

**ADAM
ALEXANDER**

**GARAGE
BAND**



**Nothing to do with
music. Everything to
do with getting even**



Garage Band

Free Teaser Edition

Adam Alexander

Imagin8™ Publishing

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Dedication

For Annie

Forever my inspiration

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Chapter 1

Surrounded

Four black SUV's with blue flickering lights tore through the streets of the industrial area, kicking up papers and loose stones. They mounted the dusty kerb outside the warehouse and ground noisily to a halt sending plumes of dust spiralling into the air. Immediately the doors flew open, and policemen wearing black body armour poured out and took up a practiced formation at the warehouse door.

From the driver's seat of the lead vehicle, Detective Muller dropped heavily to the ground. He joined the commander of the tactical team at the warehouse door, and nodded.

Muller signalled four men around to the rear entrance. He waited a few minutes for them to take position. Then he held the bullhorn to his mouth.

Their intel had been on point. His tech had confirmed that there was still traffic originating from this location. Whoever was threatening to blow up Sandton City was still inside.

"This is the police!" he spoke loudly. The bullhorn made his voice sound crackly and grainy. "You are completely surrounded. Come out with your hands in the air! I repeat. Come out with your hands in the air!"

Lanthus Trilby looked at Jason, the young hacker, in silence. There were only two entrances to the warehouse. Jason's screen showed grainy images of four armed police men at the rear entrance, and eight at the front.

The day was hot, and windless. Police officers stood still as statues, weapons poised, while beads of sweat formed on their foreheads underneath their helmets, and rolled down their faces.

Muller gave his tactical team leader the nod. The man radioed the second team, and gave the *go* signal. Together, they stormed the building.

Chapter 2

Getting Screwed

3 months earlier

Lanthus awoke to the sound of sneakers tracing a pathway up and down the wooden floors of the passage outside his bedroom. It was Sunday morning. Father's Day. He looked at his watch, cursed, and rolled over. Closing his eyes, he began drifting off to sleep again when the bedroom door opened with a loud clunk.

There was silence. Not the fanfare he was expecting. On Father's Day last year the children had brought him breakfast in bed - cold scrambled eggs and lukewarm milky coffee. Peeking over the duvet now, he saw a closed bedroom door. No smiling faces. No Father's Day cards and no presents. The bathroom door clicked closed and he heard the sounds of Felicity busying herself inside.

For a few minutes, Lanthus Trilby tossed in the warm bed before resigning himself to the fact that nobody was bringing him anything in bed. He sighed, threw the duvet off him, and placed two bare feet on the cold floor.

He found his drab green dressing gown hanging on the back of the bedroom door, and plodded through to the kitchen. He managed to pass the living room without being noticed by either Margaret or Thomas, who were both lying lazily on the sofa, staring at the television like teenaged zombies in their pyjamas. Lanthus poured himself a cup of coffee and stood by the kettle in the corner of the kitchen with his arms folded.

"Happy Father's Day," he toasted himself.

"Oh, there you are," Felicity called, thumping noisily into the kitchen. Lanthus felt the vibrations announcing her arrival long before he heard the sound of her shrill voice. "Remember we've got mom and dad and my brother and his family coming to lunch. Better get ready. We still need to get some things from the shops."

The noise from the television competed loudly with the sound of his wife's voice. Lanthus abandoned his attempt to mentally tune in to the squawking voices coming from the television to avoid the equally piercing sound of Felicity's nagging.

"Oh, right," he nodded. "Everybody coming for lunch so we can be reminded that...?" He let his words trail intentionally, hoping that she'd realize that he too was one of the fathers who were supposed to be celebrating the day with his feet up on the coffee table, beer in hand watching sport on the telly.

"Yes, yes, today's Father's Day," she acquiesced, squeezing past him to get to the kettle. She patted him condescendingly on the shoulder and gave him a peck on the cheek.

Lanthus pursed his lips, and nodded, tethering his mounting anger with another soothing sip of coffee.

I hate her sometimes, he thought to himself, though he'd never actually tell her. He had visions of his face being smashed in by Felicity holding a marble rolling pin if ever he did. Lanthus watched his wife's xxx-large behind waddle over to the breakfast table while he elected to finish his morning caffeine in the safety of the corner by the kettle.

After a mug of hot contemplation, Lanthus went back upstairs and brushed his teeth, pausing to look at his receding hairline and drawn features in the mirror for a moment. *Thirty-nine*, he thought. And not a happy looking thirty-nine either. Life was not treating him well, he mused, and if this was all life was about, he wondered why he bothered making a fuss about anything. He continued to ponder life as he slipped into a pair of denims, and a yellow and green checked button-up shirt. He looked around at his wife's side of the dressing room. Felicity had eaten herself an entire wardrobe bigger in the last eight months alone.

His mind drifted to work, which, although mundane, was a place where everybody regarded him as something of a mathematical genius. He also knew that his colleagues thought he was a complete social misfit. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been invited to a get-together outside the office. And here he was, getting dressed on Father's Day having woken himself, made his own coffee without so much as a nod of acknowledgement from his children, and he was about to cook up an entire lunch for the whole extended family. How

had he managed to agree to all this? Oh, yes, he reminded himself. *Because you never win an argument with Felicity.*

He found himself mouthing the words as he tied his laces, remembering Felicity's reply to his protests at the idea that he barbecue for the family on Father's Day. *You know we can't afford to take the whole family out, and besides, remember that disastrous affair last year when we waited hours and hours at that fish place on Mother's Day? Poor Mom nearly died of dehydration and starvation,* she had said.

Silently, Lanthus wished it had been Felicity who had died of dehydration and starvation on Mother's Day, but as he recalled, she made do adequately with the baskets of complimentary bread that she insisted be refilled several times until their cold, dry food had eventually arrived.

"Yup," he said out loud, standing up. "We wouldn't want that to happen, would we?"

Miraculously, Margaret and Thomas had somehow detached themselves from the sofa and were now vertical when Lanthus reappeared in the kitchen. More alarming was the fact that neither of them were biting at one another. Felicity was dressed in something that did a dismal job of concealing her rotund form.

God help us, he thought before saying loudly, "Everybody ready?"

The drive to the shopping centre was another fifteen minute monologue by Felicity, to which Lanthus completely tuned out, allowing his mind to wander, turning actuarial problems over in his head while nodding occasionally and saying "Uh huh," from time to time so as to appear interested. The children had the advantage of being able to retreat into their headphones.

He arrived at Sandton City and drove through the voluminous, multi-level undercover parking, climbed several ramps, and eventually found a vacant spot far away from the nearest entrance to the shopping centre.

The town of Sandton had the accolade of being the richest square mile on the African Continent. Eighty per cent of the entire country's GDP came from the small, land-locked province of Gauteng, and a large portion of the commercial heavyweights were located right here in Sandton. Rising from the centre of the town was Sandton City, a tall building which was part office, part shopping centre, and was one of the oldest, most established shopping complexes in the

area, sporting its twenty storey office block on top of several floors of the most expensive retail space in the county. And this was where Felicity insisted on shopping on a Sunday morning.

Lanthus opened the door of his silver Toyota, and waited for the rest of the family to pour out of the vehicle. As he waited, he admired the car next to his, a sleek, black BMW Cabriolet that must have cost over a million Rand, easily. He eyed the vehicle enviously before the silence was broken by the babbling of his wife, and the squeaking of sneakers as Margaret and Thomas walked noisily towards the distant glass doorway bickering at one another.

Shopping was an arduous exercise in endurance, chasing his wife around the crowded supermarket with the trolley as she moved as swiftly as a hippopotamus in water through the aisles. As much as she was a nag, the woman could shop, Lanthus thought. He dropped a box of his favourite biscuits into the trolley as he trailed behind the whirlwind that was Felicity on a mission. They really shouldn't allow women of her size to wear tight-fitting clothes, he thought. It was a crime against humanity. People should not be subjected to that kind of visual torture. It was bad enough that he had to endure seeing her naked, he thought. He already longed for Monday morning when he could escape to the sanctity of his office and shut out all this mayhem.

A few hours later, the silver Toyota pulled into the garage of the Trilby's suburban home, which was tucked away behind the walls of the security estate that characterised the Northern Suburbs. Crime was a consideration when choosing a home. Those that could afford the slightly higher monthly fees chose to live in security controlled complexes which, in themselves, varied greatly in opulence. At the bottom of the scale was the very bare minimum two storey complex, devoid of character, but offering at the very least a high wall and a 24-hour manned security boom at the entrance. At the top of the scale were the lavish estates, with huge stands where people could build houses of their own design. They offered established parks and gardens within the high walls of the complex.

The Trilby's address was one of those that was neither devoid of character, nor was it remarkable, falling by default somewhere in the middle of the two extremes.

The children bundled out of the car, leaving Felicity to unlock the kitchen

door, and Lanthus to make several trips back and forth between the kitchen and the car ferrying plastic bags crammed full of groceries muttering to himself. He did mention the words *teenagers* and *Father's Day* several times, although only he could hear.

The afternoon promised to be a clear and sunny day. Armed with a bag of charcoal, a pair of tongs, and a beer, Lanthus left Felicity to the kitchen while he went outside to light a fire for the barbecue.

Lanthus took some of the morning's frustrations out on the bag of charcoal. He circled it menacingly a few times, threatening it with a long barbecue fork, then pounced, stabbing at the bag with the fork several times. The bag now mortally wounded, Lanthus the Terrible dropped his weapon and ripped the bag open at the neck. The dying bag coughed out a plume of black dust before yielding, and Lanthus the victor, poured a small heap of charcoal briquettes out onto the grille. He added two firelighters, and carefully rearranged the briquettes around them so that they formed two mounds that looked like miniature black pebble volcanoes.

Checking his watch, he set them alight, and stepped back. The smell of burning charcoal filled the air around him, and he welcomed it by cracking open his first beer of the day. The cold, refreshing beverage immediately washed away the irritation of the morning, and his intolerance meter slowly dialled back to zero.

Before long, the air was rich with the smoky smell of barbecue. The kids had extricated themselves from the living room and had now plonked themselves lazily on the garden furniture lost in their cell phones, while Felicity breezed in and out carrying cutlery, crockery and condiments. Lanthus felt a deep sense of contentment within. Although they hadn't made a big fuss of him that morning, he was surrounded by his family, and after all, that was the very essence of the secret to happiness. Not to want after what you could not have, but to be happy with that which you did have. He watched Felicity's large bottom waddle back into the kitchen and tried several times to reword the last part about being happy with what he did have, but between the smoke, the beer and the barbecue, he managed to convince himself that he was happy to be standing by the fire with a beer in his hand and to have his family around him on Father's Day, and he tried instead to keep his eyes on the glowing coals.

By the time the guests arrived, the smell of the marinated beef, ribs and chicken grilling on the barbecue greeted them at the front door even before Felicity could welcome them with her shrill, ear-piercing giggle.

The conversation at the table was a feverish pitch of words rapidly exchanged as everyone except Lanthus competed for the attention of everyone else. Felicity's father occupied the head of the table opposite Lanthus. He was a big man, intimidating in appearance, even as he approached his mid-seventies. Steve had a mop of salt and pepper hair brushed into a side parting atop a bushy grey moustache and a reddened nose well accustomed to the smell of brandy. To his right sat Marge, Felicity's mom, who was talking across the table to the grandchildren. On Steve's left was Arthur, Felicity's older brother, an irritatingly well-groomed and quietly successful man, approaching forty gracefully, who still had all his hair and the physique of an athlete. One of the reasons Lanthus hated him so much was because he couldn't find anything to hate about the man. He was good looking, intelligent, humble, caring, and a loving husband to a beautiful wife, who sat poised next to him, with her hand resting gently on her husband's knee. Between the grown-ups having an intelligent conversation at the far end of the table and the head of the household at the other end, was the mayhem created by five children amongst which were Margaret, named after Grandma Marge, and Thomas, named after no-one in particular, and an empty seat for Felicity who was constantly running up and down between the kitchen and the table, despite her hours of preparation.

Lanthus observed the noisy tabloid as if watching a show on television. The ritual of gathering around a table to share a meal had oddly lost its appeal for him after the warmth he had felt earlier. He caught himself eyeing Arthur with a pang of jealousy. His brother-in-law was no more intelligent than he, yet the two of them couldn't be more polar opposites. Arthur's family was beautiful. Lanthus' was ordinary. Arthur was admired. Lanthus was ignored. Arthur's wife was beautiful. Lanthus had Felicity. How had it all gone so terribly wrong, Lanthus wondered. He jolted out of his journey into the depths of his thoughts when he recognized, almost guiltily, the voice of his wife, toasting all the dads at the table. Steve and Arthur raised a glass and toasted him from the opposite end of the table. Lanthus did the same, resenting the seating arrangements and the fact that he had been relegated to the position of chef and child-minder on what

should have been his day off.

Up to that point, it had all been relatively bearable. Ordinary, boring, but bearable. Then it all went horribly wrong for the Trilby's. Well, for Lanthus, anyway.

"Cheers," Steve echoed in his deep voice. His accent had the distinctive roughness of the South, a harshness to the "r", and a way of splitting the word into two distinct syllables. Arthur's toast was silent, accompanied by a warm smile.

"Cheers," Lanthus smiled back.

"Happy Father's Day," the niece and nephew chorused, and they stood from their chairs and ran around the table to give Arthur and grandpa Steve big hugs.

"Happy Father's Day," Thomas groaned, and he and Margaret made a big show of getting up to give their dad an obligatory acknowledgement. The small pang of jealousy inside Lanthus began to grow.

"Happy Father's Day, dad," Margaret said, bending over to sling a warm hug around his neck. Lanthus kissed her on the cheek she exposed for him. He wondered if the gesture would have happened at all if the entire family weren't there to witness it.

"Thank you, my baby," he said forcing a smile, but he still felt the bitter resentment for the missed morning of acknowledgement from his kids.

"What did you get for Father's Day?" Arthur asked. Lanthus smiled. He was about to say, "Fuck-all, plus the job of being cook for you lot," when Felicity butted in.

"Oh stop it, Arthur! You know it's not about the presents! It's about what's in the heart."

Lanthus was about to add that he'd had fuck-all of that too, when Felicity asked, "What did you get for Father's Day, Arthur?"

Arthur smiled warmly and looked down.

"It's parked outside," Steve blurted. "Arthur picked us up and gave us a ride in his new toy!"

"You have to see it," said little Chelsea, beaming.

Taryn, Arthur's wife, smiled. "I had to follow the boys with Mum and all the kids in the mommy car," she said.

"Oh really?" Felicity feigned genuine happiness and interest poorly. Lanthus

could feel the effort it took to keep the corners of her mouth from drooping.

“It's so cool,” yelled Gary, Arthur's youngest son enthusiastically. “The *woof* comes down and everything!” he spoke through the gap left by his missing two front teeth.

Lanthus could care less about the toy his brother-in-law had bought himself. It was his wife he was thinking about. He knew it was only a matter of time before she would be rubbing it in, how her brother and his wife were buying sports cars, and what had he amounted to? Lanthus gritted his teeth, petrified of Felicity's next words. The silence that followed was the ominous peace before the devastating twister.

She stood behind Lanthus, two hands on his shoulders, unable to speak for a moment. Before she could say a word, Lanthus slapped both hands in the table.

“That's amazing, Arthur, well done you!” He cast a glance up at Felicity who towered over him. “Let's go take a look!”

Arthur smiled sheepishly. He knew Lanthus lived within his means, and his lifestyle was, well, ordinary, all things considered. Still, he felt very uncomfortable at the envy his new cabriolet would engender.

“Well?” Lanthus smiled, “Are we going to take a look or aren't we?”

The party followed the reluctant Arthur through the house and out the front door to the excitement of the children and the smouldering envy Felicity was trying unsuccessfully to conceal. She followed through the cluttered entrance hall, almost knocking over the freestanding coat hook as she sidestepped eager children, regarding her older brother with mixed feelings. Part jealousy, because as much as she didn't want to admit it, she coveted the life he had. And part pride, because even through her jealousy she enjoyed bragging about her successful older brother when she was with her friends. Today was one of those days where her jealousy and envy outweighed everything else she felt for him.

The sleek black cabriolet was parked on the verge, which Felicity had planted and tended herself. The beautiful arrangements of colourful flowers were completely overshadowed by the sports car that stood like a panther in the sunshine. The roof had been retracted, and the topless machine begged to be admired. And envied.

“Wow,” Lanthus remarked. “That's a beautiful machine!”

“Yes,” Felicity forced herself to speak without any inflection in her voice

that would betray her mixed feelings. “What a beautiful car.”

“Goes like a monster,” Steve chipped in. Arthur nodded, looking down, acutely aware of the dynamics that were going on between his younger sister and her husband, although they weren’t showing any signs.

“Must have set you back a small fortune,” Felicity pressed. Lanthus closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I’m sure it did, my dear,” Lanthus interjected, placing a restraining hand on her shoulder and before Arthur could reply, he quickly added, “If it wasn’t expensive we’d all be driving one, and besides, I’m sure it’s none of our business.”

After a lot of excitement and fuss made by the children peeking inside, and inspecting the car from every conceivable angle, and Lanthus pretending he hadn’t just heard Thomas utter the words *panty dropper*, the family filed back through the front door, and out once again into the Trilby’s garden. Somehow the conversation during the part of lunch that followed the visit to the new car was neither as incessant nor as vigorous as the conversation before the expedition to the front of the house, and the occasion seemed to labour on. Then there was a drawn out dessert of bananas which Lanthus had blackened on the barbecue and served with ice cream and orange liqueur, and coffee that Lanthus wished Felicity hadn’t insisted on offering, and finally, the master of the house was relieved to shake hands and kiss all the relations goodbye, and return to the tranquillity of his home.

He dropped heavily onto the sofa, kicked off his shoes, and rested his feet on the coffee table. He reached for the remote, and found some football on the telly. For a moment he breathed a happy sigh to finally have his own space back again, but it was short lived as Felicity clinked a cup of tea noisily on the table in front of Lanthus. He felt the sofa cushion jolt, raising him up a few inches before slowly letting him down again as the large woman slumped into the seat next to him and the couch wheezed audibly.

“Well, that was a lovely afternoon, wasn’t it?” she announced. Lanthus wasn’t sure if there was a question in there he was meant to answer, so he just *humphed* something unintelligible that could be construed to mean anything at all. Felicity spoke while browsing on her cell phone. Lanthus tried to tune his own attention back into the football game, but was continuously interrupted by

Felicity's voice.

"That's a nice car Arthur's just got himself, isn't it?" she said, making no effort to hide her envy.

"Yep," said Lanthus.

"A lot nicer than our car."

"Yep," said Lanthus. Manchester United had just crossed to the opposite side of the field, and they looked like they were set to score.

"Why can't we get one like that?"

"Do you know how much those things cost?" he asked her, open mouthed. "They're close to a million Rand."

"Oh," Felicity pouted.

"And then there's the running costs. And the insurance. Do you have any idea how much insurance on those things is? You're..." Lanthus searched for the word because he never cursed in front of anyone. "You're *throwing* money down the toilet."

"Our very own Warren Buffet," Felicity mumbled as she returned to her phone to see what her friends had been up to. There was a silence as she read her very own social pages on Facebook while Lanthus tried to pick up the game again. Somehow he had missed the goal his team had scored, as well as the equalizer, which, as it happened, were the only two goals in the entire match.

"Hmh," Felicity remarked, scrolling through pictures on her phone. Lanthus tried not to ask, but he couldn't help himself.

He resisted as long as he could, but after the third *Hmh*, he said, "What?"

"Charlotte Myers, my friend from school."

"The one who got married recently?" Lanthus asked.

"Yes, the one who married the multi-millionaire." She said the last part, slowly, almost dreamily. Lanthus eyed her suspiciously. They'd had this conversation dozens of times before. The one where Felicity went on about how she wished she was also able to jet-set around the world, implying that she wasn't happy with her lot in life, and included somewhere in all that was Lanthus.

"What about her?" he asked, although he already knew what Felicity was going to say. Perhaps he'd had enough of biting his tongue all day. The late afternoon sun cast a golden light through the windows of the living room,

enveloping them in a rich orange hue.

“She’s in Bali, posting pictures of herself at some exotic temple.” Her tone wasn’t purely narrative.

“Lucky her,” Lanthus commented matter of fact. Had Felicity left it there, his life might never have changed. Or perhaps it would have, but not as dramatically as the events that followed that particular afternoon.

“Last month she was in Greece,” Felicity went on. There was that tone in her voice again. That tone that said *why couldn’t it have been us*, and Lanthus immediately stiffened.

“Hmh,” said Lanthus, his irritation immediately getting the better of him.

“And the month before that they were in Prague.”

Lanthus turned and glared at her threateningly, but she didn’t stop.

“Why can’t we also go to places like that?” she said accusingly.

“Are we really going to have this conversation again? Now? After the Father’s Day you never gave me?” he growled. Inside, his pressure gauge had peaked and was steaming through the top of its imaginary casing inside his core.

Felicity was affronted by the remark. “What? What do you call this?” she motioned to the table outside, still laden with condiments, glasses, cups and dessert plates.

“That?” Lanthus stammered incredulously. “That was a lot of hard work.” He rose, staring down at her. Felicity awkwardly raised her huge form and stood inches away from him.

“That was for you! For Father’s Day!” she snivelled, and proceeded to burst into tears that Lanthus had seen too many times before.

“Oh don’t start that!” he warned. “You did that for Steve and Arthur, not for me. What did the kids give me for Father’s Day?”

“Don’t bring them into this,” Felicity sniffed. Her attempt at playing on her husband’s sympathy in order to put an end to the confrontation wasn’t working.

Lanthus’ jaw dropped. For a moment he stood there open-mouthed. “It’s *all* about them,” he said. “They’re old enough to go shopping with you, aren’t they? Give them some cash and leave them to find something on their own at the mall while you have yourself a cup of tea. Is that so difficult? Or buy them a gift to give to me. Do something to spoil me for one day a year. I work all week so we can have a roof over our heads and go on holiday once a year as a family.”

Felicity folded her arms and looked sideways up at the ceiling. “Yes, to *Durban*.” She coughed the word out as if it were a fish bone caught in her throat.

“You know that’s always been the problem with you,” Lanthus said, jabbing a finger in her bosom that disappeared deep into her plump skin. “It’s never good enough. My car isn’t as fancy as Arthur’s. The places I can afford to take us to are never as exotic as the ones your friend...what’s-her-name’s billionaire husband takes her to.”

Felicity pouted, and her eyes welled up with tears.

“Don’t turn on the tears, Felicity, it’s not going to work. Not this time. I’m sick of being unappreciated. If it’s not good enough for you, go marry a billionaire. This is all I’ve got.”

“It’s not all you’ve got. What about all the money we’ve got saved...”

He cut her short, his mouth even wider open than the previous time.

“Are you out of your mind?” he said, his head protruding forward on his neck. “That’s our retirement money. Do you think I want to work like this forever?”

“Well, that’s your downfall, Lanthus.” She jabbed a finger into his chest, and it immediately struck bone. “You’re making your whole family live like paupers while you’re saving up all this money.” She said the last word mockingly. “And how much have we actually got saved? Enough to retire on in twenty years. Twenty years! Is that how long you want to wait before we also live a little? Look at Arthur. He’s not so worried about twenty years’ time. He’s living now.”

“He makes a lot more money than I do, Felicity,” Lanthus protested.

“Well maybe that’s your problem too. If you weren’t such a misfit at work, maybe you’d be in charge of the division by now instead of sitting in a back room with a calculator.”

Lanthus turned and stormed off to the kitchen. “Misfit?” he hissed. His face was red, and his eyes were too. “Misfit?” he repeated. “I’ll never be like Arthur, Felicity. If you wanted me to be like Arthur you should have married him not me. Happy Father’s Day. I’m going to spend the rest of this miserable excuse for an occasion on my own at the pub.” He grabbed his car keys off the hook and slammed the kitchen door on his way out yelling, “And I don’t sit in a back room, I sit in an open plan office! With a computer! Not a calculator!”

Felicity heard the hum and rattle and creak as the rolling garage door hoisted

noisily. She heard Lanthus rev the engine before screeching out of the garage and off down the road. She heard the shrill shriek of tyres skidding on tar as he hit the first speed hump, and then she heard the sound of scraping as the front of the car dipped and hit the tarmac. Felicity folded her arms and stood fuming for a moment before stomping to the liquor cabinet and pouring herself a double vodka.

Lanthus arrived at the Corner House, a place he hardly ever visited alone. He had only been there a few times since moving to the Northern Suburbs five years ago. It wasn't the kind of place Felicity felt comfortable in, which was exactly why he had chosen this place at that particular moment. Built on a corner, and originally an inconspicuous bed and breakfast, the place had recently been bought over by a younger, more visionary proprietor who had immediately tossed out the respectable and wealthy hotel guests and converted the entire establishment into a catch-all for society's reprobates. If you were at the Corner House, you were there with your mistress, or you were there looking to find one. Whatever your reasons for visiting the Corner House, they generally included *not* wanting to bump into anyone you knew.

The sky outside was turning dark, as was the inside of the small room that was the bar. There was an empty raised bandstand at one end, and three wooden pub benches stretched along one wall. The rest of the place consisted of a single, long bar counter, in front of which most of the patrons had gathered, and a vacant dance floor in front of the vacant bandstand. An equally vacant upper loft level overlooked the floor below.

Lanthus crossed the empty room, very conscious of how much he didn't belong. He ordered himself a pint of beer, feeling a momentary sense of panic in case he said something wrong to the bartender who was a young woman of nineteen with bright red hair and piercings in her upper lip and left nostril. She thumped his beer down on the counter and took his money with a nod. A man with tattoos covering all of his bare arms watched silently. Lanthus Trilby decided he'd take his beer up to the loft just in case the man with the tattoos turned out to be a serial killer.

Drink in hand, and his tension meter still fuming well into the red, Lanthus climbed the staircase outside the main building, and re-entered one level up. He

walked around the gallery-like loft looking down on the empty space below, and slid into a bench, and began to lose himself in his thoughts and his beer, which went down in no time at all. Lanthus signalled a waiter who made a show of unpropping himself from the wall and sauntered over to take the order, his face devoid of expression. Before long, Lanthus was on his fourth, and the closer the hour of 10:00pm, the busier the Corner House became.

“Mind?” Lanthus heard behind him. He turned. A scrawny man in a beige overcoat was pointing to the empty seats at his table.

“Huh?”

“Mind if I join you?” the man asked again. Looking around, Lanthus noticed that the three empty seats at his table were the only available seats in the loft. Since his arrival, the Corner House had filled up with a band on the lower level, and people cramming the dance floor as well as every available square inch of standing and seating room on both levels. Lanthus hadn’t noticed the transformation at all, he had been so lost in his own thoughts.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “Go ahead.”

The man slid into the seat opposite, and the two watched the activity going on around them without a word for a while. Lanthus watched his new silent companion bob his head to the music. He looked like the guy on the Van Rijn cigarette packs with shoulder length brown hair and a brown moustache. The man noticed Lanthus watching him. After a moment, he extended a hand across the table.

“Reyno,” he said.

“Lanthus.” They shook hands. The two men nodded at each other for a while. Reyno shook his head, and motioned with his beer.

“You don’t look like you come here a lot,” he said after a while. Lanthus shook his head too. “So what is it,” the new acquaintance asked, looking at Lanthus’ wedding ring. “Missus giving you problems?”

Lanthus nodded, flexing his fingers and looking distastefully at the symbol of his misery on the ring finger of his left hand. “Don’t want to bore you with the details,” he said. Angry as he was with Felicity, he really didn’t feel comfortable pouring his heart out to a total stranger.

“What you drinking?” Reyno asked.

Lanthus looked down at his glass. “Castle draft,” he replied. Reyno snorted,

and called the waiter over. Lanthus couldn't hear what the man had ordered. They nodded in silence to the music for a while, and the waiter returned with a tray full of shooters. Reyno began unpacking them onto the table.

"What's this?" Lanthus asked. His surprise at the volume of alcohol being unloaded onto the table instantly took his mind off anything he might have been worrying about. His immediate concern now was for his own survival.

"It's what I call the Corner House buffet. Don't ask, just drink," Reyno smiled. One by one, they paired shooter glasses, raised them, toasted one another for no reason except that they happened to share a table, and down they went. The last one was a tequila. As Lanthus reached for the salt shaker, Reyno held up a finger. "Not that way," he smiled. Lanthus frowned. He watched as the scrawny man poured out some salt on the back of his hand. "Suicide tequila," Reyno announced. He blocked one nostril with a finger and snorted the salt up his nose, downed the tequila, and proceeded to squeeze the lemon juice into his left eye.

"Are you mad?" Lanthus asked, completely stunned. Reyno smiled. "Where the hell did you learn to do that?"

"Army," Reyno said simply. Lanthus shook his head.

"There's no way I'm doing that," the actuary shouted over the noise. He downed his Tequila the regular way. Lanthus counted six empty shot glasses in front of him. Seven if he included the passion fruit from the suitcase. He was now feeling considerably less wound up than he was when he had first arrived. "Where were you in the army?" Lanthus asked.

"Potch," Reyno replied. He seemed to be a man of few syllables. Lanthus nodded.

"Infantry?"

"Demolition."

Lanthus' eyebrows raised in surprise. "Nice job?"

The scrawny man nodded. "Blew up stuff without getting arrested," he grinned. The words were difficult to make out over the music. Both men looked down at the crowded dance floor below. From up here they could see everything. The band consisted of a guitarist and a drummer, both taking turns at being the vocalist. The dancing crowd bobbed and screamed at all the right moments. Every time the drummer tossed his sticks skilfully the crowd applauded loudly.

You couldn't move down there, Lanthus thought, glad to be in the loft, even if it was with the suicide tequila bomber.

"Why did you leave?" Lanthus asked. Reyno leaned forward, placing a hand behind his ear. "The army. Why did you leave?"

Reyno shrugged. There had been an incident involving him, an old wrecked Bedford truck, and a kilogram of C4 one lazy Sunday afternoon at the base that his senior officers didn't find as amusing as he had at the time. "More money in the private sector," he said.

Lanthus nodded. Right now he could think of a dozen things he'd liked to have blown up. Most of them had some connection to Felicity. One of them *was* Felicity. And Arthur's new black fancy cabriolet. That would put an end to her constantly nagging him to be like Arthur. His Toyota too. He could blow it up and claim on the insurance. Get an upgrade. It was probably worth more written off than it was if he sold it.

"What?" Reyno asked, noticing the distant look on Lanthus' face.

"Just thinking of some things I'd like to blow up myself," he smiled.

"*Ja*, everybody says that," the man laughed over the music. "Tell somebody you're in demolition and immediately all their shit comes out." He gestured broadly in the air with both hands. "I had a chick ask me to blow up her ex while he was in bed with his new girlfriend, and this chick wanted to watch! She wanted to see bits of him flying through the air. Fucking sick." They looked at each other for a moment, and Reyno squinted his eyes. "Don't even go there, buddy," he warned waving a finger in front of Lanthus' watery eyes. "Once you start, you can never come back."

"What do you mean?" Lanthus asked, looking as guilty as a schoolboy caught sabotaging the headmaster's telephone earpiece with KY-jelly.

Reyno leaned forward. "Don't even start thinking about asking me to blow stuff up for you, because once you start, you open a door you can never close again."

"How did you know I was..."

"They all look exactly the same as you did just now." Had there been a backrest to his seat, Reyno would have been slumped right up against it with his arm slung arrogantly over the back. Instead he slumped forward with his elbows on the table. "I know that look. You're doing more than dreaming, man."

“You mean you’ve actually done this before?” Lanthus leaned in.

“Shhhh,” Reyno held a finger to his lips. He straightened and nodded once, proudly. Lanthus’ eyes went wide as shot glasses. He was speechless. “So,” Reyno tried to change the subject. “What are you doing here?”

“The wife,” Lanthus said without skipping a beat, surprised at his sudden lack of restraint. “Bitch,” he surprised himself again. He had never cursed Felicity openly, but surprisingly, although his tongue felt lame and heavy in his mouth, he felt the need to use it a lot. “Keeps telling me I’m not good enough, you know?” His face screwed up in pain, and he immediately felt close to tears. “Says she’s not happy that I’m not making as much money as her brother, the little shit. That was tonight’s argument. So fuck her. That’s why I’m here. Fuck her!” He slammed two hands on the wooden table, and looked for a drink to toast with, but there was nothing in front of them. There were no waiters in sight. “Let’s go get a drink,” he suggested. The two men left the table, which stood vacant for a fraction of a second before being swamped by a group of girls who crammed themselves into the empty benches.

Lanthus Trilby stumbled down the staircase which seemed a lot steeper and more wobbly on the way down than it did on the way up. Reyno skipped down the stairs, unaffected by the Corner House Buffet. They wormed their way through the deafening beat to the bar counter, ordered another round of beers and returned to the area outside the noisy dance floor to talk more.

With the thumping of the music muted inside the building, they could talk more freely.

“So what’s with your missus, then?” Reyno asked. Lanthus recounted the sad tale of his Father’s Day non-event. He felt vindicated having shared his story with someone who had paid such close attention to his tale. Reyno proved to be a more attentive audience than his work colleagues would have been. The man stared at him intently throughout, and waited till Lanthus had finished before offering his words of advice.

“You know what I say?” Reyno announced. “Fuck ’em.” That was all that was needed. Lanthus nodded, and the two of them drank another toast to the brotherhood of few words.

They swapped numbers after several more beers and Lanthus eventually proclaimed that he had had enough of being angry with his wife, and was going

home to bed. He vowed, on the advice of his new best friend, to enter the house noisily, and the bedroom even more so.

“I didn’t even hear you come in last night,” Felicity said solemnly when Lanthus opened his bloodshot eyes the next morning.

“What time is it?” Lanthus groaned.

“Seven thirty. You slept through your alarm. Where were you last night? I was worried. You weren’t even answering your phone.”

“Ow. My head feels like it’s been hit with a shovel.”

“That’s your own fault,” said Felicity self-righteously. “Serves you right going off like that. You still reek of alcohol.”

“Don’t *you* start. Not in the mood right now.” Lanthus groaned, clinging tightly to the pillow.

Felicity was about to say something but thought better of it. She rose from where she had been sitting on the corner of the bed, which in turn rose a few inches, relieved of her weight. She toddled off to the kitchen leaving Lanthus to deal with his own self-induced agony.

“Serves him right,” she mumbled as she plodded along the passage and thumped down the stairs.

Lanthus called in sick. His employer would undoubtedly suffer more if he were to engage himself in calculating risk factors and assessing probabilities in his current state than if he delayed his return to work by one day. The office wouldn’t miss him.

He buried his head under the pillow while the distant commotion downstairs in the kitchen peaked and subsequently culminated in the slamming of the front door as the last of the children followed Felicity out to her car for their ride to school. Then the slamming of the door again as one of the children returned to fetch something they’d forgotten and left again. Then the slamming once more as the exercise of retrieving something else forgotten was repeated by the other child. Finally, muted by the pillow pulled down tightly over his ears, he heard the car starting up and the sound of the engine trundling off down the street. The house would be quiet for at least an hour until she returned, unless his wife stopped to have coffee across the road from the school with some of the other mothers, or popped in at the grocery store on her way home. Either way, his time

of silence at home was limited, and he didn't feel like being confined to the house with Felicity on the one hand competing for his attention and a throbbing head on the other which would deny her any chance of getting it. He rolled himself into a sitting position and waited for the world to come into focus, and for the imbalance in his head to reset as his brain adjusted to its new location.

"Ow," he said again as he stumbled into the bathroom and fumbled through the medicine cabinet in search of paracetamol. He swallowed two immediately, washing them down with gulps of water from the tap. His head throbbed as he righted himself once more, vowing not to try such severe movements again until the pain had subsided. After a few long minutes of regarding himself distastefully in the mirror, Lanthus slipped into some weekend denims and an old t-shirt, and made the painful journey downstairs to the kitchen. He contemplated breakfast, but decided instead to head out to the local mall before Felicity returned to break the silence of his agonizing recovery.

The drive was more challenging than Lanthus had anticipated. Every time he turned his head, the throbbing intensified and he found himself rotating his entire torso to look left or right.

He arrived at the same mall he and the family had visited the morning before, and found an empty parking bay in the undercover section in seconds. Everybody whose cars had filled the parking on Sunday was now at work, and the place was completely empty. He walked slowly through to the mall and chose a seat at a coffee shop inside, away from the window, away from the light, and away from any loud noises. He kept his dark glasses on.

He ordered the biggest, greasiest breakfast on the menu, and ate in silence in the nearly empty coffee shop. His actuarial brain tried to muddle through some of the unfinished problems he was trying to solve at work, but he found it much harder to maintain a train of thought for anything longer than a few seconds before the throbbing halted operations and he started at the beginning of his mental calculations once more.

He was trying to figure out whether the new model for insuring motor vehicles would work. Charles, his boss, had tasked him with churning the numbers for his new idea. Eastland Insurance, Lanthus' employer, had 90% of the motor insurance industry, which was becoming viciously competitive, and it seemed that business wasn't going to get any easier. The company had been

making cutbacks in order to save costs, and the risk model Lanthus was working on was intended to bring in more revenue. Of course, the whole thing had to be completely new, something never seen before in the insurance industry, because it was only the novel and ingenious insurance products that were sweeping up the market. That was Charles's job. To come up with the ideas. Lanthus' job was to stop him going broke by taking care of the risk models. Some insurance companies had started offering cash back to customers who didn't claim for a certain number of years. Another competitor had linked their car insurance to the driver's mobile phone so that they could assess their driving habits in real time, and load their premiums if it transpired that they were insuring reckless or dangerous drivers. Lanthus was still turning the numbers and financial models over in his head very, very slowly when breakfast arrived. Everything greasy, just as it said on the menu. He allowed his thoughts about work to meld with the rich and comforting smells of bacon, warm toast, and hot, steaming coffee.

Having lingered for more than a while, Lanthus eventually extracted himself from his seat, and wandered the mall, looking aimlessly into windows with his hands thrust into his pockets. His head was still dull, and he felt as if he were seeing everything in slow motion. As he peered through the glass windows of a clothing shop, he noticed movement behind him and recognized the waitress from the restaurant. He turned to smile politely at her, and then his smile changed to an awkward kind of lop-sided one as he saw the small black leather folder she was waving at him. Lanthus had been so preoccupied with the throbbing in his head, he had left the restaurant without paying, and the expression on the waitress's face said, amongst other things, *I'll be damned if I'm going to have to pay your bill, buddy*. Lanthus dismissed the fuming woman with a handsome tip and watched her storm back to work.

Before he returned home, he had a cigarette while leaning against the bonnet of his car in the undercover garage. With work returning to his mind, he wondered just how many of the cars that filled this multi-level parkade on a weekend were insured by Eastland, and just how much money they were making from people's fear of loss. The whole insurance industry is a gamble, he thought. Every month, people gambled without realizing. The same people who swore they'd never enter a casino and throw money into a slot machine were gambling religiously. Every month, they would bet their insurance companies

that they would die, or write off their cars, or lose their homes in a fire, and the insurance companies bet that they wouldn't. And unless there was a major disaster like a hurricane or a tsunami, the insurance companies won. He stubbed out his cigarette and made his way back home.

When Lanthus returned to work on Tuesday, he lied sorrowfully about his sudden episode of gastro the day before, holding his hand convincingly on his stomach. His desk was one of many in one of many rows in the open plan office. He opened up his laptop, and went to make himself a cup of coffee in the kitchenette while it booted up. Around him were people whose names he knew, but about whom he knew very little.

"Morning," Arnold Steenkamp said cheerfully as he entered the kitchen. He stretched around Lanthus to get his mug out of the eye-level cupboard, and then returned to the filter coffee machine to pour himself a cup, not waiting his turn. He wore a shirt with bold, deep blue and white stripes, and had a toothpaste commercial smile. His hair was perfectly groomed, his complexion was a perfect shade that came from many comfortable hours in the sun, and he exuded confidence. He was, after all, one of the four candidates in line for promotion to the position of Regional Sales Manager of Gauteng.

"Morning," Lanthus said flatly. There was a silence as he waited for the fake smile to finish pouring his coffee. With a clink, Arnold Steenkamp replaced the pot on the warmer on top of the coffee machine, leaving just enough in the bottom of the pot for less than half a cup. Steenkamp exited the kitchen reciting his mantra for the day.

"I live by choice, not by chance..." the man with the fake smile and the perfect hair mouthed to himself as he left Lanthus holding the glass bottomed jug in the air, peering at the remnants that Steenkamp had left him.

Twenty minutes later, Lanthus arrived at his desk with a piping hot cup of coffee, having laboriously refilled the filter machine with water, opened a fresh sachet of coffee, and waited for the brew to fill the new pot. He sat down at his computer, his mind refreshed, ready to tackle the unenviable task of devising new risk models, churning numbers, and analysing the one thing that few people in his office actually understood, but upon which the entire dwindling fortunes of Eastland had been built – risk and actuarial sciences.

As he opened up a spreadsheet wall to wall with numbers, a message popped open on his screen.

“Come see me when you’ve got a minute.”

The message came from Charles Wagner, CEO of Eastland, and Lanthus’ direct boss. Charles wasn’t the kind of person to be kept waiting. If Charles said “come see me when you’ve got a minute,” he meant “come see me when *I’ve* got a minute,” and that generally meant right now. Lanthus took a longing look at the spreadsheet he had opened before taking his coffee with him to Charles’s office.

“Knock, knock,” he said standing in the doorframe. Only people whose job titles started with *C* and ended with *O* had offices with doors.

“Lanthus, come in,” Charles said, rising from his seat. He came around his desk to shake Lanthus’ hand. “How are you feeling today?” he asked. Lanthus was surprised at Charles’s uncharacteristic interest in his health. He wondered if the man had perhaps been dragged off to church by his wife over the weekend.

“Better,” he smiled. “Was feeling really weak yesterday. Gastro,” he lied.

Charles nodded. “Glad you’re feeling better,” he smiled for a millisecond, waving Lanthus to a chair in front of his desk. Charles sat in the empty seat next to him. This was most out of character. Charles never came out from behind his desk unless he was giving praise, which was rare, or...

“I’m afraid I have some unpleasant news I need to share with you,” Charles began.

...or he was about to break some bad news, Lanthus thought. Clearly this wasn’t about praise.

“We’ve been approached by one of our smaller competitors, Richmond.”

Lanthus nodded. Richmond was one of the smaller, more focussed competitors that had arisen over the last three years, and was rapidly becoming a stronger brand in the industry, a real threat.

“Well, to cut a long story short,” Charles continued, “we’re considering a merger with them. They’ve had great success cornering a section of the market we’ve been unable to attract, and they do it exceptionally well.”

“Uh huh?” Lanthus nodded. He didn’t see how this involved him.

“They have some very sharp actuarial minds, and some very sophisticated software which enables them to do their risk modelling faster than...” Charles

held a hand out towards Lanthus and then returned it to his lap. “Well, than any human.”

A cold and uncomfortable feeling settled over Lanthus. There was a silence during which his mind receded like one of those scenes in a horror movie where the background seems to elongate behind the main character just before he gets eaten by a zombie. He cocked his head.

“Well,” Charles said again, “what this means is, if we go ahead with the deal, and I’m saying a very big *if*, because Richmond is a very small company compared to us, and we’re only considering the deal, we haven’t signed anything with them yet – *if* the deal goes ahead, we’ll own their actuarial brains, and all their computational models.”

Lanthus could only think of two directions this conversation could be heading. One where he was placed in charge of the bean counters of Eastland and Richmond, and one where he became obsolete. In light of the cutbacks Eastland had been making, his hopes of being the head of the new department weren’t very high. In fact they were sinking fast. The way he’d been called into Charles’s office for an informal chat. This didn’t bode well at all.

“You’re saying I’m going to be made redundant?” he interrupted. Lanthus wasn’t known for his interpersonal skills.

Charles swallowed the words he was about say before he was interrupted. “Yes, Lanthus,” he nodded sombrely. “I’m afraid that if we do this deal, we’ll have a surplus of actuaries, and these guys have made a success of...”

“You’re going to keep the new guys and retrench the ones that have been a part of Eastland for all these years?” Lanthus asked indignantly, rising to his feet. Charles rose too, trying to placate Lanthus with two hands, motioning for the man to take it easy.

“Lanthus,” Charles tried to reason. “Come on, man. You’ve had a good innings here.” He placed a hand on Lanthus’ shoulder. “These kids are young, ambitious, and they know this market. Let’s face it, we haven’t been too successful in going after the under 30’s, and they have it all sewn up.”

“Whose fault is that?” Lanthus asked.

“What do you mean?” Charles said defensively.

“It’s not my fault that Eastland couldn’t get the under 30’s market”

“Lanthus, you were the one working on the risk models,” Charles said

pointing a finger.

“Yes, working on the risk models for products that *you* told me to analyse. Don’t axe me for your incompetence.” Lanthus was getting emotional. His voice quavered just a fraction.

Charles’s face went red. “Don’t go calling me incompetent,” Charles said waving a finger at Lanthus. “Your job is to run the numbers.”

“I run the numbers for the questions *you* ask me to answer. You’re the one asking the wrong questions.” Lanthus’ voice rose an octave. He didn’t handle face-to-face conflict very well at all.

“Now, let’s take a five minute breather before we both do something we regret,” Charles warned calmly.

“What do you mean *we*? You’re already placing my career on the chopping board, and it looks like you’re citing my inability to capture a new market as the reason. *These guys have it all sewn up,*” Lanthus imitated the way Charles had spoken about the bright young stars from Richmond. “But it’s not my job to come up with the new products, I’m only supposed to tell you what the risks are in the ones *you* come up with.” He jabbed a finger in Charles’s chest. “Not that you’ve ever listened to any of my ideas anyway.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Charles warned, looking down at his chest then up at Lanthus.

Lanthus was enraged. Seventeen years of service at Eastland were sitting on a precipice, and not only had he done nothing wrong, he was about to get replaced by younger, brighter individuals. He felt angered, cheated and betrayed.

“After everything I’ve done for this company?” Lanthus exclaimed, heading for the door. “After all the years and dedication I’ve given this company?” He was standing in the doorway now, and was drawing stares from everyone within earshot. “And you?” Lanthus’ face was red, and his eyes were glistening and bloodshot, brimming with tears. “I’ve given you everything I had, Charles. Not this company. You. And this is what you do to me for all my years of service and loyalty?”

Charles breathed in deeply. His face, like Lanthus’, red, framed by his closely cropped brown wavy hair and full beard. He said nothing.

“Well you let me know if I should come back to work, then, because I’m not giving you another minute of my time if you’re planning on replacing me.”

Lanthus waited. He waited for Charles to say that it would all be ok, that he would fight for him. That he would make sure his loyalty and years of service meant something. But all he said was “Don’t come back, Lanthus.”

There was a ghostly silence in the office.

Angela, Charles’s PA, looked sorrowfully up at Lanthus as he walked past her desk. Arnold Steenkamp, the dental commercial, had been observing the spectacle from a few metres away. Lanthus thrust his mug into the man’s hand, spilling coffee all over his starched shirt.

“Hey!” Arnold chided, looking down at the brown stains on his clothes.

“Don’t worry about filling the coffee machine, dickwad!” Lanthus said without looking back. “Live *that* one by choice you brainless idiot!”

Steenkamp stared open mouthed at Lanthus as the man stormed towards his desk where he retrieved his car keys, leaving everything else for Charles and the bright young stars of Richmond to figure out.

Arnold Steenkamp looked around. The entire office was on its feet staring in stunned silence. Some of them snickered in his direction.

“I live by choice, not by chance,” he recited in his head. His mantra for the day. Arnold Steenkamp left the office to get a clean shirt.

Lanthus’ face was ashen as he stood out in the open parking lot. The sun was shining, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Trembling, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and smoked several in succession, whilst leaning against the car door, and feeling the heat bearing down on him. Whatever happened to loyalty? To the years of dedication and service he had given Eastland without a single complaint. He had worked tirelessly, long hours, and weekends whenever Charles had asked him without raising an objection. He was part of the older generation, the ones to whom loyalty mattered. The younger generation didn’t value loyalty. By the age of 30, most of them had already held 8 or 10 jobs, whereas Lanthus would have still been working for the same company. The future belonged to the younger generation. The *slashies*, they called them.

Loyalty meant nothing to them. They didn’t define themselves by a single job title either. They mixed jobs to suit their lifestyles. You’d find a twenty-something girl calling herself a web designer slash cake decorator slash child minder. And he was about to be replaced by a bunch of them. The loyal actuary

stubbed out his cigarette on the tarmac, and dropped the empty cigarette box on top of the small pile of butts he had squashed under his shoe in the last half hour. Lanthus climbed into his silver Toyota.

He passed by Charles's car on the way out of the parking lot. A glistening Jaguar coupé. Flashy. Expensive. *Son of a bitch*, Lanthus thought. *I helped pay for that*. Charles had maintained his position as the head of this company largely because of the intelligence and insights Lanthus had provided. If it weren't for Lanthus, Charles would have allowed Eastland to go to market with all sorts of high-risk products which would have crippled the company. It was Lanthus who had saved this company on many occasions. He was as much a part of this company's success as the CEO, and he felt the heat of the emotions raging through his being. He considered dragging the keys to his Toyota across the Jag's body, but there were cameras in the parking lot, and besides, Lanthus had never intentionally damaged anything in his life. Instead, he headed for his new place of solace and refuge.

The Corner House had a completely different persona by day. The gyrating bodies were gone. All that was left was a quiet spot, with a dark and empty interior and a single barman, some wooden bench-and-table combinations dotted around the outside spaces, and a single pizza chef standing lazily rolling out a pizza base. Lanthus ordered himself a soft drink and felt compelled to order a pizza to keep the chef occupied. He took a seat outside on the upper deck beneath the shade of a yellow umbrella and watched the traffic pass by on the road in front of him. Cars travelled east and west in a never-ending stream. And then the evil thought that altered the course of his life occurred to him.

"Reyno?" Lanthus spoke into the phone.

"Who is this?" the voice said curtly.

"It's me, Lanthus. From the Corner House the other night."

"Don't know you," Reyno cut him off.

"Don't you remember? The Corner House Buffet. And the suicide tequila?" Lanthus begged.

"Oh yes. You. *Ja*. What's up?" His demeanour changed instantly.

"I wanted to talk to you. About the work you do," Lanthus said secretively.

"I want...you know...a *job* done."

“I told you, you don’t want to go there.” Reyno warned apprehensively.

“Nobody gets hurt,” Lanthus reassured him. “I just want to send a message. Nobody even suffers, really. I just want to make a noise and piss off a few people.”

“Not over the phone. Where are you now?”

“Corner House,” Lanthus replied.

“Wait for me.” The phone went dead.

As he waited for Reyno and consumed his pizza, Lanthus considered what he had to show for his years of tireless service to Eastland. He’d get two month’s severance pay, plus one week’s pay for every year of service. Plus maybe a golden handshake, but more like lead than gold, given the fact that Eastland was cutting costs and getting rid of people gradually. His pension must be worth something by now, he thought, but he was still sixteen years away from retirement age, and so most of the growth he needed in order to completely retire hadn’t yet happened. He had maybe a few hundred thousand Rand, which wouldn’t be enough to retire on. Basically, Charles had just screwed him out of a future. The labour courts would take his side if he rejected Eastland’s settlement offer, but regardless of the outcome, even if he managed to get them to add a few months’ pay to the severance package, he would still have to look for work, and it was getting harder and harder to sell himself into a new job.

He pictured Charles’s glistening Jaguar blowing up into a million little pieces.

“You want me to blow up a car?” Reyno said disdainfully, sipping on his beer twenty minutes later, nodding in thought.

Lanthus nodded. “Yup. A little payback for what they did to me.” He had told Reyno the story of his day shortly after the skinny man arrived, and had waited till he had a beer in his hand before he told him what he had in mind.

Reyno bobbed his head from side to side, mentally calculating what would be involved in pulling off the job.

“Where?”

“Eastland head office,” Lanthus said. “He parks in the open air parking lot. Security’s not very tight. You have to sign in at the boom gate, but you can use a fake name. They don’t even check your ID or anything. You can make out like

you're a maintenance man or a vehicle inspection agent – they come around all the time. Wear a cap to avoid getting your face on the cameras. Slide your bomb under his car. Get out of there, and detonate by remote control.”

“What about making sure nobody gets hurt unintentionally?” he asked.

“Charles always parks in the same spot every day. It's in a corner, away from the main reception doors. The people that park near him are the ones who arrive early for work, and leave at six pm. They never come out of the office till it's dark, and nobody goes near their cars all day. They're so predictable.”

Reyno thought some more.

“It's gonna cost ten grand,” he said.

Lanthus nodded. He had access to some of his investments and savings, and this would be a small price to pay to say *so long and thanks for all the fish*, one of his favourite lines from one of his favourite authors.

“Can do,” he confirmed.

“I need one week,” Reyno said. “To get supplies. Can you bring cash tonight?”

Lanthus thought for a moment. He would have to hide this from Felicity. And from scrutiny if he became a suspect following the bomb blast. He would have to draw cash in small tranches to avoid creating a paper trail. Working in the *risk* part of insurance, he dealt with forensics from time to time, and he became privy to some of the questions asked during investigations. It was always the little things that gave people away. Drawing large amounts of cash, for example, if this wasn't a regular pattern, or withdrawing cash from an ATM in a location he didn't often frequent.

“Maybe by tonight,” he agreed. “I'll call you if I...”

“No, don't call me. Ever again. We can't speak to each other over the phone,” Reyno whispered leaning in. “They'll be able to trace who you've called. At least if we don't speak again the cops will just be able to prove that we met here one night, had lunch two days later, and that's it.” Reyno snapped his fingers in the air. Lanthus appreciated the man's shrewdness and caution. The more cautious they were right from the beginning the less evidence they would leave for the police to follow.

“Good idea,” said Lanthus. “How do we communicate?”

“Hotmail. Or Gmail. Anything anonymous.”

“Understood.”

“So can you get the cash tonight without attracting attention?”

Lanthus nodded. He had an idea which involved heading out to the local supermarket mini-mall, and there was still plenty of daylight left.

“See you back here at eight? Thanks for the drink. Catch you later,” Reyno said. He stood and left. Lanthus followed a few minutes later.

Lanthus had Felicity to thank for the method he used to get ten thousand Rand in cash without visiting the ATM.

Over the last ten years, the single, remote roadside corner shop on a lonely 4-way stop on a dirt road miles out of town had mushroomed into a sprawling mall. From being nothing but a shabby shop on the side of the road, the mall now featured dozens of restaurants, shops, chemists, clothing stores and a large supermarket that attracted four million pairs of feet annually.

Lanthus started at one end of the complex and slowly made his way to the other, filling his trolley with small purchases from selected shops, and finally did a tour through the supermarket itself. After an hour he had spent over ten thousand Rand on his credit card. For the first time he felt a sense of satisfaction, and finally thought he might just have a small understanding of why Felicity loved to shop so much. It was the pleasurable side of working. He had spent all his life in the office, and was usually too mentally exhausted for mundane activities like shopping. Felicity commanded the credit cards. He found being dragged around a mall about as exciting as root canal with no anaesthetic. But today's exercise was far more enjoyable than he had imagined. Spending his own money gave him a smile he couldn't explain. In order to execute part two of his plan, he needed a small time lapse of an hour or two, which he spent reading the paper in one of the mall's restaurants.

When it was time, he retraced his route from the one end of the mall to the other, telling the same story at each store of how he had bought the wrong item, and on producing the original receipt, the store clerks were more than happy to let Lanthus return the unopened items in exchange for cash. He returned everything with the exception of one bottle of Scotch with which he couldn't part, that left him four hundred Rand short of his target for the meeting with Reyno. One quick visit to the ATM and a minor withdrawal on his way to the

car left him with enough cash to buy Reyno's expertise, without leaving a suspicious trail. Ingenious, he thought.

As he carefully placed the bottle of whiskey in the trunk, he stood slowly and gazed across the parking lot. It was now getting closer to the end of the day, and the car park was full. Hundreds of vehicles were parked side by side.

One thing nagged at Lanthus before he started up the car and headed back to the Corner House. Nine out of every ten vehicles he was looking at were insured by Eastland.

He called Felicity on his way to his rendezvous and told her he was working late. It wasn't unusual. He had done it many times before, but this was the first time the call was a lie.

Lanthus arrived at the rendezvous point about two hours ahead of the scheduled meeting time with his mind processing numbers, probabilities, and developing what he thought was the beginnings of an ingenious plan. He would have to break the news to Reyno, but he was sure that what he had in mind would be more than agreeable. By the time Reyno arrived just after 8:00pm, Lanthus had filled several napkins with notes, numbers, and hieroglyphics that were completely unintelligible to Reyno.

"What's that then?" the wiry man asked settling down opposite Lanthus in the gallery where they had first made each other's acquaintance.

"You're late," Lanthus said looking up.

"Yeah, well I hate being predictable," Reyno replied. "Are we drinking or are you having *poofa* drinks with training wheels," he smirked, pointing at the glass of soda on the table.

"Pacing myself," Lanthus said. "And besides, I think we need clear heads for what I'm about to show you."

Reyno made a face with an uneven smile.

"Clear heads for what? I've done this sort of thing before. I could do this one in my sleep. A child could do this in his sleep."

"Maybe not so much," Lanthus said looking up. "This job just got bigger."

Reyno cocked his head, like a dog that just heard a high-pitched whine.

After draining his beer, Reyno carefully placed his glass down on the table. He had listened to Lanthus outline a plan. An ingenious plan. And now it was his

turn to think. He pondered for a moment.

“I certainly do think it could work. We need a team,” Reyno said after a long silence, poking a finger in the air. “A hacker, some technology, a couple of vans, and a couple of mini-me’s.” He thumbed his chest. “Gonna take a lot more than ten grand, and it’s going to take some careful planning.”

Lanthus nodded. He knew it was possible, but certainly not easy.

“When you say we’ll all make *a lot of money*, just how much were you thinking? Ball park?” Reyno asked.

“About a million US Dollars. Maybe more. Each.”

Reyno let out a long whistle.

Chapter 3

Making New Friends

Class had just ended, and Jason joined the mentally exhausted students as they dropped their notepads, pens and textbooks back into their bags and wearily slung them over their shoulders like unwanted burdens. The fold-out seats made a clamorous clattering, snapping back into their upright position as people randomly stood up. This was followed by the sound of feet scraping lazily along the linoleum floors towards the aisles on either side as weary students joined long queues stretching back from the two doors at the top end of the stairs which raked upwards from the lecturer's podium at the bottom of the amphitheatre-like hall.

Jason smiled at a very pretty girl who completely ignored him and brushed by nearly every male, who gladly stood aside to watch her pass.

"Sexy, that one," said Pike.

"Maybe on the outside," Jason commented. Pike flicked aside the thick piece of hair that fell down his forehead and over his eyes. It slid right back immediately. Both boys trundled slowly up the stairs.

"What we got next?" Pike asked.

"Economics."

"Crap," said Pike. "Hate economics."

"Me too," Jason concurred.

"But you got like ninety on the last exam," Pike commented. He remembered feeling insanely jealous when he and his friend had compared results after the mid-years.

"Fluke," Jason commented.

"Hardly," Pike said as they rounded the corner into the busy hallway. They made their way out of the building and into the bright sunshine.

"You go on ahead. I think I'm gonna sit this one out," Jason said. He stood a clear head taller than Pike and he stretched to his full height as he yawned out

the exhaustion of the preceding hour of Statistics.

“Really?” Pike was visibly despondent. He didn’t mix well, and Jason was his only real companion at the university. Had it not been for their exceptionally matched talent in all things technological, they would never have spoken to each other during orientation, and Pike would have been completely alone. “Well, ok,” Pike said, and meandered off across the vast lawns around which the university buildings were arranged like seats at a long dinner table. Jason waited until his friend was out of sight before he darted off towards Central Block where the administrative offices were located. Amongst them was the private office of the much-adored Professor Saville, to whose class Pike was about to subject himself for the next sixty minutes.

With the clock now five minutes past the hour, most classes had begun, and the hallways were empty except for the occasional student whose schedule left them free for the hour, or staff member casually heading back to their own office. Jason made sure that the corridor leading to the Prof’s office was empty before making as if he was knocking on the door. While he waited for the benefit of anyone walking by, he slid a card along the magnetic panel on the doorframe, which caused the small light to flash green. He opened the door and slipped inside the Professor’s office unseen.

The space was tiny. For all their academic esteem, professors were shown respect only in their titles and in the admiration they received from their students and definitely not in the grandeur of their offices. The cramped room barely accommodated the Prof’s desk, two visitor’s chairs, and a small filing cabinet. Jason headed over to the desk on which sat a laptop, secured to the table top by a lock at the end of a translucent yellow cable.

Quickly, Jason dropped his bag on the chair, and pulled out his own slim laptop. He connected this to the Professor’s, and typed away on one keyboard then the other. A few seconds later, the Professor’s password was cracked, and Jason searched for the files he was after. They too were password protected, but he would deal with this from his dorm. The important thing was to get the files off Saville’s computer. While he had the Professor’s laptop to himself, he took the liberty of planting a worm, which would open up a port for him to connect to the computer remotely without the unsuspecting professor ever knowing. It was the kind of thing to which the average computer user with university sanctioned

firewalls believed themselves to be immune. What they didn't know was that the firewalls prevented a direct attack from the *outside*. They couldn't protect the user if the firewall itself was compromised from the inside.

With the final exam questions and model answers for the Economics paper transferred, and with the Professor's computer now vulnerable to Jason's unwelcome intrusions, the lanky student slipped out of the office, and headed back to the lawns where he enjoyed a cold drink and a half hour of sunshine before meeting up with Pike again for what passed as lunch at the canteen.

While they were seated at one of the grease-speckled, tomato sauce stained plastic tables in the space beside the canteen munching on a sandwich, discussing the up-coming assignment for computer science, Jason's phone rang.

"Yep?" Jason answered.

"Jason, buddy. You well?" Reyno asked. Jason found this man infinitely slimy and something about the way he spoke always gave the young student the sense that Reyno was either puffing up the facts to elevate his self-importance, or to make his story more appealing. In any event, anything Reyno said was to be regarded with circumspect.

"Yep, all good." Jason waited for the slick and manipulative man to reveal the reason for his call.

"I've got an opportunity I think you'll be very interested in," Reyno began. He always started his conversations with Jason the same way. The man was incurable. And full of crap.

"Listen, I'm a little tied up with assignments and exams right now." He made a face to Pike indicating boredom, and his friend smiled and nodded.

"What exams?" Reyno objected. "I know you're probably sitting with every one of the exam papers safely tucked away on your hard drive in that computer over your shoulder right now."

Jason couldn't help glancing over his shoulder at the black bag that was a part of his dress code.

"Yeah, ok. So I'm not that busy, but..." Jason began. Reyno cut him off mid-sentence.

"Listen, I know I've asked you to do some dodgy shit in the past, but this one, you're gonna wanna be in on. Trust me. This one...is the mother lode."

"How big a mother lode?" Jason couldn't help asking, sitting upright. He

turned slightly away from Pike.

“Millions, my friend. Millions. And I need someone with your special talent.” They didn’t mention trigger words like hacker over the phone.

“When?” Jason asked.

“Today. At Sandton City. The Mugg and Bean. You know the one? Can you be there at five?”

Jason looked at his watch. He could even manage an hour’s cycle before the meeting, and crack the passwords on Prof Saville’s final exam paper.

“Sure. What the hell.” Even if the meeting was another of Reyno’s ridiculous schemes that turned out to be a waste of time, he would get a free early dinner. No student would pass that up.

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