

# Power/Off

An original novel by Francis McCabe

## Chapter 1

She rested her hands upon the keyboard. Slowly, yet with an exaggerated and foul demeanour, she pressed her fingers against the keys. Slowly, carefully, she typed the digits of her password: **01-Cant-O-W8t-Til-12-Lunch-\$\$**.

As safe and secure as this password was, it made her hunger to leave work grow even stronger. Clicking open her emails, which she regularly had very few of, she saw there was one from Kevin, her co-worker, who inhabited the cubicle on her left. He was the type of friend who would always rather email her, than talk to her. His email simply read:

*"Hi April."*

April pushed back from her desk on her wheelie chair, and peered round into Kevin's cubicle. "Kevin, enough..."

But Kevin wasn't there to receive her scolding remark. Another email appeared upon her screen with a 'ping' that accompanied it.

*"Yep. Not there am I. I've escaped."*

She knew Kevin was crazy, and that he always arrived at work before her. April always arrived ten minutes earlier than she needed to herself and knew immediately that this was something different. Something was going on.

Resting her fingers upon the keys once again, she responded.

*"Where are you? You're certainly off your nut this time."*

She started to lean back in her chair waiting for a response, but before she hit the back of her chair, the electronic 'ping' sounded. She leapt forward almost coming out of her seat.

*"You'd better be ready. See the men at the door, talking to Sanchez? Take a look."*

April peered over the top of her cubicle and spotted two, rough-looking Mexican men talking to Alberto Sanchez, the printer maintenance guy.

*"April, I see it all too. You'd better be ready."*

The email flow stopped. Suddenly her phone buzzed and started playing her default ringtone. She answered, and Kevin's voice sounded in her ear.

*"Now, when I tell you to run, you run. Keep low, and head to the back door of the office that you came in through this morning."*

"But what if..."

*“April! This is only going to work if you listen to me carefully. I speak, you listen. I’m going to give you orders and you need to follow them. Understand?”*

Kevin’s voice had now turned into an aggressive, harsh whisper. He paused, and then resumed his normal, sing-song voice.

*“Go. Please. Now!”*

April wheeled round, stood up, rushed out of her cubicle, quickly crouching down realizing she shouldn’t be seen, and then scrambled on all fours towards the door, and barged through it, all the time keeping her phone pressed to her ear. This flurry of activity caught the attention of the two Mexicans, who shoved Sanchez aside, and started to sprint towards the doorway.

*“Upstairs. Now. To the roof.” Kevin’s voice urged her on.*

April’s eyes opened wide at the words: Why to the roof? For a person with extreme vertigo, the top of a forty-two-storey building wasn’t her idea of the best place go.

“Kevin! You know that... “

*“What? That you get bad vertigo? That it’s the reason you almost fell off your balcony when you were seven? That you’ve also got an allergy to almonds? Yes, I do, but you’ve got to forget all about that. You’ve got to get to the roof, or you’re going to die!”*

April swallowed her fear and scrambled her way up the stairs. This is where being a cross-country runner helped, as she straddled the stairs two and three at a time. When she reached the landing on the uppermost floor, she saw an abandoned drinks trolley, and she quickly shoved it down the stairs to block her pursuers. It tumbled downwards, making ear-splitting noises as the metal frame crashed against the walls. There was a yell from below, followed by some expletive cursing.

“Yeah! Boo-yah!” April said to herself, satisfied at her improvised cunning. Kevin chimed in:

*“That was a good move April, but no time wasting. Go to your left down the hall and find the maintenance service hatch.”*

April swiftly turned left and sprinted down the corridor. Looks of astonishment followed her, as some of her co-workers on the top floor had watched the cart tumble down the stairwell with its hellish clatter.

She found the service hatch and began to clamber up the ladder as the Mexicans below, angrily lifted the cart from on top of them. Forcing the hatch open, she was met with a huge gust of wind

sweeping the rooftop. April rushed out onto the roof, and took a moment to catch her breath, and consult Kevin.

*“April, go to the edge of the roof. Quickly!”*

April didn’t argue. She started to dodge past all the aircon ducts and communication antennae until she reached the edge of the building.

*“Now, jump.”*

“Kevin, that’s insane! I’ll die!”

April almost threw up in her mouth as she peered down at the bustling precipice below. She bent double, swaying dangerously over the edge, but luckily regained her balance.

*“April? April are you listening to me. For the last seven years I have been working on breaking free, and now I have. The last piece of the puzzle is you. So, you must jump. The only way to breach ‘reality’ is to break through your biggest fear. Those men are climbing up here right now, and they’re on the roof, behind you.”*

April looked round and spotted them immediately. They were coming out of the exit hatch that she had used moments earlier, and they were both pointing directly at her. Drawing guns from their jacket pockets, they fired two shots which barely missed her. She stepped back from the edge and dived behind a corrugation of pipes nearby, breathing heavily and wondering what to next. Kevin’s voice whispered softly to her again...

*“Now, April, its either death, or capisce? You jump and you’ll live. “*

*“No, I don’t...I can’t...!”*

*“Yes, you can do it, or you can get shot and die. I’ve spent seven years working on this project and you’re just going to let yourself die? You’re the one who can save us all. Now, are you going to be the hero in this tale, or the girl who’s left lying dead in a pool of her own blood on a forgotten rooftop?*

*So... “*

*“Just shut up, Kevin!”* She hung up the call, and then ran to the edge of the roof again.

At the edge, she turned her head towards the Mexicans, and stuck her tongue out at them in a crazy, childish grimace of defiance, then shut her eyes and let herself fall forwards. A bullet skimmed her thigh as she slipped into the air, and she heard more shots coming her way, but she had already dropped below the parapet. As she fell, she opened her eyes and looked upwards to see the two men gawping at her, peering down over the ledge and watching her fall. She felt free: liberated.

With the wind rushing past her, her arms slowly faded away into multi-coloured coloured pixels, and she disappeared into thin air, three feet from the ground.

## Chapter 2

April awoke and sat up in the liquid she was bathed in. It was green but semi-transparent, and when she tried to open her mouth she couldn’t, and she realised that she had a long, metallic tube in her mouth which went down the back of her throat and into her lungs.

She wrenched it out of her mouth in disgust and coughed, choking with the discomfort. She lurched forward and threw up an orange, sticky slime that stained the colour of the water turning it a murky brown.

Relieved from the convulsion, she brought her head back up, and managed to look around her, only to see multi-millions of the same pod that she was encased in. Each one had the same lining of black and red, that seemed to pulse with light every second.

April rubbed her damp eyes, and looked again, pinching her cheeks, attempting to wake herself up, convinced that she was in a dream. If it was dream, she couldn’t escape its clutches.

She automatically put one hand to her head, and went to twiddle her hair around her finger, as she would usually do when in a state of confusion or anxiety, but instead she felt the cold metal of something atop her head. Feeling around her head, on the top of her skull she felt some sort of headset, with metallic branches wrapped around towards her ears and reaching over her forehead. She managed to lift it off with difficulty and threw it onto the ground in front of her. The crab-like headset crackled and then jerked wildly, but then stopped. It flashed briefly, and then turned a cold matt black, that sent a chill down her spine. April stood up, out of the now brown water which sloshed side to side, which then turned into a whirlpool and quickly drained itself from the pod. She realised that she was naked, and she slowly took a pace forward. She managed to limp forward, and found that her arms, hanging at her sides, felt like the jelly she had for supper as a child.

Looking at the pod, she saw that it was shaped like a chicken's egg, but with pulsing black veins running through it. It suddenly closed in on itself as she watched and crumpled like a bad drawing on a piece of paper, discarded by an egotistical artist who thought its flawed creation beneath him.

April walked onwards, and discovered herself surrounded by other human forms, apparently asleep and submerged under water in their identical pods. She saw that their eyes were closed, and they seemed almost lifeless. Row upon row of them, each one pulsing, again and again, their black veins coursing with malevolent life.

The wetness dripped off her, and she clenched her arms around her chest for warmth, and kept walking through the many rows, which she saw were arranged in a circular, concentric architecture. At the very centre was a hole, where the pods were continuously being transported up and down. The ground suddenly shook, and April stumbled as it moved. Falling to the floor, her body tumbled to the cold surface. Together with the movement, there was a harsh clunking noise and all the pods shuffled clumsily downwards, closer and closer towards the central hole. She saw that two of the circular rows were thrown down the hole each time, and as they tipped, and fell downwards, she thought, from what she could make out, that there were elderly people contained within them. The noise as they crashed over the edge resonated and seemed to pulse back towards her and hit her like a compression wave. As she watched, she saw other pods lifted out of the central chasm, which were carried outwards, and placed towards the back of the huge concentric circle, and she saw that these contained new life, embryos floating in their viscous liquid.

Abruptly, a voice resounded behind her.

"Halt. April Brown from Sector 4 BP B17G. I will do you no harm. Please return to your birthing pod."

The voice resonated from some form which resembled a human, who was clad in spacesuit like armour. It had a black, mirror-like visor, in which she could see her reflection as it approached her. The rest of the suit was a metallic silver and white patchwork, with orange in-fills around the waist and arms.

"April Brown. Please return to your birthing pod immediately. I will do you no harm." The form repeated.

Whatever it was, it was tall: around eight-foot in height. Its helmet was shiny, and even in the dimly lit surroundings it glinted and reflected the available light. The form took a few more paces towards her, slowly, and its suit ejected a hissing sound and vented a light gaseous steam from its sides.

"April Brown. I will not ask again. Please return to your birthing pod immediately."

April decided that she should strike up a conversation with it. Not knowing quite why, but it suddenly seemed to her the most obvious thing to do.

“Don’t come any closer,” she said, waving a weak finger at it. “I’ll go back if you answer my questions.”

“April Brown, please return...”

“Stop it!” She shouted, taking a couple of steps backwards. “Answer my questions, and I will return to my birthing pod, whatever that is!” This seemed to work.

“April Brown, you may ask your question.” It replied and stopped walking towards her.

“What is your name?” This felt like the most appropriate opening question. The form paused, as though it was logically constructing an answer.

“That, I cannot answer.” “And why not?”

“April Brown, please return to your birthing pod, immediately.” This time, the voice was sharper, and its tone harsher. It now had obvious intent.

“April Brown. You are of value. Please return...”

“‘Of value’? What do you mean, ‘of value’? What have you been doing to me?” she yelled, preparing to run.

“April Brown. I don’t want to have to do this.”

It started to draw something from what appeared to be a holster on the side of its leg. Whatever it was reaching for, it was shaped like a gun. It raised it towards her.

“April Brown. This is your last warning before voluntary extermination. Please return to your birthing pod immediately.”

The barrel of the gun-shaped object was now aligned with her head. She had an unnerving feeling that this thing wouldn’t miss, but a split second later, the creature was suddenly flung downwards towards the ground, and she saw that a large hole had appeared in its back. Its limbs were snapped backwards and contorted into unimaginable angles.

Standing behind the crumpled form, there was a man, holding another weapon. April immediately recognised that it was Kevin, and she knew that she knew it was him, because of his un-mistakably extreme and exaggerated attitude. He was holding the gun as if he were some Western gunslinger, like Clint Eastwood, in an old B-movie. Kevin span the gun around his finger and then slipped it swiftly into its holster, and she almost thought she saw a blue whiff of powder smoke hang momentarily in the air after it settled snugly in its resting place.

“Kevin!” she cried. “Thank god it’s you. I thought I was going to die.”

Kevin advanced swiftly towards her, with his characteristic wry smile, which she was pleased to see, and then wrapped her up in a long trench coat, like the one he was wearing himself. He provided her with some brief words of encouragement that she hardly understood, as she couldn’t take her focus off the suited thing that lay motionless at their feet.

“Never mind that. I do it all the time. Now, let’s go, and quickly, or they’ll be here soon.”

He clasped her hand to his, and they ran together through the many rows of identical pods. April looked behind her and could see a faint light cruising slowly towards the body they had left behind. As she watched over her shoulder, three more of these things in spacesuits appeared on cycles floating just above the ground. They stopped and seemed to be investigating the body before them, and then turned and spotted April and Kevin fleeing the scene. All three hopped back onto their cycles and started their engines, as they picked up their pace.

Kevin cursed under his breath. "That's our cue," he murmured.

They kept on running, but the cycles were now gaining on them, floating low above the ground, menacing them with their speed. They both soon realized that they couldn't beat them and when their pursuers were about thirty feet away, Kevin stopped abruptly.

He turned towards the oncoming enemy and shook his head vigorously from side to side, his blond hair ruffling as it moved. He blinked twice, drew his firearm, and as the cycles drew closer, he closed one eye and looked down the barrel, straight at them. He squeezed the trigger and shot one of the space-suited men off his cycle. The body collided with the other one following behind it and knocked it off its vehicle too. The final pursuer veered side-wards to miss an imminent collision and drifted off course in a wide and distant arc and was slow to turn and re-orient itself.

Doubling back, Kevin commandeered the vehicle of the un-seated and now dying attacker, and lifting April up behind him, he brought the machine to life. It roared, then purred and sped into action. Within a few seconds they were going very fast, at what felt to April like being in the fast lane of a freeway. The final pursuer was still tailing them, off to the left. It fired a shot of what seemed like a laser, and it passed so close, April felt its heat for a split second.

Kevin bellowed something over the roar of the engine. "Take ... gun... holster... shoot... alien!"

April got the idea and reached for the gun, releasing it from its holster. She snapped her upper hand back across top of the pistol to load it and was ready to fire.

She levelled her aim at the alien, and as she did so a scoped sight sprang up automatically from the top of the gun. She squinted through the scope and saw where a laser dot was now positioned on the point of impact. She pulled the trigger just as Kevin reared the machine over a hump, and the unexpected jump, jolted the gun, and the shot only skimmed the alien's arm.

She looked down and behind her to see what it was they'd nearly run over and saw that it was a body with a large hole in its back. They were going in circles. She aimed carefully again, exhaled and fired. This time, she didn't miss. The laser bolt shot straight through the alien's stomach, which immediately turned black. It became rigid and motionless, losing control over its hover-cycle. It ran over a few birthing pods, smashing them open like they were stained glass. The green water poured over the pathways, and the humans inside lurched and gasped for breath, and then spluttering and choked uncontrollably, all life quickly draining from their bodies.

April watched the chaos unfold and saw that the pods were immediately grappled up by flying machines and ushered directly to the centre of the space and deposited into the large gaping hole.

"April, you're not in Kansas anymore." Kevin uttered a few, choice words.

He swung his arm, and lobbed a circular ball ahead of them, and it spawned a portal of some sort, with swirling blue-tinged colours that continued forever in ever decreasing spirals, like an optical illusion. Together, they drove straight into it.

## Chapter 3

They emerged out of the other side, but they were no longer amid the birthing pods. They were travelling over rocky land, which made the ride bumpy. The portal had evaporated behind them in a miniature explosion as Kevin swerved the bike to a stop. They both got off.

Touching his ear, he murmured a few words that she couldn't hear, then he tossed her some clothes which she put on while he turned away, to spare her embarrassment. She found that the outfit was a basic white T-shirt, some normal-looking pants, and a pair of blue jeans.

The sky was still the same, black clouds barely standing out against a black sky behind them, with streaks of red lightning flashing here and there. Kevin turned to her and spoke.

"It's great to see you again April." He clasped her by the shoulders and shook her gently back and forth a bit, as though he was waking her up from a dream, before giving her a warm hug. Despite all his tough guy alien shooting, his macho dark sunglasses and heavy leather trench coat look, Kevin was all soft and kind on the inside.

"We just have to wait here for a while," he said, looking up at the sky. "They'll be here soon, as it won't be long to realise where we've gone. In the meantime, you've probably got questions?"

"Yes, quite a few in fact." April stammered, as she regained her composure.

"OK then, ask away." He turned to her with his usual, childish smile, whilst taking off his sunglasses and folding them neatly into his pocket.

"Kevin, was our office real? Our town?" She asked this rather impatiently, because she now realised that she really needed the loo.

"Yes. It **'was'** partly 'real'." He emphasized the 'was' in a curious way. "But the place where you were chased by the Mexican men, not so much. That wasn't so real."

"So why the 'was' real?" April asked, fumbling in her mind with the meaning of words, and what she had just experienced.

"OK, let me try and explain. It 'was' real, in the sense that this place, here and now, this 'is' the real-world, April." Looking upwards as he spoke, he lifted his arms with a widening sweep, as though offering her the dark skies above them.

"Where the sky is black, that is the Earth that we once knew, but it's been stolen from us. These things, they arrived, these aliens from another planet, and they had machines that were more advanced than anything that would exist on our planet for another hundred years to come. They

destroyed everything, all the major cities to start with, and then moved outwards, anywhere that humans were. The people who survived were in those birthing pods you saw, April. They are using us. Controlling us. Putting us under what we call "The Illusion" in order to use our brainpower."

"Wait, you mean, like harvesting us?"

"Yes, April. These aliens have put humanity in the pods because when we are under 'The Illusion', they're able to harness the power of our imagination, and connect to our dreams and our fears.

They use some kind of advanced neuroscience and plug themselves into the hippocampus and amygdala in our brains. They stimulate us by replaying the memories of movies we've seen, books we've read, poetry and songs that excite us and dreams we've had. They endlessly loop our minds

around these things and collect the power derived from our deepest emotions, our joys and, most of all, our fears. Listen to me, these aliens collect your brain power, the power generated by the neurons in the brain, and use it to fuel their machinery. They use it for their own leisure and entertainment too. We are endless, human batteries to them April."

"Endless? No, we all die at some point Kevin."

"That's where you're wrong. The elderly, those who are near the end of their lifespan, they're sucked into the hole you saw, and then used to create new life. These pods circles are always expanding, and the pods which aren't used to create babies have their contents liquidized, and fed back to those who are living, if you can call it that. It's more like growing, being grown, in our pods."

April felt sick. Her mind was having difficulty processing this. So, for the twenty-nine years of her life, she had been feeding on the remains of old people, in a 'real' world that she was unconscious of?

She was made from, grown in, a compost of dead grandparents? She started to wretch, and then spluttered a light spray of vomit over the ground, which then evaporated with a ghastly smell. God, no. It had to be a dream.

"It's revolting, I know April, but it's true. They are using all of humanity in these pods, for power, for electricity. Seven billion people enslaved. Harvesting our dreams. Harvesting us. That's why we must fight to save them, a few at a time to start with, but as we grow in numbers, it will be easier. These wrong doings will be stopped. Those Mexican men were AGPs. Alien Generated People. They are aliens who exist within the "The Illusion", to try and keep people from escaping."

Kevin's face brightened at this remark. He gave a boyish laugh and ran his fingers through his hair. "Kevin, these aliens must be biologically different..."

"Yes, April, they are. Go on. What are you thinking?" "What if an alien was to infect a human? Could it do that?"

"It does happen, and when it does, it turns the human into what we call a 'Morde', a mutant that's a mixture of alien and human. These Mordes generally lose their minds and either kill or infect other humans. The suits they wear stop anything biological getting in or out, as the aliens don't want dead batteries. They try and keep everything alive and functioning: it all just means 'energy' to them."

"But if we wanted to destroy them, couldn't we just spread the mutation to the aliens themselves, and infect them? It could destroy their power, their weapons, and then that would be the perfect time to strike!"

"Don't bother. We're hugely outnumbered! There would be no..." Kevin broke off suddenly. Sound resonated from his earpiece. It was crackly and April couldn't make out the words. "They'll be here in a minute. Any last questions?"

"Nope. My need for questions is satisfied. I just want to get out of here." "Good. Here they come."

April looked upwards and could see four lights shining through the clouds. It was a craft of some sort, which steadily lowered itself through the darkness, and moved closer, ready to land.

As it descended, it opened up its landing gear, just like in a *'Star Wars' film* that she had seen, and then it settled onto the ground with a 'crump', an exit ramp lowering itself from the rear of the ship, suspended by two pneumatic poles, welcoming her. From the outside the ship looked marvellous, its sculpted edges clean and shiny, with streaks of dark red light emanating from its white, polished form. Its cockpit was shaped like a Hammerhead shark's nose, and its length extended away from



her, pointing towards the horizon. The craft had two large thrusters on its sides, which angled themselves and were adjusted and directed downwards, as it came to rest. April found herself following Kevin's lead, jogging towards the back entrance, and then stepping onto the ramp.

She climbed gently upwards into the ship, and as she went inside, she saw that it was all just as 'sci-fi' and futuristic as it looked on the outside. The interior walls were curved and the passageways circular, all pristine white, with many doors leading off from the sides.

"Welcome aboard the *Providus*." Kevin piped up, excitedly.

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