

# THE UNKNOWN KNOWN



PAUL THOMAS

# The Unknown Known

Paul Thomas

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## DEDICATION

To Irene Norma Cutter 1921 - 1992

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## THE UNKNOWN KNOWN

PAUL

“If the universe is all that there is, then the cause of the universe must be the universe itself.”

Paul paused for dramatic effect, letting his elegantly crafted aphorism hang in the air.

“But, does that mean,” said one of his students abruptly, while casually toying with her iPad, “that it has to be an intelligible thing?”

Up to that point in the seminar he’d felt rather good about himself.

Now he was caught in the twists of his own circular puzzle. How did he get there? Where did “intelligible” come from?

He silently backtracked his argument. We think of the universe as everything. OK, this includes the causes of everything in it. The cause of everything is the universe. This everything must include its own cause. And that is the universe’s intelligibility. Whew. He looked up from the blur of his notes.

“If everything in the universe is intelligible,” he ventured, “then everything must be connected, everything with everything else. Nothing is left out. This hypothesis is what allows us to understand how we relate to the world, find our place in the world, our worldliness. Our individuality and identity would have to be a consequence of the universe being intelligible.”

He noticed the hint of a sarcastic smile as the student sweetly responded, “Then are we the cause of ourselves within the universe?”

Where were these jibes coming from? Who was this know-it-all? He scrambled to get an edge on her.



“The universe does not care if it is intelligible or unintelligible,” he said, knowing full well how desperate it sounded, “although we care about knowing if it’s intelligible, or if it’s unintelligible. Odd that, isn’t it? We’re an odd material substance, a substance that questions, that has a vested interest in knowing. But our consciousness makes us outsiders in the conformity of the universe, like some irritant on the fabric of the universe. We are a bad case of dermatitis that can’t be controlled by creams or ointments.” He was on a roll now. “The problem with knowing is the unknown known that drives decision-making, a cloud of unknowing that helps us pretend not to know, to cover up knowing that we don’t know. We are duplicitous. You are. Me too. Our only defence is not to have known we don’t know what we know. That’s how it comes out in the end. In that duplicity, we recognise that we are the cause of ourselves.”

There was an agreeable silence. “I think that explains it,” he added.

“By the way,” he asked her, “I’m sorry but I don’t know your name.”

“Call me Anita,” she answered.

## EDWARD

As Edward Gorham packed the bottle of Bollinger into his stowaway, he wondered how Anita was getting on down in Antarctica. It had all ended so abruptly down there, a whole year ago. Not ended, no. On pause. “I’ve missed you,” he thought, with a candour that surprised himself, “it’s been too long.” And this time, he figured, let’s do it right. Celebrate. ANITA would fulfil his dream.

Edward loved the theatrical setting of Antarctica for this dream. It was like the sanctity of a white gallery space, a gallery creating an almost spiritual environment in which paintings could transmit their photons without contamination. Without noise or interference. It was like being inside the most austere protestant church, bleached of any distracting mundane detail, anything interfering with his direct reverential contact

with the sublime. ANITA would be there, in the white, like that painting streaming its photons, like that sublime vision of austerity; pure, minimal and waiting for him.

Her antennae would be extended, as she drifted ethereally above the ice scanning an area below her the size of Egypt. She'd be listening to that familiar crackle of background radiation noise, all those signals that were showering down from the universe. She was the one who would hear amid all that clutter the elusive clue that he'd been searching for since he was a boy. He knew she wouldn't let him down.

ANITA. She was the Antarctic Impulsive Transient Antenna, rigged to a balloon quietly floating above this exquisite desolation, capturing and recording every high-density neutrino striking the icy surface below. She would lead Edward to a Nobel Prize. He trusted her. He knew this. She would help him make a discovery of the same magnitude as when scientists discovered the microwave background radiation in 1964 when he was that wide-eyed boy. He never forgot that it was initially thought to be noise produced by birdshit on the antennas. How comical that once that was eliminated as a cause, this birdshit noise turned out to be the background radiation coming to Earth from the big bang. Ever since then he never questioned noise, that stuff that is nearly always dismissed, normalised, extracted from data. Instead, it might be the very thing you're looking for. You need to be brave, especially when a lot of ongoing funding is at stake if you base your future on noise. But he had ANITA on his side.

And she had delivered, a year earlier. While the Antarctic air gleamed with a crystalline clarity outside, the team had been huddled in the warm glow of the computer monitor gazing at the cryptic lines and chains of her last data download, at the end of their months-long experiment in the white.

“There it is again,” someone mumbled anxiously, “that blip ... it must be a high-density particle.”

“But we aren’t getting a clean signal,” another groaned, “it could be just noise, we don’t know what it is.”

“The odd thing is that if it’s a high-density neutrino,” interjected a third voice in the throng, “it’s not coming down from outer space. ANITA’s sensing it coming up through the earth.”

That was the trigger for Edward’s intuitive flash.

“Turn me on dead man!” he shouted.

All the faces around him were blank. “Turn me on...,” he repeated, feeling his words drop like dead birds from the sky. “Where were you all in 1968? Ah, OK. Maybe not born, some of you. But history, you should know history. The White Album. The Beatles. Revolution 9. The lyrics.... Number nine...” Edward was stammering, he couldn’t get it out fast enough. The aha moment. He took a breath. “It’s gone down in history as their most unpopular song—a collage of noise. Avant-garde. Sonic death spiral...all the things going on at that time, Vietnam, political assassinations, student protests.... But because it was so puzzlingly weird to the fans, conspiracy theories emerged about its meaning.”

“What on this cold part of the earth are you going on about Edward?”

“Number nine, number nine,” he intoned as if it was a magical spell. A mantra. But his crew still hung there with their mouths open. Just like the Beatles’ audience back then, thought Edward. “Look. A rumour had got about that Paul McCartney ...erm, you know he was one of the Beatles ... there was a rumour put about that he was dead, and that a double had taken his place to keep the band going. In the song, a deadpan voice keeps repeating this seemingly meaningless phrase, number nine. Well, fans reasoned that it had to be ... intelligible in some way ... it just had to be. Maybe code, planted as a secret message, connected to other clues on the album. And that maybe the album was a secret requiem, or even a piece of sorcery, an incantation of the dead Paul. Then some bright spark played the song in reverse. Backmasking it’s called. Always sounds

spooky. Bingo. Listen to it in reverse and you hear it: turn me on, dead man, turn me on, dead man!”

“Hey Edward, I know you might be depressed about this noise in the data, but you don’t need to go down that road.”

“Huh? No,” shouted Edward impatiently, jumping to his feet, “that’s not the point. Reverse ANITA’s signal and play it back!”

And there it was. The sound and shape of the signal they had been looking for.

“Turn me on, ANITA,” cried out Edward. As his heart stopped racing and the afterglow beamed from his face, he took stock of the implications, mumbling to himself. “The high-density neutrino that was supposed to be coming down from space is going the other way, but it’s not just a spatial direction. Like backmasking, time for these particles is potentially going backwards if the earth’s moving forward in space-time.”

“That’s ... wild,” he heard someone utter, “crazy but hot. Great! Thank you, Paul McCartney. RIP.”

“Not necessarily,” replied Edward. His flashback to The White Album seemed to be haunted by a warning. It was indeed crazy. At least now, unsubstantiated, in the last moment of their work in that Antarctic station. And Revolution 9 had been almost universally maligned, then turned into fodder for a ridiculous conspiracy theory. Would the same fate await ANITA’s song? “Can you see the news headlines,” he said uneasily. “Scientists locked up in Antarctic lab for months say time goes backwards. Maybe they need to get out more.’ Or, ‘Time reverses for Antarctic scientists who end up like Benjamin Button.’ We would be seen ... ANITA would be seen ... as a joke. We’re at the end of our time here, and we need funding to come back next year. We can’t publish. We can’t let it out. Yet.”

So he’d waited a year. Now the minibus to take Edward and his colleagues out to the airport for the dawn flight had arrived. He carefully

loaded his carry-on, with the bottle of Bollinger tucked inside, in the back and then climbed in to sit next to the driver. He knew how much was riding on this final trip. Along with that bottle of champagne. He knew what he needed from ANITA.

## JOHN

The Cheltenham Science Festival was the high point of a steady invasion into the local community, and its real estate, by technology parks and innovation centres. The town now proudly declared the message, as if written into its fabric and waving like a banner over a gateway, that science would save us from our disregard for the planet's wellbeing and save us from ourselves. The festival's high point was the series of public talks, symposiums and awards ceremonies conducted under the cheerfully welcoming marquee on the village green. But while the festival had programmed these events with meticulous timing, it was not prepared for what would happen when one of its emergent stars would take the stage.

Although he was about to receive one of its prestigious honours, John Taylor didn't like the science festival. Not one bit. He'd shocked his fellow postgrads back at college by spitting vitriol at the news of his award.

"Cheltenham believes a small investment in science is enough to absolve them from their part in destroying the planet," he railed with a swagger in the pub. "They're like medieval Catholics buying indulgences, purchasing redemption from their sins before they die. They're not thinking about the rest of us trying to stay alive. But we've all got blood on our hands."

Staring straight ahead, John took the stairs up to the stage and to the handshake that went with the award, like the passing of a baton in the science relay race. "And, ladies and gentlemen," announced the vaguely familiar celebrity wheeled into MC the day's events, "the award for most innovative graduate student paper goes ... to John Taylor." Heads turned, and he knew why: he knew he was a handsome young man; he knew he could command an audience by his presence alone. All too pleasant,

thought John, all so polite and grinning and empty-headed. And when they walk out of this marquee, what would they really know, he snarled to himself. Well, he would show them something they wouldn't forget.

Standing at the lectern he proudly declared, "My paper proposes the existence of another universe, a cosmic artefact starting simultaneously with the Big Bang but heading in the opposite direction in time to us!" He paused for a calculated dramatic effect. "Is that for real, you ask? But what is real? Is this, for instance, a real ...." And as he said this, John pulled a snub-nosed revolver from his coat pocket, then flourished the handgun in the air, showing it off like a prize trophy.

Hah. He saw the audience collectively shudder. But he didn't get to finish his sentence. A sentence he had been crafting as he had walked across the lawn, down the aisle between the folding chairs arrayed in neat rows, as he'd climbed up the stairs and as he had shaken hands with the egregious MC. But it was all being erased in a second.

An explosion punctured the air. To John, it seemed like a pause in the tempo, the pace, of the universe. A pause for breath. Except it took his breath away. That pause in a conversation that you use as a tool for expression, for making your point. He wanted to make this point. But what was happening now took him by surprise. He could hear screaming, those neatly arranged chairs crashing in disarray, footsteps thudding on the staircase and voices coalescing in a thick cloud around him, like a storm was wrapping the fabric of the marquee around him. Then he felt himself falling, his legs giving way and then his arms. He was sliding, then tumbling like a sack, down to the stage floor. And something had opened in his chest.

Dan Golding was kneeling over him. He knew Dan, a friendly face. A physicist who'd taken an interest in John's doctoral research. But now Dan seemed interested in something else, urgently pressing down on John's chest, as if trying to close up what had opened there. Pressing down on the wound, trying to staunch the warm blood flow. But John knew it was futile. Dan must know too, thought John. Or maybe, for Dan, this was a known unknown. Unknown whether John might survive the

gunshot, unknown where it had come from and who might have fired it and why ... But knowing this Dan had to try to save John.

John could see Dan's distressed gaze turn into curiosity as it turned toward the gun lying near John's outstretched arm.

"What's with the gun, John, what the hell...?" shouted Dan. "Where did you get that, and why on earth ....?"

Lifting one hand from John's chest, Dan took the gun gingerly between bloodied fingers. A shocking look of disbelief took over from inquisitiveness. "But... this is plastic. It's a toy, John, a goddamned toy!"

"Of course," John spluttered, "I found it outside lying on the ground, I was walking across the park heading to the awards. Maybe a kid dropped it. I picked it up. Put it in my pocket. The universe always gives me signs. It would let me know if I was going in the right direction, and if I was defining a meaning to my life. I knew this gun had turned up, right where I was walking, to be part of my presentation. Use a fake gun to demonstrate fake science. But this fake thing can show us ... the truth. Dan, we need a leap of faith to comprehend what could be ... the outcome of ... parallel universes. Things that ... appear to be real can be stronger than ... reality."

"I don't understand." Dan urgently but gently responded, leaning close. "Sorry, John, but I can't make out what you're saying." John's words sounded at first indiscernible, but now gibberish to Dan.

"Listen, Dan," John persisted, even as he could hear his own words breaking up like an ice floe melting, "humans individually operate in two different universes, on two different temporal planes, one going forward, one going backwards ... each taking alternate routes with no navigator to guide them.... The stars that sailors had as points of reference ... navigating the smooth space of the oceans ... but the stars are clouded over .... Navigators, bounce around the cosmic void without stars or compass as guides ... only to loop back on themselves, to re-enter a now. You know very well Dan, the improbability of a bottle falling from a

table, gathering its shattered pieces together and rising from the floor to resume its position on the table ... if time could go backwards, a resurrection would be at hand!”

John’s words were rapidly fading from this world. He was now talking only to himself, unsure of how much of that self was left. “The instantaneity of the occurrence of things brought to this situation of my being shot is akin to entangled particles,” he mused, “each affecting one another no matter how far apart in or even in another universe. The world of Bohr and Heisenberg is part of a global consciousness that we all live within without knowing, the unknown known. It happens immediately faster than thought. It is the speed of the infinite.”

John’s body was zipped up in a plastic bag on the stage. The universe’s mechanics could not mend any of this. The life that had drained out of his organs, the hole in his coat jacket and his shirt, let alone the gap in his chest. The universe had not reversed, had not cleaned up the blood or repaired the wound. On the infinite experiential timeless cosmic plateau, something had moved on and wasn’t going back.

ERIN

Standing on the stage of the marquee where she was about to make her presentation, Erin Stone felt something hitting her chest. Then it all went black.

Then there were bright neon lights in a creamy-painted room and a voice telling her she was safe in the hospital. A soothing, stabilising voice. But not that necessary. Erin didn’t feel any pain. She slowly looked around the room. In a chair nearby, on the other side of the transparent plastic bubble that surrounded her, sitting very still, was the blurred figure of a man, maybe mid-thirties, and looking serious.

“She ok to talk, doc?”



“Mmm,” the figure Erin presumed to be the doctor and source of the soothing voice, nodded. This figure too was outside the plastic wall. “Should be, but go easy. It was a nasty shock. She’s been traumatised.”

The figure left the room, as silently and ethereally as a ghost.

Now, as she started to piece together the scrambled memories in her head and the disjointed impressions of this room, Erin felt her heart begin to race. Something had happened to her, something to land her here. Not knowing unsettled her. The serious figure in the chair looked straight at her, with an inscrutable expression.

“I am Detective Inspector Jack Jones, CID. I need to ask you some questions. Are you up to it?”

He had questions. So did she. Trauma, the doctor had said; but she couldn’t spot any significant damage to herself, couldn’t feel anything wrong—other than being in a strange place and not knowing how she got there. Was she in shock? If so, not enough to stop a DI from questioning her. Had she done something wrong, something criminal that she couldn’t recall? Was she about to be charged and interrogated? Was she infected with something contagious?

“I don’t know what is happening,” she said defensively. “why am I here? Did I have a heart attack? Am I infected?”

He gazed steadily at her, pausing, she thought, as if he expected her to admit to some forgotten crime.

“No,” he replied eventually. “not a heart attack. And the biohazard screen, it’s to keep you safe, not me.”

There was now a reassuring quality in his voice that didn’t sound accusatory, and Erin thought his dark brown eyes looked soft and compelling. What he said next however shook her out of that complacent mood.

“You were shot,” he said.

“What? I was shot!?” She couldn’t believe her ears. “How? Who would want to shoot me?”

“Well, at least, we believe you were,” he added curiously. “you were on the stage at the science festival, about to give a speech. Do you remember?”

“Who would do it? I don’t have enemies, at least like that.”

“Let’s say that you were indeed shot,” he continued with this weird hypothesis. “we haven’t been able to identify the perpetrator, other than as a male, believed to be middle-aged. Disappeared from the scene remarkably quickly, and easily, by the sound of it. No one saw him go.” He let this mystery resonate for a moment. “So, you can’t think of anyone who might have cause. Someone with a grudge? An ex-lover, a current lover? A jealous colleague?”

But Erin wasn’t listening. She had another urgent question.

“I don’t feel like I’ve been shot. I mean, I’ve never been shot so I don’t know what I should feel. But it would have to be bad. Am I badly wounded?”

“Mmm,” he lingered on this murmur. “here’s the odd thing. Remarkable, in fact. I’m not sure how to put it. The bullet ... well ...,” he seemed to be struggling to be both discreet and also to sound convincing, “the bullet appears to have passed right through you, not leaving any damage. It hasn’t hurt you.”

“What ... do you mean, I’m OK?”

“You’re under observation,” he answered, seeming to hide behind a bureaucratic phrase. “the entry mark—what we assume to be the bullet’s entry mark in your chest—is now only a slight bruise. Same with the exit. But we think you were definitely shot. The witnesses, and there are lots

of them, all agree. It's ... well, strange. No more than that. Much more. Either you healed up, or the bullet was or did ... well ... something we don't know about yet."

"That's not possible."

"Impossible. Miraculous, I'd say." There was the slightest edge of contempt in that last phrase. He gazed through her, but she could see he was as suspicious of her situation as she was perplexed, and that he was pondering the unanswerable implication of his own words.

"Anyway, that's for the medicos and scientists. I'm dealing with the problem that, whatever this damned peculiar situation is now, you were seen being shot. Let's go back. Have you received any threats? Any unusual correspondence or had any odd encounters with anyone?"

Erin was playing with a jigsaw in her mind, trying to reassemble the broken shards of an event that she had no idea how long ago had happened, to put the pieces into one thought or one image; but she knew that those firing neurons were made out of millions of other neurons all triggering infinitesimal thoughts.

"Yes," she recalled from the detective's earlier prompt, "the science festival. I was there. On stage. I was being awarded a prize for a research paper. I was at the lectern and had started giving my presentation."

The detective moved forward a fraction in the chair, in a gesture of anticipation. "Keep going," he said encouragingly.

"Something hit my chest with a thud. There was a sound too, a bang, and I guess that's when I blacked out."

"Do you remember seeing anything? The gunman must have been close, maybe directly in front of you."

She was starting to get a picture, but it wouldn't focus.

“A small blur coming towards me, taking over my vision. A tiny smudge or smear growing bigger and bigger. It’s like a ghost. No, I am not sure what I saw.”

JOHN

John’s body was lying on stage, cocooned in a body bag. The molecules in his body were still active, he felt conscious of this. And he felt buoyant after that intensity of the pain. It was a euphoric experience he wanted to protect at all costs. Phosphene, creates atomic swarms, fragmenting as soon as the possibility of an image formed. Patterns, emerging in projected cinematic images, shifting as soon as they were recognisable.

But it was a pain that he was now forgetting as quickly as he recollected how he never really had understood severe pain as a young man. Yes, had a fair share of aches and bruises. Often ended up at the doctor’s being asked, where does it hurt, and how much. On a scale from one to ten. What was ten in pain? The worst pain that one could feel whilst still alive. When you pass out? What would one have equated to? When you were numb to everything. Congenital analgesia, was that one? If you can delineate pain, and grade it into ten numbers it must be a variable signal going to the brain for interpretation. John was a river. He was the source and the mouth at the same time. Same ... time? He is atemporal, placing his hand in the river, touching the water at the beginning and the end. Running the cursor on the timeline backwards and forwards. Now stopping at one point, now another. Never allow the following action to take place. Closing the program and switching off the computer. Turn it off, turn it on. Reboot, shut down. That’s playing God.

Something came back. An unfinished sentence. Speech that could have been flowing out the audience in the marquee. The words vibrate air molecules, the audience's ears picking up the frequency, transmitting the frequency to signals in the brain. The beginning sentence was delivered; the rest was snubbed out by the noise of the gun. Firing ringing out invading the soundwaves. A suffering body, suffering noise.

The body suffers embarrassment for other people's actions to the point where you can't watch what they were doing. On a winter's night as a kid, and in college, watching embarrassing situations on TV would make him pull the jumper he was wearing over his head. Like the fear in front of a horror movie. He'd re-appear when it was safe. But how did he know when it was safe to poke his head out, with a jumper over his head? The embarrassment signal is translated into the pain region of the brain. That made sense. That was true because that is exactly what it felt like. When confronting embarrassment: excruciating pain. Horror.

Did this division of numbers for pain include embarrassment? What was flickering in his brain now? Nothing. No embarrassment, no pain. No horror. At that moment, he had plunged from ten down to one. One. He was swimming in a sea of oneness.

JACK

Jack left the hospital returning to the station to write up his notes and make a victim report on the strangest shooting in the history of shootings. A bullet hit its target, but no hole was made in the flesh.

"I want you to take the lead on this science festival investigation," said the Superintendent. "Jack, did you hear me?"

Jack looked up from his notes at Jan Munro, who was standing by his desk. How long had she been there, and what did she just say?

"Oh, um, sure ma'am," he blustered, all too obviously.

"Tell DC Dan Collins that I've put you in charge."

"Got it."

"Know what I'm talking about?"

“Sorry ma’am,” Jack apologised, seeing the bluff had failed, “I’ve been trying to make sense of this statement from the victim. If we can call her that. And the medical report. It’s damned weird.”

“You’ve been here with us now,” probed Munro, not paying attention to his remark, “how long?”

Of course, she knew. Only two months since he transferred from Tufnell Park in London, escaping the chaos in his life. He didn’t bother answering and knew she didn’t need an answer.

“So,” she continued, “let’s see how you go with this. Dan Collins is out there now.”

Jack glanced back and forth between the unfinished paperwork on his desk and Superintendent Munro.

“Now,” she said.

Jack made it to the festival marquee in no time. Now a crime scene (though just what was the crime, Jack couldn’t help wondering), it was taped off with the modest bustle of uniforms and protective jumpsuits milling about.

“DI Jones? We’ve been notified you’re the lead on this. So, you see we’ve sealed off the marquee and surrounding area where the shooter stood. Forensics are going over the ground.”

Jack stared for a moment.

“DC Dan Collins,” the figure introduced itself. But Jack could just make out, beneath the hazard suit, an ambiguously female figure.

“Danielle,” she explained impatiently, and with the laborious expression of someone at having to repeat this, “but call me Dan.”

“Sorry,” offered Jack by way of apology for his obvious and discourteous stare, “old school, I guess.” He could tell that didn’t help and was hovering over a question about which pronoun was preferred but switched directions. She; for the time being he’d go with she. “OK, Dan, what have you got here?”

It was about the same as Jack already knew. Nothing significant on the perpetrator, despite the witness statements. Photography done. Forensics already looking blank. Too much mayhem at the moment of the shooting. Jack still found that word hard to reconcile with the image of the crime: shooting. In his mind, “alleged” had to apply to the perp, the victim and even the crime. Just what the hell was he investigating?

Suited up, Jack entered the marquee and walked up to the stage. The pages of what he presumed were Erin’s talk were scattered on the floor around the lectern. He bagged them for evidence. “We need copies of this ASAP,” he said to Dan.

“How’s your advanced physics?” she asked, glancing at the pages through the plastic sleeves. “Looks pretty dense stuff. Something in there that the shooter didn’t want known?”

“We’ll find out,” said Jack, “hopefully.”

“Shoot the messenger, sure,” pondered Dan, “but then why leave the message lying about?”

“The villain didn’t get the chance, or maybe the message wasn’t the target.” Jack was now at the lectern, where Erin would have stood, and looked at the jumble of chairs in front of the stage. There would have been phone cameras recording the speeches, surely.

Dan jumped ahead of his line of thought. “As yet, no photos or vid from cell phones in the timeframe,” she said. “they all seemed to have turned their cameras away. It’s almost conspiratorial. No CCTV in the area either. Really damned bad luck for us.”

“Jesus, who’s this birk?” thought Jack as they were hailed, stepping outside the marquee.

“You there,” shouted a strutting imperious figure, looking to Jack like a vaguely familiar pompous media celebrity, “you look like you’re supposed to be in charge of this circus, how long are you keeping us out of this area? We’ve got important industry talks and meetings to hold. A lot of urgent business depends on this.”

“This is a crime scene, sir...” Jack rattled off the usual protocols that he was so used to when dealing with officious prats like this. This routine prattle was the best way to avoid the sort of stick he’d gotten into back in London, dealing with self-centred arseholes. If it got out of hand it could send him crazy. Fully crazy. “Bastard,” he mumbled as he walked away, back to the police station.

In the station’s tiny self-serve canteen come kitchenette, Jack sat at a formica table leafing through the copies of Erin’s paper.

I want to thank the Science Innovation Foundation for establishing this prize. My topic for the paper was based on publications from a recent experiment undertaken in the Antarctic using the Antarctic Impulsive Transient Antenna (ANITA). I am talking to a general audience today, and so my summary here has removed the more technical aspects of the paper.

High-density neutrinos known as “ghost particles” pass through the earth, unaffected by magnetic fields and thus travel undeviating from their point of origin at the big bang. I argue, however, that the latest evidence from ANITA, can be interpreted to show that neutrinos coming through the earth are actually moving in the opposite directions to neutrinos from the big bang. The neutrinos detected by ANITA are going in two opposed directions simultaneously, although these are temporal as well as spatial orientations. We should not think of this as one particle going forward and the other going backwards in time. The opposition is instead the work of two universes, with particles having spins that rotate in different directions as matter and antimatter.



Jack got lost after that. And she'd left out the technical stuff?! What a mind-fuck, the thought. But there was something in it, a sliver that he could grasp, that wouldn't let go of him, something that made him feel vertiginous, like the universe was suddenly turning over. "Fuck me," he muttered, louder than he'd intended.

"Pardon?", said the woman who'd appeared as if out of thin air next to him.

"Oh, Dan, just trying to get my head around this," waving the pages in the air. "got anything new for me?"

"The victim, Erin, was released from hospital. Even the medicos said those so-called wounds looked like skin blemishes. They're baffled. No explanation for what reportedly happened. Nothing from uniform, no intelligence coming from the crime scene. No problems with her work or social life, either. Happy families all around."

"So," Jack leaned back in his chair, summing up the abject failure of the scene to cohere, "we have a report of a shooting, we have the sound of gunfire from witnesses who say they heard and saw something but can't exactly say what it was, no vision on it at all, and we have a victim who has no real sign of being shot and no significant memory of it. Any lead on the shooter in this uneventful crime?"

"Zero," answered Dan, "this might be the shortest case in history."

"Hmm," Jack rocked forward and stood, trying to impart some sense of purpose while gesturing with Erin's talk in his hand, "but there's something in this. God knows what though. And ... something else is bugging me." He paused, uncertain about how to go on. "Say," he finally summoned it up as they walked into the drab briefing room next door, "would it be OK if I called you Danielle? I knew a Dan back in London. Frightful character. I'm trying to get him out of my head."

"If you must," she replied tersely, "after all, you're the DI."

“Hmm,” he got the message. “ok, let’s take another tack on this event. Do you think this might be some sort of prank, a university student stunt? Dan?”

Was that a tiny smile he saw flicker there? Jack had never had a female partner on a case. He was unsure how to take the nuances in their conversation.

“If it’s a prank,” said Dan, “it’s a brilliant magic act.”

They were staring at the ludicrously empty evidence chart, their “crazy wall”, with nothing but a photo of Erin taped in the centre of the grimy whiteboard. Jack toyed with the marker pen he had picked up from the tray, trying to make his vacant gesture appear thoughtful. The whiteboard rocked on its wonky wheels making the pen slip as he wrote under the photo. He stepped back as if to get some perspective. The name was barely legible.

“I’m afraid to say,” Dan chimed in, “that we seem to be dealing with an inexplicable phenomenon. Beyond the bounds of medical science and physics. A case of mass hallucination, perhaps. Maybe we need a psychologist.”

Jack’s attention had drifted around the dim, claustrophobic room. It was a dumping ground for disused office furniture and other unclassifiable detritus. It looked like the walls, gone dirty beige from decades of cigarette smoke, hadn’t been painted since the mid-50s. The windows hadn’t been cleaned on the outside since a housing development illegally built flats almost flush with that side of the station. All this neglect and downright laziness and—he had to confess—all this horrible ageing, they were like an insult. And a horror.

Jack had always considered himself an optimist. He didn’t know where that had come from because his parents were both worriers, consumed with anxieties. His mother, Wendy, had been a midwife who spent every night worrying about her patients in the maternity ward, fretting that

those things might happen which mostly never did. Evening meals were dour, with his dad, Larry, agonising over the family finances. He'd never quite known what his father did for a living, but he knew it involved endless financial woe. Every night was a miserable affair. Such a depleting atmosphere where his parents sucked the life out of life. Compensating for one's parents could be a life-long disease. Jack was not going to let it beat him.

The board should be like this room, he realised: a collage, an avalanche, of unrelated stuff waiting for the network of lines to interconnect them and to tell a story. Instead, Erin was alone in a sea of white.

JOHN

On the morning before the festival awards, John had dragged himself once again from his bed to join Bill and Betty for breakfast. His parents.

"It's the B's that bind us together," his father said as usual, almost like a mantra in that moment of household calm that preceded the domestic storms of the day. There was a slim probability that this phrase had some merit. Each day in his head at the breakfast table John did the maths that he knew back to front, and, yes, there it was each time as the calculated outcome: a slim, but undeniable, probability. Each day at breakfast he announced this to Bill and Betty.

"You're smart," said his father, "yes, we know that, and it always amazes us, doesn't it Betty?"

"But, darling," continued his mother, "we have no idea how smart you actually are, do we Bill?"

"Or what smart might really mean," added his father. "We often say that to each other, don't we Betty? Always in fact. We've been so proud to see you go off to university, so young ... how old was he when he went to university, Betty?"

“Very young, Bill, very young. You were just a little thing. And so smart.”

“And now,” said his father, “off to get that award. Well, we always knew you’d get that, or something like it, even if we don’t know what it’s for. Didn’t we, Betty?”

“We did that,” she answered, “even if we don’t know what it’s all about.”

“What it’s all about,” John measured his words out as if talking to a couple of ignorant children, “is that I know something that no one else does.”

“That about sums it up,” said his father.

“Exactly how I feel,” said his mother, and then cautiously added, “although the judges who gave you the prize must have some idea of what it means.”

“They might think they know but they can’t really see the whole picture,” John snarled back.

Betty worked in Cheltenham for the local council. She handled housing proposal approvals. Convenient. Their house extension with the new bathroom went through uncontested. Bill was a delivery driver for a pharmaceutical company, servicing the county of Gloucestershire. There was no shortage of aspirin in the house.

Then the usual bickering started as breakfast was winding down.

“Well,” said Bill, holding the last sliver of baked bacon between his fingers, like a prize trophy, “I know what I have to do, and it may not be as smart as university things to do, but the world can’t do without it. Better get off to do it quick smart.”

“No time to clean up the dishes then Bill,” said Betty clattering her empty plate onto Bill’s and stacking them both routinely in front of John, “with

that truckload of aspirin to urgently drive around. Where does it all come from, and where does it all go? Sometimes I think it must be the same truckload, every day, that you drive around.”

She didn't think this sometimes, reflected John. She always, drearily, thought this.

“I'm in public health,” explained Bill to John, as if John had never heard this before, “and I think John would agree that that's an important job.”

John never agreed with this.

“But, unlike some, I don't have the privilege of time to dawdle,” said Betty, more to John than to Bill, “I've got people needing to be housed, not just needing to get rid of a headache.”

“Pain relief, dearest,” responded Bill, “don't diminish its importance in today's world.”

“You're giving me a headache, my dearest,” said Betty.

“Thank god, then, that there's aspirin in the house.”

“Yes, in the extension we could build.”

“Comparisons,” John stepped in, “are relative to what is being compared and the criteria associated with the questions that are being asked.”

“Smart Alec,” said Betty, leaving the table.

“Always said so,” added Bill, walking out.

The house was pleasant enough and the extension had given space for everyone not to be on top of one another. It also meant that John was isolated more than was physiologically good for an only child. It was as though his remoteness was in preparation for something bigger to come. He went back to his bedroom and pulled out the book that he kept

under the bed, hidden as if it were secret, even illicit. It was from his art school days before he pivoted toward physics. The book fell open now at its most visited location. Splayed out across a double page spread in lurid liquid colour, in supple flowing ripeness. On one side, the 1931 painting by Salvador Dali called “The Persistence of Memory”. Opposite it, Dali’s 1954 revision of it, “The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory.” What was it about these Surrealist hallucinatory images— how can someone visualise the possibility of time being a liquid past, present and future moments happening on the surface of a painting? A two-dimensional membrane that reveals all these moments of time as one image with no real depth no mathematical factor, the canvas is only a millimetre thick, and Dali’s paint was applied so thinly. What was it in these images that triggered his mind so much? He knew that Dali had referred to the soft clocks as his paranoid visions of Einsteinian relativity, as the “camembert of space and time”. For John, it was the possibility of time being a liquid past, present and future moment, images of a soft watch stripped of its engineering becomes a skin able to be twisted. A canvas only a millimetre thick, with Dali’s paint thinly applied. It was virtually a two-dimensional membrane holding these moments of time as one image with no depth, no mathematical factor.

For John, these paintings were signs of an awareness of a link between moments in past and future life. Each painting challenged the physics of its time as a unique sign pointing back to the other, like stretching out one’s index finger to identify and individuate something in the world. The indexicality of the index finger, he mused, means that by individuating our experience of the world we have an indexical relation to it. “My finger,” he thought out the consequence of this intuition, “is a digit that has magical power. It allows me to touch at a distance—and leave a virtual fingerprint on—what I acknowledge in the world. A personal visual library of acknowledgements with digital index cards to catalogue the database of all I know, my known knowns.”

In the morning John had woken late got up showered shaved and went downstairs for breakfast the family had gone to work. He had time to relax, to go through his presentation before leaving for the festival, his presentation timed for midday. He fretted a little never wanting to be late

for anyone or anything. Tidying away the breakfast dishes he left the kitchen as though he had never been there. He recited his paper constantly looking up at the mirror with his timer on to make sure he hit the ten-minute allocated timeslot. Reading it again tell the voice sounded natural and relaxed. There were five minutes for questions at the end of his presentation where he hoped someone would pipe up with an in-depth critique but wasn't counting on it.

He locked the front door and left, walking slowly feeling the spring morning breeze make him aware of the surface of his skin. That moment of being aware of being made him smile. This time of year was special new life becoming visible all around him reinforcing these feelings that things were going to change for him. In his exuberance, he shouted, "I am going to show them". Walking along the street toward the village green with its marquee, filled with reps from big science and tech companies, he knew was heading in the right direction in his life. Unaware of the glances he was getting from passers-by, who steered around him as if he was crazy. And then, with an irony only he could appreciate, he suddenly recalled a YouTube lecture that he'd recently tuned in to by the theoretical physicist Leonard Susskind, called "Why is Time a One Way Street?" He burst out laughing. A loud, explosive laugh, another sign.

ERIN

All the trouble you caused, and not a mark on you.

No one said it, but she could hear it. All the way back home in the car.

"I've gotta lay down," sighed Erin as her dad's car pulled up outside. She hurriedly swung open the car door and staggered across the small, neatly manicured suburban garden.

"What, you have been laying down in that hospital bed all afternoon," her father shouted after her, impatiently adding, "not rested enough then to close the car door behind you?"

"Soldier on," said Erin caustically at the front door, "yeah thanks, Dad."

“No need to get all emotional with me,” he responded, opening the front door ceremoniously. “like your mum,” he then threw in, with a sting. “I just think it’s better to do things, get your mind off of it.”

Shrugging off her father’s remark, Erin headed straight to her bedroom and flopped. What she needed was her mind on it. What the hell had happened today? She tried to piece together its moments like a diary, to write the day’s exceptional story; but the page stubbornly stayed blank, a white sheet with her alone in the middle.

She walked carefully but with an increasing sense of panic back through her journey that day as she made her way inexorably toward the lectern on stage, looking with her mind’s eye to left and right, above and below for a clue, for anything that might have pushed the day into the waking nightmare she now inhabited.

From the door of her house to the village. Now striding with take-away coffee in hand across the road. Coffee’s too bitter. Marquee is ahead of her. Throw the Styrofoam cup in the bin as she steps onto the grass. Bird calls from the tree to the left. A car horn far off. Soft lawn underfoot. Still a bit dewy. Look out for dogshit. Eyes down. And there! What the hell is that?

A handgun lying in the grass.

She freezes on the spot. It’s almost right between her feet. Hasn’t anyone else noticed it? It’s damned obvious. No one? Please, someone, pay attention! She couldn’t handle the guilt of walking away from it, stepping over it to get to her appointment on stage. But she didn’t want the responsibility of finding it.

It was like an obscene and unknowable thing that had intruded into her world of normality. With a rage against it and against the circumstance that brought her to it, against the path—laid out like a boardgame for her—that she’d taken from her front door to the tent in front of her, against that game fate had played with her, she kicked it.



And in a moment, the anguish and anger were gone.

It was a toy. A goddamned plastic toy. Some kid—likely some nasty kid—had lost it, and a good thing too. Leave it with the rest of the day’s litter, to be cleaned up and thrown into a tip.

Suddenly a microphone crackled. Michelle had her hand on it, swivelling it, restlessly adjusting its angle as she spoke at the lectern, unaware of the fidgeting noise that was interrupting her speech.

“...complex new theories of the Antiverse ...,” she was saying, “... hard science but also intuitive investigation ... postulation of another universe started at the same moment as the big bang ... going backwards in time....”

What a treat it had been for Erin to have a physicist of Michelle Simpson’s stature introduce her at the festival. And so fulsomely. Erin lavishly played it back in her mind, editing out the noise.

“That great physicist Richard Feynman,” said Michelle, “once declared that if you think you understand quantum mechanics then you will be wrong.” Erin had always loved that maxim of Feynman’s. “Well,” continued Michelle, “the award for the most innovative graduate student paper goes to a young scientist who very much understands quantum mechanics, and who is not wrong. Erin Stone.”

“Not wrong,” Erin replayed that strange double negative over several times as she stepped up to the lectern. Was that a backhanded compliment? Or was Michelle slyly saying Erin had made the mistake Feynman warned against? But the award was hers, the applause was hers. And now the microphone was hers.

And then, as she had begun speaking something else became hers. A sensation she had never had before. Something passing through her, like a ghost. Like a breath. As if she’d sucked it in, and yet it had been sucked out of her almost straight away. Like those old flute whistles from her childhood. Push the plunger in and out while blowing and you hear that

strange sine wave, up and down, but as a howling sound. Like a train's pitch as it went past you. On the train from Bristol to Cheltenham. She was on the train as a child and heard over the loudspeaker that the next stop was Yate. But the train was pulling out of Yate. Was the announcement wrong, or was it "not wrong"? Was the train going in reverse at the same time it was heading to Cheltenham? Heading to her destiny, years later, in the tent. At the lectern. As the breath of something awful passed through her. Like a ghost. But a ghost in pain.

Pain. It was like ... noise.

When the bullet went through her it took something with it. An atom flies through the cosmic void and picks up noise and sensations that fluctuate across the universe.

Something entered and exited in a split second by the same door, and in that fleeting moment had left a residue, the trace of something that she could not explain.

## EDWARD

This was the team's final stint in the Antarctic. Another month in that antiseptic whiteness, listening for a tiny sound coming from the cosmic dark. Outside, the immaculate atmosphere of an icy Eden gleamed like a vast, modernist white wall. Inside, the brutalist container structure housing the lab and dorms smelled of bleach from a cleaning crew ridding it of any residue from the last occupants. This was the difference between the untouched—intact, indifferent—and the merely sanitised.

"No leaks," ordered Edward to his team assembled in the cramped laboratory. "what we've discovered so far stays our research. Camaraderie. Eh, comrades?" He suspected that each member of his team had secretly prepared their own papers ready to publish. Had clandestinely plotted with big tech companies for R&D deals. Behind the nods of approval, he smelt treachery. Mumbles of no problem. Lips are sealed. Could not agree more. His irritation grew with every expression of confidence. "Great expectations," he added, in a rallying effort falling

straightaway on stony ground. They probably knew Dickens, he figured, as much as they knew the Beatles. He focussed on his resolve. He was chasing higher things than some opportunist business transaction. Like Pip in the Dickens story, he was destined for another sort of fortune. And he was thinking of ANITA, untouched by any of this commerce. “but let’s have no leaks.”

Back in his own pod, he threw himself again onto the bed that had suffered nights of his wrestling insomnia through the protracted daylight hours, fretfully rewriting beneath his eye mask the rejoinders to each science journal’s peer review board, one after another. He was a laughingstock in one scenario. The project was wild speculation in another. Unsubstantiated imaginings, not fit to print.

“I’ll amaze them, I’ll amaze the world,” he muttered, stewing in the humid privacy of his tin can in the ice. “leadership. But this crew, they’re just of-the-shelf scientists more like techs. If it wasn’t for me giving up everything to come down here, there would be nothing for them to write home about. It’s a matter of leadership. And mine will rest on my high-density ghost particles coming out of the earth, coming out of time. Time, they’ll see, is our nemesis.”

He had an image of ANITA outside gliding above him, over the ice. She would be floating like a ghost, like a breath of air, searching the white terrain for the noise that would signal direction, source and meaning of the data. No point trying to sleep when his mind was oscillating between these visions, one of petty bureaucratic wrangling for funding and publication, the other of pristine and ethereal beauty. He threw the eye mask aside, climbed from his bunk and walked into the kitchen, and into a coffee break conversation between two colleagues Tim and Tony.

“And what’s worrying me, Tony, is whether this experimental research has now been admitting the flakiest possibilities under the guise of ....”

“Yes,” Tony interjected, excitedly speaking over him, “the research funding can’t be acquitted by something like artistic licence; funding only

permits you to test the theory that's ... oh, hi Edward. Umm, you're not on shift."

Edward mumbled about his insomnia, pouring a coffee. He didn't want to hear this. Something they evidently didn't expect him, or want him, to hear.

"So I have some artist friends who try to tell me about research," said Tim, all too clearly trying to deflect the subject away from what Edward had walked in on, "and they can't figure out the trick of scientific research. I tell them that art doesn't have a citation system. How can it be when you exhibit rather than publish? And their dream is a solo show. One stupid know-it-all signature. I tell them, in science we publish as teams, sometimes twenty names on paper."

"Art's the pretty stuff that goes on a white wall," said Tony, more twitchily than scornfully, "come to think of it, we could do with some of that down here. A nice nudie maybe, a hot goddess, eh Edward?"

Enough, thought Edward. It was like his own aspirations for the sheer—transcendent—beauty of his project were being flung back at him from some degraded mirror. The Beatles, Dickens. What did this team of his know about art? About the licence it warranted for discovery, and for going it alone? He tipped the coffee down the sink, grabbed his parka and stepped outside into the clean, clear and noiseless air.

She was up there unsullied in a sky that gleamed in a surreal milky radiance, both twilight and dawn. Above a cold sun that circled the horizon.

"You know," she whispered, "my name means 'grace'. Also, 'merciful'. And 'favour'. It fits me, uncommonly well, don't you think?"

There was just the slightest touch of vanity in that, and a coquettishness. And, mused Edward, was that also just the tiniest, flirtatious smile?

## JACK

He'd figured out how to handle her. In his mind, that's to say in his mind's eye and in his mind's ear, she was Danielle. In the world of real sounds and sights, she was Dan. Dan was a sound in his world of conversation, commerce, and policing. Noise. Danielle was a sound ... of silence. She was the picture in his mind. Each referred to the other, but they weren't the same thing. You can move the spoken name around, put it in different sentences. The one in your head couldn't be exchanged like this. Or, he mused, it's like seeing the word "women" on the door of a changing room, and then thinking of a particular body that might be inside, behind the door. The word on the outside was deliberately general enough to apply to any female. But what it referred to on the inside was so specific you weren't allowed to see it, you kept it behind closed doors. Yes, there were two worlds he could straddle. Danielle was ... private, his private meaning of her. His secret knowledge. Dan, on the other hand, was a name within all that noisiness of the public world, and a name for the noise he'd left behind in London.

"How are we going to handle this?" Dan shocked him out of his reverie. "How do you want to do this, unmask the prank? Her fellow students?" She appeared so comfortable in her skin. Calm, confident. And apparently, that's how he, Jack, appeared to the world. Back in London, at least. "How do you do it?" an ex-girlfriend had muttered once during an argument.

"You don't, or won't, get caught up in anything stressful. Anything that might disturb things in your little world. So relaxed. So peaceful." It hadn't been meant as a compliment, not even as a nod at his professional demeanour. It was a platitude, but it was better than people seeing the crumbling wreckage that was on the inside. He'd conformed to it. He'd used his reticence to suggest a knowing pause in any interrogation. It could put others into an agonised confession or trip them up to make an obvious deception. But his silence was always also a time of self-doubt, inner turmoil. Breaking that silence was always a problem.

"I said," Dan came back at him, "what's the strategy?"

How long had they been driving toward the university campus, driving in silence? He knew he was wallowing.

“Erin’s private life away from her parents,” he responded. Forcing himself out of automatic pilot, “what makes her tick? We’ll do the staff first. I want to hear from her professors.”

Dan snapped back, “They’re hardly going to give us the inside story on her character. Unless she’s shagging one of them. Or some of them. Or all of them.”

“No, I doubt she’s doing that.” Jack was picturing Erin in his mind. She’s a quiet achiever. She’s a nerd. She’s a loner. She appealed to him. “I reckon the way inside is to find out about her research. Remember, her research is the stake in this weird game.”

“Not the shagging? I reckon that’s a better motive for a stunt like this. You don’t think we’re wasting our time? I mean, what’s C.I.D. going to come out with: slap on the wrist for her, naughty girl, grow up, shag someone from your own set; downstream dismissal for whoever is shagging her?”

“What’s with this shag-fest you’re imagining?” He meant that as a joke, but Jack could hear his interrogation method cranking away. Throw the phrase back so they hear the guilty secret they’re trying to conceal. Nudge them toward an angry defence. He recalled some phrase about “a lady protesting too much”. Dead giveaway.

“We’ll see,” Dan’s resistance quickly turned into accusation, though said with a little smile. “you said the paper was a mind-fuck. Are we coming out here to enrol in a course on mathematical physics?”

“You’re just going to have to indulge me, Dan.”

“Indulging, boss. OK. They’re expecting us, so whose first on the list?”

Jack would have told Dan that he was smart enough to get into university but that he never felt he fit into academia. He had deductive and inductive reasoning in bags full. Maybe not a Sherlock Holmes, but he knew he

picked up and threaded clues that other detectives had just walked by. But he got stuck on that last remark of hers. Was that the first time he'd been called "boss"? Not bad, he thought.

"I want to talk to that one who handed the prize over, Michelle Simpson."

"Mmm, makes sense," Dan nodded in agreement, "I figure our Erin is a dyke."

"Jeesuz, Dan. No, I think we'll talk to Jock Warwick first, he's her supervisor."

The car pulled up outside a bland, brick building that to Jack looked like it housed clerks working in a council office—dull, public works or health department stuff. No ivy-covered cloister with academics in nooks scrawling earth-shattering ideas on blackboards while they stood in a sea of screwed-up paper jottings, surrounded by towers of books. He had to knock several times before hearing a grunt of acknowledgement from behind the door on which a thin metal plaque had "Prof. J Warwick" stamped in dull, official signage. He took that mumble as a signal to open the door.

"Professor Warwick?" Jack silently cursed himself for putting it as a question, as if he needed reassurance rather than simple confirmation of this man's identity. The middle-aged hermit-like figure sitting at a bare desk glanced up over the screen of his laptop computer, fingers statically poised over the keyboard, his face given a chill flat luminosity from the screen. He had the expression of someone whose idle browsing through a newspaper had been interrupted by a conductor routinely asking for his train ticket. Was that arrogance or ivory tower self-absorption? This academic evidently knew he was having a call from C.I.D. This might be a rehearsed indifference.

The bookshelves behind the professor were bare, other than a few copies of what looked to be his textbook, one of which was turned with its cover on display as if in a bookshop. This room didn't have the aura of an office where ideas were forged and tempered. Nor the clutter of a workday den.

A place just for interviews, probably with grad students. Something he visited for a few hours maybe once a week. There was only one chair in the room, other than the one he was perched on. A bare wooden one, pushed against the wall to the side of the desk. Uncomfortable, surely, for any student to have to occupy, and – by the look of the room’s spartan discipline – any adjustment would be forbidden. It would upset the room’s balance of power.

“Professor Warwick,” Jack repeated it, this time flatly, as a declaration. “D.I. Jack Jones,” he announced and then gestured sideways, “and D.C. Dan Collins. As we’d arranged, we’d like to talk to you about that student of yours involved in the incident at the science festival, Erin Stone.” “Aah,” he remained fixed, staring over the screen, as if he’d expected some other topic of conversation. There was no invitation to sit down, thankfully thought Jack. “Is she alright? I heard about what happened. A remarkable young woman.”

Dan was quick to jump in. “In what way?”

Warwick looked surprised. Was that a trace of discomfort as well?

“In what way what?” he asked, clearly needled and seeming to struggle with his response. “In what way is she alright?”

“In what way,” Dan’s words were ominously accented, “is she a remarkable ... woman?”

Jack realised Dan had gotten in first; she was leading the interview, and he suspected into terrain not that relevant. But he was quietly impressed that Warwick didn’t take the bait.

“She’s very quick to pick up ideas. Always keen to discuss how she interprets the science we’re exploring at the time. The only concern I have is that she’d feel so confident that she might not recognise the need for the labour of mathematical and physical proof. In this business, you back up with solid research, quantitative data, experiment, and demonstration. You show every step. She has a poetic, intuitive feel for interpretation, speculative research, and that put her at odds with her



fellow students, especially as these insightful interpretations come ... well, so naturally to her.”

He’s rehearsing a performance review, thought Jack. Or maybe a repeating one he’s already written. What would be on that screen, Jack wondered. Was a script prepared in advance for this interview? Warwick may not have taken the bait, but he was still dodging, stepping into the bureaucrat’s role that his office had been styled for.

“At odds,” Jack pulled focus on his image of Erin in a graduate seminar, “do you mean there were ill feelings from her peers?”

“She has opinions,” Warwick said, now veering from the template of a student report, “far-fetched sometimes, but always interesting. But this is science, not philosophy or art. We work with empirical facts, and it can be tedious work to demonstrate a hypothesis. Erin likes to speculate. She jumps, sideways, sometimes ahead. Especially with the new work she was doing. It could annoy some of the students, especially the ones working on long experimental lab work. Could drive some of them crazy.”

“Enough to ridicule her in public,” asked Jack, “maybe scare her? Harm her?”

Warwick gazed blankly ahead, then shrugged his shoulders.

“Competitive scene?” interjected Dan.

Warwick almost shrugged again, but slowly and cautiously rolled his shoulders away from it. “At the end of their doctorates they’re all looking for jobs, funding, awards. Of course.”

“Relationships?” Dan’s telegraphic questions were clearly irritating the professor. His fingers moved from the keyboard, clamping together and settling in his lap.

“Looking for relationships?” ventured Warwick, in what Jack thought was feigning a misunderstanding. “Not much time for that, I’d say. They’re all pretty much absorbed in getting across the line ... .”

“I meant,” Dan impatiently reprimanded him, “I meant her relationships. Social, sexual. Lovers, that sort of thing. You know: boys, girls ... staff.”

“We don’t get to know students all that personally,” said Warwick, then adding, “these days.”

“We’d like to talk to her classmates,” explained Jack, “friends, and her enemies. Can you provide us with some names? By the way, you mentioned she’s been particularly causing some ... hmm ... trouble with new work she was doing.”

“Her doctoral thesis has jumped into some pretty strange territory. The paper she got the prize for is a report on that. It was controversial. I thought she argued it well, though I wouldn’t go there myself. But she’s young, ambitious. She’s got to make a mark. And she did it.”

“How did she make this mark?” asked Jack.

“It’s very edgy speculative stuff. An offshoot of quantum cosmology. Proposes a pretty wild theory of what’s being dubbed the ‘antiverse’.” Jack could feel he was being lured toward Erin’s strange and prodigious smartness.

“It’s the postulation of an alternate universe,” Warwick continued, “created in the same big bang as ours, but evolving in reverse temporality to ours. It’s not entirely as madcap as it sounds, based on some intriguing experimental work in the Antarctic, tracing high-density cosmic particles that don’t seem to be behaving normally. As much as there is a norm for that sort of particle behaviour. Just the sort of wildly speculative stuff that would appeal to Erin.”

Dan’s scoffing was audible. Jack could imagine the tirade that was welling up, probably more for him later than for the nutty professor. But

she came to attention when Warwick added, “You should talk with Michelle Simpson. She’s been closer to Erin with this work than I have been. And I must say, I’m a little jealous of her.”

“Of Erin or of this Michelle?” Dan asked.

“Hmmm,” Warwick pondered, over what Jack felt was a genuinely considered and ambiguous answer, “maybe both of them. By the way, you didn’t tell me if Erin’s alright.”

## MICHELLE

“Detective Inspector Jack Jones,” said the slightly rumpled figure standing in her office doorway. He seemed to be indecisively frozen at the threshold, like a new student unsure of the protocols for visiting a professor’s room. She could see him glance over her shoulders, as his eyes rapidly scanned the crammed and overflowing bookcase behind her. He looked down at the desktop computer and the piles of notes scattered around it, then over to the window with its vases of flowers perched on the ledge. Then he turned his attention back at her, opening his mouth and standing there in a silent gawp as if something had come into his mind and been stalled straightaway. Something he cut off before it could get out. Not out of nervousness, she surmised. He was a cop, after all. Why would a cop get nervous, especially coming into her office? She was being scrutinised through her office department; she knew that. And she knew he was here about Erin.

“This is about Erin Stone,” she said, breaking him out of some small micro-trance he seemed to have fallen into. “you’ve read my statement taken at the scene. So, it’s a case for C.I.D.? I thought she was supposed to be fine. Out of the hospital. No damage.”

“Well, yes and no, she is fine, as you say, without hardly a mark on her,” he stammered. And then went silent. Still caught on the threshold but, to Michelle, seeming to drift like a man in shock. “The circumstances were ... strange to say the least. There was definitely a gunshot. Anyway ... Professor Warwick suggested ...”

“Jock,” said Michelle, “yes he’s her supervisor, you’ve seen him?”

“Just now, he sent us here.”

Michelle gazed past him in case there was someone still in the corridor outside, blocked from view.

“Oh, no, just me,” said Jack, turning round momentarily as if to make sure and then quickly correcting his gesture, “I sent my colleague off to the college to speak to some of Erin’s classmates. No, it’s just me. Umm, yes so there was a gunshot . . . .”

“Would you like to sit down, detective?” offered Michelle, waving toward one of her two armchairs arranged snugly around a small coffee table. “Sorry, it’s a small space, but . . . please. You were saying?”

He appeared to compose himself as he stared down at the Persian rug underfoot, covering the lino floor. Don’t look too closely at it, thought Michelle. She was embarrassed that it was a cheap knock-off. But who puts an expensive rug in their office, even if she spent more time here than at home? “We think the incident may be a student prank,” the detective continued. “you gave her the award.”

“I explained everything that I saw,” Michelle intervened. Cut that one off, she didn’t have a clue what had actually happened, other than it was damned traumatic. She should be on leave for PTSD.

“It must have been very disturbing,” said the detective, as if reading her mind, and collecting his in the process. “I must say, I’m surprised to find you at work. But glad I’m here to meet you. No, I mean, no I don’t want to talk about the incident itself. I was wondering if you could tell me about Erin’s research work. More specifically the work for which she received that award.”

Michelle hadn’t had a lot of dealings with detectives; in fact, none. This one fitted the guise of those slightly down-at-heel, existential, broken anti-heroes in TV drama. If a little more dishevelled, and a little less

handsome, but a little more real. And, there was something charming about his candour. As well as something surprising about his interest in Erin's scientific work. The problem was, how could she explain something so arcane to a hard-boiled ... or maybe soft-boiled ... cop?

"I'm just following a train of thought," he said, evidently seeing her hesitation.

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"It's a strange train, I should warn you, or at least it will take you on a strange journey."

"I'm up for it," he replied, "you can be my Bradshaws."

Michelle felt an eyebrow involuntarily raise. How old school is this guy? What a grandad reference! A train spotter maybe? No, not the type. More into comfort TV. But, she thought, that's rather cute; well, amiable at any rate.

"Imagine a large empty space," she began drawing on an old school metaphor of her own, "like a cricket oval. In the middle is a small dot. The rest of the oval is a void, everything is in stasis. We have a starting point where every molecule is gathered and as a universe, it starts a journey we call space-time."

"The big bang," offered the detective.

"Yes," she continued, "or the great expansion. But let's imagine the starting point creates two universes, almost identical but one the temporal inverse of the other. These two universes – or more strictly a universe and its antiverse – like two sides of a page – create space-time paths, worming their way as world lines through a block of space-time filled with everything that could or can happen but in which the wormy world line is what actually happens, forming a tunnel or twisting pathway of statistical possibility. The path is chaotic, or as Doctor Who famously once said, wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey."

She'd used that line frequently in the undergrad classes and used it here without really thinking; but she noticed the detective smile with a brief gleam of recognition, even if he quickly suppressed it. Hmm, she thought. It takes a fan to share that in-joke without questioning your intelligence or your sanity.

"OK," she continued, "imagine a mirror to this block of space-time, but overlaid or superposed on it. Every point in our space-time mirrored or flipped: the antiverse. It might be improbable but not impossible for this antiverse to coincidentally pass through our universe, like the surface of a mirror where things look backwards, are reversed. Like Alice's looking glass. All this was based on a strange signal detected from a research balloon in Antarctica, a project called ANITA."

"Erin's talk mentions this, yes."

My god thought, Michelle, he's following. He's taking notes. She was spurred on. "Erin had developed a thought experiment which demonstrated the possible convergence of a universe and its antiverse. It required incredibly complex mathematics, far too complicated to explain here – and I mean even for me – but Erin was able to show – I, at any rate believe – that although extremely rare, it was possible that certain particles spinning one way in our universe could theoretically converge — attach, in simple terms — to those spinning the opposite way in an antiverse. She felt ANITA was providing experimental proof."

"Erin has command of some seriously challenging maths by the sound of it. And you've been pretty close to her throughout this work, although not as an academic supervisor?"

"She's special," confessed Michelle, sensing that she had gone about as far as she could with this detective's perplexing interest in theoretical particle physics. She risked losing his interest. But why did she feel this was a risk? Why want to hold his interest? He wasn't a student. She couldn't quite understand why, but she wanted to ... hold his interest.

“I’m faced with some pretty challenging physics myself, if this isn’t all some kind of set-up,” he said, looking across at her wall of books again. As his eyes moved from her toward her library, Michelle felt a little embarrassed by the unintended display of all that knowledge, all that miscellany and clutter of research and curiosity, as if she was exposing herself to him, as if he’d stepped accidentally into a changing room and seen her, not unclothed but unguarded. Did he mean that her office was a set-up, a hoax, a kind of toy? How many students and other staff had looked at her bookshelves jealously hunting for a loan of some obscure text? There was nothing phoney about this office, surely. This was her profession, just as his was sub-Freudian interrogation of suspects, prodding their insecurities out of the bag. Did he mean this as an insult or a goad? “I mean,” looking back at her, “what happened to Erin? If it wasn’t some kind of stunt. Gathering self-attention maybe.” Michelle felt relieved. But why did she not want to appear to him to be the very thing she privately feared about herself? A kind self-congratulation in recognising the special talent in Erin when Jock could barely understand or care about it. Why did she care what this detective felt? About her.

“She doesn’t seem that ... insecure,” added the detective.

“You have prodigies in every profession,” Michelle was pleased to redirect his and her attention onto Erin. “They have major breakthroughs when they’re young, and which they can’t repeat in later years. It happens in science and art. An epiphany of sorts, that occurs just the once. It seems to set up a career with intelligence and celebrity – fame and fortune, if you like – but usually also with a job, an academic one, that sets up expectations not met by the daily grind of work. That breakthrough moment gets buried under all the routine business of holding a job down. People can forget that moment, even the prodigy can forget.”

“Like marking essays, applying for grants to stay in the lane,” he said, with a glance at the litter on her desk.

There it was again. Like she'd caught him looking at her through a doorway, when she had her guard down. A peeping tom. No. Not quite that. That was unfair to him. She had dropped her guard, maybe unintentionally, when she'd made that last unnecessary remark. She'd exposed herself. She deserved the embarrassment.

"You think Erin might be aware of that, as a possible future for her?" he asked, with an almost stinging poignancy. Michelle sensed the question was not just about Erin, but about Michelle's relationship with her. Michelle had called it mentoring. Now it seemed something more than just that. Yes, there was a tinge of self-recognition, a tinge of jealousy too. But nothing fake.

"Not enough to warrant pulling a prank, she just wouldn't do anything like that."

"I don't think so either," said the detective, "though I shouldn't admit that, should I?"

He sounded genuine, Michelle thought. Sly, but genuine. Like he had overstepped his decorum, almost as an equivalent gesture for her. And he probably knew that she would recognise it. They were both silent, and for Michelle it was that silence that seemed to anticipate something that she couldn't quite predict. She wanted to say something, something to ... yes, again, hold his interest.

"I'll email you some more material on what Erin was researching if you like." God, that was rather transparent, she admitted feeling the warmth of a blush coming on as she glanced down at his card, still in her hand.

"Please do," he said, with what Michelle discerned as an eager politeness. Why would a detective use the word "please"? They usually just tell you what to do. "I have a feeling that this work of Erin's – what I can make of it – is tied up with the festival incident, whatever the hell that was. Two things I don't understand, but I figure they're tangled up somehow."

"Entanglement," Michelle said. Not, to her surprise, using it as a physics teacher but as a token in conversation. She quickly donned the tone of



that teacher, but only to hear it falling away with each word. “It’s a term in quantum physics. Two particles can interact or share properties simultaneously, can be correlated, even when remote from each other. Einstein called it ‘spooky action at a distance’. I like the way it sounds ... very human, if unusual, even unearthly. Getting tangled up in something or someone. Entanglement.”

“Across a crowded room, that sort of spooky stuff,” said the detective. “in my job, I’m supposed to untangle the threads. But sometimes they can make a beautiful knot. A work of art. The perfect crime is a work of art.” His gaze shifted, furtively it seemed, and for the first time Michelle had noticed, from her face down to her body. It was only for a moment. “It sounds like you’re on track with all this,” he added quickly. “I’d like to talk with you more. Professor. Again.”

“Sure, and it’s Michelle,” she offered. “you’ll be able to find me, D.I. Jones me. You’re a detective.”

“Jack,” he offered in return.

DAN

“Give me a crime scene with villains any day,” groaned Dan, sliding into the car seat next to Jack as he started the engine. She’d clearly kept him waiting. But she had the rounds of college dorm to make. “students! Talk about privileged, self-absorbed, over-subsidised... hey, what’s on your mind, Boss? You look a bit moony.”

“What have you got for me?” he said, over the idling of the car. He was dodging something, she figured. Not that she expected a conversation, but this looked like she’d caught him with his pants down. Hmm. He’d been interviewing that other professor, Simpson. Probably a honey-trap. Well in a sciencey-wiencey sort of way. And probably tied up with the Stone girl. Dan had to admit, although anything but a babe Erin was a bit of looker, in a nerdy fashion. If she and Simpson had a thing, and Dan figured it was in the air, Simpson was probably a match in looks.

A mature version. Of course, theirs would have been a meeting of minds more than hot, sweaty ...

“Something on your mind?” He was looking straight at her, and it wasn’t really a question, she realised.

“OK,” Dan made a flourish with her notebook, “accounts of the incident all match with your professor’s.” She noticed a little wince. “The Simpson one, not the old bastard. So not much joy there.” She was piling it on. “According to her irritatingly big-headed classmates, Stone doesn’t have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Though they reckon she hooks up occasionally, with both. Nothing serious or deep, probably through a fuck-buddy app.”

“Is that reliable info?” her boss stepped in.

“Their suspicions. Seems Stone was very private, at least about that stuff. Not so with the science guff. General impression was hard-working, highly focused, not short on humble-bragging, and not so humble. They all said this to a tee: a little too much me, me, me for them.”

“So, expressions of jealousy?”

“Not outright. Stone might be smart, I’ll give her that, but her fellow students seem pretty shallow. Not much motivation to either pull a Carrie, or a JFK.”

“A Carrie,” murmured her boss, obviously struggling to make a connection.

“The teen horror movie, you know, high school girl with special powers gets a bucket of blood tipped on her at prom night. And the JFK assassina ...”

“I know about JFK!”

“So,” said Dan, teasingly dragging the word out, “how’d you make out with the professor?”

“What?”

“The Simpson prof, score anything there?”

“I think you’re right, there’s something between her and Erin.”

“I knew it! Pay me on that one Boss,” shouted Dan in triumph, imagining tangled bodies under a bench in a laboratory, skirts skewed ... no, maybe high street slacks unzipped.

“No, not that way, at least that’s not the main thing. Simpson is our most proximate witness to the incident. She’s definitely ... entangled some way with it.”

“The stunt. Do you think they cooked it up between them? A bit of a magic act.”

“I doubt either of them cooked it up. And I don’t believe in magic.”

“I said magic act, Boss.”

“And I said magic. I think there’s some sort of science behind this, but it’s a spooky science. I don’t think either of them knows or admits to knowing how they’re caught up in it.”

“So, we add Simpson to our whiteboard. That’s if you think it’s still C.I.D. business. And if so, it’s still pretty empty.”

“There’s something there, in that empty whiteness. I know there’s something there. Something weird. And I think it’s got its sticky fingers on Erin and Michelle. Maybe it’s tentacles.”

“Stick with the crime shows Boss, not the horror movies,” counselled Dan, “much as I have a spot for Carrie.” She hadn’t missed that Professor Simpson was now Michelle. There was definitely a spot for Michelle on that whiteboard.

## ERIN

Erin was determined to act normal even though the world around her had shifted. How long does it take a sensation of pain to travel the nerve fibres into the brain, to spark the neuronal synapses that configure intensive clusters of electrochemical interactions as data processed into an image of injury represented in the mind? How do we measure pain in dolls and relate this to being shot as a physical experience? How long then for that network of stimuli to trigger a response, for that grey goop igniting with billions of arcing explosions like lightning flickering in a volcanic storm cloud, for that multitude of flashing energy to coalesce into a signal travelling back into the body, triggering muscles into convulsions, deflated lungs gulping for oxygen, glands secreting adrenalin, speeding the heart rate, pumping blood that spurts out across skin She wanted to understand, to comprehend how this could happen and what could be done. The repeated visualisation of a bullet entering, breaking through the skin following its trajectory to fulfil its intention, ripping through flesh, a shockwave disturbing the cellular matrix, reconfiguring the molecular structure. With heat and speed transforming the forces on swarms of atoms that hold together every cell, throwing the body's system into chaos. Erin mentally followed the steel-encrusted soft lead bullet leaving its molecular detritus of steel in the compression of tissue as it created a tunnel cavity housing the residual smell of burnt flesh within her body. The perforating wound exiting the skin with a larger hole as the blood began to gather together to slowly trickle and then flood out of her body.

The chaos taking place had happened too quickly for thought it could only be a sensation which Erin was trying to unpack into a visual language of a physical memory. She felt the bullet re-enter her body moving backwards, the internal damage becoming invisible, each atom each molecule each cell returning to their original duties as though nothing had happened, the shockwave of the initial impact was returning to its epicentre as the bullet left Erin's body to be lost in space and time. As Erin slowly came out of her visualisation and internalisation there was

an unusual aftertaste in her mouth as though she had eaten something strange for breakfast.

Replaying the trauma-image over and over, Erin was becoming convinced that her sensation, the image of that sensation in her mind, was right. It was like one of those slow-motion analysis, femto-photography, capturing images of a bullet passing through a plastic bottle from base to cap at a trillion frames a second. The animated frames of a photon bullet that travels a million times faster than an actual bullet. The photon bullet violating the bottle ripples light disturbing the tube, exploding back from the cap leaving reflected images that fade to black. The bottle returning to its normal state.

The bullet was a real ecstatic violation. A horror performed on her, more than a crime. She knew there would be no bullet hole to be found, either in her torso or in the tent, or in a tree outside the tent, or anywhere in the town or on this earth. The bullet would be lost, not just lost in space but in time. She would be alright, but in that reversal of cause and effect, her world had irreversibly shifted. Her whole life now felt like a sudden peculiar aftertaste in the mouth. Not foul, but not pleasant either. Just unidentifiable. And it wouldn't wash out it just had to fade

“And then I blacked out,” Erin rounded off the account.

DI Jones was respectfully attentive, sitting behind disarranged files on his shabby, government issue desk. He clearly took her seriously; despite the ambiguous language and figures of speech she'd had to resort to. He was chewing the end of a pencil and staring at his notebook, like he was ruminating on some impenetrable but also disconcerting maths problem.

“One hell of a hallucination,” added Erin, trying to find a justification for her confusion.

“If it is, then you're not alone in suffering it,” the detective inspector muttered. “sorry,” he quickly added as a conciliatory correction, “sorry if that sounded callous. You've been the target of an assault of some kind. I don't doubt that, and I appreciate your distress. Trouble for us is,” and he

nodded in the direction of a young colleague was seated next to him who Erin felt had incongruously the air, and partly the look, of a dominatrix, “we can’t determine what the crime is. You say one thing, witness statements another. And these,” he waved at a whiteboard with an array of twenty or so digital prints taped up and like scattered jigsaw pieces around an old family photograph of herself, looking ridiculously smiley-faced and wearing ancient clobber, clearly supplied by her father, “these say yet another.”

But what did they say? Erin looked at the whiteboard. Seeing herself in this setting was so strange, not just on the whiteboard but surrounded by ridiculously ebullient social media imagery.

“These photographs,” explained the dominatrix, “they’re taken around the time of the incident. They’ve been sent in from our crime stoppers call out. We’re trying to make some composite and sequential images based on the timecode recorded on each image courtesy of mobile phone location-based software. Every file has exact data we can use.”

Many of them were selfies by people in the audience. Then there were photographs of people looking at the stage. Some were animatedly giving peace signs, others holding up the science fair bags for the camera. Others looking distracted, but only as if their attention had wandered. Erin didn’t recall that many mobiles being used at the time. Not even her friends were taking photos of her on stage. Weirdly, thought Erin, there are hardly any of her at all. No-one in the snapshots seemed interested in her receiving the award or giving the speech. It was as if her loss of consciousness had infected all these mobile phone cameras. Cameras that seemed to have been nowhere in sight when she was there. The real stars of these photographs, Erin understood, were no longer the people she could recognise but the pixels, the patterns hiding in the background.

“Yes, odd isn’t it,” the D.I. interrupted her reverie. “you’re hardly there.”

“I was looking at the background,” said Erin, deflecting him from her wounded pride. “The man or woman who shot me, who did whatever it

was, well, wouldn't they be somewhere in that background, in the audience?"

"Ever see a movie called Blow Up?" asked the D.I., throwing it to both women.

"War movie, is it, boss?" asked DI's feisty colleague. Erin furtively studied the woman's face as it ruthlessly examined hers. As if doing a diagnosis, maybe a dissection. If she wasn't so hostile, thought Erin, there was something attractive .... "Or," the woman added, "something to do with terrorists? I like a good thriller."

"Not quite that genre," he answered, "but it is a sort of crime story. Sort of. A guy sneakily photographs a couple of lovers—an older man and a young woman—who he spots snogging in a quiet part of a London park. The woman catches him out, comes over wanting the roll of film, like it's incriminating for her or for her boyfriend. It's the analogue film era, so it's a roll of film in the camera. He won't give it up, figuring if it's a big deal for her then he's got something interesting. She takes off and he snaps a last shot of her standing back where the boyfriend had been, but he's gone."

"Peeping tom and a blackmailer, eh," the S&M woman interrupted. "That's more than 'sort of' a crime? Eh boss?"

"Not the point of the story," he pushed back. "well, it sort of is. He's a fashion photographer who wants to do serious documentary stuff. So, when he prints up the pix he notices something odd. While they're in a clinch, the woman is looking away, aware of something in a clump of nearby trees. He blows up the image to see what she's looking at. Then blows up the blow-up. It's blotchy—these are analogue days—but there, among the branches and leaves, he makes out a hand holding a gun, pointing at the couple. She seems to know this is happening, like she's lured the boyfriend there to be murdered. But by being discovered taking the photo, the photographer has saved the guy's life."

“Moral quandary, huh,” said the B&D girl. “But the day ends well. Peeping Tom gets his photos, and saves a stranger’s life.”

“Well, here’s the thing. He doesn’t. When the photographer blows up the last of his photos of the woman on her own, he sees her standing next to the shape lying under a tree. It’s the body of the boyfriend. He didn’t stop a shooting, he witnessed it.”

“So he has the evidence,” said the dominatrix. “Case solved?”

“Nope,” the detective replied. “While he goes out to find the body in the park, his negatives and prints get stolen from his studio. All he has left is a torn fragment of a blow-up print, it’s of the body but it just looks like an abstract painting. A lot of dots. Without the context it’s meaningless.”

“But he’s got the body, right?”

“Not that either. When he goes back to the park, it’s gone. He’s got nothing.”

“So,” the domme was sighing impatiently, “why was the old dude shot? Who did it?”

“You never find out. No motive. No evidence. No shooter. Nobody. So maybe even no crime.”

“What the fuck sort of thriller is that?” complained the dominatrix.

“I guess you’d say it’s a photo shoot,” piped in Erin. She didn’t know where that sudden flicker of humour came from, or why she felt compelled to come out with it at that moment. Judging from his wry smile, the joke landed well with the detective. Not so for the domina, whose eyes were drilling through Erin as if she’d caught Erin off-guard. “Can you blow these up?” Erin waved at the images on the investigation board trying to dodge the mistress’s scrutiny.



“We’ve got a uni-lab working on it,” said the detective. “They can interpolate data in these images, build up stuff.”

“You’d better hope,” the dominatrix said to Erin, “it turns out better than that movie.”

JOHN

John had been thrown into the darkness of eternal sleep, the bullet that had raced through him was now cold, being plucked out of the wall behind the stage by the forensic officers. He thought he was still conscious and wondered whether a science paper he had read on consciousness being a state of matter. The paper was looking at the probabilities that consciousness could carry on after death at an atomic/subatomic level. John thought that it was sad that he now could not go back and confirm the physicist Max Tegmark’s hypothesis but at this moment if it was a moment he no longer knew what back was, he just drifted in the darkness waiting for the battery to wear out. There was no fear of the darkness, no sense of panic just a feeling of inevitability.

Starting with fragments of tiny dots of light John started to assimilate patterns which created sensations that had a strange tingling sensation in his being that as yet was too abstract and unformed to be comprehensible. Lost in a new translation that was taking place in space that he could not define as a body. He thought of space as being similar to the old fashion term of the Ether.

JACK

“Thanks for processing these photographs for us, Professor,” Jack said. “When I enlarged them on my office desktop screen they just fell apart. Nothing but blotches. Trying to stitch together a sequence of events from that was like trying to sculpt with jelly. More joy in one of those inkblot images that shrinks use.”

Jack let memories of his teenage years immersed in Photoshop hover in his mind, like the images on his computer screen from that time. Of

course, he knew how to use those imaging apps, as any budding graphic designer would. And he loved generating on that screen what became later known as “deep fakes”, creating alternate identities for well-known faces and alternate worlds out of well-known locations. But that was fantasy and he was chasing reality. And this, here, was a trick he’d adopted so often now in his police work, he was rarely even conscious of using it. And of course, he knew what those ink blots were called. He used their verbal equivalent all the time in his interrogations. He’d long given up the dreamworld of staring at a computer screen all day, and of making art. His job was about keeping it real.

“Rorschach blots,” responded Professor Dyson, in a condescending tone that reminded Jack of being corrected by a teacher when he’d forgotten to read up prior to class. “Let’s hope we can do better than that. Anyway, we usually work in rather abstract reaches of computer science here, so it’s good for my postgrads to be involved in something with real-world outcomes.”

“Real-world,” mumbled Dan, “not sure about that.”

“Sorry ... detective?” Jack could see the professor furtively look Dan up and down, as if barely concealing his doubt about a woman dressed like her would be a legitimate police officer. Dan glared back but didn’t bother responding. The guy deserved that death stare from her, thought Jack. And Jack wouldn’t bother responding either. Let Dan’s moment of silence speak, thought Jack. It was like a schoolyard staring competition. Finally, the professor broke.

“My students, Sally and Craig,” he carefully gestured with a hand holding a polystyrene coffee cup toward two nearly identical grinning figures, standing expectantly and silently at attention in identical lab coats, “have been working on a pattern recognition algorithm to identify objects across the images and build a trajectory of space and time out of the sequence.”

Jack was transfixed by this strange couple, whose height, build, stance, clothing and expressions were uncannily the same. One male, one female;

but one a duplicate of the other. But which one was the copy? He couldn't hold back the question on his mind.

“Are you ...?”

“Twins?” interrupted one.

“No,” answered the other.

“We're often mistaken to be,” said the first.

“So often mistaken, we knew what was on your mind,” said the second.

“Mind readers, as well as computer whizzes,” offered Jack. But they didn't reply. Jack felt gooseflesh on his neck. Their chirpy voices even sounded the same.

“The relevant images,” continued the professor, “have been stitched together according to their metadata, time code and location coordinates, animating into a 3-D panorama of photographs. This has been done only to the photographs pertaining exactly to the time of the alleged shooting, then each image will dissolve into the next directly based on the images' timecodes. Craig. Sally. Please.”

The professor waved his hand again, in a gesture that, despite the coffee cup, reminded Jack of a magician or a hypnotist on stage doing a pass. The creepy couple stepped together, marching in time across to a computer console next to a huge black screen in the centre of which an animated geometric logo was slowly rotating. “AVF”, it announced with its letters interlocking, and then it began flipping over and over as Jack watched the postgrads nestle into ergonomic chairs fit for the bridge of a starship. He saw the insignia on the screen unwind a spiral of letters spelling out “Advanced Visualisation Facility”.

It was an impressive screen, thought Jack, a mother of all screens.

“High-definition multi-display screen ... ,” said one of the postgrads.

“ ... a mosaic of small high-density LED monitors linked together by the software,” said the other.

The lettering on the screen dispersed into myriad grains flying outwards, and then as they reached the outer edge, they slowed and reversed, spiralling inward while dragging with them constellations of other multicoloured incandescent particles from outside the screen. It was exhilarating to Jack but also vertiginous, as if watching some cosmic explosion running backwards, being sucked into a vanishing point in the centre of eternity. Yet as a million fireflies converged, the clusters of light formed mosaics that spun frenetically clockwise then anticlockwise, back and forth, until they locked into each other as jigsaw pieces, glueing together into larger and larger mosaic facets, until an image of startling clarity and luminosity began to emerge.

“Impressive,” Jack muttered. “Better than Blow Up.” No one in the room responded. “So, what part of the scene are we looking at here, I can’t recognise anything.”

“I’m not surprised,” said the professor, “that’s my cat, Tina, in my yard. We use her at the start of any roll. She’s a sort of test pattern. And part of our copyright.”

“Just a minute,” shouted Dan, suddenly alert, “just a minute ... is that ... there in the bushes behind Tina ... a hand with a gun? ... Pointing at the cat?”

The professor leapt forward, the coffee in his polystyrene cup spilling over his lab coat.

“Whoops,” Dan added, “sorry, my mistake. It’s nothing.” And Jack hoped he was the only one in the room who noticed her wink at him.

## DAN

It was the last thing she'd expected. Especially after her stunt with the cat video. Going into that computer lab she felt she'd be like the female lead in that TV series about UFOs that she loved as a kid. Agent Scully, that was the character. The cool sceptic, voice of tough reason—or at least doubt—against the conspiracy theories and dogged belief that the other one kept spinning. Mulder. The guy who was so restrained there'd be barely an irregular blip on his ECG if he was having a heart attack. Or was being shot, she mused. OK, it did turn out Mulder was right. There were aliens behind the whole thing. Like lizards in human costume in parliament or in the royal family.

But now the tables were turned. Against her own better judgment, she'd spotted it first. Now, sitting in the office kitchenette staring at the screen grab on her phone, even she couldn't quite believe it. It wasn't just some image enhancement playing a trick with the eyes. The time sequence and the spatial construction of the imagery, however, Tweedledum and Tweedledee had done it, made it look real. There it was, poking between two unobservant figures in the park: a hand holding a gun and it was aimed at Erin Stone. But that was all there was. Dan placed her finger on the screen, like that character in the religious story she knew from childhood: the guy who stuck his finger on the wound of a dead man who'd come back to life. Doubting Thomas. The man who needed proof, hard facts, of a miracle. Seeing is believing. So is touching. As her finger touched the phone's small screen it covered up the hand with the gun. As if it had never been there.

"There is a famous optical illusion," said her boss, shaking her from the reverie as he put his coffee down, "a drawing of an older woman—a sort of crone, if you'll pardon me using a term a bit out of date these days—that can flip instantly into a beautiful young woman's face. Once you see the portrait one way it's a real struggle to see it the other way. But then, suddenly you see it. And then you can't see the other one. Like trying to see two sides of one coin. You can't see both women at the same time."

It sounded as if he was trying to console Dan for the shock of what had happened in the lab when, like meeting the last person you expected or wanted to be there in a crowded bar, she had jolted the room with the shout of “well fuck you...”, pointing to a small shape on the massive screen that no one else had noticed.

“Hmm,” said Dan as she moved her finger away from the image and saw the gun reappear, “but you have to know what to look for, eh? It’s about recognising the options.” She heard the tone of Agent Scully creeping back into her voice, displacing Mulder. Had she seen it because Erin Stone had set up the expectation? But how would Stone have imagined the amount of computer work that would be done on these random images from the science festival? Unless, even that was part of the set-up, the stunt. Now she sounded like Mulder again. Conspiracy theory. “I know the trick you mean, it’s used in training. But the thing is, would you know there was a hot chick inside the image of an old duck,” she was thinking out loud, “if you weren’t told it was hiding in there? Whoever did the drawing had to know both faces would appear. They had to be able to see both!”

“At the same time?” her boss asked and seemed to be genuinely stumped. “Yeah, agreed. Even if the artist drew the images alternately, I guess they had to have some way of knowing one thing would look like the other.”

“So,” Dan felt she was taking the reins of the conversation as she held up the phone screen, “who’s the artist here? Who’s designed this fucker?” She now suspected Erin Stone even more. Somehow, Stone must have known what was going to happen in that lab. This shooter had to be a plant to cover up but also draw attention to the complexity of the stunt. Who was Stone in league with to get this done? The stooges at the lab wouldn’t have been in on it, no matter how screwy they were. But someone figured it would show up if those nerds did any work on the pics that had been taken. Someone is probably in Stone’s circle. Someone she’d been hooked up with.

“I think I ought to talk with that professor at the university some more,” said her boss. “There’s got to be some connection with what Erin was working on.”

“That git of a supervisor,” said Dan. “I reckon that’s a dead end.”

“No, the other one. The one that gave the speech on stage. Simpson.”

“Ah yes,” said Dan, feeling more like Scully than ever. “That one. Michelle.”

## MICHELLE

They’d settled for a small café near the university, a quick walk away. She had quickly agreed to the detective’s suggestion for lunch. She was peckish after all. OK, if she admitted it, the prospect of chatting to him over a bowl of soup was also ... pleasant. Even if it did sound out of order—for a detective at any rate—after what also sounded like a rather meandering, inconsequential series of questions in her office while he browsed through her bookcase. Was he looking for something? Could she help him, offer a book title or two? When she’d asked that, it sounded like they were both in a bookstore. Completely away from the university, away from her routine of teaching. And his lunch idea was friendly, not delivered as part of a professional meeting.

But she already had a glimpse of how he could make someone feel at ease, enough for them to let slip things that shouldn’t be said. Incriminating things. He was clever that way, and she did like that subtlety. Unlike the pompous gits elsewhere in the building who mansplained her research to her, he listened. And not just for clues. He seemed genuinely interested in the science. And now, he seemed interested in lunch. With this kind of guy, that wouldn’t be just a way for him to fill in time. He was interested in something other than the science. That, she thought, was an interesting turn in the conversation. Was he, she pondered, as interesting as she thought this situation to be? This would be a way to find out.

“What,” he said, holding up his phone above his soup bowl, “do you make of this, Michelle.”

First names, OK. She took the phone in her hand to look closely at the image on the screen, noticing how odd it felt to be holding something of his. Even though she’d done this before, handed her phone around or had a phone handed to her, this moment felt like it was an intersection of their two physical spaces, maybe even their bodies. She felt a little naked, and so quickly shook her head and gave him back the phone, “What am I supposed to see, Jack? I can’t make anything out.”

“Nor could anyone else there at the time,” said Jack, handing it back to her with a nudge suggesting she have another go. “It’s one of the mobile phone pics from when Erin was supposedly shot.”

“I see. Well, I don’t actually. What’s it in the photo?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” he replied. She couldn’t tell if that was disappointment or suspicion. But he seemed to sense the ambiguity in his tone, and quickly pitched into a more genial manner. “I mean, I’m not entirely sure. But, it looks like a gun.”

“Hmm, now that you mention it . . .”

“That’s the trouble. I think we’ve found something we were looking for.”

“How can that be a problem?” Michelle asked.

“It’s like a mirage. Like seeing water in a desert. I wanted it to be there, but now I’m not sure what I’m seeing.”

“Maybe more like the face on Mars,” Michelle suggested. “You know, that photograph taken when Viking 2, back in the 1970s, was looking for a spot to land. A photo came back to earth with what looked like a monumental sculpture of a rugged, human face lying on a desert escarpment. Looks spooky, but no more than the man in the moon does. Of course, it’s just a mountain. It just happened that the photo was taken



when the shadows happened to fall in such a way that they looked like the eye sockets and open mouth in a mask.”

Jack was gazing intently at his phone screen. Silently. Immersed. Unmoving. It must have been a minute before Michelle gently nudged him.

“Hey,” she murmured, “remember me?”

“I don’t usually do that,” Jack apologised. “Stare at my phone when I’m at a table with someone. Especially ... But this is bugging me.”

As far as she could tell, Jack was being quite open. No official mask. He looked as embarrassed over having let the phone preoccupy him as he was perplexed by what was on it.

“You’re right,” he gazed back, “it’s not a mirage. It’s really there, but you only see it in certain circumstances. Not a mistake or defect of vision. But it is a sort of trick of the eyes, like an optical illusion. It is one thing, but looks like another.”

She felt he was not just looking at her as he said this, but looking into her eyes. She had that sensation of being exposed again at that interface of physical spaces, but his gaze didn’t make her feel caught off guard.

“Maybe it’s not an illusion, though, but a glimpse of something you normally wouldn’t see,” she said. “When two trains speed past each other in opposite directions you get that sudden whoosh with the reduced air pressure sucking at the windows. It still shocks me, frightens me, if I’m in a window seat. The other train is so close but it’s just a blur. But if you blink, really fast, you might see someone exactly opposite you in the window seat of their train. And they might be looking back at you. They’re right next to you, you could reach out and touch them, but they’re only there for a split second.”

“And if you tried to reach out to them your arm would get torn off.”

“Might be worth the risk,” she muttered, perhaps a little too cutely. She could feel a blush coming on. My god, Michelle thought. How did that remark come out? Hopefully, he didn’t notice.

“Is that an analogy you use in a physics class?”

Michelle was surprised at herself. Now that he mentioned it, yes, she had used it. But it wasn’t hers.

“Actually, Erin uses it to describe her work.” The blush came into bloom as she remembered Erin explaining the analogy one evening, over what had started as a quick working dinner. After the third glass of wine, they’d decided to get a bottle to take back to Michelle’s. “Two trains going in opposite directions happen to pass each other on parallel tracks. Whoosh. As they fly past each other there’s a moment of chaotic turbulence in otherwise calm air. Like an explosion. A storm or thunderclap. Some part of the molecular fabric is torn apart and mixes in that interaction. After the encounter, do those particles from one host get carried away with the other? Do they return to their host? Do they end up in limbo?”

“Sounds like more than just a physics scenario,” said Jack.

“I ... uh ... what do you mean?” Michelle stuttered.

“Reminds me of something from my days in London. The limbo part. I can relate to that, as the saying goes.”

Relieved, Michelle continued, “Erin has done a rather amazing piece of maths to calculate probabilities of that happening at a cosmic scale. And at the quantum scale. The maths fits together if you take into account the data from ANITA that I mentioned. Two trains, two universes. Everyone leading parallel lives until a fateful moment when the trains converge for that instant. Something in each gets broken, torn out and flung together. Then it settles back as if nothing had happened and repairs itself, or parts travel on in the opposite direction.”

“Or falls into limbo,” added Jack.

“Yeah, that too. That’s always a possibility.”

“Freaky.”

“Physics. But yes, freaky physics.”

“Would you—possibly—be free tomorrow night?” Jack’s question seemed to come out of thin air.

“What?”

“Dinner,” he explained. “Can I take you to dinner? No physics. Just ... chemistry.”

The mention of food made Michelle realise that neither of them had touched their soup.

“Do you mean ... a date?”

“That’s always a possibility,” he answered.

## THE KNOWN UNKNOWN

PAUL

“The known unknown is the second in our series of lectures dealing with the known universe.”

Paul was starting all over again. Every year it seemed different but it was really the same. It had been that way since the dawn of philosophy. It had never really moved on. It was just different ways of looking at the same problem. The students weren't the same; each year different students, but the same age. A Groundhog Day, the only difference was that each year he was getting older. They were becoming his very own “known unknown”.

“The strange thing about the knowing that we don't know,” he declared, “is how we get to that point. We mostly don't know what we think we know; we just believe in the appearance of knowing.”

“Can you give us an instance?” His nemesis had spoken.

“Right then, let's try and use a well-trod path,” he responded. “If you would agree that we have free will, then what does it look like? Around 1785 Jeremy Bentham developed the panopticon, a famous prison system. A round building where one guard placed in the centre could look at all the prisoners highlighted by the window in the back of their cells, and who in turn know they can all be seen. An intimidating gaze, a perpetual discipline. The system becomes self-regulating. The prisoners become prisoners of themselves.”

“How does this help us find our place in the world?” Anita again asked the question.

Now she was quoting me from my first lecture, thought Paul. Is she trying to be smart or just wants to comprehend what is inevitably incomprehensible?

“Let's try and address this now: what standard in a more enlightened period is required to make a successful prisoner? It would be to enable someone to fit back into society. So as to live a functional life fulfilling that society's rules, they would need to become normalised. So is our

place in the world to be normal? But who makes the rules on what is normal?”

Anita piped up again: “Is this Foucault speaking?”

Sprung

“Yes, but let’s look at it today, in our technological society, aren’t we all just trying to be normal—being watched and watching others 24/7? Our governments imply they define society’s norms, but the norms are based on the requirements of the industry. An industry must take something that is not known and make it known—normal. The known unknown, if you take it that we are all monitoring each other to double-check a normal meaningful life in the service of others. This normal is latent unknowing, even when we individually think we know. We know there is an unknown, but we can never get in a position of seeing or affecting it. You are a spectator in the spectacle of life; not able to make a critical stance towards it.”

“Does this apply to a pandemic like COVID?” Her question, once more.

“Does it create a new normal or just suppress the normal? Does it create a new known that is unknown until someone can define the normality that we can aspire to be known as?”

Feeling that he had made an interesting point, he measured Anita’s expression. She had drifted off even as he started to answer her question. Was it disrespect or was he so predictable? It is times like this that one could just come to embrace the great divide that was between knowing and not knowing.

“Where was I?”

JACK

Jack was languishing in the briefing room after seeing Michelle. He printed out some of the photographs from his phone and placed them on the investigation chart, but in reality in no real order. He was relying on random associations to try and jog his mind into thinking about the unthinkable. Slumping down on a rickety old office swivel chair, he put his feet up as Dan walked in wearing her hipster leather trousers. A child of the 80s thought Jack. He pushed another dilapidated swivel chair with

his foot over in her direction as a wordless invitation for her to join him in contemplating the board.

“Shite, boss, you nearly took me out.”

“Sorry didn’t know my own strength”.

They sat for a while, both focused on the photographs until Jack broke the silence.

“Let’s run through the events we know and mark in the unknowns.”

Dan listed the points with cool composure: “Well, we think we know that someone with a rifle was in the trees across from the marquee at 12.30 pm. We know that Erin made her way to the lectern and started speaking at 12.08 pm. This would then coincide with her first acknowledgements and then the first sentence. We know the sound of what appeared to be a gun was heard. We know Erin fell as though she was shot. We know that by the time the paramedics came, she was mostly fine, no bleeding, but her body was under a lot of stress, and to her mind, she had been shot.”

Jack chimed in, “We also know that Michelle believed that she saw blood coming from her body only to disappear. In the same way, the gunman disappeared. This must have all happened in two or three seconds.”

“If we can believe Michelle.”

“When we get the report from Peter, he should be able to confirm the exact timeline of the key events.”

Jack was pipped at the post. “That report would give us nothing,” said Dan, quick off the mark, and Jack could only acknowledge with a dejected nod.

“Absolutely.... We’ll just have to lay out the whole chain of events to the super in the morning and see what she wants us to do with the case.”

“Not we kemo sabe .... you, this is your gig.” Dan had a wry smile on her face; another sign he could not read. He thought it was a definite problem with people’s signs and sarcasm.

“Thanks for having my back.”

“Come on this is Cheltenham.”

“I will wait for Peter’s report tomorrow, so I will at least have what appears to be a scientific report from an indisputably reliable source and let her take it from there.”

EDWARD

On the morning of the last day, the storm arrived: not atmospheric but acoustic, causing a sense of elation. Another identical noise but this time instantly recognised by its sonic shape as not being just noise but a high-density neutrino. The scientists’ ghostly faces were highlighted by the glow of the monitor, their eyes fixed on the screen as the technician played with the data, identically to the first time following Edward’s now infamous Beate’s technique for playing the noise backwards. There it was in all its glory, the high-density neutrino going in the opposite direction. This signal that, by physics’ currently recognised laws, was not meant to exist.

“So much for the appearance of truth. Nothing is proven only unproven by time, no wonder the world is in a constant state of trauma, afraid of change.” Edward’s whispered insight was drowned out by the cheers, hugs and smacks on the backs, fist pumps that explode and a final high five. Or at least a stalled attempt at one. Edward watched as Tom’s arm rose in the air but becoming self-conscious at the top of the arc fell unconsummated to his side. High fives were embarrassingly no longer fashionable. Edward turned his attention to studying the group, thinking that the shit would really hit the fan now, Publish or perish is the motto they love to follow at research-intensive universities, and they literally do mean perish. After the cheers had settled down, Edward popped the cork on the Bollinger and passed around some plastic champagne flutes. It was a moment that had lain in wait to erupt.

Edward handed the bottle to one of the team to fill everyone’s glasses for a toast as silence fell, then voices collectively shouted out, “Speech!”

“Well, I just wanted to say a few words.” Edward knew what he wanted to say: leave my discovery alone. But then he forces other words to flow. “We have, odd as this may sound I believe today expanded human awareness of what we don’t know considerably with this discovery. It will take some processing after analysing the findings and conferring with colleagues around the world. I am sure you are all champing at the bit to publish, but one word of warning, maintain the suspicion that the

potential for defining the real implications of this momentous discovery will take many years ...”

“We should all get professorships now,” yelled Tom.

“There is the probability of it meaning something else than what we all judge it to mean at this moment,” said Edward trying to calm the air. “So, let’s not go off half-cocked. Good luck and a safe journey home.”

Edward went back to the business at hand. He’d read all the team's abstracts, and none had really understood the pertinent possibility that had come to him from ANITA as though she had telepathically transmitted it into his mind as he slept. “To ANITA!” Edward yelled the toast with a passion that surprised everyone, but they all responded with equal volume and downed their Bollinger.

“ANITA!”

More bottles were coming out of bags and lockers, and being opened and downed in vigorous succession. One of the team who already was healthily intoxicated offered another toast. “Congratulations to Edward; the project has taken up a few years of his life; he has sacrificed a lot to get this research off the ground but now with this result, it has been well worth it. To Edward.”

“Thanks, Mike; it has been a long run,” replied Edward courteously, although he knew his run with the alcohol needed to come to an early end. “I must be home the day after tomorrow, so a lot of writing, checking and packing to do. Thanks, everyone; see you all online soon.”

Edward’s plane landed at Heathrow, where he was to change flights for the final leg of his journey and as it taxied toward the terminal he switched on his phone. A text message from one of the team immediately appeared on the screen with a link. Not this quick thought Edward as he touched the blue underlined text and the title came up: “Welcome to the antiverse. Mysterious particles uncovered in the Antarctic could be evidence of a mind-bending mirror universe, reveals Jon Cartwright.”

“What the fuck, I haven’t even got out of my seat,” he muttered. Ahead lay the agonising wait for the next domestic flight home.

ERIN



Erin's journey to this point started when her computer's notifications introduced her to a paper entitled "Welcome to the antiverse", positing a parallel universe. A month later, another online science website published a critical rejoinder, "The real truth about a parallel universe.". She threw her hat into the ring with the first paragraph of her paper that jokingly began, "If you've heard the recent claim that NASA detected a parallel universe (!) in Antarctica (!) where time runs backwards (!!), we're glad you've now clicked on this article. Strap yourselves in for the truth." This was the paper that won her the award.

Erin suspected that the hyperbole in these articles veiled, what was actually discovered. Contradicting each other, they sounded certain in their argument when neither could say anything for certain. "Everything they do or say is just the appearance of truth," she argued, "cobbled together with as much evidence to withstand criticism until the day someone crashes their party." Erin had recognised from the beginning of her physics course that no one could understand quantum physics, yet it ironically generated some of the most successful mathematical theories in science. For Erin, some science justifiably resorted to intuition to discover physics concepts that broke the traditional scientific research paradigm. It was qualitative, experiential and above all, unique. The possibilities inherent to an antiverse were too good not to follow up, even if this required an intuitive speculative research style.

These thoughts were in her head as she contemplated the day's events: the shooting that ought to have been fatal but which left little more than a bruise. There was a shift taking place inside her; not a shift accruing from a loss or a rupture, but more like a gain. She felt stronger mentally, and that seemed to be echoed in her speaking out today at the university, not just to hear her voice but to contribute as part of a team. She felt that she did not have to push herself to the front. There wasn't any need to gain attention. For once she felt strangely comfortable being herself.

She now wondered if what had happened to her as part of this journey was connected to the concepts she had been working on in her theoretical paper. There were so many medical pioneers who performed experimental tests on themselves. Recently Barry Marshall in Western Australia experimented on himself to prove that *H. pylori* cause stomach ulcers, and he won a Nobel prize. A human guinea pig subjected to his own experiments. "Christ," she thought, "have I become a guinea pig of my own creation?" The thought scared but intrigued her at the same time; what could be the evolution of such a monumental experiment? "Could a minuscule molecular fragment of a parallel universe affect me in such a

dramatic way? That would be incredible.” Voicing these words for the first time, precise and unequivocal, suddenly added a frightening conclusion: “Could I become a human Guinea pig for others to experiment with?”

“What’s that, dear?” interrupted a nearby voice.

“Nothing Mum, don’t worry.”

“I am not worried. I was just asking what you said.”

Erin didn’t answer. She was focused on making herself ready to handle a new day. And she needed to keep secret her growing awareness of something taking place inside of her. Something fearful.

JACK

The sound of an email notification after a long day was like the bell ringing for Pavlov’s dog. It prompted Jack to automatically open it, against his better judgment. Nothing he was getting seemed to clear the case up. Just more uncertainties. More unknowns. The subject line declared “CONFIDENTIAL REPORT”. It was from the lab. From Peter, regarding the timeline for the shooting. Jack opened the attached Excel spreadsheet and stared at the rows of numbers. He grabbed his phone, “Hi Michelle, you doing anything tonight?”

“You sound pretty keen.”

“No, but I mean yes; but also no ...I sound pretty lame.”

“Really lame.”

But he knew this was her teasing, even flirting.

“I’d love your opinion on the lab’s data, I just got it from Peter, I mean Professor Dyson.”

“I know Dyson,” said Michelle. “So it’s just work”

“Ummm. Yes, well no, I mean yes it is work-related. I’m not saying let’s cancel our date tomorrow tonight; I mean tonight would be work. Well, maybe not just work.”

Jack felt he was burying himself with every word. Why was it so hard to speak? So hard to know what she was thinking about his stumbling eagerness?

“I was taking it easy tonight,” she said, and then released him from his torment, “so why not come over and bring some take away with you. And we can discuss what we might get up to tomorrow night.”

“Ummm. What do you fancy eating?” Every word seemed to have an unintended nuance.

“Surprise me.”

It was a test, he knew that and he was interested to see how badly he would fail. Keep it practical, don't think about the nuances. They're in your head. OK, did she have any allergies? She would have said. He phoned a Thai restaurant and ordered his go-to meal two of their Holy Basil Crispy Salmon lightly stir-fried with garlic chive flowers and chilli, and picked up a bottle of Chenin Blanc wine.

He arrived at 8.00 pm on the dot. Had they agreed to a time? Hmm. Now that he thought of it, no. He stood for a moment undecided as to whether he was now early or late, then with the trepidation of a man about to jump from a plane with a parachute he hasn't tested, he rang the doorbell.

“Come in, I have plates warming in the oven, we can eat straight away. Oh, you bought some wine. I'll get us a couple of glasses. I thought this was going to be a work night?”

“Ummm, yes, well not entirely, but yes I thought our work might go better with some wine.” Damnit, was he revealing all his cards in one moment?

Jack felt out of his league. He'd been in a long relationship that ended sadly with the feeling that he had been too needy. This among other factors had prompted him to transfer to Cheltenham; he'd not had another relationship since the breakup.

“Two Holy Basil Crispy Salmon orders with steamed rice. Cheers,” Jack raised his wine glass, “Cheers.”

But Jack didn't eat; instead, he was looking directly at Michelle.

“What? ...Do I have something on my face?”

“No, you don’t. That’s what I was hoping for though. I was hoping for that look of surprise.”

“Well, here’s my look of surprise.” She raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t buy two different things from the menu.”

“Umm, actually I was thinking of the soup,” Jack smiled and dug in. “But no. I decided not to.”

He liked her. A smart woman who said things without being too guarded. They ate and chatted. Then, as if the idle meal talk had suddenly pivoted, Michelle went into first-date mode. “I was married, now divorced, my ex-husband bought me out of our flat in London. Not wanting to be constantly reminded of my failures, my idea was to get away. I managed to get a position at the university here and moved to Cheltenham. Bought this house.”

Jack was taken aback enough to worry that he’d have to reciprocate. So he gave the room the attention he’d been wanting to since arriving, almost forensically trying to divine more about Michelle from all its details as he did in her office. But that was different. He could tell she was closely watching him do it. Was she comfortable with his intimate scrutiny of her home? He felt almost unduly comfortable there, in her house. “Impressed with your house, I’ve only rented. I’d like to buy something around here, but I am in no rush, taking things slow.” Hopefully, he thought, that might be enough from his personal file.

“So,” Michelle dragged out the vowel, like a smooth slide on a dance floor, “tell me more.” It wasn’t quite a question.

“Umm, well yes. Actually no, not much. Ummm. I had an amicable breakup from a long-term relationship with someone. Well more than someone. Her name was Carol, whom I’d met at university. We were together for a while, quite a while but then ... umm...drifted apart. As our careers took off. Took us in different directions. Independent of each other. Well, no actually one of us started drifting apart more than the other.” Oh god, this stuff was spilling out of him. Control it.

“No marriage then?” Again this was not quite a question. “So ...”, Michelle went on, dragging out that vowel again, “who moved on? Carol?”

“Before Carol,” Jack responded as if he hadn’t heard that, “I had only a few short dating stints.” Jack stopped there quickly. Any further and he’d be telling her when he lost his virginity. No matter how much he worked on it, this was yet another outbreak of his usual stupid reveal-all affliction. He wanted to come across as cool, slightly detached, and definitely not desperate. He wanted to exude a certain worldliness and mystique, but as he pondered the history of his love life, he came to realise it was rather lacklustre. Now his reticence just looked like dullness.

Michelle opened her mouth as if to speak, but stayed silent. By a sort of mutual agreement, it seemed that narrative, the erotic part of how he found himself there with Michelle, was over. Jack automatically retreated to who he’d been before he’d lost his cool, at least the cool he liked to think he had.

“We should have a look at the documents now.” And dutifully, they packed away the empty plastic containers and cleared the table. Except for the wine. Jack needed another drink now, but not for social loosening up. He laid the file down on the cleanly wiped dining table.

Michelle was surveying the documents. “What do you want me to help you with? Something specifically in the timeline?” she asked, leaning close to him.

“I was wondering what you thought about the time it would take for something, let’s say a person in a real-world situation, to appear and disappear then reappear only to disappear again.”

“Do you mean to come out of some type of camouflage and then dive back under it again? That’s out of my league.”

“No,” explained Jack, trying to make his next remark sound as sincere to her as it sounded absurd to him, “I mean someone to step through from that antiverse and then go back.”

“That is also out of my league.”

“I don’t think so, it’s a speciality of yours, isn’t it?” Jack just wanted to coax her at least into speculating. “Just take a look. Treat it as a ‘what if’ situation. I won’t quote you on it, it’s just between us.”

Michelle was leaning forward, closer to the images, and had gone quiet, deep in thought, her face wonderfully relaxed into the sort of concentration that was her speciality. He was thinking of that “spooky action at a distance” phenomenon, and not in too scientific a way. He figured she was diving into something much deeper than anything he could see.

“Well,” she began as if coming up for air, “if the metadata from all the images that have been entered is correct, it obviously would not be possible for this to happen in what you call a real-world situation. There would have to be some sense of movement on the part of the gunman. Apart from what looks a like a puff of smoke, there is no visual indication of movement. Spooky action and a distance.”

She knew what he was thinking about, and she was letting him know.

“If I was to explain this implausible shooting to my Superintendent,” said Jack, “we would have to say that the gunman appeared out of nowhere and had enough time to take aim and fire. Then disappear and reappear a moment later, capturing the bullet back into the barrel as it returns to the rifle’s chamber.”

“You are catching on fast, Jack, but your Superintendent would hardly believe that scenario, I don’t even believe it, but in physics, there is a probabilistic chance that it could have happened. Erin’s paper is almost an appraisal of this very situation which, if it is true, will make her living proof of her thesis.”

“What do you mean by this living proof?”

“Well, Erin’s body would become a site for every scientist interested in this phenomenon. Governments, industries as well as scientists from around the world would want to examine her, and take specimens. You know how that turns out; you’ve seen the movies. It would mean governments might see her as a threat or as an asset. She would no longer have a life as we enjoy it, but would constantly be monitored. Think of it if the press and social media were ever to find out about her. “The girl who could repel bullets”, the headlines would read. They wouldn’t understand that she had nothing to do with it apart from scientifically speculating on a probability. A very slim probability too, but that might be the explanation of what happened.”

The probability of the method for this attempted murder might be low, very low; but the probability of a devastating effect on Erin's life was huge. "Oh God," mumbled Jack, "what the hell can we do?"

"Think long and hard before showing the photographic evidence to your Superintendent, that's what," said Michelle. "Once the miraculous story of a shooting and survival from it becomes public knowledge, it will go viral."

Jack sat down on the couch with his wine. "Sorry, I have taken us away from the non-work part of the evening, haven't I."

"I believe you have. And in terms of your work, I don't envy you. Knowing what to do next would be difficult; but I know that you'll make the right decision because you don't always go by the book, do you?"

Jack grinned at her. She knew him enough to know that he'd take what she just said as a compliment. "You are right," he replied, emphasising her observation and his resignation, "but this is my first big case in Cheltenham, and there are so many things that just don't add up. I might call it a night. Is that ok with you?"

"It's fine with me, Jack," added with a warm softness, "and you are a pleasant surprise. Still on for tomorrow though?"

"Sure," which sounded to as he said it as lacklustre as his love life, so he quickly enthused: "Absolutely, that will be great."

"I'll book a table and text you."

At the door, he turned and looked back at Michelle. It was a threshold moment. But he retreated. He felt completely out of his depth. The known unknowns were mounting, and not just at the crime scene.

When he got into his car it was 9.45 pm. It felt too early to have left, but if he'd stayed would that have been overstaying his welcome? He switched focus back to work, it was a work night after all. He had a feeling to call Erin.

"It's a late call, I realise, but there's an issue with the crime scene I want to run by you. I have the data back from Edward's analysis of photographs, and they make pretty strange reading. I could be over at your house around 10 pm."

“I’m worn out,” she pleaded, “and my parents will say the house is a mess. It isn’t of course, but there’ll be an argument with my dad and he’ll blame my mother for the state of the house ....”

Erin’s father, thought Jack, obstinate type. Then suddenly Erin’s tone changed as if she was spoiling for that fight. The phone was still being held near enough to her so that Jack could hear her turn and shout the announcement: “DI Jones is coming over. He’ll be here in 15.”

He was met with stony silence by Erin’s Dad. No matter.

“Erin, it seems impossible that the gunman could have been there, he was clearly visible in two sequences. According to Peter’s findings, there is definite evidence that someone appeared and fired a gun but the time signatures on the images make it impossible to have happened in our understanding of time. The gunman appears, disappears, reappears and then disappears again with no physical trace left of him being there.”

“I’m not sure what to say....” She was alarmed, but her hesitation wasn’t due to incomprehension. Jack could sense there was excitement in the air as if there was a rush of too much information as if she meant to say, “I don’t know where to begin.”

“Your research may provide an explanation,” he said encouragingly.

“Will you think I am mad?”

“Why don’t you just try me and see what happens? My mind is open to things I never thought I’d consider possible. Or probable.”

Looking Jack straight in the eye, she began in a way that almost suggested a confession. “I want to tell you everything, starting with the research paper. That paper suggested a set of theoretical possibilities based on research undertaken in Antarctica.”

“Yep,” Jack nodded. “I read it. Out of my league, of course, but Michelle filled me in on some of it.”

“Wow, that makes me feel a little better. Well, when I thought about it more fully, I couldn’t believe the context related to how the events that took place seemed to be a copy of my paper. Turning me into a living guinea pig of my theoretical concept, like a self-fulfilling prophecy.”



“The shooting?”

“No, not the shooting. The possibility of a parallel universe passing through us, going in the opposite direction. I was affected in some inexplicable way by that particular part.”

“And the shooting?”

“Yes, but why it happened to me is possibly that I was open to it. The thing that scares me is that the moment this gets out I’ll be seen as some sort of freak. I’ll be under investigation as much as the shooter.”

Her viewpoint was exactly what Michelle had warned him about. He had to define his moral as well as ethical responsibility in this bizarre case. To find some way to protect her.

“There’s something else,” Erin continued. “A kind of sensory dissociation I’ve been experiencing. Little things like food tasting different, but almost like it’s someone else’s breakfast I’m eating. But bigger things too. Something altering inside me. Do you know about transubstantiation? The alleged miracle in the Catholic mass, when wine turns into blood and bread into flesh?”

“Thanks for being so honest. I understand your fears, and they are real, so we need to tread carefully with what we devolve.” But, thought Jack, how is anyone going to believe this? Nonetheless, if this starts seeping out of the cracks both Erin and Jack will be subject to ridicule or worse. Michelle had referred to the danger of Erin being used as a site and not as a person. And there were those postgrad students at the university whose research funding would be savaged by sensationalist news headlines.

This was not the sort of case he thought he would find at the gateway to the idyllic Cotswolds.

ERIN

Erin felt that things could go awry very quickly. She paced about her bedroom, calculating how she needed the next few days to take control and plan the possible scenarios. If her suspicions were true not only did the bullet go back in time, but some particles of the parallel universe were now part of her, programmed into her DNA. Rather than be probed and prodded like a lab rat in a government or private institution she needed

time to work it out for herself. One thing was certain: she had to go, early in the morning. She'd need cash. Where do all these things come from when you want to go off the grid? This alien thought was hard for her to face – but her intelligence and intuition told her that this was an extreme situation calling for extreme action.

Suddenly there was an unfamiliar sound. There were figures surrounding her, dressed in black with balaclavas, pushing her over, holding her to the floor, and strapping her hands and feet together. Before there was a chance of screaming, thick gaffer tape was clamped over her mouth and a hood was drawn over her head. She was picked up and thrown over someone's shoulder as though she weighed less than a feather. Terrified, barely managing to struggle against gruff arms around her, she realised how weak she was compared to her assailants. She could feel carried effortlessly downstairs, out the door and laid into what she assumed must be the boot of a car. Almost immediately the car took off at speed, bouncing her around as she curled in a foetal position. It had happened, so soon—news was out—but how?

Inside the boot and inside the hood she was buried in the blackest blackness. In panic and stress her heart was pounding, but her other senses were on high alert, feeding a change that was happening inside her. Something was growing, evolving like a warm blanket and creating a calming feeling of inner strength. Without sight the inward journey was rewarding even as Erin's head was being sloshed around. Was there any cause for her change of being? She was reminded of a game where she had twenty questions to guess what she did for a living according to the unknown sign placed on her head. In Erin's game, she asked and answered her own questions to find out what she was experiencing. "Could it have been the bullet? Could the bullet have infected, polluted, contaminated her?" Mumbling her answers into the gaffer tape made her feel safer in the darkness. "Particles might have travelled across the universe. From the parallel location of the shooting; the bullet and the victim of the bullet. How can I ever really think this, I could never really know them. If possible then intuition would kick in, I would have to intuit them, allow whatever they were to come out and manifest themselves."

The car stopped, and the boot opened letting in fresh cold air. Erin had given up the idea that some divine or demonic intervention could take place. She was going to be responsible for what happened, at least in part without knowing which part.

"Grab her arms, and I get her feet."

“Boss said not to damage the goods.”

“Yeah, I worked at the markets. I know all about damaged fruit.”

“Ok, take her up to the computer lab.”

Not the government, thought Erin calmly, maybe a private company, or an adjunct set up independently by the government.

She was pushed down on her back across what felt like a bench or hard bed, and struggled as she tried her arms and legs were quickly strapped onto what were presumably railings of some kind of the sides. The hood came off in a flurry like a reveal in a magic act on stage. As Erin’s eyes grew accustomed to the light she saw she was indeed inside a lab, on a surgical operating table. There were a number of instruments attached around her to computers and helmets with sensors dangling down.

“Not a very pretty space,” she mumbled defiantly against the gag, “not somewhere you would want to come to work every day. Where is the natural light? My god, you’re all like caged animals in here.”

“Get rid of that tape from her mouth.”

The tape was ripped off with the same theatrical zeal as the hood had been dispatched.

“Sorry, I didn’t realise I was speaking my thoughts out loud,” she said through stinging lips. Was this adrenalin talking?

“Crazy fu.....”

“Quiet.”

That last order must be from the man in charge.

“Good evening, Erin, lovely to have you here. My name is Jim Falon; sorry to snatch you away; we had some incredibly exciting news about you and wanted to meet you in person. But we couldn’t wait for the news to become public, or for reports to leak out to other industries and agencies, without talking to you first.”

“News?” Erin knew this was a big question. “From where?”

“Ah, news from Professor Peter Dyson, about two of his computer science postgrads working on a set of photographs. These photos proved to us you were shot and then just in the blink of an eye you were un-shot, if you see what I mean. We need to ask you a few questions, then do a few tests.”

Erin felt confident that they knew nothing about the real reason she might be of interest. She couldn't help but become sarcastic in her defiance.

“Do you have permission for these tests, and have you done the correct ethical approval paperwork for me to sign so you can ask me questions?”

“Don't be silly or difficult. You're different. And you might not be aware, but you are a quite remarkable young lady because of that difference. Government, the military ... they'd pay a lot of money to find out what makes you different.”

“You're the one being silly, difficult ... and patronising. Don't ever call me young lady again in that condescending tone.”

Jim laughed, but she could tell he was uneasy, not expecting Erin to be so unflappable, so in control. She imagined he expected she'd be a screaming mess.

“Strap the EEG on her head and get MEG ready. If we don't get anything useful, we will try the PET scan.’

JACK

“Is that Detective Inspector Jones?” The man's voice on the phone was gruff, impatient, and angry but also urgent. Almost desperate.

“Yes, is that Erin's number?” It had come up on his mobile.

“You the bastard who arrested my daughter?”

“Whaa ... can you repeat that?”

“Erin's been arrested! We went to bed just as you arrived to interview her. Woke up when we heard car doors slam shut and the motor rev, knocked on her bedroom door to find she was gone. Not a note left, not a

word from you coppers. Thank gawd I found her mobile. Why is she arrested and where is she?"

"She hasn't been ...," Jack started to say, but a dreadful thought interrupted him. "You say this happened just now? I'll be there as quick as I can, don't touch anything. No, it was not me."

In the car Jack made a call, "Dan, yeah I know it's late ... hey can you hear me? Can you turn the music down?"

Dan's voice was being drowned by what Jack pictured as the booming ferocity of a nightclub inferno lit by strobes. Where did she find a place like that in this town? "Sorry about this but, listen, I need you to get over to Erin's house immediately. It sounds like she might have been abducted."

"What the fuck!"

Jack was unsure whether that was a response to the news or simply to his voice being the one on the line. "OK, OK I'll get there ...," she shouted reluctantly through the techno beats still pounding in the background, "though you're interrupting what might have turned into a damned good time."

It was well after midnight when Jack arrived back at Erin's parent's house. Dan squealed to a stop a few minutes later. Jack was impressed, especially as Dan still had the look of someone out clubbing. "Thanks for coming," he offered. "Sorry to cut your night short." She theatrically pouted at this. "I want to check out the house for signs of a break-in and what I believe might be kidnapping. I need you to deal with the parents; you know the normal 24hrs routine before they report her a missing person. Distract them, I know it won't be easy."

"I know what to do, thank you," Dan was miffed at Jack's attitude.

"Look, there's stuff I haven't told you about, stuff that's happened since we last spoke. I need to inspect Erin's bedroom straight away."

"Ok, not a problem ... but I was having a really good night by Cheltenham standards."

While Dan engaged the parents with her notebook out, Erin's father pointed upstairs, drawing an imaginary map on the ceiling to show where the bedroom was.

Jack figured from his conversation with her earlier, that Erin was probably planning to leave. She was astutely aware of the predicament that was becoming her life. A suitcase was open on the bed, half packed. Jack sat next to it, looking at the contents and pondering where she thought she might run to. His gaze wandered vaguely to the carpet at his feet. What was that mark there, in the carpet pile next to the toe of his shoe? He took out his mobile and turned on its torch, angling it low and swivelling it across the surface. Yes, those shadows that it cast looked like indents of some heavy creped sole of a boot. He followed them across the floor then out onto the hall landing. The bedroom door had a small number of fibres caught in the latch. Two or three intruders. She'd be taken quickly and quietly. And expertly. A highly professional job. Gagged if not unconscious. Carried out to the car outside. The noise of getting her into the—into the boot most likely—had woken up the parents. Heading downstairs, he heard Dan finishing up with how the police would put a call out, and for them to call, if she showed up. The usual guff. She did it well enough to placate them, at least for the moment.

Sitting next to each other back in Dan's car, Jack gave the background details of what had happened so far. Dan sat in amazement. "I knew the photos were strange," she said, "but that's like a magic trick; now you see it, now you don't. In the morning briefing, you weren't going to disclose all the information, were you? You were going to protect Erin and Michelle."

"Michelle doesn't need protection." Jack saw Dan's eyebrow raise as if she'd noticed another clue.

"Well, Erin then," she continued, "because she'd become the subject of some scientific test agency ... which would be a complete invasion of her person."

Jack looked at Dan in a new light. "Precisely. Of course, I was going to run all of it by you first. But now this has happened. It's forcing my hand, and if you're with me, it is your hand as well. It would take forensics to prove it but I know there are traces upstairs of a struggle."

“And,” added Dan, “the parents said they heard car doors and a boot being slammed shut. Light sleepers, I guess. Though in this dead quiet neck of the suburban woods, a car door slamming could be a bomb going off.”

“But if they didn’t wake to the break-in and the scuffle, then it seems pretty clear someone very professional got to her.”

“OK,” Dan relented, “I am definitely in, but what are we going to do? Send for forensics in a week after the missing person paperwork has gone through? That’ll be too late.”

“We have to find her as soon as possible. Peter’s report hit my desk early tonight and only hours later Erin’s abducted. That’s crazily close timing, eh? Let’s start with the postgrads first thing, then we have to tell the Super of Erin’s possible abduction, and that I believe it’s linked to the shooting.”

“Well, that could hold for a couple of days, but we also have to reveal the evidence of the photographs at some stage.”

“See you first thing.”

Dan watched the car door slam shut and waited for Jack to drive off. Could she go back to the nightclub and pull an all-nighter? She knew she was addicted to the environment where the vibrating soundwaves grabbed you as soon as you entered, and pulled all your muscles into action independent of thought. Primitive movements give Dan a totally embodied experience, the sheer joy of being confluent with her being, independent of thought.

She started her car and headed home; stupid guilt had the final say.

Jack drove home with his head popping and an anxious feeling, but he was desperate to snatch a few hours of sleep. The scenarios of Erin’s abduction and whatever her predicament was, now played over on his mind. He set his alarm for 6 am.

But even more perplexing issues kept him awake. Trying to understand the strangeness of timelines was hurting his head. Could he accept something so strange as a parallel universe? He got up and checked his old dictionary. Parallel: side by side, equal distance apart. Why would this other universe not be skew or not coalescing with this one? Now he was thinking of the graphic images proving the gunman’s existence.

There were people who believed in miracles and the magic in the Bible, so why not a parallel antiverse? The questionable nature of this whole case was chaotically looping about in his throbbing head like the beat of the techno music in Dan's nightclub world.

A moment later the alarm went off next to his bed. 6 am. Damn. It took willpower he didn't realise he had to climb out of bed and stagger to the shower. Thank god he had a shower and not the usual English bath he'd grown up with, the one with that spray hose attached to the taps. He never understood designers. So many things they created in the world that did not make any sense. Jack could have written a book about bad object design that could have covered nearly every other appliance in the house if not, in fact, the whole world. The argument from design. Wasn't that a religious argument about god's design for us all? Just as bad.

He dragged himself into the hot shower in an induced daze, then had breakfast over a quick flash at the news on his iPad, and then he was off to the station.

DAN

Dan was there already with the students' addresses in her hand, waiting at her car.

"That was an interesting night," she welcomed him, "though not as interesting as the one I might have had before you called."

"I think I set my alarm for 6," he said ruefully, "around 5 am."

"Well," Dan's sarcasm was naked, "that's interesting too."

"First up," Jack announced, "one of the creepy twins at the lab, Craig Arnott. Lives with his parents also. I've already called."

At 7.30, they were knocking on the front door of another comfortably boring suburban house. With surprising promptness, the door swung open. "Good morning, come in," said an unnaturally bright and chirpy young man in a tracksuit, "we're all up and happy to help."

"Sorry to call so early, just a couple of questions that we would like to ask," Jack mumbled unnecessarily, and quickly went on, "Yesterday, fantastic work. by the way. But did you or, to your knowledge, your fellow student Sally contact anyone about your findings."



“Why,” Craig responded, “what’s happened?”

That seemed a bit too prepared, figured Dan. To her, it was like a cue: “What do you think could happen?”

Craig was momentarily caught. “Oh, nothing. No, we just sat amazed, looking at the result. Peter said it would be a game-changer for our research and worth millions. I suggested that we had to sit on it and wait till after the police investigation because it might affect Erin. But Peter then suggested he’d make some discreet inquiries ... he wanted to start getting the application ready for the next funding round.”

Dan was on her phone getting Peter’s home address.

“Well you’re right to keep it quiet for the moment,” she remarked, not looking up. “This is an ongoing investigation so don’t say anything to anyone till we get back to you.”

“You have my word,” Craig was in a double take, glancing between the two of them. Nice spot for a twin, thought Dan. “I don’t want to get Erin into any trouble,” he added, “... or more than she seems to be in already. By the evidence, she’s experienced spectacularly strange things.”

“The fucking creep,” said Dan as they left, “he must have known the gravity of the situation for Erin, having met her.”

“Twin boy Craig?” asked Jack. “Oh, do you mean Peter? I thought we might have some time, at least a day, but this case has just gone into overdrive.”

Dan was driving fast. “Peter better cough up,” she said, “we need to find her before whatever shit is about to fall on this young person’s shoulders happens.”

Dan surprised herself with the sudden shift in attitude towards Erin. She could tell Jack was glad of it. By 8.15 am they were knocking at Peter’s door and were invited in by a middle-aged man in his dressing gown. “This is a bright and early start,” said Peter cheerily, “do you have any news? I heard from Craig that you’d visited.”

Why is everyone else so cheery this early in the morning? Dan brooded over this for a moment, thinking back to the missed opportunities of her

night before, and how she might have been waking up today but for this. “News travels faster than we do,” she said cuttingly.

“I will cut straight to the chase. Did you call anyone about the data you put in your report pertinent to our investigation?” Jack’s voice no longer had any sympathy or politeness to it.

“I am not sure that I like your tone.” Peter’s remark, thought Dan, seemed silly coming from someone in their plaid dressing gown.

“We’re part of an ongoing investigation into a young woman’s near-fatal shooting and now her possible abduction. I don’t care about you liking my tone, I just want you to answer directly: who did you speak to about the lab work after we left?”

Peter was startled. “What do you mean, I can speak to anyone I like, it’s my work.” He then added, more—thought Dan—as an overreaction than as a caution, “Should I call my lawyer?”

“If you want, but there’s no need. Just tell us who you called,” said Jack, “...now! I can get it from the phone records in another hour, but if something has happened to Erin, I will be coming for you.”

“Something’s happened to her?” He seemed suddenly alarmed. “What? Look, I just called an old friend...”

“Name and address,” demanded Dan.

“He’s someone who can help out with funding for my research. I was so excited. I knew he’d be interested and able to ... apply leverage. Works in partnership with the government on advanced security systems, you know the kind of thing, making the world a better place.”

Dan repeated, “Name and what company, address?”

Peter went to write it down, “It’s perfectly legal, you know, the government fund it. Could not come with higher recommendations.”

“Recommended by the government,” said Jack, “and we know they’re so altruistic. The world will be a better place if only life’s crazy circumstances would be re-designed by the government.”

“What happened to Erin?” Peter asked, obviously getting nervous.

Dan snatched the paper out of his hand, turned heading for her car, “Do not phone any more of your old friends. No one. That clear?”

“We think she was abducted last night,” Jack put in this morsel for Peter to swallow, “not long after you made your call.”

“Abducted? Like kidnapped?” gasped Peter. Then added, under his breath, “No, I don’t believe it, they wouldn’t.”

JACK

“So, it’s called Securope,” said Jack, googling it on his phone, “which gives us an idea of its geographic span I suppose. Either that or it’s a bondage cult.” He spoke the address into the car’s navigation system, while Dan put her foot down. Soon they were speeding along a narrow country lane.

“This is getting exciting,” Dan said. “Just as well I didn’t follow through on my missed opportunity last night. You know I almost was going to scoot back to that nightclub after the biz at Erin’s. Unlucky for me. But lucky for you I’m clear-eyed and clear-headed this morning.”

“Christ; look out!”

Dan swerved the car, just missing a blurred object lying slightly off the centre of the tarmac. The back wheels slid in a screeching arc. Jack could see Dan keeping her foot on the accelerator, steering the front wheel drive straight into the slide to correct the drift. Wow, he thought. Once it was out of the spin, Dan brought the car to a halt.

“Faarck,” she screeched. “Well, I didn’t expect that.”

“Impressive,” said Jack, though he noticed her grip on the steering wheel was like claws in a piece of prey. “You OK?”

“Do you need to call for backup?” she asked, jokingly. “We’re not even there yet and we almost got killed.”

“Relax. We’re going to look pretty stupid charging in there if she’s back home having a cup of tea with her parents while we storm this government-funded company with Cheltenham’s finest.”

“What the hell was that, by the way,” asked Dan. Jack stepped out of the car, surprised at his jelly legs and walked back towards the object on the

road. With each shaky step its form became clearer until he froze a few metres from what was without a doubt a human body. “Jesus, we didn’t hit it,” he reassured himself. He’d seen that it was already laid out as the car swerved from it. He stepped cautiously closer and could make it out as female, young too. And then came the astonishing recognition of her face. It was Erin. Without a doubt. Erin. The last steps toward her were even more unsteady, even more fearful than if it had been an anonymous figure. As he crouched over her he could see she was alive, alive and even semi-conscious. “Erin, Erin...,” he shouted, to her, to Dan, to himself. He quickly looked her over for any obvious signs of damage, limbs in unnatural positions, broken bones, pooling blood. He felt along her spine for any evidence of injury. It would be a risk, but he had to get her quickly away from this place. Lifting her as best he could he staggered with her back to the car. Dan had the rear doors already open and they laid Erin gently across the back seat.

“We passed a company CCTV camera just back there,” Dan pointed out. “We have to keep going or they’ll suss something at the next camera.”

“Eagle eye, nice work Dan,” offered Jack, “but what do we do about our new passenger? Wherever the hell she came from. However, she got there.”

“First thing is we’ll have to cover her up so she’s not picked up on the camera. There’s a blanket in the boot and some of my clothes. We can drape those over her. She seems unhurt and unconscious. Let’s hope she stays that way for a bit longer.”

“Looks like some quite a bit of gym gear of yours,” murmured Jack as he poked about in the boot, “or ... maybe not, hmmm ... how do you wear this?”

“It’s not gym gear, boss; and don’t ask if you don’t want to be shocked. Just chuck it all and the blanket over her, like it’s my messy back seat.”

Dan took off fast to make up time.

“Let’s hope we’re too early for Securope,” said Jack uneasily, turning to check Erin’s condition under the pile. “We don’t want to deliver her back into whatever ordeal they were perpetrating on her.”

The gated technology park had the obligatory security guard, gesturing for Dan to wind down the window. Before he could speak she'd flashed her police ID. "It's a little early," he muttered, "who are you here to see?"

"Jim Falon at Securope."

"No, you won't find him here. Not at this hour. And anyway, that lot keeps strange office hours. Must all work from home or something like that."

"If he does show up here, tell him he's to call into Cheltenham Police."

"OK," said Jack as Dan reversed out and turned the car around. "Not a complete loss, as we have our passenger in the back. We'll have to chase this Falon chap up at his home. But first, we need to talk with Erin and find her somewhere safe to hide. If we take her to my place we can drive into the garage, and no one will see her. I'll go to work to arrange a safe house."

"Do you think the Super will believe you?"

"I'll have to make her believe me."

"It's going to be quite a story. I wish I was going with you."

"They might order us to bring Erin in. If so, then it's out of our hands."  
"I'll stay with Erin," offered Dan, "but I am no babysitter, so don't be too long and keep me up to speed."

As the car moved up the driveway, Jack opened the garage door with his remote. Together they helped Erin up the stairs and into the spare bed. Jack went to his room to grab a couple of unused prepaid phones, remnants of a previous case in North London. He handed Dan a phone with his new mobile phone number set on speed dial.

"You've got your gun, haven't you?" he asked, although he knew the answer.

"Of course. Do you think I'll need it?"

"I fucking hope not. Shit, didn't mean to swear."

“The situation demands it,” said Dan and grabbed him by the arm in camaraderie.

JANE

Superintendent Jane Munro looked up from the screen calendar that had pinged a notification for a meeting with DI Jones just as he walked through her door.

“Hello, Ma’am.”

“What is all this, Jack?”

Jack sat down and began going through all the details in his notebook meticulously and systematically. Jane’s eyes were focused entirely on him, while he studied his notebook, as page after page turned over. It was like a weird fictional story but Jack’s account of it showed he believed it. She had to replay it on her terms to make sure she got it.

“What you are saying is that we have technical evidence that there was a shooter. But that he could not exist, and yet there he is in the photographs. And that, whether this shooter was there or not, Erin was shot; but now there is no evidence of this at all. Then this computer science Professor helps you identify that there was a shooter through some kind of tricky data visualisation.”

“Yes Ma’am, that’s the start of it.”

“And this professor, believing that he’d achieved some major breakthrough, called a company by the name of Securope to alert them to your investigation.”

“Yes,” agreed Jack, and went over it again, “then Erin then gets abducted.”

“OK, Erin gets abducted. But you did not call in because you were unsure that she hadn’t gone into hiding or just run off. Meanwhile, this professor passes some kind of report to the director of Securope, whose name is Jim Falon. You drive to the company premises believing Falon might have abducted Erin only to find Erin on the road along the way, semi-conscious in a state of exhaustion.”

“Yep ... yes, Ma’am.”

“But you’ve now left her somewhere you won’t tell us, with Dan as a minder. And now you come here asking to use a safe house.”

“Exactly, and I know it sounds ...”

“Yes, exactly!” said Jane, stressing every syllable. “It sounds like one of those stupid time-shifting movies that I hate. You never know where anyone is. But at least in those movies you know it’s fiction. Now you’re asking me to believe this is a fact.”

“Not a fact, well, not quite, or not yet. It’s just ... in the terms of the physics that Erin and all those that have since become involved in this case seem to be caught up in, in those terms there is a high probability that all these contrary things are real. At least, I’d say there is enough circumstantial evidence to suggest that we should investigate further.”

To say the least, Jane was bewildered. But one fact at least seemed certain: Erin was under some kind of threat. Jack and Dan had her safety in mind. And a safe place to question her would be a halfway decent means of getting this tangle sorted out. “OK, you can have your safe house.”

“And look,” added Jack, “if I’m wrong then no one will come after her or us. The government won’t call. Jim Falon won’t call. It will all die down, and Erin can go home. What happened at the science fair will go down as a story from Tales of the Unexpected.”

“Tales of the ... what?” asked Jane. But Jack didn’t have time to reply. “What?” she barked at the knock on the office door. “Ma’am, there’s a call for you that is claiming to be urgent. Shouting about government business. The caller’s name is Falon. Jim Falon.”

“Falon?” She could hardly believe it. Something was definitely going on. “Has he been listening in on us?”

She’d mumbled that last bit to herself, but the constable clearly heard.

“Well, he seems quite irritated by something Ma’am,” explained the constable sheepishly.

“I think this deserves the speaker phone,” Jane gestured to Jack to pull his chair close in on her desk as she waved the constable out of the office. “Superintendent Munro here, how can I help you?”

“At last! And apart from an issue with your ... receptionist ... just now, I have a serious complaint with you about a couple of your detectives. I understand that two of your staff apparently tried to force their way into Technology Park this morning to question me. I need you to know that I deal in technology that has a high-security status with the government. I won't be questioned by your plod about data that they couldn't possibly understand and that could pose a sensitive security risk if they accessed it. And, I think they've also been harassing my collaborator, Professor Dyson. They should leave him out of this as well.”

Jane could see Jack's mouth hanging open in alarm, tinged with a kind of amusement.

“If my detectives called on you, be assured that they did so as part of an ongoing criminal investigation. Are you calling to apologise for not being able to meet with them? We could have you come by the station. If you'd prefer the process to be more formal.”

There was a pause, and then Falon spoke patronisingly down to her: “Do I need to repeat myself to make this clear? Securope is a private company but is funded by the government; we do government business and what we do is—to be as blunt as I can—top secret. The signage says ‘Keep Out’. ‘No Entry’. That includes your minions.”

“Do I need to repeat myself?”, responded Jane. “They would have been there because they are carrying out an investigation into a crime.”

“I want the name of the detectives, the man and the woman, who came out to Technology Park today.”

“They'll give you their names when they see you in person. I am going to look into this case, and — believe me — I will get back to you as well.”

“I don't think you should take this lightly; I am very well connected in places that could exert unwanted pressure on you and your Cheltenham crew.”

“I can assure you that we will not take your call lightly.”



Jane put the receiver down as she heard it click off on the other end, and then in a double take made sure the line was disconnected. She looked up and drilled her eyes silently into Jack, like in a staring game between a parent and child, knowing he'd have to break first.

Jack cleared his throat, rhetorically. "Erm, raw nerve there?"

"I'm still not sure what is going on, Jack," she said, "but that just made it even more bizarre, and suspicious. Quite apart from Falon's security paranoia, for Erin's security, any info on her ought to be kept on a need-to-know basis. We don't want any more leaks. Find out what she knows about Securope."

"First," ventured Jack, "I want to know how she escaped from Securope."

"I want to make this clear," said Jane solemnly, "I never imagined anything this weird would be your first case here. I want you and Dan to take great care from now on. Nothing that even hints of being dangerous without backup. I will have a safe house for you within the hour."

DAN

"Erin's been drinking tea," she updated him as they helped her out to Dan's car, "and I've been pacing from one untidy room to another, getting edgier by the minute." From his lack of homeliness, Dan pegged Jack as still being a tourist in Cheltenham. "I'm worried about the bizarre twists in this case, boss, almost as much as I am about your personal hygiene."

"We'll be better in the car, even driving around in circles rather than sitting at my place," said Jack. "Is she up for talking?"

"I am sitting here, Jack; you can ask me."

"Sorry, you've been out of it for a while. You ok moving? We need to find somewhere to talk; we need to know how you ended up in a field outside a technology park."

A strange maracas sound filled the car's interior. Jack pulled his phone out. "Text from the Super," he announced. "HmMMM."

"We're on the edge of our seats, boss," said Dan impatiently.

“Government rang to find out what was going on,” he read, “and she gives me my score card: ‘2 out of 2 for Jack’.”

“What was that about?”

“I told the Super that I bet she’d get calls from Securope and the government. Bingo.”

“You have any good money on that?”

The maracas notification tones sounded again. “Ok, it’s the safe house,” and Jack typed the location into the sat-nav system. “It’s out on the B4213 just past the River Severn.”

They drove on in a silence that Dan found ominously strained, punctuated only by the sat-nav voice announcing their itinerary, one long step after another. Finally, it declared, “You have reached your destination.”

“At fucking last,” Dan muttered as she pulled the car off the road and glided into a layby.

“So a hitchhiker,” she said, breaking the silence after stopping the car, “was picked up by a woman who claimed she was a witch. I don’t believe you, said the hitchhiker, prove it! So she tuned into a layby.”

“That is one awful joke,” replied Jack. But Dan saw that he couldn’t help a smile of relief breaking out. She looked in the windscreen mirror and saw Erin smiling in the back seat.

“What have you two got to laugh about?” All three of them gasped out a giggle. And then slumped back into a sluggish silence.

“Erin, let’s get you inside and find out what happened to you,” said Jack with an official tone.

As they helped Erin out of the car and along the path to the cottage, conveniently concealed from the road by trees, Dan heard Erin whisper in her ear, “I kind of expected you to be a witch.” Was that a compliment? Was that a come-on? Erin was plucky; Dan would give her that. But she was a strange one too.

ERIN

“It’s hard to recount it all,” began Erin. They were in the living room of what Jack and Dan referred to as the safe house. She’d had a shower and was wrapped in a blanket, clutching a mug of coffee and pondering the Danish roll that they’d collected from a café along the way there, wherever they were. They’d passed Apperley and crossed the River Severn, so she figured they were west of Cheltenham. That was the end of her mental map. “I just knew I’d have to run, to get away. I didn’t talk to my parents about it; too complicated, and they’d only try to stop me. I was just quietly throwing some things in a bag when suddenly there were men in my room. God knows how they got in, and how they did that without making any noise. In fact, there didn’t seem to be any noise at all. I was gagged so I couldn’t scream and held so tightly I couldn’t kick out to knock anything over. Then one of them picked me up. The world went topsy-turvy. A bag went over my head. It was horrible. I was gulping for air but with something pushed into my mouth and thick tape clamped across it. I was wildly panicking but no matter what I did just unable to make any noise. I could feel I was being carried downstairs and then I felt cold air, so I figured I was outside. As much as I kicked and shoved, their hold on me was too strong. Oh god, I thought I was going to die. Or that something worse was in store for me. Then it did get worse. I was dropped into a small space. I had to curl up to fit into it. At least with the bag over my head there was still a bit of greyish-yellow light seeping through. But then everything went pitch black. I guessed I’d been bundled into the boot of a car and the boot door was slammed shut.”

“I realise this is traumatic for you,” consoled Jack sliding a freshly made coffee across to her, “but anything you can tell us will be helpful. We’ll see you get some counselling once we can be assured of your safety.”

“For PTSD?” said Erin. “I think I’m an old hand at that now.”

“Before the hood was put on you,” asked Dan, “did you make out anything about the people who had gained entry into your bedroom?”

“It sounds like a cliché, but they were dressed in black with balaclavas over their heads.”

“Well, that narrows it down,” quipped Dan, evidently trying to ease the pressure.

“So, you were in the boot of the car,” prompted Jack.

She paused in anguish. Recalling the terror of that drive into the unknown. It was like stepping toward a cliff edge. There was something dark and deep and cold in front of her and she was staring into it. Staring, silently.

“When you’re ready...,” Jack prompted her gingerly.

“It was cold. In the boot. I was only wearing what I had on from the house. Funny, you don’t think about dressing appropriately for being kidnapped, do you?” Erin made a mock laugh, to help her step back from the cliff edge. “I’m not sure how long I was in there; it felt like forever, in blackness. But while I was in the boot of the car, I could feel something in me. I am not sure how to explain, but it felt like someone had made me a playlist of songs, and they were going around in my head. Songs I’d never heard of but could sing along to. In the darkness I could only travel inwards, and as I did, I seemed to pick up more and more new information, connecting to me without knowing where it came from. It wasn’t that long a drive, but the bumpy road made me think we were in the countryside. When we stopped, I was lifted out of the boot and carried for several minutes. I could sense that I was being taken into a building going through security doors, like the research labs at the university. I tried struggling of course but the brutes who had me were strong as oxen. One made a joke about hauling sacks in a fruit market. Not very flattering. Another said to take me to the computer lab. When they took the hood off it didn’t look like the sort of computer lab I worked in. More like a research hospital or clinic with a treatment bed in the centre of the room. They bound me to the bed with straps, but the tape had become loose and I was able to work part of the gag out of my mouth enough to start spitting insults. Don’t know where that pugnacity came from. There was a dozen or so techs in the room in their lab coats. They were wiring me up to a couple of biometric reading machines, you know EEG and gear like that.”

“That must have been terrifying,” offered Dan, looking up from her notebook sympathetically.

“First thing in my mind was: why the hell are they doing this? Then I got very scared: if they’re were letting me see their faces, they’re not ever letting me go. That made me feel more helpless than I was before, and yet also with nothing to lose. Don’t know what came over me, but I demanded if they had ethics clearance to do whatever it was they were doing!”

She noticed Dan give an encouraging smile.

“That’s when a man who seemed to be in charge of all this, stepped up to me and weirdly introduced himself. As if he couldn’t care less about being behind a kidnapping. Which of course made me shit scared that they didn’t intend to let me go, by ransom or anything else. That I might be used for an experiment and then chucked in the waste disposal.”

“Introduced himself,” said Jack, “you mean he gave his name?”

“Jim,” replied Erin. “Yes, Jim. Not the sort of name for a kidnapper is it? Can’t remember his last name. Sounded like a bird, I think. And he did this guff routine about how I was a remarkable person who had an obligation to the world to share what I knew. And what I had could help with global security. I was looking at him and saying that I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. Finally, he said, well, in that case, you don’t mind if we do some tests.”

“I think we’ve got a good idea who this Jim is,” said Jack, “but tell us what happened then.”

“This sounds like some sort of bravado I don’t have, but by this stage I think I was more irritated than frightened. What happened is a bit of a blur, it started when they began running the EEG machine ... I don’t know how to put this ... my head seemed to reject the apparatus that was testing it.”

“Reject?” asked Dan, looking up from her notes.

“You were angry,” suggested Jack.

“More than that, it was like my antibodies were violently fighting back from an invasive disease. Actually, my neurons too. I thought what was happening was just in my head, it was surreal but the whole room went crazy. It wasn’t just the EEG machine they had connected me to, but all of the equipment in the room. The machines were sparking, imploding. The noise was massive, like a special effects soundtrack gone haywire. Some of the machines caught on fire. The staff panicked, thankfully untying me, shouting and pulling switches. The fire must have triggered the sprinkler system. Don’t know why they call it a ‘sprinkler’: it came down in a torrent. Honestly, it was like being under a pounding waterfall. People were colliding with each other and slipping on the floor as they ran toward the exit doors. Those brutes must have lost me in the chaos.

But actually, no one seemed to want to restrain or get hold of me. Maybe they thought I was the cause of the chaos and I was dangerous. Whatever, I managed to get outside alone. I was in a kind of back lot, empty, buildings around me but no people.”

“Did you see any signage on any of the buildings?” asked Jack.

“No Entry. Keep Out. Stuff like that, yes. And a name. Yes, a name that struck me as quite strange, ironic if you know what I mean, Securope. But I didn’t want to hang around to get any details. I just wanted to get away, far away before anyone else came out of that building. It was night but moonlit and looking around I saw some fields and ran for them, laying down behind some hedgerows. My head was pounding, but no one was coming after me. No one was shouting my name. No tracker dogs. No paramilitary with torches and guns. Nothing that I expected would happen. After a while, I crept across the field toward a road. The sun was well up by the time I crawled all the way to it. I thought if I could get to that road, I might be able to flag down a car and get home. But I must have passed out until you found me.”

“That’s a hell of an escape,” said Jack admiringly, “do you have any ideas as to why or how the lab machines, like an EEG apparatus, began exploding? Some sort of massive power surge?”

“I have some theories,” said Erin, “but they are wild.”

“Wilder than being shot by a gunman,” asked Dan, “who disappears and then reappears only to reclaim the bullet?”

Erin took a big sip of her coffee and dug into one the Danishes that Jack had bought. After a moment, she said, “My guess would be that whatever else made contact with me at the same time as the bullet did not go back in time but stayed with me, changing direction and coming on my journey with me.”

Dan looked mystified. “Why is it every time you speak I don’t know what you’re talking about? It’s driving me crazy.”

Jack stepped in: “I recall that Michelle used a train analogy to explain this,” he offered, “with letters being transferred between trains. Two trains going in opposite directions speed past each other on parallel tracks, creating a sort of narrow corridor of turbulent air, of chaos. In that interface between the two trains, layers of atomic fabric are torn away

from each surface and intermingle, hanging in limbo. But some from one train could get transferred into the other and taken in a reverse direction. Now think of a letter on board each of the trains. A love letter.”

Erin could see Dan dramatically raise an eyebrow. There’s more to this than just a casual example, she thought.

“The love letter,” Jack continued, “consists of individual characters that a person has constructed into words which are assembled into sentences to convey their emotion to someone: memories, dreams, what they care about, how they describe the world, and what compels them to express their ideas and write them down as words and sentences. Think of those characters as particles of thought—like atoms—appearing as a mass or a swarm on the page. Love letters transform the person who receives and reads them. Their energy is transferred; it can’t be extinguished. Even if you set fire to the letter as a gesture releasing a love that was entangled in words on the letter’s page as part of the transformed feeling.”

“I’m losing you,” Dan interrupted, “or you’re losing the thread.”

“The letter has done its job becoming atmospheric as the flames transformed the ink into carbon and water molecules forming part of the atmosphere. So now think of the love letters as the passing trains, tearing off their atomic layers into limbo. But what if they migrated onto each other, so parts of one intermingled with the other.”

“Is that the sort of thing that you are trying to say, Erin?” asked Dan quizzically, and seeming to have also directed the question at Jack.

“Actually ... that’s beautifully put, and pretty much what I was thinking. And the very thing is I fear that some of the molecules you refer to in the love letter analogy have come across and are now part of me as antimatter. These infinitely small particles have continued on with me rather than on their journey.”

“So, this excess of matter—as antimatter—in your body is what caused the lab machines to misfire. Or what enabled you to do so with them,” said Jack carefully proposing a distinction.

“Aha, Erin, you’re like some sort of superhero,” announced Dan. “Contaminated by radiation.”

“I think that is what really happened in the Securope lab,” Jack added. “That may too have been why you mysteriously managed to escape without anyone appearing to follow you, and how you got through the security barrier,” Jack was evidently musing to himself. “You might have just disappeared from everyone else’s viewfinder.”

Dan was looking at them both. “This is doing my head in. Erin, are you saying that whatever is in your body, or head, or wherever, can affect machines remotely?”

“Simply put, that is what I imagine might have happened. It might have been a power surge at the company. There might be another reason, perhaps a solar flare, but I felt something in me, projecting from me.”

“Antimatter: it sounds like a sci-fi device.” Said Dan.

“In medical institutes,” Erin explained, “they use very small amounts of antimatter to obtain images of the brain. So, antimatter does exist in this universe but in very small amounts.”

“How do you know,” Dan asked, “that whatever is acting inside you won’t harm you?”

“I don’t. I just feel that it is some kind of kindred spirit that came to me at the same time as the shooting took place. Like Jack’s analogy of the love letter, but the main problem is that antimatter and matter are not happy bedfellows.”

“Speaking of bedfellows ... well, sort of,” said Jack, awkwardly shifting the tone and pitch of the conversation, “we should settle you in here. My notes about this place say that behind this cupboard ... is a panic room. Ah yes, here it is. I must say, having a panic room seems to me ironic in a safe house.”

“Erin, do you still have your mobile on you?” asked Dan.

“No, they took it when I was kidnapped.”

“That’s an advantage,” said Jack. “for the time being, we don’t want you ringing out or anyone else ringing in. We have a new mobile for you. But this is only to call us, and us you. For now absolutely no one must know that you are here! for now!”



“My parents?”

“Not just yet,” and then Jack added emphatically, “no-one!”

EDWARD

Edward sat in his bland environment struggling with what he had now convinced himself to be his intellectual property. His inner turmoil was coming to a head, unable to deal with all the implications and possible fallout. Ranting at the wall like a crazed, solitary monk, he was pouring out his bile: “That endless chain of emails that point to the authenticity of any theory you want to propose, as an argument representing your whole life’s research, can come back and bite you. There’s no real education left; training is where the money is. Doctors, dentists, scientists, engineers, finance and business entrepreneurs; it’s all just training for their professional careers, negating an education where they learn to value humanity’s ongoing effort to determine truths. I publish, I retract, I publish again. The university loves a connection to world-leading research like mine. OK, it’s still speculative. But I’m about to publish it. Convinced. A hundred per cent. It’s true. It’ll be proved true.”

Edward wasn’t happy. He could do something to shock everyone with his new audacious ideas, but he knew they’d call it pseudo-scientific. For him, it was like Heisenberg: an intuitive reaction to the data. Admittedly, he had fought all his life against privileging such gut reactions. He’d ridiculed students who used the word intuition, suggesting it was just sloppy thinking. Like hearing that scientists’ wildest speculations could all be successfully vindicated in Hugh Everett’s multi-world theory.

But he had something. He knew without quantitative data it would not be provable. But was that just yet? The acute paranoia that someone else would stumble across what he was thinking was crucifying him in agony. He imagined this someone as someone who had not done any of the hard work he’d done, repeatedly fighting for funding, repeatedly going to the Antarctic, and then enduring months in isolation there. They would not be concerned about getting the grants, with those hours and days of writing and rewriting applications. Writing rejoinders. Marshalling and corralling collaborators. They would just jump in and steal his ideas.

Edward jumped out of his chair, indignant and yet appalled at the outrageousness of the words he heard himself uttering. His outrage was distracted by the sound of an email landing on his computer. But only for a moment. He glanced at the screen to see it was from a colleague,

headed “Cheltenham Science Festival find!” The text was characteristically telegraphic, more like a tweet or PR notification than an email. “Edward! The prize-winning paper that I reviewed was delivered at the Festival. Incredible work. Very clever PhD student: John Taylor. Name to watch. Draws on your research about high-density neutrinos. Lots. Inspired interpretation. Interested? See attached.”

Edward slumped back in the chair as though a pile driver had landed on his chest and was smashing its way through. He printed out the attached paper and quickly scanned through it.

“On the road to fame, eh John Taylor. Imagine you might land a Nobel prize, eh? While I’m left in the gutter of discards, those who hadn’t acted quickly enough to publish. Well fuck you John Taylor!” There was still time to redeem this situation.

## JOHN

John’s molecular contribution to Erin was growing and blending with atomic attractions creating new connections and collaborations. The antimatter seeds of his consciousness were still active, and he wondered if they would soon fade or what even faded means in the context of this continuing existence. There was a host; he could feel the host all around him, creating a welcoming homely feeling. John laughed. “All the words that I use seem so inadequate. Take the word ‘feel’. How do I know I feel? It’s all too crazy, but it still has margins of reality to it.” His highly charged antimatter was still coalescing with Erin’s materiality, which is supposedly impossible, but he had predicted it in his paper. No molecular antibodies attacked him; he also felt that the compatibility was based on a strange sense of equilibrium with the host. This became clear to John when there was suddenly a stream of signals he was intercepting that recorded a presence. He felt this was looking for his presence, so he became the antimatter antibody for his host’s defence. John’s atomic antimatter structure was feeling violated, being probed by matter; there was still a lot of history that had not been dealt with since the dawn of the universe. He replied by sending antimatter back to where the original signals had come from with destructive outcomes. The antimatter molecules reacted with the EEG’s materiality and any other machine connected to it by tearing it apart from the inside. It was just a small release of antimatter molecules, a tester to share in time with the host. For now, he had some control of his antimatter in this system, assisting or helping whoever the host organism was; he was protecting it.

John drifted on an analogy for a while. “I’m conjuring up images from any neurons that have travelled with me so far, which on consideration might be a limited palette. It is always hard to know oneself, to interrogate self without knowing what the interrogator knows. Am I the truth of your existence or a perpetual spanner in the works, developing incorrect hypotheses relating to memories that might or might not be yours? This was the bald man's philosophical problem; if a bald man has one hair on his head, is he still bald? With two hairs, is he still bald? This was repeated, that if I were one molecule, would I still exist, how many molecules constitute existence, how many molecules are needed to create a coexistence with a host?”

The recent episode of controlling his antimatter matter was of significance for his sense of materiality. He could affect things, his host must be working out some of the weird things that were happening; this was not just a coincidental joining. He and the host had something in common; it was meant to be, like a serendipitous event, destiny. He felt that he was becoming smaller while expanding; it was territorialisation but without ownership, like crying tears in the rain.

JACK

Jack and Dan were trying to get their boss to comprehend the incomprehensible. They were all struggling to find a way to speak to each other. Jack knew some rudimentary stuff about antimatter from Wikipedia. Dan said she thought they might as well hold a séance. Erin had been open about what she felt was happening inside her body. Now they all needed info on what was going on inside Securope. The one thing Jack was sure of now, well close to certain as he could be, close to knowing something unknowable ... is it takes a leap of faith. Jack knew faith was a loaded word in this company, and didn't want to spin things that were already giddy enough. The most important thing was that, although extreme, what had happened to Erin had an appearance of truth. She'd been kidnapped. She'd escaped. And Securope wanted something from her. He had that to go by, and he would strive to protect her.

“As you said the government did call,” continued Jane, “gave me the guff: they did not want to interfere with the case, couldn't speak highly enough of Jim Falon. Talked about the important work they were doing regarding security and suggested that we work closely with them. I couldn't believe it; you were right on both counts.”

“Thanks, Ma’am, though I’d been hoping we would have been wrong, for Erin’s sake.”

“Speaking of...,” said Jane, “how is she?”

“We left her at the safe house with an officer outside,” explained Jack. “Got a detailed account of her escape, which has some credible moments but also some incredible ones. It’s not as straightforward as we’d like.”

“She’s probably in shock,” suggested Jane. “What’s the next move?”

Dan was impatiently itching to get in on the act. “Looking into Securope and Jim Falon for a start. He presumably doesn’t know what we know, doesn’t know we have the victim of his abduction. And that we have her in protective custody. That’s leverage and we want to push him.”

“Keep in mind, Ma’am,” added Jack, “there have now been two assaults perpetrated on Erin. Whatever is going on here, she’s at the centre of it. She’s become hot property. We need to find out why Securope has been so aggressive and desperate for what they believe Erin knows.”

“Ok,” concluded Jane, “let’s meet back here first thing Monday for a full status report. Things like this can turn ugly, very quickly. So watch out.”

As the meeting closed and he walked back to his desk, Jack suddenly remembered that he was seeing Michelle that evening. His anticipation of the rendezvous had all been lost in the storm and fog of this situation with Erin. Now he wanted to grasp onto something real, at least the prospect of something real as well as exciting in his relationship with her.

“Have you dropped Michelle as a suspect?” asked Dan facetiously.

Jack realised he’d been staring at Michelle’s name on the ever-growing investigation chart, which Dan had just been adding to.

“Ok don’t rub it in,” said Jack collapsing in his swivel chair.

“Rub it in? I think you want to rub her name out, off this chart I mean,” Dan laughed.

“No, she’s part of the picture,” answered Jack.

“A pretty picture, hmmm,” smirked Dan.

They were both looking morosely at the tangled web of lines and names on the whiteboard in front of them.

“This chart,” Jack broke the silence, “would be incomprehensible to anyone coming in from outside the case and trying to read it.”

Dan sat down next to him, “Not just to an outsider. What are we doing Jack, what is the case we are looking at? I am so lost.”

“Let’s go through what we know, what we suspect and what we accept as possibly having taken place. We accept the possibility that Erin was shot whilst giving a paper at the science festival; shot by a gunman who appeared and then disappeared. And we have it as fact that Peter Dyson informed Securope of the photographs of this event late yesterday afternoon. We suspect that Securope sent men to grab Erin for a test or worse. We have her account that Erin escaped due to the machinery bursting into flames in the lab. And we know she is in our protective custody for the time being.”

Dan stepped in, “Let me rephrase that. Smart young science wizard Erin is now a target of the government and of an industry that we know is entangled. Whatever they’re after they’ll even abduct her to get it. How big are they and how small are we? We may have her sheltered for the moment, but, we have nothing really to stop them.”

Jack had to admire her. He could tell that despite her doubts, she was in this seriously. It was “we” all the way. “What Securope want with Erin is the main question that needs answering,” he added.

“You remember that case,” said Jack after a few more moments gazing at the board, “where a person was charged on evidence from CCTV but realised that the audio and image had not been synced properly. It’s like when you’re on Skype, and someone is talking to you normally; then suddenly they slow down, then their voice speeds up to catch up with their lips and they continue as normal. It’s happening in real-time, but what is real about that time?”

Dan screwed up her face. “I thought we just had hold of something real a moment ago. Don't spin any more stories like Blow Up. Stick with the task at hand. Let’s go and shake up Securope.”

DAN

Jack read aloud from the Securope site as Dan whipped them through the traffic. “We are at the beginning of a new kind of research, quantum research, and if the public wants to be secure in the age of quantum uncertainty, then the country needs the research being done at Securope.”

“What they want is to fry Erin’s brain,” said Dan, “to find out how she’d been shot and then un-shot.”

“I’m meeting Michelle tonight and will see what she has to say about all this.”

“A date, eh?”

“Well, maybe.”

“Sounds great. I hope you guys have a nice time.” She couldn’t help the sarcastic lilt in her voice, recalling how she’d been called away from the nightclub only a day or two earlier when this chain of events kicked off.

It was mid-afternoon as they went through the security gate for Technology Park. This time, with appropriate approvals, the security guard waved them through to the visitors’ car park of Securope. Waiting at reception Dan nudged Jack to note several technicians, down a corridor pushing what looked like burnt-out equipment. There was a stack of this detritus at a storage door.

“Detectives, please come this way.” A security guard walked them through the foyer to an elevator, pushing button number 2, to the next floor and escorted them through two very tall doors into a large office.

“About time you got here, I put in a report about vandals destroying some equipment in the lab here at Securope.” Jim Falon was sitting behind his desk; he rose, swaggered over to the detectives with his hand held out in front to shake their hands.

“Seriously?” Dan muttered. She couldn’t help but smile at the irony of Falon’s admission, adding weight to Erin’s story.

“Sorry, did I say something to amuse you?”

“No, not at all,” said Jack taking command. “We’re here on a serious matter, but not a reported break-in by vandals.”

“Then what are you here for?”

Jack was in Jim’s face, “This morning one of your associates, Professor Peter Dyson, illegally sent a data file to you. Illegal because it was evidence in an investigation into a serious crime. We will need your computer to secure these files and any other data sent to you regarding the ongoing investigation.”

“What we do here, and that includes the work of my associate, Peter Dyson, is adjoined to government work and is classified under the official secrets act.”

“Does your version of the official secrets act cover attempted murder?”

Falon seemed as much flustered as belligerent, “Should I be contacting my solicitor?”

“We haven’t accused you of anything. So far. But let me help. Last night the victim of an attempted murder was abducted from her home in Cheltenham just after midnight. She reported being taken to what sounds like a research facility. Not ...,” said Jack theatrically looking around and out the window, “not unlike this. From what she told us, some sort of experiment would be conducted on her. Something nasty perhaps ....”

Jack had let that last line hang in the air, noticed Dan, to let Falon squirm. Maybe he didn’t see himself as a sadist and would inadvertently deny the nastiness. Or maybe he knew it was going to be nasty and might relish the thought.

“Somehow,” continued Jack after a pause, “she managed to escape. She was found semi-conscious and in a state of traumatic anxiety not far from here.”

“And the good news is,” Dan added, as per their rehearsal enroute, “the victim was transported to a hospital where she is recovering under police guard. We should have the full story soon.”

Dan noticed Falon twitch. “But she has already given us an account of a fire breaking out in the facility. Equipment would have been destroyed. Do you think she may have been involved in your break-in and the vandalism?”

“Why would she have ended up here?”

“We’ll ask the questions, thanks,” said Jack. “But since you raise the possibility, perhaps we should take a look at the lab.”

Dan jumped in. “You’ve said you called the police, so I will call it in; tell the duty officer that we’ll deal with it as we’re already on site. You will need a case logged number from us for insurance.”

Dan spoke on the phone to headquarters, making sure the call time and location were duly noted.

“You lead the way,” prompted Jack to Falon.

Jim Falon scoffed, “Follow me, then.”

“And can you show me how you think they got into Securope?” asked Dan, pronouncing the syllables of ‘secure’ with an exaggerated inflexion.

“We believe they hacked our system and destroyed our equipment.”

“Not so secure! That must be embarrassing for you.”

“It was a helpful training exercise for us, always good to have the best trying to hack you, keeps you on your toes, we learn a lot from cyber-attacks. Speaking of which, mind your step.”

“Not enough training to stop last night’s breaking and entering.” Dan blamed crime shows on TV for her attempts at police wit. “Aha, is this the scene of the crime?”

They were now standing in a laboratory-like space, cabinets and trolleys had been pushed into clusters, evidently out of the way of whatever high-tech apparatuses had been there but had now been dragged out. An operating table was in the middle of the room, with straps dangling loosely over the sides. Small black outlines of smoke were on the wall, presumably where the equipment had been. Everything smelled of electrical burns sodden and drenched, and there were still shallow pools of water in odd places where the lino floor had sunk under the weight of machinery. It was just as Erin had described.

“It’s like an explosion has gone off in here,” said Jack, convincingly expressing surprise. “What would cause the type of machines you use



here to explode and burn? I presume you're not saying that these vandals brought in explosives?"

Dan found herself pacing around the room in excitement, beginning to believe the unbelievable. "Whoever did this had a thing about this room. What was taking place in here?"

"It's a sick room for staff," explained Falon. "And we store lots of equipment here."

Dan was at the surgical bed, exploring it with a forensic eye. She noticed Falon looking tense, and so she straightened and slipped on her rubber gloves in front of his face, wiggling her fingers as though she was about to check his prostate. Then turning back to the bed, carefully picked a long strand of reddish hair caught in one of the screws near the top. "Hmmm," she let the tension build with the same precision that she had given to extracting the filament of hair. "Boss, do you have an evidence bag on you?"

"Of course, what have you found?"

"A thread of hair," Dan said it as if Jack would understand, and much to Falon's irritation, as if it was a key piece of proof to something other than the alleged vandalism. She quietly bagged and identified it, and then muttered—but loud enough for Falon to hear—"That's a good one."

"A strand of hair hardly sounds important next to the carnage we experienced here with these vandals. And anyway, we have so many employees in here." It was clear to Dan that Falon wasn't used to being investigated; his overly awkward demeanour was getting more awkward.

"If one of your vandals has their DNA on file, we will have your perpetrators," said Jack.

"Or" said Dan, looking straight at Falon, "who knows what it might be a clue to?"

She could see his mind coming to terms with the implications of the single red hair. "I think MI 6 might be interested in that find. You should leave that here." Falon seemed to be getting a second wind of arrogance.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jack took over. "And no, we'll be holding this. This is officially police property now."

“They’ll send a team down to investigate this, as we deal with the material covered by the government official secrets act here.”

“I think they will be interested in how their industry partner who explicitly deals in high-end security is so insecure. Surely you already know who these people are from the security cameras. If we investigate your break-in we’ll need access to the recordings.”

“The hack interfered with them .... Thank you for looking into this small matter for us detectives, but I have to get back to work, so I will have to ask you to leave now.”

Back in the parking lot, Dan let her contempt out. “He’s a fucking idiot, obviously had to report the damage but didn’t want anyone investigating it. He surely can’t be the actual CEO of this company. The man’s a stooge.”

“Yes,” Jack mused, “the bluff and bluster are almost comical. He’s like an actor who’s been dropped in and told to improvise. He’s not the main man, there’s someone or something behind him. Falon is just a front.”

‘Speaking of fronts,’ said Dan, desperately chasing a segue, “I can’t help but notice you look a bit dolled up today, boss. Got a date?”

“Thanks, urmmm, yep. Sort of. Well, yes. I’m seeing Michelle this evening. But, of course, you knew that.”

MICHELLE

Michelle watched as Jack entered the restaurant waving the maître de away, pointing towards Michelle, mouthing that he could find his way. He kissed her on the cheek and sat down opposite her.

“This is nice, a good choice.”

Michelle smiled, “You look nice, so yes, good choice.” She saw the acknowledgement with a sudden relax in his posture, “How was your day?”

"Let’s not go there ... yet ... tell me about yours.”

“Good, mostly writing a journal paper. But that’s boring stuff compared to what you’re doing. How’s this strange case of yours going?”

She waited as he was evidently putting things into order and a perspective in his head.

“Things are rocketing, but not in a good way.”

Jack explained that there had been some intriguing developments and tried to list them, focussing on what Erin had told him about her escape and the concept of antimatter becoming part of her DNA makeup. Michelle was shocked at the mention of Peter Dyson's involvement.

“What an idiot that Dyson must be,” she gasped. “And poor Erin, I was worried about this. The problem with private business’s involvement in academic research is an ongoing saga. When the government who have funded a lot of university research then started to develop partnerships with companies to research, they were double-dipping and steering research in a specific direction rather than looking for truth.”

“Truth,” Jack repeated the word solemnly.

“Scientists look for truth just as detectives do,” responded Michelle. “In some ways we’re alike, looking for clues, looking for that breakthrough in knowledge.”

“Except you’re not dealing with a crime. But then, I don’t even know if I am. We have evidence of a gunman manifesting, a shot fired, and that shot, in turn, travels backwards in time to repair seamlessly the damage it had caused.”

“Whatever happened,” Michelle insisted, “you need to protect Erin ... and the possibility of a parallel universe’s physical materiality in her.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t do this, but I can tell you that we have her in a safe house. Aside from three of us cops, you’re the only other person who knows.”

Michelle recognised this was a sign of trust and she felt they had something between them now, something that was strangely real.

“I need to tell you something else,” Jack confided. “And I don’t want to alarm you, but in the past day, I’ve noticed a car with black tinted

windows several times in the traffic behind me. I think I'm being followed. If so, it's most probably by a government agency. If I am being followed, then you might be drawn into this web. You might even be in danger."

Michelle sat over her drink, summing this up and looking at Jack as the meal arrived. "Let's eat. And if I'm going to be caught up in this affair, then I need to know what's happening. Tell me about Erin."

"Well, I told her your analogy of the love letters and the train to get an idea of how parts of a person could cut across parallel universes. The love letter is a total cacophony of signals, signs and qualities that go to make up a person's feelings of love. The anticipation of the sender becomes part of the transference creating an emotional state in the recipient. This cacophony is what I imagine is going on inside Erin at this moment."

Jack's focus seemed to be more on the love letter than the analogy, thought Michelle ... not without a little thrill that he had both remembered the imagery and appreciated its poetic message. She was also surprised at his acceptance of the probability of quantum phenomena. It was like someone embracing the afterlife, spirits, or clairvoyance.

"We both think something has happened to Erin," added Jack, "that relates to her paper and its proposition of a transitional local, non-local connection of parallel universes having a physical effect. Something has happened to Erin that does not make sense in a classical real-world situation; something that happened to her in that lab when she was abducted by Securope ... ."

"What!?" shouted Michelle. "Erin was abducted?"

"God, I didn't mention that. Yes, we're certain it was by that company Securope, in cahoots with the government—probably MI6. But she escaped, and how is the mystery. But we found her outside the tech park. Hence she's in a safe house."

"Don't leave something out like that again. How is she?"

"She is in a state of shock, but she is OK for now."

"If indeed she is going through what I think is happening—having antimatter inside her, potentially now making molecular connections—

then Erin is living evidence of the research speculations of the data from ANITA in the Antarctic. This is amazing. We should try and find out more from her about what is going on. I would like to talk with her. Can I get some blood samples and some basic bio-metric readings? We need to help her with this.”

“If I make that possible,” said Jack, “you’ll become a bigger target than you are already; as I said, I’m pretty certain someone was following me here. It would be a big risk, but if you can get the equipment—and it’s portable—I’ll try to lose my tail in the morning and pick you up.”

“It’s portable, I just need to collect it from the campus.” Michelle leaned close in. “Now, I hate to say this but if you’re right about being followed, they’ve probably put a tracker on your car tonight, it’d be easier than tailing you. I mean—MI6 or a security company? They’ll have the gear. I’d say they’re not bothering watching you inside here, just outside. So they may not know about me yet.”

“Do you read detective novels or watch lots of crime shows?”

Michelle smiled. “As I said, science is like detective work. And like the way a psychoanalyst analyse their patients, we analyse material phenomena. They’re just different versions of the same thing. Seeking a truth in a world where there is a lot of deception.”

“Hmmm, my suggestion was going to be that I pick up a safe car tomorrow first thing, you go jogging in the morning, and I’ll wait for the other side of the woodland; from there, I can check if you’re being followed.”

“What about my equipment?”

“Can we pick that up tonight?”

“Sure,” answered Michelle, “but not in your car. I suggest we take mine. And that I pick you up around the back. There’s an exit through the kitchen you can slip out from, just in case they’re out front. Yes, I know this restaurant. And no, I haven’t done this kind of thing before. But I figure, if they’re tracking your car they’ll be sitting waiting for it to move for a while before twiggling you’ve done a switch.”

“Sounds like a scripted line,” said Jack, but with obvious admiration.

“Here’s another plot twist,” added Michelle. “I don’t think you should go back to yours tonight, even without your car.”

“Urmmm ...,” Jack looked bashful. That boyish expression gave Michelle the nudge to cross a line.

“You’ll be staying at mine.”

JACK

Michelle had said she hadn’t done it before, but Jack was impressed at how cool and confident she’d handled the scenario. He’d spent most of the trip on the floor of her car, when he looked up could see she was darting her eyes from the road in front to the rear-view mirrors, inside and outside the car, ever vigilant for any signs of being followed. And then, occasionally she would glance round at Jack. There was no sign of disapproval. They’d given each other soft, quick smiles. Conspiratorial smiles of acknowledgement. Like children playing a private game.

They’d left the tote bags with her equipment in the car boot so that they could move quickly through the shadows. He couldn’t quite remember how they’d got into her apartment. The furtiveness of their gazes at each other in the car became bodily as they’d sneaked noiselessly, voiceless, into her building, their shoulders touching, then arms. The back of their hands brushed against each other. Then their fingers. A gentle, seemingly accidental tap, then a stroke. Then contact. Fingers entwined.

Her fingers ran along his arm, his down her back. Still, no words were spoken. Touching became caressing, then kissing, lingering and then seeking. Something is undone, something else slips off. The first intimate connections lead into the first sequence of exaltations. The ritual breaking down of boundaries between people is a strange slow process that demands permission and acceptance. Trust begins as walls come down.

They lay side by side, each passing the first stage, spent with sensitivity; what had been expected had swept over them. Michelle spoke first, as their fingertips played coyly. “Hey, know what? That really was ... beautiful.” Jack couldn’t make out his own words in reply, a sound of some kind came out of his mouth but he knew that whatever he’d said, it was tender. It was his mind transformed into a sensation.

As Michelle smiled, he felt his body relax into hers, as though he was about to become adrift but nonetheless secure that she was close to him.

She kissed him demurely on the cheek. Where he was drifting with her was unknown; an unknowable unknown. Just immersion, slow tidal movement, flow. No need to put a name to it. But it had a direction now, he could feel that he was heading into that contented oblivion that came with the reward of sleep.

“Hey,” Michelle interrupted his trance, “you don’t get away that easy.” She climbed onto him as if to teasingly pin his shoulders down; but then, with an appetite that kindled his, she plunged her mouth over and into his. Then, arching her back she sat upright, unfurling her limbs to plant herself across him. No, he wouldn’t be getting away.

ERIN

Erin was up, having hardly slept, worried so much about the alien evolving inside her. She couldn't help but keep seeing in her mind's eye that moment in the movie, *Alien*, when the creature erupted, eating its way out of John Hurt's stomach. Sure, it's the epitome of a universal fear that everyone shares about a foreign agent growing inside them. The feeling of being pregnant with something other than a beautiful baby. She wondered if all mothers at some moment in pregnancy had a suspicion turning into fear that they'd been impregnated by an alien. Or that regardless of its paternity, the thing growing inside them was less than, or more than, human. If she had been polluted by someone from the antiverse, then she was the site of a novel virus, an unexplored parasite, now comingling with her DNA. If she were to eventually have children, would her new DNA strain be passed on to generation after generation, evolving into ... well, who knows what? Would it be a positive additive to her body, one that would give her children incredible abilities? Maybe, but then would all the generations that followed be judged as freaks? Like the start of the *X-Men* saga. If you were part of someone from a parallel universe, would you have the same legal rights? Get a passport? Would you have restricted travel? Erin could see some research papers dealing with this topic, along with a post-doc somewhere. Maybe in Antarctica, where the ANITA facility is. Too many questions, too many unknowns—I just need to live my life, she decided.

“Coffees for everyone,” Dan shouted out. There was unanimous agreement. Erin watched Michelle distractedly making final adjustments to the equipment.

“Thanks for doing this,” said Erin.

“How are you going?” Michelle responded, stifling a yawn. “Sorry, not boredom; just tiredness. Sleepless night.” Erin noticed Dan throw a wide-eyed glance over her shoulder at Jack. “This situation, the abduction on top of it all, must be quite a shock for you.”

“I am finding it hard to deal with all the things going on in my head. I start to worry that it’s really real, not just in my head which at the moment feels like an overpopulated share-house that no one’s keeping tidy.”

“I want to do some blood samples, but we’ll start with some neuro scanning.”

“Fine with me. What do you hope to find out?”

“No idea really what can be detected, but I’d like to see if we can find some neurological signals that are out of the ordinary.”

Erin felt the sensors connecting to her head, she relaxed back on the couch, calming herself, not fighting nor afraid of what might happen next. She took a deep breath and focused on a small indentation in the wall where someone must have removed a screw. Maybe a picture had been there of a loved one. She now recognised the slight discolouration around what would have been the shape of the picture frame. So removed not too long ago. But this is a safe house, she corrected herself. Who would hang family photos in a police safe house, unless they were fake; but then why fake a family for a house that is like a gaol or a fortress? She could see data appearing on the computer screen. Jack looked at his hands nervously hovering near the power cables, and she realised his job was to terminate the connection, and cut the computer's power should anything like what happened at Securope begin to manifest. Well, that means they believe her, thought Erin. And thankfully, there were no sparks or plumes of smoke in the room. Michelle fussed over the connections between the machinery and Erin’s scalp, chest and arms.

“Everything OK?” asked Erin.

“This data is unique, I’ve never seen anything like it, Erin,” said Michelle, although she directed the remark at Jack equally. “The EEG readouts’ history is a set of mirroring data, one stream appearing in reverse, forming a reflective memetic pattern.”



“What do you make of that?” asked Jack, with a genuine look of confusion on his face, while he nervously glanced along the power cables.

“I don't know. It's fascinating. Erin: I want to ask you a few questions. Are you feeling stressed? Do let us know if you begin feeling anything like what happened in that lab.”

“Nothing to worry about so far.”

“Look,” said Michelle, “the graph has now lost its symmetry. One signal has gone high while the other went low.”

“I feel both,” said Erin in a detached voice, like a reverb filter on an audio file. “I'm not sure how or why, but I sense that I am completely in control, and then I feel schizophrenic.”

“Different signals are affecting similar regions of the brain simultaneously,” Michelle said, “this might be entangled particles responding to being observed by the EEG.”

Even Erin was finding this shorthand exchange bewildering. But then Jack intervened with something equally perplexing. “Was there only one shooter?”

“The data just went into a symmetric mirroring pattern,” said Michelle.

“Guess that means yes,” said Jack. “Did the actual shooting take place somewhere else?”

Again, the same pattern, Michelle pointed out.

“There was no gunman to be found there?”

Now Dan jumped in: “Erin, can you connect to the laptop?”

Yes. And once again, Michelle observed that the same pattern from the ECG arrived on the computer screen. A line of text confirmed it.

“Good question Dan, but I'd connect a lot better to a quantum computer.”

Michelle looked at the screen, switched off the computer and disconnected all the cables, beckoning Jack and Dan into a huddle with Erin.

“I think these were the sorts of tests Securope wanted to do with Erin. Probably much much more, of course; but if they even knew just this—if they could comprehend Erin’s gift —then even if they don’t have an idea of what her potential is, Securope will want her, just to make sure that no one else gets her.”

Erin could not believe what she had seen, she could hear what was being said and she knew they were right. This is only going to get a lot worse if any more information got out about what has happened to her. She had hoped it might be like an illness that visits for a while and then moves on. But this wasn’t moving on.

DAN

Nothing was moving out there. It had been such a quiet afternoon; Dan was hunting through the rooms of the safe house looking for something to read. She’d settled on looking out the front window, watching shadows lengthen, watching the leaves on the looming trees form swirling patterns in the wind, like waves sweeping onto a beach, then break up into eddies and cross-currents. Michelle and Erin were mumbling incomprehensible science to each other in the kitchen over countless coffees. Jack had stretched out on the sofa in a doze. To say Dan was bored now would be an understatement. But she was alert, not exhausted. Not tired like her boss and Michelle so clearly were. Yes, that date last night must have been a jackpot for them both. Hmm, what next? What next for them, and what next for Erin? Whatever it was, Dan felt like it was leaving her behind. She’d lost track of the weird science. She’d lost track of the detective work, and now was just assuming the tedium of guard duty. Being on guard.

And thank god she was.

At first, it looked like the shapeless form of those shadows lurking in the trees as the sun receded. Then she could make out the profile, fuzzy but solid. Nothing wispy about it. A large dark lump sitting behind the hedgerow. She opened the window and leaned out to focus. Black van, figured Dan. When had it pulled up there? How long had she been staring at it without seeing it there? More importantly, how long did they have until whatever was going to happen next happened?

“Boss,” she shouted urgently at Jack. Her voice must have compressed all her anxiety into one syllable because Jack jumped with his eyes wide as if he’d had a bolt of electricity surge into him. “A van, boss, I have a feeling it’s just pulled up beyond that hedgerow. And our surveillance car has gone.”

Jack looked out the window, following Dan’s direction. “The present moment is being forced upon us,” he muttered as if still climbing out of his doze.

Dan shouted, “Grab what you can. Use Michelle’s car, it’s around the back and take that back route out. Mine’s in their line of vision. They’ll think we’re still here.”

Moments later, Erin, Michelle, and Jack were clambering into Michelle’s car with whatever they could carry. But Dan knew this was her time, standing next to the open passenger door. “You guys get going. I’ll delay them.”

“Dan, what are you saying,” Jack exclaimed in surprise. “No way, they’ll be dangerous.”

“It’s Erin they’re after, not me. It may not be a pleasant chat, but I’ll just be an inconvenience to them. They’re not going to hurt me.” Dan glanced at Erin, “Sorry for being tough on you ...”

Dan slammed the car door shut and ran back into the house before any of the three could stop her. By the time she got to the front window again the black shape behind the hedgerow had moved and was in the driveway in full view. She watched as three men got out of the black van, they looked ex-military to Dan, mercenaries; and sure enough, they were armed. “Fuck!” she muttered to herself, “I wasn’t expecting guns. Ah well, fire meets fire.” She pulled her pistol out of its shoulder holster and aimed at the large black van’s tyres through an open window. Two pops dispatched the front tyres. “At least, that’ll stall them for a while.” But now she had the riposte to deal with. She dived below the window frame as the return gunfire ripped through the window spraying glass and wood all over her. “I shot at your car, not at you, bastards,” she thought, but realised the distinction didn’t matter. After the volley, she leapt up and ran to the back of the house and took position behind a door frame with a view down the corridor to the front door. That door flew off its hinges, and a hail of bullets ate their way through the cheap fabric of the house’s

interior, down toward Dan. “They’re gonna kill Erin if they’re not careful,” she thought—stupidly, she admitted straightaway. But the gravity of that thought made her also realise there was nothing sane about this moment. It was out of control. There was nothing for it. For some reason, unknown to her, Dan ran as if she believed she was invisible.

JACK

Jack looked in the rear-view to see Michelle and Erin white with fear in the backseat. He swerved into a small side road. No van had followed them away from the safe house. Had they not seen the car leave? Was Dan arguing with them about police protocols? Either way, he let out a loud audible sigh of relief. But almost straight away the sigh switched to a gasp of alarm. He could hear rapid gunfire in the distance.

“That sound ...,” Michelle caught Jack’s gaze in the rear-view mirror, “is that ... ?”

“Gunfire.”

“Would it be Dan?”

“Rapid fire, assault weapons,” said Jack, “not Dan, she only has a pistol.”

He was horribly torn. His obligation to his partner who—he had to face it, after that massive gunfire—might well be dead was on a violently swinging pendulum against protecting Erin and Michelle, who were in his charge and were still alive and breathing. “We have to keep going.”

Jack had only known Dan for a couple of days. With so much gunfire and heavy weaponry, he had to presume she was dead. A general emergency call would blow their cover completely. He’d have to think carefully about how to handle that anonymously. He wanted to call Jane Munro, call for backup, but the thought was spinning in his head that the surveillance car had gone. Someone had ordered it to leave, someone who knew about the safe house and had the authority. Whatever, he figured they were all in big trouble now. They needed to get as much distance between themselves and whatever had happened back there. But first, he quickly got out of the car and smeared mud from the nearby ditch over the number plates. One little interference for whoever might take chase. Then he steered the car back onto the road and accelerated away from the safe house.

They drove on in silence for several minutes, although Jack lost all sense of time. He was still deep in thought and deeply troubled about alerting Munro if she was an accomplice. But even so, surely, he reasoned, she wouldn't have foreseen the violence that may have injured or perhaps killed Dan. Even if—especially if—she'd been party to it, he needed to let Munro know what had happened. And if there was the thinnest sliver of possibility that Dan was still alive, and Jane wasn't embroiled in the disaster, Jane was the only way to get help quickly to Dan.

“I've got to call the Superintendent; it's a risk, but I have to do something about Dan. I'll make the call and then ditch the phone. I'm thinking—if we weren't betrayed by someone—they may have tracked us through our phones. Me for sure, but I'm worried they know about you too Michelle and if they don't know already it won't take long for them put the pieces together, so you'll have to destroy your sim card and take the battery out of your phone.”

“Wait not so quick,” Michelle interrupted. “Driving like this toward ... where ... South Wales? It won't do us any good running away. Get to a service centre near some trucks, Jack. Use your work mobile for the call, then dump it on a flatbed or in a van that looks like it's going anywhere away from us. We need to get back to town: you need to get who in the force is behind this, and I need to finish the tests on Erin. Erin, if Jack's right about the police surveillance of the safe house being removed, you may be safer without that kind of police protection.”

Jack pulled into a service spot, stepped out of the car and casually walked around the car park looking for a suitable vehicle (conveniently, by the grace of the gods, there was one with Welsh number plates) to ditch the phone into. He could see Michelle filling the tank from the bowser. Munro picked up and Jack described what had happened—omitting any mention of Michelle. Munro sounded genuinely disturbed. “Jack, I've had the secret service all over me, they won't say anything, I'll have a patrol car head for the safe house straight away. If anything has happened to Dan—someone is going to be very fucking sorry.”

“My priority is to keep Erin safe,” again he made no mention of Michelle, although just thinking of her name was even eclipsing his concern for Erin, “and I don't trust our safe houses or our own security.”

“You have to bring her in,” said Munro, “you can't keep her safe. We'll try to find somewhere protected ...”

“I’ll do the protecting from now, I promised her parents,” Jack was sure he could sense there was a trace on the line. “These government-funded Securope goons, they went too far; someone is going to have to pay.”

On that word, by a strange coincidence, he saw Michelle head inside to pay for the gas. Now it was time for that bit of theatrics he’d devised. “Erin,” he said into thin air, and then made a weak gesture at concealing the mouthpiece of the mobile, “there ... that’s the Cardiff bus ... hurry, now.” He cut off the call and dropped the phone discreetly into the open tray of the utility. As he walked back to the car, he saw Michelle come out with an armful of food.

“There’s a patrol heading to the safe house,” said Jack. “If I can trust the Super, which ... I think I can.”

“You’ve done what you could,” said Michelle, reassuringly. “Three ploughman’s sandwiches and teas,” she announced. “Let’s get out of here and find somewhere quiet to recharge.”

## MICHELLE

It was way dark by the time they got back to Cheltenham. On her advice, Jack had parked her car a couple of blocks away. If anyone had an ID on her car it would be safer not to advertise their return. After furtive manoeuvres down back lanes, Michelle let them into her house. It was a risk, but she was not sure what else they could do; a thousand ideas went through her head even to the point of suggesting to Erin that she willingly be tested publicly by the university, with a proviso that she would be released after the tests unharmed. But then she hated how she could tolerate unthinkable things—creating justifiable rationales with agencies that were so cold-blooded. It must be akin to a murderer premeditating their strategy, an idea assembled out of fragments of thoughts. A mind that contained millions of firing neurons, conjuring up vague ideas stitched together concretising with each repetitive mental replay. And a murderer has no mental trip-switch to stop them from carrying out that immaterial thought, turning it into a materialised deadly physical scenario. The idea of an idea being made real in that manner was why she had become a scientist, and when she thought about it probably why Jack had become a detective. In her case, it was to reveal an unknown pattern, even a motive force in nature. In his case, to make the unknown patterns and motives of a criminal psyche known. In his case too, beyond this detective work, there was the mission to find a way to ensure thought had

its barometer, its gauge by which to predict and judge the ethical and moral consequences of actioning a thought.

They all settled into Michelle's domesticity through the afternoon, but it was an uncomfortable atmosphere of waiting for who knew what. It hung over the evening meal consisting of a bowl of soup and some bread. Appropriately prison-like, or monastic, thought Michelle. Erin excused herself to crash out in the spare bedroom. Michelle and Jack were left alone, clearing away the dishes to the muffled but audible sounds of Erin's sobbing accompaniment down the hallway.

"I am so sorry for getting you into this, Michelle." Jack was standing right in front of her with a look on his face like an errant schoolboy fronting up to a headmistress. "This has got out of hand; I just didn't gauge the seriousness of the situation. I encouraged you to help and get tangled up with this case, and I shouldn't have done that."

While she found the boyishness cute, she didn't like the feeling of being cast as a schoolmarm, or for that matter as a reprimanding parent. "Now you're starting to piss me off, Jack," but she tried to make that affectionate. "Something ... extraordinary ... is happening here, and I can tell you I wanted to be in on it. I wouldn't want to miss out." Jack's expression shifted slightly, into embarrassment. He caught the sting of being charged with old-school protectiveness of a weak woman. "You know Jack, if I need protection, you certainly would be the first person I'd turn to. And although we're all in the same boat now, Erin is the real target here. You and I, we're collateral. She needs our care in the different ways we can do this. Like you, I don't want her—and whatever it is that she has—becoming part of some secretive government-funded project with no scruples or morals."

Michelle put her arms around him, and he relaxed into the hug. Deeply. Then she stepped back, with her arm still around his waist and steered him toward her bedroom.

## EDWARD

Edward had returned from Antarctica to his home desperate to keep his dreams alive. Walking through the door he could see his dreams were shattered. The stark realisation that he had been living in a research bubble, a transference of a lived experience to his work. It was a grim recognition, but Edward's eyes were now wide open to his situation. His rented house was a mausoleum. Signs of neglect and self-disgust were

everywhere. No wife, and no kids, his furniture was pieced together from IKEA flatpacks. The décor in this so-called home of his looked like it had been pieced together from the pickings of hard rubbish on the street, only sterile and characterless. There were no flowers in the vases, no art on the walls; only piles of scientific papers on the tables, papers that were becoming redundant as passing time was rendering them obsolete. Many of those science papers had gone the way of old mobile phones; they'd become obsolete, unfashionable. Who wants an old iPhone? Apple uses software updates, he mused, to slow down the older iPhones and make them frustrating to use. But you don't have any other option.

Obsolescence is part of a generation's desire for the new. This would be the generation of obsolescence, he thought, not of sustainability or repair. You will be able to have your children genetically modified; each modification superseding the previous one. Mark IV will supersede Mark III, and when your child wants to get a job, they will go for an interview—the boss will say, sorry, you are only a Mark III; we need Mark IV. Poor Mark! He'll be obsolete and end up blaming his parents because they didn't wait another year before having him with the latest Mark IV upgrade. There used to be a time when antique furniture was sought after. Now it's hard to get rid of the stuff. How do you handle the resentment of being obsolete? There's an argument in this, he pondered, for murder: under the condition that things in this world now become generationally obsolete, it didn't matter if you got rid of them. In this case, the 'thing' could be a person. How to forestall obsolescence? You can't really, but you freeze-frame fame: getting a Nobel prize made you immortal, like an icon in the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame. Dead but unforgettable. In a world full of obsolescence, the immortality of fame was the only prize. Or infamy, he added. What's old is junk. He was feeling old. The kids with the upgrade were his enemy.

He remembered a rifle that he'd had for years, a Winchester Model 70 with telescopic sites, for hunting deer. It had been his dad's and maybe the only thing in the house that reflected his Scottish heritage. He'd grown up there, walking the estate with his dad who had been a grounds manager. He would arrange shoots for the laird of the manor, a grotesque company director who enjoyed killing wildlife before it became unethical for anyone involved in business to be seen doing so. Edward retained all that his dad had taught him regarding the skills of stalking prey. He'd also kept the rifle in good shape, licensed, cleaned and serviceable and practicable. Until now, he hadn't known why.

Edward's plan started by disguising his rifle in a fishing rod case. Along with the rest of the tackle, he put this in the back of his rented car for a



fictitious fishing trip, stopping off seemingly enroute at Cheltenham. The place where he knew his destiny was waiting.

According to the online festival program, John Taylor was to present around midday in the main marquee. During the drive, Edward kept reiterating the plan to himself, going over every detail, thinking of all the relevant scenarios with scientific calculation.

Spotting disused brick kilns, he turned off the road; an old brickyard would be a great place to make sure he still had it, to test the rifle, no more just a sentimental keepsake. Yes, it still fitted with his body, like the embrace of a lover, and felt right to his touch in some strange, inexplicable but erotic way. The rifle made him feel strong and calm. And determined.

Edward spent the night at a Travelodge. That night he dreamed of ANITA hovering over the ice pack. She was a beautiful silent apparition casting radiating light as she slowly drifted over his own body, caressing his skin under the night sky. The two of them were surrounded by a million stars.

He woke to a Travelodge breakfast deal on a plastic tray outside the door. It reminded him of his domestic routine: food as mere fuel to get the day going and keep it going. Fuel, like that in his rented car to get him to Cheltenham. Fuel: consumed by things disposable—a car rental, a rented house, a rented room, a waged life. He owned nothing, only his name on those journal articles which could so easily be taken from him. Everything was disposable except for this: his meeting at Cheltenham. That was essential. And according to google maps, the drive to Cheltenham had him arriving at 11.30 am, with enough time to scout out the best location.

At 11.30 am he parked his hire car and walked across the park. There was the centre stage, a marquee, empty now though with chairs set up ready for a ceremony. Yes, a ceremonial moment, he thought. He walked into the marquee and stood near the lectern, gauging the best line of sight. The trees skirting the edge of the park with low shrubbery in front would give ideal cover for him. It hasn't occurred to him until this point that he could get clean away.

He went back and moved the car close to the trees. Got his dad's fold-out shooting stick, with its leather seat and planted it in the ground, so he was surrounded by the shrubs. He slowly undid the fishing rod case and took

out the rifle, resting it gently across his knees. Some sweet memories came back to him now, seated in a hide, quietly waiting for the prey to venture into his range. He wished he still had his dad's whisky flask. That would have been a nice touch. Now it was a matter of waiting. But he knew this wasn't just passive waiting, like in a waiting room in a queue. He wasn't waiting for his turn. A word crept into his mind, a word he loved and could hear his father saying: stealth. Yes, this waiting of his was a kind of stealth.

And he stealthily watched the marquee filling up. Edward stayed motionless. Then he saw his colleague who had sent him John's paper in that fateful email. It would be any minute now. Unhurried, he carefully lifted the rifle, loading the round, tucking the butt close into his shoulder, one arm under the barrel, the other nestling on the trigger, his eye up to the rifle telescopic sight, the cross-hairs trained on the lectern. Edward was breathing steadily, even as he could feel the adrenaline surge through his body. It was like yoga, breathing in to find stillness for this action, an action that would define his life and make him immortal. Enlightened. He had become one with the rifle, and the rifle had become one with the event. This was the embodiment, a crystallisation of his body in the moment of destiny. Through the telescopic sight, he saw John step into the space at the lectern.

What would this upstart be saying? Taking ownership of Edward's research, supplanting Edward's lifelong pursuit. Yes, out of the way old man. There's a new kid on the block. Well, it won't be that easy sonny boy. If you want to be a researcher, then research this! Edward pulled the trigger.

He hadn't quite been expecting the sound and the jolt. He'd been so steadily concentrating, so locked out from everything around him. Suddenly he smelled cordite, smoke, and the leaves in the shrubs. He felt the discomfort in his leg muscles, the tingling weight of his bum on the seat, his boots squelched into the ground. Behind the telescopic sight, his kill seemed impersonal and objectified, at the same time that he felt it was so deeply personal and vengeful.

But as his eye remained at the telescopic sight, he now saw a young woman falling to the ground. Where was his target? The target that had been in his view an instant before. How could he have missed? He moved the rifle left and right still glued to the telescopic sight. Everything in the scene was the same as that instant before, but he'd seen a young woman fall with the impact of the shot. It was like a bizarre, ridiculous, absurd

magic act. It was very very wrong. He'd killed a woman, not John. He trained the telescopic sight back to where John had been standing as if that might make him reappear. And at that moment, the world blurred. For a fleeting femtosecond, John's body was there again, falling. He felt a thud against his shoulder, or more like it was from his shoulder as if he was jolting the rifle. As if the gunshot was running in reverse. He moved the rifle's telescopic sight down the lectern. There, on the stage floor, in a pool of blood was John. Edward's colleague was at John's side, speaking to him, then looking around wild-eyed, and then staring in Edward's direction.

Edward suddenly felt like a voyeur caught in the act of looking through a keyhole. There's no way anyone in the tent could see him. But he knew that if he wanted to get away, he had to move as fast as he could with stealth. He packed the rifle into the fishing rod bag, folded up the stool and looked through the foliage to check his escape route. No one was there. All attention would be on the mayhem inside the tent. He carefully stepped out of the bushes, quickly assuming the guise of someone casually walking to their car, wondering what the commotion in the park might be.

Sitting behind the wheel in his car with the fishing rod case leaning against the seat next to him as if a passenger on his journey, he was able to speculate on what had happened. Yes, his work had prophesied this and John's speculations in his paper which, although nowhere near as brilliant as Edward's, made it clear what had happened. Edward had experienced proof of concept, a parallel universe of antimatter. All his work had converged in that fateful moment, living proof that he travelled to another universe. He was meant to kill John. The young woman was from elsewhere. The universe intended it to happen as a means to open up the doorway of perception for Edward. The elation in his body exploded in laughter and cheering. He was slapping the steering wheel and shouting out, "I am number one!"

What had happened to him? Yes, he must have gone mad; but he had lost his faculties for a reason. This experience brought him back to a new reality. He now knew he had set up a chain of events that spanned two universes, and that chain will never be broken. An unknown known had suddenly become clear. Should he detest himself, as he had been doing for so much of his life in his dreadful home, and unrewarding university career? There was no turning back, no possibility to undo this. It was exhilarating, and he had to keep going on this journey that fate had determined. There was only one thing left now. He had his travelling

companion there next to him. He took it out of its case, loaded it, and as he put the barrel in his mouth to receive the bullet, ANITA was there floating, enticing him to join her to search endlessly for the inconceivable and unknowable.

JACK

Jack now had one thing on his mind: to find Jim Falon. There were questions that only Falon could answer. There was no time for correct channels, no legitimate time. Jack realised that he could be arrested for not bringing Erin in. Securope, MI6 or even his force could concoct a story of him kidnapping Erin and holding her against her will. If Securope and MI6 spun the story of her breaking in to vandalise the research lab, she could even be labelled as a terrorist. And he was her accomplice.

He left Michelle's discreetly without a word, but his head was swimming with resentment against Falon and whoever was in it with him. If Dan was dead, if Michelle was in danger, and Erin was ... well, whatever she was ... Jack felt the time had come for a showdown. And he'd do it at Falon's home, his address accessed originally by Dan would be put to good use. He didn't want to think about what might happen as a result. Had he lost all reason, was he becoming a deranged character in a detective novel? He wondered what an author would make of the circumstances in which he'd been placed. Would the writer push things to the brink like this? Something wildly wilful and excessive to get a reaction, not knowing whether the outcome would be positive or negative? What particular scenario would play out all these factors? In Jack's mind he would never be a writer, having that much power over characters and their fates, even if it was all imaginary. Just fiction.

Can a fictional scenario of murder become a template for a real murder? Could the author conjure up the perfect crime, a crime that the author would need to act out to prove it possible? Proof of concept. The author paints a picture of this concept in ways that make it a suitable outcome, make it a desirable future. You accept this fiction as an inevitable future and simulate it, acting it out, making it actual. Jack knew of so many situations that started out as fictional only to turn into reality. He was beginning to feel shit scared, not so much for his physical safety but scared of this constant babbling going on inside his head.

In this case, Jack figured that no plan was the best move. Step confidently into the unknown A plan took options off the table and left him with one

determined and best outcome. Confrontation with the motive, and he'd use any means to get there. Rely on intuition and opportunity he thought as he climbed over Falon's back fence. Surprisingly the place wasn't heavily fortified. Who cares if there were security cameras recording him. He walked directly across a large, manicured garden to the back area of the house which was all glass walls, like a conservatory. A view of nature but with no insects, no birds, no cold wind, and no rain to mediate the experience.

Jack had expected some kind of response within the house. Alarms. A security guard to tackle him. Maybe even a curious butler or maid or, who knows, a family member to peer out through the glass wall at him. But everything was quiet. Even the insects, the birds and the wind were silent. He grabbed the handle of the large glass door and to his surprise, it turned easily. The door swung open fluidly. All the lights seemed to have been switched on in the house but there was no movement, not a sound. He quietly moved toward a luxurious open-plan lounge. One of the doors was ajar and looked like it led to a home office. Wouldn't that be convenient, thought Jack, to find Falon working at his desk. A good place for a head-to-head, or a head-on. He peered in through the opening.

Falon was there at his desk, but not sitting at it. He was slumped, and not like he was having a nap. Jack approached and saw a bullet hole in the back of Falon's head. A pool of blood had soaked into the antique blotter on the desk. It was a neat job, probably taking out the face. "Fuck," Jack thought, "that's a professional hit." If Falon was gone, Dan had been right: he was not the main man, but a front-man who'd expended his usefulness. Now he knew why it had been so easy to get into Falon's property and house. IT had been left precisely for muggings to walk in. Jack was now a sitting target for any organisation to point the finger at him for this murder. Now he also realised that he'd left Michelle and Erin in danger. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and picked up the phone to call Munro. He had no choice now; all the options were off the table. He'd have to call this in. He put the receiver to his head, but the ringtone stopped, the lights went out, and so did Jack.

It seemed like no time had passed, which to Jack meant not that things happened in a blink, but that what had passed was not in the order of time. Out of the darkness, there was now a voice that added even more to his disorientation.

"Glad to see you're joining us, Jack, you've been on quite an adventure."

The voice was unknown to Jack, but he felt irritated enough by the posh accent to give back the sarcasm. “I’m glad you enjoyed my adventure. And to whom am I speaking? You obviously know me on a first-name basis. You’ll also know that I’m a detective, and my colleagues are going to be looking for me.”

“Spot on, Jack! They are looking for you, in earnest and everywhere. I should add, however, that they’re looking for a murderer who left fingerprints on the murder weapon and all over the house. Oh, that’ll be you.”

“Uh huh,” replied Jack coolly, “surely you’re not thinking that some cheap frame-up from a detective novel is going to work?”

But no doubt about it, Jack was feeling unhappy. Uncertain. And sick. For one thing, breathing in his own breath under a hood was suffocating, but he also suspected that whoever this villain was, they had a better grasp on the drama—and on him being framed for murder—than he granted them.

“Yes, actually I do think it will work. For one thing, your antagonism toward Mr Falon is a topic of some gossip back at your yard. But perhaps more importantly, the powerful—and secretive, I must add—instruments of your very own government on my side. Not on yours. And now, with your fellow activists Michelle and Erin held captive—gosh, I think you’re washed up. But don’t be too depressed about this, though god knows I would be. No, for the time being at least you’re safe with us.”

With that statement slowly decaying, the hood was removed. As his eyes slowly tried to focus, he made out that he was now in an overgenerously appointed executive office, though with large sheets of clear plastic spread across the floor underfoot. Bright light poured in from a floor-to-ceiling window that stretched the length of the room, hurting Jack’s eyes. Against this light he could make out the silhouettes of two figures, slumped unconscious and strapped down in their executive chairs. A trim, well-dressed man was standing, also silhouetted against the window’s panorama, in the radiance of which Jack could now make out as a skyline of high-rise buildings. Spaced about the room were three, no four, men. They looked like they were brutishly bursting from their suits, armed for sure thought Jack. Private militia, not just security. He looked back at the vista in the window. He was no longer in Cheltenham, that was for sure. It was a skyline that had to be London. Back in bloody London!

“But let me introduce myself,” the man intoned with mock courtesy. “My name is Ian Carmichael. I am the director of Securope, as you can no doubt surmise.” He held out both arms with palms face up as though he was about to levitate.

Well, he did look the part, thought Jack. Much more so than that obese blustering buffoon Falon. But what is it with these guys’ egos? They commit kidnapping and murder but quite happily reveal their identity. Again, he thought this was like an easy trick in a detective novel. Or like a villain in a James Bond movie explaining who they were and their intentions to tortuously kill Bond, but not waiting around for a few minutes for the job to be done. Will this guy and his minions conveniently leave the room for Jack to find some means of escape, like Bond? Hmmm, he had to admit, reality didn’t quite work that way. Certainly not the reality of his situation, he might have to ‘Get Smart’ it instead.

Carmichael was still standing in his absurd pseudo-divine posture, as if expecting applause for his god-complex. “Sorry,” offered Jack thinking out loud, “my hands are tied.”

“You have no more obligations to a police force that is hunting you for murder, Jack,” Carmichael misunderstood Jack’s derision. The voice was so ingratiating that Jack couldn’t help but struggle to try to get his hands free, just for the opportunity to punch out the source of it. But at least, thought Jack, he’d managed to break the theatrical moment.

“You’re the genius behind this secret empire, eh?” Jack realised his ironic tone must have struck Carmichael as sheer irreverence. “You dress the part, but I have to say you don’t act smart enough for the job. You don’t think this company has got criminality all over its face by now?”

“With my leverage in government,” responded Carmichael, “that’s proof of concept! And as far as smarts go, Jack, I must thank you for making it so easy to bring you all here and to allow Erin to share all her knowledge with us. But as the old saying goes, knowledge is power. And we’re more interested in power. That’s why our means, no matter the criminality on the face of it, will justify our ends.”

With each sentence, he was sounding more like Dr No or Siegfried from KAOS. But now, Jack could see there were signs that Michelle and Erin were stirring.

“They will be coming out of sedation soon, and when fully aware of what we can do to them as well as to you, I’m sure you will cooperate fully.” Jack now realised why the floor was covered in sheets of plastic. Carmichael wouldn’t want his executive suite stained. Or was that a theatrical gesture again? No, looking at the muscle in the room, Jack figured there would be blood.

“So,” continued Carmichael as though addressing a corporate meeting, “we’ve seen the photos and read the data; therefore, we are aware that Erin is a remarkable entity. Shot, presumably in cold blood by an assailant—whom we’ll get to in a moment— shot and then, remarkably ... how shall we put this ... ‘unshot’ a second later. To put it in layman’s terms, pardon the awkwardness of this, the bullet came back out the way it went in! Repairing all the damage it had done, well apart from some residual bruising, which we felt was more collateral damage from falling than from the wound itself. No, as far as the wound goes, all the atoms and their molecular fabric in her body returned to their state before her having been shot. A miracle, would you say? No, we say. Extraordinary, certainly. But not a miracle. At Securope we deal in science not miracles, how else could we do business? And we have a scientific explanation for this. True, it’s not easy to grasp. It’s new and challenging science. But it’s not just theory. It’s practice. And the evidence is the assailant. The gunman, to get to that crucial character, appeared and disappeared and we say they will never be seen in this universe again. Yes, I said this universe.”

This guy is unhinged, thought Jack, not in what he’s saying but because of the imperious way he’s putting it. “I say, old chap,” Jack interjected adopting Carmichael’s accent, “have you heard of the term ‘mansplaining’? But it’s not usually done to another man.”

“And what,” Carmichael taunted, “have you done in this scenario that warrants you being called a man? But I can tell by your expression that, in whatever small way it is, you’re not unfamiliar with this explanation of the case, misplaced as your attention has been. Yes, Jack, I have read Erin’s paper in full. I have had my technical experts unpick it and put it back together as a blueprint for application. You see, my job is to protect this country from terrorism. Security, Jack. That means being secure. Make this country secure first, that’s where our government has lent us a hand. A strong hand, if limited to this country. But then, there’s Europe, and then ... well, the world is my oyster, Jack. The world. Governments govern best by coercing their populations, and they coerce best by stoking unknown fears and then offering security against them. The task of



security is to legitimise the illegal actions by which populations are kept secure. In this, seemingly circular manoeuvre, Erin is a game-changer and if we can't have her then I'm afraid—as a matter of state security—no one else should. Erin has not only composed a scientific theory that is amazing; she has embodied it. Enacted it! My goodness, the way our lab was destroyed is baffling, but it is truly exciting.”

Jack could definitely see a spark of dictatorial euphoria in Carmichael's eye. It was a symptom of the aspiration to be a supervillain. Against this, Jack could only sling invective. “But the lab was destroyed, and if you think you're going to harness Erin in some way, you don't know her and you're thinking out of your arse.” Another really bad retort Jack, he thought. He knew he had to do better than that. He was glad Michelle was still sedated enough not to have heard it. Oh, on second thought . . .

Small moaning noises were coming from Michelle, beneath the hood that was over her head. She was coming back to consciousness, but for a moment—a wicked moment—the sounds reminded Jack of a more intimate experience with her. “Get that hood off her in case she vomits,” ordered Jack, trying to dispel and discipline his sudden erotic memories, and recalling how nauseous he had felt minutes earlier when he was coming to. It was done discreetly, but Jack saw Carmichael nod at one of the muscle men who pulled the hood up, but only as far as Michelle's mouth. To his surprise, and he guessed to Carmichael's as well, Michelle suddenly tossed and flicked her head about and the hood came off completely.

“What the fuck is going on?” she shouted. “You can't abduct people like this.”

“Well, Michelle,” said Carmichael with a cruelly patronising tone, “. . . and I think we can be on first names basis now, Michelle I am Ian . . . well, Michelle the fact that you and your friends are here now kind of suggests that I can indeed do that.”

“Michelle, I'll sort this, I promise.” Jack couldn't believe he'd said those words. Of course, they were meant as reassurance, feeble as that might be. But they came out absurdly gung-ho. He knew he was scared not only that they may not make it out alive, but that even if they did his relationship with Michelle may be irredeemable. Even Carmichael laughed out loud.

“You went off to solve this mess,” said Michelle, “so if you think you’ll sort this out, then you’re a loveable idiot.”

“Well put, Michelle,” Carmichael retorted.

“I said ‘loveable idiot’,” responded Michelle. “Whereas you, Ian, whatever else the fuck you are, you are a fucking twat!”

ERIN

Erin was floating to the surface of a black well, not knowing how long her breath would last. She could recall a hand wrapped around her mouth, muffling her scream as she woke up abruptly in Michelle’s spare bed. A moment later, she was gagged and tied to a kitchen chair next to Michelle, who was also bound and gagged. There were three men in black balaclavas standing in front of them. Oh no, Erin moaned to herself, not again, not again.

A mobile phone camera was pointing at them. “Confirming these are the packages you want. They don’t look much.”

“Roger that,” a voice came through the speaker on the phone, “so give them the jab and get back here. Take the gags off before stowing them, boss says we can’t have them doing a Jimi.”

“A Jimi?” Even through his balaclava, one of the thugs looked perplexed.

“Jimi Hendrix,” said another thug as if they were joking about in a schoolyard, “drowning in their own vomit.”

He was taking two syringes out of his waist pack. In horror, Erin saw one of them go roughly into Michelle’s neck. A moment later she felt the stab in her own. The giddiness then wooziness came on moments later. Yes, she was feeling like she might spew. This wasn’t surgery-style anaesthesia. More like what she imagined a spiked drink would do. As the gag came off she muttered to Michelle, “Where’s Jack when we need him...” Then the hood went over her head.

“Gone to play hero and save us,” mumbled Michelle in a woozy voice.

“Hope he’s safe,” Erin spoke into the heavy cloth covering her face, almost hoping the drug would knock her out quickly.

“He’d better be.” Somehow Michelle was still managing to speak. “I’ve got a few unfinished sentences for him.”

“Yap yap yap,” grumbled an ugly voice from outside of Erin’s hood, “don’t you girls know when to shut the fuck up!”

“Fuck you, you patronising pricks,” she heard Michelle bellow from far away. But then, coming closer, and clearer she heard Michelle’s voice again. “... you are a fucking twat!”

“Ah Erin,” another voice, male, cloyingly posh, immediately irritating, was coalescing in her fogged perception, “so glad you’ve joined us too. Now we’re all here. How chummy.”

Erin assumed this voice belonged to the fucking twat. As her vision focussed, she could make him out, along with the thugs who had presumably broken into Michelle’s house. By the look of them, the thugs were more professional than the last goons who had kidnapped her. As was this twat-in-charge. Jim whatisname back at the research lab was a clown compared to this polished twat.

“Apologies for having to sedate you all to get you here, but I didn’t think you’d agree to an appointment by email. And we needed to protect Jack and Michelle from themselves during transit. But with you, Erin, I think I can safely say we needed to protect ourselves from you. We’re still not sure what you might be capable of. After all, to put it simply, how do we deal with someone who has part of their brain from another universe.”

“Can you stop saying another universe?” said Jack. “It’s losing its impact.”

“So, Mr Twat,” said Erin, “you read my paper and you think it’s true. You’re a fool.”

“Did I scare you by mentioning that I knew your secret, the one you proudly broadcast in your paper? Such a novel concept, well worth a trophy in a hall of scientific fame. I hope you’ll collect it one day when we’ve downloaded what we need from you. Although it may be a posthumous presentation, of course.”

“What do you want to do with me?”

“A few brain scans to begin with, nothing too intrusive but you’ll have to be on your best behaviour. We don’t want any vandalism like last time. Of course, I wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble for just a few scans. I’m thinking we may need to go surgically into the brain. Don’t worry too much, my staff all have some kind of medical training.” Carmichael gestured to his security squad, and added, “Even these chaps. Now, I’d love to chat more but now that you’re all wakey wakey, we have work to do. So shall we start?”

The squad moved in on Erin, wheeling the executive chair she was tied to out of the room and down a corridor. She could hear Jack’s and Michelle’s shouts of protest drifting into the distance. Her cries seemed equally pointless.

The room she was wheeled into had a similar feel to the one at the Securope research lab, but this one seemed even more sinister. It was hard to comprehend how much had happened in such a short amount of time. Erin had become a casualty of this company’s relentless quest to be ahead of the game at all costs. Its quest was about power rather than scientific knowledge, and her published research wasn’t enough for them. They wanted to probe and extract something physical from her head. She shuddered with that thought.

Her ties were cut free but immediately and firmly replaced by straps fixed to the side railing of the surgical bed. The tranquiliser had nearly worn off, but she needed some more time to think clearly. To get an edge on what was happening.

“I need to use the ladies,” she said. It was an old ploy, but it might buy some time.

“That old line?” said the twat, obviously second-guessing her, while standing like a general in front of his troops.

“Take it that way if you like, Mr Twat,” replied Erin, “but unless you want me to piss and shit all over the table, you’ll have someone escort me to the ladies.”

‘Ah, I see we’re still not on familiar terms. I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself before. The name is Carmichael, but you can call me Ian.’

“Apology accepted, but Mr Twat, now can I go and relieve myself? It could get unpleasant.”

The busyness around her in the operating room paused, as if waiting for Carmichael's response.

"I need to use the fucking ladies!"

"All right," Carmichael relented, "I think we can afford a few minutes. And we don't want another scene, do we?" He nodded to two of his men. They undid the straps on her arms and legs and motioned to put plastic ties on her wrists.

"OK, hold off on that," said Erin. "How am I supposed to wipe my bum? Are your goons going to do that?" Amazingly, she saw they recoiled at that.

"Of course, Erin," intervened Carmichael, waving away the plastic ties, "what was I thinking? Give the young woman her dignity, chaps. But don't let her out of your sight."

"It's number twos," she said to them as they opened the cubicle door, "I don't do pressure poohs, so kindly stay out and shut the door." Would she have spoken like this two or three days ago? Daily domestic life with the folks in suburban Cheltenham was disappearing fast from her character profile.

Sitting in the cubicle, she looked around. This is ridiculous, she thought, it's the stuff of crime or spy movies. But the hero there always has some trick up their sleeve. Here, there was nothing. Nothing to prompt how she might escape, let alone help Michelle and Jack. Nothing around her, on the outside; so she went inwards. She had undertaken some past life regression workshops at uni under so-called "mindfulness" sessions she'd been embarrassed into taking during an especially heavy workload with the PhD. She had hated it, but now it seemed it comes in handy. She imagined her head extending out from her body to float into space. Journeying up past the moon, past Mars and Jupiter and then further out into the Milky Way to be surrounded by an infinitesimal number of stars shining in the blackness. There was a kind of peace in this vacuum of space, where she was reaching the end of time. Then she imagined coming back all that way into her body, into her head, travelling inwards to the brain tissue, then to the cells. She remembered the movie *Fantastic Voyage* where a scientist gets an inoperable blood clot in his brain, and using his own invention that can miniaturise matter, a team of experts enters his body in a submarine to burn out the clot with a laser. Erin was

following in their footsteps, reducing to the infinitesimally small, she was floating towards cells, onto swarms of atoms then protons, electrons, photons and neutrons. This wasn't just atomic tourism. She was seeking something in those atomic swarms. Smears and smudges moving in a direction opposite to her travel. They were the signposts to that alien part within her, that part of some other universe. She imagined seeing the infinite folds of the brain's sticky grey tissue unfurled, the neuronal arcs and links anamorphically laid out like a hyperspatial flow diagram, like a map of the internet, with the synapses flashing as multicoloured signals, gemstones flickering in the dark, stars birthing and bursting in deep space. Time was slipping away, but she stayed focused on a co-mingling of atomic swarms as if it were a switch that could be activated in the brain to allow the flow of alien energies.

"That's long enough. Come on."

"Another minute," she stood and flushed the toilet, opened the cubicle door and stepped up to the washbasin, looking at herself in the mirror. Had she triggered something in herself? Was there some sub-molecular physical change taking place? "Possibly a brightness in the eyes, a tiny twinkle," she told her reflection. "But what thoughts to have sitting on the loo!"

She walked confidently back to the lab and, voluntarily lying down on the surgery table, declared, "What on earth are you thinking you can gain from attaching me to these silly machines?"

"You know very well," said Carmichael. "We will trigger responses, find out what happened to my equipment at the research lab. How you managed to destroy them."

She felt a smile grow across her face, "Best of luck."

"I admire your cocky spirit, Erin. But you are now this company's asset, which we intend to mine, to exhaustion if it's worth it. So you do realise we must keep at it till we find what we're looking for. And, alas, you may not be in such a good state mentally by then."

"It's your mental state that will be disturbed. You don't know what your fucking messing with."

"Hmm. That ought to be our policy statement at Securope! You don't know who you messing with, young lady."

For Erin, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. "That's the second time I've heard that. Is it company policy to be condescending to women? Don't ever, ever call me 'young lady', you patronising bastard."

Carmichael made a show of turning to his men and winking.

"Oh, I forgot to mention this little condition of our game," he proclaimed, with a new touch of venom in his voice. "You misbehave, you get injected, and when you wake up you'll have some presents from Santa. On your lap. A piece of Michelle and a piece of Jack. Fingers and toes don't count. I'm not parsimonious with my presents, but believe me, we can keep the gifts coming. OK, now that we have that clear, let's see her light up, boys," he ordered, "and harvest some data. If she tries anything, or anything starts to snap, crackle or pop, sedate her. If she is invincible to bullets, we'll soon be finding out."

There was a flurry of activity from the technicians surrounding Erin, attaching cables and switching on machines. The noise of the CT scanner added to the cacophony of sounds. Data was already starting to stream across the screens. Things started pumping in a hive of male energy.

"Then let the games begin," Erin muttered, "and don't say I didn't warn you."

"Holy shit," someone shouted, "sedation, now!"

A white-coated technician plunged the hypodermic syringe into her neck. As the syringe's point perforated her skin, Erin felt a force, destabilising her, as a wave of radiation emanated from her body.

The tranquilliser did nothing. Erin was fermenting something inside herself, carrying it like a pregnancy or an erupting disease. Or a bomb. A coexistence of matter and antimatter, swirling inside her and seeking an outlet. It was a power, a power she had only felt the intimation of in the past days, but it was now a force that could be released on demand. And she demanded it.

An invisible electromagnetic storm front of energy, a tangled collision of matter and antimatter, and a fiercely rapacious tsunami of anger and revenge flooded across the lab, like the blast from a nuclear explosion.

The syringe was stupidly hanging from her neck as the shock waves of the explosion blew the lab technicians off their feet. In some cases, literally, limbs were severed by flying machinery that was twisting as it spun across the room like massive pieces of shrapnel. And the bodies and body parts that were whirling through the air could do similar damage. It must be like being in a cyclone, thought Erin, though she was in the eye of the storm.

Still strapped to the operating table, she found she was floating, lifted buoyantly yet calmly. She felt joyously weightless as if riding a cloud. Albeit a storm cloud.

JACK

Jack and Michelle had been left alone in the executive suite after Erin was wheeled out toward whatever torture had been designed for her.

“This is a right fucking cock-up, Jack,” said Michelle. “Do we have a plan?”

He had to hand it to her. She was right. A fuck-up. He hadn't had a plan when he went after Falon. And although Carmichael's goon squad went to Michelle's, if Jack had been there, things might have turned out differently. Securope seemed to be one step ahead of them at each crucial moment. A fuck-up. But he did have one plan but he couldn't bring himself to say it. He was clenching his jaw tight while furiously twisting one of his hands to try to free it from a plastic tie that felt just marginally looser than the other. It was painful. Agonising, but the blood was making his wrist and the hand slippery. Gradually, but with surges of increasingly burning pain his hand was working its way little by little out from the plastic handcuff. At last, with a final wrenching move and anguished grunt, his blood-sodden hand was free.

“Holy Mary Mother of God!” screeched Michelle as she saw his arm move freely, flinging spatters of blood onto the plastic sheeting over the floor. “Are you ... are you OK?”

“Better now than before,” said Jack at last able to relax his jaw.

“Well done, Jack. Lucky for them they'd thought of the plastic. I hate to think what the reason for that is.”



“Not out of the woods yet,” he cautioned. One arm was free, but his legs were still tied to the legs of the chair. Bending over with a grunt he was just able to reach the floor with the tips of his fingers. Slowly, painfully slowly, he worked the chair over towards the big corporate desk. There had to be something on this massive desk or in the drawers he could use to free his other hand and feet. Damn, the paper-free office. Finally, he found an old ornamental paper-knife. He held it up as if looking at it more closely would make it less dubious a tool.

“What’s behind those doors, Jack?” Michelle poked her chin in the direction of a set of sliding doors. “Big corporate office—gotta have a private kitchenette of some kind.”

“Of course,” but he tucked the paperknife in his belt for safekeeping. Again, he was slowly edging his way across the office floor, like a manic ape swinging his free arm along the ground, although this passage was a bit easier as there was no plastic sheeting here. Whatever that protective sheeting was intended for, it was only for the area where their chairs had been positioned. And it didn’t look like any office renovations in that area were planned. The gruesome suspicion spurred him on through the pain. At least I’m leaving blood on their clean floor, he thought. When he slid the doors open there was a kitchenette bench with a sink and espresso machine. A quick rifle through the drawers found a serviceably sharp-looking knife. A good weapon too. He quickly untethered himself from the chair and raced over to free Michelle.

“Isn’t this where you tear off a piece of clothing to wrap my wrist and staunch the blood?” he asked.

“Pretty hard to do that when you’re wearing lycra athleisure wear,” Michelle replied. “But if I had a fulsome skirt on, I’d rip it off for you.” She winked and went to the kitchenette grabbing a tea towel which she tied around his hand. “You poor darling, but brave darling. I won’t ask if it hurts. I can feel it from here.”

“Now comes the hard part,” he said, “finding Erin and getting the fuck away from here.”

“She went through that door and down a hall,” Michelle reminded him, “but that’s also where all the bastards went to do whatever it is they’re going to do to her. I guess this is where we say we need to create a diversion to stop them doing whatever it is they’re doing.”

“I suppose we could ...,” began Jack, but his voice was suddenly overwhelmed by a massive explosion. Then the building’s alarm system burst into song. Jack grabbed onto Michelle’s hand as a blast flung the office door inward. The air was filled with acrid dust. They could both see down the corridor. Smoke was pouring out from what looked like a hole in a wall, but which had probably been a set of double doors. The corridor was being lit up by flashes of what seemed to be lightning, sparking from inside the new hole in the wall, presumably what had been a room.

“Do you suppose ...?” began Michelle.

“Got to be Erin,” answered Jack.

Good sense, or self-preservation, would have steered them in another direction, any other direction. But they ran straight down the corridor toward the heart of the chaos. What they witnessed as they leapt over the debris and peered through the gaping hole in the wall was like a battlefield in an action movie. Those lying wounded were groaning in pain. Those silent were probably unconscious, possibly dead. Except these weren’t actors or stunt people. Even though they had most likely been torturing Erin, Jack felt appalled at the carnage. They caused it, he was saying to himself. They caused this.

Michelle was calling out for Erin, with no answer. Jack was looking for Carmichael in the devastation, hoping he’d be among the injured. His security guards were there, but there was no trace of him. The room was being lit by flares and arcs of electrical discharges. To Jack, it almost looked like a disco light show. As if to shake him out of that illusion, the sprinkler system came on. Just as Erin had described it at the lab, it came down in a noisy torrent. Michelle grabbed Jack’s arm and pointed with her other hand toward the ceiling. She had a look of utter disbelief on her face. Through the whorl of rain and smoke, Jack could make out a shadowy shape slowly descending. The operating table. It was unattached to anything structural above it or below it. It was floating.

“What the fuck?” Jack heard himself crying out. This wasn’t real. This was a hallucination, an effect of shock. But the table was real, and it was descending, settling comfortably back onto the floor. Erin was lying on it. Wide awake. Unruffled. Almost smiling.

“Erin, Erin ... you OK?” asked Michelle.

“Ermmm . . . .,” Jack was gesturing palely at the hypodermic syringe, dangling out of her neck. Michelle quickly plucked it out and threw it on the floor into the rubble.

“I am fine,” answered Erin. “But I did this. I did it. Look at the devastation I can cause.”

She was in shock, reasoned Jack. First thing is, he reminded himself, to get her and Michelle and get the fuck away. Then we’ll find out about the levitation, and the blast. Michelle and Jack released the straps on the table and helped her onto her feet, confirming with her that she could walk. The floor was slippery with water, ash, rubble and blood. As nimbly as possible, they were stepping over contorted bodies, and body parts, trying not to look too closely. When they got out into the corridor the air was filled with a stinking, smouldering stench of burnt electrical cable and a concoction of other burnt things Jack didn’t want to think he was inhaling.

“This way,” Jack took the lead, feeling assertive, feeling that he had an edge now in this craziness. Focus on getting them out of the building. The fire alarms are blaring, what do staff do when the alarms go off? Head for the fire escape. They blended in with other staff urgently rushing down the concrete and metal stairwell. Their sodden and soiled clothes giving them an air of authenticity. They’d been in the thick of it. The building staff, most of whom Jack reasoned would be unaware of what had happened in Carmichael’s private operating theatre, gave the trio of escapees priority passage out through the lobby and onto the street outside. The crowd was large enough and confused enough for Jack to steer Michelle and Erin away from the building forecourt as the first emergency response team was coming around the corner. Jack hailed a taxi directing it to Paddington station.

“My cash is running out fast, but when we get there I’ll buy the tickets and grab some food from the station takeaway.”

Exhausted and looking like they’d just emerged from an overland marathon, they boarded the train bound for Cheltenham. “Once again, fare thee fucking well London,” Jack spat the words out as he saw the city speeding away behind him.

ERIN

Now that it had made itself so forcefully known to her, to almost have a type of personality, Erin needed to give it a name. This coalescence of matter and antimatter inside, but also alongside, her. It felt opposite to her in polarity, so the easiest way to deal with that was to treat it as opposite in sex. Male. But its identity was still unknown to her: he was a known unknown. She needed a generic name that she wouldn't become too attached to, and would herself identify with. What did crime shows call the unknown arrivals at the morgue, while they were waiting to be identified? John or Jane Doe. That was a good association for her to keep in mind. She'd call him 'John'. He did not only exist as a phantasm in her mind. John must inhabit a sub-molecular level for what happened to make any sense.

The sound of the train was hypnotic, dulling her senses into that fitful space between sleep and waking. Her mind was in freefall trying to picture her quantum biological system where uncertainty was the king ruled by probabilities in conjunction with the structure of matter. Spinning tops all spinning together create a stable matter moment in their chaotic uncertainty, which means that the reverse spinning antimatter would generally make interaction with matter impossible. The particles would annihilate each other. Somehow the biology of my being, she realised, was sympathetic and supportive, creating entanglement states. Erin's body was respecting the other's spin. Was this, she pondered, what spiritual enlightenment was like enabling complementary flows to continue no matter what path they were on? Was this intuited awareness the actual result of the research she'd undertaken, leading to an encounter with 'John'? Was it possible that antimatter was part of her ongoing material existence, her 'becoming'? Was she ... pregnant with antimatter? Was 'John' the electromagnetic radiation that poured from her, or was the trigger for a power that was hers?

If any of this was true, then these two forces, one positive and one negative, were in balance; nothing changes unless there is some reaction. Antimatter in its parallel universe has been seen as abandoned, thought Erin, banished from being part of this material universe. The matter troops outnumbering the antimatter troops had torn into them, in a war at the dawn of the universe. The antimatter at the frontline sacrificed itself as suicide bombers; the horde of antimatter surviving was dispersed like a sandstorm and blown into exile. Now she could identify a refugee from that battle as John, the noise in her brain that would be the trigger of her superhuman power. What would the scientist who had instigated the

ANITA experiment in Antarctica think about this, the probability of this antimatter anti-identity? The train's swaying rhythms were making Erin's eyes close. "... the proof ... of my very existence," she flinched, jolting back awake. It occurred to her then that no matter where she turned, or who she turned to in the scientific world, they would want quantitative proof of her existence. They would subject her to more invasive tests, just like Securope. With the warmth and rocking rhythm of the train carriage and the lingering taste of her cheddar and sweet chutney sandwich, she fell back towards childhood and sleep. As she sank into the embrace she heard herself muttering, "Mum says don't eat cheese before bedtime. You get bad dreams. Technicolour. Vivid. Visits from another world..."

MICHELLE

"It's not far to walk to the university," encouraged Michelle. "And early enough so as not to bump into anyone." She used her swipe card. "It's only management's record-keeping."

Jack looked nervous. "I hope you're right. I don't want MI5 or MI6 knocking on our door. Goddamn, this has been so weird I wouldn't be surprised if we were dealing with another branch, a sort of X-files division. MI7, maybe?"

"Erin, how does that sound to you? Going to the university campus, I mean, not MI7."

"Sorry," said Erin coming back from what looked like a remote reverie, "I'm not here, I was still back on the train ... weird dreams or thoughts not really sure which ... yes .... I would love to know more about what is happening here," she tapped her hand on her chest, "inside me."

Michelle's office at the university was adjacent to her lab. "We'll start with up here," Michelle gestured to Erin's forehead, "I know we've done this before, but after yesterday's catastrophe, I'd like to compare things with the previous data. Let's get started straightaway if that is ok with you all."

"I'll leave you and Erin to do your thing," Jack offered, "and keep a low profile in your office."

Michelle had been watching Jack on the train, tracking an inner turmoil in him as existential as Erin's. She wanted to help him but didn't want to be a maternal protector. What an old-fashioned role for a woman. Especially for a lover! And yet, she couldn't deny that a strong part of what she liked

about him was that he was here, caught up in this mayhem in a state of shock because he was searching for some kind of redemption.

“Sure,” Michelle said, and added with a cheeky playful smile, “and we need somewhere to stay for the night, so that might occupy a moment of your time.”

Jack nodded in relaxed agreement and went back to Michelle’s office. Even with the door closed, Michelle felt a positive charge connecting them.

“Erin,” Michelle began after collecting her thoughts and retrieving a pedagogic tone she felt she ought to have utterly lost in the last days, “the issue before us is how the entangled molecular novel structure of the brain, in its interactions with antimatter, reacts to various stimuli that I’d call a physiology of consciousness. The microwave signals in the Securope labs seem to have prompted a physical condensate, which by your account is sub-conscious rather than fully in your consciousness, and that induced an electromagnetic radiation domino effect across the equipment you were connected with. A kind of fatal harmonics between the lab apparatuses that were plugging into your biological and neurological functions.”

“Except,” Erin added, “and I don’t quite know how to put this ... but in London, the effect wasn’t sub-conscious. It was ... on my part ... consciously willed. Well, I know I was driven by emotions that I wasn’t entirely aware of. Fear, for sure, also anger, and concern ... for you and Jack. But—and I’m not sure how—but I did what I did on purpose. I couldn’t quite control it, but I made it happen. Or rather, something in me allowed me to make it happen. An entity. I still can’t admit to the consequences. They were horrific, and yet I knew that’s how it had to be if we were all to get out of there alive. Erin’s stuttering confession suddenly became deeply emotional, “Michelle, they were going to do things to you and Jack if I didn’t cooperate. I don’t want to tell you the threat, but I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

Michelle remembered the plastic sheeting on the floor of the office and shuddered. She didn’t want to dwell on it, and so continued as the pedagogue. “An entity?! Well, this sub-molecular confluence can bridge into energetic wavefronts on a macroscopic scale. It seems our challenge is to help you control this entity, maybe suppress it so that you can lead an everyday life. Without things exploding around you. I think you have to work on an intuitive level with this parallel entity.”

“Intuition,” Erin reflected. “That’s a word that I’ve always found useful in speculating about the quantum world. I like to use every faculty I possess to pursue different understandings of being in the world. Something occurred to me at the Securope headquarters that makes me want to be free of the constraints in exploring physics that are based on mechanical determinism. A door opened that enables me to explore ... what, free will? I think what happened to me was an awakening of my own free will without really knowing what free will meant and how was it even found. It’s a tautology, I realise, or maybe just a contradiction in terms. How can I freely, wilfully think of free will? It was just the proposition of free will, an unknown-unknown, that might be determined precisely by what is unknown to me.”

This sounded like a different Erin from the one Michelle had known, and she admired this version of Erin for the strength and courage with which she was facing a new, bizarre world. She connected the sensors to Erin's head. “Erin, I am about to switch on some equipment here and really hope it won’t explode. Do you think it will? Are you feeling comfortable? More importantly, relaxed?”

“I don’t think anything like that will happen, Michelle. I’m not being threatened in any way. At the same time, it’s not like I am in command—not the way I felt in the lab yesterday. It’s as though I’m only reflective as an afterthought by whatever is driving that part of me.”

“We’re all just afterthoughts of our brains. Everything outside the brain, in the world, happens quicker than we can process and then we’re restricted to one mental outcome even though multiple things might be happening to us. That’s consciousness.” Michelle tapped some keys on a console. “OK this is where the fun starts, I guess.”

To the relief of both, the more extensive tests were completed without any problem. To Michelle’s relief, the readouts appeared to confirm a sympathetic relationship had developed between the antimatter and matter in Erin’s brain mass. The question now appeared about where else the antimatter might have spread within her body.

“What do you think is happening to me,” asked Erin, “what is going to happen.”

“Diagnosis? These results reveal a sort of molecular co-habitation, but don’t tell us whether it’s growing or coalescing and assimilating with

your body. It doesn't look like any kind of virus, no matter how strange, for which there might be some anti-viral treatment. It's not a parasite, at least not in the conventional biological meaning of that term. It's very much a part of you. Now for the prognosis. It's clearly dangerous to others, but not to you. You say you now feel you can command it, but is it going to be controllable? For now, I'd say the treatment will be trial and error, learning from your experiences, and tuning into its effects on you. Educating yourself on how to relate to the world around you both without damaging the world. The problem is that the uniqueness of your antimatter duality is evidently of great interest to private enterprises, like Securope, and the government agencies they're in cahoots with, or want to be in bed with. I dare say, when Securope spoke about security they were talking about a military-industrial nexus. That's scary for all of us. Yet they don't really know what is special about you, Erin. But they know you're special, very special. They've already shown the lengths they'll go to to get their hands on you, and I can only predict the pressure will increase immensely."

"Oh god," Erin looked depressed, "I was hoping for something else like, that the antimatter would slowly deteriorate. At least, I'm glad you're not holding back."

"Look, it might decay, but your immune system does not seem worried about it. It looks like, from the blood sample I took at the safe house, no antibodies are being created to fight the invasion. At the moment, the ability you might have to use the antimatter inside you could be extraordinary. Can you feel it now?"

"Yes, it's hard to individuate, like having a pain that you think has gone away but comes back when you stop being busy. Or maybe like what some amputees call phantom pain—like some part of me has been traumatically removed or, rather, replaced; but I still feel it and feel the trauma it went through."

"I think you should take a break and catch up on some rest now," said Michelle, still slightly nervous about Erin's capacity to contain or unleash 'the entity'; but she also wanted to spend some time with Jack. It was clear to her that the perilous nature of their situation was bound to escalate again. As far as she could see, there was no real way out. As soon as she returned to her office, Jack threw down the smartphone he'd been obviously idling with and leapt to his feet. She wrapped her arms around him at the same moment as he did to her, and they both held on



tight. She was glad that his response was warm and caring. It was exactly what she needed.

Still holding each other, he looked at her straight in the eyes, but the look of love was tinged with anguish.

“Thank god you’re finished in there,” he began. His heart sank. “I have some awful news. While you were with Erin I rested, waking with a start I checked the internet on my phone, wanting to find out what happened to Dan. The local paper has a story. I had to read it five times before I believed it was happening. ... It claims Dan was killed when confronting a group responsible for a terrorist attack at Technology Park and who were allegedly planning another attack in London. It said she had been working with Special Services and had tracked them down to a house outside Cheltenham, but had gone there alone.”

“Oh my god, then ... she is dead? Oh, that’s awful, awful. I’m so sorry ...” Michelle pressed her face against his. Then pulled back. “But what’s this about a terrorist gang hiding out in that house? They’re the ones who attacked us.”

“Yeah. How about that! It seems the three culprits got away. But the government has released their names and descriptions. Guess who?”

It suddenly hit her, harder than the news about Dan.

“You used your swipe to get in here,” said Jack. “I reckon they’ll have that pretty soon, if not already, we have been here way too long. In any case, we three are now national news as armed and dangerous terrorists. We have to get out of here immediately.”

“How much worse can this get?” cried Michelle. “Can you call someone? Can you tell them that this is not true?”

“Who can we call? I can’t sugar-coat it. This is the work of the government; no one else has the sort of clout to fabricate a lie like this.”

“Jack we have no money and can’t use credit cards; how can we go anywhere? How are we going to clear our names and keep Erin safe?”

“We can just hand ourselves in, tell our side of the story? There must be evidence ...”

“Darling, we’ve had enough trouble trying to understand this situation among ourselves. Imagine explaining the layers of science to a cop in an interview room whose only priorities are exonerating a dead cop and nailing a crooked cop ... or to some local journalist in fifty words!”

“I see your point. And how do you fight the government, except with terrorism?”

“In the interests of national security, we are the terrorists. Securope are the good guys. And with MI6—or whoever—and the Cheltenham force out for my blood, they can do anything. We’re in a bad place.”

“Jack, you’re terrifying me.”

The office door opened, with Erin sheepishly poking her head in. “Sorry to disturb you two love birds, but I was getting lonely.” Her face dropped when she saw the tears in Michelle’s eyes. “What ... what’s ...”

“Erin, Dan is dead,” said Michelle, reaching out her hand to Erin’s. “But we’ve been accused of it.”

Jack quickly filled her in on the story.

“Under these circumstances,” Jack continues, “if we stick together we increase the evidence of our movements, and if they catch one they catch us all. I think we have to split up and split their numbers in the search party. Also, we need to change the way we look as much as possible. Anything that can cover your head or face will be a start.” Michelle saw Jack looking around her office as if there might be something lying around. What did he expect? Hats, sunglasses, wigs? It was futile. She could see him losing the fight.

Erin became surprisingly calm. “I will give myself up. That’s what they want. Not you. And they want me alive. And they’ll know now that they can’t fuck around with me. I can make sure they know that if I feel threatened, and if I feel they’re threatening you, then all hell will break loose.”

Michelle hated to admit it, but she sensed this might be the one slim thread of hope they had left. She could see that Jack was fighting against agreeing with it but was also brooding on it. They were in a corner. The worst predicament yet. And to Michelle, the strategy of splitting up was doomed. They would be picked up one by one.

“What do you say guys?” asked Erin, “I think it’s the last shot we’ve got. Face up to them rather than run.”

God that girl has guts, thought Michelle.

“I suppose,” said Jack unhappily but resigned. “But we have to call the shots on coming in from the cold. We have to avoid any trigger-happy clowns. If this is what you want, I’ll call Munro and state that we all agree to come into the station in the morning, arriving at 9 am. We need to stage this so we can maximise the only thing we still have on our side surprise. It is already just after midday. We need to leave now and I will wait to call the press and the news stations, giving our versions. They’ll run the story straight away, I’m sure. They’ll have reporters and cameras at the station from early too, so that should give us some protection.”

Jack said he knew of a disused flat not too far from the university that was part of a previous investigation. A drug raid where everyone had fled, leaving a sectioned-off crime scene. He was sure that the flat would still be sealed. He gave Erin and Michelle the address and told each of them the directions to get there.

Michelle knew the habits of her colleagues in the department and knew she could probably find odd coats and hats in the offices that she could access—quite a few staff neglected to lock their doors. When she came back several minutes later she had a small stash under her arm. Erin left first wearing track pants and an oversized hoody from a professor’s gym bag, with a white lab coat tied around her waist to look like a skirt.

Michelle went to Jack and hugged him for as long as possible. She could see the tears in Jack’s eyes “Sorry for the cliché,” she said, “but if this all goes wrong, I just want you to know I’ve found something that I haven’t known before.”

“This crazy hat?” said Jack, with a rakish smile as he donned the deerstalker that Michelle had found on top of a researcher’s bookshelf.

“You,” she said. “You.” And poked him in the belly. He exited with his shirt put back on inside out, another ill-fitting lab coat draped over his shoulders, looking as if she had styled him every bit like an eccentric physics academic lost in an arcane mathematical excursion.

Michelle waited her turn, which came after ten painful minutes as she shed more tears. Then walked out of her office, and out of the building in someone's old bomber-style jacket retrieved from the tea room where it had been neglected for weeks, along with a beanie pulled down over the head. The beanie had been consigned to the bottom drawer of her desk more than a year ago. She now felt as she had felt then, that it made her look like a petty criminal on a job.

## JACK

Jack had become poignantly aware of how fickle time was. It could pass by so quickly when he wanted it to slow or stall. It was not just the dramatic circumstances of the last few days that had made him feel so close to Michelle, or that fuelled the passion between them across an intense embrace. It was as if in that embrace, or kiss, or even glance, they had to love each other the equivalent of a lifetime. He wanted to reciprocate Michelle's confession before he left her office. He could see the tears swelling in her eyes, but he knew she was the strong one. As he left her office, he'd placed his hand on her desk as if to leave a trace of himself behind for her.

Jack was left with a nagging feeling that what he had to do could be disastrous for them all, but he could not see any other way out. He had called a national newspaper colleague so he would spread the word, and alert the TV stations that they were turning themselves in. At least, if the press and TV were at the police station when they arrived it would prevent MI6, or whatever the section, from doing anything too sinister. Getting there would of course be just as hazardous, but hopefully not a gun-riddled walk, like that of Clint Eastwood doing his duty in the movie, Gauntlet. In that the whole of the city police force had lined the route to stop him, peppering his amateur armoured bus with bullets. Jack pictured Michelle, Erin and himself walking past the welcome sign at Holland House and, with press cameras flashing, entering the station safely. "Me, I am going in...", "Jack recited the lines from the movie in his head. "Why? At least someone will know I tried."

## MICHELLE

Michelle climbed through the blue and white checked tape across the front door, which as Jack had said was not locked, just pulled shut. She eased it closed behind her and gingerly made her way to the living room which overlooked the street. It had taken a while to meander through the surrounding streets, waiting for a quiet moment to get into the flat unseen.

The evening was settling and the streetlights outside switched on, illuminating the flat's sorry state. It looked like a squat, only more derelict for its emptiness. Filthy food tins, pizza boxes, cups and glasses, half-drunk bottles of beer, odd items of clothing, and a lot of debris presumably from the raid. All evidence of drug use and dealing—scales, bags, money counting machines—would have been impounded. Just in case, however, she did a careful search for sharps and thankfully found none. What had been the furniture, from street throw-outs by the look of it, had been haphazardly tossed around during the druggies' fight or their flight. The place looked as putrid as what had gone on in it. Michelle despairingly flopped down on the stained velvet couch, by now too exhausted mentally and physically to care about the rubbish she was surrounded by.

“Michelle,” she heard a voice whisper nearby.

“Fuck!” She jumped up from the sofa. “Oh fuck, Erin. I didn't hear you come in.”

“You were fast asleep Michelle, so sorry I frightened you. I tried to be quiet.”

“Christ, how long have I been asleep?” she cursed herself. “Anyway, I'm glad you are safe. Everything OK en route here?”

“Fine,” Erin was still whispering, “really, I was just happy to be out, walking a little, staying safely away from people. With the hood on I felt I was invisible.”

Erin was looking around the place, “This really is a dump, eh?”

“Think of it as the Chelsea Hotel.”

“Not much point cleaning it up, is there?”

The door creaked open and Erin swung in the direction of the intruder with a look on her face that frightened Michelle. It was like a banshee. No, like a Valkyrie. A goddess of war, yes that's it. And it must have frightened Jack too as he stepped into the room.

“Whoa,” he shouted, “It's me, Jack, I come in peace.”

He had instantly felt the same fear that Michelle experienced: that Erin might issue another shock wave, irradiating those in the vicinity.

“Peace,” he repeated just to smooth out any wrinkles left in Erin’s state, “and I bring food.”

“Where? How? And what?” asked Michelle.

“Got my journo mate to order Uber eats at a phoney address on his card. As to what it is, I didn’t get to look at the menu when he ordered. By the smell of it, I’d say it’s curry.”

“It could be gruel and still be a treat, Jack,” said Michelle.

“And, hey, we don’t have to do the washing up, or take out the garbage,” added Erin.

Erin took up her bunk on the couch with a rug. Michelle and Jack made their way to the bedroom, placing a blanket over the mattress. They hadn’t dared turn any lights on the whole evening, using only the pale cold ether of the streetlights to make the place habitable for the night. Michelle followed Jack onto the bed, felt his arms wrap around her shoulders and let her head rest on his chest. They lay there, unmoving, breathing slowly. It seemed like hours had gone passed before she finally knew what to say.

“Even in these conditions, Jack, this is the best I have felt for a long time.”

“I sure know how to treat a girl to a good night out.”

“It may sound strange, but I’d like this moment to last for a long time.”

But no sooner had she said that than she fell into a deep sleep, leaving it all behind.

COLIN

Colin Cox pulled his digital recorder from his inside top pocket and placed it on the lectern in front of Gloucester County Chief of Police, Damian Henderson. Colin had always disliked Henderson, thinking of him as at best a mouthpiece for upper echelons of government and at worst as a self-serving and snivelling toad. So this moment felt like a nice

bit of karma coming back onto Henderson. Colin had been called by Jack the day before with a scoop on the so-called terrorists' imminent surrender. He trusted Jack from the old days in London and he trusted Jack's story, weird if not crazy as it sounded. And Colin had an ear for stories that could ruffle feathers of authority, and Jack's account of the past few days as well as his plight had the plot points set for an explosive story. While Jack was no swashbuckling hero, his chronicle of escape reminded Colin of those great spy stories of double-crossed protagonists, from *The Thirty-Nine Steps* to *The Bourne Identity*. But there was no sign of Jack or his pals at this briefing. Perhaps, thought Colin with a little grin, they're planning a theatrical entrance.

The early morning press conference began with a nervous cough from the chief, unnecessarily getting the attention of those in the room. He was standing at the head of a group of expressionless and effectively anonymous men, some in suits and others in quasi-military uniforms. Colin didn't have a clue who these other characters were, what the uniform was, nor why they were there. Then he found out.

"At 2 am this morning," Henderson announced, "an armed anti-terror squad using ballistic breaching entered a flat in Cheltenham to carry out a raid on a suspected terrorist cell's hideout."

"What the hell?" Colin could not hold back his shock.

"Information gathered from GCHQ Cheltenham had detected the whereabouts of the cell. It was believed the cell intended an action this morning, hence the urgency of the raid. The three suspects, who had already been linked to a bombing in Cheltenham and a bombing in London, were shot dead in an exchange of fire. The flat showed evidence of terrorist propaganda, both as hard copy and as intended internet activity, along with detailed plans for an attack on the GCHQ. Footage of the raid has been released to the press."

The Chief of Police continued in a stilted monologue while blurred and shaky footage began running on a monitor next to him. "Dramatic helmet-camera footage shows gunfire flashes as the anti-terrorist squad which been helicoptered in from London dealt with this imminent and dangerous situation, curtailing a terrorist crime that was to be perpetrated on UK soil. After receiving what they report as an aggressive barrage from assault-type weapons, the squad returned fire, in which two females and a male were shot dead. The terrorists were believed to be responsible

for the recent murder of a police officer who had been attempting to arrest them the day before.”

Colin couldn't make much out of the video, which he suspected was from a training exercise, so he tried to ask a question but the chief went on reading his script unfazed.

“I want to say that the anti-terrorist squad acted with great courage to take on an armed and violent terrorist group like this. The culprits had been operating undercover and all came from surprising backgrounds, which meant that until very recently they had eluded being of interest to our security partners. The two females were a Physics Professor and her award-winning student, both from the university here. But that background in no way diminishes the violent threat they posed to our law and order. Most heinously, the male had been a police detective recently attached to the Cheltenham force. As I stated, there had been no known security issues with the three suspects, but it is believed the male had been radicalised by a militant group in London. It seems he incited the two females to join his conspiracy, possibly by seducing them. He appears to have forged a relationship with the professor to this end.”

Henderson let that last comment hang in the air, as if—thought Colin—to signal Jack's moral as well as criminal corruption.

“Let me conclude,” Henderson rounded off, “by thanking the combined efforts and swift action of our police and our government security partners in this successful outcome. I'd also like to thank Securope, the company previously targeted by this terrorist gang, for their unwavering and expert assistance in this operation, despite having been victim to two earlier attacks. This was a great day for the people of Cheltenham who can now sleep safely in their beds and return to business as usual.”

Henderson and the mysterious league of goons exited the room without even blinking in the direction of the cacophony of questions being thrown at them.

After the conference, Colin skipped into a nearby café and opened his laptop, quickly jotting the key points down. “What a crock of shit,” he couldn't help but say aloud. He looked up from the screen, waving an apology to the nearby customers who were looking askance at him. But there was no doubt in his mind. He could see in the browser windows what he had seen at the briefing was already being fed to social media sites and internet influencers. Erin had become radicalised at university,



unbeknownst to her parents. Michelle had converted her with tales of government manipulation of scientific research to destroy lives and freedoms in third-world countries, contributing to global warming and ecological damage. She had also fostered a sexual relationship with Erin. Jack's family were interviewed about how shocked they were at learning that Jack had become radicalised during his time as a detective in North London. How he had bought into conspiracy theories that had led to a breakdown which entailed moving to Cheltenham, and once there he instigated a plan to attack the GCHQ. One channel that Colin knew too well as a peddler of right-wing conspiracy theories was already at the scene, interviewing witnesses.

"I just returned to the flats from me late-night shift," said a man in overalls, filmed against the crime scene tape at the flat, in an accent that seemed overstated, "and hears gunfire inside the buildin'. I thought fireworks had gone off. But I says to meself, it ain't Guy Fawkes is it? Hah. But it were just as excitin'. I saw loads of men in riot gear. Even let me do a selfie wif 'em. Good on 'em."

"And your feelings about the use of force such as this against these criminals," asked the interviewer.

"Bring it on, I say, get rid of them terror bastards or send 'em back where they came from preferably in a box. Law an order is what we want in his country."

Colin looked over his story and pushed 'send'. He suspected it would be neutered by the editor and put below other more editorially aligned stories. Let's see, he thought: something on the university scrambling to cover itself from allegations of harbouring radical intellectuals, with statements about new disciplinary measures being introduced to stop the spread of anti-social ideas in academe. Another about Jack's family, embarrassed and humiliated by his actions, going into hiding. Another in Michelle's family, and an elderly relative so devastated by the news all fell into a deep depression, having to be hospitalised due to their daughter's behaviour. Erin's parents would be desolate, left in disbelief over what their lovely daughter had gone and done.

And by the end of the day, he was right.

## THE UNKNOWN UNKNOWN

PAUL

Paul knew he shouldn't start this lecture with the unknown unknown variations. But he doggedly wouldn't give it up, even as he managed to confuse himself so many times in trying to remember the nuances of the argument. Were all his deliberations just hot air, not going anywhere? Hot air, yes and getting hotter by the day. Were his lectures just him filling in time while the world was starting to burn? Did philosophers believe they were above racism, fascism, social corruption, or were they sleeping on the job while fanatics excreted their shit over society? Asleep at the wheel, barrelling into the unknown, and not even knowing they were doing that. Or did philosophers just want to be the people that smugly said I told you so: I saw this coming but we all never did anything about it? You, out there, didn't know what was happening, but I knew. I knew that you didn't know what was happening. Hah! Or was it that you knew but didn't want to know that you knew. And knew that too. Know-it-alls squaring off against know-nothings.

“Ahem, will you be starting the lecture soon Professor?”

Not Anita again. She's got it in for me, he thought. He hadn't a clue how long he'd been standing at the lectern. Staring blankly at the laptop screen in front of him, a finger resting on the tracker pad. Ah, in the old analogue days, he could at least have been shuffling his papers, searching for a page and no one would ask what was going on. Now there was no cover for his delay. I've been falling back into my head again, he thought, realising that even thinking that very thing, as if it was a remedy, was only adding to the problem.

“I was just clarifying a point of argument in my head,” he blurted out apologetically. That’s the “get out of jail free” card for academics: they ought to be always in deep thought. Of course, half the time they’re hovering in a blank space, idling, literally lost in thought; or if not lost then chasing their tails in a kind of vertigo.

“The title of today’s lecture,” Paul finally began, “was made famous by the US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld when justifying a terrible war he had orchestrated against Iraq. In a press conference, a journalist had asked him about the lack of evidence to support the US and its allies’ reason for declaring war: the claim that the Iraqi government was supplying or could supply weapons of mass destruction to terrorist organisations. Rumsfeld responded with this cryptic logic. He said, OK that there are things we know and there are things we don’t know. But it’s not that simple. Because there are things we know, and that we’re aware of knowing. Call them ‘known knowns’. Dead certainties, in other words. Indisputable things. Baghdad is the capital of Iraq. Known known. But among the things that we don’t know there are those that we know we don’t know. Call these ‘known unknowns’: clear gaps in our knowledge. Stuff that ought to be, or needs to be, there to get the full picture but which is missing, like bits of a jigsaw puzzle. A physics theory needs a certain particle for it to make sense and work: you experiment to see if it exists. And then, there’s a third category. The things we don’t know and of which we are unaware. That’s to say, we’re so truly in the dark about them that we don’t even know that we don’t know. We call these ‘unknown unknowns’.”

“Is that otherwise known as ‘blissful ignorance’?” The voice again was unmistakably Anita’s.

Paul was caught with his mouth open, stalled. Clever, he thought, but not clever enough.

“Ignorance of the law is no excuse for breaking it,” he replied. He wasn’t quite sure himself whether that made sense in this situation, but it sounded rhetorical enough to suggest it did.

“Ah yes,” she bounced back breezily, “ignorantia juris non excusat, but there is no way any individual citizen can know every single piece of legislation they live under, much of which would anyway be written in relatively impenetrable legalese.”

“I think we’re going in the wrong direction,” said Paul with evident frustration.

“Regardless,” continued Anita, “didn’t you miss a combination of those words that makes for a fourth category?”

Christ, give me a break, thought Paul. “Well, yes, that is correct, there has been a postulation of the ‘unknown known’, even if that doesn’t make true sense. I guess that would be like trying to disown something. Something you ought to know but don’t. Anyway, we will be discussing all these knowns and unknowns ... and if I miss out on the unknown unknowingly, please forgive me as it was obviously unimportant.”

“If you miss out on the unknown unknown,” bellowed Anita from the audience, “you’ll have missed out on what today’s lecture is supposedly about. You’re supposed to know this.”

Paul was definitely feeling trapped. All this smart-alecky sport between him and Anita was starting to feel like a strange dance around something unspoken or unspeakable. An unknown unknown. A weapon of mass destruction, for which there was no evidence or proof other than a spiralling logical game between the two of them.

In a way that had been exhilarating, and all he'd really wanted to do was highlight the deliciously strange sound of the double-barrelled 'unknown unknown'. A double negative that didn't negate its negation, that didn't cancel itself out. But now, with his head spinning and the embarrassment rising as a hot flush of frustration, he felt damaged by the exchange. He looked towards Anita and couldn't help but imagine her as a weapon of mass destruction. Sitting there in the lecture theatre, trigger teased and ready to detonate. Something dangerous.

There was nothing else to do but live dangerously. He carried on with the lecture.

“The meaning of life. What does that phrase actually mean? If we can assert there is some meaning to life, it means that we know something about ourselves and the universe. Even if we know there are unknowns within that meaning. But for those who assert there is no meaning to life then there is only the unknown, and unknowing. We poor humans however are constantly seeking something knowable, while disregarding a world of unknown unknowns. The task of enlightenment in both religion and government is knowing all. All that there is. The universe, in a nutshell. But there is beauty in not knowing. The universe can't be defined by religion or by government.”

“My god,” muttered Anita, though loud enough to be heard, “that sounds like the resignation of a comfortable, well-subsidised boomer. The question is: do you know what you sound like?”

Oh fuck it all, thought Paul. Ignorance would be bliss.

ERIN

Erin had been on the couch when she was startled awake by the noise and the force of the smoke bomb exploding in the lounge room. The front door of the flat seemed to come off its hinges and an army poured in like a turbulent black sea bringing with them a horrendous, acrid fog. As the choking cloud enveloped her she realised she was alone in the room. Jack and Michelle must have left, she reasoned; maybe they would be safe from whatever this cataclysm was. But then she heard a woman scream and a man swearing, sounds coming from the bedroom. Of course, they must have slipped away to the bedroom.

Jack's torrent of cursing turned into a clear expression of outrage.

“What the fuck is happening? I am a police officer!”

Then the sound of gunfire came thick and fast from the invaders, with flashes sparking across the smokey pall like lightning. Chunks of plasterboard and brickwork were being torn out of walls and the ceiling. Fragments of cheap and putrid furniture were flung left and right. For a moment Erin thought this squad from hell might be shooting each other in the melee. How could anything survive that storm or metal? Why wasn't she caught up in it? But then she realised it was directed at where those two voices had come from. And those voices had stopped.

So far, what had saved her was her stunned silence. But if they saw her silhouette in the smoke haze she knew the guns would be turned in her direction. Suddenly her body went calm, and intuitively she felt something change in her—a feeling not unfamiliar now but still unnervingly weird. A molecular shift taking place. Had the antimatter she now harboured somehow automatically been activated? If so, it was happening faster than she would have expected. Despite the murderous

horror happening in front of her, and her imminent death, she wanted this change to slow down, delay enough to give her time to understand what it all meant. But she only had a few milliseconds to face up to what was unknown to her. Red laser dots were dancing over the walls and furniture and had found her. She could hear the goon squad shouting, but it was like a war cry now that the killing had got into their nerves. Get a grip of yourself, a voice seemed to be screaming inside her head; and get down, get down. There wasn't time enough to even shout at them, fuck you. She gave herself over to her intuition and to the change. It happened in an instant. The whole room vanished in front of her.

She knew at this moment, too, that she was gone.

IAN

Ian Carmichael had burst through the lounge door following on the heels of the anti-terrorist squad. "Don't shoot, you fools!" But he knew it was too late. He could hardly hear his voice over the gunfire, he could hardly see anything in the smoke. Even he felt the tragic irony that anyone in the apartment would react to this gun-happy squad's home invasion as if it was, itself, an act of terrorism. And they'd fight back, and probably die fighting.

Then he saw what some of the squad must have. A shadowy form, a silhouette in the smoke. A form that was unmistakably a young woman. Most likely Erin, he realised in a flash. He could see the laser spots landing on her, like hungry insects homing in. "Don't ...!" Again, no sooner had he begun to shout than the guns pounded out another crazed volley into the profile.

And seemingly, straight through it. He could see the bullets striking chunks out of a blank wall behind the figure.

“What the hell?” someone shouted. Then with a touch of hysteria, “She’s vanished!”

“She must have been hit,” called out a voice less feverish and with some authority. “Spread out, look down, she’ll be on the floor. Look for blood. Find her.”

Carmichael was scanning the room with his night vision visor. But there was no body, no trace of blood. Not a sign of Erin. They may as well have shot a ghost. Did this mean that she might be alive, still? Maybe somewhere else altogether? Maybe these gun-crazy goons hadn’t shot her, but just a shadowy form in the haze. Or maybe her body, missing chunks the size of the holes in the apartment wall, or ripped into pieces, had been flung away into a niche or under a chair out of sight. And unrecognisable.

He could feel the expression on his face stretching into a contorted rage. Either way, he’d lost his prize. He started shouting abuse at the room, shouting and kicking out anything that moved.

ERIN

Erin found herself as an ethereal thing, a thought, floating in her mind; or was it her body that was floating? She heard Morrissey singing through the white mist, “Does the body rule the mind; Or does the mind rule the body? I don’t know.” How did these words become audible? Was this a place somewhere between one universe and another? Her intuition had saved her from the spray of bullets; she gulped for air, still smelling, and tasting the smoke bomb in her mouth. It was the antimatter still working inside her, she barely knew what was happening, some kind of interface, something to work with. Michelle had told her to allow her intuition to be



a guide; it would be the key to her staying alive. Summoning up Michelle's name made Erin dive into a well of bereavement.

“Poor Jack,” the words reverberated in the mist. She felt the tears slide down her face and her stomach arched as if her heart was being wrenched out of her chest. But over time, as she floated aimlessly, the pain gradually subsided. The liminal space between universes where she was immersed materialised as a mist, but not like the caustic vapours of the smoke bomb. It was a luminous blur in which she was buoyant, hovering or drifting, she couldn't tell, like being inside a passenger jet, disoriented and not knowing that you are moving. Her intuition had brought her to this place so she could escape becoming part of the slow-moving structure of molecular mist. The pain of the memory of what had happened ripped through her. As much as she felt incorporeal, she felt she cried corporeal tears for Michelle and Jack. And she cried for her parents, the molecular tears mixed with occult mist in which she was drifting. Erin hated injustice, corruption and cruelty; her family would need to understand what happened, Michelle and Jack's family—whoever and wherever they were. They needed to know. But she could not forgive what had happened to Michelle and Jack. Those who executed these crimes will be held to account. Michelle and Jack's innocence was her *raison-d'être*, her crusade. But floating as a cloud for who knows how long was not going to give her any release or bring any justice. She needed to create a rupture in this limbo world to get her back to the real, to start a collision of atomic particles to release a perturbation in this seamless and now meaningless cloud. She thought about consciousness, about how we can prove it exists, about how it is fostered by intuition, and so on and so on. But at a fundamental level, there is only one way to move her consciousness out of this fog: make a plan.

She thought back to what had led her towards physics and all those mathematical equations. She thought about number one and how it was

all there was. If you had the number five, it was made up of five ones, all separate and alone even if linked by plus signs (but only four of them needed to make five). To have one, you needed space all around it; otherwise, it could become polluted, the same way five is polluted, and the four (the plus signs, in themselves not one thing nor a zero thing). Five, four: they don't exist. There is only the one and without that none. And that space around one is vital to all maths, not just the one. Does five hide its ones as though it is embarrassing to be made up of ones? What about those plus signs? There are four of them to make up the five of five ones. Perhaps she should have gone into philosophy rather than physics; but then, physics had become philosophy by allowing consciousness to come into the equation.

After all this deliberation, where was she? Still adrift in a sea of indiscernible uncertainty, unable to comprehend any depth of this void. It was like a sensation of being immersed in water. Fluid. But she seemed to be breathing, as if in a mist. Breathing what? This void must surely be airless. Was this breath just some residual bodily sensation? Like the experience, she imagined a ghost might have. Phantom pain, or rather because this was all painless (and presumably pleasure-less as well), it would be just phantom sensation. In this place, she didn't know the difference between a physical experience and a mental apparition. Although, mental apparitions are physical events in brain tissue. But was she, here in this incorporeal fluid, was she a brain? Like a brain in a vat. It couldn't be that she existed just because she said she existed—if she was able to say something, anything, even the question 'Do I exist?', then she must exist. But that was circular; it wasn't that simple for her to accept. She needed to test things out and see how existence worked in this misty sea. Everything had to be turned into something in the brain.

These thoughts were the stuff of insanity.

This was a primordial space—she was in Siddhartha’s river; at the beginning of time and at the end of time, simultaneously. She inwardly smiled as she imagined being told off for repeating the word time too many times in a sentence. This was getting ridiculous, she wanted to shout out, but would the voice carry in this misty sea of an undefinable something. Maybe it would be like shouting underwater. It might feel good but could someone only hear the words within the buloop, buloop, buloop sounds? The catchy pitch for the science fiction horror movie Alien was: ‘In space, no one can hear you scream’. If she could turn this experience (if that word fitted this oceanic milieu) into a movie, Erin would advertise it as ‘in this undefinable something, no one can hear you buloop’. Did this thought mean that her humour had not deserted her? There were no fish in this sea of undefinable something, no tidal currents, no temperature shifts, no laminar flow.

And then ANITA came into her mind. The Antarctic Impulsive Transient Antenna. Now Erin had become a semblance, an incarnation, of the ethereal balloon floating over the featureless Antarctic white. Silently monitoring the universe’s most minute particles and events, and also monitoring the stray signal that might come from another universe. She was an antenna, ungrounded in whiteout. This was ANITA’s secret mission: her impulsive nature to prompt her drift into a cyber-situationist’s *dérive*. Making detours and diversions spurred by the chaos of the elements, the perfect way to discover the undiscoverable. This was the paradigm she needed to work with as she hovered in the undefinable, to develop some impulsive momentum that would pitch her out from the stasis in which she found herself—becalmed in this sea of tranquillity.

A river, a sea, a mist. But she was thinking and thinking takes time. So was she floating in human time, or was this time of the river, sea and mist like ‘phantom pain’, a relic of her humanness? It is so hard to let go of the effects of time on us, she thought. Our time is just a measurement of

space, the rotation of the earth, it makes sense but does not explain consciousness. Her mind, like ANITA, wanders off to a time before people had wristwatches before a need for accurate time. Clocks would suddenly start appearing on architectural structures. Time was becoming part of our universe's external fabric, enabling people to meet at a certain time to catch a train that itself would be running on time. The Newtonian world dropped down from its lofty heights to affect everyone, with them never really being aware of its descent. Time was a crucial adjustment to a new normal: it had to be normal to get to work on time, attend meetings on time, lunch on time, and have undertaken a full day's work clocking on and off.

Erin would not be affected by Newtonian world views whilst they worked for her in her university courses; they controlled how she felt and intuited the world. She needed to be free of that old-world thinking and be attentive to the momentary variations of things. Newtonian thinking had been challenged by Heisenberg and Bohr but she still had to adjust all the work done whilst at university. She had written papers for a research matrix, no other reason than to play the game and boost the university's research outputs. The paper that won first prize at the Cheltenham Science Week was intuitive and speculative; she was now semi-living proof of that paper's credibility.

Sadness suddenly hit, like emotional lightning crashing into Erin's antennas. The light from laser beams darting through the smoke. Silhouettes of armed men poised ready to fire. The apartment simmering in dimmed technicolour and slow motion. The sound of Jack and Michelle dying. Everything she ever worked for was gone in a flash. She felt disgust for humanity. A corrupt humanity, insecure, incapable, stupidly believing itself redeemed by its own stupid beliefs. She had to find a way to get back to her parents, to be physical, to be.... She stopped

herself, about to say normal, but she knew that normal was just a political trick for controlling people's lives.

Erin rephrased the thought: credibility was searching for truth, not a true truth, but one that gives the appearance of verisimilitude. When something exciting happens to you, like your research paper being accepted for an award, it's as though someone has opened a door and said: yes, you can enter the realm of truthful appearance. A tiny tick in a world of crosses. You start to realise that the work you are doing is for no other reason but to comprehend the appearance of something and share that comprehension with the world. But it's transmitting to a world that most probably won't ever read what you've written, and won't ever hear a probable truth.

Transmitting to an uncomprehending world. Now Erin again thought of ANITA with her antennae, and now she knew that this was the answer for her. There was no militia with guns blazing to force her into using the newfound entities within her to evaporate, disappear, teleport to this undefinable something, this now unknown unknown. Erin allowed herself not just to hover but to drift, envisioning a signal, searching for some cosmic vibration in the same way that ANITA detected the high-density neutrino in Antarctica. She saw herself as a receiver and transmitter. Waiting to see if she could pick up a signal in this misty existence, she was going to be a perturbation, a trigger, an effect on the stasis in which she was suspended and from which she would be released.

## BILL AND BETTY

Bill and Betty returned home with the urn of John's ashes. His body had risen through the chimney to be part of the atmosphere, the volatile chemicals rising from the chimney spreading his molecular being to the four corners of the world. What was left was dust. But they both knew,

through the cremation, there was an unanswered question hovering over them.

“I want to scatter John’s ashes in the garden he loved,” said Betty.

“I thought we decided on Cheltenham FC around the centre circle,” Bill responded.

“We’re not having those Cheltenham thugs you call footballers treading all over our John,” answered Betty.

“Let’s half him, you do what you want,” Bill reasoned, thinking it made good sense and polite sense at that, “and I will do what I want with my half. But we will do it together.”

Betty’s eyes swelled with tears at Bill’s kind words. She nodded her head, happy with the compromise.

“Today?”

“Today.”

Betty reached for the kitchen scales. It ought to be done properly, she insisted, and by extraordinary coincidence when she weighed the mound of ash was equal to John’s body weight when he was first born. Dividing the baby’s weight reminded her of a story from the Bible she’d heard in childhood. Something about a wise king cutting a baby in half. Their decision with John’s baby weight was a wise one, she realised.

She needed a container in which to decant half, exactly half, of John for their trip to Cheltenham FC. The only packet that Betty could find was an ancient small cardboard packet of couscous.

“Remember when I bought this couscous to try cooking something different, an exotic meal, to show John we were modern?” said Betty as she emptied the stale remnants from the box into the sink. She gave it several taps to ensure it was empty, then ran the cold water to flush it down the drain. “It would make John laugh,” she added, looking into the empty couscous box. She ladled John in to the box with a kitchen scoop.

“You never got around to buying the other ingredients,” mentioned Bill.

“There were simply too many different spices and herbs needed.”

“It was a bit of a laugh,” said Bill.

Bill, she thought, was a simple man with simple tastes. Why try and spoil him as it would only lead to more work for her in the end?

“So, your half is going outside now?” he asked, checking the weight on the scale.

“Yes, dear. I want John a little closer to me than the Cheltenham FC ground, so I’m placing him in the backyard.” Then she realised that Bill knew this already so she added, “with some rocks. I’ll make a little funeral mound so I can pop out and talk to John.”

“You could get a small plaque engraved with his name and build a little contemplation spot around the mound.”

Betty looked at Bill with astonishment and joy. Her man had given her a sweet project to help with mourning John, at least half of him. The plaque, she thought, should refer to the pointless waste of his life, and to the murderous scientist whose name they would not mention ever, taking

his own life immediately afterwards. An act of professional jealousy, the papers said. Not much professionalism in that, Betty and Bill had thought.

John watched them standing in the garden in front of a mound of rocks, with the kitchen scales sitting on the ground next to it. There was a faint smear of ash on the tray. Betty wiped it clean with the dishcloth in her hand. Bill and Betty hugged each other, both looking up to the sky, as though John could be out there somewhere in the misty haze, his spirit at one with the universe looking down on them, rather than down at their feet under a small pile of rocks. John couldn't tell them that he was neither in the sky nor under the rocks. He was mostly, at least halfway although probably more, in another universe they would never know about. He mentally waved to them as best he could, being not even a ghost in this universe, his final goodbye.

JOHN

His identity was fading. That much was firmly on his mind, whatever mind he had, a mind that was still functioning but without a gauge of how deeply its functions went. His deductive powers were telling him that. What had happened to his awareness of himself since merging after the shooting with his new molecular family? He was morphing into something attributed to someone else. Another entity. He hoped that the entity would be pleased that they had worked together to avoid annihilation more than once. That John was a synchronistic ally. His host was going to experience the best of him; not the arrogance born out of insecurity owed to his parents, to his colleagues, to the rest of humanity. OK, he realised that was a little over the top; but he was beyond caring. John could feel the fade slowly happening as the sense of his senses was losing focus. Whatever he was fading into was a more significant entity than what he had been. He recalled the entity composed of self-replicating nanomachines in the sci-fi novel Bloom: it was called the



Mycora, and matched the information engineer Eric Drexler's concept of 'grey goo': out of control molecular nanotech, obliterating planetary life by its sheer scale of reproduction. He imagined his atoms losing their bonds to the forces that would bring them together in whatever new form they were to become: human, non-human transforming everything into one living entity. Being is good, as the philosophers would say: learning to be is goodness. Becoming, however, is better. And he was becoming something else. An entity, a oneness: one the atom of all the mathematical frameworks of the universe. This one entity is becoming all the atoms that the Mycora—he'll call it—devours, a hyper-materiality. Any humans leftover can only be described as 'immunities' rather than 'communities'—odd, accidental features that protect them from being consumed. John, however, was resigned to his consumption by this new body. This one, he'll call it Erin. He felt only a calmness and serenity coming over him. There was no need to fight for independence. He would be happier and more vital being immersed, to become one in Erin's Mycora.

John, the John that was fading, was a physicist who still knew enough about his physics to know that when trying to affect multiples of electrons acting as a core processor in a quantum computer, you add atoms to a coupled quantum system. Yes, he still knew that. And he knew that the energy (or distance) between the quantum states becomes smaller by that addition. So, if you make it larger and larger, it becomes harder to keep it quantum since the energy scales become smaller. This, he said to himself (as much of himself as he could still acknowledge) was exactly what was happening to him. To maintain the distance between him and the host in a quantum state of entanglement means conserving a distributed energy. It was getting harder to do that, and he was fading. Like the end of a gunfight in a western, he lies dying in the dirt outside the saloon delivering over-elaborate, elongated dying last words. John pictured his parents Betty and Bill sprinkling his ashes—or some of them—over

Cheltenham FC's grounds from an old couscous box. He never liked football. He'd never liked couscous; well, he'd never really had a good taste of it at home. Still, John knew that it would mean the world to his dad to have something of John—even ashes ground into the dirt under football boots at the ground that he'd go to every Saturday...apart from away games.

In the backyard John had pictured Betty and Bill at the football ground sprinkling his ashes as though he were fertiliser, not wanting to draw attention to the solemn nature of their task. His parents marked with a pile of stones the spot where his ashes were mixed with the backyard dirt; but he doubted whether the football players would know that they were passing the ball over dirt mixed with the son of one of their club's lifetime members.

John calmly waited for a final moment in his former universe. It felt like talking to someone on his phone with a dying battery. You try to sustain the conversation as long as you can, but waste time telling the other person that your battery is fading. Somehow, the phone draws on hidden power, extending the conversation beyond your repeated warnings that it will end any time soon. Then, although you're expecting it, surprisingly it falls into chaos. John's élan vital is transformed, his conversation with himself ends sooner than....

ERIN

She was floating, maybe gliding, waiting to force a perturbation that would prompt some action. Humans need to be connected like galaxies, she mused. They can't stand to be alone. Gravitational forces bind them together in constellations. But what would be the trigger? Could it be an actual premeditated intention? Concentrate, she demanded. She knew she had to keep talking to herself to make that perturbation real. I think, she

thought, I would have a smile come over my face. If I had a face, she added to herself. But she had a self, so why couldn't that self smile? But, she realised, there was now no time to ponder what came first: the self or the smile. She was feeling stronger in her core. "I'm becoming coherent, sensing myself"—the new one she figured, new, but a new version of the old one. She was going back to where this had all begun, renewing things in a journey of deliberation and reflection. And what happens when she gets to the start in her now new version? "I would need to be isolated, undetectable, access some cash, find some way of getting a completely new identity." She remembered visiting relations in Scotland, visualising the rich farming-formed landscape around Lancaraty, near Perth. Projecting the picture as clearly as she could and with the apprehension of the unknown in her heart, she announced with a voiceless air — or was it an airless voice? — the words: "Scotland is where I need to begin again." She imagined Dorothy in her ruby slippers clicking them three times but she wasn't interested at all in stupid Kansas.

## CAMERON

Cameron had been voluntarily homeless for over two years now. He'd been wandering aimlessly around the UK, not knowing where he would end up, letting chance and a northerly disposition direct him. He had decided to become a real nomad. He felt that his inner compass, his magnetic orientation, was due north and that he was migrating. His essential nomadic possessions were neatly stowed. He was proud of his cleverly packed rucksack, making maximum use of space. The weight was geared to his physical capabilities for extended meanders through town and country. Cameron's life up until a few years ago had been textbook normal. Loving parents, a good school. Attended university, studied computer science, and then getting what he describes as a geeky job in programming. He put a large down payment on a flat, fell in love and ... nothing but plain sailing. Nothing, that is to say. For Cameron,

everything in his life became so predictable it was as if he was no longer a programmer but was the one being programmed. And then one day his partner announced her intention to “quit this loser.” Security, comfort, and steady money didn’t hold her: she, he realised, was as bored as he was. But his realisation was too late. After she left, he’d just snapped; even if snapping, he’d thought, was yet another cliché of normality. Snapping, he then realised, only counted for something if he also, ironically, left as well. He assembled a well-researched Camping World traveller’s inventory to fit alongside a 1.4kg ultralight hiking tent in a rucksack. The rest of his belongings, along with the apartment and power of attorney, was deposited in the hands of an accountant friend.

Cameron became a homeless wanderer of the old-school variety. Zigzagging through streets, country lanes and fields, he slowly rambled his way up the west coast of England, doing odd jobs when they came up but never staying long enough anywhere to feel attached to people or place, never long enough to feel responsible to anyone or anything other than his wish to journey elsewhere. Certainly never to allow the hint of roots to form. He was a nomad, but not seasonal, not following the needs of a herd or a tribe; more like a traveller, unsettled and constantly displaced. Maybe there was Romany blood in his genealogy, he pondered, that had finally surfaced through the years of boredom, prompting this desire to roam. But then, that was a romantic idea of a maligned race of people who travelled as skilled craftsmen. No, his pursuit was more self-indulgent, he was looking for meaning somewhere other than where his complacent success had offered. Someone asked once, “If you could ask God one question, what would it be?” And he answered with the question, “Would God really have an answer to that one question?” Cameron turned this paradoxical question — about the unknowable unknown — into his quest.

Fortunately for him, as a lone traveller, Cameron was happy with his own company. This was new in itself, because when he'd been settled and at work he'd hated his own company. Looking back on things, programming had been a way to fill his mind during the day. In the evenings he'd been equally busy watching TV with his partner, never wanting a spare moment to himself. It seemed, at the time, fulfilling. At least it filled the time. But that time was being filled with distractions, and those endless habits of distraction were his normal way of being. Until she snapped, snapping him and he walked out—and kept walking. But when he walked, he assured himself, he was moving towards rather than running away from himself. And every now and then, he'd come across a sign of himself along the road. It could be anything, but the sign had to draw his attention for some intuitive or coincidental reason. A chance encounter that caused him to halt for a moment, just long enough to suggest he set up camp. It required a special sort of attentiveness to spot these signs, the opposite of his long years of distraction.

He'd told this methodology to a fellow traveller once. "The first sign I saw was a playing card: a seven of hearts in the mud of a field. The card had a quirky lenticular print on the back with a lion's head. It was roaring aggressively when looked at in one direction; in the other direction, the lion looked serenely proud.

"Leo, huh? Was that your star sign?"

"Not just that. Seven is my lucky number, and being hearts it signified a bridge between the two faces of the lion: anger and pride, two sides of me that had pushed me into becoming a wanderer. It was as if it said to me, take a moment here. So I pitched my tent right there."

“Well, cards put me in this fucking situation,” said the stranger, “I used to gamble, so if I saw that card it would be a sign of punishment. But you know, it’s just a grubby card. Turning it into fortune-telling shit is like the mistake I made. Thinking that the cards were telling me something, that there was a purpose or pattern to them, a message to me. But you know what? I know now they never said a fucking word to me.”

“What’s keeping you going on your journey then?”

“I move from one meal to the next. I stop when the pickings are good.”

For Cameron, good pickings were the signs that tripped him up on his otherwise pointless months with himself on the road. Those months and the good signs had taken up across the border into Scotland at Gretna Green. With some enjoyment, he realised it was summer weather. He walked due north past Edinburgh and was sauntering on an empty road just beyond Perth when he noticed a paperback book lying face down, flayed open on the tarmac near the verge. It had caught his eye, and so deserved due care in being picked up. The cover, when he turned it gingerly over, had an image of a man with many arms, gesturing with open palms, and with multiple profiles of his face. He was standing against a red background that was shaped like an almond. The print above and below the image read: “HERMANN HESSE/ Siddhartha / PICADOR.” He figured there were two possibilities as to how it got there: accidentally left, half-read, forgotten on the roof of a car when it was stationary and then eventually blown off; or intentionally, for reasons unknown, thrown out the window of a passing car. Turning it back to the open, muddy and water-damaged pages that it had fallen open at, he saw that the stains appeared to act as an arrow pointing to one sentence: “I have always believed, and I still believe, that whatever good or bad fortune may come our way, we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value.” He remembered he’d once some time ago

started reading the book but had never finished it. It had almost no action in it that hooked him. Back then to hook him a good read, like a good movie, required someone getting shot in its first 5 minutes. In this book no one got shot in the first five minutes.

When he looked up from reading these words he noticed that he was looking at an open gate that led onto an empty field off the roadside. So he walked through the gate and on until the ground was suitably flat and dry to pitch his tent. Resting on his groundsheet he re-read Hesse's sentence.

Two weeks from Gretna Green, past Edinburgh and Perth, here was another sign. In fact a sign of all signs, like the two faces of the lion at the start of his own story on the road: here was Siddhartha looking for enlightenment and reminding him that he could transform unknown events, things left by the wayside, into known values for his journey. This was a perfect place to rest for awhile. He put the book down and leaned into his backpack and drifted off to sleep, waking a few hours later in a beautiful twilight haze.

As he opened his eyes he could see what looked like a tree trunk, fallen and lying in the field nearby. He hadn't noticed it there before, but there was no reason for him to have done so. Staring at it now in this low light against an ethereal backdrop, it began to resemble a prone human body. The branches and limbs took on the anthropomorphic form of a body. Well, thought Cameron, trees and human bodies have "limbs", after all. He'd heard someone somewhere point out that projecting ourselves onto nature, linguistically or by visual resemblance, was an anthropocentric game we played to make ourselves feel safe, or at least not alone. And trees so easily took on the form of human silhouettes, like the multi-armed figure on the cover of the book he'd picked up on the roadside. Like an optical illusion when a drawing of a rabbit flips into an image of

a duck. You recognise both convincingly, but at what moment and why does that transformation take place? How can your brain be tricked? And which is the correct image? Someone along the way tells you the signs mean nothing, or that you're deluding yourself with fortune-telling tricks; but then you find Siddhartha looking for enlightenment. Without being aware of it, Cameron had all this going on in his head whilst getting up from the groundsheet and was walking toward the tree trunk, as if drawn to it unconsciously. And the resemblance to a human form was now unnerving.

“Fuck!” he shouted aloud. The rabbit had become a duck. Crazy he suddenly thought: did I say “fuck” or “duck”? Fuck a duck anyway! This was no tree trunk but a human. Lying on the grass in a hoodie with track pants. It was a girl, or a young woman. Where on earth did she come from? Surely he would have noticed her before. Lost, a runaway, kidnapped and escaped, or dumped ... dead? There was no way she had just wandered into this field and laid down to have a kip. Especially nearby some stranger's tent. He knelt down beside her, hoping to see her breathing under the hoodie. But the clothing was too bulky to show that. He didn't dare to touch her. It was like a taboo to do so: especially as she was a stranger, and especially if she was unconscious and he touched her ... and she woke up. But especially too if she didn't wake up! Especially, if she didn't do that because she was dead. He felt the bile rise in his throat at the thought of touching a corpse. But not knowing if she was alive or dead, and not knowing what he ought to do, was sending him into a spin. So he did something that he'd seen actors on TV do so many times at scenes of a crime, and something he'd only done once ages ago in a forgotten first aid training course. He put his fingers on her neck to feel for a pulse. Would it work? He had no idea. His pulse was pounding in his ears. But one thing was evident. As he moved his fingertips around the jawline and down toward the shoulder, the bare skin of her neck was warm. Humanly warm, soft and supple. That was a good life sign. And



there it was. Yes, he could feel something, a beat on the tips of his fingers. I'll be damned, he thought. It works!

“Are you ok?” As he asked this, he knew it sounded stupid. Of course she would not be OK. Whatever got her into this situation would not itself have been OK. The question was intended just to try to wake her. But there was no response. Feeling a bit more brazen now, he looked closely at her clothing top to toe for signs of any bleeding through from an injury. Thankfully, nothing. But he knew he didn't just have a medical eye. He could see a shapely female form, an attractive one at that, underneath. He carefully rolled the hood away from her head. No wound, no bruising there. Then he granted himself the excuse to gently prod her arms and legs for any indications of broken bones. Again, and thankfully, nothing obvious.

He cautiously shook her to see if she could wake up; at least to let her know someone was at her side, and wanting to help.

“I can't find any injuries,” he said. It was like talking at the bedside of someone in a coma, telling them the news or family gossip in the hope that they might hear a voice consoling them in the darkness. Then, with some desperation, “Please, wake up, tell me what happened.”

He could now recall fragments of the first aid procedure. “Detect danger ... send for help.” Well, he couldn't do any of that. Not out here in the middle of nowhere. He'd have to walk away back down the road to get a signal on his phone. Too far to leave her without knowing she would survive that length of time. Then it came back: ABCD: Airways, Breathing, CPR and Defibrillation. She was breathing well enough. Pulse, now that he could find it more easily on her wrist, was steady. The only danger he felt was leaving her here, in the open and exposed. The sun was quickly going down and with it the temperature. He couldn't imagine she

would have a back injury. How could she have gotten into this field, even if she'd been hit by a passing car that didn't stop. He'd have to risk it.

"I've got to get you under shelter, and warm," he said to her, again hoping this might register somewhere in her mind, and then added as if it were a proviso, "before I think of going for help."

He put his arms under hers and as slowly as he could dragged her back and into his tent and onto the groundsheet. Once again he checked her breathing and pulse. Steady. At least in there, with his lightweight blanket over her, she was out of the weather and off the bare ground. He pulled his stove kit out of his backpack, along with some teabags and sugar, and then edged himself out of the tent. As he zipped it up, he saw her face for the first time without the anxieties that had previously clouded his vision. Her face: beautiful; but what was the word for the expression on it? Then it came to him. Unearthly.

ERIN

Erin wasn't sure if she had lost consciousness but now the floating feeling had gone. She was still in what seemed to be a cloud, but she could feel something pressing along her back and down her legs, something solid, and something carrying her weight. Yes she could sense gravity, feel the weight of her body, and her body was supine. She was lying on something, uneven, mildly uncomfortable, but something solid. The cloud around her was also becoming solid, like a canopy overhead. And there, in front was what looked like a seam joining two pieces of cloth. She tried moving her arms, hips and legs. She was rocking, side to side, only a few degrees, but whatever these sensations were they were real. Bodily ones. And she was warm. In clothing. Under something light but warm. A blanket maybe. There were scents too in the air she was breathing. A faint smell of plastic, or rubber, or nylon was all around her. But other smells

too, and in the air that was crisp and clean, despite the encompassing synthetic material. She was trying to find the words for these smells which seemed to be coming from far away but moving into close focus. Grass. Soil. But something more comforting than that, warm in the air like a waft from nearby. Tea! Hot tea. And now noises. Bird calls, like some sort of distant jubilation drawing her towards. She lifted her head, looking closer at the seam hanging before her, and recognised it as a zip. How mundane, she thought. I'm in a tent, she concluded. Whatever had brought her there didn't injure her. She felt fine, like waking up in the morning. Although she sensed it wasn't morning. And then she realised someone must have put her in that tent and zipped it up. Were they protecting her or imprisoning her as a captive? Only one way to find out. She undid the zip to face whatever it was that waited outside.

"Tea?" said a young man, turning his head with a look of pleasant surprise on his face. A look, she deduced, of immense relief. Although the rest of him looked frightful. A hobo. A bum. A hermit, maybe. Someone, she thought, who hasn't seen himself in a mirror for some time. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of a portable camping stove.

"Thank god you've woken up. I won't hurt you," he said with what sounded like genuine, if urgent reassurance for himself as much as for her. "Here. Please," he offered her a cup. "It will make you feel better." He paused, looked embarrassed and quickly added, "I'm sorry. I should explain. I found you unconscious in the field, over there. I thought I should get you out of the weather. That's why you're in the tent. Oh, do you want sugar?"

It was so ridiculously mundane, she thought. And so she nodded in response, as if she'd just arrived to meet a friend at a café. She watched him stir in a cube of sugar, and then hold a small carton over the cup.

“Milk? It’s long-life, but just opened.” She nodded again, then took the cup in her hands and felt the warmth spread over her fingers. Oh my god, that felt so real, she thought. Just as it did with her mouth touching the lip of an enamel cup. She sipped slowly and deliberately, not wanting to take a moment of it for granted. It was so familiar, but also—inexplicably—so new. When you buy something new, she thought as she ran her tongue around her warm lips, you can never experience that newness again. It was a Heraclitus moment. No woman ever drinks from the same cup of tea twice, for it’s not the same cup of tea and she’s not the same woman. She understood that now. You want to enjoy that moment, she insisted to herself; it will never be the same feeling again, not as the original moment. Maybe that was why addicts get addicted; they want that unique experience repeatedly but can’t ever get it back.

“My name is Cameron. Cameron Thomas,” he announced, politely waiting for her to down the cup of tea. “I’m here because ... well that’s a long story, and not all that important right now. I’m backpacking around. That’s how come I’m here. But I have to ask what are you doing here? You seem to have come out of the blue. Do you have a backpack somewhere?”

“Where is here?” she asked.

He looked quizzically at her. “Do you think you might have concussion?”

“I said, where is here? Where are we?” she replied emphatically.

“A bit outside of Perth.”

“Perth ... which one? There are a few of them around the world”

“Perth,” he replied as if confused himself, “Perth in Scotland.”

“Scotland!” She shouted in disbelief.

“Sounds like you’ve come a long way without knowing it,” his tone was guarded now, even suspicious.

“You’ve no idea.” Scotland, she thought, that’s a long way from the miserable flat in London. Had she been in a coma? “How long was I unconscious ... after you found me?”

“It took a little while to get you over to the tent, and then I just made some tea. Maybe half an hour since I found you. But you couldn’t have been there long. I only came here an hour or so ago myself. I’d dozed off and then noticed you when I woke up. Look,” he dropped the guarded edge to his voice and said with concern, “it seems something happened to you that landed you here, evidently a long way from where you thought you were. It sounds like you’ve experienced something ... unpleasant, and traumatic. You don’t have to tell me but I think we should get you to medical care. Someone —friends or family — is more than likely worried. I should probably inform the police.”

“Don't call the police,” she said urgently, “don't call anyone, please.” She could see him register her fear.

“OK, I won’t call anyone, but maybe you can tell me what’s happened to you. Starting with your name, or at least something to call you by.”

She was panicked by the problem of trying to explain something she didn’t entirely understand herself, something that would make her sound not just confused but crazy. To this young backpacker, she most probably looked like a runaway, not a teenager of course but from some sort of domestic abuse. That would be the easiest explanation. But she needed to find out about him first. She wouldn’t give him her name, not yet

anyway. She was with a solitary guy in a field somewhere in Scotland with night falling, and without anything of her own other than the clothes she'd had on in that London flat. She didn't want to be found by anyone right now, certainly not the police who could have easy ways of tracking her back to what happened in London. And what about this guy travelling alone in the middle of nowhere? He didn't exactly look like he was on some global nomad party trail. Did he also not want to be found?

“Maybe you should tell me about yourself first,” she said, as if brokering a deal with him. “I promise, I'll explain myself afterwards. OK?”

“OK,” he seemed agreeable to that, “but first, are you hungry?”

Once again, she nodded, relaxing into the mundane reality of a world in which her stomach could make an embarrassing low grumble.

Cameron introduced her to a Marks and Spencer sandwich, which he explained apologetically was “only just barely out of date.” With the first bite, she was thinking of herself back on the train journey with Jack and Michelle. It was the taste of strong cheddar and sweet carrot chutney. A woman can't bite into the same sandwich twice? But this brought with it a sadness she would remember forever. She bit into it for a second time, and was still there on the train.

“OK, me,” began Cameron as if well-rehearsed, “well pretty much normal, ordinary, boring, yep, in every way leading up to a moment I became not normal.” He broke into a smile. “Girlfriend moves out telling me I'm ordinary and boring. And she's way right. I slump into moroseness, but then can't avoid agreeing with her. I quit my all-too-comfortable job in IT. Leave my all-too-comfortable apartment in London. Step out on the street with a backpack, a modest amount of savings linked to a card, and start walking. My first steps on the road to

nowhere in particular. Well, nowhere I plan to go. I follow signs on the road. Not the ones that say ‘Perth 20 miles’ in such and such a direction. But the signs that I figure are meant for me alone. Things overlooked by most along the road. Once I’d started being attentive to them, I found them pretty regularly. I could plot my course with them.”

It was dark enough now for him to switch on a small rechargeable camping light.

“One of them led me here onto this field.”

She felt a slight shiver, not only with the encroaching cool of the night air but from the sense of portent with which this young man had almost theatrically flourished a mood of fateful coincidence about her meeting him.

“I found this book by the roadside, just near the gate onto this field.” He held it up to show her in the glow of the lamplight. “Or rather,” he added, “the book found me. It made me stop right here. And it kind of showed me the open gate. I was reading the page it was open at as I’d found it. And I dozed off for a moment and then I saw you lying over there. The passage I was reading told me to make something of value from adversity. Not that encountering you is adversity, well not that now you seem fine and uninjured, physically I mean. But I get the impression you’ve been through something adverse. So maybe there’s value in our encounter. Pardon me for saying this,” he broke off with a pause, “but you’re looking very tired.”

There was no question for her about that. It was as if she was being lulled to sleep by a bedtime story. Was this what he did to all the women he found lying in a field? Something about him however was making her believe this was as new to him as it was to her. He seemed so gently

whacky and good-humoured that she felt safe with him, certainly safer than where she had been—who knows, minutes, hours, months before in that choking smoke and in the line of fire. Maybe he was right in thinking that there was some cosmic coincidence in the two of them meeting this way, via his esoteric signage and her inexplicable teleportation. And why did she end up here of all places, in this field, near this solitary man?

“I’ll admit it,” she said, spotting a way out of her side of the bargain, “am suddenly so exhausted. And I don’t know where to go, even if I had the strength to go anywhere else. Let me stay here, and I’ll tell you my story in the morning.”

“Of course,” and then with genuine gentlemanliness, “I will be ok out here with the sleeping bag. You take the tent; it is pretty warm in there. And ermm, if you need to heed the call of nature, you should do so now so you won’t be stumbling around in the pitch dark. Take it from one who is experienced.”

She could talk, she could walk and now she needed to have a piss. Yes, she was in the world, real and physically embodied for sure. That alone was reassuring. Yes, it was a risky thing to spend the night in a tent with a strange man outside, but he didn’t seem a psychopath, didn’t seem sleazy, and certainly didn’t seem as bad as the small army of bloodthirsty thugs who had tried to shoot her, and had murdered Jack and Michelle. And, she reasoned that if anything bad was to happen overnight, even an unwanted advance, she would probably teleport to somewhere else. She left the small hedge she’d used for cover and walked back unsteadily to the lamplight.

“Thanks for the life story,” she offered. “And for letting me use your tent; by the way what was your name again?”



“Cameron. And yours?”

She crawled into the tent, turned around to zip it up, but then unzipped it a little and looked out at Cameron. “Erin,” she answered.

CAMERON

Cameron was woken by the sound of screaming from inside the tent. He tried to jump up but immediately rolled over stupidly having to squirm out of his sleeping bag. Scrambling out of it onto his hands and knees he got over to the tent and unzipped the entrance. Erin was in there alone but wrestling unconsciously with some sort of invisible phantom in her nightmare.

“Hey, hey,” he clambered inside and shook her awake, kneeling beside her, “you’re ok, you’re safe.”

He hadn’t had much practice at calming down someone from a nightmare at such a scale, in fact he had none at all. Thankfully Erin came to quickly and responded by sitting upright and over into a foetal position. His hands had been on her shoulders, and when she curled forward his arms automatically slid down her back and around her and he’d let his arms close on her body in an embrace. At first it didn’t feel erotic, more primal like the way you’d hold a frightened child. But Erin was leaning toward him, rocking back and forward as she was catching her breath and he felt the warm volume of her breasts brushing against his thighs.

“You’re in my tent,” he said soothingly, “in Scotland.” But then recalled the way she’d been disoriented and alarmed about their location before. So he held her a little more tightly and repeated, “You’re safe, you’re safe.” Whatever demon she’d been visited by seemed to be retreating. He felt her move one of her arms around to hold him by the waist. Gradually,

she relaxed. And as she did, he felt her become more soft and even snug in his arms. And, he felt something stirring in his lap. This ought not to happen, he thought. Embarrassed but also cautious. She was an unknown quantity. Did she do this to every lonely guy she met in an empty field? Could she be a psychopath or sociopath, spotting him asleep in the afternoon? Maybe she was the advance guard for a gang of bandits or sadistic lunatics. Handle with care, he reminded himself. “Another cup of tea?” he asked, “It’s a cure for nightmares.” He needed one himself.

“Yes please, Cameron, that would be nice.”

He pulled himself free of the tent and ignited the hiking stove, emptying his canteen in the kettle. He looked around keenly for any accomplice she might have, sneaking up to rob him or ... who knows ... sacrifice him to a Druid god. There was no one around, not even any animals in the field. All was quiet, and he quieted down as well. He felt Erin shuffle near him, coyly and almost apologetically, and they sat silently staring at the kerosene flame. The short summer night was giving way to the early sun, and the view across the fields was bathed in soft purples and mauves. The air had a bit of a chill to it.

“Sorry about that,” she offered. He believed she meant it. From the look on her face, the nightmare had been real enough. The fear and trembling too. And, he thought, the arm around his waist also.

“I figured you’d had a bad experience,” he responded, pouring the tea. “One sugar and milk. Up to telling me about it... Erin?”

She held her hands around the mug, staring into it meditatively. Cameron gave her an intense look he hoped she’d interpret if peripherally, an expression that was custodial as well as friendly.

“When you’re not in a Scottish field,” he prompted her and trying to lighten the mood, “spending the night with a man who most probably looks like a hobo you’ve only just met, where do you usually live?”

“Cheltenham,” she answered after a few slow sips of tea. “I’m at university there. A postgrad. Or was. I’m a physicist. Or was.”

Well, that’s a bit of a relief, he thought. Not a junkie (of course, she didn’t have that wear and tear of a seasoned junkie). Maybe a dropout (but she didn’t look like a hippie). Maybe she just up and quit like him and hit the road (but that didn’t account for her lack of travelling equipment).

“Well, I still am — a scientist I mean. But in research, theoretical stuff. Not practical work in labs. It’s a pretty arcane field I work in, but not so long ago, gosh maybe only days ago, I won an award for my theoretical work!”

“So, what happened to bring you all the way here? A wild party to celebrate the award?”

He immediately regretted the quip, as he saw her face turn sour. “Is that what I look like, someone on a bender who gets picked up at a pub and then dumped hundreds of miles away?”

He shook his head slowly and deliberately. “No, you don’t at all. It’s just that whatever that nightmare was, it sounded like you were fighting off someone that had something to do with how you ended up here.”

“It’s true I was ... kidnapped, if that’s the word for being abducted and bundled into the boot of a car ...”

“Holy shit!” Cameron exclaimed, “I’m so sorry I made a joke out of it.”

“Actually, that happened before this bit of the adventure, in fact, it happened twice.” He detected the glimmer of a weird smile on her lips. “How I got here,” she added, “is something else, altogether.”

As they both sipped their tea, Cameron listened attentively as she told him about her university work, her family life, and then the event at the science fair. She told him about the police officers Jack and Dan, about Michelle, about the abductions, her escape, the safe house and Dan’s shooting, and the murder of Jack and Michelle in the London flat raid.

Cameron was terrified. He’d read something like this narrative in a newspaper he’d picked up in Perth on his travels a while ago. If she was making this up based on that news story she definitely was a psychopath or sociopath. But if she wasn’t, and she certainly gave the impression of desperately telling the truth, then she was dangerous, or at the very least she was in danger; and now, by their association, so was he.

“That’s fucking incredible,” he gasped, not wishing to give away that he was familiar with another version of that story, one that didn’t have the believable detail of hers, and one that painted her in a very different—and not so believable—villainous light. “So, I have to ask this, how on earth did you get from London to here?”

“That’s the hardest part to tell, hardest because you won’t believe it. Even I don’t believe it.”

“This is the point where I say, ‘Try me.’ And I mean that. Try me.”

Cameron listened. And she was right. He couldn’t believe it. But he kept thinking back to that look on her face when he found her unconscious and

when he looked at her after getting her into the tent and under a blanket. What was the word that had come to mind then?

Unearthly.

Yes, there was something then and still was something unearthly about her. Despite warming her hands on a mug of tea and wandering off to a hedge to take a piss and putting her arm around his waist in a moment seeking consolation and security. What on earth got her from London to a field in Scotland? Nothing on earth, not on this one at least.

“You think that this thing that is happening to you has given you some sort of power to appear and disappear, as well as be transported through space.”

“I wouldn’t blame you for thinking I’m mad cooking up a cock and bull story like that. The trouble is, I am a scientist. This cock and bull stuff is just what my theoretical work has been leading me toward. Am I in a psychotic state where my speculations are seeming to be real to me? Or is there antimatter coexisting with me, inside me, entangling me with other states, other universes, enabling me to be here now intact?”

“You’ve lost me with the science,” admitted Cameron, “but I doubt—and hope—I’m not part of a psychotic fantasy of yours. I mean I’ve got a life story that goes back way before I met you yesterday.”

“That could be a false memory I’ve implanted in you, to convince myself of your reality. All those messages you get along the roadside. Are they a bit convenient?”

“No, you’re not getting out of it that way. I’m real, I know that for sure—I’ve been through a lot that I reckon guarantees my reality. And I think you’re quite real too.”

“I’m not a psychotic fantasy of yours?” asked Erin.

“I couldn’t come up with something as scientifically complicated as what you’ve just told me. But,” Cameron tentatively put the feeling he’d been harbouring since their embrace in the tent, enhanced by her exhilarating intelligence and storytelling technique, “I rather feel emboldened to say you are ... pretty fantastic.”

Was that a blush on her face? He could feel one on his.

“Thanks,” she said, quickly adding, “I mean thanks for not dismissing me out of hand.”

“I know this will sound trite, but I mean it. If there’s anything I can do to help ....” But straight away he could hardly think of anything he could that would help her.

Except for one thing at least.

“You know, I’ve been living on the road a while now. And I know where to have a shower, clean up, you know; get clean clobber at op shops, stuff like that.”

“I’d love to get out of these smelly gym clothes,” she said, and Cameron couldn’t help but smile at the double entendre, which he figured only he heard. Was he hearing that inference because he was becoming attached to her? He had to admit, everything about her was like another sign showing him a direction to follow. It was foolhardy, probably; but these

signs had not let him down and this was a seismic moment in his life. A perturbation in his journey, compelled him to act, to get on board something that might turn out to be remarkable. He could feel that there was a mission here, that he was destined to help this woman repair the damage that had been done. He was free to walk away from her, even if that felt like throwing her to the wolves. But helping her out wouldn't just be charity. It was a kind of commitment he hadn't felt before. As fantastic as her story sounded, there was a truth in it for him. Even if that was just the act of committing himself to the adventure she offered. "I'll walk on to the nearest town," he suggested, "get some food, check out the surveillance cameras. If that's all good we can go get you some different clothes, maybe get your hair dyed. Or we could do it ourselves. Would you trust me to cut it into a different shape? I've only got a Swiss Army knife, but I've cut my own with it. What do you think?"

"About your hair or about you cutting mine?" she replied with a little laugh. "Let's try the dye first and the change of clothes, maybe that'll be enough adjustment to my appearance. But I didn't get to tell you: I only landed here with what I was wearing in London. I haven't any money, and no access to any."

"I have enough to get by for the time being, and even if you had an autoteller or charge card I wouldn't advise using it. The police would be tracking its transactions. You'll have to rely on me. And I don't mind if you don't mind."

"Don't take this the wrong way," said Erin carefully, "but I'll find a way to pay you back. I mean the money."

"Don't take this the wrong way but you're giving me an adventure. A nice bit of cloak-and-dagger stuff. That's enough."

‘People get killed around me.’

There wasn’t anything he could say to that. He nodded solemnly. And then they both sat still again as the morning sun rays started to break through the trees.

How long they sat there Cameron couldn’t rightly say. Time seemed to be suspended, but he knew he had to set out and leave her with his tent and his gear. Would she still be here when he returned? Again, he reasoned it out that even if she were a petty thief, which he seriously doubted, even that empty campsite would have some kind of meaning for him. It was a matter of trusting destiny.

But he had to admit relief when he saw the tent still there an hour or two later on his return.

“First, breakfast,” he declared, handing her fruit juice and a cold BLT. “Bugger forgot to ask if you were vegetarian or had any food allergies.”

“All good,” she said hungrily.

“And here’s a present.” He put down an old, second-hand rucksack in front of her. “I got this from one of what looks like the many charity stores in the town. You’ll need it. You can put some of the camping gear in it to begin with. We’re going to be a couple doing a walking holiday together. I made a booking this afternoon for a cut and colour at the town’s grooviest-looking salon. I explained to them it was going to be a birthday surprise for you.” He could see by her expression that he had indeed surprised her. “Whoa, is it actually your birthday?”

“No, I just think that’s so clever of you. Thanks, Cameron, I’m not sure what to say.”



“OK, so that’s one job that will be done. Now, there are only a couple of CCTV cameras in the village which are easy to avoid. We’ll need to drop into a few of the charity shops to get you fitted out with appropriate gear for our holiday. We should think about a night in a hostel too, to get cleaned up so we can have dinner out.”

“You move fast.”

She seemed to say that approvingly. Cameron smiled back at her.

“I don’t mean to take liberties but, you know, desperate times.”

Once in the village, Cameron led the way around the charity stores. For a university student, Erin seemed surprisingly new to op shopping, unsure of what other peoples’ clothes would look like on her. “Keep in mind,” he advised, “you’re looking for practical gear. Non-descript.” Occasionally he pulled out an item off the rack that he thought would look good and practical on her. But now and then, there was something that he thought would look brilliant on her. “But also, keep in mind that the best op shopping is in pursuit of that personal treasure that no one else has seen.”

“More of your esoteric signs pointing the way?” she asked, taking hold of the brilliant pieces and draping them over her arm.

He was becoming more attached to her, he realised, trying to second guess her taste, and like him, she was getting more relaxed about it. Finally, she lifted a sequined miniskirt out, stepped towards him and hung it just in front of his waist with a mischievous grin on her face.

“I am not wearing a kilt out to dinner if that is what you think,” he blurted out. “This is Scotland, lassie, I’ll get quizzed about mae tartan.”

They both giggled. It was a moment not only of comedy but also intimacy. He enjoyed watching Erin laughing at him and with him. It was the first time he had seen her spontaneously happy. And the intimacy was consolidated when she asked him to wait outside the changing area, to appraise her outfit.

“Don’t raise your eyebrows at me young man,” she said in a mock complaint after a few pirouettes. “You can’t expect a girl to dress in a non-descript way when she’s on holiday.”

He noticed she was still hanging onto the sequined miniskirt.

“Too non-descript?” she asked.

“Well, I guess that depends on how you wear it. Give it a try.”

She stepped out a moment later.

“I’m buying that for you!”

“You just want to wear it too,” she joked. “Will it go with your other gear? Let’s see, what have you got?”

Cameron showed her a striped boating blazer and a vintage rock T-shirt.

“Perfect combo! But you’ll have to wrestle me for the mini. You won’t get it off me easily.”

This time, he was pretty certain from a look in her eye that she heard the double entendre as well.

## ERIN

She studied her new appearance in the salon mirror. Her long, and usually — she now admitted to herself — unkempt hair was cut back into a sharp bob. Despite the hairdresser's Celtic protestation against it accented in a thick brogue and her misgivings, her flaming red hair was now a dark brunette. It had to be done, the first of many changes required to escape detection. It would grow out, eventually, but she felt another sadness come over her, other than just the loss of her long locks. Changing appearance was one stage in changing identity. But that adjustment meant the assumption of a false identity. It meant surrendering the memories and allegiances to those people she had become so bonded to in the last week: Jack, Michelle and Dan. They were gone, forever, and she had survived.

Erin had read about the psychological rut of “survivor guilt”, in which people who escape death or some other major calamity blame themselves for the other's misfortune. She knew this was an aspect of post-traumatic stress, but it was intensified for her by the need to disavow any connection to those she had lost. She couldn't even mourn them. It just didn't seem fair, not a fair trade for whatever these new powers of hers were.

And there seemed to have been another trade off in this awful situation. She had lost those three friends and gained a new one. Here was Cameron, out of the blue, not just looking out for her like a Good Samaritan but looking after her, like ... like what? Not just a friend but already something a little bit more. A boyfriend? He was floating the cost of this identity change, which meant she was indebted to him. But a debt he seemed to have already wiped. How could she involve him in the peril that she caused to people wherever she was?

The clothes shopping had been a fun distraction. Or Cameron had managed to turn it into fun, rather than the furtive labour she would have approached it as. They even managed to play out buying her new underwear and toiletries as a sort of callow frolic. And now her new hairstyle. Again, Cameron was encouraging, light-hearted but excited and genuinely complimentary. Her new appearance, she had to admit, was down to him. He had financed it, of course, but also had directed it. And she was a willing accomplice, not passive. She wanted and was happy to be ... what was that cliché ... “putty in his hands”. As she said that to herself, the erotic innuendo didn’t escape her. But she also recalled a phrase that had come out during last night’s conversation. People close to her get killed.

“Thanks for helping me,” she looked up from the lunch plate that she had cleaned off with embarrassing speed. The pub was relatively quiet. He’d chosen one that looked like it catered for a quieter clientele and in that pleasantly unobtrusive atmosphere, their conversation over their meal had the opportunity to be discreetly casual, at turns flippant and even flirtatious, and offering occasions for intimate honesty. “Honestly, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Honestly back, it’s been my pleasure. Although ...I can hear a ‘but’ hovering there unsaid,” Cameron replied sheepishly.

“But ... I don’t want to say it ... but,” she stumbled and then found another way to say it as if it was a word game, “and yet ... I should take it from here. I don’t want you to get hurt in what I must do.”

“Unless you totally refuse to have anything to do with me because you can’t stand my company unless you say that, I’m coming with you.”

“Of course I can’t say that! And won’t say it. Meeting you, well kind of landing in your lap, has renewed something in me that I thought had been extinguished with the raid back in London. And it’s, well, sparked something new in me. I think you know what I’m saying.” She felt another blush bloom on her face. She wanted to use the word “desire”. Something held her back. “But I’m scared for you, it’s dangerous. I told you what happened to those who were trying to protect me. I escape to never-never land and leave them to a fate that should be mine.”

“Hey kiddo, it’s not just that I want to help you. As I’ve told you, the very crazy way you turned up in my life is something I can’t ignore. I’d like to be of use to you, but I suspect you’re going to be very important for me. Call me crazy, but all this has got to have some meaning that will be a lost opportunity if we part company. If it means I get to be Watson to your Sherlock or Robin to your Batman and we confront injustice and revenge your friends, then all the better.”

“I am not seeking revenge. You can spend a lifetime exacting revenge but the person who you’re targeting might not be the kind of person who ever cares about what they have done, who would never feel guilty by your standards.”

“That’s a speech I must try to remember,” said Cameron, looking chastened.

“Not mine,” Erin admitted, feeling she’d overstepped her response, “it’s from Simone.”

“Nina Simone?” Cameron looked baffled, and innocently cute.

“No,” Erin laughed, “de Beauvoir, but who knows maybe she lifted it from one of Nina’s songs.”

“You like Nina Simone?” asked Cameron, obviously to Erin deflecting the argument.

“One of my favourites,” she replied complicitly.

“We can’t part company yet then, no matter what else. We cannot part at the very least until we listen to some Nina together.”

Erin smiled as she saw the earnestness in Cameron; she could see behind that weathered face a young man who was in search of some meaning to his being alive. He was genuine; there had been no fast come-ons, and yet they had accepted a closeness with each other so quickly. It almost did feel like fate had plonked her there in that field in order to meet him. And there was a good-looking face under that beard, put together with the clothes he paraded for her. It would be very interesting, she thought, to see him when he’d had a haircut and a shave. All six feet two inches of him would cut an attractive, sophisticated man.

“From what you’ve told me,” Erin said, almost wistfully, “you’ve been following your signs drifting north, I suppose you’ll reach Orkney or the Shetlands.”

“As I say, I go where the signs point me. Last night, one pointed me into that field ... to meet you. I don’t have an ultimate destination in Ultima Thule.”

“OK, but you see, I have to head in the other direction. I’m not after revenge but I do have to expose Securope and their dark dealings. To do that I have to go south.”

“Then, south is where I go. The sign points south.”

“So I can’t shake you,” said Erin resignedly.

“I’m stirred by you, stirred not shaken.”

“Well, Mr Bond,” and Erin couldn’t help herself embellishing their mutual joke coquettishly, “in that case ... I think we’re going to need a bigger tent.

IAN

Ian Carmichael dealt with the fallout from the mercenaries’ part in Dan, Jack and Michelle’s deaths with the flourish of a cheque for minor building fabric damages. The mercs were pure grunt—employed by Securope but given the convenient tag of “anti-terrorism agents” by the cooperative areas of government that found their tactics and targets convenient—and everyone involved expected they’d do some damage. For Ian, even if the massive gunfire expended that night seemed out of control, the operation’s consequences were easily managed. Appropriate people had been paid off. Uncooperative government ministers had been frightened. The public had been fooled by newspaper headlines explaining how a planned violent attack on home soil had been thwarted. Naturally, there’d be some collateral damage.

What irked Ian however was how Erin had slipped out of their grasp. But then, he reasoned, that she had managed to do so was the “proof of concept” for his plans. Her extraordinary powers were being revealed with each engagement. And with no body, no trace of any injury to her, she simply couldn’t be dead. Thank God for that, he thought. There had been no sighting by any of his field operatives of Erin since she vaporised in front of the anti-terrorist squad. She was somewhere hiding and he would find her. Inevitable. But it was her mode of escape that held his

attention. Despite the excuses from his paid army at the scene, it wasn't just a magician's sleight of hand in the chaos and smoke, but some unknown means of controlling time and space at the molecular level. Whatever it was that Erin knew to effect this, he knew that getting his hands on Erin would be his fast-track ticket to discover "new hyper alternative scenario solutions" to combat. And to political power. He liked the way that sounded as it rolled off his tongue. It said nothing, meant nothing, but came across as being intriguing. All you have to do is say those ambiguous words with absolute conviction; governments and their stakeholders will believe it to be true.

It's all about controlling the narrative. Spin. For Ian, the maestro of spin was the caricatured investment broker in the movie Wall Street. Gordon Gecko. Meant to be a figure of derision to most audiences, Ian regarded Gecko as a paragon. A manipulator of time and space for his value. That was real virtue: the virtue of mastering the illusion under which so many labour, and making them labour for you. Ian particularly loved the scene in the movie in which Gecko comments on the rise in the value of an abstract painting he owns and which he considers worthless. "I bought that painting for \$60,000 yesterday," Ian would say at Securope board meetings, mimicking the actor who played Gecko, Michael Douglas. "\$60,00 then, and I could sell it today for \$600,000. The illusion has become real, and the more real it becomes, the more desperate they want it—capitalism at its finest."

That's what he wanted: the illusion to become real. Erin had vanished in a hail of bullets. Illusion. She came and then was gone. He would make that illusion real, for everyone who wanted to believe in it and pay for it. Even as he signed off on the costs of his special military operation, he smiled thinking about Erin's return, her second coming.



ERIN

Erin woke to the sound of rain on the tent; she unzipped the front flap and called out to Cameron to come in. She saw him hesitate for a second, then carefully slithered like a giant slug into the tent his head inches away from Erin. She hadn't been this close to a man for a long time. Boyfriends tended to take her away from studying for just one thing only, sex; when they had got the sex, they were more interested in wasting their time playing computer games.

“Are you ok, comfortable, I mean?”

“Yes, fine,” Erin looked at him in the half-light of the rechargeable battery-powered lamp. Seeing his face instantly made her feel safe. A wonderful feeling, she thought to have that sensation when being so vulnerable. To sense trust with another human being whom you have only just met, like magnetic particles aligning.

She could sense Cameron watching her intently. Caringly and excitedly. But her tiredness overtook her desire, and slowly, her eyes shut, and she was again asleep.

CAMERON

Cameron kept an ever-vigilant eye out for surveillance cameras as they walked with their backpacks to a café in Perth looking for breakfast.

“Do you think,” asked Erin after they had dodged the sixth camera to settle into a shared plate of eggs, bacon, tomato, beans and a slab of black pudding both of them left untouched, “that I still look too much like my former self?”

“I’m only suggesting lying low because I have a natural dislike of surveillance,” explained Cameron. “I reckon the police would be lucky to identify you on camera. The transformation has been significant. Even I can hardly recognise you as the girl I once knew.”

“You only met me two days ago! And one of those days I looked like this.”

“But you landed in my lap. So to speak. That makes a big impression on a guy.”

“Anyway, I’m not fishing for a compliment.”

“No need to. You might have aged a bit, but you’re as beautiful now as the day I met you!”

“I’m thinking about whether I’ll be getting into London, undetected.”

“That’s ‘we’ getting to London. I figure you have a plan in your head, but we need to put it out on the table so we work together on this. Hmmm, you don’t go for black pudding either. I’ll take that as another sign of providence.”

“There’s a weird science in me,” said Erin with a surprising casualness, “but it doesn’t extend to eating cooked blood. So far at any rate. But here’s the thing, and I’m sorry about this, but I don’t really have a plan as such, more an objective.”

“London.”

“And to bring Securope and that prick Ian Carmichael to justice for murder.”

“Sounds clear enough, if not exactly simple enough. Well, first off the practicalities that I can offer. I’ll call my accountant and arrange to get the keys to my apartment so we have somewhere to stay. It’ll be a secure place to start gathering intel on this Securope joint. And, you know how they say in moments like these in the movies, ‘We should split up’? Uh-huh, well I say, let’s stick together. If this security firm and its police accomplices are looking for you, they won’t expect you to have hooked up with ... ermm ... shall we say a ‘boyfriend’ this quickly.”

Cameron discreetly but half-heartedly gestured quote marks around the awkward noun.

“Actually,” said Erin seeming to ignore the gesture, “how quickly is that?”

“You usually hook up with boyfriends this quickly?” No need for quote marks this time, thought Cameron.

“No, no, I mean, what is the date today?”

“Last time I looked, which I think was today, it was the 27th.”

Erin looked confused. “But it’s springtime...”

“Earlyish, yes, but that’s global warming.”

“In January?”

Now Cameron felt confused. “March, my dear march hare. Check your fob watch. It’s March. Where have you been?”

“Holy shit!” Erin reeled. “That means I was in never-never land for almost four months!”

If Cameron had any doubts left about Erin’s story, they disappeared when he saw the look of genuine shock on her face. Whether her story was implausibly real or a plausible psychosis, she utterly believed it to be true. Either way, he was down a rabbit hole with her. And he just now felt a gear change in the cosmic machine that had linked him to her. “Do you mean in that dreamy cloudland you spoke about?”

“I thought it was only moments. But now that I think about it I can’t remember an experience of time going past. I guess it was like a sort of waking sleep. No, not like a dream, more like a liminal state, between a dream and waking. Between worlds. You know that train analogy I mentioned back when we were in the field—and thanks for being so patient in letting me rant on like that—do you remember? As two trains go past each other in opposite directions they create a whirlwind but with stillness momentarily at its core. They create enough suction to form a vacuum for a moment in that sliver of time in between. I think that’s where I’ve been. Unaware of time passing like the trains. Do you see what this means? Not only was I displaced geographically but also temporally. I jumped through time!”

Cameron surprised himself by not flinching at what she said. “So, you stepped off the world at one point and then stepped back on board at another.”

“Bit more dramatic than stepping. It felt more like I was sucked off,” Erin replied, evidently unaware, if only for a moment, of what she had just said. Cameron couldn’t hold back his reaction, and nor could she. They suddenly both burst into laughter.

“Well,” said Cameron in the aftermath, “let’s hope the universe keeps the trains running on time, so we see what drama awaits us.”

ERIN

Erin watched Cameron tap a passcode into the keypad next to the building’s heavy glass plate and swing it open. Even if she thought it unlikely, she’d felt as if their every move had been tracked by anonymous eyes, high up on walls or even in the sky, following them from the station to the accountant’s office, and now to this tower of uncompromising steel and glass. She wanted to get inside, away from the pedestrianised plazas of this part of town. When he steered her toward one out of seemingly half a dozen similar apartment blocks, she thought it looked more like an office building than a residential zone; but then she figured that fusion of work and life in a vertical gated community was aspirational and emblematic of the new breed of IT and financial warriors in London. There’d be a gym fully lined with mirrors, like a dance studio but for narcissistic exhibition rather than choreographic training, and there’d be a heated indoor pool somewhere in the basement. Under its fluorescent lights, the pool would be for laps only, no dawdling and no aimless relaxation. A minute later they were stepping out of the lift, and into a grey almost featureless corridor that led to a large, bland steel door. Cameron turned the key.

“Still working,” he said with what seemed to Erin to be a mixture of relief but also misgiving, then nudging the door open just enough to poke his head through apprehensively.

“Expecting someone to be home?” asked Erin, feeling as hesitant as he appeared to be.

“Not at all,” he sounded reassuring. “It’s just that I actually can’t remember how I left it. You know, maybe the garbage bin was still full if there are cobwebs draped over the furniture. The half-drunk coffee cups covered with mould. Or whether my accountant has been using it as a bachelor pad. I’m not sure which would be worse.”

To Erin’s relief, but also with some dismay, she stepped into the apartment and found its ultra-modern furnishings were tidy, clean and quite empty of any unwanted and surprised occupants, but the overall effect was very sterile. Grey, black, chrome, white. Slick leather. Polished concrete. Subway tiles on the walls. Like a groovy space capsule, but with views through its floor-to-ceiling glass walls of other steel and glass towers with similar apartments, gyms and pools. To Erin, it seemed not just unused for however long Cameron had been on the road; it resembled an apartment dressed up by a real estate company for inspection. As if no one had lived in it.

“Someone’s tidied it all up for you,” offered Erin.

“No,” replied Cameron, “it’s just as I left it. Welcome to my former life.”

He showed her through the rooms: kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom. Not a thing on the white walls, not even a cheap poster; clean surfaces with no personal knickknacks visible, other than a glass vase that appeared unused and a geometric sculpture on a coffee table that looked like a paperweight or doorstop. A few books on otherwise empty shelves, probably unread. A couple of generic magazines that could easily sit in a dentist’s waiting room, one on art and antiques, another on computer games.

“Boring, eh?” said Cameron, breaking Erin’s meditative silence.

Erin had to admit, she could see why the girlfriend left. And why it would be easy, in practical terms, for Cameron to then walk out of this flat with nothing but a backpack. He wouldn't have had much in the way of personal things to worry over leaving behind. She swung her second-hand rucksack down onto the bed, but it looked out of place and insolent sitting on the vast crisp white duvet, so she lifted it off and dropped it on the parquet floor, where it still had the character of an impertinent intruder. Did she appear this way too, in this strangely antiseptic apartment?

“OK. Shower,” he announced half as an order and half as an offer, pulling some large towels out of a side cupboard and shaking them out to air them. “They might smell stale but they’re clean.” He walked her into the large sleek bathroom, opening the drawers till he found a box with a bar of soap. “Brand new,” he said, dropping the soap into a tray in the walk-in shower; then leaned in to turn on the water. Cold. Then hot. “Glad I didn’t turn off the power, all this time.” It took a while, minutes and minutes passing for the water to begin to steam. He tested it with his hand. Erin found herself staring at his hand, turning over and around under the stream of water. Something was captivating in his action, something that made her skin tingle with an anticipation of feeling naked under that warmth, with his hand moving near her. There was enough of a pause, then, a moment, Erin thought, when she could have just lifted her top off right then and there, as an invitation for him to join her in the shower. God knows, she imagined it would be big enough for the two of them not just to stand in but also lie down. But that moment lapsed, and she stood still staring into the shower bay, unmoved.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he stammered while drying his hand, “erm, I’ll pop out and get some provisions.”

Damn, she reproached herself.

He turned to leave but hovered at the bathroom door, as if captured by a second thought, then turned back to her.

“Feel free,” he said in a way that seemed to her to be an enticement and then continued, “...to explore the place. But I’d suggest one rule: don’t answer the phone or the intercom, and certainly not the door if anyone dings or knocks.”

Erin nodded. She watched him leave and was out of her clothes before she heard the front door shut. Then she stepped into the shower, thinking about that hand of his testing the temperature.

## CAMERON

When Cameron stepped back into his apartment holding several shopping bags, he felt for a second as if the past couple of years had vanished. Erin was sitting on the lounge in a loosely draped bathrobe with a handtowel around her wet hair, reading a magazine. It was like a flashgun had gone off in front of him, momentarily blinding him. As if two moments in time had collapsed into one dazzling but ambiguous event. There it was: the past, when he’d encounter his girlfriend idling like this about the place, trying to be comfortable in an apartment that had so little comforts it felt, even to him, uncomfortably programmed. There was no place for anything truly personal — in the apartment and in his life with her. Even their intimacy was programmed.

And now in the present tense, here was Erin. Everything about her was the antithesis of that regulated, planned, air-conditioned world he had inhabited. And, he dared to think, it was the opposite of his previous romantic relationship. Even the way Erin sprawled across the leather sofa, with the bathrobe falling in a tantalising reveal of her legs. He found himself wondering whether she had anything at all on beneath it. Then he



thought back to how he'd found her in the field in Scotland. This was no ordinary romantic relationship.

"You play?" she asked, peering over the top of the magazine. "Computer games."

"Used to, yeah. But that was when life was a bit different. I didn't have to tackle an evil mastermind using antimatter to manipulate time and space."

"That sounds just like one of these games," she smiled. "Anyway," she dropped the magazine on the floor and leaned back along the length of the sofa into a languorous stretch, "we don't have to take the enemy on right away. We've got a bit of time for R&R."

Cameron suddenly became aware that he was holding the shopping bags with both hands. He felt ridiculous and frustrated that he couldn't walk straight over to her.

"Come on," she said, "put those things down. It's your turn."

"Uh?"

"Shower, your turn in the shower. Put those in the kitchen, and get in the shower while I'll make us something to eat."

It was a risk, a risk of looking not so much sleazy as just looking stupid; but he weighed his impulse against Erin's ease with the bathrobe and so decided after the shower to don a bathrobe himself. He was excited to see that Erin hadn't changed out of hers. They were equals in their immodesty. And not only that. It felt as if they had already been living together. She'd found her way around the kitchen as well as what he'd unpreparedly grabbed at the local supermarket, and had pasta and a sauce

well underway. He took the cork out of a bottle of red as she lifted a spoon up to him for a taste test, blowing to cool the sauce. He poured two glasses, and they clinked them standing over the stove.

ERIN

“Sorry, I was miles away,” she said, easing into ... what was it, her third glass of wine? Or fourth? They did open a second bottle, she recalled. She hadn’t felt this relaxed and safe and yet excited in such a long time. She was thinking back to when Cameron had come back to the flat and found her on the sofa. She should be attending to those serious matters that brought her to London, and to the horrors that had driven her out of London. But the past few days had offered something other than struggle, suspicion and fear. She wanted at least to tease out this respite, to even luxuriate in it.

“That’s OK. You’ve been in something like virtual reality for months. I’m glad you’re back in this world, and you’re not that far away, you know,” Cameron leaned across the table to clink glasses again. “I was saying,” Cameron spoke softly, “that my equipment’s been out of action for a while, but it should still be in working order.”

“Your ... equipment?”

“My computer gear, modem and stuff.”

“Oh, that, mmmm.” Yes, she’d wondered what he would be like washed, shaven, cleaned up, and with a haircut. Well, he didn’t need that haircut. That long-haired dishevelled look after his shower was quite rakish. “Hey,” she said putting her hands on the table as if in a séance, “what ... what’s this table doing?”

“Eh? Nothing. Oh no,” Cameron had a look of anguish on his face, “you’re not drifting back into never-never land, are you.”

“No, no, I mean what’s it doing ... between us.”

She stood and stepped around towards him, and he got out of his chair. As he did so, she sneaked a look down and could tell he wasn’t wearing anything underneath his robe. So she took him by the hand and led him into the bedroom.

CAMERON

Cameron woke up first. It had been late, very late, he figured before sleep overcame them and they both gave in to mutual exhaustion. Whatever the hour was now, it must be late. He slowly removed his arm from beneath Erin’s bare shoulders as her head lolled away from his chest and she blinked her eyes open. They were both silent for a moment, and for that moment he became worried whether she might have woken up with regrets.

“Hello,” she almost sang the word.

“Top of the morning to you, if morning it still is.” He inwardly groaned at his self-conscious attempt at a Scottish accent.

“Who cares,” she replied still singing. “I mean whether it’s morning or not.” Then she quickly slid out from under the tangled sheet, onto her feet. “Call of nature,” she explained.

“And not a hedge in sight.”

Her laugh was so light and sincere and carefree, Cameron felt like pulling her back into the bed still warm with their luxury. But he quickly recognised his nature calling. “Coffee?” he shouted as he saw Erin peek back from the bathroom and nod.

They took their time over breakfast. It was his turn in the kitchen. He kissed her neck from behind as he put the bowl of cereal down for her. She stroked his foot with hers under the table while they sat, facing each other and hardly speaking.

“I don’t know whether to say that last night shot me into never-never land again, or brought me back lusciously into the world,” Erin reflected. “Either way, it did me a power of good. In fact, I’m powered up now to start thinking about what to do next. Other than a repeat performance, later on of course ... please.”

“At your service. But what did you have in mind? I mean, other than an encore.”

“I guess we’ll need to dive into the darker parts of the web, to reconnoitre Securope before doing anything ... physical.”

After breakfast, they took their coffees into the room that Cameron, before quitting his job, had turned into his computer lab. He switched on the monitor and drives and heard that startup humming that used to be so familiar to him. The old desktop image came up of an almost featureless Antarctic landscape, a cold white blankness that he used to find tranquil enough to allow him to begin focussing on work, and to return to when getting stressed out. Cameron had enough security built into his web access to feel he could surf freely, but he doubted his level of hacking skills would be enough to slip into something the scale of Securope and

lurk or dive deep without being detected. It could be the moment for Erin to try out her skill set.

Erin was gazing intently at the image on the startup screen. “I know that from somewhere,” she said quizzically.

“Antarctica?”

“Mmm, but that particular image.”

“How on earth can you identify that, it’s almost completely blank?” he asked rhetorically, staring into the white screen himself. “Anyway,” he went on, “you told me that you were able to interact with electronic devices, in such a way that can disable them.” He said this in absolute sincerity, implicitly believing her stories about the explosions in the Securope labs.

“I guess you could call my interactions with Securope’s lab equipment that.”

“Well, I wonder if you can interfere with devices in a way that’s more like tinkering with them instead of shattering them. You know, getting them to behave slightly differently. Eventually, I wouldn’t be surprised if you could get us into Securope’s data architecture by subterfuge via the web: a spy not just a hacker, moving around under camouflage as those cyberjockeys do in cyberpunk novels and movies.”

“I’m more than happy to try, if it means degutting Securope. So far,” Erin explained, “I only seem to connect with machinery when there’s a crisis of some kind. But I do have the impression I could control it, especially now that my anxieties have been displaced by far more pleasant sensations,” and she nudged her foot against his again and winked, “and

that my abject fear and outrage seem to have turned into a sort of resolve.”

Cameron patiently listened to Erin venting her anguish and anger, and how from the vantage point of her “never-never land” she’d been able to perceive the way her somatic and psychic activity could interlace with the electronic circuitry of the lab machines. The connection, as she said, seemed triggered by extreme emotional states. But they didn’t have to be identified with threatening or potentially fatal experiences. Other states of mind or body might well be able to cause interactions and events that were more wilful, not just reactive.

“More pleasant sensations, maybe?” asked Cameron, planting a kiss on her cheek.

“We should certainly try that, but I’d say we should avoid the ... erm ... extremely pleasant sensations. For a while, at least, until I learn how to control the interaction. Any kind of extreme might cause ... well, who knows what? Fireworks.”

“Had them last night, and we both made it through undamaged,” Cameron laughed. “But yes, I understand. Softly softly catchee monkey.”

And they spent the rest of the day, with Erin gradually developing, step by step, gaining and losing but gaining in the end what to Cameron appeared to be a mental power over his computer interface, almost as if Erin was in a telepathic communication with the core. processor.

Evening was falling, the coffee cups had been filled, emptied, rinsed, and filled again countless times. The only light in the room was glowing off the computer screen, and it cast a strange pallor over Erin’s face, which was fixed with concentration. She was sitting on her hands to avoid any

accidental or automatic motion toward the mouse or keyboard. She looked at him like a marble statue, staring straight ahead.

“I’m in your hard drive,” she announced suddenly. “Lots of boring work files. Hmmm,” she added with a mischievous edge to her voice, “and what’s this?”

A folder appeared on the screen and opened up with a stack of jpg photos, clearly snapped with a phone camera, of a young woman, attractive, in what looked like erotic cosplay with a Catwoman hood and mask and sitting on the black leather sofa that was in the living room next door. Other than her, everything else in the photo—the sparse ornaments, the view through the floor-to-ceiling windows, even the placement of the furniture—all looked the same to Cameron as it was now. And to him, the woman looked unhappy at being photographed. Or was she unhappy about being on the sofa? Or just unhappy being in the room itself? Or just being there with him taking the photograph? But, one thing lingered in his memory: she did not seem uncomfortable or unhappy about the costume she was wearing.

“Oh shit,” Cameron swore, feeling mortified, “I thought I’d deleted them. From a previous life. 1.0 and long gone. Sorry, how embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry,” said Erin, “I’ve found far worse in there which I didn’t think were ... appropriate to put on the screen. But, there must have been times when you two got on, swimmingly I’d say, at least in the hot tub. I didn’t know there was one in this building. Is it in the gym? You two took a bit of a risk doing it there didn’t you? And, ermm, did she always wear that mask when you photographed her?”

“Oh god, delete them please Erin,” he was reaching for the mouse as if he could move faster than she could think.

“Already done it,” she answered, with a smile on her face. “Upgraded now to life 2.0.” The screen was now blank, flipped back to the white expanse of Antarctica with Erin’s ghostly reflection hovering in it. She didn’t say it to Cameron, but he could see a dark thought was on her mind about that woman. He wouldn’t say it to her, but he had the impression that it was not just a jealous response to the ex-girlfriend. Erin was especially interested in the woman from Life 1.0.

## ERIN

Erin lay in bed in the morning light, while she listened to Cameron in the kitchen, brewing coffee, sizzling up something on the stove. Even though she’d deleted the image files of his former girlfriend from the computer she couldn’t quite erase them from her memory. She was being niggled at by a sense of familiarity, especially with that look of discontent on the woman’s face as she sat on the sofa; though Erin surprised herself that she was not stewing over the R-rated activities photographed with mutual abandon elsewhere. They could go in the bin. Erin felt happy here, not just content. So there was no chance of her falling into an echo of that girl’s discontent. No, this was an entirely new life and a new identity. It was almost like being in another world. And she felt able to enjoy this man, as a companion, a co-conspirator and ... as a man. She knew that her feelings for him were reliable, and yet sweeping through his hard drive, his internet search history, his workplace—all those aspects of his former life—there were still unknown areas of his world, especially the period when he was on the road, of which there was almost no internet or cloud history. He had effectively cancelled his internet identity during that time. She was almost envious of that.



From her point of view, she needed to identify the parts of her that were new and how they might be linked with (or disconnected from) the old parts of her—life 1.0—that were increasingly becoming less known to her. Her acts of violence in Securope and her escape from violence in the London flat were compulsive clashes that occurred independently of her conscious will. Much as she gained the ability to purposefully dive into and navigate Cameron’s computer memory and apps, she couldn’t yet tell how the extreme reaches of this ability worked. That was the uncertainty that scared and excited her, not so much the dark parts of Cameron’s data exhaust. Which after all, she thought, is what that other woman on the sofa is now: data exhaust. Flush that memory cache, she said to herself.

“Breakfast,” declared Cameron with a flourish like a magician, “your favourite: black pudding!”

“Yum, how sweet of you to remember,” said Erin loosely donning a bathrobe and sitting down – with relief – to a plate of eggs and bacon.

“Looks like you’ve been doing some serious thinking, while I have done some serious coffee brewing.”

“I want to find the known unknown,” she said, trying to summarise the chronicle of her morning reflections, “mmm, nice coffee.”

“The known unknown? Is that Siddhartha?”

“Donald Rumsfeld. Not quite the sage.”

“Whatever, sounds like you could spend a lifetime with a library of self-help books on that quest.”

“Wasn’t that your quest?”

“I was one of that army of insecure folks who don’t know that they know themselves. So they go looking for their answers from someone else. Fortunately, I didn’t need a library. Just the one book. That’s what the Siddhartha book says, in a roundabout sort of way.”

“That’s the book that helped you find me.”

“Exactly, thanking the fates, and where would I be now but for that book, and you?”

“Somewhere up the top end of Scotland,” she mused. “Carefree and having a good time, I imagine. Rather than facing danger in London with me.”

“Well, I do miss all that black sausage. But,” he stopped the quip, “am I in danger being with you? I don’t think so.”

“What drives an interface with the world,” she spoke out again trying to condense the saga of her thoughts whilst in the bed, “if you can’t think of everything simultaneously? You only have the ability to weigh up so many possibilities—but then the possibilities that are lost become part of the action, a hidden unknown.”

Cameron didn’t seem phased by her weirdly abstract statement. “Isn’t that what intuition is for? The problem is you have to trust your intuition and that is hard for a lot of people. You can try and rationalise everything, or be guided by your senses, or instinct. Though instinct is a bad word, so maybe call that last one clairvoyance.”

“Clairvoyance? Not bad. It’s like there is something taking hold of me ... from the other side.” She didn’t want to add that she had given that other

thing taking hold of her a name, a male name at that: John. “And if I still want to participate in this world—in your world, your flat,” she added shrugging off the thought of John, “or in the bowels of Securope—then I have to allow this otherness to take control. I need to be guided by instinct, sure. But when you have antimatter potential playing a part in your life, in your body, those instincts are an indeterminable added ingredient.”

“Do you trust this potentiality you have? From what you’ve told me, it hasn’t let you down so far.”

“OK,” she answered, starting to recognise the insecurity that a library of self-help books wouldn’t answer. “But what if the antimatter, as antimatter particles, has a vested interest? That these particles have their own destiny. Their intentions, or at least their effects, are too far out there, on the other side, for me to control?”

“We all have hidden or unknown intentions, which make us their perpetrators. Forces we’re unconscious of. God, half the time we’re trying to fix problems that we’ve unwittingly inherited from our parents. Problems that are our parents. I reckon our parents are like your antimatter particles.”

“Or ex-girlfriends?” said Erin, unable to resist the dig. She quickly disposed of the joke. “No, that’s deleted data. Which reminds me, I should get onto the computer again, I’ve got an idea about how to test Securope’s security.”

“Should I be nervous about mine?” Cameron asked sheepishly. “My computer now seems to know what you’re thinking, especially what you’re thinking about me.”

“It is your computer, so it is you, a mimetic copy. Not just the data cache but the way you make your apps work. Can’t help that, but I promise not to go digging up the dead.” But that phrase made her baulk, as if she’d said something hurtful without knowing it. “Now be quiet.”

Erin wondered if indeed the computer reacted to her unsolicited, unconscious thoughts. She wanted to tease out the fringes of Securope’s information architecture, its tentacle-like extremities on the web without sensitising them to her delicate and surgical probes. This meant going in through services and sites that were contiguous or adjacent to Securope, looking for their connections and links, driving searches to uncover evil intent.

Windows were opening at an accelerated pace as Erin became more confident and more able to juggle multiple search paths simultaneously. The pathways were overlaying and spiralling, forming stacks, then branching into data arrays that she intuited rather than saw on the screen. She was accumulating a mass of interrelated information, and somehow storing it in her mind, much of which she felt could be retrieved and processed later. Even so, she had a strong feeling of claustrophobia, caged within the networks’ temporality. She needed another level of computing power to slip through the barriers she could now feel, almost palpably, around Securope. But it wasn’t just about investigating. She felt the seduction of something irresponsible. She felt the need for freedom. She needed to reach a quantum computer, like the ones tested by IBM or Google to fully explore the possibilities of this freedom. It was exhilarating, hurtling toward something utterly unknown. Not just data but power. It was sublime, an extremity she suddenly realised was dangerously uncontrollable, and likely to tear Cameron’s workstation and him to shreds if she didn’t stop. More importantly she was risking being discovered. With a scream, she pulled back from that horizon, like slamming on the brakes of a car to avoid hitting a wall. Vast fields of data

fractured and spun around her, gradually resolving back to the furniture in Cameron's room. She slumped down with her head on the desk, hearing Cameron gasping close by.

“Christ, what just happened? Are you OK?”

“I got carried away. Far away. I found I was connecting with other computers building an insanely large network. I just couldn't stop the insatiable connectivity. It felt like a crazy sort of desire, a hunger, but also being engorged at the same time.”

“Well,” Cameron took her hand and gave a mischievous wink, “I get just that exact feeling when I look at you.”

OK, that was a quick and clever way to defuse the drama, thought Erin. And she laughed.

“Though I've got to say,” Cameron added, “you have more self-control than me.”

“I was heading towards a quantum computer somewhere,” she explained now that she had calmed down. “I think it may have been a quantum computer in Securope. I was being drawn towards it as though it was calling me. I don't know if it recognised me. It didn't treat me as if I was an agent with a body, someone called Erin sitting at a console. But it was asking me to come and play, to test it out, like taking a new car for a test run to see if garners muster.”

“‘Garners muster’, where did you get that saying that from? Your Dad?”

“I guess so. He was always test-driving cars and finding flaws in them. I was worried that I was giving us away. That Securope would know that I am alive and sitting somewhere connected.”

Erin thought back to Cameron’s remark about parents being like her antimatter inhabitant. Whatever this drive was, and she recalled how the car metaphor had come to her just before catastrophe would have occurred, she could only think that it was the effect of the antimatter. It was that other person, that thing she called ‘John’ in her clairvoyant communication with the other side. She should deal with this energy, recognising it as a thing with a face and a name. Antimatter was a noun but it wasn’t a name. The name she’d given this otherness in her was a sign calling her on, like Cameron’s open book, Siddhartha.

And then she disconnected the computer from the network, remembering something from her immersion in that flux of data that was like the open pages of a book that she’d spotted whirling past her in a twister.

She remembered a name.

“I need to show you something,” she said to Cameron, giving it the ominous tone she knew it deserved. She opened his computer again and slowly this time scanning through stacks of bureaucratic pages, then she doubled back down the forks to an email string that came up and sat fixed on the screen.

“Holy shit,” he said, sounding as embarrassed as he was angry.

“I found some old emails from a recruitment firm that does head hunting for Securope. Looks like you were approached a few years ago, repeatedly too, and with some lucrative advantages ....” She looked around the apartment, making sure Cameron saw her doing so.

“But I never agreed,” Cameron was visibly shaken. “You’ll see that in the emails,” he added.

“You knew about Securope all the while I was telling you about my horrible experiences with them,” she said, “but you didn’t let me know.”

“I’ve never been involved with them,” Cameron almost whined defensively. “In my field, you get job offers several times a week. I don’t mean that to sound pretentious, but, well, I was rather good at my work and it’s a competitive marketplace. My life 1.0.”

“Why didn’t you take their offer, I mean their offers,” asked Erin.

“There was something ... I don’t know how to put it ... something didn’t smell right. Well, I know that now. They were working on something that hardly anyone in the security game knew anything about; highly secretive. Which meant highly innovative. But their security was so thorough there weren’t even many rumours.”

“That didn’t tempt you?” Erin realised the conversation was drifting towards an interrogation, but she couldn’t help it.

“It would have been like agreeing to a one-way flight to Mars. No turning back.”

“I thought that was exactly what you launched yourself onto, on the road,” Erin could hear herself, unwillingly heightening her suspicion.

“In my Life 2.0, true. But that came with walking away from my IT world. Jettisoning it.”

“Maybe, but not the debit card. Not the apartment either, nor its computer office.”

“As it turns out,” said Cameron sheepishly, “I’m glad I didn’t throw it all in the bin. I wouldn’t have met you. We wouldn’t be here now. Doing this. Having done what we’ve done. And planning what we’re going to do to Securope.”

Erin smiled. Even if something very small, something she couldn’t put her finger on, and couldn’t leave alone, still remained unknown.



## THE KNOWN KNOWN

### PAUL

Paul had begun thinking about that day's lecture only on the way into work. Planning every word well beforehand made him sound monotonous, even to himself. He wanted his lectures to be more spontaneous. He knew the basic premise of what he was trying to say, but his aim in the lecture was shifting like the goalposts he was picturing. Now, as he stepped up to the lectern all he had was a vague hope that things would come together once he started speaking. He consoled himself by the fact that the philosophical bent of the talk was that everything, including his lecture, was in a constant state of flux. But that did leave an insecurity in the soul, a dark space that was covered up in the attempt to lead a normal life, by which he meant having the script fully written out and delivering it all on time.

But despite these gestures of reprieve in regards his performance and a lecturer, he felt the nervous pressure building as he entered the lecture theatre. His nerves were jangling, and it was also embarrassing that he could still feel afraid and unprepared. The fear came down to this tortured conceptual predicament: was what he knew he knew going to desert him? Would he be so full of so many things to say that he would be left speechless, dumbfounded, alone at the lectern with just gibberish dribbling down his chin. Or would the spirit possess him, and like an inspired actor on stage or preacher at a pulpit he would transform the audience's minds and hearts to the reward of thunderous applause.

"This is the final lecture in this series on knowing and the *unknown*," he began, feeling the stress fall on his last word.

“As I have said once or twice before, the notorious Donald Rumsfeld outlined three categories of knowledge: the known knowns; the known unknowns; and the unknown unknowns. I’m sure you all know what I’m talking about.”

He paused with a wink for a response to his quip. The silence however was uncomfortable, so he continued.

“That famous, or nowadays infamous, philosophical thinker Slavoj Žižek said that beyond Donald Rumsfeld’s three categories is a fourth. What would that be? Well, it has to be the only combination left: the unknown known. Zizek, who is deeply into psychoanalysis by this term would probably be referring to the Unconscious, or that realm of knowledge that we disavow or repress. But we might also look at it in terms of the creative process. An artist, for instance, once told me that he produces work when he glimpses possibilities for that work (say, its medium, its content, expression, style ...), but that then his work melts away into a mist until he catches another glimpse of the possibility. I’d say he got a glimpse of the unknown known.”

“Didn’t we start off with this, professor? Aren’t we —or shouldn’t we be — now on the known known.”

Anita. It had to be her.

“Exactly!” Although Paul wasn’t exactly sure what he was saying, now that Anita had once again interrupted what he considered, given his unpreparedness, was a reasonably good performance.

“Yes,” he added, pushing as far possible beyond her reprimand, “and so we are steering towards the absurdity of being in and of the world.”

OK, he thought, that will get them on edge. He could see Anita shift in her seat, like a lioness crouching before the pounce.

“The binary between success and failure is an extreme contradiction. It is the very failure in everyday life that needs to be seen not pitted against

the concept of success, but ... failure should be seen as a friend that will never leave you. The right to failure is a constant gift. The imperative drive for categorical success actually thrives on friendless failure. That sort of success is an illusion. We need to remember that failure — even the failure to remember — is a friend.”

That should stall them for a while, while Paul could collect his thoughts, but there was a growing murmur of discontent swirling around the half-full lecture room. Half-full. Where were the other students, and what were they doing? Things had gotten worse for lecturing, he quietly observed, since all lectures were now recorded. While he was slaving away for them, his students could be anywhere doing anything else: playing computer games, going to the gym, lounging by a pool, watching movies, on a date, having sex. His lecture would be replayed sure, but at the moment it was background noise, like elevator music or easy-listening programme music. He could feel himself failing.

“In art,” he suddenly remembered, “we have a wonderfully complete failure. It’s a failure born out of a desire to comprehend the incomprehensible. Each work of art’s failure has the possibility of discovering the sublime. The artist is a person who knows they are going to fail but they keep on doing what they fail at. But with this proviso. ‘Fail better,’ as the absurdist author, Samuel Beckett, put it. That is the known known in action. And it is our plague because as soon as we utter a word we put things in the realm of the known. A tangible communicable thing that accepts incongruities in translation. But, of course, there those things lost in translation: the unknown known.”

“You’re here with us talking about quantum mechanics,” interrupted Anita, “and each week you go through the knowns and unknowns, and in the end no-one knows what you’re talking about. Is that just a failure to communicate or a successful failure of communication?”

Damn she's on the ball, thought Paul. And he noticed the murmur of discontent around the half-empty lecture theatre had stopped. Stopped in its tracks. Anita had become the class spokeswoman. For sure, she wouldn't be failing the subject. But was he, as her professor, failing to do right by her?

“With quantum mechanics,” he proposed, “we have the perfect contrivance to explore failure, as it is a beautifully flawed system. The system is indeed based on failure. The failure of measuring the world at the sub-molecular level creates uncertainty at the heart of knowing. Quantum failure is the exemplar for contemporary thinking in that enables it the absurd to come to the fore. Philosophically, it enables one to steer life in the direction of uncertainty, to embrace the prospect of failure not as an anxiety but as a freedom from the pursuit of illusory success. The unknown known is what has made quantum great, it does not rely on anything but probabilities. Once you can calculate those probabilities as knowable uncertainties, you're in the known known.”

Yes, he felt a tingling as his unscripted lecture took flight as a mode of performance art.

“The friend who toys with failure that I mentioned a moment ago is a visual artist. And I've learned from him that in attempting to deal with the complexity of reality, visual art is prone to failure. It delves into the complexity of a world first imagined by the Epicureans and Atomists, and of their micro world of swerving particles in relation to the macro world of constellated or aggregated compositions, such as forms, shapes, volumes, textures and so forth — the stuff that visual artists usually get attached to. It's generally assumed by modernists that it took the freedom from representing reality granted by the invention of photography for painting to explore what reality might actually look like beneath the

appearance of composite form, shape, texture and so on. This freedom leads to the destruction of certainty, the embrace of chance, the incorporation of a psychological and metaphysical inner world, inspiring also an intuition of the quantum world and of our material coexistence with matter and time. We all know that the world is absurd, yet we still construct a lived experience in it. Absurdity is the known when it is known as known.”

“That is absurd thinking,” Anita intervened again, “absurd, even for you professor.”

“Only if you want to believe.”

Paul could hear how absurd that last statement of his was. A rather precisely delivered non sequitur, with a sly allusion to *The X Files*. Yes, he could congratulate himself on that one.

“I do want to believe,” responded Anita. “I just don’t believe in you.”

Well, that floored him. What the hell did Anita mean by that? By god she was a smart alec: she had just fired another riposte, meaningless but with a force to knock him sideways. The only thing was to parry it and punk her own insult.

“And that — I want the rest of class to take note — is exactly how it should be. Don’t believe the teacher if they say quantum mechanics can be understood. Take a lesson here too from the journey of Siddhartha, in Herman Hesse’s book of that name, when he realised that his guru could not tell him how to achieve enlightenment, he could only tell him what he was doing at that actual moment.”

God, thought Paul, he was so over being deflated by intelligent students. But maybe he had it all wrong. Is there a right or wrong way to knowledge, to the known known? Can one use the adjectives “intelligent” and “unintelligent” as a prefix for “knowns” and “unknowns”?

“Before I continue with the rest of the lecture dealing with counterfactual definitiveness,” he announced, feeling at last confident with his subject matter and with his audience’s enthusiasm for this topic, “if there are no other pertinent questions I’d just offer a reminder that your essay on the epistemology of the four combinations of knowns and unknowns is due next week.”

“Professor,” Anita was leaning forward in her seat, “what about an impertinent question?”

Paul looked at the army of zombies herded behind her in the room. Talk about follow the leader, he reflected, and fuck the known and unknowns. But he wasn’t sure whether he thought that to himself, or actually whispered it under his breath.

ERIN

Erin knew. She couldn’t avoid facing it any longer. Even after the escape from the London flat she could still claim she didn’t really know about her brave new world of power. She wasn’t in control of it, it was controlling her. But after the recent excursion into the internet through Cameron’s computer, she now knew she could command it. OK, it was like a test driver steering a new experimental formula one vehicle. There was a probability, as well as possibility, that she could oversteer, or that something could go wrong with the electronics or the mechanics. But she was in the cockpit and the thing was, down to split-second timing, responding to her intentions. Of course, when a speeding car flips out, it’s

not only the driver at risk but the bystanders at the edge of the track. Yes, she could be a timebomb delivering collateral damage, but her supernatural power — no, don't call it "supernatural", there's nothing mystical about it, she reasoned ... call it a superpower, yes, and with training and care it could be controlled and beneficial, not just destructive. It could be ... what was the word she was looking for? Heroic? Could it be the power of a movie or comic book superhero?

"The only problem with being a superhero," she said out loud, "is how to use your power for good."

Cameron looked up quizzically from his breakfast at her. She suddenly realised with embarrassment that, to Cameron, that statement must have come out of thin air. She had just referred to herself as a superhero.

"Sorry, that must have sounded pretentious. I was in the middle of an argument with myself," she explained.

"Well, I think you're rather super, Erin. And I can see you're gonna have to be a hero in facing up to Securope."

"For me, good means beating Securope. Revenge as much as getting rid of something that I think can do the world harm. But I know revenge is a big part of my intention. Superheroes are supposed to be above revenge, aren't they? But does superpower automatically come with a moral compass, so you can know right from wrong, good from evil? Doesn't a superhero need a supervillain to match them? Otherwise, the fight wouldn't be fair. So I'm going to have to assume Securope, or the guy behind it, is a supervillain. That's fair but scary. And how would the hero know if their team — their friends, their allies, the country they were in — was worth defending? One person's freedom fighter, as the old saying goes, in another person's terrorist. In this networked world, surely there's

no absolute truth, only relative values, relations between simulacra. The absolute, universal good or evil ... they're each a facsimile of facsimiles, a meme of memes, put online by anyone. When the facsimile becomes what you want to believe in, it becomes the truth to you. Am I rambling?"

Cameron looked perplexed, but eager to support what Erin knew must have sounded like an anxious zigzag of ideas.

"I might be following you," he said cautiously, "so, do you mean that we want to believe in something to make it true and good, like believing in the image of a person you have fallen in love with online."

"Yes, that person you have connected with is nothing like the actual person in looks or temperament. You have fallen in love with a facsimile, you've fallen in love with the internet itself."

"Is this the coffee talking?"

"No... Yes. I'm sorry, but you see I saved myself in that London flat, but I didn't manage to save Jack and Michelle. I keep thinking whether my power is only manifested to save myself."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. From what you've told me, you were a fledgeling."

"Can I be a link in a causal loop and not have an effect on things? Does the antimatter in me cause me to escape, to distance myself from the world, leaving only a light footprint? I've been thinking about whether dropping into your life actually was unintentional or whether it was predetermined, not just a random event. Maybe even determined by myself, unconsciously. But if I felt nothing truly was random, then the quantum world would not exist. Are you, Cameron, just part of a new



causal loop? Can you live in multiple causal loops at the same time?  
Cameron, why are you looking at me like that?"

"Sorry, like what."

"Looking as though I'm weirding you out. As though you've seen a ghost, or you're sitting with a shell of a person who's no longer inhabiting her own bodily home."

"That might be my coffee doing that to me. But I must admit there was a weird moment there. I thought I'd lost you just now, and in the same way that I found you a few days ago. I thought you'd gone, and you were just waiting for your body to catch up. I know, with this strange matter-antimatter-here-now-gone-now state you're in that it could happen. But if it did, I would miss you. Thinking about you floating somewhere in-between universes makes me shudder. It's hard to comprehend what you could achieve or do with all this that's going on inside you.... Now I'm the one rambling."

"Rambling is supposed to be a pleasant stroll. Nothing wrong with that over breakfast is there?"

"I'll make another coffee," Cameron offered, stepping to the stove.

"You know, when I was floating in never-neverland, a song came into my mind, not sure why. I don't like Black Box that much ... you know, that '90s Italian electro house band. But they had a song called Fantasy, and it kept going around in my head ... as though it was being sung to me. It was echoed my plight in never-neverland in mind."

"I don't know it," said Cameron. "How does it go?"

Erin felt embarrassed, once again. This time for bringing up the mention of lyrics she knew she couldn't sing ... unless those anti-matter particles in her were shared from the singer. Even then, she figured that singing was not in her inventory of new powers. If that talent escaped her, the words didn't. They came back effortlessly, even if she précised in a self-conscious whisper that turned into a staccato rap.

“There's a part of the song that says...Fantasy has in store for you...As you glide...with the wind as you fly away...smiling...you say I am free. I am on my way.”

“That's talking not singing, you made it grime and you are not bad at it,” said Cameron. “Another skill set I am happy to discover you possess. Not just a pretty face.”

“Well,” Erin dodged the compliment even though she was relieved to hear it, “I'm not sure where I would be on my way to, but it made me think that these peculiar memories might be part of what I'd picked up from the sharing of molecules with the parallel me.”

“Maybe they, whoever they were or are, maybe it was their favourite song, and they were keeping you company in never-neverland.”

Erin found the thought of being accompanied in never-neverland both consoling and also disturbing.

## CAMERON

The next few days were taken up with searches and tracking down as much information leading up to the shooting of Jack and Michelle.

Cameron and Erin had been able to put together a profile of Securope's company directors, making links between the company's investments, its annual reports, and strategic placements of executive roles on various

company boards. How many government ministers were connected to these companies? As much information as they could find out to create a giant flowchart on the living room wall of the apartment, similar to what Jack and Dan had been putting together to investigate Erin's case.

Sleeping, searching, watching Netflix, eating, and making love, became a formula with the breaks in contact when Cameron went out for more tech (if needed) and food (when needed).

It was the morning of what Cameron counted as day 3 of their schedule, as he lazily listened with closed eyes to Erin getting up from their bed, padding her bare feet across the floor and through the open bedroom door, then oddly coming to a halt. He quietly rolled out of bed and stepped after her into the living room, to watch her as she stood naked and dreamlike in front of the flowchart. She was standing statuesque, arms crossed under her breasts, breathing deeply as if she was a sleepwalker held spellbound before the wall of documents, photographs and connecting lines, unaware of him although he was close enough to see her eyes flicking back and forth along and across the diagram's connecting lines.

"You look like you're in a trance."

His voice, he figured, ought to have made her jump. But she was still as stone.

"I saw this artwork by Nam June Paik," she said, without moving her eyes from the display board and as if already in a conversation with him. "He'd stuck audiotape from a reel-to-reel recording flat onto the gallery wall to create a linear abstract work. Next to it was a playback tape head that had been removed from the recorder and which was attached by a long cable leading to some speakers. You could physically run the

playback head over the magnetic tape on the wall to play back what was recorded on it. Of course, it played back at the speed of your arm and in the places that you put it.”

“I get it, you controlled the playback.”

“Yep, but you’d never quite do it at machine speed or in the same direction as the machine. So people would play with it, moving the tape head backwards, forwards, making loops and edits by moving their hands and arms even bodies around. Creating new sounds.”

“Hmmm, that’s cool.”

“So this is what I was thinking: we could try connecting all the words on the pages running down the connecting lines made by a soft graphite pencil. The current flows through the images creating a mini circuit diagram directly onto the wall and over the photocopies marking connections; I could be analogous to Paik’s playback head.”

“Go for it, and we can download the data, that would be great”

ERIN

Cameron instilled confidence in Erin. It gave her courage to tackle the strange things she experienced, like what she imagined happening at a sub-molecular level. The antimatter was aligning with her matter and creating audio-visual scenarios taking place inside her head, projected through her mind's eyes. She could see mind-sorting probabilities drawn from the board before her. And, there was something else happening.

“Fuck,” she gasped, “it’s the network, I’m online!”

The network coalesced in her mind the way a scary face suddenly appears at the window in a horror movie. A flash of recognition, and fright. She leapt across the room and yanked the power plug out of the wall.

Erin saw fear on Cameron's face.

"The computers woke up on their own," he shouted, "I didn't touch them."

"Yeah, I know Cameron. That was me. And I didn't touch them either. Add this to my inventory of new powers. And I'm as surprised as you are. I wasn't in there for long, but I went deep — or maybe it was the other way around. That's scary. But in any respect, I saw the tentacles of Securope reaching out, for me but for a lot else too. It's a global thing, they're planning global insecurity, chaos so they can step in to take control. A global dictatorship."

Cameron had restarted the computers, and was scrolling through the vast history files that had been generated in only the few seconds that Erin had been connected. He was also checking his mobile phone.

"I can't see anything that would suggest we've been hacked. It seems you did transmit and receive data but maybe not enough time to really spark their interest. We're going to have to be careful from now on. And on the subject of being careful ... erm," Cameron added with a wink, "... honey, much as I appreciate the display, you might want to wear some clothes next time you go online. At least the power needs to be connected for you to access the apps on this desktop, but we'll have to find a protocol to keep control of your inbuilt network capabilities with mobiles and tablets. No sign of any connection through those devices so far. I guess you followed the route you took the other day, through my desktop."

Erin quickly stepped back into the bedroom to grab a bathrobe, although something much more serious than modesty was on her mind.

“Cameron, when I was in there I got this glimpse of the consequences of human inability to deal with uncertainty. That’s how this Securope system is getting its leverage in political machines. Global security corporations are creating internment camps for everyone, but — get this — without the need for populations to leave their own homes. It’s an unecosystem. Securope is a company that creates applications professing to keep people safe and secure, and whose goal is to create the opportunity for technically deskilling vast sectors of populations. Under the cover of almost subliminal facility of use and through what the tyros now call ‘the internet of things’, we become dependent on their technologies that interlink just about every apparatus in our lives — domestic, leisure and professional — and we’re distracted from the reach of this tech by needing their constant upgrades and refits. Their operating system is their ideology. I know this sounds like a conspiracy theory but I saw the company’s unbelievably complex simulations of marketing and political as well as ecological interventions, and its aim is total control.”

Cameron drew breath between his teeth. “We really need a plan.”

“I think we need to go on the offensive, not just wait around gathering more information. We need to shake things up. Make some kind of chink in Securope’s armour. If we can upset things there, we might have a ripple effect through their corporation. Can you do a search on that cop who was Jack’s boss. Superintendent Jane Munro. I want to know if she’s bent or was coerced and manipulated. She just may be a useful contact, we might get an insight into the cover up, within the government. Look for who in the government is against what Securope are trying to do and might be an ally?”

“Hey, that’s a real job for me,” said Cameron with excited gratitude. “I’ll get cracking.”

“Do you think we’re still safe here, in this place?”

Erin had to admit, she was feeling caged in. Her new powers were still manifesting in unpredictable ways, and was growing restless with anxiety. Feeling responsible for Cameron, too, especially with his kindness and amorous company, was increasingly unnerving for her. And those emails he’d exchanged with Securope still weighed on her mind.

When Erin came back into the living room having showered and dressed Cameron flourished his hand across his computer screens.

“I’ve put three documents together, one on Jane Munro which doesn’t get us anywhere much, at least for the time being I’m afraid. But I thought I’d do a quick dossier on another person called Sebastian Fry. Heard of him? No? He’s a parliamentarian for Louth and Horncastle. Fry was speaking up about Securope and other companies trying to control data networks in the UK.” Cameron turned to one of his screens, “Checkout this speech of his. Fry says: ‘The control I worry about is more invasive than the routine data monitoring and surveillance by Google and Facebook; it is the total control of each individual. Don’t bother building robots when you can make humans behave like robots. If we feel comfortable around robots when they emulate human attributes, then surely, we need to worry more about turning humans into robots. It would no longer be them and us but us and us.’ So, what do you think?”

“Sounds like someone we could contact. Pity he’s not your local member. Is there a local member for homeless IT geniuses?”

“Don’t know about the ‘genius’ but, well, hey, I had a home ... I just didn’t want to live in it for a while. But now, with you, I’m kind of really

liking it here. Oh and by the way,” Cameron continued, “there’s also a newish online paper, a blog really, but like a one-person Huffington Post, that I spotted that might interest us. A reporter called Olivera Turner is writing about her political concerns with big companies and security tech. Points toward our enemy without actually naming them. Despite being pretty specific stuff with lots of tech jargon, it looks like her online blog, called the Daily Times Up — cute, heh? — is becoming big time popular. At least among politically progressive IT nerds. She might be another person to contact. Maybe we can feed some of the stories about Securope to her, see how she responds?”

Erin was taking all this in, nodding at Cameron’s evident sense of achievement. “We need to create some internet gossip that will lead to news articles discrediting the circumstances behind Jack and Michelle’s — and my own — deaths. Unfortunately, planting seeds of doubt like this will make family and friends relive the trauma, including my parents. But I’m sure none of our families and colleagues would have really bought the cover up about us being terrorists. But they’ve been intimidated I’d say, or at least fed stories that they can’t effectively dispute. We need that circle around Jack, Michelle and myself to feel confident about pushing back. They need to know there are others out there who are speaking up. And we can help them without making contact; because any contact at all would put them in danger.”

Although she’d kept her cool about it with Cameron over the past days, Erin was desperate to ring her family, to tell them she was ok. But that would only be possible when all this was over. And when she knew a bit more about what was happening to her, and how she had escaped the fate of Jack and Michelle. She imagined what her father would say when he first heard her voice. “I never believed you were a terrorist. You couldn’t even light a bloody firecracker. So where have you been this time? On holiday, I suppose, on some beach, drinking Piña Colada while your mum



and me worry ourselves to death over you.” No, he’d be angry, but he wouldn’t know who to vent his anger at: her, for getting mixed up in something obviously nasty; or the police, for making him think the worst of her.

“Let’s start,” she said, “with your reporter who has the blog. I’ll put something together about the night that Jack and Michelle were gunned down. An eyewitness account of the raid on the flat. It will need to sound authentic, but it also has to be — until we know we can trust her — untraceable. Until I know how to control my connectivity with the internet, I’d better stay analogue. Do you — politically progressive IT nerd that you are — happen to have a pen and paper somewhere in this apartment?”

Erin steeled herself with a strong coffee to compose herself and to compose the sequence of events that led up to the carnage in the flat. It was all going to be in the third person, referring to Erin as one of the characters. Her award at a Science Festival and a “near” shooting (she wouldn’t go into the quantum physics of that event). The subsequent police case and her kidnapping by Securope. Her escape (also with the physics redacted) to finally be rescued by Dan and Jack and taken to the safe house. Dan’s death was hard to write about, but Erin hadn’t actually witnessed it, only the signs of it in the distance.

It was a different matter telling the story of Jack and Michelle at the flat. How Erin had woken up on the sofa with the blast of the smoke bomb. Having had in some split second of reaction the recognition that those two had gone to bed together in the other room. What was that volatile mix of feelings she’d felt in that moment? The flight or fight response of self-preservation, along with anger that they had left her there alone, and — she had to admit — jealousy about them being together. But then before she could even disentangle herself from that selfishness, she’d

heard Michelle screaming in both fear and in outrage. She heard Jack shouting at the intruders, as if he could stop them in their tracks with an order. Michelle and Jack had been her guardian angels, and there they were, even as blurs in the doorway of the bedroom trying to come to her aid. None of the three of them knew then just how evil the situation was, how calculated the deception was. And Jack and Michelle wouldn't ever know, because at the first sign of them being in the room the bullets started to fly.

There were no guns in the apartment, no bomb-making facilities, no terrorist propaganda. There was not any misunderstanding about what was going down. It was all cooked up. Jack and Michelle were murdered violently as they had stepped out of the bedroom, murdered by company mercenaries, sanctioned by a ruthless government. These same mercenaries most probably murdered Dan back at the safehouse. Dan's unselfish action had given Jack and Michelle time to help Erin escape the clutches of Securope. But it had been a pointless sacrifice. That's what galled Erin so much. The bad guys won in the end.

Although, it wasn't the end, was it? Erin couldn't mention the shots fired at her, which would have gouged strafe marks across the wall as she dematerialised. She cautiously skipped over that. That mystery of her escape would have to wait, wait on the bait being taken by internet bloggers. Just as she had to leave out the incident at the Science Festival that started this whole story going by turning her world on its head. She turned instead to write about Securope, focusing on the original director of Securope stupidity reporting a break-in that must have been recorded by the police. Erin went into as much trackable detail as she could without mentioning herself as the author. She signed it with the pseudonym of Kid Galloway.

Cameron read it through, squirming at times. He put the paper down on the desk and looked into her eyes.

“That’s a hell of a story, Erin. You’re a good writer. But I hope you don’t have to write anything as wrenching as that again. If Olivera publishes it, it will put the cat among the pigeons. It will be a bomb. That should start some questions being asked.”

“How will we get it to her? I’m worried about leaving any markers on it if I send it.”

“I’ll type it into a peripheral, no sync with any other device and strip any embedded code in the document. Then, I’ll go old school, find an internet café, set up a dummy email account — there still are a few internet cafés around, especially in East London I reckon. I used to come across the odd one when I was on the road as well. Could be quite a nostalgic experience, if I can remember how to use them.”

“How will we know if she gets it and will respond to it? I don’t want anything trackable back to here. Sorry I’m just getting agitated.”

“Well, she’ll probably email back to the dummy account, although I’m sure she’ll realise what it is. It’s safer for us to check the blog occasionally. Look, I think the story is credible because, well I’ve got you in front of me, but she’ll get this from out of thin air from Kid Galloway, and in that respect it may as well be from an alien in outer space. But as I say, it’s got convincing detail and a tight, I’d say provable, narrative so I reckon it will prompt her to do some investigative work — that’s her style by the look of it. I’ll go to different internet cafés to check in to the email, but I don’t want to do that often. So, we probably won’t know what she’ll do when she gets it; we’ll just have to wait. And see. Enough

people follow her Daily Times Up blog for me, when I take a look, to disappear into the herd. The herd of nerds. Don't worry."

CAMERON

The next few days followed the routine of more online research, filling up the apartment walls with more information. The two of them were building a formidable profile of what Erin was calling a company with "a complete contempt for humanity."

"Maybe," Cameron cautiously proposed, "this is less than contempt as it's a new form of technological Darwinism."

"Are you saying they're no more evil than ... what ... than natural selection?"

The last thing Cameron wanted was an argument with Erin, especially not about such an existential issue as their allied hatred for Securope and what it had done to her and her friends.

"I'm not giving them any excuse," he continued, "just trying to understand their modus operandi — and understand what's at stake here. Look at it this way. Securope are part of a media landscape of surveillance capitalism that's violently competitive. Eat or be eaten. It's a marketplace and they're selling a product to make a profit. What's their product? Security. But that "security" requires the sort of tactics that you and your friends have suffered from. It's not peace and love and chasing rainbows to let people flourish, it's assault rifles and grenades used to respond to any implication of threat. And what's the strategy to make their product marketable and make a profit? Not so much the guns, as they make a lot of noise and draw attention to the brute force. No, it's also softly softly catchy monkey. The stealth technology of surveillance,

of getting into people's private domains to control by influence. And, from their vantage, the less conscious we are of that influence the better. From the corporate history, we've looked at, Securope has devoured one after another firm by amalgamation and takeover. They're not a monopoly yet, but they're still stuck in their own financial and technological ecosystem. Every other player in that game is trying to get that margin of innovation to make their product more relevant than others. Then you turn up. A game changer, and Securope is the company that notices you and knows that you've cracked the ecosystem wide open. They have to own you or remove you. It's not just a matter of competitive edge but of their survival in a changed ecology."

Cameron had been idly checking notifications on his desktop and suddenly jumped in alarm.

"Whoa, Erin, look what just made the headline on the latest issue of Daily Times Up."

Erin leaned over his shoulder to look at the monitor gasping in delight. It named Securope as an accomplice in the raid on the London flat. Cameron quickly scanned the story beneath.

"She's identified your text as a source, as information she's received and quoted extensively from it. Wow. OK, she's treating it as a journalist in that world would – we expected that. It's not opinion but reporting. And she's loaded some of her own investigation into it, so I reckon she's on our side. We might need to acknowledge to her that we've seen it and approved of it. That'll mean a trip to another internet café. But this is good. We have ignition, and lift off."

It was time for a bit of a stock take, he reasoned to himself. Cameron had gone along with this adventure in a spirit of enthusiasm, the source for

which was actually unclear to him. He had initially thought that his professional and personal circumstances, alongside the serendipitous event of finding Erin in the field, made it fortuitous to assist her in what he understood was a quest. And a romantically old-school sort of quest at that: good against evil, defeating the mighty hordes that were about to pour down from the dark castle and wreak havoc. But this alone was not a strong enough reason for changing his whole life around, and he knew deep down there was something else. That he was smitten with Erin. But he was unsure how she felt about him. For Cameron, this was part of his own pathology. Women always held a particular power for him that was as elusive as it was unmistakable. They had the power to accept him or dismiss him. He thought of this not just as the possibility of mutual attraction or repulsion, of a decisive moment of love or disdain, but as a maddening circularity of not knowing. He desired to be desired, and it was impossible to step outside of this loop. He knew that nothing could really happen between him and Erin until this quest was over. This quest wasn't what he needed to do, it was more what he chose to do. And that was to support Erin without any expectations. Maybe, he thought, this might be close to love, overcoming his desire to be desired. Like giving a gift freely without any ties.

Cameron had seen Erin change, becoming more self-confident and less dependent on him. That suited what he also had come to know about her character. He couldn't help picturing this in the sort of scientific language she used: of all the neurons firing in different parts of the brain, rerouting signals, thinking of how the antimatter inside her was a significant part of her transformation. But it was worrying what the eventual outcome might be for her ... and, consequently, for him and his bond with her. This was the first time he felt that he had adopted a cause at all. He was happy with this choice; now, he had to put himself and his skills on the line.

“I think it’s time for us to go on a journey,” he announced. “No, not just to an internet café. Remember the old email from Securope offering me a job? Well, contacted them, asking if there was any casual work to fill in between my other assignments. I aimed the request at the labs in Cheltenham, not the executive suite in London.”

“And you were going to tell me this ... when?”

“Right about now,” Cameron said looking at his watch.

“Go up to Cheltenham. For real?” Erin sounded angry, or at least anxious, perhaps due to the implied danger for both of them. “When did this suddenly spring into mind, and why do you want to do that?”

“Actually, you kind of suggested it. You’re feelings cornered here, and you’ve been saying that we should be pro-active. If that article in Daily Times Up has had the effect we wanted, and shaken anyone up at Securope, that would be a good place to have a spy or mole. I could do that. In fact,” he slowly added, “I’ve got an interview up there in two days’ time.”

Erin was clearly flummoxed by this, but after a moment’s silence surprised Cameron with a light-hearted distraction. “Seriously, you a mole? Well, I guess that makes me a mole’s moll.”

“No,” Cameron felt relieved at Erin’s joke, “you will be meeting with Jane Munro, you seemed to feel we could trust her.”

“There’s no evidence of her complicity with Securope, sure. But I don’t think I can use this antimatter thing to read minds. Not hers yet anyway.”

“You seem to be able to read mine.”

“Your mind is an open book, and even a person who couldn’t read minds could read your mind.”

“Only when I’m looking at you, I’ll admit I can’t hide anything. Ok, well, what do you think about a nice couple of days away from all this work, work, work? I’ll pick up the rental car, and it’s a two hour drive on the M40. Overnight bags in the boot, and I’ve already sussed out a Travelodge, nothing special, cheap and clean on the outskirts of town. Not likely to draw attention to us. It’s in my name, as Securope would expect when they do that inevitable surveillance check on me.”

“Speaking of surveillance,” said Erin, “if I’m to meet with Munro, we have to make sure she’s on her own and it has to be somewhere without surveillance cameras.”

“Not an easy job, I confess,” Cameron replied, “but with some modified anti-surveillance software, I’ve come up with a park in a small suburb of Cheltenham. Fortunately, nowhere near your parents’ home. The deal is of course that she arrives alone, and on time for the meeting so that I can scout about and watch from the car to make sure that she hasn’t arranged to be followed. She’ll no doubt be expecting someone will be looking out for you. If she complies with the terms, that on its own will be a test of Munro’s reliability. But we need a quick getaway if she fails us. Hopefully not. We could use someone in the police we can trust.”

ERIN

Jane Munro had sounded shocked by Erin’s phone call. But not, reasoned Erin, by a voice from beyond the grave — Munro would have known that Erin’s body had not been found in the debris of the flat. It sounded to Erin more like Munro was shocked at the temerity of Erin to call her, to come



out of wherever she had been so effectively hiding for several months. To Erin's surprise, and her unease, Munro had agreed to the meeting and to its strategically short term arrangement and conditions.

And there she was, noted Erin. Alone on the bench as requested. Erin looked around to confirm what Cameron had told her as she left the car: there was no sign of anyone lurking or even casually strolling in the park. No one in any parked car nearby. Of course, Munro might be carrying a wire. She would have had enough time to arrange that. But that didn't matter. All the better if she was. Nothing Erin was going to say could incriminate her.

Erin boldly stepped up toward Munro, slipping the hood of her sweatshirt off as she sat down next to the policewoman.

"I only met you once, at the station with Jack," began Munro, eyeing Erin. "I remember a mass of flaming red hair. Shame to see it go, but I understand why. You still look good with the short hair and new colour."

Erin wasn't swayed by the superficial female-friendly compliment. Erin was now so used to her new look and its maintenance that she had almost forgotten her former appearance. Munro's remark was clearly meant to indicate she knew who she was talking to, and was aware of the new guise.

"I am glad to see you alive," Munro continued. "So, tell me what the hell happened in that flat?"

"Exactly what was written in the article. I would have figured you'd read it, or you wouldn't be here."

"I saw it, yes. Who's Kid Gallahad?"

Erin pointed her thumb at herself.

“I was hoping we may have had another witness, other than the mysterious Erin who vanishes without a trace from the scene of a crime.”

“You’ll have to take my word for it. I wanted to start drawing attention to what Securope did to Dan, Michelle and Jack. And I know it’s like poking a stick into a nest of vipers. So, Superintendent, if I’m going to get the truth of this out, I’ll need your help—can I trust you?”

“I think that question goes two-way, don’t you? Are you recording this conversation?”

“No, though I have a signal scanner and a walkie talkie if anything goes wrong. Are you recording this?”

“So you have a ... let’s say you have a partner in this venture? I expected that. And they’re in the vicinity?”

“Seconds away, if I need them.”

“You won’t, and no I’m not recording us. I want to say some things that are ... private. I never believed the stories that came out about Jack. He’s no more a terrorist than I am. I threw him into the deep-end when I gave him your case, but I never thought the case would have turned out to be as big as it has. So, what do you need me for? What are you planning to do?”

“Nothing at present I just need to know that there’s someone in an official position I can trust.”

“Why do Securope want you so badly, so much they’d do all this?”

“Something happened to me when I was shot, in the Science Fair tent, similar to being contaminated by radiation. I’m not sure how much Jack told you, so you’re probably not going to believe this. It’s a kind of radiation from a parallel universe. Jack did believe me, in the end. So did Dan and Michelle. And they were killed for it. Or for trying to stop Securope getting their hands on me. They want what I seem to have been given — I don’t know why I was gifted this, it might have just been circumstances, being in the right place and the right time. Although for me, it was all wrong. But I have these ... powers, the nature and extent of which can be pretty scary and which I’m still trying to understand. And Securope is very keen to understand that too. They seem to think I can manipulate time, even though they’re the ones that have been one step ahead of us — Dan, Jack, Michelle and me — most of the time.”

“I remember Jack coming up with a fantastic story about you having absorbed or encountered antimatter in your body, and this was fuelling your ability to get out of difficult situations. Is that how you escaped from the flat that night?”

“Yes, I didn’t know how I did it, but I transported myself to another plane between matter and antimatter a split second before the bullets came raining in on me. I saved myself, but didn’t know how to do anything to save Jack and Michelle. I slipped into some sort of transitory zone between this universe and the other. It was like floating in a dream that lasted nearly three months.”

“OK,” Munro’s voice was reassuringly calm and convincing, “Securope killed my two officers and your academic friend while trying to get hold of you. Presumably for some godawful murky research experiments they had in mind.”

Erin shivered and flinched at the memory of this.

“And now you’re back,” continued Munro. “Do you think going after Securope is worth it? You’ve seen what they’re capable of, and I am not sure what I can do. You’re still seen as some kind of terrorist and wanted in connection with Dan's death. Obviously, it’s a setup, but they have the power to persuade government and the media that what they’re doing is sorting out terrorism and making everyone more secure.”

“That’s exactly why I am here: to clear up the whole mess and get some justice for them and their families. We need you to be around to help. We can't trust anyone; we’re banking on you.”

“I will do what I can, but there are powers at work that are bigger than I can handle.”

“I know this sounds fanciful, but I think what Securope and its subsidiaries are really interested in is a form of controlling time backwards as well as forwards. They think that by altering past events they can develop new scenarios to adjust the present. It’s like with any decision. If you delay your choice, you can make alternative choices. Now imagine if you could connect clusters of actions with a computer simulation, make choices in the short term, and see the possible as well as probable outcomes of those choices. Then be able to go back in time and change your mind. That is what happened to me, even if I didn’t realise at the time. I was shot and then became un-shot as though for me, time travelled in the opposite direction. The bullet went in but then came back without leaving a trace. Securope want to study me to see how it happened, and to do so they want to find the part in my being that authorised this reverse engineering.”

“Right, I see why Jack was sounding a bit looney to me. This stuff is above my paygrade.”

“Securope don’t really understand the time manipulation any more than I do. It just happened to me, and I still can’t control that. But what I can do and control now is more interesting and to Securope more threatening. I think they were starting to work it out. As am I. But one thing for certain: this stuff is going to broaden your job description in the future.”

“I may not grasp the physics, but I do know a villain when I see one. Securope fits the bill. So here is a special number you can ring me on anytime. Cheltenham may be the worst to place for you to be in. Especially with your friends and family here. Stay safe.”

“I want justice, not safety.”

“We’ll do our best to have both.”

CAMERON

“Fuck.”

Cameron let the word slowly drawl out. The car felt like a cocoon. The windscreen creates a strange zone of stillness in front. There’s no physical sensation of the world outside, no wind in your face, your feet don’t move. It seems your watch is slowing down, getting lethargic or distended by waiting. Waiting and watching out the windscreen for any signs of danger. It surprisingly becomes boring, but even so he felt that Erin was taking too long to come back. They were both too vulnerable to be in the open for this long.

“Time to leave,” he muttered to himself.

Erin was suddenly swinging the passenger door open. “Let’s move.”

“Fuck,” he jumped, this time the word came out in a blurt. “Are you reading my mind again?”

He took a circuitous route around the town to get back to the Travelodge, getting debriefed on the meeting with Munro.

“OK, so now the next move,” said Cameron. “We need to know more about Securope's connections, so I think a visit from the great Cameron could go down really well. We need to put some trojans in the system.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Interview’s today, I’ve got to get attention and show how keen I am.”

“And you're going looking like that?”

“Absolutely, my dress sense shows a nerdy disrespect for appearance. Sweatshirt, jeans and runners. It’s a uniform. What is it called, normcore? You’re so hooked into the computer nothing else really matters except doing the job.”

“Best of luck, let me know if you get past the guard.”

"Ye of little faith. While I am away why don't you practice with your networking skills with the gear in the room. We need a training camp for you so you can hone your skills. And maybe we need a cool superhero name for you. Antimatter woman? Immersion woman?"

“Ooof, they sound like cleaning products.”

“Well, the latest product lines in that field have got atoms and quantum forces working as cleaning agents! Use phosphors to make the washing look white. I will see you later. Concentrate on yourself while I'm gone. You need more time to see how you're coming to terms with your contamination.”

“Don't say that. It sounds like a disease.”

“Sorry, just trying to make your condition more out in the open; I know it's deeply troubling you.”

"It makes me a freak.”

Cameron leaned over towards Erin and put his arms wide.

“I will hug you when you get back from your job interview only if you are still alive,” said Erin with both her hands on his chest, holding him back.

“I get it. No backhanded remarks about your upgrade. Promise. Hey, hubby's going off to work. Goodbye kiss?”

She dropped her hands and leaned forward into him. The kiss, thought Cameron, lasted a long time. He hoped it was just to mark a brief parting.

ERIN

Erin was glad of the space. She really liked Cameron but needed more time to compute what the ongoing condition was taking place inside her.

She had to prepare herself for what she could achieve if she lived with this antimatter as a friend and not a sickness.

Erin felt she had been too touchy with Cameron. She didn't know what had come over her. He was being so kind, risking everything for her. And now she felt guilty, which made her angry with him. There'd been a crazy moment when she wanted him to say to her, go to hell, you're in this by yourself; that she would have to go it alone. That was a recoil from another feeling: she realised that she didn't want the responsibility of Cameron on her conscience. The thought of him being hurt in any way was too painful for her — she had seen what Securope were capable of. But the opposite thought of him not being here with her was also distressing. Caught in this binary, she tried to do what he'd suggested. Train her skills, focusing on what the matter and antimatter were up to now.

How was this small amount of antimatter surviving in her system? Her matter should have annihilated it. She recalled the postulation of a Posner cluster that could contain atoms in a sort of autonomous space that had a protective wall around them. It was thought that these Posner clusters could enable the human brain to act like a quantum computer, working by expanding the coherence of phosphorous atoms, with the ability to operate in the noisy environment of the human brain. This could be a possible answer to how antimatter could not only exist within her but how it could thrive.

Erin sat on the bed in front of the wardrobe mirror, and stared at herself as if in a trance, hoping this was a way to trigger some metaphysical activity. Giving the antimatter a chance to be heard over the noise of her own matter, a strange sort of truce where she volunteers her own perceived material awareness to the antimatter. Two primary elements



born from the beginning of time coexisting in one person, she was becoming a child of a contemporary universe.

Erin felt she was certainly becoming part of the bed she sat on. She could feel part of herself dissolving, flowing out like invisible infinitely small molecular particles; dust driven by her desire into a minute invisible particle swarm. Boundaryless, the particles swarmed from Erin, distributed in the physical world around her. She tried to control the speed and direction of the swarm. Focusing on something banal, mundane but personal, like her hairbrush or his shaver. Becoming one with these objects, she sensed that a patina of his ownership had penetrated throughout the shaver. It had a history of him as well as its own embedded in its molecular structure. She noticed that her hairbrush had some foreign DNA in it, foreign hairs. Bloody Cameron, he's borrowed it! As the clarity of her comprehension developed around her the air itself took on characteristics of emotions, becoming thicker, with invisible forces spreading chaotically in space.

Erin's molecules drifted in the swarm, picking up individual messages and meanings. She was directing a swarm of molecular-like drones subject to her will, picking up the vibrations of the material, audio and visual object personal archives. She found she could translate these signals creating multiple views of the Travelodge room. She directed her drone of molecular slaves out through the glass window. She was in the driver's seat of this incredible multiscreen computer game happening in her mind, projected on the back of her retina. An augmented reality where she dwelled in both realities at the same time. Erin's guided swarm went to the carpark, moving from one car to another, picking up information stored within the materiality of the seats, dashboard, windows satellite navigation. Every oscillation, vibration and pattern had something to say. The materiality of the car was an atomic archive of all the energies bombarded and stored in its materiality. People on their cell phones, the

log of calls, the conversations, all stored to be decoded from the molecules themselves. One car took her interest as she drew her molecular swarm's attention to it, drawing down as much information as she could. She was sure the car was the site of an abduction recently taken place. A girl's voice pleading to be released, screams coming from all interior trimmings. Erin tapped into the car's GPS finding out where the car had been, her adrenalin was pumping, she was making mental notes of the salient facts.

CAMERON

Cameron burst through the door shouting, "Honey I'm home! And you are looking at the next new employee for Securope. Shit, sorry you are into something."

"You're back so quickly."

"It's been over three hours."

"Holy shite, is it that long? Cameron, you have to listen to me. I need to explain everything that had happened to me since you left. I created a molecular swarm that allowed me to be connected to all the matter around me. I could focus my attention on a specific object, but the most significant thing that I could download information from matter itself, how matter worked as an archive of the world recording all the sub-molecular waves that hit it. Drawing in the energy and transcribing it to make it part of material history."

"That's so incredible, you're saying that when photons hit an object their energy remains for ever?"

“Something like that, when a photon strikes an object, it absorbs the energy wave and leaves a trace or imprint in the deep structure of the object. One car had such horrific incriminating information as part of its materiality, I have to contact Jane Munro about it straight away.”

Cameron watched as she sent a text message to Munro with the car make, licence plate and details of two males who had abducted a young girl, adding their GPS coordinates.

“That’s fucking incredible. And you extracted from the materiality of the car? But how can you prove that? Wouldn’t the police want more evidence than ... ”

“Absolutely, but if I didn’t do something about it I’d never be able to forgive myself.”

“How much of this secret world of crime are you going to end up texting to the police? It’s an incredible power to have, but it could become a curse.”

“Yes, I see. I’ll do it sparingly. It might get me a job however. Speaking of which, tell me what happened to you.”

“I got the job!”

“What? Are they insane?” she laughed. “No, congratulations, you did it.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. But I’ve got to remind myself that I’m being employed as a trojan horse, a saboteur, as a secret agent. Hey, have you been sitting there the whole time since I left?”

“Totally, but tell me all about the interview.”

“Well, I showed them some of the code I’d written,” Cameron began with a tone of professional pride in his voice, “which proved my skill set to them. But I was grilled about what I had been doing these past few years, rejecting the rat race after having an epiphany of sorts, and why I wanted to come back into the field. Well, you know that sort of crowd, they love a prodigal son returning from a futile attempt at an alternative lifestyle — coming back in from the cold. It confirms their own belief in the system; I showed them how I could hack into systems and put up a code screen so I could never be seen by them. Now, this piece of code impressed them. I showed them how I could put it on one of their systems, and they would not see my presence.”

“Wasn’t that a bit risky?”

“No risk, no gain. They’re arrogant knobs who didn’t believe I could do that, so they stupidly let me install the code line to prove them wrong. When they tried to find me in the system, they couldn’t see me; they freaked and offered me a job on the spot. You know, the best way to get a security job with a company to show them how to hack their own security. I signed a agreement as a freelancer. Of course, they wanted rights to the code to prevent them from being hacked. In other words, they were paying me off and, in turn, getting their hands on my code. But they don’t know there’s an invisible substratum of the code in their that still gives me access. So, now we have eyes and ears in their system, and we don’t have to endanger you.”

“I thought you said you gave them the code.”

“I used the code as a bargaining chip to get in, but not all of it. There are screens behind screens if you know what I mean.”

Erin looked impressed, “The old Trojan Horse. I’m following you.”

“We still have to be careful and not access too many things at once, so give me your top wishlist.”

“Let's start with any references to me. We need a starting point within Securope.”

“Ok, I will see what I can do, slowly, slowly, wins the race”

Cameron watched Erin pacing up and down, restlessly breathing in and out in short bursts. He knew she was worried about the girl’s ability to control her impatience.

“I was wondering,” she said, “about all the times when I should have acted with patience, not overreacted to a situation, making things worse for myself. But, on the other hand, there are those times when I had waited patiently for something to happen, which never did.”

“Patience is a virtue.”

“Ok, I will wait.”

“But, then, he or she who hesitates is lost. I’m glad you texted Munro about that what happened in that car.”

ERIN

Erin was lying on the bed in the small Travelodge room, feeling like a caged animal sensing an impending storm. Out there in the world, the cogs of intrigue and conspiracy and their own sabotage of it were starting to turn. Once it got in gear it would be unstoppable. She would have to

stay on top of all these things, and she knew this was not going to be easy. Erin was hoping Cameron who had been hunched over the computer at night, burrowing into the Securope data banks that he worked around by day, could find some proof, a who's who of those really in this game. Some email, some reference to what is actually going down.

Impatiently Erin took control of the situation, "We'll wait till after the weekend, but I feel that we need to break into Securope to be able to find what we are looking for."

"Do we know what we are looking for?"

"I feel that if I am in their lab or office, something will catch my attention. You know I can be part of the fabric of that building."

Cameron had admitted that over the weekend the computer searches had not born the rewards they were looking for about Jack and Michelle. But they had tracked through a vast amount of data linking Securope's activities to covert actions of political repression throughout the world, enough data for a dump through a channel like WikiLeaks to get it into the public domain. But then, Erin had reminded Cameron, of what happened to Edward Snowden. She could see the big picture, for sure, but Erin wanted the particulars dealt with too: and they were justice for Jack, Dan and Michelle.

"Let's just stay focused on the victims we know," said Erin. "This other stuff is too big for us, but maybe by finding out about Securope's involvement and their interest in me, maybe that will be a tiny crack in their dam wall which could start a flood. When a small stone is dropped in a pond the ripples travel to all the banks."

"But this is bigger than a pond, honey," Cameron grinned.

“OK, well think of what we’re doing as being like the butterfly flapping its wings in South America.”

“And the hurricane in North America, OK, I got it.”

“Well, thank God! No more need for clichéd analogies.”

Erin threw her pillow at him and the war commenced. After a wrestle, and with the clothes they had left on in disarray, they both collapsed into the tangle of bedsheets, breathless and sweaty.

CAMERON

Cameron had purchased some black tracksuits from Target with some Go pro cameras. Having done two full days only at Securope he had obtained as much information about the security in the building as he could.

It was Tuesday evening at the Travelodge, the night they had planned to break in, and Cameron could tell Erin’s stress levels were growing. There was almost an audible buzz in the room, as if the building was vibrating with her tension. They pulled on their tracksuits.

“We either look like a keep fit jogging obsessed married couple or and an anti-surveillance street gang,” said Erin.

“What a difference a hood makes,” joked Cameron, pulling the hood up and then dropping it back, “gang member ... respectable fitness hound.”

But nothing could really break the mood of tense anticipation. The whole drive to the spot where Jack and Dan had first found Erin, the night she had escaped from the first abduction by Securope, was cloaked in morbid

silence and in darkness. As they pulled up to the side of the road, Erin offered one remark.

“I hope Munro saves that girl whose cries I felt in that car, back near the hotel.”

“Me too,” Cameron answered, knowing how feeble it sounded. He realised if she felt the clamour of what happened in the car back there, she probably was tuning in to her own experience here, several months ago. You wouldn’t need superpowers to feel that.

He found the blind spot he’d programmed in the fence’s surveillance, and they were over the fence and into the building without any problem using Cameron’s card.

“They’ll get the log of this entry tomorrow, so I guess this will have been my shortest job ever.”

“You’ll get a better one,” Erin whispered as they moved carefully through the building, with Cameron directing them toward the office marked “Director”. They froze as a torch light flashed in the dimly lit corridor. There was a familiar clunk and clatter of change and a can of some sugar-soaked soft drink hitting the tray. The torch disappeared but the moment left Cameron with a racing heartbeat. It must have affected Erin too, she involuntarily grabbed his hand to steady herself, releasing her grip as she entered the director’s office.

“OK, look and learn, no time to waste,” she said to herself.

Cameron was puzzled by this weird display of bravado in a sort of motto on Erin’s part. It was meant to reassure him, probably. As was the next thing she did. Sit on the director’s desk, her hand gripping the edges.



Cameron couldn't help but feel like a schoolboy breaking into the headmaster's office, just to defy and defile it. But they had more important and dangerous things facing them than a teacher's reprimand.

"This is Jim Falons old desk," said Erin, "I'm going into the swarm now, you'll have to shake me out of it if you hear anyone coming, OK?"

He couldn't notice anything different about her, other than her stillness and slow breathing, as if she was doing a yoga session. She was staring down and tilting her head as if looking for something next to her on the desk, though he was sure she wasn't using her eyes. Then she shuddered.

"Oh god," she murmured, "I didn't want to know that ... he's had sex on this. Urrgh. Yikes, that many times?"

Trying to hold back a flicker in his mouth that oscillated between a smile and a grimace, Cameron stared at the wooden desk with a newly different sense of its dimensions and significance of the careful placement of objects on it. He was unsure how to judge what he was imagining.

"Remember," Erin said toward Cameron without seeming to interrupt her trance, "I can read your mind."

She straightened up and then turned slightly, leaning toward to hard-drive stack beside the desk. Cameron mused that these gestures for Erin must be unconscious if cute anachronisms, or maybe were a triggering ritual. If she could infiltrate a company's internet presence by her seemingly telepathic powers she hardly needs to look directly a hard-drive, or sit on the director's desk to record the events of his sex life on it. But her dumpster dive into Securopes hard-drive or cloud back up, wherever she was now, seemed not to be as easy.

“Difficult. Can’t focus my mind on any one particular thought,” she muttered with evident frustration. “It’s like swimming in a sea of potential connections—synapses continually making connections. My brain can’t create a hierarchy. Too many narratives.”

She shook her head, as trying to flick water off her hair.

“The problems I wanted to ask ... system thinking helps structure the right sorting formula ... become the fluid content of the search ... sorting based on multiple narratives happening ... at the same time.”

It was gibberish to Cameron, but he could tell Erin was trying to find her way through what to him was an unimaginable array of data, cross-referenced names, meetings, locations. Suddenly she became rigid, almost like a hunting dog pointing at the prey.

“Hmmm,” she said with a sinister tone with her eyes closed but all the signs to Cameron of her reading something at speed, “I just found Jim Falcon. That idiot was in charge when I was kidnapped from home. Hah. Here’s a file referring to his incompetence. That’s when Carmichael will take over. A six-figure amount to locate and deliver me to the labs .... Some speculation on what I am and how to appropriate and exploit my capabilities .... Bastard! Carmichael recommends terminating Jack and Michelle. ‘Eliminate the problem,’ it says. Use a Securope private security unit acting under contract to the government. I’m to be shipped overseas to a subsidiary research facility in Leuven and taken apart molecule by molecule. Alive or dead.”

“Someone’s coming!”

Cameron took her by the shoulders. She slid off the desk and they quickly stepped into the hallway, closing the door. A cluster of torch lights

immediately swung toward them, like headlights aimed at an animal that had been trying to cross a dark country road. And like an animal they were momentarily blinded and struck rigid, gazing at three silhouettes dimly profiled by the bounce of the torchlight off the hallway's white walls.

“Well, well,” a voice in the darkness from the shadowy shape in the middle sounded hostile but not taken by surprise, “this looks like our new employee, if I'm not mistaken, very keen to work back late. Or have you been out jogging with the missus and lost your way?”

“Sorry, I can't see you,” Cameron answered, pointlessly putting his hand above his eyes as if to block out sunlight and hearing his own voice turn into that same hopeless whimper he'd heard when caught by his headmaster, “is that Mr Carmichael? As a matter of fact, we were jogging and I remembered I'd left something at work. You don't mind me coming in after hours ... oh this is my girlfriend.”

“You left something in the office?”

“I was showing her my new workplace.” It was hopeless, thought Cameron, hopeless.

“You usually go jogging all the way out here? At night?”

“I like the view,” answered Cameron, giving it up.

“Oh shut the fuck up! Do you think we trusted you when you came to our office? You're a good coder but too good to just walk in off the street. I was expecting a visit from you after you rigged a blindspot in the perimeter surveillance today.”

“Nice to know my work skills are appreciated.”

Even though he couldn't properly see them behind the flare of torches, Cameron felt Carmichael's eyes burning into him with an intimidating ruthlessness.

“Stop trying to be a smart-arse. You and your girlfriend are going to have to face some questions, a bit tougher than mine just now. These guys with me are going to ask those questions. They'll make sure you answer.”

“This may not appear to be the best moment to raise a matter of sexual politics,” Erin intervened with astonishing venom, “but why the fuck do men like you always address the man when there's a woman standing next to him? Do you think I'm some sort of dumb accessory going along for the ride out of devotion? If you're gonna make threats then you can have the courtesy to make them to me as well!”

Cameron couldn't believe his ears. At a time like this? Maybe, he hoped, it was a ploy to throw Carmichael off.

“By all means,” answered Carmichael, with a move of his hand toward one of the hulking dark shapes standing nearby. That shadowy figure loomed forward, focussing his torch onto Erin. A big bastard, thought Cameron. “You're the prize after all,” added Carmichael, and Cameron realised Securope was once again one step ahead. “You think I didn't recognise you?”

On Carmichael's prompt, the security guard grabbed at Erin. She snapped back in rage, “Don't you touch me.”

“Oh, fighter,” the guard chuckled, “not scared ya'll lose ya jewellery?”

“Leave her alone, you bastard!” Cameron shouted, just as a fist from another direction hit him hard in the stomach, and he felt a blow to back of his knees. He fell to the floor, on all fours, winded as the stabbing pain spread up through his throat and clamping his breath in a vice. He could hear a chorus of laughter around him, and a booted foot slammed into the side of his head, knocking him face down into a sprawl across the floor. Through the ringing in his ears he heard Carmichael’s muffled but snide voice.

“As for you, young lady, I really didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to come back here. To the scene of the crime.”

“You’re the fucking criminal!”

Cameron heard the sound of hand smacking across a face, not a punch but an open hand and delivered with what must have been eye-popping force. His neck felt like jelly and he couldn’t look up but knew from her soft groan that it had been Erin on the receiving end. Carmichael voice leaked in through the buzz in Cameron’s ears.

“I wasn’t here on your last visit. But if I had been I would have handled a tough little bitch like you the way you should be treated. A bit of tenderising before cooking.”

Cameron heard another smack across a face. From the sound of the blow, he imagined the mountainous guard’s hand must have been the size of Erin’s head. There’d be a lot of brute muscle behind that hand as well. He felt pathetic, unable to catch his breath, unable to focus his eyes, unable to lift himself up from the prone position he was in. But suddenly there was another sound, louder and more piercing than the tinnitus-like clanging in his ears. And he was lying in a pool of something. At first he

thought it might be his own blood, but it was cold, and he could feel it like tiny pellets on his back and in his hair, drenching him.

The fire alarm had gone off with a recurrent, sickening sinusoidal scream. The sprinkler system was disgorging a torrent of water into the hallway. Cameron could make out a pale glimmer of a red light, like a car's brake light glinting off the water in a rainstorm at night. Somehow he managed to register this would have been emergency lighting.

“What the fuck is this?” Cameron heard the voice of one of the guards in shock.

“Ignore it,” shouted Carmichael just barely over the clamour, “it's one of her tricks. Get hold of her!”

“Where the fuck did she go?” Another guard bellowed in dismay, before groaning in an outburst of pain.

“Here she ...” barked the other guard, but he was cut off by a sound like an electrical crackle and boom. Cameron heard a massive body thud to the floor. And then a pair of hands were under his arms, lifting him up to his knees. He caught his breath, lurching into an embrace for a moment, enough to realise Erin had hold of him. Explosive sparks were ripping the rainstorm apart like a strobe flashing into the mosh-pit in front of an ultra-heavy metal band. He felt as though his ears were bleeding, unsure if the sensation could be sweat or water. He put all his strength into forcing himself up from kneeling, rocking Erin slightly, but managing to get stable. Around him the hallway looked molten, as if walls and floor were vibrating and turning into a sort of hellish swamp. He could make out two whale-like bodies motionless, a third one crawling like an injured insect.

Erin gave the prompt with a twist of her torso to indicate which way Cameron should turn. She nudged him into a pace so they could move forward. He felt like he was in a three-legged race from childhood, but any sense of a game was quickly overtaken by the urgency to escape the scene. They got out under a dimly flickering exit sign.

“The files?” Cameron managed to croak out the desperate question into Erin’s ear.

“Already emailed them to our server.”

ERIN

Erin woke early, but didn’t want to move from the bed or from Cameron’s enveloping arms. She lay listening to his quiet sleepy breathing, which seemed to wrap her in a warmth that reminded her of staying under a doona as a child, that touch of something illicit in hiding from the dull and dreary routines of the waking world, staying in the lingering aftermath of a vaguely remembered dream. She floated through the drive back to motel and crawled into bed with Cameron, and then surged with that carnal imperative to feel him inside her, to feel like just a body coupled in urgent insistent sensuality with another body. To get lost, submerged, locked away. But then her jaw started to ache again, as it had last night, from that thug’s blow that was like being hit side on by a leg of ham. A blow that almost took her head off and make her ears ring with a stinging electronic drone. The sound came in long vibrating pulses, rushing in and then ebbing out, the way waves break on shore. It came and went persistently, as if it was shaking her awake.

She opened her eyes, rolled out of Cameron’s now listless embrace and without thinking reached over for her mobile that was buzzing and rattling on the bedside table.

“Erin,” said a female voice on the line, “there’s too much to explain and no time to do it in. It’s Dan here ...”

“What,” Erin was still partly enveloped in her dream of being submerged in a sexual clinch, but this voice hit her with a shock greater than that gorilla’s fist in the Securope hallway. It was a voice from the grave. “What ... the fuck? Dan? You’re dead.”

“Greatly exaggerated, as the saying goes. Look, I’d love to chat but ...”

“But you’re fucking dead!” Erin heard Cameron stir and looked back at him to see his eyes open in alarm.

“Evidently, I’m not. No, I managed to elude that fate. It’s going to take time we don’t have to tell you how. Just believe me, Securope thinks I’m dusted but I’m around and on your case. I’ve been working undercover, well more like incognito, with the Super, trailing Securope since the London shoot out.”

“For fuck’s sake...”

“Erin, listen, Carmichael knows where you are. You must get out quickly. Get on the road now.”

“But ... how do you know he knows?” Erin was still trying to process this resurrection of Dan, but the urgency and impatience in Dan’s voice was a reality bite. It clicked Erin into gear.

“Once you’re in the car and out of there,” said Dan, “call me back on this number. It’ll be in your phone’s call list. Now hang up, grab some clothes and your boyfriend and get out before Carmichael’s goons get to you.”



“OK, OK,” Erin stuttered already climbing from the bed, “but you better fucking answer my call once we’re out of here.”

“Will do, now shut up and move.”

Erin explained as best she could, and her frenzied voice must have infected Cameron with the rush and the resolve to flee. The tracksuits, still damp from last night, were left on the floor. They grabbed the few items they had from the wardrobe, and dashed downstairs. Cameron threw the door key into the express check out slot and they bolted to the hire car outside. The car park was quiet, a dozen or so vehicles politely parked as if dozing side by side. Just let us get out of this car park, thought Erin as they both climbed in. Cameron was at the wheel, his knuckles white, hands clenched like clamps around the wheel. The car hiccupped, lurching with his overeager foot on the accelerator. Erin crouched over in the back seat, then sliding down out of view as close to the floor as she could.

She felt the car slowly go over a speed bump, make a long curving sweep and then pick up speed. They must be out on the road now. Ten seconds later, another lazy turn, then another. That would put a couple of blocks between them and the hotel.

“All clear?” she asked from the backseat.

“Stay down!”

His voice had an edge of fear in it. She heard a slow whoosh on her side. A vehicle went past them in the opposite direction, she could tell. A big one, like a van. Then another whoosh. And another.

“Bejeesuz,” Cameron breathed out, “that was close. Too close. Three VAN’s, definitely bad guys, up to no good. Stay down there for a bit longer just to make sure. In case they turn around. Not many cars out this early, I’d say they’d remember passing us once they get there and find us gone. We’ll need to put a lot of mileage between us by then.”

Erin felt a sweet release of the anxiety that had got them both moving so quickly. She shifted around to make herself a bit more comfortable and rested her head back looking at the tops of trees, house all linked by telegraph lines zoomed past. Cameron was making turn after turn, obviously staying off any main road. Both of them stayed quietly locked and almost relaxing into the rhythm of the car’s steady movements.

“Safe to come up for air?” asked Erin after a minute or two.

“Maybe not. I mean, you may as well, stay down there ...,” said Cameron.

It took Erin a few seconds to catch on to the problem of her coming up on CCTV.

“Now,” she said picking up her mobile, “to find out why we just did all that.”

The number answered after one ring.

“Dan?”

“You’re out? You’re away safely and not followed?”

“All good, yep. Now. But you were right about the bad guys coming for us. Unless it was an odd sort of funeral, there was a motorcade heading

our way. By the way, I didn't get the chance before, but it's good to know you're alive. Now, what's the story behind that?"

"I found a way out, let's just say. Like you. But of course not quite like you. But like you, there was no bodybag with a name tag on it. So I'm still persona non grata with Securope, but I laid a trail to suggest I ran out of the country with my tail between my legs. They think I'm in Australia – that's a big enough place to look for me. Took me a while to stop feeling bad about the boss – Jack I mean – and Michelle. I'm gonna get the bastards that did that. Now that I'm kind of unofficial official, I can indulge in extra-legal stuff, like vengeance. At least the boss and Michelle were together when it ended for them."

"Yes," said Erin thoughtfully, and then she added in an almost self-pitying sob, "I couldn't do anything to help them! I don't know how I escaped, but I couldn't do anything. I was the reason why those mercs busted in. And the reason why Jack and Michelle were there, caught in the line of fire. I was standing there looking at the two of them and then they were gone."

"That's called 'survivor guilt', Erin. Don't beat yourself up about it. Jack was doing his job. I think Michelle would say she was doing that too. But I have some more bad news. I'm afraid Superintendent Munro is dead."

"What ... what happened? Too many people die around me," Erin said quietly, trying not to let Cameron hear her, but knowing that he would have sensed that.

"Carmichael knew that you'd been in touch with Munro, of course, he has ways and means to find out these things. So he knew you'd be in town and probably going to make a move against him. He didn't know what

you and Munro had cooked up together. And nor do I. She was very secretive.”

“We hadn’t plotted anything,” interrupted Erin. “I just needed someone inside the force to help me. And I trusted her.”

“You were right to do so. And I’m sure she had something in the works to help you out. She had the same drive for justice as you do Erin, to see Securope brought to court and gaol. I wish I had the same noble motives. I just want an eye for an eye.”

Dan fell silent for a moment, and she seemed to clear her throat.

“Well,” she continued, “it seems there was a burglary at the Super’s house in the small hours of the morning. She’s got a panic button and used it. But the burglary came with aggravated assault that turned to homicide. Of course, because it was the Super who went down, the whole station jumped on it. Cop killers get special attention, including from a pal of mine who’s been my contact inside while I’ve been underground. The Super had told me about you contacting her and had given me your number. Said if anything happened to her I was to use it. She knew Securope might make a move on her. They were the perp on this, I’m a hundred per cent sure, as if Carmichael himself had the blood on his hands.”

“He may not have personally done it,” said Erin, “I left him in bad shape last night. But he would have given the order. Pity I didn’t kill him.”

“Next time,” said Dan approvingly. “Your boyfriend’s appearance at Securope on Monday was noted in my scrutiny of the company, and it didn’t take long to spot you with him at the Travelodge. Sorry but, yes you both were on my radar these past couple of days. So when I heard

about the Super, I figured they'd be going after you next. And they would have tracked down your boyfriend's hotel accommodation. That's their kind of work, after all. I took a punt, and I'm glad — in a way — that I was right. By the way, is your b-f actually called Cameron?"

"Fraid so," said Erin with a glance up at the back of his head, but she knew this was Dan's way of proving her intel, not disapproving of Cameron.

"Don't tell me where you're heading, but call me again when you get there. You two stay safe."

Erin tapped the red button on the mobile window to sign off. She dropped the phone into her lap and slumped down in the car seat.

"We going back to London?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Cameron, "The hire car could have been a mistake. They might have seen it on the lodge security cameras. I will transfer our number plates with another car in a small-town car park we pass through. That should keep us invisible for a while, there won't be anything too useful for them in the system. And I've got my own surveillance set up back at the flat, so I can check to see if we've had any unwanted visitors. Now, what's the bad news?"

"I didn't have time to explain before, but the phone call that woke us up, and the one I just made, were with the cop that I thought had died in the safe house shoot out. Dan."

"She's not dead? That sounds like good news."

“That part is. But what she told me isn’t. That superintendent that we arranged for me to meet with last week in the park. Jane Munro. She’s dead. I can’t believe it. She’s dead. Murdered. They made it look like a burglary gone wrong and gone too far. ‘They’ being Securope. For sure. It’s murder. Because I met with her.”

Cameron went silent for a while with an expression that looked to Erin like he was brooding. He might be thinking about his own involvement in the business, wondered Erin, and how she had dragged him into being a kind of accomplice, if an unwitting one, in murder. Too many dead piling up around her. She grimaced thinking about it.

“It’s not your fault, Erin. None of this is. You’ve got to remember who’s pulling the strings. Securope. They’re the guilty party, and they know it. And this Munro woman, she’s a seasoned cop. She would have known the risks. Of course it’s terrible, terrible. But this ... thing that killed her ... it’s a sticky web and it’s got you caught in it. Securope’s the spider.”

“You’ve been caught in it too, now. And that is my fault.”

“Could it be the other way around? You landed in my lap. So to speak. I switched trains at that point. I’m glad I’ve changed direction, and I super happy that you’re with me on this journey.”

“But you’ll be on their hit list now.”

“I consider that a privilege. And by the way, you rescued me last night. You saved my life. And I know the fire alarm was your doing. And whatever else it was that you did to those trolls, that was rather special. I’m picturing lightning bolts coming from your fingers. Or maybe from your eyes. I only wish I’d seen it.”

Erin couldn't remember what she had done. But she was pleased she'd done it.

## CAMERON

He went through the security recordings twice to make sure, so that he could say to Erin with sincere confidence that no-one suspicious had been in the vicinity. For the time being, for a while, maybe a few days at the very least, no baddies were likely to visit. But now that they were back, and in the relative sanctuary of a secure apartment in a secure building with burglar alarms and closed circuit cameras at the building's main entrance as well as in the hallways and the elevators, he could let his own personal guardedness be relaxed. And with that vulnerability, he was open to the full unfiltered strength of Erin's anguish and sense of persecution and inconsolable grief. It took a day before she let it out into the open.

"I was so close to visiting my parents," confessed Erin. "I didn't tell you but while you were at work at Securope I tried ringing their landline number. I did it a few times, and at first I think they might have thought it was a stalker. I hung up as soon as I heard the phone pick up. I didn't want to hear either of their voices. But in that split second before I cancelled the call, I could hear the acoustic space of the living room where the phone sits on a little side table. I could feel the dimensions of the room, the way the carpet swallowed the sounds of their shoes where they were standing and picking up the phone's handset. I could hear the tiny reflections of sound off the glass door in their drinks cabinet in the room, and how those reflected sounds were absorbed by the drapery over the window. It was like I'd gone through the landline and was in that room. Just for that split second. But then one time, the last time I called, I waited just a fraction too long and I heard my father's voice, very frail and longingly say one word before I cut him off. One word: my name.

Erin. And I cut him off. Then I realised that Securope was probably monitoring that phone line, that they would have traced the call back to my device back to the hotel room. That I had stupidly put my parents and both of us in peril by being selfish.”

“Nothing selfish about wanting to see or talk to your parents, Erin. That’s only natural. And if you’re dad thought it was you calling, I’m sure he’d understand your caution. I’m sure he’d be filled with hope that you’re OK. And I’m sure your parents would gladly put themselves in ... well ... in danger ... to know that you’re alive and thinking of them.”

She held her head in her hands and sobbed. Cameron put an arm around her, as tenderly as he could. But he could feel some resistance from her, not a rejection of him but a sense of her withdrawing into herself. He also detected a tinge of something foreboding, something Erin was working through that excluded him.

“Those Securope emails that you were able to retrieve and send to our server here,” he offered, trying to bring her back into the world with him, “I’ve been going through them since we got back. While their admission about wishing to ‘eliminate’ Jack and Michelle has been worded ambiguously enough so it probably won’t stand as legal proof, there’s enough nastiness in them to feed them to our new friend Olivera at the Daily Times Up. I’m sure she knows her way around libel laws. So, if she runs them, like a Wikileaks dump, or even just does a story on them, it’s going to blow this sticky web of theirs to smithereens. Other media are bound to pick it up. It’s going to do massive damage to their reputation at least, even if they have government protection.”

“It would bring this whole nightmare to a head,” said Erin. “But I doubt they’re worried too much about their reputation. They’ve managed to



cover their hit squad's activities as anti-terrorism interventions, with government help.”

“Yeah, and hopefully those emails will incriminate a few politicians along the way. It'll be a delicious commotion.”

“No more than they deserve.”

“So, they're going to come after us with everything. Is that right? I say, bring it on.”

“They will,” Erin responded, her tone of voice turning sober and giving Cameron that same hint of foreboding, “and I wanted to talk to you about this. It was hearing my father's voice. Saying my name. It's haunted me. And it's made me realise how ... how careless I seem to be about those I truly care for. You know ... you know how I feel about you, don't you. You know. I ... I .... I have to say, you've done so much for me. But you've done more than enough. But, that's just it. You've done enough.”

Cameron instantly turned around to leave feeling a different atmosphere in the room that made him sense a change was coming. He did not want to deal with these feelings at that moment as it might mean that he was losing Erin. Losing Erin was the last thing he wanted to happen. He thought that there was a strong bond forming, a platform upon which to build.

She was in control. She had always been in control of what was coming out, the foreboding became the imminent arrival of something significant. Especially as it was accompanied by that sobbing again. Whatever it was, it was going to be painful for them both.

“It can’t be ‘us’ they throw their shit at anymore,” she straightened up to say. “It’s not going to be ‘us’. I have to go it alone now.”

He felt crushed. He could tell she had been thinking this over, that it had been welling up in her certainly since their arrival back in London. Why couldn’t she talk to him about it? Did she mistrust him? Did she think he was too weak to help? Well, he had been dropped by that ape man or man ape in the Securope hallway. That didn’t look good. But fist fights were not his forte.

“It’s not because I don’t trust you or think you’re incapable of helping me in a scrap,” she said staring him straight in the eyes. He had forgotten she could read his mind, or at least read his moods like an open book. He didn’t want to hide anything — even his weaknesses — from her. “But this is much worse than a scrap. I mean, my god three people are dead already. That could have been four if Dan hadn’t managed to survive. And it could have been five if we hadn’t escaped from the lab the other night. That fifth would have been you. You! I couldn’t cope if they got to you. Anyone I’m close to is in danger. There can be no us.”

“Erin”, he said her name with much passion in his voice. You must realise that I’m tagged with you whether you want it or not. And I want it. I want to be with you.”

“I can’t get someone else injured or killed on my account.”

“It’s not on your account. This is on my account. Remember? Maybe I can’t protect you — not in the physical way when we were caught in the corridor. But I want to stand up against these techno fascist bullies in the ways that I can.”

“Exactly,” she pounced, “that’s my point. Do what you can for me here, through your skills and connections. I might be able to swarm through electronic data but I can’t control that the way you can. And I want you to send this data we’ve collected on to Olivera. You’re a native in the world she lives in and writes about. You can make it all sane and plausible to her. I’d just sound like loony tunes if I tried a conversation with her. I know you can see that. I know you know that. This is not a negotiation. I have to leave.”

Erin walked towards him and hugged him with an intensity that was overwhelming. Chaste and passionate at once. He felt her whole body pressing against him, greedily and yet also with a frightened desperation. As if she was savouring him for the last time, like someone clinging to the edge of a cliff, not wanting to let go. He couldn’t help it. He burst into tears. It wasn’t her parting from him that made him cry. It was the love that was pouring out of her. Her vulnerability. Her bravery. He had to meet both of these with courage, a form of courage new to him.

They kissed. It seemed for ages. Devouring, sinking, floating. He didn’t know where he was. In the living room? In the bedroom? Standing? Lying and rolling against each other? Moving over her skin, around her limbs, inside her. All of them, at once.

When it was over, Erin was standing — somehow it had happened without him, and he suspected without her, being aware of how she got there and how long it had taken to get there — by the front door in her thrift shop clothes with her backpack beside her. The clothes and backpack he’d bought her up in Scotland.

“Stay safe, Erin. You know you just have to call, and I’ll be there. Wherever.”

“Till we meet on the other side,” she answered.

“Don’t stay too long in never-neverland this time.”

Erin nodded, pulling her rucksack over her shoulder. Then she was out the door. She was gone, not looking back, not uttering another word.

Cameron turned back, surveying his flat and the information carnage of collaged walls that told a sorry story of corruption, and now of lost love.

ERIN

Erin walked head down, acting out her first part of a not very well-planned plan. She had spent the day populating the website Cameron had set up for her. With the domain name of matter-matter.net it allowed her phone to post images and live stream AV, linked to Daily Times Up and then forwarded through that site’s links to its family of social media platforms. She did this moving from internet café to internet café, following Cameron’s instruction to try and stay under the radar and use the old school system when logging on to the computers, restricting her powers of connectivity that would leave her signature on the internet, all too readily picked up by Securope’s host of bots and spiders.

In the late afternoon she entered a woman’s refuge where she could get a few nights sleep in what she hoped would be a safe environment. At least her immediate tasks were clear if not so simple to achieve. Staying alive was number one. Number two was getting a passport so she could get over to that Securope centre in Leuven, to find out what was actually going down there.

She put her belongings in a locker allotted to her bunkbed.

“Is that your bunk?” a voice pleasantly enquired from behind her, making her jump a little. There was a woman leaning out from over the top level of a two-tiered bunk, holding a battered paperback in her hand. Erin hadn’t noticed her up there when she’d come into the dorm room. The woman had a delightfully open, friendly face with an infectious smile. Not at all what Erin was presuming to meet in a refuge.

“Sorry, darling, I didn’t mean to scare. Just that from your number, I’m in the one above. Hah,” the woman beamed, pointing to her own bed and dropping the paperback onto her pillow. “Cotton’s the name. Just Cotton, that’ll do.”

She swung down acrobatically from the bed to land lightly in front of the bunks. Erin looked at this young woman who had just introduced herself. She seemed personable enough. About Erin’s own age, by the looks of her. Similar build and even a similar haircut. She was dressed in a style of boiler suit, cute and groovy rather than shabby. But the more Erin looked, that smile betrayed an inner hunted look, more like what one might expect in a refuge, and which Erin was sure she displayed as well. The woman’s greeting was one of camaraderie. And irresistible.

“I’m Erin. Pleased to meet you.”

Cotton was looking intently at her this time, but with an innocent curiosity lacking any guile, let alone any menace.

“Just got in here too? You from London? I just came in from Birmingham myself. What a relief to get away. Sorry for staring at you darling, but you know we could almost be sisters. I mean in looks, like, from the same family. I mean we’re all ‘sisters’ in here aren’t we. Got that bond of sisterhood. Us against them.”

“That’s for sure,” said Erin, realising that this person, Cotton, probably had as much right to feel the world was against her as Erin did. She liked Cotton instantly, sensing a kindred spirit. Independent, damaged but rising above her situation, and affable in her demeanour and warmth.

“Hey, you feel confident enough to get out of this city of bunk beds?” Cotton asked, although it came out more like a shrewd observation of Erin’s attitude and situation than just a friendly invitation. “We can step outside, you know. I know a spot round the corner. I can shout us a round or two.”

They spent the evening drinking in a pub, not far from the hostel. To Erin’s relief and delight too, their conversation flowed effortlessly. Erin could tell her story fluently, but only up to the shooting incident at the science fair. After that it was awkward. She didn’t want to veer into what would sound like science fiction. And she didn’t mention Cameron at all. Firstly because she didn’t want to run the risk of him being identified. But secondly because she didn’t want Cotton to think he may have been the reason for her being in the refuge. That wouldn’t have been fair or truthful. And Erin couldn’t possibly pull that deception off convincingly. So when it came to the hard part of her story, she spoke about a man called Ian. It wasn’t hard to paint him as the villain. And the gaps and jumps in the story seemed only to convince Cotton of the trauma Erin had suffered, even if Erin pitched it as a domestic relationship and not the criminal and political viciousness it actually was.

Cotton was, for all her tipsy gregariousness, less forthcoming about her backstory. Erin wasn’t discouraging, but didn’t want to encourage a confession that was doubtless bound up with reliving traumas delivered by a former partner in micro as well as macro aggression. Even with only the sparse dot points to Cotton’s story, it was poignant. And made doubly so by the bouncy and sociable face that Cotton exercised in Erin’s

company. A façade put up to cover a terrible betrayal of trust, thought Erin, and also a signal that Cotton was urgently looking for someone or something to replace that dark but blank figure — male, female, trans ... Erin couldn't politely work it out — who was being alluded to in Cotton's recent past. Both Erin and Cotton had fled domestic relationships; but, Erin alone knew, for opposite reasons. Cotton was running from violence. Erin was running straight toward it. Erin had had a partner in her world whom she could trust as well as desire. Cotton now had neither. She was graciously approachable. But alone and lonely. That mirrored asymmetry between the two of them, which Erin sensed Cotton was also aware of, increased their comradeship as well as their schoolgirl-like admissions about desire, jealousy, sex, and love. All topics that six months ago Erin would have never spoken about, let alone with the candour she now expressed.

“Tell you what. I feel lucky meeting you,” said Cotton with a charming breeziness, “and I've got a few coins. Let's try our luck on the pokies.”

“Are you sure you want to waste the money?”

“Tell you what, you have this coin and have a go for me.”

Cotton pushed a coin into Erin's hand, closing for the briefest moment her fingers around Erin's.

“It's an odd thing to admit,” Erin said, “but I've never played a poker machine.”

“It's easy, just slip it in the slot and push the right button,” Cotton said cheekily, but coyly withdrawing her hand. “I always jinx the machine, so you go first. You never know your luck.”

Erin almost said aloud that she did know her luck, and it was bad.

“I trust you,” said Cotton.

They stepped up to a machine. Cotton’s coin was wasted. Nothing happened. But something did, something Erin couldn’t mention. Couldn’t actually put into words. As she touched the play button, Erin had unintentionally swarmed into the thing’s inner workings — electrical and mechanical. It wasn’t a dumb machine operating on chance. It been programmed. And programmed against the player. Cotton might win, but only after what had been fed into that slot was much more than any amount of payout. That win would feel like a victory against the machine. It would be a phoney triumph, however, and obviously that’s how the owners of the machine made their profit. A huge one. The size of the reservoir of coins she knew was currently sitting inside. Erin felt angry at the unfairness of it. It had nothing to do with luck. Cotton would indeed be wasting her money.

“Sorry I lucked out,” apologised Erin.

“Don’t be disheartened darling. I got another coin. Lucky last. Try again.”

“How about,” Erin proposed, “we do it together. Fifty fifty.”

“Deal!”

They pinched each side of the coin between thumb and forefingers. Cotton led the move of the hands toward the slot with Erin following, but then like a dance step waved the coin several times over it. It felt to Erin like the moment she remembered from childhood when a Ouija board pointer started to move as if with a life of its own, circling the board



under the touch of half a dozen fingertips. Children dabbling with the occult. It felt pleasurable, she recognised, to have Cotton leading the dance and her fingertips following.

“Abracadabra,” Cotton chanted. “Down the hatch.”

The machine gulped the coin down and lit up again, on the ready as Cotton took Erin’s forefinger in a clutch with her own, clasping them together with her other free hand, and aimed their two fingers like a double-barrelled weapon at the smug greedy machine.

Not this time, thought Erin. And as their fingertips touched the device she dived into the machine’s program.

The machine went into a jittering spasm, as if it had been electrocuted. The entire front panel was flashing, as though it were trying to signal for help. But nothing came to its assistance. It was disgorging all the stored up coins inside it, vomiting them up with such helpless and unending obscenity that the spectacle caught the attention of the others in the pub. A round of applause and cheers from the room, no doubt from regulars generously happy to see the machine get its comeuppance at last. The coins were spilling out of the small tray underneath its maw — clearly not designed for this much of a pay-out — and cascading down into a mound on the floor. Like someone emptying their stomach after eating too much, it coughed up the last bits and then shut down, exhausted and silently morose.

Erin looked down at the loot, still tinkling as it overflowed down the front of the machine. She knelt to scoop up the coins. It would take a dozen handfuls at least. She cupped her hands together to hold a healthy load and looked up, offering them to Cotton. But Cotton was standing dazed,

staring at her finger. Her faced seemed to be glowing even more than it had been from the alcohol.

“That was incredible,” she said, more to herself than to Erin.

“Gosh I’ll say! Does it usually do this?” Erin played innocently gushing, especially given the interest that the pub’s manager was showing. “Fifty-fifty, heh. But we’ll need more than our bare hands to collect all this.”

“Mmm, sure,” Cotton was still staring at her finger, and then looked down at Erin, puzzled but enquiring. “No, I mean what that felt like, when we pushed the button. That was incredible. I never felt anything like that before. It was ... thrilling. But ... I don’t know what ....”

“I guess we made a good team,” said Erin, stepping in and trying to downplay an entanglement that must have happened with Cotton. Was that a momentary phenomenon, she thought, or have I infected Cotton? Would that be a bad or a good thing for Cotton? For Erin, herself?

They counted it out and exchanged it for paper money at the bar. The manager was incredulous and suspicious but couldn’t do anything about it. Then they offered a round of drinks to everyone there. It was the least she could do, thought Erin. Some of that loot would surely have been deposited by those in the bar.

“It’s over two thousand quid,” Cotton whispered into Erin’s ear. “Don’t want to say it too loud, you know. Don’t want to get mugged on the way back. But I never held this much cash in my hand, ever. I can’t believe it happened.”

“Nor me, Cotton. Nor me.” Erin believed that only she was aware of the nuance in what she had just said.

But Cotton threw her arms around Erin and hugged her.

“I knew there was something about you. I knew it. When we touched that machine. I don’t know Erin, something amazing happened. Did you feel it? It kind of went all through me. I mean, it was like lightning but really really good.”

“I think that was your lucky streak lighting up.”

“Erin,” Cotton’s voice turned serious, but still buoyant, “I know it wasn’t that. It was something else. Something of you. I felt something of you. I don’t know if I’ll ever feel it again, but I’m glad I have even if it’s just this once. Thanks darling.”

Cotton touched Erin’s hand. Affectionately and yet also with a demure respect. Erin felt a tightness in her throat, stuck between wanting to confess and apologise for what she may have done to Cotton but also wanting to kiss her for her insightfulness, and for Cotton’s acceptance of her.

“We should get back to the dorm, Cotton, before we get too tipsy to do it safely.” Erin felt that her bond with Cotton was now deep enough that if even anyone tried to mug them they’d get the sort of treatment Carmichael and his goons got when they went for Cameron back in Cheltenham.

Back at the hostel they sat together on the old vinyl lounge in the rec room, sipping dreadful instant coffee from the kitchen, watching two women quietly and ritually finishing off a game of pool. Apart from the occasional soft clunk of the balls the only sound was a drink dispenser with a noisy fridge motor running. Erin noticed a row of thrift store

paperbacks on a bookshelf next to a stack of old board games. Cotton had probably been reading one of them when Erin had arrived at the dorm.

“Is the novel any good?” Erin broke the silence. “The one you were reading when we met.” My God, she thought, that was only about six hours ago. But it seemed like they’d known each other for years. Sisters under the skin.

“Nup. A sci-fi thing about jumping across multiple universes. Couldn’t really follow it though I do like sciencey stuff. Timey-wimey stuff, like the doctor says.”

“Who?” For Erin it was a question in genuine ignorance.

“Yes that’s the guy. You a fan of the Doctor? Anyway, it was all a bit abstract for me. I’m a sucker for a bit of romance. Romantic thriller, that’s my game. So I’m glad you arrived and interrupted me. I’d probably be fast asleep in my bunk with that book on my face but for that. Instead of having had, well, a damned good night out with a girlfriend.”

The pool women had finished, offering their cue sticks to Erin and Cotton who, in synch and without conferring, declined. The women rolled the cues onto the empty mat of the table, nodded at each other and walked together almost in step into the dormitory, leaving Erin and Cotton alone with their coffee. Cotton was intently staring at the women’s exit.

“Do you think,” she whispered mischievously as she pulled out of her boiler suit bib pocket a small flat flask of brandy from the pub and topped up Erin’s coffee, “do you think, those two, they’re going to do it? Be a bit difficult in those bunks we’ve got.”

Erin was drunk enough to indiscreetly giggle, but also trusting enough of Cotton to change the topic and carefully broach the second of the tasks that had caused her to leave Cameron. Getting to Leuven.

“Cotton?”

“Yes my darling?”

“I need to ask you for some help with something I have to do. It’s a bit tricky. Tricky for me to explain. I must get to Europe for a couple of days to look someone up.”

“Hmm, a rendezvous with a lover?” Cotton’s question had an edge to it.

“No, no. Quite the opposite. I can’t really go into it, but I can’t afford to let them or their associates here know that I’m travelling.”

“Oh gosh, I knew you were an international woman of mystery! Under cover? Is it espionage? Please don’t say it’s drug running. Especially if you’re going to pull a gypsy switch on some villains. I wouldn’t want you involved in that. That’s worse than being an arms dealer. Is it spies? Is it to do with treasure hunting or the art trade or money laundering?”

“Cotton,” Erin was able to draw on a few movie lines without sounding insincere at all, “I can assure you it’s nothing to do with drugs or arms running or anything like that. But it’s best, for your own safety, if you don’t know. I can tell you about it when I return. Will you be here, in a few days’ time?”

“Would I get a better offer than to be involved in a romantic thriller like this? I’ll be here. What can I do for you, to help in this adventure story? This will be much more fun than that sci-fi novel.”

“It’s not that exciting, I’m afraid Cotton. I just want you to go to a travel agent and buy me a Eurail ticket and book a hotel room for me. Actually, two different hotel rooms, one per night I’m away.”

“Well, that’s easy. But what about something with a bit more intrigue? You know, cloak and dagger, using a false name; yes, that’s it, you’ll need an assumed identity.”

“Oh shit!” At the word ‘identity’ a terrible memory suddenly surged into Erin’s mind. A flashback to the contents of her bedroom drawer at her parents’ house in Cheltenham. “Oh fuck. Sorry, sorry Cotton but I just remembered: I don’t have my passport.”

Cotton looked at Erin with alarm but also without expecting an explanation.

“I left it behind,” said Erin, “somewhere that I can’t go back to. And ... I realise I hadn’t thought it through till you suggested that I’d need another name.”

“Oh dear, I get it, for sure. Left in a rush. Mmmm. But that does put your trip on the Eurostar into a fix. Well, I figure we’d have enough money now to buy you a phoney one, you know on the black market. Meet some dodgy character in an alley or under railway bridge at midnight with some photobooth pics. You’re a girl of mystery. Do you know how to do that sort of thing?”

“Oh Cotton, I wouldn’t have a clue. I’ve been through the wringer with lots of things, but I just wouldn’t have the faintest clue how to do anything like that.”

“Nor me, darling, nor me.”

They both fell into a deep silence. For Erin it wasn't the silence of scheming or calculation but of despair. Of an obstinate barrier. As impervious as an immigration border. For Cotton, however, it appeared to have been thinking out a plan.

“Hang on a minute,” said Cotton. “It's a wild shot I know. But just ... stay there.”

Cotton jumped up, taking out of her pocket what Erin could see was her locker key, and walked with purpose into the dorm.

COTTON

The dorm was in darkness, with most of the bunks empty. The streetlights leaking in through translucent curtained windows silhouetted a few inert bulky shapes moulded onto the beds. Sleeping. Soft snoring from one direction. One of those shapes, lumpier and larger than the others, had looked restless as she entered the room, causing Cotton to politely pause in her tracks, but then it too settled into a steady heavy breathing. Cotton trod lightly over to her locker, and slid out her suitcase. She carefully rummaged through it, feeling her way toward a zippered compartment on the side. It took a few moments but there it was safe and sound, that small red booklet with a gold crest on the cover.

When she came back into the rec room Erin was looking up expectantly, having finished off the laced coffee.

“Those girls,” Cotton whispered as she sat down next to Erin, “I think they were doing it! Brazen things!”

Erin laughed out loud. What a relief it was to hear Erin lose it and really relax, if just for a moment. Cotton lifted the red booklet up next to Erin's face and opened it up, flipping her eyes from Erin's face to the photo in the booklet.

"Told you we could be sisters," she said, handing the passport to Erin with the photo page open. "I reckon — given how awful passport photos are — this could be you. I mean, you're much prettier than this photo, but I reckon we could pass it off as you ... on a bad hair day."

"I honestly don't have any idea of what I look like. But if I look like this I'd be flattered. It's actually a very nice photo of you. And, you're the one that's beautiful. You shine through this photo."

Cotton felt herself blush. And then blush doubly with the embarrassment. She saw that Erin had really meant it.

"Use it," said Cotton.

"Bless you Cotton, but I couldn't, it's your ID. You don't know me, I could do ... things with it that would be on your record. I could take off with it to ... I don't know, to Australia and disappear."

"No you won't," said Cotton. And then she spoke as calmly as she could but still unable to stop her feverish conviction. "I know you. Something happened between us in that pub. Something bringing us together. You know that too. And I think you know what it was. I'm still tingling from it, whatever it was, but I do know this about you because of that: you'll come back. With the passport. But," she shifted tone, embarrassed at the pretentiousness of what she had just uttered, "you'll have to eventually get your own, young lady. In the meantime, I'm not going anywhere that I'll need it. Other than to a travel agent to book your train ticket and your



hotel. Where are you going? Paris? Oh, I so want to go there. At least my passport will have the stamp on it.”

“You’ll get there. When all this trouble I’m caught up in is over, I’d like to make sure you do. I mean that Cotton. Anyway, no I’m not going to Paris. I’m going to Leuven. In Belgium. But the name of the hotel you book for me, is all that I can let you know, for now, for your own sake.”

“How absolutely thrilling,” replied Cotton, pressing her passport into Erin’s hands and now letting her own hands hold onto Erin’s with a lingering warmth that she could tell Erin was happy not to interrupt. Cotton caught Erin’s gaze as she looked up from their enfolded hands and held onto that gaze with the same warmth. She looked into Erin’s eyes, and she felt she also was being held there, by Erin or maybe by that something in Erin that she’d felt before. The room around them seemed so quiet Cotton almost dared not to speak.

ERIN

Early next morning Erin had left Cotton sleeping and had made her zig zag and cautious way from the refuge to St Pancras Station and the Eurostar terminal. Cotton’s passport did its job, and once relaxing on board the train Erin couldn’t help but think there had been something literally “extraordinary”, so far out of the ordinary that it was supernatural, about her meeting Cotton. No, not supernatural. She reminded herself that she was, after all, a physicist. Maybe the word was “extramundane”. She wrestled a moment with that distinction. Meeting Cotton was anything but mundane, and yet also and with some jealousy Erin realised that so many people lived their mundane, worldly, lives just like that. Meeting each other. Going to a pub together. Playing the pokies. For many people it was “ordinary”. No, meeting Cotton was not ordinary. It was special. Maybe it was just improbable. Or rather, what was the

probability of their encounter, and at that most opportune of times for Erin? Could it be calculated by some formula? The question of maths was where you started working from. By going in reverse you never ended with zero, 8, 4, 2, 1,  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{8}$  there was no local absolute immobility, no ground zero She was shocked at the callousness of her own train of thought. Cotton wasn't the outcome of some mathematical process. But then all physics was mathematical, wasn't it?. The train of thought. She'd call her Eurostar journey by that name, as she tried to resist nodding off, hypnotised by the sleek swishing scissoring sounds of the train speeding. But she should catch up on her sleep. Only a few hours last night. She hadn't said goodbye to Cotton in the morning. But she had said goodnight.

The train trip was long, but not long enough for Erin to deal with the multitude of thoughts and emotions swimming around in her mind. Not long enough for sleep. And before she really was prepared for it, the train was braking as it slid into Brussels-Centraal. And then she was walking, wandering around the streets nearby the station, until she spotted a modern and clean looking café, planted herself discreetly at a small table where she wouldn't be interrupted and ordered the first of several coffees to wake her up. She had noted that trains left for Leuven every ten minutes. There was no rush. Time to think, to think straight and focus of the job ahead of her.

She had never really travelled in Europe, spending most of her time studying in Cheltenham apart from the occasional cultural trip with school or then with the university to scientific research centres. Which had looked very much like Cheltenham. But now she was sitting on her own in a café in a city she had never been to before. About to take a train to a city even less familiar than this one. She felt independent, enjoying the romance of a new experience. But then those unplanned feelings began surfacing as they had on the train. Romance. That word seemed to

belong to Cotton now. Who would be, gone back to reading her sci-fi novel? Erin's predicament would be a lot clearer to her if she was in a romantic thriller rather than what felt to her like a sci-fi scenario. She could be a drug mule. A money launderer. An arms dealer. They all sounded much more straightforward and even less dangerous than where she was headed. But then how she pictured herself, how she acted in that picture, these were patterns of activity in her brain, a brain infected with antimatter, infected with the tiniest filaments of another person from another universe. An infection that was the chance perturbation of atomic and subatomic particles in the matter of her body that made her the observer of herself in a bizarre sci-fi plot. Was this how the universe works, the smallest perturbation in the system creates ideas to come into existence by chance? This would mean that we could only really reflect on the outcomes of chance; any sense of premeditation, or decision, was illusory. A consoling illusion. The chance had to happen first, then came the awareness of the chance occurrence, which led to the reflection that hopefully led to a comprehension of a way forward. But then the whole thing repeated itself. Sometime in a split second. Was this how Cameron had lived his life after he ran out on his job? If something is already known, the level of comprehension is always tainted by preconceptions. In this context, chance events would always predate the event itself.

Lucretius, she remembered, understood that the chance swerve of an atom would lead us to coming into existence. We predate a conscious understanding of ourselves; therefore, everything that happened to us through a day or throughout evolution was only recognised after the event. The most important thing, ethically speaking, was that it still had to be identified as the chance event that is. But how do you build an ethics of chance, especially if these thoughts were themselves just chance events in the swerve of the atom? How many chance events in a person's life went unacknowledged as blind reactions; and were our actions just an acknowledgement of those chance events that permitted us to feel in

control of things? In the world, somewhere for everyone of us, there will be a mountain of chances that gets higher and higher as long as we live. This was the picture she had of herself, waking up in the morning in her gorgeously quaint hotel room in the old town of Leuven, looking out the window down into a little vine covered, mossy banked, almost Venetian canal with a church spire rising above the soft higgledy-piggledy angles of brick houses ... my gosh, Cotton had done a good job choosing this first hotel at the travel agents. Would the second one be as good? Erin wouldn't mind staying here for a few days, just being a tourist, meandering through its streets and museums. A pity Cotton couldn't join her here, she would have loved it. They could have stopped off in Paris on the way. Why didn't Erin think of that? Oh! Yes. Of course. She's travelling on Cotton's passport. The one she presented to the hotel staff last night. The one she'll need to con her way into the Securope building in the Leuven Technology Park.

Now Erin was back, jolted out of her daydream. And sitting atop a growing mountain of chaos. What was the time? She needed a coffee. How was she going to get to the Leuven facility? And where was Cotton now — on her bunk reading her novel? No, don't ponder that. Get dressed, grab the backpack. Walk out. Settle the bill. You won't be able to come back to this hotel. To its lovely little quiet room. To that view out the window. Don't look back. They'll be coming after you by tonight. Don't look back. Behind you is the chaos of all those chance encounters with swerving atoms that put you here, now, where you are. This was the message that she was getting loud and clear sitting in the café Papparoti waiting to catch the train to find what Securope is up to in their company at Leuven Technology Park—look for signs.

The bus ride to the technology park centre took her through the historical inner city, which didn't look real at all to Erin but like a miniature village her parents had taken her to in Beaconsfield as a child. Bekonscot. That

was its name. Was Leuven's rebuild after the bombing in the war modelled on Bekonscot? Or is it the other way around. Life imitates art. No. Art imitates life. No, don't look back for the words to describe this picture. Call it Pleasantville. Call it Seahaven the town under the dome in The Truman Show: a miniature world, a simulation of life. Life imitates art, scripted like a melodrama. Or has the genre swerved into science fiction? Because here's the tech park now in front of her: sterile, flinty, grey, white, steel, glass, concrete. More real than the historical panorama of the old town, yet so self-consciously futuristic and brutal it looks like a caricature, with clipped lawns in which real grass has been grown and maintained precisely to look like its artificial, plastic copy. Like the food in Japanese restaurant windows that always looks better than the real thing inside, although too good to be true. Inedible.

And here is Securope's building, its outer walls made of long vertical blades of metal jutting out and throwing menacing shadows into the recesses between. No delicately wrought Flemish filigrees on rooflines or church spires. A metallic cliff face with deep etched clefts running a height of maybe ten floors, as if they'd been scratched into the building by a monstrous claw. With no definition of any internal floors, it could be one vast dimensionless hangar space or air con outlet for an unimaginably large underground city. The only respite from its severity was some tufts of greenery poking above and between the coronet of battlements on the roof, like pubic hair poking out above knickers. Erin followed the concrete pathway through the building's glass doors. Look around, take in the security arrangements in case of a quick getaway. Those treeless empty spaces between buildings, the spartan décor and minimal enormity of the foyer area here will make it hard to hide if it comes to that. But security seems slack here. The few guards about the place even smile at a stranger entering the building, directing Erin to a far wall with a geometrically severe reception desk with a waiting receptionist smiling as if in a resort hotel's lobby. Fakeville.

“Hello, or bonjour or guten tag,” began Erin, “I’m sorry, do you speak English?”

“English, Dutch, French, German, Flemish ... you prefer English?”

“Please, thank you,” said Erin automatically sliding her passport across the desk as if she was arriving at a border control, “I emailed in advance but I’ve found myself here in Leuven way ahead of the schedule of my travel dates in that letter. I hope this won’t be inconvenient.”

Erin quietly waited, as if the receptionist would understand what she was saying.

“I’m sorry ... mademoiselle ...,” the receptionist looked bewildered and awkwardly opened the passport as if to find something in it that would account for this person’s presence.

“Cotton is fine, I go by that name,” said Erin offering an immediate sense of casual intimacy. “Just to explain, I’m that post grad student in quantum biology who wrote to ... oh gosh, erm Doctor ... mmm. Who was that doctor? Who, who? Sorry I’ve forgotten. Wrote about a fortnight ago and got a reply email. But as I said, I’m here a bit ahead of time. Can you ....erm ....?”

Erin deliberately left the sentence dangling for the receptionist to pick it up.

“Quantum biology was that, mademoiselle? Erm, sorry, Ms ...Cotton.” She typed a phrase into her desktop. “That would be Doctor McCarthy? Angus McCarthy? Was that the person?”

“Yes that’s the chap,” said Erin in a deliberate gush, “how awful of me to forget, such a prominent figure in the field, but I’m travelling around Europe calling into as many places as my professor — my thesis supervisor, that is — has given me on this massive list. I’m just hopping from one place to the next, and honestly sometimes I get the names mixed up with who is where, even where I am sometimes. Though with Doctor McCarthy, I think I went through maybe his secretary or an assistant.” That would give Erin an excuse when McCarthy didn’t know who the hell she was. “But I was told it would be fine to call in for a chat with him about the research going on here. Once again, I’m sorry I’m here unannounced.”

“Not at all,” the receptionist seemed genuinely accommodating, picking up her phone handset and speaking into it with the stereotypically hushed voice of officialdom. Erin hoped that whoever she spoke with above this woman’s paygrade would be equally susceptible. “You are in luck, Doctor McCarthy is available today. Take a seat and someone will come down to escort you.”

Being seated and left alone for a moment gave Erin the opportunity to swarm into the receptionist’s computer link to the company’s storage with its address book and the emails flowing through it. She found a stack with documents rich in details about this Doctor McCarthy’s research with stimulants in the brain to test the “temporal aptitude of the subjects”. Those subjects appeared primarily to be central African refugees, some as young as twelve years old. But the data on their recruitment to the testing program was misleading, and downright dodgy. It looked like they were given the impression of being housed in a special processing centre, undergoing testing before they received asylum status. Nasty. But where would they be in this building? Probably not exercising or sunning themselves on the roof garden. More likely locked in cells in a

gargantuan basement. And what on earth was “temporal aptitude”? Erin was suddenly jolted out of what must have looked like an idle reverie.

“How can I help you, young lady?”

A tall, thin man with a receding hairline, a short greyish beard with a subtle smattering of ginger, was standing in front of her. Erin got to her feet and handed her passport to him, again as an automatic courtesy. And, like the receptionist, he was taken aback, unsure what to do with it. He opened it up and looked rather vacantly at the photo, as if this was the official response to her action, and handed it back.

“I’m Angus McCarthy. Ms....?”

He had clearly forgotten the name, having probably not even read it.

“Cotton’s fine, just plain Cotton. Nice to meet you at last in the flesh Doctor McCarthy,” she said enthusiastically offering her hand, to which he automatically but like a robot reciprocated. She gave him a hearty handshake, to match the enthusiasm of her greeting.

“Ms ...erm ... Cotton, I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re doing here. You’re from ...?”

The statement was more of a query, thought Erin, rather than a challenge.

“I sent an email, maybe an assistant dealt with it. I’m a post grad student in quantum biology,” and quickly refreshing her memory of some of the emails McCarthy had seen as part of a mail list but not replied to, she added, “I’m doing my thesis down in Sydney, in Australia, at the University of New South Wales. I think you know my supervisor, Professor Paul Thomas.”



“Oh, erm, yes I ... I think I recognise the name. Sydney, you say. He recommended you see me? I seem to, yes, recall an email perhaps from him. Anyhow, you’ve come a long way. Yes, that is a long way, isn’t it? Australia. Least I can do is grant you some time. So, how can I help you? What are you working on?”

“Well, quantum biology as I said, but with an interest in temporality at the biological quantum level, particularly with its relevance to neuroscience. I’m working in particular on artificial neurotransmitter stimuli for increasing synaptic speed and capacity, as well as entangled communication with external systems. At a quantum level, you understand.”

Hopefully, thought Erin, just the right amount of youthful arrogance to make McCarthy feel superior and unguarded.

“Hmm, you don’t say? Well, I can see why your professor would have recommended a visit here. We’re pretty much a leading centre in that kind of research. Shall we go upstairs to the lab and I’ll fill you in on what we’re up to? Of course, you must realise that some of the work is under embargo. And some of it is behind industrial security. We’re part of a commercial enterprise rather than a university institute. But I’ll show you what I can. Do come this way.”

Unfortunately, Erin’s visit to the lab was not quite so sociable.

McCARTHY

Ms Cotton had seemed innocently enthusiastic at first, but McCarthy became increasingly tetchy with her enquiries into the more speculative, and secretive, aspects of his research — details that he was surprised she

was acquainted with. Damn that Australian professor who sent her here, he thought. That fellow, ...whatisname? He'll recognise it when he checks his email. He'll have to have words with him.

But then, as her questions began uncomfortably teasing out politically sensitive issues with the work, he realised she had information she really ought not to have been aware of at all. When he quizzed her on her own research he started feeling convinced about his suspicions. She knew her quantum theory and nanotechnology well beyond the level he'd expect from a current post grad. It was, if anything, indicating real genius. But when asked about her thesis, she seemed to be tailoring her responses to McCarthy's field of expertise. Conforming a little too much, especially as some of that material hadn't been published. And likely wouldn't see the light of day outside a senior corporate executive meeting.

"Your clinical trials," Ms Cotton had asked, "sound rather invasive, if I may say. How do you determine and then access the sample groups?"

"I didn't think clinical study was part of your project, Ms Cotton."

"But we are talking about human subjects for what are still quite experimental procedures, are we not? That does raise some difficult ethical protocols."

"What on earth makes you think we're deploying that methodology? We run simulations derived from data harvested from .... In any respect, I don't think that's at all pertinent or relevant."

"Sorry, where are you harvesting that data?"

"That, my dear Ms Cotton, is not your business, either for your thesis or for your conversation here, which ..."

Cotton interrupted: “But your association with the British HQ of Securope and their dubious work with anti-terrorism surveillance would indicate ...”

“... conversation which, I was about to say, is terminated!”

“OK,” she had replied dropping all pretence of disguise and charm, “that’s fine with me, I’ve got what I came for, and I’ll see myself out. By the way, the name’s Cotton. Just Cotton.”

“You most certainly won’t see yourself out!” And McCarthy called Security who, after fruitlessly searching her shoulder bag and even frisking her, promptly escorted the young woman out of the building.

CARMICHAEL

“She seemed to be kosher when she arrived,” pleaded McCarthy on the zoom call. “Had the credentials. Even showed us her passport, which I guess, looking back on it now was kind of unnecessary. But there was supposedly an email trail from some guy in Australia, her supervisor. How was I supposed to know who she really was?”

Carmichael raised his voice again. “Don’t you ever read my emails? We had the equivalent of an APB on her, sent out to each centre. Where’s your fucking cyber security? Your fucking employer is called Securope, after all! You can let your front of house team of fuck ups know they’re fucking unemployed from today! But what’s even worse than letting her fucking in in the first place, you then had to go and fucking let her out!”

Carmichael could see his spit spraying over the zoom screen. Good, he thought. Spittle stuck all over that fuckwit’s face.

“I got her out of the building,” McCarthy whimpered, “as soon as I twigged something was wrong, but I thought she was a journalist. I can hardly kidnap a journalist.”

“Why the fuck not!” McCarthy got his voice even higher in pitch. “We’re Securope. We’ve got the power. We can do any fucking thing we want! Especially with nosey journos—which, you twat, are far less dangerous than that specimen you had in your grip and let fucking loose.”

“She had nothing on her when she left. I had her searched. No recording device, no wire, no camera ... ”

“Did you search inside her head?” interrupted Carmichael, with special venom. “That’s where it’ll be. In her DNA, in her prions and fucking protein chains, in neurons and ... fuck all other microbe level antimatter shit she has for a body now.”

“You mean her body is ... a data storage?”

“She’s a frickin data spider! She doesn’t just store, she trawls, dives, creeps, lurks ... fuck me, she would have been inside your system as soon as some dumb fuckwit activated a link she could leech!”

“She had nothing on her that could have done that, no peripheral device at all.” McCarthy was pleading again.

“She is the peripheral! Don’t you get it? She somehow jumps from wetware to software.”

“But that’s what we’re working on! How does she do that?”

“At last! You see some fucking light. Yes, that’s exactly what we’re paying you to do. And, yes, that’s why she would’ve gone to you. And no, I don’t know how the fuck she does it. Which is why we’ve been trying to get our hands on her. And she drops in on you for a fucking cup of tea thank you very much and you say have some more then cheerio and by the way feel free to take everything we’re working on as you leave.”

“But if she can do it herself, why would she want our research, research that hasn’t yet accomplished what she can do? That’s seems a pointless sort of raid.”

Carmichael felt that the heart attack his GP had warned him of was going to get closer if he tried dealing much more with this ingenué. He’d love to sack McCarthy here and now, but he needed McCarthy on board for when they finally could do an autopsy on Erin. He was the specialist who would know what to look for. He was the forensic anatomist they would call in. But this idiot in his ivory tower of luxury research had the company by the balls, and he didn’t even know it. Well, small mercies that he didn’t.

“Do I have to spell it out? She’s obviously not after the tech,” Carmichael dialled his temper down. “It’s the clinical trials, and those anachronistic ethical protocols we’ve been helping you sidestep. She clearly wants to nobble your work, and as a bonus for her own pleasure blow us out of the water. My advice now is that we dispose of those assets.”

“But you reckon she’s got them, somehow. What? Downloaded from our encrypted data store? I can’t endorse deleting them.”

“I’m not talking about the data, not the files. Yes of course she’s got those already. I’m talking about the hard evidence.”

“As a rule we don’t store anything on paper, but I’ll shred anything that might have been ...”

“Not the paper trail, man. I’m mean the subjects, the actual meat. You know, downstairs in your dungeons. Get rid of the evidence. Get rid of it!”

McCarthy looked like was turning green as Carmichael abruptly ended the zoom session and clicked onto another call that he had waiting.

“Sorry to keep you waiting Minister,” Carmichael altered his tone to affected conciliatory mildness. “I’ve just been dealing with that regrettable breach of security with our Belgium asset. I have it under control now.”

“You better have,” said the figure online, appearing only as a fluttering skull and crossbones flag gif. “Can’t handle the Belgian stuff becoming as public as your antics here. Especially now with rumblings from a particularly troublesome backbencher which are being heard in parts of Parliament and in the City where they bloody well shouldn’t be heard. Giving me some grief, he is. Seems to have a bee in his bonnet about the death of that lady cop, Munro. You might have heard, huh?” The voice behind the ridiculous flag had turned sarcastic, seeming to quiver in time with the animation’s jerky ripple effect. “Burglary with homicide? Honestly, couldn’t you have done better than that? I don’t like the force getting too close on this. Cop killers get special attention you know. Couldn’t you have pinned that one on your little terrorist girlie as well?”

“We can and will. Softly, softly, Minister. We’ll catch that little monkey, don’t worry.”

“I wouldn’t call three deaths at the hands of a government anti-terror squad stacked with your mercenaries who now, by the way, have had their smell of Securope well and truly publicised ... oh and look I’m not complaining about the use of a bit of stick ... but I wouldn’t call that soft-cock stuff. Your lack of reputational control is making us here look like the Kremlin.”

“We’re working on that bad publicity. It’s just coming from a tech journo running a blog. She’s a flea on the arse of an elephant. She won’t last long. It’ll take a flick of the finger to shake her off. But who’s this upstart prick giving it to us from the back bench?”

“Sebastian Fry.”

“Oh Jesus, that twat! What does he want? Sports car? A holiday in the sun? Promotion to a ministry? You want to look after it yourself? Have you got room for an under-secretary aide in charge of beverages?”

“Very funny McCarthy. Go fuck yourself. And Fry, he’s a worker prat and seriously thinks he can’t be bought. And we can’t wait around till he realises his mistake. That’s why I’m mentioning it to you. You have your ways, I have mine. And mine aren’t appropriate now. But if you can ... erm, persuade him ... to shut up, make sure this time it goes with a non-disclosure agreement. Enforceable in advance, if you get my drift.”

“Hmm. I think the public would be convinced when the right media reports it that our little terrorist girlie had to do something about Mr Fry. Maybe he’s been digging into the Munro case in order to pin the murder on her. She might not like that sort of attention. Might want to make a public statement of her own.”

“Just make sure Fry appreciates the peril of his pursuit. And, please, be thoroughly convincing. You and I have skated out of bounds, into the thin stuff, and we can’t go back from here.”

Carmichael cut off the meeting without saying goodbye. Politicians, he fumed, were an evil blight on this world. Scheming narcissists who actually didn’t have the courage to stand by their own principles. Time would come and soon when we didn’t need them. When society would be run by the real masters, those who knew how to order the world with a power that didn’t rely on all the compromises and bureaucratic red tape that professional politicians wallowed in, thrived on, and made their personal fortunes from. Carmichael had nothing against personal fortune, of course, just the demeaning way in which politics restrained or checked or even neutered those who had the strength to obtain it. Those who deserved it.

Democracy — of the sort often hypocritically championed by the very parliamentarians that allied with Carmichael, like the one who feebly hid behind his preposterous skull and crossbones gif — was a useful transitional stage for Carmichael into a technologically ordered secure society liberated from the burden of government. And in which masterful companies like Securope (eventually a monopoly, of course) would profit immeasurably. But when Securope was so wealthy it didn’t care about being wealthy, market and social competition would simply become a series of minor adjustments to marginal budgetary allocations. In fact, as he used to say to rev up the executive meetings, “Security is the historical evolution and overcoming of democracy. It will be the adaptation of a primal fear into the systemic control of populations through neuro-aesthetics and neuro-marketing without the use of political form.” Leaning back in his chair, Carmichael allowed himself to luxuriate for a moment in the fond memory of those rhetorical successes in his career. “When the Jesuits said, ‘Give me the child at seven and I’ll show you the



man,” he would intone to the spellbound board of trustees, “they meant give me the child and they are mine for life. Create a desire for security at the earliest age, and people will belong to Securope for life. Simple and clean, no one gets hurt, and life has no new threats. We are here to adjust the deepest fear level: the fear of not being able to being able to fulfil the desire of being normal, of being secure. Feeling secure means being secured. We have lost the ability to see beauty in the secured world. We substitute this loss of beauty by seeing through screens of plundered resources, mimetic technological advancement and destruction. We need to see beauty again.” Round of applause in his head.

Yes indeed. As long as fuckwits like dear Doctor McCarthy and his Belgian Congo farm experiments can actually output some useful muscular results instead of sucking on the teat of the R&D budget! And, if they could clamp down and dissect this fucking freak of a girl on the run who was sabotaging all of human evolution and Securope’s hard work with her fucking undeserved mutant ability and undirected PMT outbursts! People who resist the page turn of evolution would have to get hurt so the rest can feel safe and secure.

And so for now, Carmichael figured he could get his heart rate and blood pressure down by focussing on a less irritating — in fact, pleasurable — concern. Dealing with Sebastian Fry, MP.

ERIN

Erin stepped out of the St Pancras station into a cold, grey London morning. Something felt thick and ugly in the air, in addition to the smog. Was it a presentiment, or the toxic burden of her past, its cloak of subterfuge, the cloistered feeling of deceit and the bristling menace, the recollection of death, that gave this place under the neogothic façade of St Pancras a fantastic funereal gloom?

Erin walked quickly across the intersection to the British Library next door on Euston Street, checked her backpack in the basement and went to the reading room. At a spare computer terminal she logged onto the server that had been set up with Cameron. She knew he'd see she was active on the site, and that would be some relief to him, knowing that she'd got out of Leuven. The files she'd downloaded from McCarthy's lab two days ago were there. By now, Cameron would have burned them onto hard copies and sent them as a dump to the Daily Times Up server. But there was something else in there, a link that Cameron had flagged for her as urgent.

“Fuck, no!” She tried to muffle her voice. A few heads turned in annoyance or curiosity and then went back to their screens, happily unaware of the battering ram that had hit her. The link had opened a news story about the tragic deaths last evening of a British MP and his family (wife and two adopted children) in what appeared to be a gas explosion at their north London house. Sebastian Fry MP had recently been threatened by a terrorist group, two of whom had been killed in a police raid at their Cheltenham hideout several months ago. Fry had evidence claiming to have linked the group to the murder of a Cheltenham senior police officer.

It wasn't hard to read what was missing. Erin was being accused of threatening and then assassinating an MP she had heard of but only via the internet.

Cameron had patched another link onto Fry's name. This took Erin to the Daily Times Up, posted around the same time as the news story, with an opinion piece by Fry about Securope's political affiliations, suggesting a certain but unnamed ministerial conflict of interest. Of course, she

remembered now that Cameron had come across Fry's earlier warnings about the R&D programs of companies like Securope.

But this didn't add up. On one hand, Fry was accusing Securope, which made a great deal of sense, but on the other also trying to blame Erin — whom he didn't know — of Munro's murder, which made no sense at all. Unless it smelled of Carmichael. In fact, it stank of him. That opinion piece must have been filed the night of the explosion, before Carmichael's goons did the job, and Carmichael didn't know about it. At least not yet. And Fry must have had a lot more up his sleeve, if Carmichael had been prompted to murder, once more. Christ, the deaths kept piling up in her wake. The body count would now be ... what ...? She had to use her fingers. Seven! Carmichael had also somehow mobilised sentiment among his political jackbooted gang to bring up the terrorism scam again and use it to cover getting rid of Fry. Erin knew she was about to become a very public target. The escapee from the London raid comes up from underground to strike again. She had to get the story about what was going on in Leuven's Securope bio-engineering farm out into the public. And then, she'd have to face up to Carmichael.

After a string of deliberate diversions and a labyrinthine taxi ride to shake off any possible tail, Erin stepped back into the women's refuge looking for Cotton. There she was, lying on the top bunk, reading a paperback. Despite all the urgency that was fizzing around Erin's head, Cotton's huge smile at seeing her caused Erin to break into a smile herself. She felt she could float up onto that top bunk and shed all the darkness enveloping her. A moment later, Cotton, as lithe as the first time Erin saw her, had bounded down to embrace her.

"How's the sci-fi novel going?" Erin asked, gulping and almost lost for words.

“Huh, oh it’s good to see you too, darling,” Cotton joked.

Erin blushed as Cotton held up the paperback for a moment, looking at it as though browsing in a bookstore.

“I junked the sci-fi one,” Cotton continued. “Am into a cheesy romance now. Well, I had to have something to do to fill in my time and distract me while you were off galivanting around Europe. This one’s got some supernatural stuff and some hot sexy stuff, though not enough of that. Can’t get enough of that. But I think it’ll end badly. It always ends badly.” She tossed the book casually up onto her bunk. “So, your turn. How did Miss Cloak and Dagger go?”

The dark cloud returned. And Cotton could obviously see it.

“The Europe part was ... OK. But some bad shit happened here, while I was coming back. I didn’t have anything to do with it but ... don’t know what to tell you, how to tell you .... I’m ... I’m going to be blamed for something I had nothing to do with. Something awful. Oh Cotton, you have to be careful. You can’t afford to be seen with me. They’ll come after me. They did it before. People get caught in the crossfire. Badly. I shouldn’t have used your passport. I shouldn’t have done that. Say I stole it from you. You have to stick by that story. You can’t be seen with me. You didn’t see me here now. I shouldn’t have come here. I shouldn’t ....”

It was finally too much for her. Erin’s stuttering and confused monologue finally broke into tears. Weak, impotent tears of collapse. Blubbing, defenceless tears. All she wanted was to be hugged and wrapped up. And all she knew she should do was get as far from Cotton as she could. For Cotton’s sake. The two of them shouldn’t be seen talking, sharing confidences, let alone touching. Erin had to leave, immediately. But she was frozen to the spot.

Cotton took her in her arms. Firmly but gently. Stroked her hair. Guided Erin to the empty bunk. Sat down and rocked her gently without ever letting go. Erin melted into the wordless but compassionate embrace.

After a while, Cotton brushed Erin's hair away from her face and looked her in the eyes. "I guess what you're running from is more than a bad household. But you know what, my darling? You're not alone in this. I know you think you ought to be. But, after all, you've been travelling and getting up to high jinks under my name, so I think we're a sort of team, aren't we? I'm happy with that, to be a team with you. So, you tell me what you feel you can, and tell me what you want to do. But here's one thing you're not doing – going it alone, whatever it is that's coming after you. You're not running out of here and leaving me wondering what happened to you before, and what will happen to you after this."

Erin composed herself as best she could, wiping her face, straightening her clothes, catching her breath.

"I haven't had my morning coffee yet, Cotton. Sorry for that outburst."

Cotton smiled. "Well, I wouldn't recommend the service or the quality here. Shall we find somewhere else, somewhere quiet and private? There's a greasy spoon just nearby, surprisingly good fare for a girl with — let's say — a girl with a hangover. And for anyone who happens to notice, she's a girl in a sensitive state. Oh my god, they'll think: what happened last night? She needs some confidential downtime in a huddle with a girlfriend."

"That's the truth. And, yes I'll tell you. I will. That's a promise. You may not want to know me after you ... well, after you get to know me."

“I think I can say I already have a good idea,” encouraged Cotton. “You know, you and I, our stories are kind of ... what’s the right word for it?”

That word came out of nowhere straight into Erin’s head, taking her by surprise, “...entangled?”

“Well, that’s a delicious word, my darling. And speaking of delicious, let’s get that fry-up in you for your ... hangover. Oh, one last thing. I don’t want this to end badly. Not this story. Because, among other things, girlfriend, you owe me a trip to Paris.”

CAMERON

Cameron had sent the files that Erin had extracted from Leuven’s Securope lab to Olivera at the Daily Times Up. He had had only time for a quick scan of the contents but was able to hazard a good guess at the explosive implications. How Erin did that was still a mystery to him, and even a few days away from her had made him realise that she inhabited a world he probably couldn’t really settle in. He also knew that with this bit piracy she was jumping from the frying pan into the fire. This was such damning stuff for Securope that he knew they’d be gunning for her. The Sebastian Fry carnage was just a taste of what was coming. For him, most likely too. Despite his best efforts, he was certain Securope’s thugs would be calling on him sooner or later. He hoped it would be later. Enough time to convince Olivera to run the story about Leuven.

It seems she didn’t need convincing. No sooner had he spotted the ping from Erin, logging in to the server from a London terminal that morning, than he got an email to the dummy address from Olivera. Quite a few online news outlets were taking up the previous stories she had filed. This one, she had written, would be the bomb. The fallout stretched across Europe. “Using refugees as guinea pigs ... worse than Australia’s

detention camps. There was a wave of investigative journalism and even political and police suspicion growing in the past days against Securope. Thankfully, not all of them, wrote Olivera, have been bought. That was good, but of course, Securope would be aware of this and would be responding. Stay safe, she had warned.

“You too,” he wrote back. And then, nudged by a feeling he couldn’t quite identify he added, “Maybe we’ll meet one day, IRL.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for you.” The message came back a few seconds later. “Till then, signing off.”

He shut down his system and looked around the apartment. Time to leave. Again. At least this time he knew how to pack a rucksack for life on the road. Half an hour later he was standing at the door, remembering how Erin had stood there with her backpack. It felt like an age since she had walked out. Now he had to do the same. Walk out, don’t look back.

Cameron walked across the street into an alley and waited. After about an hour, a black van pulled up and out jumped Securope’s mercenaries who swarmed into his building. He turned and walked, then ran down the alley heading towards the British Library, Erin’s last noted location, hungry to find her to explain that he was still relevant.

He saw more of the black vans speed past him down the back streets so he reduced his pace, not wanting to attract their attention. He felt Erin nearby, so he continued moving slowly towards the library.

A black van abruptly pulled up directly in front of him with a squawk of tyre rubber as the side door slid open. In well-rehearsed moves, two men in black balaclavas jumped out, slinging a hood over him and dragging Cameron inside. His arms flailed uselessly in an automatic effort to

struggle with the hood. His shins scraped over the doorway's lower edge. They'd be bleeding in a moment. So this is what it's like. This is what Erin went through.

He fell into a jumble, hitting his head with a crack against what must have been a seat in the back of the van, as he heard the door slide and slam shut and the earth under him rattle and move. The van was taking off. In his head everything was swirling. He felt like he wanted to vomit. He was rolled like a sock onto his belly. A colossal, heavy, sweaty body was pressing down on his back, pulling his arms around and clamping them together with a plastic tie that bit mercilessly into his wrists. He could make out a rough dark weave of the cloth over his face and a smell like wet dog coming from the figure, still driving its massive knee into his back and stopping him from breathing. This is the end, he admitted. The last person he'd said goodbye to was Olivera. And he didn't even know what she looked like.

COTTON

It took about half an hour, but Erin finished her story at the same time as she finished her meal. The way she'd reported it, leaning across their table in the café booth and keeping her voice to a whisper while periodically looking over her shoulder for any eavesdropping from other customers ... it gave Erin's account of her past few months a conspiratorial ambience. Cotton had to admit, she rather liked that atmosphere between them.

"My God," said Cotton, "that's as complicated as the sci-fi novel I ditched. But better than it."

"Do you believe me?"



“Of course I do, of course. I know it’s all horrid what’s happened to you, and to your friends, but when you were telling me about it I had the feeling it was ... meant to happen. Not the bad stuff. But you meeting that guy Cameron, and then me. It’s not like you met us through the algorithm on a dating site, our paths crossed in ways that are ... well, I don’t know how to put it ... are destined to cross.”

“Now that you know, are you going to run away from me? I wouldn’t blame you. In fact, I’d feel better if you could just get as much distance from me as possible and as quickly as possible. So you’d be safe.”

“You know how I got here, and I think you’d know then that there’s no safer place for me than to be than here with you.”

“Thank you, Cotton. Thank you. But ... maybe not right here. I’m pretty sure that if they haven’t already tracked me and your passport to the refuge, they will very soon. I think we should get away from here, to another part of town and lie low for a while.”

“Lying low with you? Nothing wrong with that,” said Cotton cheerily. “Shall we pick up our gear at the refuge and head out? I would like to finish that book.”

But within a few steps outside the café Cotton realised just how urgent Erin’s warning had been. They saw it at the same time, and Cotton felt Erin’s body stiffen in shock, and bring them both to a sudden halt in the street. The black van parked outside the refuge was a perfect match for the ones in Erin’s story. Sinister, brooding like a demon, a gargoyle perched on a ledge ready to swoop.

“It’s a women’s refuge. They won’t let those guys in,” said Cotton desperately hoping for some reassurance in her own voice.

“No, they won’t,” Erin answered. “These guys will claim to be cops of a sort. And if they’re not inside, they’ll be outside!”

Both of them looked quickly around, suddenly vulnerable, just as Cotton heard a soft swishing sound and felt Erin’s body pitch towards her. Erin was clutching at the side of her neck. But Cotton couldn’t see any blood. It couldn’t be a bullet. Oh fuck. A dart. A tranquilliser dart. Erin’s knees were giving way. She was sliding out of Cotton’s grasp to the ground, but still looking up into Cotton’s eyes. “I’m so sorry . . .” She was mouthing the words with almost no sound, and her eyes pleading forgiveness were already going glassy.

Cotton’s vision went into a tunnel, focussed on Erin as a pair of hands roughly took hold of Erin, dragging her toward the van which was now moving at speed along the street toward them both.

“Get your filthy fucking hands off her!”

But it wasn’t Cotton’s scream that stopped the assailant in his tracks. Cotton had reached out desperately with her arms, as if to try to hold onto Erin, straining down the gullet of her tunnel vision. She knew it was a vain gesture. That didn’t stop her. But the anger overwhelmed the agony. The rage had taken her over just as a fist out of nowhere hit her hard in the head. She screamed as the force propelled her forward, skin burning as she slid along the tarmac, straight into and under the front wheels of the van as it sped toward the semi-unconscious Erin whose blurry eyes could do nothing but watch, incapable of blinking as the agonising spectacle played out. The van pitched, whilst hitting the obstacle, cracking bones and tearing flesh open as it bounced upward over Cotton’s squirming body. It came down with a thud. And sat for a moment like a massive bear paused in a fight, collecting its wits. The van’s side door

slid open, Erin was tossed inside. It took off again, the force lifting her off the van's floor for a moment, as if she was on a carnival ride, as it bounced its back wheels over the body still laying on the tarmac. Cotton had been left behind, like a broken doll.

## CAMERON

The van had gone into a long swerve, like taking a street corner at top speed at the last moment, thought Cameron. The sway of the vehicle felt unsteady, impulsive and distracted, as if the driver was suddenly trying to avoid something. Colliding with something.

A split second later there was a grinding explosion from one side of the vehicle. The ugly gravity of the human bear sitting on top of him was suddenly released, propelling the bear and Cameron into the air in what felt, in Cameron's ecstatic sense of relief, to be slow motion. The beast landed first with a sickening crunch, its body then cushioning Cameron's fall. The van was now careening sideways, as if being pushed by a wild bull with its horns dug in, and to the ringing clamour of metal scraping and ploughing up asphalt. Then everything went silent.

The van rocked, as though perched on a cliff edge. A second later Cameron heard the sound of the driver's door being wrenched open, swearing and the dull thud of fists on flesh. A hand took hold of his hood and pulled it off him. In the dim light of the van's interior a woman's face, framed with a helmet, leaned toward him.

"You'd be Cameron, am I right?"

A saviour in a Kevlar vest, she looked dazzling to Cameron. A warrior disco dominatrix. Maybe it was concussion. She was cutting the plastic tie from his wrist. He wanted to worship her.

DAN

“I’m Dan, Erin’s friend. We’d been scoping your apartment this morning, not for you but for Erin. Yeah, we knew she was at yours, she kindly let me know a couple of days ago.”

Cameron looked confused. More than just shock. Obviously, Erin hadn’t let him know.

“All shit’s breaking loose this morning,” she continued, “so we came over to find her. Noticed you getting nabbed, thought we’d help out. Sorry for the drama but ramming was the best we could do in the moment. Bloody lost my coffee though. How are you hanging? Anything broken?”

“Oh my god, she’s mentioned you,” Cameron was blubbering with relief. “You’re Dan. The one back from the grave. You with the cops. Special Branch?”

“Something like that. As I say, shit’s hitting the proverbial right now. Number 1: is Erin in there?”

“She left. She’s gone. Must be five or so days ago. I haven’t seen her since. Wasn’t expecting to see her again.”

Hmm. That’s when she’d contacted Dan with this address, telling her to keep an eye on it.

“Sorry she bolted on you, Cameron, but I think she was looking out for you. Anyway, any idea where she might be?”

“She went underground, so I’ve no idea. But she did log on to our server — too much to explain just now — mid-morning today, from a terminal in the British Library. She’d downloaded — don’t ask me how — a shitload of docs from a Securope lab in Belgium, so she must have been there. You know she couldn’t have had anything to do with what happened to Sebastian Fry.”

“We know that. Fry and his family. Yes, that was a hit. No accident. But she wasn’t involved. We’ve got some serious intel on another MP. Bent as hell. In your, shall we say, back door entries to the involved parties have you come across this guy Crossley?”

“Crossley! He turns up on the dark side of Securope. Some sort of conspiracy in the offing. Looks like a duck, smells like a duck.”

“A dead duck. I’m on my way to have a fireside chat with him. I usually don’t ask civvies along, but since you’re a friend of Erin’s ....”

Dan steered Cameron toward her van, gesturing to one of the four cops in assault gear riding with her, “Jack, you stay here and clean this fracas up with the uniforms. And you, Jack, Jack, and Jack,” she pointed at the other anonymous figures, “come with us.” As they closed the van doors she added under her breath in confidence, “I call them all Jack. Bit of a homage.”

The van was only dinged by the ramming. Dan hit the accelerator and turned to Cameron.

“He’s a miserable turd this Crossley who does business with Securope hiding behind a jolly roger as his zoom icon. Can you believe it? Our hackers, it turns out, are better than Securope’s coders.”

“I can testify to that,” said Cameron, “I’ve done both with Securope. Crossley uses a jolly roger, you say? That’s a bit of a give-away.”

“Well,” Dan smirked, “he’s in for a jolly rogering.”

CAMERON

Sitting next to Dan, as the van careered through the streets of London Cameron’s anxiety was peaking.

“Stop, now.” he screamed.

“What the fuck!”

“On a new mission, I need to find Erin, I can sense that she’s in danger.” He knew this sense was real, not a sign but a clear communication. Maybe he had been around her long enough and she was finally rubbing off on him.

Securope’s head offices is where he reasoned they would have taken her. Erin had destroyed the place last time. Carmichael would have now made it Erin proof—just in case.

“Ok but take this”.

“A gun, no thanks, but it’s great that you are in this with us.”

He knew this time he needed to get caught. It was the only way he could find Erin quickly or be gunned down needlessly.

Brazenly he walked into the Securope’s London headquarters. “I need to see Ian Carmichael now! It’s a matter of life and death.” He did not mention that it was his life.

The receptionist was puzzled by his directness. “Carmichael, you say?” she smiled whilst pressing the panic button under her desk.

“Hurry up, get him down here right now.”

“I am sorry . . . Who should I say is calling?” enquired the receptionist.

Cameron was taken aback by how calmly she dealt with his threatening demeanour. Was this another example that he was in the wrong game? It was too late now to look at his lifestyle decisions. Two of Securope’s men came running into the foyer.

“Fucking leave me alone.” He put on a show of struggling that cost him a few seriously good punches to the head and body knocking the wind out of his sails...dragging his semi-conscious body towards Erin.

As he came back to earth, Cameron could feel a mix of joy that his plan had worked, along with outrage and fear like a combustible gas brewing inside him. Carmichael, that strutting bastard! He could recognise all the despicable traits that Erin and he detested. He was totally bad. Bad guys shouldn’t win. But this one had a winning streak. He knew it, and he was smirking about it.

“Well, I’ll be damned. How did that happen?” remarked Carmichael.

## CARMICHAEL

Carmichael was barely holding back his wish to seriously damage Erin. She was tied down, sure, and drugged, sure, but he still didn’t want to get too close even with two bodyguards with tranquilliser guns at the ready. News that a second person was attempting to do some damage in the street when one of his squad put a significant spin on her plans.

“Don’t tell me,” he said sarcastically as she was coming round, “you’re got a dead sister. She looked like you. Hah. It would have been nice to be present at a family reunion. And a long-lost sister at that. Because, Erin, we haven’t any record of you having a sister. Maybe she was given away at birth, maybe she’s the freakier one rather than you. Well, I’ll have to have a chat with your parents about the recent demise of their other daughter.” Carmichael was smirking now. “By the way, Erin, do you recognise this place?”

He gestured around the room in which the two of them were seated, plastic ties holding their arms and legs to the chairs they sat in.

“It’s my executive suite that you managed to wreck on your last visit. Looked as though a cyclone had gone through here. I must say you know how to throw a party. But I had quite a bill for that. I should be entitled to a reimbursement from you.”

“You’re a fucking murdering pig.” Erin was nearly fully conscious. She could feel the rage and hatred building up inside.

“I’ve a fellow over there in Leuven who would be very interested in meeting you again. Though I warn you he has a razor-sharp wit. No, he doesn’t really. I just said that to get the joke in about cutting you up. In most areas he’s witless, but he does know about taking a living human brain apart. The question is, how much of you isn’t human?”

“If you really want to find out,” said Erin, “cut us loose.”

“That was a rhetorical question, Erin,” he laughed. “Anyway, now we’ve got Cameron to come and join us we have a surfeit of riches, but also a



redundancy. I need someone here who can answer for Mr Fry and his family's fate. And, Cameron, you fit the description of one of the perpetrator's rather well."

Cameron looked toward Erin. He wanted his expression to be a spur, a sign of fighting spirit. It must have come out as helplessness.

"But then," Carmichael continued imperiously, "now that we are all back together, Cameron we will have to prepare you for your audition to pass the screen test for a burnt corpse. Or would you like to choose? Which of you would like to be a terrorist incinerated by their own bomb?"

"I've already been to Leuven," said Erin. "I don't need to see that place again."

"Such self-sacrifice, Erin. By the way, speaking of wild parties, we've got one planned this evening. And now that you're both working for Securope I could get you an invitation. But then, it's a rather VIP event. Involves the PM."

"Oh fuck," said Cameron, "is he in your pay as well?"

"No, well not enough to count. We're unfortunately going to have to accidentally lose our beloved Prime Minister tonight. I have arranged a little private conspiratorial tete-a-tete I've arranged for him at a colleague's London residence. Something I know he wouldn't be able to resist. Not that the PM's an unlikeable chap. Just obstinate and happens to be in the way."

The nerve of this crazy plot was overshadowed by the smugness of its author. Hasn't this guy read any James Bond? What's with a villain,

thought Cameron, whose incredulous arrogance and vanity needs to mansplain his plans to us while we're tied to chairs?

“You're going to kill the PM as well? You're a psychopath!” Erin goaded him. Cameron could see something changing in Erin's expression, like a fog was starting to clear.

“One person's psychopath is another's visionary,” answered Carmichael. “Anyhow, no fear, I have a suitable replacement for him, that's to say, his party's moronic inner sanctum will believe they have. Excellent CV. Minister of Defence. Came highly recommended to me, by himself.” Carmichael obviously felt he could afford a chuckle. “And... actually, you'll like this ... icing on the cake. He's also your own MP, for that fucking epicentre of mutant fuckery, Cheltenham.”

“You're talking about a coup d'état.”

“Well done, Erin. You know your political science. Shows up with your history of terrorist activity toward the state. In dealing with that nosey bitch of a policewoman Munro, and of course that little pretender Fry and his useless fucking family. PM's going to be your next assignment. Think of it as a promotion. But right now, I should make sure you catch your private jet to Belgium. First class ticket, though my dear little freakish fuck up you won't be awake to enjoy it.”

ERIN

It wasn't going to end badly. She'd promised that to Cotton and look where her promise had got her, crushed under a van by Carmichael's goons. She gave her life trying to protect me. Erin's anger, mixed with the acute pain of having watched Cotton crushed to death, was rising like a torrent.

“What the fuck were you thinking letting your men kill Cotton, leaving her smashed and bleeding on the tarmac?”

“Casualties of war. You shouldn’t have got her involved. You are just a selfish bitch with a disregard for other people.”

“You’re not going to separate Cameron and me now”. Every fibre, cell and molecule of Erin’s being was on notice. “Cotton needs revenge and justice along with everyone else who needlessly died because of you, your insane megalomaniac plans”.

Erin was fishing for time, when something came rushing into her mind, like the time she woke up Cameron’s computer and swarmed into his internet connection. But this was not the howl of the internet. Instead, a desperate single voice, weak, confused and urgently trying to get into the room. She heard a mobile phone on a desk behind Carmichael, rattling as it buzzed an incoming call.

“I think you might want to take that,” Erin said.

Carmichael raised an eyebrow, as if he twigged some connection between the phone and Erin. He turned, pointedly, defiantly with back to her, and picked it up.

“What the fuck?! You’re fucking joking. Interpol? What the fuck! How much time have you ...? McCarthy, stop your fucking whimpering and get that staff I pay for to do their job. I don’t care how you get rid of the reffos.... I don’t care. Just stop Interpol getting down to the basement. And then get the fuck out of there!”

CARMICHAEL

“You have done this, Erin. When you got into the Leuven lab. Get rid of the asset and the shithead with her. They are obstacles now, not opportunities.”

He threw the phone down onto the desk with so much anger that its casing broke apart. With as much theatrical drama as he could summon, he slowly turned toward the two captives, menacingly simmering.

“Change of fucking plan.”

It was just in time to see Erin getting to her feet, with the plastic ties melting into little puddles on the floor. Erin was staring at him. She spoke with the same simmering menace.

“I’ll say.”

CROSSLEY

“Get off the fucking phone! I’ve got fucking Special Branch in the front yard! It’s a fucking raid,” he shouted into the voicemail, as if the volume of his voice might force its way through so Carmichael could hear it. But it was useless. Half a dozen calls into the ether. Carmichael was probably lolling back in his chair with the phone, boasting to one of his shareholders. That bastard cursed Crossley.

Carmichael’s goon squad had the PM and his call girl stowed in the basement, sure, but what was the point of going through with things when there was what looked like a small army outside, hammering their way in? This wasn’t what he’d signed up for, being caught in the middle. That bastard Carmichael might have even planned it this way, making him the fall guy. Did Carmichael have someone else lined up to step into the

PM's dead shoes? Vengeance, Crossley realised, can be a bigger drive than self-preservation. He'd get that treacherous pig Carmichael. But first, self-preservation. Nothing else for it. A quick bolt out the back, past the swimming pool, into that neighbour's yard. He'd used that gateway hidden down the back enough times when making those private nightly visits to that accommodating lady of the house. Out of the public eye. He could do it blindfolded.

He heard the front door give way as he ran faster than he ever thought he could out the back of the house, head down, bolting toward the pool. What the hell was this woman in her nightgown doing coming toward him? He had only a moment to assess.

"I was worried . . . all the noise," she enquired in a squeaky familiar voice, "oooof!!"

He slammed into her and they were both flying through the air before tumbling deep into the pool, twirling around each other as they went down. He could feel her breasts rubbing against his arm and his hand grabbing around her waist. It was a clinch they'd done so many times, he recalled, but not in a pool tangled up in their clothing. And this time he was pushing her away rather than hungrily grasping at her. Pushing her down, he kicked and punched his way to the surface, leaving her behind to whatever fate the pool had for her. He clawed his way to the edge and hauled himself up. Self-preservation.

"Well, well . . . What's this then, a midnight dip?"

This woman's voice was very different. Dry sarcasm. He looked up through eyes stinging with chlorine at an amazon in tactical gear, pointing a taser at him. He had to admit, she looked dazzling.

“Mr Crossley,” she said, “you are under arrest.”

ERIN

Carmichael’s look of a staged threat turning into shock lasted only for a second before signalling his two paramilitaries to fire their tranquilliser guns.

Not this time, thought Erin. And with a sweep of her arm the guards were hurled by an invisible force high and backwards, hard into the far wall, falling to the floor unconscious. Not bad, she congratulated herself. Carmichael was back fumbling at the desk. Was he trying to put that phone together? She turned away from him to glance over and see Cameron realising he was freed from the plastic ties, that had formed a second puddle on the floor. Erin looked over towards Cameron, But Cameron was moving, seemingly in slow motion, from the chair to his feet in one move. He had seen something Erin hadn’t and was now leaping toward her with a look of utter alarm, his hands stretching ahead of him as if trying to ward off some impending and terrible danger.

Erin heard the gunshot. She swung her gaze back to Carmichael who was now holding a pistol at arm’s length pointing directly at her. He hadn’t been going for his phone, she realised. It took a split second, but she saw it, as a re-enactment of the dilated time of never-neverland. Cameron threw himself across Erin, his arms wrapping around her shoulders. Perhaps Cameron was trying to push her out of the way. However, Erin felt it more like an embrace, a protective hug, enveloping her as Cameron’s body reeled around her, and veered straight into the path of Carmichael’s bullet.

The bullet tore into Cameron’s back, splitting vertebrae and gouging its way through tissues to lodge in the rear of his breastbone. Erin could feel

the air punched out of Cameron's lungs with the impact. It felt like a hot breath over her face. A tremor washed through Erin's chest in an awful shock wave. Cameron's body surged into her, nudging her backward, rolling with the bullet's momentum and whipping Erin's arms around Cameron as they both fell toward the floor.

"No, no, Cameron, no ..."

Cameron was sinking, ebbing away in her arms. Erin looked up to see Carmichael's face contorting in a rictus of evil pleasure, of insane self-satisfaction. He'd got away with it again. The gun dropping to his side, spent, smoke still rising from the muzzle in the aftermath of a monstrous sexual pleasure. Yesss, Carmichael seemed to be hissing to himself like a snake licking its venomous fangs.

"No ... no!"

This time Erin's words lost their plea for Cameron and turned into defiance. No, you won't. Cameron, you won't die, not for me, not for nothing. No, Carmichael, you won't have this. It won't end badly!

Erin's atomistic power swarmed into Cameron, and met his energy and commitment to her still burning. "Do this with me, Cameron", Erin was encouraging, "Don't leave. We can do this together".

Cameron was fighting against the death that was in him, trying to expel it. Erin focussed on the bullet, dislodging it, and turned their power towards Carmichael. The bullet began to move. Away from bone, back through the flesh it tore open. Past the spinal column it had fractured, and out of the wound ruptured in Cameron's back. Flesh and bone were closing up, healing in microseconds as the bullet exited along the path it had ferociously taken.

And the bullet kept going on its return path. Straight towards Carmichael's chest.

## CARMICHAEL

In that triumphant moment he was convinced he'd fortuitously brought both of them down. How convenient for one of them to fling themselves across the other as the bullet hit. The scene had played out similarly to a slow-motion, Kevin Costner diving across Whitney Houston in *The Bodyguard*. Carmichael couldn't help but think what an embarrassing tool Costner was. His only regret was that he may not get Erin's body into cryo-storage quick enough. He had the facilities there, near his executive suite, but probably no staff at hand. Dammit. But with the Leuven lab in tatters now, what the fuck did it matter? At least these two meddling fuckwits were out of action. He'd find a way out as well. He'd have the PM well and truly fucked by now. Just get these bodies into the van and to the scene of the crime. A shame his team couldn't save the PM in time, but they did finish off the assassins. I'll get the last word, he thought.

"You lousy prick!"

But the words, the last ones, came from Erin. She and Cameron were looking at him, not as corpses as they really ought to be. And something else, even more strange than that, something very very strange was happening.

He saw the bullet. Not while it was travelling for him. Straight for him. But he saw it now because it was hovering, stock still, like time had been snap frozen, come to a stop right there, a mere fraction away from his chest. As if those controllers were saying to him, "see what we can do". As if they were giving him a few more moments before the bullet



finished its journey. As if he could lift his free hand up and snip that bullet delicately between his thumb and forefinger and hold it there.

But he couldn't do that. His arm was frozen, not in time, but in pain. The pain was radiating down his left arm from his chest, and it had nothing to do with that bullet. The bullet was sitting there, impossibly, just in front of his heart that was, all on its own, seizing up. Wrenching, twisting in a blazing knot that could never be untangled. His knees gave way, and he slid to the floor, gasping for breath. His last breath. His last curse. And the last thing he heard. The bullet dropping harmlessly to the floor, next to him.

## PETER AND CYNTHIA

“What a bloody mess!” Peter was scrolling through the news on his tablet in disbelief and couldn't help but say it out loud with a chuckle. He was delighted to see that this government that had been so uninterested in workers had now fallen like a house of cards. Some of this corruption and intrigue brought to light by journalist Colin Cox, sounded like it was a crime thriller: an assassination attempt on the PM, tying him to a love nest with a call girl. That was special but fell into the background with the startling confessions from that slimy Minister of Defence, Crossley. Shady was hardly the word for what had been going on.

“I can't believe it,” he shouted out, putting his coffee down on the breakfast table. “Cynthia, you've got to hear this. That company, Securope, they did those murders ... the police, that poor woman scientist, the MP and his family. There was no terrorist plot. Other than their own. They were going to bring down the government. Well, I suppose they did that. Not quite the way they'd planned, hah. Only their director didn't get to see it happen. No wonder he had a coronary. Cynthia?”

As usual, she was quietly working away in the corner, showing only the slightest sign of interest in such worldly matters. Her detached voice reached Peter, “Didn’t the scientist use to teach at the same university as Paul.”

“Yes, your right! I wonder.” Peter thought for a moment of a myriad of inexplicable thoughts before moving on. “And this stuff about the Belgian laboratory. Urrgh, it could be out of The Island of Dr Moreau. People locked in cages underground. Refugees. I don’t want to tell you what the experiments were, darling. Best you don’t know. And when the place was raided, those crazies running it were caught actually trying to cement the poor bastards in, underground. Burying them alive. Can you believe it? Far cry from Cheltenham, eh?”

Cynthia definitely hummed, a song she had loved before she met Peter as a sign for him to move on to a new topic.

“Whole thing, seems to revolve around some work this young physicist was doing on quantum biology and antimatter. Not her fault though. Just the usual bastards trying to poach her work and twist it into something else. She sounds quite interesting, actually. Her work coincidentally overlaps in some way... well it might relate to Paul.”

He toyed with his coffee cup, summoning up the right words.”

Cynthia paused her humming for a moment. It was enough of a moment for Patrick to prepare for a dispiriting quip, but Cynthia quietly reflected and then went back to her daily work.

“She sounds too smart for Paul,” she hummed.

OLIVERA

“I just wanted to see the look on your face, Cameron, “she said over the noise of the evening crowd in the pub. “That’s why I didn’t want to tell you over the internet. Hah.”

“All this time, since you left me, you’d been setting up to launch The Daily Times Up! I should have realised. You always had it in you. And the name. Of course, Vera! Vera, it’s so bloody obvious now. And so bloody good to see you again. And, of course, I can’t thank you enough for all that work you did with the Securope dumps that I was getting from Erin.”

“I knew the Snowden cover was you, of course, Cameron,” said Vera. “You can’t change your digital fingerprints, not enough to fool a girl like me. At least, one who lived with you all that time. And ... and loved you, Cameron. But you have changed, mate. I think that time on the road was good for you.”

“Meeting Siddhartha along the way helped.”

“Erin?”

“Her too, yes. And, by the way, she moved out as well, hah, although she was only there a few days really.”

“Hardly got to know you.”

“Got to know me enough. I’m glad she’s safe and in good company.”

“What are your plans, now? Hitting the road again? How are you getting on with that amazing dom-queen who rescued you?”

“Too scary for me. You should have seen the way she handled those guys threatening to kill the PM. Whoa. And then the way she handled the PM. Even tougher. No, I’m going back to the safety of my apartment. Recoup. Look for a job.”

“Thought about journalism? Times Up could use some help.”

“You know, Vera,” Cameron raised his glass to hers, but then paused as a wistful look came into his eyes. “Sorry to change the subject, but I’ve still got that photo of you, the one on the sofa in our apartment.”

“So have I.”

ERIN

“I think my parents really like you,” Erin cheerfully announced as she brought the drinks over.

“They must be so pleased to see you safe and well.” said Cameron lifting beer into the air to clink glasses with Erin. “When I think what we have gone through.”

“Tell me,” Erin attempted to brush away any vestige of the ordeal they had been through, “what are your feelings?”

“Feelings? You mean my feelings for you? Well, I love you, of course, but I feel that we’re both on different journeys now, but we will always be connected, if you know what I mean?”

“I feel that way too. Strangely when you were shot it was that weird feeling that the bullet was separating us.”

“Wow, finally we are on the same page but now in a different book. You know if you need me, I would go anywhere with you.”

“First I am going to Paris on my own. There is a lot of trauma and turmoil that surrounds me and I need to spend time lost in my own crowd.

“Don’t forget to trust in the signs.” said Cameron with a spot of humour in his voice

## THE CLOUD OF KNOWING

PAUL

“And that concludes the course,” declared Paul, closing his laptop computer with a flourish. “The known known: we know what we know. The unknown known: we don’t know something, but it’s there hidden inside us. The known unknown: we know things that are unknown. And the unknown unknown: mysteriously inexplicable. Thank you, ladies and gentleman, for your interest and your attention throughout this journey. It’s been a pleasure to ...”

Over his last words the audience offered a half-hearted courteous trickle of applause, and then quickly began shuffling out of the lecture theatre before he’d finished his sentence.

Paul felt a sense of emptiness that an actor might feel after the applause fades away. He waited for an opening in the shambling tide of students to make a break for the door. He was stopped at the threshold by a single student, transfixing him with her steely gaze. Anita. Here it comes, he thought, the coup de grâce.

“I wonder,” she began, more confidently than those words implied, “if I might be able to talk with you about a PhD proposal I’d like to pursue.”

Paul reluctantly and almost timidly nodded. What else could he do?

“You see,” she continued, “after doing this course of yours I thought I might ask if you would be my supervisor.”

Paul was shocked and flattered, but also dismayed. After all her snide interventions? But he had to admit, she had what it takes to survive. She was smart and opinionated and knew her stuff. There was a touch of real genius there. His professionalism and penchant for the rebel overcame the nervous apprehension.

“I think I can manage that. Yes, let’s have a meeting then Anita. It is Anita, isn’t it?”

“No, Professor Thomas. You’ve got me mistaken for someone else. My name is Erin Cotton.”



Paul Thomas is an Honorary Professor at UNSW Art and Design and currently the founder and series-chair of the Transdisciplinary Imaging Conference series 2010-2022. In 2000 he instigated and was the founding Director of the Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth 2002, 2004 and 2007. As an artist he is a pioneer of transdisciplinary art practice. His practice led research takes not only inspiration from nanoscience and quantum theory, but actually operates there. His current academic publication is based on the concept that at the core of both art and science we find the twin forces of probability and uncertainty.

Thomas's internationally exhibited research projects have been based on working with scientist's inquiring in specific areas of physics. The current creative practice 'Quantum Chaos' artworks are based on experiments done in collaboration with the Centre for Quantum Computation and Communication Technology, UNSW. Publications, Quantum Art and Uncertainty (2018), Nanoart: The Immateriality of Art (2013). An archive of his practice can be found on my website <http://VisibleSpace.com>