

The
Terminator
Gene

Will Evans

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One

Karen Wilkes was very well accustomed to the unusual way in which her contacts behaved, but the unmarked compact disk just wasn't giving any clues. It contained a single document. No note. No senders details and the contents just a meaningless jumble of numbers and letters.

Maybe it was just something she had done. Or not done. Or simply done wrong. Finn was always telling her, in that tone that comes so easily to fourteen year old boys, that she needed to 'just double click it'. Well that just didn't seem to work.

"I hope I haven't done any permanent damage" she worried as she realised that the fourteen year old inside Kyle, the office techie, would be hardly less impressed than Finn with her lack of computer literacy. And it had nothing to do with her gender, whatever was written all over his face whenever she asked him a question.

Still, she wouldn't have any trouble with Kyle. Something she'd learnt at a very early age. She wandered down to the basement.

"Kyle, sweet thing, would you have a look at this for me?"

Kyle swivelled to meet her approach. "What have you done now, gorgeous?"

She never could decide whether the compliment was sincere, even if you disregarded the fact that it came from a barely post pubescent, trainee member of the human race. But then, why not get it while you still can?

"Nothing" she said. "I just tried to check what was on this CD and all I get is garbage."

"Give it here" he sighed. "What's the format? PC or MAC?"

"Yes probably. You know I have very limited experience with this stuff" she admitted resignedly. "But I do know you're the only person we have who stands any sort of a chance of fixing this for me."

Ego on overdrive, Kyle took the disk and slipped it into his laptop with a sensual flick of the wrist. At least he thought it was sensual. Any eroticism was of course completely lost on Karen, since, unsurprisingly I suppose, she didn't find computer technology or its minders particularly interesting.

"OK. What do we have here?" he said almost to himself.

“Straight text file. Not HTML. Not CSV or fixed. Looks like a key file to me. 32 character blocks means it’s probably DES or AES. Most likely AES.”

Karen wished Kyle had said that last bit to himself.

“Pretty unusual to use AES outside the banking community though. Maybe the sender wants to send you something pretty special. Does your husband know about this?”

“That’s lovely Kyle. And now for the English translation?”

“Well, as you probably know, AES, or Advanced Encryption Standard and DES or Data Encryption Standard are symmetric encryption technologies developed by the US government. DES gave up the ghost to a brute force hacking attack in the mid nineties. Only a complete nutter would use it now, given the security services can probably crack it in about half an hour. AES on the other hand is much more recent and dependable. The only other alternative would be PGP. It’s a system developed by Phil Zimmermann in 1991 for the asymmetric encryption of data files using the Rivest, Shamir Adelman algorithm...”

“Yes, a sound and comprehensive knowledge of history is a wonderful thing” she interrupted. “But what does it do?”

“The file you see here is part of a system used to encrypt or code a document so that only the person with this key can decode it.”

“So can you decode it for me?”

“No, no, no. You’ve got the wrong end of the stick entirely. I thought I made it completely clear. This is not the document. This is just the key to get into the document.”

Her retort was somewhat impatient. “So where is the document?”

“Well it wouldn’t be on the disk for a start, would it?”

Karen bit her tongue and waited.

“The only sensible precaution would be to send the document separately, just like they do with the PIN number for your credit card.”

“Then how am I going to recognise this document?”

“Hard to say. Could be anything; though when you open it without decrypting it first, you’ll soon recognise it ‘cos it will look like random text.”

“How will I get this document?”

“Beats me. How did you get the disk?”

“Anonymous.”

“Better keep an eye on the post then.”

Karen headed for the door. “Thank you Kyle” she singsonged as it slammed shut behind her.

The email arrived two days later on a Wednesday morning. The subject line read ‘Hotel reservation’ and she nearly deleted it without reading it, thinking it was just one of the many junk emails she received each day. But a hotel reservation from a global player in the biotechnology industry? That was worth opening.

A week later she would regret, if only for a moment, ever opening that email.

The body of the email contained the following text...

Attached document may be of interest to you.

This was followed by a standard corporate disclaimer ending with the following line...

MailScan™ 3.1.9 1 attachment(s) removed for security purposes.

There was no attachment.

Maybe the sender, who appeared to be a David Maxwell, had forgotten to attach the document. Karen made a habit of that particular mistake, constantly having to follow up with an email containing the forgotten document.

Kyle didn’t usually get in until 9.30 or even 10 o’clock. Karen was waiting for him in reception. And he was late.

“Kyle I need you” she said.

Ignoring the glance he exchanged with the security guard, she took him by the arm and steered him towards the lift. On the fourth floor she guided him to her PC and sat him down in her chair. The email was open on the screen where she had left it.

“Nice to see you guys at the sharp end take security so seriously” he gestured.

She ignored him. It was a particularly easy thing to do.

“What do you make of this email?”

He took the mouse and began scanning menus and icons. His commentary took no prisoners. “Sent using SendMail 8.1.2... Mail domain is allegedly sorrensen.com... The Header indicates it came from an SMTP mail server at GeneX... Date and time look kosher... Nothing unusual that I can see.”

“Can you be certain it came from GeneX?”

“As far as I can tell, yes. I’d need to do a little research first to be sure.”

“And what did you mean when you said the date and time were kosher?”

“The times that emails display are often wrong due to a whole variety of reasons I haven’t got time to go into now, but these ones check out.”

“What does the message about an attachment being removed mean?”

The answer was bound to have a patronising edge to it. Karen decided to grit her teeth and go with the flow. It was either that or punch him. She gritted.

“When a person in a corporate organisation sends out an attachment, that attachment could have a virus. And it’s not good for business to unleash viruses on your customers. So, a lot of corporate organisations use a virus scanner to check outgoing attachments. When they find a document infected with a virus they remove the infected attachment and quarantine it. That message tells you that a file has been removed.”

“Is there any way of getting hold of the document that’s been removed?”

“No, they keep it inside their firewall. You could always email David.Maxwell@sorrensen.com and ask him to send it on a CD, but don’t use it in any of my computers here in the office when you get it.”

Kyle rose to leave.

“When will you be able to tell me whether it came from GeneX?”

“Forward me the email and I’ll try to sort it by lunchtime.”

“Thanks Kyle.”

David Maxwell parked in his usual parking place. It wasn’t that he had an assigned space, he just liked to get in early in a morning to miss the traffic and to ensure that he got his usual place close to the entrance to the laboratory block.

He applied the handbrake, put the car in first gear and picked up his sandwich box. Carefully locking and checking the drivers door he marched quickly over to the security turnstile. This particular morning he felt a little nervous as he stood beneath the security cameras and fumbled inside his corduroy jacket for his pass. He swiped it in the wrong direction twice before he realised why he wasn't being allowed in.

The turnstile clicked and he pushed forward into the air conditioned building. The Harrison Laboratory for Plant Genetics was on the first floor. He took the stairs. He always took the stairs. Coming through the door at the top of the stairs he almost knocked over an early morning cleaner. He apologised profusely. David always apologised profusely.

Access to the lab only required a swipe but his office needed a PIN number as well. The keypad was just below the laser etched glass sign. Dr David Maxwell, BSc, PhD, LRBS. They hadn't had room for the rest, but thankfully they had managed to get them all on his business card.

He keyed his PIN. Right first time. The breathing exercises must be working.

It was habit that made him place the sandwich box in the third drawer down and another inconsequential habit that made him hang his jacket on the coat hanger to one side of his glass office door.

And it was habit that made him notice the order of the papers in his desktop filing tray. The papers had been moved. He always made sure they were in a logical order. He was sure the top two sets of documents had been swapped.

A wave of panic came over him. He felt a cold sweat break on his neck and shoulders. His whole body tensed. He could feel his heart beating faster.

Who could have been in his office?

He stood up and leant forward on the desk. What were they doing with his papers? He slumped back into his chair. What else had they been interested in?

It could not have been the cleaners. They were only allowed into the lab directors offices when they were occupied. As far as he knew the only people who had access to the office were security. They must have been checking up on him. Or was he just overreacting. Just a guilty conscience playing games with his memory. No. He was sure the papers had been moved.

He now faced a dilemma. Should he make a preemptive strike, invent some implausible story, report his suspicions to security, walking straight

into the lion's den or should he move his plans forward a couple of days?

He sat for long minutes, controlling his breathing, staring into the middle distance, thinking through all the permutations. He worked methodically through all the possibilities. Eventually, sure of his moves, he decided to stick with the original plan. He would stay at work until Friday.

"Must keep up appearances" he thought. "Just a couple more days to go"

He switched on his desktop computer. He was calm now. You needed to be when you had to wait this long for your PC to start up. He opened his email program. There was only one email. It was a return receipt from kwilkes@PressCorp.com.

He almost exploded. David Maxwell was a man right on the edge.

Why had that stupid, stupid woman sent him a return receipt? God knows who might have seen it. His secretary was due in any moment now. What ever happened to confidentiality of sources? "Calm, calm, calm" he repeated to himself.

She must have realised that he was taking a huge risk sending her that document. He deleted the offending reply, closed his email program and then reopened it. He wasn't sure why you did this but someone else had told him it worked and assured him that it was the only way you could be sure that your emails were completely deleted.

The phone rang.

The "Good morning, Doctor Maxwell" was automatic. He heard no reply but the static in the earpiece. He resignedly pitched a couple of 'hellos' back down the phone line, but got no reply. The phone was put back on the hook. Just another problem with the phones he thought as he brought up his electronic diary.

Two

The phone on Karen's desk began to ring. She put down her coffee cup and lifted the receiver.

"Karen"

"Kyle"

"I've checked out that email for you. I even did a little digging with GeneX and the Sorrensen organisation."

Karen could not believe what she was hearing. "Kyle, you didn't..."

"Don't worry" he interrupted. "I just bounced an email off their server to see what it did. And before you ask. I used a completely anonymous account and a completely fake name. I'm sure they don't employ many people whose first name is Darth."

"Sarcasm" she thought. There was hope for him yet.

"So? And bear in mind that was a non technical so."

"The original email checks out as genuine. As far as I can tell it originated on a GeneX mail server within the Sorrensen Foundation. Sent about seven thirty yesterday evening." Kyle paused ever so slightly. Karen knew when to keep quiet. "However, when the Sorrensen mail server told me they didn't have any employees from a galaxy far, far away, it did tell me that they check all their mail using MimeSweeper. " He paused again. This time it was a cue.

He was obviously pleased with what he had discovered. All Karen needed was a translation. "Explain the significance of that last bit for me Kyle. What are you saying?"

"The original email had a message saying that an attachment had been removed by a program called MailScan. I bounced a message off the same server and it told me it was using MimeSweeper. Somebody is telling porkies."

Karen still didn't see the significance, but didn't have time for a supplementary as Kyle continued. "I also checked out MailScan. It seems it's more than just a virus scanner. It can be configured to prevent attachments leaving an organisation. One of my less socialised buddies came across it being used by the spooks from corporate security at his place. You just tell it

what or who you want to monitor and it just sits and watches twenty four seven.”

“Can you be certain that the attachment was removed deliberately by somebody at GeneX, after David Maxwell sent the email?”

“I can’t be certain, and while I actually am a great believer in conspiracy theory, it doesn’t really take a very cynical mind to believe that the attachment was removed because they thought it was a security risk.”

“Damn.” Karen slammed the phone down into its cradle. David Maxwell, an employee of GeneX, the specialist gene technology division of the multinational biotechnology corporation, The Sorrensen Foundation, had sent her an encrypted document. He’d used an unusual and powerful key to encode it. He’d sent it after hours. He had probably been targeted by corporate security. His email had almost certainly been tampered with. This had all the makings of a major story.

She knew that all she needed now was the document. This was to prove a little more difficult than she could have hoped for.

Sandra had worked for Dr Maxwell as his personal assistant, her words, or secretary, his, for the last two years. Although theirs was a close working relationship, she felt that she hardly really knew the real David Maxwell. Although she supposed that the ‘real’ anybody didn’t actually exist.

He must be mid to late fifties. She knew he wasn’t married, and she was pretty sure he lived on his own. But, try as she might, she just couldn’t find any categories to file him under. He wasn’t even the archetypal mad professor. Far from it in fact.

Of course she had checked him out before she came to work for him. Undergraduate and Postgraduate career at the same Oxford college. Then research. He’d been moved to Sorrensen when his research group had been commercialised in the mid eighties. Been here ever since.

He was a reasonable enough boss. Never too heavy handed, not too disorganised. He just lacked any basic social skills. He never attended any of the company social events and she had only ever seen him once at any of the seminars GeneX hosted for customers and investors. And even then he had left as soon as he had given his presentation.

This was a capital crime as far as Sandra was concerned, since she organised the catering at these events and she made sure they had the best

the extremely generous budget could buy. How could anybody turn their nose up at all that free food and drink? Still, all the more for her to take home.

As David walked into her office that afternoon, Sandra looked up from her workstation. She couldn't quite figure out why, but she felt strangely sympathetic. Maybe David looked older or more vulnerable. Perhaps he was looking tired. Perhaps all of these things.

“Have we got a meeting room booked for this afternoon?”

She wanted to say something along the lines of “Why the hell would I be booking a meeting room for this afternoon” but she knew he wouldn't see the funny side, even if he hadn't been in such a strange mood. She checked the electronic schedule.

“Meeting room 6 from 2pm to 4pm and...” Before she had time to tell him everything was in hand he had fired back the supplementary.

“And the refreshments?”

“All organised, including your Earl Grey and your favourite Highland Shorties.” She knew this last would wind him up as he never seemed to like admitting that he was a creature of habit.

“Right” he stumbled. “Thank you. I'll just get back to my office then.”

He knew very well that Sandra would have booked the meeting room and the catering even if he hadn't checked on the online schedule only minutes before. He just wanted to communicate with someone, to feel a connection with another human being, to feel like he had when he was a child. As she watched him scuttle back to his office, Sandra felt she had been a little unkind.

In fact David spent the rest of the morning in the library. He felt safer here in amongst the stacks of familiar volumes. It wasn't like a public library where the books are all sorts of different sizes. Here the books came in multi volume sets. Row upon row of neatly identical, bound copies of periodicals. He randomly selected a couple of suitably large books and tucked himself away in a quiet corner.

While he sat and pretended to read, his mind kept returning to the misplaced papers in his office. If he was being investigated by corporate security there was little he could do. He wondered if they were able to monitor his email. In hindsight it was probably not so smart to email from his company account. But to use his personal account he would have had to take a copy of the document home with him and that seemed so much more

like stealing.

He was getting very tired now. The strain was beginning to show and he just didn't have the strength to worry any more. People had to know what was in the document. They had a right. It affected their lives and the lives of their children. And he had rights too. He had the right to be recognised for all the hard work and long hours that he he'd put into 219Zulu. He had a right to be recognised for his erudition, for his scholarship, for his pure goddamn genius.

At the sudden noise, he almost leapt out of his seat. What seemed like minutes went by before he realised it was just the alarm on his personal organiser reminding him about his 2 pm meeting. If looks could kill, he had just been assassinated by the librarian. He left the books out on the table and headed straight for meeting room 6.

As usual, Karen was late for the afternoon editorial meeting. And in the usual way she had a fairly lame excuse. And in quite his usual way her producer didn't take the slightest bit of notice. Maybe that's why she was always late.

She sat down between Mo Donaldson the co-presenter and Denise, one of the script editors. Everybody seemed to be arguing about who would be best able to present a piece to camera about the latest incompetence at the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice or whatever they had decided to call it this week. Mo sounded like she had most support until Terry, the executive producer, pulled rank and gave the job to Colin. Colin smirked. Mo cursed under her breath. Karen yawned. Denise continued to stare into the bottom of her coffee mug.

"Are we boring you Wilkes?" barked Terry in his native Glaswegian lilt.

"Sorry. Up late last night."

She paused for effect.

"Working."

He continued more softly. "You chose the perfect time to make an appearance. Anything for us that's going to breach the boundaries of science as we know and love it?"

"Nothing right now, but I may have something for you later in the week."

"I'll be hanging on your every word. Jane. Anything from the EU?"

The meeting had gone on until five. Once again 4.45 had turned out to be the ideal time to reach consensus and minute the agreement on an action plan for the field trials in Puerto Rico. David went straight back to his office, checked his email for the umpteenth time that day and left early. That is he left early for him.

Sandra was extremely surprised to see him walking out to his car at only ten past five. By all accounts he never, ever left work before 7pm. David Maxwell, the ultimate creature of habit, was changing his routine. "Good for him" she thought. "He looked like he needed a break."

David walked to his car. He unlocked the passenger side door and laid his battered leather briefcase on the passenger seat. He folded his raincoat neatly on top, closed the door and walked round the car. As he reached the drivers side he looked up to see two uniformed security guards running towards him across the lawns from the main reception. His heart skipped a beat and all his reflexes switched to flight mode. Heart rate increased. Breathing became deeper and more rapid. Sugar production rose steeply. His muscles tensed.

The smaller of the two guards was the first to reach him. The guard just kept on running. It was then that he noticed they were both carrying fire extinguishers. He turned to see smoke pouring from the waste bin outside the research centre. Someone must have disposed of a cigarette butt carelessly. He felt a bead of perspiration trickle down his back.

Breathing easily again, he slid quietly into the drivers seat. He drove the car slowly out of the parking space and headed for the main gate. He knew the guard on the gate by sight and took the rather unusual step of returning his wave. Once out of the gate he headed for home. Twenty six minutes later he was standing inside the hallway of his modest detached bungalow. He was home. He was safe. He slumped down in front of the early evening news and almost instantaneously fell into a very deep and untroubled sleep.

Three

The Justice piece was pulled at the last minute. In its place, Mo did an interview with a cabinet minister, constantly pressing him about the rumour of an impending unscheduled increase in the PSBR and finishing with a fairly direct question about the Deputy Prime Ministers alleged affair with a senior police officer. Karen hadn't realised there were so many different ways to say 'No comment'.

Karen did a three minute filler on science teaching for girls. Being the consummate professional, nobody would have guessed that she really thought the whole topic the biggest load of drivel she had heard in a long time.

They wrapped at 6.30 and were in the pub for 7. Karen collared Terry and took him to one side. She explained the story of the mysterious disk and the empty email. One on one, Terry was the perfect listener. He waited until the end of her story before he made a comment.

"You have a blank email and a disk full of gobbledygook and you want me to let you spend time on this nonsense. This is probably just some elaborate practical joke. Have you contacted this David Maxwell yet?"

"No. If he is trying to blow the whistle on some new biotech scandal, I don't want to scare him off or even worse arouse the suspicion of the Sorrensen Foundation. This needs a softly, softly approach. We need to give him enough confidence to come out into the open. I'm sure the direct approach would just spook him."

"What makes you think this is a big story?"

"It's difficult to pin it down. It's lots of little things. And with all the controversy over GM foods at the moment, this would be a great time to be running a 'big nasty biotech' story. Please say yes. I'll be your friend for ever."

"OK. Go with it for the rest of this week. Give me an update on Friday by 5pm."

"Thanks Terry you're a pal. Listen I've got to go. See you in the morning. Bye."

Terry swallowed a mouthful of scotch and growled softly. "See ya."

Karen took the tube to London Bridge and then the mainline to Belvedere. The walk from the station was about half a mile and usually took fifteen minutes. The early evening rain had slowed to a fine drizzle that was just visible in the warm yellow glow of the sodium streetlights.

She was almost home when she became aware of footsteps behind her. She quickened her pace. The footsteps were faster now. She fumbled in her bag for her mobile phone, although she hadn't really thought who she was going to call.

The footsteps behind her were almost running now. She turned to look around. The man was two strides away. In the dimly lit alleyway she could barely make him out. He was much taller than her and his facial features were indistinct. She was later to attribute this to a stocking mask or scarf over his face.

He covered the two strides with alarming speed. His powerful hands grasped her shoulders and threw her against the wooden fence, winding her. She had once completed an evening class in self defence, but she just couldn't think fast enough. He pushed her to the ground and clamped his hand tightly over her mouth. With his other hand he tore her handbag from her left shoulder. She grabbed the strap of the handbag and began to struggle.

Instantly she saw the flash of a steel blade. The knife sliced through the thick leather strap with ease. The assailant wrenched the bag from her hand, turned and ran back up the alley.

She turned and ran as fast as she could in the opposite direction. She was only moments from home. When she got there she realised she had no keys. She hammered and hammered on the front door. The door was opened by a clearly startled Finn. "Mum, you're a complete mess."

As soon as he realised what had happened Finn had called the police. By the time they arrived Karen had calmed down. She had not been hysterical, that wasn't in her nature, but she had been shaken by her encounter.

The police took a brief statement. They assured her they were already out looking for her assailant and arranged for a detective to visit her the following morning. They were very sympathetic. They were very caring. When they were sure she was completely recovered, they left.

Karen took a long, hot bath, drank half a bottle of wine, persuaded Finn she was fine and curled up in bed. Her body ached from head to toe

but she soon drifted off into a deep and satisfying sleep.

Karen slept straight through and was only woken by the sound of the doorbell. She looked at the clock by the bed. “Oh my god” she thought “It’s gone eight. I’m going to be late for work again.”

She leapt from the bed, the shooting pains in her back and side reminding her of the night before. Finn was certain from the noises coming from his mother’s bedroom that she was awake and in the very painful process of getting up. He showed the two uniformed police officers into the front room and assured them she would be down shortly.

Ten minutes later, he sprinted up the stairs and knocked softly on the bedroom door. “Mum” he called. “The cops are here to take you down the police station.”

Karen opened the door six or seven inches. Finn realised his mother would be a while longer yet. “They’ve come to take me down to the police station? I thought they were coming here to interview me. Anyway, I have to get to work. I’m horribly late already.”

“Work is sorted. I called them an hour ago to let them know you wouldn’t be in today. If you’d like me to write you a note, we could always trade? I have to split or I’m going to be just as late as you think you are. See ya.” Finn thundered down the stairs and slammed the door on his way out. How was it that he could be so incredibly rude, patronising and generally obnoxious and still make it quite obvious that he cared about her. “I guess he’s just becoming a man. What a horrible thought.”

The heat of the water in the shower eased some of the pain. She was surprised at how many bruises she had. She was almost covered from head to toe in the blue black marks. Drying herself off and dressing quickly she walked slowly and painfully down the stairs and into the front room.

The two uniformed officers were finishing their tea when she walked in to the small front room. They both stood up. “Mrs Wilkes?” the taller of the two asked.

“No it’s Ms Wilkes” she replied a shade too frostily.

“I’m sorry” he replied.

“We’re here to take you down to Belvedere police station to make a statement.”

She must have given away her surprise at the empty tea cups. The

shorter, and obviously younger officer, pre-empted her question. “Your son made us the tea, and very good it was too. He said he’d seen people do it on the TV.”

“While we’re on the subject of your son, Ms Wilkes, you might mention to him that he needs to be more careful with strangers.” He continued. “We had to make him check our warrant cards. I think he would have let us in just because we were in uniform.”

“I don’t suppose he knows what a warrant card looks like anyway. Neither do I for that matter.” One of the police officers handed her a credit card sized piece of plastic with the officers details and the words Kent Police emblazoned across it. The photograph didn’t do him justice. She handed back the warrant card.

Karen collected the cups from the coffee table and took them through to the kitchen. She left them on the drainer and walked back into the front room. “I thought the officers last night said that a detective would be calling to interview me at home?” she said questioningly.

The first officer glanced briefly at his colleague. “We have only had instructions to ask you to come in to the station. The relief that were on last night probably didn’t know which detective would be available this morning. We’re a bit short staffed in CID at the moment.”

“OK, OK, it’s not a problem. Shall I follow you down or meet you there?” she asked.

“It’s probably easiest if you come with us,” the second policeman said in a friendly voice. “That way you don’t have to worry about driving in your delicate state.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“No. Not really, but we get a briefing on what has happened in the last 24 hours and the report of your attack doesn’t make for very happy reading.”

“I’ll just get my handbag.”

That was the moment that Karen realised she had lost her handbag to her attacker the previous night. A cold shiver went through her body. She turned back to the policemen. “My bag was stolen last night. It had all my cards, keys, everything. I need to stop the cards. The house keys.”

“It’s all right Mrs Wilkes. Your son told us this morning that he had stopped all the cards last night. He even spoke to your bank this morning to order a new cheque book and cards.”

“But how could he? They wouldn’t take instructions over the phone

from a 14 year old boy.”

“It appears that he told the bank that he was you. Since he could answer all the security questions correctly they appear to have fallen for the deception. Officially we don’t approve, but I have to say he’s a very resourceful young lad.” Boy did he keep those depths hidden thought Karen.

“But what about the house keys. If the attacker knows where I live he can just walk in while I’m away at the police station.”

The taller officer spoke to his colleague. “Call it in Mike. Cad can make a decision on this one.”

The younger officer walked out into the hallway and spoke into his radio. Karen couldn’t make out what was being said. The taller officer was listening intently. “They’ve just asked Mike to wait while they sort something out.”

The radio crackled again. Mike answered with a clipped “591 Roger Control” as he came back into the front room.

Mike was at his most reassuring. “Our control room are sending a mobile unit to sit outside the house while we’re away. They’ve organised an emergency locksmith to come out to change the locks. He’ll be here within the hour.”

Mike’s radio crackled into life again. The message could have been anything but Mike replied. He looked towards Karen. “That was a call from our colleagues in the other mobile unit. They’ll be here in a couple of minutes. Are you ready to go?”

Karen put on the raincoat hanging in the hall and followed the police officers out. She absent mindedly registered relief at the weight of her mobile phone in the pocket. At least her attacker hadn’t got that. She really would have to get Finn to make copies of all her contacts; she would be completely lost without them.

By the time she had pulled the door closed behind her, the second patrol car had arrived. Karen locked up and gave the spare keys to the police officers who were going to be watching the house.