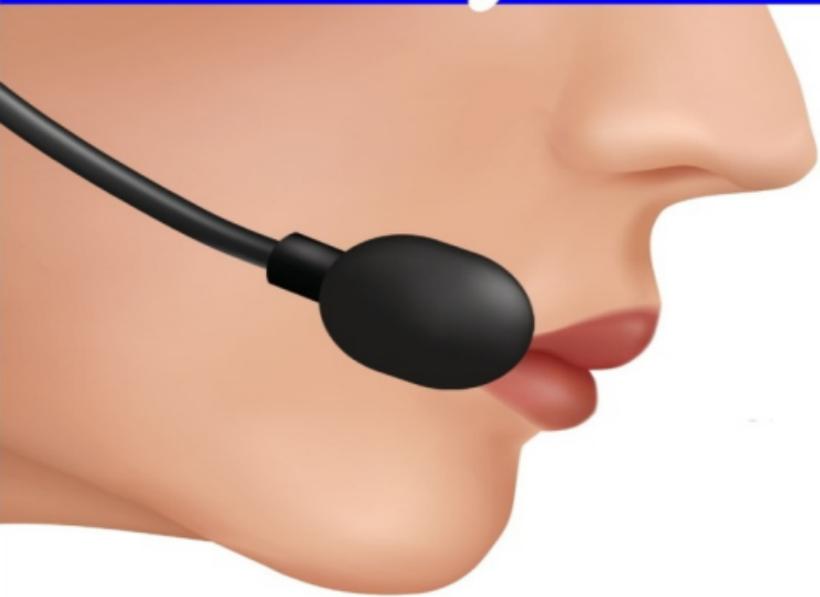


# Love Lust and Petty Crime



Eric Feka

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by  
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents contained therein are products of the author's imagination and are fictitious. Events and characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual incidents, places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

TLDR: It is all a bunch of lies I made up. Honest.

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## Epilogue

# Chapter 1

The sun rises upon a pleasant but unremarkable suburban landscape in a place that is almost, but not quite, America. If one cares to look, the new day illuminates signs of comfort and wealth. A street sweeper rumbles along the gutter, devouring litter. There are shiny cars parked outside well-maintained houses, all with manicured lawns and landscaped gardens. Despite its affluence, there is nothing particularly special about this place, nor are the people who live here particularly important. The sad truth is that if Destiny were searching for her chosen one, she would probably look somewhere else. Even though most of the people living in this unremarkable place are incredibly wealthy and fortunate when compared to the vast majority of the global population – food is cheap and usually pre-packaged, and men with guns do not roam the streets fomenting revolution- many do not consider themselves so. In fact, some consider themselves hard done by. Some believe that they are victims of a harsh society; a society that values productivity above humanity; a society that forces individuals into a suburban banality that tears body from soul, and sacrifices their creativity to the god of uniformity. OK, not many of them think that. Only one of them does, in fact, and he is just now rising to greet a day that contains a little personal destiny. Today, Emmet is destined to attend a job interview, and he is not looking

forward to it.

Witness Emmet. Pudgy about the middle with an unremarkable face, he stands at an unremarkable height with unruly but unremarkable hair. A light sleeper, he wakes quickly and is fully alert within minutes of opening his eyes. Bitter experience has taught him that social isolation awaits those who are chirpy and cheerful in the morning, so for the sake of his social life he adopts a grumpy façade until he consumes at least one cup of coffee.

The sounds of a household rising from slumber come through the thin and poorly decorated walls of his bedroom. His father farts loudly in the corridor that runs from his parent's bedroom to the bathroom and his mother is being busy in the kitchen. She generally wakes up an hour before everyone else in order to prepare breakfast. This morning, however, she was up even earlier than usual to prepare for what she calls 'Emmet's special day'. His father had farted in that corridor every morning since Emmet could remember, but he did produce an especially impressive one this morning, which was probably his way of supporting Emmet's quest for a wage.

The only late riser in the household is Plato, his brother, but he has an uncanny ability to sense an upcoming big meal and the activity in the kitchen had roused him. He had been singing a sad but pleasant song in the shower before his father abruptly ended it by flushing the toilet. Emmet sighs and dons a threadbare bathrobe. Escorted by his brother's curses, he

leaves his bedroom and shuffles into the corridor that leads to the kitchen. In the morning at his parent's home, all corridors lead to breakfast.

There are many, many corridors in the home of Emmet's parents. They like it that way. In their considered and collective opinion, corridors are what make a house a home, and the more corridors a house contains, the homelier it is. While they have never actually articulated this opinion, Emmet thinks it is the only explanation for how much of the house is corridor. On the other hand, they may need the wall space to pay homage to the legends of Greek antiquity, because decorations depicting scenes from ancient Greek mythology line the walls of each and every corridor. In the one that Emmet is currently ambling along, there hang various media depicting Hercules' mighty deeds. Emmet's favourite is the shell encrusted, backlit painting on glass of Hercules' battle with the Nemean Lion. It shows a rather muscular young demigod in the process of strangling what looks like a large domestic tabby on a bad hair day. Emmet thinks the broken club on the ground beside the combatants is a nice touch. His mother calls out just as Emmet is drawing level with a decorative plate showing King Eurystheus peeping out of a large vase at Hercules clutching a two-headed dog to his chest. One head is looking out of the plate wearing an expression of well-meaning idiocy, while the other is trying to lick Hercules on the cheek.

'Emmet, breakfast!' she calls, 'Hurry or you'll be late!'

Emmet pushes open the door into the kitchen. ‘The interview is at one, Mum, it’s still hours away.’

The scene that greets him when he opens the door to the kitchen is a grand statement in culinary excess. His mother is setting down a plate piled high with French toast, bacon, and fried tomatoes. In the centre of the table is an overflowing platter of sausages, an enormous bowl of coleslaw and a massive Greek salad, a selection of cheeses and olives, a vat of thick yogurt, and a pot of honey. He can smell potatoes frying on the stovetop.

Plato, still dripping from his truncated shower, is half way through his first piece of toast and accelerating.

‘Mum’s prepared quite a spread for her special little man,’ he says, in a spray of breadcrumbs. ‘You should try and become a useful member of society more often.’

‘You are the butt plug in the anus of my life,’ Emmet retorts, but quietly so that his mother does not hear. She responds violently to coarse humour and on one memorable occasion had broken a wooden spoon over Plato’s head for calling Emmet a dickwad. The brothers are fairly sure that she does not know what a dickwad is, but it sounds crude and that is enough for her. Not that Plato hears Emmet’s reply because no sooner has he spoken than he returned his attention to the food before him. As Emmet takes his seat, he notices that a considerable amount of the cheese from the communal platter has already made its way onto Plato’s plate. Cursing quietly, he clears some room on his own plate

and begins an assault on the sausages, but Plato is too quick. He parries Emmet's fork with his knife and then skewers several plump spicy pork sausages, flipping them skilfully onto his plate, and leaving only a motley collection of anaemic beef sausages behind.

Snarling, the brothers transfer their attention to the Greek salad where, accompanied by the clink and clatter of clashing utensils, they battle amongst the cucumbers.

'Plato, let your brother eat!' says their mother, frowning at her youngest son while adding another platter of sausages and a small mountain of fried potatoes to the table. 'This breakfast is for him, and I will not have you spoiling it.' She clips Plato behind the ear with the ever-present wooden spoon on her way back to the kitchen. Wearing a winner's grin, Emmet transfers the lion's share of potatoes to his plate.

'You better get that job today, Emmet,' says his father, entering the kitchen from a corridor festooned with images of the Goddess Athena. 'Those potatoes aren't free you know.' Father pours himself a cup of coffee and sits down at the breakfast table. His wife brings two plates to the table and sits beside him. Compared to the heaped offerings placed before the boys, the servings are modest. Together, the two of them bow their heads and give a short prayer of thanks.

'A lovely spread, Persephone. Enough for an army,' father says, once the deity of their choice had been thanked for the bounty of the table. 'Just shy of satisfying our two

fine sons, but definitely enough for an army,' he adds.

'Now Atlas, they are young men who need their energy,' Persephone says, beaming at the two young men sitting opposite. 'Emmet will make us very proud today, I am sure.'

Emmet sighs. 'It's just a job interview,' he explains in the leaden tones of the terminally patient. 'I go to job interviews all the time, why do you always make such a fuss?'

'Because you go to job interviews all the time, and never actually go to jobs,' Atlas responds, stabbing the air with an angry fork, and spraying egg and bread in Emmet's general direction. 'Always interviews, never jobs,' Atlas adds, waving his hands in the air for added effect.

Emmet wipes bits of masticated French toast from his face. 'Before every interview, it's the same conversation,' he says, glowering at his father. 'I have only one thing left to say,' he continues, raising a finger theatrically into the air. 'Fuck you!' Emmet yells, and makes a break for the door leading to the Herculean corridor. He makes it through just in time, and the wooden spoon clatters harmlessly onto the floor. Plato, distracted briefly from his meal, turns back to his breakfast.

'Sensitive soul isn't he?' Plato says, as he raises a spicy sausage to his lips. Atlas glares daggers at his youngest son.

'What are you looking at? It's not my fault Emmet is a fruit loop,' Plato says. The remains of a wooden spoon clatter to the ground. 'Ouch! Mum, what d'you do that for?'

Emmet leans dramatically against his bedroom door and

lets out a heartfelt sigh. A witness to this moment would have had no doubt that here is a man under pressure; a man locked in battle with the massed forces of stupidity surrounding him, and laying siege to his sanity. There is no witness, however, so it is all a bit of a waste. He looks around and notices that his father has deposited a freshly polished pair of shoes under a chair. The night before, his mother had placed a crisply pressed shirt on a hanger on the back of the door and cleaned his suit, which now hangs in its bag on the handle of his wardrobe, a selection of ties draped over the shoulder. He ponders what use is all this help if his parents spend the rest of their time tormenting him with petty grievances about this or that, as the whim takes them? His father, in particular, has a bee in his bonnet about Emmet's continued unemployment, unfortunately highlighted by Plato's many career successes. It has been nearly a decade since Emmet finished his schooling, and his father has made it clear that he thinks that it is high time Emmet started to bring in a decent income. Emmet often points out that, in fact, he had secure employment through much of this time, but his father refuses to accept delivering pizzas or giving out change at the local arcade as productive labour.

'That's not work,' he would say, 'that's adolescent fantasy.'

There is a polite knock at the door that Emmet knows is Persephone. 'What is it Mum?' he asks.

Persephone opens the door just enough to deposit a

heaped plate on a chair. ‘Just making sure you have enough energy, dear,’ she says. ‘Forgive your father, you know what he is like.’

‘Thanks Mum,’ Emmet replies, ‘I’m sorry I cursed dad, I know he means well.’ He slumps dejectedly on to the bed, but not before scooping up the plate of food from the chair. Persephone withdraws and Emmet turns his attention to his breakfast. Philosophy is one thing, he reasons, but breakfast is the most important meal of the day and it would be unwise to miss it on such an important one as this. Feeling a little guilty about his outburst at the breakfast table, Emmet wolfs down the substantial meal his mother brought him and prepares to face his demons.

The past few months have been a frustrating time for Emmet. He has attended fifteen job interviews since calling it quits on pizza delivery as a career and is still without a job. The many rejections have sapped his confidence and robbed him of much of his bravado. His battered ego does what it can, and even managed to convince Emmet that he is an unfortunate victim of circumstance, but it cannot totally banish the self-doubt. As a last ditch effort to bolster Emmet’s flagging confidence, his ego points out that this job is for an insurance call centre, and really, how picky can they afford to be? Unfortunately, it is all to no avail, so Emmet’s ego skulks off to hassle Emmet’s id. Feeling a little sorry for himself, Emmet gets dressed and prepares to face what he is sure will turn into yet another humiliating rejection.

## (ii)

His freshly polished shoes gleaming in the late morning sun, Emmet walks slowly through the suburban streets towards the main road that stands between his quiet suburban purgatory and the industrial estate that houses the train line into the city. A carefully blank expression conceals an inner turmoil from the casual observer, not that there are many people out and about on this week day morning during the school year. Most people are doing things. Some are away from their homes, gainfully employed in offices, or workshops, or factories; others are attending schools in preparation for gainful employment. Still others have retired from gainful employment and are spending their time working on their gardens and grumbling about modern times. Of those that remain, most are busy raising children to add to the ranks of the gainfully employed.

Emmet is also doing things, but he does not want to be doing them. It is not that Emmet is lazy, far from it. He works long and hard at pursuits that he enjoys. Unfortunately, what he enjoys rarely coincides with a socially accepted definition of gainful employment. He has attained, for example, a high level of excellence in a range of online computer games, pouring hundreds of hours into each and every one. His dedication and hard work have made him a

valued member of several game playing kins and guilds, and they often call upon him for aid when they encounter difficulties in their virtual adventures. He also loves to read, and usually gets through two or three books every month. His greatest joy, however, is whiling away hours spouting opinions and philosophies while drinking a variety of beverages with friends at any one of a number of café's and nightclubs that he regularly attends. If he could draw a wage for doing any of these three activities then Emmet would be a wealthy man. But he can't, so he isn't.

Friends and family, so often the source of advice whether it is welcome or not, often point out that the root of Emmet's problem lies in his enjoyment of the good life coupled with his lack of independent wealth. Had he been born into the household of a media magnate, for example, or an aging pop star, he could have pursued his lifestyle without the need to draw a wage from a third party, but this is not the case. His parents are not magnates or pop stars, although his mother can carry a nice tune when the mood takes her. Emmet knows that his uninvited advisers are correct, although he would never admit it. He knows that the tension between his lack of money and his preferred lifestyle is the origin of much of the angst in his life, and is currently the root cause of his dejected trudging.

Resigning himself to employment, Emmet has tried various and diverse vocations that he thought would satisfy his earning requirements without impacting heavily upon his

preferred activities. His most recent employment, as a delivery driver for the local pizza shop, was looking promising until an unfortunate run in with the local police. It was such bad luck! He had accepted a job to deliver a pizza to a house at the end of a narrow lane. It was the last order of the night, had already been paid for, and conveniently located on Emmet's way home. Usually he avoided the area because the battered old station wagon that he used to deliver pizzas could barely fit between the corrugated iron fences. He reasoned, inaccurately as it turns out, that one quick run could not hurt.

Showers of sparks marked his approach to the house in the twilight, thrown up whenever the side of his car rubbed against the iron fences that lined the road. The car itself suffered little. Its panels were in such poor condition that any change in their shape was an improvement.

As luck would have it, at the end of the lane on that night were two police officers who had attended the house next door to the pizza purchasers in order to settle a domestic dispute. Having arrived to find the disputants locked in a passionate embrace they were on their way out when they spied Emmet's fiery wagon working its way towards them. The larger of the two gestured to Emmet to stop his car and roll down the window.

'Bit of dangerous driving there, sir,' he said. 'You appear to have damaged some of the property along the lane.'

The other policeman was looking intently at the front

right tyre of the vehicle. ‘Your tyre appears to be rather worn, sir,’ he gestured towards the offending item. ‘There appears to be no rubber on it at all.’

‘That’s the spare,’ Emmet replied, rather too quickly. ‘I had a flat tyre a few minutes ago. It’ll be changed first thing tomorrow.’

The policeman produced a torch from his belt and wandered slowly around the car, looking at the tyres. ‘There does not appear to be much rubber on any of your tyres, sir,’ he said, looking at his partner in anti-crime, who nodded almost imperceptibly. ‘Please exit the vehicle.’

Emmet got out of the car and the torch-bearing policeman climbed into the driver’s seat.

‘You have neglected to activate the park brake sir, which can be dangerous,’ the seated policeman said, and grasped the park brake lever, depressed the button and pulled the lever up.

Emmet jumped. ‘Watch the button!’ he yelled, but it was too late. The police officer let go of the button on the handbrake, which shot out of its socket, ricocheted off the windscreen and hit the seated man on the nose. For the second time that night, he looked at his companion, who again nodded almost imperceptibly.

Wiping away a trickle of blood from his damaged nostril, the police officer returned to his inspection of the car, ‘I cannot help noticing, sir, that the pedal on your foot brake is missing,’ he said looking down into the cabin of the car. ‘There is just a lump of metal sticking up out of the floor.’

He turned to look at Emmet. ‘It appears that the maintenance of this vehicle has been sorely neglected.’

Emmet hung his head in shame. ‘It’s true, officer. The car is a heap,’ he said. Both officers nodded grimly.

Night had fallen by the time Emmet arrived home that fateful day. The police officers had been thorough in their examination of the battered old wagon, and handed Emmet a comprehensive list of what was required to bring it back to a roadworthy condition. The following morning, he and Atlas went and fetched the car. In an effort to keep costs down, Atlas suggested they take it to his nephew, Jason, who is a mechanic. Emmet was nervous about driving the vehicle because the police were adamant that it was too dangerous to move under its own power. Atlas, however, refused to pay for a tow truck and Emmet did not have the funds available himself, so they drove it the short way to Jason’s workshop. They found the journey stressful. Both men were half expecting a SWAT team to fall from the sky at any moment and drag them off to gaol for such a blatant disregard of police authority.

They made it without incident, however, and Jason immediately hoisted the vehicle to inspect the undercarriage. After a few minutes, and many a muffled exclamations, he emerged and looked intently at Emmet. ‘Have you been driving this around?’ he asked.

‘All the time,’ Emmet replied, ‘I use it to deliver pizzas.’ Jason shook his head and looked up at the car. ‘You’re

lucky to be alive,' he said. 'It's over for this thing, not worth fixing, even for family rates. Take it to the wreckers and see what you can get for it. But whatever you do, don't take it over forty.'

Later that afternoon, Emmet drove the car, very slowly, to the local wreckers who offered him two hundred and fifty dollars. Emmet accepted, but grudgingly.

'It's fine, mate, runs smooth as silk,' he protested.

'There isn't a straight panel on it,' the wrecker replied, slapping the bonnet as he spoke, which caused the whole car to creak. Both men stood back as it began to sway. 'It doesn't look very silky, truth be told,' the wrecker said. A tortured groan came from beneath the wagon, its front wheels collapsed inwards and the nose came crashing to the ground. 'I reckon fifty is a fair price, don't you?' said the wrecker, watching a hubcap roll away from the wreckage.

'More than fair, really,' Emmet replied.

The demise of the delivery wagon marked the end of Emmet's career in the hospitality industry. Without a car he could no longer deliver pizzas and Atlas was not about to shell out several thousand dollars so that his eldest son can earn eight dollars an hour while driving it into the ground. Nor does a career working at the sweaty end of a pizza oven excite him. Had this been an isolated incident, Emmet may have been able to laugh it off, or even turn it into an amusing anecdote with which to entertain friends. Unfortunately, it was not.

Wherever Emmet went for a wage, disaster was sure to follow. While working for a local arcade, his attempts to retrieve an errant coin from the maw of a defunct slot machine had caused an hour-long blackout of the immediate neighbourhood and cost his employer hundreds of dollars in refunds to irate customers. A jaunt in a pet shop resulted in the premature death of two bunny rabbits, and even stacking shelves in a supermarket seemed to be beyond him (he still had nightmares about stacking cans of pineapple). As the years passed, he began to wonder if had missed his calling. What that calling is he has no idea, but he seems to have missed it nonetheless.

Emmet's reluctant feet finally deliver him to the train station in the industrial estate, which is deserted and bears a remarkable resemblance to the ghost towns often depicted in 1950's b-grade westerns, except that crisp packets have replaced tumbleweeds and there is nowhere for a passing cowboy to tie his horse. During the morning and afternoon peaks, the station is humming with people and trains come and go every few minutes. Now, it is empty of activity and somehow gives the impression that no living being has passed through the gates in several years, with the possible exception of an incontinent dog that pissed up and down the platform, thus explaining the aroma of stale urine that hangs in the air. Emmet is not a public transport man. It is far too public for his liking, and it seems to him that most of the people who use it have a thing or two to learn about personal hygiene. He

looks up and down the station with distaste etched on his face, thankful that it is devoid of people. Sighing deeply, he inserts money into the ticket machine, which refuses to issue a ticket or, subsequently, refund his money.

‘Ahhh, you bastard,’ Emmet yells, and punches the machine. ‘Ahhhh, ‘ou ‘astard,’ Emmet screams, sucking on his bleeding knuckles. Defeated, he walks across the tracks and purchases a ticket from the machine on the opposite platform.

Another lone traveller arrives on the platform just as Emmet returns and fiddles with the ticket machine.

‘It ate my money too, mate’ Emmet informs him, ‘you may need to go across the tracks.’

‘Really?’ the stranger replies. ‘It worked fine for me, but it did give me extra change.’ Emmet glares angrily at the ticket machine, which maintains an electronic silence. He marches to the other end of the platform, away from the lucky rail patron, and awaits the train in angry silence. By the time it arrives his knuckles have stopped bleeding and an uneasy feeling of impending doom has usurped the anger. He boards an empty carriage and sits down in a corner, away from the doors.

At the next station, a rather dirty old man gets on the train and, despite the carriage being totally empty, comes and sits in the chair opposite Emmet. He smells of urine and the fabric at the front of his pants, running down both legs, is dark with moisture. He gives Emmet a hearty grin and begins

to pick his nose. At the next stop, a young woman enters the train and, despite the empty carriage, occupies the seat beside Emmet. Once seated, she reaches into her bag to produce a container filled with hot, greasy, fried chicken. The pungent aroma of the chicken rises into the carriage and issues a challenge the urine smell for dominance. Emmet groans.

At the next station, a well-dressed young man enters the carriage and sits down at the opposite end from the trio. Emmet takes his chance. 'David!' he exclaims, and rushes to the other side of the carriage, leaving chicken woman and the wee-wee man to their own devices. 'Sorry, my mistake,' Emmet says as he gets nearer, and sits down a few seats away, his back to the bemused man.

Much to Emmet's surprise, the young man actually bears a remarkable resemblance to his old friend David Parkinson. The two had gone through several years of schooling together, and were almost inseparable during much of that time. Their friendship faded, however, when David left school to get a job, taking with him the secure knowledge that eventually he would be a high-flying corporate executive. Emmet envied David his rock solid idea of where he wanted to go and how he wanted to spend his life while, at the same time, finding those self same aspirations puzzling. He found it difficult to believe that someone as dim as David- a man so mentally challenged that most people can't believe he isn't playing stupid- could be so consumed by ambition that it dominates his every waking moment.

The last time Emmet had seen David they had had a few drinks at a popular beachside café and he was waxing lyrical about his plans for corporate domination. Approaching his well-known shortcoming in characteristic head on fashion, he said

‘I may be IQ poor, mate, but I’m logic rich,’ while tapping his temple and winking in Emmet’s direction. Emmet had no idea what David meant by this statement, but even so he considered it to be his greatest intellectual achievement. On the positive side, David had an amazing ability to look good regardless of what he was wearing. His tall, angular frame could make even the cheapest suit look like a fashion coup. This annoyed Emmet because, even now that he was dolled up for an important interview, wearing an expensive suit and tie, neatly groomed, and freshly shaved, he still managed to radiate an aura of scruffiness. ‘Lucky bastard,’ Emmet thinks as he stares morosely out the of the train window. Eventually the train reaches its destination, and Emmet leaves the carriage, wondering vaguely about where David is now, and whether he has achieved his life’s ambition.

### (iii)

The building housing the agency conducting the interview is a short trudge from the train station, but Emmet’s feet extend the journey by dragging themselves along the pavement. A

feeling of dread creeps over him as he gazes upon its cold glass and concrete façade. He knows that somewhere in there, someone is casting a judgemental eye upon his rather anaemic resume and shaking his or her head. Not wishing to delay the inevitable, and aware that there is a good chance he would run away if he did not enter the building promptly, Emmet mounts the stairs. He hopes, against all the evidence thus far, that his day will improve but knows that the most likely outcome is that Fate will mount him, probably in a public place and definitely without using a lubricant.

The inside of the building is pleasant in an all-humanity-will-be-drained-from-those-who-enter-here kind of way. Glass and stainless steel feature heavily, reinforcing the cold and humourless exterior. ‘A complete package,’ Emmet thinks.

A glass-covered plaque lists the building occupants in steel letters on a black background. He notes that his date with destiny is on the fifth floor and enters an elevator at the back of the foyer. He is surprised to see that there is no button marked ‘Hell’ on the control panel of the elevator. ‘Probably an oversight,’ he thinks, and presses the button labeled ‘5’.

Emmet half expects a horned demon to greet him on the fifth floor, twirling its trident while looking at him with a knowing smile on its lips. Instead, the elevator disgorges him into a small reception area with an enormous reception desk that hides a small, bored receptionist.

‘Emmet Storch?’ she asks, arching an eyebrow.

‘Yes,’ he replies.

‘Please take a seat,’ she points to a row of black plastic moulded chairs to the left of her desk. ‘One of our agents will be with you shortly.’ She turns back to her computer. From the set of her shoulders as she types at her computer Emmet is quite sure that he no longer exists in her world.

The time Emmet spends sitting in the uncomfortable black chair seems to last for an eternity, possibly even two. Eventually, a door behind the receptionist opens and a small, balding, fat man holding a clipboard enters the room.

‘Emmet Stork,’ he calls, even though Emmet is the only person in the room apart from the receptionist. Emmet stands and raises his hand.

‘Here,’ Emmet says, and is immediately embarrassed.

The man looks at him with unsympathetic eyes. ‘Come this way,’ he says, and turns back through the door. Emmet follows quickly in case his feet decide to make a break for it. The room they enter is large and filled with people sitting at desks while engaging in gainful employment- talking on telephones, writing on notepads, typing at computers. All of them are engrossed in what they are doing and no one looks up when Emmet and his escort enter. The man talks while he walks. His short, quick steps move him forward at a surprising pace.

‘My colleague and I have cast an eye over the documents you submitted,’ the short man says. ‘Your lack of engagement on the employment front may be a hindrance going forward.’

They wind a complicated path through the desks filled with occupied people and eventually end up at a door at the far end of the room. The agent knocks and opens the door, revealing a plush office with a large desk at its centre. In front of the desk, in the middle of a cleared space is one of the short, moulded chairs that Emmet first encountered in the reception area. Behind the desk sits an attractive blonde woman. She is holding a pencil in such a way that Emmet, at first glance, thought she was holding a dagger. She regards Emmet for a moment,

‘Mr Storch, I will be both brief and blunt,’ she says. ‘You are not the type of person we are looking for.’

With a monumental effort of will, Emmet does not vacate his bowels and take to flight.

‘Really?’ is all he can say.

‘Yes, really,’ she answers. ‘In fact, this interview should never have happened.’ She glares at the short, fat man, who hangs his head. ‘However, because it has happened, we are willing to give you a chance.’ She stands up and moves around the desk towards Emmet, who cannot help but notice that she is quite tall with long, shapely legs. ‘Nice hips, too,’ his id points out.

‘There is a test that usually accompanies these interviews. You will sit this test and if you do well we may be able to find a place for you.’ She is now standing directly in front of Emmet, who is trying very hard to control several biological impulses at once.

‘OK,’ he chokes out eventually.

‘Good,’ she says, and smiles. ‘Bobby here will show you where you are to take the test.’

The short man looks mildly annoyed. ‘I prefer Robert, as you well know,’ Bobby says, and turns to Emmet. ‘Follow me Mr Stork, if you please.’ The reluctant Bobby leads Emmet back out into the busy room and to an empty desk near the office. ‘The test is all set up,’ Bobby says. ‘There is a one hour time limit. Do the best you can. I’ll be back when your hour is up.’ He scoots off, back into the office with the woman whom Emmet cannot help labelling the dangerous blonde.

An hour passes. The dangerous blonde, whose name is Glykeria, looks at Bobby. ‘There must be a mistake,’ she says. ‘He has a perfect score.’

Bobby’s brow furrows. ‘Are you sure? You haven’t stuffed the connection again, have you?’ he says, moving behind the desk and tapping at the computer. ‘Bloody hell, he has got a perfect score.’

‘What does that mean?’ Glykeria asks.

‘It means that the rather sad specimen outside is a perfect customer care consultant for a busy call centre, that’s what it means.’

‘I wouldn’t call him a sad specimen if I were you, little Bobby,’ Glykeria says, smiling and looking at Bobby. She reaches out and grasps the front of his trousers. ‘Little boys with no hair and tiny cocks should be more humble.’

Bobby looks like he is about to cry. ‘Well, what do we do now?’ he asks.

‘We give him a job, that’s what we do,’ Glykeria says. ‘Go and bring him in, but first, drop your pants and sing the little dick song for me.’ She smiles wickedly at Bobby who, after climbing onto the black chair in front of the desk, performs for her.

Emmet follows Bobby back into the office where Glykeria sits behind her desk. It seems to him that Bobby has lost some of the spring in his step and he constantly looks at the floor.

‘Your test results are very impressive, Mr Storch,’ Glykeria says. ‘While we are unable to offer you a position immediately, I can say that I will be recommending you highly to our clients.’

Emmet nearly falls over. ‘Really?’ he asks.

‘Yes, really,’ she says, smiling. ‘Bobby will show you the way out. It has been a pleasure meeting you, Mr Storch.’ Once again Emmet finds himself following Bobby, who leads him back out into the reception area and then turns to face him.

‘A very impressive test result, Mr Stork,’ Bobby says. ‘I have been here many years, and I have never seen anything like it before.’ He reaches out and takes Emmet’s hand, giving it a vigorous shake. ‘We will definitely be in touch,’ Bobby says, and turns back through the door. Emmet wanders into the lift, giving a wan smile to the receptionist on the way through, but she completely ignores him.

The trip home feels like a dream to Emmet. He finds ten dollars on the footpath outside the station. The ticket-validating machine incorrectly stamps his ticket, making it valid for another seven days. The train is on time and he sits in an empty carriage most of the way home. The only other person to get on is a pretty, young woman who flirts with him shamelessly for the entire trip. His feet dance across the pavement as he makes his way from the train station to his parent's house.

Persephone notices that the thunderclouds seem to be absent from her son's brow upon his return. 'Well, how did it go?' she asks, smiling.

'Quite well, Mum, I think I might have got it!' Emmet answers.

'Atlas, come quick,' she bellows. 'The other one has a job!'

'I think I have,' says Emmet, trying to find a positive side to being "the other one."

'Sit down,' Persephone says. 'I will prepare a celebratory feast.'

'Hey Emmet, well-done mate,' says Plato, magically appearing out of nowhere. 'What are you going to cook, Mum?'

'That's my boy,' says Atlas, entering from a corridor dedicated to Apollo.

'Yeah, thanks everyone,' Emmet says, and slumps onto a chair. A strange weariness overtakes him and he feels the

need to withdraw for a while. ‘I’m just going to lie down for a bit,’ Emmet says, and wanders off in the direction of his room.

Atlas watches him leave through the door leading to the Herculean corridor, and turns to his wife. ‘Persephone, love of my life,’ he says, ‘do you think it would have been lonely without children?’

The euphoria from the interview wears off after a few days, leaving Emmet wondering if he imagined the whole thing. Surely, the agency- complete with foreboding building and strange people- had been a figment of his overactive imagination? Best not to dwell upon it, especially since right here and right now there are people depending upon him. He sits at his computer guiding his avatar on a dangerous mission with a group of other virtually hardened adventurers, headphones blocking out the sounds of the ultimate reality.

‘Incoming. Two o’clock,’ he calls into a microphone. Like a well-oiled machine, he and his virtual brothers-in-arms turn to face the new threat, eliminating it with well-practiced efficiency.

‘Well done team,’ says Horc, leader of this band of merry avatars, ‘but this is where it starts to get hairy. Grocok, keep on your toes, we are all relying on you.’

‘Ready, willing and more than able,’ replies Emmet.

‘OK, here they come,’ says Horc. ‘Do your stuff, Grocok.’

Emmet eases his avatar forward, prepares the spells that

will turn the approaching virtual evildoers into a smear on the virtual landscape. Timing is everything. He leans forward. Now! Nothing happens. ‘What the fuck,’ Emmet exclaims, clicking the mouse buttons furiously. He can see his fellow adventurers meeting a horrible, virtual death. He looks up and sees his mother with the mouse cord in her hand.

‘Grocok, you neub, double-you, tee, eff?’ says Horc, who always pronounces each letter of an acronym instead of saying the words.

Emmet rips off his headphone in fury. ‘Why do you always do stuff like this?’ he yells at his mother.

She beams a big smile at him. ‘You have a call from the recruitment agency,’ Persephone says, and hands Emmet the phone, ‘he says his name is Robert.’

Emmet takes the phone. ‘Hello,’ he says.

‘Hello Emmet, your mother sounds lovely. I didn’t know you still lived at home.’

‘It’s not something I mention during job interviews,’ Emmet replies.

Robert chuckles. ‘Just ringing to let you know your application has been successful,’ he says. ‘You’ll be receiving a letter from us in a few days giving details of what you need to do next. Congratulations, Mr Stork.’

‘Thanks Robert,’ Emmet replies. ‘I appreciate it.’

Robert chuckles again. ‘No worries mate,’ he says. ‘With that test score, they would be stupid not to hire you. See you around, Emmet.’ Robert hangs up, and Emmet hands the

phone to his mother. 'I have a job, Mum,' he says, slumping further into his chair, 'and it's a real one this time.'

## Chapter 2

Two weeks after Robert's fateful telephone call, Emmet finds himself sitting in a large, well-appointed conference room located in a concrete and glass tower at the city's centre. The view overlooking the city through the floor to ceiling window is breathtaking. In the distance, heavily forested hills run into two mist-shrouded cliffs that stand, like silent guardians, on either side of a bay. The view inside the room is not quite as inspiring. A huge oval table dominates its centre. On one side of the table, their backs to the window, sit ten trainees each sporting their own, unique interpretation of formal business attire. On the other side, their view of the city obstructed by ten eager faces, sits three people- two men on either side of a woman.

The woman looks at her watch and clears her throat.

'Hello everyone, my name is Fran Dorrell and I am the manager of the call centre here at Star Insurance,' she says, and pauses for a moment. 'I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you all into the fold. We here at Star think of ourselves as a rock hard, cohesive team that work together towards common goals while watching one another's back. In fact, we are more than a team. We are a family, and this special relationship extends to all who make it through our rigorous and comprehensive training and testing program. But you will all get to know me very well in the following

weeks, so I will hand you over to Acheron Pomtas, our Chief Executive Officer,' she gestures towards the older man on her right.

Acheron acknowledges her introduction with a nod as he stands. His bearing suggests that he is a man accustomed to being the centre of attention. Pushing his chair into the table, he turns to Fran. 'Thank you Fran,' he says, and everyone in the room knows that he sincerely feels that he owes Fran a debt of gratitude. Fran squirms in her seat and crosses her legs. Radiating confidence, he turns to the trainees and opens his arms in a gesture of acceptance, 'and welcome to Star Insurance, ladies and gentlemen. I am sure that our relationship will be long and prosperous.' He looks down and strokes his chin. 'These are changing times here at Star, and you are the ambassadors of this change. Most of you will know that we are not a traditional insurance company. All our customers are, in fact, members of a professional guild and we exist to serve those members. Now this may have worked well in the past, but the current economic climate demands that we make changes to our structure in order to compete effectively. We must change, ladies and gentlemen, and you are going to help us.' He looks intently at the trainees sitting opposite. 'It is you who will lead this company into the future,' he says, beginning to pace up and down behind Fran. 'You will take us to the top of the insurance game. You will be the heroes that set the Star in the heavens where it belongs. You and only you can do this, I am

convinced of it.’

Emmet looks around at his fellow trainees and notes the shining eyes and eager faces.

‘So sad,’ he thinks, and turns back to Acheron, who continues his monologue.

‘Over the years, we have made do with a three percent profit margin here at Star. For a member organisation, that’s not bad, but let’s face it, we could make more money sticking the member contributions in the bank and collecting the interest. Three percent is not good enough for the most profitable insurance company in the country, and that is what we plan on becoming. But we can only do it with your help.’ He stops and places his hands palm down on the table. ‘You are the vanguard. You are the leaders. One day, you will lead Star in positions of authority, but we must all start somewhere, and this is where you start.’ Every time he says the word ‘you’, he slaps the tabletop with his right hand, making the trainees jump. Acheron stands up straight again and faces Fran. ‘They are all yours again, Fran, I’m off to do a little hard work. Hopefully, together with these new recruits, our hard work and dedication to the cause will make Star fly.’ He turns to the trainees and gives a mock salute. ‘Good luck recruits,’ he says and walks out of the door behind the desk. Fran watches him leave, and then turns back to the trainees.

‘An inspirational leader, I’m sure you all agree,’ she says. ‘Your training will now begin in earnest, and the gentleman to

my left will guide you through that. I will most definitely be seeing you all later, but until then, I'll leave in the capable hands of Tony Callas.' Fran stands and, with a quick smile to Tony and the trainees, exits through the same door as Acheron.

When she has gone, Tony pushes his chair back and puts his feet on the table. 'Lap it up, folks,' he says, an expression of bored resignation on his face. He looks around the room before letting his eyes rest on the view outside the window. 'Take a good look at that view, because chances are you won't be seeing it again anytime soon. Our training is in a smaller, less impressive room than this. The view isn't quite as good. In fact, there isn't a view because it's in the basement.' After a brief moment admiring the scene outside the window, he stands. 'Now, if you would all kindly follow me, we can make our way there and begin our four weeks together,' he says, and moves towards the door. The trainees all shuffle out of their seats and follow. Emmet, as has been the case all his life, brings up the rear.

Tony leads the trainees down twenty floors, through the fume-filled car park and into a small room in the basement of the building. 'This is our new home,' he says, watching the trainees file in and take their seats around the small, laminated tables scattered throughout the room. 'Now you all have me at a disadvantage because you know who I am, but I don't know who you are. To fix this, you are all going to stand up and introduce yourselves to me and to the rest of the

room, starting with the rather gloomy looking young man sitting in the back corner,’ he points at Emmet, who drops his head onto the cheap table, then drags his carcass into an upright position.

‘My name is Emmet,’ he says, ‘but don’t bother committing it to memory because I don’t think I’ll be staying on.’

Tony smirks. ‘Now, now, Emmet, don’t be alarmed by the naff little display of our CEO and the all powerful Fran. Star is, believe it or not, a good place to work. Give us a chance and you will be pleasantly surprised.’ Tony points to the young woman sitting beside Emmet. ‘Hopefully, you won’t be planning a runner like our man Emmet here. Tell us something unusual about yourself.’

The girl stands, a cheeky smile on her face. ‘Hello everyone, my name is River and I flow both ways.’

‘Hmm, interesting,’ says Tony as River sits down. ‘You aren’t alone in that regard here at Star.’

The procession of names and quirks continues until all of the trainees have introduced themselves, rather self-consciously, to themselves. As near as Emmet can tell, they are the same person, divided between nine bodies. Only two stand out: the easy flowing River sitting beside him, and the curvaceous Natalie, who just happens to be sitting in the exact spot where Emmet can leer at her without being obvious.

Emmet is in his sexual prime, and his lack of intimacy is

weighing heavily on his psyche especially while looking at Natalie in her tight black dress. It has been many, many months since his last sexual encounter, which was an unsatisfying frenzy of physicality during the death throes of a doomed relationship. Now, sitting beside the sexually ambiguous River while looking at Natalie's barely restrained breasts, his reluctant celibacy is at the forefront of his mind.

'What a splendid group,' says Tony, shaking Emmet out of a trance that was bound to lead to an embarrassing boner, 'and what an exhausting process. Let's have lunch, shall we?' He looks at his watch. 'Let's see, its ten thirty now, so back here at one? I think a long lunch is warranted on your first day.' With that, he gathers his possessions and departs the room at high speed.

The trainees continue to sit for a few minutes, looking anywhere and everywhere in order to avoid one another's eyes. Eventually, Natalie stands and leaves the room. Emmet, never a leader but on this occasion a very enthusiastic follower, jumps out of his chair and makes a break for the door. Thoughts of escape from the world of insurance inspire his feet, which move like feet possessed, barely touching the floor in their effort to get themselves out of there.

'Emmet, wait,' says a sweet voice behind him. He turns to see River following. 'Do you want to get a coffee?' she asks, drawing up beside him.

'Actually, what I want to get is away, but a coffee sounds like a good compromise,' Emmet says, ignoring the

suggestions coming from his id that, if followed, would take him well outside the bounds of civility.

‘I tell you what,’ says River. ‘I’ll buy you lunch if you promise to see out the day.’

‘How can I refuse?’

‘Easy, you say no,’ River says, taking Emmet by the arm and leading him, ever so gently, towards the elevator. In the dark recesses of his subconscious, Emmet’s id exalts.

River leads Emmet to a small cafe across the road from the Star Insurance building. She orders a sandwich on organic, wholegrain bread and Emmet orders a coffee. He is still a little bloated from breakfast, which was on such a grand scale that Plato felt inspired to take photographs.

‘Not hungry?’ River asks.

‘Nah, my mother made me a big breakfast this morning to celebrate my first day at work,’ Emmet says.

‘She probably didn’t expect it to be your last, then,’ River says as her sandwich arrives, the bread so full of grains that an aura of wholesome goodness surrounds it.

Emmet’s coffee arrives shortly after, totally goodness and aura free. ‘That organic stuff is a con, you know’ says Emmet, sipping at his coffee. ‘It’s all bullshit, what the farmers say.’

‘My uncle runs a market garden,’ River says, looking perplexed. ‘He wouldn’t bullshit me, I’m his favourite niece.’

Emmet watches the steam rise from the liquid in his cup. He remembers a time, not too long ago, when he asked a

friend what he was going to get his mother for mother's day. The reason for his friend's hysterical reaction was forthcoming the following day, when the poor woman succumbed to a virulent cancer. 'Sorry,' was all that he could think to say.

River giggles. 'You are a complete tool,' she says. 'I knew there was something I liked about you.' She takes a bite of her sandwich, and chews with a contemplative air. 'What do you think of our partners in insurance? There are one or two hot ones in there.'

Emmet's mind, however, is somewhere else. 'Do you really "flow both ways"?' he asks, making little quotation marks in the air with his fingers.

'Yeah,' River says her brow furrowing. 'Sort of. Possibly. I think some girls are very sexy.' She puts her sandwich down. 'I've never actually, you know, done it with a girl. But I think about it quite a bit.' She picks up her sandwich again, which is beginning to lose shape and shed its organic innards. 'So, really, the answer is "God knows",' she says, putting her sandwich down again to make quotation marks in the air with her fingers. 'But you didn't answer my question. What do you think of our fellow butt monkeys?'

'The butt monkeys are OK,' Emmet says, 'but the monkey masters look a little hardcore. I don't know what that Fran woman does to relax, but I reckon someone suffers when she does.'

'What about Acheron!' River says and laughs, 'that grey

hair, those sober eyes, that manic glint. I'd do him on the table right now!'

Emmet looks at River over his coffee. She blushes.

'OK, I wouldn't,' she says, 'but he is quite sexy in a seedy kind of way.'

Emmet leans back in his chair. 'River,' he says, 'I think working at Star Insurance is going to be an experience.'

'So you're staying then?' she asks, her smile widening.

'Yeah,' Emmet says. 'I don't see any way out of it. My mother would kill me if I didn't but, what's worse, is that my dad would follow me beyond the grave to make sure that I kept suffering.'

'Best value coffee ever,' River says, putting the sandwich down again, 'but this is a crappy sandwich.'

Emmet and River return to the cramped training room to find the entire butt monkey brigade already there. Many look like they haven't moved, like suicidal bunnies waiting patiently in the centre of the road to be hypnotised by oncoming lights. Tony, however, is absent. Instead, Fran is standing at the front of the room, accompanied by a very pretty, very slender woman.

'Ah, the prodigal trainees,' Fran says as they enter and take their seats. 'Now that we are all here, we can get a move on. I know you were all expecting Tony to be taking your training, but there has been a necessary re-evaluation of the role that Tony is to play within Star Insurance and, consequently, he can no longer be involved with your group

on a day-to-day basis. Instead, the management team think it would be more appropriate for an experienced call centre operator to take responsibility of your training and chose Ms Voula Spipidopoulos as that operator,' she gestures towards the young woman beside her. 'Voula is a team leader in our call centre. Her product knowledge is encyclopaedic, and her customer service skills impeccable. I am sure you will all benefit greatly from her knowledge and experience.'

Emmet sits transfixed as Fran continues her introduction, but her voice has faded into the background. In his subconscious, Emmet's id and ego are both leering.

'She is haich-oh-tee HOT,' says Emmet's id.

'No arguments there, even though she is a little on the thin side,' replies his ego. 'Mum's cooking will fix that.'

The ego's metaphoric jaw drops. 'We are not going after her!'

'Why?'

'Why? Because she's unstable, that's why. She has three packets of cigarettes in her bag, all different brands. Look at her! She's a nervous wreck. The only time she isn't shaking is when she is fondling those celebrity magazines sitting beside her smokes! Do you really want us to go out with a girl who has three different brands of cigarette in her bag and who is only comfortable when fondling pictures of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie? What if she knocks him back? Worse still, what if she doesn't.'

If the ego had hands, it would be wringing them. 'It's not

you that has to deal with the wreckage, mate. It's a bloody pain, let me tell you. Blue balls aren't the half of it.' The ego contemplates the scene on the other side of Emmet's eyeballs. 'Remember Sue? We took months to recover.'

'Yeah, I remember Sue, all right. Best fuck we ever had.' The id pauses, lost in thought.

'Fuck it,' it says, moodily. 'I want that sucking our member as soon as possible, if not sooner. Mental stability be damned.'

'What about the other one, she's pretty hot as well?'

'I lost it for her at lunch. The girl-on-girl thing had me going, but she seems a little too eager.'

The ego sighs. 'It's because she seems well balanced and stable, isn't it?'

'It has been my experience that neurotic and erotic tend to go hand in hand,' the id says, rather stiffly.

'So does arsenic and death,' the ego replies, but it knows it is fighting a losing battle. 'All right, have it your way, it's not as if there is anything I can do about it anyway,' it says, 'but I'll be suggesting an extended bout of celibacy if it fails.'

'Yeah, right, just like after Sue,' says Emmet's id, and wanders off to get things moving.

## (ii)

Emmet spends the rest of the afternoon in a daze. He has

vivid recollections of the sound of Voula's voice, but can't actually remember what she said. Her face is etched into his mind's eye (an inspired idea and a lot of hard work by Emmet's id), and the memory of her graceful movements sets his pulse racing with unsavoury sexual fantasies. Somehow, he finds himself sitting in the café across the road accompanied by River, the first day of training has ended and he is a little unsure of how he got here.

'What a turn up,' River says. 'I wonder what happened to Tony.'

'Hmm? Oh, Tony? Training probably isn't his thing,' Emmet replies.

'Nah, I reckon that bitch Natalie might have had a word to someone about our long lunch,' River says.

Emmet shrugs his shoulders. 'Whatever.'

'And what about Voula? What a skinny skank,' River continues. 'Encyclopaedic knowledge my bum. She came in carrying three different celebrity gossip magazines. Did you see her smoking at afternoon tea? She sucked down four cigarettes in ten minutes!'

'She must have something going for her,' responds Emmet, 'she looks very young and is a team leader already.'

'Yeah, she probably has a nimble tongue seeking promotion, if you know what I mean.' River leers.

'That is totally uncalled for. She could just be a clever, ambitious individual,' says Emmet, a little on the short side.

'Emmet loves Voula, Emmet loves Voula, Emmet loves

Voula,' River teases.

'You are such a wit,' he responds, forcing a smile onto his lips.

'Why thank you, dear boy, I always try to please.'

River looks at her watch and gulps down the remainder of her coffee. 'Gotta run, mate,' she says, standing up. 'I've got a shopping date with my sister. See you tomorrow, shall we say half an hour before start? Right here in this, the worst café in the universe.'

'Have I a choice?' Emmet asks.

'No,' she says, picking up her bag and moving towards the door.

'OK, I'll be here,' Emmet shrugs.

Emmet sits alone in the café after River's departure.

What a day! He contemplates the direction his life has taken, and wonders how this new job will affect his family and his lifestyle. He also thinks of his new friend, River, whose brash words seem to be a little out of sync with her personality. But most of all, he thinks of the beautiful Voula, more often than not naked, and what he would do to her if he had unfettered access to her body. Eventually, the mental imagery forces him from the café to a more private place, where his erotic imaginings can find a physical release.

Star Insurance's training program is the envy of the insurance industry, guaranteed to take an ordinary human being and transform him or her into a heartless automaton in four tedious, soul-destroying weeks. To Emmet, however, the whole process feels right. It is possible that the writers of the program had him in mind as they were working because, for the first time in his life, he excels. Everything comes easy: he knows the answers to questions; he can see the sense in what he is learning. The telephone headpiece becomes an extension of his body; irate policyholders find comfort in his soothing words; recalcitrant contractors become polite and respectful.

He had progressed barely half way through the program when a realisation hit him like a thunderbolt hurled by a vengeful god who has had his insurance claim denied on a technicality. After a lifetime of not quite searching, Emmet has finally found his calling. At first, he is a little disturbed to think that his calling contains sub-clauses that are beyond human comprehension but he soon accepts that he is special, in an insurance kind of way. The examination at the end of the training period is, in Emmet's eyes, laughable. It is supposed to take a trainee three hours to complete, but Emmet finishes in less than sixty minutes, and that includes going back and double-checking his answers. His early exit from the room surprises many observers, all of whom expect him to do very well. They are even more surprised when the results come through.

River and Emmet sit in the café, which has become a safe haven for the trainees, discussing the newly published examination results. They placed first and second in the rankings, and are indulging in a little post-training gloating.

‘You are good, young Emmet, but not quite good enough,’ crows River. ‘I am the insurance master.’

‘You beat me by one mark, and that solitary mark cost you two hours of your life,’ replies Emmet. ‘You have the highest mark, overall, yes, but I enjoyed two hours of freedom thanks to my superior marks-per-hour.’

‘What a crock of shit. The powers that be don’t give a rat’s for marks-per-hour, Mr Second Place, it’s the total that counts.’ River says, pausing to take a mouthful of beer before continuing. ‘That arch-bitch Natalie wasn’t too pleased.’

‘She can suck my left one, the horrible slag.’ Emmet says, with feeling. The weeks have not been kind to Emmet’s opinion of Natalie, whose ever-present aura of nastiness and disregard for others has made her unpopular with everyone. He dons a sour face. ‘Voula, Emmet was late this morning,’ Emmet says in a squeaky voice meant to imitate Natalie. ‘Acheron, Emmet had two biscuits with his coffee. Oh Acheron, please ejaculate on my face, I long to be used by a powerful man.’

River laughs. ‘That last one was me, you silly boy,’ she says.

‘You’re all talk, babe, all talk’ Emmet says, smiling.

River looks at Emmet for a moment, aware that here is a

man with not enough sex in his life. She can tell that it's been a long time between drinks by the hungry expression in his eyes when he is around anyone who is even vaguely feminine.

'As far as you know, I am,' she says, resisting the urge to bring his lack of a sex life onto the table for ridicule. She looks at her watch and drains the last few drops of beer from her glass. 'Are we going to have another one, or should we leave that for the morrow, at the butt monkey knees up?'

'I'm caffeine-d out, so I'll take the pass.' Emmet says, and stands to leave.

'You are just out of control, wild man! Slow down or it's an early grave for you,' River says, looking at her watch again. 'Great, that gives me time to do a little shopping for the big day. Gotta run sweet cheeks, I'll see you tomorrow.'

'See you then, Oh Master of Insurance.' Emmet bows his head in mock supplication.

'That's better, a subordinate male. Just how I like them' River says, and then gives Emmet a quick peck on the cheek and makes to leave.

'That's not what Acheron tells me,' Emmet says, leering.

Emmet is not at his best at big gatherings, especially ones that promise to degenerate into drunken orgies of stupidity, and he believes the standard of individual involved in this knees-up could push the stupidity factor to record levels. This explains why River finds him lurking in the shadows across the road from the Star Insurance Building,

'Emmet! How nice! You waited for me,' River says, when

she sees him.

‘Yeah, I’m waiting for you,’ Emmet says. ‘That’s what I’m doing.’

‘Yeah right, and I’m Natalie’s best friend,’ River replies. ‘You’re too scared to go in, aren’t you?’

‘I aint scared of nothing!’ Emmet asserts. River looks at Emmet, who returns the look defiantly for a few seconds, before cracking. ‘Ok, I’m scared. Natalie is in there, and Acheron, too.’

‘It’s your own fault for not drinking. A couple of beers and you sink to their level,’ River says.

‘But what if they have a couple of beers as well?’ Emmet asks, hysteria tinging his voice.

‘Well, that’s the pain of being an intellectual giant,’ River says and sighs. ‘We are always behind the stupidity curve.’ She inspects herself critically in the glass of the building, and makes several imperceptible adjustments to the hang of her skirt and jacket. ‘Come on,’ she says, ‘time to hit the piss.’

Emmet follows River into the building, where they take the elevator into the basement. It is full of people, most of whom Emmet does not recognise. ‘Who are the foreigners?’ he asks.

‘Apparently, the entire company is here,’ River answers, leaning towards Emmet to make herself heard over the music. ‘Insurance people have a reputation for partying hard.’ She leads Emmet to a makeshift bar and orders two cocktails.

‘Here you go,’ she says, offering one of the colourful drinks to Emmet, who looks at it with mistrust.

‘What is it?’ Emmet asks, lifting it above head height to better inspect the drink from all angles.

‘It’s a Grapefruit Granita,’ River replies. ‘I thought you might like it because it is mostly fruit juice.’

‘Really? Mostly fruit juice you say.’ Emmet takes a sip. ‘It’s a bit strong,’ he says, gagging, ‘but very nice.’ He takes another sip. ‘What’s in it?’

‘I think its grapefruit, mint, and a little vodka.’ River downs hers in one gulp, then turns and orders another two.

‘Take it easy,’ Emmet warns, looking alarmed.

River laughs and hands him another drink. ‘Fuck taking it easy!’ she says. ‘We are insurance people now. Drink enough and, with any luck, we will forget.’

Emmet ponders her words for a moment, and then downs the first drink in one gulp.

‘That’s the spirit,’ River lifts the second drink in the air. ‘To insurance!’ she says, and downs the second drink in one mouthful.

‘To insurance,’ echoes Emmet, and does the same. ‘You know,’ he says, swaying a little. ‘My mother thanked God for me getting this job, and it is just the sort of thing that bastard would do.’

‘Really?’ says River, ‘do go on.’

‘Well, she says it like it’s a good thing. But insurance? C’mon. The sad thing is, I’m good at it,’ Emmet says, his

word slurring ever so slightly.

‘Yeah, but I’m better,’ River says.

‘Is that somethin’ to be proud of, though?’ Emmet continues as if River hadn’t spoken. ‘Benevolent God, pffft.’ He accepts a third drink from River. ‘Take this alcohol right. It’s good stuff. But it makes you stupid. Would a benevolent God make a really good drink, and then make it so it rots your brain when you drink it? I should think not!’ He sips his drink.

‘Interesting theory,’ says River.

‘But it doesn’t end there,’ Emmet says, a little too loudly for River’s comfort.

‘Surely there can’t be more?’ River says.

‘Of course there’s more,’ Emmet says, slurring his words and adding extra volume. ‘Like, take pizza. I love pizza. I really, really love it. I’d sleep with it if I could, that’s how much I love it.’

‘Really?’ says River, thinking she may have pushed Emmet too far with that second drink.

‘Yes, really,’ says Emmet. ‘A benevolent God would arrange matters so that pizza is good for you. It should make you healthy and strong. Instead, it clogs your arteries and makes you sexually unappealing.’ He sips at his drink again. ‘If I was God, I’d fix it so that the more Vodka a person drinks the smarter and healthier they become. Kids would get a pint of vodka for morning tea at school, and if they don’t drink it, the teacher will call the parents to complain.’ He

makes a fist with his right hand, open at the thumb, which points upwards, and at the pinkie, which points down, then holds it to the side of his head as if it were a telephone. ‘Mr Storch,’ he says into his pinkie, ‘little Emmet isn’t drinking his vodka again. What are you going to do about it?’

‘I see,’ says River, trying to take the drink from Emmet’s hand.

‘Hey, that’s mine,’ Emmet says, drawing the hand holding the drink out of River’s reach. ‘And vegetables would make you fat,’ he continues. ‘A fat person would walk by, and people would point and say ‘stop eating broccoli, fat boy, and have a pizza,’ they would say.’ Emmet lapses into a surly silence.

‘Hey, there’s Voula!’ says River, glad for the distraction. ‘And who is that man with her,’ she adds, her voice sounding strange and distant.

Emmet looks up in alarm. Voula has a man? And from the way River spoke, a desirable one at that. He sees her just as she sees him. She waves and then turns to a tall man standing behind her, pointing in Emmet and River’s direction. The two make their way over, and Voula gives them both a little peck on the cheek. Emmet nearly swoons.

‘Jurgen, these are the two star recruits I’ve been telling you about,’ Voula says. ‘Emmet, River, this is Jurgen, my partner. He’s also a team leader at the call centre.’

Jurgen extends a hand, first to River and then to Emmet, who shakes it with a sinking feeling. Out of the corner of his

eye, he notices that River is staring at Jurgen, mouth agape. He steps backward onto her foot. She grunts softly and closes her mouth.

In Emmet's subconscious, things are not going well.

'I told you,' screams his ego. 'Oh benevolent God, where are you when he needs you?'

'Shut up idiot. I was expecting this,' says Emmet's id.

'You were?'

'Well, she is gorgeous, and gorgeous women always have fuckwits hanging around. This dickwad is not even up to scratch,' says the id.

Emmet's ego looks out into the ultimate reality, gazing upon Jurgen's tall, muscular frame. It notes his chiselled features, and hears his effortless conversation. There is, obviously, a sparkling wit behind that easy smile. For some reason, he does not share the id's confidence. 'We are screwed,' it mutters, and wanders off to prepare for what it believes will be an inevitable fall.

River recovers magnificently from her stupefied state, and takes Emmet by the hand. 'C'mon Emmet, let's boogie!' she says, leading him towards a makeshift dance floor at the centre of the room. Emmet hands his drink to Jurgen as he is dragged past, protesting feebly.

'I am a very poor dancer,' he informs River as they face off in the centre of the floor. 'In fact, I have been voted the world's most un-funky man three years running by a panel of expert judges.'

‘You are so full of it, Mr Storch,’ says River, her body moving to the music. Emmet makes but a token sacrifice to the gods of rhythm, but he admires River as she gyrates and convulses to the pulsating beat. A few minutes later, Voula appears beside them, and begins to spin and twirl in a most attractive way. Emmet begins to sweat, despite his rather minimalistic movements. The two women whirl and gyrate around him, oblivious to his existence. He, however, is not oblivious to theirs. With River’s assertion that she flows both ways ringing in his ears, he allows his poorly co-ordinated feet to shuffle him towards Jurgen and blessed alcohol. His eyes, however, remained glued on the bodies of the dancing women. Jurgen returns his drink without a word, and the two of them watch River and Voula in silence. Occasionally, Emmet twitches.

Standing in a room full of people, Emmet can see nothing but two bodies in constant motion. Voula and River dance in a world of Emmet’s creation, a world that consists only of the two dancers, the music that governs their movements, and his unrestrained lust. Primal and immediate, the atmosphere thick with expectation, their dancing fills his consciousness and his fertile imagination works overtime to devise situations where both these woman would be at his beck and call, compelled to fulfil his every desire. He is acutely aware that he is sweating.

Eventually the music stops and the women make their way from the makeshift dance floor back to the two silent

insurance consultants standing beside the makeshift bar. River collapses onto Emmet's shoulder. 'I am owed drinks, I believe,' she says, and takes what is left of Emmet's from his unresisting hand. He surrenders it without a word and tries not to think of the supple body currently pressing against his. He is not very successful.

'I'll get them in,' offers Jurgen, 'we can't stay long and I don't want to leave as the tight wad that didn't stand his round.' He goes to the bar and returns with four drinks, which he distributes.

'Voula tells me that you two were the stand outs in her training group. I was hoping to snare one of you for my team,' Jurgen says.

Voula gives Jurgen a withering look. 'You've talked about noting but work tonight, Jurgy,' she says, causing Jurgen to colour a little at the use of his pet name, 'we'll have plenty of time to do that on Monday.' She puts her drink down and embraces the tall man as the music starts again. 'C'mon, you promised me a dance, and then I'll introduce you to everyone else.' She turns to River and Emmet.

'River, get this man drunk enough to dance and then meet me on the floor,' Voula says, and leads Jurgen towards the dance floor. River and Emmet watch them go.

'I vote we get the fuck out of here,' says River, when the two are out of earshot. 'Before I accidently fuck them both.'

Emmet drains his glass. Strangely, the alcohol is no longer having a pleasing effect on his mood. 'Yeah, lets,' he says.

‘The café opens as a bar on Saturday nights.’ As one, they turn towards the elevator and hurry away.

## (iv)

River and Emmet sit in a dingy corner of the café come bar. ‘It goes off on a Saturday nights,’ River says, looking around the room. The place is crowded, every table is full and there is standing room only at the bar. The music is muted, and the atmosphere sombre. This is not the type of establishment where college kids gather to exercise their post pubescent angst. This is a serious drinking establishment for the serious drinker.

‘I like it,’ says Emmet. ‘The suicidal depression theme works. Gothic.’

‘Yeah,’ River says. ‘Nice. Now stop smiling and buy me a drink. Something strong. Make it a double. I don’t want any fruit, umbrellas or worms in it. Just alcohol in a glass.’

‘Chill out,’ says Emmet. ‘How about a beer?’

‘Ok, that’ll do.’

Emmet gets up and returns shortly with two very large beers. ‘They do big beer here,’ he says, carefully putting the drinks on the table. ‘Apparently, they either have to sell beer like this, or hire more bar staff.’

River is impressed. ‘So, what did you think of Jurgen?’ she asks innocently.

‘He seems alright. A bit alpha, but so it goes.’ Emmet says and takes a long draught of his big beer. ‘You seemed mightily impressed.’

‘He is a very good looking man.’ River says, also taking a long drink from her big beer. ‘The question is how the fuck did a vacant dimwit like Voula score such a man?’

‘She is also very good looking.’

‘But she is so-o-o-o-o-o stupid,’ River says. ‘What could they possibly talk about? All she does is read celebrity mags and smoke.’

Emmet shrugs. ‘People are people,’ he says. ‘Look at our little troop of butt monkeys. They look good, I’ll grant you, but they are a flawed bunch. Imagine who they fuck.’ He takes another drink. ‘Individually, I mean. Not as a collective,’ he adds, not wanting to be misunderstood. River giggles into her beer.

‘People do not giggle in the Suicide Bar,’ Emmet says, wagging a finger in her direction. ‘This is a serious place and frivolity is not appreciated.’

‘I couldn’t help it, I just pictured our little troop going at it while Oksana tells everyone that orgy’s are against the will of God, and Sam is complaining that sex was better in the eighties. Is that the real name, or did you just make it up?’

‘It’s the real name,’ Emmet says, pointing at a sign above the bar. ‘Oksana is one sexy bitch,’ he says, not wishing to leave such a stimulating line of conversation, ‘but she’d probably insist on missionary.’

‘No! No! NO!’ River chokes on her beer. ‘Anal is the only way to do Oksana, but then you’d have to stop her flagellating herself afterwards.’

‘Why? Because it is wrong?’ Emmet asks.

‘No silly,’ River wipes the beer froth from her top lip with the back of her hand, ‘because she would be so ashamed about enjoying it.’

‘I reckon Borriss would be the sort of man that Oksana would like,’ Emmet says. ‘A man’s man- strong, silent, bordering on the psychotic.’

River is in hysterics. ‘I would only do Borriss if he dressed up as a school girl and wore white frilly knickers underneath,’ she says and then tries to take a drink of her beer, but only succeeds in blowing froth onto Emmet’s face.

Emmet wipes the froth away. ‘And blowing froth onto Natalie’s face would be the only way she would want it,’ he says, which sets River off again, laughing so hard that tears run down her face.

‘Calm down,’ says Emmet. ‘Everyone is looking at us.’

‘Let ‘em look, the gloomy fucks,’ River says, wiping tears from her eyes. ‘Oh man, those images are wrong and broken,’ she says, when she can speak again, ‘but so funny. I reckon Jurgen gives it to Voula hard. If I was him, I’d roll up one of her magazines and shove it up her arse.’

Emmet looks shocked. ‘Easy does it,’ he says, sobering up and feeling offended at River’s besmirching of his beloved’s name.

River looks up from her beer. ‘Why?’ she asks, sounding perplexed.

Emmet panics. ‘She should get what she deserves, that’s why,’ he says, beginning to sweat.

‘If I had Voula to myself, I’d tie her face down on the bed and beat her arse till it glowed, then summon my assistant, the psycho Natalie, and get them to perform dirty lesbian sex for my pleasure. I like a bit of nasty girl on girl action. With tools, of course,’ says Emmet, getting a little overexcited.

River fiddles with her big beer. ‘Are you into all that bondage and stuff?’ she asks.

Emmet shrugs. ‘As much as anybody else is, I suppose. I’ve never actually tied or been tied, if that’s what you’re asking, but I don’t see anything wrong with it,’ he says. ‘It’s pretty common, from what I can tell. Typing the word “bondage” into any decent search engine is the first step in a journey of a million websites.’

‘Really?’ River says, looking a little annoyed.

Emmet is oblivious and continues on his merry way. ‘Oh yes,’ he says, ‘I’ve always thought of it as the middle class fetish. Butt plugs are just so bourgeois.’

‘I see,’ River says, looking very annoyed. ‘Gotta run,’ she adds, and races out the door.

Emmet is stunned. He gets up and races out the door after her, but too late. By the time he gets outside, she has climbed into a taxi and fled the area. He stands and watches the taillights vanish into the distance before trudging dejectedly

towards the train station.

Emmet arrives home shortly after midnight. The train ride had been hellish and the walk from the station, dark and lonely. He grabs a plate of leftovers from the refrigerator and settles into the couch in front of the television. A little mindlessness should help put things in perspective. At times like these, when other people feel like alien life forms that he has no hope of ever understanding, he finds television comforting. Look here, it says to him, fucked up and stupid you may be, but that's OK because so is everybody else.

Emmet flicks through the channels. The programs on offer tonight all revolve around murder, rape, fast food, or lifestyle advice. He settles for a dramatic sitcom about an ex-cop who now runs a pizza restaurant, but whose knack for catching serial killers that specialise in killing sexy young women has his former colleges running to him for help on a weekly basis. As if this is not drawing a long enough bow, the gentleman in question is married to a forensic scientist with a passion for gardening. Good old television; nothing else can prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Western society has several unresolved issues.

The cushion under his backside had barely begun to warm when the telephone rings. Grumbling, he reaches over and answers, expecting a stream of incoherent Greek from some long lost uncle trying to hit Atlas up for a loan. 'Atlas has no money,' he says, the moment he picks up the telephone.

'What? Emmet, is that you?' says a feminine voice.

‘River? Sorry, I thought you were my uncle,’ Emmet says, putting the plate down on the coffee table.

‘I’m not that butch, am I? To be honest, I think I’m rather soft and feminine,’ River says over the telephone line.

‘What are you talking about, and what happened to you?’ Emmet says, sitting up straight and turning off the television. ‘One minute, your pissing yourself laughing, the next you’re running out the door.’

‘I’m sorry,’ River says. ‘Talking about fetish stuff like bondage makes me annoyed. It’s not your fault.’

‘What?’ Emmet asks, genuinely perplexed. ‘You were talking about sodomy, cross dressing and humiliation just a few minutes before. What’s the difference?’

‘I don’t know, but there is a difference. Maybe it’s just me,’ River says.

‘Oh.’ Emmet pauses. ‘I didn’t upset you with what I said about Voula, did I?’ he asks, sounding contrite. ‘It was a little hardcore. I get these weird s and m fantasies sometimes...’

‘Enough, enough, I don’t want to hear your filthy little fantasies, especially if you’re tying someone up.’ River interrupts him.

‘I’m glad you’re OK with it,’ Emmet says.

‘If everyone is doing it like you say, it must be an irrational fear,’ River says. ‘It’s time I did something about it. Got any recommendations for educational websites?’

‘Not specific sites,’ Emmet says after a moment of think time. ‘Avoid anything with the word “pony” in the title and

you should be OK.’

‘That sounds sensible,’ River says and laughs. ‘I’ll tell you about my adventures on Monday morning at the Suicide café? Half an hour before work starts?’

‘OK, and be careful of ...’ Emmet begins, but the sound of a toilet flushing cuts short his witticism. ‘I’d better go; I think the old man is awake. See you Monday.’

‘Ok, see you then,’ River says and hangs up the telephone.

Atlas enters the lounge and looks at Emmet. ‘Tell whoever it is that I have no money,’ he says, ‘except if it is your uncle Spiro. Tell him my coffers are overflowing, but he cannot have any of it because he is a tightarse.’

‘It wasn’t for you, dad, it was for me,’ Emmet says.

Atlas looks surprised. ‘Was it a girl?’ he asks, tentatively, as if the act of asking could make the answer negative.

‘Yes, a girl.’ Emmet replies, wearily.

‘Good, it’s about time you settled down and had some children. Your uncle Spiro says that you must be gay, to not have a girlfriend at your age.’

‘Uncle Spiro is a tightarse, dad,’ Emmet says, looking for a distraction.

‘Yes, he is,’ says Atlas emphatically. ‘He still has not paid for his share of the lamb last Easter. I do not care if his whole family is vegetarian! It’s an extended family thing, and salads don’t come free but I never ask him to pay for them.’

‘Yes, yes, dad,’ says Emmet, taking the excitable man by

the arm and leading him back towards the corridor. ‘Time to go back to bed.’

‘Yes, you are right,’ Atlas says, and then yawns. ‘I must tell Persephone the good news. Our Emmet has a new girlfriend!’

‘Dad! I don’t have a girlfriend,’ Emmet shouts. ‘She is just a friend.’

‘Let us dream, my son.’ Atlas says as he wanders off towards his bedroom. ‘At least for one night we can dream that our household will be blessed with grandchildren.’

Emmet prepares for a return salvo, but the stoop in his father’s shoulders deflates his anger. ‘What’s the point,’ he thinks as he wanders towards his own room and the promise of sleep. With any luck, things will make more sense tomorrow.

## Chapter 3

Emmet arrives early on Monday morning only to find River already waiting for him at the poorly branded Suicide Café. She is sitting amongst the familiar sights, sounds and smells of their training group, who are taking up several tables at the rear of the cafe. He gives her a quizzical look, and she responds with a shrug of her shoulders, indicating that she has nothing to do with the turnout. A quick scan of the faces reveals that Natalie is, thankfully, absent.

‘Emmet!’ the group cries in unison when he walks in. Borris, sharing the table nearest the door with River, points to a fresh cup of coffee and an empty seat beside him. Emmet says nothing as he sits down. The butt monkeys, a term he has come to think of as the plural for trainee, sit together in groups and cliques that crystallised during their training weeks. Some appear to be a little closer after the alcohol fuelled Saturday night. On the table directly in front of the his sit Aros and Melissa. They are so close that they are in danger of merging. Kaela shares their table but is at a respectable distance. She is engaged in a spirited conversation with Oksana, who sits at the next table. Peter and the venerable Sam are on either side of her, and look like they are enjoying the conversation between the two women immensely. They remind Emmet of spectators at a professional football game: they can watch, they can marvel, but they can never

compete.

Emmet sips at his coffee and notes, approvingly, that it is hot, strong, and bitter. He lifts the cup to his lips and takes a deep, long draught that drains the liquid. ‘Coffee always comes first,’ he says, smiling at the group. ‘How the fuck are you all. I missed you on Saturday night thanks to my overindulgence.’

‘Don’t worry,’ says Aros, ‘River has explained everything.’ He gives Emmet a conspiratorial wink, and puts his hand between Melissa’s knees. ‘We know all about your “overindulgence”, as you put it.’

Melissa smiles sweetly at Emmet, then opens her mouth and wiggles her tongue before licking her lips. Everyone laughs except Emmet, who blushes.

‘Yes, well, you know how it goes,’ Emmet says, unsuccessfully trying to hide his embarrassment.

‘Aros don’t tease him,’ says River, coming to Emmet’s defence. ‘He was a perfect gentleman, which is more than can be said about most of the men in this group.’

Emmet blushes again, a deep shade of red that spreads to the tips of his ears. Aros bursts out laughing.

‘Just stirring, Emmet,’ Aros says. ‘I can’t help myself. You blush such a lovely crimson.’

Emmet turns back to his table and his empty coffee cup. ‘What a lovely way to start a new career,’ he sighs.

River smiles at Emmet and pats his hand. ‘It’s still early yet,’ she says. ‘Things could very easily get worse.’

‘Your words are, as always, a comfort,’ replies Emmet, sipping a newly arrived second cup of coffee. ‘Thanks Borris,’ he says, lifting his cup. ‘I’m glad to see that the lovely Natalie has not graced us with her presence.’

Borris snorts. ‘We invited her, but apparently she goes running with Fran every morning.’

‘Wow,’ says Emmet, chocking on his coffee. ‘What are they, old friends or something?’

‘Yeah, they go back at least three weeks.’ Borris says and takes a swig of his coffee. ‘And she came to the party on Saturday with Fran’s son.’

‘Bloody hell,’ says Emmet, ‘she hasn’t even started her job yet and she has networked her way into the boss’s family. That’s impressive.’ He literally pours the rest of his second coffee down his throat. ‘Frightening, but impressive.’

Aros leans over from the next table. ‘Nat’s gonna love this place. It’s full of lunatics. Apparently Voula’s boyfriend, that Jurgen fellow is a complete psycho,’ he says. ‘He does all these motivational courses and shit, and then tries all the weird brain fucking techniques on his team.’

‘He’s a monster,’ Melissa chimes in, enthusiastically smearing the character of a person she has met briefly in a dark room filled with deafeningly loud music after drinking large quantities of intoxicating liquids.

‘I know someone from his team,’ Melissa continues. ‘She reckons he’d sell his grandmother for a promotion. The rumour is,’ her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper, ‘he

used one grandmother for the team leader job, but he's saving the other one for something special.'

'I didn't know there was a market for used grandmothers,' says Emmet, but the sarcasm has as much impact on Melissa as a zephyr on a concrete bunker. Emmet is perplexed. 'So what does that mean? Is he in over his head? Can't do his job?' he asks, trying hard to participate in Melissa's conspiracy.

'Nah, my friend reckons he's the best team leader there.' Melissa says, and then squeals as Aros pinches her bottom. 'Stop it, button,' she admonishes, and then turns back to Emmet. 'Just don't get between him and his career.'

Emmet shrugs. 'He seemed alright to me.'

'Yeah, but all he could talk about was work,' River points out.

'How would you know,' Emmet says, 'you were doing a credible impression of a stunned mullet for most of the time he was around.'

I wasn't completely lala', River says. 'I was just surprised Voula had a man, that's all.' Emmet looks at River over his coffee. She returns his gaze. 'He is very good looking,' River concedes, 'but definitely not my type.'

'I hear that Fran and Jurgen hate one another,' Peter says, overhearing some of Melissa commentary on Jurgen's character during a lull in the Oksana-Kaela conflict. 'Fran thinks Jurgen wants her job, so she does everything she can to piss him off or fuck him up. And he gets all pissy when she

gets in his way. From all accounts, it creates an unusual dynamic in the office.’

Emmet buries his head in his hands. ‘What kills me is that we have to do interviews to see if we are good enough to join these dildos,’ he says. Aros and Melissa giggle.

River looks down at her watch and shakes her head. ‘C’mon folks, time to seize the day,’ she says, in a voice that cuts through all the private conversations (and petting) going on around her. She stands and heads for the door. Grumbling, the rest of the group follow in dribs and drabs. As usual, Emmet brings up the rear.

## (ii)

Voula is waiting for the trainees on the fourteenth floor and the sight of her sends Emmet into an emotional tailspin. Love, lust, shame, fear, and regret combine in a chaotic eruption of hope-spattered disappointment that threatens to overwhelm his consciousness. He fights the urge to declare his love to Voula that very instant and damn the consequences. Anxiety and Emmet’s mistrust of benevolent deities, however, quells the eruption and sanity prevails. Instead, he scratches at his nose and lets out a heartfelt sigh. The thought that Voula’s affections belong to someone else ties his stomach in a knot. Has fate denied him his soul mate? What luck, to meet the women of his dreams only to find that

someone else has already captured her heart? This ranks right up there with Vodka and Pizza as proof that God is a bastard.

To stop the tears that he feels welling up in his eyes, Emmet stares at the row of lights above the elevators, and allows the conversations of the butt monkeys to flow over and around him. He watches the numbers change as the elevators move up and down at the behest of the passengers in their bellies. A small fly bangs against the doors of one of the lifts, eager to get inside, but too small and insignificant to make it happen. Undeterred, it hurls its tiny body at the lifts, pitting exoskeleton against steel in a display that demonstrates to the world its earnest belief that it is made of sterner stuff than mere worked metal. Eventually, the door opens and the fly triumphantly buzzes in, a victor ready to enjoy the spoils of battle.

Emmet ponders the story of the fly. It banged in futility. It banged against the odds. It banged because it believed. It banged and, eventually, it triumphed. The steel gave way and it entered the lift, once denied it. Emmet knows the lift door opening was a coincidence, but he is sure that the fly does not think so. Is there a possibility that it was not a coincidence? Is it possible that the fly was the recipient of divine benevolence? Could it be that the benevolence of a deity is a function of the care of the subject? In a way, it makes perfect sense. Why should an omnipotent and omniscient deity be benevolent when the subject of his or her benevolence doesn't give a shit? Is it possible that the act of crunching its

exoskeleton on the implacable steel of the lift door caused an omnipotent deity to exercise benevolence and arrange matters so that the plucky fly could eat shit on the thirteenth floor? What if God only helps those who help themselves, just like his Mum keeps telling him. Emmet feels his backbone stiffen. So what if Voula has a boyfriend? So what if that boyfriend is handsome, strong, and successful? Is that any reason to give up the fight? So he, Emmet, is the underdog. So it doesn't seem likely that he will succeed. Is almost certain failure a good reason to throw up one's hands and surrender? History is awash with famous victories against the odds. He can't quite recall any right now, but he is sure history is awash with them. With a weird smile on his face, Emmet prepares to bang his metaphoric exoskeleton on the steel doors of Voula's love.

'Voula, you will be mine,' he thinks to himself. 'I don't care if you already have a handsome, successful and charming boyfriend.'

What a prize she would be! His eyes follow the contours of her body, taking in her small but shapely breasts, wasp-thin waist and tiny backside. The cold fluorescent light casts shadows on her face, hollowing her cheeks and robbing them of warmth. Her femininity is lost in the severe cut of her business suit, all straight lines and sharp angles.

'Yep, a prize all right,' he thinks. 'Those lips, those tits, that miniscule arse,' he brings his hands up to his eyes and almost sobs as the worms of doubt gnaw at the heart of his

passion. ‘That sure is one tiny arse,’ he thinks, ‘my hand is almost bigger than both buttocks put together!’ For a moment, Emmet’s obsession with Voula wavers, but only for a moment. ‘Mum should be able to put a little meat on those bones, something to grab on to,’ he reassures himself, and returns to his internal yearning. ‘Oh Voula,’ he thinks, ‘come to your Emmet and let your Emmet cum on you.’

Emmet’s ego is surveying the scene. ‘He’s right, you know, she’s not really his type. We like them meatier than that.’

‘Shut up, you vandal,’ replies Emmet’s id, ‘I want her, and what I want, we all want. Understand?’

‘Of course, of course,’ the ego says, ‘just noting the disconnection between then and now.’

‘Disconnection my arse, stop trying to throw your spanner into my works. It’s the biological imperative; we fuck therefore we are.’

Emmet’s ego watches what Emmet sees. ‘You don’t have an arse,’ it says. Things are not going well for its man.

Voula herds them into a small room just off the elevator foyer where they crowd around two small tables at its centre. ‘I’ve got your team placements here,’ she says. ‘We’ll walk around the floor together and drop people off as we get to their teams.’ She sets off at a brisk pace, with all ten butt-monkeys in tow. Natalie had joined them just before they went into the room, entering the foyer from the lift opened by the fly’s belief. Emmet feels lessened by her presence, as if

she sucks the humanity from those around her to make up for her lack.

‘That’s probably not all she sucks,’ says a treacherous little voice in his subconscious.

Voula leads them through a door into a busy and expansive open office. Emmet estimates that the room contains over one hundred insurance consultants, spread throughout the floor, each busy with his or her labours. While the floor is completely open, activity concentrates around five distinct clusters of desks. Shelves line every wall, packed to bursting with files. Voula approaches the biggest desk at the first cluster, a trail of butt monkeys behind her like a self-conscious comet tail, and waves at the severe looking woman seated behind it.

‘Hi Daisy,’ Voula says cheerfully, and then turns to the butt-monkeys. ‘This is Daisy Gentle,’ she says. ‘She is the team leader here.’ Daisy gives them all a short wave and the barest flicker of a smile.

Voula consults her clipboard. ‘Kaela, Borris,’ she looks up and seeks out the two named trainees. ‘You’ll be joining this team.’ Daisy comes forward to claim her consultants and looks them up and down with a practiced eye.

‘We’ll be seeing you guys around,’ Voula says, and sets off again. Emmet follows, but he feels wretched, as if he is abandoning brothers-in-arms to a merciless enemy. A fleeting look back shows Kaela and Borris surrounded by experienced insurance consultants, like two innocent gazelle surrounded by

a pack of jackals.

They arrive at the next cluster, and Voula talks to what appears to be a cadaver in a suit. She introduces him as Chaim Amar, and allocates Sam and Melissa to his team. Emmet can see that Aros is almost in tears, parted from his true love until morning tea at the earliest. Voula waves her goodbyes to the two ex-trainees and heads towards the third cluster. Emmet dares a quick look over his shoulder and sees the cadaverous Chaim leading the two fresh faced insurance consultants into the depths of his dim cluster.

They are half way to the third cluster when a small, excitable young man peels off from the activity and approaches them at high speed. 'Voula,' he screeches as he gets nearer, 'have you got those trainees? Quickly, quickly now, we have hit a bit of a crisis in my team.'

Voula emits a tired sigh. 'This is Clarence,' she says, 'and Aros and Natalie have the pleasure of working in his team.' She gives the sacrificial trainees a wan smile and hurries on, as if eager to be away from the one-man crisis zone that is Clarence. Emmet looks over his shoulder as he hurriedly follows Voula, but the general chaos of the cluster has already swallowed the former butt-monkeys.

Voula heads off at high speed towards the next cluster where, seated behind the biggest desk in this cluster is Jurgen. Voula waves and smiles, then turns to the remaining four butt-monkeys. 'You all know Jurgen,' she says, 'and Emmet and Oksana will be joining his team.' Emmet's heart sinks as

Jurgen approaches them. He takes Emmet's unresisting hand and gives it a firm shake.

'Great to have you both on the team,' Jurgen says, and moves on to shake Oksana's hand. Voula bids them both a fond farewell, and takes River and Peter off to the fifth cluster, where she is team leader. And with that final separation, the butt-monkeys as a collective were no more.

Jurgen leads Emmet and Oksana into the heart of the cluster that houses his team. The faceless insurance consultants of a few moments ago grow faces as the former butt-monkeys approach. Here a peculiar nose, there a ridiculous moustache. They are no longer just insurance consultants. They are now also people, and Emmet is not too sure he is comfortable with their humanisation. Jurgen stops in the centre of the cluster and raises both hands in the air like a prophet about to address his flock. 'Gather round, folks,' he says. 'Put your phones on work when you finish your current call and gather around.'

Those consultants browsing through the files immediately make their way towards their leader, while those on the phone hasten to end the calls. There is a furious scribbling of names and numbers. Eventually, all of Jurgen's team is sitting or standing around their leader and the two ex-trainees, waiting impatiently for the impromptu meeting to be over so they can return to their labours.

'Sorry to interrupt you all, I know you have numerous tasks to go on with, but today we are welcoming two new

members to our team,' Jurgen says, leaning backwards onto a desk.

'Today we introduce Emmet and Oksana, not as replacements for missing comrades, but as totally new additions to our team. Hopefully, they can help alleviate some of the pressure we are all feeling.' There is a polite, but muted, round of applause from the assembled consultants. Jurgen continues. 'Today, I'll be running them through some of the basics of what we do here, and tomorrow they will go on the phones with a buddy. With any luck, they'll be flying solo in a week.' He stands up straight again. 'Ok, you can all return to your tasks.'

The consultants indulge in another spontaneous round of applause; the more enthusiastic of them shake the ex-trainees by the hand and wish them a warm welcome before returning to their work.

Emmet and Oksana are given an exhaustive training session by Jurgen that is as unrelenting as it is mystifying. Processes, procedures, rules, and regulations stream through the air. Occasionally, something would stick in the mind and the bewildered ex-trainee would hold on to it in a vain attempt to convince themselves that they are on top of the situation (Emmet wasn't even sure what the situation looked like, let alone how to mount it). Both end up at the Suicide Café at the end of the day, trying to wind down and wash the taste of bureaucracy from their mouth.

### (iii)

Oksana sits at a table with Borris and the two are totally engrossed in one another to the exclusion of all else. It appears to Emmet that it would a sizable explosion just to get their attention, possibly delivered by a nuclear weapon. He sits morosely at a table, accompanied by River, who seems strangely at peace with the world.

‘Aren’t they sweet,’ says River, cupping her chin in her hands and looking at the bureaucratic love birds. ‘In love and in insurance. Does it get any better?’

Emmet considers the couple. ‘They look very stern, even while gazing into one another’s eyes.’

‘Oksana isn’t as bad as we all think. She smiled at me at morning tea today,’ says River.

‘What?’ Emmet says. The day is a blur as far as he is concerned; bookended by stints at the Suicide Café watching passionate petting between members of the butt-monkey brigade, but this piece of news is startling. ‘Really? She smiled?’

‘Yep,’ River says, nodding. ‘Only for a few seconds, but she really smiled.’ She continues to watch the two lovecrats. ‘Wow, they’re holding hands. Guys, get a room.’

Emmet decides to take the plunge. ‘So, what’s Voula like as a boss,’ he asks, trying to sound bored and uninterested, but hunger tinges his voice. River gives the impression that she

doesn't notice.

'Oh, she's OK. She didn't do much. Passed us on to the assistant team leader and then sat around reading her magazines.' River replies while playing with the straw in her drink. 'I think her strength lies in soothing angry customers rather than process and procedure,' she says, diplomatically. 'What about Jurgen?'

'He's a monster.' Emmet replies, with feeling. 'He's got the whole team brainwashed, just like Aros said. He rides their arses as if they are soldiers on the front lines, going on and on about being in it together. What kills me is that the stupid fucks buy it. I'm surprised that they don't salute him when he walks by.'

'Yeah, well, maybe they do feel like they are in it together. Working as a team; looking out for one another. You know, co-operating,' River says.

'That's just sick,' Emmet says, shaking his head. 'It'll never catch on.'

'It's not so bad, working here, is it?' River says. 'The work may be a little dull, but the people aren't so bad. What do you think?'

'Yeah, it's OK,' Emmet admits, but grudgingly. 'I shouldn't say this to someone who will no doubt use it against me in the future, but insurance seems to suit me. I reckon if it wasn't for people like Natalie and Jurgen, it would be perfect.'

River laughs. 'Surely he's not that bad? Like Natalie? C'mon, there are demons in the fiery pits of hell that have

sunnier dispositions than what the bitch-queen Natalie does. Jurgen couldn't possibly be that bad,' she says.

'I reserve the right to have an unreasonable dislike for my boss,' Emmet replies, but he is cheering up despite himself. 'The question is, what's my dad gonna do now that I have a job? He's going to need a new hobby.'

'I can't see that as being your problem, sweet boy.' River looks at her watch. 'Here tomorrow? Same time?'

'Wouldn't miss it for the world,' Emmet says. The two newly minted insurance consultants stroll out the door together, leaving Oksana and Borris to their sombre courtship rituals.

The following day, a member of Jurgen's team, who introduces himself as Moe, greets Emmet at the elevator.

'Right mate,' Moe says, 'we're going to wire you up and let you loose on the phones. Don't worry, I'll be listening in and will help you if you get into trouble.'

Moe leads Emmet to a small desk in the middle of Jurgen's cluster, where he finds a complicated looking headpiece attached to the telephone. Moe indicates that Emmet should don the fearsome helmet. A wire runs to a second headpiece, which Moe puts on.

'Right,' Moe says, 'let's see how you travel. You have your bible,' he indicates a thick, ring bound tome in front of the telephone with the words "Star Insurance Policy and Procedures Manual" embossed on its front cover. 'You have your lodgement screen setup on your computer, and all the

transfer numbers are on that flippy thing by the mouse.’ He looks at Emmet, who is sweating. ‘You ready?’

‘As I’ll ever be,’ Emmet replies.

Moe nods and presses the button that activates the telephone. He drags the chair closer to Emmet, and sits with his finger on the telephone’s mute button. So begins Emmet’s first true day as an insurance consultant. After fifteen minutes, Moe relaxes a little, takes his finger from the mute button and sits back in his chair. After an hour, he stands up, fetches a newspaper from his own desk and starts to read, his feet up on an empty desk beside him. After another hour, he taps Emmet on the shoulder. ‘Take a break,’ he says, and disconnects the telephone. ‘Go down stairs and have a smoke. Back here in fifteen minutes.’ Emmet watches Moe scurry off towards Jurgen’s desk. No one else seems to be leaving their desk for a break, so Emmet wanders towards the lifts, alone and anxious.

When Emmet returns ten minutes later, a half consumed Suicide Café coffee in a one hand, it seems his worst fears are realised. There is no sign of Moe, but Jurgen is sitting in what was Moe’s seat, already with headset on. He smiles when he sees Emmet and gestures towards the second headset. Emmet sits down, all thoughts of coffee driven from his mind. He dons the headset nervously and watches as Jurgen activates the telephone. For a full hour, Jurgen listens in on Emmet at his work, and not once is he asked for advice or needed to correct an error. The telephone loves Emmet, and Emmet

repays its love with soothing words, stemming the flow of customer angst with the red tape of process. Jurgen is impressed. He turns off the telephone and removes the headset.

‘Amazing, never seen anything like it,’ Jurgen says, standing up and stretching. ‘Want to have lunch? Nothing fancy, just the place across the road.’

‘Sure,’ Emmet says, ‘now?’

‘Yep, one of the perks of being team leader is you can pick your own lunchtime.’

At the Suicide Café, Jurgen orders a large bowl of greasy fried potatoes and a meat pie and sets about eating them with gusto. Emmet has a coffee.

‘Not hungry, mate?’ asks Jurgen, between mouthfuls of grease and dubious gravy.

‘I had a big breakfast,’ Emmet says. ‘My mother has been going ballistic since I got this job. Not many people get served three types of meat, two salads and fried rice for breakfast.’

‘Still live with your parents? Smart move, I wish I still did.’ Jurgen says then resumes shovelling food into his mouth in a way that would make Plato proud. ‘But it takes three hours to drive anywhere from where they live, and castrating sheep is not something that appeals to me as a career.’

‘I’m sure the sheep are glad you think like that,’ Emmet says.

Jurgen smiles and wipes the grease from around his mouth

with a napkin. ‘Enough bullshit,’ he says. ‘You are an amazing operator. I have never seen anything like it, so I’m going to go out on a limb here.’ Emmet nods. He can think of nothing else to do.

‘I want to offer you the assistant team leader position,’ Jurgen continues, ‘because I think you have what it takes.’ He pauses to order a large carton of flavoured milk and another plate of fried potatoes from a passing waiter. ‘But just to be on the safe side, I’m going to wait a couple of weeks to make sure you really are as good as you appear to be.’

The milk and potatoes arrive and Jurgen sets upon them. ‘So what do you reckon?’ he says, after the few minutes it took him to eat all the fried potatoes. ‘Impress me for a fortnight and you get the promotion.’

Emmet is stunned. ‘What about the rest of the team?’ he asks when he regains control of his senses. ‘Won’t they get pissed when some smart arse waltzes in and gets a promotion almost instantly?’

‘My team trust me to make the best decision for us as a unit,’ Jurgen says. ‘If I make you second in charge- we call it 2ic- they will know that you are the best person in the team for the job.’

‘What about the current 2ic?’ Emmet asks.

‘It’s Moe,’ Jurgen says, looking disappointed that the last of the strawberry milk has disappeared out of the carton. ‘He’s leaving us next week to move down to Total Loss.’

‘Total loss? What’s total loss?’ asks Emmet. ‘It sounds

like the place where insurance consultants go to die.’

‘Not far from the truth. They handle all the claims on unrepairable cars. It tends to attract the defeated ones, and Moe is pretty defeated,’ Jurgen says, then stands up and brushes himself down with his hands. ‘Well, I’m off to the gym. Usually eat afterwards, but wanted to make sure we had a chat before the day ends. I’ll see you upstairs in the team meeting after lunch,’ he says and stalks off. ‘Oh, by the way,’ he says, doubling back, ‘Voula thought it would be nice if you came out with us for dinner one night soon. Like me, she reckons you’re going places. She suggested Saturday. What do you think?’

‘Sure, sounds great,’ Emmet replies, his heart leaping and his id exalting.

‘Great, see you after lunch.’ Jurgen says, before hurrying out of the café.

## (iv)

Emmet arrives back at his desk after lunch to find that he is to participate in his first ever team meeting as an insurance consultant. Jurgen wanders the cluster, encouraging and interacting with his team. The odd quip exchanged with a glum looking consultant; a laugh shared with a frustrated looking man on the end of a telephone. He moves from consultant to consultant, making the work of insurance easier

for all to bear. Emmet is impressed. Jurgen finishes his round and once again raises his hands in the air and addresses the faithful.

‘OK all finish up what you’re doing,’ Jurgen says, ‘team meeting in The Hole in ten minutes.’

There is a general muttering from the troops. One by one, they finish whatever they are doing and move towards a door at the far end of the office. Emmet follows in their wake, even venturing a little muttering of his own in order to fit in the better.

The Hole deserves its name. There is only one door and no windows. It has more than a hint of classroom about it, with a combination blackboard/whiteboard dominating one wall. A semi circle of tables and chairs face the boards. There are three fluorescent lights on the ceiling. The middle one does not work, making the room look like a meeting place for shadows. A musty smell in the air reminds Emmet of his old school and its malfunctioning air conditioning system. The semicircle arrangement annoys Emmet, one of nature’s back seat lurkers. He chooses an empty seat midway between the boards and the apex of the curve and settles down to wait.

Within a few minutes, the remaining consultants from team Jurgen have filed in and taken a seat. The man himself stands by a small table in front of the two boards. He lifts his arms in the air again, a gesture that Emmet is sure will grow old very quickly.

‘Settle down now, folks. Settle down,’ Jurgen says in his

addressing-the-faithful voice. ‘OK, it’s a short meeting today, just touching base and listening to how some people have made improvements in their call times.’

Beside Emmet, the consultant starts to scribble furiously on a pad of lined paper. Unable to help himself, Emmet looks over at the pad and notices that a line divides the page into two uneven columns. The first, and narrower, column has the word ‘minutes’ at the top and the numbers one to thirty spaced evenly every three lines going down the page. In the second column and beside the number one, the consultant had written ‘settle down’. Emmet sighs and looks up in time to see Jurgen take a marker from his back pocket and write ‘Emmet’ and ‘Oksana’ on the whiteboard.

‘Just for those who missed our casual introduction earlier in the day,’ Jurgen says, ‘our first order of business is to introduce the two new consultants. Emmet, Oksana, can you please stand up.’

Emmet and Oksana both stand. Emmet looks at Oksana’s face and the words ‘grim’ and ‘rictus’ float into his mind. He guesses that she is probably not finding the world of insurance satisfying and fun. Emmet’s gaze sweeps the room as Jurgen addresses the team, taking in the diversity of shape, size and colour of the people – no, not people; consultants. If he were to make a second guess, he would guess that is not much sympathy in the collective soul of team Jurgen for the struggling newb. He wonders what insurance people do for fun, besides drink heavily.

Once again, Emmet's gaze sweeps the room. 'God knows, they look like they could use a little fun,' he thinks to himself. One or two of the assembled consultants are smiling at him. 'That's strange,' he thinks as he catches a couple more consultants giggling into their hands. Suddenly, he realises that he can no longer hear Jurgen's voice. He looks towards Oksana and sees she is sitting down, trying very hard not to laugh. 'Funny,' he thinks, as he feels the colour rise in his cheeks, 'Now I've seen Oksana smile too.'

'You can sit down now, Emmet,' he hears Jurgen say as he collapses back into his chair and buries his face in his hands.

'Now we all know who the new people are, and I'm sure no one here will forget who Emmet is,' cue twitter from massed consultants, 'we can wander over every now and again to make sure they are travelling okay.'

Emmet swallows his embarrassment and sneaks a look at the pad of the scrawling consultant. Besides minutes two to seven the scribbler has written 'Introduced new people. Oksana OK, Emmet d-head.' Emmet considers this a very good summation of events.

Jurgen, struggling to keep a straight face, leans against the desk at the front and consults a clipboard he brought in with him. 'Moving right along,' he says, 'let's hear how Isabel improved her call times by an average of seven seconds in the last month.'

A plump young woman, sitting at the table nearest the

front, stands and addresses the meeting. 'By talking a little faster, but without sacrificing communication quality, I was able to reduce my call times on all my calls,' she says woodenly. The massed consultants clap, except for the pad writer, who scribbles furiously. The next consultant summoned by Jurgen informs them that he had increased call volumes by going to the toilet only during scheduled breaks. And on it goes. The litany of false efficiencies continues for a full hour, and each consultant in the room has a go, even the pad writer, who has to redouble his efforts in order to catch up after his turn ends. Emmet leaves the meeting feeling drained and exhausted, thankful to be returning to the comfort of the phones.

## (v)

The strange alchemy that often accompanies new friendships between disparate people postponed Emmet's dinner date with Jurgen and Voula for several weeks. Eventually, however, Emmet finds himself standing on the threshold of their immaculately presented home in a leafy and painfully trendy inner city suburb. Much has changed in a short time. Standing on the threshold is not Emmet, newly appointed employee of Star Insurance. It is Emmet, 2ic of the leanest, meanest, most efficient team of insurance consultants in the entire company. Possibly even the entire

insurance world.

Within a few short weeks, this once rudderless young man has moved from spending his time thinking up creative ways to sponge off the generosity of his parents, to being an integral member of an elite insurance claim lodging team. There were grumblings following his rapid-fire promotion, both from within Jurgen's team and from outside it. His affinities with the very essence of insurance, however, answered most of his critics. Here is a man born for the telephone. A man who understands passages in the policy document, penned by lawyers long dead, that are a mystery even to Star Insurance's legal team. Here is a man who can talk sense to contractors, a man who can understand the invoices they send, often written in the secret hieroglyphics of the tradesman. Here is a man who can convince even the most recalcitrant policyholder to repair their vehicle at a Star Insurance approved repairer. Now, most people at Star Insurance cannot even imagine Emmet in any other role. Most but not all; Natalie frowns at him whenever their paths cross.

What remains unchanged is Emmet's infatuation with Voula. Every time he sees her, his torment renews. To stop himself walking around in a love-induced daze, as well as avoid the embarrassment of public erections, he throws himself into his work. His mighty efforts win him praise, and raise his profile within the company. But profile seems to attract Voula. As his stocks within the company grow, their

occasional chats beside the photocopier become less occasional. The more he focuses on his work, the closer she gets. The closer she gets, the more he focuses on his work. As the weeks pass, the cycle tightens until his concentration is furious and his trips to the toilet more frequent.

Now he finds himself here, at the door of the home she shares with her partner, a man that Emmet has come to consider a friend ever since Star Insurances human resources department threw them together. He looks around at the manicured gardens; at the nice cars in the driveway; at the softly glowing street lamps beside the tall, mature trees. In the distance, he can hear the perpetual motion of the sea. Letting out a deep sigh, he wonders how the hell he got into a situation where he is having dinner with the woman of his dreams at the home she shares with his boss.

In Emmet's subconscious, two pairs of metaphoric eyes peer out into the ultimate reality and wonder if the expensive bottle of wine under his arm is of sufficient quality. The atmosphere is thick with anticipation.

'Don't even think about it,' says the ego to the id.

'Something's gotta give soon,' the id warns, 'but you may have a point.'

With his guts in a knot and an inexplicable ill feeling towards the bottle of wine he has under his arm, Emmet reaches out and rings the doorbell. A pleasant tune sounds in the house, triggering a scurrying of feet. A partially clad Jurgen opens the door.

‘Yo, Emmet,’ he says, ‘you’re only ten minutes late!’ He motions for Emmet to come in. ‘As you get to know us better you’ll learn that we live half an hour behind the times,’ he says, closing the door behind the nervous guest. ‘You brought alcohol! Wonderful.’ Jurgen grabs the bottle from under Emmet’s arm and inspects the label. ‘Nice,’ he says. ‘We can have a drink and nibbles while we wait for the taxi.’

‘Taxi?’ Emmet asks, surprised.

‘Yep, taxi.’ Jurgen replies. ‘I’m sure we all want to have a few tonight, so we’ll leave the cars at home.’

Jurgen leads Emmet into a vast, open space. The furniture is tasteful, elegant, and functional, but Atlas would disapprove because it owes nothing to Hellenic culture. There is a distressing absence of doilies.

‘Grab some glasses and nibbles from the kitchen,’ instructs Jurgen, pointing towards a well-designed and functional kitchen at the rear of the open space. ‘There are dips and shit in the fridge,’ he says. ‘Take the wine and I’ll finish getting ready’

Emmet takes the bottle back from Jurgen, who disappears up a flight of stairs, and heads towards the kitchen. A search in the cupboards beside a massive refrigerator uncovers many wine glasses, but the only food Emmet can find is a pack of stale crackers and a box of breadsticks. The cavernous refrigerator seems to be full of soft drinks and alcohol, but Emmet manages to scrounge two unopened containers of cheese related goo from the back of one of the more obscure

shelves. He takes the lacklustre bounty of the kitchen and places it, along with the bottle of wine, on a table in what appears to be the dining area.

After a few minutes, he pours himself a glass of wine and takes a tentative sip.

‘Nice,’ he thinks, and takes a brave mouthful. Fortunately, he swallows before he sees Voula coming down the stairs in a tight white dress that ends mid thigh.

‘Emmet,’ she exclaims when she sees him. ‘Good to see you’re into the alcohol already.’ She sits down beside him and examines the label on the bottle. ‘Nice,’ she says, and pours herself a very large glass.

Jurgen strolls down the stairs and joins them, pouring himself an obscenely large glass of wine. He looks at what remains in the bottle, makes a sour face and scurries off to the pantry, returning with two more bottles.

‘So, where are we headed?’ Emmet asks, refilling his glass from the dregs of the first bottle.

‘New place in the city,’ replies Voula. ‘Very trendy, they do a fusion of Italian and Vietnamese.’

‘I thought we were eating here.’ Emmet says.

Jurgen shakes his head. ‘Nah, Saturday night is eat out night,’ he answers.

Emmet laughs. ‘From the amount of food in your kitchen, I thought you guys eat out all the time,’ he says.

‘I wish,’ Voula says and sighs, ‘but ever since we got the mortgage we hardly ever eat out.’ She swirls the wine around

in her glass before downing it in one mouthful. ‘Sadly, we get home delivery almost every day and only go out to eat on the weekends.’

‘Responsibilities,’ says Emmet, and opens one of the bottles Jurgen liberated from the pantry. He fills a new glass for Voula, then one for himself. ‘Sometimes, you just gotta make those sacrifices.’

The doorbells rings and Jurgen jumps up and opens the door. He has a brief conversation with someone there before calling out. ‘C’mon folks, taxi’s here.’

Voula and Emmet both finish their drinks and follow Jurgen out the door.

The taxi delivers them safely to a small restaurant tucked away in one of the many lanes in the city centre. Emmet is strangely aware of the Star Insurance building a few blocks away, which towers over the city like a colossus. The three off duty consultants enter the restaurant and a small, polite waiter guides them through the gloom to their table. Emmet and Jurgen peruse the menu, but Voula scans the crowd.

‘There’s Jilly!’ she squeals. ‘I’ll just go and say hello.’

Emmet watches her leave, and then returns to examining the menu. ‘Looks interesting,’ he says. ‘I think I’ll try the pork ragu on rice noodles.’

‘No entrée?’ Jurgen asks.

‘Nah, not that hungry.’

‘Your mother at it again?’ Jurgen asks, smiling.

‘She always cooks something I like if I’m going out.’

Emmet says. ‘She says it’s to put a lining on my stomach, but I reckon she’s scared I might find cooking I like better than hers.’

Voula returns, and opens the menu. ‘I’ll have the basil and tomato wontons,’ she says. ‘Hey, Linda and Frank just walked in. I’ll be right back,’ she says and she scuttles off again.

Jurgen notices Emmet’s eyes following Voula. ‘Get used to it,’ he says. ‘She’s more interested in being seen here than the actual food they serve.’ He summons the waiter and orders for all three diners. ‘You finding everything OK in the team?’ he asks after the waiter departs with their order.

Emmet shrugs. ‘Everything is great. No complaints,’ he says.

‘Well, I’ve been getting some great feedback about your performance from both staff and customers,’ Jurgen says, ‘but there is a small issue I have with claim car476969.’ He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a well-thumbed notebook. ‘Ms Cockhead was unhappy with your attitude when you answered the initial call,’ he says, consulting his notes. ‘Apparently you giggled when she said her name, and then laughed when you issued her the claim number.’

Emmet stares open mouthed at Jurgen, who looks sternly at him.

‘Insurance consultants do not need a sense of humour,’ Jurgen says, ‘especially not a coarse one.’

Voula arrives back long enough to take a sip from her drink before spotting another familiar face. She scuttles off

again, but this time takes her drink.

‘I’d also like to get your advice on car54329,’ Jurgen says, leafing through his notebook after she has gone. ‘I’m having trouble determining liability, which is one of your strengths.’ He hands Emmet a sketch of an accident scene along with several pages of notes. ‘No hurry,’ he says, ‘have your recommendations on my desk by Wednesday.’

The food arrives and saves Emmet from further insurance related banter. Jurgen puts his notebook down beside him and turns to his meal. Voula returns from her wanderings full of news.

‘Guys!’ she says excitedly, ‘can you see what Jilly is wearing? Those shoes are fabulous.’ She takes her fork and pushes a wonton around the red broth in her bowl. ‘She got them from a tiny little shop in the harbour. The guy who owns it makes shoes!’

‘Really,’ says Emmet, ‘she bought shoes from an actual shoemaker?’

‘Yes! Yes!’ Voula squeals. ‘A real shoemaker! She says they are unique. She’s going to take me next week so I can get a pair.’

Jurgen continues to read his notes while eating his diner, oblivious to Jilly and her unique shoes. Emmet cannot help but notice that Voula is indifferent to Jurgen’s indifference. He takes a mouthful of his horrible noodles and decides to press home the advantage, trying to wedge himself between Voula and Jurgen’s indifference.

‘Who else is here?’ Emmet asks, sounding oily even to him. The other two appear not to have noticed the undercurrent of sleaze in his voice.

Pushing her plate to one side and clutching her drink, Voula tells Emmet of all the people that fill her world. That Sophie is sitting in the back with a new guy, even though she hasn’t officially split up with Jarrod. That Warren, sitting in the corner by himself, has scored a walk on part in a movie and has already slept with the female lead, even though filming has only just begun. That Silvia on the next table has a new job to go with her new man and to celebrate bought a gorgeous new dress and handbag. When Voula pauses for breath, Jurgen fills the void with talk of claims, payouts, and office politics. Emmet feels as if he is having dinner with two separate people who are, quite by coincidence, sitting at the same table. Eventually, the evening winds to a close and the three find themselves outside the restaurant. Voula has not eaten anything and Jurgen has talked of nothing but insurance the entire night.

Emmet feels strangely elated. Voula talked to him, almost exclusively, throughout the night. There is a hidden depth here, he thinks, in amongst the talk of handbags, and shoes, and infidelity.

‘You coming back to our place,’ Jurgen asks while Voula snuggles against him, trying to stay out of the wind.

‘Nah,’ Emmet replies. ‘I’m meeting a friend in a bar in an hour or so,’ he lies.

The night has seen him make progress in his quest for Voula's love, at least in his own mind. It is best to end it here, he thinks.

'I'll see you both at work on Monday,' Emmet says, and wanders off towards the train station.

Voula runs over and gives him a hug, then runs back to the shelter of Jurgen's body.

'Bye Emmet,' she says, and the two of them climb into a waiting taxi.

## (vi)

Quite without knowing how, Emmet's feet lead him to the Suicide café, which is masquerading as a bar. He is unsurprised to find River inside, nursing a drink.

'Getting in nice an early for Monday,' he asks, taking a seat beside her. She shrugs and smiles. 'Nah, I was kind of hoping you would drop in,' she says.

'Strange, but I think I dropped by hoping that you would drop in,' Emmet says.

The waiter, familiar with all the Star Insurance staff, places giant beers before the two consultants.

'I have just had dinner with Jurgen and Voula,' Emmet continues, causing River to spray a mouthful of beer into the air.

'You what?' she exclaims, wiping beer from her mouth

with her sleeve.

‘Well, Jurgen and I had dinner, Voula drank.’ He takes a deep draught of his beer. ‘They are very strange. They didn’t actually speak to one another the entire night. Jurgen talked to me about work, and Voula talked to me about fashion accessories. But they didn’t exchange a word to one another for the entire five or six hours.’

‘Maybe they had a fight,’ says River, looking for the obvious answer.

‘They hid it well, then, because they were touchy feely by the end of the night,’ Emmet says.

River shrugs. ‘So they have poor oral communication skills, they aren’t alone.’

‘They have no food in their house,’ Emmet continues, ‘just alcohol and soft drinks. And Voula doesn’t seem to understand the concept of cooking at home. In her world, there is eating out or home delivered.’

‘You should introduce her to your mum, then,’ says River, preparing to drain the beer from her big beer. ‘She’ll put her straight.’

Emmet considers a meeting between Persephone and Voula. ‘Nah, the world would probably end if those two ever met,’ he says. ‘Like matter and anti-matter.’

## Chapter 4

Inevitably, the day-after follows the night-before, and a bill for any extravagances or indulgences often accompanies it. Payment is generally required in blood. This particular morning, the day-after presents Emmet with an invoice for moderate extravagances with Jurgen and Voula, followed by serious liquid indulgences with River. The price is high, but Emmet is in no position to argue, and anyway, complaints to management are a waste of time because, he (or she) is a bastard. Thus, the morning extracts its payment from Emmet's reluctant hide: his head is tender, his tongue fuzzy, and his bowels delicate. Groaning, he fights consciousness, but his success is limited because consciousness has friends who own domestic appliances. In another room, Persephone unplugs her vacuum cleaner and moves on.

Persephone enjoys vacuuming the entire house on Sunday mornings. She likes to get the whole thing over and done with nice and early. She is aware, however, that some people like to sleep in on Sundays. As a compromise, and because she likes to think that she is a kindly soul, she starts at seven, right after preparing a buffet breakfast for the three men in her life, but still leaving enough time to get ready for church when she is finished.

'VRRRRRRM SHHHHHFMMMMMM,' goes the vacuum cleaner as Persephone pushes it under Emmet's bed, just

below his ears. ‘SSSCHHHHLLLOOOOOK,’ it says, as Persephone removes the head and uses the open hose to suck up dust in the far corners of the room.

‘Oh, fuck me dead,’ says Emmet, not thinking clearly this early in the morning.

‘DOOONG,’ goes the vacuum cleaner, as it connects with Emmet’s skull, vibrating the contents therein.

‘Ow, Mum, why’d you do that for,’ Emmet exclaims, clutching at his abused noggin.

‘I hit you for your own good!’ Persephone snaps. ‘There is never a reason to swear like that. I do not raise vulgar criminals that swear and curse first thing in the morning.’ She drags the covers off his bed. ‘Now get up and have breakfast. Just because you now have a job, does not mean you are king of the castle.’

Emmet bows to the inevitable and takes his suffering out the door. He can hear the vacuum cleaner start up again as he trudges into the corridor. Still half asleep, his mind drifts back to the night before. Not in his wildest dreams would he have imagined that Jurgen and Voula’s relationship could be so... so...so weird. Yes, weird is definitely the word for it. They are beyond strange, which gives the impression of an everyday kind of unusual that is still within the realms of the mundane. Weird, on the other hand, describes something that is well beyond the realms of the commonly strange. Yep, they are definitely weird. He stops to adjust a bust of Apollo that someone has pushed askew.

Dysfunctional is another word that seems to fit. Weird and dysfunctional they are, and Jurgen's indifference to Voula feels like a blessing from a benevolent deity. While Jurgen is aloof and distant, he, Emmet, will be sympathetic and attentive.

'A little attention, a little affection, a little sympathy and she will be mine!' he sings to himself as he dances along the corridor, a strange weird smile creeping over his face. He can feel her love already and it is causing some embarrassment in his nether regions. He hurries on to the bathroom and the privacy it provides.

Once out of the corridor, Emmet strips out of his pyjamas, the pants of which are back to front as well as inside out, and steps cautiously into the shower. Caution is necessary because taking a shower has become a dangerous activity since Atlas began to fancy himself a bit of a handyman. It needs nerves of steel and a patient hand, preferably one that is sensitive to the internal pressures and machinations of the plumbing. This is because, while Atlas is quite good with his hands, he is also more than a little impatient and has a fuse so short it may as well not exist. Emmet and Plato refer to him as the 95% man because everything he repairs or creates has a small but vital flaw, usually attributable to his temperament.

The shower is a magnificent example of Atlas's work. There are no drips or leaks. The water actually drains away quite well, and he has managed to avoid the mouldy wallpaper look that often accompanies amateur bathroom renovations.

The 5% flaw is totally contained in the taps, which he cursed with many profanities during their construction, and which now house evil spirits from the nether realm. These spirits delight in releasing scorching streams of water straight from the rivers of Hell onto the naked form of any unwary shower taker. The stream's origin is obviously diabolical- no mechanism made by human hands can heat water to such a temperature and have it remain liquid- and it changes abruptly, usually just as the echoes of the first screams fade away, to one so cold that even Arctic penguins, used to the freezing waters at the world's end, would shiver and complain. It is no wonder, then, that Emmet carefully adjusts the water temperature, and keeps the more sensitive parts of his anatomy well out of harm's way until the stream stabilises.

Finally convinced that he has pacified the spirits of the taps through his careful manipulations, Emmet eases himself into the pleasantly hot stream of water and lathers up. It has been an exhaustive and exciting few months since his bizarre encounter with Robert and the dangerous blonde. Not in a million years would he have thought he had a natural aptitude for insurance, but obviously he does and that suits him just fine. He feels good about his transformation from a penniless bum to a cashed up working man. His confidence and self-esteem restored, the one dark spot in his life is the absence of a life partner, which translates into a Voula sized yearning in his psyche. How he longs for the touch of her body, the warmth of her love. His lathering becomes a little more

intense.

The problem is that women like Voula do not come cheap. The night out with her and Jurgen cost him a pretty penny, and they were going Dutch. Somehow, he does not think that Voula would be interested in a man that insists she pay her own way. He will definitely need to solve the cash problem before he can pry her from Jurgen's indifferent hands.

Emmet showers and ponders. So engrossed is he in his musings that he misses the sounds of Atlas wandering towards the toilet in the bathroom on the other side of the house. A toilet only recently added by Atlas during a frenzy of home improvement. A toilet that, for some inexplicable reason, excites the shower-tap spirits when used.

A more alert Emmet would have hurried out of the water at the merest suggestion that anyone was even approaching the new toilet. But Emmet is not alert. He is hung over. He should still be in bed, sleeping off the worst of his overnight indulgences. Instead, he is standing in a shower of pleasantly warm water, thinking about the woman he loves. Needless to say, stimuli from the outside world struggle to get through unless they are brutal in their methods. The sound of the toilet flushing reaches Emmet's ears just as the scolding hot water reaches his lathered nether regions. The resultant scream echoes around the house, followed by a stream of profanities and curses that eventually fade into a faint sobbing.

The scream has a profound effect on the rest of the household. Persephone, just finishing up her work in Emmet's room, decides that a good swear now and then is healthy for the psyche. Packing away the vacuum cleaner, she scurries off to attend to her devotions at the local church. Atlas hurriedly washes his hands and scuttles out to the shed, eager to sort trash from treasures in an enclosed space a goodly distance from his son. Even Plato, masticating his way through a third helping of breakfast, bustles out of the house, thinking coffee and donuts at a not too local café.

Emmet emerges from the shower with a red bottom. Thankfully, he had been standing with his back to the water. He does not even want to think about what would have happened had he been facing the other way. The freezing stream of water that followed the scalding one limited the damage done to the flesh of his backside, and Persephone, always sensitive to the needs of her family, has stocked the bathroom cupboard with a variety of creams and unguents to soothe heat traumatised skin.

'Some silver linings aren't worth the clouds they're printed on,' he thinks, as he applies burn cream to his damaged skin. And herein lays another problem in his quest for love. How can a woman like Voula take seriously a man still living at home with his mum and dad? How would she react to his family? How would they react to her? He shivers at the thought of Persephone chasing Voula around the house with a hardboiled egg in an effort to "put meat on those

bones” like she had done when he and Plato were younger.

Emmet dresses in the bathroom then shuffles off towards the kitchen, unnerved by the strange quiet that has settled throughout the house. Where is Persephone with her vacuum cleaner? Where is Atlas with his hammer and manic eyes? What could possibly have shifted Plato from a full table? He enters the kitchen and assembles a generous breakfast from the array of goodies Persephone has prepared. There is bacon, three types of egg, fried tomatoes, sausages, and two types of breakfast cereal. He sits gingerly, taking care not to further traumatise his heat-damaged derriere, and ponders anew.

Jurgen and Voula’s house had been a revelation- open plan living! Of course, he had heard of the concept on television, in advertisements for housing developments that promise to be only 30 minutes from the city centre (by helicopter). He had always discounted it as marketing hype, but Saturday night demonstrated that he was clearly wrong to do so. Open plan living is obviously the hallmark of the free.

Emmet looks around at the small kitchen with its many doors leading to many corridors. Suddenly, he feels hemmed in, claustrophobic. Like a laboratory rat, he spends his day scurrying along pre-determined paths. In the house that Atlas renovated, he is nothing but a rodent travelling along the corridors of his despair. He realises- coincidentally while chewing on a tasty piece of cheese- that Voula’s love would be too much for a laboratory rat. Her purity, grace, and

beauty, and the sheer force of her love would overpower rodent sensibilities, leaving it stunned and immobile. Besides, Voula herself would never settle for such a beast. She deserves more than a rodent. She deserves a man in every sense of the word.

Suddenly, a revelation hits Emmet. It is not enough that he increase his earnings to keep Voula in the way in which she is accustomed. Nor is it sufficient that he simply move out of his home into another corridor-dominated rodent run. To be truly worthy, Emmet must transcend not only the physicality of corridors, but also the comfort of corridors for it comes with a high price tag- his freedom. No more must he succumb to the uncomplicated absence of thought provided by pre-determined paths. They restrict his movement; funnel and lead him. Like a fish in a river that must stay within the banks, he has no choice but to tread their floorboards regardless of where he is going to or where he is coming from.

Open plan living is different- it encourages freedom. Open plan living presents a start and a finish; how the traveller negotiates the two points is entirely up to him or her. There were infinite ways, for example, to cross the floor from the kitchen to the bathroom in the house of Voula and Jurgen. The journey was his to make, and the route was entirely his to determine. But the benefits are not limited to infinite paths. Jurgen and Voula can arrange furniture in total freedom; the choice is theirs and theirs alone. There are no walls to restrict how a sofa lies, to determine the position of

the refrigerator, or to tell the inhabitants where they can or cannot watch television. Emmet draws a deep breath. The time has come to move beyond the corridors that guide his steps and cut his existence into comfortable, rodent friendly segments. He must smash them down, and create the open-plan of freedom. Only then would he be truly worthy of Voula's love.

Emmet leans back in his chair and stares at his half-eaten breakfast. Of course, all this philosophising is well and good, but the truth of the matter is that his family are beginning to drive him crazy. As an unemployed bum, he was able to sleep through the noisy bits but as a working man, he has no choice but to participate in the day-to-day madness. Obviously, Voula's love is still his ultimate goal and everything he does, he does for her. However, he can't help thinking he could do it all a lot better while living in a different house, preferably one that didn't contain a vacuuming mother, a renovating father, or a devouring brother. His family is wonderful, and he loves them all dearly, but they are a trying lot and if he were to live here too much longer, he was in danger of loving them to death using a blunt instrument. There will be an increase in housework, of course, but he has a sneaking suspicion that Persephone would insist on helping him cope with the stresses of living alone.

Emmet eventually wanders out of the kitchen. During the rodent days of his recent past, Sunday mornings were set aside for virtual adventures with his unsighted comrades-in-virtual-

arms, but not this morning. This morning, Emmet the Man sits down at his computer and begins to plot. He opens a window into the internet and types 'open plan living' into the search engine.

## (ii)

As inevitably as night follows day, Monday follows Sunday and like the good insurance consultant that he is, Emmet is at his desk ready to launch into another week of helping the public with their insurance needs. This Monday, however, is a little different. Today is the day that Emmet plans to execute part one of what he believes to be a cunning, multipart scheme to wrest the love of Voula from Jurgen, his good friend, team leader, and mentor at Star Insurance. Of course, because he is a good insurance consultant, he would not dream of letting it get in the way of his insurance work.

Emmet's scheme does not call for anything radical, just a minor re-arrangement of his habits while at work. He fondles a half empty packet of cigarettes in the pocket of his sensible business pants. Realising that the casual observer may think he is fondling something else, he quickly brings his hand back up above the desk. If the casual observer had any suspicions about Emmet's activities under the table, they would deepen if they catch a glimpse of the guilty and shameful look that briefly crosses his face. The suspicions would become rock

hard conviction if they follow Emmet's hungry eyes to see who he was looking at.

Hands in plain sight, Emmet watches Voula as she wanders around her cluster. It generally doesn't take much convincing to get him to leer at the object of his desire in any case, but this time lust is not the prime motivation. This time, he awaits a sign from Voula that will launch his master plan.

Emmet has noticed that every morning, Voula takes her celebrity mags from her bag and wanders down to the basement for a cigarette. She usually goes alone because not many people at Star Insurance smoke cigarettes, and the ones that do tend not to enjoy celebrity magazines. This morning, Emmet is determined that she will not smoke alone. He has been practicing smoking all weekend, and has progressed to the point where he can now inhale the smoke without gagging. Thankfully, the cigarettes contain chemicals that sooth his smoke ravaged throat, saving him from violent fits of coughing and hacking.

Emmet is almost disappointed when the moment finally arrives and Voula reaches into her bag and withdraws two glossy magazines. With a tinge of regret and a sigh, he stops leering at his beloved and leaves his desk. Cigarettes held prominently, he moves in a trajectory carefully calculated to take him past Voula as she goes from her bag to the tearoom for a coffee. It works perfectly, almost too well in fact, and the two nearly collide.

'Emmet,' Voula says says, seeing the cigarettes. 'I didn't

know you smoke.’

Emmet shrugs. ‘Yeah, I gave up just before I got this job, but you know what pressure can do to ex-smokers.’

‘Well, I’m just getting a coffee on my way down for a smoke, do you want to come?’ Voula offers.

In the theatre of Emmet’s imagination, his id flashes an unsavoury but highly desirable image of Voula going down. For some strange reason, it is in the washed out colours of bad 70’s porn, and has a tinny soundtrack running in the background.

‘Sure,’ Emmet squeaks, working hard to shift the image from the seedy sinema of his mind before the blood starts to flow south. He wonders why the Voula in his imagination is wearing a police uniform with the crotch cut out of the pants, why the underwear the cut out exposes is sensible and obviously chosen for its hard wearing properties, and why her standard issue truncheon is a lurid fluorescent pink with raised rings around its circumference evenly spaced along its length. While this line of inquiry succeeds in killing his half-formed boner, it also has him considering whether some sort of therapy may be in order. ‘I’ll get one too,’ he chokes out, trying to sound nonchalant and natural but failing. Voula is oblivious and accompanies him to the tearoom.

With horrible and probably carcinogenic instant coffees clutched to their bosoms, the two consultants enter the lift and descend into the bowels of the building. They sit on cigarette-scarred chairs at a rickety table covered almost

completely by overflowing ashtrays. Emmet opens his packet of cigarettes and offers one to Voula, who accepts.

Withdrawing an old Zippo lighter from his pocket, he lights the flame and, with shaking hands, offers it to Voula. She places a hand on either side of Emmet's in order to steady the flame, then leans forward to light her cigarette.

The feel of her cool skin sends Emmet into an internal nosedive. He can feel nothing but the touch of her hands; see nothing but her face as it draws nearer his own; hear nothing but the sound of his heart pounding; smell nothing but acrid smoke from her cigarette.

'Nice lighter,' Voula says, breaking the spell. 'Where did you get it?'

'It's my father's,' Emmet lies. In reality, he bought it at an opportunity shop on his way to work, but he thinks that an inherited cigarette lighter is more in line with the image he is trying to put across. Voula does not look the type to do her shopping in establishments designed to ease the misery of poverty.

'I saw one just like it in an opp shop a few days ago,' Voula says. 'How's it going in your team?'

'Pretty busy, but we're staying on top of things. What about you?' Emmet replies.

'We're in the middle of archiving the old files,' she says, shaking her head. 'It's murder. And bloody Conrad goes and kills himself in the middle of it.'

'Excuse me? Did I hear you right?' Emmet says, sounding

more than a little shocked. ‘Conrad, your 2ic, right, is dead?’

Emmet’s memory trawls through the recent past and comes up with images of a thin, sad looking man with a limp.

‘Haven’t you heard?’ Voula says. ‘It’s been all everyone has been talking about this morning.’

‘I’ve been kind of pre-occupied,’ Emmet admits.

Voula takes a long pull of her cigarette and follows it with a sip of horrible coffee. She gags. ‘We have to talk Fran into buying better coffee,’ she says, briefly distracted. ‘He jumped off the bridge in the harbour on Saturday night with a copy of the Star Insurance manual strapped to his stomach.’

‘The bridge is quite low and the manual isn’t that heavy, it would take more than that to kill someone,’ Emmet observes.

‘That’s what the cops reckon,’ Voula says.

Emmet has a flashback to the sinema of his mind. He simply cannot forget the sensible underwear the dream Voula was wearing beneath her saucy police uniform.

‘He didn’t drown, no bruises, nothing,’ Voula continues. ‘But he was quite dead when they fished him out.’

‘Wow,’ Emmet says. ‘He wanted to die so badly, he killed himself with death.’

‘He’d been acting funny the last couple of weeks,’ Voula says. ‘River reckons that for the past week, he had been going on and on about being a musician trapped in a clerk’s body.’

Voula lights a second cigarette from the stub of the first before continuing. ‘He was all weird on Friday afternoon at

the pub, too. He kept saying that if he knew his life would have turned out like this, he would have gotten onto the heavy drugs as a kid.’ She takes a worried drag of her cigarette and exhales the smoke through her nose. ‘Something about the humiliation being the same, but at least with drugs you don’t remember it.’

‘Why didn’t he just get another job? Death is kind of an overreaction.’ Emmet says, putting the butt of his cigarette in an already overflowing ashtray. It had extinguished itself through his neglect.

Emmet feels disturbed by his reaction to Conrad’s death. The initial surprise and sadness had been all too brief, and displaced far too easily by anger.

‘Maybe insurance was all he knew?’ Voula says. ‘Maybe changing careers mid stream was too hard for him.’

‘Harder than death, you mean?’ Emmet hears the harshness in his voice and forces himself to calm down. He takes a sip of his coffee and gags. ‘That is truly crappy coffee,’ he says, breaking the tension.

Voula laughs and takes a more relaxed drag of her cigarette.

‘What I’m saying is,’ Emmet continues, ‘from my perspective, it’s more desirable to leave a job than to leave life.’

‘But that, my dear Emmet, is from your perspective. We don’t know what else was going on in his life. Work may not have been his only motivation.’

‘Strapping your workplace manual to your stomach before you dive off a bridge is a pretty strong indication that you are unhappy with your employment situation, don’t you think?’ Emmet says.

‘Maybe it wasn’t the job itself, but what it represents,’ Voula says, lighting a third cigarette from the embers of the second, and then dropping the butt into her coffee. ‘Maybe no price is too high to escape the pain of broken dreams?’

Emmet takes a cigarette out of his packet and lights it in an absent-minded sort of way. He leans back in his chair and takes a drag, tapping the ash into his coffee. He takes another drag and lets the smoke escape through his nostrils. ‘Death is final,’ he says. ‘I would have gone the heavy drugs route.’

The two consultants sit quietly for a few minutes, lost in their own thoughts.

Eventually Voula breaks the silence. ‘I’ve made River the new 2ic,’ she says. ‘Hopefully she can do for me what you do for Jurgen.’

Emmet offers a wan smile. The sadness has returned. Not so much for Conrad’s death, he barely knew the man, but rather for the idea of Conrad’s death. He simply cannot comprehend how someone can allow himself or herself to become so desperately unhappy that only oblivion can take away the tears. As far as he is concerned, anything is better than death. Obviously, there are people out there who don’t share his way of thinking and would rather die than, say, work in an insurance call centre. He can’t see a future in thinking

that way himself, but each to their own.

Voula waves her hand in front of Emmet's face. 'Hello, Emmet,' she says, 'Earth to Emmet. Are you with us?'

'Sorry,' Emmet says, shaking himself out of his contemplative trance. 'Just thinking about Conrad. Why didn't the bloody idiot just get himself a hobby?' He rubs the glowing end of his cigarette into the overflowing ashes of an ashtray. 'I reckon River will make a fantastic 2ic,' he adds, getting up and pocketing his cigarettes, but leaving the lighter on the table. 'And you know what? That isn't my dad's lighter. My dad doesn't smoke. Never has, never will.' He pushes the lighter across the table at Voula. 'It's the one you saw in the opp shop. Take it, it's yours.'

Voula laughs and takes the lighter from the table. 'Why'd you bullshit?' she asks him.

'I have no idea,' Emmet replies, 'probably just for the hell of it.'

'You don't smoke, either, do you?'

Emmet takes the cigarettes from his pocket and tosses them onto the table. 'No I don't,' he says. 'Never have, and let's face it, never will. You can have those as well. I just wanted to share my break with someone outside my team because all they talk about is work.'

'I call that Jurgen-itis,' Voula says, giggling. 'I'll come and get you before afternoon tea then, shall I?'

'I would appreciate that immensely,' Emmet replies, 'but we better get back or Jurgen will have a hissy fit.'

Voula nods and extinguishes her cigarette in the murky greyness of what was once her coffee. ‘And you won’t be the only one to cop it, either,’ she says, tucking the unread magazines under her arm. They hurry back to the elevator, which takes them up into the heart of the bureaucracy.

Emmet settles back into his desk and prepares for an afternoon of consulting, hopefully crowned by an afternoon tea with Voula. He spots River at the communal photocopier between their respective clusters and scoots over to offer his congratulations on her promotion.

‘Welcome to the world of 2ic’ing, little one,’ he says. ‘Do not be disheartened. Your meagre talents will grow with time. One day, you may be able to execute your duties in a passable fashion.’

‘Fuck off, Storch,’ River says, not looking up. Her voice is thick, as if she is holding back tears. ‘Conrad’s dead and you’re still at it with the witless bullshit.’

‘Sorry,’ Emmet responds, but the word alone seems inadequate. He ventures an earnest question. ‘Were you close?’

‘No we weren’t close,’ River snaps, ‘the truth is he was a miserable fuck, but he is dead and deserves a little respect.’

‘But I didn’t say anything about him,’ Emmet protests.

‘Just shut up!’ River tells him. ‘Do you want to have lunch?’

‘Sure, twelve OK?’ Emmet says, ‘I just got back from tea so have to put in some time.’

‘Nah, Jurgen thinks the sun shines out of your arse. I’ll drop by at half past eleven,’ River says, before taking her documents from the copier and marching off.

‘No worries,’ Emmet replies to the back of her head, before returning to his desk.

### (iii)

Emmet’s morning is chock full of annoyed customers, nasty contractors and whispering co-workers. He feels as if he had barely begun the labours of the day when he sees River approaching his desk. He puts down his cheap plastic pen and looks towards Jurgen, mouthing the word ‘lunch’. Jurgen nods grumpily and the two 2ic’s head for the lift.

The silence remains unbroken until they take their seats in the Suicide Café. River looks drawn and pale, and that concerns Emmet.

‘Are you OK,’ he asks her. ‘I didn’t mean to offend at the photocopier.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ River replies, rubbing her red rimmed eyes with the palms of her hands.

‘What was he like? I hardly knew the guy, myself,’ Emmet asks, in as sincere a manner as he is able. River’s reaction to the death of someone she hardly knew perplexes him.

River bursts into tears. Emmet, always at a loss when

confronted with highly emotional situations, tries to make comforting noises. After a few minutes, he leaves the table and returns with a double vodka, which he places in front of River. She stops crying and knocks back her drink.

‘Thanks,’ she says, and starts to cry again, but with less conviction than previously. Emmet, happy to have found an effective coping strategy, organises another double vodka.

River’s tears eventually abate. ‘Thanks for being here,’ she says. ‘I just needed someone to talk to.’

Emmet remains silent, but endeavours to look sympathetic. He thinks it unwise to point out that they haven’t actually discussed anything.

‘I think I made Conrad kill himself!’ River blurts out, fresh tears welling up in her eyes. ‘He asked me out on Friday night, and I told him to piss off, and he went away all sad, and he said that’s OK, and he looked so sad, and he asked me out. I killed him, and now I have his job, and I couldn’t say no to Voula, she’s hopeless without a 2ic, and I took his job after killing him!’

Emmet looks stunned. ‘He asked you out?’

‘Is that so hard to believe?’ River asks, not too upset to take offence.

‘No, no, I mean I didn’t think you were his type.’ Emmet says, trying desperately to communicate but failing.

‘You hardly knew him!’ River says angrily. ‘Don’t you think I can attract men?’

‘No, no, no, I mean you’re, you know, nice and he ...

wasn't,' says Emmet, trailing off. 'You know?'

'No I don't, but I do believe that you're trying to be nice to me so I will forgive you,' River says and wipes a few stray tears from her cheeks, looks at her vodka then pushes it away. 'I need to stay sober,' she says. 'I'm getting some food, what about you?'

'Nah, I'm full from breakfast. A coffee would be nice, though.'

River vanishes in the direction of the bar, returning a few minutes later with a hamburger and an enormous bowl of fried potatoes.

'Your coffee is coming,' River says before attacking her food in Plato-esque fashion.

Emmet watches River eat, sipping at his coffee when it finally arrived. It seems to him that Conrad is making a bigger impression in death than he ever did in life. He wonders what it actually was that finally sent him over the edge.

Loneliness? Despair? Loneliness and despair? Did he wake up on Saturday morning, see a future of cold beds and multi-vehicle accidents stretching out to infinity and think 'That's it old son, enough is enough, time to go.' Surely, he could have found something to make life tolerable.

It astounds Emmet that people can become so disillusioned with life when their very existence is nothing short of miraculous. There is no need to go as far as the complex machinery of the heart or lungs, or the unbelievable power of the brain to find wonder. A single finger is a triumph

of engineering with a multitude of uses. There are veins and arteries in there, bones, neurons, and tendons- even a fingernail- all of which work together to create an implement that is ideal for ferreting out the most stubborn booger. But wait, there's more! Each and every person gets ten of these little marvels and only two nostrils, leaving eight spare to do all manner of things. But there's even more! Each set of fingers comes attached to a unique body that situates the nostrils within easy picking distance. So how much would you expect to pay? How much would you pay for a mesh of marvellous biological machines and systems that leaves the most complex manmade objects in the dust? Sit down, because you'll be knocked over if you aren't. You pay the grand price of... nothing! That's right, nothing! Zero, zilch. What's more, if you're not entirely happy with your fingers and body, just return them any time for a full refund of ... nothing! That's right, return the body and fingers, in any condition, and you'll get a full refund! Does it get any better than a bargain price with a full refund if you aren't entirely satisfied? Just find yourself a low bridge and over you go, gaining absolutely nothing for your efforts! Emmet stretches luxuriantly and feels the tug of muscle on bone. Life, love it or loathe it. In the end, it's all you've got.

River wipes the crumbs and grease from her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket. She's had just enough vodka to ignore the stain it leaves on the expensive fabric. 'So, you smoke now?' she asks, raising an eyebrow.

‘Nah, a momentary stupidity. I tried to join the cool kids but was too geeky.’ Emmet says, while considering his empty coffee cup. He risks a look at River, who is smiling.

‘Voula thinks you’re pretty nice,’ River says, leering like someone who has had a little too much to drink. ‘You’re not trying anything sneaky, are you Mr Storch?’

‘Wipe that smile off your face,’ Emmet tells her, ‘I’m just trying to widen my circle of friends. At the moment, it’s you and Jurgen, and he only ever talks insurance.’

‘I almost believe you,’ River says, ‘but only because making a play for your boss’s girlfriend is just too sitcom, even for one as sitcom as you.’ She knocks back the vodka she so recently rejected. ‘Sobriety be damned,’ she says and gets unsteadily to her feet. ‘I’m going home to get truly hammered. Tell Voula I’m feeling sick.’

‘Are you sure,’ Emmet asks, standing quickly and offering a hand for support.

‘Yeah, I’m sure. And don’t go humping the boss’s wife while I’m gone,’ River says and waves an admonishing finger at Emmet.

Emmet sees River safely into a taxi and returns to the office. His plan was to make a beeline for Voula’s desk to let her know that River had gone home due to illness, but she isn’t there. In fact, there are no team leaders on the floor whatsoever. There is a general frivolity about the place, and consultants are lounging about, chatting and drinking horrible instant coffee. Emmet returns to his team, which remains a

bastion of seriousness in a sea of light heartedness. He wanders over to Oksana's desk and sits on the edge.

'Where are the team leaders?' Emmet asks her.

Oksana looks up from her work and shrugs. 'Fran called all the team leaders to a meeting about ten minutes ago. They're all in The Hole,' she says, and satisfied that she has done all that Emmet requires of her, she turns back to her work.

Emmet continues to sit on the edge of her desk, however, kicking his feet and looking bored.

After a few minutes Oksana sighs, but doesn't look up. 'What is it Emmet?' she asks.

'Nothing much,' Emmet shrugs. 'You know, just killing some time.'

Oksana rubs her forehead. 'Well kill it somewhere else, I'm busy,' she says.

'Did you hear about Conrad from Voula's team?' Emmet asks, ignoring her request to piss off.

'Yes,' Oksana replies, testily, 'very sad, tragic even. We will all miss him. Obviously, he had problems, but he was a good insurance consultant and 2ic. Now fuck off.'

'Ok, ok, no need to get uppity,' Emmet makes placating gestures with his hands. 'I thought your religious beliefs precluded you from dropping the f-bomb. One more question, and I'll go, I promise.'

'I pray for forgiveness,' Oksana massages her forehead with her right hand. 'Ok, ok, ask the question.'

‘How can you be so casual about human life?’ Emmet asks. ‘Isn’t every life sacred? A man has just died and you’ve barely looked up from your paperwork.’

Oksana puts down her pen. ‘You’re right, every life is sacred, and suicide is a terrible thing, but I’m only human, OK? There are over six billion people on the face of the Earth and most of them are not familiar to me. Conrad was one of those anonymous people. On the other hand, only four hours remain of the working day, and I need to finish these files before I can go home and spend some quality time with my family. Now go away. I’ll make my peace with God from the comfort of my lounge room.’

Emmet opens his mouth to say something but the look on Oksana’s face suggests that it is best he doesn’t. Instead, he shuffles back to his own desk. Death comes to everyone in the end, he thinks, but unpaid overtime only comes to those who don’t finish their tasks in the allotted time. He sits down, dons his headset and dives into the ocean of paperwork on his desk. Process and procedure drive death from his mind, as he becomes one with the bureaucratic machine.

## (iv)

An hour passes before the team leaders emerge from The Hole. Emmet is deep in a bureaucratic fug as they drift back to their respective teams, but the sight of Jurgen and Voula

chatting excitedly to one another stops him midway through Form 47T1 (Motor Vehicle). They stop at Voula's desk and enter a conspiratorial huddle.

Overcome by curiosity, Emmet feigns clerking and, with a file under his arm as cover, he wanders over to the photocopier. He needn't have bothered. He is half way to his destination when Jurgen stands up and, giving him a wave, heads off in the direction of Fran's office. Voula also looks up and, cigarettes in hand, makes a beeline for him.

'Emmet, it's so exciting,' Voula says when she gets a few feet away. 'I'll explain when we get down stairs.'

The two consultants head for the lifts. Out of sheer habit, Voula gets a horrible coffee despite the fact that she knows it will wind up serving as an ashtray.

Voula refuses to elaborate further until she has smoked an entire cigarette and choked down a mouthful of horrible coffee. Finally, she puts her coffee down and lights a second cigarette.

'Do you remember Tony, the guy I replaced at your training?' she asks Emmet, who nods.

'Well, he became the assistant manager of the call centre and was supposed to be working closely with Fran to implement some new system or other.' Voula takes a drag of her cigarette.

'He has resigned!' she finishes triumphantly.

Emmet looks far from impressed. 'So?' he asks, 'big deal. People come and go from companies all the time. The era of

spending a lifetime in one job is over, we can all expect to move on from Star eventually.'

'What are you talking about?' Voula asks him, taking an impatient drag of her cigarette and a quick choke of her coffee. 'With Tony gone, Jurgen can move up in the organisation. He's almost guaranteed the job. In the eleven months since he became a team leader, his team has gone from the worst performing to the best performing in the organisation.' She takes an excited drag of her cigarette, which burns it down to the filter, then lights a replacement with the ember. 'I'll be so happy if he gets it. My man is good looking, smart and successful.'

'Don't get carried away,' Emmet warns her, his heart sinking. 'Office politics can screw over even the best.'

'You are such a downer, Emmet,' Voula slaps him playfully on the shoulder. 'My man will get his promotion, just you wait and see.'

'I'm sure he will,' Emmet says, putting on a fake smile. 'By the way, River wasn't feeling well at lunch, so she went home. She asked me to tell you.'

'Oh no, River's gone!' Voula says, looking panicked. 'I hope she's OK.' She drops the cigarette into her coffee and gets up quickly. 'I better go call her,' she says, already half way to the elevator. Emmet watches her go then sits by himself awhile, contemplating the complexities of life, love and sex. After a few minutes, he also gets up and heads for the lift.

## (v)

Time marches inexorably on, and the business of insurance marches alongside it. Emmet sits at his desk after having endured four and a half days of Jurgen, *The Aspiring*. The pace has been gruelling and the standard exacting. Jurgen drives his team to new heights, but there is a cost. One third of the team has called in sick on this, the first Friday since Tony's resignation. Two consultants have taken extended annual leave by going over Jurgen's head and getting permission directly from Fran. Jurgen's response to the reduced numbers is to drive those who do turn up harder, with the promise of being looked after when he ascends a throne that the consultants are increasingly convinced exists only in his head.

The vigour with which Jurgen pursues his promotion stops Emmet from having morning and afternoon tea with Voula, not only because Emmet has not had the time, but also because Jurgen is using all available personnel from Voula's team, including Voula. Only River escapes Jurgen's ambitions by convincing Voula that she is vital for the proper functioning of her own team, but even she is overloaded with work that other's should of been doing had they not been drafted into team Jurgen. All in all, it has been an exhausting week and Emmet cannot wait to see the back of it. Judging

from the faces of those around him, he is not alone.

Emmet hears raised voices from the photocopier and looks up to see Voula and Jurgen in heated debate. Voula slams her clenched fist into the lid of the photocopier in what Emmet considers a most un-Voula like manner, then turns her back on Jurgen and heads for the elevator.

‘Emmet!’ Voula calls as she walks past, ‘we’re going to lunch.’

Emmet hesitates, should he show loyalty to his team, or should he follow his dick heart? The delay is momentary. Grabbing his wallet, he races to the elevator that a clearly impatient Voula is holding for him. As the elevator doors close, Emmet can see Jurgen scowling at them. The pang of guilt is minor, as far as guilt goes, and is overcome by the smell of Voula’s perfume in the enclosed space.

Voula is not a fan of the Suicide Café and insists on going to another cafe several blocks from the Star Insurance building. They sit down at a small table next to the bar, and peruse the menu. Emmet nearly chokes when he sees the prices, but figures that Voula’s love will be worth it.

‘What are you going to have,’ Emmet asks a clearly still fuming Voula. ‘It all looks so good.’

‘The food is crap here,’ Voula says. ‘But they make great cocktails. I’ll have a Brandy Alexander.’

Emmet wanders off to the bar and returns with a cocktail for Voula and a coffee for himself.

‘Can you believe that bastard?’ Voula asks, before he has

even retaken his seat. ‘Talk about taking it all too far. He asked that I miss lunch, and stay after work tonight, and come in tomorrow.’

Emmet sips at his coffee. ‘He is trying really hard to get this promotion,’ he consoles her. ‘Success has its price.’

Voula, looking unconvinced at Emmet’s half-hearted words of comfort, takes a big mouthful of her cocktail. ‘Oh come on Emmet, he’s driving everyone insane,’ she says and finishes her drink. She signals to a passing waiter for another. ‘He has come home after midnight every night this week.’ Her cocktail arrives and she takes a big mouthful. ‘Making demands of me the minute he gets in.’

Emmet’s curiosity is piqued. ‘Demands?’

‘Yes, demands,’ Voula says and then swallows the rest of her drink. She signals at the bemused waiter for another.

‘Slow down,’ Emmet cautions her, ‘you’ll get sick. Let’s get some food.’

The waiter brings Voula’s third cocktail and Emmet hurriedly orders several small items from the menu, hoping that they arrive quickly.

‘Don’t you go bossing me around as well,’ Voula says, a little drunk. ‘Everybody is always bossing me around.’

‘Hey c’mon Voula, I was only suggesting, not ordering,’ Emmet says and reaches out to pat her hand.

‘I’m sorry Emmet,’ Voula says to him. ‘You’re so nice. Not like most people.’ She drains her drink in one go. ‘I wish Jurgen was more like you. But he’s not. He just makes

demands.’

The waiter returns and places several small dishes, each containing a few morsels, on the table before the two diners. Voula orders a glass of wine and picks at the meagre offerings. ‘You’re right,’ she says. ‘I’ll slow down and have something to eat. But you ordered so much food, you’ll have to help.’

Emmet considers the food on the table. Combined, it may qualify as a mouthful, but only if it wasn’t compacted heavily. ‘No worries,’ he says.

Voula nibbles distractedly at her food. ‘Have you ever been in love?’ she asks him.

Emmet shrugs. ‘Once, truth be told, but it didn’t work out,’ he answers, but she is not listening.

‘It’s so hard, being in love,’ Voula says, but the arrival of her wine interrupts her. She takes a mouthful before continuing. ‘I love Jurgen, but it is so hard being in love,’ she says, and sips moodily at her drink.

Emmet waits a few minutes for the rest of Voula’s insight. ‘Why is it hard being in love, Voula,’ he asks when it becomes obvious that there is no more. His voice snaps her out of her private contemplations. For a brief moment, she seems to be surprised that he is there.

‘Because everyone wants something different,’ Voula says. ‘And loving someone means that sometimes, you have to make compromises so that they can have what they want.’

Emmet sips at his coffee and says nothing. Guilt, like a rat, gnaws at his guts.

‘Everything is a compromise,’ Voula continues. ‘I want Chinese when he wants Thai. I want to go out when he wants to stay in. I let him pick the colour of our car, even though it is so yesterday!’

The Terriers of Emmet’s psyche hunt down the rat of guilt and tear it to shreds. ‘And he makes demands?’ he asks her, hoping to throw fuel on the meagre embers of her discontent. The result isn’t quite what he expects.

‘It’s not all bad,’ Voula says, a smile spreads across her face, accompanied by an unfocused, lost look in her eyes. She stops talking and stares into the middle distance while running her fingers up and down the stem of her glass. Emmet coughs politely, bringing Voula back to the here and now.

Voula looks guiltily at Emmet. ‘He is such a strong man,’ she says, and drains the last of the wine from her glass. ‘So dominant, I don’t know if I can take much more.’

‘I see,’ Emmet says, motioning to the waiter to bring Voula another drink.

‘Ever since Tony resigned, the thought of the promotions gets him going. He wants to play CEO’s every night.’

‘CEO’s?’ Emmet asks her, then turns to the waiter. ‘Another glass of wine and a double ouzo neat, thanks.’

Voula blushes. ‘Promise you won’t laugh?’ she says.

‘Not on the outside, anyway,’ Emmet promises.

‘OK, well Jurgen likes to role play a bit,’ Voula says, but the arrival of their drinks interrupts her.

Voula takes a mouthful of wine and Emmet makes short work of his ouzo.

‘He likes to pretend he’s a CEO and I’m his personal assistant,’ she continues, but the alcohol is clearly having an effect. Her words are slurred and she delivers them with an unfocussed smile on her face. ‘It used to be fun when we first started seeing one another,’ she says, and looks sadly at her wine. ‘But does it always have to be a CEO and personal assistant? If I have to take dick-tation one more time, I’m going to scream.’ She stops talking to take a mouthful of wine. ‘I wouldn’t mind a change every now and again. Maybe I can be a naughty schoolgirl every so often, or a desperate hitchhiker. I already have the costumes.’

Emmet sits quietly, staring at the table, trying to think cool thoughts. But even the sensible underwear of the dream Voula has little effect on the rising tide of lust threatening to engulf him. Voula looks at him and giggles. ‘You’re blushing! I made you embarrassed, how sweet.’

Emmet sighs. His hard-on abates and his blush intensifies. ‘We’d better be getting back,’ he says, and signals to the waiter for the bill.

The two intoxicated consultants stumble back to the office to find a furious Jurgen waiting for them.

‘Where the fuck have you two been?’ he thunders the minute the elevator doors open. Emmet looked at the clock on the wall above the elevators.

‘We’ve only been gone half an hour, mate,’ Emmet says,

‘that’s hardly a long lunch break.’

‘Every lunch break is too long under present conditions,’ Jurgen screams at them, the veins standing out on his forehead and neck.

‘Shut the fuck up you bossy shit head,’ says an obviously drunk Voula. ‘We’re all sick of your promotion crap. You don’t deserve a personal assistant.’

The effect of her words could not have been more comprehensive had she peeled off her skin to expose an alien organism beneath. Jurgen just stands with his mouth open, staring at Voula. Emmet steps forward and takes him by the elbow. ‘I think you should have a seat,’ he says, and tries to lead him to his desk. Jurgen, however, does not budge. Eventually, he closes his mouth and walks towards Voula, getting so close that he is standing almost on top of her.

‘You’ve been drinking,’ Jurgen says, in measured, low, and above all, menacing, tones.

Voula looks up and directly into his eyes. ‘So fucking what,’ she says, mimicking his tone. ‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘Storch!’ Jurgen calls, without taking his eyes off Voula. ‘Take over for the day. I’m taking this drunk home to sober up.’

‘No worries,’ says Emmet, still clutching at Jurgen’s elbow. Jurgen turns and looks at him, then down at his elbow. Emmet hastily lets go.

‘Make sure you get the single vehicle stats done before

you go home tonight,’ Jurgen says, ‘and let River know what has happened to her alleged Team Leader.’

‘Sir, yes, sir!’ Emmet says, suppressing an urge to salute. Jurgen gives him a withering look, and then takes Voula by the upper arm. He spins her around and half drags her into the elevator. The doors of the elevator close like the curtains on a stage. A couple of the assembled consultants clap.

With the excitement over, the consultants drift back to work. Emmet gets stuck into the single vehicle stats; an onerous task shunned by all and often meted out as punishment to the undeserving.

Eventually, River makes her way over to his desk. ‘Coming for drinks tonight,’ she asks him, innocently.

‘Nah, I’ve got a family function to go to,’ Emmet answers.

‘Bullshit, you’re coming,’ River informs him. ‘I have a strong suspicion that you caused that spat, and I want to know how and why.’

Emmet looks up at her, unable to suppress the grin on his face. ‘That wasn’t a spat, River my dear. That was foreplay.’

‘No way,’ River squeals in delight. ‘How do you know? Tell me more!’

‘Gladly,’ Emmet says, ‘but the telling needs alcohol and I have to finish these stats before I can leave.’

‘I’ll help,’ River says, pulling up a chair beside his. Together, the two set about their work with a will.

## Chapter 5

Process and procedure govern the choice of Tony's replacement- there are interviews to conduct, resumes to vet, and referees to annoy- which means that Star Insurance, as a collective, endures several weeks of Jurgen the Aspiring. Sadly, the pain suffered by so many for so long is for naught because Jurgen doesn't get the job. This all explains why Emmet and Jurgen are currently in a gloomy bar, drinking gloomy beer with gloomy faces. More accurately, Jurgen sits in the gloom while Emmet, wholly uninvited, tries to cheer him up. He is finding the going difficult, however, having already tried several well-worn clichés without much success. The tried and true 'it's not the end of the world' line fails miserably. The 'you're still a young man' angle encounters apathy and a beery belch, and 'they'll be other jobs' leads to an intense series of howling sobs.

Having placated the security personnel unnerved by Jurgen's sobbing, Emmet now sits quietly, hoping for inspiration. Jurgen draws a deep breath and leans back in his chair. 'You work hard, you push the envelope, and what does it get you?' he asks an unsympathetic world, cutting short Emmet's dithering. 'A kick in the teeth, that's what, a knee in the groin, a slap in the face, a squirrel grip with iron gloves,' he answers himself when the world does not.

The violent metaphors worry Emmet because Jurgen is a

very big man. Muscles honed by years of lunchtime gym sessions ripple beneath his finely tailored shirt. Enormous, calloused hands lie on either side of his beer, balled into fists. Probably not a man you want to see become aggressive, Emmet thinks, as Jurgen turns towards him and buries a thick finger deep into his shoulder.

‘Do you know who got the job?’ Jurgen asks Emmet, who shakes his head despite knowing who won the promotion. The safest option, as far as he can see, is to play along and avoid antagonising this very large and extremely agitated young man.

‘It’s Natalie, that’s who. And do you know why she got the job?’ Jurgen pushes his finger deeper into Emmet’s shoulder.

‘No Jurgen, I don’t,’ Emmet squeaks.

‘She is getting the job because she is fucking Fran’s son, that’s why she is getting the fucking job,’ Jurgen says, shaking his head. ‘One thing’s for sure, she isn’t getting it because she is fucking good at insurance. And it can’t be for her customer service skills, because they suck. She hasn’t got any people management skills at all, so they didn’t score her the job. Nope, she got the job ‘cos she wrapped her tongue around a cock with influence.’ He removes his finger from Emmet’s shoulder and grasps hold of his beer. ‘Star insurance is meant to be a fucking meritocracy. That’s what Acheron says in all his fucking motivational bullshit speeches. I don’t see no fuckin’ merit here mate. I just see a cocksucker getting the

promotion that I worked for.’ Suddenly, the tension and anger seem to drain from his body and he slumps forward onto the bar. ‘I hate cocksuckers,’ he says, with feeling.

Somehow, a defeated Jurgen seems worse to Emmet than an angry one. At least anger indicates a fire burning somewhere in his psyche. Defeat can only signal the death of ambition, and Jurgen without ambition makes as much sense as a fish without gills. Images of Emmet’s dim but driven friend David float into his mind’s eye. Jurgen would be his mirror image- all ability, no drive.

‘Maybe he was using new age management jargon,’ Emmet hazards, trying to lighten the mood a little. He figures he can risk a little antagonism. ‘Maybe in Acheron’s world, merit means cock sucking. So a meritocracy is a place where cocksuckers get promotions before people who deserve them. I think it explains the current situation quite well, don’t you?’

For the first time that day, Jurgen smiles, but it isn’t convincing and reminds Emmet of a picture he once saw of a smiley face drawn on a nuclear warhead- the façade and the reality do not quite coincide. Nevertheless, a smile, even a weak one, is a lot better than a frown. He looks around the bar and spots several of the former butt-monkeys amongst other assorted Star Insurance personnel in a corner. None of their colleagues had approached the two morose figures because news has gotten round of Natalie’s promotion, and everyone is giving Jurgen a wide berth until things settle. Emmet stands and stretches.

‘I can see Oksana and Borris in the corner over there,’ Emmet says, pointing in their general direction. ‘Let’s go over and get Borris drunk so that Oksana yells at him. That’s always good for a laugh.’

‘Nah it’s alright, you go ahead,’ Jurgen says. ‘I’m just going to finish my beer and go home.’

‘You sure?’ Emmet asks, turning towards Jurgen as he does so. He gets no answer because Jurgen has frozen, beer half way to his lips. Emmet follows his gaze to the front door and sees Fran, with Natalie hot on her heels. He rubs his eyes and refocuses them on the man that Natalie is towing along by the hand. Yep, it’s Robert from the recruitment agency.

Emmet’s hand seeks the comfort of his beer as Fran sees them. She and Natalie both wave and head in their direction, dragging Robert along behind.

‘Hello boys,’ Fran says to the gloomy two as she and her entourage front up. ‘Here to celebrate Natalie’s promotion with us?’ Emmet shrugs and Jurgen just sips at his beer.

‘I’ve overtaken you, Storchy,’ Natalie says to Emmet. ‘You’re 2ic of a team, but I’m now 2ic of the entire department.’

Jurgen slams his empty glass onto the table, causing everyone to jump. The two women look alarmed. Natalie stands behind Robert, for all the good he would do against a rampaging Jurgen.

‘I’d better be going,’ Jurgen says, rising from his seat. The dim lights make him loom large and add an air of menace to

his presence. ‘I’ll catch you later,’ he says to Emmet, then nods at Fran and Natalie and stalks out of the bar. Emmet is surprised to see that Fran looks unhappy at his departure. Not so Natalie.

‘Bit of a poor loser,’ Natalie says when she judges Jurgen to be safely out of earshot. ‘He obviously doesn’t have a baldy to rub for luck,’ she continues, grabbing Robert in a headlock with her left arm and rubbing the top of his baldhead with her right hand. ‘Now get me a drink, you cute little man. I’ll be back soon.’ She gives Robert a resounding smack on his backside and heads off towards the toilet.

Robert leans on the bar beside Emmet and motions towards the bartender. ‘Three Gin and Tonic’s please,’ he says, when the bartender is within earshot, ‘and another drink for this gentleman,’ he motions towards Emmet. He pays the bartender then turns to Emmet. ‘How are you Mister Stork,’ he says, ‘Star Insurance treating you well?’

‘Can’t complain, Bobby,’ Emmet answers. ‘How’s life as a HR boffin?’

‘Okay, I suppose. By the way, my name is Robert. Back in a moment,’ he says, getting off his bar stool and heading off towards the toilets.

‘Your son?’ Emmet asks Fran as they both watch Robert scuttle away.

‘Yeah,’ Fran replies, reaching for her drink. ‘An only child. I try to learn from my mistakes.’

‘That’s a bit harsh, isn’t it?’ Emmet says.

‘What? Oh no, Robert’s wonderful. I mean his old man is a prick,’ Fran says.

‘Oh, I see.’ Emmet sips at his new beer.

Despite the fact that every fibre of his being wants to rip Jurgen’s life partner from his arms, he has a soft spot for the young lunatic and it annoys him that Fran has used her position to elevate the horrible Natalie at Jurgen’s expense. Taking a swallow of his beer to muster courage, he prepares to confront Fran with his version of the awful truth.

‘You got Natalie the job, didn’t you?’ Emmet accuses her, putting his beer down and poking the air in her direction for added effect. ‘You gave poor Jurgen the shaft so that your newly acquired best buddy and soon to be relative can get ahead, even though she doesn’t deserve it. You do know, right, that Natalie is using your son to crawl up the corporate ladder, right? You do know that?’

Fran bursts out laughing. ‘Firstly, let me remind you that I am your boss and stupid accusations like that can make your working life very difficult,’ she says, then pauses to take a drink. She looks at Emmet in the same way a slaughterman would look at a lamb that pleads, not for its own life, but for that of its friends. ‘Piss me off enough,’ she continues, ‘and you’ll be doing stats for the rest of your days at Star. This time I’ll let you off because you almost got things right. You just fingered the wrong ogre.’ Fran looks around the bar with a paranoid eye. Satisfied that the no one else is within earshot, she leans towards Emmet. ‘Let me put you straight

on our friend Natalie,' she says in a conspiratorial whisper. 'Firstly, the bitch is definitely using my son, but not to climb the corporate ladder. Being Acheron's niece, she has a far more direct route to the top than through the balding son of a middle manager. No, she's using him for her own perverted pleasure, the bitch. I don't know how she's done it, but the cow has turned my boy into a fawning pussy. Second, if it were up to me, I would have just given Jurgen the job. All that bullshit about interviews was simply a way to hide Acheron's nepotism behind process and procedure.' Fran sighs deeply. 'From where I stand, Natalie's relationship with my son is a catastrophe. If they split up, my career at Star could be over.' Fran finishes her drink and orders another. A double, Emmet notices.

Fran and Emmet watch Robert emerge from the toilet.

'It's my fault, in the end,' Fran says, accepting her drink from the barman. 'I found out Natalie was Acheron's niece and I thought I'd do a little networking. How the fuck was I to know that she would fall in love with my Robert?' They both watch the rotund little man amble towards them.

'Yeah, I see what you mean,' Emmet says, 'a most unlikely couple.'

'I am so screwed,' Fran sighs and knocks back her double in one movement.

Natalie makes her way back to the little company a few minutes later, her arrival delayed by random chats to Star employees along the way. When she finally reaches them, she

pats Robert on his baldhead. ‘Is that a jelly bean in your pants,’ she asks, looking at his groin. ‘Or are you glad to see me?’

Fran glares, but manages to raise a smile when Natalie looks in her direction. Emmet shakes his head and puts his half-finished beer on the bar.

‘I’ll see you all at work on Monday, except for you, Bobby’ Emmet says. ‘I don’t know when I’ll see you again but hopefully, it won’t be for a while.’

‘Bobby,’ Natalie squeals, ‘I love it.’ She pinches her partner’s chubby cheek then pats him on the head, before turning back to Emmet. ‘No worries, Storchy,’ she says. ‘We 2ic’s have got to stick together, even if I am at a higher level.’

Robert aka Bobby waves goodbye, loathing radiating from every pore, and Fran flashes a resigned smile in Emmet’s direction. Although brief, Fran’s smile suggests that people such as us must make allowances for people such as her. Emmet concentrates on getting away, as far and as fast as possible.

## (ii)

So begins the dark reign of Natalie, 2ic of the call centre at Star Insurance. Drunk with power, she stalks the clusters searching for victims to micro-manage. Like a nasty virus

that spreads via sexual contact, she involves herself in matters that are none of her concern and inserts herself where she is not wanted. She opens bureaucratic wounds that fester and accumulate the puss of corporate disharmony, smashing synergies and forcing everyone to think inside the box. If any dare question her competency or authority, she runs squealing to her uncle to spew bile into his ear.

Dire as the situation may be, Natalie is not Emmet's main concern. Jurgen- his team leader, friend, and secret rival- has been missing these past two days and whose decline from Team Leader of the Year to petulant schoolboy truant has left Emmet in charge of a team of dispirited consultants.

Jurgen deteriorated rapidly and caught Emmet totally unawares. It began innocuously enough- he began to turn up to work unshaven, or with his shirt unironed, or a few minutes late. Emmet only became concerned, however, when Jurgen began taking morning tea breaks- unthinkable pre-Natalie- and migrated his lunch break from the gym to the bar. Shortly after, he stopped wandering his cluster, leaving the spirits of ailing consultants un-bolstered, and leading his team of crack insurance professionals to new depths. Then one day, he failed to turn up at all, which really set the alarm bells ringing.

Jurgen never takes a day off. The population of the office generally accepts that if he died, his re-animated corpse would turn up, probably on time, with a note from Satan explaining the situation. Even if his body met total destruction, the consensus is that a disembodied spirit would whistle through

the files, throwing the most urgent, poltergeist-like, onto the floor for immediate attention.

In desperation, Emmet arranges to meet Voula for lunch at a nearby café to try and find out how Jurgen is going. When she arrives she looks stressed, flustered and oh so gorgeous.

‘Oh good, an outside table,’ Voula says. ‘I really need a smoke. Sorry I’m late, Natalie re-organised the seating configuration of my team. I’ve been moving desks all morning,’ she adds, by way of explanation.

‘Yeah I know, I was watching. We’ll probably be next,’ Emmet replies. ‘She’s been a wonderful addition to the Star Insurance management team.’

‘That silly individual is making the office a difficult environment,’ Voula says, with remarkable restraint considering she spent the last three hours shuffling boxes, chairs, desks, and insurance consultants around a room for no apparent gain. ‘She is an ignorant, nosy, bossy, arsehole that has to get her way in everything. Please feel free to disagree.’

‘No, no, I totally agree with you,’ Emmet answers.

Voula shrugs and takes her cigarettes out of her bag. ‘Not much we can do about it, though, is there?’ she says, lighting the first of what Emmet knows will be many during the afternoon.

‘Can I have one of those?’ Emmet asks, gesturing towards the cigarettes. The smile on her face makes words redundant as she silently pushes the packet across the table.

Emmet lights up, inhales the bittersweet smoke, and leans back in his chair. ‘How’s Jurgen?’ he asks, trying to sound casual. Unfortunately, sounding casual is not a skill he has mastered. Fortunately, sensitivity to the plight of others is not a skill Voula has mastered, so the tone of conflicted desperation in Emmet’s voice goes right over her head.

‘I don’t know,’ Voula replies quietly. ‘When I’m home, he locks himself in the study and refuses to come out.’

‘So you don’t know when he’ll be back in the office?’ Emmet asks. Voula looks confused for a moment and then shapes to answer, but the stress of working during the reign of Natalie, coupled with her plummeting love life, finally overtakes her. She folds her arms onto the table and drops her head into the hollow they create. Only when her face is out of sight does she start to cry.

Voula’s tears trigger Emmet’s natural reaction to displays of extreme emotion. He panics. Should he hazard a comforting pat on the shoulder? Maybe a few soothing words to ease away the pain and frustration? The most distressing aspect of watching Voula cry is that he finds it arousing. But images of throwing Voula over his shoulder and taking her back to his den for a jolly good fuck only complicate matters, if only because his bedroom at home can hardly be considered a den.

Recalling his successes with River a few weeks ago, he leaves the table and returns a few minutes later with a double vodka, which he places in front of Voula. She continues

sobbing for a while longer, then lifts her head and looks at the drink before her. There is a blur of motion culminating in an empty shot glass slowly spinning to a halt on the tabletop.

‘Can I have another?’ Voula asks, taking a cigarette from her packet. Emmet hastily obliges, helping himself to a second cigarette when he returns.

‘Good old alcohol,’ Emmet thinks, as he lights-up. ‘Where would we be without you?’

Voula sips at her second vodka and lights another cigarette. ‘It’s pretty bad at home,’ she says, ‘Jurgen is a complete mess. He stopped shaving a few days ago, stopped showering, stopped running in the evenings. And as far as I can tell, he eats nothing but cornflakes and drinks nothing but beer.’

Emmet looks shocked at the news. ‘You mean you guys have food in the house now?’ he exclaims.

Voula rolls her eyes. ‘Be serious, Emmet, of course we have food. We always have had food in the house,’ she butts out her cigarette in an annoyed fashion. ‘Cereal is great when you have a hangover and there is always something to nibble with a drink.’

Voula lights another cigarette and continues her tale of woe. ‘He’s a real mess,’ she says. ‘I don’t know what to do. How can I go out with him looking like that? He’s getting chubby, and his hair is so-o-o-o greasy.’ She grasps his arm and looks imploringly into his eyes. ‘Help me Emmet,’ she says, ‘I’m going out with a loser!’

Emmet sighs as realisation dawns that he and Voula do not exist in the same reality. ‘But those eyes are to die for,’ says a desperate little voice in his head. ‘Not to mention those perky little tits.’

Emmet shakes his head in an effort to dislodge the annoying whisperer in his mind. ‘Maybe he just needs a holiday,’ he suggests. ‘You know, recharge the old batteries in the sun for a couple of weeks. Somewhere tropical with a bar in a pool and mud massages and stuff.’

‘Emmet! You’re a genius!’ Voula squeals, jumping into an upright position in her seat. Emmet’s eyes fall, quite without prompting from the conscious portion of his brain, on her bouncing breasts. ‘What a great idea, after all, all work and no play makes Jurgen a smelly pig,’ she continues. ‘We could go to one of those trendy executive retreats by the bay.’ Just as suddenly, she falls back into her seat. Emmet’s eyes remain on her breasts. When you’re on a winner, stick to it.

‘But we can’t,’ Voula says sadly, visibly wilting. ‘The plastic is at its limit, and so is the home loan. We can’t get any more.’

‘Credit?’ Emmet asks, ruminating over the “we” in Voula’s squeal. An absent Jurgen, one that will not inspire pity like the demoralised Jurgen currently does, would be a boon for his plans to woo Voula. ‘Haven’t you got any money in the bank? It’s also cheaper for one to travel than for two.’

Voula looks at him in exasperation. ‘What, like saving?’

she asks. ‘That’s so old school. Not even my parents live like that anymore. It makes far more sense to own stuff and pay the credit card companies a small fee every month than to save up and let the money gather dust in the bank.’ She lights another cigarette and sits back in her chair and stares at a sliver of blue sky just visible in the gap between the Star Insurance building and the glass and steel tower beside it. ‘A holiday would be nice,’ she sighs. ‘I think I could use one as well. But the only way we’ll be able to afford it is if we pull the third party shuffle.’

‘The third party shuffle?’ Emmet asks.

Voula blushes. ‘Oops, you don’t know about that, do you?’

Emmet shakes his head.

‘Well,’ Voula continues, ‘Whenever we need money to buy something and the plastic is stretched, Jurgen and I often joke about adding a fake third party to a claim. It’s all a bit of a fantasy, really, because it’s impossible to make work. They put the quote through the ringer and then send a cheque in the name of the third party.’

‘Is it easy to add a third party?’ Emmet asks, intrigued.

‘It is for a team leader,’ Voula says. ‘It just takes a couple of file notes. It helps if there are several vehicles involved in the accident. Multi-car pile-ups always take ages to sort out and have all sorts of communication problems.’

‘So the only problem is the quote and the cheque?’ Emmet asks, a plan starting to germinate in the fertile fields

of his imagination.

‘Yeah, and the guts to actually do it,’ Voula laughs. She looks at her watch. ‘I gotta run,’ she says. ‘I left River up there alone with Natalie. If I stay too long, River might kill her.’

‘No worries,’ Emmet says, ‘I’m going to have another coffee. See you at afternoon tea?’

‘Sure, why not.’ Voula replies.

‘Can I have a smoke before you go?’ Emmet asks.

‘Take the packet and bring it to tea,’ Voula says, dropping a packet of cigarettes and the old Zippo lighter on the table.

Emmet lights up a cigarette as he watches Voula leave, her hips swinging in a tiny arc. Truth be told, he is also feeling severely restricted by a lack of funds. How can he even think of wooing Voula in his present circumstances? What he needs is a cash injection to help him become the kind of man that can attract a woman like Voula. No doubt about it, he needs to change and the sooner the better. He must become a man that does not live under the same roof as his mum and dad, a man that thinks nothing of spending hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars on trinkets for the woman he loves.

While his current salary is not meagre by any stretch of the imagination, he needs a wad to set up the infrastructure. Crime had not featured on his radar thus far, not because he opposes it philosophically, but because most of the criminals

he knows scare twelve textures of shit out of him, as does the possibility of official retribution. But Voula is not scary, and the third party shuffle could possibly deliver enough benefit to make the risk worthwhile. Emmet fondles the white collar of his shirt, extinguishes his cigarette and heads into the Star Insurance building to indulge in a little research.

### (iii)

Emmet spends the next two days researching the merits of the third party shuffle. As near as he can tell, it would be undetectable if executed properly. Easing his task was a call made by Jurgen to Fran early in the piece to inform her that he would be away from the office for at least two weeks. As acting team leader, Emmet is able to create plenty of research time provided he successfully dodges Natalie, a practice elevated to an art form in the office. Some of the more adept practitioners can go for hours without getting within ten metres of the archfiend by skilfully manipulating schedules and routines to be where she isn't. Emmet is new to the practice but his peers acknowledged that, while his techniques are raw and unrefined, he displays imagination and flair that is too often lacking in many of the more experienced Natalie avoiders. The consensus is that Emmet is an avoider to watch.

Barely able to contain his excitement and not quite

believing that he will do what he plans to do, Emmet nonchalantly wanders over to Voula's desk. At least he thinks the stilted walk he employs is nonchalant.

'Have you hurt your back?' Voula asks, 'you're walking funny.'

'No, just wondering if you want to go for afternoon tea?' Emmet says, deciding against leaning casually on the desk.

'Good move,' Voula says, nodding. 'Natalie is back from tea in the next few minutes. Let's go.'

The two descend into the basement where Voula hurriedly lights a cigarette. 'Thank god for smokes,' she says, inhaling deeply. 'Soothe the nerves and keep the waist trim.'

Emmet arches an eyebrow, but still lights up.

'I see you've taken it up full time,' Voula observes. 'Even watching you smoke, though, you still come across as a non smoker.'

Emmet shrugs. 'It gives me a reason to leave my desk for a few minutes every now and again, and the coffee here is far more of a danger to human health than mere tobacco.'

Voula giggles and leans back in her chair. 'How does it feel being a team leader?' she asks.

'It's OK, I guess,' Emmet says. 'I've got some big shoes to fill. How is the man, by the way?'

'The same,' Voula says, sighing. 'I wish there was something I could do.'

'Well,' says Emmet, licking his lips nervously. 'We could do the third party shuffle and then send him on a holiday.'

Voula starts to laugh again, but stops when she sees the expression on his face. ‘You’re serious, aren’t you?’ she says, horrified admiration in her voice.

‘Yep, I think I can make it work so that it is totally untraceable,’ Emmet says enthusiastically. ‘As long as we aren’t greedy and do it just once, there is almost no chance of being caught.’

‘Do you know what you are saying?’ Voula exclaims. ‘You’re talking about fraud.’

‘How long do you think you are going to last in team Natalie?’ Emmet says, answering her question with a question. ‘Jurgen is already pretty much gone, but he won’t be the only one. She is screwing everyone. Think about it. Absenteeism is through the roof, which makes it a perfect time for something like this. Here and now, nobody is being too careful. Nobody is doing their job as well as they should. Everybody is too distracted with his or her own problems to dig too deep into little irregularities. Nobody will be too surprised if one or two files disappear, will they?’

Voula crosses her legs and lights another cigarette. She looks at Emmet as if she is seeing him for the first time. ‘There is more to you than meets the eye, Mr Storch,’ she says eventually. ‘And you’re right. Natalie’s psychosis has the office in a bit of a tizz, but that doesn’t mean that they are totally blind, nor will it be permanent.’

‘It doesn’t need to be permanent,’ Emmet replies. ‘It just needs to be for a few days.’

‘This is such bullshit, Emmet. It’s just a joke. It was never meant to actually happen.’ Voula says, nervously lighting another cigarette.

‘Jurgen was never meant to deteriorate into an unwashed deadbeat, either, but it happened.’ Emmet retorts. ‘Look, it’s tough talking about it here. Meet me in that new club in the city tonight, The Black Cat I think it’s called, and I’ll fill you in on all the details.’

‘I’ve heard of that place,’ Voula says. ‘It’s supposed to be a bit dodgy.’

Emmet shrugs. He knew that planning a crime at a stylish and purportedly dangerous club like The Black Cat would be irresistible to Voula.

Voula licks her lips, sending a shiver down Emmet’s spine. ‘If Jurgen was his old self, I wouldn’t be able to go because he would want to come along. But he isn’t, is he?’ she says and butts out her cigarette, immediately lighting another. Tilting her head back, she exhales the blue smoke over Emmet’s head. ‘And Natalie is such a bitch, getting Jurgen back and firing on all cylinders would piss her off so much.’ She looks at Emmet and exhales a line of smoke directly into his face. Emmet fights off an erection. ‘Mr Storch,’ she says, ‘we have a date.’

Emmet arrives at The Black Cat wearing a black suit over a black shirt with a purple tie and carrying a black briefcase. The bar itself is decorated along similar lines as the Suicide Café; everything is black and illuminated by halogen lamps in the ceiling. However, it has two major points of departure from the old Suicide. First, all decorations are of black cats. Second, the fantastically beautiful patrons look as though they have just sauntered off the pages of a glossy fashion magazine after the airbrush has removed any unsightly blemishes.

Everyone is wearing black. Emmet assumes that this must be the colour of danger, because despite the reputation of the place the only part of him that feels threatened is his self-esteem. He eventually finds Voula in the smoking section, a small mound of cigarette butts in the ashtray before her, which has been cunningly fashioned to look like a flattened black cat. She is also wearing black and looking absolutely fabulous.

‘I see you’ve only been here a few minutes,’ Emmet says, pointing to the ash in the tray.

‘Ho ho, you are a funny one,’ Voula responds. ‘I have no idea why the fuck I am here, but here I am. A free drink or two would make me feel better about the situation.’

‘Blame your curiosity for getting you in this mess,’ Emmet says, ‘and the entire evening is on me. I’ll be right back with the first round.’

Emmet returns a few minutes later with four drinks

perched on a cat shaped tray. ‘I thought we could start off with a of CrimeWave,’ he says, indicating two tall glasses containing a thick purple liquid, ‘then follow it up with an Embezzler,’ he points to the swirling fluorescent green fluid presented in short tumblers.’

Voula takes one of each of the dubiously named cocktails and has a taste. ‘Not bad,’ she says, ‘a little on the sweet side, but there you go.’

‘I think you’re meant to have them one at a time,’ Emmet points out. ‘Otherwise they overwhelm your palate and subtle variation in flavour and aroma are lost.’

Voula looks at the two beverages in front of her. ‘I think these are actually meant to overwhelm your palate on their way to overwhelming your brain,’ she says, before draining an Embezzler in one mouthful.

Emmet takes a sip of his CrimeWave and puts his briefcase on the table. ‘I have some stuff I want you to see,’ he says, opening the briefcase and withdrawing a small pouch. From the pouch, he takes two sheets of paper. ‘Here are two quotes for the repair of a prestige vehicle,’ he says, handing them to Voula. ‘One is real and the other I made on my computer. Can you tell which is which?’

Voula inspects both documents and shrugs. ‘They look the same to me,’ she says, making to hand them back to Emmet. He holds up his hand to indicate that she needs to hang on to them. ‘Tell me,’ Emmet says, ‘who would a cheque be made out to for both those quotes, assuming they

were unrepairable?’

Voula transfers her attention to the documents again. ‘This one will be made to Kingsville Computers,’ she says, putting the first quote down. ‘And this one to Seddon Internet,’ dropping the second quote on top of the first.

‘Do you know that I own Seddon Internet? It’s just a business name I registered years ago’ Emmet tells her, smiling broadly.

‘So?’ Voula says. ‘You’ll still need to cash it into a company account.’

‘I already have one, and it can be closed at a moment’s notice. Like a few days after withdrawing the funds from a cheque,’ Emmet says. He leans back in his chair and takes another sip of his CrimeWave. ‘And I can make a better quote than that one there. Tailor it so that it fits the file exactly. I reckon we could get away with two hundred thousand, not a worry.’

Voula almost drops her drink. ‘That’s way too much, they’ll check the file for sure,’ she says, but Emmet shakes his head.

‘They only check single claims over quarter of a million,’ Emmet says. ‘We’ll be well under that just to be on the safe side.’ He puts the empty glass on the table and picks up the Embezzler. ‘And a week or so after it’s over, the file gets quietly shredded and we forget it ever happened. If we only do it once, there will be no patterns to follow, no strange surge in luxury vehicle accidents. We take a hundred thousand each

and then stop. We don't want to get greedy.' Emmet looks at Voula and sees that the magic of lots of dollars is having an effect.

Voula is staring dreamily into the middle distance, her cigarette turning to ash in the ashtray- a sure sign that she is distracted. 'I could buy a lot of stuff with a hundred thousand dollars, even after going on a holiday,' she says.

'You could retire some of your debt,' Emmet suggests.

Voula laughs. 'You're such a joker,' she says. 'Ok, let's say I agree to this madness, what would I do?'

'All you have to do is make a file note that you have spoken to the owner of Seddon Internet on the phone and that he has replaced the vehicle already because he needs a car to run his business,' Emmet says. 'Then you pass the quote on to the assessors and ask them to check it. When it comes back, get Fran to look at it. If she signs off, which I'm sure she will, organise the payment.' He stops to light a cigarette. 'I've already found a file and I'll take care of destroying it when we've finished.'

'That's quite a bit,' Voula says, a look of concern crossing her face.

'So is a hundred thousand dollars.'

Voula picks up her CrimeWave. 'It most certainly is,' she says, and takes a mouthful of the sticky liquid. 'This stuff is horrid,' she says when she finally chokes it all down. 'Wait here, I'm going to the bar. You have absolutely no taste in drinks.'

Emmet watches her back as she walks to the bar. There is no doubt that she is a very beautiful woman. Tall and slender, she fits perfectly into the beautiful but not so dangerous crowd at The Black Cat. And she is here, with him. The fact that she is with him plotting to defraud the company that they both work is irrelevant to the hormones coursing through his veins.

In Emmet's subconscious, the battle rages.

'You're seriously contemplating fraud as a method of getting our end in?' asks Emmet's ego, aghast at the way the evening with Voula is shaping up. 'I thought we'd just muck about with it then decide it's silly.'

'Women like Voula need a special effort,' the id informs the ego. 'We have to push the boundaries for a woman like her.'

The ego looks out into the ultimate reality, looking at Voula through Emmet's eyes.

'Skinny, you mean?' the ego hazards, 'or neurotic? What has she got that any healthy young woman of her age doesn't have?'

'That's the trouble with intellectualising everything,' replies the id. 'Just look at her, she's beautiful. Our genes together will make beautiful babies.'

'There are millions of women out there that have beautiful genes and that don't require us to commit a crime in order to have sex with us,' the ego responds. 'Why can't we try one of them?'

‘To be quite honest, I don’t know,’ admits the id. ‘I just want to... Well, you know what I want to do.’

They watch Voula returning from the bar with the drinks.

‘She is quite attractive,’ concedes the ego. ‘And we could certainly use the funds. Living at home is really screwing our self esteem.’

‘It’s a victimless crime,’ adds the id. ‘Star insurance has loads of cash. I’m sure they won’t miss a little bit of it.’

‘Victimless?’ says the ego. ‘What if we’re not the only ones stealing? A little bit here, a little bit there and all of a sudden, the company folds due to corruption and crime. Will it be us who tells the retrenched workers they’re not victims?’

‘Just shut up, OK?’

Voula places the drinks on the table. ‘These are called Fraudsters,’ she says. ‘Not only are they absolutely delicious and high in alcohol, but they fit the theme of the evening quite well.’ She takes one of the drinks and holds it up in the air. ‘To a successful venture,’ she says.

Emmet takes up his drink and taps Voula’s glass with his. ‘To a successful venture,’ he echoes, and both drain their drinks.

‘I really hope this works, Emmet,’ Voula says when she stops gagging. The Fraudster wasn’t as delicious as she had hoped.

Emmet makes a disgusted face after tasting his Fraudster and puts his drink down. ‘I’ve spent the last two days going

through hundreds of multi vehicle accident files,' he says when he can talk again. 'In at least a third of them, someone has added a vehicle a week or more after the accident occurred. I even found two cases that match, almost exactly, what we are going to do. One of the claims was for eighty thousand and the other was for one hundred and ten thousand. While it isn't common, it's not unusual either.' He pauses to light a cigarette. 'The file I've picked already has four cars involved, and the great thing is that it happened in an industrial estate. All of them belonged to big companies that run fleets for their employees and we've replaced or paid for repairs for all of them already. One more wouldn't raise suspicions. To top it all off, they are all high value cars, so even the size of the payout would fit in with the rest. It should be fine as long as we don't get greedy. We do it once, take the money and then forget it ever happened.'

'And then I can take my Jurgy on a holiday and get him back to his ambitious best,' Voula sighs. She grasps Emmet's left hand with both hands. 'It's the only hope for Jurgen and I, isn't it?' she asks him earnestly. The alcohol has pushed her into the sappy area between tipsy and violently ill. 'Even before the job interview, our relationship was falling apart. Sometimes I think we only stayed together because of the house.' Voula stops and thinks for a short while. 'Okay, it was the house and the sensational sex. You just don't know what you've got until it's gone, do you? What I wouldn't give to be his personal assistant right now.' She lets go of his hand and

fans herself. 'It makes me hot just thinking about it.'

Sweating heavily, Emmet butts out his cigarette and thinks cool thoughts.

Voula leans forward and gestures to him to get closer. 'Don't tell anyone,' she says, 'but I haven't had sex for ages. It's been weeks and I'm getting really, really frustrated.' She lights a cigarette. 'I need my Jurgen back really soon, Emmet. Really soon.'

'It's been weeks? Wow, you poor thing, you must be just jumping out of your skin,' Emmet says, packing the quotes back into his briefcase. 'I'm going to get a beer. All these fancy drinks are making me sick. Do you want one?' Voula nods and Emmet scuttles off to the bar, thinking unsexual thoughts and wondering why some bastards get all the luck.

Over a couple of beers, the two conspirators agree that the sooner they start, the more likely they will be to succeed. The plan is that Emmet will go into work tomorrow and show Voula the file that they will use. He will then take the following day off and call in the quote. All Voula needs to do is treat him as she would any ordinary annoying customer and go through all the proper procedures. Eventually, she catches a taxi home but Emmet, after seeing her off, decides that a walk would do him good. Voula's revelation that she is hungry for sex excites him. That she still clings to her relationship with Jurgen disappoints him. Even more disappointing, however, is that he didn't really try very hard to make her think that he, Emmet, would be a good surrogate fuck until

Jurgen regains his senses.

Hands in pockets, he wanders disconsolately through the late night party crowds in the city, oblivious to the general cheerfulness and frivolity that disguises a hunger for the biological imperatives of sex. The throngs of revellers in the centre become thinner as he gets closer to the outskirts. Eventually, they dissipate entirely and a mist replaces them, which shrouds the streets and avenues of suburbia. His pre-occupied steps lead him to the house he shares with his family. Even at this late hour, all the lights are on and, judging from the noise, the occupants are awake and testing sonic weaponry for the CIA. Emmet squares his shoulders and opens the gate. With an ounce of luck, his family will be too busy making noise to notice his return.

## Chapter 6

Emmet and Voula make the final arrangements for the crime at morning tea on the day after their meeting at The Black Cat. The ambiance in the Star Insurance basement is a little different, but what The Black Cat does to create a certain atmosphere with cat shaped ornaments, the basement does with an excess of bad coffee and acrid cigarette smoke. It's still ambience, just not as pleasant, and this morning it is a little more piquant by the abundance of nervous sweat supplied by the two jittery consultants.

An aura of unreality hangs in the air because, truth be told, neither Emmet nor Voula consider themselves criminals. Yet here they are, engaging in criminal activity. Every passing minute brings them closer to acquiring a large sum of money from a socially unacceptable source. The perplexing thing is that neither is poor, or in need of money to pay off gambling debts to serious men who use concussion as a repayment incentive.

So why, the audience may ask, are they going through with this folly? To answer that question, we need to dig down through the untruth and pretention that accompanies all human interaction. If it were possible to banish the bullshit for a moment and allow reality and truth to dominate observation, an observant eye may see that, obviously, neither of the two is particularly comfortable with property

crime. It may also note that the fraudsters are not particularly comfortable with whom they think they are, and both believe that a large chunk of cash will help them on their way to being who they want to be. The observant eye, therefore, may conclude that our foray into truth and reality has exposed status and wealth as being more important than ethics and morality in the worlds of Emmet and Voula, and really, that's what the bullshit is there to hide.

This is a pity because, as has been previously mentioned, the fraudsters consider themselves to be on the side of good-white hat wearers, enemies of evil, champions of justice. But what if the eye of observation is simply being negative? Perhaps it is in a bad mood. Perhaps a more positive attitude in the observer would see the interactions here in a more positive light. What if the observant eye had been well shagged in the not too distant past and was in a very good mood? A sympathetic and sated observant eye may see two lonely people, desperately trying to get a handle on all this sex business. The problem is, it may note, that that they share the belief that money is a lubricant. A sympathetic and sated observant eye, therefore, may conclude that the fraudsters are two delusional individuals with more hormones than sense.

Sadly, the forces of bullshit are sneaky and untrustworthy, making them difficult to contain. In no time at all, they convince their keepers that their detention is a left wing conspiracy and have it away on their toes, flooding back into

the narrative and trampling truth in their eagerness to muddy the waters. The observant eyes wander off, one to have a shower and the other to pull the wings off blowflies, leaving Emmet and Voula to their sweat and cigarettes.

‘I know I can do it,’ a visibly agitated Voula says, after Emmet details her role in the crime. ‘I’d always imagined it would be more complicated than that but I’m glad it isn’t.’

‘Yeah, it’s best to keep things as simple and uncomplicated as possible,’ Emmet says, butting out his cigarette and internally vowing to give the ghastly habit away. ‘The important thing is that you simply forget it’s me on the phone tomorrow. Just treat me like any other customer you want to get rid of.’

‘I think I can manage that,’ says Voula, casting an admiring eye over the young 2ic. Her raging hormones point out that Emmet is quite handsome if you can get past the scruffiness.

Emmet begins to redden under her gaze. ‘What?’ he asks. ‘Stop staring like that, it’s making me self conscious.’

‘I’m just thinking that you are the only person I’d trust to do this sort of thing, and it’s kind of weird,’ Voula says.

‘What’s weird about it?’

‘I only started to trust you after we started planning a crime together,’ Voula says. ‘That’s definitely weird. Do you think that’s weird?’

Emmet lights another cigarette in an absent-minded way, then looks at it in annoyance before butting it out. ‘You’re

right, it's weird,' he says, 'but life is weird, and if you look at humanity from the outside you soon realise that we specialise in weird. We're weird as a collective when we indulge in the shared madness of things like war and television, and we're weird on our lonesome, smoking cigarettes, keeping pet fish, and stuff like that.'

'Thought about this a lot, have you?' Voula asks, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

'Yep, I have,' Emmet says, 'I even have a favourite weirdness. I just love those bizarre cleanliness fetishes that so many people have. They're totally weird. I had a girlfriend like that once, a total clean freak. Used to carry around those antiseptic wipe thingies and wipe everything down before she touched it. She once screamed at a waiter because she found a hair in her pizza. The really weird bit is she was a demon for oral sex. She'd stick her tongue everywhere, and I mean everywhere. Now I reckon that hair in her pizza may not have been recently shampooed, but I can almost guarantee that it carried far less harmful bacteria than what exists on my arse.'

Voula considers Emmet's words, then shrugs. 'Using sex as an example is unfair. Everyone's a bit weird about sex. I know I am.' She crosses her legs and lights a cigarette. 'So, you're a bit of a dominator, are you, to have a girl licking your arse like that?' she asks.

Emmet looks surprised. 'Not really,' he finally stammers out. 'She did it independently.'

‘Oh,’ Voula says, looking faintly disappointed. ‘I’d better go. Don’t leave it too late tomorrow, I might lose my nerve.’

‘No worries,’ Emmet replies, mortified that he had just told Voula the hair and arse story, which he usually keeps for more robust company that he isn’t trying to have sex with. ‘I’ll get it done first thing. Expect a call about eleven.’

That evening, Emmet locks the door to his bedroom to keep his nosy family out. It’s a practice his family accepts, acknowledging that a young man with an internet connection in his bedroom may want a little privacy every now and then. In fact, Atlas makes regular forays into Emmet’s bedroom after a lockout in order to transfer the digital cache onto his own computer. He has even managed to find the portable hard-drive that Emmet hides in his underwear drawer, which contains some of the more exotic downloaded files.

Tonight, however, Emmet is not after digital titillation. Tonight, he is working towards becoming an independent man and winning the woman of his dreams. True, it’s a new dream, but it’s fairly robust and even in these early days it has shown potential to develop into an unhealthy obsession given enough time.

The desire to spend a lifetime by Voula’s side drives Emmet, his scissors snipping busily as he cuts and pastes several real quotes into one fake one. It needs to tick several boxes to minimise suspicion. It must be from a repairer that seldom deals with Star; Emmet finds a boutique repairer that specialises in prestige European sports cars. While his work is

highly regarded in the industry, he has a reputation as a surely recluse with poor English skills and dubious hygiene. Tick.

It must have damage consistent with being the ‘meat in the sandwich’ in a car accident. Emmet finds quotes from two different vehicles of the same type as their fake. One has damage at the front while the other has damage to the rear. He is able to splice them together to get the required effect. Tick.

The quote needs registration numbers that won’t raise suspicion. Emmet is able to use the number from one of the two damaged vehicles because they had not been included with the quote. A little investigative work on the internet was all it took to find them, but no insurance consultant worth his or her salt would increase their workload by checking every registration number that crosses their desk. A suspicious consultant would do their utmost to avoid doing it themselves anyway, and would probably flick the investigation to their team leader. The numbers look real and that is all that matters. Tick.

Smiling and whistling as he works, Emmet assembles his fake quote on a piece of card, pasting in bits and pieces to make a fraud montage, which he places carefully in his scanner. He takes a moment to reflect as the scanner does its work. He had never really excelled at school except for a brief period in his younger days when cutting and pasting had been necessary skills. His steady hand and calculating eye were a boon during those times, and he was able to take several

disparate magazine cuttings and assemble them to into a single, pleasing mishmash of colour and shape. No one in his pre-school class could match him, and it stayed that way right up to the third grade or so, when the art of montage started to fade from the curriculum. By the sixth grade, montage was something that little kids did. The rigours of geometry and physics brought Emmet back to the field, and his montage skills became a distant, fading memory. Who would have thought that, once again, they would have a chance to shine?

The scanner takes less than a minute to transform the image on the card into digital form. Emmet inspects the finished product and is pleased. The fake quote is magnificent, its fault lines practically invisible! Only a detailed examination at three times the normal magnification, conducted by someone who knows exactly what to look for, could expose it as a fake. To make it even sweeter, the consultants at Star will be working off a printed fax, so they won't have access to the digital file. He prints a copy just to be sure and is more than happy. It looks real, it feels real, it smells real, it is real. Star Insurance doesn't stand a chance against Emmet's leet cut and paste skills. In the morning, he'll call Voula and send it straight to the fax from his computer and once Star Insurance sends out the cheque, he'll destroy the original file.

Feeling tired but elated, Emmet unlocks his door and wanders off in search of something to eat. In another room, in another part of the house, Atlas waits for Emmet's

footsteps to reach the kitchen. The sound of the refrigerator door swinging open sends him scurrying into the corridor, lesbian bondage movies uppermost in his mind.

That night, law enforcement features heavily in Emmet's nightmares. Police pop out from behind trees, waving fake quotes. A riot squad of heavily armed chickens led by Fang, his long dead pet rabbit, chase him into a blind alley demanding he drive them to the courthouse in a vehicle made from insurance files. Voula makes an appearance, naked as usual, waving a handful of hair she found on a pizza. Emmet awakes with a start, the taste of humiliation strong in his mouth.

The sun has yet to rise but he doubts that he can get back to sleep, especially if it means a resumption of his rather pathetic nightmare. Springing out of bed, he switches on his computer, logs into one of the many online worlds he inhabits and ducks out for cola and snacks while the loading screen does its thing.

At this time of the morning, Emmet's favourite killing fields should be empty save for a gold farmer or two, allowing him to work towards that shiny new sword he's been coveting. He feels pity for those who did not spend time in these massive online worlds because they help alleviate the drudgery of everyday life, injecting a little adventure into the mundane safety of modern existence. His avatar finally loaded, he checks his faction requirements and rejoices when he learns he only needs to kill 1437 zombies before he can

get that sword! He begins his task, targeting a zombie with a fireball, sending out a chilling bolt a few seconds later, then freezing it in place when it gets to close and finishing it with a second fireball. Only 1436 zombies to kill before he can get that sword!

Persephone finds him slumped on his keyboard several hours later, his cola half-drunk and snacks littering the floor. 'Emmet,' she says, grabbing a handful of hair and lifting his head gently off the keyboard, 'wake up, my dearest one, breakfast is ready.' Emmet continues to snore.

'You will be late for work. Come on dearest, breakfast is ready,' Persephone says. Still Emmett snores.

Persephone considers her options. 'WAKE UP YOU BRAINLESS BAG OF MEAT,' she yells, dropping his head back onto the keyboard. Persephone has many virtues. Patience is, obviously, not one of them.

Despite the noise and the pain, Emmet continues to snore. Persephone purses her lips. Those who know her well also know that she has as much compassion as she has patience. On this occasion, however, she takes pity on her son. He has worked hard for several months and is due a mental health day. She wanders out into the corridor, picks up the telephone and calls his work.

'Star insurance,' says the voice on the other end of the line. 'This is River speaking, how can I help you?'

'Hello deary,' says Persephone, 'I'm Emmet's Mum and I'm just letting you know he won't be in today. He's very

sick.’

‘Oh, really?’ says River, ‘Is it serious?’

‘Oh yes, he’s not well at all. Wouldn’t even come to breakfast.’

‘Wow, that’s bad. Wish him well from River, please Mrs Storch, and I’ll let the right people here know.’

‘You’re very kind,’ says Persephone. ‘You sound so-o-o-o nice, someone like you is bound to have been snapped up by now. Are you married, dear?’

‘No, Mrs Storch,’ River says, then giggles. ‘I’m very single. I’d love to chat, but sadly I’ve got to get back to work now, thanks for the call.’

‘My pleasure dear. Did you know that Emmet is single as well?’ Persephone says, who is the type of mother who spruces her son’s virtues to every un-married woman she encounters. ‘And very clean in his habits, too.’

‘That’s good to know. Goodbye Mrs Storch.’

‘Goodbye deary.’

Persephone hears a groan from Emmet’s room and bustles back. ‘I’ve just saved you the trouble of calling in sick,’ she informs the barely conscious Emmet. ‘What’s that River like, she sounds simply lovely?’

‘She’s bisexual, Mum, leave it alone.’

Persephone looks shocked. ‘I wasn’t suggesting anything, just making an observation,’ she says angrily, ‘but you must admit you’re getting on in years. Who’ll marry you when you have saggy old skin and faded eyes? Huh? Who?’

Emmet drinks the flat cola. ‘No one Mum, but that’s a long way away so let’s talk about it later.’ He stands up and puts an affectionate arm around her shoulders. ‘Thanks for calling, though, you saved me an explanation,’ he says, steering his mother towards the door. ‘What’s for breakfast?’

Emmet takes his time over breakfast, a rare pleasure in these days of productive labour. To be honest, Persephone’s breakfasts are best when one has a little time to spend. Emmet’s preferred method is to start at the top of the table and work down, but both Plato and Atlas start at the centre and work out in a spiral that moves anti-clockwise. He feels strangely calm and composed while masticating his way through his bacon and eggs, which is surprising considering his plans for the morning.

Finally sated after an hour of solid eating, Emmet takes the portable phone from the kitchen and wanders into his bedroom where he dials Star Insurance.

‘Hello Star Insurance,’ says the voice on the other end of the line. ‘This is River speaking, how can I help you?’

Emmet puts on a gruff voice. ‘You can help me by teaching your customers to drive, that’s how you can help me,’ he says.

‘Do you have a claim number or registration number there, please sir?’ River says. Emmet is impressed, she sounds almost cheerful.

‘Yes I do,’ he responds, deciding he may as well enjoy himself.

‘And that number is?’ enquires River’s voice without even a smidgeon of tetchiness.

‘CAR465789L,’ Emmet says, trying to sound annoyed. ‘That idiot driver of yours pushed another car into my arse, and that pushed me into the car in front.’ He snorts for effect. ‘My beautiful car is a fucking write off, do you hear me, a fucking write off. Now I gotta wait for another one to come from overseas.’

‘That’s terrible sir, I can understand your anger but I must ask you not to swear,’ says River’s voice, painfully reasonable. ‘That file is with our team leader. I’ll transfer you through. Hold the line.’

There is a brief bout of elevator music followed by Voula’s voice. ‘Good morning sir,’ she says. ‘I have your claim number here, do you have the registration number of the vehicle?’ Emmet shuffles some papers and mutters, before passing on the fake number.

‘We don’t seem to have you listed here sir,’ says Voula, ‘but the original claim does identify that one party did not leave details at the scene. Do you have a quote for your damages?’

‘Yes, yes I do,’ Emmet says, maintaining the gruff voice, aware that some of these telephone conversations are recorded, ‘but the car is cactus. It’s a write off, what can I do.’

‘Our usual procedure is to get a quote assessed and then send out a cheque,’ says Voula. ‘Do you have a quote showing

the extent of damages?’

‘Sure, should I drop it in?’ Emmet says.

‘No need to do that,’ Voula replies hastily, ‘just fax it in. Can I have your name as well please sir?’

‘Sure, it’s Peter Phillips,’ Emmet says, ‘but the car was registered under Seddon Internet. I’ll fax it right away. Thanks for your help.’

‘My pleasure, Mr Phillips,’ Voula says. ‘Please write the claim number on it and mark it attention Voula.’

‘Will do,’ Emmet replies and hangs up.

Voula receives the fax ten minutes later and attaches it to the file. She decides that she should walk it down to the total loss department because to stay here and send it via the internal mail would, she believes, drive her mad. Trying her best not to cry, she walks the few metres to the lifts and takes it down to the thirteenth floor where lurks the beast.

Voula likes total loss; it has a very masculine feel and the entire floor has an aggressive vibe. She is convinced that the people who inhabit this floor have an excess of testosterone, and half of them are female.

‘Voula, baby,’ says a throaty voice the minute she steps out of the lift, ‘coming down to slum it with us for a while?’ It belongs to Frank Wednesday, the hirsute team leader of total loss- a hard drinking, hard working, hard playing man who likes to go away on weekends and let it all hang out at nudist retreats.

‘Hello Frank,’ Voula says, ‘I need a quote checked,

ASAP.'

'I'll get to it after lunch,' Frank says. 'The pub's a'waiting. Want to come?'

'Frank!' Voula stamps her foot in frustration. 'Can't you do it now, as a favour to me?'

Frank looks annoyed for a few seconds, then his big hairy face splits into a grin. 'Only because I have never seen anyone stamp their foot like that.' He reaches out and takes the file from her.

'How's Jurgen,' he asks as he looks at the quote.

'He's fucked,' Voula says reflexively. 'Haven't seen him in days.'

Frank shakes his head. 'That sucks,' he says, sympathetically. 'Bloody Natalie is giving everyone the shits.' He scrawls a signature on the quote and hands the file back to Voula.

'Gotta run,' he says. 'I'm sure you'll check the addition for me. But the damage looks fairly consistent with the accident.'

'Thanks Frank,' Voula says as they walk to the lifts together. 'If I can have this file finalised by this afternoon, I'll buy you a drink tonight.'

'I'll expect a drink even if you don't,' Frank says as they part company.

Voula returns to her cluster and sets the file aside. Everything is going so well that she feels that the best course of action is to let it slide until after lunch- after all, there is

no need to rush. She decides to wait a couple of hours before going to Fran, just to be on the safe side.

A full quarter of an hour passes before Voula finally cracks. She makes a few notes on the file, checks the totals on the quote, then high-tails it to Fran's office.

'Can you look over this file for me,' Voula asks an obviously distracted Fran.

'Sure,' Fran says, taking the file from Voula's sweaty hands. 'But only if Natalie isn't involved in any way shape or form.'

Voula smirks. It's nice to know that everyone hates Natalie. 'No,' she says to Fran. 'You can tell by the absence of talon marks.'

Fran laughs out loud, signs the file and hands it back. 'How's Jurgen?' she asks. Voula is ready this time and gives a more guarded reply.

'He's Ok,' she says. 'Getting better.'

'Glad to hear it,' Fran says, 'and now if you'll excuse me, I've got to get back to compiling individual stats on our consultants as requested by Archon at the behest of Natalie.'

Voula gives Fran a weak smile. 'Good luck with that,' she says and backs out of the room.

Almost crying with relief, Voula goes to River and drops the file on her desk. 'Can we get a cheque for this cocksucker please?' she asks. 'It'd be great if you could do it now so I can get him off my back.'

'Sure,' River says, opening the file and making a few

notations. She punches some keys on her keyboard that prints a cheque on a printer behind her. She tears it off its perforated roll, double checks the details, signs it, and hands it to Voula. ‘There you go,’ she says, ‘I’m sure the cocksucker will be satisfied with that.’

‘Thanks River,’ Voula says and gives her a hug. ‘You’re the best.’ She runs off to her desk and stuffs it into an envelope.

‘I’m going to the mail room to send this,’ Voula calls out as she runs past River on her way to the lifts. ‘Don’t want it hanging over my head all weekend.’

River nods acknowledgement, then returns to her work. ‘Poor Voula,’ she thinks, ‘this crap with Jurgen is really fucking her up.’ The annoying thing is that Jurgen isn’t the only one affected by Natalie’s promotion; almost everybody in the office is behaving strangely. Unless there is a change for the better soon, the silly bitch will single handed empty the Star Insurance call centre into the unemployment queue. Even Emmet is taking mental health days. Her mind wanders back to her conversation with Emmet’s mother that morning. No doubt about it, they are a singular family. She should go visit Emmet after work and expose his day off for what it is- a unilateral decision to have a long weekend.

‘Sick my arse,’ she mutters to herself.

River stands outside Emmet's home, which is a well maintained, sprawling structure in an inner city suburb that has escaped gentrification due to the distressing smells emanating from the industrial estate at its heart. Steeling herself against the general weirdness that she knows she will encounter within those walls, she walks up the garden path and knocks on the door.

A small, busy woman answers, carrying a handbag and wearing a coat. She looks as if she was leaving and is rather surprised to see someone standing on the veranda.

'Yes?' The woman says, arching an eyebrow and adjusting her coat. River notices that her hands are in constant motion.

'Persephone?' River says, 'My name is River, we spoke on the telephone this morning.' Persephone smiles hugely and grasps River's hand.

'Come in dear, come in. What a lovely surprise.' She leads River into a room containing a couch, two sofa chairs and several million ornaments. Doilies cover every surface. 'Please have a seat and I'll get Emmet.'

Persephone disappears into a corridor and returns a short time later with Emmet in tow. 'It's been lovely to meet you dear,' she says, and then turns to Emmet. 'You treat our guest well while I'm at the supermarket. There is some Baklava in the fridge that would make a nice start. Bye bye, dearie,' she says to River and leaves the room, busily adjusting an ornament and its supporting doily on her way out.

‘Come on,’ Emmet says to River, ‘let’s get out of the public spaces before my father finds you.’ He leads her through a maze of corridors to his room and closes the door.

River feigns shock. ‘The minute I get here, you drag me to the bedroom. I thought you were sick, but now I know you are!’

‘Ha ha, very funny. I brought you in here for your own protection,’ Emmet tells her. ‘Atlas is out there and you never know what might happen if he finds you.’

As if the mere mention of his father’s name is enough to awaken dark powers, the two insurance consultants hear a rumbling of footsteps deep in the house, growing louder and closer by the second. The footsteps stop, and there is silence for a few minutes, broken by a long, low wail from somewhere on the other side of the door. The footsteps start up again, but this time faster, and approaching rapidly.

‘Emmet, why are there no new lesbian bondage movies on your secret drive?’ yells an angry voice and the door to Emmet’s room bursts open. In the doorway stands a tall, grizzled old man with bright green eyes, holding aloft a small portable hard drive. He sees River and lowers the hard drive. ‘I didn’t know you had company,’ he whispers, then rallies. ‘I will not have this type of disgusting pornography in my house,’ he admonishes Emmet. ‘Aren’t you going to introduce me?’

‘No,’ replies Emmet, taking the old man by the arm and dragging him out into the corridor. The door closes behind

the two devotees of literature detailing the power relationships between members of a social minority, leaving River alone in the room. She can hear snippets of conversation in which the word ‘humiliate’ features heavily.

Embarrassed and highly amused, River wanders around Emmet’s bedroom, reading the spines of the books he keeps in his bookshelf and generally being nosey. She flips open the scanner half expecting to find a dirty magazine in the process of digitisation. Instead, she finds a familiar looking quote pasted onto a card.

‘That’s strange,’ she mumbles to herself, ‘I wonder what that’s about?’ Aware that a direct question will expose her nosiness, she jots down the file number on a scrap of paper for further investigation on Monday. Emmet returns a few minutes later looking tired and defeated.

‘Let’s go somewhere and drink,’ he says, pulling on a jacket.

‘I remember you didn’t drink when I first met you,’ River says, shaking her head.

‘You’ve met the family,’ Emmet responds. ‘It was inevitable.’ On their way out, they pass a window that overlooks the back garden where a huge, heavily muscled man is lifting weights made of metal bars stuck in 4 litre olive oil cans filled with solid concrete. River stops and stares.

‘Wow, who’s that?’ she asks.

‘That’s my brother Plato.’ Emmet says, also stopping to look. He has to admit, Plato in motion is an impressive sight.

‘He’s a professional wrestler. He’s just starting out, so you won’t see him on television unless he’s having the snot beat out of him by one of the stars.’

‘He’s one scary looking dude,’ River says, awestruck.

‘Yeah, he certainly looks like he’s a violent psycho,’ Emmet says, ‘but he’s actually a committed pacifist. Totally rejects all forms of violence or coercion.’

They both stand for a while and watch Plato go through his paces.

‘You’re a strange lot, Mr Storch, you and your crazy family,’ River says, her eyes glued to Plato’s pectoral muscles.

‘Yep, which is why I now drink,’ Emmet says, taking her hand and leading her, reluctantly, towards the front door.

River spends the entire weekend with Emmet, and he is strange. He is more cheerful than usual, which is nice, but it is a cheer tinged with melancholy. He drinks more, talks more excitedly, laughs louder, and is more charming than usual, which is difficult because Emmet secretes charm like a snail secretes slime. Something is definitely not right. To top it all off, Emmet calls in sick again on Monday morning and tells Fran that he is very ill and the doctor has advised him to take a week off work.

Fishing the scrap of paper on which she had written the number on the quote in Emmet’s scanner from her bag, River checks its status on her computer. As she suspected, the same file caused Voula’s hysterics on Friday. Nor would it surprise

her if it was the cause of Emmet's strangeness on the weekend. A little more investigation reveals that the registration number, while registered to the same type of car, was deactivated a short time before the accident occurred.

River is impressed. As much as she believes it's not possible, the evidence all points to a crime. She wanders over to Voula's desk and sits on the edge.

Voula looks up, a little surprised. 'Hello River,' she says. 'What's up?'

'The cocksucker from CAR465789L just rang,' River says, smiling like a predator. 'He says you should buy me a coffee right away. 'He wants you to be very nice to me. Come on, let's go.' Voula looks like she is about to cry. 'You know?' she asks, her voice shaking with fear.

'Yep, but don't worry, I'm on your side,' River says, 'Let's find somewhere private to discuss this.' River and Voula leave the building in silence and walk to a quiet cafe on the other side of town. They sit down in a smoky corner and River fetches two glasses of sparkling wine from the bar.

'Congratulations,' River says. 'An excellent, well executed plan. One minor detail to fix and I reckon you're home free.' River almost collapses in relief.

'I'm sure Emmet won't mind if we split it three ways,' she says, accepting her drink. 'Cheers!'

River smiles and the two drink to the success of the fraud. 'I don't think you understand, Voula dear,' River says after they finish their drink. 'I don't want any money, I want you

to offer Emmet a three way with you and I.’ Voula’s jaw drops. River leans forward until her face is just centimetres away. ‘I’m going to teach you a lesson for being so bad.’

Voula crosses her legs and drains her glass. I can’t,’ she says at last, ‘I’ve got a boyfriend and I don’t like girls.’

‘Tough titties,’ whispers River. ‘You’ll do it or I’m calling the cops. Next Friday, at The Benedict. I want you to book a suite for the entire weekend.’

Voula hangs her head. ‘Okay,’ she says in a small voice. ‘But I’m going home now. Tell Fran that I’m sick.’ She stands up quickly and runs out of the bar. River watches her go, surprised at herself for feeling so good about being so bad. This should be fun.

Voula runs home, locks the door, runs into her bedroom, locks the door, strips off and masturbates like a middle-aged account executive who has discovered the delights of Viagra. One climactic orgasm later, she lights a cigarette and wonders what has become of Jurgen, her loving partner. This whole caper was, after all, about salvaging their relationship. Thinking back, she cannot recall seeing him since last Saturday night when he slipped out of the house without a word. It is now Monday afternoon and he was yet to return.

Finishing her cigarette, Voula wanders out into the lounge naked and sated. Before Natalie, she would always smoke outside as a courtesy to the non-smoking Jurgen. Now, with Jurgen the way he is, she no longer sees the point. Picking up the telephone, she calls Fran and tells her that she has been to

the doctor who advised her that she should stay at home until next week. Fran screams in frustration, but wishes her a speedy recovery.

After a moment's reflection, Voula calls River. 'You're right,' she says before River can even complete the standard greeting. 'I've been really bad and need to be punished. Don't be gentle, I deserve everything I get.' She hangs up before River can say anything. Collapsing on the floor, it takes just another moment to orgasm again.

### (iii)

The week that follows is a tumultuous one in Emmet's History as a call centre consultant at Star Insurance. On Tuesday, Emmet receives a cheque for two hundred thousand dollars in the mail, which he deposits gleefully in a temporary bank account set up specifically for the purpose. On Wednesday, Acheron calls Fran to let her know that he is going on a two-week retreat and will not be contactable during that time. He also lets her know that he has moved Natalie to a new position, Head of Corporate Strategy, located on the same floor as total loss. He will announce a replacement when he returns. On Thursday, the entire call centre goes out for a good-bye lunch with Natalie. She is not happy. On Friday, the funds from Emmet and Voula's crime finally clear and Emmet withdraws the full amount, in cash.

Emmet sits at the bar in The Black Cat fidgeting while waiting for Voula to arrive. In his briefcase, he has a beautiful and expensive handbag stuffed with one hundred thousand dollars in small denominations.

Voula arrives wearing a short leather skirt, tight leather shirt and a diamond studded leather band around her neck. Emmet fights his erection as she sits down nervously beside him.

‘Hi,’ Voula says, offering a weak smile. ‘How did it go?’

Emmet smile hugely and fishes out the handbag from his briefcase. ‘Quite well,’ he says, offering her the handbag.

‘Oh that’s beautiful,’ Voula exclaims, ‘is it for me?’

‘Yes Voula, it’s for you. Have a look inside.’

‘Who cares about what’s inside, it’s so beautiful on the outside,’ Voula says, reaching out and taking the bag from him. ‘You have very good taste, Mr Storch,’ she compliments him, her nervousness forgotten.

‘Just look inside,’ Emmet urges.

Voula opens the bag, looks inside then shuts it quickly. ‘Is that what I think it is?’ she asks. Emmet nods.

‘You mean it all actually happened?’ Voula asks.

Emmet nods again.

‘You mean it actually worked?’

Emmet nods for a third time. ‘And from this moment on, neither of us shall ever talk of this again,’ he says. ‘Now you can go and book that holiday with Jurgen and get your winner back.’ Voula’s smile fades at the mention of her partner’s

name. ‘He hasn’t been home since last Saturday,’ she tells him. ‘He left a message on my mobile saying he was at his parent’s farm to try and work himself out, and he would be back in a couple of weeks.’

‘That’s not so bad, is it?’ Emmet asks her. ‘So you put the holiday back a bit. I’m sure you’ve got enough leave. Neither of you two workaholics has taken time off for three years.’

‘His mother rang on Tuesday to let him know they’ll be down next weekend and wondering if we could all go to dinner together,’ Voula says sadly.

‘Oh. That’s bad,’ Emmet says, shaking his head. ‘What a bastard.’

‘No he’s not, he’s just a bit sad and confused,’ she says.

Voula looks at her brand new handbag. Strange, but she feels that the bag is a bigger prize than the loot it contains. A smile spreads across her dainty little face. ‘Did you know that River is bi?’ she says.

‘Yeah, she says she is,’ Emmet says. ‘She told all of us on the first day of training, but she told me later on that she’s never actually kissed a girl,’ he tells her, motioning to the bartender at the same time.

Voula’s eyebrows lift at the news. ‘Really? Never kissed a girl?’

‘That’s what she told me. Do you want a beer?’ Emmet asks as the bartender arrives.

Voula nods yes to the beer. ‘Well, she propositioned me

last week,' Voula says, stroking her new handbag. Emmet is dumbstruck. Voula shapes to continue her tale, but Emmet motions for her to stop.

'Wait for beer please,' he says.

The beers arrive and Emmet takes a long, deep drink. Thus fortified, he feels he can hear more. 'Go on, what actually happened?' he says, motioning for her to continue. Thinking that Emmet may be unhappy knowing that River is aware of the crime, Voula gives a slightly distorted version of events at Star on Monday.

'She came up to me during smoko on Monday,' she says, 'and asked if I wanted to go out with her tonight.'

'And you said yes,' Emmet says, determined to explore as far as his ego will allow.

Voula shrugs and has a drink of her beer. 'I haven't had sex in a while, and she is really hot, and Jurgen is gone and no-one knows when he'll be back, and it can just be a single weekend thing, so I thought what the hell.' She draws breath and looks at Emmet who looks like he is about to burst into tears.

'Weekend thing?' Emmet says. 'You mean it's going to go on for a whole weekend?'

'I've booked a hotel room for two nights,' she tells him.

Emmet sighs and drains his beer. 'I hope you have a lovely weekend,' he says, and stands as if to leave.

'Don't go, I haven't finished yet,' Voula grabs his arm and pulls him back onto his barstool.

‘Please don’t go into graphic detail,’ Emmet implores her as he motions to the barman for another beer. ‘It’s been longer for me than for you, believe me.’

Voula smiles at him and pats his knee. ‘I told River I’d go only if we had a threesome.’

Emmet looks at her incredulously. ‘Well, I suppose that since you’re already in the gutter, you may as well splash about a bit. Please don’t tell me you’ve invited Natalie. Or Fran.’ His imagination throughs up several images for his consideration, all featuring naked women cavorting with Voula and River. The first image features Natalie, the second Fran, and the third with both. Distressingly, he finds them all pleasing.

‘No you idiot, do I have to spell it out to you?’ Voula snaps. ‘I’m not sure I like girls, so I said yes but only if you would come along and make it a three-way.’

‘Excuse me, I didn’t quite get that,’ Emmet says.

Voula rolls her eyes in exasperation. ‘The three of us, naked for the weekend doing what comes naturally. It’s not rocket science.’

Emmet sits, dumbfounded. Finally, his id, unable to see such an opportunity go to waste, takes control. ‘Sure, I’d love to,’ he says, feeling that to decline would be to betray, not only his own masculinity, but also masculinity as a concept and a way of life. What heterosexual man could turn down something like this? Who wouldn’t want to share a beautiful experience with the boss’s gorgeous girlfriend, and their own,

just as gorgeous, best friend? Imagine the shame if he said no and people found out about it. They'd laugh him out of the gender.

'Want another drink?' Emmet asks Voula. 'I'm having a double vodka.'

Voula giggles. 'Not too much, now,' she says, 'you're going to be in demand in a few hours and you need to make sure you can perform.'

Emmet ejaculates. 'Really,' he squeaks. 'I'm off to the bathroom. Get me an orange juice.'

'Get it yourself,' Voula says. 'I'm going shopping. Meet us at The Benedict at eight sharp. Show some photo ID at reception and they'll give you a key.' She stands up clutching her new purse.

'I love the purse,' she says as an aside and bends down to kiss him on the cheek.

'See you then,' says Emmet, and runs to the bathroom.

Voula smiles as she watches him go. 'It'll be an experience if nothing else,' she thinks as she walks towards the door. Emmet sits on the toilet in The Black Cat for a long time, looking sightlessly at the cat motifs and contemplating how his life has changed since he found employment at Star Insurance. To be fair, he spent more time cleaning the semen from his pants than he did in deep thought, but it doesn't sound nearly as impressive.

He is troubled by the question of whether indulging in kinky sex with his beloved bring him closer to securing her as

a life partner? Assuming he is successful in winning her affections, would spending a dirty weekend with her and another woman set the tone for their relationship henceforth? Could a relationship based predominantly on sex survive the long haul? What happens when the new and exciting become the routine and mundane? All questions that he knows the answer too.

His hormones screaming, Emmet takes out his mobile phone and call River.

‘Hey River, it’s me,’ he says. ‘Feel like a coffee?’

‘Sure. Is this about the Voula situation?’ says River’s voice on the other end of the invisible line. ‘I can’t wait.’

‘Yeah, me either,’ Emmet says. ‘Come down to The Black Cat and I’ll buy you a drink.’

‘Great, I was wondering how I was going to kill the time till tonight,’ River says. ‘See you soon.’

When River walks into the Black Cat, Emmet is sitting morosely at the bar, half-heartedly sipping at his beer. She looks dazzling, but Emmet was expecting nothing less. She sits down beside him and looks at his long face.

‘What’s the matter?’ River asks, ‘I thought you’d be so high we’d need a ladder to take your pants off.’

‘I can’t do it, River, I just can’t.’ Emmet blurts out.

River looks at him in the same way you would look at someone who refuses free money. ‘Why the hell not?’ she asks incredulously. ‘An offer like this doesn’t come up all that often unless you’re in the porn industry.’ She stops mid

tirade, realisation dawning on her face. ‘You’re gay, aren’t you? I knew it! I knew it! I bet you’re in love with Jurgen.’

‘I am not gay, and I only love Jurgen as a friend,’ Emmet says.

‘Yeah, right,’ River says, sounding incredulous. ‘You turn down an entire weekend with two beautiful and willing women for no apparent reason and then claim heterosexuality. My arse, Emmet, my arse.’ River looks at him again, a look of concern spreading across her face. ‘You haven’t got AIDS, have you Emmet? Or cancer? You’re not going to die, are you? Please don’t die, Emmet, I’ll miss you, I really will,’ she says, her eyes filling with moisture.

‘Will you quit it, already? I’m not gay and I’m not going to die, OK?’ Emmet snaps, then regrets his temper.

River looks taken aback. ‘What the fuck is it then?’ she asks, perplexed.

‘I’m in love with Voula,’ Emmet says, surprised to hear the words said out aloud after keeping them inside for so long. ‘She’s all I can think about, all I dream about.’ Emmet strikes a pose that he believes someone who sacrifices all for love should strike.

‘So what you’re saying,’ River says after taking a moment to internalise his revelation and contemplate his pose. ‘Is that you love Voula so you don’t want to have sex with her.’

‘That’s right,’ Emmet says, nodding his head enthusiastically. ‘I don’t want our relationship to be based on

sex.’

‘I hate to tell you this, Emmet my dear, but all sexual relationships are based on sex. The title kind of gives it away.’

‘No, no, no,’ Emmet responds, this time shaking his head vigorously, ‘sex is definitely part of the plan, but I want it to happen naturally, as our relationship blossoms. I just don’t think that starting a relationship with a multi-partner event sets the right tone for the future.’ He shakes his head and looks down at his beer. ‘Why does it have to be kinky, that’s what I want to know? Doesn’t anyone just fuck anymore?’ he adds.

River looks dumbfounded. ‘What’s wrong with starting a relationship while having a good time?’ she responds. ‘And to answer your question, no, nobody just fucks anymore unless they have a missionary fetish. It’s because of the internet. But let’s not stray too far from your psychosis. You’re gay, aren’t you?’

‘For the last time, I am not gay,’ Emmet explodes loud enough to attract the attention of nearby drinkers. ‘I just think that love deserves to be treated with a little respect,’ he adds a little more quietly.

River doesn’t quite believe what she is hearing. A straight man with a pulse should jump at something like this, or so her preconceptions would have her believe. She tries a different tack. ‘C’mon Emmet, please come tonight,’ River implores him. ‘If you’re not gay and you’re not dying then chill out

and have some fun. No one will ever know except us.'

Emmet does not look amused. 'But River, we're the only ones that count,' he says. 'Just us knowing is as bad as everyone knowing.' He pauses a moment and thinks about what he has just said. 'Well, almost as bad. I was kind of hoping you wouldn't go either,' he adds.

River chokes on her drink. 'Excuse me? Did I hear you correctly? You want me to not fuck Voula because you love her and don't want to have sex with her yourself?'

'Please, River. Do me this favour as a friend. Please don't go tonight,' Emmet begs, head hung low and eyes downcast. 'I love her so much and you're not even sure you like girls. Please.'

'To be honest, I only set it up after hearing from your dad that you had a lesbian fetish,' River admits, and then shakes her head. 'But since then, I haven't been able to stop thinking about her naked.' She sighs and looks at her downcast friend. 'But friendships are a little more important than a dirty weekend. You owe me big time, Mr Storch. Big time. I'll go to the hotel and tell her it's off.'

Emmet stands up and embraces her. 'Thanks River, you're the best?' he says as she melts into his arms and hugs him back.

'And the stupidest, don't forget the stupidest,' River says, sighing deeply.

## Chapter 7

After lying low for the weekend, Emmet arrives at work on Monday morning feeling sheepish and a little strange. The solitude of the past two days presented plenty of ponder-time that he devoted, in its entirety, to thinking about Friday's lost opportunity. After two sleepless nights, during which a nagging voice at the back of his head kept calling him a tool, he concluded that knocking back Voula's invitation for a dirty weekend was a bad move.

To his dismay, and to compound his already complex relationship with himself, his subconscious has replaced pleasant images and thoughts of a naked and available Voula with unpleasant musing about sex, love, self-esteem, and his lack of all three. His position on the purity of a relationship at its inception is looking a little ridiculous. A fun filled cavort would probably have had a positive effect and strengthened the relationship rather than weakened it.

To put it bluntly, Emmet feels like a right bastard. He knows that to a dispassionate outsider it would appear that he had befriended Voula because he needed her in order to commit the fraud. Now that the money is safely in the bank and he has no further use for her, he has cast her aside. To compound his misery, having a spare one hundred thousand dollars in his bank account isn't making him as happy as he once thought it would.

Now, in the cold, fluorescent light of insurance, Emmet can see that River had a point about the role of sex and fun in a relationship and he may very well have insulted Voula by refusing to attend. It looks even worse when you consider it from Voula's perspective. What choice would she have other than to assume he didn't find her attractive? She is unaware that he desires to spend his every living moment with her. All she can see is some bastard who used her for his own ends and then wandered off when she had fulfilled her role.

He heads straight to his desk when he arrives at work, avoiding eye contact with everyone including River and Voula. For the first few hours of the day no one approaches and he is able to wade out into the deep, still waters of bureaucracy and let the soothing red tape drain his humanity away. But as the hours pass, the shame of his recent behaviour grows until eventually it gets the better of him and, just before lunch, he wanders over to Voula's desk. She looks up and smiles.

'Hi, how was your weekend? We missed you on Friday,' she says.

'It was good. I just needed a break after all the crap that went down last week,' Emmet answers. 'I hope you weren't offended. I feel like a complete bastard.'

'No, not offended,' Voula says, smiling. 'A little surprised, but not offended.'

Emmet stands around, feeling embarrassed and at a loss. 'So how was your weekend?' he asks, hoping to fill the

embarrassing silence with idle chatter. From his perspective, inane bullshit is far more appealing than textured silence.

‘It was okay considering my boyfriend is nowhere to be found,’ Voula replies.

‘That’s unfortunate, I wish there was something I could do,’ Emmet says, trying to sound sympathetic.

‘There is,’ Voula says and smiles up at him. ‘Come to dinner with me tonight. My favourite restaurant has a new chef and I have no one to go with to check her out. The word is she’s very good.’

‘Sure,’ Emmet replies, radiating relief, ‘I was afraid you’d hate me after Friday.’

‘If it had been anyone but you, there would be a problem. But I don’t think you would intentionally hurt anyone,’ Voula says. ‘You may be a cunning, untrustworthy, deceitful bastard, but underneath it all you’re a nice guy. Just don’t expect me to lend you any money or co-sign any loans.’

‘Gee, thanks. I think,’ Emmet says. ‘I’ll come by at seven?’

‘Sure,’ she says. ‘Now shoo, I don’t have time for a smoko this morning, too much to do.’

‘No worries,’ Emmet replies, and wanders off towards his cluster. River gives him a wave and a smile as he walks past her desk. Emmet waves back, suddenly feeling quite good about life and the role played by love, sex, and self-esteem.

Monday evening finally comes around and Emmet finds himself having a pleasant meal with Voula at an exclusive

restaurant in the city's centre. He'd used some of his ill-gotten gains to purchase an expensive necklace that Voula had once admired while they were at lunch together. Plucking up some courage, he invites her out again the following evening, and she graciously accepts.

On Tuesday night, he presents her with a pair of earrings that match the necklace he gave her on Monday. Now it is Wednesday night, and he and Voula are sitting in another exclusive restaurant, sharing their third evening together. Emmet is riding high on love's expectations. Tonight is the night that he will make his move. The signs have been positive thus far but he feels he must be careful so as not to fall at the last hurdle.

'So, how's Jurgen,' Emmet asks casually.

'You are a tool,' says a voice at the back of his head.

Voula's face says roughly the same thing, but only briefly. Then her eyes moisten and her head drops. 'I don't know,' she whispers. 'I hope nothing bad has happened to him. He was so depressed the last time I saw him.'

'I'm sure he's OK,' Emmet says, in an effort to head off the tears. 'He's certainly no Conrad,' he adds, continuing his streak of stupidly insensitive comments.

'Thankfully, no,' Voula responds, pulling herself together. 'He would never take his own life, but I just can't help worrying.'

'Me too,' Emmet admits. 'I wish he'd contact someone so that we can all breathe a little easier.'

Emmet runs his hand through his unruly hair, which is just beginning to recede, and shakes his head. ‘During all the excitement I kind of forgot about the Jurgen situation. Now it’s all over, I’m really worried.’ He slumps back in his chair.

‘Yeah, it helped me forget a little as well.’ Voula says morosely, then a smile lights her face. ‘It was fun though, what we did. I still can’t believe we got away with it. Until I see the bag of money under my bed, that is.’

‘Put it in the bank,’ Emmet admonishes. ‘It’s dangerous having that much cash lying around. What if someone finds out?’

‘Who’s going to find out? I don’t quite believe it myself, and I’ve counted every dollar,’ she points out.

‘You’re right, I just worry too much,’ Emmet says, smiling and shaking his head. ‘So tell me, have you booked your holiday yet?’

Voula’s eyes fill with tears once again, but her voice remains steady. ‘Somehow, I don’t think Jurgen and I will be together for very much longer even if he comes back,’ she whispers. ‘In fact, I think we can assume that Jurgen and I are no longer a couple.’

Emmet works hard to suppress a winner’s grin. ‘That’s sad,’ he says in a tone that says no such thing, and is immediately ashamed of his elation. His shame deepens when he sees the look of pain and loss in Voula’s eyes. He signals to a passing waiter and orders a bottle of red wine. When the waiter returns a few minutes later, Emmet stops him from

pouring and takes the bottle.

‘I’ll do that,’ he says and sends the waiter away. Emmet pours two generous measures. ‘I’m new to drinking,’ he says to the teary Voula, ‘but somehow a nice red wine feels appropriate at a time like this.’ He raises his glass in the air in Voula’s direction. ‘To fond memories,’ he says and drinks down the entire glass.

Voula says nothing and just sips at her wine. ‘The memories aren’t all that fond,’ she says, whipping away the tears. ‘I’m just upset that it had to end like this. How can someone get the sulks so bad that it wrecks their home? What a whiney, spoilt little brat.’

‘Actually, he’s quite big,’ Emmet corrects her.

‘Well, yes, physically he’s big, and in more ways than are immediately apparent. But as soon as things stopped going his way he has a hissy fit and skulks off to sulk like a little boy.’

Emmet shrugs and pours himself another big glass of wine. ‘No one’s perfect,’ he says. An uncomfortable silence descends and Voula fidgets with her napkin while Emmet fiddles with something in his jacket pocket.

Looking like a man who knows he can’t win the race no matter how fast he runs, Emmet takes a small, velvet covered box from his jacket pocket. ‘I don’t know whether this is the right time to give you this,’ he says to Voula, ‘but what the hell. I hope you like it.’ He hands it across the table. Voula looks at Emmet and then down at the box, then back at Emmet, who senses her disquiet.

‘It’s not an engagement ring or anything like that,’ Emmet reassures her.

‘I didn’t think it was,’ Voula lies, her relief obvious. She opens the box to reveal a diamond-encrusted bracelet that matches the gifts of the previous two nights. ‘Oh Emmet, it’s beautiful!’ she exclaims and hastily puts it on.

Emmet reaches out and takes her hand. ‘Voula, I think I love you.’

She freezes for a moment, and then bursts into tears. ‘I’m sorry, Emmet,’ she sobs, then gets up and races for the door.

‘Not again,’ Emmet mutters to himself as he launches the pursuit. He catches her before she can leave the restaurant and takes her arm. ‘Please don’t run away,’ he says, not really surprised at how easily he caught her. Voula has a well-developed sense of theatre and he suspects that she hadn’t tried too hard to escape in case she actually succeeded.

They return to their table through the whisperings of the other diners and Emmet signals to the waiter for another bottle.

Voula sits down and does a credible job of composing herself. ‘Sorry,’ she says, ‘but I can’t. I just can’t. I love someone else.’

‘I understand,’ Emmet comforts her. ‘I’m sure you can work it out with Jurgen.’

Voula looks miserable. ‘It’s not Jurgen,’ she says, ‘I’m over him. I don’t think I ever loved him.’ She looks down at her hands and plays with her new bracelet in a distracted way.

‘Not the way I love River,’ she adds.

Emmet is stunned.

‘I’m sorry Emmet,’ Voula continues. ‘I didn’t think I loved her like this until just now. She told me of your feelings for me and I honestly thought that once we got together, I would forget her.’ She produces a handkerchief from the handbag Emmet bought for her and dabs at her eyes. ‘But just the thought that I may never be with her again makes me feel sick.’

Emmet remains stunned.

Voula looks at him, searching for a reaction. When none is forthcoming, she pours herself a glass of wine. ‘Last weekend, when you didn’t show up, she wanted to call it off. But I begged her to stay. I got on my hands and knees and begged, Emmet. I begged her to stay, and I’m so glad that she did,’ Voula says, her eyes un-focussing as her mind’s eye takes her back. ‘She did things to me that I can’t even think about without getting excited. I’ve never felt like that before. Ever.’

Once again, silence descends as Voula loses herself in her memories and Emmet loses brain function. They sit quietly for a few minutes before Emmet’s subconscious deems it safe to allow him to talk again.

‘Wow, I didn’t see that coming,’ Emmet admits, ‘I thought River was just crapping on about being bi.’

His voice shakes Voula out of her trance. ‘She’s definitely into girls, alright. I can assure you of that, and so can my

aching body,' Voula says and drains her wine glass. She pours herself another. 'I'm really sorry if I led you on but admitting that you may be gay can be tough, even to yourself.'

'Maybe you're not,' Emmet says, clutching at straws. 'Maybe it's just the allure of the new.' Voula shakes her head. 'I've always suspected, to be honest,' she says.

Emmet can feel his hopes and dreams crumbling.

'I just kept telling myself that I needed to find a real man to find satisfaction,' Voula continues. 'But they don't get much realer or masculine than Jurgen, and you know how that turned out.' She takes a drink of wine. 'And the way Voula made me feel during those two nights we spent together, she did things to...'

'Yes, yes, I get the picture,' Emmet cuts her off.

Voula looks at him and giggles. 'You wouldn't believe what she did with my magazines,' she says, and Emmet smirks at the thought. The tension drains away, and he slumps back into his chair. 'You are a couple of twisted bitches,' he says, shaking his head and smiling. 'Let's go home.'

'Yeah, it's time to go,' Voula agrees, 'but first I must do something.' She takes off all the jewellery that Emmet has gifted her and hands it back to him. He accepts without a word.

'Please don't be offended,' Voula says, 'but you should have these back. They'll just make me cry at what could have been. I'm keeping the handbag, though, because it's absolutely gorgeous.' Finally, she signals the waiter for the bill and pays

the full amount. ‘I think we’re square now,’ she says, and he nods agreement.

Emmet and Voula leave the restaurant together, but part ways as soon as they are outside. Voula catches a taxi to the house she once shared with Jurgen. Emmet, wanting some solo time in which to ruminate over the events of the day, begins the long walk to the house he shares with his family.

## (ii)

The following morning, Emmet awakes to a strange feeling of peace and contentment. He’d had a strange dream during the night in which he’d escaped some horrible fate by the skin of his teeth. While the details are rather sketchy, blurred by his subconscious in its never-ending quest to keep him from knowing who he really is, there remains an overwhelming sense of relief.

The sun is yet to rise, but he can hear Persephone already preparing breakfast while Atlas tools around in the back shed. The rhythmic sound of Plato’s feet pounding along the back lane as he begins his morning exercise routine adds an aural shape to the morning. It all feels a bit like one of those crappy breakfast-cereal commercials, except that the family making the accidental music is a long way from the ideal. A very, very long way.

In Emmet’s mind, the Storch family occupies the same

place in the human kingdom as howler monkeys occupy in the monkey kingdom: big, loud, and prone to throwing their shit at passers-by. His whole life Emmet had felt a little out of place in the Storch household- a quiet, dignified orang-utan in a house full of howling gibbons- but now he finally has the means to escape. With a smile on his face he springs out of bed, eager to get the next stage of his rebirth underway.

There are several hours to kill before work and he has no desire to interact with his family this early in the day, so Emmet puts off breakfast and fires up his computer. Ignoring the powerful siren's song of his online worlds, he points his browser towards the real estate pages with the aim of finding his own little piece of the ultimate reality to have and to hold. The ringing of his mobile phone, however, interrupts his quest.

Cursing, Emmet makes to hurl the horrible thing against the wall, but catches a glimpse at the screen, which reveals that the inconvenient caller is River. Curious as to why she would call him this early, he answers.

'Hello,' he says, still scrolling through the hundreds of Storch-free homes for sale.

'It's me,' says River's. 'I need to talk to you.'

'OK,' Emmet says, 'I'll meet you at the Suicide in an hour.'

'No,' River responds, 'not near work. Meet me at The Black Cat. And forget about work today, this could take a while.'

‘Are you alright?’ Emmet asks, feigning concern.

‘Yeah. Sort of. Maybe. No. Not really. I’m so confused,’ River babbles down the line.

‘I understand,’ Emmet says. ‘I’ll just call in when the office opens and then head out.’

‘There’s no need to call in,’ River says, sounding a little hysterical. ‘Voula’s here and she already knows you’re not going to work.’

‘Is she coming too?’

‘No, no,’ River says hurriedly, ‘she came over last night and stayed.’

Emmet isn’t quite sure what to feel. Here is his best friend complaining to him that the woman he coveted for so long has spent the night with her. ‘And that’s a problem?’ he asks.

River is quiet for a few seconds. ‘I don’t know,’ she responds. ‘The problem is that I don’t know. Please Emmet, do something for someone else for a change. I need someone to talk to and you’re the obvious one. Please.’

‘Okay, okay,’ Emmet replies, feeling chastened but not knowing why. ‘I’ll be there in half an hour.’

‘Thanks mate, it means a lot to me,’ River says and hangs up. He looks at his phone, startled by the abrupt end to the conversation, and sighs. He can remember imploring River to refrain from doing something for the sake of their friendship, and look at how that turned out.

Grumbling, Emmet shuffles off for his daily battle with the shower, dropping past the kitchen to let Persephone

know that he will be missing breakfast. As usual, she takes it hard and berates him about his tardy attendance at family meals since becoming a working man. Emmet showers and dresses while Persephone lectures him from the kitchen about the nutritional and economic benefits of eating nice home cooked meals, and the health problems of those who choose to consume nasty, fat laden, restaurant food. As he shuffles out the door, the sense of peace he awoke with long gone, he hears Atlas join with Persephone in the general condemnation of all food prepared beyond the corridors they know.

‘Soon,’ he thinks to himself, ‘soon.’

River arrives over an hour late looking tired and dishevelled. Emmet wisely decides not to make a big deal of the timing of her arrival. Instead, he orders her a coffee. ‘What’s up?’ he asks when River has finally settled into the dark booth and drunk a substantial amount of coffee.

‘Oh, nothing much,’ River answers. ‘My existence has been hijacked by a crazed nymphomaniac who insists on barging into my home and demanding kinky sex at the most inopportune times.’ She looks at the remains of her coffee. ‘It’s not too early for alcohol,’ she adds, looking annoyed.

‘Yes it is,’ Emmet replies. He cannot recall ever seeing River this flustered. ‘This is about Voula, isn’t it?’ he asks, thinking he is showing remarkable insight and perception.

‘Well der, who else is it going to be about,’ River says, showing little patience.

‘But you’ve told everyone you’re bi. You can’t be bi and not have sex with women. It’s part of the definition.’

‘What are you talking about?’ River exclaims, looking annoyed.

‘But you told me that you’d never, you know, done it with a girl before.’ Emmet says.

River covers her face with her hands. ‘I was lying, Emmet,’ she says, ‘You asked a stupid question and I gave you a stupid answer. I wasn’t expecting you to actually believe it.’ She fidgets with her coffee cup, spinning it on its saucer and watching the waves of coffee rising to the lip. ‘It’s the way we have sex that is the problem.’

Emmet says nothing, concentrating on not getting an erection.

‘She is so obsessed, it’s fucked up,’ River continues, but her words sound hollow. She looks up from her coffee to Emmet’s face. ‘I don’t know how to handle it.’

‘Really,’ Emmet’s voice is a murmur. He can imagine all too easily how to handle it.

‘Yes, really,’ River says, defiantly. ‘I’m not ready for such a commitment. She is gorgeous and all that, but she is also really, really needy. It’s freaking me out here, Emmet, freaking me out.’

Emmet is feeling conflicted, but decides that the softer road is probably the best. ‘If you’re not ready for commitment, let her go. I’m sure she’ll get over it,’ he says. ‘Eventually,’ he adds, after a moment contemplating Voula’s

temperament.

River's expression cools. 'You still have a thing for her?' she asks.

'Hey, it's only been a few hours since she knocked me back,' Emmet points out. 'I'm feeling a little depressed about it, to be quite honest.'

'Really? You don't look like your suffering too much,' River says, observant as ever.

'Actually, you're right, I feel great, but I don't think it has much to do with her.' Emmet says, then gets up and storms off.

River looks at his receding back. She wants to follow and apologise, she wants to hold him in her arms for a moment, just so he knows he is not alone. But she does nothing. She sits frozen in her seat, unable even to cry. Thankfully, he returns a few minutes later with two beers.

River jumps out of her seat and applies an enthusiastic bear hug on a surprised Emmet. 'I'm sorry, Emmet,' she sobs loudly into his ear. 'I didn't mean to take her away from you. I tried, but she was naked when I got there and she begged me, and she is so beautiful.'

Emmet skilfully manoeuvres himself next to their table and puts down the beers without spilling a drop. 'I changed my mind,' he says, hugging her back. 'It's not too early to have a drink. I hope you like beer with your breakfast.' They disengage and resume their seats, both sipping at their beers for a few minutes.

Eventually, Emmet breaks the silence. ‘This shit happens,’ he says. ‘And if it doesn’t work between the two of you, then maybe I can try again. But don’t tear yourself up on my account, I’ll be fine.’

River continues to sup at her beer. ‘I felt really bad about going against my word,’ she says, and then pauses a moment, trying to come to terms with the way she feels. ‘But it’s not about that. It’s Voula. She’s freaking me out. She’s really submissive, which is fine and everything and I’m okay with that,’ she says and then takes a drink of her beer followed by a sip of her cold coffee. ‘Actually, it’s not her, it’s me that’s freaking me out. I just can’t believe how much I love being a bitch.’

Emmet stares at River. Thankfully, he’s had enough beer to make fighting off an erection fairly straightforward. ‘Let me get this right,’ he ventures. ‘You are having an existential crisis because you’re uncomfortable with the way you treat your submissive girlfriend?’

‘I wouldn’t put it quite like that, but yeah, in a nutshell.’ River says and takes a drink of her beer, which sends a shiver through her entire body. Now that she has had time to settle down, breakfast drinking doesn’t seem like a good idea. She takes up her cold coffee instead.

‘I’ve always thought of myself as a gentle person. Kind to small fluffy animals, only eat free range chickens, you know stuff like that,’ she takes a drink of her coffee, makes a face and takes up her beer again. ‘Sure, I’d fantasised about being a

dominant bitch, but never actually gone through with it. Until now. Some of the things I did to her make me ashamed. Like, I took one of her celebrity mags and rolled it up...

‘OK, OK, I get the picture.’ Emmet interrupts her. ‘So what’s the problem?’

‘Treating a person like they are less than human, like you would treat an animal or a piece of furniture, just doesn’t feel right,’ River says.

‘Then don’t,’ Emmet responds, totally missing the point as far as River is concerned.

‘I wish it was that easy, but she wants me to, and I want to, and not doing it is like trying to defy gravity,’ River says in exasperation.

Emmet considers his beer for a moment. It tastes just as good at 8 am as it does at 8 pm. ‘So what you’re saying, correct me if I’m wrong,’ he says, ‘is that you feel ashamed of treating Voula the way you do, even though both of you enjoy it?’

‘Yeah, it’s wrong to make someone vacuum the floor with a wooden spoon up their...’

‘No details please,’ Emmet says, holding his hand up and palm outward in a universal sign that tells the audience that going further is a bad idea. ‘It’s hard enough without the gory bits.’

Emmet is also afraid that if it gets any harder, it’ll blow. Scrapping semen off his pants in the toilets of The Black Cat is not a habit he wants to get into. ‘River, my dear,’ he says,

trying to sound worldly and wise. ‘As long as it’s between consenting adults, what does it matter?’

River looks at Emmet and sighs. ‘But what does it says about me?’ she asks. ‘Why do I need to humiliate someone to enjoy sex? And what does it says about Voula, who can only enjoy intimacy if she is being physically or emotionally abused?’ River lapses into a confused silence. Emmet joins her, to show solidarity.

Eventually, Emmet gets up and returns with two hot coffees and a platter of pastries. ‘This is more like breakfast,’ he says, setting the platter down. They tuck into their food and drink and say nothing of consequence for the next half an hour. Sated at last and with the effects of the beer wearing off, Emmet sits back in his seat and looks carefully at River. She is, quite possibly, the nicest person he has ever met. She is kind, considerate and positive. Hearing that she enjoys humiliating her sexual partners is like hearing Bambi has a heroin problem. ‘Do you think all that shit with Voula has got something to do with your past?’ he asks, playing amateur psychologist.

‘I don’t think so,’ River says, worrying half a croissant around her plate. ‘My folks were great when I was growing up. Sure, they had their issues, but nothing bad.’

‘I don’t know, River,’ Emmet says to her after an appropriate amount of ponder time. ‘You’re really nice. It’s not like you’re a natural a-hole like Natalie. I just can’t see a problem here. So you like kinky sex, big deal. As long as

there's consent, who gives a fuck? '

'But what about Voula?' River says, tears in her eyes. 'She deserves better than to be treated like that.'

Emmet hands River a packet of tissues he brought with him. He tries to learn from his experiences. 'What about her?' he says. 'If she enjoys it, who are you to judge? It's not like calling her a few names and smacking her arse is going to do any real damage to her psyche.'

'But it's so much more than that,' River sobs. 'It's about physical and emotional humiliation. I'm ashamed of some of the things I've done to her.'

Emmet shakes his head. 'It's not more than that,' he tells her. 'It just feels like it is. It all boils down to a little role-play about power relationships, nothing more than a dip into fantasy.' River nervously fiddles with a tissue.

'It's not as if you really are like that. I know you, you know you,' Emmet says, taking her hands to stop her fidgeting. It was distracting. 'And she isn't always a pushover, either. In fact, her job as a team leader requires that she spend most of her time bullying people into doing what she wants them to do. It's a fantasy River, it's not real.' Emmet pauses for a few minutes to get his breath. River is still sobbing, but the intensity of her sobs has lessened.

Feeling he is making progress, Emmet pushes on. 'Surely it's not all about sex, either,' he says. 'Make an effort to have an egalitarian relationship outside of sex. Always let her know how important she is to you, and how much you love

her,' he continues, as River wipes her eyes and blows her nose. 'Communicate with her, let her know that the sex part is fantasy and that in reality, you love and respect her as an equal. You'd be surprised at how effective communication is in keeping reality and fantasy separate.'

River's tears abate, but she continues to fiddle with the damp tissue. 'It's not that easy, Emmet,' she whines. 'With Voula, it's all about sex. She insists on being submissive all the time.'

'You freak me out,' Emmet says. 'Not a week ago, you were telling me off about sex and fun in relationships, now you're in a similar spot, and it's OK to stress. It's not as easy from the inside, is it?'

River shrugs. 'That was a bit of fun, this is real. Having a playful romp with friends over a weekend is a bit different to a long term relationship founded on anger and self loathing.' she responds. 'She has called me every night to tell me how your dates went. Last night, she came over pissed as a fart. This morning, she wouldn't leave until, uh, she got what she deserved.'

Emmet shakes his head yet again. 'It may have been a little bit of fun from where you sit, my dear, but it was bloody serious from my point of view,' he says, sounding angrier than he would have liked. 'It's no different at all, and that's all bullshit about hate and self loathing. You're both intelligent, reasonable human beings. There is nothing strange or bizarre about either of you. Even your sexual deviations

are common. The problem is you're trying to look at this logically. It not logical, River, you can't think shit like this through. It's about lust, instinct and biology, not reason and philosophy. People are people, and sex is fucked up.'

Emmet looks at River's downcast features and a pang of sympathy forces a sigh from his lips. 'Do your best,' he says, 'give the relationship a chance to settle and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. At least then you can say you've given it a go, and if it goes to shit, well, what can I say. I'll still be around.'

River looks at him and smiles. 'You're a cunning little rodent, Mr Storch, but this time you may be right. I'll enjoy some kinky sex for a while and if it doesn't work, you can oil you're way in.'

Emmet considers her words. If this is the nicest person he knows, maybe he doesn't know enough people. 'It's very difficult to see positives in that last comment of yours,' he says, 'but for the sake of our friendship, I'll take it as a compliment.'

The two insurance consultants sit at their booth for several hours, the conversation meandering along the well-worn paths of office gossip and politics. They part feeling strangely normalised, and the events of the past fortnight have an unreal texture about them, like a dream that the detritus of everyday life will soon smother from their memories.

### (iii)

Emmet goes home after his breakfast with River and settles down to resume his search for a Storch-free home. Once again, however, his mobile phone interrupts him and once again, he shapes to throw the thing against the wall. A precautionary glance at the screen reveals that it is Jurgen calling, which once again spares the phone from destruction.

‘Jurgen,’ Emmet squeals, ‘where the fuck have you been?’

‘Hey Storchy,’ says the familiar voice, ‘have you missed me?’

‘Oh man, if only you knew,’ Emmet says, and hears Jurgen laugh.

‘Anything exciting happen since I’ve been gone?’ Jurgen asks.

Emmet considers the past fortnight. ‘Nah, just the same old same old,’ he says. ‘But you haven’t answered my question. Where the fuck have you been? Voula’s been worried sick.’

‘That’s a story that needs a beer or three,’ Jurgen replies. ‘Meet me at The Black Cat in half an hour and I’ll tell all.’

‘No worries,’ Emmet says, ‘see you then.’ After today, he vows to himself as he hangs up, no more Black fucking Cat. On his way out, he drops his telephone into the toilet and flushes it into the sewers.

Jurgen is waiting for him in the same booth that he and

River were in not two hours before. He gets up as Emmet arrives and gives him a hug. If nothing else, Emmet knows that his friends hold him in some affection judging by how often they embrace him.

‘Believe it or not,’ Jurgen says as they sit down, ‘I missed you more than anybody else.’

Emmet blushes. ‘I missed you too, mate, it was doing all your work that kept reminding me of your absent face,’ he says, but with a smile.

Jurgen pats his hand. ‘I’m sure you’ll find it’s a price well worth paying,’ he says.

Emmet looks around for the waiter. When he finally catches his eye, the waiter raises a questioning eyebrow and disappears behind the bar. He returns with two beers.

‘On the house,’ he says to Emmet as he sets the beers down. ‘You look like you need it.’

‘Thanks,’ Emmet replies. ‘These will be the first of many, I’m sure.’ He turns to Jurgen.

‘So, where have you been?’ he asks, ‘people have been worried sick about you. And before you go on, we know you weren’t at your parents place.’

‘Well, you know how I got all depressed about not getting that job?’ Jurgen asks him.

‘Yes, we could all see that.’

‘Well, I got sick of being depressed and I thought, fuck it, my time at Star is over,’ Jurgen says. ‘So I called Acheron and asked him if cocksucking was the same as merit in Star

Insurance.’

‘You did what?’ Emmet exclaims, and puts his head in his hands. ‘That is simply the stupidest thing that I have ever heard.’

Jurgen nods agreement. ‘I certainly thought so. But it doesn’t end there,’ he continues. ‘He said yes, and invited me out for a drink.’

‘Excuse me,’ Emmet says, lifting his head. ‘I couldn’t have heard what you just said.’

‘It’s true,’ Jurgen says, laughing. ‘Every fucking word and it gets better. He invited me out for a drink and then, after we had a few drinks, he invited me to his place.’

Emmet faints, causing his forehead to smack onto the top of his beer glass. The resultant bruise looked remarkably like the letter “L”.

Jurgen revives his friend by lifting his head off the table by the hair and sprinkling beer on his face. ‘Are you OK,’ he asks, looking into Emmet’s unfocused eyes.

‘Yes, yes, I’m fine, Emmet says, rubbing his tender forehead. ‘So let me get this right. While Voula was going out of her mind with worry about you, and while I was doing all your work, you were sucking the boss’s dick?’

‘Yep,’ says Jurgen. ‘That’s a rather crude way of putting it, but very accurate.’

Emmet shakes his head and takes a long, deep drink of his beer.

‘But that’s not all,’ Jurgen says, bursting at the seams

with juicy, shareable information. ‘It turns out that Natalie is Acheron’s niece, which is why she got the job. It was Tony that was the cocksucker, but when they split up he was so upset that he left.’

Emmet signals to the waiter. ‘Could we have two double Vodkas, please’ he calls out when he gets the man’s attention.

Jurgen pauses while the drinks arrive. ‘Anyway, to cut a long story short, I thought what the fuck, I’ll milk this,’ he continues with a double vodka in his right hand while making lewd gestures with his left hand. ‘So I started working on Achi for favours. I got him to move Natalie out of claims and into her own private hell with total loss, and I’m going to get her job.’

‘Nice,’ Emmet says, refusing to accept any definition of milking that does not involve cows.

‘And to be honest,’ Jurgen says, ‘I felt bad about dumping all that work on you, so I got him to promote you to my old position.’

Emmet freezes, Vodkas half way to his lips. ‘I’m going to be a team leader?’ he says, smiling despite himself.

Jurgen spreads out in the booth and smiles broadly. ‘Yep. As soon as Achi gets back to work,’ Jurgen replies.

‘Wow, team leader.’ Emmet murmurs, almost to himself. A sudden thought knocks the smile from his face. ‘Does Voula know about any of this?’ he asks.

Jurgen also loses his smile. ‘No, I haven’t spoken to her yet. I don’t know how I’m going to tell her,’ he says.

Emmet leans back in his chair and thinks, what the fuck. ‘Jurgen,’ he says, slowly. ‘Remember how I said that it’s been the same old same old?’

‘Yeah,’ Jurgen says, knocking back the vodka and making a face.

‘Well, it wasn’t quite true.’

Editing out all criminal activity, Emmet makes a full and frank admission about his love for Voula and of his efforts to win her from Jurgen’s grasp, including their many lunches and tea breaks together, culminating in the three dinner dates. He also tells Jurgen that he failed, not because Voula did not like him as a man, but because she liked River as a woman.

‘Bloody hell,’ Jurgen says when Emmet finished. ‘Go away for a couple of weeks and the entire world goes to shit.’

‘Hey, you haven’t been a model of stability either, Mr Milkman,’ Emmet retorts.

‘Fair enough,’ Jurgen says, ‘but I must admit, the news about Voula surprises me. She’s so into masculinity.’

Emmet shrugs. ‘Maybe she’s more into dominance and the masculine world is very dominant,’ he says. ‘Or maybe this is all a part of that and the connection is in her head. Who knows? The end result is that she’s in love with River, and River may also be in love with her, but it’s hard to tell for sure with River.’

The two men sit quietly for a few minutes before Jurgen looks at his watch and jumps out of his seat. ‘I gotta go, mate,’ he says. ‘I want to get my stuff from home and take it

to Achi's before he gets back. Do you want to come with?'

Emmet shakes his head. 'If you don't mind mate, I'll just stay here and have some lunch. I need some time to take it all in.'

'Taking it all in is what Achi likes about me,' Jurgen leers.

'Enough, enough,' Emmet says. Jurgen waves and wanders off, leaving Emmet to ponder his future as a team leader at Star Insurance.

# Chapter 8

The following week ushers in a new era at Star Insurance. The dynamic in the office has changed and there is an atmosphere of rebirth and renewal. Old alliances have shattered and new partnerships forged, but Natalie is gone so everyone is happy. Everyone, that is, except Emmet.

To your average consultant at Star Insurance, the bizarre dance of the lower managers is something that happens at one remove, an experience akin to watching a bunch of talented circus clowns do their thing under the Big Top. Emmet, however, finds himself in the thick of it.

Emmet's rapid promotion from consultant to ~~clown~~ manager has thrust him into the big ring with all the other managers ~~clowns~~, and he is having trouble coping because he is the junior performer who always gets the whitewash in the pants. Everyone's ally, Emmet finds himself included in all manner of plots and schemes, from the grand to the trivial, most of which run at cross-purposes and none of which benefit him in any way. To complicate matters, both Jurgen and Voula are having guilt pangs about the way they treated one another, but instead of getting together to resolve their issues, they spill their guts to Emmet.

Much to Emmet's surprise, his clown shaped cloud comes with a silver lining. Voula and Jurgen have decided that they cannot possibly keep their home and have put it on the

market. Because the onetime lovebirds used him as an intermediary in their negotiations, Emmet is the first to know and is overjoyed because his search for a Storch free house had been going poorly.

That is why he finds himself, on a cold Saturday morning, driving the Storch family car to the auction of Voula and Jurgen's house with the intention of buying the open plan home of his dreams. Unfortunately, his family got wind of his intentions and imposed themselves as only they can. His car, therefore, is distressingly full of Storch as he makes the short drive to the auction. Atlas, who has made it clear that he is against the purchase, sits in surly silence in the front passenger seat. Persephone and Plato sit in the back, chatting about food.

Emmet casts a sideward glance at his father's thundery demeanour and sighs. Try as he might, he simply cannot convince the man that location is an important factor in any home purchase. Sure, there are equivalent houses on the other side of the city for half the price. It is also true that they are even closer to the city than this one, and are more conveniently located with respect to services and public transport. The neighbourhoods are quite respectable as well, and there are no problems with crime or pollution.

The point Emmet keeps trying to make is that price, convenience and safety cannot be the only measures relevant to a home purchase. In addition to these three rather pedestrian considerations, there is also the social condition,

which in Emmet's view overrides the other three. The place where you live should not just be a home; it should be an integral part of your personality. It is a piece of geography that marks your position in the social spectrum, an external symbol of your internal landscape. Where you live defines who you are, and living in this trendy little suburb by the beach will tell the world exactly who Emmet is. Infuriatingly, Atlas refuses to listen to such illogic and maintains a purely rational line.

Both Persephone and Plato support Emmet in his quest to live by the sea, for their own selfish reasons of course, but support is support. Persephone dreams of telling her friends at the Balkan Villages Collective Association Social Club about the successes of her oldest son, proof of which will be an expensive home in a ritzy suburb. For years, she has felt that Emmet has been holding them back as they try and conquer the dizzying heights of Balkan Village society. His lack of direction has often been the subject of behind the hand comment and not so gentle humour, but no more! Once Emmet buys this house, they will finally take their rightful place at the forefront of Balkan Village culture, and she and Atlas will surely be invited to sit at the front table at the monthly bingo night alongside the other leading families such as the Pantepsis's and Oligrapsis's.

Plato, on the other hand, dreams of morning runs along the beach culminating in a hearty breakfast at one of the many café's that line the foreshore. True, it will be Emmet's

house, but it has three bedrooms and he knows his brother very well. Emmet is not someone who likes to live alone, despite his many laments and protestations. The only problem that Plato can foresee is that Emmet may manage to attract a partner. He casts a critical but affectionate eye over his big brother. Nah, the man is as mad as a cut snake. Even if he manages to find a girlfriend, his many unique anxieties have the potential to keep them living in separate houses for years.

The crowd awaiting the auction are surprised when the Storch family erupt from their car like angry wasps from their nest. Atlas and Emmet are screaming at one another, while Plato stands between them. Persephone runs alongside and alternates between shouting at Emmet to respect his father, and telling Atlas he is an ignorant old fool. Many in the crowd are impressed at the way the four combatants are able to maintain their formation while moving swiftly towards their destination. An aspiring choreographer scrawls notes on the back of the auction flyer that will, in the fullness of time, become the world famous Dance of the Loons.

People tend to make way for Plato and so the Storch family find a nice spot at the front of the crowd where they settle down for some good old-fashioned bickering while waiting for the auction to begin. Emmet is standing in front of Plato, who towers over the crowd. Persephone is to his right and Atlas to his left.

‘Look at this place,’ Atlas whispers in his left ear, ‘full of

wankers. This place just isn't you, my son. Listen to reason.'

'Oh what a lovely street,' whispers Persephone in his right ear, 'everyone here is so well groomed.'

'Not one locally produced car on the entire street,' whispers Atlas.

'And look at all the new cars,' whispers Persephone, 'they're all this year's models.'

'You'll regret buying this the rest of your life,' Atlas predicts in his left ear.

'If you buy this house,' Persephone says into his right ear, 'it'll be the smartest move you've ever made.'

The auctioneer comes out of the front door of the house and mounts his pedestal. Emmet takes a deep breath and prepares himself. He can see Jurgen peeping out of one of the windows and a smirk crosses his lips.

'Don't do it,' warns Atlas in his left ear.

'Go for it,' encourages Persephone in his right ear.

The auctioneer begins his spiel, letting everyone know that this house would make a lovely home for the discerning professional with a family. He points out the lovely, tree-lined street and the large allotment of land. He draws the eyes of the crowd to the perfectly manicured, landscaped garden and the wonderful façade of the house itself. Sales speak over, the auctioneer raises his gavel and the auction begins. He opens his mouth and emits a stream of gibberish followed by a number that makes Atlas blanch. Emmet raises his hand and the auctioneer points his gavel at him, turning the stream of

nonsense in his direction.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ Atlas whispers urgently in his left ear.

‘Oh Emmet, this is so exciting!’ whispers Persephone in his right ear.

Another member of the crowd raises a hand and the auctioneer turns the stream of noise away from Emmet towards the newcomer.

‘There is a God,’ says a relieved Atlas.

‘Please Emmet, bid again, bid again!’ says a distressed Persephone. The crowd of onlookers at the auction have noticed the conflict revolving around Emmet, and all eyes are upon him as he raises his hand.

The auctioneer turns his gavel and redirects the unintelligible stream of noise back towards Emmet.

‘For fucks sake, Emmet, the mortgage will drive us broke,’ an angry Atlas chokes into his left ear.

‘Emmet, I’m so proud of you,’ a happy Persephone squeals into his right ear.

Emmet’s adversary raises his hand and the auctioneer abandons Emmet once again.

‘You’re bloody lucky my boy, now don’t do anything stupid,’ Atlas advises Emmet in his left ear.

‘Buy it! Buy it!’ Persephone screams into his right ear, so loud that she interrupts the stream of noise coming out of the auctioneer’s mouth. Emmet raises his hand and both Atlas and Persephone almost swoon.

‘Madness,’ bellows an agitated Atlas into his left ear.

‘Joy!’ shrieks a happy Persephone into his right ear.

The adversary raises his hand and a hush descends upon the crowd.

‘Don’t do it again,’ implores Atlas into his left ear, clutching at his chest.

‘Please God, make it happen,’ cries Persephone into his right ear. The whole crowd turns to look at Emmet. His mouth closed, the auctioneer waits in silence for a sign. Emmet raises his hand and the crowd erupts into spontaneous cheering; even the adversary joins in, overtaken by the collective emotion. Persephone kisses and hugs her son as the auctioneer, his gibberish flowing once again, brings the gavel down once, twice, and a sale clenching third time. Atlas holds his head high. Defeated he may be, but bowed he is not.

The following hours become a blur of deposits, mortgages, contracts, and smiling people who are pocketing a hefty commission. Eventually, the excitement goes away and leaves Emmet and Jurgen sitting in the lounge room of the newly sold house, watching football and drinking beer. A half consumed pizza sits on the coffee table as proof that Plato has left the building.

‘Big boy, your brother,’ Jurgen says by way of conversation.

‘I’m sure he’s straight,’ Emmet replies to an implication that is not there.

Jurgen smiles and returns to watching the football. ‘I

never asked if he was straight or not,' he says after a few minutes. 'You shouldn't assume that's where I was headed.'

'Sorry,' Emmet says.

Jurgen sits up and takes a piece of cold pizza. 'It freaks me out that someone like you can be so hung up about sex. That's all you ever think about and you take it so seriously.'

'It's the biological imperative, isn't it?' Emmet replies. 'That's all anyone thinks about. Until we get old, of course, and then death kind of grabs our attention.'

Jurgen laughs and chews on his cold pizza. 'That was in the long, long ago,' he says, tossing the cold crust back into the box. 'But the species is now well and truly established and many of our more base instincts are no longer relevant.'

'Which is why you fuck anything that moves?' Emmet asks. 'Am I right?'

'I don't fuck anything that moves, mate. In fact, I've only had two sexual partners in the last five years.'

Emmet looks surprised. 'Really? Only two? Even I've had more than that,' he lies.

'Only two and both have been with a view to a long term commitment,' Jurgen claims.

'Oh come on,' Emmet says, exasperated. 'It's obvious that humping Acheron is a career move. In your position, I'd be claiming condoms as necessary business expenses on my taxes.'

Jurgen, in the process of taking a mouthful of beer, tries to suppress a laugh but fails. Beer streams out of his nose and

onto the carpet. 'I'm glad I don't own that anymore,' he says running a sleeve across his mouth and nose to clear the beer.

Emmet clears the mess and the two men resume watching the football, albeit without the cold pizza that had been directly below Jurgen's nose when the hilarity struck.

'It's true, though,' says Jurgen, picking up the thread of the interrupted conversation. 'You take sex too seriously.'

'I do not,' responds Emmet, 'I take sex any way I can get it.'

'Yeah, right,' Jurgen says. 'Not many men, and I'm including a lot of men who identify as one hundred percent gay here, would have knocked back a weekend with River and Voula. You did.'

Emmet winces at the memory and a voice at the back of his mind reminds him that he is a tool. 'Don't remind me,' he says. 'I'll regret that for the rest of my life.'

'It's because you take sex too seriously,' Jurgen says. 'You thought it would fuck everything up if you jumped in, but it wouldn't have. In fact, from what River tells me, you got fucked up because you left it in your pants.'

They watch the football in silence for a while, engrossed in the engineered contest between two groups of muscular men wearing tight, flimsy outfits. Jurgen is the first to break the silence.

'In the end, sex isn't just about breeding, it's a recreation,' he says, not taking his eyes from the screen. Emmet looks perplexed but says nothing. On the screen, a

group of men grapple one another trying to be the first to gain possession of a small red ball. ‘People fuck for two reasons,’ Jurgen continues. ‘It’s either fucking to breed or fucking for fun. That is all.’

Emmet looks away from the screen where the umpire had separated the men, and who now held the ball aloft, as if taunting the others with his power. ‘That’s crap,’ he says, ‘what about love?’

‘Sexual love is bullshit,’ Jurgen says, dismissing an emotion in whose name people throughout the ages have committed unspeakably atrocities and heinous acts, often leading to death and destruction. True, there were some good bits in there, but it’s predominantly death and destruction.

‘It’s all to do with fun and reproduction, sexual love is just a way to say you want to breed with a particular person. Love that is non-sexual is another matter entirely, but tying real love to sex is wrong,’ Jurgen continues. ‘You may love the person you are fucking, which is fantastic and may lead to a long and happy relationship, but the act of fucking isn’t really related to that love. If you aren’t fucking for kids, then there is very little that separates sex from, say, watching football.’

Emmet watches the men on the screen re-engage in their grappling. The umpire, a smug look on his face, watches from the sidelines. ‘That is so much crap, Jurgen,’ he says. ‘Is there anything else on?’

Jurgen hides the remote control behind his back. ‘Nope,

it's footy all the way,' he says. 'You've had girlfriends before? You know what it's like. The relationship is over, but you would still play hide the sausage at a moment's notice. You may hate the cow with a passion, but a fuck is a fuck.'

Emmet thinks of his ex-girlfriend, and then stops quickly before the mental images lead to an erection. 'I only want to fuck my ex because she's a kinky bitch,' he says. Emmet ponders Jurgen's words and sees little of merit. Real love is sexual and leads to lifelong partnerships, kids, happy families, and stuff like that. An image of family Storch floats across his mind's eye. It's not always perfect of course, but it's an ideal to aim for. Too tired from an emotional day to argue the point with Jurgen, he decides to change the subject.

'I wonder how Natalie's getting on,' Emmet says.

'She loving it, apparently,' Jurgen responds. 'Get's to hang out with the guys at total loss and not actually do any work.' He stops and thinks for a moment. 'Natalie's a perfect example of what I mean,' Jurgen continues. 'I hate her guts but I'd fuck her in a heartbeat. You probably wouldn't, but only because you're hung up about sex and take it too seriously.'

Emmet shakes his head. 'Nah, I'd fuck her,' he says, 'but only because I hate her guts. Anyway, why are you on about fucking your boyfriend's niece? I thought you'd sworn off women.'

'Mate, aren't you listening? Sex is for fun. I'm fucking Acheron for fun and profit. Sure, I love him as a friend, but

not enough to breed.’ Jurgen says, then stops for a moment and considers the logic of his statement. ‘Or adoption or whatever gay folk do for kids. It’s like playing basketball instead of football. Basically the same thing, but you use different equipment.’

‘Or snooker,’ Emmet says, unable to help himself.

‘You’re a clown, Storchy,’ Jurgen says, smiling. ‘But I love you anyway.’

They watch the rest of the football game on television, but both decide that the televised basketball game following is not their cup of tea. Jurgen calls Acheron and arranges to meet him at The Black Cat. Emmet turns down an invitation to join them, arguing that his brain may implode if he ever crosses that particular threshold ever again.

‘You sure you don’t want to come?’ Jurgen asks at the door.

‘No mate, I told you, it makes my eyeballs bleed.’

‘Well, come with us to the cinema tomorrow afternoon,’ Jurgen implores, but Emmet shakes his head.

‘I’m taking Voula and River to the airport tomorrow,’ Emmet explains. ‘They’re off for a holiday in the sun.’

Jurgen nods understanding and embraces Emmet before leaving. His words are positive, but his shoulders are hunched and his face downcast. ‘Off for some fun,’ he says as he walks out the door.

## (ii)

The rising sun finds Emmet playing video games (only 832 zombies to go!) because the prospect of spending a day with the woman of his dreams had him tossing and turning in his bed. OK, there was more tossing than turning, but Emmet is a healthy young man with needs and desires.

Try as he might, he is incapable of not loving Voula. Jurgen's hare-brained philosophies may discount sexual love as simply the desire to breed, but his desire to be with Voula demonstrates that they are false. It is more than the desire to breed; it is the desire for a woman so right for him that all others are mere shadows in comparison. While children may happen, they will be a product of their perfect union rather than their hormonal impulses.

Or so Emmet tells himself as he kills virtual zombies. It certainly feels like more than the desire to breed because Voula fills his mind from sunup to sundown. Come to think of it, she fills his mind from sundown to sunup as well, usually with more intensity and in explicit detail. Emmet's obsession glosses over the fact that he is meeting the woman of his dreams today in order to take her and her lesbian lover to the airport so that they can go away on a romantic holiday together. His subconscious has convinced him that Voula's obsession with River is an inconvenient and temporary setback. In fact, he is sure both River and Voula are only

experimenting with their sexuality and will revert to heterosexuality in the fullness of time. His very sanity depends upon it.

Emmet logs off from his virtual world when the sunlight actually falls upon his stained keyboard. Clad in his threadbare bathrobe, he makes his way to the hated shower, winding through a litter of boxes that contain the material elements of his life. He began the moving process the minute he heard that Voula and Jurgen were selling because he was sure that he was destined to own this house and experience the open plan lifestyle it promised. How else can one explain the crime that netted just enough money for a solid deposit, and the bank's willingness- nay, eagerness- to finance the balance? They even offered him enough money to buy a new car and have an overseas holiday! Obviously, the hand of a benevolent deity is at work here.

Even Atlas has come around and in a generous gesture of reconciliation purchased several items of furniture for his move. Not to be seen to be outdone in the generosity race, Persephone opened one of the big chests in the living room to reveal thousands of handcrafted doilies (she likes to be busy) and offered him some choice pieces to take to his new home. He dared not refuse. Finally, Emmet feels as if his whole life is falling into place. Now all that remains is to capture the love of the woman of his dreams.

Voula is staying with River in a small house located in a non-descript outer suburb. So unnoticeable, in fact, that

Emmet had never even heard of it until he met River, despite spending most of his life in the city. From all accounts, Voula is unhappy by its unremarkable nature and is agitating for immediate change, even bringing up the possibility that they buy a new place together once the money from the sale of her and Jurgen's house comes through. River does not seem too impressed by the idea and favours the status quo.

Emmet arrives at the house after a harrowing two-hour drive. It took precisely 20 minutes to arrive at the outskirts of the suburb, the name of which Emmet can never recall, and another 100 minutes negotiating the brain-sapping network of lanes, circuits, courts, and cul-de-sacs that were so popular with town planners in the 1980's. The thinking at the time was that the tangle of streets and avenues would discourage speeding. Emmet is also of the opinion that they have the added benefit of discouraging invasion because there is no guarantee that once your armoured column enters the tangled web that it will ever come out again.

The house itself is nothing special, and Emmet follows a brick path through an overgrown lawn to the front door and pushes the doorbell. A pleasant tune leads to a cacophony of bangs and thumps, and the door swings open to reveal River and Voula dragging two suitcases.

Emmet stares. River is dressed in jeans, a button down shirt, complimented by a loose tie and oversized running boots. She does not look happy. Voula, on the other hand, is all smiles. She is wearing a tight black dress that ends just

above her knees, a wide black belt, and black stockings. High heels accentuate her long legs.

‘Don’t say a word, Storch,’ River says, seeing his face and knowing his mind. ‘Help us with the suitcases.’

‘Hello ladies,’ he says, changing tack at River’s warning and inadvertently sounding sleazy. Embarrassed, he grabs a suitcase and leads them back to the car. The three indulge in idle chatter during the long drive to the airport. More accurately, Voula talks incessantly while River and Emmet make grunting noises at the appropriate times.

At the airport, they send their baggage on its way and retire to a bar to await the flight. Voula buys a round of drinks and re-engages her chatting muscles. Emmet, finally over the shock of seeing River dressed as a man, looks approvingly at Voula. She appears to have filled out a little. River notices his gaze and smiles. ‘Voula dear,’ she says, ‘why don’t you go and buy some magazines for the flight.’

Voula pouts. ‘Do I have to?’ she asks.

River looks at her sternly. ‘Yes you do,’ she says, and pushes Voula off her seat, then smacks her quite hard on the backside as she walks away.

Emmet waits until Voula is out of earshot. ‘That was a bit harsh,’ he says. ‘You should be nicer to her.’

‘You’re kidding me, right?’ River says. ‘Look at me. She cried when I told her I wasn’t going to wear this.’

Emmet finally allows a suppressed grin to surface. ‘You look fabulous,’ he says, ‘living the dream.’

River scowls, but it quickly fades to a smile. ‘I gotta admit, she’s one intense individual,’ she says. ‘She’s goes all the way. Do you know she spent hours on the internet and bought heaps of magazines before deciding on outfits for us today? Everything has to be perfect for Voula, from the caresses to the shoes.’

‘So, how is lesbian life?’ Emmet asks.

River shrugs and takes a drink. ‘Just like ordinary life as far as I can tell,’ she says. ‘It’s the couple thing that’s killing me at the moment.’ River looks sadly at her drink before taking a big mouthful. ‘She’s great, but she’s driving me insane. She picks my clothes, makes the bed, everything except cook,’ she continues. ‘I made dinner at home one night and she freaked out, said we could get spaghetti delivered, so why make it.’

‘I’m sure you can work it out,’ Emmet says.

River looks at her drink. ‘Actually, no I can’t,’ she says. ‘I’m going to drop her when we get back. This has gone too far. I just wanted to have some fun, not get married.’

Emmet shapes to say something, but Voula’s return silences him. She puts three very thick magazines on the table and resumes her seat. River sighs and drops them into her bag.

Voula’s happy chatting masks the silence of her companions. Emmet is busy contemplating a future in which Voula is a free agent, while River smiles to herself at the thought of regaining her independence. Eventually, the boarding announcement for Voula and River’s flight comes

over the airport public address system and the three rise and make their way to the departure gates.

Voula embraces Emmet. ‘Thanks for everything,’ she says, when she finally disengages. ‘I love you.’

River also embraces Emmet, just as passionately. ‘See you in two weeks,’ she says. ‘We’ll go to dinner when we get back and tell you all about it.’

Emmet watches from the security barricade while his two friends walk hand-in-hand into the corridor that leads to the aeroplane. When they are out of sight, he pumps his fist into the air joyfully, drawing the attention of the security staff nearby.

Embarrassed, but with a spring in his step, he heads back towards his car. To make it all the sweeter, he will be ready to move into his new house just before River and Voula get back. In hindsight, getting a job wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

### (iii)

The move into his new Storch free house was surprisingly incident free, and Emmet is relieved that he now rises every morning to shower in a bathroom that does not have plumbing running through the netherworld. As he suspected, Persephone visits regularly to ‘see how he is doing’ (make sure he is not drowning in a sea of his own filth), but a nagging darkness gnaws away at the back of his mind. The

open planning revolution wasn't quite as life changing as he expected, but the routine is pleasant enough and he feels that he is finally free of the smothering influence of his family. Only one more piece of the puzzle remains, which he thinks must be the source of his blues: Voula.

Contrary to what the conscious part of Emmet believes, however, the funk continues after River and Voula return from their holiday. Nor does it lift when Voula once again becomes a free agent after River ends their relationship. It continues to darken his days, despite the fact that the newly available Voula comes to see him often after moving into a small apartment in the city. It saps at his confidence, and a couple of gloomy weeks pass before Emmet finally plucks up the courage to ask her out again. She graciously accepts.

The evening of the date has a bizarre and familiar feel to it that Emmet finds unnerving. He sits with a strangely lethargic Voula in an exclusive restaurant, wondering when he should make his move. After the entree, which Voula barely touches, she reaches out and takes hold of his hand cutting his wondering short. 'Dear Emmet,' she says, 'I'm so glad we are still friends.'

Emmet looks at her and fears the worst. This is when she tells me to shove off, he thinks, but remains silent.

Voula looks directly into his eyes. 'You're the only person in the whole world I can trust,' she says, tears welling up in her eyes. 'No one else seems to understand me.'

'Really?' says Emmet.

Voula looks totally wretched. ‘I haven’t told anyone else about this,’ she says, ‘but while River and I were away, I got really drunk one night and started an argument. I don’t know why but I just couldn’t stand being in the same room with her. I said some really bad things and she got so angry that she took her stuff and got a room by herself. We made up the next day, but the damage was done.’ Voula pauses, releases Emmet’s hand and picks up her drink. ‘While she was gone, I called Jurgen.’

Emmet is stunned. ‘How did that go?’ he asks when he finally regains his voice.

‘How do you think it went?’ Voula snaps. ‘It’s fucking twisted, Emmet, fucking twisted. I love him, he loves me but for some bizarre reason we are no longer together. When I got home, the only thing I wanted to do was see him. I told River I was going for a walk but I think she kind of knew what was going on. I think that’s why she dumped me. I went straight to Jurgen and we made passionate love at a motel near The Black Cat. It was love, Emmet, not sex, but love. We’ve been seeing one another on the sly ever since. He promises to leave Acheron, but wants to do it in a way that won’t ruin his career. I’m telling you this because I feel guilty about leading you on again.’ She looks at him and takes his hand again. ‘Dear Emmet, we were never meant to be,’ she adds, driving what feels to Emmet like a stiletto made of pure psychosis deep into his palpitating heart.

‘Wow,’ Emmet says, reaching for his drink. ‘But I

thought you never really loved Jurgen, and that River was your one true love?’

Voula shrugs. ‘You’re right, I did say all those things. I think it was because I was angry with Jurgen for disappearing after his failed job interview. I felt alone and unloved and River just happened to be there when I needed a physical release. These things happen, people make mistakes, and my relationship with River was a mistake. I shouldn’t have thrown myself at her, and I shouldn’t have led you on like I did. I don’t want to make more mistakes like those, which is why I’m telling you all this. We don’t have a connection, Emmet. We never will.’

‘Wow,’ Emmet repeats.

Voula puts her head in her hands. ‘Now I can’t stop thinking of Jurgen,’ she says. ‘I know I should wait for him to choose a time, but the thought of some else sucking his dick makes me so angry. What am I going to do, Emmet? What am I going to do?’

‘Wow,’ Emmet repeats. He looks at Voula. He looks at the door. A familiar flight instinct stirs in his heart and his legs propel him out of his seat. ‘Go feet go,’ he thinks as he escapes the restaurant, hitting the pavement outside at full speed. Through the city crowds he runs, through the mist shrouded suburban streets.

Emmet’s feet, on sealed instructions from his subconscious, propel him to the place that he has called home for more years than he can actually remember. He screams

through the front door, down the Herculean corridor and into his old bedroom, which is empty.

Feeling a little silly, he makes his way along his beloved corridors to the lounge room, where Persephone is watching television while Plato and Atlas play backgammon.

‘Hey guys,’ Emmet says, sweat streaming down his face. ‘What’s up?’

Plato and Atlas look up from their game and laugh.

Persephone gets up off the couch. ‘You hungry, dear?’ she asks, already on the move towards the kitchen.

‘Sure,’ Emmet replies and sits down next to Plato at the gaming table.

Persephone returns a few minutes later with a plate piled high with leftovers from that evening’s dinner. ‘Been running?’ she asks as she puts the plate down in front of her son. Emmet nods. ‘Well, you should have dressed appropriately,’ Persephone chastises him. ‘You’ve ruined your suit.’

‘That’s okay, Mum,’ Emmet replies. ‘I’m a Team Leader now. I can afford another one.’

# Epilogue

A tall, grizzled old man and a young boy walk hand in hand along a quiet suburban street.

‘Papoo,’ says the young boy, ‘what does it mean when someone is gay?’

The old man looks down at his young charge. ‘It means that they are happy, young Homer,’ he says. ‘Have you been hanging around with your uncle Plato again?’

The young boy shakes his head. ‘I heard uncle Spiro tell Mum that he once thought dad was gay, but now he’s sure he isn’t.’

‘Don’t you listen to that man, my boy, he’s a tight arse,’ says the old man, an angry look crossing his features for a moment. ‘He still owes me money from before you were born.’

‘But Papoo, uncle Spiro is wrong! Dad is happy now,’ little Homer says, ‘and Mum said that she thought he was too, but that’s okay, because she thought she was too and I think she still is happy, just like dad. Have you got a chocy?’

Papoo sighs. ‘Yaya has confiscated all the chocy’s, my boy, but if you promise to stop talking about how gay everyone is, I’ll buy you an ice-cream at the mall.’

Homer considers the offer. ‘Okay,’ he says, ‘but only if it’s chocolate.’

The two walk on in silence for a little while, still hand in

hand.

‘Papoo,’ says little Homer after a few minutes. ‘How can someone flow both ways?’

The old man looks down into innocent blue eyes. ‘Why don’t you ask your mother that question, little Homer,’ he says, ‘she would know better than anyone else what that means.’

‘Really? Why? Don’t you know?’ Homer says, wide eyed and disbelieving. As far as he is concerned, Papoo knows everything.

‘Oh I know what it means alright,’ says Papoo, ‘but your mother is so much better at explaining than I am.’

Silence descends once again, but it is textured, and thick with repressed curiosity.

‘Papoo,’ little Homer says after a few minutes, ‘uncle Jurgen says that...’

‘I will make a deal with you, my boy,’ says Papoo, interrupting Homer mid sentence. ‘If we talk about Spongebob Squarepants for the rest of the day, I will take you to the amusement park tomorrow afternoon.’

Homer considers his options. ‘Can I get fairy floss?’

‘I’ll get you jumbo sized fairy floss at the beginning and at the end.’

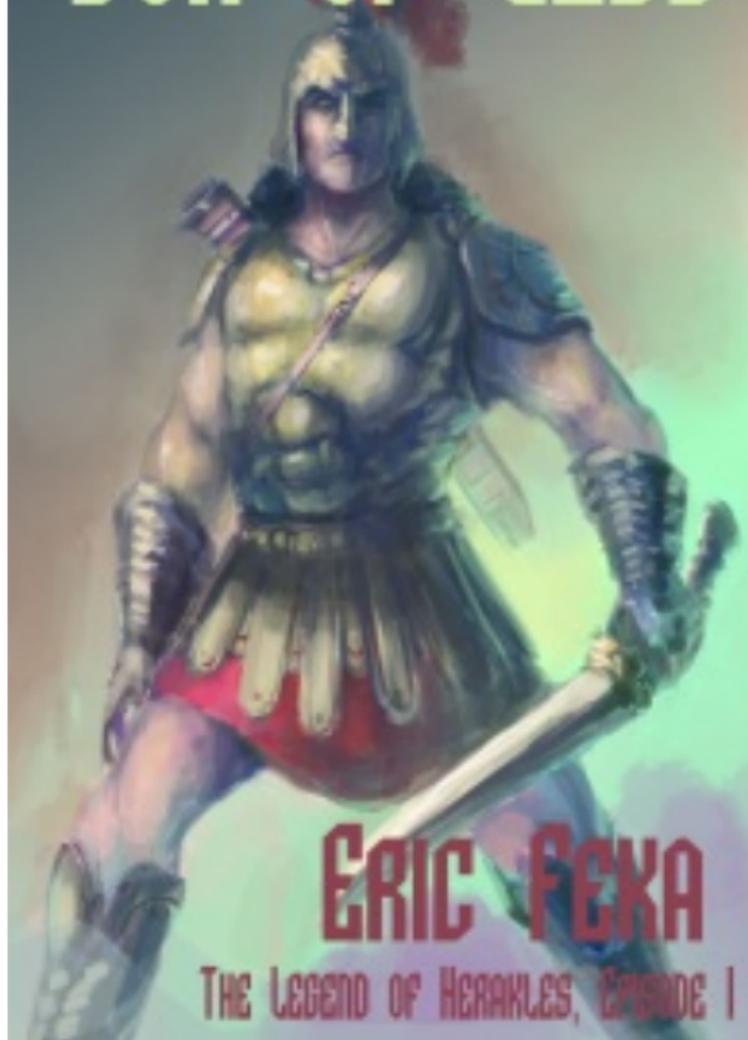
‘Can Simone come too? Uncle Jurgen said she is staying with us for the weekend because he and aunty Voula are going to visit a farm.’

‘Yes Simone can come too,’ says Papoo, feeling a little

put upon. ‘Now let’s talk cartoons!’

**Also By Eric Feka:**

# SON OF ZEUS



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Herakles is the most celebrated hero of Greek mythology and famed as a warrior without peer. Born through a God's infidelity, Herakles lived in a brutal and violent world, populated by belligerent deities and vicious monsters.

Named Alkides at birth, this is the story of how the most famous son of Zeus came to take the name Herakles, and the horrific crime that changed the course of his life.

# THE LION OF NEMEA

THE LEGEND OF HERAKLES, EPISODE 2



ERIC FEKA

Exiled from Thebes, Herakles finds himself a pawn in the spiteful games of the Gods. As penance for his crime, they have decreed that he must serve his cousin King Eurystheus of Mykênae for twelve years.

In that time, he must perform ten tasks, the first of which is to find and kill the monstrous Lion of Nemea, a horrifying beast that had been terrorizing the people of Hellas for years, and whose golden hide was said to be immune to all mortal weapons.



Otto was having trouble relating to people, which is why the virtual world of Sword of Valour was so appealing.

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In *Sword of Valour*, you could be whoever you wanted to be. What was puzzling was that everyone seemed to be exactly the same as they were in the real world. The same hang ups, the same egos, the same bloody mindedness. The only real difference, as far as Otto could tell, was that if you killed someone, instead of rotting, he or she complained. It was enough to make a conservative young man unsheathe the virtual daggers and go rogue.

A tale about who we think we are, who everybody else thinks we are, who we really are, and who we wish we were.



The Mad God Monos, who insisted that his worshipers eat meat only on Wednesdays and have, um, *relations* only during the fool moon, had mustered an army

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