

Last Headline

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One

It was the saddest sound I'd ever heard.

'Ho, ho, ho . . . ho.'

Santa Claus was just off Leicester Square, standing next to a freestanding notice board that said, *We Buy Gold for Cash!!!!* Every now and then, aware that almost the whole of London was ignoring him, he'd add an angry shake of his hand bell. To add to his discomfort, it was a bitterly cold late December morning and his crimson suit was woven from the thinnest nylon. True, he had a layer of fat to help keep him warm, but it was not the healthy fat of a proper Santa Claus, it was the unhealthy fat of a heavy drinker.

I limped up, out of the sparse and fast moving crowd, and stood in front of him, looking up with a suppressed smile.

'Ho, ho . . . what?'

'Vic!' I exclaimed. I'm not a great actor and I almost laughed at how wooden I sounded. 'Vic Syed!'

'Do I know you?' He asked, staring over my head.

'Richard Collins. Richie. We were at school together.'

His eyes, with staring pinpoint pupils, flicked down into mine. The dirty false beard veiled his expression, but there was no pleasure in his surprise. 'You're kidding.' 'Nope.'

He shook his head. 'You recognised me, under all this shit?'

'It's your voice. How could I forget your dulcet tones, eh?'

'What?'

'I can't believe it. Vic! Do you live in London?'

After a moment, he nodded.

I said, 'I'm just amazed by the coincidence. Aren't you? I'm only down here because I'm following a story.'

Vic's eyes narrowed. 'What story?'

'A news story. I'm a reporter for the *Birmingham Post*.'

'Then why aren't you in Birmingham?'

'Because I'm following a story – as I said.'

'Yeah? Well, I'll leave you to it then.'

'But Vic, I thought I'd stand you lunch. I'm on expenses, and isn't it better to have someone to chat with while you eat? And drink, of course. How about something to warm you up?'

As I spoke, he was coolly assessing my suit and my shoes. Of the latter, he could have perhaps afforded the laces. I might have made it easier on him by dressing down a little, but there you are.

Suddenly his off-white teeth showed through his grubby beard and I presumed he was smiling.

'You're not trying to pick me up, are you?'

I looked at my watch. 'Do you have to stay put here?'

'I don't have to do anything.'

'Trouble is, I have an appointment at two. I really can't wait –'

'In that case, I wouldn't dream of letting you down, old chum. Stay there.' Vic turned abruptly and went into the small shop behind, which sold sandwiches. A minute later came swaggering back. He had exchanged his Santa suit and beard for a leisure suit and a coating of grey stubble.

I smiled.

'Well, well, well, little man,' he said sneeringly, 'where you taking me?'

‘It’s not too fancy, big guy. *Drewmore’s* in Charlotte Street. They’re Greek-fusion, despite the name.’

‘I prefer the Tottenham. Don’t you know that pub?’

‘You see, I normally go to *Drewmore’s* when I’m down here. It’s easier for my expenses to stick to the old favourites.’

‘Well, if it’s not too shit.’

‘No, it’s not.’ I moved off. ‘And they sell booze, so that’s okay.’

He easily caught up with me, the plastic heels of his boots rapping the cold paving blocks. ‘You’re even smaller than I remember.’

‘And I’ve never forgotten you either, Vic,’ I murmured.

He shot me a covert glance. ‘It’s been a long time.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Tough old school we went to, wasn’t it?’

‘Tough for me.’

‘Well – ’

‘But, I always remembered you as the one who defended me against the thugs.’

I felt his cold eyes resting on me. There was a pause. ‘I don’t remember that,’ he said deliberately.

‘Oh, a big guy like you wouldn’t. But I do. How about that time we were playing football and Stefan Linder came at me, fists flying, just because I kicked the ball and it went flying at a wild angle – as usual.’ Vic’s glance slid down to my misshapen legs and back again. ‘And then it went straight into his big fat mouth, didn’t it? Filled it full of mud.’ I let out a sharp laugh. ‘Of course, that asshole Twynning, the sports teacher, remember him?’ Vic shook his head. ‘Naturally he was looking the other way, the supine shit.’ I smiled up at him. ‘Stefan was a big chap too, wasn’t he? Even bigger than you.’ I stared straight ahead. ‘That’s why you were so brave to stand in his way. He was saying, “I’m going to kill that little fucking freak.” But do you remember what you told him?’ I looked up at Vic inquiringly.

He was staring at me, nakedly fascinated. A moment later he shook his head.

‘You said, “Touch him, Stefan and I’ll smash your fucking teeth down your fucking throat!” Remember now?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘You see, this is what I’ve found again and again in my job as a reporter.’

Vic looked relieved not to have to try and remember the school incident. ‘What is it you’ve found, again and again?’ He asked drily.

‘I’ve found that people often remember the exact opposite of what actually happened.’

‘Do they?’ We had come to a stop at the end of the *Charing Cross Road*. The busy crowd streamed all around us. He was still watching me intently, but now he had begun to grin – unpleasantly. ‘And what *you* remember is kicking the ball at *Stefan*?’

I kept my eyes wide and innocent.

‘Yeah, that ball went straight into his stupid face. Covered it in mud.’

We stared at each other and for the briefest moment my true feelings must have shown through, because all at once his grin fell from his ugly face.

I tore my gaze away.

‘Across here Vic, then it’s on the right.’

The street lights changed and we crossed Oxford Street and began walking down, passing the *Tottenham* pub along the way..

‘What I always remember about you,’ he said, ‘is how yappy you were. You never shut the fuck up.’

‘That’s right. My predilection was always for words. Hence my career. Not that there was ever any encouragement at school, or at home. Though, I suppose at home, at least, there was

no active discouragement, like there seemed to be at school. I personally judge our teachers to have been perfectly worthless. Or even worse than worthless. How about you, Vic?’

‘Yeah, they were all shit,’ he muttered – his thoughts elsewhere. Abruptly, he turned to me. ‘What was that disease you had?’

‘I didn’t have a disease, Vic. I was born bungled. It was God’s handiwork.’

He turned away and looked straight ahead. ‘Shame,’ he said, almost sounding like he meant it.

I took no notice. Personally, I’m not susceptible to sentimentality. Thugs of Vic’s ilk had knocked all that nonsense out of me long ago.

We arrived at the restaurant. Its steel and glass exterior shone in the low sun and it looked as severely expensive on the outside that it assuredly was on the inside.

Big men look funny when they are brought to a juddering, confounded halt. He took a moment to scan the aforementioned exterior. No doubt about it, the cleaners in this joint wouldn’t have used the rags he was wearing to wipe the floors – and he knew it.

‘After you, Vic,’ I said chirpily. ‘Remember, it’s all on me. Or rather, the *Birmingham Post*.’

I saw his face reflected in the glass door. It was set in a painful grin. Any passing remorse he’d felt for kicking me around at school had evaporated. The good old days, as he might have termed them, were long gone, and the present was far less palatable, even though he was entering an upmarket restaurant.

I asked for my usual table, a little away from the other diners, and ordered a bottle of wine. I watched with interest as Vic gulped down a glass almost without thinking about it. It was a relief to see that my information was correct – he was in thrall to alcohol.

Even so, keeping the conversation going was hard at first, but as he listened, he sipped his glass and gradually thawed.

‘As you rightly pointed out, words were always my thing,’ I was saying, ‘and after school I went to college and then to university.’

‘Yeah?’

‘But I didn’t finish my degree. Humanities – a waste of time. I got a job on the *Birmingham Post*. See, I’d been writing filler paragraphs since I was at school, for free. What else do you do when you got no friends?’

‘Dunno.’

‘But after school, I got a bit more confidence and I discovered I had a knack of getting on with people. Or at any rate, they would spill the beans to me, whereas, some toffy nosed, upper-middle class type would just get the cold shoulder.’

‘So you did well at the *Birmingham Post* and you’ve been there ever since,’ Vic said, satisfied that was the end of the story.

‘What about you, Vic? I heard you went into the army.’

He cocked his head. ‘How did you know that?’

‘Friend of a friend of a friend . . . I don’t know. Things get around.’

He looked at his glass, suddenly weary, his dull eyes washed over with murky regret. ‘I suppose. Well, your friend of a friend was right.’ He swallowed more wine.

‘I’ll order another bottle.’

That cheered him up a bit.

He learned back, smiled in that sneering way he had, and said, ‘Guess who I worked for when I came out?’

‘Who?’

‘You’ll never guess?’

‘Er – I don’t know.’

‘Your worst enemy.’

‘Who?’

‘At school,’ he prodded.

‘Ah, Stefan Linder, I suppose. There were so many others . . .’

‘His father owned factories. Did you know that?’

‘No.’

‘But he was a socialist – his father was, and that’s why he sent Linder to our bog-standard school.’ Vic shook his head. ‘Stefan never forgave him really. That’s why he sold the family business off. He started from scratch, with a lot of money, mind you, and built up *Halbermas Holdings* from nothing.’

‘*Halbermas Holdings*?’ I exclaimed. ‘That’s behind a lot of tech companies. Christ, does he really own that?’

Vic nodded slowly, looking at me dispassionately. ‘Yeah, what a bastard, eh?’

‘But you worked for him?’

‘He told me to look him up if I needed a job, and when I came out the army, I did.’

‘Doing what?’

‘What do you think? Personal security.’

‘Really? And yet, he was a naturally courageous type, I always thought.’

‘He had guts – but he wasn’t stupid either. But anyway, it was an easy ride. He spent a lot of time out of sight, doing research.’

‘What kind of thing was that, his research?’

‘How do I know?’ Vic scowled. ‘I never went into his labs.’

The new bottle landed on the table and he filled his glass.

‘How long were you with him?’

‘Fifteen years, pretty much.’

‘Wow. And then you became Santa Claus?’

‘Fuck off,’ he murmured. Then he reconsidered my remark and laughed. ‘Actually, I don’t care anymore. It’s all pointless.’ He glanced around the restaurant, his eyes dead. ‘If you want to know, I set up my own cab firm. But it’s gone now. I was doing too much of this,’ he raised his glass. ‘And then there was divorce number three –’

‘Couldn’t you get your old job back with Stefan?’

‘See, the wife caused a problem there too. SsHis wife.’

‘His wife? What did she do?’

He grinned. ‘She died, Richie.’

‘Oh?’

‘And he went to pieces. Not at first. Later, bit by bit. He started off by getting rid of all her stuff. Everything that reminded him of her. Eventually that meant the staff too – including me. Still, we got a generous pay off.’

I toyed with my drink, as if I were thinking this over, and tried again.

‘Still, if I were you, I’d give him a call. Tell him you’re down on your luck. Anything’s worth a try.’

He snorted with suppressed laughter. ‘God, you’re the optimist. Then again, you have to be, don’t you? Working at the *Birmingham Post*.’

I let him savour his own wit.

‘It’s still a pity,’ I said at last.

‘What is?’

‘That you’re not in contact with him.’

‘Listen, will you, his wife . . . he doesn’t want to be reminded. Ever again.’

Keeping my tone as businesslike as possible, I said, ‘I labour the point because Stefan has a story worth telling. You tell me he’s boss behind *Halbermas Holdings*. That makes him news.’

‘Who really cares?’

‘The logos are everywhere. Put a face to them, that’s news. I can tell you, as a reporter – ’
‘For the *Birmingham Post*?’

‘– that I have contacts in the national dailies, Vic. The human face behind *Halbermas Holdings*, especially as he’s a recluse – they’d rip your arm off for exclusive information. They’d pay serious money.’

Vic became alert. The magical promise of money had cut straight through all that alcohol.

‘Oh yeah?’

I smiled. ‘You could give them a call yourself, perhaps. I’ll give you some numbers. But I’d say you’d get seriously underpaid.’

‘You mean ripped off.’

‘Something like that. However, I could – ’

‘And why wouldn’t *you* rip me off?’

‘Because I never forget a kindness, Vic. Can you understand that?’

He frowned and nodded hesitantly.

I went on.

‘And this is an amazing piece of luck, isn’t it? I can actually repay you for all the good turns you did me, old pal. By sheer chance. Who could ever believe it?’

‘Who are these people, who would pay for the information?’

‘Oh, I’ll link you up, don’t worry about that.’

‘Yeah?’

‘I just need to give them something to lure them, Vic. Get them hot under the collar. Some piece of info that perhaps you only know.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well,’ I mused. ‘Linder’s a recluse, I believe, and no one really even knows where he lives . . . ’

‘I do happen to know that.’

‘Do you?’ Feigning mild interest

‘Oh yes.’ He watched me, waiting for a reaction.

I glanced at my watch. ‘That might just about do it.’

‘Will they pay for it, or not?’

‘Yes, if it checks out. They’ll want to check it out, Vic.’

He nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. ‘Okay, Richie, and I can trust you to link me up, right?’

‘Tell you what, I’ll put it in writing. Honest, that’s my forte.’

‘Alright, alright. There’s this run-down factory he owns – *Griersom*’s. He left it the same on the outside, but on the inside it’s a luxury place, see?’

‘Not really.’

‘Linder converted it so that his wife could be nearer to her parents, and still maintain their privacy.’

‘He lives in converted factory?’

‘That’s right, Richie, in *Senacternacy* – USA.’

‘I haven’t heard of it.’

‘Sort of the point, don’t you think?’

‘Right. They’ll find it.’

Vic leaned forward, making the table creak.

‘You could do better, if I get a cut, that is.’

‘Um?’

‘I could get you in. You could even get to meet Stephan. I mean, if he recognises you from school, he might give you his whole story. Worth a shot, ain’t it? Wouldn’t that be the

biggest thing you ever wrote?’

I really hadn’t expected this.

‘How could you get me in?’ I asked. For the first time since we’d met I wasn’t acting in any way.

‘I know the code for the entry.’

‘He’d have changed it by now.’

‘I don’t think so. No one else, apart from him and his wife, was supposed to know the code. But I do, because – ’ he flashed me a big smile, displaying teeth stained and chipped by poverty, ‘I’m very sneaky boy.’

‘Good for you, Vic!’

Two

The old *Grierson’s* factory stood on the edge of *Senacternacy*, a powered-down Midwestern town. It was a dignified redbrick turn-of-last-century building, adrift in a sprawl of used-car lots, strip malls, discount stores and warehouse blocks.

The first day I arrived, having checked into a motel, I took a stroll up the service alley running along one side of the factory building. There were three loading bays here. The first two had been bricked up, but the last was fitted with a metal roll-up door and a numeric keypad lock. This, Vic had told me, was the only way in. I slipped a pellet of screwed up paper between the door and frame, near the ground, and went away to wait and watch from the diner on the main street.

I staked a place out for three days, during which I didn’t see anyone come or go from the service alley. On the fourth morning, I made my move.

The paper pellet was still in place. I keyed in the code Vic had given me and the door noiselessly rolled up. The mechanism was uncanny, working so perfectly it could have belonged to a spaceship.

The huge interior was just about lit by a row of filthy skylights, revealing endless rows of steel girders and tubes stacked high on heavy trestles of oily wood. The air had a sharp chemical tang and was deadly cold.

It hardly looked promising. Still, I went in and began to pick my way around the steel off cuts and lumber scattered over the floor. These made walking treacherous. There was a kind of central avenue that was fairly clear, and I kept to that. From there, anyway, I should have been able to spot any doorways leading further into the factory. The first and then the second survey revealed nothing but shadowy wall. So far as I could tell, I was in an ordinary warehouse. One that had been deserted for years.

Although I had told myself not to hope too much, I was still keenly disappointed. Up until then I’d been almost too lucky. While poking around into Stefan Linder’s past I’d found someone who had gone to school with him who suffered the same birth defects I did – a certain Richard Collins. Of course, Linder had been sniffed around by other journalists before now, and so had everyone who had ever known the reclusive billionaire, but I suppose I was the first journalist who might pass for Collins– and that had given me the idea. I’d even had some press documents mocked up with his name, for when I did finally meet Linder. He wouldn’t exactly recognise me, of course, but I guessed that, like me, Collins had been a peripheral at school. Linder would remember me perhaps the way Vic had,. And then, being an old contemporary from his schooldays, he might talk.

The real Richie Collins, by the way, was already dead, and the latest news I’d had from the doctor was that I would be following his example in a few months. Consequently, this was set to be my last headline, and hopefully my biggest.

Or so I'd hoped.

There weren't any doors leading to Stefan Linder here and I turned to go. My foot caught on something hidden in the greyed-out light and I almost went face first into a bunch of steel tubes, pointing my way like spears. If I'd been born straight and true, I'd have been finished. As it was, the spears missed and instead I just landed awkwardly on the dirty floor. I yelled out a curse.

As if in reply, there was a slithering sound off to the left. I held my breath and froze. The sound stopped straight away. Absolute silence followed, apart from the pounding in my ears. Suddenly, I was alone and vulnerable in that cold and desolate place. It went darker – the dirty sky lights went dark as the sun passed behind cloud..

I got to my feet as quietly as I could and set out for the door, winding my way through the metal detritus on the floor. Bafflingly, the door to the service alley seemed to have disappeared. I turned around, forcing myself to stay calm while I orientated myself again. But there was no doubt, I had reached the spot where I had entered. The realisation dawned on me then – the door had closed, as noiselessly and efficiently as it had opened. I felt my chest tighten with panic.

In that moment, the slithering sound started up again.

I span round.

A big man in a suit, wearing sneakers, was dancing towards me as he dodged the scattered debris with deadly agility. The place was so silent I could hear the fabric of his suit sliding over his skin.

He stopped about ten feet away, from where I could just make out his face.

'Vic! You followed me out.' I laughed thinly in my relief.

In reply Vic raised one hand and pointed something at me. It glinted – the snout of a long barrel. 'Vic! You've got to be joking!'

I remember a flash and a choking sensation, then nothing.

Three

A sharp pain on the back of one hand brought me to my senses.

I found myself lying on a couch. Standing over me, framed by beautifully patterned sunlit walls, was a swarthy, bald man dressed in a tight grey suit. He held a hypodermic between two fingers, like a cigarette. His bespectacled eyes assessed me coldly.

Turning slightly, he spoke over his shoulder. 'He should stay put for ten minutes or so.' Then to me. 'Out of interest, please – is your condition a result of *Qualadozine*?'

I felt slightly nauseous. 'Are you definitely a doctor?'

There was a murmur from someone out of sight.

'What is *Qualadozine*?'

The man spoke over his shoulder again. 'It was prescribed to pregnant women. A kind of anti depressant.'

A tall man loomed into view and with a shock I realised it was Stefan Linder. Going by the photos, he had been a handsome boy and he still had all the components in place – the square jaw, the mane of hair, the high cheekbones, but somehow, they looked compromised. Ravaged from inside, rather than outside by the usual wear and tear of the world.

His clear eyes were quite dead.

'I always wondered about your condition, Richie, when we were at school. Didn't want to ask, of course. Is the doctor correct?'

'Yes, she took it.'

'And you got a lifetime of sorrow, eh?' Linder glanced at the doctor with a hint of a

smile. 'You see that? You people can't save us.'

'The drug was withdrawn,' the doctor answered perfunctorily. After a moment's thought, he added, 'And it wasn't as awful as *thalidomide*.'

'Actually,' I said, 'Mom got compensation and that paid my university fees.'

'There you are!' Linder gave the doctor's arm a friendly squeeze. 'Beneficial side effects.' He was abruptly serious. 'We'll talk later.'

The doctor nodded and turned away. I heard a door open and shut.

Linder pulled up an armchair, a very good eighteenth century reproduction, I believe, and sat opposite me. 'First of all, you're not injured. You were shot by a pocket of electrified nerve gas. One of our most humane inventions.'

I sat up groggily. 'Thank you.' Glancing around the room, I was surprised to see the decor matched the chair. It was a faux eighteenth century room.

'I'm sorry, but we searched through your pockets. I know you're working for the Daily Mail.'

'Are you angry, Stefan?' I said, noting his eerie calm.

'Not at all. What were you after?'

'Just a story, that's all. By an amazing stroke of luck, I happened to know you from school, so I thought there was a slim chance you'd talk to me.'

He shook his head, preoccupied by another train of thought.

'At school . . . yes, I remember thinking you'd have no life at all when you grew up. And yet, here you are, working for a national daily and acting like James Bond. How very admirable. I expect you're as tough as old boots by now.' His dead eyes stared over my head into space.

He was wondering perhaps what one did with old boots.

I began to feel nervous. I was, after all, at his disposal.

'Not a bit of it, Stefan. I'm stubborn more than anything else. That's why I insisted on playing football at school, even though no one, not even the teachers wanted me to. Remember Twynning, the sports teacher? Remember that shit?'

Linder's slowly descended onto me. 'Twynning? Yes.'

'He laughed at me. The way I ran, like a lame donkey, he said. What precisely was the joke, eh? And remember when I slammed the ball into Vic Syed's dirty face and he was going to punch my head in while Twynning happened to look the other way? But you stopped him. You protected me all the time, even though we weren't exactly friends. Remember that, Stefan?'

He didn't respond. His expression had tightened at the mention of Vic. He stared down at his hands. They were clenched.

I said, 'He shot me, didn't he, with the gas?'

Linder slowly roused himself. 'Who?'

'Vic. He shot me.'

He scowled at me. 'I sacked Vic years ago.'

'Oh. My mistake.' I laughed nervously. 'The light was bad – and security staff can all look the same, don't they?'

He stood up abruptly and walked a few paces away. He abruptly turned back. 'That's how you got the code, isn't it?' His voice stilted by pent up violence. 'From Syed?' His eyes had come alive, maybe for the last time. They glared at me ferociously.

I was too disconcerted to answer at first.

'Come on, you said he looked like the guy in the warehouse. It follows that you know what he looks like now.'

'Of course I got the code from him, Stefan,' I said quietly.

'What did he tell you?' He prowled over towards me.

‘His sob story, of course. That’s the only story they ever have in the end – people. You sacked him, he set up a cab firm, it went broke and he got divorced – three times. Now he’s doing odd jobs and living in a room full of roaches.’

Linder had put himself behind the armchair and he grasped the backrest as if to restrain his large, bony hands. ‘But why Vic?’ He almost wailed. ‘Why *him*, of all people?’

The question seemed to be torturing him.

‘I spoke to the other security staff too,’ I gabbled, ‘but he was the one who happened to know the code. That’s all.’

‘What did he tell you?’ Linder barked. ‘Come on, what were his insights into my life?’

I was scared. He was shaking with fury. The heavy chair rocked in his grip. I talked faster.

‘He told me you were devastated by the death of your wife. He said that’s why he was sacked. You wanted to rid yourself of everything that reminded you of her. Which is understandable, Stefan. I myself got divorced a couple of years ago and I felt something similar, though of course, there’s no real comparison, and anyway, that’s a nothing, like the rest of my life. I’m interested – the world is fascinated in by *you*, Stefan Linder, the industrialist, the brilliant technologist who changed our world. That’s the story I want. You can’t blame me for trying, can you? *Can* you blame me, Stephan, for coming here to big you up?’

I stared at him, fascinated. It really was touch and go for a moment. He glared at me with an inhuman intensity and I had to hold my breath. I could actually sense something big and ugly churn around inside When him.

Then he closed his eyes for a moment and his whole body sagged. When he opened them again I could see the inner crisis had passed. He bowed his head and, holding the back of the chair, he shuffled round and collapsed into it, covering his face with huge, vein-streaked hands.

‘God, I’m tired.’ He spoke without emotion and when he dropped his hands, his eyes were deader than ever. ‘What got into you, I wonder,’ he murmured dispassionately. ‘To make you break in like that? Bit desperate, isn’t it? A career endangering move? Is the editor on your case, or something?’

Trying to hide my relief, I said, ‘Honestly, I’d like to blame her, but it’s like this, I’m fifty-five and it’s just a matter of time before I’m elbowed out the job. I don’t actually care that much. Fuck them. I’ll retire and set up a consultancy, or something. Just one thing though, I’ve never really broken a big story.’

He frowned mistrustfully. ‘A puff piece about an industrialist – what’s so big about that?’

‘About six months ago, I had a tip off. I’m not at liberty to divulge who – ’ Recalling Linder’s abrupt mood changes, I reconsidered. ‘Well, yes, it was one of your researchers. Ulbrecht Hursborg – ’

Linder waved the name away with a look of disgust.

‘That guy doesn’t know anything. That’s why I sacked him.’

‘He doesn’t know anything concrete, but he claimed you had a secret project near completion. Something amazing. Something utterly different from anything that’s gone before.’

Linder’s eyes dropped. ‘Oh, he can’t really know. He kinda guessed . . .but then – ’ He was suddenly smiling – the last thing I’d expected him to do. ‘He guessed right.’

‘Yes?’ I asked hopefully.

Linder thought for a moment, then stood up. ‘Okay, my old school chum,’ he said, with the hint of a sneer. ‘I’ll give you your big story.’

Four

We left by the main door and came into a long corridor lined on one side by arched windows. The walls were tiled all over, Moroccan style, and ornate silver lamps hung at regular intervals from the ceiling.

‘Wow, I wasn’t expecting this,’ I said.

‘Just a whim. The arabic and the eighteenth century were two styles my darling Zena detested.’

Zena was his deceased wife, the love of his life, according to Vic.

I turned away and looked through the first window. The contempt in his tone was shocking and I knew in that instant that he had, in fact, loathed Zena. Vic had sold me the complete opposite of the truth. Through the window, I found myself looking at a desert scrubland and distant bluish mountains.

‘Stefan, where are we?’

‘The Sonoran desert. I had you flown over. I haven’t been in *Senacternacy* for years.’

‘How long was I unconscious for?’

‘A few hours – ’ Linder answered irritably. ‘Can we hurry?’

I followed him into a noiselessly opening steel elevator and we dropped at stomach churning speed.

‘The laboratories are underground. Your Ulbrecht Hursborg never set foot in them, by the way.’ The car came to a gradual halt and the doors opened. He smiled sardonically. ‘I wonder how you’ll write this up.’

The laboratory gleamed beyond the doors, as vast as an aircraft hanger, as silent and devoid of activity as the grave.

‘That depends on you.’

‘But this isn’t about me. It’s about my latest project – my last project.’

He ushered me out of the elevator car. The laboratory was brilliantly lit by blazing white discs that were suspended from high above. Partially dismantled machines and containers stood all around us. It looked like everything was being wound down and packed away.

We walked to a perspex dias, chest height (to me) and about six feet in diameter. Upon this lay a dull, silvery object, slightly curled up. It was featureless. One end was smaller than the other, somewhat like a drawn-out egg. It was roughly two foot long.

‘What do you think?’ Linder asked.

‘I don’t know. What is it?’

‘The prototype.’

‘And what does it do?’

‘Now, that’s what Zena used to ask. She never took the slightest interest in my work beyond its commercial value.’ He turned to me. ‘Do you know what products are, Richie?’

‘Products?’

‘They are sycophants.’

‘Oh?’ Perplexed, I shook my head.

‘They assiduously court and pander to the tiniest whim of the herd. They’re cowardly slaves and yet, through them, everyone is enslaved. Even I myself have been enslaved.’

‘This, then,’ I pointed to the object on the dias, ‘is not a product?’

‘No.’

And so, what function does this serve?’

‘None whatsoever. Beyond that fact it will be my monument.’ He gave me a bleak smile. ‘It’s immortal, you know. And indestructible.’

‘Gosh.’

‘Oh, but it doesn’t sit around doing nothing. You asked if it served a function, not

whether it did anything. It certainly does something – it is a fully functioning factory.’

‘A factory? A miniature factory?’

He nodded, grinning. ‘Have a guess at what it manufactures?’

‘Microchips?’

‘What? No! Haven’t you listened to me? No more products!’

‘No,’ I agreed lamely.

‘It *reproduces*.’ He stressed the word as if I were being supernaturally obtuse. ‘It creates *another* factory, another one just like itself. It serves its own ends, not theirs – ’

‘The herd’s?’

‘Yes! It’s not even entertaining.’ Linder said, relishing the herd’s discomfort. ‘They can’t even waste their time staring at it. The robot shoggoth takes millennia to absorb enough material.’

‘Is that what you call it, a robot shoggoth?’

‘Yes,’ he answered unwillingly.

‘Ah. And you say it eats?’

‘Absorbs. Through its skin.’

‘Like an amoeba, is it?’

‘Sure, in a way’

I rested my chin on my hands and stared at the thing. ‘So, the point is to have no point, for us, for people?’

Linder smiled and dropped a heavy arm around my shoulders.

‘You see,’ he said in an avuncular fashion, ‘when you’re a kid, you know everything by instinct. Or I did. So when I was a kid I saw them all for what they were. Quite literally. I went through this phase where I’d look at a face, any face, and all I’d see were holes. You know, the mouth, the nostrils. Vile.’ He pulled me a little closer and smiled. ‘That’s why I quite liked you at school, Richie. You were honest. There was no pretending. You were honestly ugly.’

‘Yes, I was rather, wasn’t I?’ I smiled back nervously.

My heart sank as I found myself at my last headline:

BRILLIANT BILLIONAIRE RECLUSE GOES INSANE.

I heaved a sigh. This wasn’t going to be any sort of exclusive. Billionaires and recluses have gone nuts before now. It was pretty much a cliché. No, I wasn’t going out with a big bang after all.

Linder contemplated me. He sensed my lack of enthusiasm.

‘You understand this is a prototype. The actual model is beautiful – it’s alive. There’s nothing like meeting it in person.’

‘Well then. I’d like to do that.’

Five

We drove out into the desert in a *Humvee*, following a dirt track that wound between rounded boulders and low bushes that bristled with wicked thorns. At one point we crossed over a dry river bed. Linder did not slow down and we rocked wildly in our seats as the wheels bounced over the half-buried stones.

‘Believe it or not, I haven’t been out this way for a few weeks,’ he shouted over the roar of the engine. ‘We had floods. That’s why the desert’s blooming.’

It wasn’t blooming at all.

‘Why out here?’ I asked.

‘This will how it’ll be when the human race is no more. My factory will be alone, out in the open.’

The journey, he had warned me, would last about an hour. We fell silent for a time. I was thoughtful and he surprised me by speaking first.

‘How’s Vic looking?’

‘Oh – bad. Gone to flab. Unhealthy. He’s drinking more than eating, I’d say.’

‘Would you credit anyone caring for him?’

‘In what way? Who?’

‘A woman. Apart from his mother?’

‘Maybe his wives did.’

‘Yeah, maybe,’ he snarled. He thought for a moment and went on. ‘Strange though, because so far as I was concerned, all he that was good for was talking a bullet instead. So, you have to wonder what gets into a woman’s mind, don’t you, to consider a human shield as a suitable lover? This is someone,’ he pursued his point, even though the subject seemed to rankle him, ‘who never did anything useful or original in his life. Did nothing, really, except convert food into waste. And yet, as it turned out, this was a guy who . . .’ I could see the muscles in his jaw bulge and he clenched his teeth. He was being tortured from within. I held onto my seat nervously, recalling his episode of blind rage indoors. We sped round a bend and almost crashed into a boulder.

This served to avert the oncoming fugue and he laughed hollowly.

‘I’m making a general point, Richie,’ he shouted.

‘Oh?’ I said tremulously.

‘About people in general. Really . . . Vic wasn’t so different from the average Joe. That’s what kills me. To have wasted so much of my time pandering to this species of ours . . .’ He was looking at me. ‘You know what Freud said?’

I pointed urgently at the track ahead, to where it vanished over a ridge of some sort. ‘No! Look!’

He grinned and slowed the *Humvee* to a crawl. ‘He said that after decades of close study he had reached the conclusion that ninety per cent of the human race was intrinsically worthless.’

He looked at me expectantly.

I nodded. ‘Accurate and funny.’

‘Yes, I always thought Freud would have made an excellent comedian.’

He manoeuvred the car back onto the track – we had drifted off – and we continued at top speed. Linder was trying to escape his inner realm of misery by driving too fast again.

Fortunately, we arrived at our destination soon after.

It was a small, naturally-formed corral in dense scrub. From here, he led me along a narrow path that gradually rose. The sun was quite low, but the heat was still relentless. I’d taken my jacket off already and my shirt was soaked. Suddenly, we were at the lip of a shallow ravine.

Linder came to an abrupt halt and I just about avoided going over the edge.

The ravine was partly sunk in shadow. At the bottom lay three specimens of the new and pointless machine. Linder had been right, even at a distance of about a hundred yards, there was something unnerving about the real thing. They were moving slightly, trembling just as living creatures would, insects in particular.

‘There are three, not one,’ I remarked.

‘Yes,’ Linder answered remotely. ‘I told you, they replicate themselves.’

So, what he was saying might be true after all. I perked up.

My last headline had improved a little:

BRILLIANT BILLIONAIRE RECLUSE CREATES SELF REPLICATING MACHINE
AND GOES INSANE.

‘It’s working, then?’

He wasn't as pleased as I would have expected.

'Didn't I tell you?' He said, still unable to drag his eyes away from his three living machines. 'It should take millennia to replicate.' He added brightly. 'But then, it's interesting too.'

'Oh? Does this mean you can't control them in any way?'

'No, they're entirely self contained now. And like I say, indestructible.'

A low but tremendous rumble vibrated the ground and we stared at each other, wide eyed. The noise subsided slowly, like distant thunder.

'What was that, Stefan?'

He was staring over my head, like Vic had done in London.

Ignoring me, he abruptly began walking, following the ridge of the ravine at a perilous pace, sometimes clinging onto the branches of the stunted trees that grew from the stone and dust.

I chased after as quickly as I was able to, but it was five minutes before I found him again.

He was standing perfectly still, leaning against a large boulder. I stood beside him and I found myself peering down into a gigantic crater. Great hunks of living stone had been exposed where the ground had simply caved in. The original outline of the ravine had disappeared. A hundred feet below us, at the bottom of the crater, there was a boiling sea of Linder's machines. I immediately thought of the body of a dead dog I'd seen once as a child, which had died in a ditch. The chest had collapsed and had been overflowing with a squirming mass of maggots.

MACHINES CREATED BY INSANE RECLUSIVE INDUSTRIALIST ARE OUT OF CONTROL!!!

'This isn't what you expected, is it Stefan?' I asked quietly.

Very slowly, he turned to me. The low sun shone into his colourless eyes, creating the impression that they were dematerializing.

'Compelling sight, isn't it?'

'It is almost like they are consuming the earth.'

He was struck by this idea. I saw no fear, or regret, only a sort of relief.

'That's exactly what they are doing, Richie,' he exclaimed. 'At this rate . . . ' he shrugged and turned away. 'But what does it matter? No more Zenas. No more Vics.'

When he uttered those names together everything clicked into place. I remembered Vic's expression when I had asked how he had obtained Linder's security code.

I'm very sneaky boy.

That smirk of his – Vic had had an affair with Zena.

And Linder must have found out.

' . . . at this rate,' Linder continued, lost in a dream, 'they'll eat absolutely everything in a couple of months. Think of it, the entire earth. Strange, I think now I knew what I was doing all along . . .'

I stared at him and seeing my look of horror he suddenly giggled.

I had it – my final headline:

IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

End

Herman's History

A dark urban comedy about fate, half price at Smashwords.com with this code: **KN93N**

Chapter One

Herman was surrounded by plankton.

He sat in City Hall and just like the rest of the low-grade administrative in the teeming office, he was hunched over a cramped desk.

The large, open-plan office had plenty of windows, but a nearby office block obscured the sky. By necessity, the neon strip lighting had to be kept blazing all day. It was blazing now, bombarding his young flesh with low-level radiation, draining it of health and vitality. He was twenty-nine, but in a couple of years he'd look thirty-nine, and by then he would be as pallid and sickly as all the other common drudges – the semi-transparent toiling minions, the aimless fodder of giant corporations and government bodies . . .

The plankton.

A tenancy application for a city-owned apartment lay on his desk. His job was to process it so that some poor homeless sap could get out of the rain and wind. However, there was a problem. The application form had been filled out in the most hopeless scrawl. Only the name was fully legible – J. Broughton. Everything else was going to call for time and energy to decipher.

Herman took J. Broughton's demand for time and energy personally. J. Broughton had not considered Herman's situation before complaining about his own. The tide of paperwork here rose twice a day, just like a real tide, and never failed to leave behind stacks of files on his desk. On account of J. Broughton's blatant lack of consideration, the stacks would be higher by the end of the day than they usually were, and Herman would be even more exhausted than usual. J. Broughton, it seemed, believed Herman's time and energy were of no great importance. Apparently, J. Broughton felt Herman was his private dogsbody.

But where there's life (even if it's only plankton) there's hope and Herman's heart beat a little faster when he noticed that the mail clerk had not stamped J. Broughton's application form – an omission which meant it hadn't been officially received and therefore . . .

It could be safely disposed of!

Of course, throwing the form away would also require time and energy. The open-plan office was constantly scanned by Fennimore, his line manager, a creature several notches up on the evolutionary ladder. Herman needed Fennimore to be looking the other way before he could safely dispose of the form.

He opened another bundle of files and shuffled the papers.

But doing this actually drew Fennimore's malignant gaze. Herman felt those small but bright eyes piercing him, as if he were already as transparent and defenceless as his colleagues.

Nevertheless, he sat tight and contemplated a letter from a disgruntled tenant. The handwriting, he noted, was almost as bad as J. Broughton's. He tried to pick out the words. Tried to call Fennimore's bluff. The minutes passed and still those remorseless little black eyes were burrowing into his cowering back.

Suddenly, Herman found himself in the grip of office paranoia. Did Fennimore know J. Broughton's form hadn't been stamped? Was this a set-up to entrap him? Wasn't it the case City Hall were always looking for an excuse to shed staff?

His resolve broke and with his shoulders slumped in defeat, he turned to his terminal and began to process the form.

City Hall, Fennimore *and* J. Broughton had won.

Herman's phone chirped.

He picked it up and intoned, 'Finance, Section Three.'

'What?' A voice barked from the other end. 'Herman? That you?'

Herman lowered his own voice. 'Hello Uncle.' He had been informed about his Uncle Sonny's court case by Aunt Cleopatra. The charge? Grievous bodily harm, of course. It could never be anything else. And there was never any doubt in anyone's mind that Sonny would and should be sent to prison. Herman smiled as he asked chirpily, 'So, are you in *Winson Green* now?'

'No, they put me in the fucking *Scrubs*.'

'Oh, London then. Nice. I'll have to come and visit you – perhaps.'

'No, stay where you are! I want you to look after my house.'

'Your house? Aunt Cleo can do that.'

'No, she can't. My damn sister's useless. She can't look after anything.'

'She looks after Uncle Oliver. She manages that, doesn't she?'

'Yeah? Why's he been at death's door for ten years?'

'Because he's really sick?'

'Just listen! She's got the key, so get it off her and move in.'

'What?'

'Get the key and move in. Look after my house. If you're living there, the place won't get broken into. I've already called Cleo and told her you're coming.'

'What for?'

'The fucking key, boy. Keep the place safe and tidy for me. And don't let the bastards cut the electric off! Pay the bill . . . I'll give you the money.'

Herman was too affronted by that claim to respond. In the pause, he listened to the background noises of Wormwood Scrubs Prison – echoing voices, metal doors slamming and vicious laughter.

Sonny went on, 'You're stuck in that pokey little apartment of yours, aren't you, boy? You should be grateful to live in a proper house for once. In fact, you should pay me rent for the privilege . . . shouldn't you, Herman . . . ? Herman? Hey!'

'Still here.' Herman chuckled with pleasure. 'And yeah, I promise, when I can afford it, I'll pay you rent. Okay?'

Sonny's voice softened a little. 'Herman, you're different from the rest of them. You can be trusted to stand up for yourself. I like that. Want to know something?'

'Hm?'

'When I'm gone, the house is yours.'

Herman took a moment to swallow this, the biggest insult to his intelligence so far. He murmured drily, 'Don't talk like that.'

'And don't forget my car!' Abruptly, Uncle Sonny's tone was threatening – its default mode. He was talking about his taxi cab. 'Don't let anyone take it! Sodding bastards. And don't you touch it either! That's my living. And if anybody comes burgling me, kick them out of their fucking shoes! You're big enough, Herman.' Sonny's mood changed again. You could almost hear the switch being flicked. 'You're a good boy really.' Yes, the old psychotic was waxing sentimental. 'The star of the family. The one I could see something in. Remember, Herman, when I'm gone, the house is . . .'

Herman was thinking that Sonny was right about one thing – his apartment was pokey. And then, it was situated on the Dudley Road, which was four lanes wide and never slept. It was also situated over *Donny and Mo's*, a busy pizza joint.

But now he was starting to get a brilliant idea.

If he were to move into Uncle Sonny's house, as so kindly requested, he could let the old apartment out. That way, he'd get a good night's sleep while some other sucker paid him

good money for the company of roaring trucks and hollering pizza makers.

Yes, there was no doubt about it – that was a brilliant idea.

‘Tell you what,’ Herman said, perking up, ‘I’ll move in tomorrow. I’ll kill the burglars with my bare hands if I have to.’

‘You’d better, or else.’

‘And I promise, no wild parties.’

Herman could almost picture Uncle Sonny’s round, dead eyes swivel in their sockets.

‘You watch what you do with my property, boy! Any damage and I’ll fucking . . . ’

‘Come on, I’m joking. If you’re leaving it to me, why wouldn’t I look after it?’

But Sonny didn’t do complex reasoning. Instead he began to remind him that Auntie Cleopatra had the keys.

Herman hurriedly put the phone down, cutting off the coarse, hectoring voice. He had just noticed Fennimore was engaged in conversation and facing in the opposite direction.

He seized the moment and screwed J. Broughton’s application form into a tiny ball.

Savouring his victory, he casually tossed the ball into the waste paper basket.

Ping!

Fennimore’s head span round. The little black eyes were rapidly searching, probing, scanning . . . but there was nothing to see. Herman was already pretending to examine another form.

It seems J. Broughton hadn’t been so lucky after all.

End of first chapter