

CHAPTER ONE

Computing the future

Rachel put down her pen, and closed her eyes. She felt tired, very tired. She looked up at the clock: four thirty. Good, there was enough time to get to the newspaper office before five o'clock, and she wanted the advertisement to go into Friday's newspaper. Then . . . well, she didn't know what was going to happen next. It was a wonderful idea, and it was a new idea. She picked up the finished advertisement and walked through the office door into the computer room.

The computer room was always busy. Fourteen people worked there. Rachel smiled and said 'Hello' to everyone as she walked across the room. Long pieces of blue paper were coming out of the computers. The operators were checking them carefully, then putting them into envelopes. Rachel's company used computers to do horoscopes for people. You sent the date, time and place of your birthday to the company, Computer Astrology Ltd, and the computers could do a horoscope for you. Rachel's boss, Mervyn Astra, started the company three years before. Mervyn Astra wasn't his real name, of course, but it sounded good. It sounded good in the newspaper and magazine advertisements.

His real name was Brian Smith, but only a few people knew that. Rachel was his assistant. She didn't like Mervyn very

much. He was a short fat man with glasses and very long hair. Mervyn drove an orange Rolls-Royce everywhere. There were gold stars all over it. 'It's good advertising,' Mervyn always said. Anyway, when Rachel had the new idea, Mervyn said, 'All right, you can try it.'

On Friday morning Rachel got up early. She was waiting for the newspaper. It arrived at eight o'clock. Rachel hurried to the table, and opened it. She was looking for her advertisement. There it was! On page seven!

Rachel smiled. She didn't really believe in palmistry. She thought it was nonsense. But she thought astrology was nonsense, too. And the advertisement wasn't a lie. Not really. Mervyn was a wonderful computer programmer, and the computer program really did have all the information that they could find about palmistry. It could 'read' the photographs with a special video camera, and it could compare them to thousands and thousands of pictures in the program. The program was very expensive. Mervyn worked on it for a long time. Rachel was a little worried. She wanted the idea to be successful. Mervyn could get angry very quickly, and he hated losing money. She read the advertisement again, and laughed. 'Rachel Grant, Palmistry Consultant.' That was funny. It was Mervyn's idea, of course.

DO YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE FUTURE?

Palmistry is the science of telling the future from people's hands. It's a very old science. You can learn about your life, and about important things that will happen to you.

You can learn about your thoughts, future romances, and your future wealth! We use modern technology to give you a forecast of the future. Our computer has a special program, with information from all the best fortune tellers in the world.

Are you interested? Just send a photograph of your left hand, with a cheque for \$10.00 made out to Computer Astrology Ltd to:

Rachel Grant,

Palmistry Consultant,

Computer Astrology Ltd,

P.O. Box 75, LAZENHURST, LE6 4IQ.

(Don't forget to write your name on the back of the photograph.)

COMPUTER ASTROLOGY LTD™

Director: Mervyn Astra

CHAPTER TWO

It's all nonsense!

Rachel didn't need to worry. The idea was successful. It was more successful than the computer horoscopes. A week later they had thousands of photographs of hands. They put the advertisement in more newspapers and magazines. Mervyn had to buy more computers, and a month later there were thirty people working in the computer room. Mervyn bought a yellow Cadillac, and put pictures of hands all over it. He used to drive the Rolls-Royce during the week, and the Cadillac at weekends. He was a very happy man.

Mervyn gave Rachel a lot more money, but she wasn't happy. She was embarrassed by her job, 'Palmistry Consultant'. Three months ago it was funny. Now it was embarrassing. When people said, 'What do you do?' she usually said, 'Oh, I work with computers.'

One day, Rachel was at a party. She was speaking to a woman. They were talking about sport, when the woman asked her name. Rachel told her. Suddenly the woman said, 'Are you the Rachel Grant? You know, the palmistry consultant?'

'Er ... yes. Yes, I am,' said Rachel, 'Why? Have you heard about me?'

'Oh, yes,' said the woman, 'I have. I've seen the advertisements in all the newspapers. I used to be very interested in palmistry. I used to read people's hands.'

'Used to be?' said Rachel. 'Aren't you interested in it now?'

'No, I'm not,' said the woman. 'I read a lot of books about it, it's all nonsense. Nonsense.'

Rachel smiled. 'Why do you think so?' she asked.

'Well,' said the woman, 'think about it. What does the life line tell you?'

'It tells you how long people will live,' she said.

'Yes,' said the woman. 'So, in 1914 and 1939, before the two world wars, were there a lot of people with short life lines?'

'I don't know,' said Rachel. 'I've never thought about it.'

'Well,' said the woman, 'think about it for a minute. Did fortune tellers see a lot of people with short life lines? Millions of people died in the wars.'

'Maybe. I don't know.'

'But no fortune teller wrote about it. Never. I've read all the important books. No one wrote about it.'

'That's interesting,' said Rachel, 'but maybe they didn't want to tell people about it. And it was a long time ago.'

'What about the Vietnam war? And Cambodia? What about Ethiopia? I can give you a lot of modern examples, too.'

'Fortune tellers don't usually tell bad news,' said Rachel. 'People don't want to know.'

'Have you read much about palmistry, Miss Grant?' the woman said.

'Well, yes, of course. We had to read everything before we wrote the computer program,' said Rachel.

'Oh, yes, I'm sorry. I forgot. You are a palmistry consultant, aren't you?' The woman smiled. 'Come on, Miss Grant,' she said, 'it's nonsense. And you know that it's nonsense don't you? I can see that!'

CHAPTER THREE

Frightened of the future

The next day Rachel was sitting in her office. She was thinking about the woman at the party. She looked through some books on palmistry. She had a lot of books. She couldn't find any information about life lines before the two world wars. Maybe the woman was right. She stood up, and went to the door.

'Mark,' she called, 'Mark, can you come into my office for a minute?'

Mark was one of the computer programmers. He worked with Mervyn on the palmistry program. He came in, and sat down. Rachel told him about the woman at the party.

'Mark,' she said, 'can we do a statistical analysis of all the palmistry photographs?'

Mark looked surprised, 'Yes,' he said, 'we can do that. It's easy. But why? What are you looking for?'

'I'm not sure,' said Rachel. 'I've got an idea. Maybe it's a silly idea, but I want to compare all the photographs. Maybe we can find something in all of them. Something about the future.'

'You mean ... you mean a lot of short life lines?'

'I hope not,' said Rachel. 'But it's interesting, isn't it? I want you to compare different towns and cities. Compare them with each other, and compare them with the country areas. I want statistics for different areas of the country. We've got all this information in the computer. Why don't we use it? You can do it, can't you?'

'Does Mervyn know about this?' said Mark.

'Not yet,' said Rachel. 'I probably won't tell him either.'

'You're right,' said Mark. 'Mervyn won't like it. He won't like it at all. He's frightened of the future. Did you know that? He's never done his own horoscope on the computer. I wanted to do it when we were writing the program. We needed to try the program, but he didn't want his horoscope, and he didn't want a photograph of his hand, either. He was afraid.'

They both laughed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Some interesting results

A few days later Mark walked into Rachel's office. He put a box on her desk, and sat down.

'What's in there?' said Rachel.

'Computer printouts,' said Mark.

'Well,' said Rachel, 'what have you found?'

Mark looked down at the desk. 'Nothing really,' he said. 'In most areas we've got photographs of hands with long life lines, middle-sized life lines, and short life lines. We didn't learn very much. You see, we haven't got enough photographs. We'd need a thousand or more from each area of the country before we could do any real statistical analysis.'

'But we've had thousands and thousands of photographs!' said Rachel.

'Yes, but that's from everywhere in the country,' said Mark.

'Wait a minute,' said Rachel. 'You said in most areas there are long life lines, middle-sized life lines and short life lines, you didn't say in all areas.'

'There is one area ... but it's silly ...' said Mark.

'Go on,' said Rachel.

'It's only one town ... Chatford,' he said.

'Chatford?' said Rachel.

'Yes, it's a middle-sized town in the south-west. About 130,000 people live there. I know the town well. I used to live there, too.'

'You used to live there?' asked Rachel. 'I didn't know.'

'Yes, I used to be a computer operator at the power station. That was four or five years ago, before I worked for Mervyn. Anyway, there's a big nuclear power station, just outside Chatford. I used to work there on computers.'

'What about Chatford?' said Rachel.

'First, we've got nearly two thousand photographs from Chatford ...'

'Two thousand? Isn't that a lot from one town?'

Yes. And it's enough to do a statistical analysis. Look at the list ... these are all towns about the same size as Chatford. There are twenty-two photographs from Norwich, one hundred and eight from Oxford, ninety-three from Bournemouth, one hundred and five from Torquay, eighty-six from Brighton, forty-two from Exeter ...'

'Why did we get so many from Chatford?' asked Rachel.

' Yes, I wanted to know that, too. It's very easy. Mervyn's brother owns the newspaper there, the Chatford Evening Star. He gave Mervyn a lot of free advertisements, and he wrote a lot of stories about computer palmistry for the newspaper. Mervyn comes from Chatford. I met him there. He was visiting his brother.'

'Well, what's strange about the photographs?'

'It sounds silly, but more than seventy-five per cent have got short life lines,' said Mark.

'Did that happen in any other town?'

'Not really. All the photographs from Norwich had long life lines. Then I looked at the addresses on the back of the photographs. We only had twenty-two, but twenty were all from the same hospital for old people. They were all from people more than eighty years old.'

'That's interesting, you mean all of these old people had long life lines? Maybe it's not nonsense.'

'Maybe,' said Mark.

'Anyway,' said Rachel, 'how short were the life lines in Chatford?'

'I looked at each age group: under ten, ten to twenty, twenty to thirty, thirty to forty ... The life lines were shorter than

average in all of them. I mean, they weren't very, very short.'

'Were they shorter or longer than mine?' asked Rachel. She showed Mark the palm of her left hand.

Mark looked at it carefully. 'Er ... they were about the same,' he said.

Rachel felt cold suddenly.

'Don't worry,' said Mark. 'Do you understand statistics? If you put one foot in water at 0° C, and the other foot in water at 100° C, then statistically you're comfortable.'

'What?' said Rachel.

'Well, the average temperature will be 50° C. That's statistics.'

Rachel looked at him. 'Have you spoken to Mervyn about the printouts?' she asked.

'No, you told me not to tell him,' said Mark.

'Good, I'll speak to him. Can you leave the computer printouts here, Mark?'

CHAPTER FIVE

None of it's true!

Mervyn wasn't very happy that day. On the way to work, he had a small accident in the Rolls-Royce. He drove into the back of another car. That evening he was going to be on a television programme about fortune tellers. He was worried about it. He was thinking about the television programme when Rachel knocked on his office door.

'Who's that? I'm busy. Go away.'

'It's me, Rachel.'

'I said go away!'

'I must speak to you.'

'Come back later.'

'It's important, Mervyn.' Rachel opened the door and went in.

'Yes, what do you want?' said Mervyn.

'Well, Mervyn, I had an idea...'

'I'm not interested in your ideas,' said Mervyn.

'You were interested in my idea for computer palmistry,' said Rachel.

'OK, sit down and tell me. But hurry, I'm very busy.'

Rachel told him about the woman at the party, and he laughed.

'Does it matter?' he said.

'Well, yes,' she said. 'I wanted the computer to compare the photographs from different towns.'

'We don't pay you to play with the computer,' said Mervyn angrily. 'Anyway, you aren't a computer programmer. You couldn't do this. Someone helped you. Who was it?'

'Mark,' said Rachel, 'but he did the work in his own time.'

'He used my computer, and he used my electricity!' said Mervyn.

'Can I show you what we found?' said Rachel. She showed the printouts to Mervyn. He got angrier and angrier.

'Rachel,' he said, 'this is all nonsense! Nobody can tell you about the future. You don't believe this, do you?'

'Don't you believe it?' she said quietly.

'Of course not. It's not true. None of it.'

'Then you're cheating your customers.'

'Yes, I know,' said Mervyn. 'There's a fool born every minute.' You've heard that before, haven't you? That's why I'm a rich man. Anyway, we got all the information about palmistry and astrology from the best books. The program doesn't cheat. It gives us the best information on palmistry... but all of the information is nonsense.'

Rachel stood up. 'That's it, Mervyn. You're a cheat and a thief.'

Mervyn smiled. 'Thank you,' he said.

'Well, I'm not working for you any more. You can find another palmistry consultant. Ask at the prison. They'll find somebody for you.'

She left Mervyn's room, and hurried back to her office. She put on her coat, and walked out.

The air outside felt clean and good. She smiled. She wasn't a 'palmistry consultant' any more.

'Now,' she thought, 'I'm going to get a real job.'

CHAPTER SIX

Chatford

Rachel left Computer Astrology on March 19th. She soon found another job, as a reporter for the Daily Echo, a newspaper in London. She was a reporter before she worked for Mervyn. But she never forgot about Mark's computer printouts, and she never forgot about Chatford. One day she was talking to her boss at the newspaper, and she told him about the life lines. He laughed.

'Do you believe it, Rachel?' he said.

'I don't know, but it's interesting.'

'Yes. It's a good story. Look, why don't you go to Chatford? Perhaps you can write a story for the newspaper.'

'Mervyn won't like it,' she said.

'Are you worried about Mervyn Astra? No, you go and write the story. Look round Chatford, talk to people ... read their hands ...'

'I told you, I can't read hands,' she said.

'You know enough about palmistry. There's a good story here.'

Write it.'

Rachel smiled, 'OK, I will. I'll go there next week.'

Rachel arrived in Chatford by train on Wednesday, 20th September. She got a taxi to the Royal Hotel. She walked into the hotel, and stopped. A short fat man with glasses and very long hair was standing there. He was shouting at the girl behind the desk.

'Do you know who I am?' he shouted. 'My brother owns the Chatford Evening Star. I want a room with a bath, and I want it now!'

'And you didn't write or telephone?' said the girl.

'What's your name? Come on, what is it? You're going to lose your job! My brother's a very important man in this town!' His face was very red.

Rachel walked over to the desk. 'Hello, Mervyn,' she said.

Mervyn looked round. 'What are you doing here?' he said. 'You won't get a room. The hotel's full.'

Rachel smiled at the girl behind the desk. 'Rachel Grant,' she said, 'from the Daily Echo. I phoned yesterday.'

'Ah, yes,' said the girl, 'Ms Grant. A room with bath. You're in Room 437. I've got your key. Wait here, someone will take your case to the room.'

'Thank you,' said Rachel.

Mervyn looked very angry. 'Well, I'm not staying here. I'm going to another hotel. A better one.'

'Good,' said Rachel. 'Good night.'

Mervyn walked out of the hotel. The girl behind the desk was smiling.

'Enjoy your stay, Ms Grant,' she said. 'Thank you,' said Rachel, 'I will.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Terrible news

On the morning of September 21st Mark woke early. He couldn't sleep. He had dreams all night about Rachel, and the computer printouts. He went downstairs to get the newspaper. It was on the floor with the letters. He picked it up, and looked at the front page.

Daily Echo

London, 21 September

THE WORST DAY EVER!

NUCLEAR EXPLOSION IN CHATFORD - THOUSANDS DEAD

At 10.35 yesterday evening, there was an atomic explosion at the Chatford Nuclear Power Station. Thousands of people are dead. The army has closed all roads round Chatford, and there is no news from the town. Nobody knows why the power station exploded, or how many people have died. Our reporter, Rachel Grant, was in the town when the power station exploded. The army has asked people to stay in their homes in an area fifty miles round Chatford. The Prime Minister will speak on television and radio at nine o'clock this morning.

Mark put down the newspaper. He was crying. He went to a cupboard and took out the box of computer printouts. He looked at them for a moment. Then he walked over to the telephone. He had to phone the Daily Echo. He found the phone book, and looked for the number. There it was: (0171) 1311676. Then he stopped and thought. He picked up the box of printouts, took them into the garden and burned them.

He never told anybody about the life lines.