

The flowers were carnations, the cloned sort that don't have any scent, with petals like bloodless flesh. I hurried to the nearest cab point with them tucked under my arm inside a flare of cellophane. I didn't know what else to do. It wasn't a mission borne of the desire to mourn the mother I hadn't heard from in years, it was more the necessity to see her memorial for myself, to accept that it was finally too late for me to find out *why*.

The driver took me out through Cheapside, past my old apartment. The takeaway underneath was boarded up. Somebody had stapled a Unit 'illegal meat' order to the door. A graffiti artist had sketched a rat over the top.

Why now?

Why, after all these years, when the sleepless nights and the bad dreams had at last been replaced by a life, a job, a *purpose*, why should a name on a card shake me up all over again?

We pulled away from Cheapside in a slick of rainwater, and within minutes, we'd arrived at the gates to River City Crematorium.

'You wanna be careful,' said the cabbie as I pushed my bleep code at him. 'Notice says it's only open another twenty minutes. You don't wanna be locked in that place all night. No sayin' what walks round in there after dark. Shall I wait?'

'Thank you, I'd appreciate that,' I said, sliding the door closed behind me.

In the half-light, with its big gates, Kevlar locks, and Old World perimeter wall, the place looked more abandoned prison than memorial facility.

I had to see Connie first. It seemed only right, somehow - she was the one who'd brought me up, after all. I turned west, and kept walking.

The damp air transformed the glow lamps into balls of white floss. Foggy mizzle oozed along the paths, turning the edges of the monuments into nebulous smears. Rows of plot markers gaped through the fake-grass like little open mouths. When I reached Connie's, it was dulled by a layer of grime. Was it really so long since I'd last been? I took out a cloth and wiped it clean.

*Look after yourself, Jess. Keep yourself to yourself and never stay in one place too long.
Promise me?*

It was only now, years later, that I found myself wondering what the hell she'd meant.

I split the wrapping and laid half the flowers down, then changed my mind and pulled the rest from the cellophane. It didn't seem right to split them equally between Aunt Connie and my mother. My mother didn't deserve them. They spilled over onto the neighbouring plots in a tangle of stems. I said a prayer, then set off for the opposite side of the cemetery.

An android janitor was on duty on the main walkway. It wore a white suit with the word 'maintenance' printed on the back, and walked down the edge of the fake-grass flicking gravel back onto the path with a paddle. It turned and looked at me with its big, blank sensor eyes. Unnerved, I turned down the next path on the right. When I looked back, the carnations on Connie's grave stood out like the bleached bones of a small animal. The janitor had disappeared. A claxon rang from

the chapel.

'Eight minutes until lock-down,' said the clock.

The markers at the end of the row were obfuscated by years of muck. I knelt down and started to rub them clean. If my mother was here, then she'd died while Aunt Connie was still alive. Why hadn't Connie told me?

I'd cleaned half a dozen before I realised there *was* no Abigail Tempest Green. I checked the plot number again. The number on the card, that should've been the end of the row, simply *didn't exist*. Confused, I stared up and down the endless rows, which vanished into the mizzle in both directions. If the memorial card had the wrong plot number, I'd never find my mother. She could be anywhere.

Or she might not be anywhere at all.

I felt sick. The one thing I'd been certain of when I'd set out for the cemetery, was that I'd get the chance to lay something to rest today. Now, I couldn't even do that.

A private hop hung overhead, its lights glowing in the twilight like the eyes of a huge hunting insect. They passed over me, briefly, slicing my jacket with a stray beam, at the same time as the janitor crossed my line of vision in a flash of white. A second later I was alone again, the mizzle thickening to rain and hitting me in stinging splats. I headed back towards the main path.

At the exit, I remembered the Book of Souls.

'Four minutes until...' said the clock.

Four minutes was enough time to check a name in a holo-book. I ran past the fake-roses, ignoring my splintered reflection as it ran alongside, jiggering over the leaded lights.

The chapel door was open. Inside, statuettes of the Virgin glowed softly from alcoves, their robes scored with shadow. Simulated candle light gave the impression of warmth, but it was so cold that my breath hung in a fog. The Book of Souls sat on a holographic lectern at the far end. I ran to it and rifled through the index. Outside, the lamps began to flick off in zones, killing the stained glass panel by panel. Abigail Tempest Green was missing from the book, and so was her plot number. The clock gave a one minute warning and began a count-down. The auto-bar activated in the inner doors, ready to engage. If Abigail Tempest Green wasn't remembered here, then somebody had sent me a *fake* memorial card.

Who would do that, and why?

I jumped off the podium and ran to the doors. They were already closing as I slipped outside. With twenty seconds to go, I slid between the gates and headed for the cab point, chased by darkness as the final lights went out behind me.

The driver opened the door, and I jumped inside.

'You OK?' he said, his face pale under the ceiling light.

'Yes. Thanks for waiting.' My voice came out as a whisper.

I leaned back and strapped myself in. As the cab pulled away, the locks clunked into place behind us, and a smudge of white appeared behind the grille.

For a moment, I thought I was looking straight into the face of the janitor, its

blank sensors trained on the cab, but the only thing staring back at me was the security Eye, which winked as we drove away, and the lights of the private hop, which rose and vanished into the darkness.