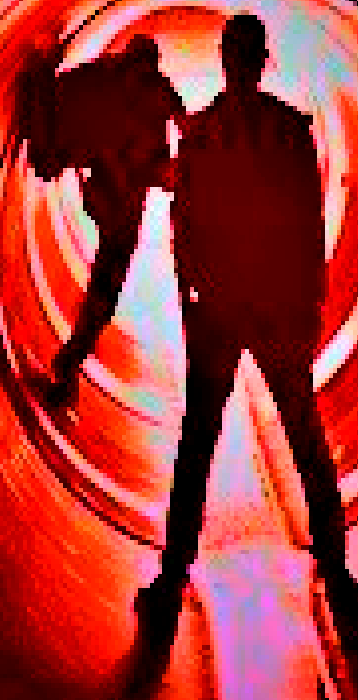


# *The Broken Chain*



Ferggus

# Chapter One

*A bullet ricochets off the wall next to the man. The concrete explodes, showering shards of concrete over a young boy standing next to him. Several embed in the child's face and, with blood pouring from the wounds, the boy screams in agony, calling out for his father to save him. The little girl at his feet, his sister, has a bullet lodged in her neck, and blood is pumping out of her, forming a red halo about her head. With bullets still flying all around them the man doesn't hesitate. He grabs a child under each arm and makes a dash for it, a wild zig zag across the street. What was once a leafy avenue beyond the limits of the bitter militia warfare has suddenly become the battlefield, dragging in innocents like the two children caught in the crossfire as they'd walked home from school. The man is attempting to make it to the relative safety of the international hotel where the rest of the journalists are holed up, but a sniper has other ideas....*

*High above, on the rooftop of one of the elegant apartment buildings that line the full length of the street, the sniper takes careful aim, lining up the cross hairs on the back of the man's head. Then, smiling grimly, he squeezes the trigger. If he hadn't stumbled at that exact moment the man would have been killed, his head exploding on the impact of the soft nosed bullet the sniper had very deliberately selected. As it is, for a moment the man lies sprawled on the road, an easy target for the myriad of gunman lined up either side of the divide. One of the children had slipped from his grip and lies several metres away. A separate target, out of the sphere of the journalist's protection. But again he doesn't think of his own safety, weaving back through the hail of bullets he rescues the little boy before continuing their desperate dash for safety. Miraculously none of them are hit, and the trio make it ..... The children recover, and two months later they are reunited, their circumstances on this occasion very different. The journalist and the two children this time are standing on a podium in front*

*of an audience of thousands, all cheering and clapping the man's selfless bravery, for which he is receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.....*

FLICK

*The river forms a perfect ox bow around the farmhouse. On the riverbank, twenty seven children and four dogs with their seven puppies are captured by the display of the orange scaled fish that, as if desperate to escape its confines, leap metres out of the water in shimmering arcs. Three of the puppies - the ones always getting themselves into the most mischief - can't help themselves. Yelping madly, in unison the trio jump into the water, bellyflop with a huge splash, and then, after floundering around for a few moments, disappear below the surface. Whilst most are rolling around with laughter, a few of the older boys dive in, fully clothed, and rescue the wayward dogs.*

*At the centre of the crowd of joyful children stands a grey haired man of indeterminate age. At his side is a woman, evidently his wife. She is much younger than him, perhaps in her mid forties, and she's still breathtakingly beautiful; in the prime of life. Behind them the timber and sandstone farmhouse is silhouetted by the rising sun, which reflects dazzlingly off the water. Completing this outline are lengths of white post and rail fencing, within which gallop a stallion and a mare with a young foal at her side. There is a sense of freedom, complete abandon, as the animals gallop across the fertile green pastures. The man says something to the woman and, whilst resting one hand on the head of the grandchild nearest to her, she clasps his arm a little tighter and whispers, "I love you, darling."*

FLICK

*Four naked girls are lying on a massive bed positioned on a raised platform in the centre of the penthouse suite of a high rise apartment. The views that stretch to the horizon are of a bustling, modern metropolis, but*

*there are no landmarks to distinguish it. It might be Beijing, Singapore, New York, Rio, or any one of a dozen others. With two of the beautiful girls on either arm, the man wears a Cheshire cat expression, replete with wall to wall grin. One of the girls peels off his arm and goes down on him. Whoa, what have we here dangling between her legs? Well, they say they give the best head, and the man certainly looks like he's enjoying every centimetre of his penis sliding down her throat. Not to be outdone, the other girls begin licking his body, not one millimetre missed. Two start at his feet, and the other has her tongue drilling through his ear. Just as they reach his groin the ladyboy gives several fast, hard tugs and the man ejaculates, covering each girl in wads of semen, which they start licking off each other and then .....*



Fuck it. Really? Really? Hehe - weeeell, maybe having the dick sucked by a ladyboy: after all you gotta try everything once. And if you like it, fuck it, go back for a lot more. But really, would any of these fantasy lives actually make me happy? Make it so it felt like there was some point to my existence continuing? Who knows, maybe I would have been content with the thrills and spills lifestyle of a freelance war correspondent. But, fuck it, almost anything would have to be better than the actual, real, one I'm pushing shit uphill through.

Sunday afternoon, a beautiful day outside, the best thing I can come up with is work. More fucking work. And worse still, it's grindstone, bill payer stuff, not something I'm going to be beaver away at through the night because I'm so into the story I've GOT to get it out. Coughing a lung up I stub out the half finished cigarette I lit as soon as I woke up. Immediately light up another. In the back of my head I can hear Jules nagging voice. Yeah I lied, I promised her I'd given up. The fuck I have, and why should I anyway? Lazily resentful of the world in general I drag myself off the bed, pad over to the fridge and pull a can. Then wander around the flat, hoping something will trigger some interest. It doesn't. Flop back on

the bed, wishing there was someone else in it, apart from the dog, fast asleep on his back, snoring like the old man used to.

Lying there, looking up at the off white ceiling, I think about what I would passionately love to be doing. Blank pages of an empty book turn slowly in my mind. This is where my life is at. *I don't really want to do anything, be anywhere - even be with anyone.* How the fuck did I get to this point, this bottom of the fucking barrel? You don't want to know, trust me. It's times like this I just wanna sink into the ground - no fuss, no fanfare. Yeah, suicide would make too much noise, I'm talking just merge. Why does it always have to be a twenty one gun fucking salute?

Well, there's nothing for it. Roll off the bed, and head into the spare bedroom. It resembles an office, with shelves wall to ceiling, filled with books I've read and re-read, and magazines which I tell everyone are for reference purposes. In fact they're either there just to fill up the shelves, or because I can't be arsed to throw them out. The aim is to make it look like I'm busy. The reality is - I'm never busy. I always have plenty of time, and nothing to fill it with. In a corner, by the window overlooking the park, is an old desk. The only thing on it is an aged laptop, with wires bristling from it like the centrepiece of Frankenstein's laboratory. Why does everyone need the greatest and latest? This baby does all I need and it'll last well into the next century with the amount of use it gets out of me. That said, I heard you can now get live sex on a webcam and mine certainly can't do that. I like that idea, for when you're so fucking lazy you can't be bothered even to get off your arse and go to a brothel.

Am I fooling anyone with this jaded nonchalance? Actually, there are occasions when I love my job. Getting stuck into a real juicy story doesn't look so bad right now. Of course, one that will make me rich, loved and famous, hehe. The hero David - using only the power of his mighty words - defeats the ugly giant Goliath. In my fantasies Goliath comes in many forms. But it's usually a multinational screwing everyone, but especially the poorest and most vulnerable. Which is only possible because they're usually numbered in the hundreds of millions and don't have a fucking clue about very much. Because they're fully occupied just fucking

surviving. They'll never get the chance to make more of themselves, and so will live out the same life their forebears led, and theirs before that....

You know, I have a mate.... I guess we've all got a mate like him, leading the life we want to lead. BUT DON'T. Robbo has been everywhere and seen and done everything. Most of the time it's undercover, splurging the scoop before anyone else has even heard the rumour. Where do I start? Fuck it, I could start almost anywhere. Let's see, India was a good one: all those foreign kids dying after taking party drugs. He was sent over there to dig out the real story. Like most of his assignments this one is very dangerous: autopsies of the victims showing the drugs were laced with rat poison. So we're not talking about a few teenagers partying a little too hard, this is straight out murder. Robbo goes in as a backpacker, big time stoner so no one takes him too seriously. Of course he's having a good time along the way, in and out of bed. Actually chicks were never a big deal for him, take it or leave it, which is maybe why there's always one after him. Women can be like that. Me, I must ooze desperation. I can never get enough fuck.

Anyway, the story starts in Delhi, and then he's making his way north up into the high country, where the trail gets hotter. Robbo's keeping on the fringes, hanging out with the right crowd, the types that make up the majority of the victims: Israelis just out of national service wanting to break out crazy. Along with everyone else he's buying the dangerous shit, but always palms it and takes the stuff he knows is clean. He's taken it all before, right up to heroin and opium, so he knows what to expect and makes sure to get himself into a safe situation when he's completely off it. Yeah, usually between a chick's legs, hehe.

They're in Lahdach now, on the Tibet border: even the yaks here look stoned. One night it goes off, mainline. These obviously Jewish guys, down to the long curls, leather straps on the arms and the black top hats, they gatecrash a party. They look totally out of place. Make no attempt to mingle, keeping to themselves, superior looking, huddled in a corner. Robbo's keeping a close eye on them, because the rumour is that it might be a right wing religious group, though everyone had assumed that meant Islamists.

He tells me how it went down after that, "I wasn't sure what I was going to do, mate, but it might be my only chance, so I had no choice, I had to follow them. So when they swing out of the party I hop on the old Bullet and follow them, lights off and well back. Before long we get to a nondescript house half way down a dead end road. It's dead quiet and almost pitch black, with no other houses in sight. Now, The Bullet is great for blending in with the crowd, but it makes a fucking racket, so once I've located their hideout I turn back around and leave it up at the start of the road and then walk the hundred or so metres down to the house. Almost immediately there's a big giveaway, and I'm wishing to fuck I'd seen it whilst I still had The Bullet. Out the back yard they've got a satellite dish. To most people it would look like it was for TV, but I've seen one of these before and there's no porn channels on this satellite service, mate. This is a MOSAD setup. This is a comms satellite. As soon as I realised it was MOSAD my only thought is to get the fuck out of there as fast as I can. If MOSAD wants to kill off its own fucking kids, maybe some kind of warning to lay off the drugs when they get back to Israel, that's fucking fine by me. So I've hightailed up the road and have almost got back to The Bullet when my heart skips several beats. There's two of them waiting for me, and you can sense straight away they'd know how to kill you. In several, very painful, ways. And wouldn't hesitate to do it. They want explanations, so I break into my story, living here in India, and need to make a little cash, not big time, just enough for living expenses. I heard they're the main dealers around here, maybe I could mule for them? Plausible enough under the circumstances, yeah? I don't know how much, if any, they believe, but next second my arms are pinned behind my back and my face is close enough to the exhaust of the old Bullet I can smell my hair singeing. "This is a warning, for you and anyone else".

He pushes my face hard against the red hot metal, and holds it there for a second. I let out the biggest girl's scream I can make and the two of them start pissing themselves laughing. He drops me then, and I'm lying there, face in the dirt. Stars are popping in front of my eyes and the pain is fucking unbelievable. MOSAD says, "You'd better be out of town by the

morning, and if we see you again you'll be eating your balls for breakfast. And then we'll kill you." Or something along those lines."

"Of course the face is hurting like fuck so I head straight for a river I remember passing on the way in. We're in the high mountains and the water comes straight off The Himalayas, so it's like putting your face into a bucket of ice. Which at that moment is just what I need. Pictures of my whole fucking face peeling off mate. It dulls the pain enough for me to make it to a hospital where they do a good fix up job, no questions asked. Of course, next day I'm out of there, heading for the beaches of Goa, but I was still curious so later I do a bit of research through the contacts I'd made. I get the whole story, but I'll never publish it. As I'd speculated, it's a MOSAD project – still going as far as I know - to put a lid on their kids' drug taking. Apparently it's starting to become an expensive social problem back home, and they're pinning it on their kids' trips to India."

That gives you a flavor of Robbo, right? We've known each other a long time and been through a fair bit together. We first met at a backpacker bar in Turbo, Colombia. I walk into the bar, off my head on cocaine, and all I see is naked bodies decked out in bits of green. That I got - it was Paddy's Day after all. But ten people, eight guys and two hot looking chicks, bollock naked? What the fuck? "Yeah, it took some convincing, but as soon as the girls were up for it, of course all the boys were in," he tells me later. As I'm standing at the bar still wondering what the fuck's going on Robbo shouts, "Get your cacks off and get the fuck up here or you're a fucking pussy." Yeah, good opening line, never met the fucker before in my life, right? One of the girls, an Irish lass, is especially hot, but like all of us we're high on coke, so fucking is the last thing on our minds. Talk, talk - and then more talk. Turbo, ha ha! Fuck they got that name right: the whole time we're full throttle, boozing and snorting.

One night we run out of coke and end up in a taxi, fifty bucks each in our pockets. We start off in the backpacker quarter, just up from the beach, close to the main street. But Turbo is a one horse town, so that isn't actually saying much. As we get further away from familiarity, the streets get darker and more deserted, and before long it's pitch black and no soul in sight. But we're high and don't give a fuck. The taxi driver stops outside

a shack, takes the money, and a few minutes later comes racing out with a large package - way much more than we'd expected. Fucking A we're thinking, sitting in the back giggling like kids. Suddenly there's a hard metallic tap on the window. A cop, banging on the glass with a huge gun - shiny silver, almost unreal, except you know it isn't. Very easy to imagine it putting a big fucking hole in your chest. And out the other side. He's got the police hat on, dark glasses, and looks the fucking business. And, did I mention, looking very pissed? We both freeze. Mind goes a complete blank. I'm shitting myself, and wanting badly to piss. Oh, no, that's after the taxi driver thoughtfully winds down the window and now the gun is inside the car, an inch from our faces. The cop yells something at us, then yanks open the door. We don't need a fucking Spanish lesson to know what he wants. It's then we see the cop car, parked on a corner a little way down the street where, if possible, it's even a little darker.

Leaning up against the bonnet is a similar looking dude. Dirty Harry motions us over to the cop car: I might have pissed myself by this point. Five minutes later we're both bollock naked, though for some reason they allow us to keep our trainers on. The whole while Dirty Harry is talking to us in a deep growl, occasionally turning around to laugh at something his partner says. The other cop, after testing the coke, is all smiles and thumbs up. It's at this point that Harry motions for us to go back to the taxi, and once there points for us to lie face down on the hood. It's totally silent and I'm thinking, I can still remember it as clear as day: there is absolutely nothing, nothing, they can't do to us right now. The gun clicks and I shit myself. I can hear behind me Harry laughing, then he throws Robbo's shirt at me, and says what I assume is *Clean yourself the fuck up*. Turning around, the cop car is cruising towards us, and Harry indicates we should get back in the taxi. We're both still bollock naked and, though I'd done my best, my hands were shaking so much I still have plenty of shit down the back of my legs, so within a minute the taxi stinks to fuck.

Cop car comes to a stop by the taxi. Driver winds down the window. Harry leans in, face close enough that you can smell the garlic on his breath. Cracks a huge smile, all his teeth showing. I remember the two front ones were pure gold. Then, in perfect English, he says, "Welcome to

Colombia!" and with that the two cops start to crack it. They say some more, again in perfect English, the cunts, but we're not listening and the taxi driver seems keen to get the fuck out of there as well. That was Columbia. I wanted to punch the cop, a nice clean one in the face, but at the same time I had to give it to them, they got us completely. Home ground advantage, hey? And that was Robbo. Yeah, funny. I got an email only a few days back, which is what made me think of him. Of all the ways he could have got himself killed, and he ends up slipping over in the shower and a few days later he has a brain haemorrhage. Dead at thirty five.

Robbo's death has been playing on my mind these last few weeks. Been making it extra difficult for me to get off my arse and do some work. Do anything for that matter. But, life must go on, right?

Sitting at my desk I turn on my trusty computer and start thinking who to call. Someone to get me out of this cesspit of self pity. Something to lift me out of my current debt troubles, which unfortunately is my usual financial state. Now I know I'm giving a good impression of being a complete loser, but in fact in my time I've had my successes in scooping a story. I was just out of college in Sydney when a rumor started circulating of a very high profile paedophile ring involving politicians, investment bankers, and the upper echelons of the legal profession. Yeah you might say, the usual suspects. Being not totally wet behind the ears I dropped hints with a few State politicians I'd heard might have the balls to stand up to these abusers of young - very young - children. Of course, it took a woman to pluck up the courage and agree to name names using parliamentary privilege. But neither of us realised quite how far out of our depths we'd swum. Even after one of the most senior judges in the country committed suicide, leaving a cryptic message which most took to be a confession. That's certainly how I ran with it.

We were still celebrating our coup, talking up all sorts of toppling of the powerful when the politician gets a call from her husband, insisting she stop the expose, immediately. Threats were being made concerning illegal sexual activity by her homosexual son. Warnings. How nasty things happen

inside; jailbait emphasised several times. Anything possible.... And no one will give a shit. Yeah, you could say, the usual modus operandi of the Elite when they're closing ranks on a cover up.

And when I got back to my place, of course it had been trashed. No one seen or heard anything, and Pig is even more uncooperative than usual. Six months later and the story resurfaces briefly, leading to the suicide of a flamboyant investment banker, and the mysterious death of the journalist who persisted with the story online, after the print media heavies had refused to have a bar of it. I have to say, it sometimes bothers me, that story. The first real one I ever wrote and still the most successful. Like it's gone all downhill from there. I learned a useful lesson though. Such is the monopoly of information and power in Australia. Which I suppose is why I usually head offshore when I'm playing Robin Hood. It's not much insurance, but it's all I got. Unlike the paid up investigative journalists who get round the clock protection if necessary, if you're freelance you're on your jack.

As I was saying, I am once again in the financial shit, which means more specifically that I've only got enough money to pay the rent and bills for maybe two more weeks before I'll be back out on the streets. Yeah, it's happened before. Right now there are no editors to help me out, banging down the door desperate for one of my stories. Not that that happens much these days, since every cunt thinks they're a fucking writer now. The papers don't give a fuck what shit goes in there, the more dumbfuck the better, so long as it sells. This is the era of reality TV after all - people don't want to have to think, right? So, in that context, very fast I need a story with a good gossip angle. Juicy enough they'll want to push it out without endless fucking meetings to decide.... Fuck, what do they talk about in those meetings? But gossip, yeah, that they do understand and they know it will sell. So, who do I call? That's not a hard decision. Dave, my best and oldest friend can always be relied upon for something. We go a long way back.

Dave was once the guru, an underground hero to hackers the world over. He has many claims to fame, in that closed community where it's all

about the middle finger raised in defiance against the boring adult world. Getting away with hacking into the President of India's website and editing his personal online diary was the highlight for me. A cause of minor uproar in the international press, and even questions asked in Parliament. To us it was all a joke. Did any of them really think the President of India would confess, online, to a crush on the Prime Minister of New Zealand? Fucking politicians, they take themselves way too seriously.

At school Dave was the nerdy kid, smarter than everyone, including the teachers. He never took any notice of the rules but he never got caught. In Adult World he's an IT security expert, testing to breaking computer security systems and then developing very expensive, impregnable fortresses. Well that's the story he sells to his clients anyway. And if they're fool enough to believe anything is impenetrable then they're fucking morons and deserve to be hacked. That's actually a verbatim quote from the man himself. Don't get me wrong, they're good systems, but everyone knows there's nothing that can't be hacked if someone's determined enough and has the time. Ironic: Dave's spent his childhood breaking into half the very systems he's now putting up defences for. Of course this means he's switched sides, is working for the enemy now, but he doesn't see the moral contradiction. It's just a job to him; it's not an important part of his life. Pays the bills, keeps the wolf from the door, that's it.

What IS important to him? I've no idea. We've talked a lot of shit, but never actually had that conversation. Who knows, maybe nothing now. With the family he certainly doesn't have the hours needed for the seemingly pointless art of cracking code. But he still misses the buzz of maybe getting caught, so he dabbles his hand in. Especially with websites for companies that turned him down for business, hehe.

I throw my feet up on the desk and light up, lean back and blow a couple of smoke rings, continuing to relive some of those forever summer days when life seemed so much easier. Less complicated. So you can see I have a heap of respect for Dave and we're good mates. But that isn't why I'm calling him. Through his hacking and what he hears through the grapevine, in the past Dave has given me leads on some great stories. He's

uncovered a few scandals which have earned me some serious paydirt, and even a few heavy secrets: political, military, that kind of thing. Of course, it's not as easy to uncover those kinds of scoops these days, and we often look back amazed at some of the stuff he was able to unearth when the internet was first kicking off. Why was it so easy then? Simply down to governments and businesses not knowing how to protect themselves, because they didn't have a fucking clue who they were protecting themselves from. Those were the fucking days!

As Dave has got older - let's not say sophisticated, but at least more worldly wise – he's developed a new hobby. Gets a buzz out of hacking into a company's website and burying data that makes it look like the company is either about to go into free fall, or is on the verge of a fantastic discovery that will send the company shares sky rocketing. He'll hide the information in such a way that makes someone finding it think maybe they're the only person that's wised up to it. And that's where the art comes in. Hints at ground breaking discoveries; or questionable performance figures. What Dave's after is to see the company crash or its stock go through the roof - all on the back of what he'd planted. And it's happened a few times, though the cause was never acknowledged publicly. Now, it might seem childish, irresponsible even. But Dave always argues that if someone is idiot enough to destroy a company on the back of some easily verifiable information that's a problem with and for the system: he's not the problem. Dave liked to style himself: The Messenger.

You know, I'm pretty sure that some of those early adventures were the reason I got into journalism in the first place. It had seemed so easy to get to the heart of things then. But not any more. The Establishment has got wise, is adept at covering its tracks, and keeping the rest of us out, most of the time at least. Except of course the ones that it really needs to be wary of. Spies, organized crime, you know: The Real Enemy. Of course those guys can still find out whatever they want, and they won't break a sweat doing it. I'll give you an example. It started out as a, *What if?* We're going back to the early days when the internet was still very new to the general public, and everyone was trying to work out how to get something out of it. Business could see the potential, but not as something

immediate. The scientists on the other hand, the ones who came up with the www concept in the first place, had quickly spread the word amongst their mates, so they were up and running before everyone else had even got their shorts and spikes on. It took government a little longer, after all it is a lumbering beast not prone to speed or agility of thought.

The story originated with the US and UK governments, with them wondering what they should do to control what the plebs might get up to on the internet. They couldn't let us have free rein, they'd already worked that much out. That would stink too much like real freedom, and of course they couldn't allow that. But once they started to delve, to see what the dangers were, that was when they realised what it could do for THEM. It's potential for surveillance and control.

After that we're fast forward to three years ago, when conspiracy theories are running rampant amongst the hacking community, that these two governments are engaged in bulk data collection of digital traffic. Of course around the same time mobile phones started to come online, so apparently data from mobile calls is getting sucked up too. How much they're capturing no one is sure because no one's got any concrete evidence. Well, all but one, hehe. Here's how Dave tells it. "The CIA have in place a system to capture and analyse every piece of digital communication. They don't have the computer capacity to physically capture it all yet, but the system is in place and operational, so it's just a matter of time, scaling up as the hardware develops. Actually, most of the ideas came from GCHQ in the UK, and we all know those snooping cunts will only be happy when they have a record of every word that comes out of a person's mouth. I guess a time will come when the technology will be there to capture our thoughts too. And of course they'll be first in the fucking queue. Big Brother isn't here yet, but fuck he's not far off. Mate, I often wonder, what kind of world do they actually want to create."

So what does Dave and his nerdy hacker mates do with this CIA scoop that they've got some solid, hard evidence on, that everyone's screaming out for? The responsible thing would be to break the story, making everyone aware of what these two governments are planning. And, fair play to them, that's exactly what Dave's mob does. Every politician in the

UK and US, and every leading newspaper, receive not only the story but several detailed CIA reports as evidence. These include transcripts of secret recordings of meetings between several heads of government. All good, it works. The spy agencies are told in no uncertain terms by their political masters to immediately close down the programme. Of course Joe Public never hears a thing. Was never meant to. Maybe one day he'll find out. That everything he says on his phone, everything on his phone, everything he does on the internet – it belongs to Peeping Tom. That the spies that are supposed to be protecting us from the baddies, have actually got the microscope on us. Why? Because we the 99% ARE the enemy. They dont give a fuck about putting away terrorists and paedophiles – they want them out there. They need a bogey man, and the shoe fits them just fucking dandy.

Sorry, I digress. Despite Peeping Tom's mea culpa promises – there must have been some concrete action taken too – it wasn't long before serious doubt was thrown over whether they'd fully closed down operations. A year back , someone - not Dave or any of his crew – released to the same media and politicians further examples of wiretapping. GCHQ and CIA transcripts, European spy agencies too. But this time of a much more personal nature. Sexually related and so on. Usually not very important, but when one of the subjects getting caught up in the dragnet is Royalty the shit will hit the fan. And in this case The Royal, along with a few of their celebrity friends, shares a common obsession: necrophilia and underage sex, preferably a combination of the two. Other scandals circulated, even more chilling, but to date no one has dug out enough evidence to make that dirt stick.

Unfortunately, instead of being content with Dave's targeted publicity, this hacker group felt a need to take it a step further. Now, here's the problem with most of these guys. No question they have the minds of geniuses. And their particular type of genius means they can truly influence power, something the majority of us will never be able to do. But, and it's a big fucking but, they have the street smarts of a teenager, and their arrogance to go with it. A combustible combination. They might start out with good intentions but most fuck up and achieve nothing for

the common good. In fact, often the reverse. This crew was a case in point. They released the incriminating video online with the victims - we're talking kids remember - and their abusers clearly identifiable. Oh yeah, their idea of humour is also regressed, so they thought it hilarious to edit in a cartoon style narration over the soundtrack. No one knows, because of course they're not telling, but this edit enabled the agencies to track them down very quickly. They're inside - dire threats of lifetime sentences. But worse to come - within a couple of weeks all three of the abused kids in the video committed suicide. After the initial shit storm no one connected with the saga - not even the families of the kids that killed themselves - were prepared to testify against the Royal and their mates. Consequently, The Crown was unable to put a case together, allowing the aristocracy to breathe a sigh and return to their usual antics.

But it doesn't end there. Does it really ever fucking end with them? You mess with Royalty - heads will roll. The journalist that sprung the leak, and the hackers that dished the dirt, are now enjoying the full force of His Majesty's Pleasure. Of course this was always going to happen. It would take a revolution of almost unimaginable scale to break up the monolith, the structure of power, that exists in the European aristocracy. Particularly in England - that model of inequality. I have a feeling that even should the beast be killed it would, like the hydra, simply grow another head - a little wilier for the setback, and therefore more dangerous. Whoever said the aristocracy does good is a wanker of the biggest fucking order. They're the lowest form of scum. Because power does that to people, especially when they're retarded inbreds that have never had to work a day in their self absorbed fucking lives.

I stub out the cigarette on the desk and give Dave a call but he doesn't pick up. What the fuck's taking him so loong? I can't imagine he's getting laid - Belinda is hardly forthcoming in that department. The cunt can't be asleep, it's past ten, but then again, he doesn't keep the same hours as the rest of us, so maybe. I'm about to slam the phone down and write a shithead email when he picks up. With Dave there's no need for wasting time on pleasantries, and by now I'm not in the mood anyway.

“Seen anything interesting mate? Gossip, scandal, trade secrets. Corporate bombshells are very popular at the moment. Mate I’m desperate. I need your help, badly. What have you got me for?”

After the usual, um, errs - yeah, I forgot to mention Dave’s verbal communication skills aren’t the best - “Yeah, mate, actually, yeah I did. You might like this one mate. It’s a website in the US. I can’t believe some of these supposedly top secret organizations, that pretend they don’t exist and yet leave the front door wide open when it comes to the net. Yeah, website’s for a medical research institute. At first I couldn’t work out why it was so top secret, it just seemed like some more boring research that no one’s ever going to use.”

Feet up on the table, looking out across the park, perving at a couple kissing, and doing a little more besides, I only have half an ear to what he’s saying. I’m also still wondering why I can’t think of anything better to be doing than being stuck at home alone, sitting in front of a computer on a beautiful sunny day. Why isn’t it me snogging that chick? Or down the beach, frolicking in the waves with a babe on each arm, a prelude to something a little steamier. That reminds me: beaches, could be playing with my kids, even that would be better than this, only they’re with Jules this weekend. My mind is still drifting when he starts talking about the actual research, and immediately my ears radar in. “They had all sorts of projects going but the one that got me interested was with preliminary studies into extending lifespan. And I’m not talking a year or two, I’m talking a hundred years or more. Yeah, no shit! They’re still working on animals but they’ve got up to chimps and it’s all looking pretty good from what I could see. But it’s a long term project, right - have to wait a few years before they can start cracking the champagne and be sure Charlie chimp is going to live to two hundred.”

I’m struggling to follow when he starts sidetracking onto mice, rats – some bullshit. “Mate, this is a whole different ballgame to the trialling they’ve done with rodents for those age reversing drugs.... Yeah, you do know mate. You must have seen them. Always being reported on the news. *The latest breakthrough* - when in reality they’re barely scratching the surface. Extend a few measly years, and more the point - you’re still

stuck with a body that's falling apart. This project, yeah the one on the US website, they're talking artificial bodies. Shangri La mate – live forever in a robotic body. Never get sick. Never get old. Of course, I'm starting to wonder - a quantum leap in the field, so why haven't we heard anything about this research?"

Me, I'm creaming myself at this point, thinking how I'm gonna break THE BIGGEST STORY EVER. The accolades. And oh yeah, hehe - the money. Fucking truck loads of it. But just as Dave gets me close to orgasm he fucking kills it. "Unfortunately, I think the area I got into must be well out of date because the reports, data, everything - just suddenly stops. Almost in the middle of an experiment. Like someone pulled the plug on funding. There's nothing more recent than a few years ago."

All I'm thinking is, fuck what's the point of telling me this fucking Goldilocks story then, mate? The dick is rapidly shrivelling, losing interest fast, but some instinct won't quite let it go. To this day, I don't know what it was. Dave's still yapping: "Mate, I poked around for a while to see if I could find any more current research. No, sorry mate, didn't find anything, but I kept the passwords and login information, thought you might want to take a sniff around. There's a whole heap of stuff I didn't have time to check out. You never know, there might be a story in there for you, mate. And who's to say, maybe one day they might make it happen: live for a few hundred years. Fuck that, mate. I'm good for sixty or seventy: retire, a bit of a holiday, but not too long. The body's fucked by then, old age is overrated mate. I'd be happy to hang up the boots at seventy, eighty tops."

After that we gossip a bit and discuss what we're going to do over the next few weeks, planning a couple of camping trips, if we can get time out on the same weekends. I might not be busy with work, but the kids are like a full time fucking job. Yeah, always feeling like I'm on a tight rein. Anyway, the conversation then moves onto my favorite topic, me bitching about the hard lucks of being freelance. Particularly that bullshit about being my own boss. There's no sympathy coming from Dave's quarter. I'd made the choice, hadn't I? Then again he's freelance too so he knows what I'm talking about. No boss, yeah! Crock of shit. Everyone's your boss. Every customer. But then, coming back to my predicament, I tell Dave, "Mate, this

is no bullshit, the money's getting very fucking low and unless I get a decent story out to someone real soon I'm going to starve mate. I've got nothing else, so I'll check it out; I hope there's something in that website, mate, otherwise I might have to get a regular job."

He just laughs, like he really cares. "How many times have I heard you say that. What happens when you do work for one of the Dailies? The Australian, wasn't it, mate, and didn't you end up screwing half the girls in the office? And punching out the editor, when he knocked back one of your best stories. Mate, you couldn't work for someone else however desperate you were." All true. What can I say? So I keep my mouth shut as he prattles on about everyday life. "Anyway have a look at that website, it could be a goldmine. Mate, I can hear Belinda calling: gotta go and mow the lawn."

Like I said, how the fuck, how the fucking fuck, did we get to this point? Thinking. Would you say our lives have got mundane, maybe there's something missing? But what could we change? What would we change? How can you change something when you don't know what you want or even what you're pissed off about? I end the conversation with something resembling wisdom. "I know our lives are boring, mate, but I've had enough excitement to last me a lifetime. Anything for a quiet time, writing when I want to and travelling when I have some spare cash." This will be about the last intelligent thing I'll say - to my mate, to anyone else - before I hit The Shit Trail. I don't need those words on any tombstone to remind me. They haunt me. With this loud wise ass voice, laughing in my face.

Dave responds, "Mate get a steady girlfriend. You'll feel better then. That's what girls are for. Your life is still as shit as it was before but they distract you enough so you don't see the paper peeling off the walls. What happened to Penny?" Dave had liked Penny. But, then again, he likes most of my girlfriends. He thinks it's cool to be single and free: yeah, free to be alone most of the time. "I was afraid to fuck things up by shagging her. You know how it is with me, as soon as I fuck it's like the beginning of the end. Better be friends I sometimes think. In the end she gave me the flick

anyway. Ironic huh?" He likes hearing these stories, a bit of juice, from a distance, where there's no pain.

Anyway, it starts me thinking about my current girlfriend. "Did I tell you about Sharon? I've been dating her for a while now. Yeah, right. Did you know she has a kid? Unbelievable story. She marries this guy from Laos. He'd got separated from his family during the turmoil of the war and lands up as a refugee in Australia, alone. He meets Sharon and pretty soon they're married and have a kid, happy families all round. Then bam! the wife from Laos shows up. He said he'd thought she was dead, what with the chaos of the war and all the bombings. She believes him: I don't. He insists he has to remarry his first wife. And divorce Sharon: has to be a divorce. Sharon believes it when he says he'll take care of their boy, so what does it matter if they divorce? But as soon as they do the Ex doesn't want to know. Says he can't afford to bring up both families. She says it was all the wife's doing but I think the guy had it planned from the start. And I'd want to kill the bitch. But when I told her a few home truths about the husband she got real pissed at me. Anyway, no money, and her English not great, that's how she ended up a prostitute. Though she's smart, she's never worked in a regular job over here so what else could she do? So now she goes to the temple every week to pray for her soul, and the soul of her son, the son of a prostitute."

As I'm finishing up the story I hear Belinda calling Dave again, sounding petulant now. With the tone of voice that says, come right now or you're going to pay big time. Dave has to learn for himself, I'd already learned that lesson the hard way. As I hang up I'm still wondering if there's a story in this medical research thing. Only one way to find out, right? Whenever I think about it now, what happened, I wish I'd never heard about that fucking research into immortality. How is it that a single conversation - a few innocuous minutes in time, can totally change your life's direction? And everyone else around you. But maybe it was always going to go that way. What do I know? Of course, at the time I was over the moon, couldnt wait to check it out.

# Chapter Two

Anyway, feeling a little more relaxed after the chat with Dave, I get up and take a look out the window overlooking the main street in Newtown, which is buzzing near as dammit 24/7. Sunday arvo. Music drifts in from a pub somewhere; the crowds on the streets milling around unsure where to head next. I glance across the road to the café, my regular. Then I notice the time, shit it's nearly two o'clock and they're about to close. Joe's starting to tidy up, and Maria's stacking the tables. Fuck, I'm starving, I haven't eaten all day, so I run down the stairs, grabbing my wallet on the way out.

Have the crack with Joe - a one sided conversation, with him responding with monosyllabic grunts as he's preparing the food. Not a conversationalist yeah, but more than makes up for it with his to die for Napolitano's. By the time I've finished that I've almost forgotten about Dave's web site. After a cappo and a chat with one of the girls I'm still feeling it. Sunday arvo lazy. It's too early to head home so after leaving Joe's my legs start walking me in a familiar direction. Heading up one of those narrow streets. That a hundred years ago must have seemed like broad avenues, when it was only horse and cart trotting up its cobbled pavement.

With nothing else to do, as I'm dragging my arse up the hill I begin people watching. The familiar images, neatly framed by a window. They might be a little different but really they're all showing the same movie: reruns of the drudgery of domestic life. Through one I get a glimpse of dad, watching the TV with baby in one arm and a five year old at the other end of the sofa. You can see the old man's bored shitless watching a kid's cartoon he's seen a million times before, and would rather be down the pub getting pissed with his mates. At least, that's the way it always seems to me.

Nearly there now: to the top of the road and turn right onto the main drag, if you can call it that, of Erskineville. And then pull up at *The Hive*. It's

Sunday arvo, so the band is playing, the whole lot of them crammed onto a stage most people would call a pot stand. Good on them, they just look pig in shit pleased to be playing. Laying out some cool jazz riffs which get inside your head and set your feet tapping. The pub sits on a corner, with tables out on both streets. Which it needs since the bar itself is so narrow you can touch both sides at a stretch. Fuck swing a cat, you'd smack it's head in. Running the length of one wall are French windows that have wide sills with built in cushions to sprawl on. You have to be early to get one of those, because anyone that does, they're there for the arvo; maybe to closing. *The Hive* is going for laid back, and they nail it.

As expected I find my mate sitting at one of the outside tables eyeing up one of the bar girls - the one I don't like, though I couldn't tell you why. Just as I sit down the other one comes out, all smiles. I don't normally go for that look, long blonde dreadlocks, but she's showed a lot of interest in me from the first time we clapped eyes on each other. And she has the greatest tits, which she has no hesitation flaunting. We flirt for a bit and talk about maybe catching up when she's finished her shift, then she heads off with our orders.

"How would your life be different, mate?" It's a question we often ask each other, since we've both got the same opinion about how shit ours are. Though I have to say, from where I'm sitting, Brian's looks a lot better than mine. First up, he's loaded. He inherited a large house from his mum, and working for the council for twenty years he's built up a tidy nest egg. Good on him, with that behind him he threw the nine to five and started producing plays, most of which he wrote himself. So where's the downside, you might be asking? He seems to have a life most people could only dream of. Well, this boy has manic depression and he has it bad. I tried sharing his house when I first moved to Newtown: that's how we first met. I lasted a week, and if I hadn't left I'd have probably killed myself. When you're in there - he, the house, his dead mother - someone/something sucks every ounce of energy, every gram of positive thinking, out of you. After a while you feel like you just wanna curl up in bed and never get up. But if you don't get up, get out of the place, you would - kill yourself I mean. Maybe schizophrenic, I don't know, but the boy

is on enough meds to kill a horse. Brian's a big time stoner so most of the time he's an easy fella to be around, and of course I'm not averse to the odd spliff. Many's the times we've wasted entire weekends talking complete shit. Unfortunately, from time to time, Brian gets it in his head that he doesn't need the meds, and then he onto the heavy stuff - Ice being his current implement of choice. When he's on it you might see him in the middle of Newtown High Street, broad daylight, screaming at some imaginary adversary. Or banging his head against the sandstone walls of the Church - blood all over his face, so he looks like someone just been through five rounds of kick boxing.

Right now, sat opposite me is a ghost, something barely living. Fortunately, he's clear of the stuff for now, after coming off a long bender. There must be a strong survival instinct in him because he always seems to know when to pull up, but then again I guess every dead addict thinks that way. This way of life, this cycle of self destruction, has been the same for years now, but he manages to keep going. Fortunately, money is still no worries. And somehow he still manages to put out a few plays every year. It might have slipped a mention: they're all complete shit. Hardly anyone can sit through them. Then again, in the avant garde theatre, was that ever the point? For Brian, the audiences are mostly surplus to requirement. An annoyance even.

The pub specialises in micro brewery products, so after several schooners of what they call Bitter, tastes like piss but has a kick like a fucking mule, I'm feeling well below my best. "Mate, why the fuck does anyone have kids? What do they do but tie you down to a monotonous non life? Look at me, I should be jetting off to some conflict hotspot about to explode, like Robbo used to, shouldn't I? Remember that last minute call to fly up to Tibet when the Chinese were evicting the Tibetans off their land, with their full swing ethnic cleansing programme? What chance did I have of taking them up on that? Sorry, Mr Dalai Lama, can't go today, got a busy schedule this week: the kid's sports carnival, then gotta take them to The Easter Show so they can throw up into their show bags. Would you mind asking the Chinese to hold off until next week? No? OK, no worries mate. Even on an assignment here in Australia I have to get permission in

fucking triplicate from Jules or she'll start threatening The Family Court. That bitch has me by the balls, right?"

Brian is in one of his lighter moods. "Mate, why don't you just tell her to fuck off, and go? Make it up later? That's what you'd do if you were married, right?" A whole world of pain and self pity is welling up. "Don't get me started, mate. Yes, that would be the logical, but that's not how it works. She's got them in a vice remember, and she likes to squeeze them now and again to remind me." I could go on, but I won't.

Fast forward: the next morning I wake up with a killing head and an empty wallet. I've no idea how I tipped it out, or how I got home, or what if anything I did when I got here. But I'm not giving it a lot of thought because I can't stop thinking about a dream I had last night. I don't often do that but this one I remember every detail vividly. All these old people walking towards me with terrible faces, lined and wrinkled like old leather. They're all piling on top of me; I'm drowning in a sea of dry, crumbling flesh. I woke myself up in the middle of the night shouting, trying to push them off.

Funny how the mind works. It reminds me of the conversation with Dave and the life extending research, so after a drink and a shower I patter into the room I call my office, and sit down in front of my other best friend, the ancient Toshiba laptop. Now, do you know what is the problem with Toshibas? The fucking problem is they never fucking go wrong, which means you never have any fucking excuse to replace them. So, whenever I just go *fuck it!* and buy one I feel guilty. The original Tightwad. Yeah, I know, I have a lot of issues - as the fucking counsellor pointed out, and Jules sniggered.

Anyway, let's get back to Dave's research website. So this is how it goes. I've followed up so many of David's hacked site leads before, even to some fairly heavy duty government or military sites and we've never had any dramas. He's shown me ways that keep you as good as under the radar, and I'm able to use the same hack techniques on this occasion. Feeling fairly blasé as I follow the instructions he's emailed me, it doesn't take long before I'm bang into the restricted part of the site. Blah, blah, new research, blah, extending life, blah, trials on animals. It all looks fairly

uninspiring, nothing to get too excited about, or, more importantly, make a buck out of. All out of date, right, according to Dave. That's the track my mind is on at this point. Turns out it's a website for The Department of Medical Research, some offshoot for the State of California. Before long I'm into the archive section, one of the places Dave said he hadn't got to and it's here that my professional antennae starts to go berserk. A report by a Doctor Linsky reads: *" We have concluded all stages of the trials with primates. We are now ready to create a fully functioning human body which can act as a vehicle for the human brain to exist in perpetuity. Our generous benefactors will be pleased that their investment has finally borne fruit, and can themselves reap the benefit..."*

# Chapter Three

***“Our generous benefactors will be pleased that their investment has finally borne fruit, and can themselves reap the benefit...”***

The report ends referring to another organisation, where the next stage of the research – the human trials – is to be conducted. I have to read it three times before it fully sinks in. If this is true ... I can't believe what I'm reading. Going back - the report goes into very specific detail to outline how the DMR team developed an artificial animal body which not only houses the brain but allows the chimp to fully control the robotic body. What the fuck! In the archive section. Dave didn't see this part. Dave didn't see this fucking part! Fuck Dave. Fuck friendships. This IS gonna be the biggest story I've ever written. Correction – anyone's ever written, period. Yeah, let him read about it when it's out on the front fucking page of every newspaper.

The report goes on, in very technical medical terms that I struggle to comprehend, to explain how they did it. How successful animal trials had originally been the projects goals, but then someone had got to hear of the research, someone powerful. That's where this other, privately funded, organisation comes in. Taking it to the next stage, conducting the human trials. So that's why things suddenly stopped in the California DMR site. Their research was the just the starting point. The first step, leading us all the way up to the holiest of fucking grails: Eternal Life. The summary report states that their first stage will be the prototype production of robotic human bodies. The project is being funded and managed through a corporate called *Gargon Industries*. They're calling it *Project BPOD*, which is the the name given to the artificial body. Of course, when I go to Gargon's web site there's no reference to *Project BPOD* anywhere.

I'd never heard of *Gargon Industries* but from their website it's immediately obvious they're a massive multinational with fingers in every pie – construction, hospitality, you name it. In fact the only notable absence is in the health sector: not a mention. Based out of the US, and of

course the CEO and directors are all blanked faced Suits to a man. And, yeah, no women in sight in the Director's register.

Of course it's no surprise there's no reference on their shopfront to the *Project BPOD*. A top secret project: the meat is going to be found buried somewhere in Gargon's servers. And since I don't have the resources for a Watergate style break in I don't have much other choice, so that's where I'll have to start. And, of course, for that I'm back to needing Dave's help: yeah, yeah, just like I always do. Before I give him a call, I get back to wading through the DMR website, looking for documents relating to Gargon that might help us track down where on their systems the records might be kept. But unfortunately most of the information is related to the research, and that's still flying clean over my head. I'm losing interest, and about to call Dave when all of a sudden a report starts to list names of recipients of the BPOD. Full on human trials! Let's get this clear, this is a list of people that through the Gargon funded project have, if the report is to be believed, the BPOD robotic body and are living for as long as they wish. Yeah, while we poor mutts have to do with a meagre sixty to seventy years and, more to the point, no knowing when our time's going to be up. And even more to the point, in bodies that after forty years start to fall apart and are no fun to be in at all. Fuck them!

Look, there's something else to this story, which is the reason I stayed tuned even after Dave had said he'd hit a dead end. I'm about as far as it's possible to be from being the detached chronicler of events any good journalist should be when working on a story. Self interest raised its head at the mention of a robotic body. And while of course it would be great to have a BPOD for myself, there's someone else in my life needs and deserves this kind of thing far more than I ever will. There is a part of me that I am not proud of: I should say, am deeply ashamed of. I haven't told Sharon about Hamish. In fact no one knows about him except Dave. And maybe Belinda - because I sometimes notice her giving me a look that would strip paint.

I have, in fact, three children and the oldest is Hamish, from a different mother to the younger two. She and I were at uni together. I don't think either of us were actually in love, though I think she thought

she was. It was the done thing, and anyway I was shy, didn't have much confidence around girls. It was easier to get married than not, and then Hamish came along pretty fast. I guess too fast because fourteen months after he was born I bolted. It might also have had something to do with him being a quadriplegic, the result of a routine operation which went badly wrong. Admittedly the surgeon was as distraught as we were, but that wasn't going to bring back the bouncing, healthy little boy that had stomped into the hospital the previous day, and come out a lump of fucking jelly. Of course, when I bolted, not for one minute was I thinking of Lisa, Hamish's mother. But then again, what was there to do? I had a career to get off the ground and that wasn't going to happen minding a baby, who we were told wouldn't live past his third birthday, then promptly did.

We all deal with tragedy in different ways, and I can't have been thinking very straight around then, because a few months after the botched operation I contacted a mate in Thailand. "How much to break his legs?" Duggy replies in his stretched out Queensland drawl, "Mate, there's not a lot of finesse with these boys. You can ask, but there's no guarantees. A hit usually ends up with someone dead. Think about it, and let me know. It's a piece of piss to set up, and don't worry about the price, life is cheap in the South."

You could say I had a lot of guilt to expunge, so without thinking I tell him, "Fuck it, the cunt deserves whatever he gets." The conversation ends shortly after that, but the next day I start having doubts. So I call Duggy and tell him to pull the pin on the hit. His response is not what I want to hear, "Mate, you're too late. Things were quiet so I was able to get some one easy - they'll already be in Sydney. Don't worry so much, the boys never squeal, it's an honour thing. And if they do, they don't last long inside. You can't keep your guard up 24/7 when you're banged up, right? Anyway mate, I asked for just the legs, so let's see." Fuck it! Of course immediately I'm completely shitting myself. Hadn't I only wanted the doctor to wind up with a couple of broken bones, not me end up being done for fucking murder? For two days I don't go anywhere, waiting for the phone call: I must have gone through three cartons of cigarettes

waiting for that fucking phone call. Of course the whole time I'm terrified that at any moment Pig is going to walk through the door. But then I get the call from Dougy I'd been praying for. Fortunately luck was on both our sides: they managed to only do the doc's legs, and it was over a year after the surgery fuck up, so the cops never made the connection.

Since then I've done a pile of research into artificial limbs and stem cells and so on. Basically anything that might offer the kid a glimmer of walking again. I'm hoping this *Project BPOD* is the answer. Anyway, one outcome is that my knowledge about repairing fucked up human bodies is above average. And so I'm able - once I've got over the initial shock and distraction - to follow most of the DMR research. And very conveniently someone there has still kept on writing these summary reports, long after their research ended. Where Gargon started and are up to. The problems they had to overcome on the way. Fucking amazing, they must have some of the best on this team. But then it goes to the next level. Most of their work on extending human life is cutting edge. Still, some of the background research I've read before, so I get the gist. After trawling the site a few hours I've got a pretty solid picture of where Gargon are up to. And more importantly, where they've still got a mile to go if they want to keep their human customers alive in the production version of the robotic body.

See, in these summaries there's mention of failures of the human robot prototypes. A lot of near disasters; it's a full on job keeping the things going. In fact two of the recipients die. But what do any of them care? If it wasn't for the BPOD they'd be dead anyway. At least they got a few extra years. From the last few reports I conclude Gargon got up to working on mass production prototypes. Yeah, developing something reliable enough that when they go to market Gargon isn't going to have bodies piled up outside the boardroom and being sued into oblivion. Whatever, I keep coming back to it - how up to date are these DMR reports on Gargon's research? The next step has got to be to break into Gargon's computers. DMR stopped at the chimps - at first I wasn't clear on that, but yeah, that was definitely where the break came. All human trials have been done only in Gargon labs. And of course that's what I'm

interested in. Those DMR summaries are only a tantalizing appetiser. I need the meat. And anyway they stopped a few years back. Where are they up to now? Have they actually hit pay dirt? I don't think so. Surely something would have got leaked if they had. But who knows. Not surprisingly, the whole time in the back of my mind I'm thinking of my boy. It's fucking sad mate. Hamish is now fourteen, and though he's beaten all the odds, the biggest hurdle now is himself. He's had enough, he's losing the will to live, and you can see by the look on his face that it can't come soon enough. Poor kid wouldn't put up much of a fight if he got hit with pneumonia, or some other respiratory disease, which is what ends up killing a lot of quadriplegics. And I know Lisa has been pulling on the tether for a long time now. For a boy that's been helpless his whole life, he's had a lot of fight in him, but how much he's got left I'm not sure. This BPOD research offers the best hope I've ever seen. But what are the chances, right? This is for a select few: a bunch of arseholes who've screwed the world already to make their billions and are now able to swan around in a machine that will let them live for as long as they want. And stay young and virile into the bargain. Fuck, imagine a perfect body for eternity. The bastard! It isn't fair! Christ, is this world ever fucking fair!

My interest homes in on the DMR summaries about the living recipients. The list has ten names on it. Two dead, so we're down to eight. They're people that would probably be known by everyone on the planet, even a yak herder in Outer fucking Mongolia. High profile political leaders. The super rich - you know, the ones on the R85 list. Plus a couple of underworld figures that most people wouldn't have heard of. Hehe, in another life I was a crime reporter, so their names are familiar, but that's a story for another time.

At around this point it crosses my mind that I should get the fuck off the site. This knowledge is extremely dangerous, given some of the names on the list. But before I quit I want to get enough intel to enable Dave to crack Gargon's intranet. Most importantly, an up to date list of who's received the BPOD transplant. With the last DMR report a few years old, there's got to be more rich cunts that have had the operation. Yeah, the gossip angle, because if nothing else, this has got to be worth a few

hundred thousand to the trash mags. Yeah, ching ching has started to cross my mind, and why the fuck not? I don't do this for love, right? I want to be able to retire in a few years, while I can still fucking enjoy it. Not like the old man that worked his arse off for forty years with the same mob and then upped and died six months after retiring. After that, I'll need proof, as much as I can lay my hands on, because I'm going to blow this story wide open. It's going to be the biggest thing I've ever written. And, just maybe, anyone's ever written. Right?

Of course, you'd have to be a blunt pencil not to know that if I do scoop this story to the world Gargon will be after me. Do everything they can to discredit the hell out of me and the story. We've all seen that scenario - not hard to picture. But I've been in the ring before with powerful, vested interest, and I'm confident I can take care of myself if that's the road it goes down. So long as the readers that matter can see Gargon's bullshit for what it is – a desperate attempt to cover up – then I'll be in the clear. It's a constant surprise to me: despite their money these monster multinationals don't have a lot of finesse, or maybe it's because of it, and because they assume Joe Public is a lot more gullible than he actually is. That normally plays to my advantage, and I'm banking on this mob, Gargon, being no different.

Still frantically searching the DMR website, I'm looking for some more Sexy that will grab my reader's attention and drive the headlines. Then ah, better than an orgasm. There it is. Gold. On a very well laid out few pages, not at all like the usual chaotic scientific websites, which can be a fucking nightmare, someone has been very thorough in documenting dates; participants; a neat summary of the research results; contact details for the senior members of the research team; so on. There must have been a very thorough administrator working on this project. If I need to get more information they might be a very useful starting point. I can avoid the glory boys for a while if she's (I'm assuming it's a she, a bit of a librarian, but with a sexy through the glasses look) prepared to talk. Scanning through meeting records the name Charlotte Drewburry comes up frequently as the recorder of the minutes. A lot of other documents have CD in the file

name, so I assume she must be it, the administrator. Still on the DMR website, a search of HR records brings up her personal details and address.

I'm beginning to get the warm feeling I get when a good story starts to emerge. And thinking about the next step, my favorite part of the gig: an all expenses trip to California to dig around. Who'd cough the easiest, who to avoid stirring things up with? I'm even imagining some up front funding being forthcoming from one of the lush scientific publications or a gossip mag. After all, research can be expensive, and I have cheap, but extensive tastes, hehe.

Time had stopped for me, I'm totally engrossed in the story, or at least the potential of it. It's only when I look up and see the sun dipping towards the horizon that I remember I'd planned to spend the arvo with Dave and his family on the beach. I was also supposed to call Sharon to see if she wanted to join us. She loves the beach. She always joked it was the only reason she'd come to Australia from Malaysia, which was where she was born and brought up. I don't know what work she did back home. In fact, I'm not even sure she ever worked, coming from a wealthy family there. She only ever talked about this or that party she'd been to. Boyfriends. Shopping trips overseas. Yeah, not a care in the world. I got the impression her father was quite powerful, tied up in business and politics: then again, up there the two always seem to go hand in hand. She'd never wanted for anything as a kid, and trips to our holiday destinations - Gold Coast, Great Barrier Reef and so on - had figured frequently in stories from her teenage years. It must have made it doubly hard for her to deal with the poverty and isolation she now faces, when up til then everything had been handed to her by the plateful. When she'd been married to the cunt from Laos she'd made many trips back home. I don't think her parents approved of her marriage to the guy but she was the spoilt youngest girl so she didn't get much grief from them on that score. But since their divorce Sharon has never been home, she's terrified her parents find out what she does to make ends meet. She'd never endure the loss of face if they ever find out she's a prostitute.

Sharon is poles apart from my ex wife. With Jules I'm always double guessing what mood she's in and tailoring the conversation to suit. It was

even like that when we were married - walking on eggshells. She was just a regular girl, HR manager at a bank. No big ambition. No dreams beyond the usual – house / husband / two kids. She had all of that once, but she still wasn't happy, which isn't hard to figure out why. Then I fucked up, cheating with her best mate on a double date holiday in Bali. I don't know how Jules found out, but at least it finally gave her someone to blame for all the disappointment she holds of life. With Sharon almost everything is the exact opposite. Of course Sharon looks different, but not stunning so your jaw drops, like some Asian chicks. And her life is certainly different to any other girl I've ever known. A hooker, for fuck's sake! What would she have seen in her time? She doesn't like to talk about it and though I'm sometimes curious I've never had the balls to push her. I'm sure she'd have told me, that's the kind of person she is. And I guess that's the reason I don't ask. Personality wise, she's like the living fucking Buddha by comparison with Jules. For example, you can talk about any kind of sex, and she's one of the few women I know that's not hung up on that crock of shit monogamy. She's seen enough men just needing to get their rocks off and then go back happy to where they were an hour before: their home, and their wife, who gives them almost everything they need from a woman. But not quite. Because no woman can, and no man can for that matter. Sharon, she's never fazed by anything, and doesn't take us, men I mean, too seriously, which gives me room to fuck up and not feel a double shit about myself. Yeah, I could actually see it working long term for us.

Lighting up another cigarette - fuck the pack's almost empty - I'm back with my head in the Toshiba. If what I'm reading is all true this is the biggest story I'm ever going to write in my life. I hope to fuck it's not a hoax. How ironic would that be after all Dave and I used to get up to as kids. It's almost too much to believe – and too good to be true that I've unearthed it - that for years now, some people have the choice, simply because of their wealth and power, to live indefinitely, not in an ageing crusty old body like the rest of us. No illness. No injury that can't be fixed by a quick trip to the doctor. Which will be no different to a car service. And I guess like getting a new tyres when the old ones wear out? How do they have babies? Can they? But I guess we'd trade that to be able to live

forever, right? Do they choose what sex they are? Guess they can choose what they look like. How do they stay alive so long and no one realize? A million questions. And no answers. Total fucking silence, and that's the way they're gonna want to keep it. Which reminds me that I need to get my arse in gear, and finish up downloading these documents so I've got some nice hard evidence. Then get the fuck off this website before some lowlife IT support picks up the unauthorised logon.

I'm flicking through DMR's web pages, deciding what other documents to download. But to be honest my mind is distracted. Wandering a little ahead of itself. A rosy colored picture of Dave cracking his way into Gargon computers and finding all the dope in a couple of keystrokes. The queue of editors clamoring for the BPOD story. The accolades. And, hehe, not forgetting the ching ching. I'm almost through downloading the half dozen documents that look the most incriminating when suddenly my computer screen freezes. For about thirty seconds nothing happens. Then an error comes up saying the file stuck on my screen doesn't exist. I copy down what I can from the screenshot, reboot, and go back in and do a search for the files I'd already copied. Every file I've downloaded has been removed from the website. I'm wondering what to do next when my screen goes blank, the internet connection is terminated, and my computer is turned off. How the hell can someone turn off my computer from ten thousand kilometres away? And why have they gone to the trouble to anyway? Just to show me they can?

I sit back for a second, my mind numb. Unless it has happened to you, it might seem like nothing, but when someone takes over your computer while you're sat in front of it, the keyboard writing its own shit, it's fucking scary, let me tell you. You start looking over your shoulder. What else can they do? And what are they gonna do next? Then your mind explodes as the imagination takes over and you're picturing all the things they could do. I get slowly to my feet; pad over to the window. Dark now; nothing out there grabs my attention. Going over the angles; still reasonably coherent. That lasts about five minutes. After that I'm pacing, my legs kind of feeling disconnected from me, then I'm running, from room to room, banging into the walls, deliberately smacking my head against them. The pain is

something of a relief, a distraction from what's going on inside. Maybe I'm talking to myself, I don't know. At one point I know I'm crying. I hear it like I'm watching myself; out of my body. Go to the kitchen and pull a can. Then throw it in the bin. Contemplate lighting a spliff. No. It might calm me down, but fuck I need my wits about me. What the hell have I just discovered? And what the fucking fuck is going to happen to me? I try consciously talking to myself, "Calm down. Step at a time. You can do this." But then the realization of the danger I'm facing comes crashing back and I'm off again.

Firstly I've just stumbled across an event as influential on humanity's future as when man first talked. If Gargon Industries - a major fucking multinational, about as big as they fucking come - has this technology whilst no one else is coming close to developing it then the door is open to them for untold wealth. Maybe the whole fucking world order could be turned on its head by this technology? Robot armies? Why not? Bad enough now, but this means that military capability will no longer be the sole preserve of nations. Gotta be. Powerful multinationals, responsible to no one but themselves, with their own private armies. Their only interest to acquire greater wealth and spread their power. Gotta be. Mate, I sometimes wonder if people like that would ever be satisfied.

This story has suddenly gone from being a very interesting headline to a fucking potential death warrant. I know these kinds of people, they don't like publicity, and particularly not on something like this. When megabucks are at stake they're sure as fuck not going to be very nice to someone that's blown the lid on their dirty little secret. No, they'll be prepared to do anything. And I mean literally anything, to keep it a fucking secret. For these people there are no rules, certainly not the ones the rest of us are expected to live by. Still pacing up and down, in the office, occasionally glancing at the computer screen, any second I'm expecting it to light up with a message like, "We're coming to get you, fuckwit. Don't bother thinking about escape. You've got nowhere to hide."

All that CIA stuff of Dave's is coming back to me. Which makes me think, have they been on to Dave for a while? Have they listened into our whole fucking phone conversation? Could they do that? Should I warn

Dave? It crosses my mind for a millisecond. Fuck no! Not if it means they get distracted locating and hunting down Dave, because maybe that'll buy me the time I need to get the fuck out.

At some point my mind ceases its hamster wheel turning and I come to an abrupt stop in the middle of the living room. My legs kind of give way and I find myself sitting on the floor. Snail pace, I look around me at my pathetic little non-descript apartment. Location: just another city where no one gives a fuck about you. We've all read the story of someone that died a lonely death and was immediately forgotten about so their body wasn't discovered for fifteen years. Fuck, that's got me written all over it. A feeling of me as a Nothing comes over. It also strikes me very hard that I have nowhere to run. From what Dave said, once they, CIA or Gargon's version of it, can pin something on you, something you've done that they don't like, they're going to find you. It's just a matter of time. No point thinking you'll ever be beyond their reach. And they - let's assume CIA for simplicity sake - are judge, jury and executioner. Finding you might take a few years if you're an international terrorist with billions and the right connections in high places, but even then they're walking dead these days.

It used to be - didn't it? - that government acted in the people's interest. Or was that more wishful thinking? Anyway, if that were the case then yes, I'd say at least they have an argument for blanket surveillance. Though it's not one I'd agree with. Privacy is sacrosanct for fuck's sake. What's the point of living if there's always someone looking over your shoulder, judging your every move? Privacy, it's enough to die for to protect it. Yeah! I'd put my hand up if that's what it takes. Seriously. Yeah, if it means keeping the Establishment the fuck out of everyone's business my death would be worth that. Mate, it should be worth anyone's life, because if we don't have freedom we're dead anyway. Government doesn't have our interests in mind. The gap between the governing and the governed gets wider every day. So, no, fuck off, Government has no justification for mass surveillance.

Anyway, more pressing right now is that someone knows that I know about the BPOD project. And they want me to know that they know. Hide the files, yeah, but they didn't need to shut me down. That was show. That

was a statement. In reality it's probably not that hard to do technically. Dave can turn my computer off remotely in his sleep, but usually hackers don't want people to know they're there, or been there. It's like a thief taking everything and then leaving a business card. Of course now Dave's one of The Good Guys, but usually the same rules apply. Security trackers like to surreptitiously follow the hacker until they've got the proof they need for a watertight case and then it's hello Mr Plod.

# Chapter Four

You might think me paranoid, but working in this industry I've heard too many stories that start out like this. A good friend of mine got a lead on a big government cover up, involving of course the US, and a small but politically strategic country in South East Asia. He'd found the US was funding the slaughter on a mass scale of the country's impoverished and uneducated population. Of course the masses weren't any kind of threat to anyone, they had enough on their plate to survive to the day's end. But the man the US had decided to back was a paranoid megalomaniac, so everyone was a threat to his plans for world domination. Craig had stumbled across the story in, of all places, a bar in Sydney, talking to the ex prime minister of the country. He'd escaped and was working as a barman in a crappy tourist pub in The Rocks when Craig met him. A trip over to the country and a few interviews later Craig knew two things. First, the guy wasn't bullshitting, and more important, he had a sensational story.

I was in Vietnam at the time. One day he rocks up at the hotel I'm staying at with all these files, and video tapes of what he says are interviews that no one would be able to argue with. Real excited. For Craig that's unusual, he's normally dead pan, but this time he knows he's hit on the story of a lifetime. I'm pleased for him, though of course I'm jealous as hell. Made worse by the fact that at the time I'm in a lean spell, bumming around trying to drum up work, with little success. He tells me he reckons this story is a signal that his life is finally turning around. After everything had gone to shit when he lost his wife and kids a couple of years earlier in a car smash back home in the Midwest.

He wants to celebrate, so we go on an all nighter, which ends up in a dodgy brothel in downtown Hanoi City. Very downtown, not a place you want to be at the best of times, take my word for it. This is back streets, far from The Lakes and all the tourist bullshit. By now Craig looks terrible, in a worse state than I'm feeling. We've taken advantage of the facilities but get ourselves kicked out because Craig won't pay, since he's so pissed he

couldn't get it up. Out on the street it's just starting to get light. I'm on my last legs and need to get home fast, so I find out where his hotel is and wave down a cab, one of those open air things on three wheels. It's a cool, crisp morning, so by the time we get to Craig's hotel I'm wide awake again. Craig can still barely walk, but the concierge at the hotel recognises him and gives me the room key, no worries. When I get up there the door's open. First up I think it's the cleaner. But cleaners don't carry pistols, and they don't kick you in the balls so stars are dancing in front of your eyes and you swear you can feel them in your throat. Fortunately for me they're only interested in Craig so they just boot me out of the room. Do I play the hero? Do I fuck. No hesitation, I'm running as fast as I can to get the fuck out. Half way down the corridor I hear a single shot. I still hear it sometimes in a dream, or when I'm in a hotel that reminds me of the one where Craig was murdered.

Actually, that's not the full story, there's a part I left out. I'm not ashamed to tell it because there's times in all our lives when it's circumstance that dictates our actions. Fuck it, haven't I seen enough to know we, humans, we're capable of anything in the right situation. What Craig didn't know when he agreed to meet me was that the CIA had managed to get hold of incriminating evidence about my foray into the Thai hitman business. I don't know how, there was only my friend in Hat Yai and me that knew about it, and he had no reason to dob me in, that I knew of at least. Though I've since come to the conclusion that already their spread is big enough - CIA / MI5 / MOSAD whoever - that they'll have enough on all of us that whenever they want to they can pull our strings to make the play go the way they want it. Anyhow, Craig didn't just rock up, it was a carefully planned sting that had taken weeks to put together, principally because he was so shit scared, ironically enough, of a CIA hit. I've no doubt that without me he wouldn't have agreed to meeting then, though I'm equally sure one way or another he would have wound up dead. These guys are leeches, once you're on their radar there's only one way to get off it. Example: without any warning one day they're just there, in the middle of the night in my bedroom, two of them sitting as casually as you like on the end of my bed, "wanting to have a chat concerning a

friend of yours that won't listen to common sense." Look, I've never been one for a fight, so it didn't take them long to have me stringing along like a well trained fucking monkey. The promise of a long stint in The Bangkok Hilton did it for me as I recall. They wanted Craig, so I delivered him, straight to them.

Back to my present predicament. Why, I'm wondering, should I treat it any different this time, with this Gargon after my balls for snooping around their BPOD project. Why don't I just let everyone else take the heat and then take my chances of talking my way out of it, like I usually do? It's saved my arse enough times before in not dissimilar situations, and it always involves fucking someone over that has trusted me more than they should. So no big deal right?

I used to see trusting anyone was a weakness, but there's something about Sharon.... I don't know. And Hamish: this is more personal than any other story I've ever done. It might give me the opportunity to atone for at least some of the shit I've caused him. You know, the load's felt heavier these last few years. I don't sleep so well – popping pills, and needing more to knock me out. It's felt for a while that I need to lighten the load, that I need to feel a little better about myself, so as I can give myself more than just a quick glance in the mirror. What the fuck, I'm getting old and tired, you can only duck and dive for so long before you get so slow they catch you easy and it's all over, Red Rover.

I look out the window. Fuck it must be eight or nine in the evening but of course, this being Newtown, the streets are still plenty busy outside. People going for eats, heading to the pub to spin bullshit over pints, or zipped up and ready for clubbing - though it's probably still a little early for that mob. You've still even got the family shit, kids strolling with their parents; lovers entwined. Yeah, normal stuff. Yeah, I know my priority should be to get my arse in gear and get this story off to a dozen editors but, seeing that, normality, I get a sudden urge to be a part of it, because something tells me this could be the last time I get a chance to do anything remotely like normal. Anyway, I've run out of smokes and I know I won't be able to function without a cigarette, so there's nothing for it. I run down the stairs and out onto the pavement. As I hit the familiar street, my feet

following an unconscious path, my mind is still on Craig and what happened to him. To me, it doesn't take too many joined up dots to see the same thing happening to me.

Even though it's a warm night, and I have on long sleeves and jeans, I suddenly feel very cold and my whole body is starting to shake. I must look like shit too because as I pass The Bank Hotel, a few people look at me sideways, probably assuming I'm just another Ice case in need of a fix. An old lady asks me if I'm OK. I smile weakly at her and she walks on, comforted. Bumping into people as I walk down High Street, past the station, still kind of half on auto, I realise I must be heading for The Union. Five minutes from my place and I can be there, and at the same time in the other direction I can be at The Hive - or any one of a dozen pubs and clubs. But that's Newtown, that's what I love about it. It's the only part of Sydney where there's a real hub. Of everything cool. Not plastic commerce with the usual fucking shopping centre and seven screen cinema showing Hollywood shite 24/7. This place has live music going almost all night, and more oddballs per square kilometre than you could poke a stick at. Why here? They gravitate to Newtown because they know they'll be welcome here, and can find some kind of place to call home. Even if it is a derelict hovel or a disused warehouse with a broken window anyone can crawl through and take the little they have left to call their own. Or maybe it's just a park bench. Which isn't so bad on a balmy night, but in the winter the cops are always peeling frozen corpses off a bench. Whenever I see that I wonder what happens to their bodies? Charcoal I suppose. And then to thinking about their life. How did they end up there - the loneliest death of all, a corpse on a winter park bench? We all start the same, right, but the end, fuck, who'd be able to predict that, looking at a little kid, with all the possibilities open to us?

As I'm walking I start checking off some of the other stories I've covered. The ones where I might have got myself killed, but wasn't. It gives me some kind of comfort, remembering all those times when I'd been convinced there was no way out, and then somehow squeaked through. Maybe this time too? As I said before, in my time as an investigative journalist I've come across plenty of ruthless people prepared to kill me

without much hesitation. And for less valuable information than I now possess. A fucking lot less. This immediately gets me paranoid again, and I start staring into the faces of the people passing by. There should be safety in numbers, but I'm not feeling it. That's the thing, when corrupt government - which ALL government is - has the means to eavesdrop on everyone, and does so whether we've done anything wrong or not, then there's no check on them. Because, when they've got that much power, Power can get to the Whistleblower long before they've got the protective shield of publicity around them. When it's only them, with the balls to take on the bully, that keeps The Establishment in any kind of check.

When you look at it like that, our future looks narrow and very bleak. These days, even if you're innocent, they're intent on checking up on you: that's the quantum shift. Didn't it used to be that if you kept your nose clean you were off the radar? Which is how it should be, isn't it? If you didn't want to play with the big boys and their power games you had the freedom to do your thing. But that's all changed and now they want to know everything about everyone. The Elite always defined what we can and can't do. But with surveillance as it is, they've got the means to fully enforce it. I guess when facial recognition is in every CCTV, yeah it'll be game over. But yeah, that's the biggest fucking joke: it's those moral villains R85, the truly evil, that dictate how we should behave. Fucked. Classic fucked.

Heading down the hill, on the home stretch now, on the right there's The Newtown Social Club, where you can guarantee there'll be a live band playing solid. And outside two pissheads in a fight where they're mostly punching air - more comedy than action flick. And, sure enough, there's two middle aged fellas, huge beer guts, in the middle of an argument. They're only up to waving fingers at each other, but I'm sure if I hung around I'd see the two of them swinging. And then on the other side, no more than a stone's throw, you've got the theatre; haven for the pretentious. Give me the Social Club any day; the place might be full of pricks, but at least they're real. Looking at the theatre hoardings, no, not one of Brian's shit monologues tonight I see, but you can guarantee it'll be something equally Shoot me before I die of Boredom. It must be the

interval, because there's crowds out blocking the pavement. Hehe, yeah, for sure, with the wine and bullshit flowing in equal measure.

I stumble onto the road and almost get knocked over by car. The train of thought - about Craig and all the other close shaves - reminds me of a story a little closer to home I once broke. About a political cover up by the Federal Opposition. For some reason I was in PNG when the newspapers, and then the TV stations, caught on to my story. So it was there in Port Moresby when the international press descended, all clambering for a share of the spoils. It was about the current Australian opposition leader, a popular and charismatic figure at the time. And that - combined with the level of international interest in the story proved a little too much for the powers that be. Being outside Australian jurisdiction, of course, was no protection at all. So one day, in broad daylight and as I was strolling the main street in downtown Moresby, a team of SAS gunners grabbed me and bundled me into a van. Fifteen minutes later I'm dumped in the shittiest prison cell ever. And then, after spending twenty four hours banged up, I'm on a flight back to sunny Australia, that beacon of democracy, rolling around the cargo area of a RAAF Hercules, the whole time shackled hand and foot.

At a military air base somewhere in New South Wales, I'm dragged out of the plane, still shackled like Hannibal fucking Lectern, and into an office where I'm confronted with the familiar face of a very irate Deputy Prime Minister. Who wants to know what benefit I think my story would have on Australia's political stability. Admittedly this was at a time when our country's government was suffering a lot in the credibility department with most of our allies and near neighbours, so I could understand his perspective. But wasn't that the fucking point? So what if I'd leaked that the opposition leader had had a string of homosexual affair with young boys? The guy had looked like he'd be the next prime minister for Christ's sake. So surely people had a right to know their future leader was wide open to the first blackmailer that snapped him with his hand down some kid's pants. Didn't they?

Well, the Deputy PM didn't see it that way. And got very pissed when I suggested it might be in his party's interests to have a loose cannon

leading the opposition to a perhaps short lived election victory. As soon as the people's euphoria had worn off it would only take a couple of judiciously leaked reports of what he liked to do with underage boys for the lads and lasses in blue to be back in power. After making his feelings about me, and *The Left Wing Press* in general, he left. But I wasn't alone for long. Having a pair of ASIO goons screaming in your face for eight hours isn't my idea of a blast. But then again, in light of other more recent rendition stories, it could have been a lot worse. After that, following a light beating, I'm unceremoniously kicked off the Air force base and told to "find your own fucking way home, you commie cunt." Hmmm, on reflection, that kind of tame ending looks very unlikely in the present circumstances, but I still have a few cards that could turn things in my favor.

I'd been mostly walking head down, baseball cap pulled low, trying to look inconspicuous. Yeah, fucked I know but, all the war stories aside, I've really no fucking idea what I'm doing. Looking up, ah, nearly there now: the little sign for The Union, like the finish flag. What the race is – your guess is as good as mine. Fuck I could do with a pint, and a spliff wouldn't go amiss, but that would be just plain stupid. I start running, pushing through the lazy Sunday evening crowds. I ignore the shout from the local deli shop owner. I know what he'll be wanting to talk about: I owe him money. Of course it's hardly a priority to me right now, but it must have been to him, because suddenly he's right in front of me, blocking my path, looking mean and very determined.

A big guy, hehe, bigger than I'd noticed before. It crosses my mind I should have picked someone else to run a tab up with. He's smirking as usual, which I'm used to by now. Even when he doesn't have something over me he'll have this half smile, without showing his teeth, and he'll say something smartarse. The only comfort is that he behaves like that with everybody. Him with a firm hold on my arm, I look up into his face and notice the usual expression on his face has changed. I'm already missing the smirk. I think I preferred condescending bastard to this. Real menace in his voice, he says, "Mate you need to settle up. Otherwise it's going to get

ugly. It's two weeks since you paid anything. You're taking the piss mate. Do you take me for a soft touch or something, mate?"

Well, at least that's what I imagine he'd wanted to say, because I don't hang around to listen. Squirming, I manage to free myself from his grip and dart across the street, nearly getting flattened by a cruising V8. Electric blue with lights chasing across the dashboard, and jam full of a bunch of Samoan super heavyweights. They're squeezed in so tight they look as though they'd never get out. Shit did I put a dent in the hood? Those guys don't need *a reason* to beat the crap out of you. I'd be dog meat if they get hold of me. I hear them roar but daren't look back; just keep running. It's about now I would give my left testicle to be down The Union with those mates who've lived and died in Newtown their whole lives. That's what had been in the back of my mind as I was heading there. Seeking my version of normality. Just for half an hour, to be able to saunter in and smell the beer on the floor, been there so long it stinks like piss. To play pool, and not give a fuck that everyone kicks my arse. Or to get lost in that chick's voice. Friend of a friend. Never had the chance to go there though, hehe, I'd give up my other one willingly for a shot. Just a pub singer, but she can put so much feeling into the song you never want it to stop. Want to wake up next to her, with her still singing some Blues song that makes you weep. But then you end up laughing until you can't stop, until you start crying again at the beauty of it.

Fortunately the deli owner doesn't know exactly where I live so I'm not expecting a follow up, but a pleasant evening at The Union - yeah, well, maybe another night. Bit too close to the bastard's shop. Instead I'm ducking into the maze of side streets. Double backing a few times - hehe, yeah James Bond style. And then there's the apartment building straight ahead. Now, the fluoro lights on the cafes opposite light up the area surrounding my flat like a footy pitch. Which under normal circumstances is a pain in the arse but presently I'm thinking, yeah, quite handy actually. No chance for someone to lurk in the shadows, spring out and tumble me into a black limo. I'm taking no chances though. I hang around the least lit side street, checking out if there's anyone looks suspicious. Someone I

haven't seen before. But in fact the streets are mostly empty. A few local kids running around making the most of the tail end of the weekend. The usual Olds getting dragged along by their dogs. Give it another minute. Feels like the coast is clear, then walk slowly across the road and run up the stairs.

Back in the apartment I head straight for the office. Standing in front of the desk I look down at my hands and I notice they're shaking slightly, so I light one up and take a deep drag. OK, no more excuses, I need to get down to writing the article. Mentally checking off the things I need, yeah, looks like I've got everything: the documents in a neat pile next to the computer, lid open and lights blinking, looking like an expectant dog waiting to go for its morning walk. And The Bible... The Bible, fuck it's not on the desk, where it should be. I start rummaging around the office looking for it. Before long the place looks like it's already been turned over. Yeah I should have put the old Filofax - which has the contact details of every editor I've ever done a job for - onto a computer database. Wished I had right then, but who the fuck does that? Having looked everywhere I can think of, I'm standing there, wondering what the fuck to do next, when I jump about a metre in the air.

# Chapter Five

The phone just rang. And immediately I'm thinking, how the fuck did Gargon track me down so quick! Then I realize it's just one of the kids calling me using one of our secret codes – five rings, hang up, five rings. I wonder, what the fuck do they want? Probably not getting things their way, so want to have a bitch about how terrible my wife is and how wonderful I am. Which never makes me feel better, because I've heard them say the same thing to her when they're pissed off with me. I just get to the phone when it stops ringing but I know it won't be long before they ring back again, if they've got the shits bad enough. For some reason, self interest, ego, whatever uncharitable reason you want to think of, I haven't given a moment's thought to how all this shit might affect my two youngest. I'm assuming this much though: these people won't stop at anything. Of course, in the past when I'd got a story printed and someone rang up making threats I'd wondered what I could do to protect the kids. They're your Achilles heel, right?

Now, I've found, to my surprise as much as anyone, that I'm as brave as the next man when there's only my own arse at stake, but as soon as my kids are threatened, I'm jelly. It doesn't help I recently had a premonition that something would happen to Grace. I'd balled my eyes out, just at the thought of it. That said, despite all the headlines I've put out that have pissed off a lot of powerful and - at the time of the expose - very angry people, I've only needed protection once. A drug dealer got put away for a long stretch as an indirect result of one of my stories. Except he didn't see it that way: as far as he was concerned I was all responsible. Fortunately, not long after that his business got swallowed up by another gang so his funds dried up. But not before he'd sent a pair of Neanderthals - Lebanese boys with some unpleasant sexual preferences - to pay me a visit. Let's just say the baseball bat didn't just get used to beat the living shit out of me. For the threats, and the bashing I got from his boys, the drug boss ended up getting a few more years on top of the original sentence.

Not surprisingly, after the beating I was shit scared enough that I told Jules to keep the kids and not let them call me, while I skipped the country for a few months to let the heat die down. And who could forget Tony Fisher, the politician with the gambling problem? He'd been still powerful when a less than flattering story I wrote about him broke. Powerful enough to make me sweat for a bit. And with him the cops weren't so helpful. I guess he must have still had membership of one of those secret handshake clubs. Connections like that can be relied on through thick and thin. Then again, I'm assuming I'm dealing with CIA, and as far as I know there's no Masonic links there, but what the fuck do I know?

Sometimes I feel like the smallest minnow swimming against this huge tide and nothing I do is going to make the slightest fucking difference to my outcome. And that is the power of the elite in a nutshell. What's worse, in this case I've really no fucking idea who I'm up against, though I've a nasty feeling I'm going to find out very soon. About as soon as the guys from Gargon get their act together. Equally it could be one of the cunts on the BPOD list; given their wealth that could be almost any one of them. OK, so once again I'm back to pacing around the flat. Caged animal - but not your lion / tiger, more the terrified little rodent just before the snake gets let in the cage for his dinner. I keep having to tell myself, mate whatever happens, you've done all you can to protect the kids. After the scare with the Drug Baron we set things up so, including Hamish, they all carry their mother's name and all their personal records are linked to her. So, in theory at least, nothing connects them to me. But this is reality, so if we're talking about the right echelons of mega power, which I think we can safely assume in this case, there's really fuck all you can do. Whatever they want, whoever they want, they just gotta click their fingers and they will get.

As this reality starts to sink in something snaps in me and I start throwing stuff around the office and screaming my lungs out. I pick up the phone and am looking forward to seeing it smash to pieces against the wall. About now the neighbour's light goes on upstairs and he starts pounding on the floor. This usually only happens when I'm stoned and playing the music too loud. I guess I must have been making a fair racket,

since the old fella puts up with a lot before he loses it, which brings me to my senses some. And then the fucking phone rings again.

I guess the protective instinct kicks in at that point because my mind starts to settle and think not of myself but how I'm going to keep my kids out of this mess I've dumped myself in. Christ, why couldn't I have just gone out and mowed the lawn like everyone else, instead of being a smart arse and thinking I can change the world? Why don't I just pull the fucking trigger now, and save us all the trouble? But I won't. Survival instinct is powerful with me, enough to look inevitable death in the face and still keep fighting. Not that we're there yet, I hope. I pick up the phone. It's Jules, at the end of her tether with the kids. I try to focus on what she's blahing about and to my relief the pointless shit, which I've heard a million times before, actually has the opposite of its usual effect. She wants me to take them off her hands. I hesitate, and even contemplate, for a millisecond, telling her what is going on. Whenever I'm having to deal with Jules I sense the leash tighten. And, as is so often the case, in turn this starts me thinking about Robbo. Fuck, what I would give to be out of this place right now, somewhere more basic, "where you can still escape, mate, a place you can move without a fucking CCTV camera in your face from every fucking angle." Robbo left Australia years ago, and used to base himself in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. He'd got to hate living in Australia. "Mate, this is the hub, around the ASEAN region. Australia, it's a fucking backwater, mate, nothing worth writing about is ever going to happen there. You know what's the fucking shame, mate? It could have really been something, a new direction from the usual western bullshit, but there's no chance of that, not with the dickwads running the country. Mark my words mate, in less than ten years half of the Rich List will be full of Australian fucking miners who've made their billions by raping our land of its natural resources, and all with the connivance of government."

"Giving the fucking money away, when it should have been used to develop real industries, like they're doing in Malaysia. Mate there's examples all over, you don't have to look far to see how the political cunts have wasted the opportunity to make Australia a manufacturing powerhouse. And don't think there'll be another fucking chance, because

all the resources are gone mate, already given away." Actually, Robbo loved Australia, it was the people running it he couldn't stand. "Mate, if I'm ever on my last legs, I'll line the fucking lot of them up and put a bullet in the back of their heads, every fucking last one of them." But when he was really pissed he'd tell me about another place he loved. And that's where I'd like to be right now: "Mate, if I'm not around ASEAN, then I'll be back in Central America, on an island. Just me and the dog, yeah." But, dead serious, he'd never tell me the name of it, or how to find it. Said he'd never told anyone, "It's the final getaway, mate, when there's nowhere else to go." He told me he bought a little guest house on the island, and planned one day to retire there full time. He made the place sound like some kind of Shangri La. And he meant it; Robbo could move at the drop of a hat, no baggage literally. One backpack was all he allowed himself; anything that wouldn't fit in, throw it out. "Don't fucking need it anyway, mate", he'd growl. And that's the attitude I need to have right now: no baggage, just go for it.

Of course.... OF COURSE.... it's crossed my mind that I might be completely paranoid and blown this whole thing up out of nothing. Granted, very little has actually happened. But, no, instincts are telling me I'm in shit deep. Now, most people, on the back of what I've got so far, would ignore the little voice of warning, right? They certainly wouldn't take the kind of action I'm planning on, for myself, for Sharon and Timmy, and for the kids if I get lumbered with them. Which is looking very fucking likely right now. And, fair enough, I might have the same blasé attitude, ignoring the instincts, if something hadn't happened to me that changed things, forever. Actually, it concerned Tony Fisher, the politician I mentioned earlier, the one with Masonic connections. Mate, when you have a premonition there's something wrong with your car, which makes you hesitate to go near it. Then, thirty seconds later, when you're standing just fifty metres from it with the kids on each hand, and the thing explodes into a fire ball, mate, you take a lot of fucking notice of your instincts after that. I'll never forget the screams of the kids as these huge lumps of smouldering metal are raining down around us. That was a true miracle none of us were hit.

OK, Mr fucking Pedantic, let's recap if you insist. Look through a web site then a few files I was looking at suddenly disappear and the computer unexpectedly turns itself off. Internet connection severed. Big deal. All down to technical glitch. Yeah, *you could look at it that way*. That's how Jules would for sure, and still find something to blame me for. Still on the line, she says she wants me to come and take them off her hands.

"YES, right now!" I plead with her. "Are you sure they can't stay with you til next weekend. I've got to go out of town for a few days. Urgent business." I should have saved my breath, because before she speaks I know what she's going to say. She tells me she'll pick them up Tuesday and immediately I'm thinking, better not to argue, or she'll start questioning me and I'll let something slip. It will only end up worse. Why? Because it ALWAYS fucking ends up worse with Jules. I don't get a chance anyway; before I get to try my excuses out for size the phone clicks with a finality only she can muster. I take a quick shower, and try to freshen up so she won't criticize my appearance, which by now has become part of the ritual of putting me down whenever she sees me. She'll do it either straight up. Or by a withering look - a quick one, two that eyes me up from head to toe and comes up with a zero. I often figure, the well of her vengeance must run very fucking deep.

In the office I leave everything as it is, and then I'm jumping down the stairs three at a time, and bumping past the old couple that live on the same floor as me that are snailing it up. The street's starting to empty a little now. Still wary I hesitate at the door and have a quick look around: no goons, and fortunately the deli owner isn't around, wanting to continue Our Little Chat. It's late by now, so I end up having to walk all the way up to The High Street to find a cab. As things are still buzzing on the main drag, once there it doesn't take too long to flag one down. At this time of night most of the bars are still open and the music blaring out onto the streets like a wall to wall nightclub. People spilling onto the sidewalks, drinks in hand, making assignations, or getting rebuffed; yeah, it's about that time when you find out if you've scored or you've wasted your cash and should have taken a safe bet down Kings Cross. After sliding into the back seat of the cab, I give the driver the address and try to settle down some. Snatch

some peace before having to front up to Julie. But the driver has other ideas, so I'm forced into a desultory conversation with him, revolving around how his kids are lazy cunts and fleece him for all the money he's got. I can understand most of what he's saying, which is unusual for a Sydney cab driver. Most of the cabbies I get, mate their accents are so fucking terrible you don't know what fucking language they're talking. As he's crapping on, my mind drifts onto the day to day of living in a BPOD, what it would be like. I ask the cabbie how long he'd want to live for. I think he said a hundred, so he could outlive his kids and enjoy spending his money on himself for a change. At least I think that's what he says. Haha, life can be so fucking mundane at times, and we humans, so fucking primitive.

The ride seems to take forever. We pass through the run down industrial area to the south of Newtown, and get held up in a Sunday night traffic jam outside one of the warehouses that's been converted into a night club. The neons running the length of the building cast an eerie glow over the deserted street. Then the clouds clear and the full moon makes it almost light as dawn so that, uncluttered by the highrises, the open sky paints itself with her eerie beauty. Any other time it would have been an idyllic evening for a run. The warm, familiar feeling of loneliness. The silence - only the sound of my feet slapping on the tarmac disturbing the rhythm of my thoughts.

Eventually we make it to the city centre and he drops me off at the corner of George Street and the narrow lane where the theatre is. The street is one of those with boutiques full of useless but very expensive bling where only bored, high maintenance wives of rich men can afford to shop. I see Jules straight away, standing with the kids about half way down, out the front of the theatre. She'd taken them to see a famous teen band Grace was into that millisecond. The usual bullshit and show, couldn't sing for shit and half of them gay. Nothing wrong with that, but don't pretend different, not for a wad of cash anyway. Is anything real any more? Does anyone care if it is?

Even George Street is deserted, not a single car in sight. Times like this it's hard to picture it, full on in the buzz of day - people, cars, the

noise. But this is Sunday evening, the family outings are over, kids are mostly now at home in front of the TV or round at grandma's for Sunday Dinner. I had a life like that once. When I had it, I didn't want it, and I still don't want it. Whoever said having kids had to be like that? Why does real excitement and adventure have to stop? Wouldn't they, the kids I mean, wouldn't they want a slice of that too? Don't they only sit in front of the X-Box because there's no one telling them, *Hey, we're heading out the door, we don't know for how long, and we don't know where, but fuck it we're going anyway.*

Jules tried, I have to give her that. She worked her arse off and got into film editing. When the kids came along it was very part time. Though now with the maintenance she can afford a carer so she's back into it full time. Seems to genuinely enjoy it. She used to give me a long rein. And with no other strings things could have bumbled on in what some people would call a normal marriage. But there were expectations, a long fucking list of them, which usually involved turning our little two up, two down into a fucking palace. I'm a practical man, when it comes to avoiding getting my head blown off, but put a spanner in my hand and it's as likely to end up through the kitchen window. Every fucking weekend she'd have some fucking project waiting for me, it got so as I'd dread going home. Then, as my career took off, the jealousy kicked in, and it became more about control.

When a women says, *Can you please piss sitting down*, it's got nothing to do with the bullshit reasons she gives you for wanting you to piss like a girl. Yeah, take my word for it. It's to control you, to emasculate you. And when she withholds sex, uses it as a weapon, you know you're onto the last chapter. For me the final straw was when she wanted me to stop going on assignment. She justified it by saying *It's irresponsible, you've got two kids now, what if you got yourself killed?* Of course she'd line up her mother and a posse of friends to back up her version, and make me look the cunt. But a man has to risk, to place himself in danger, otherwise he's dead inside. That's a statement by the way. Not an invitation for debate. So if you want a man around, that goes with the territory. She would never accept that, even started telling me how a Real

Man would behave. I guess we should have talked and if we couldn't work it out then gone our separate ways. But I can be a dick, so that's how I ended up in bed with a girl I didn't even like. So I looked the cunt. But I don't care - life isn't a fucking popularity contest. It's about being true to yourself, as best you can, and doing something you believe in. And, despite all my weaknesses, all my fucked upness, that I have always done. And when I can't any more, that will be the time to quit.

I dawdle at the end of the street, deliberately staying in the shadows so they don't see me. I want to get a sense of the mood she's in: what I've got coming. It doesn't take long. The kids look bored and restless. Jules jumpy, looking around with those jerky movements that I once tried to calm. But, like so many things I'd tried to do for her, it never worked. If truth be told, invariably I made it worse. She's always on edge with me, not sure what I'm going to do next, but certain it will be something she'll disapprove of. Or maybe that's just my way of thinking about us. Negative. We two could conjure up a rain cloud on the brightest of days.

When she does finally see me Jules nods briefly then crosses the street and slips into a café opposite the theatre. By the time I arrive they've already all got cocoa in steaming mugs, and faces flushed, and thank fuck, looking a little more relaxed. They're the only customers in the café, but the old fella has a smile on, genuine, and he looks at me in a friendly way. What the hell, it might be the last time we do something together for a while, so I call over for a cappo, and sit down on the last empty chair. As you'd expect opposite a theatre, the walls are covered with photos of people staring out with that look like they think they're a star, a household name, when the reality is they never were and no one ever had any idea who the fuck they were. The old fella has a flamboyance about him, like he might have been on the stage once. In fact, the way he acts you could say he is now - the wife and the others working there, supporting cast. Music, opera I suppose, is playing loud enough to give the place a mood. The kids say hi and look pleased to see me, but with so much going on in my head I'm finding it an effort to concentrate on the conversation Jules is having with them. Whilst they're talking suburbia I'm flicking through all the possibilities of my future, none of which are

pleasant. When I do eventually speak I can hear my voice cracking. I hope it isn't enough for any of them to notice. "How was the show?"

But Jules isn't interested in small talk and is wallowing in one of her shit moods. Whilst the kids are nattering on to each other about the show she asides, in a whisper that she still manages to get an edge into, "You can keep them for the rest of the week, I'm going away for the long weekend up the coast." Then gives me that look which says, don't bother arguing; you can drag it out, but it's not gonna change anything. Yeah, for a moment there I'd forgotten it's the Easter long weekend. Despite the look, my first reaction is still to think of an excuse to keep the kids off my hands, but then I think, well, if I'm stuck with them, the longer I can put off having to explain to Jules what's going down the better it will be. I've tried coming up with some bullshit stories in the past but she always sees through them, so I've given up long ago trying to garbage my way out of a mess. Yeah, right now I'm not up for the holocaust she'll let rip when I tell her what I've done, and what is maybe, probably, going to happen.

But then, as I'm sitting there in the cafe, thinking that to an outsider we must look all the world like happy families, a numbing lethargy comes over me. In a way wouldn't it be better to just get it over with? Spill the beans and let all her hatred wash over me? Guaranteed it would be a vitriol of trivial suburban bullshit, but at least it would be a distraction from the crap spinning around in my head right now. But of course I lose my nerve before I can blurt it out and instead do smalltalk. Already I can see she's not really listening to what I'm saying: yeah, I guess most of the time neither of us takes much notice of what the other is saying. She's already gone, away up the North Coast, to escape from me, and probably from life if she could...

To be honest, I don't give a fuck what the reason is, because I've seen the look she's got in her eyes too many times to give a shit anymore. Same that I see in a lot of people: this is not what she was expecting from life, but that's how it is and, to her mind, there's nothing she can do about it. Usually that's followed by an attitude, well, if my life is fucked, let's make everyone else's fucked too. I've been on the end of that enough times with Jules, and maybe deserved some of it, but I'm beyond it most of the time.

Switching my attention, I try to concentrate on what Grace is saying and then she's tugging at my arm, and I get the look that tells me she wants to go. Fergus just looks happy to see me and Jules together, even if it is across a table, the gap about as wide as The Grand Canyon.

I try to think of something nice to say. Despite all the bitching I'd hate to think the last thing I'd say to Jules, or she to me, was something mean or petty. "You're looking good Jules. How's Geoff? Is he going up the coast with you?" You could never be sure with those two, they have one of those on / off relationships. Sometimes she seems to enjoy the drama of it but mostly I think she likes to know she's in control, which I know she never felt with me.

I feel the tension drop a bit. *That wasn't so hard*, I tell myself: pat on the back. On the rare occasions when her face softens Jules still looks beautiful. "I haven't decided yet. I think I just need some time away on my own. Work is stressing me out." Her eyes slide across my face, as if she's hiding something. Another fight, maybe - what the hell do I care? So long as he doesn't beat her up, what's it to do with me? But I do care, and I suppose I always will. Does she feel the same? Sometimes I think she does; I hope she does. It seems important that we get as much right as we can today; it'd be worth the effort. We talk a bit more and say some nice things to each other which we should have said a long time ago. For a while after we split up we'd been able to talk about anything to each other, but then other people got in the way, and it turned sour. Stilted, even worse than when we were married. But right now I could go on sitting here together forever, and in the end it's Jules that gets up. We give each other a hug, and mean it, but love doesn't stretch to a kiss. The kids stand around looking happy, especially Grace. She tries not show it, but our break up affected her badly. After paying him, the café owner smiles at us and says something in Italian to his wife, then waves us down a taxi. Jules is parked across the other side of the city so we all get in the cab. As we slip across town, down streets full of shadows and empty silence, the kids babble on about the show.

Time passes quickly and before I've had time to say any of the things I'd wanted to, we're dropping Jules off. She gives the kids a kiss goodnight

then slides quickly out the cab. I try to take her hand but she pulls away and quickly closes the door without looking at me. As we pull away I look back to check she's got to her car safe, but she hasn't moved. Jules looks small and alone, and it crosses my mind to wonder what she thinks about us: was it worth it, or is it all regret? But then my thoughts turn to the kids. In this cocoon of night time silence, the faint yellow light outside, the taxi flying down a stream of identical suburban streets, I look down at them, one sitting either side of me. A pair of small faces, occasionally lit by the street lights. Fergus looks blank, on the verge of sleep, but there's concern in Grace's expression. For half an hour, distracted by Jules and the kids, I'd forgotten about the shit I've got myself into, which is good because I find it's cleared my head a little and a plan's starting to take shape. It's not a good one, but I'm not too bothered, I have this heavy feeling I can't shake that anything I do is just putting off the inevitable. Looking at the kids again, and thinking back over the implications of what's happened today, I can't escape the thought that, yeah, this would have to be the biggest cunt I've ever felt.

# Chapter Six

For once the taxi driver is silent, for which I'm grateful. I'm not in the mood for small talk; even with the kids it's a struggle. I'm preoccupied running over my options which, with time chasing at my heels, are diminishing rapidly. Gargon is based in The States, right? So I should be able to assume we're safe for a few hours yet. Then again, it's only a phone call to the local police; make up a good story and I'm locked up. The cops would have been very obliging I'm sure. They've been after my balls for a long time, ever since I did an expose of police involvement in drug related / organized crime. Ever had that feeling that everything you've ever done seems to be leading up to a point? Fuck, why did Jules have to dump the fucking kids on me, this of all times?

Grace breaks into my thoughts. "Where are we going, dad? This isn't the way home."

I'd forgotten to tell them where we're going: the first stage of *Piss Weak Plan A*. "We're going to Sharon's. Do you remember her?" They'd only seen her once before because Jules didn't approve of them "going to a prostitute's house." Like I said, I was never good at hiding anything from Jules. Sharon, the situation, they're just another nail in the coffin as far as she's concerned. I'm sure Jules thinks I'm going to end up a wino down in Hyde Park. Hehe, right now that kind of future doesn't look half bad: when it looks like you've got no fucking future at all. I know Grace likes Sharon but I can see another question bubble up and I don't have to wait long. Giving me a stare she says, "Why are we going to Sharon's? We were over there only the other day. Is there something you're not telling us dad?" Grace, aged ten, is a step ahead of her old man. I mumble something about getting a good feed and a surprise but I know she doesn't buy it. In many ways Grace is easier to deal with than Fergus. Me and her are similar personalities, very open about our feelings, whereas Fergus is more like Jules. Jules has been more intimate with me than she's been with anyone else in her life, but still I think I barely know her. I hope I get to know Fergus better, for both our sakes.

So we head out of the city, towards the western suburbs where Sharon has a little terrace house. Now, for the plan to work I need the kid's passports, and fortunately I've got them as we'd been planning on a trip to Fiji for a while, so Jules had let me keep them. Money had delayed the trip to Fiji, seemingly indefinitely, to the point that Grace commented that I shouldn't worry about taking them. "When I've got a job I'll take you, so long as your false teeth don't fall out and you don't dribble." I think that was the gist of the conversation. God, is she going to break some hearts when she's older. I hope she'll show some mercy on them, but it would take her heart to be broken for that to happen. Either way, I hope she learns that lesson sooner rather than later, otherwise you'll be able to fill up a cemetery with the bodies of dead boyfriends. A graveyard of broken hearts, all to herself.

Persistent. Did I mention that too? "What's the surprise Dad? It's late and we're both tired. Ferg's asleep. Can't we just go home." I don't like lying to her, partly because I love her but mainly because she makes me look a dick when I get caught out, which is pretty much every time. It's my job to skewer the powerful and corrupt, so you'd think I'd have learned a few tricks for when the tables get turned on me, but it doesn't seem to work that way. I'm a soft fuck when it comes to the kids, but I don't mind. There's not many people in this world I can say I love, but I like to think that when it comes to the kids I'd do the right thing.

"You know I promised to take you to Fiji. Well there's been a change of plan. Sharon's going to take you to Penang. It's in Malaysia, an island just off the mainland and there's a big resort there. Her family is there too so you can do the tourist stuff and hang out with her nephews and nieces. Tim's going too, and there'll be plenty of other kids to play with too."

"Why can't we just go to Fiji with Sharon? And what about you? You're coming too, aren't you?" I'd hoped she hadn't notice that bit. Not a chance with that one. I lie again. I can see myself going down in her estimation with every one that trips out of my mouth. I'm not sure but I think I'm getting close to the bottom of the barrel with Grace, and it's crossed my mind a few times what that would look like. "Oh I've got a few things to do. But I'll be flying up in a few days." I try desperately to believe

in what I'm saying, because I know it's my only hope of convincing her. "It'll be great. There's awesome beaches, and the people are really friendly. It will be just like Fiji. You won't notice the difference, and with Sharon's family there you'll have heaps more fun than you would have had in Fiji."

I can see she's really pissed with me. "But I want to go to Fiji, all my friends have been there. They won't have even heard of Penang, they'll be totally unimpressed." Still in the taxi, with a few kilometres still to go before we get to Sharon, I can see Grace is about to kick off a tantrum and, in the process, wake Ferg up, neither of which I need right now. I try to sound like a real parent: definite, leaving no room for argument. "Well I thought it would be a change from the usual tourist thing. Anyway the flights are booked and you're heading off tonight." It seems to work enough for her to go silent, though I still get a look, that says, *You're gonna pay for this, mister*. Then she shifts a little away from me, and stares blankly out the window. Any other time I'd be looking for ways to make up but I'm glad of the break, and though I know it's about to burst, I want to keep going with this safe little bubble of normality for as long as I can.

Thinking ahead, I'm pretty confident I can get a flight to KL and then they can get the train through to the coast and catch the ferry from Butterworth to Penang. Sharon might even drive across. I'm still relying on their names on their passports being different to mine. To be honest, so long as they're well out of Australia I don't really care about anything else. I'd never liked them having their mother's names on their passports but I'm glad of it now. I doubt it will be enough to let them slip through before the net tightens around me, but I'm hoping. What the fuck else can I do?

I give Sharon a call on the mobile to let her know we're coming. She says she can't talk but she's cool as ever about our unexpected visit. She told me a week or so back that the everyday problems of my life would be like heaven compared to what she normally goes through. I guess this time she might have a different opinion. She never likes to talk about her work but it's obvious it kills her to do it, and it seems to get more difficult for her every day. It's hard to imagine the detail of working as a prostitute, of what happens and how you'd feel about yourself when it's happening, but it

doesn't take a fucking genius to get the overall picture. My thoughts of Sharon are interrupted by Grace, who's started up grumbling about Fiji again, and is still at it when we arrive at Sharon's place. Fergus is sleep oblivious, so I carry him from the taxi up the short driveway to Sharon's little town house. Half way up the little fella wakes up and wants to know where we are. I put him down and Grace takes his hand; he smiles up at her trustingly, as only little kids can. "Come on Ferg," Grace says, before giving me another of her looks.

Sharon is standing at the front door. A peck on the cheek, and I squeeze her hand. It's cool and soft, as always. She smiles up at me, her dark brown hair in a ponytail, which makes her look younger, and more vulnerable. Seeing her makes me feel a little better, but then I start to think maybe it isn't such a great idea to involve her. I bite my lip and try to gain some composure. "Hi darling, I brought the kids over. Where's Timmy?" She puts her arm around my waist. There's a tenderness in her voice when she responds, which is familiar now and comforting, because it's always there, whatever we're talking about. I like that. "Oh he's watching a DVD, the new Harry Potter I expect."

She pushes opened the front door. "Go on up kids, Timmy's watching a movie you might like." Grace and Ferg need no invitation, and they're already half way up the stairs to Timmy's room before she's finished speaking. I hear Tim say hello to them, and then his bedroom door's slammed shut. I lead Sharon by the hand into the kitchen and put the kettle on. She tells me about what she'd been up to over the week since I've seen her, but I can't handle the small talk for long. "Darling I need you to do me a big favour. I'll owe you forever. I need you to take the kids to Penang; it should only be for a few days."

Normally composed, she immediately looks worried and upset. Some instinct telling her something's wrong. This is, after all, a woman that's seen it all, and doesn't need any more of it from me. "You know you shouldn't ask me to do that. I can't go home. My parents keep questioning me about what I'm doing for money now. I'm sure my mother suspects something." What with everything else, I'd forgotten about her fear of going home. I don't know why I say it; I wasn't thinking about it, and I

certainly hadn't planned on saying it. "You don't need to worry about that, when you get back I think we should get married." I don't know if she's more shocked than me. We both grow silent, playing the idea around in our heads. But the more I think of it, the more it makes sense. We're standing in the middle of the kitchen, a little apart as I say it, about as mundane as it can get. But my heart's racing, and it feels like the most important day of my life. I take her in my arms and she leans into me. I think if I hadn't held her she'd have sunk to the floor, all the strength gone from her. I don't know how long we stand like that, but I could have let it go on forever. It's the best feeling: we're close, but this is the closest I've ever felt to anyone. A new level of feeling and trust.

I suppose I could have been a cunt and left out the hard part, but I know that if we're going to start off on the right foot I have to tell her the truth. I have to give her a chance to get out of my life. "Darling, there's something else, there's a reason I need you to take the kids. And when I've told you please don't think it's why I've asked you to marry me." I lift Sharon into my arms and walk up the short flight of stairs to the living room. With her still in my arms I sit down on the sofa. She sinks into my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck, her head nestled into my shoulder, and our faces almost touching. I hold her tight, and begin talking in a low voice, trying my best to stay calm. I don't want her to say anything until I've told her the whole story, otherwise I know she'll refuse to get involved. Who wouldn't? I tell her as much as I can and finish up by admitting, "Of course the less you know the better. I'm in a lot of danger. What I've uncovered is pretty sinister and I know it's only a matter of time before I get a visit from the people involved. But if I can get the story out then we've got nothing to worry about." I pause a second, "We'll all be safe then, I'm sure of that."

She unwinds herself from me, gets up and takes a few steps back. Looking down at me, a cold edge in her voice now, she says "This sounds really dangerous. Should you be getting me and Tim involved?" I lean forward and take her hand. She lets me pull her back down and, resting her head on my shoulder again, she appears resigned, as if she already knows, better than anyone, how our story's going to end. The lighting in

the room is soft, and there's no traffic in the street, giving me such a feeling of peace I haven't felt all day. The low rumble from the TV upstairs is the only sound. I lean my head against hers, and take her other hand. I'm starting to lose confidence in this plan, but I don't tell her, simply because I don't have any other that stands a hope in hell's chance.

"You're already involved because you know me. So if you're away from here you'll be a lot safer. As far away from me as possible. And my kids will be safe with you, because I'm hoping they won't make the connection back to me." Looking into her eyes, I can see she trusts me. I think she's the only person in the world that's ever trusted me as much as she does. But I can also see the scars of hurt from all that has gone on in her life. It doesn't seem fair to lay this on her, but where's the choice? It's all out of my hands now. "I didn't want to involve Jules. You know she's useless in this kind of situation. The less she knows the better. She's off for a few days so by the time she gets back it should have blown over." That's the best spin I can put on it. And if I can get something out into the media I really do think we have a chance. "They're not going to be interested in the kids if they're not right there. And I'll make sure I make it easy for them to find me. Hopefully once they've got me they'll lose interest in everyone else. Why would they be interested in you or the kids then?" She looks up, doubt creeping into her eyes again. "I don't know. Why are you asking me? It sounds like you're trying to convince yourself."

I guess I am. "Look I've been in situations like this before. It seems pretty bad at the start, like a big conspiracy, guns blazing and no way out. Movie stuff. But it usually just ends up in the hands of lawyers and becomes boring as all hell. I'll be up there before you know it." I smile, actually believing this bullshit for a second. Because that's what I want to happen. More than anything in the world. Sharon still looks worried, even a little angry now. This isn't going well, but there's nothing she's said I can argue with. "I still think you should have told Julie. I've never met her, but she's their mum. She's a right to know."

I shake my head. "Right. You don't know her. She'd have a nervous breakdown, and nothing would get done because we'd all be trying to pacify her. At least if she's not involved you've got a chance of getting the

kids on a plane out of here.” That I'm sure of. Maybe the only thing I'm certain of at that moment. Everything else is just hope. I take Sharon's face in my hands, and look again into her trusting eyes. Trying to keep her gaze is hard, because I know that in reality almost anything could happen to her and the kids over the next twenty four hours. Intently, I scan her face and realise that my admiration for her has lifted to another level. I really don't deserve her, or this degree of loyalty. She takes my hand and squeezes it. Then, smiling gently back at me, in her soft, smooth voice that I can listen to for hours, she jokes, “Well the ring had better be a head turner. Enough to make my sisters green.” I try not to give too much indication of my relief.

After that she gets up and it's all business. Talking about booking flights. Ringing her parents and telling them about her and the kids coming over. I know once Sharon is onto details, organizing, she'll be fine. She's no fear for herself. She told me that in the early days, just after the divorce, she wished she could have died. In fact, if it hadn't been for Timmy I think she probably would have killed herself. But more recently she's begun to see life as a more positive. The dark thoughts are less frequent, though she still doesn't understand why it's happened to her. She's a Buddhist and believes in karma, so she assumes it must have been in retribution for something awful she did in a previous life. When she first told me that, a while ago now, I thought it was fucked and I argued with her that sometimes shit happens and no one's to blame. She just shook her head, and the conversation ended there. It left a small gap between us, which neither of us was able to close at the time, though both of us tried.

We go up to the Timmy's room and give them the good news, then boot them down to the TV in the living room, while we get onto the Malaysian Airlines web site and start checking out flight times and availabilities. Everything has departed or is already booked out, but then we get a lucky break. Someone must have just cancelled because suddenly five seats come free on a flight going tonight, a red eye special. Which is great, but looking at the flight time the chances of us making it are very slim. But then again, we don't have a choice, it has to be tonight. Sharon tries to persuade me to go with them but I assure her Tim will be safer without me around. Whilst I pay for the flights and arrange a taxi, Sharon

gets the kids revved up about the trip so, by the time I get down to the kitchen, I find they're all packed and the kids barely needing a plane to get them there. There's a pile of suitcases and backpacks stacked by the front door, the kids' are all beaming faces, and Sharon is standing in the middle of them, also smile as wide as. Of course, I'm pleased she's got them sorted so quickly but I can't help but notice that it looks like she's packed enough for a month. "Maybe I could fit Ferg and Grace in one of the cases and save us on the fares."

Grace gives me the withering look I deserve. Obviously she still hasn't forgiven me for piking on the trip to Fiji. Maybe she thinks I can't afford it, and this is my idea of a cheap fallback? Kids these days, fuck they don't know how good they got it. In another way though, not: like they know too much, too soon. Glancing at her again, I can tell Grace is on to me, that there's more to what's going on. And Grace being Grace, for sure she's not going to let up until she's found out everything. Ferg, on the other hand, he's oblivious most of the time. Wouldn't I wish for that right now for myself?

Of course, for the kids it's just one big adventure: they can't wait for the taxi to arrive, while Sharon and I go round turning everything off. Then me and the kids are out and stood on the kerb, looking up into the night sky counting stars, while Sharon locks her little place up. As she closes the front door I see her look up at a window, a wistful expression on her face. I think she'd found some peace here, and maybe I've just ripped it to shreds. The street itself is empty, not a soul out. Yeah, it's starting to get late but anyway, this is Western Sydney suburbia, so what reason would anyone have to be out at this time when the Sunday evening Reality Shows are on and dinner in the microwave?

We're all itching to get going, but after another five minutes of waiting and the cab still hasn't arrived, the kids are starting to get restless. You'd think it was eight in the morning after a good night's sleep, the energy they've got. I keep ringing the cab company but I'm only ever getting an answering machine. I think of stealing a car, but who the hell really knows how to hotwire a car? Once again I'm reminded how totally unprepared I am for this situation. Yeah, I'm definitely no James Bond.

Sure, I'm wicked with a pen, but not the ones that can kill you. This starts me worrying about the kids again. They're standing together, and I can see Fergus is trying to keep up with the older ones, but he's starting to get the sleeps again, so I go over and take him in my arms. I keep looking up and down the street, but there's still no sign of a cab. I feel a hand on my arm, it's Grace. She looks up at me, suddenly looking so very young. She's dead beat too, her usual self confidence evaporated, but she's trying hard not to show it. After all, ten years isn't very old when your world is suddenly turned upside down. Really, she hardly knows Sharon, and she knows I'm not telling her the truth, or at least leaving a whole lot of the story out. Don't girls just have that instinct born with them? I'm starting to bristle, but the look she gives me is enough. She still loves me, but does she wish she had a different dad sometimes?

Sharon comes over and gives me a hug, then she takes Timmy's hand and stands a little apart from us. Timmy wants to jump in the puddles and drags at her hand. It's sometimes easy to forget I've only known Sharon for six months, sometimes it feels like we've known each other for ever. Maybe it's because I'm so used to Jules being so edgy, so fidgety, anyhow Sharon looks so serene, as if nothing would faze her. A bit of that could rub off on me, and help. It makes me realise again how much I love her, for lots of reasons, but especially because of her attitude to all the shit that's come her way. She's still a good, kind and considerate person despite everything, when most people would have become bitter and wanted to take it out on the world. Just then she looks over at me and I mouth the words I want to say out loud, but can't in front of the kids. She smiles back, and nods, like she gets it.

By the time the taxi's arrived we have only fifteen minutes to get to the airport. But we're close by and we've still a chance to make it. The roads are deserted so it's a straight run and we arrive still with a few minutes to spare before Check In closes. Sharon takes the tickets and runs off to find the right counter, while I sort out the taxi driver and play hunt the trolley. Eventually Timmy finds one and we pile everything on, but there's still Sharon's suitcase to sort out. She's going to be way overweight, so I head for the nearest shop selling bags and buy a holdall. Ferg seems

happy to hang around with me, while I send Grace off to a games shop with Timmy, to distract him while I toss out most of Sharon's stuff into the nearest bin. After that I get the kids together and we head off in search of Sharon. Timmy is being a pain, running off, but when we can't find his mum he starts to look scared and comes over to me. Grace does the good thing and takes his hand, which seems to calm him down a bit.

By now Fergus is fast asleep again, sprawled across the luggage on the trolley. Looking much like a bag himself. I look up at the Departures screen and see the check in desk for the KL flight has closed. Shit, have we missed it? If that's the case that means we'd have to come back the next day and do it all over again. But, fuck, that that would be too late. Gargon would have had plenty of time to track us down by then. Still no sign of Sharon, but then we all see her at the same time. Running towards us, a big grin across her face. Timmy lets go of Grace's hand and runs to her. Sharon shouts, "Quick, they're holding the flight. But you'll have to dump my case. They didnt have time to do a luggage check in."

I lift up the holdall. At first she doesn't understand. But when she sees her case isn't with the rest of the hand luggage, she laughs and looks relieved. Immediately she turns and starts running the other way, calling to the kids to follow. She darts down between two lines of tourists, while we're doing our best to keep up. In the end I put Timmy on the trolley too, while Grace is running alongside Sharon. Don't we look for all the world as if we're all just off on a family holiday in the sun? Picture postcard. I catch a couple of guys looking at Sharon. Any other day I'd have thought they were just eyeing her up and been flattered and proud that she's my girlfriend. But now I'm on one track: are they trailing us? It makes me run a little faster, and also makes me feel like if I don't get them on this flight and the hell out of here I will have failed them. Coming from me that's saying something. I hold a few records in the Fuck Up Book, believe me.

We take a wrong turning at one point, but eventually get to the right departure gate. From going at double speed, suddenly everything's in slow motion. Fergus wakes up on cue, and stretches himself lazily, while Grace comes over and gives me a big hug around my legs. I kneel down and hug her as hard as I can. I can feel tears on my cheeks: at first I thought they

were hers but then I realize it's me crying. She wipes my face and kissed my eyes. "It's only a few days dad. And me and Ferg will be fine with Sharon. I really like her, dad. I can see why you like her too." I don't know if she means any of what she's saying, but it's kind of her to say it anyway. She can be like that. Fergus doesn't say a word, he just walks slowly over to me. Grace goes over to stand by Sharon again, with Timmy, who's holding tightly onto his mum's hand. Grace picks up her bag and heaves it over her shoulder, looking small, but self contained.

I hold Fergus, wishing I could think of something to say that would make him feel safe. I hear a muffled "I want mummy" into my neck. "I know Ferg, mate, but mummy's away for a few days. I'll be up before you know it." I thought he was going to cry, but he just looks at me, with that look I've seen Jules give me a million times. Disappointment. I've let him down, but he isn't going to say anything because there's nothing to be done, and he doesn't want to be disloyal. I glance over at Sharon and, like most women can, she instinctively picks up there's something wrong. She comes over and bends down, at Fergus level. Gently takes one of his hands and then leads him over to Grace. He doesn't resist, just looks back at me once with that same expression, and then turns away, takes Grace by the other hand and starts walking through the passport control gate. I feel a complete cunt. Twice in one day: I wish I could say that was a record, but I'd be lying if I did.

Just before they pass through the security gate I run over to Sharon and give her a quick hug and kiss. The last I see of them is Sharon in the middle with the two boys hanging off her right hand and Grace holding tightly to her left. And then they're gone. Straining, wanting to hear her voice, I think I catch Sharon telling them about the monkey temple and the beaches they'll visit, and how they'll visit her old parents and the cousins. Maybe I just imagined it: I love the sound of her voice, whenever I hear it the world seems a little brighter. Easier to endure. Then I'm alone, kind of huddled in a corner against the big window overlooking the runways. Forgetting where I am for a second, I light up. The familiar burning sensation in my throat comforts me. Then, turning away, my legs feeling heavy and unwilling, I begin the slow walk out, through long, silent

corridors. It doesn't feel like distance I'm covering but time, walking into my future. Down the escalator and passing through Arrivals, the lights seem over bright and, with so many people still milling around, the sense of unreality becomes overwhelming. Suddenly I get the urge to run and once I've started it feels like I'll never be able to stop.

# Chapter Seven

Before I know it I'm back at my place and running up the stairs to my apartment. Just as I turn the key in the lock the timer switches off the hall lights and, with the stairwell suddenly pitch black, I notice a strip of light under my front door. My first instinct is to run, but my legs are shaking so much, feel so piss weak, I know I wouldn't make it down the stairs. But then something snaps in me, a recollection of Craig. How in that hotel room in Vietnam he went down without a whimper. And I think, *No, no, that's not how it's going to be for me. If it's going to blow up, let it be now, fuck it, I'm past caring.*

Pushing the door wide it slams against the wall, and the noise is some kind of comfort from the silence that preceded it, which seemed like a prelude to something very ugly. I walk fast into the office, trying to blank all thought from my mind, because once that starts I'll be jelly, pissing my pants. Ever had that feeling of anticlimax, like you've built something up out of nothing? Yeah, standing in the middle of the office, and everything is exactly as I left it. Dickwad, I must have only left the fucking lights on. I notice my arms are pumped, Popeye like. My shoulders slump. Who the fuck am I kidding? I start to laugh, and then at some point it turns to tears and I drop to my knees, face in hands, balling my eyes out. Face down on the carpet I continue with the tears.

I don't know how long I was like that but at some point I must have fallen asleep. Because some time later I come to with one of the neighbours standing just inside the front door asking me if I'm alright. Bleary, I don't do a good job of explaining, but they leave anyway, though I notice the wife still looking concerned. Is it for me, or is she wondering whether she's got another Crackhead in the building to contend with? Fucking suburbia, doesn't anything ever go wrong with their lives? Or maybe that's the way they want it, doing all they can to create a flatline existence. After the couple leave I start wracking my brains. Did I turn the lights off? Did I? Fuck knows; how does anyone remember that kind of

detail? But I do start to wonder. Has someone been here already? Looking out over the park, dark and I hope empty, I pick up the phone. Then put it down again. Where am I going to start? Still jumpy, I walk round the flat, just to make sure there's no one hiding, about to pounce out on me. Sounds stupid, but in situation like this you do that kind of shit. There isn't a sound, as if the volume has been turned to zero. You could have heard a mouse fart.

Before I got the phone call from Jules, my plan had been to get the article out as quickly as I could, but with all the time wasted getting Sharon and the kids out of the way I'm thinking now I need to do something about covering my arse before I start getting down to the writing. On this, of course, I'm out of my league, I need to speak to someone who's been in these kinds of situations before. The first name that springs to mind is Geoff, an ex SAS officer I'd come across on an assignment. My involvement was as much a PR exercise as anything. An SAS platoon had gone too far, even for them – lined up and killed in cold blood the seven kids of a major league Afghan warlord with Taliban connections. Apparently, in their minds this was in fair retaliation for the blowing up of a school bus in Germany, near the biggest British Army base in Europe, which meant a lot of the victims were Army kids. The warlord had been judged responsible, albeit on fairly flimsy evidence which in fact later proved to be false. Maybe even was a set up by a rival.

OK, so it was bad enough to kill his kids, but in order to cover up the murders the SAS had killed three other children that happened to be in the warlord's home at the time the execution squad stormed it. Unfortunately, actually you'd have to say fortunately, these were no ordinary village kids. If they had been it's unlikely the war crime would ever have come to light. No, they happened to be the only children of The Pakistani Foreign Minister. Now, you might be asking why the children of a Minister of the Pakistani Government are best buddies with the kids of a man at the very top of the US government's most wanted list, but that's a question for someone else to pull the rug on.

Anyway, that's the background. The notoriously secretive SAS felt the need to polish up their image. Well, actually that probably came from

MOD. SAS don't give a fuck what anyone thinks, they're a law unto themselves. Some people, myself included, would say they're a dangerously out of control neo terrorist organisation. Politicians like to think they command this dangerous rabble. And hanker after playing The Great Game. Picturing themselves as shapers of the world. The reality – fuck, anyone can see it – is planets different. Fat, lazy cunts, without a single one of the prerequisites for leadership. To imagine they have the steel hard will, undaunted courage and determination to keep going when all else have given up, which is the clay from which true commander is made. Now that is a fucking joke of the first order. They're jelly bones without morals. Their guiding principle only being to preserve, for as long as possible, their snout in the trough.

Back to Geoff and the PR exercise. Now, PR, that might make it sound like it's not a real situation, which would be a mistake. SAS don't do anything but real, and this operation is no different. In fact, if I'm being completely honest, if I'd known how dangerous it was going to be I'd never have agreed to tag along, but they conveniently left out some of the details when they first told me about the operation. So, it's only once we're airborne and well on our way that I find out it's going to be a strike behind the lines, deep into enemy territory - on the ground intelligence gathering concerning weapons of mass destruction. Someone needed proof so they could justify more carnage in the slaughterhouse that used to be known as the cradle of civilisation. The CO, in his upper crust British Public School accent, goes on, matter of fact as you like, "Men, this is the most dangerous assignment we've undertaken for a very long time, which is why it was decided to make it a volunteer mission." Now, until the CO had started going through the final briefing, amidst the roar of the engines, I'd been mostly switched off, busying myself writing up set the scene notes. This gathered from what I'd been privy to seeing of their secret training for the attack, and the few conversations I'd been allowed with the SAS soldiers themselves. Now into the ops briefing I've got all ears. Hehe, heart skipping as the picture of what I've let myself in forgets clearer. But at the mention it's a volunteer mission I realise that more than anything I've ever done before I'm truly, fully, fucked. Because, knowing

what I do about the SAS, that can mean only one thing. All at the same time my balls tighten into little nuggets you'd struggle to find, my mouth goes Sahara Desert dry, and I want to throw up. Fuck! No one ever mentioned it was a fucking volunteer mission.