

GROUND ZERO



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GROUND ZERO

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DreamCraft, South Australia

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DreamCraft ebook edition September 2009

ISBN: 978-0-9807092-0-9

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Chapter One

They were ten minutes late. Lee Ronson was still fuming after an hour in the early evening traffic when he and his partner stepped into the wide, rose marble foyer of the Hindley Convention Center. Three hundred assorted guests were already present, representing Federal, State and Local government, media and emergency services, as well as the Metropolitan Police and several of the state's universities. Lee was keenly aware that he and Brendan Scott were wearing the official face of Franklin University tonight, and tardiness might be deemed the only unpardonable sin.

The James Beckwith Hall had been converted into a vast restaurant under monstrous chandeliers. It was well occupied, buzzing with conversation, but serving had not yet begun. A pace behind Lee, Brendan paused to present their invitations to a waiter, and from the vantage point of his far greater height, he scanned the crowd for familiar faces.

"I think we're in luck," he speculated quietly. Lee glanced up and back over his shoulder, and Brendan winked one brown eye at him. "Looks like Strachan's even later than we are."

Doctor Robert Strachan was normally punctual to the point of obsession, but he would also have been caught in the snarl just short of the Keswick Bridge. A heavy truck had jumped three lanes and collided with trees on the median; the highway was closed, and the detour took traffic on a mystery tour of the east parklands. Strachan only had to come up from Glenelg, but crews were still trying to reopen the road, and the usual twenty minute journey would take better than half an hour.

Their table was off to the right, tucked into one side of the broad, velvet-draped stage. Flags were arranged to either side of the podium – the Commonwealth of Australia, the state of South Australia, and the Metropolitan Police Department. An embossed plaque on their table read, 'Welcome, guests from Franklin University.' Lee gave it a wry glance, and pulled out a chair. Brendan was ordering a couple of beers as

a tide-over; they were already hungry, and at these events one was often fed late and little.

Still, formal, dress-up occasions were rare, and Lee would never pass up the opportunity to watch Brendan brush the long, dark brown hair into a sleek ponytail, fasten it with a gold clasp, and then curse over the black bowtie until Lee unraveled it for him. At some things, Brendan was brilliant; black tie events were not among them. Lee had never worked with a better data recordist. He was sure Brendan could coax meaningful data out of mud, using a tuning fork and a teaspoon. Four years in the field with the Live Eye news video crew, working the wastelands and battlefields of Africa and Asia, had honed his skills until he could do instinctively the work classroom-taught technicians labored over.

And Live Eye would have missed his services, Lee thought, when Brendan resigned while he was still alive and more or less intact. The wounds in his back were well healed by now; the scars were just faint white lines against the copper hues of his dark olive skin – the legacy of a Maori paternal grandfather, and a Greek maternal grandfather. Only Lee knew how much the old injuries were inclined to ache. Brendan never spoke of them. Lee would never ask, and did not need to. When you shared a home, and a bed, with a man, there were things you just *knew*.

At that moment Brendan was watching the sound crew setting up the podium equipment, and as he caught sight of figures in the wings, he gave Lee a nudge with one big elbow. “Jarmin’s here. Your old boss is dressed to kill ... so where the devil is Strachan? It only took us an extra ten minutes, even in the traffic from hell.”

“He’ll be here. Relax.” Lee leaned back and studied Brendan with overt appreciation, and at last Brendan noticed. His brows rose, his eyes took on a sparkle of mischief, and under the table he hooked a foot around Lee’s right leg.

“Behave yourself,” Lee admonished.

“Strachan’s not even here yet,” Brendan protested.

“But Maggie Jarmin is.” Lee was exchanging smiles and waves with Metro’s current darling even then. “And her radar is never turned off. You start horsing around, and she’ll bloody know! She’ll have my guts for guitar strings – not yours, mind you. She can’t resist you, like twenty other women I could name.”

Brendan gave him a pained look. “Give me a break. She knows you and me are together. And besides, you haven’t worked for her in four

years – not since you busted out of her department and ran for your life, before they turned you into a basket case.”

“I *was* a basket case,” Lee confessed, and turned his attention to his beer.

He was keenly aware of Brendan’s eyes on him, studying him with the sure knowledge of the long-term partner. Once, he had gone to great lengths to conceal the circumstances under which he quit Jarmin’s department at Metro, but in fact Brendan more than understood.

Working with Live Eye, he had seen more blood than Lee would ever see, and after five years he was glad to walk away from the job. Lee had never been exposed to personal danger in his job with Metro – the data analysts were rarely in the field, and almost never under fire. But they waded in what Jarmin termed the ‘raw guts’ of impossible crimes, cases passed to them by detectives who were not merely perplexed but appalled.

How Margot Jarmin handled it, decade after decade, Lee could not imagine. Three years was enough for him, and when his dreams were distorted by fear, despair, horror, and he was committed to industrial grade therapy, he was pleased to check emails one morning and see a message from Franklin University. It was from Doctor Robert Strachan, specifically – the specialist who had just inherited a run-down, disorganized department, and had been granted a healthy budget from a deceased estate, to rebuild it.

The old grazier, Jonathan H. Carlysle, was more than a decade past his century when he passed away, and in the last twenty years of his life he had one passion, one obsession. Many people gravitated to religion in their later years, when the knowledge of life’s brevity began to weigh heavily on them, and when the end of their personal days was obviously so much closer than their beginnings. But Jon Carlysle was born on a sheep station in corner country in 1931, and if he had ever owned any faith it was battered out of him when his parents were killed in World War II, and his children perished in Vietnam. When the weight of his own years began to suffocate him, religion was the last thing he wanted, and for some time he made generous donations to the labs studying parapsychology from the vantage point of science, which had been unimagined in his youth.

He died in 2044, and his will was specific. The Jonathan Carlysle Trust endowed two scholarships in arts and literature, and funded the battered old department that had been rusting away to itself in the basements of Franklin University since the ’20s. The funding was avail-

able to the university *only* on the proviso that Paranormal Studies should be refurbished, revitalized, given a transfusion of new life, *bona fide* talent, which would continue Carlyle's passion.

Just as Lee Ronson was walking out of Jarmin's department and right into therapy, Robert Strachan picked up the gauntlet. He took Paranormal Studies out of the basement and put it on the nineteenth floor of the Franklin University campus, that monolith towering over the old suburb of Hawthorndene.

Franklin was built between 2021 and 2024, when the city's population began to blow out badly, and ground space within the metropolitan limits was at an incredible premium. Other universities, built many decades before, sprawled outward over five hectares, or ten. Instead, Franklin dug down six levels into the earth to accommodate the carparks and quarantine facilities, and reared forty floors above the untouchable green belt of the national parks. And for Lee, working there was his salvation.

Strachan's first task was to call his contacts at Flinders, Adelaide University, Monash and James Cook, and when he had his specialists in physics and chemistry, biology, electronics, he moved on to his associates in the emergency services and the armed forces. From a list of almost forty candidates, he chose Lee Ronson as his data analyst, and Brendan Scott as his data recordist. They were hired to work in harmony, so close, they would soon read each other's thoughts ... Strachan had no idea what he had set in motion.

Memories of those early days amused Lee as he watched Brendan in the soft, diffuse light of the vast Beckwith Hall which had been converted for the night into a restaurant that would accommodate three hundred. Brend was thirty-three now, and to Lee's eyes the years were only improving him. There was a strength about him, not merely the physical power one expected of a man who stood two meters tall in his bare feet, but also an emotional strength which grew out of more than fifteen years living his own life, often in rough places and in danger.

"Well, look who just decided to show up," Brendan was saying as a waitress wafted through their space with a tray of champagne.

The hall was three-quarters populated by now. A few tables were still empty – and likely to remain so. In the last two weeks, the 'superbug' 2048-3a had swept through the city like a cyclone, leaving the population reeling. Hospitals were at capacity, the elderly, the very young and the frail were at considerable risk, and it was only a matter of time before someone died. Both Lee and Brendan had come down early and already

thrown it off. '3a' was being categorized as a 'quick virus' which hit almost everyone but went through the human system in a matter of days; and the most fascinating aspect of it, from Lee's perspective, was the vector.

According to the experts, there *was* no vector. 3a was bred and born here, in the fair city of Adelaide, where just over two million people were incubating it like wildfire, and travelers had already begun to take it abroad. It would race around the world, but right *here*, and right *now*, was the start of it, and Patient Zero appeared to be an elderly farmer from the dairy country far south of the city, who had never been overseas in his life, and had not even traveled out of the state in fifteen years.

Robert Strachan had not yet suffered the so-called plague of '48, but it seemed no one escaped, and when he came down with it – more than likely the last soul on the campus to call in sick – Paranormal Studies would freewheel for a week or so without his unyielding and acerbic presence. Strachan was just short of his seventieth birthday, middle height, middle weight, as fit as a man twenty years younger, with the clear skin of one who has never smoked, and the bright, shrewd eyes of a human raptor. Lee liked him. Strachan was one of a kind: a man whose principles would never allow him to fudge facts, no matter how greatly he might desire to validate a haunting, a sighting, an 'oopart.'

Under his tenure, the department had transitioned from being ridiculed as the 'Ghoul School' of the '20s, into the highly respected 'Spook Busters.' Only Strachan knew exactly how much he longed to prove the existence of dimensions, and lives, beyond the paltry confines of what human eyes and human machines could see and measure. But almost all the work he had done in more than four decades had exploded myths, exposed charlatans, explained away even the most persistent riddles.

At the end of it all, a handful of data remained, just enough to keep Robert Strachan working, long after his colleagues would have quit – or fudged the facts to get results before retirement overtook them, and the glory went to someone else. He could have done it. Many times in the four years since Lee and Brendan signed on with Paranormal Studies, Strachan could have chosen to ignore *this*, take *that* out of context, or give the bald, hard facts a furtive nudge that made them drop into place where he wanted them.

He was not about to do it, and Lee respected him for it. He stood as the old man approached, and took the overcoat and scarf from him as he reached the table. "Traffic?"

"You're psychic," Strachan observed dryly.

"No, they just sent us on the same magical mystery tour, halfway to Unley and back," Lee told him. "Detective Chief Superintendent Jarmin is in the wings ... and if they don't produce some kind of food from somewhere soon, Brendan'll start eating the table decorations."

"Brendan," Brend snorted, "will bugger off and find a noodle bar, and shoot back here in time for the presentations. These things drone on for hours."

"Drone on?" Strachan echoed as he sat and took a glass of champagne. "I've been working on my speech for two weeks. It's quite an honor to be asked to present a career achievement award."

The irony was heavy in his voice. Strachan himself had never won any such award, and likely never would. Maggie Jarmin was fourteen years younger – a criminologist with three degrees and thirty years invested in Metro; the award was the coronation of her career. She could retire at whim after tonight, and go out with an ovation.

Lee hoped she would *not*. Paranormal Studies worked hand in glove with Metro on some of the weirdest, most unsavory cases, where the behavior of serial killers was so aberrant, the most basic functions of the human mind were called into question. Conditions and ailments of the human psyche had begun to manifest in recent decades, which were unknown in the past – unknowable. 'Spacer Syndrome' could not be compared with any previous condition. People came back from the mines on the dark side of the moon, in the asteroid belt, on Mars, with symptoms of derangement, schizophrenia – a strange dislocation from other people, even their spouses and children, an inability to rejoin human society or grasp everyday reality. Some became addicts; others went off the rails, with bloody results. Individuals might be apparently normal for weeks, months, and then lose their minds in an instant, when some event triggered them to violent, sociopathic behavior.

Such people were as much victims as criminals, and the paper trails of bizarre evidence left by their antics before they were captured inspired traditional policemen to consternation. Jarmin had spent half her career studying the syndrome, profiling cases, and much of the work, lately, involved Paranormal Studies.

When the weirdness of a case begged for a science team rather than simply Forensics and Pathology, Jarmin knew who to call. She made it easy for Strachan's people to do the job. Without the authority of her department at Metro, the authorization to bear arms, the security clearance to go almost anywhere and ask almost anything, the work would

be much more difficult. And as Strachan had often said, when Maggie Jarmin retired, to a vast extent, the attitude and temperament of her replacement would decide if Paranormal Studies continued to flourish or was gradually relegated back to the basement.

The woman looked good, Lee thought, watching her approach, along the front of the stage, under the podium. At 55, she was hard and fit, lean as a runner and supple as a dancer, with pale brown hair and contacts that brought her irises up green. Only in close-up did one see the fine lines around her eyes and mouth that hinted at her age, and Lee was disinclined to notice them. They mattered much less to him than the last dark smudges around Brendan's eyes, betraying the 'flu they had both fought off, a week before. He had known Maggie Jarmin since his years at Metro, but Lee's passions lay elsewhere.

"Food," Brendan intoned as a troupe of waiters stepped into the hall, enveloped in the aromas of seafood, rice and sauces. "I think we might get fed after all."

"In the nick of time, before you desert us for the noodle bar?" Strachan indulged himself in a chuckle. "It's the public face of Franklin University you're wearing tonight, so – behave yourself."

Brendan's brows rose, and he drained a second glass of champagne. "What a coincidence. Lee said the same thing."

"Smart boy," Strachan approved, and then stood and gave DCS Jarmin his hand. "Maggie, you look wonderful."

"I look like I'm going to a funeral," she argued. "Why do these functions always involve dragging your death shrouds out of the closet?" She was glaring at the black suit, black pumps, black bag, that would have been equally appropriate at the graveside. "The last time I dressed up like this, my grandfather was being cremated." Her usual winter wardrobe ran to jeans and sweaters, and she looked damned uncomfortable.

"What can't be cured," Strachan observed, raising his glass. "Endure for a couple of hours, get the award, and then I'll take you for a quiet drink, if you like."

She had already gulped a glass of champagne. "I'd like."

"You're nervous," Lee accused. She glared at him. "What, you're not allowed to be nervous in front of three hundred of your peers and the state's luminaries? I'm seeing senators, a couple of high court judges ... the bloody Commissioner of Police and his entourage are at the corner table; there's two actors I recognize, and a couple of celebrity cricketers. I just spotted the State Premier herself, and half a dozen Federal Police

officers, not to mention Sir Geoffrey Lonsdale talking with the publisher of the *Morning Herald*."

"Why, thank you, Lee," Jarmin said with acid sweetness, "that makes me feel much more calm and collected."

"You *are* nervous, aren't you?" Brendan was intent on the approaching food. "You don't have a reason to be. You've earned this. Take it when it's offered, shove it in the trophy case, and get back to what you do best."

Jarmin regarded him with the usual fascination most women discovered for Brendan Scott. He was difficult to resist, Lee admitted – he was also immune to the charms of the female of the species, and they knew it, which created a crackle of electricity between them. Women were attracted and confounded in the same moment; Brendan rarely seemed to even notice.

"And what exactly," Jarmin asked darkly, "would you say I'm best at?"

For the first time, Brendan divorced his attention from the food and looked Maggie Jarmin in the eye. "You're what we used to call an enabler. You make things happen. When I was with Live Eye, stuck halfway up a backwater creek in some Southeast Asian shithole, dying of fleas and flies, rotten food and bad water, we'd get on the blower, call the Air Force, the Army, whoever, and pray for someone who knew how to get things done. Make things happen. My producer used to call these angels *enablers*." Brendan favored her with a dazzling smile. "And you're one."

"I believe," Strachan mused, "I might stand up and applaud. Seriously, Maggie, he's right. The only reason we can do half the work we do, is that your authority opens doors."

With a brimming champagne glass, she saluted both Strachan and Brendan. "And the only reason my track record in terms of tangible results is even half as good as it is, Robert, is because I'm enough of a criminologist and profiler to know when what I'm looking at is *way* past anything 'normal' ... and I know whose number to call."

"Paranormal Studies, Franklin U, extension 656," Lee said with mock gravity as a wide platter of appetizers was set between him and Brendan. He lifted his own glass. "Cheers."

And yet his appetite had almost quit on him. He saw crab, prawns, shaved pork, gourmet cheeses, smoked salmon sushi, teriyaki chicken bits, and all he could think of was the work he had done when he was on Jarmin's staff. Several years with Metro, wrangling data in an

effort to make sense of cases, evidence, victims, criminals, that made no particular sense, until his dreams were a tangle of blood and terror, and he could barely sleep at all unless he was drugged out of his gourd.

He was only picking around the edges of appetizers, while Brendan wolfed them. Brend's appetite was legend, and a body of that stature took a lot of maintaining. He was halfway through the platter without much assistance from Lee before he noticed his partner's sudden disinterest in the food.

Brown eyes studied him soberly, and Brendan leaned closer. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Lee began.

It was too obviously a lie. "Don't try selling me that line of bull," Brendan told him, "cuz I ain't buying. There's a bug in your ear."

"You noticed." Lee took another glass of champagne and sat back. Strachan and Jarmin were talking, heads close together – talking shop, if Lee was any judge – and anything he said would be private. "It's just ... I dunno. Being in the same place with Jarmin, listening to the old Metro doubletalk, seeing Bill Curry and Terri Hunter at the next table –"

"You worked with them, on the same team," Brendan said quietly. He had met Curry and Hunter a couple of times, years before.

"Right. Last time I saw them, they were in surgical scrubs, blood from head to foot, walking out of an autopsy lab with a drill in one hand and a saw in the other." Lee took a long breath, held it, exhaled slowly and nibbled on a canapé. "It stirs up the mud, mate, brings back things I've been trying to forget for a long time."

Brendan frowned at him. "You shouldn't be here."

"You kidding?" Lee gave him a mocking look. "Skip DCS Jarmin's big night? In an hour, Strachan's going to be making the 'crowning achievement of a lifetime's work' speech. You think I want to miss this? And even if I did, Jarmin'd never forgive me."

He was right, and Brendan knew it. "You don't have to stay for the whole evening."

"You think?" Lee swallowed the canapé, washed down with champagne. He had already drunk enough for the booze to be buzzing in his brain cells and nerve endings. "It'll be three hours of after-dinner speeches while the big-wheels get hammered."

"So –" Brendan leaned closer and said against his ear, "Leave. We've shown our faces. We can shove off after the presentation."

The idea was appealing, but Lee was less than sure. "Let me think about it," he muttered.

"Then, get some food into you," Brendan advised, "because the way you're drinking, you're going to be hammered way ahead of the big-wheels, and I know you, when you've had a skinful."

Lee glared at him. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," Brendan said, eyes glittering with amusement, "you lay your pretty little head down on my shoulder, go dead asleep and snore softly in my ear."

"I do-bloody-not!" Lee protested.

"You bloody do," Brendan informed him, and pulled the platter closer. "So eat, before I'm propping you up!"

So Lee ate a little, enough to offset the effects of the champagne which never ceased to flow, as if it issued from a fountain somewhere on the other side of the foyer. The dinner was very fine; it was wasted on him, but Strachan complimented the staff when the dessert dishes were removed, the port, cheeseboard, nuts and dried fruits served, and at last, the preliminary speeches were completed.

An underling from Metro drifted, ghostlike, to the table and whispered some cue to Strachan and Jarmin. On the stage, the battery of spotlights faded up and a bevy of press photographers moved into position. Sir Geoffrey Lonsdale stumbled in from the wings, adjusting a serious pair of spectacles and leafing through a set of cue cards on his way to the podium. And DCS Margot Theresa Jarmin swore fluently in a whisper.

"Here we go," Strachan murmured. "Stop worrying. You're their *wunderkind*, and as Brendan said before dinner, you've earned this, several times over if I'm any judge."

"Deserving it isn't the damned issue," Jarmin hissed. "It's not getting my feet tangled in the lighting cables, getting my tongue around the acceptance speech – and then getting off that goddamned stage without falling off these stupid high heels or dropping the award and smashing it into a million bits, right in front of three hundred luminaries and the news cameras!"

It was a crystal bowl, the interior fully engraved with her name and rank, the date and event, and Lee suspected it was fragile. At the podium, old Sir Geoffrey Lonsdale, retired Forensic Pathologist extraordinaire, had already launched into a glowing speech about Jarmin, who had 'completely reshaped her department since 2032, and brought global processes of criminology into an old service which had been entrenched in traditional methodology.'

"Drone, drone," Brendan growled. "Get on with it, man."

In fact, it was Sir Geoffrey's moment in the spotlight too, and Lee had fully expected him to bask in it. He spoke for fifteen minutes, recalling the highlights of his own career, before he slid the cards back into his inside pocket, gave the audience a benevolent, Magoo-esque gaze, and adjusted the microphone.

"And now, it's my great pleasure to introduce a colleague who has worked alongside DCS Jarmin for many years, and has come to know her better than I ever did. Let me invite to the podium Doctor Robert Strachan, of Franklin University."

"Jesus, at last," Brendan groaned. "Look at the time!"

It was almost 21:00, and like Brendan, Lee was fidgeting, needing to breathe fresh air, get out of the suffocating environment of an 'old boy net' that encompassed the legal profession, politics, media, and the science community.

"Ten more minutes," Lee whispered against Brendan's ear, and took the opportunity to flick him there with his tongue, making Brendan almost jump out of his skin. "I've read Strachan's speech – if he doesn't start *ad libbing*, it takes ten minutes. Add another ten for Jarmin to say 'Thanks, guys, I appreciate it, can I go now?' And then we're out of here."

Brendan was scratching his ear, and gave Lee a dark-eyed, rueful look. His pupils had dilated, and in an instant his thoughts were far from this desiccated assembly. "You want to go clubbing? We're in the right part of the world. You fancy Rampage?"

"On a Friday night?" Lee made a face. "You couldn't hear yourself think in there, *and* you can't breathe for the smoke, this being the last week of the month, and it's Smokers' Night – *and* you know you'll get groped eight times between the door and the bar." He was whispering in a fierce hiss close to Brendan's smooth cheek as he watched Strachan make his way up onto the stage. This close to Brendan, his olfactory sense could bypass Brend's cologne and zero in on the man, a scent of warm, vital masculinity that would have seduced a saint. Lee was no saint.

"Then, for chrissakes, where?" Brendan muttered under the patter of applause as Strachan approached the podium.

But before Lee could think of a suitable haven, much less speak, Strachan had taken the microphone. By comparison with Lonsdale's rambling self-aggrandizement, Strachan's speech was crisp, pointed, spiked with humor and blessedly brief. He praised Maggie Jarmin unstintingly, and pointed out at some length the gray area where forensics, pathology, profiling, psychology and the paranormal converged and

crossed over. The quality that had always set Jarmin's police work apart, according to Strachan – and Lee agreed – was that she was also a scientist, a psychologist and criminologist, to whom the whole concept of the paranormal was familiar territory, because she worked by preference in the domain of the human mind, which was still a largely uncharted realm. And she was smart enough to know how much was still unknown to science.

"One of the greatest strengths to which a human being can aspire," Strachan said to a silent, rapt assembly, "is the ability to speak, and mean, three small words: *We don't know*. The best scientists will admit the truth, if you paint them into a corner: every answer which is uncovered by years of meticulous research generates ten more questions, and if there's one thing we learn afresh with each new discovery, it's that we know one hell of a lot less about the cosmos than our nineteenth and even twentieth century forbears thought *they* knew!

"There was a time when the greatest minds, the legendary scholars of the Victorian era, believed science to be an almost completed project. They believed that what could be known about the universe had already been discovered, quantified, documented ... and filed away." He looked out over the gathering of politicians, legal professionals, celebrities, and he must have known most of them had no faintest idea what he was talking about. "Those men and women were geniuses ... but to say they were wrong is an understatement. Yet only recently have scientists come to accept the truth.

"We know an infinitesimal fraction of what is to *be* known, and if you'll forgive me for misquoting Shakespeare, there are more things in heaven and earth than have been dreamed of by science even in our own century. The strength to recognize this, grasp this fact, and work *with* it instead of denying it, is the power, and the source of the energy, that has brought Ms. Jarmin to this hall tonight, to be saluted by her profession, by the state of South Australia, and by the nation.

"Those who know Maggie best – and I count myself among the fortunate few! – will tell you her open mind is as powerful a force as her intellectual brilliance. Ladies and gentlemen, let me invite onto the podium Detective Chief Superintendent Margot Jarmin."

The applause was enthusiastic. Under cover of it, Lee looked at his watch. "Nine minutes, forty-seven seconds."

"Thank gods for brevity." Brendan shifted closer, pressed warm and hard along Lee's right side. "Five minutes for Jarmin?"

"I'd say, give her ten," Lee judged. "But no longer. Look at her. That

podium is the last place in the world she wants to be.”

She cut an elegant figure, but she looked ill at ease as she joined Strachan, and sure enough, she glanced down to make sure of where the cables were. A steward was waiting with the enormous crystal bowl; the photographers were busy, and several news crews were shooting video.

In fact, Jarmin and Strachan made an odd couple, Lee decided. Jarmin was long divorced from her fourth husband, and Strachan was two years widowed. There was no ‘chemistry’ Lee could detect between the two, and yet they would almost certainly drift together, despite the age difference between them, because they were at ease together, with the kind of comfort many married couples never enjoyed. Strachan was fourteen years her senior, by the calendar, but maturity suited him. He wore it well. Other men became ugly with age; Robert Strachan became distinguished. His hair was still thick, and pure white; his back was still straight, his shoulders still square. In his youth he was very handsome indeed, and in age he was still striking, pleasant, with a kind of dignity Lee hoped to discover in his own later years.

No doubt Jarmin made a wonderful speech, but Lee would have to catch up with it on tv. He barely heard a syllable, since Brendan had decided to tease. The tongue in Brend’s ear had been an impulse, and Lee was paying the price for it now, with a large, brown hand amusing itself between his thighs under the table, while the room’s attention was riveted to the podium.

Thinking was too difficult. The blood supply seemed to have been diverted elsewhere, and the lights were too bright of a sudden. Some remote corner of Lee’s brain that was still semi-functional told him his eyes were dilating as Brendan teased, and it was his own fault. Brendan never needed much encouragement, and Lee had known he was lighting a short fuse.

As Jarmin took the crystal bowl and stepped away from the podium to another patter of applause, Brendan pushed back his chair. Strachan had made his way back to the table ahead of Jarmin, and lifted a brow at the younger men.

“Gotta get a breath of fresh air, boss,” Brendan told him. “They’re going to talk for hours now. If we don’t catch a breath –”

“You’ll fall face down in the cheese board,” Strachan finished. “I wish I could step out with you, but it’d be more than my tenure’s worth. You’ll be back?”

“Maybe,” Brendan muttered.

“Give us half an hour,” Lee promised. “Forty minutes, max.” He

gestured at the stage. "The after-dinner speakers are tuning up. They could ramble on till eleven."

"Good Christ, I hope they don't," Strachan breathed. "You'll carry me out of here, feet-first."

Brendan's hand was in the middle of Lee's back, shoving. "Go. Move, while we can," he said just loudly enough for Lee to hear him.

The next speech had already begun as they stepped out, and Lee breathed a sound of relief. The foyer was quiet, cool, with a faint babble of muzak and the breeze from doors that were constantly opening. The lifts stood to left and right of the reception desk, and on a whim he headed for the nearest. Brendan was a pace behind, perhaps guessing where he was headed.

Fifteen levels up, the lifts opened into the Hindley Mall, three levels of light-vehicle parking, and the heliport on the roof. At this hour most stores were closed, but Pepito's would be open all night for coffee. It was a caffeine transfusion Lee wanted now – and fresh air.

Patrons who had just left one of the IMAX cinemas jostled with the crowd from the VR arcades. Some were on their way to clubs like Rampage; many were 'dressed' for the evening, which mostly meant body paint and jewelry, just this side of what was actually legal.

At Pepito's, and at this time of night, two long blacks, double strong, double sweet, served up in 'souvenir' styrofoam mugs, cost Brendan almost thirty dollars, and he swore as he paid the orange-haired walking acne zone behind the counter his pound of flesh.

"Can't complain," Lee reasoned. "Dinner didn't cost us a dime, and that champagne must've racked up two hundred bucks every time they popped a cork." He headed back out into the cool, breezy mall, and cut a line past the closed boutiques and gift stores to the balcony area.

The open air restaurant was deserted; the umbrellas were folded and tied, the chairs turned over and stacked. The cleaners were already done, and they had the whole balcony to themselves. Two levels up, the helipad was busy with the flotilla of tiny, damselfly helicabs which flitted between downtown's higher buildings like gnats, without pause. The air had that hot metal and scorching kerosene smell of hard working machines. Two levels down, the cinemas and live theaters were disgorging their crowds after the mid-evening show; live music boomed out of a dance club two levels lower still. Downtown Friday night was just starting to kick into gear.

The city lights were a glittering rainbow as far as they could see, every hue, in every direction. More than two million people lived within

the metropolitan limits now; the sky was bright even at night with their light pollution, and rarely quiet, since the airport had become a spaceport in the early '30s. Transorbital flights, passengers and cargo, staged through Adelaide all day, every day, headed for every point on the globe, and on to the Moon and Mars. Even then a commuter shuttle was on its way out. It might touch down again in Hong Kong or London, or it might be headed up for the transit station, where offworld passengers laid over, waiting for a flight.

Lee gave the view one glance and turned his back on it. He had grown up with it, seen it a thousand times, and he was much more interested in the man who had molded against his side and was nuzzling his neck. The night air was sharply cold, but Brendan was hot – and not merely with the physical warmth of a much larger body that was recently well fed and refueled with a great deal of champagne. Lee felt the rock hardness of him against his own hip, and he knew the sound of Brendan's bass little growls as he pressed himself there, humping as much as he dared in a place that was semi-public, even if it was deserted.

"We need to go somewhere," he said, moist heat against Lee's cheek, shocking by contrast to the chill of the July night.

"We need to get back to that bloody stuffed-shirt convention," Lee sighed.

"You're kidding me." Brendan leaned back and looked at him as if Lee had spontaneously gone insane, and to emphasize his point, he bumped and ground into Lee's hip. "We need," he repeated, "to go somewhere."

"In a hurry," Lee agreed a little breathlessly. "Ideas?"

The city lights sparkled in Brendan's eyes. "Car."

"Car?" Lee demanded, caught between amusement and outrage. "You serious?"

"Nothing wrong with a car," Brendan argued. "What, you never got done in a car? You don't know what you've been missing."

"I didn't say that," Lee admitted. "But ... I was fifteen."

Brendan hung one big arm over him. "And now you're thirty. And a hundred bucks says our car's a hell of a lot better than your dad's '25 Toyota."

The arm around his shoulders was trying to steer Lee to the outside lifts, and he resisted. "Actually, it was my mom's '27 Ford. And the only reason you're suggesting this is, you've got three sheets in the wind!"

"Ford, Toyota, big difference, huh?" Brendan devoured his ear and nibbled down the length of his neck. "Car?"

Coherent thought was rapidly deteriorating, but enough brain cells were holding it together for Lee to know the back seat of a Holden Ultima was never going to accommodate a body the size of Brendan, even vaguely horizontal.

"How about," he suggested while he could still speak at all, "we buy an hour down at Farlight Zone?" Talking was not easy. His gonads seemed to have plans of their own.

"That's eighty bucks," Brendan groaned.

"So, you want to head for home?" Lee popped the top off the coffee, found it drinkable by now, and swallowed half of the scalding liquid in one chug.

"That's forty minutes." Brendan was wheedling.

"My gramma used to say, 'You can save time or you can save money, not both,'" Lee intoned.

"Smart lady," Brendan agreed. "And if I didn't have three sheets in the freakin' wind, I wouldn't even be thinking about paying eighty freakin' bucks for an hour in a freakin' VR arcade!"

"But since you do..." Lee breathed coffee steam into his ear.

"Let's swing by the car. There's a coupla things we need," Brendan growled, and gave Lee another push.

This time, he allowed himself to be steered to the lifts. They rode down to the parking levels with an old couple, a very pregnant girl, and three party animals of indeterminate gender whose levels of inebriation made Lee and Brendan look stone-cold sober. The rest of the passengers were headed for street level, but Brendan had punched for 'P Level 3,' and they stepped out into aromatic cold, concrete and echoes.

The '46 Holden Ultima stood on the edge of the top deck of the parking levels. Not far from the lifts and kiosks. It was a decent sized hatchback with a long wheelbase and, admittedly, a big back seat. Still, Lee had never actually considered getting horizontal in it, and while part of him responded to the delicious thrill of the different, another part demanded comfort, if not dignity.

Blue-white neon overheads made even Brendan look leprous, despite his deep olive skin; Lee knew what he must look like himself, with his fair complexion. The blood-scarlet Holden had turned crimson with purple highlights. Brend unlocked it as they approached, and reached in, to the glovebox. Lee knew what he was fetching out, and lounged by the hatch, finishing his coffee and enjoying the opportunity to watch Brendan's long legs.

Then the car relocked, and they were back in the lift – alone this

time, headed back to the mall, and the top VR arcade, the 'parlor' with the multi-hookups and party rigs. Farlight Zone was not cheap, but it was the best, and more adults than kids frequented it. Younger patrons were carded before they could get into the adult games, but if one put down a Titanium credit card, access was unrestricted.

Mashed against the wall with Brendan plastered against him, intent on devouring him until the doors opened onto the mall, Lee was only barely coherent. He took a swift glance around as Brend released him – the cc surveillance cameras were sure to have imaged them, but no human eyes would be watching as Brendan humped against him, and Lee's hands clenched into his buttocks in encouragement Brendan did not need.

They would also be cc imaged at Farlight Zone, but Lee was past caring if some computer knew the humans were getting laid, and if it ticketed them for having sex in a semi-public location, so be it. The fine would be money well spent. The damned AI nannies were everywhere now. You could hardly hope to scratch your nose without being imaged, and in the end the omnipresent surveillance was the same as if there was no surveillance at all: people had come to ignore it. Brendan was oblivious to it – or scornful of it.

The VR arcades were still busy, and would continue to rock into the small hours of Saturday morning. Farlight was a little less congested than the Captain's Club; it was a lot more select, sophisticated, with fewer family hookups and a lot more party rigs.

The woman working reception looked them over with a faint air of amusement. She was forty, too blonde, too tanned, with purple eye makeup and black lipstick, and a tiger-striped skinsuit that might have been stenciled-on paint.

"Hookup for two?" she guessed.

There was a time Lee might have blushed, but not now. They both looked flushed, tousled, and the champagne had cast a palpable aura around them. Brendan produced his card with a flourish. "You got that one game with the ruined Mayan temple and the werejaguars?"

"Legend of the Black Orchid." She punched keys. "You've played it before?"

"Long time ago," Brendan admitted. "Leave out the giant spiders and the soldier ants ... leave out the werejaguars and the mad priests."

She blinked long, mascara-heavy lashes at him. "You leave those out, all you've got left is the ruins."

"And the tropical night, and the jungle birds, and a big full moon,

and a million stars, and the hot wind off the mountains," Brendan said blithely.

She looked him up and down, and then looked at Lee, and snorted. "One Black Orchid scenario, hold the game."

Lee smothered a chuckle. "You get this often, this time of night, Friday, Saturday?"

"You have no idea, kiddo." She pushed the ticket over the counter at Brendan. "You'll get a soft chime at fifteen minutes, a louder one at thirty, a real clanger at forty-five, and a red light starts blipping at five minutes from closeout. You want to continue, it's a buck a minute. We hold your credit card till you leave. Game control instructions are on the back of the door, and you'll find a pamphlet on each seat."

"Thanks." Brendan saluted her with the ticket and leaned closer to Lee's ear as they headed for the hookups. "I don't need any damn' instructions for the game we'll be playing."

The party rigs and multi-hookups were in the back, two ranks of booths, each three meters by three, on upper and lower decks. The twin rigs were on the top deck, and all but one were already occupied. A door stood open. Brendan swiped the ticket over the scanner and the power booted up inside.

The enclosure was black, and as the door slid shut the lights dimmed almost to nothing. Machinery hummed discreetly, but the small room's only furniture was a couple of full body, smart-forming couches. Forty interleaved screens faded up, covering every centimeter of the inside of the enclosure; jungle birds began to sing, far off among the trees, and a white moon shone over the ruins of a temple that seemed as old as time. The sky was dark blue-green and filled with the kind of stars one never saw in the city.

The couches whined back as far, as flat, as they would go; hot air wafted out of the vents, with the scent of humus, plants, exotic flowers. The night wind rustled in the trees; the moon reflected in the eyes of a big animal, not far away, before the cat melted back into the jungle, and howler monkeys called from the forested slopes.

The humidity in the game room rose sharply. The temperature was in the low thirties, and the air was heavy with the drone of insects, the smell of night blooming plants. It was realistic enough for Lee to tip back his neck and gaze at the stars while a sweat broke and the subetherics began to growl through bones and nerves. If he put on the visor, now, the game would begin ... danger if he wanted it, seduction and sex, peril of any kind one chose from the game menu set into the arm of the couch.

He let himself be tumbled onto the nearest couch, grateful when Brendan began to strip him. The simulated tropical night was almost too warm, and they were caught in a womb-dark cocoon of privacy in the midst of a city that never paused to take a breath.

With a soft curse, Lee surrendered. Every sense he possessed was in some superb overdrive. Brendan was heavy on him, all knees and elbows, hands and tongue – big, hot, everywhere at once. Lee was not complaining. He was naked in moments, with Brend's knees between his own, and he squirmed down flat, plucking at Brendan's shirt and slacks.

There was just enough space on the couch. His own hands raced over Brendan's torso, hunting for skin, testing the fabric of his shirt. With a rasp of velcro his slacks unbuckled, and Lee whispered as his palms spanned Brend's bare chest. The hair which lightly furred his breast was fine, soft, and Lee loved to bury his face in the slight hollow, rub his nose and cheeks there, before he set his open mouth over a nipple and made Brendan groan.

Here and now, there was little space to maneuver and just the glimmer of moonlight and starlight to see by. Pure instinct guided him, while Brendan shoved fabric and leather out of the way and settled on him at last. The slick glide of Brend's shaft against his own was liquid fire; the weight and strength and heat of him were pure heaven. Lee wrestled until he could lock both legs around him, hold him there, and get some leverage.

He bucked into Brendan's belly and caught his breath as a race of sensation ambushed him. The sharp counterpoint of Brendan's teeth in the skin where neck met shoulder, the big, firm hand that dove between them, caught him, molded to him, the fist clenched into his hair to turn his head toward a kiss which stole the breath out of his lungs – all of it was Brendan, as wild as he was gentle, as rough as he was careful. He was one of a kind, in bed and out of it, and Lee had never loved, never *been* loved, like it.

It was Brendan's scent in his nostrils as he shared breath and body heat with him, felt the quick, heavy beat of his heart. Bass groans rewarded and urged him as he bucked, and Brendan slammed against him, getting close.

Was the house AI watching them? Lee knew it had to be – the security systems watched everything, everyone, everywhere, without pause. But the AIs were impartial, impossible to embarrass, and at Farlight the limits were set quite high. The AI knew the difference between a couple having sex and a serious crime unfolding, and Lee

forgot about the machine in the same moment the thought crossed his mind.

Brendan's voice rasped, his fingers were bruising on Lee's shoulders, and then he sucked in a sharp breath, backed off and slowed down with an effort. "We bought an hour. Don't need to hurry."

It was slow, meticulous, thorough, until they heard the forty-five minute chime, and then Lee snaked a hand over the side of the couch, hunting for Brendan's jacket – for the bag in his inside pocket, and a couple of foil packets. The condoms rolled on smoothly. The surveillance AI would be satisfied, and no trace of the humans' activities would remain when they checked out.

And then Lee caught Brendan with an arm hooked around his neck, pulled him in tight, and they began in earnest. The heat turned up fast, and it was feverish, a cross between race and wrestling bout, until Brendan tossed his head back and choked off a groan as he came.

That primal sound, and the slam of his hips, finished Lee moments later. He heard his own voice shout as if it belonged to someone else, and reality seemed to skew. A long time later thoughts dribbled back into his mind, wove themselves into a semblance of consciousness, and he found himself struggling to breathe beneath Brendan's weight. Brend was all knees and elbows again, too big to do this on a couch in a VR arcade without bruising something.

"I feel," Lee panted, "like I'm on the bottom of an All Blacks scrum, and the bloody tight head prop just collapsed it on me."

"Tight head prop," Brendan echoed, shifting at last to let him breathe. "Better?"

He was moving around, shoving Lee's legs to win himself space to sit, and Lee scooted sideways. "That was..."

"Good?" Brendan guessed. "Unexpected? Great?"

"All of the above," Lee decided. "Damn, I'm wrecked."

"You're beautiful in the moonlight," Brendan argued, hugging him with one arm for a moment before he deftly and unceremoniously dealt with the condoms. A handful of Kleenex, a ziplock bag. A bunch of cologne tissues. "There, good as new."

Beautiful? Lee would have argued. He knew exactly what he looked like. A little above average height, a little thin, with pale brown hair and gray eyes, high cheekbones and straight teeth. But if Brendan wanted to call that 'beautiful,' so be it. Whatever Brend saw was not what Lee saw when he confronted himself in the shaving mirror each morning.

With limbs that seemed to have been cast in solid lead he sorted his

clothes from Brendan's and dressed. "Thanks. That was great."

"You're thanking me?" Brendan paused, half-clad, honey-brown in the starlight. He thumbed the game controls, and the vents began to blow cool, dry air; the lights came up. "Do I look like I've just been half shagged to death?"

"Yep," Lee affirmed. "Then again, so do I." He glanced at his watch. "You want another breath of air, then back to the shuffled-shirt convention?"

Brendan yawned deeply. "Sure. You *know* they're still making speeches."

"And you know we have to be there," Lee added philosophically. "It has to be us, because we're the only ones who've had the goddamned 'flu, gotten over it and got back to work."

The mystery of 2048-3a distracted him as he dressed, and he turned his face to the vents to let the cool airstream strip the flush from his cheeks, the sweat from his skin. When they heard the five minute chime and the red lights began to blip insistently in both couch arms, he was combing his hair, rearranging his shirt. He held out his arms for Brendan's approval, and Brend gave him a nod.

"You'll do." He looked down at himself. "And...?"

"Now, *you're* more what I'd call beautiful," Lee mused. "And I don't know how you do it, but you look like you just walked out of a staff meeting and sex is the last thing on your mind."

The remark earned him a snort of humor. "You know me better. Sex is never from this mind."

"I know it," Lee admitted, "heaven help me."

They hall was beginning to empty out as they returned to the table where Strachan and Jarmin still sat over coffee, talking shop with a half dozen faces from her department. Many were absent. The 'superbug' was crippling Metro as it had disabled the major universities and over-taxed every hospital in the state. The other states would soon be equally affected, and as the news headlines quoted daily, the factor about 3a no one understood was, how it could develop itself from nothing in this city, and explode through the population as if no one, anywhere, had even a scrap of immunity against it.

"It might have escaped from a lab, you know," Strachan was saying as Lee and Brendan returned. "Now, I don't have the authority to pry into the business of medical research facilities, but you do, Maggie. You could take a look into it."

"I could." She heaved a massive yawn and peered at the wide gold

sunburst clock to the right of the stage. "Good gods, is that the time? I need my beauty sleep."

Strachan made mocking noises. "As do we all." He gave Lee and Brendan a suspicious look. "You enjoyed your ... breath of air?"

"There's nothing else like it." Brendan slapped his flat middle. "Makes you feel like a new man."

"Indeed?" Strachan shoved back his chair. "Then you can hold down the fort while I go and resuscitate myself. And switch to coffee, the pair of you. Whichever of us passes the bag test is driving."

"If any of us does," Lee said acerbically.

"You want to share a helicab?" Jarmin offered. "Don't know about you guys, but I'm ... squiffy. Definitely squiffy."

"Helicab," Strachan agreed. "It wouldn't do for Metro's darling to be busted on the way home from getting a career achievement award. You can crash at my place, if you like."

She angled a curiously unfocused look at him. "Why, Robert, are you making me an offer?"

"If I were," Strachan said enigmatically, "it wouldn't be the couch in the staff lounge, which is what you're getting if you come back with me. I'm sleeping over at the office. I've work to do."

Work to do, Lee wondered – or a too-empty house, where the silence and the bare spaces were too much to be borne, reminding him as they did, every moment, of the wife of forty years he had buried two Augusts ago. His eyes brooded on Brendan, and he pictured himself, four decades from now, with an empty space beside him where Brendan Scott should have been.

The image was too painful and with an effort he shoved it away, forced himself to concentrate on what Jarmin was saying. "You work too hard," she was telling Strachan, "and if you don't mind me saying so, I doubt Kate would approve."

"Kate –" he leaned over and dropped a kiss on the top of her head – would have been the first one to sleep over at the office, if she were waiting for the analysis results of the biggest project collect this year. The datastream has been rendering for the last four hours."

"Which project?" Jarmin wondered.

"Kavanaugh House." Strachan gestured vaguely into the southeast, where the colonial era mansion was notorious for its restless spirits and the long string of apparent murder-suicides spanning almost two centuries. The latest deaths in that miserable house took place in the last year, and Jarmin's department was assigned the unpleasant and perplexing

case. "We might be seeing results in two or three hours, and I want to be there when they come in."

"So do I," she decided. "The couch in your staff lounge?"

"And breakfast at Wok and Roll," Strachan added.

She glanced along at Lee and Brendan for sympathy. "Now, how could you refuse?"

Lee plucked the phone from his pocket. "You want me to organize us the helicab? You want to crash at the office, Brend? I'll toss you for who takes the train in tomorrow, and brings the car back."

A noncommittal grunt answered him, while Brendan beckoned one of the last waiters still circulating. "If we're cabbng, who wants a night-cap? Glenfiddich?"

"Make it a double," Lee decided, "and you're on."

Chapter Two

"This," Lee said as he looked over Brendan's shoulder and scanned the leader screen in the document the server had just handed them, "is police business. I don't see what it has to do with us. Not our usual fare, is it?" Both hands on Brendan's big shoulders, he angled a thoughtful look at the boss. "It looks like murder, pure and simple. I can't see why Serious Crime would even send us the files."

Strachan was polishing his spectacles, his eyes on the screen through which Brendan was scrolling. Grudging late afternoon sunlight slanted into the office under the rolled venetians and from the outer office came a clatter of coffee cups and a buzz of water cooler gossip. With the campus short handed, most of the research staff and all the office staff were doing two, sometimes three jobs each.

Winter was a trying time, and 'flu struck impartially, the high caste and low alike. 2048-3a was less virulent than some, but no one had the immunity to escape it for long. Strachan himself did not look well now, and Lee was uncertain if he and Brendan were lucky or not to be back in harness while thirty percent of the Franklin students and forty percent of both staff and faculty were at home, in various stages of the virus.

Given the circumstances, Lee knew he was right to question the

documentation they had just inherited. Any work that could be handed back to Serious Crime or Metro was one more project this department did not have to carry. Strachan sighed, slipped his glasses back onto his nose and leaned across the desk toward Brendan's tablet. Rubbing the back of his neck as if it ached, he gestured at the screen. "Serious Crime didn't send the files. Maggie did. And I agreed with you, until I made the same connection she'd have made before she sent them."

"Connection?" Lee's brows knitted, and he leaned down over Brendan's shoulder for a better look at the screen. He was missing something. They both were. Brendan's eyes flicked a glance at him and his brows quirked in an expression Lee had long ago learned to read: *beats hell out of me*. "You want to enlighten us, Doc?"

As far as the bottom of page one – through which Brendan was still wading with a look of complete distaste on his face – no single word seemed to connect the string of recent murders to the Paranormal Studies Lab. Brendan swiveled his chair around from Strachan's desk, looked up him with a sick expression and thrust the tablet at him.

"Here, it's all yours. I just ate."

"Thanks a bunch." Lee held the tablet by thumbs and fingertips as if it were contaminated. He turned his full attention to the screen and forced himself to digest the data. "Five murders, each committed at night, at sites as far apart as Victor Harbour and Gawler, cause of death identical in all cases, all murders falling within the last two weeks." He looked up over the file at Strachan. "If this is a serial killer, he's got a bike."

The moment's levity made Strachan smile faintly, but he gave Lee a gesture to get on with it.

"Post mortems performed by the State Coroner in every case revealed the cause of death as ..." And there Lee stopped, took a breath and deliberately re-read the statement, sure he had misread it. "Massive blood loss."

"Count Dracula strikes back." Brendan said acerbically. He settled in the chair, big arms folded over his chest, long legs in gray denim thrust out before him, crossed at the ankles.

"The reports all agree ... no major wounds," Lee went on, his tone and manner sobering as the researcher in him was, as always, lured by the mystery. He had once admitted to Brendan, he hated mysteries the way Strachan hated spiders. "The autopsies show just one puncture in each case, a surgical wound caused by the insertion of a – and I'm quoting! – a precision instrument which connected with the pulmonary vein ... it's all medical gibberish from here on."

"Bottom line?" Brendan asked in the rich bass Lee had quickly come to love.

"Um ... all right, one very weird bottom line: the victims were drained by a device which tapped into the main vein leaving the lungs." He looked down into Brendan's dark, suspicious eyes. "This doesn't make sense. I mean, what serial killer do you know who'd go to all this trouble just to kill a person? If you wanted to bleed someone to death, how would you do it?"

"Boxknife, go for the jugular. The poor bastard's dead in less than a minute," Brendan said bleakly, as if he had seen the situation far too often. As a Live Eye journalist, he probably had.

Lee gestured with the computer. "But it says here, these particular poor bastards would have taken at least ten minutes to be bled to death."

"Read on," Strachan added acidly. "There's a good deal more. And much worse."

"And ... at none of the sites where Serious Crime found the bodies," Lee continued, "was there ever so much as a drop of blood on the ground. So, they were either killed somewhere else and then dumped where they were intended to be found, or –"

"Or a murderer with surgical skills deliberately collected the blood without spilling ... wasting? ... a drop," Brendan finished. He frowned across the desk at Strachan. "That'd take specific medical knowledge, wouldn't it?"

"And access to surgical equipment," Strachan added. He was more than twice the age of Lee or Brendan, and had spent decades in Paranormal Studies. 'Spook busting.' Yet even Strachan was mystified and appalled. It was a look Lee could rarely remember seeing on the boss's face before.

Brendan made disgusted noises. "You mean, somebody's out there making like Jack the Ripper?" He gave Lee a frown. "Speaking of whom, and which, any sign of sexual contact with the victims?"

"Er ... according to this, no." Lee skimmed the tight-packed text. "None of these poor sods had been raped, nor had voluntary intercourse taken place in the last twelve hours," he said slowly thoughtfully, as he finished the top screens. "You've got three women, two men, and no sign of sex anywhere on them, consensual or otherwise. So we're looking at a maniac doctor, or *wannabe* doctor, but the crazy bugger's not killing for sex. He's impartial as to gender and he's killing for blood. As much of it as he can get, which he carefully collects and takes away."

They were silent for some time, and then Brendan asked, "Where

did they find the bodies?" As his curiosity overcame his distaste, he beckoned Lee to fetch the computer back to the desk, and set it down where they could both read. He pressed in close against Lee's side, a small, companionable gesture, and they bent over the disagreeable documentation. "One was a traveling salesman, found in a room at the local pub. Another was an after-hours cleaner, found under the desks in a classroom at a primary school. The third was a night watchman, dumped in the office at a factory ... and then a housewife discovered on her kitchen floor ... the owner-manager of a convenience store, found in the yard behind his shop."

A pattern was evident already, though Lee hated to recognize it. "Each of those locations would be quiet and private," he mused, "so the killer planned carefully, well ahead of time. No way are we looking at murders committed in the heat of anger. And Serious Crime don't need us to tell them that much. Maggie would be profiling somebody like a paramedic, a battlefield medivac guy, a medical student or someone who was chucked out of medical college. The individual is highly intelligent, well taught ... and bonkers." He straightened, thrust his hands into the hip pockets of his blue denims and frowned at Strachan. "All very intriguing, but it's not our business. Is it?"

Strachan leaned over the desk and turned the tablet to see the screen. "I think it might be. The cause of death was enough to make Maggie call me. It's ... abnormal, if not *paranormal*, and I'd agreed to take a look. But what involves us is the next list. I went over it with her, and a couple of old associates from Criminology, vid-chatting during lunch. We made this correlation quite by accident. What you have here is a connection between two datastreams, apparently two different cases. It took some extremely sharp-eyes in the data analysis department – your own old job, Lee – to notice the times, dates and places."

They leaned closer to the screen and Brendan read, "Victor Harbour, 9th July; Aldinga, 11th July; Mount Barker, the 13th; Gawler, the 15th ... Edinburgh, the 17th. Evenly spaced two days apart. And ... damn." His forefinger tapped the bottom line to draw Lee's attention down the screen. "And if that isn't whacko enough, try this: each of the killings took place within three kilometers of a robbery at a top security facility. Some kind of R&D lab. There's your connection."

"And today's the 19th," Lee added quietly, "so it's a safe bet it'll happen again. Somebody's going to die, somebody's going to be robbed." He knuckled his eyes and read quickly down the next screen, which was a list of the peculiar items stolen from security labs in Salis-

bury, Edinburgh and points south. "Platinum and gold circuit wire. Microchips. A current inverter. A UHF microwave generator. The wave guide from a Doppler tracking system. Precision tools." He gave Brendan a baffled look. "It looks like so much random junk to me."

The remark made Strachan chuckle. "Hardly junk. Those items are so high-tech, some of them are still on the secret list. According to an associate of Maggie's, some of these items are so hush-hush, they're still drawing board designs and won't even be used by the military till next year. Yet our thief walks into these factories, unseen; he leaves hardly a trace of evidence to say he was ever there at all. He, or she, goes directly to what he wants, takes one item and leaves again, under the noses of the guards. He, or she, leaves behind numerous other items which would have been easy to take, and just as valuable."

"Doesn't make sense," Brendan muttered.

"No signs of forced entry at any of the labs." Lee was reading through the next screen. "Under normal circumstances you'd have to say it was an inside job. Someone opened the gate, let him just walk in, or provided him with keys and passes."

"But, inside jobs at five different labs, from Victor to Gawler?" Brendan shook his head emphatically. "It'd take months, years, to set up each one of these robberies as inside jobs. You'd have to get in there, seduce or bribe or scare somebody who works on the inside till they're falling over themselves to do anything you wanted. But – every other day, routine as an orbital freight schedule?"

"Exactly." Strachan sat back and kneaded his temples. "There's an element of the weird, the unexplained, which made Maggie call me, and I'm glad she did. She's already profiled the subject, as you were saying, Lee." He frowned at the computer, hands in pockets, head canted in an expression of pure speculation. "There's every reason to believe we have a serial killer, a surgeon or someone with enormous medical knowledge. At the very least a student or paramedic who's lost his or her mind. The person has access to surgical instruments. And he is also – somehow, and we don't pretend to know how – breaking into top security, high-tech research and development labs. He or she steals some bit of equipment which seems to us to be totally useless, then he deliberately, clinically, drains almost every drop of blood out of a victim within a radius of three kilometers of the scene of the robbery ... and vanishes."

"Only to reappear somewhere else two days later and perform the whole routine again." Lee sat in the chair opposite Brendan, crossed one long leg over the other and regarded his partner with a deep frown.

"Why would he take the waveguide off a Doppler tracking system, and not lift the whole scanner?"

Brendan's fingertips drummed a tribal rhythm on the desk. "Maybe the whole scanner was too big to be carried away, without it being seen by the guards. If the thief's a cat man he'd have gone over the fences, possibly even over the roof. How'd you like to carry a full set of Doppler radar gear?"

"But he took a current inverter from a lab in Aldinga," Lee argued, "and one of those weighs about a hundred kilos! However he moved that, he could have got the whole scanner the same way. So you have to guess he didn't *want* the entire scanner. Just the waveguide." He sighed. "Industrial espionage?"

"Find out." Strachan forced himself to his feet and reached for the bottle of Bailey's which stood by the coffee pot, on the filing cabinet. "You have Maggie Jarmin's usual licence to proceed. Level 4 clearance, which should get you through any door. Go where you need, ask what you like of whom you like ... and if they don't like being asked, quote DCS Jarmin's name, or mine." He paused, glass in one hand, Bailey's in the other, and glared at the computer. "If you can make sense of these killings at the same time, so much the better, but I'm afraid they're probably a fetish thing. An amusement, even. If they act like a signpost and point the way to our high-tech thief, use them."

"It could be cult," Lee mused.

"Cult?" Brendan echoed. His warzone experience was vast, but here, after years working with Metro, Lee knew a great deal more.

"I've seen something like it before." Lee closed the cover on the tablet and passed it back to Brendan, who was waiting for him to elaborate. "These murders have the look of ritual killings, an initiation rite, perhaps a rite of passage into some kind of society. Does the name of The Hurons mean anything to you?"

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