



A Question Of Theories

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Chapter **1**

Presidential Briefing

March 2003...The White House

It had been the President's busiest weekend in so long a time, but everything had been set in motion. Saddam Hussein had been given his last ultimatum, Resolution 1441. It was either disarm or face the consequences. And Saddam had only a mere moment of time to decide.

The Azores Summit over, his goodbyes said to the Spanish and British Prime Ministers, the President had boarded Air Force One for the return home; for relaxation, he'd requested an in-flight movie, the one about the crazy public transport driver. Halfway through the film, Condoleezza dropped a bombshell. She'd intimated there was more truth to it than anyone realized.

Now, back home, his curiosity was getting the better of him and he wanted to know more. He buzzed for her.

Ten minutes later, his National Security Adviser was sitting on the other side of the desk, a huge, manila folder in her hands, ready to brief her boss. She waited till he'd finished checking a few documents.

The President cleared his throat, then spoke.

"Okay, Condoleezza, now tell me more about what you said on the plane."

"Anything specific, Sir?" she replied.

"For starters, explain to me what you meant about that movie. I thought it was just a comedy, but you've practically hinted there was an intelligence operation behind it. What gives?"

"Sir, the real-life version was Australian. Originally, he was a trolley—I think they call them trams in Australia—conductor, cartoonist and later a taxi driver. He was caught up in an operation of one of our dumber covert units, initially not knowing that. He was mainly used as a way to bring an errant cult leader back into line."

She then handed him the file.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"I see you missed the briefing on the use of cults for human intelligence..."

"Well, you know how distracted I've been of late. Go on."

"Okay, to quickly summarize: occasionally, some of the best intelligence comes from religious groups in all denominations and confessions. We had one unit covering that, but they sometimes had problems with a few cult leaders. In this case, one Australian leader got too big for his boots, and there was a need to institute a 'fail-safe.' But, the unit got more than they bargained for."

"Heck, and that's the back-story to that movie?"

"Yessir!"

"So, how does Hollywood fit into this?"

"You already know some of it... how the Pentagon helps out certain creative people in return for favorable treatment and views. The covert unit in question needed our real-life driver discredited if he found out more than they wanted him to know."

"Did this real-life guy use the Internet to research cults?"

"Very much so, Sir. He was good at working things out just from available information on the Net. Some other units have considered if he'd make a good intelligence assessor. Then again, he found out a few extra things, like who killed J.F.K."

"Hot Diggetty Damn! That's damn good. Uh... by the way, who did kill J.F.K.?"

"Sir, I have it on reliable authority that if the unit which does know have to tell you, they'd also have to kill you." Condy smiled as she said it.

"They are kidding... right?"

"Did you give them permission to kid, Sir?"

"Point taken. So, did the big-name actor who played the movie version know any of this?"

"Sir, if he did, they'd have to kill him too."

"Got it! So, what else was involved here?"

"Unlike the movie version, there was actually a romantic triangle involved. Look Sir, it's in the file."

The President looked at the manila folder in his hands.

"Condy, from what you say, it'd be quite a change from the usual stuff I have to read. And I need some relaxing reading at the moment, what with all this Iraq stuff."

"You'll find it intriguing, Sir."

"Any parts of it the missus can read?"

"Oh, definitely. I reclassified the romantic triangle elements with the First Lady in mind, so she's cleared to read those sections. Feel free to share those parts with her."

"Thanks, Condo."

"Sir, remember how I hate that nickname?"

"Um... sometimes."

"And, I also have some big friends in the professional wrestling community, who lean on people calling me that nickname."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks, Condy."

She had an important appointment to attend, so she said her good-byes, leaving the President to ponder the file. It would take him another two years to finally get through it all, considering the other issues at hand.

Within days, Saddam would ignore the ultimatum, the war would begin, within weeks it would be over and the Iraqi dictator in hiding, but over the following few years, the controversy would weigh heavily on the President. This file would be his only source of lighter moments.

He started reading the file...

Chapter 2

The Triangle

1. Mid-1987...Melbourne Australia

Not far from Melbourne's General Post Office, in Little Bourke Street, sits Galavici's Restaurant, home of some of the best pizza and pasta in all of Melbourne. Galavici's draws a reasonable trade from the various office-workers and city denizens, from lunchtime to late evening.

This particular night, close to eight-twenty-five, a yellow, 1979 model Toyota Corona station wagon pulled up outside. The car's owner, Gary Halliday, had given his friend, Anya Disimenko, a lift there, due to her own car developing problems earlier.

Gary was in his mid-twenties, tall but slim, dark-haired with blond tips. Anya herself was short, but petite, with long, flowing dark hair. She was nearly nineteen, but wasn't that great with mechanical details, hence, her car had run out of oil, nearly causing her to miss the appointment here at the restaurant.

"Thanks for driving me here, Gaz," she said. "I could kick myself for not checking that oil better."

"Don't apologize, Anya," he replied. "You know I don't mind helping out. So... who's this person you're here to meet? Male or female?"

Anya smirked.

"Female, if you must know. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were jealous."

"You wish, Kiddo. You and I are friends, not lovers. There's absolutely no reason for me to be jealous at all." It was hard to tell if he was joking or serious.

"Well, I'm glad we met at that Salvation Army church last year, because you've been a darn good friend to me ever since. Anyway, it's an old, school friend of mine, one I haven't seen in years. I'll be doing a lot of catching up tonight."

Halliday looked at his watch.

"Well, it's just on eight-thirty now, so you'd better get in there. Otherwise your friend will think you're being fashionably late."

Anya checked her handbag.

"So, why aren't you working tonight? I thought you were on late shift this week."

"It's a rostered-day-off tonight. No tram conducting. But I've got a heap of comic artwork to catch up on. So, are you sure you don't want me picking you up later?"

"Naw, I can catch a cab home afterward. Thanks again, Gaz."

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek, then exited the car. Within half a minute, he was driving off, leaving her to look in the window to see if her friend had arrived yet. Sure enough, the friend was sitting in one of the back booths.

Marianna Enzarizzi was taller than Anya, but younger than her by one day. She also was an immaculate dresser, though modest in her presentation, and had permed, dark hair.

It was forty-five minutes later. The girls were tucking into their after-meal sweets. Anya was just finishing a story.

"... and you should have seen the look on her face," she said, giggling.

Marianna was reminded of how Anya had been in the early years of high school, the sort of humor she'd had, so she was feeling uncomfortable about the story.

"You've grown out of your old antics, haven't you?" Marianna asked.

The other girl was midway through tasting her gelati.

"Of course," said Anya. "One has to grow up sooner or later. Changing the subject... you still going out with the guy you were seeing in school?"

Marianna looked wistful as she replied.

"He left for Switzerland a few years ago. I was upset at the time, but I eventually got over it. I think I annoyed my poor mama with how I carried on, though. I guess that guy wasn't meant to be the right one."

"So what about now? Any cool young spunks you've seen in your travels?"

This time Marianna smiled, dreamily.

"Seen, yes. Made any moves on, no. There's this cute-butted, skinny tram conductor I keep noticing on the Collins Street and Lygon Street lines. He's got dark hair with blond tips."

Anya nearly bit her gelati spoon, but Marianna failed to notice the reaction or the expression in her eyes.

"A trammie, eh? Have you talked to him yet?"

"Heavens no! I'm a bit shy yet. I'm still trying to figure a way for him to come up and talk to me."

"You'll still be single if you leave it up to a guy. When I want one's attention, I usually try dropping a hanky and get them to pick it up. Actually, drop anything, whatever gets the guy's attention."

"I'll have to remember that next time I'm on his tram. Heck, I can even pinch his bum that way."

Anya's eyes narrowed. Marianna ordered another cup of coffee, then turned to her friend to ask something more.

"So, what about your own love life, Anya?"

"There's really not that much to tell. I have a frie... friends, but nothing romantic going on at the moment. There were a couple of guys I went out with at different times last year, but nothing worked out. Heck, one even dumped me for a worse-looking blond."

"Yeah, being dumped for a blond isn't fun. We know blonds are good for only one thing."

"Yeah, but never tell any Italian boys that. They have such loopy grins on their faces if we shared such a thought with them."

They both laughed.

The waiter soon arrived with Marianna's coffee, so she took time out to put sugar in and stir, before asking her next question.

"So, what else has been happening apart from that?"

Anya contemplated her answer for a moment.

"Well, I'm working part-time in a government department... I usually have small parties regularly with friends... other than that, no much. I suppose there's a nagging need for religion in my life, too. I've done a few things I'm not proud of, so I guess you could say I'm searching a bit."

"Aren't we all? SO, what about future plans?"

"Hmmm. Well, I want to get married and have kids one day."

"Doesn't every girl? How many kids do you think you'll have?"

"Don't know yet. Hadn't thought about exact numbers."

"Knowing your luck, you'll probably have nearly ten of the blighters."

Years later, it would turn out a near-prophetic statement.

"So, what about you?" Anya asked.

"I'm a bit of a romantic. I keep dreaming of a handsome prince coming into my life and sweeping me off my feet, and off to his castle."

"Get real, Marianna. How many princes do you think you can find these days?"

"Hey, I'm not expecting a real prince. Just a guy who behaves like one. A guy with a gentle nature."

Anya's eyes narrowed again.

"Gee, you don't expect much, do you?"

"I only expect a guy who's really gentle-natured. And I've got a thing for slim guys."

Marianna missed the expression in Anya's eyes.

"Anyway, I'm not sure yet what sort of guy I want," Anya said, trying to change the subject slightly. "Sometimes I wonder if I'll end up a spinster."

"Come on, things with guys can't be that bad... "

"It doesn't help that I'm not good-looking like you."

"Anya, you're not that bad-looking."

"I'm realistic, Marianna. Anyway, it's getting on for time. I've got some things to do, so I'll have to get moving."

The girls settled their bills and made their way outside. Marianna started walking towards the Elizabeth Street tram line to catch the next tram home, waving goodbye to Anya as she went.

Anya stayed near the restaurant, watching her. Then she started opening her handbag. Inside the bag was a photo. She looked carefully at it, an image of Gary in his tram conductor's uniform, showing him the very way Marianna described.

As Marianna disappeared around the corner, Anya said something under his breath.

"I don't believe it. Of all tram conductors, she had to have the hots for Gary!"

Chapter 3

Orphine's Task

1. Mid-1989...Arlington Virginia, USA

In a quiet section of Arlington, not far from the divide between urban and rural, sat a nondescript, thirty-storey building. From the outside, it looked so very ordinary, not at all different from any commercial property elsewhere.

On the ninth floor were, what seemed from the outside, ordinary business offices. There were a few round the western side of the floor, with the rest of the space taken up by cubicles. Fifty men and women went about their chores, really, no different from any ordinary place... except for the fact they wore well-tailored black suit outfits, and dark glasses indoors.

In reality, this was a highly-covert intelligence unit.

In the south-western corner of the floor was the office of Daniel David Orphine, head of this unit. In there sat a tall, balding, grey-haired Orphine, adjusting his Rayban glasses and wiping small beads of sweat from his forehead. The case file on his desk annoyed him. He pressed his intercom and communicated with his 2-I-C.

Within a minute, Jake Fletcher had shuffled his portly frame in and was sitting on the other side of the desk. Jake was beyond receding hairlines, completely bald, with a light-grey mustache and very ordinary sunglasses. He always smiled.

"Okay, Boss, what's on your mind?" Jake asked his superior.

"It's that cult leader in Melbourne. He's pulling in heaps of money and funneling it through our cut-outs, but he just can't seem to stay out of trouble," the other replied.

"Titmouse? He still being a bit over-controversial?"

"Yep. We keep giving him hints to tone own, but he just doesn't seem to listen. He thinks as long as he's keeping incomes up, he can do as he chooses."

"He always was a bit of a pain. Some of our best people are still running themselves ragged, trying to cover up some of his mistakes."

"That's the problem, Jake... every time he's over-controversial, he drags scrutiny down not just on himself, but also on our other operations."

"So, I take it you want me to start trying something else with him?"

"Yeah. I think it's time we worked out what we want to do with him."

"Standard cult self-destruct?"

"I don't think so. We want to space those out a bit. And there are other groups I'm more wanting to save a self-destruct for. I'm thinking we should do the single-person, fail-safe option on Titmouse."

"Oooh, that's a nasty little option. I think some of the groups would prefer a self-destruct to the fail-safe." It's a damn pity we still have too many cult-leaders who get too big for their boots. The unit choosing these idiots needs to do better at weeding out the troublemakers. All we want cults to do is provide hum-int for us and an income stream from the adherents."

"So, you have any particular person in mind for fail-safing Titmouse, Boss?"

"Actually... " Orphine picked up another file. "... I do. You remember the old, war criminal emigre groups?"

"I do, although I'd have to check my security clearance again to see if I'm supposed to remember."

"We have a girl associated with one of the groups. Brilliant at databasing and networking. She's provided us with details of a man she thinks has the skills needed. The person in question could make either a good replacement cult-leader, or a good cult-buster. Here, this is the file on him."

Orphine tossed the file to Fletcher.

"This guy??" asked Jake, as he saw the photo immediately inside the file's cover. "Wasn't he the one whose ex-wife was also in the war criminal emigre groups?"

"Yes. We've got his ex entering union politics, so later down the line she can turn her particular union to the Right. This guy's cropped up in her file."

"But... last intell on him, he was starting to become aware of what his ex's politics were. The other girl must be keeping her own ties very secret from him."

"Oh, she is. And so far, she's doing a good job. We have her staying away from politics, and leading the guy down a different path. Anyway,

the young man looks to be a perfect fail-safe candidate. I want you to start setting things up.”

“What sort of time frame?”

“I’ll give you roughly a year on this one, Jake.”

“Got it. I’ll get on the secure line to our Melbourne agents to pass on the preliminaries.”

Fletcher was out the door in seconds.

Back at the desk, Daniel Orphine lit up a cigarette and looked out his window. Outside, he noted the clear skies and hot, balmy day. However, his gaze was in the wrong direction. Dark clouds were forming over the opposite side, just on the horizon.

Chapter 4

Sergio

1. October 1989...Pascoe Vale, Victoria Australia

The Semolina house was a lesson in contrasts. Some parts of it were immaculate, other parts spartan and ordinary. On the one hand, it had a beautiful dining area with an expensive couch and table, yet the kitchen was bare and furnished with old chairs. It was a two-storey brick residence, sitting right in the middle of a quiet, leafy street.

Mrs Semolina had been widowed over a decade now, and while her other two children had long since flown the coop, her youngest son, Sergio, still lived here.

At this point of time, though, he was pacing around the kitchen, mumbling to himself. He ran his fingers through his springy, dark, curly hair, then mumbled some more. Presently, he stopped near the kitchen table, picked up one of the chairs and threw it across the room, swearing at his mother as he did so.

She barely dodged it.

"Sergio, calma down. Dis mooda no good for you," she said. Even after all her years in Australia, her Italian accent was still quite heavy.

He wasn't in the mood for being lectured, either.

"You don't understand," he snapped. "You don't know how much pain I'm in. You're a bitch, Mama!"

Mrs Semolina was already past seventy, though her dark hair belied her age. She was also a woman of simple dress tastes, her clothing clearly not the latest fashion.

The sound of the doorbell ringing gave her a much-needed reprieve. She shuffled out to the hallway and took a look through the peephole in the front door, then returned to the kitchen.

"Sergio, itta your friend, Anya. Calma down, so I canna letta her in."

Her son appeared to do so, straightening up the chair he'd thrown a couple of moments earlier. He now looked surprisingly serene and waited as his mother escorted Anya Disimenko into the kitchen.

Anya's family had known the Semolina for a number of years, socializing with them regularly. After the customary Italian greeting kiss, she was the first to speak.

"Sergio, you really should have come to Anika's 21st last weekend... you'd have had such a good time," Anya stated.

"I'm sorry, Anya, but you know how sick I was," he replied.

His mother interjected.

"So, dissa party... what itta like?"

"Oh, it was a nice, rock-and-roll one... you know Anika's tastes in music. Casual dress, not formal. Although... there were two people there who didn't read the invitation correctly and came over-dressed."

"Didda that nice-a friend of yours, dat Gary boy, he go to da party?"

"He was one of the over-dressed ones. The other was a girl I used to go to school with."

"Aha. So, what else-a happen?"

"The over-dressed girl kept asking about Gary... who he was and if he were single. Earlier in the evening, he looked as if he wanted to dance with her. Luckily he doesn't do rock-and-roll, so I kept the jukebox playing everything he can't dance to."

With a blank look on his face, Sergio got back into the conversation.

"When are you going to bring Gary around again? He's a good bloke... a good bloke."

"Soon, Serge... soon."

Half an hour and one Italian coffee later, he had gone off to the lounge leaving Anya and his mother to chat. Mrs Semolina was expressing concerns about him to the younger woman.

"I worrya about my boy, Anya. He no getta any better. One doctor say one ting, other doctor saya another."

"We'll think of something, Mrs Semolina," Anya consoled.

"Perhaps. I getting old, Anya. I canna no look after him forever. Soona or da later, I needa finda some girl who take-a Sergio offa my hands," said Mrs Semolina as she took another sip of her own coffee.

"So, backa to da Gary. You like-a him?" she continued.

"Well, a bit... I never thought of him romantically before. On the other hand, I don't want that old, school friend being interested in him."

"Hassa he gotta good job?"

"Yes, he recently got a promotion at his work, too. He's also come into a small inheritance, as well."

"Alla dese tings very importanta. Betta notta let da other girl get hold of him. Gooda ting she no getta far atta da Anika party."

"You could be right there. What do you think I should do?"

"You smarta girl, Anya, you thinka da something. Boyz notta dat hard to figure out. Anyway, when-a your owna 21st party?"

"Less than a couple of months away."

"So keepa give-a da Gary hints. He normal boy, he eventually getta da hint."

Anya laughed.

"Okay, I'll work on it."

Not much more was said before Anya started making her goodbyes, then Mrs Semolina escorted her to the door. As it closed behind Anya, another chair went flying in the lounge.

Even outside, one could hear Sergio yelling: "Oh, my back!"

Chapter 5

Birthday Antics

1. December 1989...Moonee Ponds, Victoria Australia

Anya's 21st party was quite a shindig. Her guest list ran to one hundred-and-fifty people, a mixture of family, friends acquaintances and others, so she needed one of the bigger reception centers in the area.

Mia Casa Receptions was a fairly modern reception hall, not far up the road from the Moonee Ponds shopping district. This particular night it was full to the brim, and the music, a fair amount of seventies-and-eighties cover songs, was handled by the in-house band. Nobody was complaining about the music, judging by the packed dance floor. Anya herself was milling about, talking to various guests.

Over in one of the far corners of the hall sat Gary Halliday, looking puzzled by his particular seating assignment. He was with a group of people he didn't even know, well away from the usual group of friends he knew through Anya.

His hair no longer had blond tips, and tonight he was dressed handsomely in a leather jacket, slacks and with a thin, aqua-blue leather tie. Although he was very skinny still, a few girls had already noticed him and eyed him off.

One lady in particular was Marianna Enzarizzi, who sat over on the table in the opposite corner to Gary. This night she wore a smart, pink jacket and skirt, and she was already conversing with a dark-haired girl on her table.

The dark-haired girl noticed where Marianna's attention was.

"So, what's so special over at that other table, Marianna?" she asked.

"That guy over there," Enzarizzi replied, dreamily. "The cute, skinny one. Wotta spunk!"

The other girl looked disgusted.

"Him? He's pretty ordinary-looking, if you ask me. I prefer 'em muscular."

"I don't. I've never liked guys with steroid builds. Heck, a couple of years ago, I even had a thing for a skinny tram conductor."

"So, what ever happened to him, then?" asked the dark-haired girl, sipping her midori."

"I dunno. I never got the conductor's attention back then... and I haven't seen him on the trams lately." Marianna paused. "Oh, and then there was this other skinny guy I liked the look of at Anika's party..."

"Personally, I don't understand what you see in such wimpy guys."

"Skinny guys aren't necessarily wimpy."

The other girl was getting bored with the topic.

"Look, why don't you go ask Anya about him? I think he's a good friend of hers."

"Great idea!"

Near the center of the room, Anya was enjoying a break from the schmoozing and catching her breath. She leaned up against a pillar and scrunched up her hair, which had been specially permed for the occasion, then straightened up her halter-topped, white, long dress. She was a bit surprised to then see Marianna approaching her.

"Hey Mars," she called out. "What's happening?"

"I wanted to ask you something about the guy on that table in the far corner," Marianna pointed to Gary. "Do you know him?"

Anya saw who she was pointing to.

"Don't you know who that is?" she asked the other girl.

"My eyes aren't good at long distances. Am I supposed to know him?"

"Um... no, I guess not. What do you want to know about him?"

"Who is he, what's his name... and is he single?"

Anya answered very quickly.

"He's not available. I think he's spoken for already."

"Damn! I never get the ones I want."

"Hmm, that's interesting. So, you never got to talk to that tram conductor you once told me about?"

"Funny... I was just mentioning the trammie to someone on my table. No, nothing happened. I guess I was a bit too subtle with my hanky-dropping."

"Aw, what a crying shame! Guess you miss out on this one, too."

Marianna walked off, disheartened, finding someone else to talk to. Anya kept an eye on her for the rest of the evening.

Midnight finally came and most of the guests had already left, leaving only a few people wandering around. The reception hall staff were starting to turn most of the lights off, so Anya put on her jacket and started

heading for the exit. She found Gary just outside the door, so she walked up to him.

“So Mister, you heading off, or are you up for a little bit more?” she asked.

“Such as?”

“Late-night pizza to begin with. After that... well, I still feel like doing something.”

“What have you got in mind for after pizza?”

“I want to spend some time with my best friend... meaning you.”

2. Hours Later...Footscray, Victoria Australia

After a decent round of pizza in Lygon Street, Anya and Gary drove the scenic route back to his Footscray apartment, arriving there just after two in the morning. Gary locked the car up and opened his front door, and Anya just strolled inside. He hung his jacket up on the hook behind the door while Anya herself was already comfortable and jacketless on his couch. For such a busy night, she was still showing no signs of tiredness.

"So, who was that girl who came up to you and pointed to me, back at the party?" asked Gary, still standing for the moment.

Anya leaned back, suggestively.

"Oh, her. Just a friend of mine from my high school days."

"Was that the one you went to see in the city, a couple of years back, the night your car buggered up?"

Anya was peeved.

"Gee, you've got a good memory. Yeah, it's the same one. You know, you're starting to look uncomfortable, standing up like that... come one, sit down next to me."

"Okay."

"Gaz, how long have we been friends now?"

"Uh, close to four years now."

"Do you think we should be more than just friends?"

Gary hesitated before answering.

"Anya, I've often wondered about it, but I never thought I had a chance with you that way."

She was staring at the lambs' wool rug in the middle of the lounge floor.

"You know, I'm in the mood for a back massage," she said, moving over to the rug.

"Pardon?" said Gary in surprise. "Did I hear you right?"

"Back massage, Boy... now!"

All he could do was comply. She was already lying flat on her stomach, waiting for him to begin, her bare upper back accessible and ready. He began massaging, starting at her shoulders and noting she felt a tiny bit tense at first; within a couple of minutes of massage, she started relaxing. Gary looked down at her profile, seeing her smiling, her eyes closed.

"So, what did you mean by us being more than friends, exactly?" he asked her. "Definition, please."

"You've never made a pass at me. It's time you did."

"Again, I never thought I had a chance with you, romantically."

"Perhaps you had more chance than you realized.

Anya started to turn.

"Enough of my back," she continued. "Now you can massage the front."

Gary's jaw dropped. By now she was completely turned over, looking up at him and grinning.

"Uh, there's one problem with giving you a massage this way... "

She pulled his hands to her stomach.

"What, Mr Halliday?"

"Your boobs are in the way."

She pulled his hands, impatiently, from her stomach and moved them up to her breasts, letting him feel their firmness. While his attention was fixed there, she reached behind her neck to unclasp the halter on her dress. As she slowly let more bare flesh show, she watched and noted Gary's reaction.

"You can be so slow sometimes, Gaz... " she said, pressing his hands harder against her nipples.

Now he finally took the hint. His hands moved about over her breasts, drinking in their softness, enjoying them. Her nipples were now started to harden, especially when Gary tweaked them. Then he stopped tweaking them and moved a hand between her breasts, causing her to shiver and tingle. She thought about how a divorced guy was so good at this.

Things finally got to her. She pulled his face closer to her own, brushed her lips against his, then more firmly, then finally gave him a passionate kiss.

Chapter 6

Titmouse

1. Five Months Later...Footscray, Victoria Australia

In the kitchen of Halliday's flat, the calendar showed April 1990. The lounge, however, showed a trail of clothes, male and female, leading from the front door to the bedroom. Over the couch, a large, green backpack had been hastily dumped, while on the door handle leading to the bedroom, a bra was hanging limply.

Anya had picked Gary up at the airport only half an hour earlier, upon his return from a one-month, overseas trip. Upon their arrival at Gary's flat, they had a lot of catching up to do.

Inside the bedroom, they were both naked under the sheets, kissing and caressing passionately, oblivious to anything else. Anya pressed up to Gary, exploring his lips and mouth, while his hands explored her stomach and breasts.

She moved herself up and sat on top of his groin, feeling his manhood against her own nether regions, then started moving back and forth along its length. Gary's hands firmly caressed her stomach and sides, then moved slowly toward her breasts. She pulled his left hand against her right nipple, wanting him to tweak it, revelling in what he was doing. His other hand grabbed her left breast harder, as she moved faster and more firmly against him.

Gary wanted her so much, but was still leaving things at foreplay level. Yet, when she sat atop him like this, he wondered if his self-control could hold out much longer.

Finally, she lay down again, next to him, sweating, French-kissing him with abandon.

"For a man who just got back after a twenty-three hour flight, you've got a lot of energy, Mr Halliday," she said, unlocking her lips from his.

"After a whole month away, I'm just glad to see you," he replied.

She took a look at his groin.

"Yep, you certainly are."

She moved up on the pillow.

"So, Gary... was Israel all you'd hoped it'd be?" she asked.

"That and a whole lot more. The trip was really worthwhile.

Anya stroked his arm, slightly digging her nails in.

"I missed you heaps. I'm really glad you're back."

"And I missed you too. One thing, though. We've been cuddling up like this for a few months now. When are we going to tell our friends we're an item?"

Anya was contemplative.

"I'd prefer we waited awhile yet before telling anyone. I just want to be sure of us first."

"I hope it's soon. I don't like being secretive. I'd prefer going out with you properly."

"Just give me a little more time... "

"I am giving you time... that's why you're still a virgin."

Anya chuckled.

"Yeah, right... a virgin who still gets naked with her guy and indulges in heaps of foreplay. But you've got some amazing self-control there."

"Oh well... "

"Anyway, after such a long flight, you're probably more jet-lagged than you want to admit. Let's snuggle up and sleep the rest of the afternoon, then we can discuss plans for this evening."

"What do you have in mind?"

"My sister, Laura... she's come across a church she finds interesting. They have home meetings during the week and there's one on tonight. I want you to come."

"Pardon?"

"Get your mind above your navel, Halliday! Or go to sleep."

He was already quite drowsy, so he didn't need much prompting to put his head on his pillow.

"You should have come with me to Israel, Anya... you would have a whole new complexion on churches and religion."

"Sshh! Sleep, Gary."

He'd soon drifted off, snoring lightly, leaving Anya to just watch him as she sat back against the bed-head.

2. 8pm That Night...Northern Suburbs

The home meeting Anya referred to was being held in Campbellfield, a few streets south of Mahony's Road. Anya and Laura Disimenko had also invited another friend from their group, Anika di Nomino, along with them. At this point of the home meeting, the daughter of Pastor Noel Titmous, Jacinta, was speaking.

There were also two dozen other young people there, listening intently to her every word, though, there were some young men present who were more intent on ogling at her lithe form. Jacinta wore an exceptionally tight, woolen sweater and even tighter jeans. It was not the sort of gear on expected to see the daughter of a pastor in and couldn't be called modest dress.

Jacinta was standing in the middle of the room, flicking her long, blond hair back out of her eyes with one hand, holding an unopened bible in the other. And she was sounding like a televangelist.

"... Jesus died for our sins, people; he suffered on the cross for all of us. We must honor that sacrifice by learning this book, God's Word," she stated.

On one of the couches sat Gary, Anya, Laura Disimenko and Anika. Gary and Anya were sitting right next to each other, but trying not to give their friends any idea of just how close they really were. Something was bugging Gary about what he was seeing and hearing.

He leaned over to Anya and whispered in her ear.

"Is it just me, or does something sound a little different here?"

"Shh, Gary," Anya whispered back. "Just keep listening to Jacinta."

The pastor's daughter continued.

"At Faith Church, we have a great prophet, my father, the Reverend Noel Titmouse. I believe he's a mighty man of God. Come and discover it for yourselves at our Sunday meeting."

"I'm a bit puzzle," Gary whispered to Anya. "She still hasn't opened that bible yet... and it's sounding more like a sales pitch with each passing minute."

"Gary! Just shut up and listen." Her whispered, exasperated reply stunned him.

The main part of the evening was presently over, so everyone settled into socializing and partying. Snacks and soft drinks were placed on tables and other areas, both in the kitchen and lounge areas. Gary ended up in the kitchen, pouring a coca-cola, while the girls were talking elsewhere.

As he put his drink to his lips, a tall young man approached.

"So, what do you think?" asked the young man, in an over-enthusiastic tone.

"Its... " Gary took a second to compose his answer. "Well... it's intriguing. Your first time here, or are you a regular?"

"I've been going to Faith Church for a few months now. It's really turned my life around. You have to see Pastor Titmouse preach!"

"If my friends have their way, I probably will."

"Anya and Anika were saying you've just been to the Holy Land. You must have seen all the Christian sites there, then."

"Yep, all three religions' sites, too... Christian, Jewish and Islamic. I wasn't that happy with the Christian sites, though. There's this weird demarcation dispute at the Holy Sepulcher... "

"So what's wrong with being Christian? Man, it's the best thing to be!"

"I dunno... when I see the contrast between the three religions, I tend to prefer the original, Judaism. You really are full-on for this Faith Church, aren't you?"

"Of course I am! Aren't you?"

"Fair go, Mate, it's only my first contact. On the surface it seems close, but I wouldn't be awarding any cigars yet."

"Well, if you don't like it, don't bother coming back. We only want people who like Faith Church and its teachings!"

As the young bloke walked off, Gary was still in shock at how aggressive the guy had been. Meantime, Anika, who'd been listening to the conversation, came up to him.

"Gee, Gaz, he got a bit over-the-top, didn't he?"

"Yeah, something you don't always see at other church groups elsewhere. What's the story on this, Anika?"

"Oh, this is a group Laura found. She came to it first, then Anya followed, while you were overseas."

"That's ironic... usually it's Anya who's the searcher. She usually finds some church to explore, then drags us along."

Speaking of which, Anya and Laura had just entered the kitchen. Anya came up to Gary and asked him a question.

"So, what do you think of it, Gary?"

"Not answering that," he replied. "Got my head bitten off the last time."

Anya was perplexed, so Anika made a passing comment.

"Long story, Babe."

All three girls then went out of the kitchen, leaving Gary to contemplate another drink. Over the other corner of the kitchen was an older, solid-built man, who'd been listening to the whole lot while making a coffee. This was Paul Titmouse, eldest son of the Faith Church pastor. He turned to Gary.

"The young bloke had a point, Mate. Faith and Faith Church are about commitment."

"Perhaps, but he pushed it a little too strongly."

Paul's next comment surprised the Hell out of Gary.

"Let's be realistic, Mate... you're only here for the girls."

"If we're talking about my friends, Anya, Anika and Laura, yes I am. But I get the impression you don't mean them, do you?"

"You mean you're not here to perv on Christian women? Bullshit!"

"With all due respect, your group's woemn are good-looing—and they wear the tightest of clothes—but no, I'm not. And since when did Christians say 'bullshit'?"

Anya had returned to the kitchen just in time to hear this exchange. She started moving Gary away.

"Time to go, Gaz. You can talk to Pastor Paul another time."

Gary's jaw dropped. "You mean... he's a pastor himself?"

3. May 1990...Preston, Victoria Australia

A few weeks later, Anya had successfully convinced Gary to accompany her to a Faith Church Sunday meeting. The church sat on a little side-street in the residential part of East Preston, a relatively-modern main building, alongside an older, smaller hall. Approximately sixty young adults, all under thirty, filled the pews, mixing couples and singles together.

Pastor Noel Titmouse himself stood up on the podium, microphone in hand, delivering his message. Titmouse was a portly man, fifty-five years of age, with receding, white hair. His voice was a rich baritone and he surveyed his flock like a prince, barely glancing at the two people in the pews to his left... Anya and Gary. He continued his spiel.

"Religion, my friends," he said, gesturing heavily with his free hand. "Interesting word, that, religion. Then there's that other word, 'religious.' You know, I meet a lot of 'religious' people. But it's possible to be religious, yet never follow Jesus at all. Weren't the Temple leaders of his time religious? Yet, they didn't follow him. Those who ignored Jesus all claimed to be religious. I see it also, these days, even in the prisons I minister in. Some of the most sickening murderers and rapists come from religious homes. Some themselves claim to be religious. Yet, look where they are and what for. What did being religious truly mean to them? No, being born again is not about being religious."

Anya whispered to Gary. "Isn't that so true, Gaz?"

"I'd seriously question half of what he's said so far," he replied, also in light tones.

"Must you question everything?"

"It's called 'critical analysis.' I never leave home without it."

Back up on the podium, it was time for less talk. There was now a young lady standing in front of Titmouse. Behind her stood Paul Titmouse. The pastor had his free hand upon the lady's forehead as he prayed over her, while Paul stood, seemingly, ready to catch her if she fell back.

"This woman has a demon in her," Noel Titmouse bellowed. "I name it a demon of rebelliousness and drug abuse. I now cast this demon out in the name of the Lord. Out, demon... out. In the name of Jee-zuz!"

There was a small, almost imperceptible nod of his head, then Paul's fingers probed deeply into the woman's kidney region, sharply and quickly. She fell backwards, into his waiting arms and he lowered her to the podium floor. She appeared to convulse, barely able to move.

Almost everyone in the hall had failed to see the younger Titmouse's finger movements. Only one person had spotted it and noted its timing... Gary. He knew he'd seen a parlor trick. The problem? Everyone else thought it had been for real.

Noel Titmouse looked back to his audience. "As Jesus was able to do, so too can his disciples. I have cast out many demons in His name. This is the power of Jesus working in Faith Church. To do our work, your support is crucial. We don't want people here who don't want to contribute. We don't want people who aren't prepared to put their money where their faith is."

Gary whispered to himself. "I think I get what's happening here."

Anya's Mistake

1. Late-July 1990...Footscray, Victoria Australia

It was a Saturday evening, just after midnight. The lounge was lit by a single, dim light, with only a small amount of even that light filtering through to the bedroom. In the semi-darkness, Gary and Anya lay intertwined, naked, indulging in more foreplay, although with a sharper edge due to the debating they'd been doing beforehand.

This time Anya chooses the bottom position, cradling his head as he kissed her soft breasts and nibbled her nipples. Although she didn't like the arguing, she loved the result, when he was more passionate and assertive. His mouth was all over her upper body, kissing and eating her shoulders and chest. She in turn ran her fingernails down his back, down to his buttocks, then she guided his left hand between her legs. He understood what she wanted and started to massage her pubic region. While they hadn't indulged in full sex, she loved it when he got her aroused this way. She spread her legs more and moaned as he played with her moistness, drinking in the sensation. She in turn grasped his manhood, feeling it firm between her fingers.

Sometimes, though, she wished he wasn't so much of a gentleman with her. She really wanted him to take her. But for now, as he played with her this way, she was enjoying his touch. Her moans became louder as she neared climax, she gripped him even tighter, till finally she came. At the highest point of it, she bit into his chest, hard.

Afterward, as they cuddled, she spoke to him.

"I really wish you'd see things my way, Gaz. Don't you see how good Faith Church is? It's great, compared to some of the other churches we've seen."

He was exasperated. "Anya!! It's all about money there. Money and illusion. We've been to enough meetings the last couple of months and seen the same thing. Every time they cast out demons, or dring down the

Holy Spirit, Paul's doing that hand-movement trick. Can't you see how suspect that is?"

"Paul and the others are just there to see nobody hurts themselves when they fall. It's no trick."

Gary could see the anger and hurt in her eyes, so he backed off a little.

"You know, we never used to argue before Faith Church appeared," he said, stroking her face.

She gave him a small smile. "On the plus side, we're more passionate when we argue, so there's one good thing about it. Look, Gaz, I don't like arguing with you... but I think, sooner or later, you're going to have to see I'm right."

"Pardon?!?" Are you right if you keep missing that trick Paul uses?"

She turned away from him slightly.

"Gary, Honey, I need you to trust me on this."

"You I trust. It's these Faith Churchers I'm not so sure of."

Weeks after that, this time on an August Saturday afternoon, Anya was again visiting Gary. After their usual antics, she walked around the apartment clad only in his pajama top. Gary himself was sitting on the couch, wearing the bottom half of the pajamas, working at his drawing board, trying to pencil his comic character while distracted by the television. On the TV there was a newcast about Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Anya returned from the kitchen with coffees for both of them.

"Gaz, you've been at the drawing for over an hour. Take a break," she suggested.

"I'm trying to get this finished, but these news updates don't help."

"What's the big deal? So there's some silly war over in Kuwait. It's thousands of kilometers away from here. It doesn't affect us."

"It may, though. You know, when I was in Israel earlier this year, Saddam was threatening to scorch half of Israel if they even looked in his direction. Not that they were... but it indicated he had something on his mind. Now we know what. And yet, he still wants to cause trouble for the Israelis, even though they don't have any interest in him at the moment. I'm concerned about it, even if no one else is."

"You're just one person. What can you do?"

"I can give a shit, for starters."

She wanted to change the subject. She put the coffee down on the small table, then sat down beside Gary, nuzzling him.

"So... tell me about this comic character. Is this the one you used to draw for that Australian comic?" she asked.

"Yeah. The one I did for Revealed Anthologies. I call the character Shomer."

"What ever happened to the comic?"

"The publisher couldn't afford to keep it going. It closed in 1986. It wasn't a paying proposition anyway for the artists, more a labor of love. Here in Australia, mainstream publishers think it's cheaper to use reprints instead of paying writers and artists a page rate."

"Have you ever thought of doing a comic strip about a comic artist or writer?"

Gary sucked on his technical pencil. He thought the suggestion over.

"And what exactly would a comic artist or writer do as a comic character himself?"

"I dunno... perhaps get caught up in a mystery?"

"Yeah, right. As if. I don't think such a concept would sell or work, not even as a book or a movie, let alone a comic. Heck, I don't even think it could possibly happen in real life."

There was a faint, barely-noticed curling of Anya's lip. However, something outside drew her attention.

"Gaz," she said. "Can you hear that siren? Is that an ambulance going past?"

"Possible. Usually one of those goes past every week in this neighborhood. Now, what was I saying? Oh yeah... I think the idea of a comic creator getting caught up in a mystery is a bit too far-fetched and silly."

Anya leaned on his shoulder. "I suppose you're right."

For a change, they got through the rest of the day without arguing. The TV, however, kept grabbing his attention as he watched each news update about the Kuwait situation. He was concerned how Israel would far in this latest bit of trouble. Anya's best bit of snuggling couldn't get it off his mind completely.

2. Late-August 1990

Unfortunately, the argument-free time didn't last.

Nor did Saddam Hussein heed calls to get out of Kuwait.

In a northern-suburbs pizza shop, where Faith Churchers gathered each Sunday night after the meeting, Anya and Gary were debating things again.

It was a large restaurant with capacity for one hundred patrons, though, tonight, there were only sixty Faith Churchers, including the Titmouse clan, having a meal. More than enough custom to keep the proprietor happy. The atmosphere was convivial and jovial, except in the corner where Anya and Gary were seated as they tried to resolve a sticking point.

It was Gary's turn to speak.

"You asked me a really interesting question during the meeting, Anya... but you know the answer. I can't join Faith Church with you."

"But why not?" she pleaded. "This is something we can do as a couple, just the way you wanted us to be. I really want us to do this together."

He was really straining as he made his answer.

"This is going to be the hardest decision I've ever made, Anya, but it's the correct one. I can't join. End of story."

"Gary, without you, I've already gotten baptized. If you really push me, it can be all without you."

"If... I... push... you?? Lady, you're the one pushing me! There's still a lot of things wrong with this group that a fine-tooth comb would easily show up. And since your baptism, some of your behavior has actually gotten worse, not better. Doesn't that tell you something's not kosher here?"

A couple of tears started to trickle down Anya's left cheek.

"Gaz... I feel you'd only hold me back!"

Opposite her, Gary did a double-take. Just one phrase had hit him like a wrecking ball. He'd heard the very same phrase years earlier, with a different woman, in different, more deserved circumstances. He could not believe Anya had just said that. He had to rein in his emotions, as he felt the urge to slap her.

"Nice comment, Anya," he said. "I heard the same thing from my ex-wife, five years ago." With that, he stormed from the restaurant. He had to.

Across the road from the pizza restaurant was a small shopping precinct, so Gary crossed over to it to try and work through his emotions.

He couldn't understand how this could be happening. His marital split five years earlier had been bad enough, but he'd lived this far in the hope good things would come out of it. The way things had gone with Anya, previously, had led him to think she was a huge improvement over his ex-wife... so how could everything have turned so pear-shaped?

His stomach was turning as he began the return leg to the restaurant. He knew she'd essentially just given him the bum's rush. It didn't make it any easier to accept. He had to wonder why God was putting him through all this.

After a fifteen minute walk, Gary returned to his seat opposite Anya. He was trying so hard to hold back tears as he got ready to make an announcement to her.

"Anya," he said, "I care a hell of a lot about you—damn it, I even actually love you—but the answer's still the same. I think God's definitely got a different path for me. Perhaps it's Israel. Perhaps I'm needed there more than I am here."

Anya's expression betrayed her shock. This was not what she'd wanted.

"Huh?? What? But—how—Gazza?!?" she blurted. "What are you talking about? What are you going to do?"

He gave her a determined look. "I'm going to toss in my job and make another trip to Israel."

Gary turned away for a brief second, looking over to Titmouse. Behind him, Anya said something in a low whisper.

"Omigod! I've blown it."

Flights

1. Mid-September 1990...Tullamarine Airport, Melbourne

The night before Gary was due to fly out overseas again, Anya left his apartment at three in the morning.

Thirteen hours later, Marianna Enzarizzi was joining her at the airport. Anya's invitation had come out of the blue, so Marianna barely had time to put on a good outfit and drive up to the airport.

Now, here they were, walking through the sliding doors into the departure lounge.

"Thanks for inviting me, Anya. I was getting bored at home today."

"Hey, I wanted to catch up with you, Marianna. I haven't seen you since your own 21st."

"That was such a fun night, too. I just wished I'd had a boyfriend to share it with. I should show you the video of it... you're in a fair few scenes."

"Ha ha! I guess I'm quite a ham actress," Anya giggled.

"So remind me again... who are we seeing off here?"

"A good friend of mine. He's heading over to Israel, of all places!"

"Oh boy! He really picks a good spot, what with all that Saddam Hussein and Kuwait stuff going on at the moment. He must be a pretty brave guy."

"Brave or stupid, one of the two. Still... he's a really kind, honest guy. I'm going to miss him."

"Is he a boyfriend of yours?"

Anya was caught off-guard. "Um—uhh—er, well... naw, he and I are just good friends. That's it, just good friends."

"Yeah, sure, Anya... the way you're going on about him, you must really like him."

"Like I said: just good friends!" Anya snapped, defensively.

Thankfully for her, they finally found Gary and her other friends near one of the airport bars. Gary was now sporting the beginnings of a beard

and an akubra hat was perched on his head. However, Anya wanted to keep Marianna distracted. She had Anika talk to her while she moved Gary to a more private corner.

When she'd found the right spot, she leaned close to him, but not so close anyone could figure her real feelings for him. She was still keeping things from the rest of the group about how close she and Gary had been.

"So, did you get much sleep after I left this morning?" she asked.

Half-sleepily, and half-smiling, Gary replied. "Only a little bit."

"Hopefully you'll get some sleep on the plane. Pity you were so damned self-controlled again."

"For a baptized girl, you really needed to take a few cold showers last night, Anya. I spent two hours trying to tell you to cool your libido."

"Sometimes I wonder if you're a virgin yourself, Mr Halliday."

"Sorry, but I do take your choice seriously. You've been baptized, so I don't think it's right to go all the way, even under the current circumstances."

She moved even closer to him.

"You are going to come back in three months, aren't you?"

"Of course I will. I just think this will help things a bit... give us both some time to think."

"I'd rather you stayed, Gaz."

"I know... but I'm feeling it's better for me to have something to do for a few months, instead of arguing."

They returned to the bar and the rest of the gang. However, Anya still didn't want Marianna too close to Gary, so she moved her away to converse with her.

"So, what do you think of him?"

"Not that I got a good look at him... but from I did see, he's damn cute. Anya, are you sure you're not going out with him?"

Her sole reply was a stare. An icy, freezing stare. A deep chill stare. If looks could kill...

"So, when did you say he's coming back?" Marianna asked, smiling.

"From what he said a few minutes ago, I don't think he is returning at all."

Marianna was disappointed. "What a shame. I wouldn't have minded getting to know him. You did say he was single, didn't you?"

In Australia, there's a saying about glares that could melt asphalt at twenty paces. The look Anya was giving Mariana would have melted the whole of Antarctica.

Not that Enzarizzi was noticing it. She was too busy trying to get a better look at Gary.

The boarding announcement came over the public address system, so they had to start moving to the customs doors. Somewhere in the immediate area, a radio was playing a popular Wilson Phillips song. Gary now had his backpack on, was adjusting his akubra hat and talking a last look at his friends. The line of people for the flight moved up, and finally it was his turn to go through the doors. He appeared confused, especially when he made one quick, last glance at Anya. Then he was gone.

All the rest of the group was busy watching Gary disappear through the doors, but Marianna was watching Anya's reaction. She spotted a sole, lonely tear in Anya's eye which was quickly brushed away. Yes, Anya was upset, but she was even more annoyed at Marianna's interest. In spite of her never recognizing Gary from previous times, Marianna had a bad knack of still being attracted to him, no matter how different his appearance was.

A full two minutes passed, with Anya still staring at the customs doors. Then she turned to Anika, Laura, Marianna and a couple of others and said: "Okay, that's it. Time to move on. Pizza, anyone?"

As they all slowly moved to the exit, Laura spoke to her sister.

"I can tell when something's wrong, Sis. What's up?"

"Marianna's got the hots for Gary."

"So?"

"I don't like it. Thankfully, every time she's seen him, he never looks the same, so she doesn't recognize him from times like my 21st, or back on the trams. Still, it annoys the shit out of me."

"Weird. She got eyesight problems?"

"Yes, she doesn't see too well at long distances."

"No, I meant she must have bad eyesight to want Gary."

"At least I can trust you not to have the hots for him."

Both girls laughed.

"Just help me make sure she never realizes he's her favorite tram conductor," Anya added.

2. December 1990...Melbourne

After an eventful Israel trip, Gary was coming through the arrivals door at Tullamarine, returning at the expected three-month point.

He looked around, watching other people being greeted by their loved ones. He tried looking for his own friends, but even before the quick glance, he knew the answer. There would be no Anya here to meet and greet him. All he could do was make his way to the taxi rank.

Forty minutes later, the key turned in the lock of his front door, and the light was switched on. Gary noted the apartment was exactly as he'd left it, everything still intact. But it felt empty. There would be no Anya to snuggle up to this return.

The phone still had a dial tone. Thankfully he'd thought to pre-pay his bills in advance of the trip. Fingers ran along the keypad, dialing Anya's number. A moment as the connection was made, then her voice. But there was little emotion in it now, just shallow commentary and business-like banter.

"Yeah, I've been back about an hour now. I really wish you'd been there," he said into the phone receiver.

On the other end, Anya was making an excuse for not seeing him when his plane arrived.

"I know you've been busy. So, do I at least get to see you tonight, then?"

Anya said she had a function at Faith Church to attend that night.

"Heck, how many Faith Church things do you go to these days?"

She asked if he were arguing.

"No, I'm not. I was just hoping that, with me being away for three months, you'd actually want to see me."

Anya mentioned having a hole in her busy schedule the next week.

"Okay, that's fine. Not as early as I'd like, but it'll do. Okay, see ya then."

The phone was placed back on its cradle. More staring at a cold, lifeless apartment. Then tears, flowing like rivers.

Later the same day, Marianna was also talking to Anya by phone.

"... yes, of course I'll come along. So, what is it again? Another Faith Church meeting? Well... I suppose. Nothing else on the social calendar today," she said to the other girl.

Marianna suddenly remembered something, while Anya prattled on the other end of the line.

“Hey, whatever happened to that guy we saw off at the airport back in September?” she asked Anya.

The reply was that he'd never returned.

“Aw, what a pity! He was such a spunk. Would have been nice to have met him properly.”

Icy silence on Anya's end of the line.

“Anya? You still there? You went so quiet I thought the line went dead. Okay... you'll pick me up at seven? See you then.

Chapter 9

Off To The Gulf War

1. January 9, 1991...Western Suburbs, Melbourne

Nothing much improved during Gary's one-month return to Melbourne. At best, he and Anya shared only one trip to the movies, the furthest they went being holding hands. Things were nothing like they'd been back in September.

He'd already made a decision to go back to Israel and see how the Gulf War would turn out. He was booked for one of the last flights into Israel before the deadline for war, having made promises to friend in Jerusalem to sit out the crisis with them and he wanted to keep his word. It was clear there was nothing back in Melbourne to cause him to do otherwise.

Days before Gary's next flight out of Australia, Anya and Anika organized a party for him, part 31st birthday, part going-away party. The early part of the evening was spent at a Campbellfield restaurant, with the after-party occurring at the home of two of their friends, Sharon and Eustace.

Sharon was the same age as Gary, but worked with Anya. So too did Eustace, actually, albeit in a different section. Sharon was soft-spoken, yet her face had a hard edge to it, underneath sandy-colored hair. Eustace himself sported the customary, eighties mullet hair-style. He was actually younger than Sharon by eight years.

Other members of the group in attendance were Laura and a bespectacled Connor. Connor had joined the group through one of Anya's other church links, a year or two earlier, much to Gary's surprise. He'd known Connor back at college, but had lost contact with him in the years afterward.

At one end of the lounge, Gary was speaking with the hosts.

"Look Gary, I know how hard it is for you to accept this," Sharon was saying. "Things change. Anya wants to do her own thing. You just have to accept it anyway."

"Sure," Gary replied. "But even you've agreed things aren't right at Faith Church."

"Different issue! I know you like her, but I don't think you two have a chance together."

"Luv, aren't you being a bit hard on him?" Eustace interjected.

"Sweetie, it's just life, plain and simple."

Gary didn't want to hear any more from Sharon, so he strode to a different part of the room, sitting down on a stool. He was really upset by her opinion and fighting to repress tears.

Connor came up to him with a bowl of crisps.

"Gary, you amaze me," he stated.

"How so, Connor?"

"You've got some really incredible different ideas on religion... you're prepared to follow-through with them, to the point of walking into Israel again, just as the war's about to start."

"Perhaps I've got a self-destructive streak... "

"Naw, seriously Mate... you're doing something that takes both guts and faith."

"I don't see anyone else in the room wanting to do the same," Gary said, sarcastically.

"Different people, different types of faith."

"Your mum's Jewish, Connor... perhaps you should be the one going over there."

"She's only Jewish by birth. The family's been effectively Christian for over a generation."

"Deep down, you're still Jewish yourself. It should be you caring more about Israel."

"Let's discuss that another time, like when you get back from this next trip. How long are you going to be away this time?"

"I dunno, perhaps a couple of years. I don't see any other reason keeping me here at the moment."

Connor walked off to talk to someone else, replaced by Anya, who had been listening in on Gary and Connor's conversation.

"Happy Birthday, Gaz," she gushed.

"It doesn't feel like one this time," he replied.

"I'm sorry we haven't seen each other much, this time round. You do understand, don't you?"

"I wish I did, Anya... I wish I did. You keep telling me this is how God wants things. Sometimes, I have to wonder."

She didn't react to the comment, she just leaned forward and gave him four kisses on his cheek in quick succession, thinking it would cheer him up.

Instead, he was bewildered. She moved off, leaving him to ponder the action.

“Why did those feel like Judas Kisses?” he wondered.

2. 8pm, January 11, 1991

It was dusk and everyone was at Tullarmarine Airport again, although Anya had brought Sergio Semolina along this time. Marianna Enzarizzi was also present, contacted by Anya to attend.

Gary was talking with most of the others, while Sergio stood on his own, with his usual blank look. Over in a far corner, Disimenko was talking to Marianna.

"You've got a lot of friends going overseas this year, Anya," Enzarizzi said. "Especially skinny ones. What's the story this time?"

The other girl looked over to Gary. This time, he was clean-shaved, no hat on. Anya was keeping her as far away from him as possible, hoping she could still get away with keeping Marianna in the dark about previous times she'd seen Gary.

"Nothing you'd want to know," Anya finally answered. "Thanks for coming."

Enzarizzi was trying to get a better look at Halliday.

"Gee, this one's a little different from the one in September. Just as skinny, though. You must have a lot of slim friends. He's a spunk!"

Anya rolled her eyes. She could anticipate what would be said next.

"So," Marianna began, "who is he, what's his name... a-a-n-n-d, is he..."

"Single?" the other girl finished the question. "Not worth knowing."

Disimenko walked then walked over to Sergio, who was still staring blankly and fidgeting with his fingers. It was a trait of his she'd seen so often in the time she'd known him.

"So, Serge," she said, looking back to Marianna. "What do you think of her?"

"Is she Italian, Anya? Is she Italian? It'd be good if she were Italian."

Anya grinned. "She is. After Gary's gone, I'll introduce you to her. Better yet, I'll bring her down to your mother's place."

"You're a good friend, Anya, a good friend. So... where's Gary off to again?"

"For the twentieth time, Serge, he's off to Israel."

"Israel... that's in the Middle East, isn't it? That's where the Gulf War will be?"

"Mmm-hmm!"

"I wish I were as brave as Gary. But I'm sick."

The minutes ticked away to departure time, so Gary came up to Anya for one last, brief chat.

“So... goodbye or farewell?”

“We'll know in time, Gary. I know I'll miss you, but we each have our own paths to take at this moment. Just don't get yourself killed over there, okay?”

“I'll try not to.”

She gave him a quick, Italian-style kiss, nothing romantic, even emotionless.

He moved through the customs doors, much quicker than four months before. This time, Anya shed no tears for him.

She now brought Marianna into the main grouping, and said: “Okay everyone, Mrs Semolina is putting on tea, coffee and biscuits...”

Chapter 10

Plan 'B'

1. September 1992...Arlington Virginia, USA

Apart from Jake Fletcher, everyone in the office was keeping out of Orphine's way. His mood was so bad, none of them knew what he'd do, or where they'd be posted if they got on the wrong side of him.

Jake was aware why his boss was so upset.

Fletcher looked at the ashtray on Orphine's desk, noting it was filled to overflowing. He knew his boss chain-smoked heavily when something really bugged him. He then saw the most recent cigarette still protruding from his boss's mouth.

"Do you realize how our reputation is right now?" Orphine shouted. "Every other nation's intelligence service is laughing at us, and even some of our local competitors inside the Pentagon!"

"I know, Boss," Jake replied. The Israeli Mossad boys especially are snickering. But if you really want to hear some big guffaws, listen to the German BND."

"It looked so simple a few years ago... simply get Halliday to be Titmouse's replacement. How the Bleep! Could we have cocked that up?"

"I've always had my doubts about those ex-Nazi networks and their people."

"Jake, Halliday wasn't even supposed to be in Israel these past two years. Whoever screwed that up should be horse-whipped."

"We don't horsewhip women, Boss."

"Jake, that wimp survived the Gulf War... then somehow managed to survive an eighteen-month enmity with one of the worst Hamas people in all of Jerusalem. That was not part of our planning."

"Ya gotta laugh, though, Boss... what a unique way to pull down a Hamas terrorist... stand up to him in front of two hundred of his fellow Palestinians."

"Pure dumb luck on Halliday's part."

"On the other hand, if we want to use him as a cult-buster, wouldn't you say the exercises provided the perfect training?"

"Except it was never part of our original intentions."

"So let's utilize it anyway, Boss."

Orphine thought it over for a minute.

"Perhaps it might be a way of regaining some standing with the other covert units. Still, Jake, I can't get over what Halliday did to that Ali Hasan. Heck, non-violently, too. Whatever happened to people who punch and kick like Arnie?"

"Boss, Arnie's an actor... "

"God help us if Arnie ever gets into politics... he'd be another Reagan."

"Keeping things on subject, Boss, Halliday's going to be returning to Australia in a couple of months."

"Yeah, I got the transcripts from the West Jerusalem Consulate. Enough on Halliday... update me on the Titmouse thing."

"The scrutiny on Titmouse is getting worse. There was an expose done by that Australian journalist, Hensch, a few months back. Then there's a Victorian State Minister looking Titmouse's way, too."

"Then we still need to use Halliday anyway... "

"I'm afraid so, Boss."

"We need a better handler for Halliday than the bitch we previously used. I think I have someone in mind." Fletcher was handed a file, which he quickly examined.

"Hmm, very interesting... I didn't know this guy even knew Halliday."

"Get on with things, Jake and let's hope we can get it right this time."

Chapter 11

Return

1. Early-December 1992...Pascoe Vale, Victoria Australia

Coming down the street to the double-storey house was a much slimmer Gary Halliday than the one who left for Israel, two years earlier. Actually, he was still recovering from malnutrition suffered eight months ago. His hair was now in a mullet style and this particular morning he sported two-day stubble. However, his gait was more determined than it had ever been.

The last time he'd seen the Semolina residence was little over two years ago, but this was effectively his first visit by himself.

Now inside the property and at the front door, he rang the bell.

The door opened and Mrs Semolina peered out.

"Gazza! Issa long time-a no see," she said.

"Hi, Mrs Semolina... two years isn't that long," he replied, a gentle smile on his face.

"I supposa you wanna see Sergio. Come-a insida."

She escorted Gary through to the lounge, where he found Serge and someone else... a young, tall, dark-haired, young lady in her early-twenties.

Sergio got off the couch and rose to greet him.

"Gary Mate, you're back at last," he gushed. "Did you get my letter?"

"Of course I did, Sergio," Gary was looking past him to the young lady, trying to figure out if he'd seen her before. "It cheered me up immensely during the worst part of the trip. By the way, shouldn't you be making some introductions?"

Semolina was embarrassed. "Forgive my manners. Gary Halliday, meet Marianna Enzarizzi. Gary, Marianna's my girlfriend."

Considering what he remembered of Sergio, Gary was amazed such a thing had occurred.

"Explain that to me, Serge. How did you manage to get such a good-looking girlfriend?"

"Anya introduced us a couple of years ago... but we've only been going out the past six months," Sergio answered.

"You're a friend of Anya's, then?" Gary asked Marianna.

"Yeah," she replied. "I used to go to school with her once."

"I get the strangest feeling I know you from somewhere."

"Funny. I was getting the same feeling. I know I've seen you before, but I can't place where."

"Perhaps it was on the trams."

Gary didn't realize just how close he'd come to the truth.

Neither did Marianna. "Perhaps. Anyway, Serge has been telling me you've been overseas."

"Just got back, too. I hear Anya's really over-the-top for Faith Church these days."

Sergio interrupted. "You should come, Gary. Pastor Noel's a great man... he's even healed me a few times."

"So he's never been able to do it on a permanent basis?"

"Well, I lose faith too easily. So the healing stops after awhile. Pastor Noel's a great man."

"That's what I'm here to disprove, Serge. He's the biggest faker out."

"So you don't like Faith Church? You won't be too popular with Anya, then," Marianna interjected.

"I'm unpopular already, writing to her and saying the same thing earlier this year."

"So, what's your relationship to her?"

"I used to be a good friend of hers once. Heck, she and I were even closer than friends before Faith Church appeared. I hear, though, she's been keeping that a secret from everyone."

At that point, Mrs Semolina returned from the lounge.

"Gazza," she said. "Come havva da coffee in the kitchen."

He followed the old lady out of the lounge, leaving Marianna to talk with Sergio.

"So, what's the story on Gary?"

"The way Anya tells it... " said Serge, "he's obsessed with her."

In another part of the house, halfway up the stairs, sat Anya herself. She'd told the other three not to let on to Gary she was actually present.

She'd heard everything, even the exchange between Gary and Marianna.

Chapter 12

Pizza And Pastor

1. Early-January 1993...North Melbourne, Victoria Australia

For almost a year, Faith Church had been headquartered in a new, three-storey building in one of the side-streets of North Melbourne. There was still conjecture about what happened to their previous site, some whispers about it being destroyed by arson for insurance reasons.

Gary Halliday had decided to turn up at one of the Sunday night meetings, having now gotten as far as sitting in the pews on the top floor, amongst the adherents. The meeting was still five minutes away from starting.

Anya had shown photos of Gary to the Faith Church hierarchy, so a junior pastor soon recognized him. He and two other Faith Churchers approached Halliday.

"Mr Halliday," said the junior pastor, "might I have a word with you in private?"

Gary left the pews and followed the other three nearer to the exit. Then the pastor dropped his bombshell.

"Mr Halliday, it's come to our attention you don't agree with Faith Church doctrines and teachings. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Isn't that a twist?" Gary noted. "Usually you begin evangelizing talking to people who don't necessarily have an interest in the subject, don't you?"

"I'm not going to ask you a second time, Halliday..."

"Okay, I get the message. And out of courtesy, I will leave. Simply because that's my way, not because of anything you guys say or do."

He was soon outside the building, having no further problems from the Faith Churchers. He stood for a minute, looking back to the building, recognizing he wouldn't get anywhere with this approach. He'd have to come up with another angle. He wasn't going to be deterred.

2. Late-January 1993...Prahran, Victoria Australia

He'd found lodgings in a boarding house he'd lived at ten years earlier. It was an old, brick place, on one of the major roads in Prahran, with over twenty-two tenants' rooms. There was a small, central lounge area on the ground floor, so it was here he conversed with an old friend from his previous stay, Kirrin Kirkham.

Kirkham was in his forties, with longish, curly hair and a baby face. His style of dress was semi-rocker, the usual t-shirt and jeans, big belt and boots. He was also solid-built, albeit with a paunch. He'd just spent the past half-hour listening to Gary explain the situation with Anya and Faith Church and had a few ideas he wanted to share with him.

"So what makes you think you can help, Kirrin?" Gary was cautious.

"Gaz, I know a couple of guys who investigate cults," Kirkham replied. "Give me a few weeks to contact them and I'll see what they can do."

"One of your own girlfriends was in a cult once. Were these the guys who helped you back then?"

"Well, they tried. In the end, the girl herself didn't want to leave it. Anyway, they're journalists."

"I'm still not sure of this, Kirrin, but if you can get them to give me anything of value for getting Anya out of Faith Church, it'll be worth a try."

The older man lit up a cigarette. "So, changing the subject... do you ever hear from your ex-wife?"

Gary picked up a comic to glance through. "Haven't talked to her in years. Last time I heard, she was an organizer in the union she's in."

"We had some good, fun times together when you two were living here."

"Yeah, but that was a decade ago. I don't think she's ever stayed in contact with anyone from this place."

"I suppose she was a fraction snobby..."

Halliday checked his watch. "I've got to get going, Kirrin. I'm trying for a job with a taxi company today."

"Good luck with it."

Minutes after Gary had left, Kirkham moved to the alcove just under the stairs, where the house's public phone was situated. It was one of the old, red-style Telstra phones. He inserted twenty cents into it, dialed a number, and waited for the connection. Then he talked.

"He bought the cover story," he said to the person on the other end.

“Yes, I know what to do. No, I don't have any problems with it. He walways was a little dip shit anyway,” he added a few seconds later.

“By the way, how's things in the union?”

3. Late-March 1993

As with the headquarters, even the pizza shop the Faith Churchers went to after a meeting had changed. It had taken a month for Gary to get a rough idea where.

He'd already been popping in to this establishment, Fast Pizza and Pasta, for a couple of Sundays now, having his meal break and keeping to himself, even while the Faith Churchers gave him the cold shoulder.

This particular March night, Anya was finally in attendance. Gary watched from his corner table, calmly having a vegetarian pizza. Over in the diagonally-opposite corner, Anya was talking to the junior pastor from a few months earlier.

"We told you not to come here while Halliday was around," he was saying to her. "If you'd done as we suggested, he'd have given up. Sometimes I wonder what you're up to, or what goes on in that head of yours."

She looked over to Gary. "I dunno... I thought, perhaps, I could reason with him."

"So what's his real problem? Can't he accept you have a new life as a Christian?"

"Umm, he seems to think I'm in danger from Faith Church. He thinks Pastor Noel is a charlatan. He thinks he's doing the right thing."

"Excuse me?!? Weren't you the one, about a year ago, telling us he was annoying you, that he was obsessed with you??"

"Yeah, well, um... oh, I'm so confused."

"No surprise there. Some Christian women can be very dippy. Look, I'll see if I can get some of the boys to shift him out of here."

He went over and had some words with two young men, a dark-haired one and a red-headed one. They then walked over to Gary's table. The red-head leaned on the table and spoke.

"Hey Mate... we want to talk to you for a minute. Outside."

It was a tense minute. Gary rose to his feet, pizza slice still in his left hand, and looked the gentleman right in the eye.

"One, I'm still eating," Gary pointed to the pizza slice. "Two, it's quite fair if you really want to have an ordinary discussion with me, but you can do that right here, in front of witnesses, independent or otherwise. Seriously, Mate, if you think I'm going to fall for that old, hoary chestnut, you're sadly mistaken."

Both Faith Church and non-Faith Church patrons, even the proprietor of the restaurant, watched and held their breath, wondering how it was

going to play out. The two young blokes, however, were caught off-guard by Halliday's response. It even scared them, so they shuffled back to their own table again, leaving Gary to eat in peace.

The proprietor came up to Gary's table with a fresh glass of coca-cola.

"You don't trust them much, do you?" he asked the young taxi driver.

"No, I guess not. It pays to be cautious sometimes."

The restaurant owner sat down with him for a moment and talked of his own opinions of the Faith Churchers.

"They pay our bills very well with their custom, but I still have to wonder. Supposedly 'born again' Christians drinking alcohol here as much as they do? And they flirt around something shocking."

"Tell me something I don't know. They were like that even when Anya first came across them."

"Speaking of which, I think she's coming over this way."

"Omigod, you're right! I thought it'd take a few more Sundays at least before she did."

The pizza shop owner discreetly returned to his counter, leaving Anya to sit down on the opposite side of the table. She had an equal amount of anger and confusion in her eyes.

"Don't you ever get the point? I don't want you," she said.

"I'd believe that more if I hadn't seen how much you've been changed, Kiddo," Gary replied.

"Of course I'm changed. I'm a new person in Jesus."

"Really? Marianna told me a couple of weeks ago how you now swear like a trooper. Heck, it even shocked her. Now, since when is that Christian behavior? If it is, I'm a monkey's rear-end."

"Monkey's arse, you mean... "

"I rest my case, Your Honor... see what I mean? SO, since when is that a sign of being born again?"

"Gary, why didn't you stay in Israel and marry some girl over there?"

"I dunno. You'd have to ask the Good Lord Above why. It isn't exactly easy returning and seeing the way you've turned out."

"Are your feelings for me clouding your judgment concerning Pastor Titmouse?"

"My feelings for you... and my thoughts on Titmouse... are two separate issues. He would still be a fake, whatever my feelings were for you."

The junior pastor had been hovering nearby, listening to the conversation. He'd grown impatient with Anya, thinking she'd given Halliday too much time, so he came up and dragged her toward the counter. Gary followed, coming up with a quick comment.

"I've got to hand it to you, Mate... darn good brainwashing job."

The other man swung around, pushing Gary back roughly. Halliday, though, held his ground. The junior pastor started to raise his fist to swing a punch, but remembered he was being observed by everyone in the place. He had to content himself with words.

"You're an asshole, Halliday," he said, spitting the words out. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm not like all these wimps here you pick on..."

Gary smiled. "Gee, as everyone here can attest, I don't pick on anyone. I just come here, eat my pizza, without giving anyone any problems. Oh, and did we all just hear you call your own people wimps?"

The junior pastor's hand grabbed the nearest drink glass and hurled it towards Halliday. It flew past Gary's ear, barely centimeters away. He didn't even flinch.

It was a tactical error on the junior pastor's part and, too late, he recognized it as such. All he could do was scream.

4. May 1993...Pascoe Vale

Gary was in the process of describing the pizza shop incident to Marianna and Sergio, over at the Semolina residence. Marianna had been listening intently.

"So, what happened after that, Gaz?" she asked.

"Five minutes later, the creep was trying to... cast a 'demon of vengeance and vindictiveness' out of me me," he explained. "which would have to be the best misnaming I've ever heard."

Sergio, with his customary blank look, asked: "So, Marianna, does Gary have a demon in him? Does he really?"

She was annoyed at her boyfriend's question.

"Of course he doesn't," she snapped. "The junior pastor was being a smartarse, wasn't he, Gary?"

"Yep. It was his second tactical mistake of that evening."

"How so?"

"Paul Titmouse wasn't standing anywhere near my kidney region. Ipso facto, no one to poke the nerve cluster there, and no falling backwards, no temporary paralysis and disorientation."

"You're kidding!"

"It was a laugh, watching him fail. Guess Titmouse never bothered to share the secret of that gimmick with him, so he made a fool of himself."

Sergio cut in. "So, Marianna... did Gary have a demon in him, or not?"

"Go back to sleep, Serge," she said, cheekily. "Gary didn't have any demon in him whatsoever."

Mrs Semolina was bringing a tray of Italian coffees in for all of them.

"Thissa problema, Gazza... it no scare-a you?" she asked, handing him his cup.

"Why should it, Mrs Semolina? I've handled worse, more dangerous stuff, back in Israel."

"Gee, Gary, you're so brave," Sergio said. "I wish I were as brave as you, but I'm sick... I'll never be as brave as you. I used to be a great soccer player once, before I got sick. So, do you have a demon in you or don't you?"

"Seeerrrrgggge!" said Gary and Marianna in unison.

A few sips of coffee down the track, Marianna asked something else.

"So, what about Anya? You think you're getting through to her yet?"

"I don't know. I guess I won't know for a few months yet."

"I think she's stupid. There's not too many guys in the world who'll stand up to a whole group, out of concern for a girl's well-being and

safety. How many times have the Faith Churchers threatened you, now?"

"At least a dozen times since I got back... plus twice picking arguments with me in the street, near where I live. Have you seen the second Hench program on them?"

"Yeah, we saw it on TV a few weeks back. But... didn't Hench get sacked this week?"

"Yesterday, actually. One day after I'd posted off the information I'd gathered from my pizza shop sorties to him. Guess the previously-expected third expose won't occur now."

"Coincidental timing, eh?"

"Too much so. Makes me wonder if Titmouse has some connections somewhere."

For some reason, Mrs Semolina pointed out the time.

"You go worka now, Gazza. You lose-a money you stayya here and chatta."

As Gary rose to leave, Sergio said: "Gary, I still can't understand the demon thing... "

The other two young people broke into laughter.

Chapter 13

Change Of Tack

1. June 1993...Mrs Semolina's House

Coffee was always a big thing at Mrs Semolina's place. Tonight, she was having one with Anya.

"Gary be here-a soon, Anya," she said to the younger woman. "Now, tella me what-a happen atta da pizza shoppa."

"The Faith Churchers won't go there any more," Anya replied.

"Gazza tella me something about-a dat. He sayya he go there a few weeka back, finda no one-a dere. He sayya da Faith Churcher runna."

"That's his interpretation! We just took our business elsewhere."

"So, since-a den, you come-a here and see-a da Gary... "

"Well, it keeps him focused on me. You don't want him talking too much to Marianna, remember?"

"True. Tonight-a Marianna anda da Sergio go outta da movies. Gazza come-a rounda, only himma anda you."

"You've given him the idea he should try a different approach with me?"

"Yep. Azza I tella you a few year-a ago... boyza da simple creature."

Anya looked at her watch. "He should be here any second. You know I'm only doing this so he doesn't come between Serge and Marianna... "

"Any excusa, Anya. You stilla have-a bit of da thing for Gazza, don't you?"

"We-e-e-l-l-l... perhaps a little. Not that I'd tell him that. It'd defeat the purpose."

The doorbell rang.

"He-a here. I letta him in, I den go uppa da stairs, leave-a you two alone-a."

In the hallway, a few seconds after, Mrs Semolina was giving last-minute instructions to Gary.

"Justa remembera da ting I tella you. Try-a be more-a da man with-a her... "

"I don't know," Gary whispered back. "I never had to go overboard back when she and I were close, so I'm not sure it'll work."

"Give-a da try anyhowa. You gotta da nothing to lose-a."

With that, Mrs Semolina headed upstairs.

Gary walked into the kitchen. Anya was standing over in the far corner. He sat down at the table and looked at her. She turned around and looked back at him.

"Are you ever going to give up trying to prove Pastor Noel a fake?" she asked.

"We went over that the last time you were here, Anya," he replied. "You know the answer."

"And me?"

He cleared his throat and worked up his courage. It took him almost a full minute to say what he had to.

"Perhaps I should have just screwed you and forgotten you."

"Hallelujah!" Anya said with a big smile on her face.

Gary, on the other hand, put his finger into his ear, trying to shake the wax out. He wasn't sure he'd heard right.

"Uh, Anya... do you realize what you just hallelujahed?"

"Yes,"

"Omigod!"

She started moving closer to him, much, much closer.

Unfortunately, Mrs Semolina had gotten ahead of herself, entering the kitchen a little too early. Gary and Anya looked at each other, then Gary decided to say something.

"Mrs Semolina, perhaps we should give you a little break tonight. We'll get going."

"Yeah, that's right," Anya followed his lead. "I'll give you a call tomorrow night."

Minutes later, they were outside the gate, on the footpath. A very curious Mrs Semolina was watching them from the window. Anya had some religious books and tracts in her hands and was standing close to Gary, the books held level with his groin. She moved even closer.

"Now, what were you going to say, before you were interrupted?" she asked.

"That I should screw you anyway. You're such a horny little slut, Anya. I should just take you, every which way."

"Tell me more!"

"Maybe I will... but not here. Mrs Semolina keeps watching us."

"There's a park down the road... with quite a few private areas."

So they walked in that direction.

2. October 1994...Prahran

"So Anya and I went down to the park, and I talked like that to her for the next few hours. But I kept getting this strong gut instinct to just keep it at talk, not to do anything."

Gary had just finished explaining that night to Kirrin Kirkham. They were in Kirkham's own suite within the boarding house, a set of rooms with kitchenette, bedroom and lounge. On the walls of the lounge section were posters from porno magazines. Kirrin himself was in the process of reading the latest Penthouse, as he listened to Gary.

"I'm actually amazed at you, Gary," he said. "Anyone else would have just given her a jolly good rogering. You missed a perfect opportunity."

"Like I said, the gut instinct kept giving me an alarm bell. So I went with my gut."

"Well, you never heard from her for six months afterward, so that's where your gut instinct got you."

"It still amazes me how she behaved that night. I've never had to be so... aggressive... with her, back when she and I were close. It's annoying I had to change to get a response out of her. I don't like having to sound like a sleazy Faith Churcher to get her attention."

"Well, she's still a woman, in spite of the religiosity. The way I see it, she responds just like any secular girl."

"Try telling her that."

Kirkham put his magazine down on the nearby coffee table.

"By the way, Gaz, my journalist friends have finally given me the information you were after."

"Took them long enough! You told me they started their infiltration over a year ago."

"You know they had to work their way in, and get near the top, if they were ever going to get key info. It's not like TV shows. Nothing gets resolved in an hour."

"Yeah, but I've been sitting on my butt while we were waiting. I actually thought we'd have it solved by now."

"It's the real world. It doesn't happen overnight."

Gary himself lit up a cigarette. "Okay, what's the news from these guys?"

Kirrin stood, leaning against his mantelpiece.

"Firstly, they've completed the Faith Church end of things. Now they're infiltrating the higher-up levels, Titmouse's backers. Now, I want you to be aware there's a bigger issue, that it's not just about cults..."

"Skip the intro and get on with it, Kirkham!"

"Okay... Anya got married, earlier this year, to a Faith Churcher, didn't she?"

"Gee, I don't need infiltrators to tell me that... "

"Her new husband has a sinister background."

"You don't want to hear half the things he's been involved with."

"What else?"

"The good reverend keeps quite a full file on the sexual antics and fantasies of his followers. You'd be surprised at some of Anya's."

"That actually is news to me."

"There's also a bit of a rift between Titmouse and that junior pastor you've had problems with. The junior pastor is beginning to question things."

"That's a surprise! Of all people... "

"Yeah, you were right, the Titmouses never shared the secret of 'casting demons out' with him. You actually got that through to him. The other thing he figured out was that Titmouse wasn't as independent as first claimed."

"Okay, now we're getting somewhere. Look, Kirrin, I'm going off to work some things out. I'll talk to you later about the finer details."

Gary left the rooms. Kirkham close and locked his door, then pulled a flip-style cellular phone out of his pocket and dialed a number.

"Hello? Yes, I passed the information on to him. He's taking the bait," Kirkham said to the person on the other end.

"Yeah, the idea of an infiltration kept him from tracking any paper trails. Great cover story, too," Kirrin continued.

"Okay, I'll just keep going and start moving him to the next stage... "

He closed the flip to end the call. Then he picked up his magazine again and examined the centerfold on page ninety-three.

Chapter 14

Trap Sprung

1. December 1995...West Melbourne, Victoria Australia

On the main street of West Melbourne sat an unassuming reception center. On a warm, December Saturday night, it played host to the wedding reception of Sergio Semolina and Marianna Enzarizzi. After much reticence by Sergio, the big day had finally come. The ceremony itself had occurred that afternoon back in Pascoe Vale, but now, here in West Melbourne, the reception part was drawing almost to a close.

Sergio had just removed Marianna's garter and was making ready to throw it over his shoulder to the waiting guys, lined up ready to catch it, as per custom. Over on one wall, the side where Sergio's family's guests were placed, Mrs Semolina was talking with Anya.

Anya was immaculately dress in a light-blue, knee-length outfit. The interesting thing about such an outfit was it was nearly identical to the one Marianna had worn to Anika's 21st party, six years before.

Mrs Semolina herself was in an ecstatic mood. "It worka, Anya. We getta dem married offa ata last."

"And no Gary anywhere near it," said the smug, younger woman.

"Marianna wanta invite-a da Gazza. It he hadda turn uppa, she want put him over near-a da bridal table."

"Yeah, while she put me over this side, as far away from it as possible."

"Well, he no getta da invitation. I make-a sure-a dat."

"Thanks, Mrs Semolina. I appreciate it. He won't even know about the wedding until Serge and Marianna are off on their honeymoon. By then, it'll be too late for him to interfere."

"He-a helpful to-a da Marianna and Serge. But you stilla no trusta him?"

"You know the reasons, Mrs Semolina."

The older woman was watching something in the dance floor area.

“Issa dat Brendan, your husbanda, talka to doze girls over there?” she asked.

“Damn! I keep warning him not to flirt with other girls. I'm going to give him a good piece of my mind when I get him home,” Anya fumed.

Mrs Semolina laughed loudly. “Boyz!! They such simple creature. Dey alwayza thinka with a their...”

2. April 1996...Pahran

Kirrin Kirkham was sitting in his lounge, his favorite TV dinner sitting on his lap ready to be eaten. Unfortunately, a knock on his door ruined the moment.

The visitor was Gary, dressed in his taxi driver's uniform, in an agitated, shocked state.

"Kirrin, there's something I have to tell you about..." he said.

"Calm down, Gary."

"... I've been at an internet cafe all week, researching cults and brain-washing. Tonight, I read about something called MKULTRA," Gary finished.

He stepped into Kirrin's suite, while Kirkham returned to his plate. Between mouthfuls, Kirrin said. "Took you long enough."

"That's what you've been hinting about all this time, isn't it?"

"Yep!" Kirkham gulped down another mouthful.

"You mean to tell me I've been dealing with the bottom rung of an intelligence operation?" Halliday asked rhetorically, astounded all the same.

"Uh huh."

"Bloody Hell!"

"Where do you think my journalist mates are checking at this moment? That's the level they're up to."

"I'm still in shock about what I read tonight... and all I did was work backwards from the techniques I saw Titmouse use."

"And from there back to commercial techniques, finally to the military/intelligence ones which everything sprung from. Yeah, I know the stuff."

"I heard of MKULTRA in a comic, once. I always thought it was just fiction."

"No, it was very real. It was exposed by the Yank Congress in 1975. You'll find references to it in the Congressional Archives... which, I believe, can be accessed by the Internet. But you know that already, don't you?"

"So MKULTRA created cults like the one which self-destructed in 1978?"

"Yep, although MKULTRA was theoretically closed by that stage. Officially, anyway. You'll learn more the further you research."

"Does Titmouse know any of this?"

"He knows a little of it. Compartmentalized stuff. His junior pastor finally got wind of it and wasn't pleased with the connection. That's what caused the rift between the two."

"Damn! And here was me thinking it was all a basic problem. This is what Anya got herself into?"

"Yep, and she's in way over her head. According to one of my journalist mates, she's Jewish. She's there to eventually be used a scapegoat."

"Shee-itt!"

"So, what have you been hearing about Anya the past few months?"

"What?? Oh. Well, in March, she and Brendan invited me around for tea. I asked him about that stuff you told me of, but he denied it... said even if it were true, he'd be forgiven. And she's pregnant for the second time in as many years."

"What about Sergio and Marianna?"

"Them? Marianna's preggers herself. Must be the season for it. Sergio? Still the same. The doctors keep calling his condition a nervous disorder. He still raves on about things he has no idea of. Still moody, too. Somewhere along the line, I want to work out what's really wrong with him. And I hope Marianna can handle him. Getting married hasn't improved him any."

"What's Anya's thoughts on them?"

"She's negative. She says she wonders how someone like Marianna can put up with him."

"That's a whole different kettle of fish. Look, I'm about to go down to the pub. I'll talk to you more, later, Gaz."

Halliday took his leave and Kirkham closed the door after him, cackling with laughter.

3. July 1996

Early in 1996, Marianna and Sergio had moved out of Mrs Semolina's, buying an old house in the northern suburbs. Marianna felt freer there. Around June, their son Jack was born. However, when the baby was barely a month old, Sergio had a psychotic episode. Marianna managed to find Gary's mobile phone number and make an emergency call to him, needing him to come and calm Serge down.

In the kitchen of their house, Sergio Semolina was stalking around and throwing plates about. He was totally oblivious to the distress this was causing his wife and child.

"Ooooh, my back, my head!" he yelled. "I'm in such pain, Marianna... and you don't care. You don't respect a sick person! Bitch, Putana!"

She was trying to keep focused, hoping Gary would arrive soon. "Serge, calm down. Please, you're scaring the baby."

Serge was only more agitated. "I'm sick, the baby isn't. I'm going to break that wall cabinet."

The cupboard he referred to took up one whole side of the kitchen. It was filled with all their trinkets, wedding presents and good crystalware. He moved toward it, intent on slamming it to the floor... only to see Marianna step in his way. In a surprisingly fast move, he grabbed her wrist.

"Bitch! You're playing with my head."

Thankfully, the doorbell rang at that moment, allowing Marianna a sigh of relief. The cavalry had arrived! She pulled her wrist free.

"That's Gary. He said he was going to visit tonight," she said.

Sergio was still angry. "You called him. You always call him when I'm as sick as this."

"He's your friend... and my friend, too. He's always reliable in a crunch. You want to calm down before he enters? Or during? Either way, he doesn't tolerate this sort of mood."

Her husband couldn't figure out what to do, so she had an opportunity to go to the door and let Gary in, rushing him to the kitchen, where Sergio was picking up another plate to throw. Halliday simply stood in front of him, looking him right in the eye.

"I'm only going to say it once, Sergio... " Gary used his firmest tone. "Put it down... then sit down. Now!"

Sergio had never been able to handle Gary's patented nasty glare, so he backed down immediately, switching from psychotic to meek in a matter of seconds. He looked more like a child, with big, puppy-dog eyes.

"I'm sorry, Gaz. You forgive me, don't you?" he pleaded.

Halliday still kept a close eye on him. "It depends, Serge. You've got a baby in the other room, crying. You've got to cut back on these moments."

Gary turned to Marianna, noting how stressed she still was. Then he turned back to Sergio.

"Nothing you're going through should make you want to scare your own wife. She's the most caring woman you've ever come across. I want you to start appreciating that."

Sergio began crying. "I'm sorry, Gaz... and I'm sorry, Marianna. Forgive me. I didn't mean to stress you."

Thirty minutes later, he'd gone off to bed, leaving Gary and Marianna to talk in the lounge. Marianna was nursing Jack, feeding him a bottle of formula. Halliday was sipping a warm drink.

"Bugger what Anya thinks!" Marianna said, smiling. "When you're so reliable in a crisis, you're okay in my book."

"Good thing it was a slow night in the cab," Gary replied. "No passengers to drop off first before zooming here."

"You're still fast even when you do have to get the passengers dropped off. That's still bloody reliable, if you ask me."

"It's nothing. I simply had good examples to watch, overseas. You should see how good Israelis are in emergencies."

"Thanks anyway, Gary. It was so scary tonight. I've seen Serge have moody moments before, but this time was the worst so far."

"Makes you wonder if his shrink's doing any real good. Nothing the psychiatrist has tried over the years ever worked, or even shown signs of working."

Marianna was now rocking the baby to sleep. "So, how's the cult-busting going?"

Gary leaned back in his chair. "It's hit a snag at the moment. I figured out something very important about my information source."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"Not right now. You know the problem we have with Sergio talking out of school when it comes to Faith Church, even."

"I hope you solve it, anyway."

She took the baby off to put him in his crib. Halliday sipped some more coffee and smiled a little, thinking how lucky Sergio was to have a woman like her.

4. September 1996

It took some time for Gary to be sure of his facts about Kirkham. Then he acted.

He was in Kirkham's rooms, pushing a forearm against the other man's throat.

"You're such a prick, Kirkham," Gary intoned angrily. "But you made one crucial error. You kept telling me your reporter friends got as far up the pyramid as the intelligence level. It finally dawned on me I've never heard of reporters getting that far in real life. You've been working for Titmouse's backers, haven't you?"

"Geez, you're not as dumb as you look," Kirrin coughed, squirming under Gary's grip.

Halliday pulled his arm away, regaining some composure and allowing Kirkham to regain some breath.

"You realize there's no way I'm going to stay in this idiocy, now. I quit. End of story," Gary stated.

"Sorrory Gaz, but you can't quit."

"And why the bloody Hell not?"

Nervously, Kirkham picked up a packet of nearby cigarettes, took one out and lit it.

"Because, if you do, Titmouse's backers will only activate an alternative plan. One with less regard for innocents than you. You catch my drift?"

The realization sunk in fairly quickly.

"I... damn, of course I do. You're implying Anya is in danger if I quit."

"Exactly."

"You're an absolute bastard, Kirrin."

"Thanks for the compliment."

Chapter 15

Cult Busters And Israelis

1. The Same Evening...Melbourne CBD, Australia

Gary had been on the road for three hours, trying to get over Kirkham's treachery. He just couldn't believe Kirrin had done this to him. After all, he'd known him since 1981. Then again, when he thought about it, he hadn't known him as well as he thought he did.

He'd had only one fare in the entire time, so it was turning out to be a really boring night. He turned into Bourke Street, then noticed a person a couple of hundred meters away. Luckily, there weren't too many other cabs close by. He drove toward the figure.

A tall, lanky young man finished his cigarette as Gary's cab pulled up beside him. His face was in shadow, and remained so, even as he got into the back seat of the taxi.

"Frankston, thanks," the man said. "Take the Nepean Highway."

"Got it, Mate," Gary answered. As they drove out of the CBD, the tall man in the back struck up a conversation.

"So, been a busy night for you?"

"Naw," Gary said. "Quiet as anything. It's a Monday night."

"Nu... everything closes too early this end of the week."

Gary's eyebrow raised. That use of the word 'nu'...

"Hang on," he said. "What you just said... you're either Jewish or Israeli."

"Very astute. You must read a bit of Yiddish literature."

"No, I've just been to Israel a few times in the early nineties."

"And you're not Jewish." Not noticed by Gary, it was a statement, not a question.

"No, as Gentile as they come. But I learned a fair bit about Judaism while I was there."

"I'm Israeli. Actually, I was born there, but I've lived here since I was a kid. I just got back from there a few months ago... after I finished my miluim, my military service."

"What sort of unit were you in?"

"If I told you which, I'd have to kill you."

"Oh, those units! I get it."

"Very smart, Mr Halliday."

Gary froze. "You know my name?!?" he asked, alarmed.

"Don't panic, Mr Halliday," the stranger said, chuckling. "Everyone in the IDF has heard of you. You're the one who handled Ali Hasan in 1992. You really don't know how much that got around..."

"But... but... all I ever did was survive the creep."

"You did more than just survive him, Halliday. Your little altercation with him in Damascus Gate is legend in Jerusalem now, both around Israelis and Palestinians."

"So how did you know I drive cabs?"

"I have friends back there who like to follow your misadventures. They get a bit of a laugh. I hear you tackle cults these days."

By the time they'd gotten to the Glenhuntly Road intersection, the stranger had suggested they stop at a McDonald's there, to continue the discussion. Gary stopped the meter momentarily.

Gary gave the stranger the whole story to that point. On the TV inside the McDonald's, there was a movie with Stallone, Banderas and Julianne Moore. Hardly anyone was watching it, let alone Gary and the other man.

"So that's the whole story," Gary said, finishing his recap.

"I can see the predicament you're in. You need to get away from using Kirkham as an information source."

"Don't I know it!"

"So what else happened with the Faith Church matter?"

"Around a year ago, there was an Age newspaper expose done... around the same time as some Supreme Court trouble they were in."

"And you supplied information to the main journalist doing that set of articles?"

"Yeah... though he told me my situation was a bit too 'personal' to use in them."

"Must have been because you're the only person getting any ground on Faith Church."

"Probably."

"My name's Ezra, by the way. I'll see what I can do to help you, then."

"Thanks. You don't know how much that means to me, after what Kirkham pulled tonight. I've got one question for you, though."

"Yep?"

"Is any help you're going to give 'official'?"

"No way," Ezra laughed. "As far as they're concerned back in Israel, I'm a 'section eight.' Too much of a fruit loop to be handling official covert ops. No, it'll be totally independent. Though, I do have the odd contact back home, if we need to do any checking of facts."

"Sounds good. I wonder if it'll make a difference if I mention there's now an 'Israeli' element involved."

"Good psychological warfare, Mr Halliday. Go for it."

2. November 1996...North Melbourne

Noel Titmouse and his son, Paul, were discussing the latest turn of events.

"The nerve of that wimp!" screamed Titmouse, thumping his desk. "What right does he have to bring in Israeli help??"

"He gave us enough trouble on his own... this could be disastrous," replied Paul Titmouse.

"He seems to think it's okay to bring such assistance, to make it fair, considering who our backers are."

"I'm starting to think Anya wasn't worth all the grief she brought us, Dad."

"Even putting her and Brendan down the other end of the state hasn't worked. Halliday didn't follow her down there, as we expected him to."

"Perhaps we should get some of the boys to find the Israeli... "

3. One Week Later

Ezra was walking down Little Collins Street, after a night at the pub. It was one in the morning, and the street was practically deserted. Yet, thirty meters behind him, two Faith Churchers followed, both standing out like sore thumbs in their suits.

Ezra turned into what was clearly marked as a blind alley. Further back, the two Faith Churchers looked at each other and smiled. They had him where they wanted him.

They entered the alley... but couldn't see him anywhere. Then again, they weren't looking upwards. There was a pipe, ten meters above them, and the Israeli was hanging from it. He then dropped down, right behind them.

The two were caught off-guard. One tried a roundhouse kick at Ezra, missing him by a fair distance. Ezra caught him off-balance and hit him, using an Israeli martial art. Bottom of the palm... hard into the jaw. One Faith Churcher down.

The second Faith Churcher tried swinging a punch, only to see it easily blocked. The Israeli was grinning. He used another part of the Israeli martial art, using the webbing between thumb and fingers, against the Faith Churcher's throat, pushing him against a wall.

"Bad move, Mate," said Ezra. "So, tell me... what did that pastor of yours order you to do?"

"He told us to rough you up," the second Faith Churcher coughed, still choking.

"Looks like you failed, then. And since that was your intention, I'm entitled to self-defense. Now... what should I do with you?"

There was a sudden, pungent odor, and Ezra's nose was assaulted by it.

"Hmm, that smell," he said. "Aw, Man... are you so scared you shat your pants???"

An hour later, Titmouse had heard the after-story from his bruised adherents. He threw a bible straight at the wall in rage.

"Why is it they can't get anything right?" he said to his son. Paul Titmouse was calmer, sitting down and weighing things up.

"Sadly, Dad," Paul reflected, "it's the same problem we have with all our people. They're great, as long as they have advantages, but lousy if they're facing a real challenge."

"What are you saying, Paul??"

"That we have to give Halliday some credit. He faces challenges and overcomes hurdles."

"Damn, damn, damn... damn!!!!"

"Dad, your backers have always said you should done down a little..."

"Paul, they do things their way, we do things ours. I want to expand the ministry... I don't care how it's done. We give them their share of the money we collect, that's all they should care about."

Paul checked the time on his watch. "Dad, it's something we can discuss at daylight."

The lights went off, and the building was locked. Nobody worked there in the wee hours. The clock on the wall showed three. The window of Titmouse's office slowly opened and a black-outfitted Ezra climbed in.

He took a good look at his surroundings, then planted Israel flag stickers over almost everything. Then he noticed Titmouse's computer. After he'd booted it up, he left a message, using the word processor. Once he was finished, he turned it off, then climbed out the window again.

At nine in the morning, Paul and Noel re-entered the office... and both their jaws dropped. They could see all the Israeli stickers.

"Oh shit!" Paul exclaimed.

"Paul, the computer... check it, quick!"

Two minutes later, they were both reading the file left on the desktop. It said: "Naughty, naughty. I don't like your little thugs trying to bush-whack me. By the way, next time you send them, give them a fresh change of diapers."

Noel Titmouse was going red in the face. "Shit... shit... shit!!!!"

4. December 1996

A month later, Gary was driving somewhere with Ezra as a passenger, again. This time, the Israeli sat in the front passenger seat.

"... yeah, I'll be in Israel for two months," the Israeli was explaining.

"I never figured you for a writer," Gary said.

"Yep, fiction and non-fiction. My Israel publisher has a book idea he wants me to work on."

"So, are you going to find out those two things for me, while you're there?"

"Of course. First thing: find out what happened to Ali Hasan in the end, just to satisfy your curiosity. Secondly: find out the exact story on just how Jewish Anya is."

"That last one especially. There was always a discrepancy between what Kirkham said, and what she claimed. Her story was that she only had a Jewish grandparent."

"You think you can handle the Faith Churchers while I'm away?"

"Aw, come one, Ezra... I managed for a couple of years before you showed up... "

Chapter 16

Presidential Interlude

1. Mid-April 2004...Washington DC, USA

"Arik... so glad you could make it," the President greeted the Israeli Prime Minister. "So, how's things back in Jerusalem?"

In a heavy, Hebrew accent, the Israeli replied, "Nu, same as usual. You know how it's like in politics, even in a Jewish Stae."

"Yeah, you boys are still copping flack for taking out that Hamas leader, recently."

"Oh, that... well, hopefully, you'll catch those Al-Qaida terrorists the same way."

"Enough of that for the moment, Arik. I've been meaning to ask you something entirely off the agenda. I've been reading a file about a wimp who was in your country over a decade ago."

"This is more important than our diplomatic talks??"

"Naw, just a light touch before we begin. I've been reading it for a year, had some laughs and wanted you to fill me in on some bits."

"Dubbya, Dubbya, Dubbya..."

"Just don't say the word 'dot!'"

"Ha ha, I won't. Look, you really don't want to hear about Halliday..."

"But what I've read on him doesn't give any detail on his Israel trip... there's only a reference to a different file."

"I'm sure your people have the other file. Now, can we get on with what I'm here for??"

"Later. So, what do your people call Halliday?"

"Jokingly, they refer to him as the 'wimp with balls of steel.' Seriously, Dubbya..."

"Why do you call him that?"

"Oy vey! Okay, he's called that because he survived one of the most dangerous Hamas men in Jerusalem, for eighteen months. He also stood

up to him, one day, quite successfully. The poor Hamas schmuck was never the same again."

"Um, there's some talk you've heard of his... later adventures."

"Have I? Oh, you mean that cult stuff. No, haven't heard a thing about that... hehehe!"

"Come on, Arik, be straight with me... "

"Okay, I heard. You really shouldn't let the dumber intelligence people do covert ops with cults, Dubbya. It backfires on them so much."

"Did your people help him?"

"I neither confirm or deny."

"Damn it, Arik, this isn't about Israeli reactors... "

"Shhh!!!!!"

"Hmmm... we're getting nowhere here."

"Nu? Dubbya, I've got some really important business that's on hold while we talk about some wimp who embarrassed your intelligence people. You want to talk about getting nowhere???"

"What can I say, Arik... that wimp's file was the most interesting stuff I've read for years. Which is saying a lot, considering our people's other antics."

"You know, Dubbya, if your people spent less time annoying nondescript wimps and more time keeping an eye on Al-Qaida... "

"Hey, that's unfair... we've already got enough trouble and criticism coming out of the current Congressional hearings."

"Look, Dubbya... can we get down to business? I have this disengagement plan for Gaza... "

Hurtful Truths

1. December 1996...Hawthorn, Victoria Australia

In the early days of the Australian end of the Internet, people wanting to learn about it, or have quick access to it, would head to the Cyber Surf Cafe in Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn. A single-fronted shop nestled between two restaurants, it drew a reasonable patronage in the early part of the evening, tapering off to only a couple of people after eight.

This night, a solitary taxi driver was the only customer, sitting and typing away, watched by the cafe supervisor, Ricardo. The supervisor was a cheerful chap, mid-thirties, sandy-colored hair, with an exquisite, waxed mustache, who was keeping himself occupied cleaning cups and plates.

"You know, Gaz," Ricardo said, "after last week, I thought you would have given up researching cults, intelligence and conspiracies. That was a bit strange, reading about a movie close to what you've been doing."

"Ric, as I told you then," said Gary, between keystrokes, "I'm not going to get paranoid just because someone in America's doing a film vaguely resembling my story."

"Seriously, Gary, you must have been a bit freaked out. Remember that preview site you showed me? I nearly froze when I saw the 'internet-savvy' reference... that's a dead giveaway someone even knows which search engine you use."

"Pure coincidence. Nothing more. So, why does this freak you out so much."

"A flatmate of mine was once busted by ASIO, the Australian Security Intelligence Organization. Busted both physically and metaphorically."

"Fair enough."

"So, after everything you've researched the past year... what's tonight's line of inquiry?"

"I'm working on the idea MKULTRA was a little too weird even by American standards. It seems to follow there was more to it than that. I

had this—no pun intended—theory, that it looked more like the sort of stuff the Nazis would do.”

“So, does it prove in practice?”

“Well, I'm currently examining web documents from mainstream sources... something about a Project Paperclip.”

“Which was... ”

“A project where the Yanks and the Brits let off most of the war criminals as, get this, good little anti-Communists.”

“You're sure?”

“Yep. As mainstream and as verifiable as possible. Heck, it's not even classified any more. Oh, and one more thing: MKULTRA utilized quite a few ex-Nazi experts.”

“Hell, that's like letting foxes run rampant in the chook-house.”

At this moment, Gary's mobile phone rang. He answered it.

“Ezra... how's the weather in Israel? Oh, you're freezing? Poor bugger... it's lovely and warm back here. What's that? Your contacts think I should forget her? Disturbing news on her? Look, tell me everything when you get back. Got it. Bye.”

He was stunned by what he'd just heard. Meantime, Ricardo had brought a latte and some biscuits over for him.

“Bad news, Chum?”

“I'll know soon enough. Wonder if it's got anything to do with what I've just read.”

“Wasn't your ex-wife's background something to do with Nazis and Fascists?”

“Actually, it was Ustasha... her ancestral homeland's version of the Fascists. Hey, you're right. That does explain her a bit better. But... it couldn't happen twice in one lifetime, couldn't it?”

Ricardo couldn't give him an answer.

2. February 1997...Brighton, Victoria Australia

Ezra had been back from Israel two days and phoned Gary to meet him in a quiet park, near the beach. It was time to report his findings to the taxi driver.

"What do you want to hear first? The good news or the bad news?"

"Start with Ali Hasan first."

"Okay, Ali Hasan is dead."

"What? How?"

"He blew himself up. Actually, he succumbed to injuries from blowing his hands and most of his face off, along with third-degree burns."

"How'd it happen?"

"According to my source, he was having to prove himself to Hamas all over again. They ordered him to make a bomb and blow up innocent Israelis, but he got himself instead, while he was still putting it together."

"Interesting. But why was he having to prove himself again? Last time I saw him, he was supposed to be one of the most dangerous Hamas twerps."

"Not after you stood up to him in Damascus Gate, he wasn't."

"Explain that to me."

"Turn your mind back to mid-1992. You'd just stood up to him, successfully, in front of two hundred Arabs and Palestinians. Among the audience were a lot of Arabs Ali Hasan himself had personally picked on. Anyway, over the next few months, those two hundred spread gossip about the incident, till it got around the entire Arab population in Israel."

"Egad!"

"And the people he'd been picking on, again, his fellow Arabs, thought they could stand up to him just like you had."

"Oh no... "

"Yes, everyone else started picking on him for a change."

"You mean, I started a trend?"

"Too right you did! Anyway, over the next year or two, his reputation, his social-standing and his confidence all nosedived. By nearly three years after the altercation, Hamas leaders heard about it, dragged him over the coals, told him the only way to regain face was to make a bomb... but in the end, it was his own face which went messing. And no Israeli victims."

"Poor bastard!"

"Don't feel sorry for him. He had a record as long as your arm for murder and terrorism."

Halliday was still trying to absorb it all. Then he reminded himself of the other piece of information Ezra had for him.

"Now... what was so drastic about Anya?"

"One Jewish grandparent... but up to two Fascist war criminals in her background."

"You're... sure?"

"My contacts did an exhaustive exercise. Heck, they even ran a background check in her mother's homeland. In addition, Israel has this huge database on the post-war movements of every form of Fascist and Nazi. It's even triple-checked."

The taxi driver was fighting to hold in his emotions, as well as the tears.

"So, she's from a similar background to my ex-wife?? But... that's the very mistake I was working to avoid making. It stinks!! Who'd want two such girls in one lifetime?"

Ezra continued. "It also means she was more closely aligned to Titmouse's backers than even Titmouse was."

Tears in Gary's eyes flowed freely now. He walked over to a nearby play set of slides and swings, up to a raised platform. Then he started lashing out at the platform, punching and kicking it.

Finally, he dropped to his knees, screaming: "No, no, no... no!!!"

Ezra came over and finished the last part of his report. "It was a massive head-game on you. It was a waste of time and energy. I'm sorry to say, Gary, your efforts have been all for nothing."

All Ezra could do now was offer a consoling hand on Halliday's shoulder.

Chapter 18

Latrines Or Iraq

1. 1999...Arlington Virginia, USA

Orphine's offices, to the casual observer, had not changed much over the years. The staff still wore black suits, they still had their sunglasses on indoors and they were still involved in covert operations. But one thing had changed, though, and only very recently. Jake Fletcher was now in charge. Daniel David Orphine was in the process of clearing out his desk.

Jake was sitting in the main chair, also having upgraded his generic sunglasses to a leadership style of Rayban. He was now watching his former chief pack away the last of his personal effects into boxes. Orphine was showing his age, even underneath the red-and-white keffiyeh perched on his head.

"It'll be sad to see you go, Boss," said Fletcher, puffing away on a Cuban cigar.

"You don't need to call me 'Boss' any more," Orphine answered.

"Old habits die hard. So... this time next week, you'll be leading the Iraqi field office... "

"Well... our superiors gave me a choice. Iraqi field office, or Pentagon latrines to clean."

"I'm surprised you didn't take the latrines. That's one of the cushiest jobs in Washington."

"Either choice, I'm being punished for the Titmouse/Halliday mess."

"I don't see why you should have been. Although we wanted a more drastic solution for Titmouse, Halliday still succeeded in getting him to quieten down, non-violently."

"Yeah, Titmouse's son is a lot better to deal with. He keeps his nose clean, especially after his father's heart attack."

"I have to admit, Halliday turned out a complete surprise. None of our planning or our profiling on him saw him finding out as much as he did. What amazes me is he worked it out from legitimate, mainstream

sourcing. Still... I wonder if he'll ever discover what that Disimenko bitch really pulled on him. He doesn't know what she pulled on him in the personal area, does he?"

"Who knows? I couldn't care any more. Thanks to him, we became the laughing stock of the entire USA covert community. Hey, did you ever get the impression some of the other covert cells were working against us and helping him?"

"Don't know, Boss. We'll do the usual reviews and maybe one day we'll find out. Anyway, are you looking forward to Iraq?"

"I suppose so. I'm sure I can think of some challenging ways to keep myself occupied. Perhaps send off some memos to Washington about Saddam's old WMD's... "

Orphine finished the last of the packing, while Fletcher laughed at the previous comment.

"Just don't start any new wars, Boss."

"Now, would I do something like that?"

2. Late-1999...Northern Suburbs, Melbourne

Gary had taken the day off from his cab work and was visiting the Semolinas. Dressed in casual gear, he watched Marianna put clothes on the line. Sergio was sitting on a garden chair, staring into space, while three-year-old Jack sat on the ground, tapping away with a stick.

"I was watching that movie on TV last night," Marianna was commenting. "The one you were telling me about. Amazing how the main character has your brains and Sergio's mannerisms."

Gary passed her a wet towel from the basket. "Yeah. I saw it two years ago, with my Israeli mate. I still remember sinking into my seat watching the opening credits. And there was my Israeli mate, laughing and telling me the character was definitely me."

"You glad the Faith Church stuff is over?"

"Totally glad. There wasn't much point in me continuing it, after hearing of Anya's ancestry."

"That bit still freaks me out, Gaz."

"Enough of the subject. So, how are you coming to terms with the news Sergio was schizophrenic?"

She looked over to her husband as he answered.

"They called it a 'nervous disorder' or 'chemical imbalance' all the time, years ago. Non-specific terms. Vague terms. On the other hand, the term 'schizophrenic' is so clear-cut. You know exactly what that means. Neither Mrs Semolina or Anya ever told me... or you... that he was schizo."

"Good thing I went with him to his doctors' the other day and asked them, straight-out, what they were treating him for."

Halliday picked up a tennis ball and threw it over to Jack. It landed near the infant, then bounced onto his leg. Jack didn't even notice, totally engrossed in his stick-tapping. Both Marianna and Gary were concerned about the child.

"He never seems to react," Marianna noted. "And he still hasn't started talking yet. I wonder if we have another problem to deal with."

"Let's hope not," Gary replied.

3. Late-January 2000...Pahran

Strange, how an industry forces a whole shift in calendar science. The real Millenium wouldn't start till midnight, December 31, 2000. However, with all the fuss over Millenium Bugs, everyone was convinced it was to be one year earlier than it should. On the other hand, hardly any computers crashed over the alleged Bug. The computer industry pocketed billions, and the world went on as usual.

Three weeks into 2000, Gary Halliday was home at the boarding house, catching up on his sleep. He'd spent hours trying to do an upgrade of Marianna's computer, the parts still strewn about on the floor. His room was smaller than Kirkham's, neat and spartan. All that could be heard was the ticking of his clock, which read one in the afternoon. Then, a loud knocking cut the silence.

Gary woke, struggled into t-shirt and jeans, then opened his door. Although he semi-expected it, he was still surprised to see Anya standing there.

She was wearing a light-green sun frock, showing lots of cleavage, and was slim, between pregnancies for a change. She'd been having at least one baby a year since getting married. She just waltzed into the room, not bothering to wait for Gary's permission.

She walked up to his bed and sat down there.

"Hello, Gary," she chirped. "Gee, what a contrast this is to your old Footscray flat!"

"What did you expect? I haven't exactly enjoyed the success of the late-eighties, these past few years, considering all the other idiocy."

"So, are you shocked to see me?"

"Not really. Marianna rang and told me of your visit to her yesterday... about how you'd told her to wish me a Happy Millenium and all that. There was something about the way you said it to her. It clued me in you'd be contacting me."

"I don't always contact you, though."

"Not unless you're up to something. Or want something. Besides, she was telling you how I'd been helping Serge and her. She'd been saying positive things about me. I got the strangest impression, that only Marianna saying good things about me prompts you."

Anya winced. Gary was dangerously close to the truth. She had to change the subject quickly.

"You don't make much money out of taxis?"

"Get real! With all the old bullshit distracting me, did you think I would?"

"It could have been so different if you'd gone the way I wanted you to, a decade ago."

"Why are you here, Anya? And does Brendan know what you're up to?"

She leaned back on the bed, seductively, letting the strap on her sun frock drop off her shoulder. She had mischief in her eyes.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

She stood up now, letting the other strap fall, giving Gary a full view of her shoulders and collar bones, and just a hint of her breasts. Then she walked closer, right up to him, running her fingers down his chest.

Halliday wasn't in the mood to trust her, stepping back out of her reach.

"I'm going to presume you've got some un-Godly antics in mind."

She tried nuzzling up to him again, this time pulling the top of her dress right down to her waist, exposing her breasts.

"Maybe. Depends on whether you want to keep missing your chance. With your skills, you have a lot to offer a woman."

Gary was so very tempted... but gently pushed her away, bringing her dress top back up to modest position again.

"I'm going to kick myself for this later," he said. "I'll pass on the chance. Since you're here, though, I want to clarify a few things with you... the information on the war criminal background. According to my source, your father doxed in full-blooded Jews in his homeland to save his own hide."

Anya's eyes widened in disbelief. She'd never expected Gary to know anything about that.

"Perhaps your source is wrong... "

"I don't think so. Your dad was a war criminal and Fascist."

" But... my dad's name wasn't really his real name... "

Then she realized she'd just outsmarted herself. Gary was smiling, taking in the full implication of her words.

"Which means... he came here under an assumed identity anyhow," he added for her.

"But... but... a lot of people had to change their identities to escape the Soviets... "

"Face it, Anya. You know I've solved it. You're part of something even Titmouse wasn't fully aware of. You've been part of the freakiest headgame I've ever had to endure."

"You're crazy! You need medication! You... you... "

"You're being so defensive I know I've got this right."

"Ooooh, I hate you! Then again, I'm saved and you're not."

"All things considered, Anya... I wouldn't want to bet your soul on that."

She didn't stay to listen to anything further, straightening up her dress and storming out, slamming the door as she did so. Gary was left to ponder what had just happened here and if, indeed, he really had missed a clear chance here.

Chapter 19

Marianna

1. August 2000...Melbourne Australia

The gift shop on the ground floor of Melbourne Maternity Hospital was a great place to get treats, flowers and balloons. Gary and Sergio were stopping here momentarily. Actually, Gary was the one doing the purchasing, while Sergio looked on, blankly. The occasion was the birth of the Semolinas' second son.

As Gary finalized the purchase, he turned to Sergio. "Okay, how does it feel to be a father again, Serge?"

"I don't know, Gaz," his companion replied. "I don't know if I'll be that good at it. I'm sick, remember?"

"Hmm, so where do you stand on the subject of nursing the baby?"

"Oh, my back!"

"Yep, somehow I thought you'd say that. So, even lifting a baby is hard work for you?"

"Work? Oh, my back... "

They caught the elevator to the second floor, where Marianna's room was. She was resting, reading a book while the baby slept in his hospital crib nearby. Gary handed her the presents and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Serge, however, walked to the other side of the room and sat down. His wife noticed, smiling wearily.

"Ready to meet your new son, Sergio?" she asked him.

"I suppose so," he answered, staring out the window.

Meanwhile Gary was already taking a peek into the crib. "He's cute, Marianna. What are you going to name him?"

"I thought 'Michael' or 'Mikey' would be a good choice. He arrived cesarean section... there was a last-minute snag in his positioning."

"Thank God they can handle such things these days. Still, he's arrived safely."

Marianna leaned back on the pillow, observing the two males' differing reactions to the baby, weighing up what she was seeing. Then, almost reflexively, she spoke to Gary.

"Gaz, do you want to nurse Mikey?"

"Hey, I'd be honored to."

Her husband finally spoke again. "Better you than me, Gary. I don't think I can hold the baby too long."

Halliday was almost expert at handling babies, being an uncle a couple of times over. Within seconds, he was carefully nursing Mikey, making goo-goo noises and playing with his tiny hand.

Sergio, the child's natural father, showed no emotion. Gary had better paternal instincts. Marianna couldn't help but think it was quite a contrast.

A sound came from the baby's rear, causing Marianna and Gary to both laugh.

"I think he clearly likes Uncle Gary," she chuckled.

"You mean, farting on an adult is a sign of endearment by a baby??" Halliday joked.

Suddenly, Sergio rose from his chair. "Gaz, I feel tired. I'll catch the tram up to my mum's. I'm useless here."

Before anyone could answer, he'd already left the room and walked to the elevator. Marianna's tired eyes followed him, till the elevator doors closed and he disappeared. Yet, when she turned back to Gary, she smiled.

"He'll make it to his mother's okay," she said. "Besides, you're still here being supportive, just as you have for the past few months. You were more reassuring than Sergio was."

"Five months ago, you finally told me how things were getting you down... his condition, his behavior toward you... "

"And you spent those months trying to get Serge to be more reassuring too."

"I was worried he wouldn't get it right."

"Well, he wasn't very good between your visits."

"I guess he still doesn't appreciate what he's got."

"Sometimes, I think you appreciate me and the kids more than Serge does."

Gary blushed, but he took the compliment as meant and smiled.

Meantime, Marianna was looking at the balloon he bought for her. For some reason, it reminded her of Anya's old school antics.

"Gaz, did I ever tell you what Anya was like back at high school?" she asked.

Halliday had just finished placing Mikey back in the crib. "No, you haven't. Then again, I don't think even Anya herself told me anything about that part of her life."

"She was the worst practical joker in those days. She used to pick on school friends, teachers and even the odd family member. She never used to care how her jokes affected people. Some jokes... no, let me rephrase that... all her jokes, were downright cruel and heartless."

Gary was bewildered. Marianna asked why.

"Marianna," he said, "if you put what you just said together with what my Israeli mate told me... you've essentially described the class sociopath."

"I always thought she'd grown out of it, too."

"Not likely! I don't think she did. But she must have toned it down somewhat, if I wasn't able to see it for myself. This detail really sorts things out, now."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, but that still leaves some unanswered questions. Something's bugging me about this, now. I get the impression there's still one last bit of puzzling to do."

"Weird, isn't it? Anya must have known Sergio was schizophrenic, even when she first introduced me to him. Do you know, if she or Mrs Semolina had told me in the early-nineties he was schizophrene, I would never have married him?"

"You're kidding?!?"

"Seriously. When you think about it, no one ever told you or me the truth about him, not even his shrink. Not his mother, and especiall not Anya. You saw how he reacted to his own, new son."

"So who would you have married if you'd known back then?"

"If I'd had more brains back then? Someone like you."

Gary now went an even brighter shade of red.

"Anyway, Gaz," Marianna continued, "in the next few months, Jack's got to be diagnosed and assessed. I may need your help in whatever's wrong with him. There's a concern he's autistic. Anyway, visiting time's almost over. I'll see you next visit, after Mikey and I get out of here."

Before Halliday turned to leave, Marianna went up and gave him a huge hug, as well as a kiss on the cheek.

Chapter 20

Turnaround

1. August 2001...Northern Suburbs

In the north-eastern corner of the Semolinas' house, there was a spare room, where Gary and Marianna had set up her computer and a phone line extension for the modem, so the Internet could be used. Against one wall was a small bed, where Marianna could change Mikey. It was her favorite room, her quiet space.

Today, she was talking on the phone to Gary.

"Yes, the Internet works fine. It's really helpful for learning about autism. Thanks for setting it up. By the way, how's the new flat?"

"It's good. Small but good," Gary replied on the other end. "I've finally got the furniture set the way I want it. Goes well with the new job in transport. I don't miss cabs one bit. How's Sergio today?"

"Even with the new medication, he's still been a pain today."

"You want I should come round and talk to him?"

"No... hopefully he'll go off to sleep later. You know, he still can't accept that Jack has autism."

"Makes me wonder if we'll ever get through to Serge."

"Anyway, I've got to be going. Both the kids are sick with colds, so I'm going to need Serge to help me with their medicine."

She closed the line and went to see the kids.

Ten minutes later, unexpectedly, Sergio had a psychotic episode. He didn't care that the kids needed help. He just ranted and raved, pacing up and down the lounge. Then, something chilling happened.

Semolina tried picking up the TV, threatening to throw it and break it to smithereens. However, Marianna took one quick look at the expected trajectory. Mikey was crawling around on the floor, directly in the possible path. She had to react fast, grabbing the other side of the TV and forcing it back down, with all her strength. She succeeded.

However, Sergio was angered by her doing this. While she was off-balance, he grabbed her arm and swung her forcefully against the nearest wall. She hit hard and slid, dazed.

He didn't even look at her. He walked into the kitchen, grabbed his wallet, then headed out the front door.

Marianna's back was in immense pain as she tried getting up, only to slide back down again. Young Jack, autistic though he was, sensed his mother's distress. Miraculously, he somehow found the walkabout phone from the main line, bringing it to her. He clumsily, but effectively, handed it over and she quickly dialed Gary's number.

Finally, Gary answered on the other end.

"Gaz.." she gasped, between tears.

Across the city, over at Elwood, Halliday only need a couple of sentences of explanation to decide his course. He was out his door and into his mini-van, gunning the engine and screeching onto the road. As fast as legally-possible, he raced to Marianna's aid.

Up at the Semolinas' house, both the kids were in their mother's arms, getting big hugs from her. Knowing Gary would be here soon, she sat back and started daydreaming a bit... seeing herself as a princess, Sergio as the Black Knight, and Gary as a shining knight racing to rescue her.

Gary was already on the freeway, running his gears through their paces, to get the quickest acceleration he could.

Meanwhile, the Black Knight had returned. Oblivious to Marianna's distress and pain, he demanded to know where his meal was. It was the last straw. She pointed to the open front door.

"That's it, Serge. I told you often enough... if you were ever violent to me, you'd be out. Go!!!"

To accent this point the point, Gary had now arrived outside, his van screeching to a loud halt.

Sergio wanted to argue the point, until he looked out the door and saw Gary exit the van, determined stride and burning glare headed straight for him. Gary then motioned for him to come out the door and get in the van. When he was sure Semolina was safely in the passenger seat, Gary turned to Marianna.

"You okay now?" he quietly asked her.

"I will be, now. Just get him over to his mother's and have her call the Crisis Assessment team. I've already called my own mother, so she should be here soon. And Gary... you're one heck of a knight-in-shining-armor."

Within a minute, Gary was starting to drive off. As she watched the van disappear in the distance, she returned to her daydreaming, imagining the princess pinching the Shining Knight on the bum.

Two hours later, over at Mrs Semolina's, Gary was wondering why the old lady was so slow in calling the Assessment Team.

"Explain that to me, Mrs Semolina," he said. "Why are you dragging your feet?"

"Marianna not hurta dat bad. No needa to calla da Team. She getta over itta."

"I don't understand you, Mrs Semolina. Nobody deserves to be hurt the way Marianna was. And Mikey nearly copped a TV on his head."

"Anya say inna 1993, you come-a betweena Sergio anda Marianna." The comment came out of left-field, totally unexpected.

"She said that??" Gary couldn't believe it. "I don't get it. In 1993, that comment made no sense whatsoever."

"Whya not?"

"Figure it, Mrs Semolina. I was a bit over-focused on Anya for starters. No interest in Marianna whatsoever. However, it does show Anya was up to something. The only way she could make such a comment was if she knew something neither Marianna or I were aware of."

Mrs Semolina's son had been sitting quietly for the past hour. Now, he showed signs of life. "Anya's a Godly woman, Gary," he said.

"Serge, we've been over it before. Dead issue."

"And Pastor Noel's a mighty man of God."

"Past history, Serge... "

"You're not Godly, Gary... you don't understand."

Mrs Semolina now tried to defuse the moment. "Gazza, you go-a home-a now. I handle-a tings froma here."

Gary took his leave, out the door, onto the patio and into the night air. However, Sergio followed him, making one last comment.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it, Gary?"

Gary had already gotten a few steps out from the patio, but as he heard this, he spun around, eyes blazing bright with rage. He'd held his temper until this point, but now he started walking back to Sergio, the glare in his eyes hitting Semolina like a steamroller.

"You want to talk about truth??" He was right in Sergio's face now. "What did you do to Marianna??"

Semolina could barely face him. "Uh, well, I did a little thing wrong... "

“Really??? A little thing?? You slammed her up against a wall, you fool!!!”

Serge was starting to pee his pants. “Uhm, ah, er... ”

Halliday pointed a finger right between Sergio's eyes, while fixing his intense glare on him. The look was almost feral.

“Don't... you ever... touch her... ever again! You hear me?”

With that said, Gary turned again and walked out the gate.

Behind him, Sergio Semolina was white as a sheet.

Chapter 21

Photo Clues

1. January 2003...Northern Suburbs

Marianna's divorce was only a few months away from becoming final, although she'd already split with Sergio after that night back in 2001. He himself now lived in a psychiatric hostel many suburbs away, seeing the kids only every fortnight, if that. Gary Halliday was a far more regular visitor, still friends with Sergio's ex-wife and kids.

This night, they sat in the lounge, at the table; Gary was trying to get his coffee past young Mikey, now two-and-a-half, who was tugging his ears merrily. Marianna was watching and laughing, while Jack played on the floor, tapping with a stick. Sitting on the table was Gary's photo album.

Marianna couldn't get over how naturally the boys took to Halliday. In fact, the kids seemed to be thriving, in spite of the absence of their father.

"God, what a year it's been," she said.

"Yeah, but it won't be long till you're a completely divorced woman. Though... your mother-in-law hated you splitting with Serge.

"I don't care. It's been better for the boys and me. For the first time in years, I feel so relieved. Even Jack's starting to show some small improvement. Young Mikey is handling things just fine, as well."

"As my ears can attest... "

"Even though you only visit once or twice a week, the boys love you so much. Then again, you were so much more interactive with them than Sergio ever was."

"So, what did you think of the photo album?"

Gary had brought it to show Marianna photos disproving something Anya had once told her. She'd been looking at the pictures only a few minutes before.

"Amazing how she once tried to tell me you were depressed back in 1989 and 1990. But you were right, the photos prove the opposite," Marianna commented.

"It was my best time, professionally, and up to a point, I thought, my most successful personal time, too. I wonder why she told the bullshit story."

"Well, you proved your point. She was lying. Hey, can I look through the rest of it?"

"Be my guest."

Marianna leafed through the other pages, smiling at some pictures... until she came to a photo of Gary in his old, tramways uniform. She turned the album around so he could see it, confusion in her eyes.

"What's so surprising about me in my conductor's uniform?" Gary was puzzled at her reaction.

"When was this taken? Was this in the late-eighties??"

"Why, sure. Didn't I tell you I was a conductor back then?"

"You've told me a few times in recent years, but the day Sergio first introduced us, you didn't."

"Didn't I mention something about the trams, though?"

"Only that we might have seen each other on them."

"And the point is... "

"Gary, this is the same conductor I used to have the hots for and told all my friends about Including, back in 1987... Anya."

"But... the conductor in this photo is me."

"And Anya would have known it was you, based on the description I gave her."

"Oh heck... "

Marianna had already started flipping through other pages, until she came to pictures of Gary at Anya's 21st, also ones from the 1990 and 1991 airport moments.

"Omigod!" exclaimed Marianna. "Even the guys at the 21sts and the airport! They were you, too!"

"Hang on, did you ask Anya about the guy or guys you saw those times?"

"Every time. Including, asking if they... you... were single."

"Oh my frickin' God."

"We've been conned... by Anya... all these years." Anger started to build in Marianna's eyes. "That little bitch! I want her hide. I—"

The phone rang. Because she didn't have call identification yet, Marianna had to answer it to find out who was calling. In one of the most coincidental pieces of timing, it was Anya.

"Hang on a sec, Anya, I've got to switch the stove off. I'll put you on hold for a minute." She did so, then spoke to Gary.

He suggested she stay calm and try to get Anya to make some admissions. She, in turn, suggested he listen in on the other line in the computer room, then opened the line to Anya again.

Time dragged on. Anya's call had come in just after nine, but it was nearly midnight when she finally hung up. The kids were now asleep, so Gary gave Marianna a hand to put them to bed, then joined her in the lounge for one last coffee and a post-mortem on the call.

The TV was still on, showing the late-night video music clips.

Marianna was fuming. "The cow! She finally admitted she knew Mrs Semolina was conniving. Minsica!"

"That an Italian swear word? And what about her admitting I'd been the one with the real gentle nature, not Sergio?"

"That means she was manipulating our lives for over a decade. This really weirds me out, Gaz."

"I'll bet she thought it was all a huge practical joke, too."

"Do you know what this means, Gaz?"

"I sure do. Mrs Semolina's spent the last year or so making false accusations at us, but heck, we could have done whatever we liked, with clear consciences."

"It also means, if Anya had been a better friend to both of us, years ago, you and I would have met properly way earlier, gotten married... and the boys would have been your sons."

"What a thought! Still, that explains why Mikey and Jack and I have such a strong rapport."

"I guess we've been too shy with each other since Sergio left. You think it's time to change that?"

"Hmm, does that mean I've got to practice my pucker?"

"Well, you could forget about the practice part and go straight to puckering up... "

On the TV, a specific Shakespear's Sister video clip was playing. They failed to notice it, although it seemed parallel to their experience. At this moment, they had eyes only for each other.

Marianna had finally realized, this night, Gary had always been her right guy. She walked over to his side of the table and began stroking his hair. He, in turn, put his arm around her waist and leaned up to her lips. They were very tentative at first, their lips barely brushing. Then, their lips touched, gently. Then more passionately.

On the TV behind them, the song clip showed two girls fighting over one guy. If it weren't for what they were currently doing, they'd have

laughed at the irony of the song. Now, however, they were too busy making up for lost time, kissing and caressing.

Chapter 22

Presidential Epilogue

1. Mid-2005...Washington DC, USA

It had taken the President two years to read through the whole Halliday file, but now he better understood what it was about. He'd found it enjoyable reading, more enjoyable than any other document crossing his desk in that time. He would still want to read the other file, the one on Gary's Israel adventures, and some time in the future he would. For now, though, he wanted to do something. He phoned Condy at her new job over at State; an hour later, she was in the Oval Office.

He informed her he'd finished the file.

"Now there's something you don't see every day, Condy," he said. "That was a spy story with a happy ending. Still, the poor lad shouldn't have had such trouble in the first place."

"Correct, Sir. I think all he ever wanted was an ordinary life."

"Still, he was amazing in how he dealt with it all. That's extraordinary in itself."

"Who knows? We may have need of his talents some day. Though, next time we should ask him before involving him."

"I agree. I've still got a couple of questions, though."

"Such as, Sir?"

"His ex-wife... there were a few hints in the file she was somehow involved in it all. Whatever happened to her in the end?"

"According to reports, she failed as a union leader. She never got the support of her executive and became a lame-duck union secretary, resigning. Useless in the end. Another of Orphine's failures."

"And that Kirkham fella?"

"He thought he was free of the loop. We occasionally remind him he isn't. And we give him the crappiest work."

"Sounds about what he deserves. That leaves only one person. That Anya lady."

"Oh, you're going to love this report I just got in. It's hilarious." Condy handed him the report and he took a couple of minutes to assimilate the basic information. He broke into chuckles.

"You're kidding me! This actually happened to her? That's so funny. Then again, couldn't have happened to a 'nicer' girl. That's one lady I'd never want to meet in a dark alley."

"I quite agree, Sir... "

Earlier in 2005, Gary, Marianna and the two boys had been visiting the Melbourne Zoo. Unfortunately, it was the same day Anya, Brendan and their brood of seven were also at the same place.

Halliday, Marianna, Jack and Mikey were looking at the elephant enclosure, unaware Anya and tribe were only fifty meters away from them. Anya noticed them first.

"Brendan, do you see that?" she asked her husband. "How brazen Marianna is, hanging out with Gary?"

He groaned. He was beginning to wonder if it'd always been Anya making all the trouble. She was starting to be more obsessed than she ever made Halliday out to be, whenever the topic of Gary and Marianna came up. Incidentally, Brendan was the red-headed guy back in 1993, who'd tried to get Gary to go outside the pizza shop.

"Anya, give it a rest," he admonished. "He's happy with someone now. Who cares if it's with Marianna? At least he's no longer interested in you."

She glared at her husband. He just didn't have a clue, did he?

"I really want to tell her off," she said. "She has no consideration for her ex-husband, cavorting around with Gary Halliday."

"No, Anya. It's none of your business. She looks far happier with Gary than she ever was with Serge. Leave it go."

"Sometimes you can be a real shit, Brendan. Stay here and watch the kids."

Up ahead, Gary had turned around and seen Anya coming towards them. He nudged Marianna.

"Anya Alert! Breep, breep! Twenty meters and closing."

There was such a gleeful look on his girlfriend's face. "Gaz, can I argue the point with her now? Can I? Pretty please?"

"Go for it, Honey. Hope you've been sharpening your cat's claws... "

Anya was now in front of them, confronting Gary's girlfriend.

"You are such a sinner, Marianna Semolina," she yelled. "You have no shame, coming here with this crazy guy... "

But Marianna poked a finger in Anya's chest. "Excuse me? Excuse me, Anya??? Where do you get off calling anyone else a sinner after your mind-games?"

"Slut!" Anya retorted.

"Pot calling the kettle black! Perhaps I should tell Gary about those revealing mini-skirts and tops you used to wear to Faith Church meetings. By the way... was I just called a slut by someone who is effectively a breeding cow and a rabbit?"

Gary laughed so much, he ended up on the ground, nearly wetting himself. He was so proud of Marianna's witty come-backs.

"Bitch!" Anya tried again.

"What's the matter, Anya? Jealous because I finally got my tram conductor in the end, no thanks to you? Heck, you should have told me all the good things about him, years ago. And believe me, he's got some great features. You want me to list them in detail?"

The other woman couldn't hold herself back any longer. She swung her handbag at Marianna, only to miss and over-balance, over the railing, into the elephant enclosure and onto her backside.

By now, Brendan and his kids had caught up. Interestingly, Anya's own rugrats were in stitches, seeing how their mother was, right now.

Minutes earlier, though, Gary had overheard one of the zookeepers mentioning an important detail. He decided it was time to share it.

He spoke to Marianna. "You know, I heard one of the workers say the elephant Anya's near had a bad case of dysentery."

Brendan looked at him in horror. "Aw, come on, Halliday... you don't mean..."

"I'm afraid so. If she doesn't get out of there fast, the poor animal may..."

"Oh no... aw, no!"

"If it does, we can presume God thinks she's overdue this joke."

"Heck, the damn thing's reversing up to her."

"Brendan, surely you know she actually deserves this."

Anya's husband was in two minds about what to do. He wasn't sure whether to warn his wife, or sit back and watch the fun. He looked to their seven kids, who were anticipating what came next and who were already laughing.

"Anya, the elephant behind you..."

"What elephant???" she screamed at him, just barely recovering from her fall. At this point, Brendan decided to now stay silent. It was left for Gary to do the honorable thing and tell her.

"The one with Bali Belly which is about to poo on you."

She turned in time to see the animal's backside at point-blank range. They then all heard the rumbling from the elephant's stomach. Anya had time for only one sentence.

"Lord, is this the correct time to say... Aw, SHI—" It was all she got to say. But yes, it was the correct time to say that word. Literally.

With a loud rumble, a spray of very liquidy elephant poo poured right on top of Anya. In fact, there was almost a minute of it pouring. She was totally covered in it.

Even with autism, young Jack was laughing his head off, while Anya's own kids just couldn't help wetting themselves at the humor of their mother's predicament. Gary and Marianna tried to act dignified, repressing their own guffaws.

Brendan stood watching it all. Then, the faintest curl in his lip could be seen. Finally, he broke into fits of laughter himself.

Mikey decided to add another touch. He'd found a bucket of water, brought it up to the fence, then thrown it all over Anya. Nobody within range could keep a straight face, not even the other zoo patrons. To add further humor, the zoo staff tried washing her down with hoses, but this only made her look worse. Now, everyone around was laughing at her.

Finally, Marianna, Gary and the two boys started walking off, leaving Brendan to help his excrement-covered wife out of the enclosure. Of course, he was trying to avoid getting any of it on himself.

"Poor lady," Mikey said. "Poor lady get farted on by elephant."

"Yes, Mikey," Marianna said. "She got farted on severely. And there was me with no camera to record the historic moment. There are so many former school friends... and teachers of hers... who would have loved to have seen her looking that way, considering the jokes she used to pull on them."

"Guess what?" Gary said, sheepishly.

"You didn't... "

"I did. I've got a camera phone now, remember? I got a few decent snaps of it all while nobody was looking. We can show them at any future school reunion."

With a sense of long-overdue relief, Marianna hugged her man and said: "Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor??"

The End



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