

Trevor G Magnusson



Songs of Warm Dystopia



Febrile hallucinations from the collective global delirium

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1

This was nothing like bungee jumping.

Tucker Trent glanced around the Skyvan's austere cabin. A plain bench ran along one side, there was some webbing on the walls and two rows of handholds hung from the ceiling. It was all straight lines and angles, not a curve in sight. If you took a small shipping container, bolted a stubby wing with two turboprop engines across the top you'd be pretty close to the Skyvan. Through one of the small windows opposite him Tucker could see the underside of the right wing and half of the propeller's translucent disk, a shadow against the pure blue sky.

Twelve jumpers, around half the rated maximum. Full capacity would be interesting. There was plenty of space, but everyone was starting to pack in toward the rear, preparing for a tight coordinated drop.

Standing just ahead of the ramp formed by the closed tailgate was jumpmaster Ryan Mace. Lean and hard but showing his years, he'd be seeing everyone out and jumping last. His designer camo jumpsuit featured the Exit Strategy logo at the chest, just like the other four instructors. Each of them sported a severe buzz-cut, and everyone in the plane had tactical headsets with throat mics.

– Hard as. Can you say “Action figure?”

First in line was Chiron Levy, veteran of over seven hundred jumps, and man of the moment. Apart from the pilot, he wore the only non-camo suit on the plane. It was jet black. The hairpiece was long gone and his smooth head was covered by a Biggles-style leather helmet. His frame had a drawn, attenuated look and Tucker imagined that when the tailgate was raised he might be sucked out of the aircraft like a feather. But there was a hard gleam in his eye, grim but excited, and it silenced all doubts.

– Must be pumped to the eyeballs, and not just adrenalin, thought Tucker.

– Chiron Levy, mentor, friend and the luckiest break I ever got.

Next to Chiron was Ashleigh Gabriel, Chiron's partner of ten years. His face was a mask of terror held in check by something worse. Elfin features and a compact frame, he too appeared ephemeral and fragile. He was clasping hands with Chiron and harnessed tightly to his tandem master (Rod?), the locus of two very different but intimate connections. Tucker noticed Rod glance down at their entwined hands, then away. He didn't appear uncomfortable, but he didn't seem to know where to look either.

Ashleigh was no stranger to skydiving, with around fifty jumps to his name. But today it would be strictly tandem.

– What must he be going through?

Chiron's brother Cael was next, and the family resemblance was obvious. Take Chiron, fatten him up and add a few years and they could be twins. Tucker had met Cael a few times, and he seemed likeable. But he didn't have Chiron's spark, the quiet anarchy and subtle, subversive wit.

Two of Chiron's clubmates were standing against the far wall. Tucker wasn't sure of their names, they'd been introduced as Icehead and the Streak. They were pretty hardcore with plenty of airtime between them, and not a lot of it in the company of novices.

Tucker was a little forward of the jumpmaster, sitting awkwardly on the edge of the bench. His own instructor (Geoff someone-or-other) was spooned up nice and tight behind.

Standing across from Tucker was Elias Corder, founder and CEO of Corder Synergy. The boss, equal parts intimidating and engaging. The man was a coiled spring of energy, a look of fierce enthusiasm in his eyes. Time had sculpted his face, but he carried it well. This was a man with an appetite for life.

Corder caught Tucker's eye. "You wouldn't miss this for the world, would you Trent?" His voice sounded thin in Tucker's earpiece. But he needn't have said anything, his eyes were beaming the message to anyone who looked.

"No, but I'd happily postpone it a few decades."

"Indeed, wouldn't we all."

Tucker glanced at the roof-mounted LCD screen behind the cockpit. It showed altitude, airspeed, heading and temperature. They were approaching 12,000 feet and it was getting cold outside. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt cold.

Tucker recalled a younger age, a boy with a familiar but foreign-sounding name standing on a platform looking down. A thick braided elastic cable hung from his ankles, bound tightly together with a towel and secured with straps. It snaked over the edge, looped down and then up again, foreshortened by the alarming perspective.

There was terror, and it was unlike anything he had felt before. His mind, with its quiet and deliberate internal dialogue, shattered into two dozen or so blabbering imbeciles. Like a bus full of ill-disciplined children, each desperately demanding that he do as they say. Or a cage of panicked monkeys, shrieking and hammering away at the inside of his head.

Then in a momentary lull, one lone voice:

– Hey, what's the worst that could happen? If you die, you die.

And all hell breaks loose again for what feels like forever, but is probably less than five seconds. And then the still point, the moment of clarity.

– *Shut, the fuck, up.*

Dead silence.

– Just do it.

Days later he would make the Nike connection. But right now it's a blinding light from within, pure and untouched by commerce.

So he just did it.

Sure, the initial fall brought on such a sensory overload that normal processing failed for a few seconds. And then when the stretched cord flung him up again and he felt the sickening impotence of zero-g at the top of the arc, the cacophony briefly returned and he gave it voice in an involuntary cry.

Then they wheeled the trolley platform across, straddling the swimming pool so they could lower him down onto it. And it was time to buy the video (cassette!) and join his peers, assuming the required degree of detached bravado.

Some of the people who climbed up the stairs of that tower did not have what it took, and were faced with the long walk down again. The walk of shame.

He was not one of them.

But that was not the message he took with him down the years.

It was those three words, 'just do it', and the way the rabble of monkeys or preschoolers or frothing madhouse inmates evaporated.

This was nothing like bungee jumping.

The elevation was much greater this time and somehow this made the fear more remote. The ground was so far away and the danger seemed abstract, his mind discounting any risks not flagged as immediate.

And there were many other layers of emotion woven through his mind.

– Chiron Levy, mentor, friend and the luckiest break I ever got.

Ryan Mace cleared his throat. “Gentlemen, we’ll be above the drop zone in 60 seconds. Goggles down please, the pilot is about to raise the tailgate.” He paused until everyone had finished, then thumbed a control on his wrist and said something to Chiron. The two-band comms system meant that no one else could hear.

– As if we need to.

Chiron Levy nodded, turned and gave Ashleigh a quick kiss, then leant past him and did some sort of crossed forearm salute thing with his brother. Something from when they were kids. He turned and looked back at Tucker.

“Ciao,” mouthed Tucker, and Chiron smiled.

A fissure of light appeared along the floor next to the assembled group. The tailgate slowly swung up to the ceiling, transforming the space inside the plane from cozy and protected to alarmingly open. There was floor, then nothing. If the pilot were to pitch the nose up, everyone would tumble out.

Air gusted into the cabin, buffeting their suits and hair. Chiron’s body convulsed in a series of shallow coughs. They subsided and he paused and looked back. He drew a small cylindrical gadget from his pocket and looked down at it. There was a single LED, a trigger-style switch and an elastic strap. He slipped his palm into it then stepped forward and lowered himself on the floor, legs dangling over the edge.

This marked the start of pre-jump maneuvering. The aim was to minimize the delay between jumpers exiting the aircraft, and increase the chance of a successful formation in the limited freefall time. Exit Strategy was one of the very few skydiving operations willing to consider building a formation involving tandem jumpers. The obvious concern was that the drogue chutes might become entangled. They’d solved this by using a shorter line with an engineered break point. It was strong enough to slow the descent velocity of a tandem pair to that of a single jumper. But in the event of a tangle, it was designed to snap cleanly as soon as one of the pairs deployed their main chute.

Ashleigh and his tandem master joined Chiron on the edge of the floor, the instructor moving as though he couldn’t feel Ashleigh’s weight at all. Cael Levy was heavier and a little more coordination was required. But this team was practiced and professional, and they were soon in position.

Without warning Icehead and the Streak casually stepped outside, but instead of dropping away they arrested their fall and hung from the horizontal floater bar mounted just below the edge. Corder and his instructor moved in from behind and sat next to Cael, in the space where the two hardcore jumpers had been.

Tucker’s attention drifted from the assembled first row to the void and horizon gaping beyond them, filling his field of vision.

– Steady now, keep a grip

– No, make that... let go?

– Just do it.

Mace looked at the group and gestured. “Good to go.”

Chiron glanced at the small cylinder in his hand and squeezed the switch. Then he tumbled forward and out of Tucker’s sight, followed almost immediately by Ashleigh and the rest of the first row. The two floaters probably dropped at the same time, but Tucker didn’t notice them. Things were starting to happen all at once. He felt Geoff

lifting and pushing him and as he reached up to steady himself Ryan Mace seized his arm and pulled him forward. There was the sickening lurch, a rush into emptiness.

The first few seconds didn't make much sense. Some twisting, then the noise.

Geoff tucked his arms and legs in to reduce air resistance. They'd gone through all of this during prep. The first tandem jumpers would deploy their drogue chutes almost immediately to slow their descent. Tucker had dropped a few seconds later, and Geoff delayed opening his a little while, spending more time in faster freefall.

Chiron, Ryan Mace and the two hardcore jumpers weren't using drogues at all, as they weighed much less than a tandem pair. Indeed Chiron, due to his weight loss even had some lead bars sewn inside his suit. The jumpmaster was last to drop, but he would go head down to increase his fall speed and catch up with the rest of the group.

Tucker noticed the scattered figures approaching, the tiny drogue chutes of the pairs trailing upward. As he drew closer he felt a soft tugging sensation, his own drogue opening, and their descent speeds were matched. Geoff grasped Tucker's wrists and nudged his legs, adjusting them into position. The group was starting to move together, coalescing into the target snowflake configuration under the precise guidance of the tandem masters.

Tucker started to pay attention to the voices in his earpiece, faint and dry through the wind's roar. The whole group was quite close together now, although he could not see much behind or above him. The goal was to form a circle, with Chiron in the middle and everyone else linked around him. There was very little time in which to achieve this. A drop from 12,000 feet gave 45 seconds of freefall, and just getting close enough to start ate up a significant chunk of that.

According to Exit Strategy's promo DVD, they hit formation around sixty percent of the time.

They were moving together but Chiron, conspicuous in this black suit was more at the edge than in the centre. Almost near enough to jostle...

Icehead and the Streak came in and attached themselves to Chiron, levering him towards Tucker. Tucker felt someone catch the fabric of his right sleeve from above. He turned and saw Corder's face, grabbed his forearm and pulled him into alignment. Feeling his body turn, he noticed his instructor had linked arms with Ashleigh's.

"Ten, nine, eight ..." Mace's voice rasped in his ear.

Chiron was now almost perfectly positioned, but the circle around him was not complete. Mace was a little high above them, and it appeared that Cael's tandem master had misjudged the timing and thrown his drogue chute a fraction of a second late. That put the pair two body-lengths below them, a little to one side.

"Seven, six ..."

Cael's instructor extended his arms and legs in an effort to slow his descent. Mace moved in effortlessly and closed the circle.

"Five, four ..."

The instructors and experienced jumpers flexed their knees, the formation dipped slightly, and Ryan Mace and the Streak pushed away tilting a little towards the vertical. Cael's instructor reached and caught Mace's right foot. The alignment was out, Mace was pulling in, trying to link up with the Streak again...

"Three, two ..."

And there was a circle again. Well, a not-very-circular, not-very-horizontal circle, with a tail.

"One ..."

– So does this count among the sixty percent that make it?

– Come on, a formation built from a mix of singles and tandems, including some first-timers. Brilliant or what?

“Break away.”

Chiron Levy moved one of his arms and flexed a knee, breaking the symmetry of his body. With a deft twist, he rotated until he was facing skywards. Then he crossed his arms over his chest. He was still holding the little cylinder, still pressing the switch. He was smiling.

Tucker disengaged his hands from both Corder and Ashleigh, made a small adjustment to one of the shoulder straps of his harness. The tandem masters had arranged to open their canopies in a tight sequence and Tucker briefly noticed Ashleigh shoot skywards and out of his field of vision, followed a second later by Cael. Then came the violent and sudden physical shock as his own parachute opened and pulled him from freefall into slow controlled descent.

A billowing sail blossomed some distance below him and obscured the figures of Corder and his instructor. It was followed almost immediately by that of Mace, the jumpmaster. A few seconds later Icehead and the Streak opened theirs.

At this moment Tucker became aware that the roaring had been stilled and there was a slight tickling sensation in his right hand.

Chiron alone had not deployed his chute. He had turned to face the sky, and watched as lover, brother, friends and colleagues were pulled in turn from their trajectories. Tucker saw the black figure recede, become a speck still moving against the distant ground.

He gave a small salute.

– So long, Chiron. It’s been...

But he couldn’t put it into words, not even the silent internal voice could come up with anything worthwhile.

Absent-mindedly Tucker looked at his hand and saw a patch of red. There was a cut across the palm, and he was bleeding slowly. He must have been holding onto the shoulder strap as the parachute opened, and cut himself.

Earlier in the day a much larger group of family, friends and colleagues had gathered at Exit Strategy HQ. The premises were located adjacent to a civil aviation aerodrome, amid a scattering of engineering businesses and other light industries. Tucker had driven in from the city, allowing the Boxster to wind up to concert pitch on the short stretch of freeway. He was a little early, and waited in the car park until a few more guests arrived. After Elias Corder’s Mercedes had pulled up he left his car and headed inside.

An imposing commando type greeted them in the foyer, introduced himself as Ryan Mace and ushered them into the main function room. It was large but slightly austere, with beige carpet, a few chairs around the perimeter and a small podium with lectern and microphone at one end. The walls featured some framed maps and aviation diagrams, and a large plasma screen near the front was cycling through images from Chiron’s life.

Two boys holding their baby sister, one gazing at her, the other mugging for the camera.

(Fade to...) some sort of event with traditional clothing – Bar Mitzvah?

(Fade to...) a class photo, must be a private school by the uniform.

(Fade to...) Chiron and Ashleigh at an 80’s party, way too much eye-liner.

(Fade to...) Chiron with Elias Corder and some captains of industry.

Tucker looked at the guests clustered around the room. Chiron was standing at the far end in a small group, with his arm around Ashleigh. He gave a smile and waved Tucker over. Tucker recognized Cael, but not the other two, a slightly older couple.

– Energy levels looking good, Chiron.

“Folks, this is Tucker Trent, my colleague and successor at Corder Synergy. Tucker and I have been working together for, what is it, almost eight years now? Tucker, I don’t believe you’ve met my sister Sylvia and her husband Haskel.”

Tucker shook hands all round, got a two-cheek kiss from the older sister, and gave an arm-’round-the-shoulder hug to Ashleigh. There was a certain tension in the air, nobody seemed to know where to look or what to say. Maybe he could ease the mood.

“I don’t know about ‘successor’ Chiron, for one thing nobody’s going to fill your shoes. Then there’s the matter of Brandon Tyler.”

Chiron laughed, then stifled a cough. “Well that’s the thing about young guns, isn’t it? There’s never just one. But if Elias has any sense it’ll be you, Tucker.” He turned to his family. “See, even today I can’t escape office politics!”

They gave a polite laugh, with the smiles lingering a moment longer.

Over the next few minutes the remaining guests trickled in. Chiron managed to greet everyone, making introductions and small talk as appropriate. But there was not very much mingling, the group was too diverse. Partner, family, friends, colleagues. Fortunately there were canapés and drinks, so everyone had something to do with their hands. Strictly non-alcoholic, as it was critical that all the jumpers be sober. There would be time for alcohol later.

Eventually Ryan Mace mounted the podium and tapped the microphone discreetly. “Friends, this is a special time for all of us, and a difficult time as well. And I include myself and every one of us at Exit Strategy when I say that. Under normal circumstances we remain professionally detached at these engagements, but this time is different.

“Chiron Levy is our friend too, and not just our friend but the reason for our very existence. It was Chiron, with the courageous backing of Corder Synergy, who proposed the enterprise you see before you. We were struggling, uncertain of how much longer we would be able to continue operating. I recall the day Chiron, a longtime member, invited myself and the rest of the team into the Corder Synergy offices.

“The audacity of his vision stunned us. We ran a skydiving adventure club. Chiron’s ideas involved joining together with a funeral parlor, coroner’s agent, estate attorneys, a cemetery franchise, and a specialized legal team to coordinate everything. It was certainly not an idea we could have come up with ourselves. It was also challenging, and not everyone on our team was able to accept it. But from this vision came Exit Strategy.

“Chiron was passionate about whole-of-life planning. He foresaw that many people in this nation would share his views, though the political climate meant that only a brave few would express them publicly. Somehow, through hard work, brilliant strategy and his engaging passion, Chiron found a way to make these ideas work. He battled the unholy alliance of rigid fundamentalism and weak-kneed liberalism, created ways to move past the noisy minority who had held our society paralyzed.”

Mace paused, and continued in a quieter tone. “The idea of Chiron requiring our services some day was not a surprising one. But the fact that this should happen so soon, some thirty years ahead of schedule, that did come as a shock to us. That is why I say that I and everyone on the team here are truly saddened by this turn of events.

Another pause, then in a more upbeat tone: “However, we’re not here to dwell on sadness. The Exit Strategy mission is to celebrate life, choice and empowerment. And I can think of no one who better represents those three ideals than Chiron Levy.”

A round of applause greeted Chiron as he took Mace’s place. He looked around almost shyly and waited for quiet.

“It is indeed an honor to be surrounded by so many of my loved ones and dear friends. If we are defined by the people we have touched and who have touched us, then as I look out at the group gathered here I must count myself a fortunate man.

“Some of you may find this occasion challenging, and I ask your forgiveness for any distress. But I can honestly say that having each and every one of you here at this time gives me such strength and support, that any doubts about the unknown ahead are dispelled.”

Chiron steadied himself on the lectern. “When I look back over my life, I see the joys outnumbering the sorrows, the good times outnumbering the bad. There are very few regrets, and only one worth mentioning now. At the risk of stating the obvious, I wish I had never taken up smoking. Those first few cigarettes were the worst choice I ever made, and I can’t lay the blame at anyone’s feet but my own.

“But enough of that. The format for today is quite simple. This is the last speech you will hear.” He gave a wry smile. “There will be, er, another occasion quite soon in which you will be forced to sit through endless speeches about what an amazing guy I am, or rather was. But today will be more informal. We’ll mingle, we’ll reflect on times shared, we’ll have our chances to say the things we need to say.”

Chiron took a few shallow breaths. “So once again, I am deeply grateful that you have chosen to be here with me at this time. It means a lot, it really does.

“And finally I’d like to thank Ryan Mace and the team at Exit Strategy for taking a perverse little idea of mine and running with it. They’ve excelled themselves, and I’m truly proud of what we’ve created together.”

There was another round of applause as Chiron left the podium, walked over to his family and took Ashleigh’s hand.

Over the next hour or so Chiron moved around the room, sharing a few minutes with each of the guests, one-to-one or in groups of varying size. There were tears, there was laughter, hugs and high-fives.

Tucker was struck by the diversity of those assembled. There were family members, immediate and extended. Colleagues and clients, including some high-fliers from the corporate world. Even a few influential figures from the world of governance. Tucker recognized at least one prominent judge, as well as a couple of legislators. From the social circle there were the usual suspects, pairs of well-dressed men whom Tucker knew on a first-name-only basis. But Chiron’s personal life was much larger than his sexuality, and there were many others – skydiving buddies, university friends, and others whose connection Tucker did not know.

But very few children.

If the group was diverse, so was their social behavior. Some mingled easily, introducing themselves effortlessly to folk they had not met. Others remained within the security of their own groups. Tucker mingled a little, but didn’t feel the need to work the entire room. He had just finished chatting to a couple of Chiron’s high school alumni when Chiron approached.

– What do you say to someone who is planning to plunge into the earth in an hour or so?

“Chiron.” He smiled and shook his head. “You’ve pulled a decent crowd, I can say that. Look around, your whole life is represented here.”

“Yeah, it’s all here. Quite humbling really.”

“Ah... you’re going to have to forgive me if I don’t get this out right. But I just want you to know that you’re the luckiest break I ever got, you know, mentor and friend. And well... thanks. For everything.” Tucker wasn’t prone to tears, but he felt a wave of emotion pass through him and after a pause he put his arms around the gaunt man before him and gave the gentlest of hugs. Cotton wool and matchsticks. He broke away.

Chiron held his eye a moment and gave a one-sided grin. “Tucker, it’s been great – rewarding, fun, productive, and interesting. And I’m really glad you’ve agreed to be jumping with me later on.”

“Hey, it’s an honor, how could I miss it?”

“You’re going to go far in this game Tucker, I know that. A great career, and I’m glad that I was able to share the first few years of it. And I want you to know this: I really do wish you all the best with FreshStyle.”

Tucker drew a breath and lowered his eyes. “Thanks Chiron, I... appreciate it. I don’t know what to say.”

– You’re the luckiest break I ever stabbed in the back?

Chiron frowned in thought and said “No, it’s OK Tucker. FreshStyle could never have flown my way. Elias knew it too. Without your work it would have been shelved. You found a way to make it happen. You did well, kid.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Chiron surveyed the room. “Now I have a few more folk I need to say a few words to. See you in prep.”

“Go get ‘em.”

There was very little to do but mark time. Tucker felt his socializing mode fading. He was starting to feel wired, a certain tension was building. A tray of canapés was offered and he waved it past. Maybe another drink, his mouth was dry... but no, he couldn’t afford to drink too much. With stress levels like this, his bladder would be on a very short cycle. There would be no toilets in the plane.

At last it was time. Ryan Mace was addressing the gathering again.

“Folks, I’ll keep this brief. The time is upon us. In a moment I will be taking Chiron and his team to prep them for this afternoon’s mission. The bar will begin serving alcoholic beverages shortly thereafter. In about an hour we will walk from the rear of these premises to the aircraft, which will take off as soon as we are aboard. The drop zone is approximately three kilometers northwest of here, and there is a viewing area adjacent to this function room, accessible from the door behind me. Anyone who wishes may use the viewing area, but we do ask that you sign a waiver acknowledging your intention to do so.”

Mace motioned for Chiron to step onto the podium beside him, then turned to face him and saluted.

“Friends, we celebrate the life of Chiron Levy, and bid him farewell!”

This time the applause was thunderous. Tucker pumped his fist in the air, it just felt like the right thing to do.

The briefing room was pure designer military, with rows of white painted desks and spartan metal chairs. There was a table and whiteboard up the front, and more aviation charts and technical drawings on the walls. Next to the table was a raised platform, a formboard surface on a metalwork frame with a step on one side. There were six other Exit Strategy personnel in the room, and two seasoned jumpers whom Chiron knew well.

Mace introduced them to the group. Gavin was the pilot while Bruce, Terry, Geoff and Rod would be tandem masters on the drop, and David would be assisting with the briefing in his capacity as a notary public. Chiron introduced Icehead and the Streak. Tucker figured the reason they spent so much time high above the surface of this planet was that they came from another one.

There were two parts to ‘prep’.

First came the paperwork.

There was an endless stream of waivers, disclaimers and declarations, each requiring multiple signatures, initials, dates and full contact details. Many of them were printed on Gratton Hetherington Tonkin letterhead. Tucker was familiar with them, they were a very progressive firm not averse to pushing the envelope, and Corder Synergy had utilized their services for a number of projects.

Some of the declarations simply required witnessing. Cael Levy was in the desk next to Tucker, and they would swap documents to witness each other’s signatures. However, others required more formal administration and Tucker had to verbally affirm to the notary public the declarations he was signing.

The purpose of the various legal instruments Tucker was endorsing was to indemnify Exit Strategy from any liability for psychological distress he might experience, while at the same time acknowledging Exit Strategy’s denial of intention or foreknowledge of anything that might cause this distress. It didn’t make a lot of sense to Tucker, everybody knew what was going on. But he did appreciate the importance and power of a clever combination of legal wording, precedent and influential friends.

Tucker looked across to where Chiron sat. He had a much bigger pile to get through. Noticing Tucker, he gestured toward the stack, mugged a haggard expression and said “Hoist with his own petard.”

Chiron’s task was to declare that he was of sound mind, had no intention or foreknowledge of an illegal act, and to indemnify Exit Strategy against unspecified damages should any mishap transpire.

There was only one way of subscribing to Exit Strategy’s services. The process could only start if the applicant was certified by a doctor to be in good health. You couldn’t sign up after being diagnosed with a terminal illness, since that might be a result of temporary depression. It was also necessary to make and register an advance directive pursuant to legislation, stating that should you become terminally ill, once your condition deteriorates past a certain point you no longer wish to receive various forms of life-prolonging treatment.

Chiron Levy had made and lodged such an advance directive several years earlier, after helping to establish Exit Strategy. Now he was required to sign an appendix to that declaration, stating that he still held this position on these matters.

Finally he had to declare that he had sufficient skydiving experience to jump without a tandem master. That this happened to be true was of no consequence.

After the paperwork was complete, Ryan Mace handed out the jumpsuits, harnesses and headsets, and they all geared up. After his introduction they watched a short DVD presentation outlining the details of the jump. This was followed by a couple of practice runs jumping from the raised platform while harnessed to their tandem masters. Tucker’s mind was elsewhere, and he had some difficulty paying attention.

There was one point that he found interesting. Chiron’s parachute was equipped with a dead-man’s switch. His pack had an auto-deployment device, and he would hold a small transmitter in his hand on the way down. If he released the switch for any reason the canopy would activate automatically.

Tucker looked down between his feet. The earth was a long way down, and he was suddenly aware that his life was hanging, quite literally, by a couple of straps, some suspension lines and a few square yards of lightweight fabric. The raw, animal fear during the first few moments of freefall was replaced by a new fear, one based on actual thinking.

He looked over to where the tiny black figure lay. It was some distance away, and would be discreetly out of site by the time they landed. He hadn't watched the actual moment of impact. There are some things that you can never un-see, and he didn't want an image like that to dominate his memories of Chiron. This whole event was enough just as it was.

– A suitable exclamation mark for the great sentence that was his life.

Already an SUV was heading towards the impact site. It was khaki in color and Tucker could clearly read "Exit Strategy" on the roof. He didn't envy those inside their job.

The air no longer felt bracing, it was not even cool – as they descended the heat and haze welcomed them back into its embrace. The earth was moving closer, the horizon flattening out and the hills acquiring gentle contours. Tucker saw the landing zone ahead, although they were still quite high and would overshoot it. Icehead and the Streak had deployed their chutes last and landed first, quickly followed by Ryan Mace. Tucker could also see that one of the tandem pairs was already down. Probably Corder, but he couldn't be sure. He sensed Geoff pulling the control lines, saw the ground tilt and turn beneath him as they executed a lazy half spiral. There were two other parachutes above now, but the ground was coming up fast. Geoff pulled down on both control lines and they leveled out.

"Legs up," came the reminder a few seconds from touchdown. Tucker complied, leaving his instructor free to control the landing. They made contact, controlled rather than graceful, Geoff taking a couple of hopping steps before they eased into a sitting position.

"Hold still," said Geoff as the canopy slowly crumpled on the ground, losing its sleek form. Tucker felt the harness disengage and he was a free man again. He got to his feet and extended a hand to Geoff, pulling him to his feet then holding the grip in a handshake.

"Thanks," he said, then "wow." He looked down and saw that he'd got some blood on Geoff's hand. He pointed it out, "Uh sorry, I think I must have cut myself."

Geoff looked at his hand, "No problem." He squatted down and wiped it on the dry grass then rose up again, nodding slowly. "Great jump, great jump. Chiron got the ending he wanted, the ending he deserved. You know, I jumped with him quite a few times."

"So this wasn't a normal gig, right?"

"Not at all," said Geoff shaking his head. "Not at all."

Tucker excused himself and walked over to the other jumpers, awash with conflicting emotions. He felt elated and invincible, an consequence of the jump. But this very euphoria triggered guilt, as part of his mind considered those feelings inappropriate. Then there was the visceral shock that accompanies a close encounter with death in a society that quarantines such events. But Tucker couldn't feel any sadness or loss. There wasn't room for it in his overloaded mind. He knew it would come, though. Especially when he returned to work the following week.

He looked around at the other jumpers. Elias Corder was radiating ten times the elation Tucker felt, and none of the guilt. Icehead and the Streak were similarly hyped, high fiving each other and Corder. In contrast Cael Levy appeared calm and inscrutable, the very type specimen of restraint.

– Hasn't that guy just lost a brother?

But it was Ashleigh Gabriel who drew Tucker's attention. The conflict Tucker felt was writ large in his face, and more besides. He looked utterly desolate and lost. No one else seemed to be noticing.

– Now there's a kid who's got it bad.

Tucker walked straight up to the stricken man and threw his arms around him. He felt Ashleigh's body crumple and shudder as a wave of silent sobbing passed through him. It felt like a parent comforting a child, although he had never been a parent. After a few moments Ashleigh began to compose himself, and Tucker could feel a semblance of control start to assert itself.

“Thank you Tucker. I'm sorry, I...”

“Don't be, it's OK.”

It was then Tucker noticed that Corder had been looking on, and saw a faintly puzzled expression in the older man's eyes, which gave way to a barely perceptible nod of approval.

– Time was I'd be worrying how gay this looked.

– Whatever.

In very little time the instructors and single jumpers had stowed their parachutes. A four wheel drive minibus arrived to carry them back to Exit Strategy premises. The short drive was largely spent in silence, although some of the instructors spoke to each other quietly. Even Icehead and the Streak seemed subdued.

Back at Exit Strategy they were ushered into the briefing room again. Someone brought a first-aid kit and applied some antiseptic and a small adhesive bandage to Tucker's hand. After they were seated Mace addressed them and explained the remaining formalities.

“Folks, we're going to need just a few more signatures. Each of us is a witness to the passing of our friend Chiron Levy. The main declaration before you describes what has occurred this afternoon, using a formal phrasing provided by our legal team. Ironically, as it happens, under the coordination of Chiron Levy himself. These accounts, in conjunction with precedent, will allow the Coroner to deliver a finding of death by misadventure, with no culpable parties. And since Chiron has terminated his life insurance policy, there will be no challenge to that finding.

“I can assure you that the declaration contains no falsehoods, although it most certainly is in legalese. And of course I would urge you to read it before signing. As soon as we are done, these documents will be dispatched to the Coroner's office.”

Tucker started scanning the pages in front of him, but understood very little. He signed on all the lines, noticing again the Gratton Hetherington Tonkin letterhead at the top. When prompted he parroted “I so declare” to David, the notary public.

– Is this surreal, or is it just me?

When it was over, they moved back into the function room. The bar was open now, and Tucker got a beer, something imported. He didn't feel like mingling anymore, didn't have anything to say to Chiron's family or friends. There was nothing the rest of the day could offer that would match what he had been through. The other jumpers seemed to feel the same way, keeping to themselves, nursing a drink or two. He edged over to where Elias Corder was standing, his infectious enthusiasm subdued.

“After the jump, the rest of it seems to drag, doesn’t it Trent?” observed Corder.

“Yes, I suppose it is time for this show to be over,” said Tucker. He paused, then added, “The office is sure going to be a different place next week.”

A little animation twinkled back into Corder’s eyes. “Indeed. For one thing Trent, you and I are going to be working a lot more closely now. That FreshStyle launch of yours is mere days away. Are you ready for the publicity?”

“Sure, Mr Corder.”

Corder gave an approving wink.

As the guests left Ryan Mace thanked each one for attending, spending a little longer with the jumpers. Tucker filed past, and Mace shook his bandaged hand, his grip a little gentler than usual.

“Glad you could take part, Mr Trent.”

“Thanks, I can honestly say it’s like nothing I have ever done in my life.”

Mace offered him a business card and Tucker took it. It was matte black with two bands of camo across the top and bottom. Beneath the Exit Strategy logo were three lines of text:

Exit Strategy

Ryan Mace, CEO

Do not go gently into that dark night

2

Miranda Tonkin terminated the call to Delton, looked indecisively at the packet of cigarettes in her other hand and began to flush the day's business from her head. Neither her briefcase nor her mind would be carrying anything home from the office at the end of the day. She walked quickly across the smooth concrete from the elevator to her Dreadnought, pressed the switch on her key ring and was rewarded with a refined chirp. The car park was still a quarter full, it was only seven-thirty. All of the temps, assistants and clerks had gone, but most of the important players were still at work. Gratton Hetherington Tonkin rewarded diligence generously, and expected dedication and commitment from its employees.

Half of the temps thought she was a partner, at least the newer ones did. Her father didn't often venture below the top floor.

Miranda stepped up into the SUV's elevated cabin and switched on the power. Something by Mozart began to play through the speakers as the drive system came online. She released the handbrake, engaged the automatic shift and eased away silently. Approaching the exit she glanced at the row of remote controls velcroed to the dash. She reached forward and pressed one of the buttons and the boom swung up.

It wasn't until she had left the building that the engine smoothly came to life, its monotone hum blending with the subdued road noise.

Feeling herself sliding into another episode of bleak introspection, Miranda scanned for a different radio station, something a bit more upbeat. It didn't work.

The job was becoming an imposition, victories notwithstanding. It was pulling her in a direction she had no interest in. She felt her life being shaped against her will, sucked along in a sliplane. A vacuum-filled sliplane that most people would have considered a fasttrack to success.

– I was born for more than this.

– How do you know? What were you born for?

No answer.

There were three analogies that could help in understanding the mind of Miranda Tonkin. The first was TV-grade sci-fi:

– Your mission, Miranda-designate, is to study earthlings and their minds, be accepted as one of them, infiltrate their society and achieve a position of influence.

– (Yes shipmother, I hear and obey.)

Another was speculative: had Miranda been born male, she might well have become a sociopath, had a brilliant career as a serial killer, and pushed the artform of murder to dizzying new heights.

Or more whimsically: once upon a time there was a little girl who didn't know what she wanted to be when she grew up. She grew up alright, but she never found out.

The irony was that Miranda was aware of all this, cursed with an intelligence he had no interest in, and aspirations she didn't understand. But at the core of her soul was a vacuum, a void that sucked away her identity, her connection with humanity.

Miranda felt an ill-defined sense of urgency, an instinct for change. Perhaps she could manufacture an identity and then assume it, like a whole-body skin graft. She was not certain what sort of person she needed to become, but right now the terms *socialite*, *role model* and *icon* had a promising resonance to them. Perhaps they could form the template, a skeleton which she could flesh out with details.

– Her husband the heir to a midsized pharmaceutical company – an asset.

– Working in Daddy’s legal practice – more of a distraction.

But Wardell Pharmaceutical did not currently pay its heir enough to maintain the lifestyle his wife required. Gratton Hetherington Tonkin on the other hand valued the incisive skillset that Miranda was able to offer, and paid accordingly.

Miranda saw the illuminated Yummo’s franchise sign and pulled into the drive-thru lane, joining the line of single office-bound professionals and tired working mothers. The engine cut out, and the radio now seemed too loud. She turned it down. There were four cars ahead of her, and from her elevated position she could see over the top of them to the order booth. However a good part of the car immediately in front of her was obscured by her own hood. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

– There has to be some sort of plan, a schedule.

The car in front crept ahead one space and she glided forwards behind it.

– Alistair hands control of Wardell Pharmaceutical to Delton.

– Delton gets a large increase in salary.

– I leave Ton-Ton-Ton.

– Then what? Charity work? Start a high-profile, glamorous business?

The insight would come, but probably not tonight.

Eventually it was her turn. She pressed the rocker switch and the window opened with a faint hum. Across the top of the booth window a prominent sign declared “Debit, Credit, Cash, Dazzlers (surcharge applies). No checks.”

– Dazzlers. This place is all class.

A teenager, complexion washed out by the fluorescent glare stared at her blankly. She wore a large colorful badge that proclaimed “Hi, my name is Tammie” above a smiley face.

“One Yummo double-bacon cheeseburger, one grilled chicken burger, one grilled chicken wrap with ranch, a six-pack of drumsticks with barbeque sauce, a large fries, ketchup – two please, a large vanilla shake, a large diet cola and a mineral water. Oh, and some onion rings.”

“May I ask how many people will be sharing this meal?” asked Tammie flatly.

“Three adults.”

As Tammie punched the information into her terminal she recited “Would you like three garden fresh salads with this order?”

“Two please,” said Miranda.

Tammie gave the briefest of frowns and blinked. “Uh, I’ll have to check if we have them.” She bent down and said something into an industrial looking microphone. Then “Yeah, it’s OK.”

The computer pipped.

– Here it comes.

Tammie indicated a worn monitor and recited in a bored voice, “Please read this information and indicate whether you wish to proceed with the order by using the touch screen.”

The monitor read:

In the interests of helping you achieve your health and taste goals, Yummo’s would like to inform you that according to NIH recommendations, your order when shared between three average adults will yield:

98% of your daily intake of energy

150% of your daily intake of protein

100% of your daily intake of sugar

*110% of your daily intake of sodium
120% of your daily intake of total fat
(includes 105% of your daily intake of saturated fat)*

Yummo's would also like to inform you that your order contains an unspecified amount of trans fats, for which no safe level has been established, and that some items may contain traces of nuts, dairy and gluten.

Having considered this information do you wish to proceed with your order?

Yes No

– I should be outraged. Somewhere in this country, a group of poor starving lawyers are being denied a fat, juicy class action suit.

Miranda reached out and touched the 'Yes', trying not to roll her eyes.

Tammie read out the price and asked "How would you like to pay?"

Miranda leaned down and inserted her card into the reader and punched in her PIN. As soon as the terminal displayed "Approved", Tammie said "Please proceed to the next counter to pick up your order. Have a nice evening."

"Thanks."

After arranging the heavy recycled paper packages on the passenger seat, Miranda rejoined the light traffic and headed for home. The Glenview gated community was close, the food would still be warm when she arrived. At the entrance she pressed the button on another of the dash-mounted transmitters and waited while the high steel gate slowly slid open. She entered and proceeded along the curving promenades at a crawl. The Glenview speed limit seemed to be designed for the benefit of any deaf and blind cripples who might choose to limp along the centre of the streets at night during a power failure. The engine cut out and she glided forward with only the faintest whine from the electric motor.

– OK, so our hypothetical cripples needn't be deaf.

Miranda and Delton lived in a neo-Victorian semi-detached villa, as did pretty much everyone in Glenview. The lights were on and Alistair's ancient Jaguar was parked on the verge. She pressed the final remote, the garage door rolled upward and she eased the Dreadnought in next to Delton's Honda two-door.

It was a squeeze to get out.

Delton and his father were in the lounge, watching some skitshow on cable. They rose when she entered and Alistair gave her a peck on the cheek. He looked down and saw what she was carrying.

"Ah, my dear girl, I see you've brought the good stuff. Just what the doctor ordered," he enthused.

She smiled.

– Actually, hadn't the doctor ordered the exact opposite?

"Well, it will give that medication regime of yours something to work on," she said. "And let's hope Grace doesn't go asking any questions about what we had tonight."

"Don't worry about that. Every time I go over to her place I get served up enough alfalfa sprouts to last for the next six months. So I think I have enough credit to cover ten times what you've got in there."

"Thanks Hon, I appreciate it," said Delton.

Miranda excused herself to the kitchen and began to arrange the food on the good china. On her own plate she placed the chicken wrap (cut in half), a salad and a drumstick. Delton would have two drumsticks along with the chicken burger and the remaining salad. For Alistair she arranged the burger and fries, the three remaining drumsticks and the onion rings. She left the drinks in their original containers.

Delton and his father were laughing away in the other room, clearly enjoying the show. It was good to see Delton kicking back and relaxing, he definitely needed it.

But there was something slightly bizarre about the scene. Two workaholics, father and son. One battling high blood pressure, high cholesterol and late-onset diabetes, the other stressed and suffering mild depression, uptight and anal about pretty much everything. Yet here they were unwinding in each other's company, bonding over a comedy TV show and the prospect of excessive concentrations of saturated fat, salt and high fructose corn syrup.

– So in Delton's case, it probably was just what the doctor ordered.

– And it takes the company of his rebellious father to make it happen.

Miranda carried the plates to the coffee table, then followed with the drinks and some paper napkins. She didn't bother with any cutlery.

"Oh Miranda, you shouldn't have, this is too splendid for words," said Alistair warmly. Delton raised his eyebrows in approval and mimed applause.

"No trouble," insisted Miranda taking a seat next to her husband.

The plasma was showing a skit about someone in a German sports car being pulled over by a cop who turned out to be a Hassidic Jew – all sideburn ringlets under his helmet. The cop was making a big deal of the sports car's number plate – 'H8Z JWZ' (as in, 'Hates Jews'), with a whole lot of OTT stereotypical Yiddish mannerisms. The driver playing innocent, claiming that it was a supposed to mean 'Hates J.W.s – Jehovah's Witnesses. Miranda thought it was mildly amusing but would have preferred a sitcom.

When the credits started rolling, Delton flipped across to one of the networks. The news bulletin had just started. He pressed mute.

Miranda took another forkful of salad. "So, how were things at Wardell Pharmaceutical today?"

"Actually," said Alistair, "there's a couple of big things afoot. We're negotiating a stock swap with Sheldrake Life Sciences. The MOU's in place, a few details to iron out yet. And now that the acquisition of MeisnerGillespie Biotech is finalized, we're going to change our name. Keep that under your hat, we haven't announced it yet."

"Sure. What will you change it to?" asked Miranda.

"Wardell BP, for biotech and pharmaceutical. We've got a design studio working on a new logo. We're looking to raise our profile... and our capital. Being affiliated with a big multinational like SLS will help a great deal in that regard. And the acquisition has given us some very promising intellectual property."

Miranda shifted gear from polite to interested. "What sort of IP?"

"Well, I won't bore you with details, but Walt Gillespie did a tremendous amount of field work in third-world countries – South-East Asia and Africa, mainly. Really first-rate work. And came up with some brilliant insights too, but didn't have a clue on how to commercialize. He was full of grand humanitarian ideals. Graham Meisner on the other hand did have a clue, but he also had a heart problem. To cut a long story short, the company was too small, the management didn't have a succession plan, or any contingencies for that matter. So when Meisner died, they became ripe for the picking."

"So, what kind of IP?" persisted Miranda.

"Oh, it was mostly about using vaccines to attack non-biological agents – like molecules rather than viruses or bacteria. Gillespie also did some work on tropical diseases – like the Peringgi fever filovirus. Figuring out the way it infects human

cells. And also some very interesting work on the AIDS virus in West Africa. I can't go into too much detail, we're still working out how much is patentable."

"And you're going to be able to commercialize it?" asked Miranda.

"Hopefully," mused Alistair. "Though it will be a change in the way we do business. We've never had many patents before now, on file or in the pipeline. We've made most of our money from pharmacokinetics consultancy services..."

Miranda let that one wash over her. Delton had explained it to her once, but she was too tired to recall the details. She glanced at the TV screen.

"Delton, could you please turn up the sound."

The backdrop showed a still photo of a man, well groomed but a little gaunt. Beneath it the caption read 'Skydiving incident, prominent businessman dead'. Tonight's newsmode was looking to camera and mouthing silently. Her eyes could clearly be seen scanning the autocue.

"... responsible for the term 'viral business plan' and pioneered 'creative vertical alignment' together with founder Elias Corder. Levy achieved notoriety several years ago by helping Tolliver Holdings open the Tollies chain of smokers' nightclubs. Although the official cause of death is listed as a skydiving accident, there is speculation in several blog postings that it was part of a planned event involving 'Exit Strategy', a suicide club for the terminally ill that Levy himself helped set up. Chiron Levy was 48 years old and had been battling lung cancer for two years."

Miranda gestured at the remote in Delton's hand and he killed the sound. She looked stunned. "Hey, I knew that guy. I – we do quite a lot of work for Corder Synergy, at the firm that is. I even got to do some of the drafting for Exit Strategy, three or four years ago. Pretty out-there stuff. He was an amazing guy, I didn't know he was sick."

Delton frowned, puzzled. "So what was the deal – he jumped from a plane with no parachute?"

"No, the organizers have to cover themselves from all angles, from what I remember," said Miranda. "There was something about an automatic parachute, and he does something to prevent it from opening."

"Pretty extreme way to go..." mused Delton.

"Ghastly," agreed Alistair. "...until you consider the alternatives. A few years back Delton and I had a colleague die from lung cancer, I visited him about a week before the end. Not pretty at all." He shook his head at the recollection. "And of course there was my mother... and father. Not in the lungs, but just as slow and painful." He trailed off in a reverie, then added "So an exhilarating dive followed by an instantaneous, pain-free demise... well, idyllic by comparison. I wouldn't mind signing up for something like that myself. Of course, I'm not exactly the type for adventure sports."

Everyone stared into the middle distance for a moment.

Delton looked at this father. "Dad, Corder Synergy did done some consulting work for us once, didn't they?"

"Yes," said Alistair nodding slowly. "As a matter of fact, we've got them in right now, in connection with the Sheldrake alliance and the MeisnerGillespie purchase. Didn't know this Levy fellow though, we're dealing with Corder himself, and a young guy called... Tyler, Brandon Tyler." He dipped a couple of onion rings into his dwindling pool of ketchup and popped them into his mouth. "I said there were going to be some changes in the way we do business. Uncharted waters." He reached for his shake and took a long pull from the straw.

As soon as Miranda's fine china plates were bare, she gathered them up, carried them into the kitchen and fed them into the dishwasher. It was almost empty so she did not start the cycle.

"Alistair, Delt, coffee?"

"Oh, that would be nice, if it's not too much trouble," said Alistair. "And if you'd be so kind as to bring in some port glasses, I brought a little something over with me."

"Yes, thanks Hon," said Delton.

Miranda fired up the coffee maker. It was a dripolator disguised as an espresso machine, given to dramatic Italian flourishes of noise and steam but capable of delivering only weak, rather pedestrian coffee. She set about assembling a designer serving tray, three comforting mugs, three fine crystal port glasses, sugar and something vaguely dairy-like. When the coffee was poured she carried the tray into the lounge, a perfect hostess. Alistair opened a bottle of something sticky and divine. "A modest little Tokay" he called it, and it was exquisite.

Miranda picked up one of the remotes and dialed in a music-only internet radio station, specializing in DJ remixes of 50s lounge acts. She turned the volume down to ambient. "Is that OK?" she asked.

Alistair shrugged mischievously and said "Well, it's not Charlie Parker but it'll do..." then in a very different, softer voice, "Uhhh..."

He froze, an odd expression on his face as if he was about to sneeze. Then he slowly swayed to the left, poured the remainder of his Tokay into his lap and slumped unevenly over the sofa's cushioned armrest.

"Dad, are you OK? Dad?" said Delton, in a staccato voice.

Alistair might have said "Glmrth..." but Miranda couldn't be sure.

"What is it? Delt?" she asked, involuntarily glancing at Alistair's crotch to check whether his trousers had absorbed all of the spilt Tokay. The leather sofa could be wiped down, but the carpet would stain.

– Stop, not a suitable concern.

Delton was kneeling facing his father. "Dad, can you hear me? What's wrong?"

No response.

"Shall we call emergency?" asked Miranda.

Delton closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and said "Yes please." Then, "Let me do it – they'll ask a... lots of questions, er, his details."

Miranda passed him the handset and he dialed. She only heard half the exchange, punctuated by short pauses.

"Ambulance...."

"My father has lost consciousness, no warning, we were having dinner..."

"No, completely unresponsive..."

"Sixty-two..."

"I'm certain he does, but I'm not sure..."

"No I don't know the policy number, or who it's with. But does it matter? He's pretty well-off, he'll be able to afford..."

Delton listened, a look of incredulity and frustration passing over his face.

"Look, I'm his next of kin and yes, I am willing to go..." he stifled an obscenity, "guarantor in the event he is not covered." After another pause Delton gave the address, then with forced politeness said "Thank you," and closed the phone.

"What was all that about – health cover?" inquired Miranda, suddenly becoming aware that she was holding a tea-towel, and moving towards the sofa.

"Yeah – I don't believe it, I just don't believe it." Delton shook his head.

"Did they say how long they would be?"

“No.”

“Should we... make him more comfortable?” suggested Miranda, gesturing towards Alistair in a mime of lifting his legs onto the sofa, straightening him out.

“Yeah sure,” said Delton, and proceeded with the lifting while Miranda adjusted the arms and deployed the tea-towel, wiping down the sofa then tucking the tea-towel under the seat of Alistair’s trousers.

“What do you think it is – a heart attack?” asked Miranda.

“I don’t think heart attacks are that sudden,” said Delton. “It looked more like a stroke to me.”

“Can we do anything to help?” Miranda wondered aloud, retrieved her laptop and roused it from sleep mode. It took a few seconds to establish contact with the Glenview wireless network.

“I think we’ve already done it,” said Delton.

She typed ‘stroke what to do’ into the search bar and hit go. For once most of the links were on topic and she opened an FAQ page.

– Look at this, no one panicking. Delton because he’s so repressed, me because... well, just because.

“There’s something here called FAST, for face-arm-speech test. Oh, but not if they’re unconscious. Oxygen, CPR – is he breathing? What about his pulse?”

Delton leant down to listen and fumbled with his father’s wrist. “I think so, pretty faint though.” He leant down again and said softly, “Dad, we’ve called for help, they’ll be arriving soon, everything’s going to OK... OK?”

Miranda read something about body temperature, and retrieved a blanket from the guest bedroom. She spread it over the prone form, and could not prevent herself from noticing that it was dark red, and unlikely to show a stain should it pick up any Tokay. The minutes stretched, there was nothing to fill them with, nothing to say. Eventually Miranda could stand it no longer and went into the kitchen to tidy up.

Delton called out “Hon, I think he might be...”

“What?” Miranda said in a half-whisper, running back into the lounge room.

“He... he made a sound. Sort of a grunt, or a sigh. Dad, can you hear me?”

Nothing.

The doorbell chimed. Miranda rushed to answer it and saw the flashing light through the glass paneling. Two paramedics were on the landing, with a collapsible stretcher.

“Come in, he’s through here, in the lounge,” said Miranda. She held the door open for them, and followed them down the entry.

Senior bent over Alistair, felt for a pulse and shone a penlight into one eye. Then she produced a small mask and canister from a tray under the stretcher and secured the mask over Alistair’s nose.

Junior asked “Can you tell me what happened?” and listened while Delton gave a concise account. He made a few notes on a clunky looking PDA, his fingers a few sizes too large for the miniscule stylus.

Senior reported “Severe stroke, most likely hemorrhagic rather than ischemic, based on reported rapid onset. Minimal pupillary reflex, breathing shallow, heart rate elevated.” Junior tapped away earnestly, entering the information.

“Details? Health cover?” prompted Senior.

Stowing the tiny stylus inside the PDA’s silo, Junior approached Alistair and pointed the PDA towards him. There was a barely-perceptible pip.

“He’s tagged. Running it now, won’t be long.”

“What’s that? How do you mean, tagged?” Delton inquired, clearly puzzled.

“RFID tag, implanted. Saves a lot of time if there’s an emergency... like now I guess,” said Junior. Seeing Delton’s continued puzzlement, he went on. “Sorry, it’s a tiny electronic gadget, passive – that is, no battery. Your ah, father has one implanted under his skin somewhere. It’s got a unique number that can be read by something like... this,” and he held up the ungainly PDA. “Now we can look up the database and find out his name, contact details, health cover, that sort of thing.”

Another subliminal pip. Junior raised his eyebrows. “Nooo problems. He’s with NMC, he’s got the works.”

Senior said “I recommend we take your father to Lonsdale Heights Private for a full assessment. Is that satisfactory to you?”

“Sure,” said Delton, “it’ll be fine.”

The team worked together and transferred Alistair smoothly onto the stretcher. As they retraced their steps outside Junior asked, “Would one of you like to ride with us, just in case he regains consciousness?”

“Sure, um, I’d better,” agreed Delton. “Is that OK, Hon? Do you want to follow in the car?”

Miranda glanced at her watch. “OK,” she said, “it’ll save you a taxi ride later.”

As Delton was heading out the door he suddenly stopped and turned. “Oh, shit! We ought to call Grace.” He closed his eyes, collecting his thoughts. “Hon, could you do that for me? Let her know where they’re taking him. She might like to meet us there.”

Miranda nodded.

“Thanks, Hon. See you there,” and he proceeded outside again.

Miranda watched as the ambulance pulled out of the driveway, and noticed at least three neighbors watching through their windows.

– Lucky they didn’t turn on the siren.

She turned away quickly and shut the front door.

The waiting room at Lonsdale Heights Private was nicely appointed, with an up-to-date collection of magazines, a snack vending machine plus coffee making facilities. Delton had just finished describing the evening’s events to Grace, adding very little to what Miranda had told her on the phone. Grace, a well-maintained fifty-something, was calm, but her face was lined with worry. Delton was also outwardly calm.

– Lockdown mode. Business as usual.

– And me? Do I look too calm? Should I appear more concerned? Or is ‘competently supportive’ appropriate?

Miranda was not at ease in Grace’s presence. In the years since they’d met their relationship had been cordial, but not deep – they’d never warmed to each other. Right now she felt little more than a bystander.

“We were having a splendid evening,” Miranda reported. “Watching that comedy show they both like. And hardly any shop talk.”

Now there was nothing to do but wait. Alistair was having an MRI.

“The radiologist seemed awfully impressed by his own importance,” said Delton. “The machine they use has a very strong magnet, and he wanted to be sure Dad didn’t have any metal in his body. So he’s asking me all about earrings, pacemakers, artificial hips and *penile implants*. As if I’d know. In the end he just used a little metal detector.”

Miranda looked up. “What about that chip thing, the tag?”

“Yeah, he knew about that, it was on the file.”

“Did they take him straight into radiology?” asked Grace.

“Pretty much. There was a stroke specialist waiting when we arrived, ready to do some sort of assessment. But Dad still hadn’t... come around, so she didn’t have much to do.”

A few minutes later an orderly approached the group and invited them to follow him. He led them down a plain brightly lit corridor and into a consulting room dominated by a large conference table and a dozen swivel chairs arranged randomly. Three of them were occupied, a forty-something man with a trimmed beard in hospital whites, a slightly younger woman, tired and also in whites, and an older woman in a suit. They rose and the man spoke.

“Hello, I’m Dr Llewellyn, senior radiologist this evening. This is Dr Ellen Nurzhinski, stroke triage specialist, and Rhonda Winters, health cover liaison officer.” He addressed Grace. “Are you his wife?”

“No, I’m his sister.”

Turning to Delton and Miranda he inquired, “Are either of you...?”

“I’m his son, Delton Wardell.”

“Daughter-in-law,” added Miranda.

“Then let us proceed,” said the radiologist. “Ellen?”

The specialist began. “Mr Wardell presented earlier this evening unconscious, the reported rapid onset suggesting he had suffered a stroke. Following protocol, I administered the NIH stroke scale assessment. As Mr Wardell was unconscious, he was automatically assigned the maximum level of stroke severity, 42. Again following protocol, we performed a cranial MRI scan. Dr Llewellyn?”

“I supervised the scan, and performed initial analysis of the imagery,” began the radiologist. “My preliminary findings are that Mr Wardell has had a massive intraparenchymal hemorrhagic stroke. One of the blood vessels supplying the brain has ruptured, causing a bleed into the brain tissue. There is an increase in intracranial pressure, and the delivery of oxygen to other parts of the brain is also affected. The blood released will also shortly begin to have a toxic effect on the surrounding tissue.”

“What is the, er, prognosis?” queried Miranda.

“If I may?” said the specialist. “Considering the severity of the stroke and Mr Wardell’s medical history, I would estimate his chance of recovery at less than fifty percent, with full intervention. And if he does survive, the recovery process is likely to be long and challenging. It is,” she added, shaking her head slowly, “unlikely he will ever be able to return to employment.”

Delton closed his eyes, intense concentration on his face. “Backtrack. What do you mean by ‘full intervention’? Have you done anything? I mean, what can be done?”

“We’ve stabilized him and we are administering oxygen and saline,” replied the specialist. “As to what can be done, there are surgical procedures available to drain the blood before it forms a hematoma, reduce the pressure, isolate the ruptured blood vessel and seal it...”

“Then let’s proceed,” said Delton. “Do I have to give some sort of consent on his behalf?”

The trio exchanged glances. “Er, Ms Winters?” prompted the specialist.

The health cover liaison glanced down at some printout in the open document folder in front of her. “Has Mr Wardell discussed his health cover policy with you?”

Blank looks all around. Delton shook his head.

“No?” she smiled kindly and continued. “Mr Wardell holds an itemized health cover plan with NMC. This is a special policy tailored to each client, in which the insurer lists a large number of potential eventualities, and the client outlines the level

of care that is to be covered against each item. This allows the insurer to offer very competitive premiums, as the client is not paying for cover they do not want.”

Delton frowned. “Are you saying that my father is not covered for this... surgery?”

“There is something more,” continued Ms Winters. “NMC also bundles a service in which the clients may register an advance directive, outlining certain forms of treatment they specifically do not wish to receive.”

“And what did he specify for stroke?”

Ms Winters examined the printout in front of her. “Under that item he explicitly stated that in the case of a stroke severity index greater than 30 on the NIH scale, there was to be no medical intervention beyond 60 days of basic life support.”

Miranda said nothing, she was familiar with the legal framework involved.

Delton looked stunned.

Grace was indignant. “So you’re just going to do nothing? Let him die?”

Ms Winters shook her head. “No, we will be providing life support – oxygen, intravenous feeding, and monitoring his vital signs around-the-clock.”

“And after 60 days?”

“We withdraw life support.”

Delton interjected. “What if he regains consciousness in that time?”

“If he regained the ability to communicate, and if he chose to rescind the advance directives, then the hospital would provide additional care, rehabilitation and convalescence. But it would not be covered by the NMC policy.”

Delton grimaced. “This is...” He drew a breath. “Can’t we just proceed with the operation? Dad’s estate is considerable and I’m the only next of kin. I’ll be granted,” he glanced at Miranda, “oh, what’s it called, Hon? When I can make decisions for him?”

“Power of attorney,” prompted Miranda. But Miranda knew what was coming next.

Ms Winters smiled gently again. “Lonsdale Heights Private is affiliated with NMC, Mr Wardell. Under our agreement, NMC pays the costs we incur providing health care, and in return we respect the conditions and limitations associated with their policies. This means that we, like all affiliated hospitals, would be unwilling to provide treatments that have been specifically declined in advance by the policy holder, even if the relatives were to offer additional funding.”

“Are there any places that would be prepared to operate, or to keep him on life support for longer?” asked Delton.

“Probably a few of the religious hospitals,” admitted Ms Winters. “But I must inform you that NMC does not cover any treatment from institutions with which they are not affiliated. I trust that you are aware that should the procedure prove successful, convalescence and rehabilitation in cases like this can be quite prolonged.”

No one spoke. Miranda watched Delton digesting this information.

Ms Winter broke the silence. “I’m not sure if you will find this helpful, but in my opinion Mr Wardell gave this a lot of consideration. Looking at his policy, there is a wide variety in the levels of cover he has selected – for instance, he had chosen much more comprehensive levels of cover for heart-related conditions, and certain cancers. In our experience, many senior clients examine the options very closely, and choose carefully the battles they are willing to fight.” She looked from Delton to Miranda, then to Grace, and concluded softly, “The battles that are worth winning.”

Miranda drove the Dreadnought home, Delton sitting silently in the expansive passenger seat. Her mind was racing ahead.

- Delton will soon be the majority shareholder of Wardell BP.
- He’s already on the board, but in a pretty junior role.
- Is he ready to take over?

Delton gave a small humorless chuckle. “Here’s one way of looking at it: Dad probably figured that if a large slab of his brain was shut down, then whoever came out the other side, it probably wouldn’t be him. And paying to keep someone else alive... well, Dad was never all that big on charity.”

3

Skye Arbeiter stole a glance at herself in the mirror, then looked down, attending to her hands in the washbasin. She looked back up again. The harsh fluorescent light from above mocked her complexion and outlined each tiny wrinkle around her eyes. Its violet tinge camouflaged the fading traces of the shiner. No makeup, just as well – it would be smudged and running by now. Maybe another cup of coffee would help.

– www.goingtopieces.com

She sighed and cleared her head of the swimming jumble of PHP, JavaScript, ASP and CGI (the webserver framework, not movie FX). And she hadn't even started on the really fancy things like Flash, AJAX or Silverlight. The idea of carrying on without Jason was a foolish, fading reflex of a dream. The team had worked so well because each of them was very good at what they did. It was not something you could just brush up on in a few days.

It all used to be so easy. Skye would talk to the clients to find out how their organizations worked and what they wanted. She really liked that part of the job, explaining the bewildering array of choices in language they could understand, and even helping them choose a domain name if they didn't have one already. Then she would create a few sample screenshots to see if they were happy with the direction she was taking, and get stuck into the serious design effort. When she was done the website would lie on the screen, distributed across a series of files in half a dozen folders, a beautiful figure of inanimate clay. Then Jason would work his magic, crafting routines, events, active content. At the final moment he would breathe life into the sleeping form and it would rise, shimmering with nascent energy and venture out into the realm of silicon, copper and optic fiber to seek its destiny.

– www.getonwithit.com

She walked back to the makeshift office and sat down at her laptop.

- DSL router reconfigured – check
- New ISP account – check
- New admin password – check
- New email account – check
- Laptop operating system rebuilt from scratch – check
- Data files restored from backup – check
- Just try and hack in again, Jason.
- www.vindictivelittleshit.com

Dear <insert-name>,

It is with difficulty that I must inform you of the recent dissolution of SkynJas Web Solutions. I am no longer associated with Jason Curnow in any way. If you have received any email in recent days purporting to come from me, I would ask you to disregard it. I have reason to believe that some emails fraudulently claiming to come from me have been sent from the www.skynjas.com domain.

Should you require minor content updates or cosmetic changes I will be most happy to assist, however I will not be able to offer any more significant maintenance or upgrades.

I apologies for any inconvenience caused by this turn of events, but assure you the situation is beyond my control.

Yours sincerely,

Skye Arbeiter

– Probably not professional to mention the restraining order.

Skye set about sending personally-addressed copies to every contact in the portfolio. She wondered if Jason was doing the same thing, offering the services she was not able to perform. Spreading all manner of untruths and filth. How many of the contacts would welcome him into their offices, let themselves be swayed by his easy charm? Websites don't keep themselves up to date, don't maintain themselves. She sighed again.

When she finally got through the list she stepped into the kitchen and made herself that cup of coffee. Instant, and with actual milk but no sweetener.

Whether because of geography, chance or design, Beaumanoir had somehow managed to avoid most of the attentions of time. While other residential suburbs had succumbed either to development or decay, 'Beaumanure' was still largely as it had been for the last half century – it was affordable, relatively safe and had basic shops and services.

– Maybe it was stealth. The place is so mind-numbingly uninspiring it's escaped the attention of planners, investors and... gangstas.

Skye walked the familiar route along the dry stormwater channel towards the tired suburban shopping centre, squinting against the sunlight. It wasn't exactly picturesque, but it was the same path she had trodden as a child and it calmed and renewed her spirit. In addition to transporting herself to the shops, this was a 'taking stock' walk. Her thoughts were a muddle and in serious need of sorting.

Her phone chirped. Text message. She took it out and flipped it open, irritated at the interruption.

From: Twilight Angels. Location: St Agnes, rm 137. ~90 mins. RU available?

– Oh please, www.depression-plus-plus.com, I don't think I'm up for it right now.

She texted back "*Sorry cant 2day*" and fought back the twinge of guilt.

– Someone else will be available... won't they?

Forcing her mind back to the situation at hand she tried again to marshal her thoughts. Skye needed to have everything set out logically and sequentially in her mind. She didn't always achieve it.

– Learn web programming. Soul-crushingly hard, not where I want to be, tried it.

– Hire someone to do Jason's job. Risky, and how to pay them at first?

– Get hired by someone already doing Jason's job. Possibly a company.

– Do I even want to be doing web design?

– Come on, think positively.

Skye left the stormwater track and cut across the park. A lone grandmother was smoking a cigarette, supervising two toddlers on an ancient spring-loaded seesaw. The ground was dry and dusty, with hints of withered grass on the open areas, and hints of tanbark around the equipment. Skye gave an involuntary smile. Twenty-five years earlier she had played in that same playground with her own grandmother watching on, also smoking. Sometimes with playmates, sometimes alone. There was more green back then, and everything was new.

One thing was becoming apparent. Skye would need a sympathetic ear, possibly the associated shoulder, and some time. No important decision should be attempted until that was taken care of. Walking across the car park, she revised her shopping list and made a note to pick up some vodka and triple sec on the way back.

Then it was time to tackle the supermarket. Approximately two-thirds of the floor space was devoted to multi-tiered specials bins on casters. This allowed the shopkeepers to change the aisle layout every day. The rationale was to increase impulse purchases, but the only outcome was frustration for anyone foolish enough to plan in advance what they actually wanted to buy.

– *They only get away with it because it pays. If everybody were to stop buying stuff on impulse, they'd have no reason to continue doing it.*

– Oh shut up, Jason.

The last thing she needed were www.vindictivconsumer.com quotes ringing in her mind. Especially when they made sense. She busied herself navigating the maze that was today's floor plan, scanning the temporary shelves for the items on her list.

– Five hundred different cake mixes and no plain flour. Progress.

After twice the amount of time you would guess was needed she was done, and she wheeled her cart to the end of the checkout line. A rack of women's magazines was arrayed in front of her, beaming their headlines into her face. Out of habit she scanned the covers.

Donna-Lee Brewster: My Dead Mother Warned Me About Errol Clade

– Silly bimbo, *everyone* warned you.

Tiffany's Reality TV Hell

– Yeah, for you or the viewers?

Josshica To Adopt AIDS Orphan

That caught her interest. Skye liked most of Jessica Jorgensen's films, but didn't really care for anything that Josh Russel had done. Good looking or not, there was something about him that set her on edge. She didn't get why they'd hooked up, but this development looked interesting. She picked up the magazine and threw it into the cart. She reached the head of the line and stacked her groceries onto the black conveyer belt. The attendant wore a simple badge with "Rodney" on top and "Trainee" underneath. He was pretty quick though, and soon had everything scanned and packed in three of her worn eco bags. He read out the total.

Skye produced a handful of Dazzlers from her purse. "I'd like to pay with these please."

"Er, I don't know how to do those. There's a surcharge and we don't give any change," said Rodney after the briefest of pauses. Then turning around to the service desk he called in a louder voice, "Mrs Mac, Dazzlers?"

Skye could feel a small amount of animosity radiating her way from those behind her in the line. A tired looking forty-something woman came over in no particular hurry, and gave her slight nod of recognition.

"Same drill love, five percent surcharge, got ID?"

"Yes... yes" answered Skye.

Mrs Mac typed a sequence of keys into the checkout terminal and was rewarded with some printout. "Follow me," she said.

Familiar with the routine, Skye walked to the service counter and rummaged in her purse. Emerging with the ID tag and a colorful handful of notes, she arranged them neatly on the counter's glass surface. Mrs Mac produced a reader wand and slowly waved it over them, getting a satisfying *pip* for each item in turn. She then typed some more information into her terminal and clicked a couple of times on an ancient looking mouse. Finally she then indicated to the webcam mounted behind her, and the laminated prompt card beside it.

"Ready when you are, love."

Skye read clearly and distinctly, “I declare that I am Skye Arbeiter, and that I freely and without duress authorize this transaction with Beaumanoir Park Fresh Food Mini Mart.”

They waited for the information to be uploaded to the Treloars Financial mainframe.

“I never asked, love,” said Mrs Mac, “but in the past few months you’ve been using these things a lot. Why do you bother? They’re a pain, you lose money every time. And it’s not as if this place is a crime hotspot – folk hardly ever get mugged around here.”

The terminal gave the “OK” pip, and a series of receipts spooled out of the printer. Mrs Mac handed three of them to Skye.

“I was doing this internet job for a client, that is, building their website, along with my ex-partner. They had some sort of promotional deal with Treloars, but it didn’t take off so they were left holding a big surplus of Dazzlers. I don’t know the details, but they didn’t want to exchange them or cash them in. Some legal clause I think. Anyway, they were just trying to offload them at every opportunity, offering a premium to anyone who would accept them. Jason, my ex-partner, figured we could come out ahead.”

“Uh huh,” nodded Mrs Mac, her curiosity well and truly extinguished. “Bye, love.”
“Bye.”

Julia Morgan had been Skye’s across-the-street neighbor since they were both nine. Before that she had lived in Australia, and when she moved in her broad accent had sounded strange to Skye. Julia apparently enjoyed the attention it brought, and rather than toning it down she had chosen to maintain it into adulthood.

The day’s heat had faded to a balmy warmth, though the gentle breeze carried the scent of industry and dust rather than tropical flowers and salt. Julia refilled the glasses, pouring into each random amounts of reconstituted orange juice, pineapple fruit drink, lime squeeze, triple sec and vodka. As an afterthought she added some ice cubes, but didn’t bother with the mint leaves. The vodka bottle was half empty, the ash tray was half full, and the twilight was half gone.

Skye took a tentative sip and nodded approval. It had been an ideal evening, and precisely what she needed. She was already feeling a million times better, just putting the whole thing into words. As always, Julia had proved to be an excellent listener. But now that Skye’s morale was on the mend, they had moved on to specific practicalities of her current situation.

“Look at what you’ve got, Skarbs,” said Julia. “Apart from the website design thing you’ve got people skills, you can do basic network admin, and you’ve had experience running a small business.”

Skye frowned and nodded. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“Plus,” continued Julia, “plus, you’ve got this portfolio of 50 or so satisfied customers – companies who you’ve done business with. And with first-name-basis contacts in each of them – even direct phone numbers. These companies already know you’re capable, reliable, pleasant to deal with...”

“Yeah...”

“So go through your list, and call them. You said you’ve sent out all those emails, so they’ll already know half the story. Let them know you’d be interested in working for them.”

“But... they’re not looking to hire anyone.” Skye gave a small laugh. “Not on their websites, anyway – I’d know.”

“Skarbs, here’s one thing I’ve picked up in my years of temping,” said Julia. “When a company wants to hire someone, they go through a series of phases.” She began to count off on her fingers again. “First of all they just fret about it, hoping the problem will go away. Then they ask their employees and colleagues if they know of any good people looking for a job. Next they advertise by themselves, and finally they might go a recruitment agency.”

“Or a temp agency,” put in Skye.

“Yeah, depending on the position,” agreed Julia. “The thing is, those first two phases might last months. Advertising, or the recruitment agency, that’s a last resort for some of them. So if you wait for that, you’re missing most of the window of opportunity. Plus all of a sudden you’re competing with a larger number of applicants. And double-plus, after they advertise, they’re no longer in *searching* mode, they go into *elimination* mode.”

“So if I get in earlier...” mused Skye.

“You’ll save them the bother of having to advertise, shortlist applicants, schedule interviews... they’ll love you for that,” said Julia.

“Yeah, all good – if they’re wanting to hire someone,” admitted Skye. “But most of the time they won’t be.”

Julia shrugged. “No harm done, the cost of a phone call. And if they like you, they’ll file your details away for future reference.”

Skye nodded. “Yeah... makes sense, Jules.”

As the evening wore on and the vodka bottle succumbed to their determined assault, conversation began to devolve lazily towards a series of comfortable non-sequiturs. It didn’t matter, all the important things had been covered.

Skye surveyed the items assembled across the wicker table. Plates, cutlery, glasses, cartons and bottles.

“You know, you really ought to cut down on those,” she said shaking her head and gesturing towards the ash tray. “I mean... ah, your mum, and your gran.”

Julia gazed at the distant mountains with a look of serene contemplation. “Yeah, maybe. Whatever. I just go backwards and forwards between two ways of thinking about it. You could say I’m hooked and these things’ve taken my free will hostage and they’re going to kill me, or you could say that I’m doing something I really enjoy, and everybody’s got to die of something.”

“Have you heard of this new FreshStyle thing they’re launching in a couple of weeks?” asked Skye. “It was on the morning show the other day.”

“Yeah. Weird, I don’t get it.”

“Might be worth checking out...”

“Yeah.”

They sat in silence for a while.

“Hey, did you see that thing,” said Skye, “where Jossica are adopting an African AIDS orphan?”

“No,” shrugged Julia, then added “Is that an orphan *with* AIDS, or a child orphaned *by* AIDS?”

“Dunno, haven’t read the article yet.”

Skye felt a distinct cool touch to the breeze, which struck her as unusual. She took another sip, mostly melted ice. “Do you want to move inside?”

Julia glanced at her watch and shook her head. “No, I should be getting back across the road. New temp gig in the morning, want to make a good impression. Can I help you with all this stuff?”

“No, that’s OK – I’ll look after it, it’s nothing,” said Skye.

“Sure? OK, have it your way then,” laughed Julia, picking up her bag. “Thanks for the drinks, Skarbs.”

“No, thanks for putting up with me moaning all evening. I can’t tell you how much better I feel now.” Skye hugged her friend. “Bye, Jules.”

“G’night.”

Feeling mellow and contented Skye busied herself tidying up. After moving everything from the patio to the kitchen, she forced herself to drink a large glass of water. It might not save her from a headache in the morning, but it would make it less severe. Skye was usually a very light drinker, and had ambivalent views on alcohol. On the one hand it had formed a small but significant part of the Jason problem. On the other hand it had just facilitated a perfect evening of relaxing, unwinding and untangling. In this case at least, a mild hangover would be a price worth paying.

She washed the glassware first while the water was cleanest then moved on to plates and cutlery. Serving dishes and cookware was last. Finally she dried the good glasses and put them away. Everything else could drain.

– www.justwhatineeded.com

Skye drove her ancient hatchback through the gates and into the grounds of E. J. McKluskie House, and immediately noticed the changes. All the signage was new, and featured ‘Chandos International’ across the top. This matched the changes she had seen on their website, changes neither she nor Jason had any part in making. She parked the car and walked into the admin block. The front desk was unattended, and rather than ringing the bell she gave a tentative “Hello-oo?”

“Won’t be a minute, take a seat,” came a disembodied voice from behind one of the closed doors. Skye recognized it as that of Joan McKluskie, daughter of the venerable E. J. and sole trustee of the foundation. She sat down next to a pile of magazines but didn’t pick any up.

Following Julia’s advice, Skye had called about half of her contacts, skipping those she felt she would not want to work for. The responses had been warm, and nearly everyone had promised to file her details away. In some cases this was probably just a polite brush-off, but a few had specifically asked her to email in her CV. So they were more likely to be genuine. Only one had invited her for an interview, the E. J. McKluskie Foundation, and they seemed very eager.

Edward James McKluskie had established his eponymous foundation around 50 years earlier, shortly before his death. It was never revealed whether this was to influence his destination in the afterlife, or his enduring legacy in this world. Convincing arguments could be made each way. Shortly after its inception the foundation ran an orphanage, a soup kitchen and a small sanatorium. Over the years the profile had changed a little, and it now consisted of a women’s refuge, a respite centre for profoundly handicapped children and a hospice for the terminally ill.

Skye knew this from the website she had designed.

She knew nothing of Chandos International.

Joan McKluskie stepped into the room and smiled warmly at Skye. Her clothing and hairstyle were businesslike but slightly untidy, and there was strength of purpose in her eyes.

“Morning, Skye, thanks for coming in. Now if you’ll just follow me...”

After they had settled into the office and exchanged pleasantries, Joan got straight to the point.

“Skye, I know quite a lot about you, what you are like, what you can do, your work history. What I don’t know is why you want to work here.”

Skye looked the older woman in the eyes. “I’ll be perfectly honest, Joan. After Jason... after he and I imploded, I couldn’t keep the business going by myself. And the idea of working for any of the other IT consultancies just didn’t appeal anymore. So, I’m looking for a job, and I’m looking for a change.”

She drew a breath and continued, “I learnt quite a lot about the foundation when we were building the website, although I haven’t heard anything about Chandos. I can say this – for all my life my personal motto has been to make the world a better place. I’m a Twilight Angel, and I do some Big Sister work most vacations. So I believe I can contribute here, and that I’ll find it fulfilling.”

Joan considered this. “You know Skye, I sensed you had a good heart, a way with people, when I first met you. And I found it hard to warm to Jason, even though he can be charming. I’ve always had a knack for character. Now, you can learn all about CI later. Right now I can tell you that we do need someone, I guess you’d call it an administration assistant, though all-rounder would be more accurate. You’d be doing a bit of network admin, office work, liaising with clients, benefactors, government bureaucracy, some driving... who knows, in future there could be some media work.”

“Sounds good... so would I be working here, or one of the centers?” asked Skye.

“Partly here, but since the various centers seem to be in a state of perpetual emergency, you’ll probably get to see most of them in the first few weeks. Well, to be perfectly honest, the place where we’ll mostly be needing assistance is in the respite centre. Certainly not the most glamorous workplace. You know we call it the silent war zone?”

“Why is that? What war?” asked Skye.

“Take your pick. The war between apathy and outrage in the mind of the general public. The war society declares on a mother unfortunate enough to have a profoundly disabled child. Though it’s a pretty one-sided war. More like a social death sentence. If they go out in public, they are made to feel uncomfortable. So they’re stuck at home with no resources, no vacation, no recreation, even shopping for basics is a nightmare. And it goes on seven days a week, year after year.”

“But doesn’t the government do something?”

“Sure, they laughingly call it support, except no one’s laughing. Pitifully inadequate.”

“How?” asked Skye. “I mean, why don’t they do more?”

“Governments spend money to buy the favor of voters. The voters enjoy their apathy, but don’t want to be continually reminded about it. So the government spends exactly as much as it takes to keep these children and their families off the streets and out of the shopping malls and multiplexes.”

“OK...”

“Do you know that if a profoundly disabled child dies, the family members often require counseling for the guilt they feel about their relief that the ordeal is over?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

Joan laughed. “Listen to me, going on all maudlin, trying to scare you away from this place. I’ll stop.”

“No, that’s OK.”

“Let’s just take a walk over to the centre. Then you can tell me if you still want to work here. Oh, and the salary is pretty basic...”

Skye sat for a moment in her car, the previous half hour resonating in her mind. The broken children, their pain, their innocence. The damage clearly visible in their bodies and minds. But Skye could see that damage was seeping out of the children and into their families, sucking the life out of them. Then leaching out still further – into the community, hardening the hearts and humanity of those who found it too confronting. And ultimately reaching the government itself, turning a blind eye, leading by following.

– www.icanmakeadifference.com

She had certainly done herself a huge favor. She had taken her mind off her own problems, and her spirits were soaring. And she had taken care of the most pressing of those problems – employment. Joan’s final question rang in her mind:

“When can you start?”

4

Tucker Trent stood on the podium and surveyed the assembly arrayed about him. There were press (both network and self-published online) including a few camera crews, city dignitaries, socialites, some minor celebrities and interested members of the public. A few die-hard protesters were at the back holding banners aloft, but they appeared to be on their best behavior – security was discreetly visible, and an air of perplexed anticipation pervaded the room.

Beside him stood Elias Corder, a restrained but hungry smile on his face. On his other side was Randolph Reinhardt, CEO of Tolliver Holdings, and two of his top-level colleagues. Reinhardt's perfectly groomed silver hair, his bespoke suit and choice of collar and tie lent him an air of old-world class and privilege. His age was probably north of 60, but the world's best medical care (and possibly surgery) prevented any further accuracy. Rounding out the podium party was Justine Vanderveld, the energetic and almost youthful FreshStyle director. Tucker knew she would not be enjoying the publicity, her dedication was to the real job ahead.

Tucker would not be speaking today, but his presence on the podium was reward enough for the role he had played in the project.

"Look around Trent, this is your moment. The world is going to start taking notice," said Corder with eager pride.

"Yes Mr Corder, this is certainly some occasion."

– And at least Brandon Tyler isn't anywhere to be seen.

On cue Randolph Reinhardt stepped up to the lectern, calmly gazed from one side to the other and raised a hand for silence. The screen behind showed the FreshStyle logo. In fine patrician tones he began to speak.

"Honored guests and dignitaries, ladies and gentlemen, it is with honor that I welcome you to the inauguration of the very first Tolliver FreshStyle Club. The first of many, may I add." He paused and raised one eyebrow, drawing a polite round of applause.

"I suspect that some of you may be puzzled, or even suspicious as to why Tolliver, a tobacco company, would open a line of quit smoking centers. Today I hope to dispel those concerns, so that you will be as enthusiastic about FreshStyle as we are."

Behind him the projected image changed, showing the iconic image of 'the seven dwarves' – CEOs of the top seven Tobacco companies appearing before a Congressional Committee in 1994. Underneath was the quote that each had made under oath: "*I believe that nicotine is not addictive.*"

Reinhardt continued, "Ladies and gentlemen, as you know we have moved on from the old days, and we no longer deny that there are certain health risks associated with tobacco use. Of course there are. There are risks associated with every imaginable human activity and endeavor. Likewise, we no longer deny that for a significant portion of the community, nicotine is addictive."

The image behind changed to the Statue of Liberty.

"What we claim is that our customers have a right to freedom of choice, including the choice to use tobacco products. Legislation insures that the customer cannot avoid making an informed decision – the risks are clearly written on the packaging." As he said this the image changed to a packet of TolliverLights, the government health warning dominating the available area.

Tucker knew the entire presentation by heart. He recalled the birthplace of those words, the ideas, the big presidential phrases.

– A whiteboard, brainstorming with Chiron...

The moment was interrupted by a uniformed security officer with sunglasses and comms gear. He strode onto the podium and whispered a few words into Reinhardt's ear. Reinhardt looked incredulous, but stood aside. The officer stooped a little to reach the microphone and spoke in a calm but businesslike voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to inform you that we have received information relating to a potential security threat, and I must ask that you all evacuate this building. Please do not panic, we can achieve this smoothly and quickly if you follow my instructions. Those nearest the rear please exit first, please refrain from running, and do not move closer than one step to the person in front of you."

"What the *fuck*?" snarled Elias Corder, quietly.

Tucker just shook his head. It was all going wrong.

The news cameras were eating this up, it took a few seconds for the situation to get through to everyone else. Eventually people started to move, starting with those at the rear, then those at the sides. Fortunately there were several double doors along the perimeter of the function room, and the worst excesses of a stampede were avoided.

The security officer motioned for the podium party to follow, and led them through a side exit and along a corridor.

Reinhardt had composed himself and assumed the role of leader.

"Who is in charge of security?" he asked.

"I'm taking you directly to him, sir," said the security officer.

Presently they came to a fire escape and exited the building into a side alley. A police car was parked across the lane, and two police officers were talking quietly with a group of security personnel.

Reinhardt strode up to the group and declared, "Randolph Reinhardt, CEO of Tolliver Holdings. Be so kind as to tell me exactly what is going on?"

The security chief nodded, "Paul Keller, Firm Hand Security. A few minutes ago we received a phone call, very specific. The caller claimed to be from the League for Natural Justice, and said that he'd planted an explosive lethal chemical device attached to a timer in the room. Even gave the location where it could be found."

Elias Corder scoffed, "Aren't the LNJ a bunch of bored college students miffed that they weren't around in the sixties?"

Keller glanced at Corder then back to Reinhardt. "We take all matters of this nature seriously sir," he said. "It may be a hoax, but we must always assume the worst. The bomb squad are on their way, should be here in about three minutes."

Tucker wandered to the alley entrance and looked at the assembled crowd. Out of danger, they were now milling about expectantly. Curiosity seemed to be the prevailing mood, and the camera crews were collecting vox pops for the evening bulletin. Corder appeared at Tucker's side.

"Ah well Trent, look on the bright side. No such thing as bad publicity, don't they say?"

"True," mused Tucker, "but we don't want to scare away potential patrons..."

"No, quite," agreed Corder.

Randolph Reinhardt and his entourage walked up.

"Want to front up to those camera crews, Randolph?" prompted Corder.

"Yes, I suppose that would be prudent," said Reinhardt, and strode off towards them.

Tucker looked around. The bomb squad should be arriving soon. Once again he replayed in his mind the lines Reinhardt had delivered with such conviction, and then on to the remainder of the presentation, the big phrases that were coming next. Or would have except for this unforgivable interruption.

And the one unavoidable, uncomfortable fact.

– Every single line Reinhardt had recited.

– Every single word. 100% Chiron Levy.

He cast his mind back a year or so. It hadn't been plain sailing.

Chiron was dejected. Tucker had seldom seen him like that. In the months since his remission, they had been developing the FreshStyle concept, knowing that they had a primed client in Tolliver. The Tollies nightclubs had proved such a success that Corder Synergy could do no wrong.

“Did he give any reason?” asked Tucker.

Chiron shook his head. “Just said there was not enough traction, no hook.”

“Not even the prospect of offsetting the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement?”

“I mentioned that, he wasn't impressed.”

Elias Corder was not going to authorize the FreshStyle pitch, so it was not going to happen. Months of careful research and planning wasted.

– And with Chiron, this one was personal.

Tucker found it hard to look Elias Corder in the eye, but he forced himself to do it. He didn't feel the clean edge that preparation and conviction usually lent him.

In contrast, Corder seemed positively animated. He had not been expecting this. But Tucker detected something vaguely disquieting behind his encouraging smile.

– Something predatory.

“Have you discussed this with Chiron?” he asked.

“Yes,” nodded Tucker.

“And? What was his response? His reaction?” prompted Corder.

“He was impressed by the spin angle, with using it as a selling ploy. But as soon as he saw the research... well, it kind of took the wind out of his sails. But he said that if I really wanted to push the project in this direction, I should talk to you. Said he wouldn't stand in my way.”

“A man of very good grace, our Chiron,” said Corder.

“He's the luckiest break I ever got, Mr Corder. I'm not entirely happy about...”

Corder nailed Tucker in the eye with a weapons-grade gaze. “Trent, this idea has legs. I believe it will make me a lot of money, and make you a serious player in this game. But right now you've got to focus, because the ball is coming your way. You can drop it, you can pass it to someone else, or you can grasp it in both hands and *run like fuck*.” He drew breath and continued in a soft but steely voice. “I'm only going to ask this once. Do you want this?”

Tucker felt for a brief second the vertigo, the foreshortened perspective...

– *Just do it.*

“Yes sir, I do.”

“Excellent,” chuckled Corder. “Then go make your peace with Chiron, and get to work. I want you to make the pitch, and soon.”

Tucker wasn't sure whether his jaw really dropped or not. He certainly blinked a couple more times than necessary.

No expense had been spared furnishing Conference Room A. It was more opulently appointed than Elias Corder's office. Two entire walls were floor to ceiling glass, the other two were exotic wood paneling, one of which was adorned with gallery-grade art on high rotation. The other was dominated by the largest plasma display Tucker had ever seen. No projector-and-screen for Corder Synergy. The centerpiece was the conference table itself, commissioned by Corder himself. It was handmade from a handful of rainforest hardwoods, smoothed to aerospace tolerances and buffed to a fine matt sheen. The table was surrounded by a dozen high-backed leather chairs, decadent in their level of comfort.

Randolph Reinhardt and three colleagues were ushered in efficiently by Anthea McMahon, Corder's personal assistant. Reinhardt wore a suit that Tucker guessed could be measured in months of salary, and a shirt and tie studiously chosen to suggest aristocracy. He projected class and charm, but Tucker sensed something reptilian beneath his genteel exterior.

Elias Corder strode across to greet them with Tucker drawn along in his wake.

"Randolph, good to see you again. Thanks for making the time."

"Always a pleasure, Elias," said Reinhardt, in a voice that could sway a nation. "I must admit, you have piqued my curiosity."

Corder motioned towards Tucker. "Randolph, this is Tucker Trent, one of our rising stars. Tucker will be giving the presentation today."

Reinhardt offered his hand and Tucker shook it, desperately hoping he'd found the correct balance of firm-but-not-presumptuous.

"It's good to meet you, Mr Reinhardt."

Reinhardt nodded cordially. His underlings exchanged business cards with Tucker.

Corder cracked his knuckles. "Well gentlemen, shall we begin?" Anthea McMahon appeared again and directed everyone to a position around the table. She placed a leather bound folio on the table in front of each of the guests.

Tucker took a deep breath.

– This was it. Again.

He pressed a button on the small console in front of him and the two feature windows slowly dimmed. At the same time some downlights in the ceiling faded in, gently illuminating the tabletop. The plasma showed the FreshStyle logo Chiron Levy had commissioned a few months earlier.

"Gentlemen," began Tucker, "your industry is suffering the worst PR in its history, and in this country at least, that is translating into a significant negative impact on your business." He pressed another button and the screen showed a cigarette packet, focused on the health warning.

"Everyone is aware of the health risks associated with tobacco use," continued Tucker, "but that in itself never had much of an impact on consumption. You have always insisted that every facet of life has associated risks, and that this is a matter of personal choice." The image changed to a restaurant with a large "No Smoking" sign.

"On the other hand, the dwindling number of public places where smoking is tolerated is more of a cause for concern." Click, and a promotional image for the Tollies nightclub chain.

“In recent years you have made a small reversal in that area, and Corder Synergy is proud to have been part of that development.” Another press, this time the cartoon cigarette on a fish hook.

“But there is one area of public opinion where you are losing. Nicotine is addictive, even the industry has admitted that. Sure, there are still some young people who are... fearless, more concerned with image than risk. But the stark reality is being pushed hard by the anti-tobacco lobby, and they are getting through to more and more of the population: once you start, you’re hooked, and it is very difficult to quit.”

Tucker looked Reinhardt in the eye. “Think about it sir, you’re promoting freedom of choice when it comes to starting to smoke, but you are knowingly making it almost impossible to exercise that freedom if someone wants to stop. Everybody knows this, and it’s starting to bite.”

Reinhardt gestured impatiently with one hand. “Mr Trent, while your candor is impressive you have not raised anything new. Indeed, these matters are regularly discussed at board level.”

“Yes sir, I appreciate that. Let’s move right along to the details,” said Tucker. He took a deep breath then continued emphatically, “If Tolliver adopt the strategy we are proposing, no one will ever be able to cast doubt on your commitment to freedom of choice again.”

Over the next few minutes Tucker outlined the FreshStyle concept. Chiron’s ideas, Chiron’s words, Chiron’s research – they all flowed from his mouth with conviction and passion. Reinhardt remained almost perfectly impassive, but Tucker could detect the faintest traces of disbelief, then skepticism and finally annoyance beneath the surface. He reached the end of Chiron’s prepared presentation.

An icy smile played at the corner of Reinhardt’s lips. He spoke politely but with an undercurrent of venom. “So to improve our standing in the community, we should actively encourage our customers to stop buying our product? Mr Trent, earlier on you mentioned the ‘significant negative impact on our business’. Maybe I was naïve, but I had assumed you might be aiming to reverse that rather than accelerate it.” He looked over at Corder. “Elias, it’s not like you to waste my time like this.”

Tucker allowed himself a chuckle on the inside. He had anticipated this.

“Mr Reinhardt, everything you have heard so far is intended for the general public. You will have to convince the world these are the reasons, the rationale that drove you to launch FreshStyle. It will not be easy. The world will be skeptical, they will find it hard to accept that you do not have an ulterior motive...”

– One beat...

“And with good reason. Because you will launch FreshStyle for three completely different reasons. Two of which will never be made public.”

“And what might they be, Mr Trent?”

Tucker pressed the button and a news site screenshot appeared. The story was years old, the title across the top read ‘Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement’.

The first ‘hook’ was Chiron’s idea, and Chiron had done most of the research. It was complex and the outcome was not guaranteed. There was legislature, detailed legal opinion, financial projections. Tucker presented the points as best he could, watching Reinhardt’s reaction carefully. When he was done he said, “This will of course be on the public record, but we should refrain from announcing it until negotiations are successfully completed. Even then, it should not be presented as a driving factor.”

“Expenses are still expenses,” said Reinhardt, but he looked thoughtful.

Tucker clicked and the FreshStyle logo appeared again. He was on his own now, no longer delivering the work of Chiron Levy.

“Look at the logo, Mr Reinhardt. Does the color scheme or font look familiar? In particular, the way the two words are jammed up together, ‘camel-case’ – each starting with a capital letter.”

“It is very reminiscent of the TolliverLights logo,” admitted Reinhardt.

“A generation ago,” said Tucker, “advertisements for TolliverLights were seen on billboards on every street corner, in the pages of newspapers and magazines, and on TV. Today you can barely find the logo on a pack of the very cigarettes it is supposed to be promoting.”

He clicked again and a pack of TolliverLights appeared.

“Look closely – there it is, hiding underneath a pile of government health warnings and legal disclaimers.”

Click back to the FreshStyle logo.

“The FreshStyle initiative is an opportunity to get your image and branding back into the public eye again. You will be able to advertise FreshStyle without restriction – the budget will of course be up to your company’s discretion. But consider this – some of the advertising will be done for you at no expense. I’m talking about government-funded public health announcements. FreshStyle will have to be part of those – because it will be the most successful quit smoking program.”

Tucker advanced to the next image – a mockup of an evening news bulletin, with some statistics in the textbar underneath the FreshStyle logo.

“Likewise,” he continued, “you will make sure that a FreshStyle spokesperson is available for comment every time a tobacco-related item hits the news. And every time it happens it will raise your company’s profile, giving you an edge over your competitors.” After a pause he asked, “Mr Reinhardt, how did your market share respond after you began to promote the Tollies clubs?”

“There was a slight increase, as I’m sure you’re well aware,” said Reinhardt.

“All the Tollies marketing was underground and viral – stunts, internet video posts and the like. Because of all the anti-smoking restrictions. Mr Reinhardt, those restrictions won’t be here this time. Prime time is yours for the taking.”

– Let him digest that, count of three...

Click. The screen showed a bandaged patient in an intensive care ward.

“And the final reason. Mr Reinhardt, when someone is recovering from major surgery, serious injury or burns, one of the major concerns is pain management. This is usually achieved by administering morphine. Morphine is a very potent pain killer, but there are serious side effects – nausea, addiction, constipation. Finding the optimal dosage is critical – too low and the patient suffers needlessly, too high and the complications set in. For years medical staff tried to do the best they could, and almost always ended up giving too much. You know, just in case...”

Click. A group of hippies waving banners with peace signs.

“Then in the sixties, someone came up with the bright idea of letting the patients control the dosage themselves. As you might imagine, there were many vocal critics. They pointed out that allowing self administration of an addictive analgesic was an invitation to get high and stay high.”

Click. A computer controlled infusion pump with a patent-held switch.

“But then they actually tried it. In almost every case the dosages went down. The patients only took as much as they needed, and only when they needed it. And for a significant number of patients it actually dropped right down to zero. Their pain was no less severe than everyone else’s. But they didn’t administer any morphine at all.”

Tucker looked around the table. This was the shot that would make or break the deal. Back to Reinhardt.

“What made the difference? What make their pain bearable? *The security of knowing help was there if they needed it.*”

– Another beat...

“Mr Reinhardt, all over the world smokers are torn between their enjoyment of cigarettes and their knowledge of the health risks. But most of all they are worried about how hard it is to quit. Likewise, all over the world teenagers are being taught to fear how addictive nicotine is, and how tobacco companies are using every trick in the book to ensnare them for life.”

– And reel it in...

“Imagine being able to make that fear go away. To whisper in their minds ‘*there is nothing to worry about, help is there if you need it.*’ FreshStyle is your instrument to do that. Sure, you will lose a few customers. In fact it is essential that you do. That will assure the rest that you really mean business, that the help really is there, really is genuine. And for most of them, that will be enough.”

Reinhardt pursed his lips in thought. “Intriguing Mr Trent, but as far as I can tell you are simply telling me what you think might happen if we open these... quit centers. From my side of this table it looks more likely that we simply lose customers. And you are suggesting that I gamble the future of my company to find out who is correct.”

“You are right sir, we have not performed any controlled trials. What we have done is commissioned studies from three leading psychologists specializing in risk, addiction and motivation. They each employed various methodologies – structured interviews, game play studies, large sample surveys. The results are in the proposal document in front of you, but all three were unanimous in their conclusions. Good for business.”

Reinhardt opened the folio and leafed quickly through the pages. Too quickly to be picking up anything of substance. “We’ll need to get some of our people to take a look at this,” he said.

“Of course,” agreed Tucker.

“I do have one more question. Why isn’t Chiron a part of this little gathering? We were most impressed with his work on the Tollies nightclubs enterprise. My doubts would have been more easily quietened had he been present.”

Tucker blinked. “Mr Levy is, ah...”

“Unwell,” interjected Elias Corder. “He has done a lot of very valuable preparatory work, but will not be taking an active role in this project.”

“Pity. May I ask the nature of his... ailment?” asked Reinhardt with unfeigned concern.

Tucker glanced across to Corder for guidance. The CEO answered for him, “Cancer. Lung.”

Reinhardt gave the briefest of wincing and lowered his eyes. Regaining his demeanor he said quietly “Elias, I would be most obliged if you could identify a charity that is particularly close to his heart, and let me know.” It was the most human thing Tucker would ever see him do.

“Certainly Randolph, consider it done,” said Corder.

Reinhardt looked over at Tucker and held his gaze for a moment. “Mr Trent, you worked closely with Chiron for several years, didn’t you?”

“Yes Mr Reinhardt, he was my mentor, taught me everything I know.”

Reinhardt nodded, re-evaluating.

Tucker was wrenched back to the present by a sudden change in the murmur of the crowd. He looked across to see the bomb disposal squad's RCU dalek emerging from the entrance. It was carrying a cylindrical cardboard package, painted to look like a giant lit cigarette. There was a clock tied around the middle. Tucker rolled his eyes.

– Lethal chemical device, attached to a timer. Puh-lease.

Gusts of laughter danced through the assembled crowd. The original company of guests was now swollen with onlookers. Media crews were faithfully recording the scene as it played out, some with attractive reporters in shot providing earnest commentary, others zoomed in wholly on the action. The RCU carefully set the package down and was inspecting it from all angles with an array of cameras, relaying images back to the BDS officers gathered behind their Perspex barriers.

A series of loud beeps cut the air, and almost immediately a puff of white smoke issued from the lit-painted end of the package. There were some gasps from the crowd, and those at the front drew back. In one elegant choreographed motion the entire bomb disposal squad deployed their gas masks.

A moment stretched, commanding the attention of the silent gathering.

Sudden jump cut to a surrealist carnival. The air was full of smoke and what looked like confetti. There had been an explosion, but it was a small one. More pop than bang and no concussion at all. The crowd flinched and ducked as whatever was in the air began to rain down.

Not confetti – thousands of cigarettes.

It took two hours for the bomb squad to declare the building safe, during which time four things happened:

Several hundred of the undamaged cigarettes were souvenired by smokers in the assembly. The fact that so many were intact seemed to reassure the crowd – it was testament to how small the explosion had been.

The news crews frantically wrapped up their reporting of the incident and streamed it back to their headquarters for immediate broadcast. Then they collected another round of vox pops for the evening bulletin. Randolph Reinhardt spoke to most of the networks present, while Elias Corder and Tucker Trent declined all requests.

A mobile trauma counseling team arrived in a van and offered their services to all. There were a few takers, none of whom appeared particularly traumatized. But apparently counseling was something they were supposed to need after an event such as this. So they sat down and engaged earnestly with the counselors, learning all about what they would shortly be feeling, and how they could process those feelings positively.

The assembly of guests suffered a certain level of attrition. For some this was due to prior engagements, for others the reason was boredom and discomfort. Milling around in the heat outside a city building was certainly not pleasant, and for many of the dignitaries it was simply outside the boundaries that defined them. By the time the bomb squad gave the all clear numbers had dwindled down to less than half. However in response to the ensuing flock of texts many of the deserters reappeared, and when the launch finally resumed numbers were almost at their original level.

Randolph Reinhardt stood at the lectern smiling patiently. Again he raised his hand, signaling for attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Tolliver FreshStyle I would like to apologize for the inconvenience we have all experienced, and to thank you sincerely for your patience.”

Since the interruption had occurred so early in Reinhardt’s presentation he decided to start over again from the beginning.

- Logo / welcome.
- The seven dwarves / we no longer deny health risks or addictiveness.
- Statue of liberty / customers’ rights / freedom of choice.
- Cigarette packet / warnings on packet ensure risks are understood.

Reaching the point where he had been interrupted over two hours earlier Reinhardt looked around behind him in exaggerated, pantomime fashion. It was a comical image, a little incongruous against his customary cultured sophistication. He waited with a bemused smile for the scattered laughter to subside, and then a moment longer. The projected image changed to an old cartoon showing a cigarette with a fish hook through it, dangling from a line. Reinhardt’s tone became patient and paternal.

“But still the lingering doubt remains over how genuine we really are about free choice. Our critics claim that since nicotine is addictive, our appeal to free will is merely lip service.”

He paused and nodded, and raised his eyebrows thoughtfully.

“And they have a point. There are customers who find it very difficult to limit, control or stop their smoking.”

The cartoon faded into FreshStyle logo, superimposed over some models jogging along the beach. Reinhardt’s manner became patrician, his phrases short and succinct, with pauses between them. They were clearly intended as soundbytes.

“Starting today, we put that lingering doubt aside. Today we prove just how serious we are about free will.

“The programs offered by FreshStyle are world’s best practice, with results-oriented methods, based on the latest research.

“We confidently predict measurably better results than most state or special-interest group programs.

“Best of all, FreshStyle Clubs will be free to anyone who wants to use them.

“Should you decide that smoking no longer belongs in your life, we will help you to leave it behind – guaranteed!”

This drew another round of applause. Reinhardt smiled benevolently across the room, then looked back towards Tucker and gave the briefest of conspiratorial winks. Tucker nodded deferentially.

“In a few moments,” said Reinhardt, “I will ask Justine Vanderveld, the director of Tolliver FreshStyle to say a few words. But first I would like to recognize the creative input of two people from Corder Synergy who have proved indispensable to this endeavor. Firstly Elias Corder, CEO...” Corder smiled and raised his hand to identify himself and acknowledge the applause. Reinhardt continued, “and also Tucker Trent, who has been heavily involved in project management, and coordinated a lot of the original research and development.” Tucker gave a half-salute, unfeigned surprise on his face. He had not been forewarned of this, but found it gratifying nonetheless.

- But no mention of Chiron Levy.

Reinhardt spoke again. “FreshStyle is an extraordinary venture, and the job of running it requires an extraordinary individual. Fortunately such a person has been

identified, and we are privileged she has agreed to take on this challenge. Ladies and gentlemen, please give a big welcome for FreshStyle's director – Ms Justine Vanderveld.”

Justine Vanderveld approached the lectern defiantly. The woman was a diminutive dynamo who positively radiated fitness, energy and purpose. She did not appear entirely at ease with the applause.

“Thank you... thanks. As some of you will be aware, I have spent many years helping people give up smoking, and working to cut the rate of smoking in this country. And in turn I am aware that many people are surprised, shocked even, to learn that I would even consider taking up employment with a tobacco company. Today I want to assure you that I have not sold out. Far from it. Tolliver Holdings have hired me knowing full well what I stand for, and I can promise you that my dedication and passion have not been compromised. I am responsible for running the FreshStyle program, and I will not be pulling any punches.”

More applause, and she looked more comfortable with it this time.

“The centerpiece of FreshStyle is of course our quit smoking program, which will quite simply be the most effective program ever developed. But FreshStyle is more than that. We have gyms, information centers, fitness and dietary consultants for those concerned about post-smoking weight-gain, even a health food café. The café, by the way, will not be free – it is the only area of FreshStyle where you will need to take out your wallet.”

Justine was silent for a second or two, then finished her speech in stirring form. “It is not my job to comment on Tolliver's motives in creating FreshStyle. My job is to run the best quit smoking program in this country's history. And my commitment to you today is this: I will be doing my job in spades.”

This drew a rousing response from the guests, which in turn brought a smile to Justine's face. After a moment she walked back to her place and Reinhardt once again took the lectern.

“Thank you Justine. And now for my sins, we will open proceedings to questions. Now to keep everyone from talking at once we need...” He looked around the room, and on cue an attendant near the front stood forward and produced a wireless microphone.

Over the next few minutes Reinhardt fielded a dozen or so questions, indicating to the attendant who should next be given the microphone. The media contingent were for the most part well behaved, and most of the questions were about the bomb scare. In Tucker's judgment only three seemed worthy of the profession of journalism.

“Guy Stannard, Times.” Vampire-pale, groomed almost to Reinhardt's standard and with diamond-sharp eyes. “For years we've known that Big Tobacco has the best funded laboratories and biochemists in the world, and we've all heard stories and rumors about secret research. Will FreshStyle be using any new methods or knowledge from this research?”

“I can confirm that our R&D division will have an active and ongoing role, reviewing and contributing to the FreshStyle program.” Reinhardt raised one eyebrow and added “But if you are asking about unlocking secret caches of suppressed knowledge, I think we can safely file that alongside fake-moon-landings and Elvis sightings.”

“Megan Leigh, CNC.” Businesslike and inscrutable, courtesy Botox. “What will you do if FreshStyle is more successful than you planned? Obviously, if you were to

achieve a 100% success rate, you'd lose all your customers. So either there's some level of success above which you'll have to shut it down, or you're mighty confident it won't be that effective."

Reinhardt considered the question. "Ms Leigh, I believe there is a logical flaw in your reasoning. For us to lose all our customers would require two conditions: every single one of our customers would have to embark on the FreshStyle program, which in turn would need a perfect success rate. If a certain percentage of our customers enjoy our product and wish to continue using it, we will remain in business. For those who decide to quit, we are committed to providing genuine and effective assistance."

"Callum Buchanan, freelance." Tucker's attention was captured by his thick, endearing Scottish brogue. Buchanan looked about fifty, was built on the solid side of lean and had a face with just enough rough edges to keep it real. Just as well – he was wearing a coarse-weave linen shirt, tan leather vest, khaki cargo trousers and snakeskin boots. And on top of all that, shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair.

"Mr Reinhardt, you tell us the programs you offer here are free, so it can't be a money making venture. Yet you're a commercial company, answerable to shareholders. This all looks awfully expensive for a public relations exercise. So then I consider your obligations under the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement – the large sum you have to pay every state in the country, every year. Will any of the states allow you to offset your annual payments by the money you spend running FreshStyle? And if not, will you be negotiating with them to allow this?"

Reinhardt bowed his head briefly as if in resignation. He gave a rueful smile and clapped his hands quietly two or three times. "Mr Buchanan, you have raised a matter that we planned to announce in two or three weeks' time. Yes it is true that we are negotiating to offset our TMSA liabilities, because we believe we can deliver more effective public health outcomes with these funds than the various government bodies involved. Of course I cannot pre-empt the outcome of those talks, but I can say this: regardless of whether or not we are successful, our commitment to FreshStyle will remain."

– Well enough handled. I guess.

Tucker's brain had almost reached its limits in terms of taking in and processing the events around him. He was starting to feel drained – due no doubt to the culmination of months of intensely focused work, combined with the shock of the bomb scare.

Fortunately there was very little else worthy of note on the agenda. Mayor Stanley Vernon was granted a short speech in which he reminded everyone of his achievements, then dutifully unveiled a plaque. The refreshments on offer became harder. Tours of the facilities were offered to anyone interested. Some of the more persistent reporters attempted to prize a few newsworthy nuggets from Randolph Reinhardt. No one approached Tucker, though at one point he thought that Callum Buchanan, the charismatic Scottish freelance, was watching him carefully.

"What do you think Trent? A successful launch?" Elias Corder's energy levels were certainly not dented.

Tucker blinked and shook his head to clear it. "Yeah, amazing. I think I'm starting to fade though – brain buzz, overload – whatever. Ask me tomorrow. I'll sleep well tonight, that's for sure."

Corder clapped him on the shoulder. "What do they make young folk out of these days? I thought you'd be out partying."

“Maybe on the weekend.”

“OK then, Trent. Catch you tomorrow.”

“Ciao.”

5

Miranda Tonkin was home alone, feeling like a caged animal. There was nothing that needed to be done – the housekeeper had visited during the day. All floors and benches were spotless, the bed had new sheets and the drawers and wardrobes were full of freshly washed and pressed clothes. She could eat her dinner whenever she wanted, but decided to wait another half hour or so for Delton. It was getting late though.

– Should have stopped off at the gym. Burnt off some of this nervous... edge.

As stressful as she'd found the past few days, she knew full well that it was far worse for Delton. The world had fallen on his shoulders with a vengeance, and without warning. And everything was happening at once.

Miranda had decided that her role during this period would be the supportive wife, listening, understanding and giving strength. This was the type of person she wanted to *be* in a situation like this. But now while not exactly wavering, she was starting to notice how restless, how skittish she felt.

She poured herself half a glass of chenin blanc, flopped down on the couch and flipped on the TV. She surfed past half a dozen forensic cop shows, there wasn't much point trying to pick up halfway in. Likewise for sitcoms, she just wasn't in the mood. Perhaps one of the late night news reviews – might get a few more details on the FreshStyle launch bomb scare. Sure enough, it was dominating most of the bulletins.

"... attention for all the wrong reasons. Tolliver Holdings' CEO Randolph Reinhardt called it an attention-seeking stunt. City officials and Homeland Security spokespersons are calling it home-grown terrorism. In tonight's Digging Deeper we ask who are the League for Natural Justice, and why did they choose to attack the launch of Tolliver FreshStyle quit centers?"

A new face appeared, a middle-aged man reclining in a couch in front of a bookcase.

"LNJ first appeared five years ago, after the San Diego G8 summit when a group of like-minded protesters decided to adopt an ongoing strategy to publicize perceived injustices of big business and major governments. They used the internet to coordinate their activities and expand, and do not appear to have a formal leadership hierarchy. In some cases incidents attributed to the LNJ were later discovered to have been carried out by groups of left-wing university students acting in isolation. Experts claim that the concept of an organization is not relevant in the context of groups such as this."

"In the past year the LNJ or groups claiming affiliation with them have executed several high-profile stunts, so far avoiding any fatalities."

Over the familiar footage of the stunt:

"Last October a group claiming to be the League for Natural Justice kidnapped Senator Barriemore Calder, well-known for his anti-Islamic stance. After disguising him with a fake beard and Middle Eastern style clothing they injected Botox into his tongue to prevent him from speaking coherently. The senator was released outside the Capitol building, with his hands tied and a backpack attached to his chest. Two police officers came very close to shooting him at close range."

A still of some grocery shelves:

“In February over 1000 bottles of diesel fuel were labeled as cooking oil and placed in supermarkets around the country, as a protest against foodcrops being sold for biodiesel production from countries where there are food shortages. This caused three kitchen fires, and five people had to get their stomachs pumped, three of them children.”

Back to the man in the couch:

“Which brings us to today’s incident at the launch of the Tolliver FreshStyle chain of quit smoking centers. A phone call warned that a bomb was in the premises, which were promptly evacuated. Using a remote control robot, the bomb squad removed the device, which detonated outside, showering onlookers with cigarettes.”

Cut to a police officer:

“This is no laughing matter. We’re not treating this group as protesters or creators of public mischief. We’ve got to start considering them as a terrorist organization.”

The anchor:

“We’ll be back after these messages.”

Miranda scanned through the channels, stopping briefly at the comedy skitshow Delton and Alistair had been watching a week earlier. She felt a faint welling of emotion, the program reminding her of those simpler times – seven days ago. She frowned and dismissed it. The skit was about a new Homeland Security SWAT team, formed to counter the latest threat to national security. A man wearing a giant cigarette costume was being pursued through the city by a crack team of SWAT types. They were all shouting “Hep, hep, hep” for no apparent reason, and groups of them were clumsily wielding a giant water-pistol. And all against the musical backing of *Yackety-sax*. Miranda found herself laughing, then a sudden thought struck her.

– Weird, didn’t take them long to get that on air...

She pointed the remote and flipped through a few more, stopping on a community access channel that was broadcasting the entire FreshStyle launch presentation. The Tolliver CEO was grandstanding about free choice but the camera was panning all over the place, some novice operator’s idea of capturing ambience. The images projected on the screen behind the speaker didn’t look right – dark bands obscuring the images and words. When it zoomed in on the platform party Miranda easily identified Justine Vanderveld and Elias Corder. But her attention was drawn by the striking younger guy next to Corder. Dark hair, blue eyes, looking quite pleased with himself. And vaguely familiar... She cast her mind back a few years, drafting work on one of the Corder accounts – Exit Strategy?

– Of course, the junior assisting Chiron Levy. Now what was his name?

She couldn’t remember, and made a mental note to scan a few news sites, possibly even Corder Synergy’s own, and find out. She also briefly entertained the possibility of discussing with Delton whether or not she had a smoking problem, and if she should sign up for the FreshStyle quit smoking program. Then she recalled that her last pack of cigarettes had lasted three weeks, and that Delton was quite overloaded at the moment and decided to let the matter drop for the time being.

Enough waiting. She went to the kitchen and set about preparing dinner. In recent days several of her colleagues had been raving about a new domestic catering subscription service called Gourmet Tonight, so she had gone online and ordered two introductory packages earlier in the day. Having them delivered to her office had avoided the rigmarole of arranging access to the Glenview gated community. When they arrived the courier had requested Miranda’s ID, and looking at them now she understood why. The two faux-wicker hampers were very attractively presented, with ribbons, bows and a small bouquet of plastic flowers. They were obviously a key part

of the Gourmet Tonight marketing strategy, and they almost certainly sold at a loss. Miranda guessed that she would not be able to order them more than once without subscribing.

Untying the ribbon she opened the basket, letting the lid hinge backwards and revealing a collection of carefully stacked plastic containers. Bending forward to inspect their contents she was startled by the sound of a raspy musical fanfare, followed by a friendly but tinny voice:

“No time to cook? Sick of takeaway? Dining out doesn’t appeal?”

It sounded like a miniature radio, somewhere among the stack. She started pulling out the containers one by one.

“Welcome to Gourmet Tonight, the flexible home catering service. Unlike other catering services, Gourmet Tonight has no kitchens – we are an agency service, sourcing our meals from a catalogue of high-class restaurants. This lets us offer you unprecedented choice and variety. When you subscribe to Gourmet Tonight you can select from our range of cuisine lines, including Basic Variety, Michelin Three Star, International, Low-Cal, Vegetarian, Kosher and Generous Serve. At any time you can switch cuisine lines, either permanently or one-off.”

The basket was now empty, but the voice continued undaunted:

“Within these cuisine lines there are more options – children’s serve, alcoholic and soft beverages and desserts. We particularly recommend our matching wine option, which includes a bottle of premium wine perfectly suited to the delivered meal.”

She carefully picked up everything she had just placed on the bench, double checking to see if it was the source of the annoying audio.

“If you have a busy social life you’re going to have company over some nights, and you’ll probably be going out for dinner others. No problem with Gourmet Tonight, you can change the numbers, cuisine line or even cancel individual meals by phone or online as little as three hours before delivery time.”

Everything on the bench was either food, drink, plastic cutlery or napkins. She turned her attention to the basket lid.

“Join the growing number of satisfied Gourmet Tonight diners – subscribe tonight!”

That was it – a small plastic grille on the underside. There was even an on/off switch. She switched it off just as the message started to recycle.

Miranda had just started sorting the containers into those that needed to be warmed up and those that didn’t, when the muffled sound of the garage door signaled Delton’s arrival. She opened the second basket and quickly killed the ad before it started. By the time he appeared in the kitchen she had the whole meal sorted, both appetizers in the microwave, and the salads transferred to real crockery.

“Hi Hon, sorry so late... called in to see Dad on the way.”

“That’s OK Delt, how was he?”

“Thinner. A bit... creepy – his eyes were open, but they never moved. I don’t think he could hear anything I said, no response I could see.”

Miranda gave a careful sympathetic grimace, then carried some glasses, plates and cutlery to the dining table. Delton looked at the neat row of containers and said “This looks good – what is it, Hon?”

“Sort of a sample pack from a home cuisine delivery service. Let me know what you think, we can subscribe if we think it’s any good. The hampers have a little audio player built in, they played an ad when I opened them.”

“Yeah?”

Miranda had transferred the appetizers and salad to the table. She poured the wine and motioned for Delton to join her.

“You’re... ready for dinner Delt?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure... thanks,” and he sat down.

The appetizers were seared scallops in plaited scallion nests with crushed pistachios. The salad was char-grilled asparagus, artichoke and witlof with a ginger mustard aioli. Miranda took a sip of wine to prime her palate before trying her scallops. They were excellent, and she gave herself an internal pat on the back.

Delton was digging in, not paying quite enough attention for Miranda’s liking. “This is very good Hon... very good.”

– Well, for Delton that’s as hyped as it gets.

“So... how were things at Wardell BP today, Delt?”

Delton rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers, took another sip of wine and gave a tired smile. “Exhausting, but I think I’ve finally got the board on a leash.”

“You faced them down?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

Miranda was curious. “So come on, what happened?”

“You know those documents I mentioned that were delivered yesterday?”

“The ones from Alistair’s health insurance company – NMC?”

“Yeah, all part of their service. There were all sorts of things: details of his investments, passwords, a personal farewell letter. But one of them was a declaration he made nominating me as his shareholder voting proxy. And since Dad has a majority of the voting stock, it meant that I now had the power to dismiss the board if I wanted to, so it kind of shifted things in my favor.”

“Excellent.”

“Well, I was getting pretty tired of the way the board was treating me. You know I asked Gareth last week...”

“Gareth...?” queried Miranda, vaguely familiar with the name but not quite placing it.

“Gareth Clarke, he was Dad’s VP. He’s acting CEO now. So last week I asked him if I could sit in on the board, and he fobbed me off with some waffle about keeping an even keel and not rocking the boat. And I was just getting more and more suspicious – no concrete reason, just a feeling from the way they were looking at me.”

Delton started on the salad. “So last night I got thinking: they all know Dad’s voting stock is going to come to me eventually, so if anything was going down it had to be short term. Like, giving themselves big bonuses, or awarding open-ended contracts to businesses they have an interest in.”

“But you didn’t know anything for sure?” asked Miranda.

“No, just this hunch. But my hunches generally turn out to be pretty good. And I decided to act on this one. So this morning I walked into Gareth’s office and told him to hang up the phone. I showed him the proxy nomination and said I wanted to talk to the board. In one hour. And that it was in all of their interests that I do so.”

“Way to go Delt. And they all turned up? Some don’t work at your office, do they?”

“A couple had to come from across town. Two more were interstate and couldn’t make it. The rest just walked down the corridor.”

“So... what did you say to them?” prompted Miranda.

“I thanked them for coming at such short notice, then gave them an update on Dad’s condition. Told them that it was likely I’d be majority shareholder before too long. Assured them I agreed that a steady hand was needed, and that I had confidence in Gareth Clarke taking on CEO. Then I brought out the proxy form. That got their

attention, I don't think they were expecting something like that so soon." Delton had finished his salad, and took another sip of wine.

"I said I didn't have any firm evidence, but I had reason to believe there were some irregularities in recent goings-on in the company. I didn't want to pursue the matter, didn't want to know any details, I just wanted everything put right. And I wanted on the board, non-executive but firmly in the loop. And if I felt that I was getting sidelined or shafted, I'd ram through an external audit. A real cavity-search job." Delton raised his arm and spread his fingers, mime-pulling on a rubber glove.

Miranda laughed – Delton had seldom been this... fired up. "And they blinked?"

"Yeah. Asked for a few minutes on their own. Didn't take long. Called me back in and offered me a position on the board. Gareth said he'd arrange regular briefings in as many areas as I liked – strategy, accounts, R&D, client relations."

"Well done Hon, excellent," said Miranda and meant it. Delton was certainly rising to the challenge. "You don't think there will be any... resentment?"

Delton shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I got the impression they were relieved I let Gareth stay on as CEO. That some of them were fearing I'd want the job. As far as I'm concerned it makes perfect sense to have Gareth take over, for now at least. He knows the business inside out, and he'll be seen as a steady hand. Of course, Dad never planned on making him CEO. Chairman maybe, but the top spot was intended for me." Delton rubbed his eyes again. "In about ten years' time."

"How long do you think it will be before you take over?" asked Miranda, giving voice to a question that had been on her mind for some time.

"I don't want to hurry. I want everyone who does business with us to get to know me, feel comfortable that I'm not some upstart pretender. Five years, maybe?"

Miranda contemplated this, exploring how it might fit in with her plans.

– If I had any...

Miranda gathered the plates and took them to the kitchen, then began warming up the next course. It was chicken breast poached in light soy on a bed of crushed potato and roast fennel with a blood orange jus. She set the microwave to low power to avoid spoiling the delicate dish. A thought occurred to her and she called out, "Delt, you don't suppose they were just throwing you something to keep you quiet. I mean, are you confident they really are cutting you in?"

Delton appeared in the kitchen doorway, nodding. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Gareth spent a couple of hours this afternoon bringing me up to scratch on what's been happening with the Sheldrake deal. Oh yeah, that reminds me – I'm flying off to Sheldrake HQ next week, tagging along to a meeting. One of the guys from Corder Synergy will be there too."

"Really? They were in the news today, Corder I mean, for that FreshStyle thing. Did you hear?"

"No," said Delton. "I didn't have the radio on driving home. What'd I miss?"

Miranda related the details of the FreshStyle launch, the bomb stunt and associated media coverage. She was just about finished as the microwave chimed, and set about serving the chicken.

Delton looked incredulous. "Now let me get this straight – the tobacco company launched a chain of quit smoking centers, while a bunch of pranksters, presumably from the anti-smoking side of the debate, distributed free cigarettes to members of the general public?"

Miranda laughed. "I never thought of it that way, but yes I suppose you're right."

“Crazy. Anyway, I’ll be away for a couple of days next week, meeting the Sheldrake guys. Gareth seems a bit stressed out about it, the way Sheldrake are playing now.”

“The stock swap is still on though?” prompted Miranda.

“Well they haven’t totally withdrawn the offer, but they’re revising it downwards, and demanding a lot more voting stock in the mix. They know we’ve been caught off guard succession-wise, figure we’re vulnerable, and they can screw an advantage out of it.

“Bastards,” said Miranda.

“Well maybe. But it kinda mirrors what we did to MeisnerGillespie. Corporate Karma if you believe in that sort of thing.”

Miranda carried the freshly loaded plates to the table, and they both sat down again. The texture and blend of flavors were sublime, she was seriously impressed. It was well worth the extra few minutes caused by having the microwave on low.

“There’s a compounding factor,” resumed Delton, “and that’s the share price. Quite a few of the investors have got nervous, and we’ve dropped around twenty percent. Sheldrake are factoring that into their adjustments too.”

– Not even *one* comment about the chicken?

“Compounding how?” she asked.

“Oh, they’re using it to wring a few more concessions out of us.”

“OK,” nodded Miranda, “now, what is the deal with Corder Synergy? Did Alistair contact them or the other way around?”

“According to Gareth they approached Dad. They seem to be the masters of the corporate mashup at the moment, though personally I don’t get this latest... quit smoking thing. They’ve been going through our IP inventory, asking a bunch of detailed questions about everything. A bit of a challenge, most of our stuff is pretty technical. Gareth doesn’t know whether they’re looking for something specifically, or just on a fishing expedition, hoping something interesting will turn up.”

“Well then, let’s hope you all come up with something that turns the company’s fortunes around.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Delton, and did.

Presently Miranda gathered the plates and investigated the dessert. It was a crème caramel flan with candied blueberries, pecans and a Cointreau sauce. No heating was required and it could not be faulted.

Miranda lay in bed reviewing the day’s events. She was pleased that she had helped Delton relax after his day, and also with how Gourmet Tonight had turned out. It looked like a real find, and quite reasonably priced too – if you signed up for a subscription of one year or more.

But there was one thought that she couldn’t dismiss, however hard she tried to put it out of her mind.

– Not once did Delton ask about my day.

Sure, Delton had more on his mind than he had ever dealt with before. And sure, the developments at Gratton Hetherington Tonkin were nothing compared to what was happening at Wardell Biotech and Pharmaceutical...

– But he could have asked.

Because all in all, it had been a *rather* interesting day.

Geoffrey Gratton, Miles Hetherington and Bryce Tonkin were distributed between two maroon chesterfields in the executive breakroom on the top floor. They rose as Miranda entered, simultaneously triggering a twinge of unease and a flush of pride. As they exchanged polite greetings she noticed her father's slightly stilted manner. She allowed herself a moment's bemused reflection: Miranda's relationship with her father was not ideal, but it took the other two partners' presence to bring on formality like this.

Gratton gestured towards the comb-bound booklet on the table and spoke for the group. "Ms Tonkin, we've reviewed this business case of yours in quite some detail, and we're very impressed."

Hetherington continued, "I have to concede we've allowed ourselves to miss the boat with regard to paralegal services, the Responsible Rights rabble have been sneaking up on us for years and now they're starting to get some traction with the legislature. I think we have some serious catching up to do."

Her father added "And we agree with you that taking on a PLEx agency franchise is a sound strategic step, which will allow us to leapfrog our smaller competitors and go head-to-head with some of the bigger boys."

Gratton's turn to speak again, tag team style.

"Ms Tonkin, we've just created a new division – Paralegal Services, and we'd like to offer you the opportunity to lead it. This new position involves a modest increase to your salary, nothing stratospheric but we believe you'll be pleased. Your initial task will be to get the PLEx agency up and running, after which we can evaluate progress and perhaps consider fine tuning our profile in this segment."

Miranda felt the volume of space around her inflate. She hadn't expected this.

"Gentlemen, this is... unexpected," she said, her voice feeling like treacle. "Thank you very much for your confidence."

Words came from Hetherington's mouth across a vast gulf, "We're preparing an office for you on level five, with a dedicated section of open plan for your team, and a large open consultation area with a multi-panel plasma display for the PLEx feed."

Her father again: "This afternoon I'll show you around the floor. Then over the next day or so, you can tidy up any loose ends you have lying around. Get someone from the temp pool to assist if you need to. Next week we'll get Logistics to help you move." He allowed his businesslike manner to slip for a moment. "Well done, sweetheart."

"Thanks Dad."

"Ms Tonkin," concluded Gratton, "you've impressed us with your work so far, and we're confident you'll continue to do well. Now this is strictly off the record, but if you pull this off, I think you can expect to have a little chat with us about making partner. Non-equity of course, but you will be the youngest in the firm's history by about ten years. So I guess what I'm saying is: don't get too comfortable on level five, you might be moving upstairs again within the year."

On cue the three partners rose again, and after some closing pleasantries she left.

Walking on air, but not 100% elation.

She wasn't sure partner was what she wanted to *be*.

But it sure felt good to be one step closer to the offer.

It must have been morning break, since 'Mama' Cass was holding court and the conversation was punctuated with bursts of rowdy laughter. Miranda had been to the

temp pool a few times and recognized a few of the faces, but Cass was the only one she knew by name. The noise level rose a few decibels as she opened the glass door.

Slightly overweight blonde: “Look at the wedding ring, girls. Six years and counting, and well, nothing on the side. So... I can’t remember. Ages.” A few sympathetic sighs.

Slim, smooth-toned brunette: “A couple of weeks ago, and I refuse to name the guilty party, in the interests of my continuing career.”

“Ooh, someone from the firm then?” teased Cass. “You’ve been here for longer than two weeks.”

Lightly-freckled ginger: “Three nights ago. Mr Shiny... and two fresh AAs.” This generated a couple of ‘woo’s and another round of giggles.

“Don’t mind me, girls,” interrupted Miranda mugging all wide-eyed and innocent. “But I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well Miranda love, I could tell you,” said Cass, “but then I’d have to kill you. No let’s scratch that, but you would have to join in.” Encouraging nods from the circle. “When was the last time you came so hard, you...” she trailed off.

A chorus of endings jostled to complete the sentence.

“...forgot where you were, or even your name?”

“...got a cramp in your foot?”

“...passed out?”

“...the neighbors called the cops?”

Miranda assumed her best pantomime smile. “Well, I could tell *you*, but then I’d have to *fire* you.” This was rewarded with a couple of mock-pouting ‘oww’s. “But please,” she intoned, “do continue.”

After a pause the next girl, Barbie-doll-wannabe, took her cue. “Last weekend, twice. Just a guy. I met him at Tollies, we hook up every now and again. He even took me out to dinner once. Tollies is *really* good like that.”

“How do you mean?” asked Cass.

“Meeting guys. I mean look, if you go to Tollies and light up, you’re sending a message, like ‘I’m not big on long term consequences.’ I know a girl who never touches a cigarette except when she’s on the prowl. Lights up, takes a few baby drags without inhaling, then lets it idle all the way down.”

– Doesn’t anyone here know we did some of the legal work for that place?

“Gee, the place has never struck me like that,” interjected someone Miranda did not recognize. Sort of a younger version of Cass, slightly overweight with a matronly and caring face. “I go there a bit, and I *assure* you it ain’t to find a guy. It’s the only place left apart from my living room where I can smoke in peace.”

“Hmm, what do they say?” observed Cass, “you find what you seek?”

There was a slightly drawn out silence. Next in line was easily the most colorfully dressed girl in the room. She wore a long sleeved silk tunic in fuchsia over a pair of burgundy sarong wrap pants. But it was the pastel pink headscarf with gold embroidery that commanded Miranda’s attention. It framed her face, highlighting its oval shape and olive skin. She wore very little makeup, but her dark eyes shone nonetheless.

“Aaliyah?” prompted Cass tentatively. “It’s OK sweetie, you don’t have to join in. I guess we’re all a bit raunchy for someone like...” and she made a circular pointing gesture at her own face.

Aaliyah appeared to be a battling something within herself. She took a deep breath and declared, “Cass, I don’t wear the *hijab* because I’m *not* a real woman, I wear it because I *am*.” Her accent and the mixture of purity and knowing sensuousness in her

voice were powerful. Had any man been present he'd have stored the memory away for a rainy day. Even Miranda felt a slight flush of warmth on her neck.

"You should not think that because of my dress I am unlike other women," Aaliyah continued. "OK, I do not drink, and you might call my social life tame or boring. But I am married, and my marriage is full and... functioning. But yes, you are right – I *never* talk about things like this in public."

Cass paused, as if weighing up what to say next. "OK then," she suggested, "let's try it with... cultural sensitivity. Back to the question. Was it recent? How about, one blink for yes, two for no?"

Aaliyah blushed, subtle but unmistakable over her darker complexion. She assumed a theatrical posture and blinked once, prompting a gentle chorus of 'ooh's.

"Very good," Cass continued. "Final question: was it with your husband?"

A brief look of affront then immediately a single blink, followed this time by 'aaah's – more admiring than teasing.

"How long have you been married?" asked Cass.

"Three years," replied Aaliyah, pride evident in her eyes.

Cass smiled ruefully. "Gee, ain't you the lucky one, sweetheart." And the rest of the room nodded in agreement.

That seemed to signal the end of break time, and the girls began to meander back to their workstations. Miranda clapped her hands a couple of times, half applauding the unexpected entertainment and half to command attention.

"Ah, girls, I am going to need someone this afternoon and most of tomorrow. General assistance. So, who here doesn't have anything with a critical timeline, for the next day or so?"

Most of the girls shook their heads and made apologetic little sounds and gestures. Ton-Ton-Ton worked its temps pretty hard. Miranda looked to Cass, who always seemed to make it her business to know everyone else's. Cass motioned with her eyes in Aaliyah's direction then looked back at Miranda and raised her eyebrows. Miranda nodded.

"Aaliyah love, you're pretty light on this afternoon, aren't you dear?"

Aaliyah nodded.

"Good, well that's settled then," declared Cass.

Miranda approached the younger woman. "Hi, I'm Miranda Tonkin," she said and offered a business card.

"Aaliyah Ibrahim", came the soft reply.

"Have you done any work on level four before?"

Aaliyah shook her head.

"OK, well... it's a bit quieter," said Miranda. "Would you be able to come up at one-thirty?"

"Certainly," said Aaliyah.

"Well," concluded Miranda, "I'll see you then." She walked to the exit, but stopped before she reached it. There was something about the easy camaraderie she had just witnessed that captivated her. She didn't identify with these girls one bit, but found herself almost envious of the way they connected with each other. Succumbing to an impulse she didn't understand, she turned and announced with feigned resignation, "OK girls, you've twisted my arm. The last time the *planet* shook was back at university. With one of the deans. And before you jump to any conclusions, my marriage is good... but it's just not quite *that* good."

She walked away with a chorus of approval ringing in her ears.

Delton was snoring again. Miranda prodded him and tried to get him to turn over. A vague empty dissatisfaction was stealing up on her as she recalled the conviviality of the temp pool. Most of the girls there seemed to be getting *taken care of* a lot more comprehensively than she was.

– Even the delicate and innocent (yet totally competent) Aaliyah.

6

Skye Arbeiter assumed a thespian air and mused aloud, “Now let me get this straight, Jules. One: we’re going out to celebrate my new job, almost three weeks after I’ve started it. Two: we’re going to Tollies, but only one of us is a smoker, and it’s not me. And three: I’m driving so that you can drink. Am I close?”

“Oh, don’t be like that Skarbs,” said Julia Morgan from the passenger’s seat. “Come on – you’ll enjoy it, and you sure as hell could use it.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right Jules. It’ll be fine.” Skye urged the old hatchback a little faster down the almost empty streets. The air vent was jammed open, and the novelty of the chilly draught was wearing thin. Both women wore thick jackets that hadn’t seen use in years, and didn’t quite go with the rest of their outfits.

“I should get this fixed,” she said and motioned towards the faded panel optimistically labeled ‘Climate Control’.

“Nah, wouldn’t bother,” countered Julia. “This cold spell won’t last, I saw some expert on TV. It’s an aberration, a freak. Should be back to normal in a few days.”

“Amazing to see some snow back on the mountains again though,” said Skye.

“Aah, brings back the memories, doesn’t it? Going up into the mountains to play in the snow.”

Skye smiled in recollection. “Yeah. Every winter. Remember when you made the snowman with a dick?”

“Got me into trouble with your Gran,” said Julia. “Thought I was a bad influence.”

“Do you think you’ll go up to have a look at it this time?” asked Skye.

Julia shook her head. “Nah, don’t think so. You?”

“Yep – tomorrow,” said Skye.

“Really?”

“Yeah, Chandos are taking a bunch of handicapped kids from the respite centre up there. Possibly the only chance they’ll get in their lives.”

“Ooh,” said Julia wincing. “Now that would be a handful.”

“Maybe, we’ll see. We’re hiring a bus, plus a videographer.”

“What for?” asked Julia.

Skye rolled her eyes. “Part of our new fundraising strategy. Officially it’s going to be known as the Mend-a-Smile campaign, but in the office they’re calling it the gypsy fiddler.”

“Huh?”

“You know, at a restaurant and someone comes and plays his violin at you, and you pay him to go away and leave you in peace?”

“Um, yeah?” prompted Julia.

“This is the same thing,” explained Skye. “We get a bunch of footage, then go on a publicity drive. Hit as many of the news outlets as we can without having to pay. Name some target amount and keep on hammering the message. Make sure everyone understands that the *campaign* will go on until we reach it, then it will stop. So, the gypsy fiddler – they pay to make us go away.”

“So you’ll be trying to make it like those starving African children appeal ads,” said Julia with a mischievous glint in her eye, “only more annoying.”

Skye shook her head reproachfully, then giggled. “Jules...”

“Sorry. But this... sounds, I don’t know – a bit cynical?”

“I know,” admitted Skye. “Chandos are pushing in a bunch of new directions, and the E. J. McKluskie folk don’t agree with all of them.”

Julia looked confused. “Hang on, you’re working for...?”

“I was hired by the E. J. McKluskie Foundation,” said Skye, “which is currently being merged with Chandos International. Well, more like taken over. A bit of readjustment is occurring, to put it mildly.”

“OK.”

As they got closer to downtown the streets became a little busier. A few private cars but mostly buses and taxis. There were more pedestrians too, rugged up in various anachronistic non-fashion.

Skye knew the way but Julia gave directions just in case, as was her habit. Tollies was quite close to the centre, a few blocks back from the river. There was a car park, about a quarter full. Almost every income bracket was represented, watched over by a rectangular grid of Perspex-enclosed security cameras mounted on the light poles. Skye chose a well-lit area and parked. This was not to reduce the opportunity for theft – her car was probably the least valuable car in the car park. Rather it was for the benefit of her sense of personal security when they returned later.

The two women extricated themselves from the sunken car seats’ lazy embrace, took a quick inventory of handbags and jackets and strolled out of the car park. Skye looked at the Tollies building. In an age where the most fashionable nightclubs were accessed via unmarked doors, Tollies embraced a more retro philosophy and declared its presence with a neon sign that covered most of the three storey façade. There were no windows visible anywhere on the building, and the roof was bristling with industrial-looking machinery. It was making a faint humming sound, clearly audible against the soft bass jumble from multiple music sources through the thick walls.

“Shall we?”

“Let’s shall.”

A small line had formed at the front door, but it was moving steadily. Skye and Julia took their places at the end. Everyone seemed impatient to get inside, mostly because of the cold. In truth the cold was not all that severe, but its onset had been sudden, with no time to acclimatize. A brisk evening like this would have been routine had it occurred a decade earlier, in winter.

As they waited to get into the building Julia forewarned Skye about the entry procedure. Skye listened carefully, this was very different to the last nightspot she had visited.

– Whenever that was.

After a short number of long minutes they were inside the building. The admission counter was a fully enclosed glass cubicle with a barricade preventing patrons from proceeding into the club until admission formalities had been completed. There were no openings in the counter, but a speakerphone and some other electronic equipment was mounted in the glass. The attendant wore a white jumpsuit that fluoresced under the brittle lighting. Her hair was severe and clinical and her makeup was borderline shop-dummy. Skye approached first.

“Do you have a Tollies card?” asked the mannequin through the speaker grille. Her voice was surprisingly friendly and engaging.

“No.”

“OK, I’m going to have to ask you for some picture ID and proof of age, and one other form of ID.”

Skye produced her driver's license and a medical cover card, but didn't know what to do next – there was no slot or change tray that she could see. Then with a faint hiss of escaping air a rectangular panel set into the glass in front of her hinged downward and a small metal tray emerged. She placed the items on the tray and it withdrew, sealing the opening. The attendant retrieved them and there was a short delay while the cards were read electronically.

“Thanks, they're in order. Now I have to ask a few questions. Would you look at this webcam please?”

Skye did so.

– It's just like unloading Dazzlers, only with added carcinogens.

The tone of voice became stiff and monotone. “Are you a smoker?”

“Yes,” lied Skye, following Julia's instructions. Tollies didn't care about the truth, this was all about protecting themselves from litigation.

“Have you come to Tollies for the purpose of smoking, or in the full knowledge that you will be entering premises where others are smoking, and that you may be exposed to environmental tobacco smoke?”

“Yes,” replied Skye, once again providing the correct answer.

“Thanks for that,” said the attendant, breaking out of her formal demeanor. “If you plan to come again we recommend you get a Tollies card – it'll save you having to go through all this again. You can apply online, www.tollies.com. Now go enjoy your night!”

“OK, thanks.”

The barricade split into two halves and retracted, and Skye stepped through into the foyer. Julia had a Tollies card and joined her moments later.

“Now that was a bit weird,” observed Skye.

Julia smiled. “Just wait till you get inside the club proper, kiddo.”

“Lead on.”

“OK,” said Julia, “but first we need to decide whether we're going upstairs or down.”

“What's the difference?” asked Skye.

“Well,” began Julia, “upstairs is a lot fancier, kind of a club-within-a-club. There's a pretty steep cover charge, and a whole bunch of separate areas – a live band, a DJ, some quiet lounges. Good chance of spotting the odd celebrity or two.”

Skye looked at the stairway. There was a garish neon sign suspended above it, reading *cell_zero*. “And downstairs?”

“Free to get in, dancefloor with giant screen and VJ, gaming area, pool tables. It has a lounge but it's not as quiet as the ones upstairs – no soundproofing.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Skye. “I'm not really into upmarket, or celebrity-spotting for that matter.”

“Downstairs it is then,” agreed Julia and they proceeded past the stairway, a security checkpoint and into the club.

“OK now,” said Skye and paused a moment to survey the establishment. Everything in the middle of the club matched her expectations exactly – dancefloor with lightshow, bar tables and settees in darkened areas.

The perimeter was another matter altogether. Almost all of it was brightly lit, glass-fronted and fully enclosed just like the admission counter. There were speakerphones set into the glass at regular intervals, and larger versions of the sealed extending trays.

Most of the frontage was clearly recognizable as a bar, with a comprehensive full selection of beverages on display. Except... everything came in ready-prepared individual serves. The beer, alcopops and softdrinks looked perfectly normal, and the

half-sized wine bottles and spirit miniatures lent a hotel-room minibar vibe. She paid little attention to the freezer cabinets stacked with ice-filled glasses. But some of the more exotic cocktails, standing ready-mixed in rows against a backlit picture of what they were supposed to look like...

– I don't think so.

Another section of the wall sold snacks – and once again everything was pre-packaged. Still another offered cigarettes and sundry tobacco products. TolliverLights were prominently displayed, but all brands were represented.

And then there were the bar staff. They all looked like clones of the girl at the admission counter – white jumpsuits, slicked back hair. Some of them wore a bit less makeup though – the guys.

But it was something that wasn't there that surprised her most.

“Hey, I was expecting a dingy, smoky bar,” she said, puzzled.

“This is something else, eh?” smiled Julia.

The air was almost completely clear, and Skye could barely detect the aroma of tobacco smoke, although almost every patron in sight held a lit cigarette. All the exhaled smoke, plus any from idling cigarettes, advanced purposefully upwards and disappeared into the ceiling. Skye looked again – the entire ceiling was an exhaust grille. There was some serious industrial-grade air circulation and filtering going on, but Skye could not detect any draught.

“Let's find a spot to sit down,” suggested Julia.

They wandered in, found a vacant table and perched on the tall bar chairs.

“I'll go for drinks,” offered Julia. “What'll you have?”

“Oh, just water to start with.”

Alone, Skye looked around in more detail. The place was about half full, it was still quite early. As suggested by the range of vehicles in the car park, the crowd covered a broad social spectrum. And that was not counting the folk upstairs. The VJ was pandering to the latest craze in hybrid music styles and playing mostly 'binge' – techno country. A few hardy folk were on the dancefloor, their cigarettes drawing ethereal patterns in the air that immediately rose, elongating and fading.

– That is so last century.

Julia arrived with a bottle of water and something that looked like juice but almost certainly had gin, rum or vodka in it.

“Thanks, cheers,” said Skye opening her bottle and taking a swig. “Jules, from what you told me, I thought this place would be a nightspot like they used to have ages ago – like, a club, only where you were allowed to smoke. But this...” she looked around, “what's the story?”

“You haven't heard? OK, you remember a few years ago when everyone was going crazy about bioterrorism?”

Skye nodded.

“Well,” continued Julia, “a bunch of laboratories and response centers sprang up all over the place. Lots of government tenders for construction, outfitting, management... Anyway, there was this company, Noyce Biohazard Management I think they were called, anyway they won the contract for the biohazard containment systems. Made a killing. Then when things settled down, or rather everyone stopped panicking, they found themselves in trouble – they'd ramped up fast to handle the workload, and now everything was drying up.”

Julia took a sip of her cocktail, produced a pack of cigarettes from her purse and lit one up. “At the same time smoking was getting banned in more and more places –

restaurants, bars, nightclubs, and the tobacco companies were getting worried about... well, sales I guess.”

“Oh the poor little darlings,” said Skye.

“Yeah. So this company called Corder Synergy comes up with an idea for a chain of nightclubs with full integrated level IV biohazard isolation systems. Tweaked a bit of course. Floated the idea with a few tobacco companies. Tolliver liked the idea, and it was on. Corder did all the planning and project management. They needed some pretty sharp legal work, and I gather there were a few favors to swing as well. But hey, they pulled it all off, and here we are.”

Skye shook her head. “But... why? The air system is really good, I get that – everyone who wants to can smoke and no one else has to suffer. But what’s with the biohazard business? All the staff sealed away behind glass with speakerphones and motorized trays.”

“You know why smoking is banned in most commercial establishments?” asked Julia.

“Er... public health? Consideration for non-smokers?” said Skye shrugging.

“Nope, good reasons but not enough. It’s liability. Operational safety. It’s all about businesses protecting themselves from being sued by their employees. As soon as the courts accepted that passive smoking was just as dangerous as lighting up yourself, it was game on for every cancer patient who’d ever worked as a waiter. That’s why all those... rocket techs,” here Julia gestured with her cigarette towards the jumpsuited bar staff, “are breathing completely separate air from all of us in here.”

“OK,” nodded Skye, taking it all in. Then, “How come you know all this Jules? I know you’ve been here a few times, but...”

“Ah, well that’s easy. This new place I’m temping at did all the legal work. Gratton Hetherington Tonkin. They’ve done quite a lot of stuff for Corder Synergy. And Tolliver too – you know that FreshStyle quit smoking business that opened a couple of weeks back? They were all part of that deal.”

“Really? I still don’t get that. I mean, do you think it’s for real?”

Julia looked suddenly over Skye’s shoulder and stiffened. “Hey, isn’t that your ex?”

Skye turned to follow her gaze. Sure enough, there was Jason Curnow leaning against a pillar, looking around the club. He was sporting designer stubble, randomly moussed hair, grey woolen jacket and black shirt over jeans and loafers. A leather satchel hung from a strap over his shoulder. The ensemble screamed *sleek geek*, but the powerful frame underneath gave a different impression altogether.

Skye’s throat grew cold and heavy and the room threatened to close in on her.

“Let’s just leave, I don’t want a scene,” she said.

“Nonsense,” retorted Julia. “You’ve got a restraining order, right?”

Skye nodded.

“And we were here first,” continued Julia. “He’s legally obliged to leave.”

“Jules, please...” began Skye, then stopped. Jason had seen them. Skye saw him tense, clamp it down, mouth the work *fuck* to himself, then pause and think for a moment. He approached the two women.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his tone a mixture of incredulity and annoyance.

“What does it look like, boyo?” said Julia cheerfully. “Girls’ night out. A drink and a smoke, a chance to relax, have a chat.”

“But... you don’t even smoke,” said Jason, addressing Skye as if Julia had not spoken.

Skye felt some of her resolve coming back, and with it a quiet defiance. She beckoned towards the lit cigarette in Julia's hand, took it and brought it to her lips. Awakening a long dead memory from high school she took a small drag and inhaled. By good luck or design she breathed in through her nose as well as her mouth, diluting the smoke that reached her lungs and avoiding the cough reflex. After a couple of seconds she blew a thin cloud in Jason's direction, whereupon it ascended and disappeared into the ceiling.

"Way to go Skarbs," laughed Julia then looked back at Jason with eyebrows raised.

Skye took two deep breaths – to compose herself and rid her lungs of residual smoke. "Jason, please leave. Julia and I clearly got here first, so if you stay here you'll be breaking the restraining order."

Julia added "You really shouldn't be here, boyo. You don't want the kind of trouble you'll get if Skye lodges a complaint." Pointing to herself she said "She's got a witness, plus this place is crawling with security cameras."

Jason considered this for a moment and tore free of his annoyed manner. His face took on a pained expression.

"Skye, please. I'm supposed to be meeting some guys here." He unslung the leather satchel from his shoulder and gave it a couple of gentle slaps. "I've been doing some webdev for them. I really need this to work out – they've got a big job coming up and I'm trying to make a good impression."

Skye met his gaze impassively and said nothing.

Julia shook her head. "It isn't going to happen. We're not leaving."

Jason's control slipped a notch or two. "Listen you meddling bitch, I wasn't talking to you. So shut the fuck up..." The sentence would probably have ended with a threat, but he stopped in time. With some effort he calmed himself again and took a couple of deep breaths. Jason was not big on apologies, but he did shake his head in apparent disapproval of how things were heading.

"OK, chill right? Skye, I could use a break here, you know."

"I'm sure you could, Jason," said Skye. "But Jules and I are having a night out, celebrating my new job."

"Who with?" asked Jason with genuine curiosity.

"One of our old clients, the E. J. McKluskie Foundation. Charity crowd, we did them about a year ago."

Jason looked puzzled. "You doing web design? Sys admin?"

"No," said Skye patiently, "office administration and some hands-on work in their refuges. You've got open dibs on the whole SkynJas client list, Jason."

Jason sneered but didn't raise his voice. "Yeah, right. The reason I'm trying to get in tight with this new crew – the ones I'm supposed to be meeting, is because you've turned every one of those fucking contacts against me. Half the fuckers won't return my calls."

"Jason, I did nothing but inform them that I wasn't involved with SkynJas anymore. Oh, and that I was not responsible for that disgusting email that *someone* sent from my email account. Nothing more."

There was a battle raging inside Jason and it was rising to the surface. Perhaps it was aggravated by being reminded of *those* emails, or the sight of Skye *moving on*. Whatever the case he was struggling to stay in control. Skye saw his face twitch, he was almost trembling. He put the satchel down on the table, and stood biting his lower lip, clenched fists at his sides.

"Holy *fuck*, Skye," he exploded, "do you have to fuck up everything for me?"

This attracted a certain amount of attention. Expectant faces turned their way.

“Jason,” said Skye in a quiet voice, “you don’t want a scene. I think you should leave.”

“Excuse me, sir,” began a muffled voice from behind Jason. “But may I ask you to adjust your language and ah... volume, so that everyone present may enjoy their time at Tollies?”

Jason turned around to see who was interrupting. A diminutive man with an oval face, round spectacles and a widow’s peak hairline had appeared behind him. Like all Tollies staff Skye had seen so far, he was wearing a jumpsuit. Except this one was shiny black, and embroidered to suggest the outline of a tuxedo. But the oddest thing about him was the small oxygen mask he wore, secured to his head with elastic straps and sporting a flexible tube that disappeared into his clothing. Perhaps there was a miniature scuba tank on his back? Operational safety again. Also, he seemed to be wearing theatrical makeup.

– www.cirquedusoleil.com

“Who the fuck are you?” demanded Jason.

“Athol Q. Moriarty, Maitre D’, at your service,” replied the man. “And again I ask that you lower your voice, and tone down your profanity and aggression.”

Later while reflecting on the incident, Skye would wonder why this strange little man had been appointed to deal with disruptive patrons. Were management aiming to use humor, hoping his singular appearance would disarm situations like this before they escalated? Or perhaps that the jarring cultural dissonance would catch the perpetrators off guard, short-circuiting their aggression and replacing it with bewilderment?

Whatever the intention, it was clearly not going to work on Jason Curnow. He had drawn on Herculean restraint in resisting the urge to smash the faces of Skye and Julia, and now it was stretched to breaking point.

“Listen you fucking little queer... *fuck*,” spat Jason, demonstrating just how poor a crutch profanity is to the inarticulate. “This is none of your fucking business, so get your fucking face out of my... fucking face.”

Athol Q. Moriarty stood his ground without flinching. “Sir,” he said resolutely, “I must insist. This is your last warning. Please calm down if you wish to remain on Tollies premises.”

Jason cocked his arm and unleashed a right hook. Skye winced, she’d been on the receiving end of one or two of those. Athol Q. Moriarty moved his head ever so slightly to one side and somehow Jason failed to connect. A puzzled look crossed his face for a brief second, then he advanced towards the smaller man, utterly intent on maiming him beyond recognition.

He only made one step. The Maitre D’ raised what looked like a large flashlight. It had a flared head and a white translucent disk where the lens should have been. He directed it at Jason, pressed the switch and everything went

>>>*wrong*<<<

The white disk was strobing with a venomous intensity, irregular but insidiously purposeful. The pattern reached inside the skulls of everyone in its way, shorting out synapses and disrupting the firing of their neurons. Jason stood frozen, unable even to blink. Skye was a lot further back and it was not pointing directly at her, but she still felt as if the world was tearing her inside out.

Athol Q. Moriarty fingered the switch again and reality rotated back into frame. Skye took a moment to gather her wits, reaching out to the table to steady herself. Jason was going to require a little longer.

“Shit,” said Julia, “now that’s something else again.”

A new voice, thin and metallic broke the silence. “Please come with us, sir, nice and quiet.” Skye suddenly noticed three figures standing next to the Maitre D’, tall and imposing. She had not seen them arrive. Like the rest of Tollies personnel they were wearing jumpsuits – underneath everything else. There was not a single inch of exposed skin visible. They wore white helmets with darkened visors and integrated breathing apparatus, full body armor – also white, and matching boots and gloves.

A corner of Skye’s mind wondered if this was all a necessary part of operational safety, or whether just *some* if it was for effect.

– www.stormtroopers.com

With a gentle fluid motion two of the security guards slipped alongside Jason and firmly took an arm each. Jason was starting to surface, and began to notice his surroundings. His first coherent response was an expression of displeasure at having both arms immobilized. They were not held particularly tightly, and he still had some freedom of movement in his hands. He reached into his pocket with one of them and rummaged as if searching for something.

Skye didn’t know what he was searching for. Jason had never relied on weapons of any sort. But the security guards did not know that, and his effort triggered in them a renewed enthusiasm for their job. Jason’s hand was wrenched upwards and out, spraining his wrist and ripping open the seams of the pocket. A wallet flew free in a parabolic arc. It rotated and hinged open as it fell, launching a colorful cascade of shimmering Dazzlers that fluttered to the floor. The third stormtrooper stooped awkwardly to gather them up, scrunching them in his gauntleted fists.

Jason rose slowly into the air and looked about in consternation. The two guards wheeled gracefully and frogmarched him to the door, followed by the third holding his wallet and its contents.

Skye looked at Julia in disbelief. “Jules,” she said eventually, “has this happened before, I mean, any of the times you’ve been here before?”

“Once,” said Julia, “but I was up the other end of the club and missed everything.”

“Begging your pardon ladies, I apologize for the inconvenience,” said Athol Q. Moriarty. “Any disorientation you may feel will pass in a minute or so. This device,” and he offered the flashlight for their inspection, “was originally known as a ‘Dazzler’ until that... *funny money* appeared on the scene. It uses high-powered LEDs, but the secret of its potency lies in the pattern of its pulses. Very effective at short range, and absolutely no lasting effects. I trust you will enjoy the rest of your evening at Tollies.” And with a bow he turned and left.

Skye and Julia looked at each then simultaneously burst into a fit of giggles. It was a shared ritual, with an unbroken history going right back to their childhood. Over the years it had served them in a variety of ways – defying authority, building conspiratorial solidarity, short-circuiting stress and trauma.

Julia composed herself for long enough to say, “I wonder what the Q stands for,” and they were both off again.

“It’s like, Cirque du Soleil doing a Star Wars special,” spluttered Skye.

As soon as she felt free from the risk of choking Skye took a sip from her bottled water. Julia did likewise with her cocktail and busied herself with a new cigarette.

She looked at the table and pointed. “Look, he left his man-bag.”

Jason’s leather satchel was lying on the table where he had left it. Skye wondered when he would notice its absence.

“They’re not going to let him back in to pick it up, are they?”

“Nope,” said Julia. “And serves him right.” She reached over and picked it up. There was a little brass catch, but no lock. Inside were a few comb-bound booklets, some loose-leaf papers in a cardboard folder, and a slimline tablet PC. Julia displayed them to Skye.

“I reckon he won’t be too happy about leaving this behind,” she said “I guess we ought to hand it in to... management or whatever. Do you suppose our friend the Maitre D’ has a *conciierge* hiding somewhere?”

Skye’s brow furrowed in unbidden thought. “That might take him a day or two to get it back.”

“Yeah,” said Julia. “Say, you wanna try and hack into it? We could take it home...” She raised a finger to her cheek in a pantomime of thinking. “Now what could we do? Infect the hard drive with a virus? Subscribe to NAMBLA? Send out a few emails?”

Skye was laughing but shook her head.

“No, I was thinking...” she began, then hesitated. “I was just thinking I could go outside and give it to him right away. I mean, I ought to check that he’s OK too. Those... security guys were pretty rough.”

It was Julia’s turn to shake her head. She looked at her friend incredulously. “Skarbs,” she said, “you really are the limit, girl.”

Skye looked aside demurely. “Yeah, maybe,” she admitted and took out her phone. Jason wasn’t in the speed dial list anymore but she dialed his number from memory anyway. After ten or so rings his voicemail kicked in and she hung up.

“No answer?” asked Julia.

“Yeah. It’s a bit weird,” said Skye.

“What’s weird,” said Julia, “is how you can even think of giving this guy a break, after the way he’s treated you.”

Skye thumbed redial. This time Jason answered after the third ring.

“Uhh,” then a cough.

“Jason, are you OK? Your um, laptop and things – they got left behind. I was just ringing to see if you wanted me to bring them out so you could pick them up.”

Silence.

“Jason? Jason, what’s up? Are you OK?”

Jason coughed again then said “No, I’m no OK.” His words were slurred, or perhaps he was eating.

“What’s wrong? What’s happened?” asked Skye. “Did those guards...”

“Wasn’t the... bouncers. Someone else. Jumped me. About four of them.” Jason made a spitting noise and two soft grunts.

“Where are you?” asked Skye, then softly to Julia “I think he’s been mugged.”

“Car park,” said Jason in her ear, followed by sounds of clearing his throat.

“Stay there Jase, I’ll be right out – OK?”

“Um, yeah,” came the reply and Skye cut the connection.

“What are you doing, Skarbs?” asked Julia sharply.

“He’s hurt Jules, four guys attacked him. It sounds bad – I’m just going to check that he’s OK.”

“Skarbs, are you forgetting the restraining order? If you approach him, he can apply to have it declared void. Then you’ll be back to square one, except this time the courts will be pissed at you as well.”

“Jules, he’s in trouble, he needs my help,” said Skye. “I can’t just leave him.”

“No, I guess you can’t,” conceded Julia. She got up and began to gather her things.

“What are you doing?” asked Skye.

“Maybe I can’t stop you from this nonsense,” said Julia, “but I sure as hell ain’t gonna let you do it by yourself. What if he turns nasty again? What if those muggers are still around?”

Skye began to protest, then saw the good sense – and generosity, of Julia’s offer. “Thanks Jules,” she said.

As they were walking out of the club Skye noticed the look Julia was giving her.

“What?”

“I dunno, Skarbs. OK, to get along in a society like ours, most of have to draw on such basic necessities as... spite, guile, paranoia... a callous disregard for anyone who gets in our way. Things that you seem to be completely deficient in. And it’s not as if you’re stupid, you always know exactly what’s going on.”

Skye didn’t want to get into a philosophical discussion, so she steered things to the immediate situation. “Look Jules, Jason clearly brought everything on himself. But he didn’t plan for us to be there, and for most of the time he was in control. I mean, he didn’t hit me – or you.”

“He was going for our Mr Q. like he meant it,” countered Julia.

Skye waited until they were out of the building. The cold evening air assailed them afresh.

“Yeah, that’s true. I’ll agree that he deserved that flashing light thing, and being thrown out. And hey, you saw me – we both had a laugh, so don’t go making out I’m some sort of bleeding heart. But no one deserves being mugged.”

They rounded the corner of the building. A short distance away the figure of Jason Curnow, leaning against the high wire mesh fence. He saw them and gestured, more of a hand-flap than a wave. Skye looked around instinctively for security cameras. There was plenty of light, but the entire surveillance network was trained inwards on the car park. Jason was in a blind spot.

“Let’s have a look at you Jase,” said Skye approaching him. “Can you turn around into the light?”

Jason obliged. Skye watched him turn, shoulders slumped, a far cry from the belligerent figure who had confronted her ten minutes earlier. A small trickle of blood issued from his nose and there were a couple of small cuts on his cheekbone and top lip. His left eyebrow sported a much larger cut, with blood tracking down his face like cartoon tears. The whole eye was just starting to puff up.

“Gee, Jase.” Skye produced a handkerchief from her purse and offered it. “Here, hold this underneath your nose and press up.”

Jason took it. “Uh, thanks.”

“I don’t think your lip needs a stitch, but we should get some antiseptic on it, and perhaps one of those adhesive sutures. Is there anything else I can’t see?”

“My chest hurts when I cough.”

Skye unbuttoned his woolen jacket and gently ran her fingers down each side of his chest. Jason winced when she reached the spot.

“I think you’ve got a cracked rib. You should get that checked out – I mean, get an x-ray. They can puncture your lung, you know. I don’t think yours is that severe though.”

“OK.”

“The shiner you’ll have for two weeks,” continued Skye in a lower voice. “Trust me on that, Jase.”

Jason dropped his gaze, but said nothing out loud.

In a louder voice she asked “Did you drive here?”

“No, bus and taxi. Didn’t want to stick to the light stuff all night.”

Skye frowned. The taxi rank was across the other side of the Tollies building.

“Then why were you heading for the car park?”

Jason kept his silence but Skye detected an involuntary tightening of his facial muscles. She let it pass.

– www.trashmycar.com

“Come on Jase, let’s get you to my car, I’ll swing by a 24-hour pharmacy and see what we can do.” She motioned to Julia to accompany them, mouthing *it’s OK, come on*. Julia rolled her eyes, but followed.

When they arrived at the (decrepit but untrashed) car, Julia said with a slight trace of melodrama, “It’s OK, I’ll sit in the back, you’re the tall one, Jason.”

Skye gave Julia a silent *thanks*. Jason might have been the tallest, but in his present state he was the least agile. It was awkward enough getting into the front seat of the small two-door hatchback, and he winced several times. He did however refrain make a token effort to moderate his language.

Skye coaxed the engine into life, then waited a few moments for the idle to smooth itself out. She eased the car forward and turned to Jason.

“Do you want to tell us what happened?”

Jason assembled his thoughts and began, “You know when those f..., before those dolled-up bouncers threw me out, they made me drop my wallet and my money went all over the place? Well when they got to the door, the one that picked it all up just threw it out after me. Went flying everywhere. Young couple from the line helped me pick it up.”

He tensed and Skye could feel some of his rage returning.

“I’m guessing that a group of guys waiting to get in watched the whole thing and figured...” He snorted. “Stupid fuckers saw a whole bunch of money and didn’t notice that most of it was in Dazzlers. Figured I was an easy mark. So as I was walking to...”

He stopped. Chose his words again. “I wasn’t paying attention – I had other things on my mind, you know? They must have followed me, waited til there were no security cameras around.” He shook his head in frustration. “I reckon I could have taken them easily, but it was just like ‘Hey dude’ and then *wham*, king-hit to the fucking face. Then all four of them laid in good and proper.” He scowled at the memory. “As soon as I went down one of them ripped out my wallet, next minute they’re all high-fiving each other and taking off.”

“Then I rang you?”

“Yeah. I was kind of a bit dazed the first time, and it stopped ringing before I could answer.”

Skye saw the all-night pharmacy and pulled over. “I’ll just be a minute,” she said, looking at Julia in the rear-vision mirror and getting a dirty look in return. Leaving those two together in the car wasn’t ideal, but until Jason maneuvered himself out again Julia was effectively stuck. As quickly as she could, Skye located some antiseptic, cotton balls, adhesive suture strips and band-aids She also got a bottle of water and a small box of tissues. At the counter she picked up a packet of mints. A sleep-deprived teenager at the counter scanned the items and yawned while the debit machine completed its verification procedure.

Back in the car she said “Jason, can you turn this way, and I’ll see about cleaning you up a bit.”

Jason started to shift himself around delicately then stopped, a look of bewilderment in his face.

“Skye, why are you doing this? I dunno, I mean – you’ve got plenty of reasons to... not do it.”

The faintest of snorts issued from the back seat.

Skye considered the question before answering. “Good question. It’s just who I am Jase, I can’t explain it any other way.” She composed the next sentence carefully, rehearsing it internally before saying it out loud. “Having an overactive... sense of compassion isn’t the worst personality defect I can imagine. I mean, it’s not as if anyone gets hurt, is it?”

Jason made a small noncommittal sound in his throat. He shivered and turned himself toward her completely.

The car’s interior light did not work but the street they were parked on was well-lit and Skye could see enough to do her job. With gentle skill she cleaned away most of the blood with moistened cotton balls and tissues, then applied antiseptic to the cuts. It would have stung, but Jason seemed to have gone all stoic and gave nothing more than a brief facial tic.

The sudden intimacy was perplexing. A mass of conflicting memories arose in her mind, provoking feelings of both trauma and security. And of course there was Julia looking on disapprovingly from the back seat.

Skye brought her thoughts back to the practical matters at hand. She dressed the two smaller cuts with band-aids, then turned her attention to the larger one above his eye. It started bleeding again when she cleaned it, so she held another cotton ball against it for half a minute or so. Then she peeled the backing from one of the suture strips and applied it, gently pulling the two edges together. A few more dabs from a final cotton ball and she was done. She looked over her work.

“That should hold you together for a day or two Jase,” she said. “Like I said before, you should get a doctor to look at that rib, OK?”

Jason said in a small constricted voice, “OK. Thanks Skye.”

Skye accepted that in silence for a moment, then set about packing away the first aid supplies and gathering the soiled tissues and cotton balls.

A cheerful voice came from the back seat. “Well where to now, Florence Nightingale?”

Skye stifled a smirk.

“Jase, the guys who robbed you – you think they don’t know about Dazzlers? I mean, the RFID tags?”

Jason frowned in recollection. “Well I wasn’t in a state to follow them,” he said, “but they didn’t ditch them while they were around me. And I didn’t hear anyone say anything about it.”

“And they didn’t get your ID tag?” Skye knew Jason kept it on a chain around his neck, under his shirt.

Jason patted his chest. “No, got it right here.”

“Well... that means if they walk into any of the places that take Dazzlers, the sensors will register and log everything they’re carrying – plus the fact that they’re not carrying...”

“This,” said Jason, patting his chest again. He tried a smile, but stopped when it stretched his lip. “Gee Skye, why didn’t I think of that earlier?”

Skye picked it up, and the tiniest echo of a playful spirit stirred deep inside. “Concussion? Obsessing about vengeance?” she deadpanned.

Jason met her gaze for a moment. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Anyway, with any luck,” said Skye, “we can report the theft before they get spooked.”

“While the fuckers are still blazing a trail across the Treloars Financial network,” finished Jason with rising animation.

“Ah good, not a moment to lose,” sighed Julia. The deadpan thing was catching on. Jason ignored her. “Now, the nearest Treloars franchise would be...” he murmured. “City Police HQ,” said Skye. “Are you OK with that?”

“Sure, why not?” he asked defensively.

“Well, it would probably be best if I didn’t accompany you. The restraining order and all.”

“Oh yeah that,” said Jason quietly. He shrugged and immediately winced. “You’re right. If you could just drop me off there, then you can go back to your night out. Reckon you’ve gone way past the call of duty already.”

Skye bit down on her lip. The tug of old memories was disquieting. She started the engine and pulled out into the light late night traffic.

“Do you really think these guys will be picked up?” asked Julia.

“I was talking to a cop a while back,” said Jason. “They love subcontracting jobs like this. They get to use a bunch of high-tech toys, and they’re on a much longer leash if they actually get their hands on the bad guys.”

“How do you mean?”

“You know how Treloars outsources their security services to the police?”

“Uh, do they?”

“Yeah, so when the cops take on something like this, Treloars indemnifies them against excessive force suits,” Jason explained. “Plus they guarantee a civil suit if criminal charges don’t stick. And to cap it all there’s two commissions – one for the team that bags the perp, one for the force. Like I said, they love it.”

Skye had met the police officer Jason was talking about. His enthusiasm for roughing up suspects had sickened her. Having experienced violence personally made it even more troubling.

“Hell, remind me to stick to hard currency next time I roll someone,” said Julia.

Skye grunted noncommittally and drove on in silence.

CPHQ was a modern building with wide, clean lines and an attractive frontage. In this respect at least, the shift to cost-recovery and other profit-oriented policies had served the city well. There were shopfronts for half a dozen or so security-related franchises, including the Treloars Financial partnership.

– www.youronestopsecurityshop.com

Skye pulled over. She glanced over at Jason and there was an awkward pause.

“This is your stop, Jase.”

Jason was looking for words, it was obvious. Whenever he was out of his comfort zone (or in the grip of a violent rage) he became as transparent as a child. He seemed to be trying to find somewhere to look.

“Uhh... thanks Skye, and...” he breathed in slowly, stopping suddenly when his lung pressed against the broken rib. “Well, sorry... for earlier. You know, I...”

Skye nodded. She didn’t have much to say either. Soft? Naïve? Maybe, but there was no way she’d be saying ‘that’s alright Jason’ tonight.

“I think you’ve got some work ahead of you, Jase,” was what she finally settled upon.

Jason opened the door and carefully extracted himself from the car.

“Good luck with the cops,” said Skye.

“Thanks. Um, have a nice... night, whatever.” He closed the door and started to walk away.

Skye waited until he disappeared into the brightly lit foyer. She rested her head on the steering wheel.

“Well Skarbs, tell me how you think that went,” said Julia.

“Later, perhaps. Here, into the front, Jules.”

That involved fiddling the passenger seat forward, opening the door and getting out. When Julia was settled again she said “OK, what are we waiting for? No, let me answer that – cigarettes, cocktails and not-terribly-graceful dancing!”

“Oh I dunno,” said Skye, “don’t you think it’s getting a bit late for that? I’ve got this big snow trip thing tomorrow.”

Julia looked at her friend and gave a long, friendly laugh. “No way Skarbs, I’m not going home sober, and you’re not going home ‘til we’ve hit the dancefloor and given ‘em the Beaumanure Shuffle”.

Skye shook her head. “Jules... it’s a long drive, a bus full of disabled kids – I’ve got to be in top form.”

“Skarbs, you ever heard of coffee?”

At some ridiculous hour Skye fell into bed, anxious to catch as much sleep as she could before sunrise. As she drifted off the image of Jason came to her unbidden, his damaged face half-smiling, the fleeting moments of eye contact.

For a brief second she had caught a glimpse of the old Jason, the droll, witty and charming man she’d fallen in love with. She let her mind drift back to happier times.

It lasted all of ten seconds. Then the context, and the rest of the evening brought her unceremoniously down to earth and the present.

Jason was still broken, and she was *not* responsible for fixing him.

She had helped someone who was in trouble. Nothing more should be read into the matter.

7

Tucker Trent's apartment was a little nicer than he could comfortably afford. But if recent events were any guide, his prospects for advancement at work were rather good, and he expected the stress on his expendable income to ease any month now.

Known as 'Casa Tuccio' to his family (and no one else), it was one of the few in the block to be blessed with a fully-appointed kitchen. Most of his neighbors had elegant but tiny kitchenettes, and in this price bracket the absence of a full kitchen was definitely a *statement* rather than a compromise.

His balcony was small but comfortable, furnished with a sling chair and weathered side table and offering a view over the suburbs to the distant mountains. (Glimpses of the waterfront could be seen through the living room window but hey, you can't have everything.)

Since the weather was never cold, the balcony was a very pleasant place to relax and a good part of Tucker's recharge time was spent there. Depending on his mood he might enjoy a slow Belgian beer, something harder, a seriously corrosive espresso or perhaps a 50:50 mix of orange juice and soda water. Every now and again he would raid the Spanish cedar-lined humidor for a cigar, circumcise it and light up.

– Thanks Chiron, I'll have that little Yiddish gem of a metaphor with me 'til I die.

Next to the humidor stood a small pipe rack with a single modest briar. He couldn't recall when he'd last filled it, one of these years he'd take it up again.

Taking stock, introspection, planning. Although Tucker was emphatically a social creature, there was something more, and that something needed recharge time. But tonight was unfeasibly cold and sitting out on the balcony wasn't an option. Plus he was bored and felt like a change.

Tucker pulled into the parking lot and found a well lit spot with good CCTV coverage. The temperature must have dropped a few degrees while he was driving, or perhaps it was the wind. He turned up the collar of his well-cut but thoroughly inadequate jacket and hunched his shoulders. The feeling of chilly air ruffling his hair brought back an echo of childhood memory, a feeling of place rather than any specific episode. A precise shade of green against white – new leaves in the snow perhaps? Very different times, a very different person. He closed the remaining distance at a brisk pace.

There was a small line, but Tucker bypassed it and strode into the foyer. An illuminated sign proclaiming 'VIP admission' adorned the rightmost glass-enclosed counter, and he approached it confidently. Inside a curiously costumed attendant regarded him impartially. Opening his wallet Tucker produced the elegant plastic card Randolph Reinhardt's assistant had given him. He placed it onto the small metal tray that extended from the cubicle and watched it retract with a hissing sound.

The attendant relaxed his manner a degree or two. He tapped something into his keyboard and looked at the screen for a moment. "Welcome to Tollies, Mr Trent," he said politely, his voice coming through a grille in the cubicle. "Would you please proceed through the gate and then upstairs to *cell_zero*, where... Nicolette will be waiting to welcome you."

"Sure, thanks."

The gate slid open as Tucker approached it. The noise level was a little higher inside, a discordant but familiar mix of music from more than one source and voices

raised in conversation. Although he could not see much of it, he got the feeling that Tollies downstairs was quite full. He had a vague urge to check it out.

– Maybe later. Don't want to keep Nicolette waiting.

The noise level faded noticeably as he mounted the stairs.

Nicolette was the sort of person cheerleaders grow up to be. Exuberant and outgoing, too much makeup, still attractive but lined, and well... probably not as supple as she once was. The white satin jumpsuit suited her.

She turned away from her monitor and beamed at him through the glass. "Good evening Mr Trent, welcome to Tollies. Is this your first visit?"

"First in quite a while. I've been here a couple of times a few years ago, as the guest of a colleague."

"May I take a few moments of your time to explain the club?" she asked.

"Sure," he said.

Tucker recognized several of the phrases and taglines sprinkled through Nicolette's detailed introduction. They stood out like old friends in a crowd, every single one of them guaranteed 100% Chiron Levy.

– So why do I hardly ever come here?

– Or... why am I coming here now?

– Alone?

Was it some symbolic gesture dealing with the death of Chiron? A belated celebration of his success with FreshStyle? Was he perhaps on the lookout for a little female company?

Or something else. Tucker was more than a little miffed that Elias Corder was off somewhere with Brandon Tyler, chasing some vague prospect that Tucker knew absolutely nothing about.

– WTF is Corder doing, freezing me out like this after FreshStyle went off so well?

Nicolette was looking at him expectantly. She had stopped speaking.

"Ah, great – thanks," he said.

She gave a top-shelf smile and turned back to her monitor.

Tucker walked into the atrium and looked around. The lighting was subdued and it took a moment or two for his eyes to adjust.

Ambient Lounge. Both the name of the room and the style of music emanating from a live trio behind glass in one corner, (cutesy singer, one guy on jazz guitar and another with a laptop computer.) There was a long, curved ornate bench complete with barstools along two of the walls, offering all the ergonomics of a bar without an actual *barperson* on the other side.

This was a place he could relax in. He approached the service wall and walked very slowly along the full length of the cigar counter. The lighting was superbly engineered and the wares on display almost seemed to shimmer. Pretty much every size was present, from half corona to presidente, panatela to robusto. There were pale, silky smooth claros, rich caramel colorados and dark, veined maduros. Likewise for point of origin – practically every tropical third-world country was represented.

– Even a few sad little dry numbers for the benefit of old itinerant Dutchmen.

Prices ranged from sensible to ludicrous. And most of the really expensive ones had no label.

After careful consideration Tucker selected a corona-sized Davidoff, a decent offering from the Dominican Republic and only slightly more expensive than he was comfortable with. Before placing it on the motorized tray the attendant offered to cut it. Tucker shook his head and pulled from this pocket the double guillotine-style cutter he always used.

Getting a drink was a chance to indulge in a game Tucker sometimes enjoyed.

“I’ll have a bottle of water and... a Whisky Shotgun Surgery please,” he said confidently to the jumpsuited barman.

Slight pause.

“I’m sorry sir, I don’t believe I’m familiar with that one.”

“Ah, you probably know it by the old name – a Dick Cheney?”

“No sir, I haven’t encountered that name either.”

“Well, in some places I believe it’s called a Poacher’s Ass,” offered Tucker.

“Perhaps if you would describe the drink sir, the ingredients, style of glass?”

“Oh, OK,” said Tucker pretending to wrack his memory. “Tumbler, no ice. A teaspoon of black peppercorns, then pour in a double shot of spirits – I’ll have scotch please. Now leave that standing, get a shot glass and make up a syrup of honey and Grenadine. Mix it smooth, pour it gently into the whisky so that it sinks to the bottom and add a dash of Angostura on top.”

“Ah, I see,” said the barman, “so the peppercorns are the shot pellets, and the red of the Grenadine... Do you have a preference regarding the whisky, sir?”

Tucker looked at the backlit shelves and indicated one of the more credible blends. Very little point in wasting a single malt on a cocktail. To his credit the barman assembled an excellent version of Tucker’s own creation, even adding a small pair of sugar tongs in lieu of a swizzle stick – not quite surgical forceps but close enough.

The trio were actually quite good. The guy on laptop had some sort of attachment that looked like it came straight out of the barroom scene in *Star Wars IV*, and their playlist consisted of novo-jazz arrangements of 60s R&B numbers. Tucker was winding down, taking everything (except perhaps his sweetened, peppery whisky) very slowly. He tried a couple of smoke rings and the ventilation system gently but insistently drew his efforts up into the ceiling.

He was just getting into the zone, feeling the stillness and peace when a voice drew him back abruptly.

“Well, what about that eh? The star of Corder Symmetry.” Unforgettable Scottish brogue, same ageing rockstar vibe, complete with anachronistic ponytail and goatee.

“Hi,” said Tucker, “I remember you... journo at the FreshStyle launch. Put the wind up Reinhardt. Sorry, I can’t quite...”

“Callum Buchanan,” said the other, seating himself next to Tucker and offering his hand. Tucker shook it.

“Tucker Trent. And it’s ah, Corder Synergy, not Symmetry.”

Buchanan glanced down at his drink, something amber in a tumbler identical to Tucker’s. “So it is, lad, so it is. I think maybe I’ve had one too many of these. Synergy, Symmetry...” He looked around mischievously. “Come to think of it, *Cemetery* might be more like it, what with your executive suicide clubs, and these high-tech tobacco dens.” He gestured to indicate their surroundings.

This was not quite the sort of company Tucker had been anticipating.

– Hey, it’s a club, clubs have talkative drunks.

And there was a certain intelligence and charisma in Buchanan’s eyes that the whisky had not yet dulled.

“Er, Callum,” he protested, “neither of those two enterprises is owned or run by Corder Synergy.”

“Oh, come on lad,” said Buchanan with a twinkle in his eye. “Don’t tell me you were not the driving force behind both of them.”

“Not necessarily. We were hired as consultants, and we provided the best service we could. But if you’re going to judge us by the...” Tucker searched for the right

words. “By the ethical benefits to society, then you’ve got to include FreshStyle too. What about that? Convincing a tobacco company to help people... stop using their products?”

Buchanan grunted, looked down at his glass and then over to Tucker’s. “I think the tide’s going out, your end as well as mine. What in God’s name is that concoction you’re having?”

Tucker glanced down. He hadn’t really intended to refill so soon. “Er, a Shotgun Surgery. Whisky.”

Buchanan looked at Tucker’s glass again and raised his eyebrows, then stood up and went to the drinks counter. He must have had some membership account or maybe a tab running, as he returned in very little time. He shook his head disapprovingly as he slid Tucker’s drink across the table.

“I’d say a waste of good scotch, except that it hasn’t got any ‘good scotch’ in it,” he smirked.

“What are you drinking?” asked Tucker.

“Laphroaig,” said Buchanan, and Tucker took note of the correct pronunciation.

“I tried that once, couldn’t get used to it. Smelt too much like antiseptic.”

“Aye, and that’s how they managed to import it during the prohibition, I believe,” chuckled Buchanan. “One whiff was enough to fool the customs inspectors. It’s down to the way they smoke the barley over peat fires.”

“So I heard,” said Tucker. “You know, you’re probably taking in more tar from that glass than I am with this cigar.”

Buchanan’s eyes twinkled. “Aye, but I can have it my way any time I like, in a suitably stocked restaurant or bar, which your average smoker cannot.”

“True,” conceded Tucker.

“Now where were we? I think we got a wee bit sidetracked,”

– Is it even possible for a meandering conversation with a drunk to be sidetracked?

Tucker backtracked. “Let me see... you were slandering the integrity of my company, then I said ‘what about FreshStyle?’”

“Ah yes,” nodded Buchanan, “the quit smoking club.” He looked around conspiratorially. “You know, call me paranoid, but I have trouble buying the official line.”

“So I recall,” said Tucker. “And you made that point very clearly at the launch – so much so that you forced Reinhardt to go way off-script. You put him on the back foot, made him admit to something way ahead of schedule.” Tucker struggled for the details. “Now what was that?”

“Oh, offsetting his Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement dues... Nay.” Buchanan waved his hand dismissively. “Still don’t buy it, not even with that in place. Look at the history of tobacco regulation. Can you name one thing the tobacco companies have done to reduce consumption, that hasn’t been forced on them by legislation? OK, or threat of litigation.”

Buchanan’s accent was strong, but he was slurring none of these words. A tiny flag popped up in Tucker’s mind.

“Well,” said Tucker, “you could look at it this way: Tolliver runs the FreshStyle centers, so it sort of takes the wind out of their critics’ sails. Lets them deflect all the accusations that come flying their way. Gives the anti-tobacco lobby less ground to stand on.”

Buchanan considered this. “At the cost of fewer people smoking? No, close but no cigar. For goodness sake, they’ve got a board of directors, shareholders. There’s no

way something like this'd get past those, unless it was good for business." He leaned in closer and looked Tucker in the eye. "Come on, you can tell me."

For a moment Tucker had the distinct conviction that the man next to him was stone cold sober, as if a razor sharp mind was working behind those engaging, twinkling eyes.

He summoned a good-natured laugh. "Hey Callum, you're a journalist, and a slightly drunk one. I on the other hand, have barely had two sips of my drink. OK, so this is my second, but still. So while you're going on about conspiracy theories, I'll just smile and nod and edge towards the door."

"According to their brochures," persisted Buchanan in a lower voice, "one of the treatment techniques they offer is hypnotherapy. What's to stop them from implanting post-hypnotic suggestions so that you take up smoking again five years down the track, long enough for all of their fancy statistics to look good? Or maybe the program only works on a certain percentage of takers, and for all the rest they get them to switch to Tolliver's own brand. Depending on the percentages, that might work in their favor."

Tucker laughed. These were mildly interesting ideas, but way off the mark. Perhaps there was less to this man than he'd imagined. "Well Callum, I can honestly say that nothing remotely like that is going on. At least as far as I'm aware. And I don't think Tolliver held anything back from me." He feigned a consolatory tone. "So if this story was to be your... I dunno, lucky break, then I'm sorry I'm not going to be able to help you."

"Aye, right you are," said Buchanan resuming his jovial manner. He looked down at his glass again. "Do you... nah. Can't hang around here. If I'm to get any drunker, and I fully intend to, it's going to have to be a touch less refined place than this."

"What, downstairs?" asked Tucker.

"Ah, very funny," said Buchanan rising to his feet.

Tucker followed. "Well..."

"Aye, It's been a pleasure chatting with you... Tucker."

"Likewise. Ciao."

Buchanan rummaged in his pocket and brought out his wallet. He opened it. "Here, let me give you my card. You know, just in case?"

"Sure," said Tucker, accepting it. The edges were slightly worn, but it did look to have been professionally designed and printed.

Buchanan gave a comic approximation of a military salute and departed, singing some bawdy variant of 'Loch Lomond'. Tucker resumed his seat, not knowing what to think.

When his cigar had burned down to one third its original length Tucker discarded it and went exploring. There were some secluded rooms with settees and coffee tables – ideal for small functions or perhaps an intimate chat, but not private enough for anything untoward. In a glassed-off corner of Le Disco, a small salsa school was pumping additional life into a 70s revival theme, all sharp rattling percussion, retina-burning dazzle and costumes that left little to the imagination. Up a further flight of stairs was the Mean Streets, a faux-grime concrete and wire mesh loft where the well-heeled could pretend they had the street cred of neighborhoods they would never dare visit in real life. There was a band playing, a gypsy punk outfit going by the name of 'Dromper Stomper'.

Curious, Tucker was granted entry by a doorman whose jumpsuit, anachronistic coif and personal ventilator gave him the unmistakable impression of a malnourished Elvis impersonator with asthma.

He endured the aural blitzkrieg all of ten seconds. Ten years earlier it might have been a different story.

Still, running an accordion through a Marshall stack was a nice touch.

Tucker was sitting on a stool at the surrogate bar, nursing his water bottle and surveying the room. The latinesque 70s theme night was fun, some of the songs brought back pleasant memories. There had even been some rudimentary socializing, thanks to a vivacious mixed group, one of whom had rich parents. He hadn't persisted though, the motivation just wasn't there.

– Maybe coming here was not such a hot idea.

– Time for another round of *Too What?*

He looked around the room, discreetly assigning each to their respective categories. Too young, trying too hard, too green, too easy, too old, too plain, too just-plain-trouble. Too...

– Back up, sunshine.

Now there was one that didn't fall into place. Dressed rich but not flashy, makeup down at the subtle end, sitting with a water and a port glass. Something not quite right... well, maybe not 'not right', but certainly different. Didn't fit any of the *too what* pigeonholes – the only thing wrong about her was he couldn't seem to type her at a glance. And that didn't happen often to Tucker Trent.

Not for one instant did he think this was a goldilocks. Just because he couldn't *too what* her didn't mean she was *just right*. She wasn't *that* attractive, and she wasn't *that* young either.

– Sprung.

She looked across at him, read him like a book.

– Double-take.

Subtle, but Tucker picked it up. He was pretty certain she knew who he was. Without thinking Tucker walked across. He took an unused stool from two places down and making eye contact slid it into place next to hers. It was heavier than it looked.

“Hi,” he began, “I’m...”

“You’re Tucker Trent,” she said.

“You gotta believe I’m not used to that. People knowing my name, I mean.”

“Never happened before?”

“Only once. Earlier tonight.”

She gave a look, wide-eyed and subtly playful. *Do tell.*

“Guy. Fifty-something. Not my type.”

The look again. *And I am?*

Tucker shrugged and laughed. “Why don’t you just tell me your name?”

“There’s a good change you know it already, my surname at least.”

Tucker waited a beat then said “any chance I’m going to make that discovery tonight?”

“Tonkin, Miranda Tonkin.”

“Miranda,” repeated Tucker nodding politely, then repeated it twice more internally to burn it into his short term memory. That done, he recalled the letterhead atop the forms he’d signed in the *Exit Strategy* briefing room. Plus a great deal of consultancy

work he'd commissioned while conducting feasibility studies for the FreshStyle project.

"As in Gratton Hetherington Tonkin. Say, you're not one of the..."

Miranda smiled and shook her head. "My dad's one of the founders. I haven't made partner yet."

"Have you done any work on any of the Corder accounts?" asked Tucker. "I'm kinda sure I'd remember you if we met."

"I did some of the junior drafting work for Exit Strategy. I think I did meet you once, but it was years ago. You were assisting Mr Levy, but he was dealing with my supervisor at the time. Guy Castles."

"Ah yes, I remember Guy." Tucker glanced down to her hand. There was a plain gold band around L4. "You're ah... married, Miranda?" he prompted.

"Not something you need to worry about, Tucker," she said.

Something in the tone of voice released a fuzzy surge in his lower abdomen and groin, a feeling of suspension and expectation. He felt he was standing on the cusp of something unknown, his choice imminent.

In fact, unbeknown to Tucker, he had no choice at all. From the moment his eyes had met Miranda's, their subconscious minds had recognized each other as kindred beings. The spark of recognition flared simultaneously in two reptilian brains, protocols were initiated, intent confirmed. The issue was settled efficiently and without hesitation, long before their conscious minds made anything they fondly imagined to be a decision. The night would end in rutting.

Tucker was not a highly moral man but when dealing with women he had three rules: never lie to get someone into bed, strive to leave every woman in at least as good an emotional state as when he found her, and never take anyone home on the first date. There were two clarifications on that final rule – hotels were fine, and meeting a stranger in a bar counted as a date only if the period of conversation was 'significant'.

"You don't seem to be smoking," Tucker observed.

Miranda glanced at her handbag. "Yeah, a pack seems to last me a week or so these days. Hey, neither are you."

"I had a cigar earlier," he said and pointed to the splendid array on display at the service counter.

"Oh, I see," said Miranda, "me not smoking – this place. No I was just curious really, one of the girls in the temp pool was talking about it. Our firm did some of the legal work on it, before my time though. Yours did too, didn't they?"

Tucker thought of his former mentor and smiled. "Yeah, another of Chiron Levy's little projects. Say, would you like to find someplace more... relaxing? I dunno, quiet? Private?" He forced his eyes not to glance in the direction of the secluded lounges.

Miranda gave this a moment's consideration, and Tucker saw her eyes darting to and fro involuntarily. Like someone scanning a printed page.

"Sure," she said then immediately took a sip of her port.

For Tucker it felt like looking into a mirror. The feeling he'd had of standing on the brink of a gaping unknown – now he saw it in her eyes. He pulled out his phone and opened it lengthwise, revealing the larger screen and Lilliputian keyboard.

– Easy does it.

"How do you feel about the Vista Grande?" he asked. "You don't know anyone working or staying there? I mean, anyone you might feel, er, uncomfortable bumping into?"

There was no embarrassment, no mental or emotional speedbumps, she *got* it. “No, that’s fine. Nice choice.”

The favorites list on his phone had a link to their booking page, which in turn had a one-click reservation utility. He glanced over the details, preloaded from the last time he had used it. After making one change he pressed ‘confirm’, snapped it shut and pocketed it again.

“How did you arrive here this evening, Miranda?” he asked.

“I drove, why?”

“Travel arrangements. What are you driving?”

“A Dreadnought,” she replied.

“OK,” said Tucker, “on a night like this probably the more sensible choice. I came here in a Boxster. Even with the top up, my poor little heater was working overtime on the way.” He rubbed his arms, miming cold.

“Pity,” she said, “I haven’t been in a convertible since university.” She laughed, “OK, I’ll give you a ride, you poor little street urchin you.”

They rose to leave in perfect unison.

Tucker was not comfortable with phrases like ‘one night stand’, ‘casual encounter’ or ‘hookup’, let alone ‘fuck-buddy’. His inner dialogue would play around with ‘spontaneous intimacy’ or ‘special companion’ – they were a bit better, but it was hard to avoid the multiple traps of tackiness, clunkiness, clinical coldness and all-too-obvious self-delusion.

His own special companion emerged from the bathroom, sans jacket and with one less button of her blouse done up but otherwise unchanged. She sat on the side of the bed and regarded him calmly.

Tucker held up the room service menu, open at the ‘sparkling wines’ page.

“Do you want to order something?” he asked. “Are you into Champagne?”

Miranda gave a dubious look but said nothing.

“OK, not your thing.”

“Depends on the company,” said Miranda. “If I’m working the right sort of client I can go on all night about bead size, nose, straw, floral... a bunch of things I’m supposed to be tasting.” She laughed. “You know, I can actually tell the really good French stuff from budget brands. But at the end of the day it’s all just bubbly dry white wine to me.”

Tucker cast his mind back a few weeks to the last occasion he too had ‘gone on’ about bead size, nose and finish and all the rest of it.

“Got it,” said Tucker. “Now let me run with this – you’re not knockabout enough for beer, and you’re not bimbo enough for the fluffy sweet cocktails. Hard spirits... no, I don’t think so. And everything you said about Champagne would apply just as much to most wines.”

Miranda gave him the *do go on* look.

“OK,” he continued, “and as for cocktails, they’re either frivolous and sweet, or pretentious and austere ones.”

She mimed slow applause. “So far so good, but I’m still thirsty.”

“I’m on it. What about something to eat. Do you like oysters?”

“As long as they’re not *au naturel*,” she said making a face. “Kilpatrick are OK.”

“This place can do better than that,” said Tucker, “I’d recommend the Oysters Indochine.”

“Indochine?”

“Garlic, sweet soy, lemon, coriander and a touch of chili,” read Tucker.

“Oh chili,” she said doubtfully. “I’m not into spicy foods.”

“It’s mild. Trust me.”

“Really?” asked Miranda arching one eyebrow. “How often have you availed yourself of room service in this establishment, Tucker?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Tucker teased back, then shrugged. “Not all that often, actually.” He lifted the handset and dialed room service.

“You’re not dealing with my husband’s account, are you?” she asked after he had finished.

To Tucker adultery didn’t spice things up, it was more a distraction or complication.

“You mean at Corder? Which company?”

“Wardell Biotech & Pharmaceutical – they’re in discussions with Sheldrake Life Sciences – right now I mean. My husband is interstate, with your esteemed boss, over at Sheldrake HQ for meetings.”

– As in, this hush-hush project that Corder and Brandon Tyler are up to.

Masking his curiosity, Tucker said, “I uh, knew that Corder was away on something, but I haven’t been briefed on the project. Do you know what it’s all about? Background?”

“Not really,” said Miranda. “I mean, not in any detail. My father-in-law’s company had just acquired a promising smaller group, with some patent related to AIDS. Or maybe they hadn’t patented it yet, I can’t remember. Anyway, they were about to get into some sort of partnership agreement with a bigger group – Sheldrake – when he, my father-in-law, had a stroke. Your company was involved in the original discussions, but now everything’s gotten complicated because Delton – my husband... well, he was not quite ready to step into his father’s shoes. He’s doing his best, but... hey I don’t want to bore you with their office politics.”

“No, that’s OK. Interesting – really, thanks.”

Tucker opened the sliding glass door and ventured out onto the tiny balcony. The chill air reasserted itself, but he took a moment to take in the glow of the city reflected in the clouds overhead, the scattering of lights over the river.

– Vista Grande indeed.

Taking out his phone he selected dictation mode and quietly summarized what Miranda had told him, making sure to mention Wardell Biotech & Pharmaceutical, Sheldrake Life Sciences and AIDS patents. He saved the file, pocketed the phone and went back inside to warmth and tangible promise. Miranda was watching him carefully but he felt no discomfort. She lay back on the bed and he sat down beside her. He stroked her hair, easing it behind her ears. The mixture of uncertainty and security in her eyes was tantalizing.

There was a knock on the door, the room service trolley had arrived, stainless steel adorned with crisp starched linen. Tucker tipped the waiter and began to pour the wine.

Miranda looked at the wine glasses and said “I’m curious.”

“Good, try it.”

She took a sip. “What is it?”

“Spanish Moscatel, you like?”

“Yes, sweet but...” she trailed off.

“I know what you mean,” laughed Tucker. “It’s trying to confuse you – tastes kinda like port, except it’s chilled, and white. Fresher.”

“Reminds me of Tokay” said Miranda quietly, gazing into the middle distance.

Tucker looked at her until she blinked and returned to the present. “Same grape variety I think,” he said.

“What? Oh, yes.”

Tucker impaled an oyster on a tiny fork and offered it to her. Miranda leaned forward to take it, moving her head like a predator.

“Good call, Tucker. I’ll file that away for future reference. Oysters *Indochine*.” She pronounced it ‘andosheen’. “You know what they used to say about Indochina?”

“No, what?”

“That it’s all the parts of Asia that aren’t India or China.”

Together they made short work of the oysters. When they were gone there was a drawn out silence. Miranda reached for her hand bag and walked over to the entertainment console.

“What are you doing?” Tucker asked.

“Some music – do you mind?” She took out an iPod, docked it deftly into the console’s bay and gave it a few circular caressing motions with her finger. The softest and most distant of chords faded in, joined almost immediately by a flute with ethereal reverb. It was playing lines that suggested a non-western scale without actually being out of tune. But just as Tucker thought he had his mind around it, it stuttered and a grainy, crunchy trip-hop dub beat began, along with some sounds that defied description. ‘Prayer to the insect god’ might come close.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Paul Horn, a flute player from the 70s, recorded inside the Taj Mahal,” said Miranda. “Remixed by a guy I knew in university.”

“Not bad,” said Tucker. “A bit weird. It’s like... heaven for aliens.”

Miranda looked pensive. “Heaven for aliens, I like that. Sometimes that’s what I feel like, Tucker. Like an alien, I mean.” Then after a pause, “And heaven. Do aliens even believe in heaven?”

Caught off guard by this sudden candor, Tucker said “I don’t know.”

“Tucker, put your glass down.”

He complied, and only just in time. She launched herself at him, her body slamming into his like a wrestler, toppling him backward onto the bed. Tucker felt the yielding softness of *woman*, the firmness of a regular fitness regime, the implied fragility of articulated bones, and the first unmistakable evidence of looseness in the skin and flesh. The combination was exciting to his body and poignant to his mind. He felt the rush of blood to his groin, while at the same time thinking what a sad age for a body to be – still superb but with nothing to look forward to but decay, and no way to avoid or postpone it.

He was reminded of something that Chiron had said. Something from gay culture.

– We’re here for a good time, not a long time.

– Probably not the most sound philosophy, but ain’t there times when it’s the truth.

Tucker liked to consider himself seasoned and refined, a man of the world. There had been two serious relationships, plus a couple of friendships that occasionally dipped into playful, affectionate interludes. But each time he had brought a stranger to the Vista Grande, he had been the conductor, gently leading and guiding, eyes on the prize, making sure everyone had a good time.

This was nothing like that.

This was like two driverless cars careering down the road to *fuck-knows-where*, one minute pedal to the floor, the next locked in some Gordian knot of twisted metal, tumbling stomach-sinkingly down impossibly sheer drops.

This would take some topping.

8

For the young Miranda Tonkin, the prospect of losing her virginity held no fear. Neither did she think of it as a momentous occasion, needing to be shared with a special person, a unique milestone in her life. It was nothing more than an obstacle that she had to get past, because you simply couldn't stay a virgin forever.

She waited until she was seventeen – much longer than most of her peers, but peer pressure was one of those things that Miranda had to concentrate hard on to notice. She picked a boy from the next year who would make it as trouble-free as possible. Cody Morell was cute but not full of it, social but not the type to brag, confident but controllable. Not perfect, but fit-for-purpose.

It was awkward and painful and she didn't come. This was not Cody's fault – any eighteen-year-old who could have made her come would almost certainly have been a disastrous choice in every other respect. The event was repeated on two more occasions, and on the last of those she did achieve her first orgasm in the company of another person. The fact that she had to do most of the work herself did not lessen her satisfaction.

For the remainder of her junior college years there were two boyfriends (Jordan and Troy), and 'making out' was one of the activities this involved. Memorability did not feature.

In university the field was a lot more promising, 'a veritable smorgasm-bord' as her roommate Rochelle Fletcher used to say. It was also a time of learning, which was appropriate for an academic environment. But Miranda was always the one in control, because let's face it, someone had to do it and the guys she dated weren't exactly up to the task.

That was before Professor Byron Craigie, Dean of the law school.

The Dean seemed to know more about Miranda than she did herself. Maybe it was experience, or a life spent studying the freshman female, but he read her like a book. He knew instinctively about the beast inside her, knew how to unlock its cage and took immense delight in letting it out to play. Every fumbling, artless, uncoordinated encounter paled in her memory. This was the reset button. Challenging, exhausting and different every time, like a Russian symphony.

It didn't last of course, after a few weeks she discovered that there were others. Much later she would realize that the Dean had *allowed* her to make this discovery. There were actually quite a few others. The guy must have been chomping down Viagra like breakfast cereal.

So it was back to amateur-land for Miranda Tonkin. The only notable episode during this period was a case of thrush that took weeks to shake and left her preoccupied with vaginal hygiene for years.

And in her third year there was Delton. Another story altogether.

While it was technically true she had never cheated on her husband, she had not been entirely faithful to Delton. There had been two or three discreet liaisons while they were together, even after they were engaged. But as the wedding approached she wound them all up. If the role of wife was worth playing it was worth playing sincerely.

With Delton, sex was man-maintenance. For better or worse his appetite was modest and his needs simple. She knew this long before they were married. But there

was a certain compatibility – Delton’s prospects, subdued manner and intense work focus meshed with Miranda’s blurred ambition and personal uncertainties.

A year or so into the marriage Miranda bought a vibrator online (after spending a week reading reviews and comparisons in various chat forums). While it performed exactly as advertised, she found it vaguely unsatisfying. A year or so later the batteries in one of the remotes went flat. There were no AAAs in the kitchen drawer so she purloined the relatively fresh set from the vibrator. They were never replaced.

So what had prompted her to come to Tollies while Delton was away?

It can’t have been the bawdy girl-talk of Cass and her underlings from the temp pool. Not even the image of modest and bashful Aaliyah, getting from her husband something Miranda had not had in over ten years.

Well, maybe that was the catalyst. But the hunger had been growing for a long time.

Woolly head, wrong light, something damp and distinctly tender down under. Miranda frowned and clenched *those* muscles as a few contextual memories slid into place like a theatrical backdrop. No players, no narrative yet.

– Been awhile since...

Some of those aches were in places she barely knew she had.

With an adrenaline jolt a single frame of memory came back, eidetic clarity and with an anchor for *every one* of her senses. Stark focus, centre stage. Her mind fragmented into a handful of prospective stereotypes.

– mmm, that was *good*.

– you sick *slut*

– um, weren’t we forgetting something? Safe sex?

– oh shit, we’ll be alright, won’t we? He won’t have anything will he?

– would Delton ever go for... *that*?

– was that me, or just one of those things that you only try once?

The silent debate died down into a vague disquiet. Her cold analytical mind reasserted itself. Conclusions were reached. Something had got let off the leash to a greater degree than planned. It had been a long time since that had happened. There was nothing to worry about, nothing to be afraid of. In this particular instance at least she was perfectly aware of what she had inside her.

The Tucker incident would provide texture and grist for her internal life to chew over for years to come. Self-knowledge, power, choice.

The man himself lay beside her, black hair askew, breathing rhythmically.

– Poor boy probably had no idea what hit him.

– Might find he has a few aches of his own when he wakes up.

Miranda swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. Only the faintest whisper of a blackout – blood pressure holding up nicely. She went into the bathroom and sat down to pee. Yep, definitely tender.

– One guy did that?

She walked to the sink and inspected herself in the mirror. Her hair had fared no better than Tucker’s. She made a token effort to smooth it down. Fortunately she had not been wearing very much makeup, as what remained had been randomly redistributed. A few more images from last night popped into her head and she gave herself a cursory check for scratches and bruises. A few patches of reddened skin, nothing serious.

– Nothing Delton will notice.

She decided to have a very quick shower right away and save the full soak and pamper routine for when she got back home. She pulled on the complimentary shower capped while the hot water was running, it was just starting to warm up as she stepped in.

Towel-wrapped in front of the mirror, Miranda turned her attention once more to her face. She only needed to be presentable enough to get to the car park and drive home. Opening her bag to get the travel jar of make-up removers she noticed her phone sulking away in the corner. It was in stealth mode – she'd wanted no interruptions last night, wasn't ready for them even now. An envelope icon was visible top left on the dimmed display, with '3 messages received' underneath. She picked it up to check the messages.

The first item in the list informed her of a missed call, her phone identified the caller as Delton. The second indicated that voicemail had been left. Delton had never been one to text. The final one was another missed call. She dialed up her voicemail.

Hi Hon, Delt here. I was going to call last night, um, but I never got around to it – sorry. Hey, we finished up here a bit earlier than expected, it went well, I'll give you all the details later. Anyway I'm catching the redeye, just about to board, should be home a bit before nine thirty. See you soon.

Miranda felt a sucking surge of dread form in the pit of her stomach, rise through her chest and stop just above the top of her neck, fading out as a tingling in the hair behind her ears.

– Oh shit. What's the time?

The phone displayed 08:15.

That was late, but hey – she hadn't had much sleep.

What it got down to was this: Delton would arrive to a cold empty home, an empty garage and a perfectly-made bed. This would strike him as unusual, he would ask questions – not out of mistrust or suspicion, just... questions. Miranda was not averse to lying, nor was she uncertain of her ability to do so convincingly. But she needed good material. Good *plausible* material.

– Or, I might be able to beat him home. If I move fast.

Miranda pushed down the feelings of fevered panic, allowing them to do nothing more than motivate. Moving with a cold efficiency she finished with her face and got dressed. Her blouse had a small tear and was missing two buttons, but if she wore her jacket and kept it done up it would conceal everything. She packed her collection of necessities into her bag, came out of the bathroom and over to Tucker's side of the bed.

"Tucker honey," she said gently, her hand on his shoulder.

He stretched and the sight of straining muscles triggered another memory. She smiled and touched his face.

Tucker opened his eyes and squinted against the light. "Well, hello," he said, "what time is it?"

"About twenty past eight. Tucker, something's come up. I have to leave – right away." She went to the entertainment console to retrieve her iPod.

"What's up?" asked Tucker.

Miranda considered how much to reveal.

– What the hell.

"My husband is coming home earlier than planned. If I hurry I'll get there first."

A grunt from Tucker. "You're all packed and sorted?"

"Almost, how do I look?" Miranda checked the side tables for any remaining items.

“Fine – human even,” said Tucker with a hint of mischief in his voice. “How did you achieve that?”

Miranda smiled, then in a more seriously tone asked “Tucker, did I say that I’d never cheated on my husband? Before last night, that is?”

“No,” said Tucker.

“Well, it was a first.” Searching for appropriate words. “You were a very good first time.” She retrieved her jacket from one of the chairs and put it on, zipping it all the way up.

Tucker smirked. “You’re kidding, right? Hey, you were... you are, amazing. Equally memorable.”

Miranda was unsure about how to respond to a compliment like this. She was also ready to go and wanted to draw the conversation to a close.

“Thanks,” she said and gave an *all done* shrug.

“No I mean it,” said Tucker. “This husband guy of yours is a lucky man.”

– But he’ll never know it.

“Are you going to be OK, Tucker? I mean, picking up your car. You’ll have to take a cab.” She sat down on the bed beside him.

“Yeah that’s fine, don’t worry about it,” said Tucker dismissively. “Hey, can I call you?”

Miranda froze for an instant. She hadn’t even considered something like this. The spectrum suddenly appeared in her mind: one night stand, fling, affair.

“Sure,” she said automatically. “I’m on the contact list on the company website. But could you...”

“Discreet, prudent and circumspect,” deadpanned Tucker.

– We may have to see about that. But no time now.

She bent down and gave him a quick kiss.

“I have to run. Bye.”

He held her hand as she rose, her fingers slipping gently from his.

“Ciao,” he said as she walked to the door.

As soon as Miranda inserted her key into the Dreadnought’s ignition and switched it on, her phone detected its hands-free feature and initiated connection protocol. A few seconds later the phone icon appeared in the lower left hand side of the dash display panel. As she silently glided out of the Vista Grande car park her mind was once again sifting through the possibilities, weighing, evaluating.

– Landline.

If Delton had rung home on the landline before leaving the voicemail, beating him home would be pointless – he would be curious as to why she hadn’t answered. She dialed the number from the steering console and entered the four-digit code as soon as the answering machine picked up. Two missed calls and two messages – the first nothing more than a beep, the second Delton’s voice, a touch perfunctory, “Hey Hon, Delt here, talk to you later.”

So she would still need a story, even if she beat him home.

Miranda took a few deep breaths and quietened her mind. The less sound and fury up front the better the chance her subconscious would come up with an optimal course of action. As she left downtown and the riverfront districts behind the office blocks, shops and apartments declined in health. The traffic was a bit heavier than she’d anticipated for early Saturday morning. She wondered why.

– Dad. Paralegal Services division. PLEx.

– He doesn't sleep in weekends, does he?

Miranda quickly dialed her father's home. After two rings a delicately accented woman's voice answered "Hello?"

"Hello Monique, Miranda here. Is Dad up?"

"Yes, just one moment..." sound of movement, then very faintly: "Bryce, it's Miranda."

"Hey sweetheart," came the jovial voice of her father. "What on earth could have you up this early on such a chilly morning?"

"Hi Dad, yeah it is cold isn't it." She looked over at the climate control, it was coping easily. "Dad, has Delton rung you this morning or last night?"

"No, why? Where is he?"

"Oh, out of town. Dad I really need a favor. I need to come over right away."

"Sure sweetheart, is everything OK? You're safe?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Miranda chose her words and her tone carefully. "Um, if Delton rings and asks anything before I get there, could you please say I stayed last night, and that I got his message and I'm on my way back? And call me back on this number and let me know?"

There was a pause, then "Uh, sweetheart, what is going on?"

"Please Dad, not now. You'll do it?"

"OK... sure."

"Thanks Dad, really appreciate it. I'll be there soon – fifteen minutes maybe. Bye."

After another pause he said, "I love you sweetheart," and she hung up.

That was out of place, he must have picked up that something is wrong.

– Well, not much of a stretch, is it? A call like that?

She allowed herself to relax a few degrees.

The traffic on the newly-widened Eastern Avenue was very light, but still more than Miranda would have expected. She centered the car in the outside lane and stepped on the accelerator, trying to guess how long it would take to get to her father's house. After a few seconds the subtle drone of the engine shifted to a higher key, responding to the batteries' increased load. She sped past derelict buildings and abandoned industrial estates, a buffer zone separating suburbia and declining commerce, or a reminder of better times. A sporty sedan overtook her on the inside lane, and looking down Miranda noticed two pairs of skis on the roof rack.

– Ah, skiing.

Miranda knew that she had played in the snow when she was a very little girl, as there were photographs (hardcopy, prints) in her father's album. Mittens, beanie, scarf and a thick puffy jacket. She thought she recalled vague images of the event, but they were so close to those photos that she wasn't sure. Maybe a feeling of running, laughing, falling over. She wondered what skiing would feel like – was it an adult equivalent of the delight and wonder she must have felt as a young child?

She found these thoughts vaguely disquieting and dismissed them from her mind. The skiers disappeared from view around a shallow rising bend in the road, obscured by the tall acoustic barriers erected to protect residents from road noise.

As she rounded the same curve Miranda noticed a traffic issue ahead and automatically eased off the accelerator. A large bus was pulled over, and a few passengers had disembarked. It was too wide to fit entirely on the narrow shoulder and straddled the edge of the outside lane, taking up about a third of it. Miranda recalled something about the recent widening – something about the decision not to buy up a strip of adjacent property.

With so few cars on the road this was hardly a problem – motorists on the two eastbound lanes could simply squeeze into the remaining space and get past. Eastern Avenue was not a divided road, so those on the inside would have to move closer to the oncoming traffic – but only if two cars needed to get past at the same time.

For Miranda however it wasn't quite this simple. The Dreadnought was significantly wider than most cars, so sharing the constricted space with another vehicle would be tricky. She looked around for other drivers. There were a few, well separated just a little behind her.

– Easy.

The Dreadnought had lost a lot of speed to the road's slight incline and its own lack of aerodynamics, and Miranda looked in her side mirror to judge when to pull out. Not quite...

– !

Brake hard! The car immediately in front, a small red sedan, had not even attempted to get past, and was now stopped behind the bus. The entire outside lane was now obstructed. Miranda pulled up behind the red car and wondered what the problem was – she was too high up to see the driver. After a couple of seconds she gave a short beep on the horn.

Nothing. The red car had plenty of room to get past, but didn't budge. Miranda gave a longer blast. It was a menacing sound, matching the commanding looks of the Dreadnought.

Still nothing. Well... the red car's hazard lights came on, blinking defiantly.

In the fast lane right beside her, car after car flowed past, barely slowing down.

With Delton's imminent arrival and her own schedule dominating her thoughts, Miranda's dwindling patience gave way to rising frustration. She decided to make a run for it and looked for an opening. It would be a good one, to let her in from a standing start.

– There...

With a final jab on the horn, she indicated, pulled out and flattened the accelerator.

It was about now that Miranda realized that while Dreadnoughts are large and imposing to look at, they don't actually have very much serious acceleration. She eased forwards purposefully and quietly around the red sedan then onwards past the bus. The engine remained silent – it was batteries all the way.

The gap in the fast lane's traffic was not nearly long enough – Miranda was occupying both eastbound lanes. Behind, headlights flashed, horns sounded a random atonal melody. She willed the Dreadnought forward, the free space of two unencumbered lanes beyond the bus beckoning.

Somewhere a dog barked. Or were there two? The sound insulation made everything seem distant.

Later, when making her statement, Miranda would itemize three separate things that happened. There was a brown flash, or rather a blur. There was a yelp, high pitched but not *really* high pitched. And an impact. It was not severe – her airbag did not deploy, and she had no bruising from the seatbelt. But although she could describe these events in clear detail, she found it very difficult to say in which order they had occurred.

But that was later, after her mind had had a chance to weave everything together into a coherent narrative. Right now it was all input, streaming in faster than she could process it.

The dog (yes, it was a dog, and a large one too) was thrown forward, Miranda could see part of its body on the road in front of her, over the top of her hood. She had come to a complete stop, next to the bus rather than in front of it.

A series of horns sounded, each note falling as a car sped past. The Dreadnought was taking up a good part of the inside lane, and those brave enough to get past were being partially forced into the course of oncoming traffic.

On the other side were... people. Someone was holding a video camera – it had a large round lens, professional looking.

A young girl with a round, freckly face and pudgy arms ran out onto the road and threw her arms around the creature lying there. She began to wail, something about ‘Gwover, Gwover’, but the intonation was strange.

Miranda bit back on the noise in her own mind, and her consciousness bifurcated. While one part was putting together what had just happened, and working out the most appropriate immediate action, the other evaluated the impact on her original objective. This incident would obviously translate into a significant delay, she tried to estimate how long it would be. There was also some damage to her car – the story she was constructing would obviously require changes.

She started to make a map in her mind, visualizing locations, routes and times like an online puzzle. Where was she, in relation to her father’s house? In relation to Glenview? Was this stretch of Eastern Avenue a plausible route from one to the other?

– Not quite, too far *that way*. From Dad’s place I’d have gotten onto it *there*.

– Unless... *supermarket!*

She tried to remember the contents of the refrigerator, the pantry. There had to be something about to run out. A detour to the supermarket, from her father’s place. It could fit, it would place her *here* when this unfortunate mishap befell her.

– Close call, could have been a *lot* worse...

Miranda was drawn back to the present by a loud, resonant honk and a screech of brakes. She looked around and then up into her rear vision mirror. An array of chrome, steel, panels and glass stared out at her, growing as her mind struggled to assemble the angular shapes into something that made sense.

Truck. Large. Getting larger.

Once again, it was not until much later that she was able to put the whole picture together, to imagine the dilemma the truck driver must have faced. One momentary lapse of concentration, then not enough length to stop, not enough width to pass. The driver was faced with a simple choice – to veer out into oncoming traffic, or rear-end the corner of the large SUV blocking half the remaining lane. One choice carried a very real risk of a high-speed collision, the other a certainty of a less serious collision. And a split second to make the call.

He would not have been able to see what was in front of that large SUV.

Miranda froze. There was nothing she could do. For a heart-stopping half second the image of the truck grew in the mirror. She felt it slowing, felt its tires gripping the road, pushing forwards in heroic effort to transfer its relentless momentum into the earth.

Almost.

In order to come to a complete standstill, the truck required some external assistance.

One Dreadnought, large and imposing but not all that heavy.

One dog.

One little girl.

A split second before contact Miranda anticipated a concussive impact, but when it happened what she actually felt was more like a diffuse crunch. There was sudden acceleration as the Dreadnought lurched forwards and it pushed her back into her seat, but the feeling was more *inevitable* than violent. She saw the little girl and the dog disappear from her field of vision, and felt something bad. The words ‘rolling bump’ would come later, when she needed them.

She hadn’t actually moved forwards very much.

Miranda felt the world start to close in on her, then go freeze frame. Raw data was streaming directly into her brain, bypassing the filters and networks that usually handled interpretation, recognition and understanding. Her visual field devolved into a million facets of pure dancing geometry. All she could hear were granules of tone, linked and overlapping, taunting her with hints of inherent meaning. But underneath it all, her body’s insistent proprioceptive sense that there was something *wrong* directly underneath her, making her instinctively try to sit lighter in the seat.

With the ferocity of an avalanche and the subtlety of a change in camera angle, reality started to return. Four or five adults appeared around the car, their heads almost level with Miranda’s. Most of them were shouting, but she could not understand anything. One of them was pointing that professional-looking camera at her.

Now more cars were stopping – even those that were travelling in the opposite direction. Like ants on a disturbed nest, more and more people appeared, saying things and looking up at her with strangely contorted faces. Many of them had phones. A few were frantically jabbing buttons then pressing them to their ears, but most were holding the backs towards her.

Dozens of tiny eyes, photographing, videoing.

A galvanizing jolt of realization flooded Miranda’s limbic system – this was serious. Something terrible had just happened, far more than a complication to the fabrication she was preparing for Delton. Everything was being recorded, independently, from multiple angles.

These images and videos might very well be used in a court of law. More importantly, they would also be seen by a significant fraction of the civilized world. They would appear on TV, be posted on YouTube, travel the globe a million times over by email.

Every eye was focused on her, every face looked at her expectantly.

This would be one of the moments that defined Miranda Tonkin.

Her phone rang. It was Delton. She ignored it.

Skye Arbeiter looked out into a constellation of lights, reflectors and diffusers and tried not to squint. To one side a large monitor showed her face, turning away from her as she turned towards it. She was wearing more makeup than she had ever worn in her life, and found the face in the monitor a little flattering. But phony as well.

– www.welcometothecircus.com

Diagonally across from her, side by side behind a long desk sat Grant Glaser and Donna-Lee Brewster, each wearing even more makeup than she was, if that was possible. A brightly colored but plain backdrop hung behind them, uncluttered so as to leave plenty of bare space for the hyperactive onscreen text that would frame the broadcast picture.

Anomaly #1. The entire studio, barring the small corner directly in front of the three cameras looked shabby, dull and industrial. A factory for making television. Or money.

Anomaly #2. The sheer number of people behind the cameras, milling, darting or just standing idle. Earlier she'd been introduced to the producer, director, floor and production managers, and their respective flocks of assistants. But there were also camera operators, sound engineers, gaffers, gophers and goodness knows whatnot. The studio was air-conditioned to an uncomfortable degree to prevent onscreen sweating, but she could still feel them breathing.

Anomaly #3. The two main presenters looked *hyper-real*. Like a movie where the CGI and live action don't *quite* mesh. Not a hair out of place on either of them, not a single fleck of lint on their expensive clothes.

Grant Glaser was smaller than she'd imagined from watching the show, his slow, easy smile locked in place but not quite concealing that faint trace of callousness she'd always seen in him. It felt strange, to be drawn to him and repulsed simultaneously.

With Donna-Lee Brewster, the size was right – she was petite, fragile like a delicate piece of china, but with some subtle wrinkles showing despite the heavy makeup. Good thing too – they were the only thing that made her look remotely human. They were too fine to show up in the broadcast picture, even on HD. Skye wondered what she would look like without the layers of foundation and blusher, outdoors or in a normally lit room.

She looked up through the throng of technicians toward the control room, elevated at the back of the studio space. Through the window she saw the producer, sitting high and mighty on his executive recliner, along with a few more technicians, bent over incomprehensible decks of gear.

And in there with them, her two links back to the real world in this ocean of surrealism. Joan McKluskie looked down encouragingly, firm and unfaltering as ever. Skye wondered how she would have got through the last 48 hours without her stalwart employer. Beside Joan stood Gunther Huygens, the inscrutable representative flown in from Chandos International head office.

A cold fish if ever there was one.

Gunther Huygens and Skye were firmly united in the opinion that Skye should not be the one appearing on morning TV. Chandos International were not inexperienced in managing adverse publicity and had made their media spokesperson available. But the show's producers had been emphatic. It was Skye or no deal. And the deal was

substantial. This had caused a certain amount of consternation behind the scenes, and resulted in a three-hour briefing from a Chandos International media strategies specialist (not the aforementioned spokesperson), slotted in after the first of her three post-trauma counseling sessions. She couldn't remember any of it.

The only thing she did recall was the show's producer. *"Just be yourself honey, answer the questions, tell it as you saw it. Try to describe what it felt like to be there. And don't worry, we've done this sort of thing before, we know what we're doing. Oh, and don't look at the camera, look at Grant and Donna-Lee."*

A quiet but authoritative voice from one of the pantheon of crew positions (floor manager?) brought her back to the present.

"Live in five, four, three..." then finger gestures for *two* and *one*. Grant Glaser shone his engaging smile on her and mouthed 'you'll be fine'.

On the camera directly in front of her the red light winked on.

Skye recalled being awakened by the melodic chiming of her alarm clock some forty-eight hours earlier. There was an ill-defined sense of disquiet, or maybe that was just a retroactive memory, her mind was certainly scrambled enough to play tricks on her. Images of Tollies, Jason's damaged face and Julia's dancing surfaced through the stifling wall of *not-enough-sleep*.

Then she remembered the snow and a certain sense of excitement built in her. It was going to be fun, something the kids had never seen before. After a quick shower and a quicker breakfast she picked up the bag of warm things prepared earlier and made her way to E. J. McKluskie House. The bus was already there, crouching like a behemoth in the car park. Skye locked her car and walked over.

A small group of people were standing near the front of the bus. Joan McKluskie beckoned her over. Jeans and a sweater gave her short stout frame a comical look, Skye had only ever seen her in drab business attire.

"Good morning Skye. Bright eyed and bushy tailed?"

"Joan," she nodded. "As much as I'll ever be."

Reyette and Vonda were staying at the women's refuge, escaping situations Skye could identify with, but a hundred times worse. They'd agreed to come along and help with the kids. They were dressed in not-quite-matching bargain bin specials and didn't look entirely at ease. Skye gave them a warm smile.

"Skye, this is Brian Cable, our driver for today. Brian, Skye Arbeiter," said Joan. Brian was a sturdy looking man who looked to be in his fifties, wearing navy blue drill trousers and matching shirt with epaulettes. The bus company's logo was sewn into the breast pocket.

Brian nodded. "Morning ma'am."

There were a number of tasks to complete before the children could be brought out of the shelter. Various supplies were loaded into the luggage compartment – lunches, toiletries and three cardboard boxes of thick parkas in various sizes.

"Where did you get those?" Skye asked Joan a little later.

"They just arrived yesterday," said Joan guardedly. "Our new owners are not sparing any expenses."

Skye shook her head. "It's not as if you can just walk into a department store and buy these you know. No one carries them, it never gets cold. Well, until this week."

"Well I guess they have good connections then."

Someone in the centre must have let Grover out of the security gate, and she came running up to the women, trying to lick their faces. She could sense a break from routine and was obviously excited, but didn't bark. Joan gave a sharp command which was largely effective.

"Brian, this is Grover, the centre's pets-as-therapy companion. She'll be joining us today on this expedition."

The driver looked at Joan in consternation. "Uh, Ms McKluskie, do you have a travelling kennel? It's a pretty large dog."

"No, she'll be OK riding with us," said Joan. "A kennel big enough for a Newfoundland wouldn't exactly be portable," she added. "I doubt it would fit into the luggage compartment, let alone through the door."

"Our company's policy on animals is very strict, Ms McKluskie," said Brian. "They have to travel in an approved enclosure. It's for the protection of everyone. It was in the terms and conditions of the hiring agreement."

Reyette and Vonda started to protest that Grover was very well behaved and wouldn't cause any trouble.

"Ladies, please," interrupted Joan and they fell silent. She turned to the driver. "Have you ever had blind people on your bus, Brian?"

"Yes," he answered.

"With guide dogs?" pressed Joan.

Brian nodded impatiently. "Of course, but that's different. They're exempt by law from these regulations. Plus they're specially trained."

"So are pets-as-therapy dogs, Brian. Our children have been afflicted with various disabilities, as you'll see when we bring them out shortly. Grover is part of the centre, she serves them with every bit as much dedication as the rest of us. She will be travelling with us, or you can get in and drive straight back to your depot right now."

"Ms McKluskie..." began Brian, but didn't continue.

Joan took out her phone. "Is there someone I can ring to sort this out?"

Brian considered this for a moment then threw his hands up in resignation.

"OK, OK. But if anything happens, it's on the record that you've broken those terms and conditions."

"You let me worry about that," said Joan. "And if it is any consolation one of the kids with us today is legally blind."

Brian gave her a skeptical look.

Joan paused, making sure the issue was closed and then looked at her watch.

"Now where on earth is our videographer," she mused. "It's almost time to get things rolling."

In hindsight it was obvious that the whole situation was a disaster waiting to happen. The decision to take the kids on a trip to the snow had been made by someone in Chandos International, with no experience in the day-to-day running of the respite centre. Joan McKluskie was initially uneasy and had pointed out that no excursions of that magnitude had ever been undertaken before. These objections were overruled and a day and a half's worth of planning had begun.

With regard to the bus, there were only two suitable choices. The company's first offering was the most expensive – a fully fledged touring coach, tall and luxurious. The next step down was basically a school-type bus, tidy and clean but smaller and more basic. Chandos International had authorized the less expensive option. One advantage of that was the ease with which three of the seats could be exchanged for wheelchair anchor brackets.

Paul Brass the videographer arrived late and apologized unconvincingly. He was a self-important man dressed with artful untidiness who seemed to regard the whole affair as a performance staged for his benefit. This view was partially deflated by the fact that the first scene of his opus – the boarding of the children – had almost begun without him.

This was more laborious than a layperson might expect. Many of the centre's charges needed to be escorted individually to their seats (in some cases more than once), and the wheelchair-bound had to be carried.

As soon as everyone was aboard the journey began. And as soon as the journey began, the most serious flaws overlooked in the planning process became apparent.

- Many of the children had never been on a bus before.
- There were *way* too few adult supervisors.
- In spite of Joan's assurances, Grover the pets-as-therapy dog did not travel well.
- The bus did not have seat belts, let alone tamper-proof restraints.
- The bus did not have a toilet.

Joan was seated at the front of the bus, occasionally turning around to survey the chaos and reassure the driver. Grover was clearly agitated but under control, sitting in the aisle next to Sylvia de Smoot (paraplegic). Skye moved around the cabin trying to calm the excited passengers and encouraging the more mobile to remain in their seats. Reyette and Vonda were doing likewise. Then Tillie Howe (Down's syndrome *plus* a toxic family) with the sweetest of intentions joined in and attempted to assist in this endeavor. She started going from row to row saying in her characteristic lisp "It's OK, calm down, and thtay in your theatth" to everyone. Including those who were sitting quietly, those in wheelchairs, and the supervising adults.

"Tillie, sweetheart," said Skye, "why don't *you* stay in your seat?"

"But I'm helping," explained Tillie.

"I know you are, but you could help much better if you stayed in your seat," Skye insisted, taking Tillie by the hand and leading her there. Tillie gave her a look, more confused than hurt.

After a few minutes of relative calm a high-pitched moaning sound drew Skye's attention towards the back of the bus. Dee Shriner (chronic anxiety disorder) was having a panic attack, screwing up her face and holding on tightly to the seat in front. The words 'too fast, too fast' could be discerned in her cries. Pacey Williams (behavioral problems) was seated in front of her and had turned around. He was laughing and repeating "Dee's gonna piss her pants" over and over.

Skye sat down next to Dee to try and calm her down. Pacey reduced his taunting in volume but did not stop it.

"Pacey," said Skye, "that's not helping, is it? Please turn around now."

Tillie Howe walked up to where Skye was sitting and looked at her, small eyes wide open with sincerity.

"Thkye," she lisped, "I can help Dee to thtop being thcared, I weally can. I did before, wemember?"

This time Skye was grateful for the assistance. She vacated her seat and Tillie sat down and took over. And quite effectively too – Dee's quiet wailing started to wind down like some distant air raid siren switching off. Tillie's confidence in her own abilities was not misplaced.

– www.twohoursofthis.com

In the middle of the bus Sebastian Tulloch (autism) was rocking back and forth vigorously, mumbling to himself. Jo-Jo Bevan (fragile X / developmental disability) was seated next to Sebastian and offered himself as a translator.

“Sebbie wants toilet.”

“But Sebastian, you just went,” reminded Skye. “Just before we got on the bus.”

Sebastian increased the pace of his rocking and continued muttering. Skye couldn’t pick up any of it and gave Jo-Jo a questioning glance.

Jo-Jo obliged. “Sebbie says poo, did wee before.”

“Can you hold?” asked Skye.

Sebastian made no response Skye could detect, but Jo-Jo shook his head vigorously. On her way to the front of the bus Skye walked past Paul Brass who was capturing everything in HD. It was hard to imagine how this footage could benefit the cause.

Joan was sitting next to the driver, conversing in low but insistent tones.

Skye bent down to address the pair. “I think we may need a toilet break sooner rather than later,” she said.

The driver snorted and Joan gave her a look that said ‘we don’t need this now’.

“But I think Sebastian needs to go,” persisted Skye. “Pretty badly.”

“There’s a gas station just before the freeway,” said Joan. “Let’s stop there, shall we? Shouldn’t be more than fifteen minutes. Would you go and tell him please, Skye.”

Skye straightened up but didn’t leave. The driver tensed up for a moment then took a deep breath.

“Ms McKluskie, this clearly isn’t working. When we get to the junction I’m going to turn the bus around and return to the... shelter, centre, whatever. You’re clearly understaffed and this bus is unequipped to deal with passengers of...” he shrugged, “well, like this.”

“Oh come now,” said Joan, “it’s not that bad, and I’m sure they’ll settle down once we’re out of the city.”

“Ma’am,” he said, “there are clear safety issues here, and I’m pretty we’re violating a whole bunch of regulations. I’m sorry, it just can’t go on.”

Skye turned to walk back to Sebastian’s row. As she passed Vonda she bent down and said softly “I think we’re going to turn around and go back.”

It was a mistake. Skye had spoken softly, knowing that this was not the time to inform the children that the trip was being cancelled. Vonda was less experienced than Skye in these matters, and turned to the boy sitting next to her and said in much louder voice, “Oh that’s a pity isn’t it? Not going to the snow after all? I was looking forward to it.”

Sylvia de Smoot (among others) overheard this clearly and began to cry – the full theatrical performance. In accordance with her nature and training, Grover attempted to comfort her by resting her head on the little girl’s lap and looking up at her with the canine world’s most caring eyes. When this failed to produce the intended results she tried licking Sylvia’s face, before finally giving up and joining in, howling away in perfect synchrony.

A wave of disappointment passed through the bus as the more agile minds picked up on news of the trip’s cancellation. The rest began to sense that something was wrong, becoming agitated and distressed.

Sebastian got up from his seat and ran to the front, stopping in front of the door and grabbing the hand rail. He began to shake himself back and forth before stopping and drumming on the door panels with his fists. A rhythmic keening sound was coming from his lips, it might have been ‘need to do toilet’, repeated over and over.

Joan McKluskie rose up and then stepped down beside him. She steadied herself with one hand and put the other around the boy, trying to restrain him. Skye made her way forward and tried to assist. With firm grip and fervent purpose Sebastian tried to twist free from his bondage but couldn't shake off the two women's hold. He then tried thrusting his whole body back, throwing Joan off balance and sending the three of them sprawling across to the driver's seat.

Skye let go and struggled to her feet but was immediately thrown against the front wall and windscreen as Brian Cable brought the bus to an urgent stop. He did this without skidding and to his credit none of the children sustained any bruising from the seats in front. After a brief hiatus the intensity and volume of melee increased.

Sebastian got to his feet and stood in front of the door again. Handicap notwithstanding he was more than capable of reading and understanding anything mechanical. Before Skye or Joan could gather their wits to consider what to do next he had pulled the emergency door release and run outside onto the shoulder.

There was a small grassy embankment beside the road, and not enough room for the bus to fit entirely on the shoulder. Brian had pulled over as much as he could without trying to mount the embankment. He was not at all pleased that one of his passengers had alighted.

Brandishing his camera like an assault weapon Paul Brass pushed past Skye and followed Sebastian outside. He panned slowly to get a shot of the entire bus then turned towards the boy. Sebastian as it turned out had been serious about his needs and after running behind a small spindly shrub was pulling down his pants.

Joan regained her composure, dignity and authority and called out after him.

"Mr Brass, under no circumstances are you to film that child going to the toilet. In any state other than fully clothed. I'm serious." To Skye she continued in a lower voice, "I know our day-to-day life with this group sometimes seems to consist of nothing *but* bodily functions, but any hint of that on video and charges of 'pedophile' will ring out for all to hear."

Skye retrieved her shoulder bag from the seat she had originally intended to sit in. She took out a small box of tissues and walked to the front again.

"I'll go and... assist," she said to Joan and Brian.

As soon as she stepped out Grover followed, tiring of her pining duet with Sylvia and the close confinement of the bus. The pets-as-therapy companion had been selected on the basis of her breed and temperament to be affectionate, passive and eager to please. She had then been trained thoroughly to be gentle with children, untroubled by unusual behavior, loud sounds and a variety of other circumstances. The training had not focused on strict obedience or curbing her natural spontaneity. It was therefore in keeping with her character that she ran up and down the full length of the bus, barked at a few passing cars and briefly investigated Sebastian's activities.

By this time most of the children were out of their seats and four or five had disembarked before Brian finally tried to contain the situation and his remaining passengers by closing the front door.

Tillie Howe was one of those who got out and she started chasing after the dog, calling out "Gwover, Gwover, thtop! Come here!"

Thankfully Sebastian was quite able to take care of himself after receiving the box of tissues from Skye. Skye turned her back to grant him a little privacy and surveyed the chaotic little tableau. The door reopened briefly and Joan emerged and started to round up the strays. Fortunately traffic was light, but many of the cars that drove past vented their annoyance by sounding their horns.

Then two things happened that would transform the bizarre scenario into tragedy.

A small red car balked at getting past the stationary bus. Perhaps the driver did not see an opening in the passing lane, Skye wasn't sure. The car stopped behind the bus, obscuring the whole lane and tooting away like a demented saxophonist. A line of vehicles started to form behind it, some of which joined in the emerging cacophony.

A moment or so later a pedestrian came into view on the opposite side of the road, accompanied by a fine-looking dog on a lead. They would probably have gone unnoticed by Skye except for the fact that Grover also noticed them and started barking enthusiastically at the other dog. She was standing in front of the bus, obviously wanting to cross the four lanes (three with light but fast-moving traffic) to investigate this new acquaintance in greater detail. Tillie was standing beside her with one hand on her back remonstrating with her.

Stuck directly behind the red car was a large and silly-looking SUV (the hybrid sort all the movie stars were driving these days). It was getting impatient after its contribution to the horn ensemble had been roundly ignored. With a suddenness that didn't involve spinning tires it pulled out and accelerated past the obstructing car then out of Skye's sight around the bus.

"Grover, NO!" came unbidden from Skye's throat as she saw the insane choreography unfold, precise as the clockwork of a malevolent god's scheming. The foolish dog dashed out just as the SUV cleared the bus and steered back into the free lane. It wasn't going all that fast but wouldn't have had a chance of seeing the dog and stopping in time.

Grover was thrown forwards, the SUV stopped just short of hitting it again. The poor thing was dazed and started making high-pitched whining noises, almost whistles. Tillie stood there immobile, then turned and looked at Skye, her eyes and mouth wide and round with shock. The little girl found her voice and started crying out "Gwover, Gwover" with heartbroken intensity. She checked carefully left and right, walked in front of the stationary SUV and flung herself down to comfort the sorry creature.

Sebastian appeared beside Skye and waved the box of tissues insistently in front of her face. Skye was confused for a moment by this distraction until she realized the boy was returning them and communicating that she should take them from him. She did so.

Joan had two children by the hands and was trying to walk them back into the bus. She hadn't seen the impact but had heard everything.

"Better move her off the road Skye," she called out. Skye wasn't sure whether she meant Tillie or the dog. Had she even noticed Tillie's little mercy mission?

A new voice sounded in the chorus of horns, deep and insistent. Skye couldn't see anything, the bus obscured her view. The sound of a big diesel engine...

... angrily winding down...

That deep horn again, moving fast...

A split second's worth of premonition, not nearly enough.

"Tillie! Get off the road, now!"

The little girl lifted her head from Grover's bedraggled coat and looked at her.

With a crunching sound the SUV lurched forward suddenly. Skye shut her eyes.

– www... No...

Grant Glaser leaned in with his face set to Deep Empathy. From the corner of her eye Skye saw her own face grow larger on the monitor to one side of the set. Camera three was zooming in, and whoever was in charge up in the control booth was loving it.

Real drama, nation-galvanizing shock, and broadcast-quality footage of the whole thing.

“Take your time,” said Grant Glaser in his perfect comforting and concerned voice.

– www.purenetworkgold.com

“I...” began Skye, but nothing came.

“Just tell us how you felt, what happened next,” soothed Grant.

“One thing though,” said Donna-Lee with a puzzled smile briefly breaking through her own Deep Empathy setting. “The dog – Grover? What breed did you say it was?”

“A Newfoundland, she was a Newfie,” said Skye.

“Yeah, you keep saying ‘she’ and ‘her’ – it was a... female dog?”

“Yes.”

“But Grover is a boy’s name,” said Donna-Lee.

Skye noticed a tiny flicker of annoyance on Grant Glaser’s face. “Well, it was before my time but the story I heard was this,” she said. “The centre bought her as a puppy, and as part of getting her to bond with the kids they got to name her. One of them thought she looked like a Grover and the rest of them agreed.”

“Hmmm,” nodded Donna-Lee with intense gravity.

“Happier times,” said Grant thoughtfully. “Now, getting back to Saturday’s terrible events, what was going through your mind as you saw little... Tillie Howe get run over?”

Paul Brass had missed both impacts and rushed around to the front end of the bus, recording a few seconds of jerky footage that would convey the drama of the moment perfectly. Skye stood rooted to the spot, her brain refusing to process what her eyes had just seen. Joan remained calm.

“Skye? Skye, we need you dear.” She looked down at the children she had by the hands. “Get one of the girls to come out and take these two. Don’t let any more out.”

Skye roused herself from a daze and signed through the window to Reyyette that she was required. Reyyette emerged, took over Joan’s charges and escorted them back on board. She then set about corralling the remaining children outside.

Back to the SUV. The driver, a woman, was still in shock, looking out without registering anything. No passengers. Skye prepared herself for the worst and lay down to look underneath.

It didn’t make sense at first – Skye had to work to resolve the jumble of fabric, dust, matted fur and pale freckled flesh. Not very much blood, the serious injuries here would be internal. The stupid, *stupid* SUV had almost no ground clearance, the underneath of it was all big brutish chunks of machinery and great silly showy metal rib things running lengthwise.

A face, eyes open unseeing, some blood from the mouth. A hint of movement – breathing?

“Tillie sweetheart, this is Skye here. We’re going to help you. Can you hear me? Tillie?”

No response. Skye reached in and found Tillie’s hand. It felt like the hand of a sleeping person. It meant nothing. From Grover there was some sign of life, a sound that might have been a faint distressed whine, or just labored breathing.

She scrambled to her feet and looked around for Joan. A crowd was starting to form but a good many of them were preoccupied with videoing the scene on their phones. Joan was nearby issuing instructions to anyone willing to listen. Skye ran across.

“She’s conscious. Very shallow breathing. We need to get that thing off her.”

“I know, I’ve got someone to ask the truck driver if he can move back a bit.”

“But you can’t drive that... car,” said Skye. “There’s no free space underneath.”

“I know dear. We’ll get the driver to put it in neutral, then get a dozen strong men to lift up the front end and roll it backwards.”

Skye played the proposed plan over in her mind and nodded. “Has anyone called emergency?” she asked.

“You’d hope so, wouldn’t you?” said Joan looking out at the forest of phones. “Yes, someone has. They’ll be here within twenty minutes.”

Skye looked into the bus. Various sounds of traumatized children were muted by the thick glass. Most of them were in their seats and the adults looked to be doing their best to distract and settle them. “Do you think they’ll be OK?”

“For now,” said Joan.

A movement drew all eyes to the SUV. The driver’s side door had opened and a woman was stepping down. She walked around the front of her vehicle and looked at the gathering crowd. At most times Skye tried not to assess people by their clothes or grooming, but...

She was wearing sunglasses, hair to which a dryer had recently paid lip service and clothes clearly on their way to the dry cleaners’. An expensive looking jacket was zipped all the way up. This was someone who had gotten up in a hurry.

All eyes were on the woman as she delicately lowered herself to her hands and knees to look underneath the behemoth. A shudder ran through her and she stood back up again. She addressed the crowd.

“Is she alive? Does anyone know? Has an ambulance been called?”

Various answers were offered by the crowd. Paul Brass had her centre frame, which she could not have failed to notice.

“Is there anything we can do right away? Should I... reverse back a little?”

Non-committal but generally negative answers from those who had heard her.

Joan McKluskie approached her.

“What’s your name, dear?”

“Miranda, Miranda Tonkin.”

“Joan McKluskie, I chartered the bus. Is your handbrake on?”

“I think so...”

“Please check. We’re getting the truck to reverse and I don’t want your vehicle pulled backwards. I don’t think you’re entangled but I want to make sure.”

Miranda stood on the SUV’s sideboard and looked inside.

“Yes it’s on,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Joan. “Now would you wait a moment or so? I’ll get you to do something more directly.” Without waiting for a reply Joan left to attend to something else.

“I cannot begin to express how shocked I am, how saddened, by this... this terrible accident,” began Miranda, “As you have just seen, there was nothing I could have done to prevent this from happening, and that feeling of helplessness is just... eating away inside of me. I expect it will for the rest of my life.”

Skye thought she saw the woman check to see where the camera was pointing, and adjust her angle. It was hard to be sure with those sunglasses.

– www.pressrelease.com

– Or maybe she’s just in shock. But please...

“Like everyone I guess,” continued Miranda, “I’ve always thought that events like this only happen on TV, to other people. I do hope the dear child is going to be alright. And the dog, of course. And that poor dog.”

The impromptu soliloquy was interrupted by the truck's engine coughing back to life. After a few seconds it moved backwards a few steps. The SUV shuddered a little as the two machines disengaged, but stayed put. Joan appeared on the scene again.

"Now, Miranda is it? Would you please go release your handbrake this time, and make sure that your transmission is in neutral."

"Yes, of course," said Miranda, "neutral." She returned and climbed back into the SUV and presumably put it into neutral, Skye couldn't see much below her shoulders.

Joan clapped her hands sharply a few times to attract attention. The noise level fell as those nearby stopped talking to listen.

"People," she began in a commanding voice, "we're going to need ten or so good strong men. What we're going to do is lift up the front end of the vehicle, then roll the whole thing backward."

The only noticeable response was that some members of the crowd began edging back, particularly those in the frame of Paul Brass' camera.

After a moment Joan continued, "Folks, we don't have much time here, a little girl is being crushed by the weight of that thing."

Skye couldn't help herself. "Please," she added, "I think she's alive, but she can't breathe properly. We've got to get it off her."

Nothing.

Joan approached a solid-looking man. "What's your name, sir?"

He looked across nervously to check if he was on camera. "Er, John. Just John."

"Well Just John, we sure could use your help here."

"Ma'am, I'd like to. But you can't ask me to do that. Please."

"What about spinal injuries? Move her the wrong way and it's game over, she's paralyzed," said someone nearby.

"Best to wait for the ambulance," said another.

Nods and muted grunts of assent.

"What is wrong with you people?" asked Joan in frustration. "We don't have to move her, just get this big lump of metal off her. If enough of us lift together we can do that easily. What's the problem?"

"Litigation, ma'am. If that girl is injured, and we do just one thing wrong, we could make it worse. I'm not going to risk my house for that. I've got a family, ma'am."

"You'd let a little girl die for fear of a lawsuit?" demanded Joan in disbelief. "No one would sue you for something like that."

– Tillie Howe's father might.

Miranda nodded sagely. "He's right, it's true," she said. "I work in the legal profession. There are 'Good Samaritan' statutes, offering qualified immunity but they only cover medical care, not rescue services. There have been several inconsistent interpretations in recent years."

– What's she think she's doing now? Going on some late-night current affairs show?

"The need for legal reform in this area has never been greater," Miranda continued. "How many lives must be needlessly lost before we say 'enough is enough, this has to stop'?"

No one quite knew how to take this, but Paul Brass had it all down on tape. Or disk, or solid state or whatever. When he was sure Miranda was finished he started conducting vox pops with as many eyewitnesses as were willing.

It was about this time that the fire truck arrived, its occupants in a state of high alert. Apparently several people had dialed emergency services, and at least one of them had noted that the truck involved in the collision was in fact a petrol tanker. After they

had completely assured themselves that the tanker was not leaking, or in any danger of leaking in the foreseeable future, two firefighters gave the SUV a cursory inspection.

Joan McKluskie approached the senior of the pair and explained everything, impressing upon him the urgency of situation. He nodded and walked back to the fire truck. A short time later he reappeared with an ultra-compact hydraulic trolley jack

“Ah, excellent,” said Joan. “Now, let’s raise that thing up and see if we can get her out.”

The two men looked at each other uncomfortably.

“Come on gents, time’s a-wasting,” prompted Joan.

“Uh, the ambulance will be here very soon. Best if we wait for them.”

For once Joan had nothing to say, but the withering, incredulous look she gave them served as question enough.

“Ma’am, we wouldn’t take too kindly if they showed up and tried to do our job, so we extend the same courtesy to them. Plus there’s the small matter of all that extensive paramedical training they’ve received.”

“Then why did you just go and fetch that thing?” asked Joan, exasperated.

“Ma’am, contrary to what you might think, we are trying to help here. From what I heard on the dispatch radio, there’s a standard ambulance on the way. As in, not a fully tricked-out rescue truck. They won’t be carrying one of these. I want to expedite things.”

To underscore his point he wheeled the jack into place just behind the SUV’s front wheel and raised it until contact was made.

Joan snorted and turned away. She didn’t have long to brood, the wail of the approaching ambulance rendered the discussion pointless. The city’s finest medical response ambulance appeared, edging past the tanker and around the SUV. The siren was enough to cauterize thought and Skye put her fingers in her ears just before it died.

With an efficiency that impressed Skye the two paramedics got out and started to assess the scene. Joan approached them and summarized the situation concisely, impressing upon them the need for immediate action. To the relief of both women they agreed.

One of them checked the hydraulic jack’s seating and after satisfying himself gave the two firefighters an appreciative nod. He began to raise the front corner of the SUV while the other retrieved a wheeled stretcher from the ambulance.

The large vehicle tilted as its body was lifted asymmetrically. There was a hushed intake of breath from the group of spectators as they saw more clearly the two forms lying underneath. The paramedics lowered the stretcher to the ground and were contemplating their next move, when...

With a whine that became a yelp, Grover raised her head and carefully extricated herself. This drew a rousing cheer from the crowd, a response that seemed to invigorate her. As soon as she was clear she dragged herself to her feet and limped over to Skye. One of her hind legs was almost certainly broken, the angle didn’t look right and she was holding it off the ground. But the fact that she was alive and mobile seemed to lift everyone’s spirits.

Skye looked back to where Tillie was lying, motionless under the sloping roof of the SUV’s undercarriage. One of the paramedics was on his stomach trying to examine her. He crawled out and spoke softly with his colleague.

Grover had also noticed Tillie, and apparently recalled her mission in life. Stoically ignoring her own discomforts the dog attempted to make her way back to the SUV,

her desire to comfort and assist clearly communicated. This touching display of devotion deeply impressed the onlookers but threatened to disrupt the paramedics' efforts.

Skye stepped forward and took Grover firmly by the collar. Leading her towards the back of the SUV she looked around for assistance. To free herself up in case she was needed. A sympathetic face...

She met eyes with Just John. He stepped forward.

"Could you er, hold her for me? Keep her out of the way?"

"That I think I can do," said John. Genuine, perhaps the tiniest trace sheepish.

John took Grover around behind the SUV and tried to distract her. He was obviously comfortable with animals. Grover too was comfortable with strangers, but she was also injured, stressed and did not wish to be distracted. Even with one leg incapacitated she tried to pull away, catching John off balance. He almost lost his footing but steadied himself and ended up leaning heavily against the SUV's rear edifice. He gave Skye a look that said 'harder than it looks', braced himself and set about restraining the poor animal more firmly. Skye smiled thanks and turned her attention back to the paramedics.

A gasp put Skye on full alert, followed by several involuntary vocalizations. She looked around in panic, thinking perhaps that another vehicle was about to collide.

Closer.

Movement.

Wrong.

Slowly but surely the SUV was moving forwards. The diminutive trolley jack, not nearly wide enough to resist the lateral force, was tilting. One of the paramedics was partially underneath and froze, unable to process or accept what was happening. As the jack turned still further his colleague grabbed his legs and violently pulled him free. As one they turned and tried to scramble for the girl but gravity and time were against them.

There was a sound. That Skye (and pretty much everyone else present) would never be able to un-hear. Would never be able to forget. A visceral sound that you felt as much as heard. An unequivocal sound that marked the passing of a life.

– Oh God no...

Nothing made sense. Sometime later the details would slide into place in Skye's mind. The resulting torment of hindsight would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Handbrake.

Neutral.

Just John falling against the rear end trying to hang on to Grover.

The soft, city comfort suspension on that stupid, *fucking* SUV.

There was a stunned silence. Then paralyzed by shock and with minds on autopilot, everyone present invoked their personal deity, including the atheists. This was not the first time Skye had seen death, far from it. But all the countless other times had been expected, she had been prepared. This was different, she felt numb, helpless, battered.

Another siren, more flashing lights. The City Police arrived to this barren mindfield, figured out what they had to do and started doing it. Things like 'controlling the situation', 'establishing a perimeter' and 'keeping onlookers at bay'. When this was done they set about 'identifying key eyewitnesses', which as an unintended side effect also took care of 'dispersing the crowd'. Still later a large van arrived, allowing them to progress to 'taking statements'.

Grant Glaser lowered his eyes and shook his head slowly. Faultless and convincing, but Skye had noticed him wait until he was on camera.

“So tragic, so senseless,” said Donna-Lee.

Grant drew a deep breath and composed himself. “The nation mourns a little disabled girl whose only crime was coming to the aid of the dog she loved so much.” Another slow shake of the head and then, “We’ll be right back with more after these messages from our sponsors.”

“...and... out!” from one of the floor crew.

A flock of makeup artists and sundry attendants fluttered onto the set. Donna-Lee received the most attention with Grant coming a close second. Someone approached Skye brandishing a loaded powder brush and administered some to her nose and cheeks.

“Now, Skye? Great, really great,” called Grant from beneath his entourage. “You’re doing fine. We don’t need to go into all that much detail on the aftermath, so I’ll lead with a few questions, OK?”

“Sure,” said Skye. She looked up to her colleagues in the control room. Joan McKluskie gave a businesslike but approving nod while Gunther Huygens the Chandos high-flyer remained as enigmatic as ever.

Just before disappearing into the wings Brush Girl reached down and adjusted the fabric of Skye’s blouse.

Grant put his hand up to his ear and listened intently, then nodded curtly. He turned to his co-host and said quietly, “We just hit 45/60. Ratings. Fucking creaming it in. This is good D-L, this is very good.”

Donna-Lee allowed herself a small satisfied smile, but it barely registered against Grant Glaser’s avaricious leer.

“And just quietly,” he continued, “it ain’t gonna stop anytime soon. Walked in on production earlier. Two words: funeral rights.”

Donna-Lee raised her eyebrows, clearly impressed.

Grant grunted noncommittally. “Small problem of the family though. Complete cunts.”

Skye blushed. It wasn’t the language, it was the fact she agreed with Grant Glaser. Guy and Dimity Howe had been actively shaking her faith in humanity recently.

When the ad break was finally over the producers played a recap montage for the benefit of viewers who had just tuned in.

– Or to milk every last drop out of that footage they’d bought from Paul Brass.

“We’re talking live and exclusive with Skye Arbeiter, one of the organizers of yesterday’s Special Kids Snow Trip Tragedy,” said Grant Glaser when the prepared vision had come to an end. “Skye, the police haven’t announced any action in relation to this matter. I know it’s very early, and of course the Medical Examiner’s report has not been released, but do you think anyone should be charged over the incident?”

Skye had been prepared for this. Gunther Huygens had seen to that.

“I can’t comment on that,” she said simply.

“Don’t you think someone should be held liable?” asked Grant.

– Yes, that silly lawyer in her Juggernaught or whatever it was called.

– And the truck driver.

“It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to say anything about that.”

“OK,” said Grant, “let’s talk about Chandos International. Who are they? Tell us a little about them.”

“They’re... we’re an umbrella organization of charities, benevolent societies and international aid agencies. Overseas we’re involved in several third-world development projects, in cooperation with larger NGOs. But we’re also very busy closer to home, helping folk who are in need, who are less fortunate than you and I.”

“Wonderful,” said Donna-Lee nodding sympathetically.

“Absolutely,” agreed Grant. “And I understand that you are about to launch a new fundraising drive?”

Skye was prepared for this too. This was the only reason she had agreed to appear on the show, a view shared by both her colleagues in the control room.

“Yes. The Mend-a-Smile campaign is raising money for disabled and disadvantaged children in this country – like those I work with every day at the respite centre at E. J. McKluskie House. We provide full time and respite care for up to thirty special children. Children who through no fault of their own have been born with these difficult challenges, in many cases into families who find it very difficult to cope. Children who find themselves in a society where many people feel uncomfortable when confronted by them, and want them hidden away from sight. E. J. McKluskie House relies almost wholly on donations from private individuals and corporations. The Mend-a-Smile campaign will help us mend the smiles on these precious children’s faces.”

“Skye,” said Grant Glaser, “thank you so much for coming in and sharing with us in this most difficult of times.” At the floor manager’s cue he turned to face camera two. “And if you would like to contribute to Chandos International’s Mend-a-Smile campaign, the number and website are on the screen now. The CNC network is a gold sponsor of this worthwhile cause, so please join us.”

Five seconds of silence while the graphic was displayed.

“Make sure you tune in tomorrow,” said Donna-Lee, “when our coverage of the Special Kids Snow Trip Tragedy continues. We’ll be talking to Miranda Tonkin, the city lawyer whose car was involved in this terrible event.”

Over the duration of one second animation and vigor flowed into Grant Glaser and his easy, confident smile returned.

“When we come back, Jossica’s domestic bliss with their new AIDS orphan. That’s right, Flynn Marsden will be here with the latest from Hollywood.”

Skye looked up as the flamboyant celebrity gossip presenter appeared on set.

– www.surreal.com

Tucchio DiTrento was born near Trieste in northern Italy but emigrated with his parents and older sister to ‘the new country’ when he was five. He had very few recollections of his life in Italy – scattered images and impressions. Some were suspiciously close to photographs in Papa’s album so he couldn’t be sure they were genuine memories.

- The apartment, cracks in the walls and a tiny balcony with a wrought iron railing.
- Cobblestone streets with as many donkey-drawn carts as motor cars.
- Holding his big sister Aurelia’s hand amidst a forest of legs.
- The market, with fresh (and often noisy) produce.
- The old ladies of the town tousling his hair and saying ‘bello, bello’.
- Going to the old stone church wearing stiff clothes and oiled hair.

The new country was different. There was space, there was light and every surface was dressed conscientiously - asphalt, concrete or lawn. There were parks with shiny new swings, slides and seesaws.

And there was school. Mama had taught him a few words of English but they were no preparation for the shock in store for the recent immigrant schoolchild in the days before political correctness. There were tears, but they didn’t last long. Young Tucchio looked at the children in his class, listened to the strange babbling syllables they spoke and bit back on the terror.

- I know what I need to live at home, I can learn what I need to live at school.

You kept watching and listening until you saw a pattern in a tiny bit of it. Then you took that fragment, built on it and used it to learn some more. You figured things slowly, teasing out the angles until the system made sense. Then you could start to work things to your advantage.

Tucchio didn’t realize it at the time, but luck played a part. Luck, genetics, or something else. When he set his mind to something and applied himself seriously, he would seldom fail to achieve it. Later on this would become especially true in his interactions with others. Not everyone can learn that.

Of course his first objective was simple. To be *one of the kids* instead of *that Italian kid*. The language thing was the first challenge there. Tucchio listened to his playmates carefully, copying the words he heard them say. It didn’t work at first – they laughed at his attempts, even though he was sure he had copied the sounds perfectly. But if they could hear a difference without even trying, maybe that meant there was something he had not yet learned to hear.

It was a good approach. Tucchio discovered that the *joining-up* sounds and the *singing-a-song* sounds were just as important as the *word* sounds, and he practiced them at night by copying the newsreaders on TV. It worked too – the laughing stopped, mostly.

As he made his way through the school years, Tucchio developed from a shy boy into a fully-functioning adolescent. He found it easy to get good grades, almost meeting the expectations of his parents, and was popular with his classmates, although he was not the most extroverted of his group. In high school another blessing of his heritage became apparent – he was well served in the looks department. Not quite underwear model, but enough that the vibe he got from ‘the girls’ was ‘your chances are as good as anybody’s’.

There was still the issue of his name though. He was not the only Italian in the school, but Tuccio DiTrento was just so... *provincial*. Not to mention that almost everyone who read it got it wrong – ‘Tootch-ee-oh’ instead of ‘Took-yo’. In one mercifully short-lived episode he attempted to become known as The Tookster, an exercise that failed utterly to generate the cachet of coolness he’d imagined. But he did not let go the idea of changing tags.

The other troubling matter was his sense of clothing. In a startling departure from the clichéd assumptions of his peers he was caught again and again making the sort of faux pas that even the least socialized would avoid. ‘How on earth can an Italian be such a walking fashion vacuum?’ is one way it was commonly expressed. Tuccio learned to minimize mistakes of this nature by deferring to Aurelia’s judgment, not an easy thing for a teenager forging his identity.

During his freshman year at university Tuccio did change his name, or rather, anglicize it. He didn’t tell his family, but someone else did.

“Why, Tuccio? Are you ashamed us?” asked his mama the next weekend the family got together.

“No Mama, I will happily share my background with everyone I get to know.”

“Then why?”

“It’s just... being Italian is something *about* me, but it’s not the... When I meet someone for the first time, I want them to think of me as this *guy*, not this *Italian* guy. ‘Tuccio DiTrento’ kind of drowns out everything else about me.”

“So how are you called now, figlio mio?” she asked with resignation.

“Tucker Trent. I just made a tiny little adjustment. For the new country.”

The heavily-pregnant Aurelia already knew and was waiting for this moment, mischief in mind.

“Mama, to become ‘Trent’, you see Tuccio has removed *Di-o* from his name.”

– As in, God.

Mama thought this over.

“Io prego di non togliere da Lui il tuo cuore,” she said finally.

– *I pray you do not remove Him from your heart.*

His papa never once spoke of the matter.

Tucker sat in the foyer of Life/Style Coordinates yawning and flipping aimlessly through the pages of a magazine. It might have been GQ.

They seek him here

They seek him there

A triggered memory – every time. A special after-dinner, pre-bedtime performance. Young Rachael and Adam doing the exaggerated pantomime actions – hands shading eyes, turning left then right. Both dressed in their Sunday best plus hastily improvised, over-the-top accessories, Rachael wearing some of Aurelia’s makeup. Jeremy strumming away on his mandolin, an almost-successful substitute for banjo or ukulele, singing in that old-fashioned vaudeville style. Aurelia rolling her eyes, shaking her head, *this is all Jeremy’s doing, I didn’t have anything to do with it.*

Tucker smiled. It was all completely unfair – his sister knew that very well and so in all likelihood did her husband. But a lot of fun anyway. Jeremy was an incessant teaser and stirrer, sometimes annoying but never malicious.

He'd even put in an extra chorus at the end, after all the 'Oh yes he is's (with the children providing the echoes).

*He hasn't got the heart to read 'No Logo'
Naomi isn't worthy of St Calvin's sacred name
To such a dedicated follower of fashion*

That wasn't fair either. It was a bit like the joke about where you wanted to go when you die – heaven for the climate, hell for the company. Only this time it was which Klein would you prefer to have over for dinner – Naomi for the conversation, Calvin for the scenery (assuming there was an entourage involved, of course). And a dedicated follower of fashion? Real wide of the mark. Jeremy must have known that.

Then the children had gone away for five minutes, reappearing in their pajamas (Rachael with traces of smudged makeup) for kiss-goodnights.

Tucker smiled again. They weren't kids anymore. Rachael was in her first year at university, Adam would be graduating from high school soon. Aurelia and Jeremy still together – just.

"Tucker Trent?"

An unfeasibly young girl was approaching him from across the room. Her hairstyle and clothing were obviously deliberate, otherwise she would not be working here. However the impression they gave Tucker fell somewhere between color-blindness and a terrorist attack.

– Too what... postmodern?

"Yes, hi," said Tucker rising.

"I'm Zanita," began the girl brightly. "Linda has left us – did Marlene mention that? I'll be looking after you now. Let's go grab a seat. Would you like to follow me?"

"Uh, sure," said Tucker.

Zanita found a free consulting room and they sat down in a couple of high-backed office chairs, side by side at a desk. It was covered in semi-tidy stacks of fashion magazines and catalogues and a large computer display. No keyboard, must be a touchscreen. Zanita prodded and swiped it a few times, eventually producing what must have been Tucker's file. She scanned it briefly, nexted a few pages then gave up.

"Hmm. Linda didn't leave much in the way of notes. The history here looks like the full consolidated wardrobe design, but it's all... I don't get it." She rotated to face Tucker. "Why don't we start over?"

"Yeah, OK," said Tucker and gathered his thoughts. "When I was a teenager most people knew me as 'that guy with no fashion sense.' Which I found annoying". Tucker felt no need to mention the whole Italian thing at this stage, the girl looked confused enough as it was. "And if I got my sister to go shopping with me and choose my outfits, then it was 'that snappily dressed guy'. Now here's the thing – I found that annoying too."

Zanita said nothing.

"Now, I've learned a thing or two since then," continued Tucker. "If I really concentrate and study... I don't know, Men's Vogue or GQ or whatever, I can just about get by, I mean, put out the impression of being well dressed. But firstly, hey, I reckon I'd rather get my teeth pulled, it's just not something I want to spend my time doing. And secondly, when I do get it right, everyone's like 'Oh wow, you're looking sharp' – which as I hinted earlier, is not what I'm aiming for."

"So... what are you aiming for?" asked Zanita.

OK, let me put it this way – I want to be well dressed, but I don't want anyone to notice."

Zanita looked as if she might be doing a double-take on the inside.

"No, stay with me," said Tucker. "Let's say I get introduced to some keen-as-fashion reporter or something, then five minutes later you ask them 'What was that guy wearing?' and they say 'Gee, I can't remember, I didn't notice.' That's the sort of thing I'm aiming for."

Zanita finally found her tongue. "But why? You're fit, you take good care of yourself, you make enough to come to a place like Life/Style Coordinates – why wouldn't you want people to notice how well you dress? I mean, it's kind of the reason most of our clients come here, you know."

"I want to remove all the sideshows, all the distractions, between whoever I'm meeting and me, right here," said Tucker as he made a V with two fingers and pointed to his eyes. "When I make a first impression I want it to be what I'm saying and the look on my face as I'm saying it."

Zanita thought this over, then gave a decisive nod as her usual effusiveness returned.

"OK. Let's do the environmentals first, then we'll check the measurements."

With remarkable thoroughness she probed him for details on his workplace, apartment, gym, his preferences for nightlife and weekend recreation, the places he went grocery shopping. She pulled up a series of images on the touch display – fashion shots – and asked him to point out individuals that most reminded him of colleagues, friends, acquaintances and family members. Another set looked to be of interior designs – offices, homes, waiting rooms, shopping malls – and he had to rate them in terms of how comfortable he would feel there. Some of the questions struck Tucker as irrelevant – like choosing between pairs of seemingly random words. Others were *very* personal, detailing his relationships and sexual history. But the nonchalant manner in which Zanita asked them and noted his answers put Tucker at ease.

The image of Miranda Tonkin, back arched and beading with sweat, popped unbidden into Tucker's mind. Fingers reaching back to...

– Stop it. Focus.

He leaned forward to ease the slight pressure in his crotch. Miranda's face remained front and centre but the scene changed to her appearance on morning TV. Lights and makeup taking ten years from her age but giving them back as pounds. Something missing. Poise. Spouting a carefully rehearsed mishmash of non sequiturs, sound bites and bromides. Something like an amateur dramatics improv session, or a daytime soap hack.

– Not fair. Look what the girl's been through.

But at least his hard-on was gone.

Zanita had risen and was looking at him expectantly.

"Sorry, can you say that again?" said Tucker rubbing his temple. "I think I've got a headache coming on." He had intended to say it to cover his lapse of attention and was genuinely surprised to find it true.

– Something about the subconscious knowing stuff before the rest of you does?

"I was just going to confirm your measurements. Not that I'm implying you've put on any weight or anything. Oh, can I get you something for that? Painkillers?" she reached instinctively for her handbag.

"No, please. It's OK... very mild," protested Tucker. "But thanks anyway."

He stood as Zanita produced an electronic tape measure and went to work. Tucker found the mixture of professionalism and intimacy refreshing and, well... clean. Alien styling notwithstanding, there was an effervescent wholesomeness about this girl. Like a little sister.

When she was done they sat down again.

“You’re doing OK. No change to speak of in three years. Whatever your routine is, hey, it’s working.”

“Ah, thanks.”

“Now, I’ve gotta do some homework on this one,” she went on, indicating Tucker’s file on the display. “But I’m sure we’ll be able to come up with the right balance of... stealth couture? I’ll text you in a couple of days, you can come in and review the plan. Then we can start on procurement. Now for the ensemble diagrams, would you prefer laminated posters or PDFs? You can have both of course. And we’ll manage turnover via email – we’ll let you know when new articles arrive, and what you should bring in when you pick them up. Do you want to bundle the dry cleaning service? We don’t do it ourselves but we get good rates.”

– Damn, won’t be ready in time for Reinhardt’s little soirée.

Tucker wondered if he should risk going shopping himself, or make do with what he had at home. He really should have come here earlier, but so much had been happening recently. Zanita was looking at him expectantly.

“Ah, PDFs are fine, and er, no I’ve got a good place just across the road,” He said. He wasn’t sure whether he’d answered all the questions but Zanita seemed satisfied. She finished up some sort of gesture-based communion with the display that Tucker didn’t quite comprehend, spun around and rose up smiling.

“OK then,” she said as they walked back to the foyer, “well you have a really nice day. And I hope that headache clears up nice and quick.”

“Oh that, yes, thanks. Ciao.” And with that he was out the door.

Tucker could not remember the last time he’d had a headache, but he had a pretty good idea of what had triggered it. He also knew exactly where he needed to go to get it fixed. The place was a couple of blocks away and he set out purposefully towards it on foot. Not such a smart move – he was sweating before he’d covered a single block. That cold snap had broken a couple of days earlier, and the snow crowning the distant peaks was receding steadily.

– Pity I didn’t get up there to see it. Probably won’t get another chance.

And then those poor kids.

A week earlier Tucker had been preparing an afternoon snack. Make that a very late breakfast – it had been *some* night. The day had started with a long sleep in (much needed but unexpectedly alone), a taxi back to the Tollies car park to collect the Boxster, then the short drive home. The TV was on in the corner, some news bulletin update babbling away unheeded. Then something in the presenter’s tone of voice, or perhaps some key phrases that Tucker’s subconscious picked up on, made him suddenly pay attention.

The reporting was breathless and full of hyperbole, all completely unnecessary because there was footage – some really clear and hi-res, other stuff obviously shot with phones. And all right here – less than twenty minutes’ drive away, and right this morning. He watched in morbid fascination as the chain of calamity unfolded.

Then a jolt of recognition.

– Holy shit... I know that face, I know those crumpled clothes.

As in: rewind twelve hours / same face / covered in... well, DNA. Clothes likewise.

Now spouting all manner of gauche nonsense with a calm and measured delivery while ‘Special Kids Snow Trip Tragedy’ bannered across the bottom of the screen. The poor girl was probably in shock, but more of an existential shock – if there was such a thing – than the sort you’d expect someone to be in after their car had just killed a child.

A day later he left her a voicemail at her office, but she hadn’t returned his call yet.

And then the whole media circus began in earnest, starting with the big parade on morning TV.

– Skye someone-or-other: half-hippie-looking chick, one of the organizers of the trip. Really sweet girl, all heart.

– Miranda Tonkin: morning-show Miranda a completely different person to one-night-stand Miranda. There was a dissonance between her stilted lines and eloquent presentation that Tucker found troubling.

– Guy and Dimity Howe: the dead girl’s parents were utterly obnoxious. Despite the best attempts of Glaze-over and Bimbo-face to get them to express anything like grief at losing a daughter, all they could talk about was compensation and litigation.

And of course the funeral would be any day now. Paid for by the network, televised live, syndicated all over the country and streamed on dozens of websites. Following that in all probability would be the lawsuits. Those contemptible parents would have their day.

Every supermarket within a realistic distance of Tucker’s apartment offered a hundred or so flavors of all-in-one powdered coffee mixes, plus satchels and cartridges for dozens of domestic machines. But not a single one sold actual roasted beans, or even ground coffee. And he’d run out two days ago.

– Skip a lethal morning brew or two and get a headache?

– Maybe I should be cutting down a bit?

– You can take the boy out of Italy...

Tucker’s philosophy regarding coffee shops was simple. Firstly, he sought out those operated by Italian immigrants of ten years or less. Secondly, he would order his coffee in fluent, accent-free Italian. (OK, a mild Triestino accent.) There was a small risk that whoever was serving would not understand, but on the whole it had probably saved him hours of cumulative time explaining and convincing them that he really did want a ‘double-shot of Italian-style espresso in a small cup’. As opposed to some Jumbo-sized watery, pale-milky, frothy, sickly-sweet... horse piss.

The window signage proclaimed ‘Ristorante’ in a cheerful arc of green, white and red letters. Underneath it listed the wares on offer, including the magic words ‘caffè autentico’. Tucker stepped inside, suppressed his involuntary disappointment at the inadequate air-conditioning and ordered coffee from the counter. He then helped himself to a glass, a wine bottle full of water and an empty table facing the window. The place was about half full and most of the patrons were eating. Lasagne was popular today. It occurred to Tucker that it was actually lunchtime, but he wasn’t hungry – this was a purely pharmacological mission.

Tantalizing sounds and smells were coming from the espresso machine behind the counter, raising Tucker’s anticipation levels. The coffee arrived after just the right amount of time. He took a small sip, no sugar, no cream, then set the cup down to

cool a little. This was good, the real thing. Tucker willed himself to relax and unwind. The door jingled as someone entered but he paid no attention.

“Ooh, just the man I’ve been wanting to see.” Tucker recognized the Scottish accent immediately and looked up as the smiling reporter approached.

– Oh just great.

“Oh, er, hi. Wanting to see?”

“Well,” said the Scotsman taking the seat opposite Tucker uninvited, “it sort of occurred to me that perhaps I should apologize for, when was it... a week ago. Not that I’m all that big on apologizing, mind. But I think I may have been driving my mouth while under the influence, so to speak.”

“Oh, that’s OK, really,” said Tucker. He picked up his coffee and had another sip. The prospect of a quiet relaxing coffee or three evaporated.

“Of course,” continued the reporter, “if you did want to share anything about the inner dealings of Corder Synergy or Tolliver Holdings, my interest remains.”

“I would be astonished if it were any different, Mr Buchanan,” deadpanned Tucker.

“Oh, it’s Callum, please.”

Tucker had nothing to say and deliberately allowed the pause to become awkward.

“There was one other small matter,” said Buchanan. “It’s a bit, oh... delicate?”

“Really? And what would that be?”

Buchanan made a show of stroking his chin with a finger and looked up at the ceiling. “Well, towards the end of our last meeting I think I might have mentioned that I intended to go looking for another bar.”

“Yes, I think I recall that.”

“Well here’s the thing,” said Buchanan warming to his tale. “I didn’t actually leave right away. Well, OK, yes and no – I went downstairs for a while, where they let the plebs puff away. You know, cheaper drinks and such.”

A waitress had appeared at the table. Buchanan ordered a caffè latte and continued. “But it wasn’t quite to my fancy – downstairs I mean – so a little while later I was just about to amble back upstairs when who should I see coming down but your good self. And in the company of a very fine looking lassie no less. Cultured and intelligent too, from what I could see. I didn’t call out or anything, that would not have been polite – I’d had at least another whisky since our wee chat a bit earlier. So I said to myself, ‘aye, the lad’s got taste’, and that would have been that.”

“Very considerate,” said Tucker coldly.

It didn’t seem to faze Buchanan. “Except, like just about everybody else in the country, I saw the news the next day. Terrible, terrible business.” He said that bit like he meant it. “So of course I prick up my ears – and lo and behold, it’s the same lass I’d seen on your arm the night before. Oh, and later there’s this clinker of an interview on one of those morning shows. Anyway, I pick up her name and it rings a bell in my mind. Where had I heard it before? So I go and look over some of my notes – you know, random jottings – and do a bit of Googling as well.”

He looked across expectantly, but Tucker said nothing.

Buchanan signed. “I didn’t learn all that much really – she works at her Daddy’s law firm. Which in turn lists your company as a client on their website. Oh, and that she’s married. That’s all.”

Tucker marshaled his thoughts then said levelly, “Callum, a hundred years ago you could have called that a scandal, you could have published it or blackmailed me or whatever. Would have made your name. But what...” He shrugged. “I just don’t get it. Who is going to be interested in running the story? Who is going to be interested in reading it, or watching it or whatever? This is nothing.”

Buchanan's latte appeared, he left it alone.

Tucker continued with more determination. "And most importantly, how is this going to matter one little bit to me? I mean, what's the worst that could happen – my boss chews my ear about who I fuck? Miranda's husband divorces her?"

"Ooh now, calm down Tucker laddie," said Buchanan bringing back his trademark good spirits and easy charm. "Nobody said anything about blackmail. You're right, of course. I was just... you know, suggesting you might find the situation... delicate."

But Tucker wasn't done yet. "And all for what? You... digging for some supposed ulterior motive you figure Tolliver Holdings has opening the FreshStyle centers? Callum, in case you hadn't noticed I don't even work for them. I mean, who the fuck are you, and why do you keep popping up and harassing me?"

Buchanan appeared to deflate a little, but Tucker wasn't sure anything about this man was the genuine article. "OK, OK lad. It was a bit thin, I admit. And you're right, no one out there would give a toss about your little shenanigans with some spoilt lawyer." He shrugged. "Or the mysterious secret reasons behind some mid-sized tobacco company opening a stop smoking centre."

"So?"

Buchanan's expression suddenly became serious, his voice low and steely. "Tucker, I've done a lot of research into Elias Corder, and I don't mean Google. That man, that company is in bed with a lot of very unsavory characters. I'm talking corruption, organized crime, not to mention a bunch of shadowy international figures who scare the bejesus out of me. You may think you're in tight with him, you've barely made the bottom rung, lad."

Completely unexpected. Tucker couldn't think what to say.

"Well, if this is all true," he said at last, "then why are you... pumping me? I know nothing. Bottom rung and all that."

"I'm not pumping you, lad," said Buchanan kindly. "I'm priming you. You're on the up, we both know that. You're going to learn things that'll curl your hair. You're going to ask yourself, is this the kind of man I am? And if the answer is no, I want you to remember me."

Another drawn out silence. Buchanan drained his latte in three long draughts, fumbled in his pocket and threw a handful of change on the table. In the blink of an eye his jovial nature switched on again.

"Hey, it's been nice talking to you, lad. Still got my card?"

Tucker nodded.

"Well Cheerio then," he said as he got up and left.

Tucker's mind was abuzz. While he couldn't actually dismiss anything that Buchanan had said, it was confronting to hear it all spoken out loud in such a direct manner.

He made a mental note to do some Googling of his own, then ordered another espresso. When it arrived he downed it in one gulp, debating briefly whether he should stay awhile and have some lunch. But he wasn't hungry and the mood was well and truly gone.

On his way out he stopped at the counter and asked for some roast coffee beans. The proprietor smiled and nodded knowingly – Tucker was not the only customer to be seeking such wares. From underneath the counter he produced a wooden tray of hand-packed, heavy brown paper bags. They had been labeled with a black marker, about a third with a 'B', the rest with a 'G'. Not everybody had their own grinder.

This was the real deal, dark roast. The aroma reached up and tugged at the pleasure centers in Tucker's brain and just to be sure he bought two bags.

The mood might have been gone but his headache was not. If anything, it was worse. It couldn't have been the encounter with Buchanan – there was no way Tucker was that soft. Put it down to the vagaries of caffeine battling caffeine withdrawal. Or maybe dehydration. Whatever.

– Better get home and take something to knock it on the head.

He turned toward his apartment and set himself a modest pace, trying to banish the pain from his awareness. It sort of half worked.

In the kitchen Tucker discovered three half-used packets of cold and flu capsules – all the blue nighttimes used up, most of the yellow daytimes remaining. There was also a half-full bottle of antioxidants from however long ago he still thought they were a good idea, and three quarters of a roll of ancient antacid tablets.

He fared no better in the bathroom – there were two packets of band-aids (mostly odd shapes sizes) and some antiseptic. But the rest of the shelf space was taken up with skin, hair care and grooming products.

But no painkillers of any description.

Tucker thought briefly of taking an afternoon nap and trying to sleep it off, then remembered the two cups of industrial-strength coffee he had just had on an empty stomach.

– *Cazzo.*

So it was outside into the stifling heat again. He walked back down the street, looking around for a place that might stock pharmaceuticals. His local supermarket was the closest candidate so he walked in. In contrast to Ristorante, the aircon in this place was holding up just fine. He went straight to the medicine aisle and quickly located the section tagged 'Headache Medication'.

So far so good.

But then it just became frustrating.

– Most of the product names had changed since last time he had bought anything.

– Those that hadn't had certainly changed their packaging.

– There were a lot of herbal remedies masquerading as conventional drugs.

– And apparently there was no such thing as 'headache medication' anymore.

Aisle-tag notwithstanding, Tucker could not find a single packet of plain old simple painkillers or headache tablets anywhere. In their place was a bewildering variety of specialized preparations: Migraine headache, PMS headache, Hangover, Sinusitis headache, Tension headache, something called Hemicrania Continua, and NDPH.

– ???

'New Daily Persistent Headache'. Only recently discovered. Not very common (yet). But if you had it, this was apparently what you needed to take for it.

Shaking his head, he backed up to 'Tension headache' – it seemed the most generic of categories – and looked at some of the choices. After examining several packets closely he picked one that listed Ibuprofen as the main ingredient and proceeded to the checkout.

The cheerful teen behind the counter wore a badge that said 'Hi, I'm Claire'.

– Too Planet Teenager.

"Have you got your MCA card?" she asked from behind the counter.

"I'm sorry?"

“MCA card – you know, pharma program, your membership card,” prompted Claire.

Tucker was confused. “I... don’t know what you’re talking about. I just came here to buy these.” He brought his hand up to his forehead. “Headache, you know?”

Claire pointed to a panel on the packaging. “See, it says here it’s a class C. You need to be in a pharma program to get these.”

Tucker took a deep breath.

– She’s not doing this on purpose.

“What are my options, Claire?” he asked.

“You could buy one of the herbal preparations,” she offered. “They’re class D.”

Tucker was not a strong believer in herbal medicine. “I don’t think so,” he said.

“Or,” continued Clair, “you could sign up right here. We’re agents for Vitalics Consolidated, won’t take a minute, but you’ll have to go to the service desk, over there.”

Tucker thanked her and walked over to the chest-high counter Claire had indicated. A plump-looking thirty-something called Rebecca looked up and smiled.

“Hi sir, how can I help you?”

“Hi, I uh... just wanted to buy these, and the girl over there said I had to sign up for something. Pharma something.”

“Sure no problem,” said Rebecca. “We act as agents for Vitalics Consolidated, one of the leading medication consolidation agencies. Would you like me to go over some of the benefits?”

“Well, I really just wanted to buy these,” said Tucker. “To get rid of this headache.”

“That’s no problem. I’ll leave you with this brochure, it’ll tell you everything you need to know. Can I see some photo ID please? We’ll need your SSN too.”

“Sure,” said Tucker and handed over his driver’s license and SSC.

Rebecca scanned the cards and began typing information into her terminal.

Tucker was still confused. “What are these agencies? What do they do?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m not too sure of the details,” said Rebecca. “Something about reducing over medication, capping liability insurance premiums, and passing on savings because of our bulk buying power.” She tapped a few more keys. “Oh, and there’s some sort of lock-in deal with the health cover companies. It’s all in the brochure.”

“OK...”

A machine next to Rebecca spat out a freshly minted card and she handed it to Tucker. “Next time your doctor gives you a prescription, he’ll register it against this. Then all you need to do is present it at any participating drugstore and you can pick up. You can also go online and order your recurrent meds direct. Have them sent right to your door. But you’ll need to show your card when they’re delivered.”

“When did all this business start?” he asked, shaking his head.

“About a year ago. There was a big mail out at the time.” Now it was Rebecca’s turn to be perplexed. “Hasn’t your doctor spoken to you about this?”

Some vague recollection chimed in Tucker’s mind but he couldn’t remember any details.

“I guess I’m a healthy guy. I can’t remember when I last went. Probably not in the last year.”

“And you haven’t tried to buy any medication since then?”

Tucker shrugged. “No.”

This must have struck Rebecca as weird. She said nothing, but Tucker could sense she was rolling her eyes on the inside. He took the card and his tablets and paid for them at the checkout.

“Easy, huh?” chirped the friendly Claire.

“Uh, yeah, thanks,” said Tucker and headed back out into the afternoon heat haze.

– If I didn’t have a headache when I walked into that place, I reckon I would now.

He went home and exceeded the recommended dosage.

The Dreadnought didn't have a very tight turning circle. Miranda found a side street and used it to make a U-turn without hitting the gutter. It had just started to rain and she was trying to balance looking for street numbers against extra careful driving and it was fraying her nerves.

Which were pretty shot to begin with.

– Where on earth is the fucking Circle of Praise community church?

The satnav sat there silently mocking her from its mount in the dash. It had discharged its duties, informing her that she had arrived at her destination and had nothing more to say on the matter.

She was just about to pull over and make a phone call when she spotted the sign. It was pretty easy to miss, sharing space with a dental practice, an accountant and several generic business offices.

The Dreadnought purred down the ramp into the underground car park. It was running like a charm. After the police had finished their investigations she had taken it to her mechanic for a quick once-over. The rear bumper needed replacing, but it wasn't urgent.

Hardly more than cosmetic.

Structurally sound.

And the front bumper wasn't even scratched.

Miranda pulled into an empty bay and switched the car off. Closed her eyes, took a deep breath and tried to centre herself.

Everything was happening at once. You'd think that Alistair's stroke, the PLEx franchise and that little business with Tucker would be enough, but no, all of a sudden there's this accident that claims the life of some disabled girl, being invited to go on TV and having it turn out so... awkward. Not to mention finally retaining a publicity agent, *days* after she should have thought of it, after it could have made a difference.

And a lawyer, a friend of her father's who would probably do it *pro bono* if needed, though current opinion was that she was pretty safe. The police had paid no attention to her after she had given her statement.

And finally this evening meeting, this Riding High thing in the not-so-terribly auspicious premises of the Circle of Praise community church.

What a day.

Without exception, everyone at Ton-Ton-Ton had been treating her very well. From her father and the other partners down there had been nothing but support, varying only in the familiarity with which it was expressed. Even her performance on TV, so turgid she could barely think about it, had generated praise and support. The closest anyone had come to acknowledging it as a debacle was 'Mama' Cass from the temp pool who'd offered 'You did just fine, Miranda love. Everyone knows what an asshole that Glaser is, don't worry about it.'

But this harsh self-criticism was only the beginning of Miranda's concerns. She was facing a crisis of another kind. A crisis of identity. Sure, there was a terror of not being seen to react appropriately. She spent a lot of mental effort worrying about what she should project. But it went deeper than that.

– *What am I even supposed to be feeling?*

Her childhood had not been stolen. Her schooling was better than most. Her degree, career and lifestyle were well above the median. But nothing had prepared her, for this. She felt completely unequipped.

Delton had of course been a rock. In both senses of the word – a pillar of strength in his own understated way, but also unresponsive, uncommunicative. She couldn't blame him, he had just as much on his plate as she did on hers. He didn't share much, but office politics at Wardell Biotech and Pharmaceutical were getting complex, as was the relationship with Sheldrake Life Sciences. At the moment he was away again, back at Sheldrake HQ for more meetings.

And to her great relief he hadn't questioned her reasons for being out driving so early on a Saturday morning. So it appeared that repercussions from that Tucker business wouldn't be compounding her problems.

– What was I thinking?

– I'll *never* do anything like that again.

– Or maybe...

Everything really was happening at once.

Earlier that day, Miranda had stood on the makeshift platform in the Paralegal Services division public space with her father and the two other partners. To one side a row of consulting cubicles had been cordoned off with a wide blue ribbon. The lounges and coffee tables had been moved up against the wall on the other side, and two refreshment-laden tables installed near the entryway. There was champagne on offer (or sparkling white or whatever you were supposed to call it) but it was only mid-morning and most people were sticking to the orange juice or coffee.

She looked down at the assembled faces – mostly Ton-Ton-Ton personnel, but with a few guests here and there. At the front were four or five representatives of the media, one with a single camera on a tripod. Miranda suppressed the small bud of apprehension in her stomach – they were quite tame, one was here on contract, the rest by invitation and her father had made sure they would stay on topic. Most of the people were gazing around at the new space, the décor and in particular the giant array of PLEx feed plasma displays. It was not a large crowd, certainly not the 'sea of faces' her interior narration had anticipated. The TV image of another enterprise launch popped into her mind – that FreshStyle business with one Tucker Trent on the podium and that silly fake terrorism stunt.

– Let's hope this goes smoother.

When it was time Geoffrey Gratton stepped behind the microphone and tapped it with a fingernail. Silence fell quickly and he began.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank you for being here at the inauguration of Gratton Hetherington Tonkin's Paralegal Services division. We're all very excited and optimistic about this endeavor, which we believe will be good for our business, good for the legal system and good for our true constituency – the general public. We've created this division as a public service and advice bureau for anyone unsure of their legal options, and also to combat the so-called 'Responsible Rights' campaigns which we feel are eroding the legal rights that we have held dear for generations.”

Gratton was clearly preaching to the converted here. After a few 'hear hear's he continued.

“Responsible Rights extremists are paring back your right to litigation. By promoting an unrealistic interpretation of personal responsibility, they are allowing deep-pocketed multinational corporations to worm their way out of facing up to their responsibilities.” He waved his hands dismissively. “Of course, occasionally there are some absurd examples of litigation, and they make great headlines. But these... zealots have seized on those aberrations to push their own hard-line agenda.”

The conviction in his voice rose a notch. “With our new Paralegal Services division, and in particular our participation in the PLEx network, we start fighting back. We will stand with our citizens, equipping them with the knowledge and power they need to stand up for their rights. We will provide an entirely new framework for legal action in this state, and in this country.”

With his soundbytes safely unloaded he relaxed a little. “And now I’d like to ask Miranda Tonkin, head of Paralegal Services, to say a few words.” He turned to Miranda and smiled warmly. “I’m sure we’re all aware that Miranda has had some unanticipated stresses over the past few days. But we have also seen how professional she has been throughout it all, proving – if any proof were needed – what an outstanding and capable woman she is, and reaffirming our confidence in her. Miranda?”

Miranda stepped up to the microphone to polite but genuine applause.

– Focus and control.

“Firstly I’d like to thank the partners for their faith in this venture and for giving me the opportunity to lead it. I’d also like to thank every one of my team for their first class effort in keeping to a very tight schedule. Well done. And finally to you all for being here to share our excitement at the opening of this division.”

Scattered applause.

“The Paralegal Services division will provide free advice to members of the public who are considering mounting litigation. But rather than simply explaining to people their rights, we aim to go further, to take a more proactive role. Our message to the public is clear: if you are uncertain as to whom you can pursue, we can help identify parties that a court is likely to hold accountable. If you have suffered misfortune, but are uncertain of who is at fault, we can help you find who to blame... and sue. The Responsible Rights movement are seeking to take away your victim status. We can help you reclaim it.”

Not as much reaction as she’d imagined. She shrugged and spread her hands.

“But this is no mere soapbox to drum up more business for ourselves. We will also act as agents for other specialist legal services providers, hooking potential clients up with the firm most suited to their specific situation.”

One of the journalists, a small wiry woman with slightly too much makeup raised her hand.

“Ms Tonkin, what can you tell us about the PLEx service?”

Miranda wasn’t sure whether this was a bona fide question or a prearranged prompt. It didn’t matter.

“PLEx stands for Prospective Litigation Exchange,” said Miranda with renewed momentum. “It’s a new paradigm for scalable litigation. A stock exchange, if you like, for class action suits. The proposed suits are listed on the exchange, they issue prospectuses and anyone can subscribe, either as a plaintiff or investor. The unit price of the shares will rise and fall, reflecting the combined wisdom of the market, and is a strong indicator of the eventual success or failure of the suit, and more importantly, the payoff.”

This was good – everyone seemed to be paying more attention now. Evidently quite a few were unaware of this development.

“Eventually one of the law firms will decide to make what is known as a voting bid, and the suit is closed for regular investors and plaintiffs. If there’s more than one firm the PLEx software conducts an auction. The winning firm then places their voting bid money in trust and runs the suit as a standard class action, financing it with the suit’s capitalized value and any additional money they choose. If they win, the payout and the voting bid money is divided between the firm, the investors and the plaintiffs according to the PLEx formula.”

The journalist raised her hand again, lower this time. “And if they don’t win?”

“Then it’s just the voting bid money that is distributed,” said Miranda.

The thin woman looked skeptical. “I can’t see who wins here. It looks like a pretty tough gamble – both for investors and the lawyers. And the plaintiffs have to share their money with everyone – and that’s only if they win.”

Miranda smiled. She was right in her comfort zone here. “The beauty of the system is the PLEx formula. It’s very complex, and I’m told very few people actually understand it. But the benefit is simple. It will allow a large number of actions to proceed that otherwise would never get off the ground.”

– Pause for effect. And...

“A very large number. And I’m sure I don’t need to explain how that will benefit our industry.”

That brought them back. A few started clapping. Miranda bowed her head in acknowledgement.

“Thank you, thank you. Now next on the agenda is to cut the ribbon. And...” Here she stopped to make it look more spontaneous. “I know this wasn’t in the plan, but I would like to ask Bryce Tonkin to help me cut it.” She turned around. “Dad?”

Her father was clearly surprised at this, and pleased. Miranda picked up the scissors from the lectern and together father and daughter managed to hack through the ribbon. It was a task more suited to one hand than two, but made a touching scene.

When that was done she turned and said “I now declare the Gratton Hetherington Tonkin Paralegal Services division...” then looked expectantly at her father.

“Open!” he finished.

A little later in the day the nascent Paralegal Services division’s first potential client sat at a consultation desk across from Miranda and smiled lazily. His vibe, his image to Miranda’s critical eye was slacker cool with a dangerous undercurrent. He was well dressed in a casual way and sported a fading shiner on one eye, more yellow than purple. There was a small scab above the eye and another on his upper lip. Apart from that he looked to be in pretty good shape.

Miranda assumed her consultant persona and closed her eyes as it took effect.

“Hi, I’m Miranda Tonkin.”

The man rose and offered his hand across the desk. “Jason. Jason Curnow,” he said, then “Hey, you’re the... well if that isn’t the freakiest thing. Total twilight zone, eh?”

This was a little different to the way Miranda had hoped things would go.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“You know, you and Skye, and now hey... weird.” He shook his head, laughing.

Miranda was now completely lost. She waited until he had composed himself and tried to bring things back on track.

“Yes, that was me the other day, and yes, this is where I work,” she said pensively. “A dreadful business, devastating. Still, I’m sure that’s not why you’re here.”

“Nice set of wheels, the Dreadnought,” said Jason undeterred. “Bit underpowered for my taste, and you wouldn’t want to take it off road, but nice.”

“Let’s concentrate on your reason for visiting Gratton Hetherington Tonkin,” insisted Miranda, a little firmer this time.

“Sure, no problem,” said Jason. He pointed to his face. “As you can see, I’ve been in a bit of an altercation. There were four of them, jumped me from behind. Late at night.”

“You were mugged?” asked Miranda.

“Yeah. I reported it. My wallet was full of that fancy Treloars money – you know, Dazzlers – the stuff they can track with their readers. The cops helped me – a bit. We got all of that back. The muggers must have realized what it was and dumped it real quick.”

“Do you know who they were?” Miranda’s interest was waning, this wasn’t shaping up as a very good prospect. Muggers as a rule do not have deep pockets.

“No I don’t, but it doesn’t matter,” said Jason dismissively. Then in with a hard edged conviction he added “I mean, if I did find out who they are I’d pay each of them all a little visit. Return the favor so to speak.” He laughed. “But I wouldn’t need your help for that. It’s not why I’m here.”

Miranda arched an eyebrow coquettishly then caught herself.

“What do you know about Tollies nightclub – you know, that high-tech smokers’ joint?” asked Jason.

“I’m aware of that establishment,” said Miranda evenly.

– ...where it all began.

“A few nights ago I was there, got a little... well, loud. Then out of nowhere a bunch of bouncers, all body armor – real special forces types, they’re all over me. They used some sort of neural stun gun on me, paralyzed me and threw me out. Thing was, I was holding onto my wallet at the time, and I must have dropped it or something. They threw it out after me, money went flying everywhere. In full view of everyone queuing outside. Plus anyone up and down the street. Got jumped a couple of minutes later, in the car park.”

Suddenly it was interesting again. Over-enthusiastic security was a rich vein.

“And you’re interested in pursuing legal action against the nightclub?”

“Absolutely,” said Jason with venom. “There’s no way those punks would have picked on me normally. The Tollies fuckers completely sewed me up as a mark. Handed me to them on a fucking plate. Ah, excuse my French.”

“That’s OK, I understand. You have every reason to be upset,” said Miranda. “But before we continue, there is one thing I do have to mention. Gratton Hetherington Tonkin have in the past provided legal services for Tolliver Holdings, including work on the licensing, planning permissions and insurance for the Tollies chain of nightclubs. Now at present we are not acting for either of those organizations, so I do not see any potential for conflict of interest. But I thought I should disclose this, in case you consider it a problem.”

Jason looked confused.

“Don’t worry,” said Miranda, “this sort of thing happens all the time in the business. But if you want to find another firm, it’s your choice.”

“Nah, that’s OK. Let’s go on.”

Miranda opened a file on her console and began to take notes. “Now when did this incident occur, exactly?” she asked.

“Not last Friday night, the one before. About half past eleven.”

Miranda froze, but controlled it before he noticed.

– That was when I was...

“And was this in the free section of the club, or upstairs?” she asked casually.

“No, just downstairs.”

Miranda took a few more of his personal details and added them to the file.

When this was done she logged into PLEx and did a query for ‘Tollies’ and ‘Tolliver’. There were a couple of prospective suits registered against Tolliver – the terminally ill and their families. Not many investors though. They didn’t look like raising enough capital to snare a voting bid.

– Hope springs eternal.

For Tollies in particular there was one suit but it was suffering from the converse problem – there were a few investors but no plaintiffs.

– What the?

– Ah, anti-tobacco campaigners.

And of course they didn’t have a hope in hell. The legal work behind the Tollies chain was watertight. Miranda had looked it up.

“PLEx doesn’t seem to have anything suitable already listed,” she explained. “We could float a new one for you. There’s a non-refundable listing fee of \$500 – that’s all you’d ever pay, then we’d have to wait a few months to get as many co-plaintiffs and investors on board. Or we could just go it alone. That’ll cost more but you’ll get to court sooner.”

“How much?” asked Jason.

Miranda shrugged and held out her hands in an attempt at levity. “Well if you need to ask... No, there’s a sliding scale. The less you pay up front, the more of the payout we keep. I can’t give you a firm quote until we do a bit of research and get our risk assessors to go over it.”

“OK, that sounds good,” said Jason.

“You’d like us to look into the incident?”

“Yes, I would like that.”

Miranda clicked on one of the action buttons on her display, walked over to the corner and returned with the freshly-printed form.

“We’ll need your authorization to make inquiries on your behalf,” she said placing it in front of Jason and handing him a pen.

Jason scanned it briefly and signed.

Miranda took a few contact details and entered them into a new file – the very first one in the PSD folder.

“All good,” she smiled when that was done. “We’ll contact you in a few days.” She took a handsomely printed folder from a neat pile on her desk and handed it to him. “Before you go, here’s an info pack on the services we offer, and our current promotions. If you join our Frequent Plaintiff Program this month, we’re offering a free subscription to the PLEx suit of your choice.”

Jason smirked but didn’t say anything. Miranda suppressed her annoyance.

“No?” she said rising and offering her hand. “Well, thanks for choosing Gratton Hetherington Tonkin. We’ll be touch, you have a nice day.”

Jason looked around the room and pointed to the array of plasmas. “Nice getup, by the way. Is all your IT done in-house?”

“I believe we outsourced some of it,” said Miranda. “But most of what you can see here came with the franchise deal. PLEx.”

“OK, cool.” He shook his head and chuckled again. “Coincidence or what, eh? OK, be seeing you.”

– Freelance webmaster? Didn’t quite seem the type.

And what on earth was he on, going on about her and Skye like that?

It was Rikki Morgenstern who’d suggested Miranda attend a Riding High meeting. Rikki Morgenstern, of Morgenstern Personal PR was an understated weapon. There was something about this slim, stylish, beguiling woman that impressed Miranda immensely. She *got* people, and thought nothing of using that understanding for whichever goal her mind was currently set upon. As soon as Miranda realized this, she was in awe. This was a skill she would kill for. Probably literally.

There was one point that troubled her slightly, and that was the casual way Rikki expressed her initial goal.

“First priority Miranda, we’ve got to humanize you.”

Still... what a pity she hadn’t consulted the woman before going on TV. She could have been off on a major offensive instead of this current salvage operation.

“And you’re sure we don’t need to tell any of the media people that I’ll be there?” Miranda had asked two days earlier.

“Absolutely. We don’t want cameras, the Riding High people wouldn’t appreciate it, and our public don’t need to see anything. Don’t worry. Someone there is sure to blog or twitter, and the information will percolate through to the people we want to notice it. Trust me, I’ve done this before.”

Miranda climbed down from the Dreadnought and walked across the car park. It was about a quarter full of SUVs of all shapes and sizes. Well not quite – they were all SUV-shaped, but there weren’t many that would qualify as small. There were a few inexpensive budget models with plastic hubcaps over steel wheels, lots of mid-priced ‘mum’s taxi’ types with child seats fitted in the rear, and a small number of high-end luxury models. There were old rattlers and shiny new ones, base-model factory-plain ones and others festooned with every accessory devised by marketing department – roof racks, tubular bumpers, winches, fog lights, spot lights and side steps. One or two even sported evidence of having been taken off-road.

Miranda’s was the only Dreadnought though.

Inside the lobby a small trestle sign read ‘Riding High, Level 2’. She took the elevator and found the Circle of Praise community church premises. There were a few tables in the foyer, two had neat arrays of self-serve refreshments, the rest were being set up with brochures as if for a trade show. The meeting hall was a large, austere room with a raised platform at one end and stacks of chairs up against one wall. About thirty had been arranged in a large circle in the centre, and some relaxing instrumental music was playing very softly on the ancient PA. Miranda went back to the foyer and got herself a plastic cup of apple juice.

As more people filed in, some greeted each other gathered together in small groups talking quietly. Others stood alone, smiling tentatively with anyone who glanced their way. One or two were moving around the room, quietly but warmly greeting those present. The atmosphere was subdued, the mood hesitant.

“Hi, is this your first visit?” inquired a plump middle-aged woman positively beaming with empathy. Miranda did not detect any flash of recognition in her eyes.

“Yes, yes it is.”

“Then welcome, so nice to see you.” She reached inside a leather document bag and took out an elegantly printed glossy cardboard folder. “We’ve got a little something for first-timers. Here, see, it’s got a brochure, Melanie’s card – you’ll meet her soon – and this badge.”

“Thank you very much,” said Miranda accepting the folder.

“Why don’t you try it on, dear – the badge I mean? Don’t worry, you’ll be just fine.” She pointed to the door to the meeting hall. “We’ll be moving inside in about five minutes. Have a nice evening.”

“Thanks,” said Miranda.

She wasn’t so sure about the badge, but pinned it to her top anyway. A few of the others were wearing theirs.

When it was time everyone moved into the hall and sat down. A woman stood up and signaled for attention. She was in her mid-thirties and dressed in what might have been some sort of uniform, but was generic enough to leave doubt. Her red hair was cut in a severe bob that moved in lockstep with her head.

– Enough product there to keep the former Yugoslavia together.

“Good evening people,” she began, smiling like a bank teller, “and welcome to the Riding High group. I’m Melanie, and I’ll be your facilitator this evening. I see that once again we have some first time visitors with us – that’s great, a special welcome to you.” Melanie looked around the circle, meeting eyes briefly with Miranda and three or four others.

All with those badges.

“Now before we begin,” she continued, “I’d like to ask that you switch off your phones if possible, I’m sure we’d all appreciate that.”

Miranda and about ten others reached for their phones. Miranda switched hers to stealth mode. Delton was interstate, unlikely to call at this time of the evening.

Melanie smiled. “Thanks so much. Now let’s begin by going around the circle, introducing ourselves and giving brief summaries of our stories. Just one or two sentences please, we will all have opportunity to share more later on.” She looked encouragingly at the tall man seated to her left.

He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath and began. “Doug Riordan, ours is just a CR-V. Three months ago I was reversing out of our driveway and I...” He bowed his head.

“It’s OK Doug,” said Melanie softly, “we’re all here for you.”

“It was the neighbour’s kid, he was riding a tricycle near the curb. I never saw him. He... he didn’t make it.” He looked at his knees and shook his head.

“Thank you,” mouthed Melanie.

“Jen Mallory,” said the woman next to Doug. “I drive a Range Rover. Last October I’d just picked up my daughter from school, and I was about to pull out, it was busy and I was concentrating on the traffic behind me. I saw a gap and floored it. I should have been looking in front of me. I hit one of my daughter’s playmates – she was standing there trying to cross the road. She’s... she’s in a wheelchair, she’ll be like that for the rest of her life.”

“Pacey Clarke.” Short and overweight. “Lexus RX. A couple of months ago, backing out of the garage. My son was playing with his new inline skates. It was his birthday. He must have been bending forward for balance, or maybe he’d fallen over. We’ll never know...”

“Rosa-Lee Santosa.” Young, dark and pretty with a neck brace. “I was taking my sister and her family to the beach six weeks ago in our new Grand Cherokee. We were

passing another car, and just clipped the median. I tried to control it but we rolled over. My niece was waving her arms out of the window. They say she was not wearing a seat belt. She's still in a coma."

"Deanna Tognetti, we've got an old Highlander." A little older, outdoorsy looking. "We were going camping, I was just going down to get some last-minute groceries. My dear, sweet little grandson had decided to play camping, on the turning bay in front of the garage. I never saw him, he had made a tent out of a cardboard box. Shattered his leg, but it could have been so much worse."

And so it went on around the circle, story after story of horrific, tragic loss. Young lives snuffed out or changed forever; relatives, friends and neighbors stunned by grief and irrevocable consequences.

When it was Miranda's turn she took a moment to look around the circle of faces. There was comfort, support and love in the room and it felt good.

"Miranda Tonkin, I drive a Dreadnought. You may have seen it on the news, two weeks ago. The Special Kids Snow Trip Tragedy? I was trying to get past a bus that had stopped half off the road, when a dog ran out in front of me and I hit it. After I'd stopped a little girl came out to comfort it, then I was struck from behind by a truck – it pushed me right over the top of her. The poor little thing sustained further injuries while being rescued, and died at the scene."

Miranda thought she could detect the subtlest of changes in the atmosphere. Was it her imagination, or was there an ebb in that wave of solidarity and fellowship? She listened and watched carefully as the rest of the group took their turn.

Graham, Hummer, hit his son, collapsed lung.

Sophie, rolled an MDX, nephew with serious concussion, suspected brain damage.

Kelly, Escape, side-swiped a motorcycle, kid in traction.

On and on, around the circle.

"Thank you so much for that," said the firmly-coiffed Melanie when that was done. "What I'd like to do now is to extend an invitation to anyone who would like to share their feelings about their experiences. Is there anyone who would like to start?"

And out it all poured, from all directions, in no particular order. The feelings that could only be shared with other SUV drivers.

Grief. Guilt. Defiance. Confusion. Feelings of rejection by a society that refuses to understand.

After a longer-than-usual lull Miranda surprised herself by joining in, unplanned. "What really gets to me most is the great big emptiness in front of me. I've spent my whole life knowing what is expected of me, knowing what to do next, knowing how to behave. And now it's like... I don't even know what I should be feeling."

– Wha... I wasn't going to...

But it wasn't the faux pas she'd feared. Everyone just assumed she was still in shock. "Don't worry, sweetheart, it'll come. We're all feeling *for* you here," said someone, followed by a chorus of 'yeah's.

By now Miranda's earlier suspicions were confirmed – she could detect a pecking order being established. Points were awarded for how horrific the accident was, how closely the victim was related to the driver, and what kind of vehicle he or she was driving. Bonus points available depending on the level and originality of psychological scarring incurred. So Brian, who had run over his neighbor's dog in a small entry-level soft-roader didn't rate at all, while Erin's decapitation of her three-year old daughter in a fully-optioned Porsche Cayenne put her easily on top of the heap for tonight.

And all this meant that Miranda's case was clearly a problem.

Firstly the Dreadnought, imposing as it looked, and in spite of (or perhaps because of) its impeccable celebrity credentials, was not considered a ‘serious’ SUV. Not by this crowd.

Secondly, the victim was neither relative, neighbor nor friend. She was also disabled. No coos of ‘such a promising child’, no ‘oh the unrealized potential’.

Thirdly, she couldn’t really stake a claim to the burden of responsibility – the original impact was caused by her being rear-ended by the truck, and the awful business of the trolley jack was currently being thrashed out between the fire department and the ambulance company.

And finally there was the business of her appearance on morning TV. While being caught on camera and having the whole episode broadcast on prime time was good, it was pretty clear to Miranda that she hadn’t exactly *advanced the cause* in the eyes of these conflicted SUV enthusiasts, so points would probably be deducted for that.

As the evening wore on Miranda imagined the proceedings as a landscape, with sharp, cathartic mountain peaks, undulating emotional hills and valleys, and in the distance calm, fertile plains. Melanie was the leader, skillfully guiding the group on the long journey towards their objective. And everyone was working together, helping and encouraging each other.

– But this is not my journey.

“Let’s share some of the positives about our vehicles,” prompted Melanie at one stage. “What we love about our SUVs.”

This was met with a dozen different variations on the themes of size, power, a feeling of safety, being able to see further in all directions.

When that was exhausted, she asked “Is there anything that we don’t like about them? Any negatives?”

There were only a few, half-hearted responses to that, along the lines of:

“They’re gas-guzzlers.”

“The looks some people give us.”

“They’re sometimes harder to park.”

Miranda bit down on a rising sense of antipathy to these people.

– What about ‘a tendency to roll if you drive them like an idiot’?

– Or ‘not being able to see anything close to you’?

This caught her off guard and confused her. Wasn’t she supposed to be *one of them*? Weren’t they all SUV owners together, supporting each other in their time of need? The sense of belonging, so intoxicating a few moments ago, was evaporating.

The momentum was broken. Miranda listened politely for the rest of the evening but didn’t join in again. Before the meeting ended there were two exchanges in particular that she found memorable.

The first was when Melanie had said “I’d like us now to explore how we feel others treat us, how we feel society treats us.”

“What society doesn’t realize is that we’re the victims here,” said someone. “We’re the ones left behind to deal with life, to face our loss, to face our family members.”

“We’re the ones who have to pick up the pieces,” added...

– Erin? The one with the Cayenne who...

– Oh please.

But the room remained clinically irony-free.

The second was some advice the Melanie had offered. It was during a discussion of the feelings of emptiness and lack of direction experienced by those who had lost loved ones.

“These are natural feelings,” she said, “and whether we realize it or not, we are all equipped with natural ways of processing these feelings. But that doesn’t mean that all we can do is wait for this to happen – we can take a more active role. Take control, fill the emptiness, give your mind and soul some energy to heal. Take up a new hobby, try to meet some new friends, get a pet. Some of you might even consider having another child.”

After a cute little ritual of holding hands with the people on each side and chanting ‘Riding High together, Riding High forever’, the meeting was over. Everyone moved back into the foyer for some more refreshments and socializing. Miranda was surprised to see the table displays she had noticed earlier were all complete, and really had become a mini trade show. There were lightweight trade show booths, portable exhibition displays and tables full of neatly stacked brochures and business cards. Curious, she moved closer so that she could see which companies were involved, but not close enough for the representatives to engage with her.

Most of them were SUV-related accessory manufacturers and retailers. In the interest of tact, there was a strong focus on safety and vision enhancement equipment. There were also some insurance brokers, and even a firm of specialist SUV rollover attorneys.

– The sort of thing our friends over at Corder Synergy would come up with.

As she walked to her car Miranda was just about to get rid of that silly badge before someone saw her wearing it. But first she took out her phone to switch it out of stealth mode. There was an envelope icon in the display, and ‘2 messages received’ underneath.

They were from Delton.

– What on earth does he want?

12

Skye's maternal grandmother died peacefully but unexpectedly in her sleep when Skye was six years old. Across the world, in all cultures, introducing young children to the realities of death is one of the less-discussed services provided by grandparents. In Gran's case, this was done without the usual period of age-related deterioration, so there was no warning, no gradual opportunity to prepare for what was to come.

It was further complicated by the fact that the body was not discovered for two days, despite the fact that Gran lived quite close to Skye and her mother, and played an active role in their lives. Skye felt the loss and its suddenness, but did not pick up on the unwarranted feelings of guilt her mother felt until years later. But she did sense the stress, and it affected her in a typical six-year-old way.

For a few weeks following the funeral, Skye was afraid that she too might die in the night, and insisted that her mother sit on the side of her bed and hold her hand as she went to sleep.

On one of these occasions Skye said "But if I die when I'm asleep, I won't know that I've died, and I'll think I'm still alive".

Her mother assured her "Trust me, sweetheart, you're not going to die for many, many years. And when it does come time, you'll be an old lady like Gran, and you'll know that dying in your sleep like that is about the best way there is."

She didn't remember this exchange, but her mother did and related it to her when she was older.

One night her mother held the hand of Skye's dolly Lissa, 'in case she's scared too.' A few nights later she asked her daughter to 'do it for her', and Skye did. It made her feel better, more grown up, and she didn't need her mother to wait until she went to sleep anymore.

The Lonsdale Heights Private entry appeared up ahead and Skye signaled and carefully turned into it. Her wiper blades seriously needed replacing, and visibility was close to zero whenever another car's headlights were pointed in her general direction. The entrance bay and car park were well lit, allowing her concentration to unwind a notch or two.

This whole thing was an interruption, but not an unwelcome one. The call had come at very short notice and interrupted an evening of... well, nothing. Nothing planned, nothing on TV.

– www.nothingundermyfeet.com

Skye is floating just above the gravelly ground, looking straight into the terrified eyes of Tillie Howe. The little girl is stuck fast under the lumbering SUV, now inexplicably grown to the size of an ore carrier. She is also fully conscious (how could she have missed that earlier?) and her small eyes are wide open.

"I'm thcared, Thkye," she says in her little-girl Down's syndrome lisp.

She reaches out to Skye as the mass of machinery starts slowly sinking towards her. Skye rushes forward to grab her, all frantic futile swimming motions to move through

the air, but the tiny hand recedes, moving further and further away the harder Skye reaches.

The mechanical colossus bottoms out to an obscene crunching sound that reverberates through every cell in Skye's body and she wakes gasping, pulse racing.

When Skye took the job at E. J. McKluskie House it was supposed to offer an island of stability, an opportunity to get back on her feet after Jason and a chance to focus on other people, less fortunate than herself. So far it had only delivered on the last of those promises, and now even that was under threat.

Public recognition did not sit easily with Skye. For the past however many years she could walk down the street without anyone even noticing her. OK, maybe a few guys would look twice if she had put in a bit of effort before going out. Make up, clothes, that sort of thing. But now it was like every face did this dance of recognition, then either look away self consciously, smile or make some comment about how well she had done on TV or how terrible the accident had been. Even in her own neighborhood things had changed. Take Trainee Rodney at the Beamanoir supermarket – for weeks Skye had been 'that lady who pays with Dazzlers', now she was 'that lady who was on TV, and who pays with Dazzlers'.

Skye opened the hatch and took a brown canvas tote bag and a small boom box from the compartment behind the back seat. The bag had the letters T. A. written in permanent marker near the top. The boom box was archaic – it played cassettes and CDs but didn't have a line in so it couldn't be used with an MP3 player. She locked up and made her way directly to ward seven.

At the reception desk she waited for the senior nurse to look up from the array of paperwork and telemetry spread out in front of her.

"Visiting hours are over, love," she said in a tired voice and pointed at a sign on the wall that listed them in detail.

"I know, I'm not..." began Skye. "Skye Arbeiter, I'm from Twilight Angels." She put down the tote bag and consulted her phone. "I'm here for a Mr Alistair Wardell."

The nurse looked at her with an expression Skye could not read. "Well, I didn't call that one in, but I've got a fair idea who did. OK, room 725."

Skye stood waiting for a few moments more then asked "Could I have a few of his details please?"

The nurse's expressions softened. "Sure love." She punched a few keys and brought up the file. "Wardell, Alistair M. Sixty-two years old, presented in coma, diagnosed massive stroke, no surgery, just life support and monitoring."

Skye wondered why. Surely someone rich or well-covered enough to be in Lonsdale Heights Private would be getting the works, not simply lying there with a drip in their arm.

"That was about a month ago," continued the nurse. "Vitals started to decline significantly this afternoon. We tried contacting the next of kin. The son was interstate, and both the daughter-in-law and sister were unreachable." She switched windows and zoomed in to one of the terse, cryptically annotated graphs on her display. "I'd say you've got two hours, max."

"Did he regain consciousness?" asked Skye.

"No. He's been unresponsive the whole time."

“Do you happen to know if he is religious?”

The nurse clicked back to the previous page. “Nothing on file, no idea.”

“Thanks,” said Skye. “What was that room again?”

“725,” said the nurse and indicated the direction.

Skye picked up her bag and was about to make off down the corridor. She stopped. “You mentioned his son couldn’t be present. What was his name?”

The nurse scanned the file. “Delton.”

“Thanks. Again.”

Alistair Wardell had a room to himself. Skye took a moment to look at the man. He was moderately overweight, a month of wasting hadn’t changed that. There was a pallor to his complexion that made the capillaries around his nose more prominent. Various pieces of technology were attached to his body: to thin plastic tubes disappeared up his nostrils, there was a drip in his left arm and a heart rate monitor clamped onto the middle finger of this left hand.

There were three vases of fresh flowers on the dresser and side table but no cards.

Skye always operated on the assumption that even if the person was unconscious, there was a chance that somewhere deep down, some part of them might be listening.

“Hi,” he said, “my name is Skye. You don’t know me. I’m a volunteer for a group called Twilight Angels. You probably haven’t heard of them either.”

She put her tote bag on the dresser and opened it.

“What sort of music do you like, Alistair?” she asked. “I’m going to have to make a guess and choose for you, so I hope you forgive me if I get it wrong.” She flipped through the collection of CDs. “Right now I’m thinking Debussy for oboe and harp.”

The boom box did have batteries – rechargeable, of course – but there was a spare power outlet so she plugged it in. As the serene opening strains of ‘The girl with the flaxen hair’ softly played she took out some candles and placed them on the unused meal tray.

“You’re not the incense type, are you Alistair? I don’t think so.” Then in a conspiratorial voice she added, “And just between you and me, it might tick off some of the people who work in this place.”

And so, with the preparations taken care of, the vigil began. Skye sat down beside the bed and took Alistair’s free right hand.

“Let me tell you a little bit about Twilight Angels. We’re a volunteer organization who believe that no one should die alone. Everything today is just so... fragmented, that a terrible lot of people make that final journey lying in an empty room, with nothing but four walls watching them. It wasn’t always like this you know – it used to be that family members would gather around, hold the person’s hand, say goodbye. Still happens sometimes, just not as much. A lot more nursing homes, a lot more managed care. Family members who can’t take time off at short notice, or don’t even keep in contact. We can’t be with everyone of course, there’s not enough of us. But we can make a difference, one person at a time.”

Alistair’s breathing was regular but shallow and rough, with the occasional rattle. It was also quite rapid for someone who looked to be asleep. His hand was cool and limp.

“So have you worked it out yet? You know why I’ve come to visit with you? I don’t think there’s any point glossing over it Alistair, according to the signals all this equipment is picking up, you’re going to die in a little while. I don’t know if you can hear me, I don’t know if there’s some part of you that understands what’s going on. But if there is, I’m here to help you get ready. Whatever that means.”

The heart rate monitor was quietly but insistently playing its minimalist rhythm: *bip, bip, bip*. It was slow, but not the confident, measured slowness of an athlete's resting pulse. This was the grinding slowness of imminent decline.

"You had a stroke, about a month ago. That means you wouldn't have known what was coming, and you didn't have a chance to put all of your affairs in order. It's all going to turn into someone else's problem now. You can let it all go."

Skye looked at the flowers and the animated, diverging shadows they cast in the candlelight.

"You have a son, Delton. He can't be here tonight, they tell me he's interstate. I'm sure he would be if he could. Then I'd be at home, watching nothing in particular on TV I guess. Or obsessing about all the crazy things that have been happening in my life lately. Don't worry, I won't bore you with the details."

There were changes in the air at E. J. McKluskie House, or rather Chandos International. Well of course there were, someone under their charge had died under spectacularly horrible and public circumstances, and the aftermath of that would last months if not years.

But the changes went further than that. There was something going on that related directly to her appearance on TV. Skye didn't get it. As far as she could understand, she had been interviewed on the morning show and told her part of the story. Now there was talk of things like currency, traction, approval rating.

It's not as if she were running for public office or anything. But according to Joan there was some talk of a bidding war. Some of the networks floating the idea of a reality TV show. Skye being central to those negotiations.

But not actually being part of them.

The very idea of parading these respite centre kids, already traumatized, in front of a TV crew, day after day was just preposterous. There was no way the parents would stand for it. Or maybe...

– www.money.com

– www.fifteenminutesoffame.com

A lot of them would think of appearing on TV as a golden opportunity rather than an obligation. And being recognized in the street as a benefit, not an inconvenience.

Joan McKluskie of course shared Skye's views and her desire for everything to return to normal. But Chandos International appeared to have another agenda entirely. The poker-faced Gunther Huygens was now a permanent fixture at E. J. McKluskie house, with his own (hastily and stylishly refurbished) office. He seemed to spend most of his time webcam-teleconferencing with head office in a variety of languages, though no one had any real idea what he actually did.

Skye turned Alistair's hand over and examined his wrist. His pulse was too weak to feel but if she held it at just the right angle the light from one of the candles cast its delicate contours into sharp relief and let her see it. The tiny shadow bobbed in time with the monitor's slow tattoo.

"I brought along some books you know, mostly poetry. Quite a lot of folk I visit like to hear something from Emily Dickinson, but I'm guessing that wouldn't be the thing for you. Don't worry, I've got some Dylan Thomas and Robert Frost in there too. Maybe later if we've got time."

Her tote bag also contained a copy of the Bible, the Tanakh and the Koran, with bookmarks at appropriate passages as suggested by an evening's worth of Googling.

"Do you have any ideas on what might come after dying? The nurse couldn't tell me if you er, have any religious beliefs. Do you believe in Heaven? I used to when I was younger, but I'm not so sure now. Seems a bit too much like wishful thinking. A chance to put right all the things that were wrong, or unfair, or chances lost... whatever. It's a nice thought, doesn't mean it's real though. You know what I think? Someone must have had a dream that they died, and at that moment they woke up. Figured the dream was a premonition of what really happens. Came up with the idea of an afterlife, and we've been running with it ever since."

– Not to mention killing each other in arguments about what color the drapes are.

"What about the spirit realm? I kinda don't think you're the type to believe in that. You know, the story about people who've died but they haven't let go, haven't moved on. I think it's the people left behind who need to let go and move on. Just my personal opinion, mind."

In her capacity as a Twilight Angel Skye had seen dozens of people die, up close and personal. And not all were comatose like Alistair Wardell. Some faced it head on, knowing exactly what was happening. Every one of those had been glad of her presence, giving Skye the satisfaction of helping people who really needed it. But the experience was not without its toll.

With the unconscious ones it was a bit different. While Skye acknowledged the possibility that deep down, some part of them might be aware of what she was saying, it did give her an opportunity to say out loud things she would never say to anyone else.

– www.myownprivateconfessional.com

"And if there is no afterlife, then what? Nothing at all? A truly final curtain? Even if that's what you believe it doesn't sit comfortably in the mind, does it? It's easy to accept that there was nothing before we were born, why shouldn't the same thing be what's awaiting us when we die? There's a certain symmetry to that – whatever that counts for."

Skye stopped. Too much Skye-thinking-out-loud, not enough Twilight Angel.

"As you can see, I don't have too many answers, just plenty of questions. If it's answers you want, well... won't be too long to wait."

Alistair's heart skipped a beat – literally. Or at least the sensor and monitor did. The laboring rhythm resumed immediately, but it was a sign of where things were headed.

"Steady on there, Alistair. I don't think we're quite done yet. I was just going to tell you my philosophy about this life. I don't expect anything. I'm not going to live my life half-heartedly, in the hope that everything will be made right after I die. But when my time does come, I'll be keeping an open mind so that if I do find myself... somewhere, it won't come as too much of a shock."

It was probably time to move on to a new subject. Skye spent the next half hour going over the events of the previous two weeks. She tried to make it conversational, adapting it to the Twilight Angels context. Like an update for someone who's been away for a while and missed the news.

At no time did she say, "If there is a Heaven, and you meet little Tillie Howe, tell her how much I miss her, and how sorry I am I didn't do better, to make things turn out different."

At no time did she let the thought even enter her mind.

But it was there, somewhere.

At least the legal situation was settling down.

Guy and Dimity Howe had made lots of noise about compensation. As far as Skye could sense, none of that noise conveyed anything like grief or loss or sadness. They appeared on TV once, then that was it, no more publicity.

No currency, traction or approval rating apparently.

But they had hooked up very quickly with some predatory lawyer – of the 'gator skin boots kind. Some document had arrived by courier and Gunther and Joan had worked together for two days straight. A lawyer in the employment of Chandos International had joined them on the second day. The result of this effort consisted of a medical examination report and a dossier obtained from Child Protection Services. Something had happened before Skye's time and she knew very little about the incident or incidents, but after Gunther and the lawyer had paid a visit to 'gator boots, the whole thing had gone quiet.

The one true pity was that Skye had not been able to go to Tillie's funeral. She and Joan discreetly laid a wreath the next day.

"To someone who deserved better," said Skye.

"I hope you find it, little one," added Joan.

Skye had a basic understanding that the human body was built to keep going in the face of an astonishing variety of insults. There were lots of interconnected systems that all worked together. She wasn't big on the technical details – they were a bit like the jumble of PHP, JavaScript, ASP and CGI underneath the websites she used to design. Jason's department.

The point was, quite a lot has to happen for a body to die. It doesn't all happen at once – there are redundancies and resilience in the system. So unless the heart's supply of oxygen is interrupted, it takes time for the silent internal calamity to build. One system gradually runs down, placing stress on some of the others, and everything slowly grinds to a halt, in fits and starts.

Alistair's breathing became uneven – there was a pause, then two intakes in quick succession. A longer pause, then back to the original rhythm.

"So, Alistair, if you can hear me, I think we're coming to the serious end of this business. It's time for tunnels with light at the end of them, or floating up to the ceiling, or any number of ways other people have described it. But this one's yours, this life is yours, so go make the ending yours too."

The stops and starts in Alistair's breathing became more frequent, until all semblance of a normal rhythm was lost. Skye looked down at his wrist and adjusted the angle until she should see the slow, feeble pulse-shadow. In concert with the monitor's audio it too was becoming irregular.

Over the next few minutes the pulse slowed, stopped, then picked up again about five times. This was a machine that wanted to keep going. But eventually it stopped, gave two final, almost undetectable beats, then nothing.

"Adieu, Alistair."

Skye looked up at the ECG display and waited until the flatline had cycled twice across the screen. She laid the limp hand back on the sheets and stood up.

As far as Skye was concerned, a transition had just been crossed. A minute earlier there had been someone in the room with her. Now she was alone. No 'in the presence of a dead person' – that person had left.

She extinguished the candles and put them in her tote bag. Rather than abruptly pressing ‘stop’, she slowly turned the volume knob on her boom box down to silence. Debussy deserved a fade out. She then packed away the CD and power cord and made a final check she had not left anything behind.

From the corner of her eye Skye noticed a figure appear in the doorway. She assumed it was one of the nurses.

“Do you believe that rain?”

“Yeah,” said Skye without thinking. Then something about that voice made her turn and look at the newcomer.

Hair damp and slightly bedraggled, but unmistakable.

City Lawyer. Miranda Tonkin. ‘Dreadnought’ driver.

And with a large, circular badge pinned to her top:

Riding High

I (heart) my SUV

– www.yourekidding.com

Almost simultaneously Skye saw a flash of recognition in the other woman’s face. Followed by the same look of bewilderment she herself must be wearing.

In perfect unison each said, “What are *you* doing here?”

13

There was no mistaking it. A pair of headlights was following Tucker a few car lengths behind, and each time they passed under a streetlight he could see the light bar mounted on its roof. He glanced down at the speedometer again – safely below the limit, he had been driving extra carefully. He slowed down again, but police car kept its distance. There was no flashing and no siren.

– Don't they usually signal if they want you to pull over?

Tucker thought back frantically over the previous few hours.

– How many beers did I have? Was it three or four?

– And later on, I was alternating water in between the whiskies, wasn't I?

He certainly didn't feel drunk, but that might have been an illusion from the coffee. Fearing the worst he pulled over onto the verge and stopped. Sure enough the car – and it clearly was a police car now, drew in behind him.

He wound down his window.

Earlier that afternoon, with the sun sinking towards the west behind him, Tucker had stepped on the gas. He'd miscalculated traffic downtown and was going to be late. Hopefully it would be considered fashionably late rather than impolite. The freeway was clear, perhaps he could make up a few minutes.

The top was down and the cool, late afternoon air whipped his hair pleasantly. He made a mental note to tidy it up a bit when he arrived. As he had feared, the new set of outfits from Life/Style Coordinates was not due for at least a week, so he'd made do with what he already had. For tonight it was a spread collar Oxford dress shirt over chinos, with a double breasted navy blazer. Shirt out, no tie – as far as he could tell, an appropriate blend of old school and smart casual.

Two hundred years ago Keilwerth Manor was a handsome country estate, with stables and servants' quarters. But over time the country had been filled in, the chain of owners had subdivided and sold off most of the acreage and the grand old house found itself part of a suburb favored by the well-heeled. The remaining gardens were beautifully manicured and the house itself, all ivy-covered stone, still stood proud, facing the circular gravel driveway.

Tucker parked the Boxster and ran a comb through his hair while putting the roof up.

The doorbell was operated by a suitably ancient brass chain but when Tucker pulled gently on it he heard a faint chime from within, melodic and understated but definitely electronic. The door was opened by a woman Tucker did not recognize, who greeted him by name and invited him in. She introduced herself as Rosalinda and offered to take his jacket, but Tucker declined. The aircon here was just about perfect for keeping it on.

There was a lot of fine marble on display in the vestibule, which was newer than the exterior of the house. The place looked as if it had been remodeled recently by someone who knew what they were doing. Most of the old-world atmosphere had been preserved, but all the modern conveniences a top executive might require were discreetly available. The art was well chosen, too.

Rosalinda ushered Tucker through into an atrium that obviously took up a significant portion of the house. As before, the design was an homage to the graces of yesteryear skillfully blended with the light, airy open feeling of more modern times.

A jazz trio was playing softly in the corner, drummer on brushes. Guests were scattered around the place, standing in groups and conversing. Tucker had just started scanning the room when Rosalinda offered a single beer, ready poured on a silver tray. He tasted it. Definitely Belgian.

– How would she have known that?

Before he could work that one out, he was spotted by his host.

“Mr Trent, so glad you could make it,” said Randolph Reinhardt walking over and shaking Tucker’s hand. His voice and manner were cultured, smooth and relaxed.

“Thank you for inviting me, Mr Reinhardt. It’s an amazing place you’ve got here. Certainly lives up to what I’ve heard from my colleagues.”

“Well, one tries. Now I’m pretty sure everyone’s here. You’ll know a good many of them already, and I’m sure you’ll meet the rest before the night is through. It’s going to be a pretty casual affair, no order of proceedings or anything like that.” He looked at the drink in Tucker’s hand. “I see Rosalinda has been looking after you, good. Now there’s one or two things I need to attend to. Do sing out if you need anything.”

“Uh, sure. Thanks.”

As Reinhardt had said, Tucker knew most of the guests. He went and touched base with Elias Corder (“Oh, so you managed to find the place after all, Trent? Thought you must have got lost,”) and some of the Tolliver underlings he had worked with during the implementation phase (“Is this your first time at Keilwerth Manor? Ours too.”)

One person he was surprised to see was Justine Vanderveld. Or not – as FreshStyle’s director she was as central to the operation as anyone else present. But Tucker saw her standing alone, her dynamic presence attenuated. She just looked small and vulnerable. He went over.

“Hey Justine, how’re you doing?”

“Well Tucker, to be perfectly honest I feel like I don’t belong here.” And she was too – being perfectly honest. This was a woman who could look you in the eyes when talking to you and leave you in no doubt she was being 100% straightforward.

“But you’re the captain of the very ship we’re all celebrating.”

“That may be,” she said, “I don’t know. But I feel like I’m in the shark pool with ‘dinner’ written all over me. And it’s all wrong, all back to front – I’m supposed to be the one making them feel nervous and threatened.”

“Ah well, it’s still early days. One month of operation. I’m sure there’s plenty of time to... make them feel nervous and threatened. But tonight, hey, you ought to relax and enjoy the attention, this fabulous spread, the music...”

“I’ll try Tucker, but you know how all this... opulence is paid for don’t you? Addiction and misery. Blood money.”

Tucker laughed and raised his hands in mimed surrender. “OK, I tried.”

The opulence in question was first rate. Over the course of the evening a never-ending stream of finger food was distributed efficiently by Rosalinda and her inconspicuous colleagues. There were crudités, canapés, dips, blinis, mini quiches and an array of dim sums. The quality was excellent, easily matching what Tucker would have expected from a top restaurant. The range of drinks on offer was also superb, but Tucker restrained himself and alternated water and beer.

A little while later Tucker noticed Corder and Reinhardt standing in a circle with three perfectly dressed guests he didn't recognize. The eldest wore a suit even more perfect than the other two – obviously the alpha male. He was an imposing man, smooth complexion, not a hair out of place and, well... *hale*. Their conversation appeared casual and Tucker decided to listen in. He sidled up to his boss.

"Yes, he certainly will be missed," said Corder. Then, noticing Tucker, "Ah Trent, just the man." He turned to the senior figure and said, "Senator, I'd like to introduce you to the young man we spoke of earlier. This is Tucker Trent, one of the rising stars of Corder Synergy. Trent, meet Senator Alex Beresford."

The senator offered his hand and Tucker shook it. Firm. He'd heard the name of course, but couldn't remember seeing the man on TV or in the papers. A behind-the-scenes sort of guy. Mr Make-It-So by all accounts.

"An honor to meet you sir." Batting down an incongruous impulse to curtsy.

The senator smiled graciously. "So, Tucker? You're the one behind this little diversion. You came up with the whole concept, right?"

"No sir, the original idea was not mine, my role was more..."

Randolph Reinhardt interrupted. "Mr Trent is too modest, Senator. His ideas were key to the development and implementation of the FreshStyle initiative and we're all very much indebted to him."

"Excellent. Well Tucker, what I really want to know is this: what drove you to pursue these ideas? Why did you choose something so... unconventional?"

Tucker noticed a look from Corder that said 'Don't hold back on my account.' He was about to come out with some cookie-cutter platitudes about freedom of choice, rights and responsibilities, when he felt an undercurrent of subconscious communication from the senator hit him like a tsunami.

Don't bullshit me, son.

Real or imagined? Didn't matter. Tucker hit rewind and started over, choosing his words carefully.

"It was all about making things happen, and helping our partners to prosper, sir."

That's better.

A slow smile spread over the senator's face.

"Good, good. Now I've got something very important to tell you, son. Do you like cigars?"

"Yes, occasionally."

"Good. Now when our Randolph here wheels out his little cigar trolley later on, just make sure you hold out for the good stuff. He's got a proper walk-in humidor downstairs, and trust me, the pickings there are a lot better."

"Surely not," said Corder in mock outrage. "Randolph, have you been holding out on me all these years?"

Reinhardt feigned exasperation, then went deadpan. "Elias, Mr Trent. You must consider the senator's position in the food chain, and what it lets him get away with."

"I'll keep that in mind, Mr Reinhardt," said Tucker trying to keep a straight face.

Reinhardt became serious again. "Before you joined us Mr Trent, we were just reminiscing about your colleague. Chiron Levy. And what a terrible loss his passing was to us all."

"Yeah, I miss the guy," said Tucker. "Taught me everything I know."

"His role in the success of the company can't be overstated," added Corder.

"And a wicked sense of humor," mused Reinhardt.

A slow smile spread across the senator's face. "You know, when he first brought me up to steam on that 'Exit Strategy' project, behind the scenes of course, he had me believing it was going to be called 'Terminal Velocity'. Priceless."

Tucker nodded. Pure Chiron.

"Did he ever talk to you about Dead Man's Switch?" asked Corder.

The senator shook his head. "No, I don't believe so. What was that?"

"Oh, it was another of his ideas for empowering people reaching the end of their lives. Not nearly as... adrenalin-rich as Exit Strategy. But he thought it might get wider uptake."

Tucker was intrigued. "I never heard him talk about this. What was the idea?"

"Dead Man's Switch," said Corder, "was his idea for circumventing a long, drawn out demise into dementia. It was a way to ensure you stayed alive as long as you were of sound mind, but no longer. And all without either implicating or relying on anyone else. So you wouldn't have to worry about your loved ones being hauled up on charges of euthanasia, or losing their nerve and renegeing on any deals."

"Well, go on Elias, how did it work?" asked the senator.

"This was after there was something in the press about finding a way to diagnose Alzheimer's before there were any symptoms. Chiron imagined that a person in that situation would start the Dead Man's Switch program. A simple treatment – something that you would take once a day, perhaps once per week. But once you started, you had to keep it up – stopping would be lethal."

"OK," mused Tucker, "so when you reached... a certain level of forgetfulness, you'd die. Dead Man's Switch – it only goes off when you let go of it. But surely there would be family members, they'd administer the pill. Or whatever it was."

"If they knew about it..." said Corder.

The senator shook his head. "It does raise a number of interesting legal issues, but I don't think anyone's interests would be served by secrecy. Too much outrage when the family finally discovered the truth. But on the other hand, there would have to be a reliable way of preventing anyone from administering it to someone else."

"How do you mean?" asked Tucker.

"Foul play," said the senator. "What Elias here has just described is a perfect way of bumping someone off. The victim wouldn't suspect a thing, and you'd be miles away when they actually died." To Corder he said, "How was it going to work? Don't tell me you actually did the R&D..."

"No," said Corder, "no need to worry about that. He did some PR research – testing public acceptance, focus groups and the like, and raised the issue with a biochemist he was working with on something else. Got a few ideas, but never pursued anything."

"Well, go on Elias," prompted Reinhardt, "don't keep us in suspense – how was it going to work?"

"His first idea was biological. You would inoculate yourself with a specially tailored infectious agent – not contagious, of course. The ongoing treatment would be a drug that kept it in check didn't cure it. Stop taking the drug, the infection flares, and..."

The senator snorted. "Not a chance. One word. Bioterrorism."

"Exactly," said Corder, "plus the constant fear of contagion. Chiron's second approach was a narcotic – one with particularly violent withdrawal symptoms. Combined something to suppress any psychoactive effects. Cold turkey would kill you, literally."

"Doesn't sound very... pleasant," said the senator. "I mean, peaceful, painless."

“No,” said Reinhardt drily, “and I’d bet my last dollar it would become the clubbing drug of choice within a year – assuming lower doses were slightly less fatal.”

A mischievous gleam appeared in Corder’s eye. “And we couldn’t allow deadly drugs to be sold legally, could we Mr *Tolliver*?”

Reinhardt flashed him a smile, one quarter malice, three quarters playful.

“The most promising line of inquiry,” continued Corder, “was a slow-metabolizing neurotoxin coupled with a fast-metabolizing antidote. No side effects, but when you stopped taking it, the remaining antidote would be quickly removed from the system, leaving a lethal dose of the residual toxin. You would slip into a coma, followed by a quick and painless death.”

“Yes, that is slightly less problematic,” admitted the senator, “but the potential for abuse – for foul play – would be immense.”

“Chiron came up with a few ideas, but they were just that – ideas.” Corder held out one finger. “The toxin would be something that accumulated slowly, so you had to be on the course for some time for it to take hold.” A second finger. “There would be some sort of noticeable side effect – discoloration of the fingertips, or urine. Something you couldn’t fail to notice, so you’d know if someone was slipping it into your coffee.” He held out three fingers. “And finally, paramedics, doctors and pharmacists would all carry the antidote.”

“Your focus groups – what did they think of the idea?” asked Reinhardt. “Did you get any sort of a verdict on public acceptance?”

“Yes,” nodded Corder, “pretty much everybody over the age of sixty thought it was a good idea, with a few exceptions – a small minority of the deeply religious. We also extrapolated that politicians and public figures would be reluctant to lend support.”

All eyes turned to the senator. He shrugged. “It would be hard to back, certainly. The only reason Exit Strategy slipped through was due to the modest numbers choosing their services. This thing would be more popular, and that’d be a source of trouble.”

“It’s a fine line,” said Corder, “but my personal opinion is that there’d be a fair chance of pulling it off if we kept the... cocktail illegal but decriminalized for personal use. But...” he smiled, “we have no plans to pursue it any further at present.”

Tucker shook his head in puzzlement. “I’m surprised he never once mentioned this to me, all the years we worked together.”

Corder gave him a wry look. “Not everything we do is high-profile, Trent. Some of it is only disclosed on a need-to-know basis, even within the company.”

Tucker imagined he caught a shared glance between Corder, Reinhardt and the senator. Or maybe it was just paranoia.

– Yeah, let’s all patronize the virgin.

Plus he was still sore about being left in the dark about the business with Wardell Biotech and Pharmaceutical, the company run by the husband of a certain Miranda Tonkin.

“Now there’s a man who’s valuable to know Trent,” said Corder softly some time later when they were alone. “If you have the ear of Senator Beresford, you have the keys to the kingdom.”

Tucker wandered around the room, touching base and making casual conversation with a few more people. At one point he decided he should resume his chat with Justine Vanderveld. Perhaps try to get to know her a little more, or make another attempt at making her feel more comfortable. He looked around, but she was nowhere to be seen. And it wasn’t down to a visit to the restrooms, Tucker didn’t see her for

the rest of the evening. She must have just quietly slipped out and left. He couldn't really blame her.

An hour or so after Tucker had arrived Reinhardt moved the guests into the dining room. The format was still casual – the immense dining table had been moved against one wall and an array of settees, divans and coffee tables was arranged semi-haphazardly in the remaining space. The jazz combo had packed up and left and music was now provided by a string quartet. This place was amazing, an entirely different world from Tucker's. But there was no envy in Tucker's thoughts, just the faintest whisper of aspiration. Tonight was all about relaxing, enjoying the company and hospitality. Taking time to smell the roses.

Or the cigars, as it turned out.

Rosalinda and her aproned accomplices were circulating with a sweets trolley, a cheese trolley and a liquor trolley. Tucker had availed himself of a large single malt, a brand he had never even seen before. The label appeared to have been signed by hand, that almost certainly meant something. But it was Reinhardt himself pushing the cigar trolley, spending a few moments with his guests, assisting them in with their choices.

When he got to Tucker he said "Now Mr Trent, may I offer you a cigar?" Then with a twinkle in his eye added "I trust you've dismissed anything the senator said and that we're not going to have any trouble from you."

Tucker examined what was on offer. The selection was small but of superb quality, with almost every type beyond what Tucker was comfortable buying – even for special occasions.

"No trouble at all," said Tucker. "This... is impressive. If your friend the senator maintains this isn't 'the good stuff', I can only conclude that whatever you have downstairs in your cellar or walk-in humidor must be... what, historically significant, museum-grade cigars for investment purposes. Or gifts from world leaders or something."

"Very good Mr Trent, very good." Reinhardt raised one eyebrow and continued more softly, "Although, and here's a little secret I'd be most obliged if you kept to yourself, what the senator smokes and what he believes he smokes are not always one and the same, if you take my drift."

Tucker stifled a laugh, then something hit him.

– A captain of industry, sharing a joke with me, about... putting one over a powerful senator.

– Hey, maybe not such a virgin after all.

"Now, would you care to choose something from these *lean pickings*?"

Tucker chose a Cohiba Lancero. He had no doubt it was the real deal, the cigar that Fidel Castro used to hand out as diplomatic gifts for years before they were available to the public.

Reinhardt gave a half-smile. "Ah, he goes straight to the top shelf."

"I've never actually tried one before," confessed Tucker, "and I've always wanted to."

"Well, I'm delighted to be able to offer you the opportunity," said Reinhardt warmly. He took the cigar and cleanly guillotined the unique pigtailed tip then handed it to Tucker. "Tell me what you think of the unlit aroma?"

Tucker ran his nose along the shaft, inhaling gently. "Hay? Old leather? A touch of wood? What can I say, it just smells... exclusive."

"Very good. It's the triple fermentation process, these are the only cigars to use it." Reinhardt produced a long, authentic-looking wooden match and struck it. Tucker

rotated the end of his cigar above the offered flame, then took a few tentative puffs to ease it into life. He didn't inhale, but rolled the smoke past the back of his mouth and out through his nose.

"How do you find it?" asked Reinhardt.

Tucker thought carefully. "Hard to say exactly. Everything all at once. Very smooth though, very fine. But not mild."

"Excellent," said Reinhardt approvingly, "now mind you take it slowly, the Lancero has a habit of sneaking up on the unwary."

Time seemed to stretch out around Tucker, enveloping him in the soft seductive moment. It was impossible not to feel affluent in these surroundings, listening to the soothing classical music, taking tiny sips of his scotch (almost breathing it in) and careful draws from his cigar.

– Doesn't get much better than this.

Tucker felt a tiny touch of déjà vu. Something about the smoke that seemed to be familiar. Not the taste, not the aroma. Something else, something...

"Well Mr Trent, you do seem to be transported to another place. Is everything to your satisfaction?" Reinhardt had finished his rounds and was seating himself next to Tucker. He placed a shallow glass-topped wooden cabinet on the coffee table in front of them and raised the lid. Rosalinda appeared carrying a snifter of (presumably) cognac and placed it on a coaster beside the cabinet.

"This," said Tucker holding up his cigar and marshalling his thoughts, "is how it is supposed to be done. This is what all the others are trying to achieve. Some of the really good ones are excellent – noble attempts. They come close. But this... this is the benchmark."

"Very eloquent for one so young," said Reinhardt teasingly.

Tucker took another puff and watched as the smoke slowly but insistently rose to the ceiling.

– Ah, of course.

"This is the same ventilation system you've got at Tollies, isn't it?" he asked, pointing at the rising wisps of smoke.

"Eloquent *and* perceptive," said Reinhardt approvingly. "Yes, it's from the same supplier, although not to quite the industrial specifications. I'm more concerned with the comfort of my guests than biohazard isolation or indemnity."

Inside the cabinet was an assortment of porcelain tobacco jars, lacquer boxes, pipes and other accoutrements. From a drawer in the front Reinhardt took a single white cotton glove and put it on his left hand. Using this hand he took an exquisite pipe from a velvet-lined recess in the cabinet. The stem was deep mottled brown and gold with dark flecks. The bowl was a creamy caramel color buffed to a smooth matt sheen. It was minimally carved with a regal-looking emblem and the letters 'RR' in bas relief. For a moment Tucker thought it might have been an old cross-merchandising endeavor from Rolls Royce, then he realized it was Reinhardt's initials.

"That's meerschaum and amber, right?" said Tucker.

"It is indeed. A gift from the Turkish president no less." Reinhardt held it out for Tucker's inspection. The bowl was evenly colored, as the residue from years of smoking slowly diffused through the light porous stone. Reinhardt's glove prevented any oils or acids from his skin marking the delicate surface.

"How long have you had it?" asked Tucker, knowing it would have been purest white when first made.

“About twenty years,” said Reinhardt. “I don’t smoke it often, it requires a little more care than my briars.”

Tucker looked closely at the stem and mouthpiece, in particular at the black flecks. “Are those...” he began.

“Inclusions, yes. Insects mostly, though some of them are just debris I think.”

“Like, Jurassic Park fossilized mosquitoes?”

“Well I don’t think you’ll find any dinosaur DNA in there,” said Reinhardt laughing, “and I believe this a little more recent, from the Cretaceous period if I am not mistaken. But yes, I guess they are prehistoric mosquitoes, or their equivalent. Amber that old is very brittle. I’m told they treated this piece for weeks in a high-pressure chamber of oil-vapor. Why, are you fond of pipes Mr Trent?”

“I tried one for a while a few years back,” said Tucker, “but it made my tongue sore the next day.” He held up the Lancero. “I still have it, but I stick mostly to cigars these days.”

“Ah, tongue bite, the bane of every neophyte. You should have persisted, it doesn’t last. You have to learn how to pack the bowl correctly, though.”

Reinhardt began to do just that. With his un-gloved hand he opened one of the porcelain jars and began trickling pinch after pinch of tobacco into the bowl, occasionally pressing it down. When he was done he took a small butane lighter and delicately ignited the top with a lance of blue flame. That didn’t strike Tucker as very authentic, and Reinhardt must have caught that in his look.

“I prefer a wooden match for my other pipes, but for this one I think a lighter is appropriate, so as not to mark the rim as much. It does tend to annoy the purists a bit. You’re not a purist are you, Mr Trent?”

“No, I’ve never been accused of that, Mr Reinhardt,” said Tucker. He leaned over and fanned some of the column of smoke from Reinhardt’s pipe towards himself to sample it, then picked up the jar and smelled the dark, shredded tobacco. Although his senses were somewhat dulled by his whisky and the cigar he was smoking, he found the aroma of both to be sweet and rich like molasses and spice.

“What is this blend?” he asked. “It’s very nice.”

“It’s a matured black Cavendish,” said Reinhardt, “with a much higher proportion of Virginia leaf than usual. Burns a little hot if not correctly packed, definitely not for beginners – would probably take the skin off your tongue. I get my people to make me up a small batch from time to time.”

Tucker nodded “Nice perk.”

Over the course of the evening Reinhardt sipped his cognac and smoked his bowlful of bespoke tobacco with a practiced ease. He tamped it twice and relit it once, before tapping out a fine grey ash and a few specks of dry dottle into the alabaster ash tray. After letting the pipe cool for a few minutes he cleaned it, without getting as much as a speck on his glove. As he well knew, this demonstration of seemingly impossible dexterity was on a par with the top echelon of close-up conjurers, concert violinists and brain surgeons, but it was delivered with little more than a subtle twinkle in his eye from time to time.

But right now they were about various tobacco-industry-related topics, Reinhardt doing most of the talking, Tucker content to sit back and listen, interjecting a question here and there to clarify some obscure point or terminology.

A few minutes in they were interrupted by Elias Corder, as energized as ever.

“So, what are you two scheming rascals up to? Excellent evening by the way, Randolph, first rate. Tucker, you’re not button-holing our host are you?”

“He’s doing nothing of the sort,” said Reinhardt smoothly, “now do sit down and behave. Your glass is almost empty – what were you having?”

Corder glanced down at his plain glass tumbler. “Oh, it’s bourbon. Straight up.”

Reinhardt raised a hand and silently summoned Rosalinda. She appeared a minute later with the liquor trolley and attended to the glasses of each of them. Tucker asked for another water, he planned to drive home and felt it was about time to start taking things slowly.

Corder raised his glass in Reinhardt’s direction and took a sip. “Did you hear, Randolph, that we’ve just bought the Old River Port building? It was going for a song, I reckon we’ve done rather well.”

“Oh, what are you planning to do with it?” asked Reinhardt.

“Well, I’ve been wanting to get some new premises for a while now. Something more central. It’s a prime location.”

Tucker had heard this, but only third hand. This was the first time he’d heard Corder speak about the matter.

Reinhardt looked dubious. “But you won’t be able to build anything there. The whole place is hogtied with heritage protection orders and the like. Now I’m not all that au fait with architecture, but it’s a building only a mother could love. Now who was it said...? Harry S. Truman – you can’t polish a turd.”

“Oh, I have a few ideas,” said Corder with a gleam in his eye.

“Well, good luck,” said Reinhardt, “I shall await the outcome with bated breath.”

At this point the senator appeared on the scene, followed by his entourage. For a split second Tucker considered vacating his position and offering it, but the two aids quickly divined what was required and an unoccupied sofa was efficiently moved into position at right angles to the one occupied by Tucker, Reinhardt and Corder.

The senator sat down and tapped the ash from his cigar (something large – a Presidente or Lonsdale – but without an identifying band) into the ash tray. He looked at Reinhardt and snorted mischievously.

“So Randolph’s showing off the meerschaum is he? He pretends to be above all that, but there’s nothing he loves more than smoking that thing in front of folks, all Michael Jackson retro in his one white glove.”

Without missing a beat Reinhardt turned to Tucker and said, “Just think Mr Trent, if you ever become as powerful as the senator here, or at least be owed as many favors as he is, you too will be able to... now what do the young people say these days? Ah yes, you too will be able to *diss* me as he is doing now.”

“I would never dream of it, sir,” said Tucker playing along.

This banal upper-class banter continued for a few minutes, with the three senior parties giving each other a good-natured ribbing while Tucker and the senator’s colleagues sat it out quietly.

After a lull in proceedings the senator composed himself and said, “Now Elias, in our last little chat you briefly mentioned something about a cure for AIDS. What was that all about?”

Tucker’s ears pricked up at this.

– Didn’t Miranda say Wardell BP had recently acquired some AIDS-related patent?

Corder looked ill at ease. “Senator, I think we should discuss this another time.”

“Nonsense,” said the senator, “Randolph here is one of us, the epitome of discretion. And I keep no secrets from Rourke and Wallace here,” and nodded in the direction of his colleagues.

Corder said nothing but glanced in Tucker’s direction.

“I can... take a wander,” offered Tucker, it being the last thing he wanted to do.

“Stay where you are,” said the senator, “Elias, you worry too much. What’s the point of *Chuuseis* if you don’t actually let him in on what’s in the pipeline?” He looked at Tucker and said, “Hey kid, how’s the portfolio riding?”

Tucker was completely baffled by this, and if anything Corder looked even more uncomfortable.

“At this point in time, Trent ah, doesn’t have any *Chuusei* derivatives in his portfolio,” he said tersely.

Both the senator and Reinhardt seemed surprised by this.

“Elias, this is an uncharacteristic lapse,” said Reinhardt. He looked at Tucker carefully. “I had no idea. We have quite a lot of exposure here.”

“I don’t believe it’s a problem Randolph,” said Corder, “he came up with most of the sensitive stuff himself.”

“At the risk of appearing embarrassingly naïve,” said Tucker after a long pause, “exactly what are *Chuuseis*?”

Reinhardt shook his head. “Since your employer has been so remiss, allow me,” he began. “*Chuusei Kabushiki-gaisha*, or the *Chuusei* corporation, is based in Tokyo, and specializes in executive corporate loyalty. Their business plan was a series of programs designed to instill in *gaijin* – that’s us Westerners, the sort of loyalty shown by your stereotypical *sarariman*, or Japanese company worker. Most of their efforts failed miserably, they weren’t all that good at judging the cultural divide between Japan and the west. But there was one service that took off very well, in a quiet sort of way. It was aimed at executives, in particular those with knowledge of corporate secrets. The sort of secrets that might prove damaging to the company if revealed to, say, competitors.”

“Or regulatory authorities,” added the senator.

“Or the media,” mused Corder.

“When someone is entrusted with sensitive information,” Reinhardt continued, “or perhaps their employer is concerned about corporate security, they are sometimes given a peculiar form of remuneration. A *Chuusei* derivative is a packaged contract of financial instruments – other derivatives and options, designed to do two things: reward you handsomely if you are loyal, and to destroy you utterly otherwise.”

“How?” asked Tucker.

Corder took over. “The contracts are linked to the sponsoring corporation, or syndicate. When those indexed stocks perform well, the... investment if you like, pays healthy dividends. If however you disclose information to anyone that damages the corporation’s profit or prospects, the *Chuusei* noose tightens, slowly bankrupting you.”

“It doesn’t last for ever,” said Reinhardt, “it decays over time. Most contracts have a ten year maturity, but twenty years is not uncommon.” In a deadly serious voice he added, “several of my directors have twenty-year *Chuuseis* in their portfolio.”

That hung in the air for a few seconds.

“I studied a bunch of exotic derivatives when I was getting my degree,” said Tucker at last. “The indexing must be awfully specific – to be able to differentiate between all the reasons a company’s stock price might fall. I mean, how can it do that and still remain enforceable?”

Corder furrowed his brow. “I read a summary of how they work,” he said, “went completely over my head. “Something about an inverse form of some fancy-named equation, plus a pair of mutually-dependent holding companies. Specially created for each contract.”

“Save yourself the effort, Mr Trent,” said Reinhardt in what Tucker thought was a slightly patronizing tone. “You’d need degrees in economics, mathematics and corporate law to understand how they work. The Chuusei corporation employs a small army of traders all around the world to maintain the financial infrastructure. The important thing is that they’re absolutely watertight, and no one who has fallen foul of one has ever escaped ruin.”

“Can you trade them?” asked Tucker, partly out of curiosity but mainly in an attempt to lighten the mood. “I mean, are they transferrable?”

Reinhardt nodded. “Technically yes, but who would want to take them on? The very fact of trying to sell them would probably trigger the index value to go into freefall.”

“Does anyone in Corder Synergy have them?” Tucker asked. “I mean, I’ve never heard anyone talk about them.”

“Quite a few,” answered Corder, “and no, it’s not something that tends to be openly discussed. Chiron had some in the early days, but by the time they’d matured he had well and truly earned my trust. And Randolph’s, even... at the end.”

Reinhardt nodded.

“Most recently,” continued Corder, “we’ve had to truss up your good friend Brandon Tyler. Not that I distrust the boy, but he’s working on something very... delicate.” He looked to the senator as he said this. “And for the record, I was planning to bring Tucker in on this matter, very soon.” He looked hesitantly at Tucker, “And suitably... motivated.”

– Suitably ‘trussed up’.

– What sort of secrets is Corder protecting?

– Something a lot more sensitive than our dealings with Tolliver, apparently.

Tucker felt his whole understanding of Brandon Tyler shift unsteadily in his mind. Tyler’s position in the company didn’t seem quite so... enviable. What could be worth being ‘trussed up’ to that degree?

And something that Callum Buchanan had said: *‘You’re on the up, you know that. You’re going to learn things that’ll curl your hair.’*

Tucker had Googled the persistent newshound after their most recent meeting, got a few hundred matches but no one that looked like a freelance journalist. The whole thing gave him a vague, uneasy feeling.

The senator had been silent throughout the whole exchange. He cleared his throat.

“Well I guess our little chat about, well... what it was going to be about, will have to wait. Probably just as well, spoiling a splendid evening like this talking shop.”

Various sounds of assent greeted this, and the men took a few moments to puff their cigars (or pipe in Reinhardt’s case) and sip their spirits.

“Ah, the Japanese. Whatever would we do without them?” mused Reinhardt.

“Speaking of which...” said the Senator suddenly and looked around expectantly.

“Do go on,” prompted Reinhardt.

“What I mean is, speaking of quaint little curios our Japanese friends have come up with, don’t you think it’s time for another Folly?”

“Another *Arraa no Gukou*, yes, quite so,” agreed Reinhardt.

Corder gave a smile to make his dentist proud. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it? I guess we’ll need some sort of occasion though. Suitably momentous.”

“Oh, I’m sure we can come up with something if we put our minds to it,” said the senator. Corder and Reinhardt nodded.

– WTF is a Folly?

“Well that was easy,” said Reinhardt. “Now we just have to decide who will make the... arrangements.”

After a short pause Corder said, “I believe I’ll put my hand up for this one. You two have both hosted these little things before, it has to be my turn. One has to do one’s share, doesn’t one?”

“Gentlemen,” said Tucker tentatively, “as much as I hate to look like a noob twice in one evening, what is a Japanese ‘Folly’?”

Everyone except Tucker (and the senator’s two aides) exchanged amused looks.

“Well, Elias,” chuckled Reinhardt, “do you think the boy’s ready?”

Corder looked at Tucker.

– Like a lecher sizing up a whore.

“Oh, I think if we load him up with a suitable number of Chuseis he will be.”

The senator nodded. “Excellent. We need some new blood.” Then to Tucker, “Don’t worry kid, you’re going to do just fine.” To general agreement all around.

– Great. Back to patronizing the virgin farm boy.

Tucker looked in the rear vision mirror at the police car behind him. He felt very awake and very sober, but wasn’t at all confident he’d pass a field sobriety test.

Four beers? Three whiskeys? But a lot of water in between. He glanced at his watch and tried to calculate how long the evening had lasted.

The car door opened and the driver got out. There was no silhouette in the passenger side – the car was now empty.

– Don’t they usually work in pairs?

The policeman walked up to Tucker’s open window and allowed the edge of his flashlight beam to illuminate Tucker’s face.

“Good evening officer,” said Tucker politely and evenly, “is there a problem?”

The uniformed man let the question hang in the air a moment.

“No problem Mr Trent,” he said at last. “I’m not here to ruin your evening, you can rest easy. I was just escorting you home. Courtesy of Mr Reinhardt.”

Tucker processed that for a second or two. He didn’t know whether to be relieved, impressed or frightened.

The policeman turned to walk back to his car, then stopped. “Nice car, by the way. Now you take care, OK?”

They couldn't have asked for better weather. Overcast with intermittent sunshine and a breeze that could actually pass for cool. Not that anyone had the windows down. The somber party drove on in silence, Miranda following the satnav's instructions. The calculated route led through some of the more attractive suburbs, gated estates not dissimilar to Glenview, parkland struggling to stay nice in the face of diminishing maintenance and hillsides cleared for development and then abandoned.

Delton sat beside her, looking especially tidy in his lightweight black suit, white shirt and subdued tie. Tired though. If everything at once had been happening to Miranda last week, this week it was Delton's turn.

Alistair's sister Grace sat quietly in the back, looking stately, almost regal in her black dress and hat. A token fold of black net fell beneath the brim, suggesting a veil without going all out. She'd hardly spoken the whole trip.

No one had.

Miranda glanced down to her lap and straightened the folds of her own dress, knee-length and newly bought. Rikki Morgenstern had chosen it, leaving no room for discussion. Miranda didn't mind, it was close to perfect, although not something she would get much use out of.

When Rikki Morgenstern of Morgenstern Personal PR learned who was conducting the funeral service she gave an involuntary wince. It was the only lapse in her composure that Miranda would ever see, and it lasted less than a second.

"OK, they don't allow cameras," she said with calm authority, "so there won't be any press there. Do you know if your father-in-law's package includes a video?"

Miranda produced the program from her attaché case and slid it across the desk to Rikki. It was a glossy brochure with Alistair's customized selections printed on a sheet of faux parchment mounted in the gatefold.

"Yes look," said Miranda, "it says 'video recording and souvenir DVD for all attendees'."

Rikki was studying the fine print on the generic portion of the program.

"No, they won't release anything to the media without our approval. Look, there's a clause here that says that anything they release has to be broadcast in its original form. That means they'll cut it so that it's virtually a commercial. The last thing we want to do is give them free publicity. No, we'll get a single camera to film you arriving and leaving, and release that."

"Will I need to say anything? Will there be someone to ask questions?"

Rikki gave a perfunctory shake of the head.

"And... here we are," said Miranda as they pulled into the car park. They all climbed down out of the Dreadnought into the afternoon warmth. As Rikki had promised, someone with a video camera was parked by the side of the road, not on the property but with a clear view of the car park. Miranda took Delton's arm and steered him to a place where the camera operator would get a clear shot, hoping Grace would follow

and that it would look natural enough. Then she stopped them all for a moment to take in their surroundings.

Against all apprehensions the premises were actually very nice. The main building looked like a modern function centre, with textured concrete render and darkened plate glass at unconventional angles. There was an expanse of beautifully landscaped gardens behind, and a more industrial-looking building at the far end. The entrance was next to a water feature with an island, festooned with dormant floodlights. They were all pointing at one thing, a large sign rising from the middle of the island.

In proud lettering it proclaimed: *'It's My Send Off!'*, and more discreetly underneath, *'a division of Consolidated Commemoration Services Inc.'*

As they walked into the foyer, the buzz and tumult of Miranda's thoughts rose and threatened to drown out everything else.

- What am I supposed to be feeling?
- I mean, he wasn't my father.
- He used to come around a fair bit, didn't he?
- But that was all about spending time with Delton.
- There wasn't all that much of a bond with me.
- Should there have been?

She put a hand to her forehead to quell the dizziness. At least it would probably look right.

Miranda had given considerable thought and preparation to the role of grieving daughter-in-law, but the plan was still far from clear cut. It was imperative she get everything right, especially in her current circumstances.

Playing it quiet and composed would normally be a good safe strategy but she didn't want to be 'part of the wallpaper'. On the other hand, being too loud, being seen to be focusing too much attention onto herself would be even worse. It was a difficult line to tread and the more she thought about it, the more confused she became.

"Good afternoon ladies, sir. Which service will you be attending today?" This came from a small elderly man, impeccably dressed and groomed. OK, maybe the white moustache did seem to hint at a history of derring-do in the 1950s.

"Er, Alistair Wardell, he was my father," said Delton, taken aback. None of them had imagined that this establishment would conduct more than one engagement at a time.

"My condolences on your loss. Now if you would take the corridor to your left, you will find the Yeats room at the far end."

- "Thank you so much," said Miranda with a little too much fervent sincerity.
- You don't have to impress him, silly.

The corridor was actually quite long, and the party had to pass the Bronte, Byron, Cummings, Dickinson, Donne and Tennyson rooms before they reached their own. At least two of them were occupied, judging from the sounds coming from behind the closed doors.

The Yeats room was modern and had a hotel conference room atmosphere. One side was plate glass windows looking out onto the garden. There was even a bar at one end and a large plasma screen mounted on the wall at the other, showing a not-so-recent shot of Alistair. A plain polished steel coffin sat on a strange-looking plinth in front of the plasma, adorned with a single vase of flowers. Some sort of recessed metal track ran along the end of the room, underneath the plinth. There was a

microphone stand to one side of the coffin, and several rows of seats facing it. The room was full of about fifty mourners, standing around talking in subdued tones. Wall-to-wall strangers, as far as Miranda could tell. The conversation level dropped a notch or two as they were noticed.

“How many of these people do you know, Delton?” she whispered.

Delton pointed out Gareth Clark, the CEO of Wardell BP (with whom Delton now had an excellent working relationship, apparently), along with the other board members. There were a few cousins whose names he was relatively confident of, and some of Alistair’s childhood friends that he half-knew.

An older woman was standing with a younger-looking man, a little apart from the rest. They were probably the best-dressed couple in the room, though not in an ostentatious way. Neither looked at ease. Miranda elbowed Delton discreetly in the ribs and pointed with her eyes. Delton sighed.

“OK then, come on. I know, she has a right to be here, I’ll be nice.”

Grace excused herself and started chatting to one of the cousins. Delton and Miranda walked over.

“Hi Mom,” said Delton, “thanks for coming.”

There was an awkward hug.

Miranda put on her social smile. “Hi Krystal, you look lovely today.”

An awkward peck-on-the-cheek.

“Hi Javier,” they both said together, their words overlapping haphazardly.

Two awkward handshakes followed by an awkward silence.

“So sudden,” said Krystal eventually, “he didn’t deserve to go like this.”

– As if you’d care.

“No, that he didn’t,” said Delton and Miranda shook her head in agreement. After a shorter pause she flashed another smile and they edged away to mingle with some of the other attendees.

As the start of the service drew near everyone started to find a seat. Delton and Miranda moved to the front and sat next to Grace.

The coffin was quite plain with a smooth, dull surface. That and the lone, modest flower arrangement seemed to be saying something, but Miranda wasn’t quite sure what it was. Alistair obviously hadn’t skimmed on the arrangements, so why was his casket so unadorned?

Miranda looked at what was right in front of her. There was a man, a life, with all the trimmings. Some of them shared to some degree by almost everyone on the planet, some uniquely his own. There had been hopes, dreams, a failed marriage, and a son to make him proud. He was successful in business but had problems with his health. He had tastes, preferences, opinions, experiences, memories, habits – the whole works. And at the end what? Nothing to show for it but a house of meat with nobody home. Something soft and not terribly pleasant stretched out in a plain steel casket. And soon, a few handfuls of ash. Maybe those were Alistair’s thoughts too. They seemed to have a resonance with the scene arrayed before her.

She thought back to the last time she had seen Alistair. The phone messages from Delton, driving to the hospital, parking in the wrong car park and having to run through the rain. Walking into the room just minutes (apparently) after he had died. And all her mind could think about was the inexplicable presence of Skye Arbeiter, the girl from the accident who’d also been on TV.

– And what the fuck was *Twilight Angels* all about anyway?

It didn’t make sense.

Rikki Morgenstern made a memo in her phone regarding the Wardell funeral.

“There is one other matter I wanted to deal with today.”

“What’s that?”

“The other woman. Skye Arbeiter.” She looked Miranda squarely in the eye. “What do you think of her?”

– Unexpectedly in Alistair’s room when he died.

– Going on TV and... well, having everybody *like* her.

– Bitch.

“Oh, no opinion really,” she said nonchalantly. “She’s not really the sort of person I’d have anything to do with in real life. We move in very different circles, except for that one fateful set of circumstances that brought us together. I doubt I’ll have anything more to do with her. Why?”

“You’re lying. Don’t do that again,” said Rikki dismissively. “Your body language is telling me you’d like to scratch her eyes out. This is a problem, because it plays along with the general feeling out there that you’re rivals. And this is not something I want to encourage, we’re not likely to do well out of it.”

Miranda was confused. “So, what should I...”

“I want you seen in public with her, relaxed and friendly. Lunch would be good. I’d arrange it for you but that wouldn’t come across as natural. To Skye, I mean. Do you think you can manage that?”

“Of course, I’ve done lunch before. But... what would I say? What would we talk about?”

Rikki rolled her eyes. “Just try to get to know her. Ask about her job, her interests, the things she’s passionate about. Then listen. In fact, try and do more listening than talking.”

Miranda digested this. “What sort of place? Will you tip off any... paparazzi?”

“No I don’t think so. Somewhere nice, somewhere on the radar. Someone is sure to spot you, take a snap on their phone and post it.”

The amplified sound of someone clearing their throat drew Miranda’s attention to the microphone. Sir Derring-do from the olden days with his thin white moustache was standing there waiting for the talking to die down and the last few people to find a seat.

“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to ‘It’s My Send Off!’ My name is Arthur Smythe and this afternoon we will be celebrating the life of Alistair Wardell. We will be celebrating it in the way Alistair intended. Indeed the entire order of proceedings this afternoon has been personally planned by Alistair himself. ‘It’s My Send Off!’ offers forward-thinking people like Alistair the opportunity to spare their friends and loved ones the entire burden of funeral planning and financing. It also gives them control over the service itself, including any final messages they wish to impart. Should any of you wish to make this splendid parting gift to your friends and loved ones when the time comes, please pick up a brochure in the lobby, or speak to one of our consultants at the front desk. But right now, it’s time to hand over to the man of the hour... Mr Alistair Wardell!”

Arthur Smythe stood aside as the lights went down. Over the PA came the sound of 50s jazz, the real thing. Be-bop, Miranda seemed to recall. Jittery sax going a million

notes an hour, drums stuttering about like someone with Tourette's, and piano and bass sounding as if they were playing some other piece entirely.

At least that's what it sounded like to Miranda.

"Ah, Dad," said Delton, "it had to be Charlie Parker, didn't it."

After a few bars the music faded and a (relatively) healthy Alistair Wardell appeared on the plasma behind the coffin. He was sitting in his study at home, with the window behind him, looking at the camera with a knowing smile.

"Don't worry folks, I won't make you listen to that all afternoon, but this is my show, and if I didn't put any Charlie Parker in it I'd be short-changing you."

The way he said it, looking straight to camera, his manner – all looking just like the Alistair of a month ago, sitting in her lounge with Delton, eating junk food and watching that comedy show, whatever its name was.

"I update this thing every couple of years," continued Alistair on screen, "this recording I mean. And apart from the all the regular things my doctor harangues me about, I'm not aware of any imminent threat to my continued existence. So if you're watching this it means I've, well, left the party early, so to speak. Unexpectedly. Sorry about that, most inconsiderate of me. But hey, let's not get all mopey about it, the whole point of this thing is to prevent you all from getting mopey."

For the twenty minutes or so Alistair gave a potted history of his life, interspersed with short anecdotes and shout-outs to those he imagined might be present. The narrative was extensively illustrated by photos and the occasional video clip, all to a soundtrack of old-time, small-combo jazz. It all came together as a slick multimedia presentation, delivered with Alistair's comfortable, conversational manner and subtle (but sometimes pointed) humor.

For obvious reasons, this particular recounting of Alistair's life story didn't include details of his passing. "How this story ends – prematurely if they're playing this version – I don't have any idea. Pretty much none of us does, that's how life goes."

The music drew to a gentle close and the camera focused on Alistair again. "Now in a nod to tradition, I'm going to allow a couple of very special people say a few words." Here he leaned in as if he were sharing a secret and said, "But if either of them goes a second over five minutes, you have my permission to yell out at them to sit down and shut up. Never could stand those interminable eulogies, and I'll be damned if I make you sit through any on my account!"

As soon as he learned of his father's death, Delton had launched himself into a focused program of activity. He initiated contact with the firm of lawyers managing his father's estate, started looking for a suitable firm of funeral directors and began work on the eulogy. This was exactly what Miranda had expected, she knew her husband well enough to recognize his way of dealing with 'the situation'. It wasn't something she would describe as grief, at least not the human grief she had observed so far. But there was a definite emotional load, and it was genuine as far as she could tell.

Before these arrangements progressed very far Delton was contacted by It's My Send Off!, and informed that Alistair had taken care of everything in advance – funeral, obituary notices, legal and estate matters. IMSO informed him of the date and location of the funeral and requested that he prepare a five minute eulogy (strict time limit).

This had left him feeling more than a little deflated, as he had virtually nothing to do. He was not the type to be a passive participant or spectator at a time like this, he

really needed to be doing something. Miranda had tried to be helpful and understanding, she at least understood what was going on. But that sort of thing was not Miranda's strongest suit and her attempts had been clumsy and strained.

Fortunately Delton didn't notice.

“Dad loved his music, as anyone who spent time with him knows, and of course as we've just been reminded afresh in this rather unconventional way. He enjoyed a variety of musical genres, but – once again, as we all know – there was one style that he loved above all others. I think it's fitting that Dad was so into bebop. That music suited the man. Dad was a little rough in parts, occasionally challenging, always pushing the boundaries. Like the playful improvisation we find in jazz, Dad made it up as he went along. And we're not talking mellow, cocktail lounge jazz. He wasn't always easy. Just like the harder styles of Jazz you had to spend time with him to get to know what he was really like. And just as for the jazz aficionado, it was time well spent, a friendship worth that initial effort.”

Delton took a sip of water from the plastic bottle he had been holding to prevent his hands from fidgeting. Miranda knew he had made notes – several drafts – and he was sticking to them pretty closely.

“Every piece of music has an ending, each suited to its own peculiar style. And if we compare our lives to a piece of music, each one of us will play out our own final cadence when the time comes. And there are so many ways it can go. The magnificent, dramatic, closing passages of a classical symphony might suggest the glory of a heroic death on the battlefield. In a similar vein the loud, chaotic flaying of a live rock concert ending could be considered analogous to a violent death in some criminal underworld street battle. Contrast that with the radio-friendly pop songs that loop the chorus over and over and fade out – perhaps that's the fate of the mediocre masses, those who have nothing new to say, to think or to do in their final years, and fade to nothing doing the same old things over and over. Then there are the abrupt, unanticipated endings we sometimes hear in so-called art rock and jazz fusion. We think we're still in the middle of the piece and all of a sudden it's over. A heart attack maybe, or a car accident. Perhaps that's one way to think of what happened to Dad. But to me it's not the right final cadence to his life music. That sort of thing doesn't happen in bebop. The way I think of it is this: a power outage, or a disk crash in your iPod. We'll never get to hear the closing passages of Dad's life, the music stopped before the piece was finished.”

Delton looked around. When he continued his voice was less assured. He was leaving the rigid security of his notes and ad libbing.

“But hey, I'm under strict instruction not to get all maudlin. We're here to commemorate, to celebrate, the ah, music of his life that we did get to hear. And what a fabulous piece it was. Thanks.”

Miranda had a brief moment of anxiety as Delton stepped back from the microphone.

– Are we supposed to clap for something like that?

Fortunately everyone else seemed similarly confused – there was a half-hearted smattering of applause that fizzled.

Then it was Grace's turn. This was a woman who lived up to her name. She spent a few minutes reminiscing about her childhood with Alistair (hard-working, fiercely protective of his younger sister), and managed to appear relaxed and dignified.

Miranda studied her presentation intently, trying to identify and isolate the mannerisms by which she achieved it.

“And without being disrespectful to the people from It’s My Send Off!,” she concluded, “this very memorial service is ample evidence of his wicked sense of humor.” Turning briefly to the coffin she added, “I miss you Allie.”

– If only I could have done it like that when I was on TV.

“OK, now we’ve got that out of the way, I think it’s time for a little bit of fun.” Alistair’s voice and face, back on the big plasma. “This next bit is one of the options this place offers, and when I saw it I just couldn’t resist. So,” and here he cleared his throat theatrically, “may I invite you to join me on... My Final Journey!”

He beckoned upward with his hands and everyone misunderstood this as a cue to stand. Then they all noticed that the coffin, and the plinth underneath it, was also rising, smoothly with a soft whirring sound. This action exposed four wheels sitting on the recessed metal tracks, revealing the plinth as a small railway carriage.

Sir Derring-do walked to the front corner of the room and slid back one of the plate glass windows. Then the carriage with Alistair’s coffin began moving along the track towards the opening and into the garden.

“I think we’re supposed to follow,” said Delton quietly. Miranda and Grace accompanied him outside, ahead of the rest of the party.

The gathering followed the carriage as it curved to join a longer track running the glass-fronted length of the building. A walkway ran alongside it, shaded from the sun by the building’s extended eaves.

Since the Yeats room was already right at the end, they didn’t have far to walk. Rounding a corner Miranda was greeted by a sight right out of a child’s storybook. It was a miniature railway shunting yard, with two rows of track, a platform and signaling station. Everything looked about a quarter-scale, what you’d expect for a fairground train ride. Alistair’s self-powered carriage knew exactly where to go and edged towards an impressive, if diminutive steam engine. As far as Miranda could tell it was the real deal, with a coal fire under the boiler and covered in a maze of beautiful brass tubes and fittings, hissing and sputtering quietly. With smooth, practiced choreography Alistair’s carriage was hitched to the engine, then joined by about ten open-sided passenger cars.

Sir Derring-do blew a shrill note on an oversized, shiny metal whistle. “Ladies and gentlemen, all aboard please.”

Miranda resisted simultaneous urges to laugh, shake her head in disbelief and say something inappropriate.

– What next, drive-through funerals?

– Or something in an amusement park...

– ‘Alistair Wardell – The Ride!’, complete with cinema advertising campaign.

Miranda and Delton stepped into the first carriage behind Alistair’s and took their seats. Grace and three cousins (or whoever they were) joined them.

When everyone was aboard, Sir Derring-do blew his whistle again and stepped into the engine. So he was driver as well as über-retro mannequin and MC (or whatever). Truly a multi-skilled operator. With a louder but more musical blast from the engine’s own steam whistle the train lurched gently and pulled away from the platform, following the track into the beautifully kept grounds. Each passenger car had speakers mounted, and true to Alistair’s wishes, everyone was serenaded with another dose of Charlie Parker.

The train followed a subtly convoluted route as the grounds were not all that large, but the layout was impeccably designed to maximize the impact. There was an artificial lake, backed by an artificial mountain range (with white painted concrete snowcaps). Lots of real trees, secluded lawns and flower beds. Some of the lawns had fresh headstones – burial was obviously one of the options on offer from It's My Send Off! For an exorbitant price no doubt.

Eventually they approached a plain stone building at the far corner of the property. There was a marble-framed opening in the wall, veiled with a chain-link curtain. The word 'Crematory' was engraved into the curved marble lintel above the opening. No other windows or doors were visible, but an ominous chimney could be seen at the far end.

The train stopped and Sir Derring-do stepped down from the engine. Under his control, both the engine and the carriage bearing Alistair's coffin were decoupled from the rest of the train. A junction in the track allowed Alistair's carriage, once again under its own power, to make its way slowly toward the opening.

– What, no ceremony? No 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust'?

Miranda felt that everyone ought to be standing, but there wasn't enough headroom in the passenger cars, and Sir Derring-do hadn't suggested that everyone disembark. Instead, after Alistair's coffin had disappeared behind the chain curtain, the elegant old man deftly shunted the engine backwards and re-coupled it with the train. The steam whistle sounded again, and the whole procession made its way back to the function centre.

The Yeats room had undergone some changes while the party had been away. The seats were no longer in rows but arranged in a series of semicircles around the perimeter of the room. Three tables had been set up against the rear wall, each laden with the very best in modern catering (one each of cold, hot and sweets).

"I get the feeling Dad wanted us all to have a good time here," said Delton with a stretched smile.

In the absence of any direction from Sir Derring-do, the rest of the party seemed to be holding back. After an awkward moment Miranda realized they must be waiting for the principal mourners to serve themselves first. She communicated this to Delton, he passed it on to Grace, and together they got the wake underway.

The catering was first class. Miranda recognized some of the dishes. It's My Send Off! obviously had a contract with one of the same restaurants used by *Gourmet Tonight*, the home-dining subscription service she and Delton had been enjoying recently.

Alistair had apparently relented in his endeavors to convert everyone to austere, esoteric hard bop and the musical backdrop had retreated to a more accessible standard. At the front of the room the large plasma was looping through a more ambient version of the potted history of his life.

This was the hardest part of the afternoon for Miranda – an eternity of not knowing how to deal with people who themselves were unsure of how to deal with her. She had loaded her plate modestly at the row of Bain Mariés on the hot table, and ate slowly to make it last. She couldn't be seen reloading too many times and felt naked without a plate to hold in front of her.

How many variations of "we're sorry for your loss" or "my thoughts are with you"? Or from the more religious types, "we'll be praying for you".

And on her own side, how many variations of "Thank you so much" or "you're very kind"? Then they'd look at her as if they expected her to say something else.

Delton was not much help. He was just as clueless about assuming the role of gracious bereaved as she was. Not that he seemed to care – he'd just come out with something stiff and stilted, and be content with it.

A fallback position emerged, like the stereotypical pacing of a panther in a cage.

“You know, for the last few years Alistair would come around to our place for dinner once every couple of weeks and watch TV with Delton and me. Sketch comedy, mostly. We really enjoyed it, and I'm so glad we had those opportunities to spend time together.”

She must have said that to practically everyone present, and came *that close* to saying it twice to one or two of them.

– How long does it take to burn a body? How long have we been going so far?

After an agonizing stretch of time, the wake drew to a close. Sir Derring-do appeared on the scene carrying a tray on which sat several rows of beautiful black paper bags, all standing erect and decorated with a gold silk cord. He moved around the room distributing them, sharing a quiet word with everyone, the very embodiment of gentle, relaxed empathy.

Miranda suddenly hated him.

She took hers with a carefully thoughtful smile when it was her turn.

Inside was a pamphlet outlining the services offered by It's My Send Off!, a DVD and a small velour jewelry box.

– Goodie bags?

The DVD, she would later learn, contained the multimedia presentation of Alistair's life story, (both cuts – the original presentation and the ambient remix), video highlights from the service and train journey (where were the cameras?), a selection of Alistair's favorite music (reproduced under license) and in the interactive features, a mini-autobiography and a 'How well did you know Alistair Wardell?' quiz. Plus some promotional material for It's My Send Off!, and other offerings from Consolidated Commemoration Services Inc.

Inside the jewelry box was a tiny glass vial on a gold chain (18 carat, no less) filled with a fine, sand-colored powder.

A portion of the ashes of Alistair Wardell.

“I was actually pretty surprised by how fast the cremation process was,” confided Delton from the Dreadnought's passenger side on the way home.

– Fast? It was the longest two hours of my life!

But out loud Miranda only said, “Why? How long does it usually take?”

“Well I'm not sure, but I think it's quite a lot longer,” said Delton. “I was talking to that old guy, you know, the director or MC or whatever. Turns out they had done a lot of the preparation beforehand, desiccating the body, infusing it with something he called 'proprietary reactive agents'. And I got the impression there were some more things he wasn't telling me about.”

Miranda allowed herself to relax a degree or two, now that she was no longer among strangers. Not completely, there was still Grace sitting quietly in the back.

“Am I missing something,” she said, “or was this whole afternoon a case of Alistair playing one final joke on us all?”

Delton shook his head, turned his hands up and shrugged.

“I don’t know. There were times I was taking it seriously, then... pow, a kiddies’ train ride or ta-dah, let’s all take a piece of him home to remember... Kind of throws you, doesn’t it.”

“I think he wanted three things,” said Grace, “to save us the trouble of making all the arrangements, to have some control over what type of affair it was, and yes, I think there was a certain element of Allie having the last laugh. It certainly was a little bizarre.”

“Yep,” nodded Delton.

They drove on into the warm evening.

Skye locked the car – a totally unnecessary precaution, and slipped the parking ticket into her purse. Every other car in sight looked at least a hundred times as expensive as hers, no would-be burglar in this place would give it anything more than a disbelieving sneer. Hell, there was a good chance the parking fee would be more than the worth of the old hatchback.

The elevator down to ground level was nicer than any car park elevator Skye had ever been in, to her mind it was approaching something you might find in a luxury hotel. It was even air-conditioned.

Which only made the street's glare and heat all the more oppressive. Sunglasses – on the dash where she had put them after entering the car park. She briefly considered going back for them, but pressed on without. She was just a little late, and it wasn't far.

Cartridge had a big front, all darkened glass (double-glazed, she hoped) and a small, automatic sliding glass door. The foyer offered instant relief, cool and just pleasantly light. The interior walls were entirely covered with dozens of shallow steel-framed, glass-fronted cabinets, each filled with memorabilia and bric-a-brac, artfully arranged. Each cabinet seemed to have its own theme, like surgery, military, culinary, early computers, automotive... there seemed no end, she could have looked around for hours.

“Good afternoon, do you have a reservation?”

The uniformed receptionist was looking at her politely, a mask of pure professionalism. If she thought Skye looked out of place in this establishment, or if she recognized her from the recent stints on TV, nothing showed.

“Oh, thank you. Yes, I'm here to meet someone. Miranda Tonkin.”

After consulting her display briefly the receptionist said, “This way please.”

The interior was decorated in a similar fashion, the same grid of glass cabinets only these were wired into some sort of light show, some with illuminated back panels, some with spotlights shining on them, and some containing various lights of their own. The pulsing, random patterns were mesmerizing.

Miranda Tonkin smiled as Skye was ushered to her table and took her seat. She was dressed in a smart business suit that looked new, and looked almost as nervous as Skye felt.

“Hello Skye, thank you so much for coming.”

“Hi Miranda, thanks for asking,” said Skye, “I've never been here before.” Then after a pause, “Actually, I've never been to anywhere anything like this.”

Miranda looked around at the décor. “Me too. I mean, I have dined out of course, and taken clients to lunch with the firm. But nothing as... seriously out there as this.”

Both women looked down at their lunch menus. Skye noticed that hers didn't have any prices marked. This gave her an uneasy feeling but she said nothing. Most of the items used words one would not immediately associate with food.

“They don't give you many clues, do they?” said Miranda rolling her eyes.

“Ah, so it's not just me. Good.”

Each woman gave half a laugh and saw the other do the same. They hadn't exactly shattered the ice but there was now a small fracture in it.

“Plus I don't see any prices,” Skye added.

“Let’s try and figure out what’s on offer first,” said Miranda. “No seriously, this is my treat.” She looked at Skye and continued, “Circumstances have conspired to get us off to a bad start, you and I. Not once but twice. And now there are gossip columnists casting us as rivals, though I have no idea over what. I just... wanted a chance to sweep that away, to start over and meet you properly. Get to know you a bit, learn something about you. Maybe let you get to know me too.”

– www.totallyrehearsed.com

The monologue was interrupted by a waiter. Skye, sensing that she had less to lose by admitting ignorance, requested that the menu be translated into layperson’s terms. The waiter, perhaps new to Cartridge, gave her a reassuring wink and complied. Suitably informed, Skye went first and ordered the open cold cut sandwich and a side salad.

Miranda said, “I’ll have the same.”

Skye smiled at this small token of confidence.

The waiter also poured some iced water into their glasses. Or at least Skye assumed they were glasses. In any other context she would have identified them as vases.

They each took a sip.

“Why don’t I, ah, go first”, said Miranda and launched into a summary of her life and current circumstances. From her childhood, school and college days to her marriage, career and the accident, there was very little that took more than two or three carefully considered sentences. She briefly mentioned the support group for SUV drivers involved in accidents, and how a friend had suggested she attend one of the meetings. Which lead straight on to their last awkward encounter, rushing to her father-in-law’s deathbed and unexpectedly meeting Skye.

When the end was reached Skye asked a few questions and Miranda answered tersely, much less fluent when unscripted. The whole process was over in less than ten minutes.

Skye did not find Miranda an easy person to warm to, but by now she actually found herself feeling sympathy for the woman. Miranda bore very little responsibility for the tragic death of little Tillie Howe, and was having just as hard a time dealing with the aftermath as Skye was herself.

On countless occasions Julia Morgan had told Skye to loosen up, relax, chill. Now Skye felt (and resisted) the urge to parrot some of that advice to Miranda. Not that she felt the slightest bit relaxed herself, but she at least had some idea of what she must look like through Julia’s eyes.

The waiter returned with the food.

Two salads, two open sandwiches.

– www.michischneier.com

When Skye was in high school she shared an English class with an exchange student from Germany. Michi Schneier spoke English well, but had an annoying habit when preparing any written material. In an effort to appear more learned, she would look up each keyword in her thesaurus and replace it with the most academic-sounding synonym she could find. The result was almost always incomprehensible and unintentionally hilarious.

Skye imagined that the chefs at Cartridge had done something similar. It was as if the gastronomic equivalent of a thesaurus had been used to substitute something exotic in the place of every ‘normal’ ingredient one might find in a salad. This one consisted of pickled figs, water chestnuts and some unidentified mottled red leaves.

It was the same with the sandwich. Skye wasn't even sure which item on the plate was this afternoon's understudy for 'bread'.

However...

As long as she didn't hold on too tightly to the concept of 'salad' or 'sandwich', both dishes were actually quite tasty.

"So," said Miranda, sounding for all the world like a facilitator at a corporate team-building workshop. "What about you Skye? Tell me all about yourself. How have you been... finding the past few weeks?"

Skye started hesitantly, it wasn't easy talking about oneself to a stranger. There wasn't much to report about the early years, life in Beaumanoir had been pretty uneventful. She was happy to talk about the SkynJas website business but skimmed over the details of her troubles with the abusive Jason. That led to E. J. McKluskie House, the ill-fated ski trip and... as Miranda had prompted, the past few weeks.

Of which the past two had been particularly interesting.

There had been no warning at all. At the end of morning break Gunther Huygens (who hardly ever made an appearance at such times) had asked Skye to come to his office at 11:30.

At the designated time she walked across the building to his office and knocked. With him were Joan McKluskie and two men in suits whom she had not seen before. Joan's expression was impassive and subdued.

"Hello Skye, thank you for coming, I trust you had a good weekend, yes? Good," said Gunther in his subtle accent. He indicated the remaining vacant chair across from his desk. "Would you like to take a seat?"

"Yes, very nice, and thanks," said Skye and sat down. Gunther's office had new furniture, nicer than Joan's. His desk was surgically neat, with keyboard, monitor, two cardboard folders and a pen arranged as if on a grid. The monitor had a webcam mounted on top of it, dead centre. There was no telephone.

"Now before we begin, I need you to sign this." Gunther rotated a document in front of him and slid it across to her. "There is no need to worry, it is a standard non-disclosure agreement, no... fine print or hidden traps."

Skye looked across to Joan who gave a subliminal nod.

"What is it for?" asked Skye.

Gunther gave an exaggerated shrug. "Just so that we can speak freely, it is required policy for certain... situations."

Skye looked briefly at the sheet, from what she saw it looked straightforward. She signed it then printed her name and the date.

"Thank you again," and with that Gunther slid it fluidly into one of the filing folders to his left. "Now Skye, how familiar are you with the work of Chandos International in West Africa?"

"Not very. You... I mean we, run some orphanages there don't we?"

"Yes, our humanitarian endeavors there include fourteen orphanages, two travelling clinics, some educational campaigns, and many other efforts. Our administrative centre is in the Zuniga Republic, which suffers from a lot of poverty, occasional political trouble, and of course some corruption in the various layers of government."

"I heard something about diamond mines," said Skye, "ripping off the traditional owners of the land."

“Yes, yes, there is that sort of thing going on, and also trouble with Chinese agriculture companies buying up large areas of fertile land and growing crops for export while the local people suffer from malnutrition. It is not a fortunate place to live in.”

Gunther opened another cardboard folder and took out a document.

“The orphanages in particular have been a significant drain on our finances – we depend on government aid money, corporate sponsors and benevolent donations from individuals. As well as income from some quasi-commercial ventures of our own. Anyway, there is a big need for these services, more than we can afford.”

He paused and looked at the ceiling for a moment.

“Chandos International has had a project in the planning stages for some time, but there are some recent circumstances that make it necessary to move the timing forward significantly. One of these factors is the public fascination with the actors Josh Russel and Jessica Jorgensen, who have adopted a so-called AIDS orphan from Africa.”

Skye nodded but said nothing.

“The recent bus trip tragedy is another factor, and in particular how it has brought Chandos International into the public eye. And there are some other developments also, which need to remain confidential at this time. So as I said we need to move this project forward, to... take the opportunity and strike while the metal is hot.”

Gunther nodded to himself.

“What exactly is this project?” asked Skye, “And how does it involve me?”

“To accord with the old saying, ‘charity begins at home’, we want to offer more people the opportunity to follow the example of this, how are they called? Jossica? And open their homes to an orphan from Africa. It will be known as Project African Sunbeam.”

“You mean an adoption agency?” This was not something Skye was expecting, and it probably showed on her face.

“Agency, broker, yes, why not? We have a situation here in which everyone can be the winner. The children will gain a quality of life and future opportunities much greater than they have now, the new adoptive parents will be participating in a high profile, high status, celebrity-endorsed program, and Chandos International will increase its share of the international charity... what is the word? Action? And our orphanages will no longer be a financial... how do you say? Sink? They might even become a source, though we will not make that public.”

Skye shook her head. Joan was staring determinedly at the floor.

“How many children are you hoping to place this way?” asked Skye eventually.

“Oh, nationwide I am thinking one or two hundred.”

“Per year?”

“Per month.”

“Do you really think there are that many people willing to make this level of... commitment? For goodness’ sake we’re not talking Christmas puppies here. No one is going to take on a responsibility like this lightly – and neither should they.”

Gunther waved his hand dismissively. “I do not think that will be a problem. Number one, do not underestimate the number of people out there who are desperate to emulate celebrities, to identify themselves with them. Number two, almost every professional woman in the country has been postponing having a family until they find it is too late, so many of those will also find this an attractive possibility.”

That was true. The biological clock had not yet surrendered to the feminist agenda. Or whatever.

“We will be very specific in the demographic we target,” continued Gunther. “Of course in most cases we would prefer couples, so the child would have two parents, but we would not discriminate if someone who was single wished to adopt. The important thing is that they are able to provide a good standard of life, and of course the love and care that all children require. The people we will be looking for will not need to be super-rich, only secure financially. As you have said yourself, this is not something people will decide lightly. It has to be an important decision, and we will have to manage very carefully our pri... the expenses we pass on, in keeping with this... gravity.”

A red flag went up in Skye’s mind, she frowned but said nothing.

Gunther did not seem to notice. “We will be presenting this as an attractive opportunity – a status symbol if you like. By taking this step, by adopting a Project African Sunbeam child, people will be making a clear statement about what type of person, what type of family they are. One that cares about humanitarian issues, one that is prepared to take a public stand and do something concrete about suffering in third-world countries.”

Gunther interrupted his monologue and looked at Skye intently. “But you are right of course, this single choice will not be for everyone. Our market research has shown this clearly, and that is why we are planning three options, each tailored to the different levels of commitment required. It is well known that people are more likely to make an undertaking like this if there are some choices involved – not too many, but only a few. To give people a sense of empowerment and control.”

“What are these options?” asked Skye.

“In addition to the standard adoption agreement, later on in the process we will offer a domestic sponsorship option. This will allow people to support a child that someone else has adopted, easing their financial burden. The sponsors will become like... how do you say? Godparents? They will get visiting rights, and even the right to have the child stay with them for some of the time, maybe four weeks a year, there will have to be some negotiation of course. We believe this will greatly increase the number of people who can participate.”

– www.timesharekids.com

“And what is the other option?” asked Skye levelly.

“Up til now we have spoken about the standard option and the... entry-level option. But as you know, the adoption industry is very crowded, and we need an angle, something that sets us apart from the other players. So we have come up with what you might call the deluxe option. Now I must stress that this next idea is still under discussion, the plans for it are not yet complete. Some of the children who come to our orphanages are HIV positive. Yes, this is terrible and of course their life expectancy is very short. They cannot afford the drugs that are needed to keep them alive, and neither can we, sadly. We are considering the possibility of offering select candidates the opportunity to adopt one of our HIV-positive children, and by taking responsibility for the antiretroviral treatment they will literally be giving the gift of life.”

He paused and nodded for effect. “Not for everyone, but the respect which will be earned by those who choose to do this...” Gunther shook his head, “It just cannot be bought.”

– Then how come you’re selling it?

“Now, do you have any questions?”

Skye closed her eyes and tried to make everything fit. Planeloads of Africans coming over to the west, paid for by wealthy status-seekers. Two hundred years ago it

was all about slaves. Now the wealthy would be buying AIDS babies for the prestige. New levels of vulgarity were being plumbed.

And what would happen when the public's goldfish-grade attention spans faltered, what would happen to the little black Christmas-puppy toddlers one week, two weeks into New Year?

Skye gathered her thoughts.

"The HIV 'option'," she began, "I just can't see how it would work."

"OK, as I said the plans are still being developed. However, we have undertaken the necessary market research, and we are confident we have anticipated the potential problems. Of course, the first step will be to bring Social Services on board with us, that will not be a problem. But consider this for example, we will negotiate distribution rights to the latest cocktails of ART drugs. This will be very convenient for the parents, and because we will be buying in bulk we will get a good deal on the price. And we will be entering into special partnerships with childcare centers and schools, to guarantee they will accept the HIV-positive children. No, I do not think there will be any unexpected surprises."

"But surely," insisted Skye, "all this money... wouldn't it be better spent in Africa itself, where every dollar would go further? We could help so many more children."

"It is an interesting argument," said Gunther, "and one we expect some of our detractors to make. And we will be setting up a special charity for this very reason, to harness the concern of people who feel that way. If there are enough of them, and they are genuine, it will be a successful program. And if not, then they will stop... making a noise."

He shook his head. "No, in the end it is an empty argument, you must know that. When you ask the public to send their money overseas, where they cannot control how it is spent, where they cannot see the results with their own eyes... it is like speaking in an empty room."

For an instant Skye got the impression that Gunther knew perfectly well how crass, how tacky, how vulgar all this was, and yet was perfectly comfortable with it. That he saw everything through a lens of supreme pragmatism, balancing his goals against what was needed to achieve them. And right now, his goals just happened to include achieving a beneficial outcome for a group of children in desperate need. By no means was she convinced, much less won over, but she felt less compelled to dismiss it out of hand.

Gunther was looking at her expectantly.

"OK," she said, "I won't pretend I'm not skeptical. Half of me suspects the whole thing will be a big flop, and the other half is worried about what it will say about this country if it does take off. But hey, that's just my initial impressions. They've been known to be wrong before. There is one thing I would like to know, though. What's it all got to do with me? I'm about a million levels removed from the board, or whatever it is that decides policy. Why are you telling me about it so... early on?" She pointed at the folders on Gunther's desk. "Early enough to make me sign that non-disclosure form."

Gunther smiled. "We would like you to take a very active, highly... visible role in the program. A role that makes a full advantage of your skills, and your recently increased public profile."

"You mean going back on television and promoting it? Making ads?" Skye gave a dubious half-grimace. "Believe me, I want to go back to having less of that sort of thing, not more."

Joan McKluskie, still looking at the floor, raised her eyebrows and nodded. Gunther glanced impassively at her and then back to Skye.

“Yes, you will be required to participate in some of that, but most of it will be er, handled by Josh Russel and Jessica Jorgensen.”

This was a genuine surprise. Two actually. Getting Jossica on board would be a major public relations coup for Chandos International, plus the fact that either of those two would consider signing on for something like this. Skye didn’t know what to make of that.

“Then what do you have in mind for me to be doing?” asked Skye.

“Africa!” exclaimed Skye that afternoon in Joan’s office. It was the first opportunity she had to speak to her employer alone. “It seems like a whole ‘nother world. And not just a visit either, but actually living there for three months. Working with the children...” She shook her head as if it were a dream.

Joan nodded. “It’s going to be some ride,” she agreed, “and it’ll certainly cement your career in this... industry.”

“Well that’s the other thing,” said Skye, “the whole African adoption thing. It’s just... outrageous, and half of me wants to, I don’t know, go out protesting or something. And yet the other half of me is thinking if it succeeds it’ll improve, or even save, hundreds of lives, and hey, maybe even contribute to a more compassionate, caring society.”

“Yes, there is that chance,” said Joan matter-of-factly.

“And to think,” continued Skye, “what was it – six weeks ago? I was this timid, bruised little unemployed web designer trying to get back on my feet after a nasty breakup.”

“You’ve certainly landed on your feet,” said Joan.

After a pause Skye laughed. “Oh listen to me going on about it. What about you, Joan? You were awfully quiet this morning.”

“Oh don’t worry about that,” said Joan, “you have more than enough to keep your mind busy.”

“No really, is something wrong?”

Joan shrugged. “Not exactly wrong. It’s just... well since the takeover there have been so many changes, and the be truthful, I’m finding it hard to go along with some of them.” She laughed. “The inflexibility of old age I suppose. Anyway, and I didn’t want to mention this before Gunther had had a chance to make his pitch this morning, I’ve decided to resign. I’ll be leaving in two weeks.”

“You’re kidding, right? But you *are* this place, Joan.”

“I was once,” nodded Joan.

Skye took a moment to process this. “What will you do?” she asked.

“The takeover agreement didn’t make me rich, not by any stretch of the imagination,” said Joan, “but it did leave me with a certain level of security. I’ll take some time off, I haven’t had a vacation in years, then we’ll see what comes up. I might offer my services to one of the church-affiliated city missions.”

“And what about this place? Who’ll run E. J. McKluskie House?”

“Oh I’m sure Gunther will find someone. They haven’t deigned to inform me of their plans in that regard. But I’ve been asked to spend my remaining time here documenting everything I know about the foundation’s operation. So whoever it is will have plenty to read.”

“This whole takeover thing was before I joined,” said Skye. “You were the sole trustee of the E. J. McKluskie Foundation, weren’t you? I mean, why did you agree to be taken over?”

Joan turned her hands palms up. “We were under a lot of financial pressure, expenses were rising faster than our sources of funding. CI was this big global organization with loads of resources and big plans. It just made sense, a win for all parties. CI would pursue their policy of expansion into urban charity, the foundation would get the security of being part of a much larger body – to smooth out the financial bumps. That was the plan anyway.”

“So what went wrong?”

“Well, and I probably shouldn’t be saying this – there’s no way I want to undermine the new management, but for a not-for-profit organization, CI sure operate like a multinational corporation. At least that’s the way it looks to me.”

Skye nodded.

“But hey,” added Joan in a conciliatory tone, “that doesn’t mean they won’t achieve... great things. And I have every confidence that you’ll play a big part in making that happen.”

“Ah, thanks. I guess.”

News of Joan’s departure deflated Skye’s mood somewhat. She hadn’t been working under Joan for very long, but the older woman had been an excellent supervisor and mentor. Somehow she struck the perfect balance of genuine care for everyone she came into contact with, and firm, no-nonsense realism. She would be missed.

But... Africa!

With careful resolution Skye tried to concentrate on the primary reason she had agreed to Gunther’s less than 100% lily white proposal. The opportunity to help all those people who so desperately needed it. Frightened, traumatized children, denied the security of a loving, caring family, facing a jarring transition into a strange and alien culture. But like an excitable child unable to lie still at nap-time, there came bursting through the back of her mind time and again:

– www.imgoingtoafrica.com

It was going to be an adventure beyond anything she had imagined.

The next eight weeks were going to be hectic. There was such a lot to be done before the big trip. One part of Skye’s brain went into overdrive, going over the lists she had already made and composing new ones.

Three television appearances, a morning and two afternoons. No night time, though that could easily change. And one of the PMs would be together with Jossica. Skye had never been one to worship at the church of celebrity, but she did buy the odd gossipy magazine from time to time, or borrow one from the comprehensive library just across the road. Aka Julia’s place. And Jossica were about as big as you could get. She wondered if it would make any difference to the way she would be treated at the Beaumanoir supermarket.

A mountain of preparatory material to get through, and that was not counting the meetings – her calendar was blocking up something serious. Gunther had even arranged for her to take some Yoruba lessons. She had no illusions of becoming

anything like fluent, but it would help for the children to hear her saying a few phrases in their native tongue.

Arranging for Julia Morgan to housesit a few nights a week, or at least wander across and empty the mailbox from time to time. Not all of the bills that would fall due could be dealt with in advance, so she would have to do something about those too.

Then there were all the shots to look forward to. By the time she arrived in Africa her shoulder would probably feel like a pin cushion and there would be more drugs and vaccines in her veins than blood. She wasn't sure how many of them were strictly necessary, as the current plan had her staying in Lawrencetown which was reputed to be pretty safe from a health standpoint. But... better safe than sorry. Some of the diseases on offer over there were pretty horrific.

None of the plates were anywhere near clean, but both Skye and Miranda had come to the tentative conclusion that what remained was garnish and not intended to be eaten. The two women were sipping coffees, spiced with some exotic aromatic plant that was supposed to be all the rage. Cartridge was now only about three quarters full, obviously not everyone was there for the long, leisurely lunches.

"This is really, really interesting," said Miranda with conviction and candor. It was as if Skye's story had lit a fire in her eyes and set a complex mass of machinery whirring frantically just behind them. The contrast to the earlier Miranda could not have been more pronounced. Gone was the rigor mortis smile and awkward, stilted, amateur debating society manner. Miranda was not exactly relaxed – the opposite in fact, but at least her guard was down.

The same was probably true of Skye as well. A good half hour or so of prattling on about herself, sharing all the recent excitement had really loosened her up. Normally this sort of thing would happen in the company of Julia Morgan. But it had all been bottling up lately, and so the task had fallen to Miranda Tonkin.

Of all people.

Not that she seemed to mind.

"It's one of those weird coincidences," Miranda was saying. "About three months ago my husband's firm acquired a company that did some work in Africa – research, field work, something about AIDS I think. But this program, it's just... I don't know what to say."

Her eyes were glowing.

"You don't think it's a bit tacky?"

Miranda gave this some thought. "I understand what you mean, no really, I do. But I think this Chandos group of yours knows what they're doing. It's the market they're targeting, what would it be... status-conscious post-aspirational upper-middle class? Think about the world those people live in." In an affected voice she said, "a world of dumbed-down sitcoms and ADHD-pandering, five-second soundbites."

Skye smiled though she had no idea who Miranda was quoting.

"To grab their attention," Miranda continued, "you need something big and... bold like this. And with Jossica on board, you'll be able to grab onto it and not let go. It's... inspired. I'm impressed."

Miranda's enthusiasm was catching. Skye felt some of her earlier misgivings recede a little in her mind.

"You have made one serious mistake though," said Miranda regressing to the rehearsed speech mode she had been using when they had first met.

“What?”

“Well, you’ve totally broken the NDA you signed.”

Skye frowned, confused. “Huh?”

“The non-disclosure agreement. From what I can tell you’ve been doing quite a lot of disclosing this afternoon.”

– www.omg.com

It had literally not entered Skye’s mind. She was completely unfamiliar with NDAs, being entrusted with sensitive information, or having to watch what she said. As a web designer it had been her job to help her clients share their corporate information with as many of the public as possible. And as an employee of the E. J. McKluskie House, she knew all too well how determined the public was to ignore the uncomfortable truths she dealt with every day.

And now she had just spent the best part of an hour blabbing every last detail she had promised to keep secret. To an (almost) perfect stranger. She wondered if this slip up would ruin everything, incur the wrath of Gunther (or one of his even more mysterious superiors) or even jeopardize the whole program.

The faintest of mischievous smiles broke through Miranda’s studied composure.

“Oh you should see yourself, Skye. You don’t have anything to worry about, I won’t go passing anything on. Think about it. The big publicity drive is going to start any day now. There’s nothing you’ve told me that you won’t be saying on TV, when is it... next week? OK, except maybe the bit about the AIDS option, but they’ll announce that soon enough to. The NDAs are just a formality, trust me, I work for a law firm.”

Skye relaxed a notch. Miranda was probably right, but it was still a serious lapse.

The waiter materialized with a bill and Miranda handed over a plastic card. It was processed on the spot. Skye didn’t quite know where to look and eventually just met Miranda’s eyes and said “Thanks.”

“Oh don’t mention it. It was so nice to have this chance for a little chat. I’ve really enjoyed it.”

So the mask was back on.

Tucker got out promptly from the rear of Elias Corder's Mercedes as soon as it was brought to a standstill. He looked out across the river while Corder climbed out the driver's side. Brandon Tyler was last to emerge, emerging gracefully from the front passenger seat.

Tucker was on his best behavior. He was never anything less than civil with Tyler, never had been. But like some sort of magnetic field there was this tangible sense of mutual loathing that increased with proximity (and duration of proximity). Something about his pale, perfect complexion and jet black hair set every fiber of Tucker's being on edge. A face that was just begging to be cast in *The Omen*, next time they decided another remake was needed. That, and the fact that he hardly ever smiled, and when he did it was even worse.

– Yes I know it's childish.

To Tucker's knowledge, Tyler had never done anything to earn his displeasure, had never undermined him, stolen or sabotaged his ideas. With a couple of exceptions they had never even been required to work together. Chiron Levy had sensed enough of this to keep them apart. But now they were both reporting to Corder. He was almost certainly aware of what was going on, but chose to ignore it.

– Lock it away. Five more hours to go...

The weekend was looming and some of Tucker's plans were spilling over into work time. Well, not quite enough to quell the Brandon Tyler thing, but hey, in five hours Tyler would be about the last thing on his mind. Hopefully.

– Woa yeah. Happy thoughts.

"Come on, let's go have a look at the site," said Corder, and the three of them walked across the road to the Old River Port building.

It had once been the economic heart of the city, coordinating the movement of raw materials, manufactured goods and passengers. The architecture was grand, or at least would have been, back in the days before skyscrapers and plate glass. But time had not been kind, commerce had moved on, and maintenance had dried up. The once imposing sandstone edifice was in serious disrepair, and looked more archaeological than historical. Plus every section of wall accessible from the street and within reach of ground level had been decorated with graffiti and tagging.

A few years earlier, during particularly lean times the city leaders had decided to sell the property, hoping for the twin benefits of a cash injection and an appropriate development to invigorate the old section of town. This had the unintended effect of mobilizing a coalition of convenience, comprising of historical preservationists, environmentalists, anti-developmentalists and various other malcontents. Several rallies and petitions later, they had achieved the most important of their loosely-stated goals: World Heritage Listing. Faced with a long list of restrictions, the number of interested developers shrank to zero, status quo was preserved, and the building itself resumed its slow process of succumbing to time and the elements.

The main entrance was blocked by a heavy steel door which had not opened in decades. It was permanently sealed thanks to the combined effects of rust and geological layers of paint. Corder led his two charges around to one of the less grandiose side entrances, one not graced with a door. The interior was dingy in contrast to the mid morning glare outside, although the darkness was far from

absolute – shafts of light stabbed down through the dust from breaches in the roof. Most of the space was empty, but a zigzagging flight of stairs provided access to the exposed upper levels at one end.

“Smells a bit funny,” observed Tucker.

Brandon Tyler gave a barely perceptible nod in acknowledgement.

“Ah Trent, wouldn’t worry about that,” said Corder. “Look at the space. The location. The vibe of this place. And to think of the price we paid... in a year’s time I bet they’ll be accusing the city of corruption for selling it to us so cheap!”

“Why, did we...?” Tucker trailed off. Tyler gave a silent, subliminal sneer.

“No, of course not,” laughed Corder, “it’s all down to the planning restrictions. But the architects we’ve hired are working around that. Trust me boys, it will be a thing of wonder.”

“Is the design complete?” asked Tyler.

“Oh yes,” said Corder. “There are going to be a three layers. An outside shell of glass and steel, showing off sections of this original façade, like a museum cabinet. And inside, all open plan, making the most of all this wide open space.”

“Won’t all that glass trap the heat?” asked Tucker.

“No, not at all. It won’t be entirely passive of course, but the steel sections of the shell will include reflective louvers – all integrated into the design.” Corder paused for a moment and bared his teeth in thought. “There are a couple of problems, though...”

Tyler remained impassive. Tucker waited an appropriate length of time, then prompted, “Which are...?”

“What? Oh yes. The design favored by the architects, and me for that matter, involves preserving a good deal less of this structure than... the amount we are obliged to.” He pointed to the stonework at the far end of the building. To Tucker’s eyes it was even more unsightly than the rest of the building. “See the South wing down there? I’d love to bulldoze that. We’re going to try to get an amendment through on the preservation order, otherwise what we end up with won’t be... quite so impressive.”

“And the other thing?”

“A problem with the crane. I didn’t quite understand when they explained it. Something about property layout, this existing structure, and the new design. Combined. There’s no place where a conventional construction crane could be situated and service the entire site.”

Tucker tried to picture the layout, but since he had no idea of the new design it didn’t help.

“So what are they going to do?”

“They’ll either have to use three smaller cranes, though not *that* much smaller, or a really big one – a four-tower gantry model. Either way’s going to be expensive. Bit of a bother really, but it’s one of the consequences of the restrictions.”

Corder spent a few more minutes wandering around the ancient space, picturing elements of the new interior then pointing them out to his young charges – foyer, exposed elevator, mezzanine level, stacked open-sided offices.

“Now boys,” he said, craning his head and pointing almost straight up, “right up there at the top, punching through the existing roof, we’ll have the penthouse level. That’ll consist of the new Conference Room A, my office, and an office for each of you. One of them will have a view over the river, the other the city. I’ll leave it to you to sort out who goes where.”

Tucker and Tyler regarded each other warily and grunted noncommittally.

With Corder's virtual tour over, all three returned to his car.

Tyler walked ahead and opened the rear door. "Why don't you ride in the front this time, Tucker?" he offered with just a hint of the wrong kind of smile on the corner of his mouth.

"Sure, thanks," said Tucker. He tried, and failed, to suppress the echo of a barroom insult he'd heard years ago.

– Now there's a face I could never get tired of kicking.

– Settle. A bit less than five hours to go. Happy thoughts.

Back at the office Corder parked in the alpha male spot and the three men got out and stepped across to the elevator.

"Trent, could I have a word with you in my office?" said Corder as he punched the button for the top floor.

"Sure."

They ascended in silence.

Corder dimmed the glass in the picture windows, drew a stack of documents from one of the designer wood-paneled filing cabinets and arranged them on his desk.

"Now contrary to what I said to Randolph, when was it... two, three weeks ago? I never had the slightest intention of tying you up in any of these damn Chuusei contracts. But Randolph has been quite insistent, rather annoying really. I'd tell him to mind his own goddamn business, if it wasn't so tied up with ours. And vice-versa."

"That's OK Mr Corder, I quite understand. I don't have any problem with it."

Once again, Callum Buchanan's jaunty brogue flashed unbidden into his mind:

'You're going to learn things that'll curl your hair. You're going to ask yourself, is this the kind of man I am?'

"No problem at all," he reiterated to banish the memory.

"You know," confided Corder, "far fewer of our people have them than Randolph imagines. To be totally frank, I find them more trouble than they're worth. They actually perform quite well as an investment, but they're such a blunt instrument when it comes to managing the loyalty issue. Not my preferred approach at all."

Tucker wondered what Corder's preferred approach was, but didn't ask.

"Well, I'm happy to sign," he said, looking at the yellow and red X's taped to the topmost sheet.

Corder looked uncharacteristically ambivalent, but handed him a pen. It might have cost as much as Tucker's suit.

"There's a 90 day cooling-off period. That's from when they're lodged of course, not the date you sign. And that's if I lodge them at all, which I'm not entirely sure I shall. Although..."

"Yes?" prompted Tucker eventually.

"What? Oh yes, I was planning to bring you in on discussions for a project we're running. It's the thing that set Randolph off in the first place. I'll brief you next week."

"Would that be the Sheldrake Life Sciences thing?"

Corder looked at him sharply. "How do you know about that? Do we have some loose lips in the company?"

Tucker recalled standing on the balcony-for-two of a Vista Grande deluxe suite, looking out at the uncharacteristically chilly cityscape, recording a memo into his

phone. Wardell Biotech & Pharmaceutical, Sheldrake Life Sciences, something about AIDS patents. Then later, transcribing it into his private, encrypted diary file.

– Happy thoughts.

Corder was watching expectantly.

“No, I heard it from someone outside,” said Tucker. “A... a social contact.”

– That’s putting it politely.

“Someone from the Sheldrake side?” asked Corder.

“Yes, or at least a family member.”

Corder shook his head. “Looks like they’re the ones need to be using these,” he said pointing to the Chuusei contract.

Tucker signed with less confidence than his manner suggested. When he was done Corder placed them in his top drawer.

There was a very good reason that the notes Tucker had recorded a little over a month earlier were so fresh in his mind. It was the same reason he was leaving the office early this afternoon. The same reason he was heading straight home, showering, attending to various (slightly overdue) grooming tasks and choosing something nice to wear. The same reason he would shortly be returning to the scene of the crime.

Because just that morning the enigmatic Miranda Tonkin – quite out of the blue, had returned his calls.

“Hello Tucker, this Miranda.”

“Oh, hi. How are you? I’ve been trying to call you.”

“Yes, I’m sorry about that. The past few weeks have been quite... challenging.”

“Yeah, I saw a lot of it on TV, and I mean, I was thinking gee, I was with you, literally minutes before it all happened. It was kind of freaky, for me I mean. Of course, that’s nothing compared to what it must have been like for you...”

“Tucker?”

“Yes?”

“I want to see you again.”

“You do? I mean, me too.”

“Delton is away. Again. Do you have anything planned for tonight?”

“Uh, no. Tonight’s good.”

“OK. Is the Vista Grande still a good place for you?”

“Yes, sure. I’ll make a reservation right away.”

“Ah, no Tucker. Let me take care of it this time.”

“Oh. Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“OK, ah, thanks then.”

“Would six thirty be a good time for you Tucker?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Good then. Why don’t we meet in the bar, the little one off the atrium.”

“Yeah, OK.”

“Well that’s settled then, I’ll see you then. Bye.”

“Bye, Miranda. Ciao.”

“Oh, and Tucker?”

“Yes?”

“Better get your strength up, boy. You’re going to need it...”

<click>

As for looking his best, the timing could not have been better – the effervescent Zanita and the Life/Style Coordinates crew had come mere days earlier and Tucker’s wardrobe was full of new, modestly stylish outfits.

Tucker splashed on a bit more cologne and checked himself once more. He knew he was spending more attention on his appearance than the first time he had met Miranda at Tollies. It didn’t make all that much sense – there was no future in it. It was nothing more than a slightly dangerous fling with a married woman, a touch older than what he would call his ‘type’. But there was more. There was that almost subliminal sense they were kindred spirits, of like recognizing like. Which in itself was troubling, because there were other aspects of Miranda he recognized. Aspects he hoped he did not share.

- Give the girl a break. She’s been through a lot.
- And it’s not like it’s anything serious.

Tucker drove over to the Vista Grande slowly. The top was down and he didn’t want to mess up his hair. He could have put it up, but the air was just right and hey, this was one of those times where, had there been a soundtrack, it would have been James Brown. *I feel good, da-na na-na na-na nuh*. He rolled up to the front door, picked up his overnighter and got out, tipping the valet double his usual amount. That good.

- But not very discreet.

The lobby was all but deserted, as was the bar. It was way too early for there to be many people around. Which was probably a good thing. Miranda had parked herself in a cubicle at the far end, nursing a water. She was wearing a businesslike skirt, sleeveless top and a diaphanous woolen cardigan draped over her shoulders. It spoke of understated taste, and was almost certainly both expensive and new. She rose and smiled as he approached. The defiance Tucker had seen in her eyes the first time they met was still present, but this time there was some nervousness too. A brittle fragility that wasn’t there before. Just under the surface, not obvious.

- Stretched, that’s the word. As if her bones were closer to the skin.
- “Hello Tucker.”
- “Hi.”

There was a brief moment of awkwardness with Tucker not knowing what to do next, all out in public like this. He put the overnighter on a spare seat.

- Don’t go all teenager-on-a-first-date...

He moved in, took her shoulders and gave her a peck on the cheek, lingering just long enough to breath in the scent of her skin. She was wearing a perfume (subtle but elegant) but it didn’t mask the *woman* underneath. His memory stirred. They sat.

“It’s a bit early for a night out,” Tucker said looking around at the empty bar.

“Maybe, but for a night in?”

“Can I get you something? Do you want to hang around here?”

“Can’t think why,” and it was back – the deadpan playfulness he’d seen at Tollies.

“Well you’d better lead the way then.”

They rose and left the bar, Miranda maintaining some distance as they walked across to the elevator. They would have appeared to a casual observer as friends or colleagues. Or perhaps a longtime married couple. Even so, Tucker did not feel comfortable out in the open. He relaxed as the doors slid closed. Miranda pressed the button for the top floor.

“Hey, what did you book?” he asked. Last time they had been here it was a deluxe suite – very nice, but only one step up from the standard room.

“You’ll see,” she said with a half-smile.

Indeed. When they exited the elevator, the door to which Miranda led him was labeled ‘Executive Suite’.

“The presidential suite was occupied,” she said with faux humility, “so we’ll have to make do with this instead.”

“Hey, I’m impressed. Last time we were... here, I was all thinking I’m the sophisticated guy, showing the lady a fine time. But wow, you’ve trumped me. Have you been here before? I mean, these rooms?”

“I’ve escorted one or two clients here, but never with... mischief in mind.”

Tucker succumbed to his need to explore. The suite was open plan, with a king-size bed, settee, entertainment system and large plasma. The kitchenette was compact but functional, and if required would have allowed Tucker to perform actual cooking. The bathroom was all marble and brushed steel, with two sinks, a Jacuzzi and separate shower. But it was the balcony that really cemented the difference. Instead of a cramped rectangle with two chairs and a pot plant there was an expansive entertaining space, with designer outdoor furniture and a gas grill. And breathtaking views over downtown and across the river.

“Hey Miranda, there’s something I don’t quite get. You’ve been all over the news and on chat shows and whatever, and yet you’ve just booked this amazing place and brought me here. Not exactly low profile. Aren’t you worried about being spotted by some twitter-happy celeb watcher, or even followed by a reporter?”

“Not really, no.”

– Because there’s been one shadowing me.

“OK, just asking.”

“I’ll tell you why Tucker. It was five weeks ago. That’s way longer than the attention span of Mr and Mrs Joe Public. It’s not new, so it’s not news. No one wants to know anymore.”

“But... I saw something about you on the local bulletin, when was it... a couple of weeks ago? Some funeral?”

“Three weeks. And that wasn’t exactly down to being stalked by reporters,” she said with a resigned shrug. “That was just a media release being pushed by my ah... public relations agent.”

“Really? You hired a publicist?”

“I know what you’re thinking Tucker, fifteen minutes of fame wasn’t enough for me. But it wasn’t like that.”

Tucker looked down at her. She met his gaze and gave another shrug.

“OK, it wasn’t *just* that. After my complete screw-up on the morning show, I felt I needed some... professional help to try and repair the damage. So yes, I hired a publicist. Precious little good it did. I haven’t had anyone recognize me in the street for weeks. So no, I wasn’t really concerned about coming here this afternoon.”

“OK, that’s cool.”

“Now howabouts you go and tell me what’s available in the way of drinks.”

The refrigerator was well stocked and Tucker would have been happy with any of the beers on offer. But he remembered Miranda’s preferences from their last meeting (or at least his guesses on the subject), and sure enough there was nothing there that took her fancy.

He ended up mixing equal parts Champagne, orange juice and soda water and they sat outside watching the sun sink over the river. It was a good call, and appropriately low-alcohol for this early in the evening.

“Do you know why I called you, Tucker?”

“No,” he said suppressing two or three glib wisecracks.

“I am planning to make some changes in my life,” Miranda said carefully, “and we won’t be able to do... this anymore. I wanted us to say goodbye in style.”

“OK. Well you’ve certainly delivered on the style.”

“And there’s something else. Something I heard about by chance recently, that I thought you might be interested in. In a way it’s related to the discussions your firm is having with my husband’s. Or at least, it could be. Related, I mean.”

Tucker didn’t mention that he still had no idea what those discussions were about. Elias Corder was going to bring him in on them next week anyway.

Miranda launched into her infodump, starting carefully. Tucker was able to pick the odd rehearsed phrase here and there. But the further she got into it, the more she let go and allowed her thoughts and recollections to flow freely. She became more animated as the story gained momentum and her passion began to engage. Tucker was convinced this uncensored spontaneity of communication was not something Miranda got to exercise very often. The subconscious but unnerving way their minds locked together gave her rare license, and she was making the most of it.

– That, and the fact we’re virtually strangers and won’t be seeing each other again.

But he understood what it was like. For years there had been only one person whom Tucker considered truly on his wavelength. Chiron Levy.

– The man who fell to earth.

So he was more than willing to lend an ear, it was the least he could do. It was still very early in the evening. The sun was just setting, there was all the time in the world.

But this was not to be an act of courtesy, helpful consideration or charity.

Because Tucker found what she had to say very interesting indeed.

The sex did not live up to Tucker’s expectations. Both he and Miranda seemed to be trying to recreate that unexpected detonation that had ambushed them the last time they shared a suite at the Vista Grande. From the remixed Paul Horn Taj Mahal flute music to the Spanish Moscatel and Oysters Indochine, each of them was reaching back, trying to capture that elusive magic. Under any other circumstances Tucker would have described it as amazing, right up there. Miranda let him do things very few other girls had, some of which she even suggested herself.

So OK, it was pretty good. And with a nice spell in the Jacuzzi to break things up and recharge they managed to keep things going for a decent while.

It was just... tarnished by comparison. And the fact that there was no future in it.

The animal/autopilot/rollercoaster was satiated, their bodies exhausted and both of them knew there was no going back. All that remained was that spark of affinity, of recognized and shared identity that had begun the moment their eyes locked together back at Tollies all those weeks earlier. The feelings were mellowing out, and to Tucker it felt like they were morphing into cousins, though of course all of his were back in the old country. Or silent partners, though that didn’t make sense either. Mutual goodwill. Diverging paths. Best wishes.

One more for the road...

Tucker walked into to Conference Room A and sat down in his designated place at the polished hardwood table. All of the Sheldrake / Wardell party were present, seated and being served café-grade coffee (or the weaker, filtered stuff if they so chose) by the lethally efficient Anthea McMahon. Brandon Tyler was already there, one seat away from Tucker. They acknowledged each other coolly.

Each place around the table had a double-sided name plate, machined from the same wood as the table. Seated across from him were:

Stafford Tyne, VP Strategic Investments, Sheldrake Life Sciences

– Older guy, pen-pusher, rubber stamp.

Arlen Verduke, Acquired R&D group, Sheldrake Life Sciences

– Wields the power, Brandon Tyler in ten years' time, but more product in his hair.

Gareth Clarke, CEO, Wardell BP

– Older, a competent straight shooter.

Delton Wardell, Majority shareholder, Wardell BP

– Guy needs to get out more. And give his wife a good seeing-to from time to time.

Tucker was not uncomfortable in the presence of the man he had been cuckolding four days earlier, there was no way his manner would be affected by something like that. The occasional thought of *I-know-something-you-don't* might surface from time to time, as might the unbidden image of Miranda, naked and stretched out in front him, responding to every subtle move he made and *giving as fucking good as she got*. But he was completely confident in his ability to look the man in the eye and talk levelly and incisively about the business at hand.

Elias Corder made his entrance and took his seat between Tucker and Tyler. He greeted the clients by name as if they were all old friends, making small talk for a few moments before formally introducing Tucker.

“Tucker is one of our most talented analysts,” he said by way of explanation, “and I thought it might be useful to bring him in on these discussions.”

Tucker smiled deferentially.

“Now,” Corder continued, “as usual Ms McMahon will be taking minutes, so I think we are ready to begin.” He looked across to where Anthea McMahon was sitting, on the other side of Tyler, and she gave a curt nod.

– When did she sit down there? Girl's a freaking ninja.

“OK, then let's start with the molecular vaccination business. Mr Wardell, for the benefit of Mr Trent here, would you give us a brief summary of the situation?”

“Yes OK, sure,” said Delton, “a few weeks before his passing, my father acquired MeisnerGillespie Biotech, a firm struggling after the death of one of its founders. One of their interesting pieces of IP related to applying vaccination to things other than viruses and bacteria. It's all about provoking the immune system into disrupting all sorts of chemical pathways. The challenge is that a lot of the factors involved are small molecules, and the antibodies the immune system produces are only able to bind to larger ones.”

The briefing notes Corder had given him the day before had very little more than what Delton had just said – pretty much the minutes of the previous meeting. Tucker wished he had spent more time reading and digesting them.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “it's safe to say that biochemistry wasn't exactly my strongest suit in high school. But isn't the point of vaccination to stop people from getting sick? And when it attacks anything else, doesn't that lead to all sorts of autoimmune problems – arthritis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, that sort of thing?”

“There is that risk, yes,” said Delton, “so we have to be very careful not to choose antigens the immune system might confuse with the body’s own tissue proteins. But we believe this can be managed.”

“OK, but what about my original question – what’s the point of vaccination if it’s not against something that makes you sick?”

“There have been several lines of enquiry,” said Delton. “A year or so back, Gillespie thought it might be a novel way of protecting against HIV. One of the ways the virus evades the body’s defenses is by discharging its RNA directly into the bloodstream. There’s no virus to detect and try to attack, just this free-floating RNA. He tried to get an antibody that would bind to that, and be big enough to provoke an immune response.”

“Did it work?” asked Tucker.

Delton shook his head. “No, they managed to get a response, but it wasn’t enough to put any sort of damper on the infection. They also got wind that a Belgian team was working on the same approach, so they didn’t pursue it any further. It was valuable experience though. They’ve switched their attention to genetic disorders – the ones where the faulty genes cause cells to produce proteins they’re not supposed to. By getting the immune system to attack these unwanted proteins, we hope to prevent symptoms from developing.”

“Very good,” said Corder, taking charge again. “Now, is there anything new to report on this topic?”

“Not at this stage,” said Delton, “but they’ve just started investigating molecules involved in the physiological mechanisms of addiction. We think it might be possible to use vaccination as a way of interfering with it.”

“What,” interrupted Tucker, “you mean, helping junkies kick heroin?”

“Yes, that sort of thing,” said Delton.

“Do we have any more details?” asked Corder.

“No, it’s too early. I’m informed that it’s promising, though.”

A look of interest briefly lit up in Corder’s face, which he almost immediately restrained. In a level voice he said, “Well then, we’ll just have to wait and see.” He glanced down at the single piece of paper in front of him. “Now, the next item on the agenda is new, the Peringgi business. Mr Wardell, would you once again put us in the picture?”

“Sure,” said Delton. “This one is interesting. As you might know, the Peringgi fever filovirus is causing a lot of havoc at the moment in West Africa. Walt Gillespie noticed that patients in remission from leukemia, or at least one type of it, were far less likely to succumb to a Peringgi outbreak than the general population. This led him to suspect that one of the Peringgi filovirus surface proteins was similar to one expressed by the lymphoblasts – the bone marrow cells that go out of control in that form of leukemia. His hope was that one of the known treatments against leukemia might give some protection against Peringgi fever – either by targeting the filovirus directly, or priming the immune system against it.”

“Well, did it work? Did he find one?” asked Tucker.

Delton looked across at the two Sheldrake representatives. “I think perhaps Arlen can explain that more succinctly than me.”

“Indeed,” said Arlen Verduke. “Our team has taken over from Mr Gillespie. We have discovered that a dilute infusion of an early chemotherapy drug is highly effective in combating the virus *in vitro*, but we have not performed any human trials.”

“Why not?”

Verduke gave a toxic smile. “Being a chemotherapy drug, there are some unpleasant side effects, but the real reason is commercial. The compound is easy to synthesize and completely free from all patents. As soon as the information is published, any third-world drug company could churn the stuff out for a fraction of the cost we could manage, and we wouldn’t see a penny.”

“So you see,” observed Stafford Tyne, the older Sheldrake exec, “we’re in rather a vulnerable position. If we release the information, it’ll amount to nothing more than a small windfall for our competitors at the bottom of the food chain. If, on the other hand, it becomes known that we have suppressed information about this cheap drug, our ethical position will come under attack. Every bleeding heart liberal across the globe will come baying for our blood.”

“And we couldn’t just announce it, write it off as a good will, PR exercise?” suggested Tucker.

Dismissive grunts and shaking heads.

“Not while we have the special talents of the Wardell BP team at our disposal,” said Verduke.

All eyes turned to Delton. “Ah, yes. We’re carrying out a strategic pharmacokinetic analysis. It’s one of our main lines of business – pharmacokinetic consultancy services.”

Tucker held up his hand and smiled. “Could we just... pretend for a moment that I don’t know what that pharmaco-business is all about. Hypothetically?”

Delton nodded. “Sure. My father used to put it pretty simply: we help other companies patent the bleeding obvious.” He paused as if expecting a reaction, but no one said anything. “Actually, there is more to it than that. This gets a little technical... The way drugs work in the body is very complex, even for the simple ones. In a lot of cases, it’s not the actual ingredient in the pill that does the work. As soon as it enters your bloodstream the concentration starts to fall, for two reasons – your kidneys start removing it, and it gets broken down into two or more subcomponents. Then the same thing happens to those substances, following their own profile. And there are further interactions – third-generation compounds. Sometimes the actual effect of the drug is caused by a fifth-generation molecule. Standard pharmacokinetic analysis studies these pathways, maps the concentration profiles, and comes up with recommended dosages.”

“Standard pharmacokinetics,” echoed Tucker, “recommended dosages. OK.”

“So what we do is a little more creative,” continued Delton. “Suppose a company discovers a new effect of an existing drug. It may be out of patent, or the patent may be owned by a competitor. We examine the pharmacokinetics of this new effect, and find ways of duplicating it using other, unpatented compounds. Our clients can then patent those compounds, and market them as new drugs.”

“Costing considerably more than the old drugs no doubt,” observed Tucker.

“Indeed.”

“But what if someone notices, some other pharmacokinetics expert works out how the new drug is having its effect, and recognizes that it is the same as the old one?”

Delton smiled quietly – the first time Tucker had seen him do so. “Well, we’re rather good at what we do. Creative. It’s a complex area of endeavor to begin with, and with experience and skill, the biochemical pathways can be made very difficult to follow.”

“And other companies pay for these services?”

“Yes, good money,” said Delton.

“So,” said Tucker, “you think you can come up with some new, expensive, *patentable* equivalent to this old chemotherapy drug?”

“There’s a good chance. And if we can’t, we can always fall back on the old ‘magic bullet’ trick, and engineer a new monoclonal antibody. A bit more work, but guaranteed to be expensive, and as you said, patentable.” He shrugged. “We should have a result within a few weeks. But you can understand the need for secrecy. Plus it’d probably break Walt Gillespie’s heart, if he found out.”

Nods all round. Tucker suppressed the urge to ask what a monoclonal antibody was.

After a short comfort break Corder brought the meeting to order again.

“Let’s move on to the next item shall we, the possible HIV cure. Mr Tyne, would you bring us all up to steam on the current situation?”

Stafford Tyne waited until he had everyone’s attention. “As you know, thanks once again to the work of Walt Gillespie, we find ourselves in possession of what may be a cure for HIV, for AIDS. We’ve completed pretty much everything we can do the lab – tissue cultures, work with Rhesus macaque monkeys, that sort of thing. The next step is human trials, and frankly, it’ll be the biggest thing either Wardell BP or Sheldrake Life Sciences has ever embarked upon. The project is complicated by some, shall we say... controversial aspects of the cure, and we’re all a bit nervous as to how to proceed. One option of course would be to sell out to one of the really large multinationals. We’ve shortlisted three and made overtures to one of them already. Very early stages of course. But the thing is, we’d really prefer to take it on ourselves – the rewards would of course be phenomenal. That’s why we’re going over all of this one more time.”

“What do you mean by controversial?” asked Tucker.

Tyne looked across to Delton. “Would you like to...?”

“Sure,” said Delton. “You know how HIV works, don’t you? How the immune system, T-cells in particular, defend the body against foreign invaders – bacteria, viruses and parasites? For the last however many million years, the T-cells have been like, ‘hey, stop picking on my buddies.’ I mean, the invaders attack various cells in the body, which send out distress signals, then the T-cells step up and start putting the boot in. You realize of course that I am oversimplifying things here?”

“Yeah, go on,” said Tucker.

“Then HIV appeared on the scene, and things changed big time. Instead of attacking any old tissue in the body, this virus goes right for the hard target – it seeks out the T-cells and starts attacking them for all its worth. And the T-cells aren’t used to being on the receiving end, they’ve only ever dished it out. That’s the background, you probably know that. Now it gets a bit more technical.”

“OK.”

“T-cells start their life as something called hematopoietic stem cells, in the bone marrow. Because they haven’t become T-cells yet, HIV doesn’t attack them. So they remain healthy, even in someone with AIDS. Our treatment consists of gold nanoparticles carrying siRNA conjugates and a transcription factor. We infuse this...”

Tucker held up one hand. “Gold nanoparticles I get. The other two things were...”

“siRNA conjugates and a transcription factor,” said Delton. “OK, siRNAs are small interfering RNA strands. Look, it doesn’t really matter, they get into the nuclei of cells, mess with the RNA – that’s kind of like DNA, and prevent some of genes from being expressed – from working. Transcription factors are sort of the opposite – they latch on to segments of DNA and activate, where normally they’d just sit there doing nothing.” He paused and looked at Tucker.

“OK, I think I’ve got that.”

“Anyway,” continued Delton, “we infuse this solution into the bloodstream, and some of it finds its way into the bone marrow. The nanoparticles find healthy hematopoietic stem cells, and the transcription factor instructs them to differentiate into T cells. While this is going on, the siRNAs knock out the gene that codes for a protein used by HIV to attack them. Sort of a handle on their surface that the virus latches onto.”

“So you’re getting the body to produce T-cells that the HIV can’t attack?”

Delton nodded. “Exactly.”

“You put it like that, it sounds simple,” said Tucker. “I know, I know, it’s not – if it were they’d have done it years ago. But what I don’t get is... I mean, it doesn’t sound all that controversial.”

“There are a few complications,” said Arlen Verduke, “aren’t there, Delton?”

“Yes,” conceded Delton, “There are three problems we have to overcome, and we’ve made good progress on the first. Cancer. When you mess with DNA, you run the risk of turning them cancerous. Walt Gillespie’s original approach was to use an engineered viruses – even riskier. The gold nanoparticles carry the payload more efficiently and with very low toxicity. We believe this will greatly lower that risk, but it may not eliminate it altogether.”

“Do have any idea what that risk would be?” asked Tucker.

“No, not until we perform human trials.”

“OK.”

“The second issue is that only a tiny proportion of the gold nanoparticles reach the bone marrow, so we have to give a very high dosage. We anticipate some side effects associated with that.”

“What sort of side effects?”

Delton shrugged. “Inflammation, mild fever. Muscle and joint pain. This based on other nanoparticle treatments. We haven’t done any toxicity testing of our own yet.”

“OK.”

“But the most challenging problem is this. The treatment only produces a tiny number of resistant T-cells, vastly outnumbered by naturally produced ones. So they don’t actually get much chance to do any good. At this stage there are two options. The simplest is to just take the patient off their cocktail of ART drugs, and let the disease run its course. The natural T-cell count plummets and the virus literally seals its own doom by destroying every last one of the vulnerable cells that it is able to attack. As they die, the new resistant cells take their place. The virus can’t reproduce any more, so it is eliminated and the patient regains a fully functioning immune system.”

“You can understand our caution,” said Stafford Tyne. “Allowing the virus to run free goes against everything done in the past two and a half decades, and during that time the patient will go from minimally to fully contagious. And that’s just for the least controversial course of action.”

“And what is the other option, the more controversial one?”

Delton looked uncomfortable. “Some on our team consider that the number of resistant cells is so low, that simply going off ART might not be enough. During his field work in Africa, Walt Gillespie identified a new strain of the virus that attacks T-cells much quicker than normal. There is a view that instead of letting the existing infection run its course, we should inoculate the patient with this new strain, to ‘turbo charge’ the treatment so to speak.”

“OK,” said Tucker, “I think I’m starting to get the picture. Like how someone with HIV, pretty much fully controlled by their current drugs, would be less than enthusiastic about something like this.”

“And in both cases,” added Delton, “there is the risk that the tiny handful of resistant cells won’t build up. And by the time we discover this, the patient is wracked with full-blown AIDS, of either their original strain or this new, super-virulent one.”

Tucker thought this through. “This risk you speak of, do you have a feeling for how big it is? Or more generally, how confident are you that the cure will work?”

“Oh, we’re pretty confident,” said Delton. “We regard the risks as minimal, and pretty much in the realm of public perception. We think we can do a lot of good here.”

“And this cure will totally eliminate HIV from the system?”

“Yes, that’s the whole point of it,” said Delton.

“So,” said Tyne in summary, “you can see the difficulty we face. To embark on human trials in any Western nation we would have to deal with a very conservative bureaucracy, not to mention how hard it would be getting informed consent from a sufficient number of HIV-positive people. Of course, all the bigger players conduct their trials in third-world countries, but that brings its own set of problems. The logistics and conditions are sub-optimal, to put it mildly. Then there’s difficulty maintaining regular, reliable contact with patients. Getting them to stay on their drugs is very difficult without constant supervision.”

As Stafford Tyne was speaking Tucker felt a tiny bud of elation form inside him and grow to a dizzying bolt. He had to consciously restrain himself from grinning like an idiot.

– The best goddamn fuck in my life and I get this too?

– Charmed life or what?

“Mr Corder, have we ever had dealings with a group by the name of Chandos International? They’re a charity organization. They were in the news recently, if you recall the ski bus tragedy where that disabled girl died.”

Corder looked over to Anthea McMahon, who shook her head. “No Trent,” he said, “I don’t believe we have. Why do you ask?”

“Then I would like to suggest we initiate contact with them as soon as possible.”

All eyes were on him. Even Brandon Tyler looked genuinely curious.

“I have gained this information second hand, so it goes without saying that we should proceed carefully until it is verified. But over the next few months there is going to be a flood of African children coming into this country, some of them HIV positive. Chandos International are about to launch an adoption scheme, very large scale. My source has indicated that Josh Russel and Jessica Jorgensen will be involved, so we’re talking high profile.”

There was a moment of silence around the table. Tucker was discreetly watching Delton for a reaction, in case he had drawn more conclusions from Tucker’s words than he intended. His source was, of course, the man’s wife. But there was nothing he could detect.

Arlen Verduke looked incredulous. “A large scale adoption program for African children? Where are they going to find the... who’s going be doing the adopting?”

“I know, it does sound out there – third-world children as a fashion accessory and all that. But I believe my source is credible, and I think we should perhaps explore the potential for... synergy between these two projects.”

“I wonder what will be the immigration status of these children?” mused Stafford Tyne.

“Or which countries they’ll be coming from,” added Verduke.

Elias Corder paced back and forth like a caged lion, between his desk and the plate glass feature window. There was so much energy in the man Tucker pictured it fizzing away below the surface and radiating from the exposed skin on his face and hands.

“You know Trent,” he said emphatically, “I would be a much happier man if you had firstly paid a little more attention to those case files I gave you, and secondly if you had run some of these ideas of yours past me before spraying them out in front of everybody like that. These are very important clients, discussing very sensitive topics, and this... off-the-cuff brainstorming is not how we do business in this organization.”

Tucker looked at the floor and said nothing. He didn't for a moment believe that Corder was genuinely displeased but didn't want to push things.

“That being said,” continued Corder, “and mind, I do expect that you're taking it on board...” Here his sternness slipped and he shook his head, revealing a lean, engaging smile. “That being said, well done Trent, very well done. I have no idea whether anything will come of any of this, but we have a bunch of new directions to look into, leads to follow up. And the clients, as you've probably gathered seem to be impressed. Good work.”

“Thank you Mr Corder, thank you very much. And yes, I will ah, take note of what you said... earlier.”

Tucker seemed to levitate out of Corder's office, gliding along on a thin, buoyant layer of air between his shoes and the carpet. In addition to Corder's praise, two things were ringing in his mind.

Arlen Verduke saying ‘Mr Corder, why did it take you so long to introduce Mr Trent into our discussions? I do hope you have not been trying to draw out these discussions for, shall we say, billing purposes.’

And the mixed look of distaste and admiration he saw, fleetingly, on the face of Brandon Tyler.

In her early teenage years Miranda Tonkin was assailed by the standard quota of interior crises. She clashed with her mother constantly, her father occasionally, but seldom with her teachers or peers. When her mother finally did leave she was relieved. Not only was there one less source of conflict, but she felt her father could do better.

But the growing realization that she was not like the other girls gradually started to gnaw away from the inside. She had mixed feelings about this – she could use it to her advantage, as there were certain things about human behavior she understood that none of her friends did. But there was a vague unsatisfying feeling somewhere in there as well.

– Like a meal that leaves you hungry no matter how much you eat.

And of course being blessed with near-perfect introspection she was aware of all of this, and aware that she was aware of it...

– Blessed, or cursed.

There was, however, one benefit of having a mind like a computer. At the worst of times, when a storm of obsessive, ruminatory thoughts were playing on her mind, turbulent and abrasive, never as much as a trace would show on the outside. To all observers she could function coolly and calmly, as incisive and productive as ever. At least, as much as she decided was appropriate for the image of a slightly precocious, academically gifted teen.

– Whose friends had absolutely no clue.

Miranda's mind was busy rehearsing how she might raise the topic with Delton, so busy that she came *that* close to warming up the Fennel and Cilantro Gazpacho. They were trialing a new International Fusion line on Gourmet Tonight, and it was proving slightly more adventurous than both she and Delton had hoped. She was starting to think that home time should be when you could relax and do whatever you felt like, not keep up with whatever was the mode du jour with whatever segment of society she was trying to identify with. This cultured aura, living on the cutting edge, open to new experiences (as long as they're what everyone else is into...)

– Heresy. Whatever.

Well, whatever the case she certainly didn't have to impress Delton.

Tonight's menu struck her as a lot of 'out there', brash, creative-at-the-cost-of-actually-being-nice pretence, and it was putting her on edge. What she really craved was some home cooking, or if it had to be Gourmet Tonight then one of the traditional lines, something old-school. Hell, even the junk food blow outs they used to have when Alistair came around.

"Delt," she said as they finished dessert (Mangosteen Fool with Burnt Chocolate Sauce and Dried Carrot Flakes). "I know this is a busy time for you, but I've been thinking a lot recently about how time is slipping by, and... How do you feel about children?"

It certainly got his attention. She could see the wheels ticking over in his mind, blocks of current thought processes being shunted across and stacked to make room for this newcomer.

“Um, sure Hon, I’m happy to... if you’re certain. I mean, didn’t your dad say they were going to make you partner soon? It might put the brakes on that.” He shook his head, backtracking. “No, that can wait. You’re going to take the IUD out?”

“No, sorry, I don’t mean *having* them. Adopting.”

The open acceptance in Delton’s face hit a roadblock. “Oh, I’ve never thought about that. Why?”

“Next month,” said Miranda, “they’re going to be launching this scheme where people can adopt these orphans from Africa. There’s going to be a choice – you can either adopt one that has AIDS, and pay for their treatment and everything, or a normal one who has just lost their family because of AIDS. It’s going to be huge, lots of celebrities are going to be doing it – they’re going to have Jossica as part of the publicity drive. For the people that get one, it will be a big... it would be making a very public statement about what type of people they were, I mean caring and compassionate. I was just thinking, it could really be good for us. Not just you and me, I mean, but socially.”

If she had his attention before, this took it to a new level. Delton’s mental machinery could clearly be seen back tracking, executing a perfect double-take, and re-evaluating.

Fortunately she was prepared for this.

“How did you hear about this, Hon?” asked Delton.

“Oh, I heard it from Skye,” said Miranda with a near-perfect blend of nonchalance and enthusiasm. “You know, the one from the skiing trip incident. Skye Arbeiter. We did lunch last week.”

Delton shook his head. “Weird.”

“Why? Weird how?”

“Oh, it’s nothing I guess. With something as big as this there’d have to be leaks and rumors all over the place. It’s just that two days ago that consulting company – you know, the one we saw on TV with the stop smoking centers? Corder Synergy. They mentioned the program to us at work, with a view to getting us involved with the HIV treatment we’re developing.”

“Maybe they’re also working with Skye’s employer,” suggested Miranda evenly. “They were called Chandos International as I recall.”

“Yeah, that’s the organization,” said Delton, “but Corder isn’t working for them. This was some lead from out of left field. Came from a new guy they brought in, Trent. Tucker Trent.”

– Easy does it.

One of those forensic interviewers they have on TV shows might have been able to detect the briefest of reddening in Miranda’s cheeks, but not your average citizen and certainly not Delton Wardell.

Delton looked thoughtful. He took his time.

“You know, if you’re really sure it’s what you want, I think it could work out OK. You realize what a massive change it would be to our lifestyle, don’t you?”

Miranda nodded. “Yes, I have been thinking it through carefully. And I’ve spoken about it with a few people.”

Delton didn’t ask who.

– Dad, and Rikki Morgenstern.

“You know,” she added, “just to help get my thoughts in order. As you do.”

“And if Wardell BP do come on board,” said Delton, “in the project I mean, having this personal involvement could be a positive.”

Having Delton think about it in terms of public perception was something new.

– Baby, I never knew you had it in you.

It was about this time that Miranda finally allowed herself to relax on the topic of Delton making a connection between Tucker and herself. She would of course go over it continuously for the next few weeks, but at least she was fairly confident she wouldn't have to worry about Delton getting suspicious.

The previous day she had visited Rikki Morgenstern's chambers with the intention of raising the subject. After minimal pleasantries Miranda outlined the upcoming opportunity and her interest in taking part. The PR dynamo was uncharacteristically quiet and thoughtful for a few moments, then launched into her usual efficient mode.

“Miranda, I was about to tell you today that the opportunity is slipping. That your public profile is fading. As you have probably gathered, the lunch with Skye generated almost no response at all. I know you initially hired me to repair the damage from the incident and the first TV interview, and I believe we've largely done that. Then you said you wanted to take it further, to build your profile and your social identity. But without chasing further mainstream media exposure. I was skeptical that we didn't really have enough build on, and so far my skepticism has proved well founded. Now you bring me this, and OK, yes, we may be able to build on this, to make something of it.”

Rikki looked at her with incisive eyes. Miranda could feel them penetrating deep inside her, past the surface layers of charade and pretence, down almost as far as the yawning void.

“But I need to be sure of one thing,” she continued, “is this what you want? This is not something you can easily walk away from if it doesn't turn out the way you'd imagined. The public will embrace this program, that much is obvious, and if you're one of the early adopters, excuse the pun, they'll embrace you too. Some of them might even associate you with the project... maybe. But if you slip up, or stop playing along as expected, they'll turn on you and there will be nothing I can do to salvage things.”

Miranda projected thoughtfulness.

“I haven't talked it through with Delton yet,” she said, “I wanted to run it past you first. But yes, I understand fully the commitment, personally as well as in the public eye.”

“Good,” concluded Rikki. “Then we'll speak further on this after you've discussed it with your husband.”

Her father was of course concerned about the impact Miranda's plans might have on her career. He and the other two partners had taken a small gamble putting her at the helm of the nascent Paralegal Services division, and it looked at this early stage to be paying off. Bryce Tonkin wanted nothing more than for his daughter to be happy and fulfilled, but he couldn't prevent his concern for the firm surfacing just a little. The fact that the child would not be of his bloodline might have had something to do with it too.

“What did young Delton have to say on the matter?” he asked.

“I haven’t spoken to him about it yet Dad. I’m going to do it tonight.”

Her father looked at her with subtly raised eyebrows. The look he had always used, right back to her childhood, only with a few more wrinkles now.

– Time. It’s coming for us all.

“Don’t be like that,” she said defensively, “there’s nothing wrong. My mind is just going a million miles an hour, so much is going on. I’m just... ticking all the boxes.”

He smiled, same smile, same tunnel back through their shared history.

“Well OK sweetheart, you’ve got nothing to worry about from me. I’ll square it with Geoffrey and Miles, we’ll be able to work some flexibility into your schedule here.”

“But Dad, that’s just the thing,” said Miranda with sudden relief. “It won’t have any impact on my hours – we’ll get one that’s three, four... five years old. It’ll be able to go straight into childcare, or preschool or whatever. We won’t be getting one that’s still a baby.”

“OK sweetheart, whatever you manage to work out.”

The next day she went to work with a considerable load off her mind. The fact that everyone so far was cautiously positive and supportive was not exactly a surprise, but neither was it entirely expected. Basically she hadn’t known what to expect.

The PLEx franchise was not turning out to be the cash cow she had fondly imagined, but it wasn’t losing money either. Revenue from the Paralegal Services division was growing, slowly but steadily. The partners were satisfied.

Miranda was on the floor this morning and spoke to a couple of walk-ins (a recently-dismissed alcoholic going after her local liquor storekeeper and a twice-disqualified driver with the city in his sights after a particularly nasty accident). At 11:00 the first of her scheduled appointments arrived. It was her inaugural client, no less.

“Jason, so good to see you again,” she beamed, standing and offering her hand.

He shook it casually, with just a hint of a laugh. “Yeah, again eh? Hi.”

Miranda recalled their last meeting, and his annoying amusement over some unexplained twilight zone coincidence.

– Private jokes aren’t finny when there’s only one person in on them.

That aside, Jason Curnow was looking just as cool, just as dangerous, just as how-can-this-guy-be-a-geek as the first time she had seen him, only all traces of the shiner and the cuts on his brow and lip were gone. His file was open on her display and Miranda had just spent a minute skimming the new information her PA Aaliyah had added. Even so, she couldn’t help comparing him to a certain Tucker Trent, for reasons less than pure. If Tucker was the soul-mate who never was, Jason Curnow was her inner world’s stand-in for rough trade.

– No, twice is enough. It’s got to stop.

Plus he was a client. Total red flag.

“You’re looking much better than last time you were here,” she said brightly, “your face, I mean.”

“Yeah, good as new, no lasting damage.” Then he reconsidered. “Say, do you mean it’d be better for me if there was something permanent?”

“Well let’s have a look at what we have here,” Miranda said glancing across at the screen. “It’s been quite a while since you were last here. Over a month. Now as agreed I made a few inquiries, and Tollies responded very promptly. We tried to contact you, but didn’t succeed in getting through.”

“Ah, yeah. Sorry about that, I should’ve kept you in the loop. Went on a bit of a vacation. Thailand.”

The whisper of a smirk played on Jason’s face, probably without him even knowing it. Miranda did not press for details.

“Very well. Now our original angle was that Tollies were firstly derelict in their duty of care towards you, and secondly by making a public show of the contents of your wallet, facilitated the commission of an assault on your person.”

“Absolutely,” agreed Jason.

“To that end I contacted Tollies and informed them that I was acting for you, and investigating our options. I asked them if they had security camera footage of the incident on file, and whether they were prepared to release a copy to us.”

Jason said nothing. Miranda looked at her notes on the display.

“I received a response from their legal office about a week later, I won’t read it out, it’s all legalese. Basically they assert that they acted with propriety at all times, and expressed confidence that any legal action would be a waste of time.”

“Assholes.”

Miranda ignored this. “They also sent a copy of the security video. I’m not sure it will be all that helpful.”

“Huh?”

“Would you like to see it?” she asked.

“Hell yeah.”

Miranda double-clicked on the attachment and swiveled her display so they both could watch.

Looking down on Jason, front on, agitated, talking forcefully but silently to two women with their backs to the camera. No audio. Lots of gesticulating but they stand their ground. Strange little penguin suited man walks up starts talking to them, some sort of affectation where he cocks his head to one side. Jason turns his attention on the man. Pretty easy to lip-read the word ‘fuck’, quite a few times. Little man stands his ground. Three security guards, all OTT white costumes, come into view but Jason doesn’t appear to notice them. He winds up and lets fly with his fist but amazingly the penguin suit man dodges it, pulling something from his pocket. It looks like a torch, but when he twists it the front opens out like a flower into a dish. He points it at Jason and there’s a small amount of flare and gentle strobing on the screen but remarkably little drama. The device seems to affect the camera as well, the image goes a little wobbly. Jason’s shoulders slump and he just looks like he’s coming over all peaceful. He suddenly reanimates, rummages around in his pocket and two guards step up and grab his arms. The flying wallet, fluttering plastic notes and the third guard scooping them up as the first two firmly walk him out of shot.

Cut to a different camera. Jason being escorted out through the foyer, more firmly this time, he’s squirming a bit. Past the row of glass-enclosed admission counters and towards the exit.

Final cut, outside. Two guards let go and push him forward, the third offers him the wallet and a wad of the Dazzler notes. Jason steadies himself, looks like he’s either taking a swing and missing, or making a graceless snatch at the wallet. Whatever the case he only succeeds in knocking it out of the guard’s hands, and sends it flying to the pavement. The guards back off, Jason drops down to retrieve the wallet and scrambles around for the money. A couple of onlookers tentatively offer token assistance.

Freeze-frame, end of video.

“According to their response,” said Miranda levelly, “if the matter does go to trial they will argue that they acted with restraint at all times, and that the larger part of the public display of cash was caused by your own actions. They say they feel confident the video footage will support this position in court.

Jason was looking sheepish. “Yeah. Well hey, can’t blame a guy for trying.” He pointed to the display and shook his head. “This doesn’t exactly line up with how I remember things, but hey, my brain had just been zapped by that stun gun thing, and like a minute later I got jumped and worked over by four guys. Concussion, whatever. My memory isn’t going to be worth jack, hey?”

“That would be my advice too,” said Miranda.

“So you think I should just drop it?”

Miranda projected worried concentration. “That is where things get complex. Tollies have raised a certain issue and made some demands on us.”

“Huh?”

“They’re concerned about something on the internet they believe you’re involved with. What can you tell me about www.vindictiveconsumer.com?”

Jason did the whole surprise thing, Miranda didn’t know to buy it or not.

“Uh, yeah, it’s a little project I’ve been running on the side for a few years. Something I really care about. It’s a website, where annoyed customers can do in businesses that treat you like shit.”

“Like a public forum?” asked Miranda.

“Yeah, but it’s aimed mostly at corporations that deliberately give really poor levels of service. I mean, ones that use statistics to determine what level of shit the marketplace will bear, then cut costs so the standard of service is like, a whisker above that level. You know what I mean? They figure it’s not cost-effective to provide anything better. They balance up the money they might lose from customers they piss off, against what they would have to invest to provide a satisfactory level of service to those same clients. I’m not just blowing off smoke here, they really do the analysis, they really make those calculations.”

Miranda obviously didn’t look convinced enough.

“No really. Look, here’s an example,” Jason said. “Let’s say a bank wants to drive its customers to online banking, so it starts closing branches, charging more for over-the-counter services, and deliberately downgrading the quality of those services. Most people just succumb and do more of their banking online, which of course rewards and reinforces those policies. Banks, airlines, phone companies, ISPs, video rentals, power companies... I think you’d be hard pressed to find a business sector that doesn’t have this sort of thing going on.”

“OK,” said Miranda, “so you’ve got this website where people can complain about it. I’ve got to ask, how much difference does it make?”

Jason shrugged. “Yeah exactly. In the early days I really hoped I could change things. You know, skew the statistics, hit them where they’d take notice – make it so they lost more revenue because of those policies, so that it would be economically viable – necessary even, to improve the level of service. Can’t say I’ve actually noticed much change in the way the bastards do business.”

After a pause he said, “So what’s all this got to do with anything, anyway?”

“Well,” said Miranda, “in addition to consulting us, it seems you have been taking some additional action against Tollies yourself.”

“Oh, that.”

Miranda consulted the file again. “Tollies have had their attention drawn to a series of postings on www.vindictiveconsumer.com they consider defamatory, and having

identified you as both the webmaster of that site and the person involved in the... incident at the club, they are demanding that you remove those postings.”

Jason bristled, hackles rising. Miranda could almost smell the tang of testosterone.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Not a fucking chance. I swatted up on libel law way back, before I launched the site. They can’t touch me.”

Miranda nodded and poured on a bit more concern. “I understand, and although I am not a specialist in defamation law, my reading of the matter is that you are correct. There is one small complicating factor, however.”

“And that is?”

“Although there was no audio on the video they released to us, they have informed us that it is present in the original copy. Now they haven’t provided any details at all, but they claim the clarity is such they heard discussion of a restraining order against your ex partner, whom they believed was one of the parties in the video. Their security division have apparently made some inquiries and confirmed this suspicion. The upshot is, and they have worded this very carefully, that they find themselves evaluating their duty to report the breach of a restraining order, against their desire for what they describe as ‘a mutually beneficial outcome’.”

Jason sat chewing over the details.

“What do you think I should do?” he asked eventually.

“As I mentioned during our last appointment, this office has had dealings with Tolliver Holdings, I was actually involved myself in some of them. I can tell you they have a very impressive and well-funded legal team, and from what I understand an equally effective security division.” She paused and chose her words carefully. “I do not think this is a fight you would want to take on. At least, not from the position it appears you are currently... in.”

Jason slumped, the aggression subsiding. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“If I were considering taking on Tolliver Holdings,” continued Miranda more conversationally, “I wouldn’t be doing it on impulse. With this crowd it’d be careful planning, months of it.”

“Yeah, OK.” Jason was quiet for a few moments, then suddenly shook his head in a theatrical show of exasperation. “Ah, that girl. She really used to bring out the best in me, now it’s looking like the opposite. The worst.” He put on a fake grin. “Women, eh? And now here I am talking to you.” That laugh again.

– This has gone on enough.

“Jason,” she said firmly, “there is obviously something frightfully amusing about the fact that you are talking to me, but I haven’t a clue what it is.”

That stopped him, but not for long.

“Oh, sorry. Hey, really? You don’t know?”

“No idea.”

“OK, yeah, I suppose you couldn’t see her face in the video.” He paused then chuckled. “Then this’ll really kill you. My ex, the one who took out the order against me. One of those two girls I was ah, talking to in the video...” the laugh died as he brought back the memory. “That was none other than Ms Skye Arbeiter. A woman to whom I believe you need no introduction.”

Miranda was frozen, her mind backtracking in overdrive, going over the details of the past few days. Weeks even. She looked at the file, checked the date.

“Then my accident, it happened...”

“The very next day after my less than stellar performance,” Jason said pointing to the screen. “And the subsequent *whupping* I got for my... shall we say efforts.”

Miranda finished putting all the pieces in order.

- I must have been upstairs the whole time.
- Making the acquaintance of a Mr Tucker Trent, no less.
- Either that, or we'd only just left.

She wasn't totally sure of the timing.

"OK, thank you for explaining that," she said. "It is rather a coincidence isn't it?"

"Yeah." And the chuckle was back, but more self-deprecating.

Skye was exhausted, her eyes bloodshot and her whole body felt stretched. The anticipation and excitement of the past few weeks were still present in her mind, but now there was nothing to do but wait and the toll on her body was coming to the fore. By some stroke of good fortune the plane was not overbooked and there was a spare seat next to hers, which made a real difference. She adjusted the pillow and leaned back into the crevice between the seat and the window and tried to zero in on that elusive comfortable position. Not terribly successfully.

She glanced at her watch. Six hours to London, then a six hour layover for the plane to Lawrencetown. Horribly long, but too short to do anything interesting like going into town. Sleep would be a good thing, but it didn't look like coming anytime soon. She was wound way too tight.

Already the radiant and crisply uniformed attendants had brought out and served two of what the airline called meals. These seemed primarily designed to break up the time, and also to avoid offending the unadventurous. Skye had declined the second. They weren't large but her gut just felt... occupied.

She tried for another position. It would have worked better if she could recline the seat a bit more, but the man immediately behind her was larger than the average citizen in pretty much every dimension and it just wasn't going to happen.

Five hours fifty-five.

The countdown had gone smoothly and according to plan, although Skye was never quite sure whose plan it was. Every few days she would be called into Gunther's office and briefed on some new facet of the operation or upcoming scheduled item.

Early on, weeks before the big launch there had been a leak, and Skye felt more than a touch of panic, almost certain it had come from her indiscreet lunchtime chat with Miranda Tonkin. She spent a few nerve-wracking days, gripped by the irrational fear that the entire thing would be called off, or (slightly less irrationally) that her role in it would be terminated. But Gunther Huygens (or Chandos International) did not decide to investigate the source of the breach and as the date of the public announcement got closer her sense of worry subsided.

During those days there were queries coming in from all angles, at least she picked up as much from talk around the office. There was a very persistent public relations agent, apparently after advance information on behalf of a client or clients. Or to offer her services, it was unclear. A few days later there were some higher-level inquiries from a company called Sheldrake. These evolved into a series of meetings with several important-looking men in suits, and then the unofficial news dried right up and she overheard nothing more.

Shoehorned in there around this time was Joan McKluskie's farewell party. It was a low key affair, held at E. J. McKluskie house during afternoon break with cakes and a few drinks. There were speeches and tears from the some of the longer serving staff members, and although Skye had only been working with her for a short time she got a very real sense of the shared history that was coming to an end. One odd note to the proceedings came in the form of Gunther Huygens who gave a short speech. As far as

Skye could tell it was delivered with sincerity and every word, every sentence was perfectly chosen. But it still sounded awkward and out of place.

Finally the official launch date arrived. Looking back on it, the whole process was managed efficiently and effectively, and each piece fell precisely into place. But at the time, it had felt a lot more chaotic, at least from Skye's point of view.

She had made three (more) appearances on TV, and surprisingly these had turned out to be less of a big deal than she had expected.

Due to undisclosed but mutually beneficial negotiations the various shows had been managed into playing along to Chandos's script. Skye was far more prepared this time, with one of Gunther's minions (Dirk someone-or-other) spending time with her coaching and rehearsing before each occasion. So by the time she actually got out under the lights with the array of cameras facing her, everything was reduced to a case of remembering all the material she had been given to deliver.

Skye (in stark contrast to Julia Morgan) had never really worshipped at the altar of celebrity, unless you counted leafing through magazines in the Beaumanoir supermarket checkout line, or *occasionally* watching Flynn Marsden's camp gossip segment on morning TV. But even she wasn't immune to the *frisson* of excitement at the prospect of appearing alongside Josh Russel and Jessica Jorgensen.

The producers had decided to do the show in front of a studio audience, just in case the viewers might not notice the hyped up sense of occasion. This made the mechanics of broadcast more complex, but the crew, now padded out with audience wranglers or whatever they were called, were up to the job.

There was also the bother of getting past the crowd that had gathered at the studio gates (front and back), pressing and straining for a glimpse of the celebrity couple as they arrived.

Inside, after all the prepping, makeup, waiting, Skye finally laid eyes on them, in the flesh and up close and personal. It wasn't what you'd call an anticlimax, but to be honest it didn't rock her world. They seemed nice enough and little Hope, their newly-adopted African child and the topic du jour, was completely adorable – just starting to say a few words in English. But Skye only got to see them while they were all on set together, when she was spending most of her concentration on what she was supposed to be saying next. They appeared to be natural and at ease, more so than Skye but that was to be expected from professionals. And just like the first time she had been in a TV studio, the lights gave everyone that hyper-real, CGI look.

There was one moment when Josh looked over at what Hope was doing, and the look in his eyes spoke more eloquently than anything he or Jessica said out loud.

Camera two caught it.

This brief impression of humanity, of being just another doting new dad was somewhat diluted by the ever present army of assistants, representatives, spokespersons, minders and bodyguards hovering around like a cloud of mosquitoes. But since they were off camera the image the viewing public got to see was simple and uncomplicated.

At the end of the interview, after the cued applause, the 'We'll be right back after these messages', someone calling out 'clear', the entourage surrounded them and whisked them away so fast you could almost feel the air rushing in to fill the vacuum.

To Skye, the whole www.josshica.com experience was like a tornado that left no evidence of its passing, with everything sitting exactly where it had been at the beginning.

As the days wound down the preparation began to focus more and more on practical matters. Some of it was pure overkill, driven by lawyers no doubt, or insurance companies. Some of it was confusing, seeming for all the world to have been copied from some irrelevant and obsolete procedures manual. But to the little girl in Skye it was all exciting, new and had that indescribable mixture of real and unreal.

On the unpleasant side was the immunization schedule, with shots, pills and foul-tasting liquids. She got an immune reaction to one of them and spent a couple of days at home with a mild fever. But compared to the potential alternatives – the insidious assortment of bacterial, virus and fungal infections on offer in the corner of Africa she would be calling home for the next few months, well, it was a small price to pay.

A few days before departure Gunther gave her a new smartphone. It had a few new data features her old one didn't, and was preconfigured to use one of the African telcos Chandos had an account with. Julia Morgan had been very impressed with it and they spent a pleasant evening testing out its features.

The way the camera could be set up as a webcam was particularly cool, and Skye helped Julia set up her laptop so she could connect and stream it to disk if required, so that she could watch things that happened while she was asleep, or at work.

"I thought you didn't know any of the tech side of these things," said Julia, watching her work. "You said that Jason did all of that stuff, when you were with him, in the business."

Skye gave her best dubious look and said, "Jules, setting up a desktop icon to a freeware disk streaming utility isn't exactly what I'd call high tech. Now if it was configuring a secure e-trading system on a Linux Apache server, then yes, I'd need someone like... Jason."

"Whatever," said Julia. "And with this, you certainly won't have any excuse not to keep in touch now."

Lawrencetown International Airport could not come soon enough. Skye watched the landscape grow and become more detailed as the plane descended and it just looked different. No skyscrapers, no cloverleaf-junctioned freeways and the colors were all skewed, as if she was looking at everything through tinted sunglasses.

The novelty didn't last. She was absolutely wrecked, more than she could remember in her entire life. Total zombie. The plane she caught in London was nothing like the sleek, modern airliner that had brought her there. This thing was old, tattered and crowded. Every time they flew through cloud or some other tiny scrap of turbulence it broke out into a decaying series of rattles and creaks. From time to time there were vibrations in the airframe that Skye was almost certain were not due to atmospheric conditions. A complete wreck.

– www.justlikeifeel.com

Touchdown was actually quite smooth but the cacophony of sounds it provoked fooled the mind into thinking it was much bumpier. The plane taxied over to the diminutive and unconvincing terminal building and after a short delay they disembarked. The sun was sinking into the sea as Skye walked across the tarmac to the terminal, giving the neglected, post-colonial buildings a romantic, golden hue.

Inside it was like stepping back forty years, at least that was the impression. They walked past the line of passengers waiting to board her plane, with random people being patted down by large, imposing military personnel. No x-ray machine, no metal detector, and as far as Skye could see no security cameras. Skye found it

simultaneously comical, refreshing and sad. Or maybe that was just the effect of exhaustion on her emotions and she didn't know what to feel.

One of Gunther's assistants had given her a small official-looking but otherwise undecipherable document to place in her passport, and when she finally reached the head of the immigration line this was stamped without question by one of the two passport control officers.

On her way to the baggage claim area Skye noticed a youngish woman holding up a cardboard sign with 'Skye Arbeiter, Chandos International' on it. She mustered up a smile and walked over.

"Hi, I'm Skye," she said.

"Hello Miss Arbeiter, welcome to the Zuniga Republic," said the woman, "My name is Maria Ajayi, and I work for Chandos International. I hope you had a pleasant flight?"

Maria Ajayi looked to be a warm, friendly woman. She had a wholesome face with bright teeth and eyes contrasting with her dark skin. Her dress was brightly colored and quite long – below the knee, and her hair was a closely cropped frizz. Most of the women present had a similar style. Hair straightening didn't seem to be as de rigueur over here as back home.

"Yes, pleasant enough," said Skye, remembering where she was and deciding against complete honesty. "Although I must admit I am a little tired."

"Of course. Shall we proceed to your suitcase?"

There was no carousel. The baggage was being wheeled into the collection area on hand-pulled trolleys. Skye smiled at the quaintness but then stopped herself, not wanting to offend anyone. Once her suitcase had been identified and retrieved she accepted Maria's help and walked out of the terminal, past the ferry, hovercraft and helicopter terminals and into the car park.

"Please accept my apologies for this car," said Maria stopping to produce a key from a clutch purse. "It is both old and small, but will reliably take us to the compound."

The car in question was about the same size and vintage as Skye's own venerable hatchback, perhaps a little dustier.

"I'm sure it will Maria. You know, back home the car I drive is not very different. Just as old, just as small."

Maria didn't look convinced. She loaded Skye's suitcase into the back. It looked out of place among the assortment of tools, household utensils and... unidentified fabric items (clothes?) Too new.

"Have you travelled to Africa before, Miss Arbeiter?"

"No, never," said Skye with a tired smile. "I've been to Europe twice and South America once. I've never really been much of a traveler. And Maria, please call me Skye."

"Yes Miss... Skye."

Maria appeared torn between a desire to welcome and talk to this new visitor, her own natural shyness, and sensitivity to Skye's exhaustion. She made a few comments on the drive to the compound, but didn't persist with engaging Skye in conversation. The journey took half an hour, along a sealed road that was more repairs than original surface. The light was fading fast and the road was illuminated by the ancient car's headlights plus the odd, unpredictably placed streetlights. These also gave glimpses of sparse, rundown semi-suburban shacks, houses and other nondescript buildings.

Chandos International's 'Ilé Ireti', or House of Hope compound was marked by a high fence topped with razor wire. Maria pulled into a sentry station and was waved through.

"What's all the security for?" asked Skye.

"There are two reasons," said Maria. "Some people are angry that we are sending children over the sea to other countries. They say that the children are our future, that we are sending our future away. But there are other people – parents who are poor, who will try to leave their children at our door. Abandon them? They think their children will have a better life in another country. But the agreement Chandos International has with our government is strictly limited to orphans, so we must prevent these children from being left here."

Maria stopped the car next to a few others, including a few battle-worn four wheel drives. No fancy, murderous suburban SUVs, these had obviously been bought (and manufactured, and used often) for legitimate reasons.

A group of people appeared and two young men offered to take Skye's suitcase and the carry on sports bag. There were a few children shyly watching on, some peeking around the legs of the adults. Another, older man approached and offered his hand.

"Good evening, Skye. I am Dawiid Bankele, director of Ilé Ireti, the Chandos International Lawrencetown Region Orphanage. Welcome to our facility, I trust your journey was pleasant."

It wasn't a question. Skye thanked him.

Dawiid was about Skye's age and wore a business shirt and tie. His manner was one of calm authority and competence. He exchanged a few rapid fire words with Maria Ajayi. They must have been using Yoruba, but Skye was hard pressed to pick out a single word she understood.

"Have you had your evening meal?" Dawiid asked. "I can have our cook prepare something for you."

"Oh, please no," said Skye, "they fed us on the plane and to tell the truth, after travelling for a little over 24 hours, I really don't feel like eating. A shower, definitely, but no food. Thanks."

"Very well. Maria will show you to your room, and if you have sufficient energy you can join us later in the staff room." Dawiid pointed to the building behind him. "Right through there."

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

Maria led her along a gravel path past some more buildings. The two young men carrying her things followed silently. There were not very many outside lights so she could not see very much, but most of the buildings had muted lights on inside and the sound of children talking could be heard from some of them.

"This is the staff ladies' dormitory. To return, you must follow this path. The administration block is over there, near the flag pole. That is where the staff room is. Will you be able to find your way?"

"Yes, thanks," said Skye.

"Good, now I will show you where is the bathroom and then your room."

The two young men placed Skye's baggage on the veranda, bowed to her and disappeared into the night.

"Uh, thanks," Skye called after them.

The communal toilets and bathroom were newly constructed but basic. It must have been a recent renovation as her room in the same building, although clean, looked a lot older. The linen and bedspread were new though, and someone had put out some swing top bottles of water and a glass tumbler.

“Would you like me to help you unpack your belongings Miss Skye?” asked Maria.

“Oh, thanks but no, I think I’ll be able to do that.”

“As you wish. Is there anything more I can do for you now?”

“You have been very helpful already Maria, meeting me at the airport and driving me here. I think I’ll be right for a little while now. Thanks.”

Maria nodded and took her leave. Skye sat down on the padded metal chair, closed her eyes and breathed deeply. After a few moments she got up and began transferring clothes from the suitcase into the handmade timber wardrobe and chest of drawers.

Sharing the toilet and showers with everyone in the building was a bit of a change and reminded Skye of her college days. But the water was warm, it took the edge off her fatigue and freshened up her spirits. A clean change of clothes and the transformation was almost complete. This left the small matter of her wet hair.

One of Gunther Huygens’ assistants had provided her with a list of travel essentials, and she had attempted to purchase everything on it. This included two universal power adapters, one of which she extracted from a zippered satchel and attached to her hair dryer. There was a bewildering array of prongs, but she eventually found the pair that matched the wall socket in her room and the reassuring blast of hot air made the surroundings feel just a little less alien.

Skye debated whether she should make an appearance in the staff room or just crash then and there. It was tempting but she wanted to do the right thing, as well as make a good impression. As she retraced her steps back to administration block she heard a sound coming from inside one of the buildings along the way. It was a sound of a young child crying. There were words too, which she didn’t understand except for ‘mama’, which was repeated regularly and clearly. The crying was joined by another voice, this one sounding even younger and without words. A light came on, the glow diffused by curtains, and then still another voice, older but still childlike, saying something comforting and soothing. Gradually the crying subsided.

The overheard encounter brought home to Skye that this place, her home for the next few months, was a place where traumatized, grief-stricken children awaited an unknown future. A future she believed was full of promise, but to them was frightening and incomprehensible.

“Ah, it is good that you are able to join us,” Dawiid Bankele said when Skye wandered into the (clearly marked) staff room.

“I can’t promise how long I’ll be able to keep my eyes open,” said Skye, “but I thought I’d at least show my face.”

One end of the room was casual, with some lounges, scattered chairs, coffee tables and an old television. At the other end there were more chairs and a row of desks, some with computers and one with a fax machine. There was a whiteboard mounted on the wall, with a grid drawn on it showing dates down the side and names across the top. She saw her own name there, at the top of the final column.

Maria Ajayi approached her. “Would you like a hot drink?”

“That’d be lovely, thanks. What do you have?”

“It is tea,” explained Maria.

“Well then, tea it is. I mean, yes please,” said Skye, feeling awkward. Maria nodded and walked over to the kitchenette.

Dawiid gave a polite cough. “I hope you will start to feel at home here very soon, but you must understand that everything will be very different to what you are accustomed to. Is there anything I can assist you with at this early stage?”

“Well,” said Skye, “I didn’t notice any laundry, or clothes washing facilities in the dormitory building where my room was. I’ll need to wash some clothes before too long.”

Dawiid smiled. “That part at least is very easy. If you leave your items of clothing on the small table next to your door in the morning, you will find them cleaned, pressed and folded when you return in the evening.”

“Oh, OK. Who does that? The washing I mean.”

“Our domestic staff,” said Dawiid. “Now there are two other matters I can mention right away. Meals are served in the staff cafeteria, which is across the courtyard from this building. There is also a cafeteria for the children, which you are welcome to use. For example, if you were assisting children at a mealtime you may choose to eat at the same time. Each of them is supplied from the same catering company, although the staff cafeteria is more... I imagine, suited to your expectations.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” said Skye, “I’m not going to get all precious on you.”

“Very well,” said Dawiid. “The other thing is the internet.” He pointed to the row of desks against the wall. “The computer over there is for use by the staff. The speed is not great, but you will at least be able to send emails to your loved ones, and conduct other business that requires the internet. We ask that everyone use caution and... sensitivity when doing this? I do not wish to offend you or make any assumptions, but you understand that I am speaking of virus-carrying websites and also... titillating content?”

“Yes I do, thank you.” Skye tried not to laugh. The idea of anyone viewing *titillating content* in a room where anyone and everyone could walk up and look over their shoulder didn’t strike her as all that likely.

Maria returned with a chipped mug of hot, sweet tea. It was awful but hit the spot perfectly.

Skye slept like a lamb and was woken by unfamiliar sounds. By the time she arrived in the staff cafeteria two young women were starting to pack things away. There was not a lot of choice – some sort of porridge, thick and glutinous, a spicy lentil dish and some dried fruit. The only Western item available was instant coffee, surprising for a country that grew some of the finest coffee beans in the world.

Most of the morning was taken up with orientation. Maria gave her a guided tour of the compound and introduced her to some of the senior staff. There were too many, and most of the names fell straight through Skye’s memory the moment after they were given, but two stuck in her mind. The first was Garvey Kalimbe, head of security (thickset and imposing, wearing something suspiciously like military garb, medals and all). The other was Lucas Bembo, administrative assistant, a tall thin man with restless eyes in a suit that almost fitted.

The layout of the compound was pretty simple. Skye was already familiar with the administration building, the two segregated staff dormitories and the cafeteria where she had just eaten. She was shown the children’s cafeteria (much plainer), the new and well-appointed clinic and laboratory, the maintenance shed and a warehouse. In the middle was a fenced playing area that made her old Beaumanoir park look like Disneyland by comparison. Finally there were the five children’s dormitories, painted in bright colors, and named after them: Green for the newly-arrived, Yellow for the very young, Pink for older girls, Blue for older boys and Red for those ‘with a problem of health’.

“By ‘health problem’, do you mean those with AIDS?” Skye asked.

Maria paused, not knowing where to look. Eventually she nodded. “Yes, Miss Skye.”

These children were kept separate from the others. They were allowed to play outside, but only during the two hours that the healthy children were having their naps.

In the afternoon Maria drove her into town. The heat was starting to bite, and in the sun’s glare she saw everything that had been hidden in the darkness the previous evening. The impressions came thick and fast, faster than her mind could process.

Everything was dusty, including the air.

Everything new (not that there was much of that) was either gaudy or flimsy, sometimes both.

Everything else was either falling apart, or heavily repaired (with recycled materials).

And almost everywhere there were small gardens and crop plots, not terribly vigorous but free of weeds.

In town the differences kept coming. In general the buildings were made of brightly painted concrete, most of them only one or two storeys and hardly any of them over four. On the other hand there were trees everywhere. No city back home was anywhere near as green. And the way the hills sloped down to the sea was actually quite pretty, at least from a distance. The centre was more developed, with some new buildings, although they all sported foreign-looking signs and logos.

She visited the Credit Bank of West Africa and drew some cash from an ATM. It worked exactly the same as any machine she had ever used, but the printed receipt showed her balance in the local currency, a much larger number than she was used to seeing in these circumstances.

– www.millionaires-r-us.com

Next they made their way to Chandos International’s Pan-African division headquarters. It was a relatively new three storey building of white painted concrete with darkened glass windows. The architect’s intended effect was marred by the uneven layer of dust already building up and steel security grilles over the windows. It was very nice inside though, polished wooden floors, artworks and a water feature.

Dawiid had arranged for Skye to meet Claude Auteil, the chairman of Chandos International’s Pan-African Division. She had exchanged emails with him before her departure, and Gunther had mentioned him a few times. Something about a man who could get things done, and that she should talk to him if she ever needed anything.

The two women were ushered into a waiting room, complete with fish tank, coffee table and month-old European magazines. Claude Auteil had a pretty secretary who gave Maria a dismissive glance but smiled warmly at Skye. They were not kept waiting long.

The chairman’s office was very nicely appointed, even by Western standards. Skye found herself thinking that Chandos International must be doing extraordinarily well in Africa, which was a little strange since they were supposed to be charity rather than a multinational corporation.

Claude Auteil stood to greet them as they entered. He was a pale, stocky European man who made up for it all by dressing impeccably and moving with poise and a steely grace.

“Good afternoon Skye, it is good to meet you at last,” he said in a smooth French accent as he took her hand. For a moment she thought he was going to kiss it, but he only held it for slightly longer than necessary. “We don’t get to see very many, ah, new faces around here.”

“Hi, nice to meet you too,” Skye said. She could have sworn he was just about to say ‘white faces’, the way he had glanced sideways at Maria.

“So, are you settled in at the compound? Has Dawiid been treating you well? Culture shock under control?”

“Yes, it’s all OK, thank you.”

“Excellent. So, I suppose it is early days yet, you’re barely settled in. But if you do need anything that Dawiid cannot manage, be sure to let me know.” With a conjuror’s flick he produced a business card and handed it to her.

“Thanks.”

The director walked over to the wall and pointed to a large printed chart. It had a series of cascading, overlapping blocks with a time axis at the bottom. “You can see this whole operation has been very sudden, I don’t think that any other organization could have mobilized as quickly as we have.”

He spent a few minutes explaining how the Pan-African Division was implementing the program, from the fast-tracked early phases following its sudden announcement through to the more measured steps being taken currently, and forward to the anticipated consolidation and streamlining in the future.

“It is an audacious undertaking,” he concluded, “one that I am very proud to be a part of, as I am sure you are too.” He paused in the exactly the same manner as someone waiting for applause to die down. “Now, do you have any questions I can answer for you?”

“Well there is one, Mr Auteil,” began Skye.

“Claude, please,” interrupted the Frenchman. “In a place like this we can at least *tutoi* – be informal.”

“OK, Claude. There is one question, and that is how do you see my role here? You’ve given me a good overview of how the project is being managed, but I’m still a little vague on what exactly is expected of me. Gunther was never very specific, he spoke about liaison, showing the human face of the organization, things like that. But nothing about what I’d be doing day-to-day.”

“I see. First of all, I think you do not need to worry about this. Dawiid will be coordinating most of your activities. But I can give you an idea. There are never enough good hands at the compound, there will always be something to do. But for you especially, many of the children that arrive have never seen a Westerner before, and some of them will be fearful as they have come from a troubled past. You will be the first white person they will see, and if you will show them... sympathy and compassion, then this will be the first step to lessen the shock they will experience when they travel from a familiar environment to an unknown one.”

Skye took this in, no surprises there.

“There will also be some international media. Gunther said that you were able to appear relaxed and composed in front of a camera. You will be able to do some of this I think quite soon.”

Skye winced. This was the sort of thing she would have happily left back home.

Over the next few days the jarring shock receded and Skye started to learn how the centre operated. She even began to feel confident, if not comfortable with her emerging role.

Every few days a small batch of children aged between one and seven years, would arrive in a battered but hardy minivan. They would be given a plastic identification tag, attached around the wrist to the younger children and worn around the neck on a

bead chain by the older ones. The tags contained the name, age and an ID number. In some cases, particularly with younger children the child's name and age was not known, so a new name would be given and the age estimated.

Next they would be subjected to a thorough medical examination, including a battery of blood tests. There was a suitably-equipped laboratory in Lawrencetown, so this didn't take very long. When the results were in they would be moved into the dormitory according to age, gender and health status. As Maria had explained earlier, those that tested HIV-positive were segregated in Red dormitory and put on immediate ART, antiretroviral treatment.

Irrespective of the test results, all the children were put on what seemed like an excessive schedule of shots, pills, syrups and drops. The clinic had two state of the art hypodermic jet injectors, so large numbers of shots could be given very quickly, without the bother of changing and sterilizing needles. There were antibiotics, antivirals, vaccines, vitamins and mineral supplements. Skye didn't understand why all of them were needed. Maria said it had something to do with multinational corporate sponsorship. There was a certain amount of paperwork going on behind the scenes as well. Some of this was done on computer, the rest of it actually involved paper.

Most of the children were traumatized, they had obviously come from terrible conditions and now found themselves suddenly in a new and unfamiliar environment. Some were malnourished, some exhibited the sort of repetitive actions and behavior Skye had seen in animals on TV reports of poorly-run zoos. Stereotypical behavior, they called it.

It tore Skye up to look at them.

They were all cared for by staff who were genuine, enthusiastic and able but largely untrained. Some of them looked to be barely into their teens. They took on the role of surrogate parents, or rather big brothers and sisters, supervising, feeding, clothing and washing. There were even informal classes where children were taught a few words of English, and this was an area where Skye was able to join in right away.

In the days following their arrival, the look of fear and the tight, almost feral expression would start to fade from the children's faces. The regular supply of food, shelter and care would transform them from *victims* or *cases* into *people* and *personalities*. Or perhaps it was Skye's way of seeing them that was being transformed. The children would warm to their carers, including Skye, and in as far as the numbers allowed, bonds would be formed.

It was around this time, as the smiles and laughter began to appear, that two suitably skilled members of the staff (whose names had not yet lodged in Skye's memory) would take some modern and expensive video equipment from the locked storeroom and set up shop in one corner of the cafeteria. All the newly arrived children would be dressed up as well as the carers could manage and paraded in front of the cameras. Some of them found this frightening, not understanding that it was probably the most important moment of their lives. These were the images that would appear on the Chandos International website. A good shoot would increase the likelihood of adoption, failure to present well would mean a longer stay in the compound, hopes fading. Children were not entitled to stay indefinitely, and those who had not been chosen by prospective adoptive parents, particularly the older ones, were moved to another location to make room for the intermittent stream of newcomers.

With very few exceptions all the video and photo sessions turned out well. The camera seemed to love these kids, they were all gorgeous. They had wide, endearing eyes, infectious (if shy) smiles, smooth skin and well sculpted features.

It took about three batches before Skye even began to notice.

Not every child is picture perfect, but most of these were.

In the back of her mind the question was raised – what happened to those children who were not so lucky appearance-wise? Skye knew how the system had to work before she signed on for the tour of duty. But that didn't mean she was comfortable about it.

– www.meatmarket.com

When they had finished shooting the children the makeshift crew turned their attention to Skye. There were several pieces to camera to complete, a change of wardrobe in between each one. The scripts, apparently provided by Chandos International's public relations department, were surprisingly well suited to Skye's natural manner. It didn't have to be perfect and they usually had something they were all satisfied with after two or three takes. All part of the publicity campaign, taking advantage of her increased public profile, as Gunther had put it.

When a child was chosen for adoption there was another set of paperwork to complete. They would wait until five or six were ready to leave, at which time a chaperone would arrive to pick them up, take them to the airport and travel with them on the plane. These were times of mixed emotion for Skye, hope for the children's future, concern for the ordeal ahead of them – the long trip, the culture shock and dislocation as they found themselves surrounded by strangers, transplanted into an unfamiliar family environment. In some cases, the children had come to feel like family to Skye, and she felt a sense of loss as they were driven away, knowing that in all likelihood she would never see them again.

Skye was not privy to everything that went on at Ilé Ireti. Occasionally a limousine would drive through the security station, pick up Dawiid Bankele (and sometimes Lucas Bembo, his administrative assistant) and then leave. Usually they would be gone for only a few hours, but once they did not return until the next day.

On other occasions the limousine (or prestige, urban-style SUV) would arrive and discharge various high-ranking government officials and/or foreign nationals, complete with armed guards. They would disappear into Dawiid's office, then leave later in the day.

Maria had no idea what these meetings were about, and the one time Skye asked Dawiid he had been dismissive and vague.

Three or so weeks into her stay, Lucas Bembo asked Skye to be part of a field trip he was planning to lead up country. This was to be a return visit to several villages in Margai province, a remote region more than one day's drive west of the capital. A return visit, as a representative from Chandos International had already toured the area three weeks earlier, scouting for suitable orphans. The centre's amateur media contingent (whom she now knew by name – Robert Johnson and Darius Ngenda) would also be coming along.

So, it appeared, were three armed guards, young but serious members of Garvey Kalimbe's security contingent. Skye asked Lucas why they were necessary.

"We will be passing close to a large plantation operated by the Laiwu Xiajin Agribusiness Co."

“Is that a Chinese company?”

“Yes, they grow a variety of crops, some for export, some for biofuel. There are food shortages in some of the surrounding areas, and in recent months there has been some unrest. But you have nothing to worry about, Garvey’s men are a precaution only.”

The party numbered eight, and they were spread between two four wheel drives and the minivan. Skye and Maria travelled in the van, driven by Robert Johnson. Two of the security guards took point position in one of the four wheel drives, while Lucas, Darius Ngenda and the remaining guard brought up the rear.

They left before sunrise while it was still pleasantly cool. It didn’t last. The sealed road soon gave way to gravel and then rutted clay. There was no air conditioning, and since they were travelling behind one of the four wheel drives, opening the windows more than a crack did nothing except suck dust into the cabin. The hours stretched and blurred and the road seemed never to end.

The one positive element of the journey was the scenery. They travelled through lowland plains with meandering rivers and wetlands, up into a series of forested hills, almost but not quite qualifying as jungle, then more sparsely vegetated plateaus where the heat was less stifling.

But there was no wildlife. The only animals Skye saw were a few mangy African cattle wandering listlessly beside the road, tended by a disinterested herdsman who looked about fifteen.

Mid afternoon, just as Lucas had said, they came to a security station bearing a sign that said ‘Laiwu Xiajin Agribusiness Co.’ The convoy slowed down but were waved past by the armed sentries. Four were obviously African but one looked distinctly Asian. For the next half hour there was a high, razor-wire fence to their left, protecting luxuriant, irrigated green fields. At the far end was another station, after that there was only the rough open road.

Before sundown they stopped and set up camp. Maria and the two cameramen prepared a meal while the guards took care of a fire. Lucas asked Skye if she wanted to sleep in the van, but after a bone-rattling day inside she decided to join the others under the stars. There were stretchers arrayed around the fire like haphazard sunbeams, and the guards assured her they would be taking turns keeping watch.

The night was quiet, occasionally punctuated by sounds Skye could not identify. She didn’t even know if they were animal or bird. Maria told her quiet stories about when she was a little girl, and even though the pictures she painted were nothing like those of Skye’s own early years, she caught a glimpse of the joys, the mischief, the sense of adventure and fun that were universal across all cultures. Universal for those blessed with a happy childhood.

They made an early start the next morning, after a quick breakfast. Most of the distance had been covered the previous day and the convoy reached Malimbe, the first of the villages on their itinerary a little after ten thirty. They parked in what must have been the town centre and disembarked to stretch their legs and look around.

It was not something Skye was prepared for. This was poverty beyond anything she had ever seen. The buildings were crumbling, the animals (goats, cows and dogs) looked sick, the children malnourished. There were very few adults to be seen. The smell of untreated sewage hung in the air.

– www.frameless.com

Skye had seen this sort of thing before, but it had always had a frame around the outside, with the location, reporter’s name and the network logo displayed along the

bottom. Viewed from the comparative luxury of her Beaumanoir weatherboard house. Not up close and personal like *right now*.

A group of near-naked children gathered around Skye and Maria, babbling in the local dialect with hands outstretched. They kept stealing glances at the three armed guards as if they expected to be shooed away or worse.

Three village elders were approaching. Lucas Bembo stepped to the front and introduced himself. Skye understood none of the discussion that followed, and turned her attention back to the children.

“How can people live like this?” she said in a quiet voice, more to herself than anyone else. She bit back on the lump in her throat and on a sudden impulse squatted down to see them at eye level.

“Maria, can you please tell them ‘don’t worry, we’re going to take you to a place where there is plenty of food, clean beds and kind people who will look after you’?”

Maria looked at her in confusion. Two of the guards exchanged words and Skye heard the sound of quiet, bemused laughter.

“Miss Skye,” said Maria, “these are not the children we are here for. These children are not orphans, they are not starving or sick. They all have parents to look after them and houses to live in. See?” She pointed to a group of women preparing some sort of grain on a straw mat on the dirt a small distance away. Some of them were calling to the children, clearly offering advice, encouragement and suggestions.

She stood up, feeling slightly foolish but not completely. How *could* people live like this? She had imagined she understood the gulf between ‘the West’ and ‘third-world countries’, but now she was starting to think she hadn’t even begun to comprehend it.

“These are the lucky ones, Miss Skye.”

If these were the lucky ones, then what about the orphans, the children they had come for? What conditions must they be living it?

She did not have to wait long to find out. After Robert and Darius had retrieved their equipment from the vehicles, the three elders led the group to a house so decrepit Skye imagined a puff of wind would knock it down. Inside were three children, all looked to be under five. They were pitifully thin and one of them, a boy, had some sort of tumor growing on his face, messing with its symmetry and preventing his left eye from blinking.

No frame, no voiceover urging viewers to give generously...

Whatever.

It was as if Skye’s sense of shock hadn’t been given enough time to charge up again after the first time. She felt dazed but calm, and ignoring the video camera she concentrated on the immediate task at hand. Using hand gestures she introduced herself and learned that the two younger girls were called Kumba and Janjay, and that the boy was called Sando. She then set about helping them gather their belongings.

Something intruded into her mind. Lucas Bembo was saying something, and the tone was different. Skye looked around. The video camera was lowered and Maria looked at her with a tight, uncomfortable expression on her face.

“What?”

“Miss Skye, we cannot take the boy,” said Maria.

“What? How do you mean?” Skye asked, but the answer rose like a specter in her mind even before Lucas spoke.

“No one will choose him Skye, no one will adopt him. Ilé Ireti can only take in children for the purpose of adoption in your country. It is not a... general purpose orphanage.”

Skye looked at little Sando. The tumor gave one eye a squinty look, and the other was permanently open and obviously infected. It sickened her, but she knew Lucas had a point. The genius of Project African Sunbeam was that it took advantage of status-seeking middle-class couples, and subverted that to actually deliver real results to children in desperate need.

Cute children, with wide, pleading eyes.

Photogenic children.

– www.nofuckingway.com

“Lucas,” she said firmly, “this boy needs medical attention. He’ll lose sight in that eye otherwise. We can’t just leave him here.” She turned to Sando, took his hand and walked for the door. “We are taking him back with us, and when we get back to Ilé Ireti we can discuss what to do next.”

Lucas stood aside but followed them outside.

“Miss Arbeiter,” he said in a quiet but hard-edged voice, “That boy is not coming back to Lawrencetown and we will not negotiate about it. I am in charge of this expedition, and it would be a mistake for you to challenge me.” He said a few words in Yoruba and two of the security guards walked across and stood either side of him.

“Are you threatening me?” Skye asked, incredulously.

“I don’t need to,” said Lucas. “I am simply saying facts. You do not have authority here, and also you do not have... force.”

Stunned and powerless, Skye closed her eyes and tried to marshal her thoughts. They were a long way from civilization and Lucas clearly had the loyalty of the guards. Guards with military-looking uniforms and guns. There weren’t many options.

The rest of the party came out of the hut, led by Darius Ngenda walking backwards and filming. Maria was carrying the youngest of the two little girls and holding the hand of the other one.

“What am I even doing here?” she mused, not even aware she had said it out loud.

“You were certainly not sent here to change Chandos International policy or operations, Miss Arbeiter. You were sent here because you are well known on the television in your country, and also because you can easily get the trust of the children.”

Something clicked in her mind.

“Very well Lucas, you win. Can I at least have a few moments with him alone?”

“Of course, why not. But we will be leaving soon. There are three more villages to visit today.”

Skye turned around and walked back into the hut with Sando, struggling to remain calm. She briefly considered staying behind in Malimbe, but doubted Lucas would allow that. And even if he did she didn’t think she had what it would take. The village was impossibly remote and she had not heard any of the locals speaking a word of English. To her inexperienced ears even their Yoruba sounded halting.

So she didn’t have much time.

Skye was on her best behavior for the rest of the trip, but kept quiet and maintained a wounded attitude. It was only half pretending, and she didn’t want to make Lucas suspicious.

The next three villages yielded five more children, all adorable and all suitably photogenic. Skye and Maria were kept busy that evening as they camped under the stars once again, with their seven small charges to watch over. The children were not

any trouble, they were almost certainly still in shock. One of the very young ones woke crying in the middle of the night and Skye rocked her back sleep.

Back at the compound Skye was sure she would be summoned to Dawiid Bankele's office as soon as Lucas Bembo had reported to him. But for the rest of that day at least it was all business as usual. Seven new ID tags to make up, seven medical assessments to begin, seven schedules of antibiotics, vaccinations and vitamin shots.

But it was hardly business as usual for Skye. That evening, after a hasty meal and a much-needed shower she stayed up late, working into the night. The chunky little smartphone had the video file she had recorded in the few minutes she had been alone with little Sando, but she needed more.

Copying some of the techniques she had seen the camera crew use in the cafeteria, Skye hung a white bed sheet from her wardrobe door. She then arranged her own desk lamp and two borrowed ones so that they illuminated it evenly and from multiple directions. Finally she put on one of her nicer tops, applied some makeup and paid a little attention to her hair.

With the smartphone balanced precariously on her suitcase (itself standing upright on her chair) Skye carefully recorded the piece to camera she had been rehearsing in her mind for the past two days. After three takes she has something she was satisfied with.

This was where things got a little vague. Getting the raw footage had been easy, but she hadn't given very much thought about what would come next. Now there was no avoiding it. Internet/viral or mainstream/network? If she tried Grant Glazer and the morning show crew, would they take on the story? That would guarantee a huge audience, plus they had the resources to edit up her raw footage into something powerful. Or would Chandos International find out and squash the story before it was broadcast? They were paying a lot of money to the network...

Going it alone had its own set of problems. Skye couldn't do the video editing, she had neither the experience nor the equipment. There was a tiny applet on the smartphone, but there must have been some compatibility issue and it kept locking up. She gave up after five attempts.

What she needed was an accomplice. Someone who could do a decent job of editing, post the result on YouTube or somewhere, then somehow *seed* things so that it would come to the attention of so many people that Chandos International couldn't ignore it. Force something to be done.

Julia Morgan? Hardly.

Someone like...

– www.vindictivewebgenius.com

No way...

But he did sort of owe her. She'd gone way past the call of duty (Julia's words) that night he got himself thrown out of Tollies and mugged.

She thought it over for a few minutes, trying to give her mind a chance to come up with a better idea. Eventually she looked down at the smartphone in her hand, checked her watch and calculated the time difference, took a deep breath and dialed.

He answered on the fourth ring.

"Jason? Ah, it's Skye here... yeah, um, hi. I'm in Africa. Look, I know this is going to sound strange, but I need your help."

The following morning Skye was called to Dawiid Bankele's office. Lucas Bembo was there, and to Skye's surprise so was Claude Auteil. All three men looked less than comfortable.

"Good morning Skye," began the chairman, "thank you for making time for us."

Skye smiled nervously. "Not a problem, Claude."

"I hear you have accompanied Lucas on an expedition," he continued. "It is good that you can participate in our work this way, yes? Let you see some new things that you would not see at home, or even here at the compound."

"Yes, it was a real eye-opener," agreed Skye, then winced internally at her choice of words as the image of little Sando's distorted face appeared in her mind.

"Very good, very good. You are our guest here Skye, and playing an important role in the operation. And you are doing this role very well, from the reports that Dawiid sends me. Now I do not want to make of this a big drama, but I understand that during this expedition there arose... shall we say, a difference of opinion concerning how the operation should proceed?"

Skye nodded. Claude seemed to be waiting for her to say something so she said, "There was a boy in one of the villages who had a facial tumor. I was... well, quite frankly, shocked that we just... had to leave him there."

The Frenchman nodded. "As I said before, I do not want to make a big drama, but it is important that we are all working together in this operation. Do you understand why the boy was not brought to Ilé Ireti?"

"Understand, yes I guess so. Agree, absolutely not."

"It is not ideal, I know," said Claude, "but it is a fact of life. You might think that Chandos International is a large organization with lots of money, but it is not without limits. And in this operation we have some parameters that are not flexible. Our clients are paying large sums of money for the privilege of adopting. Let us not pretend to ourselves that this is something it is not. Most of them are making an investment in status – social standing. And they will be very choosy about that investment."

Skye shook her head. "But that's not what it should be about. It should be about... humanitarian work, helping children who desperately need looking after." She shrugged. "Lessening their suffering."

"I agree with you, and even if you do not accept it, I believe that is what Chandos International is trying to achieve. But they must use these social climbers and their privilege to achieve this, to finance it. I know it is a compromise, but this is the way it is."

Up until then Skye had thought Claude Auteil a bit of a buffoon, but she now suspected he was every bit as sharp as Gunther. Although she had no intention of sharing with Claude and Dawiid the course of action she had launched the previous night, there was an uncomfortable feeling growing in her. Doubts perhaps, or rather a lessening in her conviction she was doing the best thing.

Claude raised his hands in conciliation and his voice changed to that of a man confiding in a friend. "You know, this is having an impact on us all. There are things that cannot be predicted, no matter how much research is done at the beginning. Are you aware that some of the ambitions of Chandos International are in danger of not being realized?"

"No. What are they?" asked Skye.

"The demand for HIV-positive children is far less than Chandos International had hoped. There are many people who will adopt a child orphaned by AIDS, but not so

many who are willing to open their homes to one who is sick. Even knowing that the virus can be kept under control, even knowing that they are saving the child from a slow, horrible death.”

This confirmed something Skye had noticed herself. There hadn’t been a lot of ‘turnover’ among the HIV-positive residents Red dormitory.

“What will happen to them if they are not adopted?” asked Skye in a small voice.

Claude grimaced and shook his head. “Let us hope it does not come to that. But they cannot stay here indefinitely, and the drugs they are taking are also not free. They will probably be sent back to their villages, to their relatives.”

A sense of dread welled up in Skye’s core. She felt sick. It would be a death sentence.

“But that’s terrible! Surely there must be something we can do.”

“And we are doing it. You are right to be shocked, but you must realize that three months ago, that was the reality of those children. That is what has been happening for the past, er... twenty years.”

It didn’t bear thinking about.

“Well, I am happy that we have been able to have this little chat,” said Claude summing up, “and that you understand the nature of some of these realities.”

After a few more pleasantries Skye left, fragile smiles all round. She felt a sense of foreboding about the fate of the sick children, overlaid with apprehension about the outcome – whatever it might be, of the email and video she had sent Jason.

And why had Dawiid and Lucas been so quiet? Throughout the entire meeting they had both sat silently, the manager looking uncomfortable, his assistant diffident.

Before turning out the light that night, her thoughts still in turmoil, Skye checked her smartphone. There was a text from Jason:

congrats uv gone viral

“Thanks Jason,” she said to herself, “but a few more details would have been nice.”

If whatever it was Jason had done did come through, and capture the public’s attention, might she be able to build on that to improve the chances of the unchosen, HIV-positive children?

Tucker stood with Elias Corder and Brandon Tyler on the River Port building site and looked up at the war-of-the-worlds monstrosity that straddled them. Corder had gone for the four-tower gantry crane option, and Tucker had to admit it really was impressive. Cranes of that size and capacity were seldom seen outside of Dubai.

The CEO was holding a shovel with a shaft of polished hardwood and a chrome-plated blade. Tucker and Tyler stood on either side of their boss and looked over the small gathering of Corder Synergy staff, city dignitaries and jobbing reporters. They had assembled at the South wing of the building – the section that Corder wished he could bulldoze as Tucker recalled, to begin work on what was being loosely called the ‘restoration’ of the Old River Port Building. The high mesh fence had been removed, rendering the area they now occupied accessible, and half a century’s worth of weeds and undergrowth were reduced to mulch.

“This is ridiculous,” said Corder in a quiet snarl. “You would have thought that at least one of the news outlets would have sent along a camera crew.” His eager grin was locked in place, but he certainly wasn’t smiling on the inside. Two of the reporters were carrying actual cameras, the rest either didn’t think the event worthy of a picture or would be making do with their phones or PDAs.

“There should be more coverage,” Tucker agreed, nodding.

“Definitely,” added Tyler.

Corder looked up at the group of people and mused out loud, “Now where’s Anthea got to?” Before two seconds had elapsed his personal assistant materialized out of the crowd and walked up purposefully.

– Is that girl telepathic or what?

“Ah, Miss McMahan,” said Corder, “would you by any chance have a camera about your person? Most of our esteemed members of the press seem to have left theirs at the office, and I think we might be just about to have a photo opportunity or two.”

It so happened that Anthea McMahan did have a camera in her small handbag, and she took it out and turned it on. Corder then drew her close spoke so quietly in her ear that Tucker, standing just the other side, did not pick up anything. She nodded and returned back to the onlookers.

Corder stole another glance at his watch. “Well then, let’s get this circus underway.” He brandished the shovel for attention and began.

“Mayor Vernon, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for being here today to share in this occasion, the commencement of work on the historic River Port building restoration. When I bought the place a few months ago, there were those that said – openly, I might add, that I’d lost my mind. Who would want to buy this eyesore, they asked. An eyesore that also happened to be an historic site, with God-knows how many protection orders and restrictions hanging over it. Well my friends, today we start the process of finding out if I really have lost the plot, or if the diamond in the rough I see in this building behind me really does exist, and if my team and I have what it takes to polish it. For I believe we can turn this once grand old building into something wonderful, preserving its important heritage values while at the same time bringing renewal, a new vision, to the riverfront precinct.”

There ensued modestly enthusiastic applause from the Corder Synergy contingent.

“So without further ado, I’d like to ask our Mayor, Stanley Vernon, to officially begin work on this development, by turning the first sod.”

Mayor Stanley Vernon stepped up to more applause, and Elias Corder handed him the gleaming shovel. A small patch of loosened, moistened earth had been prepared and marked with four short gardening stakes and a red ribbon. The Mayor planted the blade of the shovel in the middle of this plot, gave it a token press with the toe of his black patent leather wingtips, lifted it knee-high and delicately turned it over.

“Excellent Mayor, well done,” said Corder mugging for the non-existent cameras. “Executed with the panache of one who knows where all the bodies are buried, eh?”

Stanley Vernon turned to the gathering and raised his eyes in mock surprise, but gave Corder a friendly smile as he handed back the shovel. The CEO twirled it like a circus baton, walked over to the sandstone wall and, doing some sort of Charlie Chaplin impression, wiped his brow and leaned against it with one arm.

– Ah well, today’s his day. He can act it up if he wants.

“Stan,” called Corder in an affected voice, “why don’t you come over here for a picture or two?” then in a louder voice, “Anthea, would you do the honors with that camera of yours?”

Corder had always been the showman but to Tucker this little turn seemed a bit stretched. Not quite natural. The mayor walked across and smiled for the benefit of Anthea McMahon, who was already framing the shot.

– Wha-

There was a loud, deep... well, it must have been an explosion, but without the proper concussive detonation that serious explosives would have given. On the other hand, there was smoke, instantly, everywhere.

A lot of smoke.

But no... devastation. Everyone was still standing, untouched, looking around in confusion, trying to work out what was going on. It was far from clear where the bomb had actually been located. Some people looked up and pointed, and soon everyone was looking at the same thing. From the top of the South wing wall a large, weighted canvas banner was unrolling. It read:

‘Smoking kills

Corder Synergy in bed with Big Tobacco

FreshStyle = SmokeScreen

LNJ’

– WTF? *Another* League for Natural Justice stunt?

There was almost no breeze and the acrid smoke was taking a while to clear. Some of the crowd were coughing, but they were all looking at each other incredulously, as if they just didn’t get what had happened. Tucker turned to walk over to his boss.

He never got there.

It wasn’t very loud but it caught everyone’s attention instantly. A deep, grainy crunch followed by a beat of silence, a creaking groan and then a rumbling crescendo. Elias Corder was all windmilling arms trying to regain his balance, and it was no act. A narrow section of the wall he was leaning against was moving like a fancy lens effect in a supernatural movie. The mayor looked freeze-frame, and it took a moment for all these simultaneous inputs to gel together in Tucker’s mind. A chorus of involuntary vocalizations came from the onlookers who were having trouble making sense out of this second turn of events.

But Anthea McMahon (although Tucker didn’t register it until later) just stood there perfectly calmly, her camera pointed at the unfolding scene.

The section of wall above where Corder and the mayor were standing started to shift and disintegrate and blocks of masonry rotated and fell, asserting their individuality after one and a half centuries of conformity. Elias Corder regained his

balance, grabbed the still-frozen mayor around the waist and with an awkward effort pulled him out of harm's way. Stanley Vernon was not exactly svelte, but Corder had the strength of a freight train when he needed it. It was like a footballer trying to dance with a sleepwalker. A pile of weathered stone blocks, along with the crumpled, torn canvas banner, landed in the precise spot the pair of them had been standing literally two seconds earlier.

Tucker looked up at the damaged section of the wall. Although there were still some blocks hanging precariously, the movement and sound had stopped.

"Whoa," he said to no one in particular. "Do you think it's stable?"

"Well, clearly not as much as we thought," answered Brandon Tyler, shaken but more composed than Tucker.

"Did you see that?" murmured Corder, "I... holy *fuck*. I could have been killed. Stanley? We could have been killed."

The mayor blinked and started to pay attention again. "My god, Elias, what was it? A bomb? Did all that? But..."

"You're right," said Corder becoming simultaneously more composed and animated, "it can't have been a very powerful one, because look around at everyone – no one's hurt, no one's injured. It wasn't even all that loud – more smoke than anything else. And yet..." he pointed to the pile of rubble and canvas. "And yet it brought down *that*. A fucking stone wall, for chrissakes!"

"Should I call anyone? Police? Fire department?" asked Tucker holding out his phone.

Corder nodded. "Yes, I guess we should. They'll probably want to cordon off the area, order some sort of investigation. Fuck knows what this is going to do to our schedule." He started pacing, muttering "Did you see that?" to no one in particular, but loud enough for everyone present to hear.

While Tucker called emergency services, those reporters who had brought along cameras were busy snapping away, trying to make up for their lack of foresight. The rest were making do with their phones – using them to take pictures, or frantically calling their offices for camera crews. Eventually some of them remembered their memo recording applets, and approached Corder and the mayor brandishing their phones like talismans.

Simultaneously they began asking questions, like some sort of post-modernist play. Everything was overlapping, leaving it hard to hear exactly what was being said. And of course no one had been able to prepare their questions in advance, and it showed. Tucker thought it sounded something like:

/ – "Mr Corder, were you aware you were the target for another LNJ attack?"

| – "Mayor Vernon, can you describe your feelings after this amazing close call?"

| – "Mr Corder, can you comment on the structural integrity of the building?"

| – "Mayor Vernon, will you be pressing charges for emotional trauma?"

\ – "Mr Corder, how will this setback affect the restoration?"

Corder held up his hand and over the next few minutes managed to get everyone to take turns. He gave clear answers, and if anything seemed to be handling the impromptu nature of the questioning better than some of the reporters themselves. The mayor on the other hand limited his responses to something along the lines of "Please excuse me, I'm still feeling a little shaken. But I can assure you that the city will undertake a thorough investigation, and take appropriate steps to apprehend the perpetrators of this despicable and cowardly attack."

In very impressive time a fire truck and an emergency response vehicle pulled up, sirens blaring for a lot longer than necessary. But there wasn't very much for them to

do apart from clearing some of the growing number of onlookers who had begun their own unofficial investigation of the pile of rubble, and as Corder had predicted, cordoning the area off.

Next on the scene were the news crews, fully equipped but with not very much to film. Some of them dived straight into getting vox pops while the rest crowded around Elias Corder and the mayor and began asking the same load of questions all over again. This did not seem to bother Corder one bit – if anything he was warming to the task. Mayor Vernon on the other hand clearly wished he was somewhere else. Tucker did nothing to attract attention to himself as he had no desire to appear on the evening bulletins.

Both Anthea McMahon and Brandon Tyler were nowhere to be seen.

Last to arrive were the city police. With the hazard zone already isolated, bystanders behaving themselves and no one injured they had even less to do than the firemen. This was a case for forensics, lawyers and engineers. Not regular cops.

That night the networks covering the story had all obtained footage from an unnamed member of the public who had caught everything. It wasn't broadcast grade high-def, but it was very competently captured. Tucker was certain it had been shot from the precise location where Anthea McMahon had been standing.

There wasn't very much in the way of commentary, but terms like 'homegrown terrorism' and 'extremist anti-tobacco-activists' were thrown around a lot.

It wasn't until the following night that more details emerged from the newly appointed team of forensic and engineering investigators. The explanation, ran by all of the major networks, included computer graphics, stock footage, soundbytes from an array of experts, and material from Corder Synergy's media kit.

The League for Natural Justice had planted a smoke bomb against the stone wall near the area where the sod-turning ceremony was planned. It was detonated by remote control (animation of radio waves emanating from a handheld device), as was the banner-unfurling mechanism they had placed on top of the same wall, directly above the bomb's location (diagram of how said mechanism worked). Detectives were combing the city's CCTV footage for signs of suspicious activity that might help them identify the perpetrators.

It was apparent, (explanation from a 'forensic engineer') that the wall's collapse was an unintended consequence, and not something the attackers had planned. For one thing, the bomb had almost no explosive power, for another it was not placed in a position where it could do maximum damage.

During the heyday of the River Port building's operation, it was revealed (archive footage of a river vessel being loaded), both safety and environmental regulations were not as strict as they are now. A large amount of industrial chemicals had passed through the South wing, and inevitably a number of incidents involving spillage had occurred (short clip of Buster Keaton-style slapstick). Over subsequent years weathering had caused those chemicals (which did not pose any health threats whatsoever) to leach into the foundations and the lower courses of stonework (CGI showing an area of green seeping into a porous material, followed by footage from the actual site of the collapse, with one of the engineers out, picking up some of the fallen stone and crumbling it in his fingers). Miraculously, the structure had stood for decades without incident, until the area had been 'disturbed' by the movement of heavy machinery preparing for the restoration development, which had further

weakened the structure so that the relatively weak force from the smoke bomb had caused it to fail (academic type explaining what ‘metastable’ meant).

Not that this had any effect on how the League for Natural Justice were portrayed. They were still homegrown terrorists.

“It’s just perfect,” said Elias Corder as he walked with Tucker down the corridor to Conference Room B. Tucker thought he was being sarcastic but couldn’t be sure. “We’ve got the public safety boys with their army of lawyers lining up against the heritage protection mob. Our poor old mayor Stanley Vernon caught in the middle and all we have to do is wait for the whole thing to sort itself out.”

“So what do you think will happen?” asked Tucker.

There was a gleam in Corder’s eye. “Oh, they’ll order the South wing to be demolished, there’s no question of that. With that much of the foundations compromised that’s the only option there is. Plus everyone agrees that most of the heritage value is in the façade of the main building, the part facing the city.”

“So when you said ‘just perfect’...”

“Well, it does screw up our schedule, doesn’t it?”

“OK.”

“But it does give me an idea.”

They stopped outside the door to the conference room. After a suitable wait Tucker prompted, “Yes?”

“For the Folly. I reckon I’ll even outdo Randolph’s efforts.”

“Ah, that Japanese, er, *event* you were talking about at Mr Reinhardt’s place?”

“The same.”

“And teasing me because I had no clue what it was all about.”

“Don’t worry boy, all in good time. It’ll be a night to remember, I promise you that.”

Conference Room B was for clients who didn’t warrant the shock-and-awe opulence of Conference Room A, or other occasions when the primary goal was to discuss business without distractions. It was comfortably furnished but the style was tasteful rather than ostentatious, with the multimedia features limited to a projector mounted in the ceiling.

Brandon Tyler and Anthea McMahon were seated at the table and talking politely to the two clients. They all stood when Corder and Tucker entered.

Tucker recognized one of the two visitors from previous meetings. Gunther Huygens was a tall well-dressed man with perfectly cut grey hair and a soft German accent. His associate was not apparently deemed worthy of an introduction, and said almost nothing during the entire meeting. He did however watch and listen attentively, occasionally taking notes.

After the small talk was done Corder brought the meeting to order.

“Gentlemen, Anthea,” he began, “we haven’t asked anyone from Sheldrake or Wardell to be here today, because Mr Huygens wishes to speak freely on matters that might be sensitive for those partners. Gunther, will you bring us up to speed?”

“Thank you yes,” said Huygens, “as you know the first few weeks of the Project African Sunbeam program have been satisfactory. The response was good, thanks to the involvement of Joshua and Jessica, and also the field updates from our representative in the Zuniga Republic, Skye Arbeiter. After one month of operation we are close to achieving our goal of one hundred adoptions per month.”

“Very impressive,” interrupted Corder, “I thought it would take longer, myself.”

“Yes, but our campaign was well imagined and well implemented. However, there was the distracting matter of our colleague Miss Arbeiter attempting to pursue her own operation on the ground, launching a video onto the internet and her personal campaign all about the boy with the tumor on the eye etcetera.”

“Yeah, we all watched that play out,” said Corder, “the publicity, money being raised, the expedition to retrieve the boy and fly him over here, the surgery. It all went pretty well, didn’t it? You stepped in as soon as it went mainstream, so from the public’s point of view it was virtually just another part of Project African Sunbeam.”

Gunther Huygens gave a tight smile. “The attention the video generated was too much for us to ignore, so our hands were forced. Yes, we were able to salvage things not to be seen as the bad guy in all of this. And with the current profile of Miss Arbeiter, there was not a lot we could do about her. But you can understand, we would very much like to prevent situations from developing out of our control again.”

“The public seemed to love it though, didn’t they?” asked Tucker. “The personal touch, the before and after footage. And don’t tell me that cosmetic surgeon didn’t do pretty well out of the whole deal. Do you think we should consider building the idea up into something ongoing? Get this Skye girl to find more attention-grabbing kids...”

– The light bulb above the head thing.

“Like a TV show,” he continued, “Extreme African Makeover?”

Brandon Tyler looked as if he were suppressing a laugh.

Corder looked thoughtful. “We’ve done a bit of media tie-in work, but mostly publicity-related – engineering the bulletins, that sort of thing. No actual development of new syndicated shows though. I have a few contacts in production houses, we could give them a call, run the idea past them.”

“The position of Chandos International,” said Huygens, “is that although this sort of thing will generate a lot of publicity, and possibly even money, there are two concerns that we have. The first one is sustainability – the attention span of the public is not very great. A show like this – we spend a lot of effort on it, but then how long does it last? One season? Two? Then what? Our ambition is long term. We want something that will last a generation or more.”

Tucker nodded and gave his best taking-it-on-board face.

“The other concern,” continued Huygens, “is the level and nature of criticism that it might generate. Now I have nothing against making it a big circus, ra-ra-ra. But we must be sensitive to potential criticism.”

“Hey, there’ll always be critics,” said Corder.

“Yes, but our situation is particularly vulnerable. Because we rely for our survival not only on the good will of the people, but also their motivation. And the more criticism and controversy there is about us, the more people will have an excuse to do nothing at all. And our program will fade away and die.”

Tucker held out his hands. “Hey, no problem. It was just a thought.”

“No, that is good. But you must understand that a person with a bleeding heart like Miss Arbeiter can be only a distraction from our core activities, which are improving the lives of as many people as possible, in a way that is not only cost-effective, but actually generates revenues for us and our stakeholders.”

Corder accepted all this. “OK, so no TV show. And we’ve moved past the ah, distraction as you put it. So things are going smoothly then?”

“Not quite,” said Huygens, “there is an unexpected problem that has arisen in the past few weeks. That is why I have requested this meeting without all of our partners attending.”

Tucker leaned forward.

“In the beginning,” continued Huygens, “we imagined that our idea of offering for adoption HIV-positive children was a special option that only a few especially dedicated parents would choose. Then you approached us, knowing a lot of secrets about our business, but offering a proposal to bring in some more partners and trial this new HIV treatment. So we made it a joint venture along the lines you proposed – two groups, one given the new treatment, the other conventional ART, both fully funded. And at the end of the trial, those on ART will get the option of the new treatment free of charge, if it has been shown to be safe and effective.”

“The win-win situation,” said Tucker recalling the discussions well.

“Do you remember when we discussed the processing fees for the different options?”

“I do indeed,” said Corder, “we thought the HIV option should be priced higher, to cast it as the deluxe option.”

“And we thought it should be lower, otherwise no one would choose it,” said Huygens. “We followed your advice, and for some weeks we believed we had made a mistake.”

Corder was silent.

“For a long time, hardly anyone adopted an HIV-positive child, and we were about to restructure our schedule of fees. Then all of a sudden, Errol Clade, this old rock singer who has not had a hit for ten years, he adopts a little boy with HIV, and now all the gossip magazines are showing the pictures, and there’s something about his ‘Chandos International AIDS Orphan’ wherever you look.” Huygens made quotation marks with his fingers as he said this.

“And now everybody wants one?” prompted Corder.

“That is correct,” said Huygens.

“So where’s the problem?” asked Tucker. “Isn’t that exactly what you wanted?”

“The problem,” said Huygens, “is unexpected. It appears there are not enough HIV-positive children to satisfy the sudden increase in demand. Our people in the Zuniga Republic are doing their best, but they cannot keep up. We have had to introduce a waiting list, and that is causing some dissatisfaction among our clients. They are not accustomed to being asked to wait.”

“That’s ridiculous,” snorted Tyler. “How hard can it be to find them? I mean, aren’t we talking about Africa?”

Huygens shook his head. “It is not as simple as it sounds. The children we offer need to be attractive so that they will appeal to our prospective clients. Then they must be infected quite recently to minimize the time their systems have been exposed to, and damaged by, the opportunistic infections. They must be within a narrow age range, once again for adoption purposes, and finally of course, they must be orphans. That is because of our current agreement with the Zuniga Republic government. We are in the middle of negotiations regarding some flexibility in this matter, but even if that was to happen tomorrow, it would not deliver an adequate increase in the numbers. Even in Africa,” he said looking at Tyler, “children such as this do not grow on trees.”

“What about uninfected children?” asked Tyler. “What’s the supply like there?”

“We have plenty of those,” answered Huygens, “too many actually, since everyone started wanting the HIV-positive ones.”

Brandon Tyler looked around then held Huygens' gaze for a second longer than strictly necessary.

"So let me get this straight. We've got plenty of healthy children – more than we can place, apparently. And a shortage of recently-infected but otherwise healthy, HIV-positive children. One solution is so obvious that I'm surprised no one has mentioned it yet."

It was as if there was a sharp intake of breath from everyone else at the table, but only on the inside. No one actually moved, or made a sound of any sort.

– You've got to be fucking kidding.

Tucker felt as if all the oxygen in his lungs had been replaced with something else that did the same job but felt heavier.

"You are suggesting we infect the healthy children, yes?" asked Gunther testily.

Tyler gave a barely discernable nod.

An awkward silence descended on the table. Even the eternally unflappable Anthea McMahon stared icily at her notepad.

"Well," said Corder evenly, "I suppose all ideas are open for consideration."

All eyes were on Huygens.

"It would be very risky," he observed at last. "There would have to be complete security surrounding the operation, because if it were discovered by the public it would be very harmful to all parties involved."

Tucker swallowed and took a deep breath.

– Lock it down. I can do this.

"In our last meeting with the Wardell BP and Sheldrake guys," said Tucker carefully, "Delton Wardell said he was very confident that the cure they would be trialing would be effective in curing HIV – clearing it out completely from the system, with minimal risk of complications. What I am about to say is in light of those... assurances. I want you to understand that."

"OK," said Corder shrugging, "consider it understood."

"This is not a course of action I would recommend," Tucker said, "but OK, talking hypothetically, I'd say you would need a hell of a lot more than just good security. Like they say, if you don't have a plan B, you don't have a plan. And a plan C. Hey, you'd probably need the whole fucking alphabet. So let's talk about how you might get away with it."

He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. "When I was a kid, one of my uncles, back in Italy, was a bit of an amateur magician. Not professional or anything, he only did children's parties, private shows, that sort of thing. We didn't get to visit him very often after we all came over here, but whenever we did I'd always pump him to try and find out how he did all his tricks. He showed me one or two of the simple ones, but not the ones I most wanted to learn. But he did tell me this: in all of his tricks, the part where I thought the magic was happening, he was doing nothing at all. The big flourish was only there so that the audience would focus all their attention on *nothing*. The actual trick part happened either way before that, or way after."

"Ah yes," said Corder, "misdirection, I think they call it. Excellent. But how is it relevant to the matter at hand?"

Tucker's brow furrowed in concentration. "What was that HIV vaccine research they were talking about in our last meeting? The MeisnerGillespie guy. Vaccinating against naked viral RNA in the bloodstream, you know, which they then discovered that a Belgian team was doing the same thing and then realized that it probably wouldn't work."

"Do you have the minutes, Ms McMahon?" asked Corder.

Anthea nodded, then rose and left the room.

“I think we might be able to use that,” said Tucker, “but not in the way they originally intended.”

Tucker started his morning run along the riverside with more than the usual enthusiasm. This was more like an assault on the track. No iPod or earbuds today, he didn't feel like music. He hadn't slept well and just wanted to clear the junk out of his mind for a few minutes.

The track actually went past the Old River Port building, but the nicely developed section, with parkland, picnic areas and playgrounds was a bit further south, following the river upstream.

For the first few minutes he flew past the other joggers, pushing hard. There was energy coming from somewhere, but it wasn't limitless. Soon he found his pace slowing, and it was getting harder to overtake the dedicated runners. He kept pushing though, sweat running down his face and into his eyes. By the time he reached his normal turning point breathing was becoming difficult. His lungs were struggling and each breath was more like a gasp. But this was not a morning for the normal route so he didn't stop and turn but kept going. The track became plainer, a concrete slab on the ribbon of land between less-prestigious frontage houses and the river. A quarter of an hour later even that disappeared and there was only a dark line of dirt worn into the grass. There were no other runners this far down.

Ignoring the stabbing pains in his gut, Tucker turned back. The landscape was no longer something he could pay attention to. His mind was focused on one thing – forward, and everything else was peripheral. By the time he got back to the parkland the rest of the fitness enthusiasts had all but disappeared.

The tank was starting to get seriously empty. Tucker felt his vision start to darken and blur, with dancing points of light like renegade pixels. He slowed to a standstill and hunched down to rest his hands against his knees. He made his way towards the nearest park bench and lowered himself gently into it. Without the task of staying upright (and keeping on running) he suddenly became more aware of how desperately he needed air. His lungs were working hard, ragged and rasping but he felt as if he was suffocating.

As the oxygen debt was slowly paid down, he started to notice the heat. Even though the early morning was relatively cool, he was no longer moving through the air, and his head in particular was unbearably hot and sweaty. He struggled out of his sports pack with arms that didn't quite obey the commands he sent them, and took a few sips from the water bottle inside. A few minutes passed like this with Tucker in a daze, slowly regaining physiological equilibrium.

“Been pushing it a little harder than usual, eh lad?”

The jarringly-familiar Scottish brogue brought Tucker's mind snapping back to full attention. He looked up to see the comfortably untidy Callum Buchanan standing a little way away, leaning against a lamp post. He was wearing ancient jeans and slightly more recent polo shirt and runners.

Tucker couldn't think of anything to say. “Ah, Callum. Hi,” he managed at last, “haven't seen you here before. You into fitness?”

“Oh, I do like to keep in shape,” said Buchanan as he casually walked across and sat next to Tucker, leaving an appropriate measure of personal space free. It was true too – the untidy Scot was in very good shape for the fifty-something he looked.

– But, boot camp rather than jogging or health club du jour.

“I’ve seen you out here running the odd morning or so,” said Buchanan chuckling, “but nothing like this. Like a Viking berserker you were, this morning. I do wonder what could have brought it on, I must say.”

“Must you,” muttered Tucker.

“Oh, aye,” said Buchanan, “from my extensive knowledge of human behavior, there would have to be something pretty major on your mind to provoke something like that.”

Tucker’s breathing had almost returned to normal. It was getting too bizarre to ignore, and he was in no mind for charades.

He turned to look Buchanan in the eye and said levelly, “Just who the fuck are you Callum? Because I’m really tired of playing games with you, and I’m not buying this freelance journalist shtick for one minute. You got nothing worth mentioning on Google, or any of the social networking sites. You turn up out of the blue like a fucking jack-in-the-box and try to pump stuff out of me like I’m your own personal bitch or informant or whatever. And I keep telling you I’ve got nothing for you. So how about you tell me something. Like who you really are, what you really do, who you work for?”

Buchanan mimed applause with bushy eyebrows raised. “You know, I don’t believe I’ve ever actually claimed to be a journalist. I do admit I’ve implied it, played along with it. But I’ve only ever said I was a ‘freelance’. Which could mean anything, you know. But no matter, your question, while a little abrasively put, is nevertheless a valid one.”

Tucker said nothing but kept up the pressure of eye contact.

“OK, OK,” said Buchanan, “no need to get tetchy. I’ll level with you. You are of course right – I’m not a journalist, thought you’d be amazed at the amount of mischief one can get up to using that particular cover.”

“So you’re part of some government body investigating corporate dealings? A paralegal for the anti-smoking lobby? Someone writing a book?”

Buchanan shook his head and laughed. “No, nothing so prosaic. I have a certain connection to a group of people who believe that this world, or rather this particular society, is... well to put it bluntly, fucked. Laws have become so perverted they no longer even pay lip service to anything you could call justice. A group who aims to bring justice, natural justice, back into play.”

“The League for Natural Justice – you’re part of the LNJ?” asked Tucker incredulously.

“Aye, that’s one of the names we’re known by. Or rather, that little operation is one aspect of our activities.”

“But they’re terrorists,” protested Tucker.

“Could be worse. A few months ago we were being called juvenile pranksters. ‘Terrorists’ has a much better ring to it, don’t you think? And what is terrorism anyway? As far as I can see it’s just a word the current mob in power uses to describe action by anyone who opposes it.”

“Well, you were responsible for the bombing at the River Port building. I was there you know, right under the wall. Bringing down a building, now if that’s not terrorism, then what is?”

“Ah yes, that little stunt,” admitted Buchanan. “It did appear to get a little out of hand, didn’t it?”

“But pretty pointless you know,” said Tucker, “you most likely did us all a favor. Elias Corder, the whole team. Elias has been wanting to knock down that section for

ages, but there's a heritage protection order over it. The restoration is going to be a lot easier now that we don't have to include the South wing."

Buchanan thought that over, then said cheerfully, "Well, that puts an interesting slant on things now, doesn't it? Though I don't suppose Mr Corder will be making that particular opinion public, do you?"

"Uh, no," admitted Tucker, suddenly fearing he had said too much.

"Well, never mind about that then. I'm not going to be pumping you for any tidbits this time. Today I want to speak to you about something totally different."

"OK, what's that then?" sighed Tucker.

"There's some plans being made that I thought I should share with you. I won't go into particulars, but we've discovered that in a few weeks time there's going to be some sort of meeting – or gathering, or social event, whatever. A group of the vilest, most corrupt perpetrators of crimes against society – the sort of people you might call movers and shakers. They're all going to be in one place at one time, and the League is going to strike."

Tucker was taken aback. "Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Well for one thing, I happen to know that some of the people involved are associates of yours. Do you know of any big, private, meeting in the next few weeks? Involving a group of elite power brokers – you know, business leaders, politicians, that sort of thing?"

– *The Folly?*

Tucker looked back at Buchanan as casually as he could, hoping his eyes hadn't given anything away.

"No, I can't say I do."

"Ah well no matter. Just thought I'd mention it, is all."

Tucker shook his head, angry and mystified. It didn't make sense.

"Callum, I just don't get it. Why do you think I would share information like that with you? Why do you think I'd rat out my colleagues to a bunch of ragtag urban terrorists?"

Buchanan's eyes twinkled. "Well for starters, I don't believe I actually asked you for information, I was just wondering if you were aware of the gathering in question. It's like I said at our last meeting, you've got to ask yourself what kind of a man you are, what do you stand for. And don't forget, I might very well be doing you a favor – on the odd chance that you might have been, shall we say invited, to this little get together."

The prospect of being in actual danger himself suddenly dawned on Tucker like a diffuse electric shock. It must have showed.

"Well," said Buchanan standing to leave, "you seem to have caught your breath after that herculean effort, I suppose you'll be wanting to push off again. Give me a call if you change your mind."

And with that he was off, sauntering his way purposefully across the parklands.

Tucker sat dumbfounded for a minute or two before resuming his run, setting himself a much easier pace for the homeward leg.

This limousine had even more room than the Dreadnought. Miranda stretched her legs and looked out through her dark tinted window. The sun was getting low, but the light that shone on her arm was an attenuated grey. Up front, behind a thick glass partition, their chauffeur drove sedately through the late afternoon haze. He was a large man, wearing a suit, cap and gloves that made him look like a ranking officer on parade.

“Awfully early for dinner, isn’t it?” probed Delton.

She smiled sweetly. “All will be revealed, Delt darling, in just a little while.”

“But what’s all the secrecy for? That’s what I want to know.”

“Just a surprise, and I’m not going to spoil it.”

“I mean,” Delton persisted, “it’s not our anniversary – I checked.”

“No, there’s no special occasion, though after our child... Esther, after Esther arrives, there won’t be as many opportunities to go out. This might be our last chance for quite a while.”

This was more than Miranda had meant to say at this time, but now that she had started she let the momentum carry her.

“There is one thing I can mention,” she said, “you’ve no idea how many favors I had to pull in, just to get a reservation.”

This was no exaggeration. The limousine’s destination was one of the most exclusive establishments in the city. Miranda had only learned about it while overhearing her father talking with one of his senior clients. Even then, Bryce Tonkin had been reluctant to share any further details with his daughter.

And then there was the price. For first-timers this was strictly a deposit-on-booking affair, and although the sum she had parted with wasn’t enough to enter the real estate market, it could certainly have bought her a very respectable used car.

The chauffeur pulled across to the curb and the quiet hum of the engine subsided to a subliminal murmur. He got out and opened the door for Miranda.

“Here we are Ma’am, Sir.”

Miranda alighted gracefully. The opening was large enough to allow it. Delton eased himself across the expansive seat and followed her.

“Thank you,” said Miranda stiffly, “I don’t know how long we’re going to be. Is there a number I can call you on?”

“No need for that Ma’am, the restaurant will inform me when you are ready to leave, it’s all part of the service.”

“Oh, OK. Wonderful.”

The front door was unassuming but secure and looked to be made of solid bronze. The entire surface was carved in bas relief, into mythological scenes of revelry. A figure Miranda assumed was Bacchus seemed to feature prominently in most of them. Worked into the design at the top was the legend ‘2/7’. To a casual glance it looked like the address, but the real street number was carved into the stonework above the door.

Miranda pressed the buzzer. After giving her name the door opened and they walked into the cool interior. The anteroom was plain but expensive looking, with warm lighting and lots of polished marble. There were couches, coffee tables and magazines (mostly of an epicurean nature).

It was almost full, that is to say, there were only a few unoccupied couches remaining. Miranda looked around at her fellow guests. They seemed to fall into three

categories: the unabashed obese, the rarefied wealthy, and the nervous, trend-conscious upwardly mobile.

– So no clues for guessing which group we belong to, then.

Delton was looking around like a lost child. Miranda put her arm around his waist. A well-dressed and friendly-looking couple (from their own demographic) walked over. His hair had the sort of untidiness that can only be achieved with fifteen minutes of obsessive effort, and she had the face of a porcelain doll, in that it didn't move. Ever.

“Hi, I'm Steve and this is Angie.”

“Uh, Miranda. And my husband Delton. Hello.”

“Is this your first time?” asked Steve.

“Yes, for both of us,” said Miranda.

Delton grinned and nodded. Angie beamed. She might have been terrified, it was hard to tell.

“So you're new to the, ah...” and here Steve chuckled and mimed looking down and behind himself.

Delton was puzzled. “Huh?”

This in turn seemed to catch Steve off guard, he looked at Miranda questioningly. Miranda put her finger to her lips and winked.

“Tonight is my little surprise. Delton is completely unaware of the nature of this establishment. Aren't you Delt?”

“Oh, I see,” said Steve catching on. “Well, I won't say another word then. Except, you're in for a real treat. Oh, and keep an open mind.”

Angie continued beaming as they disengaged and looked around for another couple to introduce themselves to.

“What did he mean about an open mind?” asked Delton. “This isn't one of those places where they serve really weird foreign food is it? Like live stuff, or insects or whatever?”

Miranda said nothing.

“Or that ultra bleeding edge cuisine, what do they call it? Molecular gastronomy?”

She put on her smiling sweetly face.

Delton didn't have long to wait. The door at the far end of the room opened and an important looking woman strode in purposefully, flanked by two less important people, one male, one female. She stepped onto a low platform against one of the walls and rang a small silver bell.

“Good afternoon people, and welcome to Two of Seven. My name is Jacqueline Bessel and I'm the owner here.”

Jacqueline Bessel spoke in a cultured British accent. She was a short woman, a little overweight but projecting energy and poise. Her dress was a little severe by Miranda's tastes, but immaculate and expensive looking.

“I'd like to say a few words before we begin. Could I ask first of all for a show of hands. Who has dined with us before?”

Around two thirds of the people in the room raised their hands.

“Good, good. Well you will obviously have heard what I'm about to say before, so if you wish you may proceed to the Clystering cubicles.”

About half of the guests moved towards the far end of the room and through the door.

“A few years ago,” began Jacqueline Bessel, “I was an ambitious restaurateur like so many others in this city, starting to build up a reputation for myself. It was based on my philosophy of dining, which is this: a good meal should have a beginning, a

middle and an end. And a really great meal – a feast that will linger in the memory for years to come, should leave one with a level of satiety above and beyond the everyday experience.”

She paused for a deep breath and a look of disdain came over her face.

“But there was one thing that always frustrated me. I was forever dealing with customers who took matters into their own hands. Some would skip the appetizer, some would order two appetizers and nothing else, and almost everyone it seemed would forego dessert.

“When you go into an operating theatre, you don’t tell the surgeon that you’ll be skipping the anesthetic and the stitches. When you fly in an airliner you don’t tell the pilot to skip half of the pre-flight routines. These are matters we leave to the experts. And I believe that when designing a memorable meal, the experts are in a far better position when it comes to the choice of courses.”

She gave a smile that would have been self deprecating on any other face but hers.

“I was of course, naïve. Most of those early customers ignored my recommendations, and of those who accepted them and finished everything served, some would complain at the end of the meal that they felt uncomfortable, even bloated.

“I was not happy, and my work was suffering. There was a series of less than stellar reviews and bookings started to fall. So what was I to do? Modify my philosophy?”

Jacqueline Bessel looked defiantly at the people gathered before her. That look said in no uncertain terms that backing down was definitely not on the menu.

“I gave the matter long and serious thought. I closed my restaurant and embarked on a program of market research. I sought advice from a number of sources, including a local company called Corder Synergy. We performed research, both clinical and market. And eventually I opened the establishment you are standing in now.”

The Corder Synergy thing caught Miranda by surprise, she hadn’t known they were involved. Small world. But she was getting seriously tired of standing still in her heels and hoped the talking was coming to its end. She leaned on Delton’s shoulder to take the weight off one of her feet.

“If we list the seven deadly sins in their traditional order,” continued Jacqueline Bessel, “the second item, in the original Greek, is *gastrimargia*. In Latin it is *gula*, but in English we know it as gluttony. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Two of Seven.”

Delton whispered in Miranda’s ear, “I don’t get it. This place is all about overeating?”

“Ssh,” said Miranda softly, “I think we’re about to find out.”

“Two of Seven is like no other restaurant you have ever been to. We promise a dining experience without restraint, without compromise, and without discomfort. In this little corner of the world, for tonight, overindulgence is a virtue.”

A note of practicality injected itself into her voice. “Now something like this doesn’t just happen. We aren’t able to suspend the laws of physics. A certain amount of preparation will be needed before this special meal can begin.”

Jacqueline pointed to the doors at the far end of the room, which opened in response to her silent command.

“In a moment I will ask you to proceed through those doors to your left, to the Clystering rooms. There, in the privacy of your own cubicle, our fully trained assistants will ask you to disrobe and lie on the sanitized examination bed. Here a T-ray scan will be performed, enabling our custom software to determine the precise capacity of your digestive tract.”

At this a few worried murmurs rose from the gathered guests, but Jacqueline raised her hand to silence them.

“You need have no concerns about T-rays,” she said dismissively, “they have been proven harmless in numerous studies, and something almost identical is routinely used by the TSA in airports to check for concealed weapons and contraband.”

In a dry and matter-of-fact voice she continued, “Next, the assistant will administer the clyster, a deep colonic irrigation. I personally prefer the older term – clyster, rather than ‘enema’, it is less clinical and has a certain retro charm, don’t you think? In any case, this will render your intestinal tract virtually empty, and will enable you to fully enjoy the meal we will be serving this evening.”

As if it were an afterthought she concluded with, “Now once again I must assure you that our assistants are fully trained, and embody the utmost professionalism and discretion. And of course our sterilization protocols exceed the standards required in most hospitals.”

Delton turned to face Miranda with a look on his face she couldn’t read.

“You brought me here, for *this*?” he asked incredulously. “You’ve got to be kidding. There’s no way I’m letting someone squirt water up my ass, just so I can stuff myself like a pig.”

“Delt, don’t be like that,” she cajoled softly, “lots of people have... enemas. They pay good money for it too. And I wasn’t lying before, this place is so absolutely hot right now – incredibly hard to get a booking.”

Delton didn’t look comfortable, he certainly didn’t look happy, but Miranda could see he was wavering.

“It’s going to be worth it Delt, the food here is second to none, and all this... *before* stuff is simply there to turn a fabulous meal into a totally mind-blowing experience.”

“Ass blowing, more like,” muttered Delton, but Miranda saw the twinkle in his eye that gave him away.

“You’ll do it though, just for me?” she said seductively.

He rolled his eyes. “Oh all right. But next time, I choose the restaurant.”

There were far fewer cubicles than guests, but as all the returning customers had been given a head start the wait was not too long. The inside of the cubicle had an unmistakable clinical appearance – the sleeping nest of machinery in the corner made sure of that, but someone had put some thought (and money) into softening the impression. Most of the furniture would not have been out of place in an up-market office, and the examination table had designer fabric trim, with new, starched linen covering the area where she would be lying. There was a toilet in one corner, partially obscured by the curtains matching those that delineated the far end of the cubicle. An oversized exhaust fan, quiet but powerful, was mounted in the ceiling. Miranda sat down on one of the chairs and absent-mindedly leafed through an information pamphlet. Muted sounds of talking could be heard on either side.

“Hi, I’m Jeanette.”

Miranda hadn’t heard the woman enter. She had come in through a gap in the curtains.

She smiled and rose. “Miranda.”

Jeanette was a middle-aged woman, smartly but unremarkably dressed, with an understated pragmatic approach, impeccable manners and warm hands. She was perfectly suited to the task at hand and Miranda found herself at ease in circumstances that would ordinarily have the opposite effect. When prompted, Miranda stripped down to her underwear, put on something very like a hospital gown but more

comfortable and flattering, then removed her panties. With that done she climbed onto the examination table and lay down.

“Now Miranda, you’ll notice that for the T-ray scan, I won’t be leaving the room, or wearing any protective shielding. If we were using X-rays, I’d have to – exposure to X-rays is cumulative. But with terahertz rays – T-rays, there’s no risk at all. I can stay right here, several clients per day, week after week. So you can certainly put your mind at rest on that score.”

“OK, thanks,” said Miranda, “are we ready to begin yet?”

“Oh, we’re done,” replied Jeanette with the tiniest hint of a flourish. “It doesn’t take long. If you’ll just look over here to the monitor, you can see the image we’ve captured.”

Displayed on the screen was an unflattering putty-like image of Miranda’s naked body. It had a sort of translucence and some of her internal organs could be seen as shadowy outlines underneath the surface. An animated grid was traversing the torso, outlining certain features and generating a column of numbers at the side.

“Miranda, have you ever had a colonic cleansing before?” asked Jeanette.

“No, never.”

“Very well. I’ll need to ask a few questions first. Do you have Crohn’s disease?”

“Well, I have no idea what it is, so I guess not.”

“It’s a kind of chronic inflammation of the bowel. Do you suffer from severe hemorrhoids?”

“No, I’ve been spared those, so far.”

“Good,” said Jeanette. “And I can see from the scan that you have recently had a bowel movement, so we’ll move right along. For your first cleansing, I would recommend you turn over and lie on your left side.”

Miranda complied, and then at Jeanette’s suggestion pulled her right knee up towards her chest.

“We’re going to be administering a series of two cleansings,” explained Jeanette, “and for the first we will just use a regular pump and nozzle and a shallow insertion.”

She walked over to one of the pieces of equipment – a cabinet the size of a small refrigerator, and picked up a coiled rubber hose with a shiny nubbed nozzle on the end. Miranda looked at it dubiously.

“There is nothing to worry about,” she said casually, “this entire apparatus is freshly sterilized, and we’ll be using a lubricating gel. There will be no danger and very little discomfort.”

Miranda wasn’t entirely convinced. Jeanette walked around behind her.

“Now if you’ll just hold still for moment,” she said.

Miranda felt her buttocks being parted and...

– OMG

Even though she knew full well what was about to happen there was still a significant part of her that found the sensation shocking. She quietened her mind and forced herself to breath deeply. A warm sensation of pressure was building inside her, and while it was certainly novel it was not too unpleasant.

“That’s probably enough for now,” said Jeanette after a few moments. “I’m just withdrawing the nozzle now, we’ll get you to tighten around it as it leaves, and lie there for a minute or so.”

Miranda tried to relax every part of her body but one – the urge to go to the toilet was quite strong. After a little while Jeanette helped her get up and she went over to the toilet and sat down.

“I’ll leave you here for now,” said Jeanette, “give you a little break, and be back when you’re done.”

Miranda was glad of the privacy, the results of the first ‘cleansing’ while not explosive were nevertheless quite dramatic. But the industrial strength (but quiet) ceiling fan kept the odor to a minimum, and the feeling of relief when she was done was welcome. She returned to the table, lay down and waited.

“Ah, good,” said Jeanette, “how are we feeling now?”

“Fine,” said Miranda, “relieved, I guess.”

“Good, now that the first process is out of the way, we’ll be moving on to a deep cleansing. For that we’ll be using an endoscope with a camera and light source mounted in the head, along with the nozzle.”

This time Jeanette produced a snake-like contraption that issued from the front of the cabinet. The smoothly-contoured nozzle, replete with various orifices and windows was not large, but looked threatening in a vaguely erotic way. Once again Jeanette must have seen Miranda’s expression, and hastened to reassure her.

“The sensation this time round will be a little more robust than last time, but there will be no pain, and very little discomfort. The apparatus is self-guiding, there are sensors in the head and a computer that controls it.”

For some reason Miranda did not find this all that comforting, but she nodded meekly. Unbidden, visceral memories of Tucker Trent and even Dean Byron Craigie flooded into her mind.

– Whoa there, time and place...

– OMFG

This was certainly a whole new level. And it just kept going *in* and *in*. Miranda lay motionless, a whisker short of terrified as the serpentine, computer-controlled plumbing penetrated her further and further, pressing ever inwards, conforming to every labyrinthine turn and pumping lukewarm, rose-scented distilled water halfway to dinner time.

“Now you may feel a little pressure,” said Jeanette, “we’ve reached the end of the ascending colon, so we’ll stop the insertion and begin the final phase of the irrigation.”

There was indeed pressure, but it was so far *in*, and so far outside the parameters of normal everyday experience that Miranda struggled to know what to think about it. Heavy wind? But what was inside her felt *alive*.

– Tucker my boy, you’ve been well and truly outdone. By a *long, long way*...

A few minutes later, as she tidied herself up and prepared to make her way into the restaurant, Miranda noticed a distinct feeling of euphoria. There was a certain lightness in her being, a spring in her step. The traces of discomfort had faded fast after her second (even more prodigious) session on the toilet, as had the immediacy of the indignities she had endured. Now she just felt *alive*.

The restaurant proper was decorated in an old world style, luxurious but not over-elaborate. The lighting was subdued and there were no windows. One of the walls had a row of cubicles with curtains, presumably for celebrities and other higher echelon figures wanting to maintain their privacy. The young girl at the door guided her to one of the regular tables on the restaurant floor.

As she took her seat opposite Delton, she noticed the expression on his face. It was difficult to read, which was unusual for him.

“How was it for you, Delt?” she asked in a conciliatory tone.

Delton exhaled through his teeth. “Well Hon,” he said quietly, “all I can say is, the meal better be worth it.”

“Why? I mean, I’ve just had the same thing. Was it all that bad?”

“Well the first one wasn’t all that bad, the one with the small nozzle.”

Miranda nodded, “Yeah, I found it just a bit of warm pressure, like mild diarrhea.”

“But the second part...” Delton shook his head, eyes closed and eyelids raised.

“How so?” prompted Miranda.

“Well for starters it’s like this,” said Delton after collecting his thoughts. “For my entire life, all of the nerve endings in my asshole have only ever experienced one sensation – when I sit down on the toilet, there’s something moving through, and it’s only ever going *one way* – out.” He gave a forceful pointing gesture to illustrate.

“So when that fucking robo-snake goes in, those nerve endings are all like ‘holy crap, something’s moving all right, but it’s going the *wrong way!*’”

“Yes, it was quite a shock to me too,” said Miranda with careful empathy. “And wasn’t it... I don’t know – unrelenting. It just kept on going in. Still, it’s over now.”

“But that wasn’t the half of it,” countered Delton. “As that thing went in, it must have been pressing against my prostate or something.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I got a freaking hard-on.”

“Oh,” said Miranda, at a loss for words.

“Can you imagine what that’s like for a guy? There’s this other guy pushing something up your ass, and you get a hard-on? Thank God I didn’t come or anything. I mean, it’s not as if I’m insecure about my... you know, sexual identity. I was never one to worry about whether people might think I’m gay or whatever. OK, maybe in high school. But still, I think the word ‘embarrassing’ doesn’t begin to cover it.”

Miranda nodded slowly and thoughtfully. “I guess not.” She tried to think of something else to say but couldn’t. To her considerable relief three people chose that moment to approach the table. Two looked to be waiters, both middle aged men wearing perfectly cut tuxedos. The third was the owner of the establishment, Jacqueline Bessel. It was she who spoke first.

“Ms Tonkin and Mr Wardell?”

“That’s us,” said Miranda.

Jacqueline nodded curtly. “Good, now I see you’re first-timers here. I trust the preliminaries were to your satisfaction?” Noticing the look on Delton’s face in particular she added, “Not too confronting I hope?”

“Well,” said Miranda, “let’s just say it was a little... new.”

“Yes, the first time is a little challenging,” said Jacqueline a tiny bit dismissively, “but after that it becomes much easier. Most of our guests describe it as invigorating. But enough of that. Our task for the rest of the evening is to make it all worthwhile, isn’t it? And I am confident you will not be disappointed.”

She turned and gestured the first of her companions. “Bertrand here will be your waiter this evening, and Philippe will be your sommelier.” She used the French pronunciation for both names. Miranda looked at the men and smiled. They weren’t twins, but she was still going to have to look at what they were carrying to tell them apart.

“Well then, I’ll be off now,” said Jacqueline. “If there’s anything else you need from me just ask. Bon appétit.” And with that she was gone.

With a flourish Bertrand produced two large leather-bound menus from under his arm, presented them and offered to explain any items they did not understand. By impeccable management (and to Miranda’s relief) he seemed to know it was her who had made the booking, as only hers had the prices listed down the side.

“Oh great, so I’m the lady,” grumbled Delton. It was subtle, but Miranda thought he looked to be in slightly better humor than before.

In keeping with Jacqueline Bessel’s philosophy of leaving the planning of a meal in the hands of professionals, the menu consisted almost entirely of set banquets. The serving sizes would be adjusted according to their T-ray scans, taking into account the extra room resulting from the procedure they had just been through.

“I think the European Deluxe Seven Course Banquet looks good, don’t you Delton?”

Delton finished giving each of the pages a perfunctory inspection. “Yeah Hon, it does. A bit over the top though, sheesh, look at this stuff.”

To the waiter she said, “We’ll have the European Deluxe Seven Course Banquet for two, please.”

“Certainly Madame, Monsieur.”

Now it was Philippe’s turn. He stepped up and served them a sorbet-like ice served in a small highball glass.

“Bonsoir Madame, Monsieur. This is a complimentary *digestif*, it contains a *prokinetique* that will accelerate the gastric process and enhance your comfort with the meal this evening.”

Miranda tried it. It was alcoholic – she could clearly taste the austere bite of gin, partially masking something bitter underneath.

“May I show you the wine list, Madame et Monsieur?”

Philippe waited while Miranda looked down the categories. There was nothing she remotely recognized. She looked over at Delton.

“See anything you like?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There were so many courses, maybe one of the softer reds might sort of go with most of them.”

Miranda looked up at Philippe. “We ordered the European seven course,” she said, “can you recommend something that would go with that?”

Philippe smiled discreetly. “On the final page you will see details of the Tasters’ Specials. For each of the banquets we have a prepared a list of fine wines, selected to compliment each course perfectly, and served by the glass. I think you will be happy with this choice.”

“OK then, sounds good.” Miranda glanced over at Delton. “For two, thanks.”

“Certainment. Now would either of you care for any pre-dinner drinks?”

“Just some water please,” said Delton.

“And for me, thank you,” added Miranda.

After Philippe had left, Delton frowned.

“What’s the matter, Delt?” asked Miranda.

“This...” he said, pointing at the sorbet, “this pro-digestive or whatever. I think we did some of the work on it. I didn’t pay much attention at the time – it was a few years ago. The client wanted to serve prokinetic drugs without a prescription, to accelerate gastric emptying. We had to come up with something that worked in the same way, but could slip under the radar and not be classified as a drug. We eventually something – two herbal compounds, fancy catalytic reaction, ended up with a molecule very similar to metoclopramide. An interesting piece of work. Never dreamt I’d actually get to try the stuff myself.”

“Oh, OK,” said Miranda, not understanding most of the technical details. “Well, is it safe?”

“Oh yeah, sure. I mean, I’d probably skip it if I had a stomach ulcer or anything, but yeah, nothing to worry about.”

Miranda finished the medicated ice. “It’s kind of like a gin and tonic, isn’t it? With the bitterness I mean.”

The first course, when it arrived, was a generous portion of thinly sliced jamón Iberico served with candied leeks and a melon sorbet. This was accompanied by a basket of polenta-encrusted sourdough bread rolls. Bertrand explained that the ham came from the black Iberian pig, hand-raised in Spain and fed a diet of acorns to sweeten the meat. The wine, as served and expounded upon by Philippe, was a French rosé from the Rhône region, made from a blend of Grenache, Cinsault and Syrah grapes.

The combination was excellent, with the leeks smoothing out the saltiness of the ham, while matching its sweetness. The heavy sourdough rolls were also excellent, their crusts being almost crunchy, while the insides were soft but firm and chewy.

“It’s a bit like prosciutto, you know, Parma ham,” said Delton.

“Yes,” agreed Miranda, “but... richer without being stronger, if you know what I mean.”

“Not sure it’s worth the extra price though. Not that I know what that is,” he added.

“But interesting to try. Even if it’s only once.”

“Yeah.”

They ate slowly, as Bertrand had suggested. There was all the time in the world and an experience like this was not to be rushed. Plus, the meal promised to be larger than any they had ever eaten before, and there was a limit to how fast a body could take in something like that, even after the unusual preparation they had just gone through.

The second course was calamari with orange saffron sauce, served on a bed of cucumber shavings and dried baby capers. The curled, cross-hatch scored calamari squares had been finely dusted with flour and flash-fried. This left the surface with a papery abrasive texture, almost dry to the tongue. The sauce made it almost too rich, but the wine counteracted against this. It was a Portuguese vinho verde from the Minho region, made from Alvarinho and Loureiro grapes. It was pale, very fresh, almost semi-sparkling and cleansed the palate, cutting through the richness brilliantly.

“Aren’t those the things they put on gourmet pizzas?” asked Delton, pointing at the capers.

“Yes, and they also serve them with smoked salmon,” said Miranda.

“But they’re usually larger. And wetter.”

“I guess these were picked younger.”

Course number three was a lobster bisque garnished with Périgord truffle slices. In stark contrast to every other bisque Miranda could recall, this one had large chunks of lobster meat in it, though the rich smoothness suggested there was quite a lot of puréed lobster (or crab) in there as well. Neither Miranda nor Delton had tasted truffles before, and both were very curious. Even before their first mouthful their curiosity was partway to being satisfied. The aroma that wafted up from the soup was unique – rich, earthy, nutty, almost musty.

“Like distilled, dried mushrooms,” Delton observed.

In her heart of hearts, Miranda was not exactly all that fond of them, at least not raw like this. The essence, while not overpowering, pervaded everything and she found it a little bit... dirty. Like Delton’s socks a day after he’d eaten garlic. But for something so highly prized and exclusive (not to mention expensive), there were precious few people on this earth in whom she would confide this fact.

Philippe had selected a vintage brut Champagne from a small vineyard near Rheims, made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. This almost abrasively dry wine, with its tiny lines of bubbles, was a good foil to the heavy bisque and Miranda found that it cleaned away the worst of the truffle taste.

Next to come out was pork fillets in a shallot and mustard bread sauce, served on a bed of steamed wild rice and buckwheat. This was far less exotic than the previous dishes, and Miranda had assumed that it was just going to be ‘filler’ (as if that were needed in a meal like this) – something to pad out the number of courses.

Boy was she wrong about that. It may not have been exclusive or aristocratic, but everything about it was just *right* – texture, flavor, presentation, the works. The cooking alone was a work of art – the outside nicely caramelized while the middle still had the tiniest hint of pink.

The recipe looked pretty simple, and most of the ingredients would have been available at a good supermarket (although these particular pork fillets had certainly never been in a plastic tray under cellophane wrap), but to make something this basic extraordinary was the mark of a truly great chef.

Miranda shook her head. “I’ve cooked these a few times. How do they get them to turn out like this? There’s got to be some secret.”

“It’s certainly well done,” agreed Delton, “I mean, not ‘well done’ – you know what I mean.”

The wine was halfway between a rosé and a ‘proper’ red – a Beaujolais from the Mâcon area of France, made from Gamay grapes. It was young and fresh, but with enough depth to balance the succulent pork.

The fifth course was a real salute to the grand old days – a traditional venison and foie gras Wellington. The accoutrements were more modern though, a wild fennel aioli with preserved lemon. Once again the execution was impeccable – the puff pastry light, flaky and buttery with a deep honey-colored glaze, the pâté oozing down and the meat rare and tender. And once again, deep down, Miranda secretly would have preferred it to have been cooked more thoroughly, but she also knew that it was *supposed* to be served rare, and that didn’t leave her much choice in the matter. She had to enjoy it, and therefore she did.

A rich, red Grenache and Syrah blend from the Côtes du Rhône region made a perfect match, each sip priming the palate for the next mouthful of Wellington.

“This is very old school,” said Delton, “nice though. I’ve only ever had it with beef. I like this mayo stuff.”

It was about now that Miranda started to feel full. She had already consumed more food in a single sitting than she had ever done in her life, and there were two courses to go. But she wasn’t uncomfortable, thanks to the enema or clyster or cleansing or whatever. She had a few sips of water after the latest set of plates had been cleared away.

The next course was unusual in that it looked more like a side dish than an actual course. It was a trio of potato varieties roasted in duck fat with caramelized garlic and rosemary. But when the aroma hit, a second later, she changed her mind. Here was another example of something apparently simple – roast potatoes, being taken to a whole new level. The varieties had been chosen to accentuate the contrast in textures. One had a crust, almost crunchy, with the insides soft and fluffy. Another was smooth on the outside with flesh very firm to the tooth. The final one was sort of in between.

“This is not bad,” said Delton in his usual habit of understatement, “not bad at all.”

“Do you recognize the varieties?” asked Miranda. “We should look out for them next time we go shopping. Can you buy duck fat?”

“Don’t know. Probably not in the supermarket.”

Philippe served a Rosso di Montalcino wine from Tuscany. Although it looked similar it was quite different to the more traditional French style they had tried with the Wellington – this was ‘friendlier’, at least that was how Miranda thought of it. And it went very well with the potatoes.

There was a welcome delay before the final course – dessert, was served. Miranda wasn’t sure if that prokinetic accelerator or whatever it was she’d had before the meal had worked, there certainly didn’t seem to be any spare room. She was also feeling more than a little buzzed from all the wine. One glass per course added up to quite a lot when there were as many courses as this.

After a long silence, Delton asked, “So you’re really sure about next week?”

“The adoption?” said Miranda, “Yes, I am. I know it’ll bring a lot of changes, but I believe we’ll be able to adapt, and that they’ll all be good ones. What, you’re not having second thoughts yourself are you?”

“No,” said Delton, “I think it’s a bit late for that. I mean, we’ve got a whole bunch of new furniture, a wardrobe full of clothes and about the entire store inventory of Toys ‘R’ Us. No, I was more just checking how you were feeling about it.”

“Oh, OK. Well, I’m not concerned about how it will affect me at work. Daddy’s very supportive, and quite a few of the girls I work with have children, so this will give me a certain connection with them that I don’t have now. The publicity thing doesn’t worry me – hey, I’ve been through worse when I went on TV after the accident. It can’t be worse than that.”

“I’m sure we’ll do fine there,” said Delton.

In a rare moment of candor Miranda said, “One thing I’m a bit apprehensive about is how all the other mothers will relate to me – at the childcare centre, and later on at school.”

“Why?”

“Well, the public profile, and the fact that our child will be so obviously adopted.”

“I don’t think having adopted children is all that unusual. I’m sure there will be other mothers there whose children are adopted.”

“But they probably won’t be CIAOs,” said Miranda.

“Chows? What do you mean?”

“CIAO – C. I. A. O. For ‘Chandos International AIDS Orphan’. It’s what they’re starting to call these children.”

Delton rolled his eyes. “Huh. I’ve never heard that one before. Catchy I guess. I wonder whose idea it was.” He shrugged. “But that’s not what I was asking. How are you feeling about it – what about you? What about us, what about... the child? Esther? Aren’t you nervous about that? Or... excited?”

“Oh that,” said Miranda, “yes, of course. I suppose.”

At last the dessert arrived, and as it was the final course of the meal Bertrand seemed to think it required a certain amount of fanfare. It was a white chocolate mud cake with candied fruits and shaved caramelized black truffles. The whole thing was dusted with nutmeg icing sugar and crowned with a perfect sphere of Vanilla-anise aerated cream.

Then it was Philippe’s turn to present his own coup de grâce.

“As you are no doubt aware,” he explained, “the rule of a dessert wine is that the wine should be sweeter than the food it accompanies. So you can appreciate that finding a suitable wine to pair with this white chocolate creation was quite a challenge. I have selected a Tokaji Eszencia from the Hegyalja region of Hungary.”

He paused for effect, but the names meant nothing to Miranda or Delton.

“This is the world’s sweetest wine,” he continued, “and one of the most exclusive. Although, at less than four percent alcohol, it can hardly be classified as a wine. It is made from botrytized grapes – the *pourriture noble*, or noble rot. It sucks away the water from the grapes and produces an intense concentration of the natural sugars.”

He served this concoction in two tiny glasses, barely larger than thimbles.

– So again with the truffles, plus a tiny glass of moldy grape syrup. Just great...

It all turned out to be a lot nicer than she’d anticipated. The fruits – cherries, blueberries, raisins and lemon peel, were mixed all through the soft, heavy mud cake and gave the slice a colorful appearance. The caramelization process had tamed the truffles’ aroma somewhat, and with all the fruit, it wasn’t as overpowering and out of place as she’d feared. In fact it all blended together rather well. Superbly, she decided as she took another mouthful.

And the sweet wine was something else again. Intensely sweet, but with whole bunch of aromas, like the ‘Tokay’ Alistair had brought around the night he had his stroke, but amplified by a factor of about a million. This certainly redefined the concept of Tokay.

Altogether, she forget entirely how un-hungry she was.

On the way home, both Miranda and Delton sat carefully in the back of the limousine, reclining to ease any pressure on their stomachs.

“So, what’d you think?” she asked. “Was it worth it?”

“Worth what, the price, which I don’t know anything about, or the anal violation and embarrassment I endured beforehand?”

“I don’t know... both. Whatever.”

Delton gave his trademark half-grin. “OK, it was pretty amazing, I must admit. In a once-in-a-lifetime sort of way. Definitely *once-in-a-lifetime*.”

“Yes, it’s not something we could afford to make a habit of.”

“Just as well.”

Three days later a letter arrived, addressed to Mr Delton Wardell, and bearing the Two of Seven logo on the envelope. Miranda thought about opening it but left it on the bench for Delton’s attention. Later in the evening when he got in from work, Delton read it, a frown furrowing his brow.

“What is it, Delt?” Miranda asked.

He passed it across and she read:

Dear Mr Wardell,

During your recent visit to Two of Seven, our Clystering Technician detected an atypical feature on the wall of your colon. While our technician did not consider this feature serious, for your peace of mind we suggest you consult your doctor regarding a colonoscopy.

Yours truly,

Jacqueline Bessel.

Disclaimer:

The above material is for informative purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Two of Seven recommend that medical advice, diagnosis and treatment should only be sought from a qualified medical practitioner.

Privacy statement:

Two of Seven take confidentiality very seriously. This information will not be shared with any third party, and will be deleted from our records within thirty days of your visit.

The initial ramifications of Skye's publicity stunt took several days to play out. She was driven to the Pan-African division headquarters in Lawrencetown where Claude Auteil spent half an hour questioning and remonstrating with her. He expressed his disappointment at her attitude, putting on the airs of a wounded benefactor or disappointed school teacher. Back at Ilé Ireti she was hauled before Dawiid Bankele, his administrative assistant Lucas Bembo, and security chief Garvey Kalimbe. With the veiled threat of force in the air, they demanded that Skye hand over her phone. She had no choice but to comply.

Although she hadn't used it very much, the loss of the phone left her feeling totally cut off from the world. She was still permitted to use webmail on the staff room computer, but the connection was unreliable, and Garvey Kalimbe made sure there that someone was watching her closely every time she tried. This meant that she had very little idea of how much publicity her viral video of little Sando with the facial tumor and infected eye was generating. Maria Ajayi was sympathetic, but valued her job too highly to say anything publicly.

After a few days the hostility, in particular from Lucas Bembo, seemed to rise in intensity. He stopped short of openly insulting her, but made a point of showing his disdain with passive sleights at every opportunity. It was only from Maria that she learned that there had been such a storm of protest that Chandos International had been forced to fly a helicopter to Margai province, land in the Malimbe village centre, pick up Sando and bring him back to Lawrencetown. From there he was flown out almost immediately, presumably to top-level Western medical care, surgery and a whirlwind circuit of TV appearances.

Skye allowed herself some satisfaction, but could not stop herself from feeling a little disappointed that they had not granted her any involvement in the operation. She didn't let herself dwell on it, though. Sando's welfare was what it was all about, publicity and media attention were totally overrated.

– www.butstill.com

She forced it out of her mind, and as the days passed (and the edge of Lucas' ire dulled) concentrated on the day to day operation of Ilé Ireti, the House of Hope. There was always plenty to do, and most of the staff and all of the children continued to treat her as they had always done.

There were however, no more pieces to camera. Robert Johnson and Darius Ngenda had to set up their equipment every two or three days to video all the new arrivals, but Chandos International didn't seem to need anything more featuring Skye Arbeiter.

The change was so gradual that Skye did not notice it at first. More and more children from Red dormitory – HIV-positive children, were being selected for adoption. When it happened on two successive days she couldn't ignore it, but within two weeks a full van was departing every few days, filled with Red dorm children. And the dormitory itself was getting less crowded every day. But the actual number of children moving through Ilé Ireti was more or less constant. This meant that the number of healthy children being chosen was falling. Which had one unavoidable consequence – the other dormitories, Yellow, Pink and Blue, were filling up.

Skye raised the matter with Maria one day.

“It’s crazy, Maria. Three weeks ago Red dormitory was overflowing, no one was choosing them, I was scared they were going to drive the children back to their villages to die. And now it’s completely the other way around – we’re sending them out faster than they’re coming in. Do you have any idea why?”

“But of course, Miss Skye. I thought you knew. One of the little boys was adopted by Errol Clade, and now many people in the West want one too.”

This took her by surprise. “*The Errol Clade, the old rock star?*” Colorful past, serial seducer of starlets, including quite recently, breakfast TV’s Donna-Lee Brewster...

“Yes Miss Skye, it was on the TV.”

And didn’t he narrowly beat a child porn rap ten years ago? What on earth is the world coming to...

On a more practical note, the procedures Skye had to follow were forever changing. There was always some new protocol being introduced, processes under review, or prospective streamlining going on. Likewise, the schedule of shots given to the children (both healthy and HIV-positive) was continually changing. One day Dawiid announced that they would be switching to a new laboratory to provide the HIV tests for newly-arrived children. It all had something to do with sponsorship, corporate acquisitions, boardroom deals. Chandos International seemed to be quite active in areas like that. Skye didn’t pay much attention to the reasons, but the disruption to her daily tasks was annoying.

One afternoon Skye was called into Dawiid’s office. Lucas Bembo was leaving just as she arrived, and gave her a look that could have meant anything, a restrained smile with the hint of a sneer under the surface.

Sitting on Dawiid’s desk was her phone. He indicated it with his hand.

“Skye, I think it will serve no purpose to keep this from you now. Please, take it.”

She picked it up and pocketed it with a polite nod of thanks.

“There is one thing I would like to say, Skye,” he continued, “it has not escaped my notice that throughout these... less than harmonious times, the standard of your work in Ilé Ireti, in particular with the children, has remained first class. I want you to know that we all appreciate that.”

“Thank you, Dawiid.”

“But that is not why I asked you here today. Our scouts have been doing their good work as usual, and this weekend there will be another field trip. It will be by airplane. Would you like to come? A request has come through from our masters for more footage of you in remote locations.”

Skye noticed something in the way Dawiid said this. She couldn’t put her finger on it, it just didn’t fit neatly. She dismissed it from her mind almost immediately – Dawiid was obviously in a difficult position, she certainly hadn’t made things easy for him.

“OK,” she said aloud, “where is the trip to?”

“You will be flying to Sassadougou province, to the Sorondobi airstrip, leaving early Saturday morning. You will not have to stay overnight, it will be a one day trip. Getting back before sundown.”

Sassadougou was actually closer than Margai province, it wouldn’t have taken all that longer to get there by road.

“Why by plane?” she asked. “We haven’t used them before.”

Dawiid smiled. He was more comfortable now. “There are really two reasons for that. Now that the Project African Sunbeam has proved as successful as Chandos

International had hoped, there is a little more money available, and doing it this way is more efficient. And secondly, to get to Sassadougou province by road, you would have to go through the Makaikoro district, and we have just received notification that there is an outbreak of Peringgi fever there.”

“Ah, I see.”

Although the Peringgi virus could only be spread by direct physical contact with infected people, everyone was well advised to stay away from hotspots. Which was also Chandos International’s strict policy.

“What sort of plane?” she asked. “How big, I mean. How many seats?”

“It is a Cessna 208 Caravan, modified to seat twelve.”

“So we’re picking the children up from Sorondobi?”

“No, there are two villages about an hour’s drive from the airstrip. I have arranged to hire two four-wheel drives from a local businessman.”

Skye went over the details in her mind.

“You say ‘we’. Are you coming this time, Dawiid?”

He smiled. “No, alas I must spend most of that day in a meeting with Mr Auteil. Lucas will be leading the expedition. I have just spoken with him and I believe we can all work together in this venture. I trust that I am correct in this assumption?”

Skye backtracked. Maybe that explained the creepy look she got from Lucas when she arrived at Lucas’ office.

“Yes Dawiid,” she said, “I will be on my best behavior. Team player and all that.”

“Good, so you’ll go then?”

“Sure, yes, I’ll go. It’ll be good to see a bit more of Africa from the air.”

Skye was woken at five in the morning by the sweet but insistent chiming of her alarm clock. The first thing she realized was that she had been dreaming, and somehow the sound had worked its way into her dream as if the dream knew the sound was coming. She was a little girl again, and had been creeping down the hallway in her Gran’s house towards the old grandfather clock. She wanted to open it up to see how it worked on the inside, something that was certainly not allowed. After some frustration in which the clock got further away the more she tried to get closer, she finally succeeded in unlocking the framed glass door and looked up. The pendulum and weighted chains were dangling arms and there was a face looking down from inside the cabinet. In an accusing voice it said ‘Um ah, I’m telling’ and immediately the clock started to chime, and the chiming became *different* and she woke up.

The second thing that went through her mind was a sense of foreboding as she recalled the last time she had woken up this early, to that same melodic chiming. It was the morning of the fateful snow trip. She cleared her mind. Was it really six months ago? Half a year, but it had brought more changes to her life than the previous ten.

Since it was only a day trip Skye planned to take her shoulder bag, packed the night before with the few essentials she thought she might need. Although she wasn’t hungry she made a pre-dawn sojourn to the staff cafeteria and forced herself to have a slice of toast and some unconvincing orange juice.

At six the little party assembled in the car park in front of the administration block. The eastern horizon was just starting to show some gold and crimson and the air was cool and pleasant. With very little delay they all piled into the minivan. Lucas Bembo took the driver’s seat and Skye sat beside him. Behind them, making up the security

detail were Garvey Kalimbe and one of his underlings (Joseph *someone-or-other*), with Robert Johnson and Darius Ngenda in the back.

The drive to Lawrencetown airport was quiet, the two young camera operators spoke to each other in low voices, but no one else had anything to say. Lucas wore a mask of guarded civility which didn't feel quite right to Skye. She forced herself to relax. The man was obviously just making an effort so she ought to just let things find their own course.

The sight of the airport brought back to Skye memories of her arrival in the country two months earlier. She remembered how shabby and neglected they had appeared when she first saw them. But now, in the light of the newly-risen sun the same buildings looked modern and clean. Sparkling even. Amazing what two months could do to one's point of view.

Lucas drove past the main terminal to a collection of smaller buildings, hangars, huts and converted shipping containers. This was where the charter companies and other civil aviation endeavors were based. He parked the minivan close to one of the buildings and everyone got out and retrieved their belongings from the back. Robert and Darius had to manage their camera gear as well as whatever else they were bringing, but took pride in the fact that they had more to carry than everyone else.

The building sported a faded metal sign saying 'Zuniga Air Charter Co.'. Inside was a desk covered in files and radio equipment, several metal chairs and a water dispenser. The walls were adorned with faded posters advertising aerial tours of everything the Zuniga Republic had to offer. Business was not booming, but the companies were still operating. A middle aged woman sat behind the desk studiously writing in a notebook. The paper kind, with a pen.

Lucas approached her and was treated to about a minute of being ignored. Eventually he cleared his throat to gain her attention and a conversation ensued. It was in Yoruba or one of the related dialects and Skye could barely pick out one word in ten. But one word stuck out from the others – Peringgi. Something was definitely not right. The discussion became animated with raised voices and accusing tones on both side. The rest of the group were listening, making disbelieving noises and frowning but no one offered to explain what was going on to Skye. Someone came into the office from a door in the rear, listened for a while then interjected something and left. At one stage Lucas pulled out his wallet and waved it in the woman's face, to no productive effect. He then threw his arms dramatically into the air in frustration. Skye had never seen him do anything like that before, he was more the diffident, venomous looks type. The exchange ended and he walked back to the group, rolling his eyes in what she thought was an uncharacteristic manner.

Lucas explained the situation for Skye's benefit.

"There has been a new outbreak of Peringgi fever. It is in Sassadougou province, but a long way from Sorondobi airstrip, and also from the two villages we were planning to visit. The pilot will not fly there."

"But wasn't he just going to be waiting at the airstrip?" asked Skye. "Surely there would be no risk of contact with infected people."

"I said that same thing to her," said Lucas indicating the woman behind the desk, "but the pilot is concerned that there will be rioting, and people trying to leave, and they will try to get on the plane and force him to fly them out. And the owner of this charter company is taking the side of this pilot."

The conversation switched to Yoruba. Garvey Kalimbe asked a question and Lucas answered it with a profound and theatrical lack of enthusiasm. After a few more comments he turned to Skye and said, "I will try to hire a plane from the other

company, Lawrencetown Aviation, but that company does not have a relationship with Chandos International.”

This time everyone waited around the minivan while Lucas walked across to the (only) other charter company in the little complex. The two camera operators grinned at Skye.

“I do not think he will be successful,” offered Darius.

“At least, not to leave this early in the morning,” added Robert.

“If there is a delay,” said Skye, “we probably won’t be able to fit everything into one day. I don’t think any of us brought any overnight things, I certainly didn’t. Is there a hotel in Sorondobi?”

“There is a guest house,” said Garvey. The big security chief looked at Skye and added, “but you might not call it a hotel.”

Lucas returned to the minivan shaking his head.

“There is a four-seater available,” he said, “but their fourteen-seater is up country today and the ten-seater is undergoing maintenance. Both of them will be available tomorrow, but they insist on charging double because of the Peringgi fever situation.”

“So...” said Skye, “where to now? Will we reschedule for tomorrow?”

This prompted another round of rapid fire Yoruba. Everyone except Skye was apparently being consulted.

“Skye,” said Lucas when everything was settled, “we will drive into Lawrencetown, as it is Saturday and Robert and Darius want to do some shopping there. I will do some work at Pan-African division office. Unless you have a different request, Garvey and Joseph will return with you to Ilé Ireti.

“No, that’s fine. OK.” Said Skye.

Not only was the airport quite close to downtown, the drive was actually rather pleasant. The road was relatively new and followed the coast, with beaches on the right and some surprisingly decent-looking resorts on the left. The early morning sun shone across onto the beach, painting the sand a pastel gold and making the small waves sparkle as they broke onto the shore. Then they reached the northern edge of Lawrencetown proper and everything became less idyllic.

Robert and Darius were dropped near the centre, taking their small sports bags but leaving the video equipment in the back.

“I will see you tomorrow, Miss Skye,” Robert said and she waved as they drove off.

Next stop was the white concrete and black glass monstrosity that was the Chandos International Pan-African division headquarters. After he had disembarked, Skye gave Lucas a nod through her window to say ‘see you’ but got nothing more than a disdainful look in return. Perhaps the cordiality he had been showing her was nothing more than an act for the benefit of Robert and Darius. She thought she saw Garvey Kalimbe watching her for a reaction, but paid no attention. No point in getting paranoid. They drove back towards the compound in silence.

As soon as they had cleared the sentry station it was clear something wrong. A group of children, many in a state of agitation, were milling around Red dormitory. Lots of the junior staff were there too, looking on as if there were some sort of spectacle on display. A group of security guards, none of whom Skye recognized, were standing in a line, maintaining a semblance of order.

Garvey and Joseph approached one of the guards and appeared to ask what was going on. After a quick, quiet exchange they headed straight for the security office. Skye was about to follow them to ask what they had learned but then she spotted Maria Ajayi, facing off against another of the line of guards. She ran over.

The guard took one look at her and said, "Skye Arbeiter! You not be here! You fly to Sassadougou province today!"

One corner of Skye's mind puzzled over the fact that a security guard she had never seen before knew both her name and her plans for the day. But there was no time for pondering things like that. Maria rushed over and grabbed her arm.

"Miss Skye, Miss Skye," she said, wild-eyed and breathless. "They give shots!"

Skye tried to collect her thoughts.

"But there was nothing on the schedule for anyone today," she said at last.

The words tumbled out of Maria. "Two *oyinbo* arrive, they tell Dawiid, he must select thirty children, move them to Red HIV dormitory, and give them shots."

Oyinbo was Yoruba for European.

"What," said Skye, "to make more room in Blue and Pink? Because there is plenty of space in Red? That makes sense, though it is strange that no one has said anything about it before."

"No, no, no, no, no!" said Maria with rising urgency in her voice, "They infecting AIDS! Giving children shots of AIDS!"

Like silent thunder, the situation opened up for Skye. The demand for HIV-positive orphans was exceeding the supply. Yellow, Pink and Blue dormitories were becoming seriously overcrowded. With pre-screened, photogenic children. Two problems solved at once.

Then the logical, analytical part of her mind called for calm. This whole thing was preposterous. Would they really do the... unthinkable? And there was no way they could get away with it, no way they could hush it up. There must be some mistake.

"Maria, how do you know this?"

"The *oyinbo* bring their own hypojets, in big metal cases. There was death-sign on them, the bones. I heard one of them saying things to the other one, about 'inoculation of HIV'."

By hypojets, Maria obviously meant hypodermic jet injectors.

– www.whatisgoingon.com

"Where is Dawiid Bankele, Maria?" Skye asked.

"He went away with more *oyinbo*, I think they take him to head office in Lawrencetown."

Skye wondered if she had passed him on the road, or whether he had already been inside when they dropped off Lucas. She held up her hand and tried to think what to do next.

"I'll call Claude Auteil, and if Dawiid is there he can tell me what is happening," she said.

She made her way quickly to the administration building and sat down in one of the common cubicles in the shared office area. There was a communal phone in the staff room, but this was more private. She dialed Claude's number.

"Claude," she said after persuading his secretary that it was urgent she speak to him immediately, "there is something very strange going on here at the compound. There are a bunch of new security people, and some Europeans moving children around and giving them injections. There's a lot of very frightened people here, and not just children either. Maria is convinced they're," and here she paused, "infecting them with HIV."

There was silence at the other end. Eventually Claude said, "Yes, I've just heard from Lucas that the flight you were planning to take was cancelled. This is most regrettable."

Skye didn't know what to make of this. "So, what is going on here?"

“Are you calling from the staff room, Skye?”

“No, from the office area. Why?”

“Skye, Ms Arbeiter, I must ask that you either remain in the administration block, or if you prefer, return to your quarters. Dawiid Bankele is on his way to you at this moment. He will sort everything out, he will explain everything to you.”

“But Claude, what *is* going on?”

“There is no cause for concern, Skye.”

“But...”

“Just stay there, out of the way. And please don’t do anything foolish, Skye. I’m sure you know what I mean. We must all work together as a team, this project depends on it.” And with that, he hung up.

Skye had fully expected the whole thing to be a simple misunderstanding that Claude would clear up for her, but his guarded, evasive manner only made her more suspicious. Whatever the case, one thing was certain: she would not be remaining in the admin block or her quarters. She left the building, walked across to the milling group outside Red dormitory and made her way to the entrance. Two security guards blocked her way.

“Let me in please,” she said firmly, “I work here, and all the children know me. You have to let me see them.”

The two guards didn’t budge or say anything. She made a half-hearted attempt to get past them but it was pretty pointless.

“Skye, Skye,” came the authoritative voice of Garvey Kalimbe. He approached them and took her elbow gently but firmly. “You must come with me please.” He wasn’t using force, but it was pretty clear he would if required. She walked a little way with him so that they could hear each other’s voices more easily.

“Garvey,” she began, “look around you. I am beginning to suspect that these new people are doing something really terrible to the children. I just want to find out what it is.”

Garvey shook his head to stop her. “Skye, when I arrived at my station, there was a message waiting for me from Mr Auteil. The situation here is complex and delicate, and I must ask you walk with me to the staff dormitory and remain in your room until Dawiid Bankele returns. He will be able to answer all your questions.”

There was no point arguing. They walked to her quarters and he stood watching as she went in and closed the door. There wasn’t a peephole so she couldn’t be sure if he planned to stay outside guarding it. She tried to clear her mind and plan what to do next. She looked out of her window. There was no one there, but she didn’t know how long that would last.

The phone had plenty of charge, but indoors the signal strength stayed resolutely at zero unless she stood right next to the window. She scrolled down the list of contacts to Julia Morgan’s name and hit the dial button.

<indistinct grunt>

“Julia, this is Skye. Are you awake?”

“Ugh, it’s two in the morning, Skarbs, what’s up?”

“Jules, I haven’t got much time. I think something terrible is happening here. Could you please do me a huge favor? Go over to your laptop and click on that webcam streaming icon I set up for you, you know, the freeware utility. It’s really important.”

“Yeah, OK, sure.” There followed a few sounds of fumbling movement, some more grunts, and the welcome chime of a computer coming out of sleep mode. Eventually she said, “Yeah, it’s on I think.”

“Thanks a million Jules, just leave it now. You can go back to sleep if you like. I’ll call later.”

“Uh, but hey, you’ve got me curious Skarbs, what’s happening?”

Skye hit the hands free button and pointed the satellite phone’s camera at herself, so that it would look like a video call if Julia were still watching her laptop. “No time Jules, you can watch if you like, but I’ve got to go now.”

“OK, but take care, whatever’s going on. We all want you back in one piece.”

“Sure, thanks Jules. Bye.” And she hit the orange hang up button.

After checking there was still no one outside her window, she opened it and climbed out. She slung her shoulder bag and checked that the phone was still transmitting. Just in case Garvey had left anyone at the front of the staff dorm, she walked around the back and carefully made her way to the rear of Red dorm, taking a longer route than normal to stay out of sight of the main thoroughfares. The back entrance was not guarded, though she could clearly hear some of the clamor coming from the front.

She opened the door carefully and looked inside. Since she had been in bright sunlight it took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the relative darkness. The room, used for storage and spare linen, was empty. She entered the building, found the rear corridor also empty and made her way to the kitchenette. This was also empty, and quite dark as it had no exterior windows and the lights were switched off. The only light present came from the servery into the common room, an opening in the wall with a bench on either side through which snacks and drinks could be passed. A variety of sounds issued from the common room.

Skye checked the phone. As she feared the signal was down to zero, but it was still recording. The receiving application on Julia’s laptop would now be in wait mode, and would attempt to catch up with the buffered data when she next went outside, or failing that she could manually send it across later.

To anyone in the common room, the servery would appear as a dark hole in the wall, so Skye was confident that if she kept back a little, she would not be seen unless someone happened to be looking directly at her. She bent down, holding the phone so that it would capture everything, and peeped in.

A row of clearly traumatized children were sitting in chairs against one of the walls. There were four adults in the room, two Europeans in suits and two local security guard types. She didn’t recognize any of them.

One of the Europeans stood facing the row of children, the other was sitting at a desk with some equipment on it, including a hypodermic jet injector. Just as Maria had said, one of the silvered metal cases was covered in biohazard warnings. The canister attached to the injector had the same signs, and the man at the desk was wearing white rubber gloves and a surgical mask.

A little girl of about five was standing to one side of him, held in place by one of the guards. He was obviously preparing to administer an injection. Thinking fast, Skye put the phone into her shoulder bag and zipped it up. There was no way she could do anything while holding onto it, and they’d just confiscate it again anyway. The camera’s resolution was quite good, she had already captured what was going on as best she could. And it would still be recording audio.

The door flew open and Skye strode into the common room, trying to project as much authority as she could. As soon as she cleared the doorframe, the common room’s sink came into view and she saw something in it, dark red and plastic and sporting another of the biohazard signs. But there wasn’t time to pay it any attention as things started to happen all at once.

Several of the children left their seats and ran over to her, babbling incomprehensibly. Some of the smaller ones grabbed her legs, others stood behind her.

The European who had been facing them looked around in annoyance and barked “Come back here!”

The two guards left their positions at the door at the other end of the room and made directly for Skye’s position. She didn’t have much time, so disengaging her legs from the arms of the frightened toddlers she launched herself towards the desk. There wasn’t much of a plan, she thought she might be able to knock the hypodermic injector out of the seated European’s hands, maybe even disable it altogether. There was the vague idea of saving at least one child from such an awful fate, and possibly buying time until Dawiid arrived and sorted everything out. It all happened too fast, senses jumbling together – rush, impact, the momentum killing her balance. Something about the angles was wrong, either that or the guards were too close. It was over almost before it had begun, and all she had achieved was knocking a few items off the desk.

Skye found herself held firmly with her arms pinned behind her back by one of the guards, her bag still slung over her shoulder but hanging unevenly. She couldn’t move and was barely able to breathe, at least not comfortably. There hadn’t really been much of a chance, the guards weren’t all that much larger than her but they were well trained. Besides, in all her history of violent encounters Skye had always been on the receiving end, never once had she been the one dishing it out. The second guard retrieved the child he had been holding a moment earlier, and frogmarched her to the still seated European. The injector was still in his hands, and he moved it, slowly and deliberately, to the tiny girl’s shoulder.

“Why are you doing that? How could you?” pleaded Skye.

There was a snap as the injector was primed, then a soft *pfffft* and it was all over. The seated man looked at Skye.

“It is all for a good cause,” he said with exaggerated calm and defiance.

A chorus of distressed cries arose from the children, punctuated by the staccato chorus of the two Europeans commanding “Be quiet!” repeatedly.

Skye gave a small dry sob of impotent rage.

The door at the other end of the common room flew open and Garvey Kalimbe entered, accompanied by Joseph and another member of his team.

“What is going on here?” he asked, but his voice was almost subservient, with none of the authoritarian tone Skye had expected.

The standing European motioned with his head toward Skye. “You were supposed to be keeping her away. Get her out of here, and make sure she doesn’t come back.”

“Come this way now, Miss Skye,” Garvey said firmly. He took her elbow and the guard holding her relaxed his grip. Garvey’s two men took positions in front and behind and the Skye was escorted out of the common room.

“You are causing us all a lot of trouble,” Garvey said. He sounded almost disappointed. “Mr Dawiid will not be happy.”

“Garvey,” said Skye, “those men are injecting the children with HIV, with AIDS. I saw it with my own eyes. You have to help me. They have to be stopped!”

Kalimbe shook his head. “I told you before, when Mr Dawiid returns, he will explain everything to you. You must wait in your room now for him to arrive.”

The little procession exited Red dormitory the same way Skye had entered, bypassing the subdued melee at the front door and making their way to the staff

quarters. At no point did anyone pay attention to Skye's shoulder bag. Some part of her mind willed her not to glance down, not to draw anyone's attention to it.

At the staff dormitory entrance, one of the guards (not Joseph) peeled off and walked around to the side of the building.

"Timotay will stand under your window," said Garvey by way of explanation. "And Joseph will be outside your door. Until Mr Dawiid arrives."

Inside her room, Skye closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, trying to suppress the chaotic emotions churning in her gut. After making sure the guard outside her window was not looking in, she took the phone out of her bag and positioned it so that the signal strength bar moved above zero. The recorder was shut off, but the software in the phone was still trying to send the backlog to the streaming utility Skye had installed on Julia's laptop. She left the phone sitting on a shelf near the window and confirmed that the transfer re-established itself. Then she tried to think about what to do next.

Garvey Kalimbe hadn't suspected she might be using the phone, but Skye was sure Dawiid Bankele would not be that naïve. If he was on his way there would be very little time. She positioned her chair so that the phone could continue its upload while she held it, and began composing an email. It was addressed to Julia Morgan, Jason Curnow, Gunther Huygens, Joan McKluskie, the contact email address she had for Jossica (probably their agent), and the producer of the breakfast TV show she'd been on four times. It wasn't a long email and she didn't attach the video, Julia would be able to forward that for her.

But she was confident it would kick things along with enough momentum so that Chandos International wouldn't be able to suppress it with their network of strategic corporate alliances and backroom deals.

Tucker sidled up to the elevator's cement-splattered handrail but tried not to lean against it as Elias Corder slid the safety gate closed. The image of thirteen perfectly groomed men in dinner jackets pressed together to avoid the dust and rough edges jarred at the senses. Just like the sight of thirteen limousines parked outside, surrounded by earthmoving equipment, pickup trucks and the like. The elevator was operated by an oversized lever, the sort of thing you could use with heavy protective gloves. Corder pulled it and with a shudder they started to ascend towards the top of the Old River Port building. The sun had just set and the heat was easing.

Tucker looked around at his companions. He already knew almost half of them.

His boss, the exuberant Elias Corder, who was taking a supreme delight in Tucker's curiosity about the upcoming evening.

His rival-of-sorts in the company, Brandon Tyler. All smooth pale complexion and full-but-fine black hair, like a model in a commercial, advertising shampoo to corporate antichrists. Tucker had been working more closely with Brandon over the past few weeks, and although their dislike of each other had not diminished, a certain mutual respect had established itself.

Randolph Reinhardt, CEO of Tolliver Holdings, tobacco magnate and probably the client most responsible for Tucker's rapid rise in Corder Synergy. Silver haired and positively redolent with olde-worlde airs and graces.

Mayor Stanley Vernon, delicate and balding, his customary sartorial splendor diminished by the fact that right now everyone around him was similarly attired.

The imposing Senator Alex Beresford, alpha male from central casting, who was starting to get more airtime these days. Moving out of the shadows and into the limelight. No one had actually come out and said it yet, but it was increasingly hard to dismiss the words *future president* from your mind when the senator was in the room.

The remaining guests were new to Tucker, though of course he knew some by reputation. There had been cursory introductions in Conference Room A as everyone assembled over drinks and nibbles, he now took the opportunity to consolidate in his mind who was who.

Monsignor Carlo Francesconi, head of some esoterically-named evangelical order within the Catholic Church. The man made Tucker's skin crawl. Tucker was not aware of any evidence he was anything other than a pious servant of God, but every instinct in his body screamed that no one small, weak or vulnerable should ever face this man alone.

The Sheikh. He had a name, or rather, an array of about four or five of them, but they consistently slipped through Tucker's memory. He was a Middle Eastern man of great importance, but Corder had not bothered to explain whether he was an oil baron, a politician or an imam. He wore a keffiyeh on his head, and Tucker tried in vain to stop the phrase *tea towel* from riffing creatively through his thoughts. The Sheikh said very little and had a smile that conveyed disdain with great efficiency.

Bernie Treloar, founder of Treloars Financial, the man responsible for that funny shimmery money – Dazzlers or whatever they called it. Treloar was a great big bear of a man, overweight, and someone for whom a good shave would only last twelve hours.

The diminutive but arresting Oren Lucescu, corporate guru and author of 'The Seventh Hat'. Domn Lucescu (he favored the formal title from his native land) spoke

with a strangely captivating Eastern-European accent. Tucker got the impression that if you just listened to the man talk he might be surreptitiously hypnotizing you without you realizing it.

The most colorful character in the room was almost certainly Errol Clade, ageing rock star, self-fancied political meddler and fodder for gossip columnists and paparazzi the world over. Born Robert Scollay, the one-time lead singer (and core identity) for Total Game Theory was famously bisexual and scandal of one sort or another was never far away. Although it had to be said that he was mellowing in his middle age – musically as well as in his personal life. His most recent album had been more jazz/folk than rock. But far more pertinently, Errol Clade was a recent adoptive parent to an HIV-positive African Sunbeam child, or CIAO as everyone was starting to call them.

That left just one guest remaining, the inscrutable Mr Smith. This was a man made to be forgotten. His appearance was nondescript, at least compared to those around him, except for an expensive-looking Bluetooth headset. Tucker had not been introduced, and only identified him by a process of elimination. Earlier in the day Corder had said, “Mr Smith doesn’t talk about his occupation, Trent. Mind your P’s and Q’s around that one, eh?”

- *A group of the vilest, most corrupt perpetrators of crimes against society.*
 - *The sort of people you might call movers and shakers.*
 - *They’re going to be in one place at one time, and the League is going to strike.*
- Delivered in Callum Buchanan’s charming Scottish brogue.

Two days earlier, Tucker had sat, star of the moment but decidedly uncomfortable, at the table in Conference Room B. Sitting across from him was the softly-spoken Gunther Huygens and his unnamed associate. To his right was Brandon Tyler, while on his left sat Elias Corder and Anthea McMahan. The agenda was a debriefing of recent events in the Zuniga Republic and the mood, at least as manifest by Corder, was upbeat.

After the preliminaries had been dealt with, Tucker cleared his throat and began.

“As you will no doubt be aware, three days ago the little charade we organized in Chandos International’s Lawrencetown processing centre went off without a hitch, and our er... *mark*, Skye Arbeiter, took the bait and swallowed it. She immediately made her claims public, along with supporting amateur video and audio recordings. Her claims being that Chandos International was infecting the children in the processing centre with AIDS, to satisfy the demand for HIV-positive children for adoption in the west. As expected, most of the media outlets have run coverage of this, and when she returns to this country tomorrow, they’ll be falling all over themselves to get to her. She’ll get saturation coverage, make all her accusations, and we’ll refute them comprehensively.”

“We’ve already got someone lined up to counter her?” asked Tyler.

“We have indeed,” said Tucker, “our very own Herr Huygens here.”

“I have prepared a statement for release,” confirmed Huygens, “and I will also make an appearance on some of the news and current events shows.”

“So,” said Corder, “now that the big distraction is occupying everyone’s attention, how are we placed to begin the real operation?”

Tucker looked across at Huygens. “We’ve inserted a dependable asset into Chandos’s Lawrencetown operation. He’s one of the people on the initial scouting

runs. He'll administer the inoculation during his recruiting assessments, using a miniaturized pressure-operated hypodermic injector. Standard operation has a four-to-six week interval between first contact and arrival at the processing centre. That way, the virus will have had a chance to take, and by the time they arrive at the Lawrencetown centre, they'll have just enough antibodies to test positive in the sorting process."

"Who is this asset?" asked Corder.

Gunther shook his head dismissively. "His name is not important. What is important is that he doesn't have any contact with our staff in Ilé Ireti – the processing centre. He deals only with Claude Auteil, the head of our operations in East Africa, based in Lawrencetown."

"And we can place our confidence in these two men?" pressed Corder.

"I can assure you," said Huygens, "that both of them can be trusted."

Corder mulled this over. "Well, there's obviously a few things still to play out yet, but it's all going to plan, very good. Trent, well done on that magician's misdirection approach, and your hunch that Skye would behave as predictably as she did. An excellent outcome."

After the meeting broke up, Corder asked Tucker to step into his office. Tucker sat on the settee in the understated opulence and studied the paintings on the walls, wondering if a set of aesthetics actually existed in which they could be described as art, and if so, why he did not share in them.

"I couldn't help but notice," said Corder after he had attended to a few items on his screen, "you didn't quite seem your usual bright and bushy tailed self in there. It didn't affect your performance, that was first rate as usual. But how are you riding on this, Trent? Personally, I mean. It being a little bit more sensitive than some of our previous projects."

Tucker grimaced. "Well if you really want to know," he said, "to tell the truth I'm not totally comfortable with it. It kind of smarts, I guess you'd say. Shooting up little kids with HIV, then running a con to stitch up this humanitarian worker."

"But it was your idea," countered Corder.

Tucker shook his head. "No sir, I believe the initial idea was Brandon's. I just helped make it work."

"Yes, of course," said Corder smiling and nodding. "But I don't have anything to worry about? I don't need to send off anything?" He pointed to his top drawer.

Tucker remembered what he had seen Corder place in there last time he was in his office. "No Mr Corder, I'm holding up just fine. My loyalty is not under question, irrespective of whether you activate that Chuusei contract I signed."

"Excellent. Pleased to hear it, Trent."

Something popped into Tucker's head. After a moment of indecision he said, "Speaking of loyalty, there's something I've been meaning to mention to you."

"Oh yes, what's that?"

Tucker took a deep breath. "Ever since the FreshStyle launch, there's been this journalist pestering me for inside details on the deal. Or anything I could give him on Tolliver. He was asking some very specific questions, made me think he knew a few things he wasn't letting on."

Elias Corder appeared interested, but not overly concerned. If anything he looked amused.

"Questions, eh? Did he give his name?"

"Yes, Callum Buchanan. Scottish accent too."

Corder nodded, but didn't offer anything more.

"I didn't tell him anything of course," continued Tucker. "Anyway, a few weeks ago, just after the ah, bombing at the Old River Port building, he bumps into me, pretends it's a chance meeting, and lets slip that he's either part of, or closely connected to, the League for Natural Justice."

"You don't think it was a chance meeting?" asked Corder.

"No, not really."

"But that would mean he's been stalking you."

"Something like that, yeah," said Tucker. "But that's not why I brought the matter up."

Corder made a rolling motion with his hand. "Go on then."

"Buchanan said the LNJ were aware there was going to be a meeting of, you know, movers and shakers, business leaders, politicians, elite power brokers, real soon, and they were planning a strike, something really big."

Tucker was surprised by Corder's reaction to this. Or rather, the lack of it.

"And you took that to mean the upcoming Folly?"

"Well, it seemed like a logical implication," said Tucker.

Corder paused and looked him in the eye. "Are you worried about your personal safety?"

Tucker shrugged. "Well, I just thought I'd mention it..." he said.

"Don't worry about a thing, Trent. I have the matter in hand. One of the benefits of cultivating the sort of contacts I have is that when required one can call in favors from certain people involved in... shall we say, security at the highest level. We're talking elite operatives from the world of international espionage and counter insurgency. And that's without considering whatever efforts our other esteemed guests might be taking. Trust me, you have absolutely nothing to worry about."

"Oh, OK," said Tucker, taken aback.

"Is that all?"

"Ah, yes. That was all."

"Very good," said Corder with an air of finality. "Well, I'm glad you brought it up. Good to know I can count on you, Trent."

Tucker stood up to go. "OK, thanks Mr Corder, I'll get back to it."

He left the room with a feeling of anticlimax. Corder's assurances had done nothing to ease his concerns. He was still apprehensive about the Folly, whatever it was, and there was a core of turmoil inside him whenever he thought too closely about what was going on in Africa.

– How had it come to this?

The elevator stopped and Elias Corder unlatched the safety barrier and slid it across so the group could exit. Some of the men exchanged dubious looks as they walked along a newly poured concrete floor, then up a set of makeshift wooden stairs onto a walkway made of planking. On their left was some scaffolding with a handrail, while on the right there was a gap between the walkway and the wall. Tucker could see all the way down to the ground level. It was not the sort of place for anyone with vertigo. Up ahead he could see one of the giant gantry crane's four top spans.

"This way gentlemen," said Corder cheerily, pulling back some canvas sheeting and motioning for the rest to pass through. Visibility was not very good inside and the group waited for Corder to make his way to the front and lead on.

– Thirteen souls huddled together, celebrating darkness.

Another set of stairs, metal this time, and then they were standing on a metal grill landing. There were handrails around three edges of the platform, which was attached to a shipping container. But very little could be seen, thanks to all the canvas that was slung around in every direction. Corder opened a hinged metal door and again motioned for everyone to enter.

As Tucker stepped from darkness into the soft light bathing the landing he noticed a doormat and wiped his feet. Once inside, he looked around in surprise. The interior of the shipping container – if that was what had once been, had been transformed into a beautifully-appointed room. The fit out really was first class. Two enormous sections had been cut out of the walls, one along each side, and filled floor-to-ceiling with glass. There didn't seem to be much point to this – nothing could be seen on the other side, except for a few dark folds of canvas. There were also glass panels in the roof, and unsettlingly, the floor. The two end walls were not glass and they were covered either with wood paneling or a convincing facsimile. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, and an impressive dining table ran along the length of the room. It was laid out in classic style, with a bewildering array of silver and glasses at each place. The chairs were lavishly upholstered and had armrests, and rather than being pushed into the table, were set back, against the walls on each side.

Occupying most of the far end was a small but professional looking kitchen, dominated by a large refrigerator, an array of closely spaced vertical shelves and a stack of square wicker baskets. An exhaust fan was whirring quietly above it, and nestled in the far corner was a cubicle with 'WC' carved into the wooden door. A middle aged Asian man, wearing a white apron and a chef's hat, stood impassively in the kitchen.

"Now gentlemen," said Corder in what passed for him as a gracious voice, "as you can see, space is at a bit of a premium this evening, especially if we all mill about. So if I could ask that we all take our seats, I'm sure it'll make things that much more comfortable. As you can see, there are name tags at the places to make things easy. But howabouts we leave the chairs up against the wall for the moment, rather than sitting right up to the table. So we can kick back and relax."

Tucker found his name and sat down, finding himself between Corder's place (still vacant) on one side and Brandon Tyler on the other.

"Rather unusual choice of location," he said quietly to Tyler.

"I'm sure things will become clear in due course," Tyler responded cryptically.

"What, you know something I don't?"

Tyler gave a superior smile. "I know it's a game where each of these *players* tries to outdo each other, and I've a fair idea of what our illustrious CEO has in mind for tonight."

"OK." Then after a pause, "Do you know what the whole 'Folly' thing is about? Mr Corder seems to find it terribly amusing that I don't know, and won't say a thing."

"Well it's my first time too Trent, but unlike you I found the odd contact or two who was willing to talk, so yes, I do know 'what it's about'."

"And?"

"And," said Tyler with an infuriating hint of a laugh "like Elias, I too find it terribly amusing that you have no idea."

"Yeah, fuck you too Tyler," said Tucker good naturedly.

"Charmed I'm sure."

Elias Corder was still standing next to the door by which they had entered. He slid it shut, took a phone from his pocket and pressed a few buttons. Tucker heard him say "We're all set, you standing by?" then, "OK, in about sixty" before carefully easing

the phone into the breast pocket of his jacket, without pressing the hang up key. He glanced at his watch and produced what looked like a small remote control from another pocket.

“Gentlemen,” he said in a loud voice, “may I formally welcome you to another Folly. And I would like to offer a special welcome to the two new members of our circle who are joining us for the first time this evening. Trent and Tyler there, two of the sharpest minds on my team, and with ambition to match.”

“And, I trust,” interjected Randolph Reinhardt, “well and truly hogtied with a big wad of Chuusei derivatives.”

“All in hand, Randolph, all in hand,” said Corder, shooting Tucker the most subliminal of winks.

He continued, “But I’m sure you’re all asking yourselves, what’s with these dark and dingy surroundings? Why are we cloistered away in a little hidey hole in the middle of some construction project?” He looked around, mugging dismay. Then in a theatrical voice, “So, why don’t we arrange for a little scenery? A bit of a view? Come on now, let’s get a countdown happening, shall we? Ten. Nine. Eight. Come one, it’s no fun if we don’t all join in. Seven, six.”

Bit by bit the rest of the group joined in, gaining in number and volume, and by the time they reached zero you could almost have called it enthusiastic.

“And... here we go.” Corder pressed one of the buttons on the remote he was holding.

For a split second nothing happened. Then Tucker felt a rumble, quiet at first though it rose very quickly in volume. The floor beneath them gave a small but sudden lurch, and he reflexively grasped the edge of his chair. There was a creaking sound, then a lighter area above them was revealed as several sheets of canvas started falling, or rather being pulled, from the container’s roof and walls. They fell faster and a sudden alarming vista appeared through the newly cleared glass. Sections of wall, stonework and timber framing, but it was moving, falling downward and picking up speed. With the vibration and the clouds of dust, this gave the distinct impression that they were in some kind of rocket ship taking off, and Tucker was gripped by a sensation of vertigo. Perhaps the most terrifying moment was when the floor seemed to fall away from under their feet, revealing the fact that they were sitting on a pane of plate glass, suspended above... well, chaos.

A chorus of involuntary expletives filled the room, then as those present reclaimed their nerves, there were a few genuine sounds of astonishment and even delight. The remaining disintegrating chunks of wall and roofing receded beneath them and the first hints of a stunning view became apparent. To the west, Tucker saw the remains of sunset over the river, to the east, the lights of the city asserted themselves in the waning twilight.

The shaking stopped, and their position was made clear for the first time. The thirteen men, fourteen counting the chef, were enclosed in what had once been a shipping container, but with all the glass it was now more like a giant aquarium. It was suspended by a satisfyingly chunky coupling from the enormous gantry crane. Several floors below them, largely hidden in the billowing clouds of dust and the encroaching darkness, was a mass of rubble.

Randolph Reinhardt was the first to speak, coherently at least. “Jolly good show, Elias. First rate, old chap.”

“Thank you Randolph,” said Corder, then added quietly, “I told you I would be able to remodel the place the way I liked.”

“Indeed you did,” said Reinhardt, “I stand corrected.” He waved his hands to indicate the room they were sitting in, “I take it we will not be exiting this evening’s venue in the same manner as we entered then?”

Corder held out the remote in this hand, then pointed up through the glass ceiling. “This little wireless device controls the crane. When we’re done, I’ll just get it to lower us down to ground level.”

Reinhardt glanced down through the floor to the twisted jumble at ground level. “And we’ll be able to... *alight*, on that?”

With a mock reproachful look Corder pulled the phone out of his breast pocket. It must have still been connected, as he spoke into it without dialing. “Everything OK down there? Reckon you’ll be able to clear us a spot in the next couple of hours?”

Excellent. OK, Corder out.”

Far below them, two lines of floodlights came on, followed by the rumble of heavy machinery. From off to one side something that was probably a serious bulldozer, but looked like a toy, moved slowly towards the rubble.

Senator Alex Beresford said with a trace of bemusement, “Elias, you’re telling me you cleared all this with my security people?”

“I most certainly did, Senator,” said Corder.

“I think I might be having a word with them, when all this is over,” mused the senator with a wry smile.

Errol Clade was trying to look nonchalant, and failing. Eventually he just gave up and said “Whoa. Whoa. That was just... out there.”

Big Bernie Treloar crossed himself, then looked self consciously at Monsignor Francesconi, who merely raised his eyebrows noncommittally.

Oren Lucescu made some comment about how his more exclusive seminars could benefit from something like that, Mayor Stanley Vernon took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead, the Sheikh favored Corder with a nod of his head and a smile that was equal parts deferential and disdainful. And the enigmatic Mr Smith showed no reaction at all.

Tucker turned to Brandon. “I’ve got to say, that was certainly something. But how did he plan that without anyone finding out?”

“Oh come on Trent,” said Tyler with almost-a-sneer smile, “are you telling me you didn’t see it coming?”

Tucker shook his head, smiling happily. “No, I did not.” Turning to Corder he said, “What I want to know is, how did you get away with it? I’m guessing we’ve broken every operational safety statute in the books.”

“Well,” mugged Corder, “if you’re going to accuse me of bribing officials, why don’t you just come out and say it?”

“Well, no, I was just asking...”

Corder laughed. “Ah Trent, it’s just a matter of who you know. For instance, our venerable mayor here – having him involved helped us no end, didn’t it Stanley?”

The Mayor smiled and nodded, with all the enthusiasm of a rabbit in the spotlight.

“Gentlemen,” said Corder firmly, “now that we are no longer at quite so much risk of dropping, knocking over or spilling anything, I think some drinks might be in order.” He looked toward the kitchenette. “Itamae-san ?”

The Japanese man bowed subtly and busied himself efficiently in the constrained space available. In a very quick time he produced a circular tray and started working his way around the perimeter of the room. The drinks on the tray were varied and matched closely the preferences of everyone present – he only had to return to his

corner for two of the thirteen guests. For some it was red wine, for others white or sparkling. Corder had his customary bourbon, Reinhardt's was scotch, straight up. The senator was served cognac in an oversized brandy balloon. Tucker's was a beer, suitably Belgian, and both the Sheikh and Mr Smith had water.

A little while later, on Corder's cue they all drew their chairs up to the table.

"Itamae-san has prepared for us tonight a fixed menu," he began, "which commences with a sequence of appetizers, to be followed by the beef." He looked across at Tucker and Brandon Tyler and smiled wryly. "He will then serve us the Folly... shall we say *centerpiece*, and finally dessert."

There were general nods of assent.

"He's really enjoying this, isn't he," said Tucker to Brandon. "Yeah, I know, and so are you."

"Don't worry Trent, you'll find out soon enough," said Tyler loftily.

The first course was Oysters in Lobster Butter with Lime Zest Foam and Pale Beluga Caviar. The butter was nut brown but the oysters were more warmed through than actually cooked. The foam was served from something that looked like it came from a factory floor. Rather, a high-tech, spotless, designer factory floor. It was an interesting combination of textures and flavors.

This was quickly followed by Smoked Salmon with an Aspic of Tomato Water Consommé, served with sourdough crisps. The aspic was almost perfectly clear, with just a hint of pink, and it melted in the mouth to deliver a subtly sweet burst of tomato essence.

Tucker turned to Elias Corder. "This is really good, where did you find this guy? Does he cook at one of the local Japanese restaurants?"

Corder shook his head, but it was Randolph Reinhardt who answered from across the table.

"Oh good heavens dear boy, no. Itamae-san is one of the leading chefs in Tokyo, and was present at the original *Arraa no Gukou*, the original Folly. It's quite an honor to have him here with us, you know. Not that he likes having a fuss made over it. Actually, Itamae-san isn't even his real name, it's just Japanese for 'Mr Chef'. It is how he prefers to be addressed."

"OK," said Tucker, very little the wiser.

The next dish was announced as a Mousseline of Langoustine with Morel Mushroom Infusion. What it actually was, was something between a pâté and a mousse, made of imported crayfish and mushrooms, and served on little circles of dense black rye bread. It wasn't bad, but Tucker thought that without the exotic name it would have been fairly unremarkable.

This was followed by a Tarte Fine of Scallops and Black Truffle. This one lived up to the fancy name, the pastry was perfectly executed and the aroma captivating. Tucker could have finished a whole tray of them.

"You know," he said to no one in particular, "for a Japanese chef, there's a pretty strong French influence to these dishes, wouldn't you say?"

"Absolutely," said Reinhardt, "they take international cuisine very seriously in Japan, and a large number of the ultra-elite restaurants over there are French. Now I wouldn't be brave enough to say they're better than the very top places in Paris, but... let's just say that their obsession with perfection is sometimes, frankly, disconcerting."

The idea of Reinhardt being disconcerted by the pursuit of perfect cuisine struck Tucker as highly unlikely, but he didn't say so. Several other diners nodded sagely.

The next course broke with the French theme, and was slightly larger than the preceding appetizers. It was Braised Shitake Mushrooms and Scallions with Linguine cooked in Abalone Stock. Tucker found it OK, tasty and filling, but it seemed not only wasteful but pointless to use abalone just to make a stock, and then use that to cook pasta.

But Tucker's impressions were turned around again when it was time for the beef. After serving each guest with an oversized glass of red wine (French, Tucker didn't pay any attention to the variety, let alone the label), Itamae-san circled the table displaying the freshly-sliced raw fillet. It was arranged on a silver presentation tray, nestled in a bed of fragrant, exotic herbs. In his heavy Japanese accent he explained that this was the highest grade of Wagyu beef from Kobe. It was so heavily marbled that there looked to be more fat than meat, and what meat there was appeared almost salmon in color. During its short but privileged life, this cow had been hand-massaged every day with warm sake, and in the summer months given a bottle of beer along with its daily ration of barley, alfalfa hay and potatoes. The steaks were not all that large by steakhouse standards, but they weren't token slices either. With all the courses, Tucker didn't imagine he'd reach the end of the evening hungry.

Itamae-san folded down an extra section of counter top and slid out a gas-fired grill so that a show could be made of cooking the meat. It wasn't quite teppan-yaki, but it was interesting to look at. The steaks were room temperature to begin with, and almost instantly some of the fat fell through and caught alight. Most of the smoke was vented by the silent exhaust fan above, but the enticing aroma permeated the small room.

When it was done (and the cooking time was measured in seconds rather than minutes) Itamae-san sliced each steak and placed it onto warmed plates and quickly served it to the guests. It was accompanied by a sauce made from sweetened vinegar, light soy, garlic, ginger and horseradish, and everyone except the Sheikh was presented with wooden chopsticks to eat it with.

The phrase "melts in the mouth" is overused when describing a good cut of meat, when actually it is merely tender. For the first time in Tucker's life this phrase had occasion to be, quite literally, true. This snowy-streaked, pale pink flesh bore almost no relationship to anything he had previously known as 'beef'. If someone had told him it had been flown in from another planet where genetic engineering had been used for hedonistic purposes for thousands of years, he would almost have believed it.

– Every steak I ever have from now on will suffer by comparison.

"Wow," was all he could say to Tyler, and then to Corder, "That was something else again. Just amazing."

The final course before dessert, the 'centerpiece' as Corder had described it struck Tucker as something of an anticlimax. It was served in a small plate with a perfect hemisphere of steamed rice, and consisted of small, twisted morsels of some sort of meat in a garlic butter sauce with softened peppercorns.

As Tucker took his first mouthful he noticed that every eye in the room was watching him. Some, like Reinhardt, regarded him with curious, expectant expressions while with others (Tyler and the Sheikh for instance) it was more of an amused sneer. Elias Corder looked on with a paternal, almost hungry pride.

– Whatever.

The meat was more skin and gristle than anything else, although it was quite tender. The flavor was OK, if a little over-salted, gamey and aromatic, but after everything that had gone before it just seemed out of place. Tucker downed a few more forkfuls

and had a sip of the wine. Placing his glass deliberately on the table he looked around at the other diners. Everyone was eating, though some with more enthusiasm than others.

“OK, now,” he said, “do you think someone will deign to tell me what this Folly business is all about?”

Corder glanced across to Reinhardt, who said “Allow me,” and then began:

“About thirty years ago in Tokyo, a man named Takashi Iwasaki was facing a serious problem. He was *oyabun*, or head of the Tanaka-Kai family, an up-and-coming Yakuza group. His problem was that he was rather hot-headed and hadn’t been abiding by the traditional inter-family conventions, or paying enough attention to the convoluted hierarchy of seniority that exists between these groups. He had somehow managed to offend a larger, rival family and the uneasy *détente* was falling apart.

“At this time, Takashi-san was importing black market ivory from East Africa, and became aware of certain... *cultural* practices in that region. This gave him an idea, and led to the staging of a grand conciliatory gesture. Twelve top-ranking *oyabuns* from other Yakuza families were invited to a special banquet, which he called the *Arraa no Gukou*, or ‘Folly of Allah’. The endeavor was a spectacular success, and impressed the guests so much that peace between the factions was restored, albeit temporarily.”

“Folly of Allah?” asked Tucker. “What’s Allah got to do with the Yakuza?”

Reinhardt was clearly enjoying himself, and paid no attention to Tucker’s question. “News of this event reached the West shortly thereafter, and a certain group of businessmen, high-level officials and leaders were so impressed with the sheer audacity of Takashi’s idea that they decided to recreate his little event themselves, and it has become somewhat of a tradition now. The Folly is probably the world’s most exclusive dining club. It is completely informal – there is no charter, no board, no official membership. Every few years one of us decides to put one on, and try to outdo the previous host. And I must say, Elias has certainly done a splendid job this time round, eh?”

Tucker knew that he was being toyed with. “Mr Reinhardt, are you at some point going to tell me what this audacious idea actually was? That so impressed this group of Yakuza bigwigs, and... well, the esteemed members of our present company?”

A few of the other diners chuckled. Reinhardt smiled benevolently.

“Certainly, dear boy. What Takashi-san encountered in West Africa was the practice of female genital mutilation, or female circumcision as its practitioners call it. According to the particular variant of Islam prevalent in those countries, women should not be allowed to experience sexual pleasure, possibly because it will tempt them to be unfaithful to their husbands. Takashi-san reasoned that this idea was inconsistent with the belief in an almighty creator. Why would Allah create girls with the anatomy and capacity for sexual pleasure, and then pronounce it an abomination and declare that they need to be infibulated? Surely, if it were true, it would be a foolish mistake – a folly.

“He then hit upon the idea of taking this Folly as the theme for a most unusual banquet. Through his black market contacts in West Africa, he organized the collection and freezing of the er, tissues removed in these procedures – the excised clitorises, hoods and labia minora. When he had accumulated a sufficient quantity, he had them flown back to Japan, where they formed the centerpiece of the event he hosted to appease the *oyabuns* he had offended.”

Tucker felt the blood drain from his face.

– You’ve gotta be fucking kidding...

Reinhardt pointed at the half-empty plate in front of him. He spoke like a connoisseur explaining a fine wine. “The lure of the dish lies in appreciating that each morsel represents a lifetime of orgasms denied. And also in contemplating the folly, not of Allah,” (and here he glanced at the Sheikh,) “but of anyone who could hold in their minds a set of values that would countenance such a thing.”

Brandon Tyler asked, “And what happened to this Takashi guy?”

“Oh, he met with a sticky end,” said Reinhardt. “Died in a hail of gunfire a couple of years later.”

“What, did someone put a fatwa on him or something?”

Reinhardt shook his head. “Oh no, it was far more prosaic than that. Apparently his talent for antagonizing other Yakuza families was not abated, and he went up against someone to whom he should have shown more respect. So it didn’t end well for him.”

“Ah well,” said Tyler with a lewd grin, “it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve eaten pussy.” After a pause he added, “Though I must say, I don’t usually chew.”

This was greeted by a few chuckles. Someone, it might have been Errol Clade, said “But do you swallow?”

Something seemed to be stuck in Tucker’s throat. His stomach was churning. He tried a few deep breaths but it didn’t help.

– Keep it together... oh, no...

He stood up quickly, holding the edge of the table to steady himself. His chair tilted and fell behind him, and trying not to bolt, he walked as quickly as he could to the door. Every eye was on him, some with looks of surprise, others with smug satisfaction, but most with amusement. On the metal balcony he leant on the railing, leaned over and vomited into darkness. Even though the evening was warm, there was a cold sweat on his forehead, and a shiver passed through his body. He straightened up and considered what to do next.

“You know Trent, that meal was about as good as one can get, anywhere in the world. Such a pity to waste it like that.”

Tucker hadn’t heard Corder come out onto the balcony. He turned and saw the older man standing behind him, offering a napkin. With a nod he took it, patted his brow and then wiped around his mouth. Fortunately his shirt and jacket were clean. He shook his head, trying to quiet the cacophony inside.

After checking that no one else had joined them, he said, “That’s just wrong, Mr Corder, just wrong.”

With a twinkle in his eye, Corder said, “There was one point that Randolph omitted. In *some* of the more recent Follies, the singular ingredient of the centerpiece dish has been substituted with something more easily obtainable, and how shall we say this, less challenging one’s preconceptions. Something about the valves in a pig’s heart, and a certain piece of gristle around one of the joints in a leg of ham. There’s a trick to cutting them in a certain way, threading one through the other – all beyond me of course, but I’m told the results are very similar to the... original.”

Tucker let this sink in. After waiting for Corder to continue he pointed to the door and asked “So, what did I just eat back in there?”

Corder grinned but said nothing.

“Are you going to tell me?” pressed Tucker.

“Well I must admit,” said Corder, “I’m kind of enjoying the fact that you don’t know.”

Something tightened inside Tucker. The cumulative effect of being humiliated, toyed with and laughed at was eating away at him. He pressed his lips together and said nothing.

Corder persisted. There was a burning curiosity in his gaze. “No, really Trent, what are you feeling? What are you thinking?”

“You really want to know?” said Tucker with his calm, measured voice failing. “I’ll tell you what I feel like. I feel like Dr Faustus, or whatever his name was, in that old German story. I feel like my soul has been sucked out, and I don’t even believe in such a thing as souls. It’s not just this... Kentokyo fried *cunt*. It’s everything that’s going on at the moment. I mean, what do you want from me?”

“Ah, so I’m Mephistopheles am I?” mused Corder glibly. “Buying the souls of poor innocent young things and delivering them into eternal damnation? You know, I’ve never really thought of myself that way, Trent, but I suppose I see your point.” Almost as an afterthought he added “So, what are you going to do about it?”

Whatever it was, it snapped. Tucker clenched his fist and slammed it down onto the railing with enough force to give himself a bruise. What happened next was too fast to follow. The metal clanged, and the vibration dislodged the safety latch, leaving a section of the railing – the gate through which they had entered when they arrived, swinging free. Tucker had been leaning against this section with his other hand, and as it lurched away from him he frantically grasped at it. He fell forward, feet scraping uselessly against the deck, further and further until they slid free and he was hanging, one elbow hooked over the bar, the other hand gripping it for dear life while his legs scissored uselessly over the emptiness, trying to get some momentum to swing up.

The madhouse rabble of monkeys rose in a crescendo of terror, all screaming incomprehensibly inside his skull. And then, a moment of silent clarity.

– I am not falling. I am not slipping.

He looked downwards to the spotlights, the freshly-disturbed clouds of dust, the toy-like bulldozers clearing away a section of the rubble directly underneath. And then, uninvited, two images simultaneously popped into his consciousness, layering themselves over his sensorium:

– A younger boy with a familiar but foreign-sounding name standing on a platform looking down to a postage stamp sized swimming pool.

– Standing in the box-like cabin of a Skyvan, looking down on a landscape from 12,000 feet.

And then there was Corder’s arm reaching out (while his other hand held on firmly to the fixed section of railing) grabbing the gate and swinging it back, then hooking under Tucker’s shoulders and lifting him so he was sitting on the deck’s grating.

And becoming aware that his heart was going about a million beats a minute.

“I say Trent,” came Corder’s voice, rattled for the first time in Tucker’s memory. “Don’t go doing anything rash, eh? For a minute there you gave me a bit of a fright, you know.” And then after a few moments, “You know, you might accuse me of wanting your soul, but I can assure you I most certainly don’t want it separated from your body.”

Since the wall that separated the balcony from the dining area was one of the few not made of glass, no one inside had any idea what had just taken place. They might have heard (or felt) the impact when he hit the railing, but no one had opened the door. It took a little while for Tucker’s nerves and heart rate to return to normal. Neither man spoke, they just stood there, leaning – gingerly, against the railing and breathing a little harder than normal. Tucker found that the rage was gone, but so was the core of clarity he had glimpsed while suspended from the gate.

Now there was just a void.

The two men looked at each other. Corder suggested, “Shall we?”

Inside, Tucker faced down the reactions and wisecracks of pretty much everyone present. The pallor of his face was a dead giveaway and they all concluded he had simply gone outside to be sick. He didn’t see any reason to elaborate on what had happened, and Corder didn’t mention it either. He had a few sips of water to freshen his mouth and endured it all with an adequate attempt at good grace.

After the lexicon of vomit-related witticisms had been exhausted, it was time for dessert. Tucker didn’t think he would be interested, but when it was served he found his curiosity, if not his appetite, recovering.

It was announced as Panforte Extraordinaire, and at first he was tempted to scoff at the mixture of Italian and French in its name. But after trying a bite he was hard pressed to think of a better way of describing it. It was beyond rich, and according to Itamae-san, the fruit – apricots, pears, quince and figs, had been marinated in Jamaican rum for almost two years. There were also nuts – predominantly pecans, pistachios and macadamias, and these had spent an equivalent time in honey. And just in case there was any lingering doubt as to the chef’s fanatical pursuit of decadence, the whole thing was dusted with flecks of gold leaf.

To accompany the dish, Itamae-san also served each guest with an old-fashioned atomizer – the sort with a rubber tube and bulb. It was filled with a fine Muscatel port, and the idea was to spray a fine mist into the mouth between each bite. Tucker found that if he breathed in as he did this the aroma just engulfed him.

By the time he had reached the end of the small, dense, rich Panforte he felt his mood considerably improved. Not nearly enough to make up for the so-called *centerpiece*, or his close call on the balcony, but a lot better than before. A selection of spirits and liqueurs rounded out the meal. Tucker chose a single malt scotch and handled the small talk on autopilot.

Eventually Corder made a phone call to the foreman of the clearing up crew below. The conversation consisted mainly of Corder nodding, which in an audio-only call would obviously have been lost on the other party.

When he had finished, Corder said, “Gentlemen, in a minute we shall be descending to ground level. Those of you who wish to return to your hotels or homes, simply mention this to your chauffeur. The rest will be conveyed to the premises of one Madame de Pilliaud for a spot of traditional post-Folly revelry. Each of you will shortly receive a text message from her, and if you have any *preferences* you would like her to know of in advance, you are invited to respond to that message and inform her. Now I must stress that while Madame de Pilliaud does not operate strictly within the auspices of the law, she does have a well-defined set of boundaries, and asks that you bear this in mind.” Corder glanced around the room, his eyes resting on Monsignor Francesconi for slightly longer than the others. “Remember that we are not in some third-world or former Eastern Bloc country.”

Tucker had no intention of joining in any ‘post-Folly revelry’. He felt drained and wanted to get home and put some distance between himself and the rest of the diners.

Miranda had barely touched her toast, but was already on her second cup of uninspiring coffee from the faux-Italian machine. Delton's appetite was unaffected. It felt unusual to be still in the house on a weekday, and Miranda couldn't think what she should say.

"So this is the last breakfast for just the two of us," she tried.

"Yeah, Hon, it's going to be a different scene tomorrow."

She took another mouse-like nibble, walked over to where the remote was sitting and turned on the TV. The morning show was all over the Skye Arbeiter thing, cycling between replay footage of her plane touching down the previous day, live feed from a crew outside her unimpressive home in Beaumanoir, and another in the car park of the Chandos International African Sunbeam Centre in town (formerly E. J. McKluskie House). Apparently Ms Arbeiter was scheduled to visit her (former?) employers that very morning. The live crosses were all pretty content-free, and the only clue that there might be news involved was the scrolling text at the bottom of the picture, 'African Sunbeam AIDS infection conspiracy: insider accuses Chandos International'. There was also a two-sentence statement released by Josh Russel and Jessica Jorgensen, but it was text only, flashed up on screen superimposed over some stock footage of the couple.

"So," observed Miranda, "they've got a camera crew at the African Sunbeam Centre. Do you think we'll get on TV?"

"Well that'd be a change, eh?" said Delton with his typical deadpan delivery.

Miranda rolled her eyes. "Delt."

The child seat was installed in the back of the Dreadnought, along with a collection of soft toys and a choice of colorfully-packaged drinks and snacks. Miranda exited the Glenview gated community and turned towards Eastern Avenue. There she joined the tail end of the morning rush, heading into town.

A few minutes into the journey they passed *the place*, that shallow, sloping bend that she had been driving on, travelling in the opposite direction, the morning of the ski bus incident. A sudden thought struck her.

– I wonder, when I have a child, will that change how I think about the accident?

– Should it?

Miranda frowned, considering the question, then thought back to the interview process she and Delton had gone through, two months earlier.

The job description on Nadelle Kingston's nametag, underneath her name, was Adoption Consultant. In the first consultation with Miranda and Delton she spent about half of her time stressing the seriousness of the commitment they were considering, and how it was not a decision they should be taking lightly. For the rest of the time she operated in salesperson mode, enthusing about the bundled services Chandos International were offering as part of Project African Sunbeam, and how rewarding they were going to find it. The transitions between these two personas were random and abrupt, which Miranda found a little disconcerting.

Their second meeting, a week later, was focused a lot more on paperwork. That, and finances. There were a lot of questions: would they prefer a boy or a girl, what age range would they be willing to accept. But there was one key question that tickled Miranda's sense of the bizarre. Ms Kingston actually used different words, but the way it presented itself to Miranda was:

“With AIDS or without?”

– As in, would you like fries with that?

Then Nadelle rotated her laptop and offered them a choice of three children. Miranda and Delton watched each of the videos through twice. Nadelle insisted they take some time to discuss it and let her know their choice at least one day later, but Miranda knew who she wanted right away.

At six, Margrit was at the high end of their preferred age range. But more importantly, Miranda felt she had a hard-bitten look in her eyes that said, ‘I know what you can do for me, and I’m going to take it.’

Stefan was younger and looked more the part, with bright, engaging eyes and a shy smile. No hidden agenda there. But he was a boy, and it just wouldn’t be the same.

Which left Esther. Right age, right sex, right look. She was cute, no doubt about that. Adorable even. But there was something more. Undefined potential maybe. This little girl could grow up to be... anyone. You couldn’t tell. All those choices, all those chances. Miranda wanted to be a part of that.

Not that she could explain any of this to Delton.

Delton had a mild preference for the boy. Easy to understand why – he’d just lost his father and probably wanted to get a father-son thing happening again. But he was pretty easy to talk around.

Esther it was then.

Sure enough, a small media contingent had congregated around the entrance to the African Sunbeam Centre. A couple of cameras, a couple of on-the-spot reporters, looking uncomfortable and plastic in the hot morning sun under their thicker-than-normal makeup. Miranda knew they were there for poor old Skye, covering the storm the silly girl had gotten herself involved in. But there didn’t seem to be anything happening and they all looked as if they wished they were somewhere else. As she and Delton approached one of the operators pointed a camera at them and a reporter got into position holding an oversized microphone.

– And I didn’t even have to call Rikki Morgenstern to arrange anything.

Miranda took Delton’s hand, stopped and looked at the reporter expectantly. It wasn’t anyone she recognized from her previous broadcast experiences. No one said anything. Miranda wondered why. Were they trying to provoke her?

She mustered an air of pained dignity and said, “Good morning. This is a delicate and sensitive time for us and we would ask that you respect our family’s privacy.” It was of course the last thing she wanted, but it seemed the right thing to say.

The reporter looked nonplussed. “Are you one of her relatives?” she asked.

Now it was Miranda’s turn to be puzzled. “Whose relatives?”

“Skye – Skye Arbeiter,” said the reporter. “You said respect your family’s privacy – are you a sister? Cousin?”

Sensing an unfolding angle of the story, the other reporter and camera operator turned around and got into position. “Can the family comment on Ms Arbeiter’s allegations against Chandos International?”

– They don’t *recognize* me?

Delton gave a subtle cryptic smile. “Good morning. Neither my wife nor I are in any way related to Skye Arbeiter, and I don’t think we have any comments to make about this current controversy.” He turned to Miranda. “Do we dear?” Then back to the cameras, “Good day.”

Nadelle Kingston was waiting for them inside, with a stack of paperwork for them to get through. There wasn’t very much filling in to do, thanks to Nadelle’s efficiency and Chandos International’s streamlined procedures. But a lot of signatures were required. She also took some time to describe (again) the various ongoing services Chandos International and their affiliated organizations had on offer. There were childcare centers, investment and savings schemes, subscriptions to kids’ TV networks, private schools and memberships in children’s fashion brand shopping clubs.

“You are of course under no obligation to take advantage of these opportunities,” said Nadelle, “but we at Chandos International have taken a lot of care to put together a selection of very attractive deals, specially tailored to the sort of people who would become part of Project African Sunbeam.”

Finally it was time to meet Esther. Nadelle made a short phone call then led Miranda and Delton down the corridor to one of the play centers.

“There is a video camera set up in the meeting room,” she explained. “Would you like to have this moment recorded? There is no extra charge, we will simply email it to you within twenty-four hours.”

“Sure, why not,” said Miranda. It might come in handy sometime.

The carer was sitting in a chair in a room full of toys. Her arm was around a tiny dark-skinned girl standing beside her, leaning her head against the woman. She looked apprehensive and shy but not withdrawn. Miranda thought there was even a hint of curiosity in her eyes. She and Delton stood taking in the sight.

With as warm a smile as she could assume she said, “Hi, you must be Esther,” and walked forward.

– Damn. I was supposed to bring one of those soft toys with me.

The little girl said nothing.

“She does speak English, doesn’t she?” asked Miranda.

“A little,” said Nadelle, “her family spoke Yoruba, but she learned quite a lot in the processing centre, and at this age you’ll find they pick it up very quickly. Especially if they spend time at a childcare centre.”

The carer took her arm from around Esther’s shoulder as Miranda approached, holding out her hand and trying to look as unthreatening as possible. For a moment nothing happened, and then the little girl timidly held out her own hand.

Something unexpected galvanized inside Miranda. She hadn’t seen it coming and didn’t even know exactly what it was – which was unusual for her. But she was pretty sure it was wonderful. She stooped and tried to put her arms behind Esther’s back, but the heights were all wrong and she didn’t want to get down on the floor.

Delton pointed to the chairs lined up against the wall. “Why don’t we sit down,” he suggested, “then you can sit her on your lap?”

That worked a lot better. Esther didn’t flinch as Miranda lifted her up.

“My name is Miranda,” she said with deliberate intonation, “and this is Delton. Would you like to come and live at our house? It’s very nice, and has lots of toys.”

Esther just looked at her expectantly, with those gorgeous, wide, dark brown eyes.

“We’re going to be just the perfect family,” continued Miranda, “and we’ll have ever so much fun.”

The little girl leaned her head against Miranda’s breast.

That thing happened again. There were almost tears in her eyes. Delton looked across with some sort of Mona Lisa smile.

A few minutes later, after thanking Nadelle and the carer, the new family began walking back along the corridor to the foyer. Coming towards them were three figures, walking uneasily. As they got closer Miranda recognized the figure in the middle. It was Skye Arbeiter, thinner and more tanned, but visibly shaken and vulnerable. She must have just come in through the front door. Past the two reporters and their cameras.

Miranda felt Esther’s hand go limp in hers, then let go altogether. Without a word the little girl ran over and threw her arms around Skye’s legs. Skye stopped and squatted so she could look Esther face to face. Her two companions looked on unamused.

“Why, let me see... it’s Esther, isn’t it?” said Skye. “How are you, sweetheart?”

She then looked up at Miranda, and recognition dawned on her face, hinting at a symphony of thoughts.

“Hello Skye,” said Miranda.

“Ah. Miranda, it’s nice to see you again.” She turned to Delton and added hesitantly, “And you are her husband?”

“Yes, Delton,” he said, holding out his hand. “Delton Wardell.”

Skye shook it. “Pleased to meet you.” Then to both of them, “Is Esther... with you? I mean, you’re adopting her?” She asked the question as if she were surprised.

“Oh yes,” said Miranda, back on familiar territory, “I know it’s a big decision, but Delton and I have talked about it, and we both feel it’s the right one. We can make a difference in the life of one child, and that’s very important to us. Plus,” she added, drifting out of character momentarily, “just look at her. Isn’t she gorgeous?”

Miranda suddenly recalled how she had first heard about Project African Sunbeam, the last time she and Skye had spoken, at the hip but slightly annoyingly Cartridge. It hadn’t been publicly announced, and Skye had blurted it all out, forgetting about the non-disclosure agreement she had signed. Was that why she appeared surprised to see they had signed up?

“She certainly is a very sweet little girl,” said Skye. Then in a winding-thing-up voice, “You take good care of her.”

“Yes.” Miranda stole a glance at Skye’s two... colleagues? ex-colleagues? In as sympathetic a voice as she could manage she said, “And all the best with this... business.”

Skye nodded. “Thanks.”

After an awkward moment of silence, Miranda said, “Well, we must get going.” She held out her hand. “Come on, Esther.”

Esther clearly did not want to leave Skye’s side, but complied without incident. Skye caressed the girl’s cheek. “Bye-bye, sweetheart.” Then to Miranda and Delton, “Bye.”

“Bye.”

Delton took over driving duties on the way home while Miranda sat in the back, next to Esther’s booster seat. The array of toys was well received, but the snacks didn’t generate any interest. Miranda amused her for a while, playing little games with

the toys, making them come to life and say things. For an instant she quite forgot herself, lost in the moment, the little girl in her connecting with the one sitting beside her. She even forgot why she had decided to adopt a CIAO – all that business about how all the celebrities were doing it, the media coverage, the social cachet. She was focused purely on the shy, curious little person she was playing with.

But then she remembered.

- Get a grip, this is really going to change our lives. I will be a mother.
- It's supposed to give a whole new level of meaning to one's life, isn't it?
- But not only that, I'll be the mother of a CIAO.

And she started to think of all things she would be able to say to the other mothers at the childcare centre, or the supermarket. And not forgetting 'Mama' Cass and the rest of the girls in the temp pool, with their easy camaraderie and relaxed way of talking to each other. Some of them were mothers too, weren't they? Knowing that she was part of Project African Sunbeam, that she had her very own CIAO, they would look at her differently, wouldn't they?

This was definitely going to change things.

She would be able to really be someone.

Skye sat passively in the makeup chair, bombarded with light and being plastered with foundation and anti-shine powder. A production assistant poked his head in and said “Ten minutes.” She closed her eyes and tried to imagine what it must have been like for Don Quixote, attacking a windmill with nothing more than a jousting lance and a skinny horse. Except of course that was all fiction and this was real life. The Chandos International windmill had flung her halfway across the world and was now in the process of grinding her up and spitting her out. With a dose of ‘you’ll never work in this town again’, except this was Chandos *International*, and for them ‘this town’ was pretty much the world. All those dreams of making a difference for people who really needed it. The unacknowledged excitement of working in an exotic country. All gone, and not likely to come back.

She thought back, how long – seven, eight months was it? When she had kicked Jason out, and nursing a dirty great shiner sent a bunch of emails to former clients, in case any of them could offer her a job.

– www.backtosquareone.com

Julia Morgan had been wonderful. Skye couldn’t imagine what it would have been like without her support. But it was still tough, still depressing and still impossible to see how any sort of worthwhile future could come from how things were right now.

The behavior of Chandos International during the previous week had done nothing to convince her she was mistaken. When he returned to the compound, Dawiid Bankele had been belligerent, and she could get nothing more from him than “It should not have happened this way. You were not supposed to be here.” If anything, Claude Auteil had been worse, evasive and hinting at commercial secrets.

And when, the following day, the story broke worldwide, an edict came from the very top that she was to be put on the next plane out of the Zuniga Republic. The wiry Lucas Bembo, so close to sneering it made no difference, had arrived at her door with Garvey Kalimbe and another of the security team. The first thing they did was take away her phone. Then she was instructed to pack her suitcase while they watched her every move.

Maria Ajayi had braved the disapproval of her superiors and was waiting next to the battered four wheel drive in the car park. Scores of children were watching from the dormitory windows, but none were allowed outside. Maria embraced her and said farewell, shot a defiant look at Lucas and hurried inside.

There were no planes leaving until late in the evening, so Skye was driven to a hotel in Lawrencetown. There she was placed in the care of three security guards, each sporting far more elaborate military-style decorations. One of them later told her they worked for the president. They were courteous and well spoken and projected cool efficiency and readiness. Her room, when she reached it was luxurious, at least compared to the staff dormitory that had been her home for the past three months.

She spent the rest of the day watching CNN, there was nothing else to do. About five stories into the cycling bulletin there was a two-sentence mention of the accusations she had made. And seven hours later she was driven to Lawrencetown International Airport, whisked through the formalities with head-of-state speed and

escorted onto a plane. One of the guards remained on board until just before the doors were sealed.

Back home it was a case of stepping off the plane into the media circus all over again – déjà vu flashbacks to just after the ski trip tragedy. Someone had tipped them off about her flight and there was a gaggle of media people ambushing her when she came out of passport control at the airport. The three flights had taken more than twenty-four hours and she had barely slept during any of them, so the last thing she felt like doing was giving any on-the-spot interviews. It felt like a fever, with everything happening at once, and none of it making sense. By some tiny stroke of good fortune Julia Morgan had learned when she would be returning and was also there waiting for her. Like a guardian angel, she steered Skye through the maze, fending off the questions that were firing from all directions.

“Ms Arbeiter will not be making any statements or responding to any questions at this time,” she stated levelly, about ten or so times.

The next morning there was a camera crew outside her house, and her telephone and inbox started running hot. There was what amounted to a summons from some high-level official in Chandos International to a meeting later that morning, and a dozen or so invitations from news, current affairs and infotainment shows.

She managed to escape down her own driveway without running over the camera crew, but there were another two laying in wait at E. J. McKluskie House (which now seemed to be called the African Sunbeam Centre). She wondered if someone had tipped them off or whether they’d deduced her movements all by themselves.

And then, bizarrely, on the way to the meeting, seeing Miranda Tonkin and her husband with little Esther, one of the orphans she had helped look after a mere three weeks earlier. Miranda of all people. There was so much flak flying around in her brain it was hard to know *what* to make of that.

Then the meeting. It was basically a non-event. Two executives were there, they seemed quite senior but she didn’t know whether they were above Gunther or below him. Skye was informed that she was no longer an employee of Chandos International, that legal action was being considered against her, and warning her to think very carefully before making any more public statements. She had prepared a few scribbled notes and began to explain what she had seen happen in Ilé Ireti, but they cut her short. There was no discussion, they didn’t try to deny anything, or put their own side of the story.

To her surprise, Grant Glaser gave her a good opportunity to tell the story. They even cued in clips from the footage she had taken with her phone at appropriate places, plus some of the earlier pieces to camera she had recorded before the trouble. There was a gentle question here and there to clarify a thing or two, but nothing aggressive or skeptical. Her story, along with her interpretation, was being accepted at face value, and this validation gave Skye a flicker of optimism about how things might turn out. Chandos International would not be able to ‘ride this one out’, or stonewall. It was too big. The public would demand answers.

These stirrings of confidence lasted right up until Grant Glaser threw to a break with the words, “We’ll be right back after these messages with Chandos International’s response to these sensational allegations.”

Before Skye got a chance to voice curiosity, the familiar face of Gunther Huygens appeared from one of the side doors and a production assistant escorted him to a new seat someone had placed right next to hers. She felt herself tense up inside. Gunther acknowledged her with a faint, cool smile and a nod, then turned to the hosts. Grant Glaser leaned forward and the two exchanged a few quiet words which Skye did not overhear.

Skye wondered why no one had mentioned that her ex-boss would be appearing with her. The word ‘ambush’ popped into her mind, but there was nothing to be done about it. She would just have to wing it. With caution.

As soon as the camera light was back on, Grant Glaser said, “We have with us this morning Gunther Huygens, regional director of Chandos International. Gunther, thanks for your time. Now first up I need to ask you, is Chandos International, or anyone acting for them, infecting children with HIV as part of Project African Sunbeam?”

“Thank you,” began Gunther with calm assurance, “and no, I can categorically say that we are doing no such thing. It would be unthinkable, and besides it makes absolutely no sense.”

His accent was much softer than Skye remembered.

“But surely, these are serious allegations,” pressed Grant.

“Yes,” agreed Gunther, “and Chandos International is taking them very seriously indeed.”

“So how do you explain the events at the Project African Sunbeam Centre in the Zuniga Republic last week? Events that have been captured on video.”

“The difficulty we find ourselves in,” said Gunther, “is that to clear ourselves of these accusations, we have to disclose something that we were not planning to make public for several months. But as I have already stated, we are taking this situation very seriously, so disclose it we shall. Chandos International, with the sanction of the government of the Zuniga Republic, was cooperating in the trial of an experimental AIDS vaccine.”

Grant Glaser put on his thinking-it-over face and nodded. “An AIDS vaccine trial, OK. But why the secrecy? From what Skye has reported, this was a very clandestine operation, and when she saw what was happening, your colleagues quite frankly, behaved like people with something to hide.”

“As I said, we did not plan to announce this for quite some time. One of our partner companies had recently acquired this research and wanted to develop it further. Then we discovered that a Belgian team was working along very similar lines, and we wanted to get our results published first. So we had hoped to keep our activities under the radar for as long as possible.” Here, for the benefit of the camera, he gave Skye a very pointed look.

“But aren’t you already trialing an AIDS treatment as part of Project African Sunbeam?” asked Grant. “Aren’t you offering a new type of treatment free to those children who are HIV-positive?”

“Indeed we are,” said Gunther, “but firstly, that treatment, if successful, is a cure rather than a preventative measure. And secondly, it is very expensive and therefore only likely to benefit rich, western countries. This new vaccine is very different. It is based on strands of RNA from the virus itself. Once the procedures are stabilized, we will be able to produce it in vast quantities, very cheaply. If successful, it will protect people from HIV – prevent them from developing AIDS. Think of all the lives we could save, all the misery we could eliminate. A treatment like this is something we could provide for a very low cost to the developing world.”

Grant Glaser glanced down at this laptop. “OK, but how do we know you’re telling the truth here? I’m not an expert here, but to my mind you’d have to do a blood test on all of those children to prove that they haven’t been infected.”

Gunther Huygens sighed, a little too perfectly to be real. “You are correct, Grant, but it is not as simple as one might hope. Firstly, if you mistrust our records and test every child in the compound, you will find that some of them are HIV-positive. They were HIV-positive when they arrived at our gate. Fortunately, the laboratory we use in Lawrencetown has a policy of keeping blood samples for a period of time after analysis.”

“So we concentrate on those that didn’t have HIV when they arrived,” said Grant.

“Yes, but then we come to the more serious problem. There are two common tests for HIV. The first is called ‘ELISA’ and it tests for antibodies to HIV – which are produced by the immune system. But you have to wait for about two months after infection for it to work. The second uses a technique called ‘PCR’, or polymerase chain reaction. It detects viral RNA, and is more sensitive, so you don’t have to wait so long. But consider someone who has been given a vaccine that is made from viral RNA. The purpose of a vaccine is to provoke an immune response, causing the body to create antibodies. The ELISA test will detect these antibodies, and the PCR test will detect viral RNA!”

“So you’re saying both these tests will return positive even if there’s no HIV infection?”

“Yes,” said Gunther. “Fortunately, there are other testing methods available, but very few laboratories are able to perform them. They are also more expensive, and once again you have to wait until the end of the incubation period.”

“So you’ll keep them at your... orphanage in Africa, under observation? Then test them in two months’ time?”

“Yes, but not just us,” said Gunther. “Because of the sensitivity of the accusations leveled against us, we feel it is imperative for the process be as transparent as possible. We have contacted the WHO and asked them to provide personnel to administer the monitoring and testing rather than do it ourselves. They are known to be independent and impartial, so the results they publish will be accepted by people who might be suspicious if they came from us.”

“But just to confirm, you have identified these children, and have them under observation?” asked Grant.

Gunther nodded. “Every single child who was in the Ilé Ireti compound the day Ms Arbeiter made her accusations is being monitored by the WHO and will be tested every two weeks for the next two months. They will not be available for adoption until that process is complete.”

“Will this have any impact on your waiting list?”

“Undoubtedly,” said Gunther, “and the frustrating thing is that I can tell you now with complete confidence what the tests will show. That the three children who were HIV-positive when they arrived at the compound are still HIV-positive, and the rest are not. There is no doubt in my mind, I will stake my reputation on it.”

Grant Glaser looked down to his laptop again. “Skye had suggested the reason you were infecting these children was because of the number of parents wanting to adopt HIV-positive children. That, to put it bluntly, demand was exceeding supply. We’ve heard that the waiting list for HIV-positive was getting quite long already, over a month.” He leaned forward and affected a conspiratorial tone. “Now, hypothetically, if that waiting list were to... reduce dramatically in the next few weeks, wouldn’t you agree that some observers might suspect that Skye here was onto something?”

Gunther gave a resigned smile. “Once again Grant, we are forced to announce something a long time ahead of schedule. In the past few weeks we have been in negotiation with the government of the Zuniga Republic, and have reached an agreement whereby we are able to accept into our program not just orphans, but also HIV-positive children whose parents are also HIV-positive, and who agree to give up their children for adoption and treatment in this country. Your scenario is not hypothetical, the waiting list will grow very much shorter in the next few months. But not for the reasons that you have suggested.” He smiled a calm, confident smile.

Nodding thoughtfully Grant said, “So what you’re saying is, this whole thing is nothing more than a simple misunderstanding?”

“Absolutely,” said Gunther, “something that should have been cleared up with a simple phone call, rather than going public with these groundless accusations.”

“So Skye,” said Grant turning towards her, “what do you think now, having heard this explanation. Are you going to retract your accusations?”

Skye thought of how she had been treated back in Africa, by Dawiid Bankele and Claude Auteil. She thought of the way the two Chandos International executives had dismissed her attempts to discuss what she had seen. And then all this, while the cameras were rolling. Something stirred in the back of her mind.

– www.setup.com

But what could she say?

“Well obviously I can’t prove anything, other than what I saw. There’s only one of me, against this great big global organization. It might be that Mr Huygens’ has just explained everything that happened, but it doesn’t feel that way to me. To me, all this seems just a little bit too convenient. It all dovetails together perfectly and... well, I don’t know what to say.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t fit.”

“Gunther, your response?”

Gunther shrugged. “What is the point of arguing with this? The facts speak for themselves, but only if you are willing to listen.”

“Hmm,” mused Grant sympathetically. “I guess the other thing to ask is: what are the legal ramifications of this? Will Chandos International be taking any legal action? You’ve obviously had to spend a lot of money countering these charges.”

“Yes,” agreed Gunther, “money that could otherwise have been spent on humanitarian efforts.” He made a show of considering the question. “Nevertheless we feel that no good would be served by pursuing litigation against Ms Arbeiter. Her claims have been thoroughly discredited, nothing would be gained by forcing her into bankruptcy.”

From beside the main camera the production manager made a winding up gesture. Grant sat upright and resumed his cheerful businesslike persona.

“Well Skye, I guess that’s one lucky break, eh?” Then turning to the camera, “And speaking of breaks, we’ll take one right now, then Flynn Marsden with the inside word on how Jossica are dealing with this latest controversy.”

Tucker strode down the corridor towards Elias Corder's office with resolve in his face and determination in every step. Anthea McMahon tried to catch his eye and failed, then said "Tucker, I wouldn't," but he ignored her. He put his hand on the doorknob, thought briefly about knocking then opened it and walked inside.

He looked straight across at Corder, then registered that his boss was not alone.

And then things stopped making sense.

Sitting in the couch against one of the non-window walls, almost reclining, as if he owned the place, was Callum Buchanan. He was dressed in almost-business attire rather than his usual old-rocker getup, and his hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

– Sucker punch.

"Ah, Tucker me lad," he said that familiar voice, but the Scottish accent was considerably softer than Tucker remembered.

Corder looked at him with an expression Tucker had not seen before. "Trent, is it not usual for you to consult with Anthea, or failing that at least knock, before barging into this office?"

"I..." said Tucker, then shut his mouth in confusion.

"Ah, where's the problem?" said Buchanan. "We were just about to tell him anyway."

Corder thought this over. "Quite," he said, and his brash joviality returned. He looked at Tucker, still silent. "Well Trent, ask away."

Tucker tried to clear his mind. "Aren't you... no. Not a journalist, a freelance something-or-other, something to do with the League for Natural Justice. Trying to get inside information on Tolliver Holdings and FreshStyle?" He shrugged in bewilderment. "I don't understand."

And then like an optical illusion he suddenly saw it.

"Are you telling me all this was... a test? You were testing me?"

Buchanan clapped his hands slowly three times.

"Very good Trent," said Corder, "Callum is not an employee here, but from time to time I contract his services for special projects. He is one of the most capable operatives I know, and his talents extend far beyond impersonating journalists and amateur activists."

"And all this just to find out how loyal I was?"

"Oh, a little more than that, lad, I think," said Buchanan.

Corder pressed the tips of his fingers together. "I hope you'll forgive me Trent, but I needed to know what kind of person you really were."

"How do you mean?"

"I have a lot of projects on the go, Trent, more than you might imagine. Only a small proportion of Corder Synergy projects are, shall we say, public. Publicized. For some tasks, FreshStyle for instance, I need white hats, like Justine Vanderveld. But there are other tasks where to achieve my objectives I need black hats – people who are not only tolerant of a certain level of moral ambiguity, but... let's just say thrive on it. And I need to know the boundaries in which my people can comfortably and reliably operate."

Tucker thought back over the past few months. Not very much snowy white.

"So I guess that makes me black hat?"

Corder laughed. “No Trent, darkish grey maybe, but definitely not black. I don’t think it would be good to have you mixing with any of my black hats. Just quietly, some of them can be quite scary.”

It still didn’t make sense. “And the business about the League for Natural Justice?”

“Ah yes,” said Corder, “a useful cover isn’t it. The media just lap it up, so publicity’s never a problem, and they never quite do anything quite malevolent enough to galvanize the powers that be into taking them seriously.”

“Of course,” interjected Buchanan, “it also helps that some of those very same powers that be are not entirely ignorant of the true nature of things.”

Tucker’s mind spun away of its own volition, going over everything that had happened since Chiron had died, evaluating each fragment in this new light. It was like taking apart a jigsaw puzzle and reassembling it into an entirely new picture.

“Well Trent,” said Corder, “now that we’ve got that out of the way, perhaps you can share with me the reason you came barreling in without calling ahead or organizing anything with Anthea. Must have been terribly important. What did you come here to say?”

– What? Oh, yes.

Tucker glanced at Buchanan. “Oh, it can wait. I’ll ah, make an appointment.”

“Nonsense,” said Corder, “I have very few secrets from Callum here, and you’ll certainly not know anything about them, so go on, spit it out.”

“OK. Last night I was organizing a few things with my bank accounts, and I noticed a large deposit that I wasn’t expecting. The message against it said ‘Chusei Corporation – dividend’”.

Corder was unfazed. “Yes, and?”

“Well,” said Tucker taken aback, “I guess... I thought you said you hadn’t, I mean, weren’t going to activate those contracts.”

“I don’t remember saying I wasn’t going to activate them Trent, though I may have expressed a certain indecision. But things became clear two days before the Folly. Do you recall our little chat? It concerned our good friend Callum here.”

“Oh yes, that,” said Tucker. He tried to remember what had been said.

“If memory serves me right, Trent, you assured me that your loyalty was not under question, irrespective of whether I activated the Chusei contract you had signed. I took that at face value, Trent. Those Chusei contracts work both ways you know, they don’t just punish disloyalty, they reward loyalty – and richly. I felt you deserved that reward. You don’t think I made the wrong call, do you?”

“Well, no, but it was a bit of a shock. Well, a surprise anyway.”

“OK then, please forgive me for acting without informing you.” This was said without the slightest hint of contrition. Pantomime condescension maybe.

“Now Trent,” Corder continued, “I’m glad we’ve been able to clear all that up, but Buchanan and I were in the middle of discussing something... well let’s just say a little bit black hat, and leave it at that.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Tucker backing towards the door, “OK, thanks, I’ll be off.”

“Cheerio,” said Buchanan.

Corder held up a finger. “Good, but I do want to talk to you later, Trent. Can you pop by this afternoon? Say three?”

“Sure. Shall I let Anthea know?”

“Don’t push it, Trent.” But there was that twinkle in his eye.

Tucker sat on one end of the same couch Buchanan had been lounging in, looking out towards the river. He could see the mass of scaffolding, like an angular tangle of vines, growing all over what remained of the old River Port building. Elias Corder reclined on the other end, with a Lilliputian netbook on his lap. But even relaxing he projected more energy than most men could in full flight.

“You remember the other night Trent, up on the balcony over there,” and he pointed to the gantry crane, straddling the building site like some sort of War of the Worlds invasion machine.

“I guess I came across as pretty green,” said Tucker.

“Oh never mind that. You said, as I recall, that you felt like Dr Faustus, which by implication would mean that I was Mephistopheles. Do you really see me as the Prince of Darkness, Trent?”

“Well, no, I mean, I was...”

“Because I never really saw myself as the Devil,” mused Corder. The silence grew.

– Almost as if... no.

Almost like someone deciding whether to confide in someone or not.

“I’ve always seen myself as more akin to a trickster spirit,” he said at last, softly.

Tucker puzzled over this. “Trickster spirit?”

“Sure,” said Corder, hitting his regular stride again, “all the pagan mythologies feature a trickster, playing his games, taunting those in power, pulling off outrageous stunts and surviving on his wits. Take your pick – the ancient Greeks had Hermes, the Norse had Loki. In Merry Olde England it was the fairy Puck, while over the channel the French had their Reynard the Fox. Our Native American friends had Kokopelli, and way down South it was ol’ Br’er Rabbit.”

“You’ve obviously given this considerable thought, Mr Corder,” deadpanned Tucker playfully.

“Yes, yes, but do you know who the trickster spirit of this age is, Trent?”

“No,” said Tucker, “I think it is fairly safe to assume that I do not.”

“Mister Mxyzptlk.”

“Mister Mxyz... who?”

“Yes, from the wonderful world of DC Comics. Mister Mxyzptlk is a trickster imp from the fifth dimension who delights in taunting Superman. Dangerous without actually being malign, causing all sorts of mayhem. The story goes that if you learn his true name and trick him into saying it backwards, he will disappear.”

Tucker pondered on this for a moment, then said, “Repeat after me, Saile Redroc?”

Corder considered that for a moment then laughed. “Very funny Trent, but in this case I’m deadly serious.”

“How do you mean?” asked Tucker.

Corder drew a deep breath. “This country is fucked, in case you haven’t noticed. The whole world is fucked. And nobody cares – they’re busy burying their heads in the sand. Half of the population get their news and current affairs from a stand-up comedian, the other half wait for the mini-series to come out. We’ve got universities sucking in armies of vacant-eyed proto-consumers and teaching them things my father was taught in junior high.”

He spun the tiny laptop around so Tucker could see the screen. It was a news site, with one of the big networks’ logo across the top, above a flashy animated banner ad.

“Look at this,” Corder said, “they call it news. Item one, some kid has achieved level 23 of... Mutant Quest, whatever that is. Item two, one of our local high school headmasters has just been removed from duties for allowing a Muslim to give a presentation on cultural diversity and religious tolerance.”

Tucker had never seen Corder worked up like this. Not over *issues*. Corder must have noticed his reaction.

“Yes, I know Trent, smile and nod. No sudden movements, eh?”

Tucker laughed. “Shall I edge toward the door?”

“But I brought it up for a reason.”

“Uh huh?”

“Yes, there is a little project that I’ve been mulling over for a while, and I’d like you to head it up.”

“OK, what is it?” asked Tucker.

“You remember that viral RNA vaccine research Wardell BP acquired a few months back that they’ve been sitting on?”

“Well of course,” said Tucker, “we got Chandos International to play charades with it in Africa. It didn’t have any effect on infection rates.”

“No, but they learned a lot about non-microbial targets – binding to them and provoking immune responses.”

Tucker thought back to the meeting, everyone together in Conference Room A.

“It was for treating genetic disorders, wasn’t it? Interfering with transcription factors?”

“That was one of the directions they were pursuing,” said Corder. “The other was the mechanics of addiction. The chemical pathways and such.”

“Yes, I remember now,” Tucker said slowly, “something about helping junkies kick heroin.”

“Heroin would certainly be one application,” agreed Corder, “but what they’ve actually been focusing on is tobacco.”

That got Tucker’s attention.

“Do you know why tobacco is so addictive, Trent? It actually modifies the brain structure – physically. It literally rewires your brain and transforms you into an addict. And transcription factors, among other things, is how it does that. The Wardell BP team have identified some of them, and found a molecule that could bind to them, so that the immune system will attack them.”

The biochemistry was still as baffling to Tucker as ever.

“What, a vaccine against smoking?” he asked. “What does it do, make smoking less pleasurable? Make people feel sick when they smoke?”

“No, it just prevents them from getting hooked. And there’s strong evidence, though there’s more work to be done, that if they are hooked, it can get them unhooked. It’ll be like you and your cigars, Trent – they’ll be able to enjoy a cigarette when they want to, but they won’t have any cravings.”

“And if they choose to give it up?” asked Tucker.

“Well obviously it won’t change any psychological factors, but they won’t be fighting against the physiological mechanisms of addiction.”

Tucker gave a half-smile. “So it’ll make real the line – up ‘til now false – that Mr Reinhardt and his pals have been pushing all these years. The reason we got them to get behind FreshStyle. Free choice. People will be able to maintain an occasional smoking habit – they can enjoy it when they choose, and stop when they choose.”

“Got it in one, Trent. And I want you to head up the operation. What do you say?”

“Well, sure, sounds good,” said Tucker. Then a sudden thought struck him. “Hang on a second. There’s a fair chance this’ll hurt Tolliver Holding’s bottom line. Won’t that trigger those Chuusei derivatives you so thoughtfully activated?”

Corder started laughing. For longer than necessary. “Trent, didn’t you even read that contract you signed?”

“Well, no,” said Tucker, thinking back. “As I recall you shoved it under my nose with a bunch of red and yellow ‘sign here’ stickers. What did I miss?”

“Well,” said Corder with exaggerated deliberation, “since Randolph insisted that you be saddled with the things, and it was all in relation to the FreshStyle project, I thought it only right that the contracts be indexed to FreshStyle. Which, as you no doubt recall, is an independent corporation, albeit owned by Tolliver Holdings. I very much doubt anything you do in this new venture will adversely affect its performance in any way, shape or form.”

Tucker started to get it. “Mr Corder, you’ve been planning this for quite some time, haven’t you?”

Corder clapped. “Give the boy a cigar.”

“There is one thing, though,” said Tucker.

“Well, out with it then.”

With a cross between a wince and smile, Tucker said, “You know, of all the things that have been messing with my mind, the one that gets me most is what we’ve done to our, ah, fall girl. You know, Skye Arbeiter. She didn’t deserve what we did to her. What I did to her.”

Corder shrugged. “Trent, didn’t I just put you in charge of this new operation? Well then, go make an executive decision – hire her. Rehabilitate her image. You’re going to need a few white hats for this job, and from where I’m standing she’s as white as they come. She performs well in front of a camera, has this natural way of getting folks to warm to her. And leaving aside our role, her current troubles stem in part from a tendency to go after big bad corporations. I think you’ll be able to offer her an awful lot of that.”

Tucker sat in a museum-exhibit grade chair in Cartridge and stared vacantly at the exquisitely themed décor. He wondered how long it had taken to assemble and arrange the contents of the shallow glass-fronted cabinets that covered all the walls. The constantly changing way they were lit was probably random, but it seemed to hint at order as if a pattern was just about to reveal itself.

The menu on the table was lying open in front of him. It too seemed almost comprehensible, but not quite. He glanced at his watch and took another sip of water from the overtly designed glass he had been served.

The waitress returned, fetish-du-jour uniform and all, ushering Tucker’s guest to the table. She was different to how she had looked on TV. Smaller, and her skin was not so perfect. There were faint freckles, fine lines, and a hint of shadows under her eyes. Tucker stood and offered his hand.

“Skye? I’m Tucker Trent. Thanks for coming.”

“Hi. Thanks for inviting me.”

They sat down, and the crisp waitress equipped Skye with her own oversized glass of water and then a menu. Skye glanced down at it and smiled.

“I wouldn’t bother if I were you,” Tucker said looking at his own. “I’m not even sure what language it’s written in. I haven’t been able to make sense of it.”

“Well,” said Skye matter-of-factly, “I can recommend... that one, and... that.” She pointed to a couple of items about halfway down. “That one’s kind of like a sandwich, and... that’s sort of a salad. But not really. Not bad though.”

That caught Tucker off guard. “You’ve been here before?”

“Yes, once.” Skye smiled, wistfully but with a hint of mischief. “And you’d never guess who with.”

“Oh, who?” asked Tucker.

Skye shook her head. “Oh, here’s me assuming you’ll know all about my life. A few months ago there was this thing, really sad, where a little girl I was minding died as a result of a freak accident.”

“The ski trip tragedy, yes, I remember it.”

“Oh, OK,” said Skye. “Well the woman whose SUV it was that fell on the girl, she was a lawyer, her name was Miranda Tonkin. She invited me out to lunch here, to sort of... chat things over, clear the air. Anyway, that’s how I know about this... sandwich-like-object. And salad-y-thing.”

That was an unexpected deviation from the script. Tucker’s equilibrium faltered momentarily.

– Oh, *that* Miranda Tonkin.

– Who I was fucking all night in the Vista Grande.

– Who was hurrying home the next morning when that ‘ski trip tragedy’ occurred.

Tucker cleared his mind, brought himself back to the present and looked across at Skye. She looked vulnerable, injured and wary. But also centered, and somehow, even shining. He found himself comparing her to Miranda. It dawned on him, and he was surprised to find himself thinking this, that there was no contest. Miranda was worldly-wise and jaded, a mirror to the part of Tucker’s own soul he was least proud of. He sensed, or imagined that he did, that Skye was the complete opposite, motivated by something other than cynicism and self-interest. Someone with innocence and ideals intact. Someone who still had a working sense of wonder.

He found himself wondering if their relationship might move beyond the professional. Then it occurred to him that in the five minutes since meeting her, he had not played a round of *Too What?* about her in his mind. Skye wasn’t *too* anything. OK, she probably was, but he didn’t actually care. Did that signify anything?

But it could never be a relationship based on full and complete honesty.

As in:

– Oh, by the way dear, the whole HIV-infection fiasco was a charade I devised.

– To cover up the *real* HIV-infection operation that is going on right now.

So *that* particular eventuality was not on the table. But maybe a few intriguing others were.

– The next few months could prove very interesting.

Tucker looked up from the menu. “OK, I trust you. Sandwich and side salad it is then.”