

Trouble Brewing
By Edward Winslow
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Smashwords Edition

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The thing about prison, Dave thought to himself as he joined the line for the metal detector, is how absolutely tedious the whole experience is. This shouldn't have been news to him after watching *The Shawshank Redemption*, but for some reason, he expected something more exciting. Of course, that was the US prison system. Maybe he'd expected that the New Zealand prison would be something foreign and exotic, but actually, it was just one line after another. Line up at the gates. Line up for the metal detector. Line up to sign in and out. Line up to go into the visitors' room. Between one thing and another, a half hour visit usually ended up taking closer to an hour and a half, and that didn't count the time it took to bus out to the prison and then back into work.

He finally made it to the front of the shuffling queue, put his wallet, keys and phone into the little basket, and stepped through the metal detector. It went off, and his heart jumped into his mouth.

"Step through again, please," the guard said, sounding utterly disinterested. She was a tiny woman with an outrageous beehive and an enormous gun. Dave tried to focus on the hair, but the gun kept drawing his attention. He went back through the metal detector, and it went off again. The guard sighed, and Dave swallowed nervously. Don't look shifty, he told himself. It's probably nothing. It's extremely unlikely that anyone would smuggle a gun into your pocket in the hopes that you might be able to get it through the metal detector.

"Over here, please," the guard said, pointing Dave to a spot off to the side of the metal detector. "Feet on the marks, and spread your arms, please."

Dave did as he was asked, trying to look as calm and innocent as possible. This always happened to him. International travel was even worse. He tried so hard not to look guilty that he always ended up doing something ridiculous and suspicious, and getting hauled aside for additional screening. Every time, without fail. It drove Belinda crazy. She usually went on ahead, and tried to pretend they weren't travelling together. And then yelled at him afterwards, of course.

The guard waved a handheld metal detector over Dave's body. Nothing on his front, but his back pocket went off. The guard gave the detector another experimental wave, and it squawked again. Oh shit, Dave thought. Someone really has stashed a knife in my back pocket. He licked his lips and tried to take a normal breath.

"Empty your back pocket, please, sir."

As Dave reached for his pocket, heart thumping with the thought of what he might find, he noticed a commotion on the other side of the room. A gigantic, muscular woman in ripped jeans and an Iron Maiden T-shirt was being checked out. No way was she a visitor, Dave thought. If there was one person in the world who looked like she belonged here, it was this woman. She either belonged in some sort of futuristic cyberpunk movie, or playing the Mr T role in an all-girl *A-Team* reboot, Dave decided, eyeing her short blue mohawk and the angry set of her shoulders.

The guard at the check-out desk had just given her a tray, which presumably had her personal effects in it. She was sifting through the things on the tray, looking for something that clearly wasn't there, and arguing loudly with the guard. "What do you mean, you threw them away? What the hell gives you the right to do that?"

"You know that this is a non-smoking prison," the guard was saying, completely unintimidated by her. "We're required to dispose of any cigarettes that prisoners bring with them."

"Bullshit," she replied. Dave couldn't believe it. In her place, he'd be keeping his head down and getting the hell out of there as soon as possible, but it didn't look like that thought would ever cross her mind. "I bet you guys take them home with you. Or smoke them outside."

“Sir? Please empty your back pocket.” Dave jumped. He had forgotten where he was for a minute.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, and reached into his pocket. His hand hit metal, and he pulled out a couple of coins. He held them out to show the guard. “Sorry,” he repeated. “Must have forgotten them.”

“Put them in the basket, please, sir,” the guard said. Dave dropped the coins in the basket with the rest of his stuff, then submitted to another wand, his usual metal detector anxiety forgotten as he tried to see what was going on at the check-out desk.

Amazingly enough, the woman hadn't started some sort of riot, and instead, the guard who was checking her out was laughing at something that Dave couldn't hear. He kept watching as he took his stuff out of the basket and returned it to his pockets, not really believing it. If he'd been a prisoner, he would never have argued with a guard, but if he had temporarily lost his mind and started an argument, they'd probably turn around and have him back in a cell so fast his head would spin. That wasn't happening here, though. The woman was putting her things in her pockets and joking with the guard as she rubbed something from a flat metal container into her mohawk, urging it into spikes. I'll never have that kind of charisma, Dave thought. He watched the woman finish doing her hair, and then give a friendly wave to the guard as she turned to leave. Dave shook his head, and then went to join the line to check in.

Twenty minutes later, Dave finished his queueing and made it into the visitors' room. As usual, he sagged a little bit when he stepped inside, partly from relief that he had made it through all the prison bureaucracy successfully, and partly because the room was just depressing. It was large and relatively empty, and though it was lit by fluorescents, and the cheap plastic tables and chairs were bolted to the ground, they didn't manage to make it look grim and forbidding, just cold and institutional. There were other visitors at the other tables, close enough that everyone but the toddlers felt the need to lower their voices and look uncomfortably about them when they greeted the prisoners they had come to see, but far enough away that no really juicy details of their conversations were audible. The walls were white painted cinderblocks of the sort that seemed to store up winter and release it year-round. It was a nasty place to visit, a place where talking felt wrong. It was the sort of place that seemed to insist on long periods of awkward silence. That was what Dave had done each time he had visited Belinda so far, and from what he could tell, it would be the order of ceremonies for every other visit for the next eighteen months.

Belinda wasn't there, of course. Dave had visited her four times now, and she had never been waiting. At first, he had suspected that this was just a prison thing, but from what he had seen, other prisoners managed to get down to the visitors room in plenty of time to be waiting for their visitors. She's doing it on purpose, he had decided. About the only CEO's privilege a prisoner can still exercise is keeping people waiting to see her, and Belinda seemed determined to keep him waiting at every opportunity.

He stopped at the table in the corner to pour himself a cup of tea, more because he wanted a prop than out of any desire to actually drink it. He found an empty table by the wall and sat down. Belinda came in a couple of minutes later, spotted him almost immediately, and then ostentatiously went over to the table to get herself a drink before coming over. Water, probably, Dave thought. She never drank tea, and he'd already heard enough complaints about the prison coffee to be sure she wasn't drinking that.

“Have you been waiting long?” she asked as she sat down, her voice flat and disinterested.

“A couple of minutes.”

He waited, wondering whether she would offer anything like an apology, but of course she didn't. She stared over his left shoulder and said nothing. He tried the same tactic, but he hadn't had the years of board meetings to practice it, and he cracked and spoke before she had even started looking uncomfortable. "How are you doing in here?"

"Fine."

"You've got everything you need?"

It was a stupid question, and Dave didn't need to see the scorn in her eyes to know that it was. It probably made her day that she got to show it, though. She sniffed, and jerked her chin in some approximation of a nod, but didn't reply. Dave gripped the styrofoam cup a little harder. It was cold to the touch. The tea was probably going to freeze if it got any colder. He loosened his grip and tried again.

"I'm doing fine. Found a flat in Newtown, near the zoo. Little one bedroom place under one of those old houses. It's not very big. And it's pretty draughty, but I guess all of those old buildings are."

"I suppose so."

"It's a change from the house, I can tell you that," he said. Their huge house had been seized by the bank after the trial, along with the rest of their assets. Their assets - what a joke. They had all been Belinda's assets. Almost all of them, anyway. He worked, of course, but a medical equipment salesman's salary was nothing compared to the CEO of Indomitable Insurance. That said, though, the CEO's salary and benefits were nothing compared to the enormous amounts of money Belinda had managed to funnel into her accounts in the Caymans. But it was all gone now. Houses, cars, boat, all of it. "I moved four kilometres over, and four steps down the socioeconomic scale," he said, trying for humour.

Belinda lifted an ominous eyebrow, but said nothing. Looking down, Dave could see ice crystals beginning to form on the surface of the tea.

"Work's going well," he tried. "Got a new account this week. New private hospital up in Auckland. Plastic surgery, liposuction. Hollywood-style stuff. I'm going to have to go up there in a few weeks to meet with their ops manager."

"Good."

"Yeah." He nodded, and they both returned to silent staring past each other.

"Your sister called." This was obviously desperation territory. If there was one thing that Belinda cared about less than his job, it was the suburban antics of her older sister.

"Oh yes?"

"Asked me to send you her love. She thought that she might bring the kids to see you, but then she found out that she needed you to send her a visitor form before they'd let her in."

"Really." Belinda's tone was absolutely flat, but Dave could hear the secret satisfaction.

"She asked me to remind you about it."

"Did she."

"Yes. She did."

"Well thank you for reminding me," Belinda said indifferently.

Dave wanted to shout at her. Or throw something. Or storm out of the visiting room, or anything that would make her look like the vicious bitch that she was. But he knew that if he did anything, somehow he would just come out looking like an ass. As usual. He felt the thin styrofoam of the cup flex alarmingly in his hand and made himself relax his grip. "You're welcome."

Belinda said nothing, and there was nothing more for him to say either. He sat in silence and watched the film of ice gradually expanding across the surface of the cup. By the time the half hour was up and he got up to leave, the tea was frozen solid.

Dave was still angry when he walked out of the prison, barely managing a smile in reply to the large Maori gate guard's cheerful farewell. He knew it was stupid to let Belinda get to him. For that matter, he knew it was stupid for him to be going and visiting her every week. The bus ride each way took nearly forty-five minutes - longer, if you counted the waiting time. All up, the half hour visit took up most of the morning. That was three hours he wasn't at work, and three hours he wasn't being paid for. A year ago - heck, six months ago - that wouldn't have been a big deal, but now, every cent counted, and he wasn't making any money standing around in the wind and the rain of a Wellington winter waiting for a bus.

There it was. It rounded the corner in a hurry, sending up sheets of water from the overflowing gutters. Dave stepped out and raised an arm, but the bus didn't even slow down, although it did come close enough to the kerb to drench him as it passed.

"Shit!" Dave started running after the bus, waving his arms and shouting. "Hey! Stop the bus!" He chased it for about half a block, falling further and further behind, before he gave up. "Shit!" he said again. The next bus wasn't for another half an hour. At this rate, there was no way he'd be at work before noon.

A car horn blared. "Get in!" a woman's shouted. Looking around, Dave realised that she must be shouting at him. "Yes, you! You see anyone else around here?"

The car was exactly the sort of vehicle you'd expect to find outside a prison - a battered old Nissan that would have been a great candidate for street racing if it weren't for the dented bodywork, smoking exhaust and audibly struggling engine. Dave stooped down to look through the open passenger window, and was met with another blast of the horn.

"Stop standing around! Let's go!"

The bus was nowhere in sight, and the rain was pelting down. Ordinarily, even that wouldn't induce him to get into this beater of a car with its possibly insane driver, but after half an hour of not shouting at Belinda, maybe a bad move wasn't actually such a bad idea. Shrugging his shoulders Dave opened the passenger door and got in.

"'Bout time. If you'd waited any longer you'd have had pigeons landing on you," the driver said, dropping the clutch and squealing away from the kerb. It was the woman from the prison, the one who had been arguing with the guard. "Smoke?"

"No," Dave said, but then realised it was probably best not to antagonise enormous, muscular ex-cons. "No thanks," he amended. "I don't smoke."

"Ha!" She pulled a battered softpack from the glovebox, flipped a cigarette into her mouth and lit it with graceful, economical movements. "You and everyone else."

“What?”

“Not smoking. Not drinking. Eating green leafy vegetables. Brushing teeth twice daily.” She tapped ash out of the window as she forced the asthmatic engine toward the curve of the motorway on-ramp. “Liza.”

“Dave.”

“American?”

Great, Dave thought. He couldn't believe how often this was a problem in New Zealand. Although usually when people had a problem with it, he wasn't trapped in their cars on the motorway. “By birth,” he said. “My parents are English.”

“Diplomats?” she asked.

“College professors,” Dave said. “Stanford. My Mom's in the English department, and my Dad's in Anthropology.” Liza nodded, apparently satisfied. She flicked her cigarette out the window and they drove on in silence, broken only by the clanking of the engine as it struggled to match the speed of the citybound traffic. Rush hour was well over, but the motorway was still busy. Probably another slip. The motorway cut right through the steep, shrubby hills around Wellington, and heavy rain tended to send piles of rubble coursing down the hillsides to block the roads. Between that and the surface flooding, it was a miracle that anyone got into the city some days.

“How did you get your car back so quickly? This is your car, right?” he asked. The words came out of his mouth without intervention from his brain, and he immediately wished he could take them back.

Fortunately, Liza didn't seem at all offended. “Lawyer dropped it off for me yesterday. Parked it round the corner and left the keys on the wheel. Said it was the least she could do.”

“Oh.” Dave cleared his throat. “Right. Sorry.” Liza waved the apology away.

“Thanks for the lift,” Dave said after a few minutes. “I'm at Chapple Medical Supplies in Thorndon, but you can drop me anywhere around there.”

“This isn't a lift,” she said, scowling at the road.

“What? Then what is it?” Dave heard his voice rising to a squeak, a nervous tic that he had always hated in himself. What was going on here? Was this what a kidnapping was like? It wasn't what he'd imagined, but apparently things worked differently in real life than they did in the movies. “Look, I don't have any money. Well, I've got some, but not much. Maybe a couple of hundred dollars. And I'd need to go to a bank machine to get it for you. My wife - Oh shit.” Suddenly, he knew what was going on. “This is about Belinda, isn't it? Look, I didn't know that she was ripping off the company, I swear.”

“Shut up,” Liza said, but so casually that Dave found himself relaxing. “You've got the wrong idea. This isn't a kidnapping. I don't do kidnapping.”

“What do you do?”

“That's not important.” Liza frowned at him.

“Sorry.”

“Like I was saying, this isn't a kidnapping. This is you doing me a favour.”

“What kind of a favour?”

“Need you to get some stuff for me.”

Dave was instantly suspicious. “What kind of stuff? Because I don’t do drugs. Or guns. Or anything like that, okay? I keep myself out of trouble.”

“Sure you don’t want a cigarette? Here.” She had a lit cigarette between his lips before he knew what was happening. He took a breath, coughed, and knocked ash out the window. “You need to relax. It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“So what is it?”

Liza turned the car off the motorway, blasted through an orange light, and lit another cigarette. “Man, I love that,” she said. “That’s the worst thing about prison. No smoking.”

“No kidding,” Dave said noncommittally. He wound down his window and hung his arm out into the rain, flicking the cigarette away and trying to make it look like the wind had pulled it out of his hand.

“Only part I really had trouble with.”

“What were you in for?” Dave hesitated, winding the window back up to cover his awkwardness. “If you don’t mind my asking, I mean.”

“Assault.” Liza glanced sideways at his face and waved a dismissive hand. “Not what you think.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Well, it’s true. It was an accident.”

That could mean anything. Dave wasn’t reassured. “What kind of accident?”

“Well, not completely an accident. I meant to hit her. Just didn’t mean for her to break her pelvis like that.”

“What?”

Liza laughed. “Dave, really, it’s not -”

“What I think. I know. You’ve said that.” Dave stared through the windshield, watching the wipers struggle with the heavy rain.

“You watch roller derby?”

“No.”

“Really? Probably the best sport in New Zealand. Maybe the best in the world. I’m on the Wellington All-Stars team. Evil Liza. You heard of me? Star jammer?” Dave shook his head. “Never mind. We were facing off against Auckland. Big game. We were behind, 65-68. Last jam of the match, and I was the jammer. They had a tight pack, kept cutting me off. Couldn’t get through, but our girls were doing their work, so neither could their jammer. Jam was locked up. Had to get through, though, and I had to do it first, if we were going to win the game.” Liza flicked the butt of her cigarette out the window, and shook her head.

“So what happened?”

“Well, we kept going round, and I kept getting nowhere. Clock was ticking down. Then, I’m not sure what went on in the pack, but they lost it for a second. There was a gap. I went for it, full-bore. Nearly made it. I was pulling ahead, when one of them tripped me. Bitch.”

For a second, Dave thought she was going to spit out the window, but she didn’t. “So, is that a foul?”

“Damn right it’s a foul, if one of the referees calls it. Only this time, they didn’t. I was on the ground, and Auckland’s jammer made a break through the pack. So I did the only appropriate thing.”

“What?”

“I got to my feet, worked up a good head of steam, and ran into that bitch as hard as I could. Sent her flying, right off the course. Most beautiful tackle you’ve ever seen, and completely legal as well. All the way up until she ran into the guard rail for the seating. Then, apparently, it was excessive force. Ha!”

“They sent you to jail for that? That seems pretty harsh to me.”

“Yeah, seemed pretty harsh to me, too,” Liza mumbled through yet another cigarette. “My lawyer was sure she’d get me off. Didn’t happen. Sentence was only for a month, but it was a pain in the ass. Which brings us up to today, and you helping me get my stuff back.”

Finally, Dave thought. I’m probably not going to like what comes next, but at least we’re getting to it. “Well, tell me what you want me to do, but there are some ground rules. Nothing illegal, and definitely nothing that might technically be legal but might also see me arrested for assault.”

That was insensitive, he thought as soon as the words were out of his mouth, but he managed to keep quiet and return Liza’s look with what he hoped came across as firm determination. “I don’t need you to do anything illegal. Just need a third party to pick my stuff up.”

“Where are we going, anyway?” The car had turned off the main road, and was threading through steep narrow streets lined with soggy-looking weatherboard houses. Dave only had the vaguest idea of where they were.

“To my ex’s place.” Liza waved a hand. “Kind of ex. She was on the team, and we were sleeping together, but it wasn’t really a relationship. Pretty much cut me off after the assault thing. The whole team did. Apparently it’s my fault that we got knocked out of the championship, and apparently that’s more important than me getting locked up for assault.”

“I’m sorry,” Dave said. It felt inadequate, but he didn’t know what else to say.

Liza shrugged. “Anyway,” she said, swinging the car sharply towards the kerb and hitting the brakes, “we’re here.” She cranked the handbrake up and turned to face Dave. “Just down the hill a little bit. 147B.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“What plan? You go in, you get my stuff, you try not to mention my name too much, if they ask, you don’t really know me, and so on. Don’t need a plan. Seems pretty straightforward to me.”

“You know,” Dave said, “that’s a good point. I don’t really know you. Don’t you have some friends who could do this for you?”

“Actually, no,” Liza said. “Not today, not in Wellington.” She gave him a flat look. “Look, I’m sorry. I know you’ve probably got other stuff you need to be doing. But I could really use your help with this. How about it?”

“Okay,” Dave said. “Okay. What stuff am I picking up?”

“Sleeping bag, pillow, thermarest, backpack of clothes, bike, bike helmet and laptop. There should also be a duffel full of derby gear, but she can keep that.”

“And who am I asking for?”

“Leah. But if you can get away without talking to her, do that. Her flatmate is a guy called Nigel. Chef, when he’s not on the benefit. He should be home.”

Dave nodded, and got out of the car. “All right, then.”

“Good man,” Liza said as he shut the door.

147B was a lot like every other house on the street, and like most houses in Wellington, for that matter. A white weatherboard duplex with a rusting iron roof and thick ropes of condensation streaming down the windows. Someone must be home. Dave walked up the cracked concrete drive and knocked at the door. “Coming,” a voice called from inside. A man’s voice, Dave noticed with relief. He heard the distant flushing of a toilet, and then approaching footsteps before the door was opened.

“What do you want?” The man was either stoned, or hadn’t slept in a week. His eyes were bloodshot and puffy as he squinted out into the daylight, and his clothes were rumpled and disgusting.

“Nigel, right? Is Leah around?”

“No. Come back tonight.” Nigel was closing the door before the words were even halfway out of his mouth.

“Wait!”

Nigel stopped, peering through a five centimetre gap. “What?”

“My name’s Dave. I’m here to pick some stuff up for Liza. Maybe you can help?”

“Liza, huh?” Nigel smirked. “Better if you don’t wait for Leah, then. Come on in.”

He opened the door, and Dave stepped inside. The house was probably in better condition than his own place, but it was hard to tell under the piles of unwashed clothes, dirty dishes, and lurking hulks of broken furniture. He suppressed a shudder, hoping that this wasn’t how he was going to find himself living in six months’ time.

“This way,” Nigel said, leading him through a disgusting kitchen and out into the backyard. “In here.” Until Nigel opened what was probably a door, Dave had thought he’d been looking at a pile of wood planks leaning up against a fence, but he realised that it was actually just the worst shed in New Zealand. Nigel gestured him inside impatiently, and Dave put a tentative foot inside, holding an arm in front of his head to ward off any spiders.

It wasn’t actually all that dark inside. It wasn’t light by any means, and the window was thickly layered with dust and dirt, but the wide gaps between the planks meant that quite a bit of light made it into the shed. Dave could see a heap of things in the far corner, directly under one of the larger holes in the roof. He looked back at Nigel uncertainly.

“That’s it,” Nigel said. “That’s all there is. Leah was going to put it in the street, but then she decided to dump it in here. Liza’s pretty lucky - it was a close thing.”

“Right.” Dave shouldered the dripping backpack, and gathered the rest of the things awkwardly under one arm while he tried to steer the bicycle with the other. “Was there a laptop?”

“In the bag. Leah sold the battery, but the rest of it’s still in there.”

“She sold the battery?” Dave made it out of the shed and dropped everything to check the contents of the bag. And indeed, there was a laptop, without battery, tucked into a wide inner pocket. “Why?”

“The lithium. Meth factories get it out of the batteries somehow. Don’t ask me.” Nigel shrugged, and waited impatiently while Dave gathered everything up again. “Not through the house, man,” he said. “You’ll get it dirty. Take it down the path instead.”

“Right,” Dave said, but Nigel didn’t seem to notice the sarcasm. He pushed down the path and out onto the street, trying not to worry about the crawling feelings down his neck.

Liza was standing beside the open car trunk as he walked back up the street. “Baby! Come here!” Dave looked around to see who she was talking to, and in the time it took him to turn his head back, she had whisked the bicycle out of his hands and knelt beside it, checking it over anxiously.

“I think I got everything.” Dave leaned over the trunk and let Liza’s stuff cascade out of his arms, then turned round to dump the backpack on the top of the heap. “It was in a shed. Well, in a kind of a shed. There’s probably some water damage. I’d let your laptop dry out for a day or two before you turn it on, if I were you. Oh, and the battery isn’t there. Apparently she sold it to a meth dealer.”

“Crazy bitch,” Liza said. “But at least she didn’t mess with my bike. That’s my livelihood, right there.” She slapped the ripped seat affectionately.

Dave cast a dubious eye over the bike. It looked like junk, a collection of rust, duct tape and stickers that had spontaneously assembled themselves into a bike frame. “Really?”

“She doesn’t look like it, but this is the fastest bike in Wellington. And I,” Liza said with a grand gesture, “am the fastest bike messenger. No contest.” She unearthed a battered black bike rack from the depths of the trunk and attached it to the car’s tow ball. “Leah could have used the rest of this stuff to start fires if she wanted, but if she’d laid a hand on my bike, there would have been trouble.”

Dave believed her. He didn’t understand why she was so attached to such a decrepit old bike, but that didn’t make any less sense than anything else that had happened this morning. “Well, happy to have helped,” he said, trying to check the time on his phone without being too obvious. Eleven-thirty. If they left now, maybe he could still make it into work before noon.

“Well, I appreciate it,” Liza said, busying herself with bungee cords and tiedown straps.

“No problem.”

Liza finished with the bike and turned to face him. “So what now? You want to go and get a drink or something? Must be about time for one.”

It was very tempting. After everything that had happened that morning, one drink wouldn’t be nearly enough, though. He’d need two or three at least. And it was way too early for that. “Look, I’d love to, but I really need to get to work.”

“Of course. Somewhere in Thorndon, right?” They both got in the car, and Liza fired the engine up. “Have you at your door in five minutes. Less, if I get all the lights.”

They took off in another cloud of exhaust and patch of burned rubber. Liza weaved through the narrow streets like a maniac, using the full width of the road, and skimming past the few other cars they passed with inches to spare.

“I’m not in that much of a rush,” Dave managed, closing his eyes as they narrowly avoided yet another collision.

“Relax! Didn’t you say you were going to work? Don’t want to make you late.”

“Really, it’s fine. I’ve got plenty of time.”

“Well, if you say so.” Liza slowed down fractionally as they turned onto the main road, but Dave could see that they were still overtaking other cars at an alarming rate. “So where are we going?”

“Chapple Medical Supplies. Take the third right after the lights, and then it’s right there on your left.”

“Medical supplies? Doesn’t sound fun.”

Dave laughed. “It isn’t. It’s a terrible job, and a complete waste of time, but I need the money.”

“That’s bullshit,” Liza said with a snort. “They’ve got you thinking that, and so you’re wasting your whole life doing pointless stuff that you hate.”

“I don’t hate it,” Dave began, but Liza cut him off.

“Yes you do. You just said you’re just doing it for the money. You should quit. Go do something you love, like I did.”

“What, go to jail for assault?” Dave blushed. He was usually better about thinking before he opened his mouth, but for some reason, talking to Liza was bypassing that part of his brain. “I didn’t mean that,” he muttered. He waited for an explosion, but Liza didn’t seem to mind.

“Obviously not. Like derby or martial arts or something. Something you can be passionate about. And yeah, if it means getting sent to prison for assault, you should do it anyway.”

“I don’t think that’s always such a good idea,” Dave said, more to himself than to Liza. “This is the turn,” he said more loudly, and slightly too late.

Liza guided the car through a dramatic, screeching skid, and forced it up the side street. “Where?”

“Just here. This one.” The car bumped to a stop in front of Dave’s building. He could see the empty foyer through the glass double doors. It looked like today nobody was going to see him coming in late. “Thanks for the ride,” he said.

“No problem. Thanks for your help with my stuff.”

“It’s fine.” He paused awkwardly, one hand on the door handle. “I guess we’ll probably see each other around, Wellington being what it is.”

“Maybe,” Liza shrugged. “Can’t count on it. We never saw each other before.”

“That’s true.” He sat there for another moment, feeling like he should say something else, but not knowing what.

Liza seemed to pick up on his hesitation. “Don’t have a phone number at the moment,” she said, “but if you want to have that drink sometime, call Lightspeed Couriers. Worked there before I went away. Guess they’ll probably want me back.”

“Lightspeed Couriers. Okay.” Dave opened the door and got out. “It was... interesting... meeting you. Good luck with things.”

“No need,” Liza replied. “See you round.”

“Sure.” Dave closed the car door and walked up to the office, hearing Liza’s car squeal away from the kerb behind him.

“Good morning, Dave!” The company’s receptionist, Rose, was coming up the hallway from the tearoom as Dave was sneaking down it. Damn, he thought. Busted. There goes any chance of getting in and starting work without anyone noticing what time it was. “How was your visit?”

“Fine,” he mumbled. Rose was the sort of woman that his mother had always taught him to describe as well-meaning. She was friendly and welcoming, and probably a great front person for the company, but she had absolutely no tact or discretion, and the best way to deal with her was to avoid mentioning anything personal in any way.

“How’s Belinda holding up?” Rose went on. “Are they treating her well?”

“Yes, everything’s fine.”

“Did you see the profile of her in yesterday’s Herald? I cut it out for you and put it on your desk. Such a lovely picture of her. And quite a flattering portrait, as well. Well, except for all of that nasty embezzlement business.”

“Right. Thanks.” Of course, Dave thought, it was much easier to follow the approved procedure with Rose when the papers weren’t constantly reporting on your personal life. It wasn’t as bad now as it had been during the investigation and the trial, but the papers were still running the occasional story on a slow news day. And of course, they had all covered the sentencing. Rose had had a field day with that, in the kindest way possible. She checked the trash cans at work, so he had been forced to take all of the articles she clipped for him home before throwing them away.

“Will you be going to see her next week? I thought I might make her a lolly cake. She was so fond of the one that I brought to the Easter picnic last year.”

Dave couldn’t help smiling. That would serve her right. Belinda had always been an expert in flattery and two-faced compliments, and she’d taken three pieces of that lolly cake, and then complained about it all the way home. “They don’t let you bring food in,” he said with genuine regret, “but I’ll tell her you offered.”

“Such a shame,” Rose said. “But nevermind. I’ll make one for her when she gets out.”

“That’s an excellent idea. I’m sure she’d like that.”

“Well, I’ll go and make a note in my diary now. I wouldn’t want to forget.”

Rose bustled up towards the reception desk, and Dave continued down the hallway. His office was right at the back of the building, carved out of a corner of the warehouse. It was quiet and peaceful, and very few people came to see him, but it was also tiny and a little damp, and the only window looked out on a brick wall. Almost all of the floor space was taken up by his desk, chair, and filing cabinets, and all of the surfaces were covered with papers, catalogues and assorted samples of medical equipment. He turned on his computer, hung his coat on the corner of his door to dry, and went up to the tearoom to get himself a cup of tea.

“The Zip’s broken,” Rose called down the hallway as he reached the tearoom door. Dave would have jumped out of his skin if he weren’t already used to it. Rose had actually set up a system of mirrors so she could keep an eye on the hallway without leaving her desk. Dave suspected her of keeping a

diary of everyone's movements, and discussing them with Jackie, the boss, at their weekly meetings. "I've called an electrician, but he won't be in until late this afternoon."

"That's all right. I'll just get some water," he yelled back. He snagged his favourite mug from the cupboard, and filled it with water from the tap. Then, glancing around, he plucked a teabag from the canister and a sugar packet from the bowl, tucked them into his pocket, and went back to his office.

Sitting down at his desk, he dropped the teabag into the mug of water and jiggled it up and down impatiently to release the tea. This always took forever when the water was cold, but eventually he managed to turn the water in the mug a shade of pale brown. Then, wrapping his hands around the mug, he glared at the tea and thought hot.

As the tea began to warm up, the teabag released more of its substance into the water, making the tea stronger, and speeding the heating process along. Before long, the tea was steaming hot, and Dave nodded in satisfaction, removed the teabag, and tipped the sugar into the mug, stirring it with the end of a pencil, and taking a first careful sip.

Most of the time this is a pretty pathetic talent, he thought to himself, but it certainly is handy at times like this. Not heroic or lifesaving - he'd never used his talent to warm a frostbitten mountaineer or put out a house fire with a gigantic block of frozen tea - but occasionally useful, in a small way. A lot like he was. Not grand or heroic, but sometimes quietly useful behind the scenes.

Dave had been five years old when he had first discovered that he could change the temperature of tea. It had been a Saturday morning, and he had got up early to watch cartoons. Usually, his father got up early on a Saturday as well, and brought his mother tea and toast in bed, but that morning he had slept in. Dave had decided it would be nice to make tea and toast for both of his parents, so he had gone into the kitchen, put bread in the toaster and put water on to boil.

Tea was always a bit of a ceremony in the Rosewood household. It never came in a mug, but always in the delicate green cups and saucers that had belonged to his great-grandmother. It always came with food - a fresh scone, a piece of toast, perhaps a piece of cake or an after-dinner mint. And it was always made from tea leaves in a teapot, either the little white one, or the big silver one that was even older than the cups and saucers, and never ever from a teabag. His parents had been living in California since long before Dave was born, but when it came to tea, they were English to the core.

On that morning, Dave had prepared the tray just the way his father always did. Two green cups sitting on their saucers, the matching milk jug, which he carefully filled from the bottle in the fridge, and the little sugar bowl with its silver spoon. Two small plates with butter knives, the butter dish and the jam jar, and sitting in the middle of the tray, the teapot. His father usually used the little white teapot, but Dave loved the huge old silver one, so he scooped the tealeaves into the pot, poured the boiling water carefully over the top, and then set it neatly in the middle of the tray.

When Dave went to lift the tray, it was almost too heavy for him to carry. He wrestled it through the kitchen and out into the hallway, taking tiny steps and stopping whenever the wobbling threatened to get out of control. He slopped a bit of milk out of the jug, but he made all the way to the top of the stairs before disaster struck. Daisy, the cat, was sleeping in the patch of sun by the hallway window, and Dave was concentrating so hard on the tray that he didn't see her. He stepped on her tail, she jumped and shrieked, and he overbalanced, falling over backwards and sending the tea tray flying. The lid came right off the teapot, and hot tea - just a little below boiling - came pouring down on him.

The heat of the tea burning his hands and stomach was the most awful thing he had ever felt. It seared at him for a second while he wished that it wouldn't, that it would cool down and stop hurting him, and then it did. His parents had woken up when they heard the crash, but by the time they arrived in the hallway, Dave was sitting and crying in the middle of the wreckage of the tea tray and a puddle of cold tea.

His hands had been burned, but not as badly as they could have been. The doctor was puzzled about that, and so were Dave's parents, but Dave knew what had happened. He had wanted the tea to cool down, and it had. Later that week, and not without a little fear, he had tried the same trick on a cup of tea, and had been delighted when it went from piping hot to stone cold and then back again. For a few hours he was convinced that he was going to be the greatest superhero that the world had ever seen, but when he tried to heat up the water in his paddling pool, nothing had happened. Nothing happened that night when he tried to warm his bathwater up so he could stay in a little longer, and nothing happened the next morning when he tried to cool his oatmeal down so it was easier to eat. Over the next few months, Dave tried working his power on every liquid he could get his hands on from ice cream to motor oil, but nothing worked. Except for tea. By the time he was seven he could bring a cup of tea to any temperature from superheated steam to solid ice within seconds, or less if he really let the tea stew before he started, but he couldn't even take the chill off a glass of ice water.

His parents had been baffled, but supportive. They had never heard of anything like it, and it certainly wasn't a talent that either of them possessed. They had made discreet enquiries with their own parents, but apart from some fascinating stories about a great-great-uncle who had run a popular tea-house in Shanghai at the turn of the century, it didn't seem like there was any connection to tea in the family. His father had been keen to get Dave tested, but his mother had put her foot down. As he got older, Dave read every medical book he could lay his hands on, looking for an explanation, but as far as he could tell, there wasn't one. Perhaps it was just one of those things. That didn't make him any less shy about his talent, or any more comfortable around people, but it did set him up for pre-med at college. And that set him up for meeting Belinda, dropping out of medical school and getting a job to help pay her MBA fees, moving to New Zealand, and finally here. Selling medical supplies to people who actually were doctors and trying not to feel bitter about it.

"Dave?" Dave nearly jumped out of his skin. Rose was standing in the doorway, looking at him with what would have been concern in anyone else, but from her was probably just nosiness.

"I was just thinking," he said. He realised that his cup of tea was still steaming, and he hastily dropped it down to room temperature. "You startled me."

"There's someone here to see you. That woman from the new medical centre in the Hutt." Rose sounded a little reproachful. "You hadn't forgotten, had you?"

"Of course not." Dave stood up. "I'll take her into the small conference room." He edged past Rose into the hallway. She was still looking into his office.

"Are you drinking cold tea, Dave? I told you the Zip wasn't going to be fixed until later today."

"Yes, I know that. I just need the caffeine. Something to get me started."

Rose was still looking at him strangely. "I could go down the road and get you a coffee, if you'd like."

This was exactly like Rose, Dave thought. Just when you make up your mind to really dislike her spying and gossiping and creeping around being nosy, she'd do something like this. "That would be fantastic, Rose," he said, reaching into his pocket for his wallet. Rose waved him away.

"This one's on the company," she said. "Coffee all round until the Zip's fixed. I'm sure Jackie won't mind. Flat white? Two sugars?"

"Please," he said.

Rose smiled at him. "Get on with you, then. I'll bring your coffee in to you in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Rose," he said.

Dave's apartment was probably only seven kilometres from his work, but it was on the other side of the central city, so it took nearly an hour to get from one to the other. The trip in to the central bus station was pretty quick, even if the bus was running late and he decided to walk it; but the trip across town and out to Newtown was torturous. There was no way to leave early enough to miss the rush hour traffic, and leaving late enough to avoid it meant sticking around at work till well after six. Because he had been so late in that morning, Dave did stay late, and should have had a quick ride home as his reward, but between the rain, the crowds, and the trolley bus losing its connection to the overhead wires five times in as many kilometres, it was after seven and pitch black outside by the time his feet hit the narrow alleyway that led to his basement apartment.

The light was on in the lounge room. The light was on, and the window was beginning to fog up with condensation. Dave felt his heart beat a little faster. What was going on? He might have left the light on when he had left home that morning, but he knew for a fact that he hadn't accidentally left someone sitting in his apartment breathing away and fogging up the windows. Or, for that matter, two people, he thought as he peered through the misty panes. Because that's who was in there now. Two people in what looked like dark suits and overcoats, sitting around his little dining table reading the paper. Perhaps it was some sort of optical illusion. Or a hallucination. Or some sort of weird joke. There wasn't any kind of rational explanation for it, he was quite certain.

"What the hell's going on here?" he demanded, pushing the door open.

One of the men at the table stood up. He was alarmingly large and very alarmingly muscular. Dave stopped in the doorway, bracing himself against the frame.

"Mr Rosewater," the man who was still seated said, looking up from his section of the paper with perfect calm. Dave could tell that if he were to stand up he'd be very nearly as large as the other man, and probably twice as scary. "Come in. Sit down."

The enormous man pulled out one of the mismatched chairs for Dave, but Dave didn't move. "Who are you, and how did you get into my house?"

"The door was unlocked," the seated man said. "Very careless of you, in this day and age."

Dave knew this was a lie, and by the look on his face, he could tell that the man didn't care that he knew it. "What do you want?" he asked, taking an unwilling step into the room.

"Sit down, Mr Rosewater. Make yourself at home, and then we can talk."

A little part of Dave was telling him to cut and run, but it was overruled by his legs, which were already halfway to the table. This was probably how a mouse felt when it was about to be eaten by a snake, he thought. He sat down in the chair that was being held for him, and the man at the table smiled.

"Good. My name, Mr Rosewater, is Bruce Farmer. I work for Alistair Cox. Perhaps you've heard of him?"

Dave had to fight the urge to laugh. Heard of Alistair Cox? The man was all over the papers, either for charitable contributions or suspicions of shady dealings. Sometimes both in the same story, if the stars were aligned just right for the editors. He managed to keep his face neutral and nod.

"Excellent. I thought you might have. Now, what you might not know is that Mr Cox was heavily invested in Indomitable Insurance. Very heavily invested."

“Was he?” Dave croaked. His mouth was suddenly dry. He had known that a lot of investors had lost a lot of money when Indomitable had gone under, but he hadn’t really thought about them as individuals. Belinda hadn’t wanted to talk about it, and he had been just as happy to pretend that the whole thing wasn’t happening. What a dumb move, he realised now.

“He was. He lost a couple of million in the crash, and that’s after the creditors were paid out. Eighteen cents on the dollar, Mr Rosewater. Not very much, you’ll agree.”

“No,” Dave said.

“You can imagine that Mr Cox is eager to recoup his losses. Two million dollars isn’t the sort of loss you just write off and chalk up to experience.” Bruce leaned across the table towards him, and Dave was uncomfortably aware that the other man was still standing behind his chair.

“I guess not.”

“Exactly,” Bruce said, sitting back and folding his arms.

Dave had no idea what was going on here, and even less of an idea what was expected of him, but it was obvious that Bruce was expecting something. The silence stretched out between them before he finally asked, “What do you want from me?”

Bruce slammed his palm on the table loudly enough to make Dave jump, and before he relaxed again the man behind him had pulled him out of his chair and was holding him with his arms pulled uncomfortably tight behind his back. “I should have thought that was obvious, Mr Rosewater,” Bruce said, his tone suddenly vicious. He stood up from his chair and walked around the table towards Dave. The man who was holding him turned him around, moving him away from his chair. Dave tried to pull his arms free, but he was pinned like a bug, and his efforts only made the man’s grip on him tighten.

“What we want,” Bruce said, standing in front of Dave now, “is the money.” He emphasised ‘money’ with a sharp punch to Dave’s stomach that would have sent him to the floor if he wasn’t being held so firmly. The breath flew out of him with an ugly sound, and he fought for air. Bruce stepped even closer. “Two million dollars,” he said.

“Two million dollars?” Dave gasped. He hardly recognised his own voice, and the words didn’t sound like English to his ears, but Bruce obviously understood perfectly. He probably did this every week, Dave thought. Sick bastard.

“Actually, it’s slightly more than that. Two million, three hundred thousand and eighteen dollars.” The satisfaction in Bruce’s voice curdled Dave’s stomach. Bruce leaned a little closer now and whispered in Dave’s ear. “We know that there was money that the police never recovered. The press knew it, the judge knew it, and you can be damned sure that we know it too. So what I suggest is that you go and sit down with your wife, have a heart to heart talk, and tell her that if she doesn’t come up with the fucking money by the end of August she’ll be getting your balls mailed to her for Christmas.” Bruce was shouting now, and he ended his speech with another agonising gut punch. He stepped back suddenly, and the man who had been holding Dave’s arms let them go suddenly, and Dave collapsed to the floor.

“You’re crazy.” Dave shook his head. Two million dollars? Where the hell was he supposed to come up with that kind of money? It was true that there had been rumours of secret bank accounts, offshore trusts, shell companies, and even boxes full of cash buried in their backyard on one particularly slow news day, but he’d never discussed it with Belinda because it seemed so impossible. It must have been impossible. But now, for the first time, he began to think it might be true. Alistair Cox wouldn’t send a couple of guys to shake him down like this unless he thought there was a real chance that he’d be getting some money out of it. Would he?

“I’m quite serious, I assure you, Mr Rosewater.” Bruce was calm again, or at least he sounded calm. Dave was huddled in a ball on the floor, and all he could see of Bruce was a pair of pinstriped trouser legs and polished black leather shoes.

“Where the hell am I going to come up with two million bucks in six weeks?”

“Mr Rosewater, if it weren’t for the fact that your wife is in prison, we wouldn’t have given you that long. Mr Cox is being extraordinarily generous, in view of your circumstances. So we expect you to deliver. Do you understand? Two million, three hundred thousand and eighteen dollars. From you. To us. By the end of August. Or else.” He started walking away, but Dave heard him stop in the doorway. “Oh, and Mr Rosewater? Just in case you start thinking that you can live without your balls, let me tell you this. We don’t do vivisection.”

The door slammed shut, but it was ten minutes before Dave got up off the floor and tiptoed into the kitchen to pour himself a shot of vodka.

As he walked into the visiting room at Arohata Women’s Prison for the second time that week, Dave was surprised to find that he actually felt lucky to be there. He had spent most of the previous morning on hold with the Department of Corrections, trying to arrange an extra visit with Belinda. Apparently, it was all very much against regulations, but the combination of persuasiveness, persistence, and pitiful pleading had eventually won the day. From there, it was easy. Jackie didn’t bat an eyelid when he went into her office and asked for the afternoon off to go and see Belinda. Rose didn’t say a word when he packed up and left after lunch. Although, on reflection, this was less surprising. Jackie must have told her where he was going, so there was no point in talking to him about it when she could make up a much better story to spread round the tearoom at afternoon tea.

At any rate, he was here now, and so was Belinda, entering through the door to the prison and making her way to one of the little bolted-down table and chair arrangements. The visiting room was half-empty, and Belinda was headed for a table in the corner, as far as possible from everyone else. Suits me just fine, Dave thought, but he knew it meant that Belinda was gearing up for a fight. She had never liked to air her dirty laundry in public, and the enforced airing of the trial had only made her more secretive when it came to her private life.

She reached the table before him and sat down, taking the chair that would place her back against the wall. “Dave,” she said, looking up at him as he approached. She didn’t stand up, though, or extend a hand, or do anything else that might be mistaken for a greeting.

“Belinda,” he replied. He sat down in the chair opposite hers and squirmed a little, wishing he could edge it further from the table.

She raised an eyebrow fractionally, but didn’t say anything, obviously waiting for him to start. Dave opened his mouth, and then closed it again. Where do you begin telling your wife that you’ve had a visit from a crook, probably some sort of hit man, demanding a couple of million dollars? It might have been easier if there was any kind of closeness between them, but that was long gone. The threat of horrible repercussions if they didn’t come up with the cash was the biggest thing they had had in common for years.

Dave sighed and looked down at his hands. Perhaps this would be easier if he didn’t have to look at her while he told her. Perhaps he should have done this over the phone. He knew, of course, that it would have been stupid as well as impossible, but that didn’t stop him from wishing that he was

sitting in his office right now, telling Belinda over the phone how his life had just gone to hell because of her for the second time this year.

The thought made him angry, and he was finally able to speak. "I had a visit on Tuesday night. At home. From a guy called Bruce Farmer. Perhaps you've heard of him?" Dave looked up, but Belinda didn't say anything. He waited, and eventually she shook her head.

"That's funny," he went on, "because he knows you. Seems like he's the main man for Alistair Cox. Him, I know you've heard of." Again, he paused, but she said nothing, so he kept on going. "Apparently, when you shafted Indomitable, Cox was one of the investors who lost money. A lot of it. Two million dollars. And now he wants it back. From us."

Belinda managed a laugh at that, a short, explosive "Ha!" Dave waited for more, but when she refused to speak, he ground his teeth and continued.

"Alistair Cox," he said, "thinks that you've got some money hidden away that the police and the tax department didn't find during the investigation. Assets that they didn't seize. Actually, he thinks you've got a whole lot of money hidden away, because he's given me until the end of August to come up with more than two million dollars. So I really hope you have got a bunch of money buried in the backyard somewhere, because it's not going to be pretty if you don't." Dave was suddenly aware that his voice was raised and he was sounding a little hysterical besides, so he shut his mouth and stared defiantly at her. This time, he would wait her out. She had to start talking sooner or later.

"And what are you going to do about it?" The disinterest in her voice made him want to choke her to death right where she sat.

"Well, gee, I don't know. I thought for starters, I'd get the money from you and give it to him, and then for a finale I might move to Mexico, change my name, and live out the rest of my days in peace."

"What if I don't have any money to give you?"

"What do you mean? What if you don't have any money, or what if you don't give it to me?" She had the money. He knew it as soon as the sentence was out of her mouth. That was the way she talked when she was lying on the phone, giving an excuse for why she wouldn't be at a meeting or why she couldn't meet with the bank. Or the police.

"Whatever you like."

"Damn it, Belinda, I'm your husband!" He was out of his chair now, yelling at her, and he knew he had to get a grip on himself before the guard came over to end the interview. He drew a shaky breath and sat back down. "I'm your husband," he repeated, "and if that doesn't mean anything to you, maybe this will. He knows how to get to me, and he'll make it easy, but what's he going to do then. Do you really think he can't get to you just as easily? You might get away with it for a while, but not forever."

"Maybe," Belinda said. "But maybe not. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I don't have any money for you, and if Mr Cox doesn't like that, then I'm afraid that's just the way it is."

"Belinda," he hissed, trying to stay calm, but feeling like he could lose it at any second, "his guy Farmer came round to my house and threatened me. He threatened to kill me, Belinda. I can't handle this on top of everything else. If you know anything about this money you have to help me."

"Actually, I don't." She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "I don't have to do anything. I've supported you in the past, and look what it's got me. I was a businesswoman, a success, a CEO, and what were you? A medical supply salesman, and not even a good one. Sure, you dressed up okay for dinners, but that was about all you did, and I could have got that from anyone I was willing to buy a \$3000 suit and a fancy watch for. I carried you for years, and you did absolutely nothing."

“I supported you. I stood beside you.”

“You stood behind me,” she said dismissively. “That’s all you’ve ever done. Well, I’m afraid that the ride’s over.”

“What?” Dave was getting angry again, and he knew his voice was getting louder, but this time he didn’t bother trying to keep it down. “Are you kidding me? Who paid your rent in college when you wanted to move out of the dorms? Me. Who gave up medical school, and the chance for a real career, in San Francisco when you decided you’d do better going back home to New Zealand? Me. Who arranged your events, entertained your clients and kept things going while you were out of the country for weeks at a time? Me. And who wore out the words ‘No Comment’, lived in a house with the curtains shut for three weeks and drove you to court in a blacked out SUV while your trial was on? Me. Me, me, me.”

She gave him a little round of sarcastic applause. “Well, well done, David. You’d make a great society wife. I hope you can find an ageing millionaire to take you on.”

“Fuck you,” he said, getting up from his chair and storming out of the room. He wished that he could have turned the table over and thrown a few chairs, but he realised later that that was probably why everything was bolted down.

“Mom?”

“David? Is that you? What time is it? It must be three in the morning over there. Are you all right?”

“Did I wake you up?”

“No, I was just getting up. Your father is still in bed. But why are you calling so early? Has something happened?”

“You might say that.” Dave drew in a deep breath, and tried to keep his voice level. “Mom, I’m in trouble.”

“Well, tell me what’s happened, and we’ll see if we can’t sort it out together.”

It was exactly how Dave had known she’d react, and in a way, it was why he hadn’t called her before. They’d talked, of course, during the arrest, the trial, the conviction, but since then, he’d been trying to keep his problems to himself a little more. His parents were moderately well off, and he knew that they would help him if he really needed it, but he hadn’t wanted to ask for their help just because he was suddenly poor and more than a little embarrassed. He could deal with coming down in the world, and in a way, it had almost been a relief. But this was different.

The whole story spilled out of him. The goons in his house, their demands for money, Belinda’s stonewalling, all of it. Somewhere in the middle of it, he started crying, but by the time he finished, his eyes were dry and he felt deeply relieved.

“Well,” his mother said. “It does sound like you’re in a bit of a mess.”

Dave actually laughed at that, much to his surprise. “I guess I am.”

“Do you think that Belinda has some money hidden away somewhere?”

“I don’t know,” Dave admitted. “I just don’t know. If you’d asked me a week ago, I would have said that the cops got everything, and that the rumours in the papers were basically stuff they were making up to fill in a slow news day, but now? Maybe. Maybe she does have a secret stash of cash. And if she does, you can bet she’ll try to hang onto it.”

“That’s certainly not in question.” Belinda had never got on with Dave’s parents, and his mother in particular. She’d been polite to Belinda’s face, of course, but she’d actually called her ‘vulgar’ when trying to convince Dave to call the wedding off, and that was about the worst thing she could call a person. It wasn’t an American idea of vulgarity, either, but something deeply British, a mix of rude, superficial and grasping that was everything Dave’s mother was not. “I’m afraid that there’s no hope there, even if she does have the money your Mr Cox is after.”

“Yeah,” Dave agreed, and they both lapsed into silence. Dave was curled up on the couch in his lounge room with all the lights off, keeping a nervous eye on the windows. He’d been there since he’d got back from the prison. He didn’t know when Bruce would be back, but he had no doubt that it would be sometime soon, and the thought made him sick.

“Well, David,” his mother said eventually, “I know it sounds uncharitable of me to ask this, but is this really your problem?”

“What do you mean? Of course it’s my problem. I’m the guy being beaten up in my own apartment here.”

“Yes, I know that, but when you get right down to cases, you didn’t defraud the company. You didn’t make off with anyone’s money. You’re really nothing to do with any of this. Mr Cox is just using you to get to Belinda. Surely that’s obvious?”

“I guess so.”

“Then I think the solution is obvious as well. If it’s not your problem, then all you need to do is walk away from it, and then it will go back to being Belinda’s problem, which is where it belongs.”

“What are you suggesting? That I leave the country or something?”

“Exactly, dear. I know you’ve wanted to stick it out, to stand by Belinda while she needed you, and you’ve done that. And now all you’re doing is making things worse for yourself, and you’re ultimately making things worse for her as well by letting her dodge the problems that she’s created. The best thing you can do for everyone is to leave the country and come home. Not permanently, if you don’t want to, but for a couple of months at least. Give yourself a chance to put things in perspective, and give yourself a break from this whole nasty mess. Now what do you say?”

Home. It was almost irresistible. It was summer in San Francisco now, and the thought of long sunny days on the deck at his parents’ house with a stack of books and a couple of beers made Dave feel suddenly homesick. He sighed. “That does sound great right now. All I’m going to do here is get myself beaten into a bloody pulp.”

“Exactly,” his mother repeated. “Now, do you need some money for your flights? I know things are tight for you at the moment.”

“No, I’ll be okay. Things are tight, but I should be good for a one-way ticket out of here.”

“That’s the spirit. Once you get a chance to view things calmly from a distance, I’m sure you’ll be able to sort out what you want to do next.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Any time, dear.”

“I’ll book my flights tomorrow morning, and I’ll email you my itinerary.”

“Lovely. See you soon.”

“Yeah, see you soon. Love you, Mom.”

“I love you too.”

A tiny part of Dave had hoped that talking to his parents would make everything better, but most of him was unsurprised that it hadn’t. He had tossed and turned for hours after getting off the phone, and then finally fallen into a shallow and restless sleep sometime after five. He woke up at half past eight, unrested and slightly queasy. He gave a large travel mug of tea a quick blast on his way down to the bus stop and hauled himself into work just before half past nine, hungry from having skipped breakfast, but at the same time feeling too sick to keep food down.

“Good morning, Dave!” Rose boomed as he entered. He’d been hoping to slip in unnoticed, but instead she was making enough noise that the whole office would know he was late. Which might have been deliberate, he thought. He could see Rose and Jackie sitting down and cooking up just such a scheme.

“Morning,” he mumbled. He kept his eyes down and kept moving, hoping to avoid being sucked into a discussion.

Hoping in vain, of course. “Oh, dear, you look terrible! Is something wrong? You’re not usually this late, unless of course you’ve been visiting Belinda. Has something happened at the prison? I didn’t hear anything on the news.”

“What? No. Nothing’s happened at the prison.” Dave couldn’t keep the annoyance out of his tone, but as usual, Rose didn’t notice a thing.

“Well, that’s good to hear. Now, don’t forget, you’ve got Oscar Middleton coming in at ten. I’ve booked you into the small conference room.”

“I hadn’t forgotten.”

“And don’t forget that he was asking about a new set of scales. Heaven only knows how they managed to break their set - I thought they were indestructible. Make sure that you ask him, because I’m absolutely dying to know.”

“I’m a little curious myself,” Dave admitted as he eased towards the hallway. “Better go and get ready for him.”

“I’ll ring when he gets in.”

“Thanks, Rose.” Dave reached the hallway and made a dash for it, stopping briefly in the kitchen, which was blessedly empty, to refill his mug. He made it all the way to his office without speaking to anyone else - it looked like Denise and Suresh were both out this morning, and Jackie was talking loudly on the phone - shut his door and sat down at his desk with a sigh.

I should have called in sick today, he thought. Calling in sick probably wouldn’t have been much of an improvement, anyway. Sure, it might help to have a day off if he could sleep, or if he had something to do to take his mind off everything, but as it was, he’d probably just spend the whole day

sitting on the couch waiting for Alistair Cox's goons to bust down the front door. It was amazing how horrible it was that they knew where he lived. It probably wouldn't have been much better if they'd come up to him on the bus or in the street somewhere, but there was something extra unpleasant about the fact that they'd come into his home to threaten him. Maybe it was time to move again. Maybe it was time to move all the way back home to California.

"Dave." He looked up, one hand hovering over his computer's power button. It was Jackie, standing in the doorway, holding the door halfway open and looking displeased. Not that that was anything unusual.

"Morning, Jackie," he replied, trying to sound pleasant, or at least awake.

"You're in late. Again."

"I know. Sorry. Bus broke down," he lied.

"You've been late a lot over the past few weeks. Your productivity is slipping."

"Sorry," he repeated. "Had a lot on my plate, you know."

"I'm trying to be understanding, Dave, but this is a business. I need you here during business hours, and I need you to be selling while you're here. That's what you're paid to do."

Dave felt like he was in the second grade again, being called into the principal's office for putting paint in Missy LaMonte's hair. He knew he was blushing, and hated himself for doing it. "I've got a lot of appointments lined up for next week," he said. This was an exaggeration, but not a lie, and it was the kind of thing Jackie liked to hear. "And I've got Oscar Middleton coming in at ten, and Peninsula Medical this afternoon"

"Really?" Jackie raised a disapproving eyebrow. Dave nodded, and she seemed to soften ever so slightly. "All right, then. But I don't want to have to have this conversation with you again."

"No."

"At work, on time, and in a fit state to do work, you understand."

"Yes."

"Good." She turned and left, shutting the door behind her. Dave let out a long breath, and turned his computer on.

The hell with this, he thought. His computer wheezed to life, and he logged in, fired up his browser and went to Air New Zealand's website. Wellington to San Francisco. Leaving next Monday. One adult. It came to nearly two thousand dollars, which would just about clean him out, but being broke at home in the States had to be better than staying in Wellington. He sat with his mouse hovering over the buy button for a minute, then decided to check a couple more airlines for a cheaper fare.

The phone rang when he was on his fourth search, making him jump out of his skin and knock his forgotten mug of tea over. The liquid crept across his desk towards his computer, and he hastily froze it for easy removal later.

"Sorry, Rose," he said, still fumbling with the receiver. "I got caught up in a few things here. Could you tell Mr Middleton I'll be right out?"

"I'm afraid this isn't Rose."

Dave clutched the receiver as a chill went through him. The man on the other end of the phone sounded classy and well-educated, with a voice that would be perfect for a classical radio station, but

there was something terrifying about it as well. Dave knew that it wasn't one of his clients, or anyone calling up about medical supplies, for that matter. "Who is it?" he asked, thought he was sure he knew the answer.

He wasn't disappointed. "This is Alistair Cox."

"What do you want?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the discussion you had with one of my employees earlier this week. Bruce. I'm sure you remember it." This voice could make 'Good morning' sound like a deadly threat, so the things he was actually saying were enough to make Dave glad he hadn't eaten breakfast that morning.

"Yes, I remember," he said, forcing the words through dry lips.

"Then you'll know what I'm calling about."

"The money."

"Exactly! I was sure you'd understand."

"Look, I've spoken to Belinda, and she says there's nothing. I can tell you, I haven't got any money, and definitely not two million. I think that the papers must have made some sort of mistake or something."

"I don't think so, Mr Rosewood. I think that there is two million dollars out there, and if you don't have it, you had better find it. Quickly."

"I can't-"

"You had better," Cox repeated. "It might be a little troublesome getting to your lovely wife, but as you've seen, we have no trouble getting to you. Do we?"

"No."

"And incidentally, it might be a little more difficult getting to you at 1120 Santa Cruz Avenue, but I can manage that as well. I do have connections overseas, you understand."

Dave started shivering uncontrollably. That was his parents' address. How did Cox have it? And how did he know that Dave was thinking of skipping out and going back to the States, anyway? Was he some sort of mind reader? With an effort, Dave managed to click his browser closed. "Okay," he said. "I understand."

"Good. I'm delighted to hear it. So, two million dollars by the end of August. I look forward to hearing from you."

"Wait!"

"Yes?"

"How will I get in touch with you?"

"There will be no need for that. My people will be staying in regular contact with you. Goodbye, Mr Rosewood."

The line went dead, but Dave stayed exactly where he was, the receiver still held to his ear. He was still shaking, and it didn't feel like he would ever stop. He could feel something horrible inside him, and he reached forward just in time to grab the trash can before he threw up.

Five minutes later, he was still sitting at his desk, clutching the trash can. It was hard to believe that there was something more horrible than having your wife tried for fraud and embezzlement and sent to prison, all your assets seized, and the media running around after you every day for a month, but apparently there was. He had no way of getting the money. Not even if he sold everything he had left. Not even if his parents sold everything they owned, and there was no way he would ask them to do that. There had to be an answer, though. Maybe he could disappear. Leave the country, cut all ties, change his name, and keep his head down for the rest of his life, just like he had told Belinda he would. It had to be possible.

Slowly, he felt life coming back to his arms and legs. He started gathering up the pieces of frozen tea from his desk and throwing them away. Then he stood up and took the trashcan out into the hallway and out towards reception.

“Dave? Where are you going?” Dave didn’t turn to look at her, but even out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Rose looked genuinely concerned.

“I’ve had a little accident. Just going to throw this in the skip,” he said.

“Do you want me to do it? You look like you should be sitting down.”

“No, I’m fine. The fresh air will do me good.”

“If you’re sure.” Rose sounded dubious, but she didn’t push it.

Dave went outside, walked around to the side of the warehouse, and threw his trash bag into the skip. He set the empty can down on the ground and took a few deep breaths of the chilly air. He was calming down, although it was a hopeless sort of calm. Something horrible was certain to happen, unless Belinda turned around and produced two million dollars. He couldn’t rule it out altogether, but it seemed pretty unlikely. And he couldn’t see any other way out of this.

It was nearly ten. Time for his appointment, and there was no reason to let the complete wreck of his life stop him from selling a few scalpels and bits of tubing to a hack from a third-rate medical centre. He picked up the trash can and walked back round the corner, almost colliding with a man on a bike who had just hopped the kerb.

“Hey, watch yourself,” the man said. “Special delivery.” He pulled in front of Dave and leaned his bike against the wall. Dave followed him inside.

“Delivery for Jackie Ropata,” the man was saying to Rose.

“I’ll get her,” Rose replied. The courier unstrapped his massive bag from his back, opened it up, and pulled out a package. He was wearing a silver cycling jersey, and when he took the bag off, Dave saw the logo on the back. Lightspeed Couriers. Liza. That trip out to pick up her stuff felt like it had happened last year instead of three days ago. At the time it had seemed like the weirdest thing that would happen to him all year, but now it was looking almost normal. And Liza was starting to seem almost normal compared to some of the people he had spoken to that week.

“Excuse me,” he said to the courier.

“Yeah?”

“Do you know someone called Liza?”

“Sure. She’s one of the couriers. Why?”

“No reason,” Dave said. The man looked at him suspiciously, and he felt compelled to elaborate. “I met her the other day, and she said she worked for Lightspeed Couriers. She seems very... interesting,” he finished lamely.

“You know she’s not into guys, right?” the courier snorted.

“You’ve got a delivery for me?” It was Jackie. The courier turned away from Dave and handed her a parcel.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I just get your signature here?”

Jackie signed, then turned on her heel and walked back into her office. The courier zipped up his back and hoisted it onto his back.

“Listen,” Dave said, “About Liza.”

The courier seemed surprised Dave was still there. “I told you, she’s not into guys.”

“I know that. That’s not what this is about. I- I left something her car the other day.”

“Sure you did.”

“I did! Could you give me her number? I just want to see if she’s found it.”

The courier shook his head. “No way. Against company policy.” He looked at Dave again, and then seemed to come to a decision. “But just in case you actually are someone Liza wants to talk to, here’s what I’ll do. You give me your number, and I’ll give it to her. If she wants to talk to you, she’ll call.”

“Great!” It wasn’t what Dave was hoping for, but it was better than nothing. He wasn’t sure what Liza could do to help him, but he was convinced that if there was a person in Wellington who could help him right now, it was her. He took out a business card, wrote his personal cell number on the back, and added “The guy who helped you pick your stuff up the other day”. He hope that would jog her memory. “Will you see her today? It’s kind of important.”

“I’ll get it to her,” the courier replied. “She’ll call you if she wants to.”

“Thanks.” Dave watched the courier leave.

“Who was that,” Rose asked. Dave realised she had been listening to the whole conversation.

“Who’s Liza?”

“Someone I met last week. She gave me a lift into town.”

Rose looked like she had a hundred questions queued up, but Oscar Middleton walked in the door that minute, and Dave ushered him into the conference room before she could say another word.

Walking into the seedy bar, Dave felt like a secret agent. He'd had a text that afternoon, while he was meeting with yet another practice manager for yet another small medical centre. "Friendly's bar, 6:00." That was all it had said. No name, and he didn't recognise the number. His first thought had been Liza, and then his second thought, following hard on the heels of the first, had been Alistair Cox or Bruce. Checking the bar's location on the internet had swung him back to Liza, though, and now that he was actually here, he couldn't imagine the text having come from anyone else.

At one point in its history, Newtown had been a seedy, dangerous sort of place. It had been slowly gentrifying for about twenty years, though, and Wellington City was pushing high-rise development out that way, so it was a pretty tame, mainstream sort of suburb these days. But there were still stubborn pockets of resistance a couple of streets off the main drag, and Friendly's looked like it would be one of those holdouts until the day it was finally bulldozed. Outside, the paint was cheap and peeling, the windows were blacked out, and one corner of the facade drooped alarmingly into the street. Inside, the atmosphere was dense and smoky - in complete violation of health regulations - the taps at the bar advertised three different types of cheap beer, and the linoleum on the floor was so sticky that it made sucking noises as Dave walked across it.

The place was surprisingly busy. Not full. Not hopping, but busier than Dave imagined it had any right to be. There were a couple of tough-looking older guys seated at the bar, and half a dozen small groups scattered between the booths and the darts boards. He spotted Liza, sitting in a corner booth and pouring from a pitcher of beer, at the same time she spotted him. She nodded, and he came over.

"Hey," she said. "Sit down. Beer?"

"Sure, Dave agreed, settling down into the cracked vinyl seat opposite hers. She poured another beer expertly from the pitcher and slid the full glass towards him. "Thanks." He looked at it for a moment, wondering whether the glass was clean and whether a bar like this cleaned its lines more than once a century, and then tried the beer. It was surprisingly good, and he took a healthy swig before setting the glass down.

"So," Liza said. "Joey gave me your message. Urgent, he said."

Dave flushed. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"So what's so urgent?"

"Well -" Dave hesitated. This morning, after the call from Alistair Cox, sending an urgent message to Liza had seemed like a sensible thing to do. Inevitable, even. But now that he was actually here, it just seemed a little ridiculous.

"What? It's gotta be something. Joey said you looked like you could piss your pants if someone spoke to you loud enough."

This was crazy. Dave knew it was crazy. He'd always been a bit of a loner, never had much success making friends, but he'd lived in Wellington for years, and not all of the people he and Belinda had socialised with had been her friends exclusively. Okay, most of them had, but surely he had someone better to talk to at a time like this than this strange Amazon who'd just finished serving a sentence for assault? He ran through the possibilities in his mind: Rochelle, definitely more Belinda's friend than his own; Simon and Monica, ditto; Jonno and Te Aroha, possible, but they were on a six-month holiday in Europe. They'd probably send him some nice emails of support, though, and if he did get beaten to a pulp by Cox's guys, they'd probably send amazing flowers to his hospital bed. Or his funeral. That left Daniel, and since he was possibly the biggest coward Dave had ever met, he would only be good for making Dave feel better about his recent reactions. The man was afraid of everything from aardvarks to zebras. If Dave wanted someone to puke with, all he'd have to do would be to tell Daniel about everything that had happened this week.

“Okay,” he said at last. “This is probably going to sound a little crazy, but some stuff has been happening to me this week, and I need your help.”

“You need my help?” Liza twitched an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“Okay. With what?”

She leaned back into the corner of the booth and waited. Dave took a deep breath, and then told her all of it, from the day he’d come home from work to find police searching the house right through to the call from Cox that morning. Liza listened to the whole tale in silence, nodding occasionally, and running her fingers through the condensation on the side of her glass. When he was finished, she didn’t say anything for a couple of minutes. Dave was wondering whether he should get up and leave, and he had about made up his mind to do that when she spoke again.

“Do you think she’s got the cash?”

Dave sighed explosively. “I guess that’s the question, isn’t it? I’d like to think that if she did, she’d tell me, and she’d give it to me so I could get out of this mess. And you know, up till Monday, if you’d asked me, I’d have said that of course she’d do that. But now?” His hand gripped his empty glass hard enough to turn his knuckles white. “I bet that bitch does have the money and she’s setting this whole thing up because she figures it’s cheaper than a divorce.”

Liza nodded. “I think you’re right.” She poured him another beer, and topped up her own glass. “Drink up.”

“For tomorrow I die?” Dave barked out a laugh. “Or at least by the end of August.”

“Only if you can’t come up with the cash,” Liza said.

“Haven’t you been listening? There’s no way I’m going to be able to find that kind of money. Not even if I was out there selling my body for sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. Drug dealers couldn’t even come up with two million bucks in the next six weeks.” He slammed down half his beer in one long gulp. “That pitcher’s getting low. I’ll get us another.”

“Don’t worry. Got it covered.” Liza let out a piercing whistle that made Dave jump. Looking around the room, though, nobody else seemed to be bothered. Liza held up the mostly empty jug, and the barman nodded and began filling up another one.

“Thanks, Benny,” she said when he brought it over to them.

“No worries, L,” he replied.

They drank in silence for a while before Liza spoke again. “So the problem’s pretty simple. Cox wants you to give him money. You don’t have it. Your wife might have it, and she might not have it, but either way, you’re not getting it from her. So where do you get it?”

“That is a simple problem all right,” Dave agreed, “but I think the solution’s going to be tricky.”

Liza shrugged. “Well, you can’t raise it. You can’t borrow it?”

“No.”

“So you have to steal it.” She nodded, and leaned back with a satisfied expression on her face.

“Steal it?” Dave was aware that he was talking too loudly. “Are you crazy?” he hissed.

“Am I crazy? Are *you* crazy?” she replied. “Think about it. Need money. Don’t have money. Can’t raise money. Can’t borrow money. What other option do you have?”

“That’s illegal!”

“So go to the cops. Tell them everything and see what happens. That’s your other option.”

Dave thought. Of course that was the sensible option. Why wasn’t he already down at the police station? He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a smart move. Cox will still get to me.”

“Right. Back to stealing it, then.”

“I think there has to be another solution. There’s got to be a way out of this.” Dave emptied his glass, and Liza filled it for him.

“Hey, I’m open to suggestions. You drink up, and if you think of a better idea, you let me know.”

“Are you sure about this?” Dave asked Liza as they crept up the narrow street.

Liza shrugged. “Makes sense to me. Are *you* sure, that’s the thing.”

That was a really good question, but Dave didn’t have an answer. He watched the familiar houses through the window and wondered what the hell he was thinking. It had seemed like a good idea half an hour ago, looking at it through the bottom of a few jugs of beer, but now, driving along his old street with a couple of strong coffees in his stomach, he wasn’t so sure. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Want to go back to the bar? Fine with me.”

Liza sounded genuinely accommodating, and Dave was tempted. But that wouldn’t get him any closer to sorting out his problem with Cox. Of course, breaking into his old house to see if Belinda had stashed a couple of million bucks away wasn’t the smartest idea he’d ever had. Ordinarily, he’d never consider doing anything like this. But nothing about this situation was ordinary, so perhaps the best thing to do was throw ordinarily out the window for now, and just go with it.

“I’m fine,” he said. “The house is just round this corner.”

Liza squeezed her battered car into an impossibly narrow spot between a Mercedes and a BMW. Dave could hardly bear to watch. He didn’t know whether he wanted her to make it, or to scratch a bumper, set off a car alarm, and bring this whole crazy project to an early end. He told himself he wanted her to succeed, but he felt oddly disappointed when she gave the wheel a final twist, set the handbrake and turned off the engine.

“Ready?” she asked. He gave her a jerky nod in reply. “Then let’s go.”

Dave got out of the car and watched as Liza retrieved a small backpack from the trunk. “Lead the way,” she said. He walked down the street as casually as he could manage, but feeling like everyone within a mile of him could see exactly who he was and what he was planning. The street wasn’t well lit, and most of the houses were designed to make the most of the harbour views, with hardly any windows facing onto the road. It would be remarkably bad luck if anyone saw him, and it wouldn’t matter if they did. He wasn’t doing anything illegal. Yet.

“This is it,” he said to Liza, pointing at the huge white garage and enclosed platform for the private cable car that went down to his old house. It had only been a month, but he already felt out of place

here, like he was visiting an acquaintance rather than coming home to a place he had lived for nearly six years.

“Just in time,” Liza said, pointing to the for sale sign by the big glass door. Dave looked at it. Tenders were closing next week, and who knew how soon after that someone would be moving in?

“Looks like it,” he agreed, and tried to convince himself that this was a good omen.

Liza was already trying the door, and finding it locked, was reaching into her backpack for something. Dave wasn't sure he wanted to see what she'd come out with, even though there was nobody else in sight. “Hang on,” he said, and scabbled among the white pebbles of the ornamental border for a minute before coming up with the spare key. He unlocked the door, and waved Liza through.

“You must have been loaded,” she remarked, looking at the gleaming metal of the cable car, and then peering down the hill at the house.

“Not me. It was pretty much all Belinda's money. Anyway, let's go down,” he said, getting into the cable car.

The power was still on, which was a relief. Although thinking about it, Dave decided that the real estate agent would want to keep it on so prospective buyers could use the cable car. When the power went out, the only way down to the house was by ladder down the bank, and that wasn't fun even during the daytime. At night, it was terrifying, and he was glad to be taking the cable car sedately down the hillside.

The ride was over in less than a minute, and Dave opened the cable car door. “Here we are,” he said.

“Wait,” Liza said. “We should check this thing first.”

“Good point,” Dave agreed.

There wasn't much to check, but Dave lay flat on the ground to look underneath the car while Liza pulled a screwdriver out of her backpack and opened up the panel under the seat and checked inside. Nothing. It would have been far too easy for Belinda to have hidden anything in the car. Liza reattached the panel and looked over at the front door.

“You got a key to this one too?” she asked.

Dave felt around under one of the windowsills where the spare key had been taped, but there was nothing there. “Guess not,” he said.

“Okay.” Liza looked pleased, and she rummaged in her bag while sizing up the front door. She pulled out what could only be a set of lockpicks, selected one, and put it in the lock. She moved it around for an agonisingly long time, staring at nothing and frowning with concentration, before the door opened with a satisfying click. She opened the door. “Let's go.”

“How many times have you done this, anyway?” Dave asked as he stepped inside.

“Never,” she replied. “Got a friend who's a locksmith. Gave me some lessons a couple of years ago. Always wanted to try it in real life.”

Dave shook his head, but said nothing. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or scream. In the end he did neither, but walked through the entrance hall and into the lounge room.

The house was big, dark, and empty. He'd never really felt like it was a warm and welcoming sort of place, even when he'd been living there, but now it felt positively forbidding. “Okay,” he said, “let's get this over and get out of here.”

Liza nodded. "Let's split up. Get it done more quickly."

That seemed sensible, at any rate. "I'll take this floor. There are bedrooms upstairs, and a games room downstairs. Although without furniture, I can't see where you'd hide anything in the games room. I guess the kitchen and bathrooms are most likely. If the cash is here at all, that is."

"Won't know until we look," Liza said. She went back into the entrance hall, and Dave could hear her climbing the stairs. He stood for a moment, overwhelmed with the weirdness of being back in the house again, and then shook himself and went into the kitchen.

He searched as thoroughly as he could, looking inside the oven, the dishwasher and all the cabinets and drawers, checking the fuse box and the water meter, lifting a loose flap of carpet and peering underneath. He looked inside the cistern in the downstairs bathroom, and peeled off the wrap round the hot water cylinder just in case Belinda had decided to tape a bunch of notes to it. Nothing. He was re-wrapping the cylinder when Liza joined him.

"Find anything?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. "If it's here, it's so well hidden that we'd have to knock the place down and sift the rubble to find it. Heck, if it is here, that's how they probably will find it."

"Maybe," Liza said. "Let's check outside."

They went outside and Liza locked the front door behind them, looking quite pleased with herself as she did so. Then they started searching again, but they had no more luck with the outside of the house than they had inside.

"Screw it," Dave said, straightening up and wiping dirt off his hands. "There's no money here."

"Doesn't look like it."

"Damn!" Dave said, kicking the ground in frustration. His voice sounded startlingly loud, and he froze, waiting for one of the neighbours to come out and investigate, but nobody did. "Damn," he said again in a near-whisper. "That would have been way too easy, wouldn't it? We find the cash, I give it to Cox, and this whole thing goes away. Way too easy. What now?"

Liza looked at her watch. "Back to the pub," she said. "Still a couple of hours till it closes."

Dave and Liza didn't leave Friendly's until closing time, and even though his house was less than a mile away, walking there was almost too difficult. He lurched crazily all over the sidewalk, and Liza had to practically carry him the last two blocks. He struggled with the front gate, but eventually pushed it open and stumbled down the path with Liza following.

"Wait." Dave stopped dead, and Liza ran into him, causing them both to stagger into the wall.

"What is it?"

"Light's on. Can't remember putting the light on this morning."

"Maybe you left it on last night. No point turning it on in the morning."

Dave felt the beer rising in his throat. "It's Bruce. Same as last time. I'm fucking sure of it."

“Okay.” Liza parked him up against the wall. She suddenly seemed a lot less drunk. “Wait here for a minute.”

Dave leaned against the wall, trying to control his breathing. His heart felt like it was going to beat right out of his chest. He watched Liza creeping towards the front door, peering in the windows as she went. She stopped by the door and tried the knob. “Locked,” she called back to him quietly. He stumbled towards her, groping in his pockets for the key. Liza took the key from him, unlocked the door, and slipped inside. He felt like he should follow, but he waited, ashamed by his fear.

Liza reappeared at the door in less than a minute. “Empty,” she said. “Guess you left the light on.”

Dave felt like crying. “Guess I did.”

“Hey, it’s okay. Let’s get you inside.”

“Right.” He made it all the way to the kitchen table before his legs gave way, and he barely managed to sit down before he collapsed. “Fuck,” he said, tears starting despite his efforts. “What’s happened to my life? I had it pretty good, and then all of this happened. No money... kicked out of my house... wife in prison... crazy bastards threatening to kill me unless I come up with a whole bunch of money I don’t have.” He broke down and started sobbing. Liza sat down at the table and waited silently until he stopped. “I’m sorry,” he said eventually. “I hardly know you and I’m dragging you into all of this. I don’t understand why you’re helping me.”

“I had a good feeling about you the first time we met. And I kind of owed you one for helping me out then. ”

“But not like this. This is crazy.”

“It’s an adventure.”

Dave shook his head. “You’re crazy.”

Liza just shrugged. Dave sniffed, and wiped at his face.

“Sorry for losing it,” he said.

“Forget it.” Liza stood up and looked around the kitchen. “How about a cup of tea? I’ll put on the kettle.”

Dave laughed, sounding a little hysterical even to himself. “Kettle? I’ll make it.” He pulled himself up and grabbed a couple of clean mugs from the dishrack. He filled them with cold water and took them back to the table, then grabbed the box of teabags from the cupboard.

“That’s cold water, you boozer. Not going to work.”

“I’m not drunk!” Dave insisted. “Well, maybe a little.” He dropped the teabags into the cold water and started dunking them to release the tea.

“Here.” Liza reached for the mugs. “Let me do that.”

“No! Watch this.” He let go of the teabags and glared theatrically at the two mugs. In a few seconds, steam started to rise from them. “There,” he said. “Milk and sugar?”

Liza leaned back in her chair. “How the hell did you do that?”

“It’s magic!” Dave said, with another hysterical laugh. “I am the Great Tea Magician!”

“It’s a trick, right? How did you do it?”

“I told you. And watch this.” He quickly cooled the tea in her mug until it was starting to ice over, then warmed it back up again. “Any temperature you want. Ice, water, steam. Go on, ask me.”

For the first time since he’d met her, Liza seemed speechless. “So you can make water be any temperature you want?”

“Not water! That would be way too useful,” Dave said bitterly. “Tea. Only tea.”

“Shit,” Liza breathed. “That’s incredible.”

“When I was a kid, I used to think I’d grow up to be a superhero. Using the Great Power of Tea to save people. I don’t know how the fuck I thought that would work. Building bridges out of frozen tea to save drowning children. I used to imagine that if I tried really hard, maybe I could do water instead. Now that would be useful. Tea? Useless. The only thing I’ll be building out of frozen tea is a nasty Popsicle.”

“Are you kidding me? This changes everything!”

“What, am I going to become some sort of circus freak. You think I’m going to get enough people through at five bucks a pop to raise two million bucks? In six weeks?” Dave wasn’t sure whether he was going to laugh or cry. “You know,” he said eventually, “you’re the first person I’ve ever told about this. And I don’t know why I’m telling you.” His body made the decision for him - cry. Again. “This is the most embarrassing night of my life.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Liza said, coming over to give him an awkward hug from the side. “You’re tired, you’re drunk, you’ve had a crazy week. You need to get some sleep, and then in the morning, things will look different.”

Dave woke up in his own bed the next morning, fully dressed except for his shoes and socks, and with no memory of how he got there. Rolling over, he squinted at the clock on his bedside table. It was strangely blurry - he couldn’t make out the numbers at all. It took him a few seconds to realise that it was blurry because there was a glass of water sitting beside it. I must have really been on the ball last night, he thought. I don’t usually remember to get myself water before I go to bed. Or aspirin, for that matter, he added, noticing two of them sitting beside the water. He sat up, took the aspirin and gulped the water. The coldness felt horrible in his stomach, but he managed to keep it down. Setting the empty glass back on the bedside table, he noticed a note.

Gone to get breakfast. Back in 15. Hope you like burgers. L.

Liza. Fragments of the night before started to come back to him. Friendly’s bar. The terror he had felt at seeing the kitchen light left on. His trick with the tea. And then a half bottle of Scotch that he had unearthed from the back of a cupboard. He vaguely remembered the first two shots, but after that, nothing. He hoped he hadn’t embarrassed himself further - the tea thing was bad enough, and he’d still been comparatively sober at that point. Only comparatively, though, he told himself, because to be fair, you were pretty wrecked.

The front door banged, and he heard someone moving through the house. The tips of Liza’s blue mohawk peeped around his bedroom door. “Morning, tiger,” she called, in what was probably a quiet voice for her.

“It’s okay. I’m up.”

She popped herself into the room like a jack-in-the-box. “Good. Breakfast on the table. Have a shower, get changed, and I’ll put the coffee on. Plunger in the pantry?”

“Um, yeah.”

“See you in a couple of minutes, then,” she said, leaving as suddenly as she had arrived.

This whole morning was happening too strangely and too quickly for Dave to really process. Belinda had never been this chipper after a big night. In fact, she tended to be worse than he was, and she snored so loudly that he usually staggered off to the spare room at some point in the early hours, so he was used to waking up alone with a hangover, and then going downstairs to wrestle with the analgesics and coffee on his own. Belinda would usually put in an appearance around midday, and she would expect coffee to be ready for her. Liza, meanwhile, didn’t even look a little bit hung over, and she sounded disgustingly chipper.

Still. Shower. That was probably a good idea. He struggled to the bathroom, subjected himself to a brief sluicing, and came into the kitchen just as Liza was pushing the plunger on the coffee.

“Good timing,” she said. “Sit.” He sat at the table, and she brought over the coffee and unrolled the top of a plain brown paper bag. “Can’t do McDonalds,” she said. “These are from a place I know.”

The burger she handed him was sized somewhere between softball and basketball, with grease and sauce starting to soak through the wrapper. He looked at it from a couple of angles, trying to work out the best plan of attack, and then sailed in. It was delicious. His stomach didn’t fight it at all, and it was gone in a dozen huge bites.

“That was exactly what I needed,” he said. “Thank you.”

Liza waved him away. “Me too. Just the thing after a big night out.”

“About that,” he began, and then stopped. What could he say, after the way he had acted the night before? “The whole thing,” he began again, “with the light, and the tea, and all of it. Sorry. I’ve had a rough week, I guess, and I just kind of let it get to me.”

Liza crammed the rest of her burger into her mouth and wiped her fingers on a serviette. “Forget it,” she mumbled. “Not important.”

“Well, I just wanted to say thanks for listening, and for getting me home safe. All of it. I appreciate it.”

“Seriously, not important. We need to talk about what to do next.”

“About what?”

“What, are you kidding? About the money. I’ve got an idea.”

“Really?” Dave poured himself a cup of coffee and fussed with milk and sugar, trying to buy himself time to think. Okay, he had come to Liza for help, but he hadn’t really expected that she would give it, and to tell the truth, he was a little afraid when he thought about the kind of help she was likely to offer. Sure, she was being really nice to him, and she definitely seemed efficient, but it was important to remember, he told himself, that she had been arrested for assault. Technically, he was associating with a criminal. Of course, technically, he was a criminal himself now, even though it had been his own house, and even though they didn’t find any cash to burgle.

“That tea thing that you do-” Liza said. Dave groaned. “What?”

“Look, I’m sorry about that. I was drunk. I didn’t mean to -”

“What are you talking about? That’s the key to this whole thing!”

“But it’s useless! I told you, I can’t do water, and to be honest, I have a pretty hard time with weak tea.”

“Yeah, but you can do any temperature, right?”

“Right,” he admitted, drawing the word out. “How is that going to help us?”

“Seriously?” Liza stared at him. “You’re like a human safecracker. I’ve been talking to Sue - that locksmith friend I told you about. She says this thing is totally possible.”

“What thing?” Dave felt his headache starting to come back.

“Safecracking! She says you can do it just with temperature. Heat the workings up, then freeze them. Might take a couple of goes, but eventually the metal will just shatter.”

“Really?”

“That’s what she said. Just talked to her this morning.”

Dave sat silently, spinning his coffee cup on the tabletop. If this was true, then he’d been selling his powers short for years. All his life, almost. On the other hand, it was illegal, and safecracking was probably more difficult and dangerous than Liza was making it sound. On the other other hand, it wasn’t like he had any other way to get Cox what he wanted, and it was probably better to be a little criminal than a lot dead. “I don’t want to steal from anyone who really needs the money,” he said.

Liza snorted. “If they need the money, then they don’t have the kind of money you need.”

“True. But I don’t want to steal from good people. You know, old ladies who make big donations to charity. If we have to do this, then we need to pick our targets. Robin Hood style, okay?” He couldn’t believe he was saying this, but a lot had happened lately, and maybe it was time he made some changes to his life. Even if that did mean robbing from the rich to give to Alistair Cox, who was certainly one of the rich himself. Dave felt a strange fierceness building up inside him. “And one more thing.”

“What?”

“I want to stick it to Cox. I don’t know how, but if we get the opportunity, I want to do it.”

“Sure thing, tiger.” Liza grinned at him. “That’s the ticket.”

“Okay, then all we need to do is pick our target.”

“You let me take care of that. You need to work on your skills.” Liza looked him over. “We’re going to do this thing.”

Dave nodded. “We are.”

“Finish your coffee, and then let’s hit the net. We’ve got targets to find.”

Dave spent most of Saturday on the internet with Liza, searching for a target. The Yellow Pages didn’t turn up anything promising, and neither did the news. They agreed on the guidelines early on.

No banks. Nothing with heavy security. Nobody who couldn't stand to lose the money. And preferably, someone who was enough of a prick that everyone would be secretly glad to see them lose their money if the story ended up hitting the news. It was a shame, Dave said to Liza after a couple of hours of searching, that there weren't any incredibly wealthy politicians in New Zealand. That would be seeing justice done, but as it was, none of them really had anything worth stealing. Nothing portable, anyway. Making off with a house would be a neat trick, but it was probably beyond them.

On Saturday night, they ordered pizza, and after dinner they sat around the kitchen table while Dave broke pins. He had a dish of cold tea in front of him, and they dropped the pins into it, one at a time. He heated the tea until it seemed like it would disappear in a cloud of superheated steam, then brought it down as quickly as possible to freezing. This didn't work particularly well, but when Liza suggested they switch to green tea vodka, things started to happen. A couple of heat-and chill cycles and a tap with a hammer, and the pins shattered. Dave could hardly believe it when the first one broke. Liza had been dipping into the vodka, and she let loose with a loud war cry and banged on the table hard enough to send the dish and its contents flying. Later, cleaning up the mess on the floor, Dave thought that he hadn't been so happy in years.

Liza slept on the futon in the lounge room that night, and when Dave woke up on Sunday morning, he found her toothbrush in the rack, and the disreputable backpack he had retrieved for her the first time they had met sitting by the end of the futon, clothes spilling out from the half-open zipper. Liza herself was sitting at the kitchen table, engrossed in a bowl of Weet-bix and the Sunday paper.

"Got something," she announced, thrusting the paper towards him.

"What?"

"A target. Look."

"New Tolkien film gets green light? What about it?"

"Read the rest of the article."

"Executives from three major Hollywood studios have arrived in New Zealand this week to meet with Peter Jackson. No new projects have officially been announced, but sources close to Mr Jackson have confirmed that they are in negotiations to produce another movie set in JRR Tolkien's Middle-Earth. I still don't see the point of this."

"Keep reading."

"In a rare departure from her native California, Diana Westlake has travelled to New Zealand with one of the delegations. It is rumoured that she is considering financing the new film, her fourteenth such venture. Ms Westlake has not appeared onscreen since 1985, when she played Mrs Bennet in the critically-panned punk adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. It is unknown whether she is considering a role in this new film. Ms Westlake did not respond to requests for an interview."

"Diana Westlake!" Liza threw up her hands in triumph. "Perfect."

"I'm still not seeing it."

"Don't you watch TV? This is absolutely perfect."

"Well, she can definitely stand to lose the money, but I don't see how we're going to get it from her. It's not like she's come here with a briefcase full of hundred-dollar bills."

Liza gave him a scornful look. "I'm not talking about the money. I'm talking about her necklace." Dave opened his mouth, but Liza cut him off before he could say anything. "There was a show about it last month. Not much else to do in prison. Faith - my cellmate - was mad for documentaries. And

reality TV. Fourteen hours a day. Ask me anything about endangered fish or the latest season of *Survivor*. Anything at all.”

This was more than Dave was used to hearing out of Liza in one go. He wasn't sure what to say. “How about you tell me about this necklace?” he said at last.

“Right. The Star of Mars. Massive red diamond. And a bunch of other little ones, on a necklace. Supposed to be worth millions. But apparently they got them out of some mine in the Congo with slave labour. Blood diamonds.”

“Okay, I think I've heard something about that, anyway.”

“Some sleazy dictator gave Diana this thing for her 70th. Big scandal. Big internet petition to get her to give it back. But she said fuck you to all of them, and kept it.” Liza looked as if she approved, Dave noticed. Maybe not of the necklace itself, but he was sure that she approved of the sentiment. “Takes it with her everywhere. Keeps it in a special safe. Won't trust it to hotel safes.”

“How do you know this? I thought Diana Westlake was supposed to be a recluse.”

“Saw it on the special. Don't know how they got her to do the interview. But she opened this thing up and gave them a look at the goods. Looked pretty pleased with it, too. Made in Switzerland. Some guy who mostly does bank vaults.”

Dave felt his heart beating faster. “I guess that's pretty much what we're looking for,” he said. He rubbed his palms nervously along the edge of the table.

“It's perfect,” Liza said.

Dave nodded. It was perfect. It was exactly the sort of thing they were looking for. Worth millions, at least according to Liza, and it didn't sound like there'd be many people crying when it turned up missing. If he was going to turn into a thief, then this was at least morally justifiable. But then again... “It's bound to be guarded,” he said. It sounded better than “I'm too scared to do this,” which would have been the truth.

But Liza shook her head. “She's a recluse. Bit crazy, too. Travels alone. Maybe with a maid or something, but not with a bodyguard.”

“We don't even know where she's staying.”

“True. But we can find out. Bound to be somewhere five-star. Which narrows it down a lot.”

“You're serious, aren't you? You actually want us to steal this necklace.” Dave could hear his voice rising. He gripped the edge of the table. “I'm not sure that I can.”

Liza shrugged. “What are the other options? Cox isn't going away. You need to get a grip.”

“You're right. I know you're right. Sorry.” Dave breathed out heavily and felt his shoulders relax. “I've just never thought about doing anything like this before. I don't even download movies, you know? Belinda's trial was one of the most horrible things I've ever been through, and all I had to do was sit in the back of the courtroom and watch it. It scares me, thinking about doing something that could see me right there next to her in jail.”

“Nah,” Liza said with a crooked grin. “You'd be in a men's prison.”

Dave laughed. “I guess I would.”

“But you're not going to prison. We're going to do this nice and smart, and we'll offload the trouble onto Cox before he knows what's happened. Then we'll be free and clear.”

“I guess you’re right. It’s not like he’ll be taking the necklace down to the station and saying ‘Excuse me, officers, I seem to have received these stolen goods by accident’.”

“Right.”

“So all we need to do is figure out where Diana Westlake is staying and when she’ll be out of her room.” Dave paused. “And how to get into the room, I guess. And how to get in and out without being spotted. And how to do the handoff. And-”

“Easy,” Liza cut him off. “Don’t worry about that. By the time we do this, we’ll have it all covered.”

So much had changed over the weekend that Dave felt almost disoriented going into work on Monday morning. Liza had slept on the futon for the third night in a row, and she had brought the rest of her stuff in from the car. They hadn’t discussed it, but it seemed that Liza had decided she was moving in. Dave hadn’t lived with anyone but Belinda for years, but he wasn’t complaining. Liza wasn’t obsessively neat, she didn’t take up much space in the bathroom, and she had an almost spooky sense for when he’d be in the kitchen, and managed to have coffee ready to go every morning.

Dave had taken the bus to work that morning. Liza’s shift didn’t start till ten, so she was still at home when he left. Dave wished that Bruce would try to pay an early morning visit on him with her there. When he had come out of the shower, she had been doing pushups on the lounge room floor in shorts and a sports bra. He’d never seen a more muscular woman, and he was pretty sure that she could twist Bruce’s head off his shoulders as easily as she’d take the cap off a bottle of beer. And she’d have no hesitation about doing it either, he thought with satisfaction. With her in the house, he was sleeping like a baby, with no worry about intruders and only the faintest of twinges when he thought about what they were planning to do.

“Good morning, Dave,” Rose greeted him. “You’re here bright and early this morning.”

Dave was pretty sure that this was meant to be a comment on his lateness last Friday and he didn’t answer, just gave Rose a moderately friendly nod and went straight back to his office. Putting everything that had happened in the last week out of his mind, he got to work, and got more done by morning tea than he had in weeks.

Rose and Jackie were sitting at the table in the tearoom, gossiping over the pages of an entertainment magazine.

“Hello, Dave,” Jackie said.

Damn. “Morning, Jackie.”

“How were those meetings on Friday?”

“Okay.” Dave hoped she would leave it at that, but he wasn’t surprised when she didn’t

“Sell a lot?”

Dave cleared his throat. “I made some sales. And Oscar was quite interested in the new ECG units. He’s considering an order later in the year.”

“Is he?” Jackie asked, a nasty little smile on her face. “You know, Dave, I’ve been reviewing your sales figures over the last couple of months. They’re down. Over a third lower than they were this time last year. Any thoughts on that?”

No right reply. Jackie was a master when it came to these kinds of discussions. It was almost a pleasure to watch her doing it to a client who was late paying their bills. It was much less pleasant to be on the receiving end of it. Dave just shrugged.

“I’ll be keeping a close eye on your figures this month, Dave. I expect to see an improvement.”

“Right,” Dave said, as neutrally as he could manage. Jackie gave him a final look, and then turned back to the magazine. Dave got a mug out of the cupboard and tried to make his cup of tea without making any noise. He was looking in the fridge for the milk when the bell at reception rang.

“Get that, will you, Dave,” Jackie said. “Rose is busy.”

Dave pressed his lips together angrily, but didn’t say anything. He closed the fridge and left the tearoom. “Coming,” he called up the hallway. There was a man sitting in one of the visitor’s chair, his face turned away from Dave as he flipped through one of the catalogues that Rose kept at reception. As Dave came out of the hallway, the man looked up, and Dave froze in his tracks. Bruce. Bruce crossed his legs and smiled, and something in his expression reminded Dave of Jackie. He really hoped that the two of them never met. That would be an unstoppable force.

“Mr Rosewater,” Bruce said. “What a surprise to run in to you here.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Is that any way to treat a customer, Mr Rosewater? I think not.”

“This is a medical supply company,” Dave said, keeping his voice down and hoping that Jackie and Rose stayed in the tearoom. “There’s nothing here you’d be interested in. Now what do you want?”

“Nonsense!” Bruce exclaimed, grinning like a wolf. “I’ve got a great deal of interest in the medical supply business, and someone recommended this fine establishment as a place where I could buy some equipment.” He waved the catalogue. “Your range seems very comprehensive.” Bruce sat back in his chair. “Well, aren’t you going to take my order?”

“We only supply to businesses,” Dave gritted.

“And I’m buying on behalf of a business.” Bruce dropped the smile. “Cox and Associates. Perhaps you’ve heard of them?”

“What do you want?” Dave demanded, knowing that his voice was raised, but unable to keep it down.

“Oh, a few things.” Bruce flipped theatrically through the catalogue. “One stretcher with patient restraint straps. One scalpel holder and four dozen blades. Or,” he said, staring directly at Dave in a way that made him shiver, “two million dollars.”

“Damn it,” Dave hissed, “I’m working on it. I need more than a week, you know?”

“Well, you’d better hurry. Mr Cox is getting very impatient. He’s eager to hear from you, Mr Rosewater. Please don’t disappoint him. I don’t think he’d like that.”

“Can I help you?” Rose said from quite close behind Dave, making him jump. Bruce rearranged his expression into a bland smile.

“No thank you. I was just placing an order with your colleague. I think he will be able to supply me with everything I need. Isn’t that right, Mr Rosewater?”

“Right,” Dave said slowly. Every instinct he had was telling him to run down the hallway and out through the warehouse, but he managed to hold his ground. “I’ve got your order, Mr -?”

“Farmer,” Bruce supplied. “Surely you remember.”

Dave’s stomach started to hurt as he thought back to their last meeting. “Of course,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Not at all.” Bruce reached into his coat pocket and held out a business card. “I do hope you can fill our order. My employer and I will be looking forward to hearing from you.”

Dave walked towards Bruce and gingerly took the business card, half expecting to have his wrist grabbed and his arm broken as he did so. He glanced at the card and backed away. More than anything else, he wanted Bruce to get out of the office and never come anywhere near him again. “Tell him we’ll have what he wants by the end of the week,” Dave blurted. As soon as the words left his mouth he wished he could take them back. What the hell was he saying? Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Rose beaming approvingly at him.

“Excellent! I’ll tell Mr Cox to expect your call.”

“Of course.”

“Splendid. Have a nice day.” Bruce offered one last predatory smile, including Rose in it this time, then turned and left. Dave sagged against a wall, holding the business card limply in his fingers.

“There, see?” Rose said. “Things are turning around for you already.”

“Right,” he mumbled.

“And what a nice looking young man. Is it a big order?”

“No, just a couple of things.”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be back for more if he’s happy with what we give him this time.”

Dave shuddered. “I’m sure he will,” he agreed. “I’d better go and place that order.”

He left before Rose could say anything else, holding his speed down the hallway to just below a run. When he got to his office, he shut the door and sat down, his head in his hands. What the hell was I thinking, he asked himself. Sure, it was a shock to see Bruce right there, and sure I wanted him out of there as soon as possible, but seriously. He gave me six weeks, and I’ve given myself one. What an idiot.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket with shaking fingers and dialled.

“Hey, tiger.” Liza’s cheerful voice made him relax fractionally. “What’s happening?”

“He was here,” Dave whispered into the phone. “Bruce. Came to check up on me, I think. And listen, Liza -” He didn’t want to finish the sentence, but he forced the words out. “I think I’ve just fucked things up for us.”

“How?” She didn’t sound at all alarmed, just calmly curious. Dave felt himself loosening up, and he knew that he could tell her.

“I said we’d have the money for him by the end of the week. Two million. I guess I panicked. I just wanted to get him out of there, you know.”

“That’s fine.”

“That’s fine?”

“Yep. No problem.”

“What do you mean, no problem?”

“Okay, maybe a small problem. Have you got a phone number for him?”

“Um,” Dave unclenched his hand and stared at the business card. Alistair Cox. Executive Director. And then a PO Box and a phone number. “Not for Bruce. Looks like I’ve got a number for Cox, though.”

“Good. Call him. Tell him you’ll have something for him, but he’ll need to take it in gems.”

Dave laughed, a little hysterically. “By the end of the week?”

“Yep. I was just about to text you. Been talking to the guys, checking the paper, beating the drums. I know where she is, and I know when she’s going to be out of her room. We have a clear in, tomorrow night.”

“You’re kidding me. It’s not even eleven in the morning. How did you manage that so quickly?”

“Couriers talk,” Liza said. “Not hard to put things together.”

“Liza, you’re amazing. I owe you for this.”

“Call Cox, set up the deal. Get a number you can call to make the handoff. Then go back to work, don’t think about it. We’ll talk tonight.”

“Okay. Thanks, Liza.”

“No worries.”

“Hello?”

“Mr Cox? This is David Rosewater.”

“Mr Rosewater! How nice to hear from you. I’ve been expecting your call.”

“You heard what I told your guy? Bruce?”

“Yes, he told me that the two of you had had a nice little chat.”

“Look, your two million. I can get it.”

“Bruce said you had told him that. I look forward to receiving it.”

“In gems.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I can get it for you in gems. Not cash. By the end of the week. That’s the deal.”

“I don’t think you’re in any position to be dictating terms, Mr Rosewater.”

“Yeah, that’s probably true, but this is the only way I’m going to be able to get you what you want. Two million. In gems. By the end of the week. Heck, they’re probably worth more than two million. This is a deal for you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. But nevertheless, I’m intrigued. So I accept your offer.”

“Okay. Um. How should I contact you, when I’ve got the stuff? This number?”

“Take a look in your letterbox when you get home. I’ll have one of my associates leave you a phone. Speed dial one when you’re ready to make the exchange.”

“Okay.”

“Very good. I look forward to hearing from you.”

“Right. You’ll hear from me soon.”

“I better had. Oh, and Mr Rosewater? Just in case you’re getting any smart ideas about forgery or anything like that, I want you to know that I have a jeweller on staff, and he’ll be present at the exchange.”

“I’m not thinking about ripping you off! I just want this over. Soon.”

“Excellent. I’ll be expecting your call, then.”

Dave had heard the expression ‘sweating bullets’ before, and it had always sounded vaguely appealing in an action-movie kind of way, but it turned out that it wasn’t so much fun in practice. When he was talking to Liza, even about something crazy like stealing a bunch of conflict diamonds and handing them over to a major criminal, he felt relatively confident. Or maybe not confident, but insulated from whatever craziness the world might have in store for people who did things like that. But talking to Cox, even on the phone, brought back the anxiety that he knew he should have been feeling all along.

He left work after lunch. It was the only thing he could do, after his meeting with Bruce and the call to Cox. He had tried to put it out of his mind and get on with work as if nothing had happened, but it was hopeless. He kept popping his head out into the hallway to make sure that there weren’t any more goons at the front desk, and he jumped a mile every time he heard footsteps coming towards his office. Jackie had caught him doing it at least twice, and from the look on her face, she probably suspected he was on drugs or something. And the way he was feeling, that might not be such a bad idea. Not stimulants, though. Something calming. It was a shame that Chapple Medical didn’t deal in pharmaceuticals as well as medical supplies.

Jackie had seen him leave, and of course Rose had as well, but she actually seemed relatively concerned, so Dave figured he must have looked sick. Which was only fair, because he felt pretty sick. Getting out of the office helped a little, and so did mixing with the crowds at the bus station, but when he got home and found a brand-new cellphone in his mailbox, the anxiety came back more strongly than ever. He spent the afternoon pacing his lounge room and jumping at shadows, and he had never been more glad to see anyone than he was to see Liza when she got in.

“What the hell is that?” were the first words out of his mouth. Not what he had intended to say, but it was the only appropriate question to ask.

“Still.” Liza replied, dumping the thing on the kitchen table. It looked like a giant’s chemistry set.

“A still? Why do we need a still?”

“Green tea vodka’s pretty pricey,” she replied, running hot water into the sink and adding a generous dash of pink crystals from a white plastic packet. “And besides, I bet we can make something a lot stronger than that. Never know when it’ll come in handy. Now grab a sponge and help me get it clean.”

The cleaning took the best part of an hour, and Liza let Dave do most of the work, while she cooked up the mash in his largest pot. They didn’t speak much, but Dave felt better just having something to do with his hands and knowing there was someone else nearby. It was pathetic how weak and frightened he felt, but then again, he told himself, it wasn’t like he was used to dealing with situations like this. He didn’t think that there were many people who were, though.

“Liza?” he asked, pulling the wire brush out of a piece of coiled tubing and setting the tubing out to dry.

“Yeah?” She didn’t turn around from her position at the stove.

“Have you ever done anything like this before?”

“Distilling? No. Always been curious, though.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. I meant everything else. Burglary. Jewel thefts. Dealing with guys like Cox.”

“You saw my first burglary the other night, tiger. Think it went pretty well, too. Except for not finding the cash.” Liza gave the pot another stir and then set the spoon down. “Think this is ready. Bring that big glass container over to the sink and we’ll pour this stuff in.”

Dave lifted the big demijohn into the sink and stood back as Liza poured the hot mash in. “Yeast,” she said, handing a packet of brewer’s yeast to him.

“Just pour it in on top?”

“Think so.”

He opened the packet and scattered the contents on top of the mash. Liza put a huge rubber stopper into the mouth of the container and lifted it carefully out of the sink. It must weigh a ton, Dave thought, but Liza carried it as easily as a feather pillow. She set it in the corner of the kitchen, next to the hot water cylinder. “Should be warm enough,” she said. “Now we wait.” She sat down at the kitchen table. Dave pulled out the other chair and sat down opposite her.

“I’ve been freaking out all day,” he started again. “Ever since Bruce showed up at work. He scares the shit out of me, you know?”

Liza nodded, but didn’t say anything

“I was never much of a fighter as a kid. I was more of a nerd. I liked to study. I’d wanted to be a doctor since kindergarten, and my parents were pretty big on encouraging that kind of thing. But I was pretty quiet and not obviously freakish or anything, so the other kids didn’t really bother me. There were weirder kids for them to pick on. I used to think I was lucky that way. But now I’m not so sure. Maybe if I’d learned to fight when I was younger, this whole situation would be freaking me out a little less.”

Liza leaned back in her chair and looked at him. “Worried about fighting?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Dave gestured towards his hollow chest. “Look at me. I’m not exactly a prime physical specimen. Compared to most men, I’m pretty puny. Hell, I’m pretty puny compared to a lot of women.”

“Doesn’t mean anything,” Liza said. “Just need to know what to do in a fight. There was a chick at the MMA gym I used to go to, maybe this tall,” she held up a hand just below her shoulder height, “but she beat me three times out of four. Great fighter. Great spirit, and she could turn your own strength against you like that.” She snapped her fingers.

“That’s fine, but I bet she’d probably been training for ten years or something to get that good.”

“About that,” Liza agreed.

“So I don’t think that’s going to help me right now. If someone gets me down, or gets me trapped, I’m toast.”

“Not if you’ve got tea. Throw it in their faces. Freeze them, burn them. Should turn the tables pretty quick.”

“Well, I guess that’s true,” Dave agreed. “But what if I don’t have any tea? I’m screwed, right?”

“Carry some. Always.”

“Okay, but what about when I run out?” Dave persisted. Liza gave him a long look.

“Get up,” she said, pushing her chair back and standing up herself. “Come into the lounge room. Okay. Now lie down here on your back.”

Dave lay down, feeling a little foolish. Foolishness quickly turned to concern when Liza kneeled over him, one fist threateningly raised. “This what worries you?” she asked.

“Yes!” he replied.

“Okay,” she said. “Try to get out.”

Dave wriggled and squirmed, but he couldn’t escape. He didn’t even seem to move Liza, much less move her far enough to get out from underneath her. She waited, looking expectant, until he gave up. “I can’t do it,” he said.

“Just don’t know the trick,” she said. “Switch places.” They switched. “What you need to do,” she continued, “is this.” Suddenly, she bucked her hips up, sending Dave sprawling forward over her right shoulder. “Then move your body to the side,” she said, moving as she spoke, “and then up and around and you’re out.”

Dave’s face was pressed against the carpet. “Easy for you to say,” he mumbled. “You’ve got four, five inches on me.”

“Doesn’t matter if you do it right, tiger,” she replied. “Try it.”

His first effort was a dismal failure. He barely moved Liza an inch. But she coached him through the moves patiently, and soon he was throwing her forward and getting out from underneath her almost as easily as she was with him.

“Good,” she said. “All there is to it.”

“Thanks, Liza,” he said. “That’s not as hard as I thought it would be. But does it work in a real fight?”

“Absolutely. How I lost my first league match. And the escape was helped me win my fifth. Doesn’t work every time, but it does work.”

Dave nodded thoughtfully to himself. “That’s a comforting thought,” he said. “Do you think you could teach me a couple more moves like that?”

“Sure,” Liza agreed. “Won’t make you a cage fighter or anything, but it’s good stuff to know.”

“I just hope I never need it,” Dave said.

“Don’t worry,” Liza said. “This thing goes off right, you won’t even see anybody.”

Dave had nearly forgotten where their conversation had begun, but it all came back to him like putting on a lead vest. “Right,” he said. “I hope so, anyway.”

Dave called in sick to work the next morning. Rose sounded sceptical when she took the call, but there was nothing she could do about it, and anyway, Dave was a jewel thief now, or at least very nearly. Going to work was the last thing on his mind.

“Stay at home and get ready,” Liza had told him before she went to work herself. “Take a nap. Practice your thing with the lock. Tend the still. Whatever. I’ll be back at two, and we’ll go and get ready.”

Tending the still was an appealing idea, and there was something comforting about the way it sat in the kitchen gently bubbling away, but there was really nothing to do to it. Sleep was out of the question. Dave tried half a dozen books and two DVDs, but couldn’t concentrate for more than five minutes, so when Liza finally got back to the apartment she found him on the internet, clicking through Youtube videos almost at random, but not really watching them.

She looked him over slowly, but he couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “Come on,” she said at last. “Let’s go get you ready.”

His stomach churned at the words, and it kept right on going when they got into the car and started driving. Dave felt like he was riding a rollercoaster as the car went up the hill, and he was sure he was going to have to ask her to pull over so he could throw up. “Where are we going?” he managed to ask when they stopped at a light.

“Seeing a friend.”

“What for?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

They made the rest of the trip in silence, and a few minutes later, Liza pulled up in front of a freshly painted beachfront cottage with a neat garden and a pristine red Mini in the driveway. They got out of the car, walked up a short gravel walk, and Liza knocked on the door. A small Asian man with blond-tipped hair and perfect skin pulled the door open and gave Liza a big hug.

“Liza! Darling! You look fabulous!”

Dave tried not to grin as he watched Liza submitting to an extravagant bout of air-kissing.

“Cut the flattery, you old queen,” she said, giving the little man an affectionate slap on the back that sent him staggering forward.

“But your hair,” the man continued, reaching up to inspect the roots of Liza’s mohawk. “How long has it been since you had this done?”

“I don’t know. Month? Six weeks? Week before I went inside.”

The man shook his head. “I’m glad you’re out, darling,” he said. “Sorry I didn’t visit. I was in Sydney for a fortnight, and then London. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.”

“Well, come inside and sit down. I’ll have you blue as an Eskimo’s balls before you can turn around twice.” Liza took a step inside, and the man noticed Dave for the first time. “And who is this?”

“Dave. The guy I told you about. Dave, Jean.”

“Well, hello there,” Jean said, extending a hand to Dave with an exaggerated vampiness. Dave shook it, and was surprised to find himself pulled toward Jean, held firmly by the chin, and closely inspected. “He is a pretty one, Liza. Are you sure you want to cover this face up?”

“Gotta be done,” Liza said.

“What’s got to be done?” Dave asked. He knew he should be getting used to strange things happening when he was with Liza, but he kept being surprised by the things that she sprung on him.

“You’ll see,” Jean said, letting go of his chin. “Come inside, come inside.”

Liza motioned Dave ahead of her, so he followed Jean into the house. It was as neat and tastefully set out as the garden, all polished wood floors, art deco furniture, and old movie posters on the walls.

“Come into the kitchen,” Jean said over his shoulder. “Will you have a cocktail? Mojito? Liza? Bourbon and coke?”

“Not for me,” Liza said. “Better give our man here something to steady his nerves, though. I’ll get it. You get started.”

“Excellent!” Jean agreed. “Mix me up a little something as well, won’t you? Sit down, Dave.” He motioned to a leather and chrome swivelling chair that was set up in the middle of the kitchen, next to a little wheeled tea trolley set up with scissors, makeup, and a lot of strange tools that Dave couldn’t figure out.

Dave sat down. “So, what are we doing?”

“Disguise,” Liza said, selecting a bottle from the row on the counter. “Don’t want your face all over the front page tomorrow morning.”

That made sense, but Dave still felt uneasy. “Um... Liza... Does Jean know..?”

“Relax. Jean’s solid. You can trust him. Right, J?”

“Absolutely,” Jean said, whipping a hairdressers’ gown over Sean’s head and doing it up around his neck. “When Liza commands, I obey. Except when she commands me to drink cheap beer or watch televised sporting events. Now, do as the lady says and relax. This won’t hurt a bit.”

That didn't sound at all reassuring, but Dave couldn't think of a good way to protest. Liza put a glass in his hand, and he took a deep drink. He had no idea what it was, only that it was good, and probably incredibly potent.

"What do you think, darling?" Jean asked Liza over his head. "Irish con artist? Belgian diamond magnate?"

"Up to you. But classy. It's a fancy hotel. And maybe a few distinguishing marks. Give the cops something to put in the description." She winked at Dave. "If they ever figure out what happened, that is."

"Of course." Jean moved around Dave's head, tilting it this way and that. "I think Swedish assassin. This hair will bleach out nicely, and he'll look cute as a blond. A little extra on the nose, I think, and blue contacts. And maybe a little knife scar here, on the cheekbone. Something to suggest a little danger and daring, give the receptionist a little thrill. What name, by the way, darling?"

"Andreas Schmidt. No ID. Credit card only."

"Swiss assassin, then. Perfect." Jean rested his hands on Dave's shoulders, easing him back into the chair. "Now, you sit back and relax. When I'm done with you, your own mother won't know you."

The whole transformation took nearly two hours, but Jean wasn't exaggerating his skill. When he finally pulled the gown off and gave Dave a mirror, Dave didn't recognise the person looking back at him.

"That's incredible," he said, touching his hair, which had been bleached, curled, and outrageously mulleted. "This is the exact haircut I wanted in the first grade, except my mother wouldn't let me. I can't believe you thought of it."

"Oh yes, the mullet is very in this year," Jean said. "I don't understand the attraction, myself, but you must admit that it's distinctive. And your hair was so long, it was practically crying out for it."

"What'd I tell you?" Liza said. "Jean's a genius. The best. Be paying a couple of grand for this, if you were a movie star."

"He's incredible," Dave agreed. "Thanks."

"Maybe try not to sound so American, darling," Jean suggested. "Perhaps a hint of an accent, nothing too strong. Subtle. Try to sound a little foreign."

Dave thought about his mother, the way she still sounded English after thirty-five years in California. She'd tried to teach him to speak like an English boy, but she'd given up the fight pretty gracefully when it became obvious that it wasn't going to stick. In high school, though, when he was fourteen or fifteen, he'd gone through a phase of trying to emulate her, on the theory that it might make him sound foreign and mysterious. It hadn't worked, of course, but he could probably still do the accent. "How about something like this?" he asked.

Liza nodded. "Nice."

"Perfect," Jean agreed. "And now, wardrobe. I have a few things that should be suitable."

Dave followed Jean through the house to his bedroom, and stood awkwardly in the middle of the room while Jean sized him up. "If you were two inches shorter, you could wear something of mine," Jean said, "but that's not the look we're going for. Still, I have a few things in your size that will look fabulous on you. Come through." He opened a door and led the way into a smaller room filled with racks of clothes and shoes. "I usually work on big budget films," he said, "but I do a little work on local productions from time to time. And of course, there's the derby girls." He waved his hand at a rack of gaudy outfits in leather and lycra. "But none of that for you. You want to look rich, but not

classy. This shirt, I think,” selecting an appallingly purple silk shirt from the rack and throwing it over his arm, “and the sharkskin suit. What size shoes? 42?”

“43.”

“These ones, then. Fold up some of this paper and put it in one of the heels. It’ll change the way you walk.” He handed clothes and shoes to Dave. “You can get dressed in here, and then come out and let us have a look at you. I’ll leave you to it. Call if you need anything.” He winked at Dave, and then left the room, shutting the door behind him. Dave got changed quickly, being careful not to mess up his new haircut, and then went into the kitchen, buttoning up his suit jacket.

“Not like that!” Jean said. He hurried over and fussed with the jacket “Middle button only on a three button suit. There. Now let’s have a look at you.” Jean stood back, and Dave turned around with his arms out.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Perfect,” Liza said to Jean. “Looks like some Eurotrash rocker, or a soccer player.”

“Thank you, darling. I do my best.”

“Perfect,” she said again, this time to Dave. “Got a credit card for you. Andreas Schmidt. Hotel room’s booked and paid for, so you shouldn’t need to use it.”

“How did you get that?”

She shrugged. “Borrowed it.” He must have looked horrified, because she laughed. “Actually borrowed it. From one of the guys.”

“You borrowed someone’s credit card for this? The cops will be onto him in a second.”

“No they won’t. He’s got a stack of these. Didn’t ask where this one came from. Doesn’t matter, does it?”

Dave hesitated. “I guess not.”

“Great. So, credit card, hip flask, cell phone, sprayer,” she said, handing things over and watching Dave fill his pockets. “Hammer.” An old-fashioned looking thing with an oddly shaped head and a wooden handle. “Get this down your trousers. That’ll make you walk funny.” She glanced meaningfully over at Jean, and he giggled.

“Private joke,” he said to Dave.

“One more thing.” Liza pulled a pair of black leather driving gloves from her pocket and tossed them to him. “Don’t want you getting fingerprints all over the place. Now, you ready?”

Dave felt his stomach quiver, and sternly pulled himself together. It was too late to back out now, and there was really no other option. “I’m ready,” he said, using his mother’s accent.

“Okay, then. Let’s go. I’ll drop you at the station, and you’ll walk from there.”

Walking into the Intercontinental, Dave felt oddly calm. Liza had dropped him at the train station, and he’d used the short walk over to the hotel to settle himself down and try to get into character.

He'd never been much of an actor. A couple of bit parts in school plays, and a couple of student film appearances in college when his roommate, Brian, had had actors quit on him at the last minute. It had been fun, pretending to be someone else, but he just didn't have the knack for reading dialogue. It always came out of his mouth wrong, stilted, obviously something written down rather than sounding natural.

"Forget about it," Liza had said when he'd mentioned this in the car. "Just go with what you've got. No time to write a script. Play it any way you like. It's a hotel. Whatever you do, they've seen weirder."

This, at any rate, was probably true, and Dave had repeated it to himself like a mantra as he walked up Featherston Street. He had hesitated just a little outside the hotel, then settled his suit jacket more comfortably on his shoulders and walked in.

"Excuse me, miss," he said to the woman behind the reception desk. "I have a reservation. Andreas Schmidt." Everything about that, from his phony accent to the words he had picked, sounded fake to him, but the receptionist didn't even look up.

"Of course," she said, tapping away on a keyboard. "Here we are, Mr Schmidt. Room 609. Your key," she said, pushing a swipe card across the counter towards him."

"Thank you."

"You'll need that to operate the lifts as well, so make sure you have it with you when you leave your room."

"Thank you," he said again. She gave him a minimally friendly smile as he picked up the key, but he barely returned it. Arrogant, he decided, was the way to play it. Or at least aloof. The less said, the better.

He swiped himself up to the sixth floor and let himself into his room. It was nearly as big as his apartment, and definitely a lot warmer and drier. The sort of place he would have stayed with Belinda, back when they used to take trips together. Not the sort of place he would have chosen for himself, but Belinda thought that staying in a four and a half star hotel was slumming it almost beyond bearability. Still, he thought, at least it meant he wasn't intimidated by the decor. He tried to imagine Liza in a place like this, but he couldn't. Of course, he knew that she probably made deliveries here all the time. And if she did happen to be staying in one of the rooms, he couldn't imagine her being intimidated by the decor. Or by anything else, for that matter.

Dave looked at his watch. Seven o'clock. Liza's source - the courier who had delivered the invitation - had told her that Diana Westlake would be attending a party at Peter Jackson's from eight. She was probably in her room getting ready. The coast should be clear by half past seven, but they'd agreed that Dave should wait until quarter past eight to make his move. Give her time to get well clear, and give everyone else time to go out to their business dinners and shows before he started prowling the hallways acting suspiciously. Not that he was going to be acting suspiciously. He hoped.

He sat down on the bed and channel surfed for about a quarter of an hour, but he couldn't pay attention to anything that was on the screen. He wished that Liza was there. He wished that anyone was there. Even a screaming match with Belinda would be a nice distraction. Finally, he gave up trying to find anything worth watching, and left the TV tuned to a shriekingly loud reality show set in a Texas massage parlour, looking at the screen without really taking much in. Every couple of minutes, he would touch the pockets of his jacket, checking for the hip flask full of green tea vodka in one, and the screw on misting nozzle adapted from a can of WD-40 in the other. Liza had worked on that the night before, swearing and rummaging through a litter of parts on the kitchen table while Dave had made dinner. It had been an amazingly domestic evening, and not at all like his life with Belinda. The closest he and Belinda had come to a quiet night in at home in the last five years was just before the trial started, when she'd been accosted by reporters every time she had left the house.

They'd spent two weeks' worth of evenings together, trying to find things to talk about over dinner and then sitting in awkward silence through whatever was on the TV. It had been the first real time they had spent together in years, and it had been awful. I'm not to wait for her to leave me, Dave resolved. When I get through this, I'm going to divorce her.

When I get through this. Not if.

The TV was blasting out the closing credits of the reality show, and Dave turned it off. The butterflies were still making themselves at home in his stomach, but he was almost getting used to them. He went to the bathroom, washed his hands, and checked his face in the mirror. Still okay. His cheek was starting to itch under the latex of the fake scar, but he didn't want to touch it in case he picked it loose or something. He dried his hands on a thick grey towel, pulled on Liza's black leather gloves, then checked the contents of his pockets one last time. Wallet, empty except for twenty dollars and Andreas Schmidt's credit card. Hip flask. Mister. The plasticky bulk of the disposable cellphone that Alistair Cox's men had left for him. It probably didn't weigh more than a couple of ounces, but every time he felt it sitting at the bottom of his pocket it made his skin crawl. It was a disposable phone anyway, and there was nothing he wanted more than to be rid of it. But not long now.

He took one last deep breath, then let himself out of his room, checking the hallway casually. Empty. Liza had said it would be, but in his imagination, it had been bustling with people, all of them watching him from the corner of their eyes or looking over his shoulders to see what he was up to. But no, it was empty. He walked quietly down the carpeted hallway, checking the room numbers as he went.

There. 601. The door was tucked around a corner, invisible unless you were right next to it. It couldn't have been more perfect if Dave had asked for it. He opened the hip flask and screwed the mister in place over the mouth, then looked around again, trying to seem casual. Wasted effort - the hallway was still empty. He gave the mechanism of the card locker a couple of sprays of the vodka, then heated it up as hot as he could make it. He didn't know what he was expecting, but the little click and puff of smoke drifting from the side of the lock was very satisfying. He pulled down cautiously on the door handle, and the door swung open. He slipped into the room and closed the door behind him, setting the chain lock on the door. It wouldn't help him if he were discovered, but it made him feel irrationally better.

Inside, the room was dark, with a slash of street-light orange coming through a crack in the curtains. He couldn't bring himself to turn the lights on, so it would have to be enough. He waited for a minute while his eyes adjusted. Bed, desk, table and chairs. He couldn't see anything that looked like a safe from where he stood, so he began to move carefully into the room.

There! By the bed. It was a squat cube of metal, nearly a metre on a side, looking ominous and impenetrable. And heavy. He couldn't imagine the sort of person who would travel with something like this. An eccentric, of course, and one with enough money to tip the hell out of the bellboy who had to bring it up to the room. Dave squatted down in front of the safe and inspected it. There was the lock. He put the end of the mister into the lock and pumped the handle a dozen times. A bead of vodka trickled out the lock and down the front of the safe. The whole mechanism must be soaked, he thought. At least, I hope it is. He set his gloved fingertips against the safe door and heated the vodka up, then chilled it down. He heard a little crack from inside the safe as it set hard. A little more, he thought. Better safe than sorry. He pumped in more vodka, and began the cycle again. Hot, then cold. Hot and cold. He could hear things cracking from inside the safe. Or was that someone in the hallway? He froze, holding his breath and straining to hear. No. Nothing. Carry on. One more. Hot, and cold. Cold as you can go. Good. He put the hip flask back in his pocket, leaving the mister in place.

Okay, now the tap. He really hoped that there was nobody here for this bit. He untucked his shirt from his pants, undid his belt, and eased the hammer out from the loop on his waistband where it was

hanging. He paused for another minute, listening for any sound in the hallway, but there was nothing. Okay. He tapped the safe door sharply with the hammer and heard something shatter. He took hold of the handle and pulled. The safe swung open.

There was the necklace. Lying on a velvet stand, and looking exactly like something out of a movie, or a promotional video for a diamond merchant. He snatched it up and stuffed it into his inside coat pocket. All of a sudden, all the nervousness he had been expecting to feel while he did the job welled up, and he felt himself starting to shake. He stood up, and fumbled with the hammer, trying to get it back on its loop where it belonged. It felt like forever before it was safely tucked away and his shirt was neatly tucked in again.

Okay. Time to go. He crept up to the door and slid the chain off its lock. Silence from the hallway. He hoped that nobody had crept up on the room while he was cracking the safe, waiting to collar him as soon as he opened the door. But if he waited in the room he'd get caught anyway. Better to open the door. He pushed it open, cautiously at first, but there was nobody there. Good. He closed it behind him and took off his gloves. Safe. Almost safe. He didn't meet anyone in the corridor, and the lift, when it arrived, was empty as well. Thank God. He wanted to slump against the wall and cry, but he didn't. That would be a very hard thing to explain away if the lift stopped to pick anyone else up.

But it didn't. It went straight down to the lobby. Dave got out, nodded to the woman at reception, and walked out the door.

Liza was waiting for him in a car park by the waterfront, slouched low in the driver's seat of her car. "How'd you go?" she asked casually, as if Dave had just been out picking up a few groceries.

Dave nodded, and touched his pocket "Got it," he said. He wanted to show her, but he knew that was stupid.

"Good," Liza said. "Let's make the call."

Dave's phone seemed to spring in his hand of its own accord. Speed dial one. The phone rang twice, and was answered.

"I've got what we talked about. We need to meet, tonight."

"Karaka Bay jetty. One hour." The phone went dead.

Dave hung up, and set the phone down. "We're on," he said to Liza. "Karaka Bay jetty, in an hour."

"Damn," Liza said. "I don't want this shit in my car for an hour."

"I know."

"Fuck it. Let's go for a drive."

Karaka Bay jetty was dark and deserted. In the summer, it would still be light at this time of night, and there would be families fishing from the end of the jetty. Now, though, it was cold and windy, and even the fancy houses across the street had their curtains shut. There couldn't be a better place in Wellington for a secret handover. Or an assassination, Dave thought uneasily, rubbing his hands together for warmth.

Liza was waiting in the car down the road. "I'll be watching you," she had told him when she let him out. "Be right there the second anything goes funny."

"I really hope it doesn't come to that," he had said.

"Me too," she had replied, but there was a look in her eye that suggested she was lying. She'd probably like nothing better than to mix it up with some local toughs. "Gotta be prepared, though."

"I guess so."

He wished he had brought a warmer jacket. The suit was certainly memorable, but it wasn't exactly winter wear, and he had been waiting on the jetty for nearly twenty minutes. A couple of cars had gone past in that time, but none of them had even slowed down, much less stopped. He was beginning to think that the secret plot Alistair Cox really had in mind was just to keep him out here until he froze to death.

A set of headlights came round the corner, moving slowly. Dave looked at his watch. Half past nine. This must be them. The car cruised lazily along the winding road and turned into the jetty parking bay, illuminating Dave with its headlights and also cutting off his escape route. Unless he decided to jump into the ocean.

Breathe, Dave told himself. They're crooks, but that doesn't mean this is going to end badly. Everything's gone fine up till now. No reason it won't keep on that way. He wanted to look over to where Liza's car was parked, but he knew that would be a stupid move, even if he could see anything apart from the glare of the headlights.

The car's doors opened, and three people got out. One of them stayed by the car, and the other two approached Dave. They were quite close before he could make out their faces. One was a small man who he'd never seen before. The other was Bruce. They were looking suspiciously at him, and Dave realised that they must not recognise him. Jean will be pleased, he thought, taking a step towards them.

"I was starting to think you weren't going to show," he said.

Bruce looked startled. "Mr Rosewood. I didn't recognise you in that outfit."

"A disguise seemed like a good idea."

"Indeed. I take it you were successful?"

"That's right," Dave said, keeping his voice admirably steady.

"Well, let's see what you have."

"Okay." Dave reached into his pocket and pulled out the necklace. The smaller man made a move towards it, and Dave jerked his hand away.

"Steady," Bruce said. "This is Mr Tsokos. Our jeweller. He's going to need to inspect your goods."

"Fine," Dave said. "He can inspect them. But you wait by the car. And turn the lights down."

Bruce smiled. "Very well," he agreed.

When they were alone at the end of the pier, Mr Tsokos pulled out a little lamp and a loupe, which he screwed into his eye. "May I see the necklace, please?" he asked. He took it from Dave and studied it closely for a couple of minutes, turning it in the light and muttering to himself. "Very good," he said. "Excellent." He took the loupe out of his eye and waved at Bruce, who came close enough to talk.

“Good?” Bruce asked.

“Oh, yes,” Mr Tsokos agreed. “Marvellous.”

“All right then. Take them to the car.”

Mr Tsokos walked up the pier carrying the necklace with him. Bruce turned to leave as well. “Hey,” said Dave. “What about me?”

“I’m sorry?”

“That’s it, right? We’re square now. I got you what you wanted, and now you’ll leave me alone. Right? You and Cox and all of his other guys.”

Bruce smiled. “That’s between you and Mr Cox, Mr Rosewater. But it certainly does look that way. He’ll be very pleased that you’ve made payment so promptly. I hope you don’t mind that I won’t be giving you a receipt.”

“I don’t want a receipt. I just want all of you guys to leave me alone.”

“I think it’s safe to say, Mr Rosewater, that our business is concluded.”

“Good.” Dave breathed out.

“Now, good evening.” Bruce walked up the pier and got into the car. It pulled away, and in another minute it was gone. Dave felt like singing or shouting, or something, but he made himself walk quietly back to Liza’s car and get in.

“Okay?” she asked. “Looked fine from here.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Let’s go home.”

When his alarm went off the next morning, Dave got up for just long enough to leave a message at work to say he wouldn’t be in, and then went back to bed until nearly noon. He was exhausted - despite the fact that he and Liza had been home before eleven the night before, it had been nearly three before he had finally been able to get to sleep. When he finally got up, it was only so he could get his computer to check the news.

The heist was the top story, with large type and photo of an aggrieved (and slightly stoned-looking) Diana Westlake getting top billing on all three news sites he checked. The press was all over the story, with articles about the provenance and history of the Star of Mars, articles about Diana Westlake’s fading career, articles (of course) speculating about what this would mean to the new Tolkien film she was supposed to be funding, and articles about the heist itself. Dave skimmed all of the filler articles, but he read every word that the press printed about the heist. The police had released quite a bit of information about the broken safe and the fried door lock, and they made the usual appeals for people to come forward, but it didn’t sound good for them. Each of the three articles included the magic phrase “The police have no suspects at this time”. Dave felt almost sick with relief.

He had given up on the news sites and was watching the midday news on TV when his cellphone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey, master criminal!” It was Jean, sounding camper than ever over the phone. “Congratulations on your daring midnight caper!”

Dave laughed. “Thanks, I think. I guess I’m not out of the woods yet, though.”

“Don’t be so modest. Have you seen the news? They’ve got no fucking idea what happened. You’re a natural. Your parents would be so proud.”

“My parents! Shit, I’d better call them and let them know everything’s okay now. I guess everything is okay now.”

“Of course it is. Everything’s splendid, master criminal.” The phone went silent for a minute.

“Anyway, I called to invite you to a celebration.”

“A celebration? Of what?”

“Your success, of course! Is there anything else going on that we should be celebrating?”

“I don’t think so,” Dave said. “Nothing in my life, anyway.” This whole conversation seemed a little odd, but when he stopped to think about it, his whole life had become pretty crazy over the last couple of weeks. Maybe having celebratory drinks with the virtual stranger who had helped him with his illegal activities was the logical next step.

“Nothing in my life either, yet,” Jean said.

“Yet?”

“I’m hoping to have something to celebrate real soon, if you know what I mean.”

Dave had no idea, but he laughed politely. “Well, I guess a celebration sounds good,” he said.

“Great. 221B Baker Street, tonight. You know it?”

“Yeah, I know it.” It was probably one of Wellington’s five fanciest bars, a place that had been too hip for him to consider going to even when he had been able to afford it. He couldn’t imagine taking Liza to a place like that, but he guessed Jean knew her better than he did. “I guess I’ll have to do some laundry,” he said, half to himself. “What time?” he asked Jean.

“7:30. I’ll book us a booth.”

“Okay, sounds good. See you there at 7:30.”

“Can’t wait,” Jean trilled, and then he hung up.

Dave checked the time difference to San Francisco and then dialled his parents’ number. His mother answered on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mom. It’s me.”

“David! I’ve been worried about you. How is everything?”

“Well,” Dave hesitated. Putting aside paranoid conspiracy theories about what kind of information the US government could pick out of his phone calls, how much did he want to tell his parents about what had happened? They’d probably understand why he’d done what he’d done, but he could almost guarantee that they wouldn’t approve. That they’d be disappointed in him. And to be fair, he’d probably be disappointed himself, in their place. “Everything’s okay, Mom,” he said at last.

“Are you sure? You don’t sound like everything’s okay. What time is it over there?”

“It’s just after midday,” he said. “I’ve taken the day off.”

“Are you sick?”

“Not really. Just a little run down or something. It’s been pretty crazy here.”

“And what’s happening with Belinda and that man who’s been bothering you about money?”

“Well, I think that really is okay. I don’t think he’ll be bothering me anymore.”

“You shouldn’t take risks with people like that, David. The last time we spoke, you were planning to come home. Don’t you think that would be the best thing to do?”

Dave sighed. “Honestly, Mom, everything’s working out over here. I’m still thinking about it, but I’m fine here for now.”

“If you’re sure, David. You know you’re always welcome here, and if there’s anything you need from us, all you have to do is ask.”

“I know that, Mom. And I appreciate it. You know that.”

He could hear his mother sighing down the phone. “Yes, I know that, David. I just worry about you sometimes. Especially when you tell me things like you did the other week.”

“I can understand that. It had me pretty worried too. But everything’s going to be fine now.”

“I hope so.”

“It is. Really.”

“Well, let us know if it isn’t. And keep us in mind if you decide you’ve had enough over there. We’d love to have you living closer to us again.”

“I’d like that too. But I think I need to get my life into order here first. Sort things out with Belinda. I don’t want to have that hanging over my head forever.”

“What do you mean ‘sort things out with Belinda’?” his mother asked sharply. “Has something else happened?”

“No, Mom. Nothing else has happened. Actually, I was thinking about getting a divorce. Putting all of this stuff behind me once and for all.” He hadn’t been thinking about it until the words were out of his mouth, but as soon as he said it, Dave knew that was what he wanted.

“That’s an excellent idea, David! Your father will be so pleased to hear it.”

“Well, don’t tell him yet. I haven’t spoken to Belinda yet, and I guess I should do that first.”

“Of course.”

“I should probably go now. I’ll try to get in and talk to Belinda this week, or early next week. I’ll email you and let you know what happens.”

“All right. We’ll be thinking about you. Call us if you need us.”

“Thanks, Mom. Love you.”

“I love you too, David.”

“Bye.”

“Are you sure about this?” Dave muttered to Liza as they stood in front of 221B Baker St.

Liza adjusted the chains on her jacket and rolled her eyes at him. “It’s a bar. They don’t have a dress code.”

“Yes, they do.” Dave pointed to the densely printed sign next to the door. “And this isn’t on it.” He gestured to his own artfully distressed jeans and baroquely biker leather jacket. “I should never have let you pick an outfit for me for tonight.”

“Whatever. Jean will love it.” Liza shouldered the door open. “You’d love it if you weren’t so paranoid. Besides, it goes with the hair.”

Dave reached up and touched the curls of his mullet. “I can’t believe you talked me into keeping this.”

“Hey, it looks good.”

He shook his head. “It’s so tacky. And memorable. I feel like the cops are going come grab me any minute.”

“If they have you on camera. And if they’re looking for you. And if they can tell it’s you without the nose and the scar and the contacts.” Liza rolled her eyes at him. “Not going to happen. Come on.”

She gestured insistently and he followed her into the bar, expecting to be kicked out by an outraged staff member at any minute. It didn’t happen. In fact, nobody even seemed to notice them as they walked through the low-roofed main room towards the booths along the back wall.

“Dave!” Jean called while they were still at least half a room away. He stood up and waved to them, resplendent in a red smoking jacket and tuxedo pants. “And Liza, you’re here too. I know whose idea this outfit was! Very cute. Sit down, make yourselves comfortable, and let’s have a drink.” He hugged them both, sat them down in the booth, and summoned a waiter to the side of the table before Dave knew what was happening. “Scotch and soda for me.” He leaned over the table towards Dave. “I always think it’s important to match your drinks to your surroundings, don’t you?”

“Sure, I guess.” Dave didn’t know what to say.

“Another scotch and soda for my handsome companion, and make sure you use the good stuff,” Jean instructed. “Liza?”

“No way. Beer.”

Jean shook his head. “And a beer for the lady.” The waiter tapped an order into his PDA, and moved onto the next table. “So, Dave,” Jean asked, “have you ever been here before? I know you haven’t, darling,” he said to Liza with a smile. “This isn’t your usual choice of place.”

“Not so bad,” Liza said, looking around. “Guess I’ll have to come here more often.”

Jean laughed. “Excellent, darling! And you?”

“No,” Dave said. “I’ve never been here before. We - I’ve been invited to a couple of things here, but I never went.”

“A terrible waste. Ah, here are our drinks. A toast!” Jean exclaimed, raising his glass. “To our master criminal, and his successful endeavours!”

Dave squirmed a little in his seat, wishing that Jean would talk a little more quietly, but nobody seemed to be paying them any attention. He clinked glasses with Liza and Jean, and then drank. He wasn't usually much of a scotch drinker, but this was certainly going down well. He took another large swallow and settled back into the corner of the booth.

“I can't believe what you've done to this handsome man,” Jean was saying to Liza. “It should be a crime to dress a man like that up in clothes like yours. Not to mention that they're far too big for him.”

“What? Thought you liked them rough.”

“Ha! I think we both know you're talking about yourself, Liza.”

“Yeah? What about Jerry?”

“What about Mandy? She was butcher than a truckers' convention. Do you remember the time security tried to bar her from the women's changerooms before that match in Auckland?” Liza and Jean both laughed, and then Jean launched into an incomprehensible reminiscence about people Dave had never heard of. He smiled, sipped at his scotch and soda, and said nothing, only half-listening to their conversation.

“And what about you, Dave?” Jean asked eventually.

“What?” Dave tried to replay the last few minutes of conversation. “What about me?”

“What will you do next? Now that your troublesome situation has been resolved, what plans do you have?”

“Good question,” Liza agreed.

“Well,” Dave hesitated. “I'm not sure. I hadn't really thought about it.”

“You should think about it! You and Liza are a great team, and together with me, you would be even greater. We could do anything!”

“That's true,” Liza said. “Better than working these day jobs, anyway. Lot of possibilities out there for people with your skills.”

“I have been wondering about that,” Jean said. “You will have to tell me how you developed those skills, darling. Anyone would think that you were an experienced master criminal, but Liza tells me that you're practically a virgin.”

Dave coughed, trying to cover his awkwardness. “I don't really want to talk about that,” he said. He knew that Liza vouched for Jean, and he trusted her, but he wasn't sure he was really ready to tell people about his crazy powers. Not while he was still sober, anyway. “Maybe later.”

“Of course. But what about your plans?”

“I don't really have any. Not for work, anyway. I was thinking-” he took a deep breath. “I've been thinking about getting a divorce. I am. I'm going to get a divorce from Belinda.”

Liza grinned at him, and gave him a solid thump on the shoulder. “That's it. First things first. Get rid of her, then make plans.”

Jean's eyebrows had raised almost off the top of his head. “Married?” he mouthed at Liza. She nodded. Dave blushed. “Well, that certainly calls for another round. Waiter! Another round,

please.” The waiter brought their drinks over, and Jean raised his glass again. “A toast, to that most excellent of institutions, divorce! May you find happiness.”

“Damn right,” Liza agreed.

“Divorce,” Dave murmured, lifting his own glass. They all drank.

“I had no idea you were married,” Jean said.

“Believe me, I wish I wasn’t. It was a terrible idea, and it worked out terribly.” Dave shook his head.

Liza thumped his shoulder again, more gently this time. “It happens,” she said. “Worked out in the end, though.”

“I guess,” Dave said. “If you count us having all our accounts frozen, her getting sent to jail, and me getting the squeeze from Alistair Cox as things working out. Not that things were going great before then. In fact, the whole thing was pretty much a disaster from the time we moved to New Zealand. See, Belinda was from New Zealand originally. Little farm outside Dunedin. She got some kind of scholarship to Stanford, and that’s where we met. She was sure that when she finished school, she’d be offered some hot-shot job from some big company in the States. Didn’t happen. So we ended up coming here instead when Indomitable offered her the job. Which paid pretty damned well, but obviously not well enough for her.” He gulped down half of his drink. “Thinking about it, I’m pretty sure she only married me for a green card. I should have broken it off years ago. One of us should have.”

There was silence at the table when he stopped speaking. He sighed. “Sorry. Guess I’m being a bit of a downer. I just want to put all of this stuff behind me and do something good with my life. No more prison visits and medical supply sales.”

“That’s the spirit!” Jean said. “Once you put this behind you, anything’s possible.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Dave said.

“Me too,” Liza agreed.

They clicked glasses, downed their drinks, and Jean called for another round.

“Good morning, Dave!” Rose seemed to bellow when Dave crept into work the next morning.

“Morning,” he croaked back at her. His head was pounding, and his stomach felt like it was balancing on the very edge of revolt. He had no idea how late he, Liza and Jean had been out last night. He couldn’t remember very much that had happened after the sixth scotch, but he had a vague memory of staggering down Courtenay Place between Liza and Jean, cheerfully shouting at passing cars. He thought he remembered more drinking after that, and possibly the back of a taxi, but he wasn’t at all sure about anything.

When he had opened his eyes that morning, the first thing he had seen was a fresh bottle of water, on his bedside table. The second thing was an unopened packet of ibuprofen, with a note folded underneath them. He had thought it must have been from Liza, but the handwriting was nothing like hers. It was from Jean. Take two of these and call me in the morning, the note had said. Heck, take five or six. You’ll probably need them. But give me a call anyway. And then a cellphone number, in big bold figures with two lines drawn beneath it.

He had taken four ibuprofen, washing them down with half the bottle of water. It had been a struggle, but he managed to keep them down. He had set the rest of the packet on the futon next to Liza on his way to the bathroom, where he had taken a long shower and dressed for work. He was impressed that he had made it in to work at all, but of course, Rose wouldn't see it that way.

"I think you're actually sick," she said, sarcastically, but also unpleasantly loudly. "Jackie! Dave's here. And I think he's actually sick."

Jackie popped her head out of her office. "Dave. Glad you made it." She didn't sound glad at all. "Come into my office for a minute, won't you."

This wasn't good. Dave went into her office and sat down, gritting his teeth as his stomach roiled. "What's the problem?" he asked. He knew that this was a tactical mistake, but he hoped Jackie would get whatever it was out of her system so he could go to his office and lie down for a while.

Jackie sniffed the air. "I don't think you're sick at all. Have you been drinking?"

"A little. Last night."

"I see." Jackie sat down behind her desk and stared at Dave until he started to feel uncomfortable. This was obviously going to be worse than he had thought.

"Look, could we just get on with it?"

Jackie sniffed again, this time with disapproval. "Well, Dave, the problem is you. I've got some serious concerns with your performance at work."

"Of course you do," Dave said sarcastically, much to his own surprise.

"Yes, as it happens, I do. Over the past six months, your sales have fallen steadily, and now they're substantially lower than anyone else's. Your reports are consistently late, your visits to clients are down, and to be frank, you've got a problem with absenteeism."

"Absenteeism," Dave said flatly. His stomach was under control now, but he was losing his grip on his temper.

"Absenteeism," Jackie agreed. "You know very well that you've had a lot of time off work over the past few months, between your annual leave and special leave. It would be less of a problem if your absences had all been scheduled, but they haven't been. Why is that?"

"I don't know, Jackie. Maybe it's because my wife got sent to prison." Dave's voice raised as he spoke, and he was quite sure that Rose could hear him very clearly from reception. She was probably loving it, too, he thought.

"I understand that, but this is a business, and it needs to run like a business. That means that I need to know that my employees are going to be at work and working when they're scheduled to be working. I don't know that about you, Dave, and I want to know what you're proposing to do about it."

Dave was suddenly furious. "Well, Jackie. I thought I might start by telling you to stick your job up your ass."

Jackie sat back in astonishment, and Dave smiled in spite of himself. His anger was making his headache come back, but he didn't care. "I beg your pardon?" Jackie said.

"You heard me. This is bullshit. This whole place is a joke. I've been having a major crisis in my life, and all you care about is how to squeeze more work out of me. Well, you can squeeze someone else, because I'm though! Hear that, Rose?" he shouted. "I know you're listening. Well, I hope

you're both happy, because I am. This is the worst place I have ever worked, and you are the worst people I've ever worked with. And I'm through." He stood up, pushing his chair back violently as he did. "That clear things up for you at all?"

"I don't think you're being rational about this, Dave," Jackie said.

"Maybe not, but I'm doing the right thing for once in my life, and I think that's more important. I'm out of here." Liza will be proud of me when I tell her about this, Dave thought. I might not know what I'm doing with my life now, but I know I'll be happier not doing this. He turned and marched out of Jackie's office, out past reception, where Rose was listening with her mouth open, out the door and down the street to catch a bus home.

"Dave. What are you doing back?" Liza croaked from the depths of the futon as Dave opened the front door. He took some satisfaction from the fact that she was obviously suffering almost as much as he was, which meant that she didn't have the magical capacity for infinite alcohol that she seemed to have. He dropped into the armchair beside her and helped himself to a couple more ibuprofen from the packet, which was still lying on the futon where he had dropped it when he'd left for work.

"I quit my job," he said with a heavy sigh.

"Great! That place was shit for you. Gotta be pleased with that."

He shrugged. "It was good at the time. I was getting pretty tired of taking shit from Jackie and Rose, and to tell you the truth, when they started up this morning I just decided to tell them what I thought of them. Or maybe not even decided. It just seemed to happen."

"Bout time." Liza sat up, and held out her hand for the ibuprofen. He handed her the package, and went to the kitchen to pour her some water. "Not happy, though, are you?" she said, taking the glass he offered her.

Dave shook his head. "At first, I was thrilled. I felt like a million bucks when I walked out of there. Best decision I'd ever made in my life. But then at the bus station, I had a while to wait before the next bus, so I got myself a coffee. And I was handing over the money for it, and I realised. I'm broke. Practically broke, anyway. I've got enough money in my bank account to cover two weeks of rent and food, and then I really am broke. Damn it!" He slammed his fist into the arm of his chair. "This has been hard enough. Having the house repossessed, the car, practically everything else, for that matter. Moving into this place. But at least I had a job, enough money to get by from one week to the next. Now I don't even have that."

Liza nodded, but she didn't say anything. They sat together in silence for a couple of minutes. "So what are you thinking?" she asked eventually.

"I don't know. I'm thinking I shouldn't have quit, that's for sure. I'm thinking maybe I should go crawling back and apologise, say I was having a bad day or something."

"Don't do that."

"Why not? I don't exactly like the idea of moving again, and especially not when I'd be moving into a cardboard box on Courtenay Place. I need that job, Liza."

"No you don't," Liza said firmly. "You need money. Any money's fine. That job, another job, sugar daddy, bank robbery, Lotto winnings. It's all money."

“I’m not robbing a bank,” he said, unable to keep a little smile off his face.

Liza grinned back. “Didn’t say you had to. Just an option.”

“I like some of your other options better.”

“Sugar daddy? You’ve got the legs for it.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Sure you do. Ask Jean.”

For some reason, Dave found his face heating up. “No,” he said. Liza just looked at him, perfectly calm. “But you’re right. There are other jobs out there. And I guess it doesn’t have to be a good job or anything. Not at the moment. Anything will be fine as long as it pays the bills.”

“There you go,” Liza agreed. “Plenty of work out there.” She looked at the battered plastic Casio on her wrist. “Shit. Better get moving. Gotta have one of us bringing the bacon.”

Dave pulled his laptop onto his lap and turned it on. “By the time you get back, it’ll be two of us again.”

When his cellphone rang several hours later, it nearly scared Dave out of his skin. He was deep in the online job ads, and just about coming to the conclusion that there wasn’t a single job within a hundred kilometres of Wellington that he was actually qualified to do. Mom and Dad were right, he thought, setting the laptop back on the coffee table and fumbling in his pocket for his phone. I should have gone on to med school. Then at least I’d have skills that were always in demand.

He finally got the phone out of his pocket. “Hello?”

“Mr Rosewood. This is Alistair Cox.”

Dave froze. He had to force his hand to loosen its grip on his phone before he crushed it. “What do you want?” he asked, his mouth dry.

“No need to sound so worried. I just called to thank you for your efforts. My people have had the items valued, and it seems you have more than paid off your debt to me.”

“Good.”

“That being the case, I have a proposition for you.”

I don’t like the sound of that, Dave thought to himself. “What?” he asked.

“I was wondering whether you would be interested in undertaking more jobs of a similar nature. You seem to have a natural talent for this sort of work.”

“No!” Dave practically shouted. He took a deep breath and began again. “I’m sorry, Mr Cox, but I’m not interested. As far as I’m concerned, that was a one-time thing.”

“That’s disappointing, Mr Rosewood. I would urge you to reconsider.”

“Look, I’m not interested. And I’m not going to change my mind.”

“I see.” There was silence on the line. “Mr Rosewood, I’ve got some associates in the police force, and they’ve told me that there are some very interesting circumstances about a case they’re investigating at the moment.”

“Really,” Dave said flatly.

“Oh yes. They’re all quite perplexed.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I was hoping that you could enlighten me as to your methods. You really do seem to have stumbled onto something quite new, you know.”

“Look, I’m sorry. But I’ve told you, that was a one-time deal, and I just want to put it behind me now. Okay?”

“Of course. Though I can’t help but be disappointed.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, but I won’t change my mind.”

“I see. Well, in that case, goodbye, Mr Rosewood.”

“Goodbye.”

Dave hung up. He was shaking, and he couldn’t sit still. He tried to go back to his job searching, but he couldn’t concentrate. Idiot, he told himself. Did you really think that you’d be able to pull something like that off for someone like Cox and that’d be the end of it? He heard a noise outside and jumped, half expecting to see Bruce come through the door, but nobody did. I need to get out of here for a while, he thought. He called Liza, but there was no answer. He thought about leaving a message, but in the end he just hung up.

He sat for a couple of minutes, thumbing through the contacts on his phone and tapping nervous fingers on the armrest of his chair. There was nobody in his list that he could imagine calling at a time like this. His parents, perhaps, but they would only worry. Everyone else he had known before Belinda was sent to prison seemed impossibly distant now, as if they were part of someone else’s life. Looking around the room, his eye fell on the half-empty package of ibuprofen and the note from Jean. Call me, it had said. And why not? If there was anyone in the world apart from Liza who would understand how he felt, it was Jean. He created a new contact in his phone, and entered Jean’s details. He hesitated for a second, but then he pressed Call, and heard the phone start to ring.

Sitting in the visitors’ room waiting for Belinda to be brought in, Dave found it hard to believe how much had happened in the last two weeks. It felt like two months, or maybe two years. Two weeks ago he’d been sitting here stressing about how much time at work he was missing. Not anymore. He had looked at the job ads on the weekend, but he hadn’t found much. It didn’t really seem like there was much out there. He’d wanted to feel depressed about that, but Liza wouldn’t let him. “Get over it,” she’d said. “You’ve got skills, you’ll find a way to use them. Not worth worrying about.” And surprisingly enough, he hadn’t. Considering what he and Liza had accomplished so far, it seemed ridiculous to worry about something as minor as finding another job before his savings account ran dry.

A movement in the corner of his eye made him look up. Belinda was walking towards him, grim and unsmiling as ever. “You’re here,” she said, sitting down opposite him, but looking off to one side.

“That’s right,” he replied.

The silence that followed would have felt awkward to Dave back when he was still trying to feel like he cared for her. Now, though, it didn’t bother him at all. He wondered whether it bothered her, but he found that he didn’t really care either way. A few weeks ago, he probably would have hoped that it did bother her, all the while suspecting that it didn’t. That would have upset him, then, but it didn’t now. In fact, he almost found it funny, especially when he thought how desperately Belinda had probably wanted to be rid of him for the last couple of years. He really had no idea why their marriage had lasted as long as it had. But not to worry. It wouldn’t last much longer.

“This probably isn’t the best timing for you,” he began, “but I can’t let this wait.” He thought he was speaking very calmly, but something in his tone made her look at him. “I don’t know when things went wrong for us, but I do know they’re really wrong now. And I don’t know whether we could fix what’s wrong if we tried to.” He paused for a minute, suddenly feeling nervous. But feeling nervous doesn’t make any of this less true, he told himself sternly. You’re probably feeling nervous because you know it’s been true for so long and you’re only just getting around to admitting it. He licked his lips, and continued. “Actually, to tell you the truth, I don’t even want to try. I guess that’s how broken things are. I just want to move on.”

“Do you?” It wasn’t really a question. Belinda sounded bored and angry, but Dave thought he could detect something else as well. He wasn’t sure what it was, or what he wanted it to be. Fear? Hope? He had no idea.

He took a deep breath, and let it all out in a rush. “I want a divorce.”

Belinda didn’t say anything. She didn’t even move. She sat, unblinking, like a lizard on a warm rock. Dave gave her a minute, but it became obvious she had no intention of saying anything.

“I wanted to make things work, and I tried to make them work for years. For a long time after it was really obvious that there was probably no point in trying. I’m not sure why I did, but I don’t want to do it anymore. And I don’t think you want to do it either. I think this is the best thing for both of us.”

Belinda was still sitting there, silent and unmoving. Then her lips twitched, just a little. “You’re right,” she said, with something like a smile on her face. Dave hardly remembered the last time he’d seen her smile, or even approach a smile.

“I am?”

“You know you are. This whole thing is between us is just a disaster, and it’s going nowhere but down.”

He nodded. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Belinda reached across the table and took his hand. Dave was amazed. “It’s not your fault. I’m not saying it’s my fault either, but it’s not your fault. I’m not sure how I imagined things would be between us, but nothing worked out the way that I hoped. I didn’t get the career I wanted, I didn’t have the success I thought I’d have. Nothing worked out. I hated everything about it. I hate everything about it.” She took her hand back, frustration and anger in her face, but Dave knew it wasn’t directed at him, and he was surprised to find that he actually felt sorry for her. “I wanted to blame you for everything, and it made me furious to know I was being so unreasonable. There was no way things were ever going to work, no matter what happened. I think we both know that.”

“I guess we do. I should have said something earlier.”

“One of us should have said something earlier.”

“Well, that’s not important. Look, I know the timing on this sucks, but I couldn’t wait. I want to get on with my life, and it sounds like you do too.” He saw her lips tighten. “Sorry. I guess that was pretty insensitive.”

She shook her head. “It was, but it’s fair enough. There’s no point putting you through any more of this.”

He shrugged.

“I don’t think there’s much I can do from in here, but if you can arrange things out there without me, I won’t contest the divorce. After all,” she said with another odd little smile, “it’s not like I’ve got a whole lot of property left for you to make a claim on.”

For a minute, Dave thought back to their last meeting, and he wondered whether she really did have a couple of million of Alistair Cox’s money tucked away somewhere, but he said nothing. Things were going well, and there would be nothing to be gained by asking her about it and making her angry. And even if she did have the money, he didn’t want it anyway. He didn’t want a thing that had come through Cox’s hands. “Guess not,” was what he said.

“Okay, then.” She slapped her hands on her thighs and straightened up. “I’m glad that’s resolved.”

“So am I,” he said. “You know, coming in here, I would never have expected things to turn out like this, but I’m glad they have. I didn’t really want to start another fight or anything. I think we’ve done enough of that in the past couple of years.”

“I think you’re right,” Belinda said, standing up. “You’ll let me know what you find out about whether we can do this now.”

Dave stood up as well. “I’ll look into it in, and I’ll come and see you in a couple of weeks to let you know what I’ve found out.”

“You don’t have to do that, you know. You could send a letter.”

He shrugged. “I could do that, but it seems wrong, somehow. But if you’d rather I sent a letter, I will.”

“That’s okay.” She gave him another little smile. “It might be nice to see you again and not have to spend all that energy being angry with you.”

“All right. I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.” He hesitated for a second, feeling awkwardly like he should hug her or shake her hand or something, but not knowing what to do. She laid her hand on his arm for a second, then said goodbye and turned away. He waited a minute, letting her leave, then left himself, feeling lighter than he had in years.

“Good news,” Dave called, opening the front gate and walking down the side of the house to his front door. “In fact, scratch that. Not good news. Great news. Amazing news. What the hell has happened here?”

The flat was a mess. The armchair had been knocked into one corner of the room, and the coffee table was lying on its side in another, with its contents all over the room. The futon back had been slammed into the wall hard enough to crack it, and it was dusted with flakes of plaster and paint chips.

And in the middle of the futon was Liza, holding an icepack to her knuckles, an opened beer sitting by her foot.

“Little dust-up,” she said. “Nothing major.”

“Nothing major? Are you kidding me? It looks like you called a wrecking crew in to redecorate.”

Liza looked around and grimaced. “Sorry. Should have tidied up a bit before you get in.”

“What? That’s not what I meant. What happened in here? And what happened to your hand? Are you okay?”

Liza shifted the icepack, revealing swollen knuckles and drying blood. “Fine. Just punched someone a couple of times, is all.”

“I can see that,” Dave said. “Who? And why?”

“Not important,” Liza replied, shifting in her seat and looking away. She was a terrible liar, Dave thought. Almost as bad as I am. He sat down next to her on the futon.

“Look, whatever happened, it’s fine. I can handle it. Tell me.”

Liza refused to meet his eyes, and for a moment he thought she was going to refuse to answer. “Bruce,” she said in a low voice. Dave’s stomach tightened uncomfortably, and he felt light-headed.

“He came here? What for?”

“I don’t know. Wasn’t expecting to find me here, though. Guess he was looking for you.”

Dave was sure he was going to throw up, but he managed to keep it down. “Did he ask for me?”

Liza gave him a quick, choppy nod. “Pretty pissed off when I said you were out, too. Tried to get into the bedroom to look for you. Didn’t like it when I told him he couldn’t.”

“You stopped him?” Liza nodded again. “Why? It’s not like I was in the bedroom.”

“Principle,” Liza said shortly. She seemed to think for a minute, then turned around and looked at him. “Can’t let someone like that walk all over you, Dave. Need to draw a line, and then you need to stick to it. No backing down.”

“I drew a line last week, when I talked to Cox.”

“Know you did. Now he’s pushing you on it. Time to stick to the line.”

Dave shivered involuntarily. “I know you’re right. But I’ve got to tell you, Cox and his guys scare the shit out of me.”

Liza squeezed his leg with her uninjured hand. “I know they do, tiger. It’ll be okay.”

They sat quietly together for a couple of minutes. “Are you hurt?” Dave asked eventually. “Apart from your hand, I mean.”

“No. You should see the other guy.”

“Really?” Dave found himself smiling. “What did you do to him?”

“Broke his nose.” Liza held up her swollen hand. “Just about broke my hand on it, too.”

“Shit, Liza. He’s not going to be happy with you.”

“Don’t think he’ll be back for seconds, though. Told him I’d rip open his ballsack if he did.” Dave found himself laughing as she spoke. “And you know I’ll do it.”

“I know you will,” he said. “I bet Bruce knows it too.” He shook his head, still chuckling. “Guess I’ll need to watch myself for the next little while, hey?”

“Maybe. Think they’ve got the message, though. They tried to fuck with us. We fucked back. Harder.”

“You think that Cox is really the kind of guy to leave it at that?”

“Not for something important,” Liza admitted. “For something small? Sure. No point making a big deal of it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Liza just shrugged. There didn’t seem to be anything more to say. Dave sat silently beside her, staring at a large plaster chip on the armrest of the futon. “You hungry?” he said eventually.

“Little bit.” She held up her beer bottle. “Thirsty, too.”

“I’ll go fix us something.”

“I’ll clean this place up,” Liza replied, swinging herself to her feet.

“No, you sit down. I’ll get it. You’ve already done your bit today. For the whole week, even.”

“Hope you’re right,” Liza said, and Dave could hear doubt in her voice for the first time.

“So do I,” he said.

Liza was wrong.

They grabbed Dave the next morning, as he was walking down to the supermarket. He had taken his usual route, a quick walk down a couple of quiet streets and a shortcut through a little park. The street where they got him had looked deserted. Later, he realised that they had probably been waiting in the parked electrician’s van, and jumped out behind him once he had gone past, but at the time, all he knew was that there was something over his head, he was being held in a grip far too powerful to break out of, and then, hands tied behind his back, he was lying on the floor of a moving vehicle, going somewhere, for what felt like forever.

Of course it had to be Cox. He knew that. After what Liza had done to Bruce the other night -

“Have you bastards got Liza?” he shouted, but his voice was muffled by whatever they had over his head, even to his own ears. There was no reply, and no indication that anyone was even listening. He tried shouting louder, but still, nothing.

Try not to think about it, he told himself. He was sure that what Liza would be saying if she were here. Don’t worry about anything, just get through it. Whatever it is. Figure out what’s going on, and then decide what you need to do about it. Good advice.

He felt himself relaxing, although only marginally, and he took a few deep breaths. It was harder to breathe with his head covered, but he tried to reassure himself that that was fine. You’re getting

enough air. You aren't going to choke. And once we get where we're going, they'll probably take this thing off your head.

He felt the van, which had been speeding along in a straight line for some time, start to slow and turn. We must be getting off the freeway, he thought. But where? He had no idea how long they had been driving for, but probably not more than half an hour. Where would that put us? The Hutt? Porirua? Somewhere like that, anyway. Outside Wellington itself, but not far outside.

The van twisted and turned its way onward for several minutes more, taking it relatively slowly, and then it turned one final sharp corner and eased slowly to a stop. Dave heard the front doors bang shut, the van's sliding door open, and then he was being picked up under the arms and set on his feet, held in the same unbreakable grip as before.

The person holding him propelled him forwards at a brisk pace, not pausing when he stumbled, but not letting him fall either. Dave felt like he had been picked up by a tornado and was being forced along by the winds, not knowing where he was going to land or if he'd be alive once he did. And then he did land, with a bump, in a hard metal chair. His arms were untied, briefly, but he didn't have time to do more than wiggle his fingers and flex his wrists before they were tied again, this time to the back of the chair. He heard footsteps behind him, walking away, and then there was nothing.

For a moment, Dave felt inclined to panic, but at the same time, part of him was starting to get angry. He felt oddly cheated that they hadn't uncovered his head when they put him in the chair. He had been so sure that they would.

"Hey!" he called. "What's going on? Are you just going to leave me here forever?" Saying it out loud sent a shiver through him, but he put it aside. It would make no sense, he thought. Of course, it didn't have to make sense. When you thought about it, kidnapping him in broad daylight didn't make a whole lot of sense either, but maybe that was just the way things worked with people like Cox.

Again he felt panic rising up inside him, and again he summoned Liza to beat it back. Bullshit, she'd say. He could almost hear her saying it, and the thought made him smile a little. Cox is a businessman. Not a legal business, but he still has to make money. And he makes shitloads of money. You don't get that by acting crazy. You're right, Liza, he said to himself. Whatever this is about, there's a reason for it. It's not just some sort of crazy random kidnapping, and it's probably not even just revenge for me turning him down. Cox wants something from me. He must.

Dave didn't know how long he sat in the chair, but he did know that he was intensely thirsty and sore when he finally heard the footsteps return. Only there were more of them this time - he was sure that he could hear at least two people. He heard a scraping noise nearby, and the sound of someone settling into a chair. Then silence, for just long enough to be unnerving.

"Take the bag off," he heard someone say. Cox, he was sure. And then the bag was lifted off his head, and he squinted as the light hit his eyes.

He was in a large empty room with a concrete floor and dirty white walls. A warehouse, he guessed. There were a few grimy louvered windows in the wall opposite him, and a lot of harsh fluorescents set into the ceiling. There was a flimsy metal card table in front of him, and seated opposite him, Alistair Cox.

"Hello, Mr Rosewater."

"Mr Cox," he replied coldly.

"Thank you for coming." Cox's cellphone, which was resting on the table, started to ring and vibrate, coming perilously close to jumping off the table. "Excuse me." Cox picked the phone up. "Yes? I see. No. No, tell him that's not acceptable. I want it by the end of the week. No later. Tell him I

don't think that would be advisable. No. No. Report back when you leave." Cox hung up the phone and looked over at Dave. "I'm sorry about that, Mr Rosewater. Business."

Dave didn't know what to say. He wanted to spit, or shout, but everything in him said that that would be a very bad idea. He pursed his lips, but said nothing for a long moment. "What do you want," he asked at last, managing to keep his voice relatively level.

"When we last spoke, Mr Cox, I told you I had some associates on the police force." Cox paused expectantly.

"I remember."

"You'll also remember that I told you they were quite perplexed about your methods in the Westlake burglary." He paused again, and Dave nodded. "It sounds to me as if you've come up with something quite new. And baffling. That could be very valuable to me. So I'd like to ask you to reconsider my offer. I can assure you, as a member of my team, you would be well compensated, and I think you'd agree that it would be a considerable advance on your current position." Cox looked meaningfully at where Dave's arms were tied to the chair.

Dave shook his head. "I told you, this was a one-off. I don't want to make a career of this."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I do hope I can convince you to change your mind." Cox smiled, and Dave shivered. He was opening his mouth to reply Cox's phone rang again. Cox took it out and glanced at the screen. "You'll have to excuse me again. I hope you will take this time to think about my offer."

Dave said nothing, and Cox stood up, touching the screen of the phone. "Yes? Yes." He looked over at Dave, then moved away, turning his back to him. His voice was muffled, but the room's acoustics were surprisingly good, and Dave could still hear his side of the conversation. "Excellent. I'm very pleased to hear that. This weekend? Of course. Might I suggest my holiday house on Waiheke Island? I think you'll find it suitably discreet. Of course. Of course. Why don't you have him contact my security man to make the arrangements? That's right. Yes. We will take care of all of that at this end. Certainly. Very well, Mr Liang. I'll tell him to expect your call." Cox hung up the phone and walked back to the table. "Another business matter. Now, where were we? Ah yes, we were discussing your employment with me."

"Look," Dave said, trying to sound firm but nonthreatening, "I'm really not interested. And I've gotta tell you, I wouldn't be cut out for this anyway. I don't know anything about threatening people, kidnapping them off the street, stealing stuff, or anything like that."

"Come now, Mr Rosewater. You can hardly expect me to believe that this was a first effort."

"I'm telling you that it was."

"Ridiculous! My contacts tell me that it was very professionally executed. Certainly not the work of a first-timer. There's no need to be modest, Mr Rosewater. My organisation needs your skills, and we are willing to pay generously for them. And you can see that if you choose not to work with us, we can make your life quite uncomfortable. Given those facts, I would have thought that the decision was obvious."

"I'm sorry," Dave said. "The answer's still no."

Cox stood up, slapping the table with both hands. "I'm sure you don't mean that, Mr Rosewater. It would seem most unwise. But now, I have business that I can't put off. Why don't you take a little time to consider my offer, and we can discuss it when I get back." Cox made a little gesture, and Dave heard footsteps receding behind him. "I won't be long, Mr Rosewater. And I do hope you take the time to consider all the alternatives before you make a final decision." He walked past Dave, and in a minute, Dave heard the rattling of a door.

Dave had no idea how long he sat in the empty warehouse. It was long enough for his arms to start hurting where they were tied to the chair, and for his legs to become twitchy and restless. And it was certainly long enough for him to start wondering again whether anyone would be back to untie him, or whether Cox had decided that the easiest way to take him out of commission was to leave him here to die. That's paranoid, and it doesn't make any sense, he told himself sternly, but he couldn't stop himself from worrying. He squirmed in the chair, but he was efficiently restrained, and after a short effort, he concluded that the only way he'd be getting out of it was if Cox let him loose. And that was if Cox showed up.

When he finally heard the door open again, he was ashamed at how relieved he felt. He'd known that Cox was dangerous and not afraid to use violence, but he hadn't realised that he was capable of something more subtle. It was a great effort for him not to turn around as he heard the footsteps approaching, but he managed it, and he kept a relatively calm expression as Cox sat back down opposite him.

"Mr Rosewater," Cox said, leaning back in his chair. "I hope you've taken this opportunity to reconsider my offer."

"I have," Dave said.

"And can I hope that you have decided to accept?"

Part of Dave wanted nothing more than to shout Yes over and over until Cox let him out of the chair and out of the warehouse, but he kept quiet. He didn't trust himself to speak, so he just shook his head.

"I see," said Cox. "Is that your final position, having considered all of the alternatives?"

"I'm afraid so," Dave said.

"Well, Mr Rosewater, I must say that I'm disappointed. I felt sure that you would see sense if you had a little time to think about it."

"I'm sorry, but there's just no way I can do that," Dave said. He could hear the tremble in his own voice, and he hoped that Cox couldn't.

"You're refusing my job offer?" Dave nodded. "And you refuse to show me the remarkable technique you seem to have stumbled on that is proving so troublesome to the police?" Dave managed another choppy nod.

"In that case, I will have to see whether my associates can be more convincing." Cox focused on something behind Dave, and nodded. "Mr Farmer?"

Dave heard someone come up behind him, and he turned his head to look. Oh shit, he thought as he saw who it was. Bruce. And he didn't look happy at all. He had a black eye that was vividly purple and blue, and there was some sort of construction in surgical tape over his nose.

"You've made some new friends, Dave," Bruce said, pulling Dave's chair back roughly and coming to stand in front of him. "I met them the other day when I paid you a visit."

“I can see that,” Dave said. He was shocked at how calm his voice sounded. Inside, he was screaming. But inside that, he felt a little satisfaction at the state of Bruce’s face. Good work, Liza, he thought.

“I’d hoped that Mr Farmer could talk some sense into you then, but unfortunately, it didn’t work out,” Cox said. “Mr Farmer is understandably upset by what did happen.”

“Understandably,” Dave repeated.

“And I have to tell you, one of Mr Farmer’s less admirable qualities is a desire for vengeance. Of course, if you were to join our enterprise, or at least let us in on the secrets of your remarkable success, I’m sure he’d be willing to let bygones be bygones. If not...” His voice trailed off. Dave’s heart was pounding, and he wanted nothing more than to get up and run away as fast as he could. He strained forward, but his arms were tied tight, and he fell back again.

Liza, Dave said to himself. What would she say? “Forget it,” he said.

“Very well,” Cox said. “Mr Farmer?”

A fist drove into Dave’s face, and he felt something give way in his nose. His head snapped back, and he started to shout when another fist landed deep in his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He collapsed forward, and the only thing keeping him in his chair was the ropes tying him to it. His nose was bleeding. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Bruce coming in again, fists raised, but he couldn’t stop staring at the drops of blood falling from the end of his nose and forming a little pool of blood on the leg of his jeans. And then Bruce came in with the other hand, knocking him in the side of the head and making him see stars.

“Wait,” he gasped. He knew he couldn’t handle much of this.

“Mr Farmer,” Cox said, and Bruce stepped aside. “Yes, Mr Rosewater? You’d like to reconsider my offer?”

“Yes,” Dave said. “I’ll show you how it works.” His mind was racing almost too fast to make sense. He knew he had to do something, but what? Get yourself untied, he imagined Liza saying. And then get the fuck out of there.

“Excellent! I’m delighted to hear it.”

“I’ll need a cup of tea,” Dave said. “Black, with the teabag left in. And a squirt bottle, or something like it.” He felt Bruce moving towards him again. “I’m serious!” he said hastily. “I’ll show you, but that’s what I’ll need to do it. And I’ll need to have my hands free.”

Cox looked thoughtful, but then he nodded. “Very well. Tea first, and then I will have your hands untied. But no tricks.”

Dave shook his head, causing drops of blood to fly from his nose and hit the dusty floor. “No tricks,” he agreed.

“Mr Farmer,” Cox said. “I believe there’s a kitchen behind the office. Go and see if you can get Mr Rosewater what he has asked for.”

Bruce nodded, and walked away. Dave sat in his chair, watching Cox. He had an idea, but he wasn’t at all sure how it was going to work out. Not only that, his face was killing him, and his stomach was churning like a washing machine. But he had to do something, and becoming one of Cox’s goons wasn’t an option. His muscles tensed up, and he concentrated on looking calm and harmless. Who am I kidding, he thought. I probably am harmless. And if this doesn’t work - no! I’m not going to think like that. This is going to work.

Bruce returned with a large mug full of black tea, and a squirt bottle of Exit Mould. "This do?" he asked Dave, setting them down on the table. Dave could tell that Bruce would rather be hitting him than talking to him.

"Is the bottle empty?"

Bruce picked it up and shook it. "Pretty nearly," he said.

"Could you empty it, please?" Dave felt himself calming down as he spoke. This was either going to work, or it wasn't, but either way, it was the only choice he had. Just go with it, he told himself in Liza's voice.

Bruce unscrewed the top and upended the bottle. A thin trickle of bleach fell onto the concrete. He set the bottle back on the table, next to the mug.

"Thank you." Dave looked across at Cox. "My hands?"

"Of course." Cox nodded at Bruce. Bruce moved behind Dave's chair and started loosening the ropes. "I must say, Mr Rosewater, this is all quite fascinating. I do hope that this isn't some sort of elaborate hoax. I would be most unhappy if you were trying to trick me."

The ropes fell away from Dave's arms, and he shook his hands out. "I'm not trying to trick you, Mr Cox. I know this seems odd, but I assure you it isn't a trick."

"I certainly hope not." Cox waited for Dave to finish stretching his fingers out, and then clapped his hands together. "Well," he said. "Shall we begin?"

"Okay." Dave picked up the mug of tea and took the teabag out. He took a little sniff - it seemed pretty strong. Good. He poured it carefully into the squirt bottle, trying to spill as little as possible, then screwed the nozzle back onto the bottle and gave a few experimental puffs. "Okay," he said again.

"I don't really see where this is going, Mr Rosewater," Cox said.

"Well," Dave replied, "I can't really explain it, so I'll have to show you. What I do, you see, is this." He stood up suddenly, wincing at the pain in his stomach, pivoted, and squirted Bruce square in the face, heating the tea up to boiling as it left the nozzle. Bruce screamed and fell to his knees, raising his hands to his face.

Cox, who had been watching with stunned stillness, finally started to move. Dave turned on him and repeated his trick, pumping the superheated steam furiously towards Cox until backed off. He turned and sent another blast towards Bruce for good measure, then ran for the door, the bottle still clutched in his hand.

Dave ran out of the warehouse and down the road, turning occasionally to look behind him. He expected to see Cox or Bruce coming out of the warehouse to follow him at any minute, but nobody did. He came to an intersection and turned right, just out of a desire to get out of the warehouse's line of sight. It didn't seem to matter which way he turned. The street was deserted, and lined with warehouses and light industry. From the look of the hills around him, he guessed he was somewhere in the Hutt, but he had no idea where. Not near the harbour, he knew, but beyond that, he couldn't tell. The overcast sky gave no clue as to what time it was, either. The whole experience felt utterly surreal, like something out of a dream.

He felt appallingly vulnerable running down the empty streets, but every time he looked behind him, Cox and Bruce were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps I'm going to get away with this after all, he thought. But can't get complacent. First step - what should the first step be? Stop running randomly down these streets and find a place to hide. Or better yet, get the hell away from here altogether. Wherever here was.

The growling of a poorly-maintained engine behind him made Dave turn around. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but his subconscious prompted him with helpful images of Bruce trundling down the street in a bulldozer, or perhaps a light tank. When he saw that it was actually a bus, he could have kissed the ground. There was a stop ahead of him. He stopped, and flagged the bus down.

"My God, what's happened to you, mate?" the driver asked as he stepped on board. It took Dave a minute to realise what he was talking about - he had almost forgotten the pain of his broken nose in the adrenaline of his escape.

"Accident," he said shortly.

"Off to A&E, are you? There's a medical centre right round the corner, you know."

"Long wait," Dave improvised. "Going to a doctor in town. Got an appointment in an hour." Listen to me, he thought. I sound like Liza.

"If you say so," the driver said, closing the doors and pulling out.

Dave walked down the aisle of the almost empty bus. There were a couple of children in uniform sitting near the back door - probably kids cutting class, he decided - and an old lady with a shopping buggy in the seat immediately behind the driver. He could tell she was fascinated, but trying politely not to stare. He moved right to the back of the bus and took a seat in the corner, pulling the hood of his sweatshirt up and slouching down in his seat. It probably wasn't safe to relax yet, he told himself, but he felt himself relaxing anyway. His nose was really starting to hurt, and he didn't want to know what his face looked like. Recognisable, that was for sure, although with his mullet and his old hoodie he probably fit right in here, even with the broken nose. He needed to get off the streets, but where? Not home. Cox probably wouldn't send people over there right away, but there was no question he'd get to it eventually. So home was definitely out. But so was staying off the streets. Dave stared blankly at the window while his mind went round in circles, until finally he realised that there was one thing he could do. He pulled out his cellphone and dialled a number.

Liza picked up on the second ring. "What's up?"

Dave pitched his voice as low as he could, holding the phone right next to his mouth so he could be heard over the sound of the engine. "We need to get out of town," he said.

"Why?"

"Some of Cox's guys grabbed me this morning. Took me to a warehouse somewhere out in the Hutt. I got out, but I'm sure they're looking for me. He's got contacts on the cops - he told me so," Dave said, thinking as he spoke. "I need to get out of Wellington and out of sight."

"Okay," Liza said after a hesitation so brief that Dave wondered whether he'd imagined it. "Where are you now?"

"I'm not sure. I'm on a bus. The 121, I think."

"Okay," Liza said again. The bus slowed, and turned onto a busier road. Dave still wasn't sure exactly where he was, but as long as he couldn't see Cox or Bruce, he decided that he didn't care. He waited, and eventually Liza spoke again. "I'm on a job. Nearly back at the depot, though. I'll clock out, go home and get the car."

“What should I do? I don’t know where this bus is going.”

If you’re on a bus in the Hutt, it’ll go through Waterloo Central. Get off there. Hop a train into town, get out at Kaiwharawhara. Meet you at the station. If I’m not there, wait for me. Call if you want. If anything feels funny, or if you see Cox or Bruce, call me. Then run the fuck away.”

Dave felt another spike of adrenaline rush through him, but he nodded. “Okay. I’ll meet you at there.” Anxiety prompted him to add, “Don’t be long, hey?”

“Don’t worry, tiger. I’ll beat you there.”

“I really hope so. See you soon.”

“Definitely.”

Getting off the bus and onto the train was one of the hardest things Dave had ever done. He knew that he had to keep moving, but he felt irrationally safe on the bus, and he just wanted to stay there, tucked up in his corner seat, for the rest of the day. Maybe forever. Follow the plan, he told himself sternly. You don’t even know where this bus is going. You could end up anywhere. Cox and Bruce are probably already out looking for you. Now get off the bus and follow the plan.

He pushed himself out of his seat and got off the bus. It wasn’t quite deserted, but there were very few people about. He checked the time on his cellphone - just after two. Everyone was probably still at work or at school, except for a pair of young mothers pushing enormous strollers, and a worrying looking pack of punks down the far end of the platform. Dave checked the timetable - the train wasn’t due for nearly ten minutes. He tried to sit on a bench, but he felt far too exposed. Looking around, he spotted the bathrooms. He went into the men’s room and straight to the disabled stall at the far end, which he locked behind him. Turning around, he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

His face was a mess. Actually seeing the damage made everything hurt more. His nose didn’t look too bad - perhaps a little crooked, but otherwise okay - but there was blood everywhere, and angry purple bruises were starting to form. Blood had trickled down his chin and into the front of his sweatshirt, leaving dark flaky trails where it dried. He couldn’t believe that the bus driver had let him on the bus. In the driver’s place, he would have sped off and called the cops. And perhaps that’s exactly what he had done. But no, no point in thinking like that. Keep moving, don’t attract attention, and don’t worry about things until they actually happened.

He pulled a handful of paper towels from the dispenser, wet them down, and began gingerly dabbing at his face. The pain in his nose quickly convinced him not to bother with it, but he managed to get most of the dried blood off. There was nothing he could do about the bruising, and, he concluded, nothing he could do about his hoodie. He took it off, and tied it about his waist. It was really too cold for just a T-shirt, but there was no point drawing attention to himself by walking around in a gory bloodied shirt if he didn’t have to. He rinsed his hands, threw the paper towels in the trash, and headed back out to the platform just in time to catch the train.

On the train, he took another back corner seat, and looked resolutely out the window, hoping that nobody would sit next to him or ask him for his ticket or anything like that. He knew it was irrational, but he couldn’t stop himself imagining Cox as some sort of omnipotent figure, who only had to pick up a phone to have an extensive network of criminal and legal contacts rush out to blanket the city and snap up anyone he asked for. It was probably true, to a certain extent, but Dave tried to reassure himself that there was no way Cox could know where he was at the moment, and even if he did, there

was no way he could get someone onto a moving train to pick him up on such short notice. Keep moving, he thought. All you have to do is keep moving, and he won't be able to get to you. Which was fine, as far as it went, but nobody could keep moving forever, and New Zealand wasn't exactly a huge place.

He didn't like the looks of the punks from the platform. They looked like just the sort of people Cox would have on his payroll for shakedowns, petty thefts, and any minor assaults that he might want done. They had got onto the car in front of Dave, and they hadn't seemed to pay any attention to him at any point, but one phone call from Cox was all it would take. If they come into this car, I'm going to get out at the next stop, and I don't care whether it's the right stop or not. In fact, if they come into this car, I'm pulling the e-brake and getting out right away. The hell with waiting for the next stop. Waiting's for suckers.

When the train finally pulled into Kaiwharawhara station, Dave was a nervous wreck. The car had been filling up steadily, and although nobody had actually sat anywhere near him, his heart had jumped every time someone got on. The punks had got off at Petone, though, and the relief he had felt as the train sped away from them took his breath away. I'm cracking up, he had thought.

He got up and left the train, keeping his head down and walking casually. The train doors closed, and the train pulled away, leaving him with the enormously welcome sight of Liza's battered Corolla, and Liza herself, leaning against the hood and smoking a cigarette. She looked up and met his eye, gave him a little nod. He nodded back, unable to keep a grin off his face. As he walked over the bridge towards the car, she ground out her cigarette and opened the passenger door.

"Liza!" he said, surprising himself by giving her a bear hug. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you."

She patted his back. "Glad you're okay, tiger. Had me worried. Get in the car, and let's go."

"What happened?" Liza asked, as she pulled onto the motorway and gunned the accelerator.

Dave shook his head. "I don't know where to start. I was walking down to the grocery store, and some guys jumped me and put me in the back of a van. They drove me around for a bit, and we wound up at this warehouse. They took me in, and there was Cox."

Liza looked like she wanted to spit, but instead she lit up a cigarette. "What'd he want?"

"Same as before. How we pulled off the heist. And then he offered me a job. Anyway, I told him he wasn't interested, and he went away for a while. When he came back, he had Bruce with him. I guess he thought that would change my mind. Anyway, he roughed me up a little," Dave tried not to think about the feeling of his nose breaking, and hurried on, "and then I told him I'd show him how it worked."

Liza's lips curled. "Yeah?"

"So I showed them. Just like you said. Blasted their faces with the hottest steam I could muster. And then I got the hell out of there. Ran around for a while, and then I found a bus. I hopped on, and then I called you. And that's pretty much all there was to it."

"Face looks like hell," Liza said, not taking her eyes off the road.

"I know. It feels like hell."

“Painkillers in the bag at your feet. Water, fruit, crackers. Grabbed a couple of things from the kitchen on my way through.”

Dave pulled the bag into his lap, got out a couple of painkillers, and washed them down with water. Looking at the bananas and the crackers, he realised that he was starving. “Thanks, Liza. You’re amazing.”

“Not a problem. Figured you could want them, and thought we’d better put some distance between us and Wellington before we stopped.”

“Thanks,” Dave repeated, through a mouthful of banana. His face hurt like hell when he chewed, but he was so hungry he didn’t care. He ate quickly and without talking, working his way through two bananas and half a package of crackers. “So,” he asked at last, washing everything down with another swig of water, “where are we going?”

Liza shrugged. “North,” she said.

“And after that?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” Liza admitted. “First thing was to get the hell out of Wellington. Figured we could decide later.”

Dave nodded. “Sounds good to me,” he agreed. He leaned back into his chair and closed his eyes.

Liza drove north for several hours without stopping. They drank all the water, and ate all the food Liza had packed. Looking into the back seat, Dave saw that Liza had packed up several armloads of clothes and bedding (“Didn’t want you to wait at the station, so I just grabbed what was closest.”) as well as his laptop, her laptop, and a package of tea bags (“Best to be prepared. Didn’t think you’d have any on you.”) When they got to Taihape, though, she decided to stop for food, gas, and medical supplies. She made Dave wait in the car, reading a map, while she went into the gas station and the grocery store.

“Got you some stronger drugs,” she said, tossing a bottle of pills into his lap. “And food.”

“I’m not really hungry,” Dave said, looking up from the map.

Liza had pulled a cooked chicken and some rolls from a bag and was assembling sandwiches. “Need to take those with food,” she said, handing a thick sandwich over to him. He started chewing obediently.

“So,” he said, tapping the map with a greasy finger, “where are we going to go?”

Liza shook her head. “Haven’t figured that out. Any ideas?”

“No.”

They finished their sandwiches in silence, and Liza started the car. “Keep going north, I suppose,” she said. “Plenty of quiet places to camp out for the night.”

“At least it’s not raining,” Dave said.

“Not yet. Should pick up in an hour or so. Need to sleep in the car tonight.”

“What about a motel?”

“Don’t want you to be recognised. Car tonight. Tomorrow we figure out what to do.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

They reached the town limits, and Liza sped up. “Keep going for a couple of hours, though. No point stopping here.”

Dave dozed off and on as Liza drove. His face hurt in spite of the painkillers, and he felt like he’d used up an entire year’s supply of adrenaline that day. The pain kept waking him up, but then the exhaustion put him back to sleep again pretty quickly. Liza didn’t seem to notice. She drove with her eyes fixed on the road and a frown on her face. It was the first time he had seen her without a clear idea of what to do next, and she didn’t seem to know how to handle it.

“I guess Cox will have someone watching the flat,” he said as they were driving along the edge of Lake Taupo.

“Makes sense,” Liza agreed.

“We should probably call Jean, and warn him to stay away from the place,” he suggested. “I guess they’ll try to grab him if he shows up there. I’d hate to think of that happening to him.”

Liza turned to look at him for the first time in several hours. “Brilliant,” she said, smiling broadly. “Genius.”

“What?”

“I’ll pull over.” She slowed the car and pulled over to the side of the road. “Your phone got signal?”

He looked. “Yep. Do you want me to call him?”

“Let me.” He handed his phone to her, and she dialled. “Jean? Liza. Not good. Cox grabbed Dave earlier. No. No, he’s fine. Hang on.” She handed the phone over to Dave. “Wants to talk to you.”

“Jean?”

“Dave! What happened? Liza said that Cox kidnapped you or something? My God, it’s like something out of a cheap action movie.”

“I’m fine. Really. He did get me, but I escaped. Just like a cheap action movie. Except I didn’t get blown up or shot at.”

“Where are you? Do you want me to come over?”

“No! Don’t do that. Cox is probably still after me - chances are he’s got people watching the house or something. Stay away from there.”

“But where are you? Surely you aren’t in the house?”

“No. We’ve left town. We’re somewhere south of Taupo at the moment. I’m not sure exactly where.”

“And are you okay, darling?”

“Pretty much. I’m pretty shaken up, and a little beat up, but I’m okay.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I am. Really. I don’t want to do it again tomorrow or anything, but I’m fine. Hang on, Liza wants to talk to you again.” He handed the phone back.

“We need a place to hide out,” she said. “Somewhere quiet. Away from people.” She paused, listening to Jean speak. “Exactly. Just what we need. Do you mind? Great. Thanks.” She hung up the phone and passed it back to Dave.

“What?” he asked.

“Jean’s got a bach on Waiheke Island. Holiday home. Bought it a couple of years back. Rents it to tourists, mostly, but it’s empty now. He says we can use the place. He’ll join us day after tomorrow.”

“Really? That’s fantastic!”

Liza nodded. “Should be perfect for a couple of days. Couple of weeks, even. Gives us some time to decide what to do next.” She started the car again and pulled back onto the road. “Going to try and push through tonight. You up for a shift driving later?”

“If it gets us there sooner, I’m up for just about anything.”

They drove through the night, and arrived in Auckland early the next morning, in time to make the first ferry out to Waiheke Island. Dave had never been there before, but Jean had texted him directions, so they managed to find the holiday house relatively easily. It was a little old cottage with a large rose garden out the back, and it seemed to Dave that it was basically a more picturesquely run-down version of Jean’s house in Wellington. He mentioned it to Liza, and she nodded.

“Jean knows what he likes,” she said. “Finds a thing and goes with it.”

“I guess that makes things easier,” he said.

Liza had stopped at a minimart on the outskirts of Auckland for some basic supplies, and they breakfasted on enormous bacon sandwiches and mugs of tea before going to bed. Dave was sure he wasn’t going to be able to sleep, but he was out as soon as his head hit the pillow, and he didn’t wake up until mid-afternoon. Liza, for once, slept even longer than he had, not emerging from her room until nearly five. They ate another vast but simple meal, and then lit a fire and sat in front of it playing Scrabble until well into the night. Liza played Scrabble the same way she did everything else - with an unnerving focus and efficiency - and it was all Dave could do to keep within shouting distance of her score. After four games, he managed a narrow victory, and decided it was time to quit while he was ahead. They had barely talked through the whole evening, but that was a relief. It felt like everything that had happened over the past few days was moving into the past, rather than being part of an anxiety-inducing present. Dave slept late the next morning, and woke up feeling refreshed and relaxed and almost as if he had come to Waiheke on holiday, instead of being on the run.

Jean arrived around mid-afternoon the day after they had, with hugs all round, concern for the state of Dave’s face, and newspapers. Dave wasn’t quite all over them, but there was a large photo of him on the fourth page. The story was headlined “Crooked Exec’s Husband Attacks Businessman”, and it

took great delight in rehashing all the details of Belinda's trial, painting himself as some sort of shadowy villain, and implying that maybe he had played a part in the crimes that Belinda had gone down for. Cox, if you believed the article, was a upstanding, respectable Wellington businessman, who had been minding his own business when Dave viciously assaulted him. The article ended with a plea for anyone who had any information about Dave's whereabouts to contact the police.

"Well, that's just great," Dave said, throwing down the paper in disgust. "Guess Cox must have buddies in the media as well as the police."

"Guess so," Liza grunted.

"Shit," Dave muttered. "What the hell are we going to do now?"

"We need to clear your name, darling," Jean said. "Dramatically, and conclusively, so there can be no more question about any of this."

"Well, I hate to bring this up, but the article is technically right. I probably scalded Cox and Bruce pretty badly."

"Self-defence," Jean said with a dismissive wave. Then he stopped and looked at Dave curiously. "Scalded? How did you manage that?"

Dave looked at Liza, who nodded back. "Tell him," she said. "He's cool."

He hesitated, but he knew Liza was probably right. About this, anyway. And there was no point keeping Jean in the dark now that he knew this much about what was going on. "Okay. Come into the kitchen."

There was no kitchen table, so they all stood around the kitchen counter while Dave assembled his tools. He filled a mug with cold water, and dropped a tea bag in it. Jean gave him a questioning look, but said nothing. Dave took a deep breath, suddenly feeling nervous. He cleared his throat. "Okay," he said. He wrapped his hands around the mug to hide the fact that they had started to shake, and then slowly heated the tea until it was steaming.

"Well," Jean said. "How unusual." He sounded calm enough, but Dave could see the surprise on his face.

"I can go both ways. Hot -" he brought the water right up to boiling point, "-and cold." He cooled the tea back down, taking it through room temperature and down to the point where ice started to form on the surface. "But only with tea. Nothing else." He took his hands off the mug and turned to face Jean, uncomfortably aware of the sheepish smile that he couldn't quite keep off his face.

"I think this calls for a drink," Jean said, pulling a bottle of red wine out of a cupboard. Liza grabbed a couple of glasses, and they all went back into the living room. Jean poured himself a large glass and drank about half of it in one swallow.

"Useful talent, huh?" Liza asked Jean.

"Very unusual," Jean said, taking a smaller sip of his drink. "But I suppose it would have its uses. Iced tea any time you wanted. Camping trips, if you like roughing it."

"Safecracking," Liza put in. "Breaking and entering. Escaping from kidnappers."

"Well, darling, since you put it that way, I suppose it is useful."

"You know," Dave said, "I never thought it was useful. Growing up, I was really embarrassed about it. I never told anyone, apart from you guys. None of my friends, none of my family. Not even Belinda. My parents knew about it, of course, but we never really talked about it."

“If it had been me, I would have told everyone. I would have made myself a costume and run around the neighbourhood, making little ice sculptures and leaving them on people’s car bonnets.”

Liza gave Jean an amused look. “That’s you. No surprise.”

“Really? And what would you have done with these magnificent powers?”

“Fought crime,” Liza said with a shrug “Beat up gang members. Helped people across the street. Like that.”

“I never did anything like that. Growing up in the States, do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to have a power that involves tea? And how useless. Apart from at my parents’ place, the only tea I ever saw was powdered iced tea. I don’t think that stuff even had tea in it.”

“So you carry your own supply,” Liza said. “Like last week.”

“Exactly,” Jean chipped in. “Some sort of reservoir, perhaps in a backpack. Hard shell, of course, but perhaps covered in black rubber with metal accents. And then make the costume to match.”

“Yeah? And what do you call yourself?” Liza asked. “Teaminator? The Bag Man?”

Jean brushed the question away. “Details, darling. Not important. Work out the look first, and worry about the details later.”

“Well, right now, I don’t think the look or the name matters,” Dave said. “What I need to do is clear my name and get Cox off my back.”

“Exactly,” Liza agreed.

“Well, you can’t go out looking like that. Far too recognisable. I think that in this case, the look will be very important.”

“You’re probably right,” Dave acknowledged.

“Of course I’m right. I’ll go into town and pick up a few things. We need to give you a complete makeover. Make it so your own mother won’t recognise you.”

“Shit!” Dave said. “I’d better call my folks. I hope they haven’t seen this, or haven’t had any calls from the cops or anything.”

“Good. You do that. Jean, you do the disguise. I’m going to go find wifi. Need to come up with a plan.”

Jean nodded agreement, set down his empty glass and picked up his car keys. Dave looked at him and Liza. “Thanks, guys,” he said. “I can’t believe you’re doing all of this for me, but I really do appreciate it.”

An hour later, Dave sat down on a swivelling stool in Jean’s bathroom, ready for his second makeover in as many weeks.

“What a relief,” Jean said, fastening a hairdresser’s gown behind Dave’s neck. “I’ve been trying to think of an excuse to cut this,” he lifted the heavy curls of Dave’s mullet, “off ever since I finished it. It might be appropriate if you were in some sort of heavy metal band, but it’s just not you, darling.”

“Tell me about it,” Dave grimaced.

“So this time, we need to go with something completely different. I’m thinking neat, clean-cut, perhaps with a beard.” He came round to the front of the chair and frowned at Dave. “Definitely with a beard. Have you ever worn one?”

“No. I tried a moustache in college, but it looked pretty terrible. It lasted maybe three weeks.”

“Perfect!” Jean fingered the stubble on Dave’s jaw. “You have an excellent start, so all we need to do is give it a little style and maybe darken it just a fraction while it comes through. Just for the first week.”

Dave coughed. “The last look you gave me was pretty, uh, extreme,” he said, trying to think of a polite way to phrase it.

“You’re worried that because I do so much work for film that I can’t do style?”

“No, of course not,” Dave said. “I just -” He shrugged.

“I promise you that this time, you will look elegant, cultured, and handsome. No mullets, no war wounds, and no sharkskin. Okay?”

“Okay. Sorry.”

Jean spun the stool around, sprayed Dave’s hair with water from a bottle, and started cutting. “Not at all. It’s a pleasure to find a straight man who’s concerned about his appearance. Although, I have to say, I was quite surprised when Liza told me you were married.”

“Really?” Dave felt his face heating up, and he was glad Jean was behind him where he couldn’t see it.

“Oh, yes. I’m rarely wrong about these things, but I suppose none of us can be right all of the time, don’t you think?”

“I guess not.”

“Still, a sensitive, sweet man like yourself, with such neat clothes and well-maintained hands. If you ever thought of switching teams, I could have your dance card filled inside an hour. In fact, I’d be happy to book you out myself.” Dave opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. “But I’m embarrassing you,” Jean continued.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Of course not.”

“I mean, I’m flattered, of course, and…” Dave had no idea what he meant to say.

Jean stopped cutting, and swivelled the stool around to look at Dave. “Enough,” he said. “It’s forgotten.” He swivelled the stool back and resumed cutting. “Did you contact your parents?”

“Yeah,” Dave said, jumping for the conversational ball a little too quickly. “Caught them as they were going out to the theatre. I think I kind of ruined their night, too. The cops hadn’t spoken to them, so they had no idea what was going on. And I’m glad about that, I guess. I wouldn’t like to think of what the cops might have told them. They would’ve worried. Of course,” he added with a sigh, “they’re worrying now.”

“What did you say?”

“Well, I told them about Cox’s offer. I didn’t tell them that he’d grabbed me off the street, but I did tell them he wouldn’t let me leave, and about how I got out. I had to - they would have found out one way or another. I told them that I’d left Wellington, that Cox was after me, and that the cops had the wrong idea about what had happened. That they’d probably be getting a call from the cops in a couple of days.”

“And how did they react?”

“I think it freaked them out.” Dave paused. “Okay, I know it freaked them out. But I told them that everything was okay, and that I had friends who were helping me try to set the record straight. I don’t know if that was much comfort. Dad wanted to get on a plane right then and come get me, but I told him that was a bad idea. And then I told them I’d be fine, and that I’d call again in a day or two, and that was it.”

“Good,” Jean said. “Tilt your head down, please.”

Dave tilted his head and waited, feeling the mullet falling away from his neck. He’d never really felt sentimental about his hair, but it was oddly sad to see it lying on the floor around him. He wasn’t sad to lose the mullet, though. That could have gone last week, and he wouldn’t have minded.

“Jean?” he asked later, while Jean was massaging black dye into his hair.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been wondering. Why are you and Liza helping me?”

“Why?”

“Yeah. I mean, you barely know me. Liza’s known me for less than a month, and you’ve known me for less than that. And God knows I need your help, both of you, and I’m glad to have it, but I have no idea why you’re giving it to me.”

“Well,” Jean said, his fingers moving steadily through Dave’s hair. “At first I helped because Liza asked me to, and then once I got to know you, I helped because I liked you, and I wanted to help you.”

Dave twitched a shoulder impatiently, but kept his head still. “That would make sense if I needed help moving house or something, but it doesn’t make sense for something like this. I’m on the run from the police, you know. For assault. Which probably makes you guys guilty of harbouring a felon, or being an accessory, or whatever they’d call it here. And that’s not even thinking about the Westlake diamond thing. So why are you doing it?”

Dave heard Jean sigh, and felt his fingers go slack. “I don’t want to go into it, darling, but let’s just say I’ve never found the police to be particularly helpful when a person is in trouble.”

Dave shivered. He wanted to say something, but he couldn’t think of anything that would sound right. He wasn’t sure exactly what Jean meant, but he has a couple of scenarios running around inside his head, and none of them were pleasant. He reached up, found Jean’s forearm, and gave it a squeeze. “I won’t ask.”

“Thank you,” Jean replied quietly. “I don’t like to think about it.”

“What about Liza? Same thing?” He had lowered his voice to match Jean’s, and the two of them were practically whispering.

“No,” Jean said. “Related, but not the same. She hasn’t told you?”

“No. Nothing.” Dave grimaced with embarrassment. “Actually,” he admitted, “I hadn’t really asked. I guess I needed help so badly that I didn’t want to stop and question it, just in case that jinxed it or something.”

“I can understand that. And I’m sure Liza would never tell you, however much she might want you to know. That’s just the way she is.” Jean walked around and sat on the edge of the bathtub, stripping off his gloves. “I met Liza about ten years ago, when she got involved with a band I styled. Got involved with the lead singer, more specifically. Cheri. She was ten, twelve years older than Liza - it was one of those fabulously inappropriate affairs. Liza was eighteen, very young for her age. Almost naive, although it’s probably hard for you to imagine that.”

Dave gave a little nod and smile. It was very hard for him to imagine Liza as being young and naive. She was the wisest person he had ever met.

“Well, Cheri being a musician, artistic temperament and so on, was heavily into drugs. A junkie. The music career went down the tubes a few months after she and Liza got together, and Cheri turned to alternative revenue streams.”

“What do you mean?”

“Prostitution, darling.” Jean looked impatient. “Liza had no idea. For months, really. She didn’t find out about any of it until the police raided the house. Which was unfortunate, because they picked up drugs, cash, all sorts of things. And they picked up Liza.”

“What happened?”

“Suspended sentence. Community work. Probation. But she never saw Cheri again, and she never trusted the police, or anyone else who she thought might try to take advantage of her. She hasn’t had a relationship that lasted more than six months since then, and the average has probably been closer to six weeks. She tried to cut me off, but I wouldn’t let her. I got her to move in with me for nearly a year while she got herself back on her feet. I think I’m the only person who knew her then that she still sees.”

Dave blew out a deep breath and shook his head. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting to hear, but it certainly wasn’t this. “Okay,” he said at last, still shaking his head, “that just makes it all make less sense. Why the hell did she get involved with the mess I’m in?”

“Well,” Jean said, “she told me how the two of you met.”

The memory made Dave smile. It was funny to think how terrified he’d been of Liza the first time they’d met. Now, she was probably the single most reassuring person in his life. “What about it?”

“You helped her. No questions asked.”

“Well, I asked a couple of questions.”

Jean made a dismissive gesture. “Not the way she sees it. I think she’s decided that you can be trusted. And I’m delighted that she’s found someone else she can trust.”

“Me too,” Dave said.

“That’s good. Because if you let her down, after what I’ve told you, I’d have to kill you.”

Threatening wasn’t usually a word that Dave would have associated with Jean. Outrageous, dramatic, over the top, perhaps, but not threatening. Looking at him now, though, Dave believed every word that Jean said, and he was really glad he could mean it when he said, “I’m not going to let her down.”

Jean looked at him silently for a moment, then stood up. “Good,” he said. “Now, let’s wash this dye out of your hair and see what we can do about your beard.”

“Wow,” Liza said, stopping in the door and staring at Dave. She looked over at Jean. “Good work. Wouldn’t have recognised him.”

Jean smiled, basking in the praise. “Thank you, darling. You’re too kind.”

He had given Dave a short haircut, carefully styled with lashings of product, with an overall effect somewhere between male model in jeans catalogue and young conservative. Dave had been a bit dubious about the beard, but when he actually saw what Jean had done, he was surprised by how much he liked it. Jean had waxed his eyebrows and given him another set of coloured contacts - green, this time. He’d covered over the bruises from his broken nose with some sort of makeup, and the nose itself appeared to be setting slightly crooked. A designer T-shirt and a grey sweater completed the look, which was nothing at all like the mulleted throwback Dave had been that morning, or the long haired slacker look he’d adopted for the past ten years. When Jean had finished up and let him look in the mirror, he hadn’t recognised himself. He’d been sneaking glances at himself in mirrors and other reflective surfaces for the past hour, and he’d decided that he liked the way he looked.

“What did you come up with?” he asked Liza.

She sat down in an armchair, making a disgusted gesture. “Nothing.”

“Really?” Dave could hardly believe it.

“Yep. Nothing. You’re still in the news. Don’t think they’d recognise you if they saw you now, though. Cox is still claiming assault. Diamond thing’s fallen off the radar, but that’s about the only good news.”

He shook his head. “So what do we do?”

“I don’t know.”

He had never expected to hear those words from Liza. She sighed, and they all lapsed into silence. Dave tried to think of something to say, but his mind just kept going round in circles. It looked like they were screwed, and the only thing for it was to wait until the cops picked them all up.

“Maybe I should turn myself in,” he said.

“Don’t be fucking stupid,” Liza said.

“My thoughts exactly,” Jean agreed. “That would be a waste of everything we’ve just done. If you wanted to go to the police, you should have done that right at the beginning. It’s too late for that now.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. I just don’t want this to go wrong and for you guys to get caught up in it.”

“Not going to happen. Not if we have the right plan.” Liza leaned forward, picking at the edge of the coffee table. “Two options. One, we pin something on Cox and deliver him to the cops, or two, we

fuck with him so badly he knows he doesn't want to fuck us back. Either way, we need to know more about what he's doing. Right now, we've got nothing."

"Absolutely nothing?" Dave asked. It was hard to believe. Liza had always managed to come up with something, and it seemed wrong to see her at such a loss.

"Absolutely nothing," Liza said flatly. She threw herself back in her chair. "Nothing useful, anyway. Lots of background on Cox. His companies - the straight ones. His donations to things. Big fucking architecture magazine special on his holiday home here on Waiheke. His private golf course. His-

"Wait," Dave said. "His holiday home?" He frowned with concentration. He knew that sounded familiar, but he couldn't get it. Then suddenly, the whole scene came back to him, vivid and intense. The warehouse. The chair. Cox, talking on the phone. And then Bruce, breaking his nose. He shuddered, and tried to drag his thoughts back onto their original track.

"What is it?" Jean asked, and Liza waved at him to be quiet.

"Just after Cox brought me to the warehouse, someone rang him. He took the call, and I remember him saying something about his holiday home, and some sort of thing that was going on there. I can't quite remember..."

"Don't force it," Jean murmured. "Relax, and it'll come back."

Dave blew out a breath and shook his shoulders, trying to relax and think. "He was talking to someone. I can't remember the name. Something Asian, though. Li? No, Liang. That's it. Mr Liang, he said." The whole scene was coming back to him in great chunks. "I don't know what they were talking about, but he said something about contacting his security guy, and how private his place on Waiheke was. I think that whatever it is is going down this weekend. But I don't know what. It sounded shady, but it might just be some rich dude looking for a place to have a quiet orgy or something."

"No other option I can see right now." Liza said. "Liang? You're sure?"

Dave nodded. "Yes. I'm sure."

"Okay. See what I can dig up." She got to her feet and grabbed her laptop. "You need to get wifi," she said to Jean.

"If I had wifi, it would hardly be a quiet holiday retreat, darling," Jean replied.

"True. Be handy right now, though. Anyway, back in an hour or two."

"Good luck," Dave said. Liza pinned him with a look.

"Don't worry. We'll get something."

Liza came through, just as she always did. She was gone for nearly two hours, but when she came back, Dave could tell from the expression on her face that she had found something.

"Got it," she said, setting her laptop on the coffee table, sitting down, and putting her feet up. "Nailed it."

“Excellent,” Jean said. “This deserves a drink! Hot buttered rum? The perfect drink for a winter escape.”

“Beer,” Liza said firmly. Jean sniffed, but went into the kitchen to get her a beer.

“Good call,” Dave said to her, quietly. Jean had made them both a hot buttered rum about half an hour before. Dave had never had one before, and after he had tasted it, he made a silent vow never to have one again. He had taken a couple of polite sips, and was letting the mug cool by his foot, waiting for an opportunity to either pour it out when Jean wasn’t watching, or accidentally knock it over. “I’ll be back.” He picked up the mug and went to the bathroom to tip it down the sink. When he got back, Jean waved him into a seat and demanded that Liza spill everything she knew.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “What did you get?”

“Liang,” Liza said. “Got him. He’s a major player in Hong Kong crime. Suspected in just about everything, but never arrested. Never dumb enough to have something pinned on him. Always someone else there to take the fall.”

“What do you think he wants with Cox?” Dave asked.

Liza shrugged. “Don’t know, but if they’re meeting here, probably not a cigar and a round of golf. Gotta be something big. Could be the diamonds - he’s got family in the business. Case last year when they suspected him of moving some stolen jewellery. Cops ended up picking up his brother in law. Gemstone cutter. Not cutting gems now, though. Doing ten years.”

“Would he come all the way to New Zealand for a thing like that?” Jean asked. “That doesn’t seem very sensible.”

“Could have other business as well. Been in New Zealand a lot lately. Real estate, or at least that’s what he’s telling the press. Golf courses. Probably all kinds of stuff on the side as well.”

“Right now, it’s all we’ve got,” Dave said. “If they are up to something crooked, and we could get proof of it, that might be enough to get Cox off my back. And then the cops might be more inclined to believe my side of the story about this assault thing.”

“If Cox is as crooked as you say, they might be inclined to believe you now,” Jean pointed out.

Liza brushed that away. “He’s still got the diamonds to pin on Dave, though. Need to take him out of the picture.” Jean hesitated, then nodded. “We should check this out,” Liza continued. “Can’t hurt. Might help. Might be just what we need.”

“I don’t think we can afford to be picky,” Dave agreed. “We should at least check it out, and if it’s nothing, then I guess we’ll just have to try to find something else.”

“I agree,” Jean said. “Of course we should look into this. But I think we should keep looking for alternatives.”

“There are no alternatives,” Liza said.

“None that we can see now, but if we keep looking, who knows what we might find.”

“That doesn’t matter now,” Dave cut in.

“Right,” Liza agreed, pulling a folded piece of paper from her pocket. “Directions to Cox’s place. Not far away. Everyone up for a drive?”

They piled into Jean's car ("Less conspicuous in a nice place like this, darling.") and started out across the island. The roads were almost empty as they drove through Oneroa and Ostend, and completely deserted after that. Dave felt incredibly exposed, but he reminded himself that Cox had no idea where they were, and he probably wasn't on the island yet anyway. And there was no way that his people would be looking out for Jean's Mini and certainly no way they would be able to tell that he was inside it.

Cox's house would have been easy to find even without the directions. It was ludicrously oversized, a sprawling faux-art-deco complex at the foot of a low hill. It was set well back from the road, but Dave could clearly make out a man washing the windows, and a couple more people doing something inside.

"What a repulsive design," Jean said. "I simply cannot imagine anything less suitable."

Dave had to agree. It was probably incredibly desirable if you liked that sort of thing, and there was no doubt that it was expensive, but to him it just looked like an updated version of something out of Miami Vice. "I guess these guys are here to open the place up," he said. "Probably going to take them a couple of days, too," he said. "There must be six months of built-up bird shit on those windows."

"Know when Liang's arriving?" Liza asked.

Dave thought for a minute. "No," he said. "I don't think so. I think Cox just said 'this weekend'."

"Could be any time between tomorrow and Sunday, then."

"I doubt it will be Sunday," Jean put in. "Surely Cox will want to entertain his guest if he's trying to conclude a major deal."

"Probably true," Liza said. "Need to keep a watch on this place. Starting tomorrow morning."

"A watch for what?" Dave asked. "And what are we going to do if we see whatever it is we're looking for?"

"I don't know," Liza admitted.

They all stared out of the car at the activity in the house.

"Well," Dave said slowly, "You're probably right about the watch. I guess we can't come up with any kind of plan if we don't know what's happening here. Maybe we can make some decisions once we know more about it."

"Need to set some things moving," Liza said. She was controlling her voice, but Dave could tell how frustrated she was. "Too late to be sitting around planning if things are already happening. Fuck!"

Jean started the engine. "Some things are obvious," he said. "We'll need recording equipment. Cameras. I have a friend in town who has a film production company. I'll see him tomorrow and borrow what we need. Long range microphone. Binoculars."

Liza nodded.

"Good. Stakeout first, planning later. Besides, Cox is a businessman, and so is this Liang. There will be no business conducted until after dinner. It's simply not done."

“Right,” said Dave. That had always been one of Belinda’s rules when she was trying to close a deal. “We might not have a lot of time, but we’ll have enough time to come up with something. We’ll just need to have some contingency plans up our sleeves.”

“Easy to say,” Liza muttered, but she was already looking more cheerful.

“Easy to do,” Dave said. “I’ve seen you do it. We’ll get through this.”

By Saturday morning, Dave was feeling less sure about the whole thing. He and Liza had staked out Cox’s place on Friday from six in the morning till half past ten at night, hiding in the bush across the road, and all they had seen was hours and hours of cleaning. A couple of delivery vans from upmarket delis and butchers had stopped by on Friday afternoon, as well as a station wagon that had disgorged a popular TV chef and a couple of assistants, but there had been no sign of Cox, and no sign of anyone who could have been mistaken for a Hong Kong crime boss. On Friday afternoon, it had started to rain. The trees had provided some shelter from the wind, but there was no place to sit that was completely free of drips, so by the time they finally gave up, Dave’s pants were soaked, and he was shivering. Liza seemed warmer, but no less wet, and they were both pretty dispirited when they got back to Jean’s bach.

Jean, meanwhile, had gone to Auckland to pick up the gear, and then commandeered the master bedroom. He came out to greet them, and to force mugs of hot buttered rum on them, but he wouldn’t let them see what he was working on. He seemed very pleased with himself, though, and managed to cheer them up a little before they all turned in.

Dave and Liza had agreed that morning that there was no point in them staking out the place together, and Dave had volunteered for the first shift. So, at six o’clock, he was back in position, with a pair of binoculars and a flask of coffee, watching Cox’s house slowly starting to wake up. By eight o’clock he was ready to give it up and go home. By nine o’clock, he was ready to turn himself in and take whatever came just to get away from the boredom of the stakeout. He thought about calling Liza, but he knew there was nothing to say. She’d probably switch shifts, if he asked, or even do the whole day by herself, but that wouldn’t be fair. This was his problem, and he needed to do his part, however tedious, in getting himself out of it.

All the same, though, he thought, I wish we could set up a webcam to watch this place instead of sitting out here ourselves. This is going to be a hell of a waste of a weekend if Cox never shows up. But if he’s not going to show up, then why all the activity? It’s not like he knows we’re watching him and he’s trying to distract us. At least, if he does, we’re so deeply screwed that there’s no point worrying about it.

He sighed, and tried to find a dry place to sit. Impossible. Everything was soaked, but if he scraped away the top layer of leaves, he could sit on ground that was merely damp. Damp and cold, but at least it wasn’t soaking through his pants. And at least it wasn’t raining. In fact, if he wasn’t stuck hiding in the drippy bushes, it would be quite a nice day. Cold, but sunny, and not too windy. He sipped at his coffee, looked through his binoculars, and tried to avoid checking the time on his phone.

A pair of black cars turned up the driveway, and parked in front of the house. Eight men got out, and Dave would have known immediately that they were security even if Bruce hadn’t been among them, his face a bright, shiny pink under dark sunglasses. Guess I didn’t scald him as badly as I thought I had, Dave thought, feeling oddly relieved. Bruce looked around, and Dave’s stomach clenched as Bruce’s gaze moved over the clump of trees where he was hiding. He was sure he’d be spotted, but

Bruce didn't seem to notice anything. He began pointing and speaking, obviously giving orders to the rest of the men.

Even though he was a good two hundred metres from the house, Dave didn't trust himself to speak. Instead, he pulled out his phone and texted Liza. "Security's here. Eight guys, including Bruce. Looks like they're setting up. No sign of Cox." A moment later, his cellphone vibrated.

"What's happening? Get the mike on them. Hang in there, tiger."

Idiot, Dave thought to himself. He fumbled in the case at his feet and pulled out the long-range microphone that Jean had borrowed. He set it up, put the headphones on, and pointed it at Bruce.

"...the midday ferry," Bruce was saying. "So I want you and Steve to go down and meet him. And Piri, you and John get down to the golf course. Organise the caddies, get everything ready. Mr Cox will be there at eleven. When they're ready to come back to the house, let us know. We'll have the two cars, as well as the limo, and we'll do full motorcade. We want to impress Mr Liang with our security arrangements, so everyone look sharp. No screw-ups. Understand?"

Nods from the assembled men. Bruce continued. "Good. Anything looks wrong, you call me. And I want all teams to check in with me every half hour, regardless. Understand, we aren't expecting anything funny, but we want this deal to go ahead smoothly. We don't want to worry Mr Liang, or give him any reason to think he might be better taking his business elsewhere." More nods. "All right. Questions?"

There were none. "In that case, let's get on with it."

The men scattered, with four of them getting back in the cars and driving away, slowly. Dave kept the mike pointed at Bruce, but he didn't say anything more. He watched the cars drive off, and then turned around and went into the house. Dave could see him through the windows, talking to the TV chef and one of the cleaning staff. He took off the headphones and set the microphone back down in its case, then texted Liza again.

"Liang and Cox on their way. Liang midday ferry, Cox 11. Meeting at golf course. Coming to house later."

Her reply was almost instant. "Good work. Coming to get you."

"Shit," he muttered when he read it. One of the security men had been stationed at the front of the house, and was watching the road carefully. If Liza drove past, he would see her, and if she stopped across the road to pick Dave up, he would become suspicious. It would probably give the game away. But how the hell was he going to get away from the house otherwise?

"Don't drive by house," he texted. "Man watching road. Need to find alternative pick-up." He looked around. The bush went all the way down to the beach, which was a couple of hundred metres below the road, but it was patchy. Still, if he was careful, he could probably get down to the beach without being noticed, and then he could walk along until he came to the next bay, and then make his way back up to the road. There was a sheep pasture there, out of sight from the house, where he could wait. As long as Cox's security people didn't drive past, nobody would see him. And if he waited by the hedge, perhaps they wouldn't notice him. "Going to walk along beach. Meet me in front of field with big tree."

"OK. 25mins."

He packed up the microphone properly, shutting the clasps on the case. It wasn't a great thing to be carrying when you were sneaking through the bush, but he would manage it. Thermos in one hand, and case in the other, he set out.

It was very slow going. He probably could have made it down to the beach in two minutes, but he was paranoid about making noise or obviously rustling the bushes. He could practically feel the man at the house watching him. It took him ten minutes to creep down to the beach, and then another twenty minutes to stroll casually along to the next bay, picking up shells, skimming stones, and generally acting like a tourist out for a stroll. Liza was waiting for him when he got to the pasture. She had popped the hood of her car, and was up to her waist in it. She straightened up as he approached.

“Think that’s got it,” she said loudly. She slammed the hood closed, and got in. Dave got into the passenger seat, and she started the car, doing a slow three-point turn and heading back away from Cox’s house. They drove in silence for several minutes, with Liza taking frequent glances at the rear-view mirror. She didn’t relax until they were halfway across the island.

“Good work,” she said.

“Got any ideas about what we should do?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. But we’ll have something before they finish their game.”

When they got back to the beach, they were no closer to having a plan. Liza still seemed confident, but Dave suspected that she was feeling as hopeless as he was. It seemed pretty obvious that something was going to happen at Cox’s place, and it was probably going to happen that night, but they still didn’t know what, or what to do about it. They had talked themselves to a standstill, and were staring silently out at the road.

Jean bounded out of the house before Liza had a chance to turn off the ignition. “Excellent work, darlings! Are we ready to leap into action?”

“No,” Dave said, getting out of the car and slamming the door. Liza just grunted.

“What’s the matter? Do they have armed guards and attack dogs?”

“Probably,” Liza said. Dave hadn’t considered this, but now that he did, he realised that of course the guards would be armed. Or at least some of them would be.

Jean herded them both inside and sat them on the couch. “We’ve come this far, and now you want to give up? Please. That doesn’t make sense. We’ve got our eyes on them, and of course they’re going to be doing something illegal. That goes without saying. All we need to do is get the proof, and get it to the police. Right?”

“I guess,” Dave said. “But how?”

“Not important!”

“Yes it is! We can’t just go wandering in there, cameras rolling, and hope that we catch them in the act.”

Jean deflated a little. “True. But however much I like having you as a house guest, you can’t hide out here forever. We need to take risks, and this is a good risk.”

“Right,” Liza agreed. “No question that we’ll see something if we’re watching. Get it on camera, get it to the cops. Cut some sort of a deal for you.”

“And that’s assuming we even need to cut a deal,” Jean put in. “If we give them something juicy enough, then all your problems will probably go away right along with Cox.”

“Okay,” Dave agreed. “So we need to get close enough to film whatever the hell is going on, and then get away clean at the end of it. Easier than it sounds.”

“I’m prepared for all eventualities,” Jean said, opening up another of the equipment cases he had borrowed from the film studio. “They bought this from an investigative journalism programme a couple of years ago. The producers got sued, and the show never aired, but they had some pretty nice equipment.” He held up a vaguely microphone-looking piece of equipment. “Voila!”

“What is it?”

“A laser microphone, darling. They dropped it off yesterday, while you and Liza were out. It picks up audio right through windows. And to complete the international espionage look,” he indicated another little case, “I have an infra-red camera. Fully charged, and ready to go.”

Liza got up and squeezed Jean’s shoulders. “Good work,” she said. “Guess that’s us sorted.”

“Is it?” Dave asked. “So what are we going to do?”

Jean and Liza sat down, leaning over the coffee table. Liza’s fingers twitched across the empty bottles and pieces of packaging that littered it as she spoke. “Jean covers the golf course, lets us know when they finish. We go up to the house, same way you left. Hide the car. Set up to record.”

Dave shook his head. “I’m pretty sure the dining room and stuff is around the back. We’ll need to find a good hiding spot back behind the house and set up there. I don’t know where we’d need to put the car for that, though.”

“Not important. Bound to be plenty of places to stash it.” Liza said. “We set up, stay hidden, and record. Get the dirt, get back to the car, get back here. Then call the cops. Cox doesn’t know anything until the cops pick him up.”

Dave thought it over for a long minute. It sounded too easy, but who was he to judge? Maybe sometimes things were easy. “Okay,” he said. “That sounds like it’ll work. But what if they spot us?”

“Won’t happen,” Liza said. “But if it does, we take them out. Quietly. And then back to the plan.”

“And if Cox isn’t really up to anything shady with this Liang guy?”

Jean snorted. “Please! Don’t tell me you really believe that?”

“No, I guess not. I just want to make sure we’ve got everything covered. At least, as much as we can.”

“We have everything covered,” Jean said. “And I have a little surprise for the two of you. Come with me.”

They got up, and he led them into the master bedroom. “Are you ready?” he asked, his hand on the closet door. Dave looked at Liza, who shrugged. She obviously had no idea what Jean’s little surprise was either.

“Sure,” Dave said.

“Okay! Take a look at this!” Jean flung the door open with a grand gesture.

Inside, on hangars, was a pair of costumes. There was no other way to describe them. They were matte black and looked like they were made of leather, but with dull metallic accents. “And to top it

off,” Jean said, pulling a couple of strips of fabric off one of the hangars and dangling them from his fingers, “I made you these.” He held his arm out, and Dave took the strips. He had to turn them over several times before he figured out what they were.

“Masks,” he said at last. “You made us masks?”

“Don’t forget the rest of the outfit, darling. Yours is this one.” Jean pulled one of the hangars out of the closet and extended it to Dave. “I can’t wait to see it on you. And you too, of course,” he said to Liza.

“Thanks,” she said, giving him a half-smile.

“But why?” Dave asked.

“Well, you remember the day I came up, when we were talking about your powers, and how you could carry a supply of tea with you? It seemed like too good an idea to pass up, and I had some time. And of course, I keep a stock of fabric up here in case I get the urge to sew, so you see it all came together. I had the time, you needed the costumes, and here they are. Go on, try it on! Don’t keep me in suspense all afternoon.”

Dave took the hangar from Jean and went into the bathroom to change. The costume seemed very bulky, and when he took it off the hangar, he realised why. There was an integrated backpack - black rubber with metallic accents, just the way Jean had described it - on the back, with a hose running along the right arm to a small metal pump action chamber and a nozzle. He tried the costume on. It fit snugly, but comfortably. Turning around, he looked at himself in the mirror. Instant superhero. He couldn’t keep a grin off his face.

“If you’d told me when I was ten,” he said as he emerged from the bathroom, “that one day I’d look like this and be wearing this kind of costume, on the way to catch a bad guy in the act and turn him over to the cops, I wouldn’t have believed you. But I would have wanted it to be true more than anything else.”

“Slow down, tiger,” Liza called from the master bedroom. “Just catching him on tape and turning the evidence over. No heroics.”

“Right,” he called back. Then he turned to Jean and hugged him. “Thanks, Jean,” he said. “This is amazing.”

Jean looked a little embarrassed, but pleased. “I’m glad you like it,” he said. “I hoped you would. Besides,” he said with a wink, “you looked so cute in that leather jacket of Liza’s, I had to see how you’d look in the full ensemble.”

“I love it,” Dave assured him.

“I look like a fucking biker,” Liza said from the bedroom door. Jean and Dave turned to look at her. She was fearsome - six feet of black leather and shoulder spikes.

“Yeah,” Dave said, “but you look like the scariest biker I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Jean swatted him. “Darling, you look like a ninja. Like a punk warrior. Try it with the mask.” He put her mask on and fastened it. “There. Now look.”

Liza turned to look at herself in the bedroom mirror. “Okay,” she said. “Not bad.”

“Not bad? Exquisite!” Jean insisted.

Liza nodded. “Sure. Now let’s get moving. Lot of work to do, not much time. You better fill that backpack. I need to figure out this microphone.”

Dave and Liza made it into position - a scrubby little tree and a couple of bushes near the top of the little hill behind Cox's house - just before sunset. They had parked Liza's car a couple of kilometres away, driving it down a rutted dirt road and parking under a big willow tree, and then hiked from there toting the cases full of expensive equipment. It wasn't easy. It seemed like every second bush was a gorse bush, and they formed an impenetrable barrier around most of the hill, forcing Dave and Liza to go round them. Eventually, they did find a way through, but they had to go half an hour out of their way to find it, and even so, they had to do quite a lot of bashing through gorse and undergrowth. Fortunately, it turned out that Jean's costumes formed a pretty good impenetrable barrier of their own, so they didn't get too badly scratched.

"If I ever wear this outfit again," Dave said, looking down at his muddy tennis shoes, "I'm going to have to get some boots to match it. These look ridiculous."

"That's your big concern?" Liza asked. "Worse than Jean. About to start a big op, and you're thinking about shoes."

"Hey, it's better than worrying about being caught, isn't it?" he replied. Liza shrugged, and he broke out the binoculars and peered down the hill at the house.

"How are we looking?" Liza asked.

"Pretty good, I think. I've got one guard down by the pool, and another one just inside. Couple of other people inside as well. I think they must be waiters or something. Bartenders, maybe - he's got a huge bar in that place. And there's the dining table. Perfect. Looks like we're in exactly the right spot."

"See Bruce anywhere?"

"I don't think so." Dave gave the house a slow scan. "No. He's not in sight. Guess he could be around the front of the house, though. Or he could have gone to the golf course or something. Speaking of which, anything from Jean?"

Liza glanced at her phone. "Nothing yet."

"Me neither. I wish they'd hurry up."

"Plenty of time. No point rushing it."

"I guess you're right."

Jean's text came in ten minutes later. "Leaving now. Two cars and a limo. Headed your way."

"They're on their way," Dave said to Liza. "Should we start filming?"

Liza rested a hand on his arm. "Settle down, tiger. Take them twenty-five minutes just to get here. Everything's ready - no point wasting batteries filming this."

Dave looked over at the camera rig. “Do you think we should test it again?”

“It’s fine. Smoke?” Liza pulled a crumpled pack out of a pocket on the sleeve of her costume, and lit one up.

Dave hesitated, really considering it, and then shook his head. “I doubt it’d help.”

“Up to you. Plenty here if you change your mind.”

“I’m going to text Jean.”

“Okay. Tell him to wait ten, then come up to the meeting point.”

Dave was squirming like a toddler by the time Cox’s motorcade arrived at the house. They could see the headlights come up the road and turn into the driveway, but then they were hidden by the house. “Can you get them with the mike?” he asked Liza.

She shook her head. “House’s in the way. Need a window. Just wait. Got to come back where we can see them soon enough.”

He jiggled his foot. “I hope you’re right. I can’t take much more of this.”

Liza put the headphones on and sat silently, listening to whatever was going on below. Dave picked up the binoculars and gave the house another sweep. There was another guard walking round the side of the house to join the guard who had been there all along. It looked like they were talking, but he couldn’t hear what they were saying, and he didn’t want to disturb Liza. The guards seemed very close, and as they looked out at the hill where Dave and Liza were hiding, he couldn’t help but feel that they could see him. Perhaps there were people creeping up behind them while they watched the house.

Stop it, he told himself. You’re just freaking yourself out, and you’ve got work to do. There’s nobody creeping up behind you. They almost certainly don’t even know you’re here. Look at them. Those guards are probably just for show.

Looking through the binoculars, Dave could see that the guards seemed pretty relaxed. One of them was leaning against the side of the house and smoking a cigarette. The other was facing the first guard, so all Dave could see was his back.

Liza nudged his arm. “Got em,” she said. “They’re in the dining room.”

Nothing happened for the next couple of hours. The guards wandered around the outside of Cox’s house, with Bruce and another man who seemed to be Liang’s personal guard keeping watch in the dining room. Cox and Liang dawdled their way through a pre-dinner martini, and then a four course dinner. Liza kept the microphone trained on them, but she and Dave took turns with the headphones. The conversation was frustratingly boring. The current business climate. The recession. Golf handicaps, even. Dave couldn’t believe it. His anxiety was completely gone, but he didn’t know what to do with the boredom and frustration that had replaced it.

They texted Jean every half hour, but they had nothing to report. He didn't have anything to report either, but at least he had a portable DVD player to keep him entertained. Listening to Liang and Cox was like listening to the world's most boring radio play. Dave was getting cold, and his foot was going to sleep.

"Need to put a heater in the next version of this outfit," he texted Jean.

"Price of looking fabulous," Jean texted back.

Dave put his phone away, and tried to find a more comfortable place to sit.

The dinner was drawing to a close. The dessert plates were being cleared, and Cox and Liang had pushed their chairs back and were chatting over coffee. Dave's hands were freezing, and he could see Liza suppressing a yawn.

Suddenly, her head came up, and she began fiddling with the controls to the camera.

"What is it?" he hissed. She waved him to silence. He looked through the binoculars, trying to figure out what was going on, but as far as he could tell, it was just more of the same after-dinner chitchat. Looking over at Liza, though, he could tell that it was something very interesting. He moved his head closer to hers, trying to hear something through the headphones. She looked over, and then pulled the headphones off and turned them so they could both hear.

"...considered my proposition?" Liang was saying.

"I have," Cox said.

"And can I assume that you would be interested?"

Cox nodded. "If you are interested in breaking into the New Zealand market, I would certainly be interested in a partnership. Provided that it was in my best interests, of course."

"Of course," Liang agreed.

"I'd be interested to know more about what you're planning," Cox said.

"So would I," Dave muttered. Liza glanced over at him, and then turned back to the camera screen.

"As you know, New Zealand company law provides several interesting opportunities for someone looking to move money around, you might say. I intend to create several companies in New Zealand for that purpose.

"And how much money would you be moving?" Cox asked.

"The sums would be quite significant," Liang said. "Initially, several million dollars, but I would expect that to rise substantially over the first three months."

Cox leaned back, and touched his fingertips together. "And you'd be looking for local help to -?"

"I would need some local parties to act as company directors. Strictly hands-off, you understand. Half a dozen people, to begin with."

"I believe that should be possible," Cox agreed.

“Excellent.”

“And in return,” Cox said, “I would appreciate your assistance with some of my supply lines. I believe you have contacts throughout Southeast Asia and the Middle East?”

“I do.”

“I have been having some... supply problems in Afghanistan.”

“Opium?” Liang inquired.

Cox waved a hand and nodded. Holy shit, Dave thought, and looked away from his binoculars long enough to check the recording light on the camera. “One of my suppliers was shot last month, and I’ve been unable to find a local replacement.”

“I think I can help you with that, Mr Cox” Liang said. “My suppliers can have the goods here within a week of payment.”

“I’d need to see samples and check the quality first, you understand.”

“Of course.” Liang turned, and spoke to his bodyguard in Mandarin. The guard bowed, and walked outside, pulling out a cellphone. “I will have a delivery for you by the end of the week.”

“How very efficient,” Cox said, offering Liang a worryingly toothy smile. “I’m sure that there are a number of other areas in which cooperation would be mutually beneficial.”

“That certainly seems to be the case.”

“For example, I believe you have extensive dealings in gemstones,” Cox said.

“I do.”

Cox looked over his shoulder at Bruce. “The leather case, in the study, please,” he said. Bruce nodded, and left the room. “Something very interesting came into my possession recently,” Cox continued. “I had planned to break it up for sale, but perhaps you could take it in recognition of our agreement. And as a down payment for the first month’s deliveries.”

“I’m intrigued,” Liang said.

Bruce returned with a thin leather folio, which he set on the table in front of Cox. Cox opened it, and turned it to face Liang. As he did, Dave saw something flash in the light. He adjusted the binoculars. It was the necklace. Diana Westlake’s necklace. “Fuck,” he muttered. He started to shiver, and realised that he was furious. He wanted to get up and scream, or hit someone.

“The Star of Mars,” he heard Liang say before he dropped his headphone.

He turned to Liza. “He can’t just go giving that necklace away to some crook like this. We’ve got to get it back.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” she demanded. “We’ve got everything we need right here! Let them make the exchange and we can get this tape to the cops.”

“I’m not letting him do it,” Dave said. “Sure, I took the necklace in the first place, but I’m not going to sit around and let him use it as some sort of bargaining chip in one of his deals.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Liza said, but he was already up and moving.

He ran towards the house, his eyes fixed on the dining room. The ground underneath him was uneven and rocky, and he hadn't gone more than fifty yard before he tripped and fell. He pushed himself back up to his knees, just in time for Liza to run into him. He fell again, but she managed to keep her balance and come to an awkward stop.

"Don't do it," she said again.

"I have to," he said. "I don't want those diamonds hanging over me forever. I want them turned in to the cops, and Cox along with them."

"Might not happen, you know. You might get us both killed," she hissed.

Dave shook his head. He wasn't angry anymore, but he felt like he was being picked up and carried along by something huge and inevitable. "I have to do this. You don't have to."

Liza looked behind him, towards the house. "Can't let you go alone," she said. "Anyway, they've heard us. Look!"

He looked. Sure enough, the guards who had been standing outside the house, bored to death, were moving towards them, looking alert. "Fuck," he said. "What now?"

"Gotta take them all out now," Liza said. "Then get the necklace and get out. Then back to the original plan."

"Okay," Dave said. There was no other option now. He knew that. The only thing to do was ride things out and hope for the best.

"Now get down," Liza said, pulling him down to the ground. She spoke directly into his ear as they both watched the guards approaching. "They can't see us. Wait till they're right on us. Then we take them down and run."

"Okay. What should we do?"

"Depends on what happens," she said. "We just do what we have to, and watch each other's backs."

He found her hand and squeezed it. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Let's do this."

The guards obviously didn't know where Dave and Liza were, and they were nearly on top of the place where they were lying when Liza said "Now!" and jumped to her feet. The first guard didn't have time to do much more than let out a startled shout before Liza took him to the ground. Dave was slower getting to his feet, but the second guard had turned to face Liza, and didn't see him at all. Dave tackled him from behind, knocking him down, and punched him in the back of the head. When that didn't seem to stop him, Dave punched him again, and then again. He was raising his hand for a fourth blow when Liza grabbed it.

"Enough," she said. "He's out. Now we need to get moving before the rest of them show up."

Dave looked towards the house. He could see a scramble of activity in the dining room. It looked like Cox and Liang were leaving, and there were more guards coming into the room. "Okay, let's go," he said. They got back up, and started moving towards the house, not quite running this time, but hurrying as much as they could.

"We need to go round the front," Liza said. "Stay out of the light."

They angled towards the side of the house, away from the pool and the terrace. Dave could see two more guards coming round the corner, just moving into the darkness from the light. He moved towards them, but Liza was faster, taking them both out with what seemed like superhuman speed. He had a better view of what happened this time, and he was still standing there goggling when Liza got back up.

"Come on. Four more, at least," she said.

They came to the corner of the house, and looked out. The two black cars and the limousine were parked in a pool of light. A guard was running out of the house towards the limousine. Liza pushed Dave out towards him. "Get him," she said. "I'll go in round the back."

Dave ran towards the man, his feet crunching on the gravel. He went faster than he thought he could, but he was still fifteen feet away from the man before he was spotted. Too far to jump, too far to roll. He could see the man's hand going to his belt. Gun, Dave thought. He was sure of it, but his hand was already working the pump action mechanism on the arm of his suit. He lifted his hand, and sprayed a jet of tea towards the man, heating it up to boiling point. The man screamed, dropping the gun and falling to his knees. Dave kicked him in the face, and he fell over backwards.

The gun. Dave picked it up, and threw it away as far as he could. He'd never fired a gun, and now probably wasn't a good time to start. The guard he had just hit was still on the ground, clutching at his face. Probably not getting up any time soon, Dave thought, turning towards the front door.

He could see another guard running up the hallway, and he dodged to one side and made a dive towards the front door. This guard already had his gun out and ready. Dave heard a colossal bang, and a small part of his brain realised that the guard had just shot at him. The rest of his brain wasn't even thinking, just rolling up into a crouch with a smoothness that astonished him, taking aim, and letting go with another blast of steam.

Not close enough to get the guard, but close enough to surprise him and make him hesitate. Dave saw the opportunity, and went straight for the other man, charging at him as he fired another jet of steam. This one was close enough, and the guard fired a wild shot into the air as the steam hit him. Dave hit him a second later, driving him into the ground and hitting him in the face, just as he had before.

How many was that? Six. Six, plus however many more Liza had got. From the sounds coming down the hallway, it sounded like there was at least one left, though. He could hear Liza shouting something. It didn't sound good. Getting back to his feet, he ran down the hallway and into the dining room.

Bruce stopped him in the doorway, a gun pointed directly at his chest. Dave skidded to a halt and nearly ran into him. He could see Liza over Bruce's shoulder, fighting with Liang's bodyguard. He couldn't tell who was winning.

"Down on the ground!" Bruce said, his finger tight on the trigger. Dave put up his arms, and got down to his knees, and then lay on the ground on his face. He felt Bruce's foot pressing down on his back. "Now who the fuck are you, and who sent you here?" Bruce demanded.

"Nobody sent me," Dave mumbled into the carpet.

“Bullshit. This isn’t the kind of op that you make up on the spot. Tell me who you are, and who you’re working for.” Dave couldn’t believe that Bruce didn’t recognise him, but then he realised he was wearing a mask, and besides, he’d had a substantial makeover since the last time they’d met.

“What, you don’t know who I am? I thought you were the head of security around here.” Dave said. He knew that making Bruce angry was probably a bad move, but the alternative was lying here on the floor and being shot, and it was no worse than that.

“You’re in no position to get smart with me,” Bruce said, obviously controlling his voice with some difficulty. “Tell me who sent you, and what you were told to do.”

“You’ve got no idea, have you?” Dave said scornfully.

“So why don’t you fucking tell me?” Bruce rolled Dave over roughly. His knuckles were white where they gripped his gun, and the pink sheen of his burns was lost as his face turned red. Dave’s eyes were fixed on the gun. Got to make him too angry to shoot, he thought. That’s the only way I’m getting out of this.

“You can’t figure it out for yourself? Not very smart, are you?”

Bruce dropped his weight down on Dave suddenly, sending a rush of air out of his lungs. He reached a hand out, ripped Dave’s mask off and stared into his face. Dave could see recognition and confusion warring on Bruce’s face.

“What the fuck?” Bruce said.

Dave did the first thing that came to mind - he lifted his head up and spat at Bruce. It hit him right in the cheek, and started to trickle down towards his jaw. Bruce lifted his gun hand, obviously intending to hit Dave with the gun, and as the blow came towards him Dave bucked his hips, sending Bruce falling forward. Dave wriggled his torso to one side and tried to push himself free. It was a struggle. Bruce weighed a lot more than he did, and he was clearly a better fighter. He recovered almost instantly, grabbing Dave’s arm, and wrenching the nozzle of his sprayer free. Tea spurted out, and Dave heated it up. The steam jetted towards Bruce, and he fell back, covering his face with his hands. Dave could see that Bruce had finally figured out who he was. He lunged forward with all his strength, and knocked Bruce back, snapping his head against the wall. Bruce went limp, and Dave scrambled to his feet.

Liza was still going at it with Liang’s bodyguard, but apart from that, the room was empty. Cox and Liang were nowhere to be seen. Outside, he heard a car revving. “Fuck!” he shouted, turning around. He heard a meaty thump behind him, and in a second, Liza was beside him, running down the hallway. They reached the front door as the limo pulled out.

“We’ve lost them,” he said.

“Bullshit,” replied Liza. She ran towards one of the black cars, wrenched the door open, and started the engine. “Get in!” she shouted. “And get Jean on the phone!”

Dave jumped into the car, and Liza skidded down the driveway. He dialled Jean’s number and put the phone on speaker.

“Darlings!” Jean said. “How goes the surveillance?”

“Jean, get your car into gear, and block the road with it. Cox and Liang are coming your way. Block the road, then get the fuck out of your car before they ram it.” Liza shouted

“Are you serious?”

“Hurry. You’ve got a minute at the most. We’re headed your way.”

Dave heard the sound of Jean's car starting and the crunch of gravel as he pulled it into the road. Then nothing. Liza's eyes were fixed on the road as she tried to catch up to Cox and Liang. Dave could see the headlights ahead of them, but he had no idea how far they were from Jean's car. He hoped that Liza's plan would work. He hoped that Jean got away from his car in time.

Ahead of him, he heard an enormous bang, and he saw the headlights of the limo shudder and jolt. Liza slammed on the brakes and pulled the car into a screeching skid, stopping just short of the limo. They got out of the car and ran up to the limo. Cox and Liang were inside, looking dazed and barely conscious. Liza whipped out the camera from somewhere and started filming.

"There are the diamonds. On the seat. Grab them," she said. Dave reached into the car and grabbed the necklace. Liza played the camera over the car one more time, then turned it off.

"Jean!" Dave shouted. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," he heard a reply from somewhere off to the side of the road. "But I don't think my insurance is going to cover this." Jean walked onto the road and glared at Cox. "I hope you're insured, prick," he said.

"Let's go," Liza said, heading back to the car. "Better call the cops now and hand this stuff over."

"Probably a couple of ambulances, too," Dave agreed.

"Good idea." Liza looked at him. "Good work in there, tiger. Bad idea, but good work."

He reached over and hugged her. "Thanks, Liza. I couldn't have done it without you. And you too, Jean," he said, pulling Jean into the hug.

"We're a good team," Liza agreed. "Now let's get out of here."

Dave's cellphone rang as he was leaving the police station. "Hello?"

"David! Thank heavens we've reached you. Your father saw you on the news and we've been worried out of our minds. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Really. I didn't want to call you until everything was sorted out here, but I'm fine."

"Are you sure? Your father said that the police were looking for you about an assault. I find that incredibly hard to believe, but he showed me the story, and there you were. What on earth is going on?"

Dave found a convenient bench by the side of the road and sat down. "It's pretty complicated, Mom, but basically it was all a big misunderstanding. I've talked to the police - I've actually just finished talking to them a couple of minutes ago - and we've cleared everything up."

"But how did it happen in the first place? I can't understand how they could believe that you would assault someone."

"Actually, Mom, that part did happen." There was silence on the line. Dave could almost hear his mother's shock, and he hurried on. "Not like you think, and almost certainly not the way it was reported."

"This Mr Cox from the news is the same man who was demanding money from you, isn't he?"

“Yeah, but that’s been cleared up as well. He’s under arrest at the moment, and there’s a pretty long list of charges. I don’t really want to talk about that, though. It’ll probably be on the net pretty soon.”

“What happened? Did you get Belinda to talk to him?”

“No, I took care of it myself. Not by myself, though. I had some friends who helped me.”

“I’m glad to hear that, dear. I couldn’t believe the way everyone dropped you after the trial. It thought it was disgusting.”

“These are new friends, Mom. You’ll probably need them next time you come out to visit. I think you’ll like them.” Dave heard a shout, and looked over at the police station. Liza and Jean had just stepped outside, and were looking over at them. He gave them a wave, and pointed to his phone.

“So you’ve decided to stay in New Zealand? That’s a shame. I was looking forward to having you home again.”

“I know, and I miss you guys too, but I think I’m going to stay here for a while, and see how things work out.”

“If you’re sure, dear.”

“I’m sure, Mom. I think that everything’s going to be fine. I’ll call you in a week or so, once things settle down and I know what I’m going to do next.”

“All right. I love you, David.”

“Love you too, Mom. Bye.”

“Goodbye, dear.”

Dave hung up the phone and stood up. Jean and Liza had nearly reached him. “Are you guys okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” Liza said. “You?”

“Yeah, I’m fine too. Took a while, but I think they believe me about what happened. That police psychiatrist wants to see me again, but I did the thing for him, and he definitely believes I’m not crazy now. I think he might think that he’s losing it, though.”

Jean laughed. “It will probably do him some good.”

“Maybe,” Dave agreed. “Anyway, what now? Do you guys want to head back to Wellington? I guess I should start looking for jobs and stuff, decide what I’m going to do next.”

“A drink,” Liza suggested. “Maybe a couple.”

“Excellent suggestion,” Jean agreed. “Let’s go home.”

“That sounds good to me.” Dave said.

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About the author

Edward Winslow lives in Wellington, New Zealand, where he splits his time between work, writing and karate (and, you know, wasting time on the internet and stuff). *Trouble Brewing* is his second book.