

# Wakeless

William M. Dean

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## DEDICATION

To my father,  
Morris M. W. Dean,  
for always having our backs.  
You've taught me more  
than I'm willing to admit.

*[fake-punch to the shoulder followed by awkward silence.]*



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## CHAPTER 1

“...just say’in, seems like you’ve been on the beat a long time.”

Constables Joe Sault and Darsh Singh were sitting in the patrol car, eating Subway. Singh had a drop of mustard hanging from the scraggly, jet black hair of his moustache. Joe Sault debated telling him, decided that he had to because that drip would eventually fall and, being Karma’s whipping boy, it would be Joe Sault, not Darsh Singh, who would end up wearing it when they switched positions, after lunch. He gave Singh a look and tapped the mirror-side of his own mouth.

Singh dabbed with a paper napkin, missed, then continued, “I mean fifteen years in and still on the street—if a guy hasn’t moved on in that time...” He seemed to hear himself for the first time and tried to 180, his tone softening to something more appropriate for a new boot talking to his Training Officer. “I mean, most guys’d have moved to Detective or desk-side, by now. I’m sure you’ve got a game plan...” Perhaps desperate to stop himself talking, he jammed the sandwich into his face, effectively muffling the end to that thought.

Sault took a large bite of ham and Swiss and, over the chatter of the police band, looked out the driver side window at nothing and everything that wandered through the downtown inner harbor area.

Victoria was Canada's hotspot; had the mildest weather and, being a little isolated by virtue of its location on Vancouver Island, its architecture and street décor still emulated the original, old English charm, though the facades were now as much plastic as plaster.

This time of year, tourists poured like spilled beads from the grand old lady Empress Hotel and the other high-end accommodation that ringed the harbor. They flowed toward the quaint restaurants, double-decker tour buses, horse-drawn carriages and, curiously, rickshaws. They funneled along the harbor concourse, streaming past buskers, artists, food vendors and boaters rich enough to moor in the middle of town. And they snapped a thousand more photos identical to the thousands snapped the day before, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they were smack dab in an urban core of concrete, glass and steel, buzzing road-pods and blazing holographic signage. It was augmented reality in real life...the future overlaid on the past.

Mistaking Sault's silence for reproach, Singh tried to make up for lost ground, "I mean, if this is your passion, then go for it. Why change what works, right? You've got a rep—obviously the beat works for you..."

Sault took another bite and glanced at Singh. "You missed," he said, tapping a finger against his upper lip. Singh was six foot four, wide shouldered, with scrubby facial hair that looked like a coarse, dark lather. His skin was too light and his facial features too angular for him to have been full-blooded East Indian, as his name suggested. He seemed unnaturally huge in the confines of the patrol car, forced to move by sliding body parts, as if restrained in rubber, and had to maneuver his elbow so as not to hit the dash or shotgun as he brought the napkin to his face.

"Saving it for later," he chuckled, then dabbed again with the paper. Missed again.

Sault was not the least offended by Singh's questions. He had quickly come to like the new recruit. He was swift and smart and had the foundation of an instinct that would serve

him well on the force. One day, he knew, they'd probably be Detectives, same grade, working side by side. In fact, he'd have had less respect for the other man had he not ventured into that obvious yet delicate territory. Partners had to understand each other as thoroughly as possible and come to some sort of unspoken agreement on the parts they couldn't understand. Sault was not a talkative man, but every one of his patrol partners had been and he'd always found it a benefit, if only because it relieved him of that duty.

Sault nodded toward the ocean and they both watched a woman—native, or possibly Asian, mid-twenties, waist-length hair, wrapped in a skin-tight, flashy colored micro mini that revealed more than it covered in foot high stilettos—awkwardly negotiate the steel mesh ramp that led to the docks below the concourse and the multi-million-dollar yachts moored there. Obviously, a hooker, but not one he knew. Better looking than most, maybe new to the game, maybe an out-of-towner working the season. They watched her waddle and slip, holding hard to the steel rail, inching her way down.

“One of two things,” Sault said, “Either she slips and falls head first into the drink, or some guy’s going to fall in looking at her. What do you think?”

Singh chuckled, seeing this new conversation as a ladder out of the hole he'd dug himself into, during the previous one. “Or some old dude’s going to run to her rescue,” he added having seen what Sault had missed: On one of the larger yachts a white-fringed head had popped up like a marmot and now the man was tripping over himself to debark. Probably her date. And from the enthusiastic look on his face, he was in love at first sight. He reached her on the ramp, at about the halfway point and stabilized her by taking her hand, his other hand lassoing her tiny waist in a fashion that was not fatherly. When she finally reached the dock, she quickly scanned the fifty feet of knot-holed, loosely-spaced wooden decking between her and his yacht and doffed her shoes, going barefoot. The man seemed disappointed at no longer having to hold on to her but placed a hand across her shoulders, fingers caressing bare skin.

It was a little awkward as she was taller than he, but he made it work...for himself, at least.

“The case of the escorted escort.”

Sault chuckled at Singh’s observation. “Yup.” And he thought about how comedy and tragedy mixed so fluidly on the streets—and then, thinking about his own situation—in life, in general.

Singh crushed waxy paper into a ball and stuffed the scant remains of Genoa Salami into the plastic sleeve in which it had been served. “A bot?” he asked, holding the bag open, offering it for Sault’s garbage.

“Not a bot,” Sault declared as he made his contribution.

“How’d you know? You get AR?” The widespread implementation of Augmented Reality had boomed in the late 20’s, with the advent of e-contacts. The first industry to really embrace the technology had been construction. All materials were now infused with “Rippers” (Radio ID and Position Reporting devices)—pin-head-sized chips that contained detailed material specs and a passive GPS which could be activated with a hand-held, near-field wand—the information was then translated by an Architect AI which rendered a graphic representation and transmitted that back to the worker. Workmen not only knew the position of every nail within a wall, but also the angle and depth to which it had been driven. They no longer carried plans, stud finders, levels, tape measures or pencil—all measurements and plan details were overlaid on the worksite by the Architect AI.

Other industries quickly followed that lead. But, at first, it proved too dangerous for emergency first responders because accident sites tended to vary from the archived plans. A few people ran full-tilt into debris or didn’t jump out of the way of shifting wreckage, reminding everyone that not every detail of modern life was accurately reflected in AR. Eventually, an Overseer AI had been developed to communicate with all Architect AI’s and collate the data in order to make sure that augmented data was accurate and up to date enough to ensure the safety of humans viewing the world through overlays. There

hadn't been a serious accident in years and emergency service agencies had begun to embrace the technology. Vic PD now allowed AR implants and prescription eyewear as long as it was served only by Ana, the department's AI, during work shifts. Most officers Singh's age had opted in, but for whatever reason, Darsh had not. Sault was glad. He thought it was too easy to forget that *augmented* reality was not *actual* reality and didn't want his trainees so dependent on technology to do their job.

Sault nodded, again, toward the ramp where another young woman, body swaying and bobbing provocatively, her dress equally flamboyant and engaging—again, obviously a hooker—made her way toward the ramp. Sault did not know this woman either, but for different reasons.

“She looks underage. Are we busting this?”

“Wait for it...”

Her heels were as tall and spindly as the first girl's, but when she hit the ramp, instead of legs twisted and akimbo, slowly, pneumatically, her heels lifted until she was balanced on the tips of her toes like a prima ballerina. Then she proceeded down the ramp as sure-footed as a goat. There was nothing natural in the move.

“That's a bot,” said Sault.

“Jeezus! That's just not right. How can she even balance on those pointed shoes?”

“They're rubber; built for durability, not comfort. They probably don't even come off.”

Singh let out a hiss. “She looked so normal—hot.”

“Some do, from this distance.”

“Yeah, but compared to Ana...”

Ana was the reception shell for the Vic PD's administrative AI.

“Remember DesMoines?”

Singh got the reference. Two Christmases before, top brass at the DesMoines, Iowa P.D. were happily showing off Shirley, their brand new, state-of-the-art admin-bot. Shirley was fully AI, fully autonomous and had very realistic features. According to the press release, many who visited the front desk had no

idea she was not human. Of course, many who visited the front desk couldn't have told you if it was day or night. Regardless, Shirley went viral. And, just after the new year, she went viral again when a dozen New Year's party pictures became public, featuring DesMoines cops and Shirley—all smiles— performing lewd acts. The brass had been less enthusiastic about these. Shirley was given a makeover and came back looking more like C3PO than Barbie.

Singh's thoughts had branched off, "So, you can still go to jail for possessing a lewd sketch of an underaged girl, meanwhile you can legally have sex with a prepubescent-looking doll?"

"But a lewd holo-image of that doll is prosecutable," Sault said, completing the thought. "The law's got some catching up to do. Let's swap."

Sault opened his door and lifted himself out thinking that one needed no more proof that the world was still male-dominated than the fact that six years after the first practical and affordable consumer model hit the showroom floor, sex-related bots of various configurations—from life-sized figures to remote controlled anuses—out numbered all others, three to one. And this included military devices like autonomous combat vehicles and drone swarms. Meanwhile, lawmakers seemed to be taking their sweet time addressing the sexual issues and Sault couldn't help but wonder if that was because they were largely male.

As Singh stuffed himself behind the wheel and pushed the seat all the way back, Sault eased into the passenger seat and called in their return to duty, then lifted his left arm and checked his watch and had the same fleeting thought he always had whenever he saw a modern watch; that the name was a completely misleading anachronism, just as 'phone' had been during the smartphone era, or 'gas station,' now just a convenience store with snap-charge pads installed under the parking spaces. Even the term "doll" had grown up so that it now most commonly referred to sex-bots. It surprised Sault that "action figure," hadn't made the cut though it seemed the

more obvious choice. It made him wonder if the older a language got; the more detached words became from what they describe. The device on his wrist was a plain black band of flexible plastic jammed with sensors and emitters. It understood spoken instruction and mid-air gestures, connected to everything and gave the user instant access to terabytes of data, which it delivered via a holographic display, or laser-beamed directly onto the retina, for privacy. As well, it was a shell for personal AI's, allowing them to travel with you, splitting and hopping from device to device as you moved; always available, always obedient, ever vigilant, always one step ahead of your needs.

Sault had not been an early adopter of AI technology, having bought his own only a year prior. He still had trouble imagining what use the average citizen could possibly make of a personal assistant with a genius-level IQ. As far as he could tell, most AI's spent their time auto-posting vapid updates on their user's activities to the network, which social feeds then curated and distributed to anyone they determined might be vaguely interested...which was largely other users' AI's who sifted through the detritus and responded with more trivial daily detail. In the end, Sault conjectured, the vast majority of the activity was shared between AI's and never seen by human eyes.

He had waited until all Vic PD communications and databases went AI-to-AI and owning one became a necessity of the job, no less than a gun. And then, he had found himself unable to settle on a name.

He wanted something short and convenient, and distinct from humans he was likely to encounter. AI's never got confused, but AI's with human names sometimes confused their masters. Sault also wanted a name that did not reveal anything in particular about him. Meanwhile, those around him seemed to have no such worries, naming them after famous actors, historical figures, characters and robots from fiction, their dogs, their kids or their ex's. His wife, Maya, called her AI "Gemma," after a childhood friend who now lived in Australia and whom she rarely spoke with anymore. Sault

warned her that it might get confusing to which she simply said, “If that happens, then I’ll rename it. It’s just an app.”

A lot of people Sault knew took as much care in naming their “app” as they might in naming their own child. Creatively naming their AI was tied to their ego in some way that made Sault uncomfortable. He took his wife’s advice and just started trying names. In the first six months, he went through ten names, starting with “Spud” and ending with “Ten,” trying them on and eventually rejecting them as awkward or embarrassing.

Then, one day, as his AI in its journey-bot shell lifted the back half of his Buick so that he could slide a wooden block under the chassis, it turned its blocky head toward him and said, “You can call me Vivia, if you like.”

Sault had been startled. AI’s were still new to him and he had not gotten used to the jarring shifts in conversation and the leaps of logic inherent in their design. He wasn’t sure that he ever would. As well, until that moment, he’d always thought of his AI as male largely because of its blocky, unornamented journey-bot shell. But somehow it worked for him; perhaps because it was not a name that Sault would have come up with and had absolutely no relevance to him. Or perhaps because he was anthropomorphizing, and it seemed the machine identified with that name. In any case, it stuck. If anyone asked, the machine had named itself and it meant so little to him that he accepted the suggestion, which was largely true.

A couple of swipes over the contextual menu that Vivia had prepared and he was viewing a map with GPS blips where other units were patrolling, more blips where incidents had been reported and a couple of shaded patches where Ana thought trouble was statistically likely to occur. It was pretty quiet, which was the norm in Victoria. Somehow the twenty miles of ocean between Vancouver Island and the mainland seemed to insulate the community from the usual amount of big city violence. Sault spotted a gap between patrol units. Ultimately, they’d spend the bulk of the afternoon there.

“Let’s cruise Chinatown, then head up toward

Quadra/Hillside, check out the ‘independent business people’ on Government Street, on the way.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Singh said, hitting the start button.

The windshield HUD lit up and the V-6 rumbled to life.

Sault liked the feel of power under the hood.

“Let’s park it. Take a stroll.”

Singh pulled in along a yellow colored low spot in the curb that once allowed access to a loading dock in a building, now long gone. The city had yet to resculpt and repaint the curb to make it a legal parking spot. That fact, basically, made it exclusive police parking, so even though it made him shake his head, Sault was not thinking of complaining.

“Even butler-bots are getting pretty realistic, these days.”

Singh remarked nodding toward a tall, thin man strutting by with purpose. He was wearing dress shoes, grey pants, a salmon button-up shirt with a tweed blazer, and a fedora. It was mid-May and almost 85 degrees out. His wide-eyed stare and fixed smile also set him apart from the neutral or negative expressions on human shoppers and store keeps.

They wandered Fisgard, dodging tourists and tipping their caps to familiar Chinese shop owners selling Chinese-y distractions that were available cheaper, just about everywhere else. This was Canada’s oldest Chinatown and, though the hidden tunnels for transporting drugs, prostitutes, bets and debts that used to run between back rooms had been filled in for more than a century, the neighborhood still harbored plenty of secrets in its narrow alleys, behind white-washed windows and on upper floors that seemed abandoned, but weren’t.

The mayor appeared under a store awning. It was a hologram, of course. You could always tell by the oversaturated colors in shade, or by the washed-out effect under bright light. Mayor Thomas (Tommy) Olcott was half in the shade of a store awning, so his balding pate, greying mustache and the thick arms of his steel-grey suit were overly bright, but he was faded and transparent from the paunch down. He was trying to make eye contact with everyone who passed by and swiping data off a virtual stack of pamphlets in his left hand. The mayoral race

was ramping up. Last week, the Dalai Lama had stood there swiping out messages of a peace and salvation. This week, the polar opposite.

Sault side-stepped a distracted shopper and walked right through Mayor Olcott.

“You own a Helper?” Singh asked, seemingly sparked by the simulacrum.

“About two years ago I got a journey-bot.”

“You do carpentry?”

“Not a lot—house maintenance, the usual.” said Sault, “It came with the car. I mostly use it for that.”

“Oh yeah. Journey-bots’re not pretty, but they’ve got heavy-duty frames and servos, right? Can probably lift the entire car.”

Sault shook his head. “Maybe a larger bot or a more modern car. This bot’s small—can only heft about thirty percent of mine. It’s a ‘banger.’”

“Oh yeah. I heard you drive a classic. Piston driven, like a Department unit,” he said, acknowledging the singular similarity between the 6-banger squad car and Sault’s collectible.

Sault couldn’t resist. “Oh-thirty, Grand National GNX, reissue.”

Sault’s replica edition was Buick’s final farewell to internal combustion. Its purple, metallic paint was faded and there were pits of rust in the chrome bumpers and under the wheel wells, but the engine was pristine—no longer factory original, but with the advantage that newer parts added 30 extra horsepower, though how effective those additional horses were was a matter of opinion. It was a replica, not a duplicate, and the extra power coupled with the modern, lighter power plant and chassis meant that if you stomped the gas, it literally flew, and he’d had to order special tires to try to keep the front end on the pavement.

Sault was not one to name a vehicle, but Maya called it “the family yacht.” And most other people referred to it similarly, as a boat. Resisting the demeaning label was futile. The Grand National was almost three times the length of the average road

pod and increasingly awkward to negotiate through parking lots or jam into the tiny spaces.

Singh whistled, respectfully.

“They only made five thousand of them,” Sault added. He was very proud of the car and his work on it, especially as he was in no way a natural mechanic. He was exceptionally good at puzzles—a 1000-piece Red Cuber, in fact—but the simple trick to maintaining air, fuel, and fire within an internal combustion engine eluded him from the beginning. In truth, the car performed less well now than it had when he’d first purchased it and had caused him no end of inconvenience. Still, he refused to admit defeat and Maya had finally given up pestering him to find a more reliable, more conventional vehicle.

He both loved and loathed going under the hood, constantly frustrated by engineering which placed bolts in awkward spots or even completely beyond sight. Bashed knuckles and deep cuts from razor-sharp metal were a testament to his perseverance, though they probably said more about his stubbornness.

“Fully restored?”

“Getting there. It still needs a bit of work, but the engine’s been up-spec’d—turbo charged and external reservoir shocks. Nothing on the road can touch it.”

“Oh yeah. I heard that, too.” Sault couldn’t tell if he meant that he’d heard about the incredible engine performance or the fact that Sault was so often seen under the hood, trying to coax it to life so that he could leave the station.

It was to be expected that a new boot like Singh would ask around before meeting his Training Officer, but Sault knew that Singh wouldn’t have needed to ask. Being forty-one, with seventeen years of patrol under his boots, made him one of the most senior officers currently on the street. This bought him a lot of respect among the rank and file which, he had concluded, was the thing he liked best. It was a comfort zone, unlike being a husband, or the father of two.

But the pressure from the brass was always there now. He was a Constable, Second Class, and they wanted him to at least

make First Class—Detective—and were constantly steering him that direction. And part of that push was saddling him with a never-ending stream of trainees. As Chief of Police Roth had once told him, “The Department has a lot invested in you and we need to disseminate your years of experience. If you’re not going to use it to tackle our stats, then we’ll use you to train others who will.”

“Hey, isn’t that Hamel and Hilton’s unit?”

Just ahead of them was another black and white, legally parked.

“I thought we were filling a gap area,” Singh said while simultaneously double-checking his watch to find that their unit had actually been advised to a different zone.

“First, I want to check on a guy.”

That was another thing the brass did not like; Sault didn’t always hug the curb when it came to issues of policy and procedure. Sometimes he passed on a blind curve, and once or twice in his career, he’d left the road, altogether. Each time he’d been disciplined, but minimally, because things ended well, and the cases had been too high profile to sweep him under a rug. Ok, maybe three or four times. Five, if you counted today.

He guessed that, to the administrators at Vic PD, his behavior seemed completely random, and the control freak nature of management was not happy with unpredictable, regardless of outcomes. But Sault knew that he was completely predictable.

It galled him whenever a Chief of Police was forced to publicly apologize for sloppy police work that the administration allowed to fester into a public scandal. Such announcements were always filled with vague references and subtle sidesteps that made the entire department look as shifty as the politicians. And afterward, someone on the first four floors inevitably took the fall. Fortunately, it didn’t happen often, and he was proud to know that was partially due to his efforts. Why this would not be celebrated at the top, he could never understand.

He believed that probably most of the patrolmen thought

well of him—hell, he'd trained half of them—but he knew that almost every detective hated him. The Chief had mentioned it.

He guessed they didn't like their work being scrutinized. But he never set out to do that. He saw himself as more of a fact-checker than a detective. It always started with idle curiosity and a single question. Usually, the question got answered and it ended there. But once in a while, question one led to question two and the questions just kept outpacing the answers. Those kinds of cases got their hooks in him and he just wasn't able to let them go. He wanted to, but the puzzle-addicted side of his brain would have him staring at the ceiling all night long until it was satisfied. And there was only one solution to that problem...answers. At that point, he had no choice but to put his boots where only dress shoes were authorized to tread.

He'd once overheard himself being sarcastically referred to as the "midnight auditor." He kind of liked that.

"You stand here. Anyone comes or goes through that door, grab 'em."

They were facing a skinny old wooden door that had been sloppily painted red to match the surrounding brick of Fan Tan Alley. It was made up of two vertical panels on which were faded Chinese characters, below which was a brass set of address numbers: 23½. At one time, it had obviously been latched on the left by a brass deadbolt, long defunct. Now it was hastily padlocked closed. And even this lock was old; pitted and rusty. Far from being secure, it looked like the entire assembly might fall off in a strong breeze.

Sault left Singh still examining the door and was already stepping out from the alley, onto the sidewalk by the time Singh looked up.

Singh was green, but still, he didn't like being told what to do without any context. He sighed, removed his cap and wiped his brow. Even in shorts and in the deep recess of the alleyway, the uniform was still hot. He leaned back, bracing himself against the cool alleyway brick.

Moving down the thin aisle between shelves brimming with plastic and wicker Sault felt thicker than he actually was and twisted his shoulders to be sure not to knock something to the floor. The place was quite literally filled to the rafters with knickknacks and toys, vases, decorative dishes, and wicker mats—a mighty testament to the industriousness of humans who would tool up an entire factory to stamp out another million solar-powered, golden plastic, nodding, bobbleheaded lucky cats. What struck him with even more wonder was that he had yet to come across one of these in any home he had ever visited.

He passed a young Chinese girl who he recognized as the owner's daughter, Lynn. She smiled and nodded and, once he'd passed, she brought up her watch.

Sault navigated the familiar maze of what looked like China's estate sale and made his way to the stairs hidden behind a bamboo curtain at the far end of the store. The stairs doubled back toward Fisgard and brought him to a long corridor studded with numbered doors to rooms little larger than horse stalls. A wood and metal cage jutted awkwardly into the hallway, near the stairs. Inside, an old Chinese woman who Sault didn't recognize sat on a wicker stool scribbling with a pencil on a physical newspaper covered in Kanji symbols. In every detail, she looked like she belonged in a museum. She didn't look up but started talking in a way that made him consider that she might be automated, though it was obvious that she wasn't. "You big man, want good fuck? We have many horny lovers for you. Many virgin—from Chuck E Cheese." Her pencil never stopped moving.

None of this was even remotely true. What they had were over-used and out-of-date dolls, probably throw-aways from Reno or Vegas. They were poorly-fashioned and visibly damaged globs of silicone that writhed a bit, and spouted things like, "You're such a stud!" or "You're so large!" Still, they were legal, and they served a purpose.

Sault stood at the cage and tapped the badge on his uniform. As far as he could tell she never looked but his presence seemed

to annoy her and, with her pencil, she waved him away and toward an unmarked door at the other end of the hallway, as if she were batting at a fly.

Sault didn't need her directions. He had been here before.

On his journey down the hallway, he only heard sounds from one room but guessed that with the overhead so low, they probably still made a profit.

Sault was not there to surprise anyone, so he knocked before opening the door and heard the familiar sound of panicked scuffle. By the time he was through the door there was only one man in the room, attempting to push a bookshelf back into position to cover a hidden staircase. He gave Sault a mischievous look and stepped back as Sault brushed past.

"Halt, Police!" He yelled down into the darkness, though he knew it would do no good.

Singh was tilted back next to the doorknob-side of the rickety door and so was completely surprised when it flew open from the hinged side, sandwiching him against the brick and whacking his shins in the process. A short, bald Asian kid burst through and, seeing Singh, quickly scanned up and down the alley, poised and ready to bolt, but undecided in which direction.

Singh grimaced and slammed the door closed with a fist as Sault appeared at the end of the alley.

"Stop him!" he yelled, as if Singh had been standing there smoking a joint and looking at clouds the whole time.

Sault's presence seemed to tip the balance in the kid's mind, and he darted toward Singh. His stinging shins suddenly forgotten, Singh calculated that he had two feet and a hundred pounds on the kid coming his way, but he was coming fast, so Singh braced himself for impact. But, at the last second, the kid leapt five feet up the brick wall to Singh's left. Impossibly, he bounced off the wall like it was a trampoline and leapt further upward to the opposite wall overhead, coming back down twelve feet behind Singh who stood scratching his head, uncertain of what he'd just witnessed. Sault reached Singh's

position and they both stared down the empty alley.

“I’m guess’n that was not human.”

Sault let slip a sigh of frustration, but he wasn’t disappointed in Singh. The trick door was a surprise and, had their roles been reversed, Sault knew that he would have fared no better—worse, probably. Singh was younger, bigger, more fit and had quick, keen eyes. Also, usually, he was very fast on the uptake. Sault imagined that he, himself, would have still been standing there staring at the magic door and nursing his wounds allowing the bot to casually stroll away.

“Next time just yell ‘halt’ or ‘cease’. It should have recognized your authority by the uniform.”

“Same as for an AI?”

“Because that’s all it is; an AI in a bot shell. Like Ana. That’s why she can do reception, dispatch and calculate pi to the millionth decimal, all at the same time.”

“I guess. Never thought about it that way.”

He was no longer surprised that younger people understood fundamentals of technology less than he did. They grew up as users. Anyone under the age of thirty had never used a calendar or phonebook, set a clock, phoned in a food order or made a shopping list. Apps took care of all those messy details, behind the scenes. It was a miracle that any of them still had any ability for analytical thought at all. On the other hand, he wondered if an AR implant would have revealed the backward door.

Sault turned back toward the street. “Probably wouldn’t have mattered. Dark-bots usually turn off their ears as soon as they see a badge. Let’s go.”

Singh peeked through the doorway to a narrow and worn set of wooden stairs that climbed into darkness. “Don’t you want to check out what’s inside?”

“Did that, from the other side. Thought someone might sneak in on me. Turned out, they were already there. Lucky for me, I outnumbered them.”

“But you were alone.”

Sault patted his holster. “Not entirely.”

“And that door...”

“Yeah. That’s one for the memoirs.” Sault laughed. “That door’s a famous feature of Fan Tan Alley. I’ve lived here most of my life and must have looked at it a thousand times but still, I had no idea.”

“Did you notice how thick it was? And the steel on the other side.”

“A little beyond code, I’d wager.”

“That’s security for something major.”

Sault shook his head. “Used to be Tong, but that was thirty years back. That’s all moved off the island, to Vancouver.”

“So, what now? Drugs? Hookers?”

“More like Rhino horn, Elephant tusk, tiger balls...that kind of thing.”

Hamel and Hilton were gone when they passed the spot where their black and white had been. And when they reached their own unit, as Singh reached for the door handle, the driver-side window lit up to inform him that the car had been ticketed—a citation cast in laser light hovered an inch or two from the glass. “Guess who?”

“Lovely Rita meter maid?” said Sault, citing a reference that would probably never die within the department.

“Friendly Neighborhood Spiderman,” Singh read back before acknowledging receipt by flicking it out of sight.

Once they were buckled in, Sault consulted his watch. “Vivia, find that ticket and delete it.”

It took Vivia a heartbeat to verify credentials and submit the request to Ana, the Vic PD AI. “Ticket from Friendly Neighborhood Spiderman, deleted,” she reported in a soft female voice that only Sault could hear. Sault, as did most police officers, had tuned his watch to his P.D. frequency, which relayed it to audio-dots glued in place deep within his ear canals. The sound was clearer than from his watch’s speakers.

Singh eased the vehicle to the curb at Princess and Government and began paying attention to his watch, scanning wants and warrants, BOLO’s and other relevant notifications. Sault listened to the random ticks from the cooling engine and

watched two hookers poorly mimicking moves from their sultry youth, attempting to turn traffic their way. If they were worried about the presence of the cops, nothing in their demeanor showed it.

Focused on Vic PD memos, Singh was mildly startled when Sault suddenly said, “About four months ago, a native woman died in a single-car mishap. Six hours later, the cop who found her also died.”

Singh looked up from his watch. “I heard about that. He OD’d. Contamination from the scene, right? She was a Jingo addict—a casket-dodger. That stuff is fuck’n nuclear.”

“No one dodged any caskets that day,” Sault observed, wryly.

“Latex at a crime scene, that’s 101.”

“He was green, but Terri Schneider was his TO.” Terri (Theresa) Schneider had transferred from the mainland two years earlier. The ten Vancouver-years under her belt played like twenty, in the relative quiet of Victoria. As a cop, everything about her was unassailably solid and it was obvious to everyone that she would rise fast and far. There was talk that Chief of Police Roth already had her on his radar, and Sault guessed that it was less because of her potential as a law enforcement officer, and more because of her potential as a rival. “She took good care of him. The procedure was textbook. It was a traffic accident, at that point. It didn’t become part of a criminal investigation until the officer died. His name was Jared Kowalczyk, by the way. They figure he put his gloved hands into his pockets, from habit, transferred some residue into his uniform and touched it later. Got it on his skin, from there into his blood. The supplier was never found and three months later, the case has pretty much turned to dust.”

“This about what we were just doing in Chinatown?”

Sault nodded. “Wanted to touch base with a CI who might know something.” Every cop had confidential informants; people who operated both sides of the law, bartering to get ahead or, more usually, just to survive. In Victoria, there were nearly ten thousand people who were considered regulars;

repeat customers often described in the media as “known to police.” Of these, close to 4000 were street people, most of whom skulked the heart of the city—Sault’s territory. He knew all of them by sight, a good portion by name; chatted regularly with about half. Of these, there were currently about thirty whom he considered solid CIs.

“And did he help?”

“Didn’t get the chance to talk. Walked in on something—not sure what—but that bot had instructions to bolt hard.”

“What’s it mean?”

“Probably just a traceable bot with a high-profile owner who doesn’t want the attention.”

“We could go back.”

“I will. But, not now. I need to make sure no one makes my guy as a CI. I’ll make contact, once the smoke clears.”

They sat in silence for several minutes. Sault had been partnered with Singh for less than a month, but Sault could sense that he was trying to gauge how much privilege that bought before breaching some delicate subject. Singh started tentatively, “So...here’s a rookie question:”

Sault turned away from the street to look at Singh.

“How is it that a beat cop can pursue an active investigation without instructions from a detective?”

Sault was impressed by Singh’s boldness, and not offended. His gaze returned to the street. The two desperate looking women were still smoking and strutting, trolling, waiting for equally desperate Johns to pull up.

“May as well move on,” he said.

Singh said nothing, started the car but allowed himself to vent a little frustration out of the driver’s side window. The hooker who saw him roll his eyes was too high to understand. She waved. He smiled back. The patrol car pulled away.

They reached Douglas and Hillside and had to stop for North America’s longest traffic light. Sault suddenly said, “Falkov and Caverly are not getting it done.”

“It’s their case?”

Sault nodded. “Falkov used to be pretty good, but now he’s

just coasting. I think he's two, maybe three years from retirement. Focused on that. Caverly's a climber. If this were about some white CEO from Oak Bay, he'd be all over it. But he's too white bread to follow a lead into Chinatown. Even if he did, no one would talk to him. He didn't spend enough time on the street. He's got no cred and no contacts."

"But we're not allowed to interfere in an active case. Right?"

"But if, in the course of performing my assigned duties, I stumble upon something relevant, I am obligated to pursue it."

"Ah. And the brass is ok with how often you stumble upon relevant leads? 'Cause I'm guessing the detectives aren't."

"No one's ok with it until a case breaks open and the press arrive. Then it's all smiles and back patting. And the brass absolutely love how I fade away at that time."

"You sure like to take chances, yet you don't want any credit. Why would you take the risk? Did you know him?"

"Never met him. We're in a dangerous line of work. We're supposed to take care of one another. It's about making sure that one of our own sees justice."

That was not true. He wished he could believe it was, but he knew himself better than that. The real reason was simply that he had been on the impound lot the day the car had been towed in for forensics. The little, two-seater hire-car's front end was caved in on the passenger side, almost all the way back to the rear storage area. He immediately assumed it was a multi-vehicle, highway collision. Later, when he found out that it had been recovered from a ditch on a city street, his mind just couldn't reconcile the extent of the damage he'd seen with that fact. The next day, he visited the site. The irrigation ditch looked freshly cut into the earth, so it must have been recently dredged by one of the City's drones. It was about four feet deep, with rolling sides, fringed in Scotch Broom and Blackberry brambles. His eyes followed the car's gouges which abruptly ended at a large concrete culvert that looked like it had taken a punch from The Hulk. She had been extremely unlucky. It was a straight stretch of road, and for the entirety of that length, the ditch was just scrub, dirt and water, except for this one spot.

Had she lost control anywhere else, she would likely have survived. But on top of that, the car must have been going nearly a hundred kilometers an hour. He looked back up the road. It started at a sharp intersection, so the driver would have had to slow almost to a halt to negotiate that turn. If that small electric rental could get up to such speeds in the short distance, it must be at the extreme range of its ability. It was as if she'd hit the gas and made a deliberate beeline for the culvert. By then he'd done some asking around and knew that it had been labelled an accident but, to Sault, it looked more like suicide. After that, the questions plagued him and invaded his dreams. He couldn't make himself leave it alone. As with every case he'd ever taken on, this investigation was really all about alleviating his own curiosity. At the beginning, the death of his fellow officer, Jared Kowalczyk, had been incidental.

The light changed and Singh crossed the intersection in silence.

"That cop was a new guy, like you. His wife found him. He had two kids." Sault wasn't sure if he was talking to Singh or to himself.

Singh was silent for a while, digesting the info.

"But, how do you even know where they're at with an investigation? Do you have access to the murder books?"

The radio chirped and one of Ana's dispatch voices called their sign and sent them toward a back-alley disturbance on the Galloping Goose Trail.

William M. Dean

## CHAPTER 2

They were pointed in the right direction. Singh hit the lights, Sault worked the siren and Vivia communicated with the traffic lights, so they had the right of way and they arrived near the incident site in record time.

The Galloping Goose Trail is a picturesque, paved walking path that starts from Victoria's inner harbor and snakes through city and suburbs and farmland, unbroken for thirty miles to the north. Eastward, it connects with Lochside Trail which continues for an additional twenty miles, to the Swartz Bay ferry terminal, where you could hop a ferry bound for one of the smaller islands, or Vancouver. The trail is very popular and usually busy with bicyclists weaving past pedestrians like stunt planes around pylons. It was rare, but far from unusual for a fracas to erupt between the two groups. Typically, there would be an injury involved and Ana would already have warned nearby paramedics of the possibility.

Singh screeched the vehicle to a stop in front of the Gorge Waterway Bike Park and Sault catapulted out of the car and ran across the hard-packed trails toward sounds of chaos. Singh took a little longer to disentangle himself from the seatbelt and pull himself free of the car. Sault had seen him do it a hundred times and it always reminded him of the scene in the animated movie *The Incredibles*, where Mr. Incredible steps out of his

tiny car after a hard day at work. The big man never seemed to notice. Sault guessed that for him, tight spaces and low hanging obstacles were background noise.

Sault reached the level pavement of the Galloping Goose Trail. He could hear and even feel Singh's size 11 feet slapping the ground close behind. In the tunnel created by the Burnside Road overpass, Sault saw a familiar form and slowed his pace. The man was overdressed for the heat in a ragged trench coat, boots and toque and was wailing incoherently, but Sault took himself off high alert. This man was a street person he'd seen often in the last year. He'd tried running his ID a few times, but come up empty, and so had dubbed him "Harry Potter," because of his penchant for whimsical flailing and unintelligible rants, seemingly directed at the wind. As far as Sault had been able to tell in the course of his encounters, the man was not drug addicted, more likely mentally ill; possibly off medication. He'd never been any real trouble before, always moved along, once prompted. Sault wasn't expecting any trouble now and patted the air behind himself, giving Singh the signal to stand down. Still, he heard the snap of Singh's holster as he untethered a weapon for quick access, but he didn't hear the sound of hardened steel sliding against leather, so he knew it was still safely sheathed and mentally awarded his green partner a check mark for prudence. Later he would check to see which weapon; pistol or Taser, but he had the feeling it would be the Taser; Singh did not seem the type to jump to his gun.

Sault was now twenty feet away and still unnoticed. He stopped, not wanting to startle the man. "Hey, man," he prompted.

Harry Potter seemed to notice him for the first time and turned toward Sault, away from where he had been directing his antics. His hands dropped to his sides. His eyes were wide, but not with surprise or fear. Sault's read was that he seemed overloaded with input. The eyes danced and darted as if he were doing some sort of massively complex computation in order to decide on his next move.

"You okay, buddy?"

Harry Potter pointed a finger directly at Sault. His mouth formed an O and surprised seemed to climb into him and slowly take over. And then Sault saw his other hand head toward a pocket of the trenchcoat.

As disturbing as this seemed, Sault's gut told him there would not be a weapon and he became afraid that if he couldn't curb the man's actions, this was going to end in tragedy for both Harry Potter and Singh.

"Whoa there! Just stop, alright?"

But Harry Potter's hand continued, reaching the edge of the pocket.

"Stop! Freeze! Okay?" Harry Potter hesitated, but the expression on his face gave Sault the impression that it was because he'd had to recalculate rather than because he'd heard the warning. They stood in two separate worlds and Sault knew that in his world, the hand was going into the pocket regardless of anything he might say. And then he heard the familiar sound of metal sliding against leather.

He stepped directly into Singh's line of sight, putting himself between the two, and three feet closer to Harry Potter. He was patting the air furiously, behind him aware that Singh's weapon had been rightfully drawn, hoping that it wasn't pointed.

"Take your hand out of your pocket, man. I can't help you if you don't do this for me."

In the shade of the concrete overpass, there was the thunderous echo of the traffic zooming across, but at that moment, Sault's focus was so intense that for him those sounds seemed distant and there was also a kind of silence. For the first time since leaving the vehicle Sault noticed the slight breeze and the usual tang of ocean salt in the air. His shirt collar was uncomfortably hot and the shade seemed unnaturally dark, while all around was overly bright. He heard birds chirping from the scrub that clung to the rock of the ravine. He wasn't breathing and didn't feel the need to. The man's face and expression seemed etched in his consciousness, as if mere inches away. If things went south, Sault knew this would

become an indelible memory.

He heard the scuff of shoes as Singh shifted, probably trying to reestablish a sightline. Sault focused on holding the shabby man's gaze. No sudden moves.

The eyes darted away from Sault, seemed to focus behind him, on Singh. Sault felt adrenaline building inside him, contemplated the wisdom in trying to lunge. With fifteen feet still between them, it would be dicey. And, now, there was the fresh possibility that his partner might be startled and accidentally shoot him.

And then, the man withdrew his hand and it was empty.

Sault felt the moment unwind and was just about to strongly suggest the drifter sit himself down when, unexpectedly, he did just that. When Sault examined his face, the man's eyes and mind no longer looked clouded. There was clarity, as if a mask had fallen.

Sault stepped forward, knelt down and took the man firmly by the elbow. Singh holstered the Taser and moved to the other side.

"You scared the crap out of me, old man," Sault said, shaking his head.

Singh was also kneeling. He had a nervous smile on his face.

"I'll call the paramedics."

Sault nodded and Singh stood and cocked his wrist to call.

"Sorry. What?" The old man had mumbled something that Sault hadn't caught. But the moment their eyes locked, Sault felt his entire world careen and he was suddenly certain that he'd made a big mistake. He felt a deep bite into his forearm and reflexively let go of the man and fell backward to the pavement. He was bleeding. A hypodermic needle had dropped out of from the trench coat sleeve and the stranger had stricken with the sureness and intensity of one obsessed.

Sault was still falling backward as the man shakily got to his feet and ran. He wasn't fast or sure-footed and Singh easily dropped him with the Taser, after only a few steps.

"Are you alright?" Adrenaline made him shout though Sault was now standing only a few feet away.

“Just a cut. Doesn’t hurt.” They could both see that it wasn’t just a cut. And truthfully, there were electric tendrils making their way up his entire arm. His fingers were numb. He was both embarrassed and scared at the same time, not willing to admit either. Half way up his forearm the puncture erupted blood. The flow was strong and continuous, but not a perilous volume and Sault easily stemmed it with the palm of his hand.

“Jesus! I’ll call it in. You’re going to have to get a full work up.”

Singh stood over the old man’s seizing form, calling for backup and medics while Sault knelt and felt to confirm that there was a steady pulse.

Then, suddenly exhausted, he lay down on the pavement and forced himself not to hyperventilate over thoughts of what might have been in that syringe.

He lay in a daze, looking up at the few clouds drifting by and trying to bring his mind into focus. There was a low buzzing at the periphery of his consciousness—like a hummingbird, but too consistent to be natural. It grew louder and then, seconds later, a drone slid directly into view above him, its many lenses zooming in on his face. More drones would soon follow as each of the newsfeeds covered the scene.

Sault closed his eyes.

His thoughts became random and directionless and the pure blankness of the mental canvas seemed to fill his mind while everything else faded into the background. As if at a distance, he could hear the old man rasping and could tell that he was still in spasms, and delirium. A wild and fleeting thought caused Sault to wonder if they might both be sharing the same mental landscape, and suddenly he wasn’t sure if he was hearing the old man from within or without but he distinctly heard him mumbling a single word, like a warning: “Delivered!”

William M. Dean

## CHAPTER 3

Sault lay on the asphalt a very long time focusing on his inner workings, trying to isolate anomalies. The fluid-electricity and numbness were fading fast, but he was sweating—but then it was hot out. Was he sweating too much? His breathing had gone from rapid and ragged to slow and shallow. Was that normal? His heartbeat was regular, but seemed unusually strong. He could feel the pulse in his neck and wrists, under his arm, at his groin.

And he wondered what the old man shot into his system; a poison, a hallucinogen, a disease? The most likely possibilities were ominous. But he could deal with those—one way or the other he'd have to.

What shocked and scared him the most was how totally unawares he had been. That events would turn this direction had been the furthest thing from his mind. He really was getting too old for this. It was long past time to trade the streets and patrol car for a desk and unmarked. He needed to get his Detective badge. Of course, he'd known that two years ago, and would have done, had the Chief not tried to bully him. Chief Roth's little speech had detonated Sault's stubbornness, a fault he was well aware of, but unwilling to change because it was intimately linked to results. Sault had resolved to wait until it would be obvious that accepting Detective was his own

decision. Well, that day had come.

Reality: the ultimate bully. If he applied for Detective now, then it would be obvious to everyone that this incident had affected him and prompted his sudden change of heart. On the other hand, he was not one to obfuscate reality and this would be a clear example of that fact.

Singh remained close by, the entire time, but some instinct made him maintain a distance and not pander. Sault liked him even more for that. The suspect came to shortly after being cuffed. Singh helped him up, then led him to a shady spot at the side of the walkway, under the bridge. Then he busied himself supplying details to incoming units: paramedics, forensics, other units and dropping numbered cones at significant points of the crime scene; where the assault took place, where the syringe lay, where the suspect fell...where Sault was still lying.

Sault was deep in reflection and the last thing he wanted at the moment was to play twenty questions. He was comfortably in the embrace of the familiar calm that descends when the bottom falls out of the life you plan and you land in the warm, soft primal muck; the essentials of existence, where no human construct—not civilization, not expectation, not plans, not status, not money, not love— where nothing matters except the present moment, and breathing.

But, eventually, the paramedics came prodding and prompting, making him sit upright, peeling him in his sweat-soaked shirt from the pavement, then urging him to the ambulance where they dressed his wound. He was instantly and visibly resentful, but afterward, when the crime scene photographer came, he was relieved to not be in the evidence photos, which would make the rounds between the PD and DOJ. A photo like that might even leak to the media. Then he'd become the poster boy for cop in shock. As it was, moments later a human videographer showed up and took a couple of shots of Sault propped against the door of the ambulance before Sault noticed her, sat upright and shook off the blanket he hadn't remembered receiving.

He didn't argue when they strapped him into a gurney and

made him ride that way to the hospital. By that time, there were three or four video drones weaving through the scene and he was glad to be rid of them when the ambulance doors shut. Nor did he object when they insisted on pushing him into the ER on a wheelchair. It was all procedure. Procedures evolved from past experience, and for good reasons. He was a big believer in the value of experience.

At the front desk, the paramedics handed him off to a squat nurse with a no-nonsense, take-charge demeanor. Experience. She was gruff and direct and he knew that most people would immediately dislike her. But they would do as she said. He liked her, immediately. She wheeled him into a small private room, and asked him to remove his shirt. She stuffed it into an evidence bag and then opened the door just wide enough to hand it off to someone in uniform. Sault hadn't noticed any police escort or communication between the nurse and anyone else and he realized he was still daydreaming.

She wasn't insistent but encouraged Sault to lay down on the elevated cot with the paper runner and plastic pillow. It did not look inviting, but Sault decided to bow to her experience. She showed him the emergency call button mounted on the wall, told him a doctor would be in shortly and swept out of the room casting him one last vacant smile which told him that her mind had left the room ahead of her, heeding the call of duty.

Sault lay back and forced his own reluctant mind to return to the present and step back aboard the treadmill of issues the rest of the world considered pressing.

A hospital was not where he wanted to spend the rest of the day. Probably the most common thought imaginable, under the circumstances. He thought it most likely that they'd make him stay overnight for observation, and he grimaced. It would be a boring and frustrating stay, punctuated by visitors who felt obliged to say something comforting but meaningless, including his wife and kids.

The kids, especially, would not want to be there. They cared, he knew, but kids these days were always busy. There was school, of course, but also a long list of friends. When he was

their age, his dad often forced him to play outside where he and the four other kids on his block rode bikes and splashed through puddles for fun. Occasionally, he was allowed to play a game online with kids from the neighborhood, or school. His own kids had scores of friends across the globe, which they visited and played with in Virtual Reality settings and scenarios. And, whenever the local kids physically got together, they spent most of their time playing in Augmented Reality. “Jetson kids,” he called them though they never understood the reference.

They had better things to do. Also, he had to admit that maybe he wasn’t around as much as he should be, so their relationship was more on the level of trite jokes and arm punches than emotional outbursts or heart bleeding confession. A moment as serious as this could be nothing but awkward for all of them.

His wife, Maya, would visit out of love, but equally, out of obligation. They’d definitely lost much, over the years, especially since the kids. He wanted to fix it but didn’t know how and was afraid to talk about it, afraid that he’d end up at some marriage counselor who would make him scream into a pillow or role-play his own birth, or some other such embarrassing thing. As much as he wanted her close, he was no longer sure it was worth the price.

Even so, the complete lack of sex in the last six years was frustrating for Sault and a few times this constant irritant had prompted confrontation which had led to some talk. She was lonely. While he’d been out saving Gotham, she’d turned her entire life toward the children and her charity work. And now, the children were pulling away from her, growing independent; growing up. But such confessions only made him feel abandoned, betrayed, unappreciated and, ultimately, angry. After all, it was his salary that allowed her to be a stay-at-home mom, that paid for their food, her “hobby,” and their house in a city kept safe by him and others like him. He loved his kids, but eventually, naturally, they would leave. And then there would only be the two of them. And what would they have if she abandoned him now? And, when he could afford to be truly

honest with himself, he was afraid to face retirement itself, let alone retirement without her.

He was thankful for the interruption when a nurse entered with a handful of empty vials and some paperwork. “Hi. I’m just going to record your vitals and get some samples for the lab.” Her nametag said “Patricia 4” which made him wonder how many Patricia’s must work here—enough that using the first character of their last name would not differentiate them.

“I take it there are a lot of Patricia’s on the ward,” he said, sitting himself up. He felt a swift wave of vertigo sweep over him, the room tumbled. He fought it and it passed. He noted it as unusual, then ignored it.

“Three nurses, two clerks and one volunteer named Pat, who happens to be male. So many of the EMT’s and doctors are just passing through that it can get confusing for them. Causes issues in the paperwork. So, now we’re numbered, and we’re all Patricia—not Trish or Trishia—except for the man. He gets to keep his name.”

“They’ve given you a number and taken away your name,” he said.

‘Patricia 4’ stopped what she was doing and gave him a long, quizzical look. It felt to Sault like she might be reassessing him, clinically. But the moment evaporated, and her manner softened again as she returned to organizing her implements. “Wow. Shouldn’t be long before you make Detective.”

“It’s an old song from last century. Secret Agent Man. Johnny Rivers. About 1970, I think.”

“Ah,” she said. “Vintage music. I don’t see the attraction.”

Sault took a few seconds to think about that while ‘Patricia 4’ ticked off items on a holographic checklist suspended above her watch. His own watch beeped when she connected with it. He flipped his wrist, hit the confirmation button floating there and Vivia sent her the body sensor stats it had accumulated.

“Simpler times, I guess.”

She smiled and took his arm, tucking it under her own.

“Now there’s a switch; someone cuffing me,” he quipped as she was securing the blood pressure unit. She smiled and stuck

a thermometer under his tongue. “No talking,” she said with a cute smile that belied the stern tone. It felt flirtatious and Sault couldn’t help but smile awkwardly around the instrument.

Her watch beeped, confirming that the pressure cuff and thermometer had sent their data. “Do you have an arm preference?”

Sault shrugged and extended both.

‘Patricia 4’ examined the veins in both arms, tapped in a couple of places. “You right handed?”

Sault nodded again.

She pulled his left arm toward her. “If I bruise you, you’ll still have full use of your gun hand, Cagney.”

Sault was at once amused and impressed by the reference to Cagney and Lacey, a 2-D TV show at least thirty years before her time.

“Cagney was a woman.”

“Lacey, then.” That made Sault laugh out loud.

Sault had no nurse fetish, but this one was fun and cute, and he found himself enjoying the brief contact of her warm hands as she wrapped a rubber tourniquet around his bicep. She confidently and smoothly popped the cap off a new needle and inserted it before he’d even had time to brace himself for the pin prick, which he never felt. Then she removed the tourniquet and began filling vials with his rich, red body fluid.

She extracted the needle and pulled barcoded stickers from a sheet she’d brought in, labeling each of the five vials she’d filled, followed by a quick Band-Aid and a cheery, “All done.” He admired her efficiency. “You can go home.”

Sault was surprised. “I thought a doctor was going to see me.”

Her brow furrowed briefly, then she consulted her watch, scrolling through for confirmation. “Nope. Sault, Joseph Edward. You’re free to go.” Looking up and noting the concern on his face, she added, “Sorry, I’m not allowed to discuss your situation, but your CO will have a synopsis.”

Sault nodded.

“Take care, Officer.”

“Thanks, ‘*Patricia 4*.’” She was almost out the door when he thought to ask, “What do you prefer to be called?”

“Gorgeous,” she said, winking and closing the door behind her.

In contrast to the dreary interior of the hospital, the sunlight was dazzling, and Sault quickly fished sunglasses from a shirtsleeve pocket and put them on. Singh was there. He was leaning against the squad car, facing away, watching something on his watch. It looked to Sault like a “Reality” TV show.

“Hey,” Sault said as softly as he could so as not to startle Singh.

Singh was startled anyway. “Oh! Hey. How are you?”

“Depends. Anything come in from the tenth?” The tenth floor of Vic PD housed the upper tier of the administration, including the Chief’s office.

“Yup. All clear. The syringe contained nothing...just saline solution.”

“Saline?”

“I know. What are the odds, huh? I’d buy a lotto ticket, if I were you.”

“How about the exterior of the syringe?”

“Appears to be clean, as well.”

Sault knew that he still had to be cleared in case some germ had been transmitted but wiped clean during the injection. Germ cultures took longer to grow than just chemically identifying a substance, so that’s why the blood samples and the delay in those results. He’d probably know everything in a day or two, depending upon the backlog at the lab.

“Ready to go home?” Singh asked, rhetorically.

Sault was not. Lately, his work was more a sanctuary than his home. But it was procedure. He couldn’t return to duty until his blood cleared and he’d had a psych evaluation.

Sault sighed then got into the car. “Ok, Robin. Back to Wayne Manor.”

Behind the wheel, Singh chuckled, “Hey there, Batman. You’ve got a little mustard on your cape.”

Sault contorted a bit and pulled at the material of his shorts, rotating the fabric of one leg enough that he could see the bright yellow splotch on the dark blue, which would have otherwise been positioned over his butt.

He sighed again then fell back into the seat, adjusted his sunglasses, closed his eyes and pointed a finger at the windshield, signaling Singh to get moving.

## CHAPTER 4

As soon as Sault walked through the door, he headed for the hall closet. He hung up his belt, then stripped the watch from his arm and stuck that to the charge pad. Both his gun and Taser were useless without his hand signature against the grip, but even so, he ejected the battery from one and the cartridge from the other, emptied the chamber and locked the guns with all the bits and pieces and the spare battery and cartridges in a metal cabinet bolted to the closet wall. Relieved of all the appliances, he felt much lighter and realized how exhausted he must be. Normally he'd never notice the difference. He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck and arched his back, feeling more than hearing a series of resonant tiny pops along his vertebrae. For obvious reasons, he'd been carrying a lot of tension.

When he walked into the kitchen, he interrupted his daughter, Amber, who was talking at her wrist. "Oh! Dad. Wow! You're home early."

"Because I heard this is where the *real* troublemakers hang out." He patted her on the top of the head as he passed, and she squirmed away slightly, a signal that, having recently reached eleven years, she now considered herself too old for that kind of thing. The change seemed abrupt, but he was used to that because their paths did not cross often, these days.

“The *real* trouble maker isn’t home from school yet,” she said, referring to her older brother. He grabbed a can of beer from a cupboard and started to reply, but her attention had already returned to matters more relevant than her father and she was busily pecking the air above her watch, undoubtedly having switched to texting her friend so that he couldn’t overhear.

“Who’re you talking to?”

“Miriam.”

Sault checked the clock above the stove. “Didn’t you guys just walk home from school together?”

Amber looked up and he caught a flash of annoyance before she reframed her features, “Yes, but we were AR-ing other people, most of the way.”

“But doesn’t she live next door?” Sault pulled the tab on the can, which immediately frosted over as a kinetically activated chemical reaction chilled the contents.

“And your point is...?” Her arms were crossed, and her lips were a tight, thin line. He recognized the look from her mother. He meant to tease, but she was obviously taking his questions as a serious challenge. Of his two children, Amber was the one that most closely shared his brand of comedy and in that way, they usually understood each other well. She was also the easiest going of the two, and this flash to anger seemed something new.

He didn’t want his only interaction with her in about two weeks to be a fight—especially one as silly as this. “It just seems like you could walk about thirty feet and talk to her, face to face.”

He heard her sigh.

He took a sip of beer to buy time. “Sorry. Just curious.”

She sighed again. “Ok. If you must know, I’m also talking to two other people at the same time. And we’re not here, we’re in a forest, in Narnia. If I move thirty feet away no one will be able see me unless I respawn.” She read his expression and determined from it that he had no clue what she was talking about. “Respawn. You know, reset. Log out, then log back in.”

She had misread. He understood such things in a much

deeper way than she, but his mind had been following a different thread toward a change that seemed particularly abrupt. He smiled. "Are the other two people, perhaps...*boys*?" And he gave her a mischievous, sideways glance.

"Da-ad!" She was blushing, but she also couldn't help smiling. "Isn't there some law against badgering a witness?"

"It's also against the law to withhold information from an officer of the law. It's called obstruction of justice."

"You're off duty."

"Undercover."

"Then I'll have to report you for drinking while on duty."

"A justifiable breach to maintain my cover."

"I have the right to remain silent."

"Can't argue with you there." He raised his glass to her and her head dropped as she returned to a more important conversation.

"Where's Matt?"

"Where he always is. With his best friend," she said absently.

Sault was too embarrassed to admit by asking that he didn't know the name of his own son's 'best friend.' "When's your mom get home?" he asked as he passed her on his way out of the room.

Amber sighed impatiently. He had overstayed his welcome. "Usually, by six."

At least he didn't have to ask where she was. She was where she always was; at Cavallon House.

Sidney Cavallon was a local celebrity—a prosperous land developer whom Maya had somehow convinced to donate one of his holdings as a women's shelter and half-way house. It had been a run down, rickety, ship lapped structure located off the beaten track, in the View Royal district, but with donations of time and materials from local businesses, Maya had transformed it into a practical transition house for sheltering and rehabilitating women who were trying to get back on their feet after leaving abusive relationships. It had occupied the majority of her time for nearly three years. Male visitors, in

general, were not welcome there, and so he had never been invited to see her achievement. The one and only time he had been there was while answering a disturbance call. Someone's ex had tracked them to the address but was long gone by the time Sault's unit rolled up. Maya had never told him the address, so Sault had been startled to find her there, then embarrassed as word spread that they were married, after house guests, staff, and police observed his surprise and the awkwardness between them.

That was also the only time he'd met Sidney Cavallon. He'd been surprised that a man in Cavallon's position spent any time working on what had to be no more than a publicity donation. He was further surprised to find that he was younger than himself—closer to Maya's age. Somehow, he'd gotten the impression from her that Cavallon was older. That discrepancy and what it implied bothered him, continually. But he had no justification for mistrusting her, so he kept his mouth shut on that.

Sault's partner had parked their unit directly behind Cavallon's silver Porsche e-1200 and when Cavallon stepped out of the building, seemingly surprised at all the activity, and asked how long he might expect to be delayed, Sault had been more abrupt than he'd intended. Told him to wait inside, that he could leave when they were done unless he'd like to be escorted to the cruiser.

Sidney Cavallon raised both hands, palms out, clearly surrendering to Sault's heavy-handed authority and calmly ducked back inside the building. His passive demeanor and quick compliance had deepened Sault's embarrassment and irritability.

Three minutes later, another unit reported that they'd nabbed the suspect at a nearby gas station.

Afterward, at home, Maya had never brought it up, but she didn't have to for him to know that she was embarrassed and angry. He rode that one out in silence. It wasn't one of their better months.

There was a small ache reaching into his brain from the base

of his skull. He turned toward the stairs undecided whether to lie down or change his clothes and head for the garage to putter around on the Buick. Maybe he'd do both. "Start the heater in the garage," he said to thin air, confident that Vivia was monitoring one of the electronic devices in the vicinity. The clock on the mantel spoke, "Should I discontinue my conversation with Matthew and prepare the garage for work on the Grand National GNX?"

Sault halted at the foot of the staircase. After a moment he pivoted and headed to the living room window. Matthew was sitting on a garden bench, his backpack slung over one end. Sault's journeyman-bot stood on the grass next to him and with its blocky head cocked to one side. A moment later, it nodded, and Sault saw the vivid blue laser lines that simulated its face ripple sympathetically.

For a long while, Sault just stared and tried to analyze his feelings. Something was burning an emotional hole in him, like a flame held to Styrofoam. "Let me hear your conversation with Matt."

He listened to Matt's voice through the mantle clock as the thirteen-year-old confided the details of his day to the ever-attentive, ever-patient bot.

But after only a minute or two, he began to feel more like a voyeur than a father, so he instructed Vivia to close the connection. He could always get it played back later, if he wanted. But he didn't think he would.

He came down heavily on the edge of the king-sized bed and sat there looking out the window onto the front boulevard, slowly sipping the last of his beer. Peripherally, he wondered why he and Maya still clung to the façade by sleeping in the same bed, each night. It was large enough that they never touched, but perhaps there were still embers of hope alive in each of them.

A few of the kids who were too young to be hooked on digital realities were playing together on the island in the middle of the cul-de-sac. Sault reflected how Matthew had always been so different from those kids. He preferred solitary,

online activities. He was a homebody who mostly lived inside his own head. As a puzzle-fiend, Sault understood that, but only to a degree. He liked the focus and serenity that came with puzzle-solving, but he didn't want to live in that world. Puzzles were therapy and mediation which somehow helped him resolve the hands-on problems of his real world. There was some essential difference in their personalities and despite some common ground, he had never really been able to connect with Matthew. He hadn't even realized there was a gap until Amber came along and he'd instantly felt a deeper rapport.

And by then, it was too late because after Amber their attention and energies were split, and life seemed to get so much busier and connecting had to take a back seat.

He sighed and placed the empty can on top of the dresser. As he removed his shirt, he noticed the Band-Aid, peeled it off, rolled it into a little ball and dropped it into the can. There was still some chance that the syringe had altered his life and that his time was now limited. Maybe Life was sending him a message. As awkward as it would likely be, maybe he could not afford the luxury of slowly building a rapport. Maybe he needed to try to connect today. Now.

He descended the staircase wondering how talking to a thirteen-year-old could generate so much apprehension in a seasoned police officer. The kitchen was practically on the way and he considered another beer, then decided against it. His father had been an alcoholic and after liberal experimentation in his teens, Sault had become vigilante of his own behavior recognizing that such things tended to be passed down from previous generations. As insurance against reverting to what he had become when he was about twenty, he now imposed strict rules on his own consumption.

When Sault stepped outside, Matthew and the bot were no longer anywhere in the yard, and when he opened the door to the shed and poked his head in, he noticed that the portable gas heater was on and Vivia, still inside the mechanical shell, was alone near the workbench, meticulously sorting parts across an oil-stained rag, on the low shelf he'd made for her, next to his

workbench.

The bot turned its head toward him though its hands smoothly continued with the intricate task as if its eyes had not been averted. “Matthew has gone to his room.”

Sault looked back toward house and the shuttered window of his son’s room and sighed again, whether in frustration or relief he wasn’t sure. He closed the shed door and joined Vivia at the workbench.

Maya came home an hour earlier than usual and easily tracked her husband down and found him draped across the Buick’s fender probing deep into the well of the engine, trying to unbolt the alternator. He had no idea if this part had anything to do with the sporadic electrical issue, but months in and having failed to crack the puzzle, he’d been reduced to stabbing blindly at the problem. The first thing he’d spotted when he opened the hood was the alternator and it seemed to him that it could use removing.

He heard the creak of the door, caught the vague scent of her perfume and sensed her physical presence but chose to focus on the task at hand.

Eventually, she broke the silence, “Are you ok?”

The last bolt loosened and quickly came free. He pulled himself out from under the hood and handed the alternator to Vivia who clamped it in the vice-like grip of one over-sized hand and took it over to the workbench.

“What do you mean?” he asked while cleaning excess grease from the bolt with a thin and splotchy rag, less because it was necessary than to delay eye contact. From the emotional distance between them, he now always saw her as he had before he’d really known her and it made him ache to bridge the gap, but he had no idea how they’d gotten here, let alone the path back. And the fact that she was more aloof now than ever, only heightened his torment.

“Were you hurt?”

He lifted his head to look at her and braced himself, internally. She had shoulder-length, wavy, chestnut hair; short

enough to be practical, but long enough for play. The ruby red lipstick was the only obvious makeup, whatever else she might have used was perfectly blended to match her olive tones. Her eyebrows and lashes were imperfect, but her own. After two kids, the curves of her breasts and hips had widened but, in his mind, this only accentuated her figure, which might not have been as taut as it once was but gifted her with a softness that he could never forget and always craved.

She was four years younger than him, but she'd always been the more serious of the two of them and her face reflected this. It didn't make her look old, but robbed her of a carefree, more youthful look. But it was an expressive face that could cast the deadliest and the sexiest glances he'd ever seen. And, she was smart, her intellect somehow transmitted in her every move. A cloak of calm thoughtfulness seemed to envelope her, regardless of circumstance. She had once been his anchor. Now, he felt adrift.

"How'd you know?"

"Sidney has a scanner on his watch."

"Of course." He was careful to keep his tone neutral, as if everyone monitored the police bands in their spare time. To maximize reception, the Police band was very broad, and it was encoded so as not to interfere with other transmissions on the same frequencies. Decoding those transmissions on the fly would eat up a lot of processor cycles, on the average AI. Doing so usually only appealed to those with some vested interest like EMS groupies, retired responders, and criminals. And, he guessed, those with too much money, like Sidney Cavallon.

"I tried calling you, but you didn't answer, so I called Darsh."

"Yeah, I'm ok. Shook up a little, that's all."

Her dark eyes drifted to his right arm—the wrong one, but he got the message. He rested the cloth and bolt atop the radiator and rolled up his left sleeve to show her the tiny red dot on his flesh. "Not much to look at. Turned out it was just saline solution."

"Are you kidding me?"

Sault chuckled. "Yeah. Nuts, right?"

"Well, I'm just glad you're ok. But next time, call me, ok?"

"Sure," he lied.

Sault stood there an awkward moment then retrieved the rag and the bolt, feeling that something physical should naturally happen to express concern and relief, but not knowing what it was or how to begin.

At the doorway, she turned. "I've got to go back to work tonight. We've got the silent auction to organize for the weekend."

"You look nice," he blurted incongruously, and immediately felt foolish.

There was a pause while she decided if there were any booby traps hidden in the words and he suddenly realized that their exchanges had become very civil, but also very antiseptic: Safe, but devoid of life.

Finally, and a little tentatively, she thanked him for the compliment and stepped across the threshold. The door had fallen open and lay flat against the outside of the shed. Maya disappeared briefly as she stepped outside to reach its handle. "The kids'll make that instant macaroni for their dinner, but you'll have to fend for yourself."

"I'm good with that," he lied again.

She pushed the door to and Sault stared at it for several moments wondering if he should have known what silent auction she had been talking about.

"Should we examine the windings?" Vivia inquired.

"Shut up."

That night Joe Sault had the most vivid and disturbing dream of his life.

It was a simple scene that took place in seconds but seemed to last all night. Like most dreams, it was strange and twisted reality, but unlike most, its meaning was not shrouded.

In the dream, Harry Potter lifted him off the ground and threw him through a mirror in which was reflected a whirling collage of his entire life. He knew this but felt only the flailing of

his limbs and the pounding of his heart. He couldn't focus on any single image. But then, he impacted, and everything slowed, and he could see every minute detail. The glass exploded into a thousand silver shards, each of which replayed a random scene from his life: his last words to his mother, dancing with his prom date, the birth of his children, the pivotal heart to heart with Sensei Scott Baeza, reading a comic book on a sunlit rock near Swan Lake, Vivia and Matthew on the garden bench, afraid and alone beneath the bedclothes hiding from events on the other side of his bedroom door where his father and drug-addicted friends partied, his first day on the job, walking down the aisle at his wedding, his first gun, his graduation, unexpectedly seeing Maya at Cavallon House... There were many more, and he examined them all night long, it seemed, even while he screamed out and clawed the air on his way through the looking glass.

It felt so real that, when he awoke, he almost mistook it for a memory.

## CHAPTER 5

Twenty years ago, Greater Victoria consisted of thirteen municipalities governed by thirteen mayors. It was a tight fit that incited never-ending jurisdictional battles as administrators and politicians tenaciously tried to maintain their grip on the various fiefdoms. To the frustration of developers, this stunted Victoria's evolution from small town to metropolis, even as its popularity and population swelled. In Sault's estimation, it was a blessing—the main reason that Victoria retained some vintage charm and avoided the frenzy of cities like Vancouver, only a twenty-mile ferry ride distant. Eventually, however, the costs and inefficiencies of having thirteen separate administrations critically diminished the delivery of essential services like police, fire and ambulance, and a sewer system. The simple replacement of one municipality-spanning bridge stalled for more than ten years through three administrations, ran twelve times over-budget due to the delay and was still fraught with design issues that prompted costly repairs. The public had had enough and made it clear that the quickest way out of politics was to stand in the way of amalgamation.

Seven years ago, twelve petty fiefdoms fell, leaving only one. Politicians scrambled into high-paying administrative positions they hastily created for themselves. Though there was now only

Mayor Tommy Olcott and one city hall, the transition was far from complete and, currently, under Chief of Police Roth whom Sault had had the displeasure of meeting three times, there were four Supervisory-Deputy Chiefs (within the force, sarcastically referred to as Super D's—the D did not stand for Deputy) which he had the similar displeasure of seeing more often.

Of all of them, Sault disliked Devoss the most.

Supervisory-Deputy-Chief Christian Devoss was a small, pinch-faced man with swept back, salt and pepper hair that was a little too dark and shiny and a little too evenly greyed at the temples to be natural. He liked to listen to the sound of his own voice while flipping one of his business cards between his fingers, like a magician with a coin. Whenever he happened to stumble upon what he thought was a salient point, he'd emphasize it by sandwiching the card between a couple of knuckles and shaking it toward whomever he was addressing. He was currently doing that at Sault.

"Do you know that I have seen your face more than any other beat-cop in this city, and not for commendations. Why the hell can't you seem to stay out of trouble?"

Sault was not in uniform. It was Monday and normally his shift, but he was currently off duty with pay, pending the results of the biological tests on the hypodermic needle and a psychological green light from one of the department's shrinks. He wore a faded Spiderman T-shirt his kids had given him for Christmas and well-worn jeans. Though casually dressed, he stood very still and straight and focused on keeping his expression neutral. He felt indignant in the knowledge that he was a victim here but knew from experience that silence was the fastest way to end the meeting.

Devoss leaned back into his leather desk chair and sighed deeply, as if Sault's mere presence pained him. Sault made his mind as blank as possible in an effort to ignore every one of Devoss' childish dramatic gestures, just as he had ignored Devoss' fake fatherly smile and hand on his shoulder during the newsfeed clips, the last time Sault's "trouble" had turned to gold

for the department.

Devoss always loved an audience, and today was no exception. On the sofa against the wall, behind Sault, sat Devoss' adjunct, Michael Carr, a thin and jumpy man in his mid-twenties who furiously took notes at all of Devoss' meetings, but only the notes that Devoss wanted taken. In the end, he was more of a biographer.

"Ok. Well, you certainly know the drill by now. You're off duty with pay until I get a ticket from Dr..." he sat upright to consult a file on the flat screen of his desktop and the business card slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor, "...Dr. Robillard. Check with Ana about the appointment, on your way out." He didn't retrieve the fallen card but took a new one from a little silver holder on the desk and leaned back again, staring at Sault and flipping it across his knuckles. The holographic Vic PD crest strobed distractingly between his fingers. "On your way out," he repeated, waving his empty hand toward the door.

Sault was only too glad to oblige. He left without a word and did not salute.

He couldn't see Devoss' reaction, but as he passed, he noticed that Michael Carr who had direct line of sight, looked shocked and terrified.

He'd leave it to Devoss to try to stir some drama out of a glad-to-have-you-back-in-one-piece meeting with a victimized beat cop.

He did not shut the door quietly behind him.

Some days, he just couldn't make himself give a shit.

And, who the hell used business cards anymore, anyway?

Sault had a small cubicle on the second floor. He never kept much there, but he spent a little time clearing out the drawers of irrelevant paperwork and gum wrappers. He scanned messages. There were a few obligatory emoji-strewn well wishes from members of the force, and he noted that Vivia had automatically handled several calls from a reporter from a newsfeed service, diverting them to a department Communications Officer. He'd also received a detailed text

from the department telling him who to forward his duty notes to. It looked like Darsh Singh was going to be reassigned to Constable Second Class Jimmy Fitterer. Fitterer was a good egg. He'd been on the job for about ten years and was still happy as a beat cop. He didn't seem to have any further ambition, but he was a straight shooter and knew his stuff. He'd keep Darsh safe and teach the kid a thing or two, in the process.

As he worked, a few people passed by. Everyone was busy, so no one could afford a lot of chat time, but most of them waved or gave him a thumbs-up. A couple of people threw him a short stock phrase as they went by, wishing him a quick return to duty. There wasn't much to say, really, and he didn't want to talk about his situation. Most especially, he didn't want to reveal how much it had shaken him up.

His immediate superior, Inspector Cece (Cecelia) Teng, stopped by to exchange pleasantries for a minute or two—an inordinate amount of time spent, considering her workload, he knew. Getting a bead on his condition, he guessed. She'd transferred in from Vancouver late last year, so he'd only worked under her for a few months, but he liked her. She held the highest rank possible, if you wanted to duck most of the politics. It suited her. She was short on bullshit and did not endure it in others of her rank or below. And he respected the fact that she was wiser than he and could hold her tongue when receiving bullshit from superiors. A direct meeting between a Constable and a Super was very rare. Typically, she shielded all of her charges from such abuse. Shortly after being introduced as his boss, she'd called Sault into her office and told him that she'd heard that he was a lightning rod for trouble, but also for results, and that if he kept her in the loop, she would do her best to handle the politics so that he could focus on his job. Over the months, he'd learned this to be true.

“How was it with Devoss?”

“About how you'd expect.”

“Heard you slammed the door on him.”

Sault was impressed by how fast news spread between floors. “Like I said...”

She chuckled, but Sault could see her mind pouring over the ramifications and repercussions. “Just keep a low profile for a few days, get that psych-green light and get back out on the street.”

Sault nodded. “What happened with the suspect?”

“Harry Potter? He’s in The Tank. He wouldn’t let the paramedics look him over after the tasing so the hospital is video-monitoring him. He seems lucid, but he refuses to talk. We’re holding off charges pending the toxicology results. He’s had a visit from the Crown Counsel—they sent some newbie kid, just getting the preliminaries out of the way and making sure we’re not violating any of his rights in case this heads toward the courts. But I don’t expect it will.”

She glanced toward her office. “I’d better get back to it.” Then she patted him once on the shoulder. “Low profile.” And she left.

He finished quickly and went to his locker. He never kept much in there except a change of uniform, a shaving kit, and maybe a couple of old Roadster magazines, but he wanted to give it the once-over, while he had the chance.

He heard the click of the latch as Vivia transmitted a password and unlocked the tall metal cabinet ahead of him. He swung the door open and immediately noticed the messy collection of kid-art and photos attached to the interior of the door. He really never looked at them anymore and it struck him that there were no recent pictures; just a random collage going back seven or eight years. Both kids were either babies or toddlers. He wasn’t in any of them. There was a close-up of a noticeably younger Maya, by herself at a beach, smiling while shielding her eyes from the sunshine. He brushed it with his fingers, as if that might help him remember how it was between them, back then, or help him recall the softness of her skin. It did neither. He didn’t remember taking the picture, then realized that he probably hadn’t taken *any* of the photos. He wasn’t much of a photo hound, and he wasn’t around a lot. Maya must have taken them. She was always adding to the family screensaver. The collage was messy, but he didn’t

consider removing it. He told Vivia to gather some recent family photos knowing that she would sift through the screensaver, consult with each family member's AI, and take snapshots from the various devices that surrounded them. In a day or two, he'd be able to update the locker door with fresh photos and maybe even some video clips. It was an easy fix. But, he reminded himself; photos of a family are not a family. As he already knew, there was not much else in the locker. He fished out a few random things: a novelty Christmas toque, a half roll of breath mints, loose change—that surprised him as he hadn't used cash in years—a broken shoe lace, and a few old memos. He tossed them all into a nearby garbage can. Then he closed the locker and heard Vivia relock it.

For reasons he could not identify, he wanted to get one more look at his attacker, the man they were all calling Harry Potter, pending a proper ID. He stopped in at the group of individual cages casually referred to as The Tank; temporary holding cells where they usually put drunks and druggies to sleep it off, and reckless teens to reconsider their actions before their parents came to pick them up. Most of the cells were empty so Potter was easy to spot, asleep on the cot with his back to him. Sault stood there for a minute waiting for nothing, expecting nothing. Then he left, mostly for lack of a reason to be there in the first place.

On his way out of the building, he passed through the intake area, fifteen feet behind the reception desk and nodded to Constable Dennis Hennessey. He was talking with someone via his watch but noticed Sault and gave him an absent wave. Hennessey had the unenviable job of dealing with Bot complaints. It was a job made all the more difficult because bot-control was not yet legally recognized as police territory and few of the existing laws applied. At times, Hennessey complained, it was more like warranty work. The intake area was stark, consisting of a single row of three sets of metal desks and filing cabinets separated by moveable grey fabric walls on

metal feet. Ana and other Vic PD AI's now processed so many suspects in transit that it was no longer a busy place and Sault noticed that Hennessey had commandeered the entire area, marking every desk with a clutter of office equipment, files and paperwork, and the occasional coffee cup or bobble head curling trophy from the scratch league.

Sault knew that one of Ana's many sensors would have detected and identified him well before he reached her, but he noticed that she waited until he was near before turning his way. "Hello, Constable Sault. How may I assist you, today?"

Her tone was so natural and affable that Sault couldn't help but smile and he immediately fell into addressing her like the efficient secretary she portrayed. "Hey, Ana. How's it going?"

Vic PD had heeded the lessons learned from DesMoines' Shirley-debacle, two years earlier. Ana appeared to be in her mid-forties, a little plump, with a short, straight, blonde hair style that shouted practicality. She was not a snappy dresser and she giggled often and smiled just precisely a little too much, which made her seem a bit dim, even though she had the entire digitized history of every officer, administrator or perp at her beck and call, and might simultaneously be filling out a subpoena or dispatching a unit to a crime scene while conversing at the front desk. To Sault, Ana's most ridiculous affectation was the pair of glasses with thick, dark frames, which she frequently adjusted as if by nervous habit, or discomfort. When looking at a document, or when you drew near, she would tilt her head too far backward, as though she were trying to focus through the bottom half of bifocals. It was ridiculous for several reasons: Firstly, corrective surgery had pretty much eliminated glasses, secondly, Ana's vision was probably on par with a telescope and, thirdly, there were no lenses in the frames. It was all part of management's attempt to obscure her sexuality. While not at all repulsive, she was far from gorgeous and the administration concluded that male minds would largely regard her more as a mother figure than sexual fodder. The comments in the men's locker room did not support this conclusion.

“Very well, thank you. Are you here regarding your psych-evaluation?”

“Exactly.”

“It’s with Dr. Robillard, on Wednesday, two days from today, at 9:45am. Vivia tells me that you are free at that time. Will that work for you?”

“You’re amazing,” he said, and almost winked, momentarily forgetting that she wasn’t really a doe-eyed, forty-something, human female.

Of course, she giggled, “Thank you Constable Sault. I appreciate the comment.”

Over Ana’s shoulder, Sault noticed Hennessey, just finishing his conversation and gesturing to him. “I’m sorry I...” he began, then, catching himself, just walked away from the receptionist who was not equipped to be offended.

“What’s up?”

“Hey, man. Heard what happened. You ok?” Hennessey was older than Sault, taller and leaner, with curly greying hair and a short beard, which he often scratched at. He had a bit of a squint and perpetually wore a half smile that made you unsure when he was joking. And his jokes, which were largely teasing, did little to clear that matter up. He was a local, and not a particular fan of westerns, but sauntered like the High Plains Drifter and talked with a drawl he could never have picked up in Victoria. Yet, strangely, this was genuinely him. And because “Dennis” didn’t seem to fit that image, no one, including his wife, ever called him anything other than Hennessey. He was a strong argument for genetic memory.

“Still waiting for full toxicology but looks like there’s nothing.” He was too embarrassed to mention that a syringe of saline solution had taken him down.

Hennessey whistled. “Hope so.” He allowed a beat of silence, then, abruptly moved on. “Hey, got a question for ya.”

“Sure. Hit me.”

“You know the firearm regs pretty well, right?”

“I try to keep up to date.”

“Had a bot in here complaining that her owner was teaching

her to shoot a handgun.”

“Wait, what? A bot came in?”

“Been happening more and more, lately. Used to be only owners, but now that the AI’s are so autonomous, they run their own schedules. They actually have free time. So, if they’re not tasked with something and they think there’s a problem, they wander on in here or go to a factory outlet, whichever they determine’s the best course.”

“You’re kidding? I didn’t know that.”

“Yup. Been ramping up since the version-8 frames hit, ‘bout eighteen months ago.”

Typically, bot hardware was constructed in a limited number of configurations, designed for light-, medium- or heavy-duty work. A few optional extras, like additional sensors, memory and processors were applied to the base frame, with the exterior appearances applied over top. The average consumer model fell into the light or medium-duty category and only industrial models were equipped with heavy-duty guts. Sault’s own journey-bot was a medium-duty frame with most of the servos and wiring exposed. Sault like it because it was a purpose-built device that was not trying to be anything it wasn’t. It was a machine that looked like a machine. It had no outer shell because that would serve no purpose.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, while sex-bots were produced on medium-duty frames, their exterior had to be heavy duty. A handful of custom manufacturers still existed, vying for more exclusive markets like the super wealthy and the military but by far the most popular frames were products of Unlimited Function LLC., which had come into the game early and continued to dominate. Traditionally, bots had been difficult to manufacture and expensive to purchase. UF’s Version-6’s had changed all of that and, almost instantly, production of consumer bots became the fastest growing industry on earth. Sault knew that the V-8’s were even cheaper and more versatile, and Beta V-9’s were rumored to be in limited release. In less than five years, the sight of a robot on the streets of Victoria had gone from startling to mundane.

“Three months back, a lawn mower saunters through that front door, wants to know if it’s ok that it’s harvesting weed without a license.”

“No kid’din?”

“Sure as shoot’in.”

“I thought lawn mowers were bot swarms.” Swarms were hordes of servile micro robots typically under the direction of their charging pod. Micro robots could maintain a landscape perfectly by working continually, day and night, while going largely unnoticed due to their small size.

“Most are. This one wasn’t. It was a commercial unit, specialized for tending and harvesting.”

Sault shook his head as if that might make all these new thoughts fall into place. “Ok. So, what’s your question?”

“Is a bot legally allowed to handle a firearm?”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. You can’t lend a firearm to a person who doesn’t possess a license, but bots aren’t people and they can’t obtain licenses...at least, not yet.”

“Maybe this falls under safe storage and access. A bot might not be deemed a safe repository, especially if the gun is loaded. Bullets and weapon are supposed to be stored in separate locations. Did you call Leonard Magnusson, up in legal?”

“That’s who I was talking to when you came in. Can’t ever get a straight answer from those knot-heads up there. He started going on about software versions and safety ratings. Then, to top it off, he told me that it might be illegal for me to even have that conversation with the bot without consulting the owner.”

“Well then, what the hell did they even put you here for?”

“Yup. ‘Zactly.”

“Was your bot’s gun loaded?”

“She didn’t say. I turned my back and she bolted while I was talking with Magnusson...probably didn’t like the direction of the conversation—maybe saw the conflict in endangering her owner by inciting an investigation. They’re like babes in the woods, you know, when they come in here. No matter what’s

going on, they don't really have any idea if it's wrong or not. All they know is that it conflicts with some legal programming and they are instructed to consult an authority. Soon as consulting with an authority conflicts with protecting the privacy and security of their owner, they bolt or shut up."

"Did you get the ID?"

"You know the golden rule: 'Bot or not, always ID.' Got her palm print on the tablet." Humanoid bot fingerprints were geometrical, by law, and had to have a registration number embedded in the design. "Besides, Ana scans everyone and everything that passes. I can follow up. But, seriously, I have no idea where to go from here."

Sault probed his brain but came up empty. "Sorry, Hennessey. I can't be of much help."

"What about your AI?"

The questions seemed completely non-sequitur and Sault was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, they're basically super-intelligent stalkers. They track and analyze pretty much every move you make so they know what you know, plus, of course, the sum total of all recorded human knowledge. I know you're good on the regulations, but I'll bet your AI could tell you something you don't know."

"I don't rely on my AI to do my job."

The older man seemed to realize he'd crossed a line, but in typical Hennessey fashion he met Sault's glare with the serene, lopsided smile. "Never thought you did. But you'd be surprised at what they can tell you. They're a hell of a resource."

Hennessey's manner was disarming, and Sault immediately calmed in spite of himself. "So, ask *your* AI."

"It can only quote the existing regs. It can't make educated guesses in the grey areas. It hasn't learned enough from me to do that because I don't know enough."

"Well, *my* AI gives me messages, newsfeeds and tells me the time."

Hennessey laughed abruptly, then his tone dropped to serious, though his smile never faltered. "Joe, it does a lot more than that. I think a guy like you'd find it useful."

“Maybe,” Sault relented. “I’d follow up on that one, a bit—check out the situation and at least make the owner aware that we’re aware,” he said, referring again to the gun-toting bot. “If I were on active duty, I’d knock on the door for you. Maybe ask Jimmy Fitterer and his partner to make a house call. If he tries to beg off, tell him it’s a favor for me.”

“Thanks, Joe. Will do. Enjoy your shrink-time.” He smiled and tapped the brim of an invisible Stetson.

Three floors below the station, Sault sat in his car, enjoying the insulating silence of the police garage. Vivia did not start the car. She knew that when he drove the Buick, he didn’t want any tech between him and the steering wheel. He liked to experience the sheer visceral pleasure of maneuvering 330 horses.

He slid the key into the ignition and felt a mild tingling in his fingertips that made him withdraw and look it over as if he were examining a small sculpture and not his own hand. He clenched a few times, then shook it out and imagined that the tingling had vanished, but couldn’t be sure because it had been so subtle a sensation. It was either gone, or... was he also feeling it in his left fingertips?

His hand fell from the keys in the ignition and he slumped back against the upholstery looking at the fingertips of both hands now. The sensation seemed to have passed and he wondered if it had ever been, or if it were psychosomatic.

He thought to turn the key then, but suddenly realized that he had no place to go and nothing to do for the next day and a half, before his meeting with Dr. Robillard. He’d been forced off duty a few times in his career and, each time, he’d ended up sitting in this garage thinking the exact same thing; that retirement definitely wasn’t for him. As stubborn and allergic to authority as he might be, he was also very frightened of losing his job. It was a secret that he guarded desperately, camouflaging it with an ornery bravado.

He might have sat there half the day, but a group of guys he knew suddenly emerged from the elevator and were headed to

## Wakeless

cars parked near his. He might not have anything important to do, but he didn't want it to appear like that was so. He said a silent prayer and turned the key and the Buick's 330 horses eviscerated the silence and all heads turned toward him as he pulled away. In the rear-view, he saw the group break into laughter and wondered if that had anything to do with him, then decided that he didn't care.

END OF SNEAK PEEK