

Dedication...

(Left blank for you to insert the name of your choice)

Prologue

The action of this book could take place in any city in the world. The names of the characters have been changed, and the characters themselves have been somewhat embellished. They live in this city ('the City') by pure chance. Feel free to move them anywhere in the world, as you wish (for convenience, a map is attached at the back of the book).

If anyone discerns the slightest hint of racial prejudice in this book, please do not charge in and start hunting under the floorboards; just change the names of the characters. A list of names is also attached at the back of the book.

Chapter three

Mr Ling drove in to the courtyard of his country villa in his armoured Maybach. His bodyguards followed in a BMW 7 Series, practically nosing the bumper of the Maybach. The two cars came to a synchronised stop. The guards got out, afforded the yard their customary inspection, then opened the door for Mr Linn. A pair of patent leather shoes glided impressively out of the Maybach, closely followed by Mr Linn himself. He was dressed in a black and frankly rather tight suit. A pudgy hand clutched an iPhone in a diamond-encrusted case.

The phone rang and he put it to his ear.

'Production's been brought to a complete halt by a computer virus? What's up—have you been surfing porn? Where did we get a virus from?'

'So it's a global virus? Help me care.' Mr Linn's voice was quiet—but when he stopped shouting and spoke quietly like this, the fear felt by his minions became all the greater.

'The whole IT department is to work through the night. This problem is to be fixed. Am I making myself clear?'

'No, don't let any of the night shift go anywhere. They'll be starting in an hour, but we're not paying for downtime. See to it. One other thing. Why are you calling me about such trifles?'

'We do not pay out so much as one dollar on so-called industrial injuries. It's his own mistake. We're what—we're supposed to hand out money to every blithering idiot now, are we?' Ling guffawed loudly.

'Let him sue. Actually, let him jump out the window.' His guffaw increased in volume. 'Thank you for giving me such a good laugh.' Ling ended the call.

Ling's wife stepped out onto the porch. She was from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province.

Sichuan girls have flawless white, radiant skin. It is a radiance that while the girls are young cannot be dulled, even by poverty or cheap food. In her 24 years, Su Yin had spent enough time and money on a daily basis to ensure that her radiance would never fade. Two years ago, this rising star of Chinese cinema had set herself a task: to marry successfully and never do another day's work in her life. A month later, she met Ling Linn, and in just two months had become his official wife. All the money in the world, though, could not save her from the daily routine of indulging her husband. She had learned to bow obsequiously, never to contradict him, always to share his desires, and to be ready to gratify his tiniest whim. Fortunately for Su Yin, she did not spend much time with Ling: they went out together less and less, and sex featured in their schedule no more than once a month. Granted, after this once-a-month feature, Su Yin spent a whole day licking her wounds, covering the traces of beatings or cigarette burns. Linn was a sadist, but Su Yin regarded that as the price she paid for a glamorous life.

As was her custom, Su Yin bowed to her husband. He walked by without looking at her. Her new dress with the large split down the left side and playfully cut out back, which she had put on specially for her husband's return, was appreciated only by the guards.

'Good day, Miss Linn. You look a million dollars.' This from Mark, the chief bodyguard.

'Thank you.' Su Yin was a little flustered.

Mark kept the conversation going. 'Nice weather today,' he said.

'Yes. The sky is so blue and the sunshine is just like summer,' Su Yin replied politely.

The guards were pretty much the only people around Mr Linn with whom she could exchange a few words about anything at all. Everyone else limited themselves to a brief 'Hello'.

'How was your day—tough?'

'No, nothing special,' said Mark.

'Mr Linn looks upset.' Su Yin was making an attempt to excuse her husband.

Mark shrugged his shoulders. Su Yin bowed to the guards and walked daintily into the house behind Ling. In the living room, three maids lined up to greet the master of the house. He made his way through the dining room, where the table was laid, in keeping with tradition, for dinner. The table was lavishly spread with Sichuan dishes. This was the cuisine of his childhood, and after trying every type of cuisine
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in the whole world, he still liked Sichuan best of all. Ling sat down at the table. This lordly movement was an invitation to Su Yin, who had been in step behind him the whole time, to take her own place at table.

‘You have a new dress’, he said, suddenly noticing. ‘It suits you.’

‘Thank you.’ Su Yin smiled happily.

‘I’ve had a very hard day. You may not have experienced this revelation yet, but money doesn’t fall from the sky.’

Su Yin demurely lowered her eyes. When her husband was present, she scarcely ate a thing. Now she was picking at her food with chopsticks. Dinner passed off in silence, interrupted only by a few phone calls. Mr Linn never turned off his phone. Not even at night or during sex. He knew that an urgent matter being held up for five minutes could cost him dear. Ling finished eating, stood up from the table, looked towards the three maids, and issued orders.

‘Clear away the table. When you’ve done that, your time is your own.’ Then he turned to his wife. ‘I shall be in the bedroom’.

Thus Su Yin was given to understand that today was the day. The day on which she was to fulfil her conjugal duty. She followed on to the bedroom and knocked on the door, even though it was plain that she was expected. Without waiting for an answer, she lowered her head and entered. Her husband was lying in the middle of the bed, still wearing his suit and shoes. His arms were outspread and his eyes closed. He looked to Su Yin as though he were asleep. She knelt and took off his shoes, then his socks. Ling did not stir. The thought occurred to Su Yin that it would be simply wonderful if he had suddenly died. Just like that: gone; no more Ling. And gone with him would be all these ... obligations. She would be a rich widow.

At exactly this moment, Ling’s eyelids fluttered, though he continued to lie still. Xun took from the cupboard a box of sex toys and put it beside Ling. Then she stripped naked, revealing her beautiful slender body, and went down on all fours beside the bed. Mr Linn opened his eyes, took the dog collar out of the box, and tossed it to Su Yin. She caught it out of the air and dutifully put on.

‘Undress me,’ he ordered.

Victor came out of the school and dragged himself wearily home. It was spitting with rain. He turned up the collar of his windcheater. Fished his mobile from his pocket. Looked at the screen. Missed calls: none. No-one had called him. Outside school, no-one needed him. A solitary doorman with nothing in
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his life but a lowly job. Listlessly, he pushed the phone back into his pocket. Home was ten minutes away, at a smart walk. He decided to go a roundabout way; he had more than enough time and nothing to do in it. The first yellow leaves were falling onto the asphalt. Victor reached the entrance to the house, went up to his apartment on the third floor, entered the room—and yelped with fright. There was someone sitting on the couch. A girl, brown-skinned, wearing a white tennis skirt and a t-shirt. Before her lay a remote control and a chunky instruction manual. Victor went up to her and looked her over carefully. Then he sat down and put his hand on her knee. The brown girl sat motionless. He started stroking her head. Then he took the remote and pressed the power button. The girl raised her head and greeted him:

‘Hi, I’m Elsa.’ The doll batted her eyelashes twice.

It was pretty late when Alex left the office. He had been texting and calling Inga without success. There was only one woman he was prepared to see when work had worn him out, and that was Inga. She was a hardened cynic, but that did not stop him finding her easy to get on with. He turned up the name ‘Ellen’ in his contact list, dialled the number, then changed his mind and rang off at the first beep. Then he dialled one more number. The answering machine made an announcement: ‘You have reached the editorial office of the Financial World media group. If you know the extension you require, please dial it now. If not, please wait to be connected to the operator’. This was Frank Sinatra’s cue to start singing ‘New York, New York’. Alex waited for three minutes before realizing that the operator had most likely already gone home, and that he would be better off calling tomorrow.

He climbed into his car and sped off. The Financial World offices were only a ten minute drive away, and he decided to waste no time in finding journalist Emma Krinberg’s mobile number.

Rokowski parked up right in front of the main entrance, under the No Parking sign. A sporty-looking guard spotted him, waved his arms, and started in his direction. When it was obvious that Rokowski was taking no notice, the guard walked right up to him and said wearily, ‘You can’t park here.’

‘Good afternoon’, said Rokowski, and showed his ID.

‘Are you going to be long?’ asked the guard warily.

‘I hope not.’

At that moment, a blonde woman left the building, accompanied by a plumpish man. They were both trundling small suitcases along behind them. Alex, who had found dozens of photos of Emma on the internet, recognized her at once. Emma and her companion went down the stairs and headed for the

car park. Alex quickly followed them. The car park was almost empty. Krinberg headed towards a white Toyota Mirai, standing on its own in the middle.

‘Good afternoon, Emma’. Rokowski had overtaken her, and greeted her with another wave of his ID.

‘I’m with the Investigative Committee. Can I trouble you for a couple of minutes?’

‘Hello. Well, if you really mean a couple, OK. We’re dashing to the airport.’ Her voice was low, and beautiful.

Alex thought she had one of the sexiest voices he had ever heard. Emma’s colleague looked intently at Rokowski’s ID, then glanced irritably at his watch.

‘Let me take you to the airport,’ suggested Alex. ‘We can talk in the car.’

Emma hesitated for a few seconds, then nodded her head in agreement. ‘OK. I’ll come with you. She turned to her partner and said, ‘Ivan, take my keys and drive the car to the airport. Park it there in the usual place. See you at check-in.’

Ivan took the keys. ‘Just don’t stop off anywhere on the way,’ he said. ‘Registration closes in 50 minutes.’

‘Don’t worry. Er ...’ She hesitated.

‘Alex,’ said Rokowski.

‘Alex will make sure I get there.’

Emma smiled. Alex could not help noticing that she was even more beautiful when she smiled. She had a dimple on her right cheek, and the subtle wrinkles around her eyes softened her face and made it shine. She followed Alex to his car. The guard was still standing next to Rokowski’s BMW.

‘So it was you they wanted, Miss Krinberg,’ he said respectfully to Emma. He spoke with none of the put-on fawning with which some people address the holder of a certain post; his tone was one of straightforward respect. It was clear that Emma was highly thought of within the company. Emma nodded. Alex opened the car door for her and she got in. Her movements were elegant, without the superfluous ceremony characteristic of Inga. Alex stowed her small suitcase in the trunk, jumped in the driver’s seat, buckled his belt, and started the engine. ‘We don’t have much time,’ he said, ‘so let’s get right to it. I read your article about TBS. Do you think robots actually cause—’

At that moment, there was a loud explosion. In one movement, Emma and Alex looked round. The explosion had come from the direction of the car park, which was at the corner of the Financial World

building. Again in one movement, Emma and Alex jumped out of the car. Alex rushed towards the car park and saw smoke around Emma's car. Her colleague was lying on the pavement nearby.

'Ivan,' Emma cried hysterically. She ran past Alex, who was standing motionless. He grabbed her shoulders and stopped her right there. 'You can't go any closer,' he said quietly, 'I'll call for back-up.'

Emma burst into floods of tears. The guard ran up, then froze beside them.

'Call an ambulance,' Rokowski shouted, pressing his phone to his ear. Emma tried to break free, but Alex held her firmly with one hand.

The clinic to which Ivan Kostik was taken was modern only on the inside. Outside it was a grey, dull, dilapidated building. Inside, though, some of the rooms resembled a space station, with ranks of control panels. Androids performed almost half of the clinic's work. They arrived at diagnoses in a matter of seconds and with 97% accuracy. The probability of surgical error was 0%. A while back, a group of doctors from the clinic working with autistic children had used artificial intelligence for the first time to identify symptoms of the condition. A single android spent a few hours processing all the information in the clinic's possession—information which it had taken human beings three hundred years to collect. The android identified new symptoms, which allowed for the making of an error-free diagnosis at a very early stage. Gradually, artificial intelligence was introduced into other departments in the clinic.

Krinberg sat in the hospital waiting room drinking boiled water. She did not want coffee—especially instant coffee—in the middle of the night, and the machine did not dispense tea. The hospital was warm, but she felt shivery. 'Our assignment was to do interviews and photos with one of the Sami,' said Emma, looking off into the distance.

'With what?' asked Alex.

'Sami. They're an indigenous people in Sweden,' said Emma, in her quiet but so sexy voice. 'Like the "Indians" in America. After 400 years of oppression in Sweden, there are only 20,000 of them left. They do their best to preserve their language and culture.'

Alex was rather embarrassed that he had never heard of the Sami, and said hastily, 'I hope the Sami will wait for you. Look, I guess your car being blown up was not connected with the trip you were about to make. The report on what type of explosive device was used should be ready tomorrow. That will make it easier for us to work out who was behind it. At the moment, it's hard to say whether it was an explosive device that malfunctioned, or just a hooligan larking around with a firecracker.'

'Whatever, Ivan is now in a serious condition.'

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'Ivan ... he's a close friend of yours?'

'We've worked together for almost 12 years. We've been on every business trip together. Over the years, he's come to be like family to me. As a matter of fact, I have no other family. I don't even want to think about what will happen if he doesn't survive the surgery ...'

'He'll pull through. Several of my colleagues in the force have been operated on here. They're all fine.'
Alex gave a small cough.

Emma looked at Alex with eyes red from crying. 'Let's find out who did this. I've nothing to lose.'

'If a smart, talented young lady like you has nothing to lose, what does that say about everyone else?'
Alex attempted a joke.

Emma looked at him hard, and did not smile in response. 'It's someone I've been writing about recently.'

'Who have you been writing about?'

'The mayor of the City. The owner of the ERNO chain of gas stations, and the android makers, Mister Linn. It's him you wanted to talk to me about on the way to the airport?'

'Ye-e-s.' Alex drew the word out thoughtfully. 'Have you have received any anonymous threats lately?'

'No. He's obviously a very busy man. Decided not to waste time on threats.'

'Listen, could you tell me where to find the professor who commented on your last article about TBS?'

'Yes, of course. I'll send you his details tomorrow. They're in my office.'

'Emma, do you really think that the disappearance of those three girls is the work of someone who's bought an android and gone nuts?'

'I'm sure it has to do with TBS. I just don't have any proof.'

'Let me take you home. We can talk more tomorrow. You should get some rest now.'

'I don't know if I'll be able to sleep tonight.'

Alex pulled up in front of Emma's house. 'Can I walk you to your apartment?' he offered, gallantly opening her door.

'No, no, it's okay. I don't think they'll try to kill me twice on the same day. Good night.'

'Good night.' Alex held out his business card, complete with mobile number. 'Call me any time.'

Emma nodded silently. Alex waited until she was safely through the front door. It was midnight. He did not want to go home, so he went to a bar. A double shot of whisky and some loud music—a recipe for relaxation that never let him down.

At one o'clock in the morning, Mr Linn walked into the living room. He was wearing a silk robe decorated with Chinese motifs. His hair was slightly disheveled, and in his left hand he held a whip which he carelessly tossed onto the 18th century Huanghuali table. The living room resembled a room in a museum. Paintings were hanging on the walls and works of art were standing around the place: 80 square metres densely packed with stuff that frankly did not go very well together. These were expensive items, purchased at auction by Ling's trusted agent. Ling was not fully in the know as to how much they had cost, but the more he paid for them, the more he liked them. He followed the same principle in his relations with people. He valued only those who had to pay a lot, and even more highly those who paid even more. Respect, in his view, was something deserved only by those few whom he could not buy.

Ling walked up to the bar, which boasted some sort of Indo Chinese design, took out a bottle of whisky, and poured himself a glass. He spilled some of the whisky onto the expensive Isfahan carpet, pulled a face, then took a cigar from the cigar box, settled into an armchair, rubbed the cigar in his hands, and lit it. After sitting for a couple of minutes in silence, he plucked the TV remote from the table and pressed the power button.

The news was on, and they were running an item about the blowing up of Emma Krinberg's car outside the Financial World offices. The journalist was saying, 'I am reliably informed that one person was injured in the blast—a colleague of Emma's, the journalist and photographer Ivan Kostik, who is now in hospital in a serious condition. So far, we haven't been able to get in touch with Emma to get her comments on the explosion. According to our information, she's not in danger. There's an investigative team working at the crime scene. The entrance to the Financial World office is subject to temporary restrictions.'

Ling angrily slammed his hand, still with the glass in it, onto the table, treating the 18th century Huanghuali to a second whisky spill, and dialled a number. Without waiting for a greeting from the other end, he bellowed, 'Turn on the TV. Couldn't you have thought of something less dramatic? So that it didn't become the week's big news? They'll be crawling all over my business now. Checks galore. Do you not get that? Next time you do some plastic surgery, make yourself a new brain!' Ling hung up.

Sunshine calmly put his phone to one side, pulled away from the inflated blond in his bed, and turned on the TV. The blond propped himself on his elbows, inched up to Sunshine and began to kiss his slim back with its narrow shoulders.

'Wait.' Sunshine spoke sternly, raising his right hand.

A scrolling ribbon of text was saying that a car had been blown up outside the Financial World offices. A photographer, Ivan Kostik, had been injured. Emma Krinberg had been standing a few metres away from the explosion and had not been hurt.

The blond looked at the screen, gave a lopsided smile, and asked innocently, "Everything okay, Sunshine? Anything happened?"

'It's nothing, Andrew, everything's fine,' Sunshine said quickly, then turned to the blond and kissed him passionately on the lips.

Andrew sat down on the bed. He had the pumped-up physique of a body builder. He worked as a sports instructor at a fitness club. Sunshine and Ling Linn were clients of his. He had fallen in love with Sunshine almost at first sight. For months, he had scrupulously hidden his feelings. Sometimes, pressing carefully against Sunshine, correcting his posture or his hand position on the exercise machine, he felt as if a current were fizzing through his body, setting him on fire with desire. They had been together for eight months now. Straightening his hair, Andrew whispered, 'I love you. I'll do anything you want.'

'Today I want to get drunk. Open a bottle of champagne,' ordered Sunshine. For him, his affair with Andrew was just a bit of light entertainment.