

How did Robin Hood get it so wrong?

Rory
Harden



THE
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Rory Harden

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PLUTOCRAT

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Cover photo of ringtail lemur in Madagascar by Nancy Crockett.

For John Cameron

'Fuck my victims.'

- A famous financier.

CHAPTER 1

It was a quiet house, dug in on a quiet street, low down in the quietest neighbourhood of a quiescent and sequestered town, on a spoiled and subdued frontier, buried in the interior of a vast and under-populated continent that determinedly meant to go on about its business — until the Earth gave out or its luck did — with unquiet satisfaction.

But it hummed with electricity, this house. And it held all the world's secrets within it.

Or it would, if Ricky Ponton had his way. And if he didn't, he was prepared to destroy it. Today might even be the day.

The house lay on the far side of town, but he could see it remotely, on the thin device he held between his trembling thumb and his delicate forefinger. Every room, every corner, every window, every door. The view from all four sides. The front yard, with its deliberately-neglected foliage. The weedy drive, with its undriven car. The side passageway, with its carefully-positioned rubbish bins and over-spec air-conditioners. The never-used barbecue deck at the rear, its planks prickling in the heat.

If he wanted to, he could observe, from the vantage point of a shaggy eucalyptus across the road — named for a happily-unpronounceable mineral — whether or not there were intruders on the buckling roof.

But Ricky, a mischievous elf in a broad-shouldered country, would already have known that. The sensors would have alerted him. And the house, a shonky fibro bungalow you weren't supposed to look twice at, would have known what to do without even asking him.

He slipped his state-of-the-art control surface into the breast pocket of his specially-tailored, mud-coloured safari shirt, sat back on the bonnet of the bashed-up Holden VX Commodore he'd purchased for three hundred dollars the day before, raised his military-grade binoculars, aimed beyond the railway tracks, and squinted down at the town from the monumental pile of rubbish that gave it its name.

What was he looking for? A car. A white Toyota rental with a distinctive mascot nodding on its rear shelf: a blue crow, but no beady eye. The eye would be

missing. The car would drive slowly north-east along the Silver City Highway, then turn right on Iodide Street and ascend, in plain view and via a crumbling switchback track, to where Ricky waited, high up on the remnant of the Line of Lode, with the miners' memorial and the restaurant (not yet open) to his right.

And if he were to ask himself what was he feeling, at this moment, as the Corolla of destiny presumably approached — which he wouldn't, because all sentimental solipsism had long been purged from his system, like corrupted data — it would be this: desperation tunnelling through his innards like a suffocating miner grasping for a chink of light. It was ninety-four days since they'd taken her. You could do a lot in ninety-four days; it was all online to read, if you could bear it. It sank to the bottom of his servers, and pooled there. If he were to get her back, he needed something to bargain with.

Something big.

Come on, little Toyota. I'm waiting for you. I'm dying here.

But then, today might really be the day. It was the stupidest — noblest? — risk he'd taken so far. You *never* met a provider in person. You wanted safety? It lay in the realm of machines; in data wrapped and re-wrapped, passed along, encrypted and re-encrypted, until it turned into fossilised gibberish whose sedimentary layers only Ricky could strip away and interpret. After that, data turned into information and information became — what? Hadn't someone once told Ricky that information wanted to be free? What the hell did *that* mean? Ricky didn't know and didn't care. What mattered was that secrets got out. People hated when that happened — some people. Yet Ricky loved it, and he knew it was right.

But standing up here, alone, on this mountain of spoil wasn't right at all. Okay, you couldn't lock up data. And all that freedom-loving information couldn't be un-liberated. Plastic restraints and sensory deprivation meant nothing to bit streams or databases. They didn't fear the earth beneath their water-cooled cabinets. Such terrors were for people. Just ask Kerri.

He would have to leave Broken Hill soon; he knew that. Australia, too, in all probability. You could feel when the whole match started to go that little bit extra-legal: the crowd went quiet.

So, bye-bye too-generous homeland, hello foreign lawyers.

Once more through the binoculars: no person of interest on the Silver City Highway. And again with the remote vision: no special ops on the veranda, no hazmats checking out the bone-dry hot tub.

Instead, the surprise came from directly behind him. He turned around. Sloughing across the scrappy parking lot towards him was some bloody crate of a vehicle — a pumped-up, jacked-up Land Rover? Where had it come from? There was only one road up to the top of the Line of Lode — and he'd been watching it. That was the *whole point*, after all.

He stood his ground; whatever the hell this thing was, it didn't look *official*. As it got closer, he saw the splatter across its radiator grille and lights. No fly wire, no bug screen — had it driven up from Mildura? It was another big year for locusts. What kind of idiot braved the swarms without protection?

The Land Rover pulled up behind the Commodore. As far as Ricky could tell, it contained a single occupant. This occupant didn't dismount immediately. He

— but a slight, feline figure, so maybe *she*? — cut its engine, and waited. Ricky shrugged, provocatively, then made a *so-what-then* gesture with his cupped hands.

The driver's door opened — it seemed to take a kick from the inside. And what then emerged, Ricky thought, was something that didn't belong in the outback — not even the *near-outback*. A thin, sinuous man, with sticking-up blond hair, designer wrap-around shades, immaculate drainpipe jeans and shiny, black, wing-tip shoes. He rubbed the tops of these shoes, in turn, against the back of his turn-ups. Then he spoke.

'Now, you must be Ricky Ponton. Am I right? The bad guy with all that wicked data?'

American, Ricky thought. Where were the others? They never came singly.

But the American was ahead of him.

'Hey, relax. It's just me. For now.'

Just him. Just some crazy Yank — but which variety? Not a *journalist* — look at that fancy leather jacket; journos wore suede or what they liked to call *sport coats*. And this bloke wasn't over-weight. Not *private security*; they didn't customise their vehicles. And they didn't smile. Random whistle-blower? Shocked at what was really going on at that big new special-ops base up in Darwin? No. Didn't look terrified. Some kind of post-modern spy? Again, no: totally unarmed, as far as Ricky could tell.

What, then?

'Look down there,' the American said.

On the Silver City Highway — a small white car.

'He's not in it.'

'What?'

'Check out the car. Go ahead. See the big blue bird up back? That's the car, as advertised — okay? But your guy's not in it. Go ahead, zoom in.'

Through the binoculars: white Corolla, blind crow, driver in shades with collar up and hat pulled down despite the mounting heat of the morning.

'I don't know who that is,' the American said. 'But it sure ain't your Mr Lin.'

Ricky, Ricky! You don't need to be in control all the time. You understand that now, don't you, love? Shut up, he thought, shut up and let me breathe. Take charge, Ricky, you young bludger. Stop whinging. Don't buckle under.

'Who the hell are you anyway?'

'Well, Ricky, you can call me Jay. We'll do the get-to-know-you later. Take another look.'

He felt his head turn, almost against his will.

'See there?' Jay said. 'Far side of Iodide?'

A big, black SUV with darkened windows. Not a model common in Australia.

'And back here — see? Corner of Chloride?'

A second.

'And then, way back on Silver City?'

The third. Three would be enough, wouldn't it? One for Ricky, one for Mr Lin, one spare with all the hardware.

'Your people?'

'No, Ricky. Not my people.'

'No? Fuck you.'

He stepped towards the Commodore, but Jay grabbed him by the wrist with a grip that belied his fussy-neat, middle-aged cool.

'No, that's not gonna work. Allow me.'

The American threw Ricky aside and dropped into the Commodore's wasted leather seat.

'Follow me in the Jeep.' He indicated the Land Rover. 'Keys are in it. Just up to the edge of the lot, okay?'

'What is this? What are you doing?'

'You really wanted to meet with Mr Lin, isn't that right?'

Ricky stared at him. Mr Lin was already history on Iodide Street.

'Isn't that right?' Jay repeated.

'Yeah, but —'

'Well then you need to come with me.'

'Why?'

'Because I got him.'

'You —'

The Commodore's creaky door slammed and its window squeaked down.

'Get in the Jeep, you hear? And don't worry about me, I'm used to driving on dirt.'

Jay snapped on his seat belt and yanked it tight — way tight. Then the Commodore tore a trench across the spoil of the parking lot in the direction of the access ramp. Ricky watched. Then he turned to the Land Rover. What choice was there? Stay here and be buried? Suffocate while the lawyers tried to dig him out with a spoon? Or bust out for the outback and the red dirt of freedom with this lunatic Yank?

And what might he have done with the real Mr Lin?

The Commodore had vanished. Ricky scraped his way up into the Land Rover, then had to shuffle himself across the gearbox because the steering wheel was on the wrong side. Had Jay *imported* this piece of crunkly British crap from the States?

Ricky got the thing rolling and juddering and pulled it around at the top of the ramp. And there was Jay, some fierce kind of grin on his face, pumping up the slope towards him. Oh and yeah — there was the Commodore: upside-down, smoking, blocking the ramp at its narrowest point, just after the final hairpin.

Jay jumped into the Land Rover.

'So how much d'you pay for that? Two-fifty?'

'Three hundred.'

'Aussie?'

'Aussie.'

'Well worth it, in my opinion. You want to drive?'

Ricky began to think, but gave up in disgust.

'No.'

They switched seats. The Commodore belched into flames.

Jay stuck the Land Rover into low-range.

'Aren't you forgetting something?' he said, tapping Ricky on the breast pocket.

'Shit!'

He took out the controller and checked all the cameras. Nothing happening. Everything normal. No SUVs.

'They know about your little data centre,' Jay said. 'So...'

Ricky winced. Whether or not this cocksure, clothes-horse cowboy was truly poor little Ricky's friend-in-need, he had no idea. But the bloke seemed to know the game.

The Land Rover jerked forward. Jay pointed it towards the rear edge of the parking lot, on the opposite side to the empty restaurant, the unvisited memorial and the exhausted boomtown that still tantalised itself with dreams of a new life to be achieved, any day now, through civic partnership and specialty tourism. And there, at the edge, were Jay's tyre tracks. Somehow, he'd driven this dirt-bucket up the bare, industrial scree left behind by Australia's original wave of dedicated diggers. (If you cared to see how the present wave chose to memorialise itself, you could contemplate all that real estate wedged around the rim of Sydney Harbour — and a lot of secrets there, too, Ricky thought.)

'You better do it,' Jay said, as they took the plunge.

Ricky scrolled to the extreme right and tapped at the red icon. Next, he entered the passkey, and confirmed his intentions, twice. Then he switched to the view from the eucalyptus. There would, of course, be nothing to see — not unless entry were forced. In which case, there would be a firework display. But he could almost feel in his bones the chattering and skittering of the drive heads as they zeroed out each and every one of his secrets — again and again and again.

'You got backups, I presume?' Jay said, spinning the Land Rover past a concrete culvert.

Ricky couldn't help it; he began to laugh.

'I guess you're a pretty smart guy,' Jay said.

He was, wasn't he? Cool, smart — and in control. The bastards hadn't got him yet — and they never would. But that didn't mean they didn't still have a heap of shit to make amends for. Of course he was smart. Look at that: a flip of the thumb told him that his servers in Brazil and Norway had already taken up the strain. More secrets for everyone! Courtesy of Ricky P., the pint-sized Aussie battler-brat, now the scourge of the secret classes, keeping them awake at night, proving once and for all that it wasn't *who* you knew, but *what* you knew.

'This evil, subversive, troop-endangering conspiracy of yours?' Jay said, as they hit the bottom of the slope and the Land Rover battered its way across waste ground towards the highway. 'What do you call it, again?'

'What?'

'Big something.'

'Oh. Big Data Underground.'

'Yeah, that's it.' Jay made a clucking sound with his tongue. 'Kinda pretentious. I woulda called it something different.'

'Oh? Like what?'

'Uh, something like, say, Leaks-R-Us. You know, user-friendly.'

They bumped up on to the highway. Ricky closed his eyes.

'So where are we going?'

'To see Mr Lin.'

'And where is Mr Lin?'

'He's on my ranch.'

'Ranch? What ranch? You've got a ranch?'

'No, what do you guys call it? It's a sheep station.'

Ricky opened his eyes again and stared at side of the American's face. He was concentrating on the road — the Land Rover drifted at speed — and he wasn't grinning any more.

'You have a sheep station?'

'Sure. Just bought it.'

'You...'

'Don't believe me? You'll see. Sheep and everything. Not sure what I'm gonna do with them. Maybe you can advise me.'

'You want sheep advice from me?'

'I feel responsible. Okay, we turn off here.'

Jay flung the Land Rover off the highway into an industrial zone. They bumped past loading bays and refrigerated warehouses and entered a road train marshalling yard. Jay aimed the Land Rover at a double-trailer livestock carrier and accelerated.

Ricky felt himself tense up. Why more crazy driving, he wanted to know; was it really necessary?

'Hold tight,' Jay said.

They hit the trailer ramp, barrelled up inside the trailer, skidded the length of it and came to rest against two tractor tyres that someone — Jay? — had fixed to the end.

'Have to take kind of a run at it,' Jay said.

'What are we doing in this thing?'

'Don't you have drones in Australia?'

'Well, I —'

'I know you have planes.'

A lot of laughs, this bloke.

'Now, you can stay here,' Jay said. 'If you prefer. Or you can ride up front with me. It's a long way.'

Ricky took a deep breath. A long ride. Maybe put the control thing aside for a little time-out?

'We can talk. There's a refrigerator in the cab.'

Ricky looked at his new friend. The man was enjoying himself again.

'There's beer in it.'

'All right,' Ricky said. 'All right. We'll talk. I've got a couple of things I want to know about you.'

'Cool. Let's get this rig rolling. You ever driven one?'

'No. You?'

'No. Came with the ranch. I mean, *station*.'

Between them they hitched up the rear ramp. Then they stood and looked at their new ride.

'Hey, how hard can it be?' Jay asked.

Who was this bloke? Had he really snatched Mr Lin out from under the clampdown and penned him up with his hapless sheep? What chance now for Kerri?

Ten minutes of blood-pumping manoeuvres, and they were back on the highway. Burning up inside the road train's monstrous cab, Ricky flicked the sweat from his unlined forehead and checked the outlook from the eucalyptus.

The bungalow was on fire.

CHAPTER 2

Sandy Quayle shivered in the cold. Winter had come early, sweeping in with a brutality that seemed vengeful, and almost personal. She could take it, now. At first, it had been hard — so hard that survival had seemed impossible. And so it would have been, she felt sure, had she not found her way to the village.

Here, the physical dependence of one person upon another was made manifest. And the kind of debts that you incurred served only to anchor you in solidarity against misfortune, rather than isolating you in misery.

Sure, technically, she was homeless. But she had found a home.

It lay in an unregarded and barely visible crevice, a sloping, wooded gully in an angle between the interstate and the state highway. As she surveyed it now, with its tents, tepees, improvised shacks, log fires and washing lines, she remembered that she had once believed herself to be rich and self-sufficient. She had been wrong on both counts.

A woman very much like herself — but four years younger, at forty-eight, and going by what now seemed the more formal and pretentious name of *Sandra*, rather than *Sandy* — had truly thought that she had achieved *success*: the beautiful home; the secure and rewarding career; bullet-proof good health; the go-getting businessman husband with *plans* for the future. That whole *Dream* thing, in other words.

Wrong on all counts.

Another one of those *financial* things had blown in, like a moral tornado, picking its victims. Such events weren't any more predictable or preventable than real tornados — so respectable opinion held — but they sure did punish the guilty. Or some of them, at least, *Sandy* thought.

And as the wind whipped around her well-wrapped ankles and shook the pine trees above her head, *Sandy Quayle* reminded herself that she *was* to blame, somehow. She knew this, and believed that it was only right that she should suffer the consequences. Well, at least for a time.

So had her adult life been one big mistake?

Young Sandra — home-schooled in math, motherhood and modesty, and brimming over with what she sincerely believed, at the time, to be Christian charity — would have said so. But then along had come Johnny-boy, and young Sandra's eyes had been opened to what might just be possible, if you only got wise to the ways of money. You know, like those folk on Wall Street, or on cable TV.

Now, she felt as though she'd been suckered into a cult. Money was dangerous. The *idea* of money was seductive, and corrupting. And, sometimes, it might just be evil. Thus she was ready to give the faith of her youth another try. Could you do that? Was it allowed? God welcomed sinners back, didn't he? Sure, unless there was something in the small print.

So, anyway, she felt that she could atone. Perhaps, once she'd atoned enough, grace would follow. It was worth a try.

And you could never kill a dream, right? Forget the sex and the violence and the Hollywood politics — *that* was the one thing the movies got right. Some things you never surrendered, however defeated you were.

The village was good. Despite the privations, and the personal problems of some of its residents, it was a place of peace and even — if you were prepared to look at things in a certain way — of dignity and equality.

But the village felt under threat. The land it stood on, though useless for any other purpose, belonged to the Country Club. Rumour said that *something* was going to happen.

And, despite her feelings for the village, Sandy Quayle had resolved to leave. There was still some fight left in her; she felt healthy again and there was a renewed clarity in her mind. This was still America. Things were still possible. Dreams did not have to die. They could be put on hold. She just had to find a way. Any way. And she needed to think.

She would have to wait a while yet for her turn in the 'kitchen', and there was little else to do. So she arranged her insulating layers for maximum warmth, stooped to scoop up the shopping bag in which she stowed her special possessions and made her move.

For privacy, she parked herself on a thick, dry root under cover of one of the pine trees that common opinion held too big and dangerous to fell for fuel. The pine-needle thatch above her cut out some of the fall chill, and blocked the accusatory glare of the full moon.

Luck, she thought. She needed luck. So much depended on luck. If she saw the merest hint of it, she would grasp at it, and not let go.

But before she could conjure any, an intervention came. It wasn't providence, or the kind of petty good fortune she seemed to remember but which ran at a premium these days, like a five-dollar bill on the sidewalk, and it certainly wasn't grace.

It was Hunter Bill, with a sack over his shoulder, looking older, mangier and yet more enthusiastic than ever. His offerings were better than road-kill, but they turned her stomach and she always politely declined.

'Oh, Bill,' she said. 'You know what I'm going to say.'

'Rabbit? Squirrel?'

'No thanks, Bill. Appreciate it and all, but...'

'You sure? Got raccoon tonight!'

'Raccoon? How'd you catch a raccoon, Bill? No, don't answer that.'

'What's a matter, Sandy? You a vegetarian now?'

'Maybe I am, Bill. I don't know.'

Technically, she was. Her dinner would consist of pasta from the pantry on Mellon Street. If she got lucky, someone would spice it up for her with some vegetables.

'It's fresh and it's organic,' Bill insisted, with that pitiful sincerity of his.

'I believe you.'

Actually, if he caught his raccoons or his other critters up on the golf course out back of the Country Club, or anywhere nearby, then they were most likely laced with Emerald Lawn and Verminator Supreme. That stuff couldn't be healthy. The mainstream media were probably right about that.

'Listen,' Bill said. 'You want to come by later to my, uh...' Bill didn't really have a tent. 'To my place...' He rounded off his invitation with a nod and a jiggle of his sack.

'Bear it in mind, Bill. See ya.'

Bill stood his ground for a moment and pursed his lips. Then he looked up at the moon.

'You know what's happening, right?'

'No, Bill. What?'

'China.'

'What about China?'

'Damn moon-shot. They're up there now. Think I can see 'em.'

She waited. Bill's shoulders slumped.

'Know what worries me?'

Sandy shrugged. Bill pointed at the moon with his free hand.

'We left our flag up there. You follow me?'

'I follow you, Bill.'

Hunter Bill rubbed his bony brow, then shook his head and waddled off in search of potential new markets. He might well find them, she thought.

So how had Bill ended up in the village? There was something about him, hidden behind that folksy-woodsman style of his, that made Sandy think that he'd fallen further than she had. No doubt bad luck was involved. It always was. But had there been *pride*, too?

Sandy knew about pride.

On the far side of the interstate, down a twisty, landscaped private road, just off the state highway that led into Stimsonville (remember all those car dealerships?) you could still see it: her beautiful, prideful home. So artfully built! All those extraneous gables; double pillars by the front door; windows so narrow that you had four to a room, but with classy sashes that used actual weights instead of friction; more bathrooms than bedrooms! And so on.

You deserve this mini-mansion! Or so said the broker's brochure.

Look, Sandra, I watch the market, okay? It takes a tumble, we flip out. No-brainer, sweetie.

Well, they flipped out all right. And then Johnny-boy flipped out permanently, in due course — but that really came under Anger.

Hunter Bill claimed he'd *scouted* the area recently. The house might be *bank-owned*, he'd told her, but the rabbits in the front yard sure weren't.

Sandy suspected — no, to be truthful, she was pretty certain — that there had been something fishy about the paperwork. But wasn't it better to be punished too much than too little?

So much for Pride.

There had also been Sloth.

When you watched TV, as Sandra did before she became Sandy, you learned that exercise, in large amounts and with the right clothing, kit and attitude, made you a better person. From this it followed that you would be a healthier person. Virtue conquered disease.

Sandy had to conclude that, despite all those power-walks with Candace and Melanie, she had fallen short. Sure, she had recovered, but insurance was a thing of the past, and these things came back, didn't they? And sometimes she felt dizzy and too tired to move. Maybe it was just hunger; but could it be diabetes? Next time they had one of those open-air clinics at the mall, she would walk over and get in line.

She paused. This stuff was too depressing. *Fight back, Sandy!*

And look — life went on: over by the 'kitchen' people were eating hot food and enjoying it; on the far side of the encampment, Hunter Bill was sharing a joke, at least, if not his catch of the day, with those two girls who slept in the old Mercury. (The car was some kind of *violation*, it seemed. Nothing had happened yet, but its loss would be a blow to the community.) And tomorrow, Thursday, she would get to have her weekly shower.

Thursday was Ladies Night, and quite a scene. The shower had been rigged by Gary, who said he used to be a contractor, and claimed to have installed the 'waterfall' shower that Johnny-boy had thought so essential. Where the water came from was a little mysterious. The rumour was that Gary had found a way to tap into the automatic irrigation system up on the golf course.

And human progress continued. The Chinese were going to land on the moon!

Wow, and, if that wasn't enough, it was dinner-time! Her slot in the 'kitchen' had opened up. She headed for the warmth of the fire. Someone had moved her dried pasta, but it looked like it was all still there. Gary, useful as ever, offered her a pot of water.

While she was waiting for it to boil, she noticed a commotion at the side of the camp nearest to the road, a little-used country lane that came off the state highway and functioned mainly as service access to the Country Club. Bright vehicle lights shone between the pine trees, generating a confusion of shadows.

The Stimsonville tent city was really more of a tent village. The population varied, but was currently about a hundred. And since it hid amongst the pines and was cut off on two sides by the interstate and the state highway, it didn't attract much attention. Unlike the much larger, more famous encampments in California and Tennessee, it didn't get visits from New York feature-writers or west coast independent documentary film-makers. Sandy thought this was a pity, because small towns really were the soul of the nation.

Anyway, the only regular visitor was the local sheriff, a lugubrious and generally sympathetic fellow — excepting the issue of the Mercury — whose

rationale for stopping by was always simply that he was 'monitoring the situation'. He came by on his own. Sometimes he brought canned food. But tonight there seemed to be multiple vehicles.

She glanced at the pot. Still not boiling; what she needed was some more dry wood for the fire. But before she could begin to search, she heard raised voices from the direction of the road. It was the two girls. They were yelling at their car, which looked to be moving under its own volition. But no, there was some kind of a tow-truck. The Mercury was being hauled up on to it. Well, we had *that* coming, she thought. You couldn't get away with breaking the rules forever.

Then came more lights; and the slamming of doors; and an angry voice yelling something though a bullhorn. To her left, she glimpsed Gary slip away into the darkness, his most prized possession — his toolbox — under his arm. To her right, over on the road, she saw three black vans. Each bore the same logo on its side — a stylized sun beaming down upon green fields. There was a name: *Fairmeadow* something. Behind the vans was a heavy dumpster truck. And beyond that, almost out of sight, was the sheriff's patrol car, with its lights out. A still shadow in the driver's seat.

Something buffeted against her shoulder and a camera flashed in her face. When her sight returned she saw that her cooking fire had been kicked over and her dinner lay in the dirt. The camp had been invaded by men in black uniforms and ski masks. They carried long sticks — those things that people used to call billy clubs. What couldn't be smashed — the nylon tents, for example — got thrown into the dumpster.

She wondered if the sheriff could see what was happening, because surely... But something caught her attention. It was Hunter Bill, teetering out from behind a tree at the back of the camp. His frantic gestures could only mean *follow me*. She decided this would be a smart thing to do, even if it should turn out later that he really just wanted her to help him catch more critters or foil the Chinese moon mission.

So she grabbed her shopping bag and ran.

The woods were full of fugitive shapes, stabbing beams and heavy breaths. Nobody spoke. It was a silent scramble for sanctuary — though where that might be, Sandy had no idea. The Country Club? How would that work? Wouldn't it be a little — what was the word? — impertinent? Her fellow villagers, who mostly kept out of the woods, seemed to have little sense of direction. Most of them would end up down on the service road. Hunter Bill, by contrast, was taking the high road in his long stride and she struggled to keep up with him. As for the Mercury girls? They were not to be seen.

On she went, straining her eyes as her manic woodsman flitted this way and that through the trees. The shopping bag slapped against her chapped shins.

Eventually, Bill must have realised that he'd gotten too far ahead of her and had stopped to let her catch up. By now, they were in the bushes that skirted the golf course. Amazingly, the whole thing was lit up. Somebody was playing golf at night.

Bill looked like he was lit up, too.

'You know what this is?'

Did Bill have a conspiracy theory? He often did.

'You know, it makes sense.'

Right then, very little made sense to her — except for one, simple, obvious fact: that her term in purgatory still had some time to run.

Bill gestured to her to sit. She plumped down on a patch of dry grass, taking care not to spill the contents of her shopping bag.

'Shh!' Bill said, as if she had any breath left with which to speak. He withdrew a child's toy telescope from the cavernous interior of his coat and aimed it at a gap in the bushes. Was this what he used to track his prey?

'Look!' he said, passing her the telescope.

'Oh, no — I don't think —'

'You gotta look!' he said, forcing the instrument into her hands. Sometimes you just had to humour him, so she wiped the eyepiece with her sleeve and peered through the thing.

She saw two men standing at the edge of a beautifully-trimmed circle of grass. In the centre of the circle was a flag. About five or six feet short of the flag were two neon-yellow golf balls — vital accessories for playing at night? — but the men appeared to have suspended their game in order to conduct a spirited conversation.

Perhaps ten years apart in age but neither younger than sixty, they dressed similarly, in warm slacks and wind-proof bomber jackets. The older, shorter man's jacket bore some kind of military insignia; the other's made Sandy think *Ivy League*. Their faces and hairstyles might have been purchased from the same catalogue, she thought: strong brows, square chins, perfect noses, fulsome hair — grey-streaked and swept back. The older man used grease on his; the younger's shivered in the breeze like cotton candy. And while the younger man's face retained some softness, the other's looked tough and creased. This aggressive cast was accentuated by his steel-rimmed glasses, shoulders that seemed too wide for his body, and the way he flicked at the grass with his putter.

'Recognise 'em?' Bill said. He sounded excited.

'No, Bill. Should I?'

'Hear what they're saying?'

'No, they're too far away.' She lowered the telescope. 'Perhaps we should —'

'We gotta get closer.'

'No, I really think we should —'

But Bill had produced a cell phone from that junk-filled coat of his. And it looked *very familiar*, in its sparkly pink case!

'Bill! That's Donna-Marie's phone! Did you steal it?'

Bill looked taken aback. His mouth fell open.

'Now, you *know* that's wrong!'

Donna-Marie ran what she called her *cell phone stand* in the village. Whenever she managed to get enough credit on her account and sufficient juice in her battery she would put out her shingle and wait for business. If you had fifty cents you could make a domestic call. International calls were available by special arrangement and prices were negotiable. Cell phone reception was iffy in the camp, and Donna-Marie didn't do refunds, so customers were routinely advised to seek higher ground.

'I was making a call!' Bill said. 'But then all hell —'

'You know I don't like that word. Did you pay for it?'

'Sure! Fifty damn cents!'

She gave him the kind of reproachful frown she used to give Johnny-boy's wild-girl nieces when they were all living together in the trailer.

But really — a call? Who could Bill possibly be calling? She felt a pang of sadness; Bill lived in a fantasy world.

'Looks like a conspiracy to me,' Bill said, brandishing the cell phone like a Bowie knife. 'There's an app on here. I'm gonna bug 'em.'

Well, that just proved her point for her, didn't it?

Bill got down on his hands and knees and, like some demented attack-rabbit, bobbed off into the bushes. She decided to wait for him. You didn't want to be alone in the woods; terrible stories circulated in the village. Even if only some of them were true, well...

With a quick, mumbled prayer — the first in a while — and a supreme effort of will, eyes closed, she erased them from her mind. There followed a long moment of floating in the void, and then it hit her: she was *truly* homeless.

Not homeless in the sense of losing the mini-mansion; not homeless in the manner of a person living in someone else's trailer; not homeless as in sleeping in your car. She had no money. Should the temperature drop even further, the clothes she wore might not be enough to keep her alive through the night.

Her friends and associates — all but one of them — had been dispersed. Where would they all go? The shelter in Stimsonville had been closed since the last elections.

She believed that her behaviour in the camp had been exemplary. That she had been a good neighbour, a friend in need, a shoulder to cry on — none of this could be in doubt. Then again, she lacked the skills and resources of people like Gary and Donna-Marie and Hunter Bill. And this meant that her contribution had inevitably been... Well, she didn't quite know how to think about it.

Those hateful words that had become so common these days — *moocher*, *freeloader*, *deadbeat*, *subprime* — well, they didn't apply to *her*, surely. They couldn't. And yet she felt a debt, a nagging guilt. What did it mean? Ah, but if you really thought about it, there was some small solace to be had: out there somewhere, walking about, heads held high for all she knew, were people who were guilty as you-know-what — but whose guilt *didn't nag*. She, Sandra Quayle, was superior to such people.

Then came the merest rustle in the bushes: Hunter Bill was back. She felt glad that she was a person, not a critter. Bill's face looked flushed — with triumph?

'Just as I thought,' he said.

'Aha! And what conclusion did you come to, Bill?'

'It looks bad, all right. The old guy with the nine-iron? I know him. I don't trust him, Sandy.'

It occurred to her again that Bill must have had a former life quite different to hers and, for a fleeting moment, she wondered what it had been like.

'No, I mean, did you figure out the conspiracy?'

'Maybe. Need to do some research.'

Research? Even before tonight's events the camp had lacked Internet access. And the public library in Stimsonville had shut down years ago, about the time

they were turning off the street lights. If you bought a cup of coffee you could have Wi-Fi. But the coffee cost three dollars.

'Well, you do that. Then we can all sleep safe in our beds!'

Bill gave her that sour smile of his. Really, he did lack for the personal graces sometimes.

'Let me ask you something,' he said.

'Okay.'

'You really don't recognise those two guys?'

'No.'

'Not even the old guy?'

Had there been *something* about him? Did it matter? She shook her head.

'You keep up with the news, Sandy?'

'No. Why on Earth would I want to do that?'

The news was always terrible. It was mayhem, vileness, pornography. Why did the mainstream media need to say all those horrible things about America?

'So you didn't catch the *Journal* this morning?'

That sour smile again. She really ought to tell him to stop it.

'No. I did not.'

And where, for that matter, did Hunter Bill get his newspapers delivered?

'Then I guess this'll come as a surprise to you.'

'What?'

'There's a Committee to Save America.'

Now if he was going to get all political, or disrespectful, then she might just have to consider taking her chances on her own in the woods.

'Is there now? Bill, do you really think America needs a committee to save it?'

Bill looked at her as if she'd said something truly weird. Which was weird in itself, she thought, because *he* was the weird one.

'They're here to confirm their nominee. Their candidate.'

'Candidate? For what?'

'For President.'

'Oh, Bill. You're so full... So full of crap! There. You made me say it.'

Bill sighed.

'As a matter of fact, I do need to...'

'Oh, no! Well you take yourself off over there, you hear? I don't need to see that.'

Who was she kidding? She'd seen plenty in the camp.

Bill got to his feet.

'All righty. But you stay here, Sandy, okay? Don't you move.'

With barely the snap of a twig, Bill shimmied off into the murk of the pine woods. She let out a long sigh and her breath hung on the still air like clean linen on a washing line.

It was still hanging there when something hard nudged the flappy toe of her right sneaker.

It was a fluorescent orange golf ball.

CHAPTER 3

Sandy Quayle knew nothing about golf, except that it came with a price tag. Johnny-boy used to fantasise about joining the Stimsonville Country Club, Resort & Spa, and *trading up* from fishing on the lake to *networking* on the green. But that was never going to happen. The fees had been almost as much as their mortgage payments were by the end.

How much did a golf ball cost? She picked it up and inspected it. Printed on the ball was some kind of heraldic shield, which contained the letters 'W' and 'P'. Someone's initials?

What should she do? Leave it where she found it? Hurl it back on to the course? Oh, but no — she might hit someone, and then what? Wait for Bill to return and get his opinion? No, Bill would just take it and sell it.

And right now, poor old Mr WP was up there, hunting for his ball, searching this way and that. Would he be pleased, or even thankful, if some generous-spirited person were to return his property to him and spare him his fruitless efforts? Well, maybe. Sandy had learned that gratitude was an unreliable quality. But she really needed that *luck*.

She hauled herself to her feet, collected the shopping bag, carefully, in her right hand and wrapped her left around the ball. Then she pushed her way uphill through the bushes.

Almost at once she came upon a six-foot-tall chain-link fence. It ran through the midst of the bushes and was painted green — presumably so as not to offend the sight of the club's members, while still providing them with the security they expected. For a moment she thought she would have to abandon her plan. Then she saw the hole: someone had removed a square section of the fence, at ground level. Bill? First theft and now vandalism? Really, you had to fret for the man's soul.

The hole, she calculated, was just big enough. Should she? Mr WP would laugh when she told him, wouldn't he? Sandy the raccoon, fences can't keep her out! Down she went. On the way through, she felt the back of her coat rip. But she had so many layers underneath; it wouldn't make much difference. On the far

side of the fence, she stood up again, checked her shopping bag to make sure that nothing had fallen out, and advanced into the light.

It was brighter than she'd expected. Amid the blur she immediately made out the shape of a golf buggy, with driver. Just to the right were three men. One held a golf bag, the second some kind of briefcase, and the third, the shortest, a club. That had to be Mr WP.

'Drop the bag!'

The voice came from her left. Her eyes focused on two men dressed in black jackets and hats. They looked almost identical to the men from *Fairmeadow* — but they had guns, and one of them had a German Shepherd on a chain.

'Down on the ground! Drop the bag!'

This time from the right — two more men, rifles raised.

'Drop the bag! Last warning!'

She let her shopping bag fall to the ground.

'Get down!'

She lay down on her stomach. Out here the grass was wet — was it Gary's irrigation system? For a few moments there was silence. Then a radio crackled. Some words were spoken, but she couldn't make them out. Nobody moved.

Then the radio blared again and one of the armed men began to approach her shopping bag, one step at a time — she could see it out of the corner of her eye. He knelt down on the grass. First he leaned slowly to one side, and then the other, as if the bag were a rare animal that might take fright and vanish. Then he lowered himself to the ground, pulled down a visor in front of his face and, holding his rifle at arm's length, poked its barrel gently into the opening of the bag. Next he levered up the barrel, so as to expose the bag's contents to view.

Humiliation. But *her own fault!* Why hadn't she listened to Bill?

This inspection seemed to last much longer than necessary. But then all at once it was over, the man was on his feet, her bag was upside-down in his hands, its precious cargo cast on the ground, the dog all over it.

She felt the pressure of a boot between her shoulder blades, and the travel of gloved hands over her exposed portions. Presently this stopped, and she was left alone.

When she dared to look up, she saw that Mr WP was in conference with his security detail and the man with the briefcase. The dog was enjoying a drink to the rear of the buggy, while the caddy organised his clubs. Nobody looked her way.

For a moment she wondered who Mr WP might be. Was he especially important or did every club member enjoy such protection? Might Bill's ravings about *Committees* and *Presidents* be less than completely mad?

Well, you know, she really didn't mind. Let them organise their *Committees*. Let Bill fuss over his *Journal*. Let the Chinese colonise the galaxy. She, Sandra Quayle, now that her moment of terror had passed, was going to do what she'd d—n well set out to do.

She struggled to her feet. Then she raised her left hand, uncurled her fingers and, gripping it firmly between thumb and forefinger, presented the orange golf ball on high for all the world to see.

The caddy saw it first. He touched his boss on the elbow. One by one, heads turned.

Mr WP, she was now able to observe, was a fine, sleek, mature specimen. Beneath his navy-blue wind-cheater, he wore a crisp white shirt, open at the neck, under a pale-blue sweater. Though a little generous about the waist and somewhat jowly around the face, with his clear eyes, plum-fresh cheeks, brilliant teeth, elegant, raked-back hair and rich, smooth forehead, he was the picture of prosperous health. His lips appeared set in a tolerant smile, like those of an indulgent uncle who'd done well on the stock exchange. Sandy had never had such a relative, of course, but she'd occasionally imagined one, during the trials of early adolescence, when the family's resources had always seemed so inadequate — and he'd looked quite a lot like this.

Mr WP looked her way — and registered the ball. His expression became one of delight and surprise, as if an old friend had unexpectedly dropped by for tea. He took a step forward, but then changed his mind and tapped the caddy. Sandy waited. When the caddy got close enough, she simply handed him the ball. He nodded but said nothing. Then he retreated and offered up the ball for his boss to inspect. More nodding. The caddy unzipped a pocket on his golf bag, dropped Sandy's ball into it and took out a fresh one.

Then everyone looked at her and waited. *Well, she thought, that's it — I've done what I came to do.* Guardedly, and with an eye out for the dog, she collected her shopping bag, picked up her possessions and stowed them. Still they watched her. She backed away, towards the bushes and the hole in the fence.

Then, by purest accident, her gaze met with that of Mr WP. The tolerant smile morphed into something more decisive. He turned to the man with the briefcase — some kind of personal assistant? — and spoke into his ear. The assistant frowned and seemed to protest. But Mr WP was firm. The assistant shrugged and began to march towards Sandy, reaching inside his padded jacket as he did so.

By the time he stood in front of her he'd removed his wallet. It was stuffed with money. He selected a bill and offered it to Sandy. She took it and thrust it into her pocket without looking at it. Then she turned to the bushes.

'Wait.'

She turned back. The assistant was in a crouch, the briefcase on his knees. He removed a piece of paper from the briefcase, scrawled something on the bottom of it with a fountain pen, and stood up again.

'Here.'

Sandy took the piece of paper, folded it and slipped it into her shopping bag.

'Good night.'

The assistant turned and trudged back to his boss with a gait that seemed to say *happy now?* Sandy took one last look at that peaceful, indulgent, almost *kind* smile, and dived back into the bushes.

Bill was waiting for her, his hair standing on end — but it did that quite often anyway.

'Sandy! What did I tell you!'

Oh, and what a telling-off he gave her, indeed. But she deserved it, didn't she?

When he was done, she showed him the piece of paper. He flapped his arms with comic despair.

'BREAK THE DEADLOCK!' she read. 'The Man to Save America.'

'That's the guy,' Bill said. 'Just like I told you!'

She read on. Concerned citizens were urged to vote against partisanship and return America to its democratic roots. Only one man could defeat the special interests and restore the Republic. There followed a picture of this man. He stood behind a lectern labelled with the letters 'NACF'. Behind him were two American flags, angled jauntily.

It was Mr WP. His name was Willard G. R. Prince, which Sandy thought sounded pretty fancy. After that came a web site address and an exhortation to volunteer at your local campaign headquarters — and here Mr Willard G. R. Prince's assistant had jotted down an address on Mellon Street.

'What's NACF?' she asked.

Bill sniffed.

'New American Century Fund. Guy's an investor. Makes a ton of money. But you need an invite.'

'An invite?'

'Yeah. He give you anything else?'

'Yes.'

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a five dollar bill.

CHAPTER 4

Mr Lin's material was comprehensive, convincing, urgent, important, shocking, occasionally devastating — and an utter disappointment. Comprising video, official documents, and secret internal Party reports and communications from the Organization and Propaganda departments, it detailed villagers displaced and dispossessed by politically-connected developers; tainted products; the covering-up of environmental scandals; the rigging of pollution statistics; the non-enforcement of building codes in earthquake zones; atrocious working conditions in factory towns; the ever-popular corruption of local party bosses; the fabled mistreatment of officials detained under the Central Discipline Inspection Commission's *shuanggui* procedure; the never-ending self-enrichment of *princelings*; the time-honoured repression of religious minorities; and, that grand old tradition, the theatrical harassment of dissidents.

Nothing new, in other words. Almost all of it could go online immediately, Ricky thought. It might do some good. He'd forward it to Norway for the identity-protection work.

There was a memorandum from the Central Leading Group on Foreign Affairs that complained vaguely — at least as translated by Mr Lin — about *inappropriate relations* between unnamed Chinese and American business interests. It was unusual and mildly intriguing, depending on the nature of the *relations*.

But there was nothing he could bargain with; Kerri was out of luck. Egregious, rampant and breath-taking as they were, none of Mr Lin's corruptions appeared to implicate anyone higher than Provincial Committee level. The Americans would laugh at him. Speaking of which...

Mr Jay Percival hadn't yet got around to explaining what he was doing in Australia, and why it involved Ricky. He claimed to be a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency. Ricky's database of American secrets backed this up — but did he quit or was he fired? Predictably, perhaps intentionally, this was unclear. These days, Jay said, he was a self-employed consultant, specialising in Africa. The database had nothing to say about that. And when Ricky noted that Jay's work must pay pretty well if he could afford to go about buying sheep

stations, the American had cracked up at him. All right then, Ricky thought, we'll wait.

And so now he sat on the front deck of Jay's *ranch house*, tinny in hand, watching Jay's jackaroos instruct their new boss, and Mr Lin, in the art of herding sheep with motorcycles. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves. Personally, Ricky sympathised with the sheep.

So what did this smart-arse Yank, who, by the way, seemed to be absolutely bloody *loaded*, to judge by the fancy computer gear he kept in his kitchen, want with Australia and poor, persecuted little Ricky? How about we ponder the geopolitics for a bit and then spot the connection?

What did Americans think about when they thought of Australia? Sydney Opera House, kangaroos, Crocodile bloody Dundee. Yes, but what about your strategic types? They thought, *dirty great aircraft carrier* in the western Pacific. Hence the attraction of Darwin for the special ops crowd.

So far so good. Now, what's the connection between our can-do *consultant* who loves Africa and the US military posture in the Northern Territory? Who's stirring things up in these two regions? Answer: China. Easy enough, isn't it? China's cutting up rough in the South China Sea, which, for some reason that the Pentagon's top analysts can't put their laser pointers on, China seems to regard as its *back yard*. And China's all over southern and central Africa, digging up treasure, putting down infrastructure, discomfiting some of the locals, sure, yet not actually enslaving them like the bloody Europeans did.

But the Yanks don't care if the Chinese are putting Tanzanian chicken farmers out of business, so there must be something else going on.

Who's been specialising lately in Chinese secrets? Ricky. And who blew the whistle on that super-secret, revised version of the China-containing Air-Sea Battle scenario that had to be publicly rubbish — junior officers gone rogue and so on — because no one in the Australian government had been informed about the use of Aussie territory, supposedly? Kerri.

Almost there. But not quite.

Ricky had to wait until after dinner, which Jay insisted on cooking himself, whilst monitoring all those busy devices in his kitchen.

'How'd you like to see where they shear the sheep?'

'Why not?' Ricky said.

It was a dark, sun-baked wooden shed that reeked of lanolin, sweat, oil, and warm electrics. Fear, too, Ricky thought — but was it the animals' or his? The electric shears hung on metal hooks attached to the barn's uprights, their coiled black cables looped up into the eaves.

'Tried it yourself, yet?' Ricky asked.

'No. Get kind of squeamish around animals.'

Right, Ricky thought; might mess up those shoes, too.

'How's the financial situation?' Jay asked.

'Difficult.'

The major credit card and Internet payment companies had been arm-twisted into black-listing Big Data Underground. Who said the US Congress never got anything done? Ricky had to rely on smaller operators that weren't always trusted by his right-thinking but timorous supporters.

'Yeah, figures.'

Jay removed one of the shears from its hook, inspected it, wrinkled his nose at it, and replaced it.

'How's the situation with Kerri Law?'

Ricky kicked at one of the uprights.

'Difficult.'

'She really an Elvis fan?'

'Yes, she is.'

Kerri had been a contract cleaner at the US embassy in Canberra. She'd found the Elvis CD in a waste-paper bin. It wouldn't play on her stereo, so she put it in her computer. She'd been hoping for 'Love Me Tender', but what she got was Air-Sea Battle, the bootleg version. She'd shown it to her dad, a retired and defeated union official, who'd recommended Ricky.

'You paying for her lawyer?'

'Yes.'

'That's got to be expensive.'

'It is.'

'They really want to send her to Virginia?'

'Apparently, they do. Or somewhere.'

'Why'd you let her go to London?'

'She has friends there. She thought she'd be safe.'

'That's a little naïve.'

'I would have stopped her. She was on a plane before I knew.'

Jay let out a long, noisy breath, as if Ricky's troubles were almost more than he could bear.

'Plus,' Jay said, 'you've got Mr Lin to worry about. *He's* not going back to China. I guess he's kind of your responsibility, too.'

Thanks, Ricky thought. Spell out the obvious for me. *Never* meet providers in person.

'And you've lost one of your server farms, and the Australian government is getting ready to whisper a formal complaint out of the side of its mouth once our guys in the black SUVs catch up with you and ship you out.'

'Your guys?'

'You know what I mean.'

That was enough, Ricky thought. Why not cut straight to the proposition?

'Stop fucking with me, Jay.'

'Ready to talk?'

'Ready.'

'All righty.'

Jay cast his gaze around the shed. There was a short wooden pole, propped up in a corner. He retrieved it.

'Come over here.'

In the centre of the floor, Jay drew a ragged circle in the dirt.

'Here,' he said, marking a cross at one point on the circle. 'That's Khaukphyu in Myanmar.'

He made another cross.

'That's Chittagong in Bangladesh.'

Two more crosses.

'Hambantota in Sri Lanka. And Gwadar in Pakistan. That's your *string of pearls*, right there.'

He looked up at Ricky as if he felt that Ricky ought to be impressed.

'Well, I'm impressed,' Ricky said. 'What is it?'

'Some people look at this and what they see is strategic encirclement.'

'Of the Indian Ocean?'

'Yeah. Obviously.'

'So those are bases?'

Jay shook his head.

'No, no, no! Ports. Purely commercial. Built and operated by China.'

'But they *could* be naval bases? One day?'

'You betcha.'

Ricky wondered if Jay expected him to deliver up computer blueprints for secret underwater Chinese submarine pens. If he did, he was going to be as disappointed as Ricky had been with Mr Lin. Chinese military secrets were far, far harder to get hold of than American ones. For good reason.

Jay leaned on his stick.

'Let me tell you about my boss.'

Jay had a *boss*? No, the bloke answered to himself, didn't he?

'Go ahead.'

'His name is Walter Gabo. He's one of these ANC elder-statesmen guys who
—'

'I know who he is.'

'Sure. Political guy like you. You would.'

'So what's his problem?'

'His problem is, he remembers the Cold War.'

'So tell him to get over it.'

Jay pointed at the eastern coast of Africa with his pole.

'What if, Walter says to himself, they decide to add another pearl or two?'

'Thought they loved Chinese investment over there. Just like we do here.'

'They do. This whole *peaceful rise* thing? They're totally into that. It's the *strategic rivalry* that gives them pause.'

'With you guys.'

'Yeah, with us. Their — Walter's — feeling is, they've done that once, don't want to do it again.'

'Another Cold War — fought out on their patch?'

'That kind of thing.'

All very fascinating, Ricky thought. Jay could dress it up a bit and stick it in an op-ed in the New York Times.

'Isn't he being a bit alarmist, old Walter?'

'He's heard rumours.'

'Tell him to relax. What's it all got to do with me?'

Jay propped his pole up against a pillar and rubbed his hands together slowly.

'Now, I don't want you to over-react. No offence, but you're obviously one of those jumpy, intense guys. I can understand it. I get it. But I don't want you to freak out, okay?'

Ricky began to get that tunnelling feeling again.

'Why would I freak out?'

Jay paused. Then he stroked the bridge of his nose.

'Some people in my old office have gotten in touch.'

The ripe, animalistic fug in the shed seemed to condense on Ricky's skin. This bastard had almost seduced him. He'd turned the Commodore into a flaming barricade, plucked Ricky from the jaws of the rendition mill, spirited him off to the outback, cooked him dinner, hinted at some kind of bloody bailout, flattered him with geopolitics, and it was all a wind-up! His chums from the bloody *office* were about to jump out! Where were they, then? Had they disguised themselves as fucking sheep?

'I said, don't freak out, Ricky.'

'Where are they?'

'Back home behind their desks.'

'What *the fuck* do you want?'

'Calm down and I'll tell you.'

'I want to get out of this bloody shed.'

'Yeah, why don't we?'

Outside, the air had cooled, the light had gone, and the southern sky was out on parade. Its sudden, implacable beauty — such a contrast to the murky northern skies of Ricky's early career — brought down a sullen peace upon him. And those were real sheep, for fuck's sake. *Don't freak out, Ricky. Stay in control.*

They began to walk slowly back towards the house.

'I want you to go to Hong Kong,' Jay said. 'And meet a guy there.'

Ricky let this modest suggestion hang in the dry air. Another *in-person*? No way. It was impossible in any case.

'I can't go there. China's off-limits. Even Hong Kong.'

'We'll come back to that.'

'Who's this *guy*?'

'Well, he's kind of special, Okay, they tell me he is. Got some hot shit direct from the bowels of the PLA.'

'Sounds enticing.'

Actually, military secrets from the inner sanctums of the People's Liberation Army would almost certainly qualify as *hot shit*. It was the sort of stuff he'd been hoping for from Mr Lin.

'There's a problem, though.'

'And what's that?'

'This guy. It was all set up. The *office* sent out a team. It's all systems go, everybody's expecting to get a citation from the director. Then the guy turns around, and you know what he says?'

'No. What?'

'He's only going to deal with *you*.'

'Me?'

'You.'

'Why?'

'Well, that's a good question. Far as I can tell, nobody knows. Or, if they do, they're not telling me.'

Ricky looked up at the sky. It was as obvious, he thought, as the Southern Cross.

'It's a setup.'

'Could well be.'

'So I'm not going. Can't, anyway.'

Jay stopped.

'Whatever this guy's got, I want it.'

'Good luck.'

Ricky kept walking. Jay caught up to him.

'Isn't this right up your alley?'

'Normally, yes.'

'Could be the entire Chinese military posture in Africa. Plus how they plan to counteract a US response.'

'Big stuff.'

'No kidding.'

Ricky stopped.

'Look, why are you even doing this? I don't get it. You've got all that money — from somewhere — why don't you just retire?'

'And do what? Play golf?'

Jay prodded Ricky on the chest with his forefinger.

'I'm like you. I'm on a mission. This is my life. I'm out on my own.'

'What about your *friends* in the *office*?'

'You need to understand that they're not my friends. They hate me almost as much as they hate you. I bailed out when fire-power became more important than brain-power. They don't forgive. But a few of them are amenable to a deal.'

'There's a deal?'

'Yeah. Ask me what's in it for you.'

'Tell me.'

Jay took a deep breath and stretched out his arms.

'Look at that sky. Amazing. But look — you got to understand the context here. People are going crazy back home. It's Sino-phobia. Our bat-shit politicians are going nuts. They're on Freedom News talking about manifest destiny. This moon-shot thing doesn't help. We got some dumb plutocrat, says he'll deal with China if the people make him President in November. And they damn well might! It's a volatile situation. And it needs to be handled carefully.'

'By you?'

'You, me and Walter.'

'And your *frenemies* back home?'

Jay let his arms flop to his sides. And was that a snort or a chuckle?

'Well, that's where it gets interesting. What we have to do — well, I guess this is really *your* job — is *detoxify* the material before we give it to 'em. We got Mr Lin here to help you.'

'You mean fake it up?'

'Broadly speaking.'

'Why couldn't we cut them out altogether?'

'They know who the guy is. We don't.'

'Why doesn't he contact me directly?'

'Don't know. Maybe they've got him holed up somewhere. Maybe he thought it was too risky.'

'Sounds risky all right. Anyway, I told you. I can't do it.'

'That's crap. Here you go.'

Jay pulled something out from the rear pocket of his skinny jeans and handed it to Ricky. It was a British passport. Ricky flipped it open. There was his picture: semi-long, dirt-brown hair, straggling across his curved forehead; round, too-small ears sticking out either side; pinched mouth; bottle-top chin; florid cheeks and an expression at once grumpy and mordant. There were prettier pictures, he thought, but perhaps none so accurate. He looked like an IT guy with a secret sorrow. Which, of course, he was. And his name was David Thatcher.

Jay looked happily inscrutable, like a bad poker player with a winning hand.

'That's right. You get to be a spy. You get to have your *own* secrets! Man, are you gonna be thrilled.'

'You've got to be bloody joking, mate.'

'You can do the accent, I guess. You lived there long enough. Radicalised in jolly old England!'

Long enough was right. Here came the slideshow: Ricky, the little Aussie kid who was useless at rugby and cricket; Ricky the truculent teenager with no proper respect for authority; Ricky suffering under depressive skies as everyone else got on their bikes and made a mint; Ricky the promising student who couldn't see past the mouldering bureaucracy or block the stench, as it then smelled to him, of a culture in terminal decay; Ricky the trouble-making foreigner, always on the radar; Ricky, faking identities and raking through the dustbins of the powerful, because the Internet isn't up to speed yet; Ricky, the fucking idiot, radiating self-pity after his beautiful blonde girlfriend, two inches taller than him and two social classes out of reach, turns out to be an on-duty employee of the Special Branch (or was it MI5?); Ricky, on a plane back to Australia, and good riddance.

But Jay was saying something.

'I said, the deal is, you get Kerri back. No strings. What do you say?'

CHAPTER 5

The food pantry on Mellon Street had closed down. Did this mean that times were getting better, and its services were no longer needed? Sandy Quayle hoped so, but there was no explanation posted, and the appearance of the rest of the town, she feared, did not support this hypothesis.

She had spent the night in the woods with Hunter Bill and, in a way, it was lucky that the village had gone, because imagine having to explain *that!* Of course nothing *untoward* had transpired. But people like Donna-Marie certainly liked to talk, didn't they? Bill, it turned out, had been industrious. He'd constructed a chain of hides. And one of these had afforded them shelter. To Bill's chagrin, though, it had not been a fruitful night, hunting-wise. Maybe all that commotion had scared the critters away.

In the morning they'd descended to the camp site. It was deserted. What a mess! And such a shame, too. For all its privations, the village had worked somehow. It'd had *spirit*. But perhaps this upset was just what she needed — what they all needed. A wake-up call. To get up, and get out there, and start making things happen. She'd outlined these thoughts to Hunter Bill, but he didn't seem to think much of them.

They'd scavenged enough for breakfast — no *wild meat* for Sandy, just some damp cookies — and then Bill had announced his intention to *move on*. He was going to head south, or maybe southwest. The weather was better down there and that's where the future was. If there was one. Sandy could come with him if she wanted, but she'd better understand that he set quite a pace, and he wasn't about to let her slow him down. He explained this in an offhand, brusque sort of way, but she wondered whether he secretly yearned for her presence at his side. Had he once had a family?

She'd let him down gently. And he seemed to accept it. But then, when she explained her plan, he got all out of sorts. Well, she couldn't help that. When you were handed an opportunity, you had to take it. What if it were the last chance you were ever to get?

Unlike some people, Sandy didn't care to go on about God all the time. But when you were given a gift, what were you supposed to do? No, she didn't mean

the five dollars. That was just, like, a kind of tip for returning the golf ball. What she meant was the invitation, from Mr Willard G. R. Prince personally, to join his campaign for President.

Bill's response to this had been very vulgar indeed. But she forgave him. She was convinced — almost entirely convinced — that something significant had passed between them, when her gaze had met with his — Mr Prince's, not Bill's. All right, there was a tiny bit of doubt. But surely, she ought to have faith? How could you live if you questioned every last drop of providence? You'd rationalise yourself to death, like those sad scientists over in Europe. So did she have enough faith? Well, if not, she'd just have to get herself some more.

She looked at her reflection in the food pantry's dusty window. Looking good in the camp had been a challenge. Looking *clean* had been a challenge. But she was proud — no, make that satisfied — with the way she looked this morning. It was certainly the best she could have done.

Okay, she had resorted to subterfuge. But she felt confident that the good works to come would cancel that out. At a gas station on the state highway, she'd loitered outside the restroom until a suitable victim — a smart, elderly lady with a sagging Cadillac — emerged. Then she'd staged a little song-and-dance and cadged the key. Once inside, she'd set to work. And how fortunate she was that she'd managed to hang on to her shopping bag!

She'd trimmed her hair, washed it and dried it under the electric hand-dryer. Then she'd pulled it back in a scrunchie. Though there was barely enough space in the restroom, she'd disrobed, rinsed herself down and dried off with toilet paper. Then she'd slipped into her alternate set of underclothes and climbed back into her mom jeans and polo shirt. The rip in her coat was much worse than she'd thought and she'd made the tough decision to discard it. She couldn't show up looking like *that*.

Her extra layers went into the shopping bag. It bulged, but that couldn't be helped. By now someone was banging on the door, so she finished up by applying a thin layer of the foundation that Donna-Marie had given her. It was too light for her skin — not surprising, given Sandy's long sojourn in the outdoors — and made her look a little ghostly, but it was better than nothing.

Then she'd exited the restroom and handed the key to an attendant, who said some rude things about who was and who wasn't allowed to use the facilities — but that was really *his* problem.

Fortunately, it was a sunny day, so the walk into town had not been unpleasant. She'd done it in just over three hours.

According to the *invitation*, Mr Prince's local campaign headquarters was located about four blocks east of the food pantry. If Sandy squinted she could see, far off, beyond the boarded-up storefronts, the weedy parking lots, and the empty intersections, a tiny effusion of red, white and blue. That had to be it — flags! Fluttering in the breeze! It lifted her heart.

She was about to set off when she heard a *whoop-whoop* behind her. It was the sheriff in his patrol car. He rolled up to her and buzzed down his window.

'Hey, Sandy. How're ya doin' today?'

He seemed a little uncomfortable. Was there something on his mind?

'Oh, I'm just fine!'

'You happen to see old Bill anywhere?'

'Uh, not lately.'

'When d'ya last see him?'

'Last night.'

'Last night, huh?'

She couldn't see his eyes, because of his reflective shades. But she registered that lascivious twist he gave his lips.

'Know which way he went?'

'No.'

Okay, Bill had said he was heading south or south-west. But Bill said a lot of things.

'Thing is, we got a complaint. From the country club. Vandalism. You know anything about that, Sandy?'

She shook her head.

'No? You're not holdin' back on me, are ya?'

'Oh, no. I wouldn't... I mean...'

The sheriff lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

'You know what *obstruction of justice* is, Sandy?'

She froze.

'Was it Bill that done it?'

This was horrible! What could she say? She was sure that it *was* Bill, but she had no proof...

'I —'

'Nah, I'm just fuckin' with ya. You take care, Sandy, ya hear?'

He buzzed his window up and rolled his car lazily down Mellon Street.

She felt her mood sag. He'd been so casual with her. Disrespectful. He hadn't even mentioned the eviction. Well, things in Mr Prince's world would be different. Of course they would. Sandy needed to get herself into that world. And stay there. She took a deep breath and resumed her march.

Plus, Bill had been so cynical. And wasn't it *exactly* that kind of attitude that had caused so many of today's problems? He hadn't been present when Sandy and Mr Prince met, had he? No, so he wasn't entitled to say those things. There was something special about Mr Prince. Bill might not *get it*, but then he hadn't seen the way that Mr Prince had overruled his snooty assistant in Sandy's favour. It might seem a small thing, but... Well, *she knew*.

The campaign office occupied a former hardware store. It was crammed full of desks. On each desk were two computer screens. The people behind them looked very young. What if she were rejected for being too old? This moment of panic dissolved when she spotted a mature woman in a navy-blue skirt suit and pearls. The woman looked up and caught Sandy's gaze. Then she put down the tablet computer she'd been studying, strode briskly to the front of the store and cracked the door open. Sandy saw that she was wearing an ID tag. Her name was Barbara van Dornen and she was a *Campaign Supervisor*.

'Can I assist you with anything?'

It seemed more like a challenge than a solicitation. The voice was velvety, a commanding drawl, off-putting. But Sandy wasn't about to be put off.

'I came to help.'

'Okay.'

Spoken with the word stretched out and then a pause.

'May I ask what with?'

'The campaign. Mr Prince's campaign.'

Another pause. Barbara's left hand rose to her lips as if it expected to find a cigarette there and then, having failed to do so, tucked Barbara's hair behind her ear.

'Oh my dear, you had me on the wrong track there. Come along in. Everyone's welcome. Of course they are. We need all the help we can get.'

Sandy found herself guided — quite firmly, she thought — to a conference table in an office at the back of the store. In the course of this excursion, she felt Barbara sizing up her mom jeans, her faded polo shirt and her flappy sneaker.

'Been toiling in the yard this morning, working up a sweat? I mean, if you have as many leaves to rake as we do — my *God!* All right, you sit there.'

Sandy sat. Barbara saw the bag.

'Been shopping? I thought that store had closed.'

'Oh, it did.'

'You're not one of these *environment* people, are you?'

'No, I —'

'I'm joking. It's been a little crazy around here lately. I'm sure you're setting a good example. Okay. We'll get some details and then we'll put you to work. So, start by filling this out.'

Barbara pushed a sheet of paper across the table at Sandy.

'I'll be right back.'

Barbara made a decisive exit from the office. Sandy heard her tell *Charlie* that the *demographics* were *looking up*.

She took a pen from her bag and wrote her name on the form — Sandra Quayle. Very nice. But where did Sandra Quayle live? What was her cell phone number? Her email address? Her web site (if any)? She wrote down the address of the mini-mansion, permitting herself a transgressive smile at the thought of Barbara driving by and recoiling at the state of the lawn. For cell phone number, she wrote down the last number she'd had. The phone had gone in the yard sale. Someone might get a surprise call. She made up an email address, calling herself *sandyquayle1963*, and using Johnny-boy's defunct domain.

After the personal details came a list of *policy issues*. Sandy was requested to check those that she had any knowledge of, or interest in, and which she believed she was competent to talk about in a confident and authoritative manner. She scanned the list.

Uncontrolled deficit spending.

She thought about that for a moment. Everybody knew it was a problem. All the experts on Freedom News used to say so, back when she watched TV. It was a moral issue. Sandy could talk about moral issues. No problem there.

Check.

Unaffordable entitlements.

Well, if they were unaffordable, they were unaffordable, weren't they? What else was there to say?

Check. This was fun, wasn't it?

Reducing the burden on America's entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Wow, this one hit close to home! To hear Johnny-boy tell it, it was d—n near impossible to make an honest living any more. And the reason was, all the *burdens* that the government put on people. Now, Sandy wasn't so naïve as to think that Johnny-boy always knew what he was doing, but all those failed enterprises and lost jobs — well, she could talk forever about *burdens*.

Check.

She pressed on through the list, gaining confidence as she did so, checking most of the entries. She skipped *Bold action to stabilise the international monetary base*, even though it sounded good, because she had no idea what it meant; and she gave *Harmonisation of foreign asset accounting* a miss because it sounded way too technical, however wonderful it might be.

She checked *Dealing with Chinese aggression* because, even though *Dealing with* sounded a bit mealy-mouthed, and despite her shaky knowledge of international politics, she'd had a lot of experience with aggression. In the last year or two, especially.

The last item was *Reconfiguring American exceptionalism for a new century*. That sounded a bit weird. What did it mean? Everyone knew what was exceptional about America — freedom, basically. Why would that need to be *reconfigured*? Perhaps it meant that freedom was under greater threat than ever. It certainly felt like it, sometimes.

Check.

At the bottom of the form was a space where you could pledge a donation. She left that blank.

Setting her pen down with a satisfied sigh, she glanced up at the back wall of the office. There was Mr Prince himself, pictured in a poster, arms folded, the lights of Manhattan behind him, that kindly smile on his lips and a twinkle — for real or computer-enhanced? — in his eye. The caption underneath read *You Can Count On Me*.

Yes, and *you can count on me*, Sandy thought. Although not for a donation, alas. But that face — smooth and solicitous, with its indulgent eyebrows and its Beneficently-receding hairline — how could it fail? He looked like America's rich uncle, with a heart of gold.

On a table below the poster was a clear, plastic display case containing some kind of architectural model. Sandy got up and went to inspect it. *Willard G. R. Prince Center for the Performing Arts (proposed), Stimsonville*, she read. Mr Prince was a philanthropist! Well, of course he was; how small-minded of her to be at all surprised.

'We're waiting for matching funds from the state.'

Barbara was back.

'They're pleading poverty, would you believe?'

She picked up Sandy's form and scanned it.

'My! You are going to be useful!'

To Sandy's relief, she didn't mention the missing donation.

'Follow me. We'll get you set up with Megan.'

Megan was blonde, energetic, thirty-ish and generally spiky. She was the *Phone Bank Manager*.

'So it's *Sandy*? Okay. I need ten minutes to set you up on the system. You want to make a coffee run? It's at the end of the block. Get me a skinny latte, Columbian, grande, yeah? Just put your bag under the desk here. Oh, and get me an extra shot in that.'

Well, she could hardly refuse, could she? At the coffee shop she handed over her five dollar bill. Megan's coffee cost three dollars, plus another fifty cents for the extra shot.

'Thanks,' Megan said, when Sandy handed over the drink. 'Where's yours?'

'Oh, I didn't want one.'

A white lie, yes — but still a lie.

'I live on coffee. How're your IT skills?'

All those hours in front of the screen with Johnny-boy! Trying to get the numbers to work. And Johnny-boy cursing the machine out.

'Oh, not bad.'

'Great. So here's your profile,' Megan said, as Sandy settled in behind her desk. 'Update it as necessary. The system selects the target, dials the number, tells you if they've answered. You read from the script, *here...*' Megan tapped the screen. '...and, based on how they answer, you click on the nearest matching response *here*. Then the system pops up the next thing you say, and so on. Got it? We'll put it in test mode and see how you do, okay? I'm the voter. Put your headset on.'

It was exhilarating!

Megan played one character after another. Sandy read out her questions. Megan replied. Sandy clicked. On they went. Megan — what a smart young woman she seemed to be — got ever more tricky — more vague, more ornery, more combative, more contradictory, and even a little aggressive. Sandy read and clicked, and clicked and read. Eventually, as she seemed to achieve a kind of *flow*, she began to improvise. She didn't understand everything she was reading, but she quickly realised that that wasn't the point: it was all about engaging with the emotions of the target — or the *voter*, rather. And she was *so good* at that!

'Not bad,' Megan said, when it was over. 'You'll do okay. We'll start you with *leaners*. See what the system says. Then maybe move you up to *switchers*. Have fun!'

And she did.

The hours absolutely flew by in a way that they hadn't for years. The *targets* mostly seemed to respond to her voice. Like Megan's impersonations, they were mixed-up, confused, angry or disheartened. But what really struck Sandy was that — unlike Megan — they *complained*. About their jobs, their incomes, their debts; their mistreatment by boss or bureaucracy; their healthcare, or lack of it; the decline of their neighbourhoods or towns. And then something else. It was inchoate and almost unspoken: an overwhelming sense of loss. The loss of *America*.

She did what she could. Absolutely, she understood their concerns, and so did Mr Prince. But the true communication went on in the modulation of her voice, in its rise and fall, in the pauses and the punctuations; in her living breath itself, it almost felt. She was *feeling their pain*, and they could tell. Yes, and not like you-know-who with some greedy girl under his desk!

A lot of people wanted to talk about China, but, weirdly, the system never gave her anything to say about that. Even though she'd offered to *deal with the aggression*. Maybe it was a bug.

At six o'clock, with a chilly night looming, Megan said it was time to stop. A fresh shift would take over — and drag people away from their dinners, ha-ha!

'So, Sandy. Where're you parked? Want to walk with me?'

'Oh, I didn't drive.'

'No? How the hell did you get here? You want a lift?'

'No, I think I'll just —'

'You know it's not safe to walk around here at night, right? I mean, we got that pan-handler deli place shut down, but even so...'

Think, Sandy, think!

'Are you okay?'

But before Sandy could answer, Barbara's oaky-smoky voice rang out from the front of the store.

'Megan! Sandy! You're needed. Follow me.'

A sudden emergency had arisen, Barbara explained. The company hired to cater the Pioneers' Reception had fallen down on the job. Extra hands were required, pronto.

Yes, and Mr Prince would be there in person.

CHAPTER 6

They drove to the Pioneers' Reception in Barbara's Escalade. It was much nicer than Johnny-boy's Malaysian SUV, Sandy thought, though probably not available for no money down and zero per cent interest for the first two years.

The Reception had been organised at the private home of one of Mr Prince's local backers. It was some home, she thought. If you took ten or twelve of the mini-mansions and stuck them together, and then erased all of the other houses from the subdivision, you might have ended up with something on this scale. It was located to the north of the city, close to the country club. Barbara called it the *Danthrope Estate*. Happily for Sandy, their drive did not take them past her erstwhile estate.

Barbara dropped Megan and Sandy off at the rear of the house.

'I guess we're working for our suppers tonight,' Megan said. 'You don't mind, do you?'

'Oh, no.'

At the mention of *supper*, she noticed how hungry she was.

'When you get to know Barbara, you'll understand that you just don't say no.'

Sandy reckoned she'd got that figured out already. They entered an industrial-scale kitchen. How many people could you feed from a place like this? Probably the whole village, Sandy estimated.

Their job, they were told, was simply to fill in for a couple of *wetbacks* who hadn't shown up. Megan didn't seem to flinch at the word, but it brought a little warmth to Sandy's cheeks. Once, Sandy had been bold enough to venture out loud, in front of Hunter Bill, her take on Donna-Marie's immigration status. Bill, quite rightly, had slapped Sandy down. She remembered his words: *It don't matter a damn, Sandy! She's the phone lady. We need her!*

Anyway, all they had to do was clear tables. And, at the end of the night, Mr Prince himself would express his appreciation.

'Actually, this could be fun,' Megan said. 'New experience! D'you think there'll be tips? Hey, with *this* crowd we could clean up!'

Sandy wondered how Megan had put herself through college. Most of Sandy's year had waited tables at some point. And one thing that everyone knew, and Megan apparently didn't, was that the correlation between the wealth of the diner and size of the tip was small.

'Well, let's hope so,' she said, adding, 'else we'll be stuck down with the low-income people.'

Megan laughed. Sandy realised that she'd said something funny. But no, it wasn't funny.

Then the kitchen erupted into hissing, clanging, steamy life and the work began. Sandy showed Megan a few tricks — just enough to save her blushes but not enough to expose Sandy's professionalism. But the waiters and cooks could tell, she thought.

The Pioneers themselves were seated around a table in the shape of a hollow square, outside on a covered, heated terrace. Beyond the terrace were formal gardens, tennis courts and a swimming pool. There were about twenty-five Pioneers — all but two of them men, all of them white, the youngest aged about forty. Mr Prince was not to be seen; there was a single empty chair.

'What's a Pioneer?' Sandy asked, during a lull.

'Someone who contributes ten million.'

'Ten million?'

'Not to the campaign, obviously. That's still illegal. To the super-PAC. Oh, and what we're seeing here tonight? That's not *coordination*, okay? In case you're worried.'

Well, Sandy *hadn't* been worried — should she be? *Ten million?* It was hard to keep her sense of reality the right way up in this place. She felt almost as if she were floating an inch or two above the marble floors and the forbidding rugs; was it the sheer otherworldliness of the *Danthrope Estate*, or was it just an empty stomach? Perhaps she would wake up in a moment and find that it had rained during the night and her feet were soaked; or, in a better dream, that Johnny-boy was back, and he really had gotten the message this time.

'Barbara's a Pioneer,' Megan said. 'She took over when her husband died.'

'But she's not having dinner?'

'No. Looking after Mrs P. Poor Willard. I guess everybody has their problems.'

'I expect they do.'

But what was Mrs Prince's? Sandy didn't dare ask.

The dinner dragged on, the courses kept coming, the dishes piled up in the kitchen and still Mr Prince did not appear.

'Where is he?' Sandy asked.

'Oh, he'll just come out and say his thing when they're all done,' Megan said. 'He's really private, you know? Not a big socialiser. It's all one-to-one relationships, so they say.'

That might make sense, Sandy thought, recalling her night on the golf course. If Mr Prince wanted to be President — if he was serious about *saving* the country — he'd want to pick his confidants and advisors carefully. He'd keep his counsel. And he'd need people he could trust, people he really knew. People who got it.

'Want one of these?' Megan asked, offering Sandy an untouched plate of stuffed pastry parcels.

'Oh, do you think we should?'

'It's just going in the garbage. What are they gonna do, fire us?'

'Okay.'

She took one. It tasted of... Well, she wasn't sure, but it was rich, creamy, salty and vaguely nutty. She couldn't help herself. She took two more. And then another.

'Well, look at you!' Megan said. 'How'd you keep that figure?'

'What's this — slacking on the job?'

That hickory voice — Barbara was back.

'All right, people. It's speech time. Megan — I want you to collect everything. And I *mean*, everything. Sandy, you help. Bring it all to me.'

Off she strode, the silky snap of her suit ringing in Sandy's ears.

'What does she mean?'

'Recording equipment,' Megan said. 'Phones, cameras, any kind of audio or video gear. *Everybody*, especially the staff, okay? Nobody takes chances any more. Not after what happened. Now, what we need is a big plastic sack...'

They started with the kitchen, collecting every device they could find. Then they took to the terrace. The Pioneers knew the game, it seemed. They all found it quite a hoot. Sandy noticed that a very large TV screen had been installed on one side of the terrace, in front of the hot tub.

'What's that for?'

'Hmm. Don't know.'

They delivered their bag of contraband tech to Barbara in the garden lounge, then retreated to the kitchen, where they relaxed and ate some more.

'Jesus! I want *your* metabolism,' Megan said.

Then, as the kitchen staff laboured over the clean-up, Megan lapsed into small talk. Her boyfriend had gotten a job on Wall Street — not with the New American Century Fund like Milly van Dornen, more's the pity, but never mind — and they were planning to move to the city as soon as Hartley found them an apartment. The problem was, you couldn't find anything decent for under one-point-five, so they might just have to start out in Brooklyn. Yes, Hartley *was* a funny name, wasn't it? That was because Hartley was English, and they always had funny names, didn't they? And, besides, his family was very grand, and his father was actually a lord! He'd been so *embarrassed* when he'd told her. And Megan's jaw had practically hit the floor, and so, obviously, Sandy could imagine how jealous Megan's friends were.

Sandy said yes, she could.

And Megan herself hadn't decided yet what she was going to do. After the campaign, she meant. If Mr Prince won, which Megan felt he was *basically bound to*, given the state of things, perhaps she would offer to work in his private New York office. Though if she wanted to do *that*, she'd have to stay off Barbara's shit list, wouldn't she?

Sandy said yes, she supposed so.

And what plans did Sandy have for life under the new Prince administration — Megan was assuming that Sandy was now with them for the *duration*?

Sandy said that she, too, hadn't decided yet. But, like Megan, she was considering a move.

'You two! Come and see this!'

Barbara's whiskey-dry voice commanded them outside and on to the terrace.

The Pioneers had rearranged their chairs to face the enormous TV screen. Sandy noticed that the table had been cleared but for a single, half-empty wine glass by Mr Prince's seat. Mr Prince had been and gone.

At the top of the screen, she saw the words *Inner Mongolia* superimposed over Chinese characters. Below that stood a towering rocket with a red and yellow nose cone. It was the Chinese moon launch! Well, that just went to show how much Hunter Bill *really* knew. He thought he could see the Chinese *up there*, and they hadn't even blasted off yet!

The bottom half of the screen filled with smoke and fire. After a moment of roaring, crackling hesitation, the rocket began its ascent. The Pioneers broke into jeers and ironic applause. A chant of *U-S-A* rose up above the receding grumble of Chinese rocket motors.

Well, it was all very fine landing on the moon, if they wanted to, Sandy thought. But really, didn't the Chinese have bigger priorities back down on Earth? Someone in the camp — not Bill, who seemed to be in awe of China for some reason — had told her that they had to import baby formula, because the local supply was full of poison. Well, they needed to get *that* fixed, didn't they?

While everyone else watched the Chinese rocket vanish into the sky, she went to collect Mr Prince's wine glass. To reach it, she had to push his chair in. As she did so, something fell from the chair to the floor. She picked it up. It was a hundred dollar bill.

Rule One of waiting tables was that *all tips must be shared*. But was this a tip? It had been on the chair, not the table. Ah, but it might have fallen off the table on to the chair...

She slipped it into her pocket before anyone could register her predicament, and took the wine glass back to the kitchen. It probably was a tip — from Mr Prince himself. He had *expressed* his *appreciation*. So ought she to share it with the waiters? With Megan? Well, Megan obviously didn't need it, but it went against the principle of the thing to...

But no. No, there was a more convincing explanation. The money was intended for Sandy alone. Mr Prince had left it on the chair with the specific expectation that she would find it. *He knew*.

So Sandy asked Barbara to drop her off in front of the Stimsonville Bellvue Grand Hotel, whence she would take a taxi home. She bade goodnight to her new colleagues, and promised to be at the campaign HQ on Mellon Street bright and early tomorrow morning, at eight o'clock. She watched the Escalade plough its way through the traffic, and waved until it had disappeared.

Then she walked ten blocks west and checked in at a motel that offered rooms for thirty dollars a night.

She unlocked her room, stepped inside and let her gaze wander. The huge, king-sized bed. Its fresh, white linen. The bathroom, with its shower and hot water. The windows, with their drapes. The door itself, with its lock and its key.

She flung herself on to the bed and cried tears of joy and relief.

Then she remembered that she'd left her shopping bag at the office.

CHAPTER 7

The eviction began at dawn. And, because Teresa Wolfe happened to be working the daybreak shift, she got to witness it. Teri, as she was known to everyone except the disappointed grandmother in Poughkeepsie for whom she was named, had warmed up the machines, topped up the grinders, and loaded the pastry display cabinet — and this all done with the attentively ironic care due to such matters when the guiding intelligence behind them belonged to a once-soaring, now totally-grounded, thoroughly under-employed and impossibly over-indebted modern-languages graduate of the University of Pennsylvania — when it started.

The TV screens behind the counter were, by management ordinance, supposed to remain tuned to financial channels, so that clients of Bean Village Coffee could pump themselves up on the S&P 500 or the DAX while they waited for their caffeine. But Teri liked to flip one of the screens to Freedom News — for the entertainment value, obviously, but also because the Wall-Streeters — and not just the guys — liked to look at FNN's mega-primped anchors. And Teri thought it was pretty funny, too — watching those money-horny lame-brains ogling the cheese.

The sound was off but the pictures told the story: city authorities had exhausted their patience; the threat to public health could no longer be ignored; business leaders feared for the impact on the local economy; the Mayor had spoken, and now the Robin Hood Party encampment in Battery Park was outta here. Or it would be very shortly, once the requisite muscle and machinery had been marshalled. Not forgetting the legal logistics, of course — although that could be straightened out afterwards, if necessary.

ROBIN HOOD IS HISTORY, she read. And this morning's perky anchor looked pretty pumped about it, too.

Since Pearl Street, where this particular branch of Bean Village was strategically situated, lay but a short jog downhill to the Battery, and as Pedro and Aliyah had shown up on the dot — they had a better attendance record than Teri, but so what? — Teri decided that this particular scene would be *way too good to miss*. So, offering up the convincing cover-story that she just needed to *run a*

quick errand, she left her post, slipped on her old Penn jacket, took to her heels and headed south.

Thanks to FNN, she made it to the park before the cops had finished putting up their barricades. But wait, wait, wait — *were* they cops? A lot of them wore black uniforms with a weird logo. Fairmeadow Solutions? What the hell was that? Well, whatever. The word had gotten out and the camp — look at the size of it now! — was in a ferment.

Teri dodged her way through the mêlée and secured a position at the eastern edge of the park, close to the ferry terminal. This, she figured, offered her the best chance of slipping away if — when — things got nasty. Dressed in her Bean Village chinos and Ivy League sweats, she didn't look much like a Robin-Hooder, and, if challenged, she would say that she was on her way to Staten Island to help her disabled grandmother. She jumped on to the seat of a park bench — the type that had multiple arm-rests to pre-empt sleepers — took out her phone and flipped it into video mode.

Start with a slow, cool, tracking shot across the site, she thought. Get all the tents, the banners, the stoves, the musical performers, the mime artists, the hippies, the dreads, the anti-capitalists, the anarchists... Were they really anarchists? They seemed awfully well behaved. Now also get the anticipation, the mounting excitement, the little panic attacks — people stashing their valuables — and all the natural, automatic defence mechanisms of an organism sensing imminent attack. She ought to get some neat footage, she thought, if the phone had enough memory left. The global clampdown reaches Manhattan, and Teri Wolfe captures it live!

On the far side of the encampment, a line of police vehicles drew up. Out got the cops, in no particular hurry it seemed, adjusting their helmets and visors. Then, to her right, in front of the ferry terminal, she saw a phalanx of black vans. That logo again — the jaunty sun and the luscious grass. She panned and zoomed. Out of the vans came black-clad men — and honestly, there was nothing wrong with calling them *goons*. God, she thought, these Fairmeadow crowd-busters were even better kitted out than the cops; they looked like movie extras.

She zoomed in further: no ID on them at all, how about that? Unlike the cops, they got straight down to it. Their mission was pretty obvious: grab the ring-leaders. They knew who they wanted: their leader had pictures, and he knew how to point. In they went, in groups of five — what did you call that, was it *snatch squad*?

Teri zoomed and focused. On the far side of the park the cops were lined up, still waiting. Waiting for Fairmeadow to complete their surgical extraction?

But the Robin-Hooders were on to the game now. The noise went up — yelling, crying, shrieking, desperately reasonable exasperation, breaking voices — and the fighting started. Still the cops waited. Maybe this was the time to slip away? While being an innocent bystander was still just about plausible? No, she couldn't: this was too big; this was Teri Wolfe living in history, not Teri Wolfe forgetting to sprinkle the chocolate or breaking another twenty.

The Fairmeadow goons looked like they'd gotten what they came for. They were dragging their prey back to where the vans stood, engines running. A Chinese girl, with shoulder-length hair. A young black guy, trying to help her,

pushed to the ground. This whole ring-leader thing, though, was bogus. Everybody knew that — except for Freedom News, to whom it was obvious, as usual, that foreign instigators had ginned the entire thing up and taken in a whole generation of lazy, gullible, slacker air-heads. As something of a slacker herself — yes, she admitted it, what else was she supposed to be five years out of college and three years out of hope? — Teri knew that the Robin-Hooders disdained leadership or hierarchy the way they reviled Wall Street, Washington, the Pentagon and, yes, Bean Village itself. That was why they all wore those shirts: *I Am Robin Hood*.

Okay, now there were small explosions going off. Was that smoke or gas? And junk and garbage were being thrown. The cops looked like they were readying themselves. A few more frames of video, she thought, then down off the bench and into the ferry terminal and safety.

She finished her video and slipped the phone into her jacket, but then changed her mind and stuffed it into the rear, button-down pocket of her chinos. Then she jumped.

But she went nowhere. There was an instant of *huh?* Then she went up, and backwards off the bench. There were three of them, and they had her, all hundred-and-nineteen pounds of her, by the arms and legs. They were heading for the black vans. She started to kick.

'Get the phone!'

She felt hands on her butt. Gloved hands that couldn't undo the button. *Stupid!* She kicked some more. Her feet came free and hit the ground. Then she unzipped her jacket, shimmied out, and left them holding it.

And, being small, light, agile, shit-scared and incredibly pissed, she was sliding through the mob before they could lift their visors.

She ran all the way back to Pearl Street, which at least prevented her from freezing. But the atmosphere in the coffee shop turned out to be, well, *chilly*. According to Pedro, the regional office in Trenton had been calling for her — and calling, and calling — and wanted to hear back from her about this errand she'd been running for the last hour and a half. *Shit!* The last thing she wanted was another lecture from frigging *Trenton*. Let them do their worst. Pedro and Aliyah shook their heads with the kind of knowing sadness, Teri thought, that only legal aliens could really get away with.

The TV screens had been flipped back to financial news, and Teri didn't feel like pushing her luck any further, so she went into the store room, shutting the door behind her, and replaced the memory card in her phone with a new one. She hid the old one under a ten pound can of French Roast. Nobody liked French Roast, so Teri never put it on the menu. After that she put her apron on, breathed deeply until her heart-rate returned to normal, and then wandered back out into the store to see if anyone wanted to order a coffee.

And the day dragged on like it always did, until...

'Teresa Wolfe! Oh my God!'

Shi — it! It was Teri's least-favourite former college room-mate, last seen at graduation chugging Krug in a Jaguar with some dunce from Yale, Milly van frigging Dornen. It had to be some cosmic joke. But it wasn't a very funny one.

'Hi, Milly. Long time. How are you?'

'I'm great! Everything's going really *well*. Life's really *wonderful*, and all that. So! Wow! I, ah... Are you...'

All right, come on, let's get it over with, Teri thought.

Milly frowned, ever so slightly, but her smile remained intact.

'Are you... Are you, like, *working* here? Or something?'

Or something — meaning Milly could not compute.

Teri glanced down at her Bean Village apron, wrinkled her nose, then looked up again at her wide-eyed, open-mouthed varsity pal.

'Yup. Looks like it.'

Milly seemed mystified, but also pepped-up and eager, as if someone had proposed a surprise visit to Bergdorf Goodman.

'Oh! Uh, cool. But why? What's the thinking?'

The thinking?

'It's just a job, Milly. I do it for the money. Everybody needs a job.'

No, she shouldn't have said that. It was slightly bitchy. It had never been a secret that Milly van Dornen would never need to work.

'Well, sure. Even me — hah, hah!'

'You have a job?'

'Oh, absolutely. You better believe it! I'm slaving away nine-to-five, just like... Just like everybody else.'

Nine-to-five? Who did she think she was? Dolly Parton?

'So what are you doing?'

'PR.'

'Who for?'

'New American.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Oh, the New American Century Fund. You know, Willard Prince?'

All right, that made sense. Milly's ma had some longstanding and close connection to the famous plutocrat. It had been the source of a lot of scabrous humour at Penn, which Milly hadn't appreciated.

'That's really impressive! Well done!'

Oh, the snarkiness! What a total witch she was sometimes. But Milly didn't seem to notice; she still hadn't solved the mystery du jour.

'But why a coffee shop?'

Teri sighed and wiped her hands on her apron.

'It's tough out there, Milly.'

Milly's face creased with sympathy.

'Yeah, I *heard* that.'

There was a pause. Teri couldn't stop herself drumming her fingers on the counter.

'So what you're saying... So this is, like, *all* you could get?'

'Uh-huh.'

The smile, at last, had gone. Teri instantly wished it would come back. But Milly was thinking. Her eyes glazed over and her brain seemed to take a short vacation.

'Oh my God! You know what?'

'What?'

Milly lowered her voice and leaned forward across the counter. The smile came back. Teri stopped tapping.

'I heard them talking in the office yesterday. I think there might be an opening...'

'What do you mean, an *opening*?'

'A job. A *proper* job! Oh my God, Teri! You'd be perfect!'

'Milly —'

'No, listen to me, Teri, listen. We were always, like, the best of friends, and I don't really know how we got separated? Okay? I mean, I searched for you online, but... But this is great! We can make a new start. You know, the adventure continues and all that?'

The adventure?

Milly took out her phone. It resided in a bejewelled emerald case.

'So. Give me your number.'

Oh, what the hell...

Teri recited it and Milly tapped it in.

'And your social —'

'I'm not online much, these days.'

'No problem. Cool. So I'll get back to you on that.'

'That's fabulous. Thanks, Milly.'

There was a long pause, during which they looked at each other and Milly smiled and Teri didn't.

'Okay, then!' Milly said, at length. 'Um, I'm just gonna have an espresso? Do you have French Roast?'

'No. Sorry. Kenya or Columbian.'

'Kenya?'

'Coming up. Anything to eat?'

Milly shook her head.

'Not really.'

So then Milly handed over a twenty and Teri handed back the change. She got Milly's espresso, which Milly chugged in one, still smiling.

'Okay, gotta go! This is so great!'

A skip to the door, a wave, a flounce of her designer top-coat and she was gone.

Later that afternoon Trenton called to announce that Teri was fired.

And, shortly after that, a text message arrived, inviting Teri to an interview the next morning at an address on Park Avenue.

Park Avenue?

CHAPTER 8

Ricky Ponton winced at his reflection in a pristine expanse of glass as he strode through Chek Lap Kok airport. In order to pass as the respectable British banker 'David Thatcher' he'd had to smarten himself up. Amongst other things, this meant wearing a suit — something he hadn't done for twenty years. He didn't find all this fakery too convincing himself, but Jay Percival, the freelance American pot-stirrer and Ricky's new accomplice, had judged it *fine and dandy*.

He passed without effort and with supreme efficiency through a perfectly air-conditioned immigration hall.

Then came the long ride though the smog that seeped down from the factories of the Pearl river delta. In a retro-plasticky, red Toyota taxi, Ricky sped between aggressive outgrowths of gargantuan residential towers, past monstrous container ports, over dizzying suspension bridges, across Lantau to the swarming Kowloon traffic and the Majestic Harbour Hotel. To pass the time, he fretted about what Jay had openly admitted to be the *possibility of a set-up*.

But how likely was it that Jay's *frenemies* at his former *office* would attempt to grab an Australian citizen, albeit one masquerading as a Brit fat-cat, on Chinese territory? If you were talking Italy or Germany, say, Ricky would have said *too bloody risky, mate*, right from the outset. But China? If you thought the US was touchy about sovereignty, try the Chinese — yet another sphere in which the Yanks were being out-done. If it were ever to emerge that a rendition team had operated on Chinese soil — even, perhaps especially, in Hong Kong — the diplomatic consequences, to say the least, would be ugly. And Jay had promised that, in extremis, there would be ugliness aplenty. The relevant parties, he said, had already had their cages rattled.

Then again, shipping Ricky out, were he to be nabbed, would be a cinch: he'd just driven past one of the biggest container ports in the world.

So the question was, how much did they hate him? Well, it wasn't just Kerri's Air-Sea Battle blow-up and subsequent trip to Heartbreak Hotel. Consider the highlights from the charge sheet...

Video from the War Zones, showing helicopters shooting up an unarmed crowd, and drones bombing the wrong house.

Classified military medical reports, with related internal investigations attached, pertaining to deceased detainees.

Whistle-blower complaints, documented in full, describing high-level knowledge of, and complicity in, host country abuses.

The hypocritical accommodations of European governments to said abuses, plus records of suspicious aircraft movements.

Incriminating money trails that flowed like the Amazon into Latin American politics.

Suitcase cash, disbursed to handy warlords and convenient tyrants.

Illegal surveillance of ethnic, religious and political groups; infiltration, provocation and entrapment.

Internal State Department communications in which America's top diplomats said what they really thought about the clowns and crooks who ran the rest of the world.

Sometimes Ricky thought that it was the last of these that really got to them. As for the first three, didn't bad things always happen in war? Yes. And that was one more reason why you didn't want to start the bloody wars in the first place.

People had a right to know. They might not *want* to know, they might not *listen*, and they might still vote for the *same bastards*, but truth had a value all its own. Think back through the catalogue of horrors that comprised the last three centuries. Then think about pretending it never happened.

Or, alternatively, try to get a grip, Ricky; it's espionage today, not agit-prop essays for crummy student mags.

The Majestic Harbour Hotel swung into view. Ricky hopped out of the taxi and took in the fuzzy panorama that spread across the water before him to the rampant verticality of Hong Kong island. Why did he suddenly feel lifted — almost intoxicated — with notions of freedom and progress? Paradoxical, eh?

And when he reappraised the same outlook from his hotel room, those feelings morphed into shock and — yes, why not? — awe. He'd been to Hong Kong a few times, under his own flag, before he'd been warned off. The city seemed to rebuild itself between visits. They were even filling in the harbour to make more land.

Jay, the cashed-up Yank, clearly hadn't attempted to save money on the room. It was spectacular, full of gadgets and equipment, all of which, Ricky found, could be controlled from a tablet computer. This same device now welcomed Mr David Thatcher to the Majestic Harbour Hotel and recommended that he sample the authentic Cantonese delights to be obtained at the Heavenly Garden rooftop restaurant — and *touch here, please*, for the menu. Ricky touched. The menu impressed as much as the room. *Ganchao Niu He* for three hundred Hong Kong dollars. What was that in Aussie? Forty-five? Or about fifty US. Not bad for a plate of beef and noodles. Good thing Jay was paying. And where *had* the bastard got all that money from anyway? Was it true that the CIA had its own printing press? That was one secret he'd love to possess.

He selected a Tsingtao from among the fake English beers in the mini-bar, and wondered what happened next. His only instruction from Jay, or anyone,

had been to show up and *see what happened*. Then he noticed the envelope on the bed.

Aha! This would be it. He was a *spy* now, according to Jay, so he was fully prepared to chuck on a dinner suit and bow tie, take a chauffeured Rolls Royce limo to the waterfront, jump in a speedboat — piloted by either a nifty bird in a bikini, or else some stiff-necked Royal Navy type — and permit himself to be piped on board an upside-down, submerged ocean liner, now refurbed as your ultimate spy HQ, where he would be served either a G&T or a cup of tea, plus all the secrets he could eat.

He ripped open the envelope. It appeared to contain a bus ticket. How disappointing. But all was not lost — it was a ticket for one of those hop-on, hop-off, open-top red tourist buses. On the accompanying map, one of the stops had been circled, and a date and time had been written alongside: four o'clock that afternoon. Fair enough; he didn't mind a free bus ride. It was a perfectly pleasant thing to do on a lazy Sunday, even if the smog did knock a couple of hours off his life. But would the *guy* be among his fellow riders, or would it be the gang from the *office*?

He took a stroll through the lingering haze, amid swarms of excited, prosperous-looking visitors from the mainland, reacquainting himself with Kowloon, and noting all the new restaurants, hotels, shopping malls and office towers that had managed to wedge themselves in around the teeming — and now pricey — tenements of the old town. Look what the Brits had given up! Not that they'd had any choice, and quite right too. Wasn't there an old Chinese saying? Something about the boot being on the other foot?

He wandered through the park in Tsim Sha Tsui, the site of a fort grabbed by the British in 1861, when Kowloon had been occupied. The fort had overlooked Victoria Harbour and was thus a strategic asset. Not much use now, Ricky thought — all those towers in the way.

Then he slogged through the shopping crowds up and down Nathan Road, and wondered if he'd ever seen such a rip-roaring display of full-on capitalism. It made Sydney look like a sleepy, provincial town. What was the name of that Brit politico who liked to go on about the *global race*? Dream on, mate.

Finally, having checked the time on the special phone that Jay had given him, he made his way down to the Star Ferry Pier, took his place on the upper deck to avoid the worst of the diesel fumes, and made the fifteen-minute crossing to *Central*. Once there, he followed a short but complicated route along elevated walkways to the Bus Stop of Destiny.

Ricky Ponton, *international spy*, waiting for a bus! Hilarious, right? Had James Bond ever taken public transport? And what, if anything, did our Ricky have in common with that great avatar of post-imperial denial? Nothing — not the height, the hair or the teeth; not the looks, the clothes, the sex-appeal or the sexism; not the class — not by a long chalk; not the self-confidence or the violence; no establishment to dress him down, but then pick up the bills and pay his pension; low, dirty politics in place of diamond-class patriotism; no deniability, gadgets or backup; and he couldn't really do the accent anyway, whatever Jay thought.

Oh, but wait, there was one thing, wasn't there — a relentless bloody-mindedness, not to be confused with Ricky's visceral anti-authoritarianism (which

was a feature, not a bug). Now consider Ricky's global network of powerful, truth-telling computers, which, respectable opinion said, threatened to undermine democracy and bring down the established order — and maybe he really was the villain, after all? He even liked cats.

All right, calm down, he thought; here it comes — just get on the bloody bus and *see what happens*. He climbed on board, collected his headphones, ascended to the upper deck, finding that he had it to himself, and took a seat at the rear. Perhaps the bus would fill up en route. He plugged his headphones in and selected *GB-English*.

A loop around the International Financial Centre, a building so generous that, were it to fall over, it might almost have filled in the harbour and created a land bridge to Kowloon, and the bus headed east. Alongside the PLA building — a construction from the latter days of the colonial period that resembled a rotating air-purifier (if only!) on a pedestal — the bus paused. According to Ricky's map, this wasn't an official stop, and the Sunday traffic was light. Perhaps he was supposed to admire the architecture? The commentary informed him that this was the Hong Kong headquarters of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and left it at that.

The bus moved on. A small, grey-haired man in a beige wind-cheater appeared at the top of the stairs, avoided looking at Ricky, and took a seat at the covered front end of the bus. Ricky watched. Was this the *guy*? Really? He's our mind-blowing, epoch-making whistle-blower from the PLA, and he gets on the bus outside the PLA HQ? What was the Chinese for chutzpah? But this guy, whoever he might be, wasn't a member of the *nomenklatura* — they liked their hair glossy black.

The bus rolled on. Assertive and declarative, the commentary made up for what it lacked in historical perspective with twangy music. But the *guy* wasn't listening. He sat still, looking neither left nor right. Could he see Ricky's reflection in the bus's window? And was that a hearing aid, or what?

The bus progressed. But it did not fill up. As far as Ricky could tell, most stops were moderately peopled with eager tourists, but they weren't getting on. At the harbour-dominating convention centre in Wan Chai, a young Chinese man in a bulky jacket made a point of ignoring Ricky before parking himself six rows from the front on the right. No girlfriend? Mum not trekking down from Sichuan after all, and the ticket too good to waste?

At Victoria Park, a second young man boarded and sat on the left, three rows behind the first. Well, we know there's a shortage of girls on the mainland, Ricky thought; no need to go into the reasons why. And these loners had a similar taste in fashion, too.

When the third got on at Gloucester Road, and sat three rows in front of him, Ricky decided that he had a problem. When the bus got to the Peak Tram stop, assuming nothing had happened by that point, he would make a break for it. Everyone who came to Hong Kong wanted to see the view from the Peak — from which, these days, you could practically see the edge of the American empire receding — and there was almost certain to be a big crowd.

But when it got there, the bus pulled up short of the stop, disconcerting its expectant crowd by pausing long enough only to admit a tall, sallow westerner

in a grey raincoat, who elected to remain downstairs. Ricky sank back into his seat. That knocked it on the head, didn't it? The tunnelling works in his stomach, suspended since Broken Hill, powered up again.

The bus moved on, edging past the landmark tower of a world-power bank. The dingy plaza under the skirts of the building teemed with people, almost all of them young women. Of course — it was Sunday. The city's three hundred thousand Filipina maids received one day off a week; they got chucked out of the house and the international financial elite sourced their own lunches. Enjoy your freedom, ladies, he thought.

He was about to rip off his headphones when the twanging music stopped and a different kind of twang took over.

'This is a message for Mr Ricky Ponton, if he happens to be a passenger with us on this bus. Your tour will be ending early today. We apologise for the inconvenience.'

The grey-haired man at the front of the bus had turned around. He talked into his wrist and gave Ricky a glare of informed disapproval. *Shit! What now?* Jay's final recommendation had been to *ditch the phone* if he got into trouble. So he looked down over the side of the bus, and what he saw there surprised him.

He saw a heavy, yellow dump truck — the kind of machine that belonged on a construction site. The really surprising thing, though, was what it carried in the back: a small girl in pink jeans and a Hello Kitty hoody. And a mattress. The girl caught his gaze and pulled open her hoody. She wore a T-shirt decorated with the Big Data Underground logo — a stylized baby hyena operating a computer (it wasn't Ricky's idea, but people liked it).

No, no, he thought; *that's not going to happen.*

The truck growled and sputtered three metres behind the bus, in the right-hand lane. They were on Des Voeux Road, in the gridlock zone. The bus edged forward. Looking up again, Ricky saw that the two young men were on their feet, and the American with the twang now stood at the head of the stairs.

There came a grinding, splintering sound from below; the dump truck had shunted a silver BMW out of its path and now stood parallel — just about — to the bus.

'Jump now!' the girl yelled. 'Or forget it.'

He ripped off his headphones and jumped.

What happened next passed in an agonising blur, because several different portions of him impacted the truck in a way that wasn't optimal. But it felt as if the truck had reversed away, scattering the traffic behind it, and then barrelled, horn blaring, the wrong way down a one-way side street. He lay back and tried to flex his right leg.

But he didn't get to enjoy the mattress for long.

'Get out, get out!'

The Hello Kitty girl was yanking on his arm. He hauled himself to his knees, shuffled forward, and allowed her to shove him off the back. And did he imagine it, or did the driver actually *tip* him out, too? Either way, he was on his arse in the middle of the road without much more effort on his part.

But not for long; she had him on the move again, dragging him by the wrist. They went into an office building, up a short escalator and then on to a much

longer one that seemed as though it might ascend all the way up into some Heavenly Garden in the sky.

'Stand up!'

Was he not standing? Ah, no — *get up, Ricky!*

All right, now he got it: this was the mid-levels escalator. It went all the way from Des Voeux up to Conduit Road. Under cover, too. It was supposed to cut down on traffic. But the bankers who lived on the mid-levels had stayed in their cars.

They didn't go all the way up. Hello Kitty Girl dragged him off about half way. They stumbled through walkways, passageways, shopping arcades, designer malls; over covered bridges; past multi-storey car parks; up and down escalators — and everywhere, everywhere... The maids. They sat together in their multitudes, talking, cooking, eating, drinking, singing, sewing, playing games, waiting to be let back into the house.

Then, just as Ricky began to think he would prefer to flop down with the maids and take his chances, they entered an office tower and ascended to the fortieth floor.

In a smart and spacious suite with views over the harbour, Ricky was offered a cup of *Iron Goddess* tea; was instructed that Hello Kitty Girl's name was Xin Jiao; and was further informed that Xin Jiao was a senior counter-intelligence specialist with the People's Liberation Army.

And when Ricky had finished his tea, Jiao said, there would be an opportunity for him to answer some questions.

CHAPTER 9

No, Xin Jiao said, flicking her lustrous fringe and looking to Ricky more like the lead singer in a Chinese punk-pop girl-band than a big cheese in military counter-intelligence, there was no *guy*. There had never been a *guy*.

Ricky had been more or less straight about his mission — a too-tasty, too-good-to-miss and now too-good-to-be-true mega-leak opportunity for Big Data Underground — neither mentioning Jay Percival, nor admitting that the flavour of the day had been specifically military. There didn't seem to be anything to be gained by holding back; Jiao knew who he was — she was even wearing his T-shirt. And even though they were in an office suite and not a military prison, Ricky couldn't scoot — Jiao had a couple of young guys in jeans and leather jackets loitering by the door. They looked like her backup musicians.

This girl, who could have been his daughter's school-friend — if he'd had a daughter, or, indeed, a wife or a family or any kind of social life that couldn't be encrypted for safe-keeping at his disaster recovery site in Iceland — made him feel, all at once, happy to be alive and depressed about the future. Happy, because the Chinese had got him and not the Americans — there was no question as to which interest he'd offended most, so far, and Jiao had given him tea, not a freezing shower — and also because, if he were now finished, then at least he'd gone out in decent spy style. But then depressed, because this girl, with her super-smartness and her super-competence, wore his T-shirt, he felt sure, with an extreme and very modern irony. And her hair, her blushing cheeks, and her cartoon-cute nose might just be, he thought, the pretty face of some global authoritarianism to come.

'So you wanted some secrets?' she said.

Her gave her a wan smile and nodded.

'But it was a set-up.'

'Yes, of course it was a set-up. Thanks, Jay.'

'And we snatch you from the jaws of the Americans!'

'Mm. Thanks for that.'

'You didn't finish your bus tour.'

'No. What was the point of the bus, anyway?'

Jiao swivelled in her chair.

'They thought you might have other contacts in Hong Kong. So they used the bus like a...' She consulted one of her helpers. 'Yes, it's in their emails. They call it a *roach motel*. We researched this. It means —'

'I get it,' Ricky said. Ricky *the cockroach*.

'And they can't grab you on the street. Too many people notice.'

'Someone probably noticed that truck of yours.'

A stern flick of the fringe.

'We can deal with that.'

Ricky leaned back in his chair, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, relishing the lingering perfume of the tea.

'So what now?'

Jiao didn't reply, but the corners of her mouth puckered. What was so amusing?

'Didn't we just have, you know, an *international incident*?'

'No,' she said, serious now. 'Not at all. They don't want one. We don't want one. Very bad for everyone. *Nationalism*, you understand? We don't want to have to control our people. And they can't control their politicians. So nothing happened.'

'Nothing?'

Jiao shook her head.

'Well, what about me?'

How likely was it that Jiao had plucked Ricky from the righteous fire and plied him with exquisite tea just for the hell of it? And even though she would, no doubt, uphold Chinese sovereignty until Yangtze ran dry, didn't she, just like Jay, want something?

'You wanted some secrets,' she said.

He stared at her. The fringe had settled in place, as if it had made its mind up.

No, no, he thought. That's not how it works. *You don't give me tea and secrets. I get them from sources, and I expose corruption, abuse and hypocrisy, and I'm a bloody hero. Not a stooge. Not a propaganda mouthpiece. Not another willing bloody helper for the clampdown, and lock me up if you don't like it.* He almost said that last bit out loud.

But if Jiao had spotted the indignation in his soul, she didn't let on.

'We do a lot of hacking here,' she said. 'It's very patriotic. Good fun. Nice job for a girl who used to work on a farm. You think so, too? Yes, we like it here.'

Work on a farm? Well, why not? This was China, the land of opportunity and social mobility, where you could rise to the top with nothing but a dream and an uncle with a red telephone.

'We don't hack *you*, of course. Well, we try — but you are too clever.'

Reassuring? Not really. This girl was beginning to terrify him.

'So. We have some secrets for you. We think you will really like them. Now we will show you.'

Jiao must have flipped some secret switch under her desk, because the office's floor-to-ceiling windows now became opaque and an opulent screen attached to the wall activated itself. Jiao got up and began to tap and swipe at it. Ricky turned

his chair to the left and watched. As he did so, a chill — or was it a thrill? — ran down his indignant spine. This farm girl had harvested some of the finest IP addresses on the market — even some that were masked, proxied and buggered about with so much that you practically needed a supercomputer just to get in.

'You know *this* one, I think?'

He certainly did.

A teasing brush of the fringe.

'Yes. But too good for you, I think. For now. Such a greedy man! We find something else.'

More swiping and tapping.

'Ah, look here!'

Jiao had opened up a trove of corporate emails. They belonged to a big, state-owned Chinese telecoms and computer hardware company.

'You know this company, *Weihan*?'

'Yeah, I've heard of it.'

If you searched Ricky's database for *Weihan*, you noticed that it was a popular target for the patriotic ire of those members of the US congress who thought that Chinese tech companies wanted to bug the shit out of the US, and should therefore be shut out of the US market — which was most of them.

Jiao had stuck her thumbs in the pockets of her pink jeans, and was twisting on her heel, as if she were on a first date but trying to act cool.

'Do you like this?'

Could be interesting, he thought. But wasn't there a slight problem here?

'Um, Jiao — why exactly would you want to give *me* insider dirt on one of your biggest state-owned —'

The thumbs came out of their pockets so that Jiao could hold up her hands to *stop him right there*. She gave him a scowl that obscured her faux-innocence for a long moment.

'Not state-owned! Not any more. Now we have your...'

She really didn't want to say the word, did she?

'...your *privatisation* in China.'

'Is that right?'

'We don't call it that.'

'Okay.'

'Weihan wants to work in America. They want to cooperate with American companies.'

'Cooperate? Or take over?'

Jiao shrugged.

'So they cannot be state-owned. If *Weihan* is *private*, the Americans are happy.'

'Should they be?'

Jiao turned back to her screen and resumed her tapping and swiping.

Why would the PLA want to dish the dirt on a top Chinese tech company? What would Ricky be getting into if he went along with this? Or if he didn't?

Jiao's presentation proceeded through a collection of Chinese tech firms, industrial conglomerates and banks. All, Ricky was given to understand, had filthy secrets that ought to be shown the light of day. Jiao said that it was

necessary to *discipline* those who failed to acknowledge the Party's new, tougher strictures on corruption, even if it had to be done in unconventional ways.

Ricky found it hard to believe that the Party was afraid of its own capitalists — but perhaps the times were changing? He noted that all of these supposedly wayward enterprises were private; and he recalled Mr Lin's puzzling discovery that Party chiefs were worried about *inappropriate relations* between Chinese and American business interests.

'Mind if I make a call?' he asked, when Jiao had finished and was preparing fresh tea.

'Go ahead.'

Ricky installed himself in a private corner of the office and called Jay. He described his bus ride, and Jay laughed. Then he explained his new predicament, and Jay fell silent.

'Well?'

'I'm thinking,' Jay said.

'You see, what I think,' Ricky said, 'is, if I *don't* do it, they'll —'

'You better do it. Besides, I need you back here.'

'All right.'

'Yeah. So get back, soon as you can. I gotta send you to Madagascar. Take care.'

He hung up before Ricky could respond. *Madagascar?* Did Jay say *Madagascar?* Should Ricky call back? No, deal with it later. Drink some more tea. Promise to love and obey Jiao, and be careful not to dis the Party.

Then get the hell out of here and spend some more of Jay's hot cash.

He sipped his tea. Jiao pushed a memory stick across the table.

'Put this on your web site.'

He slipped the memory stick into his shirt pocket.

'I'll have to run it by some people first.'

'Of course. This is all true. No forgeries. No fakes.'

'Sure. Leave it to me.'

Jiao leaned forward and parted her fringe so that Ricky wouldn't have any trouble seeing her eyes.

'You have seen what we can do here.'

'Yes. Very impressive.'

'You have a very nice web site. It is shameful if something happens to it.'

'A shame.'

She blushed.

'Excuse me?'

Kids, he thought.

'It would be a shame.'

'That is what I am saying.'

'Right. No worries, then. Got the message.'

He finished his tea.

'Any chance of a lift back to the hotel?'

'Of course.'

And so, later that evening, ensconced in his very own, very private nook in the Heavenly Garden, Ricky Ponton rewarded himself with a plate of *Ganchao*

Niu He for fifty American dollars, and a bottle of Hardy's Special Reserve to go with it.

Then he sat back, looked up into the swirling, illuminated murk of the night sky, soothed his raw throat with a slug of wine, and asked himself what could possibly be going on in Madagascar. Not that it mattered; whatever crackpot proposal Jay had in mind now, it wasn't going to happen. No bloody lemurs for Ricky. Perhaps a holiday in Norway?

But *Madagascar*? What was in Ricky's database? A military-backed coup, to be followed by delayed elections that never quite happened. And then, when they *did*, and the long-suffering Malagasy people got themselves a shiny new President, disputed results meant that the wrangling went on — two camps, equally corrupt and venal, in a proxy fight, with the *international community* posing as referee but mostly distracted by more violent events elsewhere. Pretty much what you'd expect. So what, then?

And thus at length, with shameful reluctance, when he'd exhausted all possible theories and contingencies, he put down his glass, pushed his plate away, and thought about what Kerri Law would be doing for dinner tonight.

CHAPTER 10

Sandy Quayle slept the sleep of the weary striver — something she had once been, and was determined to be again. But only until three in the morning, according to the clock-radio combo that was bolted to the night stand by her motel bed.

Awake with a vengeance, the final frames of her dream fading fast — Johnny-boy signing his way through a stack of loan documents while Hunter Bill and the sheriff built a hideous bonfire in their front yard — she felt her stomach cramp with hunger. She really hadn't been able to eat that much at the Pioneers' Reception; the opportunities had been limited, and, towards the end of the evening, Megan had begun to look at her funny.

But she felt seized with the knowledge that, were she to walk two blocks west, she would find herself standing before an all-night waffle house.

How much money did she have left? After all, she was back in the world of money now, and it was time to get serious.

Well, she'd started the day with five dollars. Then she'd spent three dollars and fifty cents on Megan's coffee from Bean Village. That left a dollar fifty. But then had come Mr Prince's hundred dollar bill — the one that had so impressed the motel clerk. The room had cost thirty. Thus her total net worth, excluding the clothes she'd worn all day and the contents of her shopping bag — left behind at the office, worryingly — was seventy-one dollars and fifty cents. If she spent two more nights at the motel, her net worth would shrink to eleven fifty. Or perhaps zero, if Megan drank as much coffee as she claimed. And that left nothing for food.

The conclusion was inexorable: she could only afford one more night of luxury.

That being so, she offered up a silent, preventative prayer against gluttony, and yielded.

At the waffle house the order she gave to her server — Maria, according to her name tag — comprised eggs over-easy, hash browns, Colonel Jack's sausage, and bacon, for nine dollars and twenty-five cents; root beer for a dollar thirty; and cinnamon apple pie with whipped cream on the side, for four dollars ninety-five. Total cost of meal: fifteen dollars and fifty cents. This would collapse

her net worth to fifty-six dollars exactly. But it would be worth it. She hadn't eaten like this for — how long now? — it must have been more than two years. And it would be at least twenty-four hours before she got this hungry again.

Maria, though she looked exhausted, delivered Sandy's food with a friendliness and solicitude that Sandy felt she didn't deserve, and that didn't even seem like management policy. There were food stains on Maria's skirt. Had she noticed? Sandy considered a tactful aside, but decided against it.

After she'd finished her meal and declined coffee or tea — never mind gluttony, she felt nauseous from the cream — Sandy lingered in the restaurant, watching the other diners and reflecting on her changed circumstances. Maria kept an eye on her, but didn't seem to mind.

After a decent interval, she brought the check and left it on the table.

Sandy's first day as part of Mr Prince's campaign for President had been a success, had it not? Barbara's initial aloofness and scepticism had been overcome. Megan, a young woman with big-city aspirations, who might have disdained a small-town volunteer twenty years her senior, and who refused to be intimidated by the lower end of the Manhattan real estate market, had, nonetheless and perhaps despite herself, been captivated by Sandy's performance as a telephone canvasser. The *system*, after all, had spoken. And everyone knew that computers now ruled the world.

Mr Prince certainly knew that. Sandy had gathered, from the chatter in the office, that the astonishing and *consistent* success of Mr Prince's New American Century Fund depended largely on its deployment of computer technology. Whatever software it was that Mr Prince had developed, it was miles ahead of the competition and a source of immense bafflement to them. So valuable was Mr Prince's chief Software Architect, in fact, that his contract was said to be the most enviable pair of *golden handcuffs* in the business. Of course, the machines could only do so much on their own; they worked their alchemy under the guidance of Mr Prince's *bespoke strategy*. The general parameters of this strategy were known, Sandy was told, but not the details. And of course, the Devil — Sandy knew this for sure, didn't she? — was right there, in the details. No other investment shop could replicate Mr Prince's strategy, and so it was this dual advantage — the *algorithms* combined with that unique brain — that made the New American Century Fund more exclusive than any country club in America.

Observing her fellow diners in the waffle house, Sandy figured that she probably stood a better chance of getting into the NACF than any of them. Mostly solitary, preoccupied and hunched over their food, they were surely as price-sensitive as any of Mr Prince's computers, albeit in a different way.

Beyond the enticing, neon-rimmed windows of the restaurant, traffic on the main route west out of town was light: mostly eighteen-wheelers and sagging pickups that, Sandy guessed, needed to be somewhere by dawn.

Sandy felt herself balanced between invisibility and this twilight world of work. Which way would she fall? The diners in the waffle house were simply refuelling, with as little joy as the eighteen-wheelers felt when they filled their tanks, before submitting again to the grind. They were America's sinews, but you could see that they had atrophied. All power, all vigour, had been appropriated.

The *system* preferred to talk to voters about renewal and reinvigoration, but sometimes, for a certain kind of target, it would assert the need to *take back our country*. Though she was wary of populism and recoiled from anger, Sandy felt in her soul that there was something in this. From precisely whom or what America needed to be retrieved was a little beyond her understanding, she had to concede. But it was a task that demanded selflessness and devotion, and a gentle spirit of supreme intelligence. Was Mr Prince to be this paragon? Well, if anybody had any other ideas, Sandy was ready to listen. Failing that, she'd made her choice.

But if she were not to become invisible again, Sandy would need yet more *luck*. Plus, right now, she needed to address some practicalities.

First came the issue of clothing. Later that morning she would show up at the Stimsonville HQ of the Prince Campaign wearing — having slept in! — the same clothes she wore the day before. Barbara would not be impressed. Megan would look askance. Sandy's other clothes were in the shopping bag, which, she prayed, remained untouched under her desk. If she got to the office early, could she sneak in, grab the bag and make it to the restroom before anyone noticed? Perhaps. The permanent solution to this problem was to request a campaign sweatshirt, and wear it every day with her black sweatpants.

Second, it was inevitable that at some point she would be asked, and have to divulge, details of her personal circumstances and home life. Until she became firmly established with the campaign, she felt, the truth would have to be deferred. But messing with the truth was such a terrible sin — and hadn't it gotten the country in such a mess, too? — that this could only be justified as a short-term tactic.

Third, money. She could have one more night at the motel. Then what?

Actually, how would it be if she didn't worry about money? What if she just had faith? Mr Prince presumably had enormous faith in his bespoke strategy. And it had worked out pretty darned well for him. Sandy would have faith in Mr Prince. He *knew*, obviously. And he hadn't told Barbara or Megan, and probably not the Pioneers, either. First five dollars, and then a hundred. He was looking down on her, if you like, and looking after her. Discreetly, of course. He had to think of his position. You probably needed all the discretion you could muster when you dealt in *algorithms* and *golden handcuffs*. If Sandy continued to shine, then... Well, perhaps things would happen.

Faith was the answer. Backed up with hard work and, perhaps, with a little honest cunning.

She counted out fifteen dollars and fifty cents, placed the money neatly on top of the check, and left the restaurant in high spirits. Then she negotiated her way back to the motel along the darkened highway. When she glanced back over her shoulder she saw Maria, silhouetted in black, immobile in the waffle house window, encircled by neon.

Sandy's second day at the office was a roaring success. She timed her arrival perfectly, reuniting herself with her shopping bag, and then making her dash. Thus she was able to present herself to Barbara — chestnut pants suit, cream blouse, silk scarf — and Megan — pale, tight jeans and lime cashmere polo — in her trusty black sweatpants and pink acrylic sweater. Fashion goddess? Come on, get real, people — it's our very own Sandy we're talking about here! Hey, let's send her to New York with Megan, she deserves a makeover!

Sandy spent the morning working again with *leaners*. But the system was so impressed with her that, by lunchtime, she'd been upgraded to *switchers*, a more challenging category. Megan remembered that it was her turn to do the coffee run, and brought Sandy back a grande latte, plus a blueberry muffin. Things were going so well!

And then one of Mr Prince's local backers — he owned one of the remaining car dealerships on the state highway, it seemed — stopped by to deliver the proceeds of the previous day's fund-raiser golf tournament up at the Country Club (and get himself photographed and uploaded doing so). And he brought free pizza for all the volunteers! Donald was such a great guy, according to Megan; and a fine brute of a man, in Barbara's opinion.

Donald handed the cash — it was loose in a tote bag that bore the golf club logo, untouched since the golfers had tossed in their contributions — to Megan and asked her to count it. They'd raised fifty-two thousand exactly, Donald said. Megan, eager not to miss an opportunity to network, it seemed, or let her pizza get cold, delegated the task to Sandy.

Sandy took the cash to the back office and counted it, dividing it into thousands, and securing each bundle with a rubber band. Fifty-two exactly. She was about to exit the office to collect her share of the pizza when Donald blocked the doorway, holding a brown paper bag.

'Got a little extra for ya!' he said, with a car-dealer's wink, handing her the bag. 'Just a little side-deal, you know. Willard's idea. Keep up the good work — I hear you're doing great!'

Then he was gone. She looked inside the bag — more cash, already sorted and secured. When she counted it she found that there was exactly a thousand dollars.

A thousand dollars! No, it was impossible. She counted again. But it was true. Mr Prince had given her a thousand dollars. *Just a little side-deal. Keep up the good work.* She had kept her end of their unspoken bargain and, once again, he had delivered.

And yet she hesitated. A hundred dollars was a plausible tip from a man as wealthy as Mr Prince. But a thousand? That wasn't a tip; it was something else. At the very least it betokened the entering into of some kind of conspiracy, even if a benign one. A *side-deal*? Could Donald have meant anything other than that Mr Prince entertained a special concern for Sandy, and wanted to encourage her? It was for the sake of the campaign, to be sure, but could there be some further purpose?

Or had she simply misconstrued Donald's meaning entirely? Sandy concluded that, somehow, she would have to test this thesis on Megan before she took the money for herself.

The afternoon's work went even better than the morning's. Sandy began to anticipate, and improve on, the system's arguments. Her targets — angry, bitter, despairing, or simply depleted — responded to her voice; it was the note of quiet faith with which she augmented her tone that did it, she thought.

Then, about half an hour before Sandy's shift was to end, Megan over-rode the system and let Sandy talk to some ninety-per-centers. These were voters who, the system calculated, could be prevailed upon to change their customary voting allegiance only ten per cent of the time. Sandy needed to detach them from one or other of the major parties, in favour of Mr Prince.

For one set, the system asserted that Mr Prince would instigate a return to the economic rigour that their preferred party had abandoned. For the other, the system promised that Mr Prince would restore the avenues of opportunity that their habitual party had neglected. But Sandy over-rode the system herself, telling both groups that Mr Prince wasn't a politician at all, and couldn't ever be, because he had integrity, heart and faith — and that she, personally, had been touched by all three of these qualities. It was a testament that she offered sincerely, although she did not go into specifics, and her targets, she felt, were mostly disarmed by it, if not entirely swayed.

Megan, sitting alongside and monitoring the system's analytics page, seemed disarmed, too.

'Hey, you're really good. You know that?'

Then the shift was over, and Barbara declared a timeout. Some exciting news had arrived. Firstly, the latest batch of polls now showed, for the first time, that Mr Prince had a statistically-significant lead over both of the main-party candidates.

Second, the campaign had decided that now was the time to shift its main operating base. Stimsonville, long the Prince family's sentimental home, or *country seat*, as Barbara put it, had served its purpose. Mr Prince's heartland credentials had been established. The campaign now needed to ramp up its engagement with the media, and press home its economic and financial message. This meant a move to New York.

'And I'm sure you're all as surprised as I am!' Barbara said, speaking up to cut through the cheers and hollering. And it was safe to go there now, she added, given that the *Robin Hood rabble* had been swept off the streets.

There was a looseness in Barbara's tintured voice, Sandy thought, and she looked a little unsteady in her heels. Had she been drinking?

It then emerged that Megan had been selected to transfer to the New York campaign HQ — which was pretty convenient for *her*, Sandy thought, but never mind. And then it was announced that Megan, in turn, had selected Sandy to accompany her! If, that was, Sandy's family didn't have a problem, and Sandy herself could manage to take time out from all her other activities?

'Oh, no problem at all!' Sandy said, wondering as she spoke how many nights you could afford in New York for a thousand dollars.

'Sandy will hook up — I mean *shack up* — with Megan,' Barbara declared. 'Okay with you, Megan?'

'Sure,' Megan said. 'And we'll see about that makeover.'

'All right. Well, let's get organised here, we got a new shift coming. I'll be at the Longhorn if anyone wants to join me.'

The Longhorn, Sandy knew, was the bar-restaurant at the Bellvue Grand. It was the smartest place in town.

'And Megan? Take care of the golf money, okay honey? Hah! Money honey. That's funny. So long, people.'

Barbara sashayed out into the street.

Megan turned to Sandy.

'Did you count it?'

'Yes, but —'

'Fifty-two thousand exactly, right?'

'Yes, fifty-two. But there's a bit more in —'

'A bit more?' Megan sighed. 'Donald said *exactly*. What kind of businessman is he? I guess you don't have to *count* to sell cars. Look, we've done the paperwork, and it's already in the system. Give me the fifty-two and just hold on to the change for now, okay?'

Megan's tone of voice told Sandy that 'the change' was something she'd prefer not to be bothered with ever again. Unlike Barbara, Megan was into the big picture, not the details.

But it wasn't 'change', it was a thousand dollars. And Sandy's experiences with businessmen, banks, brokers, loan-sharks, debt-collectors and money-changers in general had taught her that they never under-counted. Donald had said *five*-two. Not *five*-three, or *five*-two and change.

So the money had to be hers. What other conclusion could she come to, given Donald's behaviour? She and Mr Prince were co-conspirators. But in the best cause.

And she was going to New York, a place she'd only ever been to once before, on a college trip. She'd be staying with smart, street-wise Megan — although exactly *where* was a mystery, because Megan hadn't bought her million-dollar apartment yet, had she?

All the same, it was exciting! Look what happened if you only had faith!

Then she remembered that she had failed to leave a tip for Maria, and felt so shamed and upset that she had to run to the restroom.

CHAPTER 11

Teresa Wolfe — known to all the world as Teri, except for one irreconcilable grandmother and a single former room-mate, the ineffable Milly van Dornen — woke to find that the heat in her building had gone off again.

The building, a four-storey brick slab with ugly, antique fire escapes and even uglier factory-style windows, was owned by a retired realtor who had cashed in just before the last crash, and now lived in Florida. She was hard to get hold of. So was her building maintenance contractor. The unreliability of the twenty-five-year-old HVAC system was, according to popular suspicion, a deliberate cost-saving measure. Outages were rumoured to correspond to spikes in the price of heating oil.

The building crouched in deepest Bayonne, just off Kennedy Boulevard. Teri shared a one-bedroom apartment with two fellow food-service industry employees. In theory, this was against the rules. But, so long as the rent got paid, nobody seemed to care. Teri's two room-mates, Alicia and Burgandy, worked for a catering company that serviced retirement care homes. Because they worked different shifts, they could multi-task in the bedroom. Teri got the couch. Between them, they could just about afford the rent of eleven hundred dollars a month.

But it was tight. There was no slack in the budget. They each had college loans to pay off; Teri's amounted to ninety-four thousand dollars.

Teri rolled off the couch, wrapped herself in a blanket, and tried to decide which was worse: the shock of a cold shower, or the humiliation of Pedro and Aliyah's furtive glances. Since she was already late, she selected the latter and began to hunt for her clothes. She would need to wrap up warm today.

Teri's commute comprised four phases. First, she walked the four long blocks to the Light Rail stop at 45th Street. When the wind blew in from the Hudson, it could be a freezing slog. Then she rode the train to the fancy towers at Exchange Place, that little bit of Jersey City that longed to detach itself from Hudson County and glob on to lower Manhattan. Here she boarded a PATH train and burrowed beneath the Hudson River, leaving one world for another. Once on the other side, at the World Trade Center terminus, all that remained was the ten-minute march to Pearl Street and Bean Village.

Oh, wait a moment. Trenton — *shit!*

She'd been fired for checking out the Robin-Hooders down in Battery Park. Okay, there might have been more to it than that; it probably wasn't *totally* political. But it was a fuck-up, all the same. And it was happening at a bad time. Alicia had had some back problems; her co-payments meant that she wouldn't be able to make her share of the rent this month, and Teri had promised to cover it. What was she going to do?

The more jobs you lost, the harder it was to get another. And Teri feared the approach of that unofficial threshold beyond which simply being out of work made you unemployable. She couldn't go back home again; Dad's union contract had been voided by the state legislature, and he knew what was coming. Mom thought they could rent out Teri's old room.

But the mere thought of some desperate stranger lying awake in the very bed where Teri had dreamt of finding that special partner who would be more practical than she was; of fixer-upper makeovers in upcoming neighbourhoods; of smart new suits for the office; and of short stories in magazines — well, she didn't need to make herself feel any more morose or washed-up than she already did.

She sat down on the couch, still clasping the blanket around her waist. Was there anybody she could call? How about her old, go-to college professor — the amateur ornithologist whose room it was always safe to go to after dark? Maybe he could set her up with another gig tutoring the SAT-challenged offspring of the ruling class. The conditions were unspeakable; the parents, unreasonable; and the kids, uneducable. And it paid less than Bean Village. But it was *something*.

She groped under the couch for her phone. And when she looked at the screen she saw the message from Milly van Dornen.

Now she remembered. Should she cut back on the cheap wine in the evening? Well, maybe.

Milly, whose nickname amongst her college pals, cruelly but not without cause, had once been *Princess Mildred van Porno*, had found Teri an opening. Or a potential opening, at least.

She was expected to present herself on *Park Avenue* at eleven that morning. So it would have to be the cold shower after all. *Shit!*

*

It was one of the best apartment buildings — perhaps *the* best — on the Avenue, according to Gloria, Mr Willard G. R. Prince's Personal Secretary. Many believed it to be the master-work of the great architect, Candela, the Mozart of the pre-war triplex. Even though it opened to shareholders — it was a *cooperative*, of course — in 1933, in the depths of the Depression, it had never ceased to be a beacon of aspiration for America's original aristocracy; for her giants of industry; or, more recently, her wizards of finance. Even now, when some claimed that America had fallen into a new kind of depression — Gloria didn't accept that, nor did Mr Prince, and a young Ivy League grad like Teri surely had no truck with such pessimism — the building went from strength to strength:

Mr Prince had maintained a residence here for the last twelve years. Well, eleven years, to be precise; during the first year the apartment had been remodelled.

They sat in the *library*, having entered by private elevator and having traversed an entrance hall more spacious, Teri calculated, than the entirety of the Bayonne one-bed *plus* the apartment next door. And, sure, the walls were lined with books. But they looked like they'd been ordered by the yard; you didn't get to own a pad like this by *reading*, right? The furniture and *décor* might have been transplanted from an English stately home — or, rather, the TV representation of one. Nothing looked *old*. The fireplace looked like it had never been used. What had it all been like before it was remodelled?

Well, Gloria said, if Teri got the job, then she would be seeing a lot more of Mr Prince's superb New York home. A *lot* — in fact, she would be living here.

Living here? What had frigging Milly done — sold Teri into servitude?

But Gloria was talking. She, Gloria Steynhuis, was purely Mr Prince's personal secretary. His business, financial, and — of course — political affairs were handled by others. Nonetheless, at this particular moment, it was a case of, well, *all hands on deck*.

Thus the campaign had asked Gloria to recruit an assistant, in order to document the *human* side of Mr Prince's unprecedented and, undoubtedly, historic run for the top office. Now, obviously, a team of professional film-makers had already been hired to produce the official record of the campaign. What we were talking about here was, instead, something more informal — the lighter moments; the candidate relaxing with his family, unbuttoned or *unplugged*, as the campaign liked to put it.

The idea was to reinforce the campaign's political message, but in an accessible, soft-focus way. An entire section of the electorate did not respond to argument, apparently, or to facts and figures; they responded to emotion — so long as it was organised and presented appropriately. The campaign wanted video snippets, a blog, a social-media feed, and such-like. Authenticity was key. They wanted it produced by a *hip* and *credible* twenty-something, preferably a female college graduate with artistic leanings, who would herself look, well, *appealing* on camera. While technical assistance would be available, the whole production, Gloria had been given to understand, needed to look *amateur* — but in the slickest and most professional way possible.

And that was where Teri came in. Milly had said that Teri was a whizz with a video camera, and knew how to put a sentence together. And now that Gloria had seen Teri in person, it was clear that, with a little work, Teri could be made to look presentable, too.

Well, *thanks*, she thought. Jesus! What had Milly gotten her into here? You know, really!

'Milly says you're reliable and discreet — and very loyal.'

Well, Milly was a dope; that was the truth. And desperate for friendship, as opposed to what appeared to pass for human contact within the status-freighted, transactional matrix she'd been born into. Okay, she was a sometime-sweet, funny, naïve dope — if that helped. No doubt she felt she was doing a very sweet, helpful thing for Teri. Perhaps even now she was hugging herself with pious joy. But if she'd really known Teri at all...

'That's really sweet of her.'

'And are you?'

'Oh, I would say so.'

Don't fuck with me, Ms Personal Secretary!

'It's very important. Normally, we'd run a standard background check. But there isn't time, and the campaign wants this to look like a spontaneous, family thing. And since you're such good friends with Milly, we can stretch a point and call you *family*. So...'

'I'm sure Milly would vouch for me.'

She would, too.

Gloria slid her glasses down her nose and looked at Teri over the top of them. Scepticism? Yeah, okay — but was there any need to be so obvious?

'And I'm sure you wouldn't let her down.'

'Never.'

A pause. Gloria slid her glasses back up her nose. Teri pretended to admire the fireplace.

Did she really want this so-called job? Did it actually pay any money? And if she had to live in this Masterpiece Theater apartment — like where, under the stairs? — then what about Bayonne? And did the job end when Prince won — or, preferably, lost — the election?

'Obviously, it's a temporary position,' Gloria said. But you will have a *golden* opportunity to network.'

Yay! Teri Wolfe networks her way to personal success and lifetime achievement. Take that, Trenton!

'And the new administration will have a number of entry-level appointments to fill...'

Great! Teri gets to work for the new plutocracy. The money would be good, right?

'...subject to a full background check.'

Ah.

'So, how much do you want this job, Ms Wolfe?'

Yeah, that was the question. Suppose she said *a lot* — even if it seemed like the last thing in the world she ought to be doing?

'Oh, well this is, like, an incredible opportunity for me. I really, really want to do it.'

'You'll have to live here. In the staff wing.'

Staff wing? In an apartment? Of course — the old servants' quarters from 1933.

'Not a problem.'

'Starting immediately.'

'That's okay. I'm available.'

'There won't be much time off.'

'I'm fine with that.'

I'm in, Gloria! It's too crazy to miss. Thank you, Milly! But what about the money?

'I believe there's a salary,' Gloria said. 'I don't know what was decided, but it'll be adequate.'

Adequate. Ok—ay...

'No health benefits, obviously.'

'Not an issue.'

Teri was healthy. She knew she was.

Gloria stood up and smiled. But was it an *authentic* smile, or just part of the campaign?

'Then welcome aboard. I'll show you your room, and then we'll talk about the meeting, and how you need to conduct yourself in his presence.'

Wow, she thought. This was sure as hell going to beat selling coffee to bonus babies.

*

And thus began Teri Wolfe's translation from humble food-service worker to modern-day indentured scribe.

In her staff bedroom, tiny even by Bayonne standards, Teri paid attention to Gloria's strictures on etiquette. The *family* always took precedence and Teri should defer to them; Mr Prince was a family-first man and a great believer in the American family as an institution. This, of course, went a considerable way in explaining his enormous appeal. Mr Prince was always to be addressed as *Mr Prince*, and not *Willard* or, indeed, using any other soubriquet that Teri might have heard. (Meaning, Teri construed, don't call him *Fat Willy*, or *Prince Regent* — apparently coined by some wags at Yale who discovered that the middle initial 'R' in the man's name derived from some ancient Anglo aristo called John Dexter Regent — or by his most demotic nickname, *that rich guy*.)

Then, in Bergdorf Goodman, Teri dressed and undressed while Gloria and Gloria's personal shopper fitted her out in preppy outfits that might almost have come from Gap but were just that little bit better — for those who could tell the difference. The difference, Teri figured, amounted to about six months' rent for the dump in Bayonne, but hey — now she *really* felt Ivy League, as she had never done before, and in a very meaningful way.

Back in the library on Park Avenue, in the presence of Mr Prince's personal lawyer, a pin-striped owl with a face as stony as any of the library's mock-Roman busts, Teri signed a non-disclosure agreement that ran to twenty-six pages, as well as receipts for a laptop computer, a super-spec tablet, an HD camcorder, and all associated cables, bags, accessories, manuals and consumables.

In the *scullery*, Gloria told Teri that she ought to be able to find enough room amid the crockery to do her work; for reasons of security, the apartment did not use Wi-Fi, but a cabled connection was available here. Teri should be aware that a private security company had been hired to monitor all electronic communications in and around the apartment; and also that Mr Prince's tableware collections were very valuable.

In her own, compact, private office, adjacent — and, it seemed, directly connected — to Mr Prince's own chamber of solitude, Gloria gave Teri the executive summary of Mr Prince's historical pedigree as an American patriot. She began with the sturdy merchants who stood firm against wicked British taxes, moving on to the fearless pioneers who financed expansion to the west

and fostered the growth of agriculture in the south; the brave, can-do traders who held the nation together by providing the union army with whatever it needed; the far-sighted entrepreneurs who taught the country to embrace the railroads; the tireless industrialists who sacrificed so much to make America the richest nation in history; the real-estate geniuses who had *literally* built the shining city on the hill; the Wall Street giants who had given the man in the street a share in American prosperity; and now, in the present, the culmination of all this struggle — Mr Willard G. R. Prince himself, and his brothers and sons, who had bestowed upon the entire world a weightless, frictionless form of pure finance whose benefits were almost beyond imagining. There was more to it, of course; Teri would be expected to do her homework.

Wow, Teri thought: from smugglers to banksters, a criminal full-circle. She also noted that Gloria had no personal effects in her office — stuffed toys, comical cartoons, family photos, World's Best Mom mug; stuff like that. Weird, huh? Put that together with Gloria's ultra-conservative, grey, buttoned-up suit and her aggressively bouffant blonde hair, in some retro sixties' style (which Teri thought was kind of pushing it for someone who'd probably been forty-nine for quite a few years now) and what did you get? Right, exactly. A tad on the scary side. But when did Teri get to meet *that rich guy*?

Tonight, Gloria said, Mr Prince was to host a private dinner for the Committee to Save America — yes, the name *was* somewhat hyperbolic, but there'd been foolish public talk of *malaise*, and this was politics, after all — and Teri would be expected to attend, although strictly without her recording equipment. On this occasion, it being her first outing, Teri would be chaperoned by her great friend, Milly van Dornen, whose mother, Barbara, would also be in attendance.

Jeez, it just got better didn't it? Though Barbara was kind of a concern. Milly's mom was a smart cookie and might just know a few things about Teri that her sugar-biscuit daughter didn't.

'So,' Gloria said. 'You've just got time to clean yourself up and get changed. I'll see you in the library at seven.'

She gave Teri a nod that seemed to mean *now get out of my office*. Teri got the message and retired to her cubby-hole in the servants' quarters.

Whereupon, she decided, she would ask herself this question: *what the fuck?* What the fuck had she gotten herself into? Could she actually go through with it? Wait, wait, wait — through with *what*, exactly?

Oh no, Teri. No, no, no. *You can't be the one to pull the plug on Mr Restore Our Democracy. You've got enough problems. Let somebody else do it.* Would Fat Willy really be any worse than the other two guys? Yeah, probably, a little. But so what? Think of the entertainment value. Just don't do anything really stupid, okay? Go along for the ride. Have some LOLs on the side. Take the money — it's going to be adequate, they say. Sure, but what's adequate these days? How about the ninety-four thousand dollars in outstanding loans that don't even go away if you're bankrupt?

No bailouts for over-educated deadbeats like Teri.

Anyway, it wasn't up to Teri to decide whether America got to have its first *Prince Regent*, right? Damn right. Let the voters decide, even if *you*, Teri, are helping to manipulate their emotions. Oh, big deal. Just go along, get along with

the plutocracy. It's already happening anyway, yeah? Don't even *think* of a post-election exposé. No, no — *stop* thinking about it! *Now!*

Okay. Now let Teri have her shower in the staff bathroom, change into the new clothes that somebody else bought her, and prepare to meet the people who were going to save America.

Oh, yeah — and Milly and her mom.

CHAPTER 12

Teresa Wolfe, the slacker radical turned indentured scribe and (so it had been said) adequately-paid handmaiden of plutocracy, figured that if you could have morph-mapped the aggregate wealth of this top-shelf library crowd on your top-of-the-range tablet (which you couldn't because all such devices had been sequestered in the vestibule by an imperious blonde and her shrunken, fifty-something assistant) then, just as Africa would shrink to the size of Belgium while Westchester ballooned, the library might have aced it over the outer boroughs to become visible from space. From which vantage point, she imagined, the Chinese astronauts presently assembling the components of their monstrous moon-exploration vehicle might also have observed a temporary deformation in the Earth's pluto-magnetic field — enough, perhaps, to precipitate above Park Avenue an effulgent display of the *aurora financialis*.

Was it really so fanciful? The single square foot of library floor currently tenanted by her petite frame was worth, she calculated, more than twice her entire year's salary before tax and deductions at Bean Village. These people gave off a staticky, monetising force field; it was almost as if they were aliens, invaders from some advanced planet possessed of superior financial technology, alighting on Earth to plunder its resources and enslave, or harvest, its people. Yet they didn't look like master-race marauders, she thought; nor, at least superficially, the ravening brutes of science fiction. No, far from it — they were delicate creatures, never mind the loud voices and the over-stuffed confidence. Look at those silky hands, those dewy, frost-free cheeks — and all that bone-china décolletage. These were fragile beings; they needed protection. And so they had lawyers, private bankers, personal assistants, limos and drivers, servants like Teri. And, most of all, each other.

Like stars falling together under the pull of one other's gravity, they circulated in the library, drinks in hand, trinkets shining, pulsating with dark energy, but shielded from the body-disrupting radiation of the low-income belt by the library's tight-packed stacks of unread and irrelevant wisdom.

But the heavenly body around which they all desired to orbit — Chinese designs on the moon notwithstanding — was Mr Willard Gaffney Regent Prince,

the next President of the United States. Or *Fat Willy*, if you will. The guy on whose watch America lost the moon, or was about to.

Jesus, Teri — stop thinking this shit! You blurt it out once and the gig's over. And you haven't had any fun yet. And you won't be able to pay the rent. And you'll never get another job. And... *Okay, got it.*

Fat Willy hadn't shown up yet. But he was the talk of the town, and town was all here. The word was that Willy, alerted by wearable technology running bespoke software, had taken to his in-apartment trading room to execute yet another audacious play on behalf of the New American Century Fund. The library, Teri could see, was all in favour of *that*. However, she believed she had discerned an interesting class divide — yes, even at *this* exalted level! Milly had said that most of tonight's attendees were long-time investors. But a minority — debutantes, supplicants, suck-ups, social-climbers, greedsters and lickspittles, Teri surmised — were not. Milly had called them *aspirants*.

'So what exactly are they aspiring to, Milly?'

'Well, it's the returns.'

'What about the returns?'

'I guess they're consistent?'

'How can that be?'

'They just always are. It's the, you know, the bespoke —'

'That's bullshit, Milly.'

'You know you can't use your language around here, right?'

'Oops. Beg your pardon.'

Anyway, the slightly creepy Gloria, Teri's new boss and Fat Willy's personal secretary, had given the two varsity pals their mission for the evening. Since it was Teri's first time out, in this *milieu*, Milly would be *babysitting* (Gloria seemed to get this inadvertent joke but it went over Milly's head). Because recording equipment — now and forever at gatherings of this nature — was strictly forbidden, Milly and Teri's assignment was to seek out the younger members of the Movement to Save America (as distinct from the *Committee*, which comprised an older and very select bunch), and to get a handle on their thoughts and feelings. It was widely appreciated, Gloria said, that young libertarians — and there were more of them by the day — favoured Mr Prince. The campaign wasn't surprised, but wanted to understand exactly where the kids were coming from, so to speak. To this end, Milly and Teri had been issued with paper notepads and pencils and released into the library.

And it was as they began their search for high-value targets that Milly said something disturbing.

'Hey, my mom's looking for you!'

'What? Where is she? What about?'

'Oh, she just wants to catch up with you.'

Shit. Barbara van Dornen, Milly's mom, was one of those search-and-destroy mothers, who'd run her daughter's life like a military campaign, keeping intelligence on all Milly's friends, contacts and acquaintances — boyfriends most particularly, of course, which was probably why Milly had gotten through so many — and mostly didn't care to take prisoners. If Barbara had been tracking Teri's glittering career — that crazy ride she'd taken between graduating from Penn

and landing on her aching feet at Bean Village — then Teri could be busted. Did Barbara ever close a file? Wasn't she a one-woman FBI? Did she know about the performance art thing? The punk rock group? The environmental provocations? That *embarrassing* video blog? (She couldn't delete it because she'd lost the password; it remained a lurking peril, like an untethered sea-mine — but as close as a tap or a click!)

So Barbara had to be avoided. Just in case.

'Where's your mom now?'

'I guess she's with Megan and that woman they found in Stimsonville. D'you want me to —'

'Wait, backup. Who's Megan?'

'Oh, she's the one taking everybody's phone. She's with the campaign? Kind of pushy, but I guess she's okay. You know, with the hair and all. You are *not* going to believe this. Her boyfriend —'

'And who's this woman from Stimsonville?'

Milly seemed put out that Teri didn't care about Megan's boyfriend. Milly missed the point an awful lot — unlike her mom.

'Well, it's kind of weird. She just walks in off the street, and they put her on the phones — you know, hassling people to vote — and it's like she's some kind of genius. But then she also comes across like she's basically dumb? That's what Megan says.'

'An *idiot savant*, you mean?'

'A what?'

'Never mind. Let's go over here.'

Teri led Milly to the far end of library, away from the vestibule, its confiscated phones and its human zoo.

They fastened on to a gang of thrusting young libertarians who said they were in private equity. So what did they think about, you know, stuff? It turned out that they were eager to unload. Teri and Milly got their pencils out.

The conservative project, they thought, had gone off the rails. Sure, the Southern Strategy had worked for a long time, plus cultural issues and all that shit, but it was fucked, played out. Teri noted that Milly didn't object to their language — but then, these were boys talking.

And, sure, the old parties, they were fucked, too. They sucked up money, but they never delivered, not really, on deregulation and getting government the fuck out of the way. It was time for a realignment. Prince was The Man. Oh, and bring on the NPP.

They also thought that Reagan Pruett, the country cross-over singer who'd scandalised the Superbowl half-time millions, was shit-hot and darned cool. *Boys*, Teri thought. Yuck. But what was the NPP?

She scribbled her notes, taking care to make them illegible. Then she scanned the horizon. Now, where was Barbara? *There* — over by the fireplace on her own, ignoring the complete works of Anthony Trollope, looking like she was on the hunt. Shi—it!

Most people were nursing flutes of Champagne. Barbara lugged a bottle of red wine.

'Let's go over there.'

Teri led Milly to an alcove — a large bay, in fact, that let out on to a terrace with views across to Central Park. Here they found some junior investment bankers. What was their take on, you know, crap in general?

They were heavily into the NPP. It was essential for American competitiveness. Weihan was a great example. It was going to be a new era. There were things we always thought we knew — that China would forever be a competitor, for example. But the new paradigm was almost here. Forget about global imbalances. Level playing fields! Transnational jurisdiction! Freedom enshrined forever by treaty and check out those torts!

Yeah, and how about that Reagan Pruett? She just did it again, did you see? Cool!

Teri pulled Milly aside.

'Did you understand any of that?'

'No. You?'

'Just the bit about friggin' Pruett. I *can* say friggin', right?'

'I guess. If you must. What do we write?'

'We'll just say they're optimistic about the future, and they like this NPP thing.'

'What is that?'

'Got me. Let's not worry about it.'

Barbara had disappeared from view. Was she sneaking up out of sight, or had she gone for another bottle?

'Let's go outside.'

'Teresa — it's cold out there!'

'Just for a moment.'

They stepped out on to the terrace. The night music of the city echoed up from its urban canyons. But somehow, up here, it sounded muffled, like a movie with the sound turned down. Milly hugged herself to keep warm — or perhaps to protect herself against radiation from the low-income belt. Teri, of course, was immune. She had been exposed.

Then Milly shrieked. Teri turned.

'Whoa! What happened?'

Milly stood frozen, mouth agape.

'Milly?'

'I don't know — something... Something hit me!'

'Huh? Like what?'

'It flew into me.'

'You mean a bird?'

'No, I don't know. It was hard.'

'Where'd it go?'

They looked. Milly grabbed Teri's arm.

'Can you see anything?'

'No,' Teri said, after a pause. 'Maybe a chunk fell off the building. It's pretty old.'

'But —'

'Let's go back inside. You're right. It's really cold.'

In they went.

But oh, what a friggin' liar she was! She'd seen it all right — small, shiny-black, kind of octagonal, hovering in the shadows. Some kind of toy friggin' drone! Someone was trying to spy on Fat Willy! The nerve! But who could it be? Who could possibly afford three hundred bucks for a thing like that?

While Milly recovered from her ordeal, Teri conducted her own half-assed reconnaissance. Barbara was back — this time in the middle of the room, talking to a bullet-headed man in a tux who looked sixty but tough. Time to move on.

'Uh, Milly? Do you know *those* guys? Over in the corner?'

'Oh no, Teri, they're just —'

'Let's talk to them.'

They were IT types from Silicon Valley. Whizz kids. Nerds. Brats. Billionaires.

They were into Big Data, scalability, the network effect, IPOs, campuses, cool innovation, reforming society and libertarianism. Especially libertarianism. And, inevitably, the NPP.

They had no opinion regarding Reagan Pruett, but had a lot of harsh things to say about out-dated intellectual property laws (software patents excepted).

Teri and Milly listened, smiled, doodled with their pencils and moved on.

'I *tried* to tell you,' Milly said.

It was true. She had tried. Poor Milly — always trying to steer Teri straight.

They voyaged on again, Teri ever careful not to fall within Barbara's gravitational field, to discover youthful real estate investors, hedge fund strategists, venture capitalists, bond traders and stock brokers. It was quite the cross-section of vibrant, young American society, Teri thought. And she began to imagine her first campaign blog post:

As I discovered at the coolest party in town, a glittering fund-raiser for the Movement to Save America, young people today just aren't buying into their parents' government. They're doing it for themselves. Their role models aren't the kind of people to sit back and wait for stuff to come to them — they're start-ups and entrepreneurs, people like country cross-over star Reagan Pruett, who...

Teri felt a firm hand on her shoulder.

'Teresa!'

But it wasn't Barbara, luckily; it was Gloria.

'Teresa. Go fetch your video camera and go down to the lobby. There's something going on in the street. I want pictures. Go!'

Well, this sounded exciting! Could there be a video snippet in it for the blog? Teri abandoned Milly to a chapter of emerging-market players and made for the servants' quarters to retrieve her camcorder. Crossing the vestibule, she encountered the Sage of Stimsonville. The woman sat alone, still, on a straight-backed chair, with nothing to do, it seemed, but guard a stash of phones, tablets and other contraband tech. Had anyone even offered her a drink?

'Hi,' Teri said. 'I'm Teri.'

'Oh, I'm Sandy. I...'

'Nice to meet you, Sandy. Cool.' Teri made an expansive gesture, indicating the vestibule's Bayonne-dwarfing vastness.

'Quite a place, huh?'

Sandy shifted in her seat; she didn't seem comfortable in her clothes, a smooth grey suit that looked brand-new and contrasted with her blotched and sandpapery skin.

'Yes. It certainly is.'

'So you work with Megan?'

'Yes. That's right. I do. Do you know her?'

'Nope. Not yet. Apparently she's pushy but okay. That right?'

'Oh, no, no. I wouldn't — I mean...'

'Look, I gotta run. There's something going down in the street, apparently. Catch you later.'

She retrieved her camera and took the stairs, not wanting to wait for the sluggish elevator. On the way down, she pondered the mystery that was evidently *Sandy*. The woman had walked into the local campaign office in Hicktown, aka Stimsonville, and had blown them all away with her telephonic talent. Truly weird, but good luck to her. Where, though, had she walked in from? That shrunken, weather-beaten look — Teri knew she'd been looking at someone who'd spent way too much time in the radiation belts.

In the lobby, she saw that the head doorman and his assistants had barricaded the main door with antique furniture.

'What's happening?'

'Bunch of yahoos out there, yelling about something.'

'Demonstrators?'

'Assholes. Where're the cops?'

Teri waved her camera.

'Um, look — I'm supposed to get pictures, so —'

'Use the service entrance.'

One of the assistant doormen escorted Teri to the rear of the building and released her into the street via a steel door.

'I'll wait. Knock three times. Take care...'

He gave her a protective smile. Wasting his time.

'Thanks!'

She ran around the block to the front of the building and activated her camera. And there they were: those banners, those chants, those jaunty but sinister masks. It was a Robin Hood Party demo. Somehow they'd found out about Fat Willy's little soirée. How rude of them to intrude. What gave them the right? Ah, but perhaps they were all young libertarians?

She zoomed in to get her pictures, but then hesitated. The cops weren't here yet; they would bring their own cameras. These flash demos tended to disperse like sea mist just before the cops arrived. So Teri's footage might be used to identify... But no — look, they were all wearing masks. So no problem.

She advanced, employing what she fancied to be a cat-like tread, zooming and panning. It was a small demo — only about forty of them — but they were making a decent noise. Zooming in again, she spotted someone — a girl to judge by the shape — operating a device that hung from a strap around her neck. Twin joysticks! So the mystery object that had biffed Milly in the midriff was a Robin Hood drone! Talk about fighting fire with fire. Well, except that the Robin

Hooders' drone probably wasn't armed. And what did they expect to see, apart from a bunch of rich people getting sozzled?

Then, for the second time that evening, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

'You again!'

She spun around — and whoa, those masks were way scary up close!

'You were in Battery Park!'

'Uh, yeah? So?'

'Who are you working for? And turn that thing off.'

She lowered her camera but let it run.

'Working for?'

'Is it Fairmeadow?'

'Who?'

'Have you been, like, *following* me?'

'Uh, no...'

'Do you know where I live?'

'Don't think so.'

'But you do recognise me, don't you?'

'Not with that stupid mask on.'

'Oh. Right.'

The mask came off. And now she recognised him. The black guy whose partner — girlfriend? — had been snatched by... Oh, right, *Fairmeadow Solutions*, the rent-a-goon mob. The very same outfit employed to oversee electronic security in and around the apartment.

'Okay, gotcha now,' she said.

'So who are you and why are you always filming us?'

This, she thought, was going to be tricky to explain.

'I'm Teri,' she said. 'And you are...'

'You better call me Robin.'

'Robin. Okay. Well, here's what happened, see. I was working on Pearl Street, at Bean Village, and I heard —'

'That shit coffee place? How could you work *there*? Do you have any idea how they treat —'

'It was a job, dickhead! Do *you* have a job?'

No answer. No job? Maybe he really was a libertarian.

'Okay. Sorry. Go on.'

'Anyway, I lost the job. Happy?'

'I said sorry.'

'Sure. Anyway, I was just bored, and you guys were down there in the park, and I like to shoot video, so...'

'Yeah, well, you realise what you shot, okay? You got them taking my friend. We don't know where she is. We can't find out. They won't tell us.'

There was a pause. It was only, what — a day and a half ago? But he sounded serious.

'They say it didn't happen.'

'But it did.'

'You saw it. You videoed it.'

She nodded.

'I would like to have a copy.'

'Okay.'

'I'm assuming you have the original somewhere safe?'

'Absolutely.'

'And where might that be?'

Ah. She'd hidden the memory card under a can of French Roast in the storeroom at Bean Village. Problem. But it was definitely safe there — nobody ever asked for French Roast. Well, except Milly, obviously. Which just proved the point.

'I think,' she said, judiciously, 'that it's better if you don't know.'

'So who are you, all of a sudden — little Miss M from freaking James Bond?'

'Do you want it or not?'

'Yeah, okay, sorry. I'm feeling a little *stressed*, okay?'

Diddums.

Another pause.

'Fine,' he said, with a decisive shuffling of the feet. 'Here's what we'll do. Tomorrow. Lunchtime. Get yourself a sandwich or something. In a paper bag. Go into the park. Sit on a bench somewhere. Let's say by the rink. The memory thing is in the bag. You eat, you get up and go. And you leave the bag.'

'And you collect it?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Kind of old-school, isn't it?'

'We can't do anything digital or electronic. They see everything.'

'Freakin' James Bond shit, then.'

'Has to be.'

She thought for a moment.

'Not sure if I can do tomorrow.'

'We'll be there every day. Between twelve and two.'

'Might still be tricky.'

'Why? And why are you here anyway? I almost forgot about that.'

Teri permitted herself a long sigh.

'You really want to know? I'm not sure you're going to like it...'

'Tell me anyway.'

So she did. And he seemed impressed. There was a very long pause. He was thinking.

'You could be our mole,' he said at length.

'Mole? What is that? Some other kind of spy shit?'

'What information do you have access to?'

'Information? I told you, I'm just a friggin' servant.'

'You could poke around. Eavesdrop. Hack into their systems.'

'Hack into their systems?'

'Sure. Whose side are you on, anyway?'

What a bastard! But that was the question, wasn't it?

'You don't want this idiot to win, do you?'

'No. But...'

'You know what'll happen. It'll be the end of everything. No way back. A total fucking plutocracy.'

'You're making it sound kind of bad...'

'And then there's the NPP. We'll get that, too. On steroids.'

Teri held up her free hand.

'Can I ask you something?'

'Sure.'

'What's the NPP?'

He sighed with what sounded like the weariest frustration ever.

'See, this is our problem. Nobody's heard of it. It's all been done in secret. It's a complete new layer of international law. Written by corporations. Superior to US law. There's going to be a treaty — the New Pacific Partnership. Sounds harmless, right? There's a shitload to it, but here's a taster, okay? You, as a citizen, will never be allowed to sue any of these corporations ever again. For any reason. They, on the other hand, will have the right to sue your ass if you do anything — anything at all — to damage their profits or their interests, which they define any way they like. They call it *free trade*, or *transparency*, or *harmonisation* or whatever. It's the rule of corporations. Forever. No national government can challenge them, because they can sue. In their own international court. Are you following all this?'

She was going to say that it sounded just a tad conspiracy-theory, but he hadn't finished.

'And this guy Prince — we think he wants China in too. Think about it.'

'But isn't he all for standing up to China?'

'You buy that?'

Did she? She wasn't sure. She needed to think. But she couldn't think now because some new commotion had erupted. Black vans had blocked the Avenue. The Robin Hooders were on the run.

'Gotta go,' Robin said. 'Tomorrow. In the park.'

He pulled his mask down and was gone. Teri raised her camera, still recording, and backed away towards the rear of the building and the service entrance.

Three knocks and she was in.

Then a breathless dash upstairs and she was on her narrow bed in her cubby hole, any idea of *fun* abandoned, sweating, panting and wondering whether she could possibly be cut out for all this freaking serious James Bond shit.

CHAPTER 13

Sandra Quayle — as she was before *The Fall* — had never doubted the power of prayer. For a time it had seemed to pay off reliably, like the blue-chip health insurance she used to have. But Sandy Quayle felt a little different: she had to wonder why its benefits kicked in so capriciously, so bizarrely and, in Sandy's case, after such a long delay. Perhaps you weren't meant to understand. If you could, you'd be able to work the system. And that would make God look bad.

But what worried Sandy most pressingly was the thought that her new state of grace might be only temporary. How much, exactly, had she put in the spiritual meter? It must have been more than she'd ever realised, to bring her the gifts she'd received. Really? And how, exactly, did *luck* translate into grace? Did it all depend on her attitude? Was it contingent on faith?

It had started with a five dollar bill up on the golf course at the Stimsonville Country Club and Spa — and an invitation. She had known at once that this was an invitation she could not refuse; she had to assume that was generally how it worked with grace. You knew it when you saw it. Or else you blew it. And, although some of the less modest conceits of some of Christ's least modest followers didn't always sit right with her, she wondered if — never mind the incongruous venue — *this* might be what it felt like to be *reborn*.

After the five dollars, there had been the hundred dollar bill that Mr Prince had left for her at the Pioneers' Reception. This had paid for her stay at the motel, but it had also led to temptation. You could see how these things worked. And, of course, she'd forgotten Maria's tip. That, in turn, had led to an orgy of penance. But, learning as she went, she'd put things right: in the middle of her second and final night at the motel, having set the alarm on the clock bolted to the night stand, she had revisited the waffle house. And there — praise be, really! — she'd found Maria topping up the all-night breakfast bar. Lamenting her unwonted forgetfulness, Sandy had begged Maria's forgiveness, which came instantly and all but wordlessly. When she had said all that she could think to say, Sandy had pressed a twenty into Maria's greasy and prematurely wrinkled hand.

The scene had occasioned a whole lot of tearfulness on Sandy's part and, she had to admit, no little embarrassment on Maria's, but a wrong had been righted and Sandy had put herself back on track. She slept soundly for the rest for the night.

The twenty, of course, had come from the thousand dollars that Mr Prince had sent to Sandy via Donald, the car dealer. The motel clerk wouldn't break a hundred a second time, so, not wanting to ask Maria to do it, Sandy had tried every gas station, bar and restaurant along the highway until she'd gotten lucky.

And today had been a long day, too. So now, as she sat in the vestibule of Mr Prince's beautiful city home, waiting for Megan, she felt tired, drained, her body a little off-kilter. Well, it wasn't surprising. The long drive from Stimsonville in Barbara's Escalade had worn Sandy out, but not so much that she couldn't admire Barbara's unflinching assault on the Manhattan traffic. Megan had offered her a glass of Champagne — the real thing, too, and not sparkling wine or the oily, yellowish stuff that Hunter Bill used to suck on. Sandy had felt tempted, but she had declined. She would feel better tomorrow.

And the mystery of where Sandy and Megan were to stay had been solved. Barbara had brought them to a new apartment building a few blocks south of Central Park. The building thrust itself high above those to its north, so that the triple-height duplex apartments at the very pinnacle could enjoy views across the tops of their neighbours' spires to the entirety of the park. The apartment had been purchased, and furnished, by one of Mr Prince's backers, a *bumptious* and *hyperactive* computer genius, Barbara had said — a little disrespectfully, Sandy had thought — from the Valley. This restless guru, alas, had not yet had time to move into, or even inspect, his new property, so Megan and Sandy had the use of it until further notice. They merely had to register their fingerprints — and passports, had they been aliens, as many of the residents were — with Security.

From the upper level of her bedroom, Sandy could see joggers, a boating lake, baseball diamonds — and was that a skating rink? And trees, of course. Lots of trees. It was almost like living outdoors. But she'd had enough of that.

Megan had gone to fetch someone who wanted to meet with Sandy. She now returned, accompanied by a tall, tense-shouldered bald man in a tuxedo. He looked about sixty years old, but moved with a vigour and energy that Sandy found shocking. People of his age in the village, Hunter Bill excepted, hardly moved at all.

'Sandy, this is Ray Krall. He's our Campaign Director. The big boss. He's very interested in you.'

Krall, Sandy instantly thought, a flutter of panic in her stomach, could never have been a store-keeper, or an engineer, or a desk-worker, or a church-goer, or a good neighbour or even faintly classy. He looked like a prize-fighter who'd won a lot of money and had gone into business, yet still worked out every day in his garage. This was Mr Prince's Campaign Director?

'So you're the one they're all tellin' me about?'

Sandy didn't know what to say.

'That's her,' Megan said.

'One for the record books. I ain't seen figures like that nowhere else. Maybe I'll write a thesis.'

He held out his hand.

'Ray. Pleased to meet you.'

Sandy stood and shook. His hand felt warm and clammy. He was overheating in his tux.

'I'm Sandy. Very nice to —'

'Okay then,' Krall said, addressing Megan. 'We'll be in Willard's private study if anybody wants us.'

Megan looked as if Krall had just disinvited her from a party.

'But don't you need me to —'

'Nah, we'll do just fine. Besides, somebody gotta keep an eye on *that*.'

He smirked down at the box of confiscated phones and tablets.

'I reckon there's some wild shit in there, hey Sandy? What do you think?'

'I —'

'These people. I tell you truly. They never delete nothing. Maybe they tell someone to do it for them. Then they act all surprised and hurt, you know?'

He laughed and shook his head.

'Come on.'

Krall launched himself across the vestibule towards the corridor that led to Mr Prince's private quarters, acting like he owned the place — which he never could because he was *not* Mr Prince, and never would be. Not even close. She struggled to keep up. The suit she wore was hard to move about in. Megan had bought it for her and there had been no time for a fitting. Sandy had never worn clothes like these and they were too tight.

'Guess you're a risin' star all right,' Krall said. 'I tell you this, Sandy. You keep it up, you'll get to meet ol' Willie Boy hisself.'

Willie Boy? And she *had* met Mr Prince!

'You'll be able to say you knew him *before* he was President.'

But I do, she thought. *And I know him better than you.*

Krall showed her into a small, panelled office and offered her a seat in front of the largest antique desk she thought she'd ever seen. On the walls were pictures of well-dressed, prosperous men, often seated behind a desk such as the one before her. This private exhibition reached back into time: the older photographs were black and white, and before that there were drawings and paintings — Mr Prince's ancestors?

Krall seated himself in Mr Prince's chair and swivelled from side to side. For a moment, Sandy thought he was going to put his feet up on the desk, but he was simply pulling up his socks. He took a small device from his pocket and positioned it on the desk, pointed towards Sandy.

'You don't mind if I record this? It's purely for research purposes.'

'I guess not.'

'Thankin' you.'

Krall took a deep breath and grasped the arms of his chair.

'Sandy, do you know what this election's about?'

Given her hours on the telephone, and how well everyone had said she'd done, this seemed like a strange, and perhaps insulting, question.

'Oh, I think I do, yes.'

'And what would you say it's about?'

She thought for a moment. How could you sum up such a complicated bundle of feelings, longings, hurts — and fears?

'It's about America.'

Krall picked up a pen from Mr Prince's desk and rolled it between his fingers.

'I give you that.'

He seemed to be waiting for her to say more.

'It's about who we are as a...'

What was she trying to say? Her words had all dried up.

Krall waggled his pen, holding it delicately by the base.

'See, that's about what I figured. That's what's special about you.'

'I just meant —'

'The magic don't work when you talk to me. It's only when to talk to *real people*.'

Well, she certainly *preferred* to talk to real people.

'Don't you worry though, Sandy, it's all fine. We are just going to let you do what you do, and we are rightly grateful to you. Are we good?'

'Well, I suppose we are, yes.'

More importantly, Sandy and Mr Prince were *good*. Perhaps it was necessary for Mr Prince to employ a man like this. There were people out there who would pull Mr Prince down, if they could. People driven by greed or envy or lust. People without faith. Cynics, like Hunter Bill.

'That's what I want to hear. So let's just try a few more questions, okay?'

'Okay.'

Krall gazed up at Mr Prince's moulded ceiling, as if seeking inspiration.

'Sandy, do you worry that America's in decline?'

What a question! It felt like a trick — no matter if you said *yes* or *no*, the answer seemed to come out wrong.

'It's okay,' Krall said. 'It's just one of these mean questions, you know? Can get people riled up, or all tied up inside or discombobulated. But we're fighting an election here, so we need to deal with it. You with me?'

'People think they've been betrayed. Like something's been taken from them.'

Krall nodded and twiddled his pen.

'Uh-huh. Now, say you see Willard Prince out there, and he's sayin' our best days are still ahead. Do you believe him?'

'Yes, I believe him! Why would he lie?'

More pen-twiddling.

'Why indeed?'

She waited.

'And are you at all concerned, Sandy, that China is going to... To surpass the United States?'

Surpass? What did he mean by that?

'I know they're up there with their *moon mission*. I don't care about that. If they really want to take our flag, well, I'm sorry, but I'm just going to have to say that I don't particularly appreciate that.'

Krall leaned forward across the desk.

'You're frettin' about that flag up there, Sandy?'

'I am not *fretting* about it.'

'Okay. That's interesting.'

Krall tapped a button on his recording gadget.

'Do you worry about economic figures and shit that like, Sandy? You know, your GDP...'

'Ray, please don't use that language in front of me.'

Krall smiled and put his pen down.

'You gotta excuse me, Sandy. It's where I come from. My apologies.'

So where did he think *she* came from? It couldn't have been so different.

'I do not worry or *care* about economic figures,' she said. 'They can mean anything.'

'Sure. Okay. Good.'

He tapped his recorder again.

'You know what? I think that's enough. Let me give you this...'

He reached into his pocket and took out a small, red object.

'This here's a memory stick. It's like a security thing. When you use the system, you have to plug this in before you can log on. Here.'

He handed it to her.

'Don't lose it. Assuming you're agreeable, Sandy, we want you to come downtown and work with us. At the campaign HQ. We got a whole floor. Right above where the New American Century Fund is. Got a deal on the rent.'

'Downtown?'

'We'll get you a car service. You'll be doing what you were doing before. Only on the big system.'

'I just talk to people. That's all I do.'

'And that's all we ask. I guess there'll be a bonus of some kind. At least if we win, which we will. And who knows — maybe the guys downstairs'll give us some tips.'

'Tips?'

'You're not already invested, I take it? In the NACF?'

She let that insult lie where it fell.

'Nope, me neither.'

Sandy's suit had no pockets. So she simply closed her fist around her memory stick.

Krall eased himself up out of Mr Prince's chair and gave it a gentle spin, leaving it facing the wrong way. Then he stepped past Sandy to open the study door.

It was immediately apparent that something unwelcome had happened. Krall leaned out into the corridor and yelled.

'What the hell?'

A barrage of replies came; Sandy couldn't make them out.

'Robin Hood?' Krall said. 'Fuckin' Robin Hood? Jesus!'

He ran out into the corridor leaving Sandy alone in Mr Prince's private study. She didn't know what to do. So she waited.

After about five minutes, nobody having come for her, she got up and began to wander.

From the far end of the corridor came a hubbub of voices. She walked towards it, swinging her hips awkwardly in her tight suit and treading softly in her stiff new shoes. The noise came from an enormous room full of people. They were all dressed up, like Ray Krall, but none of them looked to be sweating. The walls of the room were lined with books: this had to be Mr Prince's private library. Sandy imagined him there, alone, a book open on his lap, sunk in contemplation. Had he actually read all of these books? Well, even if he'd only read half, imagine what he must have learned.

Something impelled her to step into the room, even though she felt she didn't belong there. Almost immediately, a waiter materialised beside her and presented her with a tray of drinks. She felt a little bruised from her encounter with Krall — he had been uncouth and disrespectful — and she felt a little rebellious. So she took a flute of Champagne. Heck, it wasn't temptation; she deserved it.

And then a second waiter offered her a kind of pastry nest with something dark and glossy in it. Well, she couldn't drink on an empty stomach, so she took it. But this was awkward; she had to hold her glass and her memory stick in the same hand. Over by the large bay window, there were was an empty couch. Perhaps it would be better if she sat.

As she navigated to her seat, easing herself between knots of guests — variously garrulous, chatty or raucous — she picked up on a smell in the library. It was something rich, fusty and sweet. Could it be the books? The people? Or was it just the smell of money?

And she caught snatches of conversation.

Another crash? Well, I don't know. But the last one wasn't so bad now, was it?

No, Costa Rica's a bust. Somebody screwed up. They're looking at Belize.

Consistent? Nobody really buys that. We're talking about an edge.

You think so? But what if they really are better capitalists than us?

Weihai is the model. It's the way forward.

Will you please stop worrying about the working-class conservatives. That's why they hired Krall.

So if we put this guy in, what's he gonna do about the Fed? That's what I want to know.

'Hey, you dropped something!'

In the tricky process of seating herself, Sandy had lost her grip on the memory stick. And now here was the spiky, brown-haired girl from the vestibule picking it up for her. She looked a little frazzled, but perhaps that was normal for her.

'Here. Can I sit with you? Teri, remember?'

'Of course. Thank you, Teri.'

'So what is that?'

Sandy hesitated.

'Oh, is it, like, secret?'

'Are you with the campaign, Teri?'

'I sure am.'

'Only, you don't look like...'

'No kidding. I'm not a donor, or anything. I do blogs and videos for the kids. The young voters.'

'Not for the working-class conservatives?'

'Uh, no. Not really.'

She was quite petite, this girl, Sandy thought. Seemed smart, too. Trustworthy?

'How long have you been with the campaign?'

'Just started, basically. Finding my feet, you know.'

'So am I. Perhaps we can help each other.'

'Sure!'

'This...' She held up the memory stick. 'Is what I have to use to access the big system. Ray Krall gave it to me.'

'Oh, the big boss.'

'Well, he's a big something-or-other.'

Sandy took a slurp of her Champagne.

'Haven't met him. Heard stuff, though.'

'He just left me sitting there. Teri, what is *Robin Hood*?'

The girl seemed to sit up in her seat.

'That? Just a bunch of protestors. Crazy people. They were outside. They've gone now. You haven't heard of them?'

'No.'

Teri lowered her voice.

'They want to *share the wealth around*.'

'Really?'

The girl flapped her hand beside her ear.

'Totally nuts.'

'Are you working downtown, too?'

'Me? No, I work here. My office is the scullery. I actually live here.'

'In this apartment?'

'Servants' quarters.'

'Seriously?'

'It's like that show on TV.'

This girl was kind of funny. It felt like you could relax with her. She made you feel... *Happy*? Sandy took another slurp.

'So what's in this big system of yours?' Teri said.

'Everything, I guess.'

'Wow. I didn't get one of those things.'

'Well that,' Sandy said, putting on a fake frown, 'must be because you're just an uppity servant girl, and you're living under the stairs. While I... Well, I'm a rising star, and I'm living with Megan in Josh Merriweather's apartment in the Aspire Building.'

Teri put on an exaggerated grimace — open mouth, wide eyes.

'No!'

'Yes. Ask Barbara.'

'Barbara? No, I take your word.'

Sandy realised that she'd finished her drink.

'I'll get you another one,' Teri said.

'Oh, no, I —'

But then there it was in her hand. There was a pause while they sipped their drinks together. Then Teri asked a question.

'So, uh, what do you think of our candidate?'

'Mr Prince?'

'Yeah. Mr Prince.'

Sandy looked at the girl. She didn't seem lost, adrift or hopeless, like so many other young people. Was she a cynic? Surely not, or she wouldn't be here. Did she have faith? That seemed questionable. But Sandy felt she was a good person — honest and not disrespectful.

'Well, Teri, I've been thinking that God sent him to do this. I truly believe that.'

There was an awkward pause. But it didn't last as long as Sandy had feared.

'Do you really think so?'

'I do, Teri. Maybe you're too —'

'No, no, I get it. So he — Mr Prince, I mean... He's on a mission?'

'Yes.'

'To save America?'

'Yes.'

'And... I guess what I'm wondering is, how did you...'

'How did I come to that conclusion?'

'Yes.'

'I had a certain experience.'

'What, like a... Like a revelation?'

'Something like that.'

'You want to tell me about it?'

Sandy looked at the girl again. Too quick off the mark, she thought. Too eager.

Needed to be taught patience.

'Not now, Teri, no. Perhaps once we get to know each other better.'

'Okay. That's cool. No problem. D'you want another —'

'No thanks.'

'Sure. Uh, this penthouse of yours? Is Barbara staying there?'

'No. She has her own townhouse.'

'Oh, that's right. Milly told me.'

'Milly?'

'Barbara's daughter. So, anyway — maybe I can call by? You know, after work?'

'I thought you servant girls didn't get time off.'

'I'll sneak out.'

'All right, then.'

It was okay to encourage the girl, Sandy thought. Probably, nothing would happen.

But just then something else did happen. The library spun into a ferment because the news had broken that another naval crisis had blown up in the South China Sea; and that, as a matter of urgency, Mr Prince was about to make a ground-breaking announcement that, for once, would force China to sit up and take notice.

CHAPTER 14

Ricky Ponton was no stranger to Struggle Street. The problem was, Struggle Street had gone global. No bloody lemurs for Ricky! Right? Wrong.

He didn't hear about the naval crisis until he got off the plane in Antananarivo, having travelled — still burdened by his *alter ego*, the go-anywhere British banker David Thatcher — via Nairobi, given his recollection that, despite its being one of the shittiest airports in the world and still reeking of smoke on account of having half burnt down within recent memory, it was much less spied-on than Paris. He wasn't so sure now: new Chinese-built terminal buildings gave the appearance of being just as fully bugged and surveilled as everywhere else.

He'd been all set to stroll back to Sydney, in defiance of Jay's instruction to report to Lemurland, when word had come through — via Big Data Underground, confirmed with glee by Jay — that the Australian government was having second thoughts about Ricky's citizenship. The Foreign Office in London had announced, gratuitously, that what remained of the United Kingdom was no longer in the mood to entertain his presence. And the US — surprise! — had put him on one of their lists. What this meant in practice was that Ricky was running out of planet. He could have South America, possibly, or one of the dodgy bits of Africa, or Russia.

Or Madagascar.

He found himself a taxi — some kind of relic that used to be a Renault 4 in the 70's — and braced himself for the long ride into *Tana*. It looked like no one had built, or even repaired, any roads here between the departure of the French and the arrival of the Chinese. The road into town was not a highway. It was an endless street market, continuous but for a swampy gap where the US embassy, a Texas-sized fortified warehouse, glowered. Why so big? In such a poor and unregarded country? Well, Ricky figured, the rent was probably cheap. And just across the Mozambique channel you had the badlands of East Africa — Tanzania, Kenya, and Somalia. Why not play it safe-ish in Lemurland?

The street food looked incredible, and Ricky was starving. But he knew better. Stick to cooked food in the hotel. This was a country where half a village could die of bubonic plague.

But why, apart from not having anywhere else to go, was he here anyway? Did it have something to do with the naval crisis? And what was Jay Percival, the CIA apostate and amateur sheep farmer, holding back? It seemed to Ricky that the unexpected recent happenings in Hong Kong — his recruitment by Xin Jiao, the leader of the punk-pop wing of the People's Liberation Army, for example — had not been such a surprise to the subtle, shiny-shoed American. When he got to Tana, Ricky would go shopping for a phone and give the guy a bell.

His hilltop hotel turned out to be a pleasant surprise: spotless, airy, built largely out of local rare hardwoods that would have been worth an illegal fortune in a Chinese furniture warehouse or an American guitar factory, and staffed by beautiful, friendly people who just happened, statistically, to be the ninth poorest in the world. From the window of his room, Ricky could look way down to a large covered market; a wide, teeming boulevard; and an elegant but defunct railway terminus. Or he could gaze way up to his left at the historic old city, the *Haute Ville*, with its palaces (not all of them burnt-out shells), mansions, cathedrals and contested presidential residence. On the hill opposite was a jumble of commercial buildings, most of which appeared to date from the 50's or the 60's.

What he really needed, though, was lunch. And then, a bank. Plus a backpack and two bodyguards.

He didn't have any problem recruiting minders; the hotel staff were used to this kind of thing. Jay had told Ricky that he was wiring money, and that you got a lot of *ariary* for your dollar. And Madagascar was — let's be honest — what you call a *cash economy*. But it turned out that Jay's arithmetic had been flawed; Ricky had to send out for a second backpack. It seemed like an awful lot of money, but never mind; Jay's ex-Agency pockets were bottomless. Having witnessed his stash squashed into the hotel's safe, and with a decent wad secured about his person, he set off alone to find a phone, making every effort to look like a gun-toting drug dealer, rare species smuggler or timber trafficker, and not a clueless tourist.

It didn't take him long to find a mobile phone stand. But it did take him a while to negotiate with its proprietor the price of a call to Namibia, whence Jay had retreated, leaving his sheep — and Mr Lin? — in the lurch.

'I bought you a house,' Jay said.

'You what?'

'It's up in the north west, on the coast. Beautiful location. You'll love it. Kind of a *distress sale*.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Well, the guy's some kind of French auteur film director. Got sued by a fifteen-year-old actress, know what I'm saying? I had to outbid some Russian guy. Got you a good deal, though. Eighteen million dollars.'

Eighteen million dollars. In the ninth-poorest country on Earth.

'No, Jay. I mean, why are you buying me houses?'

'Couple of reasons. Can you hear me?'

It was difficult. The noise from the market and the forever-backed up traffic filled the boulevard with an aural fog almost as thick as the smoke that had blown in from the southern plateau, where subsistence farmers were busy burning a third of the country's land area to refresh their exhausted soil.

'Just about. Go on.'

'All these problems you've been having. I've been giving them some thought.'

'Thanks.'

'Sure not getting any better, is it?'

'No.'

'I mean, even if you do what they're demanding — you know, shut down Big Data, hand over all your files... They're not going to let you walk away, are they?'

'No.'

'And then you've got the people who trusted you, who depended on you. What about them?'

'Right.'

'They're even worse off than you. Like Kerri.'

'Yes.'

'You're running out of places to go.'

'I know.'

'Nobody wants to live in Russia.'

'No.'

'You need a sanctuary.'

'Too bloody right, mate.'

'This house can be your sanctuary. Think about it. A refuge. Calming ocean views. Gentle breezes. A demi-paradise for all your leakers, your whistle-blowers, and your disgruntled government employees. You must have dreamed about it.'

Did it make any sense? Here was a guy who'd bought a sheep station on a whim. Had all that dirty money gone to his head?

'It's remote and inaccessible,' Jay said. 'You have to fly in. If you know the coastal waters, you can get there by boat, but it's risky. Got its own well. Own beach. Runs off solar power. Satellite Internet. The locals are very, uh, *autonomous*. So as long as you're nice to them...'

'What about the politics?'

'Well,' Jay said, sounding increasingly pleased with himself, 'the great thing about being dirt-poor is, there's no economic leverage. Not gonna get your ass kicked out of the WTO. Plus no land borders. A big old slice of nowhere with no roads, in the middle of an ocean. You *will* have to pay off the politicos, but you've got two factions who are both basically pro-Chinese, that being where the money is, so you just play 'em off against each other.'

'I don't have any money.'

'Yes, you do. You got a bag full.'

'Two bags.'

'Whatever. More where that came from.'

So, *sanctuary* then, but at a price and on Jay's terms. There was something almost mediaeval about it. But there was more, wasn't there?

'You said there were a *couple* of reasons.'

'I did.'

'So what's the other?'

'I'll tell you. But no freaking out, okay?'

Not again...

'You still there, Ricky?'

'Yeah. So tell me.'

'All righty. Now, you remember *the guy*?'

'What guy?'

'The guy you didn't meet in Hong Kong?'

Despite the heat, Ricky felt the sweat condense all down his spine.

'He doesn't exist.'

'Oh, sure he does! He just got a tad scared. Had a panic attack, if you like. Heard what your little friend Jiao was up to. So he backed off. Guess where he is now? He's right there with you in Antan — , uh, Antana —'

'Tana.'

'There you go. He's an engineer. A *military* engineer. I want you to go meet with him, bring him up to the sanctuary, treat him nice and find out what he's got. Find out why there are Chinese military engineers in Madagascar. Okay?'

Ricky noticed that the phone stand owner was agitating for a top-up. He pulled a bunch of ariary out of his pocket and handed them over without counting them.

'Ricky?'

'Are you sure about this, Jay? If I go and get this guy, and your pals from *the office* show up again...'

'They won't. Trust me. It's a beautiful house. Corsican marble. Tropical garden. Fuckin' lemurs everywhere.'

Well, what choice was there? Is was the lemurs or *Russia*.

'Never mind the lemurs. Where's the guy?'

'Well, he didn't want to come into the city. Says there are too many Chinese people there.'

This was plausible. Tana was full of Chinese-run stores selling anything cheap that could possibly be manufactured or assembled in Shenzhen or the Pearl river delta.

'Get yourself a four-wheel-drive,' Jay said. 'And head out towards the north east. There's kind of a ring road, takes you to route 2, which goes east. Look out for the brickworks. The guy's waiting at the brickworks.'

'Does this place have a name?'

'Yeah, but it starts with 'A' and it's twenty syllables long. Forget about it. Just look for the bricks.'

'What about the guy?'

'Mr Yu.'

'And where's the *sanctuary*?'

'It's called La Cachette Lémurienne.'

'Cute.'

'Got its own strip. Just tell them when you hire the plane. They'll know it. Call me when you get there.'

'Fine. Is that it?'

'Yeah. Don't get bitten by any animals.'

Jay hung up. Ricky handed the phone back to its owner, who gave Ricky a sceptical frown and plugged the phone back into its solar charger.

And then Ricky realised that Jay's whole *sanctuary* pitch had so bedazzled him that he'd forgotten to ask about the naval crisis. It seemed weird that Jay hadn't mentioned it, given the fuss he'd made about Chinese *strategic encirclement* of the Indian Ocean; the Chinese had just complained, after all, that the Americans were threatening their trade routes to India and East Africa. Just as suspicious was the idea that two warships, equipped with the best navigation kit available, would both accidentally steer off course towards each other at the same time. Who wanted a confrontation? Jiao worried about nationalism. That rich guy who wanted to be President stood to have his China-bashing bluff called. Military chiefs knew that *accidents* got you fired. Well, Ricky wasn't going to call Jay back now; the guy was only tolerable in small doses. He'd bring it up next time.

Renting a car turned out to be problematic. So Ricky fetched one of his backpacks from the hotel, paid his bill, and purchased a second-hand Nissan from a lot cluttered with scooters and clapped-out Citroëns. The Nissan was far too old to have satnav, so Ricky bought a map. Luckily, the traffic moved so slowly that he had plenty of time to study it.

After fifty minutes of bumper-to-bumper, he made it on to the ring road. And that was when he began to wonder if Jay Percival hadn't been chucked out of the CIA for sheer bloody incompetence.

He pulled the Nissan over on the side of the road. And he looked.

Up the road, down the road, kilometre after kilometre, across a great, open, brown expanse — the panorama was the same. It looked like a scene from ancient Egypt. He'd been expecting a plant, or a factory, or maybe just a big shed. But there were no buildings.

Bricks, sure. Bricks everywhere. As far as you could see. Stacked up in tottering piles, pyramids and ziggurats, some of them with fires lit underneath and lazy wisps of smoke wafting from the top. And hundreds of people, making the bloody things *by hand*, ankle-deep in mud, the men and boys stripped to the waist.

Just look for the bricks. Nice one, Jay.

Ricky got out of the car and began to trudge along the raised shoulder of the road. Perhaps Mr Yu lay in wait, sweltering, hunkered down amid the toiling multitude. (Though why he couldn't just have hung out at the Snack Bar at the airport seemed like a good question to Ricky.) Would Mr Yu spot an irate Australian marching up and down the highway? Would he proceed to leap out from behind one of these baking, Pharaonic piles, clutching his military secrets, a glow of muddy elation on his face?

As it happened, he didn't. Ricky got back in the car.

Now what? He had no phone, the agreed procedure having been to rely on the hard-to-trace services of Madagascar's independent telecoms entrepreneurs. And he didn't want to hang about in the capital, with its everyday hazards, its choking smoke, its traffic, its supersized US embassy and its political risk. Besides, he could practically hear the lemurs of La Cachette calling out to him. *Did* lemurs call out? He'd be answering that question soon enough.

He started the car and put it in gear. And then he noticed something. This stretch of road wasn't the busiest — but now there was nothing. No traffic at all.

He peered into the distance. Just about visible in the haze was the junction where the RN2 took off east to Andasibe and the main port of Toamasina. Stationary trucks. Flashing lights. He pulled the Nissan around to face south. About a kilometre away, a road-block and more flashing lights.

He felt his foot tremble on the brake pedal. What a beautiful set-up. No way out. No Jiao and no truck to the rescue this time. No fearsome Party to protect him. Bloody Jay. *They won't, trust me.* But they never gave up, these bastards; they had their own, special, *exceptional*, shit-eating pride. And they'd wired the whole bloody world, so they would always find you. Even here. And these poor sods, trying to dig themselves out of poverty, brick by brick, didn't realise that you escaped one prison just to find yourself in another. Did they have cameras-phones to record and blazon to the world what was about to happen? Probably not.

For five minutes nothing happened. The brick workers didn't stop. The lights at the road-block continued to flash. Then there was movement. A single vehicle emerged. Ricky waited. It crept forward, a black smudge in the shimmering smog. A little closer, and he could make out a large, new SUV. Closer still, and he could see its antennas, and two occupants — bulkier than your average Malagasy. A little more and — why not? — Maryland licence plates.

Ricky put the Nissan into four-wheel-drive and low-range. *Fuck it* — why not make them work for their prize? Then he pumped the accelerator and the car bucked across the broken edge of the road and slid down a shallow embankment. He put his foot down again. The car clattered down a blocky staircase from which bricks had recently been cut. He sped up across a slick flat, fishtailing and scraping the corner off one of the ziggurats. In his mirror, he saw the SUV inch off the road fifty metres back from where he'd made his exit. Did these guys know how to drive? Maybe he had a chance.

He bumped down into some ruts made by the donkey-carts that hauled the bricks and then barrelled along, thumping on the horn with his fist. The brick-makers got out of his way, but barely gave him a glance. Behind, the SUV had fallen back.

Now, he thought, there really was a chance. But which way? If he could get to the RN2, which he knew to be a good road, by local standards, he could blast out of town and find somewhere to hole up in the first settlement he came to. He yanked the wheel to the left, scraped the car out of the ruts, skittered up a crunchy slope of broken bricks and then slithered down the other side into a trench of heavy mud.

Ricky put the car into reverse and eased on the accelerator. The car jerked backwards, then slid forward again. He pressed harder. The wheels spun. He tried to rock forward and back again. It didn't work. He tried reverse again, and full power. Smoke, steam, burning rubber. *Shit!* And the worst thing? He *knew* how to drive, and these bastards didn't. But no, that wasn't the worst thing at all. Erase that thought, *idiot*.

He got out of the car and crawled to the top of the brick scree. There was the SUV, its doors open, occupants outside, propped up against the bonnet, arms folded. What was wrong with this picture?



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Rory.

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