

Chapter One

The shout cut through the air like a fist through a window. It came from the escalators where peak-hour commuters were descending from street level to the underground platforms at Wynyard Station in the heart of Sydney's CBD. Shareen gripped the strap of her handbag and turned towards the noise. The station had been upgraded since her last visit two years earlier, but she'd been too preoccupied to take much notice of the changes as she made her way from the platform towards the exit. Now, as she waited to pass through the security checkpoint, there was a sharp edge to the world around her. Could the shout be related to the terrorist alert she'd received on the train half an hour earlier? The soaring glass atrium in the centre of the concourse drew in a sparkling stream of light from the street above. It was beautiful, but she pictured it cracking and jagged shards falling onto the people below.

Most terrorist warnings turned out to be false alarms, but as the production line of office workers rolled off the escalators, several cast nervous glances behind them. A well-dressed young man in a grey suit shoved an elderly man out of his way and the older man stumbled and almost fell as another yell ricocheted down from street level.

Shareen rose on her toes and strained to get a better look. All she could see were jostling faces on the way to work. It was the perfect time to inflict maximum carnage, and the most likely group were the ecoterrorists calling themselves Day One. Their insane goal was to bring down civilisation so humanity could start again. She'd read somewhere they welcomed the war because they thought it would hasten society's collapse.

Lifting her sweaty dark hair from her neck, she ran through her options. She could take the nearest stairs leading up to the street, but it would be dangerous if she got caught in a crush. The disturbance was coming from the top, so it might be better to stay on this level or go back to the platforms where she could jump on a train. But what if she got trapped down there? The screens hanging on every wall of the station to broadcast real-time news were no help. There was nothing about an attack, just another upbeat report about the war nobody believed they were winning.

When the conflict started, the only information the public were given was that it would be a short, sharp attack on Chinese military bases by America and its allies and would be over in weeks. That was eight months ago, and now there were rumours people were being drafted to fight on the ground in Southeast Asia. Everyone feared it was going to turn nuclear; many wondered why it hadn't already.

Her best option, Shareen decided, was to watch and wait. As the rhythm of the crowd

slowed and returned to normal, she released the grip on her handbag and flexed her fingers.

The constant alerts were to blame for this. People were strung so tightly they overreacted to the smallest things. The day before, she and the twins had nearly been trampled in the supermarket after someone knocked over a jar of pasta sauce. People heard splintering glass, saw the red crime-scene splatters on the floor, and panicked.

The same ripple of fear had passed through the carriage that morning when an iD alert came through about a potential attack in the city. A handful of people got off at the next stop, but most couldn't afford to put their lives on hold every time there was a warning. If she cancelled her job interview, she could lose her unemployment benefit for six months, and that was almost as unthinkable as an attack. Instead of going home, she'd muted the alerts and closed her eyes, but she couldn't relax in the stale carriage.

For the past seven weeks her bed had been a lumpy foam mattress on the floor of her grandmother's one-bedroom unit while the twins slept head to toe on the couch beside her. The uncertainty of their situation and worry about the war caused her to wake each night with a heavy weight on her chest.

She'd been forced to move to Sydney with its better job prospects to keep receiving unemployment benefits, leaving her husband Daniel behind in Minyaka. Even if there were jobs in the small town, no one would hire her now. She and the kids had temporary permission to live at Alma's public housing unit, but she would have to reapply every three months to stay there if they didn't find somewhere else. It was unfair to inflict a pair of boisterous five-year-olds on her grandmother. She wasn't well, and the strain became more obvious each day in the dark crescents under her eyes, but the chances of finding something affordable in the city were non-existent.

Daniel held onto the fantasy that he'd join them soon and they'd get their own place, but Shareen knew how hard it would be for him to find a job here. His criminal record had destroyed his social credit score, and the bastards weren't even finished with him yet. He was making just enough to keep himself alive by cooking and cleaning at a pub, just outside Minyaka, run by an old friend who refused to believe the lies. While he was grateful for the job, every day was an endurance test as he faced the stares and whispers of people he'd lived among this whole life, people who'd respected him until a short time ago. He needed to get away, but he wasn't eligible for unemployment because of his record, and Shareen couldn't support them all on her paltry payment. It barely covered food for her and the kids. Without Alma's help, they'd be in serious trouble. She had to get a job and make some money to keep her family together, but it was hard to stay hopeful as the war dragged on and food and water rationing got stricter.

As more people emerged from the platforms, the line spilled across the concourse and turned into a stagnant pool of bodies. Although the open space was designed for ventilation, the air felt as hot and close as it did on the train. Shareen shifted her weight from one foot to the other and tried to ignore the biting pain in her heels from her cheap shoes. Her navy pencil skirt and white blouse were remnants from her working days before the twins were born. They

used to be a perfect fit but now they hung loosely from her gaunt frame. Once, she would have enjoyed doing her hair and makeup for an interview, but she'd barely found the energy to dab on some mascara and lip gloss that morning.

The screen to her right showed the time as 8:21 a.m. She had less than ten minutes to get to the interview. Compulsory wrist iDs were supposed to put an end to delays like this when they'd replaced mobile phones two years earlier. The government claimed random checkpoints were needed to catch terrorists, but this didn't make much sense when iDs monitored everyone twenty-four hours a day. It was more likely the checkpoints were used to keep people in a state of fear, and they worked.

The Agency warned clients to add extra travel time for "unforeseeable circumstances," which was another way of saying they wouldn't accept any excuses for being late. At the front of the line, the transit officers who were supposed to be checking iDs stood around in their heavy combat gear and chatted amongst themselves. They didn't seem concerned by the order they'd obviously received to stop letting people through. Shareen wanted to yell at them to get the line moving. Instead, she bit her lip and turned towards the escalators.

Only a couple of people coasted down now. It was strange to see them empty in peak hour, but the transit cops at the top had probably blocked anyone entering until the gridlock cleared down here. She glanced at the time again. Eight minutes to get to her interview. If the line started moving in the next minute or two, she could just make it. The officers roared with laughter, as if this was all a big joke for them, and she wanted to slap every one of their faces.

As she glared in the direction of the cops, there was a flurry of movement to her right and she turned to see a woman in a red dress bolting down the escalator with the jerky movements of a puppet. She looked terrified. When she reached the bottom, she dropped the folder she was carrying, and sheets of paper fluttered around her like doves. Her pinned hair fell over face as she bent to retrieve them. She swatted it from her eyes and glanced back up the escalator before she scurried towards the platforms and disappeared into the crowd.

Shareen stared at the empty escalators and wondered what had rattled the woman so badly. She gasped and covered her mouth when a huge black figure in heavy combat gear appeared at the top. At the same moment, the crowd seemed to take a collective breath in. Unlike the transit cops, the figure's helmet completely obscured his face, leaving only a narrow slit for the eyes. Despite the heat, he wore heavy gloves on his hands. His barrelled chest and massive arms gave the impression of a walking weapon. He didn't seem to be in a hurry as he stepped onto the moving stairway and looked from side to side in a mechanical motion. Shareen realised with a start she was seeing her first Auto-Enforcer.

"Here comes RoboCop," someone muttered behind her.

Now she knew why the escalator crowd had been skittish. Despite all the government's efforts to prepare the public for walking robots, people were still freaked out by them. It didn't help that the AEs were introduced to detain terrorist suspects just after the war started.

Thousands had been arrested, and many had not been heard from since. There were rumours they were being held at the new Super-Precinct at Paramatta, but the government didn't have to tell their families where they were. They could arrest people and hold them without charge for as long as they wanted to. A new fleet of AEs had been unleashed in the city to "maintain order," but she hadn't expected to encounter one so soon. They were still a rare enough sight that people were fascinated by them, but she guessed that would change soon.

With its head slightly raised, like an animal sniffing for prey, it swivelled in Shareen's direction. Her stomach plummeted as it strode off the escalator and came through the gates towards her. AEs could identify everyone in a public space through their iDs, and she felt sorry for whoever it was looking for. Most people ahead scrambled out of the way as it got nearer, and she wanted to follow them, but she couldn't afford to give up her place in the line. Instead, she took a few steps forward. She wasn't going to lose her only source of income because she was afraid of a robot.

When the AE got closer, she saw a piercing white light inside its helmet where eyes should be. It was less than ten metres away now. She had no choice but to move, but before she could step out of its path, an emotionless voice only she could hear came through her iD earpiece. "Shareen Miller, remain where you are."

As the machine bore down on her, Shareen's joints locked. For one terrifying moment, it seemed like it was going to stride right over her, leaving her broken and twisted like storm debris. Instead, it stopped abruptly, and she strained her neck to squint up at it.

"You are being detained for questioning," it said in her earpiece. The colossal body demanded obedience as it loomed over her with its head tilted forward slightly.

"I think you've made a mistake." Shareen drew herself to her full height in an attempt to look brave, but the tremor in her voice gave her away. She didn't know if it was possible to have a conversation with one of these things, but she wasn't going to let it take her away without a fight. The families of those who'd vanished during the terrorist purges claimed they'd done nothing wrong. "Can you tell me what this is about?"

She tried to meet someone's eye in the crowd, but the gates were back in operation and the spectators were draining away through the exit. Now that the AE had found its target, they were in a hurry to get back to their lives. The transit cops watched from their post, clearly not wanting to get involved. She looked at them imploringly, but they only stared back.

"You need to come for questioning," said the robot in her earpiece.

"I'm not going anywhere," Shareen said in a louder voice. "I want to talk to a real person please."

The AE didn't move or speak, it just loomed over her for an uncomfortably long time. She could hear a faint whirring underneath its armour. Her breath came out in short, sharp gasps and her bladder spasmed.

“Well, now, what’s going on here?” boomed a hearty male voice from behind.

She turned to see a transit cop with curly brown hair approaching. His eyes were hidden behind a dark visor, but his stride was loose and relaxed as he stood next to the AE. Beside the robot, he looked small and harmless. Relief flooded through her.

“Am I glad to see you,” she said, putting her hand to her heart. The ordeal was almost over, and she might still have time to make it to her interview. “This is a mistake. I need to get to a job—”

The man cut her off. “Are you refusing to cooperate?”

Shareen did a double take. “No, of course not, but I don’t need to be taken for questioning—”

“Being the infinitely patient person that I am, I’ll ask you again. Are you refusing to cooperate?”

She narrowed her eyes. She had to stay calm, but who did this man think he was? “I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what this is about. I have rights, you know.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Before she could flinch, the man seized her arm and kicked her feet out from under her. Her cheek bounced on the concrete floor and her arms were wrenched up behind her back. It happened so quickly she didn’t have time to scream. He might as well have punched her in the face. The man snapped handcuffs on her while she was on the ground and dragged her painfully to her feet.

“She’s all yours, mate,” he said as the AE took hold of her upper arm with a vice-like grip. The transit officer sauntered back towards his colleagues without a backward glance and she half-expected to see them high-five each other.

Shareen sobbed openly as the AE pulled her towards the gate. A few people looked at her as they passed, but quickly averted their eyes when they saw her face. Only one woman approached with Shareen’s handbag, which had fallen off her shoulder when the cop kicked her to the ground. The AE snatched it from the woman’s outstretched hand.

“Move on,” it said.

Shareen wanted to yell out her name and ask the woman to contact Daniel or Alma and let them know what was happening to her, but she feared what they might do if she made a scene.

“This can’t be happening,” she said out loud as she was pulled towards the bowels of the station. She didn’t expect the AE to answer her, and she jumped when it spoke in her earpiece.

“You’re being taken for questioning as an unauthorised entrant.”

“An unauthorised entrant to what?” she sputtered.

“The economic zone.”

“I don’t even know what that means. I’m just on my way to a job interview. I’m not a terrorist, for God’s sake.”

The AE didn’t reply this time but continued to propel her past shops and cafes where people were lined up to buy breakfast. The aroma of roasted coffee beans and toasted sandwiches belonged to another reality where women like her couldn’t be assaulted and snatched by robots on the way to a job interview. The shiny new part of the station gave way to a dank corridor and the robot stopped in front of a door that almost blended in completely with the grey walls around it. She’d never make the interview now, but she’d settle for just going home to her children. She could deal with the consequences of the missed interview later. There was a real possibility she could be locked up and no one would know what had happened to her.

The door clicked open, and the AE released the cuffs from her wrists, returned her handbag, and pushed her inside. It didn’t follow. She looked back to see its hulking frame disappear behind the closing door. The hum of the city cut out abruptly. Not long ago, her arrest would have been filmed by multiple people on their mobile phones, but now it was illegal to take photos and videos in public. “Citizen journalists” weren’t needed when surveillance cameras and iDs captured everything, so the government claimed. Even if someone had managed to film what had happened, there was nowhere left to post it. The emergency government controlled all channels, and social media was another casualty of the war on terror. People had lost their appetite for selfies when they realised they were being used to create a web they could never escape from, but by then, it was already far too late.

Ahead of her stretched a dim corridor lined with identical doors. Her iD was frozen with a padlock symbol on the screen. She looked around for a clue about what she was supposed to do next. Each door had a number, beginning at one on her left.

“Hello?” she called, taking a tentative step forward.

“Proceed to room eight,” said a flat female voice in her earpiece.

Her footsteps kept time with her pounding heart as she made her way past closed doors. The AE had said she was an unauthorised entrant. She’d only heard those words used to describe illegal aliens and terrorists, and she didn’t see how she could be mistaken for one of those. And what was the economic zone?

The door to number eight slid open as she approached, and Shareen paused on the threshold before stepping inside. The door clicked softly as it closed behind her. Apart from a plastic table and two chairs in the centre, the windowless room was empty. It reminded her of the cramped booths at the Agency, where she’d had to sit every week for the last six months and explain why she still didn’t have a job. These interviews could easily be conducted remotely, but their real purpose was punishment. This room seemed to be designed for the same reason. The fluorescent lighting and white walls hurt her eyes, and the only relief came from a screen mounted on the wall that looked like a deep, black pool. She longed to dive into it and disappear.

Shareen moaned as she put her bag on the table and sat down. There was a lump forming under the skin on her cheekbone, and the pain sharpened when she probed it with her fingers. Apart from the bruise, she seemed to be OK, but that was no thanks to the brute who'd assaulted her.

How could a man kick a woman to the ground like that and get away with it? Her anger was molten lava in her veins, but she had to stay focused. There was a chance this was a misunderstanding. No one could mistake her for an extremist. Until eight months ago, she'd been a police-officer's wife and stay-at-home mother, living a simple life in the country. Daniel's troubles had put an end to that, but his superiors had made it clear that the small-time drug-dealing he'd uncovered amongst his colleagues was of no importance to anyone. They'd looked the other way as he was framed for the crime he'd tried to report, and his career and reputation were razed to the ground. He'd miraculously avoided jail time so far, but his former friends continued to taunt him for their own amusement. She and Daniel had both believed it would be safer for the kids in the city, where the sheer number of people would protect them from retribution, but maybe they'd been naive in thinking his enemies' tentacles couldn't reach this far.

Her eyes darted around the blank room, seeking relief from the distressing thoughts circling in her head. They landed on something carved on the table. There were two letters: *TC*. Probably someone's initials. How many other people had been brought here as unauthorised entrants or terrorist suspects? There were no traces of them, apart from these scratched marks.

Faint footsteps sounded in the corridor. She looked towards the door, waiting for it to slide open, but nothing happened. For several moments, she sat completely still, straining for more sounds of life. All she could make out was the distant rumbling of trains in the tunnels below, accompanied by an almost imperceptible shivering of the walls.

No matter what happened, she would be calm and cooperative. She needed to know why she was here, and she couldn't give them any more reasons to assault her. As she dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled tissue from the bottom of her bag, Shareen thought about what the AE had said. Was Wynyard now a restricted zone? She should have received an alert on her iD warning her not to get off. But she'd muted all alerts while she was on the train, and she hadn't checked them while she was waiting in the line because the time was on the screens. She glanced at her wrist, but her iD was still frozen.

"Shit." Shareen smacked her hand hard on the table. An alert about travel restrictions had come through on her iD when she got on the train, but she didn't think it applied to Wynyard. This probably had nothing to do with Daniel, and if she could convince the Agency it had been a simple mistake, everything might still be fine.

She was feeling slightly better when the screen on the wall came to life, causing her to jump like she'd been stung with a taser. A woman with short black hair and perfect makeup smiled down at her. Behind the woman was an open-plan office full of equally well-groomed people sitting at desks. They all wore the visors that had replaced computer monitors and tapped away at wafer-thin keyboards. The woman didn't seem concerned to see Shareen's bruised, tear-stained face.

“Please state your full name and date of birth,” she said in a pleasant voice.

It was obviously a test because they had all her information. She had no choice but to obey.

“Shareen Miller. Thirteenth September 2001.”

“Citizenship Number.”

“One three five zero one two two C.”

“Address?”

“Two twenty-five Rosella Crescent, Narwee.”

“Employment?”

“I’m unemployed. I was on my way to a job interview when I was detained.” She was tempted to say assaulted, but she didn’t want to make things worse.

“Children?”

“A son and a daughter. Twins.”

“Age?”

“Five.”

“Close family?”

“My husband Daniel, grandmother Alma, and sister Layla. That’s it.”

“Parents?”

“My father died when I was young, and I don’t know where my mother is.” Shareen fumed as she tried to match the woman’s tone. This was so intrusive.

“Please state your business in the economic zone.”

“I was on my way to a job interview. I didn’t know I needed special permission to get off here, and I muted my alerts so I could sleep on the train. I only just moved back to Sydney, and I didn’t know anything about these restrictions.”

“Only authorised commuters are permitted to exit at Wynyard Station. You do not have authorisation to disembark here.”

“Yes, I realise this now.” She tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. “I don’t understand why they didn’t tell me this at the gate. That robot could have cleared all this up in a second. A transit cop kicked me to the ground. Can you see the bruise on my face?” She pointed to her cheekbone, which felt like a golf ball was lodged under it. “He did this to me.”

“It’s standard policy to bring all unauthorised entrants in for questioning.” The woman’s gaze was unwavering. “Transit officers are permitted to use reasonable force when a subject doesn’t comply.”

“All I asked was that they tell me what it was about. I’ve missed a job interview because of this. You’ll need to let the Agency know so I don’t lose my payments, and I want to make a serious complaint about the way I was treated by that cop. There was no need for it.”

“We are reviewing your case now.” The woman stared at her for thirty seconds with the same frozen expression while a computer somewhere decided her fate. It was eerie. “Your detainment did not breach any of our guidelines,” she finally said. “There is no right of appeal to this decision. You are now free to leave. You have been granted temporary authorisation to exit this station but will need to reapply for future trips.”

The door slid open without a sound and Shareen rose to her feet before the woman could disappear. “Listen,” she implored. “It’s very important that you contact the Agency for me and explain why I couldn’t go to the interview. I can’t lose my payments; we have no money. My husband lost his job and—”

“Auto Security takes no responsibility for any adverse personal outcomes resulting from your detainment. It is your responsibility to make sure you have the correct authorisation for travel.”

“No.” Shareen waved her arms at the screen. “Please, don’t go.” As she looked at the woman’s unchanging expression, the truth became obvious, and she sank back down into the seat with a groan. She wasn’t real; she’d been talking to a computer program. Shareen had dealt with a few fake people through the Agency, but they’d been obviously computer generated. Their official name was VirtHu, short for virtual human, but everyone called them virts, and they were perfect for these jobs because everything was black and white to them, and they couldn’t be swayed by emotions. Her stomach lurched as she watched the other figures working in the background. It was becoming impossible to know what was real anymore.

“Thank you for your time and have a good day,” said the virt. Its frozen smile lingered for a few seconds before the scene dissolved into blackness.

Shareen dropped her head into her hands and sagged onto the table. Survival was hard enough in this insane city on unemployment with two kids to support. How was she supposed to live on nothing? They could end up in one of the homeless camps of white tents that had started to pop up like clusters of mushrooms around the city. Daniel was already buckling under the guilt. This could destroy him. She had to somehow find the strength for all of them.

“Pull yourself together, Shareen,” she said. With a deep breath, she straightened up and smoothed back her hair, then gathered her bag. She would find a way to get through this because she had no other choice. They’d already used their allocation for food vouchers and weren’t entitled to any more for a year, but they could eat at soup kitchens and live off tinned food if they had to. At least they had a home, however temporary, and Alma knew how to make things last. It was only for six months. Unlike many people who’d been detained by the AEs, she could go home to her children, and that was something she’d taken for granted until now.

The AE was still there when she emerged through the main door into the station. Its head

swivelled to follow her as she passed.

“Thank you for your time,” it said in her earpiece.

“Fuck you, machine,” she replied, but only in her head.