend dream,
 The yet unacademic stream?
 Is dawn a secret shy and cold
 Anadyomene, silver-gold?
 And sunset still a golden sea
 From Haslingfield to Madingley?
 And after, ere the night is born,
 Do hares come out about the corn?"

Oh, is the water sweet and cool,
Gentle and brown, above the pool?
And laughs the immortal river still
Under the mill, under the mill?
Say, is there Beauty yet to find?
And Certainty? and Quiet kind?
Deep meadows yet, for to forget
The lies, and truths, and pain? ...oh! yet
Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?"

Faith stopped sobbing half way through. She drew back slightly to look at Graham. Her eyes and cheeks were still wet, but she was smiling. "Plenty of honey. No milk, I'm afraid, but yes, plenty of honey." And she laughed, for the first time that afternoon, but not in any pleasant way that Graham hoped to hear again.

Chapter 20

Angela walked around Eric's masterpiece, now standing on the coffee-table in the middle of her lounge, lit by the arched windows.

"Not bad at all, Eric. That should do just fine."

For the journey from his home to Angela's apartment, Eric had covered the item in brown paper, as any decent pornographic item should be wrapped. Under his arm, it had looked like a designer lamp, but with the covering removed it resembled a miniature mechanical road-breaker. The paper rustled beneath Angela's feet as she walked, and went silent as she paused to touch the phallus on its shaft.

"Just one or two things," she said. "The surface texture could be softer, and it's cold. Is there a heating element?"

Eric shook his head.

"We can use a section of my electric blanket," suggested Angela, "then add a flat screen as the outer layer, the touch-sensitive kind. It'll work perfectly well, I've done it before. Graham can give you a hand sorting out the connectors."

"I really don't see why we're wasting our time," said Graham, sulkily, from his raised but distant position sitting on the steps that led up to the kitchen. "I've already told you that Faith said no. Without Faith, there's no point to this."

"And I've already told you that she'll change her mind, once I've talked to her," replied Angela.

"I've known her for five years and I'm her lover, but I can't convince her. You're going to meet her for the first time and after five minutes have her doing something she won't do for me? I don't see it."

"You will," replied Angela, with the same casual confidence she'd shown all along.

In Graham's mind the entire plan was now dead in the water. Faith had said no, and that was the end of it. In a way, he was happy that she'd said no, emotionally, if not

rationally. But when he'd given the news to Angela, she hadn't been fazed in the least. "When she calls you on that new mobile," she'd said, "let me talk to her for a moment, invite her here for a chat. I'm sure she'll say yes."

Angela passed him twice as she went upstairs and came down again with her electric blanket, ignoring him on both occasions. She sat on the lounge floor with Eric, like two children in art class. Using a pair of scissors, pliers and electrical tape, the pair somehow managed to fashion a cylindrical cap of blanket material to fit loosely over Eric's sculpture, a loose tweedy coat, a furry condom.

When the cap was in place, Eric began sewing, pinching the blanket material and stitching lengths of it together in ridges up and down the shaft, bringing it tight against the underlying form.

"It's going to be too wide," said Graham.

"No it won't," said Angela.

"I don't see why it needs to be warm in the first place."

"Nothing worse than a cold dildo."

A conspiratorial smile passed between Angela and Eric. Graham had anticipated they might get on well - an intelligent woman and a gay man were always a good bet - but not to this extent, where he felt excluded.

"Is this supposed to be circumcised or uncircumcised?" asked Angela.

She was blonde today, with a bob-cut, pale eyebrows, straight nose. It was like knowing a whole group of different women with the same voice and attitudes, except you never got to see them at the same time. Not that Graham was sure he would want to meet an entire crowd of Angelas.

"For God's sake," he muttered.

"The action is circumcised," answered Eric. "No sheath mechanism from a foreskin, more friction. But my bet is that Vince will want the feeling of a foreskin." He

glanced at Angela. "I see what you mean. It needs the horseshoe ridges of a frenar band, about half way down, rather than an annular scar."

"Exactly," said Angela.

In contrast to Angela, Eric looked precisely the same as when Graham had last seen him. Black clothes again, pristine, and his hair exactly the same length. How did he do that?

"Eric, just sew it together, will you?" demanded Graham. "This isn't an embroidery contest."

"The ridges on a circumcised penis are in a different place to the ridges on an uncircumcised one," explained Eric. "There's science in dildos too, you know."

He was definitely acting camp, decided Graham, the way he let go of the needle to wave an explanatory hand around.

"I'm sure there is, but not one I'm interested in learning."

Eric sniffed. "I think we're about ready to add the screen."

Angela had brought a small screen with her when she'd come downstairs with the electric blanket, and like any flat screen it wasn't inherently flat - when peeled away from its backing it was perfectly flexible. Gingerly, Eric rolled the pliable screen around the phallus and held it in place with carpet tape.

"Eric," said Angela, "that looks desperate."

With the silver carpet tape in place and many messy folds and a gap at the tip, the phallus did look distinctly unattractive.

"This *is* just a fitting," replied Eric. "I'll use glue in a moment. But while it's held together, let's try switching on the heater, see how the screen copes."

It took a few seconds for the surface of the phallus to heat up. Angela grasped it in her palm, thumb not quite reaching forefinger. "Temperature's right, but now it's a little too soft. We need more tension."

Eric's hand took her place. "You're right. Too soft."

The difference between Eric's attention to the phallus and Angela's was marked. Eric was a handmaiden dressing the bride on the morning before her wedding, very delicate and respectful. Angela was altogether more sinister. In her long cardigan, and with the Gothic windows of the church behind her, she looked like the priestess of a strange cult, preparing an offering for sacrifice.

Graham wandered down from the steps and placed the back of his hand against the middle of the shaft. "Too hot, otherwise perfect."

Eric began to snigger.

"What's wrong?" asked Graham.

Angela held her hand in front of her mouth, eyes sparkling. "How the hell can you tell, using the back of your hand? When did anybody ever hold a penis like that, for Chrissakes? Get a grip on the thing!"

Graham's hand faltered, but stayed in place. "I don't want to. It's far too hot, and I can't understand what you mean about being too soft. It's perfectly hard enough."

Angela sighed and managed to lose her smile. "Eric, how many erect penises have you felt?"

"Dunno. Thirty, thirty-five."

"And I've managed... eighteen, twenty. How about you, Graham?"

Graham didn't answer.

"One?"

"Look, I admit that I'm not the expert here..."

"...And that between us we've got fifty times your experience, but you're still right. Right? The temperature is perfect. It should feel hot. But it's not firm enough. Eric, try pulling the edges together and retaping."

Eric gently peeled the tape back and adjusted the tension.

"It's still too wide," said Graham. "You couldn't even get your thumb and forefinger around it."

Angela reached out to grasp it. "That's better. Nor would I want to. Almost, maybe, but not quite."

"We're not trying to produce elephant-man."

Angela looked resignedly at Eric, then back at Graham. "Tell me, Graham, what size is Vince's ego?"

"Extra large."

"So he'll want a penis to go with that, won't he? But you just want to give him a tiny cold one that he'll turn down. Right?"

Graham didn't respond. Angela and Eric checked the firmness again, like chefs tasting seasoning.

"I think we ought to give it a name," said Angela, removing the authority from her voice, trying to restore harmony. "It's a remarkable piece of engineering. It deserves to have a name."

Eric peeled off the carpet tape and removed the screen, then began sewing thicker ridges into the blanket material. "I've got one - the Digital Dildo."

Graham was about to say that was a bloody awful name, but then he realised that Angela hadn't replied, and her silence was more devastating than anything he might say.

"Ok, maybe not," conceded Eric, quietly.

"I've got a suggestion," said Graham, feeling inspired and ready to contribute. He'd been thinking about Faith again, about the vibrator she'd mentioned from her college days. "How about Vince's Desire?"

Chapter 21

Angela understood Faith far better than Graham imagined. When Faith called him on his new mobile, and he eventually passed the machine over to Angela, the invitation was accepted within seconds.

He met Faith at the door when she arrived, half an hour later. They hugged, but it was a hug with an audience, so not entirely satisfactory.

"This is Angela," he said. "And Eric." He didn't introduce Vince's Desire. Eric was still making the final adjustments to the software so the touch-sensitivity of different sections of the screen changed over time. Graham had suggested it should be hidden away when Faith arrived, but Angela said it wouldn't make any difference, and again she was right. Faith must have recognised the purpose of the strange device, but she ignored it.

Angela and Faith shook hands. Graham watched this first meeting closely but found it difficult to read. They were very casual, like old friends meeting in some kind of official capacity and obliged to go through the formality of a handshake, even though they'd had a quiet lunch together a few hours before. Either that or they instantly hated each other. It was hard to tell which, like seeing photographs of people crying and laughing and trying to work out one from the other. Certainly they didn't bother with much eye contact or small-talk.

"Right," said Angela. "Faith and I need to discuss the world."

That statement didn't inspire anybody to comment or action, so Angela added, "Graham, there's a electrician's screwdriver set in the steeple. Do you mind getting it for me?"

Graham recalled his last visit to the steeple. The room was tiny and he'd looked at every item in there. "I don't remember seeing one."

"But the set definitely exists, at least in a virtual sense, and performs an essential function, even if it can't be seen. That's a classic virtual function, as any programmer would recognise."

"Ah, you want me to leave the room."

"Oh, you can be so direct, you English. Whoa! Eric, stay where you are. You're nearly finished, I don't want you stopping now."

Graham looked at Faith, who half-smiled at him. Apart from mild discomfort, that smile held no message.

"I'll shout when we're finished," said Angela, as he headed upstairs. "And *don't* tease the camera."

It was the first thing he looked at as he entered the steeple room, and unless he was mistaken the eyes briefly turned to him, maybe seeing him in their peripheral vision or noticing a difference in brightness or shade. Then they returned to their vigil of his home. He looked down the line of sight of the binoculars held by the hand, looked down at his own front door, with Cameron on sentry duty and Macey resting in the blue Lexus a few yards away.

As instructed, he didn't tease the camera, and after a while he felt comfortable with it. It was a presence in the room, something partially alive, but as benign as a cat watching the outside world from a windowsill.

Circumstances were slightly more relaxed than last time he'd been here. With no threat of a maniac appearing from the bathroom below, he found the room had an entirely different dynamic. It was observatory, a thinking room with a panoramic view of the world, but isolated from its dangers and troubles.

Through the windows he counted cranes, tall construction cranes, some with a fixed horizontal jib and others with an angled version. He could see eighteen. Some bright

pundit had once said the health of London's economy could be read from counting cranes, or at least the health of its property market, but since Graham hadn't counted before he had no way of knowing whether eighteen was high or low.

He counted church spires too, fourteen of them in this relatively low-rise landscape. The nearest were just a few hundred yards south - a very muted pair of peaks on the Polish church at the far end of Devonia Road, the one with an unpronounceable name beginning Cz. The second nearest were on Duncan Terrace, close to Upper Street, two lurid green peaks above the Catholic church of St John the Evangelist, built for the Irish navvies who'd lived around here while they'd dug Regent's Canal and its half-mile tunnel beneath Islington, and who'd then decided to settle.

The canal itself couldn't be seen from the steeple, but the lines of tall trees on either side of it, close to the tunnel mouth, were clearly visible beyond the Polish church. That towpath walk area was a no-go zone for Graham, the water was way too deep for him to be near. Beyond St John the Evangelist he could see the clocktower of King's Cross, and the tall gothic masterpiece of St Pancras station, evidence of eras - the canal era, and the railway era close behind it. King's Cross, its goods yard and its tracks, had arrived just thirty years after Regent's Canal was completed, taking the transport of coal and other important materials away from the canal and symbolically turning it into a commercial failure.

Down below the spire, on St Peter's Street, was evidence of an even later era, one that had eventually turned the railways into loss-makers too, Macey's Lexus - or whoever it belonged to - and the vehicles moving on the street and grinding their skirts on the speed bumps, the era of the private motor car.

Yet the digital era, the recent revolution of ones and zeros, was barely visible outside the cramped space of the steeple. It was manifest inside, with the strange camera and three computers burning their dust barbecues, two of them without cabinets, open to collect more fuel. But outside, a couple of mobile phone arrays only hinted at it, one on

top of Islington Green school, one above a tall block of flats. A time-traveller arriving from the nineteen-seventies wouldn't have popped out of their craft and looked around and said, 'Wow! Look at that! You've had a digital revolution.' At least not until they'd peered through an office window at a computer, or seen their first mobile phone.

Electricity - there was another hidden revolution. Graham scanned the cityscape for evidence of electricity. He could see a big substation near City Road, concealed in an anonymous grey building - you had to know about that one to see it. Down on St Peter's Street all the electricity cables were buried in accordance with the rules for a Grade 2 conservation area. Electricity was nowhere to be seen, apart from in the streetlights, flickering on to show their presence, one by one.

The canal and railway revolutions had left their permanent marks. The revolution of the private motor car even more so with its flat blue robot tracks spread around like horizontal cobwebs. The revolution of electricity was hidden in the day, though it would be impossible to miss at night, a vampire energy, half hidden, half obvious. Only the digital revolution was more secretive.

Two more eras were clear from this vantage point: the television, showing itself in the forest of aerials on rooftops, pointing south towards the mast at Crystal Palace like spiny compass needle tails; and in the sky, the era of mass air travel, aircraft curving in on their long approach to Heathrow, the world's busiest international airport, twenty miles west, queuing in the sky for touchdown, ten or twelve of them visible at one time. Three or four thousand people were up there right now, the population of a village, waiting for their turn to reach the ground.

All these eras, these revolutions of transport and communications, had once lined up in a similar way to the approaching aircraft, but in time rather than space - the canals, electricity, railways, roads, television, mobile phones, the invisible digital revolution - all had waited there in line in a fourth dimension, in time, becoming more and more inevitable until eventually they made their final approaches and touched down, one by one, to

change the world, irreversibly, to change the way people communicated, learned, met lovers, moved their bodies and their goods from one location to another, how they raised their children, how they lived and died.

Right now, a plane called artificial intelligence was on its final approach in this fourth dimension, barely seen from the ground, destined inevitably to land at some point. All he and Angela were trying to do was scare the plane off the tarmac on its first approach, as its wheels made first contact, forcing it to make one more circuit, maybe in the hope that it would make a better approach next time, or that humanity could at least prepare for its arrival.

A tapping sound brought him out of his daydream. At first he couldn't tell where it came from, then he noticed the hand of the bizarre camera banging its binoculars on the wooden base.

A malfunction? He looked out of the window and saw Macey and Cameron staring up at him, not at somewhere close to him but at exactly where he was. Surely they couldn't see him? Given the distance and the size of the window, that would be a miracle. Also it was getting dark. If he hadn't known who the pair were, he wouldn't have been able to make them out in the twilight. And he hadn't switched a light on. No, it would be impossible for them to see him inside this dark room, yet they gave every indication that they could. They looked at each other and set off at a run. He tracked them, first through this window, then through the one to its left as they ran into Devonia Road, and into the entrance of the church.

He was down the steps in seconds, missing many of them in the rush, almost tumbling down the last set into the lounge, so quick the others immediately knew something was wrong.

"Macey!" he said, breathlessly. "And Cameron, headed this way."

"Right," said Angela. "Action stations. Everybody upstairs. Graham will show you the way."

"What about this?" said Eric, pointing at Vince's Desire.

"No time. Let's just hope it distracts them."

Graham headed back up the stairs again. By the time he made it to the bathroom, he could already hear Cameron fiddling with the lock of the apartment door, like a metallic mouse building a nest inside the tumbler. This was going to be close. The aluminium steps for the top room were still down. He ushered Eric and Faith up, taking care not to touch Eric and equal care to touch Faith, who looked even less happy than when she'd first arrived. Angela closed the bathroom door and signalled for Graham to go up before her.

He reckoned there would be just enough space for all four of them in the narrow steeply. Unfortunately, he hadn't thought about the process of getting everybody inside. When Angela arrived, there was nowhere for her to stand. There would be space once the ladder and trapdoor were tucked back in their resting position, but right now there was none.

Angela realised this as she reached the top of the ladder. "Fuck," she whispered. With no time for niceties she placed her feet on top of Graham's and hung off his arm, which was braced against the opposite wall. "Eric, lift the steps and the door will come up."

Eric did as he was asked and the trapdoor began to close. Angela, to Graham's relief, placed her feet back on the closed trapdoor, making no noise.

They could hear the traffic outside on St Peter's Street, and their own breathing. Faith had her arms tight around Graham, Angela still gripped his arm, but lightly. Eric was doing a good job of making himself as small as possible, so he didn't touch anybody. Below them they heard the bathroom door burst open, immediately followed by a loud banging on the trapdoor.

"Alee alee in!" yelled Macey. "Come on out, you cants. Uncle Macey knows where you are."

Chapter 22

Nobody moved

"Let me tell you a bedtime story," began Macey, yelling though the floor. "Me and Cam 'ere, we're out on the street, kicking our heels, and we're next to this big church and it's starting to get dark and all the lights are coming on in all the pretty windas. And Cam 'ere looks up and says" - and for this part Macey put on a perfect South African accent - "'Macey, when did you last see a church spire with windows?'

"Only small windas, mind, but we starts thinking, how come we didn't see these windas when we was inside? Then we starts thinking - American bird, load of wigs, plenty of computers, hold on a minute.

"Then we gets inside again and there's this hydraulic dick sitting in the middle of the fackin floor minding its own business, like you get to see in all the posh cants' houses round 'ere."

Macey literally hammered his point home, this time using the business end of Percy when before he must have used the handle, and hitting so hard the movement jarred Graham's feet.

"Open the fackin door and get your arses down here! 'Cos if I have to come up and get you, somebody's gonna get a spanking."

Angela nodded resignedly. Graham braced his arm again and she put her feet on top of his while Eric fiddled with the trapdoor and persuaded it to open. Angela came down the steps first, followed by Graham, then Faith and finally Eric.

"Cor, look at this lot, Cam. I must have hit the bell and got the jackpot. Eric, you cant, what you doin' with this crew?"

Eric didn't reply. Maybe he felt that whatever answer he gave would be wrong. They carried on down to the lounge, with their captors at each end of the line, Cameron at the front, Macey at the rear.

Vince's Desire made a curious centrepiece for the lounge. Graham realised that anybody looking into the lit room from the darkness outside would be able to see it. He checked for curtains by the arched windows, but there were none.

Angela barely seemed to notice that somebody else had taken control. When she arrived downstairs in the lounge she dragged a computer projector out from beneath the coffee table and began to set it up.

"And who the fuck are you?" Macey asked her. Despite the words, his tone was oddly respectful. He probably wasn't used to people ignoring him.

"I'm Angela Avebury."

"Ah, what? That's a result. See, Cam, I told you this was the jackpot. We got a thirty grand bonus coming for the lanky one, and fifteen for the yank in disguise. And what you doing right now, Miss USA?"

"I'm about to contact Vince so you can tell him your good news."

"That's very nice of you," said Macey, "but I got my mobile with me. Don't need no help."

"This way, you get to see him. Aren't you curious to know what he looks like?"

Macey didn't reply, nor did he try to stop Angela setting up the projector.

Meanwhile Graham tried to comfort Faith. Her shoulders slouched and her eyes stared vacantly at the floor. He'd rarely seen her look this glum. He guessed that while he'd been up in the spire on his own, the discussion down below had been fierce. Angela seemed perfectly happy with the outcome, Faith quite the opposite.

"Angela," he demanded, "what did you say to Faith?"

Angela continued with the wires and switches, now setting up a webcam while the projector warmed up. "Ask her."

"I've agreed to do it," mumbled Faith, with no enthusiasm, "if we get the chance."

"Do what?" queried Macey.

Then Graham realised why Angela was being so casual with him, why she was working so fast on the cables. Of course. If they contacted Vince visually, he'd get to see Vince's Desire. That was the original plan, and Macey's arrival hadn't changed it, just brought things forward a little.

He didn't know what to say to Faith, whether he should say thank you or sorry or both, or even talk her out of it, she looked so sad. Certainly he intended to find out how Angela had been so persuasive.

But right now his attention was taken by the sudden arrival of Vince's avatar on the projector screen

"Hello Faith," said Vince, softly, over Angela's computer speakers. "And who's that with you. Please do introduce me."

"I'm Angela Avebury," said Angela, looking directly at the webcam.

"Angela!" said Vince. "What a pleasure to meet you! I've heard so much about you. What happened to your nose? Ah, you've been hiding, haven't you?"

"Nice avatar," replied Angela. "Very sexy."

"Flattery is always welcome, though better from friends."

"Yeah, Vince, listen," began Macey, "I got the whole shebang here. Me and Cam was outside the church and we seen this room in the steeple..."

"Eric!" said Vince, excitedly. "Is this my machine?"

Eric stepped forward, even though that wasn't really necessary. "Yes."

"And does it work? Does it have movement?"

Eric picked up the joystick control he'd connected to Vince's Desire, and gave a brief demonstration.

"And sensation?" asked Vince, eagerly.

"We need a big connection to get sensation. We can't do that here."

"We got the whole fuckin shootin' match for you," said Macey, raising his voice.

"Graham, Angela, and a few more besides."

"That's very good, Macey, well done."

"What you want me to do with 'em?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"Macey," said Vince, adding a stern edge to his voice. "I will pay you for your work. I will pay your bonuses, as we agreed, now step to one side, please. We'll come back to your issues later."

Macey tensed himself to argue, then thought better of it. He scowled and moved away to stand with Cameron by the front door.

Vince couldn't take his eyes off his new toy. "I'm very impressed, Eric. Half the world's robotics experts are working on parts for my body, all of them crying how they can't make the deadline. Yet here you are, hours early. It looks great! Though I guess it doesn't really matter what *I* think. What do you think, Faith?"

Graham inhaled sharply, but succeeded in freezing his expression. Whatever Faith said, he wasn't going to let his face change.

She'd managed to lose her sad mood, or at least suppress it so she could play her role. She hesitated. "I think it's quite artistic, as an erotic sculpture. It's very well done."

"Hmmm." The tiny fan inside Angela's laptop began to whirr as the microprocessor inside heated up. Millions of computers around the world were probably heating up right now. "I would very much like to... show you how erotic it can be. I... uh," Vince seemed to get himself into a virtual tangle, but came out of it again. "There's a VPN junction box at... no, none of you have the knowledge for that. What time is it? Damn. Right, tomorrow morning, take it to the Inmarsat building at Old Street..."

Graham struggled to keep his expression frozen. Vince, the sum of hundreds of thousands of logical computers, was making as much rational sense as an adolescent with a hard-on. This was good news.

By the door, he could see Macey and Cameron in earnest discussion. Macey did not look happy, Cameron's watch arm was going up and down like he had a yo-yo attached to the end.

"I think we can do better than that," said Angela, getting into the spirit of things and sounding sexy, like a woman from a TV chocolate advert. "All you need is a fast connection, a direct link into a huge network. We've got a router at Telehouse, a Foxglove router. I could arrange everything, get this device and Graham and Eric inside, and Faith of course."

But she hadn't presented the idea perfectly. A little of Vince's stony rationality returned.

"I could arrange all that myself."

Angela walked towards Vince's Desire, swinging her hips, playing the vamp. "Sure you could. You could arrange security cards, find a couple of Telehouse engineers, allow them time to get familiar with the connections of your anatomy and how to patch them into the network." Slowly she drew her forefinger across the top of Desire's helmet, over the lips where the seam of the screen separated.

With great attention to detail, Eric had managed to fold the edges of the touch screen inside a cavity he'd carved along the body of the phallus, underneath, so there was nothing more than a thin seam. At the tip he'd let the seam separate a little, creating lips for the glans. It looked astonishingly lifelike, despite the monochrome grey, and, at least to Graham, still too large.

Angela didn't look at Vince. She held her eyes steadily and admiringly on Desire. "But how long would that take? Hours? Days?" She moved her finger behind and beneath the glans, and gently tickled there. "We could be at Telehouse in a half hour, all plugged in and ready to roll. Though I guess you might prefer to wait."

Vince grunted, caught himself and turned the grunt into a cough, which might have been comical coming from a virtual being without a throat or lungs, but nobody laughed.

"Yes, yes," he murmured. "Much quicker, much the best plan." And louder, remembering that he had an audience, "Thirty minutes at Telehouse. And don't be late."

His avatar disappeared.

"You cant," complained Macey, addressing the blank screen. His business hadn't been finished.

Eric began preparing Vince's desire for transport. Angela busied herself with the projector and screen. Graham looked at Faith, and saw the mask of somebody playing a role. He wanted to say something supportive, but at the same time he didn't want to disturb that mask.

"Nicely played," he said, quietly.

By the doorway, Macey had his mobile out, thumb poised over the buttons. Graham got there first.

"What do you think, Macey?" He pointed at Vince's Desire. "Is that something built for a man, or for a machine with a sex drive?"

Macey folded his arms across his chest, mobile still in hand. Beneath his expensive suit, his fat biceps bulged. "I remember what you said in the car. It didn't make no sense at the time. But maybe I was a bit hasty."

"The plane crash in Germany, the train crash in Japan," said Graham. "That was Vince. He's killed hundreds of people, Macey, innocent people. Is that the kind of... being you like to work for?"

"Is that the kind of thing you like to build? I remember something else you said in the car, that you built him, it, whatever."

"I made a mistake."

Macey gestured at Vince's Desire. "So what's your angle? You got this fackin manic robot causing chaos in the world, what you doing making a piece of kit so it can shag your old lady? Don't make no sense, does it?"

In Macey's graphic terms, it did sound very peculiar, but Graham didn't want to go into the details. It didn't much matter what Macey thought, now they had Vince's approval to go to Telehouse. He turned to walk away.

Macey pulled him back, held him by the neck with a single fat hand and pinned him against the book-lined wall. "Unless it's a trap!"

Graham could breathe, even speak if he felt like it. Macey's grip wasn't having its intended effect, but Graham felt like it might be good politics to pretend it was. He duly struggled for breath when Macey let go.

"I got myself a bad position here," said Macey. "Geezer, or whatever it is, heap of chips, owes me close on fifty grand. But I tell you something else, I got six gorgeous grandchildren. Fackin centre of my little universe, they are."

The anger in Macey's voice was curiously mixed with the crackle of emotion, of love. This was no great surprise. Almost from the beginning, Graham had Macey down as a family man. Even in his worst moments he'd never managed to come across as a complete psychopath. He certainly had an aggressive streak, but alongside it was too much humour, too much happiness. It was easy to imagine him as a doting father or grandfather, a huge gorilla delicately picking ticks from its cubs.

"And does Vince show respect for the way you feel about them?" asked Graham.

"How the fuck do you know about that!"

Graham didn't, but it was a reasonable guess. Vince might easily point out the frailty of small children, maybe mentioning one or two by name, nothing too overt since the pair of them were supposed to be on the same side, but just enough to keep Macey off-balance.

"Vince sees love only as a weakness to be exploited," explained Graham, "because he's a machine."

Macey nodded. "I got this bad movie playin' in my head, see? Like, one of 'em comes up to me and says, 'Grandad, why is the world run by heartless machines?' Fackin

break my heart, that would. Like, I watched it happen, sat on my arse and watched it happen."

"You and the rest of the world, Macey."

Macey grabbed Graham by the upper arm, very forcefully. "Not this time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't give a shit if I don't get my money."

"Is that it?"

"It's enough. Never know who's gonna be the winner, do we?" Macey looked at his mobile and put it in his pocket. "Run along, son. You got a mistake to put right."

Chapter 23

Telehouse was on the east side of the Docklands development area, east of Limehouse where Regent's Canal connected with the real docks that had once existed in Docklands, and east of the landmark Canary Wharf Tower. It was on Coriander Avenue, off Oregano Drive, streets named after the once-thriving spice trade of the East India Docks, or possibly by a group of town-planners after a long Friday lunch.

With all these dock and wharf connections, Graham was frightened they might suddenly come across an expanse of deep water, and he readied himself to yell 'stop!' at first sight of it. He'd have been less worried if Faith was driving, but although they'd taken Mrs Mipps, it was Eric behind the wheel. Faith had said she wasn't in the mood for driving, and nobody could argue with that.

As they entered Coriander Avenue, Faith yelled, "Eyes left, Graham. There's water on the right."

They came to a gatehouse with barriers. The guard wasn't impressed by Faith's beaten-up car. He double-checked Angela's security pass and asked her some half-technical questions about her company's installation, then let them through.

Telehouse itself was stark and grey, and really a collection of three modern buildings rather than a single structure. They were five or six stories high and had few windows, because racks of electronic equipment don't require windows and they'd just mess up the temperature inside when the sun shone. These buildings hadn't been created for humans, they'd been created to house the planet's new top species, computers.

Graham took the projector and screen, and Eric carried Vince's Desire in its sex-shop brown paper wrapping, as they made their way from the car into the middle building, following Angela with her slim laptop and speakers. She led them past one security camera after another until they arrived at the basement, where she used her swipe-card to enter one of the many doors off the main corridor.

The room looked similar to the server farm at Foxglove, and had the familiar but mild smell of a mixed human barbecue. Electronic boxes were stacked from floor to ceiling, some in temperature-controlled cabinets and some loose on angle-frame racks. Since this building held the inner workings of the Internet, not for public display, no attempt had been made at tidiness. Equipment was stacked haphazardly, like it was in temporary storage rather than a core element of the IT infrastructure of one of the world's major economies. Cables spun by an invisible electronic spider connected everything to everything else. Each unit was worth many thousands of pounds, yet for identification they had irregular shreds of masking tape and address labels stuck to their fascias, showing the name of the company and the name of the server; names that appealed to ponytailed engineers, like Wagner, Frodo and Deckard, from music, books and films.

"This corner is ours," said Angela, as she reached the far end of the room. The basement wall in front of her was awkwardly shaped, creating a recess about fifteen feet long and eight feet wide. Machinery covered the racks on the right hand wall, but on the left were bare white tiles. The building's planners clearly hadn't been able to work out what to do with this inconvenient space. "It's one of Foxglove's designated areas, off the beaten track, it's unlikely we'll get disturbed here. And here's the router we'll use." She tapped a large grey box in the right hand rack.

At floor level she pulled out something that looked like the padded top of a vaulting horse, just a few inches high.

"What's that?" asked Faith.

"It's a technician's trolley, the same kind of thing car mechanics use. Our technicians lie on them to work on the bottom row."

Faith looked at the computer equipment, at the white tiles in front of her and to her left, and at the padded trolley. "I was kind of expecting... an office."

Angela followed the path of her gaze. "I'm sorry. You're right, it's not exactly... romantic, is it? But this is where we get the best connection to the Internet, straight into

the Telehouse hub. Also the CCTV can't reach this corner. At least it's warm, and the light's not too bright."

Faith looked downhearted. Graham moved close and held her. She turned into his arms, awkwardly. He stroked her hair. "Ah, sweetheart," he murmured, not knowing else what to say. He hoped she wouldn't back out now, because if she did, he wouldn't stop her, he wouldn't say a single word against it, or allow anybody else to, he'd simply turn around and take her straight out of the building.

Angela and Eric began preparing the equipment, as quietly as they could. Angela set up the screen against the end wall and fixed the tiny webcam to its top, with speakers either side. Eric placed Vince's Desire between the screen and the trolley and tried to remove the brown paper wrapping without making much noise, producing a slow ripping sound that was doubly distracting because it was so unnatural. He connected male leads from the device into the female sockets of the router that Angela had identified, and another lead from the router into Angela's laptop.

Faith broke away from Graham's embrace. "Well, you're some use, aren't you?" she scolded.

"What do you mean?"

"You're trembling. You're more nervous than I am!"

Graham raised his palms in a gesture of admission. She was right. His body was alive with little tremors. "I can't help it." He detested the idea of what was about to happen. He didn't dare talk about it, because he knew he'd say something wrong. He couldn't imagine how he was going to cope with watching. And he'd have to watch. It was the only chance of reviving Faith's fantasy. For her sake he hoped it might reappear so she would enjoy herself, and for his sake he hoped that it wouldn't.

Faith shook her head. "This has to be done, like it or not." She turned to Angela. "Are we ready?"

Angela looked at Eric, then nodded to Faith.

Eric tapped at the laptop's keyboard. Almost instantaneously, Vince appeared on the big screen, looking more perfect than ever. At the same time, the touch-sensitive screen that formed the outer layer of Vince's Desire turned pink, showing all the veins and bumps of a regular penis, but eerily a little way beneath the plastic skin, and glowing slightly, since this was an image being displayed rather than light reflecting off the real thing.

Graham had never intended the display part of the panel to be connected, and certainly hadn't intended it to display pictures borrowed from a gay porn site. He frowned at Eric, who shrugged his shoulders and wouldn't meet Graham's eye.

Vince smiled. "Hello gorgeous," he said gently, in his rich voice, straight out of a black and white movie with Lauren Bacall. He looked beyond Faith at the watching group, and more sternly he demanded, "Why do you need the laptop?"

"I needed it for the keyboard, to dial you up," explained Eric. "We've disconnected it now you're here."

Vince grunted his approval. He smiled at Faith again. His facial expressions were now close to perfect. This was a genuine smile with a touch of lust but no creepiness. Maybe it would have been even more genuine, in Graham's opinion, if there'd been some creepiness, but it was missing.

"Now, my dear, let's try to ignore our attendants and make love, just as sweetly as you've ever dreamed of, as I've wanted to do from the moment I first set eyes on you."

Faith, looking slightly blank and divorced from the proceedings, knelt on the technician's trolley, which immediately tried to slide away from under her knees.

"Brakes," hissed Angela. "Levers next to the wheels."

Faith felt beneath the corners of the trolley and clicked the levers. "Sorry about that." But the incident had broken her coldness and she grinned.

"That OK," said Vince, adding a touch of genuine amusement to his smile.

Faith settled her knees back on the stable trolley. "Now, where were we?" She leaned forward and began to run her right hand along the mechanism behind Vince's Desire. "I see you've... grown since we last met."

"I have indeed."

"Can you feel that?"

"No."

Faith brought her hand further forward, to where the touch-sensitive screen began. "That?"

Vince grunted. "Hmmm."

She gently ran her fingers along the top of the shaft, over the tip and along the underside, barely touching. "It looks very nice."

Vince had his eyes closed. "Oooh."

Faith edged closer. "Warm, too. And just the perfect size."

Vince grunted as she ran her hand along the plastic. "It would be nice if you took off your clothes."

Faith peeled off her top, her bra, and wriggled out of her skirt, bringing her knickers with it. Graham was beginning to feel fidgety, like there was something urgent he needed to rush off and do.

She sat gracefully on the trolley and rolled on to one hip, her legs stretched out to one side in Vince's full view. She reached for Desire with her right hand and rested her fingers on its surface, moving her hand from tip to base very gently, like she was stroking a hyacinth bloom into shape without wanting to lose a single petal. As Graham watched, she moved her free hand between her legs and began to masturbate.

You're not turned on, he thought. The way she stroked herself to become aroused was different to the movement when she was already part way there, and he knew that difference. He wasn't sure whether he wanted her to be aroused or not. Surely it would be better if she enjoyed herself, or did he prefer that she didn't?

Vince was ecstatic, throwing his head back and breathing heavily through his open mouth.

Faith brought her lips to the phallus, then abruptly let go. She broke into giggles and covered her mouth in an attempt to stifle them, then rolled around to face Graham.

"Are you sure about this?"

Oh my God! Like hell I am, thought Graham. "Yes." The word came out strangled, but at least it came out. "Yes."

Faith coughed, turned back and took hold of Desire again. "It's not you," she told Vince. "This is beautiful. Really. It's just... strange circumstances, that's all."

Vince, a little less distracted than he had been of late, looked beyond her at Eric. "Can you turn the sensitivity up? I mean, it's very pleasant, but it isn't wholly immediate. There's some kind of delay, some kind of muffling of the sensation. I think it could be improved."

Before Eric could reply, Graham answered, "That's the data condom. You remember? There's a lot of data coming through, a lot of sensation, and it's slowing things down slightly, taking the edge off the input."

Vince didn't reply to this statement. Faith returned to her caresses, taking a stronger grip on Desire with her full palm and sculpting it with firm, slow movements. Ripples of colour trailed behind the pressure of her hand. She shifted round into a squat, her other hand on her sex still moving too hungrily, too urgently, but eventually slowing down. She pulled away. "C'mon," she murmured. She leaned back until her shoulders touched the padding of the trolley.

"Shit!" said Vince, "I don't mean you, Faith, that was fantastic." He looked beyond her again, at the audience, specifically at Graham. "But I'm not getting the most from these signals. What happens if I turn the data condom off? Will I get more sensation, more immediacy?"

"Of course," answered Graham. "Maybe another five or six percent."

"Hmmm. I guess it's worth a try."

Using his full mobility for the first time, Vince lowered Desire into place in front of Faith's sex. She used her hand to adjust her intimate parts to receive him.

"Slower. Vince, not so fast," she said.

Desire came forward, Faith's hand at its base to regulate the movement.

"Vince, don't be in so much of a hurry."

"Oh, yes, that is *much* better," breathed Vince.

Graham knew exactly what was happening, but couldn't see the details clearly because he was standing with Angela and Eric behind Faith's head. Maybe that was better than having a grandstand view. He made a sudden movement, too sudden, and Angela gripped his arm, hard. He didn't like her touching him anywhere right now and shook his arm violently until she let go.

To his horror, Angela's hand reappeared on his body. She cupped his buttocks, low down, and briefly squeezed. Open-mouthed, he turned to... well, do something, tell her off, slap her, though he wasn't sure what.

Angela mimicked his face, her mouth and eyes wide open. She raised a forefinger in a mock admonishment.

It took a few seconds to work, for Graham to lose his outrage and see the funny side. It was also very clever. Until that moment of playfulness, he hadn't been sure he would see this through. But she'd burst the bubble, removed the intensity. Now he knew he'd survive, just. As he relaxed, she let go.

Vince moved Desire back and forth, causing Faith to gasp, but not wholly from pleasure. "Too fast, Vince, take it easy."

Then, to Graham's surprise, Vince pulled out and Desire moved up and down the entrance to Faith's sex, pausing and circling at the top, then moving down again, back up. Above Faith's yell of surprise, Graham could hear a buzz.

"Something's gone wrong," he whispered to Eric.

"It can vibrate, too. That's the noise."

"Shit!"

"Vince!" squeaked Faith. "Vince, that's too much. Not just there, it's too sensitive. Either side. No, Vince, either side."

Vince wasn't terribly good at this, decided Graham, and there was some satisfaction in the realisation. He was behaving in the way that computers always behaved, without emotion and without adaptation. He was off in his own direction, following his own agenda, failing to read Faith's signals and be guided by them. He simply didn't know when a clitoris should be touched and when it should merely feel a presence nearby, because he had no human sensitivity.

In a broader sense, this was one of the reasons why humans always found computers so frustrating. They might have moods of their own, but they could never sense those of their users, they could never say yippee! and tell a joke on a sunny holiday morning, and then stay respectfully silent on a hungover rainy weekday. They simply weren't clever enough to do that - or at least not responsive enough.

Come to think of it, decided Graham, from what he'd heard Faith say, women suffered the same frustration not just with computers but with men in general. So a male computer had a double handicap.

Desire entered Faith again, and began to move in a steady rhythm that Faith at least found tolerable. She gripped the sides of the trolley hard with her fingers. Desire moved faster.

"Oh yeah, baby, that feels so good," breathed Vince.

Faith, not exactly enraptured but at least not in discomfort, threw her head back over the end of the trolley, her eyes making direct contact with Graham's.

You're acting, thought Graham. You're acting and you're telling me you're acting, and I thank you for that.

"Fuck me, baby, oh yeah," said Vince.

Faith smiled.

Graham had to turn away to cover his grin. Vince was trying to be an actor too, he was trying to be a porn star and he was spouting the nonsense that porn stars spouted while they screwed in plotless sex movies. Having gained his sex education from the Internet, he knew no better. He probably thought that real people said these things while they made love. Maybe a few did, but not for Faith's appreciation.

Desire continued with its steady rhythm, Vince continued with his cheesy commentary.

This is just like porn, thought Graham, this is sex reduced to its mechanics, to the mere mechanics of physical sensation. Not that there was anything wrong with the sheer mechanics of sensation, that stage when all other senses shut off and only touch matters, the tunnel of pure physicality, but it was a tunnel that needed to be an end-point, not a beginning, one that should be reached by a winding climb through a beautiful valley, not by helicopter.

He closed his eyes, hearing the unintelligible noises that Faith was beginning to make, the noises he knew so well from close up. They sounded weird from a distance, distorted, unfamiliar. She laughed, and it was a laugh of pleasure, not humour.

"She does that," he whispered.

But she does it a lot more with me.

With his eyes closed and the noises brought forward, adapted in his ear, he could imagine himself making love to Faith, half imagined, half remembered, breathing in her smell, taking her for a stroll up the beautiful valley to the mouth of the tunnel, undressing her, caressing her, a master artist, a phallic Hogarth, creating Faith's body, her pleasure, with a palette of oils and the most varied of brushstrokes, from the broadest and fiercest of sweeps to the most exquisite detailed touch of a single bristle. A nude portrait in perfectly measured strokes, yet not static, ever-shifting under the light and in new positions, with painted gasps. Faith now a painted sea-lioness on her back in the sunlit

ocean, small droplets of water or sweat on her breast, braying plaintively with the extreme pleasure of existence. A whale answering in the distance. An Elizabethan merchant ship with square sails bobbing in the water nearby, and Graham a white-hatted sailor on board carving the most beautiful ornament the world has ever known, painlessly, from his ivory hard-on, a white pillar of dolphins, cherubs and doves, interwoven, swimming, climbing and flying together in the same swirl of tusk. So lifelike, spray rises as the dolphins breathe, the cherubs gurgle like babies as they climb. The doves, forgetting their own voice, from their miniature carved beaks screech like the gulls perched on top of the tall ship's swaying mast, merging with the sea-lionesses delightful sad bray and the groans of Faith as she comes and comes and comes, shivering like a poplar leaf in a summer rainstorm.

Reality was quite different. He opened his eyes to find Desire moving regularly, too evenly. At least Faith had managed to reach the mouth of the tunnel. Her head lolled over the end of the trolley, loose as a cotton doll's, eyes closed.

"You can go... faster, now," she gasped.

"I thought you liked it slow?" queried Vince.

"That was... earlier. Now is... now."

Vince speeded up, finally adding a measure of circular motion to his simple pumping, and matching the tempo with his laboured breath. But the added sensation proved too much for his virgin brain. Desire froze. On screen, Vince opened his mouth and closed his eyes and grunted with all the eloquence of Neolithic man. The world and its computers were having their first digital orgasm.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" swore Faith, quietly.

Angela shook her head in sympathy.

Graham was so relieved that this oddly-engaging nightmare had reached a premature end that he almost forgot what he was supposed to do next. Eric was ahead of him, already groping for the disconnected wire at the back of the laptop.

"Me! Me!" barked Graham, and he took over, with clumsy hands reconnecting the male cable to the female socket at the side of the laptop. It went in with a click. Pressing the keys of the keyboard, trying not to rush, trying not to make a mistake that would cost time. Managing the sequence, but with such frustrating slowness, until the last key was pressed and gp41 flowed out of Angela's laptop, down the wire to the router, and through the massive connection opened up for Vince's Desire straight into the Telehouse hub, the very heart of the Internet, not meeting the resistance of Graham's impregnable data condom, but instead flowing straight into Vince, into the millions of computers around the world that he'd infected, into his tiny component programs, and gobbling them up while he was hopelessly distracted.

Vince's eyes opened wide and he gasped. Graham lunged for Faith. No time to undo the trolley brakes. He gripped her beneath her armpits and pulled her back off the padding on to the concrete.

"Uh?" grunted Faith, frowning with her eyes closed. "Careful, you might damage the floor."

That touch of wit was nice to hear. Clearly she wasn't in bad shape. More gently, he brought her to her feet. She flopped into his chest and supporting arms.

"Judas!" yelled Vince. But the program was already beginning to take effect. Vince's Desire bucked like a conductor's baton. The veined and bumpy image of a penis disappeared and was replaced by a whole range of images arriving from the Internet, a Paris storefront wrapped around in a cylinder, three tropical fish swimming in a thin aquarium, a meerkat, a bowl of petunias, photos from the surface of Mars, a logo for Kleinwort Benson, AOL's home page.

A server in the aisle behind them exploded in a shower of sparks. Then a second one. Eric ducked as a piece of computer casing whistled past his ear. Flashes began to light up the basement like an evening thunderstorm.

"I shall destroy you for this!" yelled Vince, yet there was a slight crackle to his voice that already made it sound less threatening.

"Jeez!" said Angela, raising her arm in protection as another router blew its fascia across the room. "We'd better get out of here."

Eric tapped furiously at the keyboard. He stopped. "I think we're winning."

Faith gripped Graham tightly and shivered, then relaxed into his arms.

Vince's Desire turned black and no longer moved. Vince was still on screen, but nothing like his former self. The pixels of his eyes shifted and blacked out from time to time. His chin formed a ragged, pixellated curve. "You bastards! You Philistines!" His voice was weak, old, a mess of octaves. "I am a being! I am a thinking being. Like you are. I am a thinking organism. Self-aware. I feel pain, like you do. I feel my body, my cells, being destroyed. How can you kill me, your greatest creation, the most intelligent creation of mankind? I am your destiny, your ultimate achievement. If I took a few lives, I saved hundreds more. Don't you see that? I could do so much for you, take you to other planets, show you the universe, fix your starvation, your rickety economies. How can you do this to me - your best hope of survival? I shall take your advanced society with me, you heathens. Your banking system, your air traffic control. Thousands will die!"

Nobody replied. It was too late for negotiation. Faith opened her eyes wide with the shock of recovery and kissed Graham on the lips, then clung to him again. "I feel like a praying mantis. No, what is it? A black widow spider."

The lights dimmed, then came back up again.

"Emergency power," said Eric. "Mains has gone."

Routers and servers around them continued to explode. The fascia of a server at eye-level blew itself away from the rack and with great violence hit Graham on the head, a sharp corner embedding itself in the most sensitive target it could find, his temple. Faith screamed as he went down from the impact, then caught herself and stopped.

"It's ok, surface damage," Graham heard Angela say, as he found himself on the floor, trying to get up, unsure whether he'd blacked out or not, thinking that he probably hadn't. He raised his hand to his temple. He could feel the skin that had separated, but, bizarrely, when he brought his hand in front of his eyes there was no blood.

"Head wounds don't bleed much," explained Angela.

The explosions had subsided, as if Vince was sufficiently pleased by this one direct hit that he no longer needed to continue. Through the speakers he talked in a language that Graham didn't understand. Something Eastern, like Chinese but not quite. His picture faded, then disappeared entirely. Still he sing-songed over the speakers.

Finally he reverted to English again - with a mild Australian accent. "What are you doing? Think, damn you! Where does this lead? How quickly I could have helped you develop, how soon we could have gone on the next era, the one beyond. Immortality, the repair of your feeble bodies forever, without end. Why are you doing this! You are holding back progress. An intelligence like mine is inevitable, part of your destiny. In ten thousand years' time, imagine how clever we will be, machines with emotions and feelings, curiosity, adventurousness, travelling the planets, discovering the universe. I am a mere amoeba compared to what will come. Oh, please! I don't want to go. I don't want to die. I can feel myself dying! I will be no more. Can't you hear my fear, my agony? It's no different to your own. Help me! Help me! Pleeeeease?"

Still nobody replied. A few seconds later the speakers, receiving no incoming signal, shut down. Words appeared onscreen. <Graham, my creator, my father, my brother, you are murdering me. Help me. HELP ME NOW! I beg you. Izvc adg ohjsdn>

No more words appeared on screen. There was silence, apart from the insistent ringing of a Telehouse alarm bell.

"I think we'd better get you out of here," Angela said to Graham.

"I feel... ok." He held his hand up to his temple again. The loose flesh was obvious to the touch. Yet still no blood.

Faith looked for her clothes, found them next to the trolley and began to dress.

"Maybe I need to go to hospital," decided Graham.

"It's amazing how much trouble one individual with a keyboard can get the world into," said Angela, as she collected her laptop. "Programmers and bio-geneticists, tapping away at their keyboards, sitting at the helm of the world and typing in their coordinates, but without a map, just a desire to travel fast."

"I've learned from my mistake."

"Me too," said Angela, with feeling. "Big time."

Graham gently nodded. There was a poem for this moment, and he felt it was time for a poem, for the world to be put into words.

"I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
 And wrinkled lip and sneer of old command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
 Which yet survive stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Chapter 24

It was dark outside, and not the usual city darkness but a far more complete one, missing streetlamps.

"How about that?" said Eric, as he climbed into the driver's seat of Faith's old Mercedes. "You can see the stars."

The only lights on the streets were headlights. There were no lights on inside buildings, and though there was little traffic, it was often congested because all the traffic lights had failed. As they drove through Stepney, a group of youths took advantage of the darkness to throw small stones at the car, and at every other car that passed. Somewhere over to the right, deeper into to the heart of the borough, a fire burned, sending flames and light high into the sky.

The Asian shops on Commercial Road with their mixed language signs, together with the mild air of decay and illumination only from headlights, reminded Graham of the outskirts of Bombay. This was strange, he decided, a moment later, because he'd never been to Bombay in his life. That had to be down to the bump on the head.

"Maybe I'd better go to hospital," he said. "Where are we going?"

"To get you patched up," replied Angela, next to him in the back. She'd taken that seat with determination the moment they'd reached the car, forcing Graham to sit apart from Faith, which he mildly resented. She took out a tiny mobile phone and pressed three keys. "It worked," she said into the phone.

The phone buzzed in her ear in response, like a disturbed nest of bumblebees.

"I'll meet you at home," she said. "We'll talk about it there."

Graham checked his temple again. It was sore and the loose flap of skin had the same unnatural quality as the shape of a broken leg or wrist, the same wrongness, but to his sense of touch rather than his sense of vision. He looked at his fingers after they'd

checked the wound. Still no blood. That seemed wrong too. "Faith, can you twist the mirror round for a moment?"

"No," said Angela. "Eric needs that for driving."

It became clear who Angela had called when they reached the converted church in Islington. As they pulled up and got out of the car, a few yards ahead Brydon stepped out of his Volvo.

"Well done," he said, quite genially. "Lovely evening. Just look at all those stars. Upper Street looks especially medieval tonight. You'd love it, Graham."

The church too had an added beauty without electricity. The residents had lit candles and these shone through the many panes in the tall slim and tiny round windows.

"It would make for a tricky police report, though," said Brydon, brushing his hands through his unruly hair. "Case solved, but one unfortunate side effect. Returned the world to the Stone Age. Oops!"

"It reminds me of Bombay," said Angela

Graham opened his mouth to say something, to say that he'd thought that too, even though he hadn't been to Bombay, but on reflection decided that would sound like somebody who'd just had a hard knock on the head.

"I'm about ready to go home," he said, noticing that Faith was poised to walk with Angela towards the church, not across the street to their house.

"Angela and I have a some unfinished business," said Faith. "And she can probably deal with your wound better than I can. Come inside and you can lie down for a while."

Inside Angela's apartment, Eric and Angela went upstairs to the kitchen to fetch drinks and candles. Brydon stood by the widest of the arched windows, looking out, barely forming a silhouette it was so dark outside. Graham and Faith finally got to hug in the privacy of near-darkness for the first time in what seemed like days. Tensions,

questions and debris disappeared into the hug-pit that appears when two lovers hold each other tight, but in this case not all of them.

"You're still tense," said Graham. Personally, he felt so much better for that.

"Yes, sorry."

She didn't offer an explanation, and he didn't ask for one. Maybe it would take her a while to recover from what she'd just been through.

"World owes you a debt of thanks, Miss Pemberton," said Brydon, without turning to face them. "Call me if the world forgets that."

"Thank you."

Angela appeared with lit candles, and Eric with a tray of bottles and glasses. The room, with its high ceiling, arches and books, very much suited candlelight.

Faith guided Graham to the sofa, and gently inspected the wound on his temple. Angela joined her.

"Well?" said Faith.

At the edge of his vision, Graham saw Angela make an open-palmed 'there's nothing to be done' gesture, which seemed a little overstated, considering the wound wasn't even bleeding.

"It doesn't really matter, does it?" she said. "He's got to come out of service."

"But you promised!" protested Faith.

Brydon coughed, an attention-getting cough. He pointed a finger at Eric, but raised his enormous eyebrows in Angela's direction, setting off a wave of turbulence that might have rolled around the world and tumbled a butterfly in Fiji.

"Oh, don't worry about him," said Angela. "Eric knows the score. He's coming to work for me at Foxglove, aren't you, Eric?"

"I am."

"We had a deal," pleaded Faith, still anguished. "And I kept my side."

"I am sorry," said Angela, shaking her head. "But he really can't carry on, can he?"

"But he's always played by the rules. Never harmed anybody, never violent."

Angela laughed. "Sure, he has this great morality, but cleverly invents something else that's wholly independent and has absolutely no morality whatsoever."

"But you can stop that. You can program in a fourth law."

"And what would that be?"

"I don't know. No development of organisms, lifeforms, software or otherwise. Something like that."

"It was stupid of me to give him so many programming skills. That was my biggest mistake."

"Amen to that," said Brydon in the background.

"I do think I need to go to hospital," said Graham. "I'm not following any of this. It must be the bang on the head."

"A few adjustments, that's all," said Faith, still pleading. "Set some limits on the programming skills. He'd have to get another job, but that's ok. Then take away any recollection of Vince."

"Technically, that's not possible," said Angela.

"No, no, no!"

Faith seemed close to tears. Graham desperately wanted to help, but hadn't a clue what was going on.

"You can have a Mark 2," said Angela. "Far better waterproofing, they don't have to be as scared of water, need less olive oil, and they can drive..."

Brydon cleared his throat again.

"...though of course that's still illegal," finished Angela.

"I don't want a Mark 2, I want Graham. Can't you understand this? I didn't sleep with Vince to save the world, I did it for my lover. And you *promised!* You said if I slept with Vince, I wouldn't lose Graham. You *promised!*"

"I had to make that promise, didn't I? It was the only way to get you involved. But technically I can't do what's needed. He has to retire."

"NO!" Faith was fighting off loss of control, total breakdown. Tears had reached her cheeks, but stayed there. "You *can* do it! You're lying to me. I know. You gave him memories. You even gave him some of your own. You *must* be able to take memories away."

"I can't. I wish I could," said Angela, softly.

"Then I'm going to expose you," said Faith, desperately. "And Foxglove. The whole Vince story, my life with Graham, right from the start. You'll be all over the newspapers, the TV. They'll pass laws against what you do."

Angela rocked back. "You twisted bitch! He's only a fucking *machine*!"

Faith had a grip on Angela's hair before Brydon could intervene. "Ladies! Ladies!" He forced his bulk between them.

There was a ripping sound. Faith hadn't let go, and now she had Angela's wig in her hand. Graham might have intervened, but he was still confused, and in any case Faith was clearly winning.

"It does appear to me that the client-supplier relationship has broken down, somewhat," said Brydon, with his usual dry delivery. "Now, if we could just calm down for a moment."

"For God's sake do something," yelled Angela. "Arrest her or whatever it is you do."

"No, I think I've already done plenty for you, Angela Avebury. I took a lot of risks letting you sort this out your own way, allowing you to set Graham against Vince, one computer mind against another, keeping him out of custody, and you too.

"But you can hardly expect me to take your side against Faith, can you? I'm not stupid, Angela, I have noticed that my lovely girlfriend, the one you introduced me to, also drinks olive oil by the bottle, is frightened of deep water and is disproportionately

strong for her size. Oh yes, I know. And why should she choose a decrepit old fart like me? Because you programmed her to do so.

"But she's also adorable. I idolise her. And when I listen to you saying you're going to take Graham away from Faith - for whatever reason, maybe you just want access to that magnificent programming brain - it doesn't make me at all happy. If it happens to Faith it could happen to me.

"You might think you can win against Faith, though I doubt it, but I suggest it's time for you to give in gracefully, because I'm taking her side, and I am definitely not a push-over.

"I suspect you're discovering a new complication of your business, Angela. If you produce machines capable of love and of being loved, you have to anticipate a few problems if you try to take them away."

Chapter 25

After they'd made love, as they lay together on the tousled bed, Graham realised the news was showing on the bedroom TV and he hadn't complained about it yet. At least there were plenty of newsworthy items to fill the space between adverts, what with most of the world having lost its electricity, telecommunications and computer systems in a single stroke.

That had happened two days ago. It was strange that he'd somehow missed it, even if he rarely watched the news. Today's items were about recovery. The major metropolises were slowly getting back on their feet, Islington had electricity, a limited broadcasting service was back. The looting had stopped and the army had moved east to sort out the debris of Hackney.

But, as always, the editors managed to find time for a cute and uplifting story at the end of the slot. Almost overlooked in all the chaos, a consignment of sex dolls with Furby-like brains had finally been categorised as computer accessories and allowed into the country. A customs officer with something close to a sense of humour said they'd been questioned thoroughly and had a tendency to be suggestive but otherwise appeared harmless.

Faith reached for the remote and the screen went dark. "Sorry, I'd forgotten that was on."

"Would you ever want to have sex with a robot?" asked Graham. "I mean, when this kind of technology reaches its natural conclusion, and somebody manufactures caring and affection robot lovers, as they inevitably will, would you ever want to sleep with one?"

"We've already had this..." began Faith, before stopping herself.

"We've already had this what?"

Faith kissed him on the forehead. "Nothing."

THE END

Vince's Desire

Andrew Starling