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Lay still

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MA Creative Writing

Lay Still

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Lay Still

Prologue

She walked to the hospital. When she got there, she was shown a room and told to wait. The floor was dirty. The only bed in the room was already occupied by a man who was coughing when he wasn't moaning. He was shaking with the effort of trying to fight some kind of infection. Another man was sitting in the corner, sweating from the heat, his shirt wrapped around his head. He looked up at her when she came in, his eyes drifting over her. He pinched his lips with his fingers. His nails were dirty; his hands were calloused and riddled with veins.

She found a spot on the dusty floor where she could lean her back against the wall, spread her feet out. Her belly was full and tight and bloated, the baby inside kicking.

The sun dropped but the heat rose. She felt pressure now. The pain had started too. No one had come to check on her yet. The man in the corner had fallen asleep with his shirt still wrapped around his head; he was using it as a pillow. The man on the bed was still moaning, still coughing.

She felt her belly, the baby moving at her touch. She smiled, but before her lips could stretch across her mouth they stopped, and she winced instead. She breathed in and out, tightening her eyes, and when the pain became unbearable she screamed.

The man in the corner woke up.

'Please get someone, my baby is coming!' she said.

The man shifted, his face still drenched in sweat. He repositioned his head and closed his eyes once more.

She screamed again, her hands clutching her stomach, her fingers pressing into her skin.

The baby was born in a Romanian village in the summer, which was a small mercy. The winter was much worse. Not because it was cold. There hadn't been a really cold winter for near a decade, not since the snow had stopped. No, winter would have been worse because there were fewer women able to supply milk from their breasts. Mothers fed their infants goat milk or coconut milk in the winter months and their motherhood never lasted long. But the birth was timely. Her son had been born in June and breastmilk flowed better in the heat; less chance of infection in the breast, fewer viruses lingering in the air.

And so she walked the streets, her supply as dry as the day, but her spirits still hopeful. If she was lucky she'd feed her baby for free. Some lactating women were kind in that way,

and her son would suckle on a stranger until he was full. If she was unlucky, she'd have to pay for a feeding - not much, but enough to leave her with nothing apart from the knowledge that her child would survive another day.

From dawn to sunset, from sunset to dawn, every three hours she walked the streets and knocked on doors. And she'd need to do this for the next six months or her baby would die.

1

Geia woke up in the dark. Naked and afraid, feeling like someone in one of those shows about people who volunteer to spend weeks in some remote part of the world contending with bug bites on their balls and scratchy cooches. Well, Geia's cooch itched, and maybe it was from a bug, and she was in some remote part of the world, but the similarities ended there.

She snuck out of bed, still sticky from the lubricant between her thighs. She didn't care about that though. She had other things to worry about. Her client had squeezed her left breast too hard, and she was sure a bruise would form there soon. But it was the roughness (oh yes, the roughness) that had left a mark on her. She was used to being treated like a whore. She was a whore after all, but the pain she felt down there was new. It stabbed at her sporadically, making her wince.

She made her way to the bathroom, stepping over thrown pillows and dishevelled clothes, thankful for her small frame and the plush carpet underfoot. She didn't turn on a light. She knew better than to do that. She pushed the door closed and exhaled, trying to release the pain, as though she was experiencing nothing more than a bad case of menstrual cramps. She tried to recall the events of last night. When did she pass out? Had she passed out? She couldn't remember. It was a possibility. It had happened before - not from pain but drugs.

As she peed, she ignored the metallic smell wafting up from the bowl. She wiped quickly, ignoring the burn. Even in the dark she could just make out the stain on the toilet paper. Smears of blood and who knew what else.

Nothing good.

She wanted to get dressed and leave before her client woke up. Geia usually liked it that way, but now she needed it. Fewer complications, no talk. Payment had already been made, the deed already done. She closed the lid but didn't flush and tip-toed out of the bathroom, her eyes better adjusted to the darkness. She could make out the hotel room now - just. She could see the bed, the curtains, the small glass desk near the front door. She could make out the pictures hanging on the walls. Her memory had filled the spaces where the light did not. One picture of colourful cubes floating above clouds, the other of a road covered in orange and red leaves. Both framed, both large.

Then the light turned on and the far side of the bed glowed yellow. Geia shielded her face with her hands for a second then dropped them. The scream in her throat disappeared as though it had never been there.

'What are you doing?' The client asked, still groggy from sleep.

'Getting dressed.'

'Why?'

'Time's up.'

Her client stood up. Geia watched as contours of skin shuffled over lean muscle. The octopus tattoo came alive with every stretch and movement, the tentacles curling around vertebrae. Her eyes drifted from the tattoo to the sheet on the bed, and she saw the blood. The ugly dried maroon stain as big as a dinner plate stared back.

'Time's up,' she said again.

'It's up when I say it is,' the client said, moving past her towards the bathroom.

'Time's up, time's up, time's up.'

'Cut that shit out,' the client said from the bathroom.

She turned around, fighting a bout of dizziness, and caught her reflection in the bathroom mirror. A child. Her brown hair, cut short, untidy. Her breasts no bigger than swollen bee stings. Her small frame and skinny legs. The skin around her thighs lined with scars from the razor she carried in her purse. Every part of her unformed and stunted, forever the same. Forever fourteen years old. The lusts of wealthy, perverted, and sick people had given her a living, the only semblance of life for a woman in a girl's body. A 40-something hooker wrapped in the flesh of innocence. She saw a line of blood running down her leg and turned away from it.

'Time's up,' she mouthed.

Geia felt an arm wrap around her and a moist kiss flatten the top of her head. Her client smelt her, like an animal, unaware of or uninterested in the blood on the sheet.

‘Get back in bed.’

‘Time’s-‘

The client pinched her lips shut and shoved her onto the bed stomach down. She felt the weight of her client pressing down on her lower back. It didn’t take much strength to hold her in place. She squirmed all the same. Her hands balled up into fists, partly gripping the sheet, as a finger entered her.

‘Time’s up!’

The client leant on the back of her neck with an elbow and slapped her hard with a free hand. The mattress absorbed most of the blow. The process was repeated. Once, twice, three times. Again and again, until her screams faded to yelps, and eventually, to sobs.

‘Say it again,’ the client teased, breathless.

‘Time’s up,’ Geia whimpered. ‘Time’s up.’

The client reached towards the bedside table, yanked the lamp from its socket and struck her with the base of it. She felt pain in her head rise and roar for the briefest moment.

2

Geia drifted in and out of consciousness. She heard her client showering at one point, then a second later speaking on the phone and getting dressed. Then she thought she heard laughing and reservations being made for dinner.

She finally came around to the lingering smell of soap - sweet and honeyed. But she could smell other things, too. Sweat. Urine. Was the urine hers? She wasn't sure. The curtains had been opened and the light was making her headache worse. She tried moving and a ripping sensation tore down the left side of her body. She squeezed her eyes shut and rolled over onto her back.

'Hey you,' she said to no one. 'Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary.' She blinked and spilt tears. 'You hear it, right? Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary.' She laughed even though it hurt her. 'Time's up,' she said again. 'Time's up, time's up, time's up.'

And it finally was.

3

The kids called the pills moisture beads because they were designed to trigger your saliva glands as they touched your tongue. With two delicate fingers Ebodia placed the red pill on her tongue, felt it effervesce. She swallowed, blood pounding in her head, and defied the greatest surety Mother Nature offered. It was a delight to feel time vanish like balloons in the sky.

Her body shook, just a flutter, not from ecstasy but from an involuntary reaction to the symphony of her achievement. She closed her eyes and strode through a swarm of colours. She

wanted above all to flick the switch, to watch the moment her ageing disappeared.

She opened her eyes to another flutter, this time her hand - a secondary reaction. A physical reverberation. Her former self resisting.

She released a winter-whistle sound from her throat, a sound she had never made before. Like everything else her body now had a story to tell whether or not she liked it.

A year before this moment, Ebodia had viewed the world with uncertainty. Her life as a primary school teacher was below her skill-set, and worse, she knew it, if not in front of others then in the small glimpses of herself. Then there was Francis. A small wooden chest of wedding clippings tucked in her cupboard behind shoeboxes was the sole reminder of her failed engagement to him. Tattered pictures of dresses, rough notes of venues and dates she couldn't bring herself to burn.

The miscarriage also had its part to play. She was more certain of that now than before. That fall on the stairwell just outside her classroom had taken everything away from her. A timeline of loss (and the start of her revival) traced back to that instant.

She remembered the sight of eight-year-olds, crowding around her in the stairwell, offering small hands and small help. Little Dean Matthews had almost slipped on the wedding magazine she had been reading; he had a frantic look on his face as he picked it up, dusting his shoe print off one of the

pages. She had felt her ankle burn and bite, but her rising panic had pushed past the pain.

Please let the baby be alright, she had thought. *Please God!*

But she knew the baby wasn't alright. The movement she had felt moments before the fall were now still. What she had made and grown in four months was no longer a part of her, lost to chance. She had killed a life and inadvertently breathed fire into hers.

It prompted her to quit her job, and after Francis left her, her face eased back into its soft caramel complexion. She hadn't gotten over the miscarriage. Not completely, but it helped that she hadn't known whether the baby was a boy or girl. There was no face to remember, no name to hold onto. Nothing bought, nothing romanticised. And after a while the lines around her eyes had relaxed and her anxiety had broken away, falling like dandelion seeds in a breeze. She was now responsible to no one but herself.

From her apartment, crammed onto the fifth floor of a bland building, she could just see the city stretched out below. The high-rise's stood stoically amidst the fog and pollution. The streets were littered with cars snaking their way back home from the day. The glow of lights emerged with dusk. Her hand shook, and a fleeting worry struck her just then. Had she taken the pill correctly? She wasn't sure. She hadn't bought it legally and there were no instructions. It

came in a clear plastic container with a price she could not afford. But if the past year had taught her anything it was that everything came at a price. And it was only a pill. There was little science to taking pills. She steadied her hand against the window and studied her long fingers, the rounded nails painted purple. No skin blemishes, moles, or discolouration. Soft, delicate skin that would remain that way for another 300 days. Maybe after then she would buy another pill. It was a gift to herself. A reward and a reminder of the person she had become. The person she could always be.

She felt another flutter and ignored it.

It would take another week before she realised something was wrong, and the pigment melanin of her irises began to fade white.

4

The heat from a billion stars above them, millions of light years away was not enough to warm them as they lay naked, wrapped in each other's arms. Palms shook in the shrouded moonlight above them, the dying leaves scraping against each other in the wind. In front of them the waves lapped across the bay; the sand under them gave way under their bodies. The island, with its roots of rock, lava and coral, dug deep into

the depths of the Pacific and held like a giant anchor as the Earth spun into a new day.

Mackenzie lay awake, still and fragile with George burrowed into her collar bone, drifting in and out of sleep.

'George are you awake?'

'Mmmm. You cold?'

'Yes. Let's head back.'

He pulled her closer. 'Soon.'

After a couple of minutes, Mackenzie felt him relax into sleep. She eased his arms off her body and stood up.

She walked back to the house alone, combing her fingers through her hair, removing the sand.

5

George hadn't changed much from his college days. He still possessed an air of arrogance that only the wealthy could tolerate. He had a hard mouth - made more of stone than flesh - that citified even the most barbaric noises. They had been together for six years, unmarried - not for George's lack of trying. Mackenzie had turned down his proposal twice. George had reasoned this in his own cruel way. It was not money he was after. His family had come from oil. His fortune was old, reinvested and multiplied many times over. But even now, standing on the veranda of his white colonial mansion erected 140 years prior on his family's private island, he was jealous

of Mackenzie's power, her influence. But her sudden rise in wealth was only an irritation to him like itching skin. He could live with that. It was her pull with people that really burned him. She was like a black hole and people were in a constant state of accretion, swirling around her.

George sipped on his coffee, staring at the vista before him. The sunken rose garden in full bloom did little to douse his annoyance this morning. Mackenzie joined him, her white dress fluttering in the wind briefly before blowing out like a puffed cheek behind her.

'It's a beautiful day,' Mackenzie said. 'Why don't we go sailing?'

George craned his neck around before firming his gaze over the garden once more. 'And have those little bastards staring at you?'

'They're only children.'

'My grandfather tried to evict them in the 80s. We couldn't do a damn thing then and look at them now.'

'They don't bother us.'

'You can hear their squeals from here. It breaks my heart to see what they've done to this place.'

'And what have they done?'

George poured the rest of his coffee on the lawn.

Mackenzie walked over and kissed his shoulder. 'It's a shame to be born into such poverty. Even you can admit that.'

'It's only shameful to stay that way.'

‘They’re happy.’

‘They only think they are.’

‘I saw a boy walking with his parents the other day on the beach. Every so often he’d run into the ocean and laugh. He looked so happy. Maybe there’s more to happiness than we realise.’

George said nothing.

‘George?’

‘Mmmm?’

‘I still think we should go sailing today.’

‘I have work.’ George moved across the veranda and sat down on a wicker rocker, the same rocking chair his father had used when George was a boy.

‘What work do you have to do?’

He rocked backwards. ‘Not everyone shares your luck.’

Mackenzie tucked her hair behind her ears. ‘Do you mean that?’

‘Why not? It’s true really. One magic pill was all it took.’

‘That’s not fair. Besides we’re supposed to be on vacation.’

‘I can’t relax this morning.’

‘Why? What’s gotten into you?’

‘I told you.’

‘Fine. Then you work. If you change your mind, you know where I’ll be.’

Mackenzie walked through a hallway framed with French windows on either side towards the master bedroom. The house was enormous, but furnished sparsely, in a way that only the rich could pull off. Still, she felt crowded in it and her bearings were constantly being challenged by the many passages and rooms.

She changed into a bikini, replaced her dress over it, slipped into some flip-flops, and packed a beach bag. She left through the veranda to try and persuade George into coming one last time, but he wasn't there anymore. The rocker stood still in the morning sun. She turned, half wanting to go and find him but she stopped herself. She knew he didn't have work to do. George was just in one of his moods, probably pouting somewhere in the house. He got this way when people didn't see things as he did.

She had met George Peck at a charity gala ball. The kind where people flaunted their wealth with expensive drinks and food and auctioned off obscure art. His eyes had burned through her like coals that night but he never spoke to her. In fact, she had gone up to him and struck up a conversation. It wasn't that George had been shy but rather that he seemed to be weighing her up in his mind. He kept his distance and she liked that. Everyone was always grovelling around her, complimenting her, giving her something, asking her for something. Not George. George's business partners would've called it pride; she only found it mysterious and interesting. Lately, she

wasn't so sure. George had once told her that she had legs that could steal an afternoon, and putting aside her thoughts, she made use of them now.

The beach could be seen from the house. Even so, the short walk always surprised her. The pathway curved through a fruit garden first with dense jungle on either side only allowing for small windows of the turquoise sea just beyond.

A chorus of voices grew louder with each step, and as the pathway become more sand than brick, Mackenzie saw children playing near the shoreline, laughing as they chased each other. To her right, a group of men gathered beside a battered-looking Hokulea wearing faded Polo shorts, talking loudly and untangling a green fishing net. *Extravagance*, her yacht, sat still in the distance, the sunlight reflecting off the bedroom windows near the stern.

Mackenzie waved at a child who had stopped playing. She was young, wild hair sticking up, uncovered from the waist up. She stared, unmoving except for a small pink shell that she turned in her hands, momentarily uninterested in the game afoot. Mackenzie forced a smile and carried on walking towards the dock.

It was one of last times she would use that arm.

Cadicher was in a husk of a town near Cape Agulhas. Not near a major road. Not even near the coast. But Plybrook had been good for something - once. That was clear. The streets were wide, and the buildings were tall. Now, litter gathered in places where people should have been. The weather hadn't helped. Dark clouds gathered above him with constant flashes of light trying to rip a hole through them.

A few shops with the air of long-gone affluence cowered in the fading light. Cadicher crossed the street and entered one. Hints of vanilla and mothballs struck him first. A sign to his left read: *Treat yourshelf*. Classical music chimed from a speaker somewhere in the back of the store. On his right, a woman looked up from her book. Cadicher placed her at sixty.

'Help you?'

'You sell coffee?'

'This is a bookstore.'

'Bookstores sell coffee. They sell all kinds of stuff these days.'

The woman sighed a reply. 'We just sell books. Second-hand ones.'

Cadicher picked up a book from a shelf nearest to him – a hardcover missing the dustjacket. He opened it, heard the spine crack. 'How is the second-hand book business these days?' Cadicher asked, reading a line from the first page.

The woman dog-eared her page. ‘These days second-hand is the only type of business around here.’

Cadicher nodded still reading.

‘Just down the street you’ll find a restaurant. I forget the name but you can’t miss it.’

‘How much for this one?’

The woman pawed at the air. ‘Leave it alone.’

‘Not for sale?’

‘Everything is for sale, but you don’t want that book.’

Cadicher closed the book. Placed it back where he found it.

‘Just down the street?’

The woman fingered her dog-ear open. ‘Can’t miss it.’

7

Heavy drops started to fall from the sky. The hot street seemed to swallow them up. Cadicher walked in the rain. It was a gamble. The rain wasn’t falling hard but just down the street could’ve meant anything. He thought about running but he wasn’t in a rush. He had never been to Plybrook. He could run past the restaurant and not even know it. He settled on the walk. Just down the street wasn’t a finite distance but the woman’s sense of distance was about right. Ten minutes after setting off he found the restaurant.

A sign made of sheet metal, and about the size of a movie poster, had been nailed to the side of a brick building. The sign read: Hob House. Open since 2022. Underneath this, the menu had been spray-painted in neat white capital letters.

Cadicher glanced at the menu as beads of water dripped down the sheet metal. He took out a small fold of money from his back pocket and added them up in his head quickly.

'Good afternoon. Could I interest you in a table?'

Cadicher replaced the money. He turned and faced a man under the awning of the front door who looked like a cruise ship maître d. He was gaunt and wore a white waistcoat with matching white loafers. His grey hair had been slicked back and he was adjusting a set of cufflinks on his wrist. Cadicher focused on his face. Small eyes, wet-looking, framed a pink scar running from the left side of his nose down to the edge of his lip.

'You sell coffee?'

'We do. Table for one?'

'Take-away.'

'We don't do take-aways, sir.'

Cadicher looked back at the menu.

'We have a menu inside, if you prefer. The bar is warm.'

Cadicher took up the offer. He followed the man inside. Hob House was empty. A table near the back of the restaurant was lined with glasses and side plates. Small booths in burnt orange suede circled the edges of the room. The restaurant was

shaped like a F. The kitchen was at the top horizontal stroke. The vertical stroke was the main restaurant floor. The maître d led Cadicher through the second horizontal stroke and into the bar area. The bar had a stained mirrored ceiling. Cadicher glanced up and caught a sepia version of himself. The maître d pulled a stool from under the bar counter, removed a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped down the seat. He moved around the counter and turned on the coffee machine.

'We're short on staff today.'

Cadicher placed a cigarette between his lips. The cigarette lit up instantly when he inhaled.

'Will you be eating, sir?'

'I haven't decided. Call me Cadicher.'

'Thurman.' They shook. 'Are you from around here?' Thurman took out a glass astray from under the counter and placed it in front of Cadicher.

'No.'

Thurman poured the coffee.

'Make it Irish and skip the cream.'

Thurman added a shot of whiskey and placed it on the counter on top of a branded Hob House serviette.

'You own this place?'

Thurman nodded. 'Bought it a couple of years back. Things were better then. They haven't been great recently.'

Cadicher took a sip of his coffee. 'That's too bad, but I get it. This town is depressing.'

Thurman poured himself a shot of whiskey. ‘What brings you to Plybrook?’

‘I’m looking for someone. Maybe you know him. Reggie Stokes?

‘Stokes? No. Sorry.’

Cadicher shrugged. ‘You know where I can find Bison Street?’

‘Never heard of it.’

The smoke from Cadicher’s cigarette was making his eyes dry. He rubbed them, feeling tired. ‘Maybe I will get something to eat.’

‘What can I make you?’

‘Make? You do everything around here?’

‘Today I do.’

‘Okay, Thurman, what do you recommend?’

‘The soup of the day. Mussels are fresh.’

‘Soup then’ Cadicher said, taking another sip of coffee.

Thurman downed the rest of his drink. ‘Help yourself if you need but I won’t be long.’

Cadicher watched him leave. He took out a small pad from his jacket pocket and opened it. Scribbled inside on the second last page were the words: Thurman, Raymond. 5.8. Scar. Thin. Hob House.

He closed the pad and took another sip of coffee.

Raymond Thurman brought out a bowl of mussel soup 20 minutes later and placed it on the bar counter with a polished silver spoon. ‘Can I get you another drink?’

Cadicher put out his third cigarette. ‘Another coffee.’

Thurman moved behind the counter and got busy while Cadicher stirred his meal with the spoon. He could smell the white wine wafting from the bowl and the scent of spring onions. He tucked into it. ‘It’s good,’ he lied.

Thurman didn’t respond. He was steaming up a new mug. Cadicher shovelled the food into his mouth, not savouring the taste. Halfway through he paused; drops of yellow sauce had caught on his beard and he used the sleeve of his jacket to wipe it clean.

‘Let me get you a serviette.’

‘Don’t waste it on me,’ Cadicher said, and pushed the bowl from under his chin. He placed another cigarette in his mouth, puffing wildly as this one struggled to light.

Thurman handed Cadicher his coffee and stood across from him. ‘What line of work are you in?’

‘I own a gym.’ Cadicher took a sip of his coffee. It was hot and good. He was starting to feel warm, either from the soup or the whiskey. ‘But I also debt collect.’

‘Oh, is that so?’

‘Travel all over the place.’

‘I imagine it must be a difficult job.’

‘It can be. Some days are harder than others. Mostly, people just sit and listen, pay their debts and that’s the end. Other days,’ Cadicher paused, taking a drag. ‘Other days it’s harder.’

Thurman looked down at the half eaten bowl of soup. ‘Can I get you anything else?’

‘On those other days people play dumb, and that really pisses me off. You know what I mean?’

‘I can imagine.’

Cadicher pulled out a small white card from inside his cigarette box. It was insignificant other than the black thumb print in the middle of it. He pushed the card between them.

Thurman didn’t do anything at first. Then he lifted the card slowly, flipped it over, saw nothing, and flipped back to the thumb print. He placed the card back down on the counter.

‘You know what that is?’ Cadicher asked.

Thurman looked up at him.

Cadicher took another sip of coffee. Another drag from his cigarette.

Thurman shifted, his eyes darted under the counter. Cadicher saw it unfold, could almost sense it. There was nothing elegant or surprising about what happened next.

He watched calmly as a ribbed barrel parted the smoke and levelled with his eyes.

9

‘Leave,’ Thurman said.

Cadicher didn’t move.

‘I want you to get up and leave here, right now.’

‘Put the gun down, Thurman.’ He tapped on the bar counter with his forefinger. ‘Put it down right here.’

‘Did you hear what I said?’

‘I did. Now put the gun down so you can hear what I have to say.’

‘Last chance.’ Thurman pulled back the hammer.

‘You’re not going to shoot me. You’re not a killer, Thurman. You’re a businessman.’

‘You’re trespassing as far I’m concerned.’

‘You’re a businessman,’ he repeated. ‘You pay bills. You cook and serve people. You just got behind on some payments. I’m here to collect one of those payments. That’s all.’

Thurman’s hand was shaking. The .475 Wildey was a big gun. Heavy on both ends, unbalanced.

‘I would appreciate it if you stopped pointing that at me. Your hand is shaking. That’s an accident waiting to happen, and if it does, it’s going to be a shit day for both of us.’

Thurman didn’t move.

Cadicher reached behind his waist.

‘What are you doing?’

Cadicher paused, said: ‘Don’t do anything stupid, Thurman.’ Then he placed his right hand, palm down, on the counter. Using his left hand, he slowly reached towards his back and pulled out his own gun. It was nothing fancy. A small black snub nose, six cylinder – a .38 Special. He lifted it by the handle with two fingers and put it on the counter beside the ashtray.

Thurman eyed it, his hand shaking worse now.

‘See. I just want to talk. It’s a trust thing. Put the gun down.’

‘I don’t have any money. You can see that. Look around you.’

‘I don’t care about that, Thurman. You owe a debt. Either pay it to me or whoever put the thumbprint on that card will take it. I’m doing you a kindness here, believe it or not.’

Cadicher waited calmly. He saw Thurman think things over. He was thinking about things, too. Mainly he was thinking about distance. Like the distance between the gun and his head. Even at this range, Thurman would likely miss. The gun was bulky, more for show than accuracy, and judging by the man’s nerves, probably never pointed at anyone. A head is a small target and a big handgun has a big recoil. Cadicher was looking at Thurman’s trigger finger, waiting, trying to time his movement if needed. Then Thurman dropped his gun on the counter, unable to control his nerves any longer.

Cadicher took another drag of his cigarette. He picked up Thurman's gun, ejected the single-stack magazine, removed the bullets and dropped them in his ashtray. He picked up his own gun and replaced it where it had nestled for the past 23 years.

Thurman stopped pacing behind the bar. He stood in front of Cadicher, the scar on his face somehow more prominent now.

'I don't have - '

Cadicher hit him with the palm of his hand. Caught him on the nose. Thurman's head jerked backwards. Cadicher leant over the counter, grasped a bundle of his shirt and pulled him over the bar and onto the floor. One white loafer got left on the other side of the bar. Thurman tried to stand and Cadicher hit him again with the palm of his hand. This time the back of Thurman's head smacked against the floor and he went limp. Blood trickled from his nostrils. His eyes blinked wildly, trying and failing to stop the tears from spilling. Cadicher sat back down on his stool and crushed his cigarette between the bullets.

'The first one was for aiming a gun at me. The second one was part of the job. Both were avoidable.'

Thurman didn't say anything. He stayed on the floor like a submissive dog, only bringing a finger up to his nose to wipe away some blood.

'Now that we're done with the heroics, I have a question for you.'

Thurman glanced at Cadicher then stared at the mirrored ceiling.

'Why did you buy the pill? You're younger than me but not by much. It wasn't going to change anything. What difference was 300 days going to make if you couldn't afford it?'

Thurman didn't answer.

Cadicher shrugged. 'Doesn't matter.'

'My scar,' Thurman said, staring at mirror. 'I thought the pill would heal it.'

'*Youth* doesn't work that way.'

'It does. I've read about it.'

'You still have the scar, Thurman.'

Thurman opened his mouth to speak then lapsed into silence once more.

'So here's the deal. It's non-negotiable. You're going to meet me here tomorrow morning six am, right by your sign outside, with all the money. No bullshit, Thurman. You've got less than a day. I don't care what you do, or how you do it. Six am, you understand?'

Thurman looked at Cadicher.

'I want you to repeat what I just said.'

'Six am. All the money. No bullshit.'

'That's right. No bullshit. Six-oh-one I leave and you get back to your life. You can't run away from this anymore, and you don't want to. Trust me on that.'

Cadicher looked back at his mussel soup. The sauce was starting to coagulate. He removed two bills from his back pocket and placed them under his astray. He got up, stepped over Thurman and left.

10

Cadicher slept in his car that night. It wasn’t a big deal. Plybrook only had one hotel, and he didn’t want to be that predictable. Earlier that day he had found an office block with covered parking and bribed a car guard to rent out a space for 24 hours. He had slept in his car before. The seat was soft, worn and moulded to the shape of his body. It wasn’t a bed, but it wasn’t uncomfortable either.

He woke up to the sound of sirens and rain, checked his watch and saw that he still had a couple of hours before dawn.

He closed his eyes and dreamt of dust.

11

Cadicher woke up before daybreak. He started his car and let the heater run, warming him up. He yawned into his fist, and turned on the radio.

He moved off. Not because it was time, but because it was necessary. He drove around town for a while, slowly. There was no rush. He stayed away from the streets he had visited

yesterday so as not to draw attention to himself. He wasn't sure if Thurman would be there or not this morning but he had done his part and given Thurman a way out. If he turned it down, then so be it. Just before six am, he turned east and headed towards the bookstore he had visited yesterday. The shops were closed, nothing moved on the street.

Up ahead, Cadicher noticed smoke rising. He eased on the brake.

'Shit,' he muttered to himself.

Cadicher sat in the car, watching the smoke rise, hoping he was wrong. He put the car in gear and drove forward.

He saw the lights first. Four police cars parked outside Hob House; their sirens off, but the blue lights still sweeping in the soft grey pre-dawn. He saw the fire engine ramped up on the pavement. He saw the barricade tape being stretched out, and the brick burnt black halfway up the building.

Then he saw the ambulance, parked in front of the fire engine and his fears were confirmed.

He rolled up to Hob House. A police officer waved him through. *Nothing to see.*

Cadicher braked, put on his hazards. Wound down the passenger window.

'What happened here, Captain?' Cadicher wasn't sure if the police officer was a Captain; probably wasn't, not at 6am, but it was an easy way to get on the officer's good side.

The police officer leaned in the window. ‘We had a fire in the early hours of the morning.’

Cadicher looked towards the ambulance. ‘Everyone okay?’

The cop shook his head. ‘Two people dead. You know anything about this?’

Cadicher shook his head. ‘Just passing through.’ He opened his glovebox, took out a fake press club ID for the Cape Argus. A faded picture of him smiled from the photo. ‘Was hoping to get some information from you, perhaps a short statement?’

‘We don’t know anything yet,’ the cop said, walking away.

From experience, that was the best way to get the police to lose interest in him. He replaced the fake ID back in the glovebox and drove off.

Two people dead.

He remembered the siren earlier that morning and started to piece a timeline together.

He had turned onto the highway when the navigation screen in his car faded to black as a call came through. He answered it.

‘Morning, Interceptor.’

‘What happened?’

‘I couldn’t find you last night.’

‘What happened?’ Cadicher repeated.

‘I did you a favour.’

‘Bullshit. He was going to pay.’

'Didn't look that way after you left. He was going to run.'

'Bullshit.'

'You sound surprised.'

'Who sent you?'

'You know who.' The voice on the other end chuckled. 'Anyways, do I need to tie up any more loose strings?'

Cadicher said nothing.

'Interceptor? You still there?'

'No.'

'What about the woman?'

'What woman?'

'That old lady from the bookstore.'

'You were following me?'

'It was a mistake going inside there. She told me what you asked her. What a stupid thing to do. She would've made you. I did you another favour, Interceptor.'

'Where are you now?'

'Long gone.'

'Pity.'

'Oh?'

'Next time I see you, I'm going to beat you to death.'

The voice chuckled again. 'You won't see me, Interceptor.'

The line went dead.

Cadicher made another phone call from his car. It was answered immediately, which was surprising, as though they were expecting him to call.

'What the fuck is going on?' He said.

'Morning to you, too.'

'Don't play games with me.'

'So, you're speaking to me now? How long has it been?'

'Did you send him?'

'Send who?'

'You know who. You sent in that psychopath after you sent me? Do you know he killed two people? One was an old woman.'

'That's regrettable but the rules have changed.'

'What does that mean?'

'We're no longer collecting.'

'Why not?'

'I don't make the rules. You answer to me, I answer to someone higher.'

'So you're firing me?'

'No. We could still use you. You know we can. We need you for something else now.'

'For killing people?'

'You're upset. This is a bad time to have this conversation.'

'No, it's the perfect time,' Cadicher said.

'Let's meet up and discuss this like adults. We haven't seen each other in a while.'

'You don't want me coming to you right now.'

'Okay.'

'I won't have anything to do with this.'

'That's your decision.'

'No, it's yours. This is on you.'

'Don't do anything stupid, Interceptor. I won't be able to help you.'

'I've never needed your help for anything.'

Cadicher ended the call and his job right there.

13

Detective Huglow arrived at the scene just after 7am in the morning. Hob House was a blackened char by that time despite the main fire having been put out 2 hours prior. Smoke still plumed in the air and the firemen were still hosing parts of restaurant. The fire investigator was waiting for her, his hands in his pockets.

'What do we know?' Huglow asked, walking up to him.

'Got a call at 2:15am. On scene the building was on fire. We managed to stop it spreading at 5:22am.'

'Cause?'

'Undetermined at this stage. But this wasn't an accident. Heat markings everywhere. There's no source of origin. Fire was spread. We've taken a few samples. If I had to guess, I'd say some kind of accelerant was at play. Ignition sources were all over the place. Place was a tinderbox waiting to go up.'

'No fire measures?'

'There were a couple. Saw a foam box outside. Looked like it activated but the overheads didn't start up.'

Huglow nodded. 'What about the victims?'

'We've found two so far. Could be more. The building collapsed. We bagged them.'

'Can they be identified?'

'Burns are significant. A couple of the men said the first victim was the owner. Male. I got a name. Raymond Thurman. I can't verify it.'

'And the second victim?'

'Not much to go on so far. I'd guess female.'

'Where were they found?'

'Body placing was tight and central. They weren't near any of the doors or windows. They didn't look like they were trying to escape.'

'Send the report to my office.'

'Will do.'

'Okay, let me know if you find anything else.'

‘You might want to have a look at this.’ The fire investigator handed her a card that had been placed in a see-through evidence bag. ‘One of your guys found it on scene.’

It was a white business card with a thumb print on the back.

‘Where’d they find it?’

‘It was taped to the pavement across the street. Found it while setting up the perimeter tape. Fire didn’t reach it. Mean anything to you?’

Detective Huglow looked at the print, looked at the fire investigator. She said, ‘No.’

14

Minnie Micks Bowls Club sat on the corner of Presidential and Hallow Street, 36km from Plybrook and the nearest EV charge station. Tonight, the regulars were there, sitting outside on the terrace overlooking the bank across the road, drinking beer, talking, watching the moths fly around the florescent lamps above them.

It was Minnie’s place, so the others indulged his conversation mostly because of the free beer, and partly because Minnie was a couple of drinks short of drunk, and when he got drunk, he was apt to bring out something stronger.

Tick-tock Vick, as he was known because of his short temper, and his brother, Walter Richel were listening with straight faces. They had both taken a heavy loss earlier that month when they closed down two of their three petrol stations.

'Hear this,' Minnie said leaning forward, his index finger sticking inside the bottle neck. 'I got all my cash tied up in property. Not a lot mind you, but enough to get me by. Banks won't have it, not this year. Maybe next, but we'll see how things turn out. I got myself a plan. Capital P. That's what Lizzy always says. Capitalise or minimise.'

Polter, Minnie's oldest friend, wasn't interested in drinking too much. He had promised his wife earlier that evening that he would take it easy tonight after a doctor at the free clinic had scared him about his fatty liver just this morning. Hepatic-something or another. Now, leaning back on the red plastic chair, he said: 'What you mean about the banks, Mick?'

'They want me to sell, if you'd believe it. Said I'm behind. Never paid late a day in my life but there you have it. They stick up their goddamn noses, changing rules, and we all supposed to what? Smile while they stick us in the arse?'

'You might not have paid late, but I've known you long enough to know that you probably didn't pay enough,' Tick-tock Vick said.

Minnie took a sip. 'Well, I don't know anything like that. Besides, I'd have more money if you arseholes weren't always lounging around here, drinking my stock. All the same, you are. Trust no one is what Lizzy says. She's got it right sometimes.'

‘You can stick us with the bill, Mick.’ Walter said, stretching. ‘We’d never give you shit about it.’

Minnie considered this then nodded. ‘I know that. I’m just sour tonight. You two know it best that things are tougher here than they need to be. This whole damn town went loony after those factories closed down. Everybody is acting itchy lately.’

Cadicher sat in the corner smoking. He was looking out at the bank across the street not really caring to contribute to the conversation one way or the other. He had grown up not far from here, the son of a mechanic who had died in a motorcycle accident when Cadicher was 17, leaving him to look after himself. His mother had taken her own life much earlier. She had driven up to the Pick n Pay one winter morning and taken a sawn-off shotgun to her face, blasting bits of her skull through the back of the car window and staining the sidewalk leading up to the store windows with blood. Everybody suspected Blue, his father, had a part to play in it. It was his gun after all, but in the end the rumours stayed just that. Whatever part Blue had played in her death, he was never the same. During the funeral, Blue, distraught and high on motion sickness pills, had opened the casket to see his wife one last time. The mortician had placed an oversized wooden dowel in her neck and attached a featureless head made from plaster of Paris. No eyes, no nose, no mouth. Just a ball, vaguely human shaped. There were dents on the side of the head from the mortician’s fingers that hadn’t been levelled properly. It was

a piss-poor job, done cheaply, done quickly. Blue had screamed from the depths of his gut, drooling like an animal when he saw her. It took Cadicher, just twelve at the time, and two other men to restrain Blue that day.

When his father died, Cadicher took up a sales job at South Mall working in a camping store, and, every other night he had doubled up and worked as a security guard, patrolling the deadpan storefronts. It wasn't much of a living, but he kept his stomach full for another 4 years until he found his feet.

He never chose debt collecting as a job. It was thrust upon him when the manager of South Mall asked him to kick out the owner of a small deli after the guy had lagged behind on the rent. Cadicher obliged but improvised. It was easy. He had the presence. Even at 21 years old, people took him seriously. And when the deli owner was lying on his shop floor, pissing his pants, he came up with the money quickly. After that, Cadicher made a name for himself, transferring his skills to other businesses, private employers and corporations. But the job up to then was relatively tame. It wasn't until 11 years ago, when he started working for The Glove that things changed. Both in application and money.

Listening to Minnie Mick rambling on about his life's problems, Cadicher thought about Rose and about his promise to her. His wife had passed on two years prior to lung cancer. Stage four. By the time Rose had found out about the cancer,

Cadicher only had four months with her. He took time off work, as much time as he could anyway, but it happened fast. One morning, she woke up and kissed him and it just felt different. He couldn't explain it any other way. He just knew.

'Not today,' he had said. They were the same two words he had said every morning for the past month.

'I can feel it now,' she said.

'No, no, no, no. Hey, you're fine. Look at me, you're fine.'

'Make sure you keep your promise, you big lug.'

Cadicher hugged her tight and when he let her go she was gone. Just like that. She had taken her last breath in his arms, in the same bed they had shared for 24 years.

Cadicher snapped back from the memory at the sound of Polter's laugh.

He didn't know how to keep his promise to Rose. He thought that was partly the reason why he now spent his evenings drinking, either at Mick's place or in the back office of his gym. He was well known in town, perhaps liked even, but people kept their distance around him. He didn't take offense. He had never told anyone except Rose who he worked for, but this was a small town and people had a way of getting to know a man's business.

As the guys spat it out, a piece of the moon hung off a passing cloud. The town around them had been swallowed in darkness - quiet but for a few dogs barking madly near the scrapyard down the road. People didn't go out much anymore which is why Minnie Mick would forfeit his Bowls Club and the land that sat under it

a couple months from now to the very same bank across the street. But there was one person out tonight, coming towards them now.

Cadicher's eyes weren't what they used to be but they were still sharp, and he made the person out to be a child. No one, except Cadicher, had seen her crossing the street walking towards them, weaving a little.

'Now you've got one of those stations left,' Minnie was saying to the Richel brothers, 'and it's gotta be worth a couple. I say you hold onto it. Open another for god sakes. Loan until they moan is what Lizzy calls it.'

'You talking shit now, Mick,' Tick-Tock Vick said.

'Hear me out, hear me out. They want you to close the fucking thing. They're planning something huge for this town. I've been saying it for forever. They buying and forcing people out as best they can for a reason. It's got nothing to do with repayments and what have you. They've never had a problem before. Why now?'

'You're off it this time,' Tick-Tock Vick added. Minnie looked at him, irritated. Tick-Tock Vick never saw things as Minnie did even though he was the first one to stiff a bill. If not for nothing, Mick thought he should at least humour him a little instead of shutting him down at every turn.

Minnie continued.

Cadicher droned out the sound of Mick's voice and watched the girl stumble on. Then she stopped, looked up and down the street, turned full circle, and saw the terrace with the fluorescent lights and the bugs sweeping above them. She arrowed

for them as best she could, crossing through the parking lot, placing one hand on Walter's old Mercedes door to steady herself as she moved past. Cadicher thought he could hear her. She was mumbling something, talking to herself, it seemed. The way her feet dragged her forwards reminded him of a zombie from that old show, *The Walking Dead* that he and Rose had watched all those years ago.

'All I'm saying,' Minnie said, raising his voice louder, 'is that we haven't got two for nothing in this town. But we got those Packy-whatever trucks rolling down the street here every Wednesday, sometimes on Friday, too. What they for then, huh? You tell me.'

'Someone's coming, Mick,' Cadicher said.

'Sure they're coming,' Minnie said, turning to him. 'That's what I'm saying, Caddy. This whole town is due for something and soon.'

Polter had followed Cadicher's gaze and saw the girl walking up to them; she had made it to the stairs leading up to the terrace, and was now climbing them one at a time, holding onto one side of the railing with both hands. 'Jesus, it's a kid. What's she doing out here alone in the dark?'

Cadicher stubbed out his cigarette on the floor and got up from the chair. The front of her shirt was drenched in sweat. Tick-Tock Vick would swear to his wife the next morning that it was puke, not sweat that covered the front of her shirt.

The girl kept on.

The five men were now all looking at her, Minnie finally lapsing into silence. Cadicher crossed the terrace before scooping the girl up in both arms as she made it up the fifth and final step. The girl closed her eyes and moaned as he did this, but she didn't resist.

'Jesus, a kid out here,' Polter said breathlessly, shaking his head. 'She okay, Caddy?'

'Don't know,' Cadicher replied.

Minnie got up from his chair, knocking over a couple of empty beer bottles under his feet. 'Lemme call an ambulance.'

'She sick or something?' Tick-Tock Vick asked.

'Give me your jacket,' Cadicher said.

'Take mine,' Polter said, removing it. 'She can't be older than my grandkid. What she doing out here?'

'Put it on the floor.'

Polter laid the jacket on the terrace and bundled the sleeves together to make a pillow of sorts for her head. Cadicher put her down as gently as he could. Her fringe was clamped to her forehead in sweat. He checked her pulse. Checked his watch. 'It's weak.'

'Maybe she's just lost,' Walter said.

Cadicher heard Minnie on the phone inside. 'Yeah, there's a child here at my place. Don't know where from, but she doesn't look in good shape. You'd want to get someone out here… Yeah, I don't know much about that… Uh-huh, Corner of Presidential and Hallow. The Bowls Club.'

Cadicher saw that the flesh on the side of her neck was a purple-black colour, like a bruise. The skin under her eyes was puffed out, too. They looked, Polter told Minnie a week later when they gathered around for another beer, like she had had an allergic reaction to something.

Minnie hung up the phone inside.

'You got a blanket, Mick?' Polter called from the terrace, noticing that the girl was shivering.

Minnie came out with a white table cloth and Tick-Tock Vick snuffed at the air.

'What? It's not a fucking hotel!'

Cadicher covered her body with the table cloth.

The girl pulled it up to her chin and moaned thickly in her throat. When it became obvious she was trying to say something, Cadicher knelt beside her.

'She gonna be okay, Caddy?' Polter asked again.

'Mick called for an ambulance. She's alright now,' Walter said.

After a moment, Cadicher straightened up.

'What she say?' Minnie asked.

Cadicher shrugged. 'Nothing important, I guess. Just a name over and over.'

The five of them stood in silence around her before Polter said, 'Should we move her inside maybe?'

Cadicher shook his head. ‘You don’t know what’s wrong with her. Probably best not to move her too much. Just keep her warm until the ambulance arrives.’

‘We don’t know how long that’ll take,’ Polter said. ‘I think we should drive her ourselves. Hospital isn’t too far anyways.’

‘No.’

‘Christ Caddy, she’s just a kid,’ Polter said.

‘She’s not a kid,’ Cadicher said. ‘And you’re too drunk to drive anyways.’

Cadicher studied the girl for a moment, her eyes briefly opening. Her irises were white as bone and something clicked inside his head. Suddenly he knew how he was going to fulfil the promise he had made to his wife two years ago.

15

Ebodia crouched in the wardrobe. She could have stood up except the top four shutters were missing, broken long ago, and now exposed the wire necks of hangers. She didn’t want to sit either. Sitting meant she was rooted, fixed, immovable.

So she crouched.

Even though her legs shook, and her thighs burned. Even though her balance swayed, and her vision was obscured by a yellow light coming from the billboard outside, breaking through her bedroom window, she crouched.

She crouched and waited, listening for the intruder who had broken into her home.

16

The intruder was a man. Not tall. Not short. He wore a coat. A red brooch in the shape of a rose with the words, 'I Got All The Luck' written on the one of the petals, was pinned to his right lapel. He wore jeans and black boots. He removed a pair of leather gloves from his pocket and slipped them on, one at a time. He stretched his fingers open and then closed them into a fist. He shut the door behind him silently, only hearing the bevelled tongue slip into the door jamb in his mind. He held his hand on the door for longer than needed, letting his eyes linger a moment, adjusting to the darkness. He could see various lights in the apartment - the blue glow from the button under the TV that had been mounted to a wall; the red eye blinking from the side of a laptop on a coffee table. He made out the shapes of small, lifeless pieces of furniture.

Kitchen to his right. Lounge to his left. Passage down the middle leading to the bedrooms. He guessed two. The apartment was small, built for young professionals. It was on the 5th floor, 15 floors below the penthouses. It was possible that there was another bedroom and a bathroom but the sun always rose due east so it ultimately didn't matter how many rooms there were – the master bedroom would always be on the right.

40, maybe 50 square meters of living space. Large windows in the lounge with half-drawn curtains looked out across the city. Distant lights from a couple of identical pill-shaped buildings stared back at him.

He closed his eyes and listened.

And heard laughter.

17

Ebodia heard the laughter coming from Mrs. Hyatt's television one floor beneath her. Mrs. Hyatt, 72 years old and widowed, had been watching re-runs of *Frasier* on DVD. Deaf in the right ear and suffering from decades of insomnia, she habitually left her TV on throughout the night. Tonight it was *Frasier*, a boxset bought back when Blu-ray players were all the hype. Most nights however, she let the commercial channel run its course, offering specials on chewing gum that fixed your teeth or the newest take on the popular umbrella handbag – the umbrella purse. People always wanted convenience. They wanted one item to do the job of 10. The craze had started with the cellular phone and it had never stopped. Why shouldn't gum be something else, too? Or an umbrella for that matter?

Mrs. Hyatt had made just one purchase in all her years' binge watching the commercial channel – a universal remote control that was also a night light. When not in use, the buttons, made from a type of synthetic gel, would melt away

into the casing and glow with an orange hue, bubbling back and forth from eye to battery case, much like a lava lamp.

She didn't feel particularly well tonight though. Her son, Peter, had called from prison and she missed him. Arsonist or not, he was still her little boy; the same boy who had suckled on her for three years and couldn't pronounce the word elephant. Until the age of eight he had pronounced it, *Eff-fa-fant*. How she had laughed at that; big belly-roll laughs that made her wish she had had one more child. But Dodie hadn't wanted another, and then she hit her forties and didn't think about it as often. But it broke her heart to see her only child in jail; it was one of the reasons she never visited anymore, that and the v-buses never ran on time. She needed to take her mind off Peter and his troubles, and the best way to do so was with *Frasier*. She was infatuated with Martin Crane and always laughed at his lines(not quite the big belly-roll laughs, but close enough), mumbling them under her breath before he said them, all while sucking in air through the green oxygen tank she kept parked beside her. Emphysema from smoking was the official diagnosis. She had bought the tank and cut down on the cancer sticks. She was supposed to quit entirely. Supposed to. Ha! She could belly-laugh at that one. Her son was *supposed to* be a famous actor by now – God knew she had paid for enough acting lessons. Instead, this year, he was playing the character of Kenickie Murdoch in Pollsmoor's prison production of *Grease*.

Not that any of this mattered. Two months from now, she'd smoke one of those Instant-Lite cigarettes during her evening TV marathons and blow up floors 5 through 8 from a leaking valve on her tank, killing herself and another 16 people.

But not tonight.

Tonight she laughed and coughed up green mucus-spit that dripped down the triangular plastic mould covering her mouth, oblivious to anything happening in the apartment above her.

18

The intruder made his way through the apartment, carefully, trying not to make a sound but his boots squeaked a couple times on the tiles. The noise was drowned out by the blaring TV beneath him.

Even so, the boots were a bad idea.

19

Ebodia heard the squeak of rubber on the floor, just outside her bedroom. It was faint, but in the silence between the laughs coming from Mrs. Hyatt's TV, it could just as well have been a gunshot. She steadied herself against the back of her wardrobe. The billboard outside her bedroom window changed adverts – showing the new ORAL B vape toothpaste, with blue light now spilling over her bed.

Through the spaces between the shutters, she could just make out the bedroom door to her left. She listened to the chrome handle squealing as it moved down, coiling the stiff spring inside it.

She blinked and the door swung open, and in its place stood the intruder.

20

The intruder saw the bed first. The wrinkled sheet, the creased pillow, the splayed bed cover half thrown on the floor. The room had more light than the rest of the apartment. A window stood open near the foot of the bed, and beyond it, neon advertising lights from the city rushed in, casting a blue glow on the space. The room was bare except for a Venetian wardrobe to his right. No pictures, no mirrors, no books. Nothing except blank walls. He could smell a lingering perfume. It was faint but still sickly sweet, harsh notes of vanilla floating in the space.

He took three steps towards the wardrobe and stood in front of it. He could see shirts and jackets sagging off hangers. The top four or five shutters from the wardrobe had been removed or broken. He ran a gloved hand down the intact shutters, slowly, allowing the tips of his fingers to briefly catch the edges. He looked back towards the door, then turned and walked to the bed, his boots squeaking as he moved. He

threw the remaining covers on the floor and sat down on the corner of the bed.

'Come out of there,' he said, staring at the wardrobe.

21

Ebodia opened the wardrobe and stepped out. She heard her knees pop as she straightened. She saw the silhouette of the man sitting on the bed. She walked towards the door and flicked on the light.

'What was that?'

'What?'

'I wrote a script. Nowhere did it say you should speak.'

The man squinted in the light. 'I thought I'd improvise a bit.'

Ebodia reached for a silk gown hanging off the back of the door. 'I'm not paying your agency so that you can improvise. That's why there's a script.'

The man stood up. 'I didn't think it would matter. There wasn't a lot to go on.'

'I was very specific. Did you even read it?'

The man took off his gloves and put them in his coat pocket. He stared at the arches and curves of her back as she slipped on the gown. 'Let's just redo this, okay? I'll go back out, and you go hide again.'

Ebodia let out a cynical laugh. 'Forget it.'

‘What do you mean forget it? It was mistake. There’s no reason to get bitchy about it. This isn’t a common request. The agency didn’t know who to send. I volunteered. Give me another go.’

‘Just leave. I’m not in the mood anymore,’ Ebodia said, tying the front of her robe closed.

The man considered this. ‘Fine, but I want you to give me my rating now.’

‘You want five stars for fucking up?’

‘No, I want you to complete the order. You don’t have to rate me. But I’ve got a perfect score, and I’m not about to let you write whatever you want and mess up reviews. This is my livelihood.’

‘You’re not going to force me into doing anything.’

The man took a step towards Ebodia. ‘You’re not listening to me.’ He grabbed her by the wrist and turned her around. ‘Look at me.’

‘Let go of me.’

The man noticed Ebodia’s eyes for the first time and hesitated, just for a moment. Then he smiled. ‘You’re a ghost.’

‘Let go of my wrist.’

‘Is this the only way you get people to sleep with you? You’re supposed to disclose that information with the agency. Seems like you weren’t very specific after all.’

‘I said let go of me!’ Ebodia tried to break free of his grip but couldn’t.

'I've never been with a ghost before. You people are supposed to never age right? I heard that it's good luck to sleep with ghosts. Makes you feel younger. The younger the ghost, the better, and you don't look a day over 25 which is still pretty rare.' The man studied her for a moment. 'Get on the bed.'

'I told you, I don't want to do this anymore.'

'You wanted a fantasy,' the man said pulling Ebodia towards the bed, undoing the buttons on his coat with his free hand at the same time. 'You paid good money for it. It'd be a shame if that went to waste.'

'Stop it!'

'Or what? You'll report me to the agency? The police? Who'd believe you? This is what you wanted.'

'He's not wrong about that,' Cadicher said.

22

The man looked past Ebodia and shrank instantly at the sight of Cadicher. He stood in the doorway like a giant ape, filling up the room with a stench of stale cigarettes.

'Who the hell are you?' The man said, his eyes darting to Ebodia who looked just as confused.

'Doesn't matter who I am,' Cadicher said.

The man let go of Ebodia's wrist. She snatched back her arm and moved to a corner.

‘How’d you get in here?’ the man asked.

Cadicher looked towards Ebodia.

Gathering some composure, the man said, ‘Were you hiding here the whole time?’

‘I don’t play pretend,’ Cadicher said, still staring at Ebodia.

‘You think I’m scared of you?’ Then to Ebodia: ‘Is this someone you know? Is this a setup?’ Building up steam, the man took a step towards Cadicher, his boots squeaking as he moved.

It was all Cadicher needed. The reptilian part of his brain immediately took over. He hit the man harder than he had hit anyone before. Knuckles, callused and hard as rocks, went straight through the man’s cheek and into his jaw, dislocating it, separating teeth from gums, sending them back into his mouth like tiny projectiles, ripping through the flesh on his tongue. The second punch came just an instant later, this time connecting near the top of his right eye. The blows had a sickening effect. The man made an *ooomfph* sound and crumpled to the floor like a towel. He made snoring sounds, but it wasn’t from his nose – he was trying to swallow his tongue. Cadicher kicked him in the head twice without a second thought, his cigarette box flying out of his pocket, skidding to a stop against the wardrobe.

A pulp of a face, bloodied and swollen, turned to one side and faced Ebodia who had sunk to the floor in shock. Cadicher bent over and grabbed fistfuls of the man’s coat. He lifted him

off the ground like a stuffed toy, took two steps, and threw him out the window, breaking half of the window frame in the process.

23

'I don't have a lot of time.'

'Is he dead?' Ebodia asked, her voice cracking.

'I'm not a doctor. You're in shock. I understand that. But what just happened is not important.'

'Who are you?'

'Doesn't matter. What you should be asking is why I'm here.' Cadicher offered his hand for Ebodia to grab but she shied away from it, repulsed, and stood up on her own, cradling her torso with both arms.

'I'm here because you were the last person I was supposed to meet before - '

Ebodia wasn't looking at Cadicher. Her eyes moved from the floor to the broken window and back again.

'I need you to listen to this then I'll be gone. Stop worrying about the guy who tried to rape you; you can do that later. This is more important.' Cadicher checked his watch. He wasn't sure who had heard what had happened, or how long he had before someone found the guy on the street. Five minutes, probably less.

‘You’re the last person I was going to meet with before I quit. Your name is Ebodia Michaels. You purchased *youth* four months ago from who-the-fuck knows, but you were actually buying it from an organisation known as The Glove, the same organisation I used to work for. You haven’t made any payments; I don’t care why. You’re a ghost, so I think I get it. I wouldn’t have paid either. The point is I was supposed to convince you to pay up in full. But, for whatever reason, The Glove isn’t interested in collecting money anymore from people like you. They’re just killing off whoever hasn’t paid. Call it civic duty, or whatever you want, but I came here to warn you. What happened just now was pure cosmic coincidence.’

Ebodia was still looking at the window.

Cadicher checked his watch again. ‘I’m sorry. I have to go.’

‘Wait.’

Cadicher stopped in the doorway.

‘What do I do?’

‘Call the police. Tell them the truth.’

‘No, about what you said.’

Cadicher thought a moment. ‘Same answer.’ Then he added, ‘I’m not sure there is anything you can do, but at least you know.’

‘Someone’s been following me.’

‘Who?’ Cadicher said, turning around.

‘I don’t know but you could help me.’

‘I can’t.’

‘My fiancé...my ex...he doesn’t live far from here. You could drop me off at his house. I don’t want to be alone tonight.’

‘No.’

‘It’s not far. Please.’

‘No.’

‘Then why bother telling me all of this, if you won’t help me? Did you just want to clear your conscience? You owe me this.’

‘I don’t owe you anything.’

Cadicher was out of breath, mostly from the adrenaline coursing through his body. He went to pick up his box of cigarettes when something else caught his eye on the floor. A red brooch in the shape of a rose was lying on its side.

Cadicher stared at it for what felt like an eternity. Then he picked it up, read what it said, and threw it out the window too.

24

Cadicher had parked in the basement of the building. Scattered cars stood cold, except for his, which was parked adjacent to the elevator, the engine still warm and ticking. He got in, pushed the START button. He closed his eyes and replayed the events in his mind. He didn’t get very far. A rap on the

passenger window interrupted his thoughts. He unlocked the doors. Ebodia squeezed into the seat, still wearing her silk gown, but with the addition of a denim jacket and red pumps on her feet. She hugged a small bag, containing, Cadicher thought, a few essentials – whatever she could think to pack in the minute he had given her.

Cadicher didn't believe in signs, and certainly not signs that came in the form of a red brooch. He wasn't the type. He was almost certain it was just a coincidence, but almost certain and being certain were not the same thing. The rational part of him struggled to understand why he had given in to her so easily or why she had simply trusted him. He hadn't earned it, not really, and she was just a name to him. The emotional part of him understood exactly why this was happening.

He drove out the basement and onto the street in silence, still thinking this was a mistake. He was being reckless and impulsive – the types of traits careless people were attracted to. This wasn't just a drop off. Nothing in life was ever that simple for him. He hadn't thought this through. This wasn't the job, this wasn't the plan.

He made a U-turn at the next robot without explaining himself, deciding to head back to her apartment building. He would drop her off then go home. He wasn't responsible for her. She would get out or he would drag her out. She meant nothing to him, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Ebodia merely shuffled in her seat.

It was late; the streets were barren with only a few cars in the distance, which was why the halogen lights following him caught his attention straight away.

25

People break the law for all types of reasons. A U-turn is usually inconsequential, especially late at night but it's always noticeable because of its awkwardness. 180 degree turns are never done with finesse unless you're a child playing with Matchbox dinkies. A car heading in the wrong direction and wanting to go the other way is no big deal. Two cars heading in the wrong direction at the same time, and deciding to change course at the exact location is rare, but not unprecedented.

Cadicher only needed rare.

He glanced at the rear-view mirror and saw the lights, almost flickering at him, casting a bright, bluish-white light. He couldn't make out the car, or the driver. The lights sat high so the car was big. Maybe an SUV, maybe a van.

He slowed down but the lights kept their distance, never intruding on the space between them.

He drove back, past the entrance to the basement of the apartment building. Ebodia looked at him for the first time.

'Where are we going?'

Cadicher made a left turn without warning. He sped up and checked his rear-view mirror once more. Seconds passed. He blinked towards the road then back at the mirror.

The lights were on him again, this time steaming towards them on high beam, blinding Cadicher's vision, growing larger, illuminating the entire back window.

Ebodia turned in her seat to look behind. She only had a moment.

26

The car rammed them from behind, sending Ebodia's bag flying from her grasp and onto the dash. Cadicher was jolted from his seat but the seatbelt caught him in mid-air and threw him back into the worn, creased leather. The car had only bumped them. Whoever was driving behind him wanted him to panic, overcorrect the steering to one side, and veer off the road. Instead, Cadicher did very little except try to keep the steering wheel straight and push as hard as he could on the accelerator.

His car shot to life, roaring up the narrow street, but even though the speedometer needle rapidly swept from 110 to 140, Cadicher couldn't put any distance between him and the car behind him.

It's not a van, he thought.

His car had five years in the service book. Not new but still expensive, even in the second-hand market. It wasn't

built for speed but it had lots of power and ample torque to shift its bulk.

The car behind kept up with him easily, backing off then speeding up, clipping the rear bumper once more, trying to get the car to sway one way or another.

Cadicher should have been looking ahead of him but the halogens behind him kept snatching his attention, breaking his concentration. They were flicking off and on as though signalling something. He was trying to anticipate when the driver behind him would try to ram him again. He was trying to do too much. He was over thinking things.

Which is why he didn't see the driverless car coming in the opposite lane jump over into his and hit them head on.

27

Ebodia screamed. The sound first caught in her lungs and hung there momentarily before it was blasted out of her throat; the seat belt constricted across her chest with such force that she fractured two ribs instantly. The windshield cracked faster than a bullet, splintered, and then sent a million pieces of glass into the car before she could blink. The dashboard airbag exploded violently into her face. Instantaneously, the curtain airbag to her left unfolded like a lifeboat, trying to cushion any whiplash, trying to limit the damage. Both airbags deployed with little effect. The dash crumpled into her legs. Metal,

rubber, and plastic twisted, bent, and warped around her. She felt her body move in knots, in ways that stretched and pulled and contracted every muscle, every strand of sinew, every fibre. Pain detonated inside her for the briefest time as the car flipped over. Neurons fired and misfired, shooting agonising signals from her brain to her body, overloading her senses. Then it was too much. All too much for her to bear and she snapped into darkness.

28

Cadicher inhaled as he saw the car cross into his lane. His mind had time to register that this was a trap, all intended, all planned. There were always two cars following him, not one. He just hadn’t noticed. He tried jerking the steering wheel sharply to his right, but his reactions were slow. Maybe years of drinking had finally dulled whatever breakneck reflexes he had possessed in his youth. However, he had done enough. Just. The driverless car had ripped through most of the left side of the bonnet, shredding it into pieces of metal, some as fine as powder, which were consumed by the heat of the collision within seconds.

Cadicher exhaled upside down, regaining consciousness, blood pouring from a cut on his nose into his eyes, making them sting, making them burn and itch. He wanted to close them again, to rest, to allow himself another moment away from it

all but he could feel a raw, dull heat around him. He could taste iron in his mouth. Then the smell of petrol struck him. His mind told him to move. His body resisted. His head felt pressurised, heavy, and turning it made him grind his jaw shut, his teeth gritting together like folded sandpaper.

Ebodia was still. He hoped just unconscious and not dead. Her face looked like it had been rubbed against a grater. He couldn't tell whether her injuries were life threatening or not. He tried to move a hand towards her jugular but his shoulder bit into him, causing him to scream. He was reaching for the seatbelt clasp when a light struck his face, blinding him; he turned, wincing at it. Then another light struck him from the other side, through the broken passenger window. He felt hands tugging at him, trying to yank him from his seat.

Something cracked near his shoulder and he barked out in pain. It could have been his scapula, perhaps his collar bone. Whatever it was it had snapped like a dried branch and so it made little difference which. Cadicher looked down through a curtain of blood and saw a blade cutting across the nylon band of the seatbelt. He felt it fray and finally break. He dropped onto the roof of the car, neck bent, his body scrunched up like wasted paper. A hand grabbed his leg and dragged him through the crumpled, half-open door.

'Plut hymn orn hyzz neez.'

Cadicher heard the voice come out slowly and muffled, as though a woman were speaking underwater. The colours of the

night swirled around him. Oranges and yellows and blacks and greys circled each other, never staying in one position.

Powerless, he was put into place like a man about to be executed.

29

The three people sat in the car waiting patiently. The man in the back seat was holding a large tablet-like device, the size of a small TV, his finger moving across the screen from the bottom, up.

The driver asked, 'How much longer?'

The man in the back seat said, 'We're ready. I've got control.'

The woman in the passenger seat replied, 'Okay.'

When they saw the car exit the apartment building basement, the driver waited ten seconds before following. He counted them off in his head. He wasn't in a rush. He had all the time in the world. When he got to ten, he started the car and eased forward. They drove for a minute then the car ahead made a U-turn at the robot.

'This is a problem,' the driver said.

'Why?' the woman asked.

'The roads are empty.'

'So?'

'He'll notice we're following him now.'

‘That’s not a problem,’ said the woman. Then she spoke to the man sitting behind her: ‘You sure you’re ready?’

‘It’s a hacked autonomous car but I’m also controlling it from here. A fail safe. Like a co-driver. Piece of cake. There’s no problem.’

The driver made a U-turn. The power steering whined as they turned. The car was big, the manoeuvre ungraceful. Like turning an oil tanker. But the roads were barren so there was no delay. They drove back towards the apartment building.

‘I think he’s slowing down,’ the driver said. ‘He knows we’re following him. Maybe the U-turn was a test.’

‘I don’t need a narrative,’ the woman said. ‘I have eyes and a brain. Use yours to drive the car.’

The car ahead suddenly made a sharp left turn.

The driver followed. He made up the distance quickly. All three of them had their heads pushed back against their seats as the car accelerated.

‘Distract him,’ the woman said.

The driver flicked on his brights and rammed the car ahead. He eased off and did it again. This time the front of his grill only nudged the back of their bumper, like a kiss. Like a boy kissing a girl for the first time. He had their attention. He wasn’t trying to push them off the road, he just wanted them to concentrate on what was happening behind them. He didn’t want them thinking about anything else.

The man in the back seat said, ‘600 meters and closing.’

The woman said, ‘Can you match their speed?’

‘I'm the co-driver. Piece of cake.’

The driver backed off. He flicked his lights off high beam. Then on again. Then off again.

‘100 meters,’ the man in the back seat said. ‘Back off.’

The driver braked hard. The nose of their car pitched forward, like an invisible weight had pushed down on it.

The man sitting behind moved his finger down, across the tablet diagonally and to the left.

The three of them watched the two cars collide. It happened quickly. They saw the car ahead of them try to move out of the way. They saw it swerve. It wasn’t a direct hit but this wasn’t surgery. It didn’t need to be precise. They heard metal crunch and screech. They saw the driverless car punch through the one they had been following; debris hitting the road like hail. The car they were following had pitched sideways on two wheels before flipping on its roof. The driverless car had swivelled, curtailing off before it crashed through a storefront window near the road. Then it was over, just a couple of seconds of complete, deafening carnage before silence choked out the night once more.

The driver eased forward. The wheels squelched and popped over bits of plastic and glass. They stopped beside the car on its roof. All three of them got out. The driver took out two torches, handed one to the woman. They swept the lights over the wreckage. Steam rose from the engine; water, oil and petrol

puddled around them and met in a crevice in the road, already beginning to run down the street. One light from the flipped-over car was still on, flickering sporadically, casting a yellow beam up the road, flying insects already weaving through its warmth.

The driver bent down and shone his torch through the driver's side of the wreck. The woman shone her torch through the other end. Some kind of unconscious symmetry in their actions. Then the third man, the one who had been using the oversized tablet, began pulling at the man in the wreck. He stood up, removed a knife from his jacket and started cutting the seatbelt.

The woman walked around the car as the other two hauled the body from the wreckage. 'Put him on his knees.' She brought out a gun from her underarm holster and fired two shots.

The blood pooled with the water and the oil and the petrol, racing down the street.

30

Cadicher didn't see the gun. He didn't see the trigger being pulled. He heard the shots and pitched forward, one arm outstretched, trying to stop the fall, pain flaring everywhere.

The two men dropped dead. Their eyes still wide open, slightly askew, as though trying to look up at the holes about

an inch above their eyebrows, their faces frozen somewhere between shock and nothingness.

The woman fired another four shots, two for the driver, two for the man who had been using the oversized tablet. Double-taps. Blood stained their shirts near their centre masses.

She holstered her gun, bent down and picked up six bullet shells.

Cadicher looked up at her.

'You've looked worse,' she said.

31

She helped Cadicher to the car. She placed him in the passenger seat and asked him: 'What about the woman?'

'Is she alive?'

'For now.'

'Then we bring her,' Cadicher said, picking out a piece of glass from his cheek. The woman turned to move when Cadicher grabbed her arm and asked, 'Why?'

'Later.'

Cadicher tried to steady his vision as she moved quickly around the wreckage.

32

The woman pulled Ebodia from the wreck as carefully as she could. She was alive. Blood in all the wrong places, but alive. And that was all that mattered for now. She dragged her to the car, her arms hooking under Ebodia's armpits, like a soldier carrying a wounded comrade on the battlefield. She made it to the car, squatted, and used her legs to lift. It was an effort, but she was built tough, all muscle and sinew. Nothing she hadn't done before in the army. She laid Ebodia out on the back seat while Cadicher sat nursing his left arm with his eyes closed, taking shallow breaths.

'You still smoke?' the woman asked.

'Front pocket.'

The woman found the pack of Instant-lite cigarettes. The box was crushed but the cigarettes inside were mostly still in good shape.

The woman said, 'Give me a minute.'

She took closer to five. She hauled the driver into the flipped-over car. The same dragging technique - small, constant steps. Then she dragged the other man to the driverless car, which was further away. It took a lot of work and she was sweating when she was done.

The driverless car was in better shape than the flipped-over car, which was her main problem.

She moved the man inside and caught her breath, walking to the back of the vehicle, sucking in deep mouthfuls of air. The petrol cap cover had only bent in the collision but it didn't

take much strength to pry it open. She fished out an Instant-lite from the crumpled box, put it in her mouth and breathed in. The cigarette caught alight instantly. She puffed twice, unscrewed the petrol cap and dropped the cigarette inside, stepping away as quickly as possible.

Two things happened in quick succession.

First there was a whooshing sound as the petrol inside the tank caught alight. Second, the tank imploded with a crack and the lit petrol escaped, engulfing the car in seconds. The woman shielded her face with her arm.

'That's one car taken care of,' Cadicher said, when she opened the driver door. 'What about the other?'

She shrugged, closing the driver door, starting the engine, putting it in gear. 'There's petrol everywhere. The fire will move to the other car in time.'

'Not good enough,' Cadicher said.

The woman checked her mirrors. There were no other cars. She couldn't hear sirens either. But that didn't mean no one was coming. She got another cigarette from the box and placed it in Cadicher's mouth.

'Make it quick.'

Cadicher removed the cigarette from his mouth, the butt smeared red with blood, the tip burning bright orange. He opened the window and flicked the cigarette into a puddle closest to the flipped over car. The puddle ignited, tentacles

of fire expanding outwards in every direction wet with petrol, including the flipped over car.

'That won't fool anyone,' Cadicher said as they drove off.

'It'll fool a lot of people.'

'None that matter.'

33

One of the Ralston twins was supposed to be a boy, so of course when Deidre pushed out another girl, everyone called her Mack.

Mackenzie hated the name then, and she hated it now, especially thinking back at how Alice had improvised it to: Mack Truck - big, dirty, and shiny with dome sweat. Except Mackenzie was none of those things and Alice was all of them.

'Miss Ralston?'

'Yes?'

'Do you have any questions?'

Mackenzie looked away from the window towards the doctor.

'No.'

'None?'

After a while the doctor nodded. 'I'll come back later and check up on you. We'll get you fitted in no time.' He walked to

the side of her bed and placed a pamphlet in her hand. Like he was handing her something he wasn't supposed to.

Mackenzie glanced at the title, LIVING WITH TRANSHUMERAL AMPUTATION. Her fingers, the only five she had left, tightened on the paper. She stared out the window again and the doctor left.

34

There were two problems for Detective Huglow. The first happened before she left her home. It was a call with new evidence, only better. This was the way forward, but it needed work. She wasn't sure whether the chain was reliable but it was the only smart play she had left. The source was unexpected, almost too good to be true, a man of status and significant power, and it would take at least a day to run through the details and make the necessary calls. She'd need to sacrifice a lot for it to work. But if it worked out, she would get medals and commendations.

The second problem happened five minutes later when she got in her car and the bullet ripped through her skull.

35

The Closer controlled his breathing, his right hand reloading the sniper rifle quickly, shifting the bolt action back into

place smoothly. The detective's head had snapped back in a mist of blood. She wasn't moving but that didn't mean she was dead. He had seen stranger things. But firing a second shot involved risk, even with a silencer, even with the relative safety of the rooftop, even with a stationary target 980 metres away. He didn't want to compromise himself unnecessarily. It also boiled down to pride. One shot, one kill.

So he waited, moving the rifle to her front door, checking the area for activity before bringing it back to the target. No change in position for the victim, no movement near the house or car. He moved the rifle in the other direction, sweeping up and down the suburban street. He saw a man dressed in a suit, standing on the pavement, speaking on a cell phone, 80 metres northeast of the target. It was possible that he had heard the shot. Not likely though. The morning buzz was gathering steam. People were leaving for work. Household appliances were on; kids were getting ready for school. It was 50/50 - odds which The Closer wasn't comfortable with.

The Closer's finger poised on the trigger, he adjusted his aim for gravity and wind and distance. If he pulled the trigger, the man in the suit would have less than two seconds left to live. One shot, one kill.

The man in the suit smiled. The Closer could see him through his scope laughing at something someone was saying over the phone. The assassin relaxed, waited a moment then swept his crosshairs back to the target. Detective Huglow still hadn't

moved. He knew that the bullet had gone right through, the exit hole about the size of his fist. It was a quick death, merciful even in some ways. It could have been worse.

He didn't want to think about Detective Huglow too much and the implications her death would have. He kept telling himself she was just a target. The end. She was just a name to him and a location, his rifle taking care of the rest.

Satisfied with a confirmed kill, The Closer reached for a phone to his right. He dialled, waited for the third ring and hung up.

The message was clear.

36

Mackenzie had been discharged. She had been fitted with the latest prosthetic money could buy. It wasn't supposed to be commercially ready. It worked with her nerves and had touch settings which were all programmed individually to her, linked directly to her brain. It was also fitted with self-healing prosthetic skin that could mimic hot and cold conditions, cloned and reproduced proportionally to her other arm. Visually, it was her arm, in almost every sense. The Octolimb Technology Company had used all available technological resources at its disposal, even going so far as to mimic hair and nail growth, finger length and width, tension and resistance parameters, movement reality, and pain receptors.

They had spared no expense given the client. Mackenzie had a one-of-a-kind prosthetic, and yet she saw it as nothing more than a store window mannequin abomination.

The prosthetic skin would take three months to fuse with the skin above her elbow, and the doctors assured her that the scar it left behind would look like nothing more than a thin, faded stretch mark. But she would know. She would always know that this wasn't her arm, even if no one else did. Her wrist no longer clicked when she rotated it; the silvery scar above the knuckle on her middle finger was no longer there. The beauty spot on her palm had been replaced with a small, UV barcoded tattoo.

A part of her was gone and nothing could replace it. The memories, good and bad, were just that now, and that arm had carried its fair share of physical reminders of her past.

Lying in bed, Mackenzie dreamt of Alice.

'Mack?' Alice had called, walking through the field. 'Mack, I can't find you! Mama's looking for you! Mack!'

Seven year old Mackenzie was sitting in her uncle's tobacco field. The plants, green and heavy, swayed in the wind. Rows and rows of them, thousands of them, simultaneously dancing to the same rhythm, as the dark clouds surrounded her, walling off the sky, seemingly trapping her within a giant storm. She was between two rows, legs crossed, loose hair whipping back like thin, black ribbons. She watched as birds

cartwheeled above her, frantically trying to locate shelter before the storm started.

Mackenzie could hear her sister somewhere ahead, crashing through the crop. She knew Alice would find her eventually. She wasn't hiding. Their uncle wouldn't stand for childish games like that.

She heard the rain fall, striking some leaves around her, and closed her eyes, waiting for the drops to hit her.

But Alice beat them to it.

Mackenzie woke with a start just as her sister's hand evaporated from her dream.

37

The Closer walked through the crowded streets, shoulder to shoulder in some areas, his rifle folded away in a back pack. He made another call, this time from his private phone.

'I need to see you.'

'Now?'

'Yes.'

'I can't see you now.'

'I understand. What about tomorrow?'

The call went dead.

He stared at the screen for a long time, people streaming around him like he was a stone in a river.

38

Hyenas are more intelligent at solving complex problems than chimps. But this fact is dwarfed by their jaw strength. A hyena's jaws can crush bones as though they are nothing more than a packet of chips, which is why The Closer took three pain pills and an ice bath when he got home.

His left foot ached. Walking, he had read somewhere, was supposed to release endorphins, easing the pain, but the nerves were permanently damaged, no matter how many steps he got in. Still, he tried everything. He had to. This was an old injury with a daily dose of fresh pain.

Usually, he could keep the agony at bay with a handful of drugs but they always dulled his concentration and sometimes gave him the shakes. Pain was a better companion when he worked. He could ignore it or fight through it. He couldn't do that when the shakes started, and he had needed steady hands this morning.

He undressed and got in the bath, the cold instantly taking his breath away, making him shiver, making his body numb and pink.

Gripping the side of the bath, he stuttered through chattering teeth, 'Cu-Cu-Cuckacheya is-is-isn't here. Y-y-you are. Y-you are. Y-you are.'

Cukacheya, a spotted hyena raised by his mother, had grown into a 60kg matriarch in 18 short months. The Closer's mother had found Cukacheya on a hunt one day; she was just a cub at the time, forced to starve by a sibling and left to die in the den. The Closer's mother had trained the hyena to obey different commands. Like a pet dog, only stronger and faster and smarter.

His mother had run a small, but lucrative business for trophy hunters, breeding and selling wild animals on her game farm. In the southern foothills of the Magalies Mountain she was known as Aunty Lika, to her son she was known as 'that evil bitch'. The Closer had known his mother long enough to regard her often quiet and contemplative demeanour around strangers as nothing more than a mask she would wear, waiting until they were alone before ripping it off.

What had started out as disciplining a naughty child had soon turned into abuse with no one to stop it. The Closer had never met his father, never known his name or seen a photograph. His mother only entertained questions about his existence when she drank. He knew his father was alive, sleeping god-knows-where with god-knows-who judging from his mother's slipping tongue and unstable moods, which usually came after her fourth or fifth glass of whiskey.

As The Closer got older, the abuse waned. The piece of hosepipe his mother had used on his back every Tuesday and

Thursday eventually tore and spilt from the sun as it baked on the veranda. But whilst the physical abuse declined (she could no longer inflict much damage on her 6ft-and-still-growing son) the emotional abuse continued.

As the years passed, The Closer still sought out his father's identity, his curiosity never breaking.

'I want to know who he is?'

'And I don't have to tell you.'

'I just want to know his name.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I've given you everything. He's never given you anything. Never called. Never tried to see you.'

'Does he know I exist?'

His mother smirked, 'You don't get it, do you? Your father wants nothing to do with you. Now stop acting like such a stupid, weak boy.'

'I'm a man now. I deserve to know the truth.'

His mother snickered. 'A man? You still piss your bed, boy. Don't think I don't know about it. 15 years old and your mattress stinks just the same as when I potty trained you. You disgust me. A man? Your little cock is good for pissing on things, like all men. And if you ever learn to fuck a girl, you'll piss on her, too.'

The Closer kicked out his chair and overturned the small dining room table, their supper spraying the floor, plates and glasses breaking.

‘I’ll find him myself then.’

His mother smiled at the aggression, mute, allowing her son’s outburst to pass without retaliation.

Until later that night. Until she had finished her fourth glass of whiskey.

She pushed open his bedroom door silently and Cukacheya tramped inside the room, her nails clicking on the hardwood floor, gums drawn back, teeth yellow and stained.

The Closer had been lying on his bed unaware, stomach down, having fallen asleep to music with his headphones on. His arms were folded in a makeshift pillow, his feet hanging off the edge of his bed.

Cukacheya’s ears pricked up at the heavy metal music coming from the headphones, tail erect, head stretching forward sniffing the air, a small growl escaping from her throat.

The Closer’s mother slapped the hyena on the snout, tightening the chain leash around her neck.

Cukacheya turned sharply at the strike, wincing, a single strand of saliva dripping from her lower jaw.

The Closer’s mother wasn’t insane. Cukacheya would maul her son to death given the chance. She just wanted to teach him a lesson.

She guided Cukacheya to her son's foot, the hyena sniffing the sock, groaning deeply. And when it clamped down on The Closer's ankle it giggled, shaking its head wildly, pulling him off his bed.

The image of Cukacheya and his mother, both grinning, both licking their lips after she had eventually pulled the hyena off would stay with The Closer forever.

A couple of weeks later, it was The Closer who would laugh manically, hearing his mother's sobs as her cherished pet lay writhing in the dirt, hind legs jerking out at nothing, foaming at the mouth from the poison he had rubbed into the horsemeat she had eaten.

His mother knew he was to blame.

She took out her handgun and shot the hyena where it lay. She turned, wiping tears, cocking the gun once more, making her way back to the house.

And The Closer watched, the sun setting behind him, the barrel of his hunting rifle resting on the back tyre of a tractor just to the right of the house.

'One shot, one kill,' he said to himself.

Just like his mother had taught him.

40

Mackenzie felt the inside of her bottom lip with her tongue. She could still feel the scar tissue from where she had bitten

through the skin after Alice had struck her all those years ago in the tobacco field.

She rubbed her eyes and immediately felt disgusted knowing that she had used her prosthetic to do it. Worse still, she couldn't feel the difference between her prosthetic palm and her actual palm.

Her phone vibrated. She reached across her bed and picked it up from the bedside table. She swiped the screen left, opening the camera feed from her intercom outside her gate.

A notification popped up on the left of the screen with three options. It read:

LICENSE PLATE BG12-09-GG

REG OWNER: GYMAN ROTHERDAM

ACCEPT

IGNORE

CONTACT AUTHORITIES

Mackenzie's finger hovered over the options before she finally tapped ACCEPT. The gates to her mansion opened inwards and the Bishop drove in.

41

'I hope this isn't a bad time, my child?' Roman Catholic Bishop Gyman Rotherdam said, as he watched Mackenzie descend

her marble staircase into the main entrance foyer. ‘Your front door was open.’

‘Not at all, Your Grace,’ Mackenzie replied, kissing the Bishop’s hand. ‘I unlocked and opened the door from upstairs. Please join me.’

The Bishop nodded as Mackenzie led him down the entrance hall and into the parlour. This was an extravagant circular room, the walls replaced with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the pond. Every piece of furniture had been hand-picked by an interior designer or bought at auction. In the centre of the room lay The Pearl Carpet of Baroda. Despite its price tag, it always struck Mackenzie as a little kitsch-looking, the diamonds and rubies and emeralds easily mistaken for cheap knock-offs.

She ushered the Bishop to one of the more intimate seating arrangements in the room, and sat across from him, a small glass table separating them.

‘Can I offer you something to drink?’

Bishop Rotherdam waved a hand at the air. Despite his age, he still looked jovial, like a young Santa Claus, the sides of his purple cassock plumping out. ‘No, please. I came to tend to you. How are things?’

Mackenzie opened and closed her prosthetic fingers. ‘I’m still getting used to everything, Your Grace.’

‘I heard. Change can be hard, my child.’ He leaned forward in his chair. ‘Would you mind if I touched it?’

Mackenzie looked up at him, caught off guard by the question. She tentatively extended her prosthetic and the Bishop's soft fingers prodded and felt her own.

'Remarkable,' he said, leaning back in his chair. 'It's amazing what science can do these days, but look who I'm talking to.'

Mackenzie had known the Bishop for a good part of a decade. He had contacted her personally, at the peak of her success, asking her to donate land and funds so he could build one of the largest Catholic churches in Africa. In his letter he had stated that churches were a life preserver and that people in her position owed mankind more than charity. She had been blessed by God to give something more than money. She could gift people justice and dignity and appreciation of self-worth. The Bishop had come across to her as a moderate man, and always willing to expend his influence for the greater good.

'After I heard about what happened to you, I tried phoning.'

'I haven't been in the mood for much sympathy.'

'Understandable. It is not in your nature, and not good for business. You have changed the world with your pills. It would look strange if you couldn't accept an artificial arm when you expect others to buy into artificial ageing.'

Mackenzie hadn't thought about her situation in that way.

'And how are things with you, Your Grace?'

'As they have always been but I must admit I came here today with a second agenda.'

'Something I can help with?' Mackenzie asked, genuinely curious.

'I'm sure you have seen the news lately about the increase in missing people. The news stories coming out are quite disturbing.'

Mackenzie shook her head.

'No? Your associates didn't mention anything to you?'

'What do missing people have to do with me?'

He interlaced his fingers on his lap. 'I thought you knew. Ghosts are disappearing.'

'What do you mean disappearing?'

'Seven people were reported missing last week. They were all ghosts. You must have heard that the Minister of Education was kidnapped three weeks ago?'

Mackenzie had heard of this. Everyone had. Bhekisisa Mzobe was one of just a handful of public ghosts, having taken *youth* three years ago.

Bishop Rotherdam continued, 'At first people thought it was just a coincidence, but a pattern has emerged. Someone is kidnapping ghosts. At least that's what we are to believe from the news. Has nobody told you this?'

'I had no idea.'

The Bishop nodded. 'People are sheltering you. They think you are too fragile to handle this unwanted news right now.'

Mackenzie said nothing.

'I've always been curious about ghosts,' the Bishop said.

'In what way, Your Grace?'

'Well, I know only what I hear. Gossip mostly. Superstitious nonsense, I'm sure.'

Mackenzie knew of the rumours. How ghosts were somehow a special, chosen few. The stories ranged from them being the next step in evolution all the way to children of the devil. The truth was not so glamourous.

'Most of what's written about them is inaccurate, Your Grace.'

'I think you're being polite.'

'They're nothing more than a side effect of *youth.* Normally, *youth* supresses the age-1 gene - '

The Bishop laughed, cutting her off. 'You've already lost me.'

Mackenzie tracked back, trying to find a simple way of explaining her life's work. 'Genes are responsible for our characteristics. Some people are better at running, some are better at math. These traits are inherited through our genes. Telling someone that they have good genes because they look young is true. The age-1 gene controls how quickly we age.'

'I see.'

'*Youth* supresses this ageing gene for approximately 300 days. After then, the gene reactivates, and the ageing process resumes. If a person keeps taking the pill, they would

theoretically never age for as long as they lived. However, in some rare cases, the age-1 gene never reactivates.'

Mackenzie didn't know why this happened. A team of scientists, biologists and geneticists working for her didn't know why. Countless articles had been published, theorising various reasons but their conclusions were outlandish, based more on speculation than fact. Most of the scientific world believed the answer was a result of the chaos theory - that people were essentially different. But Mackenzie always felt this explanation was lazy and she strived for definitive proof. What she did know for certain was that, on average, for every 12000 people who did take *youth*, one of them wouldn't be able to restart the age-1 gene. For men, the odds were better - roughly, one in twenty thousand. Children were affected worst of all. One in six hundred children under the age of 16 couldn't resume the ageing process, and those odds dropped exponentially the younger the child. Mackenzie knew that the problem had to do with the rate of ageing – that much was clear. Men didn't age as quickly as women because they had less estrogen. And obviously women and men didn't age as quickly as children; thus, those who still needed the age-1 gene had the most to lose, which is why after five years of FDA testing, *youth* was illegal for anyone under the age of 21. The maturity of the age-1 gene obviously had a dramatic effect on whether it could reactivate after 300 days of suppression. She just didn't know why. Yet.

Mackenzie continued, ‘The white eyes that you see in ghosts are caused by the permanent deactivation of the age-1 gene.’

‘And why does that happen?’

‘As people naturally age, their cells take longer to divide into new cells. When the division stops altogether, the cells eventually die causing hair loss, wrinkles, cancer, and other age-related issues. A common old age disorder is something called arcus senilis. Ordinarily, arcus senilis presents as a white ring around the cornea, but as *youth* disables the age-1 gene, and ghosts cannot reactivate it, the body goes into overdrive, thinking that the age-1 gene has stopped dividing cells *because* of old age.’

‘You lost me again, my child.’

‘In essence, their eyes turn white because their body thinks that they’re old.’

The Bishop was quiet for a moment, processing the information.

‘So why would anyone want to kidnap these people?’

‘I could think of a few reasons, but none of them are pleasant.’

‘This is troubling. And what do you intend to do about our situation.’

Mackenzie stiffened.

‘Our affiliation is delicate, my child. Science and religion have never seen eye to eye.’

‘But you and I do.’

‘Yes, but for how long? It seems our paths must diverge now. Perhaps they will meet again.’

‘Diverge?’

The Bishop reached inside a pocket. ‘I took the liberty of preparing a press release of sorts for you.’

‘I don’t see how this concerns you.’

Bishop Rotherdam sighed heavily, his hand retreating. ‘It concerns everyone, my child. I have known you for a long time now and...’

‘And,’ Mackenzie interrupted, piecing together what the Bishop was trying to say, ‘you don’t want to be associated with anyone who may be behind this. You’re covering your reputation. We need the church on our side. You can’t abandon us now.’

‘Have faith, my child.’

‘I could ask the same of you.’

‘These are just sensitive times.’

‘What is this really about, Your Grace?’

‘I can see that I have upset you. That was not my intention. This is just temporary, until things settle down.’

Mackenzie looked past the Bishop, towards her pond where the sunlight shimmered off the water. ‘You used me. I helped you get what you needed.’

‘We both needed each other. Let us not end things this way. We can still – ’

‘I think you should leave now.’

The Bishop closed his mouth and stood slowly, his face turning red with embarrassment. ‘Very well. I’ll pray about your situation for both our sakes.’

Mackenzie watched as he walked out the parlour, his cassock sweeping behind him.

42

One time was all it took. That was it. One time. No more.

But he came around a second time, F’tah. He came around and stole the sun. And darkness fell. It dropped no inch of light from the sky. No slant ever looked skew again.

Here he reared. Naked and full of dust.

Dust, F’tah.

Dust.

43

Cadicher didn’t gasp or wipe sweat from his brow or clutch his chest. He simply opened his eyes.

He saw the ceiling first. The peeling paint, half hanging like an icicle, waiting to impale him. The room was bright and bland. The curtains open, the sunlight concentrated, heavy, pressing on his body, pressing on his injuries.

He moved slowly, got out of bed.

The bathroom was just a toilet, stained yellow in the bowl from the dripping tank. Speckled rust sullied the hinges of the lid. A crow, rotting in the shallow water in the bowl, opened and closed its beak.

Cadicher squeezed out brown urine, thick as toothpaste. He was wounded, dangerous, and dying. Two red roses budded over his chest. They opened. The petals turned yellow, then brown and fell to the floor.

He took pills. One for his liver, two for his gut. He took another dose to catch up. Then another for the hell of it.

He swayed and almost fell. He stumbled backwards, catching the door behind him. He hunched over and coughed and spat something off-white. Something with edges and weight.

A tooth.

He prodded his mouth with wrinkled fingers, like they had been left in water for too long. They came out stained with bright blood.

He returned to bed. The sunlight was concentrated and heavy and pressing on his body.

He closed his eyes and woke up.

44

The woman laid a hand on Cadicher's shoulder. 'Take it easy. You were dreaming.'

Cadicher looked up at the ceiling. The white paint was peeling, half hanging off.

'Where am I?'

'A safe house. Relax. You'll pull your stitches.'

Cadicher looked down and saw a layer of blood-soaked bandages around his bare chest.

'How bad?'

'You'll live.'

'And the woman I was with?'

The woman moved across the room. She walked towards a dressing table. She checked her watch and cleared dust from the surface of the wood.

'Fuck sakes. Just tell me.'

'Does it matter?'

'It's a simple question.'

The woman smiled. 'You don't give a shit about anyone. Case in point: I got out of prison.'

'I figured.'

'You never tried to get in touch. The first time I spoke to you was when you called the other day and quit the business.'

'That hurt your feelings?'

'Wouldn't go that far.'

'Seems like it did,' Cadicher said, prodding the bandages with his fingers.

‘Four years I was in there. Would’ve been nice to hear from you.’

‘Fifty months.’

‘What?’

‘You were in there for fifty months. Four years and two months.’

‘Is that supposed to change anything? Were you crossing off the months on a calendar?’

‘No.’

‘I could have lived with the silence in prison, but I’ve also been out for six months now. But you already know that.’

‘You want an apology?’

She didn’t reply.

‘What then, Echo?’ Cadicher asked.

‘I called Mom every Friday. Then she just stopped taking my calls. I thought you’d stopped her. The fucked up thing is that I wasn’t angry at you. I know what kind of heartless bastard you are. But mom wasn’t like you. She...’ Echo laughed. ‘I was so angry with her, you know? I went a year in there without knowing she had died.’

‘You were in prison.’

‘So you punished me?’

‘You made a choice, Echo.’

‘So did you.’

‘I can live with mine.’

Echo nodded absently. ‘You’ll be in pain for a while. You dislocated your shoulder. Nothing too serious. You should rest then disappear. You should also know that what happened last night wasn’t personal.’ Echo threw a white business card onto the bed. Cadicher saw the finger print on one side in black ink.

‘That’s all the way from the top,’ Echo said.

‘The Glove?’

Echo didn’t reply.

‘Why?’ Cadicher asked.

‘What did you think would happen? I told you not to do anything stupid.’

Cadicher picked up the card. He’d never seen The Glove’s print before. He got his orders from people lower down the hierarchy.

‘If this is from The Glove then you’re not safe anymore,’ Cadicher said.

‘Okay.’

‘They know you’re my daughter.’

‘I’ll be fine. I’m The Middle Finger, remember?’

‘You can’t be this stupid. They’ll know you helped me.’

‘A little late to play the part of a concerned father now, don’t you think? You should have thought about me before you went around suddenly trying to right all the wrongs in the world like some fucking superhero.’

‘I had to try. You know I did. I gave your mother my word, Echo.’

‘Sure you did. I have to go.’

‘Why’d you save me?’

‘I didn’t want to. I thought I was like you. Guess I took after mom.’

‘You should’ve killed me.’

‘What’s done is done.’

‘Bullshit.’

Echo moved to leave. ‘You want to die? There’s a gun in the cupboard. There’s a car in the garage and a pool outside. Lots of choices. I won’t do you any more favours, Dad.’

‘Wait.’

Echo stopped at the door.

‘The woman? Ebodia?’

‘She didn’t make it. She died before we got here.’

‘So what did you do with her? She might have had family.’

‘I took care of it. I drove her back to her place and called it in.’

‘What about the accident?’

‘What about it?’

‘Can it be traced back to us? My car was there.’

‘We burnt everything.’

‘We?’

‘Yes. You and me. You’re not thinking straight.’

Cadicher had a headache. He needed to rest. ‘Fire might not destroy everything.’

‘Someone took care of that after us. If there’s anything there, he’ll remove it.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Don’t worry about him. He’s good. Worry about yourself. If I were you, I would think about my next move carefully.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re in over your head this time.’

45

Cadicher heard his daughter leave. He heard a door somewhere in the house slam close. He heard a car start up and drive off. Then he heard nothing.

He sat up on the edge of the bed and ignored the pain shooting down his shoulder into his arm. He opened the bedside table drawer. He found his wallet inside. He found a crumpled box of smokes. He shook one out, placed it between his lips and inhaled. He looked around the room. He saw his shirt and pants tossed on the floor, his socks stuffed into his shoes. He searched in the drawer again and found his notebook. It was dirty, the right-hand corner stained with blood. He flipped through it and found Ebodia’s name. He thought back to the accident. He could see it, playing in his head on repeat. He

could see her face. Her hair. Her limp body, hanging upside down. She wasn't the job, driving her wasn't the plan. Her death was his fault.

He moved through the house, trying to take his mind off what had happened. The house was a single storey, laid out in a style that would've been considered old fashioned 30 years ago. A passage of rooms opened up to a large, open-planned area with a small kitchen on the right and a back door leading to a garden. It had the bare essentials. A kettle but no coffee. A fridge but no food. The cupboards were empty, except for a few diminished moth balls in the corners. The power worked but the light fixtures had no bulbs. There was a couch in the open-planned room - a black, leathery, monstrous thing with steel rivets jutting from the arms. It faced a flat-screen TV propped on a serving trolley. He found a bathroom one room over from the bedroom. The sink was dirty and old. He drank from the tap. He pulled back the shower curtain hanging over a bath and tested the hot water. It sputtered dirty liquid, the pipes groaning and rattling in the walls. He put them out of their misery when he saw steam rising. He threw his cigarette in the toilet. It fizzled out and floated.

He stepped back into the room, got into bed, and fell asleep.

Cadicher snapped his eyes open in the dark and lay there, tense and rigid. How long had he been asleep for? What day was this? That night? The next? He had no sense of time. The curtains in his room billowed and bulged inwards. A second later they retreated, as though being sucked back through the window by a vacuum. He was usually a light sleeper, some part of his brain always stayed awake, a primitive evolutionary instinct that hadn't faded with time. Fear was the prime motivator – an old distress signal to respond to sound or touch or smell, passed down millions of years from Homo Habilis waking up at night to the sound of a snapping branch.

In the distance, Cadicher heard thunder spreading across the night's sky and relaxed.

Just a storm.

He was cold and tired but he couldn't fall back asleep, so he dressed and made his way to the couch. He walked slowly in the dark, letting his memory guide him.

He turned on the TV and caught mute static before the screen turned blue. He reached to switch it off and froze. A prickling sensation spread over his skin as he realised his mistake.

He thought the storm had woken him up. The evolutionary instinct had apparently weakened over millions of years. Or maybe it hadn't. Either way, something was wrong, something was different. His peripheral vision spotted it a second later,

near the corner, six metres from where he was standing. A dark, solid mass.

It stepped out from the corner.

Cadicher swivelled from the serving trolley just as a muzzled bullet punched through the back of the TV, plunging the room into darkness once more. He flung himself behind the couch as another two shots ripped into the leather, narrowly missing his head.

‘You’ve lost your touch, Interceptor. The last time we spoke you said you would beat me to death if you saw me.’ The Closer took a step forward and fired into the couch again. The thickness of the couch took the edge off the bullets, slowing them, but they still tore through the back rest, ricocheting behind Cadicher.

‘How’d you find me?’

‘You want to talk? Stand up.’

Cadicher heard The Closer take another step.

There was nothing behind the couch. Just an empty tiled floor leading to a wall. Cadicher remembered Echo telling him there was a gun in the cupboard. Which cupboard? What gun? Was it loaded?

The gun was useless. Even if he knew where the gun was, getting there meant exposing himself.

Cadicher shifted his weight, trying to compress himself tightly against a slot where The Closer had already fired. The Closer was a good shot, but he was playing the odds, and he

wouldn’t waste time firing at the same place twice unless he had reason to. The couch was big, so hiding was easy, but it was only a matter of time before a bullet found its mark.

Cadicher said, ‘You still limping around?’

The Closer fired another two shots into the right side of the couch. This time, the bullets came from a different trajectory, ricocheting off the floor, not the walls. Cadicher pictured the gun, held above The Closer’s head, the barrel angled down as he tried to get a better shot. ‘You can’t hide forever.’

‘Said the guy waiting in the dark.’

‘Keep talking, Interceptor. I love it. These are the last words that’ll ever come out your mouth.’

The Closer fired another shot. The bullet grazed Cadicher’s ear. He bit down on his hand to stop himself from screaming.

‘What?’ The Closer said. ‘No comment this time?’

Cadicher’s other hand felt under the couch. There was a gap, about 15 centimetres, from the floor to the bottom of the couch because it sat on circular legs. The Closer hadn’t realised. When he did, he would just need to lie on his stomach and shoot from left to right. With an even spray, at least one would hit Cadicher’s legs.

‘You know what I think?’ The Closer said.

Cadicher tried to place The Closer in relation to where he was hiding. The Closer had taken three steps from the corner of

the room. The first would've instinctively been sideways, trying to offset his initial position. That left two. If it had been Cadicher shooting, he would have covered a metre and half in two steps, while still staying within a step from cover. But the house was barren. There wasn't any cover, unless The Closer moved back towards the kitchen, which he didn't. So a metre forwards, give or take, moving at angles, not linear, which put The Closer slightly left of the centre point of the room.

'I think I've given you too much credit. I think you're unarmed. Do you want to know how I know?'

Cadicher said nothing.

'You're slipping,' The Closer said, stepping forward. 'I've heard all kinds of stories about you. They're all bullshit. Look at you. Look at me.'

A metre and a half now, Cadicher thought.

'At least die with some pride,' The Closer said. 'You owe me that much. Let me see your face.'

Cadicher placed both his hands under the couch and flipped it. The backrest pitched forward, the edge hitting the floor. The underside of the couch now faced upwards.

Then he pushed, hard and fast.

The Closer fired wildly with little effect. The bullets now had to travel through the backrest and the underside of the couch. Two layers of protection and seat padding – as thick as a cheap mattress - absorbed the shots. The couch was at least four meters long, and heavier than Cadicher expected but he

shoulder-charged it, his legs pumping like he was trying to jumpstart a car. He felt it crash into The Closer. Then he kept pushing, towards the corner back to where The Closer had stepped out from. Cadicher wanted to pin him in a small triangle. Between two walls and the couch. Cadicher moved to the right side of the couch, where the armrest was. The Closer extended a hand over the couch, angled down and fired. Nothing happened. His gun was empty. He ejected the magazine, reached for a new one. He was quick. He had the new mag halfway in the gun when Cadicher jumped up from behind the couch, and hit the gun out of his hands, striking it with his open hand. The gun hit the wall and rebounded away. Cadicher grabbed blindly at the Closer, snatched at any material he could hold onto, lifted him up and threw him over the couch. The Closer somersaulted over, his back slamming into the floor. He got over it quickly, rolled and stood up.

Cadicher faced him.

The Closer took a step backwards, positioned himself, his stronger leg slid back, holding his weight.

Cadicher charged. He was heavier, taller, quicker to react. He tackled The Closer across the room, slammed him into a wall. He reached up using his forearm as a wedge under The Closer’s chin, lifting him up on his toes, and hit him in the kidney with his free hand. He moved his forearm away, grabbed The Closer’s face in his hands, pulled back and slammed the back of his head into the wall. Then he did it again. Bits of

plaster and paint chipped off from the impact. He kneed The Closer in the groin, stomped on his foot, crushing the toes and bones. Cadicher stepped back, giving himself some room. He threw two heavy punches, left and right, connecting either side of The Closer's jaw. In five seconds the fight was over.

The Closer sank to the floor, on his haunches but still conscious. Cadicher stepped forward.

The Closer raised a hand, his five fingers open, pleading for a break. He wanted to surrender. 'Wait, wait, wait, wait, wa-'

Cadicher didn't. He had grabbed The Closer's hand, extended it as far out as it would go, and stamped the underside of his boot heel where the wrist connected to the arm. Everything shattered.

The Closer screamed, cradled his hand, and Cadicher kicked at his ribs. The Closer tried to scamper away using one leg and one arm. Like an injured spider. That's all he was to Cadicher. An insect. In disgust he watched him, half trying to crawl, half trying to slither away. Cadicher stood on the side of his neck, stopping him in his tracks.

47

Cadicher dragged The Closer by the hem of his pants into the bathroom. He tore out the plastic curtain hanging over the bath, and dumped him inside. Then he sat on the floor with his

back to the bath, and wiped the blood from his ear and cheek. He groaned, feeling the ache in his abdomen, and spat to the side. He had ripped his stitches. He heard The Closer moan and looked over his shoulder. He stood up too fast and the room spun around him. He swayed, took a couple of steps and caught the sink, his foot slipping in the blood on the floor.

He made his way back to the tub, stumbling like a drunk, and leaned into the bath and hit The Closer in the face. It was the final expulsion of anger and energy because he blacked out then, from pain and exhaustion, and fell on top of him.

And there they lay, cradled on top of each other until the sun rose, like it had done a billion years before.

48

The Closer should've died. He shouldn't have been breathing but he was. The pain in his back made him forget about the pain in his foot. The pain in his jaw made the pain in his back seem like an itch. The pain in his balls overrode them all. Every breath hurt. A collapsed lung, a fractured pelvis, a broken wrist. What else? If he lived, he'd never be the same. His life was now split into two periods of existence - then and now. Then he could walk; now he'd be lucky to be able to shit without an audience.

The Interceptor was big and strong, but that didn't make him tough. Over the years he had shed his flesh and replaced it

with armour. Iron and nails. Raw and hard. There was Rock 'n Roll and there was Death Metal. Acoustic and electric. No amount of training could make you like he was built. You either had it or you didn't. It was that simple.

The Closer came to this realisation now.

He gasped for air, overwhelmed that he could. He tried to move and couldn't. He tried to close his fingers and couldn't. The only thing he could do was the one thing he was trying not to do. Eventually he pissed himself and heard his mother saying, 'Told you so, boy.' He heard Cuckacheya laughing in a corner of his mind.

One eye opened, managing to escape the swelling, and he saw a face form above him, staring down at him, a fresh cigarette dangling from a bottom lip. He saw the mouth stretch into a smile, and the smoke ribbon upwards before dissipating.

'Sleep well?'

The Closer gurgled a reply in his throat.

49

'Can you write? Answer like your life depends on it.'

The Closer did nothing. Could do nothing but stare with one eye.

Cadicher pressed the muzzle of a gun to The Closer's belly button, and pulled the trigger. The shot was ear-splitting in the small space, the cartridge case ejecting automatically,

making room for the next bullet. The Closer choked out blood, but his eye remained open and defiant.

'That's so we're clear. You will die, here in this house, as you are. The only choice you get to make is when you die. I could have hit all sorts of organs just now, maybe I nicked your abdominal aorta and you die in a couple of minutes. Maybe I hit nothing and you die hours from now. If you're smart you'll want me to kill you quick so answer quickly. How'd you find me?'

The Closer's eye flicked down towards his pants pocket. The movement was subtle but enough.

Cadicher turned The Closer on his side and tapped his pockets; found the phone and removed it.

'Unlock it.'

The Closer did nothing. Could do nothing.

Cadicher pressed his thumb in The Closer's eye; felt him shake in agony until the eye popped like a cherry tomato. The eyeball deflated and Cadicher's thumb came away with a watery gel which he wiped off on The Closer's shirt.

'You only have your hearing left now, and I'll make you deaf before I'm done. I promise you. So listen while you can. I want you to unlock your phone.' Cadicher shoved the phone in The Closer's hand. 'Do it now.'

The phone slipped out of The Closer's fingers and fell to the edge of the bath. Cadicher grabbed The Closer's left ear and squeezed it in his hand like a stress ball. Then he pulled,

using his other hand to keep The Closer's head pushed back down in the bath. He tried ripping it off like a page from a book and The Closer kicked out in pain.

'I'll do this the whole fucking day if I have to. You think this is the worst you can feel? I'll rip you apart piece by piece. I'm going to put the phone in your hand again. Ignore the pain and unlock it.'

Cadicher placed the phone in The Closer's hand and it slipped out again.

50

Four hours later, Cadicher left the safe house dressed and armed. He had no clean clothes so he wore what he had been wearing the night of the accident. His face was bruised shades of yellow and purple but at least it was no longer bloody. He walked for a couple of minutes then spotted an automated taxi parked on the street. He got in, pressed his wallet over the screen in the middle of the back seat, and found the address for the nearest steak house.

Twenty minutes later he was seated at a table, the extra glasses and silverware removed. He ordered any beer that came in a can. When it arrived he salted the top of the can and drank it. Then he ordered another, with a steak so rare that it could've eaten the salad that came with the meal.

When the waitress collected the empty plate she asked, ‘Was everything okay?’

‘Yes. You have a pen?’

The waitress dug one out her apron.

Cadicher clicked it and scribbled something in his notebook. He closed the notebook, and handed back the pen.

‘What happened to you?’

Cadicher leaned back in his chair, surprised at the question.

‘Nothing interesting. I’m just a common man with an uncommon job.’

‘Must be some job.’

‘You sell any Instant Lites?’

‘Only menthol, I think. But you don’t look like a menthol guy, mister.’

‘Give me the cheapest non-menthols you have and a lighter.’

The waitress moved off and he emptied the notes from his wallet. It would have paid for the meal four times over. He left it all there.

When the waitress returned he pocketed the box of cigarettes and lighter. Then he slid the money to her.

‘You need change or something?’

Cadicher shook his head. ‘Take care.’

He got up and made his way back to the street, looking for a taxi again.

He waited longer than he expected so he checked his notebook again. He had written 16 letters, six of them vowels. Five syllables. Two words. One name.

Mackenzie Ralston.

51

He pushed the front door slowly. It was unlocked, left ajar, a small sliver of the afternoon light casting a deep shadow inside. The muzzle of the gun went in first. It nudged the door further open and lined up with the kitchen, which looked empty. The gun swept left to the corner, towards an overturned black couch, then down to the floor. Brush strokes of dried blood on the tiles lead to a passage on the right.

He moved forward, right leg crossing over the left with purpose and precision, shoulders boxed in, head aligned with the eyesight, index finger half-squeezing the trigger, the gun steady, the end of the barrel always a third of a metre in front, leading the charge.

He moved in a half circle, rounding on the passage from the left to get a better angle. No surprises, big targets, pressure increasing on the trigger just a fraction.

Two steps forward, pause, evaluate the position. Assess sight, smell, and sound. Rinse and repeat.

He moved through the sitting room, and took in the surroundings as the passage exposed itself.

The blood abruptly stopped at a closed door on the left, like a body had been dragged in there. There were two other doors along the passage - one opposite the blood trail, which was open, and one further down which was closed.

Start with the open door, then the bloody one, leave the least suspicious for last.

He moved forward, back pressed against the left side of the passage wall, decreasing the odds for an ambush. A change of tactics was now required. Speed, not caution, was needed for the open door.

He moved quickly. The gun entered the room first, checking left and right in a second. An unmade bed sat near a window. Blood stains on the sheets. Blood stains on the pillow. A wooden dresser on the right wall. Cupboard doors open, empty shelves exposing the chipboard within.

He turned around and faced the closed door with the blood trail. Opening this door would need one free hand, so the right hand stayed on the gun, the index finger still on the trigger, and the left hand moved to the handle. His head aligned with the eyesight once more, and the right shoulder stayed cocked and locked.

He opened the door and pushed. His foot took an instinctive step into the door frame to stop the door from rebounding off a wall and closing again. The left hand returned to cradle the right in a rush. The barrel levelled with a

vacant toilet opposite the door, and an instant later to a bath on the left.

Body.

He stepped towards the bath and moved right. The gun aimed at a sink…

Ear

…then swept back to the bath.

The bathroom was small, stank of smoke, and looked like a slaughter house.

He eased off the pressure on the trigger.

The Closer wasn't moving. His left ear had been ripped from the side of his head. He was swollen, practically unrecognisable, and definitely dead.

52

Cadicher heard The Closer's phone ringing in his pants pocket. He shuffled forward in the seat of the taxi to make room for his fingers to reach it.

He answered it.

Silence.

He checked the phone. The call was live. The number withheld. 18 seconds later the call went dead with nothing said.

He lit a cigarette and the taxi's screen in the middle of the back seat displayed a no smoking sign. Cadicher ignored it,

and tapped on the internet icon below the sign. He searched for Mackenzie Ralston. He found eight people with the same name, spread across various websites and social networks, but none that fit the bill, except one.

He exited the screen, opened the window and threw out his cigarette.

The no smoking sign disappeared and the navigation route reappeared. He was five minutes away.

53

Mackenzie wasn't at home. She was at George's sister's 42nd birthday party on a private beach called Platboom, talking with some guy who couldn't stop fidgeting while he spoke. She thought he had Tourette's, but it wasn't that. He had just taken cocaine. His fingers kept tapping the sides of his thigh while he spoke.

'I'm not superstitious. Never have been. Not really. You know that some people won't even get out of bed if they wake up on the wrong side of the bed? You believe that shit? Some people decide to waste an entire day because they rolled one too many times in their sleep and now think that if they get up their life will end. Productivity-0. Superstition-1. Well that's their problem. I don't live by those rules. I'm just a curious guy. People in general interest me, you know? Now I am not saying that people shouldn't do crazy shit. No way. Hey, in

fact, I'll vouch for any of your craziness, just so long as you don't lie in bed all fucking day. Take this lady standing in front of me in the queue yesterday. She looks like a mom, maybe middle aged, maybe old, maybe she's divorced. That's a lot of maybes, I know. Now, general analysing isn't where I want to side track you, so I'll just get to the point. This woman is as boring as gum under a desk. Boring clothes, boring posture - and that's important – but also boring shoes, too. The list will continue long after the sand on this beach is washed up. A personification of boring, if there ever was one, so what do I do? I'll tell you.'

'I first tapped her shoulder. She turned and looked at me, like I touched her fanny or something. Never mind. I broaden my smile and soften my approach. I don't want B.O.R.E.D.O.M to suspect anything. Her eyes melt when I smile. I see her drop her stiffness like a pair of panties. She almost looks eager to talk to me now, you know? Fucking bored people often do, you take my word on that. Anyways, so there we are: stranger-woman and me, looking at each other. I turn around to look behind me. No one there. Not that it would have mattered, no, no, no, no, but I like to prepare, you see? I turn and face her again. This time her smile has faded slightly and rightfully so. So I wind my hand and slap her across the face. It echoed across the building. First she does nothing except make this ugly sound. But the shock of what happened has frozen her brain. She's not just trying to comprehend what just happened but why? Why? Why?

Why? It takes only a couple of milliseconds, maybe a full second, shit, let's be generous, two whole agonizing long seconds, but then it clicks. Not like a light bulb but like a mousetrap, you know? She's just been hit by a bus, washed by the sea, caught in rain - you get the point. This woman, standing in a queue, minding her own fucking business was just slapped for no reason. Fuck you superstitious freaks, fuck you. Everyone's concerned with doing the right thing, being the right thing. A paper model of society that's constantly getting wet until what we have to say and do becomes smudged and unreadable. Well I say fuck to that, I say go graffiti your name on a church, draw a big cock next to it, and tell the truth about the world. Don't think of the world as a good place because it sure as fuck doesn't know you exist. And the world is an *it*, and you're just a *just*. You're just a tiny shadow, darkening its face and guess what? This earth is a tanned motherfucker, and you're blocking its sun, so beware and don't forget that I warned you, fragile heart. Life's a balance is what I always say. Get some, give some. Scores even in the end. You know what I'm saying, right?'

Then the guy howled at the setting sun, and ran up a sand dune to talk to a couple who were sitting there.

Mackenzie watched him, his one shoe slipping off his foot as he ran.

George walked up to her, his eyes glassed over and bloodshot.

‘There you are, sweetheart.’

He embraced her and tried to kiss her, but Mackenzie moved away.

‘I want to leave, George.’

‘What are you talking about? We just got here. Don’t start.’

Mackenzie looked back at the guy who had taken cocaine. He was throwing sand on the couple, shouting: ‘It’s raining. It’s always raining!’

‘Who is that?’

George spun around. ‘That? That’s Packy’s son, Yanni-something. You’ve met Packy. He owns half the city. What he want?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not enjoying this.’

‘You said you wanted to come.’

‘I did. So you should stay. Tell Caroline I’m sorry. I have other things on my mind.’

George wasn’t listening. He was watching a group of women streak into the waves, the cold ocean making them laugh, their voices carrying over the beach.

Mackenzie pushed passed him and made her way back to the car. She didn’t turn back at George’s calls.

It was dark when Mackenzie parked her car in her driveway and the doors unlocked. She was waiting for the steering wheel to slide back into the dashboard before getting out when the rear proximity sensors in her car beeped once and then stopped. Before she could look at the screen on her centre console, Cadicher opened the passenger door, got in, and closed the door.

Mackenzie did nothing, she sat frozen, shocked into stillness, trying to decide whether to scream or not.

'I'm The Interceptor. I don't want anything from you but information.' He handed her The Closer's phone. 'You recognise this phone?'

'What?'

'Look at it.'

Mackenzie stared at the black screen, her mind numb and blank.

Cadicher moved his hand.

This time Mackenzie did scream.

Cadicher placed his hand over her mouth and Mackenzie started to hyperventilate. 'You need to stay calm. This is a bad situation. I get it. Right now we're just talking. Let's keep it that way.'

Cadicher removed his hand from her mouth and moved it over the button on the side of the phone. The screen lit up.

'Go to the contacts.'

Mackenzie used her prosthetic; her fingers were the only part of her not shaking, and for once she was happy to have an artificial arm. She clicked a faceless silhouette. The screen changed to just one name. Hers.

'Why is your name here?'

'Just take whatever you want.'

'I want to know why your name is on this phone.'

Mackenzie said nothing.

'Who is The Closer to you?'

'I don't know.'

'Why did he have your number?'

'I don't know.'

Cadicher took the phone from her. He called the number. He heard it ringing in her pocket.

'That's not a coincidence. Get your phone.'

Mackenzie didn't move. 'Just take what you want, please. You can take the car. Just let me go.'

Cadicher pulled out his gun, pointed it at her.

'No. Please.'

'Get your phone. We're still just talking for now. Don't let that change.'

Mackenzie dug out her phone from her jeans and handed it over.

Cadicher pressed the gun into the side of her head and Mackenzie shut her eyes.

'Turn your head to face the window.'

Mackenzie did.

Cadicher waited a beat, and then looked at the screen. The number had a name attached to it: Kingsley.

He ended the call, and threw both phones on the back seat.

'Who is Kingsley?'

Mackenzie said nothing.

'Last chance,' Cadicher said, pulling back the hammer.

'Please don't kill me.'

'Tell me.'

'He's my brother.'

55

Cadicher put the gun away. He knew almost nothing about The Closer, but everyone was someone. No one really knew the real him either, so he got over the news quickly.

'Describe him.'

Mackenzie said nothing.

'Do you want us to stop talking?' Cadicher asked.

'He's tall.'

'And?'

'I think he lives alone.'

'And?'

'He has something wrong with his foot.'

'What happened to his foot?'

'I don't know.'

'But he's your brother?'

‘Yes.’

‘What happened to his foot?’

‘I don’t know. We weren’t close. He was my half-brother. We have the same father. I didn’t know he existed until a couple of years ago. We only spoke a couple of times. We met once, and we didn’t talk for very long.’

‘You didn’t know him at all then. He tried to kill me last night.’

‘I don’t know where he is.’

‘I do, and don’t care. Neither should you. Start the car.’

‘You don’t have to do this.’

‘Start the car, and do what I tell you. We’re not done talking, and we can’t stay here so you’re coming with me. Decide now if you want to drive. This is a big car and you could take a nap on the back seat if you prefer.’

‘What are you going to do to me?’

‘Look at me.’

Mackenzie did, her face pale. She looked like she had aged a decade in a minute.

‘I had a wife who died years ago. Her name was Rose. She believed that when she died she would go to heaven. I promised her that I would try to do the right thing after she died because from what I understand it’s hard to get in, especially for people like me, but I want to see her again.’

‘I don’t know what that means.’

‘Drive or nap? Choose.’

‘Please don’t hurt me.’

‘So drive.’

56

There’s a road in every city where good turns bad. Where new houses are replaced with those that are a hundred years old. Pre-war. Short walls, untended pavements, spray-painted signs. An invisible line scratched in the tar where the street lights glow a little dimmer, or not at all. Where hawkers loiter side-by-side with mothers and children as they wait for idling cars with outstretched hands. Dirty clothes fused with their skin. Hollow cheeks, shifting eyes, old rubber on their feet. Forgotten, invisible, drunk on poverty. There lies a road where steel roller doors fall over shop windows and the smell of something burning lingers in the air like a base note. Where people cough the longest in winter and sweat the hardest in summer. Here the seasons are too hot or too cold. Here the rain is felt and never seen. Where the only lights in the night’s sky come and go like apparitions, the flash of primary colours refracting into bedroom windows. Where what you want is traded for what you need without a second thought.

Here too live the beat-up assholes with keys that open nothing. Here too live the washed-up dreamers who think fucking and dating are synonyms, with tans and diets that cost nothing.

There runs a road in every city where the darling days are done and never return, where the unfurling asphalt is a cancer that has metastasized to the bones and the bricks.

For some, the road leads on. For Cadicher, the road led home.

57

Cadicher lit up for the third time. He was feeling lightheaded, a little nauseated. His throat felt like loose gravel. His clothes were dusted with flecks of ash. He was strangely calm, a little tired, mostly thirsty. The butt of the gun dug into his lower back. The handle too chunky to be practical to carry around all the time. He wanted to take it out, place it somewhere else, but that would make Mackenzie nervous so he left it where it was. He could deal with the irritation.

'Turn left at the next road,' he said, checking the side mirror.

Mackenzie indicated. She was driving slowly. He didn't mind. Slow was good. He could anticipate things if they were going slow. He leaned back in the seat, took another drag and checked his side mirror once more.

'Can I have a cigarette?' Mackenzie asked.

'What?'

'A cigarette.'

'You smoke?'

‘Sometimes.’

‘Good for you, but these are mine.’

‘I just need something-’

‘I don’t care what you need. Drive the car.’

‘Where are we going?’

Cadicher said nothing.

‘You’re scaring me.’

‘Then stop asking questions. Drive the car.’

‘I don’t feel well.’

Cadicher swivelled in his seat and looked behind.

‘Pull over.’

‘No, I’ll stop talking.’

Cadicher threw his cigarette out the window. ‘I said pull over.’

‘There’s no place to do it here.’

‘This isn’t a driving test. Stop the damn car.’

When the car came to a stop Cadicher said, ‘Take a look around you.’

Mackenzie did.

‘Not in the car. Outside.’

They had stopped outside a second-hand car dealership. The prices of the cars were written on the windscreen with white shoe polish. Across the street, an old apartment building seemed to sag from its weight. Small balconies on every floor housed the day’s washing. ‘I don’t see anything.’

'That's because you're not looking. I don't have the time to make you trust me. You're worried about yourself. That's understandable given what's happened but it's easier for us all if you do this willingly. So here's what we're going to do. I'm going to get out. You can drive back home if you want.'

'Why would you do that?'

'Do you really want to know?'

Mackenzie said nothing.

Cadicher removed the seatbelt and opened the door. 'Before I go, do me a favour and look in your rear view mirror.'

Mackenzie did.

'See the lights?'

Mackenzie saw two orange lights shining dimly in the distance. They weren't getting closer. They were stationary.

'That car has been following us for a while. I can't be sure but I think I know who they are. I bet those boys are Kinder. You ever hear of them?'

'No.'

'They're nobodies trying to make a name. Truth be told they're doing a good job of it lately. They steal cars. This car draws a lot of attention, especially in this area, and I think you've just been marked. Now, you can take your chances with me or take your chances with them. I just need answers. They need your car. You won't get far on your own. They hunt in packs. There's probably another car up ahead. They'll run you off the road, steal your car, and kill you quickly if you're

lucky. A week from now the newspaper headlines would have already replaced your story and life will move on. You could of course tell them who you are but that would be a mistake. Anyways, it's not really a money thing with them. Money doesn't buy you respect here. Only fear does. Then again, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe those lights are just lights. Maybe you get home safe.'

'I won't tell anyone what happened.'

'Do I look worried?' He got out the car, pulled out the gun, and dropped it on the seat.

'You'll need that more than I will.'

Then he closed the door and started walking.

58

Mackenzie locked the doors, watched Cadicher walk for a moment, and then looked down at the gun that he had left on the seat. After taking a second to compose herself, she drove away as fast as she could, the engine whipping the 600 hundred horses into life at the slightest touch of her foot. She wanted to call someone – anyone - and let them know what had happened but she remembered that Cadicher had thrown her phone on the back seat. She did the next best thing and turned on the screen in the centre of her dash. The light was harsh in the dark cabin, even with the night settings automatically adjusting the

brightness. She scrolled through the menu using voice prompts and opened the contacts list. Then she said, ‘Call George.’

The number dialled. She heard it ringing. He didn’t answer. He was still at the beach party. She came to a stop at a robot and suddenly realised that she didn’t know where she was. She hit the navigation system on the console and the screen turned bright white with little roads in blue scattered like veins. The robot changed to green and she took off again. She was now shaking badly as the adrenaline wore off. She didn’t care where she was. She just wanted to put as much distance as she could between herself and Cadicher. They had been driving for less than an hour which meant in 60 minutes or less she’d be back home. She kept reminding herself of that. She thought she was in Blue Downs but she couldn’t be sure. She didn’t want to stop and check her GPS because it didn’t matter. She knew where she lived. She just needed to give the GPS a location.

’96 Victoria ro- ‘

She stopped mid-command as two orange lights flashed in her mirrors.

59

Cadicher stopped walking as the car with the orange lights approached. It rolled up to him slowly and stopped. He waited, staring into the blacked out windows. He knew there were two

guys in front, maybe two in the back based on the low suspension. He did nothing. They did nothing. Then the window dropped an inch, and a stream of smoke ran out. The front passenger door opened and a kid got out. He was young, no older than 13, coloured, dressed casually.

'How how, oupa. Where's your friend gone off to?'

'Do you know who I am?'

'Nah, nah, don't care, oupa.'

Cadicher saw another car with the same orange lights blaze down the road. Two motorbikes trailed behind it, one of them popped a wheelie as they split into different directions.

'So so, you all alone here now? This a bad place, oupa. Bad place.'

'If you say so.'

'Ja ja, so let us see your wallet, oupa.'

Cadicher reached in his pants, took out his wallet and placed it between his feet.

The kid whistled. Two guys who were older than the kid jumped out from the back of the car. A little more presence now.

'Now now, you don't want us coming over there, oupa. Kick it to me.'

Cadicher did.

The kid picked it up, flipped it open, saw there was nothing inside, and handed it over to one of the other guys to go through it more thoroughly.

Cadicher saw another car with the same orange lights come down the road. It gave a little hoot and the kid interlaced his fingers above his head, moving his index fingers back and forth, before breaking the sign and pointing down the road.

'So so, why you'd get out the car, oupa?'

'This is where I live.'

The kid laughed. 'You don't live here, oupa.'

One of his friends whispered something in his ear and handed him the wallet.

The kid opened the wallet to make sure. He clicked his tongue like a rider would for a horse to move and the other two guys got back in the car. Then he threw back Cadicher's wallet. Cadicher caught it. He made sure everything was just as it was and then dropped it between his feet once more.

'Now now, I didn't know, oupa.'

'Come here.'

The kid did.

Closer now, Cadicher noticed his bone-white eyes. 'Tell them to bring her back here.'

'Okay, oupa.'

'Tell them.'

'Sure sure, ok, oupa. No hassle.'

The kid turned and drew an invisible infinity sign with his finger in the air to the driver.

Cadicher heard a radio crackle in the car a moment later.

'It's done, oupa.'

Cadicher said nothing.

The kid waited a beat and then bent down and picked up Cadicher's wallet. 'I didn't know, oupa.' He extended the wallet to Cadicher.

Cadicher ignored him, repeated: 'Do you know who I am?'

'Ya, ya.'

'Do you care now?'

'Oupa, I care.'

'You have a gun?'

The kid nodded.

'Take it out.'

The kid hesitated. He reached inside his pants and pulled out a handgun. The chrome barrel caught the moonlight.

'Go put it down somewhere.'

'Now now, oupa.'

'Put it down somewhere. Hold on to my wallet.'

The kid wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, shook his head looking back at the car, but did what he was told.

'If she comes back hurt, I'm going to break your back in front of your friends.'

'She's fine, oupa. We didn't know.'

'So hit me.'

'Oupa?'

'Hit me.'

The kid scratched the back of his head.

'Hit me,' Cadicher said.

‘Oupa I didn’t-‘

‘Hit me.’

The kid gave a playful punch on Cadicher’s arm.

‘Hit me.’

I’m not a fighter, Oupa.’

‘Is that why you carry a gun?’

‘Ya, ya.’

‘How old are you?’

‘2 and 7, oupa.’

‘Those your friends?’

‘Ya, ya.’

Cadicher head-butted the kid on his nose half-heartedly. Not enough to break it but enough to get it bleeding.

The kid clutched his face, groaning quietly.

All three of the other guys got out of the car at once. Cadicher watched the suspension of the car bounce up. They were looking at each other unsure what to do. The kid held up his hand signalling for them to keep back.

‘Why aren’t your friends helping you?’

‘They scared, oupa.’

Cadicher slapped the kid across his face. It was enough to throw him off balance.

‘Why are they scared?’

‘Because of who you are, oupa.’

‘Are you going to forget?’

‘No, no, oupa.’

Cadicher heard the sounds of engines approaching. He saw the orange lights in the distance. He also saw a set of bright halogens belonging to Mackenzie's car.

60

The cars parked along the street. The bikes circled around the first car, stopping near the boot. Six guys got out of the cars. The guys on the bikes jumped off, removed their helmets.

Cadicher didn't see Mackenzie.

'Tell them,' Cadicher said to the kid.

The kid raised his right hand in the air and made a fist.

Cadicher turned towards the six guys. None of them looked older than 20.

'You boys have families?'

One or two of them nodded.

'Then bring her to me and go see them tonight.'

Cadicher waited as they talked in their made up sign language. A minute later, Mackenzie was brought out of her car. Her hands had been tied together, her mouth taped shut. They pushed her towards Cadicher.

Cadicher removed the tape from her mouth.

'You okay?'

Mackenzie nodded.

'Go sit down over there.' He pointed to the pavement.

The kid whose nose was bleeding said, ‘See see, oupa. She’s good, no, no?’

Cadicher extended his hand for his wallet.

The kid stepped forward handing it over.

Cadicher grabbed his wrist and hit him in the face repeatedly until his legs gave way and his body drooped towards the ground. Cadicher let go of his wrist and he crumpled into the road. Cadicher looked at the other guys. None of them moved to help him.

Cadicher flicked his middle finger against the palm of his left hand. *Even now.* He raised his middle and ring finger and shook them like he was performing a magic trick. *Go.*

The six guys slowly broke off into their cars. The other two guys climbed back on their bikes and put on their helmets. The three guys from the first car went to help the kid. They carried him into the back seat. They closed doors and started engines and left in a group.

Cadicher watched them drive off, and then he turned and faced Mackenzie.

61

Cadicher walked up to Mackenzie who sat on the pavement. He offered her his hand. She ignored it so he crouched down and untied her hands.

‘You okay?’

She didn't answer. Cadicher threw the rope to the side and stood up.

She looked up him. 'Who are you?'

'I told you.'

'What do you want from me?'

'I told you that, too.'

Mackenzie lapsed into silence.

He looked around. Mackenzie's car was parked on the street. The boot stood open. Other than that, the street had a feel of desolation to it. Nothing moved. Everything seemed too hot and stale. He reached inside his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. Then he stepped onto the pavement, walked a couple of steps and inserted the keys into a wooden door. It was the entrance to a low, dark building, the sign outside was worn out and tired, the paint faded. It had once been a butcher shop, a long time ago, then a comic book store, before finally being converted into a small gym for boxers to train. It was his building, he owned it. A business he had hoped to run full time once he had retired. A business that had never really taken off, but still, the bank loan had been paid, and he was up to date with the levies and the rates and the taxes. The gym had a small following. Some of the younger kids who came had likened the old-school way of training to the newer, and more modern boxing gyms.

‘Come inside and I’ll make some tea,’ Cadicher said, turning on a light which exposed a line of steps from the door, leading up. Then he disappeared up them.

62

Mackenzie watched as Cadicher climbed the stairs. She looked at the building, and saw a light turn on upstairs. The windows were dirty and cracked. She stood, and moved towards her car quickly. She didn’t need to stay, that much was clear. There was no one forcing her to do anything anymore. But things had changed now.

She closed her boot and opened the driver door. The keys were still in the ignition, the gun still on the passenger seat. She looked up at the building and saw nothing except for a yellow glow from a cheap bulb trying to escape. She got in the car, and started it.

At that moment, her cell phone rang in the back seat. She reached behind and looked at the screen. It was George. She answered it.

‘Where are you?’ George said, almost shouting.

‘George, something happened –’

‘You’re missing a hell of a time here. Look I’m sorry for before. Come back, it’s not the same without you.’

Mackenzie heard laughing in the background. George shouted something away from the speaker she couldn’t make out.

‘Just tell me you’re on your way,’ George said, half drunk.

‘George, listen-‘

‘No, no, no, no,’ he interrupted, cutting her off. ‘Just tell me you’re on the way back here. This is who you are. You’re the life of me. I should have come with you that day you went sailing. I should’ve, you know that, but sometimes, I don’t know. Just listen. Tell me you’re on the way.’

Silence.

‘Are you still there?’

‘I’ll see you soon, George.’

Mackenzie hung up, got out of her car, and walked up the steps into Cadicher’s gym.

63

She reached the top of the stairs. On her left was a brick wall with a green exit sign and a little white stick figure running down a set of steps. On her right, expanded before her, was a boxing ring, the ropes coloured red, black and blue, from high to low. Around the ring stood various exercise machines. A couple of punching bags hung from wooden beams that stretched across the ceiling. Along the one side of the gym, bolted into the bricks was a large wooden rack with various sized gloves packed in a line on the top shelf. Directly underneath was a row of cheap towels and steel buckets. A little office door

stood ajar on the other side of the ring, and Mackenzie headed towards it. The name on the door read: Caddy. She entered, and saw Cadicher standing behind his desk, pouring hot water from a small white kettle into two mugs.

'How'd you know I wouldn't leave?'

Cadicher shrugged. 'Wasn't sure you wouldn't. Take a seat.'

She sat in a plastic chair, watched him add in three full spoons of sugar to one of the mugs.

'I take mine black and plain.'

'Not here you don't,' Cadicher said, placing a mug in front of her, and took a seat across the desk from her. 'You're in shock, even if you don't feel it.'

She looked around the small office. The walls needed a fresh coat of paint. An old movie poster of Rocky was taped to the wall behind Cadicher. The desk - a hundred years old with steel legs and cracked rubber nibs on the feet was a mess of paperwork. Mackenzie took the mug of tea and sipped at it. It was too sweet, killing all the flavour, but she didn't say anything.

Cadicher watched her, squinting through the steam. He took a gulp from his cup, set it down, and placed a cigarette in his mouth. He hesitated before lighting it, then reached across the table and offered it to her.

'You still want one?'

She took it.

He sighed, removed another cigarette and lit them both. Then he dumped a dirty cereal bowl between them for an ashtray.

'Tell me about your brother,' Cadicher said.

'There isn't much to tell. I hardly knew him.'

'Did you know where he lived?'

'No.'

Cadicher took another sip. 'Okay. What else?'

'We had the same father. I never met his real mother.'

'Did he ever meet your father?'

'Is that important?'

Cadicher shrugged.

'What about you?' Mackenzie asked.

'What about me?'

'What's your name?'

'Cadicher.'

'Caddy?' Mackenzie asked, tilting her head towards the door.

'If you prefer.'

'Earlier you said your name was The Interceptor.'

'That's right.'

'What did you mean?'

'It's partly a codename, partly a nickname. The organisation I used to work for gave it to me.'

'You make it sound like a legitimate business.'

'How do you know it isn't?'

‘Last I checked legitimate businesses don’t give out codenames and guns. Anyways, you don’t strike me as the typical 9 to 5 guy.’

‘In some ways I am. I run this place 9 to 5 most days.’

‘Okay, so what is this organisation?’

‘It’s called The Glove. One boss – The Glove, and five managers – The Thumb, The Index, The Middle, The Ring, and The Pinky. Then there were guys like me. Foot soldiers. We sold your little magic pill on the black market to anyone who would buy it.’

‘How would that work?’

‘What’s the price for *youth* these days? A month’s salary?’

‘That’s not a standard unit of measurement.’

‘Okay,’ Cadicher said. ‘But it’s five figures, I bet. Somewhere in the ballpark?’

‘I don’t set the price. It was never for the money.’

‘That’s not the point. What is the point is that not everyone can afford *youth*, and people want what they can’t have. The Glove let anyone have it at a monthly cost plus interest. Like buying on credit. The same thing, really. At the end of 300 days, they could have bought three pills, not one. A bad deal, but people will do stupid things. When folks didn’t pay on time, I was sent to make sure it never happened again.’

‘I’ve heard about this. Black market *youth* is out of control.’

‘You’ve only heard rumours. Things were much worse in reality. They sold it to anyone, kids included.’

‘Like that boy tonight? The one you hit.’

‘Just like that kid, yes.’

‘Why’d they let us go tonight?’

Cadicher exhaled smoke. ‘Those guys only respond to pain. Like animals. Pain and fear. And there’s always a bigger fish in the pond. They just haven’t heard that I’m back to being a minnow. This gym is all I have left now.’

‘When did you leave?’

‘Recently.’

‘And Kingsley? He was part of this organisation?’

‘From what I know your brother was a hired gun. He was a last resort. He was called The Closer. The end of the line. The Glove probably had him on the payroll for extreme measures. Then a week ago they sent him to kill anyone who still owed money.’

‘Why would they do that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cadicher said, rubbing the side of his head. ‘The rules changed. That’s what I was told. Whatever that means.’

‘Maybe they didn’t care about the money anymore.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Maybe it was just a logistics problem. Too many balls in the air, more important things to do.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And you’re sure they’re killing these people?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you want to stop it?’

‘I can’t stop it, but I’ll try.’

‘Why?’

‘The Glove has tried to kill me twice now. They sent the wrong people both times. After a while I start to take things personally. I won’t give them a third chance.’

‘Do you want to know what I think?’

Cadicher nodded.

‘Leave. Just go. Why stick around? You’ve been given two chances already.’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘Why?’

‘I made a promise. I can’t do nothing. Ignoring this is not an option for me.’

Mackenzie said, ‘There are more important things in life. Is your promise worth your life?’

Cadicher thought about this. ‘This life is over for me. Maybe there’s a chance for something better on the other side.’

‘Sounds macabre.’

‘It is what it is.’

‘Okay, so you’re going after them?’

‘That’s the current plan. I’m going to cut the head off the snake.’

‘And if that doesn’t work?’

‘Then it doesn’t work.’

‘I won’t be able to help you do that.’ Mackenzie stubbed out her cigarette and Cadicher followed. ‘So, why am I here, Caddy?’

Cadicher never got a chance to answer the question.

64

Remy Gardner was an estate agent. Not a successful one. Not even a good one. In fact, she had just gotten her license. She was young - 22 years old - having dropped out of university. She had studied law and hated it. Her grades had told her as much, but her parents had told her things, too. Things like: she needed a degree and what else was she going to do with her life? The latter didn’t sound rhetorical, and she didn’t take it to be.

In the end she had made the decision to quit her studies two and half years into them. Everyone told her it was a mistake; a decision she would one day regret. But she didn’t see it that way. If she was being really honest with herself, she thought her looks would get her by in life. Not in the ‘find a rich husband’ sense, but in her job. Whatever job. She wasn’t pretty enough to be on the cover of magazines, but she knew she wasn’t far off either. And anyways, her oldest friend had gone directly into a sales job from high school and she was already paying off a car and renting her own flat. In that time

Remy had started another four years of schooling, still lived with her mother, begun a life debt, and gone into a depression when she realised law wasn't for her, no matter how often she read a John Grisham novel.

So she quit university on a Monday morning in June and exactly one week later she was sitting in her new job. It was an unpaid internship, which she expected. What she did not expect was that they also needed money for the three month realtor course which she was required to take before she could plaster her face on signs in front of houses. But Remy was all in at this point, so she paid it. What was a little more debt?

And, when September rolled on, she went out with a couple of new friends to celebrate her newly acquired license.

They headed to a bar not far from work. They drank, and laughed, and told stories. They danced, drank some more, and smoked a little pot. And as the night wore on, they got tired and parted ways. On the way home, Remy became paranoid that her new job might want her to take a drug test on her first official day. The paranoia only lasted for the duration of the taxi ride. By the time she got inside her tiny, rented, one room apartment, she had already laughed it off. Why would they? She wasn't starting a job at NASA. Her job would consist of cold-calling, meeting clients, compiling valuations and price reports.

So she kicked off her heels, took a couple of headache pills, and fell asleep on a pull-out couch, blissfully unaware of the person watching her.

65

Remy woke up in the dark strapped to a steel table. A machine was whining, lifting her from a dreamless sleep. Something was spinning inside it, gathering speed, creating the whine. The machine was somewhere to her left, on the floor. She couldn't see it. Not even if the lights had been switched on. She was scared and cold. Her arms and legs were bound with firm restraints. Something smooth and hard. She guessed handcuffs, some kind of chain at least, but she couldn't be sure.

The machine whined louder. Whatever was inside it had spun to its precipice before slowing down and finally stopping. It reminded Remy of her washing machine back home. Then the machine began to pump. She could visualize it in her head. Some sort of tubing compressing up and down. The release of air on the down compression sounded like breathing. Like the machine was alive.

Remy remembered going to bed in her flat. How did she get to this room unable to move? At first she had thought it was just a nightmare, some kind of sleep paralysis, but the smell of disinfectant was too real. The room stank of it. She had tried to sit up and couldn't. That's when she had panicked,

realising something was horribly wrong, and began screaming and thrashing.

That seemed so long ago now.

She could only guess how long she had actually been here. The machine pumped for an hour then switched off for an hour. She had counted the seconds – it was the only thing she could do, and this was its 11th cycle. Roughly 22 hours, roughly a day. That seemed about right. That was her best guess.

After her first cycle she realised she wasn't alone in the room either. Someone else was with her. She could hear faint breathing when her machine stopped pumping and the one across the room started up, whining and spinning the – whatever it was - inside it. The two machines were like two people crossing the ocean in a raft with one paddle. One rested while the other worked. The effect it created was a constant mechanical noise, a mechanical breathing from the pumping, torturous and unrelenting. Remy had tried calling out to the other person, had tried asking questions, had tried to do something, but she was always met with silence. Except once. After her pleading and crying, a woman's voice cut through the darkness.

'Let them take it.'

Remy thought she had only imagined the other person, but every so often she'd hear the soft clink of restraints across the room and her belief would be reconfirmed. The thought of another person with her in the room did little to comfort her. Why would it? She was being drained, like a child sipping on a

juice box. She could just about make out the arc of a catheter tube running from her arm down below the table. She also felt a sharp pain at the top of her right foot; the skin there was taut like it had been covered with a plaster, and she guessed another catheter ran from there even though she couldn't see it and didn't know what it was for.

She felt faint after her machine stopped its pumping so it had to be removing blood.

Let them take it.

But blood didn't make any sense. She would have died hours ago if it were blood. The body only had so much. She had donated blood once, a long time ago, and some stale memory told her that she needed to wait six weeks before donating again. If it was blood, she was giving more than she had. It could have been plasma. She had heard of people donating that too, but every hour? No.

Remy felt tired, felt like throwing up, and even in the darkness, the room seemed to spin. She closed her eyes, trying to stop the sensation, hoping for another dreamless sleep before the next cycle began.

66

'I can't stand it anymore!' Remy cried. 'Help me! Please!' Anyone!'

Remy was now on her 14th cycle. Her machine was whining again; she felt dizzy again, having thrown up for the second time in an hour. Whatever was happening to her was getting worse. She could feel herself getting weaker. Was this what dying felt like? She tried thinking about how this had happened. She remembered going out, coming home and falling asleep. Nothing else. How did she get here?

'Who are you?' She called to the person in the room with her. 'Please, talk to me. Just tell me how long you've been here.'

The only reply came from the spinning sound her machine was currently making.

'Help me, please! Please someone, help me!'

She was pulling now, trying to break free. The restraints dug into her wrists and ankles as she thrashed. She arched her back upwards and fell back onto the cold table.

'Talk to me! Help me!'

A door opened behind her, and a flood of light entered the room. Remy was blinded for an instant, but the light disappeared as quickly as it had come as the door closed again.

Remy's eyes tried to adjust to the darkness once more, her vision swarmed with tiny red and yellow spots.

'Hello?' She said. 'Hello, is someone there? Please help me.'

'So it's you,' The Closer said and stepped forward.

67

The Closer sat outside the room, in the hallway. The fluorescent light directly above him kept flickering every couple of seconds, irritating him. He was bored. He had been assigned to babysitting duty. There was no other word for it.

Earlier that night, The Middle Finger had called, given him an address and a time, and when he arrived he was told to sit on a chair outside a room and do nothing until she said otherwise. Those were his instructions. He had protested. Surely, this was an idiot's job. Was there really no one else? But The Middle Finger had not been in the mood for a discussion. She had needed someone reliable. Someone she could trust. Or so she had said.

'Anyways,' she had assured him, 'It won't be long. I'll send someone to relieve you soon.'

'Why can't they stay?' The Closer had asked, pointing to the two guys standing behind her.

'They're coming with me.'

'Who are they?'

'They're new.'

'So let them stay. I could come with you?'

'No, you'll stay here. You know this is more important right now. We're going after The Interceptor. He's making his rounds, warning every arsehole about what you were supposed to

keep to yourself. You had to make a show of it in Plybrook, rub it in his face.'

'I wanted him to know.'

'Whatever. We've got a name and an address for the last on his list. Ebodia Michaels. We don't think he's met her yet.'

'Let me get this straight,' the Closer said. 'You're going to… intercept him?' Then he chuckled at his joke.

The Middle Finger didn't laugh. 'Stay here. Watch the room. We'll be back soon.'

'Let someone else do this.'

'No, you'll do it.'

'So this is some sort of punishment then. I just wanted to get under his skin.'

'You did. That's why you're sitting this one out. Look at this as part of the job. If you hear anything funny, you have my permission to enter the room, but only then.'

'Your permission?'

'Yes, my permission.'

The Closer grinned. 'How do you know he'll be there?'

The Middle Finger didn't answer. She was already walking away.

That had happened an hour ago and there was still no word from her. He was used to waiting, but this was different. Here, he didn't have his rifle; there was no need to calm his breathing or focus. He could stare at an area no bigger than a coin for hours, and never be bored, but this wasn't the same.

Here there was no rush, no excitement, no anticipation. This was wearing down the clock for no end result.

The Closer got up and walked the length of the hallway. There were doors to his left and right. Some had names, others had numbers. It took him thirty three steps to reach the elevator at the opposite end. His foot was throbbing again so he chewed a couple of pain pills to numb it. They would kick in after 15 minutes and dull the pain to just bearable. He made his way back to the chair outside the room. He took a switchblade from inside his coat and started playing with it. He released the locking pin, pushed a small button on the grip, and a three inch steel blade shot out. Then he folded the blade back into the handle, locked the pin, and started the process over again.

The fifth time he did this, he heard someone shouting from inside the room he was babysitting. They were calling for help, asking for someone to talk to them. The Closer folded back the blade and pushed his ear to the door. He couldn’t hear anything except a mechanical noise coming from inside. Then he heard the same female voice calling out for help.

The Closer got out his phone, about to call The Middle Finger when he changed his mind.

He looked through the keyhole and saw nothing.

He looked down the hallway and then back at the door. He stood up and moved his chair aside. Then he opened the door, stepped inside and closed it.

68

‘So it’s you,’ The Closer said. ‘You’re the one making all the noise.’

‘Help me.’

‘Hush now,’ The Closer said, moving towards her. He brushed his fingers over her ribcage. ‘Tell me. What’s your name?’

‘Remy.’

‘Are you scared, Remy?’

‘Yes, please let me go.’

‘Oh, I wish I could.’

‘What do you want from me?’

The Closer traced his finger down her navel. ‘If I tell you, will you promise not to scream?’

‘What?’

The Closer clamped her jaw in his hand, squeezing it hard. He leaned in until their faces were almost touching. Finally, he said, ‘You stink of puke.’ He let go of her jaw and Remy began to cry.

The Closer brought out a night vision monocular on a chain. It barely fit over one eye. It was a novelty gift he had bought for himself, a tacky toy that could be used as a last resort while on the job. The Closer placed what looked like a tiny scope over his right eye and turned it on.

The pitch black room changed to a washed-out light green. The Closer could see Remy lying naked on a table in front of him. She had tubes going out her feet and arms. They ran below the table, on the floor and into a box. The front of the box was transparent, covered with glass, and inside a fan spun. On top of the box, two plastic cylinders moved up and down like car pistons. From the back of the box more tubes ran out, across the floor and into another identical box. More tubes were connected to this one. They ran up another table and connected into another woman. This time, the tubes went into her feet, arms and neck. The tubes from her feet, arms and neck, joined into one bigger tube which led away from her to a third table. On that table sat a collection of sandwich bags, each with a small nozzle connecting into the singular tube. Tens of them, all filling up with something.

The Closer moved towards the other woman. She wasn't moving. He touched her on the arm. He moved the hair from her face and the woman's eye's flicked open, her irises shining like reflecting tape.

The woman didn't say anything. She didn't move or flinch at his touch.

'You look defiant; I like that. Maybe I'll start with you. Cut you up a little. Not much, so don't worry.' The Closer brought out his switchblade. He ran the tip of the blade up her leg, between her thighs, around her belly button, over her breasts. Still, the woman didn't move or flinch.

The Closer laughed a little. He pressed the blade in her neck enough to draw a drop of blood.

The woman moved. Not away from the knife but towards it, thrusting the knife deep inside her jugular.

It surprised The Closer. He stepped back and the knife stayed in her throat, deep, most of the blade disappearing into her flesh. The woman shook on the table, having punctured her carotid artery. The blood was gushing out, pumping and squirting with her increased heartrate. He could hear it sloshing and splattering on the floor like a burst water pipe.

The Closer looked on in disbelief. He had just wanted to mess around with her, scare her, not try and kill her. But he hadn't killed her, not really. She had killed herself. She had committed suicide and there was nothing he could do about it now. He couldn't save her. He didn't know how, even if he wanted to. Even if he was the best trauma surgeon in the country her odds of survival were sitting at about 30% and dropping every second.

Her restraints pulled and tightened against the steel as she thrashed sporadically. She was dying quickly, grotesquely.

Remy was crying, unaware what was happening.

'You fucking bitch,' The Closer whispered, more to himself than the woman.

The woman closed her eyes and smiled.

The Closer shut the door behind him and sat back on the chair outside of the room. He rubbed his hands in front of his face and blew hot air through his fingers. He made a phone call and explained what happened and then sat there for hours, thinking.

At dawn the next day got a call from The Middle Finger. He listened and nodded. He finally said, 'Okay. No problem. Consider it done.'

He got up from the chair, glanced back at the door, and walked the thirty three steps to the elevator.

He had less than 24 hours left to live.

70

Bishop Rotherdam finished his last service for the day at exactly 9pm on a Sunday. He had been working since 6am in the morning, standing for most of the day, his feet and back now aching. He changed into his casual clothes and headed home. By the time his car was parked in the basement of his building, an hour had passed. He waited patiently by the elevator listening to the death of yet another week. He was tired and impatient to get home but he was more than happy to wait until the elevator dropped to the underground floor rather than having to trudge up three flights of stairs. Had he taken the stairs that night,

he may have been alive today. But it had been long day, so he waited, looking at the numbers flash above the elevator doors; they flashed down from 5 to 4, then to 3. When the number flashed 1, a shadow from behind him moved.

He was hit twice. The first blow struck him behind the neck and the second just higher up on the back of his head. He was dragged into the elevator. His floor number was pushed, and the doors closed. There was a small chance that someone might have seen all of this happening but the building had been watched for weeks now. It was a safe bet. Besides, bishop Rotherdam's movements were like clockwork on Sundays.

The doors to the elevator opened, and he was pulled by his ankles to his front door which was 5 feet away, leaving behind a thin trail of blood.

This was a vulnerable moment in the plan. Bishop Rotherdam would be lying in the passage for maybe a minute. If someone stepped out into the hallway in that time, they would see him, the back of his head dripping with dark blood.

The attacker knocked on the front door and waited. Seven seconds passed and the attacker knocked again, this time with more urgency. The attacker could hear a noise coming from inside.

Locks were turned, and the door opened an inch, catching on the chain. An old woman's face appeared in the gap - Sophia Rotherdam - the bishop's mute sister.

‘Sorry for the interruption, Miss Rotherdam’ the attacker said. ‘But I need to speak with you. It’s about your brother.’

Sophia shut the door, undid the chain, and reopened the door. She stood on the other side of the threshold and did three things.

First, she looked at the attacker standing in front of her. Second, her eyes dropped down to the floor and she saw her brother lying there. Third, Sophia opened her mouth as though she were trying to scream.

The attacker extended a tazer to Sophia’s neck. She tried to move away, back inside the door, but her whole body stiffened and became rigid. She collapsed into the doorway, knocking over a small table, breaking an antique glass bowl in the process. The attacker winced at the sound, pulled out a gun, and aimed it at the neighbour’s door across the hallway. The attacker waited twenty seconds, then another thirty. Finally, the attacker relaxed, holstered the gun, and pulled the bishop into the house, dragging him beyond the doorway and placing him beside his sister.

Sweating, the attacker closed the door. Inside the flat, Sophia had the TV on in the background which had drowned some of the noise, and probably saved their neighbour’s life. The dinner table was laid out for two people. Food was steaming from dishes and pots. Plates and cutlery were set. Sunday dinner was a special event.

The attacker moved quickly. The bishop was pulled away from his sister and down the short passage towards the living room. The attacker quickly checked to make sure that all the curtains were drawn and found them to be meticulously shut for the night. Sophia was old and mute, but not disabled. She had energy to do things around the house and the attacker made a mental note of this.

Satisfied that they were alone in the apartment, the attacker studied the bishop. His thinning hair looked matted, his face peaceful. His lips were thin and his skin looked soft, pudgy, pale and almost translucent.

The attacker walked towards the door once more. Sophia was moving her arms and fingers – a side effect of the electric current wreaking havoc on her nervous system. She was trying to turn herself onto her stomach, eyes still closed. It looked as though she was fighting to wake up, but couldn't. The two burn marks were starting to swell up on her neck where the tazer had touched her. The attacker snatched a clump of Sophia's grey, curly hair, placed the tazer needles on the same two burn marks and held in the rubber button on the side of the tazer.

The attacker watched Sophia's body shake uncontrollably, smelt her skin burning and saw a puddle of urine escape from her thighs and pool on the floor. After a minute, her body became still and the smell of her burnt flesh blended with the smell of food from the kitchen.

71

Sophia had not died, at least not when the attacker had thought so. She had managed to spasm an eye open just long enough to see the back of the attacker.

The tentacles of a blue, tattooed octopus standing over her husband seemed to twist and curl and move with each downward swipe.

A tear dripped down her cheek and it was all that she could do to try and save her brother before her heart stopped.

72

Cadicher didn't have a chance to respond to Mackenzie's question because he heard sirens. They were coming from the west, faintly at first, growing louder, reaching their crescendo as they stopped in front of his gym.

He heard doors open and shut. He heard radios crackle. He heard people run up the steps shouting, 'Police! Don't move!'

Three men and a woman reached the top of the stairs with their guns drawn, all barking orders and shouting as they stormed inside. Two cops went to the right of the ring, two cops went left. They moved quickly. The two cops, both male, from the left side entered Cadicher's office. Both of them were right handed, both of them held a torch under the barrel of the gun, and aimed the light directly into Cadicher's face.

‘Let me see your hands!’ One of the cops shouted.

Cadicher opened his palms up towards the ceiling, his knuckles resting on the desk.

The other cop moved around the desk and used his forearm to push Cadicher’s neck down onto the desk. It didn’t budge.

‘Put your head on the desk,’ the cop said.

Cadicher did.

‘Keep your hands open. Don’t move.’

Cadicher followed the order. He watched the other cop in front of him, standing next to Mackenzie, cover his partner. The gun aimed directly at his head.

The cop behind him holstered his gun and torch, and started patting down Cadicher, first under his arms, then down to his wrists. He tapped and rubbed his ribcage, squeezed his belly, and checked his back.

‘Do you have any weapons on you?’ The cop asked.

‘No.’

‘Any weapons in this office?’

‘Plenty.’

‘Where?’

‘A couple on you. A couple on your partner.’

‘Any other weapons beside the ones we’re carrying?’

‘Not to my knowledge.’

‘What does that mean?’ The cop asked, frisking Cadicher’s pants, removing his wallet and keys and placing them on the

desk. ‘It’s a yes or no question,’ the cop added. ‘Don’t get smart with us.’

‘No,’ Cadicher replied.

The cop patted down Cadicher’s legs, moved to the ankles, squeezed around them, near the top of his shoes.

‘Any other people in this building?’

‘No.’

‘Raise your left hand,’ the cop said.

Cadicher did. The moment it left the table, the cop grabbed his thumb and twisted it behind Cadichers back. He slapped on a handcuff around Cadicher’s wrist. The teeth snapped into the last joint and held. The cop linked a second set of handcuffs into the first and said, ‘now your right.’

The same deal.

The cop said, ‘On the count of one, you stand. You got it?’

‘Yes.’

‘One,’ the cop said, and he pulled Cadicher upright. He pushed him towards the left corner of the office, with Cadicher facing the wall, and pulled out his stun gun. The cop jammed it into the back of Cadicher’s neck. ‘Don’t move. Don’t try anything. If you move, you go down. Clear?’

‘Clear,’ Cadicher replied.

‘Good.’

‘Can I ask what you’re doing here?’ Cadicher said.

‘No, you cannot.’

The cop nearest Mackenzie started speaking: ‘Mackenzie Ralston?’

‘Yes?’ Mackenzie replied.

‘Your car was reported stolen earlier tonight. This was the last location on the tracking device.’

‘My car’s parked outside. Who reported it stolen?’

The cop ignored the question, said, ‘Can I ask what you’re doing here?’

‘Is that any of your business?’

‘Could you stand up Miss and provide some identification. Face the wall while I search you.’

‘Which is it?’

‘Excuse me?

‘Do you want me to show you some ID or do you want me to face the wall?’

The cop holding the stun gun into Cadicher’s neck answered. ‘You can do both.’

‘I don’t have any identification on me,’ Mackenzie replied. ‘My bag is in my car.’

‘Just face the wall Miss,’ the cop next to her said.

Makenzie did. The cop searched her just as thoroughly.

The other two cops entered the office. The woman officer said, ‘Who owns this building?’

‘I do,’ Cadicher replied.

‘Any other exits?’

‘There’s two windows overlooking the street,’ Cadicher said.

The woman officer asked, ‘Is that a joke?’

‘You tell me?’ Cadicher replied. ‘I can’t see if you’re smiling or not?’

‘Watch it,’ the cop with the stun gun said, jamming the pincers deeper into Cadicher’s flesh.

Once the cop was done searching Mackenzie, he said: ‘Do you know this man?’

Mackenzie looked at Cadicher. His head was down; he was staring at his shoes. His beard was wild, uncut, peppered grey in the corners. He looked like a giant bear. He was tall and wide. His ear was scabbing over from some kind of wound. His clothes were creased and he stank, even from here - sweat and smoke and who knew what else. He had kidnapped her an hour ago, rescued her 15 minutes ago. He was trouble and bad news. He was someone to avoid, someone she would never normally associate with, not socially, not professionally. She watched him glide his tongue over his teeth, making his beard above his lips protrude.

‘Yes, I know him. We were just having a drink before you came through,’ Mackenzie said, pointing to her cup.

The last cop poked his head into the office. ‘Building is clear. Registration from the car checks out.’

The tension in the room started to dissipate. Everyone could feel it. The pressure from the pincers on the stun gun eased off Cadicher's neck.

The woman officer grabbed Cadicher's wallet from the desk. It had no money. No photos or loose change. The wallet was cheap, made from knock-off leather, the fabric peeling away at the edges. It had a card and a driver's license tucked away in the card holders.

The woman studied the license, grabbed the radio that was clipped on her bulletproof vest and called in his ID number and name. She placed the license on the table, removed the card. She flipped it over. Showed to the cop nearest to Cadicher and said, 'Look at this?'

73

Cadicher was turned away from the wall. The cop nearest to him made him sit down again, back in his chair, his hands still handcuffed behind his back.

'What is this?' The woman cop asked.

'A business card,' Cadicher said.

'Does this look like a business card to you, Dussel?'

The cop nearest to Cadicher said, 'Nope.'

'How about you Parrow?'

The cop nearest to Mackenzie shook his head. 'Doesn't look like anything.'

The woman cop waited a couple of seconds. ‘Well?’

‘Well what?’ Cadicher said.

‘I want to know what this is.’

‘I’ve already told you.’

‘There’s no business address, no name, no telephone number. This isn’t a business card. It has a finger print on it.’

‘Okay,’ Cadicher replied. ‘Then I don’t know what it is.’

The woman’s radio bleeped on her vest. ‘Yeah, go ahead.’ She turned her back to Cadicher and listened. Everyone did. Cadicher came back clean. No prior arrests. No warrants.

‘Copy that,’ the woman said. She turned back to Cadicher, flicked the card between her fingers. ‘I’ll ask you one more time. What is this?’

‘Like you said. It’s a fingerprint on a card. I found it on the street. I liked the way it looked. I thought it was a business card. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s somebody’s idea for art.’

‘Art?’ The woman cop said. ‘You’re going with that?’

‘Sure.’

‘And you found this on the street?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Where?’

‘Can’t remember.’

The woman cop said: ‘You collect a lot of art?’

‘Not really.’

‘So why would you keep this?’

Cadicher shrugged.

‘There’s nothing else inside your wallet.’

‘Is that a crime?’

‘No, it’s not a crime. It’s just suspicious. A man with nothing in his wallet except for this.’

‘My license was in there too.’

‘Why would you be keeping a fingerprint of a woman inside your wallet?’

Cadicher looked up. ‘What did you say?’

‘I said it’s creepy that a man keeps a woman’s finger print on a card inside his wallet.’

‘How do you know that’s a woman’s print?’

The woman cop looked at the fingerprint once more. ‘It’s too small to be a man’s. Too big to be child’s. My guess is that this is a female. But you already know that, so don’t play dumb with me now.’

Cadicher slumped back in his chair.

‘You’re not speaking anymore?’ The woman cop said.

‘We’re done here. You want to arrest me? Fine. Lead me into the back of one of your cars, but you better be damn sure that you have something more than that card and your suspicions. We all just heard you right now. There’s nothing off about me. The owner of the suspected stolen car is standing right here and she has already told you its parked outside. In fact, you’re probably blocking her, and it’s late now. You’ve

come inside without a warrant; I'll let it pass. But now you're just wasting my time. Either arrest me or get lost.'

74

Cadicher looked out the window but he didn't stay to watch the cops drive off. He walked back into his office and started digging through his desk drawers. Mackenzie joined him a moment later. He was looking through a set of yellow folders, flipping through loose pages.

'I didn't call the cops.'

'What?'

'If you were thinking that. I just wanted to let you know that I didn't call them.'

'I believe you.'

'You do?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

Cadicher stopped what he was doing. 'Because those guys in that Kinder gang did.'

'Why would they do that?'

'Because it's what I would do. They're learning, adapting, modifying their behaviour. Two years from now, they'll be unstoppable.'

'That doesn't make any sense.'

'I could be wrong but I also saw them parked down the street just now. They watched the whole thing unfold.'

'That's scary.'

'You're fine. We both are. They won't bother us again.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'They had their chance. By the time they figure out I don't work for The Glove, I'll be long gone, and you'll be anywhere but here. All they know right now is that you're with me. That's as good as it gets for you.'

'You lead an exciting life, Caddy.'

'If you say so,' Cadicher said, and resumed his search.

'What are you looking for over there?'

'A number.'

'Like a telephone number?'

'No, not like one. Specifically one.'

'Not a number you've saved on your cell?'

'I don't have a phone anymore.'

'Okay.'

'I wrote it down months ago. It was a spur of the moment thing. It's somewhere here but I have a filing system that goes back six years.'

'Who still uses a filing system with paper and folders?' Mackenzie asked.

'I do.'

'Okay, then let me help.'

Cadicher threw a folder across the desk. ‘I remember writing it on the top of a page. I underlined it a couple of times, I think.’

Mackenzie pushed the folder back across the desk. ‘No, I can help you look for it like a normal person. Give me the name of the place or person you’re trying to find. I’ll search for them online.’

‘Won’t help you.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because my daughter is smarter than that.’

75

Echo woke up in her car. She was parked at a petrol station off the highway. She could hear the cars and the vans and the trucks driving on the road 20 metres away. A continuous drone of movement. It was 6am, early for a workday, not early enough to leave without sitting in traffic. Her windows were misted over, the car cold. She wasn’t far from her home and a bed and a shower. She just didn’t want to go there. Not last night, not right now. She couldn’t say why she decided to sleep in her car. It wasn’t a conscious decision. There was no rationality or sense to it. Only that it didn’t appeal to her at the moment. It came down to something wrong with her wiring. An electrical misfire. An antediluvian trait. Comfort and

enclosure scared her. She needed to be on the move, on the lookout, for anyone and anything.

As a child her mother had told her she was just like her father, and even though she hated him, she could see the truth to it now. They were similar. She thought the same, saw the world in the same way. Material things didn't interest her. Not houses, or cars, or clothes. She saved most of her money, not because she was frugal, but because she could think of nothing she wanted. She had everything she needed. She was happier being alone than being around people. Friends were non-existent; the only family she had left was Cadicher.

Echo got out the car, her breath cold, and walked to the coffee shop adjacent to the petrol station. She ordered a coffee and sat at a table with a view of the road.

Hundreds of cars saluted her as they drove by, some with bored drivers slumped in their seats, others with no one driving at all, with passengers or packages on the back seat, the sunlight catching off the windows as they moved. The coffee shop was quiet except for a man reading his morning paper, and a couple eating breakfast as their baby slammed a teething toy from the highchair onto the table.

She ordered breakfast when the waitress came over, and a refill of coffee. She ran her fingers through her hair, trying to neaten it, feeling the oiliness. Her hands were dry, her neck stiff, and she couldn't stop yawning. She watched a truck pull up outside her window, blocking her view of the highway.

It hissed and sighed and came to a stop. A couple of guys got out. They stretched and looked around. They had probably driven all night. The truck was long and white, with canvas tarps running down the sides of the trailer. They were worn and dirty, but they were cheap and effective, too.

One guy spoke to the petrol attendant; the other guy looked through the coffee shop window and saw Echo. He gave a small nod and a smaller smile. Echo reciprocated.

Eventually, her food came and the truck pulled away, and her view of the highway returned. The morning rush was in full swing. Cars were starting to hog up every available space. Echo could see them starting to slow, as though every vehicle was a small cog for a greater machine, grinding to a halt. She found this relaxing. Always had. There was something about roads and cars and petrol stations that felt right to her, as though in a previous life she had been somehow connected to it all in some inexplicable way. She knew, for instance, that 175000 cars passed this exact petrol station every single day, and that on average, 4 people died a month between this petrol station and the nearest tollgate, just 7 km’s away. National Road 1, or the N1 highway, ran 1929km and cut South Africa diagonally from top to bottom. Echo had made the drive 6 times. Four of them purely for pleasure, two for work. The border at Masinga had been important for shipping in large quantities of *youth*. That was before their operation exploded. Now they relied on ports, and Cape Town had its fair share.

Youth wasn't made here. The main factory was located in Malaysia so the pills had to be brought here somehow. Once The Glove got fingers into controlling the entry point at Table Bay, the whole operation changed overnight. No more driving to the border, no more relying on trucks to transport pills across the country. Their overheads dropped to a fraction of what they had been. The pills came in the port and 10 minutes later they were sitting in their warehouse, ready to be sorted, packed and distributed.

Echo finished her food, got another refill, and paid the bill. It was getting close to 7am and she had a busy day ahead of her.

Then she got a call from a number she didn't recognise. It rang once and hung up. It ran again and she waited. After two seconds, the call went dead once more.

It was a code.

76

They hadn't slept. Cadicher had told Mackenzie she could leave whenever she wanted. He didn't want to come out and tell her that he didn't need her anymore, not after everything he had put her through, but if he was honest there wasn't anything she could really do now either. In the end, he let fate decide. If she left, he'd shake her hand, apologise for what happened earlier in the evening, and hope she got home safe. If she

stayed, then so be it. He owed her that much. But she had gone above and beyond, not only deciding to stay, but helping him look through each scrap of paper in the office, never complaining in the process. She made tea twice, and he shared out his cigarettes every time he needed one. Four hours had passed with little said but she had found the number scribbled on an old receipt for an order of three Eye Irons for his gym. Then he had asked to borrow her phone, and she gave it up. He dialled the number and hung up. Mackenzie thought he had just entered a digit wrong. She watched him do it a second time. Same thing. This time he handed the phone back to her.

'What are you doing?' Mackenzie asked.

'I'm letting her know that I'm calling.'

'Why don't you wait for her to pick up?'

'Doesn't work that way. She might be somewhere where she can't talk. Not answering a call is suspicious. This way, it just looks like someone misdialled twice. This way, she'll know it's me. It's like a personal message. Trust me.'

'So we just wait?'

'Yes.'

Mackenzie nodded, looked around the office and started to pick up the folders and pieces of paper that were lying all over the floor.

'You don't have to do that,' Cadicher said.

‘It’s okay. We’re not doing anything right now. I think I may have spoken too soon when I said you led an interesting life.’

‘I agree.’

‘A lot more waiting around than I thought.’

‘Doing nothing beats doing what I do.’

‘Okay.’

Mackenzie’s phone started ringing. She stopped collecting paper off the floor and looked at the screen. ‘I think it’s her,’ she said, and handed the phone to Cadicher.

He answered it.

77

‘What do you want?’ Echo said.

She got up from the table she was sitting at and made her way back to the car. She had to speak louder now that she was outside among the traffic.

‘Remember the card you gave me?’ Cadicher asked.

She made it to her car, opened the door and got inside. She closed the door, the phone pressed between her shoulder and ear as she put the keys in the ignition. Then she put the phone on speaker and looked at herself in the rear-view mirror. ‘Yeah I remember. What about it?’

‘So you met The Glove, right?’

‘No I didn’t, but you know that already, because you never did either. That’s not how this works.’

‘Your relationship with The Glove is different.’

‘What are you talking about? It isn’t different.’

‘Are you lying to me?’ Cadicher asked. ‘A cop just saw the card. She told me something interesting.’

‘Why would I lie? And why did a cop see that anyways? In fact, I don’t want to know. You’re acting insane, and you’re pulling yourself down into some deep shit.’

‘I need your help with this.’

‘There’s nothing to help. This is over. Leave it alone and move on with your life.’

‘Hear me out first. We could help each other.’

‘No, you need to listen to me right now, drop it. I don’t need your help. It was one thing to screw up your job, but now you’re interfering with mine.’

Echo hung up. She started the car, and drove onto the highway, joining the traffic, becoming just another cog in the machine.

78

Cadicher handed the phone back to Mackenzie. He sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes with his palms.

‘I don’t understand,’ Mackenzie said.

‘She said she’s never met The Glove.’

‘How is that possible? How’d she get the card then?’

‘Same way we all do, I guess.’

‘Meaning?’

Cadicher said, ‘Meaning we all have a boss.’

‘But she’s a finger-something, right? You said there’s a hierarchy to this organisation. The Glove, five fingers, and then people like you.’

‘Yes.’

‘So her boss is The Glove,’ Mackenzie said.

‘Or her boss is another finger.’

‘What would be the order of seniority for fingers?’

‘I don’t know, but she’s in the middle. If there is an order, then there are two people above her.

‘Doesn’t make sense,’ Mackenzie said. ‘Hear me out. I’m taking a fresh perspective here. Have you ever seen or heard from any of these other fingers?’

‘No, but that means nothing. That’s not how this works. We don’t all get together on Friday afternoons and drink beer. Everything about us is secretive. I didn’t even know your brother’s real name.’

‘But that woman officer told you that print belonged to a female, right?’

‘You were there.’

‘So we have three possibilities. The first possibility is that your daughter put her own print on the card for some

reason. The second possibility is that her boss is female and most likely The Glove, or another finger.'

'What's the third possibility?'

'The third possibility kinda ties them all together. It's the only thing that makes sense to me.'

'Spill it.'

'The third possibility is that your daughter is The Glove.'

79

Cadicher yawned into his fist. 'I need some sleep.'

'So that's it?'

'For now.'

Mackenzie said, 'Do you sleep here?'

'Sometimes. If I need to. I can sleep anywhere.'

'Let me help you with this, Caddy.'

'That's not a good idea.'

'Why?'

'You've done enough. There's nothing else you can do.'

'But I'm connected to it all,' Mackenzie said. 'I'm the reason you're in this position.'

'No, you're not. If you trip while walking, you don't sue Nike. They're not to blame. You created a pill. It does what it does. We exploited it.'

'You're going to make me say it?'

'Say what?' Cadicher asked.

'I have money and resources. Two things you may end up needing.'

'This isn't your fight. Go home.'

'It is my fight. Kingsley was my brother. The Glove killed him.'

'I told you what happened.'

'Yes, you did but unlike you, I think if you fall, you should sue Nike. Everything is impossible until someone does it. Think what you want, but what happened to Kingsley wasn't his fault entirely. Someone shares that blame.'

Cadicher stood up and yawned again. 'I need some sleep. Let's talk about it afterwards, if you're still around, which you shouldn't be.'

Mackenzie looked around the office. 'Are you going to sleep here? In the office?'

'Yes. I just need a few hours.'

'Where?'

'Right here. On the floor. Or the chair.'

Mackenzie said, 'I have a better idea.'

The suite was large and furnished, as big as Cadicher's house, garden included. The hotel was the tallest building in the city centre – The Roger Jaeger - built for the Cape Town Olympic Games.

The suite had two floors, a personal elevator leading to the basement parking, a working kitchen, and panoramic views of the Atlantic. It had a formal sitting room, a pyjama lounge, a bar, and five bedrooms. It had six bathrooms, underfloor heating and expensive artwork hanging from the walls.

Cadicher was shown around the suite by a bellhop wearing a blue velvet jacket. Cadicher wasn't interested. He didn't care. He just needed a bed. When the man left, the suite became uncomfortably quiet. He could hear the soft drone from the air conditioner and not much else. He wondered briefly whether Mackenzie's room was the same. Whether all this space and elegance made her happy or not.

He tucked the room key card in his wallet, looked at the stairs leading up, and left the second floor where it was. There was no need to explore it. It was probably more of the same. He walked down the corridor and turned into the first room he saw. He closed the door and locked it. Not that he needed to. It was just force of habit. The side lamps on either side of the bed were turned on and the curtains were open. It was overkill and excessive. Everything was, to the finest detail. The room smelt like flowers and soap and baby powder.

The bed was huge. Bigger than a King. The sheets and covers were clean and white and crisp. The pillows looked brand new; they were propped up off the head of the bed, like they were hovering. They had a capital R and J stitched in the centre in blue. The room came with an en suite bathroom. Two sinks, two toilets, two baths, one shower - large enough to fit a car inside. There were two towel racks on either side of the baths, with blue towels rolled up on every shelf. There must have been 30 or 40 of them altogether. Between the two sinks stood a large, clear vase with freshly cut yellow tulips. The flowers and the towels were the only colour in the otherwise white bathroom.

Cadicher peeled off his clothes and stepped inside the shower. The showerhead was fitted in the ceiling and the water fell on him like he had been caught in a storm. He made it quick. He used the tiny bottles of shampoo and conditioner on his hair and body. He emptied them. Then he tore off a piece of plastic that covered a bar of soap in the shape of a tulip bud. It looked tiny in his hands. He washed everywhere twice over. Then he just stood under the hot water; after 10 minutes he stepped out and used two towels to dry himself. He found a white dressing gown, with the same R and J letters stitched over the right breast. It was packaged in clear plastic, hanging behind the door, the cotton plush and expensive. He walked back into the room and drew the curtains closed. He cleared the first set of pillows from the bed, and threw them

on the floor. He turned off all the lights and fell face first onto the bed. The knot from the gown was pushing into his gut so he loosened it and used the gown as a make-shift blanket. He could smell the shampoo and the conditioner and the soap. All three were fragranced slightly differently. He could smell lavender and jasmine and something strange like boiled oats and wheat. He closed his eyes and fell asleep almost instantly on a bed that relieved pressure and pain and helped support posture. On a bed that was finally too big for him.

81

Cadicher woke up around noon. He checked the time. He had slept for just over three hours. It was enough. He got up, retied his gown and stepped out into the hallway. The suite was quiet but he could smell coffee brewing in the kitchen. He found Mackenzie sitting on one of the bar stools around the kitchen island. She had changed into fresh clothes. She cradled a cup between her hands, the steam rising into her face.

When she saw Cadicher she said, ‘Did I wake you?’

‘How’d you get in here?’

She held up a key card. ‘They let me borrow a spare down at reception.’ She handed him a cup of coffee.

‘Where’d you get the clothes? Or did they let you borrow those from reception, too?’

‘I own the suite next door to yours. Actually, I own both of these. I use this one for guests.’

Cadicher nodded. He moved away from the kitchen and into the sitting room where the chairs looked more comfortable. He stared out the windows and admired the view of the ocean, the white horses breaking over the water for as far as he could see.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ Mackenzie said, walking over to him.

‘Didn’t you sleep?’ Cadicher asked.

‘No, I can’t sleep when I’m onto something. My brain won’t let me.’

‘Mental health is nothing to take lightly,’ Cadicher said, sitting down. ‘You should see a doctor.’

‘I’ll make a note of it. Like I was saying –‘

Cadicher held up his hand. ‘Stop. Just sit down and relax for a second. Or at least let me wake up first.’

Mackenzie sighed and sat down opposite him. She was quiet for a minute but she started drumming her fingers on the armrest. Cadicher tried to ignore it.

Finally he said, ‘How long have you been waiting for me to get up?’

‘What?’

‘Were you just sitting there in the kitchen waiting for me?’

‘I didn’t want to wake you.’

‘How did you know I hadn’t left?’

Mackenzie said nothing.

Cadicher said, ‘You checked didn’t you?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I didn’t hear you walking down the passage.’

‘I didn’t open the door or anything.’

‘I was sleeping, not dead.’ He sighed. ‘So what have you been thinking about?’

Mackenzie placed her cup down on the coffee table between them. She pitched forward as though she was going to give a big speech. Her hands moved with her mouth. ‘We use my connections to figure out where and when the pills are being stolen. My guess: Table Bay. I’m waiting on a when, but it’s in motion. After we land the shipment, the supplier is then supposed to bring them directly to our headquarters where they get inventoried and distributed. I’m guessing The Glove doesn’t wait for this. I’m guessing they steal the pills right off the container.’

‘Let me stop you for a second,’ Cadicher said. ‘You’re right on all three accounts, but only partially. The pills do come in from Table Bay. There are more locations, but that’s the main one. And, you’re right, The Glove doesn’t wait. They have trucks lined up there on the docks, three of them. They take 20000 pills directly from the container and load them up. They don’t steal them though. They don’t need to. They buy them. They’re a supplier themselves. At least they pretend to be.’

‘Okay, so let’s go down there now. We follow the trucks when the pills come in and we have our next move.’

‘A good idea in theory but there’s a problem.’

‘What?’

‘You don’t need to wait for a when anymore. The pills come in once a month. We’d have to wait another six days before the next shipment arrives.’

‘How do you know this?’

‘Unless things have changed in the last week, the pills arrive in six days. Besides, following the trucks won’t lead us to The Glove.’

‘Oh,’ Mackenzie said, sitting back. ‘So how do we find The Glove?’

‘We don’t. Haven’t you watched any cop shows?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Police shows?’

‘No, I meant about not finding The Glove?’

‘I need a smoke.’

‘I’ll send someone to get you some. Tell me what you meant.’

Cadicher placed his cup down. ‘There was this old show my wife and I used to watch. *The Wire*? You ever see it?’

‘No.’

‘When you’re trying to catch someone, you don’t go looking for the who. You go looking for the why and the how and the when.’

‘Okay.’

‘A couple of days ago, I was involved in a car accident. There was someone with me in the car. A woman. My daughter said she died.’

‘Who was she?’

‘I didn’t know her. Not really. She owed The Glove some money. She hadn’t paid in a while. I was trying to help her and she got caught in the middle of something.’

‘What does she have to do with finding The Glove?’ Mackenzie asked.

‘Maybe nothing,’ Cadicher said. ‘Maybe everything.’

82

Cadicher told Mackenzie what happened on the night he met Ebodia. He left out the part where he threw the guy out the window. It wasn’t important. He told her about the crash, and how his daughter had helped him. He told her about waking up in the safe house. He skipped over the part about killing The Closer, for obvious reasons. There was no need to go into detail.

‘I still don’t get how this woman helps us find The Glove,’ Mackenzie said.

‘She’s a part of the puzzle.’

‘How?’

‘Either my daughter was lying that Ebodia died or she wasn’t.’

‘And if she was?’

‘Then your theory about Echo goes up a rung in the ladder.’

‘And if she wasn’t?’

‘Then my theory does. Either way, we need to find out who’s on the right track.’

‘So how do we find out?’ Mackenzie asked.

‘Echo said Ebodia died in the car. She said she drove her back to the apartment building where she lived and called it in. It sounded strange then, but now it sounds ridiculous.’

‘Why?’

‘Driving back to Ebodia’s apartment would have caused all sorts of problems. Did she drag her from the car to her front door? It’s plausible only in the same sense that it’s plausible to cut grass with cuticle scissors. It was a bad option from the start.’

‘Because of time?’

‘Also, why the aggravation? Ebodia was innocent, but Echo was taking a huge risk. It was unnecessary. It was the right thing to do, but it didn’t make any sense. I couldn’t see that before. She didn’t owe me or Ebodia any favours.’

‘Maybe your daughter was just telling you what you needed to hear then.’

‘Doubt it.’

‘Maybe she didn’t drive her to the apartment. Maybe she left her at a hospital.’

‘She wouldn’t lie about that. She’d say that.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘It’s just who she is. She tells it how it is, which is why I think you’re wrong about her. She wasn’t afraid to tell me how to kill myself. She wouldn’t be afraid to tell me whether Ebodia died.’

‘Why would she tell you how to kill yourself? I thought she saved you from the crash?’

‘We have a complicated relationship.’

‘Clearly.’

‘The point is that she wasn’t sparing my feelings.’

‘OK, well maybe your daughter felt guilty about what happened to this woman.’

Cadicher said, ‘Wait. You’re taking her side now? You thought she was The Glove a couple of hours ago.’

‘I still do. But I’m playing devil’s advocate. Still doesn’t change the fact that she could have felt guilty about what happened.’

‘There was no reason for her to. That car was coming for me. My side. I was the one who tried to swerve away. I was the one who killed her. Echo had no reason to feel guilty. She was just doing her job. I would’ve done the same thing.’

Mackenzie was quiet for a moment before speaking again. ‘So we go to Ebodia’s apartment building?’

‘No. That was days ago. We find out which hospital she was taken to. See if anyone was brought in recently. I know her name and I know what she looks like. It shouldn’t be hard.’

‘Doesn’t sound straightforward from where I’m sitting,’ Mackenzie said. Her phone started vibrating. It was George. She ignored it. It was the fourth time this morning he had tried calling her.

‘There are six main hospitals in the province,’ Cadicher said. ‘She’ll be in a morgue. They all have morgues so she’ll be in the one nearest to where she lived. We just need to find that hospital.’

‘How do you know there are only six hospitals?’

‘In my line of work, knowing where a hospital is is important.’

‘Okay, but what if we can’t find her?’

‘We’ll get to that if we get to that.’

‘So when do you want to go?’

Cadicher stood up. ‘I’ll meet you at the car in 15 minutes.’

83

Mackenzie parked the car in the hospital parking lot. It took her ten minutes to find a spot. Lunch break was over, afternoon appointments had filled every available inch of parking space; doctors were cramming in the last of the sick for the day. The

hospital building was low and long. Two floors and a basement. It was painted a modern grey with a red roof, with windows sparkling in the sunlight and a row of air conditioners lined up along the back. The hospital was just 4km away from Ebodia's apartment. The next closest was 16km. If she was dead, she was here.

Mackenzie and Cadicher entered through the parting doors together and were blasted with cold air. To the left of them, a small pharmacy with people lining up for medication. To the right of them, a small coffee shop with magazines and teddy bears and fresh flowers. Directly in front of them a reception desk curved in a semi-circle from one end of the wall to the other with seven booths and seven computer screens. They walked to the one booth that was empty and they both sat down in red tub chairs that were small, uncomfortable, made from hard plastic.

The screen saver with the hospital's name disappeared and a man's face popped up.

'How can I help you today?' The man in the screen asked. He was wearing a head piece with a little microphone hovering near his mouth.

'We're looking for someone,' Cadicher said.

'Sure, what's the name and I'll check on the system for you quick, sir.'

'Ebodia Michaels.'

The man tapped his fingers on something off the screen. ‘Just spell it for me, sir.’

Cadicher fired off the letters.

‘I don’t see her here, sir. When did she come here?’

‘Either today, yesterday, or two days ago.’

‘Do you know the name of her doctor?’

Mackenzie looked at Cadicher.

Cadicher said, ‘She was pronounced dead at home. We were told she was brought here but we can’t be sure.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that, sir. Are you family?’

‘No.’

‘Okay, so she wouldn’t necessarily be here if she was found dead, sir. We have a mortuary near Salt River where bodies are taken, especially if they require autopsy or identification. Anything like that sir and the hospital usually moves the deceased within 72 hours. Most likely in 24 hours though. Were either of you her next of kin at all?’

‘No,’ Cadicher said.

‘If you’re not family or her next of kin then it won’t be possible to see her, sir. Is there some kind of investigation going on?’

‘Nothing like that,’ Cadicher said. ‘We don’t need to see her. We just need to know where she is. That’s it. We’re helping the family with the funeral arrangements.’

‘Okay, sir, I understand. Let me see if I can’t get in touch with them there at Salt River and see if they can’t maybe let us know quick.’

‘Appreciate it,’ Cadicher said.

‘Okay, give me a minute please.’ The man’s face disappeared from the screen, and the hospital logo reappeared.

Makenzie said, ‘This is looking like a dead end.’

‘Yeah, probably.’

‘We need to check their files.’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘You know what to look for? Or where?’

‘No.’

‘Let’s see what we find in Salt River,’ Cadicher said.

‘He’s going to come back with nothing. We’re wasting our time here.’

‘Maybe, but how many ghosts are there in the country? A thousand? Less?’

‘Wait,’ Mackenzie said. ‘She was a ghost?’

‘Yes.’

‘You didn’t tell me that.’

‘Does it make a difference?’

‘There’s a registry for ghosts.’

‘What do you mean a registry?’

‘It’s an unofficial law. We have access to it. For medical reasons mostly, but for other reasons too.’

‘Since when?’

‘Since the Rosebank ghost 11 years ago.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Denny de Bruin was given *youth* by his drugged up mother when he was just a boy – must’ve been five or six. A decade later he was completely insane, found sitting in a nursery school with a bunch of kids, singing nursery rhymes and clapping his hands. He had tattooed his eyeballs to make it seem like he was just an average kid. Ever since then, we’ve kept a registry of all ghosts in South Africa.’

‘But Ebodia bought *youth* from The Glove. How would you know she was a ghost?’

‘Like I said it’s unofficial law. We can’t force people to tell us they’re ghosts, but we also need to know if they are, if only to stop people like Denny de Bruin from doing crazy shit. You’d be surprised how many things you can get away with if you look like a child. If Ebodia went to the doctor for anything we’ll have her on the registry. Same goes for banks, schools, home affairs offices, even shopping online. We cast a wide net.’

‘How is that even possible?’

‘Happens all the time. Happened with cell phone contacts first. Remember sim cards? Remember all the information you needed to supply to get a number? Then came websites. Social media. ByBy payment chips. Information about people is the most valuable asset in the world.’

Mackenzie unlocked her phone, flipped it horizontally, and started typing. Cadicher watched her.

'Do we still need to wait here for this?' Cadicher asked.

Mackenzie said nothing, still busy with her phone.

The hospital logo disappeared and the man reappeared. 'Hi, sir. Okay, I just got off the phone with Salt River mortuary and according to their records there is no one there by the name of Ebodia Michaels.'

'Okay.'

'I'm sorry I couldn't help you, sir. Maybe you can try one of the other hospitals?'

'We'll do that,' Cadicher said.

'Anything else I can help you with?'

'No.'

'Have a good day, sir.'

The man's face disappeared once more.

Cadicher looked at Mackenzie. 'You find anything?'

Mackenzie said, 'I found something.'

84

Mackenzie handed Cadicher her phone. There was a long list of names and numbers. Some of the numbers were changing in real time.

'What am I looking at?' Cadicher asked.

'It's alphabetical. Look at the last names.'

Cadicher scrolled down to M. There was no Michaels.

'Don't see her here.'

'I couldn't find her either but look at the numbers.'

Cadicher sighed, handed back her phone. 'Why don't you just tell me what you found and we cut the shit?'

Mackenzie took her phone back and studied Cadicher for a moment. 'Why are you getting upset?'

'I'm not.'

She glanced at Cadicher's watch. It was a digital G-shock. 'Have you always worn digital watches?'

Cadicher rotated the band of his watch. 'What's your point?'

'You also couldn't remember your daughter's phone number. You needed to write it down on a piece of paper.'

'Nothing unique there.'

'Do you have dyscalculia, Caddy?'

'Don't even know what that is. Any more questions?'

'No.'

'Fantastic. Then tell me what you found out.'

'The numbers are live GPS coordinates, triangulated with cell phones. One of them matches to this location. There's a ghost in the hospital.'

'Name?'

'Traycer, G. It could be her. I mean it could just be a doctor or a nurse.'

‘Could be anyone, so let’s find out,’ Cadicher said. He turned towards the computer screen in front of him, and the logo disappeared once more.

85

Traycer, G was a patient in the ICU, which was encouraging according to Cadicher. If Ebodia had survived she’d be in the ICU. He walked up ahead. Mackenzie hung back, irritated at herself for bringing up dyscalculia with Cadicher. Sometimes she needed to make sense of things as they happened to her. It was both a strength and a weakness. They turned down a long corridor. The walls were beige, solid; the lighting above harsh and bright. The corridor opened up to a waiting room which lay adjacent to two glass doors with two sets of red letters spelling ICU on each pane of glass. Scattered steel chairs surrounded glass tables in the waiting area. All of the seats were empty except one. A man had his head down, staring at the floor. He looked a mess. His clothes were creased, his hair dishevelled. He was tapping his left foot on the floor impatiently. His blue, leather loafers were stained and dirty.

Mackenzie recognised him immediately.

It was George.

86

Mackenzie's heart flickered at the sight of him. 'George?'

George looked up, his eyes red and puffy.

'Mack?' he said, looking confused, standing up. 'I've been trying to get hold you.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

'How'd you know I was here?'

'I didn't until just now. What's happened?'

George looked towards Cadicher who was staring at them.

'Who are you?' George said.

Cadicher ignored him. He asked Mackenzie: 'You good?'

'Yes. I'll catch up with you,' Mackenzie said.

Cadicher nodded, headed through the ICU doors and walked towards the nurse's counter. Mackenzie watched him.

'Who is that?' George said.

'A friend. I'll explain later. Why are you here?'

George rubbed the stubble of his beard, the skin on his cheek stretching and pulling. He turned away and sat down on a chair.

'You're scaring me, George. What happened?' Mackenzie said, sitting opposite him.

'I don't know everything but Bishop Rotherdam and his sister were killed last night.'

Mackenzie leant forward, whispered, 'What?'

'It was some kind of attack. I don't know. He was stabbed. They apparently found him alive, brought him here, they couldn't save him. Sophia was killed. I don't know. I don't

know who would do this to him or his family. I got a call early this morning. He put us down as his emergency contact. You weren't answering your phone and they called me. Did you know he did that?'

'Did what?'

'Put us down as their emergency contact.'

'He never told me.'

'Did they have any other family? Did his sister have any children?'

'No,' Mackenzie said.

'What do we do with this?'

'We'll take care of it.'

'They must've had people in their life that they were closer to than us.'

Mackenzie remembered the last time she had spoken to the bishop. They had fought. He had wanted to distance himself from her. 'Go home, George. You're in no condition to handle this now. There'll be some press with this. We'll handle this, but not now, not from here, not like this.'

George ran his fingers through his hair. 'This is over isn't it?'

Mackenzie met his eye, but avoided the question. 'Is he still in there, George?'

George swallowed a pebble in his throat and stood up. 'Yes. I think so.'

'Okay.'

He clutched her shoulder, dug his hand in his pocket looking for his keys, and finally limped away.

87

Cadicher entered Traycer, G's room and closed the sliding door behind him. The curtain hanging over the bed was drawn open. The window across from him was open and a breeze shook the vertical blinds together. He approached not knowing whether Traycer, G was asleep or unconscious or awake, not knowing whether she was Ebodia. The latter was answered a second later when he saw the girl's face. Not Ebodia. A girl - no older than 15 years old - was sitting up, reading a copy of The New Testament in bed.

Cadicher thought about leaving right then, without saying anything. No delay. Wrong person. A dead end.

But the girl asked: 'Can I help you?' and Cadicher lingered an instant longer and realised he had seen this girl before.

88

'I know you,' Cadicher said.

'Excuse me?'

'You don't remember me, do you?'

'No,' the girl said putting down the bible on her lap.

Cadicher walked around the bed, but stayed closer to the foot so as not to invade her space. ‘I helped you at the Bowls Club. You were in bad shape.’

The girl sat up. ‘I don’t really remember that.’

Cadicher nodded. ‘It doesn’t matter. I’m glad you’re feeling better.’

‘You found me?’

‘Not exactly. You found us. A couple friends of mine were having a drink and I saw you coming towards us. We thought you were drugged up or something.’

‘Oh.’

Cadicher noticed her eyes. Remembered how she wasn’t a girl at all, but a woman. In the light she looked different. She was beautiful and striking, with cheek bones that could slice lips and fingers.

‘I’m Geia,’ she said, extending her hand.

‘Cadicher,’ he said, taking her tiny hand in his.

‘Thank you.’

Cadicher nodded.

‘How’d you know I was here?’

‘I didn’t,’ Cadicher said. ‘I was looking for someone else.’

‘Well, I’m glad you ran into me. It must be a sign.’

‘Maybe.’

They fell into an awkward silence before Geia said, ‘Are you religious, Cadicher?’

‘No.’

‘I believe I was saved, and not just by you. That day you found me was one of the worst days of my life. I was raped, left to die.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I was so afraid of the storm but I’m not afraid anymore.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When I was 14 years old, I took a pill and 21 years later... here we are. I was so afraid of everything. Then God saved me.’

Cadicher said nothing. There was nothing to say. Geia had apparently found religion. He had heard of such things, and could never understand them. A whole lifetime of principles exchanged for a set of new ones in a matter of days. One belief system had been taken apart, erased, and put back together with a whole new group of morals and codes. He was certain it gave comfort, false comfort, but comfort all the same. To him, it was the equivalent of putting a plaster on a warning light.

‘Are you the storm?’ Geia asked.

‘The what?’

‘God sent you here, Cadicher.’

‘Okay.’

‘You believe that, don’t you?’

‘No. I believe that religion is a placebo used to appease the fear of death.’

‘It’s not death people fear. What do you think will happen when you die?’

‘There’s only one thing that will happen,’ Cadicher said.

‘What?’

‘When you die, the people that love you will miss you.’

‘And after that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Then I’ll pray for you. Just like I’ll pray for my attacker. She has a lot to answer for.’

‘Your attacker was a woman?’

‘Among other things.’

Cadicher hadn’t thought a woman had raped her.

‘Are you thinking it, too?’ Geia asked.

‘Thinking what?’

Geia looked out her window and the wind caught her hair, flicking it away from her face. Cadicher noticed the bruises on her neck once more. They were fading but were now an ugly yellow colour. Like a banana about to over ripen.

‘Do you know what they check for when you tell people in hospital that you were raped?’

‘Pregnancy probability?’

Geia tapped her finger on her nose. ‘Look at the brain on you. That’s right. Then they offered me a prophylaxis. No one asked who raped me. They just figured it was a man. I still haven’t told them. I’m not sure what’s easier to live with to tell you the truth.’

‘You should tell them.’

‘Why?’

‘There’s nothing embarrassing about it. You’re physically still a minor.’

‘And what will they do, you think?’

‘We don’t live in the dark ages anymore. You can be proactive.’

‘I can’t do anything,’ Geia replied. ‘There’s nothing you, me, or anyone else can do about what happened. It’s done.’

‘And you’re okay with that?’

Geia nodded. ‘For now.’

‘Who was she?’

‘Like I said, you can’t help this. You can’t fix this.’

‘I can try to stop it happening to someone else.’

Geia laughed. It sounded child-like. ‘You see? You are the storm. God sent you.’

‘What was her name?’

‘I don’t know. I was a prostitute. No cards, no names. Maybe she told me, I don’t know. I can’t remember. I had, or still have a concussion. Can’t remember that either.’

Cadicher said, ‘The night I found you, you told me something. You were just whispering it. It was a name. You were saying it over and over. Mary. Think it’s her?’

‘No. I don’t know a Mary.’

‘Sure?’

‘Yes.’

'Okay,' Cadicher replied. He looked towards the door. 'I'll leave you to get back to your reading then. I'm sorry again about what happened to you. I'm glad you've found some comfort, but my advice is to tell someone. Anyone. You never know.'

'I just did. The dust will settle after the storm, you'll see. Will you close the curtain on your way out?'

Cadicher nodded, reached up, and drew the turquoise curtain around the railing above Geia's bed. Before he enclosed her in privacy, she added: 'There was an octopus tattoo on her back.'

89

Cadicher closed the sliding door behind him and found Mackenzie sitting out the ICU waiting room. She was alone, talking on her phone. She looked upset.

'Yes,' Mackenzie said. 'That's fine. Just let me know when you do.' She hung up.

'Everything Okay?' Cadicher asked.

Mackenzie ignored the question. 'You find her?'

'No. Wrong person.'

'And now?'

Cadicher didn't reply.

They made their way back to the parking lot, walking in silence for their own reasons. Just before they broke apart to

go to their separate sides of the car, Cadicher said, 'This is where we go our own way.'

Mackenzie stopped. She looked deflated.

Cadicher said, 'You have your own problems. I'll take care of this.'

'We're doing this together.'

'It was fun playing detective, but it stops here. Sort out your life. I'll handle this. I'll get it done.'

Mackenzie began to protest, but Cadicher didn't hear her. Something else stole his attention. He heard the sound of tyres squealing as they tried to grip the surface of the parking lot. From the corner of his eye, he saw a deep, royal blue coloured shape growing larger.

He reacted to the intensifying noise out of instinct. There was no thought process. No weighing the odds. No time for it. He moved forward, towards Mackenzie. The shape in the corner of his eye grew larger, a mixture of pronounced edges and sweeping, elongated curves. He leaped across the distance between them and grabbed her, his momentum driving her backwards, out the way. The blue shape barely missed them, ramming the back of Mackenzie's car. Cadicher fell on top of her and he felt her chest decompress, the air in her body ejecting out. He looked to where he had stood a second ago. In his place, he saw the shining alloy wheel, the fat tyre, the crumpled bonnet. He heard the engine of the blue sports car rev uncontrollably, he heard the hiss of water and oil. He rolled

off Mackenzie, his right hand cut and bleeding, a line of dark blood running down his wrist towards his elbow. The driver door opened and he recognised the man from earlier. It was the guy in the waiting room. The guy Mackenzie called George.

90

Cadicher watched him fight off the airbag, watched him hit it and push it. He had forgotten about his seatbelt, and tried to get out the car while it was still attached. His right leg was sticking out from the door, his dirty leather loafer resting on the ground.

Cadicher pulled back his right knee as though he was pulling back on a bow string; he kicked out at the open door, flat footed, spreading the impact, slamming the weight of the door back into George's shin.

Cadicher stood up. In the distance he could see people come out of the hospital, looking at them, wondering what had happened. A security guard dressed in black with a visibility jacket was on his radio, jogging towards them.

Cadicher moved towards the car, swung the car door open and pretended to check for George's pulse. He had instead clamped his oven glove-sized hand around George's throat.

Cadicher looked up above the top of the sports car's roof and called out to the approaching guard, 'Get help! Now! He's not breathing!'

The security guard stopped in his tracks, turned, and ran the other way, back to the hospital entrance. Cadicher ducked his head into the cabin. The passenger airbag had deployed and was still intact, obscuring the view of the onlookers on the other side.

George was turning a deep shade of red. Both his hands were trying to pry off Cadicher's fingers to no avail. Cadicher's knuckles were white, unmoving.

'You think they'll get here before you pass out?' Cadicher asked.

George was kicking his feet, arching his back, his eyes were bulging in their sockets; he was trying to do anything for a sip of air, trying to do anything for the suffocation to ease up, even for a fraction. Cadicher could feel the energy sapping from George's body. It reminded him of Echo as a baby. He could always tell when she had fallen asleep in his arms; the way her body would suddenly lose all its rigidity and tension and built-up pressure. The way her breathing would change. Strangling someone to death was like waiting for the same sensation.

'This is how you die,' Cadicher said. 'Here. Now. In a hospital parking lot.'

'Caddy,' Mackenzie said.

Cadicher turned his head back to look at Mackenzie who was standing behind him. She stood like she had a sore stomach,

half bent at the waist, one arm cradling her navel, the colour from her face washed out.

'Let him go.'

'He could have killed us.'

'He didn't,' Mackenzie said. 'You saved me. And now you need to let him go.'

Cadicher turned back to George. His lips and cheeks were turning blue, a darker shade to the colour of his car. Cadicher tightened his grip for a second then released his fingers from George's neck.

George instantly sucked in a bucket of oxygen, his hands moving across his neck as a failsafe. The preservation of life never ceased to amaze Cadicher. The body always reacted intuitively in cases of extreme stress.

Cadicher looked over the roof of the car once more. The security guard and some hospital staff were running and pushing a gurney down the parking lot. A doctor's white coat flapped back as he ran. Like a scene from those cheap, knock-off medical shows.

Cadicher ducked into the car once more and grabbed George's wrist. It came away from his neck with ease. He used all his strength, applying the maximum amount of pressure on the smallest section. He squeezed about an inch below the thumb, just off centre. He felt the trapezoid and scaphoid fold over one another, rub and grind against each other. They were relatively small bones. He was interested in breaking just one

- the scaphoid. It connected the bones in the wrist and forearm. It was one of the few bones you never wanted to break. It shared its borders with the radius and four other bones. It acted like a tunnel for the radial artery, bringing blood to the fingers. Breaking it meant severe pain. It also meant that George would be in agony when they fitted him in handcuffs, which is what they'd do to him soon. He'd never be able to jerk off, hold a pen or place his hand on another steering wheel without thinking about this moment.

Cadicher gave him a life's worth of discomfort before the hospital staff got halfway to the car.

91

Cadicher moved out the way while the hospital staff attended to George. A nurse was asking Mackenzie if she was hurt. No one asked Cadicher anything so he spoke to the security guard. He was a burly man, but more point-rump than ostrich steak. He was a two-mule wagon in a jet plane world. A radio, nightstick, minimal training.

'Have you called the police?' Cadicher asked.

'Ya, they're on the way.'

'Good. This wasn't an accident. I saw the whole thing. These two were fighting inside. I think he's her boyfriend,

maybe her husband. They were arguing. She said something. He didn't like it. He tried to run her over.'

'You're not with her?'

'Don't know who she is.'

'Okay.'

'Just a bystander.'

'Okay. Will you wait for the police?'

'I need to be somewhere. It's why I'm telling you.'

'Okay.'

I'm going to give her my details. She can contact me if the police need to speak to me. Make sure this crazy bastard doesn't do anything else stupid. You've done a fine job so far.' Cadicher shook the security guard's hand and his posture straightened.

They were placing George on a stretcher, his neck braced, his left hand cradling his right. He was shaking from shock. He was lucky to be shaking at all.

Cadicher spoke over the crowd of people around him. 'Make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else. He tried to kill this woman. Police are on their way.' He clapped the security guard on the shoulder and turned towards Mackenzie. The nurse was pressing a couple fingers near her ribs, checking for breaks. 'Sorry to interrupt,' Cadicher said. 'How you feeling, Ma'am?'

'I'll live,' Mackenzie said, raising an eyebrow.

'Glad to hear it. Listen, I need to leave, but if the police or you need a statement or anything then I'm staying at

The Roger Jaeger downtown. Just ask for Mr. Caddy. I'll be home after 6.'

'Wait a second. Can't you just stay for a little while longer?'

'I have to get back to work.'

92

Cadicher made his way past the front entrance of the hospital, towards the emergency entrance, near the street. On the corner, parked as close as possible to the curb, stood a line of three taxis, two of them automated, one with a driver. The driver was standing beside his car, smoking. He had a thick black moustache with hair to match. He looked Middle Eastern, maybe Eastern European. He looked about the same size as Cadicher, maybe a couple of centimetres shorter, maybe a few kilograms lighter.

'You need to go somewhere?' The driver asked when he saw Cadicher. His accent was thick and heavy but he spoke English well enough.

'I do.'

'Hop in.'

Cadicher almost laughed. Instead he said, 'Why?'

'I'm a taxi driver. More reliable than these other two.'

'What makes you think I would choose you over one of these?' Cadicher said, gesturing to the automated cars.

'Human company?'

'Trying to get away from that.'

The taxi driver studied Cadicher for a moment. 'I'll also give you some advice.'

'Like what?'

'Like how women need to feel loved to have sex, but men need sex to feel loved.'

'That's not advice.'

The driver laughed. 'You smoke?' He reached inside his pocket and pulled out a soft pack of unfiltered Camels.

Cadicher shrugged, walked over and took one. 'Thought they didn't make these anymore.'

'They do in Moldova, my friend.' He lit the cigarette for Cadicher. 'Do you know this place?'

'I travelled to Romania a long time ago. It's not far from there, right?'

'Correct, my friend. Beautiful country. Lots of beautiful women too, all needing to feel loved.'

'I'll take your word for it.'

'So,' the taxi driver said. 'Where do you need to go?'

'I'm not sure yet.'

The taxi driver nodded, blowing rings.

Cadicher thought back to Geia, back to what she had told him. She said her attacker was a woman. She said her attacker had an octopus tattoo. There wasn't much to go on there, but then he remembered something about that night. Something that

now made sense. Geia had said the name Mary over and over again when he met her that night.

Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary.

That might have meant nothing to Geia, but Cadicher knew that woman. Had known her his entire life. That's why he needed to get away from Mackenzie. This was something personal. This was family.

'C'mon,' Cadicher said, throwing away his smoke. 'Let's get going then.'

93

Echo stood across from two men. They were in an abandoned house on the outskirts of the city. Undeveloped land surrounded them. The land was hilly, rocky and unripe. It wasn't good for farming anymore – not since the droughts, not since the hailstorms. It wasn't good for living. The house had four walls and a roof. Boarded up windows and two wooden doors – one at the front, one at the back, both soft with rot, both green and black with mould and moss. The house was good for something though. Lingering smells of cheap cigarettes, weed and sweat were choking the air; old newspapers, stained mattresses and syringes made up the furniture.

The two men standing across from Echo were unimpressed. They drove expensive cars and were worried about them parked on the dirt driveway outside. They were looking up, looking down,

constantly fidgeting. The meeting place made their skin crawl and itch. They were out of their element. They had expensive clothes and shoes. Their watches were matching Rose Gold APs. The men looked similar. Both stood around 6 feet tall. Both were medium built. Both were born in Singapore. The one was bald, the other was balding. They were brothers, four years apart. They were business partners. Echo knew who they were, knew everything about them. The bald brother called himself Kade. The balding brother called himself Jin.

'Why would you meet us here?' Kade asked.

'It's quiet,' Echo said.

'It's disgusting,' Kade said.

'Doesn't make a good first impression,' Jin added.

'Neither does going to jail,' Echo said.

The brothers said nothing.

'We want a 20% cut,' Echo said.

Kade said, 'Impossible. 5%.'

'I'm not negotiating,' Echo replied.

'That's not how we operate,' Jin said. 'There's no room for profit at 20%. We can't cut the margins.'

'I don't care how you operate, and I don't care about your margins. 20% or nothing.'

'7%,' Kade said.

'That's the highest we can go,' Jin added.

'You're not listening,' Echo said. 'I told you I'm not here to negotiate. You agree to 20% or you don't.'

Kade put his hands in his pockets. ‘We can always get the product, ship it overseas ourselves. You’re not offering anything we can’t already do.’

‘You could. We wouldn’t stop you. But you’ll do it once, and once only.’

Both brothers smiled.

Jin said, ‘Threats don’t digest well with us.’

‘Then take the deal. Or don’t. Interfering with our business is not an option.’

‘Or you’ll... kill us?’ Kade asked. ‘We don’t think so.’

‘I’m curious,’ Echo said. ‘Do you think we can and won’t or simply that we can’t?’

Jin said, ‘We know who you are. We know who you represent. We still stand where we stand.’

‘Then we have nothing further to discuss,’ Echo replied.

‘7.5%,’ Kade said. ‘Final offer.’

‘No deal,’ Echo said.

‘You sure?’ Kade asked.

‘No deal.’

Jin said, ‘This was a waste of time.’

Echo said, ‘Nothing ever is. If you change your mind then you know how to get in touch.’

Kade spoke to his brother in Malay. Jin looked off in the distance, nodded. Jin spoke to Echo: ‘Maybe you’re not the right person to be doing this.’

‘Oh?’

‘Maybe your boss would have a different opinion,’ Jin said. ‘The Glove. Maybe we speak to your boss. Maybe we don’t meet in a shithole. Maybe we discuss things like business partners and not children.’

‘Every light needs a shadow,’ Echo said.

‘What?’ Kade said.

‘This shithole, as you call it, wasn’t always like this.’ Echo moved to one of the boarded up windows. There was a deep crack in one of the boards, and through it, Echo could see the yellow bush grass growing wildly. ‘You two are standing in my childhood. I didn’t know another home for the first eight years of my life. Over there,’ Echo pointed to a space behind her, ‘was the kitchen. My mother used to sing in the morning while making me breakfast. I have a lot of good memories of this place. But every light needs a shadow. Out there, in the clearing, I saw my father kill a man. He buried him right there.’ Echo turned away from the window and faced the men again. ‘I stopped being a child a long time ago, gentlemen.’

‘We still want to speak to your boss,’ Kade said.

‘No.’

‘Pity,’ Kade said.

Jin agreed.

Three men entered the house.

Echo watched the three men come through the front door. She was nonchalant about their presence. Like watching ants carrying a dead insect carcass. Unfazed that she hadn't seen them before. Unfazed that they circled around her. Unfazed that one of them held a gun in his hand.

'We're in a meeting,' Echo told them. 'Go wait outside until we're done.'

'You're ballsy, we'll give you that,' Jin said. 'Hand over your weapon.'

'Don't have a weapon,' Echo said.

'Check her,' Kade said.

One of the men stepped towards her.

'Uh huh. Stop right there, pup.'

The man stopped, looked at Kade.

Echo unzipped her hoodie, threw it to the ground. Underneath, she was wearing a white t-shirt with a picture of road runner and the words BEEP! BEEP! MOTHERFUCKA! written off to the side. She lifted her shirt above her jeans, exposing her skin, turning around. 360 degrees later she dropped her shirt and said, 'It's bad faith to bring weapons to a meeting. I thought we were supposed to be discussing things like business partners, not children.'

'You were uncooperative,' Jin said. 'You don't want us to speak to The Glove so we'll send The Glove a message another way.'

'Five against one doesn't seem fair,' Echo said.

‘Don’t worry. We’ll sit this out,’ Kade said.

‘Then it’s really not fair. You should’ve brought more men.’

Kade said something in Malay and the first of the men stepped into Echo’s space.

Kade and Jin were successful entrepreneurs, but they were poor tacticians when it came to fighting. They had no experience. If they did, they would have given the command for all three of their guys to attack at the same time. At least then they would’ve had a chance. Cadicher had taught Echo to fight when she was very little. He had taught her how to close a fist; how to end a fight. Told her street fights were like a game of chess. Taught her to think three moves in advance. But it was all theoretical. It wasn’t before high school that Echo had been in a real fight and taken her practical test. A boy her age had tried to kiss her. He had closed his eyes, bent his neck, leaned in, and puckered his lips. Echo head-butted him, broke his nose. And as young Leo clutched his face, shouting out in pain, fresh blood wetting his hands, Echo kicked him in the sternum, sending him onto the ground. Her father’s voice told her that the fight wasn’t over. Not yet. Not by a long shot. Leo was twice her weight, a head taller. So Echo –

- Echo struck the man in the throat with her fingers. She hit him an instant later with her elbow, having brought her fingers back to her collar bone. Quick, hard, rotating at the hips. The blow caught him above the ear.

She dropped to one knee and pushed him towards the guy holding the gun on the left. It was a small diversion. The guy on the right didn't move, which was unexpected, but not really a problem. Echo exploded forwards and upwards from her lower vantage point, and caught him with an uppercut, whipping his head back, connecting with the fleshy part under his lower jaw. She spun after the connection, heard the gun fire and miss, the bullet pinging into the wall behind her. She saw the gun as a blur, but saw it all the same. She grabbed the wrist of the guy holding the gun, stepping into him, and used her other hand to bend the barrel outwards, away from her, twisting the guy's trigger finger at an awkward angle, but not enough to break it. This left her open, and the guy used his free hand to hit her freely in the face. The first punch stung and disoriented her, but he caught her too high, his knuckles sliding off her brow. The second punch was much better, more powerful. Echo could do nothing but take the full force of it as he hit her, knocking her off her feet, sending her backwards.

Echo pushed herself off the floor. Her right eyebrow had been cut open, she had an instant headache, but she was grinning. She had taken two punches, but come away with the gun, gripped in both hands. A good trade-off. The guy who had been holding the gun knew the mistake he had made. He had fallen for her decoy. She had sacrificed her queen and won the game. She was thinking three moves ahead.

The guy who had been holding the gun didn't know what to do, so he just stood there, which made things easy.

Echo fired and hit his heart directly.

95

Kade backed away against the wall. Jin raised his hands in defeat. Both kept quiet in the hopes of diminishing their threat and presence.

The guy who had been holding the gun lay on his back, sprawled out and dead. The other two guys in the room were moaning, moving slowly, as though they were trapped in dense liquid. They were discombobulated. They were no longer a threat.

Echo checked the gun once over, let it hang at her side, as she caught her breath.

'We're sorry,' Jin said.

'We made a mistake,' Kade said.

'Shut up,' Echo replied, and both brothers fell silent. 'Do you think that the two of you showing up makes you look stronger? That you show a united front? All it really does is emphasise how weak you both really are together.' Echo looked at the dead guy. 'Who was he?'

The brothers looked at each other.

'This guy,' Echo said, pointing with her gun.

‘Our cousin,’ Jin said.

Echo nodded. ‘Punishment fits the crime.’ She looked at the other two guys on the floor. ‘Are they also cousins?’

Jin shook his head. ‘They’re nobodies.’

‘They’re alive. Which is more than you can say about your trigger happy cousin.’

‘What about us?’ Kade asked.

‘What about you?’

‘What are you going to do to us?’ Kade said

Jin said, ‘We’ll offer you 9%.’

Echo shot him through the knee. Jin fell forward, a spray of blood hitting the back wall.

Kade closed his eyes and begged for mercy.

‘Your brother interrupted us,’ Echo said. ‘What were you saying?’

‘Please don’t kill us.’

‘Give me a reason not to.’

‘We’ll give you 20%,’ Kade said.

Echo shot Kade through the knee. Same leg, same knee, same reaction.

Echo moved towards the brothers. ‘Thought you guys would like the same bullet wound to go along with everything else. Matching scars will look good at your next pool party.’

Jin was breathing fast, gritting his teeth.

‘If you go into shock, there’s a good chance you’ll die, Jin. Then your wife will have to raise your two beautiful girls

all by herself. I suggest that you focus your mind on other things. Like how you've now agreed to a 25% cut.'

Jin looked up at her.

'Deal?' Echo asked.

'Yes,' Jin said, clutching his leg.

'Kade?' Echo asked. 'How about you? You agree with your brother here? 25%?

'Yes,' Kade said.

'Good. We have a deal.' Echo dropped the magazine from the gun on the floor and tossed the gun into the next room. 'If you want to discuss the finer details of the deal, meet me here.' She took out a card. It had an address on it. She showed it to Kade for 10 seconds. She slipped the card back in her pocket. She walked back to her hoodie, picked it up, put it on, and zippered it up.

'Gentlemen,' Echo said, dabbing the blood from her cut eye with her hoodie sleeve.

She walked out the house, and into the sunlight, across the dirt path, slipping between the two black Mercedes. Her car was parked just beyond. She got in, turned on the radio, wound down the window, put the car in gear, and drove off slowly, leaving a small trail of dust in her wake.

Echo drove slowly. Her head was throbbing. She took a couple of painkillers that were stored in her cubby. She chewed them, swallowing the bitterness.

She turned up the volume on her radio. It was an old, *The Offspring: Greatest Hits* CD, bought two decades ago, back when they were still a thing, still together, still producing music. Tracks 1 and 8 were scratched, the songs skipping and jumping, but she didn't care. She wasn't really listening to the music. The noise closed the door in her head, allowed her to think clearer.

Echo considered what else she needed to do today, but it was getting late. Nonetheless, there were a couple more things still lined up on her schedule. She was thinking about going back to her house, showering and changing. Maybe grabbing some food and coffee. She felt sticky, dirty, drained. She yawned and decided, then and there. Home it was. She turned down the volume until it hit the right frequency in her head, and allowed the music to come inside.

97

The taxi driver pulled up to the dirt road and stopped.

'Down here, my friend?'

'That's right,' Cadicher said. 'If you're worried about your car getting dirty, pull over and I'll walk it.'

'No problem. Just asking.'

The taxi driver, who had introduced himself to Cadicher as Max, turned down the narrow, dirt road, the car bouncing on the uneven path. The driveway was pitted with ditches and potholes, and littered with rocks and stones. It bent left then straightened. As it did, Cadicher said, 'Stop.'

The car's brakes squealed in the heat. Cadicher leant forward, trying to get a better look, but it was undeniable.

There were two identical, black Mercedes parked nose to rear, blocking the front door of his old house.

98

Cadicher waited for a minute, studying the scene, looking for movement. He opened the door and said, 'Wait for me back at the main road.' He got out the car and walked down the dirt road. There was no cover on either side so he walked it as a straight shot, bee lining for the cars. When he reached them, he looked through the windows. They were vacant. He looked behind him, saw the back of Max's taxi disappear around the bend in the driveway. He put his hand on the car's bonnets. They weren't hot, they weren't cold. They were only out of place, out here in the middle of nowhere. He moved around the cars, staying alert. He wanted to check the rear of the house before going through the front door, but he heard something and stopped.

He heard a man's voice speaking. He couldn't place the language, but it sounded Asian to his ear. He heard movement, coming towards the door, and pushed himself up against the brick wall. He waited. Footsteps approached. They didn't sound like a normal rhythm. They sounded like a shuffle. Like a drunk walking on the street.

The door opened and Cadicher did nothing. He stayed low and quiet. He saw an Asian man stumble out, dressed in a cheap suit; he was holding a gun in one hand and a set of keys in the other. As the guy approached one of the cars, the doors unlocked. He opened the passenger door, put the gun on the roof, and threw his suit jack inside. He undid the top button of his shirt and pulled at the collar. He coughed and shook his head. He rested his arms on the door then got a bottle of water from a cup holder inside the car. He splashed his face with water and took a sip. He did everything except notice Cadicher standing behind him.

99

Cadicher wrapped one arm around the guy's neck. He positioned the guy's chin in the crease between forearm and bicep. He used his other arm to pull up and secure the hold, compressing the arteries until hypoxia set in. It took just eight seconds. The blood choke was effective. It did its job, no fuss, no thrills. It was quick and easy to use. Cadicher didn't know whether

this guy was good or bad, and didn't care. He needed him subdued. In a couple of minutes, the guy would wake up worse, but wake up all the same. In a couple of minutes Cadicher would be gone.

He kept the hold in place until he could drop the guy to the ground, which was easy, as the guy suddenly felt like a rubbery, floppy mass of flesh and bone.

Cadicher let go of the hold and collected the gun off the top of the roof. He smelt the barrel and smelt nitroglycerine. It smelt like burnt sugar. The odour was still pungent but it lacked sharpness. If he had to guess, it was fired within the last hour. He checked the magazine, checked the gun. The gun was built in Austria. It was an old model but reliable. It looked oiled and maintained. The bullets looked new. There was no hammer on the gun, so no quick fire. A security mechanism was instead built into it to prevent it from accidentally firing, which was great for safety training and amateur shooters, but not ideal for Cadicher. Not right here, not right now. Without the hammer, he'd have to decompress the trigger fully to fire. It wasn't the end of the world, but it would eat up valuable split seconds in a life or death situation. He was still lucky all things considered. Newer guns had fingerprint scanners built on the trigger, registered to one owner and one shooter. If this gun had been built in the last twenty years it would be good for nothing except hitting someone over the head with.

Cadicher held the gun outstretched, slightly lower than his breastbone. If he needed to shoot, he'd hit the centre mass. No headshots. Nothing elaborate. He moved towards the front door and pushed it open with his foot.

100

The smell hit him first. A sucker punch. A putrid smell. If there was one thing worse than the smell, it was the way it looked. Cadicher had lived here for almost a decade, had painted the walls, tiled the floor. He had always taken great pride in knowing that he had built the house just as Rose had wanted it. Now, tiles were missing, the cement floor exposed, dirty and chiselled. The walls were the same soft purple – *Peaking Duck* was the label colour on the paint tin (he'd never forget it) but that wasn't the only colour. There were hundreds of graffiti markings, murals, and tags covering up almost all of the available space. The house was barely upright - a supporting arch had been demolished which made the roof sag heavily to the left - and it was now being used as a drug den, a prostitute den, a den where bogus ghost hunters with cheap cameras made viral videos of paranormal activity. Cadicher moved through the short passage. It opened up to a scene of bodies scattered in the open. Four guys in total – two were shot but alive, one looked dead. A bullet to the heart. The

last guy was puking in the corner, and had his back turned to Cadicher.

Cadicher didn't hesitate. He took four quick steps, like a running start, and moved to the guy puking his guts. The guy didn't try to move. Cadicher kicked him under the chin, hard, not losing any momentum - one swift movement. Puke spiralled upwards in a half circle, and the guy slammed backwards onto the floor, his back and head absorbing all of the impact. He didn't move again. The two guys on the floor just watched. Cadicher moved towards them. He noticed that both of them had been shot through the left knee. Identical wounds. Some kind of message.

'Who else is here?' Cadicher asked.

'No one,' the guy on the left said. 'Who are you?'

Cadicher noticed that the guy on the right looked very pale. He was going into shock from blood loss.

'Who did this?' Cadicher asked.

The guy on the left said nothing.

'Was it a woman? Did she work for The Glove?'

The guy on the left looked up. The guy on the right's eyes flickered into life just a bit.

'Good, so it was a woman. You met The Middle Finger, correct?'

The guy on the left said nothing. The guy on the right eyes began to dim again.

'Where is she now?'

Silence.

Cadicher studied the men. Other than their hairlines, they looked similar. Same facial features, same eyes and nose and lips, so probably related. They even wore the same watch. They were also dressed differently to the other guys - casual yet smart. Their clothes and shoes and belts were expensive, tailored. It didn't take a giant leap to guess that they were the owners of the matching cars outside. They were the men in charge, all brains no brawn. The other three guys were just working for them. They were all brawn and no brains. Both groups were doing their jobs poorly.

'Your brother is going to die,' Cadicher finally said to the guy on the left. 'He's lost a lot of blood. I can help you save him. But I need information.'

'You can't help us,' the guy on the left said.

'I can. First I need information.'

The guy on the left said, 'I'm Kade.' He looked at his brother. 'He's Jin. Now help him.'

'I don't care about your names,' Cadicher said. 'Did the woman call herself anything?'

Kade said, 'No, she never told us her name.'

Jin shivered. He was sweating and cold. His vital organs weren't getting enough blood and oxygen.

'She wouldn't have,' Cadicher said. 'Did she call herself The Middle Finger?'

'No. Now please help him,' Kade said holding Jin's hand.

‘Describe the woman,’ Cadicher said.

‘Medium size. Brown hair. Slim. She had some kind of tattoo on her back.’

‘An octopus?’

‘I didn’t see it all. Looked like the end of a snake. Maybe a tentacle. Maybe an octopus. That’s all I know.’

‘Good start,’ Cadicher said.

‘Please,’ Kade said.

‘Where is she now?’

‘She left.’

‘Where did she go?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why were you meeting her?’

‘Business deal.’

‘What business deal?’

Kade said nothing.

‘What business deal.’

‘Why is it important?’

‘It’s not.’

‘So why do you want to know?’

‘What business deal?’ Cadicher repeated.

Kade said nothing.

‘I’ll wait. Take your time.’

Jin vomited on the floor. It was reddish-brown in colour. It came out frothy and hot like the foam on the top of a cappuccino.

Kade spoke to his brother. Cadicher couldn't understand what he said. 'Help him! I'll tell you anything you want to know.'

'What did you want with *youth*?' Cadicher asked.

Kade looked up. 'We didn't want *youth*.'

'Then what did you want?'

Kade said, 'Blood.'

101

Cadicher stripped the dead guy of his belt. He checked him for a phone but found none. He looped the belt around Jin's leg, near the upper thigh, above the knee, and tightened the belt as much as possible. He made a knot with the excess band, so that the tension wouldn't ease off.

'Elevate your leg, if you can,' Cadicher said.

Jin nodded.

'You need to do the same,' Cadicher said to Kade. As Kade began to remove his belt, Cadicher added, 'Now, you'll tell me everything. Your guy who went outside will start to regain consciousness soon. If you haven't told me what I need to know before he wakes up, I'll put a bullet in your brother's head. If I think you're lying to me, I'll put a bullet in your head. Fair?'

Kade paused. 'I'll tell you everything I know.'

'What did you want with blood?'

‘We wanted ghost blood. The demand for it is greater than *youth*. Five drops costs the same as one pill.’

‘Where?’

‘Mostly Asia.’

‘Why?’

‘Remember when Rhinos were killed for their horns? Same thing. Except they use it like salad dressing over there. They think it’ll give them some sort of life elixir.’

‘How do you extract it?’

Kade tightened the belt around his leg. ‘The process is messy. The ghost suffers a long time. We swap out their blood with a non-ghost host. In theory only the host should die, but both eventually do.’

‘Why not just kill the ghost? That way you don’t need to kill the host as well.’

‘The blood changes after death. It pools with gravity. The liquids begin to separate. Denser material sits at the bottom. Lighter fluid, like water, at the top.’ Kade moved his hands on top of each other by means of a visual. ‘That’s how I understand it. Once the ghost dies, so does the product. They extract the blood, send it through a machine and this prevents it from clotting. It’s then good for two days.’

‘How do people know you haven’t just used normal blood?’

‘We wouldn’t be in business for very long if we did that.’

‘Nobody would know though, right?’

'Ghost blood has special properties. It's a healing agent.'

'You believe that shit?'Cadicher asked.

Kade said, 'I don't have to.'

'What were you negotiating here today?'

'The Glove has the facilities already set up to begin exporting the blood, but we control the market.'

'Why use The Glove at all then? Facilities can be replicated.'

'Timing mostly. They have the head start. We're also not in the business of killing people. We're in the business of making money. We saw an opportunity.'

'Have you seen them extract blood?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'We were sent a video.'

'By who?'

'The woman.'

Cadicher thought a moment. 'Why did she let you live?'

'We made a deal.'

'So how do you fulfil it?'

Kade elevated his leg. 'She gave us an address to discuss the details.'

'Spill it.'

Kade told him.

102

It was a hot day. The heat was shimmering in the distance, causing a blur of tarmac and trees up ahead. Max was leaning against his taxi, smoking his second cigarette. The car was still running, the air conditioner on full blast inside. He checked the time, checked his phone.

He stubbed out his cigarette underfoot and placed a fresh one in his mouth. As he went to light it, he heard two shots in quick succession, the sound carrying over the open space.

The flame from his lighter wavered, then extinguished as he turned and faced the dirt driveway. A second later he heard a third shot. He removed the cigarette from his mouth, and opened the door. He got inside, closed the door, the cold air blowing on his face. He turned down the air conditioner and listened. He heard a fourth shot, muted and muffled. He looked around. He was in the middle of nowhere. What were the chances those shots came from the house down the dirt driveway? What were the chances those were shots at all?

He told himself he'd wait another two minutes, with or without his passenger.

He kept one eye on the driveway with his mirrors, and one eye on the time on his phone.

When he saw Cadicher walking, he wasn't sure whether he was relieved or not. His foot touched the accelerator, and the

car revved a touch, the gear still in neutral. He removed his foot from the pedal and the engine settled down.

His passenger reached the door to the backseat. He knocked on the window and said, ‘Open up.’

Max snapped out of his daze and fumbled with the unlock button on the side of the door. The door opened and Cadicher got in.

‘New address for you,’ Cadicher said.

‘Everything fine?’ Max asked.

‘Wrong house.’

Max nodded, looking at his passenger in the rear mirror. He said, ‘Did you hear something on your way back?’

‘Like what?’

‘Sounded like gun fire, my friend.’

‘I didn’t hear anything. In any case, there are lots of farms around these parts.’

Max didn’t reply.

Cadicher caught Max’s eye in the rear mirror and said, ‘Let’s go.’

103

Echo sat down on the shower floor. She wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked herself as the water ran off her body. The drain was blocking up, the water slowly rising around her. She placed the underside of her foot over the drain and lifted her

heel a fraction, creating a suction. Like a plunger. The pressure of the water being forced up and down eventually dislodged the hair and soap and dirt. She sat on the shower floor until the water began to run cold.

104

Echo changed into the clothes she had laid out on her bed. They were comfortable, practical. Jeans and a plain shirt. She left her hair wet, not brushed, faintly smelling of conditioner. She turned on the kettle, put two slices of bread in the toaster and removed a bag of birdseed from the pantry. She threw a handful of food in a birdcage which stood beside the fridge. An African grey hopped down from a wooden stick, pecking at the food and newspaper at the bottom of the cage.

Echo slipped her fingers through the thin bars, stroking the back of the bird. 'Had a good day, Cat?'

The African grey continued eating.

Echo made herself coffee, buttered the toast. She turned on the TV and sat on the couch, resting her feet on the table. She flicked through the channels, chewing.

Her phone chimed in her room, and she got up to check it, carrying her coffee with her. The phone was face down on her bed. Cat squawked from the kitchen, said, 'Tough titty said the kitty.'

Echo read her message – nothing that couldn't wait. She put her phone on a charging block and went back into the sitting room, sipping her coffee, and saw Cadicher standing in her doorway.

105

They stared at each other without saying anything. Echo took another sip of coffee then sat on the couch once more.

'How'd you find me?' She asked.

'The woman from the car accident. Ebodia. Where is she?'

'What?'

'Where is she?'

'Told you.'

'You told me nothing, except that she died. Where is she?'

'I took her back to her place.'

'You're lying.'

Echo took another sip of coffee, said, 'What are you doing here?'

'You wouldn't have done that. It would've been too risky. Even for you. You're a lot of things, but you're not stupid.'

'That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.'

Cadicher slammed the front door closed as hard as possible, the windows shaking from the impact.

Echo slipped a hand between the couch cushions, feeling for the gun she kept there. 'I've had a bad 24 hours. You're not making things better.'

‘I don’t give a shit,’ Cadicher said. ‘I know exactly what you’ve done, what you’re doing, what you’re going to do.’

‘Are you just going to stand there?’

‘You’re coming with me. Now.’

‘No, I think I’m going to sit right here.’

Cadicher took a step closer.

Echo removed the gun from the couch, aimed it at her father. ‘You’re not welcome in my house.’

‘You’re going to shoot me?’

‘Take another step and find out.’

‘You raped a woman, left her for dead. You kidnapped Ebodia. You’re killing people, innocent people for fucking blood.’

‘How’d you figure that?’

‘You’re The Glove, aren’t you? That card you gave me, I found out it was a woman’s finger print. It was your print. You gave it to me. That’s why you weren’t ever worried about The Glove knowing you were my daughter. That’s why you retired me, told me to drop everything, told me to leave. You didn’t have the balls to kill me yourself that night you saved me from the accident. That’s why you told me to off myself. That’s why you sent The Closer to kill me. That’s how he found me. You told him. You’re a goddamn coward.’

‘Are you done?’

‘Get up. Get your shit.’

Echo took another sip of coffee, the gun still aimed at Cadicher. ‘Are you going to drop me off at the police station?’

Cadicher took another step, said: ‘I’m –’

Echo fired the gun, the bullet just missing Cadicher’s head.

‘Turn around. Leave.’

Cadicher glanced back at the spot in the wall where the bullet had hit. ‘Look at you. You think this is what I wanted for you? You think your mother wanted this life for you? What would she think of you right now?’

‘Don’t mention her to me. You have no right.’

‘You’re still my daughter.’

‘Your daughter? Where were you my whole life? I only saw glimpses of you. You were never around. The only memories I have of you are fucking horrifying. You went around calling yourself The Interceptor. You stopped bad shit happening to people, but you did nothing for me. You didn’t stop anything. It was me and mom. And she made friends with some fucked up people. But I don’t blame her for what happened to me. I blame you. She needed people in her life. I just needed you. The Interceptor?’ Echo laughed. ‘You’re a joke. You’ll never understand what I’ve gone through.’

‘Whatever happened to you didn’t justify this.’

‘How would you know?’

‘We raised you better than this.’

‘You didn’t raise me!’

‘I had a job. Just like everyone else. Your mother would be sick looking at you now.’

‘I told you to never mention her again.’

‘You being in prison nearly killed her. Right now I’m glad she isn’t alive to see what you’ve become.’

Echo lowered her gun, tossed it on the couch and stood up. ‘I’m going to beat the shit out of you, and toss you out on your arse myself.’

Cadicher said, ‘Come.’

106

Echo looked at her father like an enemy. She felt rage and anger and uncontrollable hate burn up inside her. She needed to finish the fight quickly. Maximum damage. Her father was the best fighter she had seen. She had never known him to lose to anyone, but there was always someone stronger, faster, better. Cadicher knew this, had told her himself.

A part of her wanted to save herself the trouble, reach over for the gun on the couch once more, empty the clip in his head, leave his body right here and disappear forever but she didn’t respect him enough. Besides, another part of her wanted to feel her fists smash into him, watch the shock on his face as he realised he had trained her too well. That the someone stronger, faster and better was his own daughter.

Echo stepped up to The Interceptor and finally felt what it was like to be on the other side. Tiny sparks were shooting through her fingers and she closed them into fists, so he wouldn't see her shaking and mistake it as weakness.

Cat said, 'Tough titty said the kitty.'

Echo moved before Cat had even finished, bringing up her leg and smashing the heel of her foot into her father's shin, slightly at an angle. It caught him completely off guard. He didn't expect it. She was looking to disable him straight away. If it was anyone else, their tibia would have shattered. 99 times out of 100 the fight ended right here. Instead, Cadicher just buckled onto one knee. Echo hit him once in the face, just under the nose, catching him on the upper lip, feeling the flesh being pushed back onto his upper teeth. She didn't back off; she rotated and tried to kick him on the side of the head, but he raised his hands in time and blocked most of the impact. Echo reacted quickly though. She grabbed the back of his head and rammed her knee into his jaw, knocking him backwards.

Cadicher fell back, but Echo was fighting beyond her rounds now. Those four moves would have been enough to hospitalise most people. She reminded herself that The Interceptor wasn't most people.

She jumped in the air, brought her knees as high as possible and tried to stomp on his face, but Cadicher saw it coming and rolled out the way just in time. Echo felt the vibrations of the floor send shockwaves through her feet, up

her legs, and into her hips. She kicked out at Cadicher's head and missed.

He swung his legs around and caught her high on the hind foot, sweeping her off her feet.

Echo hit her face on the door, opening up her right eye once more.

She stood up, composed herself, and saw Cadicher doing the same thing. He was bleeding from the nose, but otherwise looked like he had barely been affected. It was then that Echo realised what made Cadicher so dangerous. It wasn't that he was faster or stronger or better than anyone. No. It was because he could handle pain. He swallowed it like air. Nonetheless, it should have been impossible that he was conscious, much less standing.

'Is that all you got?' Cadicher asked, wiping away the blood on his nose with his thumb.

Echo charged at him. There was a window behind him. She wanted to send him through it. She needed to go low, explode upwards at the last second, use her shoulder and upper body as the battering ram. She closed the distance between them in a second. She leapt upwards at the last moment, but instead of crashing into Cadicher, her shoulder went straight into the wall to the right of her. She bounced off the brick and plaster and fell to floor. He had side stepped her, used her momentum against her.

Echo felt the roots of her hair pull upwards as Cadicher lifted her off the ground.

'It's over,' he said.

She plunged her head straight onto Cadicher's nose. She kneed him in the groin, threw two knuckled blows under the right side of his ribcage, and he finally let go of her hair. She stepped into him wanting to throw a left\right combination to his face when suddenly the air blasted out of her, and her torso felt like it was spasming; she felt like a truck had just run over her. She stumbled back, unable to breathe and wondered whether this was what dying felt like.

107

Cadicher didn't want to injure her, but she was a good fighter and she had hurt him. The head butt was more irritating than crippling, the knee to the groin made him nauseous, but the two punches under his ribs made him want to squawk like her pet bird. She had opened his stitches. The wound there was still raw and sensitive. When he saw her move into him, for what would've been another set of manic attacks, he hit her in the solar plexus which momentarily paralysed her diaphragm. She instantly clutched her chest as though she was having a heart attack. He saw a gap. He hesitated. He thought back to Geia and Ebodia and to what Kade in his old house had told him. He

stepped forwards and hit her behind the ear. He pulled back on his power before making contact.

Echo's head still whipped into the door frame and she fell face down on the floor and didn't get up again.

Cadicher leant beside his daughter and checked her pulse on her neck. He moved her hair from her airways and positioned her head to one side. He lifted the back of her shirt.

The blue octopus tattoo stared back at him, its tentacles spreading over her back.

Cat said, 'Tough titty said the kitty'.

108

Cadicher carried his daughter to her car, which was parked in a double garage. He found some cable ties on a shelf and he took precautions. He strapped her in the back seat, tied her hands behind her back, tied her feet together at the ankles. He made sure she wouldn't be able to do anything stupid if she woke up and he left the gun where it was - on her couch - to make sure he wouldn't do anything stupid.

He drove out the garage. The house next to hers was the address he had been given by Kade. If Cadicher had to guess, that house was connected to hers somehow. Maybe by an underground tunnel, maybe through a gap in the perimeter walls. He found her because he would've done the same thing, had done the same thing, in fact. His gym was connected to his house. He

always believed that you keep your place of business next to where you sleep. No one expects it. Echo lived in the suburbs alongside middleclass families. The Glove. The person Cadicher had worked for. Right under his nose. He would never have figured it out on his own. The Glove wasn't a fixed person; it was a title and a position of success. Like a CEO. Changeable. It was a symbol of something much larger and sinister. Had she been promoted to it recently? And if so, by whom? He had heard rumours that The Glove was a hardened prisoner, a person with money and contacts. Someone who wished to remain anonymous. Someone who paid well for a job done well. But those were just stories.

The Glove was just his daughter. His girl.

He watched her through the rear view mirror. She looked like she was sleeping; she looked like she was five years old again and he was taking her for swimming lessons.

'Daddy, one more time!' Echo said from the backseat.

Cadicher laughed. 'Okay, okay. One last time.' Cadicher began to sing in a whisper: 'In the cottage, in the woods, a little man by the window stood. Saw a rabbit hopping by, knocking at the door.' Cadicher raised his voice. 'Help me! Help me! Help me! The rabbit said, before the hunter shoots me dead.' Cadicher lowered his voice. 'Come little rabbit, come inside, happy you will be.' Echo sang the last lines with Cadicher as loud as possible. 'Jump around with me! Jump around

with me!' Echo squealed with laughter, clapping her hands. 'Daddy, one more time!'

'Okay, Okay,' Cadicher said, laughing.

His girl.

109

Cadicher pulled up to The Roger Jaeger and parked the car in the basement. He took out his wallet, removed the key card. There was an elevator just across from where he had parked. He looked around. There were lots of expensive cars, no passengers and no drivers, no tyres screeching, no movement whatsoever. He got out the car and checked once more. Nothing. He opened the rear door, placed the key card between his teeth. He scooped Echo into his arms and flung her over his shoulder. He carried her to the elevator like a wounded soldier. A small screen jutted from the side of the door. It had two green lights shining from either side. Cadicher placed the card between the lights. He waited a second, then two. The doors eventually opened. He took back his card and stepped into the elevator. Inside, there were no floor numbers. No screen. Just four polished steel doors and a gold wraparound railing. The elevator moved upwards automatically. Twenty seconds later it came to a stop, and he felt his insides move around. The doors opened and he saw the view of the Atlantic once more across the room. The air conditioner was still droning quietly. The room

was cold, smelt clean and fresh. The coffee cups from earlier had been cleared and washed and packed away. He carried Echo to the couch and dumped her there. She was still out. He thought about trying to wake her up right then, and decided against it. He needed some time to think. He didn't want to hand her in to the cops, he didn't want her to walk away free. He needed to convince her to leave, to drop everything and move on with her life. To start fresh. To try and make things right. It was an impossible task.

He wasn't sure of the plan from here on out.

110

Cadicher found a phone in the room. It had a line directly linked to reception downstairs. When he picked it up someone on the other side answered immediately, as though their entire job was to wait on the phone just in case a guest needed something.

'Hello, may I help you?' A woman's voice, as soft and smooth as an aged single malt.

'Hi. I'm looking to get hold of Mackenzie Ralston. She's in the suite next to mine.'

'Certainly, sir. Let me see if she's in her room. Who may I say is calling?'

'Caddy. '

'Hold on one moment.'

Cadicher glanced at Echo. She had stirred at the sound of his voice.

'Hello, sir. I'm sorry to inform you but there is no one answering at the moment. Can I leave a message for her at reception?'

'Yes. Tell her Caddy is back.'

'C-a-d-d-y?'

'Yes.'

'It that all?'

'That's it.'

'Certainly, sir.'

Cadicher hung up and made his way into the kitchen. He opened the cupboards, opened the drawers. Checked under the sink and found what he was looking for – a small bottle of ammonia. He poured half of it in a glass and added some water from the tap. He used a spoon to stir the mixture. He dipped his index and middle finger into the glass and placed them under Echo's nose. He held it there until she coughed, until she tried to move away, until she finally opened her eyes.

111

Cadicher placed the glass on the coffee table. He wiped his hand on his shirt and sat across from his daughter.

'We need to talk,' he said.

Echo squeezed her eyes shut and licked her lips. She used her upper body to right herself on the couch. She looked around the suite.

'Nice place you have here,' she said.

'It's not mine.'

'I know.' She laughed hoarsely, looking out the windows, across the ocean. The sun had just set, the sky outside looked purple, going on black. In the distance, dim lights from a ship searched across the sea.

'You haven't left me with a lot of options,' Cadicher said.

'You're making a mistake.'

'Explain that,' Cadicher said.

'Why?'

'Because it's really important that we're clear with each other from here on.'

'Oh, I didn't know it was *really* important.'

'Where are you extracting blood?'

'You have no idea what you're doing, do you? You don't know anything.'

'I know enough.'

'No. Not even close.'

'Where are you extracting blood?'

'Why? You want to go and stop it?'

'Yes.'

'You can't. It's too late.'

‘What do you mean?’

Echo shifted on the couch. ‘Cut me out of these restraints.’

‘No.’

‘Cut me out and we’ll talk.’

‘No.’

‘Well, then you really don’t have very many options.’

‘I have one.’

Echo waited a beat, asked: ‘Is it a secret?’

‘No, it’s not a secret. You gave me the idea actually. You said it as a joke before, but it’s starting to grow on me. I could just take you to the police station.’

‘I suppose that is an option, but it’s a weak one.’

‘Why?’

‘Nothing would stick. And I would be forced to tell them everything I know about you. Don’t think you want me to do that. Anyways, I’m not stupid. Nothing would stick.’

‘Don’t care what you say about me. What if I tell them that you raped a woman and that I know where that woman is right now? She can identify you. That’s 15 years in prison right there. You have a record. I don’t need anything to stick. I just need it to be sticky.’

‘She was a prostitute. Nobody is going to believe her.’

‘You still raped her.’

‘And you believe that?’

‘I found her that night. I saw what you did to her. I’ll testify as much.’

‘You mean the ghost prostitute? If you met her, you’d know she’s not all there. Screws loose in her brain. She’s got all the sand in the bucket but she can’t build a sandcastle. I didn’t rape her. No one will believe her. No one will believe you.’

Cadicher looked out the window.

‘And that woman you were with?’ Echo said. ‘Ebodia, was it? Wonder what the police would say about the guy you threw out her window that night? Don’t think that’s a viable option for you. That’s two down. But maybe you want to tell them your theory about me being The Glove, kidnapping people, selling blood? That’s certainly a wild one. Where’s the proof? But you already know all of this. So I don’t think going to the police is an option for you at all.’

‘It is. You’re forgetting something.’

‘Like what?’

‘What if I told them you killed five guys in cold blood.’

Echo said, ‘What are you talking about? What five guys?’

‘See? You’re forgetting something. You asked me earlier how I found you. Are you really still curious?’

Echo thought back. After a couple of seconds she said, ‘I had a deal with those guys.’

‘Not anymore.’

Echo leant back on the couch, half slumped. ‘I didn’t kill five guys. I killed one, and only because he tried to shoot me.’

Cadicher shrugged. ‘You say one. I say at least two. That one brother? Jin? Don’t think he was going to make it.’

‘I killed one guy, in self-defence. You killed the others.’

‘That’s not how it’s going to look. I made sure of that. Murder is 25 years; multiply that by five and you’ve got how many years rotting away in a cell?’

‘Fuck you.’

‘Try again.’

‘I didn’t kill those guys.’

‘Wrong.’

‘You bastard,’ Echo said, trying to break free of her restraints.

‘Nope. It’s 125 years.’

112

After a couple of minutes of silence, Cadicher stood up and walked to the kitchen. He opened the fridge and drank full cream milk straight from the 1L box. ‘Do you want something to drink?’

Echo didn’t reply. She was staring off into the distance.

Cadicher found the light switch and turned on the lights for the suite. They were harsh and bright. He used the circular dimmer to lower their intensity. ‘Last chance,’ he said.

‘Please take off these restraints,’ Echo said.

‘I’m offering you a drink.’

‘My shoulder is killing me. You can leave the ones around my feet. I won’t try anything.’

Cadicher found a knife from one of the drawers. It was short and sharp, used for slicing vegetables, not cutting meat. He walked up to Echo and said, ‘Turn around.’

Echo turned and leant forwards, showing the back of her hands. Cadicher placed the handle of the knife in her right hand. He stepped back.

‘Cut yourself free. Only your hands. When you’re done, put the knife in the glass with the ammonia, handle sticking up. If you don’t follow these instructions we’re going to have a problem. Understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then repeat it.’

Echo said, ‘Cut my hand restraints, knife goes in the glass. Handle up, sharp bit down.’

‘While you’re busy with that, do you want a drink?’

‘Coffee.’

‘Milk or water?’

‘I drink coffee with both.’

‘Good to know, but I don’t care,’ Cadicher said. ‘You’re not getting anything hot in a ceramic mug. ‘You either have bottled water or milk from the box. Nothing is also an option.’

‘Water,’ she said, concentrating on her task.

Echo turned the knife in her hand until the blade made contact with the cable tie. She moved the knife up and down. It wasn’t elegant, it wasn’t easy work.

Cadicher removed a bottle of water from the fridge. He unscrewed the lid and tossed it in the sink. Lids were dangerous. They were compact, the edges slightly serrated. In Echo’s hands, a lid was about equal to the knife she was holding.

She broke free of the cable ties quicker than expected, and Cadicher watched her. She was rubbing her wrists, rotating her shoulder. The knife was on her lap and she was staring at it. She was thinking and calculating. She was playing out scenarios in her head. Cadicher could see them unfold. One quick swipe would break her leg restraints. Then she’d stand up, knife in hand, and take a chance. Round two – one on one - only this time she’d have a weapon. Of course, there were always the massive windows to the left of her. She could cut her leg restraints and plunge through the glass, hoping that something would break her fall. It would be painful; the chances of survival near zero, but it would be an attempt to escape. The simplest option was the one Cadicher was waiting for - a scenario where she’d pick up the knife and throw it at

him, hoping to hit somewhere important, somewhere vascular. But, supposing she did throw it, and supposing it did hit somewhere sensitive, the knife was still small, still used for slicing - not a cleaver, not a machete, not that sharp.

Echo picked up the knife, looked at him.

He waited.

She dropped the knife in the glass.

113

He handed Echo the bottle of water and sat back down across from her. She drank half of it – greedily, water spilling down her chin, dripping onto her shirt. She poured some into her hand and splashed the back of her head and face. She prodded the cut above her eye with her finger. The blood had dried, forming a scab, but the wound still stung.

'How do you do it?' She asked.

'Do what?'

'Look at you. You're still a mess from the other night. Your ear looks like it was half-chewed. You have cuts on your arm. You were just in a fight, but you seem fine. How do you do it?'

Cadicher thought for a while. Finally, he said, 'Pain is always fleeting. Sometimes it lasts a second or a minute or a year or a lifetime. But it always ends. Sometimes with death, most times with time, but it always ends. When you understand

that, it no longer has a hold on you. You build up a resistance to it. Like people who can handle eating hot food. It takes time; it doesn't just happen.'

Echo took another sip of water, swallowed then said: 'What was your other option?'

'What other option?'

'Handing me in to the cops is one option. What was the other?'

'Honestly?'

'Yes.'

'A trade.'

'For what?'

'Show me what you're doing and where you're doing it. Then walk away from it. Don't come back. Buy a ticket overseas. Somewhere far. Somewhere cold and isolated. Like Alaska. Go hunt and fish and live in peace. Go enjoy your life. I don't know. Just don't come back here, don't come back to this life. It's a trade. You give me what I want and you get your freedom. You don't and I take everything away from you.'

'So prison or Alaska?'

'No. Prison or Freedom. Doesn't need to be Alaska. Steel bars or the open road.'

Echo didn't reply.

'I was a bad father to you. I know that. I was hard on you. I neglected you. I neglected your mother until it was too late. I made a lot of mistakes in my life, some that I'm

probably too ashamed to admit to. I'm trying to fix one while I still can.'

Echo didn't reply.

'You may hate me but I don't hate you. You loved your mother, and she loved you, but she also loved me. She wanted me to keep a promise to her. Help me do that. Not for me. For her. Show me where you keep the blood. We can stop this.'

'We can't,' Echo said.

'I can.'

'You don't understand. It won't matter. You have it all wrong. Your entire premise is wrong.'

'Why?'

'Because,' Echo said. 'I'm not The Glove.'

114

Cadicher was quiet for a long time and Echo didn't say anything else. She had let her words hang in the air.

'Then who is?' Cadicher eventually asked.

Echo said, 'You don't understand.'

'What about the fingerprint on the card? The one you gave me? Is that yours?'

'No.'

'Where'd you get it from?'

‘Why are you acting like you don’t know the answer already. You know how we did things. I got my instructions the same way you did, the same way we all do.’

‘Why should I believe you?’

‘You shouldn’t,’ Echo said. ‘But that doesn’t make what I’m saying a lie.’

Cadicher took out his wallet, opened it, removed the card with the thumb print and put it on the table. ‘You’re saying that’s not your print?’ He tapped on the card with his index finger.

‘That’s what I’m saying.’

‘Prove it.’

‘I can’t.’

Cadicher stood up. He looked around; found a pen with the hotel’s logo printed on the side, sitting on a small writing pad next to the phone. He scribbled on the pad hard, focusing on a small area only. Satisfied, he walked over to Echo and grabbed her hand. He pressed her right thumb on the blue ink spot, took the card and pressed her thumb beside the one already there. He waited 10 seconds. He let go of her hand and sat opposite her again once more.

‘Well?’ she asked.

He studied the card, studied both prints.

‘Well?’

He handed her the card.

She looked at it, handed it back. ‘I can’t tell, and I know these aren’t the same print.’

Cadicher replaced the card in his wallet. ‘Good answer.’

‘You were expecting me to say something different?’

He said, ‘Yes. Guilty people always try too hard to prove they’re not guilty. They talk too much.’

She asked, ’So, you think I’m innocent?’

‘Far from it.’

‘There’s a reason finger prints get analysed and studied,’ Echo said. ‘They all look too similar. Smudge your print slightly left and right and you’re a giant. Don’t press as hard and you’re tiny. That test just proved I have a thumbprint. Nothing more, nothing less. You don’t even know if that other print is a thumb. Your test has an 80 percent chance of failure before you even get down to the more complicated stuff. You can’t match the shape and depth of the ridges; you can’t measure and compare the length of the edges. Not by eye, not right now, not right here.’

‘Maybe you’re not The Glove. Maybe you are. At this point, I’m not convinced either way so it also makes little difference. The only thing I’m interested in now is whether you’re going to help me?’

‘And If I say yes you’ll let me go?’

He said, ‘Yes.’

She said, ‘I’ll help you keep your promise to my mother.’

‘Good answer.’

Then the lights in the suite went out.

115

As soon as the lights turned off Cadicher hesitated. It was brief. It was an eternity. He wasn't expecting it. It took a fraction of a second for the suite to become pitch black. In that fraction of a second, particles of light were absorbed by the furniture, appliances, walls and windows, and turned into miniscule heat waves. The photons that didn't get absorbed were transmitted throughout the room, reflected and eventually scattered.

He didn't have time to think *how* and *why*. He had wasted enough time. He leant forward for the knife in the glass. He could feel nothing. He stuck two fingers inside. Nothing.

Echo had reacted quicker, decisively, her mind on one thing, and one thing only.

Cadicher now had a choice to make. Sit where he was or move in the dark? He chose the former, against his instincts. Move where? He couldn't see. Do what? He didn't know. He thought that if Echo was going to attack him, then the chair was maybe the second or third place she'd try. She wouldn't be expecting him to stay still. It was a double bluff. A risk. A gamble. But it was just for the short term. Just until his eyes could begin making out shapes again.

So he did nothing except hunker down a bit, trying to make himself a smaller target, lowering the top of his head from the top of the chair, ducking awkwardly. He was listening for sounds, specifically steps. But Echo was still barefoot. He'd have better luck trying to hear a cat walk across a carpet. He listened for anything and heard his heartbeat in his ears. After 12 seconds, he made out the coffee table and the rounded glass with ammonia and water, barely. Three seconds later, the couch opposite him started to outline itself. It was vacant. He looked across the room, his eyes picking up something near the staircase that led to the second floor. He couldn't be sure if it was her or not. He couldn't be sure if his mind was playing tricks on him. He gave it another five seconds, the suite slowly revealing itself. They were a long five seconds, and after they had expired he stood.

As he straightened, the lights turned back on, the dimmer switch cranked to full. He shielded his hands in front of his face, squinting.

Echo had gone; the cut cable tie binding her feet lay on the floor.

Two people had entered the suite in the darkness, unseen and unheard.

Cadicher recognised both of them in the light.

Cadicher tried to get a sense of what was happening. He was putting things together. But not fast enough. He was using addition to get from point A to point B when he should have been using multiplication. He would never catch up. He realised this and sat back down.

Mackenzie Ralston stepped forward, sat where Echo had been sitting a minute ago. Standing behind her was Max, the taxi driver from earlier. He looked the same. He had a cigarette tucked behind his ear - a camel, unfiltered. He had his arms folded across his chest.

Cadicher said, 'What's going on?'

Mackenzie nodded towards Max and said, 'Find her.'

Max unfolded his arms and moved off like he was bored.

Mackenzie looked at Cadicher, said, 'You look confused. Do I need to spell it out for you?'

'Spell what out?'

'Who am I, Caddy?'

'What?'

'It's a simple enough question. Who am I?'

'Mackenzie Ralston.'

'I'm a little disappointed in you.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I thought this would be harder. You made it too easy. I thought you would have figured this out already.'

Cadicher said nothing.

'I'll give you a clue. I'm the person you never knew existed.'

Cadicher said nothing.

Mackenzie said, 'Who am I, Caddy?'

117

The wall behind Mackenzie had a large painting of a sand dune. In the distance, three men were standing on the crescent. They were pulling up something using rope, heaving it up the slanted bank. It looked like a box or a stone, something with sharp edges, something heavy. It was the first time Cadicher had noticed the painting. The purple sky, the engorged sun, the way the men looked very small, almost featureless but also detailed at the same time. There was something about it. And for a second, he understood why people bought art. But the appreciation quickly faded, and the painting became just a painting once more, his epiphany disappearing as quickly as it had surfaced.

Cadicher looked down from the framed painting and met Mackenzie's eyes. She stared back.

'Who am I?' She said.

Cadicher shrugged. 'Should I care?'

'You're not curious?'

'I'm bored.'

'You won't be in a minute.'

'I'm also impatient. Is there something stopping me from leaving other than you and the taxi driver?'

'There's your daughter. Max told me you found her.'

'She's not The Glove.'

'You believe her?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Good. That's just about the only thing you've gotten right so far. Let's go for two. Who am I?'

'You're The Glove.'

Mackenzie sat back on the chair, sighed. 'No.'

'No?'

She shook her head. 'You really have no idea do you?'

'I'm tired of people saying that. It's starting to piss me off. I'm done with the games. If you're not The Glove then who is?'

Mackenzie sat forward, pointed her finger at Cadicher. 'You are, Caddy. You're The Glove.'

118

Max and Echo came down the flight of stairs. Echo was still barefoot; Max still had the cigarette tucked behind his ear. He still looked bored. Neither of them seemed tense or worried with each other. They both joined Mackenzie, sat on either side of her.

‘Pity, we can’t all be here for this,’ Mackenzie said.

Cadicher ignored the comment, looked at his daughter. ‘You know these two?’

‘Yes.’

Cadicher didn’t reply.

Echo said, ‘I gave you a chance to leave all of this behind. I told you not to interfere with this. You should have left when you had the chance.’

‘I’m not The Glove,’ Cadicher said to Mackenzie. ‘What the hell are you talking about?’

Mackenzie said, ‘She tried to protect you from this.’

‘From what?’

‘Let’s make this easy for you and get straight to the point’ Mackenzie said. ‘Echo is The Middle finger. Max over here is The Thumb. I’m The Ring. The Closer was also known as The Index Finger. My twin sister, Alice Huglow, was The Pinky. Five fingers. Five partners. And you? You’re The Glove. You connected us all.’

‘Bullshit,’ Cadicher said.

‘It’s true,’ Echo said.

‘Bullshit,’ Cadicher repeated.

‘I know it’s a surprise, but that’s not even the interesting part, Caddy,’ Mackenzie said. ‘You started working for an organization called The Glove 17 years ago. Before then, you were a debt collector. You worked for some shady people. It

wasn't until after *youth* came out that you started working for The Glove, correct?'

'Yes.'

'That's because I created *youth* and I created the organisation known as The Glove.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

'Sure it does. Some rich people donate to charities, others do this.'

'Why would you?'

'Simple. I could. I wanted to. I created a drug that delayed the ageing process. But it was a failure. I was striving for something a lot better. Everyone applauded me, they worshipped me, but in my mind I was still a failure. I wanted to cure death. Create a world filled with eternal life. But *youth* was too successful. It exploded beyond my control. Everyone wanted a quick fix. No one wanted to see the bigger picture. I was like an artist that had drawn a pencil sketch. But I still needed to add the colour, I still need to complete the masterpiece.' Mackenzie shook her head and then continued, 'After *youth*, I couldn't even continue with my research anymore. Do you know how many pharmaceutical companies, heads of state and religious organisations came after me when I told them that *youth* was just the start? The most powerful people in the world wanted me to stop. They forced this. I thought I had a friend - a Bishop. He was a start. But everyone has their own agenda. You see, there's no money to be made in drugs and

medicine if people don't die, Caddy. What good is religion if you can live forever? Progress is not good for our economy and it's not good for our beliefs. They want to stunt progress. They can't. No one can. We're on the cusp of something bigger than us. So, what does a dissatisfied billionaire with a dream do but continue pursuing it.'

'And that's exactly what I did. I needed to track down ghosts. They were the key. Once I had them, I needed their blood. It's simple. It's the first step to continuing my work. I need to find out why they never age. I'm not selling ghost blood to Asia, I'm using it. I'm trying to save lives. People don't understand that. They don't want to understand it. They don't understand that in order to do something truly boundless, a sacrifice must be made. They forced me to work outside the law. Outside the regulations. Outside the system.'

'You're killing innocent people,' Cadicher said.

'Don't be dense,' Mackenzie replied. 'It's necessary. Think of the implications if I succeed. Think what it would mean for billions of people. I will abolish natural death. People like your wife would never have to die.'

'She did, so what difference does it make to me? I don't care about your dream. I don't care about your aspirations. I don't care about living forever. I told you this already.'

Mackenzie nodded. 'That's your right. A selfish one, but nonetheless yours. But don't sit there and take the moral high road with us. We know what you did in your past.'

Echo said to Cadicher: ‘It doesn’t have to be this way.’

‘She’s right. Join your family,’ Mackenzie said.

‘Echo,’ Cadicher said. ‘You know what I need to do. You’re my daughter. I’m doing this for you as well.’

Mackenzie shook her head. ‘You’re not listening. I said join your family, not just your daughter.’

‘My daughter is the only family I have left.’

‘Wrong again,’ Mackenzie said.

119

Cadicher hadn’t seen a weapon; he hadn’t seen anything keeping him from leaving. He didn’t feel trapped; he didn’t feel like a hostage. Yet a part of him begged to leave, whilst another, begged him to stay. Echo caused the rift in his mind. He didn’t want to leave her without finding out what was happening, what she had gotten herself mixed up in. It was her face, her behaviour. She had a look of despair; a cloud of anxiety hovered around her. He could almost see her shirt fluttering from her heartbeat. Her expression had changed - the vehemence from before evaporating with every second. So he sat where he was, arms resting on the chair, his fingers drumming the material.

‘Unless you’ve figured a way to bring people back from the dead,’ Cadicher said, ‘she’s the only family I have left.’

Mackenzie said, ‘36 years ago, you took a job. You travelled to Trestiana, Romania. Ring any bells?’

‘What does that have to do with anything?’

‘You met a woman there. Brief encounter, I’m guessing. Max, you know this better than me. Who was she?’

Max said, ‘Doesn’t matter. I’m her son.’

‘Good for you,’ Cadicher said.

‘You’re his father, Caddy,’ Mackenzie said.

Cadicher said nothing.

‘Three years later,’ Mackenzie continued, ‘you met a woman named Deidre. Your relationship with her was a bit longer. She described you as a shadow. A man of few words. She said you always travelled, and one day you just never came back. She also said that you were a loser, a fraud, that you had cheated on her with another woman. That other woman turned out to be your wife - Echo’s mother. But you see the funny thing about it is that you also got her pregnant. Deidre Ralston was my mother. You fathered twins and didn’t know that either - Alice and Mackenzie. My older sister was a detective. Unfortunately, like you, she couldn’t see the bigger picture. But three out of five isn’t too bad.’

‘Five?’ Cadicher said.

‘Oh yes,’ Mackenzie replied. ‘Turns out you were quite the hound when you were younger, Caddy. After you had Echo, you also fathered another bastard. The youngest of us all.

‘Who?’ Cadicher asked, the answer already dawning on him.

‘Our half-brother - The Closer.’

120

Mackenzie stood up and walked towards the windows overlooking the ocean. ‘Kingsley always wanted to find you. He wanted to know who his father was. He was obsessed. And when he found out who you were...well, they say never meet your heroes. I don’t know what he expected, but something changed. Maybe it was because he spent every second thinking about you, and you didn’t give him the time of day. His obsession to find you turned into an obsession to best you, and finally, when that didn’t get your attention, he wanted to kill you. I eventually gave him the order to do it. Echo tried to stop him, tried to talk him out of it. It didn’t matter though, did it? Because no one can stop The Interceptor, right?’

‘Stop speaking,’ Cadicher said.

Mackenzie persisted. ‘Once I found out who you were, it wasn’t hard to track you down and fill in all the pieces. Alice helped. We found out about Echo and Kingsley because they both used your last name on their birth certificates. Max was harder to find. We used Y-DNA from each of us and cross-checked it with a very large database. We found a couple of matches. We thought you had spawned an entire army of unwanted children. In truth, only one other person matched with your DNA perfectly –

Max. I contacted him, told him what I had to offer. And here we are today.'

Cadicher said nothing.

'Five children,' Mackenzie continued. 'Five fingers. Five siblings. All connected. To you.'

Cadicher remembered Romania, but not the name of the woman he had slept with. He had been a young man then. Careless and immature. He remembered Deidre though. For a while, he thought they would get married, start a family. She had wanted a simple life, a life that Cadicher could never be broken into. Would he have left her if he had known she was pregnant? He honestly didn't know.

And it didn't matter. There was no use thinking about it. After he married Rose she had given birth to Echo, but the good times had ended, at least momentarily. They had separated briefly when Echo was six months old. Things were hard with the baby and his job. Their marriage took a toll. It was during this period he had met Lika in a bar in Magaliesburg. It was a one night stand. They weren't in love, they weren't attracted to each other, they had no delusions of what they were doing. They were just drunk and happy for a couple of hours. Lika had tried contacting him once afterwards, almost a year later. Cadicher had heard a baby screaming in the background. He didn't think anything of it then and she hadn't said much. Just her name - triggering his memory of the night - and that they needed to talk. Cadicher had asked what they needed to talk

about, that he was busy and now married. After that she had hung up abruptly and he had never heard from her again.

'Why tell me this now? Why didn't any of you say something before?' Cadicher asked, scattering away the memories.

'Why would we?' Mackenzie said. 'What would you have done? Hmmm? What would you have done? Would you have made up for lost time? Even if you didn't know about any of us, you still knew you had a daughter and look at your relationship with her. Still, catharsis and all that, I suppose. That's the closest answer I have for you.'

Cadicher kept quiet for a minute. Then he said, 'What about Ebodia?'

'What about her?' Mackenzie replied.

'Is she alive?'

'For now.'

'What does that mean?'

'That night when you met Ebodia I had sent Echo to kill you. That same night Kingsley was meant to guard a ghost and a host while we extracted blood. But the opposite thing happened. Echo had saved you and Kingsley had killed the ghost. So I improvised. I told Echo to take Ebodia and switch her out with the dead ghost and I sent Kingsley to kill you. When you kidnapped me in my car it was a pure act of fate. Kingsley had made a mistake keeping my number, but you found me. What were the chances of that? And when you did, I thought I would play along, find out what you knew. Maybe spend some time with you,

get to know you. Get to know my father. It was an interesting experience, at least for me. So, I'll say it again, join your family. We could still use you.'

'No,' Cadicher said. 'This ends tonight. The difference between you and Echo is the same difference between reading a love poem and being in love. You're not my family.'

Mackenzie heaved her shoulders and sighed heavily, her eyebrows rising and falling. 'Sticks and stones, but you're right. On all counts. Bravo.'

Max reached behind his back and pulled out a gun. It was a revolver. A snub nose. A .38 special. Cadicher's revolver. The same one he had carried. The same one he had on the night of the car crash. The same gun his father had once owned. A gun he had fired hundreds of times, sometimes at people, most times in the open, at targets made of paper and wood. He knew the weight of it, the smell, the feel of the oak handle - smooth and cold, the grain shiny in places where it had been held. Countless hours spent cleaning it, loading it, unloading it. There was an 'X' scratched on the top of barrel, near the fixed sight. A scratch he had made when he had killed Marins Belthuge – his first. In his cupboard he had a collection of holsters and cases, mostly new, still stiff, finished in leather and steel and hardened plastic, some branded with his name and initials, others with dates, all of them gifts, all of them unused. The gun had always been most comfortable tucked behind his back, loose and ready. Metal on skin. There were times when it

thought of replacing it, buying something with more stopping power, more accuracy, more reliability and capacity. He could never do it. It was an unspoken bond. A man and his weapon. Soldiers throughout history understood the relationship perfectly. The gun was his.

And yet he had never seen it from this angle before. It looked ridiculous. The barrel was too short and too narrow, the trigger guard looked tiny. The weapon didn't look like much. It was a relic 50 years ago. Today, right now, it was more of an antique, something you displayed on a shelf.

He smiled thinking about this and Max shot him twice through the chest.

Cadicher didn't move, didn't do very much of anything, in fact. He merely looked down at his shirt, saw the blood blossom and looked at Max. Echo rushed to him and applied pressure to his midsection. He winced at the compression. He could taste blood in his mouth as though he had just taken a sip of the stuff. He coughed some out. He looked at his daughter, took her hand in his and off the entry wounds. He smiled at her, shook his head, tried to say something. He couldn't catch his breath and felt nothing. No fear, no pain. He thought of his wife, saw her in his daughter. Saw her. He felt no fear, no pain. He felt nothing.

His head slumped down, his body became limp. His fingers, slick with his own blood, slipped out of hers and lay still.

121

Echo crouched at her father's feet, head down, her cheek resting on his hand. She wanted to cry and couldn't. She wanted to feel sadness but it never came. She wanted gut-wrenching pain because she had just seen her father die, but it simply wasn't there. The one thing she felt was overwhelming loneliness. It consumed her instantly and uncontrollably.

'Are you good?' Max said, the gun still raised.

After a minute, Echo said, 'I need a moment with him.'

Max looked at Mackenzie who nodded. He lowered the gun and moved to the table, laid a hand on Echo's shoulder. 'I'm sorry it had to be this way.'

Echo gripped the small knife in her hand. The same knife she had used to cut herself free from the cable ties. She swivelled and stabbed Max high in the thigh, removed the knife and pushed it in his jugular notch – the dip between his neck and collarbones. She left it there, reached for the revolver behind his back. She pulled it out and shot him under the ribs, then between the eyes. Max dropped like a stiff plank, a splatter of blood painting her face. Echo turned towards Mackenzie. She had her mouth half-open. She was in shock. Echo didn't say anything, crossing the distance between them. She shot her in the gut, shot her in face, part of her jaw ripping off. Mackenzie fell backwards, through the windows, and disappeared into the night. Echo was still pulling the trigger,

firing at nothing as the suite became still once more apart from wind whistling its way through the room.

Except Echo did none of this.

Max moved between the table, laid a hand on Echo's shoulder. 'I'm sorry it had to be this way.'

Echo gripped the small knife in her hand. She wanted to kill Max and Mackenzie. But she also believed in what they were doing. If Mackenzie was successful with this, she would change everything. And most importantly, she was right. This was bigger than any of them. Sacrifices had to be made. She let go of the knife handle, and it slipped back into her pocket.

Mackenzie said, 'Take all the time you need, Echo. I really liked him. He saved my life twice. This hurts me, too.'

Echo said nothing, still holding her father's hand against her cheek.

122

Later that night Echo entered a room and heard machines spinning and whining. Like a washing machine on full spin. She left the door open for light. She saw Remy and Ebodia on two steel tables. They both looked half dead, barely conscious.

She stood there for a while, staring at nothing, not doing anything, thinking things over. Her hands were still stained with blood, flakes of blood rubbing off on a steel key she held in her hand. She felt nothing. She guessed it was shock, but it

shouldn’t have been. She wasn’t shocked by what had happened. There were only two ways things were going to end tonight. Hope for the best, plan for the worst, and she had planned on Cadicher dying. It was just that simple.

Echo pushed a button on the first machine, pushed a button on the second machine. The whine and spin slowed until they both fell silent. She unhooked the tubes from Remy and then did the same to Ebodia. Her actions were all mechanical. She opened locks and cut straps with the small knife. She saw mouths move and lips stretch, but she heard no words. She reacted to nothing they were saying.

Echo said, ‘There are bathrobes outside in the hall. You’re free. No one will stop you. You’ll both need blood transfusions. There’s an automated taxi in the basement. It’s waiting for you. It’ll take you to a hospital.’

She saw Remy crying and Ebodia sitting up, almost slipping off the table. She watched their limbs shaking uncontrollably.

She took one last look around the room then left.

Epilogue

She trudged through the snow, her knees lifting higher with each step. There was no path, no compass. She knew the way from memory, relying on small, visual markers that kept her on

track. It was quiet and cold. The trees mostly bare, brown and white. Her breath came out misty and thick as she worked hard to get to the river. She pulled her beanie tighter over her head because her ears were stinging, winter stabbing through her layers of clothes. It was one of the few places in the world where snow still fell naturally, but even here it never lasted for long. She had only seen light snowfall for a couple of weeks late last winter before the oily spring heat scorched it. This year looked more promising, but she couldn't be sure.

When she reached the river she stood and caught her breath, trying to slow her heartbeat. She cupped some water in her gloved hands and drank. Although she had set out after lunch, the final embers of the day were already beginning to extinguish themselves. She was crying now and didn't try to stop herself. There was no one to see her, no one to hold her, no one around for as far she could she.

She undressed, her boots coming off last, and she tossed everything on the rising bank behind her. Chunks of ice floated in the river. The water was clear, running slowly. A three hour walk west and the river would open its jaws to the Bering Sea. If there had been more time, she may have considered it. But there wasn't, and she was going to get there anyways. She didn't need to exert herself.

She was shivering badly when she finally stopped crying, gooseflesh breaking over her body. She dipped a foot in the water and took it out quickly, the skin turning red. She shook

her hands and closed her eyes. She took a couple of deep breaths, holding the image of her mother in her head and dived into the river. The temperature took her breath away immediately. She felt like a child learning to swim again, her muscles and thoughts freezing up. Every part of her signalled an alarm. She bottled down the panic, bottled down her fear.

It was a full minute before the blue octopus submerged itself once more, its tentacles curling in before finally relaxing.

The End.

Panayotis Scordis - 0601544E

MA Creative Writing: Reflective Essay

Lay Still

Supervisor: Associate Professor Bronwyn Law-Viljoen

The beginning

1

> Carpenters build houses, stores, and banks. They build some of wood a plank at a time and some of brick a brick at a time. You will build a paragraph at a time, constructing these of your vocabulary and your knowledge of grammar and basic style. As long as you stay level-on-the-level and shave even every door, you can build whatever you like – whole mansions, if you have the energy (Stephen King, *On Writing*, 2000: 153-154).

Lay Still is a stupid name for a book. I won't try and convince you that it means something meaningful to me. Just this: I read the line in a Richard Laymon book (I forget which) and always liked the way it sounded. For a time, the working title of the novel was *Since When*, but I'll keep that for another book – perhaps a prequel.

Anyway, I digress.

Laymon had a profound influence on me growing up. In truth, I stole copies of his books from my high school. Why they were

there in the first place remains a mystery to me. If there's ever a moment of guilt that crosses my mind over my short-lived kleptomania, I remind myself that Richard Laymon should not have been sitting between Louis L'Amour and C.S Lewis in a school library.

For those who are unfamiliar with his work, Laymon's novels are easy to summarise because they all have identical premises: boy tries to have sex with girl.

Simple. Shocking. Taboo. 45 novels all telling the same story. His writing was jet-fuelled on cheap thrills, unexpected twists, and softcore horror. It was the literary equivalent of watching a B-grade movie. But he taught me my first lesson in writing.

Tell it like it is.

Even when it's appalling. Even when you can't look at your mom without blushing. Tell it like it is. Writing needs to be raw. It has to shock you and the reader. And, if it can hurt the reader - better still. Good writing is always powerful and universal and it never apologises if people are offended. When I sit at my desk it is my responsibility to tell you two things - the world as I see it and the world as it is. Richard Laymon in his non-fiction book, *A Writer's Tale* hints at this blunt approach to writing when he states that horror writers should be like:

> ...tour guides leading readers into dangerous, frightening territories. In general, we write nasty stuff. It repels a lot of readers. But it also attracts them. Many readers probably feel especially uncomfortable if they find themselves drawn to such sordid material. Good people are not supposed to enjoy reading about these things. If they do like it, many of them undoubtedly suffer feelings of guilt. Reading horror is like looking at pornography. Plenty of people might want to do it, but they know it would be wrong. It would be dirty (1998: 207).

Richard Laymon died in 2001. I've tried to keep him alive in my novel. He often saw the world at its worst, but if you're looking for a ride, I'd recommend him. This book isn't for him. Still, I owe him a debt. Without those cheap thrills I'd be doing just about anything else. God, without his books I'd be normal.

2

The point of writing a book, any book, is for someone to read it. The irony of course, is that all writers, at least at one time, write for themselves, alone, perhaps somewhere dark and cold, perhaps with artificial lighting and no windows, with only an idea. For instance, I write in a corner of a garage, hovelled

between a car and some storage containers. In winter, I must decide whether to run a blow heater or have my mouse constantly freeze up. The choice is not overly simple when you consider the price of electricity. And, as I do most of my writing between 7pm and midnight, the decision weighs heavy. The heat is no better. In the summer, the fan in my desktop computer runs so fast, I imagine it slipping out of its case in the tower and impaling my neck. I picture my wife finding my limp body the next morning hunched over the keyboard in a pool of slippery blood, headphones still looped around my head, one song constantly on repeat as a string of letters runs across the screen. This fear could be one reason why I write so fast in the months of summer.

Another reason I write is because when I was 11 years old, I received my black belt in karate. I was made senpai in my class, second only to the sensei. In 1998 I was the bee's knees, man. I had the trophies and the medals and the starched uniforms. I was qualified and certified as a judge in tournaments and spent an entire weekend training with Japanese Master, Teuro Chinin.

The funny thing about it all was that I hated karate. Never understood it. Every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday I'd be punching and kicking at nothing, screaming Japanese numerals. To this day, I see no logical reason for wanting to defend yourself

using the ‘wax on, wax off’ training regimen. Karate is the same as building an elaborate apocalyptic underground bunker – chances are you’ll never use it. And if you happen to be in a fight, a hard kick to the genitals will work just fine and save you seven years of intense training.

Karate is not the same as writing, obviously, but if consistency could make me that good at doing something I hated, then what would it do for something I actually enjoyed doing?

3

Once upon a time I imagined writing this book with beautifully structured chapters. It was simple. Start at one and end at fifty. 2000 words a chapter. Not a word under. Not a word over. In the end, I’d have a perfect draft number of 100000 words. And don’t think that’s just hot air. With OCD it’s not impossible, just necessary. Or else many terrible things will happen.

But in my experience there’s only one thing that can cure OCD, at least temporarily - a child. Children don’t care if you need to touch a painting on the wall as you walk by it, or wash your hands a hundred times. If they want or need something, they get it. Or they don’t, and you get headache. Newton’s third law, I believe.

At the start of this book, my son was six months old. Now he's 26 months old, and the only change in 20 months is that recently I now get an hour of extra sleep between 5am and 6am (there are only so many goddamn sunrises a person needs to see). The thing is: you can't go to bed after midnight and wake up at 5am every day. Maybe *you* can, *I* can't. After the first week, my writing time got pushed back from 5 and half hours, to four hours, to finally - a meagre 2 hours per night. That was all that was left in the tank at the end of the day. What this meant was that my beautifully structured chapters looked like roadkill after the first month. To put it another way: I didn't care. So I changed things up. Each night when I sat to down to write, I tried to write a scene in my head. It didn't matter if that scene was 100 words, or a 1000. The death of that pubescent OCD behaviour meant that my book took on a new life. Instead of writing chapters, I was writing scenes. These scenes offered a new perspective for me. There wasn't a need to try to think of complicated narratives and how these would fit into the end product. Not yet anyway.

I remember watching the television show *Lost* (2004) in high school. In the pilot episode, survivors of a plane crash must find a way to work together to survive on a tropical island. Near the end of the episode, three or four characters are chased by a polar bear and the pilot of the plane is killed by a

mysterious monster made of smoke. I loved *Lost* because the story was so wild, so unexpected. Nothing was as it seemed. Every episode ended on a massive cliff-hanger. I always had a suspicion that the show was too unpredictable to be plotted in its entirety. As if to confirm my impression, Carlton Cuse, director and producer of the show, noted in an interview with Esquire that:

> I think a lot of times we intentionally painted ourselves into corners. As Damon [Lindelof] used to say, "Well, then we'll just walk up the wall." That was a fun part of the storytelling — to create challenges for ourselves. The only place we ever got stuck was when we did things we regretted doing, not that they were narrative cul-de-sacs but like Nikki and Paulo. That was an example of a story idea where once we'd initiated it we regretted having done it. Or, on a smaller scale, when we told the story of Jack flashing back to Thailand and how he got his tattoos, we really regretted that we had decided that was a worthy flashback story (Zemler, 2014).

Lost (2004) gave me insight to the fact that stories are not all told in the same way. In my mind, writing scenes meant I could do anything, and just have the novel loosely connect. Episodic writing also quickened the book and gave me a target. It kept

the writing fresh. It was unintentional, but it worked. Each scene was a signpost in my head, leading the way. I was attacking the book using guerrilla tactics. Hit and retreat. Take the next day to regroup, restock, and medicate up. And for a while it worked. Then the book made an all-out charge, shouting: '*This doesn't make sense!*' and '*You don't know what the fuck you're doing!*' and my little platoon of thoughts could do nothing but look on as they were massacred. At first a couple of words got killed off, then entire pages. Thousands of letters and sentences and paragraphs lying in the bottom of the recycle bin. One night I sat down at my desk and saw Lieutenant Plot on the horizon suit up and take off in his shiny new fighter plane. That bastard was going to drop an atomic bomb on everything; he was going to end the war then and there.

4

For the most part, the scenes aligned with what I was trying to do with my novel. They served to keep the writing tight and unexpected. I had 24 hours every day to think of a new 'sight'. James Patterson, in a YouTube video (ABC Arts, 2015), states that writing short chapters is a disaster for most writers. I agree, but my gut tells me that it ultimately depends on what type of story you're writing. A chapter that contains only 250-

500 words can leave the reader feeling stranded in the story, but sometimes that's deliberate. Most books, but I suspect thrillers in general, require a certain level of trust between a reader and writer. It is a give and take relationship, just like in life, and when writing, I've found that trust comes in three main forms.

For instance, regarding inflections in dialogue, in her book, *A Novel in a Year* (2007), Louise Doughty proposes that you should:

> ...trust [a] reader to guess at what your characters really mean in exactly the same way that we all have to guess at what people really mean in our daily lives (68).

To put this more simply, William Strunk in *The Elements of Style* advises: 'Omit needless words' (2009:23).

In *Dear Writer* (1996) Australian author, Carmel Bird teases out a second form of trust:

> Perhaps you thought that you, as the writer, were the one who had to do all the imagining, and that the reader was to get every detail of the picture from your words. The reader of fiction [and, I would add, narrative non-fiction]takes pleasure in doing some of the work, and will more readily believe you and trust you if there is work to do(82).

These two forms of trust were relatively easy to implement in my novel. The first was a simple elimination of adjectives and adverbs. 'Cadicher said sourly' merely became 'Cadicher said'. And if I thought the dialogue wasn't conveying a certain emotion, then the dialogue changed. The second form of trust - Bird's - is more stylistic in nature. And whenever you consciously decide to play with the intricacies of a story (especially how that story is told), then you inevitably decide to choose a side – literary fiction or genre fiction? There may be a case that genre fiction, the type of fiction that entertains and thrills, can imitate the human condition and offer valued commentary but I have never really believed this. Genre fiction is always reliant on plot (intentional or not).

So whilst it is easy to eliminate specific details, say in description, there is a finer balance here. In my novel there is very little physical description. Even now, thinking about my characters, I have a hard time describing them, as I imagine most readers would. Is this to say that they don't take a form? I cannot answer that; all I can hope is that the reader will fill in their own picture of the characters and scenes without me having to write a fashion catalogue or a tour guide.

With description in general, I adapted the pacing style of Lee Child. Child's writing is humble – he speeds up the boring

bits and slows down the interesting bits. And for me, most description is boring which is why it was so easy to 'speed up'. Writers are, after all, storytellers, not story-showers. An English teacher once gave me a piece of advice that supports this. Miss Courtlove told me that books should be like a TV commercial of a wave. A wave is always seen in normal speed, right up to when the water crests and breaks. At this point, the commercial is slowed down to where every drop is seen, where every shadow beneath the water is ominous. The injunction to 'show rather than tell' is for movies and children's books, works of art where the imagination needs a stimulus. Writing my novel episodically, in a film-like style does not contradict this. We're both going to the same place, I'll admit as much, but story-showers are teleporting there and storytellers are walking.

The third and final form of trust is a leap of faith for the reader. It is an intrinsic feature of the thriller genre where essentially you're asking the reader to trust you because you hold all the cards. Questions keep the reader engaged, but they also require answers. However, in order to answer those questions, you need a very clear outline of your story, and writing scenes with no direction or a planned plot is risky writing.

So, naturally I had a problem here. I had no idea where I was going with the story so I signed a truce. I decided I would revise my work so far (roughly 20000 words at the time) and map out the rest of my novel. It was a good idea in theory but the writing lost something. It no longer felt sharp. The characters became dull. The story fell into a black hole. *Lay Still* suddenly had no pulse. It was waiting for me to write, 'The End'. More importantly, the writing now felt like work – I may as well have been screaming Japanese numerals again, kicking and punching thin air. The fun was gone and every word was hammered out with nothing new to look forward to. And if I knew what was going to happen when I sat down to write then some part of me felt like the reader would too. After a couple of months, I revised the truce. I deleted every planned plot idea from that day forward, and started writing new scenes.

Once I released control of this process then anything could happen (and often did). This thought was freeing. It allowed me to write without fear. Before this, if I decided that a specific character needed to do X, then I never allowed myself room to consider any of the other possibilities, because I was writing for X.

My novel may seem like it was plotted, but I had no idea Cadicher was The Glove until I wrote the line. As long as it took a reader to shift their eyes across the revelation was as

long as I had plotted it. Similarly, I had no idea what part Max would play in the end, or that Mackenzie was Cadicher's child. To effectively pull this off I needed to go back in the story and plant a few seeds, granted, but this was easier than trying to chop down a redwood obscuring the way forward. Stephen King's, *On Writing* notes:

> Plot is, I think, the good writer's last resort and the dullard's first choice. The story which results from it is apt to feel artificial and labored (2000:128).

Not all of my scenes made it into the final draft, but a good many did. Likewise, some of the earlier plot ideas stayed too, and in truth, I think the book is weaker for it. But honey, I tried, and you can't win 'em all.

5

A couple of questions that I kept asking myself were: why this book? Why this idea? And I suppose to answer those questions I need to go back in time, back before I had even conceived the idea for *Lay Still*.

At the end of 2016 I decided to quit my job and concentrate on writing full time. My job at the time was mind-numbingly

boring. It required long stretches of concentration. It was tedious and repetitive work. But I was also strangely good at it, as though fate only made me successful in things I didn't want to do.

In early December I gave my notice with enough money saved up to not have to work for a year and a half. Writing with no worries or distractions sounded better to me than just about anything else. It was a joyous time. Perhaps too joyous.

Six weeks later my wife and I found out we were going to have a baby.

6

Richard Peck at a PEN panel in New York once said, 'The only way you can write is by the light of the burning bridges behind you' (2010). This sounds great, but in my experience it's not true. I had written two books prior to 2016 with all my bridges still in pretty good condition. Even so, I tacked the saying on my garage wall, put aside my fears and started writing.

The new work - *Ike*, was finished in early June, but by then my wife was already six months pregnant, and we were blowing through money faster than I had calculated. We needed everything – from cots to clothes; from monitors to toys; from baby gates

to bum cream; whatever. My wife - by this point - had stopped working as well which meant my 18-month savings, had shrunk to just 10-months' worth, and I had used up more than half of that whilst writing a first draft. I now had just four months to go before we were broke. Then I made a mistake; a mistake that led to more mistakes - a mistake born out of panic. I had convinced myself that *Ike* was terrible. It needed a major overhaul from the first draft. So I put it aside and starting working on my earlier novels, tinkering with them, thinking this was the safest and quickest way to go. It was during this time that I started spinning, trying this and trying that, instead of just staying focused on the book I had just finished. It wasn't all bad though. In one of these spiralling moments I came up with three new ideas for novels. They were all good; one of them I finished this year, in fact. But the one idea that stuck out at the time was about a pill which people would take to stop them from ageing. I wrote two or three pages and gave them to my wife to read. She liked it, which was enough for me.

July now and in less than a month we were set for an upgrade – from a family of *ni* to a family of *san*.

I cannot recall exactly how the idea of *Lay Still* came to mind, only that those first two or three pages included a third person narrator giving a tour of Mackenzie's house during her birthday party. When I wrote the book, there were times I

couldn't stand Mackenzie. Not the way she spoke. Not the money she had, and not the way she acted. But, like Richard Laymon, I owed Mackenzie Ralston a debt. She was there at the start. Furthermore, you must understand that there was nothing rational about this decision. In his book, *On Writing* King says, 'kill your darlings, kill your darlings' (2000:156). He was talking about writing in general; I took it to mean something a little more literal. In this sense, Mackenzie was never my darling, and that's probably why she stayed around.

When August came along, *Lay Still* had evolved to include Cadicher, The Closer, and The Glove - at least in my head. But by now, everything had changed. Afraid that I'd never write or work again, I decided to apply for this course, convinced that this degree would help with one or the other.

The 'Muddle'

1

One thing that always plagues me is whether anything I write is truly original. Intertextuality is a disease that all writers must live with. The Russian linguist Bakhtin proposes that the meaning of words and grammar is found in dialogue and social relations:

> Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of interaction between listener and speaker... It is like an electric spark that occurs when two different terminals are hooked together... Only the current of verbal intercourse endows a word with the light of meaning. (Volosinov/Bakhtin 1973:102-103)

Thus, language is not only your words, but also other people's words. If language and discourse are fundamentally intertextual then all writing will always carry traces of the past. Whilst writing my own book, I was consciously careful not to deliberately invoke any comparisons. But it would be vain to think that none exist.

Even now, writing this, I can't help but think that *Lay Still* is the new instalment of Patrick Lee's Sam Dryden series. But perhaps this is too harsh. The reading list I suggested in my proposal did include books that were at least similar in genre. So, some echo of these texts will undoubtedly be heard. In any case, early on in the degree I decided to abandon my reading list in the hopes of avoiding any suggestion of intertextuality. Would the end result have been different had I kept to the books mentioned in my proposal? I don't think so.

I have always believed that writing is the most therapeutic of art forms. Psychologists have also noted the benefits of writing as a form of therapy. James Pennebaker, in his article, 'Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding of inhibition and disease' (1986), notes that writing is a 'self-help strategy for coping with stress and is effective in reducing the symptoms of depression' (112). We dive into our conscious and weave together a story based on an idea. The only problem is that that initial idea is never constant. It shifts and changes; it moves and redirects like a tiger shark searching for prey. My novel started out as one idea some years ago, and it eventually evolved to something completely different in the end. And, if we are to believe in the premise that writing is therapeutic, then we have to admit that there needs to be an underlying necessity for some kind of therapy, and that writing, at least partly, stems from fear, anxiety, depression, truth and vulnerability. I have always thought that the novels I have written were created out of some kind of destabilisation in my life.

In my novel death is apparent. It was (and probably still is) one fear I had in the early conception of the book. The fear of not having a purpose in life is another prominent dread I faced. I suppose one could argue that these are merely general fears in humans, but I would disagree. Most healthy people don't

obsess over death or sit up all night wondering what their purpose is in life. These two fears may seem like opposites, but really they are connected ideas, at least in my mind, and they are found in the book. But it seemed futile to read books in a particular genre based on a current idea or concept or state of mind; in fact my novel had changed genres from horror to speculative fiction in the first three months of this degree. Why? This question presented itself numerous times in the discussion groups. Was there a connection between the fear of death and the horror genre? At the time, I never gave it much thought. Now if asked, I would reply: horror gives readers the option to experience the fear of death from afar, from the safety of the page. And horror novels have a dissociative capacity, allowing a reader to accept the inevitable because of the many ways death is presented. Furthermore, reading about death allocates a sense of power, a sense of inspiration, a sense of acceptance.

I was writing horror because that was the current destabilisation in my life at the time. As my fears changed and adapted so too did the outline, tone and genre of the book. I viewed a reading list as something intangible, as an unconscious means to direct my fears, not a stringent 'have-to-do', and this in turn released me from the governing question of what type of book I was trying to write.

My initial reading list was compiled as a means to study-up how certain novels explore future societies and the complexities of how mankind evolves alongside technology. It included Michael Crichton's, *Next* (2006), which deals with a futuristic society where genes can be patented, and Mary Doria Russel's, *The Sparrow* (1996), which explores how a group of missionaries makes contact with an alien civilization. In truth, these were the only two books I did read, which is why I include them here. But having read them, I was left disheartened. These were not the types of books I wanted to write. More so, these were not the types of books I was writing.

But I ultimately didn't know what book I was writing, so I read books that interested me. I read books on the cosmos, books on the start of human civilisation, books on religion and, weirdly, a lot of books on Auschwitz. What I did not realise then was that all of these texts were connected. I was in fact witnessing a type of intertextuality through history. Only, scientists and academics called it evolution. All of these things were as far away from horror, speculative fiction and thrillers as I could think of being.

Let me reiterate though: intertextuality is a disease all writers must live with, so the irony is that all of these things are in my book, too.

2

I still find it strange that I have written something akin to a thriller. Regardless of how I, or anyone else, classifies the genre, I think we could all agree on two things about my novel: 1) *Lay Still* is not a horror novel and, 2) it is the cheeseburger of books. The finished product is not fine dining. It is messy and greasy and gives you heartburn. It is quick and cheap.

I believe that characters drive the story, not the other way round. And if a character is fleshed out enough then not only do they drive the story but they also dictate what type of story you're writing as well. At least to some degree. I put Cadicher in a situation and watched him work his way through it. He took the reins and I followed him, writing down what he did and said. Every time I wanted to direct the story back to my comfort zone, back to horror, Cadicher saw through the bullshit. If a noise was coming from the dark room upstairs it wasn't a spirit or some evil force. It was just the wind. Worse case: an intruder. I couldn't put anything past The Interceptor. Mackenzie was different. Why? I don't know. And that's the honest answer. For one submission in the Creative Writing seminar, I handed in a piece of her backstory. The horror element bled in and my default switch activated. The other

participants in the seminar noticed the slippage. What was different between Mackenzie and Cadicher? Was she underdeveloped? It was at this point I started questioning myself because strangely, all the usual elements for a developed character were there. She certainly took up a fair amount of page time, she suffered in her own way, she tried to attain a goal, she had a philosophical stance, she disagreed with me, her attitudes and beliefs changed throughout the novel, but there was something just off-point with her development. If I had to guess, I would use Echo's line from the book: 'she had all the sand in the bucket' but I just couldn't build a sandcastle for her. That's the closest explanation I have. Of course, another explanation could be that I never really knew who she was right until the end of the book. At the end of the book, I thought about going back and filling in the character a little more, now that I knew her true intentions, but on the first full read, I wasn't sure what more I could I have said about her. In the end, I left her as I originally wrote her. She was mysterious, unknown, but also strangely in control. Nobody really knew her and that was okay given the outcome of my book.

Russian novelist and poet Vladimir Nabokov (1981) lecturing at Cornell University notes:

> In an Anglo-Saxon thriller, the villain is generally punished, and the strong silent man generally wins the weak babbling girl, but there is no governmental law in Western countries to ban a story that does not comply with a fond tradition, so that we always hope that the wicked but romantic fellow will escape scot-free and the good but dull chap will be finally snubbed by the moody heroine.

Cadicher is the protagonist in the book but he is not the typical good guy. He operates in the grey. His relationship with his daughter is dysfunctional; he tortures The Closer, throws a man out of a window, and has very little remorse for what happens to innocent people. I wanted to take his moral codes right up to the edge. Likewise, The Closer is not all bad. He is a result of childhood abuse. His antagonism needs to move in the opposite direction, to the point where a reader almost pities him. Echo was perhaps the most complex character I wrote. If Cadicher lives in the grey then Echo's moral code rises and falls like one of those high striker games you find at arcades with the oversized hammer and rising coloured lights. Right up until the end of the book I wasn't sure which way she would go.

But this was good. This was what I wanted to do. I wrote two endings for the book. One for either way. I was happy with both. They both worked with a few tweaks. Importantly, if I didn't know whether she was ultimately good or bad 30 pages from the end then the reader wouldn't either.

The characters I created were all evil in one sense or another. There were some - like The Closer - who were just worse. Once I saw the forest from the trees, it was clear to me that not even Cadicher was good. He would never really become the protagonist that most thrillers employ. He wasn't going to save the day and he wasn't going to figure out anything. His likeability, if it exists at all, is found in the fact that he is the anti-hero. Nicholas Laham, author of *Currents of Comedy on the American Screen: How Film and Television Deliver Different Laughs for Changing Times* states that:

> The anti-hero is guided by moral values, no matter how shallow they might be. He...pursues his self-interest; and if he does the right thing, it is more because it serves his self-interest than because it is morally correct (2009:51).

Cadicher was a fun character to write, but only because there was a villain in him somewhere. In my book, the antagonists

picked their own bones. They killed each other off. And Mackenzie, who I felt was at least trying to change the world for the better, got to walk away unscathed. But evil won the day in this book, and justice did not prevail because Nabokov's word's kept ringing in my ears. I tried to employ a tactic where the reader thought they were reading a conventional thriller, where they thought they were siding with the good guys, only to have this taken apart through the characters' actions. They were all decadent characters, but they had good intentions. Their perception of morality was subjective but that wasn't the point and it wasn't my job to argue with them.

I read Stephen King's *The Dead Zone* (1979) a long time ago. In one memorable scene, in the first couple of chapters, the protagonist goes on a date with his fiancée. Only you'd never know it. John Smith is the perfect good guy, even down to his American name. His fiancée suggests that they sleep together for the first time after the date but this does not sit well with Johnny-boy. He feels they should wait until after they are married. Now, an argument could be made that Richard Laymon had skewed my reality of what happens when two people go on a date but I would disagree. I wasn't expecting John Smith to be a closet murderer but I wasn't expecting him to be an asexual toaster either.

King's novels have always had a great appeal for me because of his flawed, believable, everyday-type characters. And, I suspect that his characters have made a huge contribution to his success because readers identify with them. There are good characters turned bad like Louis Creed in *Pet Sematary* (1983), or bad characters turned good such as Jack Torrence in *The Shining* (1977), but John Smith was neither of these. He was just too good, too likeable, flawless, and unrealistic.

Whenever I'm trying to flesh out a character and find myself falling in love with them, I imagine them taking a shit. This is the great equaliser in life – it removes the idea that people are perfect. No race or religion will ever change this. It doesn't matter if you're rich, poor, male, female, beautiful, ugly, good or bad. When we need to go, we all squat and push.

Cadicher, for all his wit, all his aggression and fight, dies sitting down, shot by his own gun and Mackenzie and Max walk away to continue with their work on *youth*. Echo's reasons for not killing them were ones I shared with her. I ultimately believed in their cause. The greater good trumped everything. Whether they succeeded or not, I don't know. But if someone was going to stop them, then that someone was not Cadicher. He hadn't earned that right, and neither had Echo.

Echo's epilogue was difficult to write. I broke her leg in one scene, holed her up in a cabin in the middle of nowhere,

unable to get help and left her to starve. But this seemed unjust. In an interview with Ashwin Sanghi (2014) Dan Brown notes that 'the punishment [for your characters] must always fit their crime'. Yes, she had killed people and yes she had kidnapped Ebodia, but she had killed bad people, and freed Ebodia, too. So, on balance, death by starvation didn't seem just to me. She also couldn't go off and live in peace so I compromised. I thought suicide sounded like something she would do; a type of modern day *seppuku* fit for her - a soldier killing herself with honour.

4

My novel is influenced by the cinematic approach to storytelling and my point of view naturally follows this. There are some scenes where a clear detached third narrator is telling the story and others where the narrator becomes attached. Sometimes this shift happens quite dramatically. For me, the narrator of the book worked as a film director. I wanted to get in the characters' faces and thoughts, but I also wanted to stand back and record what they were doing without any involvement. I implemented a film-shot type of writing where a scene started in a wide lens and then narrowed its focus to a character. Often, I

would end a scene with a larger lens, and the narrator would once again become omnipotent.

This style of narration worked as double-edged sword at times, and I am aware of its pitfalls. There were instances where I found that I could quickly shift perspectives and allow the story to flow, but I also think that when it was used too much, the story and the characters lost their intensity. As the novel was nearing an end, I found that the point of view slotted into a rhythm where the use of a different 'lens' was no longer that abrupt or noticeable.

The End

1

There were times when I thought this idea was too big for me. Still think it. I suppose all writers wonder if the finished book is the same as the first conception of it. I knew from the beginning this would be a fun book to write, but it also felt like a missed opportunity. Could I have done more? Probably. The first year writing this book, I kept trying to make the text more complicated than it needed to be. The book needed to be on the top shelf, not lying face down with staining yellow pages. I

tried to write about the division of society, religion, and class. The story needed to be bigger; it needed more world building, more explanation, more everything, just more. The cheeseburger needed an extra patty, needed chips and a drink.

The Diary of a Young Girl (1995) changed all of that.

2

During my Auschwitz reading months, I came across Anne Frank. I had never read it. Having finished it, I still think about her and what that book captured. The power, I think, is not found in the context of the story. The Holocaust is too big, too impersonal. You cannot fathom the millions of deaths. It is shocking only in the instant before passing. But when it is shrunk down to one person, they'll grab you by the throat and squeeze 'til you listen. I've read hundreds, maybe thousands of books, but never have I read an ending as potent as that. Her diary just ends, the story falls off the cliff, and you are left with a footnote. The horrors of the Holocaust didn't need elaboration. It just needed a teenage girl and her thoughts and her plans for the future.

The fascination for me was that the entire diary details only a very small portion of the war. She wasn't describing the food; she was describing the taste in her mouth. Miss Courtlove

would approve, I think. My aim with *Lay Still* was to try to recreate this. Just like Anne Frank, I couldn't fully grasp and understand the world I was writing, but that didn't mean the story wasn't there. I just needed to take a slice of the world and let the reader fill in the gaps.

But was there another connection here? Did *The Diary of a Young Girl* share something with my novel? Harold Bloom, author of *Literature of the Holocaust* posits this about Holocaust literature:

> [It]occupies another sphere of study, one that is not only topical in interest but that extends so far as to force us to contemplate what may be fundamental changes in our modes of perception and expression, our altered way of being-in-the-world. What needs to be stressed is this: the nature and magnitude of the Holocaust were such as to mark, almost certainly, the end of one era of consciousness and the beginning of another (109-110)

'Our altered way of being-in-the-world' is the phrase that sticks out to me here. Stick this in the science fiction canon and it finds a home like a long lost relative; place this in speculative fiction and it circles three times before plopping itself on the bed. The horrors of World War 2 can jump in the ring with the most horrific things any author can come up with

and go 12 rounds. No writer could ever attempt to imagine the Sisak children's concentration camp. Treblinka? Birkenau? Compared to this, all the violence, horror and shock found in my novel is comparable to a Judd Apatow movie.

Reading about the Holocaust gave me a deep appreciation of the realities of the past. If I was to going to write anything that carried weight in terms of shocking the reader, then I needed to appreciate books like Anne Frank and how they captured a sense of impending doom and the fragility of life.

3

This novel is many things. But if you ask me to sum it up in one sentence then I would retort: A man looks to redeem his past in order to reunite with his wife in the afterlife. Rose asks Cadicher to keep his promise to her. And he does, right up to where she blossoms on his chest as a stamp of approval.

Forget horror, speculative fiction and thriller. Forget literary fiction and popular fiction.

I wrote a love story.

And that's fine, too.

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PLAGIARISM
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