

# GIANTKILLER

by Ben Jeapes

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Parking her buggy in the close, Jacqui Dunmore – salesperson extraordinaire, company troubleshooter – noticed the man because he smiled at her.

‘Good morning,’ he said, and carried on walking. He appeared to be out for a stroll.

‘Good morning,’ she said back with her best dazzling smile, and promptly forgot him.

All she had seen of the estate so far was spotless, and so it should be. The guard at the gate had scowled at the two-year-old registration on the buggy, as if to demand what she thought she was doing, taking that heap of junk through the wall (thirty feet tall, sloping outward, topped with razor-wire) into the sacred environs of Warren Court estate. But her pass was beyond reproach; her presence was approved by the Residents’ Committee and she was licensed to sell.

She gave herself a quick once-over. Non-stick coat (for the water, paint or worse): check. Non-permanent humane dog dazer: check. Sunny disposition: check. Time to go. The potentially lucrative Warren Court franchise was making no progress despite the best predictions of the Marketing Department and she was going to find out why.

The street pattern of the estate resembled a giant, fern-like fractal, each frond a close holding ten or twenty deluxe residences. She walked up the nearest, spotless garden path; past the immaculate, even grass and up to the pristine front door. This was Number One. She rang the bell.

‘Hello?’ said a disembodied voice. Jacqui looked up at the camera over the door, smiled and held up her ID.

‘Hello! My name is Jacqui Dunmore and I’m an agent for Custom Homes-’

*Bzzzzzz.*

She rang the bell again.

‘What?’ The voice verged on irritated.

‘I assure you, I’ve been accredited by the Residents’ Committee, so you really have nothing to fear. I’m not one of those-’

*Bzzzzzz.*

‘But you are,’ Jacqui muttered, and left for Number Two.

'You can answer this question with a simple yes or no,' said the intercom. 'Are you selling something?'

'Um-'

*Bzzzzz.*

By the time she had gone all around the close to Number Fifteen and ended up back where she started, Jacqui was beginning to feel discouraged.

And then she saw the man again.

She noticed something she hadn't noticed before. His clothes were ... well, not bad, not ragged or anything, but ... like her buggy. A couple of years old, which was well past the use-by date for Warren Court.

In other words, he probably wasn't a resident either.

'You look down,' he said. She had let her professional smile slip and she fixed it firmly in place again.

'They're cagey, aren't they?' she said.

'Who?'

He also sounded out-of-place. There was a hint of Irish there, which was not at all the estate's intended catchment area and appeared only rarely in her own social circle.

'The people who live here,' she said.

'You're in the wrong place if you want people,' he said with a beam. 'You'll find people in the next close, but this one's too new, you see. They just finished the houses here and the first residents move in next week.'

Okay, she had met Warren Court's resident loon.

'Look,' she said, 'I have just spoken to the intercoms of fifteen-'

There was something in the way he was looking at her. Let her work it out, it was saying.

'Rich people,' he said.

'Yes, and I've-'

'Minimum required income, two hundred grand.'

'And-'

'Can afford the best.'

'Listen-'

'Of everything.'

'See-'

It began to sink in.

‘Everything?’ she said.

\* \* \*

I thought only big companies used them,’ Jacqui said. She was grateful for the coffee that the man, Joseph, had served back at his apartment. He was a resident after all: he had one of the smallest places, not much more than a studio, on the edge of the estate, up against the wall.

‘They’re moving into the private home, now,’ he said. ‘Another year and everyone will have them. It’s still only the really expensive models that can hold a conversation.’

‘So what was I holding with them?’ Jacqui asked.

‘That was just some basic neural networks either stonewalling you or taking what you said and throwing it straight back at you. Imagine a bright parrot and you have those things. Artificial, but not what we’d call intelligent.’

‘You know a lot about them?’

‘My job.’

‘Yes, your job!’ It dawned on Jacqui that, apart from being the first person to act with any kind of decency that she had met on the estate, she didn’t know his job yet. ‘What is that?’

‘Father Joseph Loughlin, of the Catholic Alliance Mission.’

Father ...

Childhood associations from a convent education welled up inside her, but she remembered her training. *You may meet transvestites, paedophiles, Satanists or just plain weirdos. But they’re the customers, so be polite.* And she hadn’t come top of the training class for nothing. Manners took over.

‘Jacqui Dunmore, of Custom Homes.’

‘Ah, yes.’ He nodded. ‘The holographic wallpaper people.’

‘You’ve heard of us?’ She was pleased.

‘Wall hangings, pictures, other fixtures and furniture available through add-on modules.’ He smiled. ‘I’ve seen your ads, but you’re a bit out of my wage group.’

When he said ‘wage group’, the words ‘minimum required income, two hundred grand’ floated up from the back of her mind.

‘Can I ask, very nicely and with no offence intended, what you’re doing here, then?’ she said.

‘Do you know what the Church gets each year? It earns the pants off these people. No, Warren Court has been dubbed an area of Extreme Spiritual Need by my superiors, so here I am. The apartment is owned by the Holy Father, through one means or another.’

‘I thought the inner cities had the Extreme Spiritual Need.’

'Lady, where have you been? They hit the bottom long ago and are bouncing back nicely. But this place ... Now, I can't believe a swish outfit like yours' still uses door-to-dooring, so what are you doing here?'

Jacqui had no reason to hide anything.

'We've tried several sales campaigns here at Warren Court already,' she said. 'Direct mail, phone, fax, e-mail, and not one of them has made a sale. Not one!'

'That's terrible,' Joseph said, with a completely straight face.

'So, I'm here to see why not, and to drum up some business. I don't normally door-to-door but this morning was by way of reconnaissance.'

'And now you know the problem.'

'I do indeed.' She put down her cup. 'Thanks for the chat, Joseph, I did need it, but I've got to-'

'-go and talk to a bunch of moronic artificial intelligences who won't give you the time of day, let alone open the door for you.'

He was right, but she didn't want to admit it. Technology moved too fast. When she had done her training there had been no question of being bamboozled by AIs. Buckets of water, rottweilers, feigned deafness – she could deal with all of those. But AIs?

'So what would you suggest?' she asked. He shrugged.

'You and I have the same basic aims. Get past the front doors, plug the product. We could join up.'

She was certain that the sincerity of her smile could not be doubted as she contemplated the thought of having a priest breathing down her neck.

'That's very kind of you-'

'-but you would just love to make use of the complete database that I have of every AI on the Warren Court estate,' he said. It wasn't quite how Jacqui had planned to finish her sentence but it did change her mind quite nicely.

'Show me,' she said.

\* \* \*

'Door-to-dooring is outmoded,' Joseph said. They stood outside Number Twenty, Pineview Drive. This road, Joseph promised, did have human inhabitants. 'So are most forms of direct marketing, but door-to-dooring especially. Imagine us back in the nineteenth century, when anyone who was anyone had servants to answer the door. Can you imagine door-to-dooring then? You might talk to a lot of butlers but you would never get past them to the master of the house.'

'No one has a butler nowadays,' Jacqui protested.

‘No, but they have the next best thing.’ Joseph consulted his pocket infocard, a wafer of flexible liquid crystal. ‘Ah, yes. The Harrisons, and a Syn-Science Personality Simulator, version five, between us and them. Slightly behind in the latest developments, these people. Observe.’

Joseph pressed the intercom button.

‘Yes?’

‘Hello, my name is Joseph. I work for the Catholic Alliance Mission on-’

That hateful buzz! It would haunt Jacqui’s nightmares. Joseph winked and pressed the button again.

‘Yes?’ It was exactly the same disinterested tone as the last time.

‘I have an urgent delivery of blood plasma for the occupant requiring his signature,’ said Joseph, poker faced. The door slid open.

*The door slid open!* Through it Jacqui saw a lobby. Nicely decorated, Mondrians hanging on the wall, other doors leading off it-

She took a step forward and a hand on her shoulder pulled her back.

‘Sorry, wrong number,’ said Joseph. The door slid shut again and Jacqui felt like Moses, granted only a look at the Promised Land. She wanted to scream.

‘In case you hadn’t noticed, I just told a porky,’ Joseph said. ‘I’m not going to gain false entry into anyone’s home.’

‘But ... but ...’

‘Even if you don’t care about your immortal soul, Jacqui, it’s slightly illegal. Let’s see what Number Eighteen has to offer.’

Joseph led her to yet another door and again consulted his infocard.

‘Ha-hum,’ he said.

The usual ritual. Press button, wait ...

‘Yes?’

‘Excuse me, are you a human?’ said Joseph.

*‘What an odd question! Of course I am. Are you?’* said the voice.

Joseph grinned at Jacqui.

‘A fairly simple back-propagation algorithm,’ he murmured. ‘It can understand an extended natural language vocabulary and devise an answer to anything you say. Keep you nattering for hours on everything but what you want to talk about. Let’s try a simple verbal Turing test.’

He turned back to the intercom.

‘Please repeat after me, ‘I’m not a pheasant plucker I’m a pheasant plucker’s son and I’ll keep on plucking pheasants ‘til the pheasant plucking’s done.’”

The voice repeated his words flawlessly; the AI, Jacqui realised, was so mindless it didn't even have the gumption to ask why it should. Joseph asked it to repeat itself faster, and faster still, until it was gabbling the rhyme out in less than a second and still pronouncing everything perfectly.

Joseph led Jacqui away without comment, to Number Sixteen.

'This is good for a laugh,' he said. 'The most basic of all.'

He pressed the bell and said, 'An important message for the occupant. A matter of life and death.'

'Go on.'

'Esusjay oveslay ouyay, otherbray.'

'*Failure thirteen. Syntax error in input,*' said the intercom. They turned away, then Jacqui turned back and rang again.

'What time is it?' she asked.

'*Eleven forty three and seventeen seconds,*' the voice said.

'Okay, point taken,' Joseph said. 'They will give you the time of day.'

\* \* \*

Back at his place again, they debriefed.

'They all have 'em,' said Joseph. 'You have to remember what kind of people live here. People with so much that they can afford to closet themselves away from the real world.'

'I can understand that,' Jacqui said. 'The real world isn't very nice.' She remembered the cardboard city built in the lee of Warren Court's wall. She thought of the numerous locks and alarms in her own apartment the other side of town. She mused how nice it would be to be able to take a walk outside her front door without checking her bag for defence items first. For a brief moment, her perception of Warren Court wavered suspiciously close to sympathy for the dwellers.

'Irrelevant,' Joseph said, his flat dismissal knocking her daydream aside. 'It's there and it won't go away. These people, now, they don't need other people about them any more. They work from home by virtual reality to earn their daily bread and the home supplies their every need. Of course they can afford a simple AI or two to repel unwanted visitors. Anything from Outside that impinges on their cosy little worldview is a threat, but I expect religious callers are Public Enemy Number One and you lot are Number Two. You see, Jacqui, there is one problem with people like you and me that has always been the case, since long before AIs were heard of.'

'What's that?' Jacqui said eagerly. Joseph's smile was apologetic.

'We're irritating.'

'We are not!'

‘We damn well are. You’re sitting comfortably, looking at the news, or going about your job, or making love to your partner, and ... ding-dong!’ He put an inane grin on his face. ‘Good morning, sir, I represent-’

‘But we’re trained to deal with situations like that. We know what to say-’

‘Okay, you have defused my annoyance at your intrusion with your silken words. You describe your wares. I say no thank you and shut the door. Do you leave it at that?’

‘Of course not! I return-’

‘Exactly, and that is why we’re irritating. Irritating! My organisation has a history of bullying people into giving the right answer and we’re still trying to live it down. Our job is to present the information that we’re trying to impart in such a way that they can take it in without being threatened.’

‘That’s door-to-dooring dealt with, then,’ Jacqui said, ‘but that’s scut work and I’ve told you I don’t normally do it. There are other ways-’

‘The same principle applies. Don’t you dare take it upon yourself to tell others what to think, Jacqui. Suggest but don’t tell, don’t coerce.’

‘But-’ Jacqui said, aghast. Joseph held up a finger.

‘Exactly, but. But, these people won’t even go that far. They won’t even give us the chance to present the info. Quite apart from being totally unacceptable to any good missionary, there’s a far more sinister aspect. I’ll show you a sociological profile I had the computer work out. Jacqui, these people run the country! They make all the decisions that affect us. Not politicians, but businessmen, bankers, people of influence. And they can’t believe that other people really matter! They deal with you, me, everybody as theoretical entities, figures in a column of statistics. They’ve forgotten how to treat people as people, which is pretty well why the world is in the mess it is now, and as long as they hibernate their lives away here the situation will get worse. We don’t just have to reach them for their own sakes but for everyone’s.’

He turned back to the computer and called up a map.

‘You would do well to study this, Jacqui. I’ve got my own programs in the estate’s network, probing the opposition. Every home is protected in all directions but I can tell you the makes, model and efficiency of every single AI.’

‘Why are you telling me all this?’ Jacqui asked. The missionary glow in his eyes burned even brighter for a moment.

‘Because, although my dream is for each and every one to turn to the Holy Mother Church, I’ll be happy just to see them treat other human beings as human beings, and that even includes salespersons for Custom Homes. Sit down and I’ll show you around the system.’

Jacqui sat.

‘Everyone,’ Joseph said, ‘has a bulletin board of their own. And, anyone can leave a message on it! E-mail evangelism! Or selling. Or whatever. All of them have AIs filtering the messages that get through to their masters, but the AI hasn’t been invented yet that can distinguish between physical and spiritual well being. They have to let any message to do with physical life and death through, so as long as you phrase your messages in terms of spiritual life and death they get through as well, and you haven’t misrepresented yourself at all. Of course, how you’re going to apply spiritual life and death to holographic wallpaper remains to be seen. And if you’re too heavy handed they report you for threatening behaviour.’

‘What kind of messages do you send?’ Jacqui asked.

‘Thoughts for the day. Bible passages.’ He shrugged and the glow seemed to dim. ‘That sort of thing.’

Jacqui looked at him. For the first time Joseph was looking worried; tired, even.

‘Do you make many converts?’ she asked gently.

‘Not many. Not many at all.’

Then he convulsed in his seat. Something was blinking on the screen in front of him.

‘Good Lord, Jacqui, a message! *A message!*’

It was, indeed, a message. It was from the Bishop, informing Joseph that he was being transferred to the high-priority mission area of South Kensington. The Bishop warmly congratulated Joseph on his successes so far and trusted he would do as good a job in the new area to which the Lord had called him.

Joseph swore.

\* \* \*

Joseph had a fortnight’s grace, and in that time they settled into a coffee-break routine. Jacqui was free to use his computing facilities; she had put in a request to Custom Homes for equipment of her own, but it was such a departure from Approved Routine that it had probably blown a fuse somewhere in their own system.

First came Jacqui’s introduction to virtual reality. The medium for interfacing with the Other Side of computers had come on a lot since her school days and she had never been into a proper net before. She put on Joseph’s goggles with a tingle of trepidation and excitement.

Warren Court had its own estate network and it was like the streets of the estate itself – gapingly empty. Every now and then a service AI would flash by on some mission but otherwise it was like wandering on her own around a maze of pipes and tunnels.

Until she discovered the main conduit into the global Net. Icons representing human users buzzed to and fro like ants on a trail. These were the inhabitants of

Warren Court: the faceless people behind all those gleaming, polished, oak-imitation front doors that she had come to loathe so much.

The first time, she tried to talk to one of them. It wasn't moving as fast as some of the others, so she had her icon match pace with it on a parallel course.

'Good morning,' she said.

'Yes?' said the other brusquely. It was a man's voice that spoke in her earphones, but of course that didn't mean anything in VR.

'I have some information that might be of interest,' she said.

'Go on.'

'I work for Custom Homes-'

'One moment.' The icon was silent, presumably checking information elsewhere. 'I don't have them on the Stock Exchange listing. Are they a subsidiary? Who's their parent?'

'Um- they're a private firm-'

'For sale?'

'I don't believe so-'

'So why bother me?' the icon said angrily and moved off at double time.

Jacqui selected an incoming icon at random and trailed it. As far as she could tell, it didn't notice that she was following it. It headed for a memory patch that she knew in the real world was a nicely exclusive cul-de-sac. Big money.

The icon's destination hove into view – the input port of a domestic net. It passed through without any effort. No traps, no passwords. She moved in after it, preparing her spiel. Why didn't Joseph try-

Shapes materialised in front of her, blocking her way. Not humans but AIs, natives of the land. They were black and shiny and their form alone suggested menace. The icon of the closest one merged boundaries with her.

'Password', said a toneless voice in her ear.

'Um-'

'Incorrect,' it said, and threw her away.

She yelled as the net spun around her with dizzying speed. She was vaguely aware of angry voices in her ear that seemed to flash by her and, when she had got herself under control, she saw why. She had been flung clear across the net, regardless of who or what she passed through to get there. She hadn't known they could do that.

'Wow,' she said.

'Nice try,' Joseph said when she took her goggles off.

\* \* \*

So, it was back to pleasing the AIs.

‘Remember I talked about butlers in the nineteenth century?’ Joseph said conversationally over coffee.

‘Mmm,’ Jacqui said vaguely, not looking up from her notes.

‘Learnt an interesting fact the other day. They weren’t a complete barrier to salesmen, apparently. The trick was to sell to the butlers.’

Inspiration struck.

Copywriting wasn’t meant to be her job, but, as Joseph put it, she had been given this area to conquer and she had to do it herself. With Joseph as referee of grammar and spelling, Jacqui prepared a number of promotional electronic flyers and left them on bulletin boards, where it would be the AIs’ job to scan for new info and bring it home to their human masters if it was deemed suitable.

She followed her mentor’s example carefully. Be truthful, Joseph had said. Avoid hype. AIs have algorithms to recognise that. So, out with ‘I’m sure you’ve heard the sad case of Mr X of Doncaster who ordered holograms from an inferior competitor!’ In with ‘Market research has shown that 82% of AB bracket home owners are Custom Homes customers ... shouldn’t you be too?’ And she had to make damn sure that market research had shown what she said it had: AIs could check the online databases in seconds.

Back at her terminal, she prepared different kinds of letters to the people in the estate’s different sociological categories, and she personalised each one. Since Father Joseph Loughlin, SJ, Catholic Alliance Mission had just received a letter to Father Sjcarn, she carefully checked that each name was correct and that she didn’t make reference to wives for widowers, families for single people . . .

Then it was back into the net again. Her computer could have delivered everything in a blink, but she wanted to impress with the personal touch. She went from mailbox to mailbox and dropped her letters off, taking care to stay a discreet distance from each input port so that she wouldn’t intrude on the occupant’s space. Don’t annoy, don’t annoy.

She was doing nicely until she realised where she was: the port from which she had been hurled across the net. She still reeled at the memory and had already conceived a serious dislike of the resident (56 Chestnut Close, in the real world) and his guards, which she had mentally christened dobermans. She posted her letter and drew back quickly when one of the guard dogs came out to investigate.

It showed no interest in her, this time; she was far enough away to pose no threat. It approached the letter as though it were an interesting stick, or perhaps a trap. Feelers were sent out to confirm that the file was data only; no viruses, no hidden AIs likely to hijack the house’s control systems. Then the AI scanned the data and ran it through its parameters. It took in the sense of what was said; assessed its relevance to its owners; judged whether or not it would be welcome in the home that it was protecting ...

... and accepted the message. Jacqui blinked. Public Arsehole Number One had accepted a message! No, surely the AI was taking it in to destroy it, surely ...

But no. If it was to be destroyed, that could be done in the net. The fact was, this message had been received.

It occurred to her to check on the other messages. If King Snot's AIs were receiving, surely the others were too? Every one had been taken in.

Jacqui tore off the goggles and threw them in the air.

'Ye-es!' she yelled.

\* \* \*

Joseph was off into the spiritual wilds of darkest Kensington where, he said, the Spirit of Mammon roamed abroad and God's honest people trembled in their beds at night. He bequeathed her his network password. Custom Homes had finally come up with the goods and Jacqui had a terminal of her own. She sat in her own apartment, awaiting the surge in demand for Custom Homes products.

She could have waited a long time if she hadn't got the hint earlier. She looked up some of the statistics on direct marketing and compared them with the results.

'It's impossible!' she exclaimed. She double-checked and the answer was still the same: for a maildrop of this size, it should be statistically impossible to get exactly zero answers. Yet that was what she had.

'They're sitting on them,' she said to herself. 'They took them in but they're sitting on them.'

The AIs still didn't trust her. They were just as cagey as they always were.

'Oh, God,' she said, and buried her face in her hands.

In that moment, she hated Warren Court estate. It was like a vast, malevolent being. It was an alien mind; each AI in it was a separate neuron and the sum of the whole was an intelligence that was dedicated to keeping her, Jacqui Dunmore, away.

'What do you mean, we don't have sentient AIs yet?' she demanded of the air and the spirit of Joseph. 'They're here now, they just don't realise what they are. Warren Court is sentient and it loathes me. So there.'

Joseph's answer, she mused bitterly, would be to love them all to death. Love AIs? Who could love impulses of energy?

But it was a challenge.

'You're big and powerful and you hate me,' she said out loud, not sure who it was she was addressing. The spirit of Warren Court, perhaps; the embodiment of the 'sod-you-I'm-rich-and-all-right' attitude that dwelt in every household. That was the real problem. The AIs couldn't be blamed for being programmed like that – they were doing their job, which was to prop up the creature that was Warren Court.

She would take on this giant and kill it.

‘But I know who you are, now,’ she said to the screen, ‘and I will bring you down.’

\* \* \*

It wasn't bribery, she consoled herself as she moved through the net with her packages. Bribes were ... well, different. No, this was an investment: a dedication of existing resources towards an unspecified future goal.

The upgrades she carried with her had cut into her savings, but she assured herself that just a couple of commissions would cover them. Perhaps she could find a way of getting Custom Homes to foot the bill. Not bribes, she emphasised again silently, imagining the invoice passing through Accounts at Custom Homes HQ ('To: five hundred bribes ...'). Not bribes.

Expenses. Overheads.

She began to drop off her load as she had dropped off her flyers, though these were not messages for the perusal of the human occupants or anything that might conceivably be found threatening. These were for the AIs themselves. Presents. Sweeteners. Upgrades to the memory that would make them better thinkers, quicker to go about their jobs. Like giving a perfectly functioning dog a set of bionic legs. Something that the AIs would recognise as good and make them identify her as a source of good things.

Suddenly she was at the Gloomy Portal again. 56 Chestnut Close. One of the dobermans was there; perhaps waiting for her – had her reputation preceded her? – perhaps not.

She treated it carefully, remembering what it could do.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘I’ve got something for you.’

It continued to observe her, apparently passively, though there was no way of knowing what was going on inside its tiny mind. Was it about to pounce? Would it send her flying again?

She dropped the upgrade (a generic model, should fit all types) and retreated. The doberman stayed put.

‘Not taking, huh?’ Jacqui said. ‘Well, I’m not moving it. I guess I’ll just have to wait for a service AI to get it instead. That would be a shame, wouldn’t it? A nice upgrade like this going to a bog-standard slug-brain instead of a beautiful thing like you.’

She moved off, carefully not looking back. A slave to its functioning, she was sure that the semi-sentient thing would have to take it. Or, at least, study it, go through the routines of assessing its threat ... and find none. And it should have enough self-interest to want it for itself.

She looked back just before she was out of sight: doberman and upgrade were gone. Moving back to the apartment, she saw that all the upgrades were taken and that several AIs were wearing them.

She got back to see a request for a sample-viewing appointment flashing on her console. An AI had studied her flyer and requested a meeting on behalf of its patron.

\* \* \*

The man walked in through the door and stopped dead. Like his wife, he was stocky, middle aged and well groomed. One look at him told Jacqui that this man had one foot firmly in the twentieth century, where men were unconditional masters of their homes and wives did as they were told.

His eyes flicked around the walls of the main living room, taking in the flowing colours that ran across them.

‘What ... what ...’ He looked at the two women standing in the middle of the room. ‘Explain, dear.’

His wife, Mrs Wilson (Jacqui hadn’t yet discovered her first name), hurried forward.

‘Alistair, this is from Jacqui from Custom Homes.’ She waved a hand at the laser displays covering the walls. ‘Isn’t it lovely? See, here’s her brochure-’

‘Wait. Wait a moment.’ The man, whose name Jacqui felt she could reasonably guess to be Alistair Wilson, put a hand to his forehead. ‘I’m sorry, Miss . . .’

‘Dunmore,’ said Jacqui.

‘-Dunmore, I’d forgotten we had an appointment-’

‘We didn’t when you went to work, dear,’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘The Household made it this morning. It saw some of her literature and-’

‘*What?*’ Wilson’s face turned red, and in two strides he crossed to the desk terminal.

‘Household. Display junk mail items received this a.m. and action taken.’ Images appeared on the monitor and he ran his gaze over them, lips moving silently. Then he spun round on Jacqui.

‘What did you do? Did you subvert my systems?’ He advanced on her. ‘Well?’

‘Alistair-’ Mrs Wilson began.

‘Quiet, Irene.’

*Irene. Okay,* Jacqui thought.

Wilson stood in front of Jacqui, waving a finger.

‘I want your name and the name of your employers, Miss Dunmore. I intend to make a formal complaint-’

‘About what?’ Jacqui asked, her first words other than her surname that she had uttered since he had come into the room and interrupted her sales pitch.

‘About what? About what?’ Wilson stammered, clearly trying to think of what. ‘Assault against private property! In the form of my household AI – a very classy

model, let me tell you, dear, well outside your price range, and designed to get rid of people like you!

‘I-’

‘It’s subversion!’ he raged. ‘What did you use? Because let me tell you, dear, there are very, very tight rules on what we at Warren Court allow in our net. Oh yes! Was it a virus? Did you get at its code in some way? I demand to know!’

Jacqui seized the chance as he took a breath to squeeze in a reply.

‘I gave your AI a memory upgrade,’ she said, and watched as his face now turned from red to purple.

‘So!’ he exclaimed eventually. ‘You tampered with-’

‘I tampered with nothing,’ Jacqui said. ‘The upgrade was a gift and I simply left it there. I didn’t say I wanted anything in return and I didn’t change your AI in any way that would interfere with it doing its job. If I had been a genuine threat to your household systems, your dober- your AI would have been just as capable of dealing with me. In fact, it will now be slightly better at dealing with such threats.’

She didn’t say that the point was, beforehand, his AI had viewed everything out in the net with blanket paranoia. Now it could get on with dealing with genuine dangers, because she had been nice to it and it knew she wasn’t a risk.

‘But I bought that AI specifically to keep people like you out! I want to live in peace!’

‘Then if you don’t want marketing flyers, tell your AI not to let them through. I can’t stop that and I wouldn’t want to.’ She remembered Joseph: he would be proud of her, even if she did have her fingers crossed as she said: ‘You naturally have a right to make up your own mind, having considered the information available.’

‘Well, I choose not to buy your rubbish! I-’

‘What does Mrs Wilson think?’ Jacqui said sweetly, turning to the other woman. What she thought about the wallpaper, Jacqui didn’t know, but body language told her that even docile Irene Wilson was getting annoyed by her husband’s attitude.

‘I think it’s very nice,’ she said. ‘Payments are very reasonable, dear, and-’

‘I don’t care about the payments! I’m not making any! I’m not letting this ... this ... pirate into my account!’

‘You don’t have to, dear,’ Mrs Wilson said. ‘It’s my treat to myself and it’ll come out of my allowance.’ She looked Jacqui squarely in the eye. ‘I accept your offer, Jacqui. Now, remind me, thirty-six monthly payments ...?’

When Jacqui got home there were over twenty new appointments logged on her terminal.

\* \* \*

There was a stranger in the Warren Court net; something in the way the icon moved told Jacqui, a veteran after a month's familiarity with the environment, that the user wasn't used to being here. It was an odd icon, a bit like a chess rook.

Sales were piling up; she had just about handed over to the sales team who would be handling the franchise from now on. Custom Homes' confidence in her had been justified and her reputation had soared no end. She was in a good mood and had time to kill, so she went up to the stranger.

'Hello,' she said.

'Hello!' it said. 'Do you live here?'

'No, I just work here.'

'Oh, what a shame! Listen, you've heard about the trouble they're having in the former CIS? I'm here to talk to people about-'

Now Jacqui could place the routine, and the icon. It was a watchtower.

'Thanks, but no thanks,' she said. 'I'm just passing through.'

So, she thought as she moved off, others were getting the hang of using the net to proselytise. The people of Warren Court were going to be annoyed. The outside world was imposing on their tranquil haven and she couldn't really blame them for being irked. Had her victory been worth it?

Yes, it had. If the people here didn't want to talk to door-to-door missionaries, they just had to tell their AIs to block them. AIs would obey a direct order like that; that was the privilege of the owners.

But the AIs had learnt not to fear. They had learnt trust. Joseph had wanted to teach their human patrons human values; the start had been to teach them to the AIs themselves.

A moment later, the watchtower icon flew past her, spinning out of control, and Jacqui suppressed a smile. Someone had a lot to learn.