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Rory Harden



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Rory Harden

THE
POPULIST

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Cover photo of iguana in Costa Rica by Nancy Crockett.

For Bonnie Crockett

'I only know what I believe.'

- A famous statesman.

CHAPTER 1

Deserts are beautiful, but deadly. In return for peace, purity and perfection, you accept danger. Bonnie DiAngelo had forgotten that, or else she had deceived herself.

An unending emptiness can fill the soul and seduce, or seem to. But the void can kill you without a thought, as if you were a careless visitor from another planet. And no desert is truly empty — not even the great deserts of Africa.

But they were the most beautiful of all. And the most dangerous.

A blast of canyon dust stung her eyes. *Someone save me from myself*, she thought. *Where are you, Leo?*

'Get down, Bonnie, get down now!'

Leo, the eco tycoon and seismic sophisticate from Costa Rica, whose advice and itinerary she had bought into, but now regretted, had tumbled from his donkey and lost his ridiculous hat in the process.

'Up here!'

He meant up by the red, vulcanised walls of the canyon — and this time his counsel was sound.

All ahead was commotion: the loaded-up camel trains; the attendant mules and donkeys; the Tigrayan salt merchants and their Afar guides and guards, rifles bouncing on their backs — all charging towards them. The Saba river canyon narrowed here, so the risk of meeting this dusty, panicky exodus head-on was too great.

She lost her donkey, but found Leo in a sandy cleft, dusting off his hat. The din rose and the dust blew up with it, filling the canyon like an overheated vacuum cleaner.

'What's happening? Where's Sam?'

'I don't know. Sam's over *there*. Somewhere.'

On the other side of the canyon, out of sight for now — gone for good? Sam (not his real name, they knew, but the boy had tact) was their guide, a subtle young Afar hipster with trad-style goat-butter ringlets and the latest sneakers. When he'd made enough money, he'd told them, he would travel to America. Would he be allowed to take his AK-47?

The slow-motion stampede went on. Animals collided. The camels' economy-sustaining cargo — the salt blocks slung like paving slabs at their sides — cracked and shattered. Leo's donkey — understandably, she thought — considered the odds and voted with its hooves, propelling Leo into the rear of the cleft where, once again, he parted with his hat.

'We should have done this by Jeep,' she said.

'If you ride in a...' — Leo paused to catch his breath — '...in a four-by-four, that is not an *eco adventure*.'

Well, okay, he had a point. She imagined the pitch she would make to her discriminating clients at her next Adventure Travel Evening.

*Here you have a camel train. It travels through the canyon, down the escarpment to the salt flats at Lake Asele. They've been doing this for two thousand years, maybe much longer. Ignore the rifles and the footwear and it doesn't look any different. You've got the local people, the Afar. Very exotic. Read what these British explorers from the nineteen-thirties have to say about them. Pretty scary, right? See the picture of the sixteen-inch curved dagger? That's what they used. On their enemies. And *foreigners*. Don't worry — *laughter* — they're not like that now.*

And *there* you have a Toyota Land Cruiser. Which is more romantic? Which picture do you want in the brochure?

She shuffled back into the shade of the cleft. The sun was high now, and the canyon was heating up — not quite to the 120 degrees they'd been told to expect on the salt flats, but hot enough.

'This morning,' she said. 'Did you hear it?'

'Yes. I heard it.'

The journey to the salt flats by caravan took three days. It began, half-way down the escarpment from the highlands, in the salt-market town of Berahile, a purposeful settlement of red-brown gravel, stone walls, tin roofs, recycled plastic sheeting and wonky electricity poles. Here they had parked their Land Cruiser, rented in Addis Ababa, under the supervision of Sam's uncle and next to the pen where he kept his goats.

The trail ran to the north through tiny villages comprised of circular wood-and-palm-thatch huts and then, turning to the east, entered the Saba river canyon. Twisting its way down the escarpment, the canyon eventually issued out into the Danakil desert. Here, in a zone spanning Eritrea to the north, Ethiopia in the centre and Djibouti to the south, lay the Danakil depression. In it, one could encounter, at fifty metres below sea-level, and at a volcano called Dallol, the hottest place on Earth. It was official.

So someone had decided that the hottest place on Earth was going to get hotter.

It was going to happen anyway, but Bonnie DiAngelo, burning up under the Ethiopian sun on her sixty-second birthday, was not willing to flame out quite yet, and saw no good reason to hasten the final conflagration.

Who needed this? Not the proprietor of Eco Adventures of Brookline, Massachusetts, who, contemplating another down year with her frazzled accountant, had been urged to seek out new destinations, the old ones having gone either out of fashion or into the op-ed columns, or both. What did the clients

want? Not the fiery birth-pangs of democracy, for sure. Nor boredom in placid Botswana again; they'd seen the wild dogs, and the hyenas, and then there was the dollar-cost. Find somewhere exciting, Bonnie — the real Africa. But safe. And not too expensive.

So here she was, excited for sure, high up in the mountains of north-eastern Ethiopia. And it might have worked, it really might. But down there in the Danakil depression, she now felt sure, the desert was on fire.

It had not been their intention, on this trip, to visit Dallol, or Erte Ale and its uniquely permanent lava pool, or the geysers, or the hot springs, or the faults and fissures — much as Leo might have wished. This would have necessitated vehicles and equipment (Bonnie's clients were not youngsters) and would not have been *eco*.

Instead, their destination was a dusty outpost called Hamed Ela, located on an outcrop above the desert and the salt flats, where the camels rested and the salt merchants paid their taxes. Here they would determine whether Bonnie's clients could sensibly undertake the final hike to the flats to observe, at first hand, the hacking-out and levering-up of the salt and the fashioning of camel-sized blocks, all by hand, all very ancient and all without a carbon footprint, if you didn't count the camels.

But this morning, after two nights under the empty Ethiopian skies and just after tea, they had heard something — far off and in the direction of Hamed Ela. There had been a conference of merchants and guards. Quite a discussion, in fact. She'd approached Sam while Leo was finishing his tea and observing the debate. Any problem? No, Sam had said, the caravan would proceed as normal. He hadn't looked happy, so she'd pushed things a bit. Bandits? The Eritreans? The possibility of being kidnapped by Eritrean bandits was the only convincing danger that her research had turned up. (I mean, *really*, she imagined telling her clients — in Botswana you can get *malaria*, you can get *eaten by crocodiles*...)

But those sounds were explosions, she thought now. Big ones. Not bandit-sized ordnance.

The donkeys and camels were right to panic. She and Leo would have to turn back.

For perhaps another fifteen minutes she sat immobile, blinking the dust from her eyes, until the tide of men and animals began to abate. She became aware that Leo, behind her, had taken out a notebook and a GPS and was scribbling furiously. What was he writing? A demand for a refund on the donkeys? Instructions to his plantation managers to put more eco logos on the coffee bags? Notes for his big speech at the climate conference?

Probably the latter: she was the cynic, not he. At the conference in Cape Town — most likely the last one ever, he'd said, considering the way the others had gone — would he give them the pitch he'd rehearsed with her?

Drought and politics. Put them together, what do you get? Think back to the nineteen-eighties. But the politics didn't cause the drought; rainfall in the highlands is unreliable. Now consider this. Two thousand years of sustainable industry in the hottest place on the planet. Yet by the end of the century it's too hot for people, too hot for camels. It's the first totally uninhabitable place on the

surface of the Earth. It's Venus. And up in the highlands it's one big political drought. And sixty million people live there.

And so on.

The few hardy stragglers remaining in the canyon passed by without acknowledging her, but, on the far side, cross-legged on a ledge, staring across at her in calm concentration, was Sam, the precocious Afar entrepreneur who, she remembered, hadn't been paid yet.

She attracted Leo's attention by swatting at his ankle.

'Hey. Better head back, I guess.'

Leo pursed his lips and adjusted his hat — a voluminous custom-made job, donated, he claimed, by a fan in New Mexico. Why wear an abomination like that when you had such thick, lush black hair?

'We should consult with our guide.'

'Sure.' Keep things on the up-and-up, as Leo prefers.

By the time they reached the centre of the canyon, Sam was already there, cleaning the dust from his rifle. The kid seemed to have lost his cool; he looked embarrassed.

'Our caravan...' — he waved a sorrowful arm in the direction of Berahile — '...has gone. I am sorry.'

'No, no, not your fault,' she said. 'It's only twenty minutes. We can catch up, right?'

Sam looked her up and down. Beautiful dark eyes, she thought — but do they have to look so dubious?

'Maybe,' he said, in a tone that meant *I don't think so*.

She looked at Leo. Come on, Mr Sustainable Business Leader of Costa Rica, 2009 — show us some leadership. Leo fiddled with his GPS.

'We are *here*,' he said, with conviction.

We certainly are, she thought. He gave his GPS some thumb action.

'Hamed Ela is *there*. Four or five hours.'

'You think we should go on? But —'

'It's two and a half days back to Berahile. We have no food.'

'The villages —'

'Still too far.'

She turned to Sam but the look on his face, translated, read what-can-I-tell-you and no-good-options and reminded her, for an absurd instant, of that last session with the accountant.

'Well, fine,' she said, 'but something — I'm telling you, *something* blew up down there. That can't be good.'

For a moment no one spoke.

'Sam,' she said, 'do you know what happened?'

Sam shook his head, slowly. Didn't know or didn't want to speculate?

'We should go to Hamed Ela,' Leo said. 'Hamed Ela has not blown up.' He let out a sigh and stowed his GPS carefully in his cargo pants. 'They have huts and they have camels. What could blow up?'

Well, in his annoying way, he's settled it, she thought. But what's he so uptight about? What does he know? Nothing, probably, but the rugged-and-sensitive stuff can be hard to keep up when you're not feeling in control and you can't

easily get someone on the end of a phone who's seen your picture on magazine covers. But, be fair, Bonnie — would you want to be here without him?

'Let's go,' she said.

With the briefest of smiles in her favour, Sam took his rifle in both hands and stepped out in front. They began to walk.

She slipped on her super-dark sunglasses and fell into a rhythm. Exploding camels? Of course not; give him that. But what was the hidden agenda, if there was one?

Leo, of course, had never lacked an agenda. Land reform, capital controls, carbon trading, sustainable energy — two decades of this, combined with the hair, the smile and the irresistible allure of the enlightened capitalist, had been enough to earn him the unpaid job of pin-up or poster-boy for the New Latin American Economic Model. His reputation ran high in such circles. And in Europe, and the better sort of coffee shop in Brookline and the Back Bay. Perhaps a little too high? Washington certainly thought so. But what a crazy town that was, these days! You had to laugh. Well, no, actually.

And serious-minded Annie, Bonnie's daughter and only child, wouldn't be laughing either, though she might have done once. Before graduation, perhaps — before she set off to save the place from itself? That, surely, had been a joke. Did she laugh at all these days? Well, dumping your husband wasn't so funny, especially when you tell everyone it's not just personal, it's political. And then you copy his hard drive and mail it to the Feds. But you could get another husband — even, God help us all, a conservative. Dumping your mother was worse.

Was there an explanation? You could say it was simply the politics of the new generation gap, as the weekly magazines, high as ever on demographics, would have it.

But was it? For that fleeting, sunny interlude — Bonnie's Rich Period — during which the condo in Brookline had pretended to be worth more than two million dollars, you might easily have understood the frustrations of a twenty-something researcher for a lobbying firm who made thirty-five thousand a year.

Yet Annie hadn't seemed frustrated by her mother's transient wealth so much as Bonnie's refusal to celebrate it. Annie had rejected her mother's politics for a stunted ideology that seemed childish and secretive. And, despite Mom's hopes, she wasn't going to be growing out of anything anytime soon because, at twenty-nine, she was scarily committed, and implacable. Leo, of course, understood how Bonnie felt about her daughter, but maintained a strict neutrality — a deliberate and, it seemed, highly sustainable detachment.

You're rambling, she thought. Brain too hot? Hyperthermia? Let's hope not. We want to see Hamed Ela — intact and with all its camels.

She tapped Leo on the elbow.

'You know what? We *do* have food. I have Oreos in my pack. Want some?'

He did. And, in deference, he left unsaid what she heard anyway: Oreos are *not* food.

On they went. It got hotter.

But look, she thought, if it wasn't the camels exploding, then... Vulcanicity? The Afar Triple Junction: three faults defining a triangle that was sinking into

the Red Sea. Cracks everywhere, eruptions. Leo would know. But he hadn't said anything.

Not camels, not volcanoes, not the bandits. Well, then: unavoidable conclusion? Military activity. A sensitive subject in these parts, and not just because of the endless, pointless animosity between Ethiopia and Eritrea, something about which the clients would have to be gently educated — mind those cameras, people, especially in Addis. So... Military activity?

She felt the dullness of defeat begin to seep into her soul. Coming here had been a big mistake. She had really screwed up. This was going to be a problem; this was going to be a huge waste of money — real money, not pretend — that she didn't have.

She should have looked at the map a little longer. What would her former son-in-law have told her?

He would have told her that there were (a) war zones; and (b) War Zones, capitalised, the latter being ours. But she knew this. South Sudan was a war zone, still category (a). Mali and Somalia fell into both categories — she wasn't going to argue about it. The Maghreb — looking more and more like (b). Yemen, definitely (b). Tanzania and Kenya, not there yet but heating up. Egypt — freed up and then locked down, but for how long? Iraq, Syria, give me a break. Then all this talk, even from her daughter, about the Greater Persian Region. And Djibouti — what the hell went on there? Was she supposed to keep up with all this?

No. But Leo did, didn't he?

Hotter, flatter, brighter, wider — the canyon went on. But at length they stumbled out on to plains of sand and gravel. Now visible, far off in the haze, under a vacant and trembling sky, was the outcrop upon which Hamed Ela crouched.

A hot wind blew up. They covered their faces and picked up the pace.

CHAPTER 2

This was one hell of a party to crash. How long would he last? The name on the photo ID he wore around his neck on a red ribbon was not his own. Nor was the picture, though it resembled him somewhat.

He did not represent the real-time embedded-systems software development corporation whose Head of Business Development he purported to be. That corporation did not exist, except as a figment of cyberspace. And it was only recently that a friendly science teacher had explained to him, in seventh-grade terms, what real-time embedded systems were. He hoped that none of the corporate tech-heads he'd already spied in the Laptop Lounge (you weren't allowed to bring your own) would expect him to converse on the subjects of 'multi-threaded error-handling', the 'apartment model' or 'interface negotiation'.

And he knew that, back at the office, a pool had been established and bets taken on how quickly he would be unmasked and ejected. He had a reputation, after all, for clumsiness, accidents and fuck-ups. And he had only taken on this job because no one else had the nerve. What a bunch of wimps. Risk, he had tried to explain, was not just for the capitalists.

Which was why he had infiltrated himself into the Unmanned Aerial Dynamics Expo, Fair and Picnic.

So far things had gone well. He had mispronounced his fake name to the security guys on the way in, and misspelled it on the non-disclosure, but they hadn't noticed. Nor had they spotted the latest edition of The Liberal — with his face on the cover! — that he had forgotten to remove from his bag. A battery of detectors, scanners and sniffers had been negotiated almost without incident. He had broken the lock on the cubicle in the men's room, but hey — it wasn't like they couldn't afford a new one. And he had brushed against a model of an in-flight refuelling tanker, which obviously hadn't been secured efficiently, and sent it crashing to the floor. Fortunately, the room had been empty. No one was interested in tankers. They were interested in drones. As was he.

And so, in order to plausibly resemble a man legitimately interested in the world of drones, dronedom and droning, he had, under instruction from Katherine, his boss, cut his hair way short, shaved properly, bought a tie,

borrowed a suit, rented a black Mercedes, collected his bogus credentials and driven down to South Carolina, to the thousand-acre compound or campus which had been constructed in the foresty middle of nowhere by an outfit called Fair Meadow Solutions. FMS was a private company — very private — and appeared to be descended from the deliberately unpronounceable and now defunct Qfw Corp, which had been split up following various foreign embarrassments. An earlier and only slightly different set of foreign embarrassments had led the briefly notorious Military Logistics Group to change its name to Qfw. But so what? Business was a constant process of evolution and improvement, right?

Yet, in truth, Jefferson Crockett (Jeff Crock to his friends and his rather more numerous enemies) was unhappy with the mission. As he followed the crowd into the lecture theatre and edged his way along a row near the back, trying very hard not to step on anyone's toes, he couldn't help but dwell on the reasons why.

For one thing, that issue of *The Liberal* in his bag was to be the last ever produced in physical form. Katherine had lost money to that Ponzi bastard in New York and couldn't afford to subsidise it any more. Advertising? Forget about it. Back in Katherine's office they'd cased the competition. Ads for aerospace, anyone? Agribusiness? Private banking? The Global Faith Initiative of... Well, at that point he'd slammed his coffee mug down on the table and the handle had snapped off. There would be no big-ticket advertising. And besides, that magazine with the Faith Initiative ad — look at the shit they were writing about the so-called Greater Persian Question. Fuck off, Katherine!

And so, from now on, he would be an investigative *blogger*. He'd better start getting used to it.

He selected a seat between two dark suits who didn't look like tech-heads.

Moving on, then, there was the more personal question of his *obsession*. Yes, he knew it was an obsession, and a particularly unhealthy one, too, according to the wisdom of the times. Like an all-consuming addiction, or a self-inflicted wasting disease, it was eating him up. Everyone said so. Some spoke of it with concern, rather more with mockery. Those who loved him — a small band, admittedly, but dedicated — tried to distract and soothe, to sympathise and share his pain. Others... Well, just wait around and see what happened the next time someone told him to his face to *get over it*.

The lecture theatre was military-media-centre spotless, corporate-hospitality plush and clammy with Bible-Belt air-con. He calmed down a bit.

Basically, drones were fine. Drones were important. Something had to be done about drones. But there were *War Criminals* at liberty, folks! Walking around free. Taking money from dictators. Talking on the TV. Setting up Foundations and Initiatives. Getting rich. Giving speeches about Africa. War Criminals! Don't we care any more? Doesn't it matter? A little thing called justice? *No evidence*, you say? Are you kidding? Oh, *that* sort of evidence. Fine. I'll get it. One day. I'll get it. You'll see.

So, anyway, added to the obsession and the *blogging* thing, there was the Annie issue. But there wasn't time to fret about that because the top-of-the-bill speaker had come on and was cranking up his laptop — a specially-licensed one, presumably.

Jeff reconfigured his long, lanky frame into a comfortable shape, reached up to brush back his hair, realised it wasn't there any more, jabbed his neighbour with his elbow — oops, sorry! — then breathed out heavily and perked up his ears.

The speaker, a Big-'n'-Tall customer who would have resembled an Italian opera singer but for his ginger buzz-cut, waited for the audience to fall silent.

Someone dimmed the lights. A hush fell. All Jeff Crock could hear was the huffing of the air conditioning.

With operatic flair, the speaker threw his gaze from one side of the auditorium to the other, nodding, as if checking off each of the twelve hundred or so attendees against a mental list. Then he must have activated a secret switch, because the cinema-sized screen behind him lit up in blue. Oh shit, Jeff thought, PowerPoint time. A click of the mouse and the first slide appeared: 'The Future,' in very big letters. How exciting. Another long pause. What a tease.

And then something odd happened. Up came a photograph. There was the minutest pause — just long enough for a cartoon double-take — and then a collective 'Whoa!' went up from the crowd, followed by the sort of applause you got on a reality show finale where the winner's family and supporters took up the first ten rows. Jeff studied the photograph. Yes, he'd done his homework. He knew what it was. Two wings, long cylindrical body — fuselage? Tail fin. The bulges and insect-antennae that gave it the sinister vibe that everyone expected. It was a drone. What a surprise. Why the commotion?

His neighbour leaned across.

'That's something, don't you think?'

'Certainly is.'

'Haven't seen anything like that before!'

No? Jeff looked the screen again. It looked like a perfectly ordinary drone, positively humdrum, as drones went. He'd seen lots of pictures exactly like this one.

'No,' he said. 'It's so... What would you say it is?'

But his neighbour didn't seem to be listening.

'This is huge!'

What was huge, exactly? Well, perhaps ginger buzz-cut would spell it out; he had begun to speak.

But it was no use. Jeff's mood plunged. It was all jargon and he couldn't make any sense of it. Extended parameters. Battle space matrix. Remote capability modes. Automatic target profile sensing. Strategic-tactical duality. Enhanced this. Enhanced that. Of course, he would have smuggled in one of those tiny digital audio recorders, for later consultation with experts, but these people had a detector for everything.

Quite soon, to his surprise, it was all over. There were no more pictures. The room emptied in a buzz of excitement. Well, he still didn't get it. He took one last look at the image before the screen went dark. What was he missing? Well, fuck it, there was condensation trickling down his neck; he needed to get outside and get some air. Wait a minute — wasn't there supposed to be a Fair and a Picnic? Perhaps the drive from Brooklyn hadn't been a waste after all. He made a dash from the auditorium. Then immediately returned to fetch his bag.

Jeff Crock stood in the parking lot with upturned face and secretly stole himself some pristine, early fall, Carolina sunshine. The aroma of pine forests infiltrated his nostrils and a gentle breeze probed his defences. Camouflaged birds in the parking lot's landscaped margins exchanged coded messages. From undercover, somewhere nearby, came the cryptic cries of children, whose hidden meanings evaded him.

He shook himself out of his reverie. Katherine had been right about the car. The parking lot had voted, and black was its colour — SUVs, Limos, Mercedes. His second-hand white Prius, with its provocative decals, would have been noticeable.

But what about those children? He followed the sound of their voices, tip-toeing, since there were no footpaths, across the red earth of the parking lot's floral borders and around the side of the main building, a low reflective-glass hangar almost completely obscured by banks of shrubbery.

At the rear of the building he found lawns, tents, a major catering operation, an inflatable castle and the children. Well, of course — the Picnic. A picnic in the lap of the Flying Death Robots? Why not? They probably had cook-outs at Los Alamos, desert notwithstanding.

But whose children? The employees', presumably. Even for drone people, automation, cybernetics and remote control only took you so far. He'd noticed a day-care centre in the main building and a 'Family Administration' wing. The building on the far side of the lawns resembled a school. And was that a supermarket next to it? Quite the little self-contained community.

He tracked the scent of barbecue to its source and loaded up; drones made you hungry, he had to conclude. All frivolity aside, though, what had he accomplished here? They're unveiling something new, Katherine had said, find out what it is. Well, it was same-old, wasn't it? With a bit of enhanced this and a dash of enhanced that. Typical corporate product hype. Find out which countries they're operating in, Jeff. Who really controls them, who owns them. Where's the investment coming from? Who are the buyers? These were tough, relevant questions — which he clearly had little chance of answering.

He took up his paper plate of pulled pork, snatched a plastic fork and set off to investigate the tents.

They turned out to house the Fair portion of the proceedings. Drones, it was interesting to learn, were like cars. They came with many options and accessories. For example, satnav was generally standard, as you'd expect at this price point in the market. But you could opt for *premium* guidance. And while undercoating didn't really apply, you were free to select your colour of choice. Disks — SSD or Sata II? Tyres — these cost more upfront, but you'll get your money back after fifty missions.

But the most important add-on package a buyer had to consider was what shit they wanted to drop on people.

The options were extensive.

As he turned to walk back to the parking lot, he felt that familiar knot of disgust in his stomach. Unhappily, these days it always came with an unwanted soundtrack — Annie's voice repeating 'Are you sure this whole thing isn't just about you?' For Annie, righteous anger was always suspect. She was a grown-up;

she did the cost-benefit analysis before involving her emotional resources. Sensible. Pragmatic. And, he felt he had learned at length, cold. He had come up with the come-back too late: 'Well, if you don't *feel* these things, maybe it's really all about *you*!'

'Sir!'

Someone was hailing him.

'Sir, would you like to try?'

Try what? Try again with Annie? Oh, whatever.

'Just step inside, sir.'

He allowed himself to be guided into the last tent in the row. Inside he saw nothing but a large video screen at one end and a Barcalounger recliner at the other.

'Take a seat, sir.'

He sat.

'May I?'

He handed over his pulled pork.

'Make yourself comfortable.'

'Thanks.'

'Here's your phone.'

He was handed a touchscreen cell phone.

'Okay. That's your app right there. Just tap and we're away.'

'What?'

'Just tap, sir.'

He tapped. The video screen came to life. He was looking down at a desert, as seen from beneath the nose of a drone.

'Use your cursor keys, sir. Blue button to lock on, red button to fire. Take your time.'

What the fuck?

'Here comes the target. Steady, sir...'

He wasn't in the mood for stupid bullshit video games. He stabbed his thumbs randomly against the touchscreen, jumped to his feet and flung the phone down on the chair. Then he stopped. Jesus Christ, that was realistic — a rocket had torn away from the drone, smashed into the desert and a huge cloud of smoke and dust was rising up.

'Gee, a miss, I'm afraid, sir.'

'Wow. Almost like the real thing. I guess.'

'I'm sorry, sir?'

'Looked almost real.'

There was a pause and the moist Carolinian air seemed to chill.

'It *is* real.'

'Really! No shit. You mean I actually... But where...'

He became aware that his photo ID was now an object of interest. He covered it casually with his hand.

'Let's just say it's in a very big, hot country.'

'Okay.'

'Ah, sir, would you mind just waiting here a moment?'

Yes, he would.

'Sorry, gotta go.'

He fled the tent, dodged around behind it, and made for the crowds at the barbecue stand. After ten minutes of ducking and lurking it seemed safe to conclude that he wasn't being pursued. A mild elation suffused his ramshackle frame. He would have *something* to tell Katherine after all. They're *phoning it in* now — can you believe it? He could hardly wait to get back to Brooklyn and *blog* about it. Or, better still, he could get out of here, pull off the highway and *blog away* from his cell phone. Was there any way he could get hold of that app? Presumably it wasn't available in the App Store.

No, forget it, he thought. His luck had lasted way longer than usual; it was time to leave. And he would have done so, right then, if he hadn't seen three black SUVs emerge from the forest, drive across the lawn and head for the row of tents. Across the lawn! This had to be someone important. He felt something that he experienced only on very special occasions — a pang of pure political lust. Oh, who could it be! Let it be... No, not him, let it be... Well, he had to find out. But the cars had stopped outside the last tent in the row. He wasn't going back there again. He needed to loiter inconspicuously and wait for the cars to return.

He decided to hide behind the inflatable castle.

Very quickly, he realised that this was a bad decision. Someone was tugging at his sleeve. It was a small girl, aged about nine.

'Why are you hiding?'

'I'm not. I'm just getting out of the sun'.

'There's more shade on the other side.'

'I prefer it here.'

'But your head is in the sun.'

'It's the rest of me I'm worried about.'

'Your head's more important. You'll get heatstroke.'

'No, I won't.'

She pulled a sceptical face and changed her line of questioning.

'Are you here for the picnic?'

'Amongst other things.'

'What's your name?'

'My name's Jeff. What's yours?'

'Amelie.'

'Hi, Amelie. Having fun?'

'Yeah, I guess.'

'Does your dad work here?'

A shade of defiance coloured Amelie's face.

'No, my mom. And I'm prohibited, uh... I'm not allowed to say where my dad is.'

Prohibited? It was a warning sign, but recklessness overcame him.

'Really? That's weird. Why not?'

She thought for a moment then shook her head.

'I'm not allowed to say why not.'

'Huh. Who says?'

Another moment of thought — and a frown of anguish.

'No, it's okay. I get it,' he said. 'Is your mom here now?'

A nervous pull at her hair.

'She's gone to get more wine.'

'That's good.'

'Do you want to come on the castle?'

He surveyed the scene. There were other grown-ups inside, bouncing grimly away, so it was probably all right. Good cover, too. And he could still observe the motorcade — he might even get a better view on a good bounce.

'Sure.'

They climbed in and the bouncing began.

And it would, Jeff Crock felt convinced, have been good, clean fun, had not Amelie and her little friends decided that the only thing better than bouncing was bouncing *into* harmless, truth-seeking *bloggers* and flipping them upside down. Eventually — and, on reflection, predictably — things got out of control and he found himself lying face-down on the grass with Amelie sitting on his shoulders and shrieking with delight.

Then a pair of elegant designer sandals came into view. Amelie dismounted.

'Mommy's back!'

Jeff looked up at a tall woman in a pale shift dress, a dark bob, and enormous sunglasses. She was holding a large glass of white wine.

'Who's your new friend, honey?'

'That's Jeff.'

'Good to meet you, Jeff. Hope Amelie didn't hurt you there.'

'No, no. We were doing great.'

Actually, he was pretty sure he'd bruised his ribs.

'Oh...'

Amelie's mom had spotted something.

'Sweetie, hold that for mommy.'

She gave her glass to her daughter and picked up something from the grass.

'You lost your...'

She was reading his photo ID.

'What was your name again?'

What was it?

'Actually, Jeff is a nickname. It's Burt. Burt... Burt *something*.'

There were some words, he mused, that, in his experience, women were able to shout much louder than others. 'Security' was one of them. By the time he had struggled to his feet, men in black baseball hats and bulky bomber jackets were converging on him from all sides.

And at that point, the motorcade returned, slowed, and then stopped to see what all the fuss was about. Down went the tinted windows. And, focusing in on the back seat of the middle vehicle, Jeff Crock experienced, full-on, what in other walks is called the money-shot.

A face pinched but hard, sagging but resilient, tanned but off-colour. Eyes full of tension, rimmed around with corruption. Full, pale lips. Rich, bad teeth. Superfluous hair. Belligerent bones.

War Criminal Number Two.

And as he felt his collapsed frame sing with suffocating electricity, a single repeating phrase rang through his brain.

This is huge!

CHAPTER 3

The escarpment dimmed from scorched brown to volcanic black as the sun retreated across the peaks of the Ethiopian highlands. To their relief, the desiccating wind dropped, the air cooled and they felt becalmed.

Then, as they stumbled their way, breathless, into Hamed Ela, they saw that the village, like a ghost ship on a fossilised sea, had been abandoned by its crew.

Together, at Sam's insistence and six steps behind him, they went from house to house — huts, really, Bonnie DiAngelo thought, but homes to the people who lived in them and had left in such a hurry. Meals abandoned, clothing discarded, money — the salt taxes? — left uncounted.

It was a rapid evacuation, she thought, but not a panic. Valuable animals had been rounded up and herded out. No one had been left behind. It was what you did when you woke up and found — or heard — Military Activity on your African doorstep.

'Where did they go, Sam?' she said.

The boy was running his hand along the doorframe of a hut and wrinkling his nose.

'Sam?'

He looked up and gestured to the north. 'I think that way.'

Leo looked disconsolate, verging on angry, like a business leader who'd made the wrong call and lacked any means to pretend otherwise.

'Well,' she said. 'I guess we spend the night here. Maybe we should get on the sat phone and —'

'It's not working,' Leo said.

'Why not?'

'I don't know. No connection. Satellite not found.'

'Oh. Maybe in the morning.'

'Maybe. Where's Sam?'

'He's right over —'

But Sam had vanished. *That's it*, she thought. Here it is, that dumb, random, binary fate that still ruled in the uncapitalised half of the world: you're alive, you're dead, it's just a probability thing, nothing personal — completely

impersonal, in scientific fact. But then, no; it was vanity. She ought to stop dramatising herself. Sam's grey shadow was beckoning them on, towards the east and the edge of the outcrop. They followed.

And down on the plain, torn perpendicular to the trail that the caravans took to the salt flats, was a great longitudinal scar of red, black and yellow rock, now turning brown in the weakening light.

For a minute or so no one spoke. It was hard to judge the scale of the thing at this distance, but it was huge.

'So what is that?' she asked, but got no answer. 'Leo?'

But Leo was staring at Sam. The boy's head was tipped back, his nose wrinkling again.

'Smell something?' Leo said.

Sam nodded.

'Know what it is?'

A shake of the head.

'Me neither.'

A pause.

'Go a bit closer?'

Another nod. The two men started down towards the plain. She hesitated. What could they smell? Her senses couldn't match theirs. Did she want to find out? She could just wait here and... No. She'd be sitting here in the dark, her flashlight would die after an hour and then what? Better to bust her ankle within shouting distance than slip away in silence. Sure, she was fit for her age. All the same...

*

By the time they reached the scar, the light had almost gone. Leo had taken out his flashlight; she did the same.

There had been an impact. Something very large had smashed into the ground and travelled some distance — how far, it was impossible to tell in the gloom. But, from the way that the rocks and gravel had been scattered, Leo said, the trajectory of this object was clear. It had come out of the north-west. He took out his GPS and marked their position carefully.

'Did you mark the village?' she said.

'It was already marked. Do you have your camera?'

'Yes.'

'Can you take pictures?'

'What of?'

'Everything.'

'Okay.'

'Except Sam. We'll leave him out of this, yes?'

'If you say so.'

So now she was official expedition photographer, but no portraits, please. And if Leo thought any plane-crash images were going in the brochure, well, they weren't.

Now Leo took the lead. She followed, and Sam, without a flashlight but apparently able to see in the dark, became their rear gunner. After a hundred yards or so they began to find wreckage.

'This,' Leo said, pointing. A *blip* on the GPS.

She photographed a shard of grey metal with rivets along one edge.

'And this,' he said, working his flashlight like a fashion-shoot director until shadows were minimised and the object rendered in sharp relief.

She photographed a steel plate covered with dense, black numbering.

'Here.' *Blip*.

Some kind of circuit board, with trailing wires.

'And here.'

A small, black box — a computer hard drive? Everything in small pieces, she thought. Fragments. Unsurvivable.

They progressed: Sam silently on guard, barely visible behind them; and Leo, darting from side to side, flicking his flashlight; and herself, sweating despite the cooling air, snapping his pictures and now thinking the unthinkable.

'Leo,' she said. 'Wait. Should we be doing this? The passengers...'

He stopped.

'No, no, no,' he said, all at once flustered, as if there'd been some silly mistake. 'No passengers. You were worried. I'm sorry. You thought I was going to make you —'

'Yes, but the crew?'

'No crew.'

'No crew? Then what —'

'Unmanned.'

'Unmanned what?'

'Aerial vehicle. Drone.'

Yes, she thought, a *drone*. You saw pictures of them in the New York Times. They looked like toy gliders. *This* was not a toy glider.

'You can tell that?'

Leo was firm.

'Yes.'

She waited for him to explain. Realising that he had to say more, he seemed to improvise. Sam, immobile, listened from the gloom.

'No seats, no baggage, no fabric. Other stuff. I know a bit about planes, so... I knew it wasn't a plane.'

'But it's — it must have been so big.'

Unexpectedly, Leo laughed, loudly.

'Yeah! It's big, my God.'

Bodies or no bodies, she thought, survivors or no survivors — this had to end. She wasn't in this business, and neither was Leo, was he? What usually happened to people who photographed Military Activity? And not just any old Military Activity, if Leo wasn't talking out of his ass.

'Leo, I don't like this. Let's go back to the village and wait for help.'

Leo lowered his flashlight.

'Okay, you're right. I'm sorry. This is just so... We'll go back. Just a hundred metres more, okay?'

She shone her flashlight in his face.

'Okay. But no more photos.'

'No more photos.'

They moved on, Sam lingering ever more obscurely behind them.

But now, what had been merely frightening became, by turns, both sinister and absurd. Large, shiny-metal tanks, with hosepipes attached. A *Wholefoods Market* recyclable eco-bag full of glossy corporate literature. A shower head. More plastic pipes, like spilled guts. A copy of *USA Today*, from three months ago. A mobile phone in a pretty, pink case.

With great care, Leo picked the phone up by the strap attached to its case and examined it under his flashlight. Then he brought it close to his nose and sniffed at it. Apparently satisfied, he removed the phone from its case.

'Does it work?' she asked.

'I don't think we should find out.'

With his flashlight wedged between chin and shoulder, he popped the back cover off the phone and removed a memory card. Then he slipped the cover back on and positioned the phone exactly as he had found it.

So what did he want to be now, she wondered — a spy?

'What do you suppose is on that?'

'Could be anything.'

Right, she thought. Friends and family. Vacation snaps. Account numbers. Porn. Facebook crap. Military secrets.

'Do you know what you're doing?'

'Most of the time.'

Most of the time.

'So whose drone is this?'

'I'm assuming it's yours.'

'Mine?'

Leo removed the memory card from his GPS. Then he took out a glasses case from his cargo pants, opened it and removed a pair of sunglasses.

'One day we'll all have them. Give me the card from your camera.'

She gave it to him. He prised up the inner lining of the case with his thumbnail, slipped all three memory cards underneath, and packed the whole thing away again.

'They're getting cheaper, better, bigger. So why not?' He paused. 'Well, maybe not *this* big.'

Great, she thought. Drone wars everywhere and ours are the biggest. But could she smell something here? Something musty and organic?

'Let's go back now, Leo.'

'Sure, okay, let's go.'

Sam stood off to the side in the dark, and their little expedition reversed itself in silence.

And what, she wondered, was Sam thinking? Interesting question. How did he feel about having his desert despoiled like this? What kind of tip or bonus could make up for it? Was he angry? Probably. She wanted to apologise to Sam for the alien garbage in his unspoiled wilderness and, well, just the whole concept of it, really — the parcelling up of the globe into *commands* and the sheer

un-neighbourliness of it all. Eco Adventures prided itself — herself — on its light footprint and sensitivity. Crashing military hardware into your host's backyard wasn't on. At least it hadn't hit the village. No, it hadn't, and yet...

'Leo.'

'Yes?'

'Why did the villagers leave? The crash site is a long way from —'

'They were afraid of something.'

'That smell?'

'Maybe.'

'There was more than one explosion.'

'I think it shot off some rockets or something. Before it crashed.'

'Why?'

'I have no idea. Maybe it got lost.'

'They send these things over Yemen from Djibouti, don't they?'

'Yes. But this one is not from Djibouti.'

'Where, then?'

'Good question.'

'It's probably an accident, though?'

Leo muttered something that she couldn't make out. She dropped back and fell in step with Sam. He seemed surprised, but pleased.

'I'm sorry, but that's all wrong,' she said, with an emphatic gesture. 'That's really too much. What a mess we make, sometimes — honestly!'

So there she was, apologising for America. Could you do that? ('Never!' she imagined she heard someone say loudly, over the horizon). But just this once, on the quiet, between herself and this boy... Well, she wasn't the President. So there.

'I think people ought to see this land,' she went on. Sam smiled at her. 'I mean, not too many. Sustainable.' A nod towards Leo. 'So fragile.'

'People are fragile,' Sam said.

'Yes, people too.' Fragility everywhere.

'It's hard to live here.'

'Even so, it's a special place.'

Sam looked at her.

'Where are you from?'

'Boston.'

'Is that a special place?'

'Uh, well, maybe. It's different. I suppose it depends —'

'To you?'

'It's home, so...'

'I think I will go there one day.'

'You should.'

And then, unprompted, he began to describe for her the terms under which life was conducted in this brutal, burning, fragile void: the ever-present drought, relieved perhaps in the two short rainy seasons; the lack of permanent vegetation, except for one river valley in the extreme south; the imperative of following the rains; the impossibility of following them when politics closed the borders; the diet limited to not much more than whatever the goats could provide; the presence of bandits in the north and hostile tribes in the south and clan rivalry

everywhere; social customs, such as the filing of teeth; the remoteness of the government; the memory of famine in Tigray in the highlands; the regular loss of valuable animals to the drought; the occasional discovery of antiquities, which excited foreign experts; the joys of a marriage linking two families, and thus two villages; the unpredictable pleasures of meeting visitors like herself.

And, finally, in short, he wasn't *that* upset that she'd littered his ancestral domain with smart, but now useless, war-fighting technology.

'Thanks,' she said.

They pressed on, their pace slowing. Bonnie felt the glow of Sam's dissertation and the hideous excitement of their discovery slip away, to be replaced by exhaustion. Then, at the point where they were to turn west to climb back up to the village, she remembered that it was her sixty-second birthday — and fatigue turned to light-headed elation. Much was survivable, after all. Things might drop out of the sky, but, if they didn't blow your head off, you were fully entitled to keep right on.

Leo was looking at her.

'I haven't forgotten, you know. When we get there, we shall celebrate. I'm carrying something special.'

He tapped his backpack.

Perhaps you are, she thought.

'I'm too tired.'

'You'll be able to rest soon.'

But then, as they crept up upon the last ridge before the village, she heard the thumping of the helicopter.

CHAPTER 4

The helicopter, though large and plainly military in character, Bonnie DiAngelo thought, lacked confidence in its identity; it bore few markings. No flags, no insignia, no numbers — just an aggressively abstract logo of no obvious import. Perhaps it had been borrowed from a movie studio.

While it manoeuvred to land — too close to them, surely — they sheltered from its downdraft and blazing lights behind one of the abandoned huts. When the whirring sandstorm subsided, she looked for Sam. But this time the boy had given himself up fully to his ancestral night — rifle, sneakers and all.

The helicopter's engine cut out and its blades coasted to a stop. Somehow this told her that they weren't simply going to be offered a lift. Leo's hat had blown away, but he made no effort to retrieve it.

'Stick with me,' he said, as if he thought she might prefer to join Sam on his midnight run.

From the helicopter there came the squeaking of doors and the clattering of steps. In the dim square of the doorway, a slight silhouette appeared. As it edged towards the top of the steps, the helicopter's external lights revealed desert boots, black pants, a loose white polo shirt and a young face, tanned, confident and curious. One very careful survey of the terrain from his vantage point, a leap and a bound, and he was with them.

'Just the two of you?'

Leo nodded. British accent, she thought. And not so young; blond hair turning to grey, receding at the temples.

'Not three?'

'Just two,' Leo said.

No pictures of Sam, he'd said earlier. Not just cultural sensitivity; a precaution.

'Only we thought we saw... Well, that's okay, then. Now *you*,' he said, pointing at Leo, '...are Mr Vargas? All the way from Costa Rica?'

'Who are you?' Leo said.

'And *you*... Are Mrs DiAngelo. American. Very good. No doubt you'll be wanting a lift, and that's fine, we're all set up for that and it won't cost you a penny. Just the two of you. Good.'

He rubbed his hands together, like a father conscripted for after-school taxi duty and determined to evince enthusiasm.

'We'll get going shortly. Just a few details first.'

'Our plan is to spend the night here,' Leo said. 'But I would like to know who you are.'

'Here? But they've all gone!' Arms spread wide in mock incredulity. 'You can't stay here.'

'Our caravan will return tomorrow.'

'It won't, you know. It won't.'

'Why not?' she asked.

He turned his smile on her.

'The thing is, they've declared an exclusion zone. The government. The Ethiopians.'

He let her absorb this fact.

'So, obviously, nobody's coming in or out. That's all there is to it, really.'

He folded his arms, as if resting his case.

'An exclusion zone?' she said.

'On your little expedition,' he said, 'you must have noticed it. Bit of a mess, down there, isn't it? We could see you on the infra-red, with your little torches. And on the thermal imaging. All two of you.'

'So that whatever-it-is that crashed — that's yours?'

'We're just part of the clean-up.'

She decided to test his patience.

'Well, so you say, but who are you?'

The smile collapsed on one side.

'My name is Andrew, Mrs DiAngelo. I work for a company, that through a long chain of contracts and connections and so on and so forth, that I won't bore you with right now, is ultimately acting for and responsible to your very own State Department.'

'Oh, them...'

'And — I hope you don't mind my saying this — but a woman of your intelligence — Princeton, no less! — who knows her way around Africa, keeps up with current affairs and has a daughter who works in the defence industry, ought to recognise a national security emergency when she sees one.'

'My daughter works in the defence industry?'

Leo touched her elbow gently.

'Where are you going to take us?' he said.

Andrew turned back to Leo, the smile gone now.

'Back to base. For fuel. Then we'll see.'

'All right. We'll come with you.'

'Great. Splendid.'

A big sigh.

'Now, before we all hop on — electronic devices. What have we got?'

He looked from Leo to Bonnie and back to Leo, as if they were children who might or might not have presents for teacher.

'Cameras? Anyone?'

'I have a camera,' she said.

'May I?'

She gave him her camera. Expertly, he opened the memory compartment.

'There's no card in here, Mrs DiAngelo.'

'I just filled one up.'

'Mm. You were going to put a new one in later.'

He pointed to the helicopter.

'To be perfectly honest... I'd really prefer *not* to ask for help here. Yes? I want everything electronic. Cards, phones, the lot.'

They removed their packs and emptied their pockets. With impatient dexterity, Andrew inspected and discarded, examined and confiscated. When it was over, Leo's glasses case was not the first thing Leo picked up, and it was not the last.

Andrew seemed satisfied. The smile perked up again at both corners.

'You will, of course, each get a receipt. Especially for Mr Vargas's satellite phone and his GPS, which happen to be very expensive models. Very nice indeed. So, I think we're ready —'

He broke off because two men in fatigues had jumped from the helicopter. They ran to the rear of the craft and crouched in the darkness. A searchlight snapped on and swung its beam in the same direction.

Andrew swore under his breath.

'You two wait here. What the hell —'

He ran to the helicopter. Bonnie could hear the sound of racing engines. Leo grasped her hand and tugged her towards the nearest hut. A set of yellow headlights appeared in the gloom, then a second, brighter pair. The grilles of two trucks flashed in the searchlight. Rifle shots rang out. Leo pushed her into the hut and rolled in after her. She heard Andrew yelling and swearing.

They crawled to the back of the hut. Leo pressed her to the floor and folded his arms over her head. The battle outside was ragged and ill-disciplined, like a middle-of-the-night firework binge conducted by a drunken neighbour.

The helicopter engine began to whine. Shadows jumped and the noise of the trucks reeled around behind them. A gale of sand and grit blasted into the hut as the helicopter rose and the shadows flickered again.

'Stay down,' Leo rasped in her ear.

She stayed down. The pounding of the helicopter receded, fading into the sky to an insolent salute of pot-shots. For a moment there was quiet. Then came the crunching of tyres at their door. A slam, some footsteps and a sarcastic rap on the doorframe.

The bandits, she thought. After all this, the bloody bandits. Taking advantage of a *national security emergency*. Then a voice.

'Anybody home?'

An American accent. She felt Leo fall away from her.

'Are you...'

'Am I what?'

'Are you kidnapping us?'

'Why no, ma'am. My name's Jay and I'm rescuing you.'

CHAPTER 5

Owing to the treachery of the over-active and under-parented Amelie, Jeff Crock (real name Jefferson Crockett, fake name Burt *something*) had been zapped, dragged out, roughed up, shaken down, harangued, insulted, accused, intimidated, coerced, compared to Hitler, belittled and, worst of all by far, threatened with a law suit by a rich and aggressive corporation of mysterious ownership that was, by all appearances, on the best of terms with war criminals.

Then, on the way home in a second (and much cheaper) rental car, the black Mercedes having been impounded — and, for all he knew, dismantled — by Fair Meadow Solutions' forensic security, he found himself detained and questioned at length by the Border and Immigration Joint Security Task Force, which had woken up and decided that this was an ideal day for conducting a 'routine sweep' along the interstate. Coincidence? This despite his elongated stature, his unyieldingly Caledonian complexion and a passport convincing enough for Fair Meadow Solutions' finest.

Plus, he would have to break the news about the Mercedes to Katherine.

And yet, it had been a good day.

Why? Well, what could you really do to someone for sneaking into a *picnic* and bouncing in an inflatable castle? The threat of a law suit was a joke. And he didn't have a beard, so they couldn't plausibly allege that his intentions towards the picnic were terroristic. Weirdly, they hadn't mentioned the lecture he'd attended. But he had been forced to sign an agreement to remain silent about his adventure (yeah, right!) and had been given to understand that he was going to be under heavy surveillance from now on. By what or whom wasn't stated.

But the thing was this: he'd gained an invaluable piece of intelligence. War Criminal Number Two — henceforth just Number Two for short — was into something that smelled real bad. Or good, depending on your point of view.

Global Faith Initiatives, unpaid diplomacy, book royalties to charity — it was all bullshit, a smoke screen. Open your eyes, people! Number Two might no longer be in a position to start any more wars — *might* not — but it was obvious that his addiction hadn't been cured. Why else would he be hanging out at the drone

factory? What new martial fantasy had drawn him there? Would any wedding party anywhere in the Developing World be safe if he were not stopped? And what if there was a money connection, too? Cash being the other thing Number Two couldn't get enough of.

It would be tough to persuade Katherine to sanction a proper investigation. But, since he was sitting in her Upper West Side office, right across the desk from her, and although she was beaming at him in her I-cope-with-difficult-kids way, it was worth a try.

He let her have it.

'It was definitely him. This could be huge. We've got to go after it.'

'Well, he *is* in the country. Someone's giving him a medal.'

Another one!

'No! Who is it this time?'

'Oh, I don't know. The Florida Realtors' Association?'

'Shit!'

'All right, Jeff. So you saw him there. And it's not on his public itinerary, so it looks a bit sleazy. But what else have we got?'

'But *why* was he there? He's working for someone else, that's what I think. I mean, he's basically a gofer, right? Doing the dirty work for the real boss?'

'Well...'

'Needy guy, too. Needs the praise, the applause, the fucking medals. Wants them to let him into the club.'

'Look, Jeff —'

'You should see the crap they drop from these drones. Oh! And you know what? You can do it from your phone now.'

'Your phone?'

'Yeah, I did it myself. There's an app. You can see everything on the screen. You can actually fly the fucker, and then it's just tap-tap-boom!'

'That's certainly a story, you're right about that. Pity we can't back it up.'

Out of Katherine's sight, Jeff Crock's right foot began, unbidden, to flail in righteous agitation.

'I think there's a conspiracy,' he said.

'But there's always a conspiracy, Jeff,' Katherine said, her voice softening into tell-it-to-Mommy mode. 'The world runs on conspiracy these days. We both know that, don't we? Our job is to be selective. That way we can make a difference. Can't we, Jeff?'

'I think I should follow him back to London.'

'London's very expensive, Jeff.'

'I thought England went bust.'

'Even so. And besides, you've kind of blown your cover already, haven't you?'

Jeff's foot stilled itself. She wasn't buying it. The more reasonable she got, the more obvious it was.

'And there was definitely nothing special about this new drone?'

'No.'

'And yet it got quite a reception, you say?'

'Yeah.'

'Why was that, do you think?'

'Fuck knows.'

'Think back. Remember what you saw. Visualise. See it again in your mind's eye.'

Here we go, he thought. We'll be doing yoga in a moment. Katherine's problem was that she put too much emphasis on intellectual speculation and thought experiments, and not enough on, say, hacking people's email or going through their trash cans.

He blamed the parents.

Katherine was the fifty-ish but young-looking daughter of celebrity academics who — once their book on preserving American values while achieving self-worth and financial security in a China-dominated world had become first a blogospheric sensation and then a Hollywood franchise — had parachuted out of their ivory tower and into talk-show heaven. Now retired, they spent their days island-hopping around the Caribbean, with more style than caution. Katherine had been left with her grandparents' now-Ponzi-fied money, a finely-developed sense of the ridiculous and the obligation to uphold the family's intellectual tradition.

'I've got nothing,' he said.

'Oh well.'

There was a pause. Katherine brushed her shoulder-length blonde hair behind her ears.

'Tell you what, Jeff.'

He folded his arms and put his head on one side.

'What?'

'You're going to like this. And it involves foreign travel.'

So there was a budget, after all.

'You know there are certain places I can't go, right?'

'Central America.'

He unfolded his arms and sat up.

'Go on.'

This sounded promising. There had been a series of failed right-wing coups in Central and South America, accompanied, like rice and beans, by the usual protestations of disinterest up north. But something was definitely cooking down there, and it was only a matter of time, conventional wisdom held, before some faux-populist businessman ate an elected leftist for lunch.

'Costa Rica.'

Nice place, he thought. Rainforests, tree frogs, volcanoes, pineapples, coffee, palm oil, turtles, business-friendly government low down on the list of possible coup targets.

'So what's happening down there?'

'Someone is constructing a kind of private resort for Americans only.'

This was hardly news.

'And?'

'It's one of these gated, high-security places.'

'It would be.'

'Yes. But it goes much further than that. My sources say that it's positively fortified. And it's enormous. And no one can figure out who's really behind it.'

'Fortified?'

'Like something out of Baghdad. Only much prettier, obviously. Nice landscaping.'

It was intriguing.

'Costa Rica doesn't have an army,' Jeff said.

'No. Don't really see a connection, though.'

'Guess not.'

'Could just be paranoia and too much money.'

'Possibly.'

'Or you could go down there and take a look for yourself.'

He considered. It was probably just the tax-exempt folly of some billionaire survivalist who'd been tuning in too often to Freedom News Network. But he hadn't had a foreign vacation in a long while...

'Well,' he said, drawing out the word to great length in order to tease her, 'I'll go down there if you really think it's worthwhile.'

'I think so, yes. Thanks, Jeff. I'll set things in motion. Can you be ready to ship out by Thursday?'

'I guess so.'

'That's really good of you, Jeff.'

'No problem. Are we done?'

'Almost.'

Katherine's eyes narrowed, indicating that she was about to enter painful-truths mode. Shit, he thought.

'Jeff — the war criminal thing? You know I agree with you, don't you? Wholeheartedly. In every detail. Well, pretty much. But, well, I know you've heard this before, but don't you think it's really time, at long last, after everything that's happened, after all the arguments and all we've been through and all the moving on and so forth — isn't it time you were over it?'

There was a perfectly good filing cabinet in the photocopier room next door, and there was no reason, he felt, for not going in there right now and vandalising it severely. The only thing that prevented him from following this course was iron self-control — and the memory of what had happened last time. The drawers had jammed and the whole thing had ended in an ugly mob scene involving crowbars and chainsaws.

'Nnngh!' he said.

'Just think about what I've said.'

'Yes, Katherine.'

'Well, there we are! We're done.'

Jeff unclenched his fists and rose carefully from his chair.

'Oh, one last thing,' Katherine said. 'I've been getting phone calls. Did you take the Mercedes back?'

*

In the event, Katherine was understanding about the Mercedes. Perhaps she had feared for her filing cabinet.

Jeff stumbled on to a number 2 train and, under cover of darkness and stopping only to collect a six-pack from a bodega, dragged himself home to his rented

one-bed on the extreme northern fringe of what he regarded as the Official Park Slope Gentrification Zone. His mood was one of equable trepidation. This turned out to be prescient. His apartment had been ransacked in the most blatant, condescending and by-the-numbers manner. It was not the first time. He cleared a space on the couch, yawned and flopped down.

All his top-secret material was stored securely off-site. That went without saying, so this petty intrusion was just meant to piss him off. Actually, right now he didn't have any top-secret material worth the name. But the principle applied.

He turned on the TV and flipped, as he often did, to Freedom News Network. Some people might have diagnosed in this act a psychological weakness or disorder — narcissistic self-pity, perhaps, or masochism, or a complex involving the fetishisation of victimhood and the desire for self-abnegation. He called it research.

Unusually, they were broadcasting from Europe — it looked like London. He turned the volume up.

Some civilian dumb-ass, it appeared, had fought off an attacker and saved the Prime Minister from injury. The PM's security detail had, it seemed clear, fucked up royally, and this guy had jumped in. What a hero! (Although, looking at his flabby, vacant face, you had to wonder if he'd had any idea what he was doing.) And then — get this — he'd spent half an hour — *half an hour* — berating the PM about what was wrong with the man personally, his government, the country, and the world in general.

And the PM, out of gratitude, embarrassment, and an acute awareness of the PR peril of his situation, and with the cameras rolling, had stood there and taken it. Sensation! The whole, brain-dead, right-wing rant. Incredible! The Brits were totally screwed. No wonder they'd gone bust.

And look at this: the guy's name was *Dolt*. John Dolt. Come on, this was too much. And now, according to mallet-headed Flint Gunner, FNN's man on the scene, the question everybody's asking is *Who is John Dolt?*

Give me a break.

He turned off the TV, headed into the bedroom, shook the tangled clothes and scattered books from the comforter, disrobed and climbed into bed.

Who the fuck was *John Dolt*?

Nnngh.

CHAPTER 6

Jay Percival, it seemed to Bonnie DiAngelo as she struggled to decode the shifty résumé he gave her, wished to represent himself as some kind of renegade American spy with a self-awarded licence to roam Africa and cause trouble. He claimed 'good friends' in South Africa and contacts everywhere.

And his companions, six of them, were indeed bandits.

But, Jay explained as they rattled and careened their way across volcanic deserts to his operating base of the moment in the midst of an aerially-unremarkable Eritrean village, banditry was not always all it was cracked down to be. These guys, for example, had always treated their captives well and handed over the goods promptly upon payment. Local employment opportunities were poor; but, for now, these six were employed by *him*, so everyone was happy. He was a one-man economic stimulus and much respected in the village.

So everyone was in good shape, Jay insisted — except, of course, Leo, who had been hit in the back by shrapnel and was in pain though not in danger. His *guys* had not had the best training, Jay conceded. He was very sorry.

Jay was a like a wild animal, she thought, a little long in the tooth but still vital, a nervous and probably reckless predator with clear, restless eyes, a hunter's brain and all manner of instincts, some unnameable, on call. This picture of Darwinian exuberance, however, was contradicted by the fact that he wore slick, black dress shoes, like a fashion-conscious lawyer; and that, underneath the dust and sand, they had surely been recently polished.

As soon as they arrived in the village, the trucks were camouflaged with wooden fencing and palm thatch. No privacy anywhere any more, Jay told her. A sky full of spies, for all eternity. Then Leo was taken away for treatment and Jay asked Bonnie if she would be interested in knowing what the hell he was up to.

'Yes.'

'Then come this way.'

He led her to a hut full of electronic gear and batteries.

'Have a seat.'

She sat down on a palm mat, the only seating available.

'Tea?'

'Definitely.'

He produced a vacuum flask and a plastic cup.

'I make it before we head out, and it's here waiting for me when we get back.'

Never used to like tea until I came here. This is yours.'

She took her tea and drank. It was as strong as creosote.

'Okay,' he said. 'So you're a travel agent?'

A little respect, please, she thought.

'Eco Adventures. For educated travellers.'

'I get it. Light footprint and all that. No littering.'

'That's it.'

'Been in this part of Africa before?'

'Not really.'

'But you've been most places.'

'Except the war zones.'

'Right.'

He paused.

'You say you rescued us,' she said.

'From Andy.'

'Andrew?'

'That's the guy.'

'Who's going to rescue us from *you*?'

He laughed.

'That's good. A day like the one you've just had and you still have your sense of humour. When was the last time you were in a gun fight?'

'Never.'

'A new experience. That's why you travel, correct?'

'Correct.'

He laughed again, softly, and drank his tea.

'I actually don't know much about you,' he said. 'Just what I got from listening to Andy.' He tapped his stack of equipment with his well-fitted toe.

'We didn't know if we would get down there before Andy. Wanted to take a look at the drone. Didn't have time, as it turned out. But at least we got you.'

'Do you know what happened to Sam?'

Something snapped on, she thought — one of his animal instincts? He put his tea down.

'Who's Sam?'

'Our guide. He disappeared. Just before the helicopter landed.'

A pause.

'Local?'

'One of those young Afar guys. Rather sweet.'

'Never heard 'em called sweet before. You didn't see him go?'

'No.'

Jay sat back, tapped his chin with his fist and made a show of pondering Sam's fate — a performance for her benefit?

'Don't rightly know what to do about that for now.' He sighed. 'Andy didn't see him?'

'No. Except on his *thermal imaging*.'

'Oh, for sure. Got all the toys, Andy's people. Most likely had a surveillance drone tailing the big guy.'

Well now, she thought, was a good time to find out exactly what sort of trouble she and Leo were really in.

'Andy's people — who are they?'

He sniffed and rubbed his nose.

'Private contractors. It's all private contractors, now.'

'Not the government?'

'Who's the government?'

Was that an answer or an attitude? She put her tea down.

'I think that's all I can drink. A bit too strong.'

'Really? I'll bear that in mind when I fix breakfast.'

'Thanks. How about telling me why you *rescued* us?'

'Yup. Okay. One moment.'

He reached over to his equipment and punched in a number on a keypad.

'Time to change frequency. Now, why did I rescue you from Andy? Seems like a fairly harmless guy, right? Kind of officious, maybe a little — what's the word? — smarmy? Didn't threaten you or anything, did he?'

'Maybe a little.'

'Okay. Guy's probably feeling the pressure. Did he say where he wanted to take you?'

'His base. To refuel. Then...'

'They didn't need to refuel. They could have flown to Asmara. Or Djibouti. Sana'a. Khartoum, Addis.'

'Oh.'

'And this base of theirs, well, I'd like to know where it is, because that's one of the things my boss is paying me to find out. I don't suppose Andy happened to mention...'

'No. Who's your boss?'

'One of Africa's elder statesmen. One of the good guys. You won't have heard of him.'

'He wants to find out about this drone thing?'

'Hates the idea of 'em flying over his house.'

She pictured a dignified, but indignant, Mandela-type standing on his back porch, waving his fist at aerial intruders — and found herself laughing.

'But it's good you didn't go with Andy,' Jay said, 'because Andy's got some pretty questionable friends, and *their* friends are even worse. And, the way it works these days is, if you've got a problem you don't want to deal with, you can hand it on to someone else. And maybe the someone else will hand it on, too. No telling where you're going to end up. Until it's too late and nobody's responsible because they all asked for and were all given *assurances*. With me?'

She wanted to say 'yes', but no words came.

'I guess you are,' he said.

Jay poured himself more tea.

'You saw their new toy.'

'Some toy.'

'Exactly. Don't seem to working quite right yet, but there you go. And they don't want anybody to know about it.'

'But I do. And so do you.'

'They don't know about me. Let me ask you this. Would anyone be surprised if you went missing in Africa and never showed up again?'

'Me? Maybe not. What about Leo?'

'Mr Vargas, the prominent global citizen, who's pro-business but wants to save the three-toed sloth and the rainforests, especially *his* forests, and also abolish poverty. Even I've heard of him. Guy's got a bit of a reputation. Something for Andy's friends to get their teeth into. You need to understand we're talking about people who can't tell the difference between a Costa Rican businessman and Fidel Castro.'

She remembered what she felt when she first met Leo, just after he opened that original little hotel of his, up near Arenal, and she brought in his first big group: here's a man who wants to make a lot of friends — and influence everyone.

'I guess he can command publicity,' she said.

'You bet. Does he have a camera?'

'No, but I do.'

'Okay, here's the question I've been itching to ask you. Don't let me down. Did you get pictures?'

'Yes.'

'Have you still got them?'

'Yes.'

'Where are they?'

'Leo hid them. With his glasses.'

'Bonnie, you are one hell of a travel agent. Let's go see.'

*

You found *what?* Jay said, starting up his laptop. Leo, propped up against sacks of camel fodder, stiff but alert, she thought — and probably sizing up Jay the freelance intel man for a role in one of his *agendas* — described the homely junk they'd found amid the wreckage of the drone.

'*Corporate literature?*' Jay said. 'Did you read it?'

Leo reached inside his shirt, drew out a thin, glossy flyer and offered it to Jay.

'Green Lake Robotics,' Jay read. '*The world at your robotic fingertips.* Huh. Or under your robotic heel, I guess. Depending. Green Lake? New gang to me. And there was a cell phone? You got that, too?'

'One moment.' Leo took out his glasses case and removed the memory cards. 'GPS,' he said, handing the cards one by one to Jay, 'pictures, phone.'

Jay plugged the phone card into his laptop and began clicking and typing.

'Encrypted. Going to need some help on that. So these people aren't complete idiots. Not to the point of leaving their laundry or their lunch inside the freaking drone. Maybe they're really busy? Can't keep up with demand?'

He plugged in the GPS card.

'Okay, good. Now let's see the pictures.'

Bonnie shifted her position so that she could see the screen but Jay turned it away from her. Why didn't he want her to see her own pictures?

Jay's face assumed a look of cold, cat-like intensity as he clicked slowly through the images. At the end he paused and glanced up at Bonnie, without changing his expression. Then he looked down again and clicked through the pictures, slowly, a second time.

'The village was completely empty, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' she said.

'And you looked pretty much everywhere?'

'Everywhere.'

'Nobody left behind.'

'Nobody.'

'The wind,' Jay said, 'was blowing pretty fierce all day, wasn't it?'

'We felt it in the canyon.'

'Uh-huh.'

There was a moment of expectant silence. Come on, Jay, Bonnie thought, let's have some intelligence, let's have your analysis. And then, not to be ungrateful or anything, but let's talk about how we're going to get out of here and go home.

'So what do you think?' Leo said.

Jay turned his computer off. 'What I'm thinking,' he said, 'is, why are Andy's friends building giant crop-spraying drones? And why are they sending them out over the desert?'

'Crop spraying?' she said.

'That would be the innocent explanation. Trouble is, it don't make sense.'

'Chemicals?'

'Think about it. Think about that wind.'

'But... That would be illegal, wouldn't it? I mean, apart from —'

'Oh, yeah. Big time.'

'So how can they —'

'Okay, look,' Jay said. 'Let me ask you something, the two of you. What's your position on the Greater Persian Question?'

Don't go political on us, she thought. Don't talk about *chemicals*. Just tell us when we're going home.

'What do you mean?' Leo said.

'Instability,' Jay said, rubbing his eyes. 'That whole region. It spreads out from the centre. This isn't what *I* think, it's what *they* think. You stomp down on trouble here, it pops up over there. It's all connected. It's like whack-a-mole. Very frustrating. Such a lot of trouble finding the bad guys. Mountains everywhere. So many places to hide. You know roughly where they are, but not exactly. To get lucky you need a tip-off. You send out your drone, let loose with the precision ordnance. Week later, it turns out some guy had a grudge against his neighbours. It's not working, is it? Bigger thinking is required. What if you could sanitise a whole mountain or a whole valley?'

'This isn't possible,' Leo said.

Jay shrugged. 'Maybe it *is* just a crop-sprayer.'

For a moment no one spoke.

'Jay,' Bonnie said, 'whatever it is, it isn't *our* business.'

'It isn't?'

'We just want to be done with this. We want to go home. We're grateful, I guess, but...'

Jay collected the memory cards and zipped them into a pocket.

'You want to go home. Not so easy.'

'Why not?'

'Andy knows who you are. He can't be sure you don't have pictures. He's not going to let it rest.'

'We could destroy the pictures right now.'

'I'm not going to do that. Wouldn't make a difference anyhow.'

She looked at Leo, but Leo said nothing. Why the reticence? And, really, why did such otherwise useful men still have to be boys, too — with their little empires, wars and agendas?

'Well, what are we going to do then, Jay?' she said.

Jay looked at Leo and tapped his pocket.

'Want me to make you copies, Mr Vargas?'

Leo nodded.

'Leo!' she said. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm just doing my job, Bonnie.'

'Your job?'

'Mr Global Citizen,' Jay said. 'Doesn't need the money. Does it out of a sense of duty. Not quite like me, but we're on the same side, I guess.'

Leo and his agendas, she thought — his secret bloody agendas. *All* the way down that canyon, when they could have turned around; *all* the way across the desert. People had shot at her. She'd almost been poisoned. She couldn't go home. What would the accountant say?

'Leo, you didn't tell me *anything*!'

'No. I'm sorry. It was a mistake.'

Well, she'd never heard him say *that* before.

'So, then, I want to hear from one of you,' she said, 'what exactly I'm supposed to do.'

Jay looked at her.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I've been thinking about that.'

*

In a still, graceful, Eritrean dawn, as the sun began to warm the distant slopes of the Ethiopian escarpment, and the Great Rift cracked open and the Afar Triangle sank into the Red Sea, Bonnie DiAngelo, the American travel agent, said goodbye to Leo Vargas, the Costa Rican entrepreneur, eco-saint and spy.

Fittingly, Leo was in disguise — dressed up from head to toe like an Ethiopian camel-hand, and not unhappy about it, either. According to Jay, the sky was full not only of stars, but also spies, and you just wouldn't believe the resolution they were capable of, these days.

Jay's bandits had gone into the goat-trading business and had marshalled an authentic and convincing assembly of animals and supplies. Now, as they receded into the west, Bonnie saw Leo raise a hand. She waved back.

Get home safely, you lying bastard, she'd told him. Of course, he'd replied; see you in Brookline.

That they had to separate was obvious to Jay. Didn't they see the logic? Well, yes, she supposed she did. Leo and his precious cargo — computer memories, not goats — would wend their way up into the highlands, perhaps to Mek'ele. Or else to some other town — it was best not to know — from which Leo could take a bus to Addis. Buses were a great and fun way, Jay insisted, to hide from the all-seeing sky. Jay had a contact in Addis who would help Leo with his onward journey. Leo should return to Costa Rica, that being the safest place for him, and resume his preparations for the Cape Town conference. Oh, and he should remember to store those memory cards somewhere super-safe.

As for Bonnie — and Jay's attitude here irked her — she was a little more of a *problem*.

'Well, I can't stay here,' she said.

'No, you can't. Nor me. Where shall we go?'

'Can't we go to Addis, like Leo?'

'I think we're out of goats.'

'No, seriously —'

'Seriously, we need to go someplace else. South, I think. Most likely going to need my support systems. Ever been to Namibia?'

'Yes, it's beautiful.'

'Also a long way. Obviously, we're not walking. Not even from here. Pardon me for mentioning it, but you're not as fit as Leo. Plus you're going to be a lot more obvious.'

'Sky full of spies.'

'Yeah.'

Jay was teasing her, she thought. He had a shelf full of plans and he'd pulled one out the moment he'd seen her.

'So,' he said, 'we'll wait for a dark, cloudy night. Then we'll take the truck to Aksum. Then we'll buy a plane. Could be a rough ride.'

'Rough ride?' she said. 'The truck or the plane?'

'The truck *and* the plane.'

Was this man brilliant, or exasperating — or both?

'What do we buy a plane with?'

'Cash. Don't worry, I'm loaded.'

'How are you loaded?'

Jay smiled and shrugged — the way, Bonnie thought, pretty teens did when challenged about their beauty.

'The years of the gold-rush,' Jay said. 'A while back now. We used to hand out suitcases full of money. There was more than I could use. I got stuck with it. Tell you more on the trip.'

'I think you should.'

A de-frocked, felonious, CIA chuck-out with a redacted history, she thought. How far should she travel with him?

'Are you serious about Namibia?' she said.

'I had a farm there,' he said, his voice lower. 'But it got blown up. Long story. Had some friends round at the time, and... Well, I bought another one. We can go there.'

Okay, she thought, we'll go to your farm. The one that hasn't blown up yet.

'There'll be some stops on the way,' he said. 'The plane can only go six hundred miles, max. We'll need a little help from Walter.'

'Walter's your *elder statesman*?'

'He is.'

'How do you contact him?'

Jay grimaced.

'Unprotected radio.'

'I guess those spies in the sky have ears, too?'

'They do. But they're not always listening.'

'Can't use a phone or the net?'

He shook his head.

'Totally bugged.'

'So,' she said. 'When do we get a dark and cloudy night?'

'I'm hoping,' he said, 'tonight.'

CHAPTER 7

This was going to be a glorious day. His luck was about to change. The light squeaking through his filthy blinds told him that a warm, sunny autumn day had dawned and, all in an instant, a great, big, high-definition panorama descended on him like a vision: droplets of dew strung along the A40, at the end of his road; sunlight bouncing off the mirrors of the amiable old minibus he drove for the Super Westway Limousine Company; happy pigeons celebrating his good fortune up on high, perched on his corroded guttering; the morning air still scented with the perfume of last night's extravagance at the Mega Kerahi Kebab; the city shaking off its night sweats in anticipation of a New Day and a new man to command it; London lying back and waiting for it. For him.

The question was, would they be there?

John Dolt slipped out of bed, adjusted his underwear and approached the did-it-himself double-glazed window of his ground-floor bedroom. Would they be there? He was sure they would; you could tell when your turn finally arrived, when the golden envelope denied to so many flopped down on your doormat. He prised the sticky slats of the blinds apart — and there they were! Hordes of them. Shoved up against his window, crushed between the minibus, the skip and the van, taking up every square foot of the heavy-duty concrete he'd put down in place of the useless garden; staring with understandable distaste at the frontage of the house (originally pebbledash, but painted over so many times that it looked like the house had bad pores). There was even a satellite truck blocking next door's driveway.

Good, he thought. But the van was a bit of a concern. He didn't want it damaged. It was quite new — only four years old — and he wanted to keep it nice. Would this media mob respect it? It was an important asset, and essential to his various enterprises. You could get two three-piece suites in there, or a dozen gas boilers. What if they took pictures of it? Would they blank out the licence plate? Suppose they photographed what was inside? He tried to remember what was inside. Well, it was probably okay.

Now, it wasn't like he was emotionally attached to the van. You just had to have one, didn't you? He liked it, didn't love it. Not really a pride-and-joy sort of thing. It was a white Jobba van. It got the job done.

So there they all were, waiting for him. This was his moment. How should he stage his appearance? To what profitable end could he leverage his sudden celebrity? Hadn't really given it enough thought, had he? So much excitement yesterday — and so little time in which to formulate a media strategy.

His first thought, which had occurred to him just after he finished his little chat with the Prime Minister and was being ushered away for a separate chat with a lot of policemen and some anxious blokes in suits, was *springboard*. He could use his unexpected encounter as a springboard into a TV career. It was the sort of thing that happened all the time. He couldn't sing — not even, he was sure, with the assistance of computers — but he could go on an island. Or... Well, he could go on an island, or whatever.

But wait: your white van man was a realist, was he not? Bloody well had to be, didn't he? Was Dolt over forty? Yes. Was he overweight? Well, a little. Pretty face? Nothing special; a bit pasty and droopy, to be honest. Hair and teeth? Some investment required. Overall televisual appeal? Despite his strong chin and persuasive blue eyes, his squat stature, tufty grey-brown hair, and fast-food physique argued for an emphasis on personality. Narrative or back-story? Well, his personal odyssey all the way from an Essex council estate to half a house just off the A40 contained plenty of grind and angst, but lacked that essential spark of tragedy. And when he asked himself what hurdles and setbacks he'd overcome, the answer was: same as every other bleeder round here.

So he had no strategy. Yet it was essential that he grasp this opportunity. Perhaps he could probe the experts outside for tips? He took another peek through the blinds. This time they spotted him. The uproar was immediate.

'He's up!'

'John! Come out and talk to us!'

'What time d'you call this?'

What time was it? Ten o'clock! And he had a minibus job at eleven — transporting a girls' lacrosse team from Maida Vale to Heathrow. Shit! Could he blow it off? What, and get on the wrong side of Hamid at Super Westway? No chance. But what an idiot he was. Why hadn't he set the sodding alarm? He was going to fumble his one-and-only.

But John Dolt was at his best when under pressure — hadn't he demonstrated that yesterday? He conceived a plan. A quick shower was necessary because, for some reason, he stank. He would dress in the clothes that Hamid preferred him to wear, but which he never did. Then he would step outside, issue a brief statement, give them his mobile number and offer to grant interviews to selected outlets later in the day. After that, he would jump in the minibus and set course for Maida Vale.

It was *still* going to be a glorious day, and there was nothing that these girls or their stupid lacrosse could do to sabotage it.

In the shower, he reviewed, as if in slow motion, his triumph of the day before.

The scene was the Big Builder DIY Warehouse. He'd piloted the Jobba all the way down there on a mission from Lescek the bathroom guy to acquire a large

quantity of the cheapest tiles possible that weren't plain toilet white. He hadn't really noticed at the time, but now it was obvious: Big Builder had stepped up their security. Normally, their dozy staff didn't have wires coming out of their ears. And they usually couldn't care less about the portable satnav that he never failed to remove from the Jobba; on this occasion he'd been required to demonstrate it.

After that, he'd gone straight to the bathroom section. But all the tiles, by Lescek's standards at least, were ridiculously expensive. It was very frustrating. And he'd already been on the verge of exasperation, what with the upstairs neighbours moaning about not having room to park their Micra; the council threatening him on account of the skip; letters from the VAT; the insurance about to run out on the Jobba; and Tamsin and Tamara, his daughters, constantly texting him about the latest lies their bloody mother was feeding them. Frankly, he'd been close to the edge.

And another thing that had been close to the edge — the edge of the crappy Big Builder Warehouse mile-high shelving, that is — was a pallet of plastic toilet brushes. This had been key.

Why, of all the dreary dumps in London, had the man, or his top political know-all, chosen Big Builder DIY? A cheeky grab for the working-class vote? Some pathetic we're-all-in-this-together-but-you-have-to-do-it-yourself stunt? Whatever it was, it hadn't been planned properly. The warehouse had not been cleared of customers. Presumably, a lonely stroll with the managing director would not have provided the images required.

Anyway, just as the Prime Minister approached the very aisle in which John Dolt, oblivious and consumed with tile-rage, tottered on a Big Builder value-priced ladder, it happened.

Some nutter had come charging out of the garden section, armed with a battery-powered hedge-trimmer. Now, whether or not the PM's security blokes had been distracted by Big Builder's end-of-summer sale bargains — some of which were quite tasty, to be honest — Dolt couldn't say.

But they hadn't moved fast enough. And, if Dolt's foot hadn't slipped on the value-priced ladder's non-slip step, then the toilet brushes would not have tumbled, the crazed assailant would not have been felled, and the Prime Minister would have been — well, not toast, perhaps, but certainly topiary.

He, John Dolt, was therefore a hero. That this was merely an accidental side-effect of the dearth of affordable tiling in North London would forever be his secret.

At the time, however, he had not been so sanguine. This, too, had subsequently played out to his advantage. Because, as he rose from the warehouse's greasy floor, incensed and in pain, Dolt had been minded to vent at the first person he saw. That person just happened to be the Prime Minister.

It had taken a little while before Dolt had realised who he was talking to.

Then he'd really let rip.

As he thought about it now, in the shower, he was conscious of a certain embarrassment. Did he really believe all those things he'd said? Hadn't some of it — too much? — come straight out of the tabloids? Wasn't a lot of it just the jaundiced natter you heard in horrible pubs like the Britannia Arms in Wembley

and the Royal Fusilier in Cricklewood? Stuff that crawled into a guilty hole at the back of your mind when you found yourself talking to Hamid or Lescek? And some of it had come out of nowhere at all, it seemed — what, after all, did he, John Dolt, know about terrorism or international banking? Bugger all, actually. So where had all those fiercely-argued opinions come from?

It was a mystery. But he was all showered now and there was no time for idle speculation. He towelled off and began to hunt for his limousine-driver's uniform.

Of course, the police had been quite taken with him. Less so their slick-suited and wary friends. But never mind *them*. He'd been the toast of the station, and not just because of the facts he'd placed before the PM on the subject of law and order. The cops had explained to him that certain formalities had to be gone through and, so long as he wasn't a terrorist or an extremist or an anti-war protestor — and they were quite sure he was none of these — then it was perfectly all right to *talk to the Prime Minister like that*.

They'd given him a ride home; declared the Jobba free of suspicion and restored it to its rightful place next to the skip; and two of the cops had even joined him at his table at the Mega Karahi — for his own protection, they said.

The limousine-driver's uniform was creased and crinkled, but still preferable, in the circumstances, to the cargo shorts and Big Builder fleece he would probably have worn otherwise.

He grabbed his wallet, keys, phone and satnav, grasped the handle of his front door and prepared to embrace his destiny. Then he cracked the door open and they were upon him.

'John! Over here! John!'

'John — is there anything at all you *don't* regret saying?'

'Tell us the truth, John — we can handle it!'

'Give us a quote on migrants, John! Tell us what you really think!'

'What've you got against the Germans, John?'

'John! We need some pictures of your missus!'

'Where're you going to put all the people you want to round up?'

'John! Do a rant for us! Do one now!'

'What exactly have you got against VAT? And tiles?'

'What was all that stuff about banking?'

'Don't look now — some scroungers are stealing your van!'

'John — d'you really think the Prime Minister's a wanker?'

'John! John! John!'

*

Dolt realised very quickly, as he flung the minibus along the silky streets of Little Venice, that in becoming a Public Figure he faced something of a learning-curve.

Take, for example, his reception at the hands of the mob, as he emerged from his half-a-house. It had not been, as he had anticipated, that owed to a plucky everyman who spoke truth to power. Far from it. They had been rude and sarcastic. He had been mocked. And yet when they showed him the headlines in

their papers, the tone could not have been more different. *DOLT THE HERO!* *DOLT TELLS IT LIKE IT IS.* *DOLT SPEAKS FOR ENGLAND.*

How did you explain that?

Another skill he would have to acquire was how to deal with intruders, hangers-on, groupies and such-like. The minibus had filled up, despite his protests, with some of the more aggressive members of the mob. He'd told them about the girls and the lacrosse, but that had only encouraged them. They yelled questions and obscenities at him as he manoeuvred the minibus past flower vans and badly-parked Range Rovers.

What's more, if he checked his mirrors — as Hamid constantly urged — he could see an entire procession of cars and vans on his tail, with the satellite truck bringing up the rear.

Two of his back-seat questioners proved insistent. One was small and weaselly, with raked-back curly hair. The other was much larger, taking up two seats, and had a head like a breeze block. This giant sounded American. The two seemed to operate as a team; one shouted questions at Dolt while the other intimidated the competition.

Dolt tried to answer their questions but, stressed-out with negotiating traffic-calming measures and preoccupied with not mowing down what passed for café culture in Maida Vale, he could not address the perplexing issues they raised with the consideration such topics merited. Instead, he fell back on the more instinctive mode he had employed with the Prime Minister. It didn't seem to matter, though. His responses were met with uproarious approval.

'Nice one, John — like it!'

'What did the guy say, Nige?'

'He said this country was built by people like him, Flint.'

'He wants his country back. Guy's a friggin' patriot, Nige. You got patriots in England?'

'Yes, Flint.'

The school barged into view and Dolt's heart sank. There were the girls, milling about in front of the gates, talking — quite possibly to each other — on their little phones; and there was the lacrosse gear, piled up high on the pavement — it would present a weighty challenge to the minibus, but he'd coped with worse. So far so good. The problem was the mothers: they'd illegally parked their people-carriers and four-by-fours on *both* sides of the street and there wasn't room for the minibus to squeeze through, let alone park.

Dolt cranked his window down and addressed the nearest conference of mothers.

'Excuse me, you're going to have to move,' he said.

No response from the mothers. Dolt yanked on his handbrake and revved his engine.

'I *said* you're going to have to move, okay?'

Still no response. 'Right. Here we go,' Dolt muttered to himself.

'What'd he say, Nige?'

'He's mildly pissed off and he's about to make an executive decision, Flint.'

Dolt dismounted from the minibus and approached the mothers.

'Oi! Excuse me! Whose car is that?' he said, pointing out the offending vehicle with what he calculated to be low-to-moderate aggression. They stopped talking and looked at him.

'That one!' Dolt said. 'The big BMW.'

'That's mine.'

'Well, you're going to have to move it, aren't you?'

'Why?'

'And the Lexus and the thing behind that.'

'Why?'

'Because I can't get the bus through, can I?'

'Why not?'

It wasn't that Dolt was inexperienced in these situations; it was just that they never got any easier. It made him sympathise with the troops in the War Zones.

'Because there isn't enough room, is there?'

'Why not?'

'Because...'

But Dolt knew the threshold of cluelessness when he saw it. The discussion would proceed from mere physics into the realm of the moral and political. He wasn't going there.

'Look,' he said, 'you've *got* to move it. That's all there is to it. *And the Lexus and that big ugly thing behind it.*'

'It's a Porsche, you stupid little man!' someone yelled.

Dolt ignored this insult with great insouciance and pressed his case further.

'If I can't park, then no one's going anywhere,' he said, folding his arms.

'Why not?'

'I'm not loading up the bus in the middle of the road.'

'Why not?'

Word of the confrontation must have spread back down the procession because Dolt now became aware of a semi-circle of spectators at a respectful — or safe — distance behind him; there were microphones above his head and cameras looking over his shoulder.

'Because that is further than I am prepared to go.'

Strictly speaking, this was not quite a lie. The truth was that mid-carriageway embarkation of minors was against regulations — regulations that Hamid, unaccountably, was keen to enforce. And, until his other enterprises began to transition from the investment to the profit phase, Dolt could not afford to lose his employment with Super Westway. If the present scene were not being broadcast around the world in real time, he would have offered up his usual case-closer: 'There's nothing I can do, it's the Health and Safety.' But he understood, all too horribly, the storm of derision that would have erupted over him were he to invoke it now. And how could the man who, fewer than twenty-four hours earlier, had *told off* the Prime Minister in blunt and unflinching terms now be seen to weasel out of a tight spot in ignominy?

Of course, not all of those petty rules so dear to Hamid were entirely stupid. Even amid the present gridlock, a poorly-applied handbrake or an undisciplined manoeuvre could cause injury. But this was not a time for hair-splitting or logic.

'I pay your bloody wages!' someone told him.

This was stretching a point at best, Dolt felt. The remuneration that trickled down to him from Hamid's keenly-priced contracts was modest.

'Bloody little council bureaucrats with their gold-plated pensions!'

Why did they think he worked for the council? Dolt operated exclusively in the private sector. As for pensions — *what's a pension?* he thought satirically.

But, more to the point, didn't they know who he was? Hadn't they seen him on TV? Why did they think the cameras were here now? Something didn't add up. And he wasn't sure what to do next. He just knew he couldn't back down.

'If you don't want to move it,' he told the BMW-owner, 'I will. Give me your keys.'

This provoked a reaction that ran a little beyond his intent; he might as well have said 'Give me your daughters.' And it was now that things threatened to slide into anarchy. The noise level went up and the mob consolidated in front of him. Faces turned red. Even the lacrosse girls looked up from their phones. Then at his shoulder he heard two familiar voices.

'What's he gonna do now, Nige?'

'He's going to make a stand, Flint. He's going to remind them who he is.'

Yes, Dolt thought, that's *exactly* what he's going to do.

He put a foot on the minibus's shiny offside front tyre, levered himself up on to the bonnet and, in the manner of that revolutionary bloke in some film who hopped on the front of a speeding loco, leaped to a perch on the roof rack. Once stabilised, he took a deep breath and began his oration.

'Right,' he said. 'You lot. Shut up and listen.'

The racket subsided a bit.

'I am John Dolt!'

It subsided a bit more. He repeated the line, slowly, and with emphasis on the *am*.

The racket all but dissipated.

'That's right,' he said, calmly and at moderate volume. 'My name is John Dolt. And nobody — *nobody!* — is going to tread on me. Understand?'

Dolt scanned the crowd. Frozen looks and open mouths told him they were beginning to.

'Didn't you see me on the telly last night?' Dolt continued, accusingly. 'Don't you get it? See *them*?'

He pointed at the media caravan which, to the sound of distant honking, still blocked the road behind him for a hundred yards or more.

'Why d'you think *they're* here? Because of me. Because of what I said, right?'

He noticed a lot of mouth-to-ear whispering going on in the ranks. What was the matter with these people — didn't they watch TV? Didn't they read the papers?

'I'm not going to repeat it all now,' he said, reasonably enough since he wasn't sure how much he could actually remember, 'but I will say this. This country is dying. It's bleeding to death. Why? Because of the *takers*. They take, and they take, and they take. They never get enough. They take what's rightfully ours. Yours. Mine. Someone has to stand up for this country and say *enough!* And that is what I did, right? *They* —' Dolt pointed vaguely towards the top of a nearby block of flats. '— *they* don't get it. The so-called elites...'

Were the elites merely so-called or were they actually elite? Something to ponder later.

'...the elites don't get it. Do they? I mean, I had to tell the bleeding Prime Minister myself!'

He thought this was a good crack, but no one laughed. He pressed on.

'We've got to get back to basics. No more hand-outs! No more bureaucrats! No more wasteful spending! No more coming over here and expecting the best this country has to offer!'

A queasiness arose in Dolt's stomach. Had yesterday's eloquence deserted him? Were these exhortations honest prescriptions or mendacious slogans? A voice below him piped up.

'Bravo!'

It sounded like the creature known as *Nige*. And with this, the mood of the crowd seemed to turn. A smattering of applause rang out. It was time to bring matters to a conclusion.

'And so it is in that spirit that I call on you now to *move those cars!*'

And they did.

The BMW woman resisted, but was prevailed upon by her peers. A space opened up at the kerb and Dolt was able to dock the minibus. Things then proceeded smoothly. The girls boarded the bus. Their mothers, giving Dolt a wide but respectful berth, bade their daughters farewell, good luck and don't give those bloody foreigners an inch. Cameramen crouched in order to flatter Dolt with imposing angles. He felt his back slapped in congratulation.

No one, of course, offered to help him load the lacrosse gear on to the roof rack. But that didn't surprise him.

Then the media pack, having caught wind of another football sex scandal, wished him well and took their leave. The rest of the journey to Heathrow was uneventful. The roads were as passable as could be expected, delays amounting to no more than a single bomb-scare at Hangar Lane and a small riot in Hounslow.

It was only after he'd unloaded the last piece of gear at Terminal Five and was climbing, sweatily, back into the fraying driver's seat that he noticed he still had two passengers.

'I bet you're glad *that's over.*'

'What?'

'I'm Nigel and this is my associate Flint. Flint's with Freedom News Network, very big stateside. You've probably heard of *FNN's National Security Bunker Hour with Flint Gunner?* You haven't? We'll get you some DVDs.'

'Nigel?' Dolt said. 'Nigel fucking who?'

'Nigel Weese. You might have seen the name here or there.'

Weese started in on a kind of *curriculum vitae*, in which he claimed to have contributed *major ground-breakers* to everything from The Star to The Statesman, whatever that was.

'Hang on,' Dolt said. 'Why are you still on my bus?'

'Well,' Weese said, 'isn't the question really, don't you want everyone to be on your bus?'

'What?'

'You're a star, John. Don't you want to make a career of it?'

Dolt considered. It was already well past lunchtime and he was no nearer to going on an island.

'Depends, doesn't it?'

'Of course. *Everything* depends, doesn't it, Flint?'

'You betcha.'

'My point is that it's all very well being a three-day wonder. I mean we've seen it all before, haven't we? Opera singers, pop stars, balloon boys, roller-blading hamsters, third-party political leaders. But how often is it *sustainable*? Don't get me wrong, John — you've got talent. He's already gone viral, hasn't he, Flint?'

'Sure has.'

'Viral?'

'But what you're going to need,' Weese went on, 'is professional management.'

'Management?' Dolt said. If this was a scam and they were going to hit him up for cash, they could forget about it.

'Now you're probably thinking,' Weese said, 'being the perspicacious sort of chap that you are...'

'Perspicacious?'

'...is this going to cost me anything? Could it possibly be a scam or ruse?'

This Weese had a funny way of talking. What was he getting at?

'Well, let me be clear,' Weese continued, 'it absolutely is not a scam. Is it, Flint?'

'Hell, no.'

'You will not have to contribute a penny. We have all the investment we could possibly need lined up already.'

'Investment?'

'For your campaign.'

'Campaign?'

'Yes. And your staff, your advisors, your spokes-people. Your web site, your blog, your online video, your social media presence.'

'Social media?'

'Your magazine articles, your books, your merchandise.'

'Merchandise?'

'Your lecture tour, your think-tank events, your town halls.'

'Town halls?'

'Your old-media placement, your image consultants, your pollsters.'

'Image consultants?'

'The lot. All you need to bring to the party is your own, pure, naked talent.'

'Talent?'

'You see, I was thinking,' Dolt said cautiously, 'that I might go on an island.'

Weese roared with laughter. The mallet-headed giant, Gunner, joined in.

'No, no, no, John,' Weese said, blinking away tears. 'You've got to think much, much bigger than that.'

'I do?'

'Oh, yes.'

Weese took a moment to regain his composure.

'Now, then. What do you say? Are you in?'

Dolt hesitated. Whatever they intended to do with him, it didn't sound like it involved wearing stupid clothes or eating something disgusting. And, bus-top homilies aside, the day so far had been less than glorious. So perhaps it was worth going along for the ride.

'Well, all right, then.'

'Brilliant. You're going to make history. Come with us.'

Gunner and Weese clambered out of the minibus. Weese strode off to hail a black cab.

'What about the bus?' Dolt asked.

'Screw that,' Gunner said.

CHAPTER 8

John Dolt, bouncing with deftly-concealed apprehension on the flip-down rear-facing seat of a black cab as his two newest best friends in the world contemplated him with what could not, at this stage, have been buyer's remorse and was probably only chagrin at the likely fare, hurtled back into the almost-heart of not-quite-first-class power, delayed only by disturbances in Hammersmith.

During the journey, no one spoke; and Dolt was able to conduct a subtle deconstruction of his partners' demeanour.

Gunner, the American, was too large for the cab and had made no attempt to fasten his seat-belt. Well, all right, nobody except Hamid bothered with petty regulations any more, and Gunner was sufficiently well-wedged not to fear the bang on the head that Dolt or Weese might have suffered. But it was more a question of attitude. Gunner wore the kind of expression — disgust surmounted by suspicion — that told of outrage on tap and a readiness to stiff the driver if the ride or the scenery weren't up to scratch. With his menacing wide-body chin, energy-pack chest, deep-set night-vision eyes and blast-resistant forehead, he resembled a Humvee in a suit and khaki wind-breaker. And when he made eye-contact — a little too often, Dolt felt — it was like being shoved through a full-body scanner. And yet, intimidating though all this was, Dolt suspected that Gunner's was not the presiding intelligence in the cab, and he was, if you wanted to put it that way, a couple of polls short of a trend.

Weese, by contrast, slumped in his seat with low-lidded satisfaction, like an unfit alligator that had caught its lunch but couldn't be bothered to eat it yet. His eyes moved constantly but his gaze never fell on Dolt. Advertising some slippery cogitation, his tongue poked about inside his mouth. Lip-licking and teeth-sucking betrayed the relishing of schemes. He was scruffily dressed in expensive and out-dated clothes — a double-breasted suit with floppy lapels and a stripy shirt in too-thick cotton with those cuffs that you had to fold over. He wore a mushroom-coloured raincoat that looked like it had never been cleaned; there was a penumbra of grime where his greasy, raked-back ringlets brushed his collar. And Dolt recognised a fellow smoker: Weese had dull, grease-paper

skin, corrugated lips and cloudy eyes. Moreover, Dolt felt, here was a lifer — someone who would never give up; someone who thrived on poison and would, out of spite, live on into a vigorous and rotten old age. He, John Dolt, was quitting today. Yes, he really meant it this time. It was propitious. If that was the word.

They hadn't told him where they were going. Posh hotel, trendy studio or bijou boot camp? It turned out to be a townhouse in Mayfair.

On arrival, Weese argued with the driver over a hand-written receipt while Gunner made sure that any thought of flight on Dolt's part was moot.

'This is where it all starts,' Weese said, tucking his receipt away. 'Make us proud, John.'

'You heard the guy,' Gunner added.

Together, they turned from Dolt and set off on foot, Gunner taking a straight and unyielding line along the pavement, Weese dodging street furniture and oncoming pedestrians, and jogging to catch up with his lumbering partner. A double-act, Dolt thought — and one of the weirdest ever.

But before Dolt could speculate further on this most special of relationships, he became aware that a pair of blonde girls in tweed suits had issued from the townhouse and were now busily occupied in shooing him indoors.

Bemused and curious, he permitted them to escort him to a large, first-floor room with a fireplace and a chandelier. Here, he was parked in an executive-style chair in front of a twenty-seater conference table, given a small bottle of water and a paper cup, and abandoned without further instruction. A cup of tea would have been nice, but these didn't look like the sort of girls who made tea.

Everything went quiet, except for the distant humming and banging you seemed to get in every office. He sat alone and pondered.

So what manner of establishment was this? Property prices around here were bonkers, despite the economic crisis. Who could afford it? The pale-blue paintwork, elaborate mouldings and ceiling-mounted motion-detectors weren't much of a clue. There was a portrait of some craggy-looking bloke standing in front of an American flag, but Dolt couldn't put a name to him.

He spun slowly in his executive chair, subjecting the conference room to a pitiless examination — it was the sort of thing he did as a matter of course whenever Lescek tempted him with a new bathroom job. Then he saw something, way off in a far corner.

With a nonchalant glance at the winking red lights on the motion detectors, he rose from his seat and strolled over. It turned out to be a magazine stand loaded with glossy brochures. He picked one up.

Atlantic Affairs Institute, he read, *Protecting Values in a Changing World*. Fair enough, he thought; you couldn't argue with that, as far as it went. *Executive Director, Lord Aylsham, OBE*. Never heard of him, Dolt thought. Of course, you never did hear of these people — not unless they got caught molesting teenagers or swindling the tax-payer, and probably not even then. Aylsham? Dolt's brain wound backwards through a decade of tabloids. No, nothing.

He flipped through the brochure: a lot of boring text full of abbreviations, acronyms and numbers, broken up by pictures featuring groups of well-dressed people in smiley poses. The people were interchangeable, but the backgrounds varied — mostly flags, but also churches, fighter jets and oil refineries.

Dolt didn't know what to make of it. Weese had told him he was a 'star' and had specifically highlighted his 'pure, naked talent.' So where were the agents, the cameras and the leggy presenters? Why was he in some boring *Institute* instead of an edgy TV studio? Who was this irksome git Aylsham — who wasn't even famous?

Dolt sat down again and drank his water from the bottle. It tasted of... Well, he couldn't really identify it. Something floral. He opened the brochure at the last page. On the inside of the back cover was a picture of the former Prime Minister — the one who never seemed to go away — shaking hands with some skinny, sharp-faced geezer with wavy hair. According to the caption, this geezer was Aylsham. The ex-PM grinned at the camera with cheery fanaticism. Great, Dolt thought, bitterly — if *he* comes in here now, I've got a few bleeding things to say to *him* as well.

But when the door opened it failed to admit any such dignitary — just one of the tweed girls and a tall, nattily-dressed man with chubby cheeks, an over-generous forehead and hair slicked back like an upper-class duck's arse. It was important to note, Dolt observed, that this bloke's suit, while very double-breasted indeed, looked, unlike Weese's, to have been bought that morning. And, not that Dolt was an expert, of course, but there was something about this baby-faced thirty-or-forty-something that screamed *butler!*

The tweed girl exited and the butler closed the door by jabbing it with his heel. But he didn't advance into the room. Instead, he locked his gaze on Dolt and held it for an uncomfortable fifteen seconds or so.

Dolt wasn't having this.

'I,' he said, airily, 'am John Dolt. Who are you, then?'

The butler, not picking up on Dolt's annoyance, actually seemed to chuckle.

'Who is John Dolt?' he said, as if struggling to contain himself. 'Who indeed?'

'Look —'

'I'm sorry.' The butler shook his head like a wet dog emerging from a pond. 'Forgive me.' He strode forward and held out his hand.

'My name's Gideon Reeves. I'm to be your Personal Assistant.'

Well, this raised a number of issues, didn't it?

'Gideon?'

'Yes.'

'Gideon?'

'That's right.'

'No, mate. I don't think so.'

'You don't think so?'

'Nobody's called Gideon.'

'I am.'

'You can't be. Trust me.'

'But I am. Really!'

At this point Dolt's phone tinkled. 'Hang on a mo,' he said. It was a text message from Hamid, who wanted to know where Dolt and the minibus were. He was assuming, of course, that they were in the same place. '*still @ hrow,*' Dolt texted back, accurately enough. By now, he speculated, the minibus would likely have attracted attention. But that was a side-issue.

'Gideon's no good, mate. Sorry.'

'Oh.'

'Got any other names?'

The butler raised his eyebrows, butler-style.

'Well, as a matter of fact, my *full* name —'

'Thought so,' Dolt said. 'John Dolt. Two syllables, right? Does what it says on the tin.'

'Right. Exactly. Good point. Um...'

But Dolt had made a decision. Despite the fact that he wasn't going on an island; that he wasn't in a TV studio; that he was still wearing Hamid's stupid uniform; that he hadn't had a cup of tea; that Hamid was hassling him about the minibus; and that this idiot *butler* had been sent to wind him up — despite all that, he was going to be nice to the fucker.

'Did you say you were my personal assistant?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I think we should talk about *that*. We'll come back to the name.'

'Yes, good idea.'

'Well, then. Get stuck in, shall we? What is this place? Why am I here? And, speaking of this and that, and taking everything into consideration, and so on — what the fuck is going on?'

The butler appeared emboldened.

'Excellent questions, all. And I shall endeavour —'

'No, no. Don't endeavour. Just spit it out.'

'Yes, of course. Now, we want to welcome you here to the Atlantic Affairs —'

'Wait.'

The butler frowned.

'There's one thing I want from you,' Dolt said. 'And we're not going any further until I get it.'

'Ye-es?'

'I want a cup of tea.'

*

They must have made the tea with the same water they put in the bottles because it tasted like leaves. But Dolt didn't care. He had asserted his authority over the butler, whom he had decided to think of, for now at least, as Reeves, and had acceded, late but with grace, to Reeves' handshake. Now, with his feet up on the conference table, Dolt listened in earnest as his Personal Assistant outlined what he seemed very pleased to call the *Big Picture*.

'You're just the person we've been searching for,' Reeves said, pacing the length of the conference table with what looked to Dolt like the wary but confident enthusiasm of the teenage heir about to set out on his first illegal hunt. 'When we saw you — when we *heard* what you had to say, and the way you said it, well — we *knew* we had to have you. It was *that* special.'

'Glad you think so,' Dolt said. This contradicted what his mother had often told him, but he was comforted to learn that she had been wrong after all. Yes, it was one more sadness to add to her tally, but it didn't matter now.

'...the right person at *precisely* the right time,' Reeves was saying.

'Go on.'

Reeves needed no encouragement. The western world was in a ferment, he said, wagging his fingers in illustration. But also a funk. Political leadership had failed and people knew it.

'I know it,' Dolt said.

'Yes, you do,' Reeves said.

Ordinary people were frustrated. They felt put upon, oppressed — even tyrannised, you might reasonably say. Dolt wondered how someone called *Gideon* went about tapping the mood of the masses, but didn't interrupt. So to whom, Reeves wanted to know, were the people to turn? To the elites? No, the man — or, indeed, woman — in the street knew that the elites were corrupt and self-serving.

'I know that,' Dolt said.

'Yes, you do, don't you?' Reeves said.

He went on to describe, in terms that Dolt didn't fully understand, the nature of the prevailing power system and its roots in the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-sixties. It was hard to follow, though Reeves had obviously thought about it a lot, and made his case with impressive intellectual and emotional fluency. A great many things connected up, when you thought about them, apparently, and it all pointed in one direction. The era of big government was finally at an end, brought down by its own contradictions, and the people were yearning to throw off the yoke of progressivism. Some bloke called Wilson was originally to blame — not Harold, surely? — but he'd had a lot of helpers, both evil and deluded, down the years. Nice, Dolt thought — although the 'big government' stuff was a bit lame. As for progress, that used to be a good thing, didn't it? Just went to show.

Now most people, Reeves admitted, might not sit up all night analysing things quite so — another chuckle — *forensically*, but they felt it in their bones.

'I understand it instinctively,' Dolt said, slyly.

'Of course you do,' Reeves said.

He had warmed to his thesis now, and Dolt leaned back and rocked in his chair as Reeves spun argument after argument, linked theory and anecdote, quoted from unimpeachable academic studies, cited rock-solid polling evidence, appealed to constitutional authority and promised to show Dolt some simple graphs that proved just how wealthy the average citizen would be if the government only got out of the way.

'I find it all totally persuasive,' Dolt said.

'I knew you would,' Reeves said.

'It's common sense.'

'I know.'

Reeves now turned to current events. If you looked at them in context, he claimed, there was only one conclusion you could draw. The financial crisis, the economic crisis, and all the other crises — moral, political, ethical, constitutional, jurisprudential, medical and religious — they all derived from the same root. And the protests, demonstrations, riots and disturbances you saw on the streets — well, same thing. And that thing was: Liberty. Or, rather, lack of it.

'What about the environmental crisis?' Dolt said. 'You missed that one.'

Reeves seemed to deflate a notch. He shook his head.

'No, no. There really isn't one. The market —'

'You haven't seen my house,' Dolt said.

'Ah, yes — your house...'

Reeves looked at his watch.

'What about the War Zones?' Dolt asked.

'Comes under Liberty,' Reeves said, absently. 'Um, look, John — we seem to be running a bit late here. My fault. Got a bit carried away, you seemed so interested... We've got some arrangements to make and you've got some people to meet.' He took out his phone and attacked it with his thumb. 'Yes, better get a move on. Ready to get started?'

Dolt held up a hand.

'One thing,' he said.

'Yes?'

'You said you're my assistant.'

'Absolutely.'

'What are you assisting me with?'

'Oh, *that!*' Reeves straightened up and puffed out his chest. 'That's easy. You, John, are going to be the leader — the *de facto* leader, I should say — of the New Patriot Movement. The British version, that is.'

Dolt lifted his feet from the table and planted them deliberately on the floor. He was about to speak when his phone chirped again. It was another message from Hamid. Did Dolt know why armed police had staked out Hamid's office? He sounded distressed. '*r u jokng?*' Dolt texted back. Immediately a voice call came in from Hamid's office number. Dolt hit the reject button. It was of course, the wrong thing to do, but this wasn't the time. Then again, an unattended vehicle at *hrow*, owner's name *Hamid*... Well, old Hamid could talk his way out of anything, couldn't he?

'Reevesy?' Dolt said, noting with satisfaction the butleresque twitch of his assistant's eyebrow, 'This job. This leader of the whatever. I'm assuming there's some...'

Reeves spread his arms wide.

'Look around you. Money's no object.'

'Not where patriotism and what-have-you's concerned.'

'Precisely.'

Dolt sipped the dregs of his tea. Its bitter, woody taste clung to the roof of his mouth. He swallowed.

'So... How do we get started?'

'How would you like to start?'

Dolt considered.

'Well, I'd like to get out of these bloody clothes, for one thing.'

'A new outfit. Of course. How about a complete makeover? It's on our list of possibles. Up to you. You're the boss.'

Was he? It seemed unlikely. And yet here he was, in a super-posh West End post code, with his own butler-cum-personal assistant, contemplating untold — and, so far, unspecified — riches in some poncey *Institute*, whose drains he would

hitherto have been unqualified to de-clog. But they — whoever *they* were — needed him. What choice was there? None, really. He wasn't going to be the lovable clown on the island, the one who spiked people's drinks and danced in a grass skirt; he was going to be the *de facto* leader of the New Patriot Movement.

But *Gideon* and his pals, whoever they might be, would be well-advised to tread carefully. *Who is John Dolt?* Give him power, tell him he's the boss — and you might just find out.

Another text message arrived from Hamid. Dolt deleted it.

'Let's do it,' he said.

*

The rest of the day was a blur, but it was a blur — and Dolt had experienced a few — like none he had known. It began, like so many of the great adventures, with the sense of possibilities just within grasp.

Dolt might be surprised to learn, Reeves said, as he himself had been, that many of the great men of history were autodidacts. An autodidact, he further explained, was someone who, not needing or, as in Dolt's case, not having had the benefit of a formal education, taught himself what he needed to know. But — not to worry! — Dolt wasn't going to be on his own. Reeves and the staff at the Institute had lined up, at short notice, a panel of expert mentors who would clue Dolt in on everything he needed to learn. A mentor, Dolt gathered, was someone who told you stuff and kept on telling you until you got it.

Today, Reeves announced, Dolt would meet his mentors. And there would also be a reading list, but Dolt wasn't to worry too much about that because the experience of the New Patriot Movement in the States was that the public responded better to conviction than to book-learning. Though that didn't mean, Reeves warned, that Dolt wouldn't be required to point out the War Zones on a map or quote the exact amount of cash owed by each ordinary family on account of the deficit. No problem, Dolt said; his work had often required him to study maps — the A-to-Z, for example. And he was good with figures. You had to be when you worked with people like Lescek the bathroom guy. Reeves looked reassured, Dolt thought.

'I think, then,' Reeves said, 'we'll start with economics.' They ascended to a book-lined study where a bat-like woman with short, black hair, pointy shoes and the soulless eyes of a debt-collector instructed Dolt to consult the works of Hayek and Laffer. Therein he would learn that taxation, its inherent immorality aside, not only sapped the spirits of entrepreneurs and rewarded the feckless, but also diminished government revenues the higher it rose. Dolt noted that this seemed odd. He was told he had much to learn.

'Next up,' Reeves said, 'domestic policy.' They descended to a basement library where a tall, sunken-eyed, bald man of about seventy, who wore a tight polo-neck shirt and resembled a zombie vicar on his day off, complained to Dolt that the problem with actually having an established religion was that you couldn't campaign on the basis that the constitution, contrary to the leftists' claims, not only didn't forbid it but actually embodied it. And the result was, nobody took said religion seriously.

'Sure,' Dolt said.

'That's a bit advanced, Norman,' Reeves said. 'Keep it simple, will you?'

'Yes, all right.'

Had Dolt heard of Malthus and Bentham? No? Well, he was going to. But he should remember that neither of these philosophers had imagined the day when the government would insist that *he*, Dolt, should pay for *his*, Norman's, retirement and upkeep. Dolt felt that someone, at least, ought to pay for Norman's medication, but kept that thought to himself. There followed a short lecture in which it was proven that pretty much anything Dolt could come up with in terms of public expenditure was unaffordable.

'Thanks, Norm,' Reeves said, giving Dolt a furtive glance. 'Lastly, and perhaps most importantly... Foreign policy.' Once again they ascended, this time to a large attic containing an over-sized snooker table and a brusque, sixty-ish American in a grey suit and walrus moustache.

On closer inspection, the snooker table turned out to be a map of the world. The walrus produced a laser pointer. See here and here and here? Dolt looked. Yes, he thought — the War Zones, shaded red. There were more of them than he had realised. The walrus nodded. And this? The walrus traced out an area outlined in purple. Dolt shrugged.

'The Greater Persian Region,' the walrus said, with a meaningful flick of his moustache.

Dolt looked at Reeves. Reeves narrowed his eyes and met Dolt's gaze. Dolt, not wanting to feel left out, bit his lip with great shrewdness. To be honest, though, he had no idea what he was being shrewd about. *Greater Persian Region?*

The walrus moved on to an analysis of what he called the *global threat environment*, touching on asymmetric warfare, host country alliances, pre-emption thresholds, dynamic surge doctrine, resource depletion, emerging powers, the Long War, public perception conditioning, enhanced techniques and new advances in battle-space management. In sum, it appeared, the globe itself was a threat. It followed that such a threat had to be confronted. Dolt, still nursing the queasy suspicion that something significant had passed unspoken, asked about diplomacy. The hairs in the walrus's moustache seemed to stand on end.

'He means the public media strategy,' Reeves said, stepping in pre-emptively, as it were.

The walrus directed his laser pointer at Dolt, locked on and began to advance.

'I think we'll leave it there for now,' Reeves said, hustling Dolt towards the door. 'It's an awful lot for John to take in. In one sitting, I mean.' He opened the door and pushed Dolt through. 'Much obliged, Dick!'

Outside in the corridor, Reeves slammed the door shut but kept a grip on the handle. With his other hand, he grasped Dolt by the upper arm.

'Well, that was a close one,' he said. 'You know what happened the last time someone used the 'D' word in front of Dick?'

'What?'

Reeves hesitated.

'Actually, never mind. My fault entirely. Should have warned you. Will you forgive me?'

'Yes, but —'

'Good. Now — my office. Ready to make a dash?'

The door handle rattled. Reeves held it tight.

'Ready.'

'Ground floor. On a count of three.'

*

Safe from incoming walruses in an armchair in Reeves' office, a small glass of sherry on the three-legged table at his elbow, Dolt felt it was time for a reality check.

'Reevesy?'

'Yes?'

'Are you sure you've got the right person? I mean —'

'Well, of course, I know what you're going to say.' Reeves sipped his sherry and shook his head with what Dolt took to be calculated ruefulness. 'They're a bit of a bunch, aren't they? Eva, Norman, Dick. Especially Dick. But you have to make allowances for them, John. They're not like you and me. They're intellectuals.'

'Thinkers, you mean.'

'Exactly. Not like you. Not men of action.' Reeves took a pensive sip. 'Possible exception of Eva.'

Perhaps it was the sherry, but Dolt felt himself warming somewhat towards his personal assistant.

'They frightened me, Reevesy.'

Reeves put his sherry down and leaned forward, elbows on knees, chin on fists.

'I know, John, I know. Frankly, they scare me sometimes. They don't get out much, you see. Makes them a little too intense.'

'Yeah.'

'But they're really just there to help you. You're the important one.'

'Am I?'

'Of course. No question. Have some more sherry.'

Dolt gave himself a top-up.

'But politics, right? I'm not sure I can —'

'No, John. Don't you get it yet? You're the *anti-politics*. You stand for the common man. For common sense. Now, Eva, Norman and Dick — of course they're all facts and figures and theory and so on. That's fine, as far as it goes. But it's all useless without someone like you, who, um, has the ability — the very rare ability — to put it into language that *real people* can understand.'

Dolt thought about this. It was true that he could put things in language that real people were able to understand. But was that really so rare? He took a sip of sherry. Perhaps it was. Why would Reeves lie to him?

'Well, I suppose so, but...'

Reeves took a deep breath and held it.

'You know what?' he said, at length. 'Let me show you something.' He reached under his chair and pulled out a hardback book. 'Look at this,' he said, handing the book to Dolt. 'Signed copy.'

The book's jacket depicted an intensely-groomed, blonde-haired woman of perhaps forty-five who dressed in expensive and conservative attire — blouse, pearls, red tailored jacket and black skirt. Her hair fell in self-conscious tendrils to her shoulders and she wore steel-rimmed glasses. The expression on her face struck Dolt as one of cultish self-exaltation backed up by freight-train neediness.

But what really impressed him was the monstrous machine-gun she held across her chest. And the two hooded captives who knelt at her feet. The book's title was *Exceptional* and the author's name was Amber Pike.

'Heard of her?' Reeves asked.

'Um...'

'She's one of the leading lights — some would say *the* leading light — of the American New Patriot Movement.'

'Ah.'

'This is her autobiography. Written by an old friend of mine, actually.'

Dolt studied the book's jacket.

'Is that really her gun?'

'No.'

'Does she have a gun like that?'

'No.'

'Did she really catch those two terrorists?'

'No.'

'Are they terrorists?'

'No.'

'What are they?'

'Actors.'

Dolt paused to take this in. He flicked the pages of the book. There weren't that many of them and the print seemed quite large.

'So... This is her story?'

'Yes.'

'Is it true?'

'Not really.'

'So... She's just a big fake?'

Reeves drained his sherry glass.

'John, it's a bit late in the day to start investigating the nature of reality. Or, indeed, the uses of mythology. The point is this. She's just like you. She came from nowhere, and the intellectuals and the professional politicians all looked down on her. But — like you — she *connects* with real people. She knows how they feel and she knows what's bothering them. She's had her problems — her family, I mean, my God! — and she knows that real people have the same problems. Just like you. Do you follow me?'

'Sort of.'

'She's not a *fake*, John. She's authentic. Like you.'

'But you said the book —'

'Is fake, yes. Mostly. It's just something she had to do to play the game. You know that sometimes you have to play the game by the opposition's rules, don't you?'

Dolt thought of his dealings with Hamid and Lescek, and of a lifetime under the thumb of one dumb authority or another.

'Yes,' he said.

'You know that the game's rigged, don't you?'

Dolt permitted himself a bitter laugh.

'Yes.'

'And you know that there's no such thing as a level playing-field or a fair fight?'

'Yes.'

'And that to understand the nature of the prince, one must be of the people?'

'What?'

'Forget that one. The point is, Amber knows all this, too. Read the book and you'll see.'

Dolt opened the book near to the beginning and began to read. Amber had wanted to build a deck at the back of her house so that her children could play there in safety. But she had been swindled by a corrupt contractor whose political contacts protected him from prosecution. To get her money back and rebuild the deck — better than ever! — for her children, and, indeed, her disabled neighbour's children, Amber had run for the office of mayor. Dolt skimmed pages of adversity, hardship, calumny, mishap and betrayal to read that Amber had won office, cleaned house and built the deck.

'Bullshit,' Dolt said.

'Yes, but *inspiring* bullshit, John.'

'Yeah, but —'

'Look at her now. She's the most, let's say, motivating force in America. And she's worth millions.'

'Millions?'

'Millions.'

Reeves topped up his sherry and sat back in his chair. Dolt did likewise. Amber Pike, he thought, might just have got something figured out. And so too, perhaps, had Reeves.

'If you and I are successful,' Reeves said, 'you'll be meeting her. Perhaps sooner than you think.'

'Really?'

'Absolutely. And I'll tell you this. She'll respect you.'

'Will she?'

'Yes, she will. Not like those women at the school.'

'So, he knew about that?'

'They didn't respect me.'

'They did not.'

'But they *will*, won't they?'

'That's right, John. They will.'

Dolt finished his sherry.

'Well?' Reeves said.

'Well what?'

'Ready to start building that deck?'

Dolt closed the book.

'Yes.'

CHAPTER 9

John Dolt had never been a sherry drinker. Consequently — and partly because of the rapport that, bizarrely, he seemed to have struck up with his new personal assistant, whose butler-smooth style and sympathetic manner had, Dolt was forced to admit, utterly seduced him in the end — he had misjudged his intake. Thus it was that, cocooned in a warm and woozy numbness, Dolt found himself transported to an undiscloseable central London hotel of startling kitsch and international ritziness.

He had presumed that the day's work — a long and arduous day, at that — was over. He was wrong.

In the 'business den' of his suite, described in the room guide as 'styled by Groot-Karlo as a comment on African-inflected Swiss modernism,' Dolt held bleary court before a succession of advisors, consultants and other suitors, all of whom claimed to be acting under instructions from Reeves, and most of whom resisted Dolt's declaration that *he* was the boss here, not *Gideon* the bloody butler.

The first thing Dolt learned, from Des, his security consultant, who claimed a 'special forces' background but looked like a bricklayer, was that there was no way he was going back to his half-a-house — styled by Dolt as a comment on Big Builder — just off the A40. And that wasn't all. The house had already been secured and was about to undergo decontamination.

'Decontamination?' Dolt said. 'Are you having a laugh? It's not *that* bad.'

No, Des explained, he meant merely that all compromising materials had to be removed and destroyed. Before Dolt's enemies could access them.

'Enemies, you say?' Dolt said, half-consciously emulating his personal assistant's cadences. 'What rubbish! I'm extremely popular. Reevesy said so. I'm going to be a national treasure.'

Des scratched his nose.

'Drugs?' he said. 'Porn? Guns? Stolen goods? Dodgy receipts? Pirate videos? Unlicensed TV? Illegal pets? Financial documents of any description? Embarrassing medication? Letters from girlfriends? Boyfriends?'

'No, no, no,' Dolt said. 'None of that.'

Des looked sceptical.

'We'll find it, you see. It's just that you could save us time.'

Dolt shook his head — and then stopped because he felt dizzy.

'Nothing.'

'If you say so. Got a computer?'

'Yes.'

'We'll get you a new one. Who's your ISP?'

Dolt told him.

'Good, we can take care of them. Got any mobiles?'

'Yes.'

'How many?'

'Only one.'

'Hand it over.'

Dolt gave Des his mobile phone, which Reeves had made him turn off prior to their encounter with Eva, the vampire economist. Des turned it back on and tapped away.

'Know anything about a minibus?'

Dolt groaned.

'Maybe.'

'Would that be the one blown up by the army at Heathrow?'

'What!'

'Don't panic. It's already taken care of. We'll get you a new phone. Make sure you set the PIN. Now, then. Money...'

Des unfolded a laptop and proceeded to unpick what he called Dolt's 'entire financial infrastructure,' which, he said, would have to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Finally, as Des shut down his computer and prepared to leave, Dolt raised the issue that had been bothering him.

'So, um, where am I living, then?'

'Here.'

'What, in this hotel? It's eight hundred quid a night!'

'Yeah, but it's secure.'

'But —'

'In year or two, when they're finished with you, you can buy yourself a fucking mansion in Surrey. Or, in your case, perhaps Essex. Sound good to you?'

'Finished with me?'

But Des was gone, to be replaced by Jacqueline, who must have been waiting outside the door.

Jacqueline wanted to know if Dolt was up for a little fashion show, because she just knew he was going to be excited when he saw the sample outfits she'd brought with her.

The prospect of binning Hamid's miserable uniform for good certainly appealed but, Dolt found, the practicalities of disrobing and then dressing again in his sherry-sozzled condition occasioned more embarrassment than excitement. But Jacqueline — even more than Des, it seemed — was made of stern stuff. Just get it all off, she told him; she'd seen things that no sensitive stylist ought to have seen. It was a hazard of working with politicians. *But I'm not a politician,*

Dolt wanted to say, but couldn't because his head was wedged in the neck of a too-tight cashmere sweater — *I'm the anti-politics!*

Ultimately, however, knitwear was rejected. So, too, were a series of business and leisure suits. Some people just weren't suit people, Jacqueline lamented. Sorry.

So his final catwalk turn from his safari-chalet kitchen to the den found Dolt kitted out in mid-blue jeans — not quite designer but definitely better than high-street — plus open-necked shirt and a sports jacket that was mildly tweedy but not too structured. For footwear he was given lace-up ankle boots that hit a mark somewhere between upmarket petrol-head and military reservist. The overall effect, Jacqueline declared, was that of a successful self-employed artisan — a plumber, say — togged up for a Friday night out with the wife and the nice couple down the road.

'Fine,' Dolt said, wondering to himself whether Jacqueline could tell him what line the average successful artisan would take on the Greater Persian Question. 'Looks really good. Thanks.'

'Glad you like it,' Jacqueline said, gathering up her samples and shoving Hamid's uniform into a bin bag. 'I'll get to work on outerwear. Formal's still a problem, but I'm sure there's a solution.'

And then there was Roberto.

'No,' Dolt said. 'It's nearly fucking midnight. I'm not having a haircut!'

'Ah, but, yes you are, you see — Mr Reeves, he made himself very clear, you know. And, of course, the facial.'

And so it went on.

Step by step, ever wearier and blearer, Dolt observed himself as if from slightly outside his own body as he was stripped down, tarted up, made over, reconstructed, and generally re-engineered from the ground up. Reeves' words echoed through his muddled brain: *you're the important one, John; they're just here to help you*. Yeah, thanks, *Gideon*.

And so Dolt's personal private banker explained how money would be deposited, discreetly, in an account in the Cayman Islands; and how Dolt, if and when it was deemed appropriate, might access it.

His publicist asked for a few authentic details of his early life that could be woven into an affecting narrative that would engage the public. Dolt thought of Amber Pike and her fake autobiography and made up a couple of heart-warming anecdotes.

An earnest young man in an ill-fitting suit and under-developed goatee, who said he was Dolt's Director of Communications, offered Dolt his choice of *vox pops*, to be inserted in his speeches as he saw fit. Baffled at first, Dolt quickly realised that these were prefabricated encounters with members of the public in which Dolt would claim to have met a *blank* in *blank* who told him *blank*, where the first *blank* was a type of person; the second, a boring provincial town; and the third, a politically-slanted fairy tale. Thanks very much, he said.

An aggressive young woman in a very tight-fitting suit and over-developed make-up, who said she was Dolt's Political Advisor, insisted on giving him the low-down on the state of the parties and the hidden fault-lines within the government and the cabinet. Dolt, she said, was to use this information to

out-flank just about everyone from the right, and to boost his populist credentials. But Dolt was too tired by this stage to point out that (a), he was already popular; and (b), he wasn't political, he was *anti-political*. Sure, he said. Out-flank, no problem.

The next few visitors passed by in a haze. Someone showed him some graphs. Someone else wanted to know about his travel preferences. A dentist called to make an appointment, and left looking grim. Another young woman wanted to walk him through his engagements for the next week, but decided to call back in the morning. A messenger arrived with a golden envelope — but no, it wasn't golden, merely buff — which contained a fancy, embossed invitation to a Global something-or-other.

Then, last of all, Dolt's personal lawyer asked if he wouldn't mind signing *here* and initialling *here* and *here*. Sure, Dolt said, whatever, thanks very much — and signed his way through a stack of documents without reading a word.

And then, as he tumbled into his emperor-sized bed, having shed his new clothes, splashed water on his new face and run his fingers roughly through his new hair, he fell into a deep and refreshing slumber.

At what point this gentle sleep turned to terror he couldn't say but, waking again in a shivering sweat at four in the morning, breathing heavily and still battling the demons of the night, he gave himself up to one solemn vow: never would he, John Dolt, agree to go unaccompanied to any lonely mountain cabin owned by the famous American rabble-rousing faker, Amber Pike, no matter how *exceptional* she turned out to be.

Troubled and disoriented, he reached for the bedside lamp and flicked it on. As his eyes began to focus, the first thing he spotted, nestling on top of his zebra-skin coffee table next to his stainless steel mini fondue set, was the golden envelope — and the odd thing about it was that, in this light, it really did look golden. He stumbled over, picked it up and shook it. The embossed invitation card tumbled out.

Global Faith Initiative, he read. *Uniting Humanity for Peace*. There was an address in Kensington and a web site, but no phone number. The invitation itself was written by hand in broad, slopey strokes: *Love to get your input, please come on Friday*. There followed an unintelligible signature. This minor mystery resolved itself only when Dolt read the very small print at the bottom of the card. The *Global Faith Initiative*, it appeared, was a wholly-owned subsidiary of the foundation formed by and modestly named after the former Prime Minister — the one who kept coming back like a toothache and was on chummy terms with Aylsham, the supremo of Atlantic Affairs.

What to make of this? Dolt put the card down and toyed with the fondue set. The former PM wanted Dolt's *input*? He wanted Dolt to help him unite humanity for peace and profit? No, wait — it was just peace, wasn't it? Curious, all the same.

He wandered across to the windows in the business den, slid them open and stepped out on to the balcony. The chill of the night air shivered him into wakefulness. The city, too, seemed alert, watchful and ready for action, despite the hour. Probably storing up energy for another day of ire and recrimination, plus a load more *disturbances*, Dolt thought. A police car screamed past in the

street below and faded away into the city's sleepless hum. Looking down, Dolt could see the hotel's security patrol flashing their torches and checking their equipment; Des, the consultant, would no doubt approve. The whirring of a helicopter came from above, but the night was full of low, restless cloud and Dolt couldn't locate it. As it retreated, the angry strains of an argument rose up from one of the hotel's lower and slightly less expensive rooms. Then a gusty wind picked up and Dolt retreated to his den.

This, he realised, was his new world; this was how the glorious day ended. He had won his freedom from Hamid and Lescek; from the A40 and Big Builder; from all the threats, demands, debasements and impositions of white van land; and, with any luck, from all those sodding arguments about invoices. He had a personal stylist, a Director of Communications and, apparently, a bank account in the Caribbean. All compromising materials were to be destroyed by his security people; the process of decontaminating his life had already begun. Would this process extend to Tamsin and Tamara, his daughters, or to Victoria, their irreconcilable mother?

Gone were the Jobba van and the half-a-house, replaced by rented luxury and Reeves the butler. Dolt, the accidental tribune of the people, had, almost at the moment of his alchemical rant — turning bile to gold — been separated from them. Not that the people, in his opinion, were that much to write home about, anyway. And as for *humanity*...

Certain that the opportunity for sleep had passed, and fearful in any case of a repeat visit to Amber's cabin, he padded into the entertainment lounge and activated the LED 3D Ultra-HD multi-satellite system.

The foreign news channels came up first. Flicking through them, he was at first horrified, but then, by degrees, ever more amused to view his confrontation with the lacrosse mothers in Mandarin, Hindi, French, Russian, Italian, German and a bunch of other languages, some middle-eastern, that he couldn't identify. The BBC had shut down for the night — a cost-saving measure, apparently — but from the remaining English-language stations he gathered, variously, that the PM (the current one), responding to accusations from the Leader of the Opposition, had insisted that he had indeed taken Dolt's criticisms to heart and was planning a National Symposium, to which Dolt himself would be invited; that measures were to be stepped up against the disturbances, now widely believed to be fomented by a shadowy figure known only as *Red Ron*; that there was no evidence that the Government had knowledge of a coup said to be imminent in South America; that Amber Pike's book of children's stories was number one in the best-seller list; that a new strategy in the War Zones was expected to bring rapid improvements; that the financial markets approved of the government's fiscal policies and weren't too worried about the disturbances; that the economic crisis had unexpectedly worsened again; and that the Big Builder home improvement chain had gone bust only a month after its chief executive had retired to Costa Rica. Inadequate customer demand was blamed.

Dolt turned the TV off.

Got out just in time, he thought, as he sank into his leopard-and-chrome sofa, picked up his signed copy of *Exceptional* and began to read.

CHAPTER 10

Jefferson Crockett — or Jeff Crock, as he had long been known, cordially and otherwise, in the small and embattled world of American left-leaning investigative journalism, and would no doubt continue to be, at his new and degraded perch in bloggerdom — had been right to surmise that Katherine, his kindly boss at The Liberal, had managed, despite the efforts of New York's finest Ponzi artists, to preserve a budget for overseas investigations.

He had been wrong to presume that it would be adequate.

Thus, it wasn't long after he touched down in bustling, sweaty San Jose, that he discovered that the only vehicle he could afford to rent was a clapped-out Suzuki jeep with a canvas roof. Even then, he was forced to skimp on insurance.

Naturally, the Jeep lacked satnav, so Jeff had to fall back on the maps Katherine had given him. The ones he'd left on the plane. Eventually, on his third pass by the airport, a weary traffic policeman had taken pity on him and set him on the right road.

And so, by the end of his bone-rattling journey to the sleepy, bay-side town of Puerto Jiménez, the only significant settlement on the hot, humid and remote Osa peninsula on Costa Rica's Pacific coast, and having realised that this was a place that anyone with any sense — and any budget at all — *flew* into, Jeff Crock had shed any illusions he might have entertained of enjoying a cushy, free vacation. And the Jeep had shed its top.

On a shady street at the edge of town, next to a tree full of iguanas, he found a backpacker hotel whose owner, a dreadlocked Canadian of indeterminate age called Eric, agreed to rent him a private room for US dollars, cash, plus a little help around the outdoor bar. They drank a couple of Imperials together to cement the deal, and then Eric offered to help Jeff unload his Jeep.

'Travelling light, huh?'

'Yeah,' Jeff said. 'Best way.' Especially if you found you needed to make a quick exit, which had often been his experience.

Eric looked interested.

'So, maybe you would like to rent some gear?'

'Gear?'

'To take down to Cabo Matapolo.'

'Cabo...'

'Yeah, the waves, man. I figured you took the top off your Jeep to make room for —'

'Surfing?'

'Cabo Matapolo, man. Surfers' paradise.'

Jeff Crock had never surfed. He had learned at an early age that all sports were dangerous sports.

'Not really a surfer,' he said, retrieving his single, small bag from the back seat of the Jeep.

Eric looked him up and down.

'Guess not,' he said, sadly. 'Tall guys like you... So I guess you're hiking the Corcovado?' He peered into the back of the Jeep. 'Bring your own tent?'

'Corcovado?'

Eric took a careful step back from the Jeep.

'The Corcovado,' he said. 'Forty-one thousand hectares? The only tropical, primary lowland rainforest in the world?' He raised his hand and made a gun-like gesture. 'It's just over there.'

Jeff looked. The hills beyond the town were indeed forested. But had he detected a change in the atmospherics here? Try a little enthusiasm, he thought.

'Rainforest, you say? Gee, that sounds interesting.'

Eric took another step backwards and folded his arms.

'You know,' he said, 'the local cops and I, we have a very good relationship. And there's no way I...'

At the word 'cops,' Jeff realised, a little late as ever, that he might have a problem.

'Problem?' he said, facing the issue head-on.

Eric ground his heel in the dirt and shrugged.

'I mean, come on, dude. You're not surfing, you're not hiking, you're not paying six hundred dollars a night to sunbathe at the friggin' eco lodge. You don't have a camera, so I'm guessing you're not here to photograph the scarlet macaws.'

'I *do* have a camera,' Jeff said, producing his trusty compact spy-camera.

'I mean a *serious* camera. Okay, look. I don't want any trouble, so what's the deal?'

'The deal?'

He was tired, of course, but Jeff had to ask himself how it was that the same crack operator who had bluffed his way into the heart of the military-industrial complex had now failed to infiltrate a hippy flophouse.

But then he realised what Eric was getting at.

'You've got the wrong idea,' he said. 'The deal is... Not what you think it is.'

'Gonna have to do better than that, man. Otherwise...'

'Otherwise what?' Jeff said, picking up his bag and taking a delicate step towards Eric.

'Otherwise, I'm going to have to charge you for that beer. And ask you to move on.' Eric pointed at Jeff's bag.

'Whatever kind of shit you're doing, I can't have it here.'

Jeff stopped and put the bag down again. There was nothing else to do, he felt, and he didn't really care at this point.

'There's no shit,' he said. 'Really. No shit at all. Look for yourself.'

'Sure?'

'Go ahead.'

Eric unzipped the bag and picked through its contents as Jeff shifted his weight from one leg to the other in dull humiliation. It took longer than he expected; clearly, Eric was more diligent than he looked.

'I guess you're clean. Sorry about that.'

'Not a problem.'

Eric bit his lip, a look of judicious circumspection on his face.

'I guess I'm still kind of curious as to why you're here...'

If you thought about it, Jeff reasoned, it might not be a bad thing to get on the right side of a clued-in local who had a good relationship with the local cops. Local cops — more so even than corporate lawyers, private security goons, and Katherine's budgets — had been the bane of his professional life.

'You know what?' he said, wiping the sweat from his brow with the hem of his T-shirt, 'I think I'm going to tell you. Let's go back to the bar.'

*

Jeff Crock cracked open another Imperial. 'And so,' he said, having regaled Eric Lapierre, his curious host, with the PG-rated rendering of his illustrious career, including the episode in which he had exposed the off-shore tax evasions of a bailout-seeking bank CEO, and not forgetting the time he bugged the antebellum boudoir of a distinctly pro-bellum southern senator, to the dismay not just of the defence-contracting industry but the family-values crowd as well, 'it's really all about this place called Rancho Colorado.'

Eric choked on his beer.

'What?' Jeff said, and waited for Eric to recover.

'You're here about *that*?'

'That's right.'

Eric decided to splutter a little more.

'That's a crazy place, man. You want to stay away from there.'

Since this was precisely what Jeff didn't want to do, he sipped his beer and settled on an indirect approach.

'Sure, if you say so. But it's right around here, isn't it?'

'No, it's the other side of the eco lodge.'

'Oh, okay. Only I couldn't see it on the satellite maps. I zoomed in but...'

'It's only been there eighteen months.'

'The maps were newer than that.'

'Well, that's weird then, isn't it?'

'Yeah.'

Jeff took another long draw on his Imperial.

'But *you* know where it is.'

'Uh-huh.'

Another pause.

'So this rainforest — this...'

'Corcovado.'

'...Corcovado. Must be a pretty special place.'

'It's a national park. Global importance.'

'Right. So how do you get to build a thing like Rancho Colorado in it?'

'Good question.'

'Must have been protests.'

Eric looked at Jeff as if he were an idiot.

'Well, duh. That eco guy was all against it. But if *he* couldn't stop it, then...'

'Which eco guy is that?'

'Leo Vargas. Owns the eco lodge. Very big on the environment.'

The name sounded familiar. Vargas — was that the guy who was threatening to shake up the big conference in Cape Town?

'Does he live here?'

'Mostly. He went off to Africa. Should have been back by now, but I haven't seen him around.'

Vargas was clearly someone to talk to. Jeff would have to track him down. But wasn't he also some kind of businessman with political pull?

'So, Eric. This Vargas guy. You're sure there wasn't some deal —'

'No, man. He's for real. Listen, where're you from?'

'Brooklyn.'

'Okay. So how much of your energy — your electricity — how much is renewable?'

'Uh, not much, I'm guessing.'

'We get eighty percent. It's all hydro.'

'That's good.'

'The temperature goes up, we get less rain.'

'Not so good.'

'Up in the Monteverde — the cloud forest, okay? Maybe the cloud level is going up. It's going to dry out. Maybe all the tree frogs are gonna die.'

'That's bad.'

Eric waved his empty beer bottle in Jeff's face.

'And down here, we got the ocean. And if that warms up, maybe this forest starts putting out more CO₂ than it takes in.'

'Don't want that.'

'So, you've got to understand. This is where Leo is coming from.'

'Got it. You a friend of his?'

Eric put his beer bottle down and scratched the back of his head.

'No, he's not a big fan of the, uh, surfing community.'

'Bit of a prig?'

'Maybe.'

Jeff tipped his chair back and looked up at the tree that shaded the bar.

'What kind of tree is that?'

'Wild plum.'

'Ah.'

Jeff studied the tree.

'Those iguanas?' he said.

Eric looked up and inspected the tree as if he'd never seen it before.

'What about them?'

'Do they ever fall down?'

'Sometimes.'

'Another beer?'

'You paying?'

Jeff considered. He was extracting some useful info from Eric, so this conversation counted as work. It was, therefore, expense-able.

'Sure. Break 'em open. *Dude!*'

*

Jeff Crock lay awake and sweltered on the creaky single bed that comprised most of the furniture to be found in his private room, which, as a seasoned traveller, he was able to identify as an improvised lean-to that served partly to shore up Eric's kitchen. The remainder of the furniture, a wooden chair with a fraying seat, supported a grimy electric fan that pattered to itself to little effect.

Yet Jeff felt content. Somehow, the effects of the beer and the humidity cancelled each other out, transporting Jeff into a state of lucid doziness. The thickness of the atmosphere softened the fecund sounds of the night and, despite the thinness of Eric's mattress and the pokiness of its brittle springs, Jeff felt almost as if he were floating on a forest of clouds.

How long this sense of well-earned serenity lasted, he could not say. But it ended when the roof exploded.

Of course, the roof did not explode; it merely sounded that way. And the cavernous *rat-a-tat* that followed couldn't have been the rending of tropical thunder or the ripping of fire-crackers, although it resembled them at first.

Jeff snapped into consciousness and then froze, waiting for his war reporter's brain to haul itself back online.

Then it happened again.

He jumped to his feet, tripped over the fan cable, picked himself up and ran outside. A minute of squinting in the gloom and the whole thing became clear.

Reaching down to a point about two feet above the tin roof of Jeff's lean-to was one of the thicker branches of the wild plum tree. The iguanas had selected this branch as their on-ramp of choice in their plan to penetrate the open skylight on top of Eric's kitchen. The two-foot drop from the branch to Jeff's ceiling appeared to be something they took in their ungainly stride. How did they get back up? Jeff wondered. Well, it wasn't his problem and, fuck it, he'd probably have done the same thing in their situation.

He decided to sit outside in the comparative cool of the night until the last of the iguanas had taken the plunge. While he was waiting, he would review his evening with Eric. It had turned out to be quite productive, once the beers got rolling.

Not only did Eric know where Rancho Colorado was, he also knew how to get there. Presumably, Eric said, Jeff was thinking more in terms of slipping in through the tradesmen's entrance than of rolling up to the front door and ringing the bell? Exactly, Jeff said. Residents, according to Eric, arrived by sea-plane or

helicopter; because of the terrain, or perhaps for security reasons, there was no airstrip. Supplies and staff came by boat, although employees lived on site for months at a time. Of course there wasn't really a back door at all, but there were tracks through the forest which had been used by the heavy construction equipment, and some of these might still be passable. You'd need a four-wheel-drive, but Jeff had one of those, didn't he?

Jeff had wondered if the Suzuki did, in fact, have four-wheel-drive and, if so, how you turned it on. Go on, he'd said.

Well, Eric said, for a small consideration, he'd be prepared to guide Jeff along these tracks and make sure he didn't get lost, or eaten by jaguars or molested by tapirs. Jeff would be responsible for fuel and all incidental expenses. Fine, Jeff said. He managed to negotiate the 'small consideration' down to two hundred dollars, which was most of what he had in his contingency reserve.

But didn't Eric have other guests to care for? No, Eric said. Jeff was his only guest. The global economic downturn had impacted the surfer community badly, and the only people down at Cabo Matapolo these days were the *trustafarians*, who had their own beach houses.

There was one more thing, though, Eric said. Once they got close enough, Jeff was on his own. Because the people inside Rancho Colorado were totally crazy, man. Crazy as in wing-nut, rightist politics? Jeff suggested, humorously. Well, maybe, Eric conceded — but mainly crazy as in *armed and extremely crazy*. Did Jeff have a gun? No. Did he want one? Probably not. Well, at least he'd been warned, hadn't he? Yes, Jeff said, he'd been warned.

Actually, there was one thing he *did* need, Jeff said. One of the problems of being an investigative reporter — or blogger — these days was that it wasn't enough merely to be intrepid. You almost had to be invisible, too. Any place worth busting into was pretty much guaranteed to have wall-to-wall, twenty-four-hour, smart HD surveillance. Some kind of head-to-toe disguise was required; could Eric provide such a thing? You mean, like a burqa? Eric said. It didn't matter, Jeff said, so long as it didn't cost more than twenty dollars. He was sure he could come up with something, Eric said.

To seal the deal, they'd cracked open two more beers, and then the conversation had taken a darker, more philosophical turn.

Something, Eric felt, was *up* in Costa Rica, and Central America in general. On the one hand, you had the ever-revolving rumours of coups and plots — one month here, another month there — and the general feeling amongst ordinary people that they were being manipulated, prodded, sized-up and bamboozled. What, more than ordinarily? Jeff wanted to know. Yes, Eric said — much more so. And then, on the other hand, the economic colonisation of the south by the north — of which he was himself a tiny part, he was ready to admit — seemed to have moved into a new gear. In addition, the new Latin American politics of people like Leo Vargas, snobby elitist as he might well be, had been pushed back, and yet no one could say precisely who was doing the pushing. Usual suspects, if you ask me, Jeff had said, but Eric didn't look convinced. And don't forget the plight of the tree-frogs, he said; America had practically written climate-change denial into its constitution. Not quite, Jeff said.

And if you wanted a perfect symbol in which all four of these baleful trends coalesced, what could serve better, Eric demanded to know, than *Rancho Colorado*? What indeed, Jeff said.

Then, hoping to lighten the mood a bit, he'd asked Eric whose turn it was to be top of the bill at the coup-of-the-month club. Venezuela, since you ask, Eric had replied.

The mood hadn't lightened.

Not until they'd consumed a couple more beers, that is, and Eric had gotten out his acoustic guitar and played a medley of Neil Young tunes.

Jeff glanced at the roof of his room and noted with satisfaction that the last of the iguana raiding party was about to make its leap. From inside the kitchen came the sounds of clattering pots and smashing glass. Jeff took a depth breath of perfumed night air and went back to bed.

*

The damage to Eric's kitchen couldn't have been all that bad, because Jeff's breakfast of rice, black beans, eggs and fruit, served on papaya leaves, was delicious. That Eric harboured suspicions was clear — *are you sure you didn't hear anything, man? Not a thing*, Jeff had lied. But this night of the iguanas hadn't jeopardised the mission. Jeff was pretty sure about that.

Eric had taken the Jeep and gone off to fuel up and gather supplies. While he was away, Jeff found a spot near the jacarandas in Eric's back yard that had passable cell phone reception and checked his messages.

Most were from Katherine. Jeff hadn't forgotten about the limit on the corporate Amex card, had he? No, he certainly hadn't. Was Jeff picking up anything on the street regarding Venezuela? It was fortunate that Jeff happened to be in the region; a shame that the budget didn't stretch to Caracas. Just the usual rumours, he replied. Katherine had sent him a link to the social media mumblings of some guy called John Dolt. Dolt? Oh, the dumb-ass Brit who'd gone to the trouble of saving the Prime Minister only to turn around and rip him a new one. Why did Katherine always think these morons were so hilarious? He clicked though and read the latest post:

Talked to a plumber in Norwich. Told me the migrants want to take his job, but always b@ll#cks up the work. More for him! Socialist stimulus!

Well, Katherine was famous for her sophisticated sense of humour. Frankly, it did nothing for him.

Lastly, and most importantly, Katherine wanted to know if Jeff had heard anything about a local notable called Leo Vargas. Right ahead of you there, Jeff thought. Vargas had been in Ethiopia, but had not shown up at a meeting connected to the Cape Town summit. No one seemed to know where he was. Katherine included a link to a news report of a light aircraft crash in the region of Ethiopia where Vargas had last been heard of. Who was in the plane? There were conflicting accounts. Could Jeff find any friends, family or associates who

could clarify? Well, perhaps, but it would have to wait until after his assault on Rancho Colorado. And another thing, Katherine said: why such a huge exclusion zone for one little Cessna? Yes, Jeff thought, that would be weird, wouldn't it?

And then there was the message from Annie. This was, to say the least, unexpected. The subject was 'stuff.' He sat and thought about it for a minute. No, he decided, this was not the right moment for Annie's *stuff*. Perhaps later, after he'd cased Rancho Colorado, submitted his findings, and felt relaxed and carefree.

By the time he'd typed in his replies, Eric had returned. He looked strangely pleased with himself.

'Are we cool?' he said.

'I think so,' Jeff said.

Eric laughed.

'Awesome. Let's roll.'

The Suzuki, it turned out, did have four-wheel-drive. In fact, it was stuck in it. So no worries there. Eric took the wheel, pointed the jeep in the direction of the hills, and the two men — the hippy surfer and the subversive veteran — set out to confront the forces of paranoid plutocracy.

It was like something out of *Star Wars*, Jeff thought.

CHAPTER 11

Under heavy, colluding clouds and a blind night sky, Bonnie DiAngelo stole back across the border, from Eritrea into Ethiopia, in the company of Jay Percival, a one-man spin-off from America's global enterprise, whose shiny shoes and cat-like tread betokened the kind of light footprint that any right-minded eco-traveller ought to have admired. Nothing so kind, she thought, could be said about the state of his pick-up truck, which was a mess.

Sand, plastic bottles, and miscellaneous rubbish; dead batteries and bullet cases; papers spilling from folders — secrets? And something that might have been a hand grenade. Freelance spying was clearly a dirty business. When she moved one of the rubber mats, she found forgotten hundred-dollar bills underneath. What *would* the accountant have said?

The journey was difficult and soul-wearying. Under a veiled and indifferent moon and craftily-dimmed headlights, she could barely tell a pothole from a crater; a dip from a crevasse; a sandy ledge from a dune. Jay's face had lost all its customary animation; he was driving the desert and the desert didn't care for it.

At dawn, they reached the foot of the escarpment, and stopped for breakfast — black tea, goat's cheese and flatbread. The first rays of the morning began to glint off the truck, filthy though it was.

'Now they can see us,' she said.

Jay pointed to the west.

'We'll go along that canyon,' he said. 'Should be pretty well hidden. When we come out at the far end, we'll just be traffic.'

The canyon by day was no easier than the desert by night. They crossed the river bed and then crossed it again. Each time she thought the truck would stick on the bank, but it never did. Three times they had to stop to shift rocks from their path. She realised that Jay had never driven this route before; perhaps no one had. He had picked it at random.

The heat built and by mid-afternoon they had burned most of their fuel and exhausted their water supply. More encouragingly, Jay proclaimed an absence

of airborne watchers. What chance of spotting them? she asked. Actually, not much, he said.

At dusk, they reached a village, where Jay exchanged tea for water and emptied the last can of gas into the truck's tank.

'Wake me in an hour,' he said, tipping his seat back.

*

When she woke, they were driving on a surfaced road and the truck's lights were bright.

'Where are we?'

'On the road to Aksum.'

'Good.'

Aksum was the kind of place she should have stuck to all along: a scrappy little city of no small prettiness and high touristic aspiration, with all the myth and history required to back it up. Famous for its *stelae*, its obelisk, its ancient kingdom, and, if you wanted to believe the local Orthodox Church, custodian of the Ark of the Covenant.

'Sleep some more,' he said.

She did.

*

Beside the weather-beaten hangar of a scenic flight company adjacent to the airport, Jay told her to wait in the truck while he conducted business.

'Let's see if they really meant it,' he said, pulling a shopping bag full of dollars out from under his seat.

Twenty minutes later he returned without the bag.

'Seems they were going to sell it anyway,' he said. 'It's worn out. These guys are not the smartest businessmen.'

'But you gave them the full price anyway?'

'Good to have friends.'

'Or buy them.'

'Well, that was what the money was for in the first place, you know? Your tax dollars at work.'

She laughed.

'Funny. Here's a question for you.'

'Okay.'

'I can get on a plane here — not *your* plane, a nice, big one, like *that* one over there. And I can fly to Addis. Then to London. And on to Boston. Why shouldn't I just do that?'

With what seemed intended as exorbitant patience, Jay brushed his dirty, blond hair out of his eyes.

'Got your passport?'

'As a matter of fact, I have.'

'Money?'

'No. But you seem to have plenty.'

He paused and gave her a look that seemed to say *I know you're not serious, tell me you're not.*

'Not worried about Andy?'

'Perhaps he's not the threat you imply.'

Jay turned on the truck's shortwave radio and punched in some numbers.

'Had to talk to him anyway,' he said. 'So...'

The radio buzzed and clicked and then a deep, slow, regretful voice came through.

'That must be Mr Percival. How are you today, Jay?'

'Fine, Walter. Listen, I've got to keep this short. I'm taking route B down to your place, okay? Do what you can, yes?'

'I'll do what I can.'

'I'm going to need your computer guys.'

'I'll wake them up.'

'And I've got Mrs DiAngelo with me. Mr Vargas's, uh, friend. She's not worried about Andy. Keep it short but tell her, will you?'

A fuzzy, over-modulated sigh seeped from the radio. And Bonnie listened as the African elder statesman she'd never heard of asked her to please believe that this man, *Andy*, was truly the worst of the worst. And she could ask Mr Percival if she really wanted to know.

'Well?'

'Okay. So tell me.'

'I'll just run down the highlights.'

And here they came: private military companies; mercenaries; secret contracts and illegal weapons; mayhem-for-hire and off-the-books assassination; privatised kidnapping and out-sourced murder; extra-judicial thuggery and goons gone wild; black sites and torture; and, the ultimate reason for all of this, the immense amount of money that accrued to Mr Andrew Willoughby-St. John and his enterprises.

'Enough?'

It was enough.

'So where's our plane?' she said.

'They're getting it ready. Get out and stretch your legs.'

*

Jay's taxpayer-funded impulse purchase was an ancient four-seater Cessna. It was not fitted with an emergency parachute; nor did it, as far as Bonnie could tell, benefit from GPS navigation. Instead, it had brown, fake-leather seats and ashtrays in the doors.

All this seemed to matter less when she looked down on the roof of Africa — the jagged, green mountains of the Ethiopian highlands — and wondered how much her customers back in Massachusetts might reasonably pay for a similar, but safer, view. Whether Jay had learned to fly at the expense of the CIA, or of African elder statesmen, or — improbably — had shelled out for lessons himself, the results were not impressive.

Bonnie remembered a flight across the empty desert mountains of Northern Namibia, up into the Hartmann Valley, the home of the Himba. Her destination had been a lonely and otherworldly lodge that sat on the bank of the Cunene river, looking across to Angola on the other side. (The lodge had since been refurbished to plutocratic standards and was no longer worth offering to Bonnie's clients. The price of a single night there would buy you a small Volkswagen.) And, on that occasion, her pilot had been a tiny, eager South African girl who must have been at least twenty-one, but looked fourteen. It had been a nerve-testing ride. But the girl flew better than Jay.

The plane, needless to say, had only one working headset, so conversation was difficult. Jay asserted, with reckless enthusiasm, she thought, that he intended to fly down the rift valley, skirting Addis, and refuel near Lake Abaya. They would then cross — without observing the niceties — into Kenya. He would aim for the southern tip of Lake Turkana, refuel again near Nakuru, and head on to Lake Victoria. There would be an overnight stop in Tanzania, and further refuelling in Zambia before they snuck into Namibia via the Caprivi strip. And there would be some sneaky, low-level flying because there was no guarantee as to how many strings Walter could pull or how many radars he could jam.

How many times, Bonnie wanted to know, had Jay flown *route B* down into Walter's stoic but tender embrace? First time, Jay said. I knew it, she thought.

Her voice began to crack up; it was simply too much for her to shout over the noise of the plane. Jay, however, had become talkative. Was it the excitement of the mission — conveying a bewildered travel agent across half a continent? Or the result of sitting in an Eritrean hut for longer than the average covert-action man would prefer?

Things were likely going to get rough, Jay said. And, no, he wasn't talking about his flying. Was Bonnie following the elections? Which elections? The US campaign, of course. Well, if Bonnie felt turned-off, he could relate to that. Problem was, the incoming administration — Jay, like everybody else, could see which way things were going — didn't know what it didn't know. Worse, it didn't think it needed to. You had a whole bunch of people who hated everything about the government except the military. And, by the way — Bonnie might not know this but it was true — the intelligence services were effectively a part of the military nowadays. You only had to look at the funding and who reported to whom. Now, back in *his* day, spies weren't expected to wear combat boots — but he was digressing.

You'd got this trillion-dollar machine, he said. It was slipping out of control. Look, you had generals on the talk shows, making policy; and then letting their guard down in the speakeasy and dining out in the private sector. People back home were too busy avoiding foreclosure to keep count of the War Zones.

'There's no money for nothin',' Jay said, 'but we need all the drones we can get. They're profitable. They're the future of warfare, and warfare is therefore our future. And then, in come these yahoos. This is what they're thinking to themselves: hey, if war is the only path left to greatness, we'll take it, and — *shit!*'

He was looking out to the left and above at another plane in the distance.

'No, come on, you guys aren't that good.'

'Who is it?' she said.

'It's no one.'

They had emerged from the mountains into the valley; she could see roads and settlements. Jay banked the plane and took it lower.

She looked out of her side window and realised that the other plane was much nearer than she had thought. Jay put them into a steep, twisting descent.

'They don't like flying too close to the ground,' he said. 'If they're using a satellite link, there's a delay — they can't react so fast.' Down they went, until Jay levelled out close to the valley edge.

The other plane, she now realised, had come very close. And it wasn't a plane at all — it was small, unpiloted and remorseless in its attentions.

'Another new model,' Jay said. 'Kind of fast. Hang on.'

He pulled the throttle out and climbed sharply. She felt the plane judder. When they evened out, the drone was ahead of them. As she watched, it accelerated and cut across their path.

'Turn around,' Jay said. 'They want us to turn around.'

'Is that thing —'

'Armed? No. Not this one. Just for spying.'

'So what do we —'

'Ignore it. Get down at Abaya. Figure out route C.'

He was flying at full power, and too low, she knew. Could they even make it to Abaya?

The drone made another looping pass in front of them.

'Shit! That thing is *fast*. They want us to go north, fuck 'em. Not gonna do that, I think.'

The plane hit some turbulent air and she felt her seat drop away beneath her.

'Getting hot. Better go up a bit.'

The drone followed them up and cut across their path again — closer this time.

'Why won't they take *no* for an answer?' Jay said, pulling the plane higher.

She looked out of her window to the right.

'Jay? What is *that*?'

Before he could answer, a streak of grey smoke tore across the sky in front of them and exploded in a ball of white light. For a moment she was blinded; Jay must have been too, because the plane banked sharply to the right and began to yaw, before she felt him correcting it. When her sight returned, what she saw, directly in front of them, was the underside of a silver-grey plane about the size, she thought, of a 737, perhaps larger. But when it banked to turn north, she saw that its shape was angular and elongated; that it had no windows, and no cockpit; and its wings were loaded with weaponry.

'*That*,' Jay said. 'Is what you found in the Danakil. *Jesus*. The size of it.'

He eased off on the throttle and fumbled under his seat for a bottle of water. She opened it for him and he drank, slowly. So what did he do now? Get Walter on the shortwave? She watched him drink: his face had lost its tautness and his head seemed to have sunk into his shoulders — the look of the cornered cat, she thought.

And if the little drone's big brother had wanted to shoot them down — well, it could have done so easily, couldn't it? So what did it really want? Her?

Jay handed her his empty bottle.

'I am truly sorry, Mrs DiAngelo,' he said. 'But we will have to go north after all.'

He banked the plane in a tight circle. Ahead of them and receding into the distance was the big drone.

'We can't keep up with that,' Jay said. 'I guess the little guy will keep us company.'

They climbed high above the mountains, following the small drone. Jay slumped in his seat and said nothing.

She thought of Leo, and wondered where he was now. Holed up in Addis? Safely off-limits on a scheduled flight to London, in the unwitting company of two hundred human shields? Jay had been right to send him off on his own. He would *do* something. Even so, it was hard to believe that Leo, or even that unseen mastermind Walter, could match the capabilities of Mr Andrew Willoughby-St. John and his faceless flying corps of robots.

She lapsed into a semi-dream of fearful deserts and death-dealing computers, wondering what Annie would say when she found out her mother had been kidnapped by cyborgs.

Eventually, they turned towards the sun and left the mountains behind.

'Sudan,' Jay said. 'This is ridiculous. There's nothing here. It's all desert. It's the Sahara. We're going to run out of fuel.'

An hour later they did.

Jay brought the plane down between longitudinal dunes. Its wheels dragged in the sand and the plane slid to a halt on its side, its wing snapped. But they crawled out unhurt.

As they stood and watched, the small drone descended and circled them three times. Then it turned to the north-west and faded into the orange glow of the sunset.

Jay kicked at the sand.

'Libya,' he said. 'They've gone to fucking Libya. That's just great. What a perfect place for them.' He started towards the plane. 'I'll check the radio.'

When he returned, he looked embarrassed — but in the grimmest way possible.

'No good?' she said.

'No good.'

'So what now?'

'They know we're here. They know we're not going anywhere. They know we'll be dead in two days.'

'Only two?'

Jay looked at her.

'It's just a question of whether they come back. Or not.'



Thanks for reading this sample!

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