

DEREK CRESSMAN

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For Rachel

*Every gal has a right to risk her life if that's
what it takes to save it.*

—Jacqueline Russo

CHAPTER 1

The elevator screen flashed something unexpected as Vera took her daily ride up to the 23rd floor of Magnificent Estates.

Now's my chance.

After the routine weather forecast and the gladiator sports highlights, the screen had announced that tonight's big reality TV episode would be canceled due to a sudden medical emergency of a key participant.

She detested the canceled program, *Big Mother Gets Real*, but viewed it regularly so she would be able to talk about it with colleagues at work. Further, she worried that if she ignored the program, the datatrackers would notice and possibly recommend a MyndScreen upgrade. A recent incident at work had convinced her that too much deviation from normal viewing habits could be dangerous.

Members of the Establishment, such as Vera, primarily watched episodes through MyndScreen chips implanted directly into the cerebral cortex, which received signals sent through upgraded 11G cellular towers. Most members of the lower consumer class, known as Vues, hadn't yet received an implant. They still relied upon the older technology of MyScreen virtual reality helmets, which fit over the head, not inside it. Dome-shaped individual screens covered each eye, sur-

round sound speakers encased the ears, and touch simulators in the helmet stimulated the scalp and forehead.

After eating a dinner of Italiozagna™ Pepsolent, Vera opened her single kitchen cabinet to find a stash of green tea she procured months ago, at considerable expense. This was not green-tea-flavored Pepsolent, but actual tea leaves smuggled in to avoid the high tariffs put in place during Chinasia's trade war with Globalia. She brewed the tea in an old ceramic mug she purchased on a whim from a thrift shop that carried turn-of-the-century items. It was her sole piece of dinnerware.

As the tea steeped, Vera glanced at the two wall screen windows in the living room of her LuxureLife™ suite. One showed a live video feed from the exterior cameras of Magnificent Estates, along with a continuous scroll of temperature, wind, humidity, and weather forecast information for her precise GPS location. The other screen depicted a live shot from the African savannah, where a few antelope wandered in the distance. The only outside view from the apartment came from the sliding glass doors that opened to the small delivery balcony.

While sitting down on the hard faux-wood floor next to the couch where she normally viewed programs, she deliberately allowed the re-broadcast of last week's episode of *Big Mother Gets Real* to pop up on her MyndScreen. The show's jingle, "Watch *Big Mother* – reality like no uuh-ther!" cried out an irresistible earworm that looped endlessly in Vera's head all day long. It was followed by the usual promotional tagline, "brought to you by Timeless Warning –Amusement is Peace."

Vera knew what would happen, not only because she had seen this episode just last week but also because the

plot formula of *Big Mother Gets Real* was dreadfully predictable. She could anticipate how each show would play out after watching the first five minutes.

As the rerun began, she waited for the scene where a lead character called for mediation of a dispute over who would get to remain on the program for next week's episode.

As the celebrity guest mediator began questioning the participants, Vera opened a second MyndScreen window and searched for the term "meditation." She opted against running it as a confidential search, fearing the mere fact she was engaged in that behavior during an episode of *Big Mother* would create a metadata point. Vera convinced herself that the SpeidrWeb™ metadata engines would conclude that her search for "meditation" would be dismissed as a typo for "mediation" and therefore not tracked as anything of significant marketing value.

She had grown curious about the practice of mindfulness ever since accidentally stumbling upon a decades-old medical journal article. She'd found the dense text while searching for a verified fact about overstimulation of the lab-grown food economy for her job at the Department of Information. The medical experts quoted in the article suggested that overstimulation of the brain could cause mental illness and anxiety. The symptoms described in the article were familiar: loss of appetite, fatigue, fidgeting, nervous scratching, insomnia, panic, and nausea. She thought it would be good to learn techniques that calm the mind, but she also feared what might happen if she pursued the interest too far.

After she lost track of her husband in 2045, Vera had found herself increasingly bored with her life. She'd

found solace in travel shows where quirky hosts explored exotic places far beyond MyndScreen transmissions, but the programs now exacerbated her desire to get away, to find something new. There was certainly no lack of entertainment in Los Angeles, the city at the heart of the Globalian infotainment firm economy. But, the daily bombardment of new programs, hot celebrity sightings, and never-ending anime conventions no longer stirred her soul as they once had.

She intentionally skipped the first five screens that came up in her Noodle™ search, including the “featured” search item at the top of each page with the “breaking” news headline: “Legal expert Aneeka Randall discusses the pros and cons of today’s ruling by the Tribunal of Experts on Attention Withdrawal Syndrome.” Vera was certain these results would lead to highly viewed episodes and articles, which meant they had been heavily promoted by one of the major infotain firms. The corporate ownership of these studios had a direct interest in obscuring the information Vera was searching for. So much of the world’s prosperity depended upon infotainment “views” that any effort to escape the firms’ programming threatened not only shareholder profits but also global stability and safety.

Yet escape was precisely what Vera sought.

On the ninth screen, Vera found an old link titled, “ten-minute meditation guide,” which had a mere 174 views. It looked amateurish and almost certainly had not been produced by an infotain studio.

Doubts wriggled into Vera’s mind as she kept the Big Mother episode running in a multitask window. Can I really concentrate on anything for ten minutes straight? Will my inattention to ‘Big Mother’ trigger a metadata

point? Is meditation any fun? Annoyed by a boisterous laugh track exploding on the *Big Mother* episode as a contestant ripped her bikini bottom on a wild boar's tusk in an obviously staged jungle encounter, Vera steeled her resolve.

I'll do it. She knew in the end it would ruin her, that nobody ever really escaped. But nothing felt worse than the inanity of ads, chatterfeeds, emojicons, facts and entertainment that bombarded her incessantly and made it impossible to think on her own for even a moment.

Calling up the link, she was at first confused as her MyndScreen displayed an image of a glowing orange ball — nothing more. Five seconds later, the sound of waves crashing into a beach entered her mind — it reminded her of a documentary she'd seen recently about sea stars and life in tidal pools that had been narrated by a stunningly gorgeous Hollywood actor with a nice set of six-pack abs and flowing blonde surfer-style hair.

After what felt like an hour, a deep soothing voice said languidly, "Sit with your spine straight, and take a deep breath, down into your belly." A woman in a gray leotard with highlighted brown hair pulled up in a ponytail assumed a cross-legged, sitting position on the floor. Vera thought that her own hair might look similar if she grew her bangs out and added some blonde streaks.

Vera's heart pounded like a bass drum, thumping against her rib cage at a faster rate than normal. The eczema on her left elbow suddenly itched sharply. How could she breathe deeply while on the edge of panic?

The voice said, "There, good," before Vera had managed to inhale.

The *Big Mother* jingle blared back into Vera's consciousness as the program cut to a commercial for

Pepsoilent's new LemonMeringue™ dessert. "Watch *Big Mother*, reality like no uuh-ther. Brought to you by Timeless Warning — Amusement is Peace."

Vera almost gave up.

Fidgeting on the floor and crossing her legs in the other direction, she felt blood rushing into her calves that had begun to tingle from lack of circulation. She scratched her elbow and managed to regain her calm composure by concentrating on the sound of the waves.

"Take another deep breath and draw your attention to the center of your body."

Vera thought about her pasty white belly, with a soft roll of skin bulging only slightly beneath her pink polyfiber T-shirt. She thought again about the nature show narrator with his six-pack abs and the sea stars. She tried another inhalation, and this time was able to draw fresh feeling air deeply into her lungs, smelling its crispness as it passed through her nostrils. Holding her breath for a moment, she was dumbfounded when a thump in her head beat a rhythm corresponding to the pulsation of her heart. She exhaled and noticed that the cadence of her heartbeat slowed.

"Now," said the voice, "let go of the thoughts, worries, and curiosities that are running through your brain. Don't force them out, just let them pass through undisturbed."

Taking several more breaths, she concentrated on the sound of her heartbeat. She failed to notice that the episode of *Big Mother* had ended.

For a moment, Vera was absorbed in silence.

Her mind began wondering what she could have for breakfast the next day. There were 14,447 options loaded onto her Pepsoilent home extruder but a new flavor of

danish, PerkyPersimmon™, was scheduled to be released tomorrow. She'd been seeing pop-up ads for it every day for the past week whenever she sent her order in. It might not be that good, but it was something to look forward to.

The voice interrupted, "Now, draw your attention down to the soles of your feet."

Vera tried, but had a hard time using her mind to locate her feet without simply grabbing them physically in her hands. While failing to focus below her knees, Vera basked in the tranquility of being lost within her body. No sound from the outside world or image from her MyndScreen broke the spell.

She sighed.

The shrill ring of her doorbell startled her out of the trance.

Had her search been too careless? Was the tech doctor squad already here to upgrade her MyndScreen? After a split-second of panic, Vera concluded that wasn't likely. She wasn't really sure how they performed upgrades, but it seemed doubtful they could do it on-site.

Besides, even if her Noodle search had triggered a SpeidrWeb report, it was nearly impossible to think the tech squad could have reacted so quickly.

Maybe it's the paramedics, she thought, remembering an aunt whose life was saved when her MyndScreen sent a distress signal after registering inactivity during normal daytime usage hours. The emergency response team had been quick, rushing to the scene with lifesaving drones in time to save her from the stroke. While the portion of her brain responsible for long-term memory had been damaged, the brain technicians had expanded the deep recall functions of her MyndScreen with back-up files of her

previous Noodle searches and the corresponding results. Many of her past thoughts and queries had been, in effect, restored.

Almost by reflex, Vera hastened to the door. If she didn't respond, the paramedics would break in and she'd have to explain why she was not lying unconscious on the floor despite her recent brain inactivity.

Her heart quickening, Vera pressed her thumb on the print reader to unlock the door. As it swung open, she saw Mrs. Manquin, her neighbor across the hall, looking slightly peeved.

Vera unleashed an audible breath and invited Mrs. Manquin inside.