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# Corporate Blue

A novel presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English.

Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

Daniel Robert Myers  
2002

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## Acknowledgements

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I once explained to my brother-in-law what the writer's life was like; the long hours, weeks and months sitting alone in front of a computer screen writing the words and wondering if anyone will ever read them; and the many months and years to follow of writing query letters, collecting rejection slips and waiting patiently for publishers to respond. At the end of my little narrative, my brother-in-law nodded thoughtfully and said, "so, basically, writing is years of isolation followed by years of rejection." At the time, it seemed to be a succinct summation of my life.

In fact, once the novel is completed and it is time to mention those people who, in one way or another, offered their assistance in making my scribblings into something coherent and cohesive, it becomes apparent that it was a team effort. For one thing, it takes a certain amount of fortitude just to be friends with a writer; to sit there in the pub and pretend to have intelligent discourse with someone whose mind is faraway, working out a particularly troublesome plot problem or character development issue; to listen to the writer's self-indulgent whining and obsession with the work. I am grateful to have such tolerant friends.

In addition there are those in particular who made a direct contribution to this work and, to them, I am particularly indebted:

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## Table of Contents

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Acknowledgments .....	iii
Corporate Blue	
Part One: The Good Old Days .....	1
Part Two: The New World Order.....	98
Part Three: Taps.....	199
Appendix	
Lessons in Drowning: The Creative Writing Process in <i>Corporate Blue</i> .....	280
Annotated Bibliography.....	298

# **Corporate Blue**

**A Novel**

**by Daniel Myers**

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## Part One: The Good Ol' Days

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## One

My first day on the job with those nutcases, I was greeted by the loser's end of a very large handgun. Were I a more intuitive man, I could have taken that as a sign to just turn around and walk away. Leave that place and never think of it again. It would've been the wise thing to do.

In my own defence however, I could point out that I didn't have a lot of options as to where I could turn. The President of the United States, among others, was pissed-off with me. And I had promised myself that I would make the best of this new situation in a new country. In time—I figured a year max—I was sure they would all forgive me back in America and let me come home.

The new country was New Zealand. My new situation at the moment was looking into the gaping barrel of an especially unforgiving-looking weapon. Attached to the opposite end of the gun—the end with the trigger—was a gentleman looking every bit the battle-scarred veteran gone off the deep end. It was not so much the hunting jacket, military fatigue pants, the week of untrimmed beard or the unkempt collar-length hair that gave that impression as the feral, 'hunted' look in his eyes.

"This is about to be your worst day ever, flyboy," he said in a menacing growl.

"Perhaps I should've knocked first," I suggested, though there was no way he would've heard me had I been knocking on the door at the base of the tower three floors down. By American control tower standards, security had seemed a bit lax to leave the door unlocked, but at first glance there also didn't look to be much of a threat. At barely eight-thirty on a Monday morning the airport seemed lifeless. No wind, no airplanes taxiing, not a soul to be seen. The lingering patches of ground fog accentuated the stillness and, like the tumbleweed rolling through a ghost town, added that final touch of emptiness.

I considered the possibility that I was in the wrong place; this was just an abandoned airfield and the Milton Gorge aerodrome I was looking for was farther down the road. This place looked like a throwback to the Second World War. Large Quonset hangars and wood frame buildings, all weather-beaten from the years, lined the perimeter on three sides. The control tower, a sad looking structure from a bygone

time, stood between the two huge runways that crossed in a lopsided X. Its wooden walls showed the marks of many years of neglect. A tattered, checker flag hung limply from the pole on one corner of the roof.

The door to the control tower was open. So I walked in and since there was nobody in the office downstairs, proceeded up to the top floor—the cab. The tower was not tall as far as control towers go, three stories, but then anything higher would've been unnecessary on this size of airfield. On the second floor, below the cab, was a small kitchen and general-purpose area with a table, some bookshelves and cupboards. I continued up the stairs to the tower cab. Except for the creak of the floorboards, there was not a sound—no hushed voices coming from the top of the stairs, no radio chatter. Again, I was convinced the place was deserted. A few steps from the top, just as I peaked over the railing to get my first view inside Milton Gorge tower, I found myself facing this, the first of the nutcases that were to become so entwined in my life.

“Are you one of *them*?” the gunman asked me.

“No,” I said, not really sure to whom his “they” referred, but guessing that a psychopath would probably never consider “them” as allies. “I’m one of you, I think, sort of, possibly less violent. Definitely unarmed.”

He lowered the pistol, studied me suspiciously for a moment, then grinned. “Don’t worry, it’s not loaded. Tea?” He waved the gun indicating an electric jug and coffee-making facilities in the corner. “I was just about to have a cuppa.”

I hesitantly took the last few steps into the cab. “Yeah, sure.” I didn’t want a cup of tea, didn’t even like tea, but thought it best not to refuse a madman’s hospitality.

“I like to wake these bastards up in the morning,” the gunman said, raising his weapon and smiling, making him look at least slightly deranged. He took a few steps across the cab, opened the door to the catwalk outside, raised the gun and fired it toward the flying school office. The gun was a signal pistol used for firing flares and, in this case, bird-scaring cartridges that make a whirring noise until they explode with a loud *bang* at the end of their trajectory. The trajectory, again in this case, ended about fifty feet before the door to the flying school office.

“I thought you said it wasn’t loaded.”

"It's not. Not anymore." He tossed the pistol in the desk drawer, slammed it shut, then returned to the electric kettle and started preparing the tea.

Outside the flying school a couple of instructors emerged from the front door waving their arms, gesturing rudely and yelling something in the direction of the tower.

"I don't think those guys liked your wake up call."

"They never do," the gunman said without looking up from his tea-making. "Never mind, by tonight I'll have bought them a round at *The Tie Down* and they'll have forgotten all about it." He looked up and grinned again. "Until tomorrow morning."

"You do that often?"

"Sometimes," he said. "After all, we *are* supposed to test the signal pistol on a regular basis."

"I see," I said, nodding and wondering if it was too late for me to slip out unnoticed.

"He's still mad about his car," the gunman added without encouragement.

"What car?"

"I set his car on fire a few months ago," he explained, shaking his head. "It was an honest mistake, I didn't notice it was a flare I loaded." He looked up from his task. "You see the flares have a longer trajectory than the bird cartridges. The damn thing hit his car, and before you know it, poof!" He returned to the tea. "Christ, it was only a Corolla. Sugar?"

"What?"

"Sugar. Do you want any sugar?"

"Oh, ah, no, plain is fine."

"Plain?" He mimicked my American accent. "You're not from around here are you mate?"

"No. From America. I just got in this morning. My name's Tom Hardy, I thought you might be expecting me." I offered a hand, unsure if that was a good idea.

"I'm Flynn," he introduced himself, squinted at me, then snapped his fingers as he found what he was looking for. "You're the cowboy!"

"No. I'm a controller, I'm supposed—"

"I know who you are, you were supposed to work here."

"As a controller, I don't know anything about being a cowboy."

"Of course you do, you're from California, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah, but—" There seemed to be a certain futility in continuing the argument. "It's not like I'm from Texas."

"So are you in or out?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Were you before or after the big change? The big *switcheroo* as you would say."

"I don't think I've ever said switcheroo." I shrugged. I had no idea what this guy was talking about.

"It makes a difference, you see. I mean, we were expecting you a while back."

"There was red tape—getting a visa and all. I came as fast as I could."

"Ah ha. But who hired you?"

I patted myself down until I located the letter in my back pocket, extracted it and held it out to him. It was from the Civil Aviation Authority offering me a position at Milton Gorge Aerodrome.

"Hmmm, CAA." Flynn shook his head. "That's not good."

"Why not?"

"It was before the New World Order."

"The New World... what?"

He dropped the letter on the desk and passed me the cup of tea. "Ah well, don't worry about it. She'll be right."

"Who will? Do you know something I don't know?"

Flynn shrugged. "Not me. They never tell me anything around here." He held his cup of tea up as a toast. "Cheers."

I decided not to pursue my attempt to make any sense out of this nutcase in the hunting jacket and was relieved when he was distracted by another car approaching the tower.

"Christ," he said bitterly and dropped into his chair. "Here she comes. Her Royal Harness."

"Who?"

He shook his head without saying a word, looking truly despondent over the impending arrival.

That was nutcase number one.

Number two was soon to be on her way up the stairs.

\* \* \*

*"What?" I paused. I could see his eyebrow twitch—somehow I got the feeling this guy didn't believe me.*

*"I didn't say anything." He gave me a smug smile, which was meant to suggest that if he didn't say something, then I was too stupid to pick up on the nuances of a raised eyebrow.*

*"But you're looking at me like you don't believe me," I said to him.*

*"What's not to believe?"*

*"Well, what then? You told me to start at the beginning."*

*"Yes, I guess I did—but, well, this was a long time ago you're talking about."*

*"Too early?"*

*"Maybe—but then again, maybe not. Maybe you could tell me more about your life before New Zealand. Before you left America. Why was the President so angry at you?"*

*"Forget it."*

*"Do you feel persecuted by people in power?"*

*"Forget it. Listen, I know where you're trying to take this. It wasn't the President, okay? At least, not him personally. I'm not that crazy. It was his damn airplane."*

*"His airplane was angry at you?"*

*"Yeah, Air Force One."*

*"Oh yes, I saw that movie."*

*"I'm not talking about the movie—which, by the way, was truer than you might think."*

*"I see."*

*"I'm talking about having nutcases on board. I mean, you would think they*

*would have some sort of sanity screening before they let someone into the cockpit.”*

*“More nutcases? There seem to be a lot of them in your life.”*

*“You’re telling me?”*

## Two

Freddie Moore stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the eighth floor, glad he was alone and glad there was a mirror—it gave him the opportunity to do a quick check on his appearance. The all-important first self-impression was good. He made a minor adjustment to the expensive silk tie he had grabbed off the rack in haste, only ten minutes earlier. The tie was a good match to his dark blue suit and gave him a solidly conservative look. Despite being rushed, he still had enough taste to steal the right tie. He practiced his ‘confident-but-not-too-cocky’ smile and checked his teeth for remnants of the Egg McMuffin. He didn’t really have to steal ties from menswear stores anymore, he just liked keeping in practice—it was like a game, and he liked the game.

In his youth, Frederick Templeton Moore III hated his name as much as he hated his poverty. But he at first learned to tolerate the former when he discovered how it could be used to alleviate the latter. It was all about having the right *attitude*. At the time he was living outside of Toronto at the Scarborough Home for Youthful Offenders—better known to the local citizens as *Scarberia*, and to the teenage inmates as the SHITs—an acronym that was supposed to stand for the Scarborough Home for Incorrigible Teens, but the management of the facility refused to cooperate on that point. He was still embarrassed that he had been sent there for the most blue-collar of all teenage crimes, stealing cars. The very thought of sinking so low brought a momentary twinge and a flicker to his otherwise easy smile. But that was the end of his days as a lowly car thief. Leave the petty stuff to the deadbeats, the punks, the losers and the blue-collar schmucks as his old man used to call them. His old man of course, was one of the biggest losers around, a petty criminal whose greatest talent was for getting caught. Indeed, the mere fact that he ‘emigrated’ to Canada from his native Detroit represents the only time he ever really got away. What he was running from Freddie never knew. Their relationship was not exactly Brady Bunch. Most of his conversations with his father were limited to visiting hours and the only two pieces of actual wisdom that he could remember his father passing on to him were, “The world is full of chumps, don’t be another.” And, “Listen up, kid, just

whatever you do, don't ever get caught."

Alfie Moore was wise enough to advise Freddie to never get caught; he just wasn't smart enough to know how to avoid it himself. Fortunately, Freddie was smarter than his old man and, while Alfie fulfilled his station in life, Freddie decided on his. His station, his *destiny*, was among a much higher class of people.

While at Scarberia, he began a transformation that would take him from Fast Freddie the teenage car thief to his proper and full potential. And it started when he first understood why a petty crook by the name of Alfie Moore could label a little kid with as outlandish a handle as "Frederick Templeton Moore III." But the old man had a bit of sense after all, if only a bit. He made up the 'Templeton' and tacked on the 'III' because he thought it made him sound classy. And, as his dad had said, "It's not who you are, but who they *think* you are."

Freddie brushed his fingers lightly across his hair to tidy it up; *should've got a haircut*, he thought, but dismissed it as an unnecessary concern. He was just glad he still had his hair closing in on forty. He stepped back and took one last glance over his whole presentation before the doors opened. It was still good; he was tall, but not imposing, his dark hair was flecked with the right amount of grey to offset his boyish good looks, and his thickening middle made him look successful.

The elevator doors opened and revealed the reception desk with an attractive woman sitting behind it. Freddie liked beautiful women well enough, but what immediately caught his eye was the stainless steel corporate logo that adorned the wall behind her. "ControlCorp" it said. Both the Cs dipped and swooped down under the other letters, suggesting a pair of jets tracing contrails in the sky; the polished silver letters on a field of blue. To Freddie Moore, *that* was beauty, and he had no doubt that it would soon be his logo, his company, and when that day came, he would have the receptionist as his mistress, just because she looked so good under the corporate logo.

"Hello, darling," he said to her with a warm smile that would, as it always did, disarm any offence she might take to his greeting. "I'm Frederick Moore, the third. I believe I'm expected."

"Yes, Mr. Moore," she responded with her own smile. "Welcome to ControlCorp. I'll let them know you're here." She picked up the phone.

Freddie stepped over to the window and looked at the view from the eighth floor lobby. The sun shone on Wellington like a jewel waiting to be uplifted from its lonely place in the jeweller's case and wrapped warmly and lovingly in his fist. It would be his city, his company, his mistress. There was so much opportunity here; he could taste it. This was a new beginning for him; he had finally found his place.

*To hell with practicing law.* This, the corporate world, was where he was meant to be.

He didn't regret putting himself through law school. Most of it was just a lot of work doctoring the necessary records. He knew the law well enough to sail through with no problems and, though he wasn't too thrilled about being disbarred last year, he could see now that it was all for the better. At least he was able to deal himself out of doing time. He smiled to himself, *a cell door closes and a window opens, to hell with the law.*

All he had to do with ControlCorp was play his cards right, be patient, keep a high-profile at the right time, a low-profile at other times, and always know what time it was. It was going to be a breeze getting in good with these poor stupid, civil-service-trained chumps.

"Hello, Freddie."

Freddie turned to the sound of the familiar voice.

*Speak of the devil, hello chump.* He smiled and reached out his hand, "Why, hello, Carlton. It's so good to see you again."

Carlton Woodcock was a short, mousy-faced guy with big glasses hanging on his mousy-little nose. He was several years younger than Freddie and his past was uninspiring. He went to school and studied hard for an MBA so he could graduate and climb only so far on the corporate ladder before being plucked off. He lacked the spine, cunning and charm to be a really good confidence man, but was smart enough to know that's what was needed to succeed. Like Freddie, he was smart enough to know that only chumps sat around and waited to get what they "deserved" which invariably they did, and it was squat. One had to *take* what one deserved. Freddie was clever enough to do that, but someone like Woodcock was only smart enough to attach himself like a leech to more talented men. He was the good ol' reliable "Number 2", a professional sidekick.

Freddie had no doubt why Woodcock had brought him into ControlCorp, why Woodcock had encouraged the board to fully support and swallow whole, Freddie's c.v. Woodcock knew what the score was; regardless of their job titles, there was a pecking order, a "master-disciple" relationship to be honoured.

Woodcock was used to it; they had worked together before. When Freddie first arrived here in this new land of opportunity a year and a half earlier, Woodcock had been a steerer for him, directing pigeons toward Freddie's real estate investment venture. Of course, when it all turned to shit, Woodcock did a bloody good disappearing act himself. Freddie himself was struck off, but it was a small price to pay. They made some money, had a good time. *To hell with the law.*

"I'll show you to your new office," Woodcock nodded down the hall, carpeted in thick, blue plush. "Typically, they've given you a better office than mine."

"Just a humble little cubicle will do," Freddie said with smile.

"The Board was impressed, Freddie," Woodcock said as they started to walk. "You must be especially proud of that little piece of fiction you call a c.v."

"Fiction is only a more potent truth, Carlton. I'm sure the Board just recognized talent."

"Yeah, I'll put your name in for the Montana Book Award. You really played up the overseas experience."

"Hey, I've been to nearly all those places."

"And an MBA just last year?"

"You want to see it?"

"But don't you think 'Corporate Reformer' might've been pushing it a bit? And how the hell did you manage the article in *The Business Times*?"

"I didn't say it was from *The Business Times*? I think I said it *should've* been run there."

"I see, another fabrication to add to your portfolio."

"Don't know what you're talking about." Freddie put his hand on Woodcock's shoulder and patted it gently. "Remember what I taught you, Carlton."

"Let's see now: never admit to anything, never take anything shoved at you, leave someone else's fingerprints, remember the orphanage at Christmas—oh, and call your mum once a week."

"No, no, Carlton—*know your audience.*"

"You mean, know that they are either too busy, too old or too close to being indicted themselves to worry about background checking?"

"Oh, don't make it sound so cynical, Carlton. I was only highlighting my strengths. You know, sarcasm doesn't suit you. If I didn't know better I could get the impression you were not completely thrilled to see me here."

"Well I'm responsible for bringing you here aren't I?" Woodcock paused, looked up at Freddie, then let out a snort through his little mousy nose—a habit, Freddie was reminded, that was especially irritating and betrayed the kid's vulgar origins. "I guess I'm just a little worried, Freddie. This company's the best break I've ever had to make a mark in the business world. I want you to promise you won't get carried away. This is a legitimate business with huge potential, and all legally exploitable."

"Which is why you brought me in as your new Manager of Commercial Operations."

"All I'm saying is don't get—"

"Carlton, please. You insult me. You brought me in because I'm the best man for the job. And, like you said, there's so much potential. What do you think I'm going to do, steal pens from the stationary cupboard?"

Woodcock stared at Freddie for a moment, then let out another little snort in resignation.

"That's my boy." Freddie smiled.

"Here's your office."

Freddie entered slowly, savouring the moment of crossing the threshold into his new office, his new world, and the lair from which to rule it.

*A corner office no less.* He suppressed a smile, simply nodding his approval instead. To one side there was a sofa, chairs and wet bar for entertaining important visitors and 'relaxing' with the secretary, to the other, the business end. He walked behind the desk and admired the view from his eighth floor office, again nodding his approval of Wellington. From his eighth floor corner office Freddie could see the waterfront which, unlike the smelly port back home, was an *ocean* port with the clean, sticky smell of salt air and water a person could swim in without having to worry

about dead fish or toxic waste.

"It'll do," Freddie said, finally turning back to Woodcock.

"Corner office," Woodcock grunted. "I can't believe they gave you a better office than mine."

"Commercial opportunities, that's why, Carlton my boy. My job will be to impress big shots from the outside. Besides," he sunk into the smooth leather chair and had to resist the urge to let out a sigh of orgasmic satisfaction with its gentle caress, "You're always welcome in here." He motioned Woodcock to the seat opposite. "This is where you and I will spend many long hours turning this pissant little company into a formidable corporate power."

Woodcock flopped into the chair. "Yeah, well, before you start restructuring your kingdom, keep in mind we're due in the boardroom in ten minutes to meet the rest of the staff. They've laid out a little spread for morning tea in there."

"Good, I'm starving." Freddie clasped his fingers behind his head, leaned back and gazed into the soft fluorescent lighting. "Just a couple things I thought we could go over before we meet everyone else."

"Yeah?" Woodcock glanced at his watch.

"Well, just one thing really. You know, it's all been such a whirlwind: the headhunting, preparing the c.v., the interviewing, flying here, flying there, meeting the Board. There are a few things I haven't had a chance to get caught up on." He glanced at Woodcock. "You know, just some background business info."

"Well, they'll catch you up on the details over the next few days." Woodcock shrugged.

"Yeah, the details." Freddie leaned forward and bent across his desk, lowering his voice. "But generally speaking ... what is it ControlCorp actually does?"

When Woodcock squinted, it made him look like a near-sighted mouse and was just as unbecoming as his little snort. "You're kidding?"

"I mean, just out of general interest." Freddie shrugged nonchalantly. "Ultimately, business is business. It doesn't matter what they actually do. They hired me for my business expertise, I don't care if we make airplanes or garbage can lids."

"We don't make anything. We're the sole provider of air traffic control to the entire country and a sizable chunk of the Pacific, a service that was previously

provided by a government department."

"Oh? Service industry? That's good, even better, no suppliers to deal with. And the traffic controller is the guy with the orange torches?" He motioned his hands in a backward wave of his fists.

"No, not the guys on the tarmac. These are the guys on the radio, in the tower, behind the radar screens. You know, air traffic controllers. They're professionals, they're well paid, they're arrogant and they're unionised."

"All minor points to be dealt with one at a time. Okay, I'm ready." Freddie slapped his leather armrests, "Let's get to that little reception, Carlton." He stood up and paused as he took a deep breath and put his hand on his heart. "Yes, sir," he said with a pleasant smile to an imaginary board member as he started walking toward the door. "Aviation's been a secret passion of mine since my childhood. Oh, no, I don't regret having to give up those dreams of pursuing a career as an air controller for one moment when my father was killed. My mother and my little sister needed me to be working."

"Christ," Woodcock snorted as he pushed himself upright and followed. "I think my ulcer is flaring up again."

## Three

*"Amanda had that dangerous quality of being a nutcase who appeared utterly normal. A first look would only tell you that she was an attractive, intelligent, confident woman who knew what she wanted in life. At least she thought she knew what she wanted." I glanced across at the guy. He seemed only mildly interested, with his heavily lidded eyes and emotionless expression. He looked like he could doze off at any minute. "But it was all part of her deception, she was attractive in the same way a black widow spider must look to her doomed mate."*

*"Yet you were attracted?"*

*"At first, maybe, why not? There was something magnetic about her. Seductive. In any case, I seem to go for women like that. Janey, my ex-wife, was like that."*

*His eyebrow twitched. "So, you were married in the States?"*

*"Yeah, it was like a fairy tale."*

*"Good?"*

*"Grimm."*

\* \* \*

The first thing I saw of Amanda Sheppard was her head as she ascended the stairs in the tower cab. She had long, blond hair, clear blue eyes and graceful, if not slightly sharp, features. The rest of her, as it appeared, did not do anything to let the promise down. By the time her beautifully sculpted, wonderfully presented and expertly manoeuvred legs made their appearance, I was thoroughly impressed. Of course, it was wrong of me to think that way in this day and age, but my point is that Amanda Sheppard knew the power of presentation. Decades of political-correctness conditioning ensured I would be tremendously aware of, and sufficiently guilty of, my sexist reaction. But I could not help but feel I was already being manipulated a little.

"Good morning," she said, offering a sparkling smile that somehow made me feel it was meant for me and me alone. She set a stack of books down on the counter

and reached her hand out. Her features softened considerably under her relaxed smile.  
“I’m Amanda Sheppard.”

“This is Cowboy,” Flynn said without looking at Amanda and before I had a chance to respond.

“Oh, it’s good to meet you at long last, we’ve heard so much about you.” Her handshake was warm, soft, and, though gentle, quite firm.

“Tom Hardy,” I said. At a loss to say anything more, I stumbled out with, “And, ah, likewise.”

“Oh what a smooth talker,” Flynn said, apparently to himself but for the benefit of all.

“Don’t take any notice of him,” Amanda said, her words taking on a sudden harshness, “and whatever first impression he gave you, ignore it. He’s hardly our best ambassador.”

“Ambassador?” Flynn grunted, then glanced up at me and winked. “Amanda, on the other hand, will be glad to do what she can to change your impressions.”

Amanda ignored Flynn. “Well, first we’ll start with a cup of tea.”

“Got one.” I held up the cup Flynn had given me.

“A proper cup.” She swept the cup from my hand.

“Well, anyway, I’m not much of a tea drinker.”

“No, don’t worry, I insist. Besides, you’re our guest.”

Amanda took considerably longer preparing the tea than Flynn did, making it in a pot instead of the cups, washing and preheating the cups, carefully doling out the milk into each of the two cups—apparently, Flynn wasn’t getting another.

“So how was your flight?”

“Long,” I said. I was about to tell her about the talkative 280-pound Australian rugby fan who sat next to me for eleven and a half hours, but then figured she probably was not interested.

“And how do you find New Zealand?”

“Oh, it’s fine, I guess. Haven’t seen much, but they were very nice in customs. Except the sniffer-dog bit me, but ...” I let my sentence trail off with a shrug, assuming she wasn’t really interested in that either. Flynn had retrieved the signal pistol from the drawer and was deeply engrossed in cleaning it.

"So," she said, handing me the cup of tea. "Welcome to *Milton Gorge*," she pronounced it as if it was a joke name. "And the end of an era."

"The end of what era?"

"The end of the old days," Amanda said smiling, her eyes sparkling with the optimism of someone whose favourite political candidate has just been elected. "The end of an outdated, outmoded bureaucracy. The end of the prodigal system."

"Oh," was all I could think of to say and looking past Amanda at Flynn who rolled his eyes, suggesting Amanda was a loonier tune than he was. "Ah, the *prodigal* system, you say? Is there something I'm missing?"

"Not at all," Amanda said, almost laughing. "You're just in time for it. And don't worry, I know there will be room in the new system for *you*." She briefly tilted her head venomously in Flynn's direction.

"Could you, ah, *elaborate* a little?" Though I wasn't sure I wanted to know anymore.

"I don't have time myself," she said as she tucked her books under one arm and held her cup of tea in the other hand. "I have to get some studying done."

As she turned toward the stairs, I caught a glimpse of the top book under her arm—a textbook, '*Business Administration*.'

"Gee," Flynn piped in loudly. "Foolish me, I thought you might've come here to do some *controlling*."

"Oh, yes, of course, it is busy, isn't it?" She said, calmly sarcastic. "But, a great controller like you shouldn't be too overworked by, let me see, *zero* airplanes? So just call me if you need me, *Owen*." She nearly spat his name.

"I told you not to call me that!" Flynn's upper lip twitched.

"See you later, Cowboy," Amanda said, returning her attention to me with a seductive smile. I was impressed at how easily, and how completely, she could toggle between charm and spite.

"Oh, don't call me—"

"Thornie should be in anytime now," she said as she disappeared down the stairs. "I'll catch up with you later."

"Thornie?"

"Believe me," Flynn said. "You don't want to know until you absolutely have

to."

"Thank you." I sat down in the chair and looked into my cup of tea. "Is everybody around here—?" But didn't know how to finish.

"Some of them are worse," Flynn said. "Wait till you meet the guy with the rat. Now, if you don't mind." Flynn stood up and started for the stairs. "Since Princess isn't going to give me a break, I have some important business to attend to. Watch that for me, will ya?"

"Watch what?"

"Well, what do you think?" Flynn asked. "You can either watch me take a dump, or you can watch that." He waved his hand at the chair where he had been sitting—the tower controller's position. "You *are* a controller aren't you?"

"Well, yeah, but—" I didn't know where to begin. Even an experienced controller needed training at a new airport. Besides, I hadn't done it for months, and never in this country.

"But, what?" Flynn shrugged. "Thornie said you were the best Cowboy in town."

"Who's Thornie?"

But Flynn had already disappeared down the stairs. I looked around the tower cab.

*Was this just a weird dream I was having, brought on by some indigestible additive in the in-flight meal?*

*Still, it is quiet here. And that's what I was looking for.*

*"Milton Gorge Tower,"* the radio at the tower controller's position crackled with a suddenness that made me jump. *"This is Cessna echo delta mike ready to taxi for the circuit at the flying school."*

I stared at the radio. Okay, not a dream.

"Tower?" the radio crackled again. *"You there, tower? Hellooo tower, come in."* The pilot said impatiently.

"An' let poor damned bodies be," I whispered, reaching for the microphone, my hand shaking as I keyed the switch. "Ah, calling the tower, say again?"

*"Cessna echo delta mike,"* the pilot started again slowly. *"At the school, taxi for circuits."*

"Cessna echo delta mike," I responded with as much authority as I could muster without knowing what the hell I was talking about. "Taxi approved."

"*Thank you, tower.*" The pilot sounded suspicious: "*Which runway you using?*"

*Yes, of course, which runway indeed?* I wished I knew what runway numbers they used at this airport. But a good controller has to be able to think on his feet, even if he doesn't know where he is, or why he is there—and the only thing I knew about where I was, was that it was on thin ice. I reminded myself of the rule of thumb for such a situation.

*May as well dance.* I put the mike up to my mouth and glanced at the anemometer on the control panel. "Echo delta mike, the wind is three five zero degrees at five knots, runway's your choice."

"Roger that. We'll take three zero."

Great. Three-zero. That meant the other end was one-two. Just avoid using the crossing runway and we should not have to suffer any public embarrassment.

When I spotted the aircraft taxiing from the area Flynn had recently fired upon, I was already well on my way to figuring this place out and feeling reasonably confident, so I decided to push it. "Echo delta mike, advise your direction of flight."

"Ahh, we're remaining in the circuit."

*The what?*

"Roger," I said to the plane, "And what will you be doing there?"

"Touch and goes, what else?" the pilot spoke hesitantly, as if he were talking to an idiot.

*Okay, make a mental note: they call it the 'circuit.'* In America we call it the 'pattern', the traffic pattern. "Roger," I said authoritatively, "That's approved."

"You're new here, aren't you?" the pilot asked.

"Does it show?"

"Only a little."

"Just started today."

"Today?" There was a momentary silence, then, for the second time already that day I was asked, "*Are you one of them?*"

I keyed the mike and applied the same philosophy I did with Flynn. "No, I'm

one of us."

Perhaps I was in the wrong place. It crossed my mind again that maybe this place was just an unused airfield where the authorities let the lunatics roam free. But at the moment I was considering the possibility that maybe this dilapidated relic of an airport could be just what I needed; a quiet place where nothing happened and nothing ever went wrong. Besides, air traffic control is like riding a bike and a few months away from it was hardly going to make me rusty. By the time that plane made two trips around the traffic pattern—the *circuit*—I was already feeling pretty comfortable at the old job, at least, with one airplane at a time.

"*Milton Gorge tower,*" a new voice showed up on the radio. "*Delta charlie tango over Mokarangi, inbound for landing.*"

"Mocha-what?" I said aloud, feeling like the big kid was about to push me off my bike.

"Southwest, seven miles," came the answer from behind. It was Flynn standing at the top of the stairs.

"Good, you're back." I stood up.

"What are you doing?" Flynn asked as he went to the tea service to make himself another cup. "You're doing fine, just give him left base joining, tell him to follow the guy on downwind. He'll be okay."

I issued the instructions to the pilot, picked up the binoculars and scanned the horizon for the incoming traffic. Here I was talking to airplanes, working again, only hours after setting foot in this country. *This is nuts.*

Flynn fixed himself another cup of tea and took his seat back. "Thornie's here, you might as well go down and get it over with."

"Go down where? Get what over with? And who is Thornie?"

## Four

"Thornie?"

"Nutcase number three. He was sort of the king of the nutcases."

A cold southerly was kicking up outside and tapping at the window.

"Well," I said, staring out the window, "he was actually a pretty good guy, kind of a sweet old harmless nutcase. At least he was the most—" I paused but could think of no better word, "harmless."

"Was?"

"Yeah, he's dead now."

"I'm sorry to hear that. How did he die?"

"Murdered."

"Murdered? That's terrible. Did they ever catch the culprit?"

I looked across the desk between us, at this arrogant pric, leaning back in his leather chair, staring at me with his half-open eyes, his arched fingers touching just so in a carefully struck pose to imply a Zen-like wisdom to his judgment. His judgment. The judgment he makes of me, deciding my future. He doesn't know me, didn't know Thornie. He only knows what the Corporation wants him to know. He has already formed his judgment and is now, piece by piece, justifying it to himself so he can go justify it to the Corporation who are awaiting reason to justify the decision they have already made.

"The culprit?" I narrowed my eyes and stared back at him. "That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"Okay. So who was Thornie?"

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"Thorndike Rumbold," the old man sitting behind the desk said in a soft voice. He was dressed in a grey tweed suit, white shirt and red bow tie, much as one would expect a high school science teacher to be dressed in 1958. Despite his obvious age,

his eyes sparkled behind the wire-rimmed glasses, his round cheeks glowed with colour and his bald head shone like polished marble. "Perfectly dreadful name, don't you think? And I won't even tell you what all my middle names are. 'T' is a simply appalling name, I tell you."

"Well, it's not *that* bad," I tried to reassure him and glanced across the room to Amanda, who was collecting her books again and preparing to depart upstairs. She offered little more than a smile and a wink for support.

"Oh, but my dear boy, it is." He folded his hands neatly in front of him on the desk. "And I should say, *I* would know. I've had to live with that dreadful moniker for many, many years."

"I guess."

"Now, who might you be, young man?"

"Thomas Hardy," I said, though Amanda had already introduced me only moments before.

"Oh, how wonderfully literary," he said with a smile.

"Don't you remember, Thornie?" Amanda said in a gentle, reassuring tone.  
"This is the cowboy from America."

"No," I protested, "I'm a controller. I've never even been near a—"

"Oh yes indeed!" Thornie said and half stood as he offered me his hand again.  
"Please, sit down."

"Thank you." I sat down across the desk from him.

"Oh, damnation." Thornie squeezed his lips so tightly they disappeared. "We haven't had our morning tea yet."

"I'm fine, I'm not really much of—"

"Don't you worry, Thornie," Amanda cut in, "I'll go fix it. You just relax and have a nice chat to Thomas."

"Who?"

"Thomas," she said, indicating me. "Cowboy."

"Oh yes, of course, silly me." He returned his attention to me and smiled warmly. "You know, when I was a child, I wanted to be a cowboy."

"I'm not a cowboy. I'm an air traffic controller."

"You're a controller, too? Well you *are* something then."

Amanda leaned over me as she started out. "I'll put in a good word for you," he said. "And we'll catch up later."

"So, how do you find Milton Gorge?" Thornie asked, his eyes sparkled eagerly.

"It's fine. Maybe a little—"

"Good!" He seemed truly delighted. "I'm so glad you like it here at our little aerodrome. I must confess, though, I *do* take it rather personally."

"Take what personally?"

"Milton Gorge. You see—" He leaned forward and lowered his voice as if he was about to divulge a military secret. "I'm the original."

I leaned forward and asked in a respectful whisper. "The original what?"

Thornie leaned back and laughed. "My dear boy, I'm the original controller."

"You're a *controller*?" I had assumed he was a civil service clerk who had been assigned to take care of the administrative functions at Milton Gorge. He certainly didn't project the image of the controller with his soft voice, gentle, if not slightly effeminate mannerisms, not to mention the fact that his mind appeared to wander aimlessly in a cloud far from reality.

"Not *a controller*, my boy, but *the controller*." He paused to let that sink in. "You see, I was the first civilian controller here at Milton Gorge."

"Really?"

"Yes, indeed. In 1962, the Civil Aviation Authority decided it was time to introduce air traffic control here at Milton Gorge and, for the first three months, I was the only controller here. I worked Monday through Friday, eight a.m. until three p.m. After the first three months, they hired a second controller and—let me see, that was Norwynn Skidmore, long since dead I'm afraid. Nonetheless, he was very much alive in those days and the two of us alone were air traffic control at Milton Gorge for nearly two years." Thornie leaned back, looked up at the ceiling and let out a satisfied sigh. "Oh yes, those *were* the days. What rascallions we were, old Winnie and I."

Thornie sat, entranced with the ceiling for a good thirty seconds. I was unsure if it would be safe to wake him from the trance, but fortunately, he jolted himself out of it.

"Oh dear," he said. "I'm getting ahead of myself. Milton Gorge had been

around since long before 1962." He rose from his chair, walked to the bookcase and stretched to reach the upper shelf. He retrieved a photo album, which he placed in my lap, then took the chair beside me and reached across to open it. The photos were World War II era and were accompanied by newspaper clippings. " 'T' was you Yanks we have to thank for building our little aerodrome. They were frightfully worried about the advancement of the Japanese in this part of the world and so thought to make this a major base. Of course, the Japanese never got close enough to pose any real threat, so as soon as they were finished building, all the Yanks were shipped off, just like that. But, look what they left us." Thornie turned the pages and pointed at photographs, yellowed with age, of Milton Gorge airport in its early years. I was impressed at the size of the runways, far bigger than necessary for a small general aviation airport.

"Why'd they build it so big?"

"To be prepared, of course. A very *American* attitude, don't you think?" He let out a quiet giggle at his little joke. "They wanted to be able to accommodate virtually anything that would come along. And you must remember, in those days, labour and materials were practically free for the taking—at least, you Yanks seemed to think so. They started building those runways and had little better to do for two years but to continue building. Do you know, those runways are ten feet thick."

"Really?" I didn't know how thick runways normally were, but it sounded impressive.

Thornie now seemed to be in full use of his senses, able to recount the smallest detail and was obviously relishing the audience. He gave me a step-by-step walk through history, gently touching the newspaper clipping or photograph as he explained each. "The Aeroworks Maintenance hangar." He pointed to a 1956 photo of the hangar that still occupied the northeast side. "The Milton Gorge Flying School opened in 1960," he said, caressing another. "And here," he pointed to a photo from 1964 that showed three middle-aged or older men in clerical garb, two younger ones in leather flying jackets and one in a suit and tie, standing in front of a twin Beechcraft. "The inauguration of HolyAir."

"HolyAir?"

"I believe their motto was 'Flying for God,'" Thornie said, suppressing a grin.

"They're still in operation though their mission may have changed somewhat. Started as a group of religious zealots wanting to spread the word of the Lord. But I'm afraid the Lord's word didn't pay for aviation fuel and thus, they got into charter work." He looked at the photo for a moment in silence. "Regardless, they're mostly all dead now, too. This one was killed in '68." He pointed to one of the younger men, "And this one in '75," he said pointing to the other.

"And who's that cheerful looking guy?" I pointed to a barely discernable face that was scowling at the camera from inside the cockpit of the plane.

"Oh, I say, what remarkable eyesight." He leaned forward and squinted. "Oh yes, of course, that would be the Holy Terror, himself." He leaned back, gave his head a brief, serious jerk as if to shake loose an unpleasant thought. "Amos Scuffield—bit of bad news if ever there was one."

Thornie had more photos, many of himself in the old days. He had been trained as a pilot in the air force, then worked as top dressing pilot until the CAA hired him as the original air traffic controller. If it had not been for the many photographs to back up the old man's claims, I would not have believed half of it.

We reached the end of the first photo album and Thornie gently closed the cover, brushed off some dust with his palm and returned it to its place on the shelf. "I have three more albums," he said as he reached for the second. But, thankfully, Amanda returned with a tray of tea.

"Oh my dear, you *are* a lifesaver." Thornie restored the second album to its place on the shelf, returned to his seat behind the desk and began serving the tea. He hesitated, counting only two cups. "But my dear, won't you be joining us? I've been having the most delightful conversation with this young man."

"I'd love to Thornie," Amanda said, "but I'm afraid our Mr. Flynn is throwing a fit. So I better go give him a break before he hurts someone."

"Oh, yes," Thornie said, letting another brief giggle slip out. "Mustn't keep your comrades waiting. Duty calls."

Amanda touched my shoulder as she departed.

"Yes, this is much better." Thornie offered me another cup of tea and a shortbread biscuit. "Now then ... Thomas was it? Tell me what brings you here to Milton Gorge?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm sure you didn't come all the way from your ranch in America just to hear the history of Milton Gorge."

"I came to work, don't you remember?"

Thornie rubbed his chin and contemplated this seriously. "Well now, I don't know too many people in the cattle industry, but I suppose I can make some inquiries."

"I'm not a cowboy. I'm a controller. Look—" I dug the letter from the CAA out of my pocket and put it in front of Thornie. "Don't you know anything about this? They offered me a job here, said I would be stationed at Milton Gorge tower. Wasn't anybody expecting me?"

Thornie took his glasses off, carefully polished them with his handkerchief, then picked up the letter and studied it for a full two minutes.

"I see," he said as he put the letter down in front of him. "This *is* a dilemma."

"Why is it a dilemma?"

"You see, things have changed."

"I know, I know, a *new world order* or something."

"It's the Corporation!"

"What corporation?"

"*ControlCorp*," Thornie huffed. "We've been corporatized, my boy."

"Who's been corporatized?"

"We have; air traffic control. The CAA has gone and flogged us off. They say it's going to make us more *efficient* or some such nonsense. Mind you, I don't approve. I think they just wanted to make a 'quick buck' as you Yanks like to say. I say we've been quite happily going on about our business for nearly four decades now and why mess with it?"

"So you're saying, the CAA hired me but the Corporation's not interested in employing me?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that's it in a nutshell." He looked truly apologetic. "At least, that's the way it will be in a few days."

"What happens in a few days?"

"Friday, at the close of business. That's when the changeover takes place.

That's when we become *ControlCorp.*" He screwed his face as if the name left a bad taste in his mouth. "And they informed us that only air traffic control staff who are fully licensed by the CAA at the time of the changeover will be employed by the Corporation."

I could think of nothing further to say, so stood up to leave. When I turned, I saw Flynn leaning against the doorframe.

"Good morning, boss," Flynn said cheerfully to Thornie.

"Well, good morning Flynn, and how are you today? Glad to see you've got the plaster off and are walking again. Feeling good, I trust?" He sounded cheerful and fully recovered from my problem that weighed heavily on his mind five seconds earlier.

"Yes sir, nothing like a fractured femur to help a guy get caught up on daytime television. I tell you though, that's the last time I let someone else pack my chute for me." He stepped inside and whispered to me, "It was three years ago." He took a seat and returned his attention to Thornie. "I see you've met Cowboy here. Sure was a good idea to bring him on board."

"Oh, I'm afraid it's a very unfortunate turn of events for our young friend."

"What do you mean?" Flynn slid into a slouching position. "You can't cut him loose now, he's halfway through training."

"But how can that be?" Thornie asked. I, too, was interested in the answer.

"Well, he's been here since yesterday."

"I don't remember him here yesterday."

"But you weren't here yesterday, were you? Not on a Sunday. Don't you remember? You told me to keep an eye out for the new guy if he showed up over the weekend and to get him started right away. Remember?"

"Well not—" Thornie scratched his bald head.

"Sure you do," Flynn countered quickly.

"Well, now that you mention it, I do seem to remember saying *something*—" He stopped scratching. "But still, how could he be halfway through the training programme if he only just started yesterday? Training should take at least four weeks."

"Not with this guy, he's *that* good!" Flynn pointed at me, but I could think of

nothing to say, so I stood with my mouth hanging open. "You remember when you told us about him a couple months ago? You showed us his file, said he sounded like a real hotshot, a 'cowboy', you said. That's what we've been calling him ever since."

"Yes, of course, but," Thornie paused and squinted at Flynn. "Are you telling me he can finish training and be licensed in only four days? That would be unheard of. It would be—" He turned his gaze to me and whispered, "*remarkable.*"

"You should've seen him this morning moving airplanes!"

"Really?" Thornie rubbed his chin as he looked at me approvingly. "And he has excellent eyesight."

"You could license him today," Flynn assured him. "But why put pressure on him? Give him a couple more days."

"Yes, of course, why indeed?" Thornie smiled. "Don't want you to work *too* hard, my boy. Take your time, relax, I'll schedule a licensing board to convene at nine o'clock on Friday morning. My word, this is exciting!"

Flynn got up and walked out. I stood for a moment, alternating my gaze between Thornie, beaming in admiration, and Flynn's back. I caught up with Flynn at the base of the stairs.

"Hey."

Flynn stopped two steps up and turned.

"You really think that? I mean that I'm that good?"

"Based on what? That you had one airplane and couldn't even get that right?" He grinned maliciously. "What I think, *mate*, is that you better get to work and pray for a miracle."

"Then why the hell did you get me into this?" I screamed as loud as I could whisper.

"You want a job, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Look," Flynn took a step down and lowered his voice. "You got two things going for you. When things start moving here, this place is a madhouse at the best of times. You won't ever *control* anything here, the pilots only occasionally follow instructions. The best you can learn is to *not* try to make any sense of it and just keep your head down."

"What's the other thing?"

Flynn grabbed my shoulder, squeezed hard and smiled as if he had just seen Amanda fall down three flights of stairs. "I'm going to teach you how to do that in just four days."

"Great," I said, though not completely convinced. "With all that on my side, how could I lose?"

"Because you have about a hundred other things working against you." Flynn turned and headed up the stairs.

\* \* \*

*"So," he narrowed his eyes and looked at me as if he didn't believe a word of it. "You're that good?"*

*"Well," I thought about it for a moment. "I don't know if it really matters if I am or not. Reputation goes a long way in this business. But self-confidence goes even further—it's the key to a good controller. So I guess what is more important is not whether I was or not, but whether I believed it or not."*

*"And did you? Did you believe you were that good? Did you believe your own reputation, Cowboy?"*

*I hated this smug bastard. I had only known him for something less than half an hour and already hated him. Not just disliked, but actually hated, even passionately. His phoney compassion grated, his pseudo-sincerity was mocking me. They were looking to string me up and this was the guy they hired to tie the noose.*

*"I mean, you finished your training in four days." He looked at me suspiciously. "I don't know much about this business, but it sounds remarkable."*

*Yeah, you don't know much about this business. That sort of sums it up, doesn't it? The man who judges me will do so only by his rules. He won't—can't—understand my life but by his terms. And to him, everything is framed in terms of what he considers 'normal behaviour.' He wouldn't begin to understand that 'normal' doesn't factor into it. There's very little about what we do that, put under close analysis, could be considered normal. After all, what we desire most in this job is to have a sky full of airplanes, travelling at a variety of speeds from a hundred knots to*

*several hundred, all of them on different trajectories, at various altitudes, climbing, descending, all of them heavily laden with highly volatile Jet-A1 fuel and carrying two, three, four hundred or more human lives. And they are all trusting that you, the controller, are having a good day—that you are happy with your life and are not feeling particularly homicidal or suicidal, that you are focused on your job, thinking clearly and your brain is not fuzzy from too much gin the night before or not enough coffee this morning or from the chronic lack of sleep that ultimately plagues adrenaline junkies and shift workers—of which you are both. They put it all in your hands. You want it, you ask for it, and they give it to you. Just what is normal about that? It's insane. At least the pilot gets the uniform and the flight attendants.*

*The job sounds simple enough; turn chaos into order. Faced with a constantly changing three-dimensional puzzle, the controller must be able to think three-dimensionally, and to live out two or three options to every scenario before they happen. The controller is a performance artist, a maestro whose planes and pilots are the players in his orchestra. And, at the best of times, the music they make together can be beautiful. Anything less than the best of times is not acceptable, for it is a deadly art.*

*So where does ‘normal behaviour’ reckon into it? To want this job, to be any good at it, one has to begin at the borderline, so most of us are doomed from the start. One false step and you’re wandering the wide-open plains of abnormal behaviour. Not an easy place to find your way out of either. God knows, we cannot ask for directions or help, because then some prick like this comes running down to sit and judge my life by his rules—his narrow-minded, unimaginative rules. They want me at this job because I am abnormal, yet they are ready and willing to put me on trial and condemn me for being that way.*

*Yes, Your Honour, I’m good at my job, because it is my job. To believe yourself to be good at it, to have absolute, unwavering faith in your ability, is not an ego thing. It is a survival thing. It is just necessary. And, Your Honour, there are not too many alternative career opportunities for those of us who live in the border lands: cop, maybe, fireman, air traffic controller, rock star, psychopath—limited choices for society’s limina. And yes, Your Honour, I think I’m that good that I could finish my training in four days.*

## Five

Blue Leader circled far to the east to position the squadron between the target and the sun so the unsuspecting enemy would not see them until it was too late. Their mission: neutralize the enemy airfield at Milton Gorge, take out the enemy control tower, maximum casualties within the building, minimum outside. Many of their friends were being held captive on the ground. Being held captive by landing fees, fuel taxes and now, new charges for air traffic services being provided by an enemy that had taken over the airfield in a brutal and unwarranted assault on their peaceful home.

The Squadron Leader pressed the little button on his stick with his thumb. "Okay men, tighten up," he said to the other three aircraft that were inching their way into position. "Blue two, bring it in closer."

"Roger, Blue Leader."

"Blue Leader to Dakota Blue. Are you in position?" the Squadron Leader asked the fifth member of the strike force, a DC3 flying somewhat lower and closer in. If all went as planned, the second the four T6's of Blue Squadron crossed the control tower on their strafing run at eight hundred feet, the DC3 would be arriving from a slightly different angle, east by northeast, and crossing their flight paths just behind at one thousand five hundred to deposit its payload. The T6's would break left, over the DC3, which would then position itself number five.

Their objective was simple: strike hard, strike fast and be gone before the enemy had a chance to know what hit them. It was routine. Most of them had been doing this for many years. These days it was more difficult to tell the enemy apart; friend looked like foe. Except for the uniform, the enemy dressed in blue suits. But that was enough to the old men of Blue Squadron. Their eyes may not have been as sharp, their senses not as keen, but their trigger fingers were just as quick.

They pulled into formation and from then on moved as one aircraft. Only Blue Leader had the target airfield in sight. Each man to his right kept his eyes glued to the wing of the man to his left.

The fourth plane in line was 'Blue Four', Amos Scuffield. There was something he had not told his comrades in the briefing room that morning—this was to be his last flight. Even this flight was illegal. The doctor had pulled his medical the day before. He was grounded, permanently. Amos Scuffield had been diagnosed with cancer of the liver; his flying days were forever over. After this flight, he would no longer fly with the men of Blue Squadron.

He had been flying since he hit puberty sixty years ago. He didn't know how *not* to fly. It was in his blood, permeated his very soul. When he rested on the front porch of his house in the afternoon, he never watched the passers-by on the road; his eyes and thoughts were on the sky. That's where he lived and without it he would die for sure. That's why he decided not to mention it to the boys in Blue Squadron. He didn't want their pitying eyes glancing at him sideways, he didn't want to hear about the passing of an era, the fact that he was the last pilot in the squadron who had been in WWII. He could still keep his plane tucked in close behind Blue Three; his hand was still as steady. By right of seniority, he could've been Blue Leader. But he opted for the fourth position, it better suited his plan. He was not ready to give up what meant everything to him, and he was damned sure not going to spend the next year or so rotting away on the ground, in an hospital ward smelling of antiseptic and remembering what used to be. Blue Squadron's plan was simple. His was more so.

"All right, men," Blue Leader announced. "We're going in." He nudged the nose of his aircraft over, keeping his target centred right above the nose.

\* \* \*

"How many times do I have to tell you before it sinks in?" Flynn was sitting on the counter in the rear of the cab, leaning on the window and polishing his hunting knife in what, to me, was an unreasonably threatening manner. "They're not listening to you anyway, so you're better off saying as little as possible."

I was finding little encouragement in his methods. At present I had four aircraft in the circuit doing touch and goes, three aircraft on the ground waiting for take-off, four inbound from three different directions joining to land, one non-radio Auster Aiglet circling overhead waiting for a light signal approving him to land on the

grass strip, and a helicopter hovering around on the east side of the field doing God-knows-what. All were piloted by sometimes unintelligible accents and using place names to report their positions that could've been in China for all I knew.

"Try ignoring them," Flynn said, holding the knife up to inspect the sheen.

"It's not what I was trained to do."

"They'd probably be safer if you'd shut up." He squinted at the blade of the knife. "Why don't you have yourself a cup of tea, Cowboy?"

"Why don't *you* have a cup of tea?" I turned to Flynn, but my attention was caught by something over his shoulder, through the window in the bright sunlight—an elongated spot on the sky, hard to see in the glare of the sun. But I had spent enough years of my life looking for tiny specks in the sky, to take notice. I couldn't make it out. *Was it one of mine? Was I missing one? Had to be an airplane, perhaps just passing by, en route elsewhere.* I turned my attention back to the airplanes I knew about and filed the spot in the sky away as something to be dealt with five or ten seconds later. There was a more immediate concern; the Piper Cub on short final was trying to land on top of a Cessna that was supposed to have taken off thirty seconds ago, but was still sitting on the runway. I aborted the Cub's landing and told him to re-circuit and turned my attention back to the Cessna and cleared him for take-off again. Meanwhile, a Piper Cherokee was trying to descend into the traffic pattern on top of another Cessna and an impatient chap in a Beechcraft was causing more radio clutter by repeatedly requesting take-off clearance, apparently oblivious to the existence of the two aircraft in front of him.

"Why, thank you, I think I will have a cup of tea." Flynn dropped off the counter and pointed the knife at me again. "You know what your problem is, you need to learn to relax."

I told the Cherokee to stop his descent until he could spot the Cessna, told the Beechcraft to stand-by and turned to say something nasty to Flynn about his habit of brandishing weapons.

"My problem is—" But before I could fill in the blank my attention was again drawn to the spot emerging from the glare, much larger now. It was not a transient. This was something for us. I squinted again. *Not one airplane, two, three.*

In the cockpit, there is a moment—the briefest of all moments—for which the

pilot must always be ready. A general rule of thumb regarding traffic: if an observed target appears to move forward through the pilot's field of vision, the observer will pass behind the target. If the target appears to move backward, the observer will pass ahead. The target that appears stationary, is on a collision course. And the target that appears stationary is the most difficult to spot for its lack of motion. In that brief moment of realization, that the spot in the sky is not a speck on the windscreen but, in fact, another aircraft, on a collision course, there is often only that single moment to make a decision and take evasive action. Fortunately, control towers do not travel through space and, thus, the rate of closure is fully dependent on the airspeed of one object and not two, which gave me twice as much time. My attention was fully focused on the ever-increasing target when that moment arrived. *One, two, three, four—there were four aircraft and they were closing in on the control tower rapidly.*

"I think we're under attack."

Flynn turned around and saw the formation bearing down on the tower at full throttle. He growled like a dog, lip curled back, tightened his grip on the hunting knife, kicked the outside door open with his foot, and leapt onto the catwalk.

\* \* \*

Blue Squadron approached the field boundary at eight hundred feet. They levelled off for their fly-by. Blue Four then commenced his own 'plan B.' He keyed his mike and transmitted a message. "Blue Four dropping out. I'm going in alone." And without waiting for a reply, he pushed his nose down and dipped out of the formation. There was a jumble of confused transmissions. Blue Leader thought at first Blue Four had had engine failure and was making an emergency landing, but in a millisecond it sunk in; Blue Four was Amos Scuffield. He had long been concerned about Amos's mental capacity. It was time for the man to retire, but he had not had the heart. Flying was everything to Amos.

"Blue Four! No!" Blue Leader yelled into his mike, but there was so little time. He did not know what could be said in the split second that remained to make Amos Scuffield divert from whatever it was he had in mind to do. He pulled back on his stick and brought the remainder of his squadron up to one thousand feet and held

his breath in horror waiting to see what Amos was going to do.

Amos had only one objective. He was going to destroy the control tower by flying right through it. Sure, there would be fatalities; his was already sealed in a lab report at his doctor's office. And the others that were doomed to die that day worked for the same government that was taking his wings away. All these old windbags at Blue Squadron thought they would make a difference by pulling off this silly little stunt, an unapproved flyby, a buzz and break, the DC3 dumping a couple hundred pounds of flour on the tower. Like spitting on the beach to protest the ocean. No one would take notice of their flaccid complaint. If they wanted to make a difference they needed to leave a bleeding, open wound, a scar. And who better for the job? He had reasons to be rid of that building, reasons that went back to a time when most of these old blowhards were waiting for their testicles to drop. He dropped his plane down almost to the deck and pulled it level with the tower cab. They were a bunch of old men full of hot air. Only he was willing to take the action that would get someone to take notice. His hands tightened on the stick, he did not breathe, his eyes were locked on the target.

Amos Scuffield was the last remaining active pilot who had been with the squadron in Bougainville. Of the rest of the active roster, some had flown in the Korean conflict, most of them spent their weekdays sitting in the cockpits of 747's pushing the autopilot button and the flight attendant call button for coffee refills. None of them had known what he had known tangling with the Japs in the skies over New Guinea. On the ground, it was like living in Hell; the heat, the malaria, the misery. The only place to escape it was the air, where the Japs fought with a fierceness he had never expected when he signed up. They were relentless, never letting up. And, for all that misery, they were some of the best days of his life. He was where he was supposed to be for the only time in his life. He was an airborne warrior tasting the total freedom of flight, the pure adrenaline of the fight, the camaraderie. The best friend he ever had in his life, the only friend, was a wild young man named Arthur Capstone. Together, Cappy and he ruled the skies; no one dared challenge their authority. They were young and insanely brave. They were invincible. They thought. Cappy disintegrated in a ball of flame off Amos's wing one day hit by enemy fire. None of these button-pushing old farts had seen their best friends disappear in

fire off their wing.

His eyes were totally focused on the target. He did not blink. Estimated time of impact, about two seconds. "It's taps for you ol' Rumbold," he whispered.

On the catwalk which ran along the outside of the tower cab, he could see someone standing there defiantly, holding ... what was that he had in his hand? A knife? He was waving a knife? Good Lord, what was the man thinking? That he could put a nasty scratch in the plane as it obliterated the building?

Then there was that moment; he locked eyes with the madman on the catwalk with the knife. He knew that boy. It was Owen Flynn. Didn't like him too much; he was rude, wild, unpredictable and—. And foolishly brave enough to try to stare down a T6 at full throttle. He was Cappy. He wasn't Amos's enemy, merely a foot soldier caught on the wrong side. If only it had been Rumbold out there, it would be easy. But that traitorous pencil pusher probably wasn't even in the building at this hour of the morning.

Amos jerked his hand back and flicked the nose just high enough to clear the roof of the tower by a few feet, then banked hard to the left to avoid colliding with the Auster that suddenly filled his field of vision.

\* \* \*

"Ha! You chickenshit!" Flynn screamed at the top of his lungs in the typhoon-force blast of air that hit him as the plane went sailing overhead. He was still screaming out his victory two seconds later when the DC3 flew overhead and dropped two hundred pounds of flour over him in protest of the recently announced increased landing fees.

As Flynn came back in amidst a swirling cloud of flour looking much like a walking blizzard in the snow-covered Alps, I cautiously peeked from my vantage point under the desk. I checked myself to make sure I had not wet my pants before I stood on wobbly knees and, at that moment, resolved that at the first opportunity, I would book a flight back to California.

Flynn was still laughing like a maniac as he ineffectively brushed just enough flour from his sleeve to perpetuate the cloud that surrounded him. He slid the knife

into its sheath. "Okay, *I'll* make the tea."

Despite my heart pumping at three times its normal rate, I returned my attention back to my more immediate concern, the chaos in the circuit, which was now obscured by the thick flour fog descending on the tower. Somewhere out there, the Cherokee finally spotted the Cessna and slipped in behind him. There was nothing I could do to protect the aircraft in the circuit out there from such stunts. Only sheer good fortune and a few feet had prevented the Auster from falling to the ground a crumpled, shredded and bloodied tangle of fabric and aluminium tubing. There was no air traffic control procedure to apply, no commands I could issue. But at the ensuing investigation they would grill me on what I had not done, why I had not performed some miracle to prevent it.

*Investigation?* What am I talking about? There won't be any investigation. This was the third insanely illegal act I'd witnessed in two days and the most serious response yet was a disgusted sigh as someone went to make the tea.

"This place is a madhouse," I said aloud, hoping the sound of my own voice would wake me up.

"Yeah, but it's home," Flynn said as he noisily pushed dishes around the cluttered counter top. "Anyway, could be worse."

"How?" I glanced over my shoulder at Flynn who was deeply absorbed in something at the bottom of one of the cups, then returned my attention to the Auster without the radio that was now trying to cut in front of the Piper Cub.

"Shit, that's gross," Flynn said at whatever was down in the bottom of his mug.

"You could try washing it Owen," Amanda's voice came drifting up the stairwell. She appeared at the top of the stairs with her armful of books.

"There," Flynn said pointing at Amanda. "It just got worse."

Amanda took so little notice of Flynn's comment that I guessed she had been ignoring him for years.

"And how are you this morning, Thomas?" She asked dropping the books onto the back counter. She was sparkling clean, having narrowly escaped being flour-bombed. I was impressed at how completely she was ignoring the fact that both the tower and Flynn were presently shrouded in a cloud of flour, without the slightest hint

of curiosity.

"Fine, thank you; and you?" I said automatically but was more concerned with the chaos at the runway.

*"Fine thank you, and you?"* Flynn mimicked.

"Busy?" Amanda placed her hand on my shoulder and gently, almost imperceptibly, massaged it with her thumb.

"Only in a Lost Cause sort of way," I said, trying not to let the gentle motion of her thumb distract me from what was going on outside. The flour cloud was clearing, leaving enough of a fine residue on the window to give the view outside a blurred, dreamlike quality. The Cub positioned number two behind the Auster for landing on the grass. A warm tingle spiralled into my shoulder muscle. A vision flashed through my mind of Amanda giving me a full body massage, rubbing almond oil into my naked muscles. I felt the stirrings of an erection and leaned forward in an attempt to escape her thumb.

"Well, you look like you're not having any trouble settling in." Her hand followed the forward motion of my shoulder and did not interrupt the rhythm of her thumb. "Despite the lack of guidance."

"He don't need guidance," Flynn barked. "He's a natural. A regular fucking cowboy."

"Really?" Amanda's thumb increased its tempo on my shoulder and I considered the possibility that there was more passion in her thumb than my ex-wife had had in her whole body. Maybe that's unfair; Janey had passion, just not for me. Amanda, though, she was smouldering. The warm, tingling sensation was working its way into my spine. *The Auster, the Cub, the tingle*—I suddenly understood what drives a cat to purr.

"Why don't you take a break so you don't wear yourself out?" Amanda's thumb came to an abrupt stop. She pulled her hand away, sat down next to me and picked up a pen. "What do you have?"

*What do I have?* I considered the many things I had at the moment: *a boner in my lap, some guys from World War II out to kill me and a flying circus that was positioning for one big, twelve-way mid-air collision as its grand finale.*

Amanda sat down next to me and made notes as I identified each aircraft,

working from the runway out. Then I slowly stood up behind her and watched, making sure I hadn't forgotten anything.

"How'd you do that?" Flynn asked in feigned awe. "You got Amanda to work. I'm impressed."

I ignored Flynn and watched Amanda take control of the traffic. She issued instructions with the clipped efficiency of someone who does not invite doubt as to who is in charge. I looked down at her shoulder, wondering if I should return the favour.

"Must be your pheromones, Cowboy," Flynn said, persisting for his amusement only. "To make them come running like that. They must be screaming 'Amanda, Amanda, I'm gonna lasso your heart. Giddiup. Come on, what's your secret? Are you a natural with women, same as you are with moving airplanes and cattle around?'"

"It's called a shower," I suggested. "You should try it."

Flynn grinned. "May be hope for you yet, Cowboy."

At three-thirty that afternoon, Flynn introduced me to *The Tie Down*, what he explained as an aviation 'social club' but I would've called a bar. It was in a room adjoining the Milton Gorge Flying School, not posh, but functional with a bar, a pool table and a scattering of tables and chairs. When we arrived there was only one other group of four pilots sitting in one corner noisily trying to outdo each other's flying tales. By a quarter past four there was four times that many and the place was getting noisier.

I was surprised at how cheerful so many of these pilots were with Flynn. I mean, considering he had fired on this place with a signal pistol only the day before. But, as he had told me then, all was quickly forgotten once a few beers were poured. And once Flynn told them a few completely fabricated stories on how I ended up being called Cowboy and perpetuated a few more myths about what I had done to the President, they seemed to be unusually quick to welcome me into the brotherhood of the reckless.

Flynn and I were seated on stools at the bar when the old man walked in. His appearance did not create an absolute hush in the room, but the noise level dropped

considerably as he paused in the doorway and scanned the room. He was dressed in an olive green flying suit with several patches sewn on it.

I was facing the door and saw him first and would not have paid any attention had it not been for him stopping his scan of the room on us. Seemingly satisfied that we were who he was looking for, he moved toward us in a slow, but steady pace. Although he looked to be very old in his gaunt deeply lined face, he did not look frail. His tall, lean frame was ramrod straight as he approached Flynn and me. It was not until he was almost upon us when Flynn must have noticed my distraction and turned in his seat.

"Scuffs," Flynn smiled at the old man. "You're still alive."

"Mr. Flynn." The old man nodded but did not return the smile, then inclined his head toward me and offered another nod.

"Tom Hardy," Flynn said, jabbing a thumb toward me. "We call him Cowboy. He's the new guy in the tower. He's from America."

"How do you do? I was stationed with the Americans during the war," Scuffield offered but did not indicate whether that was a good experience or not.

Flynn then reversed his position and looked at me while he turned his thumb to indicate the old man. "Amos Scuffield, last of the great airborne warriors and the guy who tried to kill you a few hours ago." He then turned back to Scuffield and added, "A little closer than usual, eh Scuffs?"

I noticed the room was still quieter than it had been before Amos Scuffield entered and several of the people in our proximity seemed to be interested in the exchange. The old man obviously commanded some sort of subdued reverence from these younger pilots.

"I sincerely hope," Scuffield turned back to me and studied me with icy grey eyes, "that I did not frighten you, young man." He barely inclined his head toward me but did not unlock his gaze. It sounded more like a challenge than an apology, as a commanding officer might issue a new recruit or a P.E. coach might issue anyone.

"No, sir," I said and shot a nervous glance toward Flynn. "I completely lost my sense of fear when I was a flight instructor."

This brought a polite round of laughter from those around us who were listening in, but Scuffield remained unmoved, with his eyes locked on me. Then,

slowly, a slight upward turn of one side of his mouth and I felt like I had gained his approval.

"So, Scuffs," Flynn said, "not like you to be flying mid-week. You guys coming out this weekend? I only ask, of course, so I know to wear my flour-coloured shirt."

"No, that's it for me, Mr. Flynn. You were my last dual today, and I acknowledge your victory."

"What's up?" Flynn asked. His face took on an expression of concern.

The old man took out his wallet, pulled two twenties from it and carefully laid them on the bar. "Please take care of these gentlemen, thank you," he said to the bartender, then turned back to Flynn. "I'm afraid it's taps for ol' Scuffs." Then he turned and walked out.

"What did he mean by that?" I asked Flynn when Scuffield was out of earshot. "Taps for ol' Scuffs."

"Don't know," Flynn shrugged as he watched the old man depart. "Don't know."

## Six

"Have you ever killed anything?" Flynn asked looking up from the newspaper. We were sitting across from each other at the table in the kitchen, taking a break on my last day of training, he reading the newspaper and me trying to make some sense of the air traffic control manual.

"Not yet," I said as I skimmed through the first section of the manual on definitions and abbreviations, looking for something that looked like I needed to memorize.

"No, I mean shooting. Hunting. I thought I'd head up to the mountains and see if I could bag a deer this weekend. You want to come along?"

"I don't think so. I sort of lack the killer instinct."

"Ha! That's not what I heard."

"What did you hear?" I asked, though I think he was just screwing with me.

"Nothing, of course—always the last to know. We won't kill anything if you don't want to. There are no world leaders up there anyway. We'll just go camping. Or how about fishing? Do you like fishing?"

I looked at him. *Yeah, I like fishing*, I thought, but for some reason answered, "Not particularly."

"You like the mountains?"

"Yeah, I like the mountains." I started reading the section on aircraft priorities. Certainly they'd ask me something on priorities during the test: *Aircraft emergencies get the highest priority*, that was easy; *second, multi-engine aircraft with one engine out*; *third, radio failure*; *fourth, air ambulance*, fifth—

"I could show you some of the most scenic country in the world. We could go down to the Rangitikei and pack our stuff in."

"Don't you think I should concentrate on this?" I asked, tapping the book.

"I'm talking about Saturday. That'll be over with one way or another, tomorrow morning. Either way, you're going to have the weekend off."

*Damn it! That's right—tomorrow.* I flipped through the two or three hundred pages of the book I hadn't looked at yet. *One way or another, I'm screwed.*

"What do you say?"

*Priorities, bloody priorities.* I looked up from the book again. "Don't you think I ought to concentrate on this at least *for now?*"

"Say 'yes' and I'll leave you to that useless information that you have absolutely no need for."

"Yes, I'll go camping this weekend."

"Great. I'll pick you up five o'clock Saturday morning."

"Five o'clock!"

"Yep." Flynn dropped the newspaper on the table and stood up. "Now, I'll go give Princess a hand upstairs. You fill your head with rubbish down here until you're ready for more abuse upstairs." As Flynn started to walk out, Thornie met him at the door.

"There you are, Flynn. I'm glad I caught you," he said, looking mildly concerned about something. He noticed me seated at the table and his face immediately took on a new glow. "Oh good morning, Thomas. And how are you today?"

"I'm—" I was about to tell him I was a fraud and wanted to go home, but was cut off by Flynn.

"Awesome!" Flynn jumped in. "*I'm* learning things just watching him."

"Isn't that marvellous?" Thornie said, beaming with pride.

"But don't ask him about it, he's too modest," Flynn added. "So what did you want to ask me?"

"Ask you? Oh yes. What time do you finish work today?"

"At three."

"Oh dear." Thornie looked down at the floor.

"Do you want me to stay late?"

"No. Don't do that. In fact, can you leave early? Say, about two, or a quarter of?"

"Sure." Flynn shrugged. "But who'll cover for me? Wouldn't want to leave Amanda on her own. People would die."

"Yes, of course," Thornie mumbled as he scratched his head.

"How about Cowboy here?" Flynn suggested. "You could put him on ground

control."

"What?" I interjected.

Thornie looked up, then followed Flynn's nod toward me. "Oh yes, of course, *Cowboy*." He smiled. "What a *perfect* solution. Good idea, Flynn."

"Bad idea. What are you talking about? I'm not licensed."

"Oh, a silly technicality." Thornie waved it away as if it were a fly.

"Gravy, for a man of your talent." Flynn grinned. "Five o'clock, *Cowboy*," he said as he walked out.

"Thank you, Thomas, I mean, *Cowboy*," Thornie sounded pleased with the nickname. "You're a big help—a real life saver. Solves a little problem."

"What problem?" I was thinking more of the major problem it was going to cause.

"Well," Thornie lowered his voice and shot a glance toward the door to ensure Flynn was out of earshot. "Some corporation executives are coming by for a wee look-see this afternoon at two."

"And you don't want Flynn around when they show up. You don't want any bloodshed."

"Exactly. You understand perfectly."

"Yes, I do. That's what worries me."

\* \* \*

"They gave you a *BMW*?" Woodcock was grumbling from the passenger seat, though Freddie paid little attention. He was too busy thinking of real estate as it flew by the window in a 120-kph-blur. And trying to remember to stay on the left side of the road. "I can't believe this. You get a *BMW*. They gave me a *Honda*." He turned accusingly to Freddie, "An *Accord*. They gave me an *Accord*."

"Carlton," Freddie said soothingly, hoping to quiet Woodcock down so that he could get back to his fantasizing. "I told you, it's just the image thing. I have to schmooze execs and dignitaries, and I got to look good doing it. Believe me, to not have to kiss up to them, I'd sooner ride a bike to work."

They were into the second day of their executive drive-thru, stopping off at all

the pissant little facilities in the provinces to reassure the peasants that they were all safe and secure and life in the Corporation was going to be like living in the Emerald City. Freddie considered himself an infinitely patient man, but a day and a half of listening to Carlton Woodcock gripe about cars was wearing him down. He could not wait to get to Auckland that evening where he could put the little moaner back on the plane to Wellington.

In an effort to block out Carlton's whinging, Freddie let his mind roam freely with the beautiful countryside they were sailing through.

*Real estate. So much of it. So untouched.* He had not forgotten how badly he got burnt with the last real estate venture. But he had learned from his mistakes, which was the important thing; always learn from your mistakes, don't be afraid to get right back up on that high horse or however it went. In any case, he was brewing a whole new plan. Foolproof.

"Okay, Freddie, give me the BMW and I'll buy you a pushbike," Carlton said.

"You want a BMW?"

"Yeah, I want a BMW."

"Then I guarantee you'll be driving one by the end of the year. Just trust me. Now, we were supposed to be using this travel time to do some brainstorming. Have you come up with anything?"

"For what?"

"For anything. Carlton, my boy, you got to learn to think outside the box. Give me five new ways the Corporation can make money right now, without thinking about it. Go ahead, on your mark, get set, go!"

Woodcock snorted. "Freddie, my job in Financial is to *save* the Corporation money. I don't have to think of ways to *make* money, that's your job."

"It's *our* job, we're all part of the Commercial Group."

"No, I'm part of the Operations Group."

"Carlton, you need to keep up with the memoranda."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Financial falls under Commercial Group now. We've been restructured."

Freddie clenched his teeth, knowing what came next.

Carlton whipped his head around so fast he almost lost his glasses. "What the

fuck are you saying? We're not even in business yet and you're telling me they already restructured?"

"Well, what better time to? At least we don't have to change stationary. It's no big deal, I was just breakfasting with a few of the Board members yesterday and we all agreed it made more sense this way."

"So I'm working for you? Is that what you're trying to tell me? You've been here four fucking days and already I've been reduced to your employee?"

"Well, I don't look at it that way, Carlton. You're much more to me than that. You're my most trusted advisor, my right hand—"

"Oh shut the fuck up, Freddie!"

"You see, Carlton? That's one of those things that gets in your way—that language. For goodness sake, sometimes I cannot tell the difference between you and those controllers we had to talk to down in Palmerston North. And one should *always* be able to tell the difference, even before you open your mouth. We need to work on that Carlton."

"The only thing we're working on is my ulcer," Carlton snorted as he struggled with the lid on a bottle of Mylanta.

"All right, let's talk about cost-saving if you like then," Freddie said, attempting to divert Woodcock from giving him the silent treatment. "Show me the expense analysis you've been working on. I know, show me the pie chart. I like pie charts; they remind me of ... well, pies."

Woodcock rolled his eyes in Freddie's direction. "Right, Freddie, I'll show you a picture of a pie. It's right here in my briefcase." He reached in the backseat, snapped open the briefcase and retrieved the top document.

"Hold on a second—" Carlton looked at the document carefully. "What the hell's this?"

"Oh, that's mine. You must've been in the wrong briefcase."

"It looks just like mine." He twisted in his seat and inspected Freddie's briefcase. "It is the same as mine."

"You see, Carlton, there *is* hope for you and equality in the world. Nice one too. Real leather."

"What do you know about that?" Carlton offered a smug smile.

"We're all equal in ControlCorp, Carlton. It's what I've been trying to tell you. We're all on the same team. And there's no 'I' in team, unless you're a really bad speller."

"Yeah, Freddie, I get it—I read the Corporate handbook too. Hell, I wrote it."

"I'm just saying cheer up and be patient. The Corporation is going to treat you right. Hell, they've already given you a nice, fuel efficient car and an expensive briefcase."

"They gave you yours? They made me buy mine."

"Yeah? But at cost, right?"

"So what is this anyway?" Woodcock held up the document he had retrieved from Freddie's briefcase.

"I'm glad you asked. Its something I've been toying with. You know, just some ideas to toss around, get some feedback on ways to modernize, that sort of thing."

"The Corporate Held Units Modernization Plan?" Woodcock squinted at the cover, then turned to Freddie. "CHUMP?"

"Yeah," Freddie smiled, "it's got a certain ring to it, don't you think? I was going to try for SCHMUCKS but that was too much of a stretch. Anyway, it's just a few ideas. It's the reason for the whole restructuring. It needs us working together as a team. So, can I count on you, Carlton? Are you a team player?"

Woodcock took another swig from his bottle.

"You got to learn to trust me," Freddie said.

"That'll be the day," Woodcock said. "I swear to fuck, Freddie, one of these days you're going to get me thrown into jail." He stared out at the passing scenery for a few moments of moody silence. "First thing, we can't call it the CHUMP Project."

Freddie smiled and shrugged. "You have no sense of whimsy, Carlton. But, when you're right, you're right." He reached across and patted Woodcock on the shoulder. "So what's the next stop on our little tour today?"

Woodcock retrieved a different folder from the floor of the car. "Let's see. Milton Gorge aerodrome; mostly flight schools, small charter outfits, topdressing. Typical provincial shit. The staff consists of a tower manager, one Thorndike Rumbold who has virtually ignored every head office directive for the last eighteen

years. And the staff is ... well, the place is known as Exile Tower for good reason. Seven controllers, all of them dumped there in Rumbold's lap, all of them for various reasons ranging from the positively whimsical—" Woodcock looked down and read from the file, "one Kenneth Wilson, who broke all previous records for the number of mid-air collisions he had during his simulator training and now refuses to stop bringing pet rats with him to work—says they keep him focused."

"Yuck." Freddie shuddered. "Any mid-air collisions since?"

"No, of course not. But he was ultimately blamed for the rodent infestation of Gisborne tower. Then, of course, there is our man, Owen Flynn, who was legendary for trying to put two nose-to-nose down on the same track in Canterbury a few years back and refused to resolve the conflict until the two pilots agreed to—and I now quote from the transcript of the radio frequency—'to stop acting like a couple of fuckwits.'"

"And, he kept his job?"

"Turns out they were twenty miles apart. He never told them that. Had them sweating though."

"Anyone else of interest?"

"That Yank, the guy who had a run in with the President's plane. You probably didn't hear about it. It was a CAA kiss-up job, figured they might get in good with the FAA if they offered jobs to every deadbeat the Americans wanted to unload."

Freddie shrugged, "Basically, the same philosophy behind importing toxic waste."

"I think they figured it would ultimately get us back into ANZUS or something. Anyway, we didn't think he would ever show up, but when I talked to Rumbold this morning, apparently the guy not only showed, but finished training just in time to be employed by the CAA. So, unfortunately, he gets in on a technicality."

"Hmm," Freddie nodded, "so, what you're saying is; one useless airfield, eight useless employees. We nuke them and we get rid of nine problems and save a bit of money."

"Yeah, except we're supposed to be a nuclear-free zone."

"A minor technicality, Carlton. Let me make a few calls."

\* \* \*

Flynn disappeared at one-thirty, never once having asked why Thornie did not want him around, nor showing the least amount of concern about it. Amanda occupied the tower position, while I worked ground control. The mid-afternoon was mercifully quiet.

"So," Amanda said, attempting to draw my attention from the ATC manual. "At last, we're alone. I don't know how you stand it, having to work with Owen Flynn."

"But you're the one who has to work with him," I reminded her without looking up. "I've only been here a few days."

"That's right." She looked out the window. All was quiet over the airfield. "Good Lord, I don't know how *I've* been able to put up with it this long."

I glanced up from the book. "Then why do you? Can't you trade with someone on the roster so that you don't have to work with him?"

"Oh, if it was only that easy." She brushed my comment away as Thornie would brush regulations away.

I returned to my reading without comment.

"Of course, that's all going to change very soon."

"How's that?" I asked, though was more interested in trying to memorize minimum weather criteria for landing and taking off at Milton Gorge.

"When the Corporation is running this business, it will be run the way a business ought to be run—efficiently. There'll be no room in it for the likes of Owen Flynn or his primitive behaviour."

I looked up again, but still did not say anything.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me—for us." Her eyes lit up, the blueness accentuated by the purity of the white. "The Corporation will be for us, Thomas."

"Us?"

"For people like you and me: open-minded professionals who are ready and willing to embrace change, people who know opportunity and when to seize it."

"I just wanted to find someplace quiet," I said, but Amanda was not listening. She was only talking.

"You and me, Thomas, we're the people who can change things."

"Do you have an aspirin?"

"Of course." She reached for her purse and began digging through it. "You should probably put the book away when they get here," Amanda suggested. "It wouldn't look too good to be reading on position."

"Not even the air traffic manual?" I held it up for her to see, but knew she was right and had no intention of looking like that much of a geek in front of the new bosses. I closed the book.

Amanda smiled at me, seductively, alluringly, as if she was inviting me into a secret. "This is the first time we've actually got to work together."

"Yes. And it could be our last after my test tomorrow."

"I'm absolutely certain you'll pass."

"I wish I had your confidence."

"It's not confidence, it's knowledge." She smiled and touched her temple with the long polished nail of her index finger. She leaned back in her chair. "So, tell me about yourself."

"What's to say? Just a controller, did some flight instructing for a while."

"I know that much. What about your family?"

"Dad's been dead since I was a kid, my mom's remarried and living in Phoenix. No brothers or sisters; it's a small family."

"No, ahh—" She gave her shoulder a little shrug and looked out the window. "No, partner?"

"No, turns out she preferred pilots, preferably one with a Cause."

"I see." She turned back and smiled again. "Then I guess it's been a while since you've had a nice home-cooked meal. Why don't you come around tonight and I'll cook?"

"I better not, need to study."

"Of course, but tomorrow night?"

"Ahh, maybe."

"No maybes," Amanda said decisively and was about to say something else

but stopped at the sound of voices in the stairwell.

"Yes, since 1965 it's been like that." Thornie's voice drifted up the stairs with other mumbling voices and stomping feet. "Here we are." Thornie appeared first, followed by a tall portly man and a short, mousy-faced guy with glasses perched on the end of a button nose.

"And how lucky we are, indeed," Thornie waved toward us. "Miss Amanda Sheppard."

"Ms.," Amanda corrected with a humourless smile, stepped forward, ignoring the mousy-faced man, and offered her hand to the obvious highest power in the room. "A pleasure to finally meet you. We've been looking forward to it."

Thornie wrinkled his brow. "This," he said, "is Mr. Freddie Moore, manager, of, ah—well, something important."

"Commercial Operations Group," Moore said. "The pleasure is mine. We're just working our way up the country calling in at our airports and meeting the staff."

The mousy-faced man looked around nervously.

"And this is Mr. Woodstock," Thornie said. "Manager of something equally impressive sounding."

"Woodcock, Carlton Woodcock," he said with an agitated sigh and a resentful glance at Moore. "It used to be Chief Financial Officer, but it's changing daily."

"Oh my, *does* sound a bit like royalty, though, doesn't it?" Thornie giggled. "And this is Thomas Hardy, a countryman of yours."

"Hardy?" Moore first exchanged a glance with Woodcock, then turned his attention to me and offered his hand. "I've heard so much about you."

"Well, not actually a—"

"Tell me, Tom—do you mind if I call you Tom?" Moore asked but did not wait for an answer. "What brings you here?"

"Work," I said, deciding against any further attempts to correct him on my national origins or explanations on how I was run out of town on a rail. "So what have you heard?"

"Oh, Thomas is so delightfully modest," Thornie piped in proudly. "He's the best in the business and has even been using his skills to teach our own controllers a few things."

I could see Amanda stiffening up through the corner of my eye. Or maybe I just *felt* it. There was definitely a chill in the air.

"Is *that* so?" Moore said, rubbing his chin and squinting at me.

"Well, now, I wouldn't exactly say," I tried to offer some argument, but was saved from further conversation by an aircraft calling ground control and so turned my attention to the radio.

Thornie, speaking quietly so as not to disturb me—the Master of Ground Control—was pointing out various buildings on the field for Moore, who appeared to be only half-listening. Woodcock cowered under Amanda's grilling over the business plan and escaped under the pretence of having a question for Thornie. Moore then turned his attention back to me.

"It's good to see a man who knows opportunity when he sees it," he said and slapped me on the back. "And don't worry, Tom. We don't care so much who you *were* or what you *did*. I suspect you could be going places. The future is an equal opportunity employer."

"Ah, yes, sir, I guess." *Where I'll be going is to jail for impersonating a controller.*

"Well, Amanda," Thornie said turning to her. "Mr. Moore has expressed a desire to see more of the aerodrome itself. Would you mind keeping an eye on things for me for thirty minutes?"

"Of course," Amanda said. "You know you can always count on me."

"So you leave the girl in charge?" Moore piped in. "Excellent. Good to see them having an equal go of it."

Amanda stood rigidly still. "Yes, sir," she said crisply, lips slowly disappearing into a single thin line. Her eyes were locked on Freddie Moore, though he did not notice. He had turned away.

While Thornie's attention was briefly to Amanda, Moore leaned over to Woodcock and whispered something through the corner of his mouth. I could not hear what he had said, but it elicited a knowing nod from Woodcock.

Thornie led the two men out of the cab. Amanda's cold, savage glare followed them out and remained frozen on the empty space they left behind for several seconds.

"So, there's one of your new corporate bosses for you," I said, trying to break her trance. "Anyway, I wouldn't take him too seriously if I were you."

Amanda turned to me and smiled. As she did, the grimness once again, melted in the radiance. Though, I thought, a shadow remained.

She sat down. "So, I do believe we were discussing dinner."

## Seven

*"So, somehow through all the turmoil of that first week, you actually completed your training as well. Doesn't that say something positive about your own skill?"*

*"Skill? This is what I'm saying, I don't think anyone cared whether I could actually do the job or not."*

*"Of course they cared, they'd have to. I mean, you did finish the training programme, didn't you?"*

*"That's what I'm telling you—that was pretty much the extent of it. I never got a grip on the insanity. I only got an introduction to it. You know, a taste of things to come."*

*"But you passed your rating board?"*

*"Apparently with flying colours."*

*"How's that?"*

*"In America I went through four months of training in Oklahoma, followed by over a year of on-the-job training. I faced a frightening oral examination on the regulations, plus several days worth of evaluation on the job to get rated. Here, I stayed up most of the night before trying to memorise that damn book. I didn't stand a chance; not in one night, not in four days. In the real world, I didn't stand a chance. Here, I passed with flying colours."*

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It was nine-thirty when I got to Thornie's office.

"Ah! Come in, Thomas. Please have a seat." Thornie was sitting behind his desk. Seated to his right was another man in the same age group as Thornie whom I had not met before, though his face was vaguely familiar. "This," Thornie said dramatically, "is our star pupil, a man of immense talent, a man who's turned air traffic control into an art form. May I present, Mr. Thomas Hardy."

"Not *the* Thomas Hardy." The old man laughed as he took my hand, which was good because I was hoping he was taking it all as a joke.

"Sorry I'm so late," I said. "I was, ah—" I was going to tell them how I had been up all night cramming an endless assault of numbers: runway lengths, emergency phone numbers, types of airfield lighting, regulations, radio frequencies and countless other pieces of information that I would probably forget within hours. But even the excuse seemed pointless, so I left it with a shrug.

"Oh you don't need to explain to us. After all, we were young men once too, weren't we?" Thornie looked sideways at the other gentleman and giggled.

In my state of exhaustion I could not imagine what Thornie thought I was getting up to the night before and decided not to try.

"Thomas," Thornie held a hand up to the other gentleman. "I'd like you to meet Norwynn Skidmore, from the CAA head office, he'll be conducting the test with myself."

"Oh, yes, of course." Then I remembered the face from one of Thornie's photographs and offered a hand. "I thought you were, ah—" I didn't know how to finish and turned to Thornie for help.

"Dead?" Skidmore offered. "Did he tell you I was dead? Damn you, Thornie, how many times do I have to tell you I'm not dead?"

"Oh, silly me," Thornie chastised himself. "Did I say that? I keep forgetting, you didn't die, you just went to head office."

"Well, *I'm* glad you're alive anyway," I said with a smile, just kissing up to the examiner.

"Oh, thank you, that's very kind of you to say," Skidmore seemed genuinely touched. "I say, Thornie, he *is* a good man, isn't he?"

"Quite," Thornie said, smiling as if I was a favourite child. "Now, shall we get this messy licensing business over with?"

I took the seat facing the two men, suppressed another yawn and blinked several times in an effort to look more awake.

"As you know," Thornie began, "the licensing process is broken down into two parts; the oral exam, which is what we're going to commence now, and the practical exam, which, of course took place yesterday. Now—"

"Excuse me?"

"Yes?"

"What practical exam was that, that I took yesterday?"

"Well, of course, the on-the-job test where we observe you practicing what you do so well—even, might I say, *magnificently*—controlling airplanes."

"I don't recall this taking place. When did you observe me?"

"Oh, I don't do that *myself*. I'm far too out of practice to be judging you. Besides, wouldn't want to place any undo stress on you." He smiled gently. "No. I rely on your trainer for that. And, of course, Mr. Flynn speaks highly of you. I'm sure if I were to ask him he would tell me how remarkable you were. But, then of course, I know how modest you are and I didn't want to embarrass you. So let's just take it as said then, shall we?"

I shook my head and raised my hands in defeat.

"Now, first we need some tea. Would you like some tea, Thomas?"

"Ah, not really, I'm not much—" but then considered the benefits caffeine might provide. "Well, okay."

"Very good! That is correct." Thornie annotated something on his notepad.

"Huh?"

"Now, do you remember how to *make* it?"

"Ahh, yeah. Hot water, tea bag."

"Remember, heat the pot first, a little hot water and gently swish, swish."

Thornie made a slight circular motion with his fist. "And what do we do with the mugs as well?"

"Heat them? Swish swish?" I copied the motion.

"Excellent! Now, Thomas," Thornie looked at me seriously. "How long do you let it brew?"

I'm fairly sure I did not dream this. I still remember it specifically. I assumed they were just trying to lighten things up before they started pounding me for some real information.

I shrugged and took a shot. "Three minutes?"

They both stared for several seconds in silence.

"You were right, Thornie," Skidmore finally said. "He's a natural."

"Well, didn't I tell you?" Thornie turned to Skidmore.

"You told me, but I didn't believe you," Skidmore said to Thornie, then shot a quick glance at me that I can only describe as awe-filled. "And to think, ranching, too."

I was sure they were having me on. Perhaps this joke of theirs was so elaborate that they had planned it all from the first day. Or maybe they were doing it out of kindness to bolster my self-esteem before they dropped the inevitable axe and sent me packing back to the farm—rather, the ranch.

Well, shit, I wasn't offended. After all, they were all nice people, perhaps all in need of some competent and intensive psychiatric care, but nice, nonetheless. They couldn't help what had happened to the organization. Maybe, if I went along with it good-naturedly, this ControlCorp would compensate me for the week and give me a few days holiday. I could spend another few weeks wandering around the country, head down to the South Island. *Hell*, I could spend as long as I wanted; I had a three-year working visa. Admittedly, it was a good gag, and I had been *got*.

"Well." I leaned back and decided to show I had a sense of humour even now. "They say I was born into it—*ordained* at birth. That I was sequencing and separating the toys in my crib."

"Really?" Skidmore leaned forward.

I laughed and looked from Skidmore to Thornie and back again, hoping they might join in. But they waited, in hushed awe.

"No, not really."

"There's that modesty again," Thornie piped in proudly.

"I was just kidding," I tried to explain. "Weren't you?"

"Your modesty is admirable," Skidmore said in a fatherly tone. "But you should be proud of your gift, son."

"Yes, sir. I am. But, maybe I've given everyone the wrong idea."

"Personally," Thornie jumped in and turned to Skidmore, "I happen to find Thomas's modesty most appealing. Such a delightful change."

"Well, I agree, Thornie. I'm just saying, the young man has a gift and he shouldn't be shy about it." Skidmore was talking as if I had disappeared.

"Oh, pish-posh." Thornie dismissed Skidmore with a wave of his hand.

"Thomas doesn't have anything to prove."

"Yes I do." But I don't think either was listening by this time.

"Okay." Skidmore rubbed his neck. "I see what you're saying Thornie, and I'll concede that he doesn't have to prove anything to us. I guess I'd just hate to see his talent go to waste. He should be—I mean what's he doing out here in Milton Gorge?"

"I assure you, Wynn, he won't be wasted. But give him time to settle in."

"Yes I do!" I said, louder.

The two men stopped their debate and looked at me.

"You do what?" Thornie asked.

"*I do* have something to prove." I looked from one to the other, hoping to get a chance to use some of my knowledge before it fell through the sieve that is my memory. "The runway, for instance, ask me how long the runway is."

"The runway?" Skidmore exchanged a perplexed look with Thornie.

"Runway three-zero/one-two is the larger of the two. Two thousand two hundred and ten metres in length, it's composed of reinforced concrete with an eight metre reinforced bitumen edge and a three hundred and twenty metre reinforced bitumen overrun on runway three-zero. The lighting is composed of high-intensity, aviation white—"

"I should say, that sounds long enough," Skidmore interrupted me again.

Thornie nodded agreement, then giggled and wagged his finger at Skidmore. "Although, I do recall, Wynn, there was at least one occasion when you found it a wee bit short. When was that? '65?"

"Oh bloody hell, Thornie, you know damn well it was '66. It's the one thing you'll never forget as long as you live." He wagged his finger right back as if he was challenging Thornie to a sword fight with fingers. "Besides, I still blame you for that. You were in the tower, you should've told me about the wind shift. I swear there must've been fifteen knots up my arse."

"Oh, there was not," Thornie snorted. "There was no wind shift, you just can't admit you were coming in too high and fast."

"High and fast!" Skidmore's voice jumped up a full two octaves. "Listen, I reckon I have a few more hours logged in Tiger Moths than you old man."

"Well, perhaps you should consider logging a few more until you learn to fly

something without flaps. I told you thirty years ago, Wynn, ‘you’re using flaps like a crutch, Wynn,’ I said, ‘and you’ll forget how to fly without them.’ And that’s exactly what happened and you still can’t admit it.”

“The only thing that I admit is that I knew the day would come when I’d regret saving your life, and, by golly, I do now.”

“Oh, saved my life, *indeed.*”

“Well do you deny that it was me who brought your attention to Abercrombie trying to land his DC3 on top of you? Another second and you would’ve been history and I’d be sitting here with Abercrombie today.”

“Abercrombie,” Thornie huffed. “Now there was a man who had no business sitting in an airplane.”

“Oh, of course not,” Skidmore raised both his palms to Thornie and leaned back in his chair. “No argument from me. Everyone knows he couldn’t fly if God had given him wings and a jet engine up his arse. And what a shot!”

Both men simultaneously burst out laughing.

“Do you remember?” Thornie asked between gasps of air. “The day he dropped a load of DDT from a hundred and fifty feet and the wind blew it over Edna Bascom’s rose garden?”

“Do I *remember?*” Skidmore’s eyes were glazing over as he tried to catch his breath. “Hell, we lived six houses down from her and he still managed to kill my wife’s hydrangeas. Thought I’d never hear the end of it.”

“Oh and what a state Edna was in. As I recall she didn’t speak another word to him for the rest of her life.” Thornie took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his eyes.

“She had a few choice words to say to him the day she drove her Vauxhall through his tomatoes.” This brought another round of reminiscent laughter from the two men.

“Excuse me?” I was not sure if it was safe to interrupt the two old men, but if I had to listen to them much longer I thought I might start crying. “Do you want to ask me any questions?”

“Oh, no. I think that pretty much covers it.” Thornie turned to Skidmore. “What do you say, Wynn? About a—” he shrugged, “shall we say ninety-five

percent?"

"Sounds good. After all, he did struggle there for a moment, but ninety-five sounds about right."

"Well then," Thornie held his hand out to me. "Congratulations, son, welcome aboard and keep up the good work. You are a credit to your profession."

I was acutely aware that my mouth was hanging open, but could do nothing about it. "You're joking, right?"

"Now, now, don't be modest, you truly *are* a credit to your profession."

Thornie gently slapped his desktop. "I say, I'm parched. Thomas, would you care to join Wynnie and me for a cuppa?"

"Ah, no, I don't really—" I stood up. "You know, I think I'll just go upstairs and, ah, do something."

"Good heavens," Skidmore said. "He *is* a good keen man, isn't he?"

"Very dedicated," Thornie agreed.

I backed out of the office, nodding and smiling and making no sudden movements until I was out in the hall. As I approached the stairs, I hesitated. I could take a hard right out the front door, make a break from this loony bin and never look back. Could have my bags packed in ten minutes and by tomorrow morning be half way across the ocean. They'd take me back in America, right? I mean, they have to, I think. In any case, the FAA was still short-staffed—probably desperate enough—perhaps they could give me a job as a weather observer in the Aleutians.

I stared at the door.

"Christ, I'm going to regret this." I turned left and climbed the stairs to the tower cab.

## Eight

*"And did you regret it?"*

*"Not half as much as I came to regret the evening that followed."*

*"What happened then?"*

*"I took Amanda up on her dinner offer."*

*"Ah, I see."*

*"Oh, I doubt you do."*

*"But you were attracted to her? Didn't you say that before?"*

*"Maybe."*

*"Tell me about it."*

*I turned my head to the window, thought I had heard someone tapping on it, but it was just the southerly. The light was disappearing outside. It would be raining before I got out of here.*

*"Look, you can't write any of this down. I mean, you can't repeat any of this, right?"*

*"Of course not. Nothing leaves this room."*

*"No, of course not." I glanced around the room, at the pictures on the walls, the light fixtures. "The room's probably bugged."*

*"I promise it's not."*

*"It's just that—well—Amanda can be a real pain in the ass sometimes. And I think if they're going to call me insane, then she's at least as much so—personally, I think more so. But I also realize she's now my boss. Not the best—I certainly don't agree with her corporate policies—but I don't have any need to screw up her career."*

*"You won't. Why are you so compassionate toward her? Are you still attracted to her?"*

*"No. I'm just a generally compassionate person, I guess—and I feel kind of sorry for her. But I'm definitely not attracted to her. I was cured of that quite early. Look, I admit, going to dinner at Amanda's wasn't the smartest move I made, and I knew it even then. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong in accepting a dinner*

*invitation to the home of an attractive single woman. I could justify it by saying ‘why not?’ Didn’t know anyone in town, hadn’t had a decent meal since I arrived. I mean, why not? But, yeah, I had an ulterior motive. Is that a crime? And if I was reading her signals correctly—which, apparently, I wasn’t—I thought she was equally motivated in that direction. Going into it, I knew it was wrong for at least two reasons: she was a workmate and she was the wrong type of woman for me. She was a lot like Janey that way.’*

\* \* \*

I arrived at Amanda’s house at twenty passed seven. When she came to the door, I realized she was even more attractive after hours than she was at work. Maybe it was the light of the setting sun, or the soft glow of the porch light that was on too early, but her blond hair glowed with just a hint of red, her eyes seemed a deeper shade of blue in the twilight. She wore blue jeans and a snug-fitting tee shirt that accentuated a striking and, probably, well-managed figure. Her fragrance smelled of lilacs and was, perhaps, just a little too strong.

“Hello good-looking,” she said as she motioned me inside. “You find the place all right?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, handing her a bottle of Australian red. “I’m a pilot, I don’t get lost.”

She looked at the label on the wine and, though her smile only flickered slightly, I could see it fell short of her approval. “Yes, you are a pilot, aren’t you? Can I get you something to drink? Gin? Scotch? A glass of white?”

“Yeah. Whatever you’re having.”

“Make yourself comfortable. Put some music on,” she said as she showed me into the lounge and then continued into the kitchen to get the drinks.

The lounge was tastefully decorated—a little too much so for three single people sharing a flat. There was no mismatched furniture or stereo cabinets made of apple crates or walls decorated with posters of James Dean or cats poking their heads out of toilet bowls and no rubber tree plant dying in the corner. All these plants were alive and thriving, the walls adorned with modern art, the leather lounge suite looked

too expensive to be comfortable and the whole room was bathed in the glow of a half-dozen candles.

I selected a disc and perused the label.

"Ray Charles, okay?"

A quiet groan came from the kitchen. "I'd prefer some classical, if you don't mind," she said.

"Fine." I returned Ray to his place and continued through the stack. *Rossini—nothing like the Italians for romance.* I fumbled with the stereo. "So you say there are three of you here?"

"Yeah," she called back. "Myself, Anthony and Caroline. But flatting is only temporary for me. I've got better ideas than this for my lifestyle. Besides, don't have much use for Caroline." Then added matter-of-factly. "She's a slut."

"Lucky Anthony," I said to myself, but hadn't seen her re-enter.

"He's gay," she said, standing in the doorway with two glasses of wine. She held a glass out and glanced at the stereo as Rossini started playing. "Oh, Anthony likes that Italian stuff, too." She reached over and turned the volume down, then returned to me and held her glass aloft.

"Cheers," I offered, tapping her glass and raising it to my mouth, wishing I had asked for a gin.

"Don't give me this 'cheers' business." She held her glass still, poised, waiting for me to return my glass back to the toast position. "To our newest controller, congratulations," she said, proudly.

"I'll drink to that." I tapped her glass again, but still hers remained unmoved.

"To the Corporation. A new age." She glowed as she spoke the words, as if she were proclaiming the birth of a new religion.

"Whatever you say." I tapped her glass and took another drink. At this rate, it was entirely possible I may finish my glass before she got around to taking one sip.

"To us!" she proclaimed loudly.

Again, I tapped her glass, hesitantly. "Ah, okay, to controllers, worldwide."

"No," she said emphatically. "To *us*. To you, me—*us!*" This time she tapped my glass and raised it to her lips.

"Ah, yeah, sure." My words echoed in the glass before I downed the

remaining wine.

She went back into the kitchen, returned with the bottle of wine and refilled my glass.

"I must say," she said, "after meeting our Mr. Moore yesterday, I should say we won't be encountering much trouble moving up the ladder." She moved to the sofa, sat down and leaned back, holding her glass delicately, seductively.

"What ladder?"

She smiled at me as if she knew I was playing stupid. "Promotions, my dear. I mean, if that's the calibre of executive, then I'd say we both would easily meet the standard."

"Executive?" I laughed at the thought of me as an exec, then took another big gulp of wine and moved over to the sofa. "I don't think—"

"Just a second," Amanda set her glass down and jumped up. "Stir-fry's almost done. Why don't you take the bottle and have a seat at the table?"

I refilled my glass, filling it to the rim, then emptied the rest of the bottle into her glass.

A few minutes later, she re-entered and placed a ceramic dish on the table. "It's nothing fancy, I hope you don't mind. I'll just get the rice and we can get started."

I leaned over and smelled the dish of chicken and stir-fried vegetables. "Smells great."

"Oh, it's nothing, just something easy enough for me not to ruin." She reappeared with a bowl of rice in one hand and a large green salad in the other. "I'm really not the kitchen type."

"No, I'm sure you're a great cook," I smiled and raised my glass to her, but I knew that didn't come out right even before I felt the chill. "Uh, what I meant was it, ah, smells good and figured you must be a, ah, great, ah, or a pretty good, cook."

"Being a woman doesn't mean I have any *natural* inclinations toward cooking." She set the bowls down on the table with a thump and eyed me cautiously, as if it was my turn to serve the ball.

"Of course not. I mean, what do I know? I'm hardly a connoisseur of fine dining. It might be crap for all I know. No, that doesn't sound right either. Well ...

maybe we should open that other bottle of wine. I believe Australian red goes well with foot. Anyway, you know what I mean—”

“Yes I do.” She offered a slight smile, not so much out of kindness as victory, and went to the sideboard, returning with the bottle of red. “I’d suggest giving it plenty of time to breathe.”

While I wrestled with uncorking the wine, she served up the dinner and looked to be relaxing again as she motioned me to take a seat—not across from her, but at an intimate right angle. Having decided against saying any more than was necessary, I asked about the classes she was taking, a subject that warmed her up considerably. She told me about how hard she had been working to complete her course of study in business, how she had had the foresight to see the changes in the wind and that she believed she would have her masters in less than a year. She had little intention of remaining a controller any longer than was necessary and knew I could understand that. She talked for ten or fifteen minutes on the fascinating things she’s been learning without pause enough to take a bite of food. I listened politely, smelling the stir-fry as it cooled off, and, when she sounded like she was winding down on the subject, picked up my fork, hoping she might follow my lead.

“It looks, ah—” but I saved myself the hazard of finishing a sentence by sticking a forkful of food in my mouth. And it *was* good, certainly better than any of the fast food meals I had had since my arrival. “Mmmm, *very*,” I hesitated, nodding my approval—“sufficient. Adequate. Completely functional.”

She laughed—which I took as a minor victory for me: one all. At my best I’m sure I could have made Stalin laugh.

“Thomas.” She raised her glass of white, still not half way through her first. Once again, her eyes were bright, her smile easy. She looked safe.

“Yes?”

I finished off the last of my white and eyed the bottle of red, wondering how much breathing would be enough.

“Thomas,” she said again. “You and I.”

Enough breathing—I poured a glass of red.

“Do you see the potential for people like us?”

“Oh yeah.”

"I knew you would. That's why you came here, for the opportunity."

"I say 'never pass one up.' Ask anyone, that's what I say." My head was already starting to feel the buzz that I knew would turn into a roar.

"Exactly. With new economic policies constantly being introduced in New Zealand, we are quickly becoming the land of opportunity."

"And opportunists." I held my glass up in toast.

"A man like you is attracted by that."

"Absolutely, I like someone who knows what they want."

"Yes!" She leaned back and smiled. "You know, I never believed that ridiculous story about you and the President's plane from the start. I was sure it was a complete fabrication."

"One hundred percent bullshit—for the most part. Not more than forty percent truth. *Maybe* fifty, sixty max. In any case, the man's still alive, isn't he? So what does he have to complain about?" I had another bite of chicken stir-fry, but was more interested in the wine at that stage.

"I can't tell you how good it is to finally have a like-minded person show up at that God-forsaken airfield. Thanks to Mr. Rumbold, that place has been permanently stuck in 1963. Do you know, he's the reason we've become known as Exile Tower."

"Exile Tower?"

"Yes. You haven't heard that one yet? Because Thornie created his own little kingdom where nothing ever goes wrong and there is no such thing as problems or confrontations, the ministry took advantage of that and began using the place as a dumping ground for every controller they never wanted to deal with. Really, can you picture Owen Flynn being employed *anywhere* else. He's completely uncivilized."

"Oh, I don't know. For all his faults, Flynn isn't too bad."

"Oh, *please*. He's a Neanderthal."

"Possibly."

"Even if he has managed not to kill anybody *yet*—and it's only a matter of time before he does—he's so out-dated. There's no place in the new system for a man as unprofessional and uncivilized as him."

"He's a little rough around the edges." I really did not want to talk about Flynn with Amanda. There were so many other things we could be talking about. Nor did I

want to have to defend him, but he was the only person in the country that I, sort of, considered a friend. I'm not exactly sure why. Maybe it was because out of all the lunatics, Flynn was the only one who knew he was lunatic.

"You need to be careful that you're not identified too closely with him." She gently waved a finger at me that suggested I was on my way to detention. "You and I are the only two people at that airport who are really suitable to carry on this business into the future. And they'll see it."

"So why are you there? Why were you sent to Exile Tower?"

"Me?" She leaned forward and, rather unexpectedly, smiled. Not a smile that radiated warmth or pleasure, or even sarcasm or wickedness. Her lips did not quiver with doubt—her mouth, her eyes, her whole face was fixed in certainty. Her expression was that of an Olympic gold medallist who has just turned in the winning performance, knows it, but now must wait those few moments for the official results. "I was a threat to the old boys of the ministry. Now, their days are over and mine have just begun."

For the first time since I had known her—and drunk as I was—I felt something radiating from Amanda Sheppard. Something *else*. It was not just passion or ambition as I had thought earlier—those were just part of it. This was power. This was *real* power. She thought she wanted it, but she already had it. What she wanted—*needed*—was to make it tangible. She wanted to feel it in her hands. At that moment, to me, she was frightening. And so *damned* hot.

"Now, Thomas," she leaned further forward and lowered her voice to a seductive whisper, "we were discussing us, and *our* future."

"Oh yeah." I took another long drink of the red wine, then set my glass down and reached over to place my hand on hers.

"Networking, alliances are extremely important, and it's never too early to start. We each have the potential for rewards here, individually, but the two of us—" she reached her other arm across the table and placed it on mine, "as a team, we could be—" she squeezed my arm, "symbiotic!"

"Oh yeah," I whispered.

"We could join forces."

I leaned forward until my face was only inches from hers. "Let's."

"Yes, an alliance." She smiled mischievously. "We could be going places."

"But let's stay in tonight."

"Oh, we're so much alike." She pulled her hand out from under mine and placed it on top. "We both know just what we want, no competition between us because we can both *have* it, and we're both willing to do what we have to do to get it." Her hand squeezed my arm harder. "There's *nothing* wrong with that. The meek may, possibly, inherit the earth in the *end*. But it's *us*, the ambitious, the ones willing to work for it, who will *earn* it!" She was raising her voice and increasing the pressure on my arm. "We're the ones who *cause* progress. We have the chance to make a change, a change for the better. The power to right the wrongs of the past."

"Let tomorrow deal with regrets, that's what I say." That was supposed to sound poetic, but I was drunk and horny and it was the best I could do as I went forward and met her lips over the table. I knew, from that moment, I would be regretting it long before tomorrow though. I was already scared of her. I knew I was walking right into her web, could feel the silk threads encircling me and tightening around my throat as real as I felt her grip cutting off the circulation to my arm. I grabbed her by the shoulder, knocking over my wine while she came forward and snaked her arm around to the small of my back as the red wine blossomed into the white linen tablecloth.

"Thomas, Thomas, Thomas," she breathed heavily into my ear.

"That would be pretty much all of us." I tried to roll her over into the stir-fry, but she had better leverage and somehow reversed the tactic.

"I want to be a major player in the Corporation." She didn't seem to mind that she had an elbow in her own plate of stir-fry. "I want *you* to be a major player, Thomas. I can make you one. Right by my side. Together we'll be magnificent." She rolled me over through the salad, knocking her own wine over so that her white mixed with my red. "I want it all, Thomas! I want *us* to have it all. Thomas! I want *you*!" She planted her lips firmly on mine, the force of which brought us both to the floor and the whole of our dinner following closely behind. "I want you to be my ally."

I groped at her tight fitting t-shirt; she pulled at the buttons of my shirt even as she was pushing me away.

"But not this, Thomas."

"Yes, this here, now. I've never done it on rice before."

"No, we can't." She pushed me away as she sat up. "Don't you see? Our potential goes way beyond sex. We have the chance to form a business merger."

"So let's merge."

"But we don't want to spoil it with a physical relationship."

"Yes. Yes we do."

"No, Thomas."

"I'm pretty sure I want this very much right now."

"What you want is what *we* want. We have a chance to change the world. What we want is power."

"No, it's just the sex I want for now." It was amazing, I hadn't even *had* sex with her yet and I was already regretting it. Regretting it and begging for it all at once. I could see the fangs coming down and all I wanted was what was due me before death. Does the spider do the same thing? Is the male black widow spider aware that he's going to die shortly after sex saying to himself, 'this better be good'? Is that human nature too? Or just spider nature?

She leaned away. "Thomas, try to think clearly here. Try for one moment to consider the future."

"What?"

"The future."

"How am I supposed to think of the future? I'm laying under your dining table in chicken stir-fry and rice with something dripping on my head."

"I think you're getting carried away."

"*I'm* getting carried away? You were breathing pretty heavy too, you know."

"Your advances were uncalled for, a typically male response. You misunderstand your own animal instincts for actual intellectual discourse."

"What? You're insane." In retrospect, that was a really bad thing to say. Her head snapped around, her eyes filled with the fires of hatred. At that moment I was sure she could have killed me with her bare hands.

"Don't you *ever* call me insane."

"I'm sorry, but listen, Amanda." I was still catching my breath. "You got the wrong idea. All I want is to be a controller. That's all I am; that's all I want to be. I'm

not executive material, not a manager, not an aspiring mover and/or shaker, not a rancher and I've never even been on a horse. All I want is to live quietly someplace where I can talk to airplanes and not worry about one, *minor* infraction being turned into an international incident."

I slowly got up, letting chunks of sticky rice fall to the floor. She remained sitting on the floor, back against the sideboard. A devilish smile was tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Thomas?"

"Yes?"

"If you're not with me, you're against me."

"No, no, no."

"Being a male gives you the competitive edge only for now. That won't be the case forever, or even for long. Despite having allies like Mr. Moore."

"Allies? What are you talking about?"

She smiled again. "Oh don't deny it. You don't need to be ashamed of it. You know as well as I do that Mr. Moore was at Milton Gorge this week just to scout for talent. The way he was looking at you, the way he was looking at *me*. He knows where we're headed."

"For now, I'm headed home." I picked another clump of rice out of my hair and looked around for my car keys.

"I don't blame you for trying to impress him. And I'm not afraid of a little competition myself. We could go so much further if we were to stick together but just don't think you will ever betray me and not pay for it."

"Okay, got it." I headed for the door. "Thanks for dinner, Amanda, it was, I'm sorry to say, wonderful."

"Thomas?" She had stood up, but kept her distance.

I paused at the front door.

"Don't leave," she whispered. "Stay?"

"I got an early day tomorrow. Listen—." It was at this point that I would normally apologize for being me and they would own me from then on. But I didn't, which I consider a moment of personal growth. Instead I just stared at her for several seconds in silence. She reminded me, in several ways, of my ex-wife, Janey. It was

hard to put my finger on just what they had in common. Perhaps it was because they both wanted me as a foot soldier in their crusades.

"I'll see you at work next week," I said, offered a gentle smile and left.

*It's happening all over again,* I thought as I drove away from Amanda's.

I've been calling my ex-wife a bitch for a while now and I have enough evidence to support the claim. She dumped me after three years of spending all my money; she left me for a pilot and, worse yet, a guy I knew and *didn't* like; and at the time of her departure, my career was going down the shitter and she was not entirely without blame there. In fairness to Janey, however, I should say she was not really, or always a bitch, and if she was, I may have played a part in making her that way.

She had her passion. She was a strong and intense person. But passion can be a dangerous chemical when it meets the wrong catalyst. And maybe that's what I was. After all, when I met her, she seemed pretty nice. She was caring to animals and the elderly. She took in strays—I think that's the qualification I got in on—and she joined every liberal activist group within a fifty-mile radius. In Northern California, that's a lot of joining.

We had a lot in common, I just cannot remember exactly what that was now. I thought I was a liberal, but she made me feel like a rightwing extremist just because I worked for the federal government. The guy she referred to as 'my boss,' that is, the President, was a Republican. Hell I didn't vote for him. I didn't vote for anybody.

The dirty money these Republicans paid me every other week, however, was not so tainted that she did not funnel a considerable amount of it toward her causes. I always thought I deserved at least a *some* credit for pretty much funding that entire demonstration down at the stand of redwoods that they opened up for logging, even though I couldn't be there myself to get thrown in jail with my wife and the rest of the local heroes because I was on morning shifts all that week.

When I suggested to her that social injustice was too big and widespread for one person to take on single-handedly without being driven completely off their rocker, she did not take it well. Apparently, it all became clear to her that I was just another closet Republican who was probably actively working against activism. And like an idiot, I responded by attempting to prove her wrong. Like a bloody idiot.

## Nine

I was in the middle of this dream. I was at Sugarloaf Ridge state park outside Santa Rosa in Northern California. I was the age I am now, but with my dog, Wiley, that I got when I was a kid but now long dead. We used to go up there a lot when I was a teenager. So Wiley knew the place as well as I did. He knew the big green meadow that lay before us and dashed ahead in anticipation of what he was going to find to chase.

"Come back here, Wiley," I yelled after him in vain. If the park ranger caught me letting my dog run free, I'd be in trouble again. A stupid rule, I knew, and one that needed to be broken every now and again. There was seldom anyone else up there during the week and a dog needed to be unleashed at times, everyone did.

"He never listens to me. You'd think he was a pilot," I said to Janey, who I thought was walking at my side, though it made no sense, since I did not meet her until long after I left Santa Rosa.

But, in fact, it was not Janey's voice that replied. "Och! My wee laddie is lost!" My dad said in his pretend Scottish accent, then laughed loudly, "Then you, ye auld, snick-drawing dog!"

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

He stopped laughing, his expression was as grey and lifeless as his casket, as he leaned his ashen face to within inches of mine and, in a low, slow rumble, growled, "remember, Cowboy. Or others will die."

"Remember what?" I asked.

"Remember me," he said.

"What? But I haven't forgotten you. How could I?"

Then I was jolted awake.

"Hey, Cowboy!" Flynn kicked the bed frame. "Wake up."

The room was the dark grey glow of predawn. I recognized the voice of the shadowy figure standing over my bed, but too late to prevent my body from twitching in momentary fright.

"I didn't scare you, did I?" Flynn said, grinning.

"You're a God awful thing to wake up to. What the hell are you doing here and how did you get in?"

"We're going camping today, remember? And I let myself in."

"Let yourself out and lock the door on your way out. I don't want to go, I changed my mind." I pulled the blankets up to my chin and rolled over, hoping against hope that this, too, was just an extension of a bad dream.

"I don't think the lock works anymore. Besides, you'll change your mind once we get there. Now come on, we're late." Flynn grabbed the blankets and, in one swift motion, left them in a pile at the foot of the bed.

The sharp coldness of the morning air hit me like the snap of a wet towel and all I could do was moan in agony, curl up, shivering in my underwear and bury my face in my pillow.

"Come on, Cowboy, we're wasting daylight, we got distance to cover," Flynn said. "I'll go fix you a cup of coffee."

"Daylight?" I clutched the pillow for warmth.

"It'll be light soon enough," Flynn said from the kitchen as he made an unnecessarily loud show of preparing a cup of instant coffee, banging cupboard doors, rattling dishes and kicking chairs around the kitchen.

I rolled out of bed and struggled into my clothes. The wine from the night before had worked its way into my cranium and set my brain afloat, banging against its moorings and making sloshing noises inside my head.

"You're not a morning person, are you?" Flynn handed me a cup of instant coffee as I stumbled into the kitchen, wrestling my way into a sweatshirt.

"I had a late night." I took a sip of the strong, hot coffee and closed my eyes in pain. "Jesus, you're worse at coffee than you are at tea."

"It'll do the trick," Flynn said, looking mildly hurt. He took a seat at the table. "So—did you pork her?"

"Pork who?" My hand trembled as I searched through the assortment of junk collecting on top of the refrigerator until I found the container of aspirin. I sat down opposite Flynn and fumbled with the inebriate-proof cap.

"You know who," Flynn said, snatching the aspirin and ripping the top off

without regard as to whether the little arrows were lined up or not. Nothing could keep Flynn out if he wanted inside; be it an aspirin bottle or my house. He set the open bottle in front of me. "Her Royal Harness, the Queen Bitch. Weren't you going to her place last night for a little pork?"

"I think we had chicken and, no, I didn't. I'm pretty sure she hates me. Unless of course I misunderstood her threat to ruin me." I struggled to wash a couple aspirin down with the hot coffee.

"Thank God, you're saved." He got up from the table and looked around. "So, I don't suppose you're ready?"

"Not quite. Look, have you checked the weather? Maybe this isn't the best—"

"The weather's fine. Trust me, everything's going to be perfect. Now, you go get your gear together and I'll fry us up a couple egg sandwiches for the road.."

I suspected Flynn would not hesitate to use force, club me over the head, or perhaps hold me at gunpoint, and then lock me in the trunk of the car. So I decided to go quietly.

"Well I did it," I said once we hit the highway.

"Did what?"

"Passed the test. Such as it was."

Flynn looked at me and rolled his eyes back. "You still haven't figured it out yet then?"

"I haven't figured anything out yet, Flynn. When I was in school, I got stuck on Reaganomics and haven't been able to tackle another riddle since. And yesterday was one heck of a riddle. They didn't ask me a single question that had anything to do with anything. I'm not even sure if they knew I was there."

"They knew. You're just a controller who probably knows more about it than they do, so how are they supposed to test you?"

"What about the questions though? All that stuff I've been trying to cram into my brain over the last few days. I thought he might be interested to know if I knew any of it."

"Thornie's a practical guy. He knows there's not a lot of the rulebook that applies to Milton Gorge. He also knows you're going to learn what you need to survive."

"Yeah, well, you could've saved me a lot of hassle."

"And spoil the fun?" Flynn laughed. "We ask for so little."

I forced a laugh to prove to the son-of-a-bitch I was a good sport.

"I'm sure he would've liked to have given you a month or so to get comfortable," Flynn continued. "But he didn't have the time. Besides, he likes you, and if he likes you he'll bend over backwards to help you out."

"He doesn't even know me. He still thinks I herd cattle in my spare time."

Flynn laughed again. "He knows he likes you. You're lucky that way. I'm lucky because he likes *me*. That's something Amanda hasn't figured out. She can bad mouth me all she wants, but when it comes down to it, he likes me and he doesn't like her."

"Really? He seems to be pretty nice to her."

"He's afraid of her."

*Afraid of her?*"

"You have to remember, in Thornie's prime it was a boys-only club. He's not intentionally sexist. He's just old-fashioned."

"I see." I turned to watch the scenery in the early morning light; the rolling green hills reminded me of Ireland. When I was a kid, my dad took us there on a holiday one summer. I was too young to remember much of that trip, except that I saw very little of my dad. He was giving lectures at the university most of the time.

I had never thought to ask Flynn where this river he wanted to go to was, I just assumed we would drive for an hour, back the car into an open space next to the gently tumbling mountain stream, pitch the tent and start pumping the Coleman stove. My assumptions were incorrect. In the first three hours we covered the distance a law-abiding driver might've done in five. I alternated my time during the drive by trying to doze off and clenching the armrest hard enough to inhibit the blood flow in my arm—much like a soldier in the trenches tries to catch a few minutes of shut-eye while knowing death is imminent. Flynn attacked the road as if he had a personal vendetta against the benignly winding ribbon of asphalt, snapping the car around bends, rocketing passed the other cars in his way without pause or hesitation and, I was certain, on two or three occasions, went airborne over bumps.

It was somewhat ironic, I thought as I watched the gentle, placid farmlands

pass by my window in a serene blur, that I could die in absolute horror, like this, here. *Finally found someplace peaceful and quiet, eh?* The landscape at dawn was tranquil blend of greens and golds, the sky a smooth, polished granite. The mountains appeared on the horizon, the peaks shrouded in the cloud, the land rose and the hills became steeper. The agriculture industry gave way to timberlands, which, in turn, gave way to native bush.

We headed south, west of Lake Taupo, hit the Desert Road and at some point I barely noticed, turned east and headed into the bush. Flynn slowed down only marginally when the sealed road gave way to unsealed gravel, and, again, when the gravel gave way to dirt. The dirt road deteriorated into ruts and potholes. Possibly not a road at all, I considered, but a riverbed, or a washout, or some other naturally caused phenomenon serving as a reminder that we would probably never be found again should we suffer a mechanical—or nervous—breakdown.

The noon-day sun was just burning off the overcast when Flynn announced our arrival. I stumbled from the car, stretched my back, massaged my sore arm in an effort to restore circulation and took a look around at the surrounding forest.

"Not bad, eh?" Flynn said as he unloaded the car, tossing the packs onto the ground.

"Nice." Although the fragment of serenity I felt was not so much from the surrounding native bush, but more out of the gratitude to whatever luck or God had kept me alive over the last several hours. "Is there a campsite around here?"

"Nope, we need to walk a bit to get to it." Flynn had both packs open on the ground and was transferring some of the food from his to mine.

I slapped an insect that was biting into my arm. "There're mosquitoes here," I announced as I wiped away the spot of blood and the little diner's crushed body. Another chomped into my neck and met a similar fate. "Shit, they're all over the place."

"They're sandflies, the mozzies won't be out till dusk. I'd recommend you get your gear together before they devour you. They won't bother you as much once you start moving."

Flynn slung his pack on, walked up to me and slapped me in the face, then examined his palm and grinned as he showed me the squashed sandfly.

I rubbed my cheek as I watched Flynn walk away and pondered the intelligence of me disappearing into the forest with this guy. I should have left word with somebody. Maybe they could have warned me that Flynn has been a suspect in several cases of disappearing foreigners. But it was a bit late now, and, against the certainty of death by sandfly, I might be better to take my chances with him. I picked another sandfly off my arm, rolled it between my fingertips and inspected it. *At least death might be quicker with Flynn.*

The bush was dense, the track overgrown. I stepped carefully through the thick, twisted roots that laced the path. Flynn was waiting for me on the other side of a muddy patch, which I attempted to step gingerly around.

"You think you're going to keep those boots dry?" Flynn laughed, shook his head and continued ahead.

When I was a kid, in California, I had done one or two backpacking trips in my brief and inglorious career with the scouts. But it did not prepare me for this. Those trails were well graded and dry; this was more like the Amazon. The foliage was lush and often obscured the track, which itself was mostly just muddy bogs or masses of twisted roots. My dream of dry feet lasted nearly ten minutes. There was no way to avoid the ankle deep mud and, occasionally, a harmless damp patch turned out to be knee deep. By the time we reached the first stream to ford, I was grateful enough to wade through, if for no other reason than to wash some of the thick, sticky mud from my boots and lighten the load.

Flynn was several strides ahead and the hard, steady pace he maintained was not conducive to carrying on idle conversation, so I was content to occupy my ears with the songs and the screeches of the forest birds and the *squish-suck-squish-suck* sound made by my boots with every step I took through the mud. As my foot hit the ground, the mud and water that was saturating my socks would ooze out between the laces in sync with the *squish-suck-squish-suck*. At first, it made me giggle. Then it started to lose its entertainment value, became merely monotonous, then hypnotic—*squish-suck-squish-suck-squish-suck*. Occasionally the screech of a forest bird would jump in on cue as if it had all been orchestrated as part of a forest symphony: *squish-suck-squish-suck-screech-squawk-squish-suck-ooze*.

*Enough, I thought, to drive a perfectly sane man crazy.* A perfectly sane

man—maybe that was my problem. All the evidence suggested the contrary. Here I was, alone in a jungle, up to my ass in mud, with a man known to be, at the very least, borderline insane, if not a full blown psychopath. I reached for a moss-covered log that crumbled in my grip and left me with a handful of green, squooshy fluff. I grabbed at another branch that offered slightly more support in my tug-of-war with Mother Earth.

After the first hour, I was beginning to doubt Flynn's concept of time.

"Where the hell is this campsite?"

"Just up ahead a bit."

"That's what you said when we started out."

"Yeah, well, it's still ahead of us."

As we approached the second hour, I tried a new tack.

"I think I'm having a stroke."

"Naaah," Flynn said without stopping. "You're just out of shape."

"Let's see, numbness in the arms, shortness of breath, dizziness—no, I think it's a stroke."

"Walk through it. It'll go away."

Flynn showed no signs of slowing down or even being out of breath. The track rose sharply and he went up the steep zigzag climb like a mountain goat. My shoulders ached from the heavy load, my back was possibly permanently bowed and my legs would've gladly given out at anytime.

As the track continued to get steeper, there was a slight change in the vegetation, from the thick rainforest, to what Flynn explained was mostly beech, though I wouldn't know. To me, if it's green, it's poison ivy.

By late afternoon we had worked our way around to the south eastern side of the mountain and were working our way down toward the river again. The cloud cover had burnt off and the sun was high in the sky.

"There it is," Flynn said, pointing ahead.

"There what is?" It took me a minute to make out the small green shack that blended in well with the background. "Who would build a house up here?"

"It's not a house, it's a hut, not the flashiest of huts in the backcountry, but as far as I'm concerned, it's the best. And I'll show you why."

The inside of the hut smelled of dampness and age, but was, all things considered, in good shape. It was small; each wall no more than eight feet long; four solidly built bunks, two on each side, with a potbelly stove in the centre, and a heavy, scarred wooden table. The bunks looked like they had seen a lot of use, but were holding up and comfortable enough.

I eased the pack off, letting the weight slide from my aching muscles and feeling like Atlas taking a smoko. I sunk onto a lower bunk and would've gladly surrendered to it, but Flynn wasn't about to let me.

"Come on. We won't eat dinner if we don't catch it." He pulled some gear from his pack and began assembling a fishing rod and reel.

I paused as I watched him.

"I know. You don't like fishing either," he said, rolling his eyes. "Give it a try. You might learn to like it."

"I have given it a try," I said, but was thinking that maybe I should try it again. Flynn shrugged. "Suit yourself."

*Maybe that's what I need; a hobby. Go fishing, just like the good ol' days.* I rolled the idea around for a few minutes and decided against it for the time being. However, I did find my way down to the river where I perched myself on a nearby rock to watch Flynn fish.

I have never been clear on fishing. It is not so much that I enjoy the act as I enjoy the idea. My dad took me fishing a few times when I was a kid, but I went because I wanted to do something with my dad, not with the fish. In fact, during those trips I was usually quite concerned that I might actually catch something. My lack of killer instinct extends that far.

"But you're not averse to eating them?" Flynn asked.

"No. I'm not," I said, knowing very well what his point was and how easy it was for him to make it, but I still didn't buy it. There is a big difference between seeing something on the plate and being the one to squeeze the life from it.

"The problem is, you think of it as a friend. Think of it as an arch foe and I bet you wouldn't have too much trouble killing and devouring it. You've had enemies before, haven't you?" He turned toward me and grinned. "I mean, besides heads-of-state."

"There's no truth to that story."

"Of course not." He turned back to study the line in the water.

"So who's the fish to you? Amanda?"

"Not at all, she's not my enemy."

"You're kidding, right? You hate her."

"No. Not at all." He turned back to me and was dead serious. "We don't hate each other."

"Could've fooled me."

"She's just got a lot to live up to."

"How's that?"

"Sir Richard Sheppard, that's how."

"Sir who?"

"He's huge in the corporate world, a textbook bastard by all accounts. He was married to the woman who put him through school and struggled with him through the early years. But she only produced two daughters, so he divorced her in favour of a younger woman who would provide him with male heirs—a Real Henry the Eighth type. So, you get one guess who daughter number two was."

"You're kidding. Amanda?"

Flynn nodded. "The little girl who broke up mommy and daddy's marriage because she wasn't good enough, or the right sex, from the very beginning."

"Ouch." I considered the impact such an idea might have on a little girl but was at a loss. "But certainly, this Sir Richard guy must have to offer some support."

"I don't know. I doubt very much she would take anything from him. No, she's very much into proving she can do it all without assistance. Put herself through school, honours, all that. It's a pity she has to be motivated by vengeance. That's what clouds her thinking. Anyway, she graduated number one in her class at the Aviation College."

"Number one? Really?"

"Yeah, she's actually a pretty good controller, a bit too by-the-book for me, but efficient and professional. She's pretty good." He turned and glared menacingly. "Don't you ever repeat that."

I nodded. "So how'd she end up in Milton Gorge?"

"In Exile Tower?" Flynn smiled. "I think she just scared the bosses down in Wellington. She was already better educated than anybody in management when she started in air traffic. When she finished her course at the College, they sent her right to Wellington, but she was too ambitious and it was too obvious. And it scared the shit out of them, made even worse because she was a woman, and young."

"And attractive."

"Yup. So they made up an excuse that she needed more experience in a domestic centre and packed her off."

"So her paranoia is actually justifiable?"

"Yup."

"Unlike mine."

"Oh no, trust me, yours is justified too. Anyway, when she first arrived at Milton Gorge, all perky and pleasant, hell, I actually felt sorry for her. First thing she tried to do though was to organize the place."

"Organize?"

"Yeah, tried to get the pilots to comply with regulations and standard-operating-procedures. Tried to get the controllers to use only approved phraseology and radio techniques, and filing incident reports for every minor infraction, which, in itself would've been a full-time job at that place. Hell, she even tried to organize a social club, I mean a regular one, not the one at *The Tie Down*, the most sociable airfield in the country and she wanted to introduce a social club." Flynn laughed at the thought. "What a trooper. It was enough to keep Thornie locked in his office for a week."

"So, if you felt so sorry for her, how come you guys are always going at each other?"

"She can detect pity and she won't have any of it. She'll go for your jugular if you try it. Besides, life in the balance, you know? We're just playing out our roles. She's an extreme person. So, to keep things balanced out there, I got to be extremely opposite. She knows it as well as I do. In the end, we're all in this together. We the unloved, the unwashed, the unwanted, the orphans of air traffic control." He stared into the water for a moment in silence and then started reeling his line in. "Come on, they're not biting. Time for a drink. I think the pub's almost open."

"There's a pub here?"

"Just follow me."

"To the end of the earth, Flynn. Or are we there yet?"

Flynn disappeared into the hut and returned a minute later, held up a canteen in one hand and a hip flask in the other, giving both a little shake. They sounded temptingly full.

"Grab your mug and follow me," he said as he took to the path that rose behind the hut. A moment of panic seized me as I rushed into the hut and dug through my pack for the mug, as if I let him get too far ahead I would be lost. It was at the moment I was tossing things out of my pack in an effort to find my tin mug that I suspected I was falling under the influence of this pie-eyed piper. Or maybe it was the fear of missing out on another drink. Either way, I was not terribly dignified.

Flynn must have jogged the rocky hill behind the hut because I did not catch up until the top, despite feeling a hundred pounds lighter without the pack.

"More climbing," I said, trying to catch my breath. "Jesus, what a great view."

"It's more than a view, mate," Flynn shouted, his arms were spread wide as if he were awaiting crucifixion. "It's the whole universe."

It did not seem like such an overstatement. We were perched on top of a rocky hill with a nearly 360-degree view of mountain scenery, the river twisting and tumbling a couple hundred feet below, the jagged peaks clawing the sky above, deep green canyons and dense forest below. Twilight had touched the deepening blue of the sky, one of the planets was already glowing brightly.

"Venus," Flynn pointed out. "We'll be able to see Jupiter tonight, too."

Flynn set the mugs up and poured out equal portions of what he called 'Mountain Screwdrivers'—powdered orange drink and vodka. "Raro and vodka—the best drink in the world. Drink up."

We toasted the mountains and sculled the first mug. Flynn set up a second round as I stood and took in the view.

"It's really beautiful, pity it's so difficult to get to." The vodka was making itself known, my brain unwinding, but not yet spinning. "Mud!" I yelled.

Flynn laughed. "I'll tell you what, mate. Living an easy life is easy. It takes effort, imagination and lots of hard work to have a hard, miserable existence."

"Reminds me of life back on the ranch," I said, toasting the darkening sky.

Flynn laughed. "I knew it!"

It seemed to me that something was happening to Flynn up there on that hilltop. He was not merely enjoying the view, he was breathing it in, reviving something, feeding something. The cloud of intensity that usually swirled around him was dissipating, burning off like the morning overcast so that he, too, was becoming a flawless blue sky.

"Have you seen your place in the corporate structure?" He asked, still gazing out across the river valley. "It was in the briefing file yesterday."

"The corporate tree? I glanced at it. Didn't know I was actually on it."

"You're not—not as an individual, or even a human being. You're down at the bottom. The *very* bottom. Barely on the page. Bottom of the food chain—bacteria. You're one of the six hundred people they lumped together in that last little box: 'ATC staff.' We comprise eighty percent of the employees and we barely get a mention."

"Oh well, try not to take it personally."

"I don't." He turned to me. "You want to know why?"

"Why?"

"Because only I understand the *real* corporate structure, the natural and unchangeable corporate structure."

"How's that?"

Flynn pulled a small flashlight from his pocket and tossed it to me.

"Take a look at your feet."

I looked down at the ground at the moss-covered rocks.

"Not moss. Lichen," Flynn pointed out. "It's the oldest living thing on earth." He knelt down by the rock. "Now look closely and tell me what you see there."

I turned the light on and illuminated the lichen.

"Lichen," I said, shrugging my shoulders.

"What else?"

I leaned closer. "Just lichen and," I squinted, "oh, some tiny little bugs."

"That's right—it's a whole different world in there. Almost microscopic to us, but to their world, shit, we'd be God-size."

I leaned back in and returned to sitting on my rock, checking first to make sure I wasn't sitting on any lichen worlds.

"Okay," I conjectured, "so up here, you're the CEO?"

"Not quite." Flynn nodded toward the sky. "How could I be?"

The sky had taken on a deep twilight hue, Venus blazing brightly near a crescent moon and another planet faintly visible. I stood up to get a closer look.

"And that," he continued, "is just our own patch of lichen out there. Wait'll the stars come out to illustrate what makes our own solar system look like a speck of dust."

I nodded. "So I'm back to dust, bacteria, ATC staff."

"Take a deep breath, take in that view." Flynn stepped behind and out of my field of vision. "Right now you can see farther than you can walk in two days. Look at the size of the sky, those mountains, the depths of those valleys." He paused. "Close your eyes, pull it into your lungs."

I closed my eyes and swayed from the vodka, but followed his instructions.

"Draw it in slowly," Flynn continued, "the stars, the planets, the moon, the mountains, the river, pull it in as deep as you can, and then—," he paused again, leaned closer to my ear and whispered, "and exhale it through your feet."

I confess, I was not sure how one exhaled through ones feet, but instead of questioning his instructions I did my damnedest to follow them and, I swear, without trying, I almost felt it was happening.

"Let your breath flow through you, into the ground, into the rocks, into the lichen, into the vastness that's too small for you to see. Just let it flow like a conduit. A flow of energy that moves smoothly, naturally, back and forth through a continuum."

I kept my eyes closed, but could hear him moving around to the front again.

"Tell me now, Tom," he said quietly, using my name for the first time I could remember. "What do you feel like? A speck of dust or a god?"

"Neither. Or maybe both. I feel—" I opened my eyes to find him staring intently at me, "a part of it. I can't really explain it."

"Don't try to explain it. Just *feel* it. Know it." He smiled. "*That's* the real corporate structure, mate. We're all part of an infinite chain and every link is as

important as the next whether it's the size of dust or the size of God. And the more you try to fuck with that natural structure, the more the natural structure will reject you, spit you out."

"Very philosophical," I said, out of nervousness, but I wished I hadn't. I got the feeling Flynn didn't share this with many.

"Just the truth," he said, "which is not hard to see when you just open your eyes." He turned his face to the sky again. "You know, Cowboy, they're going to give you a higher branch on that corporate tree one of these days."

"I doubt that very much."

"Oh they will, I promise you that." He turned back to me again. "All I'm saying is, don't look to someone else's diagrams to tell you where your place is. If you lose it, you won't find it in the briefing file. You'll need to come back here, and stand right here, on this spot."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say to him. Over the preceding week, I thought I was getting to know this guy. The wild man of air traffic control, the borderline psychopath, the bolshie, brash, uncivilized farm boy from Southland who could fix anything with a piece of number 8 bailing wire and a staple gun. And as much as that character scared the crap out of me at times, living his life at full tilt as if he was on one long high-speed chase, at least I was getting used to it. I thought I was beginning to know what to expect. But, suddenly, in the encroaching darkness I was facing a different man, a universe-pondering Buddhist, a monk in gumboots. And in a way, it was more frightening than the first. In any case, I realized, I was *never* going to know this guy.

"Man, I'm starving," Flynn said. "Let's eat."

I nodded again. "No fish."

"The hell with the fish. Next time. Besides, we don't need it." He grinned, "If I recall correctly, I might've slipped a couple kilos of beef in your pack along with the potatoes, onions, carrots and another bottle of vodka. Shit, we have a regular Thanksgiving feast waiting to happen." He slapped me on the shoulder as he passed. "Come on, Cowboy. Don't forget my torch, you'll need it."

"Right, sure thing." I followed Flynn into the shadows.

\* \* \*

*"You see, that was our little social structure, formed in the first week and never changed after that. I had Flynn on one side, Amanda on the other. The way Thornie set up the roster, half my week I worked with Flynn and half with Amanda, though they never worked together again themselves. I was being cut right down the middle. Flynn hated everything about the Corporation and everything they did and stood for. He repeatedly said; "They need to be taken down."*

*"Interesting. You think he was serious?"*

*"Of course he was. This is the guy who taught me to dig a hangi pit with dynamite. Anyway, he was just as serious as Amanda on the other side who wanted nothing more than to be a part of the Corporation, to rise to her glory. And the funny thing was, they both thought I wholly agreed with them. Flynn knew I would be a starter for any commando operation he had planned and Amanda, despite her threats, figured I was going to be racing her up the corporate ladder. You know, in those days I always thought it was like having a little devil on one shoulder and a little angel on the other each trying to coerce me over to their side. The funny part was, who was the angel and who was the devil? I couldn't tell. And it didn't stop with them either. Thornie loved me because he was convinced I was an exceptional controller and—this is the most bizarre one—that guy Freddie Moore liked me too. Why? God only knows."*

*"Maybe you're just likeable."*

*"Not at all. I'm malleable. All I could figure was that they all saw me as someone who could be shaped into an ally. After all, none of them even knew me. Every single one of them was sure I was cowboy. They were all nuts, which shouldn't be surprising to me now. Milton Gorge was a dumping ground. Every one of us was in exile out there. Thornie was an antique, Flynn was dangerous, Amanda was a threat, and Kenny—" I shuddered, "I mean the guy carried a rat around, said it helped him stay focused and thus enhanced air safety."*

*"And you?"*

*"Me? I guess I was paying my debt to society. Anyway, it didn't last long after the Corporation was installed. The first thing they did was clean house."*

## Ten

"Okay," he said slowly, as if he had to choose the word carefully. "So you were stationed in Milton Gorge, a place that was barely in-control itself. I still don't understand what that has to do with the current incident we're investigating. You understand, of course, that this evaluation of you—"

"This psychiatric evaluation," I corrected him.

"Yes, of course, be that as it may, it is only to determine if there were personal factors that contributed to the incident and to determine your fitness for a return to duty."

"In other words, you don't want to hear my life story?"

"Well, it's not that. I'm happy to hear you out, and help if I can. Or perhaps I can refer you to someone who can help you with your more ... long-term issues. For the moment, however, we really are only concerned with those matters that had a direct contributory cause on the events of last week."

"This is what I'm telling you though—it all matters. It's important to what happened. I mean, Flynn, Amanda, Thornie, they all had something to do with what happened last week. All roads lead to here. None of this would've happened if we weren't all the way we were. We were all contributing factors. I'm telling you, sure as the Corporation killed Thornie, the Corporation made Amanda a fascist, Flynn a terrorist and me—"

"And you, what?" he raised his eyebrows. "What did the Corporation make you? A rebel with a spurious cause?"

"No." I hated this guy's smugness. He, too, was just something else bought and paid for by the Corporation.

"Tell me about Thornie's death. This so-called murder."

"So-called?" Oh yeah, I forgot, this guy had already formed his opinion and cast his judgment before he even met me, before I sat down in the chair opposite to him. He probably already had his evaluation written. "Yeah, the alleged crime. Leave no fingerprints and they can prove nothing—and if they can't prove anything, must

*mean we're all innocent. Thornie was just stage one, you see."*

*"Stage one of what?"*

*"Of whatever—the plan—I don't know. What I do know is that they had to get rid of him first before they could get to us. There was a housecleaning taking place."*

\* \* \*

The coroner determined that Thornie had died of a heart attack while sitting at his desk, drinking a cup of tea. I found him face down on the desk, still clutching his cup.

When Thornie had arrived that morning, shortly after nine, he was, as always, in high spirits. Flynn and I were on duty in the cab. As was normal, Thornie first came to the tower cab to chat to the morning crew for ten or fifteen minutes before he went down to his office to prepare himself for Freddie Moore, who was due for a visit that day.

I suspect Thornie was driving the guys in H.O. crazy. Milton Gorge was his airport and he refused to make changes. Hell, I don't think he even recognized the Corporation; he just ignored its existence. When the Corporation started dictating changes to him, he'd simply say, "Oh, absolutely, I'll get right on with that," and then would turn around and completely ignore, or forget the directive. When the head office boys started coming by more often and suggesting to Thornie that maybe it was time for him to consider retirement, he'd giggle and say, "Oh, don't be silly, what would I do with myself?" And then offer them a cup of tea. They even tried promoting him to head office once. He said, "Oh good heavens, I'd be sure to cause a nationwide disaster. No, I think I'll just stay put, thank you very much."

Moore telephoned the tower cab from his car at a quarter past eleven that day and said he was not getting any answer on the office line, and would someone please go find Mr. Rumbold and advise him that Mr. Moore was going to be arriving at eleven thirty and not eleven o'clock. That alone was enough to start me wondering. Why would this high-flying corporate exec bother to call just to say he was going to be there in fifteen minutes? And the fact that Thornie did not answer the office phone was not, in any way, unusual. Since the Corporation took over, it was quite common

for Thornie to completely ignore the office phone—as he put it, “Nobody nice ever rings on that phone anymore.”

I went downstairs and found Thornie at his desk, slumped forward, clutching a still full cup of tea and stone dead. I pushed the intercom to the tower and told Flynn to get the rescue fire service over right away, then I felt for a pulse, but there was none. It seemed weird that Thornie already felt cool to the touch, yet his tea was still lukewarm.

Then, not knowing what else to do, I sat down in the chair opposite and stared at him. The room felt tomblike. There was coldness in the air and a stale dusty smell that stung my nostrils. I heard the creak of floorboards and turned my head, but realised it was just the natural groan of an old building and not the ghost I expected to see. I turned back to Thornie and saw him there, clutching his tea. Dead. It was the first time I had ever seen a dead body.

*“But fare-you-weel, Auld Nickie-Ben!”* I whispered.

\* \* \*

“*What?*”

“*Nothing.*”

“*No, what was it you said?*”

“*It was Robert Burns’ Address to the Devil, I think—I don’t know, it just came to mind at the time.*”

“*Why?*”

“*I don’t know. Just something I remember from my childhood. Perhaps my mind was damaged long before I became a controller. Or maybe it was because I was damaged that made me a controller.*”

“*But where did it come from?*”

“*Scotland. I think around 1780-something.*”

“*I mean—*”

“*My father was an English professor—another trauma of my childhood you might say. Why else do you think I ended up with the name I did?*”

*"Tom Hardy, what's wrong with that?"*

*"Think about it over a drink tonight."*

*"Is he still alive?"*

*"Thomas Hardy? Of course not."*

*"I mean your father."*

*"No. No, he's dead too. But he and Thornie and Yoda still haunt me as holograms looking on approvingly."*

*"Ahh, I see. That's very interesting."*

*"What is?"*

*"Well, doesn't it offer a little insight? I mean, I assume the reference was to Star Wars. In that scenario, your father was Darth Vader? An interesting comparison. What kind of relationship did you have with your father?"*

*"That would be Professor Vader to you."*

*"And Thornie was your Obi Wan Kenobi? Your mentor?"*

*"Yeah, you got me. You cracked the case. I wanted to be just like Thornie, to be able to relax so profoundly I could become frozen in time just like him. Don't you think you're reading a bit much into a single quip?"*

*"Sometimes they speak volumes."*

*"Only because I had to read volumes."*

*"And watch movies."*

*"Don't forget TV, lots of TV. But that was only as an escape—oops, I shouldn't have said that. Now I must remember not to break into the Timewarp before I give it all away."*

*"What were you looking to escape from?" He leaned back and offered a self-satisfied smile—the Einstein of shrinks.*

*"Reality. Now, frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."*

*"Go ahead and continue with the story, Tom."*

*"Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing in particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world."*

*"That's literature again, isn't it?"*

*"Yes, doctor." I turned my attention toward the window and watched as*

*droplets of rain begin winding their way down the pane, connecting with other droplets, forming little rivers of rainwater on the glass. "Now, where was I? Oh yeah, we were about to discuss my hypos and my substitute for pistol and ball."*

\* \* \*

Okay, it was the *second* time I saw a dead body.

*Be prepared.* That was the only thing I learned in my brief association with the scouts. My mother had thought it was just what a fatherless boy needed. She was wrong, though. What a fatherless boy needs is a father. I was not prepared.

Sitting there, staring at Thornie, may not have been the first time I've seen a dead body. I saw one once before.

Flynn came down the stairs like a commando team.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Flynn said when he came in to the office. He pressed two fingers to Thornie's jugular, gently leaned him back in his chair, tea splashing onto Thornie's spotlessly clean blotter, leaned over, and pressed an ear to the chest. "Oh, Christ, oh Christ, old man," Flynn's voice was shaking. "What has happened to you?" He stood up, let Thornie slump forward again, and stared at him.

*The puddle.* I leaned forward and squinted at the spilled tea.

"Tea's still warm," I said, still looking at the small puddle of tea soaking into the blotter.

"What?" Flynn said in a choking whisper.

"The tea." I could not take my eyes from the puddle on Thornie's blotter. "Thornie's tea is still warm."

Flynn stood there in silence. "Fire rescue should be here in a minute," he finally said, he was choking back tears. The sirens could already be heard. "You stay here with him, I'll go talk to the airplanes." He departed and left me alone with the other recently departed.

"*Great is thy pow'r an' great thy fame,*" I whispered. My eyes didn't move from the tea-stained blotter. I could smell a faint odour of smoke. Or maybe it was just the dust of an old building, a building, like a man, whose time has passed. I slowly reached to touch the puddle of tea but stopped.

The fire rescue crew was the first to arrive. They checked for a pulse, one guy pulled the cup of tea from Thornie's grip and placed it on the bookcase against the wall. Within fifteen minutes, the ambulance, the police and Freddie Moore were there as well.

I watched them remove Thornie from his desk. It was not until he was gone, and a police officer was asking me a couple questions did I notice the change in the scene.

"Where's the tea?" I asked.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" The officer asked, putting his hand on my shoulder with practiced sincerity.

"No, I just want to know." I walked to the bookcase, where the paramedic had moved it when he was attending to Thornie, but it was now gone. "Where'd it go?"

I walked out of Thornie's office into the hall and stopped at the door of the kitchen. There he was—Moore was in the kitchen at the sink. He was dumping the contents of the milk bottle down the drain.

"What are you doing?"

Moore turned around a fraction too quickly at the sound of my voice.

"Tidying up," he said. "Just tidying up a little. Making myself useful."

"But why are you dumping the milk?"

"It had gone off," Moore said without hesitation. "Past its 'use by' date."

*Like Thornie?* I wondered.

Thornie's recently washed cup was drying on the dish rack next to the sink. I picked it up and looked at it.

"You washed his cup."

"Yeah, just tidying up a little," Moore shook the excess water from the milk carton and crushed it, neatly folding it into a square. Then he put his arm on my shoulder and led me from the kitchen. "It was Mr. Hardy, right? Tom?"

"Yeah."

"You're the American."

"Yeah."

"We were just talking about you down in Wellington the other day. We think you could make quite a good future with ControlCorp. I'm glad to finally have met

you, just sorry it's under such sad circumstances."

"We've met several times."

"Right, of course. Anyway, you're under a lot of stress today. It must have been traumatic for you." He led me into the hall. "You need to take the rest of the day off. I know Mr. Rumbold meant a lot to you." He opened the front door. "I've already called in a couple of controllers to take over for you and Mr. Flynn upstairs. They should be here in a few minutes. Why don't you go home now? Or find a pub that's open and have a drink for your friend. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have the sad task of calling Mrs. Rumbold." He gently pushed me out the front door. "Oh, and Tom?"

I turned back to face Moore in the doorway.

"Grieve for him today, but don't dwell in the past. The future holds much more promise."

"Huh?"

"And just remember, Tom—my door's always open." Then he closed the door in my face.

By late that afternoon, Flynn and I were sitting across from each other at his kitchen table with a nearly empty bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label between us. The sun was low and leaving an orange glow on the towering cumuli that were collecting on the horizon, over the airport. Thunderstorms. Didn't seem right for the time of year, this late in the autumn.

*There must be an explanation,* I thought. *This can't happen.*

"He was murdered," I said. It had taken me that long and that much drink to find the courage to say it aloud. It was the only explanation.

"What?"

"I've been thinking. All the evidence points to murder."

"You mean a heart attack," Flynn said, looking at me as if he was wondering if I was going to need some medication—some *more* medication.

"They did it: Freddie Moore or his goons. He probably didn't do the dirty work. He probably had it done. Or maybe the order came from higher up, but I'm sure of it."

"His goons? Jeez, Cowboy, come on," Flynn shook his head. "I don't have much use for the guy either, but even I'm not *that* paranoid."

"How do you explain a man that fit and unstressed having a heart attack, while sitting down, *relaxing*?"

"How the hell should I know? I'm not a doctor. These things happen to the healthiest of people all the time. Maybe he just had a bum heart."

"That's not the only thing though." I poured another shot of Red Label and refilled Flynn's glass. "I've been thinking and something's bugging me. First, it's Moore and him cleaning up before anybody had a chance to look around. He washed Thornie's mug, he dumped out the milk: '*past its use by date*'—bullshit, as if Thornie would ever let the milk go off. Not just that, though, Moore rinsed out the milk carton and I *don't* think he threw it away."

"You're losing me, what's his tidying up got to do with—?"

"Exactly! *Tidying up*. In times of stress, what do we do? We rely on something that comforts us. You ever notice how Amanda, when she gets busy, keeps fussing with her hair, tucking it behind her ear, stroking it, knotting it up. Or how Kenny has the pet rat he brings to work. I knew a controller who used to start humming show tunes whenever he got busy. I start babbling lines from long dead poets. And you start calling the pilots names and have the particularly annoying habit of firing at airplanes with the signal pistol."

Flynn shrugged. "I find it relaxing. What's the point?"

"The point is, all those things come reasonably natural to us. We just intensify our habits when we're under stress. But Moore, he was *tidying up* and *staying out of the way*, two things that, I doubt very much, come natural to him at all."

"I'm not following you."

"Remember a few months back when Moore gave Amanda and I a lift into town when they were having that 'let's-get-to-know-each-other' corporate bullshit meeting? I sat in the backseat of his car. He had this beautiful, brand new BMW, but the backseat was like a pigsty. The floor was covered in junk food wrappings and debris. It looked like the contents of the dumpster in back of McDonalds."

"Okay, so the guy's a pig."

"Yeah, he's a slob! It's not natural for him to be tidy. He only looks tidy on the outside because he has to."

"You're stressed, Cowboy," Flynn said. "I don't think you should go around

reasoning that Fast Freddie washing dishes proves he's guilty of murder."

"He was getting rid of the evidence." I got up, paced to the sink and returned. "He must've put something in the milk. That's the only thing Thornie ever put in his tea, was milk. Everybody who knew Thornie, knew *that*."

"Something that causes heart attacks?"

"Yes! Certain poisons *do*, I read that somewhere or saw it on TV. Like arsenic or something."

"Yeah?" Flynn said doubtfully.

"Flynn," I sat down again. "What was the most important thing in Thornie's life?"

"Well, at his eulogy I hope they say his family and his work, but, okay, I'll play along—you're right, it was tea."

"A *good* cup of tea."

"Okay, and that has some connection here?"

"Well, most days he would've come up to the tower cab to have his morning tea with whoever was on duty. But he didn't today because you and I were on duty and he *knows* neither of us could make a good cup of tea if our lives depended on it." I immediately regretted the unfortunate choice of metaphor. "Anyway, he stayed downstairs today and had tea by himself. Which means he made it, so we know—." I held my hands open to Flynn.

"That it was a *good* cup of tea?"

"Exactly. He had a good cuppa. He had only taken one or two sips before he died."

"Yeah?" Flynn said hesitantly, but I could see he knew what I was getting at.

"Thornie would never leave a good cup of tea unfinished. He would not have died, he would not have let his life finish, if he hadn't finished his tea."

"So you think they murdered him? Based on that evidence, you have concluded that Fast Freddie Moore murdered him?"

"They couldn't get rid of him, they'd been trying to retire him ever since they took over, but how could they fight him when he just ignored them?" I stood up and walked over to the phone. "We've got to call the police."

"And just *how* are you going to explain this to the police?"

"Hmmm." It was a good point. I replaced the receiver. "So what do we do?"  
"Let me think about it."

\* \* \*

*"Well," he looked at his watch and pretended to be surprised. "I think that just about covers it. I have all I need here."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"No sense in dragging this out any longer than necessary."*

*"You mean you already formed your assessment?"*

*"Well, I think I have a pretty good idea now. Yes."*

*"And your verdict is—I'm nuts?"*

*"We don't use that kind of terminology."*

*"Insane?"*

*"Not at all."*

*"Crazy."*

*"A little." He winked at me. I hate it when full-grown men wink at me.*

*"Obviously there are certain issues I think we can continue to work on, or perhaps I can recommend a good therapist."*

*"Like paranoia?"*

*"Oh, there might be a slight element of—"*

*"But now that you have enough evidence to prove I'm nuts, you don't need anything else. Like, for instance, to give me an opportunity to prove I'm not."*

*He stared at me without saying anything, then let out a combination sigh-grunt.*

*"Very well," he said. "But can we skip forward a bit. To Auckland tower for instance?"*

*"Oh yeah, that's fine by me. I'm done with Milton Gorge, we were all done with Milton Gorge. Even the Corporation was done with it. Within a week after Thornie's death, they closed the tower there; I mean, they 'disestablished' it, said it was no longer profitable and, ergo, no longer in the best interest of the Corporation. And what's not in the interest of the Corporation is not in the interest of the flying*

*public. Just like that, it was over. They threw a switch and the good ol' days died with Thornie. Hell, it's all history now: by July the tower was destroyed, the airport carved up to make room for a subdivision and we all got our marching orders. Some were made redundant; money saved. Some were shipped off to other facilities to replace higher-priced old-timers who were then made redundant; money saved again. Flynn was soon turned into a wanted man. Kenny, minus his rat, was sent to Auckland Oceanic where he's never been the same. And Amanda and I were both shipped off to Auckland tower as Senior Controllers. My career pretty much peaked there, but it was just the start for Amanda. By January she was facility manager. The New World Order was in place; up was now down, in was now out, skill and experience were replaced by corporate spirit.*"

"Right," he nodded as he glanced at his desk drawer, where, I imagined, he had a hypodermic loaded with a fast-acting sedative waiting. "Why don't we just get on to Auckland?"

"Yes, why don't we?"

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## **Part Two: The New World Order**

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## Eleven

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Simon asked from his seat on Ground Control. For a minute I thought he had been dozing off again—so he's awake after all.

I turned to this corporate-trained punk. "Never let 'em see you sweat, kid."

An Air New Zealand 747 had just touched down on the runway. A United Airlines 747 appeared to be on a seven-mile final. That was what it looked like on the tower radar display, which was built into the desk between the tower controller's position and ground control. In reality, the plane was now on about a four-mile final because the radar picture froze a couple minutes ago. It was a particularly annoying bug in the new radar equipment that every once in a while the picture just stopped. It was easy to not notice it because, as tower controllers who were generally looking out the window most of the time, we only glanced at the radar display to help us determine spacing. The technicians, we were told, were working on the problem, but in the meantime, we had to live with it and try not to kill with it.

I confess that when I told the Inland Airways Bandeante to taxi on to the runway and to be ready for an immediate takeoff, I really did think United was on a seven-mile final, which would have been plenty of room. But when I realized that the radar had gone belly-up again and the 747 was much closer than I first thought, instead of stopping the Bandit, I decided to work with it. And, above all, to act as if it was what I planned all along.

"It's not going to work," Simon said. "There's not enough room to get him out."

"It'll work," I said, keeping my eyes glued on the deepening panic in this kid's face. "What did I tell ya? What's rule number one?"

"Ahh," he shot a glance that suggested I was insane.

"Don't choke on me. What's rule number one?"

Simon struggled to find some words. "The safe orderly expeditious flow of traffic."

"No, that's your purpose in life. What's rule number one?" I glanced at the runway. Air New Zealand had thrown in his reverse thrusters and was standing on the

brakes—he was going to make the second high-speed taxiway as instructed. *Good boy.*

I keyed the mike, directing my voice to the pilot of the Bandit, but kept my eyes on Simon. “Inland four-one-one-two, be ready immediate.”

“*We’re ready,*” the pilot said, drolly, his voice nearly drowned out by the sound of his engines roaring up to full power. He, too, was standing on his brakes, waiting for the word ‘go.’ *Good boy.*

“You sure this is going to work?”

“It’ll work,” I said, then took another slow sip of coffee for a little dramatic effect. As Air New Zealand nosed onto the high-speed, I keyed the mike again.

“*Inland four-one-one-two cleared immediate take-off,*” putting just the right amount of stress on the word “immediate” to let the Bandit know, if he didn’t get that thing off the ground real soon, we’re all screwed.

“*Rolling.*” The Bandit had already started its take-off roll.

“So, how many times I got to tell you?” I said, turning back to Simon. “Rule number one: never let ‘em see you sweat.”

“What kind of separation are you applying?” His face betrayed a flash of anger that quickly settled into confusion.

“Milton Gorge separation?” I shrugged.

“Which didn’t exist when Milton Gorge existed.”

“Oh, you’ve so much to learn.” I turned my attention back to the runway. The Bandit rotated, pulling his nose up and a moment later his wheels left the ground. At the threshold end United’s main gear was moments away from touching down. “Wheels up. How about runway separation then? What do you know, it’s legal.” I returned my attention back to Simon. “They can *hear* you sweat. Don’t let them, or they’ll walk all over you and you’ll never control shit.”

“But why give yourself an ulcer if you don’t have to?”

“Give myself an ulcer? What are you talking about? I live for this, the closer the better.” I was kidding him, but with an absolutely straight face. “Besides, you have to look ahead a little at what’s coming up. Approach is backed-up, which means that Bandit’s going to fly slow as shit straight out for ten miles, after United clears, we have another seven-four-seven, followed by two seven-threes, and an Airbus is

pushing back at the international terminal. And see that VFR target at fifteen hundred feet over the city?" I pointed toward the frozen radar screen in the desk between our two positions. "I bet he calls us up any second to transition southbound. He just has that look about him. You're supposed to keep things moving, aren't you? So fill up the holes when you got them."

"I wouldn't have considered that a hole. What if—"

"*What if?* That's your job, to know how the *what if* plays out. If it doesn't work, then you do something else. That's what you're paid all this money for, that and looking at the big picture, which requires taking in all available information. Like knowing who you're dealing with. Look," I pointed at the Air New Zealand jumbo lumbering toward the international terminal. "You know that guy, you should recognize his four-pounds-of-gravel voice by now. And you know, if he says he's going to make the second high-speed then he will. And United, hell, he's just coming in from LAX where he's used to tight squeezes. Ask him to fly his airplane ten knots slower than his handbook says is possible and he'll make it happen, especially with fifteen knots of wind on his nose. And the Bandit," I pointed into the morning haze in the direction of the departed aircraft, "that's Ian Powell flying. I ran into him at the pub last night and I said, 'so, Ian, if I give you an immediate take-off tomorrow morning will you promise not to piss around on the runway so I don't have to kill you the next time you come in?' And he promised he wouldn't piss around."

Simon laughed. I think the last bit was pushing it and I don't think he believed me anymore. "I still think you're going to give me an ulcer one of these days."

"I'm going to turn you into a good controller one of these days." I reached over and tapped the radar screen, "And if you got a moment, call the techs and tell them this piece of shit froze up again."

Simon Henley was, in fact, already quite a good controller, certainly the best of the new lot that arrived from the air traffic control school in Christchurch last October. They were the first fully corporate-trained group of newcomers. There was nothing necessarily wrong with any of them—just a few holes in their training. The first thing they used to teach new controllers was their purpose, the reason for their very existence: the safe orderly expeditious flow of traffic. In that order: safe, orderly, expeditious. The second thing they used to teach them was that the first thing came

before all else—that was unchanging. Whatever regulations come into it, whatever procedures are used, whatever directive distracted, whatever whatever, never forget what your purpose is and you'll be okay.

The Corporation cut this out of the curriculum. I guess it fostered disobedience and independent thought. They replaced it with the mission statement instead. Something Fast Freddie Moore had unveiled at a management meeting a few months ago.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Freddie announced as he turned the first large piece of cardboard on the easel over. "Our mission statement. Now, you won't need to commit this to memory, I've had it printed on convenient wallet-sized cards for everybody." Freddie looked at the cardboard with a gleam of pride and began to read: "ControlCorp will be a world leader in the aviation business community, servicing the needs of its customers on a sound commercial basis. We will cost-effectively respond to our customers legitimate business requirements, as best we can, while maintaining an adequate rate of return. Develop a qualified, motivated and committed management team and treat them with respect in a climate of trust, growth and reward. We will continue to seek and develop business opportunities nationwide and worldwide." Freddie's eyes were moist when he finished reading. "Isn't that a work of art?" he asked the group.

"But, ah," I was hesitant to criticize something that the man obviously held dear, but in those days I still had one or two ideals that had not been completely defeated. So I pointed out, "It doesn't say anything about safe, orderly, expeditious."

"Huh?" Freddie looked at me.

"Well, you know. Airplanes, safety, stuff like that."

Freddie returned his admiration to the cardboard. "Yeah, well, we didn't want to make it too wordy."

Too wordy? They turned three words into probably a hundred and they thought my three words were going to make it too wordy? I might've pursued the argument, but I was getting "the look" from Amanda, who at the time had only recently been appointed as facility manager. Even when we were both senior controllers, I quickly learned when Amanda gave me "the look" it acted as a pretty good barometer that I was approaching thin ice. So I was able to use it to my

advantage and to aid my New Year's resolution about not stirring the pot, which was then supposed to make my life quieter and hassle-free.

So I dropped it. After all, I was still the senior controller in charge of all the training in the tower and not without influence over the new arrivals. The Corporation could have their mission statement, and I could have mine.

The first group of corporate-selected and corporate-trained controllers they sent us arrived in late October. Simon was the best. He had a natural talent for the job. He was just a little inflexible. In any case, I had to be careful not to be overly praiseworthy of him. The last thing young Simon needed was an ego that grew faster than his skill. Besides, if management decided he was so good, they would swipe him from me and send him down for radar training. As it was, by the time he finished his training Amanda was enjoying her new role as my boss and I had to beg her to keep Simon up in the tower. She liked me to beg for things. I finally told her I thought Simon had just a touch of Flynn in him and so she readily agreed to keep him in the tower for the time being. Of course, that was probably overkill. With that one little comment, I probably destroyed poor old Simon's career.

"It's about time," I said to Allen as he climbed the stairs. "I sent you on a break an hour ago."

"But there was cricket on the telly," he said. Allen was also a new controller who arrived in the same group of four as Simon. He was safe and competent, but not great.

"Then I'm glad it wasn't a 5-day match."

Allen took over at the tower position from me, and I stepped back to watch them for a few minutes until there was a lull in the traffic. "Don't forget to sign on," I reminded Allen. He reached across the comms panel to the small pad, held in place with a magnetic clip, and printed his name and the date and time he took over on the position.

"Where's our flight data person?" I asked, indicating the one unoccupied position in the tower. The flight data position was an administrative role and not usually filled by air traffic controllers but a person who was specifically hired for the job.

"On her way up," Allen said.

"Good. I have to go down and see Amanda."

"What?" Allen glanced back at me. "No stories? You know, Cowboy, we so look forward to your stories of the good old days." He let out a quiet giggle. I wondered how much harassment this kid had to endure for having such a girlish giggle at age twenty-two. But he didn't seem to be conscious of it, so perhaps it went unnoticed by most.

"In the old days," I said, "we were allowed to shoot you for being a smart-ass." Then I moved into my best pseudo-John Wayne voice, "Young whipper-snappers like you would've run crying at the mere sight of an airplane. And we didn't have luxuries like radios, no sirree bob, we used lights and flares, flags and raw courage. Why, I remember a time I had seventeen in the circuit at once. Hell, did I say *seventeen*? I meant to say a *hundred* and seventeen. Yes sir, winds were all over the place. Twenty knots of tailwind on both ends of the runway, six emergencies all going on at once, my underpants were on fire and it was time for my tea break." This elicited a round of laughter, but I was losing my enthusiasm for the joke myself. "Yes sir, that's the way it was. I remember I had to take a tennis racket, climb onto the roof and start swatting them like flies. You girls would've gone a-cryin' to your mamas and it'd be the wall, a blindfold and a last cigarette for you."

"Just as long as it wasn't a smoke-free firing squad, eh?" Simon piped in.

"Okay, the airplanes are out there, men," I said, pointing in the direction of the runway. "I'll be in Amanda's office if you need me." As I turned to leave I came face to face with Sarah, standing at the top of the stairs and looking pleased that I had not heard her coming.

"Hi." I scratched my neck as the heat rose toward my face. I wasn't sure what exactly was making me so self-conscious, whether it was her catching me by surprise, acting like a damn goof off with the boys again, or just seeing her here, at work. It was still a little awkward. "You're, ah, working today?"

"No, Cowboy," Simon spoke up before she could say hi. "She just came down to borrow a cup of our instant coffee."

Sarah let out a gentle laugh only because she was being kind to Simon like she was instinctively kind to everyone.

"Of course you are," I nodded. "I just thought you said something about taking

a day off. Very good, well—”

“You were going to Amanda’s office,” Simon said as he exchanged a smug grin with Allen.

“The airplanes are out *there*,” I said as emphatically as I could, pointing to the window. This provoked the same response it always did whenever I hit just the right tone in my voice. They both turned their attention to the outside and scanned for something they might have missed, something they might get in trouble for, something that might bring their careers to a premature end. They had the same fear all young male controllers had—that it would all come to an end before they were done using their profession as a means to meet impressionable young women who were awed by their cool.

I exchanged a quick smile with Sarah. What she was impressed by, I’m not sure.

“Oh, Tom,” Sarah said, not looking at me, as she settled into her chair at the flight data position. “I need to talk to you sometime this afternoon.”

“Sure.” I nodded, but could think of nothing more to add. It wasn’t that I was so tongue-tied; I just didn’t think anything ever needed saying with her. She understood things without having to verbalize *ad infinitum*. She was intelligent and insightful; she did not have to send me an email requesting an appointment. We did not need to consult my compendium with the corporate logo on the cover to slot her in for an appointment to talk in private. I did not need to ask her what the subject of our discussion would be in advance so that I could review her file and the corporate handbook. It was as simple as a request and a nod of understanding. Still, I wished she had looked at me when she asked.

The first day Sarah Gregory arrived at the facility, I knew there was something different about her. She had been on an air traffic control training course, but failed the procedural approach section and was cut from the class. The manager at the training college said she was “a nice, smart girl” and maybe we could put her to work as a flight data assistant. If not, I was to thank her and send her packing.

When she walked through those doors, I knew immediately why the guy in Christchurch did not “send her packing”, as he said. Who could? There was something about her. I knew immediately she had not failed her course because of

something she was lacking. If anything, she had too much of something. Maybe she was too smart to be a controller, or too gentle, or too nice, or too something. But there was no way I could send her packing either. So I gave her a job and she was a great addition to the tower. A person could talk to her about something other than airplanes. She was educated, well read and could talk intelligently on many subjects from music to politics. In fact, far more subjects than I could talk intelligently on. I came into work on one particularly quiet day to find the three of them all reading at their respective positions. Simon had his nose stuck in the newspaper, Allen was reading *Woman's Day* and Sarah—for God's sake—she was reading Dostoyevsky. *Dostoyevsky!* How could anyone *not* be intrigued by a woman like that?

But that was not it either. There was something else about her I could not put my finger on. I used to stare at her when she was working, when she did not know I was looking, just to try and figure it out. It was an action that was destined to get me in trouble because, even if Sarah didn't catch me at it, Simon sure did on more than one occasion, which became the source of his good-natured, albeit annoying, ribbing. He kept accusing me of being smitten with her. But it was not that, it was not love. Everyone liked Sarah, she got along with everyone, had a good sense of humour, was good at her job. But they did not see the same thing. There was just something about her, something that radiated from behind those deep brown eyes, those straight white teeth. Something in the way her shiny brown hair bounced cheerfully in a pony-tail one day, or cascaded alluringly down her shoulders another, highlighting the graceful, sensual curve of her collarbone, or the smooth softness of her skin.

*"Magnetic?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"Like a moth to a flame?"*

*"No. Like—" I pondered the idea for a moment. "Like a homing beacon. Like all the needles on my instrument panel kept pointing in that direction."*

*"So you were in love with her?"*

*"No. It wasn't love—at least, not—"*

*"Not what? Not at first?"*

*"Not at first. It was something else. Like she knew something that I needed to*

*know. Anyway, it wasn't allowed, you understand. By virtue of my position in management, I wasn't allowed to fraternize with the staff. Especially with flight data."*

*Outside, the rain was still slapping on the window, and the light was almost totally gone. 'In love' he wants to know. Can it be classified so easily?*

## Twelve

From his corner office, Freddie looked down on the flow of summertime foot traffic on the streets eight floors below. *Tourism, it's a good sign.* He smiled. *Good for the country, good for the airlines, good for the 'made in Korea' souvenirs and, thus, good for Freddie.* The souvenir trade, of course, was just beer money, and an opportunity he happened by on pure chance. Rule number one was to never pass up an opportunity no matter how small. Or, maybe that was rule number two, he could never remember. He met his souvenir supplier in the sauna at the Seoul Hilton while he was unwinding from a day of coercing the Koreans into signing a contract for ControlCorp to assist them on a major upgrade of their air traffic facilities. An upgrade that included off-loading a bit of old equipment mixed in with the new. As long as it was polished to a high shine, it was new to them.

These little Asian contracts served two very important purposes: First, they kept the money coming and going in so many different directions, it was hard to keep up with what exactly was financing what—a little corporate card trick. They also helped with the unexpected cash flow problems attached with all the new equipment they bought from the French—also a bunch of cheap crap, but it had a nice shiny new polish to it. He was not expecting to have to employ a full-time team of French technicians to keep it up and running. Of course, that was only until they could work all the bugs out or until they could phase out this whole messy service business entirely and make a decent living out of being consultants.

*Evolution,* Freddie pondered. It was the obvious evolution of business: first there was a business that required raw material and a labour force to produce the goods; get rid of the raw materials and just start with the labour force to provide the goods and, *voila*, the service industry is born. Then develop a halfway decent management team, get rid of the labour force and, *abracadabra*, the consultancy is born. Hell, all he needs now is to get a half-dozen Third World countries just to skip the bullshit and send him money straight to a Swiss bank account and he would be set.

He watched the tiny specks on the streets below and smiled. *Stupid assholes*

*with your real MBAs. You wasted your time.*

No university in the world teaches you what you really need to know, like how to strike up a casual conversation with a guy in a sauna and end it twenty minutes later with a handshake deal and another few grand to be made. All while dressed in nothing but a towel.

*Buy cheap, sell high. That's rule number one.* Freddie enjoyed philosophising about business, but it wasn't really about business, it was about people, and knowing people one person at a time. It was about human nature, how to sense the weaknesses, fears, likes and dislikes in your opponent. It was a talent, a skill, a gift. Hell, he could teach a class in this shit. *Or was that rule number three? Must remember to write these things down as they come to me.*

Carlton Woodcock entered the office carrying a manila folder and let out a little snort as he dropped into the leather chair.

"Carlton, my boy," Freddie said as if he had been expecting him. "Just the man I wanted to see." He sat down behind his desk, leaned back and tucked his hands behind his head. "Everything taken care of for Fiji next week?"

"Yes, Freddie," Carlton reported unenthusiastically. "Reception should have the tickets by Friday afternoon."

"Good." Freddie eyed Carlton carefully. "Everything okay? You look a little blue around the edges."

"I got my new car today."

"Great! How is it?"

"It's a Hyundai, Freddie," Carlton said.

"Great car, reliable, economical—"

"It's seven years old! And I don't want economy. I want a BMW. You've been promising me a BMW for a year."

"Well, now technically, I only promised you would get one *in* a year, so we're not that far behind schedule."

"The point is, it's a *Hyundai!* And it's used!"

"I know you're a little disappointed, Carlton, but it wasn't my decision. It came down from above," Freddie said, pointing at the ceiling.

"We're on the top floor."

"You know what I mean; the Board doesn't think it would look too good for us to go around buying a BMW for every executive in the building. People might start asking questions in these sensitive economic times."

"Yet, you're on your third."

"Yes, but that's different, isn't it? I have to maintain an image. I'm the one facing the public. When people look at me we want them to say '*Success!*' But if everybody in the building drives around in a company paid-for BMW, people will say '*Waste!*' It's a fine line, Carlton. Besides, if you recall, I lost one."

"Yeah, I remember." Carlton grinned. "It was tragic."

"Look, you're making a good salary, why don't you go down to the BMW dealership this afternoon and buy yourself one?"

"It's not the same. I'm supposed to get a company car."

"So you shall. But for us to present the right image—it's economy, for now." He leaned back again and laughed. "Shit, Carlton, when we see the cash from the M & G deal, you'll have enough money to buy the BMW dealership. How about a different BMW for every day of the week?"

Woodcock wasn't buying it, so Freddie switched tactics. "Anyway, I'll let you drive mine this afternoon when we hit the road."

"Hit the road?" Woodcock stared at Freddie for a moment, then shook his head when it sunk in. "No way, Freddie, I'm not doing another road trip with you, we're due in Auckland tomorrow and I'm flying this time. I already have us booked."

"Sorry, Carlton, we got business to take care of on the way in Palmie this afternoon."

"What business do we have in Palmerston North?"

"Chief controller has reached retirement age."

"And what age is that?"

"Hell if I know. He's 50ish. All I know is he's thinking in the wrong century and by this afternoon he will come to the reasonable conclusion that it's time to retire. *He* doesn't know that yet, that's why I need you to cook me up a pot full of numbers to make his transition easier on all of us. We get that little business out of the way, take the Beamer out to stretch its legs on the desert road, dinner in Taupo with Sir Dickhead to sell him on this deal, and tomorrow morning we'll make a quick stop on

our way into Auckland to see how our little investment is transforming Purgatory into Eden."

"We're stretching our necks out on that Freddie." Woodcock grimaced, "You said there'd be more funding by now. I can't keep juggling—"

"Don't worry, the funding is as good as there. The risk is minimal." Freddie offered a reassuring smile. "Now, back to the Fiji travel plans. Were you able to blow Amanda off?"

"No, of course not, you know she would never miss a chance to mix with upper management."

"Dammit! I didn't think we'd be able to lose her. She always puts such a damper on the fun. Ah well, it was worth a try. Guess we'll have to make time to do a little team building during our team-building weekend. Maybe we could play some beach volleyball or something." Freddie Moore could not figure Amanda Sheppard out. She seemed to be immune from his charm, which annoyed him, but didn't deter him. *Just switch tactics. Always have a plan B ready.* She said her ambition was to get more women in the business, and what the hell did he care? If it made her happy, she could hire trained chimpanzees. But it did not make her happy, nothing did; the more free rein he gave her, the more she wanted. And she never showed any gratitude. Every time he tried to compliment her on something, she would take it as an insult. What he would like most of all was to see the end of Amanda Sheppard, but unfortunately, she seemed intent on staying around and, as long as she did, he needed her support. Otherwise, she could cause a lot of trouble for him at this delicate time.

*What she needed, Freddie surmised, was a damn good screw.* He would not want to do the dirty work himself. *Maybe that hard case Hardy should be doing it, he figured, but that boy had a lot to learn about schmoozing. No, she would never go for someone so resistant to success. For her to be interested she would have to see some potential for influence, someone from head office at the very least, someone...*

Freddie grinned.

"What?" Woodcock shifted in his chair. "What's with the grin, Freddie?"

"Oh, nothing. Just in a good mood I guess."

"Why does that make me nervous?"

"So Amanda's coming to Fiji with us then?"

"Yes, I think that's what we've decided."

"Good. I may have a special project for you."

Woodcock squinted. "Like what?"

"I'll let you know. It'll be fun."

Woodcock stared at Freddie suspiciously. "When am I getting my BMW?"

"When we get our money from the man." Frederick held up his right hand in a Boy Scout salute. He had never been a scout himself, but learned a lot about scout life twenty-five years earlier when he was running a shell game at a jamboree in Calgary. "Which reminds me." He glanced at his watch. "Did you meet with his point men yet?"

"No. Not yet. And I still don't think it's a good idea."

"We need his support. Besides, don't worry. It's a legitimate investment opportunity for him."

"I know, but he's pretty savvy—and powerful. I don't like messing with him. He might not approve of some of M & G's tactics."

"Standard operating procedures in business. He'll understand."

"Maybe so, but you don't think he would be pretty suspicious if he knew we were working both sides of the ControlCorp-M & G fence? I don't think he would be too happy to discover we own two sides of this triangle. And, you know, it wouldn't be that hard for him to make a connection if he talks to his kids at all."

"Which he doesn't, rest assured." Freddie leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Don't get wussy on me, Carlton. This is business in the real world, my boy, not that textbook stuff you wasted your time on. Anyway, remember your ulcer. I swear I don't know why you get yourself so worked up. Everything we're doing is a perfectly legal, nothing more than normal practices for legitimate investment interests."

"Perfectly legal? Jesus Christ, Freddie." He put his face in his hands and started rubbing his forehead. "If anyone discovers our connection to M & G Properties, I'm going to jail."

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic. Name me one thing we're doing that isn't entirely legal."

"What? Are we talking about the same thing?" Woodcock wrinkled his

forehead and lowered his voice. "Was that one of the days you cut class in law school? The day they talked about the difference between the legal way and the *illegal* way to acquire property? Did you miss the day on falsification of legal documents, too? How about insider trading? Misappropriation of corporate funds? Bribing public officials?" He lowered his voice until he was only mouthing the words, "*collusion?*" Then raised his voice again. "Exactly what part of what we're doing is *not* wrong?"

"Oh, Carlton, you worry too much," Freddie waved off his concerns. "It may not be exactly letter-perfect *legal*, right now, but it's not *wrong*. Do you know it was once '*illegal*' for women to go out in public; for them to even be *seen* in public was punishable by death. Now we can acknowledge the important contribution they make—"

"*Where* was it ever illegal for women to go out in public?"

"Oh, someplace, how the hell should I know? Afghanistan I think. My point is times change and progress is only possible if someone of vision is willing to take an occasional risk. I guarantee you, when all is said and done, you'll be remembered as a visionary and for your great contribution to your country, its economy and its people. The pursuit of wealth is what progress is *made* of. Sure we may make a little money out of the deal, but look at what we're creating—we're creating homes for people and what is more noble than that? We're a regular Habitat for Humanity."

"Habitat for... these are quarter-million dollar homes!"

"Well, the middle-class are part of humanity, aren't they? We're not going to make any money on poor people, for God's sake. Where's your business sense?" He shrugged. It was obvious enough for even a moron to see. "Carlton, close your mouth, you look silly. Look, it's a short-term thing. As soon as all the sections are all sold, we sell our shares to someone else and we're out of M & G without a trace. Now," he pointed at the manila folder in Woodcock's lap, "is that something for me?"

Woodcock shook his head slowly and let out a mournful sigh as he looked down at the folder in his hand. "A little problem with Sir Douglas Malahide."

Freddie looked soberly at Woodcock. "What's wrong?"

"Well, it seems your ever-efficient staff at Auckland tower have a problem with the way his Learjet was being flown last week and have filed a safety incident report. Sir Doug is very unhappy."

"Damn that Amanda." Freddie shook his head. "She just loves causing trouble."

"Actually—" Woodcock looked at the paper. "It's Hardy's name on the bottom."

Freddie relaxed. "That's not so bad then. Hardy won't take it so seriously."

"Are you sure? It says here, 'the pilot's failure to comply with clear and specific ATC instructions resulted in creating a hazardous situation and threatened the safety of a DC-10.' The guy may not be much for rules, but he has this thing about what *he* considers air safety."

"So what happens to those things?" Freddie said pointing to the paper.

"The usual chain is the supervisor submits it to his manager and he, or she, sends it to us. We're required to submit it to Civil Aviation. They'll investigate—then, depending on the seriousness of the matter—either issue a reprimand, a fine or, in rare cases, suspension of the pilot's license." Woodcock looked again at the paper. "This sort of case would probably just be a reprimand if it were a private pilot. But since it's a Lear getting in the way of a DC-10, there'd be a fine too, but there's also another complication."

"Which is?"

"Well, it seems Sir Dougie enjoys getting behind the controls from time to time. That's what he was doing at the time. So, not only is *he* the one who has to take the blame, but he never bothered to get a rating to fly that particular type of aircraft. It would put him in a lot of trouble. He could lose his license, and I don't think it would look too good for the CEO of Inland Airways to be considered a hazard to air safety."

"Damn," Freddie whispered.

"And," Woodcock continued. "He says, if you can't fix it he's going to seriously reconsider his relationship with *us*. And I'm not talking about ControlCorp."

"We need his participation." Freddie scratched his neck. "So what's the problem? Why don't you just throw the report away?"

"Because, one thing I can't do from my office is fix parking tickets." He waved the paper. "Hardy's responsible for filing it and he has. Now the only one between him and the CAA who can stop it is the unit manager, Amanda."

"Great," Freddie said with a sigh. "I wonder what that's going to cost me?"

Okay, give it to me. Tell Malahide it's been taken care of and I'll think of something.  
What time are we due in Auckland tomorrow?"

"Eleven. It's a strategic management seminar. I told Amanda you would meet  
with her senior controllers and pretend to be interested for an hour."

"Fine. Throw a bottle of Jack Daniels in my briefcase for Hardy and I'll see if  
we can nip this little Malahide misunderstanding in the bud. Now," he stood up.

"Let's go grab a burger. I'm buying."

## Thirteen

"Good morning, Arlene," I said to the receptionist as I walked into the admin office. She was a middle-aged, divorced mother of three criminally inclined sons who gave her no end of heartache. "How's the family?"

"Jeffy's in jail," she said, matter-of-factly. "The other two are fine. Got a letter from Cassidy yesterday." Cassidy was attending an art school in London—a front, I presumed, to avoid the law at home.

"That's nice." The trick to not getting her started on the details of Cassidy's letter or Jeffy's incarceration was to not stop walking. I was usually safe once I made it to my office. The senior controller's office was the first along a pastel-hued corridor, the far end of which was capped by the heavy wooden doors of the executive boardroom.

Leanne was in there typing away on the computer. She was the newest of the tower supervisors. She was a short but athletic and strongly built woman with closely cropped hair and a face that glowed of fitness.

"Good morning," I said as I sat down at my desk and began moving a few things around to create the illusion of purpose.

"Morning," she said engrossed in her typing. "Oh, Tom, I've added a few notes to your training plan."

"What? You got into my training plan?"

"No, it was password protected. I swear I don't know why you're so paranoid about people reading it."

I looked around my desk for something else to move from one basket to another. "Security that's all. Remember what they told us about guarding the Corporation's intellectual property—all that stuff."

Leanne turned and smiled in disbelief. "Oh you turn me on when you talk dirty like that." She returned her attention to her project. "Anyway, don't worry. I put it in a separate file. It was just some stuff I got out of an ICAO document on developing training plans that I thought you would be interested in."

"ICAO, of course." Why didn't I think to check with ICAO? They regulate aviation worldwide. Of course they would have notes on developing training plans.

"Just a few suggestions," she said diplomatically. "I thought it might help us all to review each other's work. But you seem to be somewhat sensitive about people looking at yours."

"No, it's not that. I don't mind. It's just that I never claimed to be a writer or anything."

"Touchy, touchy. You certainly *act* like a writer."

"So have you already finished your standards plan?"

Each senior controller was responsible for a different area of the operation. Mine was training, Leanne's was standards and Denise, the third senior controller, was document control. As part of the modernization plan, we were each obliged to write a manual on our area of expertise. This, the Corporation said, was to enable a consistent nationwide standard, though I suspected it was so they could get rid of me and replace me with a book.

"I thought I was, until my meeting with her today." She looked up and lowered her voice. "She reminded me I had more to *prove* than you and that I ought to prove it." She turned back to the computer, shaking her head.

"Well, you understand, she's doing it for you. For the *Cause*."

Leanne rolled her eyes back.

I liked Leanne. She was a bit of a cynic. Denise, on the other hand, was a little hard on the nerves. Not because she was unpleasant, quite the opposite. She was bubbly and energetic, and enthusiastically took to corporate jargoneering like a Kiwi climber tackles Everest. Her career goal was to get into the office of Corporate Communications. That would be the fulfilment of her dream of "*Show Business!*" It was a small consolation to me that, being on the opposite side of the roster, I seldom saw Denise except at our regular management meetings.

"Right—well," I grabbed a few pieces of paper out of my 'in' basket that had no relevance to anything we were going to talk about. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," Leanne said as I left the office.

I went back around the corner to the executive wing where the pastels took on a slightly deeper hue, past Arlene again and paused briefly at Amanda's office. The

door was closed as it often was and I had never completely resolved the issue whether I should just enter, knock and wait to be invited in, or tap lightly and open the door carefully. I opted for the third. I think I always opted for the third.

"Good morning, boss."

Amanda was seated behind her desk, making notes on a notepad. She was dressed in conservative grey business attire, stiffly buttoned up to the neck and down to the wrists. Her hair was pulled back tightly, a style she took to wearing when she was appointed manager.

"Good morning, Thomas," she said. "I thought you promised me you were going to try to wear a tie more often."

"I am," I nodded. "Trying, I mean. But it's casual Wednesday."

"There's no such thing as casual Wednesday." She glanced down at a pad of paper in front of her—her ever-present, ever-ready agenda. "Anything I should know about this morning?"

The agenda must've been a good one for her to not pursue the tie issue. Not that the tie issue was settled—or maybe it was and I wasn't picking up on the nuances. Neckties were not something I wanted to be defiant about—I had one in the top drawer of my desk in case I needed to meet with someone from the airport company or give a tour to a bunch of school kids or something. I'm pretty sure Amanda only wanted me in one to remind me of which end of the leash I belonged on.

"All operations normal." I took a seat opposite her.

"That's what worries me. The Centre supervisor complained that you've been doing your squeeze plays again."

"They wouldn't be squeeze plays if they would give me more than three miles between arrivals." I could have told her about the radar freezing up again, but it would be hard to without using the term 'piece of shit' and that could only be interpreted as a poor corporate attitude.

"Did you ask them for five miles in-trail?"

"Don't worry about it, boss. The approach controller's not complaining. It's just the sup whining to get even for me parking in his spot last week."

Amanda nodded, as if she was weighing this information carefully, but I knew

she knew I was right and was not concerned about the petty squabbles the controllers had between themselves. She was just fulfilling her duty to pass on the complaint, I guess. Or maybe she was just using it as an opener. Her agenda always started with the most benign and worked its way up to the more controversial items. So, as far as openers went, this was not a good one.

"How's the first week of the new roster working out?"

"A bit of grumbling, but it seems to work." Admittedly, most of the grumbling was from me. The new roster started us on an early shift and ended us on a late shift, which ate into the weekend and was the opposite from what we were used to.

"And the new noise abatement policy?"

"That might need a bit of tweaking to really work. Maybe we should use it only after eleven p.m. There's still too much traffic at nine to try departing aircraft off in the opposite direction to the landings just to please a group of citizens who should've had more sense than to buy houses next to an airport if they were sensitive to noise."

"Well they are an organised group of citizens and we have to show we're making some sort of effort. See how it works for a week at nine and report back to me on it. Of course, don't compromise safety."

"No more so than I do daily."

"Also," she ignored my quip and moved right to the next agendum, "that incident you filed last week regarding the Learjet, let's see—" she glanced down at the notepad again. "That was Allen on duty."

"Yes."

"And you've listened to the tape? Are you sure he didn't make a mistake himself?"

"Yes, I'm sure. He said everything he was supposed to say—he did a good job."

"And his tone to the Learjet?"

"His tone? Rather angry I would say, but the guy deserved it."

"Yes, well, Mr. Moore called from Wellington a little while ago and said there may be some problems with that one and that your report was incomplete. You'll need to redo it before it can go on to CAA."

"There was nothing wrong it." They were going to sweep this one under the carpet. I could already see it coming. The Learjet pilot had political sway or something and called Wellington with threats of legal retribution or something else and ControlCorp was going to buckle. They would call it diplomacy. Never mind the issue of air safety, never mind the fact that the Learjet's little stunt almost took out a DC-10 with 260 people on board. Because he had money, he had far more influence than me in the court of corporate law. *The ruler of the land.*

"Well, be that as it may, go ahead and rewrite it, make sure it's letter-perfect. Mr. Moore and Mr. Woodcock will be up from Wellington tomorrow morning and I'll take it up with them then. Now, next item—" she looked at the agenda again. This was a trick of Amanda's—I think she got it out of one of her textbooks—she discouraged any debate on the subject by running it right into the next item on her list: '*we're going to double your workload, reduce your pay by thirty percent and take your firstborn child and next on our list, please ensure the tea-making area is kept tidy at all times.*' But she had an even more cunning variation on that theme; the next item was something that she knew would get my teeth grinding even more than the previous, thus force me to move on at her pace. And this morning was going to be no exception, because the next item on her list was...

"The billing system." She pushed her notepad a few inches away as she leaned back and looked at me as if I had been caught red-handed drawing pictures on the walls with my Crayolas. "This isn't going to be one of your silent little rebellions is it?"

"What do you mean? Who's rebelling? I told you guys what I thought a month ago. There was no secret. Freddie Moore and Woodchuck were there. I just think it's wrong to introduce an accounting department task into the tower cab. It's supposed to be a focused environment—eyes out the window, stuff like that. By requiring the controller to turn his attention away from the planes to enter billing information into the computer is, I believe, asking for trouble because it breaks his focus."

"Or her."

"Sorry. *Her* focus."

"Yes, Thomas. It was all very convincing."

"Apparently not convincing enough."

"I wasn't enthusiastic about the idea when they first suggested it to me either, but it does make a sense, and it does streamline the operation to have the task done at the source."

"You mean it allowed the Corporation to eliminate a few more jobs down in accounting."

I could see the muscle in her jaw twitch and knew she was getting bored with this exercise. She did not like debating because it implied a challenge to her rule. I was sure she considered herself quite a good manager and in some ways she was; she certainly gave it her best shot. The problem was one of respect. She didn't get it from the controllers because she didn't offer them the same. To the workforce, she embraced everything that came out of head office with passion and was quick to censure those who did not share her enthusiasm. When the Corporation announced that ATC salaries was the bulk of the Corporation's costs and thus the number one target area for cutbacks, Amanda readily volunteered that she could run her facility with six less staff. Then she was surprised when the staff balked—"they lack the proper corporate spirit," she said of the entire controller staff.

What Amanda never saw was what her ambition looked like to her staff. To them, her quick rise up looked more self-serving than anything else. She was barely thirty and already a manager. Probably 70% of the ATC staff were older and more experienced than her. When she talked about cutting six controllers, she was talking about cutting *them*, which did not give the appearance of being dedicated to an industry or committed to air safety. Maybe it would help her career along, but it did not do much for the six controllers who were out of work or those that remained to take up the increased workload and wonder if they were next.

In a word, to them, she *was* the Corporation. I personally did not feel so strongly as some of the others. Once you've rolled around the stir-fry with someone, it's just hard to forget the good times. Or maybe it was because she was really my last link to Milton Gorge.

The only other Milton Gorge alumnus who worked in this facility was Kenny, who worked downstairs in Oceanic. Not that I was ever a friend with Kenny at Milton Gorge—the rat kind of freaked me out. He used to carry it around in his pocket and take it out and pet it or let it sit on his shoulder. He was an okay controller and

sounded normal enough on the radio, but other than that, if he ever spoke it was usually in hushed tones only to the rat.

The Corporation forced the break up of that partnership. They wouldn't let him bring the rodent to work with him in Auckland. And, minus the rat, Kenny had a problem with focusing on his job. He was now becoming legendary for the number of incidents he's had. The poor guy's career was now on shaky ground, all because they wouldn't let him bring his furry little friend to work. I kind of felt sorry for him and think the Corporation was being too hard. After all, it wasn't the only rat in the building. Some were making six-figure salaries.

Amanda was, in a way, my last remaining link to the old days of Milton Gorge. And maybe it was the memory of the stir-fry incident that gave me a soft spot for her, but I think it was the same memory for her that gave her the tendency to ride me a bit. As if she blamed me for something. I probably took more shit from her than anyone, yet—and it was kind of funny—but I still had hope that she could one day pull her head out of her ass and start leading her troops instead of trying to face them down. After all, she was a good controller. She was intelligent, and she was not afraid to stand up for herself—if she could learn to stand up for others. I guess underneath it all, I have always been a closet optimist.

"In any case," Amanda reminded me, "your views were listened to, the decision to introduce the billing system into the tower as proposed was made and it is now your job to wholeheartedly support it."

"I accept it. I don't support it. So what's the problem? We've been doing it."

"Not to an acceptable level. Your crew has been leaving some undone on the evening shift for the morning crew to finish."

"That's because flight data goes home and there's no one to do it."

"The controllers."

"No."

"And so we get to the heart of the matter. Your rebellion." She leaned back, the strain of the leather chair sounded like she was saddling up. The corners of her mouth turning slightly upward, not so much as a smile as a lack of a poker face. She was manoeuvring me back into place.

"It's not a rebellion. I just don't want the controllers turning their attention

away from the airplanes."

"Come now, they're not that busy all the time. The reason we even send flight data home at eight is because it slows down. Half the time they all have their noses stuck in the newspapers up there."

"You sure do think highly of your staff."

"It's because I do that I know they can handle this rather minor additional task without compromising their primary duty."

"The point is—"

"The *point* is the decision is made, it's not open for anymore discussion and I expect you to comply."

Yes, of course. That was the point. Indeed. The decision was already made. By the time the decision reached us, they were not interested in discussion, only the appearance of having discussed.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, trying to stop the sarcastic downbeat.

Amanda stared at me in silence for a moment as she sized me up—something she did a lot of.

"Thomas—" she began, but then paused and looked like she was reconsidering her direction. She picked up a pencil and quietly tapped the tip on her pad, her agenda. I wondered what was next. "You realize some of these new members of your team look up to you—Simon and Allen for instance. You need to be very conscious of that fact, of the effect you have on them."

"What effect would that be?" I shrugged.

"Well, your manner can be rather... flippant, at times. It's not very professional."

"You think I'm unprofessional? That's pretty harsh, don't you think? I mean it doesn't seem that long ago when you were boasting what a good controller I am...or was."

"Your technical skill is not in question, but it's only a very small part of being a good corporate citizen. You're not doing any one any favours by being militant toward the Corporation. You only embarrass yourself and lead the more impressionable down the wrong path. I want you to promise me you'll make an effort to present a better corporate spirit. I would hate to have to turn this minor issue into a

disciplinary action. So just promise me."

I wondered for a moment whatever happened to the carefree days of our youth; when Amanda and I would roll around in chicken stir-fry; when Milton Gorge was like working at the circus. Then I remembered—it was the New World Order. It made more sense now. The Bolsheviks had staged their revolution, the social structure of the circus was changed, the clowns were in control of things and Amanda—Amanda had become Josef Stalin. 'You will become good corporate citizens or else there will be a—a *disciplinary* action. Yes, of course, a *disciplinary* action—it sounds much more civilized than a *firing squad*. I wonder if there is a ControlCorp equivalent to the Lubyanka? I mean, now that Exile Tower had been reduced to rubble and a suburb.

And I wonder how this New World Order is working out for them. One of the most basic, primal qualities of the nature of man—no, it is basic *animal* behaviour—is to be driven by instinct to repeat the same activities over and over again. We wake, we kill, we eat, we shit, we sleep, we wake again. All evolution does, every one hundred or one thousand years is to put a new spin on the same cycle and to give us more tools with which to conduct our affairs more efficiently and to kill on grander scales. We rise up, we revolt, we enjoy the spoils of war, we shit, we sleep, we rise up again. Round and round we go without really going anywhere. We become enlightened, we incorporate, we globalise, we shit, we sleep, we become enlightened again. The New World Order is really just variations on the theme of musical chairs, except that in this game those that are left standing when the music stops are not merely out of the game ...

*They're out of the game.*

"Of course, Amanda," I said. Somehow, I got the feeling the music was about to stop again. "I promise I'll put more effort into my attitude."

## Fourteen

I poured myself another cup of coffee from the executive brew in reception before heading back to my office. One improvement I had no complaint about was the coffeemaker—no more instant. I do not remember exactly when the Corporation moved from providing tea to providing coffee for the staff to drink. Coffee, apparently, was the corporate drink. They brought in a team of research consultants to determine what was the appropriate drink, the drink that made the right statement, the drink of success, the new *power-drink*. In any case, I suspected the cup I was holding was the most expensive cup of coffee this side of the space station.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hardy."

I turned my attention from the coffeemaker to the voice. "Edwin, shouldn't you be out looking for hijackers, I hear there may be some about."

"I'm more interested in bombers."

"Well, I'll let you know if I see any." I carried my coffee toward my office, hoping he would not tag along, but he did.

Captain Edwin Tucker was the head of aviation security and never missed an opportunity to hassle me. If I forgot to display my identification badge, if I put my car in the wrong place or broke the pedestrian speed limit through the terminal, Edwin was there, lying in wait. He had been a city cop before he took the job at the airport, but, to him, this was just another beat, and I was just another perp on the make—if my lingo is not overly *Dragnet*—too much TV as a kid.

"Would ya?" he asked as he walked alongside me. "Would you tell me if you heard from any bombers?"

"Yes, Edwin, I have your number on my speed dial between pizza delivery and the fire department." We approached the door to my office.

"You make a lot of jokes." Tucker stepped in front of door. "But, you know, all I'm after is the truth. Doesn't seem like much to ask for. With truth we can have justice. You can understand that can't you?"

"Except that I don't believe Owen Flynn is guilty of anything."

"Then why did he run? Why not just stay and tell the truth?"

"I don't know." I shrugged to make it look more convincing. "Maybe because some of us think truth doesn't always lead to justice. Not when you're being framed. Sometimes, the truth is, there is no justice."

"Yeah." Tucker smiled, then took a step closer and turned vaguely menacing with his conspiratorial whisper. "Sometimes you and I think alike."

"How frightening."

"Which is why I may be your only friend." He stared at me.

"Great. We'll go bowling sometime. Now, if you'll excuse me, Captain Tucker, I need you to let me into my office so that I can explain the reason I am late to this very important meeting was because of police harassment."

Tucker moved to the side. "You were his best friend."

"He had other friends."

"Not many, I checked."

"I'm sure you did. Now, if you'll excuse me." I pushed the door open and was sorry to see Leanne had left, thus blowing my story about having an important meeting waiting for me.

"Hard to believe you don't have any idea where he is, and if you do, that's complicity. See how funny that is."

"What is this? Is it Humphrey Bogart week again? Nobody told me."

"Where is he?"

"He and his family are living in my attic, please don't tell the Nazis." I shut the door behind me.

It seems weird to say, but in an odd sort of way, much like my feeling toward Amanda, I liked Tucker if for no other reason than the entertainment value. When I was a kid, all I ever wanted was to live on a TV show and this was as close as I ever got. Tucker made me feel like I was living my life out on the set of *Dragnet* which was better than some TV shows I could've been trapped in, at least it didn't have a laugh track. I think having a laugh track in my life might push me over the edge.

I sat behind my desk, linked my hands behind my head as I leaned back and stared at the tower through the office window. I think I might understand what it was I appreciated about Edwin Tucker; he was relentlessly dedicated to his job and his melodramatic search for truth, justice and the Kiwi way. He figured I could lead him

to the would-be terrorist Owen Flynn and, even though it was not his job anymore to track the guy down, it was something he would do because he felt it was the right thing. No, Tucker was okay. But as long as he continued to try and ambush me on the whereabouts of Flynn, it was my duty to continue to play dumb—or smart. We both had our parts to play, and mine was that of the wrongly accused. It was like a game. It was like a TV show. *Los Angeles, California. City of Angels and fallen teen idols, five million people with five million stories to tell. This is just one of them. It was a balmy summer evening. We were pulling a late shift. My partner is Bill Gannon. My name's Friday. It was Tuesday.*

Sergeant Joe Friday never harassed the innocent. I don't think he ever once turned on his own. '*Hey Bill, I know what you're up to; marijuana—that's right; pot, weed, grass, dope, reefer, Oaxaca Gold. Call it what you will; it's all a ticket on the express train to LSD, angel dust, blow, big H, Chinese no. 3, and a 'Frisco speedball.' I knew he was guilty, could see it in his guilty blue eyes; that's right, babyblues, ol' blue eyes, jeepers creepers where'd ya get those peepers? Call them what you will, they were eyes and they were blue.*'

At least, I don't remember seeing that episode during any of my TV Land binges.

"*Thomas, turn that thing off,*" my dad commanded as he walked in the front door, down the hall and into his office without ever pausing. His sudden appearance in my fantasy startled me as much as my dad bursting through the door unexpectedly had back then. I followed him with my eyes and when the door to his office was closed behind him, turned back to the television. It was another one of those oddities about my dad I was learning to ignore at an early age; an order without power, without follow-up. He was not a disciplinarian, he was an excessively rational man who tried to reason his way through every situation—even with a little kid. I knew, even back then, after that one little burst from him, if and when he re-emerged from his office in ten minutes, he would not say anything more about turning the television off.

Why that particular memory came back, I don't know. Maybe it was the similarity between Tucker's search for truth and justice and my dad's hopeless crusading for the same. I stood up and walked toward the window. The control tower

occupied most of the scene outside my window—it seemed oddly appropriate, the corporate structure had turned me inside out. They used to pay me to sit in the tower and look out, now I am here, outside, watching the tower. Leadership by remote viewing—that's when war became its most lethal, when the leaders disappeared from the front line and started watching from their offices while holding a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

*I should be up there—something's going wrong.*

*Your place.* That's what my dad used to say. *You must always know where you belong—it's your place. Defend it.*

My dad had his place and he defended it with his life to the very end. He was a professor of English literature. He loved literature passionately and teaching it was everything to him. He loved teaching it; he loved finding that one kid out of twenty or thirty or fifty whose world would be opened up by it, whose life would be changed and who would end up understanding what my dad understood. Maybe he liked teaching too much.

He had his own brand of corporatisation to deal with and I think that's what killed him in the end. Ambitious new deans who were eager to make the English department more cost-effective by cutting courses and driving dusty old professors like my dad into early retirement so they could have the budget to fund a new course on the interpretation of 60s television shows. Sure, I would take a class like that, but ... well, my dad, for God's sake, had once met T.S. Eliot and maintained a correspondence with Ezra Pound for years while the poet was locked up in an insane asylum.

One would think that being subjected to his obsessive love for books would damage a kid—drive a guy away. Although I never shared my dad's obsession, I didn't mind it in him. It was something. He wasn't a terribly warm person, I suspect he did not know how to be a family man—he had married late in life to a woman twelve years younger and was already forty-five when I was born. And we weren't close, but I wanted something, some part of him. So there were two things I pretended to like as a child to try to own part of him: books and fishing.

I remember the woods. Not up in Sugarloaf Ridge where I used to take my dog in my teenage years, but near the Russian River. My dad only took me on a couple

fishing trips down there, but I remember one specifically. I was ten or eleven at the time. It was just me and my dad. He was carrying the fishing tackle and one pole. I was struggling with the other pole.

"My secret spot," he called it. "Only men allowed. Just you and me, Thomas, and Mr. Burns."

"Where is Mr. Burns?" I asked him over and over again because there was no one else with us. I never knew my dad to have many friends, so I was anxious to meet this guy he spoke so highly of. I assumed he was going to meet us at the river. The more evasive Mr. Burns appeared to be, however, the more frightening he became to me. I half expected a crazy old man with no teeth, one eye and a hunched back to jump out from behind a tree laughing like a madman, at which point my dad would introduce Mr. Burns. But my dad just kept saying, "Patience my dear boy, you will meet Mr. Burns all in good time."

I had finally worn the old man down by begging him to let me come along on this fishing trip. Those few times a year he took a break from his work to go fishing were something important to him and I wanted a part of that. I wanted to share a part of him. So when I got old enough to figure out my dad could be reasoned with, I begged and begged until he relented and said I could come.

"I'm sure Mr. Burns won't mind the company of me fair wee laddie," he had said in the funny accent he loved to use when he was in a good mood.

When we arrived at his 'secret spot', no one else was there. I cautiously eyed the trees, but didn't see any signs of crazy old men. There was a surge of panic when I realized, *not behind the trees, but in the trees!* So slowly, fearfully, I turned my attention to the treetops, but there was no sign of the crazy, toothless old man with the hump.

I watched in quiet awe as my dad showed me how to bait the hook and adamantly refused to do my own.

"A man needs to learn to bait his own hook," my dad said. "Look, son, they're just worms, they can't hurt you."

It wasn't myself I was afraid of hurting.

"They're just worms, they don't feel anything—it doesn't hurt them."

My dad had acquiesced on the worms and, instead, put a small piece of

cheese on the end of my hook. It was not the worms either, though. It was the fish. I had wanted to go fishing with my dad for a long time, but had never really thought about what fishing had involved. I sat quietly praying that no fish would bite the cheese on my hook.

My dad found that extraordinarily funny. "Oh, Thomas, my boy, men have been fishing for many thousands of years—but leave it to my son to find the cruelty in it."

I suggested that he wouldn't much care for it himself if he had, say, been walking past the kitchen table and found mom had made him a nice grilled cheese sandwich for lunch, and so he takes a bite and suddenly finds himself in the tug of war for his life with a hook firmly embedded in the roof of his mouth. See how he would like that.

My father had laughed long and hard over that. "Bravo, son. The argument is logical and carries a certain weight of compassion."

His laughter still echoed in my ears. I wasn't hurt by it. I didn't mind so much hearing him laugh. He didn't often. He was more often an angry man, angry at the world, at the university, at people. Angry about things I did not understand.

I remember him sitting there laughing, holding his fishing pole with its line dangling in the water—and I started laughing too. When he had regained his composure, he announced that Mr. Burns had finally arrived.

I turned my head in trepidation, which brought another round of laughter from my dad. Then he reached into his rucksack and removed a small, leather-bound volume.

"Thomas," he said. "May I introduce Mr. Robert Burns of Ayrshire, Scotland." He then turned to the book and said, "Mr. Burns, I'd like to introduce my only son, and indirect descendant of one of your fellow pantheon members, Thomas, of Sonoma-shire in the Land of Moral Void."

That was when I realised my dad, talking to a book, was more than just a little odd.

"Och! A wee laddie he is," my dad said in his funny voice again. "But he will grow to be a great protector of worms and fish. Please, watch over him and guide him as you have me."

"You're weird, dad."

My dad looked at me in mock dismay. "Ay, that I may be, laddie, but at least I don't insist my fish sticks are caught only on a voluntary basis and put to death in only the most humane of circumstances." Then he laughed loudly.

I remained silent.

"A man needs guidance in his life," he said seriously, "and inspiration. There are not many sources of true inspiration."

I stared, but said nothing.

"Read all that you lay your hands on, son, be inspired by it, give something of yourself to the words and they will repay you tenfold. Allow yourself that at the very least." He held the book up. "Just be careful of that Bible. I can't save you from it, just be careful with it and with those who will beat you to death with it. Don't tell your mother I said that."

What he referred to was my mother's dedication to teaching me the Bible as the only true source of inspiration. It was one of those things they disagreed on.

"She finds a lifetime of inspiration and guidance in its pages, whereas I do not. But you are half your mother, and for her half, you'll need to respect that." He looked at the book in his hand. "As for me, I thought Mr. Burns might be up your alley. He faced great adversity in his life, yet he knew how to be happy and to rejoice in life. If you know how to be happy in the face of the blackness then you have risen above mere mortals."

My dad often referred to "the blackness" when he spoke, but I was always too afraid to ask him what he meant—it sounded too scary to hear. I could only piece it together over those few short years; what it meant to him and what it meant to me. I did not understand completely until the end.

Then he opened the book, there on the banks of the Russian River that day, and read aloud.

*"O Thou! whatever title suit thee -"* He recited in a loud and overly dramatic voice. *"Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie - Wha in yon grim an' sootie, Clos'd under the hatches, Spairges about the brunstane cootie, To scaud poor wretches!"*

To me, it sounded like Dr. Seuss.

*"Hear me, Auld Hangie, for a wee, an' let poor damned bodies be; I'm sure*

*sma' pleasure it can gie, ev'n to a deil, to skelp an' scaud poor dogs like me, an' hear us squeel."*

He read on for a long time, savouring the words as if they were chocolate-coated. When he finished, he closed the book and smiled as he gazed upon it.

"You'll understand someday," he said quietly. Then, as was typical for my dad, he gave me homework. I was to memorize just one verse from that poem which I would have to recite the next time we went fishing. And then he presented me with the book as a gift.

I learned two verses, though I could no longer recall the title. But we never went fishing again, so I never got to recite them to my dad. At least, not when he was alive.

I looked around my office. There was something I was supposed to do, paperwork of some sort. The incident—Allen's incident, I had to refile that. Bullshit.

"An' let poor damned bodies be." I remembered that.

For a moment I thought I could smell the stale mustiness of the blackness creeping in.

## Fifteen

*"The incident? That was the one between Pacific West and Tasman Airways?"*

*"No, of course not. This was the one before the one. This was the one they were sweeping under the carpet because the pilot had money and influence in the Corporation."*

*"I see."*

*"I doubt it."*

*"Look. I'm doing my best to follow you, but I've never heard of any incidents previous to the one we are currently investigating."*

*"That's because it was swept under the carpet, like I said."*

*"So what has it got to do with the current investigation?"*

*"Not much really. I guess." I turned and watched the rain on the window for a moment and wondered why I had thought this was a good idea. "But it gives you an idea of just who gets to investigate whom. I mean, exactly why are we not investigating that incident? Why do they want it dismissed? I'll tell you why," I turned back to him, "because the rules don't apply to those who can buy 'justice'—and believe me, it's for sale like every other public service in this world. Allen's incident was every bit as dangerous as Simon's, but the guy breaking the rules bought his way out. I knew it then even before I had to file a second set of paperwork, which was just a delaying tactic until they could find the right size broom.*

*He narrowed his eyes and stared at me for several moments. "Simon's incident?"*

*"What?"*

*"You said 'Simon's incident.'"*

*"No I didn't. What are you talking about? And why are you looking at me like that?"*

*"You said 'Simon's incident.'"*

*"No I didn't. I said 'my incident.'"*

"It was Simon's, wasn't it?"

"Of course not—if it was then why are you investigating me?"

"Because you took the blame for Simon."

"I'm taking the blame for the Corporation. Simon was downstairs taking a break."

"Why are you protecting him?"

"I'm not! Why are fixated on this?"

"Why do you feel a need to protect others?"

"I don't."

"What are you protecting them from?"

"Nothing. Nothingness."

"Nothingness?"

"You know what I mean—nothing."

"There's a big difference between nothing and nothingness."

"Yes, thank you for the lesson in etymology. I know damn well what nothingness is."

"Then tell me what it is."

"Go to Hell."

*He stared at me for a moment in silence as if he was considering my suggestion and which was the best route to take to the destination. Finally, he changed the subject.*

"Then tell me why you're protecting Flynn."

"I'm not."

"Yes you are. You're protecting him from Tucker."

*"No I'm not. Tucker's just for fun. I enjoy playing his game—it's better than TV. He likes to play cat-and-mouse, but what he never realized was that my life is more of a cartoon than reality—and in cartoons, sometimes the mouse outsmarts the cat."*

"Again with the TV. That's interesting."

"Then you're easily amused."

"But you still know where Flynn is, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

*"So, I ask again, why are you protecting him?"*

*"I'm not, I'm just keeping his secret. He's my friend."*

*"But he's a wanted man."*

*"Only as a scapegoat."*

*"The police say he's dangerous."*

*"They've been told what to say. Like you."*

*His lips disappeared as he clenched his jaw and his eyes turned hard. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Maybe it was going too far, but who was to say this guy wasn't feeding everything he heard in this room back to the Corporation—or even to the police? Maybe we were even being recorded. In any case, I didn't care what they knew about me, my dad, my ex-wife, my life, but I was not going to be goaded into dobbing in my mates.*

*Of course I knew where Flynn was. He was alive and well and innocent and framed and on the run. What more could a movie producer ask for?*

\* \* \*

Closing down the tower at Milton Gorge did not go down well with a lot of people. The Corporation referred the complainants to their bottom-line. There was just no way to make a profit at an airfield that could only charge the users six dollars per landing. To fully support the infrastructure they would need to charge five times that. And no pilot would go for that. 'Sure we understand your feelings,' the Corporation sniffs and shrugs and says, 'okay, if you don't want us here, we'll go.' And they were gone. The controllers were gone and the pilots were left to their own devices. 'Y'all be careful now.'

Some of the older controllers were disestablished, which was the Corporation's nice way of saying they were sacked. I bet my dad the English professor would say—if he were still around to voice his opinion—that Thornie was the only one who could be correctly described as being 'disestablished'—that is, made to no longer exist. The rest were just sacked.

Us lucky ones were shipped off in all directions: Wellington, Christchurch, Ohakea, Invercargill. They offered Flynn a position as a weather observer at Scott

Base. Kenny, sans rat, was sent to Oceanic. Amanda and I were the up-and-comers. We were sent to Auckland. Freddie Moore himself pulled me to the side and told me I should apply for the newly advertised tower supervisor position there. That forward-thinking people like me were just what the Corporation was looking for and he had it on good authority that I would be a shoe in for the job, if I knew what he meant, then he winked and squeezed my elbow. I had no idea what he meant.

Amanda also applied for the job. If I had been doing the hiring I would've hired her. She was far more qualified, far more ambitious. Even without her implied threats of sexual discrimination I still would've hired her. Instead, the Corporation chose another route. They decided they needed two supervisors and hired both of us. Which worked out so well they decided to call us senior controllers instead of supervisors and to hire a third. They've recently hired a fourth, although he has not shown up in Auckland yet and, if I'm not mistaken, I believe they are now looking for a fifth. Or maybe I'm wrong on that, maybe they're just planning ahead and looking for my replacement.

I had no complaints going to Auckland—the place suited me fine. It gave me a chance to get an apartment in the big city and to continue my search for a halfway decent Mexican restaurant. That search continues, but the city had a few more benefits. There was enough variety of pubs to allow me to further develop my drinking skills without gaining a reputation in any one particular establishment. It was also sufficiently cosmopolitan—in its own quaint, provincial way—to enable me to go for whole days without having to answer for my American accent, confess I did not know Bruce Willis personally or explain American foreign policy. Or be blamed for the President of the United States, which I always found amusing not only because I did not vote for the man—that is, had I voted, I would have voted for someone else—but also because I was probably the only person in this country who had a history with the guy. Of course, I'm talking about regular people. Some heads of state might argue that they had a relationship with the Pres. After all, it was the Prime Minister of New Zealand who pointed out to the President of the United States at last year's APEC conference that he had some salmon pâté on his tie. Who could forget? It was in the news for three days.

By the time I had finished my training at Auckland and settled into my new

role as senior controller, I think it was safe to say that my career had reached the highest point in its trajectory. Something that usually took a retrospective look to actually determine, but I knew it then; it was going to be all downhill from there.

As for Flynn, well, trajectories were his problem too. Not career trajectories, but, specifically, the difference between the trajectory of a bird-scaring cartridge and a flare. I was only kidding about his position as a weather observer at Scott Base. He didn't stand a chance of being offered a position anywhere. All they needed was an excuse. And who better to find some dirt on Flynn than Freddie Moore, who was up from Wellington on one of his housecleaning tours. It only took Freddie Moore one round of drinks at *The Tie Down* to dig up a good enough reason to get rid of Owen Flynn forever.

"What?" Flynn looked genuinely dismayed at their reasoning for dismissing him. "But it was only a Corolla."

"Nevertheless, destroying a flight instructor's car with a signal pistol shows a dangerous level of negligence."

"But it was an accident."

And it was as far as I was concerned. I mean, he thought it was a bird-scaring cartridge he loaded—it was a mistake anybody could make.

"Was it? I wonder, Mr. Flynn if you do not use the term 'accident' a little too often to explain your own inadequacies, your unprofessional conduct and simple negligence."

"Well, if I had done it on purpose, I would've been much more efficient. I'm telling you it was an accident that's all. And I know the difference between an accident and on purpose."

"Nevertheless, you're fired. Now go away."

Early the next morning, Freddie Moore began to understand what Flynn saw as the difference between an accident and on purpose when he emerged from his motel room to find a piece of notepaper under a brick in the place where Freddie had previously parked his BMW. The two neatly printed block-lettered words on the paper offered very little clue as to the whereabouts of his car—all the note said was; "for instance."

All was explained in less than hour when they found the smouldering ruins of

Freddie's BMW in the middle of the runway at Milton Gorge.

That only ensured Flynn's dismissal. It didn't turn him into a fugitive. To his credit, he denied having stolen and set fire to Freddie's car. I respected his adamant proclamation of his own innocence, although I didn't believe him. He was my friend and I know I was supposed to believe him, but, I mean, it was a fairly clear threat he made—and it was so like him. Looking back, though, I wish I had believed him because I think I had something to do with turning him into a fugitive.

Owen Flynn was the quintessential loner. In the year or so that I had known him, I learned very little of his background. He was born and raised somewhere in the South Island, probably an only child because he never mentioned siblings and probably from a broken home because he never spoke of his mother. His dad is or was a high country musterer in South Canterbury and Flynn grew up in some of the most rugged land this country had to offer.

All the time I knew him at Milton Gorge, he rented a foreman's shack on a local farm and, besides his job at the tower, put in a lot of hard work tending to his landlord's farm. That job gave him access to dynamite, a piece of circumstantial evidence that would not work in his favour. The locals all seemed to know him and like him, but he still kept to himself and had few people that could honestly be classified as a friend. In the time I knew him, two or three women came in and out of his life, but he never bothered to introduce them to me.

Yet, I considered him a friend and I'm pretty sure he felt the same way. I think he liked me because, like him, I had trouble fitting into the system. Although, as I often argued with him, I did, in fact, *try* to fit into the system, I *wanted* to fit. Whereas he seemed to go out of his way to disrupt the system and certainly took a good deal of pleasure in his disruptions.

"You only *think* you want to fit," he said as he flicked his fishing line across the water during what was becoming one of our regular trips out to the river. He was trying to teach me to fly fish. My attitude to the actual act of fishing, the hooking and killing bit, had not changed from the time I was a boy, but I still liked the idea of the fishing trip. Or maybe it was the 'ideal' of the fishing trip. I'm not sure. What I do know is that Flynn just smiled and said "sure" without asking a single question when I told him I would let him teach me how to fish if he would listen to some Robert Burns

while we were fishing. I never actually put him through that, never actually read him anything or discussed what any of it meant to me with him. And now, once again, I wish I had the chance to go back and do it. You never know when you're never going to have the chance again. All I needed to say was, "Of course I believe you Flynn. If you say you didn't steal Freddie's car, then I believe you."

But I didn't say that and Flynn, without friends, disappeared so completely, one could easily start to wonder if he ever existed. His landlord said one morning he woke up and Flynn was gone. He had packed what few things actually belonged to him, left everything else, and was gone. My guess is, feeling somewhat betrayed, too.

The one thing he did not take with him was his fishing rod, which he left laying across the bonnet of my car. Maybe he meant it as a parting gift. I only thought of it as a reminder of my betrayal of a friend.

Freddie never pressed charges on the car. He got the two things he wanted most: to be rid of Flynn and a new BMW. So, as yet, Flynn was still not a wanted man. He didn't reach that status until a few weeks after his disappearance. And this time, a lot of people wanted him.

Had there been any actual witnesses, it probably would have been a spectacular sight. One moment, Milton Gorge tower was standing there like it had for fifty odd years, and the next, just as the morning sun was casting its first few rays on the sky, there was an explosion that shook the walls and rattled the windows of every building on the field and every farmhouse within a two-mile radius. It must have been spectacular. It was not just big, it was precise—it was professional. Other than the tower being completely demolished, the only damage recorded on the airfield was eleven broken windows and some superficial damage to three aircraft from flying debris.

The preliminary police investigation decided that the tower had been demolished by someone who had a reasonable knowledge of what he—or she—had been doing; that the explosion had blown the base of the tower and probably sent the tower cab straight up before it fell back and was, itself, smashed to bits leaving little more than a pile of splinters for them to sift through.

As soon as I heard about it, I drove out to Milton Gorge to see for myself. It was stunning to see something that had become such a part of the landscape so

completely gone. I stood at the far end of the runway, by myself, and cried—partly for the tower, partly for Flynn, partly for Thornie.

After a quick consultation with ControlCorp executives, Flynn was chosen as the number one suspect. The police commenced a dragnet for him or any other suspicious looking persons, as they did not rule out the possibility it was the work of another group or hostile foreign power or, possibly, France. However, they were unable to locate Flynn or anyone else that looked like they might be out to blow up an airport.

The day Milton Gorge Tower was blown to bits and all evidence suggested Owen Flynn had become a dangerous, vengeful man on the warpath—a domestic terrorist—that was the day I realised the depth of my betrayal. That was the day I realised he was, and always had been, an innocent man. And I knew then what the fishing rod meant.

## Sixteen

"How much do you drink?"

"It took a long time to get to that question. I thought that would be one of the first."

*He shrugged.*

"The usual, I guess."

"And how much is that? The 'usual'?"

"Well, do you mean how much do I drink at work? Is that what you want to know? Or how pissed do I get before I go to work?"

"Do you?"

"Of course not. It was just a joke."

"I know."

"Obviously not a very good one."

"How much do you drink?"

"Not as much as you might think." I shrugged. "Couple beers, maybe. Sometimes I'll go for days without."

"Spirits."

I paused and stared at him. What the hell was he getting at? I thought this was supposed to be about the one incident but something told me he knew a bit more than he was letting on about Allen's run-in with the Learjet. They told him about the scotch, I would bet on it.

I was required to meet with this corporate shrink-wrapped prick to explain my actions on the previous Thursday evening in which the air traffic system failed. I was tired then. But did he actually think I had been drinking that day? As he leaned back and studied me like I was his lab rat, was he thinking I had been drunk at the time? Having been at work for more than ten hours when the incident occurred—what did he think, that I had a bottle stashed in the back of my bottom drawer? That I was breaking into the liquor cabinet in Amanda's office for a quick nip? Or spiking my coffee? How do you explain to a guy like this? Yeah, maybe I drank too much at

*times, but for God's sake, I was a pilot and a controller. You'd have to be an idiot to be dipping in while on the job. It would be fatal. Maybe that's why some pilots and controllers did drink to excess when they partied, because they were stymied so much of the time.*

*Yeah, I drank sometimes. Had a few beers with the boys down at the pub occasionally, a glass of wine or two when I went out to dinner. And spirits? Yeah—only one though—I liked the odd nip of scotch. That, I started at an early age. In fact, I believe I was savouring the occasional wee dram before I had my first beer. But it was not because I was a teenage alcoholic like that might suggest—hell, it usually was just a little sniffing and rolling a bit across my tongue and could hardly be considered drinking. No, it was because I wanted to know something and for some reason, the way scotch tickled my senses and numbed my tongue seemed to help me know it.*

*And yes, I had a bottle stashed in the bottom drawer of my desk.*

\* \* \*

The blackness, I thought, that's what nothingness was—creeping in along with the night. It would envelop my dad and drive him deep within himself. It would start with the silence. My mom could notice it and she knew I could. We would exchange a nervous glance as we passed the mashed potatoes around the dinner table and she would struggle to find a conversation in quiet small talk; 'Thomas got an A on his math exam today, didn't you dear?' 'Yes, Mom.' 'That's very good—was it a difficult exam?' 'No, not really.' 'Well, I'm glad you don't have too much trouble with math. I never was very good at math myself.' And with the exhaustion of that subject, she would fall silent again for a few minutes until she could see the tension rise in Dad's chewing, then she would find another innocuous topic to cover. She always steered clear of asking me about my English exam.

Silence was the beginning for him; first his words and thoughts receded from us, and eventually he would disappear himself. Either he left the house without a word or into his study. My mom, always apologetic, would explain it to me as 'one of his states,' that he wasn't himself and usually send me to bed early.

But silence was sometimes only the beginning of 'his state.' Sometimes in the morning he would be back to normal and talking as usual and other times it would get worse and turn violent—never toward me, and never toward my mom, but on more than one occasion I would be awakened late in the night by a sudden crash of something in his office as his anger turned outward. That's when it was worst. That was when he acted as if no one else in the world existed.

Once, when I was eleven, perhaps as I approached adolescence I was just getting braver, perhaps not, but torn between fear and courage, I ventured down the darkened stairs after hearing one such outburst. I listened at his study door for a long time, without making a sound, my ear pressed to the door. All had seemed quiet inside. I cautiously turned the knob and eased the door open. In the dim glow of the lamp, I could see my dad slumped down in his sofa amid a scatter of books and clutching a nearly empty bottle. I watched him without moving from my position at the half-opened door. His eyes were open, glazed and staring at nothing. After what seemed like a long time, he slowly turned and squinted at me as if he did not know who I was. My hand clenched the doorknob.

"Come here, Thomas," he finally said in a low, hoarse voice.

I inched forward slowly. I could see his cheeks were wet.

"Are you sick, Dad?" I asked, barely above a whisper. "Do you want me to get Mom?"

He shook his head, "Come here," he repeated and held his hand out to me.

As I approached him, I could smell the alcohol on his breath.

"I'll be okay," he said. "I just had a bad day at work. Some people who don't know how to do my job want to tell me how I should do it. Isn't that crazy?"

I nodded.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked.

"I want to fly airplanes," I told him without hesitation.

"Oh my, a pilot," he smiled, but his eyes were full of tears. "That is good news for your mother and me. You'll be able to fly us all over and you probably won't even charge us for the tickets."

"I'll give you free tickets."

"Thomas." He pulled me into him and hugged me. He hugged me so tight it

frightened me—not because I thought he would strangle me, but because he seemed so afraid to let go. The foul smell of alcohol was strong. Mostly I think it came from him, but when he had let go of his bottle to hug me, the contents started to drain onto his leather sofa. At first, the smell reminded me of the cigars that my grandfather—on my mother's side—used to smoke on his back porch every night as he stared into the darkness of the night. Since then, the smell of cigars has always reminded me of a kind of darkness, of night time, of quietness, of silence within and without. My dad occasionally smoked cigars too, but it was the smoky, musty peat smell of Scotch whiskey that reminded me of my dad in this mood, the smell of his kind of darkness, his kind of night. Still hugging me, he said, "Whatever you want to be when you grow up is okay with me, but promise me whatever you do, you'll be very good at it. No matter what other people say." Then he released me and held me at arm's length.

"Promise me that, Thomas."

"I'll try," I said.

He stared at me in silence, then began to nod slowly.

"Well," he said as he tousled my hair, "that's all I'll ask then. Now go to bed."

That is what the blackness was for my dad. I did not understand it then, but I began to on that night. A long time after he had died, maybe a full year, I went into that study which had remained unchanged and unused from when he was alive. In his lower left hand desk drawer there was another bottle, about one-third full. It was *Glenfiddich*, I remember that. I sat behind his desk and opened the bottle, putting my nose to the neck and slowly pulling in that aroma. If I closed my eyes, it became easier to see my dad, but with that vision of him also came hints of that blackness. Sitting alone in the musty, smoky smell of that old study, the room was cloaked in shadows. The first time was frightening, but I went back and did it, again and again.

I saw the bottle in my lower left desk drawer. "I tried," I whispered to myself. I had been a pilot, but never went beyond flight instructor—never went on to the airlines, or crop-dusting, or bush flying or anything else that might have made him proud. Never got my mom free tickets. Never did anything. Coincidentally, in my office at the airport, in my desk, in the lower left hand drawer is a bottle of *Glenfiddich*. It is there simply because a pilot friend picked it up in duty-free on his way through one day and gave it to me. It is only a pint bottle, the seal is unbroken. I

never drank at work and I was not about to start now. I should take it home and drink it, but instead I leave it there. Someday, after a long, hard shift, when the work is done, while Amanda is entertaining a few execs in her office with a drink, I could pull it out and offer a drink to Simon or Allen or Sarah or anyone else who had also put in a good hard day's work. I fully intended to do that someday. But somehow, for now, the bottle in my desk drawer still seemed a little illicit.

It was not the bottle of *Glenfiddich*, however, that I was reaching for in my bottom drawer. It was my mail. On my desk I had an in-basket and an out-basket along with a few other baskets, but this was mail I had pulled out of my letterbox as I left home this morning. The personal mail I usually put away in the bottom desk drawer until I had a chance to get to it for the simple reason that I was paranoid and afraid that, left in the open, Amanda might tuck her corporate letter opener in her belt, slip in here while I'm up in the tower and read what my mom has to say about Uncle Frank's impending hip-replacement surgery.

Today's was an especially good haul of junk mail, real estate brochures, another phone bill, the latest copy of *ComTalk*—the ControlCorp staff magazine—and this letter. I had been waiting so long I had almost forgot. I turned it over in my hand and inspected the return address again. My fingers trembled as I peeled away a corner and began to tear it open, but I was stopped abruptly with a gentle tap on the open door.

"Sarah," I said, catching my breath just short of a gasp. Guilt washed over me as if she had just caught me jerking off. All I was doing was opening my mail. It was not even porn—*ComTalk* had certain smuttiness to it, but it was soft-core at best.

"Busy?"

"No," I glanced down at the letter in my hand. "Just sorting through the junk mail."

She glanced at the letter in my hand and the mail scattered across the desk. "Oh, I see you got *ComTalk*." An almost imperceptible smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Anything interesting? I haven't seen my copy yet."

I glanced down. "Oh yeah, Freddie Moore has just won Azerbaijan in a card game and ControlCorp has contracted to supply one controller named 'Tom' to Rangoon—I'm thinking about applying." I dropped the letter on top of the junk mail,

then scooped it back into the drawer. "Just junk actually."

She smiled, but had not moved from the door.

"Come on in. Close the door." I got up and walked over to her. She closed the door behind her and leaned back against it gently as I leaned in closer.

"Tom," she whispered. I was close enough to feel her breath on mine.

"Yes, Sarah?" I whispered back, then leaned into her and gently touched her lips to mine before she could speak another word. Her hands came up to my chest as if to push me away, but did not.

"We shouldn't," she said as I briefly released her lips. "Not here, not at work."

"I'm on a break."

"We need to talk."

"We need to act." I pressed my mouth against hers again and my hand was running up her thigh on its long wonderful journey to her breast when we were both jolted by the muffled sound of someone about to come through the door. I jumped back and turned toward the window. As the door opened I pretended to be in the middle of a sentence—"and from now on the billing system will take highest priority and we will no longer ... Oh, hi Leanne," I said as I turned back and did my Oscar-winning best to look surprised to see her standing in the doorway, shifting her gaze from me to Sarah and back again.

"Oh, excuse me," Leanne said, looking at least as uncomfortable and embarrassed as I felt. She was not an idiot; she had bumped the door into Sarah's back when she walked in. Sarah's hand was instinctively smoothing out her hair. I paused in my speech and became suddenly, overwhelmingly, self-conscious of my mouth, rubbing my lips on each as if I was trying to even out my Chapstick. Sarah did not wear layers of thick red lipstick so there was probably not a trace, and I would have been a lot cooler to stand there and stare back at her, but instead, my own hand reached instinctively across my mouth.

"I just needed to get my, ah," Leanne pointed toward the filing cabinet and cautiously moved toward it, not taking her eyes from me as if she half-expected me to go for my gun. "My standards plan," she said as she finally remembered what her job was. "Amanda wanted to go over it before tomorrow's meeting and, ah—I'll just get it and be out of your—I mean..."

"It's okay, take your time," I said unconvincingly. "We were just discussing the, ah, thing."

Between the three of us, only Sarah did not feel the urge to fill the awkwardness with senseless prattle. Instead she pretended to be interested in reading the spines of the ATC manuals on the bookshelf.

Leanne fumbled with the filing cabinet and retrieved her standards plan. I caught Sarah's glance as Leanne slammed the drawer shut, looked up, and all three of us simultaneously caught our breaths at the sudden appearance of Amanda.

"Oh, Leanne, bring next week's roster as well, we need to—" Amanda was saying, but paused and looked around at us suspiciously. Her eyes moved from Leanne to me to Sarah and returned to me as if in her quick assessment she decided she had just walked in on a plot to assassinate her and I was the obvious ringleader. "Oh, and Tom," she paused again briefly. "Stop in and see me before you leave today."

"Yes, of course, I'll do that," I stumbled to fill a verbal void. "I'll be finished at about four and then—"

"Yes, Tom," she cut my babbling off with a wave of her hand, "just before you leave." She turned and headed back down the corridor. Leanne followed.

"Shit."

"You want this closed?" Leanne paused with a raised eyebrow, her hand on the doorknob.

"No," I said. "Leave it open."

When Leanne had left I pushed the door shut and took a step toward Sarah, but she raised her hand and stopped me.

"We need to talk."

"Right." The phrase 'we need to talk' has never preceded good news. Besides, talking is overrated, trust me, I would know, I've been in a lot of talk-heavy relationships. Talking is like a drug. At first they find a good conversationalist is stimulating, even fun. Then they want it in heavier doses and it gets to be dangerous fun. By the time we get to 'we need to talk,' what they're really saying is 'I *need* to talk—and you, my supplier, have dried up, so you're out and some guy named Ramon is in. Ramon, I tell you, is such a good listener. What a sensitive guy and he knows

shiatsu.' I walked back to the chair behind my desk, dropped into it and quietly waited for her to begin talking.

It had started innocently enough with Sarah. A few months ago, when she had just started working in the tower, Simon, Allen and I were getting off shift and were heading off for a quick beer at the airport bar. I asked Sarah if she wanted to join us. I never expected her to say 'sure.' She didn't strike me as the beer-drinking-hanging-out-with-the-boys type but that's what she said. Innocent enough. She's not much of a drinker—an occasional glass of wine and, if I recall correctly, that day she only had a Diet Coke.

What am I saying? If I recall correctly? I recall *specifically*. I was sipping my Speight's Gold and watching her sip her Diet Coke. She was laughing at one of Simon's bullshit stories the moment I became mesmerized by the curve of her collarbone. For some reason, I was thinking of a luge track; a smooth, graceful arc, so delicate yet so strong, so flawless. At the time, I was not consciously thinking of having sex with her. I was just thinking she had a quality I had not met before. It was not anything I had interpreted as perfection, it was more like *completeness*. She seemed too normal to be working in this business.

That's not to say intelligent, talented, witty and well-balanced were qualities not usually found in air traffic controllers. That would be far from true. I know many intelligent controllers, even a few talented ones and one or two witty ones. Well-balanced, forget it. But I think there is something about the nature of the business that turns a person into a cynic. It is not an easy job to learn, but once it *is* learned, once the trainee becomes the seasoned pro, the tedium inches in like an imperceptibly slow flowing tide. You get good at your job, you peak early in life and then where? All that's left is to do the job day after day for the rest of your life and that's when the intellect starts to work against you. When the job gets too easy, the brain has too much time on its hands. No. That wasn't it either. It was imagination that had the time.

Simon and Allen were both intelligent enough too. Well-balanced? It was probably his lack of balance that got Simon the job. The guy had an ego that ran a few blocks ahead of his skill. He was from the borderlands; he was a cowboy. Allen had a fairly low-key ego, but lacked the imagination to get himself into too much trouble.

As he giggled at the ridiculously exaggerated exploits of Simon, I realized he was not so much cynical himself, but went along with the cynicism of others. He was not a leader, but a reliable supporter and will probably be the long-term dependable type that never gets the glory.

But Sarah, she was just different. It was her total lack of cynicism that made her seem out of place. What I knew for sure that first time we went out socially was that she was, in some undefined way, an extraordinary person. I did not know if anyone else saw it, but I did. What I also did not know then was that as I followed that collarbone down the curve of her neck, I had already launched myself down that track.

She was on my team, I saw her almost everyday at work. We talked about things that had nothing to do with airplanes. It was refreshing. I started looking forward to going to work and disappointed on the days we did not work together. She liked camping and skiing, so we could talk about outdoor activities. She liked literature and music—so we could talk about that. She just seemed to be interested in everything, from my dad the lit. professor to the many social causes I was pulled into by my ex-wife, though I may have given her the impression I was slightly more of a leader in that area than I really was. I'm not sure what she found interesting in me and was content not to ask. Even then I was not thinking of sex—or did not think I was thinking of sex. I did not even realize at the time how fast my toboggan was going down that track.

A few weeks later, I saw her socially for only the second time at Simon's birthday party. I was feeling pretty loose after a few drinks and we were in a quiet corner having an intense discussion of something or other—or, rather, I know exactly what the discussion was about. She loved to prod me on American literature, and she was proposing the argument that *Huckleberry Finn* was a homoerotic fantasy.

"Feminist claptrap," I protested, knowing a little something myself about what buttons I could push with her too. "Can't it be simpler than that? Can't it be that it just harkens back to the simplest time in a person's life? That moment *before* puberty when the kid has the maximum freedom without being terrorized by hormones, that moment *before* sex and relationships screw us up. Can't it be a simple juxtaposition of the brutal realities of life seen through the perspective of youthful ignorance?"

I'm not sure why I felt such a strong urge to sound like I had any idea of what I was talking about, or to even debate an issue she possibly knew more about than me. All I know was that the passion I felt was invigorating and as hard as I tried to keep my mind on her argument, I kept being pulled back to the collarbone and the smooth skin of her neck.

"But don't you think the relationship between Huck and Jim is covertly homosexual?" she countered. She let out a quiet, kind of sultry laugh and moved closer to be heard over the loud music filtering in from the lounge.

"You don't think the orphan just longs for a father figure before society forces him prematurely into the role of man himself? Maybe he just wants someone to go fishing with one more time before the world changes forever. Maybe—" I paused, or maybe I kept talking and my words just faded away to my ears. At that moment, without any conscious plan, I reached up and stroked her collarbone, caressed her neck. At that moment, I started thinking of Sarah and sex in the same frame.

Instead of pulling away, she leaned forward to meet my lips. Her hand reached around and gently touched the small of my back. It was the beginning of a long passionate night that never once considered the consequences.

Since that night, we've been having a lot of fun. Movies, dinners, concerts—we even went mountain biking a few times. Our tastes in videos differ widely, but that just makes it more fun. It gives us something safe to debate. I'm sure Simon, Allen and most of our other workmates knew something was going on, but keeping it secret added to the sense of adventure.

*Adventure.* That's what I suspected appealed to Sarah. She was born and raised in Auckland, was close to her family, did a Bachelor's degree in feminist literature at Auckland University. But she never did the big O.E., never went off on any great adventures to explore the world. She was trying to live up to some parental expectations of being a good girl; don't smoke, don't drink and date only nice church-going boys. But somewhere, down deep, was a rebel and I think I might have been the rebellion. She had a lot going for her, but was starved for a challenge—and I am nothing if not a challenge. That's why I tried to keep it casual, spontaneous, because as soon as she started analysing it, she would want to 'talk.' And when that happened, we were finished.

"Tom," she said as she sank into the chair opposite me. She paused, as if she could tell my mind had drifted. "We need to talk."

"Talk? About what?"

"About us—I don't know what's going on, but I feel like you're pulling back from me."

"Pulling back?" This sounded familiar. I knew how this talk ended; divorce papers. "This is not the time or place. Can't we wait until tonight?"

"Yes, of course, we can. But this is part work. I'm resigning."

"What? Because of me?"

"Maybe. Or maybe it's just me. Either way, I think it would be easier if I were not here."

"It would be easier on this facility if you remained working here."

"It's your career. It's just a job to me—and I can find another job. I've already had another offer, one that would allow me to go back to school and finish my masters."

"Another degree? How many do you need?"

She leaned back and said nothing. It was a stupid thing to say and very unprofessional. But at the moment I did not feel like a boss giving an employee some career counselling. I felt like a guy about to get the boot by someone who wanted to bury herself in books. I felt like a guy opening the divorce papers for the first time—*irreconcilable controller*, you're out, the pilot's in because he's focused, he knows what he wants, he's mature and he knows shiatsu.

"I'm sorry," I said. My voice trembled making me feel even less in control of a situation I should have been in control of. "The supervisor in me is supposed to be supportive. I think encouraging you to continue your education is straight out of the corporate supervisor's handbook."

"Don't worry about it. You're a fine supervisor."

"If it's me then—if you want—I can move you to the other side of the roster. Put you on Denise's team. And I'm sure she can accommodate you going back to school. If it's me, we can—" I paused and turned my attention to the window in an effort to not look at her. This was all out of place. This was my worlds getting mixed up again. I was supposed to be sitting here procrastinating about filing more

paperwork on Allen's incident and hating what I've become professionally. There is supposed to be a clean line between the professional and the personal. One is a mask I wear to cover up the flaws of the other. It is firmly fixed in place during work hours—and now she's trying to pull it off and leave me naked in public. "So—is it me, then?"

"No. I don't know—maybe it's me. Or maybe it's just us. I don't know. I'm just not very good at these casual affairs. It's like you let me in long enough while you're in the mood for fun, and as soon as it's over, you shut the door again. I say something and you shut the door."

"That's ridiculous," is all I could say in my defence. She was starting to sound a lot like Janey. But it was bullshit. Why was it that they always wanted me to lay my feelings bare? Did it ever occur to them that I had no feelings to expose? Maybe I was a lot simpler than any one gave me credit for.

"I love you, Tom. I don't want to smother you, but I want more out of a relationship."

"You're not smothering me."

"So why, when I asked you to meet my parents this weekend, you suddenly remembered a fishing trip you were planning? You know, it was a big thing for me. I've been afraid of what Mum and Dad would think of you ever since I first met you. I finally told them about you, about us. Then you just shut the door—you had a fishing trip."

"I'm sorry. I forgot to tell you about it but it's kind of important."

"Right. You can't do it next weekend?"

"No."

"And I can't come?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Will you be seeing another woman there?"

"Jeez, no, of course not—I'm going alone."

"Alone, and I can't come. I'm supposed to accept that as the complete explanation and walk away feeling like I know you?"

"No. Listen, I'm sorry. I *can't* explain it here and now. You just got to trust me—can't you just trust me?"

"I do. I just don't know you."

"Of course you know me—you know as much as there is to know."

"I know nothing beyond the basic facts of your place of origin, your date of birth and that your father died when you were twelve."

"Well what more do you expect from me?"

"Honesty."

"I'm honest with you."

"You're not even honest with yourself."

"Oh, for Christ's sake! Here we go again." I stood up and walked over to the window to check on the tower. Still there. "*Get in touch with your emotions* time. Well, these are my emotions." I turned back to face her. "Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm sad and presently I'm a little angry."

"And do you ever love?"

"Yeah, give me a break—of course." I turned back to the window.

"Do you love me?"

"Come on, this is not the time or place."

She got up, walked to the door and paused.

"You know how I feel about you," I said quietly, still facing the window.

"No, I don't know anything about you," she said, barely above a whisper. She opened the door.

"Janey, wait!" I said as I spun around, then stopped myself. I only briefly caught the hurt look in her eye—the look of betrayal. "I mean, *Sarah*. Shit—" but she was gone.

"Shit," I said again and looked around my office, wishing momentarily for something to break. But even if everything in this fucking office wasn't made of unbreakable plastic or oak-veneered particle board, it would call more attention to myself than I needed right now. So I sunk into my chair behind my desk and glanced around at the mounds of bullshit paperwork and documents that were supposedly making life more efficient. My eyes stopped on the opened bottom drawer, the bottle of whiskey and the stack of mail. I could see the torn corner of the unopened letter sticking out.

"Shit—"

Yeah—she took my betrayal as well as Flynn. And left as quickly.

## Seventeen

*"So the day before the incident, you were occupied with problems in your relationship—which, in itself was a cause for stress and problematic considering you were not supposed to be fraternizing with your staff—plus the other incident to deal with—"*

*"And the training plan that was supposed to be ready the following day."*

*"Yes. So you had a lot on your mind."*

*"You think I might be able to plead insanity?"*

*"I'm sure you could." He grinned at me as if he thought he was being hilarious—it just looked a little disturbing. "But, more to the point, I would say it was obvious you had a lot on your mind and that, considering the human factors that were at work at the time of the incident, your distraction would be understandable. As for the fraternizing—the Corporation may frown upon that, but I don't think they're allowed to institute any formal policies against what two consenting adults do in their free time. What I'm saying is, your career as a supervisor may suffer. I can't help you there but there should be enough evidence, plus your otherwise good record, that you won't suffer any long-term detriment to your career."*

*"You mean you can convince them not to fire me?"*

*"Of course. Unless—"*

*"Unless what?"*

*"Unless you're lying to me. If this is covering up for someone else, even if it's just based on some misplaced sense of loyalty to your friend or colleague, if you lie to an official investigation, they will fire you without further discussion."*

*"Why do you think I'm lying?"*

*"To protect someone else—that's the one the review board will get you on. That's the one that'll threaten your job. But you're also protecting yourself from something and that's what I'm more interested in right now. I don't mean lying here, lying is too strong a word. I think what you try to do is make order out of chaos."*

*"Yeah, that's what they pay me for."*

"Yes, you're right, it is your job, isn't it? Interesting choice of profession. But I'm talking about another kind of chaos." He tapped his finger to his temple.

"You think I'm the one who's the nutcase? Or just a control freak?"

"Absolutely not. What I want you to see is that life is full of disorder—things that are unfair, unplanned and unexplainable; the sudden death of someone still in their prime, the collapse of a marriage, emotions, fears, anxiety, depression, memories that keep coming back—it happens all the time, we all suffer from some or all of these attacks on our well-being from time to time. We have to face them, deal with them, but that doesn't mean they have to make sense, that everything has to fit into some neatly arranged, logical pre-scripted sequence."

"So you think this is all fabrication?"

"No. I think this is the order that you have forced upon it. What I want to know is something about the disorder."

"I'm not following you."

"Sarah, for instance—her behaviour in your office was emotional, even a touch irrational to confront you on such a topic during work hours."

"I agree."

"What I want to know more about is not so much what was going on inside your head at the time as to what was going on inside your heart. She was emotional; you were not. She was obviously fishing for an 'I love you', why didn't you give it to her? It would've been the simplest, quickest way to nip it in the bud at the moment and defer the relationship discussion until after hours. Why didn't you just say to her 'yes, I love you'?"

"Because—" I hesitated. We were supposed to be discussing my fitness as a controller—how the hell did he sidetrack me into discussing my love life? "Maybe I didn't."

"Have you ever said 'I love you' to anyone?"

"Of course, I'm sure I have."

"Janey?"

"Sure—maybe a few times. I'm not terribly demonstrative about that sort of thing—but most guys aren't. I'm sure I said it—at least a couple times. One would think at least on our wedding day. Anyway, she knew."

"Did she? Did you? Did you love her?"

"Yeah—of course. Once."

"Who else do you love?"

"Christ, do we have to go there?"

"Yes, we do."

"Of course I have people I love."

"Your mother?"

"Of course."

"Your dad?"

I paused and glared at him. "Yes."

"Did he love you?"

"What has that got to do with Tasman Airways almost running into Pacific West? Tell me that—what has my dad's feelings toward me got to do with anything?"

"Everything. Did he love you?"

"Yes he loved me, of course he did. I guess—" I looked down at my shoes. "I don't know—maybe not. Maybe he hated me. What the fuck difference does it make? He's been dead for twenty years for God's sake."

He leaned back and stared at me for a full minute before he spoke again.

"Did you sort out things with Sarah?" he asked.

"I tried. It's one of the reasons we're here—because I was trying not to lose her. It may surprise you, but in fact I did try to sort it out with her. I went to her house that night and tried to explain things."

"You tried to impose order on it?"

"Yeah. I tried to impose order on it. I tried to make sense of it. I tried to understand it. What the hell is wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

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"I thought you might need a friend," my dad had said when he gave me the puppy for my twelfth birthday, then he switched to his funny voice and added, "'Your wily snares an' fechtin fierce.'"

I lifted the puppy from the box up to my face. "Wiley," I said and the puppy approved by slurping his smelly little tongue across my nose.

"Wiley?" My dad asked in mock dismay. "Well, I was hoping for something a bit more classical like *Wordsworth* for instance. Or perhaps abstract whimsy like *Phaedo*, but if you must take it on down to the working class, then I should say, 'Mr. Hardy meet your Mr. Laurel.'"

"Can we take him fishing with us, Dad?" I asked. I had been trying to convince my dad to take me fishing again and now summer was over, school had started, and the weather was showing the blustery signs of autumn. But there was still the weekend.

"Of course, Son."

"When?" I knew if I didn't pin the old man down on these promises, they would soon be forgotten.

"Oh, you're a cunning negotiator, my boy. Let me see," he rubbed his chin in serious thought. "Can't do it this weekend but how about next weekend? On Sunday."

"Yeah!"

"Now, Edward," my mother interrupted. "I don't want the boy missing church."

"Well, I can't do it Saturday, I'm meeting with the dean that morning for breakfast." He looked like he was about to brush it off for another week or two, but then turned back to my mom. "Now, Marion, I'm sure the Lord won't mind if we spend one day worshiping Him in his greatest temple—nature."

Mom thought about this carefully.

"Please, Mom," I pleaded. "I want to take Wiley fishing."

"Well, okay," she said reluctantly. "Just this once, we don't want you making a habit out of this." She walked back into the kitchen shaking her head as if she may be worried about my soul.

My dad winked. "Small victories will win the war, Son," he whispered. I smiled. I had no idea what he meant, but was smiling because it made me happy to see him in high spirits and joking. It had been a good birthday. Wiley was the only gift I remembered. My mom made my favourite dinner—hamburgers—and a chocolate birthday cake. My dad had even put a tiny piece of birthday cake on a plate

for Wiley. Before I went to bed that night, I studied a bit of the Robert Burns poem that I was going to recite for my dad when we went fishing. It was not easy to learn because the words all sounded made up, but I decided if I could learn just one line a day, by the time we went fishing, I would know a whole verse, maybe even two, which would please my dad.

As the week progressed, the days got cloudier and my dad got quieter. I was reprimanded more than once that week by my teacher, for letting my mind wander, but I was unrepentant; I had a dog to get home to and a fishing trip to think about. And this time, I would use real worms on the hooks.

But we never went fishing again.

On Saturday morning it had rained. My dad had been most of the morning with the dean and, when he returned, he went straight to his den and shut the door without saying anything. He was not feeling well.

Later in the afternoon, my mother called me into the house. She was going out to the store to pick up a few groceries and wanted me to play in the house until she got back because it looked like it might start raining again. She reminded me not to bother my father until he came out of his den.

"He's not feeling well," she said. Her face was pale.

So I went to my room and worked on the Robert Burns poem, while my mother went to the supermarket. After a little while, Mr. Burns' funny language was making me dizzy so I took a break and tried teaching Wiley again how to fetch a ball. The tennis ball had been too big for Wiley to get his mouth around, so we switched to the smaller red rubber ball mom had brought back from the store a few days earlier. But every time I tossed it across the room, Wiley would go grab it and then didn't want to give it back. We'd end up playing tug of war with it until I would finally get it back and was able to toss it again. I was starting to think it would be impossible to teach this dog to fetch a ball and drop it at my feet.

I heard a thud downstairs—as if someone had bumped their head. I figured my dad had dropped a book on the floor or something. Wiley pricked up his ears, dropped the ball from his mouth and let out a short whimper.

I don't know why I cared if my dad had dropped a book, but something didn't feel right. So I thought I would go to investigate.

"Dad?" I called quietly at the door to his office.

There was no response, no sound, no movement. It was, by nature, a quiet house—but this was different. This was being alone. I *felt* alone in the house.

"Dad!" I called again, but still no response.

I pushed the door to the study open just a couple inches. "Can I come in, Dad?" I whispered through the opening. I peeked around the door. It was dark in my dad's study, the light was off and only a dim grey glow seeped in through the shades. The room had a bitter, musty smell.

"Dad, I'm learning some Mr. Burns for you. Do you want to hear it?"

At the desk, I could see the dark figure of my dad with his head down on his blotter.

"Dad? Do you want to hear it?" I stepped inside and walked toward my dad. I thought maybe he was having a nap. I reached up to nudge him awake and put my hand in a puddle of tea that had spilled on the blotter. It was warm. It was still warm.

My dad had died at his desk. Heart attack. I knew it then, I guess, when I touched him and he wouldn't move. Maybe he was just napping, but I think I must've known he was dead then because all I could think of to do at the time was recite him some poetry. As if that was going to wake him.

"*'Great is thy power and great thy fame,'*" My voice trembled as I whispered the words slowly. "*'Far kend and noted is thy name; an' tho' yon lowin heugh's thy hame, Thou travels far, An' faith! thou's neither lag, nor lame, Nor blate, nor scaur.'*" Dad?"

"That," I said to Sarah. "Is more than a basic fact about me."

I don't remember exactly what time it was when I felt so inspired to go over to her house and stand at her front door telling her something I didn't want to talk about. It wasn't easy to let her see me trying hard to keep my emotions under control, but with a few drinks, one can be brave enough for just about anything.

"The reason I want to go away by myself this weekend is because it is the anniversary of that day—of the day we were supposed to go fishing. It's just something I need to do, okay?"

She reached for me and pulled me close.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her face was buried in my shoulder.

"No, I should've—"

"Come inside."

"No—I can't." I pulled away. "Listen, Sarah, you were right about me."

She shook her head slowly. "I shouldn't have pressed you. I don't want you to feel trapped. I just get scared sometimes—"

I touched my finger to her lips. "You were right about me shutting people out. I guess I'm a bit scared too sometimes."

"Come inside," she said again, a tear rolled down her cheek.

"No. I'm going home." I paused and looked her in the eyes. "I've got to go home."

"Tom?"

I don't know what else she wanted to say to me. I couldn't, at that moment, imagine if it would be enough. I was also starting to sway and was thinking maybe I had had a wee bit too much to drink. So I just said, "see you at work tomorrow" as I turned and walked into the darkness. It felt empty.

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"*What felt empty?*"

"*I did.*"

*He nodded and did not shift his eyes as he leaned back, raising his hands in his Zen-prayer-thing which he positioned in front of his mouth as he studied me.*

"*So your dad and Thornie Rumbold died in very similar ways?*"

"*Yeah, I guess so.*"

"*And you found them both?*"

"*Yeah, I guess so.*"

*"I don't understand the tea though? How could it still have been warm if the body was cool? I mean, tea would cool within minutes, even seconds if it had puddled—whereas a body takes hours to cool."*

"*Don't ask me, I'm not a coroner. Maybe it just felt that way to me.*"

"*Of course, that must be it. But it's funny though.*"

"*I'm glad you're amused.*"

*"No, I don't mean it that way. I just think it was odd that your dad was drinking tea in his office. Didn't you say he was, like you, a confirmed coffee drinker? And he liked his scotch."*

*"Yeah, I guess I might've said that. So what? Maybe he was trying something new."*

*"Or maybe it wasn't tea you remember—maybe it was coffee."*

*"Yes, of course. It probably was in fact."*

*"You were probably just confusing it with Thornie."*

*"If you say so."*

*"It's a common enough thing we all do."*

*"What is?"*

*"Mixing memories. It was a terrible thing to find your dad dead when you were all alone. Traumatic for a young child and because you don't necessarily remember all the details, you use other memories—like finding Thornie—to fill in the details."*

*"That doesn't make sense. I remembered my dad's death long before I even knew Thornie."*

*"Yes. Which makes me wonder if maybe Thornie had not been drinking tea."*

*"Of course he was. I remember that clearly."*

*He nodded. "Yes—it is quite the coincidence."*

## Eighteen

I was reconsidering my position on the backward shift rotation the next morning, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling and careful not to move too suddenly lest I upset my delicate condition. We were all generally opposed to the idea of starting our work cycle on an early shift and ending on the late. Traditionally, it was the other way round, which offered a longer break between cycles. At the moment, however, I was thanking the god of all things corporate for not having to drag my damaged body out of bed at five-thirty in the morning to get to the early morning shift. Perhaps the Corporation was onto something after all when they hired a whole team of consultants to decide they could save the cost of seven-tenths of one controller by switching the rotation of shifts around. This new set-up allowed me to drink more during my shift cycle instead of waiting for the end of it.

*Allowed? No, that doesn't sound right—that sounds dependent or too master-slavish.* I had promised someone—I believe it was the facilitator at our Team Building for Team Players seminar—that I would choose my words carefully to focus on positive attributes. The new roster *enabled* me to drink more. It *proactively empowered* me to explore new directions in my body chemistry.

*Shit. I could do this; I could be a corporate guy.* Just give me one more chance. I promise I'll make good this time.

As I lay on my back I noticed my bedroom had a slow turn to it. That was never a good sign. I carefully tilted my head just enough to see the large green numerals of my clock radio: eight-forty seven. That was late for me but had we been on the old roster rotation, I would've been two and a half hours late already. Bless those corporate boys. Maybe they were right about all these cost-cutting measures. Maybe this is a better world. I'll have to ask someone to send me a postcard someday and let me know how their new world order worked out in the end. Was it better, worse or just different?

The fact that I had slept through from whatever time I had decided to stop drinking last night to the relatively late hour of eight-forty seven in the morning

without waking up was not entirely by chance. I used the last swig of scotch to wash down a couple of sleeping pills, knowing how shitty this alcohol stupor would make me feel compounded with the lack of sleep that too much alcohol usually caused.

Today was going to be a hell of a long day. My shift normally started at two p.m., but there was that damn management meeting I had to attend today at eleven o'clock. Two hours of that bullshit, then a full shift. And I would have to talk with Sarah again tonight. This time sober.

Had I stayed with her last night, had I taken one step closer and gone in, I know exactly what she would have done. She would have opened her arms, forgiven me and all would be well. That's just the way she is.

Instead I left. Not because I was angry or hurt, but because it was over, I was not going back to her. She was right about me and my problem. Janey had complained about the same thing and she was my wife, for God's sake. How much can a person change? I tried. I tried. But it never seemed to be enough to try—you don't score points for effort in the game of love, it's either win or lose.

*Love? Was that what it was? Be careful, boy, it's a dangerous game. Love can be fatal.*

I thought things were going pretty well with Sarah. There was something about her that made me feel she understood. And judging from the pain I've been feeling over this decision to part, I think I may have been more attached to her than I wanted to admit. We had our fun, though, and now it's done. Still, there was something about her, I don't know. Did it feel this bad when I left Janey?

*I left her? Or did she leave me?* I think we both just started walking in opposite directions. *Why? Why did we do that?* There were good times with her too; in the beginning. Ol' Janey and I hit it off from the very beginning. I met her at a party...

"Oooh, a G-man," she said when I told her what I did for a living.

I had only been a controller for three months. I was still in training but I was getting a lot of mileage out of the job title.

"And you can still sleep at night?" She asked.

"No, not really. I'm an insomniac."

"Maybe it's your conscience keeping you awake. After all, your boss is an

environmental rapist."

"Who? Big Ted—he seems alright—but I don't think he's much of an outdoorsman. I mean, the guy must weigh three hundred pounds." I was serious. I honestly and quite stupidly thought she had something against Ted Kazniak, the tower manager.

"I'm talking about the President," she corrected me. "You work for the government—he's your boss."

"Oh, yeah, him—right. Yeah, he's a real asshole. Won't even say hi to me when I see him at the water cooler." That made her laugh, which was a great relief to me.

Actually I was quite turned on by Janey's militant spirit. Our first date was to a Greenpeace protest of a nuclear powerplant. We ended up in jail—how many people can say that about their first date? Well, it wasn't really jail. The police came around and herded us into a van, emptied us into a high school gymnasium, where they separated the boys from the girls and let us cool our heels for about six hours. When they "processed" us, they were really only looking for the hardcore troublemakers. Guys like me, they just threatened us with the prospect of having a criminal record then turned us loose again. Actually, with me they didn't even do that. When I told them I was an air traffic controller—a fellow G-man—and that I got roped into this whole event by my infatuation with a radical, we all had a good laugh and they looked her name up and told me that she was spending the night. They told me to come get her in the morning and, hey buddy, good luck. Laugh. Wink.

In fact, I was quite the coward. I was there in body, but I never even opened my mouth to join in the chant. When the police came and started pushing and shoving, Janey said, "go limp!" and I just quipped, "I bet you tell all the guys that." Ha ha. I didn't go limp. The cop said, "this way" and I said, "thank you, officer."

When they let me out I figured it was too far away to drive home and come back the next day for her, so I checked into a motel, ate dinner at McDonald's and went to a movie, by myself. It was an Arnold Schwarzenegger film, I don't remember which one, but he saved the world.

The next morning, I collected Janey from the gymnasium-jail and told her I had just been released only an hour earlier. Cowardly, yes, but it scored points with

her. She decided there was hope for me and we started seeing a lot of each other. It was exciting—always having that threat of a criminal record hanging over my head. At the time, I also felt like, for once in my life, I was making a stand—doing something to make a difference. Of course, I wasn't doing anything. I was just standing close to someone making a stand

I proposed to Janey at a rally for the National Organization for Women. In retrospect, it seems quite ironic and in fact uncharacteristically brave on my part, judging from the scowls I got from a lesbian couple who overheard my proposal and promptly urged Janey to reject my offer to enslave her.

Alan Alda was waffling on about something or other on stage. I was bored out of my skull and, without even thinking about it, turned to her and said, "Hey, why don't we get married?"

Janey was momentarily at a loss for words, which gave the lesbians a chance to put their suggestion forward about having me castrated. Janey smiled at them, which turned into a smirk as she looked back to me and said, I think for their benefit, "No, I won't to marry you. But how about if you marry me?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Let me think about it. Do you make much money?"

Anyway, we got married a couple months later and I never told her that I never did anytime in jail—that, instead, I did time in a reasonably-priced, clean and comfortable motel, and paid my dues by having to sit through a hundred bad quips from Arnold Schwarzenegger. That was just the first of many lies I lived with Janey.

*Shit.*

So why do I miss Janey so much? She was a good person. Militant, yes—but it was because she believed so strongly in acting against social injustice and not being one of these pretentious, BMW-driving yuppie twats who sit around and talk, talk, talk, but do nothing until tax time when they send a fifty dollar check to World Vision. No, Janey wasn't like that. She followed through with action, she gave something more valuable than money, she gave her *time*. Hell, she gave something even more valuable than *her* time—she gave *my* time. But I let her. I let her spend my money, too. I let her tell me what to believe and how to show it.

For the nearly four years that we were married, I grew more and more jealous

of her causes. They got her attention, they were important and I was jealous. I was angry, it got in the way, our marriage was running its course in record time. Suddenly we were 'over' but not before I did something really stupid in an ill-thought attempt to impress her.

We had a fight that lasted well into the night. She had finally decided that my support of her causes was disingenuous and I admitted it was—but not because I did not believe the causes were for the good. Hell, I was all for protecting the environment and civil rights and putting more into the education system and righting social wrongs. After all, I was a liberal. However, I just could not handle the guilt anymore. The fact was, I didn't want to spend all my weekends chained to trees. I wanted to learn how to golf. And I'm sorry if the CEO of Domino's Pizza publicly supported the pro-life campaign. I didn't give him money for his political beliefs, I gave it to him for his pizza—it was good pizza. And I liked war movies. I've probably seen hundreds of movies with men killing men in them and they never made me feel like it was okay to kill other people. Except for the occasional porn, movies never made me feel as guilty as my wife did going on about catering to the Hollywood machine that was corrupting our minds. One can only take so many three-hour Czech films about a woman's internal struggle for freedom, told in silent, poetic, black and white imagery and almost always ending up in suicide—either the main character's or mine.

We went round and round in circles for hours. I tried to cut the argument off by saying I had to get some sleep. I was doing the early shift the next day when Air Force One was flying in and the tower cab would be full of secret service agents and management. That only got her started off on "my boss," the environmental rapist who was trying to push a bill through to open up some national parks land to logging.

"Logging!" she shouted at me.

"It's a renewable resource!" I shouted back. Bad move—one might've thought I confessed to owning a sweatshop in Indonesia or being a republican. I slept on the sofa that night.

No, I take that back. She slept on the sofa that night—we were a totally liberated household—but not before she got her last word in.

"It's not *what* you believe in that bothers me. It's that I don't know what that

is because *you* don't know what that is. It's your total lack of commitment. You know, you should try sticking your neck out every once in a while, putting something of yourself on the line for something you believe in." She took her pillow and a blanket and headed toward the sofa. From the other room she added, "By the way, have you read the President's proposal—it's vague, it will open the door to oil drilling and God knows what else."

Janey was right in a way. I was controlled by a certain amount of fear. I did not know if I really wanted to stay married to her, but I was more afraid of being divorced. So on my drive to work early the next morning I hatched the plan that I thought would impress her. I would put something on the line. I would make a statement. And I did.

As it turned out, the statement was: Tom Hardy is an idiot.

There is a procedure we follow strictly when Air Force One is scheduled to arrive. All traffic at the airport stops for fifteen minutes before and fifteen minutes after the President's plane. That's a lot of empty space surrounding that airplane. Before arrival and again before departure the runway and taxiways are 'swept' by an army of security personnel and then kept sterile—that is, no one uses it until the President is done using it.

Security is tight, with secret service and CIA swarming the airport, including inside the tower. Facility management is expected to put reliable, seasoned professionals on the control position. When Ted Kazniak told me I was going to be on the tower position, talking to Air Force One after it was established on final approach, I should have taken it as a compliment—that he trusted me enough to not embarrass him, the facility or the profession.

When Air Force One checked in just inside the ten-mile final, and since there was not another aircraft in the sky, the correct procedure was to issue a landing clearance. The book said something like: *a controller shall not unduly withhold a clearance.*

Not me, though. Instead, I said: "Air Force One, good morning, continue number one for runway three-zero left, surface wind two-eight-zero degrees at one-two knots."

"Clear him to land," Ted said, as if I was just forgetting that part. He was

listening in from the coordinator's position.

"I will," I said to Ted, "just a second."

This gave the pilot enough time to consider his lack of clearance too.

"*Tower?*" the pilot said, "*are we cleared to land?*"

"Not just yet, sir," I said, "we need to clear something up first."

"What?" Ted said.

"*Say again?*" the pilot said.

I took a deep breath and keyed the mike. "I need to ask your boss a question of clarification on his national parks bill. Could you put him on please?"

"What the hell are you—" Ted started to say. I was not watching him and he was just outside my peripheral vision, so I could only imagine the look on his face. A secret service agent made a cautionary move toward me from the side. It looked like I might get that criminal record after all.

"*Tower—*" the pilot sounded somewhat shocked at my request. "*Say again?*"

"Your boss, you know, the President," I said in my calmest, most professional voice. "Could you put him on please?"

For a big guy on the verge of a heart attack, I was surprised by the speed at which Ted could move. In one fluid motion, he yanked my headset plug out and plugged in an external microphone, leaned forward toward the mike, his face had gone beet red and he looked like he was in the middle of aforementioned coronary. Yet, as soon as he keyed the mike his voice was utterly calm. It was magical how soothing his voice sounded in contradiction to his current emotional state. It was Zen.

"Air Force One," he said in his gentle, dulcet tone. "Disregard the previous. You are cleared to land runway three-zero left, surface wind now two-seven-zero at one-two knots."

It was at that moment, watching Ted do his job despite everything else, that I understood what professionalism was. I instantly respected him and instantly became aware of how I had just betrayed this man who should be idolized, not mocked.

A secret service agent escorted me down to Ted's office. Somehow it reminded me of my first date with Janey—I don't know why, but it was like coming full circle—where I sat in silence for over half an hour when Ted finally came down.

I had already decided that I would not fight back, that he would probably

come down here and start beating me with his fists, but that I would, finally, just go limp and accept it. When he came in, he took his chair and remained silent for what seemed like an eternity.

"Why?" he finally asked, barely above a whisper. "Why did you do that, Tom?"

My plan was simple enough. Knowing that the newspaper would be listening in as well, I figured they would report it that some stroppy controller tried to challenge the President on his environmental policies, which would raise the issue into public attention and the President would be forced to address it at the campaign rally. I would get in trouble, but it would blow over. Janey would be impressed that I was willing to put my job on the line and look at me with the same adulation she did on our first date when I was, supposedly, willing to go to jail to make a statement. That was the plan at least—but it didn't unfold like that.

Instead I looked at Ted, opened my mouth to try to explain it to him and then something happened. I just started sobbing. I am ashamed to admit it, but I just started crying. I was twenty-eight years old, I was a professional air traffic controller, I was expected to be the guy who made order out of disorder, to remain cool and in control while surrounded by chaos—and I was crying like a child in front of my boss. I started blubbering about the fight I had with Janey and how I had fallen in love with a militant democrat and she was ruining my life. How she was driving *me* to ruin my life. It was embarrassing; I acted like a baby.

To his credit—and considering what I had just done to him and his integrity—Ted did not hit me once. In fact, he was very gentle and kind, which made me hate myself all the more for doing it. As I tried to explain to him, it was just supposed to be a little prank. That's all. A prank.

A stupid prank. One small comment made on the radio frequency. The truth is, I would never have refused the pilot clearance to land. That was one of the details added to the story when it became a favourite among controllers in the area—as was my militancy, my uncontrolled wrath. The story grew, pumped up with all sorts of dramatic details how I tried to kill the President. At first I tried to correct the errors, particularly when the local chapter of the Sierra Club gave me an honorary lifetime membership and selected me as their Man of the Year. But nobody cared about what I

had to say and they believed only what they wanted to believe. They wanted to believe it the way it would've been delivered on True Life Misadventures or America's Favourite Career Catastrophes (Sunday at 7, 6 central). In fact, it was just a single comment. A stupid prank.

I thought it would cause a little stir, make the local news and go away.

They fired me. Well, not exactly fired me. Ted liked me—said I had a great future, but that it was just really a stupid thing to do. So he told me to resign in lieu of dismissal and that he would support my reapplication when things blew over.

Janey, for some reason, was not impressed and we still broke up.

*Jesus. What a fucking mess I made.*

Getting out of the country seemed the best solution. Run away run away. Run far enough and you end up at Milton Gorge—Exile Tower—it was, of course, entirely appropriate for my career progression.

Then a resurrection and my career is reborn, and I am a corporate citizen. Did I ask for this? No. But I accepted it as I have always done when choices were presented and I chose not to choose but let the impatience of time choose for me. Now another choice and a chance for me to put things straight. To go back to where I made a wrong turn and take the right one. There was a way out for me—the way *back*. I had to take it. That's why I had to leave Sarah. I had to go back home.

## Nineteen

"It's the land of opportunity," Freddie said as he gazed across the empty field that would be his shopping mall. "That's what this place is. No, even more than that. It's the *Promised Land*." He turned to Woodcock, seated next to him in the BMW. "Don't you see it, Carlton? Can't you smell it?"

"I can smell *something*, Freddie," Carlton said distractedly, as he looked over the documents in his lap. "You know, if they were to do an audit on ControlCorp right now, somebody might get curious as to why the Corporation has invested so much money in M & G Properties."

"Because it's a good investment—and it's part of my job to make sure we make good investments." He turned his attention back to the sub-division rising from the ashes of Milton Gorge aerodrome. "And look what we're creating. It's beautiful."

Carlton looked up at the once rolling green hills that now looked like an open wound and the block of houses with terracotta-coloured roofs.

"Before you know it, there'll be waves of terracotta lapping at the horizon. As far as the eye can see." Freddie sighed and tried not to get misty-eyed. "I see they finally got rid of that Aeroworks eyesore and not an airplane in sight. It's so ..." he paused.

Carlton looked at Freddie.

"So peaceful," Freddie whispered. "Peace on Earth—that's what our sign should say. Don't you think? 'St. Miltonville—Peace on Earth.' What do you think, Carlton?"

"Catchy," Carlton mumbled, then returned his attention to his documents.

"You need to work on that sense of vision, my boy," Freddie said. "Or maybe not—that's what you have me for—I'm the ideas man."

"Yeah, and I'm the guy going to jail." Carlton shook his head.

"Never. Just stick close to me and you'll be okay." Freddie turned the key and the engine purred to life.

"We need to stop by the M & G office, to pick up the papers for our meeting

with the Man."

"Of course. On our way." Freddie pulled back onto the highway and punched the accelerator.

*Another long car ride with this sour puss.* Freddie did not know why he bothered. He could have flown to Auckland, but he was having too much fun in his new car. Besides, this gave him a chance to stop in and see how his idea had become reality. He had this vision the first day he saw Milton Gorge. It was prime real estate cluttered by hangars and machines and noise. Through that, however, he had seen *this*—and this was beautiful. He got burnt on real estate once, so it was fitting that it would be real estate where he would redeem himself.

Fate must have been on his side even if it did need a little nudging here and there. First Rumbold dies, then the tower is reduced to rubble. Hell, no wonder the operators were so nervous. Leak a little document suggesting the CAA was going to decommission the aerodrome entirely and open it up for developers and watch how they crumble. Like rats off a sinking ship. Chumps. When Aeroworks finally bailed, that was the end. Milton Gorge was gone forever.

And from those ashes, rises a whole new community. Affordably priced housing for all who could afford it. *St. Miltonville Estates.*

"Milton Gorge Estates?" Freddie had scoffed at the suggestion, "Sounds like it belongs in the bayou." He thought his original suggestion of 'Miltonburgh' had the classiest sound to it, but that was thrown out by the other partners when Carlton Woodcock came up with those bullshit numbers to his bullshit survey in which eighty-seven percent of the respondents thought the place was to be called 'Milton Berle' and of those, sixty-four percent approved. *Smartass.*

The partners decided on 'St. Miltonville Estates'—which only brought a small protest from the religious community who claimed to have never heard of a 'St. Milton.' Then it was Freddie's turn to come to the rescue and reassure them that they had done extensive and expensive research and discovered the existence of St. Milton—who lived in Scotland a thousand years ago and is now the patron saint of corporate attitudes and stray cats. That was enough to quiet the church groups who were quite fond of both Scottish saints *and* stray cats. But, then again, Freddie knew that.

"You're looking terribly stressed out," Freddie said. "Remember your ulcer, Carlton. We don't want you getting sick in the car again."

"Believe me, I haven't forgotten my ulcer, Freddie."

"I just do not understand why you are so worried about this. We, as private citizens, saw an opportunity and seized it. We invested in real estate. We found a few investors, we formed a real estate development consortium and we invested in your country."

"What if we get audited? What if the ControlCorp board wakes up from its naptime? What if—"

"And what if the sun explodes tomorrow? Screw it. Live for the day, Carlton. Besides, none of that is going to happen. I promise you—you take care of your end, I take care of mine. Trust me, the board has far more important issues to focus on, and the IRD—well, just never mind, I got that covered."

"Where's my Mylanta?"

"I think you left a couple bottles in the glove box. Look, Carlton, you're a good man, you're doing a good job. You've just got to learn to be more trusting here. The day will come when you can write your own ticket. Hell, if you want to spend all your time thinking about airplanes, no problem, you can be the CEO of ControlCorp this time next year."

"CEO? You think?" Woodcock perked up.

"Sure—why not. You're the perfect man for the job. I'll personally put your name forward to the board."

Carlton narrowed his eyes. "What about you?"

"Shit no. I don't want the job. Too much work. I'm perfectly happy being the ideas man looking for commercial opportunities and all. That's more my style. After all, diversification is the name of the game, and that's what I'm good at. Diversification." Freddie smiled, then quietly sighed as he turned his attention toward the scenery rolling passed his window.

*Boredom*—that was the real reason he could never be bothered taking on a job like CEO. It would be just too bloody boring. He needed more variety in his life. Leave the actual management tasks to the hopelessly boring, unimaginative chumps like Carlton Woodcock. He would probably make a bloody good CEO, come to think

of it. He was a first-rate number cruncher. Twist them this way to make it look like a profit when a profit was needed or that way to make a loss when a loss was needed, or just so when it was needed as evidence. It took a certain talent to do that. Freddie could not be bothered, but Carlton was a regular whiz-banger. Manipulating numbers was Carlton Woodcock's talent, and recognizing other people's talent was Freddie Moore's.

"But you'd be willing to work for me?" Carlton said, his lips still ringed with Mylanta.

Freddie shrugged. "Gee, Carlton, I think of us as more of a team but if you want to put it that way, sure, why not? I'd be honoured to be your humble servant."

"You're so full of shit, Freddie." Carlton pulled the top off his Mylanta again and took another long, slow drink.

Freddie smiled. "I'm just getting warmed up, Carlton—after all, we've got a strategic management meeting to get to in Auckland."

## Twenty

The ControlCorp boardroom at Auckland airport was on the mezzanine level of the admin section, at the far end of the corridor from my office. The room, with the tables removed, was large enough to accommodate an audience of sixty or more comfortably—which they did from time to time whenever the management wanted to sell the general staff their latest and greatest new idea or to explain the latest restructuring.

I sat quietly, looking up at the ceiling. Denise was chatting away with the woman across the table from her, but the rest of us remained subdued. I wondered if any of them felt as hungover as I did. *Oh, the pain.* I closed my eyes and tried to block out Denise's perky voice and senseless chatter. *Play some music. Ah, that's better, the Restructuring Waltz.* When the music stops, if you're not sitting down, you're out. Then they hold a gun to your head while you write a memo to the staff explaining how you've voluntarily decided to leave ControlCorp to pursue other career goals, get some business cards made up calling yourself a consultant and go on the dole.

*To be that important.*

They sometimes went to great lengths and expense to restructure depending on how high up the person who was being restructured out of existence rested on the corporate food chain.

*Me, they would probably just fire. Or murder.*

I pondered the possibility as I sat at my position at the table. For a smaller meeting, like today's, the tables were arranged in a long rectangle. One end was reserved for Freddie Moore and Carlton Woodcock, who had yet to show up. Then, along the left side would be Amanda, who would probably show up when Freddie and Woodchuck did, and Leanne and Denise, who sat to my left. I was on the end opposite the head, that is, the foot of the table. On the other side of the table was a skinny guy with a large nose, bad skin and an overly prominent Adam's apple that someone had introduced as Linus Boswell from accounting. He had come up from Head Office for this meeting and none of us had any idea why he was there. He was

very nervous looking and was pretending to be deeply engrossed in his own paperwork so as not to converse with any of us.

To my right was another head office person, an attractive woman in her early thirties with a friendly smile. Her name was Susan and was apparently an administrative aide to Freddie Moore. Although, why Freddie needed to fly his own secretary up for our meeting escaped me. Especially since, according to Susan, Freddie had not flown up himself, but was driving up with Woodchuck.

Between Susan and Linus was possibly my least favourite person in the entire Corporation, and the one who Denise was at present busily kissing up to—a severe-looking woman with a sharp, angular jaw, and closely cropped coppery red hair. Her name was Gloria LaCoste and, as a rule, she hated all pilots, all controllers and TV news people. She didn't hate *everybody* but don't get her started on those three groups, who were all overpaid prima donnas as far as she was concerned, as were politicians, all *other* people who worked in television and stevedores.

I had met Gloria on several occasions, anytime there was anything newsworthy going on, she and her long pointy nose would be here digging around like a kiwi looking for grubs. More than once I would turn around and find myself face to face with her and her notepad. She talked a lot, asked a lot of dumb questions, listened very little and scribbled vigorously on her notepad. She was the corporate communications manager. 'Corporate communications manager' was a modern term, but in fact Joseph Goebbels had exactly the same job description as this woman. Her job was to add the saccharine to bullshit and she considered herself very good at it. Whenever there was an article in the newspaper about ControlCorp, it was Gloria being quoted offering the slogan of the month. Whenever there was an air traffic news story on the TV, it was Gloria fronting up to provide a face to the industry and offering the subtlest of implications that it was someone else's—usually the controller's—fault. Personally, I was terrified of her, I'm not sure why, I think because I knew she hated me. Not only was I a controller, but I suspect she had a basic contempt for Americans as well. I had the feeling she was just waiting for the opportunity to work me into a story.

At the moment, Denise was rabbiting on about something to Gloria, who was nodding at her, but eyeing me suspiciously.

"So by giving them a schematic on the organizational fit," Denise said, "we can determine who then is, and who is not, working within the matrix."

If Denise had been speaking Urdu, I would have had a better chance of understanding her. Gloria was nodding her agreement, but did not take her eyes from me as if she expected trouble from me or my kind. I wasn't planning any. I was just wondering why any of these head office people were here. Originally, this was supposed to be a senior controller meeting with Amanda. Something that we did once a month in which she spent an hour grilling us on what we've done for the Corporation lately and end with a hearty 'keep up the good work, team' and a friendly reminder of how tenuous our careers could be. As of last Monday, however, 'meetings' were out and 'strategic management seminars' were in.

When she told us there would be head office people there to address us, I figured it must be another restructuring they were going to unveil. Or something they thought equally impressive. I was kind of hoping for a restructuring. Sometimes there was a lot of money to be made. Best of all possible worlds; 'senior controllers' were being disestablished and we would all be paid off two years' salary as per our union agreement. Not likely, though—I'm not usually that lucky. Perhaps they were going to get rid of us more cost-effectively. I looked up at the sprinkler system.

*Gas. That would be it. Quick, clean and probably cheap. If Gloria excuses herself and leaves the room, I'm making a run for it.*

My theory on our dispatch was immediately shot down when Freddie Moore bowled in through the doors, closely flanked by Amanda and Woodchuck.

"Thank you for coming, everyone," he said, as if any of us had a choice. "It's good to see you all again. Hey there, Leanne," Freddie waved, then nodded at Denise with the familiar kind of grin people offer when they don't have a clue what your name is. "Tom," he snapped his fingers as he pointed at me, then flipped his wrist in a drinking motion, "you and I have to do some serious catching up."

"Sure thing, boss," I nodded back, but dropped my smile when I caught the glare from Amanda. She did not like too much of the boys-will-be-boys stuff.

"Okay, exciting times on the ControlCorp horizon," Freddie launched into his speech without hesitation as Woodchuck and Amanda took their seats. "And you're all going to be a part of it."

*Dammit. No Restructuring.*

And if it wasn't restructuring, it could be only one other thing. *Reimaging.*

"But as we rapidly expand on all fronts, we cannot forget how utterly important it is to maintain the right corporate image."

I wasn't sure about the 'utterly important'—it seemed like an odd choice of adverb.

Freddie's pep talk went on for longer than it needed to be. At first I tried to follow what he was saying, but I was having a hard time keeping my eyes open—not enough sleep, still hungover, not to mention a few issues on my mind that I considered somewhat more important than the new corporate logo or whatever it was Freddie was going to unveil.

I turned toward Susan, who turned her head toward me and offered a warm smile. *She must be a very nice person*, I thought. She was wholesome looking. But she was not Sarah, and it was Sarah I was thinking of when I was exchanging smiles with Susan. Maybe I was making a mistake.

I don't think I would necessarily have described Sarah as wholesome—not that she wasn't—but she had a kind of sophistication about her that belied wholesomeness. Or maybe once passionate sex has been had, the idea of 'wholesomeness' is tainted in my mind. Maybe that was my problem—I mean, it's not like we did anything kinky. It was good. Healthy. Wholesome.

*I don't know.* I realized I was probably holding my attention on Susan just a little too long, so turned back to Freddie and nodded as if I agreed with whatever he was saying, although by now I had pretty much lost the thread. He was still waffling on about the need for a consistent corporate image, one that represented ControlCorp as a modern, efficient and progressive organization.

*Safe, orderly, expeditious.* Why did we have to keep changing it? Keep them apart and keep them moving. That seemed simple too, or simpler yet: *Line 'em up, head 'em out, Rawhide!* Maybe I did watch too much TV as a kid. My hand trembled as I tried to take a sip of coffee—too much caffeine? Too little sleep? I didn't know, but Susan noticed my hand shaking as I lifted the cup to my mouth.

*I didn't know.* I've been thinking that was much of my problem—that I didn't know. I really did not know Sarah as much as she complained about not knowing me.

I knew it felt good to be around her, that I enjoyed her company and she seemed to enjoy mine. We laughed, we had fun. It was like it was in the beginning with Janey. She and I used to have some fun too. Wasn't that enough? It was for me.

Maybe I should have tried to understand something more about my wife, but the fact was, I thought knowing more was what would kill the relationship. I just liked it the way it was. Too much information can ruin it. Too much information can be dangerous—even life threatening. It's like fishing. If you know you enjoy something then why not just enjoy it? Try to accept it without needing to understand it, because what you discover may ruin it. Or kill it. You want to know what scotch whiskey tastes like? Or what it feels like to have your dad's blackness creeping in at the edges of your soul? Sometimes, I think, it is better to just go fishing, enjoy fishing for what it is and hope that you don't catch anything.

Maybe it was just caffeine and lack of sleep that made my hands tremble. I had to talk to Sarah today—she had to understand why I had to do what I was going to do. I had to talk to her, and I was a little nervous about it. I was not planning on talking during this meeting—this strategic management seminar—beyond the occasional 'here, here' or some other show of support for the new world order. I really had every intention of being supportive—it was going to be my gift to Amanda. My parting gift.

I just was not expecting to be called upon by Freddie Moore.

"Huh?" I said when I heard my name.

"Don't be shy, Tom," Freddie said. "We're all looking forward to your training plan. Did I tell you we're going to use it as the model for the *National Training Plan*?"

"The national—" I opened my mouth but nothing more came out.

"The *National Training Plan*—the N-T-P—it's a vital part of everything we've been talking about today—that is, *standardization*. Every unit in the country will follow the same standardized procedures whether it is in training, standards, document control, *et cetera et cetera*."

"I thought we already did—I mean follow the same procedures."

"Tom, my man, you are going to *set* the standard."

"I am?"

"Yes—Amanda has been telling me your training plan is brilliant—a regular work of art."

"She has?" I looked at Amanda and she smiled back. I'm not sure what she was up to. Her mischievous smile was getting harder to distinguish from the compassionate one. Either she was trying to build me up so she could look good as my boss, or she was just screwing with me.

*Or maybe she was just being nice.* At the moment, I wished I had taken the time to know just a little more about Amanda Sheppard.

"We are all eager to hear about it, Tom," Freddie said as he lowered himself into his chair, "so please share it with us. The floor is yours."

"Ahh, well—it's not actually done. It could still use a bit of tweaking."

"That's okay—rough draft is fine with us."

The truth is it needed more than just a little tweaking. It needed to be written. We were told to get started on our prospective plans two months ago, which unfortunately had coincided with things heating up between Sarah and me and it was hard for me to stay interested in the assignment. I didn't understand it. I even went back to Amanda and asked her 'what did you want me to say about training? They send us a trainee from the aviation college, we give him or her a headset, plug him or her in with an instructor who then teaches him or her how to keep them apart and keep them moving.' Seemed simple enough.

Amanda said that was the old way and what they now wanted was 'the corporate way. Get with the programme, Thomas.' So I sat down at the computer and I started writing my corporate training plan, which was probably overly simple:

*Stage One: Throw trainee into shark-infested waters. If trainee;*

*a. Survives*

- i. continue to Stage Two and*
- ii. bill trainee for swimming lesson*

*b. Does not survive*

- i. find new trainee and*
- ii. bill sharks for lunch*

It took me exactly eight minutes to write it—and that was including the formatting. Since then I've been having fun with Sarah and not thinking about writing

an N-T-P. The password-protected file on the computer that was marked 'Hardy-TrngPln.ver.3' was really something I found about fly-fishing. Nobody told me we were going to be asked to present these things to head office personnel and now, sitting there, scanning the eager and expectant faces, I wished I had at least come up with a Stage Two.

"Well, ah—"

"Tom, please stand up," Freddie said.

I got to my feet. "What I was going to say was, uh, well, that the national training plan—or rather the N-T-P—" I looked around the table. They were all looking at me—even Boswell seemed interested—it did not seem fair. After all, I wasn't interested in anything they had had to say. I took a deep breath and picked up a couple pieces of paper and looked at them closely—the top one was a memo I had collected from my in-box reminding everyone to please leave the tea and coffee making facilities clean and not to leave dirty cups on the countertop.

"Well, basically, it is a three stage, uh, modular training programme that takes a, uh, proactive discourse in addressing the training needs of the, ah—" I spoke slowly enough for my brain to stay one or two words ahead of my mouth, "—the training development unit and to ensure the training programme is at all times aligned with corporate objectives and meet the organizational fit for development of and exploration of various commercial opportunities and market potential in the global marketplace." I couldn't think of any place to fit the word 'matrix' but otherwise thought I was doing okay.

"Wow!" Freddie was looking overly excited. "This sounds fantastic. 'Training Development Unit'—I love that name—that's what we're going to call the aviation college from now on."

"So, Mr. Hardy, what exactly is stage one?" Gloria LaCoste asked as if she was in the pressroom at the White House trying to nail the President down on a lie.

"Ahh, yeah, stage one?" I glanced around the table—at least Boswell was looking down at his documents again—that was good. One down, six to go. Woodchuck looked like he could drift away at anytime. "Well, Ms. LaCoste, that's a good question. Stage one is simply the pre-programmed computer-assisted theory-based procedural learning, uh, matrix. That is, the classroom training, Ms. LaCoste." I

offered a smile, but she still looked hungry.

"So what would stage two be then?" Her smile was nothing more than a stretched out smirk. She turned toward Freddie, to remind them to keep watching this space for how she was about to skin my Yankee ass.

"That would be the, ah, modular on-the-job training stage, Ms. LaCoste." Again I offered a smile.

"So then, could you explain to us stage three?" Her smirk widened further into something approaching a genuine smile as she stuck her chin out and shifted her eyes again toward Freddie and Woodchuck.

"Stage three?"

"Yes," she said, turning her attention back to me, "you said it was a three stage plan."

"Of course it is." *Shit.* I could have as easily said *two* stages. "But, stage three, obviously, is our overseas market enhancement programme that is designed to attract our foreign clients, and to establish us as a leading supplier of air traffic training in the global marketplace."

"Excellent!" Freddie Moore jumped to his feet. "That's *exactly* the kind of thing I'm talking about, people. Tom is thinking outside the box—he's not limiting his ideas to the domestic market. And the only three words I have for you, Tom, are *brilliant, brilliant, brilliant!*"

"Thank you, Mr. Moore," I said as I eased myself into my chair. With just a cursory scan of the faces around the table, I learned at least two things: Gloria LaCoste and Amanda Sheppard both wanted me quite dead, and Freddie Moore—dazzled by gibberish—was as much a phoney as I was.

"I am looking forward to seeing this thing, Tom. When will it be finished?"

*Finished? Probably not until long after I'm finished.*

"Give me a couple weeks." I shrugged. What did I have to lose? I would be long gone.

The meeting was not over. Not by a long shot. It went on for another hour and a half, and we all had our turn. Leanne was next up with her standards plan, something she put a considerable amount of work into, and her idea of setting up a quality assurance program that would ensure a high standard of service nationwide.

"Very good, Leanne," Freddie said when she had finished. "Remember, though, if you set the standard too high, you'll be excluding people. ControlCorp is an *inclusive* organisation. Remember to always think positive." He then quickly moved on to Denise, who was bouncing in her seat in anticipation of sharing her schematic for the organisational matrix with the group. Freddie gave her less than two minutes to explain what the hell that meant before he dismissed document control with a quip about 'the drudge of paperwork,' a chuckle and a wave of his hand. She looked like she was about to cry when he told her to sit down and he must've noticed, so added, "but I would like you to provide a full, in-depth briefing to Mr. Woodcock on this one." And then Woodchuck looked like he was about to cry.

Even Linus Boswell had a chance. Turns out, he was the guy who came up with the idea of the billing system and now he wanted to explain his new system of charging that would substantially increase revenue. That is, they were raising the rates but he was able to make it sound better than that.

After we had been there for almost two hours, it was time to hear from Gloria LaCoste about the spit and polish they were adding to the corporate image. A new logo—which meant all new stationary. We were no longer supervisors, or senior controllers, but were now to be 'team leaders'—which meant new business cards. So far I had only used one of the five hundred business cards I had been given, and that was only to scrape an especially stubborn bird turd off my windscreen.

"So, what about everyone else?" I asked. "I mean, the people on my crew. Are they still air traffic controllers or do they get a new name, too?"

"As a matter of fact," Freddie piped in, "they're 'air traffic specialists,' and it's no longer your 'crew,' it's your 'team.'"

"Are they still people?"

"Nope," Freddie said. "They're 'human resources.'"

"Okay," I nodded my approval. "I'll be sure to pass that on to my resources this afternoon." I looked across at Susan, who was smiling at me again.

"We'll also be doing a little remodelling around here," Freddie added.

Amanda fidgeted in her seat. "Mr. Moore, we have only recently completed a refurbishment of this facility. We just finished repainting six weeks ago. There's yet to be a single coffee stain on the new carpet."

"There's one, Amanda," I said, though she ignored me. "I was going to tell you—"

"We're redoing it," Freddie said.

Amanda stiffened, her lips slowly disappeared, her fingers started drumming the blue diary that sat on the table to her left. "You realize, I chose the colour scheme myself," she said, her voice had the slightest tremble to it. She took great pride in her tastefully subdued pastels and easy on the eye watercolours. She had actually done a pretty good job of it and, at the moment, I was feeling a bit sorry for her.

"You did fine. Enjoy it until next week. We're talking a consistent corporate image, dear."

Amanda's nostrils flared, her fingers increased the tempo of their drumming. "Then why," she said coolly, regaining control over her tremble. "Did you not tell me this a few months ago before we went over-budget refurbishing this place?"

"Because the consultant team hadn't finished doing their study on the optimum colour scheme."

"And *what* is the optimum colour scheme?"

"Well, for the carpet we have a lovely shade of navy," Gloria LaCoste interjected, trying to regain control of her presentation.

"Not 'navy,'" Freddie interrupted. "I think they called that one 'James Brown-on-a-Bad-Day-Blue,'" he laughed and held his hand up. "But now, it's Corporate Blue."

"Corporate Blue?" Amanda looked to be dying a slow and painful death by bad taste.

"Yes, we'll also use that colour for all our drop files," Freddie said. There was a tense edge to his voice I had not heard before. "It's one of our *team* colours. Every team, in every corner of the world has team colours and the ControlCorp team colours are 'Corporate Blue and Successful Silver.' Blue for the sky we rule."

"And silver for the loose change we get to keep," I offered, unable to let the moment go by.

"Thank you, Tom," Freddie said sincerely. "I'm glad someone can get into the spirit of things."

While Freddie and Amanda entered into a brief and diplomatic debate on the

subject, I leaned toward Susan again who was not bothering to record the tense exchange between the two. "I had them one time," I whispered so only she could hear.

She looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"The corporate blues—doctor said I had dem bad."

She laughed silently.

"That's why I started drinking. You want to go drinking with me?"

She smiled and mouthed, "I don't think so."

"Tom," Freddie said loudly. "If you're done hitting on my secretary, we can finish up."

There was a relieved round of polite laughter from the others except for Amanda, who was giving me a laser-beam look. I could feel the colour rising in my face—red, I assume, and probably not the approved blue. "Of course," I said looking down at my stack of meaningless memos in front of me and for no reason jotted down 'blue.'

*I wasn't hitting on her.* I glanced up at Susan, but she was no longer returning my glances. *Just having a little fun,* I thought. *What's wrong with that?* It's not like I was really asking her out for drinks. I was out of here. If I was going to stick around then I would not be looking for a date with Susan. If I was going to stick around, I would stick around with Sarah. I would get to know her, I would let her get to know me.

"Very, very productive," Freddie was summing up the meeting.

*Yes, it has been, hasn't it?* We decided on new colours and new jobs titles and the new Spring collection of bullshit and, in over two hours, I don't think the word 'airplane' was actually mentioned once.

At the end of the meeting, I left the boardroom and headed straight for the men's room. I was standing in front of the urinal when Carlton Woodcock came in and stepped up to the urinal next to me.

"That was pretty funny, Hardy," he said, letting out a little snort. "Ha! The small change we get to keep. Went right over Freddie's head, too."

I tried to ignore Woodchuck—I don't think I've ever exchanged more than a few words with the guy—we've never actually had a conversation—and at that particular moment, I didn't really want to start having conversations with him. Some

guys were urinal-talkers; ‘hey, mate, how’s it hanging? You see the game? Are those refs blind as fucking bats or what?’ Some of us prefer to keep the moment somewhat more private and don’t consider it the best time for making new friends. I’m more of the latter.

“Yeah, that was pretty funny all right.” Woodchuck was worse than a urinal-talker; he talked without encouragement. “Freddie thinks he’s so smart, but he misses stuff like that because he’s too busy listening to himself blow. You’re lucky, you can get away with saying stuff like that.”

“Yeah, I’m lucky no one listens to me,” I said as I finished up. It felt safer to say something. I turned toward the basin.

“But I’m like you. I’ve had about all I can take.”

*Like me?* I turned the tap on and put my hands under the warm water. *I wonder what he meant by that. How would he know?* I dismissed the thought. “Is that right?” I asked, though I really did not want to encourage him to talk anymore. I concentrated on lathering up the soap and rubbed it slowly across my hands.

“Yeah. A guy can only take so much of the bullshit. Am I right?”

“You’re right.”

“Yeah, well at least you don’t have to work for Freddie; ‘Carlton do this, do that, buy this, burn that, go fetch.’ Like I’m his own personal arsonist or something, but I tell you I’ve had as much as I can take.”

“What?”

Woodcock looked around and let out a nervous laugh. “I said I wasn’t hired to be Freddie Moore’s personal assistant. I got a fucking MBA. Did you know that?”

I shrugged, though he probably didn’t notice.

“I mean a *real* MBA. I could be running this damn business. And I’m in it for the long term too.” He lowered his voice as he looked down at himself and fumbled to get himself put away. “Anyway, I can wait him out. One of these days... one of these days it’ll be taps for ol’ Freddie Moore.”

I looked at Woodchuck’s back in the mirror. “It will be what?”

He was shaking his head as he turned around and stepped up to me—too close. “You ever come down to Wellington, Hardy? We should go drinking.”

“Sure,” I said, drying my hands with a paper towel. “Sure thing,” I said again

as I turned to face him, but I would rather dig my eyes out with a spoon than to go drinking with Woodchuck.

"Think about staying, Hardy." Woodchuck rubbed his hands on his trousers. "Stick it out here for a while—put up with Amanda's bullshit while I put up with Freddie's bullshit—before you know it, there'll be a new world order."

"Another one?"

"For guys like us."

*Guys like us? Like what?*

"I'm serious," he said, leaning even closer. I leaned back. "I could use your help—a guy with your knowledge of the coal face."

"I don't know anything about coal," I said, but he had already turned to leave. Except that we were both males of the human species, I could not think of one thing that Woodchuck and I had in common. *Guy like us?* "Hey, Woodcock."

"Yeah?"

"What do you mean 'it'll be taps for ol' Freddie'?"

He shrugged. "Just an expression, Hardy. Haven't you ever heard it before?"

"Yeah," I said, though he was already gone. "Once before."

## Twenty-one

*"Long day after a hard night. First the meeting, and then you went on shift?"*

*"Not before my own little private meeting with Freddie."*

*"Oh?"*

*"Yeah—he didn't tell you about that? I'm surprised."*

*"No. What did he want to meet with you about?"*

*"Blackmail. What else?"*

\* \* \*

"Tom, walk with me." Freddie Moore caught up with me as I walked down the hall to my office. It sounded more like he wanted to walk with me, but I wasn't going to split hairs. "You were dynamic in there."

I looked up at him, but said nothing.

"The whole training thing, I mean."

"It was nothing," I said, and really meant it.

"You have so much potential. You ever think about applying for a head office job?"

"No, not really."

"You really ought to—I mean, how does something like national training manager sound?"

"It sounds impressive." I stopped at the door to my office. "But, you know, I'm not really—" I shrugged, not knowing how to complete the sentence. I'm not really... *what you're looking for?* Not really... *interested in being another Woodchuck?* Not really... *qualified?* Not really... *going to be here more than another week?*

"Don't dismiss the idea until you've had a chance to think about it. You've got plenty of time—hell, the job doesn't even exist yet—but say the word and it could. Just think of the influence you could have. Something like that would be a great

opportunity for you to get away from controlling.”

“But I like controlling.”

“Of course you do. Let’s talk in here.” Then he pushed me into my office and closed the door behind him. “You see, thing is, Tom—I got a problem. Well, I guess we all have our problems; *I* got a problem, *you* got a problem—but that’s all the more reason why we need to help each other out. You know, teamwork, networking and all that jazz.”

“I got a problem?”

“My problems—you don’t even want to get me started on my problems.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Politics. That’s what my problem is. Bullshit politics. Don’t you hate politics?”

“I guess.”

“Of course you do—but then you don’t have to deal with it on the level I have to deal with it. Believe me, you wouldn’t want to—enough to drive you to drink. Which reminds me, come on down to Wellington some time and we’ll go out and tip a few back. I understand you’re a man not averse to a wee drop now and again.”

“So I keep being told.”

“Just not during work hours.”

“Of course not.”

“Yeah.” Freddie suddenly stopped and got a pained look on his face as if he was experiencing an especially rough bowel movement. “Yeah,” he said again slowly, looked away from me and shook his head, “that’s where we get into this messy political bullshit. Such a nasty business really.”

“What’s that?” I shrugged. I had no idea what Freddie was leading up to, but I was kind of wishing he would just get to his point. I was not in the mood for pretending anymore. My head felt like it was trying to hatch a komodo dragon. I needed to talk to Amanda about my change in career plans, find Sarah and try to explain to her what was going on. I was facing the usually busy Thursday afternoon shift, and I was still feeling a bit queasy from Woodchuck’s attempt at friendship in the toilet. Now Freddie was trying to soften me up for something by implying I had a future down the hall from him at Head Office plotting the economic overthrow of the

Third World. It was all too much.

"Tom," Freddie said, shaking his head as if in disgust, "Let me be honest with you. I think it's all bullshit. I think Amanda's out to get you."

"Really? Why?"

"Apparently, she's got friends too."

"I should hope so."

"Friends in high places."

"Wow. Who?"

Freddie walked around my desk, tapping his fingers along the edge as he moved, until he was on the far side from me. He looked down at the desk, at the bottom drawer and, with his foot, gently nudged the drawer open. "A Mr. Malahide, it seems."

"The Learjet pilot?"

"Yeah. He says the supervisor he talked to on the phone about his alleged incident last week sounded a little—" Freddie looked down at the drawer, then leaned forward and extracted the bottle of *Glenfiddich*. "He said the supervisor sounded a little intoxicated and he wanted us to conduct an investigation."

"Hmm," I said, nodding, "which sounds unlikely, since the supervisor he spoke with that night was the centre sup, Craig—and, if I'm not mistaken, the guy's a Mormon and doesn't touch the stuff." But it was too late. I could already see the set up. The bottle of *Glenfiddich* was half empty—or half full, depending on your perspective. To me, it was half empty.

"I believe you, Tom." Freddie set the bottle on the desk and walked over to me. "I think this is some kind of political manoeuvring going on here. I mean, I wouldn't let this guy push you around, I would still throw the book at him. But, dammit," Freddie shook his head in disgust again. "He must've got to Amanda, because now she's hot on your trail. She found this and wants me to give you the sack for it. Damn her. This is going too far. I tell you what—" he reached over and put a hand on my shoulder. "I'm going to stick by you on this. There's no evidence whatsoever that you were drinking on duty. This," he waved toward the bottle, "doesn't mean anything. Nothing says you can't have a nip or two *after* work, right? What I'm saying is, I'm going to stick by you on this one. No matter what."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the big stink Malahide and all his solicitors and Amanda are going to make just because a man enjoys the odd drink. They're probably going to get the incident thrown out anyway but I'll make sure Amanda doesn't get this drinking on duty business to stick. I'm behind you, Tom."

"You want me to drop the incident, don't you?"

"Well." Freddie shrugged and pretended to think it over, "It's not something I encourage, but I can see your point-of-view on that, the big picture so to speak. Dropping it would be the quickest way for it to go away, which would save us wasting our time and resources, and sometimes it's better to just bite the bullet, make it go away and get back to the more important business. Yes, I see what you're saying, but, you know if you want to fight it, I'm on your side."

And that was it—that was the first, and to date, only time in my life I've been properly blackmailed. It was easy; it was simple. Freddie sends Woodchuck into my office while I'm out under the pretence of making a few phone calls or something, he closes the door and rifles through my desk looking for anything that might be frowned upon by Amanda. There are many things she frowns upon, so they figured the odds were good there would be something they could use. And they hit the jackpot. Woodchuck finds the bottle of *Glenfiddich* and drains half of it—God knows where, but if my rubber plant dies, I'll know who to blame. The fact that I would insist the seal was unbroken and the contents undisturbed would work even better because nobody would believe I had no intention of opening it and it would look like I was deep in an alcoholic's denial. That gave Freddie more ammo than he could have dreamed of for getting Malahide's incident swept away forever.

Woodchuck, however, found something else—a letter from the FAA—and being the nosy bastard he is, he would have read it and learned they were not only offering my job back in California, but urgently requesting that I start back as soon as possible due to staff shortage. Big Ted Kazniak really pulled through for me. My guess is Woodchuck did not share that much with Freddie because he thought he, in turn, might use it to his own advantage. So he tries to make friends with me while we're peeing.

The bottle would be too circumstantial to actually get me booted out, but it

would be enough to cause more trouble than Freddie Moore figured I wanted. *To the line—you have a future, don't blow it—learn how to play the game. Do that and become one of us.*

I wonder if this is how they got my dad in the end? I never knew who his enemies were—if they were real or imagined—but something drove him deep into his blackness, from where he never returned. I wondered if that was where I was headed. So the choice was to sell my soul now, give in, be assured of an immediate survival and a little high-flying success—but to pay the eventual price by a corporate-sponsored heart attack at my desk, face down in my puddling tea when I was no longer useful. Or I could stand up, tell Freddie Moore to go fuck himself and accept the cost to my career. That's when I had an idea of what Janey meant about a fight being worth fighting when you had something to lose.

\* \* \*

*"So what did you do? Did you drop the incident report?"*

*"It wasn't mine to drop. It was Allen's. But it was my responsibility to see that it went through. So, no, I didn't drop it."*

*"What did you tell Mr. Moore?"*

*I stared out the window and pondered it. "You see, that's what really bugs me about all this shit. I mean, I really didn't have anything to lose. I was leaving. I had already decided. I was already tying up loose ends and packing my bags. I had nothing to lose. So I would like to say I stepped up to within an inch of Freddie Moore's nose and told him I had had enough of his new world order, had had enough of him and Amanda and mission statements and Gloria LaCoste and her new more positive corporate image and the corporate vision that was blind to the one thing they should never lose sight of. I would like to say that I was no longer going to sit around and watch him rape and pillage an industry that I had once thought of as a pretty important public service. But I didn't."*

*I turned back toward him and shrugged.*

*"I was tired, I was thinking of what I had to get through in the afternoon*

*before me and I was scared. Scared of having to stand up to this guy. So I kept a respectful distance and told him I would think about it. And, you know, I meant it. I would think about it.*

*"I see. Then what?"*

*"Then I left my office and went on shift. It was an extraordinarily busy afternoon. Sarah was there, but we kept avoiding each other's glances until it was time for her to go home. Allen had gone home. It was just me, her and Simon. She went downstairs at about a quarter past eight. But Simon could tell what was going on between us. We weren't fooling anyone. The traffic had quieted down and he told me he would cover upstairs, but that I shouldn't let her leave without sorting something out. So I caught up with her in the parking lot. First we argued, then we talked. It was hard. She was quite happy to give it another try with us, but now I was trying to break it off. I tried to make her understand why I was going back to the States. Why it was important for me to go back and try to get some of my old life back, but the more I talked, the more I thought about how I had not stood up to Freddie Moore in my office—and ever since I left my office, 'going back' was feeling less like returning in victory and more like running away. Again.*

*"So we left it—resolved to no one's satisfaction and I wandered back upstairs to give Simon a break. The rest, you know."*

## Twenty-two

"Did you ask for the early turn?" The captain asked as he slipped into the left seat of the 737.

"Affirm," the first officer said without looking up from his technical log. "Said they'll advise on takeoff."

"Good. Let's try to make this as short a flight as possible. Been a long day and I've got a firm-breasted redhead with some almond oil and a bottle of champagne waiting to give me a full body massage in Wellington in about an hour." He grinned. Captain Dave Nelson loved being one of the youngest captains on the 73s, he loved his four stripes and being single and good-looking and he loved being able to talk like this to the older, married and more staid first officers. And he loved that they had to listen because he was the captain.

"Well, let's get there first," the first officer said. Wayne Perry was typical of just such a first officer that Dave liked to rib. He was a good, reliable and professional pilot. While he was busting his nuts flying the regionals for eleven years, waiting out the comings and goings of Tasman Airways hiring phases—sweating out the years as each one made him older and less desirable—this young hot shot went straight from his stint as a flight instructor into Tasman and has been on a fast track to 747 captain ever since. While Wayne spent another three years flying Metroliners, Dave started as a first officer in a 737 right from the start.

Wayne was not angry. He had long ago resigned himself to the fickleness of the airline industry. He knew it was not skill or experience that decided their seats. It was timing. And through a fluke of timing, Wayne Perry sat in the right seat and answered to Dave Nelson instead of the other way around. No, he was not angry. However, he disliked these rosters that put him in the seat next to this cocky little prick because Dave had no idea that it was luck and timing that got him the job. He was certain he was the best damn pilot in the air and that was a dangerous position to take. If Dave was smart, he would be more respectful of the older first officers, might even learn something from them—and less arrogant with the younger ones.

Company procedures called for both pilots to be in their seats while they did their pre-flight checks and received their ATC clearance, but Dave liked showing off the four stripes on his epaulets to the passengers and the flight attendants, which cut into his pre-flight time and it was left to the first officer to pick up the slack. As soon as Dave dropped into his seat, he did a quick run through of his pre-start checklist, tap in the flight plan details into the onboard computer and was ready to crank her up and get going. He did not like waiting around. Especially when he had a firm-breasted redhead waiting for him in Wellington.

"So what's the hold up?" Dave asked Wayne as he impatiently drummed his fingers on the control column. "We have any ramp rats down there to push us back or are they taking another coffee break?"

"They're just throwing on a few more bags. Should be just about done." Wayne glanced down at his route clearance and the note he scrawled on the side. "We need to be airborne in nine minutes though—they're positioning a seven-four-seven sixty miles out for runway zero-five and we have to be in our turn southbound before he hits the outer marker."

"Why? Since when does he get priority over us? Isn't two-three the runway in use?"

"They just switched to their noise abatement configuration—calm wind, no traffic after nine p.m. means in over the water and out over the water. And I believe they consider the landing traffic having priority."

"I know that. Fuck 'em." Dave drummed his fingers for a few seconds in silence. "Who's on up there tonight?" He asked, nodding in the direction of the tower.

"One of the new guys."

"Shit. All right, then let's get moving. We'll take an intersection departure. Give me the Before Start Checklist down to the line."

Several more minutes had passed by the time the ground crew had finished loading the bags, securing the cargo doors and pushing the aircraft back into position for taxiing. Another minute lost on unhitching a stubborn towbar. They were crucial minutes.

As soon as the start sequence had been completed, Dave pushed the button on his steering column that keyed his mike as he fast-taxied off the tarmac. "Tower,

Tasman four-two-two, request taxi. We'll be ready at the intersection."

Several moments passed without a response from the tower. Wayne was still doing his pre-takeoff checks trying to keep up with Dave.

"He's probably asleep up there," Dave mumbled, he was about to push the mike button again to repeat his request before he had to slow the plane down when the tower responded.

*"Tasman four-two-two, taxi runway two-three, speedway three, be ready immediate."*

"Roger."

"We don't have cabin clearance yet," Wayne said, indicating the flight attendants were not done securing the cabin.

"Shit!" Dave shook his head.

*"Tasman four-two-two you're cleared for takeoff,"* the tower said.

"Tower," he keyed the mike, "we're going full length." He unkeyed the mike and glanced at his co-pilot—"that should give them one more minute to get them all strapped down."

Wayne nodded.

Again the tower was slow in responding, and when he did, he sounded unsure.

*"Ah, Tasman four-two-two, yeah, roger, full length—no delay though, traffic being positioned for zero-five seven miles outside the marker. You're cleared immediate takeoff."*

"Roger, cleared for takeoff," Mike repeated, then unkeyed his mike. "Seven miles outside the marker—you'd think with seventeen miles between us, the guy could relax a little."

"I think he's more concerned about us being clear of the localizer signal before the seven-four reaches the outer marker," Wayne suggested.

Dave shot a quick glance at Wayne. He would rather this guy keep his lessons in air traffic management to himself at this hour of the night.

By the time they reached the end of the runway, the flight attendant had called in the cabin clearance and they were ready to go. Dave lined the plane up on the runway, set the break and pushed the throttle up to forty percent as Wayne ran through his last checklist items.

"All checks complete," Wayne announced.

"Let's roll," Dave said as he released the brakes and throttled up to max. The aircraft started its slow roll bumping along the runway, picking up speed.

"*Pacific West five-two on final,*" they heard over the radio, and, again, the tower seemed to take an inordinately long time to respond, before the same hesitant sounding voice came back and uttered, "*Pacific West five-two, number one.*"

"V-one," Wayne called off as the airspeed indicator climbed passed 136 knots. "One thirty nine, rotate."

Dave eased the nose up to fifteen degrees and the aircraft bumped a few more times before it broke free of the runway. "Gear up," he instructed his co-pilot.

They climbed through one hundred feet.

"Right, let's call radar and see if he'll turn us out of a thousand direct on track so I can get to that redhead." He grinned and glanced across at Wayne who was keeping an eye on the speed indicator waiting until it passed 190 knots to start retracting the flaps.

Then another voice came on the radio—a different controller—his voice calm, but the very weight of it commanded attention. "*Tasman four-two-two make an immediate left turn southbound—seven-four-seven traffic opposite direction.*"

Dave exchanged another quick glance with Wayne, and keyed the mike to confirm they wanted him to turn the aircraft at their present altitude, passing three feet or at the usual one thousand. After all they knew the 747 was approaching the outer marker, but that was ten miles still. He keyed the mike just as he saw it "*Confirm Tasman four—shit!*"

They had both seen it at the same time, the landing lights of a 747 bearing down on them—through the blinding glare it was impossible to say how close it was. For a moment, frozen in time, Dave Nelson knew he was going to die. The normally darkened cockpit was flooded in bright white light. The moment could have been a half a second or it could have been half his life—but in that single moment he both resigned himself to his fate and fully gave in to his survival instinct. It was pure reflex—rules, procedures, even thought had nothing to do with it—he just responded instantaneously. He put the weight of his body behind a hard bank to the left and in a split second the light went out and a thundering roar filled his ears momentarily and

then subsided. When they were still airborne, climbing through four hundred feet a second later, it began to sink in that he was still alive.

"Fuck!" Dave shouted as his faculties returned. "Son-of—" he positioned his thumb to key the mike, but the controller was already talking, apparently to the 747: "*Affirm. Climb straight ahead to two thousand feet contact approach now for vectors back to final. Break, break—Tasman four-two-two stop your climb initially at one thousand, maintain your present heading for vectors on track and contact radar now.*"

Dave looked across at Wayne—even in the dim glow of the cockpit, he could tell the guy was white was a sheet. He keyed the mike, "Roger, heading two-seven-zero, stop at one, going to control." He unkeyed the mike and paused for a moment before switching frequencies, then went back to the tower controller. "Tower, someone's going to pay for that one."

The tower controller responded almost immediately. "*Roger that, Tasman four-two-two. Please contact the centre supervisor on the telephone when you get to Wellington.*"

"You bet." Dave unkeyed his mike. Shit—this was going to be a long night of paper work. So much for the redhead.

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## Part Three: Taps

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## Twenty-three

*The rain was tapping at the window. I could make out nothing out there in the blackness of the night. No shapes, no shadows, just blackness and a cold southerly tapping at the window.*

*"So," he stretched his jaw out in a yawn. "I accept that there were a number of contributing factors, but it would be difficult to make the argument that the Corporation was the ultimate cause of this incident."*

*"'Let us go then, you and I, when the evening is spread out against the sky.' I was staring out the window. Staring at nothing out there, but the little rivers of rainwater forming on the glass again and was reminded of something Flynn said, 'a whole different world—almost microscopic to us, but to their world we'd be God-size.'*

*God-size.*

*"What's that?" he stifled another yawn.*

*"Nothing. Just something I remembered."*

*"More poetry?"*

*"Yes, that's what it is, doctor." I did not take my eyes from the window. "T.S. Eliot. Another favourite of my father's. Did I tell you he once met the man?"*

*"Yes, I think you did. Listen, we've got to wind this up." He glanced at his watch despite there being a clock mounted on the wall directly above my head. Ticking away, too loudly—'tick tick tick'—something especially designed, no doubt, for a psychiatrist's office. Tick tick tick. The mind games they play on the mentally tired people sitting here wondering where their lives have gone.*

*"There will be time, there will be time."*

*"For what?"*

*"To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," I turned back to look at him, "'there will be time to murder and create.'"*

*"I see. Look, the facts are; one, that a controller was responsible for the traffic at the time; two, that the controller was remiss in not paying attention to his*

*primary duty at the time of the incident."*

"Yes, those are the facts."

*Tick Tick tick.*

*God-size.*

*"They are the facts—disputed by no one." For the first time, I detected a rising note of impatience in his voice. "The only question that remains is; was that controller you? Or Simon?"*

"Just the facts, ma'am."

*"In either case, the other fact is, you stepped in and prevented a catastrophe. No matter how guilty you are of being a contributing factor, you still stopped it in the end."*

*"Luck saved us in the end. Luck and the Big Sky Theory—that being if all else fails, it's a big sky, chances are they'll miss each other."*

*"No—it never went that far. It was stopped before that. The system didn't fail because you did your job."*

"You sound like you're trying to get me off the hook, doc."

*"I am. Tell me the truth. Tell me it was Simon's incident."*

"No."

*He shook his head, once again having trouble concealing his exasperation. "Don't you understand? Simon has already confessed. I can help this go away, it will be easy if you work with me here. Tell the truth and you can come out of it as a hero."*

*"A hero?"*

*"That's right—the way Simon tells his story. If we can just get the two stories to gel, we won't even have to have the hearing on Wednesday."*

*"But now it's you who does not understand. 'For I have known them all already, known them all—Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoon—I have measured out my life in coffee spoons.'" I offered him a smile—it was sincere. It had just dawned on me that those were the words I was looking for all the time: 'I have measured out my life in coffee spoons.' Found in one of my father's volumes, after his death, as I sat in his study teasing my tongue with a drop of Glenfiddich. I had read the poem over and over again. As a teenager I liked it but didn't know why; as an adult I understood it. "I know the voices dying with the dying fall—Beneath the*

*music from a farther room. So how should I presume?"*

"All I need," he said, his hand nervously tapping his desk top as if he was sorely missing Happy Hour down at the shrink's lounge. "Is for you to tell me, in your own words, what happened when you went back up stairs that night. If it fits in with Simon's story. This is over—it'll just be paperwork."

"In my own words?" I stood up and walked over to the window. "And in short, I was afraid." I squinted into the night—the window faced a garden and in the night there was no light. Just darkness and vague outlines of trees and shrubs moving in the wind.

"Of course, but—"

"What you don't understand, doctor," I said as I turned to him. "What you have failed to understand is that I'm perfectly aware of the easy way out. However, it's not going to happen. Not this time. You have my statement—I stand by it as given."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why do you want to push this? Why do want to force them to put you in the chair?"

"Because it's time. It's my turn. It's their turn. It's what my dad would do—it's what Janey would do—and because I finally understand why they would've felt they had to do it." I lifted my jacket from the chair and walked toward the door. "Thank you for hearing me out doctor. You were more help than you might think."

I was almost to the door before he said anything else.

"Tom?"

"Yeah?"

He opened his mouth, then paused as if he had changed his mind about what he wanted to say and decided on a new tack. "How was the fishing trip?"

"What?" I turned and leaned against the doorframe with my arms crossed.

"The fishing trip. The fight with Sarah started over a fishing trip in which you wanted to go by yourself. Did you still go?"

"Yes, I did."

"How did it go?"

"I didn't catch anything. Not yet, at least. But, then again, maybe I've been fishing in the wrong pond. See you Wednesday, doctor."

\* \* \*

Hero? What a wanker.

They wanted me to tell the truth—their truth. The truth their spin doctors worked up. If we all sit around a boardroom table and nod in agreement, does that make it true? Read us this tale we have spun and we'll call it the truth. All we need is a hero and a villain and it will be neatly tied up in 22 minutes. A formula fit for television: two airplanes and a tired, negligent controller, . First commercial break, now a word from our sponsor *Corporate Blue the whitewash recommended by four out of five carpetbaggers*. We return now and, oops, the two airplanes are about to run into each other, what has our villain-controller done? *Trouble is here!* Second commercial break and then stayed tuned for *TV's Bloopers, Mid-Air Collisions and Practical Jokes* and now back to the show. Our dashing hero, Hardy, jumps in and saves the day! *Trouble is gone.* Tune in next week when our hero single-handedly saves the billing system from colliding with the national training plan. The end.

*It could be worse*, I thought as I leaned over the balcony of my second-floor apartment and surveyed the streets below. *At least I get to be the hero this time—Sergeant Joe Friday. And what does that make Simon in this episode—a pinko hippy high on reefer?*

The muted amber glow of the street lamps reflected on the rain soaked streets and cloaked the night in a feeble copper light. It had been raining again, the night turned cold—it appeared summer was suddenly over. I did not notice what time it was when I wandered out here onto my balcony. My guess is it was two or three in the morning. The sleep had become so fitful it drove me from my bed to sit out in the cold night air. To think? To ponder? Hardly. My brain was fogged in—indefinite ceiling zero, visibility zero.

*“Just tell me, in your own words, what happened when you went back up stairs that night. If it fits in with Simon’s story. This is over,”* he said.

Why? They knew it was Simon’s incident—simple logic could tell them that. He admitted it was his fault and why would he make that claim if it was not true? I

said it was my fault, but they knew I knew what was at stake—it would cost Simon his job because he was still on probation. With me it would be a simple reprimand, perhaps a couple weeks remedial. They also knew I would do that for Simon because I believed he was—or would be—a good controller some day and worth keeping around. Or perhaps I would do it because I had nothing to lose, because I was leaving anyway. Jumping into my safety net. Either way, simple logic. We all knew it was Simon's incident—so why did they insist I tell them so? It was all part of the process—it was how they come to own you. One piece at a time.

It was nothing so noble as sticking up for my mates, though that made me do what I was going to do. The fact that I was negligent by leaving my station to chase after Sarah that night remained true. As did the fact that I left an inexperienced controller alone to cover for me while I ran down to the parking lot and caught up with her.

I wanted to talk to her just one more time.

*Just one more time.*

To stumble over '*yes, I love you*' bad enough to make it sound like a dirty secret and to offer another poor explanation of why I still had to go back to America. To offer words of explanation that sounded cowardly even as they crossed my lips—trying to make her believe that by going back, by getting my job back and by acting like a professional in it, I could show that I was in fact accepting some responsibility. That I did have something to believe in after all—I believed in the safe orderly expeditious flow of traffic. It was something—something more than what I had when I had nothing. My dad had something to believe in. He believed in education and putting his students ahead of university politics. He believed in opening young minds to the beauty, to the truth of literature and he believed in fighting the encroaching commercialism that produced mass consumption art and short, shallow attention spans. Janey had the environment and social justice to believe in. And they were both willing to put their ideals ahead of their own comfort and security and put themselves on the line.

Of course, it killed my dad and it killed my marriage. Or did I do that? I was not going to give up this time. Not again. So I was going back.

In the end, Sarah still forgave me because she couldn't help herself. She was

kind. We parted with a warm embrace that felt like what I had always been looking for. Yet, still, I watched her drive away. Still, I let her go. Then went back upstairs.

*My own words?* I closed my eyes and could still see it and, when and if I ever fell asleep again, it played out against a black screen, but in my nightmares the 737 did not turn in time. It tried to—God damn it, it tried to—but in its steep turn it clipped a wing on the lowered nose gear of the 747. The wing sheared outside the number two engine and, maybe in level flight the pilot could have controlled it still, but in my dream and in the steep bank turn, the sudden loss of lift caused the wing to stall and, already in the turn, the 737 continued to roll over, but before it finished its roll the fuel ignited and the plane was engulfed in a ball of flame. It was the technical detail I knew in my dream that made it all so plausible to my waking mind.

Meanwhile, the 747—maybe the sudden loss of lift at such a slow airspeed, or maybe the shock the nose section sustained knocked the crew unconscious or killed them, but after being struck by the 737 it nosed over and plummeted toward the harbour. As one fireball blossomed in the sky and the 747 was a microsecond away from impact, that's when I would wake up screaming, bathed in sweat with my heart pounding at my rib cage.

*Jesus. What a mess.*

I got up and paced the room and wandered out to my balcony to search the empty streets below. I wondered if Simon was pacing his room—or does the cockiness of youth allow him to escape such nightmares? Was reality and fantasy still safely separated in his world? Did truth and fiction keep their respectful distance from each other?

*Truth and fiction.* He wanted it in my own words, but what were my own words? Truth? Or Fiction? I didn't need words at all. I had the full-length feature film playing in my head. Why did it haunt me? It was not fair. It was not my incident, they had the facts and could read through them to the truth.

I was not lying about everything. The fact was I was responsible because I had a responsibility to be there, I had a responsibility, not to the airplanes involved but to the controller who was responsible. I failed in that responsibility. That was a fact. The truth was, it was *Simon's* incident.

I went back to the tower, walked up the stairs alone. As I hit the top step, I did

a quick scan of the work area—Simon was hunched over the computer inputting the billing data—and then the operational area. And there it was, that movie played out instantly in my mind. I froze perhaps only for the split second it took me to comprehend what I was seeing.

A Boeing 737 had just rotated, maybe one hundred feet off the ground at most—too late to abort the take-off. At that moment of my glance, I also saw the landing lights of a 747 emerging from the low scud on final approach—they were on a collision course. They had about four seconds to live.

“Who’s that rotating?” I asked Simon calmly as I went straight for the tower controller’s position. If I startled him and pointed out the situation, it would take him a second or two for him to comprehend. We didn’t have a second or two.

“Tasman four-two-two, why?” the dumb fuck said without even looking up from his task.

I keyed the mike and thought of Ted Kazniak and his serenely calm voice. “Tasman four-two-two make an *immediate* left turn southbound—747 traffic opposite direction, break break, Pacific five-two go around go around.”

“*Confirm Tasman four—shit!*” the aircraft made a hard bank to the left as the pilot looked up and caught site of the landing gear filling his windscreen.

Simon looked up from the computer and yelled his own expletive—then went absolutely silent as the shock of what had almost happened sunk in.

“*Pacific five-two is going around,*” the 747 pilot said. He, too, saw what was happening and started a steep climb.

“Affirm,” I said. “Climb straight ahead to two thousand feet contact approach now for vectors back to final.” Instead of unkeying the mike and giving him a chance to complain about the service, I held the button down and turned my attention back to the 737 without pause, “Break, break—Tasman four-two-two stop your climb initially at one thousand, maintain your present heading for vectors on track and contact radar now.” Again without pause I hit the comm-button to the radar controller, “Pacific five-two is overhead climbing to two on the missed-approach, Tasman four-two-two is stopping at one mid-harbour for vectors on track. It’s a mess, sorry. You better send a centre sup up here.”

“Roger that,” the radar controller said in an unflappable voice—again, I was

reminded of Ted Kazniak and why we had to keep in control of ourselves if we were ever to sort out the sticky stuff.

"Fuck! Piece of shit!" Simon was getting wound up and started kicking the radar display. It did not take me long to see why that had suddenly become the target of his wrath. The picture was frozen again and, in that still photograph, in that frozen alternate reality, Pacific West five-two was safely well outside the outer marker being vectored for his approach.

Simon was just looking for something to kick instead of himself, though. It was his fault for letting his attention get diverted—the system set him up like a chump, but, in the end, it comes down to one person who is the last line of defence. We all helped him to fail. At the end of the day, though, he was the man who should not have let his attention get diverted. This was going to cost him big. Young guy, newly rated, still on probation—this could very well cost him his career. If he was lucky enough to keep his job he would be sent so far away he would never be heard from again. They would probably just fire him. No one was going to sweep this one under the rug for him.

"Simon, stop it," I commanded. "Get a hold of yourself."

"You saw this piece of shit. It's frozen up!"

"I see it. Now listen to me carefully. Take a couple deep breaths and calm down for a second." I paused long enough to let him know I really expected him to do it.

"This fucking radar!"

"Stop going on about the radar." I reached over and pushed his shoulder enough to turn him toward me. "Look at me. Now do it—take a couple deep breaths."

He glared at me with deep resentment, but did as he was told. He was not just angry at the equipment, he was not just angry with himself, he was angry at me for interceding—for taking over his position. It was the worst thing for his mortally wounded ego. But I had no other choice—one ego up against a couple hundred lives?

"This is what you're going to do," I explained to him slowly. "You're going downstairs to the ready room—"

"I can stay up here."

"No you can't. Now I'm not giving you a choice. I'm the damn supervisor

here and arguing with me is only going to make this bad situation worse. Now, I'm telling you what you will do—you will go downstairs to the ready room, you're going to have a glass of water or something, you're going to sit down at the table and you're going to write your statement—short and to the point, one paragraph. Just the facts, ma'am. Then you're going to sit there and wait for me to come down. But most importantly—you are not to speak to anyone about this. Do you understand?"

He looked at me, his eyes ablaze with resentment, but said nothing.

"Do you understand, Simon?" I repeated.

"Yes."

"Good. Now repeat those instructions to me."

He shook his head in defiance. "I heard the instructions."

"Repeat them."

He turned his eyes away and remained in rebellious silence for several moments, then reluctantly gave me an abbreviated version of my instructions.

"Good. Now go." We could here the thump thump of the lift arriving below us—that would be the centre supervisor. "Simon—"

He paused at the top of stairs.

"I'm on your side."

He offered no response, but continued down the stairs.

I sat down in the chair at the controller's position and looked around. Simon was a good guy—he was a good controller with a future. He made a stupid mistake. At least his was not an intentional prank—his was a lapse in judgment. If given the chance, it might permanently clarify to him what his priorities are—what his purpose is. Unfortunately, he probably would not get another chance—this was going to cost him big.

Downstairs I could hear the lift door sliding open, a pause and a muffled exchange of voices as Simon passed the supervisor. I had about ten seconds to think of my next move before the sup was in the tower cab and wanting to know exactly what happened. What happened to whom and who made it happen.

It was not Simon's career I was thinking about when I picked up a pen and reached across the comms panel. *It's just time for a showdown*, I thought. According to the digital clock, it was 2117. It had been a very long day. I scrawled my name on

the position log, wrote a 2 and a 1 and paused. *It's just time.* I could hear the supervisor's footsteps hit the stairs.

*Well, anyway—let's go out in a blaze of glory, eh?* I completed my entry: 2104.

## Twenty-Four

Two days later, I was standing up to my calves in the Rangitikei River flicking my fishing line across the water, then slowly reeling it in just to flick it again. Everything I know about fly-fishing I got out of a book. My dad did not teach me how to fish—not really. He took me to the river a few times, we sat on the bank with our lines dangling in the water, mine usually with no bait. I caught a fish one time despite my best efforts not to. It was probably no more than five or six inches long. My dad made a bit of a show of it as he grabbed my line and held it up to inspect the fish.

“A struggle of Melvillian proportions,” he said with a smile, “and this time it is man who conquers nature. Look—” he turned to me and pointed to the hook that had caught just on the fish’s lip, “barely scratched him. Even as the hunter, you are a kind man.” Then he gently removed the hook, bent over and released the fish back into the river. “Just as long as he remembers—we won this time.” He watched the fish disappear from sight. “We won this time, old boy.”

I did not learn to fish from my dad. Nor did I learn much about fishing from Flynn, come to think of it. We did not always come here to fish. Once we even rafted the river in an inflatable. This peaceful, meandering river at my feet was deceptive for there were fierce rapids around every bend. Whatever our intention was when we came out here, we usually ended up spending more time drinking Mountain Screwdrivers than fishing. As for Flynn giving me any lessons—sometimes I think his knowledge was more limited than he let on, either that or he was not very good at passing it on. His preference was for fly-fishing, which fit my image of fishing more than just sitting on the bank and dangling a line in the water. Maybe he was not the best fishing instructor or maybe I was not the best student, but after a short time, my mind would drift away like the current and I would wander off to climb a mountain while Flynn stayed at the river’s edge. Sometimes, he even managed to catch us some dinner. For me, though, I think it was just the idea of fishing I liked.

So almost everything I knew about fly-fishing came out of a book that I had found in the discount bin at Whitcoulls. I did not tie my own flies—that was well

beyond my novice status—but bought a few shortly after I had read through the book and decided that I could, in fact, become a fisherman. The only hard part would be killing the thing—but if I was so willing to eat it, it seemed I should be ready to do my own dirty work. As a fisherman, I was much like I was as a liberal—that is, willing to say I believed in the cause and willing to throw money at it, just as long as I did not have to get the blood on my hands. Today would be different. Today I would know the process from the ideal to the dirty end, and tonight I would be eating Brown Trout for dinner.

“Watch your grip. Remember you want your thumb on top of the rod.”

I turned my head to the voice. It had always amazed me that a man who charged headfirst through life with his size eleven boots barely keeping up could move as silently as a shadow. He was standing on a rock at the river’s edge.

“Gidday Flynn.”

“So I see you’ve seen the light and have committed to a life of flies.” He nodded his approval. “I admire your courage for standing up, Cowboy, and admitting the errors of your ways.”

“I bought a book.”

“Very good. Did you bring it?”

“Sure did.”

“Good thinking. We’ll need it to start a fire.”

Owen Flynn had disappeared without a trace eight months ago, just before Milton Gorge Tower had been reduced to kindling, and after I did not believe him when he told me he did not torch Freddie Moore’s BMW. As the weeks went by, however, with me wallowing in self-pity and Flynn’s fishing rod lying across my coffee table, it eventually dawned on me that Flynn would not be thinking that. He was not that petty. He knew the BMW looked like his work and even if he was disappointed in me that I was sceptical of his claims of innocence, he would not hold that against me. The fishing rod that he left across the bonnet of my car meant something else, and as I sat in my lounge staring at it, night after night, the message changed. What I had read as an accusation was nothing of the sort when I started looking at it from the simple, straightforward perspective of Flynn. It was simply an invitation. One that did not need to be written down for the police to use as a lead—

one that did not need to be emailed, or checked in the compendium with the corporate logo on it for availability. It was as simple as an invitation from one friend to another that is offered in a raised eyebrow and accepted in a nod. It was an invitation to go fishing.

When I understood that, I knew to what I was invited and I knew where. I just didn't know when. I did not look for my compendium with the corporate logo on it to see what dates stood out as obvious for the fishing trip I was invited to. Instead, I consulted the calendar of Arizona landscapes on my kitchen wall. My mother had sent the calendar to me at Christmas with a note that reminded me never to forget where my home was—which was never in Arizona, all it ever reminded me of was where my mom's home has been for the last eight years and how arbitrary these things can be.

No specific dates jumped out at me from the calendar page. It was not my birthday coming up, nor was it Flynn's, no special anniversaries or holidays or dates to commemorate. So I just picked a weekend. I had to work the following one, but was free the weekend after that, and that's how I decided when I was invited to go fishing. As it turned out, I was wrong on the date.

I left early Saturday morning and was at the river's edge in ankle-deep, bone-shatteringly cold water by late afternoon. Winter had set in since the last trip out. I was glad there was no snow, but the days, nonetheless, were short and cold.

There was not a trace of Flynn. I climbed to the top of his hill where he might be pondering the corporate-structure of the universe. I hiked up the river and down again. I sat on a log in front of the hut drinking Mountain Screwdriver's until I began to sway. Not a trace, nor any sign that he had been and gone.

I built a fire in the wood-burner, boiled up my billy and cooked some macaroni and cheese for dinner. Then, despite the cold, sat outside to eat it, watching the night creep in and marvelling at how truly alone a man can make himself if he tries hard enough. And how tangible aloneness can become if one takes the time to notice. The visual manifestation of the darkness that engulfs a soul moves in around these mountains on a moonless night without a manmade light within a fifty-mile radius. Without the help of a torch, I wouldn't see five feet in front of me. That kind of blackness is blinding. And the sound was not the lack of sound but the deafening

noise of the river and the wind—a world of sounds seldom heard and usually ignored, the sounds of the universe that are tuned out of our daily existence. If I had been less drunk, I would have climbed Flynn's hill to again be reminded of my important place in the corporate structure. I should have. I needed to. At the moment, though, being alone out there, in the mountains, in the dark, at the mercy of nature with a cold, hollow breeze blowing right through me—somehow it seemed appropriate.

A person can get used to being alone. I grew up alone—for the most part. It was not because of a quiet house and quiet parents. My parents had their lives, generally independent of each other's, and I suspect they had their friends—I know my mom had her circle. My dad had his, I suppose, though I can't recall. His life was elsewhere and he never really let me in to share it. Occasionally, we had our moments—our fishing trips—but most times the door was shut and I did not exist.

Nor was it a lack of friends in my life. I had a few though they all started drifting away after my dad died. I don't know why. It was not a lack of human contact that made someone alone—it was a lack of belonging. One must have community. My dad had belonged to a community that was dismantled. And it killed him. Maybe that was what was happening to my community. Maybe that is what will happen to me.

By lunchtime on Sunday, I came to the conclusion that Flynn was not showing up and that perhaps I had read the invitation wrong. Just in case, though, I left a note stuck to a nail on the wall of the hut—a scrap of paper with a cryptic message—not so much to foil any police detectives who were unlikely ever to be snooping around out here, but just to keep in the spirit of secret messages. *Cowboy rides through when day and night are in balance.*

The vernal equinox was in four weeks and I assumed Flynn, being a man who was in tune with nature and the universe, would get the hint. Assuming, of course, that he would be out here himself before then or ever again.

What I had not realised when I went out to the Rangitikei River that weekend was that three days later was the six-month anniversary of our first trip out there. Which, apparently, was the date Flynn had in mind and thought I was an idiot that I didn't figure that one out, it was so obvious. He, of course, was out there three days later, got my note and was already into his third Mountain Screwdriver on the

afternoon of the equinox when I arrived for my next fishing trip.

"*When day and night are in balance?*" were the first words out of his mouth before he even turned to greet me. "What, are you a Hare Krishna now? Why didn't you just say; *Flynn, I'll be back on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Cheers, Tom?*"

I was not apologetic about the note. If the police had been on to it, they could have had me tailed, they could find a note and stake out the hut. Sergeant Joe Friday would have figured that much out before the first commercial break on a bad day. The New Zealand police could probably benefit from some basic *Dragnet* training. I pointed out the importance of keeping our tracks covered.

"In that case," Flynn argued, "you don't think they would figure out the code easy enough?"

"Hmmm," I pondered this, "perhaps you're right. Okay, we'll have a whole new code. When I write 'Saturday' I'll actually mean 'Monday'—and we'll work backward from there—that is, Friday means Tuesday, Thursday Wednesday, and so on. The weeks will be coded by colour; first week of the month is 'blue,' second is 'grey,' third 'red,' and fourth 'green.' So, if I write '*grey skies are forecast for Saturday*' that really means—"

"Yeah, Cowboy, I get it—means you'll meet me here on the second Monday."

"Exactly—but we'll need to use codes names too. Let me see, I'll be *Condor* and you can be—"

"*Condor?*"

"Yeah, like *Three Days of the Condor*. It was a movie with Robert Redford."

"Yeah, yeah—another movie. Why don't you just call yourself Trev and I can be Bob?"

I shrugged.

Flynn let out an explosive laugh. "Cowboy," he slapped me on the shoulder, "I think the stresses of your job are finally getting to you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we're not on television. This is not the cinema. Why don't we just say 'I'll see you on the second Monday next month'?"

"Suppose it might work." I scratched my neck. "Doesn't seem very imaginative, though."

That was pretty much the end of my secret network of communication. I still think it would have worked, but Flynn seemed content to keep it simple. When I left the following day, he said 'So I'll see you next month, say the third weekend?' and I said 'fine', and over the course of the ensuing seven months, we went on three more fishing expeditions to the Rangitikei.

All in all, I thought Flynn had done pretty well in evading capture in such a small country—although, except for Edwin Tucker, I doubt the police were putting much effort into finding him. Tucker did not have the resources of the police department behind him anymore, so after Flynn had been on the lam for six months, I came to the conclusion that he could quite easily remain a free man for as long as it took for his alleged crime to be forgotten. Even I did not know where exactly Flynn was living or how he was supporting himself. I did not ask. What I did not know, I could not be coerced to reveal. From the way he talked, though, I gathered that he was living and working on sheep or cattle station somewhere in this region. Someplace with a 'don't ask—don't tell' policy.

"So how's life in your fascist new world order?" He asked as he stood on the rock and watched my fishing technique, then added without hesitation, "don't reel it in so fast. Let it drift a bit and bring it in slowly."

I relaxed my grip on the rod. "Pretty good," I said in response to his question. "Slavery's been reinstated and we got approval for our corporate work camps. How's life in the terrorist industry?"

He shrugged. "No dental plan, but otherwise okay."

I reeled my line in and brought the rod slowly back over my shoulder to the twelve-thirty position, paused, then brought it forward in as graceful a motion as I could muster. The line was launched with a whirring across the slow moving water of the deep pool and landed with a plop.

"Getting better." Flynn nodded.

"There's been some trouble," I said, keeping my eye on the line as I tried to get into the rhythm of the gentle current. This was to be my final rendezvous with Flynn. I was hesitant to tell him that I had decided to go back to the States, but instead of waiting until we were drunk, I thought it best to tell him up front.

"For me or for you?"

"For me," I said, then filled him in on the details of the incident, the investigation, my offer from the FAA—all the while trying to focus on the rhythm of the water and letting my fly do a slow waltz across the water in time. The river was low, burbling along in a quiet tumble. I told him the truth, what had happened between me and Sarah, how Simon had lost track of what he was doing and how I came back to the tower only seconds before disaster, and why I was forcing the matter before an investigation board.

"Making a stand, Cowboy? Going down with a six-shooter in each hand, eh?" He grinned, but it faded. "That's not like you."

"No." I reeled my line in again.

"You should be careful what you stand for. It may not be worth it. Maybe these guys are more dangerous than you think. You don't know what they're capable of. Remember what you told me about Thornie?"

I looked at him as I secured my line to the pole. *Yeah, I remember what I said.*

"Maybe there's some truth in it. I mean, I still think it's farfetched but all I'm saying is you got to be careful."

I climbed on to the bank and stepped up to Flynn. I wanted to open my mouth and tell him something, but I couldn't. It was as if, for the moment, language was beyond my capabilities.

He narrowed his eyes as he studied my face, but could find nothing there. Finally he shook his head and backed out. "Anyway, you look like you could use a drink. Come on, I'm buying."

I returned my rod to the hut and left without saying a word. Flynn was retrieving his portable wet bar from his pack as I walked out and started up the track in back of the hut that wound its way up the hill. This time, I was the one on top waiting for him to catch up.

Dusk was still an hour away, but a full yellow moon hung low, near the horizon, pale against the glow of the pastel sky. A few grey clouds were gathering in the distance, but the sky was otherwise clear.

"Anyway," Flynn finally broke the long silence after he had fixed the drinks. I was seated on a rock and taking in the expansive view—trying to remind myself what

my place in it was. Flynn sat down on the ground and leaned back against another rock until he was looking directly above him. "I don't think you should do it."

"You're not one to back down from a fight, Flynn."

"No, it's not that. It's just that you're a good controller. At the end of the day, the world needs good controllers. If you quit, then what? Maybe you've made your point. Maybe not—but there's still going to be one less good controller to keep things moving."

"What about you? You didn't put up much of a fight."

"Yeah, well, that was different."

"Why?"

He did not answer right away. He looked at me, then turned his gaze toward the river valley. He took a couple sips of his drink, then turned back to me and said, "Because I wasn't a good controller."

"That's ridiculous, you—"

"No," he stopped me. "Listen." He took another drink and stared into his mug for a long time in silence. "It was mostly bluff. I was the way I was because I didn't know how to do it properly—I didn't know the rules so I made up my own. But to be honest—" he paused again to take another drink. "I was scared. I gave them enough excuses over the years to sack me. I *wanted* them to fire me—it would've made it easier for me if they would have—but with Thornie," he looked up and rolled his eyes, "I mean, how can you compete with a guy who puts the same single word on everyone's yearly performance appraisal: 'outstanding'? He wasn't doing anyone any favours in the end."

"Why didn't you just quit if you felt that way?"

"Scared, I guess." He shrugged. "I didn't know what else I could do. That's why I was so envious of Amanda."

"Envious? Of Amanda?"

"Yeah—and you. You guys were both competent controllers. Safe. You were focused on what you were supposed to be doing, but also, especially with Amanda, she had other things going on. She was so dedicated to her studies. She could map out her whole career and where she wanted it to go. All I could do was get up in the morning and hope that I could get through the day without hurting anyone."

"You were better than you give yourself credit for. We all occasionally struggle with our self-confidence."

"Maybe so, but I know I was relieved when they gave me the boot. It gave me a reason to be angry with them. It gave me someone to blame. It gave me a reason to feel hard done by."

I nodded, but said nothing.

"It worked out for the better, you see? But you—you can't bail out like I did. Like I said, they need good controllers."

"They need them in the States, too."

There was the tiniest flicker of anger that crossed Flynn's face—he stared into his mug again, then lifted it to his mouth and downed the remainder of his Mountain Screwdriver. "I need you."

"How's that?"

"I need your help. There's been some changes in my life and I can't go on being a fugitive."

I shook my head. "Changes?"

"I'm ah—" he shook his head slowly, then started laughing. "I've been a cowboy—working on a station in the Waikato." He looked up and smiled. "Kind of ironic, isn't it? But you know something, I think you might've been bullshitting us all this time about being a cowboy. You don't know the first thing about cowboying, do you?"

I shrugged. "Just a single strand in the web of deceit that is my life."

He laughed again, shaking his head. "Anyway, I'm going to be a family man."

"What?"

"I met this girl, Carrie—Caroline—she's a good hard-working woman, who can toss hay bales with the best of them and drop a rabbit on the run with a single shot at seventy-five paces. And, you know the best part?" He leaned forward as if he was going to divulge a secret I didn't want to know. "She's the boss' daughter."

I nodded.

"Anyway—so one day we were shagging like rabbits in the middle of the back paddock, she picks me up and drops me into a fresh cowpat."

I grimaced.

"It wasn't that bad though—I thought, *hey this is my life, and this is my wife. I belong here—I've found my place.* I don't know what came over me—I guess down deep, I'm an old romantic like you. So when Carrie proposed to me in that steaming cowpat—I said, 'yeah, what the hell, let's give it a try, why not?' Anyway—" he shrugged again, "we were going to get married anyway so I guess it doesn't matter, but she's going to have a kid now too."

"That would pretty much cover all the possible changes."

"Yeah. So I thought it might be time to clear my good name."

"I see."

"That's what I need you for. I figure if I went in and confessed to the crime, they would go easy on me. Maybe I could just get away with doing a few months in jail or something. I could do that."

"But you're innocent."

"Yeah, I know, but if I fight and lose, then they probably would come down harder. It would be nice if I could get it sorted out and get back in time for the calving."

"Carrie's or the cattle?"

"Both, of course."

"I'm told a fight isn't worth fighting unless you have something to lose." I swirled the last gulp of Mountain Screwdriver around in my mug. "Besides—maybe I can come up with something—it's probably nothing but—" I drained the last of my drink and stood up. "Have you ever heard the expression 'it's taps'?" I turned to him, "you know, like 'it's taps for Flynn, it's taps for Cowboy.' I mean, is that a common expression here? I thought taps was more an American military thing."

Flynn shook his head. "Never heard it."

"Actually you have—at least once. I've heard it twice. Anyway, it's just something that's been nagging at me for a few days and it got me thinking. I have a theory—at least I'm working on it. On my way down here, I stopped off to visit our old alma mater—Milton Gorge aerodrome. Except it doesn't exist anymore. Instead they're building a flash new suburb called St. Miltonville Estates."

"So I heard. Carving the place up like a fresh kill. It's tragic."

"Yeah. Anyway, I did some snooping around. They have an office there. I

pretended I was a buyer. Asking a few questions. The girl who worked there was new and didn't know anything about the place when it was an airport. But she did give me a few threads to tug on."

"Like what?"

"Just something she said about her boss. Anyway, I'll explain later. Let me just ask you this—are you willing to risk your freedom for this? You would have to come forward, now, this week. Not to confess, but as an innocent man. If my theory proves wrong, of course, you're screwed."

Flynn shrugged. "I've already decided to give myself up."

"Right." I turned and paced the hilltop while I formulated my plan. "There's a bloke I think might help us. He's an aviation security cop and he's the one to whom you'll surrender but it'll be a trade off. He can help us. I'll head up to Auckland tomorrow and get in touch with him. Monday afternoon I have to go in for my psychiatric evaluation in connection to the incident. It's standard procedure for cases like this, they need to decide whether I am simply incompetent or if I have any homicidal tendencies."

"And do you?"

"Of course, but that's not important right now. The investigation board meets on Wednesday for a preliminary hearing. That's where we are going to do it. It'll give Tucker two full days to do what he has to do. And you'll have three days to do what you have to do and get up to Auckland in time for the hearing."

"What do I have to do?"

"You have to find someone. It's just a hunch, so it might be a wild goose chase. Besides, he may not be easy to find or willing to come back with you. He may not even be alive."

"So I need to bring a shovel. Sounds easy enough."

As dusk settled over the river, I stood on the bank scanning the water for movement beneath the surface. Unless I got up first thing in the morning and came out here with my rod, it looked as if I may never catch a fish in New Zealand. Perhaps I had been fooling myself about being a fisherman. Perhaps I had been fooling myself about a lot of things. Or maybe it just wasn't important. Catching a fish was not what

I was trying to do so much as recapture something that was long lost or that had never been.

I was not optimistic about my plan, even as I laid it out to Flynn—even to me it sounded more ridiculous than my secret code. Whether it was because he had faith in me, though, or was just trying to make me feel good, Flynn at least seemed to believe in it. When we came down off the hill, he was in good spirits as he disappeared into the hut to fix dinner. I walked down to the river's edge to do some thinking. Wednesday's hearing had nothing to do with the crimes Flynn was accused of—at least not in their eyes; to me it was all a part of the same problem—so it was not going to be easy to get him in, but it was a forum and there would be someone from head office and someone from the CAA there. It was the right audience, and that's all I needed.

*Or were they?*

I sat down on a rock and stared into the deepening shadows across the river. Taking a political stand was not something I was used to. I wished my dad was around to give me some advice on how to take on the Man.

*Or, rather, how not to.*

If I had had a cellphone on me, at that moment I might've even called Janey and asked her how one goes about finding the backbone.

*Or does it matter? Will it make a difference?* Probably not. Maybe Sarah was the one I should have called, had I had a cellphone on me.

"We have time for one more before dinner's ready," Flynn said as he approached me with a mug in each hand and a grin on his face. But it was what was hanging from his shoulder that caught my attention.

"What were you planning on doing with that?"

He handed me a mug, set his on a rock, then took the hunting rifle off his shoulder and held it up. "Oh, I brought it in case I felt like doing a little shooting this weekend." Then he held it out to me. "Why don't you give it a try? I bet you never even fired a rifle in your life."

I stared at the gun.

"Go ahead, take it. We'll see about that homicidal tendency. Give it a try, Cowboy. Pretend there are some Indians across the river."

I remained seated and did not reach for the gun. "No thanks, I'll pass."

"Come on. You don't really have to kill anything. You don't even have to shoot *at* anything. Just shoot at a log or a shadow or something."

I looked up at him, then the rifle, then turned my attention toward the shadows on the far side of the river.

"Come on," Flynn urged, "just one shot."

*Just one shot.*

I set my mug down, got to my feet and faced him. Then slowly reached a trembling hand out to the polished wood of the gunstock.

Flynn handed me the rifle.

"Look, hold it up like this." He stood behind me and showed me how to hold the weapon. I lined up the sight with a shadow on the far side of the river. The evening was settling in, the shadows longer and blacker. I lowered the rifle and tried to hand it back to Flynn. "Another time," I said.

"Come on, don't be afraid of it."

I raised it again and tucked the butt into my shoulder. I aimed at the same black shadow. I did not hear the wind in the trees, but could feel the coldness of the breeze. On Flynn's instruction, I slowly squeezed the trigger. The gun jumped with a pop that shattered my silence and left my ears ringing. I do not know where the bullet went—into the shadows, into a blackness that cannot be killed but can only be stirred into wakefulness. The bitter, burning smell of smoke stung my nostrils—it crept along my skin and seeped into my sinuses. It drifted into my brain and permeated the bone and tissue. I heard something coming out of the darkness of long ago, and then I opened a closet that held nothing but nothingness. I turned in slow motion to Flynn.

"Watch that thing," he said catching the rifle as I let it slide from my hands. "What is it, Cowboy?" Flynn asked, though his voice sounded muffled to me, the ringing growing louder in my ears.

"I—" My throat was tight and would not let the words escape. My breath was short, as if my lungs were shrinking.

"What's wrong?" He asked again.

"I—" but still my voice was silenced. Still the ringing in my head. I stumbled a few steps and reached out to a tree for support, then slowly sank to my knees on the

muddy bank. Darkness pulled in around me and wrapped me like a shroud. The smell of the gunpowder cut through my brain, it cut through my life.

Flynn was holding onto my shoulders, saying something that I did not hear, or could not hear. I looked up at him. "*An' let poor damned bodies be,*" I whispered.

"I don't understand, Cowboy. What's wrong?"

"I—"

"What's wrong? Are you sick?"

"I did it," I said. I tried to breathe but my chest was so tight.

"What did you do?"

"I did it," I said again. The shadows of the night were gripping me, suffocating me, crushing me like an insect. I tried to breath, but could not. I dropped to my hands and hung my head.

"What, Cowboy, what did you do?"

"I killed him." I looked over my shoulder at Flynn. "I killed Thornie."

## Twenty-five

At eight-thirty on Wednesday morning I was at my desk, in my office. At that time of day, it was normally advisable to draw the blinds to keep the morning sun from heating the room up too much, but I was enjoying the flood of sunlight, the warmth and focusing on the illuminated dust particles hanging suspended in the air.

*What law of aerodynamics kept them floating? Anything to keep me from the task at hand. I reached for the phone again and, again, replaced the receiver. Silly me—not everything is governed by the law of aerodynamics. Some things answer only to the law of gravity—the dust particles are just lighter than the air surrounding it.*

*And then some things answer to no law at all.* I had picked up the phone receiver three times and replaced it three times without dialling. I wondered if my bottle of *Glenfiddich* was still in my bottom desk drawer or if it was in the boardroom marked ‘exhibit A.’ I dared not look.

At eight-forty nine, I finally picked up the receiver, dialled the number and held it to my ear. It rang three times on the other end before she picked up.

“Hello?” She said—her voice was so familiar. Confident, but friendly and inviting response. “Hello?” She said again as she waited for me to say something. I was not sure if I was going to say anything, I had just wanted to hear her voice.

“Hey—” I finally said, my voice cracked. “It’s me.”

“Tom?”

“Yeah.”

“Tom, what a surprise to hear from you. How are you?”

“Good.”

“Where are you calling from?”

“I’m at work—in New Zealand.” I took a deep breath. “How are you doing, Janey?”

Amanda probably would have frowned on my using a company phone line to call my ex-wife in America, but I had already handed in my resignation two days before and figured even if they did check their phone bill, nobody would complain. I

justified it as being part of my severance package.

"I'm fine," Janey said. "How are you? You sound funny."

"I'm, ah—I'm all right I guess. I just wanted to call and say hi. See how you were doing and all." That was not completely true, I think I had another reason for calling, but I was still undecided what that was. Ever since I decided to go back, I've been picturing it as going back completely—forcing back the hands of time and being in my old life again, but doing it right this time. So it seemed natural to call Janey thinking that maybe we ought to give it another go. That's how the plan started out, but everything was changing so much, so fast, and all I knew at the moment was that there were some changes I could not undo.

"Well, things are good," she said. "I got a job working for the Hope Foundation."

"Great. Must feel pretty satisfying." I did not have a clue what the Hope Foundation was, but would not have been surprised if Janey told me we had contributed regularly and been to numerous rallies on their behalf. I smiled at the thought.

"Yeah, I enjoy the work for the most part, and the people are great, but the place has its own problems with company politics."

"You're going to get that anywhere."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Anyway, I'm happy for you."

There was an awkward pause as she waited for me to get to the point of my call, but I had had no point.

"Tom," she said, "there's something else I should probably tell you."

"What's that?"

"Ray and I are getting married."

"I see. Well, then I guess I should congratulate you."

"Are you going to be okay with that?"

*Okay? Why does she care if I'm okay with that?* I'm her ex-husband. I'm the last guy on earth she needs to seek approval from now. It's been decreed by the courts of the state of California that I am the Other. So why does she ask if I'm okay with that?

*Because she still cares. Because it is in her nature to care.*

"Yeah. I am happy for you, Janey," I said and meant it. I guess I still cared too. At that moment, I realised I was not calling to have my old life back. I was calling to let it go.

"Thanks, Tom."

"Listen, Janey, there's something I wanted to tell you."

"What's that?"

"You know when we went out that first time. I mean, when we went out to the nuclear power station and got arrested?"

She laughed. "A girl doesn't remember a first date like that."

"Yeah, well, I've been lying to you. I was never arrested that day. They let me go after a couple hours. I had dinner at McDonald's, went to an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie and stayed in a motel that night."

She laughed again. "I know that, Tom. I mean I didn't know about the Schwarzenegger film, which may not be forgivable, but I knew they released you."

"Really? How did you know?"

"Because I asked them to take it easy on you. I was worried about you. It was your first time out. I told the police you were not actively engaging in the protest and that you only went along to get into my pants. They thought that was pretty funny and a little pathetic and then told me not to worry."

I laughed. Ol' Janey. What a hard case that woman was. "So why didn't you ever call me on my lie?"

"Because I liked you, and I didn't want to lose you."

"Thanks, Janey."

"It was a small lie, Tom. It's the big ones you have to worry about."

"I know." I glanced at the clock on my wall. "I have to go now. Take care of yourself. Ray's a good guy, I hope he makes you happy. You deserve it."

It was two minutes before nine when I hung up. I was due in the boardroom for my inquisition at nine, but they would have to wait a few minutes. There was another phone call I needed to make first. Something else I had to let go of. By my calculation it was mid-afternoon in California and I might not have another chance to call before the close of business there. I dialled the number at the bottom of the

letterhead, then turned my attention to the dust particles suspended in the sunlight as I listened to the phone ringing in a distant land under the far side of the sky. *Falling, flying, tumbling, turning. Defying gravity, defying the law.*

\* \* \*

How he managed to get himself roped into these things, Freddie couldn't figure. He was upper management, for God's sake, and here they had him sitting on an investigation panel questioning controllers on some petty little screw-up.

He was standing on the patio outside the staff lunch room enjoying the quiet and the warmth of the morning sun and watching the planes come and go, wondering how he got stuck with this duty that was far more suited to Woodcock or Gloria LaCoste. He took a sip of his coffee and lifted his face to the sun. It was going to be a fine day. Summer was hanging on by its fingernails.

*Oh yeah, it was the Hardy thing,* he reminded himself. His only real concern was that it might eat into the Fiji trip. His plane to Nadi was not until later in the evening, but if for some reason this thing went into a second day, it would mess up his beach time—and, God knew, he was due for this vacation.

*Not a vacation, a management team-building seminar,* he reminded himself and smiled as he took another sip of his coffee. Still, it suited his plan to get involved in the investigation for a couple reasons. For one thing, it was Hardy they were grilling today—which might be used as leverage to speed up his rather sluggish response time in resolving the Malahide matter. Why that boy was so resistant to joining the team, Freddie couldn't figure.

*Lazy, confused, drinks too much.* Freddie considered the possibilities, *or just plain nuts.* That was the most likely scenario.

Another reason Freddie could see for his participation in this thing was Amanda. She decided this incident was more important than her attending the Fiji function—which suited Freddie down to the ground. Amanda always put such a damper on the fun. The way these things were supposed to go was that they'd sit around for a couple hours drinking coffee and eating pastries and talking about what to do for the next year:

*'What's the plan for the coming year, people?'*

*'Make more money!'*

*'Excellent! Now, as a team-building exercise, we're all going to play beach volleyball and then see if we can get Gloria LaCoste drunk enough to do that striptease act again this year.'*

Amanda, on the other hand, would come armed with all sorts of plans and proposals and budgets and projections and presentations and keep them locked up in the conference room for two days discussing an endless array of variations on her theme for making everything more efficient. So it was perfect that she found it necessary to bow out. Now, all Freddie had to do today was make sure this hearing was kept short enough to not encroach on his departure to Fiji, yet leave enough paperwork behind that would ensure Amanda was busy enough to not change her mind again.

*Balance—it's all about striking the perfect balance in life.* Freddie swirled the milky coffee around in his mug and turned when he heard the door to the patio open.

"There you are," Woodcock said with the same worried expression that was becoming a permanent part of his face.

"Carlton, my boy, good morning." Freddie smiled. "I didn't see you at breakfast this morning."

"That's because you were staying at the Regal Ambassador and I was at the Mangere Motor Lodge. I had an Egg McMuffin at McDonald's for breakfast and burnt my lip on the coffee." He set his briefcase down on the picnic bench and rubbed his sore lip.

"Oh well, don't let the small things get you down."

"Yeah, right, speaking of the small things, Freddie. Do you know what kind of car your secretary booked me?"

"Remember what I said about economy, Carlton."

"A Geo! A fucking Geo, Freddie." Carlton shook his head and snorted. "It's a pinky-red colour. Do you know how embarrassing that is?"

"Surely, you can't be worried about what people think of your rental car?"

"I'm just saying, Freddie, with all the running around I've been doing since six-thirty this morning while you slept in late, you should've let me use the BMW this

morning."

"*The BMW*—you mean, *my BMW*, don't you?"

Carlton looked at Freddie and pushed his glasses up the small bridge of his nose. "Yeah, how could I forget? Anyway, how do you think it looks when I roll up to my meeting with Sir Dickhead in something that looks like an infected appendix? I'm just trying to remember what you had to say about presenting the right image."

"How'd the meeting go?"

Carlton glared at Freddie for a moment longer, then let out a snort, opened his briefcase. "Signed and sealed," he said as he extracted the documents.

"Hang on, Carlton," Freddie held his hand up and glanced to either side. "You probably don't want to pull those out around here—too many prying eyes if you know what I mean. Keep them safely tucked away in your briefcase for now and we'll go over them later back at my hotel room."

"I've got to tell you, Freddie," Carlton shook his head as he returned the documents to his briefcase and closed the lid. "This is cutting things way to close—how you managed to get this far without their signatures—we could've gone to jail for—"

"Yet it's all working out just as I said it would, isn't it?"

Carlton glanced up at Freddie, "We still need Malahide."

"How did that go?"

"He's ready to sign, just as soon as you take care of that other little matter."

"Yeah." Freddie rubbed his chin. "We'll take care of Hardy this morning. Get a hold of Malahide, tell him his little misunderstanding with our overzealous Auckland staff will be history by lunch. We'll meet at my hotel room at three this afternoon for him to sign. Then we'll be on our way." He reached across and patted Woodcock on the shoulder. "This is going to work out fine for everyone—truly a win-win situation."

"Right," Woodcock said unconvincingly. "Either that or we'll all be sharing a cell."

"Never." Freddie glanced at his watch.

"Of course not, I'll be somebody's bitch in cell block D, while you learn to play golf in minimum security."

"That's the spirit, Carlton," Freddie laughed. "Now, on to other business. We've got a lynching to go to."

"Remind me again why I have to be a part of this. I mean, they only require one participant from head office, which is you and—"

"I need you there, Carlton. You understand the mechanics of such things better than me. Besides, what else were you going to do?"

Woodcock shook his head. "Nothing but hang out at the Motor Lodge watching Oprah."

\* \* \*

I had not expected there would be such a crowd—five of them behind the table facing down the accused. They could have given me a table, but this was part of their carefully orchestrated mind game to make me feel as exposed as possible. A single chair, facing the panel of inquisition—alone and exposed as if I was a raft floating aimlessly on the open ocean. I made a conscious effort to sit erect. I wore a clean white shirt and tie, clean-shaven, I even had my haircut yesterday—I left nothing in my appearance to be interpreted as anything but the finest of corporate citizens, a loyal foot soldier in the war to advance the profit margin.

"Thomas, as you know this is just an informal hearing," Amanda was seated in the middle. She spoke in the careful, measured style she used during formal meetings—even though, as she said, this was supposed to be informal, which everyone knew it was not. Whether she had dressed special for the occasion or not, I couldn't tell. She had her usual well-scrubbed look, with her hair pulled back and knotted up and was wearing a tasteful, yet conservative beige suit. She was looking a little bit stiffer than usual, but that could have been the presence of her superiors from head office or her watchdogs from the CAA making her nervous. To her left was Freddie Moore and Carlton Woodcock; to her right were two CAA guys—one was a crisply dressed guy I had never seen before, the other was Norwynne Skidmore—someone I had not seen since Thornie's funeral last year. He looked tired and old.

"As per the civil aviation rules, part twelve," Amanda began reading from her notes "we are required to conduct an investigation into any serious incident. The

purpose of said investigation is to identify the facts relating to ControlCorp's involvement in the incident and establish, so far as those facts will allow, the cause or causes of the incident." She looked up from her notes and addressed me directly. "The composition of the investigation panel is determined by corporate policy. That is, to ensure unbiased examination of the facts, we always have at least one representative from head office and we invite the CAA to send at least one representative. Of course you know Mr. Moore and Mr. Woodcock. They kindly agreed to act as head office representatives since they were in Auckland anyway."

"Of course," I nodded.

"Only passing through," Freddie corrected. "We have important business to attend to overseas and we have a plane to catch tonight." Freddie winked at me. "So let's make this quick, eh?"

"The importance of this matter takes precedence over the management seminar," Amanda said, addressing me but obviously answering Freddie.

"Yeah, sorry you can't make it, Amanda," Freddie said, "but I fully understand your withdrawal from the seminar. I, however, have to be there."

Amanda ignored him and returned to her introductions. "We also have two gentlemen from the CAA. Mr. Clive Colson, who is the CAA legal expert." She indicated the carefully coiffed young man sitting to her right. He was late twenties and dressed in an expensive-looking tailored suit, a sun-bed tan and a small diamond stud in his left ear.

*Must be on the take,* I thought. No civil servant makes enough to dress like that.

"How do you do, Mr. Hardy?" Colson said, when most people would've just acknowledged their introduction with a silent nod.

"I'm well, thank you."

"And also joining us from the CAA—" Amanda continued, but I cut her off.

"Mr. Skidmore, very good to see you again, sir."

"Delighted to see you again, young man," Skidmore smiled. "And how are you finding life in New Zealand?"

"A little confusing at times, but otherwise delightful. I've taken up fishing."

"Oh wonderful!" His face briefly lit up. "Flies, I hope."

"Of course, what else?"

"What else, indeed! You know, it reminds me of a time Thornie and I were flying in formation over the Kaimanawas—"

"Back on this planet, pops," Colson piped in sounding somewhat impatient—he reached over and thumped the table with his index finger a couple times in front of Skidmore. "We're not here to chit-chat," he commanded.

I was smiling at Mr. Skidmore and, for some reason, perhaps just for old times sake, was looking forward to the story. Colson, though, put an abrupt end to that. My dislike for him was instantaneous. What would have been so about bad letting Mr. Skidmore tell one little story? What right does this guy have to so rudely, and publicly, tell the old man to shut up? What corporate structure gave him authority over a man forty years his senior?

"Mr. Hardy," Skidmore said to Colson, apparently unruffled by Colson's admonishment, "was the best we have ever rated."

"Yeah?" Colson turned his smirk toward me. "We'll see about that."

I understood then why Mr. Skidmore was looking so tired—he was subordinated to this posing prick. A dinosaur caged up by an ungrateful new world order and a bunch of guys in blue suits who, combined, did not possess the wealth of life and experience this old guy probably had in his pinky. Skidmore was doomed, waiting to be culled from the system—and he looked like he knew it. All this time I was assuming that life in the CAA had remained the same from Thornie's day—but in that moment I realised the changes were across the board. The CAA had its' Woodcocks and Fast Freddies too. I felt like Charlton Heston at the end of *The Planet of the Apes* when he discovered he truly could not go home again. '*I'm back. I'm home. All this time.*' All that was left for me was to fall to the floor and pound my fist in the sand, '*damn you! Goddamn you all to hell!*'

Yeah, it's a madhouse all right. Apes wearing clothes. A madhouse.

In the brief exchange between Skidmore and Colson, I was able to make a quick assessment of those who would judge me. Skidmore would never condemn me. Colson would never acquit me—he was out to make a name for himself and somehow I got the feeling, hanging controllers out to dry was the way he wanted to do it. Woodcock was probably on my side, maybe figuring I could be *his* sidekick in the

new new world order. Freddie's vote would be determined by which way I went on the Malahide affair, and he would hold off until I gave him an answer. Of course, he was also eager to get out of there and might acquit just to expedite things.

Oddly enough, though, it was Amanda I thought of as being my truest advocate on that panel. A week ago I would have thought she would be happy for this opportunity to demonstrate the full extent of the powers she had over me. Since my return from the river, however, there had been a subtle change in our relationship. Not in her—in me. On Monday, she had tried to convince me not to go through with this investigation—almost begging me to just tell the truth that it was Simon's and not force the issue. By Tuesday, she was giving me fashion advice on how to present the most sober image at the hearing.

I was nervous, even fearful, giving her my resignation. I thought she might see it as my last act of rebellion, but I explained to her about the offer from the FAA of getting my old job back, and that it had nothing to do with the incident. In the end she looked mildly annoyed—and rightfully so since I was not giving her any notice, just leaving—but mostly she looked disappointed and sad and nodded quietly as she dropped my letter in her in-box. At the moment, I was thinking of the first time I saw her in Milton Gorge and how she glowed with optimism. She wore her hair down back then—it was nicer, freer. I remembered the night when she briefly gave in to passion and we ended up wrestling around in the stir-fry under her dining room table—and how we have managed to never mention a word about that night since. Sitting there in that boardroom, watching Amanda trying to find a fair, intelligent and rational solution to a problem that had one camp wanting to hang me and the other wanting to decorate me, I was reminded of Janey. She was willing to put herself on the line for what she believed. Willing to stick her neck out.

Amanda was, in a way, doing the same thing. She had cancelled her participation in the management seminar in Fiji—and the chance to mingle with upper management—because she saw this as more important. She was not going to let Freddie Moore turn the hearing into a farce so he could be on his way. Lined up as they were, I started to appreciate the difficult position Amanda was in. She was actually standing up for something here. Ultimately, she was responsible for whatever went on in this facility and, unlike Freddie and Carlton, she *knew* what that

responsibility was. She was accountable to both sets of suits on each side of her and she was not bending to either. She was working without a net and, for some reason, I was sorry to have put her in that position.

"In accordance with civil aviation rule twelve-point-five-nine, we are voluntarily conducting this investigation of the incident which occurred last Thursday, the seventeenth," Amanda was reciting from her notes, "classified as a serious airspace incident, in which a loss of separation occurred between Tasman Airways four-two-two, a Boeing seven-three-seven, and Pacific West five-two, a Boeing seven-four-seven, during which the controller issued non-standard instructions for the pilot to take evasive action, and the pilot subsequently took that evasive action, in order to avoid a possible collision. Do you agree with that classification, Thomas?"

"Yes."

"We have statements from the two tower controllers involved—that's you and Simon—the radar controller and both pilots. We have transcribed the tapes for both the tower and approach frequency leading up to the incident, and have analysed all supporting documents."

I was glad we were using the transcribed scripts instead of listening to the tapes. I had heard a snippet of the tower frequency and listening to the hesitation in Simon's responses to Tasman four-two-two painted a vivid picture for me of him hunched over the billing system computer, grumbling and swearing and forgetting about what was going on outside the window. It broke my heart to hear that pause, that uncertainty in his voice.

"The facts of the incident are these," Amanda continued, "At fifty-one minutes past eight p.m., the approach radar controller issued advice to Pacific West five-two that they would be radar vectored for an approach to runway zero-five and then, over the landline, coordinated this approach with the tower controller during which time he advised the tower controller that Tasman four-two-two must be airborne before Pacific West reached the outer marker and the tower controller concurred; at fifty-nine minutes past the hour Tasman Airways four-two-two was told to expect departure off of runway two-three and advised of the inbound traffic for runway zero-five; at eight minutes past the next hour, approach radar cleared Pacific West five-two for the approach; at nine minutes, tower issued an immediate take-off clearance to

Tasman four-two-two; at ten past, Pacific West five-two reported on the tower frequency as being established on final and that the runway was not in sight; at twelve past, Tasman four-two-two was observed by the tower as passing through approximately three hundred feet off the departure end of the runway—that's from your statement, Thomas, and is corroborated by the pilot's statement—and that Pacific five-two was observed to be passing through approximately five hundred feet on three mile final for runway zero-five—again, the numbers are corroborated by the pilot's statement—at which time Tasman four-two-two was issued instructions to make an immediate left turn to heading two-seven-zero, to stop climb at one thousand feet and instructions were given to Pacific West to execute a missed approach and to climb on runway heading to two thousand feet. Coordination with the approach controller was then completed." She looked up from her notes. "Do you agree with those facts, Thomas?"

"Yes I do."

"Well that pretty much sums it up nicely," Freddie piped in, glancing at his watch.

Amanda glanced briefly toward Freddie then continued. "There were a number of contributing factors; the captain of the seven-four-seven admitted that they did not turn their landing lights on until they emerged from the low cloud at about four-mile final, and the technician's log supports your contention that the tower radar display had malfunctioned."

"I don't get it," Colson, the CAA guy, said and looked at me accusingly. "Why is there a radar up in the tower? I thought you were supposed to look out the windows."

"The tower radar display," I explained to Colson to save Amanda the trouble, "is used as an aid to the tower controller so that he or she can better sequence departures with arrivals and to identify airborne aircraft. Since the installation of the new equipment, we have been experiencing numerous occurrences when the image on the display has frozen and thus providing us with inaccurate information."

"Yeah, but you're still supposed to be looking out the window, right?"

"Yes, that's correct. The radar display is only an aid, but we are required to make positive visual contact with the aircraft."

"Just so we're clear on that." Colson was looking as if he was just wishing for three minutes alone with a piece of rubber hose and me tied to a chair.

"That the incident occurred," Amanda continued, ignoring Colson, "is not disputed. What we are attempting to discern today is who was ultimately responsible for its occurrence and what, if any, contributing factors were involved. Now, Thomas, we have listened to the tapes and the tower controller who issued the route clearance, pushback and taxi instructions, and takeoff clearance was clearly Simon Henley—" she paused for a moment to look down at her notes. "The voice that issued the evasive action instructions was clearly yours—those two sound bites are corroborated by the position log. Do you agree with that?"

"Yes."

"However, it is your contention that a changeover took place between the time in which the Tasman Airways aircraft was issued a takeoff clearance and the time of the incident and that you then assumed responsibility for the position. Is *that* correct?"

"That is correct, I took responsibility."

"So you're saying you assumed the responsibility for the position?"

"I'm saying I took responsibility."

"*Assumed* responsibility?"

"*Took* responsibility."

"For the position?"

"For the operation."

"Hang on a second," Freddie raised his hands in exasperation. "You guys are losing me—what the hell are you arguing about? She says 'assumed' he says 'took'—banana – banahna—what's the difference?"

"I believe our debate," Amanda said, reluctantly turning her gaze from me to Freddie, "is one of semantics, Mr. Moore. What I'm asking Thomas to clarify is whether he had signed on the position log as being solely responsible for the tower controller's position, *not*—" she returned her attention to me, "what he *feels* responsible for toward the operation in general."

"So, Tommy my boy," Freddie said, "were you the controller or not?"

"What does the position log indicate?"

"Christ," Freddie said, again tossing his hands up. "Okay—let's just say Tom

was it, we'll tell him never to do it again, wag our fingers for a few seconds, then get on to morning tea."

"It's not that simple, Mr. Moore," Amanda said. "The position log is not corroborated by the other evidence. For one thing, the transmission at ten past—*after* you claim to have taken over the position—was clearly Simon's voice. You sometimes forget, Thomas, your American accent is quite different from the other voices up there. Secondly, Simon's statement confirms that he was the duty controller at the time of the incident and did not relinquish the position until you stepped in and took it from him and then sent him downstairs at fourteen past."

"Great," Freddie said, "so even better—Tom's the hero and we fire the other guy."

"Again, not that simple," Amanda said. "If that was the case, Thomas would be guilty of intentionally making a false statement and providing false information to an investigation." She turned to me. "Unless Thomas is willing to change his testimony that he had misread the clock and made a mistake about what time he signed on position."

*She's giving me a way out.*

"I'm sorry," I said to Amanda only, "I can't do that."

"You realise, of course, that even if it were true, Simon would still share the culpability? As part of the changeover procedure, he is supposed to remain for five minutes after the next controller takes over the position to ensure all relevant information has been passed."

"I realise that. I'm not trying to protect him."

"I wonder." Amanda closed her notebook. "We'll take a thirty minute break for morning tea now and resume with the statements."

"What?" Freddie turned to Carlton. "Is it over? Why don't we just decide who's to blame and finish up? What does she mean we'll resume with the statements?"

"What it means, Freddie," Carlton said, "is that you should start deciding what you want to have delivered for lunch."

## Twenty-six

This was going to be one of the easier moves in my life. When I arrived in New Zealand a year and a bit earlier, I had two suitcases with me. Going back to America, I had barely more than that—a couple boxes of the few possessions I had accumulated were shipped off the day before. I sold my car to one of the controllers downstairs and Allen decided to move out of his parents' place and takeover my apartment—which was convenient because he also bought the few sticks of furniture I had collected. All in all, I was amazed at how much I could accomplish when I only had two days to do it. It seemed unlikely to be sitting in my office on the morning of the day I was to leave with no last minute errands to run.

I leaned back in my chair, feet propped on the desk and stared out the window at the tower. Yes, the telephone and electricity have been switched to Allen's name; the car delivered to its new owner; bank account closed; mail redirected; bags packed. Just one last thing on my 'to do' list for today: *Bring down ControlCorp*. Shouldn't take too long. Might even have time for a beer later.

Of course, it all depended on Flynn playing his part and Tucker playing his—and so far, I had not heard from either of them. I looked up at the wall clock. It was ten-fifty. The investigation board was listening to the shrink give his report, then it would be Simon's turn. I would not be back before the inquisition until after lunch. So that gave us a couple hours to play with.

I had not heard from Flynn, so I had no idea how successful he had been. Nor did I have any way of getting a hold of him—he did not have a cellphone and would not think to call me to let me know if my theory panned out. I told him he would need to show up by noon on Wednesday and my guess is if he got to town at eleven-thirty, he would stop for lunch.

Tucker would probably be back in his office by now. His reason for not contacting me with the info was because he was probably waiting for me to deliver my side of the bargain. I had walked into his office on Monday afternoon and said, "You want him?"

Only his eyes moved from his paperwork to me, he remained motionless and silent.

"You want Flynn?"

After a long moment's continued silence, he set his pen down, leaned back in his chair and studied me carefully. "Are you turning him in?" He finally asked.

"No. He's turning himself in."

"To me?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Wednesday."

"Why?"

"Because I figure you'd be willing to hear me out first."

He nodded toward a chair.

"And," I added, "because I think you might be willing to trade us a little investigative work for him."

"Investigate who or what?"

"Ever hear of St. Miltonville Estates?"

After I had filled him in on the details, he was more reluctant than I thought he would be to get involved, but he still liked the idea of nabbing Flynn, so in the end he shrugged noncommittally and said, "I could make a few calls."

I took that as an agreement, declined his offer of coffee, explaining I was late for my psychiatric assessment and left. He had not been back to me either, so I was still running on theory. Which would have been less of a concern had it not been for Freddie Moore being the next one to walk through my door.

"Tom," he said in a well-rehearsed conspiratorial whisper as he slipped into my office without knocking. He glanced behind him down the hall before he stepped inside and closed the door gently behind. "How are you doing?"

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine. Listen, we just heard from the shrink. I shouldn't tell you this, but I think he and Amanda are setting you up for the big fall. I hate to see that happen."

"Indeed." Now I knew what we were about to talk about. He wanted to know

if I was ready to sign the deed over on my soul. What he did not realise is that before he even arrived that morning, I had tea with Amanda in her office—perhaps just one last cuppa for old time's sake, or maybe because my paranoia had been subsiding a bit in the last few days and I was starting to see Amanda as more of the ally she was. In any case, she showed me the psychiatric evaluation—she said I had every right to see it.

The guy had given me a, more or less, clean bill of health. Said that I might show indications of occasional delusions of persecution that were probably rooted in some childhood insecurity and a strongly opinionated attitude toward my job, and that I suffered from the occasional bout of low-level depression. There were a couple of other little notes that looked like they were leftover from someone else's assessment. In any case, it was pretty much what I was shooting for and proved to me that I was right—he had been asleep for most of the time and, man, did I have him fooled.

*And the award in the category of best actor goes to ... Tom Hardy for his poignant portrayal of a slightly confused but utterly sane person.*

Sane? Who would've thought? But there it was, in black and white; the bottom line—as we in the corporate world like to say—is that the official word was: I was sane. They could not claim that I was out of my gourd at the time and tried to see how close I could get the airplanes, or that I was suffering from a homicidal episode or delusions of ‘godness’ as Flynn called it.

Amanda seemed quite relaxed about the impending investigation—I had already given her my resignation and permission to heap all the blame on me if it would help her out, though I did not expect she would. Her only concern was that the psychiatrist had told her off-the-record that he thought I had my own agenda. She was right and I did not lie to her.

“I do—but what the hell—I’m leaving anyway. If you want you can fire me at the end of it—I won’t resist,” I said and was about to add ‘I’ll go limp’ but did not think she would get it.

She looked down at her teacup, gently stroked the handle and looked like she wanted to say something.

“Amanda, let me have my say—just this once before I go. It’s not meant for you, it’s for Freddie Moore.”

She smiled at me with that sultry allure she used to use back in the old days at Milton Gorge. "Do you think it will do any good?"

"No. Probably not, but maybe it will be good for me."

"Thomas," she said, then paused and shook her head, "just be careful. You still have something to lose."

"I know," I smiled. "More than you think."

So, when Freddie Moore stole into my office and suggested that Amanda was plotting against me, I knew he was bullshitting me. I mean, who are you going to trust?

"I'm telling you," Freddie said, "the way this head doctor painted the picture—you're a lunatic. A regular mad man."

"I'm feeling much better now, thank you."

"I'm not joking, Tom." Freddie moved around my desk and perched himself on the edge so he could look almost straight down on me. "This is serious. Look—I'm pretty sure I can get this to go away real fast, before you have to go in there again and start answering questions about your sanity and your drinking problem."

"My drinking problem? I don't think that's an issue—you're confusing your incidents I think."

"Oh, believe me, they're planning on bringing it up all right; and what are you holding out for? That guy Simon—I heard him talking to Amanda and he's planning on giving you up real fast."

That was more bullshit. Simon was presently not even on speaking terms with Amanda. Besides, if anything he was going to try to beat me to the punch at self-destructing his career. It was one of his faults that he looked up to me the way he did. He saw me trying to get fired and must have thought it was the cool thing to do. I thought Freddie Moore was better at bullshitting than this—maybe he was getting desperate.

"Mr. Moore," I said, still leaning back in my chair—I refused to look intimidated. "I'm afraid we cannot stop the proceedings just yet. Not until I am given the opportunity to offer my complete defence. There are complexities in this matter that need airing."

"Oh, I see. That's what this is about. You're pissed off about the radar

equipment. For Christ's sake," he got off his perch and started pacing the floor in front of my desk. He was uncharacteristically irritated.

The radar equipment was the last thing on my mind.

"You controllers," he shook his finger at me. "You think holding me to ransom is the way to get the problem fixed? I'm telling you *we're working on it!* The techs are on to it." He turned and paced back the other way. "This is not the place for you to air your petty grievances."

"I think it's the perfect place to air my grievances. Besides, it's not about the radar."

"Then what is it about?" Freddie stopped his pacing and looked at me, and for the first time, I think he was *really* looking at me.

"It's about St. Miltonville Estates." I was taking a punt I knew was a bad idea even at the time.

There was just the briefest of moments when a flicker crossed Freddie Moore face—his eyes narrowed—and then, in probably less than two seconds, his face relaxed and he was calm again. It was, though, in that brief moment, that I knew my suspicions were correct.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, a grin tugged at his lips. He was moving into his crisis control mode; calm, cheerful and deadly. "Saint—what was it?"

"You know, it used to be Milton Gorge aerodrome and now it's a subdivision that is making a lot of money for a select few."

"Oh," he nodded, then grinned at me as if he had just come to understand the heart of my problem—I was past my use-by date. "Did they sell that property off? I think I did read something about that."

"I'm sure you did read something about it. You signed the documents." Now I was just shooting in the dark. If Tucker had dug up any evidence to support my accusation, I was not presently aware of it.

Freddie let out a quiet chuckle as he shook his head. I suspected he knew I was bluffing at this point—like he knew he had covered his tracks better. Maybe he did not sign anything. Maybe he did not even use his real name.

"Tom," Freddie said quietly as he leaned onto my desk, "don't make a fool of yourself in there. You don't have any idea what you're talking about. But, you know,

I can see that you're smarter than anybody has ever given you credit for, so I'm going to stop bullshitting you. With your intelligence and lateral thinking, you are exactly the kind of person we need in head office—the kind of man I need. Good God, you're miles ahead of Carlton Woodcock in imagination. And not only is it being wasted here but it's positively doing you a disservice. Sign up with me now, Tom, and come with us to Fiji tonight. We're having a team-building seminar, and you can take Woodcock's ticket." He leaned closer and winked, still smiling. "Drop today's little crusade—because whatever you think it is, it's only a windmill. Then drop the Malahide incident. We will put all this behind us. Tomorrow you can wake up on the beach with a Bloody Mary in one hand and a little brown girl in the other. Over a lobster lunch, we will talk about how to fully utilize your talents—and I promise you, your next crusade will be huge—it'll be *global*. What do you say?"

"I burn easily."

His smile widened as he stood up, straightened his tie and smoothed back his hair. "Think about it, Tommy boy. You have until lunch to consider the offer. Try something in there—" he pointed in the direction of the boardroom, "and you will be finished. Not only here, but anywhere you think you might be able to run to. You will be finished. We will hang you by your balls." He opened the door, then turned back and added cheerfully, "enjoy your lunch."

A few seconds after Freddie walked out—I was still looking at the empty doorway—Simon stuck his head in.

"Hey, Cowboy."

"Hi Simon. I don't think they want us to be talking together before we go in."

"Fuck 'em," he said and stepped into the office, leaving the door open. "I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine, thanks. And you?" I got up and walked around my desk.

"Fine. I'm not worried about this, if that's what you mean." He shrugged, "I'm ready for whatever they want to dish out."

"You'll be okay."

"I just wanted to make sure—" he shrugged again and looked down at his shoes, "you know, that everything was okay between you and me."

"Everything is fine between you and me, Simon." I patted him on the

shoulder. "You'll be okay—don't worry."

"I'm not, I just—" he looked up at me again and offered a weak smile. "Okay, I am a bit worried. What should I tell them in there?"

"The truth, Simon. From here on in, we always tell the truth." I took him by the shoulder and guided him out the office. "Now, you go tell them the whole truth and nothing but the truth. This afternoon we will drink beer together, but for now, I am going to once again abandon you to face your duty alone so that I may go seek out Sarah."

He grinned.

"Oh, and Simon," I said as I leaned against my doorframe and watched him start toward the boardroom.

"Yeah?"

"You'll be okay," I said, but I wasn't so sure. He would probably survive the day, but what about next time? Would there be a next time? He was good enough to learn from his mistakes. He'll never get bitten by a frozen radar screen or the billing system again. He knew all the right things to say to the airplanes, he just did not know how to talk to his bosses. I was the last person he should be looking up to. He should pick a better role model. "Just as long as you never forget rule number one," I said after him.

He grinned. "Never let 'em see you sweat."

I shook my head. "The safe, orderly, expeditious flow of traffic."

I picked up a toasted ham and cheese sandwich from the tea lady and took it out on to the patio. Sarah was sitting alone at one of the picnic benches, reading the paper and eating a green salad out of a Tupperware container. I sat down across from her.

"How's it going in there?" She asked without looking up from the paper.

"I hadn't realised the CAA still had a hangman on staff, but Freddie Moore has offered to break me out if I'll join him on a worldwide crime spree."

"And here you thought your career was at a dead end." She glanced up at me and back to her paper. "Have you seen Simon?"

"Yeah, briefly. Why?"

"No reason. He's just worried about you."

"About me? He should worry about himself—he's the one they want to hang."

"I don't think he was talking about the investigation. He's going to miss you, you know."

"And you?"

She looked up again and offered a weak smile. "I'll get over you."

"I'm sorry. Look, my head is spinning right now. Things are changing so fast and I'm being pulled in every direction at once."

"I'm not pulling you, Tom. I'm just wishing you knew which direction you *wanted* to go in."

I paused and looked down at the table top—grey and cracked, weather-beaten from only a few short seasons sitting outside in the sun, wind and rain. "I know," I said, still looking at the table. I ran a finger along one of the long splits in the wood. I opened my mouth and tried to tell her some of the stuff that was spinning around in my brain, the phone calls I made this morning, the complete uncertainty of my life and career. I wanted to tell her that she was the hardest thing for me to leave behind and how, for the last thirty minutes I've been seriously considering Freddie Moore's offer just so I could enjoy a little success. And what would be wrong with that? After all, my complaint about those guys was that they had no sense of what our purpose was, what this business was *really* about—but I do. So, aren't I, then, the right person to be in that job? Could I make sure Fast Freddie and his cohorts never forgot rule number one? How long would I last? Long enough to make a difference? They could easily pull the rug out from under me, or have me bumped off in Fiji. *He was past his use-by date.* Hell, I didn't even know if the offer was real. I was pretty sure the threat was real. The only thing I knew for sure was that, in about twenty minutes I was going back into that boardroom and I had no idea what I was going to tell them. I wished I could open my mouth and tell Sarah all that, I wished I could ask her what the right thing to do was. I opened my mouth to try to tell her this but all that came out in a hoarse whisper was, "I love you, Sarah."

I looked up at her and our eyes met. She studied me for what seemed an eternity. Her eyes were glazed over. She reached up to her face as she tried to suppress the tears.

"I know, I just—" she paused long enough to regain a tenuous control over her emotions, then looked at the table and spoke in soft whisper. "I didn't want to fall in love with you. I just wanted some excitement, something—*someone*—to break me out of my predictable existence. I wanted someone who wasn't like the others and from the first time I met you, I knew that was you. But I also knew that it could only be for a little fun, for a little while, that you would leave someday. I knew that what I loved about you was the very reason I should never have fallen for you." She looked up again and offered a pained smile. "You're not boring Tom Hardy."

I nodded slowly and started to say something but she cut me off.

"I know you have to leave." Then she patted my hand and withdrew hers. "I understand why you have to do this. It's okay. Go." Then she gathered her salad and fork. "I have to get back to work."

"Will you come to the airport tonight?"

"No, I don't think that's a good idea." She stood up and looked down at me. I could see she was having a hard time holding the tears off again.

"Please?"

"I don't want to go through that." She shook her head. "I don't know. Probably not. Take care of yourself, Tom." She leaned over and kissed me on the forehead like a mother sending her little boy off to summer camp.

I watched her walk away and wondered if I would ever see her again. At the moment, I felt empty—like a chunk of me had been surgically removed. I looked around the patio, there was a group of three technicians sitting at another table eating lunch and a lone controller standing by the fence having a smoke. They were all engrossed in what they were doing. None were paying attention to me and Sarah. It was almost as if I was not part of the scene, but just an unseen viewer instead—that if I could find the right knob I could reach up and change the channels and find a cops and robbers show. That, however, was ridiculous. This was not a television show—my life was not a sitcom. If it was, then they were not the nutcases—these people all belonged here like perfectly cast actors in the plot, they all fit quite sensibly into the picture—and the only nutcase was me. *Yet, perfectly sane.*

I wandered back upstairs and stood at the end of the long corridor, looking at the solid wood doors at the far end. Amanda was down there talking to Clive Colson

and nodding. It was my turn again. It was almost one o'clock and in another minute they would start looking at their watches and wondering where I was if I was not in my chair in the centre of the room.

*This is crazy.* I was crazy. What was I thinking? I've already blamed Freddie Moore for one crime I know he did not commit. I had no evidence to support my other claims. Where was Flynn? I started a slow walk toward the boardroom doors. This was crazy—I've got to stop what I've started.

"Mr. Hardy," the voice said calmly as I passed the open door to my office. I paused and turned.

"Captain Tucker," I said to the man leaning against my bookcase.

"So where's my man, Flynn?"

"I don't know—he was supposed to be here by noon."

"We had a deal."

"I know—I had a deal with him too."

Tucker straightened up and took a couple steps toward me until he was standing in the doorframe. He had a manila folder in his hand.

"What's that?" I asked.

"My end of the bargain. Where's yours?"

"I said I don't know—look, I'm sorry, I was sure he would be here."

Tucker held the folder up and slapped it against my chest. "The only reason I'm showing this to you is because you were right about this much. Which suggests that Flynn might be less guilty than at first presumed."

I took the folder and opened it up, but hesitated when I saw the tall figure in my peripheral vision. Freddie Moore was standing outside the men's room door twenty feet away, smiling at me. I smiled back then pushed passed Tucker into my office.

"The evidence suggests," Tucker said, "that Moore and Woodcock orchestrated the sale and development of Milton Gorge aerodrome to a consortium of business men who call themselves M & G Properties—a group it appears to which Moore and Woodcock are the principals. That's illegal. The evidence, mind you, is circumstantial, but it's enough to suggest it was a pretty shady deal. Certainly enough to warrant an investigation—which, my guess is would then turn up enough to

prosecute each one of the men on that list. Different charges, of course, ranging from collusion to mere complicity."

I looked down the list of six names and paused on number four. "Shit," I whispered.

"I'm showing that to you only because it was you who brought this to my attention and we had a deal, but you can't use that for anything going on in that boardroom today. I've already turned this over to the Serious Fraud Office."

"You what?"

"It's a serious crime, Mr. Hardy."

"Yes, I know but—of course." I looked back at the list. *Shit, what have I done?*

"I'm going in there with you."

"What?"

"I'm going into that boardroom with you, Mr. Hardy."

"Why?"

"Because I want to ensure that this evidence is kept confidential. Mr. Moore is in there and I don't want you tipping him off."

"I won't, I promise."

"Just the same," he took the file back from me.

"Okay." I looked up at the clock. "We'd better get going then." I went over to my desk and collected my own corporate blue file folder from the top drawer and started with Tucker down the corridor. As we approached the double wooden doors, Carlton Woodcock came out, carrying a briefcase in one hand and twirling a set of keys on the finger of the other. When he saw us he paused and stared nervously, his eyes darting from Tucker to me.

"Hardy," he said and let out a nervous snort. "They're waiting for you. I was, ah—just going to make a couple phone calls and ah—"

I nodded and exchanged a glance with Tucker. "Use my office if you like."

"Oh, hey, thanks I will. And hey, let's have a beer tonight," he said, then started on his way looking like he was trying hard not to burst into a sprint.

"Sure thing, Woodchuck," I said as I opened the boardroom door for Tucker and glanced over my shoulder before preceding in—long enough to see Carlton dash

passed my office door and out the double glass doors toward the exit.

"It's the bigger fish we want," Tucker said quietly.

## Twenty-seven

*Stay loose, Freddie reminded himself. Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.* He smiled to himself. Sure, Hardy was getting to be a bit of a worry, but the game was only *really* fun when your opponent was worthy. The rest of these *schmucks*... Freddie glanced around the boardroom as he entered. No challenge. Hardy was fun because he was completely unpredictable. Yeah, it was a worry to see him in a scrum with that cop—but really, what could he have?

“Carlton, something’s come up,” Freddie whispered as he leaned in close to Woodcock’s ear.

Woodcock had been enjoying just a few minutes of closed-eye contemplation before the hearing got underway again. Colson and Amanda were speaking in hushed tones just inside the door, Skidmore had been in the toilet for twenty minutes and Hardy was not back yet.

When Freddie whispered in his ear, he slowly opened his eyes. “Now what?”

“Hardy knows about M & G.”

“What!” Woodcock said loud enough to attract Amanda and Colson’s attention. They both looked over then resumed their quiet discussion.

“Now, now, Carlton,” Freddie whispered, “keep cool, keep your head on—now is the moment that separates the men from the boys.”

“What do you mean, he knows?” Woodcock asked, trying to keep his voice down. “How can he—”

“It doesn’t matter how, right now. All that matters is that he knows and he’s tried to blackmail me with it.”

“Fuck.”

“And—I think he’s spilled his guts to the police. I saw him talking to that cop.”

Woodcock squeezed his eyes shut. “Fuck, fuck, fuck—I’m going to jail.”

“No you’re not, Carlton,” Freddie said soothingly, “not if you can just stay calm long enough for some damage control.”

"Damage control?"

"Yes. This is what you have to do. I think it would be judicious if you went down to the St. Miltonville office and collected certain documents—certain incriminating documents that might be better off in a more undisclosed location."

"Me? You want *me* to go destroy evidence? Why don't you do it for once—why don't you get *your* fingerprints all over this mess for a change?"

"Carlton—keep your voice down, let's not attract attention. And let's not argue—you know I can't leave until this little circus is over. You, on the other hand can claim to have another meeting to attend."

"Bullshit, Freddie—I'm not—"

"Carlton, look," Freddie reached in his pocket and pulled out his car keys, "you know that BMW you always wanted? It's yours. Take the keys. Take the car down to the M & G office and do this—we don't have much time. Here's a brand new BMW for you. My gift to you to show my appreciation for all the little things you do for me."

Carlton stared at the keys in Freddie's hand and then, cautiously, as if expecting Freddie to snatch them away again, he reached for them. "This doesn't mean I'm happy about—"

"I know, Carlton. I understand. You're a good man. Now go."

Woodcock stood up, which caught Amanda and Colson's attention again. "Something's come up," he said to Amanda, "I have another important meeting to get to."

Amanda did not say anything, but looked at him suspiciously.

"Oh, Carlton," Freddie said across the room as Woodcock walked away. "Don't forget your briefcase." He held it up, caught Woodcock's eye and patted the briefcase.

"Of course," Woodcock said nervously as he took it from Freddie then hurriedly left the room.

\* \* \*

With Tucker's arrival in the boardroom, Colson and Amanda stopped their

quiet discussion. Amanda raised her eyebrows and said, "Captain Tucker, I'm sorry this is a closed meeting."

I liked the way she referred to it as a 'meeting'—keeping the fact that it was a lynch mob on a 'need to know' basis only.

"I've been invited," Tucker said with a nod to me.

"Oh?" Amanda turned to me.

"Ah, yeah—" I shrugged. "He been doing some moonlighting in personal security, so I hired him as my bodyguard. He's quite reasonable, six bucks an hour, and he's got his own gun."

"All right, enough, Thomas," Amanda waved me away. "Take a seat then, Captain Tucker."

I caught a bit of Tucker's glare as he turned and walked toward the side of the room—people might think I'm crazy, but even Sergeant Joe Friday had a sense of humour and I think he would have smiled at my witticisms. Tucker, however, was obviously in a foul mood for getting stiffed on the Flynn deal. He positioned himself against the wall next to the door and defiantly refused to sit down. I took my seat and set my corporate blue file folder on the floor to the side of the chair.

Freddie Moore, meanwhile, seemed to be enjoying the scene immensely. He was smiling, letting out the occasional relaxed chuckle and had his eyes locked on me—possibly even in admiration. Or maybe it wasn't admiration—there was definitely a glow about him, but I was developing a new theory on the spot that the more threatened Fast Freddie Moore felt, the more relaxed and chummy he appeared. So maybe he did not so much admire my quick wit as he was warning me to not try any funny business.

When Skidmore returned to the boardroom—looking well rested and with a level of contentment with life that only a good bowel movement can produce—Amanda and Colson took their seats, and Amanda announced it was time to recommence.

"Is Mr. Woodcock coming back?" She asked.

"I'm afraid not," Freddie explained without taking his eyes from me, "he had some other, rather urgent business to attend."

"Very well, then we shall proceed." She looked down at her notes and read

them silently for a few moments before looking up at me. "Thomas, we have now reviewed all the supporting documents, listened to the tapes, heard expert testimony and have questioned all the controllers involved. The only evidence that does not fit with the rest is your statement. Therefore, we can only conclude that your statement has been falsified. According to civil aviation rule number twelve-point-sixty-three, you could be subject to prosecution if the information you have provided us turns out to be false, and none of us here wants to see that happen, so we have agreed to give you this opportunity to explain to us, in your own words, what happened. Are you willing to do that?"

I was only looking at Amanda as she was talking to me, but when she asked me if I was ready to spill my guts, I paused long enough to look around the room and I realised that everyone in the room was smiling at me. Well, Tucker's was more of a grimace—waiting in tense anticipation of me divulging sensitive state evidence against Freddie Moore. Amanda was not so much smiling either as she was looking very satisfied with herself for being in complete control of this meeting and offering me one last chance to save my future. Colson had been smiling ever since he heard the word 'prosecution'—*really*, did he think he was going to take me to trial over lying on my statement. Skidmore's smile was unadulterated warmth—the blind love of a grandfather who attends his grandson's trial thinking it is an award's ceremony. Freddie's smile had not changed—only my interpretation of it had. It was as if he too was experiencing the tense anticipation of a father whose kid is about to perform his first public solo—it was my performance that he was waiting for, would I play the fiddle or sing for these people? If he was uncertain about what tune I had in mind, he didn't show it.

"Yes," I said after a long silence.

"Proceed," Amanda said.

*Oh Amanda, would it have been different? Could it have been different?* She had spent her life trying to prove something to her father, trying to satisfy the expectations of a man whose expectations would never be satisfied. Trying to live up to his reputation. Trying to be as big as him. But when I saw Sir Richard Sheppard's name on the list of Freddie's partners, I realised something that Amanda had yet to. She was already better than him, already a bigger person than her father. Her father

would knowingly get involved with guys like Freddie Moore and their illicit business practices to gain a profit—they would portray their actions as the necessary means to gain the objective on the battlefield of business. Amanda, on the other hand, had one thing that would probably make her an early casualty in that war—she had integrity. I disagreed with many of her views, her corporate spirit irritated the hell out of me, I was convinced she was wrong about so many things. However, the one thing I had never noticed about her was that she had never, and probably would never, sell her integrity to move ahead faster. She believed passionately that the corporate approach to this industry was the right way—and who was I to say it was not? After all, the civil bureaucracy way is not exactly ideal. In the end, Amanda stood for something—something that I disagreed with—but she did so honestly.

I looked at her and remembered the good old days back at Milton Gorge. She used to radiate then, she used to laugh more when she thought of what the future held. Suddenly, I felt sorry. Not sorry for her—but apologetic.

So it was only to Amanda I spoke.

“I have misled this investigation.”

Amanda’s face relaxed slightly, as if she knew I was finally going to play the game on her team.

“I have falsified documents,” I continued, “and withheld information. For this I am deeply regretful.” I glanced around the room. Okay, so the St. Miltonville Estates scandal was out. It was not Freddie Moore I was afraid of, or Edwin Tucker—I was just not going to publicly humiliate Amanda. Which meant all I had left was to get my gripes off my chest, but I would not have any proof to offer that it was anything more than the whining of a disgruntled employee.

“But my actions,” I continued slowly, “although unprofessional, were not done out of malice or with a view to cover my own culpability or anyone else’s. I felt compelled to do what I did to illustrate a point. I did it to illustrate the very real role I *did* play in that incident that night. It is true that I was not the controller responsible for the position, it is also true that I was not present in the tower cab during most of the events leading up to the incident—and furthermore, it is true that I usurped that controller’s authority by interceding in what I thought was a critical situation.

“My reason’s were not to divert the truth, but to uncover it, because I *was*

guilty of something. I am not talking about my temporary absence from the operation during which time the incident occurred because it is typical for the supervisor to occasionally attend to duties elsewhere in the facility. I'm talking about my *other* role in which I failed that night." I leaned forward in my chair and spoke only to Amanda. "This job comes down to one man or woman in the chair, talking to the airplanes—that is who we look to as the person responsible—but that one man or woman only represents a single part of a big machine, they are the user interface, they are the voice of the system. In the end, though, the whole machine has to work properly for that person to provide the optimum service. And if things go wrong, we look to that one person to take responsibility for the failures of the system.

"I only took responsibility for the incident of last Thursday night as a controller because there was no place on the incident form for me to take responsibility as the system. But that was my role that night. I was the system. I was the infrastructure that failed to provide adequate support for my controller to do his job. I was the one who told my crew that day it was now an important duty for them to spend time inputting data into the computer for the purposes of billing the user, even while they were logged onto a control position—even though I strongly disapproved of dividing the controller's attention while they were supposed to be focused only on operational tasks. I was the system that certified as usable radar equipment that was, in fact, unreliable. And I was the system that told an inexperienced controller to, as much as possible, depart the aircraft in the opposite direction to the landing aircraft so that we, the system, can avoid the politically sensitive issue of noise abatement around the airport.

"And, finally, I failed to ensure that these new controllers understood what their most important role was—what their purpose was. I failed in that because I, as the system, lost my sense of purpose. Making this business cost-efficient is not inherently wrong in itself, as long as we remain focused on our primary purpose—but what is our purpose? Providing a service to the citizens of this country and the air-travelling public worldwide that abides by the highest safety standards is what we do. Unfortunately, safety is a terribly unprofitable and ambiguous concept. It is something that requires us to spend a lot of money never knowing for sure if it is paying off or not. We will never know how many lives are saved if we maintain the highest

standards, but we will know how many are lost as we whittle away at that great big vague area on our pie-chart called ‘the safety margin’—we will know. We almost found out last Thursday night.

“All I’m trying to say is that it is not just one controller we should be putting under the microscope here—it is the system. We need to get clear, all of us, what is the system’s primary purpose. Is it safety at all costs? Or is it the bottom-line? A little safety traded off for a lot of profit? Is it exploring new commercial opportunities?” I turned and looked at Freddie Moore, who had let his smile droop. “New investments that have nothing to do with fulfilling our true mission but only serve to distract the attention and resources of the organisation?”

“Bravo, Tom!” Freddie clapped his hands together three times loud enough to interrupt me. “Did you rehearse that? Or is that something your union provides for you on an inspirational calendar?”

“Mr. Moore, please,” Amanda said, but Freddie was not going to back down. I suspected he figured going on the offensive was the only way he was going to stave off a frontal attack. But I was quite through—I was not going to say anything more—that was it from me. Adios, amigos. Haere rā!

“Very dramatic,” Freddie continued, “You could probably sell that to the BBC. *I was the system!*” He was doing a not bad Richard Burton impression—or perhaps an impression of Richard Burton doing Winston Churchill. *“We will know, by God, we will know!* Tom, really, very good.” Once again he applauded—it was the first time I realised that one could clap sarcastically. “However, I must disagree with you. Once again you go on the assumption that controllers alone have exclusive rights on wisdom and, once again, you fail to see what you like to call the ‘big picture.’ That this business is not just about keeping the planes apart.”

“It’s supposed to be.”

“Well, it’s not. Not anymore. Wake up, Tommy boy. What you don’t know about the real world is as vast as the sky itself.”

“Mr. Moore, please settle down,” Amanda stepped in. Her voice was resolute and did not invite argument. “This is not the place to get into an argument. In fact, we invited Thomas to make his statement and he did. That does not mean you are allowed to go on the offensive like that.”

"Fine." Freddie glared at Amanda—obviously not appreciating her challenge to his authority, but also looking somewhat fearful of crossing her right now. "We came to settle this matter. If ol' Tom wants to wear it, then I say let him. All I know is I'm going to Fiji." He stood up.

"Sit down, Mr. Moore, this meeting is not over," Amanda commanded.

Freddie stared at her for a moment, then slowly lowered himself back into his chair without saying a word.

"Thank you, Thomas," Amanda said, then lowered her eyes to her notes. She was not reading, she was thinking and the moment stretched into many until there was an uneasy silence blanketing the room. Skidmore was nodding and smiling, but I was pretty sure he was still thinking about fly-fishing. Colson was studying me closely with narrowed, yet unblinking eyes.

"I think you're right," Colson finally said, "I think it *was* your fault."

"Mr. Colson, please," Amanda said. She did not look up, but continued staring at her paperwork. Still, she said nothing. Colson backed down and we all waited for Amanda. Even I was starting to get nervous. I shot a glance at Tucker, who shrugged.

"As a matter of fact." Amanda finally spoke, but paused as she looked up at me, then to Freddie, then back to me. "I agree with you."

I straightened up. "Really?"

"Yes. But what do we do?" She raised her eyebrows. "This is what I propose—" she glanced at Colson. "Number one, that Thomas, you will consider yourself as having been reprimanded; number two, that Simon Henley be placed on two weeks remedial training and upon the successful completion of that he will begin his probationary period from the beginning."

"In other words, everyone gets off Scot free?" Colson asked.

"Not at all," Amanda continued. "Number three, that we establish a new investigation panel to review the operational procedures that were involved in this incident. And we," she turned to me and offered a playful smile I hadn't seen since we were last eating chicken stir-fry together, "investigate the system."

"I have no responsibility to participate in this," Colson said, looking somewhat regretful that he was not going to get to prosecute me, but Amanda was not inviting argument and he could see it. Without her support, there was not much he could do.

Skidmore smiled, nudged Colson and just said, "I say, she's a smart one, isn't she? She reminds me of Edna Bascom in her prime, I tell you, you wouldn't want to cross that woman, she could—"

"Oh, for God's sake, shut up," Colson snapped at Skidmore.

Skidmore smiled warmly at Colson as he tilted his head and studied the young man. "You know, I knew a guy just like you during the war. Sounded a lot like you when he talked. Dressed nicely, too, just like you." Skidmore nodded, the glow in his eyes was following a long lost memory. "They say the Japs got him." He leaned closer to Colson and winked. "That's what they say."

Colson stared at Skidmore for a cautious moment, then turned back to Amanda. "Do what you want, I don't care." He was sounding disappointed that the day's hanging was called off, and started gathering his notes together.

"Fine by me," Freddie said, slapping the table. "As long as I don't have to be on *that* investigation panel. I'm sure Carlton will be available for you."

Amanda looked at me.

"Sure," I shrugged. Simon gets to keep his job and Amanda rejects the dark side of the force—not a bad day's work. I smiled at her and whispered, "Thanks, Amanda."

She winked back.

"Just one last thing," I said and reached down for my corporate blue file folder. "While Mr. Colson is here, Amanda, do you want to just give him this paperwork on the Malahide incident?"

A wicked smile spread across her face as she glanced across at Freddie. "Of course, as long as we're all here."

"You son-of-a-bitch," Freddie Moore said to me. He leaned forward and jabbed his finger at me. "You're going to pay for that."

I shrugged again. "Bill me."

But Freddie knew when he was licked and didn't fight it. He stood up again and looked eager to leave. He had a lot of damage control to get stuck into. I stood up to leave too and it was at that moment that Owen Flynn returned to the world of air traffic control.

## Twenty-eight

One of the more irrational fears in my life is the fear of finding out what character I would be cast as in a television show. In a cop show, I think I would be a cop. Not a Sergeant Joe Friday, mind you, not the lead, but also not the by-the-book captain who's always riding the hero's ass and completely missing the point. Realistically, I would probably be the hero's comic sidekick—not stupid; clever witticisms and the occasional bright, but utterly obvious insight; '*He's dead, Jim.*' Beyond the cop show, however, the fear gets more complicated. In a medical drama I would be the likeable guy that dies slowly and painfully. The western is the one that has me the most worried. I don't have the physical stature or dramatic carriage to be a Matt Dillon. I totally lack the killer eyes or murderous stubble to be a bad guy—they wouldn't call me anything that included "the Kid." Which really only leaves the role of town drunk or a usually intoxicated-and-always-unreliable deputy named Festus. It is an odd fear, I admit, but then again, that is why I pointed out that it was irrational. Why I was thinking about that at the moment was because Owen Flynn had what I did not. He had dramatic presence. He had timing. They could've called him the Rangitikei Kid and it would've stuck. The way he came through those boardroom doors, throwing both open as if he was a gunslinger entering a saloon—it was a great entrance. I never could have pulled it off myself. One of the doors would've been locked and I would've dislocated my shoulder. Silly Festus.

"Sorry I'm late, Cowboy," he said to me as he strode in. "Hope I haven't missed too much."

"Owen?" Amanda said in a stunned whisper.

"Hi, Amanda," he said, turning to her, "and please don't call me that."

"Who?" asked Colson.

"Well, I'll be a son-of-a-bitch," Freddie Moore said—once again, a lightness, a joy returned to his expression. "If it's not the mad bomber himself."

Flynn smiled. "Hello, Freddie. How's the new car?"

"Less cooked than the last one."

Tucker stood up straight. "Owen Flynn? I'm Captain Edwin Tucker of the—"

"Yeah, yeah," Flynn waved him off. "I know who you are—the marshal of Dodge City, and I'm supposed to be turning myself in to you. I'll be right with you. First, I want to introduce you to a friend of mine." Flynn went to the door and nodded.

I probably should have stopped him then—I had already decided to drop the whole St. Miltonville Estates issue—but, like everyone else at the moment, I was just another member of his audience. And I wasn't going to miss it for the world.

A moment later the man entered. He looked the same as the last time I had seen him. He still stood tall and straight and walked in a slow, measured pace. His face was still deeply etched, but I expected him to look much older. The only difference I could notice is that he was not dressed in his old flight fatigues, but instead in a loose fitting and long since dated grey tweed suit.

"Everyone, I would like to introduce you to Mr. Amos Scuffield, veteran pilot, gentleman farmer, and—" Flynn turned and winked at Freddie, "demolitions expert. Amos, everyone."

Amos looked around the room, nodding, then paused on Skidmore. "Well, Winnie, this *is* a surprise," he said in low, gravelly voice. "Aren't you dead yet? I heard it had been taps for ol' Winnie Skidmore years ago."

"Not quite, Scuffs," Skidmore shook his head. "Yet, I was sure I had outlived you, you old dinosaur."

"This is an absolutely heart-warming reunion," Freddie said, "but I'm out of here."

"You're staying," Flynn said, "if I have to tie you to that chair."

Freddie locked eyes with Flynn for a moment, then let out a bored sigh and leaned back in his chair.

Flynn turned back to Scuffield. "Now, Scuffs, would you mind telling these people who removed the structure formally known as Milton Gorge control tower."

"Of course," Scuffield smiled and turned toward Amanda. "I did. You see, I had a business arrangement with Mr. Moore here."

"For Christ's Sake," Freddie huffed, "now I've heard everything. Nice try, Mr. Flynn, I certainly got to give you credit for trying, but this is preposterous. I'm a respected leader of the business community—I have friends in high places. Do you

think they'll believe a fugitive and this old bag of bones over me?"

"Oh, there is no need to take *my* word for it, Mr. Moore." Mr. Scuffield smiled at Freddie, as he reached into his coat pocket. The room was silent. All eyes followed Scuffield's hand as he slowly brought out a microcassette recorder, set it on the table in front of Amanda and, with a trembling index finger, pushed the play button. "We can listen to your own words."

Although the voices on the tape were somewhat muffled, they were unmistakable—Scuffield's rough life-hardened voice, Freddie's Canadian accent and, in the background, Woodchuck was snorting his disapproval. The tape was cued to the juicy bits.

*"I think ten grand is pretty bloody generous,"* Freddie was saying, *"considering you would probably do it for free—don't think I don't know about that little stunt trying to fly your airplane through the building a few months ago."*

*"It doesn't sound legal,"* Scuffield said in response, *"I'm a tired old man and I'm dying, I can't afford to be put through the stress of being arrested at this stage in my life."*

*"You won't be, I've already got that covered. Now listen, I told you—this may seem a bit unorthodox to you, but it's a legit request. My partners and I own that airport, we want the tower gone. If we do it this way, no one will have a chance to file protests. There will be a beautiful new subdivision there and the airport long forgotten before anyone even notices..*

*"Long forgotten—I know the feeling."*

*"Spare us the memories, Grandpa,"* Woodchuck interjected.

*"Look—" Freddie again, "We all know you're dying to do this because you've always held a grudge against the place."*

*"Yes, I am dying to,"* Scuffield's voice was almost inaudible.

*"The job is simple: remove the building, no casualties, and then you're never heard from again."*

*"So it's taps for Ol' Milton Gorge then, eh?"* Scuffield said, which brought a loud snort of approving laughter from Woodchuck.

*"Ha! Taps for ol' Milton Gorge,"* Woodchuck repeated, *"I like that."*

At this point, Scuffield reached up and hit the stop button. "There's more of

interest on there," he said, then turned to Freddie and added, "you don't really think I'm such a daft old fool as to have that conversation and keep no record of it, do you?"

Freddie shrugged, rolled his eyes back and pretended to be bored.

Amos addressed Wynnie Skidmore. "Oh, I tell you, after doing Milton Gorge tower I felt revived, young again. Before the blast, my doctors told me I'd be dead within four months. But it did something to me—it made me feel *alive* again, it rejuvenated the very cells of my being. And look at me now. Complete remission."

"Wonderful, you've invented terrorism therapy," Freddie said. Except for a brief angry glare at Scuffield while the tape was playing, Freddie appeared quite passive, considering he was totally screwed.

"I call it being cleansed by fire," Scuffield smiled back. "And so, Mr. Moore, from the sounds of it, your operation was not entirely as legitimate as you claimed."

"I have nothing to say, I know my rights. However," he turned to Tucker and pointed at Flynn, "you still have the man who torched my car and I want you to arrest him."

"Ah, excuse me," I interjected, "but I might be able to help you on that one. I think Woodchuck—I mean, Mr. Woodcock—is the man you want to talk to about that."

"What are you talking about?" Freddie asked, but he shifted in his seat nervously.

I shrugged. "Sorry, Mr. Moore, he told me he did it and you told him to do it. He also kind of let it slip about your arrangement with Mr. Scuffield. We were peeing at the time. I think he was nervous."

Woodchuck didn't really confess to me. Not in so many words at least. I was taking another punt here. It just seemed that, if it wasn't Flynn but only made to *look* like Flynn, Woodchuck was the logical alternative.

"Why that ungrateful little prick," Freddie said.

"Where is Mr. Woodcock anyway?" Tucker asked. He walked across the room toward Freddie. "Where was he really going?"

"Well," Freddie leaned back and rubbed his chin and thought about it. "I'm not sure, but come to think of it—I think he's on his way to the St. Miltonville offices

to destroy important evidence. He seemed to be a bit worried about some possibly incriminating documents in his briefcase, too." Freddie looked down at his feet. "Of course, in his haste, he grabbed my briefcase by mistake. You see, we have the same briefcase and often confuse the two. So I just hope he doesn't get carried away and go off destroying my ham and cheese sandwich. I'm pretty sure this one, however," he lifted the other briefcase onto the table, "is actually Carlton's because it has his monogram. See?" He pointed to the initials CW. Then spun the briefcase around to face Tucker. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Tucker narrowed his eyes at Freddie.

"Well, we are on airport property, aren't we? And you *are* aviation security, aren't you? And, if I'm not mistaken—that gives you the right to search any bags brought on to the premises." He nudged the briefcase closer to Tucker.

Tucker stared at it for several seconds before he reached down and pressed the buttons to open it, then carefully lifted the lid.

"Yes, as I suspected," Freddie said peering in at the stack of documents. "Those look like they might have something to do with the subdivision at St. Miltonville and a partnership agreement with, let me see," he leaned closer, "looks like a mister, no, I take that back, *Sir* Richard Sheppard." Freddie leaned back and smiled at Amanda.

Amanda stiffened at the sound of her father's name, but otherwise did not flinch.

"And," Freddie added, "I have a feeling my name is not to be found on that document. So you see, Captain Tucker, it would appear that Carlton Woodcock is the man you are after, and if you don't hurry, you won't have anything on him either." Then Freddie patted down his pockets, looked back at Tucker in mock surprise and added, "and, oh my God, I think he's stolen my car again!"

Tucker leaned across the table and stuck his finger only an inch or two from Freddie's nose. "You! Don't even think about leaving town! The Serious Fraud Office wants to talk to you."

"Where would I go?" Freddie shrugged.

Tucker turned and headed toward the door, pausing in front of Flynn and Scuffield. "Mr. Flynn," he said, "it would appear you might be an innocent man and

Mr. Scuffield, it would appear you had a legal contract to do what you did. If you two don't mind hanging around Auckland for a couple of days—I think I can expedite this matter with the police."

"Sure." Flynn shrugged.

Tucker left.

"Well, I say," Skidmore said after a moment's silence. "That *was* good fun. Reminds me about that time back in '64 when Thornie, me and Abercrombie were—" he stopped and looked around at the faces in the room. "Yes, of course—don't let the old man get started. Scuffs? What do you say we go find a pub that's willing to serve drinks to a couple of old dinosaurs and we can continue that discussion about the time you pranged the Chipmunk into Edna Bascom's chicken coop?"

"I pranged it?" Scuffield asked in dismay. "That's it, you've finally gone completely senile!"

As Scuffield and Skidmore were leaving, Freddie followed, mumbling something about schmucks and lawyers, and Clive Colson followed close at Freddie's heels. All that remained in the boardroom was myself, Flynn and Amanda.

"So Flynn," I said, "what took you so long?"

"It's like you said, he wasn't easy to find and when I did he wasn't exactly talkative—but I convinced him in the end. Told him he owed me for trying to run me through with his Harvard. We also stopped to go fishing."

I looked at Amanda. She was quiet, just staring down at her notepad.

"I'm sorry, Amanda," I said.

She looked up, but said nothing.

"I'm mean, about your dad." I exchanged a quick glance with Flynn. "I just found out he was part of this a half hour ago. I was hoping it wouldn't be brought up. Anyway, this is pretty much all my fault and I—"

"Thomas," she stopped me, "thank you. But you needn't apologise for him—this is nothing new. It's just typical—standard operating practices. It won't even cost him one hour with his lawyer in the end." She stood up and started gathering her papers.

"So you see then?"

"See what?" she paused.

"That you have nothing to prove to him. That by having a defined sense of ethics and being willing—" I raised a hand to the now near empty boardroom, "to jeopardize your own career advancement by standing up for what you believe, you've surpassed him. You're better than he is. So how does it feel?"

She looked at me and then, slowly, a smile spread across her face. "I'm not sure how it feels, but ... thank you." Then she looked at Flynn. "And thank you, Owen. It was good seeing you again."

"Likewise." Flynn grinned. "Hey, Amanda—looks like there might be a few openings in head office."

"No thanks, I think I'll stick to my present job for a while," she said. "Why don't we have drinks before you leave town?"

"Sure," Flynn nodded. "I'd like that."

Amanda started to leave, then stopped at the door, turned around and walked back to me. "You know, Thomas, I'm quite busy this week. I suspect it will take me a full week to get to my in-box. If you change your mind about leaving..." She finished the sentence with a tilt of her head and added, "If not, then good luck," and she leaned over, kissed me on the cheek then turned and left the room.

"So, Cowboy," Flynn said as we walked down the corridor, "just out of curiosity, how did that session with the shrink go?"

"It went fine—too long, but otherwise it went well."

"And?"

"And what?"

"You know what I mean, what was the diagnosis?"

I stopped and turned toward Flynn, looked both ways to make sure there was no one within ear shot and leaned close to him.

"Completely sane," I whispered. "Completely and utterly and more or less sane."

"You're shitting me?" Flynn looked truly surprised. "How did you pull that off?"

"He was asleep for most of the time," I shrugged. "Besides, I gave him a few things to mull over and in the end he wrote up his report and said I showed certain signs of a mild delusions of persecution, but nothing serious—otherwise, completely

sane and fit for duty."

"Well, that doesn't sound too bad."

"No. In other words, reasonably normal behaviour—one might say even *abnormally* normal for a controller."

"And it's certainly an improvement over what it could've said, right?"

"You mean," I paused and looked down at my shoes, "you mean, the delusions of godness? Yeah, I guess it's an improvement." I looked up at Flynn again. "By the way, thanks for helping me with that."

"You going to be okay then?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good." We started walking down the corridor again. "So when you coming back to see me and the family?"

"My very next vacation—I promise."

\* \* \*

Carlton Woodcock cruised along in the BMW savouring the blur of pastoral scenery and the seamless craftsmanship of his new car.

*At last! My BMW.* There was no reason why it wouldn't continue to be either—Freddie Moore was history. Carlton would make sure of that.

Sure, he could go back and shred documents and get Freddie off the hook. On the other hand, if he *didn't*—if he just removed the documents to a safer location—Freddie Moore was history. Such a simple question really—to shred or not to shred? It was all in Carlton Woodcock's hands—he had control.

"Bye-bye, Freddie," Woodcock said aloud and laughed as he pushed his glasses back up the tiny bridge of his nose. "Time to *rock and roll!*" He gave the volume knob on *his* stereo in *his* BMW a quick twist and the thunderous onslaught of surround-sound completely drowned out the siren that was rapidly approaching from behind.

Woodcock could only hear the crashing beat of the drums and the anguished cry of an electric guitar when he saw the flashing lights in his rear-vision mirror. The smile dropped from his face—*what the?*

Then, slowly, the smile reappeared. He let out a snort and a loud burst of laughter. "Bye-bye, Freddie!" He punched the accelerator. "Yeehaaa!"

## Twenty-nine

Airport lounges just have that affect on me. How can one not be introspective while waiting for the plane to leave? Whether one is coming or going, running to or running away, going home or just going away, travelling into the unfamiliar or the knowingly mundane, flying to the next town down the main trunk, or reaching for what the Maoris call *te taha atu ote rangi*: the far side of the sky.

I believe the reason airport lounges have that affect is two-fold—there is the forced meditation aspect and the idea that it takes place in an environment that completely exemplifies the transient nature of life itself. We think of ourselves as static beings but we never are. We are born, we travel through life, we die. Motion is, paradoxically, our natural stasis. And the airport lounge is a reminder of that; the plane unloads, the people mill about in chaos, and then they are gone—gone home or onward in their journey. Born or dead. Life is not about being born and it is not about dying—it is about the journey between those two main hubs and the airport lounge is the place where everyone must act out the physical manifestation of their spiritual lives: *I move therefore I am; I must keep in motion or I will never arrive; this one travels light, that one is heavily burdened with unnecessary baggage; this one is frightened by the strangeness, that one is thrilled by the unknown; one just wants to get to the end, the other enjoys the ride.* They should have more churches in airports.

I was thinking about this when I was looking out at the great lumbering beast—the Boeing 747—on the tarmac that promised to take me home. Home? Or just back?

It was dark outside, and my thoughts and vision drifted between the otherworldly events going on to prepare that machine to stumble its way across the ground until it broke free and the ghostly reflections of the people waiting for their journey. When I saw his reflection, it did not surprise me—it could have been a ghost, it could have been my eyes or my mind playing tricks, but it did not surprise me he was sitting at the bar, having a drink.

I approached him.

"Buy you a drink?" Freddie asked as he twirled the ice cubes around in his vodka and tonic. He too did not look surprised to see me here.

The barman approached and put a cocktail napkin on the bar in front of me.

I looked at Freddie, then at the barman. "*Glenfiddich* on the rocks."

"Put it on my tab," Freddie said to the barman and waved his own glass for another.

"Going somewhere?" I glanced at Freddie's suitcase on the floor.

"There's a whole world of opportunity out there, Tommy boy." He took a sip from his vodka. "I've had enough of this business anyway—it's too insane." He glanced across at me and smiled.

"I don't suppose Captain Tucker would be interested to know you're leaving town?"

"I'd imagine he might be interested. If you can find him. The last I heard he was involved in a high-speed chase somewhere down country trying to catch up with Carlton Woodcock and my stolen BMW."

"So Woodchuck takes the rap?"

Freddie laughed. "Don't worry about Carlton, Tom. They've been grooming him. I probably shouldn't tell you this but," he leaned closer and whispered, "Woodcock is going to be the next CEO of ControlCorp." He lifted his drink to his lips, but paused to add, "I mean, after they catch him of course."

The drinks arrived and I sat down on the stool next to Freddie.

"So you're going home then?" Freddie asked into his glass. "Back to the old job, back to the old wife, back to your good old days, eh?"

"Not quite." I pulled my boarding card from my pocket and looked at it. "L.A. at least, but I can't go back—the wife is gone for good and the job—" I dropped the boarding card on the bar. "Well, I declined the offer."

"Why?"

"I don't know why—something about seeing what it was like without a safety net."

"Yet, you're still leaving?"

*Yeah, I guess.* I looked into my drink. "So where are you off to?"

"Well, Fiji tonight. Nobody is going to ruin that for me—not Amanda, not

Carlton and not you." He pulled his boarding card from his pocket, waved it, then dropped it on the bar too. "Then, I'm thinking Borneo."

"Borneo?"

"Borneo."

"Why Borneo?"

"I've noticed an opportunity opening up there in the rubber industry." He looked at me and studied me carefully for a moment. "You know, Tom, you're a good man—I could always use a partner. They got *diamonds* in Borneo. And real estate."

I looked at Freddie and said nothing.

"No," Freddie answered himself. "I didn't think so. Pity, we could've made a great team. You know, Tom. I'll tell you the truth. You think I'm the bad guy—but I'm not. The truth is, I was born the son of a petty crook and the only thing I ever wanted was to be better than that. Maybe to you I look like nothing more than a better-dressed version of my dad. But in the business world you've sometimes got to lie a little, cheat a little, maybe even steal a little—it's called progress—we are the ones that push progress along." He paused to take a couple sips of his drink. His smile had faded. "Your problem is that you want to blame me, but I'm not the one who's making the world like this. The government gave up trying to govern—so they gave it to us, the Corporation to do the job. The days of democracy are over—it's a corpocracy all the way to the top—and, like you, I'm just trying to make my way in it." He took another swallow of his drink. "Progress is painful, my boy," Freddie said as he got off his bar stool. He drained the rest of his drink, then gathered his ticket and picked up his suitcase. "That's the truth—that's *my* truth. I know it, because it's right in front of my nose. And, Tommy boy, one of these days you'll figure it out, that's where it is for you too."

He reached his hand out. "It's been a pleasure to know you, Tom. It's been a good game. Just remember, in the end, that's all it is—a game."

I looked at Freddie's outstretched hand and, hesitantly, took it.

Freddie smiled. "And don't take things so seriously, you'll give yourself an ulcer." He turned and walked away.

"You taking care of this?" The barman asked as he slid Freddie's tab in front of me.

*Yeah, that was his truth.* I guess it's different for everyone. I hope it is. Maybe it was because of people like Freddie that was the reason why people like Janey and people like my dad felt it necessary to stand up and resist. Balance. Life must be kept in balance. Progress could be a good thing or it could be a steamroller out of control. I've had this thing about people and their causes, both attracted to them and scared to death to participate. Janey was right, I wouldn't commit to anything. I was scared all right. Scared because it was some nameless, faceless guy like Freddie Moore who killed my dad. Or maybe not.

My dad was committed to his cause. He was dedicated to his students, to literature, to the ideals of academia. But his university was going totally corporate on him. They tried running him out and he was fighting back—fighting a losing battle. He began drinking more; his spells got longer, blacker and more frequent. I didn't know what his crusade was all about, not back then at least. I didn't care—he saw that as his primary role in life, his purpose. All I wanted was for him to be my dad—take me fishing, buy me a dog. I didn't care about his fucking crusade—I just wanted a dad.

I guess that's where my delusions of godness started. My problem was not feeling like an insignificant speck of dust, it was being God. But Flynn put me in my place. Flynn and his silly ass corporate structure of the universe philosophy—not a god, not a speck of dust, but an integral part of a continuum. He had a certain kind of gumboot wisdom.

The seeds of my god-problem were planted a long time ago, but did not blossom until Thornie Rumbold died. You see, I never believed the Corporation killed Thornie from the beginning. I wanted to believe someone had killed him—someone else. I needed to because the alternative was too painful. The truth was, I killed him.

Or to be more accurate, the fiction was; I killed Thornie.

Truth, fiction. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between the two because sometimes they are one and the same. Truth, fiction. They are not mutually exclusive. The former is merely the essence of the latter—truth expanded to fill reality. Sometimes one becomes the other.

The idea that Thornie died precisely the same death as my dad was no

coincidence because it did not happen. My dad died his death and Thornie died the death I had scripted for him. And telling Flynn about it in the hut that last night on the Rangitikei was the first time I had spoken of it ever.

*"I thought you might need a friend."* I could hear my dad's voice. *"Your wily snares an' fechtin fierce."*

I lifted the puppy from the box up to my face. "Wiley," I said and the puppy approved by slurping his smelly little tongue across my nose.

"Can we take him fishing with us, Dad?"

But we never went fishing again.

On Saturday morning it had rained. When my dad returned from his meeting with the dean, he went straight to his den and shut the door without saying anything. He was not feeling well.

"He's not feeling well," my mom said. Her face was pale, the day was grey—it is like a black and white memory, but it is the shades of grey that have become hard to define.

Not feeling well. One of his moods. *Daddy's delicate condition.* But this one was not like the others. This time the blackness came in and never let him go.

Later in the afternoon, my mother called me into the house. She was going out to the store to pick up a few groceries and wanted me to play in the house until she got back. She reminded me not to bother my father until he came out of his study.

So I went to my room to work on the Robert Burns poem and play with my dog. I was trying to teach Wiley how to fetch a ball when I heard a thud downstairs, as if someone had bumped his head.

No, it was like a *pop*.

Wiley pricked up his ears, dropped the ball from his mouth, looked at the door and let out a short whimper.

I went to investigate. I opened my bedroom door and looked out. There was no movement in the house.

"Dad?" I called quietly, too quiet for anyone downstairs to hear.

I stepped into the hall—the house was silent and still. I walked to the top of the stairs.

"Dad?" I called out, louder, leaning over the banister to direct my voice

toward the door to my dad's study. There was no response, no sound, no movement. I inched down the first couple of stairs, the wood creaking under my feet. As I slowly crept down the stairs, the study door came into view. Halfway down, I tried calling for him again, but still no response. If I could just hear dad's muffled voice, arguing with someone on the phone, or the slam of a desk drawer, or even the crash of a lamp. But there was nothing—nothing but a heavy, eerie silence. I continued slowly down the stairs and into the hall.

It was always a quiet house. But this, this was different. Like feeling alone in a thick fog, where the brain knew that there was life out beyond the greyness, but it still felt so alone. I was alone and I *felt* alone—but I was not *supposed* to be alone. I stood in the hall across from the study door.

"Dad?" I called again. The stillness crept in around me and I swallowed hard.  
*Alone.*

My heart beat faster. I looked down the hall toward the stairs—Wiley was still at the top of the stairs, whimpering quietly. The house looked dark and gloomy—it was raining again outside. I remember the pitter-pat of the rain on the roof.

"Dad!" I called loudly, but still no response.

My hand shook as I reached up, turned the knob and pushed the door open just a couple inches. "Dad?" I whispered through the opening. "Can I come in, Dad?"

I peeked around the door. It was dark, the light was off and only a dim grey glow seeped in through the shades.

"Dad, I'm learning some Mr. Burns for you. Do you want to hear it?"

At the desk, I could see the dark figure with his head down on his blotter. The room had the bitter smell of firecrackers and the smoke that slowly laced its way through the grey light toward the ceiling.

"Do you want to hear it?" My voice cracked. I stepped inside. "*'Great is thy power and great thy fame,'*" My voice trembled as I whispered words I did not know I knew. Tears welled up in my eyes. "*'Far kend and noted is thy name; an' tho' yon lowin heugh's thy hame, Thou travels far, An' faith! thou's neither lag, nor lame, Nor blate, nor scaur.'* Dad?"

I stood before the desk and could see the dark pool forming on the blotter. My dad was face down on his blotter. The handgun was still held tightly in his hand, its

barrel pointed awkwardly toward the ceiling. I reached up to touch him. When I put my hand in the blood puddling on his blotter. It felt warm—almost hot. It felt warmer than the body.

*"An' let poor damned bodies be!"* I whispered.

My dad shot himself through the head. When the two of us were alone in the house—not counting his demons of course—he put a .38 revolver to his head and decided at that moment to stop being a dad. Or maybe he had never started. All I ever wanted was a dad who would take me fishing every once in a while. I wanted Andy Griffith as a dad—what I got was a suicidal Crusader Rabbit. I guess I thought it was my fault—it was hard to believe he would do that.

In the months that followed my dad's suicide, the child psychologist told me repeatedly that it was not my fault. I would sit in the big blue chair in his office, staring at the wall and listening to the clock; *tick tick tick*. I never cried in his office, I never spoke, I just stared at the wall and listened to the ticking while he told me how sick my dad was. He told me my dad had not known I was in the house and that he must've thought I was with my mother. He told me over and over again that my dad had lost his job and was not thinking normal, that the blackness had descended and smothered him. He did not know what he was doing. But I just stared at the wall and thought it must have been my fault. It was hard to believe my dad would choose to leave this world instead of hanging out with me. I didn't want to believe it. Then I couldn't believe it. Then I didn't.

So I rewrote the script. Gave him a slightly more noble death. Heart attack, at his desk, while drinking tea. It sounded more civilised, I guess. It sounded so ... English.

I spent twenty years trying to believe in things that weren't true. I pushed it down deep—down between what I believed and what was true, between truth and fiction. I believed I had killed my dad and it was just easier to think of it as natural causes. So I made something up. Heart attack, at his desk, while drinking tea. It was all fiction.

Then the fiction became truth. I wrote it and because I had, someone ended up having to act it out. Thornie acted out the fiction of my dad's death. The Corporation did not murder Thornie—I did. I am the author of life. I am God.

At least, that was how I felt when I found Thornie had acted out my fatal fiction almost to the letter: heart attack, at his desk, while drinking tea.

The first time I met Owen Flynn, he stuck a signal pistol in my face and threatened to turn my head into a roman candle—or an ill-fated Corolla—I guess that was a clue right there. I could have turned and walked away. I'm glad I didn't.

I do not know if I really will go visit him and his family on my next vacation. I do not know if I will ever see him again. But I owe Flynn something.

It was the smell of the gunpowder. When I fired Flynn's rifle across the Rangitikei River, it was the smell that opened a door and let go an avalanche of memories that hit me with brutal vividness. Every ghost in the closet came charging out like an army of Cossacks thundering across the steppes. I tried to explain it to Flynn, but I think he figured it out.

He took me back inside the hut and made me some dinner and coffee and made me relive every moment of my dad's death. When I was all talked out, exhausted from sobbing, when I expected him to pat me on the shoulder and say, 'there, there, it was not your fault,' he didn't. He remained silent for a few moments, then let out an amused little chuckle and asked, "Did Thornie ever tell you how he lied about his age and enlisted in the Air Force?"

"What?" I did not know if I heard him correctly. Here I had just relived the most traumatic event in my life and he suddenly wanted to tell me a funny story?

And he did. He laughed at the thought of it and told me the story Thornie had told him about how he joined the NZRAF when he was sixteen and learned to fly in a Tiger Moth. When he was done with that story, he told me another about Thornie's days as a top dresser, and another of Thornie and Skidmore in the early days of Milton Gorge and the airborne pissing contest those two had with Amos Scuffield from as far back as the post-war years. He told me about Thornie's long-suffering wife and his two daughters. He told me about every thing he knew of Thornie. And when the sun came up again and we were still sitting in that hut talking about Thornie and my dad, it dawned on me what Flynn had done. He gave Thornie's life back. He knew if I could have known Thornie for the man he was, I would have known the man had lived a lifetime full of experiences and love and friends and adventure that had nothing to do with my dad or the script I had written.

No. Not a god. Not a speck of dust either. To hell with psychiatry—give me the Rangitikei River and a couple canteens of Mountain Screwdrivers any day.

I did not tell the shrink about that of course. That would have been crazy.

But that's when I decided to make an issue out of the incident. I did not know if it was the right thing or the wrong thing. If it was important or not—but it was important to me. So I decided to do it. Thinking of Janey, I decided to get rid of the safety net. That's why I called up my old boss Ted Kazniak and thanked him for going to bat for me, thanked him for getting me my job back, thanked him for being the kind of guy who thinks enough of people to do something like that. And then I said 'no thanks' and declined his generous offer. No safety net. Not this time.

Now it's over, and I find myself at another airport, in the departure lounge, looking at the great lumbering beast that would take me home or just take me back. Again I think about the corporate structure of the universe. Not god and not dust, but a place in the continuum—whether it was interpreting and reinterpreting the works of long dead poets, or trying to keep airplanes from running into each other, or being a right pain in the ass of the corporate execs—roles as equally important as the next. Recognizing my place is part of the battle, finding my direction was necessary too. And who would have thought, in the end, of all people, it would be Fast Freddie Moore who pointed me in the right direction?

It's right in front of you, he said. *Of course it is. I look to the left, I look to the right, I look behind—but the only direction available is right in front of me: forward.*

I saw her standing there long before she saw me. And she didn't see me until the boarding area was nearly empty, when they were making their final calls and pleading with those that would sooner hold up a whole plane than to just get on board when they were told to.

When she did see me, she did not come over immediately, but when I stood up, she approached slowly. Her airport security ID dangling from her pocket, she had used it to gain access to the departure lounge. She was smart, resourceful.

"I didn't want you to leave without—"

I didn't let her finish. I pulled her close and kissed her on the mouth in mid-sentence.

"I made a decision," I said when I finally released her just enough to take a breath. And I had—it felt like the first decision in my life too. I looked into Sarah's eyes and saw what I was trying to put my finger on all this time. I found my place—*she* is my place. It was right there in front of me, just as Freddie said. It was terrifying and wonderful. It was like seeing everything that was missing. It was like seeing the rest of me.

"What is that decision?" She asked in a hesitant, hopeful whisper.

"No more in-flight meals for me." I pulled her closer and kissed her again. "How about I buy you dinner?"

She gently pushed me back and looked into my eyes—I do not know exactly what she saw, but I prayed it was the same, I prayed there was something for her.

Then she smiled. "I guess you'll have to. After all, I think you just missed your airplane."

I kept my arm around her as we headed down the concourse, but we only made it a few feet before she stopped and turned to me.

"Wait a second. They wouldn't do that. They wouldn't have closed the door with a passenger missing. What about security?" Like I've always said, she's too smart to let details like that slip by.

"Oh, I think their head count still came out right. Somebody, I suspect, is sitting in seat 37A after all." I pulled my boarding card from my pocket, the boarding card that I picked up from the bar, the only one that was left for me along with the bar tab. I could have done something about it when they were loading the plane, but I guess I had already made my decision. I think I made it a long time ago—I just needed to be down here to be sure. I think he must have known I had made it, too—at least, he was counting on it. "Although I think the Fiji flight might come up one short. Which reminds me, maybe you should buy *me* dinner—after all, I'm a man with little left; no car, no place to live and—I suspect when he gets to L.A.—Freddie Moore will steal my luggage like he stole my ticket."

Sarah shook her head and laughed quietly. "You don't sound like much of a catch to me." She took a deep breath and stared into my eyes—and I think, then, she saw it too. "Still, we Kiwis are a pretty friendly sort. Maybe we can find someone willing to set you up. But—" she paused and nodded toward the aircraft pushing back

from the gate, "don't you think we should contact aviation security—at least they could nab him on the other end."

I looked toward the gate, at the great beast as it lumbered away into the blackness of the night. So ungraceful, like a whale trying to walk—but, boy, when it lifted off, that was something else entirely. When it broke free from the earth, when it stretched its wings and climbed into its element to where it belonged, it could fly to the far side of the sky and beyond. *Te taha o te rangi*. Orville and Wilbur, even Richard Pearse would be proud of us. It was beautiful, it was magic.

"Naah." I shook my head. "It's like I've been trying to tell you guys all along—you got to look at the big picture."

"Which is?"

"Well—if I'm not mistaken, Kenny is on duty in Oceanic tonight."

"Yeah?"

"Without his rat?" I shook my head slowly. "That flight is doomed."



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## Appendix

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### Lessons in Drowning: The Creative Writing Process in *Corporate Blue*

by Daniel Myers

#### Introduction

Analysing one's own creative writing process is an important and vital part of being a serious writer. From the purely practical concerns related to the writing process to the more theoretical, taking the time to scrutinise the complex issues involved in constructing a novel can only enhance the writer's technical skill. The manuscript of *Corporate Blue* was written as the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in English. By producing a full-length work of fiction, I had the opportunity to give such consideration to the creative writing process as I was experiencing it.

Adding this essay about the process itself was more of an afterthought. I had mixed feelings about its inclusion, preferring to let the work stand or fall on its own. Since I do not, as yet, have any published novels to my credit, writing an essay on the novel-writing process seemed a tad presumptuous. However, the project was intended to focus on just such a process and, since I have recently put myself through it, I believe my experiences are valid and may have something to offer other students of creative writing. As we might discover, one learns the most important properties of water when one is drowning. So go ahead, jump in.

My views, of course, are subjective—the process can be as personal as the work. Nonetheless, there are many areas that may be of interest to other writers. This

essay will draw on the writer's journal I kept while writing *Corporate Blue* and will attempt to summarise the main issues that confront the novelist as he or she faces that blank page. This is not an exhaustive study, but rather an overview of one person's journey from the idea to the completed work.

One biographical note; although I have not yet published a full-length novel, I do not consider myself a novice writer. I have been paid to write professionally, both creatively and in the business environment, including for a brief and inglorious period in television in the early 90s. In 1996, I left my job in air traffic control and returned to the USA to pursue my academic goals. During my one year of postgraduate studies at the University of South Carolina, I worked on the university president's writing staff and gained some excellent experience in writing-on-demand. During this time, I also published my first short story, *The Bridge* (from *The Class Menagerie: A Collection of Stories Out of USC* – Red Letter Press 1998) and began my first novel, *The Second Favorite Son*. The reason I point this out is because there are certain aspects of the creative writing process that I take for granted here, in this essay, and in the completion of *Corporate Blue*.

During the course of writing my first novel, *The Second Favorite Son*, there were many fundamentals I learned that I will not spend time discussing here. For instance, what I believe the single most important "skill" for an aspiring writer to learn is *discipline*—something that is easy to believe in theory but often difficult to put into practice. My own background provides ample evidence of an undisciplined personality, but adopting strange new habits—like getting up every morning long before my body wants to and writing even when the words struggle to find their way out—is essential to success in completing a novel. Knowing and exploiting ones own work habits is another fundamental. For instance, I have learned from past experience that my most productive hours for writing are the early morning hours despite my unwillingness to be a "morning person." By the time I approached *Corporate Blue*, many of these basic patterns were already established and so I will not explore them here, but only reiterate that habits such as discipline and persistence are not only essential, but learnable behaviour.

### The Idea

Once the approval for my proposal to submit a full-length work of fiction was granted, the first step was to decide on what to write. My previous manuscript was a mammoth effort: an historical family saga based in South Carolina. Three years of work, mostly research, went into that 200,000-word opus. I was looking for a ‘smaller’ story this time and preferably a New Zealand-based story as the country has been my adopted home since 1987. As a writer, I have my notebook of various ideas, which I hope to work on some day. They include ideas for at least two other novels, two film scripts, a collection of travel stories and three works of non-fiction. However, *Corporate Blue* was not among those ideas in my notebook. I was reluctant, at first, to write a story based in the air traffic industry—having left it behind years ago—but I was also conscious of my promise to make this as publishable as possible, and part of that was taking the market into consideration. I have been told many times that I was neglecting the most marketable aspect of my past experiences: my career as an air traffic controller.

As I was digging through my old files, I came across something that would become the genesis of the idea for the present novel (perhaps rule number one for the writer then should be ‘never throw anything away’—which is a good rule until you try to move house). It was an old, unfinished piece of work I had toyed with a few years ago called “The Corporate Blues.” That morbid piece was about a suicidally-depressed air traffic controller who was slowly being driven insane by nightmares and daytime hallucinations. Set in a fictional land (much of it from within a mental hospital), it was an attempt at modern Gothic that did not work as it bogged down in nightmarish imagery, fantasy and self-indulgent symbolism. (Yes, of course, it was a comedy). There were a few things, however, I thought worth saving. Firstly, was the basic premise of the corporatisation of air traffic control; secondly, I liked the fictional aerodrome of Milton Gorge; and finally, a few characters I thought showed promise, including two of my favourites: Freddie Moore and Thornie Rumbold. I also liked the title, which came from my brief stint as a senior controller at Auckland control tower; a memorandum from head office requested that we start using the standard “corporate blue” colour for all our drop files to look more professional. I did not believe it was a real colour, but to me it epitomised the gulf between what our

professional management thought was important and what we were supposed to be doing.

I started my author's journal in mid-October 2001 and spent the first month thrashing out ideas and various character sketches. By mid-November, I still had not decided on what idea I would develop into a complete novel. The decision came in New York City in late November where I was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet with some editors of major publishers and to discuss issues facing aspiring writers in today's market. Two editors I spoke with reiterated the view that I should be writing a story based in the air traffic control industry and even better that it would be set in New Zealand (their perspective was that it would appeal to the *American* readers love of foreign settings). So, while taking a long walk around Times Square, I made the decision: *Corporate Blue* was going to be the working title, and air traffic control in New Zealand was going to be the setting. The decision alone made me feel focused. All I needed now was a story to tell.

### The Theme

I confess that I am not a plot-driven writer. I am less interested in *what* is going to happen than to *whom* it will be happening and, furthermore, believe that if the characters are strong enough, they will write the plot themselves. I do, however, need to start with a sense of what the story is going to be about; a theme that will keep me on track as I write. In the case of *Corporate Blue*, the most obvious of themes was questioning the intelligence of corporatising public services—it is an easy target; the ethical issues almost *too* easy. However, delving into it a little more deeply I was interested in what was happening to the sense of professionalism in the industry and how the corporate mentality imposed on existing organisations affected the individuals on a more personal level.

In my past experience with air traffic control, I decided the conflict was one of purpose. When I arrived at the training academy on the first day of my career, before they taught us anything, before they even welcomed us to the school, a guy got up and said, "The safe, orderly, expeditious flow of traffic. That is your purpose, your reason for being. Whatever we tell you from now on, whatever anyone ever tells you, whatever rules or directives that are handed down to you—if you *always* remember

your purpose first and above all else, you'll do the right thing. Safe, orderly, expeditious—in that order. Don't ever forget." For many years I felt that some of the policies the corporation introduced challenged that sense of purpose.

That is the thematic drive that exists on the first layer of the story—the visible story. Peeled away though, there needs to exist deeper, more personal themes of individual identity and how we identify ourselves (usually by what we *do*) and how we define our own sense of purpose. Early on I knew there had to be a psychological study going on in *Corporate Blue*—one that took place on a very personal, private level for the protagonist. The idea of using the psychiatric evaluation as part of the process of a serious incident investigation was an easy answer because it not only provided me with the setting for a character's psychological self-examination, but also provided an in-built plot engine (that is, "the incident" itself).

My final preliminary thoughts on the theme were about pondering how exactly the main character would feel towards the corporation and what it did to "his" profession. I decided he would have, rightly or wrongly, concluded that it killed his profession, murdered it, took it out behind the woodshed and put a bullet in the back of its head. Thus, Thornie Rumbold was doomed from the beginning. It was no surprise to me that he would suffer an abrupt and very symbolic end. The question on whether he was really murdered or not would remain unanswered for a long time.

### The Characters

*Corporate Blue* is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between the characters and any real person is purely coincidental. That's what we are supposed to say on the copyright page, right? But what if there is a resemblance? I can say honestly that all the characters in *Corporate Blue* are fictional—purely products of my imagination. They are not meant to represent any real person living or dead. However, it has been my experience in sharing my writing with others close to me, that often the reader will recognise something, some minor gesture, comment or personality trait and begin to make connections:

*'Oh, that character just used a phrase I heard Dan use one time, so if that character is Dan, and I work three offices down from Dan, then this character*

*who works three offices down from that other character must be me, and  
...Well! I have never been so insulted in my life.'*

Trust me, it happens. The fact is, all the characters are products of my imagination, but my imagination is largely a product of the world around me. If my workmate drums his fingers just so when he is nervous, or stutters when he is angry, if I have a friend who snorts when he laughs, or if the lady in the post office dyes her hair green, these are just human characteristics—hardly unique—that I may use to flesh out one of my own characters.

The character of Flynn would be one example. That entire character comes down to just a single action I witnessed many years ago while on duty in the control tower at Ardmore aerodrome. I was new to this country and my ATC training in America did not include using signal pistols, so I was just momentarily taken aback when my colleague pulled this pistol out of the drawer; it is a piece of equipment that was seldom used in my experience (indeed, I do not think I ever fired it). To this day, I do not know if he had been telling me the truth that we were required to test it on occasion, or if he was just bored with the lack of traffic. In any case, he stepped out onto the catwalk and fired a flare off (into the air, of course, and not at a flight instructor's car). It was not the fact that he fired it, but the nonchalant way he dropped it back in the drawer. A half hour later, he retrieved the pistol and became deeply engrossed in cleaning it.

It was from that memory that Flynn was born—in an action that was expanded into a personality and filled out by imagination to create another person. My colleague was a complex human being, whereas Flynn is not. My colleague was also a good friend of mine, so there is no way, even if I wanted to, that I would try to draw an accurate portrayal of this man's life, his wealth of experiences, his many and complicated relationships, or his wide range of feelings and emotions. He is not Flynn; Flynn is not him. They simply shared one characteristic: they both would toss the signal pistol in the drawer the same nonchalant way, and both would sit there and stare at the drawer until they were driven to retrieve it and meticulously clean it. Why? Because they both knew that the thing should be cleaned after use, and the bravado and swagger of tossing it nonchalantly into the drawer and pretending to think nothing more of it always lost out to their conscientious attention to detail.

In fact, it is closer to the truth to say that most characters are, ultimately, based on myself—or rather, a part of me. Creating a fictional person is as easy as taking a single emotion or personality trait and filling a character to the top with it. At various moments in my life I have been as confused as Tom and, though I have a good relationship with my own father (and despite being from a huge family), I have felt the isolation and loneliness as a child that Tom felt, so I can draw on that one feeling enough to make it a driving force in Tom's life. Likewise, I have been as hungry for success as Amanda; as lost in the old days as Thornie; as nervous as Woodcock; occasionally (though rarely) as confident as Freddie; and I have felt what Flynn feels about standing on mountaintops. That is not to say, however, that I am striving for simple characters. A rule I have about every character I write is that they all must have a reason to be the way they are. Even if they are truly nasty, at least *they* must believe what they are doing is right and I will give them a chance to give us their point of view. In *Corporate Blue* it was not so much an issue because there are no truly wicked characters, but when you start introducing murderers, it becomes more of a stretch.

One would think that, in building a cast of characters, the writer would start with the central character and work outward. That was not the case with *Corporate Blue*; Tom was one of the last characters to emerge. First, the characters of Freddie and Thornie and a Flynn-like character and a variation on Amanda were survivors of the original story in "The Corporate Blues." Secondary characters were added as needed (Simon, Sarah, Allen, Leanne, Gloria LaCoste, Colson). Woodcock was created because Freddie needed a sidekick to rephrase Freddie's "nothing-illegal-about-that" spirit into the somewhat more accurate, "well-actually-it-is-illegal."

Naming is usually the first step in the process of defining the character. Some come easily—old-fashioned English names for the old guys: Rumbold, Skidmore, Scuffield all came easily. Freddie Moore originally started life in "The Corporate Blues" as Freddie Makin-Moore, an overly obvious pneumonic device for his role; Woodcock also seemed a natural enough moniker for the guy. Amanda's surname, Sheppard, was from Kate Sheppard, the early New Zealand feminist. I struggled for a while to find the right name for Flynn—something with the right amount of Irish was more difficult than one would expect—but my thoughts in finding his name were that

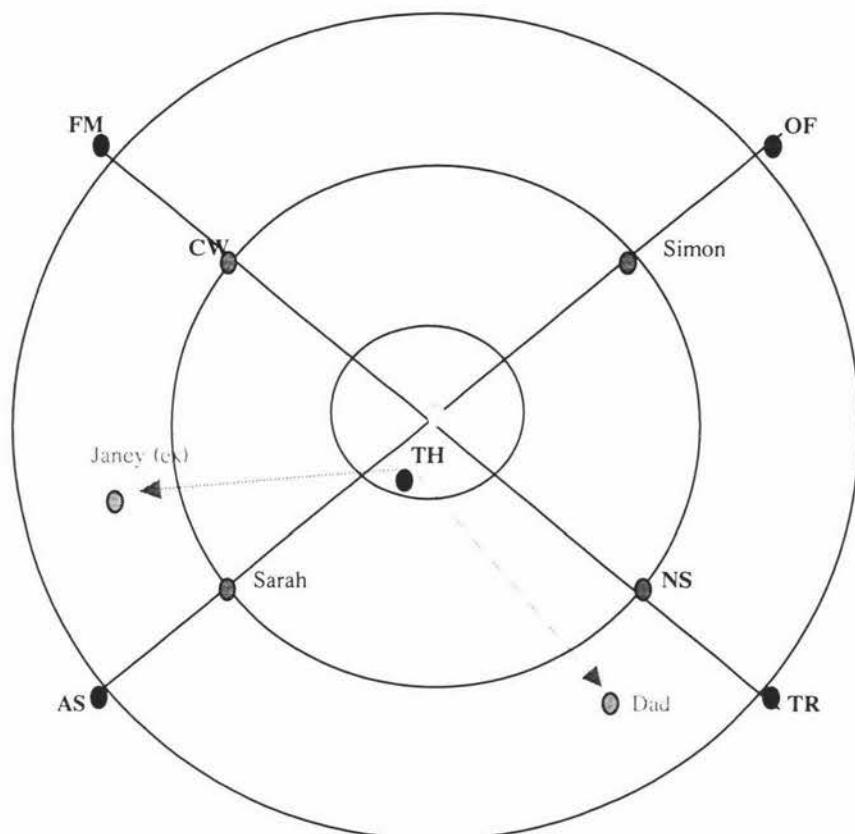
it also needed to stand on its own because I would imagine the guy would not like his first name. In fact, I think Owen Flynn has a nice rhythm to it (and echoes "Errol Flynn"). Finally, the narrator, Tom Hardy was the last to be named. I was into my second month of writing the manuscript before I settled on his name. By that time, I knew his father had been an English professor and was searching for a literary figure to name him after, but also a name that would generally be shrugged off as common enough to not call attention to itself (in fact, Thorne and Skidmore are the only two characters that make the literary connection). I could hardly call him Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Mathew Arnold was a possibility but was rejected because when I hear the name "Arnold" what comes to mind is not Schwarzenegger so much as the pig on *Green Acres*.

Since I use a lot of dialogue, another important step in defining the characters is deciding what they *sound* like. I have read enough manuscripts that give too many of the characters the same sarcastic or profane or esoteric patterns to their speech. They all begin to sound more like the author's voice. So, I try to pay particular attention to what words and phrases they use and will often assign particular words for specific characters. For instance, in the Freddie-Carlton dynamic, only Carlton will use the f-word and he will always come across as whiny and/or more profane compared to Freddie's upbeat, jargonistic spin. Similarly, the use of Americanisms comes natural enough to Tom (compare his use of "ass" to Skidmore's use of "arse"), but is used more patronisingly by Thorne and Flynn (e.g. "the big *switcheroo*").

One of the great sensations of writing is when something 'big' falls into place. As the days and weeks go by, with the words gathering on the paper in ever-increasing numbers, and just about the time I start to wonder where it's going and why I bother, something happens—usually quite unexpectedly. Something fits into something else and the two pieces together become symbiotic. It is an "Aha!" moment. And it becomes enough to fuel the story for a long time to come. That epiphany came to me, not while writing, but while walking (something else I consider to be an integral part of the writing process). I had been writing various scenes with these various characters when they suddenly all fell into place. It was as if a director blew a whistle and they all walked to their appropriate positions on stage and waited to perform. Perhaps it was not so much the characters that fell into place, as it was the

character-diagram (see Figure 1). I am very reliant on visual aids to help keep me organized, whether it is a ‘flow-chart’ to map the plot, or in this case, a diagram to map out the characters and their relationship with the world and each other. Knowing their position in such a format helps me to keep them “under control” and to make sure they evolve specifically the way I want them to.

Figure 1: Character Diagram



Character Key:

**FM**= Freddie Moore

**CW**=Carlton Woodcock

**OF**= Owen Flynn

**NS**=Norwynne Skidmore

**TR**= Thornie Rumbold

**TH**= Tom Hardy

**AS**= Amanda Sheppard

As shown in Figure 1, the **Outer orbit** represents the extreme characters—Freddie, Thornie, Amanda and Flynn. The first two characters are almost non-human—that is, they represent non-human conditions: modernity and tradition.

1. **Freddie Moore** is the Corporation at its most extreme. In this case, Freddie is overtly, and admittedly, a criminal—this I do partially for comic affect. But

not completely because, in a sense, Freddie represents the greatest fear we (on the outside) have of the corporate-reformers: that they are committing dastardly deeds without conscience. I have come to the conclusion that such people, for their own sanity, are adept at justifying their behaviour to themselves and the world, which is a survival instinct. We all pretty much believe we are doing the right thing, right?

2. **Thornie Rumbold** is Freddie's exact opposite—someone utterly stuck in tradition, so much so that he is frozen in time. Again, his extreme is done partially for comic effect, but is he not also a human representation of how we remember the "good old days"—civilised, innocent and, most of all, harmless? The next two represent extreme human reactions to these conditions:
3. **Amanda Sheppard** blindly embraces the new corporate philosophy as a means to remedy the neglect she received from the traditional system.
4. **Owen Flynn** stubbornly resists change. He is comfortable and does not want to risk that, but he is also afraid of change that might expose him as someone unable to meet the new expectations. He has defined himself and is afraid to redefine.

The **inner orbit** represents the grounding characters; not extreme but those who hold more normal attitudes/beliefs along the same lines as their more extreme counterparts.

5. **Carlton Woodcock**—although he is, at times, even more farcical than Freddie, he is actually more real. He is the guy who studied hard, with strong ambitions in the corporate world, but lacks the fortitude, the presence or the ruthlessness to be a real business leader.
6. **Norwynne Skidmore** is a minor character, but since I needed to kill Thornie off, I wanted to have some sense of call back to the old days for the end of the novel. Skidmore is a less extreme version of Thornie; he too is living in a world of memories.
7. **Simon** is a young, impressionable controller. He looks up to Tom, but also acts as a grounding character for Tom. Theirs is a father-son relationship. Having someone looking up to him bolsters Tom's doubt-ridden ego, but at

the same time forces him to recognize the responsibility he has as Simon's mentor.

8. **Sarah** was a late addition to the plot. Because Tom's backstory and his relationship with his ex-wife was used so much, I felt he needed the opportunity for redemption and so added Sarah as a love interest.
9. **Tom's father.** Originally, I made Tom's father an English professor for the sole reason that it gave me a way to have fun with my more recent history—that is, I left air traffic control back in 1996 and have been hanging out in English departments ever since. However, since I also needed Tom to experience some sort of trauma as a child, the character became more complicated. I wanted the father to be abusive—not physically, but emotionally and, even that, not intentionally, but just through neglect and an overly self-absorbed personality who only occasionally acknowledges his son. The character's manic depression was added simply as the necessary plot device that would drive him to commit suicide.
10. And finally, of course, there is **Tom**. Obviously the protagonist, the centre, I originally thought of him only as a neutral, 360-degree lens to view the others. However, it was the realization that the character of Tom was not so fixed in the diagram that made it come alive for me. The essence of his character is that he has no fixed position. Instead, he is a rogue planet who wanders his own orbit from one axis to another because he has no particular belief that offers him a gravitational anchor. He is attracted to dominant personalities because of the strength of their convictions, but those same influences (his dad, his ex) also help to keep him off-centre. This makes more sense; because of his Zelig-like malleability, he will attempt to adapt to the four different poles (Freddie, Amanda, Flynn, Thornie). By defining his character in this way, it then makes his emotional development (or lack of) easier for me to understand.

### The Plot

As I said earlier, plotting is not my strength. I did not sit down and say, 'I will write a book about an air traffic controller who has a near-miss and is then

investigated for the incident.' I am much more interested in the psychological journey—what I used as a plot engine to move that story along is almost incidental. I could have easily chosen to make it a murder mystery in which Tom's original suspicion that Freddie Moore murdered Thornie was true and then he could have spent the rest of the book proving it. Perhaps I will save that for a sequel, but I decided instead to keep the plot devices fixed in air traffic control as much as possible to keep the story from straying.

There are two basic plot engines at work here: the air traffic incident that is under investigation and Tom's psychological journey back to his father. Plot strands such as Tom's relationship with Sarah, or Freddie's real estate venture are merely devices that support the main storylines. Indeed, if I were pressed, I would say the story is about Tom's relationship with his father and *everything* else is just a ploy for me to explore that story. The father-son relationship is a recurring theme in much of what I write. I find it an endlessly interesting and fertile dynamic to explore. It seems to me to be a naturally angst ridden relationship—that is, historically, the father's duty is to train the son to take on the role of dominant male, the son then becoming the father's number one threat to his own dominance. Even in its healthiest form, there is an awkward transition of power when the son becomes the adult and assumes the status of leader of the pack. That is why most of us just find it easier to leave home.

In *Corporate Blue*, I introduced several variations on that theme with Amanda's dad, Freddie's, and (vaguely) Flynn's. Of course, the main father-son story here is that of Tom's. I decided early that Tom would be the son of an English professor—it gave me a way to sneak in literary references and play around with Robert Burns and T.S. Eliot. I was also fairly clear from the beginning that the father was dead and that there would be some unresolved issue for Tom surrounding that. When the issue over his father's death became clear to me, I decided to have Tom tell the story of his father's death in three different versions for the three parts of the book, each one increasingly closer to the truth. In part one, we hear Tom's most sanitized version of his father's death—simply, that he died. In part two, the death not only becomes more explicit—he died of a heart attack, at his desk, while drinking tea—but we also find out that Tom, as a twelve-year-old was the first one to find his dad. In part three, the real trauma is finally revealed to both the reader and Tom, who

has suppressed the memory for twenty years—that the father committed suicide while he and Tom were alone in the house.

The thread that connects the three versions, the strand that Tom is holding onto as his only real connection to the truth, is his habitual recitation of Robert Burns. Originally, Tom's habit was just an obscure satirical poke at nervous interjections in the industry, having noticed, over the years, that some of my colleagues had their own ways of staying focused—there were the hummers, the singers, the prattlers, the quipsters (me). I thought I would take that a step further with Tom and have him recite lines from Burns (I also took it a step further with Kenny, the guy who kept a pet rat in his pocket). However, as the father-son story developed, it became more of a psychological trigger for Tom (and a clue for the reader that this guy might not be "all there"). Finding Thornie dead opened a door back to his original trauma and uttering the line "an' let poor damned bodies be" was involuntary on his part at the time, but he would ultimately follow Burns deeper into his memories. At the beginning of part three, Tom switches from Burns to T.S. Eliot. The reason for this is fairly straightforward; I had originally used Burns because I thought his Dr. Seussian prose would appeal to a child (possibly a very literate child). So if Burns represented the child in Tom, it seemed a natural enough progression for him to be attracted to the middle-aged angst of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as an indication that he was, in a sense, growing up.

As for Tom's psychological "problem," I confess I am being somewhat tongue-in-cheek here with his "delusions of godness." As far as I know in my limited knowledge of the psychiatric profession, this is not a typical hang-up (and is why I let Flynn name it), nor am I aware of any psychiatric malady of this nature. It seemed, however, a natural enough step for him to take—*i.e.* he suppressed the traumatic memory by rewriting his version of history, which was a complete fabrication. He was also heavily influenced by, and absorbed in, fictional worlds (his numerous references to television and movies). I wonder then, what would happen if his fabricated history came true? Thornie acted out Tom's "fatal fiction" by dying precisely in the manner that Tom had convinced himself his dad had died. Down deep, however, he knew that was not true. For a person who already has a questionable ability to discern the difference between fact and fiction (which, of

course, becomes a predominant theme at the end of the novel), would it be possible for that person to believe he or she in fact *caused* it to happen? *I am the writer of life. I am God.* On a more ironical level, of course, it is just having fun with being a writer. In a book that was undertaken to pay particular attention to the process—how we create—and having spent so many long hours, weeks and months in the world of Tom and Freddie, can I be forgiven for wondering what *my* role in *their* world is?

The other plot engine—the “real world” events—is the air traffic incident under investigation. I am compelled to confess here that the incident in this story is highly contrived. The truth is that the air traffic system is safer than that. If the incident at all seems plausible, it is because the different elements involved are, individually, plausible. Producing a situation where my protagonist could directly attribute a near-miss to corporate policy required a bit of stretching. Not that I do not agree with Tom’s position on the Corporation cutting the safety margin to increase profit. In fact, I agree wholeheartedly that this is what is happening not only in air traffic, but in industries across the spectrum. However, the reality is far more subtle than portrayed here and it would take a book twice this length (and four times as boring) to fully develop and explore the various ways in which the Corporate mentality is chipping away at the integrity of the system: the profit margin is pushing back the safety margin. To make the plot more readable, what I have basically done is condense a variety of problem areas into one “mega-incident.”

1. The noise abatement procedure represented here is not unusual in itself.

Auckland is not the only airport that would take advantage of calm winds and no traffic to use opposite direction takeoffs and landings, when possible, to keep aircraft away from noise sensitive residential areas. Indeed, contrary to what some of those angry callers in the night might believe, air traffic controllers generally are quite considerate of those poor, sleepless individuals who bought their houses under the approach path. In reality, though, the situation would have been more closely monitored.

2. The billing system that took Simon’s attention away from his primary duties in the novel is a reality in New Zealand. Tom’s claim that it is dangerous to divide a controller’s attention between his operational duties and an administrative task is merely an echo of the views I held at the time of its

introduction. In fairness however, I will confess that I have never personally witnessed, or heard of, an incident being caused by a controller turning his attention away from the airplane to do this task. It was only a nagging fear I had at the time. Furthermore, I believe this system has been more automated now and requires less input from the operational staff.

3. The business about the radar screen that 'freezes' was also a real problem with our new equipment when the entire system was upgraded nationwide in the early 90s. I have been told that that bug in the system was remedied years ago.

All these individual elements are, in themselves, plausible enough. Combining them, however, I do for dramatic effect. To this situation I add a few more unlikely elements; the arriving B747 did not show up on the tower frequency until it was on four mile final when, in reality, it would have been transferred to the tower's control sooner. I have also completely neglected the reality of TCAS (Traffic Collision and Alerting System—standard equipment on today's commercial aircraft).

The reason I take this opportunity to shoot holes in my own story is only to stress that I took a great deal of creative licence for my own storytelling purposes here. In truth, I have far more respect for my former colleagues and the difficult job they do around the clock with the utmost of professionalism.

### The Process

How do you write a book? Well, in the immortal words of Nancy Reagan; "just do it." No, come to think of it, her immortal words were; "Just say no!" And that would hardly help us in writing a book. There is an endless selection of titles to choose from if we need technical advice on the structure of a novel and likewise if we are looking for inspirational pep talks. I have read my share of them and have taken something from many. In the end though, the far most important part of the process is developing the discipline to do it and not just *talking* about doing it, *planning* to do it or *reading* about doing it. The most important part of the process is the practice. Just doing it. I am reminded of an article I read years ago about walking the 2100-mile-plus Appalachian Trail up the east coast of the USA—the author of the article suggested that you need not be *overly* concerned with your level of fitness when you begin the track—you will be fit soon enough. For me, I tend toward a similar "total

immersion" method where I commit myself fully to the work for several months and making few trips to the surface for air. I do not believe that is the best type of discipline—certainly not the healthiest and it requires some tolerant personal relationships—but again, it is about knowing one's own work habits.

Writing on *Corporate Blue* began in earnest on December 7—that is when I was fully committed to starting and finishing this particular story, and committed myself to the routine of writing everyday. I finished a first draft on May 5. Starting as early as February, I was seeking technical and critical feedback from two other writers, an avid reader, two air traffic controllers, a pilot, and, of course, my thesis supervisor. I received a great deal of excellent input from all these people and incorporated most of it into the rewrite. On May 26, I recorded in my journal that the book was done.

The first step is fixing the routine. Once I resign myself to that, the rest becomes easier. If I can put myself in front of the computer every morning and start tapping away at the keyboard, I will build momentum with every completed page. If I get stuck on a scene, I skip it and move to the next. If I do not know what to write, I will take two of my characters, put them in a room together and start them talking; it is a good way for me to keep the story and writing moving, and probably the reason why this novel has so much dialogue.

It also helps me to break the story into parts as interim goals. My first novel was in four parts, but *Corporate Blue* seemed to fit more naturally in three parts. The early days of writing part one were easiest because the story had the potential to take off in almost any direction. Thus, the first draft of the first part was loaded with unnecessary characters or hints at things that never developed—*usually*, but not always, these are edited out of the second draft. For instance, in *Corporate Blue*, when Thornie is giving Tom the history of Milton Gorge aerodrome (chapter 4), he spends some time telling him about "HolyAir." When I wrote that, I was still considering the possibility of using a Biblical theme rather than a literary theme and put it there with the intention of picking it up later. Since I did not pick up that thread, I could have eliminated it during the rewrite, but left it in because it had a certain descriptive appeal to me about Milton Gorge in the early days. However, I trimmed it down considerably and removed all the character names except for Amos Scuffield (the

"Holy Terror") who returns later. A recurrence of the unused Biblical thread is echoed when Tom's father is criticizing his wife's reliance on the Bible for inspiration.

Conversely, there were other plot strands that entered into the story unintentionally. The reference to the U.S. president's plane in the first paragraph of the novel, for instance, started life as a throwaway quip, but I liked how it worked as a plot device. Another one was the off-hand reference to the 60s television show *Dragnet*—it started as a one-line joke, but I thought it added to Tom's character development that he sometimes thought of his life in the frame of a TV show. Not only does it suggest that he spent far too many lonely hours as a child in front of the TV, but I also enjoyed using the unlikely hero of Sergeant Joe Friday for Tom's idol; besides the sheer American-ness of the character, he also represents someone who was unemotional and steadfast in his beliefs and the kind of guy Tom would have been impressed by as a child.

Writing the middle section of the novel was the hardest part. I had to decide which plot threads to pick up, figure out the various puzzles and plausibility issues, and where to take the individual characters. Close to half the time I spent writing the entire book was spent on the second part. Two weeks into that part, the ending came to me (again, while walking). I knew exactly how I wanted the whole story to conclude, so I rushed home and wrote the last five pages of the book. I did this with my first novel too and believe it is a good technique because it acts like a beacon; from that point on I have something to steer the rest of the story toward.

By the time I got to the third and final part of the novel the writing was easier because the story was headed, in my mind, inevitably towards its conclusion. My job as author became then more one of just constructing all the necessary scenes to get from point A to point B. As for the ending itself, I look at it more as a series of endings with every main character experiencing some sort of resolution. I try to leave the "ever-after" out of the happy ending, but underneath this cynic's exterior, I am an old softie at heart and like to believe that the happy ending is found when the character discovers that there is indeed hope. Or perhaps there is no hope, but we must at least believe there is. It is like writing itself—if an aspiring novelist were to look at the odds of getting anything published in today's mass-market-driven world, he or she would probably run screaming to Montana to find a one-room shack to live

in. So, as human beings, citizens of the world and fledgling novelists, we must always push forward and believe that there is hope of success.

And this, I hope, is reflected in my characters: Tom realizes he must get on with life on whatever path he chooses and not to dwell in the past, Flynn finds there is life and love outside the establishment; Amanda is more subtle, she is a little like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* here—that is, she's always had the power, but is only just now discovering how to use it properly and, I would like to think, she is finally finding a more altruistic sense of purpose. Even for Carlton, despite being pursued by the police in his final scene, there is hope for a happy ending in Freddie's suggestion of his impending promotion. Aside from Thornie—who is, of course, still dead in the end—the only character whose ending is not happy is Freddie's. He thinks he is happy enough and is looking toward to the future and the prospects of success in the rubber industry. But he leaves exactly as he entered. To me, Freddie's end was inevitable because he is a user, and users, as long as they are using, are denied personal growth.

In the end, there is a moment when the book becomes complete. For me, it is not at the end of the first draft, but at the end of a second or third draft, when all the feedback has been addressed, when all the little plausibility issues have been resolved and all the technical details have been fixed. It is a moment that presents itself as real (and sometimes as unexpectedly) as the birth of a child; the manuscript becomes a novel and emerges alive as a three-dimensional world, filled with people who are real to me. The novel as the author's child metaphor has been used many times, but it is an accurate one because what sits before me in the end is something that I have invested much of my life into and is very much a part of me but also exists on its own. Like judging my own child, though, I am not objective in judging my own work; how can I be? So I must leave it to the reader to decide. Like my own child, I believe the novel has worth, and I try not to be overly proud of it, but I am. And, like my own child, I get to a point where I wish he would move out and find a home of his own.

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## Annotated Bibliography

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The books listed here are divided into three categories. The first (I) group are books that I was reading during the writing of this book, which may or may not have had any influence on the writing. The second (II) group were those intentionally used as inspiration or alluded to in the text. The final (III) group are the reference works used.

### I.

Bellow, Saul. Herzog. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1976. (Original work published 1964).

I have a tendency to gravitate towards the more character-driven stories. This is another exploration of middle-aged angst. Generally a good read, but often slow with a great deal of internal sermonizing.

Cahill, Thomas. How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe. London: Sceptre, 1995.

Conrad, Joseph. The Secret Agent. Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Classics, 1993. (Original work published 1906).

Dos Passos, John. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company (Mariner Books edition), 2000. (Original work published 1930). This is an excellent book about American identity through the eyes of common men and women. Dos Passos is especially good at minutiae and capturing a strong sense of time and place through detail. I also appreciate his skill at making the “ordinary” highly readable.

Gann, Ernest K. Gentlemen of Adventure. New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1983.

When I was a teenager, I used to love to read Ernest K. Gann. While Richard Bach (*Jonathon Livingston Seagull, The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*,

*Biplane*) was becoming ever more mystical about his flying, Gann was still offering up good adventures, perhaps the best being his own autobiography: *A Hostage to Fortune*.

Haldeman, Joe. The Forever War. New York: Avon Books, 1991.

Hardy, Thomas. The Mayor of Casterbridge. New York and London: Penguin Classics edition, 1997. (Original work published 1886).

King, Stephen. On Writing: A Memoir on the Craft. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000.

I am not a big fan of the horror genre, or for King's mostly formulaic stories, or for King the public personality—but he has written a few good ones and I appreciate his occasional sense of humour. This book has some good—albeit rather basic—advice on the process of writing and cleaning up the prose. Skip the autobiographical whining and stick with the section on writing.

Roth, Philip. Operation Shylock. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

I love the unreliable narrator in literature. Philip Roth does it very well here and very droll, using himself as the central character.

Stegner, Wallace. Crossing to Safety. New York and London: Penguin Books, 1987.

Wells, H. G. The War in the Air. Harmondsworth, Middx, UK: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971. (Original work published 1908).

## II.

Burns, Robert. Burns Anthology. Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.

Eliot, T.S. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. From *The Norton Anthology of American Literature (Shorter Fifth Edition)*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. (Original work published 1915).

Frost, Robert. The Road Not Taken. From *The Norton Anthology of American Literature (Shorter Fifth Edition)*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. (Original work published 1916).

Hardy, Thomas. The Convergence of the Twain. From *The Norton Anthology of Poetry (Shorter Fourth Edition)*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. (Original work published 1912).

Heller, Joseph. Catch-22. New York: Simon & Schuster (Scribner Paperback edition), 1994.

When I sat down to right the first page of *Corporate Blue*, one of my first thoughts was about the question of sanity in an occupation that has produced a number of borderline cases. Although I am not consciously trying to emulate Heller here, the idea of “you have to be nuts to want to do it—but if you’re nuts you shouldn’t be allowed to do it” was an inspirational theme.

Melville, Herman. Moby-Dick, or The Whale. New York, Penguin Books edition, 1992. (Original work published 1851).

I confess, Melville almost always gets a mention. It is the least I could do. Tom quotes from *Moby Dick* toward the end of Part One and his father makes references in Part Three.

Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. (Original work published 1884).

I refer to this as the text that Tom and Sarah were having a debate over when their passion bubbled over. It was a purely random choice, but I liked the way Tom was able to twist his interpretation into a reflection of his own issues.

### III.

Angelucci, Enzo. World Encyclopaedia of Civil Aircraft: from Leonardo Da Vinci to the Present. New York: Crown Publishers, 1982.

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