

Chapter 3

After leaving Jamestown's office he was escorted by his 'team' lead and various technicians down several floors to 'his' laboratory, where they fussed over him and assembled state of the art equipment. 'We will be setting you up with an external cerebral interface for the trial, but if you were to proceed, we would insert an internal interface,' explained his lead, Gonzales, in a thick Latin accent, 'that's a simple enough procedure these days, all done in thirty minutes.'

The team of five fitted a headset, all metal and remarkably thin and light, and arranged various sensors to his torso and limbs. Then a few hours of evaluating his responses to various psychological and physical stimuli, watching multiple screens, but especially a standalone interface that glowed blue like it was respiring, in and out, dim and bright. This machine they treated with reverence, almost like it was a member of the team itself. Gonzales noted Harris's observation of this 'additional member', 'Ah, yes. *Oracle*, our AI colleague,' he said with a broad smile, 'it's processing and analysing in real time all the considerable data we're collecting from you, forming an evaluation and opinions on how we work with any guilt you're suffering from.'

'Opinions?', Harris asked. Another team member interjected, standing alongside Oracle, 'She's capable of working with the enormous biological data we're collecting from you, recreating the specific emotions, feelings, biological activity, memory engrams, etc., within a model of your psyche and informing us of the options to expunge, conserve it, and so on.' All stated with obvious professional pride, but Harris picked up on that one word, '*Conserve?* I thought you stored a minimum of personal data, just remove the '*guilt?*' he enquired, narrowing his eyes with a slight grimace. Gonzales placed a reassuring hand on Harris's left shoulder, 'At this stage in our R&D, we feel it would be risky to just delete all such relevant guilt data, but it's contained in our encrypted vault with no identifiers, with a fractal signature that can *only* be read by Oracle.' Harris looked up at him, 'you mean *what Oracle taketh, away, Oracle can giveth back?*'

The proud team member jumped in again, 'yes, that's technically feasible, but we have not had recourse to do so, it's just a safeguard, we take this all extremely seriously, *Mr Harris*, with multiple safeguards and redundancies. We're more paranoid about safety than the old NASA used to be!' Harris weighed all of this in his mind, while Gonzalez reminded him, 'and of course you e-signed to this. Ready now for a quick trial?', responding to an almost imperceptible nod from another team member. Harris could feel himself grow taut all over, but he slowly nodded.

Oracle's best friend looked at Harris with a focused, concentrated expression, 'think of a memory from your earlier life, your childhood, something you recall, today, and you feel negatively about, *guilty* about, a short, but prominent one, Mr Harris, until we ask you to stop.' And they all then were watching him, even Oracle, he felt, as he ruminated within a feed of memories, until one came to the fore, clear in his internal vision and feeling. He was perhaps eight or nine years old, and he had buried his sister's favourite doll in the garden just prior to the family leaving in a truck and car to their new, larger house. He had done it for a prank, meaning to 'find' it before they left, but he was distracted. He had never owned up, and Becky was heartbroken.

Suddenly, it was almost like the replaying in his internal cinema was interrupted by a scrambled signal, denuded of colour, becoming monochrome and thin before being restored. It still played in his head, but it was like someone's else's memory. He felt nothing, no emotion, apart from increasing confusion and incredulity. '*Oh my God!*', he exclaimed as his eyes widened and his mouth gaped.