

Chapter One

CORPCHAT: *Corporation's 150th Anniversary Lottery winners receive Collection today - what would you choose? Join the virtual conversation in social hub beta throughout the day.*

The light-alarm filled the square bedroom with a warm yellow glow that grew brighter and brighter. Kira Jenkins snuggled deeper into the sheets, reluctant to move. Suddenly she sat up, brown eyes wide open, her short brown hair sticking out at odd angles.

'It's today, it's today,' she squealed, turning to shake her husband. 'Jed. Wake up! It's today!'

Jed grunted, still half asleep. 'Synth-caf?' he asked as he opened one pale grey eye.

Ten minutes later they were both air washed and dressed in standard Corporation tunic and trousers, dark blue for Jed and a mix of forest green and cream for his wife. They stood in the tiny kitchen area of their open plan living space, glancing at each other in excitement as they tried to do normal things like eat breakfast and drink their stimulants. Kira fished out her handheld from her tunic pocket.

'Hey hon, look - we made top sweep.'

She held the touchscreen up for Jed to see, then began flicking through her dailies and saw one from her friend Ruth.

MADSR: *Luck K, you'll be a great Mum - so proud xx*

Kira saved the message. Her friends, Ruth and Martha, firmly supported the unusual choice she'd made to parent naturally. Most of their family and work colleagues thought it was peculiar. Putting the handheld back in her pocket, Kira picked up her cup and held it in both hands, sipping the hot drink looking up at her husband over the

rim.

'You're not likely to get pulled into work tomorrow afternoon, are you?'

'No, should be fine love.' Jed picked up his breakfast bowl. 'Who's coming again?'

Kira rolled her eyes at him in mock exasperation as she ticked the guests off her fingers.

'Our parents, your sister, Pete obviously, Martha and Ruth and her latest fledgling, some of my work colleagues, some of yours – oh, and your cousins. Did you know they're studying at The Academy?'

Jed nodded, his mouth full of food. Before he could speak the vidcom on the wall in the lounge area chimed. Kira walked over and touched the illuminated panel to accept the call.

'Hi Mum.'

'Oh my goodness.' Jean Bishop's smiling round face and twinkly brown eyes appeared on screen. 'I'm so excited for you. Are you ready? Do you think she'll have brown hair like you or will she be darker like Jed. Oh it's so exciting. Did you think about getting the neural jack like I told you? I don't know why you want to be so natural, it's not normal honey. Did I tell you about that girl over on Fifth? Terrible time she had, just terrible and that was all because she didn't want the NanNan....'

Jed watched in amusement as his wife tried to get a word in edgeways. He kissed her on the cheek, motioning that he had to leave for work but she stopped him by waving at the vidcom link. It was flashing blue. Another call was coming through, this time audio only.

Jed answered the call on his ear comm, the implanted chip that allowed the user to receive and make audio calls. 'Hello?'

'Oh good, I got you before work. Your father and I have been talking, Jeddidah, and we agree it's not the right time. Don't you think you should wait? Early Collection never goes well. You recently became the youngest detective on Force and raising children is hard work - do

you really think you should be splitting your focus now? At least choose the early years option, it really is a wonderful time saver...'

Jed rolled his eyes at Kira as he left, taking the call with him. He walked down the corridor to the lift, descended four floors into the foyer of their apartment building and out through the double doors, murmuring in all the right places until he reached the public skimmer stop.

'Mother, I have to go to work now. We will send an update out later I promise.'

Jed grinned to himself as he cut her off mid-sentence – parents. The grin slipped, soon that would be him.

MADSR: Bridget Mahoney reads excerpts from 21st century top literature.

*Tonight @ Community Hub Four. No virtuality!
This is a sit in event hosted by HistoryNow - click to register.*

Sitting on the floor and not bothering to look up, Ruth Maddocks called out through the thick mane of light brown hair hanging round her face.

'Dina? Share my latest. I need to sweep it.'

A younger woman sat on the teacher's chair. She was pixie like – petite with short cropped blonde hair and baby blue eyes. With a small sigh Dina Grey picked up her hand-held and began scrolling.

'The one about boycotting the 150th Anniversary celebrations?'

'No – but do that one too,' Ruth said, trying to tuck her unruly hair out of the way and looking up at her PhD student. 'Bridget's lit reading – she thinks that because it's not virtual more people will come.'

Dina kept scrolling, looking for the right sweep.

'Who knows - they might.'

'Are you going?' Ruth arched her eyebrow at Dina.

'Well.. no... I...you see.' Dina started making excuses before she realised Ruth was teasing. 'I'm going to work on my thesis tonight.'

'Dina,' Ruth let out a heavy sigh, 'You can have fun you know. You should come outside with us tonight.'

'Outside?'

Ruth stood up and went to the open door. She poked her head out and looked up and down the corridor to make sure no-one was about before keying the classroom door shut and walking back to Dina with a mischievous glint in her brown eyes.

'We're going to the beach.'

'Beyond the forcefield? Is that allowed?'

Ruth coloured slightly and chose not to answer, instead she began to pack her bag.

'What about the radiation levels?' Dina asked in concern as she gathered her own notes.

'I've been going out of the city for years and I'm okay.' Ruth said, spreading her arms out, bangles clattering. 'There is no toxicity – people need to get a life.'

Dina shrugged, tucking her hair behind her ear.

'Shouldn't you be teaching me good Corporation values?'

'Just because I teach history at Academy, doesn't make me an old Corp fossil you know.' Ruth retorted and started to shut down all her classroom connections.

'I know, I'm sorry.' Dina said in a small voice. She went to the door and re-opened it.

'Relax.' Ruth picked up her bag and followed Dina out of the classroom. 'Are you still coming to the party tomorrow?'

'If it's okay?'

'Yeah sure. I've told K you wanna ask questions.'

'I do.' Dina nodded, relieved at the change of topic. 'Do you think she'll have time?'

The two women continued chatting down the corridor, Dina worrying and Ruth reassuring.

Jed passed through security, looking up at the silver star shaped shield depicting the scales of justice and the sword of truth crested high up on the wall. The office was buzzing as he walked towards his desk.

'What's going on?' Jed nodded a greeting to his partner, Pete Barnes.

'We've got a top priority case meeting with the Chief.' Pete replied as he stood. 'Lucky us.'

Jed followed his partner into the Chief's office, surprised to see a Corporation Medical Agent standing by the side of the Chief's desk. Usually you only saw them at autopsy.

'Sit down Detectives.' The Chief's gruff voice sounded strained.

The two men sat down in chairs opposite the desk as the Chief, a short man with thinning grey hair and a thick moustache looked worried and shuffled his notes, unwilling to begin.

'Usual disclaimers, no interviews, no family involvement – this is highly classified. We find this bastard and we deal out justice.'

The Chief gestured for the Corporation Medical Agent to address Jenkins and Barnes. Wearing standard black Corporation uniform, the young man held up a touchscreen and began to read.

'At three forty-five this morning a young woman was brought to Corporation Medical by her parents. It appears she was attacked, whilst out walking, by an unknown male assailant and was violated sexually.'

The two detectives both leaned forward, intent on the details of the attack.

'The Corporation frowns severely upon such activity and wants to promote a clear message of harsh action. It has been approved that the assailant be terminated.'

Pete sat back in his chair and raised his hand to ask a question but the Corporation Medical Agent ignored him and continued to read.

'Corporation will be recirculating the 'Why Walk?' Campaign throughout media sweeps.' He paused to pick up two info jacks from the Chief's desk and leaning forward, handed one to Pete, the other to Jed. 'Here are your info jacks with all the case details so far. Corporation is confident Force will catch this offender.'

With a nod towards the detectives the agent turned, shook hands with the Chief and left the now silent room. Pete bounced the jack in his hand before looking up at his boss.

'Whose the Vic, Chief?'

The Chief shuffled his papers again.

'At this time it's classified.' He stroked his moustache, avoiding the gaze of the two detectives.

'How are we supposed to work the case if we don't know whose been attacked?'

'Review what you've been given.' replied the Chief. 'Get an ID on the perp. That's your first priority. Dismissed.'

As they left the office Pete looked at Jed.

'Jenks, you believe this frag?'

Jed shook his head as they returned to their desks to plug in the info jacks. They were non-neural and slotted into the side of their consoles. Once loaded, there wasn't much information. The only real addition were hours and hours and hours of Drone TV covering the approximate area where the attack happened. Jed programmed the ident system to look for two people in the park at the same time and sat back to wait for the results.

ANTIC: In celebration of the relaunch of the Why Walk?

Campaign, Anti-Corp are holding a peaceful stroll through City Forty-Two. Stretch your legs and your rights, sign up now!

'I see AC are already on the Why Walk? bandwagon.' Pete remarked, checking the sweeps on his handheld as Jed

stood up to leave.

'They don't miss a trick do they?' Jed bent down slightly to check his console. 'The matrix is still running Pete but I've got to go – you okay handling this for now?'

Pete gave his partner a mock salute as he continued to scroll the dailies.

Jed shoved his jacket on, trying to clear his head. It was such an odd case and it bothered him that he didn't know who the victim was. But he had other important things to think about right now. Hurrying past security Jed nodded at the guard on the desk. He had to make it to Collection on time so he decided against taking the public skimmer.

City Forty-Two had a square layout with forcefield generators at each corner. Corporation buildings filled the bulk of the west side with Archive and Academy in the centre and residential flats beyond. The far east of the city was officially abandoned however some people did live there, the ones who couldn't or wouldn't conform to Corporation rule. Force Headquarters were located in the Upper North West, sectors First and Second, looking out over the city - set apart from Corporation yet protecting the citizens.

Checking his wristplant, Jed figured he could make it on time if he cut through Third, the advantage of using his own feet rather than following a skimmer rail. As he set off down the pavement a beautiful woman, with skin that glowed blue, brushed his hand as she walked past him. He jerked it away in surprise. Looking back over his shoulder Jed realised she had stopped and was staring straight at him with eyes sparkling like a thousand stars. He began apologising when a bee, an actual bee, zoomed across his face, taking his attention away.

'Did you see that?' Jed asked, turning back, but the woman had gone. Jed blinked in confusion. Must have been a new kind of advert he thought. The Corporation was always thinking up new ways to insinuate itself into your subconscious. But why a bee? The wristplant beeped a reminder for his appointment. Jed jogged through Third,

checking the sweeps as he went – nothing about a bee. As he approached Fourth Sector and the blue-tinged, smart-glass fronted skyscraper - known as Collection Towers, Jed could see Kira waiting for him inside the large open plan lobby.

PEBAR: Good luck Jenks

***CORP:** 150th Anniversary Celebrations continue with VR parade at 4pm – just jack in to join in, bring a friend and experience all the excitement inside your home. Remember the fallen, relive the final victory and rejoice with the founding of Corporation.*

'Hi, sorry hon.' Jed hugged his wife. 'I got here quick as I could.'

'It's fine, they haven't called us yet.'

They stood to one side of the front desk while Kira rummaged in her bag for the necessary paperwork. Behind the reception desk a woman with immaculate black hair and wearing a crisp black Corp Medical uniform, waved them forward.

'Here for Collection?'

Kira and Jed nodded.

'Okay, I need your credentials. That means photo, biometric and employment plus evidence of good credits for increased living costs, as well as your references.'

The woman held out her hand, fingers grasping at the empty air whilst Jed found his ident and chip and passed it to Kira, her paperwork already in her hand. The woman scanned each item individually, pressed a few buttons on the screen in front of her, and sniffed.

'Lottery winners – the Jenkins?' Again they nodded. 'I need proof of entry. This isn't enough.'

Kira looked at Jed, biting the corner of her lower lip.

'I didn't bring it,' she said in a small voice.

Jed grinned and took out the winning card from his

back pocket.

They hadn't even entered the Anniversary Lottery, thinking it was too small a chance to actually win. Someone had pushed the card through their door on the eve of the Anniversary celebrations. Jed thought it was Kira's mother, but despite being asked numerous times, she was not admitting it. The woman behind the desk swiped the card and passed it back.

'Your references are Miss Martha Hamble and Mr Pete Barnes. Neither one related to either of you, correct?'

They nodded.

'Hmm, seems to be in order. Do you want standard manuals, neural jacks or the full package which...' The woman looked down. 'You're not covered for so it'll be extra.'

'Standard,' Kira said, a touch defiantly. Both of them wanted to try the less popular natural route. They could always change their minds later, and besides, this was how their ancestors had done it. Kira had been researching the archives, something her position as junior city archivist allowed. It had been a different world back then but the way women had looked after their babies personally had resonated deep within her.

The woman sniffed again.

'Suit yourself. I'm guessing you want the VR experience? Nine months of pregnancy in nine minutes?' Not waiting for a reply she went on. 'We're all out so you'll have to contact your local agent.'

'Its fine' Kira murmured, secretly relieved.

'Top floor.'

And with that the woman dismissed them from her desk.

Listening to the quiet hum of machinery, Kira could feel the pitter patter of butterfly wings in her stomach and her mouth felt dry. Jed cleared his throat and squeezed his wife's hand. Finally the elevator stopped and the doors slid open onto a pristine white corridor. The door at the end

was marked Collections. As the young couple walked towards the door, Jed couldn't get the bee he'd seen out of his mind.

'Hey, guess what?' he said.

Kira looked up at him.

'I saw a bee on the way here. Can you believe that? That's gotta be a good sign right? I mean, I never thought I'd see a *live* one.'

Kira shrugged, too nervous to speak and Jed softly kissed the top of her head as they stopped in front of an illuminated wall panel.

'Name' it chimed.

'Kira & Jed Jenkins.'

The door swooshed open.

The square white room was empty, devoid of any decoration and lit with harsh, bright white strips. The couple glanced at each other, was this the right place? Another chime sounded, and a soft blue light illuminated a small recess towards the back of the room. As they walked towards it, they became aware of other niches where multiple choice screens hung ready. This was the hard part of Collection, not knowing what your choices would be and trying hard not to hope – any choice could be life changing. Anything at all. They sat on the thin bench provided, looking up at the screen which read 'Baby Jenkins multiple choice, tap when ready.'

Jed turned to look at Kira, 'Ready?'

She couldn't speak, she could only nod. Together they tapped.

Choice 1

Blue eyes & greater academic aptitude

OR

Brown eyes & improved reaction times

Choice 2*

Predisposition to cancer

OR
Predisposition to heart disease

**note – Corp Medical reminds you that genetic predisposition has yet to be eradicated however consequences can be neutralised provided you maintain regular health checks.*

Choice 3
Boy, assigned name Kai
OR
Girl, assigned name Grace

'Three choices, what do you think?' Kira whispered to Jed.

'I don't mind hon, what do you want?' Jed knew his wife had been thinking about this moment for a long time and he wanted her to be happy. She fidgeted on the bench next to him. Kira had been hoping for the girl/boy choice – not everyone had it. She had been so desperate for a girl she had even prepped the nursery cube for one, despite being told she was silly to have such hope.

'I'd like girl, blue and heart.'

'As you wish.'

He pressed the screen. It blanked then read

Processing.....Please Wait.

Jed's ear comm pinged. It was Force Control.

'Jenkins. You're wanted in a security level six briefing, a hover is on its way to pick you up. Be ready in sixty seconds.'

'I've got to go in.' He stood slowly, not wanting to leave.

Kira looked at him in dismay, how could he leave when they were so close to Collection. She was about to protest when there was a hum from the screen in front of them. It slid upwards and a small hatch opened. Inside was their collection. A baby girl, freshly grown in the lab womb and ready to be taken home.