



The Defective Detective : Cat Chaser

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For Eve

Prologue

There was another horrendous thud against the door of the store-room we were hiding in. Erin screamed as the force of it threw her down to the ground. I scrambled forward to take her place, barricading us in.

"I told you, you stupid, stupid, man!" she screamed, picking herself up and leaning against one of the metal shelving units that sliced the room into three tight rows.

I tried to glare at her but another thump against the door destroyed my composure. She stared back, her eyes wide, mascara beginning to fracture and invade the bags under her eyes.

I pushed back against the door, my feet unable to find purchase and tried without success to get my mobile out of my trouser pocket.

"Jacob," I said. "Can you reach into my trouser pocket?"

Lori giggled instinctively, her hand going up to cover her mouth but she winced in pain as her arm moved.

"You what?" said Jacob.

"My phone, it's... Never mind, come here and brace the door."

Jacob nodded and did as he was instructed. I shifted myself and grabbed my phone. Still no signal.

"It won't work," said Erin. "I keep telling you. You can't get a signal anywhere in this place, can you Lori?"

Lori shook her head.

"Well is there another way out of here?" I asked no one in particular. The wall shook from the force of another attack but the sound of splintering plaster on the other side seemed to be coming from a little further down the corridor this time.

"Erm, well," Jacob began. "I think..."

"Oh shut up, Jacob for all our sakes," Erin snapped before turning and pointing one of her hyper-manicured talons at me. "And anyway, it's no use putting you in charge. You'll just fall asleep again."

She tilted her head slightly to one side and pouted.

"Now hang on a minute," said Jacob but I held up the palm of my hand to stop him.

Erin had a point, maybe she'd spotted that I was starting to go maybe she hadn't. I could feel my lids weighing me down and I'd nearly succumbed to sleep twice but somehow I would keep it together. And the first step towards that was very, very simple.

"Can you please shut your cake-hole you bitter harpy," I made sure each

word was spoken carefully, softly and slowly.

Her bottom lip dropped, leaving her mouth hanging open. I got the feeling she didn't encounter many people with spines.

"Right then, we really need to get out of here before..." I pointed and, right on cue the wall shook, the impact of the attack knocking over one of the shelving units and scattering bleach bottles and sponges everywhere. "Before *that* gets in."

My head fell forward but I fought back the sleep again.

"Lori," I continued, dropping down onto my haunches next to her.

"How are you doing?"

"I... er... well," she said, her hand cradling her shoulder. "Scared. And I think I might need to go to the loo."

"You," I said pointing at Erin who had resorted to scowling at me. "Can you look after Lori, please?"

To her credit Erin didn't hesitate, her face snapping out of the scowl and into concern. An empty shell of a woman she may be but she knew how to put on a maternal act even if she couldn't feel the emotions.

"Okay, Jacob," I turned around and smiled. "You get the best job, my friend."

"The best job to the man who shares an office with the cleaner?" Erin muttered through her smile. "And where's that lazy caretaker anyway? Hiding as usual I'll wager."

I turned to Erin and raised an eyebrow. She turned back to Lori.

"The best job?" said Jacob. "Brilliant. What do you need me to do Mr. Barnum?"

"Please stop calling me Mr. Barnum," the urge was becoming too much now, I knew any moment I was going to have to give in to it.

"Sorry," he smiled. "I suppose we're past formalities now, eh?"

I nodded. "First I need you to barricade the door with one of those metal shelves. And then I want you to see if you can kick a hole through that partition wall. We should be able to get out I reckon."

"You know, I reckon you're right."

"Oh and do me a favour?" there was another thunderous bang against the door.

"Yeah?"

"Catch

~*~

Chapter 1

Actually, hang on a minute, I'm getting ahead of myself here aren't I? Sorry. That happens sometimes. I suppose that seemed to be the most important bit. In the storeroom but in actual fact it probably isn't going to make a great deal of sense until I tell you about what happened before.

Sorry. It's just that I think you need to understand how these things come together. I didn't just wake up in a storeroom full of people like that. Stuff happened first. I should tell you about it, I think.

Well, it was my first day, my first proper case. Mr Forsyth, the head of the agency, had called me to his office to brief me personally. Apparently that never usually happens so as you can imagine I was absolutely crapping myself. And that just exacerbates the narcolepsy.

I mean, I knew that he knew about it but I didn't want it to screw up the chances of me keeping this job. Not on the first day. Not in the first briefing.

Fortunately for me Forsyth was a talker. He loved the sound of his own voice and didn't pay a great deal of attention to anything else that was going on around him. There was, of course, another side to this. I wasn't entirely convinced that he hadn't simply employed me as a comic aside. In which case he was just waiting for me to fall asleep.

And, again, that just made it worse.

"So," Forsyth had been in monologue mode for a minute or so but he seemed to be coming to a point of sorts. "Your first case, my boy."

"Yes?" I said. I couldn't help feeling a bit of excitement underneath everything else. I mean, I was going to get to be a private detective. "I'm really looking forward to it."

He laughed and patted me on the shoulder then turned to face a painting of someone fat and monocled on the wall behind him.

"You will begin by

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gone missing. This is your number one priority. Lava Corp are absolutely rabid to get their property back as you can imagine."

My head snapped upright and I inhaled sharply.

"Are you getting all of this?" said Forsyth, turning to face me once more.

"Er," I said. "So far so good. Number one priority."

"Yes. Indeed. We're going to lock the shutters of the shop. That way there'll be no escape for your prize."

"My prize?"

"*The* prize. Fancy a brandy?"

"Er, no. Thank you but no, I'd better not," I said, the wave coming back. I had to get the prize. What prize? Oh shit.

"Probably for the best. Don't want you drunk as well as falling asleep on the job do we?" he turned to a small table on the other side of the office. "So, where was I? Oh yes. Vince from Lava Corp was fairly convinced he knows whoever has stolen their property personally."

"Yes?"

"Well, stands to reason doesn't it?" Forsyth snapped. "Don't interrupt again."

"Right."

"Okay. Taxidermy

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quite the tricky character this Ms Pingoveno. Never trust a woman who calls herself Ms, eh Clint my boy?"

I opened my eyes as wide as I could, trying to pin them to my skull. Forsyth turned around. He scowled at me and waved his brandy.

"Have some balls man, don't look so scared," he said.

I snapped my face back into what I would have described as a normal expression. "Not scared, sir, I just had cramp or something in my cheek."

I repeated the facial tick, widening my eyes as far as I could, then squinting, widening and squinting. He took a slug of his brandy and raised an eyebrow.

"Hmm, right. So you got a handle on this then have you?"

"Yes," I lied.

"Good stuff. Knew you would. Should be easy enough. The people we suspect of helping out Ms Pingoveno will all be in there. Plus a couple of others no doubt but you'll know who they are once you find out their names, won't you?" he laughed. I laughed.

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sleeping on the job?" Forsyth gave my chair a kick and I jerked back into consciousness.

"No sir, I wouldn't," years of coping mechanisms springing into action. Forsyth grinned. "Pulling my leg were you? Haha! Jolly good. Like it."

I nodded.

"Any questions?" he said.

"One or two," this was my chance to try to make sense of this mess. "Taxidermy?"

"Racket. Yes. She's running it, we can practically prove it."

"Here? In Kilchester?"

"Yes I know, I thought that was a bit odd too but apparently they piece them together and send them to the Far East. Like a Baboon with a poodle's head, that sort of thing."

"Right," I said. "And people collect that sort of thing do they?"

"Apparently so. Takes all sorts, eh? Okay, enough chit chat," Forsyth rose to his feet and picked up a file that had been lying on his desk. A case file. *This* case file. "There's someone I want you to meet."

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Chapter 2

“Of course,” said Forsyth as we walked down a long corridor, light streaming in from a spectacular atrium high above us. “Detection isn’t all we do.”

The whole thing was slightly overwhelming. I mean, you know when you get a new job and you have that feeling like one day soon they’re going to realise that you don’t actually know what you’re doing and sack you? Well, imagine that only instead of it being just a feeling it is, in fact, a very real and tangible possibility.

“In fact,” he continued. “We have three divisions in total.”

I think the problem is twofold.

“Detection. Separation. And assignation.”

Firstly that I hadn’t managed to keep a real life job. Ever.

Forsyth laughed. I wasn’t sure why. But I laughed as well.

And secondly because this wasn’t a job I was convinced I had the chops for.

“Right my boy,” said Forsyth gesturing to an imposing looking door with a brass plaque attached. On the plaque was just one letter. It had a ‘Z’ on it. “In here.”

I pushed open the door and walked into a vast room filled with desks. Under each desk was a computer, on top of each desk was a bank of six monitors and sat at each desk was a woman who was firmly out of my league.

“Clint. I’d like you to meet the Z-Girls,” Forsyth laughed his laugh again and leaned in close to me, close enough for me to smell the brandy and cigars on his breath. “I don’t just employ them for their brains.”

“Mr Forsyth,” said a voice and I turned around to see the one woman who was the most out of my league of all walking towards us.

“Agatha. This is-”

“Mr Clint Barnum. Yes. I know.”

“The defective detective! Of course you do,” he said, handed the case file to her and began to move towards the door. “I’ll leave him in your capable hands then. Oh, good luck Clint. I know you’ll do well. And if

you don't, you're sacked."

And with that he slammed the door of the office.

"Z-Girls?" I said.

"The defective detective?" she replied.

"Yeah, he just started calling me that," I said, glancing down at my shoes.

"We call him the A-Hole," she smiled and for the first time since arriving at the Agency's offices I laughed without having to force myself.

"Do you think he means it?" I said.

"What?" said Agatha, flipping open the file she'd been given and glancing inside.

"Well, about being sacked if I don't... you know."

She began walking so I began following.

"Oh, he means it," she went on. "Can't tell you the number of people who've had one case only, failed and then... "

"Ah. Right."

"But don't worry."

"No?"

"No," she said as we reached a larger desk with two chairs. She gestured for me to sit in one. "They've tended to be employees recommended by someone else. He doesn't employ anyone personally who fails. He has quite the eye for it. You're the first in... "

"Shit, so no pressure then?" I said.

Agatha looked up from the file in front of her and flashed me her bright blue eyes then followed with a smile. I looked down at the case file. If I could just get a look inside I could find out what I was supposed to be doing. Of course I couldn't let this beautiful, intelligent woman know that I'd totally failed to pick up on what Forsyth had told me. That would be insanity. She may be out of my league but you always have your pride, don't you?

"So what do you do in here exactly," I said and waved my hand in the opposite direction of the file.

Right on cue Agatha looked the other way and I craned across to read upside down. All I managed to see was the address of a department store in the centre of Kilchester. Agatha turned back around to see me leaning over the desk towards her, her eyebrows raised for a second, trying to work out what I was doing but she continued unperturbed.

"We are the brains of this organisation," she said then leaning in even closer to me and lowering her voice to a husky whisper she added. "As well as the looks."

I didn't feel it happening but with the sacking business and not knowing what I was supposed to be investigating it didn't take much to push me over the edge. She picked up her glasses from the desk and put the arm between her teeth, her dark, brown hair fell forward a little and

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shit, shit, shit, shit, SHIT!"

I was still in the same chair, still in the same office but now instead of one Z-Girl in front of me I had... Well, I don't know. Lots.

"I am so, soooo sorry," said Agatha, now standing slightly behind and to my right. "I was just joking. I mean, I knew you were... And I thought that... but I didn't think you would just drop like that. Oh shit, are you alright?"

"I think you've broken him," said one of the gathered spectators.

I smiled. "No, honestly, I'm fine. Happens all the time"

"And what about the bleeding?" said Agatha. "Does that happen all the time?"

I nodded.

"More than I'd like," I said.

"Miss Zimmerman?" said another voice.

"Err," said Agatha. "Get back to work, all of you. Give him some, erm, space."

With a disappointed grumbling the assembled women began to disperse to their respective desks. I took the bunched tissues from Agatha's hand and dabbed at the cut on my forehead. Scanning the desk I located the source of the injury. The culprit was a small ornament of a cat curled and asleep with its ears pricked upright. Looking at the blood spots on the tissue, they appeared to be the same distance apart.

"I think I'll live," I smiled. Agatha smiled nervously back and sat down. "You were saying that you were the brains?"

"I'm sorry," she said a little too loudly then moved the files on her desk slightly, lining them up. "You provide questions, we provide answers. You find a spot of blood, we find out who it belongs to. You find a glass next to a dead body, we find the poison from it. You need access to information, we investigate and inform."

"Catchy little tag line," I said.

"Not really. Oh, I see. And today we are going to get you into Crowther's Department Store."

"Which is where I'm going."

"Yes, all you need to do is swipe this card," she slid a pass card wrapped in a piece of paper across the desk. "And then type the number

that's written on the paper and you'll be in. Then we'll lock the place down. If you need to get in touch for anything here's my card with my numbers."

She slid her card across the desk and as I reached out to take it our fingers touched.

"I really am very sorry," she said.

"Don't worry," I said. "Happens to me all the time. So what exactly am I supposed to do when I get there?"

Agatha laughed in relief. "Very funny. Now, go."

~*~

Chapter 3

The sun hadn't been set long and I could feel the chill of the autumn evening slowly crawling under my coat. I was thankful to see the pedestrian traffic was starting to thin out in the area because it gave me a fighting chance of not being spotted entering the building. As I rounded the corner its Art Deco façade, although blackened with pollution and age, was still an impressive sight. Crowther's Department Store was an institution in Kilchester, with staff and customers spanning four generations. It was the sort of anachronism of a place that no-one could quite understand how it remained open. And yet no-one could ever imagine it would ever close down.

I walked past the garish window displays touting the latest in gaudy couture and glanced around before trying to slip subtly down the alley that led to the back entrance of the store. Unlike the gorgeous architecture which characterised the front of the building the back was a horrendous carbuncle that appeared to have been shit out and stuck on in the sixties. At least it was quiet down here, the only company being some birds scavenging the bins.

The building itself took up three sides of what you might loosely call a courtyard. To my left the building was dotted with tiny windows which were so small I couldn't imagine they let in any light at all. To my right the building's only feature was a rusted fire escape that zig zagged from the roof down to street level and straight ahead the only points of note were a closed roller shutter door that would presumably let in delivery vehicles and a smaller, windowless, metal door.

Since it was the only person-sized door I thought it reasonable to assume it was the staff entrance. I walked closer and saw that it was replete with card-swipe and keypad. Wonderful. The plan was going smoothly. My hand went to my jacket pocket, fingers running along the edge of the card Agatha had given me. This was it, the beginning of... well, I didn't know actually. But it was definitely the beginning of something.

I gritted my teeth, took out the card and swiped it. There was a beep and an orange light. I didn't bother bringing the piece of paper with the accompanying number, having decided to live life on the edge instead.

I pushed '1'. The keypad beeped. That was a good start. No alarms, no security, no dogs.

I pushed '2'. Another beep. Thinking I could hear footsteps I looked around the courtyard again but no-one was there.

I pushed '3'. Beep. There really was no going back now.

I pushed '4'. Beep. I wondered why she had bothered to write the number down in retrospect. Not exactly a difficult one to remember.

The orange light flicked green then turned red and sounded an electronic raspberry. I exhaled and my breath hung in the air around me. Were they definitely the instructions? Agatha had said to swipe the card then type the number. Or was it type the number then swipe the card? I reached up and touched the tiny wound she'd inflicted on my forehead.

My eyes flicked around the courtyard and once more there was no-one watching. This time, however, I was sure I could make out a security camera on the wall high above me. Which was it? Swipe then type? Or type then swipe? No, I was definitely right the first time, I swiped the card and this time instead of the orange light a green one flashed happily. This was good.

Wasn't it?

I typed 1, 2, 3 and then hesitated. It wasn't beeping this time. There was a cancel button. Maybe I should press it. I pressed '4' and waited for the click of the door opening.

The machine waited, flashed the green light at me some more and then abruptly changed red and blew another raspberry.

Right, this time I would reverse it. Type then swipe. It had to work. Unless I had the number wrong. What if I had been too hasty, what if it was 2134 or even 4321? No. Have confidence. This time it will work.

I glanced up at what I imagined to be the security camera and pressed '1'.

The door in front of me made a satisfying clunk noise and opened wide.

Inside stood a security guard.

"What the bloody hell do you

~*~

My eyes woke up first. Before my body. It happened sometimes.

I wasn't in a police car, so that was something at least. I inhaled and there was a smell like musty furniture crossed with industrial cleaning

agents. It was unmistakably the smell of Crowther's Department Store although the area I was staring at wasn't one I'd ever seen before, the smell here having a lower concentration of mustiness to it.

I seemed to be in some sort of chair at a shabby old wooden desk. Whoever had brought me here, presumably the security guard, had laid my head on the desk but my arms hung awkwardly under the desk. I could see papers, out of focus and too close to read, then a baked bean tin being used as a pen holder. On the wall in front of me was a calendar, one of those cheap and nasty ones that was just one picture with a tiny grid of numbers stuck to the bottom.

The picture was a montage, cheesily done by some amateur designer with lions, tigers and other big cats all staring down presumably aghast at the fact that, in their world at least, it was still May.

Some movement began to trickle back into me and I managed to tilt my head a fraction of an inch to see another anachronism. A dusty frame with an 'Employee of the Month' certificate inside. The date on the certificate was from five years ago and from another company whose name the dust obscured. Something beginning with 'Lav'.

"I know you're awake," said a voice. "I can see your eyes are open."

"Mmmmmph," I said, the narcolepsy had started to subside, begrudgingly giving me back control of myself.

"What the devil were you doing at the back door?" he said. He wasn't angry, he sounded worried if anything.

I sat bolt upright, my subconscious handing back control and then panicked for a moment when, inexplicably, it had refused to allow me to move either of my arms. A brief internal check revealed that lying on a desk with your arms hanging beneath you is likely to cut off the blood supply. Not the end of the world. I smiled at him.

"Usually the first thing people ask is why I fall asleep like that," I said. "Very tactful of you not to mention it."

"My pleasure, that is, what... erm," he was sitting at the other side of the room at another, smaller desk next to the door. He was a big man, in his early fifties but I would have bet that what filled his uniform was mostly muscle and not fat.

"Name's Clint Barnum, I would shake your hand but both my arms went to sleep and now the blood's returned I'm starting to get a chronic case of pins and needles."

"Jacob. I'm the security guard."

"Yes, I guessed that," I said. "The uniform's a dead giveaway. You often pick strange men out of the gutter and take them to... is this your office?"

"Yes. Well, sort of."

"And you're in charge around here are you?"

"Yes. What are you d--"

"Excellent. Great. Good man," the pins and needles tingling in my arms had turned into a painful searing, creeping feeling under my flesh. I let out a scream partly because it really hurt but mostly to keep the guard off-guard, if you'll pardon the pun.

"So what are you doing here?" he said, standing up and moving between me and the room's exit. Clearly his concern was only going to stretch so far.

"Good question. And one I intend to address, don't you worry about that. I walked over to the framed certificate and wiped the dust off it.

"Is this yours?"

"No," he said. "Now wait a--"

"Jacob, I'm a private investigator and I am here on a very important case," it was the first time I'd gotten to say that and it felt really good. He immediately sat back down in his seat. I decided to counterpoint his downward motion with some upward movement of my own and stood up. "Do you know of a Ms Pingoveno?"

"No," he replied.

"Heard of her, worked for her, any mention by anyone you've ever met?"

"No, I swear, sir," he said.

"And how about Vince?"

"Ah, now there I can help you. There are two, no, three gentlemen by that name working here. One of them lives down the street from me. I get the bus in with him when we're on the same shifts."

"They work here?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. "Lava Corp?"

Jacob shook his head.

I tried to look thoughtful by scratching my chin then turned around to survey the rest of the office. It was a cramped affair, the other walls I hadn't been able to see housing newspaper clippings mostly of football teams I didn't recognise and a small square board with hooks, the majority of which had keys hanging from them. There was a single, shared

telephone, two desks and that was it. We weren't going to make any more progress here.

"Right, Jacob," I said, finally shaking his hand as the pins and needles subsided. "I need an assistant this evening. Do you think you are up to the task?"

"Yes, sir!" he said, practically saluting as he did so.

"What do you know of taxidermy, Jacob?"

"Not much, sir, but I think you'll be wanting to speak to Miss Erin on that subject."

"Do you now?" I said.

"Yes sir, if I was you I would ask her about Lucky. Her cat."

"Would you now?" I said. At last, I was making some progress.

"Well, then lead the way."

"Right you are sir."

And off we went.

~*~

Chapter 4

It's strange, I suppose, walking through the unfamiliar insides of a building as everyday as this one. The stark concrete floors painted the same dull grey as the walls, the once large areas now partitioned into room after storeroom, cupboard after cupboard and office after office.

We walked in silence except for when Jacob would occasionally let out a warbling birdsong whistle. The place was a maze and we turned corner after corner until we reached a corridor which was shrouded in darkness.

Jacob held up his hand and put his index finger over his lips.

I stared into the darkness but at night and with no windows the corridor gave nothing away. And then the noise started.

A knock that echoed out, surrounding us then a soft, dragged hiss.

Knock. Hiss.

Knock-hiss.

Knock-hissssssss.

"Jesus, Ray, is that you?" barked Jacob into the murk.

"Course it's bloody me," a voice came back out of the darkness shortly followed by a face and then a whole body. "Who the hell else would it be at this time of night?"

Ray looked like an alcoholic Santa in the off-season. His skin was pale from the lack of sun, he'd shaved his beard, but a course, white stubble hung from his chin. The big tummy was there but it seemed a lot less jolly than the Santa we all knew and loved.

"Well, there's just been, you know," said Jacob. "What the hell was that noise?"

Ray pointed down towards the ground and it became immediately apparent. The hiss had been his left foot, the tartan slipper he wore on it dragged along the ground whilst his right leg, a wooden pirate-prosthesis tapped its peggy way alongside.

Jacob looked confused.

Ray kept walking, raising his eyebrows in acknowledgement of me then walking on past.

"I smashed the foot on my proper leg this morning so I'm stuck with the peg 'til it's fixed."

"How did it, you know," I said, pointing to his prosthesis. "How did you lose it originally?"

"Lion chewed it off on safari," he stared at me, frowning.

"Really?" I said, completely unable to hide the awe in my voice.

"Course not you bloody idiot, it was an industrial accident."

And with a *knock* and a *hiss* Ray scraped off on his way.

"You had to ask?" Jacob whispered to me then waved us on to a pair of double doors which we opened together and led us onto the real shop floor.

"Need to talk to you if you don't mind, Miss Erin."

Erin was a formidable woman, somehow seeming to tower over Jacob in spite of the fact she couldn't have been more than five foot three. She was the epitome of a makeup counter girl with her orange face, lashes like Amazonian spiders and what appeared to be perfectly manicured two-inch talons on the ends of her fingers.

"Talk?" Erin spat the words at Jacob, accompanying them with some actual spit for good measure.

"This is Mr Barnum, he's a Private Investigator."

"Please," I said. "Call me Clint."

"I will not speak to this, this..." she turned the corners of her mouth down causing her garish red lipstick to crack. "... this dick. I will not speak to him under any circumstance."

"What can you tell me about woman named Pingoveno?" I said and moved a little closer to Erin. I was hit by a wall of perfume and suppressed a cough. "And what can you tell me about Lucky?"

Erin stopped talking and stared at me, her left eyelid twitched, sending shudders through her spiderous eyelashes. I stared at her, waiting for something more. Right now this was all I had; one woman's name, a vague idea of something that had to be retrieved and a taxidermy racket.

Jacob coughed apologetically and reached into his pocket, taking out a clean, white handkerchief and passing it to Erin who took it and appeared to shatter on contact, reduced to a crying, howling mess in Jacob's arms. I couldn't go on like this.

Fishing my phone out of my pocket I dialled Agatha. It rang twice then she picked up.

"Clint," she said. "H-w i - - go-ng up there?"

"Agatha?" I said. "Can you hear me?"

There was silence on the line, I took the phone away from my ear. The call was over. No damn signal.

"Can't get a signal in here," said Jacob. "Walls too thick."

Right, so this blubbering mess was all I had to work with then. Okay, on with the show.

"Erin is it?" I said. "Can you please stop crying and talk to me? What are you upset about?"

"It's..." she managed before breaking down again. Jacob mopped her eyes and her mascara began to trickle into the wrinkles she had so valiantly tried to conceal. "I know about the taxidermy if that's what you're asking."

Bloody hell, that was easy, I was getting good at this detective lark.

"Yes," I said and put my hand on her shoulder taking the handkerchief from Jacob and dabbing her eyes, the handkerchief now looking like some sort of panda-Jesus' Turin shroud. "That's exactly what I was asking about. And what about Lucky?"

I was onto something here.

"He was," she took a deep breath, took the handkerchief from me and blew her nose. She tried to hand it back but I shook my head and smiled. "But he's... he's gone."

"Gone?" I said. My mobile started to ring in my pocket. "What do you mean 'gone'?"

I took the mobile out. Agatha's name was displayed on the screen.

"My little ginger puss. Dead. Stuffed," she began wailing again.

The phone kept ringing.

"Shh. Please, can you just hang on for one second?"

I answered the phone.

"Clint? Can you hear me?" said Agatha.

"Yes, listen, quick while I've got a signal. Am I looking for a cat?"

"Clint, Forsyth has been down looking for an update. It's imperative you retrieve the animal alive or -"

"Forsyth? Shit. Really? Agatha?" I tried walking away from Erin and Jacob, quickly jogging towards the windows. "Are you still there? Am I looking for a bloody cat?"

"C-t - anything you need?"

"Yes, Agatha. Can you please just tell me if I'm looking for a ginger cat?"

"Y- than we thought - black - orange - cat. Clint?"

"You're breaking up," I said, stabbed the disconnect key and hung up on her.

“Stop your bloody snivelling woman!” I shouted from across the floor and began striding towards them. “Are you telling me that you had a black and orange cat?”

She nodded.

“And am I to understand that he has popped his clogs?”

She nodded again.

“Shit!” I screamed. “A dead lost cat. Who the shitting hell sends a private investigator to find a lost cat? Especially a bloody dead one. Is that what I’m worth? A dead cat! A lost bastard dead bastard cat.”

“Sir?” said Jacob.

“Bring him back in one piece, Clint,” I shouted. “Oh and if you don’t you’re sacked, Clint. Arrrrrrrrgh!”

I spun around to shout at the two of them again and

~*~

Chapter 5

I woke to what was becoming a much more familiar sight; the wall with the Employee of the Month certificate on it and the still disconcerting knock-hissnoise coming up behind me. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and turned around to see Ray the caretaker looming with a mug in his hands.

"Hope you like your coffee black," he said, putting the cup on the desk in front of me. "Milk was off."

"Thanks, black's fine. You carry me back here?" I asked.

"Jacob. Then Erin started bossing him around so he asked me to keep an eye on you. What happened, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Got angry. Fell asleep," I lifted the cup to my lips but realised it was too hot before the liquid touched my mouth. "It happens."

Ray nodded and flopped into a chair, "So what was all the shouting about then?"

"That?" I blew on the coffee. "Was me shouting about the fact that Erin's dead cat is the end of my brief career as a private eye."

I gave up blowing on the coffee and sighed on it instead.

"How do you figure that out, then?" Ray scratched at his pirate leg and I tried not to look. Thankfully my mobile phone chose that moment to burst into life, I stood up and answered it, looking at the wall instead.

"Clint?"

It was Agatha.

"You phoned me. Of course it's Clint. What do you want?"

Agatha began to speak but it was a lost cause, between the dropouts and static the only thing I seemed to be able to make out was some sort of Morse code beeping repeating over and over in the background.

"It's over," I shouted into the phone. "It was Erin's cat. It's dead."

The beeps again and then, clear as a bell she said something that nearly caused me to drop my phone in the coffee.

"NOT ERIN'S CAT YOU PRAT!"

"Not Erin's cat?"

"Not Erin's cat."

"I think I love you, Agatha," I turned back around to face Ray.

Agatha seemed happy to respond in Morse code.

"It's not Erin's cat, Ray."

"So I hear but..." managed Ray before the mobile gave one last burst of coherence.

"Back on the case?"

"Yes. And thank you," I hung up, grinning.

This was brilliant. Better than brilliant, it meant that the whole thing still had the potential of actually being a proper case which meant that I might get to be a proper detective.

"You know what this means," I said.

"I'd hazard a guess it was something to do with Erin's cat," Ray replied.

"It means that I should start looking for clues. More clues, more information. That's what's required here Ray."

A smirk was creeping onto Ray's face, pushing its way through his pock-marked dimples and widening as I spoke.

"For example," I said, pointing my index finger right at him. "Do you know anything about a woman who goes by the name of Pingoveno?"

The smirk froze as a confused frown began to invade from above.

"Mmm?" I probed masterfully.

He shrugged slightly as the smirk started to fight back.

I nodded.

"Course you don't," I smiled and patted the seated caretaker on the shoulder. "Or what about - erm -"

My mobile started making an unfamiliar noise, I took it out of my pocket and found it was trying to communicate with me non-verbally. Through the medium of words. I pressed the appropriate combination of buttons and the phone beeped back, seemingly unwilling to grant me access.

"Hang on a second, sorry," I said as Agatha's name flashed up on the screen.

A message, no less. I pressed the buttons again, trying to unlock the keypad and grant me access to whatever nugget Agatha had managed to get through to me.

'Delete Message Y/N'

No, of course not. Careful now, this was a difficult operation and the phone clearly had a hair trigger. One wrong move and whatever pearl I was diving for would be lost. I pressed the key I imagined represented

the negative and was presented with an error message. Apparently in Chinese.

"I hate those things," Ray tapped his pocket. "My brother bought me one and I can't even get the bugger to turn on."

And then there it was:

'Clint, this taxidermy business is more serious than you think. I need you to be very, very careful indeed. Don't forget there is alive'

And then it descended into Chinese.

"Balls," I said.

"Problem?" asked Ray.

"Phone thinks I'm Chinese."

"A common predicament, I'm sure."

I reached towards the dusty phone that sat on the desk then stopped. I could do this. Agatha's message didn't change anything. I was careful. I was a fucking ninja.

"And," I turned away from the phone to address Ray. "What do you know about taxidermy?"

"Ah, now there I can help you."

"You can?"

"Oh yes," Ray scratched idly at his knee above where I imagined his wooden leg was strapped on. "Jacob is quite the aficionado."

"Jacob?"

"Security Jacob, yeah. He's been an amateur whatdoyoucallit for years. Sometimes brings stuff in to show me."

"Stuff?"

"Yeah, you know. Squirrels in hats, playing cards around a poker table, looking like people," he laughed. "It was funny for a bit but I sort of got bored of it and, well, I just humour him, you know?"

I nodded.

"I mean I'm sure it was all road kill and the like. Rats, mice... Squirrels like I said. This one time he did a squirrel like that cat, what was he called? Garfield. He stuffed the bugger and put suckers on its hands, stuck it to his car window."

Apparently this was one of the funniest things Ray had ever heard. I probably would have laughed but this was good stuff, it felt like the sort of thing I should be finding out.

"And no-one minded?"

"Of course people minded. Nearly got him sacked. Bet he's got something worth looking at in the back of his car," Ray waved at the wall to his left.

I looked over to see the board with the hooks and keys.
“It’s the one top right there if you want to have a look. His car keys.”
“Bloody right I do.”

~*~

Chapter 6

The wide expansive corridors had begun to smell damp and were narrowing claustrophobically as I followed Ray towards the staff car park. I'd been fortunate in that, unlike the public who were forced to park half a mile away and walk to the shop, the staff had the privilege of parking in the lower basement.

"But only if you get here early otherwise you're proper stuffed," Ray had been keen to point out.

"Number of times I've arrived for work then had to turn around and drive away," Ray's leg tap-tapped along at a reasonable pace and I'd noticed that it acted like a metronome. Whenever he spoke the rhythm of his words followed the beat perfectly and was encouraging the sleep in me so I was glad when he finally lapsed into silence and just walked.

Reaching the end of the corridor we stood in front of a service elevator. Ray leaned forward and slid the outer cage door, the diagonal bars folding flat, and carefully stepped inside. I waited for a moment as he adjusted himself into the tiny space, at first not quite sure if I would even fit in there with him and then turned around and reversed into the space.

"If you don't shut the door then it won't move," Ray grunted, the force of his words blowing the hair on the back of my head.

I slid the cage door shut. This didn't feel right, I didn't trust any of these people and I was letting one of them take me down to a deserted car park in a building the police couldn't get into even if we could call them.

Ray contorted his body, freeing his arm and putting it over my shoulder, readying himself to put me in a headlock. I moved backwards to avoid it and bumped into his Santa-gut as he reached even further forward, avoiding the headlock and instead pressing the 'B2' button on the panel to my right. He retracted his arm, folding it down by his side once more.

"You're not my type," he said then grimaced a smile at me. I raised my eyebrows and smiled back then the lift lurched into life and began to drop.

And when I say drop I do mean drop. My arms shot out to brace myself on its sides as a feeling rose in my stomach. A familiar feeling, but one I would usually only expect to feel if was on a roller coaster and certainly not in a plummeting metal cage.

I stared about me and tried not to think about it but everything about this contraption seemed designed to intimidate, from the cage door to the low ceiling to the metal sign screwed to the wall warning that no more than seven persons should be allowed in at one time. Since it was extremely unlikely that you could fit three people in this space without them becoming intimately acquainted with certain areas of one another's anatomy, presumably the only way to fit seven in would be if they were dwarves and the lift was fitted with some sort seven-tier bunk bed affair.

With a snap the lift reached the bottom of the shaft, Ray and I were both lifted a few inches into the air and the lights of the lift went out. For a moment I thought it was the narcolepsy and then the light blinked back on and we dropped down and I shakily reached forward and slid the reluctant cage door open, stepping out into an unlit corridor.

"It always does that," said Ray, walking out and flicking a collection of light switches on the wall next to the lift.

As the lights came on I could see that we were inside the car park itself and that it was practically empty. I suppose it was to be expected but for some reason I'd thought there would be a collection of cars in there. Instead there were just one or two around the edges and one blue van sitting alone in the very centre. I looked at Ray, he nodded and started walking towards it.

The van itself was nothing out of the ordinary, exactly what you would expect of a security guard I suppose. Over ten years old, bits of rust here and there and once Ray opened it up the inside was much the same. It was clean. Very clean. But scruffy from a decade of heavy use and Jacob seemed to have an obsession with air fresheners, with ten or more hanging from the partition that separated the cabin of the van from the back.

"So what made you think there might be something here?" I shouted out to Ray as I took a bunch of papers from the compartment in the door.

"Dunno," he walked in front of the car so I could see him from where I sat in the driver's seat. "You said about taxidermy so..."

There was nothing of any interest in the papers, just junk. I leaned over and opened the glove compartment but all it contained, strangely, was a pair of gloves. I took them out and mused briefly on the fact that Jacob may be the only person I'd ever met who actually used his glove

compartment for gloves. If you could call them gloves, they were more gauntlets of protective type workmen might wear. I threw them back, got out of the car and wandered around the back.

"So have you worked here long?" I said, opening the doors at the back of the van to reveal... not much.

"Six years, maybe seven," I heard Ray clack-clacking around the van as I climbed inside. "But it doesn't pay well."

"No?" I hunched over so I could walk around inside the van, again getting paranoid that he might just lock me in here I decided to make this a very quick check.

"No," he replied. "It's difficult to make ends meet so I do a bit of moonlighting."

And then I saw it. It stood out because you didn't usually expect to see a fossil amongst the newspapers and cardboard boxes. At least, that's what it looked like.

"Moonlighting?" I asked, not really listening as I reached forward and picked up the strange object.

"Yeah. Just as a cleaner, same as here."

"Mmmm," once the object was in my hand it was clear that I had been wrong, this wasn't a fossil. It was a claw. A bloody enormous claw that was maybe three inches long from the horrendously sharp tip to the part where it had become detached. I shoved it in my pocket and scrambled out of the van in time to see Erin bearing down on Ray.

"I knew it!" Erin's nasal voice echoed irritatingly around the empty car park.

"Hey, hang on a minute," said Ray. "What are you doing down here?"

"Came to get you two, something weird's going on but that's beside the point, did I hear correctly? Did Ray say that he was working two jobs?"

Ray inhaled to answer but apparently wasn't going to be given the chance as Erin just kept stamping towards him.

"You know what that means, don't you Ray? It means that when I tell the management you will finally be sacked you lazy little man."

I slammed the doors of the van.

"You were mistaken," I said. "He said no such thing, did you Ray?"

"Well..." he replied.

"We were talking about someone else. Now please, Erin, why don't you take the elevator with Ray? I'll take the stairs and see you up there."

Erin huffed then turned around and stomped towards the metal cage. There was no way I was going back inside that to play sardines with the two of them.

“Come on,” I said to Ray.

“Thanks,” he put his hand out and shook mine. “You didn’t have to do that. Thanks.”

I shrugged, “Come on. I need to talk to Jacob.”

~*~

Chapter 7

The stairs were a bit of a mistake if I'm honest. They went around the elevator shaft so there were three flights of stairs and a landing for every floor. And since there were two basements, a ground floor and three shopping floors to climb by the time I got to the top I was doubled over panting, my jacket over my arm and regretting taking a stand against the death-caged sardines.

Incredibly, the lift still hadn't arrived. Clearly without gravity on its side the antique mechanism was struggling. I leaned against the wall, the sweat from my shirt simultaneously sticking to my back and the cold of the wall and sending a welcome chill across it.

I closed my eyes and the sleep came, just for a second. My jacket fell from my grip and the claw too, dropping down onto the grey concrete. The noise was enough to snap me back and I stared at it for a second, trying to figure out how it fitted in. *If it fitted in.*

The door of the lift rattled open echoing around the tunnel. I yawned as I scooped up the claw and put the jacket back on. It was time to get down to business.

Ray and Erin maintained the silence of two people who'd had a row, an atmosphere hanging cloyingly around them as we made our way back to the shop floor. I tried to lead the way, staying ahead the whole time and only needing the odd navigational correction until we walked through the double doors to see Jacob standing next to a young girl.

She was dressed in the same white make-up girl uniform as Erin but there the comparison ended. Lori was a pale girl in her early twenties and she was striking if for no other reason than in the heels she wore she must have been over six feet tall. She and Jacob both smiled as we returned.

"This is Lori," said Jacob. I smiled back at them both. "He's the private detective I was telling you about."

Lori seemed to have a nervousness about her and I wasn't sure whether it was the situation she found herself in or whether she was just like that naturally.

Erin and Ray were still a few steps behind, I waited for them to catch up, hearing the now familiar dragging of Ray's gait and waiting until it stopped to strike.

"Tell me about Lucky, Erin," I said, spinning around.

It had just the effect I expected, sending Erin into floods of tears. Jacob stood up, walking over to her and handing back his threadbare handkerchief.

"In your own time," I added. "I should probably say I do know that Lucky is not tied up in this whole messy business."

"Messy business?" Erin was still fighting back the tears. This may take a bit longer than I'd hoped.

"And Jacob," I continued. "What can you tell me about your interest in taxidermy?"

Erin turned to face Jacob, recoiling as she did so. "Oh no, not you," she said. But it wasn't anger in her voice, it was disappointment.

"Erin?" I said, turning away from Jacob. "Something you want to tell me?"

"It wasn't him," Erin began to compose herself. Thankfully. "If you must know, I went away on holiday and a friend of mine, a very close friend of mine was looking after my house. Looking after Lucky."

I nodded and motioned with my hand that she continue.

"Lucky went missing and, well, she claimed that he'd been run over," Erin was fighting back the tears again. Jacob reached out to touch her shoulder but she moved from him. "She claimed that one of the builders who had been working on the house next door had found him. She claimed that, in all innocence, he had scooped up my poor, dear little pussy cat and then he had stuffed him and mounted him."

"I'm sorry," I tried to give her what I thought was a sympathetic smile.

"To add insult to... to... murder... the sick bastard had mounted Lucky in a remote control car!"

My sympathetic smile was in danger of metamorphosing into a grin.

"And if that wasn't bad enough she started dating the builder. And then... then they were married in the Seychelles two months ago."

Lori, who'd clearly heard this story before, had gone off to fetch a chair which she duly deposited under Erin just as the story ended. Erin was lost in the grief for her lost pet but this was great news. That was months ago, at least, so Agatha had been right, it wasn't Erin's cat we were looking for.

"Excellent," I grinned and clapped my hands together. Everyone turned and looked at me, their faces a picture of concern for their

colleague. "I mean, not excellent, obviously but we're making progress, are we not?"

"Are we?" said Jacob.

"We are, sir," I said and beckoned Jacob to come to me. "You haven't been entirely honest with me, have you, Jacob?"

The colour drained from Jacob's face as he stood up and stepped towards me.

"No, sir," he said. "I haven't. There's something I should tell you."

"About this?" I whipped the claw out of my pocket with a flourish.

Everyone stared. This was great.

"Can anyone tell me what this is?" I asked, waving the claw aloft.

"Did you find that in the car?" asked Ray.

I nodded and grinned back.

"The car?" said Jacob. "Which car?"

"Is that some sort of claw?" said Erin, squinting through tears and vague confusion.

"It would appear so. But the claw of what?"

"A Tiger!" Lori screamed. A bit of an overreaction I thought.

"Could be, I suppose," I brought the claw closer to get another look.

"Why do you say that?"

"No," Lori hissed quietly and began moving backwards. "Over there, behind you, there's a tiger."

Not really sure how to respond to a statement like that I turned around to see an enormous tiger stalking through the lingerie section of the shop. Now, I don't know if you've even seen a tiger up close but, at maybe three feet high and, I don't know, maybe ten feet long it

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Chapter 8

My eyes snapped open and I sat up sharply, smacking my head on the underside of a counter and sending several sample bottles rolling off to break on the floor. I hopped to my feet to avoid the stink getting on me and instantly regretted it. Panic hit me as if it had been fired, point-blank from a custom built panic gun.

My head whipped from side to side, scanning the perfumery, the lingerie, the ladieswear but there was no obvious tiger. There had been a tiger. Had there been a tiger?

Yes, there had. Otherwise the others would still be here. I bit the inside of my cheek hard. It hurt. A lot. So I was awake at least. The memory of the tiger felt real enough. I took the claw out of my pocket. The tiger's claw. It looked like how I would imagine a tiger's claw to look.

Although that didn't prove much because when I first saw it I was convinced it looked like how a dinosaur's claw would look, but still...

This was it. The task at hand. The cat.

The bloody 'cat'.

And how to catch it, I suppose.

"Hello?" I shouted to no-one in particular.

I looked around again, half expecting the tiger to answer or at least jump out but instead there was a slightly more familiar although no less unexpected sound.

Bing bong.

The doorbell noise over the store's tannoy system that signified someone was about to start telling you the special offers for the day. Except it didn't. Not this time.

"Clint," Jacob's voice crackling out of a multitude of speakers. "We can see you on the security cameras."

"Excellent," I said, spotting one and turning to wave. "Can you hear me? Where the hell did the tiger go?"

Bing bong went the chime again.

"We can't hear you but we can see you. We tried to get outside but we can't something's happened with the doors. They're all locked. Even the fire doors."

So Agatha *had* locked the place down. I took my phone out of my pocket. Still no signal.

Bing bong.

"And the land lines are down too," this time it was Erin's voice emanating from the aging address system. "This better not be your doing, *Detective*, because if it is -"

The system cut off.

I stepped as far towards the camera as I could and began to slowly mouth the words:

WHERE IS THE TIGER?

Adding a little mime of a tiger at the end.

Bing bong.

"Ground floor," it was Jacob again. "We think."

They think. Bloody brilliant leaving me there while they save their skins.

Bing bong.

"We're in the security office," his voice crackled out. "Ray's coming to get you."

The double doors burst open and I flinched for a moment then pretended that I hadn't and ran one of my raised hands through my hair. Ray hobbled in, his hand dipping quickly into his pocket.

"Come on," he snapped, waving to me. "Now."

I sprinted to his side then skittered behind him, following along the corridors and up the stairs to the security office. Meant for two people, maybe three, it was probably around the size of a shed but in the corner was an unvarnished desk with four monitors and some sort of controller mounted on it. All of them were black and white and currently none of them showed a tiger.

Not that it was particularly easy to see them. With Jacob and Erin sitting on the only two seats and Lori perched on the edge of the desk as I squeezed into the room it was practically full.

"We need to catch it," I got straight to the point, I didn't see I had any choice in the matter really. It wasn't just about the job. Well, okay, it was mostly about the job. But there was also the life and death aspect. That certainly had some impact on the proceedings.

"You're bloody mad!" Ray's voice from the corridor was high pitched and cracked as he spoke. "There's no way - it's... a bloody tiger."

"We need to catch it. If not, then what? It gets out? We've got it contained."

Ray let out an even higher pitched laugh. "There's no way. I'm... No. I'm not having any part of this. You're insane, Barnum. You can't go chasing after bloody tigers."

"Fine," I said. "Bugger off then."

The click-drag noise of Ray's exit wasn't wasted on the others and Jacob pushed past, leaning out of the office to shout after him but he didn't stop for a second.

Erin and Lori looked scared and just sat and stared at Jacob shouting. As Ray turned the corner out of sight he appeared on one of the monitors in front of us.

It was time to take control. I hadn't just been given a lost kitten case at the agency I'd been given a big time fucking dangerous job which meant they must have some sort of confidence in me.

"Erin. I need your help," I said, definitely not thinking about going to sleep. "I need you to watch those screens. Watch Ray, see where he goes, make sure he's alright and let me know whatever happens."

Erin was about to speak but was interrupted by the sound of a mobile phone ringing. The half-formed words turned to a look of surprise as she reached into one of her pockets and plucked out a phone. She pressed something on it and then her face snapped into disappointment. She stared at it for a second then put it back in her pocket and turned back to the screens.

"What are we going to do Mr Barnum?" Jacob asked as he sat down.

"I need to go to the toilet," said Lori. I turned, about to snap at her but thought better of it. "So go, Lori. Just go. Jacob," I continued, grabbing his shoulder as much to steady myself from the onslaught of the narcolepsy as to empower him. "We are going to catch ourselves a bloody big tiger."

Lori shook her head and looked away from me to the monitors.

"What's the worst thing that can happen?" I laughed.

"The tiger!" Lori screamed for the second time this evening. I was quite proud of the fact that this time I didn't pass out. "I don't think he's realised."

She pointed at the screens. On one of the monitors we could see Ray talking on his mobile phone and walking to a corner. That in itself wasn't particularly worrying but when you took into account monitor number two which featured a tiger approaching the same corner, the matter shifted seriousness somewhat.

"Which way?" I said.

Erin pointed. I ran. I sprinted. Down the corridor, around the first corner, picking up speed I hurled myself down the next corridor screaming Ray's name at the top of my lungs, shouting for him to stop.

And it worked. As he loomed into view he was stationary. Safe and stationary.

Bing bong.

"Err, Clint," Jacob's voice on the Tannoy. "Lori had it wrong. Tiger's in a different part of the building..."

I panted for a second.

Bing bong.

"Is it on?" Lori's voice echoed all around us. "Sorry Clint."

I waved my hand in the air like it was nothing.

"Ray," I said, an idea popping into my head. "Can I borrow your mobile for a second?"

"Haven't got one. Now piss off and leave me alone."

He stomped safely around the tigerless corner. I took my own phone out and pushed the redial button. Somehow there was a signal here and somehow Ray knew that.

Agatha picked up instantly.

"Everything okay?" she said.

"Course. Listen I need you to do something for me. There's a caretaker here called Ray. Can you find out who the last person was he phoned. On his mobile. Is that the sort of thing you do?"

"Exactly the sort of thing. Is that it?"

"Well, yeah. For now. Signal's crap here so just see what you can do."

And she hung up.

~*~

Chapter 9

“Right, people,” I said as I strode into the security office and slammed the door behind me. “Have we got a key? Can we lock that?”

“Erm, probably not,” said Jacob, pointing at the monitor.

“Oh never mind Ray, he’s off on his own mission. Reckon he’ll probably hole up in his office til this is all over.”

“Not him, it’s Lori.”

I glanced around and found that Jacob was right. Lori had gone, it was just me and him and Erin left in the office.

“Where’s she gone?”

“Look,” said Jacob, pointing at the monitors. There was Lori, back to the wall tottering on her heels towards a corner and on the adjacent monitor was the tiger. Waiting.

“These two corridors, they aren’t actually joined, are they?”

Jacob nodded.

“But before...”

Jacob’s eye’s flicked towards Erin.

“Mistakes were made,” he said. “She’s in trouble Clint, but really, you should lock the door.”

Jacob held up the key.

I shook my head.

“Brilliant. How do I get to her?”

“Left out the door, second left, then first right.”

“Left. Second Left. Right. Lock the door after me.”

“Hang on a minute,” Jacob began.

But I didn’t wait for the rest, I just started running. The sort of running you do when you’re a kid and you are going to miss the ice cream van if you don’t absolutely floor it right then and there. Left out the door, slamming it behind me and up to full speed hurtling down the corridor, hoping the shoes I was wearing had sufficient grips on the bottom to...

Stop.

Flat palms slammed into the wall, took the second left and I was already shouting her name as I started to pick up speed again and nearly missed the final...

Right.

Banged into the wall and stared down the corridor. And she wasn't there.

Left, second left, right? Was that right?

I jogged forward. Which way was she walking on the monitor? And where was the camera? I shouted her name again, looking up and down, listening for a response but there was none. I imagined that I would be able to hear something if the tiger was eating her and

~*~

here for me?"

My left leg kicked out and my eyes juddered open to see an upside down version of Lori's pale visage. I blinked and she came into focus. She was bleeding from her forehead but she was alive.

I rolled left then sat up, narrowly missing head-butting Lori in the process. A couple of seconds passed and then she reacted, flinching away from where I'd been.

"What happened?"

"What?" she said, her hand darting up and swatting some imaginary fly.

I stood up and moved quickly towards her. She was just standing there swaying as blood trickled from a deep gash on her forehead.

"Are you alright?" I reached out to turn her towards me, my hand touching her upper arm.

She let out a scream worthy of a 1930's horror movie and I recoiled, trying to see what the damage was.

"It's okay," I said softly. "Do you know what happened?"

She nodded then jumped again as first Jacob and then Erin came around the corner and into view.

"We couldn't just leave you to do this on your own," Jacob slowed to a jog, stopping in front of me.

"I- it... Lori," Erin panted and pointed at something then doubled over, her hands on her knees and wheezed heavily.

Jacob and I both looked in the direction Erin had pointed. There was a door with a plaque on it.

'Store Room' it proclaimed.

"The store room?" Jacob and I very nearly chorused. It was like trying to get a message from Skippy the Bush Kangaroo.

Erin didn't look up, just raised her right hand and wafted it away from her then pointed to the door again.

Jacob walked forward and tentatively unlocked then opened the door. He poked his head into the darkness it contained then reached inside and whipped out a foldable chair. He immediately unfolded it and took it to Erin who had finally manage to drag herself into an upright position.

"Not for me, you idiot. For Lori."

Not without some degree of trepidation Jacob and I tilted Lori backwards onto the chair. She may have been an expert at moving around in heels that high but, frankly, I was not and the last thing we needed right now was to injure her further. Erin stalked into the store room shaking her head at our antics and somehow found a blanket to wrap Lori in.

"We saw it on the monitor," said Jacob. "It whacked her. The tiger ran past and hit her with its paw."

Lori was sobbing, hiding her head in the blanket as Erin fussed around her.

"How come she's not, well, you know... in shreds?" I asked, trying to put it together in my head. "Are you alright, Lori?"

Lori looked up from her crying and sniffed.

"I need the loo," she managed through the snot. Jacob's handkerchief now looked like it had been tie-dyed with mascara and fake tan but Erin handed it over and Lori promptly cleared her sinuses into it. I wouldn't have touched the thing. "And then I was going to get my bag and get out of here."

"What did you want your bag for?" I asked, trying to sound a bit more concerned and not stare at the snot-rag.

"It's got my laptop in. My dissertation. The rest of my life. I can't die in here," she was starting to lose it, starting to rant. Maybe she was going into shock or something. "And your damn stupid idea of catching the tiger, that was it. I just thought, I don't know, I only work in this shit hole to pay for going to university and the thought of losing it all, the thought of dying a make up girl. I... I... "

"I understand," I said.

Erin coughed and stopped fussing.

We all stared at each other.

"The problem is," I broke the silence first. "That all the doors are locked. We're locked in."

Lori nodded, a calmness descending upon her.

"That's the reason I said we needed to trap the thing," I moved a little closer to her. "So we can stop anything like this happening."

Lori's eyes had been staring at some imagined spot in the middle distance but suddenly snapped into focus on me.

"It ran at me," she whispered. "Ran past me. And as it ran it hit me with its paw or its shoulder or, I dunno."

Her hand reached up and touched the gash on her head.

"Knocked her into the wall," said Jacob.

"It hurts," said Lori. "I think... my arm hurts and my ribs might be broken because they really hurt."

"Erin, can you see what you can do? Painkillers, bandages, anything can find that might work."

There was a noise somewhere down the corridor.

"Jacob, Erin, get Lori in the cupboard now."

"Err, what do you mean Mr Barnum?" Jacob began fumbling with Lori, trying to encourage her to her feet without actually touching her and possibly toppling her forward.

There was a deep, low-pitched noise, barely audible but emanating from somewhere close by.

"Come on darling," Erin managed where Jacob failed, shoving the blanket into his arms as she and Lori shuffled into the store cupboard. The lights inside blinked on.

I stood by the door looking up and down the corridor, trying to see where the noise might be coming from. Jacob grabbed the chair and snapped it loudly closed. I imagined a glimpse of movement somewhere to the right and stared as Jacob brushed past.

"Jacob, for God's sake, try to keep quiet. It might hear you."

There was a clink as something metallic hit the concrete floor. Jacob turned and somehow managed to kick the something, sending it sliding a few metres down the corridor.

The key.

My eyes flashed up and down once more. I couldn't quite see but I could hear, the deep thrum of the noise turning into a fully fledged growl. We needed to be able to lock the door. I darted forward and grabbed the key from the floor, turning around to lift it and show it to Jacob.

He'd turned to face me, presumably to see what I was doing, and I held up the key. He grinned for a second and then his face fell in slow motion, the colour draining from it and he started to shout, dropping the blanket and the chair as my name came slowly out of his mouth.

I turned around to see

~*~

Chapter 10

It was the smell of rotting flesh that permeated the sleep first. Hitting my face in bursts. Then something slightly damp touching my hair and the strange puffs of air that came from whatever it was. When what felt like heavy bacon Velcro made contact with my chin and dragged all the way to my eyebrows, I finally made the connection to the tiger.

It wasn't a conscious decision not to open my eyes, there was something deep inside, primal was what they called it in documentaries. I concentrated on my breathing. Trying to make each breath shallow. Motionless. Noiseless. Everythingless.

The sniffing stopped and a roar rose up all around me. I no longer had any sense of where the tiger was, it was as if I'd been dropped in the deep end of a swimming pool filled with big cat rage.

Usually this was the point the bastard narcolepsy kicked in. But not this time. Oh no. It wouldn't do for me to be mauled by a tiger in my sleep. My subconscious clearly hated me enough to want me to witness the event first hand.

And then there was a banging noise. Not a feline banging but a people banging. On a door and I tried opening my right eye the tiniest of tiny amounts.

I couldn't see anything so I chanced the same with my left.

Again, nothing.

Had I dreamed it?

No, we'd been through that earlier, and I wasn't going to bite my cheek again.

I opened both eyes but still kept the breathing and movement under strict supervision.

I rolled my eyes around, taking in as much of the scene as my self-imposed paralysis allowed, the banging continuing unabated in the background. And then the sound of a door bursting open and Jacob ran out and grabbed me by the feet and dragged me.

“Oi!” I said, causing Jacob to make a noise like an orang-utan doing an impersonation of an Irish wolfhound. He dropped my feet then, in an instant, composed himself.

“Come on,” he hissed, running back to the store room. “Before it comes back.”

I bolted after him and I was glad I did. As it happens tigers can loom out of the darkness of a service corridor pretty quickly and much more quietly than you would expect. I can personally testify that their camouflage is just as effective against bare concrete as it is in the jungle. Jacob began to slam the door even before I’d come through it. Then, once I was clear, he hurled his weight against it, scrabbling with the key as he did so.

Not quickly enough, as something out there slammed hard into the door and the key bounced out of his hand and onto the floor. Erin darted forward and shouldered the door as Jacob stretched to pick up the keys.

There was another horrendous thud against the door of the storeroom we were hiding in. Erin screamed as the force of it threw her down to the ground. I scrambled to take her place, barricading us in and that, dear reader, is the point at which you joined this narrative-challenged tale of mine in the first place.

So, where exactly did I get to? I lose my place sometimes. The tiger was out in the corridor, that much I know you know. Lori was injured, needed a piss, in between barricading the door I was trying to take charge of the situation whilst quashing a minor mutiny from Erin. Insults flew, mobile phones failed and the culmination of all of this excitement was a superb plan and...

I woke up with my head in a stainless steel bucket that smelled of wet dog. I wasn’t entirely convinced that Erin hadn’t put my head in there in retaliation for me being rude to her. She smirked but, then again, I probably would have too in her position. Anyway, enough of that, you’ll be wanting to find out what happened after Jacob kicked a hole in the back wall of the store room I expect?

It’s amazing the force a man can muster when he’s cornered by a marauding tiger. Jacob channelled his fear admirably, kicking, punching and battering a human-sized hole in the plasterboard. I don’t think any of us much cared what was on the other side apart from the apparent absence of tigers.

It was dark out there but once Jacob had broken through he announced, rather unsurprisingly, that it was a corridor, and scrambled out to inspect it.

"It's fine," Jacob said from the darkness. "Come on, I know where we are."

Erin carefully helped Lori crawl through the hole then flashed me an angry look, before crawling through herself. I could hear the three of them talking as I came through the hole and out of the store room.

"There's a lift just down here," said Jacob, his outline barely visible. "Follow me."

I reached out to touch the wall to try to keep some sense of direction in the dark. My fingers slid easily along the cold gloss of the paint. The four of us moved slowly and quietly down the corridor and soon the low glowing numbers above the lift became discernable. We quickened our pace and, reaching the lift, Jacob stabbed repeatedly at the call button.

There was a terrifyingly familiar noise from somewhere in the distance, the low, guttural growl. I froze, a chill hitting me from behind, forcing the hairs on the back of my neck to jump up. I caught a glimpse of the others and we'd all struck the same pose; backs to the lift, silently squinting into the darkness.

The growl grew out of the darkness, louder and more menacing. I imagined I could hear the padding of paws but I hadn't ruled out the possibility that it was just my mind fucking with me.

The lift doors slid open and we all stepped backwards, bumping shoulders as we did. I reached out and started hammering at one of the number buttons, just to get it to move, but the damn thing was refusing. As if that wasn't bad enough the growling had morphed into what I imagined was a yowling, grating attack call.

I kept pushing the button, pushing it and pushing it and pushing, willing the doors to close.

Glancing once more at the others, their faces changed from fear to panic, and when I looked back outside I could see why. The halo of light that the lift projected into the corridor had begun to pick out a distinctly tiger-shaped threat.

"Clint," Erin hissed. "Do something."

"I am doing something," I whispered back and pressed the number four again. And then I looked up and saw that the number illuminated above the door was also a number four. I'd been pressing the button of the floor we were on. Still, no need for any of the others to know that, was there?

The tiger had begun to pick up pace, moving towards the lift. I hammered the 'three' button and the doors began, aching slowly, to

close. As if sensing the imminent departure of its dinner, the tiger pounced and we all hurled ourselves against the back wall of the lift.

There was an almighty metal bang as the tiger made contact with the lift door but it was too late, the lift's outer doors managed to come together a fraction of a second before impact.

The lift jolted lightly and moved downwards.

Catching this damn tiger was going to be a tad trickier than I'd first thought.

~*~

Chapter 11

“So, I think I know what we need to do to catch that bleeding big cat,” I said to my captive audience.

They reacted with effusive indifference. Even Jacob’s enthusiasm, which had so far remained stoically intact, seemed to be wearing thin.

“We are going to capture the tiger, people,” I began, trying to instil some sort of sense of occasion.

Jacob stood up, negotiating his way past Erin and Lori, and started rummaging in some drawers.

“We’re going to trap it in the caretaker’s cupboard,” I continued, unperturbed. “And-”

“Why?” snapped Erin.

“Well, partly because it seemed, geographically speaking, to be in a good position to pull something like this off and partly because I think it’s time we got young Raymond back in the game.”

“Young Raymond?” Erin whined.

“Sarcasm, my dear. Ask me when this is all over and I’ll explain it to you,” I grimaced at her and she huffed back. “Jacob, my good man, can I ask what you’re up to over there?”

“Erm, yes,” he replied. “I just assumed whatever crackpot idea you were going to suggest was going to involve someone leaving this reasonably safe room and so I thought we could maybe use these instead of the Tannoy.”

He placed two walkie-talkies on the desk in front of the monitors.

“Radios the security guards use,” he nodded. “Could be useful.”

“I should say so,” I laughed. “So now all we need to do is go down to the food hall and grab as much raw meat as we can get our hands on. Lori, I think you should stay here and Jacob, you keep one eye on her and the other on those monitors. Erin, you’re with me.”

“I most certainly am not,” she barked.

“You can carry the walkie talkie.”

She grabbed it from the desk and stomped towards the door.

I flashed Lori and Jacob a smile and went after her. The radio almost instantly burped static at us then Jacob's voice came through. As we moved quickly away from the office the sound of his real voice receded into the distance as his broadcast self remained.

"I can't see it at the moment so keep your eyes open," he said. "But it's not in the corridor to the lift. What?"

Static bubbled from the radio.

"Lori says she can't see it in the food hall yet either, we'll keep you posted once we locate it."

"Over and out!" Erin shouted into the receiver as she stomped into the open doors of the lift and pressed one of the buttons. The doors started to close and I put my hand between them. The doors beeped and re-opened, I stepped into the lift and Erin stabbed at the 'G' button.

"So, Mr Detective," Erin began once the lift doors closed again. "Whodunnit? You seem to be doing a lot more sleeping than detecting. Well, that and running away."

"Apparently you did it because you asked me who did it rather than whatthey did."

"I'm not an idiot," she said. "You want to catch the tiger so you must be investigating who stole it or something like that."

"Close enough," I replied. "There's a bit more to it than that but yes, in a nutshell that'll be about the size of it. And as for whodunnit..."

"Yes?" her eyes lit up at the thought of the gossip.

"It could be any one of you."

"Oh, yes?"

"Well, let's take you, for example."

Erin huffed and pursed her lips.

"I can say without a shadow of a doubt that I've witnessed enough to assume that you could conceivably be the brains behind the operation. You are conniving, manipulative, bossy and you love to be in charge but above all that you are intelligent. I think it's entirely possible you orchestrated the whole affair, that you are this elusive Ms Pingoveno."

"Erm. Thanks, I think," Erin stepped out of the lift onto the ground floor. She raised the walkie talkie to her face. "Are we safe down here?"

"Still no sign of it," Lori's voice spat nervously. "Be careful."

"Of course the same could be said of Lori. And she is, arguably, even more intelligent."

"What?"

"Of course if it was either of you I would assume you had an accomplice. Not being sexist, you understand. Just the evidence as it presents

itself. If Lori wasn't just blundering around looking for her laptop and she was up to something then she certainly didn't know how to handle the tiger, did she?"

"No, I suppose not," Erin's brow creased, the wrinkles drawing together to form a furrow. "Trolleys. Grab one and we'll fill it. Have you got a pound?"

"Eh? Oh, I see," my hand went into my pocket looking for a pound coin to put in the slot and release the trolley from its chain gang brothers. "Here you go."

"I don't think it's Lori," Erin wrestled a trolley free and started pushing it in what I presumed was the right direction. There was a whine of white noise from the walkie talkie and we both jumped.

"Sorry," Lori's voice was faint. "I dropped it."

We reached the butcher's section of the food hall and proceeded to fill the trolley with meat. Lots of meat. Chickens, ducks, mince, pork chops, beef joints and then, to top it all off, the head of a pig staring blankly as our trolley's figurehead. It seemed strangely ominous.

"What if the tiger smells the meat and comes after us?" Erin wrestled the trolley into the lift and pressed the button to get us moving again.

"Best we don't think about it," I stepped inside and the doors slid shut. "And anyway, we haven't covered Ray or Jacob yet. Both of them could be our man."

"Ray's the type if you ask me. Not even supposed to be here. I'm the one who decides what shifts to put him on and I can promise you he is not supposed to be here. But Jacob? No."

"Jacob? Afraid so. Found this in his car," I briefly brandished the claw in front of an aghast Erin.

"His car? He doesn't--"

The radio spluttered once more into life. They'd caught sight of it. On the second floor. Where we were headed. This was really not good.

"And don't even get me started on where the fuck Ray fits into all this. Especially the fact that--"

I was interrupted by the doors of the lift sliding open. We stared out. Nothing stared back. Yet.

I dragged the trolley pig-first into the corridor as Erin spoke to Jacob on the walkie talkie. It was around on the second floor. They didn't know where.

"Listen, Erin," I said as I took the radio from her. "Go back up and join them. I'll find Ray and we'll do this together."

“Okay,” she said. Her face was pale and her makeup had begun seriously to falter. “Good luck.”

I grabbed the handle of the trolley and began wheeling it slowly down towards the dead end that housed the caretaker’s office. The steps echoed and I could feel my heart beating heavy in my chest. I tried not to think about it but there wasn’t really any way I was going to be able to get it out of my head.

The door was in sight. I could do this, I thought, looking over my shoulder to make sure there was nothing there. There wasn’t, but I was sure I’d heard something. I stood still and listened.

Nothing. Just the sound of water dripping somewhere far away and something else. What was it? I couldn’t quite work it out. The noise was familiar but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

I held my breath and listened harder. A burst of white noise cracked the silence, blaring out from the walkie talkie.

“Clint!” it was Jacob, there was panic in his voice.

There was that noise again. What was that-

~*~

Chapter 12

Ray's face was upside down.

Oh, hang on a second, no. That's wrong. He was leaning over me and I was on the floor. I turned my head and could see the grain of the wood on his leg.

"You must have balls of steel to wander about with that thing on the loose and your condition."

I yawned. "Piss off, peg leg."

Ray laughed and helped me to my feet. "Fair enough. So, what the hell is going on with all this then?"

"You know how when you go to the zoo there's big signs saying 'don't feed the tigers'?"

He nodded.

"Well we're going to feed the tiger."

And then I explained the rest of what was a remarkably simple plan.

"Okay then," he said. "Worth a shot, I suppose. Let's give it a go."

The walkie talkie fizzed back into life. "Clint?"

It was Jacob.

"Here."

"Good."

"You okay up there?"

"Yeah, it's up on three with us at the moment. The girls are safe in the security office. I'm going to come and help, the damn thing is way over the other side of the floor so should be easy for me to get down."

"See you in a minute then."

Ray propped open his office door with the pig's head and I pushed the trolley a little further away then dropped a handful of mince.

Two pork chops and a rump steak later, Jacob stepped out of the lift onto the floor. He was drenched in sweat and looked pretty twitchy.

"You alright?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's just getting to me a bit," he said, then grabbed a chicken breast and chucked it on the floor.

"It's getting to all of us," muttered Ray. "'Cept sleeping beauty here. You look fresh as a daisy."

"Amazing what forty winks can do for the complexion," I dropped a particularly bloody rib-eye on the floor with a satisfying *thwap*. "Can you push this for a second, Ray?"

He nodded, taking the trolley. I let a pre-plucked duck fall to the floor, wiped my hands on my jacket then pressed the button to talk to our eyes in the sky.

"Everything okay up there?" I said, then when there was no immediate reply I added, "erm, over."

"Fine." It was Erin. "Except we just lost sight of it. Might be near the stairs. Over."

"Ten four to that," Jacob and Ray stopped what they were doing to look at me. "Over and out."

We stared at each other for a second and I began to question the sanity of what we were doing. Was the job really worth this?

A shrill ringing echoed around the corridor causing Jacob, Ray and I to simultaneously jump two inches into the air. I reached into my pocket and plucked out my phone. It was Agatha.

"Hello," I said. As Agatha began to speak I could see the two of them straining to make out what she was saying.

"Really?" I continued, moving away a little to ensure they couldn't make any of it out. "That's brilliant. Listen, I've got to go."

I hung up and smiled. "Gentlemen," I said. "Let's get this place decorated."

Ray began pushing the trolley along faster, picking up speed with each step and Jacob and I were hurling raw meat left and right. Most of it was hitting the floor but, as Ray picked up speed, more of it started hitting the walls, the lighter pieces sticking where they landed, the heavier ones bouncing off and *flumping* to the ground. And Ray just kept picking up speed until he reached a point where we had to jog to keep up and the meat was flying left and right and there was blood splatter on our faces as we careered forward on this weird kind of reverse trolley-dash in an abattoir.

And as we were running along hurling meat I started to see what we were doing, mentally taking a step back, and I began to giggle. It was throwing the sausages that set me off. Of course, once I started, I set the two of them off as well until the three of us eventually skidded to a halt, howling with laughter, a trail of meat scattered behind us, and chunks of the stuff on our clothes.

The walkie talkie chose that moment to interject, spraying its static then countering with Erin saying four words.

"It's on its way."

The mood switched and the three of us ran back the way we had just come, carefully stepping around the meat explosion, until we reached the elevator.

"Come on, Jacob," I said, stepping inside the lift.

"What about Ray?" he asked.

"I know what I have to do," Ray said and as he walked past I handed him the walkie talkie.

"Glad to see you two are still in one piece," back in the security office Erin touched Jacob's sleeve, probably picking off some of the stray meat products.

"So what happens now?" asked Lori, not looking a great deal better than the last time I'd seen her.

"Now we watch on these monitors as the tiger follows the trail of meat to the caretaker's office and, once it goes inside, Ray will step out of the room next door and lock the bastard in."

"Excellent," said Erin. "Can we see what's going on? I couldn't find any cameras on the office."

"Ah," said Jacob sheepishly. "There is a camera on our office. I just don't like people watching me so I... Well... I turned it off."

Erin took half a step away from him.

"Hang on," he continued. "I'll just... "

And he leaned behind the panel of monitors and started plugging and unplugging wires, causing monitors to come on and go off. Soon all we could see on every screen was the disembodied pig's head staring right at us.

"There we go," he smiled with pride then his hand went up to cover his mouth as, amazingly, the tiger came into the frame.

A silence fell as we all stood, staring, willing the tiger to go into the office. It moved slowly, the enormous muscles shifting effortlessly to move its bulk towards the one thing it had its eye on.

Our figurehead – Mrs Pig.

It bounded forward, knocking the bait into the office then following itself. The four of us were all grinning now, the plan was so close to working. So very close.

All Ray needed to do was close the door.

The seconds ticked by and nothing moved. Not the tiger, not Ray. Everything just seemed frozen, like the feed was broken.

“Why isn’t Ray locking it in?” said Lori, eventually.

I just shook my head. My eyes were dry from lack of blinking and stayed fixed on the screen as the tiger walked out of the office with the pig’s head in its mouth.

We’d had our chance and Ray had blown it.

“I really need a wee now,” said Lori.

~*~

Chapter 13

I threw open the door of the security office completely intent on going down and confronting Ray, but Lori was insistent. Someone had to take her to the toilet, otherwise she was going to end up soiling herself. I stalked forward as Erin and Jacob hissed reassurances of our safety on the walkie talkie.

Arriving at the ladies toilet, I said nothing, just gestured to the door.

"W-what if it's in there?" Lori stammered.

I sighed and burst through the door.

"Anyone in here?" I shouted. "Mister Tiger? Yoo-hoo? No?"

I stepped back into the corridor. "No-one in there. I think it must be a boy tiger."

Lori looked down at her shoes, refusing to make eye contact, as she darted inside. I breathed deeply, leaning against the wall and picking a piece of raw chicken off my trouser leg. The walkie talkie, whose timing had never been great, chose this moment to pull another blinder and fizzed into life with those four words again.

"It's on its way." said Jacob.

"Shit," I said and stepped back into the ladies toilet.

Lori screamed her scream-queen scream.

"For Christ's sake, shut up," I said.

"I'm using the toilet here," her voice shouting from a cubicle against the far wall.

"Can you keep your voice down, Jacob's just told me it's coming this way."

"I can't go while you're here."

I shook my head. She couldn't be serious.

"What are you talking about, there's a tiger out there."

"I need to use the toilet," she insisted.

"And, what? You expect me to sacrifice my life for that?"

"I can't go with you here," she whined. "I reeeeeally need to go."

"No," I said. "Just no."

"This is the ladies."

"This is insane, listen-" I gave up and opened the door a fraction to see if it was out there. The walkie talkie spoke again, telling me that the coast was clear. I walked outside, waited and fumed.

"Thank you," Lori said when she eventually emerged.

I remained silent as I escorted her back to the office then stormed back towards the lift.

Downstairs on the second floor, Ray was exactly where we'd left him. As I threw open the door of the room he was cowering in I glanced up to the camera, acutely aware of our audience.

"What the fuck happened?" I screamed.

The walkie talkie hissed into life. Erin spoke. "Is he there? Ask him what the hell he was playing at?"

I nodded towards the walkie talkie and he shrugged. Didn't even bother to answer.

"Tell me," the anger hot in my cheeks. "Tell me why you pissed our one chance to catch that fucking beast up against the wall?"

"I-" he began.

"Actually I don't know if I even want to know, you fucking idiot."

"Sorry," he managed.

The walkie talkie spat static and this time Jacob spoke. "What's going on?"

I breathed in and out a couple of times, staring at Ray, just turning the whole thing over in my mind before I finally pressed the button. "He's fine. It's fine-"

"Clint," Jacob interrupted. "I think you two might want to get up here. It's coming your way again. You should be able to make it to the lift before it gets to you if you run."

"Come on," I said quietly and held out my hand. Ray pulled himself up to a standing position and followed me *knock-hissing* our way down the corridor. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, the tiger stepped into view.

Ray shouted and we ran for the lift, I got there first and pressed the call button. Apparently my luck had turned because the lift was waiting, the doors slid open and I stepped inside. Ray was only a few steps behind and hopped the final few metres into the metal box.

I felt calm. I felt like I knew what I was doing.

I looked out at the corridor and saw the great orange and black mass of whiskers, teeth and hatred growling down on us and I remember I thought to myself 'don't make the same mistake you made the last time,

press the right button'. I reached over and pressed one of the buttons and time began to run seriously slowly.

The calmness was good because I felt like I wasn't going to go to sleep. There was a clarity to it, staring into the tiger's yellowy eyes, I knew I was doing the right thing. And then all I could hear was Ray's voice saying, "You're pressing the wrong button."

I looked across and I was pressing the 'hold doors' button and Ray was shouting and I just kept pressing the 'hold doors' button. The tiger slapped its big paws, one after the other, moving forward, approaching the threshold of the lift and by this time Ray was trying to drag my hand off the panel, to press the buttons himself, but I just kept pressing that 'hold doors' button.

The tiger finally moved into the lift space, just its front two paws, it's head and enormous shoulders nearly taller than us sitting struggling on the floor. I took my finger off the button and turned to Ray, "Your turn."

Ray took a great lungful of air, reached into his coat and pulled out a small dictaphone. Stretching forward, he pressed a button on the side of it and an unmistakable tune began piping from its tinny little speaker.

We miss you hissssssss...

For a moment I forgot how to blink, staring at the effect of The Cure inadvertently performing 'The Lovecats' to this enormous beast. As the double bass slapped away and the piano tinkled the tiger responded by rolling onto its side in some bizarre display of trust.

My legs went from under me, not sleeping this time, just exhausted from the adrenaline. I crumpled into the corner of the lift just watching and trying to remember how to blink.

~*~

Chapter 14

Apparently someone from the Agency had called the police, but as I sat on the fire escape outside the department store I had my doubts as to whether that was true or not. After I extricated myself from the situation in the lift I'd wandered around until I got a signal, called Agatha and, well...

There were five or six black minivans spewing out of the underground parking and people in suits wandering in and out. 'Just sorting things out' apparently. I suppose this was how it happened.

I yawned and scratched my stubble as a handcuffed Ray led the tiger into one of the vans. A suited employee of the Agency opened the door and I caught a glimpse of a cage in the back. Once the tiger was safely locked down Ray was led to another car. The suit carefully put his hand on Ray's head, ducking it down so he didn't catch it on the doorframe. After a brief negotiation to swing in his leg, the headlights of the two vans came on, engines gunned and the pair drove off.

There was the unmistakable sound of a woman's heels approaching on the metal grill of the fire escape. I was tired. Real tired, not narcolepsy tired. I yawned again and stared into the darkness.

"Very impressive Mr Barnum," said the owner of the heels. "I just knocked off work and-"

I turned around and looked up but some sort of security light was blazing so all I could see was a silhouette. "Is that my favourite Z-Girl?"

"I felt bad about before, in the office," she sat down next to me and shuffled to get comfortable. "Thought you might let me buy you a coffee. If we're going to be working together again I'd hate to get off on the wrong foot."

"Do they call the police? Or did they just say that to fob me off?"

"Sometimes," she laughed. "It depends. Does that bother you?"

I started swinging my legs in and out over the edge of the fire escape. "No. I don't suppose it does."

"So, Mr Detective," Agatha sat down beside me and, shivering slightly, she loosely linked arms with me. "How did you work it out?"

"It's a bit like sitting on the edge of the pool at the swimming baths isn't it?" I swung my legs harder.

Agatha laughed and followed my lead.

"I had to work out what you'd asked me to investigate first," I admitted.

"I sort of guessed. Next time just ask, you idiot."

I nodded. "I will. Spent half the time chasing after a dead moggy. And the rest of the time running away from a bloody big tiger."

"Lost cats and messy divorces a speciality."

"Quite," I grinned. "I was shitting myself."

"I'm not surprised. If you'd bothered to stay awake long enough you might have found out there was a tranquiliser gun in one of the lockers on the top floor."

I groaned, my hand going up to cover my eyes.

"But you still did it. Come on, how?"

"There was a bunch of stuff to be honest. He tried to frame Jacob. There was a big cat calendar on the wall of the office they shared and he even led me to the car he must have brought the tiger in. I found this." I extricated myself from her and stood up, taking the claw from my pocket and handing it to her.

"Bloody hell, imagine this getting into your arm."

Blue flashing lights lit up Agatha brandishing the claw as if it was attached to her hand. An ambulance drove quietly into view, slowing to a stop at the entrance to the car park.

"But I suspected him more than the rest. He had a certificate for employee of the month except it was for Lava Corp, not here."

Agatha nodded and stood up. From here we could see Lori being escorted into the ambulance with Erin in tow.

"At first I thought one of them might be Pingoveno," I waved towards Erin and Lori. "But the older one was too ingrained in being part of the shop and she'd been a victim of taxidermy."

"Someone had stuffed her?"

"I feel a bit bad about Lori though," I said staring at the flashing lights of the ambulance. "I sort of encouraged her to get in harm's way. Jacob too, if I'm honest. And Ray of course. To test them. But it was Ray, he knew too much about the taxidermy business and used the fact that he shared an office with Jacob to try to convince me that it was Jacob with the taxidermy obsession and the car."

"But it wasn't Jacob?"

We began to walk down the flight of metal stairs to the street below.

"Didn't own a car. Didn't drive. I think he regretted it. Ray, I mean. After he got the damn tiger under control."

"With The Lovecats!"

"Exactly. He told me. He said that he'd just backed himself into a corner he couldn't get out of. Apparently they'd been bringing him dead animals to patch together and he'd do the job, ask no questions."

Agatha nodded.

"Then what they were bringing him got fresher and fresher until one day this Pingoveno character turns up with a Yorkshire Terrier."

"He didn't?"

"Not the first time but in the end they started blackmailing him. All the work he had been doing, the half-bear, half dolphin mermaids, the monkeys dressed as Al Capone, they had cameras."

"So this was what – one last job?"

"Yeah. Steal the tiger from the zoo, kill it, cross it with a silverback gorilla they already had and then they'd hand him the tapes."

"So what was he doing with it here?"

"Well he didn't want to lose his job by not turning up," I laughed. "So he drugged it and left it in the van."

"And that went well... "

The doors of the ambulance closed and a few moments later it began to pull away. A bunch of men in suits started getting into the minivans.

"But how did you know that he would be able to control the tiger, you know, in the lift?"

"I didn't for definite but I figured if he managed to get the tiger into a car then he must have a way. And there was no way he would have walked around without whatever it was to protect him."

"And so you put the pair of you in mortal danger to force his hand?"

"I suppose so."

"And what if it didn't work?"

"Hope the tiger eats him and not me?"

"How did you know about the lift?" I asked, standing on the tarmac ground and staring at the back of the building one last time.

"I was debriefing Jacob. Making sure everything was as it should be."

I nodded. "And was it?"

"It was."

"So what will happen to this Pingoveno character then?"

"Oh, nothing, probably," Agatha sighed. "She has temporarily slipped our net. But it helps. All this makes a big difference."

"And next time..."

“Or the time after that. She’ll slip up and we’ll be there. Once you’re on the radar.”

“The Z-Girls always get their... erm, man?”

“Absolutely.”

The last of the cars drove out of sight. I looked down to the car park entrance and Jacob stepped into view, waved once then stepped back inside. The grill that covered the entrance to the car park started to descend.

“So who was this Vince from Lava Corp?” I finally asked.

“I was wondering when you’d get to him. You really didn’t have any brief at all going in there did you?”

“Nope.”

“Lava Corp is just the corporation who owns the zoo. He’s just the manager of the zoo.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Doesn’t like to be called that, though.”

“I can image,” I said, stifling another yawn. “You said you were going to buy me a coffee didn’t you?”

“Keep you awake,” Agatha linked arms again. “I know this little place does really strong coffee.”

“Come on then,” I said.

“I have to admit I do have another motive for coming down here,” she flashed me a wicked smile. “It’s sort of a bribe.”

“A bribe?”

“Let’s just say that there are some things about how we Z-girls operate that I would prefer never got back to anyone who was in charge. Things like, oh I don’t know, the information about the phone call. It wasn’t what you might call publicly available.”

“And so it just... fell out of the internet and landed on your computer?”

“Exactly that!” she said, letting go and slapping my arm.

“Your nefarious methods are safe with me.”

“Oh I am glad,” she said. “You know... This could be the start...”

“Don’t say it,” I winced.

And she didn’t.

~*~

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About The Author

Adam Maxwell was born in 1976 and spends a great deal of his time in the loft on his own cultivating a fear of crowds. He has a Masters Degree in Creative Writing from Northumbria University, and lives in the wilds of Northumberland. Sometimes he throws things at passers-by.

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Whether it's becoming accidentally engaged to your ex when your fiancée is coming home for Christmas...

Or perhaps you're spending Christmas with the in-laws, your wife is stupifyingly drunk and you destroy the presents...

No?

In that case you'll want to see what happens when two master hypnotists clash over an argument concerning a Christmas tree... All these things and literally two others are dealt with in this collection of Adam Maxwell's Christmas stories.

He has asked me to tell you that he hopes these things don't happen to you this Christmas. And he also hopes they don't happen to him.

The Defective Detective : Murder on the Links (2010)

Clint had woken up in some strange places in his time. Narcolepsy is like that. But even he had never woken up on a golf course next to a dead body. Until today.

When one of his friends reveals himself to be a detective Clint jumps at the chance to tag along. But his friend is an idiot. And the police are beginning to suspect that he was involved. The identity

of the killer seems obvious but can Clint get to the bottom of the mystery and save his own skin before the stag party catches him? Murder. Intrigue. Alcohol. Detectives. Clues. Golf. Laxatives. What else do you need?

Chills, Kills & Snowflakes (2010)

Four tales of terror to send icy chills through your blood. These stories will scare you senseless this winter season.

When banker Alec takes shelter from a snow storm in a peculiar old shop, the shopkeeper is less than impressed by the lengths he has gone to secure to a last minute present.

He decides an education of sorts must be meted out and begins to tell Alec three stories to convince him the error of his ways.

A chef digests more than he bargained for in a dish served extremely cold.

A man is in for an unpleasant surprise when he tries to turn a curse to his own advantage.

And, when ghosts are awakened in a suburban house, a diary appears to show Alec the truth behind the spectres.

But with the cold snow storm closing in Alec is not as safe as he thinks in the back room of Venkman's Emporium of Curiosities.

The Defective Detective : The Curious Case of the Kilchester Courier (2012)

Chasing a parcel delivered to a neighbour, Clint is sucked into a remarkably civilised but mildly deranged crime scene. There he encounters almost-blackmail, not-actually prostitution, probable-sex scandals, genuine-imposters and the very real theft of something incredibly important.

Twice.

Will Clint be able to stay awake long enough to restore what has been stolen to its rightful owner and will he need to resort to his new book 'The Agency's Foundation in Private Investigation : Home Study Edition' in order to solve the case?

These and literally three other questions are answered in the third Defective Detective outing 'The Curious Case of the Kilchester Courier'.



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