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Graphic

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(a novel by)

I Q Cameron

Introduction

Thank you for choosing to read this free novel portion from www.killernovels.com

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As a writer, I make every effort to make available novels of the highest quality, and I sincerely hope that you will enjoy this free portion so much that you will purchase the remaining portion of the novel from www.killernovels.com for a small fee. Please remember that by doing so you will receive a fantastic novel conclusion, while also helping me to be able to continue this writing venture.

Imagine waking up in a tropical island paradise, or on a spaceship out among the stars, or in a deserted town – with no idea how you got there! Three small groups of bewildered abductees wake up to find themselves in exactly those situations, only to quickly realize they are the sporting attraction in *someone's game* – a brutal and sadistic game of hunting and slaughtering unarmed prey!

Graphic is a story about corporate and government corruption taken to a dangerously high new level. It's a story of greed and callous disregard for life, of multiple murders, and all done with the sanction of ruthless and corrupt powers.

Forced to run for their lives as their fellow victims are brutally murdered by unseen killers, it quickly becomes obvious that *someone* is killing them for sport! Victims are trapped with no hope of escape. Brutal death is only a matter of time for each of them.

No shortage of blood and violence here! You'll be on the edge of your seat as you ponder who might survive (if any), and why such horror is taking place. Danger lurks everywhere. Death comes viciously and without warning.

Are they being hunted by aliens? Invisible monsters?

There seems to be no hope.

But the groups have various things in common. Each victim is healthy, fit and bright. None of them is there by chance. And there are cruel, heartless masters behind each setting, and equally callous killers behind each sadistic, violent death. Can you find the common threads?

Graphic offers the reader a chance to ponder just how far brutal regimes and corrupt forces might actually be prepared to venture in their quest to gain absolute supremacy. Or... is it all just about wealth?

You be the judge. Guess it if you can – before it's too late... In the end, you may find yourself never able to look at powerful business, or even your own government in the same way...

Now, *please enjoy*.

Foreword

Having been a Christian for some decades, I always found it difficult to find novels that properly captured lifelike action, terror or even romance, while still maintaining Christian values or the deep truth and freedom that having a *real* relationship with the living God brings. Often (I found) writers sacrificed the reality or impact of life's sometimes horrible events, watering things down too far in an effort to make their story appear more 'Christian' or inoffensive.

The Bible, on the other hand, does not hide from the awful things men (and women) are capable of. Nor does it play down horrible events such as war, murder, sexual misconduct and assault, treachery, etc. Indeed, life itself can be unrelentingly offensive. With all that in mind, I have tried to keep my novels as realistic as possible without glorifying such things as violence, murder, sex, terror and every other horrifying human advent.

Jesus Christ died for us so that we could live forever (Heaven), as well as live fulfilling and meaningful lives right here and now – *true healing and true freedom!* And only He can do this, because He has the power and authority to firstly forgive us for all our wrongdoings (sins), and then to begin working inside us to change us into what He has always wanted us to be (and wanted for us).

So often Christians (in novels and in life) are portrayed as weak and 'just too good' to be real, in a world that we all know is *very real!* I would like to break that mold, since I believe a Christian hero or heroine should probably be one of the best examples of Godliness-meets-humanness we could ever find in this life.

Just like my books, such heroes are not perfect! (Smile...☺) Those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness and everlasting life (in this life) are not perfect. God is changing and working on us and in us every single day, no matter how our story looks. Like a story God is telling, we are a work in progress...

Jesus Christ has a life-changing impact on the genuine believer, because the two enter into a *real and loving relationship*. This, however, does not mean that our Christian heroes will ever be perfect, nor should they be portrayed that way. Indeed, the whole reason for Jesus Christ's intervention in history and in our individual lives is that we will always remain in need of His divine help and salvation, whether it be with external forces, internal ones, temptation, sin or any other factor.

Needing His help and forgiveness will never change. And God will never tire of giving it.

Many of my earliest writings lacked Christian input. Hence, I have done my best to withdraw most of those versions of my novels from circulation, and have replaced them with something I think that both Christian and non-adherent will find challenging to say the least. I

am attempting to fill what I believe is a Christian literature void, and while some may find my stories too violent or suggestive in some areas, I have tried to write about *real* issues without shying away from reality, and yet without glorifying sexual issues, crudity or coarse language.

These things exist. I don't ignore them, but neither do I exalt them.

I have no interest in terms such as 'have faith' or 'simply believe', which are meaningless to the one who doesn't understand them. Sometimes I may give an example, or even brutally demonstrate them. I would rather ire some readers, who judge my work as 'going too far', than to indulge in the usual '*too valiant and too true*' hero figures. Life is real, and when there is action, it is very often brutal.

With all that in mind, I have decided not to pull punches, so to speak. My 'baddies' are bad, and my 'heroes and heroines' are human, and as real as I can make them. I avoid excess course language and sexual scenes, but make no apologies for realistic violence and faulty characters. These things are very much a real part of life, and since we are all living in the age of terror, perhaps there is a time and need for recognizing 'real' characters and events, even – and especially – in Christian writing.

Hence, perhaps you, the reader, will be kind enough to show me a measure of grace (should you deem that I go too far in some of the things I write, etc.), as I endeavor to explain in my own very fault-riddled way, what salvation in Christ, God's love, forgiveness and some other key Christian values and teachings really mean to us all.

And I sincerely hope I don't fail you too greatly... ☺

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CHAPTER 1

Harry Langford took cover by an imposing, gnarled tree trunk as he peered through lush vegetation into the thick forest ahead. Taking as long as he dared, he silently signalled to those following, simultaneously gesturing with a downward facing palm that they should remain low, creeping just as he had previously shown them.

And silence went without question.

The tall, robust ex-army man called upon all his senses and training as he instinctively took responsibility for those in his care. He rubbed a shock of scruffy, sandy hair back from his piercing, dark eyes, regretting that he had allowed several years of civilian life to soften him. His hair *should* have been shorter. He *should* have been fitter. And he *certainly* should have been armed! But then, he had never planned on *this* situation.

No one had.

No one could.

His recently acquired underlings hesitated, not so much out of distrust for their self-appointed, rugged leader, but out of crippling fear for the inexplicable, terrifying situation in which they found themselves, and because of their surreal surroundings.

Several long seconds elapsed before a tall, fit, attractive woman moved quietly to Harry's position. She crouched, drilled him with a tense, nervous gaze, and then nudged past him, apparently satisfied that she had no other option but to trust him. Others soon followed, each one dutifully remaining low as per their leader's gesture. Once they were all close and still, Harry insisted in hushed whispers that they remain silent and low, while he continued to check the

surrounding forest for signs of danger.

They were five in all, and amid furtive scrutiny of the landscape, Harry looked over the group once more, automatically weighing up his assets and liabilities without even realising he was doing it. Forty-five years of age and five years of absence since active service had reduced his fitness, but had done nothing to dull his alert, trained mind. Still, he was human, and prone to attacks and surprises, just like everyone else.

And that was a fact that he greatly rued.

His mind raced, searching every tiny movement of leaves and grasses in the wind, and every small whisper of the breezes, as though each one might be an enemy. He felt desperate for a way to protect those suddenly thrust into his care.

Indeed, his mind was deeply troubled.

Harry knew he would never be able to forget what one small lapse in alertness just half an hour earlier had cost. Occurring without warning, the event had caught him completely off guard, and even though it wasn't his fault, he detested the fact that he had not seen it coming. And while he had acted quickly and decisively in salvaging other lives, the one that had been lost would always haunt him.

Those things always did.

They always had.

There should have been six, he cursed silently. And *her* face would always be with him.



Harry gazed furtively in a slow arc, always vigilant, always suspicious, knowing with burning clarity that he needed to formulate a plan. He continued weighing his assets, and struggling all the while with where he could take them for safety.

The first one to trust him by joining him amid the trees – the brunette, had introduced herself as Carrie Long, a small-town paramedic. Harry watched as she immediately began quietly checking the welfare of the group, her medical training coming naturally to the fore, and he could not help but notice that like him, she kept a constant vigil of her surroundings between checking patients.

When they had first met – just the previous day, she had said she was twenty-eight years old. Harry remembered that, because, despite the incredible nature of the situation they found themselves in, he had already decided that the seventeen-year gap between them would likely be too great to hope to breach.

A pity, he remembered thinking. *A huge pity*.

Carrie's eyes were blue and striking, and she was intelligent and capable, and particularly fit. Better still, he *liked her*. Indeed, he had been almost intoxicated by her from the very first glance. He tried to cast such thoughts aside. *This* was not the time for such matters.

Still, she was definitely an asset, he mused.

Next in the group was Peter Becker, a thirty-five year-old lawyer with short black hair and an unhappy face. He seemed smart enough or sarcastic enough to belong in a courtroom, but he certainly lacked any real practical skills. That had become evident soon after they had met, with the younger man wandering about, babbling legal drivel about who he might sue for his abduction, and showing no survival sense of any kind.

Not much of an asset, Harry decided.

Next was Will Vain, a small man with long hair tied up in a ponytail. Short in stature he may have been, but Will was clearly fit and strong, and Harry knew from army days that physical prowess didn't always win the battle. Will had introduced himself as a twenty-five year-old doctor, and true to his training, after watching Carrie Long checking her potential patients for injuries and shock, the doctor sluggishly began to join the medical reconnoitre. Will had shown himself to be impulsive and argumentative at every turn, but he certainly wasn't lacking in intellect.

Another asset.

That only left Emily Beach, the twenty-two year-old court stenographer. She was of medium height, with sparkling green eyes and short, stark-blond hair, and Harry couldn't help but immediately think how that well-groomed, golden-white crown would make her an easy target for a sniper's bullet. Like the young doctor, Emily had proven argumentative from the outset, something the army-man had taken an instant disliking to. She looked like she had just stepped out of a beauty salon, or at the very least, should return to one so that she might not crack a nail.

Definitely not an asset.

Harry's mind darted back to an absent member of the newly formed team. She had introduced herself as... *Julie*. *Yes, that was her name*. At least that was *one thing* of which he could be sure. *Yes, Julie, that was it*. But it barely seemed to matter now. A thirty year-old budding actress, she had said, majoring in dance.

Harry couldn't shake the vision of her pretty face and pleasant smile, and the nicest brown eyes...

He swallowed, not trying to subdue his thoughts and memories, but making an attempt to use what he had seen to comprehend what was happening. It made no sense. One night he went

to sleep in his bed, and the next thing he remembered was waking up in the forest – along with five other people suffering exactly the same amnesia. Not one of them could recall how they came to be there, and several hours of bewildered discussions had found no common trait to link them.

They all now sported clean, green jungle fatigues. As well as matching jungle greens that offered protection from the neck down, each person had also been fitted with a pair of drab jogging shoes that were clearly designed to blend in with forest colours.

Not exactly army issue, Harry pondered, though the fatigues certainly could have been. A matching, green water bottle clipped to a khaki belt about the waist of each member was the only other accessory each possessed.

Harry's mind spun.

He crunched his eyes closed hard as he tried desperately to remember how he had arrived in the jungle, but his entire recollection had been stolen away. There was *nothing* – not even a trace of anything beyond his own bed. He could have been drugged for *months* and he would not have known. There was not even a sense of time to this bewildering nightmare.

Anger began to boil in his blood at the knowledge that he had surely been drugged and abducted before being dumped without explanation in this jungle. A pressing need to even a few scores threatened to distract him, and he had to consciously force it down. In a world of lost memories and sudden dangers, with so many unknowns, vengeance was the only constant.

He changed tack to consider what he *did* know.

They were on an island, or at least it *felt like* an island.

Each member of the group had woken close by another, so it had not taken long for them to gather and begin debating their stunning predicament. The army-man could recall perfectly the bewildered introductions the previous day, each detail recorded with stark clarity, just as his training demanded. And he remembered every small detail as the lost, confused group had found themselves wandering about, investigating their new jungle home.

Harry had even been able to identify the types of razor-wire and landmines on the beach, clearly placed to ensure that no one would risk venturing out into the water...

Yesterday was clear and vivid to the most precise detail in his mind. *But before that?* The time between his bedroom and the jungle was a deep, black impassable void.

And so the group of six had spent their first day together, concentrating on searching for a way to escape the jungle, and failing that, seeking food, extra water and shelter. But other than the water in the bottles on their hips, they had found nothing. Two five-metre high block walls annexed their portion of the coastline from whatever other landmass the jungle might be part of,

forming a triangle of land from which they could not escape. The ocean and block walls, along with impenetrable barriers of razor-wire and landmines gave the tropical jungle the feel of a perilous, bizarre prison.

It had given Harry a cold, ominous sense of fear that reached down to innermost depths of his experience and being. The place had the feel of death. Even worse, *twisted, torturous death*. It reeked of ambush.

The group had surmised that their jungle-prison could be no larger than perhaps a half-dozen city blocks in size, and while it was wild and heavily wooded, the evidence of man-made structures and intervention was plentiful. There were numerous sawn stumps to show where the tallest and largest of the trees had been removed. Each sawn tree base had been left taller than a man, with the bark stripped off and the timber looking as though it had been heavily oiled. Despite some deep gouges in the timber, the stumps were so slippery as to be impossible to scale.

There were numerous other structures too, concrete and metal columns of similar height to the tree stumps, each one protruding from the earth in a regular matrix that stretched to every point amid the thick, green jungle. The columns were over half a metre in diameter, many with moss or oil on them, again making it impossible to climb them for the purposes of surveying the surrounding landscape.

And the most definitive evidence of human intervention, indeed *malicious human intervention*, were the numerous brightly painted signs that had been posted at regular intervals along the length of the block walls and the beach, each warning of landmines and electric fences. Together, those served to form an impenetrable barrier, both to the body and the mind. Even if the group *had* possessed a rope with which to scale the wall – which they didn't – there was no possible way to get past the lethal dangers that protected the wall. Clearly they were not meant to escape the jungle.

Hence, it hadn't taken much discussion to deduce that the group was in considerable trouble.

Harry cursed silently as he thought back.

He had realised from the outset that they were all in danger. He had suspected something dire from the first few minutes of consciousness. He should have seen it coming... He should have saved her!

But he hadn't. And now she was dead.

Harry's mind snapped back from memories of the previous twenty-four hours to the immediate past. He recalled Julie Daniel's smiling face as the actress had tried to comfort the group with fanciful explanations as to why they all suddenly found themselves marooned in what

was nothing less than a jungle prison, with absolutely *no* memory of their abduction or arrival. *She did television*, she had said. *It's just going to be part of some bizarre survival show! You'll all see! It's just reality TV gone one step further*, she had insisted.

She had been *so sure*...

If it was, Harry mused bitterly, he'd be taking it up with the producers personally when he got out of this wretched jungle. *Very personally*... His trained military mind could still recall with stunning clarity the moment when the first sniper's bullet had struck. Julie, the actress – the bubbly thirty year-old he had met just hours earlier, had still been smiling when the stinging lead projectile had struck without warning, ruthless and rampant.

Harry had seen such horror before.

Unfortunately.

The small red puncture mark in the young woman's forehead and the puffing spray behind, mercifully out of view; it was an image that would stay with him forever. Active service had given him many haunting experiences, most of which he tried every day since to forget. The entrance wound was small, he knew, but the exit wound would be large and jagged. In that instant he had known that the back of Julie's head probably looked as though an invisible fist had punched its way out from the inside.

He shook his head and was silently thankful that he had not been able to see the worst of the cruel, unnecessary destruction. A mass of bloody white matter and hair stuck to the tree behind Julie had confirmed Harry's worst fears. And even while his practical mind had still been confirming so factually for him the approximate direction of the sniper – and therefore the danger – he had seen two more small holes punched into Julie's chest.

Again the attacks looked small, but Harry knew that the sniper's bullets would have heralded a much more violent, gruesome destruction within. Two more fists had propelled considerable portions of the young woman's lungs and shattered ribs through gaping holes in her back, plastering the tree behind her.

Harry tried to shake the thoughts from his mind. Julie, the gushing, positive, smiling actress had been dead before her shocked face had kissed the earth.

And the rest of the group had been running ever since.



"What the hell is going on?"

Will Vain blurted the words in a shrill whisper in deference to Harry Langford's constant insistence on quiet. The young doctor ceased trying to make any pretence at checking Emily

Beach's condition, glaring at Harry as though the horror of Julie Daniel's death was somehow the older man's fault. And while Emily was clearly in shock, she was not physically harmed, so Will had no time for pandering to her. The young doctor had dutifully followed Carrie Long's lead, quickly checking the group for injuries, but he could not pretend for long to be concerned with medical matters.

"Keep your voice down!" whispered Harry tersely. "*Keep it down!*"

"The *hell* I will!" snapped the doctor, though he did. His face twisted in a resentful blend of wild fear and incensed rage, but even so he had the sense not to unnecessarily attract danger. His voice remained shrill with tension. "Didn't you *see* that? That *actress-girl was...*"

"We *all* saw it," said Harry curtly, his voice barely above a whisper. He continued to search the thick forest for dangers, giving little more than token attention to the pouting doctor, though he did give a brief, brusque explanation. "We're being hunted. *There!* Does *that* help? Now, *shut up* before you get someone else killed!"

"*Hunted!*" blurted the doctor, more out of indignation than as a genuine question.

Harry reacted instantly, striking the younger man hard across the face with the back of his right hand. Then, in a quick, efficient, fluid motion, he used a simple combination of a tripping motion with one foot while his heavy bodyweight knocked the ranting doctor hard on to his back upon the earth. The ex-army man completed the move by totally incapacitating his opponent with a thrusting forearm that came down with measured force upon Will Vain's throat, silencing him instantly, except for a series of shrill, pain-filled gasps.

"Close your gaping hole *now!*" growled Harry, always quiet, but nonetheless devastatingly threatening. "You can complain *later*. But right now, *yes – someone is* hunting us, and if you keep running off at the mouth like that, you're gonna get someone *else* killed. And it might be me. *Got it?* Now, I'm real sorry about the actress, but she's dead. It's done! Deal with it. Let's save the lives that are left! *Okay?* So, you can feel free to get *yourself* killed with your big mouth, but you sure as hell can't do it for *us!* *Got it?*"

The group was held in fearful awe by the speed and decisiveness of Harry's attack, and not a sound emanated from any individual. More importantly, the panicking, pouting young doctor was shocked into rethinking his actions, and he fell dutifully silent, despite his anger and considerable pain. A tiny trickle of blood oozed from one of Will's nostrils as Harry eased off him.

"Now, kindly *be quiet!*" whispered the older man tersely, reinforcing his will upon the group while addressing only one man. A moment later Harry's feigned anger dissipated, and he was calm again, though still forceful as he eyed each person, doing his best to give a hasty

explanation of the situation as he saw it.

“Yes, we’re being hunted,” he whispered. “That explains the mines on the coast, and those filthy great block walls. Now, if you want to live, keep your heads and your voices down. *Be quiet! All of you!*”

He held a vertical finger to his lips to punctuate his will, then carefully, slowly peeked through the foliage once more in a slow arc. Upon completing his circular scan, he found himself almost face to face with the nurse, Carrie Long.

The tall, blue-eyed brunette sported small grass and earth stains on her otherwise clean fatigues, and sweat caused her face and neck to glisten as she drew long, quiet, controlled breaths. She was a country girl by admission, and in the heat of the moment, she looked tough and fit, and maybe even ready for combat. Harry was momentarily shocked by her practical mix of strength and beauty, of raw courage and obvious appeal.

“Nice move,” she whispered.

Harry could tell immediately that she approved as much of his ability to silence the whining doctor, as much as she disapproved of Will Vain’s dangerously loud griping. It wasn’t difficult to see how such unguarded sounds could place the entire group in danger. Still, she couldn’t hide her concern, and voiced it quickly and quietly.

“But what now?”

“Don’t know,” admitted Harry. He glanced about once more, reacquainting himself with the frightened and confused members of a group he suddenly felt naturally responsible for. After another cautious scan of the forest, he found himself staring back into Carrie Long’s striking blue eyes.

She stared, waiting.

He blinked hard.

“Well, you’re the army-man,” she whispered, badgering good-naturedly, yet clearly hoping for wise guidance.

“Retired,” he corrected, equally light-hearted. He shrugged. “Some high ground would be a nice start.”

“High ground,” she repeated.

“And an assault rifle would be better.”

She simply smiled, well familiar with the type of weapon, as well as the sentiment. Then she rubbed the side of her neck, toying with a red spot there.

“My neck hurts,” she said. “Mosquito must have bit me. It’s a bad one though.”

Harry used it as an excuse to check her more closely, unable to avoid her attractiveness.

Then he leaned close and exposed his own neck to her, suffering a similar ailment.

“Probably not a mozzie,” he speculated. “More likely a needle hole – where they drugged us. I’ve got one too. I saw the doc rubbing his neck too, and I can tell you for a fact that the blonde’s definitely got one. The dead girl had one too. I saw.”

Carrie scratched the red mark some more, inflaming it until it wept.

“Damn!” she whispered jovially. “You check all the girls’ necks?”

“Absolutely,” he replied with a smile.

He stared at her, their eyes locking for some seconds, but given the intensity of the situation, it felt like an eternity to both. Deep concern was etched in the older man’s face, and it was obvious even in those fleeting moments that he felt personally responsible for the welfare of each person present. And as much as the thought shocked her, Carrie had to wonder if it might be nice to have such a man care just for her. She no sooner pondered the thought than she felt surprised for even thinking it, given the dire circumstances.

Still, the thought lingered.

Harry too, felt his heart lurch, betraying him in a moment.

He had been alone for some years, and Carrie was... *beautiful*. Yes, that was it. *Beautiful. Truly lovely*. The chemistry was instant and overwhelming, shaking him to the core, as much as any bullet might ever be able to do. He swallowed and looked suddenly vulnerable, but she had already seen the shimmer in his eyes.

It was she who broke their gaze, equally shaken, and suddenly embarrassed.

Not now, Harry warned himself silently. He just *might* have been the loneliest man on the planet, and *she just might have been* the loveliest vision he had ever encountered, but *this was not the time...*



Harry knew that God had always given him the ability to remain calm.

Even before he decided to turn to God some years before quitting the army, he had always known that God was real – a real person – and that he was doubtless looking after Harry. Enough close calls had convinced him of it.

In the end, after witnessing enough tough situations and all the losses that come with those, it seemed a natural progression for the army man to put his faith in the One who knew the future, and held it in his hand.

At first he had feared that the contradiction between Christian and soldier might prove too much. After all, how could a military man, whose job it was to fight and to kill if necessary, also

be a man of God? It barely seemed possible. But as he read his Bible, Harry had discovered that it was full of warriors and heroes, armies and conflicts, and rather than suffer inner conflict, he had found himself living up to a higher standard than ever before.

Having certain assurance that Jesus Christ, who was actually God in the flesh, had died for him to save him from his sins and the debt that he owed God for those, Harry had found new freedoms. He had become calmer, no longer feeling that every outcome resided upon his shoulders, and that he should blame himself for failures to attain given objectives.

Though the losses had still hurt him deeply. Indeed, it was the loss of certain soldiers in his charge that had finally broken his heart and convinced him to move on to easier things. Just the same, becoming a Christian had made him somewhat more fearless, rather than fearful and hesitant, and a much better soldier.

Indeed, he had even learned compassion on the battlefield – something not all soldiers are capable of, or even dare to embrace.

But those days were in the past. Even soldiers who loved their work had to eventually make a decision to rise up through the ranks as a career officer, or to call it a day, knowing that with the passing of younger years, the rugged lifestyle simply begins to cost too much.

And being a practical man – a warrior – Harry knew he could never function happily behind a desk. Residing behind the safety of the frontline, and being forced to send young men and women to their possible deaths was not something he thought he could stomach.

It just wasn't him.

He had been a man of action from the beginning, and somehow epaulets, stars and oak leaves didn't seem worth the pain he knew would come with them.

Hiding in the jungle, unarmed and with no idea of how he got there, and desperately trying to keep those in his care alive and unharmed didn't seem like a picnic to Harry either. But at least he was doing what he had been trained to do – to fight and to preserve the lives of those in his care.

Disconcerting as his situation was, Harry mused with as much good humour as he could muster, perhaps it was still better than riding a desk... In any case, it was definitely going to be one of those times when he would see whether God was going to see him safely through his ordeal, or perhaps take him home.

“Just like the good old days,” he whispered to himself.



Having heard the whip of a bullet slicing the air, one never forgets.

Harry knew from bitter experience that almost without exception a sniper's bullet delivered death before the rifle-crack could warn of the impending doom. It was a simple matter of physics. High-powered bullets travel at a speed exceeding that of sound, so no matter how fast a person's reflexes, there was simply no way of having time to duck for cover. The bullet arrived before the sound of the explosion that propelled it. Hence, a passable marksman with a reasonable rifle could easily dispense with any opponent. Fairness never entered the equation.

But a silenced rifle was even worse. *Far worse...*

Without the natural warning given by the report of the sniper's rifle, it remained impossible for Harry to know exactly where the bullets were coming from. Moreover, most of the group remained unaware that the invisible, high-pitched whipping talons that stung the leaves above them were actually lethal high-velocity bullets. It took Harry Langford only a second to recognise the hushed betrayal of a silenced rifle spitting death once more through the forest, but even in that time three lead projectiles had marauded ravaging paths over the heads of the cowering group.

"*Down!*" he spat, his voice a mix of forced whisper and terse command.

A flurry of arms and legs heralded the arrival of all five survivors upon the soft earth, but even in that time Harry counted three more bullets slicing through the bushes. A heavy fern frond, shattered and severed somewhere above him, dropped silently down to rest upon his head, and caused him to momentarily lash out, batting it away with a hand.

"*Damn this guy!*" he growled. "Everybody stay *down!*"

Behind him he heard a female cry of shock, low and little more than a whimper at first, but growing quickly in volume. He glanced around to see Emily Beach, the young blonde stenographer gripping her left shoulder, a small amount of blood trickling between the fingers of her right hand, which she had instinctively placed over a wound. In shock, and ravaged by deep fear, Emily began to thrash about, her voice rising with each of a series of panicked cries of terror. It was apparent she believed she would die from what was merely a fleshwound.

"*Silence her!*" Harry barked, his eyes flashing to Pete Becker, the closest man to the wailing, hysterical woman. "*Shut her up, dammit!*"

Terrified, and by his own admission not the outdoors-kind-of-guy, Becker did the only thing he could think of in the circumstances. He sprang down upon the writhing woman without hesitation, then slapped her face in an effort to snap her out of her growing panic. And while the crude method worked, Harry could not help but wonder if the young lawyer had watched one too many old movies, where the ranting starlet had been forced back to sensibility by the slapping hand of the leading man. It struck Harry as a strange thought given the situation, but then, his

mind had always remained aloof and calm under pressure.

That was his gift.

He turned back to check on the welfare of Carrie Long, and was particularly pleased to see her sprawled low between two rolling mounds of grassy earth, probably safer than anyone else in the group. Harry glanced up once more.

Two more invisible enemies sliced audibly through the canopy of leaves and ferns, passing just above those who lay hidden, and finally giving Harry the knowledge he needed. In quick succession he watched as several more ferns and twigs were severed, the delay in their demise giving away the direction of the sniper. His suspicion about the direction of the shooter was confirmed a moment later as a bullet struck a nearby tree, tearing out a sizeable chunk of bark and spraying it about like shrapnel.

"Hollow points!" he growled bitterly. "He's using hollow points. Maybe even modified rounds."

It certainly explained the haunting vision in his head of the mass of matter he had seen spraying out behind Julie Daniel's head and back.

"What?" Carrie Long's face look puzzled, as though she had not heard him correctly.

"Doesn't matter!" barked Harry, his mind snapping from angry indignation back to survival, and the protection of his underlings. He pointed away from the direction of the sniper to a dry creek bed that he knew would afford ample cover for a retreat.

"We need to go!" he snapped sharply, though still keeping his intentions as quiet and secret from the sniper as possible. *"Now! Move! Move!"*

He grasped Carrie's nearest ankle and began dragging her backwards along the channel in which she had taken cover, speeding her retreat while allowing her to remain low. Rough as his actions were, she did not complain.

Will Vain, the argumentative doctor who had looked just a short while earlier like he might easily become a source of annoyance to Harry, suddenly began to follow the older man's lead without question, and even to help enforce the army-man's will. Still trying to stay as quiet as possible, the doctor began to help urge the others on.

"Come on, you guys!" Will whispered shrilly, rising just slightly from his crouching position and pushing the lawyer, Pete Becker and his whimpering blonde friend, Emily Beach down into the riverbed. *"Come on! Come on! He's going to shoot us if we don't hurry up! Come on! Come..."*

That was all Will Vain said.

The unjacketed, modified hollow-point struck the doctor with devastating effect, just above

his right eye, tearing a path from front to back, and splintering apart as it went, just as intended by its maker. The young man's head exploded as though a small bomb had been inserted into his brain, just above his right ear. His skull blew out, evacuating a third of his well-educated brain and spraying it forth into the air in a lavish display of red and white death.

Will stopped all movement and simply hovered for a time, his eyes and face still intact, but with a large, bloody chunk of his head missing from front to back along the right side. He looked surprised and even disappointed, and grotesquely incomplete. Then, slowly, his eyes rolled and he slumped to his right, spitting forth a small fountain of blood as he went.

Mercifully, Harry thought, the young man had the decency to fall on to the side with the gaping headwound, largely containing the worst of the bloody emission, and hiding the worst of the horror from those who could not help but stare. Again, Harry realised, it was a morbid thought to have in the midst of death and carnage, but he had always possessed the clarity to think like that.

And given the presence of the terrified, horrified people in his care, they didn't seem unreasonable thoughts. Harry led the gasping, mortified group into the relative safety of the narrow creek bed and then made a hasty retreat from the latest deadly attack.



Pausing in the bushes behind the cover of a particularly large hardwood, Harry crouched and peered once more through the leaves. His mind raced, thinking on several planes simultaneously, searching for answers. The death of Will Vain burned fiercely in his mind, adding to the burning fury he already felt for the actress, Julie Daniel.

Somehow he had to find a way to keep the innocents in his care safe from a sniper's bullets. And somehow he had to help them deal with the brutal, bloody murder of those who had already fallen. Not that blood and death made him squirm for his own sake, but he knew that novices could hardly be expected to handle it well. For that matter, he knew from bitter experience that in quiet moments later on, such scenes would come back to haunt them all with a bitter vengeance. The pretty actress and the doctor were already vivid accusers in his mind.

But no. For the immediate present there was something he feared even more than the ghosts he knew would come to haunt him... *if he survived*. For now, there was something much more... *haunting*.

In a different lifetime Harry had made his living at killing. He knew all about armed opponents, and how to deal with them. They were inevitably human, and therefore eventually prone to making mistakes, and they were certainly bound by the natural sounds and movements

necessary to stalk prey, whether in a forest or on a city street.

The bewildered veteran felt a cold shiver pass through his adrenalin-racked body. Doing his best to remain completely still and silent, he strained every sinew and sense, searching for the killer or killers he knew would surely be pursuing the imperilled group.

But there was nothing. The pursuing sniper was utterly silent. Utterly invisible.

CHAPTER 2

Paul Moore peered out through the window of the chopper, its rotors above him whirring so fast as to appear little more than a circular blur in the bright mid-morning sunlight.

The chopper was not new, and indeed appeared to be almost military in its heavy construction and basic interior. Its engine and blades seemed to thump, the resonance of the machine changing from time to time until it played games in his mind.

There was not a cloud in the sky to cast a shadow on the view below, nor a cloud on the horizon in Moore's mind to dim his future vision. Even the crude interior of the helicopter, and its constantly changing heavy beat could not detract from his positive countenance. He had waited months for this experience, paid a fortune for it, and now nothing could dampen his excitement.

The scene below was not entirely what he had envisioned, but then, with such secrecy, and with his adventure coming at such a high price, he could hardly be surprised. After all, the Reality Extreme Graphics salespeople had made it abundantly clear from the outset that this would be the ultimate experience of Paul's life, complete with the secrecy that might normally surround such a venture – if it *was real*.

All part of the unique REG experience, they had promised. And so far, the *venture* was proving tantalisingly clandestine.

He swigged down the last of a glass of chardonnay and shivered with anticipation. The chopper flight had not been quiet or smooth, and indeed resembled what he imagined a flight over a warzone in a military chopper might feel like. The crudeness of the dark chopper seemed out of place with the fine drink he had been served, and most certainly contrasted with the crisply dressed, wonderfully attractive hostess who had accompanied him.

Still, he could hardly complain. REG had promised this would be an amazing experience from beginning to end, and so far he could not argue.

His fine Italian suit remained crisp and unstained by the experience, although he felt a

constant need to stay away from the walls of the chopper for fear of dust or grime. The particularly attractive blonde hostess opposite took the empty crystal dutifully from him, and he smiled warmly at her, enjoying one more glance at the lovely creature who had accompanied him as part of the overall REG experience.

Courtney Hoffman, she had said her name was.

Courtney. Paul might have dreamed about her at any other time in his life, but not now. *Not today.*

She looked to be in her mid thirties, and while her stature was short and slim, even petit, her pale blonde hair was almost disproportionately long, trailing down to the small of her back. Her eyes were magnificent sky-blue, everything Paul imagined he would enjoy in a female companion, or even a wife.

He had been instantly attracted to her, and while at any other time he would have done everything in his power to charm her, his mind was racing now, and far from thoughts of passing pleasures. In any case, she was on the REG payroll, and while she rolled her eyes at him and gave occasional suggestive smiles that silently promised that she was also very interested in him, he felt certain she was just another sales ploy.

Just another part of the REG experience.

Paul Moore was himself quite a catch. At forty-seven he sported the rugged handsomeness that some men develop with life's experiences. Tough and resourceful, though never cruel, his face exuded a maturity and strength gained only by living life to the full, experiencing both victories and defeats, with little fear of either. Sporting short, well-groomed dark hair and a well-trimmed beard and moustache, all with a touch of salt and pepper, he looked dashing and confident.

All this, complimented with engaging steel-blue eyes and a smile that could disarm and charm at will. Furthermore, having been widowed some years earlier, he was used to the advances of women. Indeed, he rather expected that his lovely hostess might even be genuine in her occasional flirting smiles.

But it didn't matter. Not today.

As for Courtney, she might have offered her handsome client another drink but for the fact that he was clearly already otherwise occupied, straining against the window and obviously agog with anticipation, his eyes no longer appreciating *her*, but now the landscape below.

Not that it would have mattered even if he *had* been more interested in her than the scene below. Courtney knew very well the stringent rules about company secrecy, and that any genuine effort to relate to clients on a personal level was entirely forbidden. She felt a heavy twinge of

disappointment.

Deep down she longed for a man to come and save her.

The REG facility was not at all what Paul Moore had imagined it might be. As the chopper flew in low, then rotated a smooth half-turn and began a rather rapid final descent, it was apparent that the pilot was under strict orders to get the bird down quickly.

Typical REG, mused Moore. *Clandestine, just like everything else they did. Don't let the visitors have too long to get their bearings. Mustn't let them know even where they are, or even what was below.* All he *did* know was that he had travelled across a considerable body of water to arrive at this secret location. Presumably they were well out at sea.

Still, he knew it would be worth the wait. The tingling in his bones told him so.

As the bird descended, he had just seconds to take in his destination. To his left he could make out a small town, its buildings concentrated in several blocks with sealed streets. There were a few vehicles here and there, though no obvious movement of people, and the tiny town was separated from the chopper's landing pad by a dense forest.

It was impossible to get any real sense of the size of the town since the chopper rotated and dropped with such speed as to give him only seconds to take it in. There were thick wooded areas in other directions too, the scene appearing somewhat tropical. Entire forests, in fact, and *that* was not at all what he expected. In his mind he had pictured something more... *metropolitan*.

As the chopper descended, the peering visitor caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a shining metal structure in the distance. It was not near the town, but looked large enough to be an enclosed sporting arena or a large aeroplane hangar. Strangely though, it appeared not to be surrounded by city buildings or even close by a runway, but rather, amid more forest. The shining metal monolith was gone in seconds, slipping into the cover of trees, and while its sheer size aroused Paul Moore's interest, once gone, he could not imagine its role.

Still, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Not the unexpected setting to which he found himself being delivered, nor even the amazing beauty seated opposite, who still smiled when she caught his eye. So close to his goal, there was only *one thing* that mattered now. He had paid a considerable sum to take this trip, and he had no doubt his investment would pay large dividends in time.

After all, for a mere *three million dollars* he would get to enjoy the most spectacular experience of his life, while at the same time gaining new perspectives on what might be accomplished in his own computer graphics gaming business back home. By taking up REG's unusual invitation, he could relish the opportunity to lose his inhibitions in what was touted to be

the most realistic graphics game of all time, while using the experience to gain new directions in his own gaming software development.

It seemed like a win-win situation.



The young hostess, Courtney Hoffman led Paul Moore from the helipad to a raised concrete structure not far away, where a pair of large, hinged metal doors barred their way. She punched in a code on a number-pad mounted into a wall, then led her guest through, even while the imposing, heavy doors were still swinging open to the sound of whirring electric motors.

Paul took one last look at the bright, beautiful day and the large, noisy chopper, then dutifully followed his lovely hostess into the uninviting dimness beyond. Like everything REG had promised, the scene seemed larger than life, something akin to a military emplacement.

Ahead of them a long corridor twisted and turned its way down into the earth at an easy grade, giving the impression to the nervous, excited businessman that he might be entering some kind of secret spy-world, or perhaps a forgotten military bunker designed to withstand a nuclear blast.

Small electric bulbs lighted the way, which was dull and drab, a narrow tunnel with solid concrete for walls, ceiling and floor. The air became quickly cooler as they left the morning sun and tropical scenes behind, and Paul's senses buzzed with anticipation.

As Paul followed closely behind the vision of beauty, he became aware of the natural light ebbing behind him, as the heavy metal doors slowly closed once more. He flinched as they clanged shut, and then all was silent, with even the whirring chopper no longer audible. Only the soft padding of their shoes accompanied them, and the sounds of their breaths.

The path down which Courtney led her wealthy visitor was unadorned and only dimly lit, especially since the entrance doors had closed. The downward grade continued, giving the impression that one might be entering a cold, dark tomb directly beneath the helipad. A series of various sized conduits snaked along the ceiling, water and electrical supplies that gave an impression of stark practicality, rather than the more refined images given by REG to this point.

Military helicopters and nuclear-proof bunkers hardly seemed a shadow of what REG had promised, Paul mused.

A wealthy, successful businessman, Paul Moore felt no pressing moral need to take his eyes off the rather attractive hostess who led him toward his long-awaited destination. Still, striking as his guide was, he could not help but feel somewhat daunted by what seemed to him to be a rather burdensome and overzealous attempt to secure the REG installation. Instead of an invitation to

play what was secretly touted to be the most advanced computer game on the planet, he felt as though perhaps he was entering a dungeon from which he might never return. He almost expected to encounter warring generals preparing to strike at another country, rather than the wild fantasy he had been promised.

Fantasy, he mused, his mind wandering nervously.

That was somewhat of an understatement. *Abandonment, more likely.*

The dark nature of his secret dream seemed to be matched perfectly by REG's obvious efforts to guarantee security and secrecy. As a successful software engineer, Paul's own company had taken many stringent efforts over the years to ensure that no thief could purloin their programming treasures, but no security measure he had set in place could compare with this. If not for the delightful hostess and her constant reassuring smiles, he might have believed he had taken the wrong flight.

It's only a computer game, he reminded himself.

After one more corner the narrow corridor levelled out, and a well lit room appeared. Barring the way was another door, tall and wide, this time made of thick metal bars. It reminded Paul of a jail door, where one could see what was on the other side, but do nothing to gain access without a key. And indeed, instead of an electronic lock with a number pad, this time it clearly relied on having a key and a combination, similar in design to a safe, where the tumbler was accessible from both sides of the door.

A bit archaic for a high-tech establishment, Paul thought.

Archaic, perhaps, but effective nonetheless. Paul watched as a guard came to the opposite side of the door and rotated the tumbler mechanism back and forth for a time, and then took a key that hung from a long, gold chain and inserted it into the large lock. There came a satisfying metallic clicking sound, and the guard withdrew the key once more, then pulled down on a handle.

"See," she grinned, flashing a mischievous grin at her guest as his eyes were naturally drawn from the impressive cavern and back to her lovely face. "Light at the end of the tunnel, Mister Moore."

"Absolutely stunning," he replied, staring right at her to give his reply a double meaning. *"Really beautiful.* And like I told you before, please call me Paul."

She shook her head negatively, smitten by his gaze, and moved by his adoration.

"Sorry, Mister Moore. I cannot. Company rules." Then, with a yearning look, she added, "No matter how much I might like to."

Paul exhaled audibly, unwilling to hide his attraction to her. She was window dressing. He

knew that. But he couldn't help but think she was lovely too. More than simply attractive. He sighed. REG knew how to pick their staff, apparently.

Courtney slid the door to one side, and it moved easily upon hidden rollers.

Upon stepping through Paul found himself in a well lit office area, complete with desks, comfortable chairs, and computers. He couldn't help but wonder how far underground he was, but the bland, sloping tunnel had left him unsure. What he did know for certain was that the unadorned concrete corridor had given way to a tastefully decorated, inviting office and lobby. It was like stepping into a lush, warm hidden world after the cold, dim entrance.

But far more intriguing, was what lay beyond the entrance area.

It became immediately obvious that the room beyond was nothing short of an enormous bunker, as large as a several-storey building, but without most of the usual vertical supports. Paul realised that the hill upon which the helipad was located was actually hollow, and with the aid of concrete and steel, an enormous cavern had been forged and reinforced to afford the perfect den of secrecy in which to develop REG's gaming software. Whether natural or just simply modified, the bunker was imposing and quite breathtaking, and Paul could not help but pause to stare.

"Talk about overkill. Damn! I've found the bat cave," he murmured, his eyes wandering in disbelief at the sheer magnitude of the underground room.

"Not the bat cave," a male voice suddenly announced behind him. "More of a... *hunter's den*."

Paul turned to see a tall, thin man with long, scruffy sandy hair walking in his direction, a wide grin plastered all over his face. The man was handed the gold chain and key that had granted Paul and Courtney access through the barred door, which he then draped around his neck and tucked the loose end down into his loosely buttoned shirt.

The man then came and stood close to Paul, thrusting out his hand in a welcoming gesture. He was dressed neatly in tan slacks and a pinstriped, white shirt that was not fully buttoned so as to maintain a relaxed air, and obviously to allow him constant access to the metal gate key. While he was neat in appearance, it wasn't just his shirt, but his whole being that exuded a certain relaxed style about him, even more than Paul remembered from their first interview.

"Paul. Paul Moore!" the man sprouted loudly, as though he might be addressing an old friend. "Vince Vanderman. Remember?"

"Of course," nodded Paul, and he smiled back at the friendly face of his host.

The pair shook hands vigorously as Vince placed his free hand upon Paul's shoulder. Only upon seeing the owner of the project once more did Paul fully recall just how excited Vince

Vanderman had been about his new software. Indeed, it was Vince's sheer enthusiasm that had sold Paul on the idea of such a wanton use of company funds for a mere three days of pleasure. Vince had been nothing short of effervescent, and indeed still appeared to be.

"So glad you decided to come!" gushed Vince. "You're just going to *love* what we do here. I just know you'll never be the same for the experience! I promise you!"

"Well, I certainly hope so," agreed Paul, nodding and smiling in return. He spoke with humour, but there was a definite expectation of satisfaction in his words. "Three million dollars for three days. That's a lot of money. This will want to be good."

Vince never skipped a beat, but continued to pronounce loudly his complete faith in his product's ability to please paying clients.

"Satisfaction guaranteed!" exuded the host. "Like I told you at our initial interview, think of this as an *investment*. *More* than just a game for three days. In fact, we promise you'll go home a different man to the one you came. Our experience is *that* good! No words can do our technology justice. Of that you have my *personal* guarantee. But you know this already. So come now. Let us get you settled, and then we'll get your blood pumping like never before."

The proud scientist shot a brief glance at the attractive blonde hostess, who remained standing dutifully silent as the two men exchanged greetings. Courtney Hoffman simply nodded obediently, then turned to leave. As her boss wrapped an arm about his high-paying guest's shoulders and began to lead him away, Paul Moore could not help but gaze upon her once more, keen to have a memory of her etched firmly into his mind.

Indeed, he realised, as much as he tried to convince himself that she was nothing more than window dressing, she had touched him to the very core of his being.

And Courtney Hoffman was looking back.



The virtual reality suit was not like Paul had imagined it would be.

Vince Vanderman stood close by, so often smiling as he explained some basics about his treasured creation. His thinning, long sandy hair seemed almost unruly, detracting from the otherwise neat perception the scientist presented, and certainly not in line with the business-like manner he had maintained at their initial meeting. But Vince was beyond caring, his exuberance unable to be contained as he took immense pride in preparing his newest client to take part in his master creation – *the games*.

To Paul's delight, having briefly sent her away, Vince had Courtney Hoffman return to help demonstrate the VR suit. She was very careful not to be seen flirting with her guest, though she

sent Paul several clandestine glances when she knew her boss could not see her face. Paul could not help but notice that she looked nervous, barely speaking, and certainly not daring to smile at him as she had so openly done earlier. It seemed very obvious that she was afraid of her boss, not daring to allow even the slightest hint of attraction to be seen.

In deference, Paul met her secretive glances with keen interest, but nothing more.

At first glance the VR suit resembled something akin to a diver's wetsuit, though it was remarkably lightweight and air-conditioned. It was snug fitting and comfortable, with a strong harness and wiring plug that could be connected overhead after the client was ready to play. The harness would allow the wearer to be lifted into the air, while the wiring plug would connect the suit to the heart of Vince's masterpiece – his gaming software.

"We won't get you to put the suit on just yet," explained its proud creator. "There are some small matters to take care of first. But I wanted to show you a sample of the treat you are in for. After all, I am aware that you've paid handsomely for the pleasure of playing our games."

"Yes," agreed Paul, nodding and making a face. "Three million puts a dent in my company's annual budget, I can assure you. Still, as I told my staff, I'm not just frittering it away on a game. I consider this an investment in my company – if you don't mind me saying so. Ideas I get here I can go home and apply to my own gaming software."

"Oh, please do," invited Vince. "As I explained at our initial meeting, I'd be most happy for you to do that. And I promise you; your money will be well spent here. On that you have my word. Of course, you understand that I can't allow you to see the inner workings of the graphics or gaming software code."

"Oh, and I was kind of hoping you would," prodded Paul, joking. He understood the need for secrecy in such matters very well. Code and trade secrets were the holy grail of the industry.

Vince simply smirked, then ignored the comment. He motioned with a hand for Courtney to help their guest put a hand inside one of the VR suit's sleeves. Even as the hostess helped Paul to prepare, he could feel the tiny touch-pads within, but they were soft and flexible, and he knew that once a person had the suit on, he or she would forget all about them.

"No spherical dynamic," noted Paul, his eyes unable to resist taking in his surroundings, despite the burning desire to gaze upon Courtney Hoffman as she pulled at the sleeve to get it fully on his arm. With the zipper on the front of the suit fully open, he could get a feel for it without actually putting it on. And with his eyes constantly being drawn to the lovely hostess who helped him, he thought it best to keep her boss talking.

"That's a different approach," he noted.

"You mean the three circular frames, all pivoting inside one another," noted Vince, more

making a statement than asking a question. “No, we went away from that concept right from the beginning. You see, our games rely on you – the player – being able to run and jump and tumble, and do all the things you might normally do in a real-life situation.

“So, our games use a dynamic support system for your feet – not unlike standing on numerous landing pads, or a large beachball – to allow you to turn and run in all directions, while you feel as though you are constantly in contact with the ground. The spherical concept might be great for a game where you are flying a jet, Mister Moore, but not when you’re hunting your enemy on the ground.”

“Excellent,” agreed Paul, nodding, and staring up at the complicated metal arm that would suspend him from a frame high above. Various hinged joints and pneumatic pistons gave the impression of a robotic arm that had the potential to lift the player high above the floor, a prospect that sent a shiver of fear through the astonished guest.

“I’m a bit afraid of heights,” Paul admitted. “Tell me that thing isn’t going to have me all the way up there – please.”

“Oh, but it will,” countered Vince, making no apology for the admission. “But you must trust us, Mister Moore. The machine will lift you up several metres above the ground, but only so that if you choose to jump down somewhere in the game, the sensation of falling can be accurately simulated by the computer. The machine will also bring various surfaces to bear beneath your feet at all times so that you will never be aware of anything other than standing on terra firma. Come now, Mister Moore – you’re a gaming programmer. You *must* understand this.”

Vince grinned reassuringly, and Paul gave a weak smile.

“And besides, the programming would *never* allow you to fall so far that you could be harmed. You *have* to be lifted up so that the computer can simulate every movement you make – but it will never allow you to be in any danger. And in any case, once you put the glasses on, you’ll have no concept of height. To you, it will appear that you are in the city, and your feet will always be on the ground.”

“With no concept of heights?”

“You must trust us,” Vince promised. “Once the game starts, you’ll *believe totally* that you are there. And *that* is where the real fun starts. *Realistic graphics* are only a small part of the thrill of our games, I promise you. You’ll be able to kill anyone you want – wipe out all your enemies with ease. But no matter what happens, *you* cannot be harmed. No matter how real the game may seem, you must try to keep this in the back of your mind at all times. In keeping with reality, you will not be invincible in the game, but you *will never be in danger*.”

“Yeah, I’ll try to remember,” acknowledged Paul, though he still looked slightly nervous. He glanced up once more to consider just how high the rig might eventually lift him, and his mind flashed back with clarity to the first time he had ever heard the impressive REG sales spiel.

Realistic Games! Hunt and kill realistic opponents so lifelike that you’ll believe you’re there! You – the hunter! You – invincible!

This wasn’t the first time Paul had heard the word *invincible*. And indeed, all had been explained at their first meeting, but now that he was finally ready to play – at a cost of millions of dollars - the connotation of how and when he would be *invincible* definitely more refined now than when he had signed up.

Unable to be harmed in the real world, but not invincible in the game... The difference was stark. Moreover, the prospect of being suspended high above the ground was not pleasant at all to Paul. A reassuring smile from Courtney seemed to go a small way to convincing him that all would be well.

Vince Vanderman beamed with pride over his creation.

“You’re going to find this is far more than the usual VR suit,” he sprouted. “As a fellow programmer, I’m sure you’re going to find our life-like programming the ultimate goal for your company to strive toward. And if our programming isn’t enough to thrill you, you’re going to find our graphics... absolutely astounding! You may never see anything so lifelike ever again.”

“I believe you may be right,” admitted Paul, gazing around at the mechanical and computerised monolith. The extravagance and complexity of the hardware involved was obvious even at a glance, and he had no doubt that when coupled with the advanced programming that had been described, he was in for the ride of his life.

“Three days of this. I just might get my three million dollars worth after all.”

“Oh, you will,” gloated his host, very happy to brag.

As always, Vince sounded light-hearted, but there was no doubt that there was a very serious undertone in his message.

“But again, I must warn you, Mister Moore, while we here at REG are happy to share our advanced graphics experience with our clients, you will naturally appreciate that we cannot be expected to release our trade secrets to you. No matter *how much* you enjoy your time here.”

“A pity,” Paul offered suggestively, hoping for some hint of leniency.

“Sad, but true,” assured Vince, refusing to give him any hope.

Paul smirked. *A true businessman at heart*, he mused.

“Of course not,” he agreed.

Happy that he had made his point, Vince was elated to continue bragging.

“So, this is the love of my life,” he explained, looking easily as smitten as a man newly in love.

In that moment, if it had not already been obvious enough, it was confirmed that Vince was totally, enthusiastically and unrepentantly in love with his computer games, or more precisely, the technology that made it all possible. His following explanation showed clearly that he considered his advanced software and graphics to be nothing less than the heart of his lover, his most adored quest.

“Or at least, this is the part you can see,” he said. “The software and technology that allows you to see such amazing real-life graphics must remain with us, I’m afraid to say. I could simply *never* allow you to see what we have developed in the heart of our games.”

He even used the word ‘heart’, mused Paul. He’s totally in love. A real whack-job.

“However, this little baby...” continued Vince, unaware of his client’s silent appraisal of his mental state. “This much you *can see*.” The scientist tapped one of the shining metal arms that would sustain Paul above the ground.

“This will lift you into the REG experience like you’ve never imagined before. Please, let me explain. As a fellow designer, I’m sure you will appreciate a few specifics.”

Vince held up a pair of darkened glasses, very much in appearance like regular sunglasses, though clearly they had the ability to cling to the user’s face so as to exclude outside light. He tapped them with a finger as he spoke.

“REG comprises the usual sensors to the extremities of your body, though our suit will allow you to sense touch at any part of your body, not just your fingers. Naturally, the computer is able to synchronise your body and eye movements with image-generated surroundings, but because of our advanced suit and programming, you’ll be able to feel the touch of anything you brush against, on any part of your body. These are the glasses that will provide our patented, and may I say, *most amazing* viewing experience. See, they’re not unlike a regular pair of sunglasses – at least to look at.”

The gloating scientist handed the glasses to his guest, then continued to explain.

“We’ve even managed to enhance the depth factor in them, so that we no longer need cumbersome helmets and heavy imagery devices you might be so used to.”

Paul had a mental picture of some of his own company’s VR helmets, and realised that his host was describing them exactly.

“Oh yeah,” he agreed, rolling his eyes as he pretended to despise them. “I hate those.”

Vince never caught on, but simply kept on explaining.

“With these glasses, you get enhanced graphics, without the added weight of a helmet.

Twice the viewing pleasure. And the graphics – the graphics are to die for, Mister Moore. To die for!”

Vince took a breath, realising that he was allowing his excitement to run away with him. But in reality, he simply *could not stop* gushing about his creation.

“So, while our cutting-edge graphics give the illusion of real-world surroundings, the swing-suit, as we like to call it, helps make this most amazing experience complete. Once you are strapped in to the suit and harness, you will find that the machine allows you unlimited, unrestrained movement.

“You can roll, turn, run, even fall – just as I already explained. It will be totally as if you are in the real world. You see, computer driven touch pads will constantly make contact with your body to manufacture the illusion of running or bumping into illusory images. If you bump into a wall, or even a person for that matter, you’ll feel it. The computer has the power to make you assume that all graphic surroundings are real.”

“Amazing,” acknowledged Paul, genuinely appreciative.

“Yes it is,” assured Vince, still gloating and endlessly grinning. In the presence of a fellow gamer, he could barely contain his pride.

“The programming must be...”

“Staggering.”

Vince completed the sentence for him, somewhat less than humble about his achievements.

“When you add to that the ability to carry certain weapons that sound and act just like the real thing...” He shrugged, swollen with pride as always, as if to say there was no real need for explanation. “Well, I think you get the point, Mister Moore.”

“I think I do,” nodded Paul, agog with the sheer size and complexity of the VR centre, let alone the complexity of the programming that must be running behind each mechanical masterpiece. As a fellow gaming programmer, he could not help but marvel.

“I definitely do. I most certainly do. How long before I can start?”

Vince grinned some more and shook his head.

“They *always* just want to get started,” he said. “Well, Mister Moore, it just so happens that we’ll have you in your chosen destination in just a half an hour. You chose to play our City game. A great choice to be sure. I think you’ll find our city particularly thrilling. But first, please meet my assistant, Amelia. Amelia!”

With a wave of his hand the somewhat quirky, conceited and boastful scientist beckoned to a forty-ish woman of medium height, with short brown hair, wide brown eyes and large plastic-rimmed glasses. She wore tan slacks and a white shirt, not unlike the attire of her boss, and she

sported a white labcoat, which, while giving an air of scientific expertise, did seem a little unnecessary in such surroundings.

“Please meet Miss Amelia Ulster, Mister Moore. Amelia is our computer engineer,” continued Vince, gesturing between the two. “Miss Ulster will be keeping an eye on your game as you play, making sure that all things function as they should. It’s just a formality, since nothing really *can* go wrong, as I’m sure you’re well aware. Nothing has ever gone wrong yet. Isn’t that so, Amelia?”

He shot her a look that demanded an appropriate response, though he tried to disguise the obvious prompt with another smile. Amelia nodded dutifully, then eyed their guest respectfully, trying to pretend that she was not being badgered. Still, she looked somewhat tough in her own, subtle way, and Paul could not help but wonder if there might have been a hint of tension between the pair.

“Nothing ever has,” she agreed, almost condescendingly, and while her answer seemed truthful, Paul had little doubt that she was used to giving the responses her boss demanded. She ignored her boss and dismissed the formalities, putting out her hand and proving that there was still something of a rebellious spirit hiding within her.

“Nice to meet you, Mister Moore. I know you’re just going to *love* our games. Lots of our players come back to play the city game over and over. *All the games*, for that matter.”

“Glad to hear it,” replied Paul cordially as he shook her hand.

He wanted to make a comment to the effect that the game *must* be amazing to have return customers, given the cost of it, but his attention was drawn away by the intelligent look of the woman. She was pretty, but far more attractive to him was the natural intellect she seemed to exude. She was courteous, and made striking eye contact, and Paul wanted secretly, desperately, to glean from her engineering skills. Still, he had no doubt that neither she nor Vince would be giving away trade secrets any time soon. That much had been made abundantly clear.

Having observed the introductions, Vince took control of the conversation once more.

“Amelia, here, will check that your VR suit is ready at the appropriate time, and will always be present to make sure you can escape the game at any time. She’ll also be present to answer any questions you might have during the game. You’ll be able to speak to her at all times via the small hearing aids she will place in each of your ears.”

Vince made a gesture with his hand as though he was speaking into a telephone handset.

“They come with built in microphones,” he explained. Then he glanced at his watch. “But there are others I would like you to meet before you begin your game.” He looked about hopefully. “Amelia, our other guests are not to be seen. I assume they are taking their designated

breaks, are they?"

In that moment he gestured to two more identical VR platforms further along within the dimly lit bunker. In his amazed state, Paul had not even noticed that his VR platform was not the only one within the underground structure.

"I just helped them both out of their suits," Amelia explained. She grinned, obviously sharing Vince's joy in their creations. "And they both looked pretty excited. Especially the woman. I think Mister Moore would just *love* to talk with them."

"Let's do that then," agreed her boss, not really happy to leave his genius engineer alone with a fellow programmer. "Come, please, Mister Moore. Let's introduce you to some people who have already have their lives changed by the REG experience."

"There's three of these?" he asked, though the answer was obvious.

"Oh well, yes," gloated Vince happily. "We can have three fully operational platforms in use at any time. Perhaps you will recall that there were three games for you to choose from?"

"Yes," he recalled.

"Well, it may surprise you that the programming is *so demanding*, Mister Moore, that we can only allow *one player* to play in any particular game at any time. But, should three players opt for the three games we currently offer, all three can play at once."

"That's how demanding your programming and graphics are?" Paul asked, amazed.

"Well... yes," answered Vince. "And no. You see, we *could* place two players in the same game, I suppose, but let's just say that would... take away too much pleasure from each player. Once you've played one of your games, you'll quickly come to understand that you just wouldn't want to share the experience with *anyone else*."

Paul nodded in awe, and tried to perceive just what pleasure Vince was talking about that could have players not wanting to join forces in a game. In the end, the sheer complexity and size of the gaming platforms left him with no doubt that his host must have known what he was talking about.

"One half an hour, Mister Moore," Amelia reminded him, reading the keenness in his face.

Indeed, Paul could not hide his excitement. A half hour seemed too long.

He managed to shoot the lovely Courtney Hoffman a clandestine smile as they left the VR platform, constantly agog with everything about her. There was just something... *so captivating* about her...

And he knew that whether the games lived up to their hype or not, his life had already been deeply, irreversibly touched.



Kazuki Gi looked as Japanese as his name might suggest, and seemed to be almost possessed by some form of imaginary link to his warrior history.

Acting like a warrior even in his intensity, he rarely smiled, except when recalling in broken English the various opportunities he had so greatly relished to *kill* within his chosen game. The fifty year-old businessman quickly admitted that he cared nothing for the three million dollars he spent each time he played a game, but rather that he enjoyed it so much that he would always come back for more.

Paul was inspired by the small, intense man's excitement, if not his character.

Gi was short in stature, with a crown of short black hair and almost-black eyes to match. He sported a well-trimmed moustache that seemed out of place to Paul, given that if the little man trimmed it a little more at the ends, it might have resembled that of Adolph Hitler.

Japanese with a German moustache, he mused. It didn't seem right. Still, given the brutal, sadistic tone of the Oriental, he wasn't about to question it.

Rebecca Mason-Tyler on the other hand, appeared almost the opposite of Kazuki Gi. An exaggerated English accent gave the impression of that she might be well educated, or at least well bred, but in reality she exuded more of a distasteful air of superiority and snobbery than any real sophistication.

With family money Rebecca had somehow broken into the fashion industry and made a modest name for herself. Whether successful in her own right, or perhaps relying on the family name, it didn't matter. In the end she had money to burn, and a reputation as a playgirl. She was thirty, energetic and bored – a dangerous combination. And being tall and good looking, with a long mass of auburn hair and an over-confident and pompous attitude, she had all the right ingredients to gain her admission to most parties.

Even *this* party.

Of course, REG was merely an exciting distraction for her, albeit an expensive one. In truth, it allowed her to truly indulge, both her money and her secret, hidden dark desire to kill. To Rebecca, hunting was the ultimate form of intimidation, and murder was the supreme form of domination. Vince's gaming experience pandered magnificently to her deep, inner sadistic need for control and cruelty.

"Oh, you're just going to *love* the game," she crooned, dipping her hand as though she expected Paul Moore might actually kiss the back of it. "It... amazing!"

She looked more than excited. She was *agog* – *ecstatic*. In fact, she looked so energized that she could barely maintain any façade of sophistication. Paul watched as she tried

unsuccessfully to hide her glee.

“You’ll swear you’re right there! You can actually touch your surroundings! You can feel them! And you can touch those you *kill!*” she exclaimed noisily. “It’s... it’s... *amazing!* And when you kill...! When you *kill...* Well... what can I say? I shot one man down and he actually had flames coming off his clothing. Blew a hole right through him! I actually blew another woman’s head right off, and it rolled... along the floor. Pretty little thing she was too. It was... *fantastic! Ohh!*”

Paul’s eyes widened as he listened to her brief summary of her experiences, but far more convincing than her words was her face and her demeanour. For a woman born to money and position to be revelling in such abandonment gave him more of an impression of the quality of Vince’s games than any words could ever have done. Rebecca Mason-Tyler was positively glowing.

“I’m doing the space game,” she continued, unable to stop. “Oh, you should try it. It’s just so... *amazing!* Which one are you doing? Do tell, Dear Boy.”

“The city,” Paul answered hastily, unable to resist being caught up in her infectious excitement.

“I might try that next,” Rebecca pronounced excitedly. “But oh, you have just *got* to try the space game. I shot the man in the stomach with a ray weapon. Now, I’m not normally given to gory matters...”

She hesitated, realising that she had forsaken almost all pretence of remaining demure or proper, then abandoned herself completely, unable to resist revelling fully in her glorious, murderous experience. Her eyes glistened and flashed as she remembered with as much clarity as she could muster.

“It blew a hole as big as a teacup right through the poor man,” she gushed, as if she might actually feel some faint trace of remorse for her victim. “The poor boy just stood there, staring at me. And then he looked down at the hole I’d put through him. And you wouldn’t believe it – a piece of his... dare I say... *intestines* dropped out. I mean, I could see the blast mark on the wall behind the poor dear. It was... amazing!

“I mean... not that I wanted him to suffer, but the game is *so real* that he actually looked like he *did!* He fell to the floor and... *moaned*. Can you believe that? And he bled. *Ohh!* It was... just *so real!* I just wanted to touch the... wound, you know. But of course, I didn’t. I simply *couldn’t* do that. Perhaps next time...”

“I could,” interrupted Kazuki Gi. There were short pauses between some of his words as he struggled for the correct translation. “Why not? But I use... sniper... rifle on my enemy.

Smaller holes, you see.”

“Is it good?” asked Paul, trying to gauge whether the tough Japanese businessman was enjoying his hunting game as much as Rebecca Mason-Tyler obviously was. Given the cold look of the Japanese, Paul had little doubt that Kazuki Gi would be happy enough to be killing.

Kazuki’s eyes narrowed to slits, and for a moment his face became so hard that he looked as though he might have been insulted. Then slowly, barely perceptible at first, his lips began to turn up, until he was smiling.

“It... good!” he acknowledged. He sucked in a long breath, reliving the pleasure of the chase. “The... eye-thing... the... *scope* is so good... I can... how you say – *zoom right in* on my victim? I kill one with bullet to head. Right between eye. She... no even see it coming.” He stabbed his own forehead with an extended index finger to make his point, then looked away, remembering, relishing the event. Then he added as an afterthought, “She was... very fine enemy.”

“I’ll be using a sniper rifle too,” said Paul, suddenly wondering whether he had chosen the right game. In light of Rebecca’s tale of killing at close quarters, a hint of jealousy began to creep in.

Kazuki vanquished his fears in a moment.

“Rifle good,” he promised in a confident, gravelly accent. “Scope so good you can see victim... just like they standing in front of you. If close enough, can use knife too. But be careful. If you lose fight, your game... over.” He laughed aloud. “Three million dollar gone! Must spend again to kill more!”

They all laughed, though Paul was secretly very afraid of the prospect of losing, both the game and his money. Vince Vanderman, who was standing close by, relishing his clients’ obvious appreciation of his masterpiece of creation, read Paul’s apprehension instantly, and moved quickly to remind his newest player of the danger of losing, even though they had covered it several times already.

“Yes indeed. And so I must remind you what I promised, Mister Moore” he said. “If any player should actually succeed in eliminating all six of your targets, I will give you one million of your hard-earned dollars back towards your next game as a sign of good will. And hopefully *that* will get you to spend your money with us again.

“And I believe you’ll enjoy my games *so much*... Well, *that is why* I can make you that promise. But should you lose – should one of your targets somehow kill or disable you – your game is over, and you’ll have to reschedule another game with us. There is great need for care, but we here at REG, feel that this adds another realm of realism to the games.”

“Oh, Vince, Darling,” gushed Rebecca, exaggerating her English accent once more. “Don’t bother the poor man with mere trifles. We all know we can’t be beaten! It’s never happened yet, has it Kazuki? You shouldn’t worry Mister Moore with such needless matters. The only thing you should be telling him is just how... *fantastic* the games are! I really think you should change your name to *Wonder-Man*, don’t you? You’re such a dear, dear man.”

Vince grinned, drinking in the compliment, and the promise of money he knew his English client would spend in the future. Rebecca was hooked, and Vince knew he would make a fortune from her. Still, he could not allow Paul Moore to begin a game without being certain he knew the rules.

“Remember,” repeated the scientist. “Your money is at stake here, Mister Moore. That’s part of the thrill of the game. If you win, I reward you. If you lose, you have to start again – and *pay* again. And of course, there are always more players lining up to play the games, so I can’t guarantee that you’ll be able to simply restart right away. This is not your regular computer game, you must understand.”

“So I gather,” agreed Paul nervously.

“Mister Vanderman,” offered Kazuki Gi, rather formally, though as always in broken English. “*I* will make *you* promise. I like game so much, if I kill all enemy, you keep your million dollar. Okay?”

Vince grinned again and shrugged good-naturedly.

“My friend, Mister Gi,” he agreed. “How can I possibly argue with that? If that pleases you, then so be it.”

Gi looked bewildered, so Vince simplified his answer.

“Yes.”

Gi grinned and nodded confidently. His adoration for the games was unmistakeable, and Vince relished the compliment.

“Well, Mister Moore, are you convinced yet?” he asked. “I believe it’s time for you to start your REG experience, don’t you?”

Twenty minutes later Amelia Ulster had Paul suited up within the heart of the VR machine, and ready to be transported into the untouchable, murderous world of a cold-blooded hired killer, complete with a semi-automatic sniper rifle and scope.

CHAPTER 3

Ed Waterman looked at the stars, straining his eyes for detail, and trying desperately to find a familiar constellation.

His field of view was limited, and he was forced to bend just a little to allow him to see more, but even up close to the window, there was nothing recognisable. He found it particularly eerie, given his current situation. But then, *even if he could* put everything else he knew and saw out of his mind, viewing the stars through a window beneath his feet was entirely disorienting.

The two women who had accompanied Ed through his nightmare came and stood by his side, and all three maintained regular scrutinising glances up and down the corridors, checking always for danger. None of them could fathom how stars could be visible beneath them when they were standing upright, and the strangeness of the phenomenon only served to add to their confusion and fear.

“I just don’t get it,” mused Ed out loud, sounding more tired than angry.

It made a change from earlier, when he had been fuming with wild rage, searching for someone to harm – or even kill. Now he sounded totally subdued, close to defeat.

“I’m just a taxi driver, you know. I’m no... scientist. And I just don’t get all the killin’, and the mongrel that keeps on comin’ after us. And I sure as hell don’t get this bein’ in space!”

“None of us does, Ed. This is the weirdest time of *all* our lives.”

Genie Hall reached out and touched the large man’s upper arm, warmly and firmly, like the touch of an old and trusted friend.

He was a former weight lifter, now in his late thirties, and while still very strong, he was forced to make the occasional joke about how he was suffering from a fallen chest, due to the small bulge around his middle. His brown eyes were soft, and apart from his earlier display of anger, he seemed patient and pleasant.

Genie was almost thirty, a tall, slim lawyer with short dark brown hair and matching brown eyes, and together they might have made a handsome couple, but that was not the case. Indeed, they had met only a day and a half earlier, and any closeness between them had only been forged by a terrifying mix of brutal violence and stupefying fear.

“Has it only been a day?” Ed asked in return, and he patted Genie’s hand with his own, enjoying the brief moment of human touch.

His face looked drawn and tired, and Genie found his dejection somewhat infectious, but still could not resist being close to another human being – especially the only remaining male of the group. It wasn’t sexual, so much as it was a burning need she felt to be close to someone who had already risked his life to save others, and who would undoubtedly do so again. They dared to lock eyes for just a moment, and then went back to the ritual of scouring the corridors for

dangers.

“A day and a half, I think,” came the response from the only other remaining survivor.

The third member of the trio alternated her gaze from one corridor to another, over and over, unhappy that her allies would dare to let their guards down for even a few seconds. Sherrie Vale was a country girl from birth, her small stature far from indicative of the valiant heart within. With piercing green eyes and a healthy head of long flaxen hair she looked like she might feel right at home in a salon or a mall, but in reality she was a particularly practical person, a rodeo rider, and at just twenty-two, reasonable astute and sensible.

“I don’t like to break up this fuzzy moment,” she warned, “but lest we forget, that *mongrel* is still after us. I’d just love to discuss the stars and all that, but I’d like to find a safe place to do it first... *if that’s okay.*”

“A *safe place*...” Genie Hall mused softly. “Yeah. That’d be nice.”

Normally Ed Waterman might have smiled at such mild sarcasm, and even enjoyed the young woman’s way of putting things, but he was too tired and preoccupied. Instead, he took the time to carefully examine the corridors once more, then nodded in agreement.

“My mind might be fuzzy, Sherrie,” he acknowledged, “but it’s not from any warm feeling you two lovely ladies are givin’ me. Without a watch I haven’t even got any idea how long we’ve been running for. It’s probably only a day, but it feels like three.”

He thought for a moment, glanced at the stars again, then added, “Damn not having any daylight to go by!”

“Yeah, ain’t *that* the truth,” agreed Genie, and still she didn’t remove her hand from Ed’s shoulder. There was too much reassurance to be had by that simple measure, and comfort was in scarce supply.

Somewhere along one of the corridors they heard a faint sound, like the metallic click of a door latch. It was small, but having already seen so much horror result from seemingly innocuous sounds and movements, none of the trio was prepared to sit idly by and wait. With their senses prickling the three set off once more, away from the tiny noise, and always in search of a place to hide and rest.



“So, do you really think we’re in space?”

Sherrie Vale asked the question without accent, trying not to prejudice the answer. She flicked a few unruly, long pale strands of gold from her eyes, not willing for anything to impede her view of any possible enemies.

The *spaceship* was quiet now, a twisted maze of shining metal corridors, with occasional control panels that made no sense to a country girl. Her mind could not come to grips with the concept of stars beneath her feet as well as over her head, let alone an invisible enemy that seemed to appear from nowhere and kill at will, without mercy or reason. The constant need to remain alert was telling, tiredness seeking to wedge its way into her mind and body, to dull her overloaded senses.

Ed Waterman shrugged, full of doubt and well aware that he could not be certain.

"I just can't see how it's possible," offered Genie, pre-empting any response from Ed. "I'm a lawyer, for crying out loud. I deal with facts *all day*, and all I know is I went to bed on..." She had to think. "...on Tuesday night, and woke up here on... *on this*. It doesn't make any sense to me. No. This might *look* like space, but it *sure as hell* isn't! It *can't be!*"

"Oh?" countered Sherrie, wanting to believe, but so confused that she could not. "I mean, I'm with you. I live on a property and ride horses. *Terra firma*, if you know what I mean. More firmer, less terror, if you get me. But it's just that this... This *looks so real*."

The younger woman glanced again at a window to her left, mounted so that it joined a part of the floor to the shining silvery wall of their metallic prison. Through it she could see stars sparkling in heavy blackness, with no hint of anything else recognisable at all – *stars beneath her feet*. The ceiling was the same, with another matching window mounted obliquely so that it joined the wall and revealed yet more stars.

"Stars above me... and stars below me," Sherrie groaned. "It makes no sense..."

"This is just... an illusion," insisted Genie. "Look, there's just no way that all of us could have been... magically transported to some... ship in outer space! That's just *ludicrous*. Think about it. No. This is just someone's idea of a joke. A sick joke."

"A *real sick* joke," agreed Ed, finally venturing an opinion. "And when I find out who's behind all this, you can be sure I'm gonna have a *real close* word with 'em. But until then, well... I might just be a cab driver, but this sure as hell looks real to me."

He glanced down at the starry window to an unknown outer world and tilted his head for effect. His young blonde companion, normally mature beyond her years suddenly took on a look that spoke more of shock than of fear.

"Surely, you don't think we could be on..." Sherrie hesitated. "I don't even like to say it – it sounds so stupid. But, do you think we could be on an *alien* ship?"

"*Eww, abducted by aliens*," shot back Genie, but she refrained, her need for friendship far outweighing her desire to respond with the relief of cold sarcasm. She drew a breath, then changed her tone entirely, responding without disdain. "No, Sherrie. This is man-made. You

can bet on it.”

“Then how do you explain the invisible killer?” countered her new friend, keen to react with similar strength in her statement, but trying not to alienate the older woman. “Three of our...”

Sherrie hesitated, wondering if those she had known only for a few hours could actually have been counted as friends, then decided that in the circumstances, anyone who wasn’t an enemy was most certainly a friend.

“Three of our friends have been killed and none of us even saw who killed them. And *we were all together!* Can you explain that?”

“No, I can’t,” admitted Genie. She shrugged the question off. “Look, there’s lots I don’t get about this place, but I just can’t see how we can be in space – no matter how many stars we can see.”

“Even stars beneath our feet?”

“Even stars beneath our feet. Look, have you noticed the fact that we are walking around in perfect gravity? If we were in space we’d be floating around, wouldn’t we?” Genie insisted.

Ed shrugged.

“I dunno,” he admitted. “I once read that they can make it feel like there’s gravity by making a space craft rotate, or with special shoes.”

“Well, I’m sure not wearing any special shoes,” responded the lawyer, happy to cast doubt on any suggestion that they might have been abducted to a place beyond Earth, and hence, beyond all hope as well. It was too fanciful to be possible.

“Yeah, well if you watch the stars, they *are* moving,” replied Sherrie, desperate to have her fear proven false, yet seeing evidence that Ed Waterman’s suggestion might just be plausible. She pointed. “See! If you watch them, they’re slowly moving across the window.”

Genie made a face that twisted her usually pretty features.

“Doesn’t matter,” she admonished firmly, refusing to give in. “When I see the Earth in the distance and some creepy little green man walking down the hall, I’m still going to maintain that we’re stuck in some *sick freak’s sideshow* – right here on *good old planet Earth!*”

“I wish I had your confidence,” admitted Sherrie.

“Is that how you’d argue this in court?” asked Ed, eying Genie cynically as a small smile twisted the subdued look on his face.

It was enough to defuse Genie’s bulldozer mentality, which had grown from her belief in a simple fact to a much more challenging quality as she had repeated herself. She smiled in return, realising how stressed she was. Her young female colleague’s next comment made her grin a little more.

“Well, I don’t want to meet any little green men,” Sherrie admitted softly. Then she put on her best down-home, country accent. “They ain’t probin’ nothin’!”

A small silence ensued, and then all three enjoyed a brief time of very soft, spontaneous, though guarded laughter. It was an unexpected relief, and when it was over all three went back to straining their senses for fear of being attacked again. The sounds of impending danger had been small, but definitely discernable, and it gave them some small hope of escape, as long as they remained quiet and responded quickly.

“I don’t like being hunted by something I can’t even see,” admitted Sherrie. She scratched a red mark on her neck that had been irritating her for some time. “Back on the farm I shoot all the time. But something you can’t even see? How are you supposed to defend yourself against that?”

“At least we can hear it – *or him – or them – or whoever – or whatever it is,*” noted Ed, but his comment only added to his confusion, rather than buoy his spirits.

“Well, how are you supposed to defend yourself when you haven’t even *got* a gun?” countered Genie. “I’m with you. Give me a gun and I’ll soon fix this thing – or person, or whatever it is.”

“Green man,” Sherrie joked quietly, still scratching her neck.

“Maybe,” said Ed, ignoring Sherrie’s comment and responding to Genie. He didn’t sound at all convinced. “But I dunno. When it attacked the others, I don’t think a gun would have saved them. That Mickey fella said he did some Karate, but that *sure didn’t* help him. And that other guy – Brandon, was it? He said he used to be a footballer. All that muscle didn’t make a whole lot of difference for him. Did it!”

“Yeah, and that girl said she was a fitness instructor,” added Sherrie bleakly. “She was just a bit older than me. All that fitness didn’t do *her* any good either, did it?”

With her legal mind coming instantly to the fore, and with a great desire to justify her belief that their situation was created on Earth, by men of the Earth, Genie Hall immediately began to refute her new allies’ assumptions with systematic simplicity.

“No, you’re wrong,” she began. “Think about it. Mickey Rollins might have done Karate, but he claimed he was the assistant to the Mayor. If that was true, he probably sat behind a desk all day. You all met him – be it... ever so briefly. He was hardly a practical person, and besides, I’d wager he never even *saw* a gun in his life. I think he was more lost than *anyone up here*. He was a sitting target for anyone with a few... what... *commando* skills?”

“Anyone *up here*?” shot back Sherrie, quick to jump upon the lawyer’s comment and quote it back to her. “Did I just hear you say, *up here*? I thought you said we were still on good ol’

planet Earth.”

The lawyer made a face and ignored the slip completely.

“Forget it,” she insisted. Then it was her turn to scratch her neck. “Just a figure of speech. As for the football player; by his own admission Brandon Kite had an injured knee. He hadn’t been in a game for nearly ten years. And just because he was in love with himself, doesn’t mean he was either fit, or smart. He was all wind and former glory. With a bad knee, I’ll bet he didn’t even exercise.”

“Oh, and what about the woman?” argued Sherrie softly, unwilling to dismiss the obvious physical prowess of those who had died without even putting up so much as a struggle against their invisible enemy. Moreover, the fitness instructor’s death was especially poignant, since she was a fellow woman. “She was pretty fit – and young. *And* I didn’t hear her complaining about any problem knee. She was at the top of her game. What about her?”

“She was,” admitted Genie. “Donna something... Velmont, I think. Yeah, Velmont, that was it. She might have been a fitness instructor in her spare time, but she said she was a computer programmer first and foremost. I don’t know what one of *those* does all day, but I’m betting it’s not exactly physical combat. And physical *combat* and physical *instruction* are two *very different things*. She might have been young and fit, but it could just be that she wasn’t all that *tough*. Besides, being fit doesn’t make you alert, does it? I just don’t know.”

While small holes were obvious in Genie’s arguments, and while she wanted to believe all of what she was saying for her own sake as much as for others, she knew she was far from certain about anything. Still, she managed to halt any runaway theories about aliens or invisible hunters, at least in the short term.

“Damn, Girl, you’re good. You almost got me believin’!” admitted Ed, his face cracking slightly with a smirk of admiration. Then he asked incredulously, “And you actually remember all their *names*?”

“I remember everything,” Genie responded simply, exaggerating slightly, though it wasn’t too far from the truth. “It’s just a part of what makes me a... better lawyer. I remember their names, how old they said they were, what they said they did for a living, and... how they died. Unfortunately.”

“We all remember that part,” noted Ed, agreeing with her mournful sentiment.

They all remembered. Some things could never be forgotten.

Mickey Rollins, the Karate man had been the first to die. No martial arts skills could have saved him. Genie had been behind him, and off to one side when the mayor’s assistant had been shot. She could still hear the blast, like nothing she had ever heard before, and she could still

recall with unpleasant clarity the massive hole that had exploded from Mickey's back.

It had been horrific, with a wild spray of blood and flesh torn away to leave a hole the size of a very large fist torn right through the man's lower chest from front to back. And there was a crackling, sizzling sound too, unlike anything she knew, though she only remembered it now, long after the event was over. Mickey Rollins had been knocked back as though hit by a truck. And he had barely moved a muscle.

Brandon Kite, the former footballer had not been so lucky. He had been shot by a much less powerful weapon, something Genie estimated to have a similar punch to a regular handgun. But the wounds and their effects had been horrific, and cruel beyond imagination.

Like the first weapon, when they struck flesh, they burned and sizzled. Kite was struck no less than eight times in the chest, belly, and legs. And while he may have had time to witness his attacker, he had been unable to stop screaming long enough to communicate anything he had learned.

He died screaming and thrashing in agony.

Strangely, on both occasions, the unseen killer had then melted back into the hull of the *spaceship*, never to be seen by any other person. No doubt more victims *could have been killed*, but only one had been attacked on each occasion.

It was evident that the killer had waited, then picked off each victim while they were ahead or behind the rest of the group, but once having struck, clearly the attacker did not feel the need to kill again. Not immediately, anyway. Since those first awful deaths, they had all remained close and ever-vigilant, driving themselves to the point of exhaustion.

But that hadn't helped the fitness trainer, Donna Velmont.

While walking closely with the others she too had been shot, again with the first, larger weapon. And again, the result had been horrific. Genie had heard the blast, and had turned to see yet another spray of blood, this time coming from the tall woman who walked just behind Ed Waterman.

The awful blast had actually removed the fitness instructor's head, and the vision of it rolling along the shining metal walkway was still clear in Genie's troubled mind. Like a heavy ball it rolled, with shocked eyes occasionally visible and staring up as though accusing, and with a long, dancing tail of light brown hair for adornment.

Donna hadn't even had time to scream.

The stump of Donna Velmont's neck was gone, leaving her torso completely level at the shoulders, and plumes of blood spurted about, splattering the ceiling, walls, floor, and the fellow members of her group. Donna's headless body had swayed for several seconds, time enough for

Genie to search for the shooter, and still have time to watch the spurting body fall lifeless to the metal floor.

In the aftermath, Genie had not been able to decide which had been the more traumatic sight – watching Donna’s head roll by with accusing eyes, or her headless body, spurting, falling and then shuddering upon the metal decking.

But she knew she would forget neither.

Sherrie Vale sighed.

“I just feel bad that we didn’t even... well, I don’t know... *pick them up*, or something. We should have done something for them. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Maybe,” agreed Ed, shaking his head dejectedly. “But you know as well as I do, if we took the time to do that, we’d be as dead as *they are*, right now. No, we never had a choice in it.”

“Ed’s right,” agreed Genie. “Right now the only thing we can hope to do is to stay alive – for each other as well as for ourselves. I don’t want *any more* of us to die, but I sure don’t want to be the last one left standing to face whoever this is.”

“Or *whatever*,” added Sherrie.

“*No. No. No.*” badgered Genie, remembering to keep her voice down, but not her vehemence. She pointed to the stars beneath and above them. “Because ‘*whatever*’ means *this* is space, and ‘*whoever*’ is doing this is probably some *little green man*, and I’m not having that at all! We’re still on Earth, and ‘*whatever*’ is a ‘*whoever*’! This reeks of good old-fashioned... *man. You hear me?*”

“Whatever,” shrugged Sherrie, quick-thinking and with a matching cynical smirk.

Still, it was obvious that she did not want an argument. Her nerves were frayed enough without losing one of the only two potential friends she might ever have. Ed Waterman came to her rescue in a moment.

“Either way, you two,” he noted quietly. “One thing’s for sure: This is some kind of twisted game, and that’s *all* it is. *Whoever* it is who’s killing us; they’re doing it for fun – chasin’ us all over this damn spaceship – or *whatever the hell* it is. It don’t matter much, either way. We’re still stuck in a real twisted up game.”

“And someone *else* is having all the fun,” said Genie, not hiding her sarcasm at all as she agreed completely with him. “‘Cause it sure isn’t us.”

CHAPTER 4

“But I just don’t get it!”

Tennille Green whined and twisted up her otherwise pretty face, and she squinted so hard that for several seconds her brown eyes were barely visible. She flicked her long sandy hair from one shoulder to another, then pouted some more.

“I know, I know. It’s okay.”

Owen Riley pandered to his fellow university student, hoping to win her over in some small way. They had never met until the previous day, but already a strong rapport had developed between the two, helped along immeasurably by his willingness to pander to her whining complaints.

“None of us do. Get used to it.”

Mal Jorgenson, the forty-three year-old fireman and self appointed leader of the group was gruff, and he showed considerably less willingness to tolerate the young woman’s whining. He might not have been so short with her had it not been the hundredth time she had voiced her complaint since the break of day. Jorgenson looked to the sky and tried to guess the time.

“Must be about nine or ten, I’d guess,” he said.

“Well, you gotta admit – it’s pretty weird,” insisted Tennille, refusing to be so easily ignored.

“We *know* that,” mocked Jorgenson, not being nasty so much as trying to help her.

“Well *soo-rry*,” mocked Tennille, her unhappy state forcing her to continue in a complaining manner. She rubbed the base of the right side of her neck hard, and then began to pick at a red spot there with manicured nails. “Hey, my neck hurts. Something must have bit me!”

“It’ll probably die now,” teased Mal, unable to resist.

“I’m serious,” she griped. “Here Owen, would you mind taking a look.”

Owen was all too pleased to do just that... and more.

“Hey, mine’s sore too,” noted Robyn.

Eyes widened as a chorus of agreement quickly revealed that most were suffering a similar ailment.

“What the heck does it mean?” pouted Tennille. “You guys don’t think someone might have put some drug in us that might harm us, do you?”

“It’s probably how they got us all here,” droned Mal. “You know – *they drugged us*.”

Tennille screwed up her face, not enjoying the fireman’s frequent mocking tones. To take her eyes off him, she began searching Owen’s neck so that she could see how severe the mark on

her own neck might look. But to her surprise, she could not find a mark on her new friend's neck.

"Hey, you haven't got one," she noted, sounding jealous.

Owen screwed up his nose and shrugged, looking suddenly bashful.

"That's because mine's on my butt," he said sheepishly. Then he rallied and spoke directly to Tennille. "I could show you later, if you like."

She grinned and stepped away, feigning embarrassment, though it clearly wasn't the worst thing she could imagine.

"If we could just drag ourselves away from butt-talk," interrupted Robyn Tyson, "Could we just come back to the matter at hand. I hate to admit it, but I think Tennille was right. This is all just *too weird*, and I've got a bad feeling about it."

"No shit," Tennille moaned bitterly.

Robyn, a woman of thirty, had introduced herself as an aerobics instructor when they had all met. She was fit and strong, with long, pale hair and a soft voice, and while her physical prowess helped her to keep up easily with the group, she had not proven to be the most practical or deepest of thinkers. Still, at least she wasn't complaining.

"The last thing I remember," continued Robyn, "was cooking a meal at home."

A shocked look dawned across her face, as though she had just realised some imperative detail that might illuminate their situation. She stopped, and her sudden gasp of realisation was infectious, causing those about her to cease their aimless exploration of the otherwise deserted town they found themselves in.

"No!" she blurted. "I was supposed to go on a date tonight! No!" She hesitated, pondering, and then admitted with a look of deep concern, "Well, at least I *think* it was tonight. I mean, after I woke up from whatever I was drugged with, I'm not even sure what day it is."

She looked about hopefully, but no one else was any wiser.

"You think that's bad?" groaned Tennille, continuing in her usual griping tone. "Owen and I are both due for uni exams in a few days. If I don't get back, my career will go up in a puff of smoke. Gone, just like that!"

"I thought you two said you two had never met," noted Robyn, looking puzzled.

"We hadn't," Tennille answered, then she shot Owen a small, clandestine smile as if to say that such a small detail didn't stop her from taking to him very easily. His eyes widened, and it seemed apparent that he felt the same. Then Tennille went on to explain. "Different uni's, same exam times. We're both gonna be in for it if we don't get home quick."

"What did you say you were studying?"

The question came from the other woman in the group, Meredith Merrington, who had stated that she was twenty-three and a rookie cop. She brushed a few strands of pale blonde hair from her brow, and wiped away small beads of sweat with the back of her hand, her blue eyes flashing in the morning sun. Young and inexperienced as she was, she still had the sense to read the frustration in the fireman's face, and decided she should try to divert the conversation.

"Oh, computers," answered Tennille proudly. "Computer science, programming and electronics actually. I like programming, but I like electronics too, 'cause once you've got the electronics down, you can tell computers to do stuff for you. And *that's* cool. Yeah, I just like all that... *clever* stuff, you know. Logic and stuff."

Mal's mouth actually sagged open, his face registering shock. Somehow he managed not to make a derogatory comment, though he sorely wanted to. *Logic and stuff* didn't really seem to be Tennille's strong suit, he thought.

"What about you, Owen?" Meredith continued, keen to keep the subject off Tennille's complaints and her whining tone. "What are you studying?"

"Oh, computers too," he admitted, though he sounded somewhat reticent, as though he may not have been a particularly bright or dedicated student. He didn't show near the enthusiasm of his young female colleague. "Programming mostly. Not really into electronics. You know?"

No, the young rookie *didn't* know, but she didn't think probing for information that didn't matter at a time when various people were obviously already uptight was a particularly clever avenue to follow either. Meredith let it go.

The last member of the group was Jamie Robinson, a forty year-old senior teacher. He was tall and lean, and while not particularly practical, as a part-time physical education instructor, he was also quite fit. Jamie rolled his eyes behind Tennille's back, less than impressed with her constant complaining, whining tone and dreary outlook.

By his own admission Jamie was tired of his occupation, and had lost any trace of eagerness to continue teaching, frustrated to the core with uncommitted, argumentative and badly behaved youth. From his face and body language, it was obvious that he placed Tennille somewhere within one of those categories.

Tennille managed to look up just in time to glimpse the teacher's rolling eyes and less than flattering facial expression. It was abundantly clear that he did not believe she was bright enough to be a programmer or computer engineer, and with a complaining attitude, probably never would be.

"What?" she challenged, pouting and glaring, twisting up her nose. "You think because I'm a woman, I'm not smart enough?" She pulled at a tuft of her long sandy hair and let it slip slowly

through her fingers.

"This is light, light brown, *not* blonde," she chided.

"I'm impressed," Jamie shot back. "That'll make all the difference. Look, *Girly*, we're all feeling just as... *lost* out here as you are. And you'll have to forgive my cynicism – but I've been teaching for far too long. These days I believe a student has potential when they *show me* that potential. You don't stop whining long enough for me to see *anything* else."

"*Whining?* What the hell do you mean, *whining?*" As Tennille began to react with a biting expression of her own, the rookie cop interrupted, again hoping to maintain peace, but also trying desperately to fit pieces of the puzzle together.

"Hang on, you two!" she insisted, speaking over the top of the scowling university student's comments. "Just hang on. Tennille might have a point. Just stop and think about it for a moment, could you? Listen!"

"*What?*" snapped Tennille, her intelligence questioned and her temper roused.

"You say you're training to be a computer programmer?" began Meredith.

"Computer electronics engineer, actually," corrected Tennille. "Programming's only part of it."

"Great. *Engineer*," clarified the rookie, calling on her police training to engage the insulted student in an effort to calm her, while seeking answers to their dilemma. "Well, think about it. Every one of us here has to keep fit to do our jobs. I'm a cop, Robyn said she's an aerobics instructor, Jamie teaches PE..."

"I do skydiving," noted Owen proudly, happy to remind them of his daring and skill. "I hike too."

"I do too," added Tennille, keen to equal her new potential boyfriend's boast. "And fencing too. And swimming."

"That's right," encouraged Meredith, happy to have them join in the conversation, rather than to withdraw, or worse, take to one another in anger. "And Mal, you said you were, what? A firefighter?"

"Yeah. That's right," he acknowledged, nodding.

Then he laughed, admiring the young rookie's ability and endeavour. In those few seconds she had shown more initiative to galvanise the group than he had in the last hour. He felt ashamed, and made an obvious joke in an effort to join in.

"Yep. All *I* ever do is run into burning buildings and save lives all day. Pretty boring stuff after a while. Yeah, you're right, *Officer* Merrington. We all keep fit, one way or another. So what's your point?"

“Well, just that,” continued Meredith. “We’re *all* fit. There’s not one of us here who doesn’t... exercise for a living, or just do it for fun. Between us we’ve got a fireman, a cop, a teacher, two pretty smart uni students...”

“An aerobics instructor,” added Owen Riley with unveiled scepticism.

“I teach kids as well as adults,” Robyn corrected firmly, but beyond that she refused to take the cynical teacher’s bait.

“Focus, people,” demanded Meredith, doing her best to sound firm and in control. “My point is that between us, we’re all smart and fit and strong. And not one of us can remember how we got here. Right? None of us recognises this town, and there’s no one else around. So maybe... just maybe this is some kind of a test. What do you think, Mal?”

She turned to the older man for support.

“Well, I s’pose that makes sense,” he admitted. “Makes as much sense as anything else I’ve heard. Not only a cop, but a *smart* cop.”

“You left out good looking,” Meredith shot back, and toyed with her short, pale hair for exaggerated effect.

“So who’s testing us?” asked Jamie flatly. “We already decided that none of us ever met each other before yesterday. Hell, we don’t even know *where* we are. And we *sure as hell* don’t know how we got here. I’m supposed to be teaching, for crying out loud.”

“You hate teaching,” countered Robyn, recalling how vehemently he had made the point when they had all introduced themselves. “Try to see it as a holiday.”

“True, true,” he admitted. “I *do* hate teaching. But I hate this more.”

He looked around, searching for anything that might give him some idea where they could be. Together they had already walked through most of the town, which was made up of mostly brick buildings, none of which was over three storeys, and therefore did not offer an elevated view of their new surroundings.

Buildings were made up mostly of small businesses complete with furnishings and very limited stock, and apartments with beds and working showers. There was no electricity or food, which meant that the lost, bewildered group had endured a long black night, and hunger was becoming an issue.

“Come on, guys,” insisted Meredith. “Think! What else do we know?”

“Well, there’s a great big wall on two sides and barbed wire and warning signs on the beach,” added Jamie. “So we sure aren’t intended to be going anywhere outside the town.”

Tennille sighed as though she had no interest in trying to understand her plight. Then she stared about, and her next comment surprised all, not so much due to her logic, but because it

showed that beneath her constantly complaining exterior, she really *was* thinking.

“Well, I don’t understand all the posts,” she noted, pointing. “They don’t make any sense to me.”

They all looked about, and while everyone had noticed the many large posts and columns that dotted the street, and indeed the entire town, until they were pointed out, their sheer number and regularity had gone unnoticed.

Every dozen metres there was a large post, half a metre in diameter and almost two metres tall. Most of the posts supported signs or lights, though there was no electricity to run them. Where there were no signs or lights, the posts were still present, set out in a matrix between the deserted buildings of the town. The posts even dotted the outskirts of the town, and right down to the beach.

“See,” explained Tennille, pointing out that which had been overlooked by her allies. “There are heaps of them.”

“Well, *that’s* because they hold up signs,” quipped Jamie, his voice full of sarcasm. “Posts are good for that, you know.”

Immature as she was, the young student did her best to ignore his derisive retort.

“No, you take another look,” she insisted, still pointing. “Some of them don’t hold up anything, but they’re still there. Look. See. Lots of posts. Lots of signs and stuff, but heaps of posts that just seem to do nothing. And they’re all set out in a regular pattern. It’s like they’re in a matrix or something.”

“Matrix?” enquired Mal, genuinely touched by the young woman’s input.

“No, you’re wrong,” sprouted Owen, and for the first time he seemed to dare to disagree with his potential new love interest, not as keen as he had previously been to constantly placate her. “They’re just posts. ’Course they’re in lines. Streetlights are like that. A matrix? No. Now you’re just getting carried away.”

Tennille looked shocked. She stared at him and said nothing, hurt that he would decry her small observation so pointedly. Her face flushed, and while she felt greatly drawn to him, she could not help but show her displeasure.

“Well, *soo-rrry!*” she grumbled, clearly hurt. “Look I don’t want to be here, and I don’t like this. But I was asked what I saw, and *that’s* what I saw! I’m sorry if you don’t agree, but you don’t have to shoot me down like that just for... saying it. Okay?”

“Sorry. Sorry,” Owen bleated, and he was back at her side in a moment, pandering once more, doing his best to placate her.

“Tennille’s right,” admitted Mal, genuinely impressed, though he could not see any real

importance to the discovery. Still, whether her input was significant or not, he felt that she should have been congratulated for at least trying. He tried to put on his most appreciative voice. “Well done, Tennille. I hadn’t seen that, and yeah, you’re right.”

He tried to pretend that it mattered, but in the end decided that the town’s builders must have been sticklers for setting out the town in neat, organised lines. In a way, that was true, though many of the buildings had the look of being unfinished, with much of the fine detail missing or shabbily constructed.

“Strikes me the town looks like it was built in a hurry,” he pondered out loud. “Almost like it was built... for a testing ground, or something. You know, not a real town.”

“Looks to me like the people were just zapped away by something,” droned Tennille, the groaning tone returning to her voice, and causing the fireman to force a grin. “They left everything and just... vanished! Even some of the beds are made.”

“They didn’t leave any food,” complained Owen, and he rubbed his belly for effect, staying close by Tennille, and hoping that he was forgiven for disagreeing with her.

“A weird town and absolutely no idea where we are,” added Jamie, the bitterness in his voice adding to the grating effect that the younger ones were having on Mal. “No food, no phone and not even any idea how we got here. Yep, this is just great. I love it.”

As much as the fireman found the negative outlooks of various ones in the group to be irksome, he had to admit that they were right. It troubled him greatly not to be able to recall what had happened to bring him to such a strange, deserted place. And despite the presence of buildings and beds to sleep on, there were few comforts and no explanations.

But most of all, there was no life.



“So what have we got?” asked Mal Jorgenson out loud, hoping to provoke logical input from his colleagues, and to get their minds off the negative impact of their bewildering predicament. “Let’s talk about it. We’re in a town none of us has ever seen before...”

“A town surrounded by electric fences and great big old walls on two sides, don’t forget,” reminded Jamie, his negative side never very far from the surface.

“And with no one else around,” added Robyn, pointing out the obvious. “Not a soul. I find that really weird. Kind of... frightening, really.”

“With water, but no food,” noted Tennille. “And I’m starving.”

“What else?” asked the fireman, probing his fellow wanderers to keep them focused.

“Well, it kind of looks like... a war zone, maybe,” ventured Meredith. “I’m pretty sure

those were bullet holes I saw in those buildings down the street. And there are these piles of dirt and broken bricks too. I mean, the place looks like... a battle went on, or something.”

“Mmm,” joked Robyn, trying to make light of what she feared. “Nothing like the good ol’ Sarajevo look to cheer you up when you’ve been drugged, kidnapped, and now you’re totally lost.”

“Don’t forget hungry,” demanded Tennille, happiest when she was complaining.

The six drew up alongside a dusty sedan that had been left positioned in the middle of a paved street, parked at an angle with no attempt having been made by its owner to park it near the kerb. Its windows were up, but the doors were not locked, and dusty as it was, the car looked as though it had not been driven in some time.

As Owen Riley, the young university student began rifling through it, looking to find anything of use, or that might help his friends understand how they had come to be left without memory or explanation in a deserted town, the rest of the group continued to talk.

Mal leaned against the car, unconcerned about getting dust on his clothes. Like the others, he still sported what he had been wearing the last time he could remember his normal life, and somehow the prospect of dust on faded blue jeans didn’t seem to matter much to him.

He was joined by Meredith, who also wore jeans and a pale blue blouse, also having been *kidnapped* while off duty. Jamie was about to join them, but upon seeing the state of the vehicle, decided against it. Robyn stood away from the group, scouring the eerily quiet street and empty buildings, always hoping for some hint of life, or perhaps a way to contact the outside world.

Tennille Green, dressed in white shorts and a cut-off t-shirt that showed off her pierced navel was not near so keen to lean against the dusty car, and screwed up her nose at the very thought of it. And while she did not complain verbally, somehow the look on her face was true to the form she had shown the rest of the morning, very much showing her distaste.

“Way of the future,” mused Mal quietly, wearying of Tennille’s complaints, and whispering a complaint of his own. It was not really something he meant for the young woman to hear, but she did just the same, and reacted immediately.

“What’s that?” she asked, her tone falling just short of a challenge.

She was reasonably sure she had detected a derogatory tone in the fireman’s voice, even thought she had not caught all the words. Even so, in the midst of an eerie situation, when everyone was feeling lost and tense, she had the good sense not to outright test the muscular fireman.

“Doesn’t matter,” Mal conceded, well aware that his derogatory comment did not improve matters, and neither would unnecessary tension.

“I’m tired of walking,” griped Jamie. “Where *the hell* are we?” In reality, as a physical education teacher, he was not tired so much as frustrated. Like his complaining young female colleague, he wanted answers, and food.

Owen returned from inside the dusty car empty handed, and slammed the door as a sign of his frustration. Of all those in the confused, bewildered group Owen might arguably have looked the strangest. He wore long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, as well as a dark beanie. He had been at a party, he had explained, and dressed for cool weather when he had been abducted, something he now regretted. His clothes were dark and their fabric shimmered in the hot sun, and Mal could not help but speculate that the young man would eventually become uncomfortable in the daytime heat.

Owen made an immediate path for the attractive young Tennille, unable to pry himself away from her for very long, especially since she seemed happy enough for him to dote. Mal could not help but note that the young man’s hormonal activity apparently made him immune to Tennille’s ability to whine almost constantly.

“What’d you find?” asked Tennille, pre-empting the question Mal was about to ask.

“Nothin’” grumbled Owen, shrugging. “No papers, no cell, and worst of all, no food. Not a crumb. Is anyone else here hungry?”

A combined groan emanated from every member of the group, if not for the shared hunger, then from the annoyance that Owen would say something that might invite yet another complaint from his young ally. Tennille did not disappoint, but voiced yet again her hunger and her frustration in the most nagging voice she could muster.

To the relief of most, the nuisance of her unwanted discourse was interrupted by the sound of Robyn Tyson’s voice calling from the rear of the car, where she had continued her visual inspection of the eerily quiet surrounding buildings.

“Hey, you guys,” she called, her voice raised with a mix of caution and concern. “You need to see this. I mean, you *really* need to see this.”

She beckoned with a raised hand as if her new friends might require the extra enticement, but she never took her eyes off the ground near her feet. It took some of the group longer than others to realise what she had found.

Staring down, Mal’s head began to nod slowly from side to side.

“Not good,” he said quietly. “Not good.” His eyes lifted as he scoured the buildings about them, then looked down once more.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Tennille.

Exactly the sort of stupid question one might have expected from the university Einstein,

mused Mal.

“Damn,” announced Jamie. “‘Course it is, you silly girl.”

And exactly the diplomatic response one might expect from the bitter teacher...

Meredith stepped between her friends to run her fingers over several neat, round holes in the side of the car, close to the rear. The holes were just smaller than the tip of her smallest finger, and each one was accompanied by a neat, tapered indentation, as though huge metal-munching borers had punched holes in the side of the panel.

Moreover, a dark, almost black stain joined several of the holes, looking like sticky oil that had been spilled and had then hardened in the warm sun. Considerably more of the dried fluid lay on the road by the car, stark and sinister.

“*Not good* is right,” agreed Meredith, confirming the worst fears of all those present. “I haven’t been a cop long, but I’ve already seen *this*. Those are bullet holes, and *that* – that’s blood. Someone was shot here.”

“Eww, shit,” announced Tennille.

“Yeah well, looks like they died, I’m bettin’,” noted Mal, staring down at the dark stain. His fireman-mind began examining the evidence, and he announced his conclusions without emotion or tact. “Bled out on the street, I’d reckon. This just *can’t* be a good sign.”

“Gee, thanks for that little gem, Mal,” droned Jamie. He took a pace away from the group to allow him to better view the surrounding buildings.

Fear gripped each member of the group, and suddenly the bright, sunny morning didn’t seem near as warm as it had. *Nor as placid*. And the idea of the town being *completely* deserted suddenly seemed much more appealing than it had just a minute before. Six pairs of eyes looked again to the buildings that surrounded them, straining for signs of life, with several fearful comments passing almost unnoticed.

Robyn Tyson continued her search, pacing slowly away from the rear of the car, her eyes flicking from windows to other parked cars to the street. But she saw nothing moving. A slight breeze whined its way along the deserted street, pushing along a rolled up ball of tattered, crumpled paper.

“Listen, guys,” said Jamie, his voice changing from a whining retort to Mal’s comment, to something far more urgent. His listeners barely had time to note the change in his tone, though they would never know what he wanted so say.

“I just think...”

A sharp crack emanated from somewhere on the opposite side of the lifeless street, accompanied by an almost simultaneous whizzing sound.

Vrrrp!

Because Jamie Robinson was speaking at the time, Mal's gaze was already upon him, and thus the outcome of the event. And it was both graphic and horrific, momentarily stupefying the normally decisive and composed fireman.

Something smashed a gaping v-shaped cavity in the top of Jamie Robinson's head, directly in the centre and just below his hairline. It tore through from front to back, leaving a deep furrow and exiting at the rear.

It was as though an invisible axe had fallen from the sky and cleaved the man's head right through the top. And on its way, the invisible projectile decimated and tore a considerable volume of the teacher's brain away, spraying it behind him in a puffy pink cloud that lingered and wafted in the breeze. The blow was instant and utterly decisive.

The only thing that told Mal of the direction of the sniper's bullet was the direction in which so much of his colleague's brain matter and skull was cast. A sizeable chunk of the top of Jamie's head blew off, flinging pieces of skull and hair behind him, giving the fireman a fairly good clue as to the direction of the danger.

The cloud of pale red mist hung in the air as the sniper's victim wavered, effectively already dead. Jamie's lifeless body then tumbled backwards, and he struck the paved road hard, making a dull thudding sound and spraying a lavish blossom of blood and decimated brain matter in an arc above him.

But even before the dead man came to rest, there were numerous terrified screams and shouts coming from the horrified witnesses.

Mal Jorgenson's senses finally snapped into action.

He had the presence of mind to warn his friends of the need to drop down behind the car, convinced that the shot had come from the far side of the street. He pushed Tennille Green down with force, since she was so shocked by what had happened that she was momentarily unable to react.

Only Robyn Tyson, the thirty year-old teacher and investigator who had first discovered the bullet holes in the rear of the car, stood too far away for Mal to force her down. Realising what had happened, and snapping out of the initial shock of it, Robyn decided that she was too far from the car to reach it in time, and instinctively ducked down behind a second, smaller car parked just six metres beyond.

In those precious seconds Mal realised that a rifle powerful enough to take the top of the teacher's head off would undoubtedly have no difficulty punching its way through the light panels of a car. All the Hollywood drivel about taking cover behind a car door seemed instantly

and starkly false.

Instinctively he knew that no one was safe. They might have all managed to drop down out of the sniper's sight, but that would not be enough to protect any one of them. Amid repeated screams from Tennille, and various shouts of protest from others in the group, Mal's eyes quickly surveyed the nearest buildings.

"Shut up! *Shut up!*" he bellowed, and while he could not force those with him to cease their continuing protests, he was able to get their attention. He lowered his voice, hoping that the shooter – wherever he was – would not hear.

"We need to get to that building!" Mal insisted. "It's brick. We'll be safe there."

"No way!" snarled Owen, his young face resembling something like that of a terrified little boy. "I ain't going out there! I'm staying right..."

He didn't finish his sentence as the car window directly above his head exploded and showered small gems of autoglass down on him. To his credit, he instinctively gathered his new love-interest, Tennille Green in his arms in a brave, yet futile attempt to shield her from danger.

"Listen to me!" shouted Mal. "Those bullets are gonna go right through this car. It's not gonna protect us! We've gotta get to that building!" He lowered his voice, hoping to communicate urgently with Robyn Tyson, yet without the sniper hearing.

"Robyn, get down behind the engine block and the front wheel. That might protect you!"

Kneeling close by the rear of the car, which had been parked in the opposite direction to the one behind which Mal and the others now cowered, Robyn nodded, somehow having the presence of mind to listen to him. Keeping well down she began to shuffle backwards along the side of the small car, towards its front wheel and unseen engine block.

Upon seeing that Robyn was following his direction, Mal turned back to ensure the safety of the rest of the group.

It was then that he heard the snap.



Tennille Green remained crying in Owen Riley's arms, and he had no intention of letting her go.

Another window exploded above Meredith's head, showering her with glass beads, yet somehow she managed to remain focussed, and continued looking about for a way of escape. She might have dared to peek over the top of the rear of the car, except that Mal Jorgenson pulled her down.

"Stay down!" he growled. "He's over there! That's all you need to know!"

The snapping sound he had heard from Robyn Tyson's direction culminated in a piercing scream seconds later, and Mal turned to see Robyn writhing about on the paved street behind the front of the small car she had taken cover behind. It took only another few seconds to realise what her dilemma was. Rolling about and screaming in pain, she was trying to extricate her left ankle from a rabbit trap.

First gunfire, then a rabbit trap! Mal's mind spun.

The metal jaws of the cruel device had clamped about Robyn's foot, just beneath the ankle, puncturing her shoe and causing her immense pain. And while she probably possessed the strength to prise the jaws open, with all the danger, terror and intense pain, she did not have the presence of mind to slow down long enough to perform the task.

Robyn sprawled on the ground and screamed.

Vrrrp! Vrrrp!

They all heard the cracking sounds of gunfire, and the accompanying sounds of two more bullets slicing the air above their heads, as the sniper fired through the car where the windows had been shattered just a few terrifying seconds earlier. The invisible projectiles seemed to whisper a deadly threat that caused those cowering behind the dusty car to crouch even lower.

Mal thought frantically, well aware that more people could die at any moment, and he was desperate for a way to avoid more loss. He couldn't blame them for not wanting to make the open dash to the nearest building, but there was certainly no hope if they stayed where they were.

"Listen, you lot!" he snapped, lowering his voice so that the shooter, somewhere on the opposite side of the street, could not hear. "If we stay here, he's gonna kill us all. We just *have* to get to the cover of those buildings. So all of you, keep down, and run for your lives. It's that, or you can die right here! Meredith – you're the cop. Will you take them, *please*? What's it gonna be?"

It wasn't really a question, but it drew a natural response from his allies, and most especially from the brave, young rookie, who pushed Tennille Green ahead of her, gripped the student's arm, then ran for the cover of the nearest building. And to the enormous relief of all, there came no accompanying report from the rifle.

Terrified, yet unwilling to be separated from his new love interest, Owen Riley rose next and sprinted, head down for the same corner behind which the two young women now sought cover. And as before, there came no rifle shot.

Just one look at the motionless, bloody form of Jamie Robinson, and Mal knew there was no point in trying to drag the fallen teacher to the safety of the buildings. There was no doubt at all that the man was already dead.

Now alone and crouching behind the dusty sedan, Mal turned to face Robyn, who was still rolling about on the sealed road behind the cover of the second car. She gripped her ankle and the cruel metal jaws that had clamped about her shoe with both hands, but either could not, or did not try to remove the trap.

Mal called out for her to calm down, then insisted that she try to remove the device. Tears streamed down her face as she pried at the jaws, each with rusty teeth digging right through her shoe and into her lower ankle.

“You either don’t want to shoot any more of us,” mumbled Mal, as though the unseen shooter might hear, “or you’re just the worst shot in the world. *Damn!* Give me a burning building any day!”

With that he burst forth from the cover of the larger car, and ran as fast as he could, covering the six metres between vehicles in seconds. Arriving at speed, he sprawled low behind the smaller car, coming to rest partially upon the writhing, crying Robyn Tyson.

“Lie still! Lie still!” he growled gruffly, but she didn’t, or couldn’t.

Her movements made the task of removing the trap more difficult for Mal, her small fingers interfering with his as he pulled the rusted jaws apart. After a few more seconds he slipped the trap down over Robyn’s foot, then cast the brutal device away. She hugged him briefly, then went back to holding her injured foot with both hands.

“We’ve gotta get outa here!” he said tersely, again keeping his voice low so that the sniper could not hear. “Can you run?”

“I don’t know!” she blurted, terrified, and still in great pain. “Maybe. Yes, I think so. I don’t know.”

“Well, I think we better find out!” he ordered.

Mal crouched low, holding Robyn down in the hope of avoiding any bullets that might pass right through the car, but again, the sniper either didn’t think to shoot through objects in order to hit those he was obviously so intent on killing, or perhaps it was against his ‘rules’.

Rules, Mal thought. He’d just seen the top lift off a man’s head. There didn’t seem to be any rules. Still, so far three of their number had run to safety without any attempt being made on their lives. Surely the shooter could have shot them too, if he really *wanted to*.

The thought gave him a slim hope.

“*Listen!*” he snapped brusquely. And then his tone changed, becoming softer, more appealing. “Listen to me, Robyn.”

She calmed almost immediately, at least enough to heed what the fireman was saying.

“Listen,” Mal continued. “You’ve *got* to trust me. I know this is scary. But you’ve just

gotta trust me. He could shoot us anytime, but he doesn't. And he didn't shoot the others when they ran. So I don't think he's gonna try real hard if we run, okay. Please, can you trust me, Robyn? We can't stay here. We've got to run for cover."

Robyn rolled her eyes, then nodded, knowing she had no other avenue.

"I can try to carry you," Mal explained. "But that'll slow us down plenty, and we'd *both* be easy targets. So, let's not make it any easier for him than we have to. Do you think you can run if I run beside you? We might be faster that way."

She nodded again, and for the first time made a genuine effort to stop crying and to put on a brave face.

"I can," she promised.

Mal pointed to an open doorway in the building next to where their friends had taken refuge.

"That's closer than trying to get to the others. Do you think you can do it?"

"I... I think so," Robyn said bravely, but sounding particularly apprehensive. In reality, she feared there might be broken bones in her foot, but given the situation, she hoped she could ignore the injury. She certainly didn't think there was enough time to explain her fear to the fireman.

"Then let's do this," grated Mal. They moved to crouching positions. "Wait until you hear him fire again, then run as fast as you can. I'll be right here to catch you if you fall."

It didn't take long for the invitation to come.

The sound of shattering glass just behind them as one of the small car's windows exploded was all the prompting Mal needed. He gripped Robyn's arm and together they burst into the open, sprinting for the open doorway. It was another six metres away with no cover, and seemed like an open plain to the two unarmed, beleaguered runners.

Sadly and despite her great fear, Robyn stumbled, crying aloud with renewed pain. The injury to her foot was worse than she had imagined. Worse still, as the fireman tried to support her and keep her running, she panicked.

Shaking his arm loose, Robyn screamed and scurried back toward the false safety of the small car. Mal bellowed in protest and turned to regather her, but she ran from him, ignoring his pleas to keep going.

The next thing he knew something stung his arm and sent him spinning until he fell sprawling on the road.



Having safely arrived around the corner of a brick building, Meredith, Tennille and Owen

squatted down, each gasping for breath, more from fear than from physical exertion. It took only seconds for the young rookie to recover sufficiently and take control.

“We need to keep moving!” she ordered the two gasping students.

“I’m not going *anywhere!*” blurted Tennille. She was crying, not far from becoming hysterical, and clearly quite terrified.

“Fine!” snapped Meredith. “You stay here and have *whoever-that-is* with the rifle take the top of *your* head off too. Then at least I won’t have to listen to your baby-whining any more! But you might try *not getting this guy killed too!*”

It was reverse psychology of sorts, and it worked wonders. The young sandy-haired student snapped back to reality in a moment, looking suddenly more angry and indignant than afraid.

“Baby *what?*” she spat. “Shut up and let’s go then, *cop!*”

“Better. Much better,” Tennille replied, and she might have grinned at how easily she was able to manipulate the girl, had she not felt so stressed.

With that she led the pair away from the corner around which they had come, and the three began creeping through the building, moving closer to where they hoped Mal and Robyn would be.



“Robyn... Robyn...”

Mal recovered slowly, aware of a dull pain in his left upper arm, and a ringing in his ears. There was something stinging his eyes too. He blinked, trying to dislodge several pieces of grit that threatened to completely blind him, and after several heavy blinks, he could see once more, albeit with considerable blurring and pain.

Vrrrp!

The sound snapped his senses to attention in a moment. He was sprawled on the sealed road, and very much out in the open. He blinked again, only to see that Robyn was exposed too, and lying on her back, her head not far from his. She had obviously fallen hard, and was lying almost flat, twisting and groaning and holding her injured foot with one hand.

“Robyn, *get up!*” snapped Mal. “*Get up! Now!*”

Another cracking sound from across the street heralded another whip crack in the air between them, as simultaneously a small spray of dust and asphalt shot up from the road not far from Mal’s head. He blinked again, just in time to prevent yet more dust from clouding his vision, and in an automatic reaction began to holler to the invisible attacker.

“*Stop! Don’t shoot!*” he bellowed, thrusting his hands aloft in a gesture of surrender. “We

give up, dammit! *Don't shoot! Don't shoot! Just don't shoot!*"

He blinked once more, still unable to see properly, and he knew instinctively that he had received a healthy dose of road dust from a previous bullet striking the warm pavement. He rolled to face Robyn, who was also battling with her vision, while still holding her ankle.

"Mal, I'm sorry," she bleated, sounding apologetic as much as fearful. "I think my ankle's broken. I didn't know... I..."

Between blinks her teary brown eyes had turned to face him squarely, realising that she had placed them both in grave danger. She moved on to one elbow as though she might be preparing to rise, but that was as far as she got.

And she never spoke again.

Vrrrp!

This time the slicing of air was accompanied not by a shower of road dust, but by a dull slap. Robyn Tyson jerked slightly and grunted, as though she had been punched, and she ceased her effort to rise in an instant as shreds of fabric puffed into the air, directly over her right breast.

A stunned look wiped away the worst of the fear on her face, and she looked shocked and disappointed. She snorted, then seemed to lose all interest in running away, and instead sagged and lay flat on the road, her right hand coming to rest over the torn fabric of her shirt.

"Noooo!"

Mal Jorgenson's shout reeked of bitterness and a refusal to accept reality, and he too lost some of the look of fear that had dominated his demeanour for the last few minutes. He rolled where he lay, almost overcome by what he knew to be the reality of the situation, and unwilling to leave the stricken woman he had tried so bravely to save.

Silence ensued as Mal's eyes diverted repeatedly between the face of Robyn Tyson and the apparently deserted street. He could not see any sign of a shooter, his darting eyes desperate to make eye contact with the sniper in the feeble hope of negotiating a surrender before any more harm could be done.

Mal knew very well that he was an open target, but so far the tormentor had only wounded his shoulder, even though there had been ample opportunity to kill him. Eerily, in those terrifying moments it seemed apparent that the intention to kill Mal was not present.

Sadly, for whatever reason, the same could not be said for Robyn Tyson.

She lay on her back, rasping small, shrill, rapid breaths that caused her chest to rise and fall in quick succession, and blood quickly began to trickle between her flattened, pale fingers, which she kept tightly pressed over her breast. She looked toward the sky, dazed and in shock, and then slowly turned her head once more to face the fireman. She tried to mouth something to Mal, but

no sound came out, except for an eerie wheezing that came from deep within her chest.

“Don’t try to talk,” insisted Mal.

He held up a single hand high in the air, again as a sign of surrender to the shooter. They were sitting targets, lying exposed on the road, but in shock and already aware that his new friend would very likely die, running was strangely not his first priority. As much as a natural instinct told Mal to pick up the wounded woman and run, he knew the sniper could easily prevent such a move.

In those frightening, painful and surreal moments, Mal knew instinctively that he was in a game – *a cruel, sadistic game*, and to run could only invite more retribution. The life-saving part of his fireman-nature kicked in to overcome thoughts of futile attempts at escape, and instead he hoped that holding up a yielding hand to the shooter might invite restraint.

“Shhh,” he whispered, and he reached out a hand to rest on Robyn’s brow. Her mouth opened once more, and she looked again like she might speak.

Vrrrp-slap!

Mal’s hope for restraint was ill conceived.

Instead of a dying word, Robyn’s mouth emanated only another grunt as a second bullet tore through her body, this time entering just below her sternum. Fired from a low angle the bullet tore upward through her body, shredding her oesophagus and exploding her heart within her chest. She jerked just once in nervous reaction to the brutal inner destruction, her eyes turning immediately away from Mal to stare blankly into the bright morning sky.

Even before he had the presence of mind to bellow in angry reaction to the cold-blooded, callous slaughter of a helpless victim, Mal knew that Robyn had died instantly from the second bullet. He had seen enough death in his job to know when life was gone, despite the fact that Robyn’s teary brown eyes remained wide open and her bottom lip was still quivering. Even the small exhaling gasp from her open mouth was not enough to fool him.

She was gone in a second.

“*Nooo!*” he bellowed again, wild with rage and loss.

His mind snapped, and for that moment he was more angry than afraid. For just one second he thought of standing up and walking directly across the road to face the cruel, cowardly maniac who could shoot a defenceless woman so easily when she was already down and injured. But Mal also knew that he would never make the short journey intact or alive. Any such thoughts were snatched away a moment later as the sniper continued the senseless torture.

Thump! Thump!

Two more eruptions of fabric upon Robyn Tyson’s chest spoke of two more bullets tearing

at flesh, and easily making certain of a callous task already completed. Robyn's body barely moved with the momentum of the incoming projectiles, though the destruction they wrought was visible enough.

These final two were fired high up enough so as to exit the tops of Robyn's shoulders, popping into her chest and tearing large exit wounds and shredding her blouse on either side of her neck. Blood and ghastly chunks of white tissue sprayed forth onto the road, but the peaceful look of quiet surrender on her face never changed.

Mal Jorgenson knew then that any hope of negotiating a surrender with the unseen, cold-blooded sniper was entirely and obscenely futile. With tears and dust clouding his eyes, he rolled away from the woman he had tried so valiantly to save just a minute earlier, hoping to avoid any more bullets himself.

As he did, he caught a glimpse of the terrified face of the young rookie, Meredith Merrington, peering out from the nearby doorway, her mouth wide open with shock and horror.

Mal stood up and ran.

CHAPTER 5

Paul Moore wiped sweat away from his brow with the clean, white towel provided for him, and then mopped his short sandy hair, since it was wet too.

He leaned back against the wall behind his padded stool, then mopped his bare arms. Dressed in the uniform he had been issued to play the game in, lightweight camouflage trousers and a matching button-up shirt, his visible skin shone with sweat, the just reward for exertion and excitement that went far beyond his wildest expectations.

Paul's mind spun, reeling from all that he had just witnessed. The physical effort of running, creeping and stalking his prey, combined with the sheer tension and electrifying thrill of the game had left him gasping for breath.

And the kill... The thrill of the kill...!

Mere words could never do it justice! His mind buzzed so wildly that he wondered if others might actually be able to hear the hum inside his head. And though they could not hear what was going on in his mind, they could clearly see the effects of Vince Vanderman's game upon the newcomer.

Kazuki Gi sat down beside him, dressed similarly, though his fatigues were more green than grey, suited to the jungle game he played. The Oriental also sweated, though not as much as

Paul, and he was not puffing nearly so hard. His stern face almost looked like he might weaken and smile, and it was clear that he took pleasure in the state of his rather flushed fellow player, though his hardened features drew just short of showing quite that much enjoyment.

Rebecca Mason-Tyler, the pampered Englishwoman joined them, dressed in snug Lycra that made her look rather more attractive than Paul had imagined possible. Still, despite her physical assets, he knew he would never be able to get past her pretentious wealthy façade, nor the ruthless wildcat he suspected was lurking just beneath her pale, demure surface. Like him, she was sweating, and it was obvious she too had been running in the game.

“Weeeellll! Look at you!” she crowed enthusiastically. “Look at who’s been getting into the thick of it! And enjoying it, from the look of you.”

She was right. Paul looked like a man who had just come off a racetrack.

“Well, I...” Paul thought about denying the incredible exhilaration he had felt in the game, but there was no use. And no real gain. Besides, panting as he was, he knew he could not hide his enthusiasm. “Oh, what the hell! It’s *fantastic! What a rush!* You’d swear you were right there! I could see every little detail!”

“Oh, splendid! Oh, my dear boy,” she chortled, equally enthused, and particularly keen to know of his conquests. She went right to the point. “But tell us, did you kill anyone?”

“Yes,” he answered in a forced, hushed tone, slightly ashamed to admit it at first, since the events had seemed so real, and the excitement still remained so great. Then he rolled his eyes and admitted the truth, unable to contain the sheer thrill of the game. “I’ve never seen *anything like it!* I’m telling you – it’s as though you’re *right there!*”

“*We know!*” insisted Rebecca, equally thrilled, as though they were sharing some powerful, mind-altering drug.

She tilted her head and looked just slightly down her nose at him, grinned encouragingly, then raised her eyebrows to remind him that they were all experiencing the exact same sensations, just in different game settings.

“Of course,” acknowledged Paul, and he drew a long, deep breath, forcing himself to calm down, struggling for control. “It’s just...”

“You never thought it could be so real?” she asked, completing his sentence perfectly.

“Exactly,” he agreed. “It’s... *mind-blowing!*”

“Listen, my boy,” she explained. “This is my third time here, and the only game I haven’t tried is the one you’re doing now. But trust me, if it’s anything like the other games, the experience is *never* the same twice, and you will *never* get used to it. Welcome to... *ooo...* simply the *greatest thrill of your life*, Mister... I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten.”

“Moore,” he replied. “But please, call me Paul. And *yes!* It’s just... *amazing!*”

“It how game *should be!*” announced Kazuki Gi, finally deciding to join the conversation, in his usual broken English, and acting as though his was the only opinion that mattered. His stern face made him somewhat intimidating, but for a rare moment his two companions could tell that his most cherished memories of the games were almost causing him to smile – albeit with twisted pleasure.

“I show... no mercy. *No mercy!*” he continued, gloating noisily at his sadistic recollections. “Killed first woman with bullet... to head.” He pointed with a finger to his forehead. “Shot her! *Bang!* No warning! *Brain everywhere!* Then, two more to chest.”

Again he pointed proudly.

“Shot next man while he talk to friends. *Fool!* What he expect, sitting like that? No mercy – that my rule! Next time, I want to kill up close. No gun. Use hands.”

He grinned wildly, full of cruel intent. “Use sword. Knife, maybe. Mmm, *sword!*”

“Can you do that in your game?” asked Rebecca, happy to see the older man so fully immersed in the violence and brutality of his game. “A sword, I mean?”

Something in her tone told Paul that the two were well acquainted, friends even, whose common ground was their love for the games. Oddly enough, his own appreciation of the realistic-ness and brutality of the game seemed to endear him to them almost immediately.

“Can kill with knife in all game,” explained Kazuki. “Just can’t do all time. Mus-be... close up – and that dangerous! I do it before. Last time – last time on island. *Greeaaattt!* But in *my game*, I now have sword! Even better!”

He grinned so widely that he looked possessed, especially given how sullen and stern he was the rest of the time. It seemed out of character, and served only to show how intensely he had enjoyed the experience.

“Virtura Re-al-ty no way!” he mocked, as if to say the experience was so real that it didn’t seem possible to fake it. “Could feel knife go in. Feel twist. Feel victim die. Not fake! Too real! And blood. Mush blood! Mus do ’gain.”

He continued to grin wildly, unable to hide his dark gratification at having killed his imaginary victims so callously.

“Yeah, sure was real enough,” agreed Paul enthusiastically, keen to agree with the callous, intense Japanese, and yet happy to wrench the conversation from him, given the small man’s almost insane demeanour. “I just couldn’t believe it when I killed my first one. It was so... *real!*”

“It is,” agreed Rebecca. “Not that I’ve tried the city yet. But I plan to. Think I’ll do it

next. Tell me – what was it like? Tell us, please.”

“Well, my first one was a man,” Paul explained, still trying to steady his breaths as he attempted to recall his exploits with detail. “And I’ve got to say, it was just as real as the second one, but the second one was what *really shook me*. It was... *simply amazing!* Really, it was!”

“Do tell,” crooned Rebecca, unable to hide her enthusiasm, and clearly just as keen for tales of sadistic violence as Kazuki Gi was. “Please, do tell all.”

“Well, the first one I just shot in the head,” explained Paul “I mean – that’s the game, right? I’m supposed to be a sniper, getting rid of the bugs left in a warzone, right? So I shot him. No warning, no nothing. Blew the top of his head right off. That was real enough, but what really got me was how all his friends reacted. They were just so... *lifelike!* I could have shot them all right there, I think. If I wanted, I mean. ’Course, I didn’t. I mean, I’m paying 500K for each head, so I may as well get my money’s worth, hey?”

A silent nod from his fellow players showed their agreement.

“Yeah, the fun is definitely in the chase,” agreed Rebecca. Then she shrugged with delight. “Though blowing ruddy great holes in them is rather fun too!”

“So I fired through a car they all hid behind,” continued Paul, not wanting his story to be lost. “And that’s the thing. It was just *so real*. I could hear them screaming and panicking. It was just... *so real!* Most of them eventually ran away, and I let them – ’cause I don’t want the game to be over too quick, right? But this one guy *actually risked his life* to help one of the women. And I could *see their faces* through the scope. They were completely *real!* It was... It was the most *amazing thing* I’ve ever seen! I swear! He tried to save her!”

“I hope you didn’t let him,” demanded Rebecca, her tone sounding as though she might chastise him for the wrong response. Paul knew it was immature, but he was happy to be able to give the correct response.

“No,” he answered obligingly. “No, I didn’t. I shot her too.” Again he smiled, though less enthusiastically as he recalled the murderous scene with tingling clarity.

“Oooo, how many times?” crowed Rebecca, her excitement exuding from within.

Paul rubbed his chin, thinking back.

“Three, I think.” His smile dissipated as he recalled how she had died so easily at his whim. “Once to slow her down, then one to the heart... killed her outright, I think. Hardly sporting, I fear.”

“Forget about sporting,” gushed Rebecca energetically, and she slapped his shoulder. “The sport *is* the killing. You go getting all sporting with them, Paul, and one of them might just kill you in return. And if *that* happens, you’re out of the game, and you’ve got to pay your money all

over again for a chance to even the score.

“And the worst part is it takes at least a whole day for Vince to reset the game. And you might lose your place and have to wait for some other player to be done before you can get back into it! Forget sporting. You *can't* let them have a chance. *That's* why I haven't been game enough to try killing one of mine up close – in case they kill me instead. I don't want to have to leave here and come back when there's a vacancy in the game. Listen, dear boy. Just enjoy the killing. After all, *that's* what this is all about!”

“Mmm,” he nodded, but he was clearly as moved by the reality of his victims' reactions as he was by the excitement of the game itself.

“And remember, my dear Paul,” Rebecca crooned again. “These are *not* real people. They're just... computer... thingies. *You* know that.”

“Very *real* computer thingies,” corrected Paul, unable to reconcile the authentic reactions of his victims, nor the incredible quality of the graphics.

Every tiny facet of the game had been stunningly real, and most especially the emotions and thrills that went with it. While playing the game his mind had become entirely convinced that he was right there in the warzone with his prey.

Kazuki Gi simply grunted, unimpressed with any thought of pity for his prey.

“More real is more better!” he asserted sternly. “Up close is *better still!* Mercy no good. Killing is best!” His face grew black with cold, callous cruelty, his mind dark with evil dreams. “And you, Mister Moore – you should kill... for fun! *Only for fun!* I play game many time, so I know this! But... you tell yourself people... not real if it make you feel better.”

He grinned snidely, his deep desire to kill and to be cruel satisfied only by the amazing reality of the games.

“But to me,” he said. “Victims all real. I kill... *real people!* Your victim *real too!*”



“So, what do you think of our games, Mister Moore?”

Amelia Ulster's green eyes sparkled as she spoke, giving Paul the definite impression that she loved her work, and that she was particularly intelligent. Her short brown hair seemed to dance upon her head as she spun, and her smile was warm and inviting. And having been alone with her for some time, the wealthy businessman could not help but notice how bright and attractive she was.

“It's amazing. Just fantastic,” he admitted, almost sheepishly. He made a face. “I've got to say, I'm almost ashamed to admit how much I enjoy playing. It's just *so real*. I mean, when I

shoot... it's just..."

Amelia looked so lovely, and the game was so brutal that Paul felt suddenly guilty for even playing, let alone telling her about the emotions it stirred. She read him like a book, and shot him a knowing grin to alleviate his shame.

"It *is* amazing, isn't it!" she agreed heartily. "It's okay, you can say it, Mister Moore – when you *shoot them*. Don't worry, I've played the game too. I *know* it's good. I'd ought to. After all, I *did* help design and build it."

He gave her an appropriate nod, and a low whistle of approval.

"So I believe," he said, having already gathered as much from Vince Vanderman. "Well, I'm *even more impressed* than I already was."

"Well, thank you. I've worked very hard at it," she acknowledged proudly, and she continued to smile, trying to discern whether he was making a sexual advance, or was simply, truly appreciative of her accomplishments. Either way, she felt flattered, given that he was a professional gaming developer in his own right, and an exceptionally attractive man.

"It's amazing," he repeated, barely able to find words. "Nothing I say could do it justice."

Part of his loss for words was because of his genuine astonishment at how real the city game appeared and felt, and part was due to a natural apprehension in dealing with such a bright, attractive woman who obviously shared his love of computer graphics. Not that he was in any way infatuated with her, but he could not help but be in awe of her knowledge. She made him just slightly nervous, but he could not resist trying to probe her for trade hints.

"Perhaps some time we could discuss some of your work over dinner?" he ventured cautiously.

He knew it was a vain hope. One of Vince Vanderman's core demands of players was the understanding that his company would never share their secrets with other software developers – or *anyone*, for that matter.

"Oh, I don't think Mister Vanderman would like that," Amelia replied predictably, though still with a smile.

It was nothing less than he expected, but it was certainly worth a try. Still, his ego could not help but swell as he noticed the undeniable disappointment in her tone. It was clear that she would have liked a liaison with him – at any level – very much. But her desire made no difference. Her rejection of the offer remained firm, and Paul knew it.

"Such a pity," he admitted honestly, hoping she understood that his interest was purely on an intellectual level. He had been alone for some time, and knew exactly what he was after in a woman, and had become particularly cautious about dating. Besides, the young hostess,

Courtney Hoffman had already touched his heart.

Amelia smiled once more.

“Thank you, again,” she said. “But it’s just not something I’m allowed to do – no matter how much I’d like to.”

“Fair enough,” Paul conceded.

And while his motives for wanting to speak with her were purely work-related, he couldn’t help but think that considering how obviously attracted to him she was, it might have been safer not to be alone with the lovely, intelligent computer engineer.



Meredith Merrington kept low, daring only to lift her head up far enough to spy out who might be approaching along the quiet, apparently deserted street, and even then she did not linger a long time.

She had seen the top of Jamie Robinson’s head blow off, and while she imagined such a fate might be a rather quick and hopefully painless way to end her existence, she was far from ready to die. Rather, her anger had already told her she must live long enough to exact vengeance upon whoever was shooting at unarmed civilians in such a cowardly way.

She was frightened, and yet she boiled within.

“You two keep an eye out for anything that moves,” she ordered, signalling to the opening in the stone walls of the dusty room in which they had taken refuge.

There came the expected arguments from both university students, but it didn’t take much to convince them of the need to comply. Owen Riley and Tennille Green might have been frightened, but neither was keen on the prospect of allowing the sniper to creep up on them again.

“Let’s take a look at that,” Meredith insisted, and she moved to sit beside Mal Jorgenson, whose upper left arm had bled sufficiently by now to have stained most of the lower limb, making his injury look very much worse than it actually was.

“It’s just a nick,” he insisted gruffly. He rubbed his eyes, still battling with grit from the road, and from shock. His heart ached over the loss of Robyn Tyson. Worrying about a scratch barely seemed worth considering.

“It’ll be alright,” he snorted.

Meredith would have nothing of it.

She sat down beside him and lifted his bloody sleeve, examined it for a time, then without a word removed her t-shirt. Without embarrassment at sitting beside a stranger dressed in her white brassier, she quickly beared some threads of her shirt with her teeth, then tore off a strip all

the way around the bottom of it. In a smooth motion she slipped the shirt back on, then used the narrow strip of cloth to bind Mal's bloody sleeve to his bleeding arm.

He sat astonished, his mouth sagging slightly open until finally he began to smile as Meredith tied up the ends of the cloth strip in a knot. And even in his emotional state at having been shot at, and having witnessed the deaths of two friends, one of whom he had tried valiantly to save, he could not help but be drawn to his young attendant. Her resourcefulness appealed instantly to his practical nature, and her youthful attractiveness was wonderful.

"Ahh..." he said softly, "I think I might have scratched my leg too. And there may be one on my other arm too."

Meredith smiled at him, and it did them both good to experience something pleasant for a few moments, rather than the horror and the threat of death that had been terrorising them for the past half hour.

"Down boy," she joked. "I don't want you bleeding to death, or getting infected. That's all."

"That's a pity," he replied honestly.

Then he gripped her arm, suddenly overcome by genuine fear for her, and he refused to let her turn away.

"I know," he said. "But you gotta do somethin' for me. You're very practical and pretty brave, and I like that about you. A lot." He sighed. "*A real lot.* But please – promise me you'll keep your head down in future. This guy, whoever he is, doesn't care who he shoots, and I don't want you getting..."

She nodded, and saw the very real concern in his face as his smile ran away.

"I'll be careful," she agreed. "Anyway, never mind me. What about you? You could have been shot out there. And I'm sorry you couldn't... save Robyn. Are you okay?"

"Not really," he admitted. "I'm pretty used to running into burning buildings, and I've even managed to save a few lives along the way. But that? I've never been beside anyone who was... purposely killed before. Especially not right in front of me. Messes with your head, you know. And she... *Robyn*... didn't deserve that. Nah, it really sucks. Look, I'll be okay. But please, I'm serious. *You* gotta promise me you'll keep that pretty head of yours down. *Please.*"

"I will if you will," she countered, and again a hint of a smile lit up her face.

Mal Jorgenson fell instantly in love with her, though he could not be sure whether it was pure infatuation for a younger woman, or simply some fleeting fascination egged on by the obscene pressures they were under.

It didn't matter. At that moment she gave him all the reason he needed to live – or perhaps

to risk his life. Sometimes, he knew from experience, the two could be difficult to separate. Usually it was only a matter of timing – the difference between choosing life, or risking one’s life for another.

But fearfully, he knew he could not bear to see *her* die.



“Where’s Robyn? And where’s the teacher?”

The disbelief in Meredith’s face was as bleak as her tone.

Three pairs of eyes scoured the street, all but Owen daring to ignore the danger of a sniper’s bullet for the few seconds it took to confirm what the young rookie had already told them. Mal, Meredith and Tennille could not help but peer about, shocked and pained at the knowledge that their fallen friends had somehow, mysteriously disappeared.

“They were only there a little while ago,” pouted Tennille, tears beginning to stream from her eyes. “Where the hell could they be?”

“Are you sure that’s where they were?” asked Owen, venturing a question, though he still would not risk looking for himself.

“Course we’re sure,” responded Meredith, a degree of distaste in her tone. “Their blood’s still on the road, but their bodies are gone. Look for yourself.”

“No, I’m good,” he replied, waving off the idea with a cautious gesture.

“Someone’s taken ’em,” said Mal, more angry than upset. He was still in great pain over not having been able to save Robyn Tyson. “That’s all there is to it. While we’ve been off running away from this maniac, either *he* or *someone else* has come and taken ’em.”

“Oh no,” moaned Tennille, her emotions boiling over as she sagged into a ball and cried. Between muffled sobs, she asked the questions already heavy on the fireman’s mind – questions he would rather not have even attempted to answer.

“But... *what? Why...? Where* would they take them? What would they... want to take them... *away for?*”

Mal gritted his teeth in anger. He could only imagine.



An hour later the four survivors found themselves creeping to the doorway of a building near the opposite end of the deserted town. But given that the town was small; only about four or five normal city blocks long, and just two blocks wide, there came no real feeling of safety in the knowledge that they had *crossed town*. All knew that the killer could be lurking anywhere.

Even close.

“Why can’t we just find somewhere to hide and just stay there?” whispered Tennille, her whining tone voicing clearly her desire to sit and rest rather than to continue creeping about. And as much as her desire was understandable, it was the way in which she spoke that grated on those about her.

Mal found himself being thankful that even though the pampered university student might be as far from practical as was humanly possible, at least by now she had developed the good sense to keep her voice down. Moreover, no matter how annoying he found her almost constant complaining to be, she had every right to live, and certainly not to die at the hands of a slinking, cowardly sniper.

“You’re assuming he won’t come looking for us,” whispered Mal in return. “Besides. Who’s to say he doesn’t have night-vision on that rifle of his? You need to face it, Tennille – he drugged and kidnapped us all and brought us here for some sick game. And hell, if he’s gonna spend all the money it would take to bring us all here to some private war game, I somehow rather expect he’s not going to just give up if he can’t find us.”

She nodded, no longer willing to argue. Instead she cuddled a little harder into Owen Riley’s cradling arms, and the young man was only too happy to accommodate her.

“So, what *do* we do?” she asked, looking vulnerable and frightened.

“We need to get the upper hand,” explained Mal. “Find him before he finds us. That’s the only way I can...” He trailed off in mid sentence, his gaze falling upon something that reflected light in the midday sun.

“Find him?” whispered Tennille incredulously, though she still remembered to keep her voice down. “You can’t be serious! I don’t want to find him!”

“Or we could find a weapon,” corrected Mal, adjusting his strategy. His voice revealed a hint of enthusiasm, and the trace of hope was infectious to all.

“What do you see?” asked Meredith, hope replacing desperation in the young rookie’s voice.

“I think it’s *a gun*,” whispered Mal. “Look, just over there.”

The pair studied the place where he indicated for as long as they dared, then dropped back down to safety, always afraid of allowing the unseen sniper to glimpse them. Tennille and Owen remained at their post by the opposite wall, and even released each other from their comforting embrace to allow them to keep watch unrestricted. There was an instant sense of nervous excitement that spread to each member of the team at the prospect of something to fight back with.

“It is! *It is!*” agreed Meredith. She sighed, daring to search the street for just a few seconds before ducking down again. “Do you think it could have been put there as a trap?”

Mal shrugged, already considering the possibility.

“It’d be a pretty cold, callous thing to do,” he mused. “It’s a pretty low act to lure unarmed people out on the street just to put a bullet in ’em while you skulk about in a corner somewhere, too yellow to face them.”

Then he shrugged again. “Yep. Sounds like our guy, alright.”

“Oh, you can’t risk it,” replied the young rookie. “Stay here, please. If you want, I’ll go.”

Both Owen and Tennille turned from their sentry duties, their faces shrouded in shock at the brave suggestion from a woman not much older than themselves. And while both were floored by Meredith’s selflessness, neither student felt any pressing need to make a similar offer.

“No,” said Mal firmly. “Not this time. I couldn’t let you do that. But I *can* tell you this – there’s only one way to find out if it’s a trap or not.”

With that he stepped up to Meredith and kissed her full on the lips. She pulled away in surprise, though not distaste, and before she could reply, the fireman slipped out through the doorway and began creeping toward the weapon he had seen on the street.



Mal felt fear like he had never known.

The prospect of having his head or chest pulverised at any moment laboured heavily on his mind, and the knowledge that such an event would be over before he had time to react gave him no comfort at all. He was not *ready* to die. And strangely, while he had willingly stayed with Robyn Tyson when she had been shot, the fear he felt now was far greater than then. There was something about *waiting* for an attack that was far worse than actually *being* attacked. And to add to his dread, again there was little cover.

Fear made him work with wild vigour.

The weapon was like nothing he had ever seen. Indeed, it was barely recognisable as a weapon, except for its barrel, scope and a long trail of bullets that hung on a belt beneath it. There wasn’t the usual stock, and much more intriguing was the fact that it was attached to a metal arm that protruded from a one of the nearby streetlamp posts.

The arm was thin, with occasional pivoting knuckles and small pistons, and it looked something akin to the metal fingers of androids Mal had seen in movies. Also there were wires and a circuit board attached to the side of the *rifle*, if one could call it that.

The entire assembly hung from a cavity contained within the streetlamp post, and it was

obvious that the rifle should have been hidden completely within the post, behind a hinged door. But that door was now damaged, and Mal could see where at least two bullets had dented the hinged cover, leaving it unable to close. The bullets had then skidded inside the post, where a considerable array of electronics and pneumatics controlled the movement of the rifle, but it was all now damaged beyond use.

Mal looked about, terrified that the sniper would take his life at any moment. But despite his intense fear, he could not help but notice again the many similar posts along the street. They were clearly laid out in a matrix, a fact that came eerily back to his memory as he recalled the discussion on the matter. He recalled it with clarity, as it had been the annoying young Tennille who had pointed out the number and positioning of the posts.

And a small piece of a brutal, bizarre puzzle began to fit into place in Mal's mind.



Vrrrp!

The first bullet that whizzed past Mal's head was so close that he convinced himself that he felt a movement of air from it. In reality, it was simply the shock of the bullet's sound that frightened him into believing it. He ducked, still not having completely freed the odd looking weapon from its mounting. A second lead pill slicing the air close by made him drop further, and then reef the rifle from the last of its electronic cables.

Vrrrp!

"Leave it, Mal! Leave it!"

His body tensed with terror.

He could hear Meredith's frantic restrained call, and as much as he wanted to heed her advice to run, she was part of the reason why he could not. With all his strength he pulled, and the rifle suddenly came free of its cables, as well as the metal clips that held it in place within the streetlamp post. As a last, small concession, he was forced to free the trailing belt of ammunition from a few entangled wires, and then at last the weapon came free.

With the odd looking weapon in hand, its long trail of bullets dangling beneath it, the fireman spun and ducked, then sprinted for cover as two more bullets could be heard slicing the air above him. And while he knew he had no chance of returning fire at the shooter, he could not help but instinctively seek for a glimpse of his callous pursuer.

To Mal's shock and dread, there was not just one, but two armed individuals on the far side of the street, perhaps half a block up. Unlike previous occasions they were making no effort to hide their presence, but simply stood by an open doorway, one with a rifle raised to his face, the

other wielding an automatic pistol, and both weapons were firing in his direction.

Vrrrp! Vrrrp! Vrrrp!

Surreal as the thought was, the beleaguered fireman could not help wonder how they could possibly miss him.

They had the drop on me! One has a rifle! How could they miss? And then, weird as it was to be trying to gain understanding while hearing bullets zip over his head, he knew instinctively that they were intentionally missing him. Or at least he *hoped* they were.

Either way, it was enough to convince Mal of the need to keep moving.

Just a few seconds later he was back with his friends in the temporary safety of the brick building they had taken refuge in. But with bullets still popping against the wall outside, there was no doubt in anyone's mind as to the wisdom of remaining there for long.

With his newfound asset in hand, Mal led his three terrified friends away once more.

CHAPTER 6

Harry Langford peered out between two large branches, scouring the dense landscape for signs of movement, but thankfully, there were none. He made his movements slowly, never making a sound, and after repeating the search in several directions, he looked to the fearful faces of his friends.

“What the hell kind of nightmare are we stuck in?” demanded Pete Becker, his voice tense, but so quiet that Harry could barely hear him.

Still whining, decided Harry, *but at least the lawyer had learned not to attract attention.*

They had crawled into a hollow space among a particularly large pile of fallen trees that had clearly been cut down. Huge trunks and limbs of various sizes twisted together to form a thick barrier, both to prying eyes and hopefully, flying lead. Most fortuitous was the fact that somehow, when the pile of sawn timber had been made, a sizeable natural cavern had been created, complete with numerous escape routes, no doubt made by various animals.

So, as long as one was able to crawl between the massive logs, the enormous pile provided good cover, as well as the ability to flee in different directions. The huge nest of timber provided at the very least a temporary place to rest, as well as many small windows to the outside world, by which the four would hopefully be able to see the approach of any intruder.

“I think we're in a game,” whispered Harry. “Someone's sick and twisted game.”

“A *game!*” whispered Emily Beach, her face contorting to show how incredulous she

considered such a possibility. “*What freak...?*”

She desisted as Harry held a restraining finger to his lips.

“Must keep it quiet, Emily,” insisted the former army man. “Yeah, a game, I think.”

“It’s been three hours since he...” Emily hesitated, looking for a way to avoid talking about the horrifying details of Will Vain’s violent death. “...Since he shot at us. Do you think there’s any chance he’s gone?”

“Not even a small chance,” Harry answered flatly, searching again, then facing her once more. “Look. You saw the electric fences and those dirty great block walls. We’re stuck on a few acres of ground with no way of escape. None of us remembers how we got here, and now we’re live targets in some twisted game. If *we can’t leave*, you can bet he hasn’t either. No. He’s still here.”

Emily’s face fell, hope evaporating.

“Then he’s just going to keep on coming back until he gets us all.”

“Not if I can help it,” rebutted Harry. “Just give me time. It’s most likely that he...”

“Or *they*,” corrected Pete, bitterly.

“Or *they*,” conceded Harry. “But the evidence tells me this is probably the work of just one man. There was no crossfire – which is a good thing. Anyhow, he might have a base somewhere in the jungle, or maybe he gets in through that wall somehow. Either way, if we can find it, we can get the upper hand on this asshole. All we need is a weapon or a way out. Just hold it together, Emily. Can you do that?”

“You mean the wall with all the electric fences?” she droned in a hopeless whisper. “Shouldn’t be a problem, really. I mean, all we need is a weapon. Some radios and snacks would be nice too.”

Harry simply looked at her, and she desisted, realising that no one needed her negativity or the sound of her voice to beckon the sniper to their hiding place. She nodded nervously, not daring to complain again. Instead, she moved close to Pete Becker and joined in the task of keeping watch.

“Have you noticed how most of the bigger trees have been chopped down?” Harry asked, whispering to Carrie Long, who stayed close by his side. She nodded, her eyes flashing toward the large limbs that made up their hiding place.

“Yeah. To stop us from climbing up and seeing over the walls. I get that.”

“Well,” he continued. “Have you also noticed how some of the trees have been cleared, but there’s always enough left to leave – I don’t know – *a grid pattern*. You look. There’s a tree stump at least every ten metres or so, and when there isn’t a tree, there’s a big fat post.”

Carrie peered out through a narrow gap between two horizontal sawn limbs, and immediately noticed a large post standing not far off. The post was tall and round, with no limbs, and was sawn flat on top, looking something akin to a particularly large fence post. Most importantly, it was clearly not a natural feature, but had been placed there.

“You’re right,” she whispered. “So what of it?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “Yet.”



“Well I’m sorry, but I just gotta go!” whispered Emily tersely. She ducked her head as though that might prevent her invisible enemy from hearing.

Harry rolled his eyes, then weakened and nodded his concession. Still, it was not something he was happy about. It had been a long, painful day, and with two lives already lost, he wasn’t looking to make it any more tragic. But he knew that it was likely they all were suffering a similar ailment, cramped up in the confines of the small crawl space amid the pile of sawn tree-limbs.

“Listen,” he complained good-naturedly. “I’ve got a prostate, and you don’t see *me* needin’ to rush off to the bushes.”

“Well, I suppose I could just go right here,” Emily complained.

Harry rolled his eyes again, realising that she was merely returning his humorous barb, and that the young stenographer had no intention of doing *anything* in front of strangers, no matter how close the danger had drawn them.

“Well, if you were in the service, you’d be told to just go in your pants,” Harry pointed out. “Because going out there just might cost you your life.”

Emily tilted her head and gave him a forlorn look.

“Okay. You win. You win,” he whispered with a hint of a smile. “But I’m tellin’ you now – we *shouldn’t* be goin’ out there. We should all be goin’ right here. This is stupid.”

“Never going to happen,” whispered Emily firmly.

“Look, we can’t expect the girls to...” began Pete, but he didn’t bother to finish. He didn’t have to.

“I just hope your need for a pee doesn’t get anyone killed,” Harry warned.

“No, it’s usually not *that* dangerous,” Emily quipped.

Everyone had to fight to hold in an urge to laugh, not because her comment was so funny, but because of how it broke the nervous tension that had subdued them all afternoon. It was approaching evening, and without a watch, Harry guessed it to be around five o’clock. The day

had seemed endless. They were all cramped, and as much as it felt good to be able to hide from the cruel sniper who stalked them, the prospect of physical relief was particularly attractive.

Despite the danger.

“Absolutely no sound,” commanded Harry, his voice barely audible, but his tone fiercely demanding. Three nodding heads agreed, all acutely aware of the fate that had so brutally claimed the two missing members of their team.

After taking what seemed an age to carefully survey the surrounding forest, Harry led his friends out from the dark, cramped cavern beneath the stack of timber.



No matter how many times he played the virtual reality game, Kazuki Gi could never get used to how real it felt.

The graphics were like nothing he had ever seen, not even in high-end productions. They were *so real*, in fact, that his mind could not discern any difference from reality. And with every move he made the computer somehow managed to match whatever he touched with real sensations, his gloved fingers constantly feeling the touch of ‘real’ objects. His boots also felt as though they were treading on real earth, with every angle and undulation matched with precision and excellence. Only the presence of the VR glasses and the feel of the tiny speakers in his ears reminded him that he was still suspended within the safe confines of the REG facility.

Even the risk of being confronted by his targets felt real.

But most of all – *killing them felt amazingly real!*

Kazuki crept forward, certain that he had seen a small movement amid some tall ferns about forty metres ahead. He knelt, then took time to look through his riflescope. The thin crosshairs slipped smoothly across the tropical scenery as the Japanese pretended he was a wartime warrior, seeking his targets in what was without doubt, a battle to the death.

The certain knowledge that he would forfeit the remainder of his game should any of his targets disarm and *kill* him was always on his mind, since to be forced from the expensive game and made to wait until there was a vacancy before he could play again was not something he wanted to endure. Moreover, to be cheated of the ultimate pleasure of killing *all* his victims was definitely not something he could bear.

Still, the fact that he was always in the safety of the VR machine allowed him to take risks he might not normally take, no matter how real the setting and the victims appeared.

He drew a long, excited breath as he saw his victim.

Standing amid thick ferns, and mostly shielded by a gnarled tree trunk, his enemy would not

be an easy target. Only the man's right hand and leg were visible, and it was apparent that he was leaning against the tree, keeping watch. Gi ran the crosshairs up and down, hoping for a vital organ, but unless the man moved, the best the Japanese could hope to do was wound him.

Still, he thought happily, that would be a good start...



Pete Becker stared off into the forest, searching for signs of danger.

An intelligent man, he was astute enough to survive in the business world, but was not nearly so adept in the wild. His fitness, he decided, was probably his most valuable asset. If the sniper began chasing him through the forest, he would probably be able to leave the others behind. He doubted that anyone could keep up with him. The thought made him wonder. It wasn't that he was keen to leave others to face their brutal pursuer, but at least he knew he could hold his own.

He heard Emily approaching from behind, and turned just enough to confirm that it really was her, and not some murderous killer. Sure enough, the stenographer crept toward him, her short blonde hair still somewhat visible against the green and brown shades of the forest, even though Harry Langford had insisted on smearing her blonde tresses and face with mud. Pete caught a flash of her green eyes, then went back to searching the forest.

When it came to being quiet, Emily was good, he decided. *Very good.*

Somehow she managed to creep forward without a sound. Still, in reality she was no more suited to their tropical surroundings than he was. But she certainly knew how to be quiet. Pete turned a little more, searching for where he knew the army man should be, but Harry Langford was nowhere to be seen. He stared intently at the bushes, studying every tiny leaf, certain *that* was where Harry had last been.

It took some time before Pete located Harry, and even then only because Harry moved, first giving the tiniest wave with two fingers to draw his attention, and then moving his eyes so that Pete could see him amid the ferns.

Damn, now he was really good!

The mud on Harry's face hid him perfectly. Clearly the old warhorse was back in his element, creeping about in the jungle. And while there was no sign of the nurse, Carrie Long, Pete had no doubt that Harry would not have let her stray far from him. He remembered how Harry had caked her face with mud too. The bond between those two was obvious.

Pete turned back to scrutinise the forest one more time, ready to withdraw to Harry's position. He had been in favour of this stroll, despite the obvious dangers posed by the sniper.

But now, somehow the need for a healthy stretch and to answer the call of nature seemed rather irresponsible.

Now the forest was cooling and growing dimmer with late afternoon. Tiny shards of bright golden sunlight pierced the foreboding, menacing shadows, giving an eerie feel to the forest, as well as making it more difficult to see lurking enemies.

It was definitely time to hide again. Hiding seemed like a great idea.



Harry crouched low behind a fallen tree, its huge trunk laying flat and its massive root system, caked in black earth now jutting sharply toward the sky. The rotting trunk of the tree followed the top of a steep hill, so that behind Harry the ground dropped away sharply, affording he and his friends a quick escape into the thick grass and bushes below should the need arise.

Carrie came and joined him, returning as quietly as she could, and with great care. Then she took up a silent vigil beside the man she was happy to trust for leadership.

Separated from Harry by a tall, thick tree root that juttred eerily skyward, looking like the tendril of some strange beast that might reach out and seize one of them at any moment, she had a slightly different field of view to her partner, and her sharp, blue eyes began scouring the forest for the sniper.

It didn't take long before Carrie saw the first hint of danger.



Kazuki Gi peered through the magnified world of his riflescope, keeping his other eye open all the while. That way, he knew he could keep an eye on the world at large, while preparing to claim his next victim.

And a moment later he was *particularly* glad he had.

With his right index finger already placing just the slightest hint of pressure on the trigger, he suddenly hesitated, then moved the scope to take in something his free left eye had glimpsed.

Surely not, he thought, blood surging through his veins. His body tingled with elation.

Surely he couldn't be THAT lucky. Could he?

But he was.

He drew an excited breath, his mouth falling slightly open with a thrill he could barely contain. Staring back through a barrier of ferns was a second face, that of a young woman. Kazuki estimated that she could not be much more than twenty, and while not his native Japanese, she was still a most worthy prey. She was quite beautiful to him – and just for a

moment he wondered if he really *should* eliminate her. But then, wasn't *that* the whole purpose of the game? After all, with just a small squeeze of his trigger, he could place a bullet squarely in her forehead, a quick, simple and most assuredly fatal shot. It would be so easy.

But was it right?

Adrenalin told him it most certainly was. He had to convince himself that she was real. At such close range he could even see the colour of her eyes.

Yes, it was definitely right!

Kazuki felt his pulse thump in his ears. And yes, while he knew he could eliminate her easily from the game, with just the smallest touch of finger on trigger, he had to force himself not to. He shivered with elation at the knowledge that he had cornered not just one prey, but two.

He grinned an evil grin.

Twice the fun, he mused excitedly.

Moreover, this was the chance he had *always* wanted. Now he could *finally* indulge himself, and dare to get up close and personal with a victim. He took careful aim at his chosen target, then squeezed gently on the cold, lethal trigger.



Thwack!

The sound that accompanied the smack on Pete Becker's lower right arm was deceptively small. So was the initial pain, for indeed, there was very little. But the effect of the sniper's bullet was devastating.

Pete drew back and fell against the gnarled trunk of the tree, then lifted his right arm to see what had smacked it. And at that moment all his best endeavours to remain silent were lost and forgotten. Pete looked at his raised hand to see it hanging at a grotesque angle to his forearm, the bones snapped cleanly and the limb bleeding profusely where a sizeable hole had been blasted right through his wrist.

He bellowed, not in pain, but in horrified, terrified protest.



Harry, who had been watching the progress of Pete and Emily, called sharply to them to run toward where he and Carrie were waiting. He glanced over his shoulder to check for the best retreat to take, knowing that once he set foot on the steep downhill slope behind him, it would act like a slide at a theme park, whisking him away to whatever dangers might be hidden in the tall ferns and bushes below.

Emily heard his voice and turned instantly, shocked that both he and Pete would risk calling out. She looked terrified, well aware that such shouts from the two men could only mean that trouble had found them. Instinctively she dropped down, hiding herself within the ferns.



Killing was the thrill of Kazuki's life.

That was why he had spent so many millions of dollars playing *the game*. And what a game it was! The sounds were real and the sights were more than he had ever imagined possible. With the most sophisticated virtual reality system he had ever known giving him every external physical sensation, as well as real-life vision and sound, his senses were overloaded, and his body tingled with electric exhilaration.

Void of all compassion, he lived for the thrill of the kill.

His male victim spun as his first bullet smashed the man's wrist, shattering bones and leaving the hand dangling from the bleeding stump of his forearm. The man cried out in shock, and for several seconds disappeared behind the tree he had been standing by. He was visible again soon after, holding his broken arm with his other hand, his face twisted in horrified shock. Kazuki placed the thin crosshairs of his scope upon the man's chest and punched three more holes.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

Even at that range he could hear the man's initial grunt, and thanks to his weapon's silencer, the smacking of bullets on flesh. A shower of red mist hovered behind the man in Kazuki's magnified world as he watched with utmost glee the results of his handiwork – a spray of blood from the stricken man's torso.

The Japanese then scoured the ferns and bushes for the vision of loveliness he had seen less than a minute earlier. *She* was his real prize. *She* was the elegant *gazelle*, the personal prize he wanted.

He yearned for her.

Kazuki could not bear the thought of missing her, and yet he did not want to shoot her unless he had no other choice. He moved the rifle to his right hand and slipped stealthily forward. As he did, he reached back and caressed the handle of his preferred weapon of choice.

Soon his thrill would be complete!



Harry slipped to his left in order to clear the massive clump of exposed tree roots, soil and

ferns, searching for Emily where he knew she should be.

As he did he heard Pete bellow again in protest at having had his wrist shattered, a small fountain of blood spurting from the torn, almost severed limb. But even as Harry was preparing to call Pete to him, the injured man, dazed and in shock, stumbled forward beyond the cover of the tree behind which he had been hiding.

The sniper wasted no time in bringing the injured man down.

Harry heard three distinct sounds, and even in the stress of the moment realised that he could not be certain whether it was the small report of a silenced rifle he was hearing, or that of lead impacting flesh and bone. It made no difference, since the outcome was the same.

There came the familiar telltale red haze about Pete Becker as three more bullets tore right through his upper body. Exploding puffs of flesh and torn fabric told the story, along with Pete's single grunt of protest as his hands flicked about in the air before him, as though he was doing some macabre dance with death. The lawyer fell immediately to the ground without ever attempting to break his fall.

Harry needed no further explanation.

The former army man guessed that he too would be exposed to the sniper if he dared to stand upright, and while lifting his head might help him to locate Emily Beach, it didn't seem like a wise move. Besides, by revealing his position behind the fallen tree, he knew he would also draw attention to Carrie, and simply add a new dynamic to the risks they all faced. Instead, he decided to make a low sprint to where he knew Emily should be.

A tugging on his shirt caused him to hesitate.

Carrie looked both bewildered and shocked as she pointed with an extended finger to a place perhaps thirty or forty metres to their right, well beyond the huge fallen tree behind which they hid. And while Harry was desperate to run, he was drawn to look by the sheer intensity of Carrie's face. But unlike her, he had only a brief second or two to take in what Carrie had clearly caught a much longer view of. Still, it was enough to captivate him for several seconds, and it temporarily halted his dash into the ferns.

Harry saw several flashes of movement through the tall grass, close by a large tree. They were movements of the sniper, he had no doubt, especially since that was the direction he thought had heard the muffled shots coming from. But in those moments all his army training seemed to count for nothing.

Because nothing was what he expected it to be.

He had seen ruthless killers in action before; cruel assassins who stalked their prey, waiting for their victims' most vulnerable moments. He had seen the results too; combatants and

innocent civilians alike, with unspeakable wounds, rampaging bullets having torn their bodies apart. It was always shocking, and despite the unfairness or cruelty of the ritual, the unsuspecting life was always lost.

That was the nature of battle, and despite the brutality of it, Harry had learned to live with it.

Win or lose, he could face *that*. But this was different.

Like Carrie, he drew a quick, cold breath that chilled him to the bone, perhaps even more than the knowledge that Pete Becker was already dead or dying just a short distance away. For the thing that he saw, though only for a second or two, gave no sign of being even slightly human.

Rather, the only flash of movement amid the foliage came from shining metal.



Emily Beach had to put a hand over her mouth to hide the high-pitched squeal that naturally began to shriek from within.

Even from her position among the ferns she could see Pete's reaction to being wounded, and then his resultant stumble forward, directly into the line of the sniper's fire. She threatened to scream again as she watched Pete's back become dotted with torn holes, but somehow she had the presence of mind to hold the urge in. Only a muffled, shrill gasp passed her lips as Pete fell lifelessly to the ground.

Emily dropped instinctively to her knees, her eyes searching for a way of escape. Her stunned, terrified mind told her instinctively that Pete was already dead, and moreover, the small fountains that had erupted from his back gave her the definite impression that the sniper had to be on the far side of her fallen friend. Having ducked down among the ferns, she could no longer see where Harry and Carrie were hiding, and in her terror, she had lost the exact bearing. Still, she was reasonably sure.

She knelt, staying as still as she could for several seconds, listening for sounds of the sniper moving in the tall grass and ferns, hoping to gain some sort of warning as to the killer's position, but there was only silence. Even Pete was quiet.

Emily had no doubt what *that* meant.

Gasping shrill breaths that she tried desperately to silence, she turned and scurried hastily and low toward where she was sure the fallen tree, and her friends, should be.



With his rifle slung over a shoulder and his most beloved weapon of choice in hand, Kazuki

moved at speed toward his target. Ignoring his first victim, who he had no doubt would already be dead, he sought a much more exciting prize.

She would be there, he thought.

And while he did not even *like* western women, she would be the *soft target* he had longed for. Indeed, he *craved*. She would be his prize *gazelle*. His trophy. His boast. And moreover, she would afford him his long-awaited opportunity to test his new and cherished weapon.

Kazuki didn't even bother to check the fate of the man he had just shot. There was something *far more precious* to him now. Something he had *yearned for*. And now that the makers of the game had finally allowed him to have his weapon of choice – his precious Samurai sword, he would not be denied his most glorious experience yet.

He gripped the sword tightly with both hands. Nothing could stop him now.



Even in the fleeting seconds Harry had to consider what he had seen, he possessed the clarity of mind to act logically. He moved quickly again to his left, leaving Carrie behind the relative safety of the large fallen tree. And while he was aware of her presence following him, his eyes were searching again for the terrifying presence he had just glimpsed.

What had it been? *An alien? A metal warrior? A weapon?*

A robot?

His heart raced as he looked to his left to see a movement among the ferns, and though still mostly hidden behind the safety of the exposed roots of the fallen tree, his senses bristled, ready for mortal combat. He was ready to kill.

But rather than a fearsome enemy – one who moved like *no man or thing* he had ever seen – it was the face of a friend who broke through the greenery – albeit, a particularly frightened friend.

Emily Beach's sense of direction, though disoriented by fear, was basically true.



Emily, her face and short blonde hair striped with the mud that Harry had insisted she wear, came scurrying on her hands and knees from the tall, thick ferns. She had tears in her eyes, and though she gasped with fright when she first saw the muddy man staring back at her, she quickly rushed to join him.

With an outstretched hand she reached for Harry, quite certain that no matter who or where the enemy might be, *Harry* would save her. And, equally as keen to save her, as she was to be

saved, Harry took Emily's hand, clamped it tight, then pulled her with force to bring her behind the relative safety of the huge clump of exposed tree roots.



Carrie slipped in close behind Harry, afraid to be left alone, and keen to be near him should he need help. She had no doubt that he would make a dash to save Emily, since that was clearly in his nature. Neither did she have any illusions about the fate of Pete Becker.

So close behind him, she caught just a flash of movement ahead of them – first of Emily, and then of something else. *Something odd, and terrifying.* But before she could even think of warning Harry, he came back heavily upon her, almost as if thrown back by some powerful, unseen force.

With the slippery, grassy slope dropping away at such a steep grade just behind them, she could do nothing to arrest her fall or his, and together they plummeted swiftly down the hill, crashing, rolling and thudding their way through a vast array of forest plants and ferns.



Emily looked directly into Harry's eyes, and saw only a flash of silver to alert her to the presence of something else close by.

She felt little more than a bump on her outstretched arm, and then she fell back, away from the man who was busily pulling her toward him. It was as though he had let go of her for some inexplicable reason. And somehow she had missed it.

A shocked look on Harry's face was the last she saw of him up close, and then he and Carrie were falling backwards, away from her, over the edge of the steep grassy slope.

Emily watched them tumble, over and over as they slipped away down the green slope, disappearing into a thick canopy of tall bushes, ferns and grass. In a few more surreal seconds Harry and Carrie were gone, swallowed up by the jungle and the downhill slope.

And she was left alone at the top of the hill.

But alas, Emily sensed, she was *not alone*.

Her eyes watched in disbelief to where her would-be rescuers had slipped away, and then to where a tingling sensation was beginning to awaken her senses to the fact that something was wrong with the hand she had been holding on to Harry with.

Emily let out a forlorn wail of shocked despair.

Her right forearm had been cut cleanly through near the middle of the limb, the wrist and hand nowhere in sight. And the perfectly sheared stump was spurting blood in a lavish, bright

red fountain.



Kazuki stared down the slope to where two of his prey had just disappeared, and with his rifle slung over his shoulder in deference to the weapon he currently toted – his *favourite* weapon – there was nothing he could do to prevent them from escaping.

But it didn't matter.

The truth was, and he knew it well, that he still had a full day to play the game, and he would enjoy toying with his last two victims at leisure tomorrow, far more than some quick victory now. Shooting them in the back could never compare with the intense sensations he knew he would relish the next day, when he could slowly, systematically hunt and kill.

Even torture them.

Besides, now he knew he was alone with his *treasured, wonderful gazelle*.

Kazuki ceased his gaze over the edge of the slope, then looked down to where his helpless victim remained, kneeling and crying in pain on the grass. Her scarlet blood spurted and glistened on the rich, green grass, forming wonderful patterns amid the golden shafts of light of the late afternoon sun.

There was his prize, he knew.

She was his real goal – for now, at least. The other two could wait. For now, *this one* was his chance to enjoy *real pleasure* with. Blood pulsed audibly in his ears as he thought about what he would do.

He reached down and took the young victim's left wrist, tugging her clasping hand away from the spurting stump of her severed right forearm. She was suffering from shock, and as he took her small wrist in his hand, she looked terrified. Their eyes met, then hers wandered about his body, her face showing *such deep fear* that it appeared she might be staring at an alien, or perhaps a ghost.

Kazuki could only imagine that she was overcome by the sight of being confronted by the fearsome Japanese warrior that he imagined himself to be. He watched with an overpowering sense of grandeur as his helpless, crying victim, injured and in shock, knelt helplessly before him. He grinned, his beloved weapon – the weapon of his ancestors – the weapon he was so proud of that he had asked the makers of the game to specifically arm him with – held firmly in his right hand.

A small smear of blood on his curved sword hinted at what was in his evil mind. And for a time, in his mind, he was a proud, brutal, unstoppable *samurai warrior*.



Emily Beach stared in horror at the cleanly severed stump of her right forearm, her entire wrist and hand nowhere in sight. With wide-eyed alarm she saw two neatly cut bone stubs, surrounded by soft pink flesh, and a spurting cascade of scarlet that shot forth to stain her folded thighs as she kneeled in cold submission and shock.

Then she remembered the silver streak that had heralded the disappearance of Harry and Carrie.

Her mind raced, and despite her ordeal, she recalled that something had passed between them, causing her friends to slip away down the grassy slope before her. And in that moment she realised that even with her forearm completely severed as it was, she would be better off sliding down through the slippery grass into the green unknown than staying on the top of the slope with whoever, or *whatever* had severed her arm.

She leaned forward, knowing she had no choice but to slide away to freedom.

But the man, the *beast*, the *thing* that had attacked her anticipated the move, and simply reached out and gripped her left wrist, holding her back. The grip of the *monster* was strong, like a claw of iron, and struggle as she might, she knew she could not shake herself free. So, despite her terror and pain, she bravely turned to face the manic killer, the cruel sniper, and the dreaded monster that held her.

And when she looked up to behold the cruel one who held her wrist, Emily's face turned pale with a mix of icy fear and stifling bewilderment. *He* was not at all the man she expected him to be.

Indeed, *it* was a glistening, cold machine.



Kazuki stared into the terrified eyes of his forlorn prey, his *magnificent fair-haired, fair-skinned gazelle*.

At first he was proud beyond description, elated by how the young woman stared in such fear and awe of him. He gazed into her sharp, green eyes, and could not help but note the intelligent look there.

A fine, worthy prey, he decided. *Young and fit and intelligent... But no match for him! He would be victorious, and she would be his prize! It was her destiny – and his too!*

But then he saw her face soften, some of the fear slipping away to be replaced by something else. Her slender lips parted, her mouth slowly opening in what was clearly a look of surprise.

Even her lovely eyes widened some more as the lines on her brow showed the wonder that she was obviously experiencing.

Kazuki gasped.

She was no longer as fearful as she was... amazed!

In his arrogant pride he could not imagine anything but that she was in total awe of him. *Gi – the magnificent warrior! Gi – the samurai!*

He grinned even wider than before, then raised his victim's left arm a little higher, as though he might kiss her petit hand. She was wonderful to him; young and healthy and beautiful. And while she was not his native Japanese, there was a certain attraction to him in her intelligent face, her tearful green eyes and her short, muddy blonde hair.

She was like a panting, wild beast that he had caught.

Like him, he decided, she was magnificent!

And she would be a most *worthy sacrifice* to consummate his dream of proving himself a fearsome, proud samurai warrior. With her hand raised high, and her body kneeling side-on to him on the grass, Kazuki took the shining, slightly curved sword in his right hand, laid the blade on its side, and thrust it into Emily Beach's side.

Emily screeched loud and long, her spine arching backwards in protest to the pain. She thrust her head back, exposing the softness of her throat, long and pale and slightly sweaty, her eyes wide with renewed pain and shock.

The blade pierced her in the softness of her left armpit, slipping through her camouflage uniform and between her ribs, and travelling through her upper body on a downward angle until it exited on her right side, slipping out just underneath her bottom rib.

Emily continued to gasp and squeal repeatedly with terrible pain at the cruel blade's cold intrusion, the bloody stump of her right arm rising in natural reaction to the onslaught, then dropping down upon the exposed tip of the blade as it exited on that side of her body.

She snorted and gasped and spasmed, but did not fall, held aloft by her killer's right hand about her left wrist. The blade glistened, exposed on both sides of Emily's slender body, the hilt coming to stop a full handspan short of her exposed armpit.

Not happy with that, Gi gave one last push, and gave a loud cry of his own as the rounded hilt of the shimmering weapon thudded firmly against Emily's armpit, her left arm now unable to drop down due to the large handle there.

Emily gave a smaller, more wheezing grunt in response to the second push, and then a pitiful whimper as Kazuki pushed the hilt hard into her armpit. Slowly her head, which had for some long seconds tilted back as far as it would go, tilted forward again. Her eyes and face

looked down to where the bloody stump of her right forearm now rested atop a slippery, red-stained metal blade that protruded from her right side, just below her ribcage.

She grunted and gasped several times, her body jerking about as though she might be trying to say something, but no discernable syllables passed her quivering lips. She looked back to her attacker, this time without fear, but only with a look of defiance etched in her bright, intelligent eyes.

Her mouth opened and closed, and again Gi thought she might speak, but she did not. Instead, a long gurgling sound passed from her trembling lips, and slowly her sparkling eyes looked back down to her lap. Gradually her head began to lower, and in time it appeared that she was simply staring at her folded knees and thighs.

Emily's wheezing breaths slowed, and she no longer seemed concerned with her attacker's presence, or even the cold, bloody sword that passed right through the breadth of her body, lancing her left lung and fatally wounding her heart. Kazuki could hear her small gasping breaths slowing, and he knew that she would shortly die.

He knew he must act quickly if he was to fulfil his imaginary path to becoming what he believed to be a *true warrior*.

He dropped Emily's wrist and placed his hand instead on her shoulder, then withdrew the long, curved blade of his sword. It took some time before the full length of the bloody blade was free, and when it was, Emily remained still and submissive, kneeling with her arms drooping lazily at her sides. Kazuki looked at how her head was bowed, her eyes still staring into her lap, and he wondered if there might be any remnant of life left in his young victim.

He knew he must act *now*, to truly fulfil his dream. She must still be *alive*!

A long, low wheezing sound from Emily's throat gave him the trace of hope he needed.

He raised the bloody sword and allowed its sharp, curved edge to gently kiss the nape of her neck as her head tilted fully forward. Without hesitation he then drew it back and brought the murderous weapon down hard. Emily's head dropped off into her lap as easily as if Gi had cut through a soft melon, the severed stump of her neck spitting yet more blood down upon her lifeless body. The bloody stump gave a low sucking sound as though she was gargling, then spat more red froth over her jungle uniform.

As Gi gazed in ultimate ecstasy at his victory, Emily's head continued to roll, slipping from her lap to the bloody, glistening grass upon which she knelt. Her bright green eyes remained open, but appeared sad, as though she was condemning a cruel world that had not cared for her plight. And then, as though the world indeed *did* care, albeit too late, the soft veil of green grass seemed to welcome her pretty face as her head rolled over the edge of the slope, away from her

killer, and off to freedom.

And as much as his victim's head was an important part of Kazuki Gi's fantasy-trophy, he never bothered to try to halt its escape. For while he would have liked to gloat over his young victim's head as well as her body, which remained still and silent, oozing blood in kneeling submission to his lethal, hunting prowess, the knowledge of what he had done was enough to sate his need to feel like a warrior of old.

Now he truly believed himself to be a *supreme killer*...

(Continued...)

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