

Altered States

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Author's Note

This story is fiction. However, historical references to names, events, dates and research studies are accurate. The science used in this book is real. Theories based on this science are those of the author ... and might just be true as well.

Prologue

A sick seventeen-year-old boy lays in his bed unable to move. He overhears three men talking to his mother in the next room. The three men are doctors. They tell his mother that her son will be dead by morning. The boy is infuriated. Not that he is going to die but that anyone could tell a mother that her son will be dead by morning.

A few moments later his mother steps into the room with an expression as serene as she is able, masking her deep despair.

The boy is paralysed with polio and he can barely speak, but he asks his mother to move his dresser; to push it up against his bed at an angle. She thinks he is delirious, but she is keen to comply with her son's last wishes and sets about moving the dresser. The boy issues further instructions to move the dresser back and forth, until he is satisfied. His mother does not understand why, and he does not tell her.

Finally, he is pleased. By virtue of the mirror on the dresser at its new angle, the boy can see through the doorway of his bedroom to the west-facing window of the next room.

This was his desire. To see the sun set one last time. Now he could fade with the daylight.

When the sunset comes he sees it across the whole

sky. He doesn't see the tree or the fence or the boulder in its way. He knows they are there, but he stares at the sunset so intently that his mind blocks everything else out.

When the sun has set the boy loses consciousness.

But three days later, contrary to the doctors' prognosis, he wakes.

For months he lays in his bed, unable to move anything but his eyeballs. With nothing to do but watch and think. Over these months he gains a unique understanding of the human mind.

An understanding from which the world would learn.

An understanding by which the world would be healed.

The boy's name was **Milton H. Erickson** (1901-80).

PART ONE

Branded Alive

One

My Moment

Ten years ago I died.

Okay, so I didn't actually die, but as far as the rest of the world was concerned, I ceased to exist.

And right now I was ceasing to exist in a hot tub, in San Diego, sucking on a strawberry daiquiri. Doesn't sound so bad, I admit. But there are a lot of things you don't know right now.

For the last few months I had been staying at this generic apartment complex – sorry, unique residential community. I like these places. They are pleasant, in a fake kind of way. Everything was just-so: the buildings perfectly maintained; the grounds litter-free; the vegetation neatly manicured and far greener than the climate would normally permit. It was like living in an artist's impression.

Occasionally, I paid a visit to the communal bathing area, but only at night. During the day it was way too busy with people sitting around looking at the swimming pool – seemingly content with bathing solely in its reflection.

Dotted around the pool were a number of hot tubs nestled under ornamental palm trees, and these offered a far more popular method of getting wet. I know they are massively decadent and a down-right crime against the

environment, but I appeased my guilt by reminding myself that they are also really warm and bubbly. Besides, I had bigger guilt issues to deal with in my life right now and this was my one method of escapism, of lubricating my ruminations.

As the bubbles jostled across my skin I leaned my head back and watched the breeze rustle through the broad leaves above. It reminded me of being a kid, when I used to imagine the wind as invisible giants brushing through the tress. That was how I explained it to myself back then. Explanations were so much easier to come by when you could invoke the service of invisible giants and the like.

Unfortunately, this night I had to conjure explanations without reference to a single mythical entity. And, moreover, I had to do so in the double-sized hot tub – the others being either out-of-order or occupied by canoodling couples. This presented the very real danger of interruption by outside parties, and sure enough my space was duly invaded by a bunch of drunken twenty-somethings. The male contingent were trainee pilots at the Navy base down town. They were oozing so much charisma that a slick was beginning to form on the water. The girls of the party – Navy groupies presumably – lapped up all the macho bravado with flirtatious giggles. I did my best to be my super-sociable self but suddenly felt strangely insecure about my inability to land a helicopter on a boat.

Eventually, their beers ran dry, and the Navy crew all sloped off back to one-or-other's apartment to smoke some dope. All but one girl, who returned with a tall jug of the aforementioned strawberry-based cocktail, apparently drawn to my quirky English accent.

We chatted for a while about nothing in particular and it was, well, nice. Simple as that. And if it had been any other day, that might have meant something. It might have led somewhere. But today there were a lot more elements to the equation. And I soon realised it was only going to balance one way.

I made my excuses to the hot tub girl and climbed out of the water. She gave an affronted shrug and plodded off into the darkness, leaving nothing behind but a set of evaporating footprints. But that didn't matter. She was never going to register in my world. Not today. Instead she was consigned to the long list of fleeting blips that littered my personal timeline.

As I stood there, dripping wet and motionless, staring into the night sky, the words of the news clipping I'd read earlier that day replayed in my mind.

A forty-two-year-old man was arrested today in New Meadows, Nevada, in connection with the death of Pearle Jenkins. The six-year-old girl died a year ago, reportedly from a rare viral infection. Police have released no further information as to what role the man is alleged to have played in the girl's death, but the arrest has aroused suspicion surrounding the circumstances of the incident ...

This was not something I would have chosen to know – not anymore. I had already mourned the passing of Pearle Jenkins once. And although I played no part in her death, in some ways the event itself marked the culmination of all the bad decisions I had made in my life. The point when all my mistakes had manifested into

a personal demon that struck a shard of guilt to the core of my soul.

And that was my moment.

For some people, there will be a *moment*. A moment that will define their life. A moment that every event before will unconsciously lead toward; and every event thereafter will be moulded by.

That was *my* moment.

It took me to a new dark place in my life. It took me to the edge of a million-gallon vat of whiskey that I was all ready to drown myself in.

Only recently had I allowed a glint of light to seep back in. Only recently had I felt ready to accept the fact that there was no mystery to obsess about; no answers to find. I was ready to think about the next step in my life.

But with this news the darkness came flooding back in like an unstoppable tide. I had no choice. I could not leave this behind – I could never outrun it.

I packed up a few things into my rental Pontiac and started the six-hour drive to New Meadows.

Two

Forge Ahead

A man stood at the corner of the street, one foot flat against the wall behind him. His skin was pale and tired and was framed by a shock of unkempt hair. He took out a cigarette and a rip-off Zippo lighter, and brought them together in a motion long-since committed to muscle-memory.

And then he waited.

For a client.

Or a killer.

He was one of the nameless, faceless thousands who felt there was no other route than this one, his chosen career path; though the statistics did not make for an inviting set of Terms & Conditions. Over the next four years he could expect to be arrested seven times, suffer three serious non-fatal injuries and stand a one-in-four chance of being killed.

For all this he would earn less than the minimum wage, spend most of his days in the stairwell of a condemned building, and continue living with his mum on the sixteenth floor of a community housing project high-rise. Such were the attributes of his glittering occupation.

He was a rank-and-file dealer at the bottom of a very large pyramid. He wasn't even a proper member of a gang yet. He just paid his dues for protection and the

right to sell on their turf. There was none of the glamour others associated with his trade. Only hard labour, high risk and poverty.

So why did he do it? Why does anyone do it?

Dreams.

He knew how the guys at the top lived. These were the men who engendered respect and wielded power; the ones with the girls and the cars and the diamonds.

Looking up at these superstars of the underworld made many youths understandably star-struck. They were lured like the children of Hamelin.

These stars were where the dealer's sights were set. Pretty soon he hoped to earn a place as a foot-soldier in the gang, where he would still earn next-to-nothing, but crucially he would no longer be at the bottom of a very large pyramid; he would be *one step up* ... from the bottom of a very large pyramid. And that was what it was all about, climbing the ladder.

It was no different than the young woman who abandons her career and moves to Hollywood to wait on tables; doing the photo-shoots and bit-part auditions, holding out for her big break in the movies. The chances of making it were tiny, the risks were huge, but the incentives were astronomical.

And we all operate by incentives.

A man approached the dealer on the street. A new man; one the dealer didn't recognise.

'S'up?' the stranger said with an upward nod of the head. 'Yo holdin' any threads?'

'Aff. What tags yo chasin'?'

'Blood ticket?'

'Firm. Holdin' blues-uncut n tees-white. Intro?'

'Aff. Hit me wit' a midi-tee, stat.'

Brand-slang was what they called it. No-one was fluent. That was the point. It was a language that you could never pin down. It morphed over time; never persisting long enough for anyone to really know it, for meaning to ever stick. That was just one necessity for avoiding the law.

The dealer pulled out the requested item and handed it over.

'How green?'

'Two Jacks', ma'.'

As the money was changing hands neither of them noticed the black Mercedes roll up across the street; a tinted window gliding down silently. The first shot went through the dealer's upper arm, the second through his chest. Then the car was gone.

The client had been thrown to the floor uninjured. He acted quickly, pouncing to the aid of the victim as he punched nine-one-one into his phone. He knew that at the first sound of sirens he would have to make his move. He couldn't afford to be seen here.

Blood bubbled up through the client's fingers relentlessly as he pressed his hands down on the dealer's chest wound. Then he noticed that blood was pumping out of his back too – the hole went straight through.

As the crimson pool he knelt in grew larger, Detective Conner Alvisa glanced at the holdall lying beside him, its red-splattered contents now worthless.

What a frustratingly crazy world, he thought, that so much blood should be spilt over this...

Over a bag of t-shirts and jeans.



The ‘rug trade’ was the term coined by the media to describe the trade in fake branded textiles. There were no rugs of course, mainly shirts and jeans and alike, but the term had a nice familiar ring to it which sat neatly in the front-page headlines.

The story of the rug trade began over a decade before in New Zealand with a seemingly unrelated incident. A musician and recreational drug user was enjoying himself at a house-party when he was unfortunate enough to witness the horrific and public suicide of a friend high on meth. The musician had already lost one family member to drugs and this episode finally made him determined to kick his own habit for good. He began to experiment with legal alternatives, and he even sought out a professor of neuropharmacology to tutor him and aid in his search. Eventually, from papers published in the States, he identified a compound called benzylpiperazine, or BZP. It acted like methamphetamine but was non-addictive and carried an extremely low risk of overdose or death. What was more, it was a legal substance in most countries. The musician went on to set up a multi-million dollar company selling legal highs.

This development was what turned the tide against illegal street drugs across the world. And it wasn’t just BZP; there was a massive selection of psychoactive substances designed to mimic the effect of pretty much every illegal drug on the street. Stimulants, opiates, hallucinogens – whatever your taste you could buy it online; you could even buy some at the grocery store.

All this meant that over time the bottom fell out of the illegal drug market and suddenly there were a lot of

underworld dealers with nothing much to deal.

The attention of some wily dealers turned from white powder to white cotton, from Brazil to China. They realised that if you could manufacture an item for a dollar in China which had a street value of fifty in the West, then there was some serious money to be made. It was all about stitching in the right label.

The counterfeit goods market had been around as long as there had been goods to counterfeit, but this all happened at a time when intellectual property rights were big news. Record labels and movie companies were losing millions to illegal downloads and fake discs and they were putting massive pressure on world governments to do something about it. And the governments responded. Suddenly, protecting the profits of multinational corporations seemed to become the number one priority for the law.

So these two events collided. The counterfeit fashion industry gained the regimented structure and firepower of former drugs gangs; and the law enforcers gained a huge resource boost and impetus to shut the industry down. The result, predictably, was a mess. A bloody mess. And it got no messier than on the streets of New Meadows.



It was early evening when Conner Alvisa got back to the station. Only a few people milled about the large open-plan office. He was pleased to see Mila still at her desk. He knew that when someone died all over you, it was good to have someone to bitch to about it. Mila swivelled her chair to face Conner as if she’d been awaiting his return.

'How'd it go with your new guy?' she asked.

Conner held up his blood-stained cuffs.

'Oh no. Please tell me he has some left,' she said, regarding the blood.

'Not a lot. And it's not very warm now.'

'Oh god, I'm sorry.' She hesitated for a moment.

'Kind of makes this harder to tell you then.'

'What?'

She hesitated even longer. 'Maybe sit down first.'

'*That bad?*' Conner slumped himself at his desk. 'Go on, shoot. Make my day.'

'Bigby's been arrested.'

'What?!' Conner immediately stood up again and moved over to Mila's screen displaying the arrest report.

'*Murder?*' he exclaimed with genuine confusion and leaned in to read the detail. 'Six-year-old girl, twelve months ago? What the f--' He held himself back from barking any profane rhetoric at Mila. 'Is he in?' he asked instead and marched off without awaiting a response.

'Don't...!' Mila called after him hopelessly.

Conner was heading for the office of Chief of Detectives, William McCarthy. When he got there he burst in unannounced.

'How could you let them arrest Bigby?'

McCarthy stood up to defend himself.

'*Let them?* It was a federal thing. I didn't even know about it till it was too late. Hell, I still don't know anything.'

'But, Jesus, we've been tracking this guy for eight months.'

'Well, you don't need to anymore. He's banged up.'

'Yeah, for the wrong crime. We had a chance to pull a whole network down here.'

'I know; I know. What can I do? My hands are tied.'

'Well, they might just as well be nailed to your desk,' Conner fired as his parting shot. He stormed out and whistled past Mila who was standing outside.

'That wasn't fair, Conner,' she said in pursuit.

'Well ... life isn't.'

Bigby wasn't a dealer. He was a supplier. Or, at least, he was a go-between, a runner. It took six months of investigation just to find out his real name – nobody was stupid enough to use their own name in this game. He was called Jackson Burch, hence his dealer name, Bigby – 'Big B'.

The investigation hadn't uncovered enough solid evidence to pin anything on Bigby. But then, they didn't want to arrest him anyway. He connected people. He was far more useful outside, doing his job. He could take them higher.

'Where do we go from here?' Mila asked.

Conner had calmed a little.

'Home,' he said with a resigned nod, and walked away.

Home would be dark and empty. It was always empty, but all the more so on days when you had seen someone die; when you had let someone's life bubble through your fingers. It was a stark reminder that your own life was bubbling away too, just at a slower pace.

Conner knew he would be making a detour on the way back home that day.

He found Crystal Seth skulking behind a cheap hotel; one of his favourite skulking spots. The two men briefly exchanged pseudo-pleasantries, before Conner handed over some cash in exchange for three grams of kratom

extract. Kratom is harvested from the leaves of a tree native to south-east Asia, and offers an energising and euphoric effect similar to opiates. You can buy kratom products in any of the specialist shops in the area. But some people are not so keen to be seen buying drugs, legal or otherwise – in the same way that some people are not so keen to be spotted visiting a sex shop. As such there is a small niche market of street trading legal highs.

Plus, rumour had it that Crystal Seth pepped up his wares a little. Conner wasn't sure exactly what Crystal Seth did to his products but the effect was real enough, and he knew it could only be *slightly* illegal. Certainly nothing compared to selling fake Levis on the street. Conner had been governed by the force for so long that he failed to see the irony in this sentiment.

What Conner also failed to see was that the gear he bought from Crystal Seth was identical to what he could have bought from a store around the corner at a far more reasonable price. The extra kick was purely placebo; a false high created by the thrill of obtaining drugs from a dodgy guy in a back alley; rendered even more potent by the fact that Conner was a cop.

After a muggy walk home Conner stepped into his apartment and checked the fridge. There was nothing in it that constituted food but there was three-quarters of a pint of milk, two days out-of-date. He unscrewed the lid and sniffed at the neck. Concluding that it wouldn't kill him, he poured it into a glass and added the three grams of recently purchased powder and two spoons of honey, before whisking it briskly with a fork.

In the lounge he placed the glass on the coffee table and moved over to the mantelpiece, boasting two photographs in matching aluminium frames. It wouldn't

take a detective to determine that this was the mark of a woman's touch. But the layer of dust upon them revealed that the touch had not alighted here for quite some time. Fittingly, therefore, one of the pictures was of his wife and their son. It was taken when his son was about four, when he still had fair hair. That was about a year before they – well *she* – walked out on him. Conner gets to see his son every other week now, for the weekend. He gets to see his wife every other week too, for the passing of their timeshare progeny across the threshold and back.

The other picture on the mantelpiece was of his parents. He didn't see them as much as he should either. He always felt a pang of guilt when he thought about his parents, though he wasn't sure why exactly. It was as if he hadn't yet made enough of his life to justify the sacrifices they made to have him. Or something like that.

What he did know was that all of the people staring at him should be a larger part of his life than they were, and that one day he might get around to doing something about that.

He ran a finger down the face of his wife and smiled at her. Then he turned both pictures face down; turned away four pairs of disapproving eyes so they could no longer scrutinise him.

Slumped in the sofa he held the glass of milky-cocktail for a moment. Milk seemed such an innocent drink to be taking drugs with, albeit legal ones. It felt oxymoronic, but he didn't let it trouble him for too long. He necked the drink, laid back and let euphoria wash away another day.

Three

Bailing Out

I had come to New Meadows to meet an alleged murderer. There are a lot of people in New Meadows who might make you contemplate murder – if only in an idle musing fashion. Though it is not the kind of place I would wish to vacation in for the sake of idle musing. In fact, not even if my life, wealth or sexual health depended upon it. The beautiful rolling fields promised by such a pretty place name are realised only by the endless green baize of gaming tables that stretch as far as the eye can see. Smoking is still legal here so as-far-as-the-eye-can-see is about fourteen feet, because as smoking enclaves around the globe get fewer and smaller, so the smoke gets denser and denser.

New Meadows is a border town that started life as a filling station in 1924. Now it's a gambling haven. It's fair to say that for all the things New Meadows is, meadowy it is not. To the best of my knowledge, the town has never nurtured the existence of a single blade of grass, rabid rodent or, in fact, any organism not sufficiently evolved to comprehend the rules of craps – and then lose their money playing it. Coincidentally, I have never evolved sufficiently to comprehend the rules of craps, which may have something to do with me being English. But, then, by the time I arrived in New

Meadows it was the small hours of the morning and the only thing I felt sufficiently evolved to do was sleep.

As it turned out, I couldn't even do that very well, and I awoke the next morning to a fuzzy head. For a while I attempted to hide from the day and all that it represented, but the day was on top form and found me almost immediately, cowering under a hotel duvet. I peeled open my eyes and tilted my head toward the clock on the bedside table. The clock was partially obscured by the photo I had propped against it the night before. I reached out for it and stared into it once more. A habit I'd almost shaken until the previous day.

The picture was of a young girl on a sunny day – Pearle. A bob of fair hair bounced beside her face and a mischievous smile played on her lips. I drifted away to a better time; an imaginary time. I'd never met the girl, but at that moment I was with her. Her smile infectiously spread to my own face and I was at peace. Just for a moment.

The ability to enter altered states of consciousness is a powerful ability of the human mind. One that is very much under-utilised. Few people realise that our daily lives are littered with experiences of altered states – you don't need to be hypnotised or intoxicated. If you have ever arrived at work with no recollection of the journey in, then you experienced an altered state – a kind of 'autopilot' altered state. Or if you've walked out of a cinema after watching a superhero movie and felt invincible then this too was an altered state – a superdelusion state maybe.

My altered state was more meditative; pondering the questions surrounding Pearle's short life, for what seemed like the millionth time.

Since I first learned of her existence in this world.

Since her exit from it.

It was her mother who told me. The memory was still crisp in my mind. Still raw.

I remember standing at the entrance to the hospital ward, people scuffling past me clutching bunches of flowers and bowls of fruit and selections of magazines. I hadn't brought anything. What do you bring a woman you abandoned almost a decade before? I'm not sure a bunch of grapes and a copy of Cosmo really makes up for much.

Most people associate hospitals with some bad experience in their past: a childhood injury, an elderly relative passing away. I was no exception.

The time that passed as I dallied at the doorway was time I could ill afford. I knew I could not spend too long there. So I put procrastination to one side and set out on the journey to her bed, back to her side. Reality would insist that the ward was full of people, but to me there was no one else. There was just me and her, and the distance between us, which was less now than it had been for a long, long time. Every footstep echoed with meaning, as clearly as if I were tap-dancing in a vacant cathedral.

Then the dancing stopped.

There she was. I could picture my face at that moment, an ambiguous mix of emotions. Despite the circumstances I couldn't suppress a brief moment of undiluted excitement at seeing her again. Excitement which soon faded.

'Aaron?' she said in the faintest of whispers. The lump in my throat was so thick all I could do was nod as I took her hand. And then she delivered those words that

had hounded me ever since.

'She had your eyes, Aaron,' she whispered as her own eyes gently closed. The last words shared with a grieving mother ... with the only person who ever really understood me.

She was talking about Pearle, her daughter, who had died from a rare viral infection three days before. It was such an unusual condition that it had made the newspapers. Only in a minor bottom-of-page-fifteen kind of way, but that was enough to trigger the alert that brought me here.

The infection that took Pearle was claiming her mother's life force too as I stood beside her, running those words over in my mind; *She had your eyes*. Pearle was not my daughter, so what kind of sense did it make?

Most people would not have paid such heed to these words. She was slipping in and out of consciousness at the time, prone to what doctors call confabulation: the filling of gaps in one's memory with fabrications believed to be fact. I know all about this. But, hell, if there was one thing I knew more about, it was *her*, the woman lying before me.

I had been out of her life for a long time, but that day, she saw me, and I mean she *saw* me, she *recognised* me. And those words were no idle ramblings of an ill mind. They weren't entirely lucid, but with every fibre of her body she felt that they represented the single most important fact I needed to know.

I didn't know why, and in the months that followed I tried to come to terms with the fact that I never would know why; that I never would make amends for letting her down so badly.

As her eyes closed there was the hint of a proud smile

about them.

I could not smile.

I could only cry.

From that moment on I carried an unwavering belief that Pearle was the answer to a lot of things as far as my life was concerned – maybe everything. I had little evidence to support this hypothesis, but then I didn't really know what the questions were.

Pearle was my very own forty-two.

On occasion I worried that it was just my need for something to cling to, something to obsess about. I couldn't deny that I needed such a thing, since I had left behind all the substance of my life.

I don't get to interact with the world much these days, not on a personal level. I'm what you might call a low-key kind of guy. By low-key I mean that my parents don't even know I exist anymore. Funny how life goes full circle in some ways. As a kid I was pretty darn good at hide-and-seek. Today hide-and-seek was my day job. Mainly hide.

The reason for me hiding was nothing clichéd like there being people wanting to kill me. This may also be true but it was just a footnote in my story. The main reason was that I am, well, kind of special; I have certain abilities. And there were some people – powerful people – to whom I would be very useful. There was a time when I thought helping these people was the right thing to do, but then I changed my mind. That's when I had to bail out; to run away. That was a long time ago now.

At first you feel guilt at severing yourself from everyone you know, at absolving your responsibilities. Then after a while you actually start to believe you don't exist anymore. You walk the streets like an invisible

man, with an unparalleled sense of liberation. It is quite exhilarating for a while.

But the exhilaration soon transitions to isolation; an isolation beyond which can never be imagined. Most people suffer loneliness at some point in their life. Anyone unlucky enough to be devoid of family or friends for a time. But to also have no enemies, no neighbours, no colleagues, no postman; to have no consistent figures in your life at all; is a terrifying experience. The meaning begins to ebb away from your world. People become nothing but automaton to you. That is a very dangerous place to be. When people become objects ... the world turns bad.

I didn't want the world to turn bad. Not if I could help it. So in many ways I felt I was clinging to the last shreds of sanity via the girl in that photo, because when looking at her I actually felt something inside – which was a rare experience for me these days. Or maybe that wasn't it. Maybe I just needed a stable figure in my life; and one thing you couldn't deny about Pearle was that she was very stable. She was six years old when the picture was taken – and she always will be now.

I shook myself from my reverie; I had a job to do. I needed to see a man in a prison. The man arrested in connection with Pearle's death. This was not as straightforward as it should be. Nothing ever is for me.

I'm something of an expert at laying low. I could write a book about it – though promotion may prove problematic. Specifically, I can impart that one particularly bad way of laying low is to walk into a city jail and visit a murderer; what with all the policemen, cameras, form-filling and so forth. So there was really only one alternative, and it was potentially a rather

expensive one.

I pulled on some clothes, and grabbed the briefcase full of cash I always had handy for just such occasions.

I headed into town and then slipped off the main Strip. One block makes a big difference in New Meadows. Sneak behind its glitzy façade and you find the true depth and hue of its foundation. Ugly storage units, grimy offices, low-grade accommodation for the underpaid workers. It was virtually a different world. This was the real New Meadows. The rest was just a front. A crocodile smile.

As unwelcoming as it was, this was just the ambience I was seeking. I was heading for a bail-bondsman and I needed a distinctly back-street kind of outfit. A place that wouldn't ask too many questions. I also needed to be face-to-face. Calling 1800-GET-ME-OUT would not suffice.

The door tinkled as I walked in.

'Can I help you?' The question originated from a pale-looking man sitting behind a dishevelled desk. He seemed somewhat surprised at receiving any custom in person. The décor seemed quite surprised too. In fact, it seemed to have popped out for lunch. The ceiling was short of its full compliment of tiles, and most of those that remained bore the familiar brown stain of a leaky air-con unit. Loose cables trailed across the floor beneath furniture that was mostly fashioned from bare chipboard. A real classy joint.

'I'd like to post bail,' I stated succinctly.

There was a name plate on the man's desk. It wasn't a shiny brass affair. More of a grubby plastic fridge-magnet, propped up against a pot of pencils. As such it served the double purpose of clearly stating the name of

its owner – one Kent Bradshaw – and of equally clearly stating that he was a loser. He was not a bad man, I could tell that; with a less than savoury employer most likely. In this respect I felt a twang of sympathy for him, and at some level felt bad about what I was about to do. But sometimes we have to do things that make us feel bad. Sometimes there is a greater need.

'Do take a seat,' Kent urged.

I didn't take a seat. I just gave him the particulars of my desired inmate, a man named Jackson Burch. The clerk tapped the details into the terminal in front of him, peering intently at the screen, flashing the occasional look of apparent confusion. Clerks in such mundane roles often strive to convey the impression that there is something extremely complex and unusual about entering the same half-dozen pieces of information they enter a hundred times a day. You can experience this phenomenon when checking in for a flight. Despite the fact that the airline already has all of your details and has been expecting your arrival for the three weeks since you booked the ticket, the check-in clerk still appears utterly confused at your arrival and indeed your very existence in this world. It's a power thing – that is, trying to pretend they have some. Fortunately, at the end of Kent's taxing ordeal he still found the energy to speak.

'The bail is five-hundred thousand dollars. Our fee is ten per cent, payable in advance. How would you like to settle?'

I placed the briefcase I was carrying on the desk without saying a word.

'Okay,' he said, with a slight incredulous inflection. 'And what will you be using as collateral against the

balance?’

I pushed the briefcase forward six inches in a confident motion, and offered a dry smile.

Kent looked at me quizzically. ‘You have half-a-million dollars in cash? ... In a briefcase? ... And you wish to use a bail bondsman?’ he over-punctuated.

‘Yes. I have five-hundred thousand dollars ... In a briefcase ... In one-hundred dollar bills ... And I’d like to use a bail bondsman,’ I said with subtle mimicry. ‘Is that a problem?’

‘N-No,’ the clerk stuttered. ‘But you do know you can just go right up to the court with this money, yeah?’

The guy tilted his head. I tilted mine.

‘And *you* know that some people place a very high price on anonymity. Right?’ I leaned in a little. ‘I trust you can respect that?’

By this point Kent would be thinking I was a mafia gangster wanting to knock off a witness, or someone with a similarly socially-unacceptable hobby. I was confident he’d be aware that compliance was a good life-preserving tactic when dealing with such people.

Kent busied himself again at the keyboard with beads of sweat beginning to bristle on his forehead.

‘How long will it take?’ I enquired.

‘Well, we’ll have to count the money, of course.’

‘Of course.’

‘But assuming there is no problem, the bail will be wired straight from our account; and he should be out within three or four hours.’

‘Excellent. I’ll wait.’ Finally, I took a seat. The guy was getting steadily more nervous. I can have this effect on people. When I want to.

A couple of hours later I got the nod from Kent.

‘Everything’s in order. The bail’s been posted,’ he announced with what looked akin to bladder-evacuating relief.

‘Great,’ I responded with an outstandingly cheerful smile which confused the hell out of the poor guy.

When it came to explaining to his boss why he’d mistaken a case of one-dollar bills for half-a-million bucks he’d be left with very few answers.

What can I say? I’m a very persuasive guy.

Four

Once Beaten

Conner was at his desk early. He always was. Detective work was the kind of work that followed you home; the kind of work that woke you up early in the morning to a mild state of anxiety. It was an occupational hazard and Conner accepted that.

He'd been attempting to tease meaning from the reports in front of him since 6.30am, but they were proving resistant to his best teasing tactics. So when Mila arrived she was a welcome distraction, especially as she was escorting fresh bagels and coffee.

'Bagels?' Conner enquired. 'On a Thursday?' Friday, of course, was traditional bagel day.

'I thought that having breakfast *twice* this week might be good for you.'

'Hey, I have breakfast.'

'Yeah, not quite as many calories in a cigarette as you might think.' She plucked the breaded contents from a brown paper bag. 'Cinnamon-and-Raisin or –' she peered at the second '– Shit-Loads-of-Seeds?'

Conner jabbed a key on his keyboard. 'Given that I'm already suffering a poppy-seed related F-key malfunction, I shall opt for the former, if that's okay. Thanks.'

Mila took a seat at her desk. 'What've you got there?'

she enquired, nodding at the report in front of Conner.

Conner turned to her pensively. 'It's the ballistics report from the other day's shooting.'

'Something interesting?'

'I think so.' He thumbed through a couple of leaves of pre-amble to the last page of the report and handed it to Mila. 'According to this, the same gun that killed our dealer friend was used in another gang murder last week.'

'So?'

'So, that victim was on the *other* side.'

There are only two gangs in New Meadows worth worrying about. The first, Srips, is a gang of primarily African-American members, which originally formed in Southern California as a splinter from the infamous LA gang, Crips. The gang grew and spread quickly. Within a few years of forming dozens of sets popped up in Southern California and eventually in the major cities of Nevada. In New Meadows, Srips control the streets on the North side of the Strip. The South side of the Strip is owned by the only other gang worth worrying about in New Meadows: the notorious Hispanic street gang, Sanguins.

Tensions between the gangs are constantly high, and gang-related killings in the city are not uncommon. But over recent weeks there had been a conspicuous leap in attacks and the newspapers had been quick to mark this as the beginnings of turf war.

Mila assessed the facts offered to her by Conner. 'So what's troubling you?' she asked referring to the two killings. She was experienced enough to know that members of opposing gangs being killed by the same gun was not such an unlikely scenario. Assaults and

killings within a gang were commonplace as a show of power and punishment when a member breaks the rules.

Also, competition between members of the same gang is very high. They are all vying for power and promotion. The kind of member that might pop off a member of a rival gang to earn some kudos, may just as likely kill a rival member of his own gang to remove the competition.

‘What’s troubling me,’ Conner responded, ‘is that neither of the killings seemed like an inside job. Both of them were drive-bys for a start.’

‘OK. Well maybe the guy who did the shooting last week was sensible enough to dump the weapon back on the black market and it ended up in the hands of the other side.’

Conner shook his head. ‘Firepower is an important and expensive commodity. If guns do move around it would be within the gang. Besides, it would be quite a coincidence that the gun happened to be used the following week in a similar shooting.’

‘Similar?’

‘Yeah. The MO for the two crimes is virtually identical: fairly covert drive-by shooting; single shooter; single target. And, in fact, it’s this MO that’s troubling me the most.’

‘Go on’

‘Drive-bys are about making a statement to a rival gang. *Killing* anyone is almost secondary. It’s about making a scene. Shed-load of shooters; lots of bangs; lots of screeching of tyres; and lots of people lying on the floor afterwards, perforated or otherwise. The murder I witnessed was too slick, too clinical. The fact that I’m sitting here now, covered in bagel crumbs, is testament

to that.’ He paused to brush some crumbs off his lap. ‘In fact, if I didn’t know better, I would say it was very much like a hit job.’

‘A hit? But these were nobody bottom-of-the-pile rug dealers. Who’s gonna pay to get them whacked?’

‘I dunno.’ Conner releases a big sigh as he turns to gaze out of the window. ‘Maybe the newspapers are having a slow time.’

‘Yeah, or the city undertakers.’

‘Ha, a hitman undertaker.’ Conner smiled. ‘I like that. That kind of makes sense.’

‘Maybe in professional wrestling.’

‘Well, New Meadows is just about as fake.’

‘True.’

After another frustrating morning of exploring dead-end avenues, Conner spotted the familiar cocky gait of an assistant DA striding down the corridor outside the office. Dickens was his name and he might just represent Conner’s last hope of gleaning some information about the Bigby arrest. Conner surged into the corridor with last-hope powered momentum.

‘Hey, Dickie,’ he called after the imposing figure.

Dickens turned around. He was four inches taller than Conner and about twenty pounds lighter. And his Thursday-suit was an order of magnitude more expensive than Conner’s best suit would be when he got around to owning one.

‘Mr. Alvisa. Haven’t seen you move this fast for a while. *Must* be important.’

‘Always keen to see you, that’s all,’ Conner said with a wink as he motioned Dickens to one side of the corridor.

Cops and DAs share a special kind of relationship. No respect is present on either side of the equation but both are acutely aware of how much they depend on each other. The status quo is maintained with them both floating around in an atmosphere of mutual cooperative loathing.

‘What do you know about the Jackson Burch arrest?’ Conner asked in a hushed voice.

‘Why? You interested in him?’

‘No, just wanted to pester you.’

‘You are excelling.’

‘Thanks.’ Conner flashed a ironic grin. ‘So?’

‘So, I know two things about the Burch hearing and that’s all. One, I won’t be the prosecuting attorney because they’re bringing in a federal prosecutor from DC.’

‘Figures.’ That was expected but still a blow. It meant that the chances of blagging a look at the case notes just dropped from unlikely to non-existent. ‘And the second thing?’

‘That around –’ he glanced at his watch ‘– two hours ago ... Jackson Burch was bailed out onto the street.’

‘What? You’re kidding?’ Conner hadn’t even considered this as a possibility. ‘You got the details?’

‘Of course,’ Dickens said with an overplayed twang of sarcasm. ‘I actively memorize all details of the court’s proceedings just in case I can be of service to you.’

‘Thanks. Appreciate it.’

Conner walked away to go look up the information he needed himself. A few moments later he was back at his desk studying the details of Bigby’s bailer and bail-bondsman. A few minutes after that he concluded that whoever the bailer was he had used fake ID. No

surprises there, which left only one course of action. He stood up purposefully, grabbing essentials from his desk.

‘I’m off to visit a back-street bail-bondsman,’ he announced to Mila. ‘You coming?’

Mila was engrossed in something at her desk such that the words did not even register.

‘Mila?’

She looked up this time. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘Back-street bail-bondsman questioning. Fancy it?’

‘Oh, umm, inviting offer, but I’ll pass. Got some ... stuff to sort out here.’

‘Okay.’

On his way out, Conner was pulled to one side by McCarthy.

‘Listen,’ the chief said, ‘don’t go sniffing around the Bigby arrest. I don’t think it would be good for your health.’

‘Why? What do you know?’

‘Nothing, other than I’ve had federal heavies on my case giving me the same warning. I believe them. You should too. They don’t want us messing around in this.’

‘Sure.’

Conner nodded slowly and walked out. He didn’t want to commit further because that would mean either lying or disobeying. The truth was that he was too personally invested in Bigby to drop out now, but he was damned if he was going to investigate on his own time. Cops in the movies may do their best work whilst suspended but he was rather fond of the pay cheque.

Conner tried his best not to curse his bad fortune regarding the Bigby release. He knew that such things just came with the territory of undercover investigation. With sensitive operations you can’t go around shouting

about them. You can't put little Post-It notes on people's desks – like in City Hall – saying 'If you know anything about this man please give Detective Alvisa a call on 555-'. Hence, things can happen outside one's sphere of knowledge. Like this.

In an ideal world Conner would have tailed Bigby from when the guy had been released. But Conner was a few hours behind the curve for that to be an option, so his only next shot was trying to figure out who bailed Bigby out. Presumably, bailer and bailee would be meeting up at some point and that would lead him back to Bigby.

As he walked along the street, he mulled over the scenario. The federal heavies come waltzing in; arrest a guy with some cock-and-bull murder story; slap gagging orders left, right and centre like its some issue of national security; and then? Then they grant the guy *bail*. Bail is virtually unheard of in murder cases and this was clearly no ordinary murder case. When did everything stop making sense?

When Conner arrived at the bail-bondsman's establishment he found the front office empty. He stepped in and looked around the shabby room. On a desk there was a computer screen showing a half-completed game of solitaire. Then he heard distant raised voices from the back of the building. He un-holstered his gun and made his way quickly but cautiously down a dimly lit corridor. At the end was a closed office door. The din of voices was louder but he could make out no figures through the obfuscated glass in the door. He placed one hand on the handle and held his gun in readiness. Slowly he turned the handle and held it for a moment to wait for a reaction. There was none. In a

swift motion he swung the door away from himself and brought both hands to his gun. The room was empty. It was a boardroom of some kind with an oval desk in the centre. On the desk was an open briefcase with piles of dollar bills spewing from it, some of them onto the floor.

The raucous voices had now evolved into the unmistakable sounds of a man being repeatedly punched. Adjoining the office was a small kitchen area leading to the back yard. That was where the beating was taking place. Conner judged that only two people were involved and started to move quickly. By the time he was outside the larger and uglier of the two men was wielding a metal bar.

'Police!' Conner screamed. 'Drop it. Now!'

The bar-wielder stood motionless for a while, assessing the situation, slowly arriving at the inevitability of each of the possible outcomes. Eventually, he dropped his arm to his side, and then the bar to the floor. Whilst the big man was growing accustomed to the new balance of power, Conner called-in for uniformed back-up and a paramedic. As he did so, the guy on the floor spoke up weakly.

'No,' he rasped, 'I don't want to press charges.'

'I don't care,' Conner replied. He quickly assessed the man's physical condition. 'You need medical attention. And this guy needs to calm down. So, either way, both of you are getting some flashy-light action. Now, anyone care to tell me what the hell's going on here?'

Silence.

Silent submissive cowering from one; silent seething anger from the other.

'I'm not very happy about this, I'll have you know,'

Conner pointed out to break the silence. 'I'm not supposed to be here. I only came for a quiet little chat and now I'm going to have to file a bloody report about it.' The two remained motionless. 'Well, this is nice. Whilst we're sharing, you might like to know that I came here to ask about a man called Jackson Burch.'

The angry guy's seething erupted vocally. 'That idiot –' pointing to the man on the floor '– lost me half-million bucks over him.'

'What do you mean?'

The man quickly regained control and composure. 'I'm not saying anything more till I've spoken to an attorney.'

'Great.' Conner rolled his eyes. He had to wait a while for the uniformed guys to turn up. He used these moments to arrive at the conclusion that there was no way his chief would not find out he was here, disobeying his orders. He figured that as he was already in deep enough shit it wouldn't make much difference if he kept digging. So he took a ride to the hospital with the battered guy – one Kent Bradshaw, who was employed as a clerk at the bail-bondman's office. The man doing the beating was his boss, and the altercation was over the bailing of Bigby. Apparently, the man who had bailed him had handed over a case of hundred-dollar bills that later on turned out to be a case of *one*-dollar bills. The case had only five thousand dollars in it when it should have had five-*hundred* thousand dollars.

'That's not a mistake you make easily,' Conner pointed out to the clerk.

'I know that. Especially when you know this is the result.' He pointed to his tumescent features. 'I can't explain it. I sat there and I counted every single note.'

'No chance of the case being switched?'

'No, I put the case straight in the safe afterwards. Besides, the notes in the case were the actual ones I counted because I marked the top note of each deck as I went through. It just defies logic. He must have been some kind of magician or something – I don't know.'

Conner attempted to garner an accurate description of the man.

'How old was this man?'

'Err, mid-thirties...'

'Okay.' Conner jotted it down.

'...to late-forties.'

'Riiight.' He amended his notes. 'Height?'

'Average.'

'Build?'

'Kind of ... medium.'

'Excellent. Hair?'

'Dark-slash-fair.'

'Slash bald?'

'Sorry?'

'Never mind.'

Conner didn't dare to wish that the office had CCTV. By the state of the establishment it was quite remarkable that even the walls managed to perform their intended function, let alone any complicated surveillance equipment doing so. Besides, he knew this kind of outfit was designed to service a certain class of clientele, those who did not like their picture being taken.

Conner plodded his way back from the hospital. It was a few miles home but he didn't mind the walk; he walked pretty much everywhere. Walking offered high-quality thinking time. Plus he found all other modes of

transport in the city pretty much unbearable. Grid-locked roads. Crowded subways. Slimy taxi drivers.

After thirty minutes of walking and thinking, something finally struck him. It wasn't so much an idea; more of a ... bat.

Moments later he came to, slumped against a wall with a baseball bat thrust to the centre of his chest. At the other end of the bat was a small-framed individual wearing a kid's toy mask. Or maybe it was just a kid wearing a kid's mask. Through his haze he couldn't be sure.

He shivered slightly from shock and breathed heavily. His face had hit the wall on the way down and he felt a trickle of blood from just above his eyebrow begin its journey down his face, following the tracks of his tears. He had not yet mustered the energy for even an expletive before the bat-wielder spoke. The voice was disguised by a cheap synthesiser in the mask.

'Leave Bigby alone,' it said with tinny resonance that clawed at Conner's pounding head. 'Or things will get much worse. For you. For everyone.'

He was too sluggish to respond before a final prod from the bat signalled the departure of its owner. As he watched the figure walk away he realised that there was something odd about the walker's gait, but he couldn't place what it was. And he knew this wasn't the time to care.

Slowly and somewhat apprehensively, Conner reached up to examine the damage to the back of his head. Duly his fingers returned to rest before his eyes, and they were completely covered in ... nothing. In fact, the only fresh blood offered by his head was from the cut above his eye. Last time he checked, his skull wasn't

made from titanium, which meant that the bat couldn't have been made from wood or *anything* hard. What kind of thug's weapon-of-choice is a rubber bat?

Another riddle that could wait. Getting home was his only immediate priority. He stumbled to the nearest busy street and hailed a cab.

At home he nursed a bump on his head, a cut over his eye, and what remained of his pride. He longed for someone else to be doing the nursing. He'd had a lot thrown at him in the last few days and it suddenly felt that in this game of dodge-ball that people called life, everyone else was standing on the other side of the court. He wanted someone to be on his side, for someone to just give a damn.

He placed the mantelpiece photographs face down once more and slumped back into the sofa to begin rolling a salvia joint. The dried leaves of *Salvia divinorum* – literally 'sage of the seers' – act as an intense but short-lived hallucinogen. Most people don't get on with salvia. Many find it frightening. But paranoia was not an issue for Conner right now – he really *was* being persecuted.

The woman was slender, really slender, but she carried it well, so as not to appear at all skinny. Her hair was brilliant red; her skin translucent blue. And her edges were peculiarly well defined, as if they had been inked-in by a graphic-novel illustrator. Conner recognised her, though she had no face to speak of. As a large bee circled her body, the woman contorted rhythmically for a moment, in a motion that couldn't quite be described as a dance. Then she turned and walked away. Conner watched her hips sway distinctively as she passed effortlessly through the wall.

The effects tapered off only minutes after they had begun. Reality solidified around Conner once more and his thoughts snapped back to his assault a few hours earlier. Suddenly, it was so obvious what was distinctive about his assailant's gait.

He realised that the man in question was in fact ... a woman. Further proof, if needed, that even a man concussed can maintain relatively clear focus when a woman's bottom is involved.

Yet another question. What kind of thug's gender-of-choice ... is female? – no offence.

One thing was certain. This was not the feds. If they were in the business of sending out thugs to warn off nosey cops, then slim chicks with rubber bats would not be their style.

Surely?

Five

Taking a Life

In New Meadows, the only escape from the tacky, flashy, nastiness of the casinos is the undeniable class of the grungy themed bars and restaurants. I found myself in old-town, contrary to much sound advice, including the government health warnings on the road signs: *Warning: this neighbourhood may seriously damage your life.*

I was purposefully striding along, casually risking violent muggings as I did so, when the rain began to fall. Yeah, rain in a desert – such is my meteorological fortune. Luckily, I would be ducking into the next establishment, which looked like it was ready to welcome me with open gun barrels. Satori it was called, some has-been Japanese-themed café-bar. And in an impressive homage to the concept of irony the sub-theme seemed to be water. It was everywhere. By design, rather than the result of some bad plumbing work, but gratuitous to say the least. But then, New Meadows is the definition of gratuity – and not the 15% kind.

I made my way to the bar, rather unnerved by the vivid orange carp looking up at me from beneath the glass floor. Occasionally, a column of water fell from the ceiling and disappeared into a hole in the ground.

Hopefully, this was governed by some clever system designed to avoid the clientele, rather than hydrating them in a fashion they hadn't requested.

I pulled up a stool at the bar and mumbled a request of a beer at the Japanese-themed barmaid, who was about as oriental as a Big Mac. Shortly she slid a glass in my direction. The bar she slid it over yielded no exception to the watery theme. Water coursed through a cavity within it, along with tiny brightly-coloured fish no longer than a fingernail.

'It's free if you want to take it upstairs,' the barmaid said nodding toward a baroque iron staircase that spiralled around a column of tumbling water, leading to the mezzanine level.

I knew what she meant, and I wasn't in the mood.

'No,' I said. 'Thanks.'

As I sipped, I toyed with a photograph between my digits, idly staring through it. I allowed myself an indulgent moment of escape until the barmaid dispassionately flitted a cloth across the bar in front of me, and I was back in the room – back to reality. I allowed the sensations of the external environment to return to me one-by-one, and then I held the picture of Pearle up to the side of my face.

'Do *you* think she had my eyes?' I queried toward the barmaid. The woman looked rather perplexed at the question.

'Ummm,' was all she could muster.

'Never mind,' I said with a quick shake of my head, and placed the photo on the bar in front of me. Of course, this little charade was all for the benefit of the man sitting next to me.

That was why I was here, in New Meadows, in this

bar. To sit next to this man, Jackson Burch, whoever he was. Instantly – if not slightly sooner – I knew I didn't like him. Five minutes later I knew I had to kill him. He was a bad man, you see. He'd done bad things. I could tell. That's the way it is with me. Not the killing part, but the knowing things, bad things, about people; the not liking people.

It's a drag.

In my periphery I saw the guy make the occasional sideways glance at the picture. I'd placed it slightly to one side – conspicuously closer to him. An invitation to steal a glimpse – not that he usually awaited invitation. He began to shuffle a little in his seat. I purposefully moved my attention away from the picture. Now we weren't sharing her. Now she was all his. Minutes past and a tension grew between us that was beginning to condense on the bar top. Eventually, I broke the silence.

'Do you like her?' I asked.

The man didn't speak but threw me a look that betrayed a battery of inner thoughts and questionable desires.

'Do you *know* her?' I continued, analysing his every movement.

And then finally, 'Did you *kill* her?'

Unsurprisingly, that got a response out of him.

'Who the fuck are you to be asking questions?' he snapped with unsubtle hostility.

'I'm the guy who bailed your ass out of jail to ask you these questions,' I responded enigmatically, choosing not to match his aggression.

Burch sported an expression somewhere between suspicion and confusion. 'Expensive questions,' he said. 'You know there are visiting hours, right?'

'I'm not a big fan of jails,' I said with a distasteful look, which I hoped would make him a little jittery. Mystery bail-touting benefactors in his world rarely have good intentions. I guess that was true of me too, although he could have done a lot worse. I mean, I wasn't *definitely* going to kill him.

I didn't need to say anything else now. It was probably beginning to dawn on his dullard mind that his future participation in this world might depend on his answers to the questions being put to him. He looked at the photo again, sliding it closer to himself.

'Is this the girl I'm supposed to have murdered?' he asked.

I nodded.

'Then no, I didn't.'

Normally, I would not be so direct. Normally, I'd be about as direct as a philandering politician. But when determining whether someone had committed a murder, there was no need for subtleties. When asked a question about an objective fact of such magnitude, it would be virtually impossible to react without revealing the truth, regardless of what you said. If, of course, the questioner knew what to look for.

I knew what to look for.

And the truth was ... he didn't kill Pearle; he didn't even know her. He didn't know my story or the people I had lost. He was not a player in that episode of my life. He was just unfortunate. Wrong place: here. Wrong time: now. Wrong guy: me – pissed (in the vernacular of either side of the Atlantic).

It wasn't the truth that I had wanted. It wasn't a truth that got me any nearer to closure on this issue. I sighed and tapped the table with my fingers. Where did this

leave me? It left me with a rather obvious question.

'If you didn't kill her, why have you been arrested?'

'I've been set up.'

'By whom?'

He shrugged. 'I wish I knew'.

I pondered this for a moment before asking, 'Why did you come to New Meadows?'

In response to the question Burch downed the last of his drink and motioned to leave. Surprisingly, it seemed, he hadn't come here for a spot of charity work.

'Doesn't it trouble you?' I said, without looking up.

The man paused. 'What?'

'That whoever set you up has done it so well that they've managed to convince the police?'

'Sure it does. Don't see what you're gonna do about it.'

'Listen, I don't care about you, it's true. But I want to know what happened to this girl. So I want to know who set you up. So I reckon that makes me about the only person who is gonna to do anything about it, yeah?'

'Or you could just be a cop.'

'So you were here with criminal intent?'

'I didn't say that.'

'Not directly,' I flashed a smile which verged all too close to cocky. So much for subtlety; I really should have known better. With that smile I knew I'd blown it. I wasn't going to get anything useful out of him now.

He narrowed his eyes. 'I need a piss,' he said and headed off toward the bathroom.

He wasn't the only one that needed relief. I was finding it increasingly difficult to remain affable with him. With every word I gleaned another morsel of information, beyond the word itself. And they were not

tasty morsels. So whilst the liquid of his first few beers was exploring some Japanese-themed porcelain, there was only one thing left to decide.

Was I going to leave empty handed?

Or was I going to take a life?

I searched around in my jacket pockets and recovered a small cylindrical object. It contained a substance known as Necrovial, which is used for spiking drinks with a nasty kick. It does so in a virtually untraceable manner. It uses 'clever-nano-shit' to deliver a spike of insulin into the bloodstream. An overdose of insulin reduces the level of glucose in the blood to a point where the brain can no longer function. But being a substance found naturally in the body it is virtually impossible to detect as a cause of death.

Insulin has been used as a murder weapon almost since it was first used to treat diabetes in the 1920s. It says something about the world that the first mechanism devised for delivering insulin into the bloodstream orally was perfected by a government agency for the purpose of assassinating people rather than saving them.

Ethical debate aside, Necrovial is an extremely sophisticated method of killing, which can always come in handy for the odd spot of fatal imbibing. I 'acquired' a supply before I left the agency and as of yet haven't exploited it once. That was about to change. Maybe.

My best mate was making his way back from the bathroom. In his absence I had ordered him another shot of bourbon. I had also palmed a Necrovial capsule in my hand, in readiness for his unwelcome return. But before I could take that final step, I needed to elicit one final piece of information. This was going to be more difficult. This was where subtlety came in.

In his past he had been involved with the police with regard to his unhealthy interest in young girls. He'd done some real nasty things, and just standing near him made me feel dirty to the core. But that wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to award me the role of judge and jury. I needed to know something else. I needed to know whether he was going to do it again. Because knowing this fact, I reasoned, could conceivably make the act of killing him the right thing to do.

Uncovering this detail was not like asking someone if they had a blue car or whether they'd killed somebody, with objective definite answers. This was exposing hidden desires and future intent. He may not even know the answer himself consciously. But underneath it would be there – everything was.

Just as he was lifting his drink to his mouth I placed my hand over it and forcefully slammed it back to the bar. The action was intentionally incongruent and at odds with what little the guy knew of my behaviour so far. It would jar his comfortable mental state; cause his unconscious mind to stall for a moment. It's called a pattern interrupt – the disruption of an indivisible pattern of behaviour in an unanticipated way. It leaves a person with no program of what to do next. It leaves them looking for a way out, open to suggestion.

Looking the man squarely in the eye, I instantly began to speak with an unusual pace and tone.

'It's just that it's interesting to know ... why we do the things we do. And how sometimes we manage to *justify* to ourselves actions which we know at some level to be wrong. Like maybe we speed in a restricted zone, but we tell ourselves it's okay because it's really *late*; there's no one around. And we *know* the road well. It's

like an *acquaintance*, so it's fine. It's fine to go *beyond the limit*.'

I placed particular emphasis on certain words and parts of words, prompting his subconscious to stitch together a subtextual meaning.

'So all the time, when we do these bad things, we are *probing* our minds, *penetrating* our thoughts, until we *touch* on a *loophole* that will allow us to *do* these things we like and escape the immorality.'

As I continued to fold the massively layered suggestions into the metaphor Burch stood virtually motionless but responded with almost imperceptible twitches of affirmation.

'So there really is only one question left,' I stated in conclusion. 'Will you do it again?'

In an instant the man was composed and laughing at me foolishly.

'What *are* you talking about, man?' he jibbed.

To anyone but a handful of people in the world, that was a perfect transition. The telltale micro-expression would have passed everyone else by unnoticed. But not me. Just for that split second it was written on his face as clearly as his five-o'clock shadow. And now that his misdemeanours were playing wholly on his conscious mind, all I need do was repeat the question – just to be sure.

'*Will* you do it again?'

This time he said nothing, just frowned at me as if I was a madman – spot on there I guess – and shook his head in confusion. But once again a tiny twitch of a face muscle belied his inner feelings. That was all I needed. I cracked open the fatal capsule that was nestled in my palm, then left the bar without wasting another word.

Within thirty-seconds of being in the street I knew exactly what I was going to do next and it started with me repeatedly kicking a nearby wall in frustration. I chose this symbolic gesture of head-banging rather than the real thing as it carried with it significantly less risk of cranial haemorrhaging. A good tip by anyone's standards.

Then I made my way back to the bar. Burch didn't have time to know what hit him. He was halfway towards the door by the scruff of his throat before he was going for his holster; at which point he noticed his gun sitting on the bar where I'd dumped it, getting further and further out of reach. The clientele didn't seem too perturbed at me dragging him out of the establishment, just slightly disappointed that it wasn't going to kick off inside for their own titillation.

He was still struggling to find his feet when we reached the street. I gave him a quick elbow to the face to pacify him and then shoved two fingers down his throat. The small quantity of vomit that didn't actually find its way up my sleeve splashed into the gutter. When he was done I dropped him to the ground.

'If you feel a bit faint in the next few hours,' I said, 'eat some chocolate.'

I crouched down close to his flushed face.

'Maybe reconsider your life choices – in case I'm ever back in this neighbourhood.' I stepped over him as he lay panting and shell-shocked in the gutter. As I walked away I added, 'And don't try to find me. I don't exist. Not in your world.'

Then I was gone into the darkness, like some clandestine crime-fighter, dressed all in black, with bad-guy vomit up his arm.

Maybe it would change him. Probably not. But I proved to myself once again that I couldn't do it. Couldn't take a life on my own say so. Whatever bad he had done and whatever bad he may do in the future. It just didn't feel right. I figured that was a healthy thing.

But now I was back to square one.

Almost.

Six

Truth or Care

Conner was delighted to awake to a generous helping of aches and pains. He took a peek in the bathroom mirror to find one of his eyes peeking back at him from the centre of dark swollen tissue. He decided not to go into work, figuring he was justified in calling an uncharacteristic sickie – at least for the morning. His physical injuries were not so bad, but his soul was battered and bruised, lying prostrate on the floor, and it wasn't planning on getting up anytime soon.

Conner set about doing nothing but slouching around in his favourite sweatpants, which was a mistake as it allowed his mind to set about doing way too much thinking. What he thought about began to trouble him quite severely, not that such an outcome to his thought processes surprised him anymore.

It was mid-morning before a distraction presented itself in the form of a long-overdue message from Mila. Although it did not query his whereabouts; it was merely a forwarded phone message from the office. Apparently, Kent Bradshaw, the clerk from the bail-bondsman's office, had tried to get hold of Conner, saying he needed to speak to him. Kent hadn't left a number, just a place and time to meet.

So his day off wasn't happening. But on the up side,

he hadn't consumed anything but coffee and cigarettes since waking, so taking up the offer of a lunch date may prove wise.

When Conner arrived at the rendezvous café Kent was already there, sipping on a tall milky coffee. Conner opted for the healthy option: *black* coffee. And added a blueberry muffin to notch up the first of his five-a-day. He took a seat opposite the clerk, who settled his mug down onto its saucer with a nervous rattle.

'So what's up?' Conner enquired.

'Hey, someone beat you up too?'

'No, I just do this to look intimidating.'

Kent nodded as the sarcasm whistled merrily past him.

'So, why did you want to see me?' Conner asked again.

Kent glanced around the establishment, trying to pull off nonchalance, but landing squarely on shifty.

'What I tell you now didn't come from me, okay?' he offered in a hushed voice, leaning forward.

'Sure.'

'I don't want you visiting me or calling me up like we're old buddies, right? That wouldn't be good for my health.'

'That won't be a problem. I don't call anyone up like they're my buddy.' Conner began to peel his cup-shaped baked good from its wrapper. Everyone eats their muffins differently. Conner always ate his bottom up, saving the crispy sugary bit on the top till last.

Kent shuffled in his seat. He could learn a thing or two about nonchalance from his muffin-eating companion. 'How do I know I can trust you?' he asked. Conner leaned back in mild frustration. 'Look, you

called *me* here to talk. I'd just as soon be at home watching daytime TV. So it's really your call.'

'Okay.' He sighed resignedly. 'So, last night, after I got home from the hospital –'

'Oh yes, sorry,' Conner interrupted with an overfull mouth. 'How are you feeling?'

'Quite sore, thanks. Anyway, so I'm at home and I get a phone call. Well, it's a call to the office, but they get diverted to my cell phone out-of-hours. And guess who it is?'

Conner shook his head. 'Columbo?'

'Who?'

'Never mind. Who was it?'

'It's only the guy who bailed out Burch, isn't it?'

'Really?' Conner got interested at this point – even stopped chewing for a moment. 'And what did he have to say?'

'Well, that's the odd thing. He goes and tells me where Burch is and suggests we go pick him up before he skips town.'

'Why?'

'Dunno. Doesn't make much sense.'

'So, what happened?'

'Well, I figured this might improve relations with my boss, so I call him up. And he sends a couple of heavies down to go get him.'

Conner frowned as he tried to process this information. He took a long drag of caffeine hoping it would help.

'So where is Burch now?'

'As far as I know he's in a lock-up in town, tied to a chair. They wanna make sure he gets to court for his hearing.'

‘Understandably. Isn’t that what you want too? Get your boss’s bail money back?’

‘Well yes.’

‘So, why are you telling me? Snitching on your boss for kidnapping ain’t going to put you in his good books – if indeed he has any good books.’

‘Because I don’t trust these goons. I think this way he’ll either end up missing or dead. I’d feel much more comfortable if the cops *happened* across the lock-up and took Burch in for his own protection. Besides, is it so hard to believe that some people actually prefer operating on the right side of the law?’

Conner shrugged in response. He generally finds it best to assume that they don’t.

Kent continued. ‘Look, I just want to see Burch get to court, and the more people with that aim the better. As soon as that money’s back I’m outta this town.’

Conner contemplated these details as he finished off the last crumbs of his single-serving cake. Eventually, he gave a consenting nod.

‘Give me the address of the lock-up. I’ll sort it.’

Kent returned his coffee shakily to its saucer again and wrote the address on a scrap of paper. Conner motioned to leave then stopped himself.

‘Have you talked to anyone else about this?’

‘No.’

‘Anyone? Priest, wife, men in suits?’

‘No. Do I look like the kind of man that would be religious ... or married?’

‘It’s the suits I’m worried about. Has anyone other than me come asking questions: about Burch, about who bailed him ... about me?’

‘No.’ He shook his head in the first confident motion

Conner had observed.

‘Okay. So it’s my turn to trust you. But if I discover you’re lying, rest assured I *will* come visiting. And you won’t need to worry about me acting like your buddy. Far from it.’

Conner pegged Kent as way too weak and stupid to be trying something on – whatever *something* might be. So, he left. Unfortunately, the knowledge he left with deposited him squarely on the horns of a dilemma.

Being a cop he should do exactly what Kent expected him to do. Call in the boys in blue, rescue Bigby and keep him safe till court time. But the clerk had come to the wrong cop, because all Conner wanted was Bigby back on the street, doing his job, leading him to the big boys in the rug trade.

He needed to make some decisions but he didn’t have much time. Worse, his mind returned to what had been troubling him earlier. It was troubling him more now that time had passed. He knew he had to resolve that issue first, before he could make any informed decision as to his next action. Who was he trying to kid? Any decision he made would be a long way from informed. If he could achieve anything above complete ignorance he’d be well chuffed.

There was only one thing for it. He had to go on a date.

That evening Conner waited for his guest in the Crown Liquor Saloon – the best of the seventeen so-called Irish bars in town. Having never left America he had no idea as to the bar’s authenticity, but he liked it, and that was all that mattered. The exterior was exquisitely decorated with polychromatic tiles and

stained glass. The interior was even more elaborate. Complex mosaics spilled across the entire floor. Every surface of the walls, fixtures and ceiling coalesced into what was effectively a single, highly-decorative wood-carving; as if the room had been whittled from the centre of a massive tree trunk. The altar-style bar-top that stretched the length of the establishment was made of a deep-red granite. And the whole place was lit by polished brass gas lamps. But the best feature of all were the carved wooden booths – or snugs as they called them – each with its own little door, originally designed to accommodate the more reserved patrons of a Victorian era.

It was indeed spectacular. It was also, of course, fake. A modern replica. A cheap imitation. The product of cold-blooded mimicry. The Crown had never hosted survivors of a potato famine any more serious than the kitchen running out of curly fries. But it didn't matter. Not to the kind of people that visited New Meadows. The quaintness seemed genuine enough. The Guinness tasted real enough. It more than fulfilled the needs of its clientele to feel in touch with their 'Irish roots' – the one-sixteenth of their genes that came from somewhere near Europe – and that sufficed.

It sufficed for Conner also. It was not one of Conner's dreams to visit a *real* Irish pub. It never really occurred to him. Trans-Atlantic travel was in fact very far from his thoughts as he sat at a table in the Crown, keeping a beer company, waiting for his guest to arrive. He was wearing his most recently washed jeans and his only remaining non-work shirt with a full compliment of buttons. This constituted a noteworthy level of effort on Conner's part, even if the result wasn't going to win any

Best Groomed Male of the Year – or Bar – awards.

Mila, on the other hand, looked considerably more elegant, when she arrived. But women are good at that kind of thing: looking elegant. She walked over to Conner, took one look at him and broached the expected remark.

'What happened to *you*?'

'Long story,' he moaned. 'Drink?'

Conner procured a white wine from the bar and they settled down to study the menus. The fact that this exquisitely accurate homage to ale houses of old actually *had* menus didn't strike either of them as vaguely inconsistent. But that's progress for you.

Over their meal Conner told Mila about the events of the previous night and she made all the right noises of sympathy and dismay. Then they chatted about nothing work-related, which was somewhat of a rare occurrence. Conner began to realise that he didn't know as much about Mila as perhaps he should.

After the meal Mila finally asked the question that had been hanging there over their plates for sometime.

'So what's this all about?'

'What?'

'Us. Here. Now. And don't give me an innocent look. It doesn't take a detective – which I *am*, by the way – to determine that this is an unusual turn of events; that something is up. So what is it?'

Conner conceded with a nod.

'Shall we adjourn,' he said, motioning to one of the booths. The booth in question was furnished with a battered leather sofa and a low wooden coffee table. They slumped back into the sofa and Conner produced a small package from his jacket.

‘Before we do the *what’s-up* thing, I want you to try something?’ Conner unfolded a piece of paper to reveal two white pills.

Mila looked at them and recoiled slightly. ‘Conner, you know I’m not into that stuff.’

‘You drink alcohol don’t you?’

‘Yeah, so?’

‘So, where’s the difference? You can get *these* over the counter in a convenience store. Trust me, the chemicals in these have been subjected to far greater scrutiny than that banoffee pie you’ve just eaten.’

Mila was apprehensive. ‘What do they do?’

‘It’s called EZB. It’s designed as an end-of-evening calmer. Extends all the mellowing, relaxant qualities of alcohol without enhancing the bad ones. Even lessens the effects of a hangover.’

Mila pouted in consideration. ‘If I do this will you tell me what’s going on?’

‘Deal.’

It wasn’t strictly true that you could buy EZB – pronounced ‘easy-be’ with an American ‘Zee’ – over the counter. Not yet at least. Although it had gone through FDA accreditation and was awaiting final sign-off as safe for consumption. It was important for drug companies to take market control quickly after approval of a product, before rogue parties managed to synthesize the drug and start pumping out fakes. So as it was close to a done deal the well-known drug company that held the patent for EZB had started the production lines rolling in the Far East. Consequently, a number of pills had seeped onto the grey market early. Conner had acquired his from Crystal Seth at quite an extortionate rate, but it would be worth it.

One effect that EZB had was to lower one’s guard and diminish inhibitions; to make you feel more open and confident. Like when a person is drunk, they will say things that they’d never say when sober: will confide personal details that they would never have shared otherwise. EZB has this effect, only stronger. It’s the closest thing there is to a truth serum.

Mila popped a pill and then popped the question again. ‘So why are we here?’

Conner swallowed down his pill and followed it up with a deep breath. He looked straight ahead to avoid eye contact, because he knew it was easier that way. Words didn’t come immediately. He managed a few false starts, opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish, but with no actual sounds. He tried shuffling around in his blocks a bit, to make sure he was comfortable. He wasn’t. But he had to start sometime. Eventually, the words came out.

‘One thing you might not know ... about guys,’ he began, ‘is that sometimes they need to be vulnerable. They need to be able to show weakness; to be afraid, or sad, or just tired. Culture dictates that they cannot do this very often. Not with strangers or workmates or children. Not even with friends. But with a partner they can. A partner can smooth his feathers, pat his head and say everything’s going to be okay.’

Conner paused momentarily to steel himself.

‘Since I’ve been on my own, since Lisa left, this is what I’ve missed the most. I didn’t expect that, but it’s true. And I’ve been so focussed on work and my own problems, that I’ve felt like there’s been no one looking out for me; no one I can be vulnerable with.’

He took a long draw on his drink and then continued.

‘But then, suddenly, I realised something. When I didn’t go into work this morning and I was sitting at home alone, I found myself *expecting* your call; actively *anticipating* it. I realised at that moment that all those mornings when I’d not been eating properly and bagels had appeared on my desk ... somebody had *made* them appear. And when I was down about something, somebody *knew* that I was down, somebody was there asking me if I was okay. I know this sounds bloody obvious but another thing about guys is that they can be fucking dumb sometimes.’

Conner looked up at Mila and laughed at his self-deprecation. She smiled back coyly. Then the seriousness seeped back into Conner’s face. ‘Anyway, it’s bad enough that I didn’t realise this sooner. But what’s much worse is that I didn’t reciprocate, even subconsciously.’ He looked away ashamedly. ‘I guess this makes me a pretty bad person. But the point is,’ he locked eyes again, ‘I’m truly sorry, Mila. This is the very least I can do to start making it up to you. And to say thanks for looking out for me.’

‘Well,’ Mila smiled with dewy eyes, ‘you are welcome.’ Her lips stayed parted as if more words were to come, but none arrived, and silence reigned for a while. There was a palpable tension in the air. Mila could not be fully aware as to why, but that would soon be rectified...

Conner formed a smile; a smile that a select few people in the world would call a Duchenne smile. He just knew it as fake. He fell quiet and focussed on the pint glass he was rolling between his hands. He downed what remained of its contents and then placed it heavily on the table, before pulling himself up in the chair and

ringing his empty hands together anxiously.

‘The thing I don’t understand, considering all this, considering what a great friend you have been to me all these months...’

‘Yes?’

‘The thing I don’t get is...’ – the thought was thundering through his mind like a runaway locomotive and there was no way he was going to stop it from vocalising – ‘...is why you attacked me last night?’

At this point Conner looked Mila in the eye and waited apprehensively for a reaction. Mila processed what Conner had said for a moment, before she truly grasped what he was asserting. Then her eyes widened in fury.

‘Jesus! Is that what this is all about? You get me here; you fucking *drug* me with whatever this shit is; just to entertain some stupid hypothesis of yours? Is that it?’

Conner leapt to the defensive. ‘But you didn’t call. I –

‘You what? Assumed I already knew why you hadn’t turned up at work?’

Conner looked sheepish as Mila continued to berate him.

‘Did it ever occur to you that the reason I didn’t call was because I actually thought you were big enough to look after yourself for a day? An opinion I may have to alter after this.’

‘I’m sorry. I –’

‘Stop! Don’t even consider giving me the hard-done-by crap again. It only spreads so thin and you’re real close to putting a hole through the bread.’

Mila turned away from Conner as if deciding her next action: leave or stay. She arrived at her decision and

turned back to him. Her tone was calmer now.

‘Okay, you want the truth? You want the truth that’s been staring you in the face all these months but which you’ve never seen because you spend all your time looking behind you?’

Conner nodded almost imperceptibly. Mila paused for a moment and her whole demeanour changed. Her shoulders dropped, her expression softened and then water began to well in her eyes. ‘Here’s the truth,’ she said in a hushed voice. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, as if steeling herself, and as she did so a tear seeped out. A couple more breaths and she was ready. She opened her eyes, leaned in and kissed Conner firmly on the lips. For moment he did not react. Then he began to kiss her back but she pulled away.

In almost a whisper she spoke. ‘There is your truth.’ She turned away shyly. ‘Of *course* I was worried about you today. But a girl gets embarrassed when she’s made a fool of. When she chases a guy but doesn’t get noticed. That’s why I didn’t call to find out where you were. I was desperately hanging on to what little dignity I had left.’ She grabbed her coat from beside her. ‘Now ... now it’s all gone. Thanks.’

She stood and walked away in tears.

Conner stared forward, wide-eyed and motionless; and wondered just how much more spectacularly he could mess up his life if he *really* tried? Maybe he knew the answer.

He took out his gun from its holster. He released the clip, checked its contents and snapped it back home with a satisfying click – all in a single reflexive motion. He didn’t *need* to check. He knew the status of his gun: fully loaded. It’s just one of those things that an armed

man does with his gun...

...when he knows he is about to use it.

Seven

Detextion

Hiding these days is a lot trickier than it used to be. Not that I've tried hiding in any previous time-period, but it's a considered deduction. Technology is to blame – though I hate to use that word. People like to 'blame' technology for a lot of things, whilst reheating their coffee in the microwave. On the whole, technology is pretty awesome. But it necessitates so many extra things to worry about when you're trying to lay low. Browsing the web is one of them. I'm not alluding to some Big Brother state here. I'm not suggesting that every word you type into a search engine is scrutinised by some government intelligence operative. It would be pointless. You would be amazed at the sheer volume of people searching for instructions on how to make biological weapons on an hourly basis. It would be a complete waste of time to assume that any of the searchers are any more of a threat to the nation than the average eleven-year-old kids from Dorset that they are. Just for the record, I'm not suggesting there is a disproportionate number of budding biological terrorists living in Dorset. It's just an example, to highlight the impossibility of filtering the few true evil-doers from the millions of simply-curious.

Nevertheless, you'd be naïve to think that your 'e-

activity' is entirely anonymous and unmonitored. So, I can't be too careful. As an example of the lengths I have to go to, consider the problem of me wanting to keep tabs on anything – or anyone – known to be associated with me. Bearing in mind that the people I'm hiding from are very resourceful.

For this task I have a mechanism. I employ custom-written data-mining agents: harmless software viruses that replicate themselves across the net, sniffing out information of interest to me. They go to places far beyond the reach of your favourite search engine, sneaking past firewalls, proxies and gateways to reach potentially any resource hooked up to the internet. They can't defeat all security measures but they come pretty close. And being benign they survive longer than malicious viruses. But they don't go undetected forever. After a while virus scanners will learn their signature and kill them as soon as they are detected. So from time to time I have to release new ones.

An irksome but clearly necessary restriction of agents is that they can hold no detail pertaining to their owner, such as an email address or a phone number. So when they find stuff that might be of interest, they post snippets of information on public web forums containing innocuous code words that I can look out for. I can hit these forums along with the million other users that day and suddenly I'm a leaf hidden in a forest. This was the mechanism that alerted me to Pearle's death a year ago; and to Burch's arrest more recently.

This path to information that I must follow is not entirely undetectable; the trail is still there. But it adds enough layers of indirection to be good enough, for long enough. Long enough to finish up in whatever internet

café I am visiting on that occasion and move on.

But it's not just the web where we leave our signature. You can barely take a piss these days without leaving your watermark in *the matrix*. Every step you take through life you leave behind an electronic breadcrumb trail for anyone to follow: hard disks, cell phones, credit cards, surveillance cameras. And this trail does not get gobbled up by the animals of the woods. It stays.

Considering how heavily the law enforcement agencies rely on these sources for their investigations, it's hard to imagine how detectives solved *any* crimes fifty years ago. Take away forensics too and I just don't know where they'd begin.

This e-trail everyone leaves behind is not an issue for the average person on the street. Only those who are particularly paranoid, or are a criminal, or just plain have something to hide. I have something to hide. Me. So it can be hard work sometimes.

But, today, technology was on *my* side. Today, *I* was the detective.

From my meeting with Jackson Burch earlier I learned that he had *not* been involved with Pearle Jenkins' death. He was quite confident on this issue – I could tell. Which unfortunately meant it was true. After all, he would have remembered. Worse still, he didn't even know Pearle, or her mother. He had been framed for the whole thing.

I really wasn't expecting this. People get framed for things all the time in TV shows. But it's really not that easy, especially considering all of the aforementioned techie stuff. It would only be possible by someone

intimately acquainted with the details of the crime and the person being framed. Burch was quite nonplussed by the situation. He didn't seem to have a clue who this might be.

If I'd known beforehand that he was going to be so clueless, I wouldn't have made contact. But it was too late once I had. I couldn't really continue following him around. Plus, that's another thing that happens a lot on TV, which is logistically non-practical. Try it sometime.

There was one other thing I picked up from Burch. I got the impression he was in New Meadows for some shady activity. That he was here for some kind of deal. I couldn't conjure anything more than a hazy feeling about this though. I would like to know what he was up to and who he was up to it with, but at the end of the day I'm not actually a mind-reader, and he was in no mood to tell me.

So I figured I was pretty much done with him. After dumping him in the gutter I called up the bail bondsman and tipped him off, saying that his bailee was about to skip town. The bondsman was almost half-a-million dollars down so I knew he would do a good job of keeping the guy out of harm's way for a few days.

Of course, before I let him go I lifted his mobile phone from his jacket pocket. *This* would connect me to the rest of his life. Or so I hoped.

A few blocks down from where I left Burch I started scrutinising the phone. The first thing I learned was that the guy was a professional, or an obsessive compulsive. His phone was virtually clean. There was no data on it that might provide some kind of clue as to who he was: no names, notes, images or documents. There was nothing in his calendar either, which was a shame, but it

was a long shot to expect him to be that dumb: '9am: Rob Bank'. There weren't even any entries in the phone's contact list. Though this was quite standard practice for certain individuals who do dealings with other certain individuals.

What did impress me was how fastidious he was about deleting his text messages. There wasn't a single one, incoming or outgoing; which was a big disappointment. These little babies can be a gold mine of personal information.

The only bookkeeping he hadn't done that day was to clear his call register, so this was all I had to go on. I inspected the list. It showed that after leaving the jail he had made three outgoing calls. With no entries in the phone's contact list I had no names to go on, just the numbers. There was only one option. I stopped off at a pay phone and called each one up in turn.

The first number had an area code I didn't recognise. I tapped in the number and waited. The phone rang a few times before a woman answered. I asked for a random name, wrong number style, just to have a brief conversation with her. She was helpful and pleasant. She had a mature voice and I estimated her to be in her sixties or seventies. I came to the inspired conclusion that this was Burch's mother. Who would've guessed it? It seems even bad guys have mothers. Some are even nice to them.

The second number had a 562- area code, which meant something to me but I couldn't place it. I called the number up and it turned out to be a haulage company based at the Port of Long Beach, California. This was more useful than a natter with his mom, but I couldn't do anything with it just yet.

The final entry in the register showed the call had been about ten minutes in duration. I dialled the number. It rang for a while then cut through to an answer message. The owner was probably screening his calls; wasn't going to answer to an unknown caller. The message was short and the voice was that of a middle-aged man. It was gruff and gravelly like he'd smoked his body-weight in cigarettes since breakfast.

From my chat with Burch earlier I gathered he was in town for business, for some kind of deal, but I didn't know what. Being incarcerated wouldn't have been part of his plan so I knew that as soon as he was out he would have had to rearrange any meeting he'd set up. I was pretty sure gravel-tones was who he was supposed to be meeting. I just didn't know where or when. If he had missed the first appointment, then it would probably be soon. He may already be late. He may have been waiting for the guy at Satori where I'd met him. This was rotten luck. If I'd known all this at the time I wouldn't have approached him in the first place.

I needed to make contact with gravelly but I couldn't risk a conversation. I needed to elicit some information without setting off too many alarm bells. I tapped a text message in Burch's phone and fired it into the ether.

Can't talk. Need
more time. 10pm,
Bar Satori?

Suggesting a new time was easy, but I couldn't just say 'same place' because I didn't know where that was. I had a punt at Satori. If I was right it would just seem like I was confirming the location. If I was wrong I hoped

the question mark would indicate I was suggesting a change of venue.

Assuming I heard back, 10pm would give me a couple of hours to freshen up and straighten my thoughts. To this end I headed back to my hotel du jour.

I spend a lot of time moving from hotel to hotel these days, which can involve significant context switches in a theme-crazed town like New Meadows.

The trouble with themes is that there are not so many of them – not so many that can be recognisably shammed at least. If you frequent the occasional fancy-dress party you'll know what I mean. The same tired old themes being recycled time-after-time. Hotels are no different.

The Edwardian, therefore, was a little refreshing. On the face of it, hundred-year-old England was a bit of an unusual choice of concept – much less scope for architecturally challenging structures and gaudy interior design. I was born and raised in England so was no stranger to *actual* old buildings. Granted, *The Edwardian* was a little bit more plastic than the real thing, but it was a great deal more authentic than, say, the twenty-four storey igloo across the street, or the erection down the road that, shall we say, needs no further introduction.

The lobby of *The Edwardian* was all wood panelling, slender furniture and classical paintings hanging on the walls. There wasn't any neon in sight. It was quite strange. There was of course a handy casino, situated conveniently between the reception and the elevators. Those Edwardians did love their one-armed bandits.

Back in my room I ran a bath, complete with lavender

oil and rose petals. Seriously, who do you think I am? No, it was a strictly straight-guy bath, with just two or three complimentary bottles of generic cleansing substance emptied into it to make it good and bubbly. The porcelain bath was in the centre of the room, freestanding on little cast-iron feet. The taps were nickel-plated with ceramic inlays on top saying *hot* and *cold*, beside each of which was one of my feet hanging over the edge. I've noticed that most baths are clearly not designed with adult humans in mind. Either that or they are not intended for lying down in, which just seems like a crazy design assumption from the start, but what do I know?

My right arm rested on the side of the bath to facilitate the clutching of a large tumbler of scotch. I don't really like scotch; it was just the most masculine drink I could think of to offset the effeminate leaning of my current pursuit. Trust me, I wouldn't dream of touching an Appletini until I'd gotten at least a couple of fist fights under my belt first.

I allowed myself to slip down a little into the warm water, just chilling-out, relaxing a little. Then suddenly there was an almighty ear-shattering sound, like someone in a china shop had gotten a little bored and set the gravity switch to Up.

So, herein lies some advice. When your phone is on vibrate, do *not* leave it on a porcelain toilet cistern, unless you *do* intend to wake the recently departed ... on the fourteenth floor.

I climbed back into the skin I had just jumped out of, shook the excess water from my hands and grabbed the phone. The message read:

10pm OK. Has to
be BlueJay. Be
there this time.

Game on.

Eight

Eye for an Eye

Conner arrived at the lock-up, on a dirty street on the east side of town. From the faded sign above the door it looked like it used to be a mechanic's workshop. The front consisted mostly of a closed metal shutter, large enough to drive a truck through. To the side of the shutter there was a door with a blacked-out window. The black-out paint showed fine scratches in places and when Conner brought his eye up close he could see a flickering light from behind. He turned his ear to the window and could just make out the muffled tones of the Friday night TV schedule.

Conner took out his gun and rapped the barrel on the shutter doors a few times. After a moment of nothing he tapped again, louder this time. If the babysitter inside was worth his fee he would know to ignore whoever was knocking. If he was religious he may also choose to pray for his visitor's disappearance. Conner knew this. But he wasn't going anywhere. He banged the shutters a third time just for luck, then on the fourth attempt moved to hitting on the window.

Finally, there was a reaction, of silence – the TV had been muted. Someone was coming to investigate. Conner took two paces back.

'Who is it?' a voice called from behind the glass.

‘Police,’ Conner replied with complete integrity – one of the last sincere statements he would be offering the man. ‘I suggest you open the door.’

Conner gave the man a moment to consider his option – singular. If he refused it would be obvious he was hiding something. If he complied it might turn out the nice policeman was just making a neighbourly visit. Or, at least, it would give the heavy a better chance to pop a swift bullet into the cop’s head if his hand was really forced.

Sure enough, after a moment, the door opened a crack. Conner took another pace back, not wanting to crowd the guy, fully aware of the bullet-in-the-head scenario. He held up his badge at arms length.

‘Officer?’ the guy said as sweet as his mother’s apple pie. ‘How can I help?’

‘You can help by staying calm and listening carefully to what I have to say. If you do, everything will be cool, and we can all go back to our Friday night entertainment. OK?’

‘OK.’ The hired-help was apprehensive, not quite sure what to make of the situation.

‘Good. First, I need you to know that I am mic’ed up to a radio.’ Conner lifted his coat to reveal a covert personal radio inside. ‘And round the corner there is a car with two cops in, listening right now. Got that?’

The thug at the door got twitchy but he didn’t make a move.

‘We know you are holding a man against his will. But this is your lucky night. You hit the bonus ball. I need to talk to him in connection with an unrelated case. And I can’t afford any fuss, you understand? All you have to do is go back to your goggle-box and keep on goggling,

and in half-an-hour I’ll be out of your hair and you’ll never see this face again. Won’t that be nice for you? Or ... we can do this the hard way?’

Once again Conner allowed a moment for the thick-skulled heavy to consider his options. Eventually, the door opened a little wider and Conner got his first good look at the man behind it. He was not a big man and Conner pegged him as good with a knife rather than good with his fists. He had a wide untrustworthy face, and a grade-one stubble from chin to scalp.

‘Is there anyone else in there with you who you need to relay this information to?’

‘No,’ the man grunted.

Conner wanted to be sure there weren’t any trigger-happy gun-touters around who didn’t know the score; didn’t know that anything they tried would be broadcast to the supposed cavalry.

Conner stepped into a greasy office which was virtually bare apart from a portable TV on a work surface, and a swivel chair. The man nodded to the door at the other end of the office, then resumed his TV-watching position.

‘Turn it up,’ Conner suggested as he walked past the happy viewer.

At the end of the office there were windows and a door looking out onto a large workshop area. Conner stepped through the door. The workshop was almost empty too, save for a few bits of old cars lying around: a dented fender, an exhaust back-box, a stack of bald tyres.

The few strip-lights above that remained operational cast a sallow pool of light into the room, successfully creating that *Eerie Chill* ambience that was so popular

with thugs these days. The floor looked as though a thousand cars, living and dead, had deposited layer-upon-layer of grease, engine oil, gasoline and rubber upon it, leaving it with a grimy sheen.

And in the centre of the cavernous space was a lonely figure on a chair, tied to an upright steel stanchion. The figure was kitted out in a loose orange jumpsuit like those worn by convicts – which seemed like an odd touch to Conner – and had a hood over its head.

Conner was here alone. He had figured that he couldn't go to the police with what he knew because he wasn't supposed to know it. It would almost certainly end in his suspension from the force. Besides, he didn't really see what good that would do anyone. It may protect Bigby, but that was exactly what the thugs were trying to do anyway: protect him and keep him in one place.

What Conner really wanted was to bust Bigby out, because he was key to the rug trade investigation. He'd rather the guy was back on the street. But it was too late for that. Bigby was due in court in a little over forty-eight hours. If he found his way to the street either it would only be for a couple of days until he was back inside, or he would do a runner and skip bail. Besides, busting him out was way too risky. Conner hadn't gone that far off the rails yet.

So he'd figured his best option was to get in, get some info, and get out. That was the plan.

He walked towards the centre of the room, his footsteps echoing hollowly about the walls. When he was standing directly behind the orange-clad figure he made some suitably threatening noises with his firearm – like *click*. Guns only make two noises: *click* and *bang*.

The former is usually far more productive. The hooded head, which had been bowed forward, twitched at the sound.

'Right, I'm going to keep it simple because we haven't got much time. *You* haven't got much time.'

Conner walked around to stand in front of the man.

'Your life depends on how you answer the next three questions. Ready?'

The figure's head moved a little and there was a muffled sound. Conner knew that Bigby would be gagged and so didn't expect a verbal response just yet.

'Here we go. What is the real name of the man who bailed you? Why did he bail you? Where can I find him?'

Conner glanced back toward the office. The thug was not in sight. The glow from the TV still flickered onto the walls. He holstered his gun. Not something he liked doing in such a precarious situation but he needed both hands to lift the bottom of the hood and remove the gag. Bigby did not know who Conner was, of course. And Conner wanted it to stay that way. Didn't want the eyes of this rug dealer falling on his face.

He took a step forward, reached out toward the hood, then froze.

Something wasn't right.

Something his peripheral senses had clocked a moment before was suddenly ringing alarm bells.

He walked back behind the chair. The arms of the detainee were gaffer-taped together tightly at the wrists. He bent over to take a closer look at the hands ... then he jumped back.

'Fuck,' he expleted.

Suddenly, he was no longer in control. A moment

ago he had all the information. He knew where he was. He knew the game. He knew the players. He was in the driving seat.

Now, he was not. Now, he was a passenger.

The person before him ... was not Bigby.

He didn't know the players any longer, and he didn't know the game. All bets were off.

For a moment he thought about just running like hell. Running away from this dark place. That way he might just stay alive. Might make it into the sodium glow of the streets outside. But however far he ran, he'd still be in the dark. And that wasn't good enough. Not any more. He needed to see who the person was sitting in the chair. He needed that knowledge.

He knew that to see ... meant to be seen.

But that was a trade he was willing to make.

An eye for an eye.

He steeled himself for what he had to do. He planted his feet firmly, shoulder-width apart, facing the person before him. His heart was racing as if it knew something he didn't. As if it knew how this moment would change everything. He took a deep breath then reached out and lifted the hood.

And the face he saw made him jump in horror. Not that it was a horrific face – just unexpected.

It was, in fact, a pretty face. A *familiar* face.

It was Mila's.

Her head hung low and her eyelids were heavy to the point of being closed. Now he really had no idea what was going on. He'd seen her only a couple of hours before when she walked out of the Crown.

He was spooked – big time.

For the moment he left Mila. He rushed toward the

office, pulling out his gun as he did so. The office was empty. The TV was blaring reruns of Friends, but *his* friend had gone. Conner burst through the door onto the street, looking quickly in every direction. A canoodling couple in the shadows jumped and scuttled away, but there was no one else.

His flight instinct kicked in aggressively. There was no time for reasoning. He had to get the hell away from here fast. Somewhere safe. *Then* he could think.

He ran back into the office and started rooting frantically through drawers for anything sharp. The place was abandoned and everything had been taken by the previous occupier.

'Damn it,' Conner exclaimed as he slammed the last drawer shut, but didn't hesitate before hammering the butt of his gun against the office window. It bounced off on the first attempt, but a second blow smashed straight through. He pulled the sleeve of his coat over his hand and picked up a long shard. Then he ran back to Mila and slashed through the tape around her wrists and ankles, with swift, precise motions.

He ripped the final piece of tape from her mouth and she flinched, but only a little.

'Mila, can you hear me?'

There was a groan but nothing else.

'Come on. We have to go.'

He put her arm around his shoulder and tried to get her to her feet, but she would take no weight. He had no time to teach a rag doll to walk so he slipped his right arm under her knees and lifted her up.

He staggered determinedly to the exit making a mental note to give up smoking the next day.

The street he stumbled onto was the kind of street that

few pedestrians dared to venture down and hence even fewer taxis bothered to canvass.

Calling a cab would involve a frustrating conversation with directory inquiries just to get a number – or a visit to the seedy bar across the street with his dead-weight date. That would be followed by a frustrating call to a cab company. Followed by a frustrating wait for the cab to arrive. Conclusion: frustrating.

Stealing a car was an option, with just two minor drawbacks: one, Conner did not know how to steal a car; and, two, there were no cars in this neighbourhood worth stealing – presumably they already had been.

The occasional brave soul did risk their life driving down the street, being sure not to travel slow enough for any opportunistic thieves to whip off the hub-caps. So commandeering a willing citizen seemed like the only option.

Conner stepped into the road. The first two cars swerved around him and blasted their horns in an overly zealous fashion. He stepped further into the road and the next car screeched to a halt; its driver leaping out almost before the vehicle had come to a stop.

‘What the fuck are you –’

‘Shut it!’ Conner said with such authority the driver was silenced immediately. ‘I’m a police officer. Get me to the nearest street with a cab on it.’

The man opened the rear door of the saloon and helped Conner load Mila onto the back seat. Conner followed her in.

The car owner set off with a new sense of civic duty, not quite sure whether having a harassed policeman in the back seat meant he should rigidly adhere to the road

laws or actively flout them. He judged correctly that now was not the time to ask the question, so decided to just take the middle road, as it were. He drove a couple of blocks – half-jumping one light and not-quite coming to a complete stop at a give-way – then took a right onto Fifth, where there would be cabs-a-plenty.

Taxis in New Meadows are rather like the hotels – flamboyant and largely impractical. Most of them are themed; a lot of them are stretched; far too many of them are pink with bunny-girls in the back; and one of them is a Lamborghini.

Conner managed to flag down a regular one: yellow in colour with an ethnically-minor driver boasting language skills just sufficient to *completely* misunderstand where you want to go. This would not be a problem for Conner. After he’d bundled his passenger from one car to the other – making a mental note to give up doughnuts the next day – he resorted to the modern day Lingua Franca, the emergent international language of capitalism.

‘McDonalds,’ he barked. The cabbie looked confused momentarily until Conner affirmed with a sharp, ‘Drive!’; and the cab pulled confidently into the flow of traffic almost embedding itself into a gem-studded stretched Hummer full of GI Jane bachelorettes.

They had to drive almost two whole blocks to reach the nearest big yellow M. At the drive-thru Conner picked up a sweet black coffee and then issued his next globalised instruction to the driver:

‘Holiday Inn.’

All the Holiday Inns were on the outskirts of town, so it didn’t really matter which one. He just needed to be someplace else.

The coffee wasn't for him, it was for Mila. He assumed she had just been sedated. If so she should slowly start to lift out of her lethargy, and coffee would speed the process. It was a shame he didn't have any more uppers on him. Conner began to pop the lid of the coffee, which was a task impossible to achieve on firm standing without spilling half the cup's contents. In the back of a cab, crotch-scalding was a mandatory outcome. Fortunately, McDonald's heat their drive-thru coffee to the tepid heights of four-and-a-half degrees above body temperature for just this reason. After confirming this via a few splashes to his pants he put the lid back on and started feeding it to Mila through the lid-spout, whilst cradling the back of her lolling head with his other hand.

'Drink,' he said encouragingly. She made some kind of moaning-cum-gurgling sound in response which he took as a positive development from straight moaning.

After the coffee was drained he scoped their location and determined they were only about three miles from the nearest Holiday Inn – so it would take another mere twenty-five minutes to get there at their break-neck speed of stationary. He decided to phone ahead and make a reservation to minimize any lobby-based commotion on his arrival with old Ragdolly Anna beside him. Then, finally, he sat back and took a moment to contemplate his predicament.

He opened the car window a crack to get some air, but the air outside was warm and humid. He watched the people on the busy sidewalk pass by the window, and kind of wished it wasn't because they were travelling faster than he was.

Any one of them could be the enemy now. Someone

was messing with him, but he didn't know who. It seemed unlikely in the extreme that it was some fun-loving feds warning him to stay away from Bigby. Surely they would use official channels if they knew he was still digging around. It could be the bail-bondsman reaping some revenge for his clerk-beating fun being interrupted. But he'd have to be truly crazy to start kidnapping cops if he wanted to stay in business. Scariest of all, it could be one of the rug trading gangs. Maybe his cover had been blown by one of his informants. But they would have simply dispatched him by now. Subtle games are not their style.

Whoever it was knew a lot about him, which was scary. They knew his actions and they knew Mila. That was why he had to get somewhere neutral fast. Not his place, or Mila's. Even a hospital would be too risky right now.

Once in the hotel room, Conner stayed with Mila until she could accomplish the feats of sitting and monosyllabic discourse unaided.

'What happened?' he asked.

'Walking,' she said slowly with a slight slur. 'Man ... grab.' Then she clumsily mimed a syringe motion with her first two fingers and thumb against her upper arm. Conner inspected the puncture wound. She seemed to be livening up as time passed and he was confident that she had been injected with nothing more than a sedative.

'What else do you remember?'

'Sleep'. She shrugged and gave half a smile at the thought of slumber.

'I know,' he said compassionately, realising that Mila would be providing little in the way of useful

information given that she had been unconscious for the whole ordeal.

There was only one thing left. He had to pay a visit to Kent the clerk. He sighed heavily at the prospect. He guided Mila to the bed and pulled the duvet over her.

‘Stay here and don’t answer the door to anyone,’ he instructed, though was fairly confident that such a task was way beyond her current abilities.

Conner thudded on Kent’s apartment door. He’d buzzed a different apartment’s number to get let into the building, just so he had the satisfaction of thudding on Kent’s door. After a moment the door opened and the person behind it was dragged into the corridor by the lapels of his pin-striped pyjamas.

‘Talk!’ was all Conner said as he pushed him up against the wall.

‘What?’ the clerk whimpered.

‘What do you mean what? It wasn’t Burch in that lock-up.’

‘Huh? Yes it was. Your guys picked him up a couple of hours back. I assumed you’d sent them.’

Conner loosened his grip.

‘What?’ he stated again – a sentiment he thought was worth reiterating. He let go of Kent. ‘Stay there.’

Conner made some calls to confirm what Kent was saying. Sure enough, Bigby was back in custody.

Deep down Conner had known Kent would know nothing. He was a pawn just like Conner was.

He began making his way back to the Holiday Inn – on foot this time. All his ends were dead. There was nothing more he could do. His heart rate hadn’t dropped below about one-eighty since he first popped a

methamphetamine clone two hours ago. Now he was crashing big time.

Back in the hotel room, Mila was fast asleep and breathing normally. Conner grabbed the spare blanket from the wardrobe and collapsed onto the sofa. The multitude of aches across his body had merged into one holistic dull pain. But in a rare moment of positivity he counted this as a good thing. He had no idea who was messing with him, but he knew one thing: if they had wanted him dead, he would be dead by now. The fact that he could still feel pain was very reassuring. Reassuring enough to allow him to sleep.

Nine

Dressed to Sell

BlueJay was the trendiest and therefore most expensive place to hang out in town. I arrived in good time, to give me a chance to settle in. The two large bouncers on the door looked me up and down with suspicious eyes. I flashed my most opulent looking smile at them, which proved rather ineffectual so I flashed a fifty at them instead to marginally better results. I received half a nod from one of them that clearly articulated he would allow me to pass but that he was offended by my mere existence. I didn't argue. I respected the fact that his eyebrows alone were better communicators than most cab drivers around these parts. I stepped into a large atrium.

Let me take this opportunity to tell you about the retail phenomenon that is BlueJay. It is not a standard bar or restaurant. It is a whole new concept in the genre of ... well, there is no genre – that's the point. BlueJay is a cross between a bar, a restaurant and a clothes-store. The idea is that you get the chance to browse and buy the latest fashionable apparel whilst enjoying your food and drink – or waiting for it to arrive.

Items of clothing for sale are deposited about the place in a seemingly random, but actually extremely strategic, fashion. The staff are all dressed in purchasable

garments too. And each time they nip out back to fetch your curly fries they are preened and styled like catwalk models – which they mostly are. It is well understood that nothing will sell a product better than draping it over someone unfeasibly attractive, or draping someone unfeasible attractive over it – whichever is geometrically more plausible.

The clothes for sale are those brands deemed suitable for the clientele. Not the ridiculously expensive made-to-measure shit; just whatever are the coolest off-the-shelf brands at the time. The kind where someone on an average wage would only have to forgo a single week's pay for a pair of boxer shorts. That kind of level.

This concept of plying vain fashion victims with alcohol to the point of intoxication and then offering them the opportunity to buy overpriced branded items is genius; and you have to hand it to the smug marketing bastards who dreamt up the idea.

BlueJay, New Meadows, was the original, established only about five years ago. It proved so successful that there are now a couple of dozen stores open or opening across the major cities of America.

I made my way into the establishment, studying the environment and its denizens as I moved. At the tables some people watched foot-tall holograms of themselves meandering amongst beer glasses and plates of nachos, sporting the latest catwalk styles. This was a pretty nifty piece of kit new to this flagship BlueJay store, and was creating quite a stir with the punters. I noticed how the holograms all looked particularly more stunning – usually about seven or eight pounds more stunning – than their real-world counterparts, and decided that if I wished to try something on I'd use a method less open to

silicon-minded interpretation.

I cut my way through the crowd, heading for the large circular bar at the centre of the room; the best place to take a reasonable stab at not looking too conspicuous by myself. The bar itself was rather like those you find at a sushi restaurant in that it had a conveyor belt running inside it. Only, instead of cold rice and raw fish, it proffered trendy urban kickers and neatly pleated chinos. You had to be real careful where you waved your credit card in these places.

I grabbed a stool at the bar and got myself a drink and some cigarettes. I don't actually smoke, by the way. Well, I do in the strictest sense of the word, in that I occasionally suck air through smouldering sticks of dried tobacco. But it's not through pursuit of pleasure, and that's the difference. And I'm not just some latent addict in denial. I genuinely hate the things. They make me feel nauseous, and that's not a sensation I wish to pay for. Nevertheless, I feel that my role and my associated image necessitates that I light up from time to time. Especially in places like New Meadows; especially when I'm on the hunt for bad guys. It just seems right.

BlueJay was getting busier with the evening crowd. I could hear them but I wasn't paying particular attention. My beer was company enough for the moment. As such, I was slightly irked, not to mention surprised, when a young semi-transparent lady rose up beside my beverage. An extension to their holographic mannequin technology I presumed.

'Hi,' she said in a song-like tone. She had a tight dark bob showing off large heart-shaped earrings and was dressed in a pink cat suit. 'Don't forget to treat your loved-one this Valentine day. Be sure to visit our promotional display in the West Wing to check out our exclusive

designer range of lingerie from only the best names in ladies' fashion. Thank you for visiting and happy Valentine.' The six-inch saleswomen gave a theatrical wink and faded out classily with a slight wobble to her edges.

'Fuck off,' I said politely and brought the glass to my lips before any more bar-top peddlers decided to try their luck.

I took a second to reflect on my plan: scope out the place for my mark and then ... decide what to do next. Okay, maybe not a *whole* second. The plan was in quite a nascent form, but I didn't let its brevity trouble me.

BlueJay was large. It sprawled across two floors, with several bars and many different nooks for its clientele to hang out in. There were at least a couple of hundred people currently enjoying its services. This would make it impossible to study everyone, but overall it made things easier. I could blend in here whilst trying to identify the man Jackson Burch was supposed to be meeting. And if I didn't succeed, I could employ a far more fiendish method to determine which of the many revellers he was: I could text him and ask where he was sitting.

I scanned the local vicinity. Most people were in mixed groups or couples; most were late twenties/early thirties. I was happy to rule out all of these. Although, I wasn't really sure who I *was* looking for. Certainly a little older; say, in his forties. Maybe on his own but quite likely with one or two other guys. At least one of the other guys was liable to be large and thuggish. The main man though, I wasn't so sure about. He certainly didn't have a plum in his mouth, from his accent, but he insisted on meeting in BlueJay so he wasn't allergic to sophistication. Despite his gruff brogue he was likely to be quite a slick operator.

As I was studying the locals, my attention was drawn to

a mild hubbub which erupted next to me. Two guys took stools just around from where I was sitting, ushered there by an overly-hospitable gentleman wearing a black suit with a gold name badge on the lapel. I assumed the latter was the manager of BlueJay – or a senior employee of some kind anyway. He introduced the two men to one of the stunning female members of the bar staff, and encouraged her to ply them with free drinks. Then the manager left, all smiles and flattery. I checked out the two guys. One of them looked familiar but I couldn't place him. I hate that. I'm pretty good with faces. I remember lots of them, but I don't always know who they go with. I closed my eyes in concentration, tapping my fingers on the bar-top in an it's-on-the-tip-of-my-brain kind of way. Eventually, it returned to me. He was a pro-baseball player; a hitter for the local team. I had seen him on the news recently. I guess that counted him as a minor celebrity in these parts, deserved of free drinks for the honour of his patronage.

I didn't know the guy he was with. Maybe another team player, or his agent. I'm not really into these American sports. I know enough trivia to get me by in casual conversation with a native. Although, to be honest, you don't have to know much. Get talking to a guy who's into his sports and he'll do all the running.

The hitter was loud and obnoxious as might be expected of someone earning a house-a-week in endorsements alone. His companion was fielding the batter's every word with well-practised sycophancy. They were interesting subjects, it was true, but they weren't my men – so to speak. So I did my best to divert my attention away from them and onto what would happen next.

The manager returned with a woman who he introduced

to the men; and all hope of keeping my mind on the job was lost. The woman was extremely distracting, but not in the way you are thinking. Not that she wasn't pretty, or whatever, but that's not the point.

That is a long way from the point.

She was tall and immaculately turned out. Everyone in here was smartly dressed, like they were moving on to classy nightclubs after. But she was dressed like she was moving on to a classy movie premiere after.

She was wearing a wine-coloured dress and black high heels. She had Latin features and coffee-coloured skin. Her dark hair was swept back revealing pixie-like ears, from which long slender earrings hung almost to her shoulders.

But all these superficial aesthetics were meaningless and irrelevant; rendered so by the magnitude of one single quality. A quality that she exhibited to the world with undiluted openness. Yet one the world did not care to notice.

No one knew how special she was. I was confident of this fact because there was only one person on this planet that could possibly understand the uniqueness of this woman; who could comprehend her significance.

And that person had just spat his drink across the bar-top.

But to understand why *she* was so special ... you have to know more about *me*.

You have to know who I am; where I came from.

You have to know what I can *do*.

I have to take you back to the very start. To where it all began.

PART TWO

Reading and Writing

Ten

Finding a Path

When I was a kid, growing up in England, I naturally assumed that I was going to be a superhero. It's a fairly natural belief for young boys. It is the only way to make sense of the world at that age. It just doesn't seem logical that you will grow up to be one of those normal adult creatures, with mundane things like cars and jobs and back pockets. Indeed, discovering that tea-towel capes are not sufficient for human flight is almost a rite of passage for young boys.

But, I wasn't *that* dumb. I knew I wasn't a superhero *yet* – not till I was at least sixteen. I hadn't put a great deal of thought into what my super power might be. Just so long as I was tough I wasn't too worried.

As the years went by I grew to suspect that life wasn't going to pan out quite as anticipated, which was a bit of an annoying revelation. But as with most childhood revelations there was a long period of uncertainty that dulled any pain that might ensue. The reality of my superhero future gradually drifted out of my consciousness, hitching a lift on Santa's sleigh.

Growing up, it seems, is just a whittling away of fantasies to the bones of everyday life; and the next phase of my whittling was that of super-delusions into more feasible aims. Feasible only in the sense that they

were not prohibited by the laws of nature.

At the age of fourteen I decided I was going to be successful and maybe a little bit famous. I was either going to be an accomplished sports star, a wealthy entrepreneur or a respected academic. Some people choose singer, doctor, writer, etc., but these were my top three. I wasn't sure which one yet. I assumed this would just become apparent to me when the time was right.

Of course, it doesn't quite work like that. By about seventeen I figured this much out. To be the next great baseball player¹, I'd already left it about twelve years too late to start being any good at it. So, the first of my top three whistled past without me even getting a swing at it.

Strike one.

On starting university I quickly realised I wasn't going to be a world famous scientist either. I'm quite a smart guy, but to be an academic you need to be quite, well, academic. I found my physics degree pretty easy, but it didn't turn me on – not beyond the five hours of labs and lectures a day. After that, I found other things to interest me. I'll let you decide if that was National Geographic supplements or national drinking competitions. Either way, no Nobel prize for physics heading my way.

Strike two.

Entrepreneur it had to be. That was my last shot. I had this mate at university. Well, not really a mate. He just hung around with us and we put up with him

¹ In fact, it was actually *tennis* I wanted to excel at as a child, not having been exposed to American sports, but then the whole analogy breaks down so run with it.

because we had an inkling he'd be useful to know one day. This proved to be the case in our second year, when he set up a bunch of adult web-cams in his halls of residence and enlisted local sixth-form schoolgirls to staff them. He made an absolute mint – and two girls pregnant. I'm not saying his particular display of business acumen was commendable, or indeed ethical, but it did show balls – on more than one count – and it made me realise I didn't have the tenacity to be a truly successful entrepreneur.

Strike three.

Out.

Time to worry. Incredibly, it was starting to look like I wasn't actually going to grow up to be a mega-rich superstar. It was starting to look like I was the kind of guy who wouldn't have a story to tell.

I have a story to tell.

My epiphany came in my third year at university, high on caffeine and checking out a girl in Starbucks.

But let me rewind briefly, because the path to this moment of clarity began the day before when I had been on the hunt for something in my room. Being a student and having only been in my current room for about three months – oh and not being a girl – about ninety per cent of my belongings were still in boxes under my bed. I dug one out in my search, and as I was rifling through its contents I came across an old book that I'd had since I was a kid. Now, I don't do superstition in general, but occasionally you can get caught up in one by accident. When you do, you can't escape it – and it has a very real effect. If you come to believe that you have a lucky pair of underpants then you will feel more confident wearing them, and be more likely to succeed at whatever it is you

want to be lucky at doing in your underpants – umm, if you see what I mean. But on the flip side there is a much greater effect. If you *forget* your lucky underpants – or rabbit's foot, or horseshoe, or whatever – it will play on your mind so much that you *will* be less successful.

On a number of occasions this book that I'd rediscovered had helped me decide what path to take or helped me find answers to some question or other. Before you take me for some religious zealot, let me reassure you that this book is not the Bible or any other holy text. Although, maybe it could be offered as an atheist's scripture; a collection of secular teaching tales for the non-spiritual.

The world doesn't need gods, just guiding words.

Whatever it was, the idea got lodged in my mind that this book was a guiding mascot, and so for evermore I was stuck with it – like a set of bad lottery numbers. Heaven forbid I ever lose the damn thing.

I hadn't really paid any attention to it for ages. It was just an object in my life that I unconsciously transported from one place to another – like my bladder. On this occasion, for whatever reason, I paid it greater heed.

Its cover was dated, in a way that made you wonder if anyone twenty years ago had any aesthetic appreciation at all; like looking at photos of your parents in their youth. The cover was a sickly pale green, framed with garish blue and white triangles, and adorned with large blue lettering in a selection of ugly fonts.

The hand of fashion is indeed far reaching. Not just hairstyles and clothes, but bathrooms and corporate logos and, yes, book covers. It made me wonder how I could look upon something with disgust today that a room full of designers twenty years before thought

looked pretty swish.

Had *we* changed? Or had the *world*?

Anyway, I sat down and thumbed through the book. I stopped on a story and read the first paragraph. The tale immediately leapt back into my mind. It was about a boy dying from polio. He overhears doctors telling his mother that he will be dead by morning, and knowing this he gets his mother to manoeuvre the dresser in his bedroom such that via the mirror on top he would be able to see the sunset one last time. When the sunset comes he watches it so intently that all obstacles in its way are blanked out by his mind.

The message of this tale is that you must always have a goal. No matter what your situation you must always have an aim. The fact that this was a true story made it all the more potent.

But there was *another* message – for me, at least. One that was far more important. For me, it was not the tale that was most pertinent, but who it was about. And, crucially, what he became. I knew a little about him, but soon I would realise I needed to know more.

It was all to become clear the next day, with the girl in the café, when thoughts of the story would return to me and coalesce in my mind; and change the direction of my life forever.

The café was pretty busy. I'd just acquired my overpriced beverage and was looking for a place to sit, worthy of the eat-in supplement. I made my way toward a small clearing at the far side of the room. At the same time a young woman did likewise from a different direction. There was an awkward moment of polite motionings until we eventually arranged ourselves about two small tables that were virtually touching.

I wasn't sure if this was one of those situations where it was acceptable to actually say something to another person. In most cases it seems to be a social faux pas to initiate unsolicited discourse with a stranger. This activity is considered the domain of weirdos and charity muggers.

Regardless, I was not endowed with sufficient social bravery to do so anyway. So I merely observed her in my periphery.

If you've ever spent time watching people in a coffee shop you'll have noticed that generally everyone comes prepared with a 'primary activity'. If they are not talking to someone, they will be tapping away at a laptop, or reading a book. No one ever just drinks coffee.

She was just drinking coffee.

She hadn't even stripped herself of coat and scarf. She was just cupping her beverage with both hands and staring out of the window – her eyes focused way into the distance.

It didn't take much skill to know that she was distracted. But there was so much I *didn't* know. Was she unhappy? Did she want company? Did she need help?

These were odd questions to be asking oneself, and the fact that I was asking them made me feel that at least some of the answers were yes. But I didn't know why I felt this. Maybe it was something about her demeanour – the way her body was angled slightly toward mine; the way she didn't busy herself with a 'primary activity'; the way she had placed her bags on the seat such that they slightly encroached on my space. I didn't know; it was just a gut feeling, and so I couldn't be sure.

I wondered whether, if I had been a cleverer man, I

could have constructed a non-threatening way of establishing the details I sought. Then, maybe, if she was unhappy, I'd know what to say to make her feel better.

Being able to read people and manipulate people in this way was suddenly becoming very important to me. Manipulate is a word with such negative undertones, but unjustly so. When you pay someone a compliment you make them feel better. You've affected their mood, their state of being – you've manipulated them in a *good* way.

I sorely wished I had this skill at this moment. I felt that I could have helped this girl. At some level I could hear her crying out to me, but I wasn't sure enough. And as I couldn't be sure, I did the noble thing. I finished up my coffee and walked away. And I never saw her again.

About fifty yards down the street I became drenched in a sense of failure. I knew this was ridiculous. I had no responsibility toward this girl, whoever she was. Or did I? Should we all accept responsibility for whoever is in need? Maybe so.

But walking away is so much easier to do.

At that moment, I finally decided what the next step in my life was going to be. At that moment, my story began.

Eleven

Seeding Genius

Shortly after my coffee-induced epiphany I made my way to the campus library for a spot of research. This was exactly the second time I had visited the library in my university career to date. The first time was to shelter from the rain. It's true, libraries are not so frequented as they once were, even by students.

The great thing about the modern information landscape is that it is so incredibly easy to hone in on the very nugget of information you require, with virtually no physical or intellectual effort. This seems like a good thing, and mostly it is; but the downside comes when the aforementioned nugget of information equates to half a paragraph of a four-hundred page book. In such cases you tend to lose a spot of context – like three hundred and ninety-nine pages of context.

This pattern repeats itself throughout our lives. We are forever foregoing context, for a quick hit of concentrated information. Be it daily news or exam revision, espresso info is what we seek.

The result of this skim-reading is the continual erosion of our depth of knowledge, and indeed our personalities. We are, as a society, shallower now than we have ever been before in the history of our race. The quality of our TV is testament to this fact. We are all

sound-bite and no substance.

Hence, this seemingly innocuous trip to the library was a noteworthy occurrence in my development. No longer was I going to skim the web for paraphrased titbits. I was actually going to study – I was going to learn something. I was going to read a text-book from page *one*. No, I was even going to read the preface bit that everyone skips. Note to authors: if you want someone to read a page, don't put Roman numerals at the bottom of it.

And from where did this new found fervour originate? Over the previous few years I had grown despondent that I clearly hadn't become the genius I always assumed I'd grow into. I just didn't *have what it took*. And that irked me. I was irked by the unfairness at which genius is doled out. I didn't feel it fair that those born with a natural gift should be awarded wealth and acclaim for what amounted to little more than fortuity. Whilst us average Joes had to make do with our average remunerations.

Not that I saw any other way. I never found a solution to the inequality of the gene pool. If you think about it too hard you end up following the redbrick road to communism; and that road has never led to any solutions.

But as it turns out ... maybe we don't need any.

I was obsessed with genius for so long, but it had never occurred to me to *read* about it. Not until my epiphany episode in the café. After that I dug up some research on the topic, and it led me to an enlightening discovery. Enlightening to the extent that it should be on the school curriculum. No, it should be a school mantra, chanted in morning assembly.

As it is not a school mantra then now is your only chance. If you take nothing else from my story – if you never even get to page one hundred and four – then take this simple fact, and believe it...

Geniuses are *made* ... not born.

This is true. The quality we call genius – or extreme natural talent – arises not from innate gifts but from an interplay of the following three ingredients:

- Average natural ability;
- Quality instruction;
- And a mountain of hard work.

By way of example consider New York City’s Hunter College Elementary School, which only accepts students with IQs in the top *one* percentile of the population, and boasts an average IQ that maybe only one in five thousand people exhibit. A study of graduates from this school showed that not *one* of them – none, zilch, zero, nada – went on to be superstars in any field.

Even Stephen Hawking himself – one of the greatest theoretical physicists of all time – was of only *middling* intelligence and achievement until his mid-twenties. Only at this point, when he grew obsessive about black holes, did he catch fire. It was the obsession that was key.

The truth is, the successful elite are rarely more gifted than the also-rans, but they almost invariably outworked them on the way up.

That’s not to say that there are *no* natural prodigies out there, for there are. But the majority of our great masters, from Mozart to Einstein to whomever may be your sporting hero, made it to the top of their game more through hard work and good tutelage than through innate talent.

And what does this mean? It means something very profound. It means you can be who you want to be. *If* you are willing to put in the hours.

I was finally willing.

The salient points that I had missed until now were twofold.

– One: an individual can do remarkable things when they really put their mind to it.

– Two: if an individual wants to do remarkable things ... *they have to put their mind to it!*

The difference between these two points is subtle, but massively important.

It was now that it all came together; when I gained the unquestioning belief that this was an attainable goal: to understand people; to read them and to rewrite them. I had faith in this in a way I had never had in anything before.

This was not about winning poker or picking up girls – not entirely – it was about being ... well, superhuman, in a way. It was about walking down the street and knowing I had a ‘skill’. And a worthy skill at that, not some arbitrary skill like hitting a ball into a hole with a metal stick.

I wasn’t clear how my worthy skill was going to benefit mankind, but I knew it could. I knew it had the potential, and that was good enough for now.

Twelve

Learning to Read

I lost count of how many books I ploughed through when I began my learned journey. Dozens certainly, hundreds maybe. On topics as diverse as body language, face reading, cold reading, hypnotism, suggestion, cognitive therapy, even magic. I traced my way back through a trail of bibliographies to where the source of these topics began; quickly learning to avoid any modern books, which paraphrased and simplified and distilled until all meaningful content was lost.

I tracked down second-hand, out-of-print books, coming to associate the musty smell of aged pages with the kind of sincere knowledge that seemed all too scarce since commercialism had taken hold.

These tomes were home to a wealth of fascinating characters who, by rights, should be the icons and heroes of our age, but who have been all but forgotten. One such character I need to tell you about is a man named Silvan Tomkins.

But first I need to explain a pattern I noticed during the early phase of my studies. For it appeared to me that each advancement of human understanding to date had occurred in three stages: Prodigy, Professor, and Scholar.

The Prodigy is someone with such a natural insight

that even she – for want of a gender neutral pronoun – does not know from where her skill or knowledge arises. She will be the first person to know something or the first to be able to do something. But her gift is so innate that she cannot put into words what she does such that others might learn. Her talent would disappear and be forgotten if it were not for who comes next.

The Professor will make it his life's work to painstakingly study the Prodigy and others like her, and over time may uncover the mechanisms at work, and may even learn to employ them himself. The Professor will be best placed to articulate the workings of which he studies.

And so then come the Scholars, who can learn at their leisure, standing on the shoulders of giants.

In the subject of face-reading I was the Scholar, still at kindergarten. Few would argue that a man called Paul Ekman took the role of Professor in this domain. And *he* would not argue that a remarkable man named Silvan Tomkins was the Prodigy.

Tomkins was born in Philadelphia in 1911, the son of a dentist from Russia. He was short, and slightly thick around the middle, with a wild mane of white hair and huge black-rimmed glasses. And he just may have been the best face reader there ever was

He was a legendary talker. At the end of a cocktail party, fifteen people would sit, rapt, at Tomkins feet. Someone would say, 'One more question!'; and they would all sit there for another hour and a half, as Tomkins held forth on a diverse raft of topics that enfolded into one extended riff.

During the Depression, in the midst of his doctoral studies at Harvard, he worked as a handicapper for a

horse-racing syndicate, and was so successful that he lived lavishly on Manhattan's Upper East Side. He had a system for predicting how a horse would fare based on the horses standing either side of it, based on their emotional relationship. Some may call it a system, others say it was just a gift.

And when studying people, rather than horses, Tomkins' gift was even more profound. He could glean all manner of secrets from a person's face, beyond merely their emotion. It was said he could tell a man's crime from just looking at his mug shots.

Tomkins taught psychology at Princeton and Rutgers, and his writings showed an undeniable mark of brilliance: no one could understand them. He was a true Prodigy. He didn't understand his gift well enough to articulate it.

Fortunately, Tomkins had a profound effect on a young psychologist named Paul Ekman, who had long harboured an obsession with facial expressions. Ekman was working on the problem of whether human facial expressions were universal at the time of one particular encounter with Tomkins; one that Ekman would never forget.

Ekman showed video footage to Tomkins of two tribes from Papua New Guinea. All context had been removed from the film, only close-ups of faces remained, yet Tomkins was able to accurately describe the nature of the two tribes. Ekman was astounded. Playing the film in slow motion Tomkins showed Ekman exactly how he did it, pointing out the particular bulges and wrinkles in the faces.

That was when Ekman realized that he had no choice but to create a complete taxonomy of human

expressions. It was an awesome undertaking. First, from the structure of facial muscles, he defined forty-three atomic muscular movements – Action Units as he called them.

He and a colleague then spent no less than *seven years* cataloguing ten thousand possible Action-Unit combinations. Most of them turned out to be meaningless nonsense faces, but around three thousand did have meaning and amounted to a complete directory of facial emotions.

Crucially, what Ekman had established was that expressions were the products of evolution, *universally* recognised – even by members of the remotest tribes in the world. The face was part of a physiological system; and so the system could be learned.

All I had to do ... was learn it.

I began like Ekman did, sitting in a room for hours a day, watching clips of people laughing and shouting and crying; people that were sad or confused or scared; trying to see the connections between the face and the feelings. When Ekman started learning he soon assembled a videotape library which filled three rooms in his lab, and studied them to the point where he could look at a face and pick up a flicker of emotion that might last no more than a fraction of a second.

But watching clips of endless unknown faces was beginning to drive me insane. It was too dry, too flat. I needed real people. I began to talk to friends and strangers alike, trying to analyse their faces as I spoke to them. But I found myself concentrating so hard on their expressions that I was no longer listening to what they were saying. It was a mental juggling act and I kept dropping the balls. I got a lot of odd looks in those days.

I found talking within a group was the best strategy. I could sit back and study people's faces without having to worry too much about responding.

The key to reading faces is micro-expressions. These are the involuntary facial expressions that can reveal emotions not intended to be expressed. They often appear only fleetingly, before the conscious mind masks over them with an alternative message. Micro-expressions are the leaky tap through which our true emotions leak out.

At first it was impossible. I couldn't keep up. I couldn't spot the momentary glimpses of the all-important micro-expressions, before they vanished. It was frustrating. But I understood now that frustration was just one step along the path to any goal. Even failure is just a step along the path. It marked the line at which most people would come to a halt. It was the line where *I* would have given up before. But that was why I'd never achieved anything before. I knew now that all you had to do was step over the line and keep on walking – to pick a route and stick to it. This was my route – at all costs.

It was an arduous journey, there's no doubt, but slowly it started to come together. Slowly, it started to become natural, almost unconscious, to weave this new source of information into a meaning. Eventually, the face became more than just a face. It became an unmistakable narration to an individual's actions; a subtext to their words.

One day, I recalled an event from a couple of years before, which allowed something enlightening to dawn on me.

It was my first year at university. I was high on something extremely legitimate, and packing a stonking queen-high at the poker table. When I say poker table, I mean upturned crate in my room in halls.

The hand had gotten a little carried away, and by this point I figured that if I was going down then that queen was going down with me. The one in my hand, that is, not the guy facing me. I think he was straight. At least with respect to his sexual orientation – alas not with the quality of his cards.

So, there I was, admirably bluffing my way towards a substantial student debt, now holding a paltry pair of queens. The river had left three pretty little diamonds on the table between us, and my opponent had just gone all-in off the back of it. I stared into his eyes, trying desperately to determine whether he was holding a flush or a bluff, wishing that there was some way I could know.

And then some words escaped from my mouth, and I don't know where they came from.

'You're looking pretty flushed mate,' I said.

And with that I knew – he was bluffing. I didn't understand at the time; how the subtle ambiguity of my inspired statement had blind-sided his conscious mind, just long enough for a fleeting unconscious response to seep out. Nobody else spotted it. Very few people would, but I did – somehow.

I began to realize where all the hunches I'd had in my

life had come from – like the one about the girl in the coffee shop. More profoundly, I began to realize that, in fact, I was not learning a new skill at all.

I was learning an *old* one.

I was reawakening a latent talent. It became so obvious. Before humans had mastered the spoken word, this *was* how we communicated. We *all* used to read faces. Now I could again.

And it felt ... good.

It felt ... empowering.

But power is not always a good thing. If only I'd known that at the time.

Thirteen

Reading for Others

Back in the mid-sixties Ekman and his team of psychologists in San Francisco devised a set of tests – as psychologists are wont to do – and set about finding individuals who had a reputation for being uncannily perceptive. The tests' purpose was to study people's ability to detect lies told by others. Subjects would sit in a darkened room and watch video footage of people who were either lying or telling the truth. All the subjects had to do was identify the fibbers. Simple.

The tests were given to policemen, customs officers, FBI officers, trial lawyers, psychotherapists and a bunch of other professionals who should have had a knack for spotting deception.

And their scores? Bang on fifty per cent. No better than chance.

This might have been disheartening if it weren't for the fact that every now and then, roughly one time in a thousand, someone walked into those labs and scored off the charts. Someone who could see something that nobody else could.

I read about the project with excitement. I knew I could have been the one in a thousand. That project had long-since ended. But after a little research I discovered that a couple of years ago an almost identical study had

been initiated and was still being conducted by a team of researchers at the University of California, San Diego. They had been commissioned by the US government to develop training programs for law-enforcement agencies.

Just like most other young adults about to set foot in the real world, I was looking for some kind of validation. For most people the idea of validation is a fairly woolly concept, but for me it was black-and-white; it was a multiple choice exam waiting to be taken on the other side of the pond. I contacted the team in San Diego and said I wanted to take the test. Normally researchers have to go hunting for willing guinea pigs so they happily agreed; although, of course, their expenses budget did not run to transatlantic jet-setting.

I wasn't going to let money hold me back, so as soon as I graduated I scraped together enough cash from various bar jobs for a flight to the States. And there I was, in America, ready to be prodded and probed by be-sandaled boffins.

On my first day there I asked one of the psychologists how they normally identified people to test. He said that some were random but that others were invited in because they were thought to be gifted. He told me about one cop they had called up after a news report about him had been forwarded to them.

'He was out on patrol one night,' the researcher began, 'parked up in an area known for prostitution, when a guy starts to walk toward the patrol car. The cop opens the window and asks an innocuous question, then shoots the guy dead. His partner was like – *What the fuck did you just do?*'

'So you invited him to do the tests because he was crazy?' I asked.

'Not at all. It turned out that under the dead guy's trench coat there was a sawn-off shotgun ... oh *and* a makeshift flamethrower. He was mentally unstable and looking to torch the inside of a cop car – and the cop could see it in his face. No one else would've been able to see it, but he did.'

'Right,' I said, maybe with less awe than I was supposed to.

The technician looked at me with earnest eyes. 'No one has ever beaten his test scores.'

'Ooh,' I said slowly, making more effort this time.

Then, on my very first set of tests ... I knocked that cop's scores right out of the park.

All the boffins were terribly excited – it was cute. Me, I was just kind of satisfied. I'd come all this way just to prove what I already knew. I had validation now, but that was it. I didn't know what this meant; what I was going to do with my validity.

As it turned out, my lack of direction wasn't going to prove a problem for long. Somebody else was ready to set my heading for me. His name was Zack Bayliss. I got a call from him a couple of days after my first test and he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. US citizenship, good salary, company car. Even a 401K.

'A *gun?*' I queried, highlighting just how green I was. 'Err ... a 401K is pension plan.'

'Oh.'

On a twenty-one-year-old's scale of excitement, guns and pension plans fall at quite opposite extremes. However, for a recently graduated student, a salary – good or otherwise – falls pretty much at the same end of the scale as guns. Besides, this was *America*. Needless to say, I snapped Mr. Bayliss's metaphorical arm off.

Zack Bayliss was a deputy director of national intelligence, which meant he worked in the office that oversaw the activities of the sixteen members of the US intelligence community: CIA, NSA, FBI, DEA and all the other three-letter abbreviations that are so influential in the States. In simple terms Bayliss was a *really* important person. Not that I had any clue. And what I also didn't know at the time was that being contacted by him directly was very irregular. I never met him in person and rarely even spoke to him after that first call.

My initial training was in Arlington, Virginia, where all the clever stuff happens. I was put to use in a number of mundane ways: to observe interrogations, analyse surveillance footage, and sometimes just to watch news reels of foreign leaders.

Eventually, I was sent into the field, but I was always kept out of harm's way, holed up in a nearby van or hotel room. I didn't know at this stage that this was all a try-out. Zack Bayliss had other plans for me.

Eventually, these intentions came to light when I got posted to the US defence research agency's headquarters down the road, for a spot of research and development. This felt like an odd move and I wasn't pleased at first. I didn't consider myself a scientist. But in reality that was exactly what I was. My rigorous, almost obsessive, application of research and experimentation to acquire and hone the skills that I possessed made me more of a scientist than most PhDs.

The R&D team I joined had been working for some years on developing a screening system for detecting 'potential hostile intent', as they termed it. The idea was to develop a non-invasive remote detection system for determining whether someone was about to do

something bad. The potential applications of such a system were immense: from spotting terrorists at airport security check-points, to mounting it on armoured patrol vehicles in war zones.

The team had experienced some degree of success to date. Their initial approach had concentrated on developing what was effectively a remote polygraph machine. That is, a machine that could measure physiological changes – pulse, blood-pressure, perspiration – from afar. It did this by bouncing laser beams and microwaves off people, and the mechanics of the system were sound – it achieved the aim of being able to remotely take measurements that approximated those of a polygraph. But the approach suffered from one major limitation: for polygraph readings to be meaningful, a set of accurate control measurements have to be taken for each subject. The challenge of how to do this covertly proved to be a conundrum the researchers could never crack. And a system that flagged up anyone with physiological readings outside the norm was next to useless; being as this would include those nervous of flying at an airport or ill people in a hospital.

This would have been an effective dead end. But the project had some big sponsors and a new project leader was brought in to champion a new direction. This time the approach was to develop software to analyse people's facial expressions, gait and body movements; with the same aim of identifying individuals harbouring malicious intent.

The system was dubbed Hostile Intention Detection Equipment – *Hide*. For those lucky enough not to work in an engineering environment, allow me to explain that the average engineer gets pretty horny over acronyms –

like they do about Star Wars T-shirts. Sometimes an acronym happens to spell something tangentially pertinent and they even get excited enough to pee a little.

Oftentimes, they come up with the name first, then crowbar in vaguely relevant words in a random order just to spell it. Before Hide was chosen I had to veto *Stealth Malicious Intention Location Equipment*.

The sponsors of the project also sponsored the researchers at UCSD who ran the tests I'd volunteered for. So when I caused a spike on their charts, Bayliss soon knew about it. By all accounts, *I* was the leading expert in *their* field.

Progress was slow but positive. It took months just to create a system that could filter out micro-expressions, let alone divine any meaning from them. And that was from a full-on face-shot. The fun of dealing with partially-obscured, oblique footage was still to come.

Over time I began to feel very positive about my work. It felt worthwhile. It was all about identifying bad intentions and preventing them from being actioned. That had to be a good thing. I understood the benefit it could have on society as a whole.

But that was all a long way off. In fact, it was still a pipe dream. There could still be hurdles that would not be overcome. In this respect I felt unfulfilled. No one was benefiting right now and that made me uneasy about it. I'm quite impatient, it's true.

So, in my spare time I began to dabble in my own extra-curricular activities, trying to fulfil my self-appointed superhero destiny.

But it wasn't just reading that I practised.

My skills came in two complimentary halves.

Reading...

And writing.