

ROBERT DOWELL



THE LAZARUS
PRINCIPLE

THE FUTURE HAS A PLAN FOR THE PAST

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For my mum

Prologue

The woods were quiet as a slight breeze rustled the trees. The sun had set about an hour ago but the sky still held the last light of a dying summer day. Down by the lake Robert could just make out the small campfire where a few people were sitting round casually enjoying each other's company. Looking up at the clouds he wondered what Carol would have thought of this place and its tranquillity. She had often talked about going back to a more simple life, somewhere without threats, somewhere without any of the complexities that life seemed to throw at them on a regular basis. As the tensions had grown between them they had drifted apart; Carol had tried to reconcile the part he had played in her brother's death but never managed to find peace. As time went by bitterness had eaten her up until she made the fatal decision to work with Lazarus. His schemes seemed to appeal to her need for retribution and, with very little forethought for the consequences, she had made a pact with their nemesis.

Carol, why didn't you wait, it was only a matter of time . . . Time, there's that word again.

He looked at the smoke rising from the distant fire by the water's edge. Could Carol have made any changes to her predicament, her future, their past? Would someone else have simply filled the void? How could you have free will if your actions had been predetermined by future intervention?

His gaze was taken again with the smoke from the fire moving upwards towards the stars. Pin pricks of light that shone with the promise of a new life. The vast emptiness of space was like the open areas of the grid, cold and yet somehow calming at the same time. Carol was actually somewhere out there after all.

Bee and Robert had come a long way in the last few months. Things had died down as abruptly as they had happened, most of the Net was back up and running, albeit at a slower and more sedate pace. It would

appear that not only did nature abhor a vacuum, but everything was vehemently opposed to it as well. The SIA had been replaced by a multitude of organisations vying for power, hungry with a desire to control. Governments were on the march again, everything was in motion and everything was apparently there for the taking, but beneath the surface nothing had changed. According to the latest reports from Roly everything had happened as it was supposed to, strange to think that time was beyond most people's comprehension.

Life goes on Carol . . . wherever you are now . . .

He looked out over the lake and reflected on the final sacrifice Carol had made. So many things had happened to them, so many close shaves.

Well if it is going to happen, I guess it already has.

He felt Bee put her arms around his waist and snuggle up to him. She held him tight and looked out across the lake.

'Beautiful . . . isn't it?' she said slowly. 'Tomorrow looks like a good day . . . weatherman says clear skies and sunshine.'

Turning towards her, he looked into her eyes. How could he have got through the last few months without Bee? She was everything to him, she made him feel complete.

'Well, I guess there really is a paradise after all,' he smiled at her.

For a short time they both just looked at each other and said nothing, both in their own private world, sharing the bond that only comes with true love. Then to seal the union they kissed and once more Robert felt complete.

'Robert are you coming in?' asked Bee at last, 'It's getting cold out here.'

'Yeah, coming,' he replied.

He looked at the sky. It shimmered momentarily: was it the light or did something need adjusting?

'Bee . . . can you do something about that sky, it's still not quite right.'

'Later dear, we have all the time in the world.'

Bee turned away and walked through the open door of the cabin. Robert smiled as an amusing axiom crossed his mind: *Today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday.*

'You may be right' he whispered to himself as he, too, went into the cabin and closed the door behind him.

1

The Plan

Carol's attention was captured by the spectral image that hung in front of her; its beauty reminded her of a life she had long since lost. Memories drifted through her mind, as myriad images overwhelmed her. When life was always rosy and carefree, you never worried where the money came from. When you lived with the 'highers' you just enjoyed everything at full speed. Life became a drug and she was a number-one addict.

Then in the blink of an eye it had all ended, crashing down around her. What at first looked like a seemingly random chain of events had later been revealed to be a fraud. Her boss had fabricated evidence to cover his own arse and in her innocence she had wandered straight into the firing line.

She had taken the fall. Her boss had promised to help her out and naively she believed him. If they managed to get through the next few days she would again be able to return to the society that so craved her attention. Or was it the other way round? It didn't help that the Artificial Intelligence had been squarely on the side of her boss; most AIs were constrained to always support the chain of authority. Her flow of thoughts was interrupted when Robert flicked his fingers in front of her face.

'Snap out of it, you're supposed to be good,' he mocked.

She looked at him.

'Good! As if there was any doubt!' she replied.

'Excellent! Then I won't have to worry about you making a living as a comedienne.'

She cocked an eyebrow and looked over at him.

'So you're still serious about this!'

'More than ever,' she replied.

'We hit the bank, lay the fingerprints, pick up the pay-cheque and disappear?'

She grinned. Her face said it all; she was a girl on a mission and nothing was going to get in her way. If all went well then the bank job was just for financial security; the real payback was watching everyone trying to figure it all out.

'It's that simple,' she said.

‘Nothing’s that simple, mark my words.’

‘If we plan the groundwork properly then this will lead to a chain of events that has them fingering the wrong person, and as we’re all constantly reminded . . .’ she turned to him and cocked her head, ‘Computers never lie!’

He watched the data as it played out across the screen, he too became momentarily lost in his thoughts about a future that he and Carol could have. Like the dust that drifted slowly through the air in front the screen, his life seemed aimless. His thoughts returned to the present and he turned back to Carol.

‘How do you think we’ll get in?’

‘Payback’s a bitch,’ Carol whispered.

‘What?’

‘Oh sorry, nothing I was just . . .’

‘Hey, get with the program Slick; we haven’t got time to daydream,’ he said mockingly.

‘I was just thinking . . .’

‘You should be careful, too much of that and you might strain yourself!’

She ignored his quip and continued: ‘How do you think we’ll get in?’

‘I’m not sure. If we try the dreamer interface we’ll probably hit the weakest part of the system.’

‘Are you sure? I heard that the last hacker got toasted as he tried the backdoor with that trick!’

‘Yeah, he probably didn’t have the right wares, so he got shafted by the ice. Anyway the bank’s got some real mean AI in there. My bet is they have become too complacent and rely too much on the software to make all the decisions. You got to go in at low-power otherwise the security system is gonna fry your ass.’

‘And where do you think we will get a low-power transmitter from?’

‘Ah,’ Robert raised his finger in the air. ‘I still have those convenient friends in low places, and one of them should be able to provide the right hardware for the job. With the right kind of transmitter it makes it that bit harder for the AI to put in a feedback loop on your signal and blow your ass clean out of your rig!’

After an hour of rehashing the proposed plan of action, Robert called a time-out on the proceedings. This was getting them nowhere; they needed to sleep, start afresh in the morning. Carol knew if she didn’t leave she wouldn’t get any sleep. She kissed him good night before she headed towards the door of his apartment and with one last glance in his direction she closed the door behind her and was gone.

Robert looked at the floating image again. Now that she had gone would he have any better chance of cracking it? Being the kind of person

who couldn't leave well enough alone, he had to give it a dry run. Sure he was tired and shouldn't be doing it, but what the hell!

What's the point of life if you don't know when to live?

Loading the simulation into the construct he pressed the button. 'Green-button technology, it makes everything so simple!'

The simulation started. He put on the cyber-gloves and then the neural-glasses. A small screen came to life in front of his eyes opening out to show the new world he was about to travel in. Activating the neural connection, a rush of energy and space filled his mind as he dropped into the system. Starting his descent he monitored the datastream. As all the systems he had access to displayed information about the surroundings, the simulation of the cityscape-style environment flew past at a mind-numbingly fast pace. He checked to see if all weaponry was loaded – viruses and logic bombs to name but a few – most written by himself or friends. Hacking was an art form, appreciated by few and hated by many as a result of the constant media hype, which always portrayed hackers as disaffected youngsters. Some were actually disaffected adults. The software weapons he used were not available down at your local software store, and by their nature they were highly unstable and likely to back-fire if you did not have the prerequisite experience.

In the past his targets had primarily been AIs, artificial intelligences whose intellect had far outstripped those that had created them; AIs ran the networks, the corporations and large companies. They were tricky buggers at the best of times, they analysed themselves incessantly trying to find new ways to improve. As a result of the constant advances, you just had to hope they hadn't outsmarted you till you'd deployed your cargo of electronic death. His departure from the hacking business came just as the AIs had taken a quantum leap. No one was entirely sure how or what had prompted this jump in IQ but it had happened. Increased hacker deaths had also been reported, which were generally seen as a good thing. A perceptible drop in crime helped keep the critics quiet.

AI experts had speculated that they had achieved this jump by putting aside their differences, but this, like so many theories before, had never been proven. Others theorised that a super AI had brought a new order of intelligence to the cyber world; again no proof of this was ever uncovered but whatever the reason, Robert had felt very unsafe in there and had bugged out.

He started using the control panel, moving expertly over it with unerring speed as he rushed through the simulacrum. The virtual reality around him still gave a special buzz, maybe more now than in the past. It had a special quality that appealed to him. Flying over the simulacra he watched other programs acting out their appropriate jobs, as his attention was drawn towards the approaching intersection. The interface instructed

an appropriate course and all the while a constant stream of feedback was being displayed. Using an autopilot was completely out of the question as it was just too damn predictable and could be easily spotted by an AI. The AI had always had a problem spotting humans in the system. No one was sure why this was the case; maybe it was just the way things were.

He rounded a corner and came face to face with the ICE, the firewall and security system that protected the computer's intelligence from anyone without authorisation, like him. He moved away from the shimmering force field, he did not want to disturb the myriad colours. He loaded a software probe that would allow him to determine the most likely weakness and sent it out towards the ICE. Numbers flashed up in front of him, and as a pattern started to appear he made his best guess as to the weakest point. Without waiting for a complete response he sent in a logic bomb.

'Oops, maybe that wasn't such a good idea!'

Suddenly all hell broke loose followed closely by the message 'DEAD' flashing in vivid red. He stopped thinking about the message in front of him and remembered some report, which finally and conclusively found that women make better cyberrunners due to their 'internal wiring'; men made better programmers due to their innate ability to be completely unpredictable.

'Figures!' he said to himself as he pushed the glasses up from his eyes and took them off. Pulling the gloves off his hands, he turned to get up off the chair. His whole body jolted as he was confronted with the unexpected.

'Shit, you made me jump!' he said as his body recovered from seeing Carol standing in front of him.

'Looks like you should have gone to bed after all.'

'Ha ha, how'd you get in? Those locks are . . . were supposed to be unbreakable.'

'Depends on what you mean by unbreakable . . .'

'Great . . . Anyway how long have you been standing there?'

'Long enough to see you make a complete cock-up. You're meant to go under the ICE not hit it hard. It blows you out if you try to take it head on, that's what it's there for.'

'I'll remember that next time . . .'

'You perform like that in the real world and there won't be a next time.'

'And so speaks the voice of wisdom . . . Anyway why'd you come back? I suppose you couldn't live without my inimitable charm, eh?' he said with a small chuckle.

'You wish! Anyway I . . . I didn't want to be alone tonight, and besides, you could do with the company.'

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‘Oh no, you know what happened last time you said that; we ended up getting nothing done for a week.’

He looked at her and saw an imploring look in her eyes as she tried to change his mind.

‘Okay, you’re right, I could do with the company tonight, but nothing special.’

‘Damn,’ she said laughing, ‘Okay, no funny business. I’m tired as well so I just want a hug and a kiss and then go to sleep.’

‘I love it when you get all slushy on me; you sound so romantic.’

‘Let me have a go,’ asked Carol suddenly.

‘I thought you agreed to go to bed?’ he queried.

‘I’ll be along shortly. Now you’ve had a go, I want to have a quick blast.’

‘Be my guest, ‘cos I’m off to bed; that last run drained me completely.’

He kissed her and turned towards the bedroom. Carol watched him leave the room, a light came on and she heard him close the door. She turned to the vidcom unit, pressed a button and a person’s face flashed on the screen.

‘We need to talk,’ she said.

When he woke up, she had left. The only thing that remained was the smell, her perfume on the bedclothes. He got up, put on his sweatshirt and walked out of the bedroom. The light in the kitchen was too dim, making it hard to see properly.

‘Lights!’

The lights came on slowly allowing his eyes to adjust. He looked at the clock. It took him a moment to figure it out.

‘Huhhh, six in the morning? No way,’ Robert moaned in a tortured tone. ‘You gotta be shittin’ me, this hour is inhumane.’

He looked around. ‘Something’s missing here.’ He rubbed his face with his hands, as he tried to wake up fully. ‘I wonder where Carol is?’

His eyes adjusted to the light which allowed him to admire his kitchen. It was in traditional English country-cottage style, a bit out of place but all the same homely. Luxury on this scale was usually reserved for those born as a ‘higher’, but then he had his past to thank for that. Looking across the kitchen he gazed out of the window and his thoughts returned to his past, a past that had been exciting as well as dangerous. He thought for a moment what it was like to be a higher; they had everything, from good food and health to immunity from any kind of prosecution. Class was more a matter of luck than anything else, you were either born into it or you got lucky in doing something that got you into the club. It was hard to get thrown out but Carol had managed just that; she had

unfortunately been the right person in the right place and had subsequently paid for someone else's mistake.

He remembered the news feeds. The ensuing scandal dragged on for weeks as the various news networks circled the story like sharks surrounding some kind of aquatic Alamo, devouring anything that looked edible. He sat there and wondered why he had helped her out, what had been his reason. Well, he had always been a sucker for a hard-luck story.

Oh well that's all history now.

He absent-mindedly picked up the carton of synthetic orange juice and took a quick drink.

'Errr, this is bloody warm!' He placed it into the cooler.

As it hummed gently to itself, his thoughts returned to his past, what it had been like when he'd been living on the edge. The machine beeped and he took the juice from the cooler and went to the balcony window. The view did little to liven his mood as he looked out across the sprawl. It was still dark – ever since the Ring of Fire torched Japan the dust and pollution had created an environment that never seemed clean or clear. The sun seemed to have difficulty breaking through all the crap, the city was dirty and the authorities had never taken air quality seriously.

If they had installed some atmosphere processors then the city would be cleaner. It was different in the countryside. There the filters absorbed most of the dirt and pollution. The privilege of the highers allowed some of them to live in the countryside, unlike the delightful city in which he had chosen to live.

He noticed a note on the table and as he read it he smiled: 'Had a lovely night, see you later, I'll call you, love Carol xx.'

Yes, it had been nice, the kind of night you dreamt would happen more often. A quick thought surfaced from the back of his mind; it had been too perfect. Something was wrong; to him it almost felt planned. The note went some way to allaying his fears, and he dismissed his earlier vague thoughts as a throwback to his past. He sat at the table and wondered what to do next.

The bank seemed like a nice target and being an ex-hacker/programmer made the job a lot easier. But then he sat there thinking; the uncertainty returned: was this too big a target? Carol had told him this was the reason it made such a perfect target. No one had ever done anything like that in the past, or if they had it was kept a closely guarded secret. He shivered as he remembered the AI that had almost cost him his life. He had almost become a statistic for some civil servant to process through their endless machines.

At the time he had been doing legitimate security updates to the system, but the earlier changes he had done made the AI misread his intentions. The thing that had always eluded him and that he found hard

to forget was how similar all the AIs were, as though they were clones of each other, a common thread ran through their thought processes. The memories made his head feel bad and his stomach followed suit. Maybe the bank could wait awhile; after all it was not going anywhere.

Satisfied that nothing new had surfaced he decided to go talk to a few friends down at the local cybercafe'. After getting dressed he walked over to the front door, turned and looked at the room wondering if he had missed something. The terminal rang and he looked at the screen. The number flashing was unfamiliar.

As his finger lifted off the receive button an image snapped on the screen. Old habits died hard and his past had made him wary; he kept the camera offline until he could confirm who was at the other end. Carol's face loomed large on-screen; she looked visibly shaken. He reached over and activated the camera. She relaxed as his image was transmitted to her.

'I'm in trouble Robert!'

'What's the problem?'

'I left your place and forgot my bag. The Mets could not find anything on me so they trumped up this stupid . . .' A stern voice cut into the transmission and broke up the signal: 'ENOUGH OF THAT . . . Just make your phone call!'

' . . . Okay, Okay . . . To cut a long story short they wanted to know why I was out so early in the morning, and when I said I had left a friend's they wanted to know what my name was, one question led to another and . . . well that's where you come in. I need you to bring my stuff down to the Mets station in Cheapside. Try not to get caught sweetheart.'

Robert was distracted for a moment. Why Cheapside? That was miles out of her way and so early in the morning.

'Cheapside? How'd you get there?'

'Never mind that now, I just need you to get me out of here,' Carol said, with a note of nervousness in her voice.

'Okay I'll see you in twenty minutes. Hold tight!'

'Okay, see you then. Bye.'

He slammed the vidcom button and the picture froze and then broke up into blocks before it disappeared,

'Those bastards! Will they never stop pissing me off!'

Something didn't add up. Why was she in Cheapside? It was full of dissidents and hacker types; after all, they had agreed to leave all that behind. Why had she been picked up? He could not think of a reason. A healthy dose of paranoia had been a requirement when he was a hacker and now it had returned. He wanted a look at her personal identification file, see what the Mets had attached recently. With a bit of luck he could still get in if they had not found his backdoor password.

Turning to one of the terminals on his desk he powered it up. The screen came to life and a few lines danced on its surface before asking him for a password. As he typed furiously on the old-style keyboard, different pages flashed onto the screen and disappeared just as fast. Finally, he arrived at the login screen. Entering a user ID and password, he held his breath as he waited for a response. To his great relief he got through to the police system.

‘It’s not who you know, but what you know!’ he murmured.

Having been involved in the creation of the Mets computer system, he knew a few secrets that would let him bypass the front-line security. His progress was swift as he slid into the central computer like a ghost. Using a few maintenance routines, he found the database he was after and started searching. He waited for the database to locate the information he wanted, old feelings stirring in his consciousness. He watched as the search flagged two names, both of them tagged as a ‘code 11’.

‘What a surprise!’ he chuckled as he read the information on screen.

He opened the file and read the report, which amounted to little more than attempted credit fraud. Not entirely true as they had yet to carry out their plans, but all the same inconvenient at this current moment in time.

‘Ouch, someone’s trying to tell me something! But I guess they need to turn up the volume!’

The feeling of power returned, he was tempted to poke around but he was in a hurry. With a few swift keystrokes he deleted the incriminating evidence against them both. He logged off and left his apartment.

When he arrived he handed over Carol’s ID card, everything was checked and cleared, and Carol was allowed to leave. An officer, who had been watching the incident from his office, opened the door and walked over to them.

‘You look familiar, and in my line of work I don’t like familiar things.’

‘Must be fun for your wife then,’ Robert muttered.

‘Did you say something?’

‘You are?’ Robert parried.

‘It’s my station and I’ll ask the questions. Your name please?’ the officer said slowly.

‘Depends who’s asking.’

‘Riley of the Serious Fraud Office and you are here for what reason?’

‘Not me . . . ask her,’ replied Robert. He was getting irritated by all the questions.

Officer Riley persisted. ‘You’re . . .’ then he thought for a moment. ‘Yeah I remember, you worked on our computer systems.’

‘What’re you in for?’

‘Hey, ask her! It’s not me.’

‘Come on, you know the drill, hand over your ID.’

Robert sighed as he handed it over. Riley looked him over one last time, then told one of the detectives to follow him to his office, closing the door after him.

‘What took you so long? They have me for . . .’ Carol began.

Robert placed a hand on her arm and gave an imperceptible shake of his head.

Carol took the hint and sat back, clearly on edge. Riley returned and handed Robert his card.

‘Okay, you check out! You can go.’

‘Whatever!’

‘Don’t get sarky, sunshine. Something’s going on. I don’t want to get another one of those familiar feelings again. Understand?’

Robert was about to say something when he thought better of it. Instead he smiled sarcastically at the officer, grabbed Carol by the arm and led her out of the building. As they passed through the main door, Carol looked at Robert in utter amazement, but the look on his face told her all she had to know; he had done something and that was good enough for her.

When they got back to his apartment, she closed the door and leant against it, then stared at him, a strange look on her face.

‘Why didn’t the . . .’ she said.

But Robert covered her mouth with his hand and put his finger to his lips.

‘Shushhhhh!’ he hissed quietly.

He walked over to a small console and started typing. He had constructed a program some time ago to search and trace any electronic bugs. Immediately the program reported it had found a tracer bug in the computer system.

Curious . . .

It was one of the newest and most insidious kind of bugs yet devised, which used your own computers against you, listening, waiting for the right trigger before anything was transmitted. The trigger could be anything: a certain sound, word, light or movement. Eavesdropping had come a long way in the last 50 years, now utilising bugs the size of a grain of sand.

Carol had been the key and her voice had been the trigger. He followed the data stream back to the receiver: it was linked to a computer system owned by the Metro Fraud Squad. There was no ID code, which meant it had to be connected in some way to Special Operations, a nasty band of criminals who worked in the background as shadows, sanctioned by the government and working beyond its control.

Carol looked at him and gave a nod of understanding as he turned and walked to his bathroom. She followed him in and closed the door.

'I checked your personal identification file. It turns out you and I were poison everywhere. I cleared the contents of the evidence file against us and . . .'

'What were you thinking?' Carol interrupted. 'They record everything! Christ almighty, you don't think do you? Are you really that stupid, or did you take lessons?'

'If you'll let me finish I can explain . . .'

He paused. 'That's why you spent the evening in the Bangkok Hilton. Someone is on to us and what I did bought us some time. If I had walked in there to pick you up without checking, then I would have joined you in the penthouse suite.'

'Oh!' Carol quietly replied as she regained her composure. 'I'm sorry, I didn't think . . .'

'I know, don't beat yourself up over this! You're on edge.'

'It scared me thinking we were so close and then it's all over . . .'

'Hey, it ain't over yet, but it's scary when the system closes in on you.'

Both of them paused for a moment,

'Thank you for coming down and collecting me,' Carol said, looking into his eyes and placing her hand on his arm.

Robert placed his hand over hers but remained silent,

'Where do you think we slipped up?' Carol finally asked

'I don't know, but I think it's obvious that they must have been suspicious of you for some time.'

'Of me?' Carol said with a degree of surprise. 'It takes two to tango. How did you get past security at the Mets Head Office?'

'Never mind that now. Suffice to say I didn't just walk in the front door.'

He wondered whether or not to tell her about the thing that was bugging him at the back of his mind, but now was not the right time. A look of realisation spread across her face as she understood the context of the previous statement.

'You cheeky bugger, no wonder you kept it quiet. What are you planning on doing about the Metro Fraud Squad?'

'Well, I think I would first like to find out which team's in charge of the file on us. They went to a lot of trouble to hide it, but they left a small trace. When they least expect it we'll poison their system at Head Office and leave them to sort it out. By the time they figure out what went wrong, we'll be off somewhere else causing some real trouble and being the regimental pain in the arse we are apparently so famous for.'

Carol cocked her head to one side. 'Speak for yourself!' She said indignantly.

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‘We should start by giving ourselves some breathing space. It’ll give us time to get some scope on what has happened. They may even think we’ve been scared off the idea.’

‘Oh good, we can’t screw that up!’

‘Let it go Carol, we need some time to think about this.’

‘Fine, but I just hate sitting around doing nothing.’

‘I know, but there’s nothing we can do about it. Without knowing who or what is after us we can’t do any more.’

A couple of days passed without incident. They agreed that if they wished to speak about anything important they would leave the flat and go for a walk in the park. Finally, Robert could stand the silence no longer. He decided to make the first move and see if he could start the ball rolling, maybe get some distance between him and the past few days. Nothing was said about where they were going but they had agreed beforehand that they would meet up after a couple of hours at Central Park. Robert made constant changes to his route, doubling back on himself and getting off the Metro only to go back on it through another door. Finally satisfied that no one was following him he made his way into the park.

The park looked serene; it was a rare and warm sunny day, with the pollution in the atmosphere giving the air a golden glow. He wandered slowly over to a bench and sat down. Carol would turn up soon, so he decided to stay where he was until she arrived, take a moment to enjoy the surroundings, maybe even unwind a little. The past few days had been hectic and unpleasant to say the least, problems they had not foreseen had reared their ugly heads. This was all supposed to be so simple, so easy to pull off, but as with everything in his life nothing could be further from the truth.

The park was beautiful at this time of the evening, the sun glinting off the buildings in the distance like diamonds in a sea of orange light. Here he could enjoy space, open space and lots of it. Suddenly everything else was small; it wasn’t so much of a worry any more.

He leant back and looked out idly across the large boating lake. Nearby he noticed a child playing with a small sailing boat and laughing with innocent joy as the boat bobbed about in the water. A thin mist had started to form on the ground and it glowed with a fiery orange. The scene reminded him of one of those glamorous whisky adverts you saw in the glossy magazines. Lost in his thoughts, he didn’t see Carol approach. She had been watching him for about ten minutes, partly out of fear that someone might pounce and arrest them and partly for her own needs. She sat down next to him and looked out across the lake.

‘So here we are . . . what next?’ Carol asked quietly.

Robert paused. He was not sure what he wanted. One thing was certain – he would settle for something as simple as this park. He could feel a change coming; something at the back of his mind told him that soon his life would never quite be the same again.

‘I don’t know . . . it’s as if we are being watched, as if our every move is being second-guessed.’

‘Was the previous incident a warning?’

‘Maybe. How can you be sure of anything . . .’ He sat up and turned to her. ‘The only certain things are what you have now.’

‘Did you see anyone follow you?’

‘No, what about you?’

‘Not really . . . Maybe it was a mistake and we have been killing ourselves over nothing.’

‘This was no mistake. Believe me they don’t make mistakes,’ chided Robert.

They sat there in almost complete silence until the sun had gone behind the buildings in the distance, its dying rays glittering off the distant traffic.

‘We had better get going before the spooks get us.’

‘What spooks?’

‘The ones that didn’t make the mistake with our files.’

Robert stood up and turned to Carol. For the first time he became acutely aware that other people were also in the park, and some of them had stood up as well.

‘I don’t think we are out of the woods yet.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have that feeling we’re still under observation.’

‘Robert you’re scaring me.’

‘Oh a little fear is always a good thing. Just don’t let it become rampant.’

It was time to move on, but he needed to confirm something first. One of the first lessons he had learnt as a hacker, always listen to your inner voice. If it said someone was on to you, then chances are they were. His instincts told him it would be logical to assume that right now they had been watched for some time. Now to find out who they were. He stood up and looked around, making mental notes of the other people he could see.

‘I think we should take a walk around the lake.’ He put his hand out and pulled her to her feet.

‘That sounds like a brilliant idea.’

‘Can I interest you in a meal, m’lady?’ Carol laughed at his mock butler impression.

They walked nonchalantly around the lake, taking their time and acting as if they had not a care in the world. Finally, they reached the gate and stood talking for a few more minutes. All the time Robert had been watching for any signs that they were being followed.

When he was satisfied that no one was obviously watching them they crossed the road and headed down a quiet side street where he knew there were some derelict buildings. The street seemed deathly silent; even the normal ambient sounds from surrounding traffic and city life seemed to have receded to unnaturally quiet levels. None of the people in the park appeared interested in them, but that was no guarantee they were home and dry.

‘It’s so quiet,’ whispered Carol.

‘Maybe it’s something to do with the area.’

Robert decided he needed to find a good vantage point, one that gave them a better view of the surroundings. A movement across the street caught his attention; as he focused on it he could see a boarded-up entrance to a large building.

‘Does that look loose to you?’ asked Robert without turning to look at Carol.

‘What?’

‘That board covering the entrance to that building, over there?’

Both of them looked at it for a few seconds.

‘It looks loose’ replied Carol with a note of nervousness in her voice. He wondered if this area was a favourite of squatters, or other dropouts; you could never tell. Maybe this had been used in the past. If so, maybe he could get access to the building. He looked up at the imposing edifice. In its heyday it would have been an impressive sight.

‘Time for sightseeing later,’ Robert muttered.

‘What was that?’ asked Carol.

‘Impressive building.’

‘Whatever.’ Carol was uninterested in the surroundings; she just wanted to escape this nightmare that was rapidly swallowing her up.

He crossed the street quickly and climbed the steps to the lobby entrance. Carol followed, shadowing him as closely as was comfortable given the circumstances. He got up to the lobby entrance and saw that someone must have previously gained access by pulling the boarding away from the main entrance door and securing it shut with twine. Without making a sound he signalled for Carol to stay quiet and placed his ear up to the gap. A cool damp breeze blew past his ear, whistling on its way out of the gap. He listened intently for anything that might show someone else was there.

After a couple of minutes he untied the twine, prised the board away a little and took a look inside. The glass pane had been smashed to allow

entry and shards of broken glass covered the floor. Pulling the board back slightly harder he created a gap large enough for a person to squeeze through and turned to Carol.

‘You go through, I’ll keep watch.’

‘I’m not going first! You go. It was your idea anyway!’ Carol countered nervously.

‘Carol, I don’t have time for this, NOW move!’ he said in a forceful whisper.

Carol capitulated grudgingly. Crouching down she climbed inside and slowly disappeared from view. Robert kept a lookout for anyone that might have wandered down the street after them, possibly by accident or as a result of a tail they had picked up. Satisfied the coast was clear he followed her in. As he stepped inside he heard the sound of the broken glass crackling under his trainers and felt his foot slip slightly.

Before standing up he secured the wooden board back in place leaving it as they had found it. Turning around he saw another inner door that blocked their path to the lobby. His attention was drawn to Carol who looked like she was suffering from extreme stress.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I am sorry for what happened outside, I lost it somewhat . . .’

Carefully he stood up and walked over and gave her a hug. She was cold and trembling and as he held her she slowly started to cry.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll get through this,’ Robert whispered into her hair as he held her close.

He looked at her face, wiping away the tears that streaked down her cheeks. Suddenly Carol pulled herself away from Robert and mentally snapped back to her normal tough self. Robert was initially shocked to see her react in this way, almost as though he had said or done something wrong.

‘Silly of me,’ Carol commented, as she finished rubbing her face. She changed the subject: ‘I noticed one of the doors was slightly ajar.’

Robert looked hard at Carol and thought for a moment. She had been acting strangely over the last couple of days. It was probably nothing but still he was twitchy at how easily they had been found out. Another coincidence perhaps?

He walked over to the door Carol had mentioned and looked at a small gap just big enough to get his fingers in. Pushing the door gently to see if it would swing freely open, he found that it was jammed shut and refused to move. He pushed the door harder and it gave a little, but steadfastly it refused to move further.

Several hard pushes later the door relented with a loud screeching noise that echoed through the lobby as both tortured metal and flagstone

floor complained. When a large enough gap had been created for them to squeeze through he turned and looked at Carol.

‘Well, I’m sure they know we’re here now!’

‘Hmm,’ replied Carol quietly.

Robert squeezed through the gap and Carol followed. He pushed the door shut behind them. Again, the resultant screeching noise echoed through the lobby. Carol cringed knowing that this was probably going to attract someone’s attention as far away as Perth. The echoes died away and were replaced by a calm that brought reassurance to them both.

For a short while they stood by the door and looked across the lobby. Suddenly out of nowhere a piece of plaster the size of his fist hit the floor. The noise made them both jump backwards as it hit the floor with a crash.

‘I guess the signs might have been correct when they told us to stay out!’ whispered Carol.

‘Rubbish!’ Robert whispered in response.

He followed the path of the offending masonry and saw a dust trail all the way up to the high vaulted glass atrium. Again a further piece of masonry fell to the floor in front of them, slightly smaller but still enough to cause injury.

‘Must be the noise from the door that caused it to fall,’ Carol whispered, hoping not to dislodge further debris.

‘I guess we’ll have to be quiet then,’ replied Robert with a note of sarcasm in his voice.

They waited for some time, listening to the background sounds. Then moved to the middle of the lobby and stopped. Through the silence he heard the sound of water dripping. The air was damp and musty and scattered around the lobby were upturned chairs and bits of fallen masonry and glass. A circular staircase wound round both sides of the room to the upper levels. In the deadly silence they again listened for other signs of life that might have been alerted to their presence, but nothing stirred. *Good*, thought Robert, *chances are we are completely alone*. Something caught his attention at the back of the lobby. He peered through the gloom, and saw a door partially shrouded in shadows from the staircase, which he would have missed if he hadn’t stopped to look around. He made his way quietly towards it, and hoped this would lead to a maintenance stairwell that would give them access to all the floors in the building.

A sound behind alerted him and he turned, slightly bumping Carol who was close on his heels. Just then there was a loud thud as another piece of masonry hit the floor exactly where they’d both been standing.

‘Lady Luck appears to be smiling!’ whispered Robert as they watched the plume of dust settle.

He looked at Carol and nudged her side with his elbow, grinning out the corner of his mouth.

‘Hmm . . .’

‘There you go again! What’s with this Hmm business?’ he whispered.

‘It’s a woman thing,’ she responded with a sardonic look.

Ignoring her last comment he turned his attention to the door in front of them and reached out for the latch. Unlike the lobby, this needed only a gently pull and the door opened silently. Robert peered through before stepping on to a maintenance stairwell that led both up and down. The landing was bathed in light of the dying day that penetrated through the many windows at each level. Closing the door, they both climbed the steps to the first-floor landing. Robert tried to look through a window but found that it was completely covered in a thick layer of dust and dirt.

‘Never a cop when you need one eh,’ Robert remarked sarcastically. ‘I’m going to check the windows on the upper floors, see if I can get a better view of the surrounding streets.’

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea. I mean . . . what if they know we’re here, what then?’

‘Get out any way you can, run like hell, anything to avoid being caught. I don’t think that anyone is going to take too kindly to you being here, they’ll ask all sorts of awkward questions. If anyone does come, I want you to head straight back to your apartment, not mine. Wait until you hear from me or see me, Okay?’

‘Okay, I’ll take the lower floors and I’ll see you back here, or in the lobby.’

‘Yep, see if you can find a good view out of the window . . . and try not to get caught.’

He pulled out a small surveillance monitor, turned towards the stairs and headed up to the floors above. When he got to the landing on the second floor he could just hear Carol’s footsteps moving down the corridor on the floor below. Carol’s assumption had been right: the Mets’ tentacles stretched further than either of them thought and most of the buildings had a listening device of one variety or another. Bugging devices of all sorts had a chequered history. They were originally implemented to monitor one-off situations, and only after some long-winded legal procedure had been fulfilled. Circumstances took a dramatic change after the inauguration of the SIA. The legal system became impotent as outright bugging of all public premises was brought online to facilitate government control. Ostensibly for the fight against terror, it proved so successful that the plan was extended to include all citywide structures and private residences. Legal, moral and ethical implications were all swept aside as the Intelligence Bureau’s lust for power and control grew.

With the advent of reliable smart dust the SIA finally had a technological surveillance system small enough to get into anything and anywhere. Pretty much invisible to the naked eye, it was capable of recording audio and video information while being carried by the air currents to new locations. Past governments had tried to create this kind of surveillance technology but had never really succeeded. Only a few people at the top of the SIA really knew the ruthless extent to which they were monitoring everyone on a minute-by-minute basis, and generally what the public could not see did not bother them.

Robert made a complete check of all the upper floors then turned his attention to the windows. If he was careful he could probably see if anyone was hanging around outside waiting for them. The surveillance monitor was unable to detect any other people in the close vicinity, but it did keep reporting strange fluctuating electrical fields that made no sense.

‘What the hell is this, electrical fields . . . where?’ Robert quizzed himself.

Over the next few minutes he made a complete sweep of the upper floor. No one anywhere, not a pip. But then what did he expect to find, a man in a dark suit with the word spy tattooed on his forehead? Robert laughed at his paranoia. Maybe it was unfounded; they had been under a lot of self-induced stress lately. He decided to make his way back down to the first-floor stairwell and wait for Carol. This cloak-and-dagger crap was winding him up more than the threat of being caught. He was curious about the electrical fields though but that could wait for another day.

When Robert returned to the landing it was empty and Carol was nowhere to be seen. Wondering if she’d gone looking for him, he stood waiting for a few minutes and absent-mindedly leant against the wall. Anxiety resurfaced and suddenly it dawned on him that he had lost Carol on the surveillance monitor shortly after they had split up. A thought flashed into his mind. Maybe they had caught her! He looked for obvious signs of struggle, but nothing was evident. His surveillance monitor would have picked up any other life signs. He checked it again, but this time he included Carol in the search. Nothing. He was missing something. It was almost as though he could hear a voice but was unable to discern what was being said. He’d seen something, which hadn’t registered – he just couldn’t put his finger on it.

He checked the time. It had been almost 15 minutes and the building was still silent. He walked down the corridor in the direction he thought she might have gone, checking the rooms that lay on either side. They were empty. The more he looked the more worried he became. He went back upstairs, deciding she might have gone looking for him.

An uneasy sense of a missed clue made him keep stopping to check the monitor, then he realised what had been bugging him for some minutes;

there was something odd about the dusty floor. It was undisturbed and, even more bizarre, when he looked back down the corridor he could see his footprints fade out. Initially confused he tested a theory and kicked a small piece of the masonry, it didn't move and his foot passed right through it.

'Well I never, holographics! That explains the random electrical fields, Carol disappearing and everything . . . but why?'

He remembered reading about how holographs might be used in the future, but why here in this useless old building? There was nothing to hide, was there? Whatever the reason, it would have to wait for another time; Carol was nowhere to be found. She knew the drill and would be more than capable of getting back to her old flat.

Before he could make his way down the stairwell he heard muffled noises coming from the direction of the lobby. At first it sounded like footsteps in the distance then it all went quiet. He was sure he could hear voices. He checked his security monitor display. There was nothing, and then he heard voices drifting in from the distance. The more he listened the more dangerous they sounded. Then without warning a loud voice boomed out military-style orders.

'I want all the rooms checked. Take no chances. Search every room. They must be here somewhere!'

Instinctively and without thinking he made his way to the nearest room. The door was open and he entered, hoping to find somewhere to hide. As he crossed the floor, the room shimmered and for a split second he could see two images, before it stabilised again. He hesitated and then moved quickly to the opposite wall. As he stood there, he realised that there were high-resolution holographic projectors installed somewhere; a relatively new technology and the ones used here were better than any he had seen or read about.

Somewhere in the room, was a blind spot which would shield anything, even if someone else was to enter the room. The holograph was set up to fool casual observers. Looking around he aimed straight for the light source, a window on the far side of the room. If he was correct then the room would go dark around him. The searchers had now moved on to the same floor and were doing a thorough search of the area. Now more than ever he had to be quiet.

Moving swiftly towards the window he was suddenly shrouded in darkness. Turning around he walked forward until his head was out of the holograph and checked that the room had reset itself with a thick layer of dust.

Perfect, almost as though no one has been here in years, he thought.

From the corridor came the sounds of feet moving quietly. Pulling his head sharply back into the darkness, he waited for them to pass. As the

movements got closer they seemed to stop, then without warning they started to move closer to Robert's position. From what he could hear it sounded as though two people had entered the room and were making a thorough search of the area. All Robert could hear above the noise of the people moving about was his heart beat getting louder and louder. At what distance the searcher stopped he was not sure, but they were very close.

Come on, what the bloody hell is taking you so long!

With a mental sign of relief Robert heard them move back towards the door, obviously satisfied that they could find no evidence of anyone in the room. He moved his head through the holosphere just enough to see one of the searchers leaving the room; a man in military fatigues with his back to Robert, carrying what looked like an automatic rifle. As the soldier turned to leave, Robert caught sight of the badge emblazoned on his arm. *Must make a note of that badge.* Whoever they were they had obviously not been aware of the holographic technology in the building. Relaxing slightly he sat down in the darkness and quietly waited for things to die down, content to let the darkness swallow his fears.

He woke with a start, the complete darkness confusing him for a second. He must have dozed off with the stress he had been through. He listened for a short while and then came out like a wary animal that has been hiding from a hunter. Leaning through the doorway he looked from left to right, saw no signs of movement and more importantly heard nothing.

Quietly he made his way back down to the lobby. His mind worked overtime as he listened for any sounds that would give a hint of a trap. The silence was deafening but unthreatening, so he made his way out and stood at the top of the steps of the lobby entrance, watching as the rain started to fall. Hoping the rain would ease off, he waited. The more he waited the heavier it got. It was no use he would have to get wet. Pulling his collar up he walked into the rain and back to his apartment to think over what had happened.

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The Book Guild Ltd
Pavilion View
19 New Road
Brighton
BN1 1UF
UK

TEL: +44 (0) 1273 720900

FAX: +44 (0)1273 723122

WEB: www.bookguild.co.uk