

Chapter 10: Little Sister

She's short, the sister. Darker than Angela, but they have the same face. The eyes are a little intense, and she looks like somebody who's used to getting her own way. As girls do. My mother says all human relations can be summed up in two sentences: Boys tease. Girls are bossy.

Slash seems to take an immediate dislike to this one, name of Tina. "Do you know anything about Guy Touquet?" he inquires.

"Cheez, you do get right down to business, don'tcha?" She's sitting at the kitchen table with a little brown dog in her lap. It's a dachshund, a hot dog with four legs and a pretty face.

"Sorry, but this whole thing has been driving me nuts. This person or machine or whatever. Says it's taking over everything. It's ridiculous, I know, but . . ." Slash sits opposite Tina at the table, salt and pepper shakers and a napkin holder between them.

"Yes. Well. You want to know if it's possible," Angela says. "Could a computer own assets? Buy and sell them? Run a business?" Tina shrugs.

"Could one?"

"Could an eleven-year-old?"

"You're telling me you run a business?"

"Not exactly, but I own property, and I buy and sell. On-line auctions. Programmed trading. I'm a hacker, didn't you hear?"

"So that's how my . . . my . . ." He stammers for a second. ". . . my Guy. That's how my computer guy knows you? As a hacker?"

"That would be funny."

"Funny how?"

"Hackers are not meant to be known."

"You're a hacker, then."

"Right. Picked it up in Rome. From my cousin. She's an MBA and a genius, and she helped me get started when we went back there last year. It's addictive, programming. You get instant feedback. I can hardly get up from the computer. My big sister thinks I should get a life."

"What's this programmed trading? Sounds like online gambling. You're into that?"

"All you need is a credit card. Once you get plastic you can do pretty much anything. I put together some birthday money, started a bank account with an ATM card, signed up for online banking, and it got easy after that."

"How much are you worth?"

"More than any amount of money. None of your business." She points her thumb at me. "What's the deal with him? Does he talk?" I haven't taken a seat, and I'm backing away from the table. A white cat is rubbing against my leg.

Tina strikes me as a tough customer. Sometimes you run across a little kid who scares you. Not that this one is all that little. She's small enough, all right, but she's also smart-talking and smart-seeming, and she thinks she's grown up. You get the feeling she'll take you in any sort of mental contest. So I have to close my mouth to answer her.

"I might talk when I'm not listening. I was listening. You're saying a computer can do what this computer guy claims to be doing."

"You think a computer can talk to you like a person?" She obviously thinks I'm an idiot.

"OK, so it's not possible. Slash should forget about the whole thing. It's a fraud."

"Boys are idiots. Does it have to be one or the other? You're the dude that wants to debate human extinction, right?"

"How did you know that?" I'm wearing a foolish look, I'm sure.

"My sister's in the club with you, remember? Suppose you're right. Suppose human beings are a cancer on the earth. Where does that leave me? Where's it leave you?" She waits for me to say something. I don't.

"Suppose it's true that around the time I turn 60, a big chunk of Greenland ice is going to slide into the Atlantic Ocean." She's glaring at me and petting the dog at the same time. "That's gonna make a #&*# of a splash. Some people are saying there won't be drinking water within 50 miles of here after the river backs up. This room will be under water.

"Did you know Southern California is turning into a desert? Where your food comes from? Over 200 different kinds of frogs and toads will be extinct in our lifetime. Two degrees climate change and they're dead. Forever."

My slack jaw reforms itself to a grimace. She starts pointing her finger.

"You, you're worried whether you'll reach five feet before age 21. Well, here's something to worry about." She brings her little fist down on the table, hard.

I speak. "There's going to be a lot of praying, is what you're saying." It's a tentative suggestion, an effort at wit.

"Might as well pray to the Tooth Fairy. This boy's Guy" she points at Slash, "claims he's going to solve all that. How is this a bad thing?"

"Don't get so worked up about it." I caution her.

"You should be worked up about it. Our parents and grandparents are planning to stick us with a huge mess and no solutions. Their so-called democracy is a joke, and the people who run it are crooks. They demolished two skyscrapers with people in them in front of our parents' eyes, and they pretended to pretend it didn't happen. You know what an albatross is?"

I shrug. "Some sort of bird"

"It's a big white sea bird, lives on some of the most deserted coasts on the planet. They find their skeletons in the sand a thousand miles from the closest town and where their stomach ought to be there's a pile of disposable cigarette lighters, bottle caps and tiny bits of plastic bag. They fill their bellies with our trash until there's no room for fish and they die of hunger. There's an island of plastic trash the size of Iowa in the South Pacific, where the ocean currents come together, and it's getting bigger. You can read about all this and see pictures if you have the stomach. You hear the grown-ups talk about global-this and postmodern-that as if it's nothing. It *is* cancer." She's so hot, she has to catch her breath.

She lowers her voice and slows down. "They have a lot to be ashamed of, the grown-ups. In the meantime, while they're popping pills to try to keep back the tears, you people, the smart kids, so-called, are trying to decide whether to go to film school or take up #&*& basket-weaving."

"Look," Slash cuts in, "I didn't come here for a lecture."

"Yeah, well, you get one anyway. Free of charge. You want to know whether a computer can control the world by acquiring assets on its own account. I doubt it. Guy Touquet is a braggart of a computer.

"But I'm sure you both know that a computer can buy and sell property, run businesses, direct human beings, and make lots of money. They already do it all the time. Could a computer arrange to have somebody killed? Can't imagine why it would want to, but yeah, I guess so."