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The Mockingbirds

(First Fifty Pages)

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One

It had more of the characteristics of a tsunami than a bomb; a wave that kept on growing and kept on coming rather than a finite explosion. But for some, it had the devastating effect of both. Presently, it was contained within the cyber complexities of a small, nondescript flash drive.

Among the first to become aware of it was a group of school students aged in their mid-to-late teens who were loosely gathered in the recreation area of their high school. Some were perched on benches; others were sprawled on adjacent lawn. Most were engaged in diverse activities – eating, texting, squabbling, confiding, reading – with no single behaviour capturing the interest of the group as a whole until their attention was drawn to a youth called Casey who was intently examining a small flash drive, turning it over and over in his hand.

“What you got there, Casey, nerdy porn?” This was Bones, tall and handsome with a swagger and overbearing confidence that screamed *sporty bozo*. Incorrectly. Although he wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, he certainly wasn’t sporty. And if anyone threw a hard ball to him – a cricket or golf ball or baseball, for instance – he would more likely duck away in a clumsy wheeling of arms than risk trying to catch it and getting a painful whack on the head or in the ribs. His swagger derived from believing he resembled a young Leonardo DiCaprio and that being taller and broader than those around him gave the license to his overbearing ways.

“Did you put this in my pocket, Bones?” Bespectacled Casey, on the other hand, was a head shorter than Bones, pimply and slightly stooped, with a self-effacing demeanor that didn’t suggest much at all, other than perhaps that he was indeed the nerd that Bones’ query implied, and that his better times were probably still ahead of him.

“Get real! What would I be doing with nerdy porn?” Bones and others moved closer.

“Somebody put it in my pocket. I’ve never seen it before.”

“When did you find it?” asked Jeannie, an attractive girl who seemed younger than those around her, and whose manner and the tone of the question suggesting some familiarity or sympathy with Casey.

“Just now.”

“I’ll bet it’s porn of some description,” someone responded.

“Or a virus,” offered another.

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“Or both. Porn and a virus.”

“Maybe from a shy girl who fancies you, Casey.”

“A shy boy more like it,” Bones contributed with a harrumph, eliciting frowns rather than support, reaction that would have pleased the head of the school, Claudia Wainwright.

“How could someone put something in your pocket without you knowing?” This was Jessica, who seemed older, certainly more mature, than many of the others.

“I’ve no idea.” Casey’s face suddenly clouded. “Yes, I do. An old dude wearing a hoody bumped into me outside the gate when I arrived today. I’ll bet he did it.”

“Definitely porn then,” someone offered.

“Why?” another responded.

“An old dude in a hoody in this weather would have to be a pervert.”

“Check it and see.”

“Whose device has a USB socket?”

Jeannie cradled a laptop computer close to her chest. “You’re not using mine. I don’t want it to get a virus.”

Those who could make enough room for themselves were gathered around Jeannie jostling for a view of the screen of her laptop that she now had balanced on her knees. Jeannie’s resistance at this point had been reduced to a capitulating, “If there’s a virus on this, Bones, I’ll kill you.”

Shaded by the unbroken shadow of those flanking her, the screen revealed a naked, overweight, middle-aged man chained to a tree in the nature-strip divide of a suburban street. His body was covered in what appeared to be blue dye of the type used by security companies to mark stolen banknotes with an explosive charge. His glistening cheeks and trembling jowls suggested that tears were spilling onto the placard slung around his neck that proclaimed in broad letters that he was a “WIFE-BEATING COWARD”.

Bones pointed at the screen. “Told you, porn,”

“Ugly, naked, fat-guy porn,” someone concurred.

“Ugly, blue, naked, fat-guy porn.”

The video of the man chained to a tree was suddenly hidden behind a sign on which a message was written in broad lettering that Jessica was encouraged to read by those who couldn’t see it clearly.

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“Post the name and address of any
DV thug you know on any social
media account under the heading

ENOUGH!

We will check it out and respond accordingly.

WARNING

Liars will be treated the same as thugs!”

“DV thug? What the hell’s a DV thug?” Bones asked.

“A domestic violence thug,” Jessica replied as the screen went blank. “You had better take the flash drive to Madam Dracula, Casey.”

“Why?”

“The police will want to see it.”

“If the cops don’t already know about some naked dude chained to a tree in the middle of a street, why do we have cops?”

“They mightn’t know about the video.”

“If they don’t, it won’t be long before they do,” someone responded. “Because Jeannie just posted it to all her friends.”

Casey showed his teeth and rolled his eyes. “Jesus, Jeannie!”

As Casey and Jeannie walked off reluctantly towards the school’s administrative building, the students who remained, all being on Jeannie’s list of friends, had their phones out either watching the video again, or urgently trying to access it. Some of the more dexterous were already sending it to others.

It is some interest to note that what would become a related drama was coincidentally being played out in a corner of the basement of a large house in what had become one of the city’s more affluent suburbs where a woman was crying. Her child-like sobbing was barely audible above the murmur of a large freezer that sat against a nearby wall and occasionally was completely obliterated by the hum of an air-conditioning compressor intermittently switching on at the far end of the basement. There was enough light to determine that she had her arms clasped around her knees and that she was barefoot, dressed in a thin nightdress and was trembling seemingly uncontrollably, but not enough to see if she was injured. So, whether her distress was caused by hurt or fear was difficult to tell. The loud, irregular thumping from somewhere else in the house that caused her haunted expression to intensify and her eyes to lift fearfully to the ceiling, suggested that both could be the cause. Her name was

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Lorraine, and she was forty-four years old.

Claudia Wainwright was younger than she looked. Her minimal makeup, and the shoulder-length hair she had wound into a tight matronly bun that morning – grimacing at the result in her bathroom mirror – could be seen by some as an attempt to placate those on the school council who were known to have voiced concern that, at thirty-six, she was far too young to be the head of such a prestigious place of learning as St Columbia. Given her unpretentious leanings she would have treated with disdain any proposition that she would stoop to altering her appearance simply to curry favour with people about whom she had little respect.

Presently, having just inserted Casey’s recently discovered flash drive into a USB socket of her laptop computer, she was sitting in her office looking at the screen without displaying a flicker of reaction. On the opposite side of her broad desk, Casey and Jeannie sat watching her apprehensively, Jeannie biting her bottom lip in a vain attempt to weather the occasional accusative glare Casey fired in her direction.

Eventually, Claudia looked up. “Why did you send this to your friends, Jeannie?”

Jeannie released her bottom lip causing it to tremble. “People were jostling me and, like, laughing and stuff. I suppose I didn’t want to be the only one with it on my laptop. I didn’t think it was, like, funny.” Tears began to well in her eyes.

“It’s not. And you did the right thing bringing it to me.” She pulled the flash drive from her laptop and put it to one side. “I have a policeman friend who will want to see this. He’s involved with this sort of thing.”

Casey glanced at the flashdrive. “With porn, miss?”

“Porn? Don’t be ridiculous! This isn’t porn. This is ...” She lifted her hands as if seeking to pluck words from the air. “... an anti-domestic violence message. Obviously. And now that Jeannie has sent it to ... How many friends do you have, Jeannie?”

“Six hundred and thirty-eight, miss.”

“Now that Jeannie has sent it to six hundred and thirty-eight of her friends ...” Claudia smothered a smile. “Close friends are they, Jeannie? ... there will probably be quite a few thousand people reading that message by tomorrow – if not sooner, considering the content – and perhaps ten times as many by the end of the week. Perhaps one hundred times as many.”

Jeannie grimaced. “I don’t want to get into trouble, miss.”

“Why would you get into trouble?”

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“Casey said I would.”

Claudia gripped Casey with a withering glare. “Why should Jeannie get into trouble, Casey?”

“For posting dirty pictures on the web, miss. That’s against the law.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. This is an entirely different matter. And if you don’t realise that, you should.”

Casey grimaced. “Do you have to show it to your policeman friend, miss? If the police call at my place wanting to see me, my parents will go ballistic.”

“If my friend wants to talk to either of you, I’ll tell him to do it here. I guarantee that neither of you will get into any trouble. And if anyone does contact you directly, refer them to me.”

“Why do you think the old dude put it in my pocket, miss?”

“To have you or one of your friends post it on the web – which would be more than likely – while remaining untraceable himself, would be my guess. Now go, both of you. You’re running late for your next class.”

As they stood and turned to leave, she stopped them with, “One other thing, Casey, what age would you guess was this person who bumped into you?”

“I don’t know, miss, I only caught a quick glimpse of him.”

“Take a stab at it.”

“Thirty, maybe forty.”

“You said he was an old man. Now you tell me he was no older than me.”

“Oh, he wasn’t nearly as old as you, miss.”

Two

Six months before Claudia Wainwright found herself unsettled by Casey's guileless comment, a Lockheed C-130 Hercules climbed into the sky away from Tarin Kowt airport in Afghanistan's Uruzgan Province carrying, among its passengers, three who would have a direct bearing on Casey discovering a flash drive in his pocket.

The sight from the ground of sparkling angel-wing flares, fired from the plane to deceive any incoming heat-seeking missiles, contrasted to the gloom inside the cabin where James Blake was sitting beside Walter Cranborne and Billy Smith. And it was images of the aftermath of an even more spectacular and far deadlier eruption than the colourful pyrotechnics streaming below the aircraft that played regularly on their minds throughout the flight.

The previous week, on their last mission outside the wire, along with a handful of fellow troopers, they had been bunkered down on a hillside overlooking a mud-brick compound where reliable Intel indicated that the Taliban leader labelled *Objective Buttermilk* was overseeing the manufacture of an arsenal of improvised explosive devices, better known because of the military's insatiable appetite for acronyms, as IEDs. The benign-sounding *Buttermilk* codename that had been affixed to Khaled Muhammad Amin belied his notoriety and his reputation as the country's master designer of remotely operated IEDs and car bombs. A one-eyed, one-armed veteran of a dozen wars against the infidel, he had eluded the coalition forces' attempts to capture or kill him for as many years as they had been in Afghanistan. So, the patrol had treated the mission with extra caution and spent over four days getting themselves into position above the compound, moving only at night and working their way carefully around villages and the huts of shepherds and goat herders.

After getting into position, they discovered that, as well as the expected fighting-age males they could see at the compound, there appeared to be many women and children present. So, they set up to watch and wait, hoping that Buttermilk would show himself where he could be taken out by their designated sniper. They need not have bothered. What proved to be the instrument of Khaled Muhammad Amin's demise was far more spectacular than a single bullet with a hard metal jacket.

First, they saw it, next they felt it, and finally they heard it: an earth-jolting, head-thumping explosion that sent a great billowing fireball erupting with a roar from the compound as if from the mouth of a volcano.

The medic's, "Fuuuuuk!" was accompanied by similarly elongated, mainly silent exclamations

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from all those watching from the hillside. Most of them had recoiled as if slapped, wide-eyed and gape-mouthed, with some of them falling back against the slope.

Walter was the first to respond after they were all forced to turn away from a burst of heat as the fireball, accompanied by billowing waves of black smoke, swept past them heading skyward. “Ask base if anyone’s called in air support, Billy.”

Billy Smith was a long-term friend, whom Walter had seconded from Forward Ops to be the patrol’s signaler for the mission because of his exceptional radio and IT skills. So, when Billy responded with, “No aircraft within cooee could carry anything big enough to cause that, Walt,” rather than slap him down for responding immediately, Walter accepted that he was simply pre-empting the base’s – probably belated – confirmation that the explosion had not been caused by an airborne bomb or missile.

“Check with them anyway, Billy, and tell them why you’re asking.”

A short time later someone at the base obviously tested Billy’s patience. “I’ll tell you what’s happened,” he snapped into his mic, heedless of who was at the other end. “Fucking Hiroshima is what’s happened!”

“Billy!” Walter cautioned. At thirty-five, and thereby six years older than Billy, he was not as inclined to flippancy.

Billy replaced the mic. “They’re checking, but they say they don’t think so. All air support was ordered to stay well clear in case Buttermilk became spooked.” He moved to stand beside the others and look down on the smouldering ruin in the valley below. “My guess is one of Buttermilk’s underlings forgot to tell his mother not to call him on his old mobile phone number.”

Walter shook his head. “Whatever triggered it obviously set off the entire arsenal.”

“Jesus wept!” James Blake exclaimed while looking through the tripod-mounted binoculars they had previously set up to observe the compound. James was also thirty-five years old and not inclined to flippancy. Nor usually to blasphemy. “A few moments before it went off, I was watching a group of little kids kicking a football around in the centre of the compound. Girls as well as boys, with their mothers sitting nearby watching them. Some of them nursing babies. Now there is no compound. Only a lumpy carpet of smouldering red dust.”

He stepped away from the binoculars and, leaning back against the slope, removed his helmet and ran a hand through his hair.

The patrol picked its way carefully through the dust-covered rubble in the centre of where the

compound had once stood, trying not to step on what would have been the shattered bodies and dismembered limbs of the children who had been playing football, and on the women who had sat watching them. Most of the patrol were crying. What had the greatest impact on many of them later was the tiny, blood-smearred, bare feet of the babies. James was particularly haunted by the memory of their little curled toes.

Shortly before they were preparing to leave, having collected what they believed was enough material for a forensics team to determine if Buttermilk was among the tangle of shredded corpses at what appeared to be the centre of the blast, the whine of a high-powered, rapidly approaching motorbike had them quickly assume a defensive arc. When Billy relayed the message to Walter from a sentry, that the rider was a fighting-age male with an AK-47 assault rifle resting across his lap, Walter stood up and raised his rifle to his shoulder. James then stood up a short distance away and raised his rifle.

Walter glanced at him. “What are you doing, Jimmy?”

“I’m your back-up in case you miss. And also giving him two targets to worry about.”

“I’m planning to shoot a big spot six feet above his head. I doubt I’ll miss that.”

“I’m talking about your second shot.”

“Hopefully I won’t need one.”

When the bike came into sight less than 100 yards away, Walter fired a single shot over the rider’s head causing him to execute a sliding stop behind a cascading wave of gravel.

“Throw your weapon away!” Walter shouted, before glancing back at the others. “Where’s the terp?”

“Last I saw of him, he was back there chucking his guts up,” the medic responded. “I’ve dosed him with Maxolon.”

“I’m here,” the interpreter called out from somewhere in a tone that suggested his larynx had been recently subjected to severe strain.

“Tell him to throw his weapon aside.”

The interpreter’s response was obliterated by the roar of the bike as the rider suddenly kicked it back into life and charged towards them again while attempting to aim his rifle with one hand.

Before he had advanced fifty yards, Walter fired another single shot, this one knocking him off his bike and causing it to career off the road.

Almost before the rider hit the ground, he was back to his feet clutching his rifle in both hands and limping towards them screaming, “Allahu Akbar!”

Walter, James and most of the others who had a clear shot at him then brought him to his knees

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with a volley that struck him full in the chest. When he slumped onto his back, Walter ran quickly to stand over him and kick his rifle well out of reach.

“Allahu Akbar!” the man whispered as he tried to look up at Walter with blood bubbling from his mouth and coating his black beard in a crimson web.

“I’m not so sure, mate. Not today. And if you had walked where we’ve just walked, I think you’d also have doubts. Particularly if any of those kids back there are yours.”

Whether or not the man understood what Walter was saying, or even if he could hear him, was uncertain. Before Walter had finished speaking, the man’s eyes had closed. And less than one minute later, the medic had declared him deceased.

James provided what could be interpreted as a sobering comment on the progress of the entire war, when he moved to stand beside Walter and look down at the man. “They say there are more Talibs in Uruzgan now than before our forces arrived.”

James broke a prolonged silence between himself and those sitting on either side of him during the journey from Afghanistan. “You know that, *What the fuck am I doing here? feeling?*”

Those who knew him well were probably aware that along with not being inclined to blasphemy, except under extreme duress, he was also not usually inclined to swearing aloud in company, other than when he believed it necessary or important, or wanted to stress a point. So, those who knew him well could assume there was every chance he was placing some importance on what he had to say. Certainly, enough to warrant a response.

He wasn’t expecting one from Billy, who was sitting on his left, because he had had apparently fallen asleep. But he felt certain that Walter, who was sitting on his right, was awake. Whether or not he was, he did not reply. Assuming he may have believed the question rhetorical, James soldiered on. “I have it now. But more of a, *What the fuck were we doing there?*”

Still, Walter did not respond.

“In spades.”

They had known one another for many years. So, despite being familiar with Walter’s occasional taciturn moods when he was feeling less than agreeable, James still remained determined that he acknowledge that he had heard him. “I’m out this time.”

Still silence. Except for the loud, undulating drone of the propeller-powered aircraft’s four engines. Although James was now prepared to concede that Walter was entitled to be less than agreeable, being confined in an uncomfortable seat while having to endure the noise of the engines for countless hours,

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he remained undaunted in his pursuit of a response. “For good. I never want to see another dead kid. Or another injured kid. Or another traumatised kid.”

Still, Walter remained silent. So, James, somewhat self-indulgently, chose to interpret any silences after his utterances as prompts to continue. “Or another dead, injured or traumatised woman. Or even have to hear or read about another dead, injured or traumatised woman or kid, for that matter.”

Silence again was Walter’s non-committal response.

“Ever! Not as long as I live!”

Again silence. By this time, James was beginning to lose confidence that what he had to say was being treated as seriously as he believed it should, or indeed that it was even being heard. “Or have to sit in another C-130 for endless, arse-aching, ear-damaging hours thinking I’m maybe talking to myself.”

Walter’s continuing silence now prompted James to attempt a more direct approach. “Can you hear me, Walt?”

“I hear you,” Walter conceded at last.

But this was interpreted by James as Walter being annoyingly indifferent. “I just can’t get it out of my mind that I’ve spent a good part of my adult life simply wasting my time.” Receiving no response to such a personal admission, James’ patience had finally run its course. “For God’s sake, say something!”

“What you said,” Walter responded.

“What I said!” James chuckled coldly and rolled his head back to stare into the gloom above him. “I am talking to my-fucking-self.”

Three

Crispin Sullivan was a brute. Unfortunately for young women who came within his area of influence, he was a handsome brute. A common type of handsome brute. He was in his mid-twenties, tall and slim with a six-pack torso, broad shoulders and well-muscled arms; the type of body that would readily attract many admirers, but particularly young ones. Unfortunately, he had a shallow intellect and dearth of common decency that stood in stark contrast to his physical attributes. And he had an obsession of always remaining in complete control of any female he was partnering. Consequently, he was someone the older sisters of those young admirers would have warned against because of ‘knowing the type’.

He sold steel products for a small manufacturing business; recently not very successfully. His latest female acquisition was twenty-year-old Jilly Pasmore who had worked as a temporary receptionist for the company. Their paths had crossed when he needed someone to type up a proposal he had prepared to put in front of a prospective customer. As well as typing the proposal she had suggested some changes which he agreed to make. Rather than being intimidated by how close he stood behind her while she made the changes, she was flattered. As she was when he returned later that day and asked her out, heralding the start of a relationship which didn’t take long to deteriorate into one that she wished she had been spared.

Luckily for Jilly, on the night before she planned to leave him because of having had enough of his accumulated shortcomings, he chose to take her for drinks to the same bar of the hotel where James Blake and Walter Cranborne had arranged to catch up with two former commando colleagues, Cooper Wallis and Dolly Gray.

James and Walter were now civilians, having paid off from the army shortly after returning from Afghanistan the previous month. Fifty-two-year-old Cooper had paid off some years before; so was also a civilian. But thirty-year-old Dolly, although dressed similarly to the others in jeans and T-shirt, was still a serving member. Shortly after they arrived at the bar, they carried their beers across to a table adjacent to the one where Jilly and Crispin were sitting. Crispin was bleary-eyed and seemingly half asleep, whereas Jilly was wide awake and watching him warily.

After touching their glasses and sipping their drinks, Dolly glanced at Cooper. “You heard about Shiner?”

“Yeah.”

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All four remain silent for a time.

“Heard it was the same IED that took out Horse Lamont,” Cooper responded eventually. “Have you heard how Horse is doing?”

“Heard he’ll live,” Dolly replied.”

Walter contributed to the melancholy mood that needed no reinforcement with, “What’s left of him,” and an apologetic grimace in acknowledgment of this.

At the adjacent table, Crispin suddenly caught their attention by banging his fist on the table. “And I say you’re not fucking going!” he snapped, lunging his face towards Jilly’s to give his directive added emphasis. Although he didn’t significantly raise his voice, the curl of his lips that exposed most of his teeth, Rottweiler-like, had as much effect as if he had shouted at her. “For a start, I need the car.”

Whether or not those at the next table were aware of it before – and given their training to notice small detail, they probably were – it was now obvious to anyone who glanced at Jilly that she was sporting a black eye and a bruised cheek.

“It’s my car,” she replied softly, drawing back in her chair defensively.

“You’re not going anywhere near your fucking sister. And that’s final.”

“She’s expecting me. I won’t be gone long.”

Crispin’s lips curled again. “Then why did you pack most of your stuff? Didn’t you think I’d notice?” He suddenly stood up. “Stay there. Don’t move.”

As he walked unsteadily past the table where the others were sitting, he turned and threw them a wink. “Women!”

James watched him until he passed through a door marked with signage for male and female toilets and a fire escape exit. His attention then returned to Jilly. When she ran a finger under one eye to remove a tear, he stood up.

Cooper glanced up at him. “Stay out of it, Jimmy.

Walter turned and looked at Cooper steadily. “I thought you were no longer a cop, Coops?”

“I’m not.”

Walter smiled tightly. “Hard to tell,”

James walked across to where Jilly was sitting and sat opposite her. “How long have you known him?”

Jilly cast a frightened look past him. “Please go before he comes back.”

“How long?” James persisted.

“Not long.”

“Any kids?”

“No. Good God no!”

“If you leave, will he follow? Try to take you back?”

“He doesn’t know where my sister lives. Not since she moved.”

“So, leave now. Take your car and leave. If he comes back before you’re out the door, I’ll head him off.”

Jilly’s calm exterior belied her inner turmoil as she sat watching James in silence, trying to balance the soundness of his advice against her options. Eventually, it was perhaps the level of her desperation that caused her to raise the circumstance that had the greatest influence on those options; a circumstance that would test the sincerity of James’ offer to intervene. “He has the car keys.”

James didn’t move for several seconds, and then he stood up. “I’ll be back.”

As he walked past the table where the others were sitting heading for the door where Crispin had disappeared, Cooper again tried to dissuade him. “Stay out of it, Jimmy.”

Dolly glanced at Cooper. “What’s this about you no longer being a cop, Coops?” “I heard you had rejoined them.”

Cooper’s gaze remained on James until he disappeared through the rear doorway. “Only peripherally. I now work for their Intel Department as a civilian.” He turned to Walter. “I hear you now have compulsory psych sessions when you pay off.”

“Desk jockeys who’ve never been within a bull’s roar of an interesting day out.”

“Know the type. I’ve worked with cops who have never seen an angry man. I hope these psychs have at least convinced Jimmy that he’s no longer living in a war zone.”

“Give the boy some credit for good sense.”

Jilly looked across at the men as they continued to talk quietly among themselves and wondered – as perhaps anyone who was aware of the situation may have wondered – why none of them appeared concerned enough to determine what was happening on the other side of the rear door, and whether their friend required assistance. Crispin was obviously drunk, but he was broad-shouldered with an athletic build, and displayed a confident demeanour that suggested, drunk or sober, he would be unlikely to acquiesce meekly to the demands of a single stranger who had the affront to impinge on what he would consider was his private business. He would be likely to react, Jilly believed, in the increasingly violent manner he had displayed with her and others in recent weeks, a manner that coincided with his failure to win a number of contracts he believed he deserved to win. Setbacks that exposed a fragility of character and a brutally repulsive trait, she now believed, had always bubbled just beneath the surface of his psyche.

James eventually emerged and, walking across to her, placed a set of car keys on the table. “Go.

And don't look back. Take it as written, he'll never change. They never do."

Jilly snatched the keys from the table and stood up. "Is he hurt?"

"Only his dignity." Whether she was relieved or disappointed by this was difficult to tell. "If you need to gather anything, you should have at least half an hour's grace."

"I've already packed. I won't need half an hour." She began to depart, pausing only to move closer to him and kiss him lightly on the cheek. "Thank you," she whispered before turning and hurrying out the front door while he rejoined the others and sat down.

Dolly chuckled and looked across at Cooper. "You're lucky Billy Smith wasn't here, Coops. He's an even worse sucker for a maiden in distress. And far more volatile than Jimmy."

Cooper's face lit up. "Billy Smith! There's a tearaway blast from my past."

"A smart tearaway though. He paid off at the same time as these two, so he's probably already snared himself a top IT job. He kept the Forward Ops running through thick and thin with cannibalised hardware and pirated software. And there wasn't a network he couldn't hack. As soon as a top show went on-line, we'd be watching it gratis from day one. The Yanks were impressed. Called him Heisenberg after Walter White, the guy in *Breaking Bad*."

"Wasn't he a chemist?"

Dolly shook his head. "Jesus, Coops! It was Billy's smarts that impressed them, not his fucking credentials. And we are talking Yanks."

"Regardless, Billy's a tearaway. I ought to know, I was his first boss."

"Yeah, but he's changed a lot since he was born again."

Cooper stood up. "I heard about that. Born again, but not in the *Born-Again-Christian* sense, apparently. Whatever that means and whatever it's done to him, I'll believe it's made him less of a tearaway when I see proof." He turned and headed for the rear door.

Cooper walked from door to door of the cubicles in the men's toilet, opening each in turn and glancing inside. He then walked out and down a short hallway to a fire escape exit. Emerging into a laneway, he made his way to the rear of the building and across to where heavy thumps and muffled oaths were sounding from within a large plastic dumpster that had a piece of broken packing case jammed into the catch of the lid. He took a moment to check that the makeshift bolt in the catch was secure. A few minutes later he re-entered the bar and walked across to the table where the others were sitting. "Come on. It's high time we found another pub. Any *Alibi Arms* sounds about right."

Four

In a similar room to the one they had vacated, but more comfortably furnished, the four of them sat at a table armed with glasses of beer. For a time, both Dolly and Cooper related tales mainly involving Billy Smith, many that the listeners had heard before, but they were all in a reminiscing mood.

Cooper was keen to take the lead. “Most of the time, you wouldn’t reckon butter would melt in his mouth, But, if anyone did the wrong thing by him, they needed to watch out. In his younger days, he cost me many a sleepless night. I’d regularly be sent to bail him out or talk those who were holding him into letting him go with a warning. Cops, red caps, shore patrol, whoever. The main problem, of course was that whenever he told them his name, they thought he was being a smartarse. ‘What’s your name?’ they’d say. ‘Smith,’ he’d say. ‘Yeah, and I suppose your first name is Bill?’ they’d say. ‘You must be psychic,’ he’d say, or something similar. ‘Don’t get smart with me, son,’ they’d say, and then, depending on how they reacted, and he responded, determined what happened next.

“It didn’t matter how trivial was the matter that caused them to question him – maybe he was simply a witness to a dispute, whatever – asking his name could be as dangerous as the uninitiated playing with a grenade. Particularly if whoever was questioning him responded by clipping him over the ear for being a smartarse.”

Dolly placed both hands over his ears. “Bang!”

“Yeah. Bang! The ear-clipper would end up on his arse. And then, depending on Billy’s mood and how hard his ear had been clipped, and depending on how hard the ear-clipper’s colleagues retaliated, would determine what I faced when I was called in. Whether it would be to sort out a misunderstanding or play peacemaker because World War Three had broken out.”

James leapt to his friend’s defence. “Billy’s a lovely bloke. And there would be no way he’d ever throw the first punch.”

“Yeah,” Cooper agreed. “But take it as read, being a lovely bloke, Jimmy, or within your rights, counts for little if you ever deck a cop.”

Walter shook his head. “Says Cooper the copper.”

“Like I said, Walt, not anymore.”

Walter smiled. “Once a copper always a copper, Coops. Cooper the copper.”

Dolly joined in after glancing at Walter. “So, you’re now with Police Intelligence, Coops? Remind me, Walt, ‘Police Intelligence, Army Intelligence’, what’s that word?”

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“Oxymorons.”

“That’s it, oxymorons. Oxy as in oxygen thieves, I suppose, and morons as in morons.”

Cooper lowered his brow. “Are you missing being slapped around by your betters, Dolly? Sounds like it.”

“I’m only talking Army Intelligence, Coops. Wouldn’t dare hurl crap at your lot.”

“Wise man. Although, don’t get me started on how useless we are regarding preventing some crimes.”

“Like domestic violence from all accounts.” James responded from bitter experience involving his elder sister.

“On that subject, you realise that you’ve probably made things worse for your new-found little friend.”

“How so?”

“Because when her bruiser boyfriend gets out of that dumpster and gets home, what do you think will happen to her?”

“Nothing will happen. By the time he gets home, she’ll be long gone.”

“Well, if he decides to pursue her, hopefully he won’t find her. Because there isn’t any way the police or anyone else can protect a woman indefinitely from an aggrieved partner bent on exacting revenge.”

Dolly folded his arms. “Other than dispatching him, of course.

A touch of anger crept into Cooper’s response. “Killing someone in this country is easier said than done, Dolly, particularly if you wanted to get away with it and not have to spend a good part of the rest of your life in the pokey.”

“I don’t reckon it would be too difficult.”

“If you were back in the dasht, maybe. But you’re not back in the dasht.” Cooper leant back in his chair and watched Dolly intently for a time before asking, “So tell me, if your sister had a violent partner who was regularly beating her badly, and you were certain he would kill her unless you killed him first, how would you do it?”

“I don’t have a sister.”

“Play along with me. Let’s say you do, and you decided you had to kill him. Would you use a gun, for instance?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Where would you get it? You can’t simply walk into a sports store and buy one anymore. And it wouldn’t be wise to draw one from the armory claiming you were taking it to the practice range. If you

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did, the armorer would later become a key witness at your trial. You'd have a similar problem if you suddenly joined a gun club or applied for a gun license for any reason to get hold of one. The police would check on these things, because you'd be the prime suspect if anything happened to your sister's violent partner. Given your background, you'd be the first person they'd call on."

"Maybe I'd use an illegal gun. Make enquiries at one of the rougher pubs in town about where I could buy one."

"Yeah, that would be real smart. The most likely person to get back to you would be a cop working undercover. And if ever you did get the chance to use a gun, how would you prevent any incriminating material from the discharge getting onto you and your clothes?"

"I'd wear gloves and burn them and my clothes immediately afterwards."

"You'd probably be on someone's CCTV buying those gloves. And where would you burn your clothes? You rent a flat."

"I'd take them out into the bush and burn them."

"And hope no one reported the fire, I suppose."

"I'd go deep off the road into the bush."

"And hope no one noted the license number of an empty car parked beside that road."

"It wouldn't be parked there for long."

"Maybe it wouldn't need to be. And where would you say you'd been, when you came back home to find a squad of police waiting to talk to you? You, the chief suspect, with bits of ash and other incriminating matter from your burnt clothes still clinging to you and not having had time to wash it off?"

"Alright, maybe I wouldn't use a gun? Maybe I'd simply push him off a crowded railway platform in front of a train. Or off a crowded footpath in front of a bus."

"That would be real smart! A crowd might provide you with some cover, but it would also provide plenty of witnesses when the police put a photo of their prime suspect in front of them. Or better still, stuck you in a line-up so that they could get a really good look at you. The cops would probably also have plenty of corroborating CCTV footage of you following him to the railway station or to the city street where you pushed him, regardless of how you might have tried to disguise yourself."

"What if I didn't do it myself? What if I hired a hitman?"

"Involving others would increase your chances of being blackmailed. And, to the best of my knowledge, *Hitman* doesn't come under *Pest Control* in the yellow pages? Where would you find one?"

James and Walter combined in a cross-fire. "He could enquire at that rough pub where he was going

to source a gun.”

“And wait for Coops’ undercover colleague to get in touch.”

“OK, if you two are so smart, how would you go about getting rid of him?”

“Don’t drag us into it, Dolly. She’s not our sister.”

Dolly slumped back in his chair and lifted both hands high above his head shook them in frustration. “She’s not my sister either. I don’t have a sister. Why are you all picking on me?”

Cooper rejoined the attack. “Because you said clipping someone wouldn’t be difficult.”

“Well, what would you do, Coops? Short of killing him, how would you stop a bad bastard from killing his partner?”

“I don’t think I could. I don’t think anyone could. Not if he’s truly determined.”

“Well, that’s an indictment on your lot, Coops. James responded with barely contained anger. “Both the cops you used to brush shoulders with, and now your Police Intelligence buddies. And, until there is a solution. There are going to be a lot of women killed. The current rate in this country is already more than one a week. Maybe it’s high time someone thought outside the square.”

Walter sat back in his chair and levelled a steady gaze on Cooper. “In your job, you must be aware of those who are likely to attack, possibly kill, their partners first chance they get. Surely you should be able to lock that person up and keep him locked up.” As with James, he also spoke from personal experience and with barely contained anger.

“You can lock someone up for assaulting or threatening to kill a partner. But you can’t lock them up indefinitely, even if you’re pretty sure of what they intend to do. And there would never be enough money or manpower to watch them twenty-four-seven when they’re not locked up.”

“Do you know someone like that?”

The other three sat watching Cooper as he turned away from them to stare across the room. “Well, Coops?” Walter prompted. “Do you know of someone? Cooper the copper.”

“I told you I’m no longer a copper.”

“Once a cop, always a cop, Coops. You do know someone, don’t you?”

“Of course, I know someone,” he admitted eventually, softly. “A whole heap of someones from all walks of life.”

“Give us an example.”

Cooper shook his head and released a deep sigh. “There’s a bikie gangster presently in the pokey who’s sworn to waste his ex-wife, and maybe her kids as well, as soon as he gets out. Or die trying. She’s the one who put him away and he’s a truly dangerous prick. Rabid. So, the intel is probably reliable. He almost killed her once already. That’s why he’s locked up.”

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Some two hours later, Dolly stood at the curb outside the hotel with an arm out trying in vain to hail a cab. James, who was standing behind him, turned to watch where Walter had drawn Cooper to one side.

He moved closer to them and between the roar of passing cars he heard Walter's, "When does he get out?" and Cooper's angry demand of, "Who?"

As the roar subsided, he then clearly heard Walter's equally angry, "You know who. The dangerous prick who's going to waste his wife and kids?"

But all further conversation between the two was lost behind a louder roar of passing vehicles. Eventually he saw Cooper react angrily to something Walter had said and walk away from him while waving a hand behind him in dismissal.

Five

Lorraine, wearing a simple dress and a touch of makeup, had a less haunted appearance than when she was crouched in the basement of the house where she now sat in the kitchen.

She was watching, with obvious apprehension, the man who stood facing her from the opposite side of a broad, stone-topped island bench “Sorry about your dinner. You were much later than I was expecting.”

The man made no reply.

“If it’s too dry, I can get you something fresh.”

Still, he made no reply.

“How was your day?” The question tentative, little more than a whisper, before she cringed and ducked to one side as a full plate of food was hurled against the wall behind her with a crash of smashed crockery and metallic ringing of bouncing cutlery.

Not long after dawn at a children’s playground in an outer suburb of the city, handsome, forty-seven-year-old Detective Chief Inspector Donald McPherson, accompanied by uniformed male and female officers, approached a blue, naked, middle-aged man who was chained by both wrists and one foot to a large swinging basket which, when it moved, caused him to hop after it. A placard proclaiming him to be a ‘CRUEL WIFE-BEATER’ in broad lettering hung from his neck.

Emeritus Professor Graeme Hatfield had seen better days, in particular the number of times he had stood in front of his peers, bolt upright, his chest inflated, and with his emotions barely held in check to receive the succession of honours and awards that had been bestowed on him during his illustrious career; formal recognition of his qualities that began the day he received his school’s most prestigious honour, the Colin Smyth Cup for Excellence, and stood in front of the entire school assembly to have his hand shaken by no less a notary than the Prime Minister.

As Hatfield hopped on a bare foot after the swinging basket, it is interesting to note that this first award was for his outstanding leadership as school captain and his sporting prowess as captain of the rugby team. Given his present circumstance and the placard around his neck, it is probably not surprising that, as school captain, he had assumed for himself the right of first choice of the senior female students, along with the perceived freedom to treat them as overbearingly and in as demeaning

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a manner as he believed his exalted status allowed. Without recrimination. And that, as the captain and the most solidly built member of the rugby team, that nothing pleased him more than driving fellow team members during practice, and opposing players during competition, headfirst into the turf with as much force as he could muster, regardless of the possibility of breaking their necks.

Reinforcing that this behaviour was not only acceptable but approved, his father would smile whenever young Graeme mentioned his treatment of doting female students and his aggressive sporting exploits; because a smile from his father was the equivalent of an encouraging pat on the shoulder from this former colonel in the Army Reserve who ran the Hatfield household like a military barracks of yesteryear. Yesteryear, in this instance, was when women knew their place and bullying disguised as forthrightness was considered character building; a time when once an order was given by a superior, it was never questioned, and was obeyed regardless of how obviously stupid it was and the likely adverse consequences; a time when his father's great grandfather was a British Lieutenant General during the Battle of the Somme.

At a construction site a few days later, a blue, naked, middle-aged man was discovered hanging upside-down from a crane. A placard proclaiming him to be a 'SERIAL WIFE-BEATER' in broad lettering was slung around his neck. By the time a group of people wearing suits approached him with a stepladder, preparing to get him down and release him, Detective Chief Inspector Donald McPherson had arrived, accompanied by other police officers.

As with Emeritus Professor Graeme Hatfield, Alexander Edwards had also seen better days and rarely found himself alone on a building site in any condition. As leader of the Heavy Construction and Allied Workers Union, he was more used to storming onto a site, together with a gang of sledge-hammer-wielding heavies, to knock down any non-union-approved construction; and, in similar company, more used to cramming scabs headfirst into post holes, than being treated in a similar undignified, upside-down manner. Never, did he believe he would be subjected to the compounded humiliation of being strung up naked at one of the building sites he had recently blacklisted because of the penny-pinching recalcitrance of the owners, and therefore require the assistance of non-union, suit-wearing, scab management erks to get him down.

Because Edwards had not been in a position to read the placard that had been slung around his neck but understood from remarks he overheard as he was being hauled skyward, that his present circumstance had something to do with mistreating women, he assumed one of the typists at the union office couldn't keep her stupid trap shut. So, until he was finally lowered back to earth and could read

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the placard, he had been unaware that he had been targeted because of his brutal treatment of his present wife and possibly any one, or all, of his three previous wives; and not because of the succession of young typists who had been unfortunate to fall into his clutches.

The night before The Blue Bastards rock band was to perform before an estimated one hundred thousand doting fans in their long-awaited comeback concert, Blue Frost, the leader of the group was discovered naked and painted blue and suspended upside down on the covered stage that had been constructed in a central city park to accommodate the band's comeback. The sign around his neck proclaimed simply that he was a 'WIFE-BEATER'. His present wife, Angela, was in hospital, supposedly recovering from a fall in her kitchen that had left her with severe concussion and a broken arm. The police were still investigating how this had happened and whether her husband had anything to do with her injuries.

Although Blue Frost had a long record of mistreating Angela and other women, he had not yet been charged regarding this latest incident, probably because she was not in a condition to be questioned by the police. But the timing of those who had strung him up obviously had been influenced by different criteria. Understandably, the attendant publicity of the band's about-to-be-cancelled comeback concert was a far greater determinant. As was the concert organisers' unconscious provision of such an ideal setting for conspicuous humiliation. And timing aside, the likely follow-up in the press using every possible play by headline writers on Blue's name, the band's name and his present decidedly blue appearance and demeanour, were too much of a temptation to be ignored by those seeking to maximize media coverage. Hence, the video of his toppled circumstance, vividly revealed in the harsh glare of the concert venue's stage lighting, was already streaming on social media.

Ever since his early teenage years, Blue had been known as either 'a nasty bastard' or, less generously, 'an arsehole'. Early in his career, he had taken advantage of pubescent females who were more enraptured by his publicised persona than his actual character. And similarly, during his later career, he took cruel advantage of beautiful women who were attracted by his considerable wealth, and certainly not by a face, body and mind that reflected his years of self-inflicted abuse. But it was likely that the young female officers who stood with Detective Chief Inspector Donald McPherson watching lank-haired and haggard Blue being lowered to the stage, were not fans and knew little about his glory days. So, probably looked upon him as nothing other than a pretty typical, aging rockstar.

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Not long after these and similar events, many of them involving domestic violence perpetrators who were not in the public eye, a young man named Garth Wellings, who was in his early twenties, sat at a computer keyboard chuckling as he typed with one finger. Amanda Stuart, his partner of similar age, sat beside him looking over his shoulder.

Garth had a small landscape gardening business. He would have liked it to be a big landscape gardening business, but he told himself that would require employing others and paying wages and either doing all the paperwork and tax stuff associated with that himself or employing someone to handle that side of the business as well. Which meant finding someone who was probably smarter than he was who would sit around in the office all day twiddling his thumbs when business was slow and, as with all his other employees, still be drawing wages.

Amanda suggested that, until he built up the business, he could employ casual labour and use an accountancy firm to handle his books. But what would she know?

When Garth was at school, there was a student in the same year called Phillip Buckley. He was in the class that studied Latin and French and other useless subjects and was reasonably good at sport because he was picked in the top cricket and rugby teams. He also was the first student in that year to get his own car and consequently – at least in Garth’s eyes – always going around with a good-looking girl. Because of his sporting ability and pleasant personality, he was one of the most popular students at the school. Everyone called him Bucks. Garth hated his guts.

Garth didn’t see him for a few years after he left school, until one day he bumped into him at the local shops. Garth saw him first and was going to walk past him pretending he didn’t recognise him, but Bucks collared him and for a time they exchanged reminiscences about the school. Bucks mentioned several names that didn’t ring any bells with Garth, although he pretended to remember them and laughed along with Bucks at their idiosyncrasies. He assumed they had joined the school after he decided to leave early and felt it was better not to highlight that point by pleading ignorance. What Garth found particularly galling about the encounter was learning that Bucks had moved into a large house at the end of his street.

Several months had passed between that encounter and Garth’s present, highly concentrated, one-finger typing administrations.

“Is that how you spell *coward*, c, o, w, h, e, r, d?” Amanda asked as she peered at what Garth was typing.

“Didn’t they teach you nothin’ at school? It’s like *shepherd*, someone who herds sheep.”

“But cowards don’t herd cows.”

Garth grimaced and shook his head. “Jesus Amanda! Maybe they did once. Maybe the brave dudes

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in the tribe did the fighting and the cowards stayed at home and herded the cows. Let me get on with this.”

“Who’s Phillip Buckley?”

“He’s a smartarse I went to school with.”

“The one with the Mercedes who lives at the end of the street. He seems nice enough.”

“What, with calling me Garthie whenever I bump into him at the shops like I was his best friend in the whole fuckin’ world? And always sayin’, ‘We must have you over sometime’, but never does? He’s a fuckin’ phoney, Amanda. He always was. I hate his guts.”

“But how do you know he beats his wife?”

“It doesn’t matter if he does or doesn’t. This will teach him the dangers of being such a smartarse.” He pressed a key with a flourish. “There, *Send!*”

“Jesus, Garthie, that could get you into trouble!”

“I’m not a mug, Amanda. I haven’t used this email address in years. There’s no way anyone will know who sent it.”

A few days later at a park not far from where he lived, Garth was found suspended upside-down from a tree with his face about head-height above the ground. He was naked and painted blue, with a placard proclaiming him to be a “STUPID LIAR” in broad lettering slung around his neck. Among those collected around him talking to him was Detective Chief Inspector Donald McPherson.

Also present was Amanda and two women of similar age. “I didn’t think that was how you spelt ‘coward’,” she whispered to the one standing closest to her.

Six

At the newsroom of the Daily Globe, three men were engaged in conversation with two women who were sitting at desks opposite to where they were standing. Charles Schmidt, who was in his mid-sixties, was the oldest of the group, Wayne Robertson was in his mid-thirties and Stewart Carmichael was in his early twenties. The women, Kathy Jones and Susan Benson were both in their late twenties.

Whereas Charles was immaculately attired in a light-grey, three-piece suit and sporting a gaily coloured bowtie and a matching top-pocket handkerchief, Wayne was tie-less and jacket-less and had his sleeves rolled half-way to his elbows, and Stewart was wearing an ill-fitting blue suit. Charles, who was the Globe's arts editor and had a matching demeanour, was leaning back on a desk immediately in front of the women with his hands clasped over his stomach. Wayne, who had the look of the seasoned crime reporter that he was, appeared relaxed and unmoving, his weight on his heels, his shoulders back, his hands lodged firmly in his rear pockets, and his stomach thrust forward in counterbalance. Stewart, on the other hand, who was tall, thin, and boyish, looked out of place in the newsroom and appeared uncomfortable and fidgety, continually shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

"I'm mortified by what they're doing. Absolutely mortified!" Charles was saying. Bets could be won, but usually lost, on picking Charles' sexual predilection. Those who would win were those who knew him and were aware of his long and loving relationship with the beautiful and striking Wendy Kelly, now deceased, the former personal assistant to the Globe's Managing Director, the formidable Sir Warren Goodwin. Those who would lose were those who didn't know him, and placed too much significance on his careful grooming, exemplary diction and seemingly affected mannerisms.

Kathy lifted a well-defined jaw. "How can you be mortified, Charles? You should be delighted."

"Violence should never be used to deter other violence, young lady. All that does is propagate more violence. As the First World War and thirty million deaths, and a myriad of similar examples since, attest."

Wayne chuckled. "You're a funny bastard, Charlie! Thank Christ they've confined you to the Arts supplement! You're too predisposed to hyperbole and shit-stirring to be let loose elsewhere."

Susan imparted a smile signifying agreement with Wayne and moved in quickly to support him. "We're not talking about grand armies colliding in global arenas, Charles. We're talking about family altercations in scattered kitchens and living rooms."

"You think the First World War wasn't a family altercation, my dear?"

Wayne chuckled softly and shook his head in light-hearted admonishment. “Charlie! Charlie!

“Those who were humiliated weren’t hurt all that badly, Charles,” Susan pointed out in support of her interjection. “And domestic violence has been chopped off at the knees everywhere at the cost of a few bruises.”

Charles snorted. “The cost of a few bruises! The cost of everything they held dear, you mean. Their friends, their families, their jobs, their prospects. A few bruises were the least of what it cost them.”

Kathy again lifted her jaw. “But that’s why it’s working, Charles, Painting them blue and stringing them up naked for the world to gawk at on social media is a salutary lesson to all those who abuse their women or kids that their behaviour is unacceptable and that their world could end because of it.”

“Salutary lesson! Salutary!” Charles chuckled before lowering his head theatrically onto one hand. “God save us, Wayne. The new brigade is now hurling inappropriate two-dollar words at us.”

Kathy immediately turned back to her screen in apparent angry retreat while her fingers performed a rapid flamenco dance across her keyboard. Susan’s knowing glance at her as the others then began to discuss recent public humiliations, suggested she thought it more likely Kathy was simply seeking ammunition before retaliating. She knew Kathy liked Charles and usually got on well with him, but there was no way she was going to allow a perceived slight to remain unchallenged if she believed she was in the right.

Stewart cleared his throat. “No ... no wonder per ... perpetrators of the violence fear the same happening to them,” He offered nervously. “Makes you almost feel sorry ... sorry for those who have been humiliated.”

Kathy’s head swung away from her computer terminal as both she and Susan leapt back into the conversation with all guns blazing. “Sorry for them!” Kathy snapped. “Next time I interview a battered wife, I’ll take you with me, Stewie. One good look at her should cure you of your misplaced, sappy sentiment.”

Susan planted an elbow on her desk and pointed an index finger at him pistol-like. “Either that, or have her husband beat the crap out of you to demonstrate his brutal technique.”

Wayne moved closer to Stewart and wrapped a consoling arm around his shoulder. “What did I tell you about leading with your jaw in this neck of the woods, Stewie? Around here, they take no prisoners. Stay low while I try to placate them with some worldly wisdom.”

He released Stewart and spread his hands as if delivering a sermon, priest-like. “The reason it’s working, ladies, isn’t because of offenders being afraid of being painted blue and strung up naked for the world to gawk at. Given the sheer number of fellow offenders, they’ll know that’s unlikely. But now the publicity floodgates have opened – similarly to what happened when that boofhead

Hollywood movie mogul was outed – they’ll know that, if they continue to offend, it’s likely that someone will reveal what they’ve been doing. And that someone could be their wife, a neighbour, or even one of their kids. Social media gives them nowhere to hide.”

Kathy, unknowingly hit the nail directly on the head. “In that case, my guess is that a group of people who were fed up with the burgeoning problem of domestic violence, not only decided it was time to think outside the square but decided to act on one of those thoughts. One that’s working.”

Stewart hung his head in genuine but exaggerated contrition. “Sorry, ladies. What can I do to re ... re ... repent?”

His mention of ‘sorry’ prompted an angry response from Kathy. “For a start, you can never forget that in the world we’re talking about – my bailiwick – *sorry* is never good enough.”

Susan lowered her pistol finger but still gripped Stewart with a tenacious glare. “Did you detect the thunder in those words, Stewie? In the world where women are battered and kids are traumatised, *sorry* is never good enough!”

Wayne turned to leave. “Come on, Charlie. Let’s get young Stewie out of here, before we have to clean blood off him.”

Kathy glanced at her computer terminal and held up a hand. “Wait! Wait!” And then, read from the screen: “‘Salutary – beneficial, good, worthwhile, particularly with reference to something that was unwelcome or unpleasant.’ So, Charles, when I called it ‘a salutary lesson’, for offenders, I could hardly have used a more pertinent two-dollar word.”

Charles again lowered his head onto one hand theatrically. “Quick, Wayne. Get me out of here. I’ve already had my fill of youthful assuredness this morning. I’m now in real danger of suffering from an overdose.”

As the men departed, Kathy and Susan returned their attention to the screens of their terminals but were distracted by the approach of a man dressed neatly in a lightweight dark suit. Although he extended greetings to others with a wave or a smile as he passed them, he had obviously targeted the two women and did not allow himself to be deflected from the beeline he had set to their desks. This was Hugo Moss who, when required to assist with coverage of world events, compliments of having worked with other news organisations in London, New York and Hong Kong, occasionally had *International Editor* attached to his byline. But with this area lately requiring only a simple rework of information stripped from the wire services, Carson Percival, the news editor, who was aware of Hugo’s numerous shortcomings, usually assigned him to jobs from which others had shied away. Hugo was in his mid-forties but attempted to appear younger with his sharp sideburns, a topknot, and slim-fitting trousers that rode well above his shoes.

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“Greetings and salutations, ladies!” He twirled one hand and bobbed his head in a mock bow. They both nodded and smiled in reply, neither of them projecting a great deal of enthusiasm. Hugo believed he was a ladies’ man, a point contradicted by the fact he rarely had a partner, regular or otherwise, and that most women, after first meet, gave him a wide berth. One of the possible contributing factors to his relationship problems was that he had either caught the affliction, or chose to ignore the intimidatory nature, of being a close-talker, causing people to back away until he had them up against a table or a wall without a ready avenue of escape. He also had an annoying habit of brushing too close to anyone who had their back turned to him, male and female alike, then deflecting any threatened remonstrance by throwing up his hands and pleading that his attention was elsewhere.

But for many, what was Hugo’s most disconcerting trait, was his confident belief that he was far more worldly and knowledgeable than he really was, and worse, that others had a similar mindset to his. So that whenever he imparted information or asked a question, both usually stacked with innuendo, listeners were more often left figuratively shaking their heads than being any wiser or having a clue about how they could sensibly respond. Consequently, so keen were listeners to minimize any time in his presence, they rarely contradicted him when they knew he said something that was patently incorrect. Compounding their unease, he would often wink, touch the side of his nose, or pat them on the arm or shoulder at a particular point of a story to signify God knows what. As most of those who had dealings with Hugo would readily point out, five minutes with him could seem like five hours.

Paradoxically, his written word was crisp and clearly expressed. So, provided he restricted sourcing the copy he produced from the wire services and refrained – as Carson insisted – from interviewing the newsworthy, his job was probably as secure as anyone’s in his industry. Which probably wasn’t saying much.

So, it was with apprehension bordering on annoyance that Kathy and Susan looked over at him when he planted himself directly in front of them and leaned back against the desk that Charles Schmidt had recently vacated. “So, who’s it to be ladies, on yours truly’s arm when he makes his grand entrance at the annual dinner? Don’t answer Susan because I know you’re already spoken for, and in circumstance about which I’m prepared to turn a blind eye, but I doubt any bishop would. Except, of course, those bishops who are in the habit of turning blind eyes. Say no more.”

Susan shook her head. “I haven’t said anything, Hugo.”

“I mean, I’ll say no more.”

Well, if you’re going to say no more, Hugo, you silly little man,” Susan snapped, “piss off and let us get on with our work.” In her defence, as well as being annoyed by his insinuation, she was perhaps

still simmering from her altercation with Stewart.

“Too hasty, too hasty, Susan. You’re not the only person here. I said I’ll turn a blind eye to whatever is going on between you and whose name will not breach these lips. So, there’s no need to be rude. No need.”

Susan was in no mood to back off. “If you’re not careful, Hugo not only will you be turning a blind eye, you’ll soon be sporting a black one. And if your question wasn’t directed at me as well as Kathy, why did you preface it with, ‘Ladies’, plural?”

Hugo looked uncertain. So, Kathy offered some help. “Hugo, do you want to know whether I’ll accompany you to the dinner. Is that why you’re here?”

“Yes. That’s why I’m honouring you with my presence.”

“Well, despite your honouring, the answer is, *no*.”

“But you never go with anyone. I thought you’d be pleased to have someone to chat you up when Susy here is either cutting the rug or in close, x-rated conversation with him whose name will not escape my lips.”

“My answer is now more emphatically *no*. The thought of you even attempting to chat me up risks making my stomach lurch.”

Susan re-entered the fray. “On your bike, Hugo.”

He made a few more feeble efforts to engage Kathy in conversation, but she ignored him. So, he eventually wandered off, endeavoring either to mitigate his disappointment or masquerade his retreat by exchanging comment with those who met his eye as he passed.

“Yes,” Susan admitted as both she and Kathy returned their attention to their terminals, “I am going to the dinner with Wayne. Seeing that most of you have already worked out that we’re an item, I decided there was no point in trying to hide it. And yes, despite he and his wife being separated for over a year, and despite his children probably not being too troubled by their old man having it off with some young floozy from work, I still feel guilty.”

“I haven’t said a word,” Kathy responded, without turning from her terminal. But shortly afterwards elicited a shriek of laughter from Susan with, “But I do think that calling yourself a young floozy is a stretch. After all, you’re not all that young.”

Shortly afterwards, Susan was scrolling through information on her screen when something caught her eye. After peering at it intently, she swiveled around in her chair to face Kathy. “Did you ever come across a Dominic Garibaldi with regard to domestic violence?”

“Not that I remember.” Kathy suddenly stopped typing. “Garibaldi! Wasn’t he the bikie who was killed by two other members of his gang?”

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“Yes.” Susan turned back to look at her computer screen. “The police had him under surveillance. And caught the killers before they had time to dump their car or their weapons.”

Kathy recommenced typing. “So why do you think I may have come across him?”

“When I tried to interview his wife, before she slammed the door in my face, she told me that as far as she was concerned, the brutal prick died too quick. Her words.

“Lovely.”

Kathy continued to type for a few seconds before stopping and sitting back in her chair to stare thoughtfully at the screen.

When Susan noticed, she turned back to face her squarely. “What?”

“Remember that other bikie who was killed by a fellow gang member about a month or so ago, shortly after he was released from prison?”

“The same day he got out, as I remember. Why?”

“I had a stack of domestic violence guff on him.”

Kathy turned away from her screen to face Susan with an expression that elicited another, “What?”

“I wonder if those people I said decided to think outside the square with regard to domestic violence, perhaps believed that different strokes were required for different folks.” She turned back to her terminal and her fingers again began to dance on the keys.

Seven

In his glass-encased office adjacent to where Kathy and Susan had their desks, Carson Percival was leaning back heavily in his swivel chair behind his desk reading from a single sheet of copy he held in one hand. Unlike most editors-in-chief, or chief, lead, executive, or managing editors or whatever was their title or responsibility at a major daily, Carson, the Globe's chief editor of the newsroom, had the appearance, the language and the ways of how these people were usually portrayed in the media. He was big and bluff and had a voice that sounded if it was whisky and cigarette stained. It wasn't, because he was teetotal and hadn't smoked since he was a young man.

When Kathy knocked and entered, he waved for her to take a seat opposite him, without lowering the sheet of copy or appearing to stop reading. "What have you got?"

The news staff who had worked closely with Carson for some time allowed him the license to be as abrupt with them as he liked. They would never run off to Human Resources simply because he shouted or swore at them, or even if he feigned to throw something at them, as was his occasional indication of impatience; because they liked him and believed that, despite his bluff exterior and ways, he actually liked and respected them. If he didn't, they believed, they wouldn't still be working closely with him.

Kathy sat down. "Something's happening."

Carson lowered the sheet of copy and locked his gaze on her for a few seconds before picking up a telephone handset. "Stop the presses!" He replaced the handset and sat back watching her.

"I think."

"Well think quick. There's an inky-fingered army in the bowels of this building waiting with bated breath."

"Chief, there hasn't been an inky-fingered army anywhere in this building in fifty years. Or anywhere else between us and our rapidly diminishing readership. And frankly, your, 'Stop the presses' is wearing very thin and not stopping anything other than me telling you what I think is happening."

"Other than *my* telling you what is happening, not *me* telling you what is happening. *My* – first person, singular, possessive – not *me* – first person, singular, objective." He rolled his eyes. "Thank God our poor downtrodden subs are the product of the time they still taught grammar at school!" He leaned back, closed his eyes and clasped his hands behind his neck. "OK, tell me what you've got."

“I think the *Enough* people could be involved with recent gangland murders.”

Carson straightened and watched her in silence for a time. “I’ll tell you what worries me about that statement, Kathy. Two words. *Think* and *could*.”

“I’ve only spent about half an hour on it so far, but I’ve already come up with six murders where the victims had a history of severe domestic violence. Very severe. So severe, you’d be excused thinking they got what they deserved.”

“Are you saying they weren’t killed by other gang members?”

“No, I’m not saying that.”

“Were they naked and painted blue with signs tied to them?”

“No.”

“I’m beginning to lose interest fast here, Kathy. We’re talking gangster bikies, for Christ’s Sake! Gangster bikies have a reputation for giving their old ladies a slap when the mood grips them.”

“Before those shaming incidents, I could find only one gangland killing in recent times where the victim did have a history of domestic violence. After those shaming incidents, most of them did. The coincidence is remarkable.”

“Coincidence is always remarkable, Kathy. Otherwise, we wouldn’t remark on it.”

“You miss it don’t you, Chief? Being the Globe’s fearsome senior subeditor.”

“Like I miss root therapy. And I was never fearsome. I was always my normal, lovable self.”

Carson watched her in silence for a moment. “So why do you think it’s the *Enough* crowd and not one of the army of copy-cats?”

“Because it has the professional mark of those who launched the campaign.”

“Why don’t they simply treat these brutal bastards the same way they’ve treated everyone else? Snatch them, strip them naked and paint them blue, string them up alive with a sign stating their misdeeds tied around their neck and ensure the video of it goes viral?” Carson then shook his head.

“No need to answer that. In a word, *shotguns*. They might be game, but they’re not stupid.”

“Maybe they tricked other gang members into thinking those they targeted had broken some cardinal rule. Betrayed them perhaps.”

“So, you’re prepared to risk killing the mockingbirds?”

“I’m prepared to risk what?”

Carson’s chair squeaked as he leaned back heavily and watched her silently for a time with a deep furrow creasing his brow. As this was what she and Susan – somewhat facetiously and definitely disrespectfully – called his sage mode, she waited until he eventually replied.

“What do you think of the *Enough* crowd?”

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“I think what they’ve already achieved is wonderful. This reduction in domestic violence here and abroad.” But then the likely explanation to what he was alluding struck her. Her mouth dropped open, and she sank back in her chair and stared across the room. “Do you think there’s much of a risk?”

“I think there’s a risk. And it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.”

“Isn’t calling them mockingbirds a bit of a stretch?”

“Do you think it is?”

She contemplated this silently for a time. “I don’t suppose so,” she admitted eventually. “At least not by good deed. Or by appreciated performance.”

“And that’s putting aside that they’re involved in a fair bit of mocking.”

Kathy contemplated this in silence again before suddenly leaning forward. “No! We’re newspaper people, Chief. Our responsibility is to report the news. To report whatever happens in the world. Not to judge whether or not it should be reported.”

Carson rolled his eyes. “Oh to be so young!” His chair creaked again as he straightened. “So, what do you plan to do next to find out if you’re right.”

“No idea. Yet.”

“Jesus, Kathy!”

“Give me one week.”

“And if I don’t, how would I know you weren’t taking it upon yourself to sneakily put in hours on it anyway?”

Kathy’s face was illuminated by a brilliant smile. “Chief, you’ve just sneakily split an infinitive! You, a standard bearer of the time when they still taught grammar at school.”

Carson, also smiling, but more tightly, lowered his brow and seized her with his gaze. “Splitting infinitives isn’t about grammar. It’s about style. And as probably the only person in this building who would know why splitting them causes pedants to froth at the mouth, I avoid splitting them whenever I’m knocking out copy they’re likely to read. Mouth-frothing pedants could frighten the horses! But when I’m merely suffering the chancy cheek of a disrespectful subordinate, I reserve the right to markedly and to deliberately split them whenever I fucking-well like.”

He then returned his attention to the sheet of copy he had been reading when she entered. “Now piss off and stop bothering me.”

Kathy stood up. “One week.” She began to walk towards the door, turning back when she reached it. “Because it’s derived from a single word.”

Carson lowered the sheet. “What?”

“The infinitive. In Latin and old English. It’s a single word. You’re not the only person in the

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building who knows why pedants froth at the mouth when they see or hear one split. Because it was once a single word, pedants believe the two parts of the modern equivalent, as in ‘to run’ and ‘to jump’, are irrevocably joined together and that interfering with them is as deplorable and dangerous as interfering with the space-time continuum or some such similar universe-binding glue.”

“They do indeed but it has more to do with infinitives being the pure form of a verb. As in the phrasal verb ‘to piss off’. Which is what I told you to do five minutes ago. So, why are you still here pissing me off about fucking infinitives?”

“One week.”

She ducked and hurried off as Carson feigned to pick an object from his desk to hurl at her.

Eight

The week after Kathy Jones began to pursue her belief that those involved with the *Enough* campaign were also involved with recent gangster killings, Cooper Wallis arranged to meet with James Blake and Walter Cranborne at the hotel where they last met.

Cooper had more in his background than being a former policeman, an occupation about which Walter found a need to regularly mention. He was also a former karate champion, a former commando, a former captain in the military reserve, and a former security consultant to several federal government ministers. Presently, he was a full-time consultant to the state police's intelligence division. Rather than *a jack of all trades and master of none*, as some might have too hastily described him, he was more of *a jack of some trades and master of most of them*. Cooper the copper.

After he and the others exchanged pleasantries and the three of them armed themselves with beers, Cooper took a business card from his wallet and placed it on the table in front of Walter. "What's this *Shotgun Security* card you sent me?"

"That's us. *Shotgun Security* is our registered name. Thought you'd like to know we've gone into business."

"You've got to be kidding. "*Shotgun Security!*"

James joined in. "You want your whatever to arrive safely, Coops, we make sure it does."

"You don't mean armed with a shotgun. Not with this country's gun laws."

Walter's eyes narrowed. "We're not stupid, Coops."

"Are you saying that one of your people accompanies the load?"

"Or the package. Always."

"Sounds expensive."

Walter smiled. "It is."

"Sounds labour intensive as well. How many on your staff?"

"Not many."

Cooper glanced from one to the other. "But I'm guessing a whole heap of names on call. Right?"

Unnoticed by Cooper, Billy Smith appeared at a doorway and looked around the room. Seeing the others, he raised a finger to his lips and walked across to stand directly behind Cooper. He then placed the tip of an index finger on the other man's back and spoke softly close to Cooper's ear. "Keep your eyes to the front and very carefully take out your wallet and pass it back to me."

“Billy bloody Smith!” Cooper stood up and, after both he and Billy shaped up boxer-style and fainted at exchanging punches, they embraced and shook hands.

“Jesus, boss, they’ve had you on a good paddock.” Billy reached out to pat Cooper on the stomach before stepping back as if to get a better look at him, or perhaps to stand out of reach. But not for fear of being clipped on the ear. Well acquainted with Cooper’s sentimental side and noticing that his eyes were beginning to brim, he was more fearful of being crushed in a bear hug. The spontaneous welcoming ritual of their fellow travellers caused the others to smile as they sat watching them.

“I’ll give you *good paddock*, you skinny bastard!” Cooper cleared his throat while squinting and pinching the bridge of his nose as if perhaps clearing his sinus. “You can get help for that, you know.”

They watched each other over raised chins and friendly smiles, before Billy pulled up a chair and they both sat down. The other two continued to smile, soaking up the radiated warmth. Although none of them would have believed it worth dwelling upon, all had shared enough significant experiences for any two of them to act as comfortably with each other as Cooper and Billy were behaving, regardless of any time they may have been apart, whether it had been for months, or even years. And all of them knew the exact extent of the language they could use, what salutations were acceptable, what definitely weren’t, and when to retreat from their feistier exchanges to protect their camaraderie.

So easily did Cooper and Billy reunite, that an observer would have been excused for assuming they had been apart for no more than a few days rather than many years, and that their exchange of pleasantries after sitting down may have simply been picking up on a recently interrupted conversation.

All of them spent some time catching up on events about which one or other was unaware, and the finer points of those about which they may have had some inkling but sought more detail, until Cooper eventually lowered his brow and glanced at both Walter and James. “I might have known Billy was involved with you two.”

“We needed someone to run our IT. Who better than Billy?”

“I’m not talking about your IT.” Cooper sliced a flattened hand away from his chest dismissively. “Leastwise your legitimate IT. I’m talking about hacking private email accounts, social media accounts and whatever other accounts you felt inclined to hack.”

James displayed exaggerated affront. “That came out of left field, Coops. Why on earth would we want Billy to hack anyone’s accounts? Isn’t hacking against the law?”

“Of course, it’s against the law, as you well know.”

“You have proof of this do you, Coops?”

“I don’t need proof. I’ve observed the results. And I’m not here to argue with you about the rights and wrongs of what you’ve been doing. Why I’m here today is to warn you that someone’s on to a

connection between those who have been painting people blue and stringing them up, and gangland killings. Which means you have a lot more to worry about now than staying one jump ahead of the law. At least the law takes prisoners.”

James leant back in his chair. “Not that any of this has anything to do with us, Coops who is on to this supposed connection?”

“A young reporter who covers domestic violence for the Globe by the name of Kathy Jones, for one. And after she met up with him yesterday, a hard-nosed, hard-hitting Chief Inspector of police who fights under the name of Donald McPherson, for another.”

“How do you know what they discussed?”

“She deals almost exclusively with domestic violence. And within half an hour after she met up with McPherson, he called for copies of all of the files on the recent gangland killings.”

“*Post hoc ergo propter hoc*,” Billy responded. “*After, therefore because of*. The often fallacy of assuming that, because something occurs after an event, it was caused by it.”

“You’ll need more than your smartarse Latin quotes to protect you from a mob of angry bikies bearing down on you, Billy. Why the hell couldn’t you be satisfied with painting perpetrators blue and stringing them up?”

Walter intervened. “If we were the ones involved, Coops, targetting the bikies would be largely down to you. What was it you said about the one who was about to be released when we first met up? Something about he was going to waste his whole family and being mad-dog rabid.”

“Don’t you try and hang any of this on me, Walt. Right at the start, I couldn’t have made it any clearer that I wanted nothing to do with anything you might have been contemplating.”

“Coops, nothing you’ve said suggests that whoever is doing this is definitely in any more danger than they ever were.”

“Billy, if some young female reporter has deduced there’s a link, how long before the Wolf does?”

“The what?”

“The *Wolf*.” Cooper smiled grimly and shook his head. “Don’t tell me that, with your smarts, Billy, you haven’t collectively identified those you’ve been targetting?”

Billy pulled back into his chair defensively. “If I was involved with anything you’re talking about, Coops, I would have probably been satisfied with collectively identifying them as bikies, rather than be worried about any subgroup they paid their dues to.”

“Well, you should have been worried, because I have it on good authority that all of the gangland killings that were orchestrated by someone fiddling with their emails, or text messages, or whatever were fiddled with, not only involved the Wolf motorcycle gang, but the Wolf is the very worst of the

outlaw gangs.”

Walter responded angrily. “Coops, that’s bullshit. You may have it on some authority – whether good, bad or in-between – that those killed were from the same gang, but I’ll bet there is no evidence whatsoever that they were killed because of someone interfering with their IT. That’s purely a shit-stirring assumption on your part now that you think Billy could be involved.”

“OK, I’ll admit it. But please take it as gospel that these bad bastards are the worst of the worst. They’re a rag-tag group of outcasts and defectors from some of the bigger outlaw gangs. Or those the bigger gangs wouldn’t have a bar of for whatever reason.”

“Like severe domestic violence, for instance?” James offered.

“That would be high on the list, because practically all of them have had serious DV convictions. They’re a virtual motherload of DV in the bikie community. And, for better or worse, they call themselves the *Wolf*. *Wolf* singular.”

“I’ll bet they’ve adopted their name from that poem of Byron’s where the Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, *Wolf* singular. Can we assume that their club patches are in purple and gold?”

“You can assume what you like, Jimmy. They number about thirty. So, one of your assumptions should be that – as with this Kathy Jones at the Globe – at least one or more of them might already suspect that they’ve been duped into turning upon themselves.” He gripped Billy with his gaze. “And, even as we speak, be taking steps to identify the culprit.”

He then went on to explain as much as he knew about the gang, including that their clubhouse was a former electricity substation at a disused industrial site on the edge of the city. “It’s a veritable brick fortress. After they threw out what they didn’t need and put in air-conditioning, they reinforced the single doorway with sheet steel to protect themselves from rival gangs. And they also installed a state-of-the-art security system with CCTV cameras that can be monitored remotely whenever they’re absent.”

Walter smiled tightly projecting little humour. “I hope you’re not telling us this because you’re assuming that, now we know about them, we’d consider attacking the place on the premise that attack is the best form of defence. If you are, we thank you for your concern for our welfare, but you’re telling the wrong people.”

Cooper shook his head and ignored him. “They’re led by a brutal little germ who calls himself Yousif Al-Axe. If your theory about the club patch is right, maybe he believed an Arabic-sounding moniker gives him more clout among those he needs to impress than the *Michael Murphy* he was Christened with. He once served time for the manslaughter of his first wife, which should give you some idea of his predilection for violence and general attitude to women. And he rarely goes anywhere

without his two lieutenants, twin brothers who call themselves Kalash and Nikov.”

James harrumphed! “You’re joking! Kalash and Nikov as in an AK-47. They might as well call themselves *Laughing* and *Stock*. Or maybe *Idi* and *Otic*.”

“Regardless of the apparent stupidity of their leader’s lieutenants, the Wolf are the largest supplier of ice and heroin in the region, compliments of a curious ability to stay one jump ahead of the law.”

Cooper eventually grew tired of their continual denials of complicity in any of the matters he raised; so changed the subject, “I believe Dolly Gray is heading back for another tour?”

Billy grimaced. “The silly bugger flies out in a fortnight. When he finishes leave with his parents on their farm, he’s going to call in here for a few days.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t pay off at the same time as you three. Couldn’t you have persuaded him that he’s done enough and shouldn’t continue to chance his luck?”

“He wants to get himself a better pension. And, with a bit of luck, he won’t have to spend much time in the dasht. Now that we’re just about all pulled out, most of the time he’ll probably be on security detail in Kabul.”

Later, as they were all preparing to leave, Cooper shook hands with James. “Look after yourself, Jimmy. I hope this latest development doesn’t lead anywhere. But in case it does, watch your back.”

“Hope reigns supreme, Coops. Not that anything you’ve said has anything to do with us, of course.”

“As I’ve grown weary of pointing out, *you all doth protest too much, methinks*. But, I suppose, it’s for the best that you do. I really shouldn’t hear you confirm my suspicions. My professional conscience is copping a big enough hammering as it is for telling you tales out of school.”

Billy again displayed a literary bent. “Jesus, Coops! You’ve got too much time on your hands if you’ve been reading Hamlet.”

Walter proffered his hand to Cooper. “Look after yourself, Coops. If they ever kick you out for being smarter than you look, call in on us at Shotgun Security.”

Cooper chuckled. “Yours will be the last door I’ll be knocking on if I needed another job, Walt. I’m too attached to all my bits and pieces to risk rubbing shoulders with you lot for any longer than necessary.” He then shook Billy’s hand. “And you be extra careful, Billy. You’re the one who’s most exposed to the bad bastards who would delight in doing terrible things to you.”

Billy bumped shoulders with him in a part hug. “You can count on it, boss. But, just for interest’s sake, I think I’ll check on what this reporter at the Globe has been sticking her nose into. Is she a *Kathy* with a *C* or a *K*?”

Cooper looked across at the others and shook his head. “Give me strength!”

Nine

The day after Cooper Wallis met with his friends to discuss his concerns for their safety, the Wolf were gathered inside a high fenced compound in front of the building he described as a veritable brick fortress. Some of those present were sitting on their bikes while engaged in conversation with those nearest, while others were either entering or departing the building via an open doorway beside which sat a petrol pump where some were taking turns to fill their tanks. Most of them were big men, sporting face and neck tattoos. Some had straggly beards. The jackets of those who were wearing them were emblazoned with WOLF patches in purple letters highlighted in gold.

Yousif Al-Axe, a squat, thuggish, middle-aged man with a spider-web tattoo encrusted with an assortment of insects, including a large spider, encircling his throat, appeared at the open doorway of the clubhouse accompanied by his much larger lieutenants, Kalash and Nikov. He stood for a time surveying his surrounds before moving to stroll among those gathered outside. As he moved among them, he paid scant attention to most of those who drew back to let them pass, seemingly being more interested in parading about with his jaw raised high like an ancient conquering hero returning from a successful military campaign.

At one point, his attention was drawn to the high steel gate of the compound sliding back to allow a gang-member to enter on his motorbike. This was Manawa Mahanga, a tall, twenty-something man of Pacific Islander appearance. After he dismounted, he walked quickly across to Al-Axe and lowered his head to speak close to the other man's ear. Al-Axe reacted as if slapped, causing Kalash and Nikov to move threateningly on Mahanga before Al-Axe pushed them back.

“Bring me the Nerd,” he snapped.

He then stormed off into the clubhouse while Kalash and Nikov converged on the Nerd, who was small and gaunt and dwarfed by most of those who moved quickly out of the way of the others.

The interior of the clubhouse consisted of a large room containing tables and chairs and a bar behind which the wall was festooned with posters of naked women in provocative poses. There was no ceiling, the room capped instead by a bridge-like construction of heavy, closely enmeshed, beams below the roof rafters.

Within the time it took them to escort the Nerd inside and for Mahanga to clear everyone out and slam the door, Kalash and Nikov had hold of the Nerd's shoulders forcing him face-down against a table while Al-Axe stood over him pressing the muzzle of a large pistol against his temple.

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“You told me our IT is secure!” he shouted.

“It is! It is!” the Nerd responded with difficulty from the side of his mouth.

“Don’t lie to me, you little shit!” Al-Axe cocked his pistol. “We’ve been hacked. Brothers have died because we’ve been hacked. I have it on good authority that none of those we thought were ratting on us were actually ratting on us. They were wasted for no good reason because our IT’s been hacked. If some skirt from the Globe knows we’ve been hacked, how come you don’t know?”

“Thinks we’ve been hacked.” Mahanga corrected.

Al-Axe swung to face him. “What?”

“The bird from the Globe. I was told she thinks we’ve been hacked. She doesn’t know for sure.”

“Who asked you to fucking speak? We’ve definitely been hacked. I know it in my bones. There’s no way we could have had that many brothers rat on us. No way on fucking earth!”

“If anything’s been hacked, it’s been their own email accounts, or whatever accounts,” the Nerd mumbled, his words distorted by the pool of saliva into which his mouth was pressed.

“What?” Al-Axe shouted. “What are you talking about? Let him up. Put him in a chair.”

Kalash and Nikov released the Nerd and shoved him roughly into a chair beside the table.

“Or their wives’ or girlfriends’ accounts.” The Nerd straightened his shoulders and rolled his head from side to side. “The accounts that gave us the heads-up they were ratting. Our IT’s as secure as the Bank of fucking England.”

“But they weren’t fucking ratting, were they?” Al-Axe snarled, pointing the pistol at the Nerd’s forehead. “You, you stupid little dipshit, were fooled into believing they were and convinced us they were.”

Al-Axe continued to rant for a time before sitting down opposite the Nerd and placing the pistol within easy reach on the table beside him. “I want to know who’s behind it. I want a name. How do I get a name?”

The Nerd contined to roll his head from side to side, “I know a professional hacker who can probably help.”

“Get him in here.”

“You can’t get him in here. No one knows where he lives. He could be in Russia or China, or maybe even Mongolia.”

“You said you knew him.”

“I know of him. He calls himself Temujin. They say he’s the king of hackers. I’m pretty sure he’s Asian.”

Twelve thousand miles away in a dimly lit room containing a vast array of computer monitors, where

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the only sound was the hum of air conditioning, a grossly overweight Asian man sporting a wispy beard was lounging back in an easy chair while a smaller, thinner, Asian man was kneeling at his feet painting the big man's toenails. In the background, another Asian man and an Asian woman were asleep on sofas. One of these, or possibly all, was the Nerd's *Temujin*. The name, probably derived from Temujin Khan, better known in the West as Genghis, suggested they were probably Mongolian. But, in the context that the Nerd would seek their assistance, whether or not they were Mongolian, was as unimportant as the miles that existed between them. As was their sex, their sexual predilection, their religion or anything else that defined them or their appearance, their beliefs or their ways. Such is the nature of the world wide web medium, the nebulous www. What counted was Temujin's competency. And in the trade, he, she, they or whoever – with the possible exception of those who occupied a few desks in a corner of one of India's largest call centres – was considered the best hacker outside the Kremlin.

"You think he's Asian. Of course, he's Asian," Al-Axe growled. "Asians are smart." He glanced at the others. "How come we don't have no Asians in the Wolf?"

Mahanga smiled. "Because they're smart."

Al-Axe raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Because they're smart?"

Mahanga continued to smile. "Why we don't have no Asians in the Wolf?"

Al-Axe suddenly grabbed his pistol from the table and leaped to his feet, this time pointing it at Mahanga. "You think this is funny? You think this is fucking funny? We've wasted six of our brothers for no good reason and you think this is fucking funny?"

Mahanga held up both hands with his palms flattened. "No, boss. No. I'm sorry."

Al-Axe stood for a moment staring at Mahanga before lowering the pistol and sitting back down. "Someone's going to be sorry". He put his pistol back on the table and glanced across at the Nerd. "How do you get on to this Asian?"

"I contact someone I know and tell him I have a job for Temujin. This someone I know contacts someone else, who contacts I don't know how many other someone elses, and if Temujin gets the message he might get back to me."

Al-Axe shook his head despairingly. "Jesus Christ!"

"And if he does, it will cost."

"How much will it cost?"

"Probably two grand first up to take on the job. A good bit more if he comes up with a name."

"If he comes up with a name? If? Are you telling me I could fork out two fucking grand and end up with fuck all?"

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“That’s the way they work, these professional hackers. The good ones.”

Al-Axe grabbed his pistol again and this time aimed it at the Nerd’s face. “Well, that’s not how I work. If I have to fork out two grand and you fuck me about and don’t come back to me with a name, I’m going to put a hole in the centre of your forehead. Do you hear what I’m telling you? In the centre of your fucking forehead.”

“I can’t promise you anything, boss.”

“I don’t want a fucking promise from you. I want a fucking name.”

The Nerd rose and began to leave. “You’ll have to feed my credit card.”

Al-Axe raised his gun. “Get me a name or I’ll feed more than your fucking credit card. I’ll feed you with this.”

The Nerd looked back at Kalash and Nikov. “If either of you bug-eyed morons lay a hand on me again, I’ll bight your fucking noses off.” He then turned to leave, pausing momentarily to jut out his jaw and feint threateningly at them before turning away, causing them both to exchange amused glances and chuckle as they watched him go.

Al-Axe’s gaze remained on the Nerd as he retreated. “What an unholy fucking shambles!” He turned back and locked his gaze on the others. “What are you two laughing at? You think this is fucking funny?”

“We think he’s fucking funny.”

Al-Axe rose and strode towards them brandishing his gun. “Maybe you think I’m fucking funny?”

“No, boss, we don’t think you’re fucking funny.” They both backed away.

“You’ve got that right.” He stood staring at them intently before swinging to face Mahanga. “You! You find out where this reporter from the Globe lives. We should pay her a visit.”