

TRAPPED AND FREE

By Philip Rainford

I awoke in an unfamiliar room, it looked like a hotel room but I was not sure how I got there. I remembered going out on the town. I'd been drinking alone, in a bar feeling sorry for myself but after that I couldn't remember anything. If I'd picked up a girl, where was she? I lay in bed fully clothed so I felt reasonably comfortable that I'd not taken anyone to bed.

Tentatively I stood up. Someone had placed a blanket over me. If I'd been dead drunk I wouldn't have done that. Then again, I didn't seem to have a hangover either. I approached the window and drew open the blinds. The view was breathtaking but puzzling. I was looking down onto a desert landscape from a great height. How did I get here? I had been in a coastal city several thousand miles from the nearest desert. I couldn't travel on my own that distance and not remember.

I decided to explore my room, starting with the cupboards. I had a wardrobe of clothes, clothes I'd never seen before. There was a mini bar, an ironing board, coffee and tea; an en suite bathroom. It was definitely a hotel room. I felt sweaty and unwashed; my clothes were crumpled so I decided to take advantage of the facilities. I took a shower and dressed myself in the casual wear in the wardrobe. I found a pass card near the door, dressed in long trousers and a T-shirt emerged from my room.

As expected, I found a long corridor of doors, on closing my door I registered my room number was 53. The corridor was empty I looked for an elevator or stairs, I noticed a recess about half way down where a man was standing and looked to be waiting. He was probably in his late seventies; his full head of hair was grey but thick and healthy. He smiled as I approached.

“Can you tell me where I am?” I asked.

“Level 5. You going to the foyer?” he replied.

“No, I mean, where is this hotel? I'm not sure how I got here.”

“None of us do. You're new here but you'll settle in eventually.”

“Settle in? I don't understand.”

The lift arrived. “Let me show you around, I'm Bentley Baxter.” He didn't offer his hand; he simply stepped into the lift. I followed stunned. “And you are?” he asked as the doors shut.

“Cameron Van Heusen.” I replied distractedly as Baxter selected the ground floor button. The lift opened moments later and we stepped out onto thickly piled carpet into a foyer filled with crystal chandeliers, marble floors and walls with elaborately decorated ceilings. A few people wandered around doing their jobs or heading off to their appointed destinations.

“This place must cost a fortune to stay in?” I remarked.

Baxter shook his head. “It’s all free. You don’t pay a thing. You should join me for lunch in the dining room later but first let me show you outside. He led me towards the hotel entrance and we stepped out into an artificial street - artificial in the sense that the ceiling gave the impression of clouds and a blue sky but was entirely indoors. I could see cross roads and shops. Opposite the hotel was a coffee shop. “I understand that you are the new proprietor of the coffee shop.”

“Me? What do you mean? I’m not staying here! I didn’t buy a café!”

“Let’s meet your staff,” he replied ignoring my objections. I followed him across the road. There were no cars no vehicles of any kind just pedestrians walking along the street. . We entered the café and behind the counter stood a young girl. “Hallo, Tina. This is Mr Van Heusen.”

“Good morning, sir. Can I get you a coffee?”

Baxter answered on my behalf, as I was still reeling from what I was being told to object. “No, Tina. We’re having lunch at the hotel. We’ll come back after.” He turned to me as I stood there reeling at what was happening around me. Where was I? How did I get here? When did I become the owner of a café? “Let’s meet Chef. He probably has another name but he prefers to be called Chef.”

We entered the kitchen at the back and found a man dressed in chef’s whites. How did I know what they were called? We found him reading; he looked up as we entered. “Chef, this is Mr Van Heusen.”

He put his book aside and stood up. “We have been expecting you, sir. Can I get you anything?”

“How did you know I was coming? I didn’t know?”

“Everyone knows when a new arrival is coming. We have to prepare.”

“What happened to the previous owner?” I asked concerned I might suffer a similar fate. The whole situation just didn’t make sense.

Chef simply dismissed the question with a shrug. “He left.”

I was about to comment further when Baxter grabbed my arm. “Come, time we had lunch. You can familiarise yourself with the café later.” With that he led me back outside.

“Why did he leave?” I pressed as we crossed the road back towards the hotel.

“No one knows. You have to understand the rules here. Basically, the only rules are based on the Ten Commandments. If you break them you disappear.”

“So if I swear or take the Lords name in vain, I’ll disappear,” I queried.

“Not quite that strict. More a case of you can do anything you want as long as your actions do not restrict or prevent others from doing as they wish. As everything is free there is no need to steal, you can have anything you want so no need for greed or jealousy. Just enjoy it.”

“So ...I’m free to do anything except be free to leave this place?” Baxter nodded. “So what is the point? Why are we here? Why was I picked?”

“None of us know. We just know we are here. You have a room; you have full maid service, room service if you’d prefer to eat alone. But you need to attend the café. As you are the only café in town, people come to you for coffee, afternoon and morning tea and even breakfast.”

“What people? And how many people are there here?”

“Not sure but around one hundred. I get that figure from the hotel having ten floors with ten rooms each. Shall we eat?” asked Baxter leading me across the foyer to an old style formal dining hall. I must say I felt under dressed in my casual gear given the formality of the place, waiters dressed in dinner jackets, white table clothes, expensive looking menus in leather bound covers. We sat and we ate. When we finished I was not sure what to do next.

“Take it easy, first day and all. Tina and Chef will manage. Take some time to explore and acclimatise yourself. I’ll catch up with you later.”

As Baxter got up to leave, I asked. “And what do you do around here?”

“I manage the hotel and greet the new arrivals, help them settle in. Ask at the main desk if you need me, they always know where to find me. Catch up later.” He walked off and left me sitting alone trying to take in what was happening.

I was a prisoner in a luxury hotel in a desert with all the comforts I could ever wish for, far away from everything I knew, with no prospect of getting out in the near future. I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering the streets of the shopping centre, even had an artificial river and boats for you to take a leisurely ride down stream. It reminded him of luxury hotels in Macau.

Having explored the ground floor, I decided to go to the roof and see what I could find there. As I suspected it was empty. I peered over the edge and counted the floors, then recounted, there were twelve. Ten for accommodation, one ground floor, what was the twelfth floor?

I stared out towards the spectacular windblown rocky mountains only a short distance away. The hotel was mounted in a cliff face at the base of which was a river that flowed from my right to the left. It looked so small but given I was several hundred metres above the landscape it was not surprising. Behind me were weather worn mountains like an American Western landscape. There was no escape I checked for a way out in other directions but the building jutted out from the surface about four stories; a long way to jump and then be faced with a rugged climb through the mountains.

The heat from the blazing sun started to get to me. I was beginning to feel nauseas. I realised I couldn't stay up there very long and realised I wouldn't get far in that heat even if I could escape the building. So I decided to bide my time.

For the next few days, I worked in the cafe, learned how to make coffee professionally like a barrista. Got to know some of the patrons and even began to enjoy living in this little community. The thought of being trapped nagged at me, I hated being made to do anything and I was being forced to remain here against my will.

Then one day I was talking to Chef and it occurred to me. "How do you get in your supplies?"

"I buy the meat from the butcher, the bread from the baker..."

I cut him off. "But where do they get their supplies? Where are the crops grown, the cows grazed, the chickens laying eggs?"

"Ah!" he replied finally understanding my question. "We place an order at the Ordering Store. They supply the raw materials. They give me flour. I make cakes, pies. They give me spices. I make sauces."

"Can you take me there?"

"Only open Wednesdays. You place your order and collect last weeks order. It's Monday. I'll take you Wednesday."

I agreed. I had no other choice in fact, so I waited impatiently for Wednesday to come around. Then, early morning, Chef grabbed me and said it was time. So we headed off down the street to what I'd assumed was an empty shop. The window was blanked out but today the door was open. Chef and I stepped inside and found a store-room, near the door sat a computer. Chef placed his order for next week on the computer, receiving a receipt. He then inserted what I assumed was last week's receipt and when it came back it had a number stamped on it in red ink.

He led me to a shelf linking the number to a set of boxes. "This is our order." While he'd been searching for his supplies, I had been looking around for a back door. How did they get all this stuff in here without anyone seeing? It must come up from the basement. I could see nothing but solid walls. I helped Chef carry his boxes back to the cafe.

"How long does that place stay open?"

“Only until 6pm?” replied Chef as he opened up the boxes and unpacked. That night I returned to the Collection Room. It was now empty, so I sat on the floor and waited.

As I sat there it suddenly struck me that given this was a weekly delivery I might be here a week if I didn't find the entrance so I began checking the walls. Logically there could be no secret entrance between the side walls. There were shops on either side and I'd previously checked for wall thickness. That only left the back wall. So carefully, I checked every inch; it seemed completely solid. Night approached, the lighting outside was dimmed, and my only light came through the frosted windows of the Delivery Room.

I decided my best bet was to rig the entrance door so I could open it next week and get inside before the delivery. When I tried the door it didn't budge. The handle turned uselessly in my hand but the door remained shut. Panic welled inside me I began pounding on the walls, shouting, kicking the door. Eventually I heard a click, testing the door it opened. Holding it open I looked back into the dark room. “Who are you? What do you want from us?” There was no answer but I knew they must be listening. I checked the lock and saw there was no way I could prevent it locking after me.

“Where have you been, Mr Van?” asked Tina as I walked in and found her cleaning the coffee machine.

“Just checking out some stuff; I'm heading to the hotel for dinner. Catch you tomorrow,” I replied sounding very dejected. She watched me walked off concerned for my well being.

I spent the next few weeks just going through the motions. Then Bentley came to visit me at the café. I was just sitting having a coffee and reading a book when he sat down to join me. I looked up but said nothing.

“You would not be aware but tomorrow starts the monthly fitness tests.”

“Fitness Tests,” I repeated with raised eyebrows. “What do they involve? And why am I only told now?”

“You'll be fine but you are expected to maintain a certain degree of fitness in this place. We might have fine food but without exercise you will become flabby and sick,” stated Bentley with a twinkle in his eye as if he knew something I did not.

“So what is expected at these tests?” Bentley didn't respond, he simply gave me a reassuring wink and walked off.

Next morning the lifts did not stop on the Ground Floor they took us directly to the Basement. When the doors opened I found myself in a large open space. It was empty except for some Gym mats. People were gathering around and talking as other joined us from the four lifts that existed in the hotel. Finally everyone had gathered. A man stepped forward, I recognised him as the man managing the Hotel Gym which I'd only visited once to check out but never used. He was quite muscular, heavily built like a weight lifter, huge biceps with

ugly veins sticking out. He had long golden hair, clean shaven, wearing shorts and sleeveless T-shirt. Most of the population were dressed in track suits.

“OK everyone,” he began. “Those who’ve been before know the drill. You others just follow. If you need help come see me. We’ll begin with warm up exercises.”

And we did, we did push ups, star jumps, sit ups and running on the spot. Stretches and drink stops before beginning a jog around the area, a path marked around the uprights that held up the ceiling. A few stragglers were falling behind after a few laps, the same ones I’d noticed struggling with the exercises. I was happy with my pace as I usually did exercises in my room before bed, a practice I’d started as a teenager. I walked a lot but hadn’t done any running since my arrival in this place.

Finally it was over, the three stragglers were asked to stay behind as the rest of the population dispersed to the lifts and presumably to the showers in their respective rooms. We’d all been fed liquids before and during the tests but now it was lunchtime and everyone felt hungry. I slipped away out of sight, curious as to what would happen to the three who had obviously failed the test. Near the lifts, the exercise mats had been stacked by people as they left. I decided to stay behind and hit behind the mats

The Gym Instructor stood before the three stragglers like a drill sergeant and spoke harshly to them shouting into their faces. “You were warned last month and for the last several months that you needed to get fitter or suffer the consequences. You obviously didn’t take us seriously.” He stepped aside and waited as a metal roll-a-door wound up and a man in a plain black uniform entered, followed by a gaggle of fifteen civilians dressed in track suits.

The uniformed man stepped up to each of the three test failures. “You are lazy! You sit around and let everyone else do the work while you watch! You don’t exercise! You don’t do anything! You are useless members of this society!” He prodded one with his stick and the man collapsed convulsing to the floor then remained still. The two remaining men became alarmed as he approached the next in line.

“You drink too much, you’re abusive and nobody wishes to be associated with you! You take everything but offer nothing back to this society!” The man was about to argue a plea when he was subjected to the same electrical shock. The uniformed man approached the last man.

“Please, I’ll do better!”

“You had your chance! We observed you on several occasions making inappropriate advances to the women. You are a predator and we can’t allow that to continue!” Without any delay he too, was electrocuted.

The man in uniform turned back towards the roll-a-door giving a signal. Another man dressed in similar uniform was led out in restraints accompanied by two other uniformed personnel. They stopped before the ‘officer’ and stood stiffly to attention. “You have been accused of treason! Of taking actions that threaten this projects security!”

The condemned man was afraid and angry. “What you are doing is wrong!”

“It is done for the better good. It is not your place to know the true purpose of the Project! You are here only to obey!”

“So you will murder me to silence me? But I will be replaced by others who disagree and eventually the truth will come out.”

The Officer smiled. “We aren’t going to kill anyone. When they recover, they will be confused, drugged and suffer memory loss. Their disappearance will be explained by their condition and they’ll be found in different locations so no one will connect their crazy stories, assuming they can remember anything.” The officer, without any warning applied his stick to the condemned man and he too collapsed convulsing on the floor. “Send the medical team in!”

The officer walked off with the other two uniformed men followed by the gaggle of civilians. I took the chance and joined them as they returned to the hidden underground complex. My first observations were that this place existed under the plateau behind the hotel with an access from behind the mountains. I entered a massive warehouse with trucks, boxes and crates. People in civilian clothing were everywhere I was able to remain hidden in plain sight. My biggest concern was, I could not wander around aimlessly forever before someone noticed I was lost or didn’t belong. Then I’d join the mentally challenged who were released disorientated and unable to remember anything coherent about this place.

Angela Van Heusen hadn’t heard from her brother for two days. It was not until he missed lunch with her that she became worried. It was not like him to miss an appointment and he wasn’t answering his phone. In addition he’d been depressed lately due to his business having just gone into liquidation. It had been his whole life, the reason he never got married, and he’d lost it because of the dishonesty to short sighted partners who could only see short term gains not long term fortunes. They had stripped the business of cash to cover personal debts and left the business insolvent. Could he have committed suicide?

All kinds of scenarios ran through her head as she made her way over to his place. She had her own key, both living alone they’d given each other a key in case of emergencies. She entered his apartment, a single man’s extravagant apartment built for someone who had nothing else to spend his money on. There was no sign of him.

“Are you sure he’s just not off on some bender?” asked the bored police sergeant at the front desk. Being late arvo he was anxious to finish his shift and let the next person take over. He didn’t want to be delayed by filling out paperwork for a guy who would probably turn up next morning with his tail between his legs.

“He’s not like that! He wouldn’t miss lunch with me. I rang his friends and no one has seen him since he left their party two nights ago,” insisted Angela.

“Surely he’s found someone to be with and decided not to go home for a few days.”

“Sergeant!” she began patiently. “He wouldn’t do that! Besides...he left his car parked outside his friend’s house unlocked with the keys inside.”

“There you go! He was too drunk to drive and some friend took him back to their place where he’s nursing a hangover.”

Becoming impatient, “I rang his friends. No one took him home.”

“Lady, maybe he has friends you don’t know about. Let me assure you that most of these cases resolve themselves in a few days. I’m sure he going to walk in the door in the next twenty-four hours. If not, come back and I’ll put in a report then.”

Frustrated, Angela left the station swearing under her breath. Twenty-four hours later the police began looking. Six months later they’d found no trace of him and his file went into the cold case filing room. All they had found was CCTV footage of him getting into his car, he was approached by two men, never identified, who assisted him out of the car and led him away. He seemed like he needed help which police construed as him being drunk.

Angela responded to the knock at the door reminding herself at the same time, she needed to get her doorbell fixed. She switched off the kettle and went to the door.

She found a rather portly, middle aged man, balding and a face that implied a hard life. He wore a suit and despite his rugged appearance; his voice was very quiet and none threatening. “Are you Angela Van Heusen?” Angela nodded. “My name is Bulldog Brennan, I’m a private investigator and I believe your brother is missing.”

“That’s right but I don’t usually hire opportunistic people who come to my door selling their services.”

“I’m not offering my services; I’m investigating a series of disappearances that match a pattern. I’d like to talk to you about your brother’s disappearance. I think I might be able to help.”

Angela hesitated but given she had had no success in finding any trace of him and the police had given up, she decided to grab this potential fresh lead. She stood back and ushered him inside. A short time later over a cup of coffee, they began to talk.

“Bulldog is not your real name is it?” she asked sipping her coffee and breaking the awkward silence that had descended over their meeting.

“Born William, called Billy as a kid. As an adult I joined the cops and had a tendency not to give up on a case, hence ‘bulldog’ I was stubborn and would never let go. When my best friend disappeared a few years back I pursued it, left the police after twenty two years, received a good pension so I can afford to investigate on my own.”

“So... what brought you to me?”

“Do you know that around six hundred people disappear every day world wide? That’s 4.4 million in the last twenty years that were never found. Where did they go?” Angela shrugged she didn’t have a clue but was shocked by the numbers. “Some are murdered and the bodies are never found; some are sold into slavery. Big money can be made for pretty girls in some cultures. Some are kept prisoners and work under appalling conditions in brothels around the world as sex workers. Some just disappear; maybe they are kidnapped by aliens but some...?”

“Mr Brennan...what are you suggesting?”

“I don’t know but I do know a number of people who could be considered potentially suicidal, disappear. Some turn up in cities hundreds or thousands of miles from home but they are spaced out, homeless, on drugs or alcohol with no memory of where they’ve been.”

“You found my brother?” asked Angela suddenly interested in what was becoming a drawn out scenario with no relevance to Cam.

“No but your brother fits the pattern. In addition, one of those recently located, talked about a Mr Van. Now the police are just dismissing these cases as people going on a binge rather than killing themselves and that has resulted in them having mental damage and memory loss. They see no connection.”

“Why do you think differently?”

“Because there are too many cases with similar MO’s for me to ignore especially given that I’ve had no leads, nothing since I started this three years ago.”

“What do you want from me?”

Firstly, I’d like to get a profile on your brother to ensure he fits the pattern. I also noticed you haven’t given up looking which means you’ve got some tenacity yourself. I’d like to work with you, two heads are better than one, if you’re willing to help?”

“What... like being your partner?”

“You could think of it like that... colleagues pursuing a similar goal... trying to find those missing people.”

Angela thought for a minute and decided she had nothing to lose. She had already taken a lot of time off work pursuing Cam. She could take more, as she did own her own business as a fashion designer. She had others who could take over for her. After some thought, she agreed.

Over the next few days, Bulldog brought over his files and let her pour through them giving her a chance to draw her own conclusions. To seek out flaws in his logic, to see things he might have missed. He did little to influence her; he genuinely wanted a second opinion from someone who didn’t think him crazy. He’d approached police colleagues who just

couldn't see it, thought he was pursuing a ghost. No one had been prepared to view the evidence. They managed to inspire each other but at the end of the day they had nowhere to go.

They were convinced people were being taken and some were being rejected. The selection process involved those on the verge of ruin and may very well have committed suicide or lived miserably in a state of depression because of this failure. Bulldog's friend had been a chef; the restaurant he worked at had burnt down, either deliberately or accidentally... He was interviewed for hours by police trying to get him to confess but he had not broken. Later, the Arson Squad found it had been an electrical fault, but the accusation remained and no one would employ him. It destroyed him and his career. Then he vanished.

I looked up as my name was called "You ready to take a break?" My friend Brian was standing nearby. I had been working at my computer all morning and welcomed the break. My station was one of a dozen located on a raised platform within the 'hanger' like structure that seemed big enough to house a jumbo jet. The main floor had eight military style troop carriers, several ambulances and a few trucks. No civilian cars.

"Sure! Just give us a second," I replied finished his sentence, saved the document and joined my friend. Brian was a civilian like myself and kept in the dark like everyone except for the black uniformed staff.

Since my escape from the hotel complex, I had managed to find an unoccupied computer, hacked into the mainframe and moved my ID from the hotel to the support structure. As my business had been designing computer systems I was quite skilled in this area and in preventing security breaches. The indiscretions of my partners destroyed that trust and I could not rebuild. My reputation had been tarnished, so I started working my new job in this complex without anyone noticing the new staff member among the generally unsociable crew. It had been seven months now, I had become a regular face around the base and could go anywhere unchallenged.

Brian was different, ex-military, served in Middle East, unmarried and had been engaged for a two year tour on this base. He was paid extremely well and he hoped to pay off his mortgage over those two years, take a good long holiday and perhaps return for another tour before settling down. There was nothing to spend his money on here, they could not leave the base and he wasn't into gambling. I made sure I was also put on the payroll, deciding if I was trapped here I might as well get paid like they did.

We walked off to the canteen which served meals like an army mess between certain hours and slopped food on your plate expecting you to eat it. Thank heaven the food wasn't

too bad but it certainly was not as good as that served in the hotel beyond the mystery iron door. “Do you think we’ll ever know what goes on beyond that door?” asked Brian.

“Don’t suppose we will. People go in there on stretchers and come out on stretchers.”

“Whatever is beyond must be dangerous. You help out in medical, what’s wrong with them?” asked Brian as we entered the canteen and grabbed a tray each.

“They seem to have received some kind of shock, they’re incoherent and speak with a slurred voice like they’ve had a stroke,” I replied. I had managed to incorporate into my regime that I’d been an Army medic when I’d been in the Reserves as a youth. Not that I considered myself old now. “I’ve tried talking to a few, told them my name; couldn’t get through.”

“Some mystery this place, secret government experiments I’d bet. If we did find out what they’re doing they’d probably have to kill us,” joked Brian but I feared he might be closer to the truth than he realised! “We just seem to process data and forward it to who knows where and then gather more data. It’s all coded so no idea what it’s about.”

“As long as they pay me, I don’t care,” I lied, given my whole purpose for existence was to find a way out of there or get word to the outside world. That seemed impossible, the system was closed and all data was backed up and shipped out. No electronic contact with the outside world.

“You know, the most annoying part of this place is... not even knowing what country we’re in. It’s just that desert outside which looks like ‘Death Valley’ in the US. Or we could be in Central Australia.”

“So how did you get here?” I asked.

“I signed the papers, they put me in a hotel overnight and I woke up here.”

“Same here,” I replied given it wasn’t that much different to my own experience except I didn’t sign up, I was an involuntary volunteer.

By this time we had received our lunch slops, some kind of lasagne with vegetables boiled until they were soft and tasteless but the pasta, although it looked crappy, tasted great. I even went back for more, before we returned to the daily drudge of data preparation.

Bulldog, very excited, burst into Angela’s apartment. “I’ve got something!”

“And what would that be?” she asked sipping on her coffee.

“The first thing any investigator does is check bank accounts. I initially relied upon the police investigation that indicated no credit card transactions and no withdrawals or deposits in the main account...”

“That’s right and since then I cancelled the credit card but because we can’t prove he’s alive or dead, his account is frozen,” replied Angela.

“Not anymore!” announced Bulldog triumphantly as he handed her a bank statement.

“This has to be wrong!” said Angela incredulously. “Where did he get all this money?”

“Exactly, I have a friend in banking; helps out in cases like this. Against the law but he agrees it’s in the public good.” Angela looked puzzled. “His employer is the Durham Data Systems. It’s a government funded Think Tank that’s listed on the Stock Exchange and gathers data from across the globe, processes it and comes up with projections, predictions, reports you name it.”

Angela felt relieved, angry and frustrated but mainly angry. “So he’s not missing? The bastard is working on some top secret project for the government. So how do we find him?”

Bulldog’s enthusiasm took a back seat. “We don’t. If we barge in, we could jeopardise his job and if he’s there against his will, we could jeopardise his life.”

“What!” Angela stared at him, alarmed. “Would they do that?”

Bulldog nodded. “I know guys in that business and everyone is expendable. They’re above the law until they are publicly exposed. Then, the politicians dive for cover and roast the scapegoat.”

“What do you propose?”

“Firstly, I want to talk to some of those ‘spooks’ and see what I can find out about Durham Data System. I already know it is a multi-billion dollar company with tentacles across the world with probable little or no national loyalty. It’s only sovereign is the mighty dollar and the power they can buy with it.”

Angela put down her coffee, her relaxing time was over.

People like Brian and I were dressed in civilian attire and got on well together, given the isolation and working conditions. None of us liked the uniformed personnel dressed in black with no military insignia and acting like the Gestapo. We all referred to them as the SS and we were all nervous when they were around. They did not socialise with us and just

wandered around watching everyone. Usually they kept out of our way and although we outnumbered them six to one, none of us challenged them.

The big boss, no one knew his name, was a skinny man, long horse-like face that had seen a hard life. He was clean shaven with military style black hair. He would walk around with his hands behind his back glaring at everyone as if he hated us all. He never spoke to any of us unless to reprimand us; these guys just felt like prison guards.

Our instructions came via computer; manual data was just dumped on our desks, the data came to us as a set of meaningless numbers with coded headings that we fed into a program. It did whatever analysis was required then was backed up. Every month, a car would arrive to collect the backups and drive off again. Today was that day.

We all watched as the big hanger door opened, it was wide enough to take a jumbo jet but all that entered was a military style troop carrier bringing a driver and three men in suits. The big boss, Commandant, approached them with an escort of three of men. They talked briefly as we all watched from our various stations arranged in platforms around the hanger. All work stopped but none of the 'guards' seemed to care.

I became a little nervous when two of the 'guards' broke away and came towards Brian and myself. "O- Oh!" said Brian. "Don't like the look of this!" backing away a bit as they approached. I stood my ground but was still surprised when they stopped in front of me. Without them saying a word I got the message... I was to follow. I looked to Brian, the look on his face told me if asked he'd say he didn't know me. I was led down to ground level, the carrier stood near the hanger door but the occupants and the Commandant had walked inside a bit too where our trucks were parked in a row along the side wall.

"You Van Heusen?" asked the Commandant gruffly. It was the first time I'd heard him speak since his address to his people in the fitness area. I nodded in the affirmative. "How did you get here?"

"I went to bed in my hotel room and woke up here," I replied truthfully.

"Could it be an administrative mix up?" asked one of the suited men, a man in his thirties, soft hands, probably never done any manual labour in his life. His manner indicated he was a subordinate and his suggestion was dismissed,

"People inside said he was initially in the hotel," reported a guard.

The Commandant turned to me. "How did you get out here?" I didn't respond, unsure how to answer without getting myself into trouble. Best to leave them wondering.

When I didn't reply, one of the suits stepped forward to look me over. He was chubby, young, and arrogant but still just a subordinate. "He does good work but what is he up to?"

The Commandant decided. "We can't take chances."

This was my chance, it was now or never. I activated the device in my pocket that I'd been building for months. It activated a spark in the fuel tanks of every vehicle on the premises. One by one they exploded. In the chaos I ran to the carrier, threw the driver out of the driving seat and backed up the vehicle. As I exited the hanger, another explosion damaged the gate so it couldn't be closed.

I was free! But I had no idea where I was or where I was going. A road leading from the hanger headed down the mountain towards the flat desert beyond so I drove on hoping I'd eventually arrive somewhere. That somewhere seemed to be a long way away as the hours passed and the fuel got low. I had hoped I'd make it to civilisation, I was wrong, the engine conked out and there was no sign of civilisation.

I checked the vehicle for weapons and water. I found two full water bottles. I also removed the water container from the engine before setting off on foot towards the hills; not wishing to be visible to any search parties in the open desert. I'd only just reached of the rocks when a search party appeared from the direction I'd been heading, confirming I was going in the right way.

I remained hidden as they stopped at my abandoned vehicle. I watched as two men in those same dark uniforms got out and picked up my tracks. I was still close enough to them that if I moved I'd be spotted so I waited as they moved towards me. Their vehicle turned around and headed back the way it came, looking to cut me off. I was well concealed where I was so I decided to wait for them to come to me.

Once they hit the rocks, they lost my trail. As they debated my possible direction, I threw a rock, hitting one in the temple. He collapsed as I ran and leapt at the remaining guard. We struggled but eventually I got the better of him. Both men carried unusual rifles, modified M-16 with telescopic sights. In their packs I found water and rope. Using the rope I tied them up and took one of their weapons. "You plan to leave us like this?"

"Why not? Your people will find you soon enough when you don't turn up and that will give me more time. Besides why should I care, you planned to kill me, didn't you?"

There was no further comment from them; one was still dazed from the rock strike. I took one rifle and the magazine from the second and set off over the rocks and continued west. An hour later I found the search vehicle parked on the flats with one man scanning the rocks with binoculars. I decided to delay him. Taking aim with the M-16 through the telescopic sights, I fired several rounds blowing out two tyres. I then pumped a few rounds into the radiator. He dived for cover and I changed position. When he emerged he scanned the rocks above for any movement. All was quiet and still.

It was getting late so I stayed put until dark and slipped away my only light coming from the moon. A few hours later I saw headlights crossing the flats, military style vehicles, the rescue party and reinforcements for my pursuit. I kept moving all night, at dawn I found myself a small cave. A place just big enough to crawl in, it was cool and I could watch the flats.

I hadn't noticed I'd fallen asleep until I was awoken by a noise? On the flats a vehicle moved along slowly while four men with rifles patrolled the rocks. They walked right passed me. When dark descended I moved on, I was behind them now so I had to be careful not to stumble into them. This proved an unnecessary fear as they camped by the flats with a blazing fire and a lot of noise. I slipped passed them unnoticed.

I wasn't so lucky the next day... They set off at dawn and I'd decided to try and put some distance between us so I kept going in the morning cool air. One of their vehicles spotted me. The first I noticed was the ping of a bullet bouncing off a nearby rock. I instinctively ducked then assessed the situation. Four men were moving towards me.

I was no marksman but telescopic sights at short range were quite accurate. I'd also read that an injured man takes more men out of action than a dead one. As I didn't really want to kill anyone, I took aim for the lower body of two of the guards. Practising my aim a few times and a swift movement to try and take out two before they took cover. I fired and then fired again. The two on my left collapsed grabbing their legs as the other two took cover. They were now to my right but as I'd taken out the two on my left, they commenced firing to the left with continuous automatic fire. This enabled me to get behind them as they swept the area from left to right. Once in position, I fired and both men collapsed. I didn't stop to check them; I headed for the vehicle until a shot came from there. The driver was still in possession, so I took off.

For the next three days I walked on, my water getting low and I hadn't eaten for four going on five days. I began travelling at night to avoid the heat until even that was an effort. Finally the water was gone, I stumbled along, every step an effort, but I had to push on. I knew if I stopped either my pursuers or the heat would get me once day light returned. As the moon faded, my steps became uncertain, I scraped my leg, hit my head and grazed my hands as I scrambled to cross the rocks in the dark. The rifle felt heavy but I daren't drop it as it would give them a trail to follow.

At first, I thought I was seeing things but as I focused, I saw a house ahead, lights were on and I could see no military vehicles. Stumbling closer, I could see a water tank and moved towards it. Turning the tap, I let the water run over my body... and collapsed leaving the water running so that I was eventually lying in a pool of water and mud.

Hearing the running water, the owners stepped outside. Water was a precious item in this part of the world. They found me unconscious and took me inside. From there they rang for an ambulance. I woke up in a hospital with two uniformed policemen hovering over me.

"He's awake! Can you tell us your name?"

"Cam Van Heusen. I was kidnapped and held captive in the desert," I replied.

"And who would do that?" asked the older officer sceptically. He scratched his greying hair. His rookie partner, a young eager looking lad who still felt important in a uniform listened amused.

“It was some kind of para-military base. I was held there for eight months.”

The older man scoffed. “There is no military base out there. You sure you just didn’t get lost and dreamt all this?”

“Someone must have lodged a missing person report, go do your homework before you start pointless questions.”

“Now look here, I can have you....”

“Nurse! I’m feeling faint. I need the doctor!” I cried. The nurse who’d been obediently standing in the background moved forward. “I think you should leave now!” When they hesitated, she threatened to call security.

Some hours later, a plain clothed detective entered my room and apologised for his officer’s actions. He had found the missing persons report and notified my wife. She was flying down on the next flight.

“And where exactly am I?” I asked.

“Las Vegas, your wife is flying in from New York. How did you get here?”

“I’m not sure. I was in a hotel room and when I woke up I was in this complex in the desert.”

“And where was this complex?”

“I don’t know. When I escaped, I drove for seven hours then walked for about four days, heading west. That’s all I know.”

“Okay, you rest. We’ll talk tomorrow when your wife arrives.” The detective left and I wondered how I’d been brought to the other side of the country.

I woke the next day, with Angela at my side. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” I replied weakly. “Did they brief you?”

“They don’t believe you but we do.”

“We?” I looked beyond Angela to a heavy set man standing nearby.

“This is Bulldog Brennan. We have a lot to discuss.” Bulldog sat down and they filled me in on what they had found out about Durham Data Systems having a network of data collection centres around the world. I told them of the data analysis machines on the site I had been working in after telling my story.

“Must be some kind of study on how people react in certain circumstances,” suggested Bulldog, once I’d described the hotel and my role as a café manager. “I had a friend who liked being referred to as Chef. His disappearance started me on this quest.”

I was momentarily taken aback. “Chef worked in my café!” I announced/

“Then he’s alive!” said Bulldog relieved to hear about his friend but the thought crossed his mind that his status may have changed since my escape.

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

Bulldog replied. “We start by locating your secret base. The police are convinced it doesn’t exist so won’t put resources into looking... so we’ll just have to find it ourselves.” “We get a map and we retrace your steps. I will walk you through your journey, how many hours in the car, what speed, how many days on foot over rugged terrain etc. All these are calculable distances and times. But first you need to rest; the doc says you need to stay here another couple of days. In that time we’ll gear up and together we do the calculations.”

“Yes. Get me a computer and I’ll get us a destination!” I replied regaining hope of being able to do something about these people.

Three days later we were heading east back into the desert using the GPS map I’d put together based on my recollection of times, distances and speeds that I could have achieved. I established a number of scenarios and settled on one that led us to a terrain that on the map looked familiar. We camped out one night and reached the site early afternoon the next day. As I had fled the hanger in quite a hurry my memory of the terrain was spotty but I had looked out the rear window a number of times to check on pursuit and remembered the view.

As I left the hanger I had driven down a rocky hill to the flats which stretched on endlessly to the west. We were now at the end of the flats facing east, our path blocked by a rocky hill beyond which should lie the gorge I had observed from my hotel window.

“This looks familiar. If I’m right, the hanger entrance should be up in those rocks. We should scout around to the right and see if we can find the deep gorge. It took us about an hour to find a path through the rocky terrain until we reached the rim of a huge gorge. I peered over the edge and below saw the familiar sight of the valley with a small river running through it.

Bulldog using his binoculars was examining the rock face where the hotel should have been. At first glance he could see nothing but a closer examination showed that pockets in the cliff- face were camouflaged windows. The more closely you looked the more detail could be determined. “This is it! There’s your hotel!” announced Bulldog handing me the binoculars.

After checking out the camouflaged cliff face, I lowered the binoculars. “Now that we’ve found it, all we have to do is wait for the three of us to take the entire garrison.”

“Too easy,” replied Bulldog.

We split up to explore the terrain on foot. To any observer, our vehicle had headed off to the south and was no threat. I had chosen to check out the hanger entrance and found a secure place to observe it. I saw the door was still being repaired after my explosion had destroyed the closing mechanism and taken a piece of the wall with it.

Distracted I didn't notice the patrol come up from behind and stick a rifle in my back. "Stand up slowly!" I did what I was instructed. They led me inside to be greeted by the Big Boss. "Nice of you to rejoin us."

"I missed the place," I replied with a smile that irritated my interrogator.

He responded with a smirk. "We had instructions to retake you. You saved us the trouble. Apparently you are too good a specimen to be just eliminated."

"Does that mean I get my old job back?"

"No, although you did an excellent job we would be concerned about you sabotaging the data - assuming you haven't already."

"I can honestly say I have not. Too afraid that would blow my cover."

"I wish I could believe you but for now it's back to your original assignment. Your gear has been placed in your old room. Your café staff have been missing you."

"Aren't you afraid that I'll tell them everything?"

"Apparently that is part of the analysis. However, you are warned if you corrupt any of the subjects they will be taken out... and you know what that means." I nodded. "Then we are done. Take him to the lifts."

Two guards escorted me into the basement exercise area and deposited me at the lifts. I entered alone and the doors closed. I exited in the hotel foyer and went straight to the café. "Mr Van!" exclaimed Tina, the waitress. "Where have you been?"

Chef, hearing the sound of her cry, came to join us. "Yes, where have you been?"

I hesitated unsure what to say if anything. "I was re-assigned, now I'm back." I quickly added

Tina and Chef exchanged glances. "No-one has ever come back!"

"What can I say?" I replied sounding as surprised as they were. "How about we have a coffee and close early?"

"That's against the rules!" replied Tina.

"So what can they do, sack us? Shut the doors and I'll let you know where I've been, then we'll take the night off. I need a rest and we can start fresh tomorrow."

They didn't argue further. As we drank coffee and Chef made a few savouries I told them I'd been sent to this data processing place. "When I'd finished the job they sent me back here; must have needed my computer skills."

"That would imply we are some kind of human behavioural study," suggested Chef.

I nodded. "That would be my guess but for how long and what happens to us when it's completed is the question."

Chef looked angry. "I'd also like to know, who is conducting these experiments? The government?" I shrugged, I could not reveal to them what I knew and I was unsure to what extent we were being monitored. I knew they had hidden cameras but I also knew they didn't monitor everyone all the time.

I retired to the hotel and was met by Bentley who came up to me wearing a big smile. "Cameron! You're back! I'm so pleased." I was taken aback when he gave me a big hug. Once we broke free of the embrace he stepped back. "Now you behave yourself." Having issued his warning he walked off. Tired, I retired to my room and called it a night. As I did, I wondered what Bulldog and Angela were planning to do. They must know by now I'd been taken.

Next morning I arrived at the café and was greeted by Tina. Morning, Mr Van."

"Morning Tina, how was your night off?"

"Very pleasant, I relaxed read a book and then watched a movie."

"And what movie was that?" I asked to maintain conversation.

"I don't remember the name, never can. It was one of those 1940's War movies. I love that era of film making. They were not the same before or since. Besides I fell asleep half way through."

I laughed and she joined in with a smile. "How about you?"

"Out like a light. I'd had a long day."

The conversation paused as Tina looked me over. "You must have spent a bit of time outside while you were away. Look at that tan."

"There was a place I could sit in the open air," I lied. "Have you ever been to the roof of the hotel? It is open with a view but no one goes up there."

"Never been. Once I discovered all the floors looked the same I stopped going higher."

"You must try it, if you want to escape all this. Do you miss your old life?"

"Sometimes, as a fashion designer it was high pressure all the time, meeting customer demands, coming up with new designs. I think that's why my business failed. I tried to do

everything myself. Here, I can relax enjoy the interaction with customers, no pressure, putting aside I'm a prisoner I kind of like the place."

"I do know what you mean but I can't help having the desire to escape."

"Not much chance of that," said Chef popping his head out of the kitchen. "You guys want breakfast?"

Several days later a group of soldiers gathered in the rocks near the underground entrance and waited. Bulldog joined them to give them the final briefing. "Everyone listen up. We believe that most of the people inside are civilians with an armed force of less than ten. They won't be expecting us so we want to create as much confusion as possible with minimal loss of life. Is that clear!" The fifteen soldiers present all acknowledged their orders. "Ok, Team Alpha, go in there and shoot the place up. Most of them should dive for cover and stay down. Team Beta you will back up Team Alpha and take out anyone who starts shooting."

"When do we move?" asked one soldier.

"As soon as the scout team reports the way is clear, hold steady until I give the order."

One black uniformed guard patrolled outside; he was staring into the distance across the flats watching for lights or unexpected movement. He was not expecting an attack from behind. He was rendered unconscious with ether fumes in a cloth over his mouth and tied up. A second guard wandered around and was taken out the same way. All seemed clear and Bulldogs team moved in.

The main entrance was still damaged unable to be closed. This meant no problem in getting inside. Alpha Team rushed in with guns blazing. The night shift dived for cover as the internal guards began shooting from balconies high above. Beta Team returned the fire as Alpha Team changed magazines to live rounds. So far only one soldier had been hit and was crawling for cover. Bulldog rushed out and brought him under cover.

The guards were not as easily taken out as expected. Although exposed on the high balconies they had retreated to shielded sentry boxes while the soldiers were limited to hiding behind vehicles and crates with the enemy holding the high ground. They were too high to reach with grenades and even if that were not true, the sentry boxes were built to prevent lobbing any such device inside providing only narrow openings big enough for them to shoot through. It was a stand off

Bulldog realised it was hopeless and when the Compound Commander stepped out with an offer of a truce. Weapons were surrendered and everyone was shipped upstairs into the hotel.

Baxter briefed me of the new arrivals and I joined them in the hotel dining room. As I entered Angela got up and raced towards me. They had all been uncertain of my fate and

were relieved to see me. I thought Angela might crush me with excitement. When she finally released me and Bulldog introduced me to his two top men, Zen Thomson and Wash Wilson.

“Wash? May I ask how you got that nickname?”

“My real name is Walsh but I hate getting dirty so I gained the nickname,” replied the young rugged looking man with short black hair, sideburns, and smelt as if he’d just got out of the shower.

Zen looked as if he was built of solid muscle, tall but a heavy set man, clean shaven wearing a track suit. Although I had seen these men before I had never got to know Bulldogs team. We had just travelled together and I’d let Bulldog do the organising.

“What’s our next move?” I asked

“Unknown at this stage, we just settle in and get the lie of the land. Any ideas why they put us in the general population?” Bulldog replied as he swallowed the last of his beer. The others were also drinking beer. “

“As a data analyst I’d say they want to see what reaction the population have to us. I was warned not to tell them anything of my escape. I think the rules may have changed.”

“I suggest we relax and enjoy the scenery. What’s the food like?” asked Bulldog.

“The best food in town but if you want a great breakfast I own a café in the main street, I suggest we meet there in the morning.” I turned to Angela. “Did they allocate you a room?”

“The hotel manager told me we’re bunked together,” she replied.

I gave the others a warning glance. “I wonder how he knew we were related. The walls have ears so I wouldn’t do any planning here.” So we settled in for an evening of dining and drinking. Wash began by ordering another round of drinks while I filled them all in on how the place worked. At another table, Bulldog’s men also partied away.

“Morning boss!” greeted Tina as Angela and I arrived for breakfast the next morning. “We got a friend today?”

“This is my wife, Angela. Meet Tina my top waitress.”

“His only waitress, but glad to meet you.” Tina offered her hand then turned to me. “You got friends in high places! First you return and no one returns then you bring your wife?”

“I cause trouble and get favours.”

“You must teach me that trick. Are you alone or do you have guests joining you?”

“Why do you ask?” I queried surprised at her insight. “Just that I see three guys approaching I haven’t met before.” I turned to see Bulldog and his two right hand men approaching. I introduced Tina to them.

“Nice place you got here,” remarked Bulldog. “You sure you want to get out of here. Seems to me one could be happy here. Everything supplied no pressure.” Everyone knew Bulldog was joking but they were offering a pleasant life as long as you obeyed the rules. It was the rules none of us liked.

It was Tina who responded. “I quite enjoy it here but I do miss the freedom to go elsewhere. What can I get you gentlemen and lady?” she asked as we sat.

“I had a friend once who made a magnificent ‘Big Breakfast’ you know eggs, bacon, sausage, mushroom, tomato and other stuff. Let’s see how good your man is,” suggested Bulldog. We all decided to go for the same.

When Tina left to fulfil the order, we began discussing our options. About ten minutes later Chef and Tina emerged with trays. Bulldog looked up and couldn’t believe his eyes. “Chef!” He got to his feet, relieved Chef of the tray placed it on the table gave him a big hug.

“What are you doing here?” asked Chef.

“Looking for you of course!” Bulldog laughed a harsh rough bellow. “I met up with Cameron’s wife and we came looking. Cam here told me he had a Chef in his café and I was hoping it was you. We’re the rescue party,” replied Bulldog indicating his team.

“I gather that didn’t work out too well,” grinned Chef.

“We got here,” replied Bulldog with a knowing smile. “Guys, this is Chef, the man I said made a fantastic ‘Big Breakfast’ I hope you haven’t lost your touch?”

“I have a pretty good job here, keeps me sharp and relaxed. I’m not sure I want to be rescued but thanks for coming. I do appreciate your effort and sorry you’re now a resident. Enjoy your breakfast and we’ll catch up.” Chef backed off to the kitchen leaving Tina to dish out the plates before she returned to the counter.

“It hadn’t occurred to me some people might want to stay here,” I remarked as I ate.

“The profile of inmates indicates they are people who are lost and desperate. The outside world is too harsh while here there are no threats, no worries. If only the whole world could be like this,” remarked Angela.

“The trouble is there is always a dark side and if you don’t conform to the profile you get mind wiped,” replied Wash ensuring his mouth was empty before speaking while Zen was devouring his food as if he’d not eaten for a week.

Later that morning, I took them all to the roof. Bulldog agreed any attempt to go down the face of the hotel was impossible. It was several hundred metres o the river valley bellow. Exiting above was also extremely dangerous and without climbing gear not feasible. Even if they had rope the chances of getting through were remote.

We reviewed the lifts next. There were only three with maximum capacity of 14 persons. A mass escape through the basement was unlikely to succeed even if we could get everyone down there and then we had to get through the massive steel doors that separate the exercise area from the main complex.

Our next stop was the re-supply room; I explained my earlier attempt to escape through that route. The problem was finding out just when they did the resupply. I was pretty sure there were no cameras but they did have audio because they didn't know I was there until I called out, claiming I'd fallen asleep in there and been trapped. It was now time to consider our options over a coffee. We began monitoring the delivery store. After a couple of weeks we established they locked the door the night before delivery so we needed to be inside before 6pm.

When the night came, the four of us took our places in the room. There were some really strong hooks on the wall so we each took a corner and when the floor fell away, we hung from the hooks and waited. Two workmen in overalls approached the empty platform as we hung from the hooks above them.

One of the workmen looked up and for a moment I was concerned we'd been seen but instead he turned to his mate thoughtfully. "Do you ever wonder what is going on up there? The supplies go up, nothing comes back. Every week the same thing."

Don't care, I'm getting paid to load cargo, not ask questions," replied the other.

Bulldog gave the signal and we dropped down. The movement caught their attention and they froze. It only took a moment to tie them up. Cautiously we made our way from the loading bay into the deserted main complex. We made our way quietly to the crew's quarters. Checking no-one was on the catwalk. We were now within view of the entrance door which had been fixed though it still looked a bit worse for wear.

The uniformed men slept in separate quarters to the civilians. Confident they had nothing to fear they slept with no guard and their weapons stacked neatly near the door. Helping ourselves, we fired a few shots to wake them up. Startled they all sat up but froze on seeing us standing at the entrance with their weapons.

"Okay! Now that we have your attention, get out of bed and tie each other up. We don't want any trouble," warned Bulldog. We got no resistance.

However, the commotion woke the rest of the crew who came running out to see what was happening. As soon as they saw us, they stopped dead in their tracks. I stepped forward because they knew me. "Relax. It's alright. If everyone could relax we'll explain what's

going on.” I looked to Brian. “Can you take charge? Take everyone to the common room and make coffee. No harm will come to any of you.”

It was at this point we heard the door to the outside grinding open. I ran out to see the Commander leaping into a jeep. He glared at me and drove off the door shutting behind him as I fired a shot followed by another in close succession. Once the door closed, an alarm went off.

“That’s the self destruct!” announced one of the soldiers, smugly.

Bulldog grabbed the soldier and slammed him hard against the wall. “How do we stop it?”

“You can’t without the codes! Only the Commander has them!”

“Now suddenly we’re on the same team. How long have we to evacuate?”

The soldier replied solemnly but still retaining his smugness. “Twenty minutes.”

“Untie your people and get that door open! Zen and Wash! Get the people out of the hotel. Bring them down in the storage room lift!” Zen and Wash didn’t waste time; they were gone before he finished his instruction. Brian and his people were moving rapidly to the exit door.

“Can we do this?” I asked Bulldog. “Twenty minutes to evacuate over a hundred people?”

“We’ve got to try!”

The soldier returned, this time his smugness had gone replaced by the realisation they’d been betrayed by their Commander. “The door has been sealed shut. The self destruct ensures that everyone inside is trapped!”

“I blew that door open once before! What explosives do we have?”

The soldier led me across the floor to the vehicle depot. Most of the vehicles were burned out husks from my previous escape but we gathered together the fuel drums and everything we could find that was inflammable and stacked it against the door. The soldiers gathered a few grenades and we managed to rig an impressive bomb. Our main concern now was that the bomb didn’t incinerate us when it blew! “Okay, everyone! Back to the common room!” ordered the soldier as he pulled the pin. Everyone ran including the soldier. .

The mighty explosion rocked the structure and reverberated through the hotel. People already in a panic thought the bomb had gone off. Even Wash & Zen stopped to consider what had happened as they continued to herd the people into the storage room. They recruited the former cargo loaders to operate the lift.

A massive, red hot hissing ball of flame enveloped the analysis centre but it achieved the task required. A massive hole appeared in the door through which the staff and soldiers

fled as soon as the dust settled. We had less than five minutes before the self destruct activated. Where were the others from the hotel?

I waited with Bulldog and Brian near the door after everyone else had left but there were still no sign of the hotel residents. "I'm going back," I announced and started back.

Bulldog grabbed my arm almost before I had finished speaking. "Not a good idea. We've three minutes... barely enough time to get clear." I was about to resist when we heard a great commotion as people rushing out of the storage room. Bulldog let go of my arm leaving me to direct the people.

"This way!" I yelled frantically pointing to the exit as people panicking, ran in every direction. There was no time to chase stragglers! We ran after the herd scrambling into the desert.

"Time we were gone!" shouted Bulldog watching the seconds tick down towards zero.

I had to agree and with a final yell of "RUN!!!" I headed out with the others. We hadn't gone a hundred yards when the explosion took out the hanger and sent those close to the exit flying through the air and landing hard on the desert sand. A ball of fire rolled out of the mountain side threatening to envelop those nearby.

The mountain side into which the hanger had been built collapsed on itself. On the other, the face of the hotel cracked and quickly shattered before collapsing like a smashed plaster mask on the cliff face. This was followed by the rest of the structure which fell away into the desert valley below leaving little evidence of a structure ever having been there.

As the dust settled over the moonlit scene, we picked ourselves up and looked out for the injured. How many had survived? Without a roster we had no way of doing a roll check. The injured sat around nursing their wounds; others sat staring in shock at what had been.

We had done it! But what had we done? One woman came up to me, her dishevelled face covered in dust, her evening dress singed and hung like a rag on her back, I remembered her from the café. "You took it all away from us! We were happy. For the first time in my life I felt happy! I was dancing, why did you do it?"

"Because they were killing and kidnapping people to be lab rats. Anyone who failed were mentally destroyed so they couldn't talk about this place." I replied defensively.

"It was my home, my life..." she cried as she beat me hard and repeatedly on the chest. Bulldog pulled her free and calmed the hysterical woman. Others stepped in to support her argument. Others agreed with me, it was a prison.

Bulldog led me away from the debate and we were approached by the soldier who had helped us. "We need to get these people out of here."

"Any suggestions?" I asked noticing for the first time his sergeant's stripes.

“We have a helicopter nearby assuming it hasn’t been sabotaged! I can fly it! I suggest we go for help.”

“Wouldn’t your commander have taken it?” asked Bulldog.

The Sergeant smiled. “He can’t fly.”

The helicopter stood on a flat area hidden behind a ridge out of sight of the open desert where the people were gathered. We approached cautiously expecting an ambush but all was quiet. The Sergeant climbed aboard after a quick external inspection and checked the instruments. All looked operational. The three of us climbed aboard and after the pre-flight checks were made we lifted off leaving Zen and Wash in charge supported by Baxter.

We landed the chopper in the car park outside the police station, the same police station that had ignored Angela’s pleas for help. A number of police came out to investigate as we jumped free from the craft among them the Desk Sergeant who had taken Angela’s statement and was known to Bulldog.

“You cannot land here!” he instructed.

Bulldog ignored the instruction and confronted the man. “Remember me?”

“Yeh, missing person, claims of secret bases in the desert,” he replied impatiently.

“See this man? He’s the missing person! See this chopper? It’s from the non existent base! There are about one hundred and fifty people stuck out in the desert who need rescuing! So get off your fat arse and do what you were supposed to do when we first came to you!” bellowed Bulldog, his voice rising with every word as he spoke.

The Sergeant hesitated; the officers looked to him for instructions before the station Captain joined them. “What’s going on here?”

Bulldog introduced himself and briefed the Captain, who became increasingly unhappy with his sergeant as he listened. “Show us the location! Sergeant! Alert emergency services! Now!” We followed the Captain into the police station.

Durham Data Systems was located on the top two floors of a major skyscraper in Los Angeles. I walked into the Head Office and straight into the CEO's office. "I'm here to see David Durham!"

"I'm afraid he's not seeing anyone today. Would you like to make an appointment?" replied the middle aged plump woman as she adjusted her glasses and let them fall onto her chest.

"He'll see me!" I replied and barged in. The secretary remained rooted to the spot somewhat shocked by the aggressive intrusion.

David Durham was a man in his early thirties, ambitious and ruthless. I could see that from his demeanor as he saw me enter. "Cameron Van Heusen," he said in a sly spider to the fly tone. He tossed his pen across his desk as he leaned back in his chair swivelling just slightly.

"I'm sorry, Mr Durham, he just pushed passed," stated the secretary apologetically having eventually followed me in warily.

"It's alright, Hilda. You can go."

"Should I call security?" she replied weakly.

"That won't be necessary." The secretary left and Durham watched me as I walked towards his desk. "And to what do I owe the honour of your visit?"

"I'm just come from your prison hotel resort in the desert where you run your illegal rat maze! I'm here to confront you on having me kidnapped and falsely imprisoned! Along with about one hundred others who didn't enjoy your hospitality. Though I must say, putting aside your SS troops it was quite a restful place."

Durham continued to swing back and forth in his chair. He did not miss a beat but smiled confidently. "An interesting story but I have no idea what you are talking about."

"I suppose you had nothing to do with encouraging my partners to ruin our business! Then giving them retirement benefits leaving them very comfortable before making me disappear. You didn't count on me escaping and revealing the location of your rat lab, did you now?"

"Again a very interesting story but I think you're just upset you lost your business but that was not my fault. You should have picked more honest partners."

I walked over to the side bar and poured myself a Scotch took it and sat in the guest chair. He watched me during the long silence and made no effort to move, still swinging in his chair

"We captured the Commander of your base in a motel. He had copies of your backup data and some rather incriminating files. He destroyed the base but nearly everyone survived and they are being questioned by the FBI. The ruins of your base are now being studied."

As I spoke the confident smile slowly faded from his face. “You’re bluffing.”

“Am I? All this information has been conveyed to your Board Members! You are being forced to stand down. I’m taking over as CEO effective immediately while police investigate the culpability of the firm and it’s Board. It would appear they have hung you out to dry, Mr Durham.” Having emptied my scotch, I placed my glass on his desk. “You can come in now.” I ordered to no one.

The door to his office opened and in came three police officers. They handed him a piece of paper. “This is a warrant for your arrest.” Durham remained seated as the police went around and forced him to stand before handcuffing him. Hilda stood horrified as they led him out.

Once they had gone, I turned to Hilda. “I could do with a cup of coffee, Hilda.” I said as I walked around and took the seat on the CEO side of the desk. “And call a meeting of the key Executives for one hour from now. I have an announcement to make.”

“But who are you?” she asked a bit bewildered.

“I’m your new boss. Remember Heusen’s Digital? The takeover that tripled the size of your business? That was my business and your boss swindled me out of that business. Now I’m back!”

Hilda’s mouth opened to speak then closed before again attempting to say something. She was unsure what to do and fell back into her routine for comfort. “How do you take your coffee?”

In the coming months, we re-established the hotel experiment but this time with the willing participation of those originally involved, including the analysts and the security team. Those involved in the kidnappings and other illegal activities were arrested and charged. The Board were able to show they had no knowledge of the activities of their CEO but had to pay compensation to those who were injured or killed and to those who left the experiment. In all a satisfactory result and I got my business back.