

Chapter One



She looked intently at her notes, this place was really out of the way. The roads were dirt tracks—large dirt tracks, true. But still they lacked a certain amount of something: signs of habitation, of infrastructure. So, she had to say to herself again, *Why am I coming out here. Why did I accept this invitation?*

Apparently, as she recalled, some people had tried and failed not that long ago to build an automated warehouse just a little way up the so-called road, right in the middle of where they were absolutely certain that a new government-backed transport hub would be built. But the funding for the infrastructure had fallen through, other concerns took precedent, and the hub never materialised.

Those looking to build the automated facility eventually went bust. However, they did leave a large, half-finished building in the middle of nowhere. It had virtually no clients to serve, even if it had been completed. There was no way to effectively link it to anywhere else. ‘Half-finished’ wasn’t quite accurate, in fact. According to her preliminary research, the shell of the building had been completed, as well as a good portion of the internal transit and sorting system. The facility had been constructed but not, crucially, assembled.

Another entrepreneur with a ‘vision’ had thought to convert the structure into a really secure prison, with no human guards to trick or take a bribe. The project would turn a profit by making everything automatic, using the same technology as the automated warehouse. And so, the buildings’ modified it’s assembly continued, using the already constructed parts. But this enterprise only got so far before it too went bust, due to rumoured legal and technical issues.

She sighed. Two sets of investors had sunk their money into this place to build it up, and now a third set of investors had thought to turn the warehouse into a hotel instead. She looked through the wind-shield of the car into the rain,

“Yeah, this is going to end well.” She sighed again, opened the door to the car, shoved her notes back in her pocket, and cautiously opened her umbrella. Shielded now against the rain, she stepped out of the car and snagged her bag. The driver helped her by telling her to hurry the hell up and popping open the trunk so that she could get her own suitcase. How chivalrous. What a gentleman!

With no help from the driver, she dragged the case to the steps, at the front of what would at some point, with a lot of work and the removal of the scaffolding, be a passable frontage for the hotel. Like much else, it was a work in progress. The driver shouted at her something about tipping next time and drove off. She sloshed through the mud and stepped into the frontage of the still-under-construction establishment. A robot camera focused in on her and a mechanical voice straight from the middle of the Uncanny Valley addressed her.

*“Welcome to the Autonima Hotelier.”*

Despite herself, she waved up at the camera for a moment, letting her case rest in the mud for a second. She looked about; there were certainly signs that showed the layers of the project. The building initially had been a solid basic rectangular warehouse. A big box holding whatever needed to be ready for shipment somewhere else. She noted where the structure had been beefed up at certain places back at the attempted conversion to a prison for convicted criminals. Out in the rain, slowly rusting away, were a few of the modular pods that would have made up the cells.

Now the current owners were trying to convert it yet again into something different. Something for paying guests. The same functions that would allow the abandoned automated prison to monitor the prisoners would be able to monitor the paying guests. Supposedly they would be able to attend to their every need, rather than, say, preventing escape. She looked over at one of the prison cells, and could see how it would be hung under suspension, How on the outside it was constructed of several sections, latched together by a sturdy mechanism. It gave her some insight as to how the entire hotel would stack up inside.

*“Please step in front of the sensor,”* the same slightly unnerving voice asked.

With a grating *whirr*, a large red camera lens extended out from the top of the door frame. It was perhaps there for theatrical purposes, or maybe it had been designed to be out of the reach of the prisoners. Either way, it projected a field of bright light that she was being asked to step into. She was hesitant. But this was her job, to review such projects and either give them hope and some attention—if they actually had the glimmer of a good idea—or, if they were terrible, to try and hammer the final nail in the coffin and allow the enterprise to be put to rest. She told herself that if this place had bars on the windows she was turning around and booking herself out the next minute. She looked up at the windows, and thought they didn’t look real, though at the moment her view of the building site was perhaps not the best view in the world.

*"Please present your invitation."*

More requests from the automated systems assaulted her, and she sighed and dug into her jacket. She had been sent something in the post—a 3x4-inch plastic pass that was meant to look futuristic, and she dug it out of her pocket. The plastic rectangle had a foil coating that was made to look like a circuit board with a Perspex chip in the centre, and contained a rather poor holographic image in the centre. She held it up, but nothing happened. Her shoulders slumped a little and she waved the pass backwards and forwards. She waited for something to click, figuring the pass was meant to act like a barcode.

The lens pointing down above her focused in and out, then side to side, and finally up and down. She sighed, smacked herself on the head, and turned the pass over to examine it more closely. She felt an acute embarrassment—she had been waving the back of the pass at the sensor! This time it beeped and focused in on her hand. At least there was no one else there to observe her error.

The building contained a proprietary electronic key system left over from the prison building phase. Although its original purpose was security, it was apparently still being used, but with a few tweaks that she guessed were symbols for exclusivity and novelty.

*"Running security check...running security check."*

She guessed that what was going on was some sort of left-over code from the prison project. At least now something was happening. She almost jumped as two of what must have been metal detectors rose out of the floor next to her and started to slowly beep. Several red lights illuminated her, and electronic eyes swept her up and down. She figured this had to be more for show than any practical purpose, and paused, thinking to herself how it would be best if someone didn't take any drugs or weapons into a hotel. However, this approach would send a lot of guests running, unless they toned it down a degree.

Slowly, one by one all the sensors turned green, although she still had no idea what they were looking for. Nuclear waste? Unauthorised booze? Spare parts, or contraband food? After three different companies building and remodelling the same complex system, she wasn't sure if the current owners really knew what it was doing or could potentially do.

*"Initializing unlock cycle."*

There was a juddering rumble, then the sound of a bolt clicking open. A pause, followed by two more clicks, than a *creak* emanating from the massive doors. This place was designed to be solid as a warehouse, she concluded, but they needed to synchronize the bloody doors. She could imagine the competing systems, as one minute it was a prison and then it was a hotel. The system did seem to almost be fighting itself just to get the front door open. She wondered if this venture would collapse like the last two, and whether she would actually be allowed inside to actually have a look around.

Finally, it sounded as if someone was pumping up a piston until there was enough pressure, and then the two heavy doors opened up on hydraulic arms. They moved slowly at first, as if there were a counterweight, then seemingly almost went out of control and overreached, hitting the side of the entrance with a dull heavy *thump*. It actually looked a little dangerous. If she was standing a little closer she would have been knocked over...or worse. It had her worried about how ready this place was for guests. She could almost feel as if they had printed 'guinea pig' on her invitation.

*"Dear Guest, Press Pass Accepted. Ms Maria Johnson, please step inside."*

A loudspeaker inside called to her, and she looked into the hotel past the doors. It was a large space, the floor furnished with carpets and wooden tiles in a series of repeating wavy patterns. She could make out a high ceiling with a few bits of art on the walls and some chandelier lights. The impression was that of an old hotel, only like a cheap knock-off that needed some work. Perhaps it would look better when it was finished—or if she was standing a bit closer and could see some details. First impressions counted for a lot, though, and she was not really terribly impressed. Despite or because of everything she had already experienced, a key-card or an app and a bit of regular technology would have done the same thing in five seconds. Perhaps this was the point, though, to provide a bit of a spectacle, to create an atmosphere. She grimaced—the system had kept her standing in the rain for quite a long time, and she needed to warm up and have something to eat. As she stepped under the archway, the camera lenses followed her.

Maria shook the rain off her umbrella and tapped it against the floor. There was a hollow echo, as if the

place lacked a certain indefatigable substance.

*“Welcome to the reception area, Ms Johnson. Please follow the lights to the book-in booth.”*

You only had one chance to make a first impression, she thought. Admittedly the crappy road, the late hour, and the driving rain hadn't helped. The fact that the outside of the building was still a bit of a construction site also hadn't helped. Some backlights and spotlights flipped on, displaying the high ceiling, the impressive-looking desks, and the statues and other artwork. She wondered if the more tasteful decoration had once belonged to an older hotel and had been acquired through an architectural salvage company. It all certainly had an air of legitimacy about it. Looking about the entrance, some features looked quite genuine, even if they needed a little restoration. They gave the place some weight, and provided her with some hope that this place might manage to pass muster.

A series of little floor lights activated at that point, leading her to a check-in counter, one of about a dozen that were arranged around the entrance hall. She noted what must be lifts, as well as what might be a fire exit. There were a few other points that needed maintenance, and also what she guessed was a cloakroom. The journalist slowly drifted off the illuminated path to look at a statue. Upon closer investigation it looked like it had been dragged in from a garden. As she diverted from the path, the lights sunk into the floor established a new path. Maria eventually lost interest in the decoration and wandered over to the highlighted desk.

*“Maria, please say your full name into the microphone. All further requests will be tied to your voice print, which will act as your security key.”*

She had to wonder if they had managed to get this one desk working? Was it a prototype, or was each desk the same? Maria moved over to the desk to the right, and a little banner lowered over the desk, announcing ‘Out of Service’. She shrugged, and moved over to the desk that had been indicated. A series of lights switched on as soon as she got near. A little microphone popped out of the desk and pointed in her general direction.

She cleared her throat with a little cough. “Maria Kelly Johnson,” she enunciated.

The machine hummed for a second, sounding as if the machine was processing something. Then the microphone rattled and disappeared back into the desk. The lights dimmed, then blinked a little. A speaker behind her activated with a little bit more volume than necessary for an ‘inside voice.’

*“Thank you for your compliance.”*

*At least the machine is polite,* she thought. It made some sort of positive impression on her. But looking around, she thought that maybe some sort of greeter would be more preferred. At least some screen, or an automaton, something to put a welcoming face on the place. At the moment, it was spooky and eerie, more in tune with a Halloween haunted house attraction. Also, the check-in process was taking a long time. She mused to herself, *Maybe they could create an app that would take these readings beforehand.* Something to allow them to speed up the book-in process?

For a second, something caught her attention: a rumble as something above the top of the reception counter *creaked* and shifted, then moved. It was almost like a subway train, but rather than running under the room it was running above her. She felt herself breathe in, calming herself down. The hotel was not about to collapse in on her, but was simply reconfiguring itself for her. Either some soundproofing needed to be upgraded or some gears needed to be greased, she reasoned, because that amount of noise would not allow anyone to get a good night's sleep.

*“Maria, please place your hands on the plate for fingerprint coding. This will act as a secondary validation method.”*

She didn't expect that! But then she figured it would soon get tiring to have to verbally command the hotel to do everything. She guessed that every menu would act like a fingerprint scanner. Two highlighted circles appeared on the desk. She got closer, but strangely they were far enough forwards that she would have to bend right over the desk to place her hands in the correct position. There were two slots in the desk suspiciously in the right place for her wrists. She also noted two spots exactly where her ankles would be. She had to wonder if her limbs would be seized, and that this was something left over from the automated prison.

Maria reached out tentatively, moving her feet to the side. Then, at the last minute, she pulled her hands back. The automatic cuffs clicked shut on empty air, and as Maria took a step back her ankles were also free. She was about ready to run, but when she looked back the doors were very firmly shut. They had closed without

any noise behind her, which was a little spooky considering the noise that the mechanism had made when the doors were opened.

She looked furiously at the system. The wrist and ankle cuffs slid back into the desk as if they had never been there. She marched over and tried to open the doors. She couldn't go back, though. She had to be fully registered before she could leave the room. Maria moved closer and tapped the circle with her umbrella. The cuffs shot out again and this time they extended a bit further. To avoid them she had to drop her umbrella and jump back. She quickly moved around from the side of the desk, tapped her fingertip to the plate, and retreated before it could make any more attempts to grab her.

*"Thank you for your compliance."*

She looked around the room for a way out, but there was nothing! No mechanism to activate, no interface, not even a fire alarm to trigger to get the door open. She had no option but to go through the entire induction procedure before attempting to exit the establishment. There was definitely something aggressive going on—some programming error, she wondered? The hotel seemed to want to seize her. It seemed to be acting as if it was still running part of the prison protocols. She shivered at the thought of being given a strip search and an orange jump suit. Surely, they would want to remove that from the hotel, unless they were marketing the place exclusively to guests who liked that sort of thing!

One of her ex-lovers had tried to introduce her to that sort of life. They had gotten a bit too heavy a bit too quickly, and it scared her off. That was one of the reasons that they were *EX*-lovers. And what she didn't want to do with someone she mostly trusted...well...she definitely didn't want to allow a collection of gears and poorly optimised programming the chance either.

*"Maria, please sign the guest register and legal disclaimer."*

What looked like a data pad in a housing that appeared similar to an old fashioned book was held out in front of her on an arm. There was a pen on a cord that would just realistically be a stylus, about the same level as the cuffs. She looked at it suspiciously and tentatively reached forwards. When she had a good grip on the pen she slowly reached forward, ready to dodge the cuffs again. What she wasn't expecting was the cord attached to the pen suddenly retracting and pulling her in close! She had to brace herself with her umbrella to avoid the cuffs locking onto her limbs—they were persistent! With an irritated scowl she let the pen bounce on the desk and carefully made a very half-arsed job of signing the register using the tip of her umbrella. That way, she was not so close that the mechanism could attempt to entrap her.

*"Thank you for your compliance."*

Whoever had built the machines was quite a sneaky git. Clearly, they were constantly trying to get her. Maria could see no avenue of retreat opening up yet. She lectured the machine, even though it was probably paying no attention to her.

"That is going to get very old very fast," she complained. "Hopefully in future updates you could modify how the hotel responds to people with their own personalised greetings." She pulled out her phone and found that there was absolutely no signal. Perhaps it was something due to the remote location, or perhaps something blocking the signal, put in as a security measure when they were designing the prison. A quick check indicated that there was no network to connect it to, so she was effectively cut off from the outside world. She wasn't booked in yet, so she had no way to book out! She would have to go through the entire registration process. And if she did that she might consider staying long enough to properly review the place. A voice at the back of her mind told her to get out at the first available opportunity.

*"Maria, please place your ID onto the slot for safe keeping. Please place your phone into the slot as per the terms of the disclosure agreement, and thank you for your compliance. Maria, you have been assigned room 341."*

She didn't like giving over her ID, but hotels would take a credit card or ID. To stop people dashing before paying, she mused, that would be quite hard with this place. Still, she had agreed to hand over everything at the front gate as part of the deal on this review. She held up her ID badge and it was sucked into the console, her credit card followed. It was getting harder to make an exit, making her increasingly nervous. Giving up her phone was also an unpleasant thought. In theory, she figured it was so that she would not be able to download any priority info, or steal any technical data, etc. She switched it off and held it over the slot, and it was promptly removed and transferred into safekeeping inside the machine.

Perhaps all this was to prevent espionage, an extra step for her tour of the facility. Or perhaps, Maria guessed, to prevent her gathering evidence if she were going to give the place a negative review. She realised that she should have taken some pictures of the lobby before handing her phone over. But then she had agreed not to, and the system would have probably have detected her taking pictures and done something that she wouldn't like. It was making her nervous just to think what this place might do. If she even looked like she was violating the agreement that she had signed, would she be allowed in to review the place to begin with?

*"Thank you for your compliance."*

She nervously held the electronic pass that the hotel company had given to her. The promotional material noted that it would function as a charge card, allowing her to purchase items from the various hotel spaces such as the gym, cocktails from the bar, etc. It would be linked to a credit or debit card held by the system for the duration of a guest's stay. So, if things worked, she simply had to wait and she would get her card back. Of course, for Maria everything was complimentary during the time of her stay. The menu had been designed by a top Michelin star chef, and she hoped that the auto chef that she had read about was as good as advertised. However, she would be alert to the possibility that the dishes would emerge tasting like the food on an airline that had been freshly microwaved. There was meant to be a large desert menu, though, and pre-packaged deserts would be hard for the mechanism to fuck up. At least, she hoped that would be the case.

*"Maria, please place your umbrella jacket and luggage on the auto bell-hop."*

She really didn't want to lose her umbrella, considering how useful it had been so far, but there was an obvious hatch to place it in. While she was still pondering what to do, a robotic clamp seized the end of her umbrella and plucked it away. Maria huffed, then held out her luggage, and a mechanical claw popped out and snagged the handle. It pulled her case into the slot to drag it away, ostensibly to be delivered to her room by some internal system. She was, she presumed, perhaps seeing the old warehousing system at its finest. She checked her jacket, removing anything that she might still need, then held it out for a similar treatment. The system surprised her, though, giving her some hope. Her jacket was brushed down. A coat hanger was used to hang her coat, and then it was placed in a garment bag. Only then was the bag sucked into the slot. At least they seemed to be taking some care of her possessions.

*"Thank you for your compliance."*