

Chapter 1

Mark Harris was shown through the open plexiglas door into a plush, modern, opulent office. He surveyed the interior, the enormous steel desk, faux leather chair (couldn't be *real*, right?), grand sofas, steel drinks cabinet, fireplace and grandfather clock sitting in the corner (WTF!). To impress, more than functional.

Then his eyes focused on the occupant, tall, lean, bald, ramrod straight posture, and the latest RelaxWear™ suit (again, not real, right?). The tall man was holding him in his stare, saying, 'That will be all Selena, make sure we're not disturbed, and ensure Mr Harris's assistant *is well looked after*, thank you.' As he finished speaking, the door closed silently, and the tall man reached out with a fist bump, 'Mr Harris, I'm Vladimir Jamestown.' Their fists touched briefly.

'Mr Jamestown, thank you for seeing me, and by the way, why was my assistant barred?', Harris asked in a clipped tone. Jamestown gave a thin smile that wasn't shared by his glacial eyes, 'What we do here is confidential to us and our investors, utterly, so no one else can be involved, including your young *black* assistant.' Harris was irritated by the older man's emphasis on his assistant's skin colour, and considered turning around and leaving, but instead corrected Jamestown, 'You meant *customer*, I think, correct?'. Again, that thin smile, the eyes unreachd.

'Please, call me *Vlad*, my father had a penchant for old eastern bloc names. And I say 'investor' deliberately, we see who you term *customers* more as partners investing in our work together,' and he directed Harris to one of the plush sofas, sitting on the one opposite, not losing his poise as he did. Harris took the proffered seat, letting himself relax into the sofa. A little. 'Okay, uh, Vlad. What exactly is the nature of your work here at culpabilité? A colleague and friend just suggested you could help,' leaning in a little more as he finished his question. 'Mark, may I call you by your forename, we fix what ails you, as long as what ails you is in our area of interest and expertise. And for a suitable remuneration, of course.' Mark allowed a wry smile to form, 'Of course,' he retorted, 'yes, please be informal, and I'd assume that your guarantees on privacy cuts both ways.' A statement, not a question.

'Yes, Mark, more than for even your young *black* assistant, I'd say,' Vlad said, 'so what does ail you? And do feel free to be completely open, our mutual NDAs are watertight.' Vlad was keen to reinforce he knows a lot about me, Mark thought, unpleasant, and notwithstanding his evident racism. Utterly shameless! He paused, observing Vlad, a few breaths occupying the silence. 'I have, I've had some *issues*, some challenges recently with some decisions I've had to make. *Unusually for me*,' and despite his hesitancy in answering, he emphasised the last three words by lowering and directing his voice at Vlad.

'Oh, you mean the mass firing in USA south, or the forced relocation of towns in Rwanda, *Mark*?' with that damnable smile again. Vlad was ensuring Mark could see that he was uncharacteristically exposed. 'A CEO always has to make difficult decisions and compromises all the time, but it doesn't mean you're not sometimes affected by them,' he stated, 'and that's part of remaining human, albeit a rarity these days.' Mark pointedly looked Vlad in those eyes as he finished his response.

'Oh, well then, it's unfortunate you're not the usual sociopath at the top, that makes it all the much easier to fire, or relocate, or indeed worse,' Vlad amusedly countered, 'so if it is your *conscience*, your guilt that ails you, we can do some business!' 'How?', Mark enquired, flatly. 'We *remove* guilt, Mark', Vlad stated simply, 'remove the *problem*. Clear your conscience permanently, *irrevocably*.'