

The Hissing Peacock – by Tom Afford

Excerpt

Chapter 1

High above, a piercing whistle emanates - softly at first.

Hovering weightlessly, the thin needle begins its descent. Slicing through the air, its shriek intensifies. Its fins, unwavering, hold firm. At first, a mere shadow skimming clouds - suddenly the rocket veers into view.

People below haven't twigged. Disturbed by a whistling, they mistake it for a plane or a train.

Finally, someone looks up. Then another. And another. Children scream and take flight. Exhortations ring out: 'Take cover!', 'Find shelter', but too late. It's too late.

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Tolga Lyons yawned and arched his tired back as the green dot inched steadily across the screen. Its glow revealed a haggard face. Thin lips drawn back in a ghoulis grin. Red eyes, eerily effulgent - unblinking.

The dot faded, plunging the room into darkness.

Tolga laughed, fiddling with his thin, matted beard.

His plan was coming together to perfection.

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On the edge of the orchard stood a farmer. The veranda creaked wearily beneath him.

He whittled a piece of basswood, obliviously. The ground lay littered with flakes. Curls glinted as they rocked in the breeze. The man rotated the block silently, as his left thumb guided the blade. Piece by piece, a small ship was taking shape.

The man sighed. His surroundings flickered in his periphery. Raging thoughts roiled and fell away.

'Nothing else like it,' he mused, admiring his handiwork.

A buzzing intensified as bees swarmed prodigiously around him. They sagged heavily, landing awkwardly in weathered hives. Exhausted, they pressed on. For spring had just sprung. Their drones drowned the man's tuneless humming; a hymn he'd once sung as a boy.

Violins broke out in vibrato. Classical music flooded the porch, dripping sweetly like honey - spilling into fields that stretched endlessly around. An invisible orchestra echoed distantly in tired halls. Strings filled the air with decorum. The farmer sighed. Contrary to all premonitions, it had turned out to be a glorious day.

The farmer stopped and listened to the music. His eyes grew wet. Prickled by some dust from the wood. Surely, not tears?

He couldn't recall the last time he'd cried. Perhaps as a boy, after another beating from his father. Clint had cried all his tears, years ago. He'd had to harden to survive. Yet somehow his face still stained wet.

'How bizarre...'

As he smeared streaks, a wizened figure appeared. An old-timer, lurching side to side. He approached obsequiously along the path.

'Private property! Can't you read?' The farmer nodded to a sign. His eyes flickered to his gun, hidden nearby.

Clint abhorred *any* guests. The farm had been sequestered to avoid them. The farmer valued privacy above everything.

'Spare some water, *friend*?' asked the old man, bowing his head. His eyes brushed the floor, flitting upwards like sparks. His brow-beaten demeanour betrayed an intense thirst.

'Water? What for?!'

'Why, to drink, *friend*. To *drink*!' the old-timer chuckled. His laugh morphed into coarse hacking.

Clint's whittling time was sacrosanct – his only chance to unwind. Now this fool had turned up and ruined it. Clint's patience already hung by a thread. He coiled apprehensively, then lashed out.

'Ain't your friend, old timer!' Clint spat, wiping his knife. The last few shavings fell away. He flicked the blade, up and down, deliberately.

Spotting the glint, the intruder withdrew for a moment; his smile disappeared. But then he stepped forward, again.

'Feelin' a tad faint!' the old man raised a hand, theatrically, to his brow. 'Heat and old age – they don't mix!' he smiled weakly.

The farmer glared, sheathing his knife.

'A glass of water. Please and thank you! Good sir.'

The farmer could usually work folk out in an instant. Yet this guy gave nothing away. Shuffling feet suggested a nervousness, like a convict just released, but wary of everything around him. Who was this guy? What did he *really* want?

The farmer's gaze intensified as he stared.

The old fella was in poor fettle. Heavy glasses sagged atop a bulbous nose. A light blue shirt, slightly torn, held his gut in. His trousers sat too high. A few hairs clung desperately to his temples, nesting protuberant ears in white, wispy tufts. Deep crevices sank piggy eyes to his skull. Thick lines cast his mouth in a snarl. Thin lips, pressed together, appeared cracked. Otherwise, his face was unmarked.

The old guy wasn't really obsequious at all. Hunched shoulders forced his head down in supplication. A bent spine lent a false air of lethargy. The man struggled, yet carried no cane. A proud fool, or forgetful, perhaps. He steadied himself instead by folding his arms behind his back; counterbalancing like a trebuchet poised to strike.

The request was quite simple, but the guy was presumptuous. His eyes burned with turmoil in the dying light.

Why was this guy *really* here?

'Some water?' repeated the farmer, carefully. He stretched his back until it clicked. The intruder annoyed him, but he couldn't turn him away. It wasn't the done thing.

But no water yet. He hadn't budged an inch!

'And who are you, exactly?' asked the farmer, his eyes narrowing.

'A new neighbour. Yonder,' said the old man, pointing at the setting sun, as if delivering portentous news. The spiel fit. The 'for-sale' sign had come down last week. But this man looked too frail to farm.

'Paid the full price, yet the water's still off!' He cleared his throat with a rattle. 'You're a farmer, too – I'm guessing?' He peered at the orchards, nearby.

Clint grunted.

'Can see it – in your build and your face,' said the old man. 'There's no hiding years of hard toil!' His efforts to charm fell flat. The old man staggered, then stood taller.

'Reckon I know what you're thinking!'

'What's that?' Clint asked, his eyebrows momentarily raised.

'That I'm too old for farming! And perhaps you're right. But it's all I've ever known. Gotta do what you enjoy whilst you still can, *friend*.' He was garrulous, the intruder; a nuisance.

Somehow, he'd managed to weaponise the word '*friend*'.

The farmer didn't need any friends. He had a good thing going for himself. He crossed his arms and sighed. His break was nearly over now, anyways.

'Wait here and I'll fetch you some. But then you gotta leave. I got work to do!'

The farmer stretched his full height, then disappeared inside the farmhouse. The mesh door rattled, noisily, behind him.

'Mighty fine...' but the reluctant host was already out of earshot.

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The old man rocked and glanced around. The porch needed varnishing. The house needed repainting. Yet the farmer didn't seem the lazy type. The barns were all freshly whitewashed and sported immensely heavy locks. This guy was all about business. The house was just a place where he slept.

The old man's gaze flickered to loose shavings, blustering on the floor. He saw a distant glint and then smiled.

Violins erupted, catching the intruder off-guard. His expression flickered into fear. Strings, rich with tremolo, soared upwards. Brass fanfares interjected, wresting calm. The old man swore and clutched his chest. Steadying himself, he climbed the porch steps.

At the top, he tripped on the farmer's whittling, half-done. The old man kicked it, breaking the basswood in twain.

Deep within the farmhouse, water-pipes rattled, like a dog shaking venomous snakes. Dishes clashed, distantly.

The farmer returned with a small glass of water, flicking drops from the ends of his coarse fingers. Drops fell, staining parched floorboards underneath.

'Here you go then! Some water!' Clint scratched his head. For the old man had suddenly disappeared. Then he saw his whittling, smashed into pieces.

'That old devil...' Clint clenched his fists, but his guest had faded, like he never really was.

'Silly goat's probably wandered off,' Clint grumbled. His face then flashed with fear. 'Perhaps he's gone poking around!'

With the glass still in hand, Clint peered down each side of the house. Leaning back, he tripped, letting the glass fall. It smashed with a high-pitched scream.

Picking up shards, in one, he saw a shadow.

As Clint turned, he heard a familiar click.

Blood drained from Clint's face as his own gun poked sharply in his back.

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'Take it easy, old timer. I'm just a farmer, like you,' Clint winced.

'Farmer, my arse. You disgust me!'

The sound of the wind whistled past. Clint laughed, nervously. The old man cut across.

'You and me are gonna have a chat about a missing girl...'

Clint gulped as the gun lodged deeper in his spine.

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A battered tugboat trudged steadily across the Channel; its rhythmic chug broke the silence. Otherwise, the sea sat stilly and calm.

Waves lapped persistently against the hull. Wayward surges swept its gunwale, like a child trying to sink a toy boat in the bath. Deep beneath, undercurrents swirled ferociously, untamed.

A chain of rocks jutted out: the beginnings of England. A radio hissed with venomous static; suggesting a storm now approached.

The sailor cut the engine, gliding the boat onwards. He'd been instructed to wait until midnight.

Wrenching a woollen cap from his head, Wesley wiped his brow and sighed deeply. His weather-beaten hands grated against greying stubble. His wet overalls glistened - splashed afresh by cold ocean spray.

A lighthouse oscillated nearby, scorching everything in its path. In the midst of its blinding luminescence, Wesley failed to distinguish land from sea; friend from foe.

A face appeared through a porthole; a young, attractive woman with red hair. Her face was weary and pale. Bloodshot eyes flitted side to side. Spotting land, she renewed cover beneath soiled blankets.

Her baby cried and then stilled. The men wouldn't find them here.

The lighthouse usually reassured Wesley, as the first glimpse of home and of rest. Yet tonight it alarmed him to his core. It loomed like a cyclops; with Wesley, its Odysseus. But this beast simply couldn't be blinded. Its bright eye, ever watchful, remained immortal.

Wesley checked his watch: it's cheap and digital – a present from his son. The only thing he had left to remember him by. The display was cracked and bleeding. Less for telling time, it reminded Wesley how short life could be. Every day he missed him. God, how he missed him.

The watch beeped. The lighthouse went dark.

A red flare shot out from the mainland, arcing high. A Very light, circled silently, casting all obstacles into shadow. Wesley squinted, shielding his eyes.

'You idiots!' he cried. 'Put it out!'

In the flare's wake, a small rowboat emerged. Cast off, it was headed straight for him. His watch beeped again, muffled by his coat.

Wesley's heart pulsed and raced. He'd become accustomed to waves tossing him side to side; up and down. But now he braced as his stomach reeled about.

Inside, the package shifted - a wooden box, slid noisily around. Wrapped in oil cloth, the lacquered hardwood had faded and cracked. The box sagged, as if defeated at last. In brighter light, the scars disappeared. Tessellating squares and rhomboids flared, confusing senses; an optical illusion stretching out in perpetuity. Someone had paid a small fortune to have it. Wesley must deliver it, imminently.

He still had no clue what it contained. He couldn't apprise the level of shit if he were caught. He'd been chastised for asking too many questions!

'What's in the box?' he had asked.

'You don't need to know...' they'd said bleakly.

The exchange had been arranged off the coast late at night, with the hope of a little discretion. But all subtlety had been wiped out by the damned flare!

Wesley picked up the prize, which jostled side to side, rattling with fierce resolve. It contained either a ball or an orb.

Poised precariously atop a small rowboat, two men suddenly hove into view. Each sported short beards and matching sweaters. Identical builds suggested they were brothers; perhaps twins. But as they approached, one man seemed older. Perhaps it was father and son.

The men rowed rhythmically, with broad strokes. They sliced the waves effortlessly. No words passed between them, as if they could communicate telepathically. They rowed synchronised, as if one.

'What's with the bloody flare!' cried Wesley. 'You'll get us all killed!'

The men carried on rowing and ignored him. Perhaps they hadn't heard. The sea swelled as Wesley's protestations fell flat.

The young man made a violent grabbing motion.

'Give me the parcel, quickly!' he yelled.

But Wesley held back.

'Give me the parcel, now!' The man glared at Wesley, as if he were naught but a mule.

'Where's the money?' asked Wesley, on guard.

The men exchanged a brief smirk.

'No money and I'll keep the parcel!' shouted Wesley. He'd hoped his threat might cause them alarm, but it fluttered harmlessly about, like a leaf. He felt like an obtuse teenager, making unwarranted demands to tired parents.

'Second instalment comes later!' barked the young man. 'You know this!' He tugged at his hair in mock dismay. His voice was husky and hoarse.

The older guy looked more relaxed. He shifted his weight, making their boat rock. He looked at Wesley and rocked even harder.

As Wesley moved the box far away, the men's eyes flared and followed it.

He'd always assumed that they'd honour the deal.

Wesley had agreed to their hurried terms blindly, not thinking to question them. The second instalment was to follow a few days post-delivery. But why delay? Why not pay now? Once they had the parcel, why would they pay more?! Only honour would bind them. And these were thieves and degenerates.

Wesley sized the men up. The older guy cracked his knuckles. His glee faded as quickly as it arrived. The men held themselves confidently. Thick jumpers padded heavy builds. The fight would be over in an instant. They'd throw him overboard like old chum!

Wesley reached for his knife.

'Don't be stupid,' thought Wesley. 'Don't rush.' His watch beeped gently again. Wesley thought of his dead son, and suddenly all rage disappeared. He felt remorse. He could feel his son judging him.

Wesley tossed the box clumsily over the boiling water. The parcel flew, haphazardly through the air. The men's eyes grew wide. The young man caught it, with a huge sigh of relief. The older man wiped his brow and grinned.

'Good boy!' His English was stilted; the smile was sardonic. He intended his gestures to annoy. They were provoking him into doing something stupid.

'When do I get the second payment?!' Wesley demanded again stolidly, rubbing his fingers together. He mirrored their broken English, hoping to elicit some empathy.

'Soon...' snarled the younger man. He turned in haste, muffling the tail end of his words. Wesley felt sick. No way would they pay. The older man winked and blew him a kiss.

'Don't worry, darling,' he sang. 'Lots of money. For you and for me! Very soon!'

Wesley wrung his hands and turned pale. Now he had no money, and no box! He'd been a fool. Like a papoose, tethered to a cradleboard, all he could do was look helplessly behind him. He'd have to wait. He'd have to hope they would pay.

'It's the principle. The honour...' Wesley told himself. 'Without honour, what are we?!'

Wesley hadn't risked everything to be double-crossed at the end.

But he knew how quickly life could screw you. What it was like to lose everything, overnight. Wesley's old life had unravelled so swiftly.

Wesley had pinned all his hopes on this deal. Thinking he might rebuild his old life. But the dreams faded, as the men rowed away.

Wesley saw red.

'I've done everything that you've asked!' but the men had blended with the coast. For better or for worse, the deal was already done.

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Wesley sidled back to the cabin. It had begun to rain, heavily. A ferocious storm approached. Waves began wresting the boat towards the jagged rocks.

Wesley had already charted a safe course back to land. He'd have to sit tight and wait. The money would arrive eventually...

He could hear the crackling of the fire back at home; feel hot tea scalding against his tongue; see the smoke swirling up from damp logs.

As he reached for the cabin door, Wesley heard a roar. Something kicked into him, sending him sprawling across the deck.

For a moment, he lay perfectly still. Had the package been a bomb? Or had the storm hit him full force?

An intense heat flared all around him. A searing pain wrenched his shoulder part. Wesley felt dizzy and saw blood. His own blood. He realised, too late - he'd been shot...

Pain coursed, overwhelming him – a suffering so intense, he couldn't scream. He lay silently, gasping. With all air sucked from his sails, Wesley fell unconscious. Passing out, he heard laughter in the wind.

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