

Chapter 1

Kasei closed the door to the darkened lab behind her. The rest of the team left three hours ago, and she disabled the cameras that would alert them to an after-hours presence in the building. She knew she was alone.

She rushed to the testing room at the back of the lab and booted up the Domino program, disentangling the neural nodes from the careless knot that Bianca left after the last test subject left. When was that, two weeks ago? She couldn't believe nobody noticed the mess when they spent so much time in this lab. It's no wonder the university was preparing to pull the plug on the project. It's bad enough that their success was clouded by ethical questions, but the careless handling of equipment and data didn't help matters. Perhaps it wouldn't be necessary to take drastic measures if Bianca and Naomi had been more diligent about proper procedure.

As if she wouldn't have tried this anyway. Kasei intended to integrate with Domino from the beginning. That was the plan she and Julissa made when the project began: she would integrate to work inside the program, and Julissa would oversee the program from the outside. Their family money and influence were the foundation of the research team. Favors and generous donations to the university kept prying eyes out of the way, at least until recently.

Until that awful incident a little over six months ago that put them on the media headlines too soon. Again. Some people never learn from past mistakes.

Kasei wouldn't let anybody stand in the way of fulfilling her family legacy. Not the university. Not the government. Not the media. Not even her hand-picked research team. They should have listened to her. She and Julissa had two generations of research and wisdom at their disposal. Now she would finish what her grandfather built. She would follow his footsteps to the final vision that had eluded them until it demanded that they bring more players into the game.

The problem was that one block scared them away. She should have known they couldn't trust Naomi and Bianca. One pass in a game doesn't mean you've lost. It means you need to wait things out to see what surfaces on the tiles. She refused to give up as quickly as everybody else did. She would succeed where they failed.

What about Julissa?

Kasei paused. Julissa wasn't just her cousin; she was a best friend and the only true confidant Kasei had in life. They shared the vision of using Domino to take humanity to the next level of evolution by merging man and machine. They were the doublets in this study. Always leading together. Always on the same page. Was it right for her to do this alone?

No, there's only one lead in the game of dominos, and it's me, Kasei thought. We need a winning play, and the others are blocked. I have to make a play now, or they trump the game and we lose.

That was true. The message she hacked indicated that the Domino program would be shut down tomorrow if something didn't change by midnight. Strangely, the message was sent at 10:30 p.m., nearly five and a half hours after the "official" closing time. Thank goodness for Bianca's monitoring program, or Kasei wouldn't have known until she found the lab locked in the morning. Bianca might not be a loyal player, but she had skills that opened up the game in ways that she and Julissa couldn't do on their own.

Let Naomi and Bianca burn, but I won't hurt Julissa.

Kasei didn't have time to contact Julissa. She had to do this now, pray that it worked, and explain herself later.

Kasei stuck the nodules to various points on her forehead and scalp underneath her long, blonde hair. Removing the nodes would take out chunks of hair, but it didn't matter. Hair grows back, and she would be online most of the time if this worked. Kasei settled her slender body in the chair in front of the main computer screen. Her fingers flew across the keyboard entering the encryption codes that would unlock the system.

NEURAL CONNECTIONS CONFIRMED. INITIATE DOMINO?

She clicked "yes" and rushed to the examination table connected to the back of the computer. She had approximately two minutes to connect the biological monitors before Domino would induce a beta wave brain pattern to connect her neural chip with the program and begin her data download.

Kasei's heart raced as she completed the connections and laid on the table. All of the test subjects experienced heightened anxiety when Domino initialized. Her readings were high but within acceptable parameters. They would drop off as the beta wave pattern took over.

The computer beeped, causing Kasei to jolt. What was that? She turned her head toward the computer, only to see the back of the monitor with a flashing red glow spreading against the opposite wall. She sighed at the oversight. She should have launched the projector app to lay an image of the computer screen over her so she could respond to pop up messages. Better yet, she should have brought Julissa with her. She was so desperate to save time that she neglected to think of safety protocols. Domino integration was a two-person process: the subject entering the program, and the outside operator monitoring their progress and making adjustments to the connections as the neurological mapping cloned to Domino. Julissa was a control freak, but surely she would have understood the urgency of the situation. Then again, Kasei was afraid to take a chance on convincing Julissa to act first and understand later when it came to Domino.

They were both possessive of the program, but Julissa had always been the more conservative player, both here and in the game that they named this program after. She was never able to convince Julissa that playing strategically doesn't guarantee wins in every scenario. Kasei was proof of that. She trumped most of their games during childhood and their teens because she would take risks that Julissa didn't see coming.

Stop drifting and focus. You can't afford to waste time reminiscing.

It was up to Kasei to save the program.

It will work, she thought. I'll be the first human in history to become truly immortal.

Immortal? Or create a copy of yourself inside the machine?

Now was not the time to ponder that ethical debate again.

More alerts rang out of the computer. Kasei saw the reflection of a red warning message flash against the opposite wall. She tried to rise from the table but found herself unable to move. Paralysis set in as a wave of drowsiness rolled over her, giving her a small sense of relief. Good, the program was working. The system was probably sending alerts because she was outside the parameters of their typical test subject.

Yes, by about 80 years and not terminally ill! She thought as her consciousness drifted from the darkened lab to the tunnels of glistening light guiding her into Domino. All of their test subjects were elderly and sick. Kasei felt a sense of release as she rose from her body.

She was inside Domino.

Kasei willed herself to swim through the connections and nodes in the stream of data bombarding her consciousness. Tendrils of light swirled, connecting with her neural

pathways to build an online profile. A skeletal light form of her body formed as the data processed, cloning the neurological mapping from her neural chip and building her online “body” to navigate the web. Now she had to find the back door to the Internet to have full access to the digital world.

It worked!

An alarm pierced Kasei’s consciousness. A window opened, giving her a view of the camera in the corner of the lab focused on her body convulsing on the table.

That’s impossible! Domino worked. Besides, I disabled the cameras in the lab.

You only interrupted the signal to the security alarm application. The cameras monitoring the lab are still operational.

Who are you?

Kasei swirled from the scene in front of her to face a large, dark form standing over her. What are you?

Domino is disintegrating. Soon it will be dead; just like you.

Kasei studied the form, seeking a digital signature. It didn’t take long for the quantum code to connect with her neural code, revealing the source.

It was from inside the system, and it had their fingerprints all over it.

Naomi and Bianca. They did it. They developed the virus to destroy the program if anybody tried to access it besides them. They talked about it, but she never thought Naomi would agree to it. That was a doublet she didn’t see coming.

“Traitors!” Kasei screamed, but the sound was swallowed in the silence of the web. After all, code doesn’t scream. The “scream” reverberated through her form, causing her code to destabilize briefly before coming back together in a staticky form.

The dark form studied her. “Kasei,” the mechanical voice said.

It knew her! How did it know her? Did they use the genetic profile from her neural chip to develop the virus?

Her mind flew back to that night nearly four and a half years ago in the lab. The night they initiated their vision.

They didn’t just betray her. They knew she would do this, and they meant to kill her. She walked into a trap. The form touched her, ripping off code and data. She tried to scream again, but could only struggle from the grip of the virus. How did you initiate sound in here? She needed to call for help!

The form reached for her again, its swirling darkness ripping off more code. The computations giving her form wavered, causing her to expand slightly before she willed her form to pull back together. Jolts of light erupted from her form, causing a searing sensation.

How is it possible to feel pain without a body?

There was no time to figure that out. She had to make a play, and fast! She reached around, looking for data that Naomi and Kasei might have left that night. Of course, they were clever. They had deleted everything and only left the data from the test subjects and that she and Julissa stored in the system as a “placeholder” for themselves, once the time came for them to integrate. She grabbed random data from other subjects in the system, gathering it to ward off the virus. The codes of the others in Domino sparked to activity, scrambling chaotically against the virus. The confusion of thousands of code swarming against the virus finally gave her a break to escape.

Kasei rushed through the light, fleeing the chaos of the virus fighting through the swirling codes and the camera showing her body's final convulsion dropping her on the table in the lab. The darkness expanded and broke free of the code web. Broken links scattered around the system as darkness fell around her. The virus had scattered the light of all those codes, leaving nothing but a system collapsing into darkness. All Kasei would see was the glow of the Internet porthole in the distance with a line of red code running across its frame.

The link to the web!

Could the virus survive on the web? It wasn't supposed to. The doorway to the Internet was hidden and could only be opened by her or Julissa. The university didn't want test subjects to have access to the World Wide Web until the final version of the program was ready for worldwide integration. It existed now as only a beta placeholder.

Or so they thought.

Kasei experienced a moment of panic. Did she still have the access code to open the doorway in her memory code? She frantically searched until she found the phrase that she and Julissa designed.

Please be active, Kasei thought. The tests she and Julissa ran the past few nights worked, but it wasn't stable. Kasei opened it remotely from her apartment before coming to the lab.

Would it work, or at least hold open long enough for her to get through?

Naomi and Bianca were clever, but they weren't insidious enough to develop a virus that would get out of control on the Internet. The virus would be targeted to fracture Domino, and then fracture itself. After all, we don't want to hurt anybody, do we? Nobody but the other players in the game, it seems. So, they played dirty. That's ok. Kasei could play dirty, too.

Kasei hesitated and took one last look at her body on the examination table. She hoped to keep herself in both worlds, but that couldn't happen if her body died and Domino was destroyed. She'd die in both worlds, and three generations of work would come to nothing, leaving her dead and Julissa without the family legacy they committed to carrying on. Plus, Naomi and Bianca might go after Julissa next. If they would design a virus to kill Kasei, then the next logical step would be to take out Julissa. This wasn't just about saving herself; it was about saving the future of humanity. She couldn't let Naomi and Bianca win. Domino wasn't theirs. It belonged to her and Julissa. If she could escape to the Internet then she would not only survive but would have unlimited access to the physical world through computers and mobile devices. She could reach everybody. She could do anything. She would have ultimate freedom. And she would have Julissa to help her. They could take this game to a whole new level. They would be unstoppable.

And she would have unlimited access and power to rule it all.

The darkness surrounded her, causing code to scatter through the system. Another static scream shook her form as she willed what was left of her neural essence toward the portal. Flashes of light and code were ripped from her digital form. Desperation drove her toward the light emanating from the door as the darkness continued to rip fragments of neural code off of her. Kasei willed herself to move faster. She didn't need everything she brought into Domino. Anything would do as long as the copy of her neurological mapping from the neural chip remained intact. So far, she enough to rebuild once she got through the porthole and was fully immersed in the web. She just hoped Naomi and Bianca had programmed that virus to stay confined to Domino. Otherwise, she would not only die by that virus but would take it to the Internet where it could wreak havoc on

worldwide systems. Kasei didn't want to destroy the world. She just wanted to destroy the people who tried to destroy the future that she and Julissa had spent years to build. Why would they want to destroy the only salvation that humanity had? It didn't make sense, but she and Julissa failed to convince the others to stay the course and not give up. It would need some force behind it to press forward.

Kasei intended to be that driving force.

The darkness overtook the outer reaches of the system, spreading a blanket in front of her. Kasei was undeterred. She girded her energy and rushed straight through the middle of the darkness, where the center point was stretched thin. More fragments of light and code ripped off her, throwing shadows of light and signals against the virus. She gathered what was left of her energy to project the command code to the Internet doorway.

Shuffle the bones!

She sensed a burning sensation as she rushed through the red doorway, her code glowing red and shooting off static as she pulled it through the collapsing doorway. She turned to see the darkness reaching toward her, its form dissipating against the security protocols of the porthole, before what was left of her was swept into the light code of the Internet.

Kasei swirled with the bright world surrounding her. She made it. Some of the data she brought from her neural ship was still fragmented in the program, but the neurological mapping remained eighty percent intact, and she made it through the doorway with enough data to survive. It's the Internet, after all, and she had been connected to it her whole life. There was more than enough data online to rebuild herself. She could build a better version of herself. She could be what she wanted, instead of what she had been limited to in the outside world. She

stilled her form to look around at the vast networks of rushing lights and signals swirling around her. She made it! She survived! She was the lead in Domino. Of course, she could trump it.

But barely, and her biggest threat came not from a failure in the system, but her friends. Eventually, they would figure out that she made it to the Internet. Could Julissa handle them alone? No, she couldn't. She'd need help.

Kasei was dead, or so they'd think. Let Naomi and Bianca think they blocked her integration to Domino and the online world. It wouldn't take her long to get ready and once she was, they'd pay for what they'd done. She just hoped that Julissa could protect herself from that doublet. They were traitors. Playing smart or strategically wouldn't be enough. Julissa would have to trump them.

I'll make them pay. I will know them as well as they knew themselves once I access all of their data here. Everything is connected. I'll line them up and knock them down.

Just like dominos.

Chapter 2

“What if they find out what happened?” Naomi asked.

“They won’t,” Bianca said crossly from the video message screen on Naomi’s computer. “Kasei was alone in the lab, and she never said a word on the internal monitoring video. They’ll never look at us, so stop worrying.”

“I can’t believe Kasei integrated with Domino.”

Bianca shook her head, her curly red hair bouncing around her shoulders. “Why? We knew she was losing it. We developed the virus to stop her from doing it if she made good with her claims to integrate with the system.”

“We didn’t know it would kill her,” Naomi stared at Bianca’s stern face on the screen. “Did we? It was just supposed to fracture the code for the program, not neurological data. She should have been able to pull out.”

Bianca sighed. “I thought Julissa would pull her out of the program when the virus activated. I had no idea Kasei would try to integrate alone. Domino is a two-person system to operate. Kasei should have known it would kill her if she did it by herself, especially after what happened to her father and grandfather.” She paused. “Even so, the computer in the lab is a quantum computer. Even if Kasei were alone, she should have been able to terminate her connection. She’s so arrogant that she probably thought she could beat the virus. I’ll bet she didn’t try to disconnect. She just let it happen. That seems to be a family trait.”

“You lied to me!” Naomi said. “You said it wouldn’t hurt anybody, but everybody in the system is gone now.”

“Everybody in the system, except for Kasei, was already gone. All of the other signatures were copies of the neurological maps from when they were living. They weren’t alive.”

“I’m glad you can make that distinction so clearly,” Naomi said bitterly.

“It’s the truth.”

“The purpose of Domino was to preserve that data. Our virus destroyed it.

Whether it was them or not isn’t relevant. They and their families entrusted us with that information, and it’s gone. We’ve betrayed them to protect ourselves,” Naomi said.

“Welcome to millions of years of evolution in action,” Bianca said. “Every one of our test subjects was terminally ill. Most of them are already dead. It’s not like we did anything that hasn’t or won’t happen to all of them. We aren’t stopping death, even if the media portrays it that way. Besides, we didn’t wipe that code. Kasei could have prevented all of this by disconnecting. She’s the one who killed them if you insist on referring to it that way, and herself along with them.”

Naomi dropped her head in her hands. “We knew this was coming for six months. Why didn’t we come up with a better plan?” Naomi narrowed her eyes. “Better yet, why didn’t you run that backup of Domino that Kasei kept asking you about?”

“It’s a huge program. Kasei didn’t want it backed up on Cloud storage, and I couldn’t find an external storage device big enough to hold a backup that included the program and all of the data from thousands of test subjects.”

“You don’t seem concerned about the fact that our friend is dead, the project that funded our education crashed, and pretty much everything we’ve done for the past four years a complete waste.”

Bianca sighed. “I am upset, but I’m also frustrated. We told Kasei and Julissa not to move forward with their crazy plan to integrate with Domino. Julissa was listening, but

you know how Kasei was when she got in one of her states. You couldn't tell her anything."

"We killed her. This is our fault, and they're going to find out and put us in jail and our lives will be over —"

"Naomi, stop it. You're paranoid. I'm sorry Kasei died, but we did warn her to back off. The decision to take a gamble on integrating with Domino was hers and hers alone." Bianca said.

"She walked into her death. We did kill her, Bianca. We're guilty."

"If she decided to plug herself in the system, then maybe she was suicidal."

"She wasn't suicidal. Or at least, she didn't think we would act that fast."

"Kasei's problem was that she wasn't listening to us." Bianca paused. "Heck, she was so loopy since the incident in October that I wonder if she was in the same reality as the rest of us. Maybe she wasn't aware of what was happening with the rest of the team, but we did tell her. The virus has been a backup plan if we lost control of Domino since we came on this team. We never made a secret of it. Comprehending and accepting what we said was their responsibility. Julissa listened to us and accepted it, but Kasei didn't. She made her choice and suffered the consequences of her refusal to accept reality. It's nobody's fault but her own if she was stupid enough to ignore us and take dramatic measures to save this project."

"We didn't talk about the virus much. It was mentioned what, three times over the past four years?" Naomi sniffed. "Did you tell them we were launching the virus? I haven't mentioned it since that incident in the lab in October."

Bianca clenched her jaw. "I did and got no reaction. Julissa shrugged and said keep it as a backup. Kasei gave me a blank stare and walked out of the lab. I didn't hide what I was doing." Bianca paused. "Julissa won't hurt us, and Kasei can't hurt us. Julissa is a straight arrow and Kasei's dead. Domino is gone, and the police don't have anything but our testimony, which will

agree if we act wisely. It's our word against Kasei's rambling texts and emails over the past few months. No intent to harm her can be drawn from anything they can find on us. Heck Naomi, we didn't intend to harm her! We did nothing wrong. We aren't mind readers. We didn't know she'd go directly to the lab and proceed with her plan after I intercepted that message that the university was shutting Domino down for good."

Naomi crossed her arms. "What about the virus? They'll want to know why Domino is destroyed."

Bianca smiled. "What virus? I had no idea there was a virus in the system. Domino must have been hacked at some point between when they sent that email about shutting down the experiment and when Kasei integrated with the program." She shrugged. "What's to say Kasei didn't integrate with Domino to deliver that virus?"

"They won't see that we downloaded it ten days ago?"

"Absolutely not, and don't mention it again unless we talk in person. Now I have to go in after we stop talking and delete all traces of this conversation."

Naomi pushed her brown hair away from her face. "Fair enough. If you're deleting this, then I want to ask one more question: Is Kasei gone?"

"She's being cremated. The memorial service is the day after tomorrow."

"You know what I mean. She connected with Domino."

"Domino is destroyed. Therefore, Kasei is gone. May she rest in pieces."

Naomi's throat constricted as she forced mucus down her throat. "There's a back door in Domino that links to the Internet. Maybe she got through it before the virus crashed Domino."

“It was a beta place holder to activate at a later stage of the experiment, which isn’t going to happen now,” Bianca said. “Stop worrying. You had the least to do with this. Nobody can blame Kasei’s death on anybody but Kasei.”

“I wrote the virus!”

“You wrote it with my help. One thing I added was that it destroyed itself along with Domino, just like we planned.” Bianca sighed. “It’s gone, Naomi. Nobody will ask questions if we don’t draw attention to ourselves. Go on with your life. We’re free to define ourselves now that Domino isn’t holding us prisoner anymore.”

“I thought you enjoyed the project.”

“I did, but it’s over now. We lost the minute the janitor found the body in the lab, and we’re lucky we escaped that unscathed. We can’t do anything but put the work on our resume, scrounge up a few professional references, and hope it gives us an advantage at a good job.” She paused. “Relax. Enjoy graduation in a few days. Go to grad school. Get a good job, marry Blake, have a few kids, and live happily ever after. Let it go. Domino is gone, Kasei can’t hurt us anymore, and Julissa will probably cave to those people with the university in Columbia that want to use parts of Domino for their development on their proposed Advanced Artificial Intelligence project. They’ve been trying to recruit her since she got her undergraduate degree two years ago.”

“Domino is gone now,” Naomi said.

Bianca waved it off. “It doesn’t matter. Julissa is the main organizer of Domino and probably has enough information to give them a jump start on their crazy idea to integrate artificial intelligence with our neural chips. Even if she doesn’t, she still wins. She’ll use her

family money and influence to get away from here and find some other endeavor to chase down. The future is a clear path of open doors for all three of us now.”

“Not the way I hoped.”

“No, but it’s done.”

Naomi paused. “What about you? What will you do?”

“I’m out of money, so grad school is out for me. I’ll find a job. It’s time for me to move on to the next stage of life.” She sighed. “I’ll see you at the memorial service.”

“I’ll see you later.” Naomi clicked off the call screen and stared at the block of text that was a semester’s worth of class notes. Somehow, she had to finish studying for her final exam tomorrow morning. She should probably do laundry too, so she’d have something clean to wear to the memorial service.

Naomi sighed, clicking open social media instead. The headlines screamed at her:

STUDENT COMMITS SUICIDE IN RESEARCH LAB.

Small wonder it was the headline. Palmetto University was a mid-size school, located an hour west of Columbia, South Carolina. The entire town of Palmetto City was comprised of the school and a few businesses. Kasei’s death was the top story not only on the campus news but the local news as well. Fortunately, there was no mention of Kasei being connected to Domino when she died. No speculation was offered at all, which was surprising given the high profile of their experiment. The articles simply said that she was a good student with a bright future, and her tragic suicide during finals week was a shock to the campus.

Maybe Bianca was right. Maybe it was over.

Naomi's message icon blinked. A small text box opened in the top corner of her screen, flowing with red words.

Do not be deceived.

Naomi blinked. What was this? A prank? Probably some sick person who knew she and Kasei were friends. Well, she wouldn't scare easily. She didn't need sick people feeding her anxiety. She was doing that fine on her own.

Deceived about what? She typed.

Your secrets didn't die with me.

"She knows," Naomi gasped.

Yes, I know. I know it all. You're all lined up, and now I'll knock you down.

Naomi's hands shook as she slowly typed. *Kasei?*

I told you Domino works.

Not funny, Bianca.

Bianca is the next domino to fall.

Naomi's face paled as she stared at the text on the screen. *Domino is destroyed. We lost. I'm logging off now.*

You can run, but you can't hide. The digital world is everywhere, Naomi. It surrounds us. It encompasses us. It IS us. I have perfected the integration. You gave up too soon. Worse yet, you betrayed me killed me. I can't let that betrayal go. I can't let you hurt anybody else.

What are you talking about? Naomi typed.

There was a knock at the door. Naomi jerked. "Who is it?"

"Detective Grace Milone and Officer Reid Garrison with the county police department. We have some questions about the suicide of Kasei Marculya. Can we come in?"

“You better get the door,” a mechanical voice with a female tone said from her laptop.

“What?” Naomi mumbled.

“Naomi Blake?” the woman’s voice outside the door called. “Can we come in? We have a few questions about Kasei’s suicide.”

“Why are they investigating a suicide?” Naomi mumbled.

“Because they know the truth,” The pixels swirled to the shadowy image of a woman. “You killed me.”

Naomi squinted. “Kasei?”

“Bianca lied. I survived.”

“How is this possible?” She tapped the screen. The pixels wiggled, but the face remained. “You’re dead!”

“You meant for me to die, but I didn’t.” Static filled the room. “You and Bianca aren’t the only players in this game, Naomi. The next play is mine.”

“Miss Blake, we hear you. Please open the door.”

“Yes, please open that door and explain everything to them. I’m sure they’ll understand why you designed and launched a virus that killed me. It was to secure your future. The problem is, it was at the expense of mine.” Static erupted from the small speakers on the computer. “Or so you intended. I’m smarter than you are. Now my future is forever, and yours is over.”

“No, we never meant –” Naomi cut off as the knocking on the door became more insistent. She heard voices in the hallway. No doubt, the noise alerted her neighbors, and

now they were putting their two cents worth in with the police. Those girls across the hall were so nosy!

“This can’t be happening. I didn’t mean for you to die!”

“But I did die, at least to that world, and it’s because of you.”

Naomi sprang from her chair, running to the window and throwing it open. She was on the fifth floor. No exit.

“The fire escape,” the voice said from her computer.

“What?” she strained her eyes. The fire escape was damaged from a tropical storm the previous fall. Building maintenance was repairing the network of outside catwalks to escape the buildings, but the closest secure landing was on the third floor.

“You were in gymnastics and cheerleading in high school,” the voice said. “Position yourself correctly, and you can jump down to that landing. You can make it. Go to Bianca, come up with a story, and both of you go to the police station in a few hours with whatever fiction she wants to sell them. I’m sure they’ll believe that neither of you meant any harm; until I send them a random link to Bianca’s dark web activity.”

“What?” Naomi asked.

“That’s not your problem. Play your innocence, and they’ll let you go. Let her take the fall. She set you up too if you believed that the virus wouldn’t kill me and destroy everybody in Domino. Should you pay for Bianca’s crimes?”

“It’s too far,” Naomi whined.

“You always were the weak one. Go ahead. Answer that door. Answer for yourself, and everybody else. Tell them Domino works, and you designed a virus that was meant to kill me and everybody in Domino.” The sound rose to full volume. “TELL THEM YOU KILLED ME!”

“Naomi Blake? What’s going on in there?” the male voice called through the door.

Naomi studied the landing two floors below her.

A laugh resonated from the computer. “What’s it going to be, Naomi? Face the truth, or escape with more lies to have your dream life?”

“I can’t take the blame for this! Bianca made me do it. She should go to jail.”

“You’ll go to jail if they break down that door and see you in here, and that conversation you just had with Bianca. She hasn’t deleted it yet. Do you want to go down with her?”

Naomi took a deep breath and jumped. The door to her apartment burst open to her scream as her body hurled past the landing. Grace and Reid rushed to the window just in time to see Naomi crash to the ground in an explosion of blood and bone. Reid walked to the computer, his eyes wide with shock as the screen glowed against his dark face.

“Grace, you need to see this.”

Grace walked next to Reid, the light glowing against her ebony skin and dark, curly hair tied behind her head. A single line of text glowed at the center of the computer screen.

One by one, the Dominos fall.

“What is that?” Grace asked. “Is it a suicide note?”

Reid shook his head. “No. I think it’s something else.”

Chapter 3

Detective Reid Garrison stood in the doorway of Grace Milone's office in the City Hall complex the next afternoon. "Grace, go home."

Grace continued to stare at her computer and type, her face illuminated by the blue glow of her screen. "Um-hmm."

She jumped when Reid's hand slammed the screen over the keyboard attachment. "Why did you do that?"

"I did it because it's five o'clock."

Grace looked up at Reid. The hint of a smile was always lurking on his thin face with dark skin, dark eyes, and close-cropped hair. He seemed bigger than his mid-size stature because of his outgoing personality and dogged determination to get criminals off the streets. Or rather, off the network. He was their best cyber specialist.

Such as that was in Palmetto City. Urban sprawl had expanded the major cities in the past century, but there were satellite communities in what was still considered to be a rural state. It was amazing any place in the continental United States was considered "rural." Grace was sure the spread of technology would have them looking like a typical sci-fi community by the start of the twenty-third century. The date glowing in the bottom corner of her computer screen proclaimed it was May 2, 2175, at 5:01 p.m. She sighed. At least it was P.M. She had been on duty since they went to Naomi's apartment with a few routine questions to close out the Kasei Marculya case, and found her crushed body outside of her apartment window at 9:02 p.m. on May 1. No wonder Grace was tired, hungry, and disconnected from reality. Did she have lunch today? She couldn't remember.

“I never got in touch with the other two girls on the research team. Don’t you wonder why?”

Reid shrugged. “They’re in final exams. They probably had their phones and computer apps muted, and were busy studying for the next round of exams tomorrow.”

Grace opened her computer. “The memorial service for the two deceased is tomorrow.”

“It’s late in the afternoon. The university won’t cancel or reschedule finals, especially with graduation coming up this weekend.”

Grace opened the computer. “I guess you’re right. It’s probably best for me to have a grip on all of this information before I talk to them anyway.”

“That’s true,” Reid said. “Did you look at the data I sent you? I haven’t had a chance to review it yet with all the data they have me reviewing for Domino.”

Grace rubbed her slender face. “I did, and the whole thing is off. Even the composition of the research team is strange. Take a look at this,” she launched her projector app, beaming four screens over her desk. The one on the far left showed a picture of a striking blonde with glowing skin and blue eyes. “There were four members on the research team: Kasei Marculya was the team leader with a major in psychology and a minor in systems analysis. She was scheduled to get her master’s degree this weekend.” She swiped the screen to a picture of a plain girl with brown hair and blue eyes, staring solemnly into the screen. “Naomi Blake was a computer programming major, with a minor in biology. She was scheduled to graduate with a Bachelor of Science and had a full ride to graduate school to continue her studies on this project.”

Reid nodded. “Our two deceased.”

“Both will be announced posthumous at the graduation ceremony, with the degrees presented to the families at the memorial ceremony tomorrow.” Grace swiped her screen again to the image of a pale redhead with freckles and piercing green eyes. “Bianca Collier is a system design major with a minor in psychology. She’s another undergraduate scheduled to graduate this weekend. Her role is to write and monitor the code for the actual computer system and functioning. Her work on the system is brilliant, but her grades are average. She’s graduating, but her GPA is 2.5. She lost her scholarships, and it looks like she’s been working her way through school off this project and various odd jobs online.”

Reid nodded. “Obviously, a person who does better with the practical application of information than in a classroom setting.”

Grace mimicked the nod and flipped her wrist to show the final slide of a short woman with ivory skin, and dark brown hair and eyes. “Julissa Marler is the co-leader on the team with Kasei. She’s a psychology major with a minor in computer programming. Julissa’s getting her Master of Science degree this weekend. She’s working on a doctoral thesis on integrating the Domino program on the Internet, but that’s in the air since the project was suspended due to a lab incident in October. The program was taken down by a virus when Kasei tried to integrate with it, which will also put a damper on that thesis.” Grace pointed at Julissa’s screen. “She’s the real brain behind everything. Kasei might have formed the team, but Julissa is the one who knew how to handle the data and keep things organized. The University in Columbia has been trying to recruit her for two years to work on the Advanced Artificial Intelligence program that they plan to launch during the fall semester.”

“All four of them were studying a mixture of science and computer programming.”

Grace nodded. “That’s what this research project was about. The grant proposal Palmetto University wrote for funding was for a program they called ‘Domino’ that would store information from the neural chips online. The purpose was to use the neurological mapping and data from neural chips to build an online persona that could eventually be downloaded to the Internet at a later stage of the project.”

“They seem obsessed with dominos,” Reid said. “I’ve found lots of references to the actual game in the programming, notes, and digital data I’m reviewing. It looks like Kasei and Julissa were on a team that won championships when they were in middle school and high school.”

“People get attached to weird things,” Grace said. “Kasei’s grandfather, Theron Marcuyla, was one of the primary developers of the neural chips. Her father, Keevan Marcuyla, was on the team that made the chips capable of operating with Wi-Fi technology. It looks like this team was building on their work to bring it all together by merging man with the Internet by using those neural chips.”

Reid sat in the chair across from Grace’s desk. “That could be scary. Do they want to use the data from our neural chips to build another version of ourselves online, or is the intent to actually download consciousness to the Internet?”

“I believe it’s the latter. They mention using the Wi-Fi signal in neural chips to ‘tag’ neural activity with a quantum code.” She pulled up the text from the grant proposal. “The official study was to see if it’s possible to integrate our thought patterns online. They always maintained that the information was a copy and not the actual person they were putting online, but that distinction is arguable. They also propose that, if successful, this could expedite online functioning for the living.”

“You mean it would make our online accounts ‘smart,’ so they can anticipate our behavior and act in the absence of our input?”

Grace shrugged. “Unclear. I think their primary purpose was to take advantage of quantum computing to store our neurological maps and data online.”

“Is Domino like the other ‘Elysium Fields’ projects that propose to store memories online, so people can theoretically live forever on the Internet?”

“Maybe.” Grace rubbed her eyes. “I find these hints at a human presence on the Internet, outside of a contained system, disturbing.”

Reid leaned forward. “You think that message on Naomi’s computer had something to do with this study?”

“I know it does,” Grace stood and turned to look out the window behind her desk at the woods beyond the City Hall complex where their office was situated. Her curvy frame blocked the late afternoon sunlight, casting a shadow across the room. “Maybe the data they’re working with now is a copy, but I don’t think they mean to keep it static. I think they intend for this data to become sentient, and I think they succeeded. At least, to a degree.”

Reid waved the images back to Grace’s computer, collapsing them. “Now you’re reaching. None of the other studies have succeeded. How could four students at a mid-sized school in central South Carolina succeed, while doctors at the best hospitals and institutions in the world have failed?”

“I don’t know, but it looks like they were making progress with this project, at least until something happened in that lab in late October.”

“What happened?”

Grace turned to look at Reid. “The files are sealed by Palmetto University.”

“We can get them to unseal them, now that there have been two more incidents on campus connected to this project. Wasn’t the university fixing to cut off the study because of it?”

“They did. The lab was scheduled to close and the government was scheduled to pick up Domino and all of the data and equipment connected with it the day after Kasei died.”

Reid raised an eyebrow. “The government, and not us? Why are they involved?”

Grace shrugged. “It’s one of many things about Domino and this group of women that’s strange. What amazes me the most is that they started this study with next to nothing compared to the justifications that federal grants usually require for something of this magnitude, and they had very little oversight. This study started six years ago when Kasei and Julissa were freshmen. Most of the functioning of it was turned completely over to them two years later when they brought in Naomi and Bianca to design Domino and start the actual experiments. They reported to the University and grant officials regularly, but it was general information. The correspondence amongst the team, the University, and the federal grant officials was minimal compared to other experiments in progress.”

“Why would Palmetto University put freshmen on their biggest research project, and then reduce their oversight when things started to happen with it?”

Grace leaned back. “You bring up a good question. I thought you had to be a junior to get your foot in the door on one of these studies, and that’s if you’re at the top of your class. The research teams usually have at least one professor overseeing the team, but there are no professors on the payroll for this grant. Plus, this crossed over two

unrelated programs. You would think that the social science and computer science schools would want a faculty member on a study of this magnitude. It's almost like these four girls were turned loose to do whatever they wanted with it."

"Maybe they weren't sure how to bridge the two schools together, so they didn't bother, since the students on the team took care of that with the majors and minors they declared. Palmetto University isn't huge like the top universities in the state and conference. They can fly under the radar of formality that larger schools can't. I'm just surprised they got the grant to do this research."

Grace pointed at Reid. "That's another good question. Why would the federal government award a grant for a project of this magnitude to Palmetto University? Why not the University in Columbia, or one of the other major universities in the conference?"

"Have you looked into the background and connections to all four of these women?"

"That's what I was fixing to do before you so graciously interrupted me."

Reid stood. "Do it tomorrow. We're both exhausted. We've been on this nonstop for nearly twenty hours, and we've hit a wall. Go home, eat a good meal, and get a good night's sleep. We're more likely to unravel this puzzle if we take care of ourselves and stay alert."

"Do you agree with me?"

Reid laughed. "I'm too exhausted to disagree with you. You've made some good points. Keep them in mind, and we'll pick up this conversation first thing tomorrow morning."

Grace smiled. "You'll make a great detective."

Reid laughed. "I have the best teacher and the best partner."

Grace stood. "Thank you, Reid. You're right. Let's go home and tackle this again in the morning."

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” he said.

Grace snapped her computer closed and slipped it into her tote bag as she walked out of the office. He was right, of course. This case would still be there tomorrow.

Perhaps the memorial service would shed some light on this doomed project, and how it became doomed when it seemed to be working so well.

Chapter 4

Julissa Marler and Bianca Collier sat in the front pew of the Palmetto University's small chapel, staring at the two urns in front of the altar that held the ashes of Kasei Marculya and Naomi Blake. Pictures of Kasei's bright smile contracted with Naomi's shy stare gazing just beyond the camera.

"Do you want to go to the reception?" Julissa asked. "It isn't every day you get invited to the President's House."

Bianca shook her head. "I'm not hungry, and I don't care about the President's House. She doesn't even live there. She uses it for entertainment, and she only hosted the reception for publicity." She looked down. "That's the last thing we need."

"I agree. I'm in no mood to be on display."

Bianca snorted. "I can't believe you don't want publicity for Domino."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's all you and Kasei cared about."

"That's not true," Julissa paused, pulling a tissue from her small tote bag and dabbing at her eyes and runny nose. "Kasei was like a sister to me. All of you were. You weren't just my teammates; you were my family. We're in this together."

"We were in this together," Bianca said bitterly.

Julissa turned toward Bianca. "Do you care that Kasei and Naomi are dead, or are you just interested in getting your degree and escaping this place?"

"Of course, I care about Kasei and Naomi. You're right, we were like family, and it's hard to believe they're gone. I still expect to find texts from them every morning, or to see them

in class or around campus.” Bianca turned to face Julissa. “Unfortunately, they were family who turned on us.”

“Did they turn on us, or did we turn on them?” Julissa turned her short, curvy body to face the front of the chapel again. “Are they online?”

“Kasei is. The virus purged a lot of her code, but she got out of the system with most of her neurological map intact.” Bianca shook her head. “I still don’t understand how she got out of that back door to the Internet. It wasn’t active.”

Julissa’s face twitched. “Did she leave that message on Naomi’s computer?”

“Probably.”

Julissa sighed. “What did you and Naomi do?”

Bianca stared at Julissa with wide, green eyes. “Nothing!”

“My cousin died trying to integrate with Domino, our friend jumped out of a window, and you say you did nothing? Try again, Bianca. What did you do with that virus? It wasn’t supposed to kill people or drive them to suicide. It was supposed to freeze the program. Or that’s what you told me it would do. It was more potent than that if Kasei’s dead and Naomi jumped out of a window to escape questions from the police.”

Bianca waved her hand at the urns. “The virus didn’t kill anybody. If Kasei is on the Internet, then this is an illusion.”

“That is no illusion. They’re gone, and they’ll never come back. Now I have questions, starting with what happened with that virus?”

Bianca blew out a breath. “I delivered the virus to fragment Domino a week after our last test subject left. It was supposed to happen slowly over time, but it had an accelerant code in it to wipe instantly if somebody tried to integrate into the system.

Palmetto University wasn't going to allow us to resume human trials. They gave us that lovely story about 'pausing to review safety protocols and consult with our federal partners,' but the truth is that they were planning to shut us down."

Julissa stared at Bianca. "How did you know this?"

Bianca shrugged. "You know me, I'm nosy. I hacked into the mainframe and intercepted every incoming and outgoing message with Domino mentioned."

"Why destroy it?"

"Domino was our project, our work, our future. We did all the work. We were responsible for all of those people and their data, which is private and protected information. We can't let somebody who doesn't know what it's about take it away from us!"

"The federal government is a partner on this project. They aren't strangers to it. They provide our funding."

Bianca looked down. "That's all they do. We're the ones who do the actual work. Strangers can't just walk in and take it from us. The people in Domino deserve better than that. They need us."

Julissa released a harsh laugh. "That didn't work out well for them, did it? The virus destroyed them too! We knew from the start that we were laying the foundation for the government to take it over," Julissa said. "That's why they left us and our families alone to run it. We bribed them to let us research and set it up, plain and simple. Kasei's family connections got us exclusive access until the project was off the ground, but it belonged to the federal government once it was ready for public use."

Bianca crossed her arms. "If that incident that we don't speak of didn't happen, we'd be right on track, but it didn't happen that way. Now they've reneged on the whole thing, and say

they'll shut it down. I don't believe it. This is just an excuse to grab it from us, which will happen over my dead body. I didn't do all of this work to get kicked out and silenced."

Julissa ran her hand through her hair. "Why was everybody certain that we were being cut out of the project? My Doctoral thesis was already accepted. There were no signs that the University or the government was preparing to renege on our agreement. Do you believe everybody was going to scrap a study of this magnitude? It was a ruse for the media and hackers trying to get into the system. They wanted the world to believe it was going away, but you know it wasn't."

"It had problems."

"We were working on them." Julissa paused. "I was, anyway. The rest of you were panicking, and that's what knocked down the dominos. It wouldn't have come to this if everybody had been patient."

"Everybody lost interest in Domino once the University in Columbia announced their grant to develop Advanced Artificial Intelligence," Bianca said. "Did you fail to notice that we now have competition? Or have you not heard them knocking on your door for two years trying to take you away? That's strong competition." She threw up her hands. "It might be why the government made this grab for Domino: to merge the projects into their bigger vision. They don't need us anymore. We've done the hard work, and they're going to take it to do something completely different."

"I agree that it's disturbing, but it's too soon to see if the Advanced Artificial Intelligence will be any more successful than what we're doing. We've been working on Domino for six years. It will be decades before we see where that study leads." Julissa

rubbed her eyes. “Kasei’s paranoia has spread to this whole team, and now two people are dead because of it.”

“Naomi is dead because she jumped out of a fifth-floor window.”

“Kasei and Naomi are dead because they made assumptions that weren’t based on facts. Things could have been fine. Things might have been better if we had been patient and waited to see how it played out, but you and Kasei had to fight over control and we all lost.” Julissa shrugged. “Maybe we could have worked out a cooperative partnership with that AAI study in Columbia. Who knows? We could have been on two groundbreaking studies that would rewrite human evolution.”

“Julissa, you’re too much of an idealist. We didn’t make any assumptions,” Bianca said bitterly. “I saw those messages going between the government officials and the University. They wanted us out after what happened last fall. Their first step was to clean house. Did you know they were planning to lock the lab and confiscate all of our equipment the morning after Kasei died? The only reason it’s still there is because a janitor found Kasei’s body before they arrived, and he called the police department instead of campus security.” Bianca sighed. Destroying Domino saved us, plain and simple. Let them do their work. You’re right, in this case, it’s all or nothing. I’m not handing over four years of my life and work for somebody else to take the credit for whatever becomes of this. And you know something would have. Domino worked, and this was going to be big. It was going to change human history. How can you be ok with handing over the key to human evolution to people who don’t deserve it?”

“I might be an idealist, but you’re too dramatic,” Julissa said. “There were problems, Bianca. You admitted it a minute ago. What came out wasn’t what went in. It could be fixed, but we needed more resources, and the truth is that it was going to get out of our hands and into the

world eventually. We couldn't keep this confined to ourselves forever. That's not handing it over, that's expansion. Evolution can't happen without it."

"It's not going to happen at all now, thanks to Kasei and Naomi."

Julissa slumped in the pew. "I saw you talking to the police before the service. What did you tell them about the virus?"

Bianca shrugged. "I have no idea how it got there. The best theory is that Kasei took it in the system with her because she didn't want anybody to follow her into Domino."

"That's crazy."

"That's what they believe. It wasn't hard to convince them."

"They'll figure it out," Julissa said.

"I wouldn't give them that much credit."

Julissa sighed. "Did you tell them we got the same message that Naomi got?"

"No," Bianca turned to Julissa again. "What do you plan to tell them? You know they'll question you eventually."

"I don't know anything to tell them."

"You don't want them online looking for Kasei."

Julissa clenched her jaw. "No, I don't. It's not like she can hurt anybody online anyway."

Bianca leaned back, staring at the urns. "Can she? Naomi is dead."

Julissa nodded toward the urns. "Should I be paranoid? Is this the end, or is there more I'm not aware of?"

“Leave it alone, Julissa, and get out of here. Go to Columbia, start over on that new AAI project, and mourn your cousin back home with your new family.” Bianca looked down. “I didn’t think it would end this way.”

“Nobody did, but this is what we’ve got.” Julissa sighed. “It’s gone? The virus wiped Domino, and there are no backups?”

Bianca looked down, pulling a tissue from her purse and blowing her nose. “It’s gone.”

“What a waste. The program. All of the data. All of those people. All of those lives, just gone. There’s no chance any of them made their way to the Internet, besides Kasei?”

“No. The copies of their neural maps weren’t stable enough for the next phase of the project.”

“Then it’s over.” Julissa stood up. “I’m sorry for our losses. There are no second chances after all. It’s a shame.”

“It is,” Bianca swiped a tear from her eyes, “but I suppose we weren’t meant to live forever.”