

Between Ones and Zeros

Chapter 1

Her eyes flicked upwards, pupils dilated by oxycodone took a moment to snap into a semblance of focus the image of the dark suited man stood motionless at the foot of her hospital bed; her eyes twitched as she pulled at memories to match the formal pose of the still figure studying her prone form, the male every inch the classic FBI cliché; yet more questions for her? Weariness dropped as a pebble found gravity, kick-starting the released small stone into motion towards distant water held captive far below in a darkened well, her mouth parted slightly as the yellowed eyes of the man set opposite bored straight through her, as though her features were merely an obstacle for his focus on the sweat-stained pillow propping up her short hair plastered across her cropped head.

‘Who are you with?’ Her tongue darted outwards, an attempt made to moisten her lips, the lady laying prone in the hospital bed had to force her eyes away from the unblinking gaze of the suited figure, those yellow eyes continued with their unrelenting stare.

‘Professor Annabel Kuffi.’ The dark suited man spoke quietly, emotion absent in the calm tones emitted, a New York twang clearly present in his accent.

‘Storm chaser extraordinaire, darling of the academic stage, always one step ahead of any given mesocyclone, social media at the ready to cover your exploits...’

Kuffi gritted her teeth, a glance taken down to her splinted legs liberally covered in plastic resin, various strands of metal emitted through the translucent pink resin forming a supportive mesh; her eyes inevitably sucked back up and towards the yellow, unfeeling dual crescents set unflinchingly upon her.

‘I have offered everything I know, many times over.’ The lady lain at a slight angle to the horizontal, Kuffi’s voice absent of her characteristic, bombastic energy.

‘To my fellows in the tropical cyclone academic community, to the local law enforcement community.’ Her eyes twitched, forefingers pressed against her thumbs, Kuffi gave an errant swallow, the realisation unveiled as the pebble completed its fall, water tension stood little chance as air changed to fluid, so the rounded rock vanished from sight.

‘Who are you with?’

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‘Good question.’ The man gave a single shrug, clearly an athletic figure hidden beneath the suit jacket, trousers.

‘For many years I thought I worked as part of a specialist division within the FBI, now I am a little unsure, but today I find myself here very much on Federal orders.’

A pause, the man formed a hollow smile on his lips.

‘Forgive my rudeness, I am FBI Agent David Burrows.’

‘Your office?’ Kuffi glanced to her right, chubby forefinger and middle figure pressed assertively once, twice at a domed switch built into a side table, the only signal being the microswitch clicking, no distant buzzing noise usually to be heard.

‘No, Professor Kuffi, I wanted a little time with you without interruption.’

Burrows emitted a deep sigh, his hands offered outwards, palms first.

‘The button to request outside help has been disconnected, as have the closed circuit video cameras.’

The dark suited man tilted his head slightly to one side, a frown formed, superimposing lines over his furrowed forehead.

‘Let us take it as a given I am well aware of your celebrity storm chaser status, the articles you have written, seminars given.’ Burrows paused, his eyebrows drawn momentarily together.

‘Yet the larger than life personality, the lady who will willingly ride out to the centre of the storm; I do not see this lady here?’

‘Your eyes.’ Kuffi punched out the words. ‘I recognise the patterns from so many storms, so many patterns of wind currents studied and re-studied across the decades.’

The large framed, tall lady broke eye contact with the suited man stood at the foot of her hospital bed, a half chuckle burbled from deep within her chest.

‘A pattern of events, set in motion, building to a cyclonic climax, natural rage and destructive fury.’ A slow sigh blew out her lips.

‘Always figured it would be a storm that would get me, bring me harm, I don’t see any fidelity, bravery or integrity in front of me right here, present in you.’

The frown lines eased away on the man’s furrowed features, his left hand started a staccato dance on the metal structure encasing her left leg.

‘Professor Annabel Kuffi, you misunderstand my intent.’ A shake of his head, turning to one side, a chair twirled on one leg and the FBI Agent sat down.

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‘My interest lies in a rival group of storm chasers, their technology has a characteristic mark of one we would be interested in talking to...’

‘Tism? Janet and Jodi-Bluebell?’ A disparaging tone entered Kuffi’s voice, her nose twitched.

‘Nothing but keen, pootling amateurs, they talk of the noble Science higher ground yet they have nowhere near the data pool I have, my command over tornadoes.’ A pause, Kuffi’s small, pudgy eyes flashed.

‘You want to know about tornadoes, I’m your lady.’

‘And yet, here you lie in a hospital bed, your Humvee smashed flat while the rival team not only secured their data but rescued you in the process?’ Burrows played out his fine fishing line, allowing the salmon the space to dart and dance, designed to let the fish play and run, tire herself out.

‘We were unlucky, simple as that.’ Kuffi spat out the words. ‘The next time I see Tism in Lincoln I will run him off the road.’ Her hands gestured outwards.

‘We all play the weather patterns by probability, just my turn spinning the dime to hit tails facing upwards.’

‘And yet?’ Burrows had his elbows dug into the back of the seat, his chin resting on his steepled fingers.

‘This Tism and his crew, from Lincoln Nebraska?’ An affirmative nod from the lady with her chin jutting outwards, Burrows continued, his yellow eyes zeroed in on his prey.

‘Something different about Tism’s run this time? To get so close to the tornado and safely make it out, dancing from within that giant mesocyclone to safety, so the highway patrol at the scene described it?’

Kuffi froze, her mouth slightly parted, eyes blinking rapidly, the words breathed out, a struggle to hear them.

‘You are right, Tism does not have the radar technology, the weather forecasting, the computational power to process the storm’s evolving pattern; certainly not of that magnitude, on that day.’ A nervous look up to the suited figure who was slowly unfolding his limbs from the chair, returning to stand upright once again.

‘Something very different about Tism’s run this time.’ A shake of her fleshy shoulders, a look of surprise at this insight. ‘That’s all I have Agent Burrows, I would recommend you

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speak to Tism at Janet's coffee house in Lincoln for more information.' Her eyes flickered, uncomprehending, an attempt to process information faltered.

'I need to think this through.' A swift lick of her lips. 'Think this through...'

'Thank you Professor Kuffi.' The suited figure stood at ease, his left hand reached up to his jacket lapel, a button clicked.

'That.' Burrows gestured at the small device being unfolded from his jacket, safely stored in a pocket. 'A communicator, the information you have kindly given has been overheard by a fellow FBI Agent, Agent Sian; she will follow up the lead you have offered.'

'So we're done?' An almost pleading tone in the sudden change heard within her voice, Kuffi looked upwards at the man who palmed a patch from his left trouser pocket, exhaustion heard as well as clearly evident splayed across her features.

'You see, my concern Professor Kuffi is that Agent Sian likes to leave a lot of hats on the ground, and when she cannot gain the information she needs from Tism, Janet, Jodi-Bluebell, she will come back for you, to ask you again for any further insights.'

A shrug from the athletic figure within the suit.

'There is information and there is information, I think we're done here, don't you?'

'I, I don't understand...' The words ground to a halt in Kuffi's throat.

'You would hurt me? I have given you what you wanted, the information you asked for?'

'Professor Kuffi, I understand you are allergic to shellfish, that is correct?'

Burrows did not give the lady lain on the bed a chance to respond, her mouth opening to scream now swamped by a pillow rapidly applied by one hand, a patch swiftly unpeeled by the other hand and applied to her neck, flesh swiftly turning from a chalky white to inflamed red, the convulsions in the patient swiftly came to a halt.

'You see, Professor.' Burrows was working quickly, the pillows rearranged, still, Kuffi's bulging eyes cast forever upwards, an inflamed tongue and neck clear evidence of an anaphylactic reaction.

'You have experienced living in that grey of life or death, I could offer you a day or more of life now but when Sian does not get what she wants in Lincoln, then death would certainly be the chosen resolve.' A subtle shrug quickly smoothed out through the suit fabric.

'I cannot risk you offering any more detail or information that could signpost Sian towards Tolland, and for that I am sorry.'

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Those yellow eyes held within a human mask lacking any semblance of emotion gave one final scan of the hospital room, a single nod to himself, FBI Agent David Burrows quietly opened the door to the small room, brisk steps taken away.