

## *Chapter One*

At the heart of the city was a river. At four in the morning its cold, deep scent seeped through deserted streets and settled in the shadows between warehouses. I walked carefully, unwilling to disturb the quiet. The smell of the river thickened as I headed deeper into the warehouse district, the Old Town, where the street names changed: Dagger Lane, Silver Street, The Land of Green Ginger; the fifteenth century still echoing through the beginnings of the twenty-first.

Then there were no more buildings, no more alleys, only the river, sliding slow and wide under a bare sky. I stepped cautiously into the open, like a small mammal leaving the shelter of the trees.

Rivers were the source of civilization, the scenes of all beginnings and endings in ancient times. Babies were carried to the banks to be washed, bodies were laid on biers and floated away. Births and deaths were usually communal affairs, but I was here alone.

I sat on the massive wharf timbers—black with age and slick with algae—and let my fingers trail in the water.

In the last two or three months, I had come here often, usually after twilight, when the tourists no longer posed by ancient bale chains, and the striped awnings of lunch time bistros were furled for the night. At dusk the river was sleek and implacable, a black so deep it was almost purple. I watched it in silence. It had seen Romans, vikings, and mediaeval kings. When I sat beside it, it didn't matter that I was alone. We sat companionably, the river and I, and watched the stars turn overhead.

I could see the stars because I had got into the habit of lifting the grating set discreetly in the pavement, and cracking open the dark blue box that controlled the street lighting. It pleased me to turn off the deliberately old-fashioned wrought-iron lamps whose rich, orangey light pooled on the cobbles and turned six centuries of brutal history into a cosy fireside tale. So few people strolled this way at night that it was usually a couple of days, sometimes as many as ten, before the malfunction was reported, and another week or so before it was fixed. Then I left the lights on for some random length of time before killing them again. The High Street, the city workers had begun to whisper, was haunted.

And perhaps it was. Perhaps I was a ghost. There were those who thought I was dead, and my identity, when I had one, was constructed of that most modern of ectoplasms: electrons and photons that flitted silently across the data nets of the world.

The hand I had dipped in the river was drying. It itched. I rubbed the

web between my thumb and forefinger, the scar there. Tomorrow, if all went well, if Ruth would help me one last time, a tadpole-sized implant would be placed under the scar. And I would become someone else. Again. Only this time I hoped it would be permanent. Next time I dipped my hand in the river it would be as someone who was legitimate, reborn three years after arriving naked and nameless in the city.



The first thing she thought when she woke naked on the cobbles was: *Don't roll onto your back.* She lay very still and tried to concentrate on the cold stones under hip and cheek, on the strange taste in her mouth. Drugs, they had given her drugs to make her stop struggling, after she had...

*Don't think about it.*

She could not afford to remember now. She would think about it later, when she was safe. The memory of what had happened shrank safely back into a tight bubble.

She raised her head, felt the great, open slash across her trapezoid muscles pull and stretch. Nausea forced her to breathe shallowly for a moment, but then she lifted her head again and looked about: night, in some strange city. And it was cold.

She was curled in a foetal position around some rubbish on a silent, cobbled street. More like an alley. Somewhere at the edge of her peripheral vision the colours of a newstank flashed silently. She closed her eyes again, trying to think. *Lore. My name is Lore.* A wind was blowing now, and paper, a news printout, flapped in her face. She pushed it away, then changed her mind and pulled it to her. Paper, she had read, had insulating qualities.

The odd, metallic taste in her mouth was fading, and her head cleared a little. She had to find somewhere to hide. And she had to get warm.

Rain fell on her lip and she licked it off automatically, feeling confused. Why should she hide? Surely there were people who would love her and care for her, tend her gently and clean her wounds if she just let them know where she was. But Hide, said the voice from her crocodile brain, Hide!, and her muscles jumped and sweat started on her flanks, and the slick grey memory like a balloon in her head swelled and threatened to burst.

She crawled towards the newstank because its lurid colours, the series of news pictures flashing over and over in its endless cycle, imitated life. She sat on the road in the rain in the middle of the night, naked, and bathed in the colours as if they were filtered sunlight, warm and safe.

It took her a while to realize what she was seeing: herself. Herself sitting naked on a chair, blindfolded, begging her family to please, please pay what

her kidnapers wanted.

The pictures were like a can opener, ripping open the bubble in her head, drenching her with images: the kidnap, the humiliation, the camera filming it all. "So your family will see we're serious," he had said. Day after day of it. An eighteenth birthday spent huddled naked in a tent in the middle of a room, with nothing but a plastic slop bucket for company. And here it was, in colour: her naked and weeping, a man ranting at the camera, demanding more money. Her tied to a chair, begging for food. Begging...

And the whole world had seen this. The whole world had seen her naked, physically and mentally, while they ate their breakfast or took the passenger slide to work. Or maybe drinking coffee at home they had been caught by the cleverly put together images and decided, what the hell, may as well pay to download the whole story. And she remembered her kidnapers, one who had always smelled of frying fish, half leading, half carrying her out into the barnyard because she was supposed to be dopey with the drugs she had palmed, the other one, rolling new transparent plasthene out on the floor of the open van. She remembered the smell of rain on the farm implements rusting by a wall, and the panic. The panic as she thought, *This is it. They're going to kill me.* And the absolute determination to fight one last time, the way the metallic blanket had felt as it slid off her shoulders, how she pushed the man by her side, dropped the fist-sized jag of metal into her palm and turned. Remembered the look on his face as his eyes met hers, as he knew she was going to kill him, as she knew she was going to shove the sharp metal into his throat, and she did. She remembered the tight gurgle as he fell, pulling her with him, crashing into a pile of metal. The ancient plough blade opening her own back from shoulder to lumbar vertebrae. The shouting of the other man as he jumped from the van, stumbling on the cobbles, pulling her up, checking the man on the ground, shouting, "You killed him you stupid bitch, you killed him!" The way her body would not work, would not obey her urge to run; how he pushed her roughly into the van and slammed the doors. And her blood, dripping on the plasthene sheet; thinking, *Oh, so that's what it's for.* Remembered him telling the van where to go, the blood on his hands. The way he cursed her for a fool: hadn't she known they were letting her go? But she hadn't. She thought they were going to kill her. And then the sad look, the way he shook his head and said: sorry, but you've forced me to do this and at least you won't feel any pain... And the panic again; scrabbling blindly at the handle behind her; the door falling open. She remembered beginning the slow tumble backwards, the simultaneous flooding sting of the nasal drug that should have been fatal...

But she was alive. Alive enough to sit in the rain, skin stained with

pictures of herself, and remember everything.

A taxi hummed past.

She did not call out, but she was not sure if that was because she was too weak, or because she was afraid. The taxi driver might recognize her. He would know what they had done to her. He would have seen it. Everyone would have seen it. They would look at her and know. She could not call her family. They had all see her suffer, too. Every time they looked at her they would see the pictures, and she would see them seeing it, and she would wonder why they had not paid her ransom.

Her hair was plastered to her head. The rain sheeted down. She crawled into a doorway, realized she was whimpering. She had to be quiet, she had to hide. She had to lose herself. Think. What would give her away? She pulled herself up to her knees, tried to look at her reflection in the shop window, but the rain made it impossible. She scabbled around in the corners of the doorway until the dirt there turned to mud on her wet hands. She smeared the mud onto her hair. After thirty days, the nanomechs colouring her head and body hair would be dying off and the natural grey would be showing. Only the very few, the very rich wore naturally grey hair. What else? Her Personal Identity, DNA and Account insert. But when she held out her left hand to the flickers of light flashing in the doorway she saw the angry red scar on the webbing between her thumb and index finger. Of course, the kidnappers would have removed the PIDA on the first day to prevent a trace.

She was alone, hurt and moneyless. She needed help but was afraid to find it.

It was almost dawn before she heard footsteps. She peered around the doorway. A woman, with dark blonde hair tucked into the collar of a big coat, walking with a night step: easy, but wary. One hand in her pocket.

"Help me."

Her voice was just a whisper and Lore thought the woman had not heard, but she slowed, then stopped. "Come out where I can see you." The kind of voice Lore had never heard before: light and quick and probably dangerous.

"Help me." It came out sounding like a command, and Lore heard for the first time the rounded plummy of her own voice, and knew that she would have to learn to change it.

This time the woman heard, and turned towards the doorway. "Why, what's wrong with you?" The hand shifted in its pocket, and Lore wondered if the woman had a weapon of some kind. "Stand up so I can see you."

"I can't." Trying to imitate the slippery street vowels.

"Then I'll just walk along home." She sounded as though she meant it.

"No." She tried again. "Please. I need your help."

The woman in the long coat seemed suddenly to shrug off her caution. "Let's have a look at you then." When she stepped closer to the doorway and saw Lore's muddy hair and nakedness, she grinned. "You need to get rid of the boyfriend or girlfriend that did this to you." But when the light fell on Lore's bloody back, the woman's face tightened into old lines, and her eyes flashed yellow and wise in the sodium light. She fished something out of her coat pocket, slid it inside her shirt, and took off her coat. She held it out. "This might hurt your back, but it'll keep you warm until I can get you home."

Lore pulled herself up the metal and glass corner of the doorway, and stood. The woman caught her arm as she nearly fell.

"Hurt?"

"No." It was numb now.

"It will." That sounded as though it came from experience. "It's too cold to stand around. Just put this on and walk."

Lore took the coat. It was heavy, old wool. The lining was dark silk, still warm. "It smells of summer," and there were tears in her eyes as she remembered the smells of sunshine on bruised grass, a long, long time before this nightmare began.

"Put it on." The woman sounded impatient. She was glancing about: quick flicks of her head this way and that. Her hair, free of the coat collar now, swung from side to side.

Lore struggled with the coat. She flinched when the warm silk touched her back, but all she felt was a kind of stretched numbness like the opening of a vast tunnel. "My name..." Shock made her dizzy and vague. "Who..."

"Spanner." Spanner was scanning the street again. It was noticeably lighter. Another taxi skimmed by. "Fasten the damn thing up. And hurry."



On that first night it seemed to Lore to be miles and miles from the city centre to Spanner's flat. She learned later that it was barely a mile and a half. It was not that she had a hard time moving—on the contrary, she seemed to skim along the pavement without effort—it was more that the journey stretched endlessly and the false dawn blended with the sodium street lamps to form a light like wet orange sherbet that always seemed just a moment away from fizzing, boiling off, leaving no oxygen. Lore knew she was ill. She remembered the blood, hers and his, the sharp plastic tick as it dripped onto the plathene.

She had a vague impression of a shop window and railings, and then stone steps. The stairwell was made of unfinished brick. The mortar looked old. Spanner must have opened the door then, because she found herself

inside.

Spanner did not turn on any lights; it was bright enough with the street lights washing in through unshuttered windows. Lore swayed in the middle of an enormous L-shaped room. Several power points glowed at one end, like red eyes.

"You need to sleep," Spanner said, "not talk. Here's some water. Some painkillers." Her voice sounded different in her own room, and she seemed to appear and disappear, reappearing with things—a glass, some pills; showing her the bathroom. It was like watching a jerky, badly edited film. "Here's the mat." A judo mat, by the west wall, under the windows opposite the curtained opening to the short limb of the L, the bedroom. "I'll turn up the heat. You won't be able to bear anything on that back for a while. I don't think we can do much about it tonight. Looks like it's scabbing over. I'll get a medic for you in the morning, and we'll talk then."

Lore knew she must be saying things, responding in some way she assumed reassured Spanner, but she was not aware of it. Spanner touched a pad of buttons on the wall. "I've set the alarm. If you need anything, or want to leave, wake me."

Then Spanner went into the bedroom and closed the curtain behind her.

Lore was alone. Alone in a room filled with shadows of furniture she had never seen before, things that belonged to a woman she did not know, in a city that was strange to her. Alone. A nobody with nothing, not even clothes. It was like being kidnapped again, but this time she had no escape to dream of, nowhere to run to. Her sister had killed herself. Her father was a monster who had lied to her, year after year after year.

She stood in the middle of the room, aware of the strange smells and temperature, and knew clearly that she needed this woman, Spanner; depended upon her, in a way that was shocking. Lore's fear was sharp, undeniable as a knife pressed against her cheek. It woke her up a little from her dreamy shock state. She was thirsty.

The bathroom was enormous; its window bare. It was too dark outside to see much, but she thought there were perhaps walls, and the remains of a path. She did not want to put the light on, but she could make out a yellowing, old-fashioned tub and huge, cracked black and white tiles. The water ran from the bulbous taps under low pressure, twisting like crossed fingers. She let it pour over her fingers automatically, tasted with the tip of her tongue identifying chlorine, fluorine, calcium...and suddenly she was crying.

Her fingers turned cold under the tap as she wept. She would have to drink this water that wheezed out from old lead pipes, would have to accept what she was given, from now on, and she would have to like it.

When she had finished crying, she splashed her face with water and dried herself with a towel—*Spanner's water, Spanner's towel*—and went back into the living room.

In the street twenty feet below, a freight slide rumbled to a stop but everything else was quiet. She looked down at the judo mat and imagined trying to sleep on it, face down, back towards the closed curtains of Spanner's bedroom. Horribly vulnerable.

The judo mat probably weighed less than twenty pounds but it was awkward to handle. In the end she had to drag it behind her like a travois. Several things fell as she barged fifteen feet over to the east wall. She lay on her stomach facing the shadows. The freighter moved off again. She counted to two hundred and fifty one before another passed. In the silence, she heard the creak of a tree limb rubbing up against the bricks of the outside wall.

As the street lights faded and the sun came up, the red eyes glowed less insistently and the shadows before her shifted. An electronics workbench, she thought, and tools...



Lore dozed on and off until around ten in the morning, when the noise of passenger slides and people passing by on the street filled the room with a bright hum. There was no sound from the bedroom.

The living room was big, twenty by twenty-five at least. The centrepiece of the shorter south wall was an elaborate fireplace, cold and empty now. A variety of leafy green plants stood on the hearth and on a low tin-topped table nearby. There were some books, but not many. A rug. Then the couch and coffee table, all well used, not exactly clean. The carpet was rucked up where she had dragged the mat over it last night in the dark. Squares of bright sunlight pointed up the wear in its red and blue pattern. The tree outside cast shadows of branches and shivering leaves over the wall behind her. From this angle, all she could see of it was the glint of low morning sun through leaves already beginning to turn orange and red, but the leaves looked big and raggedy, like hands. Maybe a chestnut. She lay under its shadow and tried to imagine she was at Ratnapida, lying on the grass. The bird song was all wrong.

A large proportion of the room at the north end was taken by two tables and a workbench, all covered with screens, data retrieval banks, a keyboard and headset, input panel and what looked like some kind of radio and several haphazard chipstacks, all connected together by a maze of cable.

She could not figure out what it was all for.



In what Lore came to realize was a pattern, Spanner woke up around

midday. She went straight from bed to the connecting bathroom, and about twenty minutes later emerged into the living room via the kitchen door, carrying two white mugs of some aromatic tea. The silk robe she wore had seen better days, and in the daylight her hair was the colour of antique brass. "Jasmine," she said as she held out a mug.

Lore reached for the tea. The red scar between her thumb and forefinger showed up clearly against the white ceramic. Moving hurt. Spanner nodded to herself. "I called the medic. He's on his way. And don't worry. He won't report this. Or you."

Lore felt as though she should say something, but she had no idea what. She sipped at the tea, trying to ignore the pain.

"I know who you are," Spanner said softly. "You were all over the net." Lore said nothing. "I don't understand why you're not screaming for Mummy and Daddy."

"I'll never go back."

"Why?"

Lore stayed silent. She needed Spanner, but she did not have to give her more ammunition.

Spanner shrugged. "If that's the way you want it. Can you get any money from them?"

"No." Lore hoped that sounded as final as she felt.

"Then I don't see how you're going to repay me. For the medic. For the care you look like you're going to need for a while. Do you have any skills?"

Yes, Lore wanted to say, but then she saw once again the red scar on the hand wrapped around her tea cup. How would she get a job designing remediation systems, how would she prove her experience, without an identity? "My identity..."

"That's another question. You want to get a copy of your old PIDA?"

"No." The pain was hot and round and tight. The infection must be spreading. Again, she thought of his blood mingling with hers.

"Then you'll need a new one. That costs, too. And what do you want me to call you? I can't go around calling you Frances Lorien Van Oesterling."

"Lore. Call me Lore."

"Well, Lore, if you want my help then you'll have to pay for it. You'll have to work for me."

"Legally?"

Spanner laughed. "No. Not even remotely. But I've never been caught, and what I do is low down on the police list—victimless crime. Or nearly so."

The only "victimless" crimes Lore could think of were prostitution and personal drug use.

Spanner stood up, went to her work bench, brought back a slate. "Here. Take a look."

Lore, moving her arms slowly and carefully, turned it over, switched it on. Wrote on it, queried it, turned it off. She handed it back. "It's an ordinary slate."

"Exactly. A slate stuffed with information. What do you use your slate for?"

Lore thought about it. "Making memos. Sending messages. Net codes and addresses. Ordering speciality merchandise. Appointments. Receiving messages. Keeping a balance of accounts..." She began to see where this was leading. "But it's all protected by my security code."

"That's what most people think. But it's not difficult to break it. It just takes time and a good programme. Nothing glamorous. This one..." She smiled. "Well, let's see." She sat down at her bench, connected the slate to a couple of jacks, flipped some switches. "Can you see from down there?" Lore nodded. On a readout facing Spanner numbers began to flicker faster than Lore could read them. "Depending on the complexity of the code, it takes anywhere from half a minute to an hour. I've yet to come across one that—" The numbers stopped. "Ah. An easy one." She touched another button and the red feed light on the slate lit up. "It's downloading everything: account numbers, the net numbers of people called in the last few months, name, address, occupation, DNA codes of the owner...everything." She was smiling to herself.

"What do you use it for?"

"Depends. Some slates are useless to us. We just ransom them back to their owners for a modest fee. No one gets hurt. Often we couch things in terms of a reward for the finder. No police involvement. Nothing to worry about."

"And other times?"

Someone banged on the door, two short, two long taps.

"That's the medic." But Spanner did not get up to let him in. "Better make up your mind."

"What?"

"Do you want to work with me or not? Even if I don't let him in, there'll be a small fee for call out, nothing you couldn't repay when you're able. But if he comes in here and works on you, then you'll owe me."

The medic banged on the door again, faster this time.

"Sounds like he's getting impatient."

Lore had no clothes and no ID; she doubted she could stand. "I'll do it."

Spanner went to the door.

The medic was not what Lore had expected. He was middle aged, well-

dressed and very gentle. And fast. He ran a scanner down her back. "Some infection. It'll need cleaning." He pulled out a wand-sized subcutaneous injector.

"No," Lore said. "I'm allergic."

"Patches too?"

She nodded. He sighed. "Well, that's an inconvenience." He rummaged in his bag. Lore heard a light hiss, felt a cool mist on her back, tasted a faint antiseptic tang. The pain disappeared in a vast numbness. She knew he was swabbing out her wound but all she felt was a vague tugging. "Clean enough for now." This time he took a roll of some white material from his bag. She shuddered, remembering the plasthene. He paused a moment, then unwrapped a couple of feet and cut it. It glinted. Some kind of metallic threads.

"What's that?"

"You've never seen this before?" Spanner asked. Lore shook her head. The numbness was wearing off. "Here." Spanner passed her a hand mirror. "Watch. It's interesting."

The medic, who did not seem to resent being cast as entertainment, was smearing the edges of her wound with a cold jelly and carefully laying the light material over it. Then he unwrapped a few feet of electrical wire, attached it with crocodile clips to the material.

"What—"

"Stretch as much as you can."

"It hurts."

"Do the best you can. When this sets, it sets."

She did.

He plugged in the wires. Lore felt a quick, tingling shock around her wound, and the gauzy material leapt up from her back and formed a flexible, rigid cage over the gash but still attached to her skin where the medic had applied the cold jelly. He put away the roll and the wires, took something else out of his bag. She watched him carefully in the mirror. He held it up. "Plaskin." This time the spray was throatier, lasted longer. When he was done, the raised white material, the jelly and a two inch strip of skin around the wound were all that pinkish bandage colour that marketers called "flesh." She looked as though she had a fat pink snake lying diagonally along her spine. He tapped it experimentally, nodded in satisfaction. "You won't be able to lie down on it or lean against it but you should be able to wear clothes in an hour or two, and the wound can breathe. For the next ten days bathe as normal. The plaskin will protect it. I'll come back to take it off, make sure everything's all right." He put two vials of pills on the floor by her face. "This is all I have for now in the way of antibiotics and antivirals in

pill form.” She could feel the drying plaskin begin to tug at the healthy skin on her back. "Is the pain very bad?"

"Yes."

He knelt and Lore felt a cold wipe, then the sliding pinch of a needle in the muscle at her shoulder. She could feel the drug spreading under her skin, like butter. He stood and said to Spanner, "This cream is for when the plas comes off. It'll need rubbing into the scar three times a day to keep it supple. I don't have any painkillers at all in pill form."

"I've used needles before."

Lore wondered how Spanner knew about needles, but it did not seem to worry the medic. He pulled out his slate. "What name do you want to use?" He looked from one to the other.

"Lore Smith," Spanner said.

He scribbled. "This prescription is for the drug and disposable needles.” He looked up. "Which pharmacy—the Shu chain do?" Spanner nodded, and he pressed the send button, tucked the slate back in his pocket. "They'll keep it on file for seven days, after that it's invalid. Keep the dosage down if you can. And don't give it to her more than every six hours."

Lore did not like being discussed as though she was not there, but the painkiller was coating her face with ice and her brain with cobwebs. She lay in a daze as they moved off towards the door, still talking. He seemed unsurprised by her injury. She wondered what kinds of trauma he was used to dealing with, and how people usually got the kind of hurts that they did not want disclosing. Knife wounds, gunshots...

She fell asleep, woke up to swallow the two pills Spanner held out; a needle, in her buttocks, this time. She slept again. When she woke properly it was dark and she was covered with a soft quilt. She breathed quietly. Where the cloth touched the plaskin covering her wound, it did not hurt. She smiled at that. Such a simple thing, to not hurt.

Spanner was working at her bench, sharp halogen light pooling in front of her. She reached out, took a data slate from the pile in the shadow, hooked it up to a small grey box, read something from the screen, laid it aside, took another slate.

Lore watched her for a while. This woman knew all about her: her name, age, family. If she cared to check, she could get information on education, hobbies, friends. Yet Lore knew nothing about her, did not even know if she had had any school, if she had ever been hurt, ever seen a medic under her real name. If she even had a real name. Some people, she knew, were illegitimate from birth—the fact of their existence not recorded anywhere. But that line of thought was too frightening. She yawned loudly.

Spanner swung round in her chair. "I was beginning to wonder if I'd

given you too many pills. How do you feel?"

"Thirsty. And I need some clothes."

"Both easily fixed." She stood up, disappeared into the shadow. Red power points glowed from the dark. She brought back an old, soft shirt, some underwear, trousers. No shoes, Lore noticed, but then she doubted she would be going anywhere for a while.

"We're about the same size, I think." Spanner went into the kitchen.

Lore sat up, sucked her cheeks in at the pain but made no noise. She pulled on the clothes.

Spanner brought back water, and coffee. She set Lore's by the judo mat, took her own back to the bench.

Lore watched her a while.

Spanner turned partway back towards her, impatient now. "What?" Her face glowed oddly in the white halogen and red power indicators. Like one of those late sixties paintings that looked like a vase and then turned out to be two faces, Lore thought. She shook her head. Probably the drugs.

"If stealing from slates is so easy, then don't you worry someone will do the same to yours?"

Spanner made a huffing sound, halfway between amusement and cynicism. "I don't often carry one. Or a phone."

The only time Lore had not carried a slate was on the grounds at Ratnapida. Even then, it had made her feel naked: unable to reach or be reached. Also untraceable. Probably what Spanner liked. "But when you do," she persisted.

"Then I use this." She slid open a drawer and pulled out an ordinary looking slate. "It's almost empty. I clean it every time I get back here. Take a look." She extended her hand. Lore had to drag herself up from her mat.

She looked it over, spotted the metal and ceramic protuberance immediately. "What's this?"

"A lock."

"But you said any code could—"

"It's not a code. It's an old-fashioned insert-key-and-turn lock. No one knows how they work anymore. Safe as the most modern encryption. For most people."

"Most?"

"Hyn and Zimmer are so old that they remember some things. And they've taught them to me. But that's all beside the point. This lock is like my tracking device. If someone is sharp enough, but dumb enough, to steal a slate that belongs to me, I'll want to know who they are. After they've tried to puzzle out this monster, they'll assume—wrongly, of course—that there must be some fabulous secrets on here, so sooner or later they'll start asking

around for anyone who knows anything about locks. And I'll track them down. And then we'll have a little chat."

Lore looked at the bump of metal and ceramic on the plastic slate. *A little chat.* She thought of the medic who patched up ragged wounds without comment.



When it got too cold by the river I walked to the city mortuary and leaned against the wall, just outside the circle of heavy yellowish orange street light, and waited for Ruth. Dawn was well enough along to turn the lights into unpleasant turmeric stains on the pavement by the time Ruth stepped through the gates. I was shocked at how tired she looked.

"You look as though you could do with some coffee."

"No. I just want to get home." Her voice was listless. She handed me a thin box. "Her name and details are in there, too. She's a bit old but otherwise she's a very good match. From Immingham. Anyway, it's the best I could do."

It was a small box. I rattled it dubiously. "Everything's there?"

Ruth nodded. "Though it's not a full set of fingers. The corpse was missing thumb and index from her right hand, but then I remembered you were left handed, so it shouldn't matter too much." She hesitated. "Lore, this has to be the last time."

I understood, of course. Between us, Spanner and I had done some pretty low things. Some of them to Ruth. I tucked the box into an inside pocket. "How have you been?"

"We're managing. I go back on days soon. I'll be glad when I've finished with nights. I feel as though I haven't seen Ellen for weeks. She's just leaving as I get home."

I envied them even that. "When you're back on the day shift it would be nice if you both came over for an evening."

"If you like." Ruth was too tired to hide her indifference. She turned to go.

"Ruth..." Maybe it was something in my voice, but Ruth stopped. "I mean it. I'd really like you to come. Just to talk. No favours. That other thing, the film. It's not...it won't..." I took a deep breath. "Things are different now. I'm not with Spanner anymore."

For the first time since she had walked out of the morgue gates, Ruth looked at me, really looked at me. I don't know what she saw, but she nodded. "We'll come. I'll call you."

At the river-taxi wharf, it was too early for the usual tourist hubbub so I took my coffee to a private corner table. The sun was coming up behind

me, slicking the black-paned privacy windows and newly-pointed brickwork of renovated dockside buildings bloody orange, like overripe fruit. Copters buzzed and alighted like wasps.

I slid open the box and took out the neatly printed flimsy.

*Bird, Sal. Female. Caucasian. Blood type A positive. D.O.B...* Twenty-five. Four years older than me. It could have been worse. And all the other details could be fixed. In time.

The tiny black PIDA was in a sealed bag with a note attached in Ruth's handwriting, *Already sterile*. Next to it was a plaskin pouch, the size of a pink cockroach. *Frozen blood, for DNA tests*. It did not feel cold. I slid the box open further, wondering if Ruth had forgotten the print moulds, and then smiled.

"Bless you, Ruth." Inside, instead of the print moulds I had expected, there were eight glistening plaskin finger gloves. Ready to wear. I could get started today. If Spanner would help.



Spanner never got up until after noon. I went home and slept for four hours. I had bad dreams: sweating bodies, moving limbs, blood and plasthene. I woke up just before midday and stared at the angle of green-painted rafters over my bed. The room was long and narrow: bed at one end, under the rafter; matting in the middle, underneath the heavy old couch and spindly card table; larger table with gouged veneer at the other end, under the wide window. A ficus tree in a pot by the table. Beyond, sky.

I had to walk through the tiny kitchenette to get to the bathroom. I almost banged my head on the rafter over the tub. As usual, I felt dislocated. It was odd, to wake up alone and nameless.

*Not for much longer.*

It was mid-afternoon by the time I got out to look for Spanner.

Springbank, the road that had once groaned under a thousand rubber tires a minute, was now bobbed with grey vehicle ID sensors and laced with silvery slider rails that glistened like snail tracks in the late September sunshine. It was the first day in two weeks I had not had to wear a coat. Foot traffic was heavy, and sliders hissed to a stop at almost every pole to pick up or drop off passengers. The occasional smaller, private car hummed and dodged impatiently around the tube-like sliders.

The building, old and massive, was built of sandstone. The sign over the entrance was a picture of a polar bear. Inside, it was the same as all bars.

Spanner was there. I threaded my way through the smell of stale beer and newly washed floors towards the fall of dark gold hair, and slid onto the stool next to her.

Spanner lifted her head. We looked at each other a moment. It was

strange to not touch. "It's been a while."

"Yes." It felt like a year, or an hour. It had been just over four months. I beckoned the bartender and nodded at the glass Spanner nursed between her hands. "A beer and..."

"Tonic for me."

There had to be a reason she wasn't drinking. People changed, but not that much. I tried to keep the tone light. "Waiting for anyone in particular?"

"Just sitting."

She knew I knew she was lying, but I had gone past the stage of being angry, of facing her with it. It was Spanner's life, Spanner's body.

In here, the bright sunshine was filtered by old bevelled glass and well-polished mahogany to a rich, dim glow, but it was enough to see the glitter in Spanner's eyes, the way she kept glancing up at the mirror behind the bar to see who came in the door. Her skin looked bad and she had lost weight. I paid for the drinks.

She sipped at hers. "How have you been?" She sounded as though she did not really care about the answer.

"Well enough." I hesitated. "Spanner, I've found some work, a job I might take. I need your help."

She finally dragged her attention away from the mirror and looked at me. "What happened to all your noble ideas about an honest living?" There was no mistaking the edge of contempt in her voice.

I had not expected this to be easy. "This is the last time. I want a new ID, a permanent one. I want to work, get an honest job."

"Ah. You need my dishonest help so you can make an honest living."

I looked at Spanner's face, at the hard, grooved lines by mouth and eyes that belonged to all those who had lived on their wits too long, and wanted to take her face between my hands, wanted to make her face her own reflection, and shout, *Look, look at yourself! Do you blame me for wanting to earn my living in a way that's not dangerous? In a way that no one will ever be able to use to make me feel ashamed?* But it had never done any good before.

"I've found a PIDA that might make a match. I need help with it."

"Well, as you always said, I'll do anything for money."

"Spanner..." Even though I had tried to prepare for this, the pain of reopening old wounds was sharp and bright. I took a deep breath. "What's your price?"

"Let me think about it a while."

We both knew what she would ask, eventually. "Fine, you do that, but I need the preliminary work completed now, within the next couple of days."

Spanner glanced in the mirror again, then at her wrist. She was getting nervous.

"I have an interview today," I pressed. "I should be starting work tomorrow, or the day after."

"Fine, fine. Come by the flat tomorrow." Her attention was beginning to drift.

I sighed and stood. "Your flat, then, tomorrow." But she wasn't listening any more.

When I reached the street door, a couple were just coming in. They were laughing, wore expensive clothes, good jewellery. I glanced back. Spanner was rising to meet them.

Outside, adjusting to the bright afternoon after the dim warmth of the bar, I hesitated. Those two were trouble. Maybe Spanner was too desperate for what they were offering to notice the casual hardness of their faces, the way their eyes had flickered automatically over the room looking for exits, checking for weapons.

I waited outside for nearly ten minutes before I realized I could do nothing to help. I left reluctantly, wondering why—after all she had done—I still cared.

## Chapter Two

Lore is five. Tok and Stella, the twins, are nine. They have been playing in the fountain in an Amsterdam neighbour's gardens. She has tried to catch the up-spouting water in her mouth.

Tok is shouting at her. "Don't you want to know what it is that you're drinking?"

"It's water," she says, puzzled.

"How do you know it's clean?"

"But it's always clean."

"This is clean," he says, "but it isn't everywhere." Lore hardly listens at first. His eyes are bright and fierce, an almost turquoise blue, like the sky first thing in the morning when the day will be burning hot. Like the eyes of their father, Oster, when he is excited. But then Tok pulls up facts and figures on water contamination incidents over the last thirty years and Lore listens in horror. "All it takes is one sip of some of this stuff, Lore, and then when you're grown up, or as old as me, it's leukemia, which means your blood goes yucky, or renal failure, that's when your kidneys rot and don't work anymore..."

She is frightened, but refuses to cry. Stella would mock her for weeks. "Does it hurt?"

"Of course it hurts!"

Lore does not go back to play in the fountain and that night she has nightmares of drinking swamp water full of dead rats, and she never forgets to test the water again. Even in the water- and air-filtered surrounds of the family holdings. Even on trips to luxury resorts in Belize and Australia. Even bottled water, because all it takes is one chemical spill in the groundwater table and the eau de source can be full of benzene—there and gone again in the blink of an eye, missed by the random testing. Never take anything for granted, her mother often says, and Lore never does. None of the family ever do. It is the company motto when Lore's great uncle patents the hundreds of genetically engineered microorganisms that now are indispensable in the world's attempt to clean up its own mess. It is what prompts the ever-careful Van Oesterlings to guarantee future monopoly and profit by making sure their patented, proprietary bugs need their patented, proprietary bug nutrients. And *Never take anything for granted* prompts them to use the first gouts of cash to corner a piece of the nanomechanical pollution technology, a corner that grows steadily for the next fifteen years.