



ABSOLUTION

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CHAPTER ONE

In the small room, the young student trembled. As she tried taking the phone from his hand, he held on briefly, reluctant to relinquish his grip. The other's phone would be switched off. At this stage maybe no news was good news.

"You know if you take this, you've gone and got yourself all involved, it'll make you number eight." Not quite understanding, she took the phone anyway. The two exchanged nervous glances as she waited for the call to connect. Her very brief hopeful smile quickly changed to one of disappointment.

"Well it's not switched off anymore, It went straight through to voice-mail."

"I can't believe this, has the whole world ended? Everybody's vanished." Morgan concluded.

"Maybe the network's down?" she offered.

"What has happened? It's like nobody's out there." cursed Morgan. "How did it come to this?"

Helen was truly horrified, her hand rose to cover her mouth. It wasn't a gasp that emanated from her slightly parted lips, quite the reverse, her sharp intake of breath caused the gasping sound. She simply couldn't believe it! he'd actually done it. It was all based on a lie but he'd still done it! Why? There had been irrefutable evidence that it was Icelandic terrorists. It wasn't the Russians, and he knew it. What else could you expect from an American president? The man was an out and out warmonger, nothing more, like all those trigger happy Americans. She watched in dismay, first, the most brilliant flash of light, followed by a deep rumbling bass. The vibrations shook the whole house, right down to it's very foundation. An ashtray vibrated in sympathy on the coffee table. Helen raised her hand to her face, in that moment she held her breath, waiting for the inevitable blast. A blast to tear the skin and flesh from bones as the bodies tried to flee in vain. An all consuming, mushroom cloud towered over the distant city of New York. Then it came! Whoosh! Instinctively, Helen ducked.

"Please! God help us!" she heard a terrified mother scream as she scooped up her child into her arms. Buildings were torn down like children's toys, reduced to mere piles rubble in an instant. Cars, tossed through the air by the all consuming, relentless force. The world as we all knew it, was over. It was done, finished.

"What a load of absolute crap," she moaned. *Nuclear Deterrent II* was total rubbish, blowing up the world, again. It all seemed rather silly. With that, she pressed the power button on the remote control, and that particular movie was ended.

No longer gripped by the vivid images displayed on her mother's fifty inch plasma television. Released from the pseudo realism provided by Dolby digital surround sound, alone in the ensuing empty silence Helen, cried. Like the film she'd just watched, she'd had it all going on. Vibrancy, excitement, she had an actual life. Then, exactly like the warmonger she had just cursed, knowing her husband wasn't responsible for her predicament, Helen had pressed a button and her whole world just went boom! Everything blown apart, now there was nothing, nothing on the TV screen, no sound coming from the speakers and nothing in her life. The JBL sub-woofer that had previously rocked her world sat silent, mocking her. As her anger began to rise, she looked to the side table for something with which to express herself. The heavy glass ashtray would cause too much damage, then there was her glass of vodka, good vodka was not for wasting. The little teddy her husband had bought her on Valentine's day, it too laughed at her, triggering the flashpoint. She hurled the teddy at the big screen. The cuddly toy bounced back, colliding with the glass, spilling it's contents. The glass in turn bumped the ashtray, the ashtray fell to the floor, smashing. This was Helen Goldstone's lot, the absolute contrast of Midas.

Mrs Goldstone reached for her phone, she called the number again. Her bright red polished nails slipped as she tried to press the tiny buttons on the handset. Every time she tried, the message was always the same, *'the person you are calling is unavailable at present.'* It had been four weeks since she'd last got through on that number.

"Where the hell is my husband?" she muttered, looking at his name, Rock, on the phone's display. Rock, was not her husband's name, her husband's real name was Strauss. Helen recalled the reason for the nickname. Back in their student days, she and Strauss had stayed over at her girlfriend Nina's apartment. After a night out on the town, Strauss had woken with a hangover and was late for an exam. Strauss was not to know Barry, Nina's boyfriend, kept Viagra in old Aspirin bottle, he chucked three of the tablets down his throat before heading off to his exam. It was the same day she'd gotten the nickname Dyson. The memories of the mischievousness of youth brought a temporary smile to her face.

Tentatively, Helen scrolled through the numbers in the phone-book until the name Alex appeared. Things had gotten to the stage where she'd called her brother-in-law so many times, she knew she was getting on his nerves. Thinking better of it, she clicked her phone closed. All his brother Alex would say, was that Strauss was alive, he would contact her when and if he was ready. Alex' tone offered neither guarantee nor hope.

Helen's feelings of loneliness intensified, you could see it in the puffy red eyes. Helen cried every day, she looked like she'd been through the wringer. Her previous obsession with neatness of personal presentation had almost vanished, save for the hair and the nails. Right up until the day after her funeral, the hair and the nails would always look good. In truth she felt cheated and upset. It was she, that had initiated this situation but somehow, somewhere, she'd lost control. In the beginning, she had left him, now he wouldn't take her calls, the audacity of it all. She didn't know where he was, she had no idea. Why was he being like this? It may well have been four weeks since she last spoke to him but inside the first four days of separation, she'd realised, it was a huge mistake. Now the estranged wife, Helen felt her life was stagnant and there was nothing she could actually do. Her fear was, he, on the other hand, he was drifting away, farther and farther as the days passed. Helen's demons had left her now. The madness and the shame that drove her to this point had gone, leaving her marooned in this lonely place. Why didn't he understand? If she

could just speak to him. If she could explain the forces that had driven her here, let him share her pain. If not her husband, Helen needed to share things with somebody. Helen wasn't totally crazy, she knew the vodka wasn't the answer but in the absence of human comfort, Smirnoff was the best available substitute. Using the remote control Helen powered on the radio. The television or the radio, she couldn't sleep with out one or the other being on. Most nights she didn't make it into bed, her and the sofa were well acquainted. Tonight her company would be the radio, it was the late show, old songs were playing. What would her world be like without, Strauss? her last thought, before sleep took her to another place.

CHAPTER TWO

"It doesn't make any sense, women they never make any damn sense. One day you're looking at engagement rings together, the world's so beautiful, a truly wonderful place. The next thing, the switch, they are giving you that, *'It's not you, it's me'*, crap. They ask you to be more gentle, more caring, more thoughtful. Finally, just when you think you've cracked it, after you've given up watching the game, stopped going out to bars with your friends. When one has abandoned all of one's ideals and the very essence of your being has become extinct, it's only then, and only then. They decide to tell you, they used to love you, but now you have changed!"

Alex simply nodded, by way of a reply. His older brother Strauss took this as a cue to continue.

"How do you do it?" he asked. "You seem to get on with women really well."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm single!" Alex had not really been listening, he knew the speech that Strauss was giving. The familiar moaning monologue that came out of his brother's mouth every time he was experiencing domestic unrest.

Alex stopped what he was doing and decided to give his brother his full attention. Today it was different, he felt that his brother and his wife had been the full fifteen rounds. Enough was enough, it was time for the towel to be thrown in before any further damage was done and avoidable pain caused.

"For god's sake Strauss!" the younger brother cut in. "You just don't get it do you? you're not going to win. You really need to give up. Sit down, have a Coke have a smile, chill."

"I can, I can win, I can do this" came the reply. "She's in the wrong this time, I know she's in the wrong, I've got her. I know it, she knows it."

"And therein lies the problem." You have always tried to win, it's a relationship, maybe, just maybe, the object of the exercise is not to win. How can there be any winning, if you are both supposed to be on the same side? It's not about winning, it's supposed to be all about the joy of taking part. You haven't quite

got it yet have you? Strauss, you've always tried to make decisions for the two of you. Helen's grown up now, she was just a child when you met, maybe she wants to see what the world looks like from an independent adult point of view. Did you ever consider that?"

Helen and Strauss had met when he was at university, before that, Strauss Goldstone had it all planned out. University, year out, see the world, see what was out there that needed either fixing or conquering, the general ambitions of many a nineteen year old youth. Strauss had been such a free spirited type, Indiana Jones, fortune and glory, that type of mentality. The couple's relationship developed in much the same way as many couples of that age. Things between the young lovers changed dramatically the day she'd had a heart-to-heart with her parents. From the point of view of teenagers, which they were, this was the day it all started. You and I both know it was the beginning of the end. Helen's mother could best be described as white middle class. Alex always said it's not the WMDs you need to worry about, the WMCs will get you every time. Ultimately, despite any personal reservations she may have, her daughter's happiness was paramount. Mr Beckford, he was a totally different animal. On the surface, he appeared to share the opinions of his wife. Deep down, things were indeed very different. When all would be revealed, Sam Beckford was not a racist, not as the word is generally taken to mean. His mind was just riddled with a common form of dated ignorance. I do not wish to excuse or make apology on his behalf, just to explain. Sam lived in a place where the world was flat and Britannia ruled the waves. He had once aired his views on inter-racial relationships to his daughter, Helen. The full extent of the repercussions of this most regrettable moment of heart felt expression, can only be understood by seasoned subscribers to the chaos theory. Mr Beckford had said, that although he liked Strauss and bore him no ill will. If the almighty had meant black people and white people to interact, or god forbid, even mate. God would have seen fit to have put them on the same continent from the outset. The negroes should keep to their own kind. He pleaded, with, begged her to consider fully the difficulties any children may have. Those little brown bastard children, despite having two parents, they were still bastards. If he,

Mr Beckford had any idea of the consequences of his words, surely he wouldn't have opened his mouth. Sound travels at seven-hundred and seventy miles per hour. As soon as he'd spoken, Mr Beckford wished he could move fast, faster than the speed of sound. How he prayed, he could place his hands over his baby girl's ears before his words would reach them. The first domino had fallen. His baby girl, immediately moved out of the family home and into the arms, and the bed, of her lover. Subsequently, Mrs Beckford blamed her husband for the absence of her daughter, this would eventually lead to the Beckfords divorce. The psychological effect on Strauss? He dedicated his life to proving the stupid arrogant white man wrong. Therefore, he embarked upon a path that would take him out of university and into any gainful employment. This new path would bear witness to Strauss visiting, a building society, a jewellers, an estate agent, and a church, all in quick relatively quick succession.

It needn't, shouldn't have been that way, obviously he that controls destiny was determined to create rift, feud and confusion. Strauss, Alex and Lewis went out on Strauss' stag night. It wasn't really a stag night, a few of them went out with the sole intention of getting blind drunk, it's a man thing. Drunk as lords, the three returned to Strauss and Helen's new house, the nest being furnished for post marital bliss. With things being so rushed, the home which was to be the future marital home, was almost empty. Two double beds had been delivered together with a few other essential items of furniture. In their drunken state the trio set up the beds in the lounge and pushed them together. They relaxed drinking beer and talking drunken talk until eventually they passed out. The hen night, Helen was out with her friends, getting drunk, maybe it's not a man thing. She wore her favourite strapless top and Miss Beckford wasn't going easy on the vodka. After yet another round of shots, the bride to be had an emotional moment. She didn't want to be in this club with all these leery leeches and loud music, she just wanted to be with her husband. Helen left without a word to her friends. Stumbling out of the club, she went, first the home of her future husband and then to Alex' apartment, Strauss could not be found. As a last resort she tried the new house. The drunken bride-to-be discovered the trio, deep in drunken sleep

on the makeshift bed in the lounge. Helen, having a caring sympathetic nature, realised *her boys* must be cold, she unpacked two duvets and covered them. Immediately, she herself felt the chill and snuggled in between her husband and his brother. It was all sweet and innocent. It could have been an episode of *The Waltons*, everybody was fully dressed. She felt safe and warm in between her future husband and brother-in-law.

The afternoon before the wedding, Mrs Beckford convinced Mr Beckford to make up with his only daughter. Helen was asleep and dreaming. Freddie, Jason or one those unsavoury horror characters was coming for her, she screamed. Sitting bolt upright in bed she opened her eyes. There was no Freddie or Jason, just her own father. Helen had left the front door unlocked, mother and father had simply walked in. Maybe it is something that all women do instinctively, then again Helen probably didn't want her father to cop an eyeful. The bride-to-be, sat up and pulled up the duvet to cover herself. Not realising she still wore her dress under the covers, Mr Beckford saw his daughter's bare shoulders and concluded, she was naked. What father wouldn't? After all, why would she sleep fully dressed? He, however, must shoulder some of the responsibility for the ensuing tragedy. If he'd been a perfect gentlemen and viewed his daughter as lady, rather than his little girl. Surely, he would have turned his head, any decent man would have left the room.

"Daddy! What are you doing here?" a shocked Helen questioned. The combination of noise and draught awoke her bed companions. When Strauss popped his head out from beneath the covers, Mr Beckford simply thought, bad form. You know, groom seeing the bride before the wedding and all that. When the second black, shaven head appeared, that image hit Mr Beckford in the chest like a hollow-point bullet. The sight of the third of the trio, Alex, his yawning face completed the devastation. The sight struck him like an eighteen pounder launched from Nelson's flagship. As the cannon ball hurtled towards him, all those images from all the nights he'd watched the porn channel whilst his wife slept, came back to haunt him, his little baby girl starring in every scene. Speechless, he stormed out of the house. The mother remained, she at least, got the full story.

Strauss looked out of the window, keeping his back to his brother, so as Alex wouldn't see his eyes moistening, he rubbed his eyes under his glasses. Alex knew his brother was upset, he tried to paint things in a better light.

"I think you need to put it out of your mind for now and move on. If you don't, you're gonna drive yourself crazy. You'll end up in Bedlam. Maybe in the future, who knows, but for now, keep your sanity, think self-preservation." Surprisingly, Strauss now had a smile on his face.

"Move on," he muttered, pausing briefly, he felt the front of his teeth with his tongue, this action was followed by a long slow blink and a rub of the face with his hands before he continued. "So in your considered opinion, counsellor, it's time to call it a day then?"

"It's not for me to make those decisions for you. Don't go around burning bridges you don't need to, arson is a very serious offence. You know my policy, never throw anything away, there will be a time when you might need it." Strauss said nothing, he clasped his hands together in front of him, twiddling his thumbs in a slow but definite manner.

"It doesn't really matter," Strauss spoke slowly. "Any decisions I had to make, I made before I came here. It was just a confidence thing. I needed you to confirm a few things to me. Now I know I am doing the right thing, the right thing for me."

"Please don't do anything drastic." urged the younger brother, shaking his head. "Just give Helen time, give her all the time she thinks she needs and after that, give her a little more. When and if, she ever comes round to your way of thinking, great, deal with that information, accordingly, at that time. If your life can accommodate her then all well and good. If you've other stuff going on, then it's her loss.

"I'm ahead of the game, I knew you'd say that!" Strauss smiled. "Well! check this, I've quit my job, I know that I am destined for better things. Fitting bloody tyres! What's that all about? I've sold my car and I am going to spend some time with Morgan. Me and Morgan, we are gonna spend time with our mutual long time good friend, Jack. We are gonna go out, party, jam a little, see what we can see. It has to be done."

"Morgan! Who on earth is Morgan?" quizzed Alex, pulling a face. "Morgan and Jack, are these new friends of yours? Are they from work?"

"Morgan, cousin Morgan in good old sunny Californ-I-A, and Jack. When times get rough you realise who your best friends are. Mr Daniels and I, we have become tight, trust me. Don't worry, I'm sure that you and I for once are singing from the same hymn sheet. Me, I am getting out of here. You know, get that woman off my mind for a while. I'm going on holiday, get some sun, checkout a few bars, perhaps a few clubs. You watch me, I want to go out there and put the eff back in my fun, have some laughs, see what's what when I get back. Maybe I don't have to come back. Why would I? Maybe there's a whole new life for me out there, just waiting, who knows? Right now, who cares! I'm just gonna live a little. Like you said, I've been with her since I was nineteen."

"Seems like a plan, maybe not the best plan ever devised in the history of the universe, but a plan nevertheless. Do you really want to know what I think?" Alex glanced up at the clock, as he opened the refrigerator. "Plans, plans are good. I think I'll drink to that one." Opening two bottles of lager, he passed one to his brother.

An age of silence seemed to pass before Strauss spoke again, he concentrated on his bottle, destroying the label, as if it had offended him in some manner.

"I do still love her you know," he spoke quietly. "But I don't think that you of all people, you wouldn't understand. Why would you? Women, they are like fashion accessories to you. You are a man with a woman for every occasion, but you've never had a partner, the proverbial, one, you know, your soul-mate. The split apart, spoken of by Plato."

"I think you'll find that was Aristophanes. Strauss, you are sounding like a girl. "Alex taunted him." Not just a girl but a real Shirley Temple, a girlie girl."

"You know I'm right, they're all toys to you. Most of your friends are female, but you can't get what you need from any one of them. Helen and I were balanced, in tune together. The closest you ever got was with, what was her name, Karin. Even she failed to live up to your expectations."

"Karin? What does she have to do with anything? What do you mean exactly? Come on tell me, girlie girl." Alex was becoming irritated.

"What was it you called her? Ah! Yes. Your fine and worthy opponent. That was it! Your fine and worthy opponent, that's what you want, that's what you need. That's why you do the job you do, you like to win, you have to win." Strauss was right up in Alex' face. "Like you always tell me, that doesn't work with women. It ain't about winning, is it?"

There was no reply from Alex, he thought to say 'touché', the words never quite reached his lips. This was one of the rare occasions when his older brother was getting the better of him. In argument or debate Alex was generally the victor. Under the present circumstances, Alex was going to let Strauss win. Sure, he could come up with any number of arguments, although none of them bore any relation to the truth. Alex was convinced, you were born alone, you died alone. Why bother to get attached in between? In the lonely times he did have thoughts, much like everyone else does. There must be more to life than this. From school days, as far back as he could remember Alex always wanted to be a barrister, nothing else mattered, that was his focus. He did once have a massive crush on a girl once, at school, a girl named Jen. He'd put that particular diversion down as one of those teenage, hormonal imbalance things. Other than that, sure, he liked female company, and yes, he fully enjoyed sex. The part where it became all complex and involved, that wasn't for him. Love and marriage, they seemed to be rather dated concepts. No longer did they go together like 'horse and carriage', indeed to see a horse and carriage in modern times was something of a rarity.

"Alex, I've spent my life being both proud of you and jealous of you." Strauss threw a big tangent, without warning "You're just so, I need a word here, great, you are just too great."

"Where did that come from? Which planet did you just visit?"

"Anything you put your mind to, you're just so much better than me. Life is hard when you have such a multi-talented younger brother."

"Well." Alex replied thoughtfully. "You were such a hard act to follow. I had to put the work in from an early age. Most of the stuff I learned, I learned from you."

"Alex, that's crap and you know it." Strauss was both smiling and shaking his head in dismay. "What about that shooting stuff? What was it? Twenty-five metre rapid-fire pistol shooting. You were selected for the British Olympic team, could have been world champion, even. You chose not to go, couldn't be bothered." Alex pulled a face.

"You know I hated shooting. I worked in a gun club bar when I was at university. I learned to shoot, but only because I was bored."

"My point exactly!" Strauss, pointed a finger at his brother. "You picked up a gun and, bullseye! You were instantly, Deadeye Dick. No real work, no real effort. Most people work hard and train for the opportunity of a lifetime. You get given one and you waste it."

"Strauss!" Alex laughed. "I was a teenager! Twenty-five metre rapid-fire pistol shooting, was not going to earn me any money. It certainly wasn't ever gonna get me laid. True, it could have lead to great career prospects. I could have been the next Lee Harvey Oswald. I bet you would have been proud of me then!" Strauss laughed with his brother, he could see the funny side, after all, what good could ever come from being good with a gun? Alex stopped laughing, he pushed his brother playfully across the room.

"You thought you'd got away with that one, didn't you? Alex gets all the opportunities, poor Strauss gets none." Alex' voice adopted a more serious tone. "Which one of us was invited to try out for Arsenal Football club? Which one of us wouldn't go because he knew he'd fail a drug test?" He looked at his older brother in disgust. "Strauss, you need to quit that shit. It's ruining your life."

"Lighten up, a little bit of weed never killed anybody."

As a solicitor Alex was fully competent, as a barrister, he excelled. On any given day, Mr Goldstone, could and would, convince twelve of his peers of almost anything. Despite the success of his career Alex was lonely and unhappy. This realisation came to fruition when his brother and Helen first separated. Strauss was so upset because he felt he was losing something. Alex had

never experienced, or had a relationship with, anything or anybody, he deemed so precious. He couldn't comprehend the concept, the very thought of the loss of someone, or something, could generate so much fear and anxiety. Now Alex was beginning to ask himself questions, questions to which he had no answers. Life wasn't that great, indeed, when he thought about it, even his career was fast becoming a disappointment. If he were so truly fantastic, why did he get all the trivial, mundane cases? The firm represented many high profile politicians, celebrities, sports stars, Alex just got the dregs. After five years of proving himself and walking many a guilty client, he was convinced the old boy network was the governing force and that a colour bar was most certainly in effect. The sound of Strauss' voice, disturbed Alex' thoughts.

"I am flying out to L.A. tomorrow night." The elder brother announced. "Places to go, people to see, can't be sitting down with you drinking all day. I need to fix up." Strauss placed his bottle firmly on the coffee table, rising to his feet. "I will catch up with you before I go, it'll be tomorrow, you are having dinner at your mother's, right?"

"Shit, I forgot. On that subject, have you told your mother your plans?"

"Next stop on the line, dreading it!" cringed the brother.

"Rather you than me," offered Alex. "What about your wife? What does she think about all of this? Have you even told her?"

"That's sorted! I sent her an email at work,"

"I thought you said, she said, she was on leave from work?" Alex was suspicious.

"Two words Junior! Method and madness. If I tell her before I go, that's one whole long conversation I don't need to have, during which, I would hope, she would beg me to stay. Like a fool I would probably cave in and miss out on a trip of a lifetime. This way when she's back at work, she'll get my email, by which time I'll be long gone. I won't be taking my phone. She needs her space. I need to do this. Job done."

"Tomorrow then." Alex, offered his hand to his brother. The method and madness plan pleased Alex. His brother truly was thinking about self-preservation.

"Tomorrow bro," Strauss agreed, he embraced his brother before leaving, in the elevator on the way down, Strauss had but one thought. What would the world be like without, Helen?

Alex sat pondering for a moment or two before he picked up Strauss' bottle. The way his brother had hugged him, there seemed to be something extra in the squeeze. It felt very final. Perhaps it was because, although they didn't live in each other's lives, they were at least always local, moments away in the event of crisis. He further realised, his brother had consumed a mere mouthful of lager, just the neck had gone. The greater part of the bottle's contents remained. Alex smiled to himself, in his own misguided crazy way, his older brother was making dynamic and positive steps. The thought of his brother's predicament saddened him. It was as if Strauss were somehow being penalised for trying to buck the trend. When it came to commitment, relationships and nuptial affairs, the Goldstone men had a pretty poor CV. Alex' father was around for maybe the first ten years of his childhood, less maybe, he wasn't exactly sure. As a child, Alex remembered the relentless arguments. Arguments centred around his father's endless cheating and his continual stream of affairs. He supposed that his mother had just plain run out of forgiveness in the end. Inevitably the day came when she would send him packing. The next time they saw their father, he had become ill and was hospitalised. A weakened shadow of the man they had once called Daddy. Shortly after that, there was the funeral. Daddy's death was nothing to do with a broken heart, or the loss of his family. No, nothing as tragic or dramatic as that. It was just cancer, plain and simple. Dad's brother, their Uncle Rufus, he had been cut from the same cloth. Rufus emigrated to the United States, something to do with a career in music, jazz rang a bell. Like Alex imagined, was the fate of many West Indians in the United States, things went wrong, it was bound to happen. This was the music industry, an inherent party culture, drugs and women. Uncle Rufus had a son, Morgan, only god in heaven knew who or even where the mother was. Morgan came to live with Alex and Strauss for a few years. One day Morgan simply vanished. Alex believed his cousin had gone home, back to the states with Uncle Willie. Maybe that was why Alex didn't get too involved with women with a view to, future

and family. That diabolical track record of the previous generation lead him to believe, that all the writings pertaining to the sins of the father, were very probably true. Alex changed his thoughts, today was a Saturday, a day of sport, beer and total relaxation. These were his last thoughts before he fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Alex tried his best to focus on the three empty beer bottles on the coffee table, his brain struggled to reconcile all the new data being gleaned by his senses. The bottles were now in focus, the TV wasn't, the images were a blur. The light streamed through the window, his eyes struggled to adjust, for in sleep they were in darkness. A loud persistent buzzing noise troubled him. For a moment he lay on the couch in a state of total confusion, then he saw the light, the light that emanated from the flashing display of his phone. Now it all made sense, three beers downed, he had been ripped from his sleep by the sound of his mobile phone. If only he'd had the foresight to switch the damn thing off, it moved across the surface of the table as it vibrated. The name Helen gleamed on the display, he toyed with the idea of not answering it. Unfortunately, this was one of those times when brain and body were not in complete synchronisation. Although he had decided not to answer the call, his finger had already pressed the green button.

"Yes, Helen, what's up? Where's the fire." he grunted.

"Fire, What fire?, it's Helen, have I caught you at a bad time? Were you asleep?"

"Not anymore, but I should be, I was dreaming, there was this naked woman with huge titties, and we.."

"Alex Goldstone! You are filthy!" snapped his sister-in-law.

"Nah, you are just upset coz the naked woman in my dream wasn't you, what's up anyway?"

"I wanted to talk to you, I need some good advice." Helen asked rather sheepishly.

"Okay, okay. I can make some time later, if it's that important."

"Actually, I am outside now." Helen had him cornered. Alex' heart sank, he didn't need this. Nevertheless, he pressed the button on the intercom to let her into the building. At the end of the day, Helen was his sister-in-law, family was family, and family was supposedly important. The fragmentation of previous generations had led the two brothers to make a conscious effort to look after each other. Strauss' situation was now somehow Alex' cross to bear.

That's the way it worked in the Goldstone family. On the way to the bathroom Alex opened the front door to his apartment, he could hear the lift on it's way up, his unwelcome visitor would arrive well before he had finished emptying his bladder.

"Yoohoo! Alex, where are you?" her little voice called to him.

"Using your skill and judgement, you tell me!" Alex shouted over the splashing sounds.

"Oh, I get it. Peeing is important, right. You could at least have shut the door."

"You're damn right, peeing is important. I can go without sex for two or three days, but peeing, it just has to be done. " The click click sound of shoes on a wooden floor accompanied Helen from the hall into the kitchen, there was a, squeak, followed by a chink, and then a thud, as she closed the door to the refrigerator.

"Why don't you just help yourself to a beer? Make yourself at home, why don't you?" Alex shouted sarcastically from the bathroom. By the time he had completed his task and left the bathroom, Helen had made herself comfortable on his sofa. Alex sat on the sofa opposite, but said nothing. The brother in-law had decided that he was definitely under the influence, but he was not actually drunk. Alex needed to get through this encounter carefully, it would be easy to say something that his brother would regret.

"Come on Mrs Goldstone, tell me what's up?" Alex felt he had waited long enough. If somebody didn't take the initiative, they would be sitting in silence and he would fall asleep again.

"Have you seen or spoken to Strauss?" Helen began. Alex rolled his eyes, sighing heavily.

"Of course I've seen him. Yes, I've spoken to him. Why wouldn't I? I'm his brother. "

"How is he? Is he okay?" she bowed her head when asking the question.

"Let me get this right. You are asking me how your own husband is?" Alex was rubbing the sleep from his eyes, already he was irritated. "Please Helen, I really don't want to talk about this. Actually Helen, I am not going to talk about this. No, it's you twos problem, not mine."

"I just wanted to know that he is, at least, okay," she begged.

"Well, why don't you ask him, you both have phones. I'm not into passing messages and information and stuff, no!"

"Strauss doesn't answer his phone to me anymore, I rang him at work, they told me he was unavailable and would not be available for the foreseeable future. I think he may have left."

"Helen. doesn't the expression 'unavailable for the foreseeable future.' Doesn't that in itself answer all of your questions?"

"I just want to know that he is doing okay," she persisted.

"Pray tell me. Why wouldn't he be? Personally, I've never been married, but I guess it can hurt like a bitch when your wife leaves you." Alex switched the TV off with the remote.

"Don't get me wrong, I do still love him but it's like he has got stuck in a rut, and our marriage it just ain't going anywhere."

"I see, blame the other party for your mistakes, that's standard nowadays. Where is it you would like your marriage to go? It's a marriage for god's sake, it ain't like it's a number forty-seven bus. 'til death us do part, that's where it's suppose to go." Alex did not hide that he was vexed.

"I don't know! Why are you blaming me?" Helen was upset by Alex' lack of sympathy.

"That's exactly right, you don't know, you haven't a clue, but you expect Strauss to provide all the answers for you, don't you? Because he can't do that, you have taken your marriage and are in the process of flushing it down the toilet. You think things should be better than they are, but you don't know how to improve them. Is that about right? Let me tell you some facts, honey. I don't know how my brother is. My brother was just like me, but a long time ago he met you Helen. Meeting you, gave him a whole new set of responsibilities. Strauss gave up any dreams of fortune and glory, just so he could be with you. Do you realise what you have done? You stupid woman!"

"No! What have I done?" Helen wasn't used Alex being hostile. Alex laughed and shook his head, he looked on her with contempt.

"Sometimes I think that you are really dumb. You live in a different world. You have come to me, your brother-in-law,

claiming advice but really in search of sympathy. Said brother-in-law is a half drunk barrister. You've hurt my brother, all you were ever gonna get from me is the original hostile witness." Helen really didn't get it, but that had always been the problem. Helen never got it. Alex liked Helen, he truly did, but intellectually she just didn't have it, she never made the grade, not for him and not for his brother. Nevertheless, she was his brother's choice, that in itself meant that she had to be respected. Alex refocused his mind.

"When in doubt, horses, they just run most of the time, they have nothing to be afraid of, but they just run anyway. The first sniff of anything that could be danger, they are off. You need to stay in there and fight the good fight." He put his fist against her cheek and pushed her face away.

"So, what would you do?" her next question. Alex, shook his head violently. Why was he even having this conversation?

"Ah, my dear girl," he smiled. "You want me to tell you, that you've done the right thing, and that we'll be friends forever, whatever. No, I don't think so."

"So you're saying, you really can't help me." Helen seemed lost.

"Helen! Even if I could help!" he exploded. "What exactly would you like me to do?"

"You, you seem to understand things clearly, I want you to explain things to Strauss, so he too understands, as you do." Helen's gaze was trained onto the floor.

"Some things you should keep to yourself." He walked through into his kitchen, rubbed his face with his hands and pushed the red button on his kettle. He felt that he knew exactly where this conversation was going and he would rather not partake in it. It was however, in his nature to push on and get to the bottom of things. Alex was driven by a potentially hazardous desire for truth. Helen sat rocking with her head in her hands, like she was a seasoned sectioned mental health patient. Alex decided it was probably best to play ignorant and let the truth come out, even if he didn't want to hear it.

"So do you think it was a mistake to move back to your mother's house?" his first question in a new direction of cross-examination. Helen removed her hands from her face, her face was red, her eyes bloodshot.

"I had to, I had nowhere else to go!" Helen snapped at him. The waterworks started.

"I really don't understand. Why did you need to go anywhere? You ain't no horse, why do you feel the need to run? Where's the threat? Who's the enemy?" Alex turned up the heat.

"How could I lay next to him in our bed? How could I look him in the eye?" now she was losing him

"Erm, the same way you always have? I don't understand. What happened? What had changed?"

"You don't understand, none of you understand! I was alone!" Helen was almost screaming. Alex closed his eyes, convinced a confession was about to come and he was not sure how he was going to deal with it. It was becoming quite apparent that his brother's wife had committed a crime of the infidel nature. On the one hand, he didn't want to hear it, but on the other Helen needed to tell somebody, else he feared she might do something inherently stupid, undoubtedly a woman on the edge.

"Helen, I can try to understand, calm down." Alex pleaded.

"No!" she screamed. "You will never understand, everything was perfect, then I was sick, it wasn't my fault!" Helen, immediately was the recipient of Alex', one hundred percent, undivided attention. Sick? This was not in the script. This wasn't what she was supposed to be saying, suddenly he had no idea where this was leading.

"Helen, what was it that caused you to be sick?" Alex, spoke slowly and earnestly.

"I don't know, maybe the food, maybe the water, but probably the drink. There was lots of drink. Way too much drink!" she replied, laughing hysterically. Alex continued questioning her, his manner slow and deliberate.

"Where were you, Helen? Where did this all take place? All the drinking and partying."

"I never said partying! No, no partying! Don't put words in my mouth. Alanya Turkey, on our five year wedding anniversary." She laughed taking Alex' beer bottle from the table, she drained it, went to the fridge, got another bottle and began to drink, rapidly. Now Alex's brain was getting up to speed, he

remembered when they went to Turkey, but how was this leading up to a confession of her infidelity?

"Like you say, I have ruined his life. It's true, things can never be same," she sobbed.

"But how have you ruined his life?" Alex was still trying to second guess the outcome. This seemed to be the thriller of any Hollywood producers dreams.

"You don't understand, you will hate me, you will have good cause to hate me. I can't tell you, you already know." Helen slammed down the empty beer bottle and headed for the cabinet in which he kept his selection of spirits. Alex made no attempt to stop her, he felt a little anxious, this experience was beyond intriguing, Different tactics were needed. He shouted to the kitchen as he heard liquid filling a glass.

"Have you told your mum? Does she know about this?"

"What? and have her hate me too." Helen was already filling her second glass.

"Come here," Alex beckoned his guest, "sit down." He pushed Helen into a chair, leaning over her with a hand on either of her knees. "What is it they say about the truth?"

"The truth my friend is a beautiful thing," she giggled. Oops, wrong answer, he didn't see that one coming. The question would have to be rephrased.

"What is it the truth can do for you? he asked, maintaining his composure.

"The truth, the truth can proper fuck you up." Alex knew the alcohol was now seriously affecting Helen. The obscenities always rolled quickly from her tongue the more she became inebriated.

"No Helen," he made to take the glass from her but she pulled away. "The truth Helen, the truth will set you free. Do you want to be free, free of this thing that's messing up your head?" Alex returned to his chair. Helen drained her glass and refilled it. A period of silence followed, an indefinite extension of nothingness between tick and tock.

Eventually, the heavens opened, moist red eyes previously emitting the occasional tear quickly changed to the source of a stream of tears continually running down her face.

"Go back to the top, tell me, you're gonna have to tell somebody." Alex looked at the clock, he made a conscious decision not to speak until the minute hand reached the six. Helen looked up hoping for some sort of divine inspiration or salvation, there was none forthcoming.

"We'd been married five years, Strauss said he was gonna make it just like our honeymoon. We'd been having a few problems, nothing too serious. The first three days I was just so sick, I couldn't eat anything. I tried but it just came back up again. Strauss, he was really great, he stayed in our room with me most of the time. I knew he was bored. On the Sunday, I felt better, in the evening he asked if I was well enough to come downstairs and try something light to eat. I said no, because I didn't want the public embarrassment if it repeated on me. I really did feel okay though, you know, better." Alex could see in Helen eyes that in her mind, she was actually there, reliving events. Still, he was clueless as to what had happened.

"Strauss, said he was going downstairs to eat, and would be half an hour, he came back really quickly, maybe, I think he did. I'm not too sure, I'd dozed off, he brought me some soup, chicken soup. He always said that chicken soup could remedy eighty-two percent of the world's problems." She laughed and wiped some tears from her face. "The bowl of soup was on a tray with a rose. He'd got a portable CD player with him, I think he borrowed it from the chef in the kitchen. It was really romantic, he put on some music and spoon fed me chicken soup. The next thing we were making love and after, after he fell to sleep." Again she laughed, there was a smile there now, she wiped more tears from her face with her sleeve. "I used to hate it when he fell to sleep straight after. He told me that he always fell asleep because he was obliged to put his best efforts and all his energy into the experience, for my satisfaction. If he still had one iota of energy left at the end, he would be disrespecting me. It was total crap of course, but that's why I love him." Without any prompt from Alex, she returned from her mental excursion. "I felt really great. I just felt so good. You know, like every problem I ever had was gone. I'd never felt this good in my entire life." In his mind Alex thought that he had it worked out but said nothing, he studied her face. Helen was pretty, in a girlish kind of a way, her face wet with tears, she was smiling

as she recalled the events. Very quickly, her smile vanished and the tears started once again, she was back in the present.

"When we got home, I felt sick again, but I didn't think. Nothing I ate stayed down. I thought maybe that same bug had returned. I didn't relate what had happened in Turkey, to my illness. Alex, I'd never been pregnant before." From the way she said the word pregnant, Alex knew she had never told anybody this story. It was like the word has been stuck in her throat for an age, plotting its escape." Helen continued. "I was always taking my pills, every day, they must of come back up, you know when I was being sick. How was I supposed to know?" Alex looked at the clock, the minute hand had just passed the five, he just nodded. Helen sipped her drink, she seemed drained, she had to say the rest even though it was obvious to all.

"It's really strange, in retrospect, I knew when I conceived, I knew to the second. At the time I just felt different, I hadn't a clue why. At first, I came back feeling so good, the feeling of well-being didn't last very long. Within a few weeks, I felt yuck, it was like I was dying, every morning felt like a hangover. I couldn't photocopy at work, the odour made me nauseous. Oh God! Strauss his overalls! The smell of them was so horrible, he smelled nasty, the stink of the grease made me wanna heave. I took to going for drink after work so he was all washed up before I got home. Funny!" she let out a little laugh. "He thought I was having an affair because I was never home. We argued the whole time and I knew it was this thing," she touched her gut. "This thing was causing the arguments, it was beginning to ruin my life, I had to get rid of it. It was destroying my life, my marriage. You know, I actually believed it was it or me, a matter of survival, my life wasn't big enough for the both of us. So I did it, I had a termination. Afterwards, I sat at home alone. It was no longer controlling me, I could think properly. It was then I realised what I had just done. I had committed multiple murder. Not only had I killed my child. I'd killed my husband's child, your mother's, my mother's grandchild, your niece or nephew, just gone. Had I gone fucking insane? Don't you think I knew that Strauss had given up everything for this, his life, to have a family. I just wanted to feel good again and to know which way was up. It was controlling me!" Alex, a man, try as he might, he would never fully understand. He could do no more than

to shrug his shoulders and note that she had never used the word, baby, it was it.

"Helen why? Surely somebody could have helped you. Why didn't you talk to somebody?" Alex temporarily felt some sympathy for her. He observed that she had her hand placed below her stomach during the whole conversation. Occasionally, she'd rubbed her abdomen, like something inside her needed comforting, or at the very least deserved an apology.

"Don't tell me, I know, if I had just spoken to somebody, somebody with experience. But you don't understand, I went crazy. In my head, it was all out of control."

"Helen this is a mess, I can see where your coming from, and I can see what your doing."

"You can?" she looked up.

"Yup, see, you've done what you've done, that's history. I'm a man that believes in, never say never. Sadly there is no way on God's green earth my brother Strauss is ever going to concur, let alone understand, forget any hopes of forgiveness. I'm glad that you brought this to my attention and I beg you don't ever tell anybody else." There was a vicious tone in Alex' last sentence, Helen felt threatened.

"You said, well at least, I thought, you understood." Feeling frightened, she returned her gaze to the floor. Seeking reassurance, she tried to touch Alex' arm but he quickly snatched it away. "Helen, what you have done is a terrible, evil, and wicked. Ever since your abortion, termination, call it what you like. You've done crazy things because you just can't take the guilt. Everything you are doing is making a dire situation, worse. You may feel you have to do something. Surely, there must be something you can do, but do nothing, touch nothing. Everything you touch, you are infecting and soiling. Helen, you alone must live with your grief. There is nothing that you can do, therefore do nothing. It's called pain Helen. What would the world be like without, pain?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Morgan strode across the campus car park, turned the corner and leaned against the wall. The dealer had a broad smile for all the students as they filed past, going about their daily business. The sun was hot today, like it was everyday in Oakland. Morgan thought he looked really cool, sporting a string vest, stripy jeans resembling pyjamas and his four hundred dollar trainers. He wore his dreadlocks tied back using an Oakland Raiders hair bobble. A group of students stopped opposite him, one of the group leaned on the wall beside him. The two men stood together looking into the California sunshine. The rest of the group huddled around.

“What’s your poison?” smiled Morgan, without altering his gaze.

“You got four fifties?” came the mumbled reply. Morgan reached into his little leather bag, before tucking some packets into the student’s top pocket. The occasion was reminiscent of feeding ducks or pigeons, there was a frenzy as students handed over their cash in favour of drugs. Morgan and the first student touched fists, before the whole group of students moved on.

“Y’all have a nice day now!” Morgan called after them, “The future of our nation, fucking junkies each and every one.” He tried to unravel the screwed up notes before putting them into his pocket. A good few hundred dollars in ten and twenty dollar denominations. The cash was all screwed up, he knew it was all there, there was no need to count it. Those little white kids all believed he would hunt them down and kill them for a missing dime. The dealer’s smile broadened, he pushed his money into his pocket. As Morgan began to walk away he collided with a colossus of a man. The man must have come from the college football team, he was huge, no not huge, the man was humongous. Morgan tried to act cool and unintimidated.

“Wassup big boy?” Morgan looked the man up and down, sizing him up.

“I hear you got something for me.” The guy had to stoop to whisper into the dealer’s ear.

“What d’ya need?” smiled the dealer.

"Just the ten."

"Forget that!" Morgan kissed his teeth. "There ain't been no ten dollar bags round here since a Kennedy was resident in the White House."

"Not ten dollars, I want ten gees." This character spoke calmly. In his earlier years Morgan's greed had always been his weakness, now he would exercise caution. Feeling his back pocket, finding the comfort he sought, instantly he felt more confident.

"Yeah, I can do that my brother, gimme a number and I'll call you, let you know when and where." The giant once again leaned forward, whispering into Morgan's ear. Morgan could feel the weight of the man pushing him back against the wall.

"No, my brother. I have come for Doc's ten gees, your time my brother, is up." Morgan tried to wriggle away but the big man moved too swiftly. Before he knew it, a massive hand was around Morgan's throat, he wasn't choking him, it was a firm but gentle clamp of a grip that threatened to snap his neck with ease. Morgan reached into his back pocket, with his right hand he pulled out his blade, he pressed it to the right side of the man's stomach.

"Do you feel me?" Morgan whispered to the man, through smiling yet clenched teeth, the man's body stiffened as he replied.

"There's a detector at every gate and every doorway. You don't have a blade so don't front on me, coz I'll hurt you. I'll hurt you badly."

"The detectors, detect metal. Ivory is wonderful, an amazing natural product of nature. Did you know? you can sharpen ivory so well a man can use it to shave, and if you polish it real well, even blood won't stain it. If you was white, you being so big and all, I might mistake you for a god damned refrigerator, and if I did, I might just open you up and take out a cold Budweiser and maybe even a couple slices of pizza." Morgan ran the weapon up and down the man's side as he spoke. "What's your name son?"

"Davis," the man's voice was calm, Morgan couldn't sense any fear in the tone.

"Davis, you are gonna turn, walk, and not look back. Tell Doc, next time he needs to send me a message, use the US postal service, SMS or even AOL. They way he does it now, I just hate the waste when I have to dispose of the packaging. Tell your buddy to think green, save the planet." The man raised both hands high into

the air, took two steps back, turned and was gone. Morgan watched the sasquatch like figure disappear into the crowd. Davis had made a favourable impression on the dealer, the two would meet again, only next time, things would be different.

Morgan paused, examining his ivory knife before putting it away. The knife had got him out of many sticky situations. All the metal detectors at the college didn't affect him, he freely moved from zone to zone. The idea for an ivory knife came from the Glock he'd found years ago. He'd seen a movie, leading him to believe Glockes were made of porcelain and worth a fortune. He was both shocked and disappointed the day he tried to bring the gun into college. All the alarms had gone off. The Glock was still in his possession he had it hidden away at home. He didn't know exactly why he kept it, he just did. Morgan Goldstone wasn't actually a student, he had been years ago but he'd flunked out. For years, or so it would seem, Morgan came here to sell drugs, mainly cannabis and crack cocaine. Goldstone had more front than the local mall, he operated on his little ever decreasing patch within the college campus. The bigger dealers were always trying to move in. The latest dealer wanting a shot at the title was a man named Doc. Doc, in his generosity had said that Morgan could continue to operate, but needed to pay him ten grand for the patch. Yes, Morgan did have a few dollars stashed away for a rainy day, but there was no way he was handing over his hard earned cash, not to this gangster. Besides, he knew how things worked. Give the man the ten grand today, he's going to want another twenty grand tomorrow. As usual Morgan was going to have to front this one out, sending that henchman back with a damp patch in his trousers was just the first step.

Morgan had a reputation for being straight, even honest in a criminal sort of way. People knew he would never start trouble but he was sure to end it. No way could anybody back him into a corner. Morgan would step down to nobody. This current situation was a potential problem. Charlie Hobbs was the name of the last self-appointed gangster to try to strong-arm Morgan. Charlie doesn't come around anymore, on account of him wanting to keep

the one good eye he has left. Morgan was sentenced to two years suspended sentence for bashing Charlie, he needed to be careful.

Most of the lessons Morgan had learned in life, he learned from his Grandpa. Papa was something of a rolling stone. Although in her prime she may have been a brilliant jazz vocalist with the world at her feet. Mummy, prior to her death was a blatant crack-whore. Ironically, it was heroin, not crack-cocaine that lead to her demise. Exactly where that stone had rolled to, or indeed, if it was still rolling, Morgan had neither clue nor care. Most of his early life was spent with his Grandpa and his English cousins, Alex and Strauss. All three of them had grown up to be independent stand up kind of guys, under the guidance of Grandpa Willie. Willie had taught all of the boys to look after themselves. The day Grandpa had come back to the States, he brought Morgan with him. Eventually Grandpa had died, not for any reason of gross injustice. There was no sad unfortunate whim of circumstance or twist of fate. Grandpa had simply got old, apparently that's what happens to old people, eventually, they just die.

Around here, things were getting uglier and uglier with each passing day. Everyday, without exception, at some point in time you would find yourself within earshot of a gunshot, now this worried Morgan. Morgan had a simple theory. A bullet from a handgun travels pretty much the same speed as sound, If you hear the gunshot it means it hasn't killed you. It's the time you don't hear gunshots that's the time you should really worry about. Morgan needed to get out. Oakland, like everywhere else, was turning to shit. There was a pressing desire to get out, he just didn't know where to go to. He'd saved money, there was no significant other, he was pretty much good to go. Go where? That was the big money question. Go and live amongst the red-necks? They would give him a fair trial and a fine hanging. In his own words, he weren't going out like that. The benefit of experience told Morgan, where there were black people, there was greed, violence, guns and premature death. Right now, in the world he lived in, he had already exceeded his life expectancy. He smiled to himself, remembering a recent telephone conversation with his cousin, Strauss. Strauss had to advised him to move to Dallas, apparently

nobody ever dies in Dallas. The time in which Morgan was living was almost certainly borrowed. Morgan made a mental note, he would speak to his cousin. Maybe he would visit them, see what it's like. From memory England was cold, wet and grey, but whilst he was there as a child, he couldn't recall ever hearing a gunshot. Perhaps, England was better, they carried umbrellas, not guns, it would be a new world to him. What would the world be like without, guns?

CHAPTER FIVE

Forty-four dollars and eighteen cents for a few little bits of shopping, just the essential groceries. Today was Wednesday, Georgia didn't get paid again until a week on Friday. Twenty dollars and change was all she had left. The contents of her purse and whatever tips she could make would have to last her until pay-day. Not that it really mattered, pay-day would not be her saviour, it never was. It was always the same every month, there just wasn't enough money to go around, it was a struggle just to keep the wolf from the door. The young woman walked the half mile or so from the store to her small apartment. Why was she shopping? at six o'clock in the morning. Why was she walking, carrying two heavy bags of shopping? Georgia had a car. Okay, so it wasn't the best car in the world but it took her from A to B. If that were true, why was she walking? The answer to all her questions, Andrew that lazy bastard, he'd commandeered her car, she didn't even know where it was. Georgia sighed heavily as she put down her shopping inside the front door, she kicked the door shut with her foot. Georgia didn't dream of a Mercedes-Benz and diamond studded jewellery, she just wanted to get her hair done from time to time, maybe the odd new pair of shoes. There must be more to life than this, she thought as very quietly she began to put the shopping away. Feeding the cupboards, that's what she called it, all the time continually feeding those cupboards, but the cupboards were always hungry, they were bottomless. Inside those cupboards lived the mother of all parasites, or maybe a gigantic rat, something ate all the food, it ate faster than she could provide. She would have a cup of coffee and five minutes of what she called, me time.

"I knew that I'd forgotten something," she cursed aloud. "Sugar," again she sighed switching off the percolator, orange juice would have to suffice. In the bed, under the covers was the parasite, the massive rat. The rat didn't stir, secretly she wished it dead. Why did everything go wrong in her life? When she was a teenager, she used the excuse that it was because she was black. Now she was older, she knew that was untrue. God didn't hate black people, that notion was ridiculous. Now that she was more experienced, more mature, she totally understood, God just hated,

her. Who else would he do these things to? Her last boyfriend, Justin, she actually thought she loved him. Okay, so he cheated on her, maybe they could have gotten through that, but to catch him having sex with her best friend, in her own bed, Georgia hadn't even finished paying for the damned thing. That particular indiscretion was probably unforgivable. Then again, women have forgiven worse crimes. However, seeing as her best friend was a bass player named Tony. Said Tony being a man, there could be no forgiving, and there could be no going back. For this issue, Georgia had closure. Homophobia was the definitely the issue. Georgia was not a homophobic per se, she had resolved this herself, there was no need of a therapist. If she translated the word literally. Yes, she was scared of men, but only the man, taking her man. How do you fight that? It's not like you can get a boob job or something. If your man likes other men, you have lost. It's probably best to bough out gracefully, maintain whatever dignity you have left. It doesn't matter how much steak you've got in the freezer, if your man turns vegetarian, the game is up. This latest boyfriend, Andrew the parasite, the rat, he was a new low, even for her. Sometimes people try to encourage you when they think that you are down. The words of those people now annoyed her. They'd told her, it couldn't get any worse. What the hell did they know? It had just gotten worse, much worse. She'd promised herself no more musicians, but she'd let herself down. When they first met, Andrew White promised her the world, to date, he'd given her only two things, a vaginal rash and bad credit. Why was it, she worked two jobs? while he spent his days in bed, his afternoons trying to be creative, and his evenings getting laid by any bitch that wasn't her. Georgia's, me time, was over, it was nearly eight o'clock, she needed to go to her cleaning job.

The actual day wasn't important, if I could say it was Friday the 13th then we may have a greater understanding of pattern or design. I can say, it was early in the afternoon, Andrew was awake by the time she returned from her morning cleaning job. The apartment looked like the end of a garage sale, as usual he'd done nothing, his fingers were for plucking, not lifting. Why did he see it as beneath himself to pick up his own mess, she wasn't his mother. Georgia passed him on her way to the kitchen, at last now

she could have that coffee, she thought, putting the milk into the fridge. Just five more minutes of ,me time, that's all I need. Her feet hurt, she was tired, it had been her intention to catch the bus but she'd forgotten her purse, she'd walked the mile to work. Soon after this break, another double shift in the bar beckoned. Georgia, thought to call in sick but she desperately needed the money. The next sequence of events was truly bizarre, it was to change her life. Even now, she could remember it in such detail. She'd only wanted five minutes, close to an hour had passed. Georgia sat staring into space, assessing and re-evaluating her life. She was returned from her self-induced psychosis, somewhere a church bell tolled. Her coffee had gone cold, instant coffee would have to do, no time to make a fresh cup now. Next to the kettle, her purse, open and empty, her twenty dollars gone. As she turned, Georgia was sure she caught the reflection of the television screen in the glass fronted door of the crockery cabinet, an image of the grim reaper flashed across the screen. Was she over tired? Or was she just losing her mind?

"Jesus H. fucking Christ, what is happening to me?" she muttered to herself before addressing the other. "Andrew, where's my car?" she asked looking at his grease covered face.

"Yeah, right," he began nonchalantly. "Baby, I didn't need it this week so I lent it to my friend Dawn, she had to go Los Angeles to see her folks, she'll be back on Sunday." In Georgia's mind she replayed the images from a DVD he'd made her watch, the mushroom cloud over New York.

"You lent my car to a woman that I don't know, for a whole week, while I am walking around on foot and catching the fucking bus!" she remembered the name of the film, *Nuclear Deterrent* something.

"Dawn hadn't seen her folks in ages, have a heart." Andrew wiped his mouth with a serviette, screwing it up and threw it toward the bin. The serviette missed it's target, landing on the floor. Andrew glanced at it before taking another piece of chicken, she would pick it up, she always did stuff like that. Georgia wished she could win the lottery this week, she didn't want to be rich, she just needed enough money to pay people to kill him. She wondered if she was having a mental breakdown. If

questioned, she would swear under oath she just saw a shadow passed over the serviette, then Andrew, then his guitar.

"What happened to the money, my fucking money!" she struggled to maintain a civil tone or tongue.

"Baby, I woke up starving, I got a bucket of chicken." Andrew spoke with his mouth full. Please, she looked skywards as if to pray, just kill him, put him out of my misery. Yesterday, Georgia had waited ages at the drug store to collect his prescription. It had made her late for work, he didn't care. Georgia opened her fist, somehow the ticket from yesterday was in her palm. The ticket they give you while you wait for the prescription to be filled, number sixty-two, how did it get into her hand? she hadn't it a moment ago. Was this sign from up above, after all, he does work in mysterious ways. Almost daily she'd prayed for his death, maybe this was a sign things were in hand. He who was in charge was trying to say that Andrew's number had come up. Georgia laughed, she wasn't that lucky, besides she wasn't religious, not really.

"I saved you a piece of chicken, it's a breast baby." said Andrew, gesturing towards the red and white bucket. Georgia suddenly felt very cold.

"You seem to have managed eleven pieces so far, go on, go for the full dozen. I'm sure there's room for one more inside." Her sarcastic tone and grin were wasted on him, she reached for her cardigan hanging on the back of the door. .

"More for me," he smiled, picking up the last piece and stuffing it into his mouth. Georgia watched, wishing all sorts of misfortune on him as he chewed on the piece of grease filled meat he had forced almost whole, into his mouth. That was the way Andrew ate chicken, he'd try to get the whole piece in his mouth, then pull the bone out after, rather than nibble and twist, as was her more civilised style. The window was open, an eerie gust of wind blew making the curtains flap on an otherwise still day. Andrew's acoustic guitar, his pride and joy, was precariously perched on the arm of the chair, slowly at first, it began to slide. Instinctively he moved to catch it as it fell. Go on smash, wished Georgia as the guitar headed for the wooden floor. Andrew caught it, kind of on the bounce, he smiled as his initial feeling was that the guitar had sustained was no damage. Slowly his face changed, first

he began to cough, holding his throat, he started to choke. Andrew fell back to the floor, choking and making a horrible wheezing sound. Georgia took a step towards him, she stopped. Perhaps God didn't hate her after all. She watched his face change colour, he reached out to her. Georgia didn't need to be able lip read to realise that he was trying to say, *help me*. She looked up at the clock, thinking, what the world be like without, Andrew?

"Sorry baby," she shrugged her shoulders "I got to go to work. Work, work, work, If I didn't have to work so much maybe I'd be there for you when you really needed me. Don't worry about the mess, I'll sort it when I get home." She leaned over his body, "I'll have a spring clean, maybe get rid of some of the garbage, throw out the things that serve no purpose." Georgia felt no guilt. Not only was Andrew's fate in God's hands, whatever happened next was for the common good.

In recent times, Georgia had been doing a lot of soul searching. Initially she'd decided she didn't like white people. More recently and a shocking revelation for a girl of twenty-two years old, she understood, she didn't hate them, it was just that she wasn't one of them. Georgia's mother was a coolie, she came from a Caribbean island, her skin was very light. Georgia herself was fairly light skinned. If forced to described her ancestry, most would guess she carried genes from all three major continents. She'd been fostered by white people, she'd never lived with African-Americans in the city. It was probably today as she walked to work, Georgia decided that she was black, and from now on would live her life accordingly. Out there in the big wide world, she had a brother, he'd be black. Without Andrew, she maybe could save some money. She could seek out her brother, maybe he was rich, maybe he wasn't but at least she'd have some direction in which to find some identity or culture. Morgan Goldstone, somewhere in the bay area was all she had to go on. The Oakland Raiders were her favourite football team. Oakland was a good a place as any to start.

CHAPTER SIX

"Go, run, I'll watch you home!" the man shouted from the doorway, KV ran down the street toward her apartment. Strictly speaking, it was not her apartment. The first time she stepped foot through the door, Morgan had sarcastically said,

"Welcome to rehab." That was an extremely long time ago, and now this most definitely was her home. KV, turned and waved to her boss, Carl, every night he watched her home, she waved to him as she put her key into the lock. Carl in turn, acknowledged her wave before locking his own doors. *Babylon*, read the neon sign above the entrance. There had been several debates as to why the bar was named Babylon. Carl, the owner, he just liked the name. Morgan's definition of the word Babylon was that it meant a wicked and evil place or thing. There was certainly nothing wicked or evil about the bar in which she worked. Babylon was just a regular bar, not even any dancers, nothing like that. It was just the kind of place where people stopped off for one on the way home from work and invariably ended up staying until closing time. There was another guy, a regular, he said something about, *The Tower of Babylon*, a place where all sorts of foreign people went. Apparently they all spoke different languages so they didn't understand one another. Yes, there were times when she could see the similarity. Babylon was another place, like the place she now called home. A place where KV just fitted in like part of the fixtures and fittings. It was beyond belief, there had ever been a day when she had not lived this life.

Let's be clear about this, KV wasn't drunk, she was just tired. Tonight had been an extremely long shift in the bar. Trade had been tediously slow, then she stayed behind for couple of drinks. Customers always bought her drinks, she wasn't allowed to drink them on shift and she wasn't allowed to pocket the cash. The way Carl had explained it was, that if somebody bought her a drink for say, five dollars, she'd get a free drink and he'd make the profit on the sale. If, however she took the cash, then there was nothing in it for him. She had a jar behind the bar, in which the cash built up. KV used her tips to pay for after hours drinks, or on the occasion

she went in on her day off. From time to time Morgan would come in on a bit of a bender and put a dent in the jar's reserves. The jar represented many things to her, it was always there, it was hers, and nobody ever dare touch it.

KV was sitting on her bed her third glass of wine in hand, she couldn't sleep. The thirty year-old Hispanic woman was on balance, content with her new life. When she truly thought about the series of events that had brought her to this place she now called home, it was truly bizarre.

Maybe four or five years ago, there's no fancy way of putting it KV was a hooker, not a fancy call girl, nothing so grand, a plain old run-of-the- mill, street hooker. Circumstance had made her that way, she was not proud, nor was she ashamed. Throughout long periods of her life, she and circumstance had not exactly seen eye-to-eye. In this particularly difficult time, KV had to resort to the oldest known profession to survive. Hopping onto the treadmill, she'd resorted to the use of drugs to take away some of the pain. Very soon she was hooked; she depended on the drugs so she could bring herself to do the work, she needed to work, to finance the drug dependency. For some time KV and the other girls had been having a few territorial issues. A pimp named Juvenile offered himself as the solution to her problems, but linking up with him proved to be not one of her better decisions. Juvenile had done nothing to protect her. All he ever did, was beat her for not making enough cash, she wasn't making the cash, because the other girls kept running her off the beat. On the night in question, she was arguing and fighting with a couple of her co-workers, one of them pulled out a knife.

"Ladies, ladies please! play nicely." A stranger's voice intervened, miraculously the knife vanished. The stranger was about six feet, maybe six-one or six-two. An African American, shoulder length dreadlocks, light suit jacket with jeans. His appearance could best be described as, tidy. For once, Juvenile was actually in the neighbourhood, like a dog he decided to mark his territory.

"Nigger! you need to mind you damn business and walk on." The pimp boomed, puffing out his chest to the stranger. The

stranger was well spoken and polite, you could hear it in his voice as he apologised, smiling.

"Sorry sir, just trying to keep the peace," he proceeded to walk on, to go about his business.

"You damn right to call me Sir, I'm your daddy, I ought to kick you in you ass! Keep the peace! Huh! Do want to feel some lead in your gut?" The other stopped in his tracks, it may have the talk of gunshot that provoked him, he turned and spoke very calmly.

"You are right, this here is none of my business, I am moving on. Unless you are looking for some kind of an academy award, best actor maybe? There's no need to try to act the big man in front of the ladies."

"Just shut the fuck up and walk on nigger!" Juvenile cursed. There was a very noticeable switch in attitude. The man marched up to Juvenile, the smile had gone, the calmness remained.

"Don't tell me what to do, don't ever do that. It'll make me angry."

"What!" Juvenile became quite theatrical. "You're gonna turn green or some shit like that, I should be scared, right?" The stranger looked away, looked back, he placed a finger against his lips, like he was telling somebody, maybe even himself, to be quiet. He pointed a finger, like he'd had an idea.

"Listen son, you, you are just an idiot boy standing there in ya dumb assed prison uniform. You are just waiting to be somebody's bitch." Juvenile looked down at his own clothing, a silk shirt and Armani jeans, the jeans were undone and hitched around the top of his thighs.

"Prison uniform? what the fuck you talking about, nigger? Nigger, who you calling a bitch?" The pimp pulled his gun from the waistband of his boxer shorts, he held it down by his side. Juvenile seemed tense nervous, even. The stranger must have seen the gun but elected to ignore it, he remained both calm and confident.

"Listen son," he started. "With your jeans around your knees, you won't be running very fast, will you?" The stranger ran around in a circle, impersonating a penguin. So the feds will catch you, and when they put you in pen, coz they do put scum like you

in pen. Your ass is already hanging out, ripe and ready, so them boys are gonna love you. Boy, are they gonna just love your ass. If I can adapt what Biggy said. All them dicks and no bitch you're in some serious shit, sorry, they're into your shit." The stranger chuckled as he finished the sentence. The three girls found this amusing. Juvenile got mad, shouting at them.

"What the fuck you bitches laughing at? huh! Shut the fuck up!" He turned back to the stranger, but the man was nowhere to be seen. KV was laughing loudest, attracting Juvenile's attention, she was feeling inspired and foolishly brave.

"Juvenile you are totally fucking useless, a total waste of space! That guy was right, you're just a stupid boy. Move from me! I've had it with you, I'm going back to being on my own. Juvenile, you're never around, when you are around, you can't do shit!" Juvenile didn't take this very well, by way of retaliation he slapped her then threw her over a car bonnet. The pimp began to beat her. The other girls, helpless, stood watching, this was downtown, they were used to this kind of behaviour.

"Can't do shit! Huh!" he screamed, repeatedly bringing the butt of the pistol crashing against the side of her face, again and again. "Can't do shit! Can't do shit!" he matched each phrase to a blow. After the third or fourth strike, KV lay motionless on the ground in front of the car, fully conscious. The hooker just looked up at him coldly, preparing herself for what undoubtedly came next. Juvenile tucked the gun into the back of his waistband and inserted his hand into the front of his shorts.

"Bitch! I'm gonna show you what I can do! I'll show who can't do shit!" He pulled his penis out of his boxers. KV gave Juvenile a defiant stare, followed by a long slow blink. No way was she going to give him the satisfaction of closing her eyes for this, she continued to stare. Be certain, hell would freeze over before she cried. KV would die before she begged, she was ready to make her last stand right here and now. The look in the prostitute's eyes challenged him, her eyes showed defiance, they also possessed a childlike quality, it was this, that saved her. Juvenile lost his nerve, and with it any hope of maintaining an erection. His original intent had been to rape her, right then and there in the street. To make an example of her in front of all, to show them who was boss. Without

an erection this was going to backfire. The whole neighbourhood would be calling him, limp dick.

"Fuck you bitch! I ain't even gonna fuck you, coz you ain't worth fuckin', you're trash, a stinkin' dirty spic, nuttin' but trash, you just a ho." Juvenile had to maintain his image and status. "Listen up bitch! I am gonna piss on you and leave you on the street, you'll smell like the piece of garbage you are!" For this, KV had to close her eyes, she squeezed them shut tightly, waiting for the golden humiliation to descend. She braced herself, this would be the moment of her ultimate shame. KV could never work this beat again, not after this. It was right then and there she made the decision. On the one hand it was a sin, but she remembered the words to a song, a song from the TV, apparently suicide was painless. She relaxed, looking forward to the changes, she was ready, content in both mind and heart, nothing could hurt her, not now, not ever again. Several moments passed, still she waited. Nothing happened, save for the sounds of a crash and a grunt and a thud. When the Hispanic girl eventually summoned the courage to open her eyes, the first thing she saw was the stranger leaning on a shovel, Juvenile's gun in his hand. Juvenile's body lay motionless, the stranger was pulling her to her feet.

"Fark!" she exclaimed, touching her collarbone. "Is he dead?" the gravity of the situation dawned on her, she hadn't been saved, her situation had not improved, she had nowhere to go to now, and nothing to do. She'd been staying with Juvenile, now she was homeless. The state of her face meant she could no longer work, besides, if she tried to work in this part of town again, Juvenile would kill her, confused she looked at the pimp's form and hoped he was dead. Maybe the cavalry had saved her in this particular battle but it appeared as though the war was lost. Realising her predicament, she felt the Latino rage rise within. She would have flown at him, attacking her rescuer. The intent was there, the body wouldn't comply, it hurt. The perceived hero patted her jacket a couple of times to remove the loose dirt. "No, he's not dead, you need to get out of here. You need to be somewhere else for a while." The girl shrugged her shoulders, even that action pained her.

"Do you have somewhere you can go?" he asked. KV wiped her eyes with her sleeve, shaking her head. The man took a moment to observe her, taking her hand, he began to lead her away.

"Were you not afraid of the gun, is dangerous?" she questioned him. The stranger sighed, looking at Juvenile's unconscious form.

"A gun is a dangerous weapon, even with no bullets, you can still threaten people because maybe they don't know. This gun didn't even have a clip in it," he said, discarding the weapon. KV didn't remember too much after that. She remembered the onset of pain, once the adrenalin subsided the pain from her wounds intensified. When she could no longer walk, she fainted, he carried her. When the victim eventually regained consciousness, she recollected an image of another woman, she thought that the woman may be his girlfriend or wife. He'd called the woman Camille, the woman wore white, KV had seen the stranger give her money.

"Jesus, did she get hit by a truck or what? she looks like John Merrick," the woman was heard to say on one occasion. "I'm gonna keep her over sedated, you'll both thank me one day." It was a week before the hooker was back in the real world. The stranger passed her some mashed up fruit in a bowl.

"Welcome to Rehab," he announced, examining her face. "You were quite pretty, you were lucky. When all this heals up, you will be again."

"What day is it? How long...."

"About a week," he answered before she could finish her sentence. Fragmented memories flooded back to her, she began to panic.

"Why do you keep me sleeping? What have you done to me?"

"It's called taking advantage," he smiled at her, she thought to flee and made an effort to get out of the bed but she was far too weak.

"Usted pervirtió a cerdos," she cursed, faking spitting at him, she realised, except for a white t-shirt she was naked, she had no underwear, no make-up, she felt and smelled clean.

"Disgusting pigs, twisted pigs?" he tried to translate her words.

"Perverted! is perverted pigs" she snapped. Trying to work out what was going on, she calmed a little.

"We couldn't find any needle marks, we guessed it was crack. Camille thought to take advantage of the situation, keep you sedated while you go through withdrawal."

"Oh, ci, take advantage," she mumbled, realising that embedded beneath the battered and bruised feeling, she did feel somehow different. "Where is your lady friend?"

"You mean Camille?" he was sympathetic to her disposition. "Camille, is a friend, she's a medical student. I assume you don't have insurance. I don't even no if you're legal. Camille cut a few corners to get you some treatment. You are welcome to stay here until you recover. Yes, I undressed you, great body. You probably could do with a few West-Indian dinners inside you though. When you are up and about, you'll find clothes in the drawer, over there. Any other questions will have to wait. You need more rest."

"One more question. Who is John Merrick?"

"John Merrick," he searched his memory until he knew why she would ask such a question. "John Merrick, the Elephant Man. Your face was busted up pretty bad, don't worry, like I said, you'll be pretty again."

The patient blossomed in the space of a few short weeks. She bore little resemblance to the malnourished bag of bones from that day in the street. Crack cocaine seemed deep in her past. Physical evidence of the conflict with Juvenile had healed. KV was strong again. Now, she thought it was the time, time she would have to start paying her new master. Nothing is for nothing, she knew that. She was going to have to return to work on the street, but now work would be for her new pimp. In her head it all seemed very reasonable. There was no way he could be worse than Juvenile. In a twisted sort of a way, it brought her new confidence to believe she was looked upon as a good investment. She was living in a nice environment, the place was clean and tidy. Since the day she had arrived, KV, had never stepped foot outside the apartment. For the first two weeks, he'd lock her in whenever he went out, after all, he did not know her, nor did he know her level of drug dependency. During her stay, he'd fed her, bought her

clothes, even women's toiletries and sanitary products. She didn't even know men did that sort of thing. To date, this man had asked for nothing in return. One thing gave her cause for concern, she heard the man come and go, day and night. KV was fit and healthy again. Why didn't this man come to her room in the night? It was his right to test his goods. Surely the frustrations of the day needed too be relieved from time to time.

"Maricón," she mumbled, "is must."

KV knew life didn't work this way, human nature wasn't that charitable. She had seen him give Camille money, clothes, food, heat, light, all these things cost money. Pretty Woman was just a movie, it was fiction, Julia Roberts, KV was not. Morgan Goldstone had invested in her, he needed to be repaid. What would the world be like without, Juvenile, she was about to find out.

"KV we're going out today. Time for you to start living a life and earning your keep." Morgan had said before he went out. "I have a few errands to run, then I am taking you somewhere. I'll be back for you around eleven forty-five, be ready. There's some new clothes for you in an orange bag in the kitchen, put them on." He'd bought her some smart black trousers, black skirts, a grey jacket, ten white blouses and shoes, which weren't to her taste.

"How am I to make money dressed in this?" she mumbled to herself. The woman thought she looked like a theatre usher or a government worker but she wore the clothes all the same. Maybe it was her upbringing, unless she had serious objections, KV did as she was told. A rush of nerves ripped through her body as Morgan unlocked and opened the front door. He didn't enter, he simply beckoned her with a single finger. Once on the street they strolled along in no particular hurry. It was warm out, she folded her jacket over her arm. As they passed a barber shop KV noticed her reflection in the mirrored window glass, she almost didn't recognise herself. Life, for so long, had been walking around in the costume of a hooker. She'd forgotten what she looked like dressed as a normal woman, without every one of her assets hanging out for the world to peruse and assess, like vegetables on a market stall.

"Fark!" she exclaimed, immediately covering her mouth with her hand. KV liked, even admired the reflection she saw. She decided to make a conscious effort, try to be that woman and live

up to that image. Three youths emerged from the barber shop laughing, joking and clowning around. One youth pushed another, he would have bumped into her, had she not moved sharply. Without realising, with her free arm she reached inside Morgan's arm so her fingers rested on his biceps.

"Oh, Sorry lady." The youth muttered, removing his cap as a sign of respect. After a few seconds Morgan's eyes moved to her hand, she had not moved it, he raised his eyebrows before looking away. Embarrassed by what she had done, KV withdrew her arm sharply, they carried on walking.

"In here," Morgan announced, extending an arm toward the open door of a bar. Inside, they found two vacant bar stools and waited to be served. KV took the time to read the menu. Maybe Morgan intended that they should eat, she wasn't sure, but the new woman she was would always aspire to be prepared. There were no real meals on the menu, mainly snacks, bagels and sandwiches, that sort of thing. Eventually the proprietor came and stood opposite them on the staff side of the bar. Morgan slid off his stool, pointed to KV, uttering the words.

"One on," he then left, Morgan had to meet up with Davis. Fear struck inside the woman's heart. What was going on? Was this a brothel?

"Ah!" said the man behind the bar. "You must be KV, Morgan speaks very highly of you. Come round this side, I'll show you the ropes. Morgan explained that you are fairly new to this. I'll show you how things work, you know, where everything is etcetera. What shifts did you prefer to work? Was it mainly days or nights?" KV didn't understand. Had she been sold? What kind of place was this? It just seemed like a regular bar, maybe stuff went on upstairs. "Here the hourly wages don't mean shit," he continued. You'll be on the same rate as the other girls. A pretty woman like you will treble her wages in tips. You get paid the first of the month."

"First of the month?" she echoed, the level of her voice was inaudible to him.

"Don't worry about the cocktails, you'll pick them up as you go along." He continued as he busied himself around the bar. "We either don't sell any, or it's a party night and that's all they want. Don't let it phase you, they like the names not the drinks, if

you don't know just serve them anything?" KV just stood there, her jacket folded over her arm, she eyed him suspiciously.

"You want me just to tend bar and serve drinks?" she enquired tentatively.

"Unless you want to sell your body," he offered in jest. "Then again, if women like you sold their bodies. I'd sell this bar today and spend the proceeds on foolish pleasures." KV was in shock, it showed in her face. "I'm so sorry," he immediately apologised. "I didn't mean to offend. It was just a joke."

Morgan came back for her at six-thirty, she'd just done the first legal work since before she could remember, he sat on a bar stool next to her

"KV, have a drink, celebrate. What would you like?" Morgan insisted. KV made to say something but stopped herself. She'd been about to order bourbon but a new woman needed a new drink.

"Sure," she smiled at him. "You choose,"

"A JD and a vodka tonic for the lady." Carl, the owner placed the drinks in front of them.

"My compliments," was all he had time to say before pandering to another's needs.

"To KV," Morgan raised his glass, KV touched her glass to his.

"Is Daniella," she leaned over to him and whispered in his ear.

"Is Daniella what?" Morgan didn't quite follow her.

"Is Daniella, my name is Daniella." she informed him. "Why you call me KV all the time?" Morgan realised in all this time, he had never asked her what her name was.

"You answer to it," he took a sip of his drink before wiping his mouth with his finger. He moved a little closer to her so their conversation could not be overheard.

"You were out of it for a while, I had to lock you in, remember? The people that I did talk about you to, like Camille. I started giving you a name, I'm sorry, I called you *kidnap victim*, that became KV."

"Is okay, I'm not illegal, I'm American, Daniella Dal Salvo but KV, is okay. On the street I have a different name, not many people know me as Daniella but is my name."

Daniella had known none of her family, she was adopted into an American family at a very young age. Her parents were apparently just kids themselves. With her adopted family, it just didn't work out. Daniella was branded as difficult, and so she was in the main, brought up by the state. In state care she grouped with all the Hispanic kids and that's what she preferred to be known as, that's the culture she chose, Hispanic.

There was a day, one of those heart stopping moments. You think you are away, free and clear, something from your past bears it's ugly face and tries to drag you back. Juvenile walked into Babylon, stricken with fear Daniella took a step back from the bar. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Daniella didn't know it, Morgan was outside, he had seen the pimp enter, he slipped inside, unnoticed, he was watching. When Daniella opened her eyes, Juvenile was still there, he waited until the bar was clear before coming to speak to her.

"Hi honey, I got something for ya," opening his hand, he revealed a small polythene bag.

"What can I get you sir?" she looked him straight in the eye. Juvenile didn't know, he was dealing with a different woman. This new woman possessed, more strength, more savvy, she was at the very least, a match for him, even without Morgan as backup. Morgan looked on from behind a pillar, his hand on his knife.

"I want your stinkin' spic little cunt to go out and earn me what you owe me." Juvenile grimaced.

"Stinking spic cunt, is no a cocktail that I know sir. My name is Daniella, would like me to call somebody with a little more experience?" Daniella spied the little knife used for cutting lemons, it was out of sight, below the bar.

"Whatever name your using, I've got what you need," insisted Juvenile, the little bag still open in his hand on the bar. Daniella, powered up, it's a local expression, to be brave and find one's strength.

"I will not lose this job, not for you, not for anybody. I've been places with you, I don't ever want to go back to. You want me to pay you for that bag, you want money, sure." She reached down below the bar. Next, Juvenile let out a high pitched scream. Daniella had brought down the little paring knife, it went through the bag, through his hand and buried itself a good half-inch into the bar.

"Now, whose squealing like a bitch! Is Daniella, not spic cunt." She walked away to serve other customers. Morgan took a step forward, but the regulars, Daniella's new found crew took care of the situation.

"You haven't heard the last of this, you spic bitch," Juvenile threatened as he was escorted from the building.

"Sure she has," Morgan mumbled to himself as he sneaked out undetected.

"Is Daniella!" she shouted after Juvenile.

KV was a hooker programmed to turn tricks with emotional detachment. Daniella, felt dirty, disgusting and ashamed after her one desired yet regrettable night with Morgan. The event took place a few months after they met. Daniella had just gotten her first full-time pay cheque, a cause for celebration, Juvenile had vanished, she'd seen him off, it was a great feeling. She had become friendly with a woman, Natalie, the two ladies had gone shopping together, followed by a night out on the town. Daniella came home feeling good, life was great, she was on top of the world. Morgan had fallen asleep in front of his TV, his bedroom door open. As he lay there she thought about him, normally he was both predictable and consistent. Everyday, he went out to do business. This morning, he'd gone out to take care of business. What was different? Her genuine intention was to sneak in and turn off his TV. On the screen, a chat show about women who had been through similar ordeals to herself, took her attention. Daniella forgot her original intentions, she sat on his bed absorbed, the show finished, she looked over at Morgan asleep in the bed. Daniella looked beautiful, she wore her hair up, her body clad in a very appropriate lady-like dress. She had just earned legal money and paid tax. In his sleep Morgan had pulled the duvet down now, it only covered his legs. Eyeing his muscular body, something stirred

within, a forgotten relative of the hunger pain. Looking at his body, she actually wanted it. Now for Daniella this was an awakening of an emotion she thought long dead.. Daniella Dal Salvo never wanted sex. It's fair to say she couldn't recall a desire for sex at any point during her adult life. Daniella had sex because she had to, either to get money or because she was afraid and needed to appease somebody. Sex was a like a debit card, if she wanted something, certain places would accept it as payment. Actually wanting to have sex, this she couldn't quite comprehend, it was totally alien to her. Nevertheless, she went with her feelings The Latino girl undressed and slipped into his bed, pressing her naked body against his. Morgan's response was not enthusiastically positive, neither was it particularly negative, in retrospect it was more the primeval actions of a man half asleep.

After the event, both lay in bed in silence, neither attempted to speak. Daniella had no idea how she actually felt, she imagined she felt like a normal woman would. When it became obvious that Morgan was not going to speak to, or even touch her, she retired to her own bed. Morgan lay in his bed, thinking of the day's earlier events.

Earlier, Morgan had gone to Juvenile's apartment with the sole intention of speaking to him in a calm and reasonable manner, this situation needed to be resolved. When Morgan realised he had caught Juvenile at home alone with no crew and no backup, he knew he should take full advantage. Morgan knocked on the door, shouting to Juvenile. Juvenile's first mistake was to bolt the door, believing this ensured his own personal safety. Like all dealers, Juvenile had a security gate in front of his front door. Reminiscent of prison bars, one had to unlock the gate and open it outward before you could open the door. Feeling safe and secure, Juvenile shouted threats and abuse at Morgan. Morgan simply asked Juvenile to come out and let bygones be bygones.

"Call it a day, treat it like you lost your wallet. Hey, you're pissed at the time but it happens. Get over it!" Morgan advised. That's when Juvenile, stupidly, told Morgan he was a dead man. Morgan warned Juvenile not to let this situation get out of hand

and therefore become reclassified as, a problem. He proceeded to explain, his own personal theory pertaining to problems.

"Problems my friend," he started. "Problems, are a simple mathematical formula. You see, the sum of a man's problems can never amount to more than five dollars and fifty cents..." As expected, Juvenile didn't understand any of this. Foolishly he continued to threaten and shout verbal abuse. Morgan did not respond, there was no response from Morgan, because he was no longer present. Morgan had walked over to the petrol station, he returned with a can of petrol, a length of rope and a box of matches. As he tied the front door knocker to the security gate, Morgan continued to explain his theory on the resolution of problems.

"Where was I?" he continued. "Oh yes! Five dollars, fifty cents! Well, I already had the rope. Rope is for free, you can pick a piece of rope anywhere. The expensive part, that would be the gasoline. Five dollars for the gasoline, then there's fifty cents for the matches. You can get them for a quarter in some places, maybe K-mart, somewhere like that. See now, tomorrow I can wake all happy and really enjoy my ham and eggs. I can enjoy my ham and eggs because you, as a problem. That's a problem, I won't have tomorrow." As he spoke, Morgan poured the contents of the can through the letter box. Juvenile could smell the fumes, frantically he tried to open the door, not realising, Morgan had tied the front door to the security gate, using the rope.

"Therapy is so expensive, it's design and purpose is purely for the resolution of problems, five dollars, fifty cents for a problem free life! When you see a bargain like that, you just have to take it, don't you? Anyway, do you have any last requests? A last cigarette, perhaps? Juvenile watched through the letter box. Shit, sorry, how insensitive of me? You don't mind if I do, do you?" Morgan was quite deliberate, he struck the match and watched Juvenile's eyes widen. Morgan let the match burn for a moment before lighting the cigarette. He shook the match to put it out, then pretended like he was going to throw it onto the floor. "Oops!" he smiled, "that was almost careless, careless like your mouth." Morgan took out his phone acting like he had a message. "A message from God," he announced. "You, Juvenile, have been delivered, any punishment will be down to him, not me. This whole place stinks of gas. Kids play around here don't they? The

young can be so evil, anyway, what happens to you is not up to me, I have delivered you, I can do no more than that. Morgan had previously weakened Daniella's key to the security gate, before he left, Morgan put the key in the lock and snapped it off. Cutting the rope was no longer an option solution for the pimp.

Albeit in separate rooms, eventually Daniella and Morgan both fell asleep. Daniella awoke in the middle of the night, the siren's of fire engines disturbed her. Out of the window, across town, she could see an apartment burning. Yeah, others had bigger problems than her. The woman's eyes focussed on a billboard. The ultimate disaster movie, *Nuclear Deterrent I – Countdown to Domsday*, was being advertised. Maybe she'd go see that with Natalie.

The next morning Morgan was out and gone long before Daniella awoke, over the next few days he was always up and out before her, returning home only when he believed her to be asleep. On occasion they were both at home together, he couldn't or wouldn't look her in the eye, he barely acknowledged her, he ceased to visit Babylon. An icy cold atmosphere occupied the apartment. Daniella sat with a glass of wine, alone in the bar in the middle of the night. She decided what had happened was wrong, it was just so wrong. It wasn't a simple mistake, it was wrong, as in Old Testament, wrath of God wrong. Daniella guessed that Morgan felt a similar way, she should find somewhere else to go and live. Maybe she could stay at Natalie's until she could get something sorted out. Finances dictated she would have to wait until the end of the month.

Today was Sunday. To Daniella's surprise, Morgan was actually at home, seated at the dining table at the far end of the lounge. In the kitchen Daniella made herself some coffee. As had been the procedure for the last few days, she would go to her room and wait for him to leave the lounge before she entered. Today was different, he called out her name as she passed the door, As if she was being summoned to be sentenced, she at least wanted to have arranged something with Natalie before he threw her out.

"Miss Dal Salvo, take a seat, please," he said, pushing the adjacent chair from beneath the table with his foot. Daniella sat in the chair as instructed, she cowered. If you've ever had a dog that has messed in your house while you were out, you can well imagine her demeanour.

"Okay girlfriend," he began "My Grandpa taught me, if I have nothing good to say, don't say anything at all, hence the recent silence." He paused and drew breath, standing up, he placed his hands firmly on the other's shoulders, forcing her back into the chair, she couldn't move. Two thoughts entered Daniella's mind. Firstly, it was okay, it's not like she wanted pee or anything, she'd only just been. More importantly, a man had her pinned down, he was leaning over her, he was angry, remarkably, she felt no fear whatsoever.

"The night you came to me, it shouldn't have happened! It wasn't right. It was not what was supposed to happen. Things were fine as they were." Morgan became quite animated. "You there in your space, me here in mine. I like to plan things. I don't like chaos and I don't like variables. When I saw you, I wanted to help you. Why? Because I don't like bullies," he released his grip and began to pace. "There's another reason, I don't have time for many people, there's something quite special about you. I knew you were in the wrong place. I brought you here, you recovered. I liked having you around. I have this little space and you, you're actually a nice decent person to share it with. That night, no, it was not part of the plan, you are destined for a better life and I said quite explicitly, you owe me nothing! For you to throw yourself at me like that is disappointing and totally unacceptable. It's everything that I've tried to get you to forget. I have tried to teach you, you are not currency. Your damned pussy is not to be used for payback! You cannot pay me with your body. He made Daniella feel cheap and dirty. Until recently she believed that her conditioning, made her immune to these feelings of shame. The Latin woman's eyes quickly moistened, she ran into her room. Morgan was the one person on the planet that could do this, make her cry.

Daniella lay face down on her bed, thinking of how she'd messed up again. It was a few minutes later that she sensed Morgan's presence in the room.

"It's done. I wouldn't spend too much time reflecting or worrying about it. It can't be undone. I will try to put it out of my mind and convince myself it never happened. I suggest you do the same thing, you're still my favourite girl. I just think you are a little misguided, but we can work on that." She heard her bedroom door close, then the apartment door open and close, he was gone. It was then that the tears started flooding out, maybe it was just relief, maybe it was all the times she'd held back tears in the past, but that afternoon it all came out.

Four years passed and somehow the couple had got stuck in some kind of full on, yet celibate relationship. Invitations to occasions arrived marked Morgan and Daniella, the plus one suffix now defunct. Tonight was one of the nights, the absence of any physical aspect to the relationship caused frustration. Daniella needed to be physically loved. Morgan would be home soon. The time was after three, he rarely stayed out all night. He would bring her Chinese food or something, he always did, like a perfect partner would. Morgan's thoughtfulness was, in her experience, unique. This made her situation more frustrating, her girlfriends, any woman she knew, would kill for a man like Morgan. Time and time again her best friend Natalie joked.

"Pass him over when you're done, he's so perfect." Daniella reached into her bedside cabinet, taking out her vibrator, she held the toy up to her face and spoke to it.

"You my friend, were designed by a man, you are no real friend to a woman," she eyed the power cable from the television to the plug. "A woman would have known, sometimes, just sometimes a girl needs the real deal you can only get from mains power. Before you go thinking it's all about the extra oomph, it ain't even about that. Is about always being there when I need you and never running out. There is nothing you and your little batteries can do for me tonight, or any night. I know, whatever happens, you will run out on me one day." Daniella hated the vibrator because it wasn't Morgan, right now she hated them both. If she didn't love Morgan she wouldn't need the damn thing. She dropped the vibrator on the floor in favour of her wine glass. "I don't need that," she turned to the toy. "Tonight my friend. What I need is a friend and you my friend are a good friend."

In the night, in her sleep, Daniella felt something warm on her hip. A really pleasant, warm sensation, it was part of her dream until she realised it was getting very hot, too hot. She woke up with a start. Morgan his back to her, was sending a text on his phone. The heat was coming from an aluminium container containing some sort of take-away food, Morgan had obviously placed it on her hip as she lay on her side in bed. Daniella picked up the container, reached over to the bedside cabinet, picked up a magazine, placed the magazine on her hip and then put the container back on top.

"Oh baby, you're home. What time is it?" she asked rubbing her eyes.

"It's late," he replied, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Eat your food while it's hot."

"Thanks, I've only been asleep for twenty minutes or so." Dani tried to focus on the clock. "What have you brought me tonight? Smells nice," she yawned, taking the magazine and the food, placing them in front of her. Daniella reached over, she stroked the side of his face. "Good day? Bad day?" she asked, just before putting a fork full of food into her mouth.

"You know, same old shit! I really need to get out of this shit and work for a living. Get involved in the nine to five business." Daniella chewed quickly, gesturing with her hand, she would speak as soon as she had swallowed the contents of her mouth. Morgan looked a little down, something was troubling him.

"On the way home, I passed what they refer to as a crime scene," he spoke angrily. "There were ambulances and police cars. Blood on the store window, more blood on the pavement. Two kids laying in the street, both kids were dead, the medics just hadn't covered over the bodies yet. The combined age of them two kids, didn't add up to my own. There was another body in the ambulance, I didn't get a look at that one. What's it all about?" he shook his head. "When I was I kid we used to have a game, I think it was called Cluedo, it was a damn stupid board game. You had to solve a murder, you had to find out who, where, the murder weapon. So maybe the butler did it, in the bedroom, with the candlestick, you get me? Now, it's any motherfucker did it, the

spics, the Jamaicans, the wops, the crackers, down a dark alleyway, with a nine millimetre. I don't know what goes on in this world any more, I don't understand it! Everyday all you hear is gunshots. Bang! Bang! Bang! Nobody is even shocked any more, it's just part of everyday life. When I first moved here to this neighbourhood, you'd hear a bang. Folk would be like, scattering, hitting the deck, hiding behind parked cars, whatever. Now, the sound of gunshots is more common than the sound of a dog barking. I wanna get out. I wish, I could be a regular guy, with a regular job, and a regular family." There was only the sound of his heavy breathing after he'd said his piece. Eventually his house-mate spoke.

"Morgan, baby, Is the world we live in. If you want to change your life then change it, but change to what? You do what you do and I am sure that whatever you turn your hand to, you will be good at it. Remember, it was you who brought me up to your level. I remember looking in the mirror that day and knowing I had made it, at least to somewhere."

Daniella laughed, she put both her arms around his neck, flicked back his long dreadlocks and put her hands underneath, massaging the muscles where his neck met his shoulders.

"What on earth am I gonna do with you?" she asked, looking into his eyes. "I don't know where I'd be without you. Do you think there is any hope for us?"

"What do you mean?" Morgan was dubious, he knew what was coming.

"You know, we live here like we're something. Everybody believes that we're together. Is the same, everytime you come into work, if one more person says 'chemistry' or 'perfect couple' I'll swing for them, I swear." The Latino blood was starting to simmer. Morgan looked at her and smiled.

"I like what we have and I don't want it to change. Think about it, like they say we have chemistry, and I for one, I'm happy, There's nothing I would change, there's no aspect of our relationship I'll risk in the search for something more. It's just like cooking, you know. You're there and you're tasting the sauce and it's gonna be great, you add a sprinkle of this, a little bit of that, then, all of sudden, it's too salty, and so the whole dinner's totally fucked." Daniella didn't interrupt Morgan, for she knew from the

second she'd broached the subject she was just kidding herself. She increased her lock around his neck.

"You're right, we have what we hold. I'm just sad, we have this thing between us whatever it is. I wish that you would love me, that's all." She genuinely intended for the conversation to be over, she sat cross legged on the bed and finished her food. She was doing one of those things, those out of character, bizarre things, people do from time to time. Daniella totally agreed with Morgan, she was however, going to pursue the issue of their future, even though she could see no good arising from the pointless debate. Like a dog with a Frisbee, she just wasn't letting go. Daniella digested her last mouthful of food, before rekindling the argument. What she didn't know was Morgan did love her, he just had issues, these issues were insurmountable, the situation was untenable and didn't warrant discussion.

"So you wouldn't be jealous if I met someone else then?"

"Hell no! Go for it girlfriend!" his rapid retort. "All I ask is that he treats you well and looks after you, once he takes you off my hands, there is no warranty and definitely no refunds!"

"Bastard!" she appeared to have laughed it off, but inside a little anger rose.

"It ain't no joke, be careful what you hope for." Morgan continued "Maybe I've already found the perfect man for you."

"What makes you say that?" she decided to play the game. "Do you know someone? Is he sexy like you?"

"Well you know how you said, if you ever met a man, you hoped that he would be just like me. Handsome and all that, every woman's dream." he said smiling, he used his horrible false smile, resembling a grimace more than anything. "My cousin's coming over for a few weeks, hey, he's single, new meat on the market. You can hook up with him and be proud of your silver medal."

"No Way!" she pretended to look horrified. "Surely there can be only one bastard like you!"

"Yes! Way! Strauss is a year older than me, when we were growing up, the family said he and I were more alike than him and his brother. Two peas in a pod, they used to say."

"Actually," she frowned. "Now I've thought about it, I couldn't date your cousin, it just sounds so sick. Yuck! kissing cousins, it sounds like a cellular phone monthly plan." Daniella,

faked a shudder of disgust, before fiddling with her neck chain. "What's the story going to be when he's here. Are we keeping up this Mr and Mrs perfect couple lie?"

"Oh shit! I didn't think about that. It's really none of his business, but now, thinking about it, there will be three of us and two beds. He's my cousin, he's family, I wouldn't wish a night with you on my worst enemy. I guess, you're gonna have to move into my room with me." That false grimace of a smile appeared again.

"What's he coming for, vacation, business or what?"

"You know how it goes, it's a mashed up relationship thing, this ain't no commercial break, this is a proper bust up, terminal."

"Is a terrible shame," she placed her hand at top of her neck. "These things are never easy, they can be very painful. Had they been together long?"

"Proper married and everything, he's been with her a few years, five or six I think. No, shit, they've been married for five or six years, been together for eight."

"Is so sad when that happens, any children?" Daniella was genuinely upset. These things upset the Latino woman, Morgan could tell by her mannerisms. When concerned or she felt deep sympathy, she would always place a hand on her person, above her breasts, just below her collarbone. Anxiety was signalled by her toying with the pendant at the end of her chain.

"No, no children, I think that was part of the problem, He wants to procreate, the whole Goldstone dynasty thing, she's got the career thing going. He says, since she got promoted at work, she's turned into Miss Bling! She wanted to move to a bigger house with four bedrooms, they got no kids, no plans. Now you tell me, what's that all about?"

"Wow! How long ago did they split up? Is it a very recent thing? Was it sudden? Or Maybe is one of those ongoing things."

"Jesus woman! One hundred questions!" exclaimed Morgan. "Aha! I see your angle, you're being all sympathetic and everything, really you just wanna find out the details. Don't want no man on the rebound. Don't want to be treading on nobody's toes and you don't want anybody to call you, little Miss home wrecker."

"Shut up, you got it all twisted!" Daniella objected. "I just wondered what sort state he was gonna be in. I know you! You're

not going to take him with you while you're out doing your business. You will leave him with me in the bar, I know what's in your mind. I was just wondering, if I was going to be stuck with this guy crying into his drink every night."

"It ain't even like that." Morgan adopted a more serious tone." He says he's coming over to have some fun and clear the last remnants of her from his system. As far as I know, the man is coming to party and have nasty sex with as many women as he can!"

"Sure, Do you think? That's what he says. We know different."

Daniella walked to the window and stared out across the city, she could see Babylon down the street. From her vantage point, she observed all the little people below going about their business. She loved that view from eight floors up, she felt detached but more importantly, Daniella felt safe. When Morgan first brought her home, she didn't really know where or who she was, she had been beaten, she was disorientated and she'd slept for the first week. It was when she awoke she first looked out of this window. Maybe it was the peace and quiet, or the sensation of detachment, it gave her an overwhelming feeling of security. It was certainly the beginning of a journey which had radically changed her life. Alongside all of these feelings, another existed, one of apprehensive excitement, a sense of imminent adventure and drama. As she looked out of the window the same feeling took her again.

"When did you say your cousin was coming?" Daniella, seemed vague and distant.

"I didn't. Why?" Morgan didn't like it when this mood took her. A cold shiver ran through his body.

"But he's coming real soon, right, like Sunday maybe?" She rubbed her temple, squinting like she had a migraine.

"Early hours of Monday morning. How did you find that out?"

"Nothing, It was just, just a feeling." Daniella felt imminent doom, dread, she didn't know why, there was no way she was going to say anything. "It was just a lucky guess, I know you never tell me anything 'til the last minute."

"Yeah, right! Don't even try it, I can tell when you're lying. What's up?"

"I said, nothing, now I'm gonna get some sleep because I'll need to spend all weekend getting this place ready. If we are to have a guest."

"Daniella I'm just going to ignore you, I hate it, when you start with that Hispanic fucking Voodoo shit." Morgan turned on his heels and went to his own bed, he wasn't happy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Strauss arrived in Oakland early, which was something of an amazement. The pilot had mentioned something about a strong tailwind. The way things worked out he just managed to get an earlier connecting flight from Los Angeles. A greater shock was Morgan was also early to pick him up. At the airport, their reunion was a little bizarre. It had been fully ten years since Morgan was last in England and in that time they had not changed. The two cousins instantly recognised each other. Twenty years ago, they looked like brothers, ten years they looked like twins, now, today they appeared to be clones, save for the hairstyles and fashion differences.

"Good flight?" Morgan asked, grabbing one of the cases.

"Please, I am too tired for pleasantries, forget about the flight, it's just good to see you man. It's been what? ten years. Oh, and in case I forget later, thanks for this man, I needed it. It's just so good to get away for a while. You know, away from all the shit."

"No problem, it's great to see you. Despite your problems, you look good."

"Yeah, but your relatives descending on you after ten years, and it's not like it's for a couple of days and erm don't bullshit me, I've lost over a stone."

"Don't worry about that, you're welcome anytime."

"Thanks man. I appreciate it, you have to know that."

"Come, you can appreciate in the car, KV is waiting up for us to get back, I said she shouldn't bother, but she's cooked and everything."

"Is KV cool?"

"Sure, course she's cool, you'll like her."

"I mean, I've come out here to checkout some sights and live a little, I don't want me causing stress between you and your woman 'cause I am dragging you round with me as a drinking buddy."

"Trust me, it ain't even like that, don't worry about a thing. Everything's cool, alright."

The drive back was uneventful, Strauss' did most of the talking, probably because he'd just spent fourteen hours on two different

planes with nobody to talk to. He made a conscious decision to avoid the subject of Helen. It was Strauss' first trip to the USA, he tried to focus on things that didn't exist in England. There were questions about the San Andreas fault, earthquakes, but most of all he was fascinated as to why everything was so big. Back home, Strauss' 6' 2" frame made him a fairly large, physically intimidating character, here, he was barely average. The road was wide, the pavement was wide, the cars were massive and the buildings were so tall. Secretly, he hoped that all the women weren't oversized.

"Tell me?" the English cousin began. "What do you take the word meek to mean?"

"You got me," the other replied. "I'd say. Small, quiet, unassuming, kinda shy."

"According to the bible. The meek shall inherit the earth, well cousin, it ain't gonna be you lot is it." Strauss announced, gleefully.

"Why so?" questioned, a puzzled Morgan.

"Look around, you lot are like the dinosaurs, you're all big and fat. You're all huge! Huge and loud. You lot are so loud! I think you're all gonna turn obese, you'll die from heart disease or something like that. This place is amazing though, it's like Gulliver's bloody Travels or something."

"In Gulliver's Travels, he was a giant, it's the people that were small." Morgan pointed out.

"Okay, okay, Land of the giants then. You have so many things over here that we don't have, or things we get second-hand. Then you've got your craziness. All over craziness and weirdness."

"What's so weird?"

"How can you have a black Jewish woman? Or a black woman with a Jewish name."

"Nothing wrong with that?"

"Why'd her parents call her Whoopi? What kind of name is that? Did her parents hate her?"

"I don't know. It's not something I think about too often."

"And why's she got no eyebrows? What happened to them?"

Morgan didn't reply, he just laughed as he stopped the car, pointed up to his apartment and announced that they had reached their destination.

“Arivee Le Château de Goldstone.”

Loaded with luggage, the two men made their way up to Morgan's apartment. In the elevator, Strauss kept chuntering away. “Like your constitution and the 5th Amendment. What's that all about? Do you know what the craziest thing is? The right to bear arms! That' s some proper madness, no wonder you all run around shooting one another! That one, was that 2nd Amendment or the 9th? I don't know but you definitely need some un-amendments, or some new amendments at least. Actually, I bet you wish you had just left the constitution alone, because every time you mess with it, it turns into another fuck up.”

“I heard that,” Morgan mumbled as the lift door opened. The door to the apartment was already open, Daniella had obviously seen Morgan pull up. Morgan used his foot to push open the bedroom door to his right.

“Let's chuck everything in here, we can sort it all out later.” He said, dropping the suitcases down next to the bed. Strauss followed the instruction. The host then motioned him through to the lounge where Daniella sat watching the television. As soon as she saw Strauss, she was up.

“Hey,” she greeted him, extending a hand.

“Ah, you're the special woman he missed my wedding for.” Strauss started to reply, but Morgan cut in.

“I'm forgetting my manners, Strauss, Daniella, Dani, meet Strauss, now shake hands, hug, kiss, whatever, but if you kiss, no tongues, tongues is disgusting, hate the tongue thing.” Morgan was preoccupied, texting on his phone. Strauss paused briefly, before shaking the hand offered.

“Daniella, erm, good to meet you.” he seemed embarrassed, not knowing where to put his face.

“Likewise,” she replied grinning, she sensed his apprehension. “I hope you're hungry, I've cooked for you, ten, fifteen minutes, we eat, okay.”

“Take a seat man, y'all coming up inside here making my place all untidy. ” Morgan urged, putting down his phone. Strauss sat quietly, Daniella returned her attention to the TV, still with a massive grin on her face. Morgan looked, first to Daniella, then Strauss, “Why all of a sudden, has it gone so quiet in here? What did I miss?” Daniella was trying her utmost to hold in a laugh, she

could suppress it no more, the laugh escaped, half came through her nose, making unladylike grunting sound.

"Come on people share the joke!" an edge could be heard in Morgan's voice. Strauss just sat quietly.

"He's such a fool," Daniella laughed, her hand brushed across Strauss' leg. "Morgan! you're such a fool!" The movement of his spouses hand did not go unnoticed.

"What!" Morgan became even more annoyed, further fuelled by Daniella's giggling.

"Let me guess," Daniella spoke to calm him. "You speak to your cousin on the phone, you talk about your woman, KV. You pick him up from the airport and you talk about me again, as KV. Now, you bring him to the house and introduce him to a woman named Daniella. The poor man is afraid to speak, in case he drops you in it, you with all your women!"

"Aww shit," Morgan felt foolish. Strauss let out a breath of air.

"What is all this about you missing your cousin's wedding and blaming me," Daniella demanded to know.

"Daniella, it was five years ago. What does it matter now? Now is not the time" Morgan tried to dismiss her.

"If you're blaming me at least..." Morgan cut off what she was saying, speaking slowly, he looked straight into her brown eyes.

"Daniella, five years ago, you were sick, remember. I didn't tell you because you don't tell a sick person that can't get out of bed, the inconvenience of them being sick is making you miss your cousin's wedding." Daniella appeared shocked, she fondled the single large black pearl, on the chain around her neck.

"Wow! you do this for me?" Morgan could tell her little emotional moments, the South American accent was far more pronounced. Almost instantly, she composed herself. "Hi again, Daniella aka KV, Kidnap Victim! is a long long story. Morgan will fill you in on the details at some point during your stay. I promise you, five years ago I was really bad, I thought my life was over, I never associated your wedding with my illness, honestly." She walked over to Morgan and placed an arm around him.

"I am so glad we cleared that up." Strauss mumbled. Daniella looked over at a packet of rolling papers, flasing her eyes

in the direction of Strauss before casting her gaze back to Morgan. Morgan nodded his approval.

"Well I guess it's time to work up an appetite," she announced, reaching for the green packet. "Strauss?" she gave him a questioning look, holding the packet between her fingers. Strauss looked tentatively to Morgan.

"Jesus!" exclaimed Morgan. "If y'all wanna smoke, just smoke!" On the coffee table a silver box sat proudly, it looked like it may have started life as a jewellery box. Daniella removed some of its contents, holding them between her thumb and forefinger, before placing them on the table in front of her. She slid the box across the table to Strauss. Next she pulled some papers out of the packet and tossed the packet into Strauss' lap. Strauss picked up the silver box, he smelled the contents.

"I have been dying for a little bit of weed ever since I got on the plane, thank you Lord."

"What are you thanking the Lord for?" joked Morgan. "I paid for this shit! don't be saying grace and thanking the Lord for dinner either, best you thank Daniella, else she might poison you!"

The next morning Strauss woke, it seemed really late. Was this his first experience of jet lag? He didn't feel too rough, he concluded that his body was still on UK time. The room he occupied had an en suite bathroom, he took advantage. After showering and dressing, he went in search of Morgan and something to eat. Strauss found his way to the kitchen, he was shocked to see Daniella leaning over the worktop, eating an apple, wearing just a tee shirt. Not only was it just a tee shirt, it was so obviously, her tee shirt. Had she been wearing a man's top it would have covered more, but this wasn't. It was definitely a woman's tee shirt and it was very small. Strauss cleared his throat.

"S-sorry," he stuttered, and after he'd first paused for an eyeful, retreated outside the kitchen door, smiling to himself.

"Hey sleepyhead," she called in a chirpy voice "What are you doing out there? Come in, come through. Don't be shy."

"I was just looking for Morgan, Is he around?"

"Morgan, he is at work already, is almost lunchtime. I'll make you some coffee, you must be hungry, I'll make you a sandwich or maybe you would prefer a bagel? Are bagels okay? Or

maybe you prefer something else. Tell me what you like, or what you don't like. Ham and eggs maybe?" This woman was like a little dynamo.

"What would you like to eat?"

"Yeah right, okay, thanks. Whatever you recommend. I do not like green eggs and ham." Strauss, was not yet wide awake and unprepared for the barrage of options.

"Very funny, Dr Seuss, well don't stand out there, come in. What are you doing?" she insisted. Strauss re-entered the kitchen, he was struggling for something to focus on. Daniella noticed him, trying his best to avert his gaze. "Gimme one sec, fark!" she pushed her way passed him, cursing something in Spanish. Daniella reappeared wearing track bottoms. "Sorry, I forget, you're so like Morgan. I must remember to put on some clothes, now that you are around." Strauss couldn't help thinking what an amazing body this woman possessed, he had never seen anything like it, apart from on the TV, Baywatch maybe. Daniella was slight but athletic with a naturally bronze skin tone, her small breasts resisted the forces of gravity. Strauss chastised himself for looking at, and thinking about his cousin's girlfriend in a sexual way. Daniella thrust a mug of coffee into one of his hands and a plate into the other. Looking at him, licked the butter from her finger before pointing the digit.

"Sugar," she said softly. Strauss looked into her eyes momentarily, almost hypnotised.

"Oh, yeah, right. Sugar, sugar is good," he turned to the sugar bowl, embarrassed, he'd been caught out, she was toying with him. Strauss was convinced all this innuendo and suggestion was intentional, she was testing him in some way. By the time he had eaten Daniella was back again, wearing a white shirt and black trousers. There was an efficiency and swiftness about the way Daniella did things, the way she moved, decisive and quick off the mark.

"Do you have plans? or you can come with me, is up to you." She announced as she busied herself applying some make-up in the hall mirror. "You can come with me, it makes sense." she decided, without further consultation.

"Come where? Where are you going?"

"I have to go to work now, in the bar across the street. Is very quiet today. You can come and keep me company until Morgan gets back, if you like."

"Girl, from the time you said the word, bar, trust me, I'm there with you."

Inside Babylon, it was a little dark, plenty dated and very quiet. Daniella served Strauss a drink, without first asking what he wanted.

"You drink JD same as Morgan. A woman knows these things." Around the bar a few office types sat in sporadic groups. Customers occupied various booths and tables, not interacting with anybody outside of their particular group. Strauss sat at the bar on stool whilst Daniella busied herself polishing glasses. In the far corner sat a group of elderly black men, he assumed they were Jamaican or at least from somewhere in the Caribbean. The old men appeared to play dominoes or cards, they played civilly and quietly. It wasn't the loud, slamming, table busting game he'd seen his father play. One of the party noticed Strauss looking, he put his hand in the air hailing him.

"Eh eh, I see you tun ball head now." Strauss wasn't quiet sure what the man was talking about and he certainly didn't want to get involved with any of the natives, not until he'd first found his feet. He just acknowledged the other's presence, then turned away. Daniella placed another drink in front of him, she made a negative gesture when he tried to hand over some money, he noticed her transfer money from a glass stuffed with notes into the till.

Barmaids have a unique way of leaning over a bar. Do they train them to do that? Daniella was leaning toward him, a hand under her chin, fingers extended along to her cheek and her elbow rested on the bar. Her shirt open at the top and so displaying an appropriate amount of cleavage. Daniella looked damned sexy, but the look did not offer any invitation to engage. The hostess had cleaned and shined everything in the bar that wasn't actually alive and moving. Now that she was ahead of her schedule, she felt she could take some time out to give him some of her attention.

"So, Señor Strauss. What is it that you do for a living?" she began the conversation.

"Suffer," his one word reply.

"We all do that from time to time. What's your story? What's your plans?" she asked with forced enthusiasm.

"I don't want to talk about the story, and this, this is my latest and greatest plan." he picked up his drink. Daniella changed her position. Now leaning almost horizontally across the bar, her arms folded, her chin rested on her forearms. Looking at him with just her eyes, she didn't move her head.

"You know, all the quiet nights I work, drunks come to sit at my bar, they tell me, me of all people, about all the pain in their lives. Somebody died, somebody cheated, somebody lef, de Nada, de Nada, de Nada. These people are very smart, they use many different bars, is good, the same barmaid doesn't have to listen to the same story, every night. Today is Monday, so today would normally be Reg's day. Reg's wife, she left him twenty seven years ago, he tells the same sad story every night. Reg got so drunk two weeks ago, he got hit by truck going home. Forgive me, I am glad he didn't die, but strike me down, I am so appreciative of the break. Fark! is so much torture!" Daniella paused and looked at him, she then made a fist and pushed it to his cheek, Her eyes flashed toward the cash register before looking back into his. Her voice was nothing more than a whisper. "Over there, you see, behind the register, is where Carl keeps his gun," she moved a little closer. "Carl says is for if he gets held up or robbed, I don't believe. Is for when I cannot take no more sad stories from miserable old drunks anymore. See, I can just take the gun and shoot myself in the head, bang, dead, see." She formed a pretend gun with her hand, pressing it to her temple, after removing her hand, the barmaid blew across the end of two fingers." Please, Strauss, you just got here, you wouldn't like me to shoot myself in the head, would you?" Strauss immediately got her point.

"Yeah, had those conversations! All you want is one gun and one bullet. You don't care who you shoot. It could be you, it could be them, you really don't care as long as you don't have to hear the shit any more."

"I'd rather shoot myself, you're a nice guy and everything, but I'm not going to jail for you! So come on. What's your story? What's your plans?"

"The story is, my wife. Helen, left me. The problem is, I don't know why, neither does she, or so she claims. As for the plan? The plan is to get myself out of the zone of possibility. My wife became a variable in my life, maybe she would come back, maybe she wouldn't. The shit had been going on too long, she couldn't make a decision, so I have. I've made the break. I am now most definitely single and looking, I have no plans to look back." Daniella was a little stuck for a reply, Strauss had obviously been through a lot of stress and heartache. He had now apparently found some strength outside of a Jack Daniels bottle, he'd gotten into some sort of self-help self-preservation mindset. From a woman's point of view, his wife didn't leave without good reason. She also knew, Strauss wasn't lying, he just didn't have the full facts. Fortunately, she didn't need to say anything. Daniella's girlfriend, Natalie, walked into the bar, she rubbed Strauss on the head as she sat on the stool next to him.

"A bit severe ain't it? What? Did you get enlisted or what?" Natalie was talking to Strauss but looking at Daniella. Daniella answered before Strauss could get a word in. "Nat, is not Morgan, is his cousin from England, is Strauss, Strauss, Natalie, Natalie, Strauss."

"Well, well, well! Oh my! what do we have here? Strauss, that name's just kinda classic! ain't it," she laughed. Strauss rolled his eyes, it wasn't the first time he'd heard the classic comment. Natalie prodded and poked Strauss like he was a fruit or vegetable on a supermarket shelf. "Well blow me! Looks like what we got here is the mark two version of the number one ladies choice." The woman smiled, licking her lips as she rubbed her fingers up and down his thigh. "Same sleek lines," she turned her attention to his face, "cleaner, tidier finish." She then gestured for Daniella to serve her a drink for her, and one for Strauss. "Girlfriend, If you weren't with yours, I'd probably be getting some of yours, because honey, yours is just so ripe! Now it seems, I can get me some of yours without actually pissing you off. You can't say shit because you can keep yours, coz I just found mines. I know it's mines because the rules say, you can't have two."

"I don't what she's saying and I'm scared." Strauss looked at Daniella, he faked confusion. Daniella glanced at the clock.

"Looks like you're on her supper menu, the girl's got an appetite. You're right to be scared. If I were you, I would pray to God, that she didn't skip lunch."

"Don't worry," Natalie encased his hand with hers. "I'm just fucking with you."

"Not yet," Daniella flicked up her eyebrows, " is still early," she eyed her friend in the mirror as she poured the drinks.

Later, well into the evening, Strauss observed Natalie wasn't really the loud aggressive character that she played, the girl was actually very normal, appealing even. Daniella wasn't sure how she felt, she watched the other two chatting and smiling at the bar, she wasn't happy, she wasn't unhappy, but she was not as happy as she thought she should be. Maybe, it was because he looked like Morgan's double. More probably, she was just being stupid! Her man's cousin was becoming friendly with her best friend, surely that would potentially be a convenient and good situation. All of these thoughts left her mind when Morgan arrived. The four of them chatted and drank all evening, the conversation was punctuated by Daniella clearing tables and serving drinks to other customers. The cousins were happy to see each other, Daniella could not believe how similar they were, not only visually but in nature. Daniella became embarrassed when Strauss made a drunken toast. He toasted his cousin and wished him every happiness.

"If I were you Morgan, I'd be happy, break dancing everyday. You've got it so made?" he announced. "I look at you, I'm jealous, all we need is the love of a good woman and we got it made. You cousin, you struck the mother-load when you found this one, she's fantastic. I'm not saying that I want her, that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that when your cousin strikes it rich, you gotta be happy for him." Morgan had new food for thought, he'd never heard such an appraisal of Daniella before. The customers complimented her, but that was just standard. It was good to know that somebody else seemed to think she was special. A young black girl walked into the venue, she voluntarily collected some empty bottles and glasses on the way to the bar. Morgan took the opportunity while Dani had to serve, to use the men's room.

"Hey," the girl spoke to Daniella. "I was just in town for a couple of days, I needed to look at some records, personal stuff, probably too much information. The girl used her index finger to indicate a clock in reverse. "Excuse me. Do you have any bar work going?"

"The manager, he's not around. I can't help you." Daniella replied. The girl turned and walked away. Strauss stopped her as she passed.

"Hey, pretty sister, stop for a drink with us, one drink ain't gonna kill you." The girl checked the time on her phone, before she could reply, Daniella called her back.

"Hey, just a second." The girl made her way back to the bar. "I thought you said you were only in town for a couple of days."

"I'll have a quick coke," the girl put down her bag. "Yeah, I've been in town trying to find some information. I live over in Bakersfield," again she checked the time. "I have to get the bus home soon." Daniella served her the coke, indicating that there was no need to pay for it. "Anyway," the girl continued. "I'm looking to change my life, I tend bar back home. I was a little early for the bus, so I asked in here to see what's available. It's a nice place!" Daniella looked around, she screwed up her face.

"You think this is nice?"

"Sure, it's clean and tidy," she looked over to Strauss' table. "At least you got the whole cosmopolitan thing going on, it's good to see a couple niggers up inside the place. The bar I work is redneck city."

"I think maybe we could do with some help with at the weekends, but like I said, I am not the manager." For some reason, Daniella liked this girl. The girl looked into her glass, she moved her lips as she calculated in her head.

"Weekends wouldn't be enough, you know, a girl's got rent and shit to pay out," she sighed. "If any anything changes, can you let me know?" The young woman picked up her bag and hung it on her shoulder, she scribbled her name and number on a piece of paper.

"Sure," replied the Hispanic barmaid, tucking the folded paper into her pocket.

"Thanks for the coke," the young woman made her exit. Morgan returned as the visitor stepped into the street. The door was left swinging.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Dunno," replied Strauss, she was a fine looking sister though. Natalie glared at him. Daniella leaned over the bar tapping her finger against her lips.

"I'm sure I've seen that girl before, there is something familiar about her."

By midnight, the foursome were the only people left in the bar. At two in the morning, Carl returned and kicked them all out. Again, Daniella felt that little jealous tingle come and go when Morgan invited Natalie up to the apartment. Inside, Strauss and Natalie chatted and laughed together, noting their progress, Morgan got up and walked over to the door.

"Time for bed baby, I got a lot on tomorrow," he said, gesturing for Dani to join him. The hosts waited for a break in the others conversation, to say goodnight. Realising they weren't going to get a word in, they simply left them to it.

Daniella woke with Morgan still asleep next to her. The room silent, except for the sound of his breathing. This morning was different, she had woken, her head on his chest, his arm still around her. They had maintained that position all night, even when she left the bed to use the bathroom, the second she got back in bed, his arm went back around her. Something had changed, she ambled from the bedroom to the kitchen. Daniella didn't know what exactly had changed, but it made her feel smug, she hoped it was a form of progress. It was probably the sound of Daniella moving about that ended Strauss' bizarre dream. Just for a moment he wondered where Natalie had gone, then he remembered her leaving. Natalie was direct, he liked that, he asked for her number before she left, she'd refused.

"Why? do you need phone sex? Is that your thing? I don't do it myself but I have a couple of girlfriends that do," she teased him. Natalie explained, she was a single woman, Daniella was her nearest and dearest friend, and when she wasn't at work or asleep she could normally be found in Babylon whenever Dani was on

shift. If he arrived before ten o'clock tonight, there was a good chance she would be present, sober and semi-coherent.

"Great!" he enthused. "So you want to hook up again?"

"Honey, we have to get our own rhythm going here, it'll take just a little while." She held up her thumb and index finger, indicating something small. "I call it bedroom choreography. When you meet someone new, you don't really know them, so you just stick to the basic steps. Like you, I can tell you've been dancing with the same woman for a long time. I do that to you, two three, you do that to me, three, four. One and two and turn over!"

"Really, you can tell all of that," chuckled Strauss.

"Honey, I'm gonna teach you a whole new routine, by the time I am done with you, you'll be head-spinning and break-dancing with the best of them." She let out a loud cackle, before walking back to sit on the edge of the bed. Natalie rubbed his shoulder.

"Honey, I'm just fucking with you. The truth is, I like to keep my life simple, I don't need to complicate my life, it does that all on it's own without any help from me. Think what you like but I don't usually jump into the sack with random strangers. I like you, you're cute and when we are supposed to run into each other again, we will. I am always nearabout, so don't stress, okay." Strauss appreciated what she'd said and on scrutiny, it worked really well for him. Natalie was the opposite of Helen. This whole episode was in retrospect, really quite refreshing. Realising he'd just thought about Helen, his next realisation, he hadn't thought about his wife for at least twelve hours. This, he knew was healthy progress. A further realisation was that the smell reaching his nostrils was toast, his stomach told him, he should head for the kitchen in search of food.

Daniella was more conservatively dressed this morning, at least she had some shorts on.

"Hey! Morning, sleepy head," she smiled. "Do you want some bagels or maybe you would like me to go down to the butcher's store and get you some bones?" Daniella laughed, she bumped her hip against his as she passed him on the way to the refrigerator. Strauss didn't think he should dignify her comment with an answer.

"You old dog you," she passed some coffee to him.

"I swear, it wasn't like that. The woman plied me with alcohol and took advantage. That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

"Is okay, I'm just playing with you. Natalie is my friend, so trust me. I know how it was. I bet you didn't tell her about the wife though."

"Erm, actually no." Strauss hung his head in shame. The reality dawned on him.

"I said, I was playing! I am being a bitch. I already told her, trust me, she was well briefed, I told her to be gentle with you."

"Oh, okay, so you two were engineering stuff and playing me," he waved a finger at her.

"No, not really, she is my good friend, now you are my new friend, I would hate for there to be any misunderstandings, confusion or ugliness."

"Oh, I see." Strauss was thinking, Natalie probably hadn't quite understood the part where Daniella had used the word, gentle.

"No, you are a man, you don't see!" she regained his attention. "In these situations it is most important for a woman to be aware. If we meet someone and de Nada, de Nada, de Nada, maybe we fall in love or something romantic like that happens. Then we discover another has claims with you, sorry, claims on you. If, first the situation is understood, then we can make a decision and there can be no complaints, see, is easy, no." Daniella rushed to pick up the phone, she caught it on the first ring.

"Hey, aló, " she answered before quickly covering the mouthpiece. "Morgan can be a little cranky if he is woken, especially if he has been drinking, he's grumpy." she explained to Strauss, before continuing on the phone. As Strauss watched, he thought about Daniella, Natalie and life in general. For the first time in a long time, he felt good. Daniella rolled her eyes as she listened on the telephone. "Is Natalie." she mouthed, pointing to the handset. Strauss thought about leaving the kitchen to give Daniella some privacy, but she motioned him to sit down. He observed, Daniella had a strange intuitive talent, he had made no move to leave, already she knew he was thinking about it. Yesterday she had sensed that he was uncomfortable with her attire

and in the bar, somehow she knew what he drank. Morgan was a very lucky man, he thought as he watched. Strauss knew he was the subject of the very one-sided conversation. Natalie was doing all the talking, Daniella limited herself to the odd yes or no, together with sounds which meant either, yes or no. Dani ended the conversation abruptly. "Okay, I'll see what I can do but I'll have to call you back, we have plans already." She hung up the phone and turned to Strauss. "Today, I am not working and Morgan is not working, so we planned to take you out. We thought we could go out to Bay Meadows for the day. Now Natalie, she wants to know if I was gonna be around this afternoon, she too is off work. She claims, she was coming over. Now, I could stay home with Natalie and you boys could go to the track own your own. In reality, I really don't think is me that Natalie wants to see. If I send you to the track, she will not forgive me."

"The track?" Strauss repeated.

"Yes, the racetrack, you know, with horses, is across the bay. Bay Meadows Racetrack. Morgan, he thought it would be a pleasant day out, after all, you're a tourist, you like horses, no? You think, maybe I should invite Natalie? is up to you."

"Why not, yeah, that could work, it's not a problem." Strauss realised that Daniella used a strange combination of options, questions and useless information to confuse him.

"Okay, here's the deal, I'll call her back and I'll make you some breakfast. You, you can go in there and wake the beast, deal?" Strauss grabbed Daniella's arm as she made to pass him.

"Deal," Strauss replied, "and Dani my cousin, is a very lucky man. You, are a fine woman.

Strauss did not fully know or understand Daniella. In his simplistic view, he believed her to be a pleasant, fully domesticated, intuitive woman, with too many other qualities to detail. Someday she would make an excellent wife, mother and general superwoman. If Strauss had paid more attention he would have noticed his cousin did not enter the kitchen whilst his partner was cooking. The kitchen contained knives and all manner of dangerous weapons. Daniella was a woman of principle with strong convictions. These qualities combined with her volatile Latin temperament and bad experiences, made for a potentially lethal

cocktail. Morgan knew exactly what Daniella was capable of, he didn't exactly live in fear but he was always aware. There had been a particular night inside Babylon where things had gotten way out of hand. It was a stag night, a couple of young girls were hanging around. The manager, Carl had vanished, leaving the girls with a packed bar, and literally no manpower. The lads in the stag party had disappeared, Daniella became suspicious, she hadn't seen them leave. Above the general noise and din of the bar she could hear cheering and shouting. Around the corner, the lads had gotten one of the drunk girls onto the pool table. The girl was unconscious, members of the stag party were literally queuing up to for a ride. One particularly drunken member of the group was publicly masturbating. Daniella, incensed, leapt from behind the bar, picking up the scissors on the way. She grabbed the first man, the one about to enter the now semi-conscious girl.

"Bastardo," she exclaimed, pulling him back by of his hair.

"Why do you try to fuck sleeping girls, little babies?" she hissed. "Little boy, you think that you can manage a real woman? Have you even learned how to fuck yet? Come, I'll teach you about fucking," she led him back into main bar. The crowd cheered, applauded, some banged glasses and bottles on the table. Daniella, thrust the man against the jukebox, the impact caused the music to stop. The ex-hooker, ripped open her own blouse, revealing her breasts.

"Woo-hoo! Yee Ha!" the people cheered.

"First, excite me," she demanded, pushing a nipple toward his lips. With one hand she grabbed the back of his head, violently forcing his face into her breast. The crowd in the bar cheered, believing they were about to be entertained by a live sex show. The Hispanic woman yanked the man's head away from her nipple, gripping his hair. His tongue flicked, reaching for the nipple that was so tantalisingly close. Morgan was trading outside, upon hearing the noise, immediately he headed inside to see what was going on. The dealer arrived in the nick of time. Daniella reached behind her and pulled the scissors from her waistband. She trapped the man's tongue between the blades of the scissors. The blades didn't cut all the way through, that was not her intention. Blood flowed freely as she gripped the tongue, vice like, with the scissors. Daniella hurled a rapid succession of Spanish profanities

at her victim, the whole bar was silenced. Reverting back to English, she told him in no uncertain terms, the tongue was coming off. Morgan knew she'd already made the decision, this was no joking matter, she fully intended to remove the man's tongue. A lone policeman was off duty, drinking in the bar, the officer, drew his weapon, aiming, he ordered her to release her victim. Morgan stepped into the line of fire.

"You can empty that whole clip into her, it won't stop that tongue coming off, the bitch is fully crazy" Morgan edged towards his house-mate, keeping his body between her and the police officer. "Come on Dani, let him go now, you can't cut out the man's tongue, it's unconstitutional." Morgan's attitude was light and laid back, he was almost laughing.

"They were going to take, rape, little girls, just babies," she cried, "he deserves this and more. I should cut off his pelotas."

"That bitch is crazy!" shouted one of the other members of the stag party.

"What, do you think!" replied Morgan, edging towards Daniella whilst pulling out his own knife." Don't be worrying about his tongue, that's history, nuttin' I can do about that. If I were you, I'd get out of here, your balls are probably next." Slowly Morgan, reached across Daniella, he pulled her blouse closed, so she was no longer exposed. "Honey, please show a little decorum," he stood next to her pointing the knife in the direction of the hand holding the scissors. "Don't do this, don't make me do this," he pleaded.

"Is too late," she replied. Her eyes closed, slender feminine fingers slowly tightened their grip on the bloody scissors. The man closed his eyes, several of the onlookers began to turn their heads to look away, hands covered eyes. Daniella closed her hand on the scissor grips. The man heard a metallic click, then the sharp pain in his cheek. Carefully, Morgan took the scissors from Daniella's hands. He'd skilfully forced his knife between the two blades, preventing the scissors from completely closing. The point the knife blade had gone through the man's cheek. Although cut very badly, the tongue remained in situ.

"Make a pretty pattern, the mark of Zorro, whatever, then take my knife at go home." He whispered into her ear. Daniella turned the knife in the man's cheek, pulled it out, then, as

instructed, she left the bar and headed home. The crazy woman had the knife still in her hand as she walked out. Who was going to stand in her way? "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. It's home time!" announced Morgan, he looked to the police officer, the reflected little nod, an agreement the event had not occurred. He helped the two barmaids clear out and lock up, during which time, Carl returned. Morgan explained in an animated fashion Carl had received his last warning. Security or some 'handy' male presence at least, was a mandatory condition of Daniella's continued employment and his future patronage. Morgan made a phone call, Davis arrived within fifteen minutes.

"Davis, Carl, Carl, Davis." Morgan introduced the two. "Carl, Davis is your new security operative. You two need to negotiate pay and conditions. I'm out of here, I need to sort out that mad Hispanic woman."

When Morgan returned home later, Daniella was watching television, she'd cooked Paella. The event hadn't phased her, it didn't warrant even a second thought.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Planet Earth to Commander Strauss, come in, commander Strauss! Houston, we have a problem. Come on watcha thinking about?" Morgan shook his cousin by the shoulder. Strauss was miles away, deep into his thoughts. The English cousin sat on the little balcony, staring out over the city, letting his body soak up the sun.

"Five more days, 'til I'm gone, time's gone so quickly, too quickly. To think, I have been here six weeks tomorrow. When I get back to my, well, I'll call it my real life, I need to get another job. I probably won't be able to open my own front door because the bills will be stacked so high. Jesus, I really am gonna miss the way life goes over here."

"Hmm!" pondered Morgan, a wry smile appearing on his face. "I don't think y'all be missing me too much, or Dani for that matter. I'm sure you'll get by just mighty fine without us."

"That's not true," objected his cousin. "I'll really miss you lot, you've been so great, I really feel I fit in here."

"As you much as you're gonna deny it." The American pulled up a chair next to him. "I think Natalie's your real problem, it's Natalie that you're going to miss."

"That's complete rubbish, yeah, she's a great girl. It is what it is, don't try to make it into something that it ain't. I am going home, and we are going to get on with our respective lives." From the eighth floor balcony, Strauss continued to look out over the city.

"Now, don't go believing your own hype, you are speaking in the future context of going home, you should have said, it was what it was, but you said, it is what it is." Strauss, shot his cousin a hostile look. "Don't blame me," teased Morgan. "Blame Sigmund Freud. Plus, like you say, you've been here six weeks, tomorrow. Other words, you've been here for forty nights. Not like I'm counting or anything, but you've spent thirty-five or thirty-six of them with Natalie. I dare say, if she didn't have to work, you probably would have spent the days with her too. Cuz, you know what, I'll say no more," he changed the subject. "What about your wife back home?" Strauss removed his sunglasses and turned to face his cousin. "I really don't think about her much, if I am honest,

Natalie has been more than a mere diversion. She's opened my eyes, now when I think of Helen, it's different, the rose tint has worn off my glasses. I am now resigned to several facts. One, there will be no reconciliation, it's most definitely over. Two, there is no way on God's green earth she's getting my house. If my brother Alex can't lend me the money, I'll get a re-mortgage and pay her off with a few thousand quid. She ain't getting half, no way, if she wants to play tough, the bitch can bring it."

"Yeah, kick ass! That's the spirit, sounds like some good old British fighting talk to me."

"I don't wanna fight. The way I see it, Helen and I, well we just arrived at a crossroads together, she decided to turn left and I turned right. There ain't no bad feeling, no, not really. What is it people always say in retrospect? Ah yeah, that's it, we just grew apart, that'd be it." He tossed his sunglasses onto the table.

"I heard that," was one of Morgan's standard, fully disposable replies designed to indicate agreement.

"What about Daniella? Is she happy, or is she a secret Catholic girl, dreaming of a white wedding?" teased Strauss.

"White wedding!" repeated Morgan. Hell no! Catholic? That girl was done with the missionary position way back when. With Daniella I just play smart, if I see a jewellery store, I cross the street, focus on something else, if she talks about the future, I find some place else to be. Me, with a suit and a woman in a white dress? in a god-damned church, hell no. I did boxing as kid, I was good, the coach taught me, stick and move, punch and get out, you get me? Ain't no woman gonna get me all tied up and up against the ropes. Daniella's pretty clear on what I think. And yeah, she is comfortable with it, she has to be. If she ain't, the bitch can just walk!" Morgan wasn't exactly sure why it was he was lying to himself, he knew the reasons why he was lying to Strauss.

"Well, the woman has to be a definite nine on any man's finger scale, she's mighty fine!" Strauss contributed, looking at his palms.

"Yeah nine, I'd say that, but why should anybody settle for anything less than perfect." Morgan used a hand to shade his eyes from the sun.

"Oh no man! You're not even up with the finger scale thing, are you? It's a thing me and Alex would do back in our

college days. You know, back when we were ramping and chasing women. The finger scale! You rate a woman on how many of your own fingers you are willing to cut off, if God will let you fuck her!" Morgan frowned at Strauss. Strauss, realising why Morgan was frowning, continued, trying to rectify any misunderstandings there may have been. "I'm not saying that I want a piece of your woman. What I am saying, is, that she scores a fat nine and seeing as a man only has eight fingers, I'd say that puts her right up there in the zone above perfection. Can't put a price on that one mate."

"Good investment then," Morgan sneered. "Up from the fifty bucks she used to cost."

"Say again," said Strauss, he'd heard exactly what Morgan had said, he sensed from his cousin's tone, the conversation was turning bad. Strauss thought he'd push this one to the limit. "Daniella's an angel."

"Angel! You don't know shit, she used to be a hooker! Okay! The bitch was fifty bucks a pop! A fifty dollar whore. So why don't you hot foot it down to the emergency room and see if they'll sew your fucking fingers back on!" Morgan spat out angrily. Strauss didn't exactly react the way that his cousin expected.

"Could have been worse, maybe she used to be a man," he shrugged his shoulders. "We could be sitting here on Jerry Springer, right now. We get that in England, you know. Y'all got some fucked up, in-bred natives," he laughed. Morgan was becoming more angry and very animated.

"What, you think that a man can look at a woman as the possible future mother of his children, when deep down, he knows, she's just a god-damned whore! How is a man supposed to forget that, put it out of his mind?"

"I thought you said, she *used* to be a hooker?"

"Sure, that's what I said, she did!"

"But you just said, she *is* a god-damned whore! So, is she still a hooker or not? Because, if she is, I need to know before I change all my money back to sterling." Strauss had learned to wind people up from Alex.

"No, she's not a hooker, you need to back the fuck up!" Morgan rose from his seat. "Bingo," thought Strauss. Houston we have ignition, now how about some after-burners?

"So, What's the problem, does she want to come out of retirement or what? I thought she was happy working in a bar, to me she seemed right at home."

"Yeah, she is, but.... are deliberately trying to piss me off?"

"But what?" Strauss questioned. "Didn't you just try to stitch me up talking about tense? This ain't Freud, it's me! Cousin, you need to sit the fuck down. We're eight floors up, out here on the balcony, somebody could get hurt." Morgan thought about his cousin's apparent threat before returning to his seat. Eventually, when the situation had calmed a little. Strauss continued. "They're all hookers, trust me! I've been fucking my wife for five years, it's just now I'm getting the bill! If women were straight up from the off. If they'd only told me how much that little thing they've got between their legs was gonna cost." It was Strauss' turn to get up, he stood in the frame of the French windows, propping his arms against both sides of the frame. "Sometimes, you know. I think it just might make life easier if they told us in school. That thing between their legs costs money, maybe from young, we could start some sort of lay away plan. Check it this way, last week I went bowling with Natalie. We went to Bay Meadows racetrack again, a few nights at Babylon. I must have spent over three hundred dollars. Now, I am not a man to kiss and tell, or give details, but cousin." Strauss stopped and looked at the sky while pretending to count on his fingers. "Trust me, it worked out, roughly fifty bucks a pop!" Strauss' explanation brought the beginnings of a smile to Morgan's face. Strauss insisted on forcing his advantage home. Why shouldn't he? Strauss liked Daniella, he believed her a good woman. When Strauss had been down, she had been kind to him. It was his opinion, his cousin, Morgan, was disrespecting her. "Okay you've got your phone." Strauss leaned forward, taking Morgan's phone from the table. "Is this phone pay monthly, or do you have to money on it?"

"I put money on it, why?" Morgan's face wore a dubious expression.

"Well you see, that's a regular ho-phone," enthused the English one. "If you wanna use it's services, you have to put money on it, you pay for what you use. It's great, it's straightforward, you know where you are. You pays your money you get want you want, if you don't use it don't cost you one red cent, simple. It is

beautiful, truly a creation of god. Now my phone, the one back in England, that my friend is on contract. Now, that's a wifey-phone! The phone from hell. Every month, I have to pay for that shit, even if I don't use it, I still got pay for it! It's the work of the devil, trust me. God help me if I use it too much! You know that's gonna cost extra, like I have to take it to dinner and stuff, and tell the thing, it's the best phone ever created. What's more, yeah, I am stuck with the thing for an extended contractual period, eighteen months to me feels like 'til death do us part. If I decide I don't want it any more, boy is it gonna cost me! Breach of contract or something." Morgan laughed. Strauss continued, but in more relaxed tones. "We don't like to think of our women with somebody else. That nasty little thought can drive us crazy. Then again we don't meet too many virgins, do we? It's a fucking conspiracy, I'll tell you. On the news, they'll tell you about the hole in the ozone layer. They'll tell you about the oil reserves drying up. They'll also tell you about melting polar caps. They'll let you know about snow tigers becoming extinct. It's all a distraction, just so you don't realise, the adult female virgin, as a species, is finished! I don't know what happened to them, The only ones left, they are like, twelve years old and quite rightly, held in captivity until they can be safely released into the wild. The women we meet, there can be no doubt, they have a history, so what? When you meet a woman, you know there's been a few others before you, and be damn sure there will be a couple after you. If I were you, I'd concentrate on worrying about, the couple of others at the same time as you! Having a history is like being dead or being pregnant or being a virgin. These things are my friend, they're absolute states. You either are or you are not. You do or don't! Nobody, is slightly dead, or a little bit pregnant, or close to virginity. Daniella is a cracking woman, she would do anything for you. I think that you should fix up your little schoolboy mentality and get with the grown ups program." After a certain period of deliberation, Morgan told Strauss the first chapter of the Kidnap Victim story, he didn't say anything about their feelings, or what did or didn't happen in the bedroom, but he'd made a start and he felt better for it.

"What, if anything have we resolved here today?" Strauss was trying to get his cousin to make some sort of gesture of

progressive commitment toward Daniella. From his seat on the balcony, Morgan looked at Strauss, he smiled.

"Sure," he agreed, "we've resolved something. We've resolved that quitting your job at the tyre shop was probably a good thing. Go for a new career, you do really great stand up!"

Daniella sat at the dining table, she'd been sitting for half an hour. Initially, she'd intended to read the mail but the mail remained unopened, she stared out of the window. Strauss walked over to his new friend, placing a hand on her shoulder, following her gaze out over the skyline. A billboard caught his eye. A woman, sexily dressed in military uniform stood next to the title, *Nuclear Deterrent II – The Icelandic threat*. Entranced, Daniella placed a hand over his and drew it down short of her breast. For a few seconds the obviously troubled woman continued to daydream.

"Are you wishing you could be Lana Crutch?" Strauss startled her.

"Jesus, fark, sorry," she apologised turning around. It was silly, Morgan left hours ago. Whose hand could be on her shoulder but his cousin's. "Is a mistake, I wasn't thinking."

"I was," replied Strauss. "What's wrong?"

"Is nothing," she tried to smile but Strauss saw through it.

"Come on, tell me," he wrapped his arms around her neck.

"No, she objected. "I cannot speak with you in this matter, is private family business."

"What am I?" he retorted, "chopped liver?" Daniella spun around sharply to face him. "Do you know Hercule Poirot?" he added.

"No, is English or American?" she asked.

"I think he's Belgian actually," Strauss raised a smile. "Columbo, you must know him."

"Columbo, si, detective."

"Okay, I have been her for nearly six weeks, I am not Columbo but when Natalie came around one afternoon. I ran out, if you get me? I had to search all the places I might find some."

"Find some?" she repeated his words.

"Condoms, birth control, there was none, nothing. On my search, I didn't notice any kind of birth control, male or female.

"So," she queried.

"Either, you are trying to start a family, maybe there are some problems. Problems like firing blanks or an inability to conceive, but speaking to Morgan, I know that's not the case. So I got to thinking, I can't recall that bed of yours ever squeaking. For the purpose of expedience, repeat after me, busted.

"Busted," she repeated his words, she didn't know why she said it, but she did.

"Daniella, the room that I sleep in, it's yours. Before I came, you and my cousin had separate rooms."

"Fark, busted for true," she sighed defeated. "Does Natalie know of these things?"

"No," he replied reassuringly, like you say, "it's family business."

"Is difficult," Daniella was relieved that she could talk. "Before I met your cousin, I was a very bad girl with no ambition. Wow, your cousin, he saved me, he showed me the light. Now I work hard to be a respectable woman. Is still not good enough for him."

"Is," he cleared his throat, "It's plenty good enough, trust me. He will see the light, it takes longer for some than it does for others. Be patient, destiny has good plans for you. One day you'll probably be a great soccer mom, is that what you say?"

"You think?" Daniella's conscience suffered a two pronged attack. Somehow she knew, Strauss would never repeat this conversation, her secret was safe, but her feelings of joy were always tainted with that same feeling of impending doom. They were both startled as they heard a key turn in the door.

It was getting late, Strauss was tiring. Morgan promised him the American equivalent, of the mother of all bar crawls before he returned home to England.

"What's it you say when you go the men's room again? Ah, yeah, peeing is important, that was it, right." Morgan joked as he stood up from the table. Briefly, Strauss thought of his brother Alex. It was Alex he'd picked up the expression from.

"Nah, since I been over here I've learned a new one it's, I'll be back after these messages from you local sponsor," he responded. Morgan headed off in the general direction of the men's

room. He'd heard it referred to as the rest room. What was all that about? Did people go there when they were tired? Only in a America, he thought. Strauss didn't particularly like this bar, it was a bit too loud for his tastes and the patrons seemed somewhat unsavoury. Morgan's empty glass caught his eye, he decided to kill some time by getting some refills.

"Couple more Jacks over here please," and a couple fingers of coke in each, if it's not too much trouble." Strauss placed a twenty dollar bill on the bar. Looking around the venue, the English cousin decided he just wanted to drink up and get out. Time seemed to be going exceedingly slowly and he didn't particularly want to make eye contact with anybody. He turned his attention back to the bar tender, it seemed to be the safest option. Behind the bar tender was a door to a darkened hallway. Strauss surmised the door lead to upstairs, possibly to some living accommodation or down to a cellar. The door wasn't fully closed, from his position at the bar he could just make out the figures of two men in the hallway, on the other side of the door. As the nearer man moved to the side, he noticed that the other man was Morgan. His cousin was pushing a big roll of cash into his jacket pocket. Strauss decided it was safest to just go back to the table and leave the drinks on the bar. A minute or two after he'd retaken his seat Morgan appeared.

"Damn, that feels so much better!" he announced, clapping his hands together.

"I hope you remembered to wash your hands." Strauss, raised an eyebrow.

"Always!" announced Morgan, still standing. "You know what? I've seen enough, this place has gone downhill man, are you ready to jet?"

"What's the next port of call?" Strauss tried to sound enthusiastic.

"You're always doing that, you can't jet off to a port of call. Jets have airports, ships have ports. So if I'd said let's ship out, oh forget it. It's late, I thought we should just go check Dani and Nat, then head home.

"Sounds like a good plan! I'm tired." Strauss rose from his seat the two of them headed out through the door. They had been to a few bars that night. First they'd caught a cab but after that they

were on foot, Strauss had totally lost his bearings. "Are we getting a taxi?" he asked.

"No point," Morgan replied "Babylon is only a few blocks over, if we cut through at the bottom, it's ten minutes, tops." The cousins walked briskly to the end of the main road and cut down a dimly lit side street. At the opposite end of the narrow service road, Morgan noticed a parked car, nobody parked around here at night. In these streets, in this neighbourhood, the natives would strip a parked car for parts like a vulture picks the bones of the dead. As they got closer, Morgan felt a little easier, he could see the car hadn't any occupants. As they had passed the first junction neither man seemed to notice, a car with it's lights off pulled into the street behind them. The pair were about fifty metres from the car up ahead. Morgan heard the sound of rubber rolling on tarmac, a car rolled up behind them. He spoke to Strauss in hushed tones, without looking at him. "Don't move your head, just move your eyes. On the left there's a garbage bin, in front of the fence. Do you see it?"

"Uh huh," Strauss acknowledged his cousin.

"Good. Do you have any cigarettes?" whispered Morgan.

"Uh huh." Strauss did not know what was going on, but the situation didn't look good, his pulse began to race.

"Okay, good, you are going to take out the packet and offer them to me. I'm gonna drop the packet. When I pick up the cigarettes, I can get a good angle on what the hell is going on around here. If anything out of the ordinary happens, head over the fence, turn right and then we're back on the main road in the bright lights. If we get separated go to Babylon. Got it?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay, let's do it."

Strauss pulled the cigarettes out and offered them. Morgan, clumsily knocked the packet out of his hand. The second he stooped to pick them up, headlights blazed from the parked car, illuminating the entire street. Both heard the squeal of the fan belt and tyres, the car behind them accelerated violently. Morgan and Strauss sprinted towards the fence, a hail of bullets followed, ricocheting off the ground and walls. Both cousins cleared the fence in a single bound, sprinted, top speed, down towards the main road. The sound of gunshots stopped soon after they'd cleared the

fence. Neither man slowed down, nor did they dare look back. Two minutes later, they were inside Babylon, both men were out of breath.

"Oh god! I got a bloody stitch!" Strauss cursed, he bent his head down towards his knees, he pressed his hand against his chest.

Natalie, you ain't workin' that nigger hard enough in the bedroom!" joked Morgan.

"Baby, are you okay?" Natalie sounded concerned.

"Yeah, I'm just too old for this shit." Strauss massaged his left pectoral muscle.

It was late, Babylon was officially closed. Morgan manhandled the last customers, out of the door, locking it behind them.

"Lights out," he said to Daniella. Daniella knew that now was not the time to be asking him questions. She simply did as she was asked. Morgan went behind the bar and took out Carl's gun from behind the register.

"You two, in the back." he ordered both the girls. He turned to Strauss. "Have you ever used one these before?" Strauss nodded his head, one hand still clutching his chest. Alex, Strauss' brother was something of a marksman, Strauss wasn't bad either, but he wasn't in Alex' league. Morgan looked over the gun and passed it, butt first, to Strauss. "Just point and squeeze, safety's off, clip's full, fifteen rounds." Morgan slid off the front panel of the internal Babylon sign, he pulled out another gun. Daniella shot him a look of disapproval. How could he have secrets, in her place? Strauss made his way over to the booths. With a heavy sigh he slumped down into the seat, he was just so tired. The American cousin stood inside the door, scanning up and down the street, waiting, his gun trained on every dubious looking vehicle or passer-by. The cousins waited in silence and darkness. It was so quiet you could hear the pumps whirring down in the cellar, that and Strauss' increasingly laboured breathing. Time dragged it's heels, the fifteen minutes of waiting was pure pain. Eventually, Morgan went out the back, to tell Daniella and Natalie it seemed safe. Exhaling loudly, he switched the back bar lights on, he picked up a fresh bottle of Jack Daniels. "I'll replace this tomorrow," he whispered to Dani. Morgan poured four generous glasses of neat whisky. He still had Strauss' packet of cigarettes in his pocket, he lit

one before throwing the packet over to Strauss. The pack landed on his cousin's lap, Strauss paid them no attention. Daniella wondered why Strauss always had cigarettes, she'd never actually seen him smoke. It didn't take her long to work out the answer to her own question. She slapped her forehead and mumbled something in Spanish under her breath. Morgan necked his drink, swiftly he poured another, he pushed drinks in the direction of both Natalie and Daniella, both girls cupped the glasses with both hands, they sipped the liquor slowly. Once again, Daniella felt that feeling of imminent doom. "Where's Carl?" Morgan whispered.

"He's not here as usual, he's never around. Don't be mad with him, is a weekday. Davis left five minutes before you got here, he said for me to lock up," whispered Daniella gesturing toward the big bunch of keys on the back-bar.

"Okay, that's good," Morgan drummed the bar with his fingernails. Another period of silence followed, the three of them exchanging looks.

Daniella jerked her body, as if she had fallen asleep whilst standing up then caught herself before losing her balance.

"My God," she seemed terrified. "Something very bad has happened."

"No, baby, it's not that bad," replied Morgan. "I think some of them young wannabes tried to rob us, it ain't nothing too serious, I was just being cautious, just in case it was anything more." Daniella glared at him, she was not going to be distracted by the fact that he'd called her, baby.

"No, something bad has happened, is very bad, I know it. Did you kill someone? is someone is dead!"

"No baby, I swear to you, some guys just tried to rob us and we took off. That's it, I swear." Natalie picked up Strauss' drink and took it over to the booth where he was sitting. She put the glass on the table in front of him, she sat on the table, next to the glass.

"Drink this baby, it'll calm your nerves," she reached down and picked the cigarette packet up from his lap, she took a cigarette and lit it. "Go on," she egged him. "You've had a bit of shock." Natalie held the glass out to him but he simply ignored her. Feeling shunned, she slid off the table and returned to the bar. "So much for cool under pressure, I think he's fallen asleep." She

glanced over to Strauss, he seemed a picture of relaxation, legs crossed at the ankle, eyes closed.

"Just leave him," replied Morgan, looking over. "We will wake him before we go." Daniella placed her glass to her lips, slowly, she put the glass back down onto the bar.

"I have a very bad feeling about this, is bad, I know is bad." she walked slowly over to Strauss. It was then she noticed the dark stain on the front of his jeans, her final few steps were rushed. "Dios Jesús no!" she gasped, unzipping his leather jacket, she eased her hand inside. Daniella withdrew her hand sharply. It was with a look of resignation, she examined her sticky fingers. Daniella didn't bother to wipe away the blood, she searched for a pulse on his neck. "His no sleeping, is bleeding, his dead. I think he has been shot, I can't see where." She made the announcement in a calm, matter of fact way. Morgan rushed over to the table, Natalie, turned on some more lights. Strauss' clothing, was soaked in blood, he was not breathing, Daniella was right, he was dead. Further examination revealed a small hole in the front of his jacket, adjacent his heart. His cousin surmised a single small calibre bullet, probably a two-two, had taken the English one's life. One shot, right in the heart from what was a little pea shooting pop gun, possibly even an air rifle. And the whole time Strauss had thought that he had a stitch. Daniella pondered, seemingly in shock, Natalie shook, whimpering and sobbing. Morgan sat in resignation, head in his hands, Strauss was dead, it was probably Morgan's own fault, right now he needed to make a plan.

It was light outside, the Jack Daniels bottle lay empty on the floor. Natalie was fast asleep. Morgan had fallen asleep, drunk, his head face down on the table. Daniella had been wide awake, apparently staring into space for the last two hours.

"When the going gets tough, the men get drunk, is always the way," she said to herself looking at the comatose figure of Morgan. Almost rhythmically, she nodded to herself, before she woke the other two.

"Okay," she began brightly. "Morgan, upstairs is the new carpet for the spare room, is wrapped in plastic. Leave the carpet, bring down the plastic wrapper, we need to wrap this body. Natalie, I need you to clean the booth and the table, make sure

there is no blood anywhere, not a trace. Natalie, when you're done, I need you to take my keys, go to my home, stay there, speak to nobody, except for to call your work and tell them that you are sick. After that, you must rest, try to get some sleep, I know is difficult. I won't be long behind you. And you Morgan, now is the time for you not to ask me any questions. I am coming upstairs with you, I will help you with the carpet." She gestured that he should go up the stairs, she followed. Once upstairs, out of Natalie's earshot, she explained to Morgan, what she planned to do.

"Downstairs in the basement is a big everlasting freezer, is massive. Carl bought it when he had his crazy idea about making this into a restaurant, is maybe, eight feet long, is very big. Carl never goes into the basement, you can hardly get in there, is just so full of junk. We plug in the freezer, put Strauss in there, then we put all the junk back on top. The freezer has a key, we lock it and take the key with us. Maybe, when Carl goes on vacation, we can sort something better out, right now, short notice, is the best we can do. Other than that, your cousin, he is gonna start to smell, then I think is a big problem." Morgan didn't say anything he just kissed Daniella's forehead. He was grateful Dani was taking care this aspect of the situation. His own mind ventured forward to the inevitable issues of revenge and retribution. The surviving cousin's mind was occupied. Who knew he'd just made a big sale? This was no coincidence, it had been somebody's intention to relieve him of the cash he'd just collected. Morgan hadn't spoken to anybody, Trevor, who'd set up the deal, he could be trusted, he was solid as a rock. Trevor and Morgan had done business for years. For those dealers he'd just supplied, for them to try to take back their money, that was so basic that it was simply unthinkable, but this was the only possible conclusion. Daniella interrupted his thoughts.

"I'll go downstairs to the bar to help Natalie, the quicker we get it cleaned up, the quicker we can get her out of the way. Natalie is not stable, she still cries, I can hear her, even now."

CHAPTER NINE

Natalie's emotions had been all over place since the death of Strauss. The girl didn't know where she stood. As far as she was concerned, he was on vacation, they were fuck buddies, nothing more, that's how it started anyway. The two of them had gone out together, it was only supposed to be a bit of fun. Somewhere along the way, things started to get very regular, intensity had crept in somewhere. Nothing was ever said, there was no formal agreement, suddenly they were together, a couple, maybe, she wasn't exactly sure. Natalie was akin to the little match girl, enjoying each moment. The obvious fact, eventually the matches would run out, was not to be considered. As the time for his return home drew near, she banished all thoughts of that particularly ominous event from her mind. There was always such a thing as hope, maybe they were going to have a long distance relationship. Nothing was ever agreed, their situation was never clarified. Never would she admit she'd fallen in love, not to him, nor to herself. If she admitted it to herself, that would place her in a dilemma. Any admission to him, surely that would drive him away. Natalie had other concerns, her period was due over a week ago, she'd told no one, she was confident it was purely the trauma and stress she'd been through. It had happened before, her previous lover had left her in massive amount of debt. Almost everything she owned had been repossessed, or taken and sold.. Back then she didn't have a period for three whole months. Today, Natalie was well on form, at the top of her game. Morgan had given her reassurances and a pep talk. The reassurance was that Strauss at the time of his death was most definitely her man, of that fact, Morgan had no doubt. To say, Strauss' cousin told Natalie a complete pack of lies, would be both inaccurate and unfair. For these occasions, the dictionary provides us with words, like misrepresentations. On this occasion, we will stick with the word, inaccuracies. It could be said, Morgan said these things with the sole intention of restoring her confidence. The cynical amongst us would suggest he had ulterior motives, they would be to a certain extent, correct. To Morgan, he was simply killing two birds with the one stone. Cunningly, he informed Natalie that Strauss had planned a future for the two of them.

When Strauss had gotten the cash together, he fully intended for Natalie to come over to England. Even if she was unable to make the journey, he would come back here as soon as his divorce was finalised. Morgan wound Natalie up tightly. The clock was ticking and the time left for whosoever had murdered her man, and quite possibly destroyed her future happiness, was indeed short. Morgan had a plan and Natalie was to play her part in it's execution.

The blonde wig made Natalie look totally different, she checked her face in the vanity mirror on the back of the visor, before getting out of the car. It was not a look that she would adopt under normal circumstances, as an attractive, tarty disguise, it was extremely effective.

"Stop fidgeting, he'll find you, the man is a sucker for blondes, it won't be a problem, just be yourself. Actually scratch that, do ya slut thing," was Morgan advice. Natalie took a deep breath before swaggering into the bar. As per her instructions, she strutted in like she owned the place.

"Coke, Coke, JD and Coke," she ordered, pointing to three imaginary glasses. Natalie scouted around to see if any one was watching her. Hopping up onto the stool, she slapped the bar in a drunken manner, demanding the music be turned up. Within twenty minutes, Natalie had ten drinks lined up on the bar. Various men bought her drinks as they tried their luck. With each potential mark, she used a variety of vulgar techniques to convince each of them to vacate the seat next to her. From sticking her tongue in one guy's ear, detailing to him what she would do for three hundred bucks, to looking a man up and down, before informing him he was the wrong colour. Natalie sat looking into the mirror behind the bar, admiring her own trashy look. Immediately, the next suitor installed himself in the seat next to hers, she was a little startled by a tingling sensation in her buttocks. That was the sign, as planned, her phone was set to vibrate, Morgan would prank her when the right guy came along. The mark was black, overweight, with a baby face and yellowing eyes. He wore a bright red cap, cocked to one side. Until this moment, Natalie had been quite enjoying playing the role of a slut, she actually thought, she could probably make a good living as hooker. This man however, she decided she could never have sex with.

Okay, she could, let's be practical here, everybody has their price. The problem was, Natalie was trying to remember, if a billion, was a million, million, or a thousand million when he disturbed her thoughts.

"Pretty gal u want a next drink." he announced, looking at all her drinks lined up along the bar. The mark was exactly as Morgan had described, one of them damn Jamericans.

"Drink, is not doing it for me right now, I got my car anyway," smiled Natalie, swishing the ice around in the glass.

"If you're not here to drink baby. Watcha doing here then?" he asked, leaning closer.

"I was lookin' to leave from here, pick up my girls and score a little action." She sniffed, rubbing the end her nose with the back of her hand.

"Ya here looking for mans?" he enquired gleefully. Natalie closed her eyes, she fought the urge to let out a scream of exasperation. This man was not the smartest cookie in the jar. She fanned her face with a twenty dollar bill, before rolling it up.

"Once I get a little something to help me get my groove on," she tapped him on the end of his nose with the rolled up note. "I get real horny, I need to party. If you get what I mean."

"Well girlfriend, me and the mans, we've got a little party going on over so. If you want, you and your girls can come and jam with we. We've a whole heap of party spirit." He took the twenty dollar bill from her hand and tucked it into his top pocket. Natalie was struggling to understand his accent, but got the general gist. This is too easy! she thought, then again, Morgan did describe the Jamericans as craven. Natalie turned to face her mark, parting her legs a little. The man's eyes brightened as he glimpsed her bright red underwear through the gap between her knees. Her short skirt left little to the imagination, probably a good thing, this man was probably not smart enough to have an imagination.

"Take me round the corner, pick up my girls," she ordered him, tossing her car keys onto the bar. Natalie then proceeded to walk back to her car without even a backward glance. Natalie knew he was following. It was as if she had a piece of string tied around his penis and was taking him out for his daily walk. As she reached the car, she turned around sharply, he collided with her. Aggressively, she thrust her right hand into his crotch and found

what she expected, she gripped it firmly. Morgan's accomplice pulled their soon to be victim, closer to her body.

"You can use this good?" she asked, before motioning to kiss him but she quickly pulled her head back.

"All in good time, lover," she teased, Natalie pulled him even tighter to her, squeezed his buttocks, then pushed him away. The purpose of her actions were to make sure he didn't notice Morgan hiding in the back of the car. Natalie was also checking to see if he was carrying, which he was. This, she thought, was way too simple. The fat black man looked at her with a broad expectant grin as he walked around to the driver's door. Impatiently, still eyeing her, he yanked the door open and reached across to open the passenger door. Her mark, then adjusted the seat and wound down the window. His whole body stiffened, he felt the cold of Morgan's gun in the back of his neck. Natalie smiled at him through the passenger window, she even had the audacity to blow him a kiss. Natalie then turned her attention to Morgan, she tapped the top of her left breast and pointed two fingers at her accomplice. She wasn't finished there, she rubbed her earlobe, then placed her hand on the top of her right thigh. Morgan understood, gun in inside left jacket pocket, phone in front right trouser pocket. The American cousin reached over the seat with his right hand, he pulled the gun out of the Jamerican's inside left jacket pocket. This girl is a bloody natural, Morgan thought, as he watched her start away down the street. After five or six steps, Natalie stopped and turned. This wasn't part of the plan? What was going on? Natalie walked up to the driver's door, leaned in through the window and retrieved the twenty dollar bill from the Jamerican's pocket.

"You won't need this where you're going," she paused looking into his face. "It's true what they say, you can't take it with you." The look of pure unadulterated fear in his yellowing eyes, provided Natalie with feelings of; revenge, retribution, justice, self-worth, and most importantly, closure. Before putting away the confiscated gun, Morgan noted, this particular handgun was a snub nosed Ruger, a three fifty-seven, it was not the gun that killed Strauss.

"Put your seat belt on!" ordered Morgan. "We wouldn't want you to get yourself hurt in any kind of accident, now would we. Now, very slowly, reach into your right pocket and hand me

your mobile phone." Without hesitation, the man did as instructed. Morgan looped one of the rear seat belts through the driver's seat belt and secured it. "Just making sure you don't leave before we've had a chance to get all acquainted and friendly." He smiled at the American. "Now drive to the top of the street, make a right turn."

"Where are you taking me?" the man asked nervously.

"Road trip," replied Morgan. "I got a picnic, all packed up, in the boot."

The American cousin directed the man to a disused gas station just outside of the city. The place had been vandalised, the door to the shop had been ripped off its hinges, there was nothing of note or value left inside. The gas station had been abandoned for at least a couple of years. The place was ideal, it would serve Morgan's purpose.

"Okay, so what's your name?" Morgan started calmly but then very quickly, he switched, he took on the character of a Southern slave trader. "Actually, fuck it, let's not bother with the bullshit, eh! Leroy! You see, I know your name's Leroy, and Leroy, you're small time. Leroy, do you know how I know you're small time? I know this Leroy, because it's just taken me two days to find out who the fuck you are!" Morgan hit Leroy on the back of head, not so hard as to rendered him unconscious or even draw blood. The cousin hit him with just enough force to inflict pain and to remind his guest who was in charge. Morgan continued. "Tell me Leroy, how would you like me to kill you?" Leroy made a squeaking noise and shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay Leroy," Morgan sighed, an impatient sigh. "Let's try this differently. Do you actually want me to kill you?"

"No," Leroy mumbled. "But the white girl said I was dusted."

"I love this, this is good, this, Leroy, is progress! So now Leroy, we can become business partners, because we, Leroy, we are both honourable gentlemen, we Leroy, we are men of our word, so right now, we are gonna do a deal, come to an arrangement, call it what you like. Do you want to make a deal with me Leroy.? Do you really wanna?"

"Yeah," Leroy's answer was barely audible.

"I just love doing business! and Leroy, I am just gonna love doing business with you. So, Leroy, here is the deal! You are

gonna do exactly what I say, and you, Leroy, are gonna tell me exactly what I want to know." Leroy nodded his agreement, Morgan carried on. "Do you know what I am gonna do for you Leroy. I'll tell you! My first offer was gonna be to kill you, real quick, so you didn't feel any pain. But Leroy, I have grown to like you. In this short time, believe me we have become so close. You Leroy, have been a very, very good boy, so I am gonna lay it on the line here. The truth is, you're not actually the person I am looking for. If I get what I want out of this deal, I really don't need to kill you. Why would I? But Leroy, remember, the reason you are small time and I am big time is that, I will kill you, there ain't no bones about it, trust me, so I beg you, please, don't fuck me about."

"Nah," replied the perspiring hostage.

"Saturday night you hit a dealer after a sale. didn't you?"

"Nah, we..." Morgan hit him in the head with the gun again, this time a little harder.

"Strike one! Saturday night, you hit a dealer after a sale, didn't you?" Morgan repeated himself, he didn't like to repeat himself.

"Yeah, er sure, but we didn't get nothing. We didn't get any money. I've got nothing."

"Leroy!" snapped Morgan. "Did I ask you for money? did I? Have I ever asked you for money? Tut tut. Now, Leroy you, because you never paid any attention in school, you son, are as thick as shit! A dumb-assed motherfucker. That's why you were dumb enough to use your own car. Leroy, who else was in your car with you?" He tapped Leroy in the side of the head with the gun.

"One man call Rankin and a next man, Jasper." Leroy hardly moved his lips.

"Leroy, you are getting so damn good at this! You are a natural. Leroy, I want you to call your buddies, Rankin and Jasper, tell them to come out here. Tell them you are doing a little private deal, you know, free enterprise. The American dream, this great country is built on free enterprise. Tell 'em you need some back up.

"I don't have no number for dem mans." Morgan bashed him again, really hard, on the same spot on the back of his head, the blood started to flow. Leroy lost consciousness momentarily. When he came to, Morgan was leaning forward with Leroy's phone in his hand, scrolling through the phone book.

"Strike two Leroy! we'll call that a big swing and a miss, shall we? Did you enjoy your snooze? Next time you won't fucking wake up! Are you getting me?" Leroy's nod and grunt, were taken by Morgan as sign of his agreement and commitment to further cooperation.

"Leroy, I am getting bored now," announced Morgan. "Call them, you don't even have to see them, make the call and maybe I'll let you go, who knows? Now Leroy, take a moment, settle yourself, make the call. Oh and Leroy, don't try no patois or slang shit. Coz, I am letting you know, both my parents are Jamaican. You get me? You want reach your yard, well a bird can't fly pon one wing, stick a pin." The hostage made the call, he did everything he was told. Morgan listened very carefully, he was impressed that Leroy was so convincing. He'd said four o'clock sharp, and so now they just had to wait.

"Arrgh!" Morgan stretched and got out of the car, he unbuckled Leroy and signalled with his Berreta that Leroy, should get out of the car as well.

"I bet you're a gambling man ain't you Leroy." Morgan smiled, he checked over Leroy's gun.

"Yeah, sometimes," replied Leroy, he was feeling his head and examining his hand to see how much blood there was. Morgan appeared to signal to someone over in a clump of trees.

"Leroy, we are gonna have a little gamble? Do you think you can handle your gun good? I mean, can you shoot good Leroy?"

"I'm okay," replied Leroy. Morgan prodded him in the back with the gun gesturing he should go over to a fallen tree trunk, about ten metres away."

"Okay Leroy, let me explain. It's game time Leroy, I am gonna give you your gun back, it's got two bullets in it. And Leroy, remember I'll be standing right behind you. Morgan waved his own gun in front of Leroy's face, so he got the clearer picture. "Oh and Leroy, over there in them trees, there's another gun on you, just because I want this contest to be fair with no trickery. Right, you see that tyre over there." Morgan pointed to a old car wheel laying on it's side, about one-hundred and twenty yards away. "Now, you've got two shots, if you can hit that tyre from here, you son are homeward bound, free as a bird. I am gonna give you the car keys,

and I am gonna give you five thousand dollars. Do you know why I am gonna give you all that money Leroy?" Leroy shook his head. "Because Leroy, I like you and I trust you, and I know that you are gonna hit that tyre, go on home and keep your mouth shut." Morgan pulled a big wad of cash from his inside pocket, he held it out so Leroy could see it. "Remember Leroy, I said at the beginning, for me this wasn't about money, and it ain't. There's plenty more where that came from. I know when this is all over, we can do some good business, you can make some proper cash. Would you like that Leroy? would ya?" Morgan was right up behind Leroy speaking into his ear.

"Yeah, sure," replied the hostage..

"Okay Leroy," Morgan took a step back, he put his hand above his brow to block out the sun. "Balance yourself Leroy, then take the shot. You can do it, I know you can do it." Leroy squeezed one eye shut, took aim and pulled the trigger. A puff of dust blew up near the tyre. The shot was short and to the right. "Damn Leroy, that was close! so damn close," exclaimed Morgan. "I think your gun goes a little to the right. Go again Leroy! This time, aim a touch the left and you'll get it. I know you will. Come on Leroy, I have got every confidence in you. We can do business! We can be partners, take aim and nail that sucker!" POW!! Leroy pulled the trigger, another puff of dust and then, silence. "Leroy, I think you missed." Morgan said, dropping his tone. "Shit! and you were so close. Oh fuck it! Leroy, tell me that I'm a nice guy? Can you do that?"

"You're a nice guy." Mumbled Leroy, rolling his eyes.

"Leroy, we are both nice guys. You are a brother and I have love for you," chuckled Morgan. "Because, I am a nice guy. I am gonna let you have another go. Leroy, if you are gonna work with me, you need to learn hit what you shooting at. What if the cops were chasing us? You'd need to shoot those fuckers dead. I ain't going to jail just because you can't shoot." Morgan took the gun from Leroy's hand, he reloaded it for him. Morgan was again right up close behind Leroy, he made to give him the gun, he pulled it back, shaking his head slowly. "Leroy, I don't think we are gonna do business, it's a shame, because I did need a new partner. You see Leroy, you're just too stupid! What you have here is a snub nose Ruger." Morgan held the gun in the palm of his hand. "This gun is accurate to, maybe forty yards, fifty tops. Now Leroy, that

tyre is well over a hundred yards away. Butch fucking Cassidy wasn't gonna hit it. Leroy did you think that was mean? Did you think the white girl in bar was mean? We both let you think that you had a chance. Why did I let you try, when you couldn't ever succeed? Was I hoping you might get lucky, Leroy? Do you think? No Leroy, I just needed the powder marks." He pushed the gun against the Jamerican's temple "Leroy, are you religious?" Morgan's voice, seemed to contain some sincerity, it gave Leroy a sense of hope.

"Yeah, I believe in God." Leroy replied, tears rolled down his cheeks. Morgan withdrew the firearm, returning it to his side.

"Then why? in heaven's name why? Why do you do all these bad things, you rob people, you shoot people. What's that all about? I don't get it."

"Man has to survive." Was all that Leroy could think to say. Had he known the serious nature of the question, maybe he would have thought of a better answer. Morgan was disappointed.

"Leroy, that's not survival, it's greed." he sighed. "If you believe in God, do you believe in, The sin's of the father."

"I don't know them, I don't know my father," replied Leroy, still tearful.

"No matter," Morgan shrugged. "Your father sinned, he fucked your mother without birth control, the result was just plain fucking ugly." Then, there it was again. Blam! Same spot, back of the head, as hard as he could. This time, Leroy was out cold. Morgan carried him back to the car and put him into the driver's seat. Calmly, Morgan put the Ruger into his prisoner's mouth and blew the back of his head out. Blood and skull fragments peppered the side window and the back seat. The bullet passed through the headrest and into the roof lining.

Morgan pushed the corpse forward, he let some of the blood drain into an old paint tin. He then pulled off his own jacket and pumped the rest of the bullets from the Ruger, into the front of it. Morgan had never been a particularly arty type, but reckoned he could do something good here. Using Leroy's blood, he proceeded to decorate his jacket with splatters and blood soaked areas.

"Hmm, when I am done here, I am gonna get me a new career in Hollywood! Special Effects Goldstone! That's what they'll call me." he smiled to himself, holding up the jacket, admiring his

own handy work. It was almost time. Morgan, moved to the inside of the derelict shop and randomly threw money about, he'd already thrown a few hundred dollars inside the car. Muttering to himself, Morgan poured the remaining blood over an old rocking chair, he watched the liquid run across the seat and down the legs until it began to run across the floor. A visual check of the room showed him that everything was in place. Didn't you just know that them Jamericans would be late, he thought to himself, shaking his head. Back to the task in hand, he remembered final details that he'd almost forgotten, he placed Leroy's phone next to his and transferred some video clips, all of them contained gay pornography. He grinned as he wiped the phone clean of prints. Everything was now set, now it was time. Morgan reloaded the gun with the last of bullets from Leroy's pocket, he put his jacket on and sat in the blood soaked chair. In his left hand, he held a few thousand dollars, his right hand contained the gun. Morgan bent his right hand up behind his own back and crossed his legs, forcing his right leg up onto the arm of the chair so it was bending the wrong way. His arm looked like it had been broken. Morgan closed his eyes and waited. If the American cousin were typical, maybe he would be bitter and tense as he sought revenge for the death of his English counterpart but Strauss didn't really enter his mind. He was just doing a job which he knew was going to be simple. Retribution was going to be easy, because nobody expected revenge, because nobody new Strauss was dead. His mind wandered onto the subject of Daniella and how after today, he was probably never going to see her again. Morgan felt a pang, a brief moment of intense sadness, but he knew he had to stick to the plan. If he was going to pull this off and retain his liberty, now was not the time for him to be getting all wet and sentimental. The car pulled up and the cousin opened his eyes momentarily. Morgan watched the Jamericans discover Leroy's lifeless body, he heard their continual cussing get louder as the two of them approached the shop. Oh Shit, he thought, as only one of them came inside. The man walked over to Morgan and pushed the side of his face with his gun. Morgan, let his head fall across in the direction it had been pushed. The Jamerican pulled the money from Morgan's apparently dead hand.

"A wah da bumba? (What the fuck?)" The man said under his breath as he walked back to the door, he called to his accomplice. The other Jamaican was now inside the building and moving toward Morgan, Morgan waited and waited, until finally he couldn't wait any more. The smell of the stale breath of his prey reached his nostrils. Morgan pulled out the gun. Bang! Almost the perfect shot, straight between the eyes, from a range of just eighteen inches. Before the body had hit the floor, Morgan had his gun trained on the other assailant.

"Do you," Bang! Bang! Bang! He gunned the second Jamaican down, then proceeded to talk to the dead bodies. "What? Y'all didn't realise that I watch James Bond. What? Did you think I was gonna stand here and explain to you that killed my cousin, so now I am gonna have to kill you. I ain't like you people. You know the problem with all you Jamaicans and Jamaicans. Y'all talk too damn much, you can't just kill a man or box down a man. You have to cuss him first, insult his mother or his sister and stuff like that. None of you can ever do me anything." He pulled the gun from the dead man's waist band, as he suspected, it was a two-two. "I knew it was you, you little punk." Morgan took the gun, picked up the main wad of cash, and headed out to the car, he closed Leroy's hand around the phone before tucking it into the pocket. He then wrapped Leroy's fingers around the Ruger.

"This'll cause confusion, they are gonna love you," he muttered "What is your people say? Bun fire pon batty man. (Gay people should be burned alive.)" Morgan called Daniella on his phone. "I'm ready," he said quietly, hung up, and began walking slowly back to the highway.

CHAPTER TEN

Daniella, wrapped up the hair clippers and took the bag filled with Morgan's hair out to the kitchen. There had been tons of the thick black curly locks, but it was all gone now. Morgan had all Strauss' belongings, packed up. His locks gone, he felt that something was missing, he sat feeling naked in the chair. They say, when you have a limb chopped off, it feels like it's still there, pains, itches, everything. That's how Morgan felt about his hair. Daniella entered the room, despite there being two full size sofas in the lounge, she elected to sit on the floor, between is legs.

"You don't tell me anything. What's your plan?" Morgan rubbed his close cropped head.

"If only I knew," he replied, through clenched teeth. He wasn't angry at her, his anger was born purely out of frustration. Morgan prided himself, he always had a plan and it was always well thought out. Somewhere in his mind, existed the makings of a plan, then again, it was only half a plan, nothing was firm, the beginnings were barely pencilled in. After that it was all a bit hazy, too many ifs, too many possibilities and far too many variables. Morgan had spoken to his cousin, Alex.

"Strauss wasn't coming back right now," was all he said. To break the news that your brother wasn't coming back, ever, Morgan thought he had better do that, face to face. After much deliberation, he decided he had no choice but to bring Daniella into the loop as best he could, practicalities first. He studied her, her body, then with greater scrutiny, he examined her face. Daniella had put on one of his tee shirts, that was almost standard, she wore them more than he did. Morgan allowed himself a little smile. He remembered the vision of her winding the chord to the clippers, she stood in front of the lamp. He could see the silhouette of her naked body underneath the thin top. He felt no shame, the naked body he'd ogled, was his anyway. Why should he feel any shame? Morgan, cleared his throat.

"The rent is paid out of my account, every month, so it's taken care of until the end of the month. There is enough in the bank to take care of another three payments. After that, I don't know. Hopefully, something will be sorted out, I need to move Strauss' body when the opportunity arises."

"Okay." Daniella wasn't stupid, she knew what the haircut was all about. She just couldn't piece things together in her head, well not fully anyway.

"If things don't work out, I would like you to stay here, but on your wages, I don't know how you're gonna manage. I have a few ticks out there, a couple of thousand maybe. Don't tell anybody I won't be around. Davis will collect the ticks for you, that way, at least you'll have some extra cash. After that, I don't know what the plan is, I want you to try and stay here, it's our place. I've no idea how you are gonna make the rent on your own." Daniella looked up him and smiled.

"I will stay here, because I know you are coming back soon, I feel it in my heart. Morgan, since I met you." She reached up and stroked his thigh, craning her neck, to look up into his face. "Things, they just have a habit of falling into place, I won't struggle to pay our rent." Without warning, Daniella changed the subject. "Baby, I think, I know, something that nobody else knows."

"What's that?" Morgan, appeared to be distracted, he had other things on his mind.

"I think Natalie, maybe she is pregnant."

"Why, did she say something?" the speed of his head turning may have caused whiplash.

"I said, nobody knows! Are you stupid? I don't even think that Natalie herself knows." Daniella laughed out loud. "It's a woman thing we can tell, we know about these things." She looked to Morgan, he had just realised the gravity of her statement. "When Strauss was killed," she continued to speak. "We were all upset, but Natalie, she was crying all day and all of the night. Is not like Natalie, she is tough, it must be the hormones. You see her this morning, no? she looked extra pretty, no spots, she was very happy and a new little snap in her walk." Morgan thought about Natalie, he visualised her walking to and from the car. Daniella, turned so she was facing him, kneeling between his legs.

"Yeah, you're right you know, she looked, damn fine." Morgan agreed, a little over zealously for Daniella's liking.

"Uh uh, I give it two weeks, she will look like shit, and feel like shit."

"And Strauss, he is the father?" queried Morgan. Daniella jumped up, she slapped Morgan hard on his right shoulder. She stood over him, hands on hips.

"Why you have to that, huh? Why men always have to do that? Is every night, they are here, not keeping their hands off each other, the bed is creaking all the time, like an old ship at sea. What you think, huh? You think maybe Joseph is the father?" she then muttered something in Spanish. Whatever she said, Morgan had heard it before, he recognised it as the start to her pre-detonation sequence. "You think is the immaculate conception? Fark! Are you stupid?" Morgan held his hands in the air, palms facing her. He wanted to surrender now, before furniture got broken and the neighbours started to bang on the walls.

"Just checking, sorry," he apologised, but she was still mad as hell. "Well, I have to be sure, because it's my responsibility." Morgan was trying, but he wasn't saying the right things. Daniella was about to boil over.

"Maybe you have cut off your hair, but you are not Strauss, is not your baby, Natalie is not your woman!" Daniella screamed at him. Morgan reasoned, he had just killed three men without a second thought, and would do so again, happily. Daniella and the Latino rage, scared him, it was no joke. Morgan believed she could do some, what he called 'voodoo magic shit'. Daniella always knew stuff. Tomorrow Morgan would be getting on a plane, thirty thousand feet over the Atlantic, he had visions a jumbo jet plummeting into the ocean. Probably, it was best to try to passify her.

"Woah! stick a god-damned pin!" Morgan, pulled her down onto his chest. "Okay, if things are as you say, Natalie must come and stay with you, she is now our, repeat, our responsibility. It's a family thing, Natalie and her baby must be taken care of. You are part of this. If it's my cousin's child, the child is part of our family." More by luck, than judgement. Morgan had passified Daniella, it was the word, our, that stopped her in her tracks. If he'd said, my family, then shares in Virgin-Atlantic, may well have plummeted. As it was, Daniella had turned into a pussy cat.

"You know I will always do for you," she replied. "But this time is different, normally I don't ask but this time I have to know. What is in your head? What is your plans?" Morgan still

retained the vision of a plane flying over the ocean, the word mayday popped into his head. He thought it wise to tell her everything that he knew.

"Dani, tomorrow I'm going to England, I'll see Alex and tell him everything. I'll use Strauss' passport, so there is at least a record of him leaving the USA. Strauss, had quit his job, so, no work friends, he was separated from his wife, they had no children. There will be no mutual friends that'll want to be social. Well, you know how it goes. When friends separate, you are so afraid of seen to be taking sides, you avoid both parties like the plague. Sadly, if I can go over as him, spend some time and then come back here. Nobody, will miss him. I don't know immigration policy, but I think this can be done."

"Okay, I get the picture, I know what you are saying. I have seen this before. Whatever I can do to help you, you know that I will."

"Yeah, I know, you always have, I think maybe I've taken you for granted. I don't know how to say this but..."

"Then don't." she cut in, placing a finger across his lips. "Shh!" she said before kissing him. It wasn't anything passionate, certainly not one of your big screen classics, It was just a simple kiss on the lips, long enough to be beyond a peck, but just a little kiss all the same. She didn't have the confidence to go for anything more. Morgan responded by giving her a big bear hug of a squeeze. Filled with confidence she kissed him again, a little longer this time. Daniella smiled, reached over for her glass of wine and swung her legs up, so she was lying across him on the sofa. Before she got comfortable, she sat up again and gestured to him with her glass.

"You want a drink?" she asked, sliding off the sofa.

"Well," he smiled "Seeing as your up." She let her hand trail across him, along his stomach, then over his chest and shoulder as she passed him on the way to the kitchen. Seconds later, she returned with two bottles of beer, a wine glass and a bottle opener, she stood over him.

"Choose," she demanded, holding the wine glass and the opener in the one hand, the beer in the other. Morgan nodded his preference for beer. Daniella took the top off a bottle, passed it to

him and returned to her original kneeling position, between his legs.

"Now, before I get comfortable, is there anything else?" Morgan leaned back and clasped his hands together behind his head.

"Well love, while you're down there!" he laughed. Then, there was the pressure, Bang! It didn't creep up or build, it just hit. Her breath grew shorter, she felt dizzy, then a feeling of calmness. Daniella's life stopped, right then and there, it felt like the final second of an earthquake tremor. Daniella very nearly lost her balance. The earth's rotation around it's axis, came to an abrupt, unceremonious halt. For Daniella, this was her defining moment in time. There was so much at stake, she was entitled to take a moment, to consider fully, the potential implications of said moment. The image on the television was still like a photograph. Morgan's statuesque figure had it's lips slightly parted from the last word he had spoken. Disguised as jest, the man she desired to be her lover, had asked her to perform an explicit sexual act. Morgan, to date, would not touch her because of her past life as a prostitute. That was five years ago, now she was a respectable woman. Daniella paced the still room as she considered her options. A peek out of the windows revealed that the traffic had also stopped, everything was still, waiting for her decision. As the woman she had become, would she perform the aforementioned sexual act upon her lover? Why wouldn't she? the Hispanic woman asked herself. Yes, she most definitely would. It was normal, right, lovers did that sort of stuff. As the prostitute she had been in the past. Would she still perform the act, bearing in mind there were no previously negotiated financial benefits? Hell yes! Why wouldn't she? Morgan had done so much for her, he'd save her life. The least she could do was to give him a freebie, on the house, if you like. That was it, decision made. Daniella knelt between his legs and reached a hand towards his fly.

"Morgan honey, I am going to make the earth move for you!" she enthused. Something wasn't right, felatio on a stiff? This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Nothing was alive or moving. She sighed heavily, wondering what was expected of her. A memory of a past encounter entered her mind. Morgan went nuts at the notion of her using herself as any form of payment or

reward, he'd threatened to beat that mentality out of her. "Love is to be given and received, making it an exchange." she mumbled trying to think.

"Please, " she begged, casting her eyes skyward. The Hispanic woman was already kneeling, she pressed her palms together to complete the posture of prayer. "In this moment, let me make the right decision." The world stood silent, if he existed, he would be able to hear her now. Was Daniella learning the error of her ways? Trembling, whilst rising to her feet. Daniella surmised that if she were a truly decent respectable woman and their relationship were to start, right here and now. This current situation would be the equivalent of their first date. How dare he? Her blood began to warm. Who did he think he was? The blood was boiling now. What did he take her for? Super-heated Latino blood pulsed through her veins. What a shot! Had this event been televised, it would have been played and replayed by sports channels for years to come, in slow motion, from every angle, it was the proverbial Tyson blow. She slapped his face with such a force, it was mighty. The inertia from the slap resonated through his body, eventually the shockwave passed into the earth through his legs and finally his feet. There was a clunk followed by a tremor, again she was momentarily unsteady on her feet. Once more the earth was spinning and normality was restored. Morgan grabbed both her arms, he didn't want to be struck again. Daniella was famed for her combinations.

"You know I love you, don't you?" he announced.

"Is now you're telling me this!" she cried. "Now that you are leaving, leaving me, you are telling me this!" Daniella was smiling, she knew the situation, she didn't know all the details but she had a good idea. Earlier in the evening, there had been a news bulletin. Some drug dealers, had been robbed at gun-point out on route twenty-four. There was some mention of gay pornography. Three men were shot and killed. It was being put down to the rising casualties in California's increasing drug problem, the police had no leads. Daniella was well aware that Morgan had committed this crime, and he would very probably get away with it. Three dead drug dealers didn't warrant a big enquiry or a lot of police resources. Three dead Jamerican gangsters was a good result, it didn't warrant the expenditure of US tax-dollars. That particular

file would be closed within the month. Morgan would not and could not, take the risk, she understood why it was wise for him to change his appearance and lay low for a while, or even leave the state. He knows what he's doing, she thought, she snuggled in closer. It will all work out.

Daniella stirred, she must have fallen asleep. Slowly, the silver box on the table came into focus. Briefly she wondered as to the long term effects of it's contents. The previous feeling of contentment and progress still warmed her. Something had changed, he'd joked saying, 'While you're down there'. Normally, any reference to a sexual act would remind him of her past, and undoubtedly kill the moment. Maybe today he'd finally accepted it. Hopefully, during her moment of time, she'd made the right decision. She leaned over, trying to reach the bottle of wine on the coffee table. It was no good, she was going to have to stand up. Looking over at Morgan, she could not tell, whether he was relaxing, with his eyes closed, or he was fast asleep. When she last looked, he was watching a film, *The Rules of Engagement*. Dani moved off the sofa slowly, stood up, then leaned over to fill up her glass. When she turned to go back the sofa, she turned straight into Morgan, he was standing behind her. He hadn't been sleeping he'd been thinking and he'd finally worked it out. Daniella, was a sweet sensitive woman, she was undoubtedly the finest woman he'd ever met. Daniella, had never been a hooker. Daniella, would not hurt a fly. It was KV that was the bitch-ho from hell. If he committed to Daniella, he was convinced he would be signing KV's death warrant.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"I was just getting a top up." He took the glass from her hand and placed it back onto the coffee table.

"You don't need a top up, you'll never need a top up. You're strictly on contract now." He placed both his arms around her. She returned his action with a questioning look, she didn't understand what he was saying. Although she couldn't quite fathom what was going on, Daniella instinctively wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Morgan, placed his hands on the hem at the bottom of her shirt. In one movement, he pulled the shirt up

over her head. Daniella stood in front of him naked, wondering what he was going to do next.

"Daniella, that body of yours looks dangerous!" he eyed the curves of her bronzed form.

"Is yours," she whispered to him, squeezing his body

"Don't be holding up no white flag, it's too late to surrender. I want to you be on the offensive, hostile and dangerous."

"Why, you like it rough?" she queried, she didn't understand.

"Sure, don't you know the Rules of Engagement?" his chuckle sounded rude.

"Engagement?" she repeated almost breathlessly.

"Sure," he marched her backwards towards the sofa.

"The Rules of Engagement clearly state," he stopped her before they reached the sofa. "In the event of," he looked over her body once more. "Clear and present danger," he licked his lips and pushed her down onto the sofa. "A man is entitled to," he undid his belt. "Draw his weapon," she looked him in the eye, raising her eyebrows. "And fire shots" he grinned.

"How many shots?" she teased. It almost ruined the moment, Morgan paused to think about it.

"I don't know, I suppose until the danger has ceased or you run out of bullets."

"Are you allowed to reload? is allowed?" Daniella grinned at him. Morgan's evil superior grin turned to a look of desperate despair as he followed her gaze to a large pile of magazines.